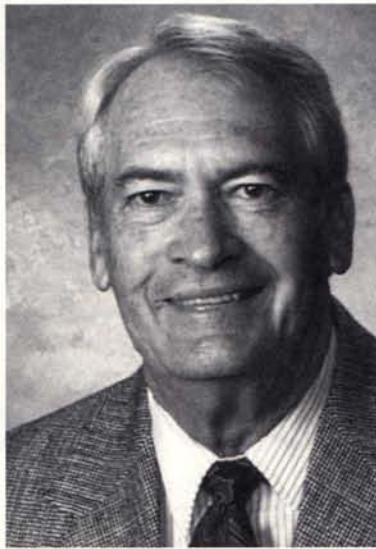


1998 THSCA HALL OF HONOR INDUCTEES



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FOOTBALL STRENGTH: WHAT APPROACH?



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Few coaches would argue that strength training can reduce a football player's risk of injury and increase his performance potential. Many coaches, however, would argue over which approach is best for increasing muscular strength. The different approaches -- the abundant amount of conflicting information -- often leaves athletes confused.

Coaches and players are also quick to jump on the bandwagon of successful teams or programs -- a practice, which frequently adds to the confusion. For example, at the conclusion of the 1997-98 college football season, two schools were named NCAA co-champions: the University of Nebraska and the University of Michigan. Both schools have a long history of success on the gridiron. If you were to compare their strength training programs, you'd be in for quite a surprise: Not only are their approaches vastly different, they offer contradictory information. One strength training program suggests fast repetition speeds, the other controlled speeds; one suggests mostly multiple sets, the other mostly single sets; one recommends split routines, the other total-body workouts; one primarily uses free weights, the other primarily machines; one uses periodization, the

other does not; one favors one-repetition maximum efforts, the other discourages them; one advocates plyometrics, the other opposes them. And these basic approaches have been used at the respective schools for more than two decades.

Yet, both Nebraska and Michigan have highly successful football programs. Moreover, their athletes are very big and very fast and very strong. Yet, these teams -- and many others -- are successful in football despite using vastly different approaches to strength training. So, how do you choose which strength training program to follow if you are looking to get bigger, faster, and stronger?

SELECTION GUIDELINES

Ultimately, you must decide what approach works best for you and your players. In your decision-making process, you should ask yourself the following five questions:

Is it Productive?

The approach you select must be productive. It makes little sense to invest time in a strength training program if it doesn't produce meaningful results. A program will be productive as long as it's based

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upon the Overload Principle. Essentially, this principle states that in order for muscles to increase in size and strength, they must be stressed -- or "overloaded" -- with a workload that is beyond their present capacity. In laymen's terms, you must challenge your muscles with progressively harder work. This can be accomplished effectively by using the Double Progressive Technique: Every time your athletes work out, they must attempt to increase either the weight they use or the repetitions they perform in relation to their previous workout. Stated otherwise,

they must impose demands upon their muscles that they haven't previously experienced by either using more weight or performing more repetitions.

Is it Comprehensive?

The approach must be comprehensive in several ways. First of all, a strength training program must address all of the major muscle groups in the body -- not just the "showy" ones. Frequently, muscles that get injured while playing football are ignored (such as the neck and the groin) while muscles that are more cosmetic than anything else get highlighted (such as the biceps and the triceps). Secondly, a thorough strength training program targets all of the athletes on the football team -- not just the ones who are innately interested in weight training. Thirdly, a comprehensive strength training program means that it is performed year round -- including the football season. Remember that it is during the competitive season that your players need to be at their best in terms of strength and conditioning.

Is it Practical?

The approach must be easy for your athletes to understand. In some instances, strength training programs have become grossly overcomplicated and correspondingly confusing. The use of pseudoscientific terminology coupled with pre-planned programs that specify inflexible instructions to vary the sets, reps, intensity and volume of activity in rigidly defined "phases" of periodization adds to the confusion. Remember, too, that references to Eastern European weightlifters are irrelevant and, therefore, don't apply to your football players -- unless your football players are competitive weightlifters. Strength training is actually quite simple: progress in resistance and/or repetitions from one workout to the next. Likewise, the approach you select should not be difficult for you to administer.

Is it Efficient?

The approach you choose must be efficient in that it should produce the maximum possible benefits in the least amount of time. An approach that requires players to exercise for more than one hour per workout or to perform more than three sessions of strength training per week isn't practical nor is it necessary. By utilizing a strength training approach that is time-efficient, your athletes will have more time available to pursue other activities such as perfecting their football skills, performing football-specific conditioning and preparing for academic experiences. Your players should invest time in the weight room, not spend time.

Is it Safe?

At first glance, many approaches look great. Closer inspection, however, may reveal that the approach is highly questionable in terms of safety. The main objective of a weight training program is to strengthen the muscles, bones and connective tissue thereby reducing your players' risk of injury on the football field. It is contradictory, therefore, to use potentially dangerous activities or exercises in the weight room. It's certainly true that football has inherent participatory risks. Your athletes accept those risks as part of football. However, this doesn't mean that your players should accept unnecessary risks in the weight room. To paraphrase Michigan State University Strength Coach Ken Mannie, "Using potentially dangerous techniques in the weight room to prepare for potentially dangerous sports is like banging your head against the wall to prepare for a concussion." In my opinion, movements that have an unreasonable amount of orthopedic risk include the power clean and snatch as well as plyometrics -- especially those that are done vertically. Performing any exercise in the weight room with an explosive

speed of movement is potentially dangerous.

IT'S YOUR CHOICE

Ultimately, you must make the decision on which approach to implement in the weight room. As a coach, you owe it to your football players to select an approach that is productive, comprehensive, practical, efficient and safe.

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