



eISSN 2279-7483

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Veins and Lymphatics 2023 [online ahead of print]

To cite this article:

Anselmo Pagani, Giulia Baldazzi, Roberta Ricci, et al. An unusual case of venous thoracic outlet syndrome in relation to the anatomical position of the subclavian vein valves in a young athlete. *Veins and Lymphatics*. 2023;12:11673. doi:10.4081/vl.2023.11673

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## **An unusual case of venous thoracic outlet syndrome in relation to the anatomical position of the subclavian vein valves in a young athlete**

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**Key words:** Venous Thoracic Outlet Syndrome, subclavian vein, subclavian valve, ultrasound M-mode, sport medicine.

**Authors' contributions:** AP, GB, contributed to the study conception; AP, RR, MB, GB, contributed to data collection; AP, GB, contributed to writing original draft; EM, GB, contributed to review and editing; EM contributed to supervision. All authors contributed to the critical review and revision. All the authors made a substantive intellectual contribution. All the authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be held accountable for all aspects of the work.

**Conflict of interest:** the authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

**Funding:** none.

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**Availability of data and materials:** all data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article.

### **Abstract**

Venous Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (vTOS) consists of upper extremities oedema, sometimes with varicose dilation of the superficial veins of the arm in consequence of compression and/or thrombosis of the subclavian vein. More specific factors, such as muscle hypertrophy, have additionally been registered in athletes.

The case focuses on a 20-year-old male student in medicine, with an intense training activity in body building. The subject has presented symptoms of upper limbs oedema he has also reported heaviness and paresthesia in the left arm and hand.

Varicose dilation of a superficial vein close to the axillary fossa was visible at naked eye.

Both Doppler ultrasound evaluation and Angio TC were negative for venous thrombosis and/or complete obstruction from external compression.

These reports depict an uncommon clinical scenario, which correlate an intense upper body training activity with the presence of a second valve distally of the first valve into the subclavian vein.

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## Introduction

Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (TOS) is a condition resulting from compression of the neurovascular structures traversing the thoracic outlet. The syndrome may be classified in three types, depending on the symptoms and signs of neurovascular compression: Neurogenic TOS (nTOS) results from brachial plexus compression, Venous TOS (vTOS) results from subclavian vein compression, and Arterial TOS (aTOS) results from subclavian artery compression.<sup>1</sup>

In some cases, patients may present with “combined TOS”, the simultaneous compression of vascular and neurological structures. This may be mixture of arterial and venous or arterial/venous and neurological or all three.<sup>2</sup>

Venous Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (vTOS) can be defined as hemodynamically significant extrinsic compression and impingement of the subclavian vein as it passes through the thoracic outlet.<sup>3</sup>

This anatomical area is subdivided in three potential compression sites for the neurovascular bundle:

- The interscalene triangle
- The costo-clavicular space containing the brachial plexus and the subclavian vessels
- The sub-coracoid space containing the axillary vessels and the brachial plexus<sup>4</sup>

Numerous causes have been cited in the literature ranging from congenital abnormalities to traumatic in origin.<sup>2</sup> Traumatic bony lesions include bone remodeling after fractures of the clavicle or first rib or posterior subluxation of the acromioclavicular joint. Soft tissue pathologies such as anterior scalene muscle hypertrophy, muscle fiber type adaptive transformation, spasm and excessive contraction particularly post cervical trauma have all been implicated in TOS.<sup>2</sup>

In athletes, more specific factors such as muscle hypertrophy, especially of the pectoralis minor have been registered, inducing the compression of the adjacent neurovascular bundle. This hypothesis is sustained by the frequent observation of muscle hypertrophy during TOS surgical procedure.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in the population considered by Farrar *et al.*, about 60% to 80% of the young patients report exercise and activity involving the extremity such as overhead throwing,

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swimming, wrestling, gymnastics, or other activities that may require sustained and forceful upper extremity motion. The pathogenesis of an effort thrombosis involves a repetitive extrinsic compression of the subclavian vein that occurs with the shoulder in an abducted and externally rotated position. This repetitive motion can result in selective muscle hypertrophy. According to Garraud *et al.*, a specific example is the hypertrophy of the scalene muscles that can be seen often in weightlifters. Additionally, the clavicle and costoclavicular ligament are anatomical landmarks that, in association with the surrounding hypertrophied muscles (anterior scalene, subclavius, and pectoral muscles) can lead to a fibrous stenosis of the subclavian vein at the level of the first rib.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, venous compression and flow impairment may lead to a further complicated clinical picture namely Paget-Schroetter Syndrome (PSS), consisting in a deep vein thrombosis causing a potential life threatening condition. The latter particularly strikes the athletes. Of the 123 cases of PSS identified by Keller *et al.*, baseball and weightlifting had the highest incidence (26.8% and 19%, respectively), followed by swimming, football, and basketball.<sup>7,8</sup>

## Case Report

The case focuses on a 20-year-old male student in medicine with an intense training activity in body building. He presented symptoms of upper limbs oedema and also reported heaviness and paresthesia in the left arm and hand.

Upon physical examination, the muscular hypertrophy of the upper body has been registered as evident, especially concerning pectoral muscles, deltoid muscles, trapezius muscles, scalene muscles, biceps brachii muscle and triceps brachii muscle. Such evidence suggests that our patient's training is focused on strength and hypertrophy, therefore including a heavy weightlifting program. This methodology of training involves few repetitions at high loads, and it is known from Hackett *et al.* that brief Valsalva Maneuver (VM) is unavoidable when lifting heavy loads (>80% of maximal voluntary contraction).<sup>9</sup>

A physical examination confirmed oedema with evidence of superficial vein dilation in left arm and a visible stria rubra close to the axilla (Figure 1). The subject then underwent a color Doppler examination showing the patency of the left jugular, subclavian, axillary and basilic cephalic veins.

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During the exam, the medical staff performed Doppler flow assessment in a resting state and during the Adson's test, in order to evaluate absence, bi-directional or turbulent flow.

The non-detectable flow in subclavian vein during Adson's maneuver with the flow recovery, phasing with breathing, immediately after the release of the posture, suggested a functional compression from muscular hypertrophy.

In addition, the point of compression corresponds to a significant change in diameter (Figure 2) and to the B-mode and M-mode (Figure 3) detection of a bicuspid valve in the dilated segment.<sup>10</sup>

Further investigation has been subsequently carried out by the means of angio computed tomography (CT) scan the vTOS. The latter confirmed a muscular compression of the subclavian vein, at distance of 30 mm from the venous angle, with a dilation corresponding to the valve detected by the means of ultrasound.

The absence of thrombosis and/or venous obstruction from external compression cannot explain the collateral varicose superficial veins as well as post training upper extremity oedema.

### ***Hypothesis***

In more than 97% of the human beings, the subclavian vein flow is regulated by just one valve, located very close to the so-called venous angle. In the reported case, this valve was present, but the ultrasound exploration has shown the presence of a second valve located 30 mm more distally in relation to the main valve (Figure 3).

Taking into consideration the repeated Valsalva maneuver during the training, the transmission of a wave of hyper-pressure along the subclavian axillary segments seems plausible,<sup>11</sup> with a hyper-pressure chamber between the two valves.

Contralaterally, just one valve in the subclavian vein same have been found out. Despite the same training condition and muscular hypertrophy, neither oedema nor superficial vein dilation were present, corroborating our pathophysiologic hypothesis.

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In their explorative morphologic study, Celepci *et al.* determined the frequency and position of the valves in the axillary and subclavian vein. The “first” valve was present in all 30 left subclavian veins observed within 2.5 to 27.5 mm distally of the venous angle. Only in one of these veins (3.3%) a “second” valve could be identified, at a distance of 30.5 mm to the venous angle.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of both valves (referring to the Celepci *et al.* Study sections called S1 and S2) in the patient, as well as the repeated Valsalva maneuver during his training, led us to advance the following hypothesis. The increased pressure between the two valves in consequences of Valsalva could cause a hyper-pressure chamber during exercise. Along time this mechanism of stop flow and increased lateral pressure might favorite the development of a collateral circle readily visible as superficial varicosities (Figure 1).

The lower frequency of Vascular TOS versus the nTOS has evidently emerged studying the epidemiology of the Thoracic Outlet Syndrome. According to Davidovic *et al.* (2003), 98% of all patients with TOS fall into the nTOS category and only 2% have vTOS.<sup>14</sup>

Vascular TOS is known to be usually caused by a structural lesion, either a cervical rib or another bony anomaly (Rayan, 1998), but no one has investigated the correlation between the vein morphology and the development of venous symptoms.<sup>15</sup>

The low frequency of venous symptoms could be correlated with the presence in the 3.3% of population of a secondary valve that could modify, exposed to high pressure, and constrained by other anatomical structures, the correct blood flow.

Additionally, the hypothesis of repeated Valsalva maneuver suggested that the vessel is subject to internal high-pressure stress and constrained by the hypertrophic muscles.

However, lack of studies in the morphology of this vessel shall limit the hypothesis at this stage, as further research would be needed in order to investigate the pathophysiology of this event.

## Conclusions

Our hypothesis has led to explaining cases of oedema in athletes with a functional mechanism, such oedema not being linked to venous thrombosis or obstruction alone but, sometimes, to an anatomical variation of the position of the valves in the subclavian vein. In the light of results,

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further investigation on the presence of a second valve in these cases by the means of ultrasound is highly encouraged.

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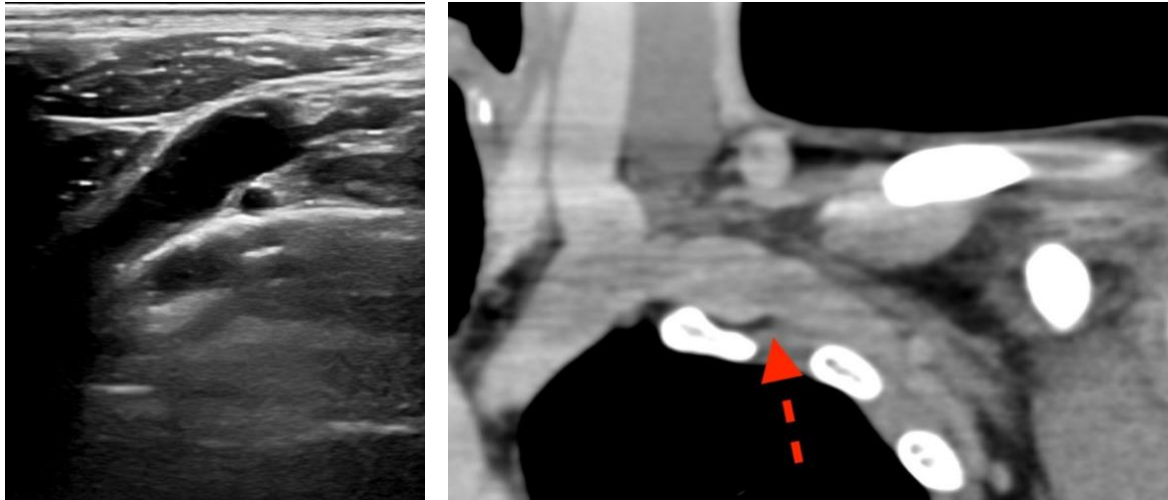
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**Figure 1.** Left axilla Stria rubra.

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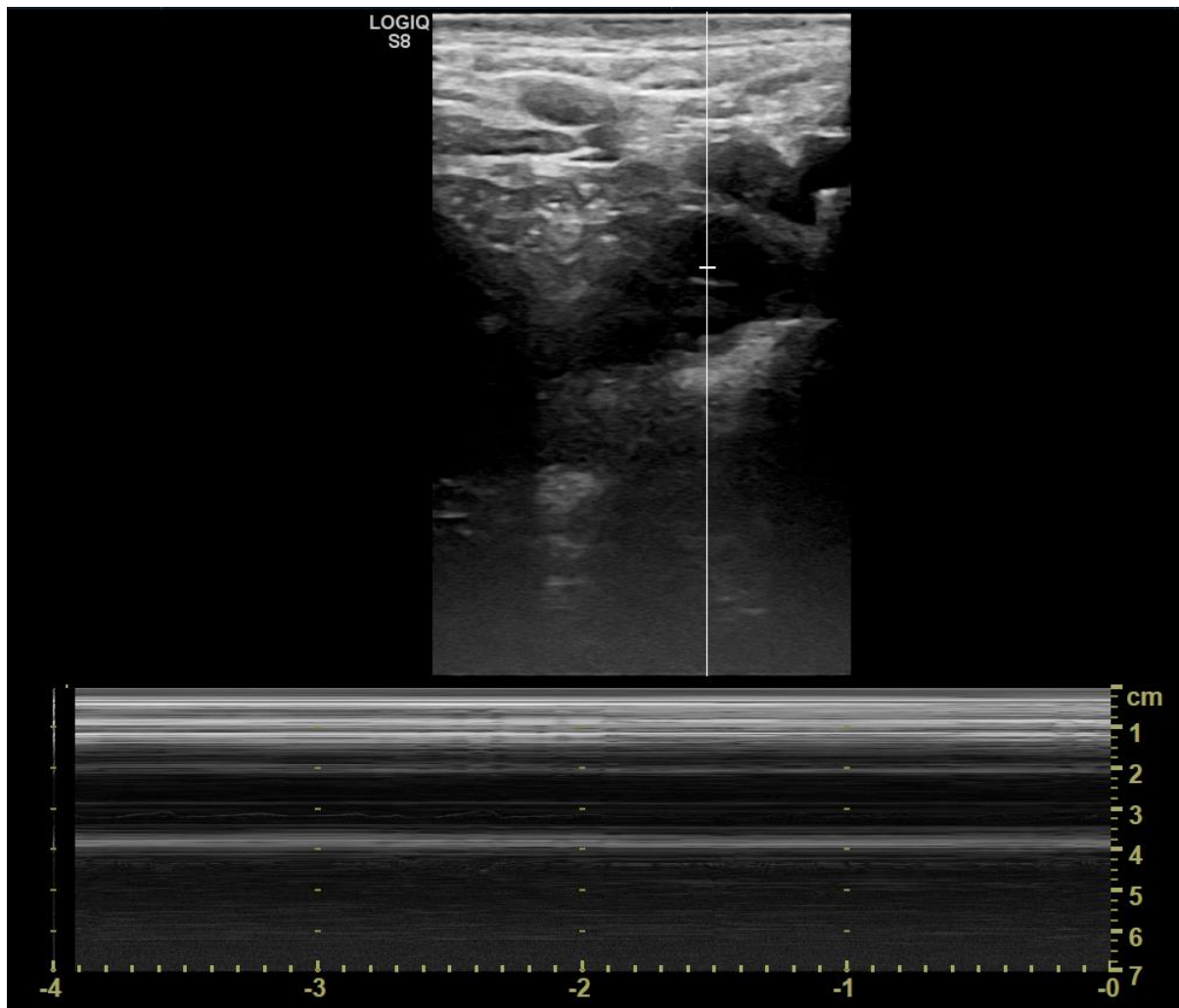
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**Figure 2.** Left: high resolution ultrasound image of the change in diameter of the right subclavian vein. Right: corresponding Magnetic Resonance (MR) image (red arrow).

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**Figure 3.** M-mode intra-luminal trace of the right distal subclavian valve (S2).

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