

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED? A RETROSPECT ON THE PAST 10 YEARS WORKING AS A TSAC-F

The tactical strength and conditioning field is evolving each year. Over a decade ago, we based much of our knowledge and experience from those working in athletics and/or performance training. We are seeing more jobs and opportunities, as well as more studies on tactical research. Because of the experience of those in the field, we are gaining a better understanding of what it actually means to work within the tactical field. I have had many learning experiences over the past decade working as a Tactical Strength and Conditioning Facilitator® (TSAC-F®) and this article summarizes some of the lessons I have learned.

In 2007, I had my first opportunity to work full time as a tactical facilitator for a fire department with roughly 600 members. Like many young coaches starting out, I was ambitious and eager. I had the qualifications on paper and all the credentials after my name. I thought I was ready to help the firefighters become athletes. What I did not realize at the time was how ignorant and naive I was.

THEY ARE NOT ATHLETES, THEY ARE TACTICAL ATHLETES

My first mistake came from thinking the firefighters were just athletes. After a few months on the job, I had my first opportunity to create an exercise program for a probationary firefighter. I was excited and went back to all my books and research. I developed what I felt to be the best program for the firefighter. It included everything: a dynamic warm-up, core exercises, and functional strength and conditioning exercises. When I was done, I looked at the program as my masterpiece and could not wait for him to praise me; I was so wrong. The firefighter looked at the workout and proceeded to give me an odd look and say, “what is this?” and I replied, “your workout.” Then he just said, “whatever” and left my office. I was crushed and disappointed that I missed my opportunity to help him.

What did I do wrong? I misunderstood the phrase “tactical athlete.” I focused on the word “athlete” and not the entire phrase. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the definition of an athlete is “a person who is trained or skilled in exercises, sports, or games requiring physical strength, agility, or stamina,” (1). Yet, not all tactical athletes require these same skill sets throughout their career. For example, a firefighter may require more athletic skills on a fire, but a division chief of training may require more wellness or nutrition. In other words, I was too narrow minded and realized my skill set as a coach was very limited. I did not understand that

firefighters have a normal life outside of their occupation, often consisting of family commitments, second jobs, and extracurricular activities that can impact their strength and conditioning program.

This was an important lesson and it changed my perspective. I had to change my approach from only a performance-based model to an all-inclusive model that also encompassed health, wellness, and injury prevention components. I realized it was not always about getting bigger, faster, or stronger, but rather developing a systematic approach that focused on performance during the early stages of their career and improved wellness for longevity for when they transition into the latter stages of their careers.

IT IS ABOUT PERFORMANCE AND MORE

As previously stated, performance is one requirement, but it also depends on the specific tactical population. If you are working with an individual who is in the military or law enforcement, they may want to try for a specialized unit; in this case, you should focus your performance program on the assessments required of that specific specialized unit. In addition, you may need to maintain their fitness levels so that they can remain on that specialized unit. However, not all tactical athletes are in need of this type of performance training, some tactical athletes just need something that will get them moving again. What I started to understand was that there are subgroups within the tactical population, and not everyone requires the same training methods. A Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist® (CSCS®) will incorporate all aspects of performance (e.g., recovery, mobility, flexibility) to optimize the athlete’s abilities on the field, but some tactical subgroups may just need one aspect to help improve their wellbeing, not performance. For example, a law enforcement officer working in cyber-crime may need more nutritional help on selecting better food choices while a helicopter pilot may require more mobility to offset the amount of time spent in a crouched position. Overall, I learned that performance and exercise may not always be the highest priority for all tactical athletes; therefore, I had to develop a method that provided priorities based on their needs without overwhelming them.

SCIENCE IS STILL THE FOUNDATION

One enormous mistake I made in the beginning of my career was not looking at tactical athletes’ job tasks appropriately. When I watched a law enforcement officer or firefighter, I just assumed everything was done with 100% effort. Therefore, I made a lot of high-intensity power training workouts. Over time, I realized

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that I neglected their strength. My programming was poor and I was not applying the basic scientific principles associated with performance training. Another issue associated with my poor programming was that the high-intensity power workouts became a “test of heart” instead of science. This created a ripple effect throughout the department and extreme conditioning programs were being implemented by unqualified professionals. The tactical athletes were beginning to think that the harder the workout, the better you are as a “tactical athlete,” but this is not always the case. I realized that I was being irresponsible by not apply scientific programming, which lead me to often hear, “well that’s what you did coach.” I came to understand that if I did it, it was assumed that it was safe and effective; so I had to come back to the basic principles of exercise science.

IT IS ALSO ABOUT HEALTH, WELLNESS, AND INJURY PREVENTION

A decade ago, we focused a lot of our efforts on performance. Now we are coming to understand the value of other areas too, such as heart disease, sleep disorders, stress, type 2 diabetes, and mental health. Although these areas are important in the athletic field, they have a slightly different role in the tactical setting. In defense of those working a decade ago, we had only one place to gain our knowledge and that was from working with athletes. Present day, our role as TSAC-Fs has grown from a performance-based model to a more holistic approach. We are coming to understand the job for the tactical athlete much better and realize it is difficult on multiple fronts (e.g., sleep disruptions, exposure to constant negatives, hormonal imbalances, aging, family). As TSAC-Fs, we are trying to educate ourselves on the other previously mentioned areas while still maintaining our base of strength and conditioning.

CONCLUSION

I have been involved with the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) TSAC Program since 2008, spent 10 years working in the tactical field, and have met many knowledgeable subject matter experts who have contributed significantly to the tactical field by sharing their knowledge and experience. Learning from others and sharing this knowledge is what allows for the entire industry to improve as a whole. Our future has an amazing road ahead. We need to remember where we came from so we do not lose focus of where we are going. In the end, I foresee all this experience and research that has been accumulated over the past decade will help continue our success, along with the continued collaboration between researchers and practitioners, and an open network of professionals sharing ideas will allow for all TSAC-F to help those serving in tactical occupations.

REFERENCES

1. Athlete. Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Retrieved 2018 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/athlete>.

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