

American Fitness

Quarterly



UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
STUDENT FITNESS AND RECREATION CENTER

OPERATING A SAFE WEIGHT ROOM

By Matt Brzycki, Assistant Strength Coach
Rutgers University

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

Strength training, like any other sport or activity, contains the potential for injury. However, safety in the weight room extends far beyond the scope of spotters and collars. Indeed, a safe program may be a coach's only defense against a lawsuit. Therefore, the intent of this article is to provide strength training professionals with a basic understanding of their legal responsibilities in the weight room.



NEGLIGENCE

In simple terms, negligence is when a coach fails to act as a reasonable and prudent coach would act in a similar situation. If you are sued and brought to trial, a judge or jury determines the appropriateness of your 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. As coaches, we have a number of legal duties. (These duties will be explained shortly.) Secondly, one of these duties must have been violated. A third factor is whether your breach of duty was responsible for an athlete's injuries. Finally, the damages or injuries are considered.

Again, all four of these factors must be proven before you can be found negligent. You will not be found negligent if any of these factors are absent.

LEGAL DUTIES

As coaches, we have certain legal obligations to our athletes which must be performed reasonably and prudently. According to the law, we are expected to provide several major duties for our athletes. These duties involve three main areas of responsibility—supervision, selection and conduct of activities and environment.

SUPERVISION. First, we must provide adequate supervision. Supervision is one of our most important responsibilities since it includes all of our legal duties.

To begin with, you should be qualified to supervise a weight room. Just because you have 18 inch arms or a 400 pound bench press doesn't automatically mean that you are a qualified supervisor. Although you don't necessarily need to possess certification, you should be mature, competent, knowledgeable and understand your legal duties. If you have assistants, make sure they too are qualified.

In performing your supervisory responsibilities, you must position yourself so that you can see and hear as much as possible. If you're the only supervisor in the weight room, try not to focus all of your attention on one athlete. Likewise, you can't supervise properly if you're lifting while your athletes are lifting. Don't coach from behind your desk either—get out on the floor with your athletes.

Obviously, you can't supervise if you aren't there! If one of your athletes gets hurt while you're gone, you could be found negligent if it was determined that your absence contributed to the injury. In short, you're asking for a lot of trouble by leaving your athletes unattended in the weight room.

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Portions of interview by Jim Swearingen, Warren Tribune Sports Writer.



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SELECTION AND 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 procedure.

Preparation and Planning. You can't simply open the weight room and "wing it." Planning begins with your approach to strength training.

First, your program should be safe. If your main purpose in strength training is to reduce your athletes' risk of injury, it becomes both contradictory as well as unwise to advocate unsafe lifting methods. Require your players to perform each repetition in a deliberate, controlled manner throughout a full range of motion. Don't allow them to explode with a weight since this exposes their joints and connective tissue to enormous forces which may cause an immediate injury or predispose them to a later injury. Also, avoid any potentially dangerous exercises or activities which place excessive strain on the musculoskeletal system.

Secondly, your approach should be practical. Asking your athletes to lift four days a week on a split routine while doing 30 sets each workout isn't very reasonable especially if you have 60 football players on your roster. Don't emphasize one repetition maximum lifts, either; just because your athletes can lift a lot of weight for one repetition doesn't mean they're suddenly better athletes. Remember, you're not training a weightlifting team. In addition, your players should not spend an inordinate amount of time bench pressing. Make sure your program addresses all of the body's major muscle groups and if you're training wrestlers or football players, require them to perform neck strengthening exercises.

Your program should also be efficient. Your athletes should strive to obtain the maximum results in the least amount of time.

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

There are a few additional points to consider in your planning. You should schedule an orientation meeting or a strength training clinic in which your athletes receive information concerning sound strength training fundamentals. They should also be given instruction in using the equipment properly and safely. In addition, you should explain the potential risks of injury due to utilizing poor lifting techniques (and frequently remind your players while they are lifting).

Give your new players a brief, basic routine when they first start out. This will give them time to adapt to the intensity of your program and enable them to understand more of what they're doing. To avoid possible injury, have your players increase their resistance by 5% when they perform the maximum number of repetitions. For instance, if one of your athletes is bench pressing 200 pounds, a 10 pound jump would be a 5% increase in weight. On the other hand, if he's curling 40 pounds, that same 10 pound jump would

represent a 25% increase in weight, which may invite injury.

Don't schedule 40 athletes to lift at the same time in a 1000 square foot facility. Each coach must determine how many athletes he or she can adequately supervise based on staff, equipment, time, space and experience.

Lastly, don't merely keep abreast of current strength training information—read it critically to determine if it is indeed safe, practical, efficient and productive. Be wary of routines that are based on either personal anecdotes or biased research.

Warning of Risks. You may be found negligent if you do not sufficiently warn your players of the risks involved in lifting weights. Your warnings should be clear and repeated as often as is necessary to ensure compliance.

Your athletes can only assume those risks which are inherent to 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 you do not warn your athletes of this possibility they may not be responsible. Furthermore, athletes should not assume the risk of any improper techniques or potentially dangerous exercises which are recommended by their coach.

Although some equipment manufacturers are placing warning labels on their products such as "Keep Hands Away While Machine Is In Use" and "Do Not Use Without Proper Supervision," you must still make sure that your players have read and understand the warnings.

Finally, provide your athletes with a written set of rules governing the use of the facility and make sure they understand

(Cont. on page 26)

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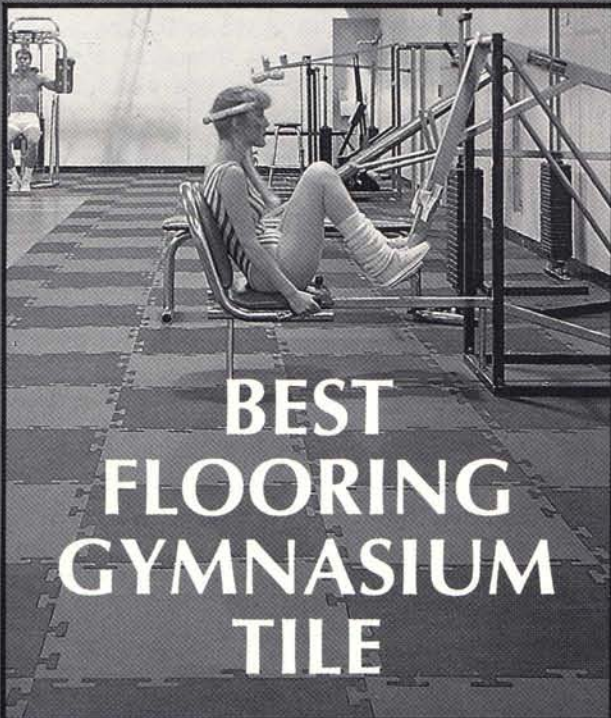
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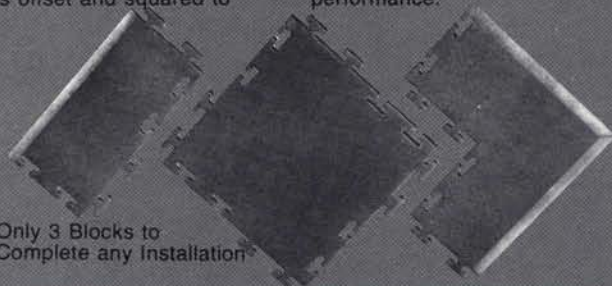
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the content. Persistent disregard for the rules should be dealt with by suspension of lifting privileges.

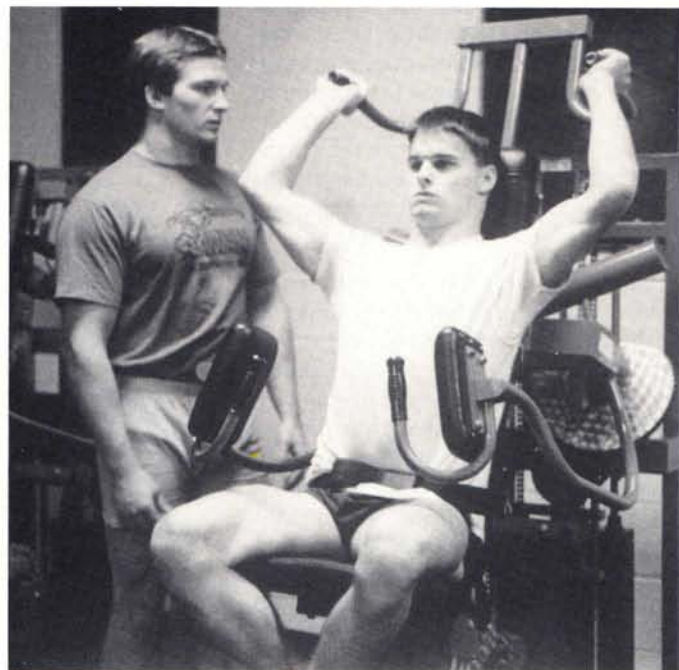
Evaluating Athletes for Limitations. You have a legal duty to make sure your athletes are physically able to strength train safely. You can use the team physician and athletic trainer as your resources to determine any restrictions on lifting. By all means, require your athletes to obtain a thorough medical examination each year before engaging in a strength training program or a re-evaluation for return after an injury.

Equal Pairing of Athletes. You also have a legal responsibility to pair your athletes so that one person is not placed at a gross disadvantage in terms of size, weight or maturation. Imagine if one of your athletes got injured on the bench press because the partner you assigned was physically unable to spot a heavy barbell. Additionally, matching your athletes properly will decrease the likelihood of one athlete injuring another during a partner resisted exercise.

First Aid and Emergency Medical Procedures. When performed, this is your most important legal responsibility. Whenever an athlete under your supervision is injured, you must provide reasonable medical assistance as soon as possible. This requires basic first aid skills and a system of obtaining trained medical personnel quickly. Unless you are adequately trained, don't go beyond basic first aid treatment. In carrying out this duty, you can be found negligent if you do nothing, if you select the wrong action or if you perform improper medical care.

It is recommended that you review and/or renew your first aid and CPR skills as needed. Keep the telephone numbers of the school nurse and an ambulance near the phone. You should also have a first aid kit in the weight room containing sterile dressings, tape, band-aids, etc. Lastly, an Injury Report should be made in the event of a serious injury.

PROVIDING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT. It is your legal duty to provide and maintain a safe weight room with good equipment in proper condition. You are responsible for eliminating any hazardous conditions or informing your supervisor of the situation in writing. You are also responsible for noticing what a reasonable and a prudent coach should have noticed, whether you did or not.

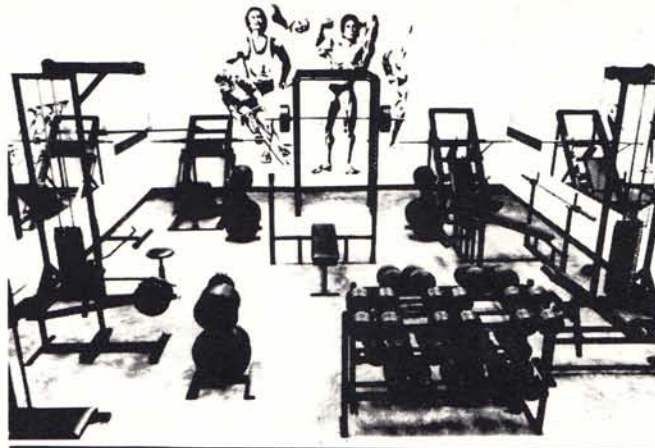


A safe weight room starts with safe equipment. Purchase the best equipment that your budget allows. Inspect the equipment regularly and thoroughly (especially any moving parts) to ensure that it is in good working order. Defective equipment should be replaced or removed. You should place the equipment in the weight room so that there's enough space for your athletes to move around without getting hurt. Insist that your athletes return all plates and dumbbells to their proper places. Your athletes should also be required to use a spotter and collars during any overhead lifts (e.g. bench press, shoulder press, etc.).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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 also a felony, coaches. Moreover, deaths directly attributed to steroid abuse are now being documented. If you recommended steroids to an athlete and he or she develops any life-threatening symptoms, you could be brought to trial and sued because of gross negligence on your part.

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. Use your common sense—you owe it to yourself and especially to your athletes. □



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