

Thoughts on Year Round Conditioning

By

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Why is being in “game shape” or “conditioned” year around so important to trainers/athletes/coaches and parents?

How many times have you as a trainer heard from a parent, who brings you their kid 6 weeks to 4 months before the season starts, “Coach Smith says Jimmy has to train conditioning 3 times a week. Coach has given him a conditioning program; I just need you to make sure he adheres to it. I would also like to see Jimmy put some size on and get stronger. But he’s a, _____ (Insert sport position: pitcher, short stop, goalie, line backer, quarter back, sprinter, jumper, point guard, etc.) so he HAS to be in shape to play. Coach said his conditioning was horrible last year.”

Great, so not only are you telling me I have to follow a program written by a guy who has no freaking clue what he’s talking about. But also, I have to get your kid bigger and stronger at the same time he’s supposed to be running 3 miles a day 3 times a week and if I don’t your going to think I am a bad trainer.

Tell ya what, next time your at the dentist’s office tell them to only use a mixture of baking soda and alcohol to clean your teeth. See how that goes.

I honestly have no intelligent, scientific or rational answer/idea what is so important about being conditioned year round. It makes no sense to me. However, if I forget common sense and take a step down into the role of the ignorant parent/trainer/athlete/coach I can come up with some basic ideas.

Parent:

1. “I want my kid to be “in shape” all the time. When I played football I was in amazing shape and could run a 4 minute mile and the 40 in under 5 seconds. I could also do 100 pull ups in a row and squat 500 lbs. Let’s not even talk about my bench press because it makes me blush a little bit.”
2. “My kid is fat and lazy. So, I want him leaving his training session covered in sweat and aching from head to toe. That way I know he did something and the money I am paying is actually worth something.”

I hate getting the parents that tell me how to train their kid. I don’t tell you how to raise them, so don’t tell me how to train them. I understand that when you played sports back in 72’ you were in great cardiovascular shape. But, guess what parents, its 2008, kids are bigger, they hit harder and injury rates are on the steep rise due to inactivity and over specialization. When you tell me what kind of shape you were in “back in the day” all that is really telling me is that you were skinny and weak. How much you sweat is not related to how much you work. Look at an Olympic sprinter, when they are done running their event they aren’t even sweating and, if the race is short enough, they don’t even

breath heavy at the end. Know how much conditioning they do? I will give you a hint, they never run more than 150% over their race distance.

Coach:

1. "You need to run sprints and gassers 3 months out from pre-season. You were slow and out of shape last season. Get your cardio up so you can play longer with out getting tired."
2. "This is what my coach did when I played, and we were state champs all 6 years I was in high school. If it worked back then it will work now. I don't believe in continuing my education concerning my sport. If the powers that be thought I didn't know what I was talking about, they wouldn't have hired me."

The "run-um-into-the-ground" mentality. This Coach wants his players in marathon condition as soon as they come into pre-season, never mind their sport is a sprint sport. In his opinion, no one is in "good shape" and everyone is slow and weak. So his answer is to run everyone into the ground with conditioning drills to "get their cardio up" and "get them stronger". If you train slow, you will become slow. Ask a sprinter how many times they practice their 100 meter dashes running at a mile pace. So this coach ends up with a team comprised of weak small athletes that can "sprint" at 80% of their max speed a whole bunch of times during the game. They get out scored and beat to the ball on every play, but boy do they keep the pressure up...from 5 yards behind every player on a break away because they have no speed.

Trainer:

1. "Ok, I have this kid for 6 weeks. His diet sucks, so he won't get any bigger. I don't want to put any thought into getting him stronger because he's gone in 6 weeks. I'll just work the hell out of him and kill him every day. That way I am bound to do some good, and at least he will be in better conditioning at the end."
2. "MY ATHLETES ARE THE BEST CONDITIONED ONES AROUND! THEY RUN EVERYONE INTO THE GROUND!"

Trainers fall prey to both of those mentalities a lot. They have a family to feed too, so they run massive "camps" where they cram 50 kids into an hour session and have them do some kind of circuit consisting of 45 seconds on, 15 seconds off. These camps are CHEAP. After all, you get what you pay for. The athlete goes into the camp in bad "shape" and he comes out in good "shape", only to sit around the house doing nothing for 2 weeks after the camp is over. The parent is happy because junior got a work out and the kid is drenched in sweat, and the kid is happy because he is taking steps toward not being so out of shape. Because after all, the coach said he was slow and out of shape last season. If you stop working out you lose what you gained. The easier it was to come by, the easier it is to lose. Cardiovascular conditioning, compared to increasing your strength, is easy to come by, and if you stop working on it, it's even easier to lose. However, most personal trainers are lazy with little understanding of basic exercise science and most of them bordering on con artists and charlatans. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to set up 10 sessions for 10 kids and have them do that for an hour. But, it's a little harder to increase someone's lifts in 6 weeks, or to put 2 lbs of muscle on them.

The “best conditioned athlete” thing always makes me chuckle. Your athletes are like the energizer bunny. That’s good, because judging by their size and strength levels they better have a lot of energy to pick themselves up off the ground every time they get knocked down. The majority of sports aren’t won by the person who can go the farthest, they are won by the person who gets their first. The majority of sports are won by the fastest strongest kid out there. You don’t get big and strong by running 3 miles a day.

Athlete

1. “Coach didn’t play me last year because my conditioning was horrible. So I am going to hammer conditioning 6 months out. I am going to be the leanest most cardio-riffic kid on the team.”
2. “I sucked so much wind last pre-season because I wasn’t conditioned. This year I am going to show the coach how much I want to play and come into the pre-season running double what everyone else does.”

You poor misguided fools. Coach didn’t play you last year because you were weak and small. Point me to a team where all of the varsity athletes can run a mile in under 5 minutes and that all weigh less then 160 lbs. Barring endurance sports (cross country, swimming, etc.) if your team consists of people like that, you probably don’t have that great of a record. If you didn’t play varsity last year, and you weigh less then 170 lbs (assuming you play some sort of contact sport), why don’t you take a summer off of conditioning and spend some time in the weight room. Most kids can play them selves into shape. If you step onto the field/court with 10 lbs of added muscle, I guarantee it doesn’t matter how slow you run that mile. The coach is going to take notice and be thinking to him self, “Jesus, Timmy is out of shape. But my god can that boy hit hard and sprint like the wind.” You’re SUPPOSED to suck wind in pre-season. The coach doesn’t know any better and he is assuming that his athletes have been sitting around playing x-box the whole summer. Coaches are the most ignorant people when it comes to conditioning for their sport. I love listening to the hellish stories about pre-season basketball conditioning. 75% of their athletes are playing a sport in the fall with minimal time off between seasons. Is there really a need to have them do suicides the first day? Maybe they should stretch the first week, since they are probably about as flexible as steel. When Sam is done playing soccer and then he goes immediately into running suicides the first week of basketball season, does that really make a lot of sense? He just got done running! Give the kid a break for gods sake, maybe he won’t sprain his ankle so much because he will be rested.

Here’s the bottom line. There is a difference between timing and endurance. Timing is when you execute actions coinciding with movement, i.e. running and throwing a LAX ball, or dribbling a soccer ball. Being in “good shape” is the blending of good timing with a sufficient level of conditioning to play your sport. If your cardio is lacking your timing will be off, however, most athletes can play themselves into shape. Once you lose your timing you have to fight to get it back. An athlete should not be in “game shape” year around, however, they should practice all their timing skills, i.e. pitching, starting, throwing, kicking, cutting, stopping, etc. year around. Remember, everything in sport is governed by strength. How strong you are determines how well you control your body

and how much force you can exert against your environment. Take some time off of conditioning and just work on getting stronger. I guarantee your bodies will feel and work much better.