



SHUT UP and LIFT: Being a Fulltime High School Strength and Conditioning Coach

By: PJ Graybeck MS, CSCS, USAW1

The world of athletics has evolved greatly in recent years. One area that has been increasingly emphasized is the importance of strength and conditioning. The question is, who is responsible for training these athletes? What was once considered the responsibility of the head football coach an assistant or the head coach of each sport, the task is slowly been placed on a certified strength and conditioning coach for all student-athletes. The following article is a brief synopsis of a few key areas that I believe has helped me become a valuable fulltime strength and conditioning coach at the high school level.

Throughout the past fourteen years I have held several different titles and responsibilities in strength and conditioning. I have been a Physical Education teacher who taught weight training class, an assistant to the Head Football Coach helping in the weight room, Strength and Conditioning Coordinator for Football, and Strength and Conditioning Coordinator for all sports. I also was an intern strength and conditioning coach for a Division I football program. Of all the titles and responsibilities, I have had, being the Strength and Conditioning Coordinator for all sports at Riverwood International Charter School in Sandy Springs, Georgia has been the hardest, most rewarding and most important.

Injury Prevention

How good am I as a strength coach if an athlete gets injured in the weight room? What good to the team is an athlete if they can't perform? My number one goal as Strength and Conditioning Coordinator is to limit the amount of injuries my athletes incur. When designing programs and implementing exercises, the main priority is injury prevention.

Riverwood athletes begin taking weight training in the 9th grade. During this time the athletes go through a development program that emphasizes proper technique of several key

exercises and movements. Athletes progress from basic exercises using body weight, plastic pipes and bands to more advanced exercises using regulation bars, dumbbells, and other equipment. Athletes need to demonstrate mastery of the basics before they can advance. I am a strong believer in slow cooking our athletes' development. I believe this not only allows them to gain confidence, but it limits some of the athletes who want to do way too much too soon. I have seen too many times young and novice weight lifters being pushed to "add more weight". They get injured or plateau too quickly.

Prehab exercises, mobility exercises and a proper dynamic warmup is included in every workout my athletes go through. These exercises allow my athletes to be prepared to go through a vigorous workout. When including these exercises, I am also thinking about the athletes who are in-season. They may have had a tough game or long week and I feel these exercises help keeps them loose and mobile for the long haul.

Recovery is not forgotten in my program. While head coaches are thinking about getting more out of their players, it is my duty to realize how much a high school athlete goes through. Many athletes play multiple sports, see outside trainers, and deal with other outside influences that can break them down mentally and physically. I make a concerted effort to include foam rolling and stretching in the plan as well as lighter, less strenuous workouts to help aid the recovery process.

Strength and Conditioning at Riverwood has been proven beneficial in injury prevention. Following my first year I sat down with our athletic trainer to compare injuries without a fulltime strength coach and with a fulltime strength coach. After the first year Riverwood athletics saw a 35% decrease in reported injuries. What this does is it allows me to adjust the workouts and use the strength and conditioning program to alleviate some of these injuries.

TIME

Being a fulltime strength coach, I can spend more time doing things that a head coach is not able to. I have more time to evaluate the mental and physical status of my players and teams. I will go and watch the teams play and take notice of how the teams are playing. Do they look sluggish or tired? Are they getting pushed around? Did the team look strong in the fourth quarter or at the end of the game? Seeing this allows me to make adjustments in the weight room and specialize the workouts for individual players or teams. My athletes are also very appreciative that I show up and support them. Even though most of our time is spent on their development mentally and physically, a special bond is formed when they know I care. They tend to give a little more in the weight room.

Many of the head coaches at Riverwood are happy to have a fulltime strength coach. Prior to coming to Riverwood fulltime, any coach that wanted their players to workout had to come in before or after school to train them on their own. In many cases coaches would cut into their practice time to incorporate an abbreviated workout that can be completed in a short

period of time. Riverwood now has all athletes taking weight training class throughout the day. This has allowed coaches to concentrate more on practice plans, pregame prep or work on material for the classes they teach.

Since I don't have to coach a sport I am able to dedicate more time learning about strength and conditioning as well as talking about the Riverwood Strength and Conditioning Program. I have been fortunate to lead several professional development sessions for the school district. I take great pride in what has been built at Riverwood and enjoy sharing what we do. Having more time going to clinics, meeting with coaches or getting a new strength and conditioning certification has benefitted in making me a better strength coach.

Weight training classes are yearlong and once the school year is over I use my time to dedicate the summer to working with many of the sport teams and athletes as they get ready for the following year. The summer program is broken down into four sessions for four days a week. Each session is for one hour and fifteen minutes. Football, Girl Sports, Non-Football Boy Sports and 9th Graders each have their own session. This is another situation in which head coaches do not have to worry about using their free time to work with their teams. They have fully entrusted me to do what needs to be done to help their team.

Experience and Certifications

Each year provides its own demands and issues. Having the knowledge and background to develop appropriate workouts is extremely helpful. As an experienced fulltime strength coach, I know I must take into consideration the amount of weight training classes there are, along with the school calendar, the space we have that includes the weight room and gym, the equipment we have that is stationary or moveable, and the training age and physical age of the athletes when designing workouts.

Through the years of being around different coaching styles and different levels of knowledge I have been able to shape my philosophy to the way it is today. As I developed the Riverwood Strength and Conditioning program I knew I was not going to sacrifice technique and injury prevention.

No matter the training age or athletic ability of an athlete, every ninth grader must go through our block zero development program. Here we install the building blocks of the strength program starting with basic movement patterns, mobility exercises, and warmups/prehab exercises. From here the athletes will progress to more complex exercises and movements. Having accredited certifications as well as learning from other certified coaches have helped me program the exercise progressions as we have it at Riverwood. Being certified also provides a major reassurance to the coaches, parents and administration that the program at Riverwood is going to accommodate all athletes while providing a safe environment, one that a non-certified coach might not be in tune with.

Organizations such as the NHSSCA have been extremely valuable for me as a strength coach in that I am able to network, gain insight from other strength coaches and I am challenged as a coach to further enhance the weight training experience for all athletes of all abilities.

Communication and Connections

Not all athletes, coaches and parents are on board with the program and are committed to the process as others. It's important for me to make that connection as best as possible. When it comes to the coaches, at the beginning of every school year I give them an opportunity to sit down with me and discuss the strength programs. I let the coaches know of any changes or ideas I have and plan to make and I let the coaches offer me their concerns. Not every time do we end up on the same page but I feel if I am able to explain in strength and conditioning terms why it will benefit their program, the coach will generally leave the meeting feeling better.

It is important that the player, coaches and I are all on the same page during the season. I have notice in the past that players will come to the weight room saying their coach doesn't want them to do anything because there is a game that day. I try to eliminate that situation by meeting with each team at the beginning of the season to explain how workouts will go on games and throughout the season. I make a point by letting them know that the coaches and I are all standing there in front of them and are on the same page. This limits the players pitting the coach and myself against each other.

I feel it is important to let the athletes have a say in certain aspects of the program. Several times a year I meet with each athlete one on one and we discuss their personal thoughts about the program. I let them be as candid as possible and even let them offer ideas on ways in which it can be better. Sometimes these ideas ended up being the best ideas. After my first year of summer workouts I let the athletes decide on the quote that will go on the back of the Lifter of the Week T-shirts. They decided on "SHUT UP and LIFT". This quote has become the theme of the weight room and is used not only on shirts, but during announcements, on twitter posts and on the big mural outside the weight room.

Head Coach Testimonials

Throughout the past four years I have been fortunate to work with several coaches that believe strength and conditioning is a valuable piece to the big puzzle that's high school athletics. As much as I can talk about how valuable my profession is, I believe it is important to hear from the Head Coaches side as well. Communicating with them daily, figuring what is working and what is not and being on the same page has helped several programs be successful. The following are testimonies from several coaches that have reaped the benefits of having a fulltime strength coach.

The girls' basketball program benefited greatly from having a full-time strength and conditioning coach. As a head coach, I appreciate not having to take valuable time out of practice to concentrate on strength training

specifically. As a basketball coach, I appreciate having a knowledge, licensed coach, that's sole purpose is to train my athletes. I have seen a reduction in injuries, which is very valuable in a 25+ game season. The girl's team made the state playoffs for the 1st time in five years. Furthermore, my athletes are more in tune with their bodies and recognize the difference between sore and an injury. Additionally, the off season and summer workouts provide a leg up on some of the competition in girl's basketball.

Michelle E. Finley, Ed.S
IB Business Instructor
FBLA Adviser
Head Girls Basketball Coach

Having a full-time strength coach has had a major impact on our program. In the four years before we added a full-time strength coach our overall record was 42-69. In the four years since incorporating full-time strength training we have been 93-25 and have had the most success in school history. Not only have I seen a significant improvement in my players' functional strength, mental toughness and competitiveness, I have also seen a drop in the number of injuries we've had. A roster of stronger, mentally tougher athletes who spend less time in the training room and more time on the court has greatly contributed to the turnaround of our basketball program.

Buck Jenkins
Head Boys Basketball Coach
AVID Coordinator/Elective Teacher
Riverwood Raiders

My volleyball team has experienced tremendous success the last two seasons (Sweet 16 and Final Four appearances), not just because they are very skilled players but it also due to their physical and mental preparation for the game due to weight and physical training. My players are fortunate to train in class as well as two additional days after school prior to practice. The advantages of having a Strength and Conditioning Coach on staff that works with our athletes is immeasurable. It allows me to use my practice time to focus on skill development and team concepts without dedicating a lot of time to conditioning. We are fortunate to have a program that is highly effective in bettering our athletes in the skill-related fitness components, injury reduction, and challenging them mentally!

Nikia Bynum-Isler
Riverwood High School
Health & P.E. Dept. Chair
Head Volleyball Coach

The benefits for a soccer coach in having a full-time strength and conditioning coordinator is it allows expertise into our training sessions and it frees up time for the coach to concentrate on technical and tactical training on the field. After working with a strength and conditioning coach or the first time, I immediately saw a decrease in muscle injuries. My athletes were developing a stronger core muscle group that prevents many of the muscle strains and pulls commonly associate with soccer. I also noticed players were not getting pushed off the ball as easier in earlier seasons as well as improved agility and flexibility. With athletes being injury free and fully fit it allows the coach to add more intensity into our training sessions. This was not possible at other schools where I have coached without a full-time strength and conditioning coach. I do not have the training nor knowledge to fully concentrate on a player's physical development and only focused on sport specific techniques and training.

Jeffery Welp
Boys Head Soccer Coach
2016 State Champions
Social Studies Teacher
Riverwood Raiders