TEACHING AND MOTIVATING YOUTH ATHLETES—A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

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Strength and conditioning coaches have a unique opportunity and responsibility to teach and motivate youth athletes. Many times, a strength and conditioning coach is an athlete's only knowledgeable source for strength and conditioning research and application in a world full of misinformation. Teaching and motivating youth athletes is no easy task. However, working with youth athletes presents many teaching and motivational opportunities for strength and conditioning coaches that can make the profession very rewarding. This article will provide insight into teaching and motivating youth athletes from a perspective based on my personal experience working with youth athletes as well as current scientific research.

TEACHING YOUTH ATHLETES

Patience is important when teaching proper strength training technique to youth athletes because many are beginners who have no strength training experience. Youth athletes should understand that it is important for them to practice technique as accurately as possible to prevent potential injury and to reap the maximal benefits of training even though it may take some time to achieve ideal technique.

Youth may learn in different ways. Although there are many learning style models used in classrooms that could help in teaching youth strength and conditioning, I prefer Fleming's VARK model when teaching exercise technique (4,6). I have found that it helps to give my athletes the opportunity to see, hear, and practice the exercise (the read/write portion of the VARK is less applicable in this case). I incorporate three of the four parts of the VARK model to help maximize retention:

1. **Visual (V)**: I demonstrate the technique properly while they watch.
2. **Auditory (A)**: I verbally explain the exercise at a slow pace while using words that they can understand.
3. **Read/write (R)**: I do not incorporate this component since it is not practical for teaching exercise technique.
4. **Kinesthetic (K)**: I let them practice the movement.

Sometimes, the athlete can naturally perform a movement correctly. Others may realize their technique problem and quickly fix it without my correction. I strive to compliment youth athletes who perform an exercise with good form or who correct errors on their own after improper technique, particularly if there are noticeable improvements from a prior set or workout. The goal of this reinforcing praise is to give the athlete a boost of self-confidence each time they hear it. If their form is incorrect after three repetitions, I correct them and answer any questions they have. I wait until after three repetitions to give my athletes a chance to make a correction on their own before I step in (as long as there is no immediate risk of injury). I have found that this sometimes works with my athletes and decreases the chances of frustration due to constant correction (3). Of course, a youth athlete should always be stopped immediately if their incorrect form is potentially dangerous for them or others around them (3).

At times I have noticed that many of my athletes become frustrated if I constantly correct them on an exercise. I feel that it is sometimes more effective when I pick battles with my athletes rather than correct every minor detail. If I sense that the athlete is getting frustrated, then I move the athlete on to another exercise before returning to the first exercise. When returning to the exercise, I encourage them to concentrate on one part of the exercise at a time as they progress towards complete, proper exercise technique. This seems to work better than continuing to frustrate them with constant correction.

For example, if the youth athlete is having a hard time with squats, I will have them focus on pushing the hips back during the squat until they can perform that part correctly. Then, I switch their focus to keeping both feet planted entirely on the ground. Finally, I teach them the difficult back positioning of the squat. Examples of incorrect squat technique are provided in Figures 1 and 2, while correct technique is depicted in Figure 3. These are some of the common improper squat techniques that I see with my athletes. These squat tips are not all-inclusive, nor are they the same with all athletes, so the strength and conditioning coach should assess each individual athlete and customize instruction accordingly. The eventual goal after focusing on one part of the movement at a time is for all parts of the exercise to combine into a successful squat.

It also helps to be familiar with common exercise technique errors. For instance, not controlling the body or the weight properly is one of the common errors I see with my athletes while performing strength exercises. This is important to correct because research has shown detrimental effects on training adaptations from improper exercise velocities (7). A good cue that I use for this problem is to "control the weight, do not let the weight control you." There are various ways that a movement can be considered out of control, so the strength and conditioning coach should assess each athlete's individual performance on specific exercises.

Because it is commonly assumed that sport success hinges on an athlete being strong, powerful, and in control of themselves, an object, or another opponent, I encourage my athletes to be strong and in control of a weight or their own body during training. During a kettlebell swing, for example, the athlete can get out of control on the way back down, causing the back to round and potentially lead to injury. An example of a rounded back during the kettlebell swing can been seen in Figure 4. Instead, the athlete should more closely resemble the form shown in Figure 5.

PROGRESSION

Proper progressions are important for youth athletes in a variety of ways, including periodized programming, training loads, volume, exercise selection, and complexity of similar muscle group exercises, to name a few. I often have my athletes start with less challenging exercises before progressing to more challenging exercises. At every step in the process, I will have them start with a light weight to ensure proper technique before adding weight.

Continuing with the squat as an example, I have my athletes perform bodyweight squat technique proficiently before any weight is added. When their technique is correct and they appear to be ready to add weight, I then have them perform a kettlebell front squat or a dumbbell squat with arms to the sides. The next step I take for the squat is a light pipe or body bar that the athletes use to mimic barbell back squats. Finally, once the athletes demonstrate the ability to perform all of the progressions properly, I have them use a barbell for a weighted back squat. It is very common for my athletes to insist that they be able to add weight or try a more complicated exercise early in the process. Throughout the process, I insist that proper technique be maintained before weight is added or a more complicated exercised is performed. This progression strategy can be implemented with many different kinds of resistance training exercises to help teach youth athletes proper exercise movements that keep them safe and lead to long-term improvements (2).

Another exercise progression I use with my athletes is starting with push-ups or machine chest presses before advancing to light dumbbell bench presses and then barbell bench presses. These progressions, just like the squat progressions, are not applicable to all youth athletes; however, I have found that they work well with the majority of my athletes. Adding too much weight or moving on to more complicated movements before technique is correct, or at least proficient enough to avoid potential injury, may lead to continual dysfunction and could even lead to acute or chronic injuries.

For this reason, it is very important to stay diligent with the slow progressions no matter how much the athlete wants to move on to harder movements, heavier weights, or more challenging programs. Remember, long-term improvements are much more important than short-term successes. I try to get my youth athletes to focus on several months or years down the road rather than only thinking about today or tomorrow.

MOTIVATING YOUTH ATHLETES TO SUCCEED

An unmotivated athlete is typically an unsuccessful athlete. When youth athletes have similar ability levels, the more motivated ones will nearly always have the advantage. At times, substantially less talented athletes or teams can gain an advantage over more talented athletes or teams because of higher levels of motivation. Therefore, I find it beneficial to utilize unique and productive ways to motivate the youth athletes I train.

One way I try to motivate my youth athletes is to promote friendly competition with other athletes. Most of my athletes thrive under this competitive pressure because winning and losing matters to them. Typically, there is an immediate increase in effort when my athletes know something is a race or competition.

If I feel that this method of motivation will be beneficial, then I challenge these athletes against other athletes of similar ability levels in small games or competitions. The goal should always be to increase their motivation levels, not to shatter their self-

confidence. That being said, winning should never be celebrated when it is demeaning to another athlete.

Setting up friendly competition can be accomplished in various ways. For example, Figures 6 – 8 illustrate a speed and agility game called "baker's dozen." In this friendly competition, two youth athletes start at an even distance from a set line in the middle where an odd number of balls or objects are lined up. Upon the strength and conditioning coach's cue, they run to the middle to grab only one ball or object at a time. After grabbing a ball or object, the youth athletes return to toss their ball into a container on their respective side. Whoever has the most balls at the end of the game wins. Various modes of movement can be implemented when approaching the line or returning to the start line (e.g., sprinting, backpedaling, shuffling, hopping, etc.). I adjust these modes of movement based on the sport and position the athlete plays and the goals of the athlete.

Another competitive game is the pro agility head-to-head race depicted in Figure 9. In this competition, youth athletes start by facing each other, waiting for the strength and conditioning coach's cue to begin. The youth athletes will sprint five yards one direction, turn and run 10 yards in the opposite direction, and then turn around for another five-yard sprint to return to the start. The first one to complete the entire drill wins.

Although I see obvious increases in effort during competition from many of my athletes of similar ability levels, not all youth athletes will respond well to competition with others as a means for motivation. This is a legitimate concern. I avoid promoting competition with these athletes because of the fear of embarrassing them and decreasing their self-confidence. If I feel that a youth athlete would not respond well to competition with other athletes, then I promote competition with themselves as an alternative for increasing motivation.

By challenging them to improve their marks on the vertical jump, broad jump, pull-up, bench press, or other athletic tests, I attempt to help athletes find purpose and inspiration in their training without having to compete directly against another athlete. By challenging youth athletes against a clock or other variables, I often see them put forth maximum effort in their workouts to surpass their previous marks. Strength and conditioning coaches should still be mindful to progress athletes at an appropriate rate so athletes do not overtrain or injure themselves while trying to beat their marks.

Whether my youth athletes are competing against other athletes or against themselves, I encourage them to make goals that align with the S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-sensitive) training principle (1). I also show them how their training program will help them to reach those goals. Goals can be very motivational to youth athletes. I encourage athletes to write their goals down and review them regularly. By understanding my athletes' goals and helping them to reach their goals, I am also attempting to trigger a boost in their self-confidence.

INCREASING SELF-CONFIDENCE

Many athletes, especially youth athletes, have a fragile sense of self-confidence. Strength and conditioning coaches are in a position to help increase athlete's confidence by being supportive, helping the athletes reach their goals, and offering praise and incentives when the athletes achieve an accomplishment. The National Strength and Conditioning Association's (NSCA) Position Statement Paper on Youth Resistance Training states that "a properly designed and supervised resistance training program can help improve the psychosocial well-being of youth," (2). In a Roundtable Discussion on Youth Resistance Training, Mike Nitka stated his personal opinion on the relationship of training and self-confidence, "psychologically, we notice an improvement in their confidence and in their self-esteem while participating in our training program," (5). Getting bigger, stronger, and faster can contribute to the overall self-confidence of youth athletes. Hearing that they are improving from others, particularly their strength and conditioning coach, may boost their confidence even more.

Simple comments and other forms of communication, positive or negative, can go a long way in encouraging or discouraging a youth athlete. Faigenbaum et al. suggest that the strength and conditioning coach should "focus on positive education. Youth strength and conditioning coaches who catch young athletes 'being good' and publicly praise them for their performance on a specific drill or exercise can enhance their self-confidence as well as the quality of the practice session," (3). If I see a youth athlete lifting a little more, running a little faster, or performing an exercise correctly, I speak up and let them know in hopes of building up their self-confidence.

I have seen that many of my youth athletes appreciate and respect me as a strength and conditioning coach because I understand their goals and take an active interest in their sporting competitions. Another example from the personal experiences of youth experts is from Faigenbaum et al. who suggest that the strength and conditioning coach "takes the time to learn every athlete's name, address any concerns, provide encouragement, and show a genuine interest in every player," (3). I have always considered attendance at my athletes' sporting events to be beneficial because I usually see a very positive reaction from them. Attending their events shows my willingness to take time and effort to support my athletes.

In addition, fist bumps, high fives, pats on the back, and helping them up after exercises on the floor are nonverbal actions that I use to encourage youth athletes and show them that I care. When youth athletes know that their strength and conditioning coach cares and wants them to succeed, they may be more likely to listen and respond positively to training programs and motivational techniques. By developing this relationship with my youth athletes,

I hope to create a stronger platform to teach and motivate. Having strong supporters can really boost the self-confidence of youth athletes.

Strength and conditioning coaches might be surprised by how much influence they have on the mentality of their youth athletes. Many of my youth athletes love to be bragged about in front of their friends, family, and sports coaches, and may keep comments like this in their minds and thrive on them. I also encourage my athletes through text messages, tweets, Facebook posts, and hand-written notes whenever appropriate. I consider it crucial to always be in control of my emotions and words, and to always strive to be a positive influence for my youth athletes.

Incentives are another great way to motivate athletes and increase their self-confidence when they achieve that incentive level. My athletes enjoy various types of clothing and sports accessories. A gift card to a local sporting goods store with a short note stating how proud I am of them for a certain accomplishment is often a well-received reward. I post pictures on a motivational board in the training facility of them playing sports or holding a championship trophy to make them feel important or give the athlete something to strive for by looking at other athletes' pictures (Figure 10). Incentives can be made known to the athlete ahead of time to encourage them to reach a certain level or can be given randomly when the athlete does not expect it. This can give the athlete and often needed boost of confidence. However, it should be noted that these types of incentives are not always allowed or condoned in certain circumstances, so strength and conditioning coaches should consult with facility or school policies before implementing such an incentive program.

CONCLUSION

Strength and conditioning coaches have an important responsibility and opportunity to teach and motivate youth athletes. Strength and conditioning coaches should strive to teach athletes in a way they can understand by hearing, seeing, and practicing. Mistakes are acceptable at first because exercises can be complicated, especially at a young age. Technique errors can be corrected with descriptive cues and then reinforced by expressing why proper technique and exercise progression is important. It is essential for strength and conditioning coaches to remain patient with youth athletes to avoid frustration. Enhancing motivation in youth athletes can be achieved through encouraging friendly competition with others, competition against themselves, and setting up S.M.A.R.T. goals. Supportive strength and conditioning coaches can help increase the self-confidence of youth athletes by showing up at sporting events and understanding their athlete's goals. Using these guidelines, strength and conditioning coaches can be valuable tools for the long-term success and the physical and psychosocial development of youth athletes.

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FIGURE 1. EXAMPLE OF INCORRECT SQUAT TECHNIQUE

FIGURE 2. EXAMPLE OF INCORRECT SQUAT TECHNIQUE

FIGURE 3. EXAMPLE OF CORRECT SQUAT TECHNIQUE

FIGURE 4. EXAMPLE OF INCORRECT KETTLEBELL SWING TECHNIQUE

FIGURE 5. EXAMPLE OF CORRECT KETTLEBELL SWING TECHNIQUE

FIGURE 6. BAKER'S DOZEN GAME – START

FIGURE 7. BAKER'S DOZEN GAME – AT THE MIDDLE LINE

FIGURE 8. BAKER'S DOZEN GAME – SCORING

FIGURE 9. PRO AGILTY HEAD-TO-HEAD RACE – START

FIGURE 10. EXAMPLE OF MOTIVATIONAL BOARD