

## Review Article

# The heritable path of human physical performance: from single polymorphisms to the “next generation”

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Accepted for publication 12 May 2015

**Human physical performance is a complex multifactorial trait. Historically, environmental factors (e.g., diet, training) alone have been unable to explain the basis of all prominent phenotypes for physical performance. Therefore, there has been an interest in the study of the contribution of genetic factors to the development of these phenotypes. Support for a genetic component is found with studies that shown that monozygotic twins were more similar than were dizygotic twins for many physiological traits. The evolution of molecular techniques and the ability to scan the entire human genome enabled association of several genetic polymorphisms with performance. However, some biases related to the selection of**

**cohorts and inadequate definition of the study variables have complicated the already difficult task of studying such a large and polymorphic genome, often resulting in inconsistent results about the influence of candidate genes. This review aims to provide a critical overview of heritable genetic aspects. Novel molecular technologies, such as next-generation sequencing, are discussed and how they can contribute to improving understanding of the molecular basis for athletic performance. It is important to ensure that the large amount of data that can be generated using these tools will be used effectively by ensuring well-designed studies.**

Human physical performance is a complex multifactorial trait that is affected by environmental factors such as diet and training, as well as hereditary factors (Tsianos et al., 2010; Eynon et al., 2011d). Environmental factors alone are unable to characterize all prominent phenotypes for human physical performance, which has resulted in greater interest in the study of the contribution of genetic factors contributing to these traits (Myburgh, 2003).

Initial studies on physical performance aimed to indirectly evaluate the genetic basis of human physical performance through heritability estimates attributable to genes, using variability in phenotypic traits of individuals in family studies, especially those comparing such traits in monozygotic and dizygotic twins (Komi et al., 1973; Fagard et al., 1991; Sundet et al., 1994; Bouchard et al., 1997; Calvo et al., 2002; Mangino, 2014). For instance, the genomic component may account for up to 90% of the variance in maximal oxygen uptake ( $VO_{2max}$ ) and the proportion of different types of muscle fibers in twins (Bouchard, 2012; Pitsiladis et al., 2013). Focusing on sex-related differences, other studies have

shown interindividual variability in muscular response to controlled resistance training (Erschine et al., 2010); while relative strength gains are higher in women, increases in absolute and relative muscle size are slightly higher in men (Hubal et al., 2005; Pescatello et al., 2013).

It is estimated that between 20% and 80% of a wide variety of traits relevant to physical performance, including oxygen uptake, cardiac output, relative proportion of fast and slow fibers, and muscle strength phenotypes (cross-section area and isometric, concentric, and eccentric strength) are highly influenced by genetic factors (MacArthur & North, 2007; Moor et al., 2007; Bouchard, 2012). Moreover, even the predisposition for adherence to sports and the competitive level achieved by individuals may be influenced by genetics (Stubbe et al., 2006; Moor et al., 2007; Mustelin et al., 2011; Costa et al., 2012). However, various studies in recent years have failed to elucidate the associations between specific genotypes and athletic ability (Amir et al., 2007; Dias, 2011; Pitsiladis et al., 2013).

Clearly, physical performance is determined by various biological and environmental factors, and, therefore it is unlikely that a single gene will determine the “athlete” phenotype. Studies on the association between genetics and physical activity revealed several loci that may potentially influence aerobic and anaerobic energy parameters, and an increasing number of polymorphisms associated with sports competence phenotypes are reported every year. In fact, over 200 genes associated with physical performance already have been described, with some of them related to elite sports performance (Rankinen et al., 2006; Bray et al., 2009; Santiago et al., 2010; Eynon et al., 2011c).

It should be noted that the goal of such studies is not to ascertain the genetic determination of a single individual phenotype, but instead seek to identify several factors that jointly determine the final phenotype. For instance, factors such as mitochondrial density, oxidative enzyme activity of myocytes, composition of muscle fibers, capillarization of skeletal muscle and myocardium,  $VO_{2max}$ , aerobic capacity, and cardiovascular efficiency may, in combination with other factors, result in a favorable phenotype for a long-distance runner (Ahmetov et al., 2007; Ben-Zaken et al., 2015).

Despite the increasing number of candidate genes and the possibility of finding a “more favorable” polygenic profile in elite athletes of a given sport (Ruiz et al., 2009; Eynon et al., 2011c), the results of these studies often are conflicting or difficult to extrapolate to actual performance. The factors that render comparisons between these studies problematic include insufficient comparative analyses across genders, ethnicities, and sport fields, the different types of parameters measured for a given individual trait, differences in the experimental design, and sample size (Zilberman-schapira et al., 2012). Moreover, most studies reported data on a single polymorphism, which limit the ability to understand individual variations in human athletic performance, as a single gene may contribute only a small portion of the heritable component (Santiago et al., 2010).

Further studies are needed to fully understand the discrete role of genetic factors in athletic performance and ability in different sports and specialties (Henderson et al., 2005). For instance, success in endurance sports, which requires increased physical strength, depends on a high level of aerobic or cardiorespiratory fitness that is often represented by  $VO_{2max}$  and resistance levels (Bouchard et al., 1998). Conversely, explosive power athletes rely on anaerobic activity and muscle speed. These two main sport fields involve different types of muscle metabolism. Sprint and power events require predominantly anaerobic or high-energy production muscle metabolism. Thus, it is unusual to find an athlete who excels in both 100 m and 10 000 m races, i.e., elite sprinters are likely not to perform well in long-distance events and vice versa (Tesch & Karlsson, 1985; Amir et al., 2007).

The aim of this review is to provide an informative overview covering the important data about heritable genetic aspects of athletic performance. A discussion is included on how next-generation sequencing can be used to improve the knowledge of the genetic contribution to athlete performance.

### Genetic polymorphisms associated with physical performance

Genetic polymorphism is the existence of multiple, or variant, alleles at a locus and the variant occurs at a frequency greater than 1% in the general population (Lewin, 2009). Several polymorphisms have been associated with physical performance, but none have been as widely investigated as the angiotensin-converting enzyme (*ACE*) and alpha-actinin 3 (*ACTN3*) genes (Ahmetov et al., 2013). The polymorphism of an insertion (I) or deletion (D) of 287 base pairs in intron 16 of the *ACE* gene was the first to be associated with physical performance. The I allele (insertion) may be associated with lower plasma and tissue *ACE* levels, better energy balance in long-term exercise, and increased performance in endurance activities in Caucasians (Rigat et al., 1990; Santiago et al., 2010; Holdys et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2013).

In contrast, the D allele, related to higher *ACE* activity, was initially associated with sprint-power performance (Cerit et al., 2006). Given that angiotensin II can act as a growth factor through the AT1 receptor pathway (Gordon et al., 2001), it would be natural to expect a greater gain in muscular strength and hypertrophy in individuals with this allele. However, there are conflicting results involving the response of individuals with the D allele to training (Semprun-Prieto et al., 2011). In addition, several studies showed that the infusion of angiotensin II can induce atrophy of skeletal muscle tissue (Tabony et al., 2011; Rezk et al., 2012) and recent investigations have observed only a milder association between the *ACE* polymorphism and muscle volume growth after controlled training (Charbonneau et al., 2008; Erskine et al., 2014). Conflicting results have been reported in the field of high-performance sports, especially in populations that traditionally reveal world-class athletes, such as Ethiopians, Kenyans (for endurance) and Jamaicans (sprinters – runners), whose performances were not associated with *ACE* polymorphisms (Scott et al., 2005a; Ash et al., 2011; Holdys et al., 2011).

The human *ACTN3* gene encodes alpha-actinin-3, which is a sarcomeric actin-binding protein that plays a fundamental role in the maintenance and regulation of the cytoskeleton. Alpha-actinin-2 and alpha-actinin-3 are structural proteins in the myofibril Z-line that form a crystalline structure that anchors along the thin filaments containing actin. They stabilize the contractile apparatus and are important for muscle contractions (McCauley

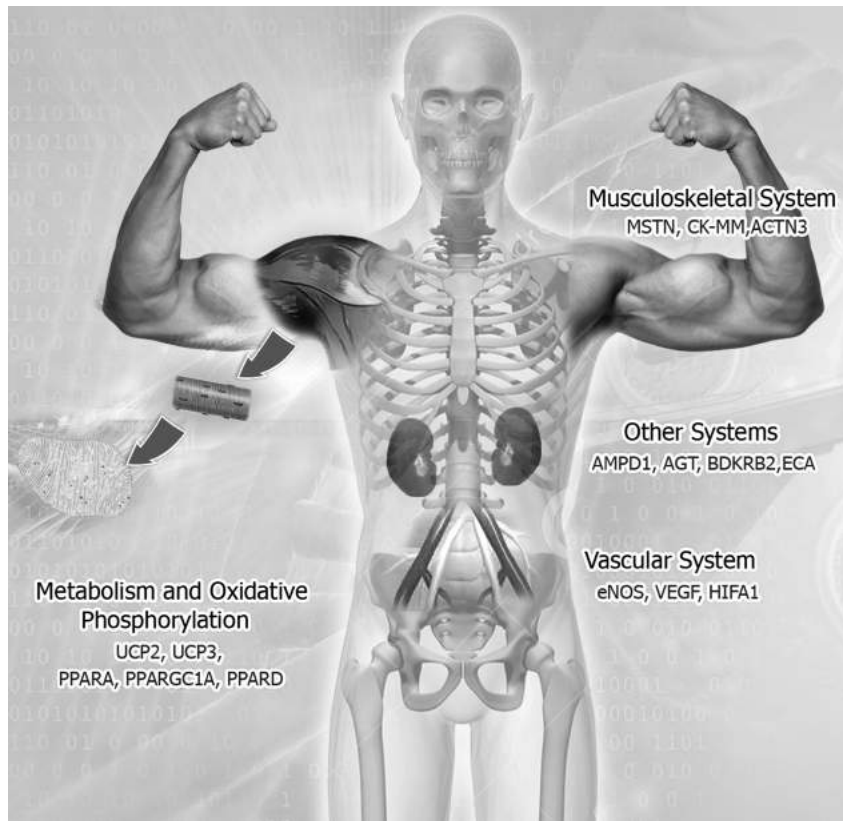
et al., 2008; Norman et al., 2009; Schiaffino & Reggiani, 2011; Ma et al., 2013). Gene variants or polymorphisms can alter the function of a protein. Single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) are the most common type of genetic polymorphism and refer to a single nucleotide change (adenine-A, thymine-T, cytosine-C, and guanine-G) in the genomic DNA at a specific position in the genome that is observed between members of the same biological species or chromosomes among individuals. The most common *ACTN3* SNP generates a stop codon in the gene, resulting in premature termination of protein synthesis in the tissue. The portion of the population worldwide containing the genotype of two deficient alleles (XX) is approximately 1 billion people. These people are completely deficient in alpha-actinin-3 (Hong & Jin, 2013). The function usually performed by *ACTN3* is possibly performed by other proteins such as alpha-actinin 2. However, the latter is found in all human skeletal muscle fibers (I, IIA, and IIX), whereas expression of alpha-actinin-3 (R allele) in muscle is restricted to fast fibers (IIA and IIX), which are more prevalent among sprint athletes (Berman & North, 2010; Lek et al., 2010; Broos et al., 2012; Grealley et al., 2013). Thus, it is possible that alpha-actinin-2 may not completely compensate for the lack of alpha-actinin-3, and therefore, polymorphisms in the *ACTN3* gene may possibly be associated with elite athletic performance, in sprint (R allele) or endurance (X allele) activities (Eynon et al., 2012; Mikami et al., 2014). However, results are conflicting when different ethnic populations are considered (Yang et al., 2007; Alfred et al., 2011; Cieszczyk et al., 2011; Eynon et al., 2013; Pitsiladis et al., 2013), justifying further investigation.

The mechanism of association between the *ACTN3* polymorphism and sprint performance also may be related to muscle fiber type ratio or to the adaptive response to training (Ahmetov et al., 2011; Seto et al., 2013). Young men ( $21.7 \pm 2.3$  years) with the “RR” genotype, which indicates the presence of functional *ACTN3* in its two alleles, showed higher relative torque in dynamic knee extension exercise ( $45\text{--}300^\circ\text{s}^{-1}$ ) than individuals with the “XX” genotype. Additionally, “RR” individuals had a higher proportion of fast-twitch type IIX fibers than “XX” individuals (Vincent et al., 2007). However, a similar study found increased torque but no differences in fiber types (Norman et al., 2009). Testing of skinned single fibers from the quadriceps muscle of three men with spinal cord injury, who each carried one of three possible genotypes (“RR,” “RX,” and “XX”), showed that the “XX” carrier’s biopsy was the only one that presented slow type I fibers (typical of endurance athletes) with a complete lack of type IIX fibers, and the preservation of type IIA fibers (Broos et al., 2012). The influence of the polymorphism in the *ACTN3* gene also has been supported by studies in 129X1/SvJ mice, in which muscle from *ACTN3* knock-out mice displayed reduced strength, muscle mass, lean mass, fast fiber

diameter, and altered contractile properties compared with wild-type mice, except in the soleus muscle, which is rich in slow-twitch type I fibers (Macarthur et al., 2008; Berman & North, 2010). Recent findings in C57BL/6J and C57BL/10ScSn mice showed that alpha-actinin-2 expression in place of alpha-actinin-3 (XX genotype) may increase the availability of calcineurin, an important signaling protein strongly associated with muscle hypertrophy and remodeling in response to exercise. This change would lead to the expression of a fiber profile characterized by slower contraction and by an oxidative phenotype, which is important for endurance performance (Jiang et al., 2010; He et al., 2011; Seto et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the differentiation of muscle fibers is a multifactorial phenotype, and several other polymorphisms have been associated with such differentiation such as the polymorphisms in the *ACE*, *HIF1A*, *PPARs*, *UCPs*, and *VEGFA* genes (Ahmetov et al., 2012; Maciejewska-Karlowska et al., 2014).

Several other polymorphisms that presumably influence physiology have been classically associated with elite physical performance (Fig. 1). These polymorphisms include genes associated with (1) muscle structure and development such as myostatin (*MSTN* or *GDF-8*), muscle creatine kinase (CK-MM), and *ACTN3* (Zhou et al., 2006; Martínez et al., 2009; Norman et al., 2009; Santiago et al., 2011); (2) general metabolism and mitochondrial function/oxidative phosphorylation such as uncoupling proteins 2 and 3 (*UCP2* and *UCP3*) and peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors (*PPARA*, *PPARGC1A*, and *PPARD*; Ahmetov et al., 2009; Ginevičienė et al., 2011; Maciejewska et al., 2011, 2012); (3) blood vessel physiology such as endothelial nitric oxide synthase, hypoxia-inducible transcription factor, and vascular endothelial growth factor (Artoli et al., 2007; Ahmetov et al., 2008, 2009; Bray et al., 2009; Eynon et al., 2010a,b; Serrano et al., 2010); and (4) other physiological pathways such as adenosine monophosphate desaminase 1, angiotensinogen, and bradykinin receptor  $\beta_2$  (Williams et al., 2004; Rubio et al., 2005; de Groote et al., 2006; Lucia et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2006; Amir et al., 2007).

Despite these most extensively studied polymorphisms, and many others that have been related to performance (Table 1), controversial and nonreproducible results are common and point to observational studies with low statistical power and significance that are hampered by the low frequency of the polymorphism in the study population, the low influence of the polymorphism in the function of its gene, and the low relevance of the polymorphism to the phenotype studied (e.g.,  $\text{VO}_{2\text{max}}$ ; Bouchard et al., 2011b; Bouchard, 2012; Hong & Park, 2012; Pitsiladis et al., 2013; Yazdi & Robin, 2013). Furthermore, other factors may confound the understanding of the molecular basis of sports performance, such as cognitive, motivational, and social aspects. For example, it has been shown that 33% of the international level



*Fig. 1.* Some of genetic polymorphisms classically associated with physical performance. MSTN (GDF-8), myostatin; CK-MM, muscle creatine kinase; ACTN3, alpha-actinin-3; UCP2 and UCP3, uncoupling proteins 2 and 3; PPARA, PPARGC1A, and PPARD, peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors; eNOS, endothelial nitric oxide synthase; HIFA-1, hypoxia-inducible transcription factor; VEGF, vascular endothelial growth factor; AMPD1, adenosine monophosphate desaminase 1; AGT, angiotensinogen; BDKRB2, bradykinin receptor  $\beta$ 2; ACE, angiotensin converting enzyme.

Kenyan runners indicated that economic empowerment was the main motivation for running, whereas 18% chose tradition as the main motivator (Onywerea et al., 2006). The use of drugs and other substances that can drastically influence an athlete's physiology (doping) also is a confounding factor when investigating the contribution of genetic factors on sports performance.

Thus, increasing sample size in association studies is crucial to understanding the relationship between heredity and sports performance (Hagberg et al., 2011). However, obtaining larger samples is complicated by the small number of elite athletes from the same ethnicity in a given sport (Buxens et al., 2010; Eynon et al., 2011b, 2013). Moreover, the low number of publications with negative results complicates the understanding of the actual effect of these polymorphisms in different populations. Positive findings, showing the association of a polymorphism with a given phenotype, are more frequently published than negative results, resulting in a strong publication bias.

In recent years, several advances involving “genomic high throughput technologies” allowed the study of the involvement of a huge number of genes and their polymorphisms in multifactorial complex traits. These technologies have enabled complete sequences of individual

human genomes and genome-wide association studies (GWAS) to be applied to the study of sports practice and performance (Bouchard, 2011; Pérusse et al., 2013). Instead of focusing on extremely limited regions of the genome as simple association studies, GWAS investigate associations between phenotypes of interest and genetic variability in a more unbiased manner throughout the genome because the study is not as limited by investigating only hypothesis-driven candidate genes (Kim et al., 2011; Pitsiladis et al., 2013). GWAS do include the screening of candidate genes, whose results must be replicated and confirmed in other populations to be considered strong evidence of positive genetic association (Manolio, 2010; Mangino, 2014). In addition, these screenings may offer a wide range of possibilities for further investigations, including genotype–phenotype studies in exercise physiology. For instance, a very well-controlled study (HERITAGE Family Study) with sedentary Caucasians (483 individuals from 99 families) and African-Americans (259 individuals from 105 families) using a multivariate regression model identified 21 SNPs (Table 1) related to  $VO_{2max}$  levels, of which 16 accounted individually for 1.0–7.0% and collectively for 45% of the total variance in  $VO_{2max}$  in response to training (Bouchard, 2011). More comprehensive studies are

Table 1. A brief overview of the diversity of physical performance measures used in some studies on genetic polymorphisms published over the last 9 years

Performance measure		Sample population	Associated markers	Nonassociated markers	Reference
Genotype-phenotype	VO <sub>2max</sub> (cycle ergometer)	686 patients (stable congestive heart failure)	–	1 (AMPD1)	de Groote et al., 2006
Case	Sport ranking	121 elite athletes	1 ( <i>ACE</i> )	–	Amir et al., 2007
Control	Elite classification	247 controls	–	–	–
Genotype-phenotype	Torque-velocity relationship, Knee extensor isometric strength	79 recreationally active	–	2 ( <i>ACE, ACTN3</i> )	McCauley et al., 2008
Case	Sport ranking	230 rowers	5 ( <i>ACE, ACTN3, NOS3(5/4), UCP2, UCP3</i> )	–	Ahmetov et al., 2008
Control	Elite classification	855 controls	1 ( <i>ACTN3</i> )	–	Norman et al., 2009
Genotype-phenotype	Wingate test, isokinetic exercise, muscle fiber typing, mRNA levels	120 recreationally active	–	–	–
Case	Sport ranking, elite classification (power/sprint), TGS	46 endurance athletes	7 (TGS of the following genes: <i>ACE, ACTN3, AMPD, CKMIM, HFE, GDF-8, PPARGC1A</i> )	–	Ruiz et al., 2009
Control	Elite classification	123 controls	3 ( <i>IL6, NAT2, eNOS-786</i> )	–	–
Case	Sport ranking	153 athletes (100 endurance/power)	–	33 ( <i>ACE, ACTN3, ADRB1, ADRB2(2), ADRB3, AGT, APOA1, APOB(3), APOE(2), GNB3, GSTP1(2), GSTT1, GSTM1, NAT2(6 others), OGG1, DSG2(5), eNOS-894, NPY, SOD2,</i> )	Buxens et al., 2010
Control	Elite classification	100 controls	–	–	–
Case	Sport ranking	153 athletes (100 endurance/power)	6 (TGS of the following genes: <i>ACE, ACTN3, AMPD, CKMIM, HFE, GDF-8, PPARGC1A</i> )	–	Ruiz et al., 2010
Control	Elite classification	100 controls	–	–	–
GWAS/longitudinal	TGS	834 sedentary subjects	21 ( <i>PRDM1, GRIN3A, KCNMB, C9orf27, ACSL1, ZIC4, CAMTA1, RGS18, BIRC7, DBX1, DAAM1, NDN, CXCR5, TTC6, LOC400950, LOC100289626, LOC100130460, NLGN1, MN1, CD44, ENPP3</i> )	~ 320 000 other SNPs	Bouchard et al., 2011b
Case	VO <sub>2max</sub> gain	–	–	–	–
Genotype-phenotype	Delta efficiency	85 subjects	2 ( <i>UCP2, UCP3</i> )	–	Dhamrait et al., 2012
Case	Sport ranking	633 elite athletes/808 controls,	1 ( <i>ACTN3</i> )	–	Eynon et al., 2012
Control	Elite classification (power/sprint)	Spanish/Polish/Russian cohort	–	–	–
Genotype-phenotype	Maximum isometric patellar tendon force, muscle volume, maximum power, 1-RM	51 untrained subjects	2 ( <i>ACTN3, ACE*</i> )	–	Erskine et al., 2014
Case	Sport ranking	299 athletes	–	–	–
Control	Elite classification (power/sprint)	649 controls	1 ( <i>ACTN3</i> )	–	Mikami et al., 2014
Case	Sport ranking	660 athletes	3 ( <i>PPARD rs2267668†, rs2016520</i> and <i>rs1053049</i> ) and Haplotypes	–	Maciejewska-Karlowska et al., 2014
Control	Elite classification (power/sprint/strength/endurance and mixed classifications)	704 controls	–	–	–

\*Only combined with *ACTN3*.

†Combined with rs2016520 and rs1053049.

1-RM, one repetition maximum; GWAS, genome-wide association study; SNP, single nucleotide polymorphism; TGS, total genotype score; VO<sub>2max</sub>, maximal oxygen uptake.

needed with these genes for confirmation of functional allelic variants and to elucidate the mechanisms associated with this possible effect. However, despite the great advances in this field, the GWAS methodology should be applied rigorously in larger cohorts, in which the phenotype of interest is better defined, to circumvent the problem of low statistical power (Manolio, 2010; Kim et al., 2011; Pitsiladis & Wang, 2011; Zhang et al., 2011). Thus, the analysis of larger cohorts, although difficult in the science of elite sports performance, may involve the formation of consortia that combine multiple studies and acquire samples from an adequate number of individuals from different populations, similarly to what has been done in genomic studies from other health science areas, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. However, an exaggerated increase of the sample size can strongly favor the appearance of type I statistical error (Jannot et al., 2015) and potentially an incorrect selection of candidate genes. The replication of novel results in different population samples may be more important than the indiscriminate increase of sample size.

### The role of mitochondrial inheritance

Mitochondria play a prominent role in physical performance because they generate the essential oxidative capacity in skeletal muscle for endurance activities (Niemi & Majamaa, 2005).  $VO_{2max}$ , which is the “gold standard” for aerobic capacity, depends not only on cardiac output, but mainly on the ability of muscles to perform oxidative phosphorylation. In fact, there is a predominance of type I muscle fibers with high density of mitochondria and aerobic metabolism capacity in top endurance athletes who typically have high  $VO_{2max}$  values (Eynon et al., 2011c; Mikami et al., 2011).

Several oxidative phosphorylation proteins are encoded by the mitochondrial genome (mtDNA) itself, thus making it an excellent candidate for influence on aerobic performance (Scott et al., 2008; Nogales-Gadea et al., 2011). Although mtDNA genome is small (16569-bp) and contains only 13 protein-coding genes, its analysis can be useful for comparisons among ethnic groups (Eynon et al., 2011b; Mikami et al., 2011). Because mtDNA has a relatively higher mutation rate than the nuclear genome, the genome is maternally inherited without recombination, and the influence of ethnicity on elite athlete performance cannot be overlooked (Calvo et al., 2002; Buxens et al., 2010), mtDNA can be used to examine detailed phylogenies and explore the matrilineal kinship of individuals and populations (Larsson & Oldfors, 2001; Deason et al., 2012; Nunnari & Suomalainen, 2012; Wilber & Pitsiladis, 2012).

Mitochondrial DNA haplogroups, which are groups of similar haplotypes based on polymorphisms that share a common ancestor, reflect the concentration and spatial distribution of matrilineal lineages, which were established through generations during the evolution and

spread of humans. In fact, aerobic capacity has been found to have stronger maternal than paternal inheritance, which supports the importance of mitochondria with endurance activities (Nogales-Gadea et al., 2011).

Some studies have associated different mtDNA haplogroups with elite sports performance. Interestingly, haplogroup distribution of Ethiopian endurance runners did not differ from that of the general Ethiopian population (Scott et al., 2005b), whereas international Kenyan athletes differed in their mtDNA haplogroup distribution relative to the general Kenyan population and displayed an excess of L0 haplogroups and a dearth of L3\* haplogroups (Scott et al., 2008). Conversely, no significant difference in total haplogroup frequencies was found between Jamaican sprinters and the general population (Deason et al., 2012). Thus, more comprehensive studies are needed because, besides genomic DNA, certain mtDNA haplogroups, subhaplogroups, and polymorphisms may influence human physical performance in a given population (Scott & Pitsiladis, 2007; Maruszak et al., 2014).

Because mitochondrial metabolism is fundamentally different between endurance and sprint/power athletes (Flueck & Eilers, 2010; Eynon et al., 2011a,c), there is great interest in investigating mitochondrial genetic diversity and its complex interactions with nuclear genome, in association with human physical performance, to uncover possible mitochondrial profiles for each type of sports activity.

### The role of ethnicity in genetic inheritance

In addition to mitochondrial inheritance, other associations between genetic profile and physical performance seem to occur consistently in certain populations. However, these associations cannot always be extrapolated to other ethnic groups. For instance, the *ACE* polymorphism (intron 16) has been estimated to explain up to 47% of the variance in *ACE* levels in Caucasians, in whom the I allele has been associated with lower *ACE* plasma levels and high endurance performance. Conversely, no differences in *ACE* levels and allelic frequency were observed between Kenyan athletes and the general Kenyan population, indicating that other factors may influence endurance performance in this population (Scott et al., 2005a; Thorn et al., 2010). Also, similar frequencies of the *ACTN3* polymorphism were observed between individuals from Nigeria and Kenya, whose athletes are known to excel in sprint and endurance events, respectively (Yang et al., 2007). These data indicate that the influence of *ACTN3* may be secondary to other genetic and environmental characteristics that differ between populations (Scott et al., 2010). The differences between populations can be striking, with frequencies of the *ACTN3* X allele close to 10% in African and 50% in Eurasian populations (North et al., 1999; North, 2008).

Ethnic differences may be even more complex. In some cases, different biogeographical origins of a given population should be considered. For instance, elite Kenyan endurance runners differed greatly in their biogeographical origin and tribe relative to the general Kenyan population (Onywera et al., 2006). Thus, studying highly heterogeneous and/or admixed populations represents a great challenge to understanding genomics within and among ethnic groups. If the “genetic advantage” is present in an ethnic group, it will not be revealed by comparing cases and controls in the same group, but rather by comparing individuals from different origins. In conclusion, ethnicity is an important variable to consider when examining the role of heredity in physical performance. The conflicting results of some studies may be attributed to the heterogeneity of the populations or the selection of a control group that is not representative of the actual population or that may even be incompatible with the case characteristics (Amir et al., 2007; Zoosmann-Diskin, 2008).

### **The role of epigenetics in performance**

Studies in the post-genomics era have been investigating the variability of gene sequences among individuals and also are focusing more so on the great variability in the form and extent to which each gene is expressed in the absence of changes in DNA sequence. The study of the mechanisms that alter gene expression is called epigenetics (McGee & Hargreaves, 2011; Costa et al., 2012; Raleigh, 2012; Denham et al., 2014). Because they do not alter the nucleotide sequence, epigenetic mechanisms can be a link between environmental stimuli and the regulation of genome function through the activation and inactivation of genes (Sharp, 2010). The variety of mechanisms that regulate gene expression can have a significant impact on physiological/metabolic pathways, particularly if major environmental factors are involved, as occurs in high-intensity training, which can cause efficient adaptation of a phenotype and influence sports performance (Gomez-Pinilla et al., 2011; Ehlert et al., 2013).

Physical exercise is known to induce significant transcriptional changes in peripheral blood cells, skeletal and cardiac muscle, brain, adipose tissue, and buccal cells in humans (Kaliman et al., 2011; Denham et al., 2014). In this regard, the RNA signature of a given tissue might better reflect the complex physiological alterations that occur in response to physical exercise (Bouchard et al., 2011a). An interesting study has observed that, from ~800 gene transcripts that were regulated after a 6-week fully supervised endurance training program in 24 young sedentary healthy men, at least 100 genes were differentially regulated between the highest and the lowest responders for aerobic capacity (Keller et al., 2011).

The major mechanisms by which the gene responds to environmental variation include covalent modifications of DNA and histones such as methylation, as well as the presence of transcription factors, coactivators, and noncoding RNAs, including long noncoding RNA (lncRNA) and microRNAs (miRNA; Sanchis-Gomar et al., 2012; Konopka & Sreekumaran Nair, 2013). For instance, miRNAs are small (~22 base pairs) noncoding RNA molecules that, when binding to target messenger RNAs (mRNAs), reduce their stability, leading to premature degradation or inhibition of their translation into proteins. Besides influencing the processes of myogenesis (Chen et al., 2006) and mitochondrial biogenesis (Russell et al., 2014), exercise has been shown to cause changes in the pattern of expression of several miRNAs (Radom-aizik et al., 2010; Eynon et al., 2011b; Kaliman et al., 2011), and some individuals respond better than others to exercise stimuli (Ehlert et al., 2013). The so-called lncRNA are bigger (>200 bp) and are involved in transcriptional and post-transcriptional regulation. They control important cellular processes, such as the differentiation of precursor myoblasts (Ballarino et al., 2015). Additionally, some RNAs annotated as lncRNA might actually encode micropeptides. A very elegant study has recently identified a lncRNA responsible for encoding the micropeptide myoregulin, which inhibits the uptake of calcium into the sarcoplasmic reticulum. Genetic knock down of myoregulin improved physical performance in mice (Anderson et al., 2015). Furthermore, changes in the patterns of DNA or histone methylation can affect mRNA transcription by preventing binding of transcription factors to their targets. In general, exercise in sedentary individuals seems to generate a hypomethylation of the genome in skeletal muscle cells, increasing local gene expression (Ntanasis-Stathopoulos et al., 2013). Other mechanisms, such as chromatin condensation and remodeling, also regulate gene expression (Konopka & Sreekumaran Nair, 2013). Of note, given that epigenetic changes are used to regulate tissue-specific gene expression, epigenetic alterations found in blood cells in response to exercise might not reflect similar changes in muscle fibers or endothelial cells, although they may reflect important physiological changes or can indirectly serve as useful biomarkers in particular cases. It also should be noted that epigenetic changes may be long-lasting (Kaliman et al., 2011; Mangino, 2014) and may help explain the influence of physical activity on the longevity and muscle fiber composition of individuals. Moreover, some of these epigenetic changes may be transmitted to offspring (Ahmetov et al., 2012).

### **The next generation of genetic analyses**

The greater availability of “next-generation sequencing” (NGS) techniques has enabled the emergence of whole genome studies aimed at understanding the different

phenotypes observed at the cellular, systemic, and behavioral levels (Ware et al., 2013). Having the ability to generate enormous amounts of raw data, NGS technologies have many applications, including massive identification of genetic polymorphisms and variable regions in the population(s) of interest, analysis of whole genomes and transcriptomes, and studies of epigenetic modifications on a grand scale (Cullum et al., 2011). Despite the seemingly high costs for a single analysis, these technologies actually represent a reduction in the total cost of sequencing when the amount of data that can be generated is considered (Xuan et al., 2013). Many more genetic markers can be typed simultaneously and the amount of information makes for more effective genetic association studies.

Exercise genomics has been incorporating these novel technologies, although more slowly than other fields of medical research (Bouchard, 2011; Mikami et al., 2014). Compared with other research areas, the number of published studies in the field of sports genetics still represents a very small fraction of the total of publications in the fields of sports and physical activity (Fig. 2(a)). A literature search in February 2015 in the Scopus database showed that the proportion of published studies containing terms commonly used in genetics studies (defined in our search as “genetic,” “genome,” “genomic,” or “polymorphism”) was lower in “sports or physical activity” studies than in other health sciences studies (“cancer,” “diabetes,” and “ischemic stroke”) for most terms. Despite the small number of genetic studies on “sports or physical activity,” the proportion of such studies has increased considerably over the last years, especially from 2011 onwards (Fig. 2(b)).

With increased use of these technologies, the systematic study of complete sequences of the DNA of high-performance athletes can help reveal which poly-

morphisms are related to a variety of sports disciplines. However, the costs of whole genome sequencing still are quite high. Alternatively, researchers can opt for only performing exome sequencing, i.e., the sequencing of the coding regions of the genome (van Dijk et al., 2014). Since the exome constitutes slightly less than about 1.5% of the human genome, it is far more feasible and economical to focus sequencing efforts on the exome. By associating these data with structural data from proteins, it is possible to understand how sequence changes could cause structural changes in proteins, affecting metabolic pathways related to high performance. However, exome sequencing will miss information in noncoding regions that could have substantial influence of performance.

Taking into account the importance of mitochondrial metabolism to athletic performance and the presence of a large number of mitochondria with multiple genome copies per cell, the assessment of the entire mitochondrial genome by NGS will permit a reliable elucidation of complete sequences, haplotypes, and haplogroups, and the identification of different types of mitochondrial genomes (heteroplasmy) in the same individual. In addition, differences in heteroplasmy levels among tissues may exist, highlighting the importance of choosing the appropriate tissue sample for each experiment (Tang et al., 2013; Wong, 2013). Although peripheral lymphocytes and buccal epithelial cells can be easily and quickly collected, their mitochondrial genomes may not reflect the same alterations related to heteroplasmy in muscle fibers. Different “mitochondrial populations” may have different metabolic phenotypes that can have an influence on the performance.

Looking for gene expression, unlike technologies such as quantitative polymerase chain reaction and microarrays, which allow the evaluation of selected panels of mRNA or microRNA, NGS can assess a wide

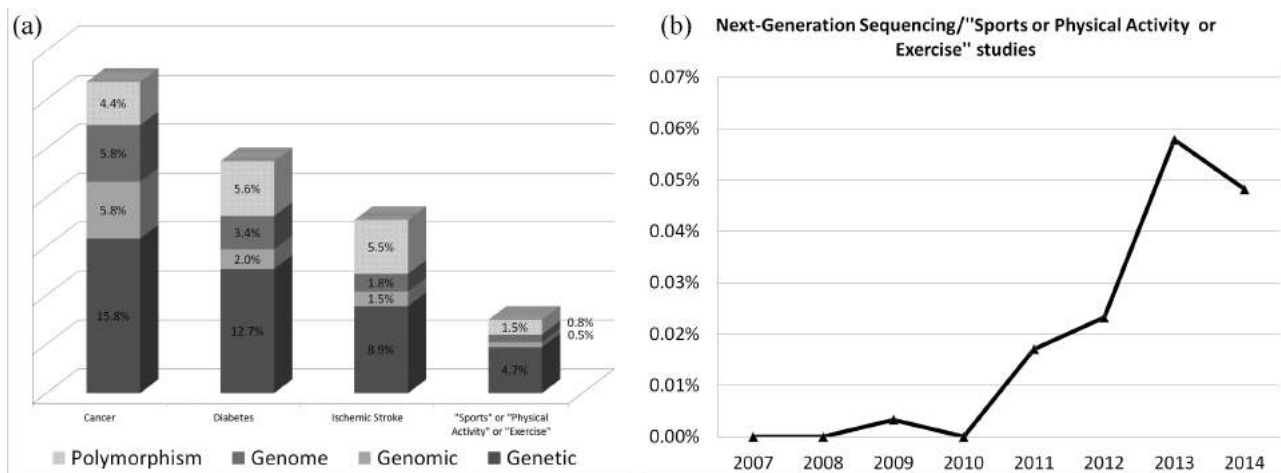


Fig. 2. Literature search showing the underrepresentation of genetic studies in the field of sports and physical activity. A literature search was performed in the Scopus database in February 2015. There were no language restrictions. (a) The bars indicate the percentage of published studies on each health science areas by cross-searching the terms “polymorphism,” “genome,” “genomic,” and “genetic” with the terms “cancer,” “diabetes,” “ischemic stroke,” and “sports or physical activity or exercise.” (b) Percentage of published studies with the term “next-generation sequencing” among the studies on “sports or physical activity or exercise.”



range of mRNA transcripts or microRNAs in a sample. Thus, a global overview can be obtained of gene expression and its variation after a biological stimulus, such as strength training. Regarding epigenetic factors, NGS can unveil DNA methylation patterns, post-translational editing, DNA–protein interactions, and transcription factor bindings, without restrictions to certain positions in the genome (Pareek et al., 2011).

NGS also can be coupled with modern separation techniques, allowing the evaluation of the genome, epigenome, or transcriptome of single cells (Raue et al., 2012; Murach et al., 2014). Thus, single-cell genetic analysis can contribute to the improvement in the understanding of several aspects of muscle cell function, regeneration, plasticity, and adaptation to physical activity, as well as to the comprehension of the unique characteristics of each type of muscle fiber.

In the near future, NGS tools could be used to generate important information about the contribution and interaction of a large number of genes and their variation in determining complex traits related to sports performance. However, the huge amount of data generated with the use of these new technologies requires a more rigorous analysis, greater caution with experimental design, and larger sample size to reduce false associations from being made.

Genomic studies for physical activity should strictly define and observe the performance influencing characteristics of each sport or activity to clearly determine the study variables. In complex traits, the variable (e.g., athletic parameters) must be properly selected so that sampling errors do not confound or overestimate the influence of a particular gene variant for sports performance. Moreover, genetic tests may have little or no prediction for athletic performance if inadequate parameters are selected.

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By combining the use of the robust molecular tools with a sound experimental design that uses classical and well-established sports performance tests applied to a population with well-defined physiological variables, it will be possible to generate data of substantial scientific value. Good science can pave the way to understand what makes a high-performance athlete.

## Perspectives

The evolution of molecular techniques may make it possible to uncover the contribution of the genetic component to physical performance. The association of genomic, transcriptomic, and epigenomic new sequencing technologies with proteomics/metabolomics data; the formation of international consortia to acquire thousands of samples; and the use of robust experimental designs are crucial steps to advance our knowledge about the molecular basis of sports performance.

**Key words:** Genetic, physical performance, genomic, heritability, polymorphisms, next-generation sequencing.

## Acknowledgements

Professor Rosane Silva receives grants from Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq), Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ), and Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES). Professor Rodrigo S Moura-Neto has a grant from FAPERJ and Professor Fernando A M S Pompeu has a grant from CAPES. Dr Pedro M Pimentel-Coelho is supported by a fellowship from Programa Ciência Sem Fronteiras-CAPES. The authors wish to thank Bruno Felipe Martins de Almeida for the artwork in Fig. 1.

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