

# Skill Versus Strength- Training for Sports

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The goal of your strength and conditioning program should be two-fold

1. **Prevent injury**
2. **Improve athletic ability**

Notice that "Enhance Sports Performance" is not one of the goals listed. This is because sports performance is just that, sports performance. In order for an athlete to improve his or her performance, they need to practice the skills required by their sport. Coaches, athletes, and parents constantly ask me if I design sport-specific training programs. My reply is always the same; "my programs are designed to enhance athletic ability, and sports performance is dependent upon your skill in the sport".

## **Athletic Ability**

All my programs are designed to enhance athletic ability; specifically to optimize muscular strength, endurance, flexibility, and cardiovascular condition. In order for a training program to be sport-specific it needs to replicate the precise movements required by the sport. In other words, practice is what I consider sport-specific training. Our training programs do not specify sport movements, but rather athletic movements. The reasoning behind this is that if someone can become a better athlete through training, then they've increased the likelihood that performance will improve during practice. So, keep in mind that a strength and conditioning program should be designed to enhance an athlete's ability and not necessarily sports performance.

## **The Skill of Training**

Keep in mind that weight lifting, running, and jumping are all skills that athletes need to learn in addition to their sports. When learning a new jumping activity or a new lift, it takes a while to learn the skill of the new exercise. One gives little consideration of how the new exercises will improve performance because there is so much focus on performing the new exercise correctly.

## **A Stronger Athlete isn't Necessarily a Better Athlete**

There's no way to determine when an athlete improves his or her strength that this in turn results in better sports performance. Keep in mind it's not the strength that will improve performance, but the rather the strength when it is applied to practice that results in improved performance. Think about it, one athlete lifts weights and conditions and the other athlete shoots free throws. After three weeks of training this way, who will have the better free throw shooting percentage? In the past, I've been known to prevent some athletes from participating in weight training because they need to spend more time improving their sports performance, and not necessarily their strength performance.

## **Skill Versus Strength**

In highly skilled sports such as basketball, volleyball, tennis and hockey a tremendous amount of skill is required in order to be successful. Sport-specific skill is the primary predictor of an athlete's ability in these sports. The best players on these teams are quite often the most skilled at their position, regardless of their strength level. It's an athlete's skill, and not necessarily their strength, that sends these athletes to the next competitive level. Sports such as golf and tennis actually require little strength in order to be successful. Now, don't take offense to what I just said, I'm trying to make a point. My point is that in order for a golfer to have success on the course he or she must possess the necessary golf skills to hit and put the ball. Believe me, I've seen some fabulous golfers that couldn't run a mile without stopping, touch their toes, or even lift 25 pounds over their head. But, they were championship golfers. I then took these athletes and trained them. They significantly improved their strength, flexibility and conditioning levels. The result; golf performance stayed the same.

### **Preventing Injury /S Improving Performance**

Simply put, an athlete can't reach his or her potential if their injured. Unfortunately, it seems so many of our strength training and conditioning coaches emphasize so much strength improvement. Coaches press athletes to improve their one-rep max by a few pounds in hopes the new strength will help performance. I disagree. For most sports, we should look at how strength training will reduce the likelihood of suffering an injury. Most practices require repetitive movements that often lead to overuse injuries, tendonitis, stress fractures, and others. It's here I think strength training can be a key component in preventing some of these injuries. For example, volleyball players and tennis players notoriously experience shoulder pain and soreness throughout a season. Weight training should be used to strengthen the shoulder cuff muscles in order to balance strength of the front and back of the shoulder. You see, the front of the shoulder for a volleyball or tennis player already is tremendously strong. Think about it, they strengthen the front of the shoulder each and every time they hit the ball. So, the front of the shoulder needs no extra training in the weight room. What should be strengthened are the muscles on the BACK of the shoulder. It's these muscles that slow the shoulder down after swinging and play a major role in keeping the shoulder healthy. Just because an athlete uses the muscles in their sport doesn't mean that those muscles have to be trained even more so in the weight room. If you do this, it can lead to over training and eventually injury. Unfortunately, using strength training to prevent injury isn't as exciting to some coaches as lifting for maximum power is. However, I feel strength training to prevent injury is far more important, and safer, than power lifting for maximum strength.

### **Bringing It All Together**

Remember, the goal of your training program is to improve athletic ability. Improving one's strength, speed, endurance, and flexibility will not only set the stage for practice, but aid in preventing injury so one can make it through the entire season without getting hurt. Never do we want our strength and conditioning programs exposing athletes to dangerous or injury causing workouts. Something may look sport-specific, and although it looks tempting, be aware! Sport-specific training should be implemented during practice. Use weight lifting, conditioning, and stretching to enhance athletic ability and prevent injury.