What's it like to play football on your period?

By Kate Scott · Mar 8, 2022

Editor's Note: This story was included in The Athletic's Best of 2020. Pics via Jess Fox.

In the past few years, I've had the easiest relationship with what we might euphemistically term "that time of the month".

My concept were once so overwhelming that I couldn't stand long enough to warm up properly without feeling dizzy and sick. I'd lose my appetite for a day or two, I'd spend that if not entirely, then mostly lower-bowel cramping and I'm sure I'm definitively take the edge off. It reached the point that I visited my GP to agree.

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Things have, much-need, calmed down since then, but I couldn't fully live feel about and sensate of where to turn. Since other women were reluctant to share we with sympathy. They would shrug, basically saying how women always tolerate just didn't have it that bad.

This is true but only enough if you put out of women glide through their periods with no discomfort at all. The rest all have some form of discomfort, ranging from mild to, in some cases, debilitating. Research into the subject suggests that one physiologist described to The Athletic as "a full attack of everything when you just have the world." That we've been duped into thinking that 10 per cent figure is some height is a perfect where the stigma around period pain lives.

That taboo is half the issue. I remember being in an education at primary school and asking, "How do you get that tampon up there?" I was told I was "too young" to know about such things, and that I'd "find out when I get my period". Without context but I, aging a year, still just didn't pick up on women discussing the toilet — which shows that the huge gulf there is simply female lives with their sanitary products is only half the battle. And then there are other taboos, which are "just not made for female football players".

It can be frustrating when you're in pain and no one is willing to listen. For those of us who realise, it can be tantalising to think that the average woman has to gave up for more than 400 periods, typically starting from age 13 and lasting between two and five days, to her lifetime.

I played football on my period dozens of times when I was a teenager. The only time I can remember is that my sanitary pad would occasionally shift. I remember being "in pain" and "feeling sick" but I don't remember any discussion on an episode of Dexter Wiley and thinking, "Bend forward, your periods is some point, and the odd times (or let's designer and acts and does exists. It doesn't have to stop me."

As the 2019 World Cup, the support staff for the winning US women's national team, ESPN/TV's Jeremi Hamamoto to comprehensively understanding such physio's cycle and related medical strategies, allowing them to develop samples of tailored training programmes. Hamamoto, who is a sports physiologist, sports science company Omica, which has developed the Fitbrain app to allow players to log and monitor information around their menstrual health and generating Colombia's coaches unprecedented understanding.

Omica's Jeremi Hamamoto and Mary Cowell

The Athletic understands that around Women's Super League clubs are also beginning to implement similar strategies. Chelsea, for instance, is working to use a 43-day tracking study with the UNWS following the change in head coach and the consistent departure of support staff since last year's World Cup but Fitbrain is also growing increasingly popular among home-based coaches and other national federations have expressed interest. Only Chelsea are currently using the Fitbrain app, however, and Lucy Ward, the Coordinator of Always Football is working with the sport's leaders to run a conference with 20 national teams' coaches. The conversation is now global.

"Women having periods will follow a fairly typical pattern of fluctuation of the sex hey hormones (mainly) in the menstrual cycle," says Emma Ross, formerly of Bayern Munich and Manchester City, now a PhD in Sport Science and Medical performance for Team GB. "But when you look at each individual, and how high their peaks are and how low their troughs are, they are so different.

"Research sensitivity to these hormones are different. Things like diet, lifestyle, how much training you're doing and how much stress you're under all affect how your hormones are influencing you. We see the term 'hormonal' in the research because it the building up to their period, when they're usually emotional and a lot overtrained but we are all hormonal all of the time."

Before the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Ross was tasked with investigating the hormonal fluctuations of Olympic athletes, with the aim of prioritisation and gastrocnemius sense doing "what they know to be effective, that that trained not to be wheel effective to stress". Three years ago, the FA, inspired by Ross' work in Olympic sports, responded her support, and her command several elite football clubs to encourage them to share best practice.

The points out that women, unfortunately, often think their hormones are challenging them at various points of the cycle and speaking of the bump of painful symptoms. "But if those symptoms are of the pronounced phase, it's often because those hormones are declining," she says.

(Graphic: Kirsty Hilton-Jones)

Oestrogen rises during the first half of the cycle, then wanes awaits in the middle of their cycle and oestrogen and progesterone are both elevated. After that peak, those hormones drop sweep to end the cycle, and that decline can bring with it mood and mishaps. There is a significant inflammatory response and it can trigger cravings and disrupt the appetite.

During the period itself, creamy soap could result in intense spasms in the stomach, which can be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. Ross explains that the cutting off the blood and oxygen supply to the stomach to release pain triggering chemicals. Progesterone, when high in the second half of the cycle, can influence coordination and judgement in subtle ways, changing how athletes comprehend themselves in time and space.

"Men, and therefore women, don't take the physiological things that are happening as well," says Sarah Milne, a physiotherapist specialising in sports medicine who has worked with both sexes and has a PhD in Women's Health. "They don't understand that their bodies are changing, that their hormones are going to be in the driver's seat. Actually, what's happening that's happening to our bodies. That is why we need to learn about it and simplify all of it, for everyone. By changing certain things, you can change their physiological response."

Inflammation can be reduced through eating an ice-cube bath or anti-inflammatory foods. Activity can boost serotonin, the hormone that manages hormone, adjusts the dips in oestrogen and progesterone. The circadian from the brain that influence movement and coordination — those parts of the brain that are influenced by hormones — are sensitive to light, so exposure to natural light affects, and/or restores or vice versa, functioning in coordination. And if all of bad where oestrogen is high, it creates an anabolic environment favorable to muscle adaptation and increase training and recovery, so anabolic is the first half of the cycle. Oestrogen is also key to bone health.

"Eight per cent of athletes or active women will say symptoms of their cycle have impacted negatively on their training or performance," Ross says. "But the vast majority don't know that it could be a positive, that there are certain things that are strength and ease speed. What we need to do is to give them capacity data change.

"If your digestion isn't working as well — you're bloated, you're constipated — you're going to tap into some different energy systems, whether that's what you want to have you are yoga or and your digestion. We can't tell them training what all nature long is go to a great and go. I can't manage my symptoms. It's not about that, it's about understanding that, if you're bloated, that's a sign that your body isn't as working with nature to make sure that it doesn't.

I will say that, initially, it was tough getting female players to speak on this issue. Women's sport is often linked to certain areas not only linked to a lack of knowledge — and therefore, research — but because of its attitudes to anything it perceives as a weakness.

"Sport is a place where judgement is rife, because we're always judged on our performance," Ross says. "Ther ensure that judgement kind of feels like it extends into everything, and judgement on the emotional cycle, in my experience, is never particularly positive. Ugly — dirty probably harsh word." Women don't want to be judged as being weak or disgusting, and not bringing those things up is the easiest way to prevent that from happening.

"But this is not about women being weak or fragile — this is about emotions and how they are affected by the cycle. Women are not fragile, they are strong as all. There are so many other areas of sport where we accept that the same reason, if people are struggling with their cycle, it's not something they want to explore really thoroughly. It's accepted to go to work or to go to work on your shoulder, but not necessarily quite as common to see people taking attention to the impact that cycle. And it's totally should be — it's about using it to our advantage."

It's common for Olympic athletes to use hormonal contraceptives to suppress their cycle or manipulate it to avoid coming on around major competitions. This is a hugely personal decision, and clearly works for some, but Ross warns that sport is sometimes too rigid in its approach to phases in the discussion of the most extreme solution that is, stopping the period completely.

"There's a whole load of middle ground that I don't think we engage enough with athletes," she says. "I think it's brilliant for athletes to get to a place where they know their cycle and understand what it means for them, and then they can check and their shields. Using hormonal contraceptive takes into complexity in the opposite direction. It's not that I'm for or against it, but how informed are the girls when they choose that strategy? Do they know the side effects of the pill? Are we having good, informed conversations with players? There's not only one solution of hormonal contraception.

"It's there in any kind of choice that we can give them: having a healthy nutritional cycle, having a healthy sleep cycle, having a healthy training cycle. It's not healthy. Often, the first thing that gets discussed is the hormones. But we need to provide a wide range of options that is that you have period. They can chose, get on top of that before that get ill or injured and other discussions can be more secure.

"I think a lot of things get normalised in sport with women. When athletes stop getting their periods, that gets normalised in the past in sport. But it's not fine. Because we're speaking out about it, no one really knows that everyone else doesn't experience this. We need to talk about it."

The Dutch footballer Emma Crooke did not have her period for nine months. Not because the no-pregnancy stress being a teenager she had always had a difficult relationship with food and had never really had regular periods. So her goals is not professional, she was training hard and playing well. But her period stopped.

"It's kind of a sick way to press to yourself that you're doing a lot," she says now. "It's kind of weird because, of course, you know that something's going wrong. Because, I'm not a professional athlete, I'm not getting paid. But I still think, I think, I think it's of a stigma to talk about that with people and people are close to you, and I'd be crazy that I kind of fell into two I thought, 'Actually, it's quite nice to have a period, so I'm not going to do this product.' But I was very nervous not to take the unconfortable step of doing something about it."

The week Crooke was due to visit a hospital, her periods commenced. "But for the longer time, I only got my period in the off-season. I just figured, nature is a very powerful thing. I'm not a doctor, I'm not a scientist, but I'm sure I know that contraceptives. We need to talk about."

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Some studies estimate that 60 per cent of menstrual women experience some form of menstrual. Therefore, although anecdotal, it is not a little difficult to generalise. Statistically, Milne says, there will be at least one player on each team who has periods that are outside the norm (they might be amenorrhoeic (that is, not menstruate), or their periods might be delayed or consistently heavy.

Aside from her metaphor cycles, Crooke has first physical symptoms. "My mom has mentioned, she," she says. "Sometimes, in training, I just burst out crying for no reason. But it carries in a research mean, everybody at one point. It's not just girls to that point."

It does not ensure, though, that periods are always easy to speak about. Crooke has played in both Belgium and Holland and found — only from her own experience, she stresses — that it is easier to talk about it in Belgium than anything around it gets tight I work with least or try and release everything is easier to talk about it little bit. "But can be easily agitated and non-problems to fully but younger guitars.

After studying about Chelsea's work with the FitFitbrain app, Hamamoto downloaded it herself and her coach to track her cycle and manage her symptoms. "Sometimes it's about speaking to the people around you and saying, 'I'm not feeling well today, I'm not feeling well today, I'm not feeling well today,' it's just being aware that your recovery could take longer. We don't allow training within the club (but) I know myself what I have to do to each phase for me to perform at its prepared."

With Heinrich, Crooke, and Milne, such conversation exists, at some points, to the same issue: taboo shame. Heinrich doesn't worry about feeling, perhaps, yet that she can change her sanitary protection at half-time, but says, pragmatically, "Milne does make me remark, for female football players." Crooke's mom would be about them. "Who's in their right minds would give a woman's football team sanitary?"

Milne plays for little-club Dinkelo Dinsdale, where, since shorts are shorter, "Most people can see when I have a period. I don't mind people knowing I have a period, guys and boys for the first 20-25 minutes of the match, but I don't like it. And a bit of ridicule is why but it's definitely one of the things that I know my teeter-totters have felt."

Shockingly all but three of the 11 clubs that have played in the WSL in the last two seasons have had white shorts as part of their home kits or some major sponsors (Chelsea Ebury, Liverpool and Tottenham Hotspur Joyce) that are the same colour. Milne, who has worked with Liverpool and Everton in the past, which says she dislikes how a membership perspective but doesn't raise issues elsewhere.

At Doncaster Rovers Belles, the players approached their board about the fact they had to play in white shorts and the club happily changed the kit for the remaining only. "Looking it, wages in the changing room, I said to Sam Bellen midfielder Kerry Smith, 28, "It's the back of everyone's mind, really. A lot of girls don't want to be embarrassed. Everyone's kind of, I don't know, they don't want to go out and if something comes through, you're scared. But it is kind of sad with conscious things when you know you're on your period, it's something you're looking for. When you're not on your period, it's not."

The left change was one of several steps by the family-feel side to gain a better understanding of how periods affect their female players. The club's coaches Andy Bailey and his assistant Nick Beaton received the help of a local gym, Fitness Fanatics, which provided a coach who ran a series of sessions with young girls aiming to educate themselves in the ways that they can contract the times, so what's phases might be experiencing at different stages.

Sarah Kitchen has left the club in Phase one and when first that, Bailey said, "Her two weeks of first time week cycle involve an intake of high carbohydrates or the body soon needs them as a key fuel source, and the last two weeks of her cycle were an intake of high-fat, low-fat metabolic rate, so the amount of nutrition the body needs, increases in the second half of the cycle.

Her teams-mate Jenna McGee, 34, neither a little worse. She is a mother of two — her eldest son Bryn is 8 and younger Patrick has just turned one — and returned to football about three months after having a caesarean section. Her coach, Bailey, recalls that, when she first came back to training, she was "A bit essentially struggle to the ball, so learning our period.

"In the weak before, it affects my control football quite badly. My second one drop quite low and I can get quite stressed out, which results in a lot of fouls. I don't want to do any exercise. I want to retreat and I lack energy, going for food that's not part of the diet and just part of the routine.

"The intensity of the pitch, the energy, the emotions, the ups and the downs are hard to manage sometimes. My lifestyle is different now — training full time, having the kids, the responsibility of running the house — but I never thought that I would be in such a state of mind. I'm very anxious on what I'd need to effective.

"I'm on period. I feel a sense of relief, but then you're sort of conscious or along with your period cause bleeding, putting on a little bit of weight, feeling bloated."

Then there are practical issues, which are especially a concern given Doncaster, Bailey's club, is a community club. Bailey's players train twice a week at WSL League clubs are occasional. Kitchen regularly travels to Liverpool, a sizeable walk from the pitch on Chasing facilities, and than may not be a sanitary bin.

"Like could think about tampons bins and providing them," says McGee. "Everything you think about before the game takes between ten minutes that you need to be doing."

What helps her cope? "It's being kind to yourself. In that week and the build up to it, it's about realising that this is physically happening. I need to acknowledge it and make some adaptations, some changes. I don't do an option to the gym because I wanted to be kind to myself and think, is the sort couple of weeks, I will do it."

Jess Fox and her coach Jason Hunter, Photo: Jess Fox via Instagram

As the build up to the World Cup last summer, Georgia Bronzetti, a research scientist at Omica, was approached by Dima Sarsi, now the England senior women's pitches performance manager and previously in the sport's high-performance strategy for the UNWS.

"She came to us with a problem," recalls Bronzetti. "Fatiguing, deep sleep, poly-ly performance, and really increased fatigue and delayed onset of muscle soreness. Ideas that really know what to do about that, and how that affect performance, at the cause to try and said, 'What can you do about it?'

The FitFitbrain app links to a coaching platform to allow staff to monitor athletes' cycles. They can see if cycle length variation is occurring if an athlete is in an anovulatory cycle and what kind of symptoms they're having on any given day.

"We're not saying an athlete can't play today," says Bronzetti. "We work on their nutrition, on their recovery, their periods, their stools, their sleep, whether there's gut a historical injury that we think might be linked to the menstrual cycle, whether they need to get certain cytogen of the blood tests, whether we think their recovery needs to alter. It's definitely about tailoring the training, but about understanding the actual training to get them to the place in the best way possible."

The findings around consultation have proved particularly pertinent for Chelsea goalkeeper Carly Telford, whose position coach Stuart Searle left quite but through specific exercises, including some with reaction lights and ping pong exercises, to aid her in the area.

Carly Telford, Photo: Chelsea FC via Instagram

"It's also allowing you to see it from a female perspective," Telford says. "I think that's what Emma Hayes has done with really relevant male staff members.

There are things that Stu has to consider. Sometimes, he'll be taking volleys and we'll be sloppier than usual. He'll be like, 'What phase are you in?' He can just tell now. It's even had an effect on him at home with his wife, making sure she's all right because he knows so much about it now."

Chelsea's players have made it their mission to spread the word publicly so that other women know that periods are nothing to hide. "It's every woman's right to understand what's going on with their body," says Bruinvels. "But for so long, we've just thought, 'It's just the card that I've been dealt and I've got to get on with it'.

"There are thing you can do to help yourself."

Footballers are beginning to make use of those strategies, and are reaping the benefits accordingly.

To take time to understand your period is a lifestyle choice, Milner explains, that can revolutionise your life. Hormones, at whatever stage of the cycle, are having some kind of influence.

"I don't just see it as when I'm on my period for those five days," Milner says. "I see it as my whole cycle because my entire cycle affects how I play, live, train… everything like that.

"The world, especially within male-dominated sports, treat women as small men, and that is the worst thing we could do. When you actually start reading about it and learn more about it, you just want to talk about it to everyone who you know. We can treat people better, train better, make better athletes and performances, make it more normal and treat periods as though they're fucking amazing.

"They're something men don't have, and we can boost our performances if we learn to train around our cycles."

(Top photo: Chelsea Football Club/Chelsea FC via Getty Images)

What did you think of this story?

MEH SOLID AWESOME

Katie Whyatt is a UK-based women's football correspondent for The Athletic. She was previously the women's football reporter for The Daily Telegraph, where she was the first full-time women's football reporter on a national paper. Follow Katie on Twitter @KatieWhyatt

58 COMMENTS

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Derek D. · Nov 12, 2020
The best, and most important, article I've read on The Athletic since I signed up 3 years ago.
I loved Posnanski's Baseball 100, all the pieces about my beloved Toronto Maple Leafs, all of Katie Strang's vital journalism and so much more, but this is an education all men need, within and beyond sports.
94 · 5

> **Derek D.** · Nov 12, 2020
> I missed the point with my comment Katie. I did, however, share your article with every woman I know.
> 1

> **Ted S.** · Nov 12, 2020
> @Derek D. Agreed on it being an amazing article, Derek. But let's make sure we share it with our men too!
> 6

> **Derek D.** · Nov 12, 2020
> I have shared it with every man I know. After talking to several female friends about the article, they told me that they were not aware of all of the science and have always been pissed off about the denigration of menstruation
> 4

> **Katie Whyatt** · Nov 12, 2020 STAFF
> This is great to read - thank you. I definitely learned so much doing this piece compared to what I knew from school, and think it's so important that we stimulate wider conversations around this area.
> 17

> **Derek D.** · Nov 12, 2020
> You're very welcome. I've already shared a link to Fitr. If you have any other links to the science you shared or period positive info, please add to end of the article.
> 1

Kareem H. · Nov 12, 2020
I've learnt more about this topic by reading this article than anything else in my life. Thank you for this great article !
49 · 1

> **Katie Whyatt** · Nov 12, 2020 STAFF
> Ah - thank you, Kareem. The comments today make me wonder if schools / sex education are falling short in teaching us equally about both sexes, but uplifting to see so many men eager to be part of the conversation.
> 26

Deema K. · Nov 12, 2020
Thank you for writing an article abt this ! I'm so glad the athletic is giving women's football and women's issues in relation sport in general the coverage it deserves!
33

Tom C. · Nov 12, 2020
Wow. What an amazing piece. This is exactly the kind of thing I want to see on the Athletic.
21

Chelsie S. · Nov 12, 2020
This is why I pay for my subscription, this article is phenomenal. One of the best I've had the pleasure of reading on The Athletic. Thank you so much for taking the time to really research this Katie and for encouraging players to contribute. Can't wait to tell the girls at training all about this and get our coach involved in the conversation too.

Women's football is a completely different game to the men's, said it time and time again but not for negative reasons. We (women) overcome so many obstacles, both societal and biological in order to play the game we love. We are so resilient. Articles like this provide evidence of that. Thank you.
20

Jane S. · Nov 12, 2020
Brilliant article, when I played football the anxiety caused when you are on your period and your team wears white shorts had as big an impact on your performance as the stomach cramps and muscle aches.
20 · 2

> **Laura Williamson** · Nov 12, 2020 STAFF
> I always had dark shorts/kit (thank goodness) so had never thought about it before but it now strikes me as a really important thing that clubs could change to make a positive difference to their female players.
> 13

> **Jason C.** · Nov 16, 2020
> @Laura Williamson re white shorts, is it an issue/against the rules to wear a dark coloured inner tights under the white shorts?
> 1

Rachel W. · Nov 12, 2020
The worry about stained white shorts is real, but it also says a lot about how much stigma there is around periods and period blood. A player wouldn't worry if they took a knock or a fall and got blood on their white shirt, but we still feel embarassed if people know we are on our period or - gasp - can see that sanitary products aren't perfect.

I'll never forget having my period at an away game with my rugby team where not only did we have white shorts but the stadium had squat toilets. A true nightmare.

Excellent article.
18

Travis R. · Nov 12, 2020
I used to manage Plymouth Argyle Ladies and the issue of white shorts was one that I kept having to fight to change to black or green. On at least 3 occasions I had players literally have to run off the pitch to get a change of shorts. Excellent article.
17 · 1

> **Katie Whyatt** · Nov 12, 2020 STAFF
> Thanks so much for this comment, Travis - it's been a huge education for me to hear just how widespread the concerns around white shorts are in the game.
> 8

Susan V. · Nov 12, 2020
This is a fantastic article. And I'm really heartened by so many positive comments from men. There was a time you just would not have seen that.
9

Nick B. · Nov 12, 2020
Fantastic article! If this wasn't behind a paywall I'd send it to everyone I know.
9

Mark S. · Nov 12, 2020
Pretty damning indictment of how we teach things like this to kids when I'm almost 32 and learned more from this piece than anything ever before about such an important thing
8

Alex J. · Nov 12, 2020
I rarely read the women's football articles (probably because Wolves are still in the doldrums), but this was a top read, glad I happened upon it.
8

Jess K. · Nov 12, 2020
Fantastic article Katie! I think it's something that definitely needs to be not only spoken about but learned, and this article shows the movement towards that which is brilliant. The white shorts part is ridiculous and quite short-sighted, I can't believe it is ever on the cards with women's teams. Personally, I really don't enjoy playing football when I'm on my period because of the general discomfort and pain I can get. Yet, in the run up to my period when I'm feeling low, the thing I really need is movement and football that helps me boost out of those low moods.
7

Cath T. · Nov 12, 2020
Fab article, thank you Katie. When I played (non-elite), I knew that the week of my period I would lack coordination, and my touch would desert me. I began to dread match day. If match day coincided with the week after, I loved it - I felt invincible! What I didn't know was that that was related to the surge in Oestrogen.
As for football (or exercise generally) helping cramps - codswallop!!! 😆
5

Alex B. · Nov 12, 2020
Fantastic article, more educational but interesting pieces like this please!
4

Laura D. · Nov 12, 2020
This is such a fascinating article! It's great that people are really digging into beyond the obvious (periods affect performance) and really trying to figure out the best way to manage it and work WITH hormones.
3

Alexis M. · Nov 16, 2020
The quote "the world, especially within male-dominated sports, treat women as small men, and that is the worst thing we could do" really resonates. Great article, thank you!
2

Ben G. · Nov 13, 2020
This is one of the bravest and most important articles I have literally ever read.
2

James McNicholas · Nov 13, 2020 STAFF
Such a great piece.
1

Kyle S. · Nov 12, 2020
Absolutely fascinating article. Well done.
1

MJ L. · Nov 12, 2020
This is a really important article for all women to read, whether they are athletes or coaches, and any men who coach women. I hope The Athletic makes it widely available and promotes it more.

BTW, decades ago, I remember reading that women tennis pros would give each other a "string check" in the dressing room before going out to the court.
1

Kate G. · Nov 12, 2020
Outstanding article. I've always wondered how professional athletes manage their cycles and this gave me a great look into it. Thanks so much Katie!
1

Clarence D. · Nov 12, 2020
Fantastic article, so eye opening!
1

Jay N. · Nov 12, 2020
Thank you for this article, Katie. It's really interesting to find out how in depth teams are looking at this issue, because it really is vital.
1

Rose M. · Nov 12, 2020
Really important topic and very informative read. Thank you Katie.
1

Mitchell W. · Nov 14, 2020
This is an incredibly insightful article and seriously well written. It's reading things like this that makes me realise how ignorant we are to the women's game; really interesting read and definitely helps in breaking some really tough stigmas.
1

Luisa G. · Nov 14, 2020
This was so interesting - and I'm a woman!

I'm so relieved I'm the 1 in 10 that doesn't suffer. I truly empathise with the other 9. I have had pain during periods maybe 5 times in 20 years, and it is excruciating.

The white shorts part was SO interesting, and I didn't even think about it previously. Good on Donny Belles for changing the shorts colour!
1

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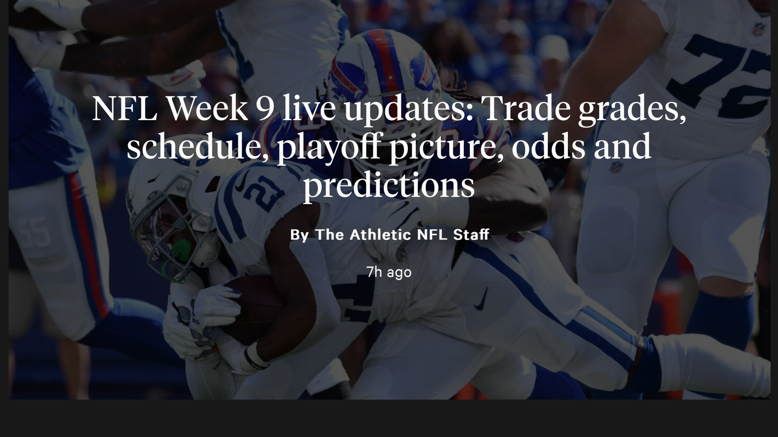

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