

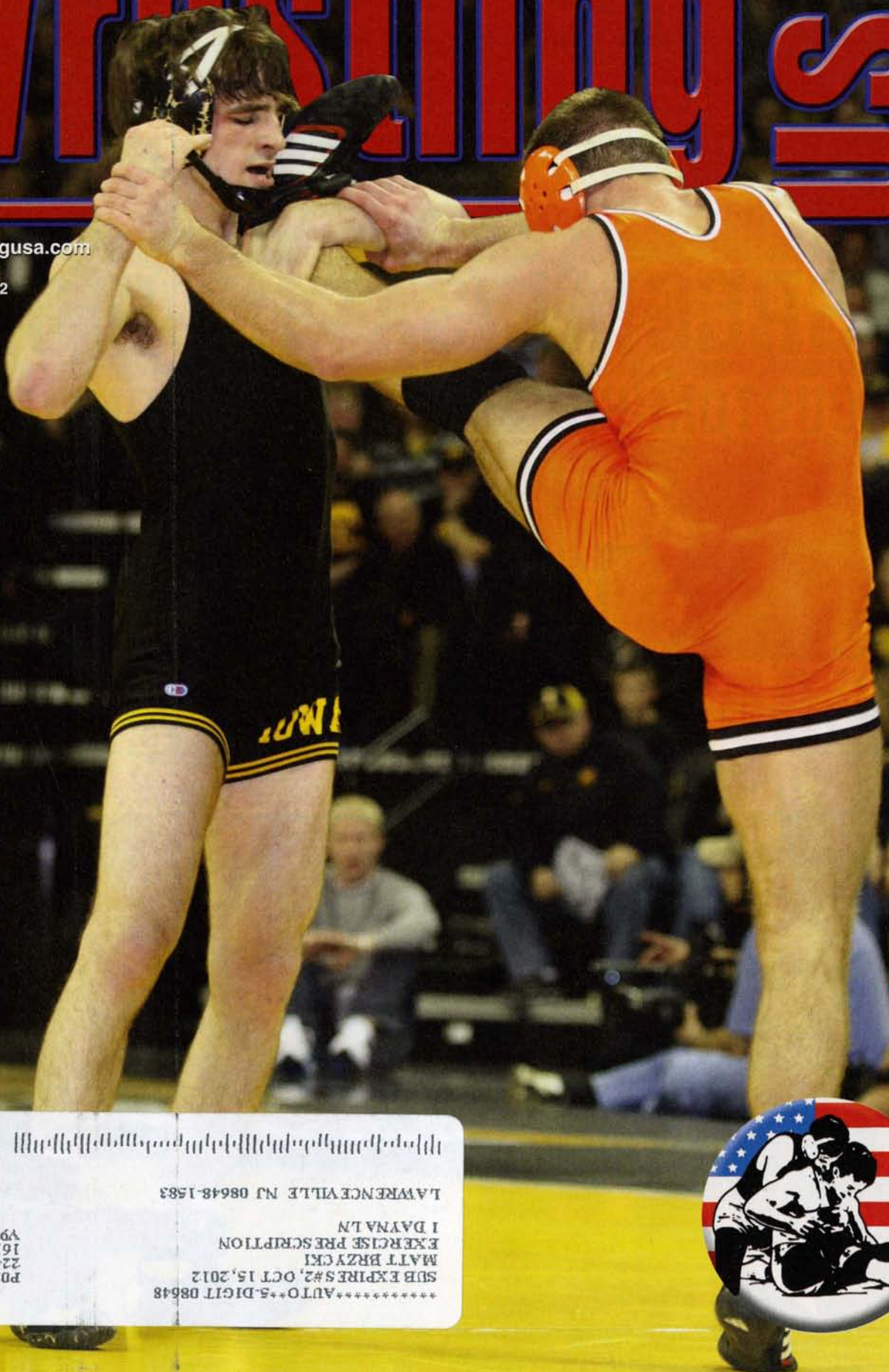
Wrestling USA

www.wrestlingusa.com

October 15, 2012

VOL. XLVIII, NO. 2

\$5.00



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SUB EXPIRES #2, OCT 15, 2012
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10 Tips for an Effective STRENGTH PROGRAM

By Matt Brzycki

At this point in time, the value of strength training is well recognized. Of primary importance for athletes is that strength training can reduce the frequency and severity of injuries. In addition, strength training can enhance their physical potential.

For these two reasons and others, most coaches implement some type of strength program. But the strength program might not be as effective as possible.

SENSIBLE SUGGESTIONS

Regardless of the strength program that you employ, there are probably some ways in which it can be improved. Here are 10 tips that can have a favorable impact on your strength program:

1. Make the strength program mandatory.

It's important for every wrestler on the team to partake in the strength program; it shouldn't be an option. Anything less than total participation should be viewed as unacceptable.

Words to the wise: If you have rules, then you must enforce rules. And this means that you must have consequences for those who break rules. Having a rule that workouts are mandatory makes absolutely no sense without having a penalty for missing a scheduled workout. Remember, a rule without teeth isn't a rule.

Along these lines, don't allow certain athletes to get a free pass when they skip workouts. Few things destroy team chemistry faster than having different rules for different wrestlers.

2. Focus on all of your athletes.

Isn't it nice to have a blue-chip wrestler or two on your roster who has the college recruiters drooling? When some athletes garner all or most of your attention, however, it can be problematic on and off the mat.

It's really easy to concentrate on the wrestlers who perform well. But everyone on your roster is equally important. The athlete who hasn't won a match all year has just as much right to your attention in the weight room as the athlete who hasn't lost a match all year.

Favoritism – whether real or perceived – is detrimental to a team. When some athletes get treated better than others, it creates a sense of unfairness and causes feelings of neglect and envy. And you don't need the drama.

To level the playing field, so to speak, don't give preferential treatment to certain wrestlers in the weight room simply because their names and photographs appear regularly in the sports section of the local newspaper. All of your wrestlers deserve a generous helping of your feedback, encouragement and praise.

3. Encourage your athletes to work hard.

One of the main reasons why athletes fail to achieve their physical potential is because they don't work hard in the weight room. A high level of intensity is necessary for maximizing the response to strength training. Here, a high level of

intensity is characterized by performing a set to the point of muscular fatigue. In simple terms, this means that the muscles have been exhausted to the extent that no additional repetitions can be done with proper technique. If an appropriate level of muscular fatigue isn't produced, increases in strength will be less than optimal.

Coaches should also keep in mind that “you play like you practice.” If your athletes do their strength training with a low level of effort, will they be able to crank up their intensity when needed in a match?

4. Place an emphasis on progression.

Little of what's done in most weight rooms can be described as progressive. It's not unusual to hear of someone who performs the same number of repetitions with the same amount of resistance over and over again, workout after workout.

In order to overload the muscles, an attempt must be made to increase the resistance that's used and/or the repetitions that are performed in comparison to a previous workout. Stated otherwise, demands must be imposed on the muscles that haven't been encountered previously by using more resistance and/or doing more repetitions. Exposing the muscles to progressively greater demands stimulates the muscles to adapt in response to the unaccustomed workload. The muscles adapt to such demands by increasing in strength.

Progression would be implemented in this manner: If an athlete attained or surpassed the maximum number of prescribed repetitions in an exercise – say he did 15 repetitions and his range is 10 to 15 – he should increase the resistance for his next workout; if an athlete reached muscular fatigue within his prescribed repetition range – say he did 14 repetitions and his range is 10 to 15 – he should use the same resistance for his next workout and try to increase the number of repetitions.

5. Have your athletes perform comprehensive workouts.

Many athletes typically train the muscles that they can see in a mirror. For the most part, this means training the muscles that influence the anterior (front) portion of their body while neglecting the muscles that influence the posterior (back) portion of their body. In effect, they train the “showy” muscles: their chest and biceps. Basically, this is a “beach workout.”

In response to the challenge “make a muscle,” who rips open their shirt collar and flexes their neck? Who pulls out their shirttail and shows off their lower back? Nobody, right? Yet, the muscles that act on the neck and lower back are extremely important, particularly in wrestling.

By not doing a comprehensive workout, problems can surface at some point down the road. For one thing, emphasizing one muscle without giving its counterpart equal – or nearly equal – attention can create an imbalance which increases the potential for injury.

Take the muscles of the upper leg, for instance. Given their druthers, most athletes will train their quadriceps but do little

or nothing for their hamstrings, thereby producing a muscle imbalance. It has long been suspected that an injury can occur when the quadriceps are significantly stronger than the hamstrings.

Another good example is the shoulder complex. Given their druthers, most athletes will train their anterior shoulder but do little or nothing for their posterior shoulder, thereby producing a muscle imbalance. It's reasonable to think that an injury can occur when the anterior deltoid is significantly stronger than the posterior deltoid.

6. Hold your athletes accountable.

You should have a means of tracking what your athletes do in the weight room. An excellent tool for this is a workout card. In particular, athletes should record the resistance and repetitions that they achieve in each exercise.

But the accountability of your wrestlers doesn't end there. You must also check their cards to see that they're completing their workouts as assigned and progressing over time in the resistance that they use and the repetitions that they do. In other words, your athletes need to do more than just show up.

You can even take this a step farther by telling your athletes what resistance they should use in a future workout based on their performance in a past workout. Software that enables you to produce computer-generated workouts can often perform this task. But if you don't have access to the high-tech stuff, you can do it the old-fashioned way: Write down the information on their cards for their next workout.

While on the subject, be on the lookout for athletes who "pencil in" their workout without actually doing much or any of it. From time to time, pick up cards at random during workouts and make sure that your wrestlers haven't recorded their repetitions before they've completed their exercises.

7. Incorporate variety.

Keeping your wrestlers excited about the strength program can definitely be a challenge. This is especially true of your upperclassmen who may have been doing the strength program for a while.

A great way to prevent workouts from becoming the "same old, same old" is to incorporate variety. This can be achieved by manipulating certain aspects of the strength program . . . and not just the set/rep scheme.

There are a number of ways that you can vary workouts. For instance, you can have your athletes do different workouts on different days such as Workout A on Monday, Workout B on Wednesday and Workout C on Friday. You can also change the workouts on a weekly or monthly basis. Or you can simply change them as needed to sustain interest and enthusiasm.

The process of varying workouts doesn't have to be complex. Workouts can be varied easily by changing the type of equipment that's used to perform the exercises. In addition, workouts can be varied by rearranging the order in which the exercises are done.

Another option is to use a theme workout every now and then. An example of this is having your athletes do all of the exercises in their workout with the same type of equipment such as a dumbbell-only workout, bodyweight-only workout or sandbag-only workout.

If you think about it, there are almost an infinite number of workouts that can be devised. The only limits, really, are the amount of equipment that's available and your imagination.

8. Require your athletes to do the strength program during the season.

Your wrestlers can make significant gains in strength during the off-season. Terminating the strength program as soon as the season rolls around is a giant step in the wrong direction.

Remember, the most important part of the year for your wrestlers is when they're in season. Think about it: This is when they need to maximize their athletic potential, right? So why should they discontinue their strength program during such a critical time?

Unless your wrestlers stick with their strength program during the season, all of the improvements that they made during the off-season will gradually disappear. Just how long it takes a muscle to begin losing strength is subject to some debate. It must certainly vary from one individual to the next. One thing is for sure, however: It's only a matter of time before it happens.

And don't go into the season with the goal to maintain strength. Yes, strength gains are difficult to accomplish during the season as a result of the added demands that are placed on the body from practicing and competing. Nonetheless, your athletes should still endeavor to improve their strength, not maintain it.

Be advised that because of the increased physical stresses during the season, you should reduce the frequency of the workouts and the total number of exercises/sets in the workouts to enable your athletes to get more recovery. Keep in mind, too, that your athletes shouldn't do any strength training within about 48 hours of a meet. So if they wrestle on Saturday, their last workout in the weight room should come no later than Thursday.

9. Provide an adequate level of supervision.

Not all schools have access to a strength coach. If you want your athletes to do strength training and a strength coach isn't available, then you or one of your assistants need to supervise them in the weight room.

There's more to administering a strength program than writing workouts on a dry-erase board or handing out computer-generated workouts and expecting the athletes to "get it done" on their own. Your strength program can be solid in many respects but if someone isn't in the trenches supervising the athletes when they're in the weight room, then it won't be as effective as possible.

Anecdote #1: When I was a strength coach "back in the day," a head coach at a high school in Pennsylvania asked me to come out and speak to his team about strength training. Once at the school, we went to the weight room. The first thing that I noticed was a guy in a tank top who was sitting in a chair with his head buried in a magazine. Meanwhile, a handful of athletes were in the room lifting weights. The head coach took me over to meet the guy who was reading. He stood, extended his hand and introduced himself as the strength coach.

Anecdote #2: Another time, I visited a weight room and literally walked around for at least five minutes in search of the strength coach. (It was a fairly large weight room that was packed with equipment.) There were a dozen athletes or more in the room lifting weights. I finally saw a guy who was sitting in a chair just outside the office reading a magazine. He was the strength coach.

On both of these occasions, the strength coach was in the weight room but – and this is a really big but – he paid little or

no attention to what was happening. How much “strength coaching” did they do? None whatsoever. How effective was their strength program? Not nearly as much as it could have been.

In the weight room, a coach’s most important legal responsibility is to provide an adequate level of supervision. Needless to say, coaches can’t supervise athletes while they’re reading Sports Illustrated or sitting behind a desk or watching ESPN or surfing the Internet or talking on their cellphones or working out.

A coach wouldn’t post a list of drills and then sit down somewhere to read a magazine or do whatever while his athletes practiced the drills. That’s not supervision. Similarly, a coach shouldn’t post a list of exercises and then sit down somewhere to read a magazine or do whatever while his athletes performed the exercises. That’s not supervision, either. And, seriously, without supervision, how many athletes would actually do the drills and exercises exactly as assigned?

Also, what would happen if an athlete got hurt in the weight room and it was found that a lack of supervision was a contributing factor in the injury? Well, let’s just say that the athlete’s lawyers would be salivating like Pavlov’s dog in anticipation of a rather large sum of money that would be awarded to their client.

Bottom line: If your athletes are lifting in the weight room then someone should be supervising in the weight room.

10. Refrain from adopting the strength programs of other schools just because of their success.

A big mistake that’s frequently made is to implement – or try to implement – the program of whatever team happens to be successful at the moment. Unfortunately, coaches “jump on the bandwagon” all the time.

It goes something like this: The coach at Smalltown High adopts the strength program of Big-Time U when that school wins the national championship. Then the following year, the coach at Smalltown High switches allegiance and adopts the strength program of East Powerhouse State when that school wins the national championship.

Point to ponder: Just because you incorporate the strength program that’s used by a successful school doesn’t mean that your school will experience the same degree of success.

THE LAST REP

At the end of the season, examine your strength program and see where it needs tweaking to be more effective. You can have a great strength program but there’s always room for improvement.

Matt Brzycki has authored, co-authored or edited 17 books on strength and fitness including four that are devoted to wrestling. His latest book is A Practical Approach to Strength Training (4th edition).

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