It is Not Black and White: A Comparison of Skin Tone by Playing Position in the Premier League and English Football

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Abstract

Within the present manuscript we explore the role of skin tone on playing position within English football's top four professional leagues. Player data (N = 4,515) was collected across five seasons (2010-2015). Results indicate that in general, darker skin toned players are more likely to operate within peripheral rather than central positions. Using both one and two-way ANOVAs, results suggest significant differences between skin tone and individual playing positions. Between league differences were, however, non-significant. Although player of a darker skin tone are still more likely to occupy peripheral positions, the situation is more nuanced than first thought. Instead of segregating players by central versus peripheral roles, it appears that footballers of a darker skin tone occupy peripheral positions traditionally associated with athleticism and strength, while teammates of a lighter skin tone are more likely to fill central positions considered to need organisational skills and creativity. That said, within English football there are still some positions, which appear almost exclusive to players of a lighter skin tone (i.e., goalkeeper and attacking midfield).

Keywords: Racial stacking; Racial Stereotypes; Racial Stratification; Soccer; Colourism; Positional Segregation

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> "As a scientist rather than a sociologist, I am prepared to risk political incorrectness by drawing attention to the seemingly obvious but under stressed fact that black sprinters and black athletes in general all seem to have natural anatomical advantages". ~ Sir Roger Bannister speaking at the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1995 (Smith & Leonard II, 1997).

Anecdotal comments – such as Sir Roger Bannister's – citing differences in biodiversity between light and dark skin toned athletes are common in society (see Entine, 2000). However, there is thought to be very little variation in biodiversity in humans and what genetic variation there is may largely be focused on processes such as our ability to digest particular foods, breathe air at different altitudes, and resist local diseases (Rutherford, 2017). Although such differences may be useful to when adapting to our environment, they are highly unlikely to play a large role in determining performance in skill based sports. Rather than being derived from genetics, sporting advantages are likely to be a result of an interaction between environment and culture (Harpalani, 2004). For example, although Kenyan athletes have become synonymous with long-distance running, their success in this field is far more likely to be the result of how they have adapted to their environment and the way in which distance running is revered socially within their culture (Larsen, 2003). Further, assigning anatomical advantages based on skin tone assumes that any variation in genetics is absolute. This, however, is not the case (Rutherford, 2017). As such it is highly unlikely that the tone of one's skin or any other physical characteristic used to define race has any discernible bearing on performance within technique based sports.

Despite these examples, skin tone and race are still regularly referred to within sport as having an influence on performance and playing characteristics (Furley & Dicks, 2014; Rasmussen, Esgate & Turner, 2005). Within the media, for example, it is commonplace for broadcasters to discuss darker skin toned players as naturally athletic and lighter skin toned players as intelligent (Buffington & Fraley, 2011, Eastman & Billings 2001; Stone, Lynch, Sjomeling, & Darley, 1997). Recently, former footballer turned pundit, Mark Lawrenson, made the following statement about Middlesbrough Football Club's Adama Traore: "When he has to think about things, he struggles, [but] when it's instinctive, it's easy" (Finch, 2016, November 21). Although such comments may at first appear benign, if an individual repeatedly suggests that certain characteristics are representative of a social group (e.g., that darker skin toned players lack intelligence), this suggests that stereotypes are being drawn upon in the evaluative process (Ferrucci, Tandoc, Painter, & Leshner, 2013). According to Koch, Sackett, and D'Mello (2014) such stereotypes are cognitive shortcuts that represent a set of qualities that are thought to represent the essence of group membership. In other words, stereotypes are the typical picture that quickly comes to mind when considering a specific social group (Lippmann 1922). In sport, Eastman and Billings (2001) have identified that the qualities associated with light skin tone players are: (1) intelligence, (2) leadership, (3) personality, and (4) work ethic. In contrast, the qualities associated with players of a darker skin tone are: (1) natural ability, (2) background, and (3) physical strength. Ferrucci et al. (2013) have since provided partial support for these associations by asking students to rate photographs of Black and White baseball players based on stereotypes identified in previous literature. There is, however, to our knowledge there is no evidence to suggest that skin tone has any bearing on complex behaviour such as creativity or psychological traits such as intelligence (Rutherford, 2017).

Beyond reflecting general beliefs about the traits which characterize typical group membership, stereotypes also provide contextual information around social groups (e.g., the social roles) and generate expectations about group members' anticipated behavior (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). When applied at a group level, stereotypes often result in the systematic and favorable evaluation of one's own membership group (i.e., in-group) as opposed to those outside who fall outside of own group membership (i.e., outgroup). Steele (1997) suggests that when an occupant of a social group becomes aware of a negative stereotype related to the task being undertaken, their performance may become impeded[1]. Steele and Aronson (1995) first defined this phenomenon as 'stereotype threat' and suggest that it is the by-product of one's reduced working memory capacity. Similar to the phenomenon of 'choking' when under pressure, scholars believe stereotype threats are the result of heightened attention to tasks typically completed instinctively (Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell., 2007; Schmader & Johns, 2003) or by a lowering of effort (Stone, 2002).

Athletes may also self-stack, by which the pressure to conform to stereotypes influences the individual's choice of playing position (Anderson, 2010). Eitzen (2016) argues that stacking refers to situations in which minority group members are relegated to specific team roles and excluded from competing for others. Consequently, stacking can lead to a form of racial stratification, whereby players are categorized based on the tone of their skin (see Smith & Leonard II, 1997 for an overview of the first 25-years of stacking literature). Although not directly related to skin tone, Furley and Mehmert (2016) provided evidence that coaches hold

[1] It is worth noting that recent criticism of the stereotype threat literature suggests that its effect on performance may not be as robust as previously thought (Flore & Wicherts, 2015).

specific stereotypes about physical size and beneficial performance characteristics. More specifically, they reported an automatic association between tall players with positive performance attributes and small players with negative performance attributes, within a sample of youth football coaches. It is not a huge leap, therefore, to expect that stereotypes around physical attributes to influence coach decision making when assigning players to positions (Eastman & Billings, 2001; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2017). Most notably, those stereotypes regarding the association between physicality and a darker tone of skin will result in players occupying peripheral positions linked with athleticism (i.e., full back and wide midfield). In contrast, players of a lighter skin tone may be viewed as intelligent, organised, and ultimately, more suited for central (i.e., goalkeeper, central defence, central midfield and forward) positions.

Prior literature and the need for further exploration.

Given the documented influence of skin tone on playing positions within sport, it is somewhat surprising that only limited research has explored this phenomenon outside of North America (Furley & Dicks, 2014). Although the consequences of racial stereotyping have been explored extensively in basketball and American football (for a review see Coakley, 2010), only Melnick (1988) and Norris and Jones (1998) have empirically examined the aforementioned processes within English football. Although the previously mentioned research has undoubtedly advanced our understanding, both studies are somewhat outdated and have methodological limitations that cannot be overlooked. For example, Melnick (1988) gathered player information by contacting the public relations officers of 22-football clubs and requested that they provide a list of their players names (n = 468), primary playing position, and race. It is worth noting here that by ‘race’, Melnick appeared to solely refer to the tone of skin as no further physical, social, or ancestral characteristics were requested. Using a playing position x race (i.e., binary skin tone)

chi-square, Melnick's results suggest an under representation of darker skin toned players in midfield and goalkeeping positions, an overrepresentation in attacking positions, and equal representation in defensive positions.

Next, Norris and Jones (1998) evaluated 10 pre-recorded Premier League games before assembling squad information (n = 1937) for each of the 92-football leagues clubs based on newspaper reports during the first 20-games of the 1994-95 season. Using the same binary black-white distinction as Melnick (1988), Norris and Jones (1998) also reported a disproportionate representation of skin tone x playing position. For example, they found that black goalkeepers were underrepresented when compared to white goalkeepers, while black centre forwards, and were overrepresented when compared to white centre forwards. Building upon this initial observation, Norris and Jones (1998) contacted 25 of the 92 teams evaluated for their perceptions on whether some positions are more important for team success than others. Of the 25-managers contacted, 10 replied and suggested that the three key positions are: (1) goalkeeper, (2) central defence, and (3) central midfield. Unfortunately, they did not state why only 25 team managers were contacted, which newspaper was used to generate the squad lists or how race was identified within their study. Although these studies are not without limitation, they do provide a baseline for further research to examine if and how attitudes have changed.

Data and method

Our data comprise 4,515 male professional football players across five seasons (i.e., 2010 to 2015) and four leagues (i.e., English Premier League, Championship, League One, and League Two). For each player the data consists of a unique player ID, name, date of birth, leagues in which the player has played in during the 2010-2015 season's, primary playing

111 position (i.e., the position in which the player made the most appearances), nationality, ethnicity,
112 and skin tone. The latter is rated on a 20-point scale from lightest skin tone to darkest. Each of
113 the variables included within the present study have gone through the following four-stage
114 quality assurance process: (i) Each club has their own researcher who is required to watch each
115 player regularly throughout the season. Within the leagues included, it is expected that
116 researchers attend at least one game per week (i.e., first, reserve, and youth teams). A constant
117 comparative approach is also adopted at club level, whereby researchers compare reports when
118 observing each other's teams for accuracy. Across the five seasons reported, this equates to
119 approximately 380-460 observations of the 4,515 players included. (ii) Club researchers report to
120 league researchers who then crosscheck the data against photographic and video evidence three
121 times per season. (iii) A six-person internal research department then re-check the data. (iv) The
122 data is then used within a popular football management simulator (e.g., two-million users),
123 which provides a dedicated forum for error reporting.

124 Our analytic strategy is to first investigate the question of whether skin tone has an effect
125 on central versus peripheral playing positions in English football (Melnick, 1988), before
126 exploring in greater detail the possible differences between individual playing positions and
127 leagues. In Melnick's study, skin tone was judged by club officials and based on a black versus
128 white dichotomized scale. However, we are uncomfortable in adopting the same approach, as for
129 us, skin tone should not be dichotomised. Due to the methodological limitation of previous
130 research within this area, the present study is not identical in design as those that have gone
131 before, which limits us from conducting confirmatory research. However, the notion of
132 identifying whether there is a relationship between position and tone of skin remains. Further, by
133 utilising population rather than sample data and adopting a more rigorous approach to the

identification of skin tone, the current research goes some way in rectifying the aforementioned limitations. Finally, as there are now vast financial discrepancies between the top four divisions in English football, we investigate the question of whether there are between league differences in playing position by skin tone.

Results

We began these analyses by conducting a descriptive analysis (see Table 1) to outline the basic features of the population. From there the distribution of players across skin tone and playing position were assessed (see Table 2). A t-test was then conducted to examine potential differences in skin tone between central and wide playing positions across the four professional leagues in England (i.e., the Premier League, the Championship, League One, and League Two). The results suggest that, like Melnick (1988), there is a significant difference in the skin tone of players who occupy either a central (i.e., goalkeeper, central defender, defensive midfielder, central midfielder, attacking midfielder, and striker; M = 8.14, SD = 4.69) or peripheral (i.e., right back, left back, right midfield, and left midfield; M = 8.80, SD = 4.78) playing position; t(4513) = -4.24, p <.001, d = .14.

[insert table 3 around here]

A One-way ANOVA was then conducted (see Figure 1) to provide a more detailed analysis of how playing position may vary according to skin tone (F(9, 4505) = 31.10, p < .001, partial ω^2 = .06). Tukey post-hoc comparisons demonstrated significant differences in skin tone based on playing position (see Table 3).

[insert figure 1 around here]

A two-way ANOVA was then conducted to explore the effect of skin tone on playing position across the four professional football leagues in England (See Figure 2). Results suggest that there is no statistically significant interaction between skin tone and playing position across the four leagues ($p = .31$, $\omega^2 < .01$). These results suggest that although the previously identified differences between positions are still observed, they are relatively consistent across the four leagues.

[insert figure 2 around here]

Discussion

The current manuscript compared positional differences by skin tone in the Premier League and English football. By building on the methodological underpinnings of previous investigations (e.g., Melnick, 1988; Norris & Jones, 1998), the results suggest that darker skin toned players still primarily occupy peripheral rather than central positions – albeit via a statistically significant difference and small effect. As such, our results are in line and consistent with previous literature examining racial stacking (Pitts & Yost, 2012; Stone et al., 1999). The present study also advances the literature by being the first to assess positional differences by skin tone across the population of English professional football. Offering a detailed analysis of where the imbalances occur and reporting a medium effect. The results suggest that although darker skin toned players may occupy central roles, lighter skin toned players still dominate the types of positions traditionally associated with organization, communication, and creativity (i.e., central and attacking midfield, and goalkeeper). Those with a working knowledge of English

179 football can observe this effect with the naked eye by considering the lack of variance in skin
180 tone demonstrated by goalkeepers across the four leagues discussed.
181 The findings also suggest that there is relative parity in the distribution of skin tone by
182 playing position across the four professional leagues assessed (i.e., Premier League,
183 Championship, League One, and League Two). Given the financial resources available in the
184 Premier League, it was thought that clubs would purchase the most suitable candidate for the
185 position. However, this fails to consider that, according to Pitts and Yost (2012); the most
186 suitable candidate may also mean the one who best fits the stereotype. As Melnick (1988, p. 126)
187 states:
188
189 "In the absence of any compelling evidence to support the belief that white and black
190 soccer players possess certain physical and/or psychological characteristics which make
191 them better suited for playing particular positions, one must look elsewhere for an
192 explanation of these findings."
193
194 With this in mind, we consider whether issues such as racial stratification, result in players
195 experiencing such processes upon entering sport; therefore, culturally normalizing the
196 phenomena in childhood (Thomas, Good & Gross, 2015). Further, the lack of exemplars
197 available to counter the stereotypes may also function to perpetuate the cycle. Like Furley and
198 Memmert (2016), we consider whether such stereotypes lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (cf.
199 Hancock, Adler, & Côté, 2013), whereby two players of similar ability, that only differ in skin
200 tone, may experience different treatment from the coach. For example, players with a darker tone
201 of skin may be offered limited opportunities to play in goal, which may lead to potential talent

being overlooked or lost and fewer talented players available to draw from. As our data show, there are outliers who counter the stereotype within the population. However, visibility of such exemplars can undoubtedly be improved. Research examining the processes in which playing positions are allocated should therefore investigate how stereotypes may create barriers to positional access. Further, it may also be worth comparing the findings presented here with those from countries that advocate positional sampling in youth football (e.g., The Netherlands). Although we suspect that coaches primarily select players based on their ability, without strict instruction to facilitate positional sampling, stereotypes and self-stacking may result in the tone of one's skin closing down opportunities to try different positions – thus reducing the pool of available talent to draw from.

It is worth noting that although issues around racial stereotyping and stratification are inferred within the present manuscript, as an exploration of cross-sectional data, causality is by no means implied. Although we have advanced the literature by conducting a detailed exploration of the present landscape in English football, further analyses of the mechanisms involved are required. Given that many of the processes described are likely to operate at a subconscious level, special attention to better understanding how implicit attitudes and stereotypes are formed, accessed, and acted upon is needed. Further, as the current study focused on English football, the findings warrant cross-cultural comparisons. In order to identify why and how positional differences emerge in sport develop; additional cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs are required. Further, quasi-experimental research examining the malleability of racial stereotypes in sport may also be needed. Given the socially sensitive nature of this topic, the authors encourage the development of an indirect measure, which are capable of assessing stereotypical views while limiting the impact of social desirability bias (Fazio & Olson, 2003).

Finally, although the data presented here suggest that some barriers may be in the process of being broken down, there is much still to be done. As Thomas, Good, and Gross (2015) conclude, we as fans, coaches, scouts, directors, and pundits must do more to recognize when stereotypes are being perpetuated and attempt to fairly evaluate players on their individual merits. Within the present manuscript, we have taken a valuable first step in highlighting the disparities within English football and hope that this will allow others to move forward and begin the process of testing the phenomena we have discussed.

Perspective

The findings presented here demonstrate that those of a lighter skin tone primarily occupy the positions of goalkeeper, central midfielder, and attacking midfielder. In contrast, those of a darker skin tone primarily occupy the positions of wide midfielder, defensive midfielder, and striker. Despite vast differences in available resources within the four English professional leagues, skin tone by playing position variance remained relatively stable. Although the empirical evidence of the cause of these effects is unavailable, factors such as the media and a lack of role models are thought to play a role. Resolving such disparity is not without challenge and research can support this effort through identifying the mechanisms and situations where the processes described within this manuscript are activated. Although difficult, this challenge should be met, as with such understanding, players may be evaluated with clearer eyes and afforded equal opportunities to develop.

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Contributions

Conception or design of the work – JM / FG / TM

Data collection – TM

Data analysis and interpretation FG / JM

Drafting the article – JM / CI / FG / TM

Critical revision of the article – CI

Final approval of the version to be published – JM / FG / CI / TM

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	Age	Appearances	Primary Position	Skin Tone
Mean	28.96	36.98	5.92	8.14
Median	28.0	22.0	6	6
Mode	25.00	1.00	10.00	5.00
Standard deviation	5.40	41.20	2.94	4.93
Minimum	18.00	1.00	1	1
Maximum	48.0	223.0	10	20
Standard error	0.0804	0.6132	0.0437	0.0733
Skewness	0.4533	1.6222	−0.0287	0.7583
Kurtosis	2.60	5.37	1.81	2.25

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

339

	Skin Tone																				
Primary Position	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**	**20**	**Total**
1. Goalkeeper	0	59	0	25	106	64	69	7	12	0	1	4	4	4	3	1	2	1	1	0	363
2. Right fullback	1	19	6	15	72	46	46	6	4	0	1	9	25	14	22	14	12	9	1	0	322
3. Left fullback	0	0	35	18	75	42	44	5	8	0	0	4	16	16	15	12	5	8	1	0	304
4. Central Defender	0	0	83	47	170	105	105	12	12	3	3	15	34	46	22	35	26	36	2	1	757
5. Right Midfield	0	0	0	39	69	55	44	6	9	1	2	14	26	24	22	26	14	21	4	0	376
6. Left Midfield	0	0	0	46	55	39	25	6	5	0	4	9	14	18	23	16	15	11	3	0	289
7. Central Midfield	0	0	0	140	211	118	104	9	12	2	4	13	22	21	18	28	14	16	6	0	738
8. Defensive Midfield	1	0	0	29	43	32	30	4	5	2	1	4	10	8	5	13	13	18	4	1	223
9. Attacking Midfield	0	0	0	34	49	24	39	1	13	2	0	5	7	3	4	3	4	7	0	0	195
10. Striker	0	0	0	108	190	141	104	11	24	0	9	18	40	40	51	67	51	81	13	0	948
Total	2	78	124	501	1040	666	610	67	104	10	25	95	198	194	185	215	156	208	35	2	4515

Table 2. Contingency table of the distribution on Skin Tone and Playing Position in Professional English Football.

	M	GK	RB	LB	CB	RM	LM	CM	DM	AM	ST
GK	5.72	-	2.82***	2.06***	2.49***	3.79***	3.47***	1.57***	3.49***	1.64***	3.83***
RB	8.55		-	-0.75*	-0.32	0.97**	0.64	-1.24***	0.67	-1.17**	1.01***
LB	7.79			-	0.42	1.72***	1.4***	-0.49	1.42***	-0.41	1.76***
CB	8.22				-	1.3**	0.97**	-0.91***	0.99**	-0.84*	1.34***
RM	9.52					-	-0.32	-2.21***	-0.3	-2.14***	0.03
LM	9.20						-	-1.89***	0.02	-1.82***	0.36
CM	7.30							-	1.91***	0.07	2.25***
DM	9.22								-	-1.84***	0.34
AM	7.37									-	2.18***
ST	9.56										-

1 Table 3. Tukey HSD post hoc analyses of between position mean differences in skin tone. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

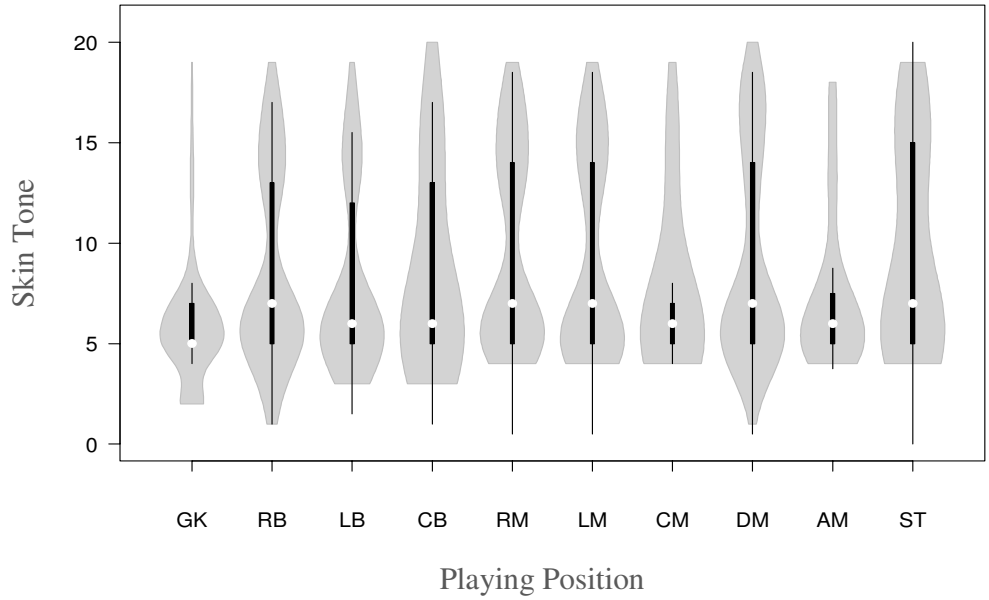

Figure 1. One-way ANOVA (F(9, 4505) = 31.10, $p < .001$, partial $\omega^2 = .06$)

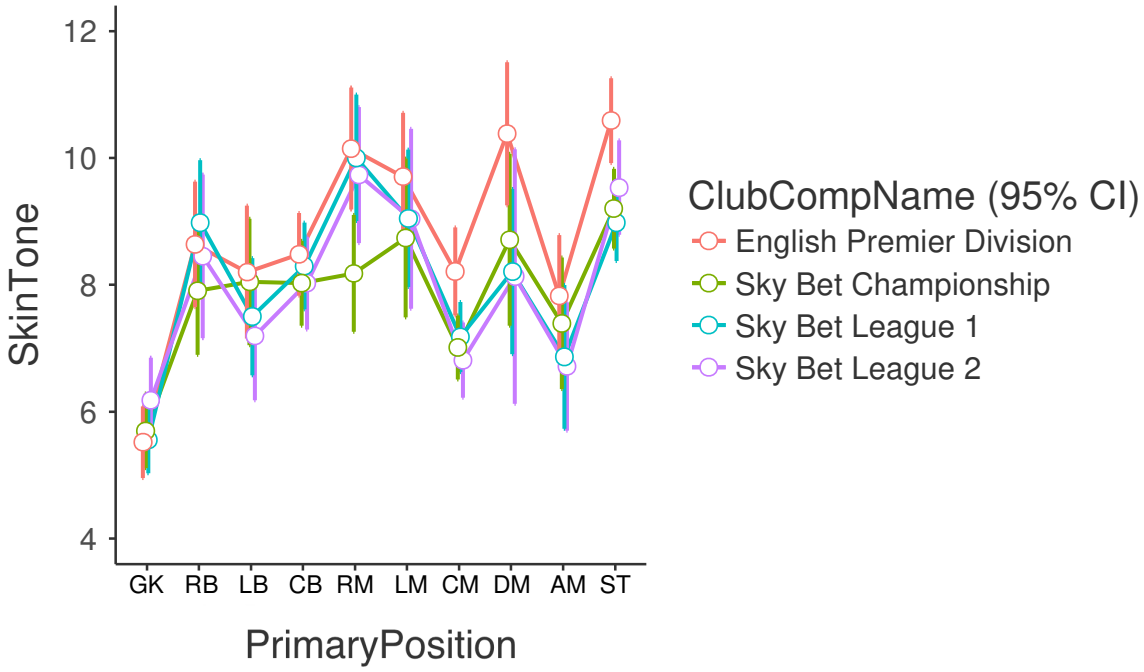

Figure 2. Two-way between groups ANOVA ($F(27, 4475) = 1.04$, $p = .31$, partial $\omega^2 < .01$).