Perceived football player performance is positively associated with perceptions of their height and weight.

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Introduction

• Physical formidability is positively related to dominance and status, with more formidability leading to better performance in physical challenges, for example in fights. 
• Likewise, in many sports, the height and weight of an athlete are important factors in performance.
• This positive association is also present in social perceptions, as more formidable men are perceived as being more competent.
• Yet, in football, the distribution of height and weight of professional players approximates ‘the average man’.
• We hypothesized that the cognitive association between physical formidability and status is so strong that even in football, player height and weight would be overestimated when performance is high.

Method

• During the European Football Cup 2012, we recruited 306 participants on campus (264 men and 42 women, age range 17 – 45, M age 22.32) to complete a short survey about the Dutch football team.
• Participants judged performance, height, and weight of four prominent Dutch players in the national team.
• Results were analyzed in a linear mixed model (Figure: height and weight judgments by judged performance pooled over all four players).

Results

When player performance was positively evaluated, players were judged as being taller (F(1,1184.161) = 4.754, p = .029; Schwarz Bayesian Criterion (BIC) = 9610.234; delta BIC second best model = 5.753) and heavier (F(1,1132.935) = 5.339, p = .021; BIC = 9391.908; delta BIC second best model = 5.300).

Conclusion

This study shows that the positive associations with physical formidability (i.e. a ‘bigger = better’ heuristic) are so strong, that they are even present when they do not apply, for example in how we perceive football players.

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