



PERFORMANCE SOCCER CONDITIONING

A NEWSLETTER DEDICATED TO IMPROVING SOCCER PLAYERS

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Breaking the Pattern of Failure in Soccer Conditioning

Jeff Turner, Founder of Fit2Play, Soccer

Jeff Turner strength and conditioning coaching experience includes: Columbus Destroyers, Columbus Crew of the MLS, Midwestern Force Lacrosse Club and is currently the strength and conditioning coach of the Ohio Premier Soccer Club. In 1994 he was named "Trainer of the Year" by the ISSA. He is Master of Sport Sciences through the International Sports Sciences Assoc. and members of International Sports Sciences Association and National Strength and Conditioning Association.

BEGIN

I've been training athletes in various sports at all levels -- from middle school to professionals -- for more than 20 years. In addition to my own observations over the years, I have asked coaches (strength/conditioning as well as head coaches) what they feel is missing with today's incoming high school / college athletes, and here's a list of their responses:

- Work ethic
- 1st step quickness
- Explosiveness
- Lateral speed and power
- Footwork
- Agility
- a "proper" lifting base
- Overall athleticism
- Pre-conditioning more focused on sprinting and agility instead of distance running
- Overall as well as sport-specific strength and muscle mass
- Rounding out instead of planting and cutting

While these needs are not surprising for 13-15 year olds, it's disturbing that the same deficiencies are reported for a large percentage, often the majority, of those athletes entering college. Furthermore, the situation can and often does get even worse during the college years, adversely impacting not only the individual but the team, coaches and school as well. Why are so many athletes set up for failure when in fact the conditioning experience should lead the player to enjoy optimal, injury free performance.

Roots of the problem-Not Learning to Move

There are a number of potential contributing factors to this



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situation. One very basic problem is that young athletes have never been taught the fundamentals of movement. They have not "grooved" the proper motor patterns. Many if not most adolescent athletes cannot run correctly, and a high percentage of girls (boys as well) don't understand how to plant and cut. This sounds elementary, but do you remember being coached as to how to run, or did you just go out and run? This in and of itself is way too important to overlook.

If a kid cannot plant and cut it truly doesn't really matter what his/her bench or hang clean is. While this may seem obvious, I see it all the time, and at every level. We constantly see coaches (from strength coach to head coach) who are expecting their athletes (whatever sport) to perform complicated lifts without first teaching them how. All the strength and conditioning programs and systems have little meaning if our young athletes are grooving poor movement patterns at 6, 8 and 10 years of age.

Roots of the problem-Lack of Qualified Supervision

And how common is it for coaches to create complex drills for their teams to perform before the athletes can perform the basics of planting and cutting? This "too much too soon" pattern, regardless of the explanation and justification (such as we don't have enough time with our athletes) is definitely a reason many of today's athletes are plagued with ongoing and nagging injuries and don't perform as well as they could.

Many of the men's soccer programs even at the high school level are requiring players to lift like the football team, and many of these young athletes have no experience under the bar. Worse yet, the strength coach will often send home a workout manual for the summer with expectations and consequences as a result if the athlete doesn't make the progress anticipated. Sadly (and inexcusably), though, it's not uncommon for the athletes to have had little competent supervised instruction on how to perform the various movements correctly. The result: creating and reinforcing poor/improper neuromotor grooves that can have significant adverse consequences over time.

Virtually all college programs have a summer packet/workout schedule that is sent home for the athlete to complete with the athletes tested upon return to classes to ensure that the program was followed. Some of the exercises and drills that I've seen in the programs of soccer players are good, but some are not. Worse is the fact that many athletes are tested on drills that have little to no application to

the sport. Take the NFL combine for example; the athletes train to test...not to play football. I've had plenty of experience "training to test" athletes at all levels of sport and for multiple sports. We get it done, but the athletes that come to me would produce better on the field if we could train specifically for their sport.

Roots of the problem-Conditioning at the Wrong Time

I'm aware of programs that will have their athletes lift and follow this (immediately) with practice so they can play under "fatigued" conditions. While MMA fighters or wrestlers may benefit from this type of preparation, it's a different story for soccer, lacrosse, field hockey and other such sports. If the Central Nervous System is in a fatigued state from heavy lifting, the last thing your athletes will be able to do is perform what you're trying to get accomplished for the day.

One of the soccer players I train reported after her first year at a D1 program that her coach made her "hate lifting." And it was not because it was hard, but because it made no sense to her -- max squats the day before a game and everyone had heavy legs. If our athletes are not recovering, you as coaches will not get 100% in practice and especially in competition.


Lifting is good, no question, and needs to be done to minimize injury and improve performance. More importantly, though, it needs to be done right! The athlete needs to learn the movement, groove the proper patterns -- and only then perform with moderate to heavy resistance. The kids that get that summer packet I was talking about sometimes never have the proper instruction and therefore are only stacking fitness on top of dysfunction.

Breaking the Pattern

A large piece of the puzzle is BAD information that has dug deep roots and will not go away anytime soon. However, with a few modifications we can drastically improve our programs and ultimately our student athletes. Some of the best and current research suggests we focus on the development of our young athletes, and NOT specialize. It's my opinion that too many coaches work towards having U12 Champions instead of General Physical Preparation. I've listened to coaches talk (during the recruiting process) about what they'd prefer and many of them have said, "Give me an athlete...I'll teach the game".

As a professional strength, conditioning and fitness coach I've had the pleasure of experiencing many different methodologies in the trenches. It's my goal to help re-focus the current thinking when it comes to physically preparing the student athlete by

- 1) helping coaches integrate fitness into their sport by first grooving correct movement patterns -- to simplify fitness and
- 2) providing methods that will help prevent over training
- 3) my intent is to help make athletes as bullet proof as possible through an ongoing educational process...the burden should not be on the coach. Let the coach do what they do -- coach the game.

What I hope to lay out in future issues can serve as a template for all your student athletes. We'll look at the "Essential 5" lifts, conditioning (General & Specific), the basics of a nutritional support system and simplify a plan for recovery. 

More Information Please! Contact Jeff at fit2play@gmail.com