

Starting a High School Strength Program

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FREQUENTLY AT CLINICS I SPEAK with high school coaches who are interested in starting or improving a strength and conditioning program at their school. Most often they are looking for guidance in setting up the program, and they always want to talk sets and reps. Coaches ask if they should do a program from a specific school or organization. Much to their dismay, I generally want to discuss organization and administrative concepts, because in my experience, these are the real keys. Setup and execution make the program run, not sets and reps.

If you get only one thing out of this article, remember this quote from an anonymous author:

“A bad program done well is better than a good program done poorly.”

Keep it simple, and adhere strictly to the guidelines given in this column.

■ Guidelines for a High School Program

Forget Uncooperative Seniors

The source of most frustration in starting a high school program is

dealing with seniors who already “know how to lift.” Separate these guys out right away. If they don’t cooperate, get rid of them. They’ll be gone soon anyway.

Do 1 Coaching-Intensive Lift Per Day

What do I mean by coaching-intensive lift? Exercises like squats or any Olympic-style movement are coaching intensive. Coaches must watch every possible set to ingrain the proper motor pattern correctly. If athletes are front squatting and hang cleaning the same day, which do you watch, the platforms or the squats racks? Don’t force yourself to make this decision. For example, do lunges instead of squats on the day that you clean, and do push-ups instead of bench press on the day you squat. On squat day, don’t do an Olympic-style movement; instead, do box jumps as your explosive exercise. This process of 1 coaching-intensive lift per day may only last a year, but you will not be having poor patterns practiced with no supervision.

Get All Administration Done Prior to the Start of Sessions

The biggest failure in strength and conditioning is coaches sitting at computers instead of coaching. If you need workouts done on computer, do them during a free period. The job is to be a strength and conditioning coach. Don’t get caught up, as many coaches do, in having great programs on paper and lousy lifters. Let the paper suffer and do the coaching.

Coach

This is what it is all about. Coach like this is your sport. So many coaches ask, “Can you give me a program?” We could, but it wouldn’t work. College or pro programs are not appropriate for high school beginners. They need teaching, not programs. The program begins and ends with technical proficiency. Coaches must realize that their athletes are the window through which others see them. If a college coach came into your weight room, would you be proud or ashamed? Would you make excuses for the poor technique or accept the pats on the back for what

great lifters your players are? The other factor, even more important than your athletes' being the window through which others see you, is that your athletes are the mirror in which you see yourself. Your lifters are a direct reflection of you. When you watch your athletes, are you happy with yourself as a teacher and coach?

Technique, Technique, Technique

Never compromise. Perform parallel squats all the time. Our athletes do nothing but front squats to a top-of-the-thigh parallel position. If you bench press, there must be no bounce, no arch. Never compromise. As soon as you allow 1 athlete to cheat or to not adhere to the program, others will follow immediately. Remember why athletes cheat. They cheat to lift more weight. Lifting more weight feeds their egos. If you allow it to start, cheating is very difficult to stop. To make your point, use exercises such as pause bench and pause front squats. These exercises can be very humbling. Canadian strength coach Charles Poliquin has a principle he calls "technical failure." This means that you never count a rep that was completed after technique broke down.

Use Bodyweight When Possible

Always teach bodyweight squats first. If your athletes can't bodyweight squat, they can't squat. Do lots of push-ups, feet-elevated push-ups, 1-leg squats, chin-ups, and dips. Bodyweight is humbling. Use it wisely and often with high school kids.

If You Test, Test Super Strict

Testing is when things really deteriorate. In testing, the coach should see every lift, and the

coach should select every weight. Don't reward strength. This is a huge mistake that I believe encourages drug use. Reward improvement: Make athletes compete with themselves, not others. There should be no T-shirts for rewards unless they reward improvement over personal bests. In addition, if you test strength, also test performance factors such as vertical jump and 10-yd dash. If athletes are improving strength without changing performance factors, the program is only marginally effective.

Have Appropriate Equipment

Fifteen- and 25-lb weightlifting bars are available for purchase. These are critical to a good high school program. Small plates can be added to dumbbells to allow athletes to make reasonable jumps when using dumbbells. Spend money to encourage success. Success is what sells the program.

Conclusion

Strength and conditioning coaching is easy in principle, but difficult in practice. The key is to try to see every set and to coach every athlete. This is difficult, time consuming, and repetitive. At the end of a good day, you should be hoarse and tired. A good strength coach will have sore legs and knees from squatting down to see squat depth all day. This intense work on the coach's part, more than any prepackaged program, is what makes a high school strength program stand out. ▲

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