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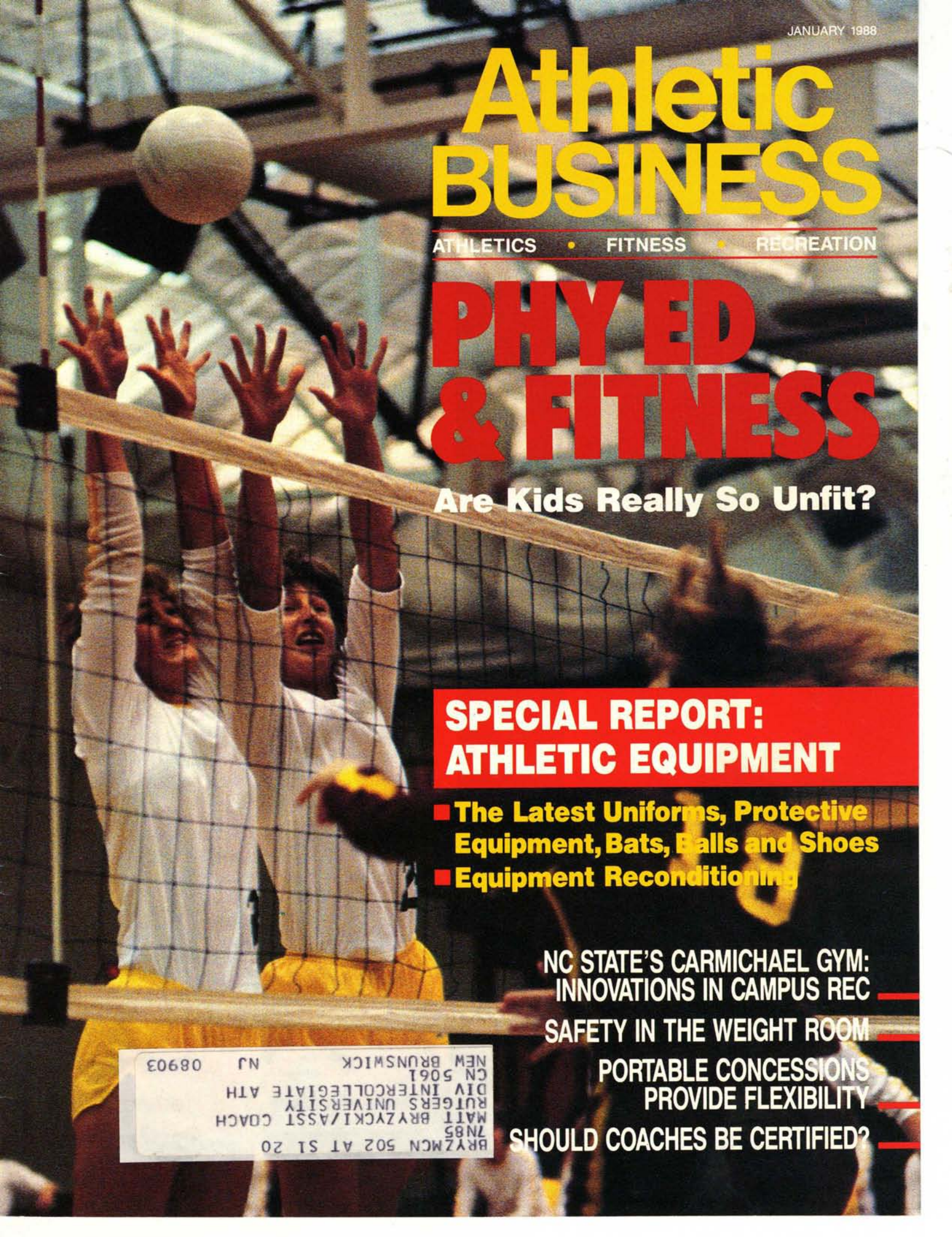
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# COACHES RESPONSIBLE FOR WEIGHT ROOM SAFETY

In today's litigious society, it is the legal responsibility of strength training coaches and supervisors to maintain a safe training environment for athletes.

By MATT BRZYCKI

In today's sue-happy society, a lawsuit can be literally a slip and fall away. Perhaps mirroring this sign of the times, lawsuits against coaches and physical educators also are on the rise.

Strength training, like any other sport or activity, contains the potential for injury. Safety in the weight room, however, extends far beyond the scope of spotters and collars.

A safe program may be a coach's only defense against a lawsuit. Therefore, it is the intent of this article to provide strength training professionals with a basic understanding of their legal responsibilities in the weight room.

**NEGLIGENCE.** In simple terms, negligence occurs when a coach fails to act as a reasonable and prudent coach would act in a similar situation. If a coach is sued and brought to trial, a judge or jury determines the appropriateness of the coach's actions. Four factors are considered in deciding whether or not a coach is negligent. All four of these factors must be present to determine negligence.

The first factor is that there must be the presence of a duty. According to the law, coaches have three main areas of responsibility—supervision, selection and conduct of activities, and environment.

Second, one of these duties must

have been violated. A third factor is whether a coach's breach of duty was responsible for an athlete's injury. Finally, the damages or injuries are considered.

**SUPERVISION.** Supervision is one of the most important responsibilities since it includes all of the legal duties. To begin with, a coach should be qualified to supervise a weight room. Just because a coach has 18-inch arms or can bench press 400 pounds doesn't automatically mean that he or she is a qualified supervisor. There are various certifications in strength training, but some of these programs test on their particular approach, which can be biased.

For example, one national certification test includes questions on the latest Eastern European training methodology. Unfortunately, most coaches don't coach aspiring Soviet weight lifters. As a result, a coach doesn't necessarily need to be certified, but he or she should be mature, competent, knowledgeable and understand his or her legal duties. If assistants are employed, make sure they too are qualified.

A coach should be located in an area where he or she can see and hear as much as possible. If there is only one supervisor in the weight room, attention should not be focused on just one athlete. Likewise, a coach shouldn't be lifting at the same time his or her athletes are lift-

ing. The best spot to be is out on the floor with the athletes.

Obviously, a coach can't supervise if he or she isn't there. If an athlete gets hurt while the coach is gone, he or she could be found negligent if it was determined that the absence contributed to the injury. In short, you're asking for a lot of trouble by leaving athletes unattended in the weight room.

**SELECTION, CONDUCT OF ACTIVITIES.** This responsibility is divided into preparation and planning, warning of risks, evaluating athletes for limitations, equal pairing of athletes, and first aid and medical procedures.

►*Preparation and planning.* It is necessary to prepare and plan for the supervision of a weight room. You can't simply open the weight room and "wing it." Planning begins with the approach to strength training that is taken.

First, programs should be safe. If the main purpose in strength training is to reduce an athlete's risk of injury, it becomes both contradictory as well as unwise to advocate unsafe lifting methods.

A coach should require his or her athletes to perform each repetition in a deliberate, controlled manner throughout a full range of motion. Athletes should not be allowed to explode with a weight since this exposes their joints and connective

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# SAFETY

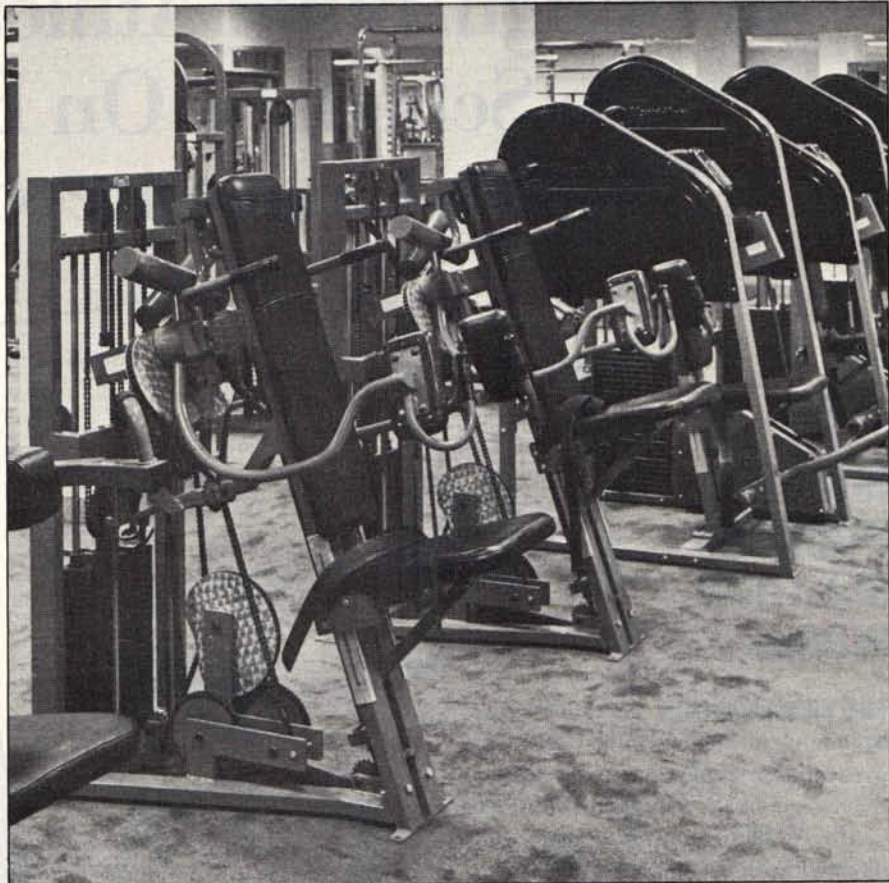
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tissue to enormous forces, which may cause an immediate injury or predisposition to future injuries. Potentially dangerous exercises or activities that place excessive strain on the musculoskeletal system, such as barbell squats, power cleans, snatches and plyometrics also should be avoided.

A few extra words of caution concerning plyometrics. The term plyometrics applies to any exercise or jumping drill (such as depth jumps) that utilizes the stretch reflex. Incredible as it may seem, proponents of this type of training have advocated "altitude jumps," which they define as stepping off a box or a platform from a height of 5 to 9 feet, landing on the ground and jumping upward as high as possible.

Ironically enough, there is no conclusive evidence that proves the stretch reflex responds to training. What there is, however, is an ever-increasing number of injuries due to the tremendous amount of stress placed on the bones, joints and

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It is a coach's legal duty to adequately supervise the weight room.

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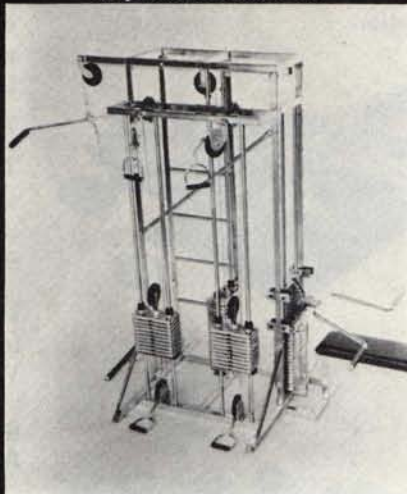
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## SAFETY

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connective tissue. In fact, many prominent sportsmedicine doctors, physical therapists and athletic trainers view plyometrics as "an injury waiting to happen." In short, athletes shouldn't be introduced to plyometrics.

If athletes currently use plyometrics, encourage them to stop immediately. If not, a coach may be ending two careers—an athlete's by injury and his or her own by lawsuit.

Second, the approach to strength training should be practical. Asking athletes to lift four days a week on a split routine while doing 30 sets each workout isn't very reasonable, especially when there are 60 football players on the roster.

One-repetition maximum lifts shouldn't be emphasized either. These lifts are potentially dangerous, and just because an athlete can lift a lot of weight for one repetition doesn't mean he or she is suddenly a better athlete.

Players also should not spend an

inordinate amount of time bench pressing. Instead, programs should address all of the body's major muscle groups. If wrestlers or football players are being trained, neck strengthening exercises should be required.

Programs also should be efficient. Although split routines, pyramiding, periodization and other competitive lifting techniques are certainly effective, they aren't usually economical in terms of time spent. Instead, athletes should strive to obtain maximum results in the least amount of time.

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Safety in the weight room extends far beyond the scope of spotters and collars.

Finally, programs should be productive. It makes little sense to have athletes engage in strength training if the approach taken doesn't yield favorable results.

In planning, there are a few additional points to consider. An orientation meeting or a strength training clinic where athletes receive information concerning sound strength training fundamentals should be scheduled. Athletes also should be given instruction in using the equipment properly and safely. Risks should be explained, and athletes should be frequently reminded of these risks while they are lifting.

Athletes should start out with a brief, basic routine when they first begin. This will give them time to adapt to the intensity of the program and enable them to better understand what they're doing.

To avoid possible injury, athletes should increase resistance by 5 percent when they perform the maximum number of repetitions. For instance, if an athlete is bench pressing 200 pounds, a 10-pound jump would be a 5 percent increase in weight. On the other hand, if an athlete is curling 40 pounds, that same 10-pound jump would represent a 25 percent increase in weight, which may invite injury.

It's also important not to schedule 40 athletes to lift at the same time in a 1,000-square-foot facility. A

determination of how many athletes can be adequately supervised should be based on staff, equipment, time, space and experience.

Finally, coaches shouldn't merely keep abreast of current strength training information—it should be read critically to determine if it is indeed safe, practical, efficient and productive. Coaches should be wary of routines that are based on either personal anecdotes or biased research. Some programs are advocated by individuals who stand to profit financially.

► **Warning of risks.** Coaches can be found negligent if they do not sufficiently warn their athletes of the risks involved in lifting weights. Warnings should be clear and repeated as often as it's necessary to ensure compliance.

A coach has a legal duty to make sure his or her athletes are physically able to train safely.

Athletes can only assume those risks that are inherent in weight training. For example, there's always a possibility that a weight could be accidentally dropped on someone's foot or that someone's finger could get caught in a machine. However, if athletes are not warned of this possibility, they may not be held responsible. Furthermore, athletes should not assume the risk of any improper techniques or potentially dangerous exercises that are recommended by their coach.

Although some equipment manufacturers are placing warning labels on their products, a coach should still make sure that all players have read and understand the warnings.

Finally, athletes should be provided with a written set of rules governing the use of the facility. Persistent disregard of the rules should be dealt with by suspension of lifting privileges.

► **Evaluating athletes for limitations.** A coach has a legal duty to make sure his or her athletes are physically able to train safely. The team physician and athletic trainer can be used as resources to determine any restrictions on lifting. Ath-

letes should definitely be required to obtain a thorough medical examination each year before engaging in a strength training program, or a reevaluation for return after an injury.

► **Equal pairing of athletes.** Coaches also have a legal responsibility to pair athletes so that one person is not placed at a gross disadvantage in terms of size, weight or maturation. Imagine if an athlete got injured on the bench press because the assigned partner was

physically unable to spot a heavy barbell. Matching athletes properly also will decrease the likelihood of one athlete injuring another during a partner resisted exercise.

► **First aid and emergency medical procedures.** When performed, first aid and emergency medical procedures are a coach's most important legal responsibility. Whenever an athlete is injured, a coach must provide reasonable medical assistance as soon as possible. This

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## SAFETY

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requires basic first aid skills and a system of quickly obtaining trained medical personnel.

Unless a coach is adequately trained, however, he or she shouldn't go beyond basic first aid treatment. In carrying out this duty, a coach can be found negligent if he or she does nothing, selects the wrong action or performs improper medical care.

It is recommended that coaches be required to review and renew their first aid and CPR skills as needed. In addition, the telephone numbers of the school nurse and an ambulance should be kept near the phone, and a first aid kit containing sterile dressings, tape and bandages should be located in the weight room. Lastly, an injury report should be made in the event of a serious injury.

**PROVIDING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.** It is the legal duty of a coach to provide and maintain a safe weight room with good equipment in proper condition. He or she is responsible for eliminating any hazardous con-

ditions or informing a supervisor of the situation in writing. A coach also is responsible for noticing what a reasonable and prudent coach should have noticed, whether he or she did or not.

A determination of how many athletes can be adequately supervised should be based on staff, equipment, time, space and experience.

A safe weight room starts with safe equipment. Purchase the best equipment that your budget allows. Inspect the equipment regularly and thoroughly (especially any moving parts) to ensure that it is in good working order. Defective equipment should be replaced or removed.

Equipment should be placed in the weight room so there is enough space for athletes to move around without getting hurt. Insist that ath-

letes return all plates and dumbbells to the proper place. Athletes also should be required to use a spotter and collars during any overhead lifts.

The subject of drug abuse merits separate discussion. It is unethical for a coach to recommend or distribute anabolic steroids, human growth hormones or any other illegal drug to his or her athletes. Distributing illicit drugs is a felony. Moreover, deaths directly attributed to steroid abuse are now being documented.

If a coach recommends steroids to an athlete and he or she develops any life-threatening symptoms, a coach can be sued because of gross negligence.

It's often said that "anybody can sue anyone for anything." This may be true, but coaches can go a long way in decreasing their chances of being sued by understanding their legal duties and operating their weight rooms in a safe and competent manner. ■

*Matt Brzycki, a certified strength and conditioning specialist, is assistant strength coach at Rutgers—The State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick, N.J.*

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