



Strength Report – The Art of Strength and Conditioning Coaching: Beyond the Sets and Reps (Part II)

By: Mike Gentry

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I believe your program's success will be impacted as much by your ability to manage, motivate and lead your athletes as by your choice of training methodology. This philosophy, which has served as the foundation of my coaching career, aligns with wisdom shared as by a legendary strength and conditioning coach:

"It is usually not whether the program works or not, but whether the player works or not, that determines success."

- Buddy Morris (College and NFL strength and conditioning coach now at the University of Buffalo)

Coaching is an honorable profession of which I'm proud to be a part. We have the ability to govern our attitude, work ethic and code of conduct. We can either develop a personal mission statement and definition of success, or choose instead to struggle without a foundation. We can either learn from our inevitable mistakes of commission and omission, or choose instead to ignore the opportunity for growth. These are all individual choices which shape not only our path, but the lives of others.

Defining Success

Our success as strength and conditioning coaches is first measured by the physical improvement of our athletes. Are the athletes bigger, faster, stronger and in better condition as a result of our training? All coaches are measured by the competitive success of their teams. Is the team winning or losing? These objective measures can be used as tools to assist us in realizing a higher mission: instilling within our athletes the principles of success, which may be transferred to their daily lives.

1. Achieving Goals. The ability to set an objective, tangible goal, develop a plan of attack, and apply consistent hard work that is directly related to achievement. This is an empowering principle of success.

2. Taking Responsibility. Successful people take responsibility for their individual dreams, goals, actions and inactions.

3. **Serving a Higher Mission.** Winners commit to causes bigger than themselves. They sacrifice for the good of the team, are accountable to teammates and understand that everyone's contribution to the mission is essential for success.

Coaching Leadership

We must model the expectations that we have for our athletes, much as a father should model the behavior he expects from his children. If we want our athletes to be disciplined, hardworking and mentally tough, then they need to see these same qualities in us. If we want our athletes to pay attention to detail and have enthusiasm, then we should strive to do the same.

As leaders, coaches must be motivated, self-disciplined and demonstrate personal integrity. Lack of authenticity will not be respected by athletes and will adversely impact your ability to lead. When seeking leaders to emulate, I have found great inspiration in studying the behaviors of people that have shown strength in adversity. These individuals may come from athletic, business, military, political or spiritual backgrounds. I'm looking for role models that have exhibited character, integrity, toughness and resolve; men and women of principle. While I may not have as many of these attributes as I'd like, I can aspire to them.

Our ability to motivate our players will be largely determined by their perception of how invested we are in the program and in our athletes as individuals. The groundwork for being able to motivate your players is established by developing relationships of mutual respect and trust with your athletes. It's not really about yelling and pregame speeches.

When it comes to your program and its inherent stresses, you will take it home with you. If the time ever comes that you don't labor over your management decisions, you will have forfeited a great deal of your coaching effectiveness. You must care if you want them to care.

You're a coach. Act like a coach. It's a choice. These kids don't need buddies. Don't be an entertainer or cheerleader for the players or the cameras. Be a coach. It's an honor.

Building a Winning Strength and Conditioning Program

Strive for something bigger: When individuals commit to a cause or an organization that is bigger than themselves, they are able to withstand more adversity and achieve more, because of the strength of the mission and the collective strength of the team.

Develop pride in the unit: "Nothing is special until you make it special." This starts with us and the athletes must believe that we are committed to the cause and the organization.

Realize that there is a price for success: Clearly state and restate your expectations and the team rules. There must be accountability to the mission.

Treat players fairly and consistently: Inconsistent discipline is a team morale breaker. Clearly defined expectations and boundaries give athletes a sense of security and a belief that they will be treated fairly.

Build a team identity and recognize the athletes when they model those qualities: For example: we will always play hard, we play to the whistle and finish strong.

Focus on and build winning traditions: If your school has a history of winning, talk about it. Develop pride in the jersey by creating competition at practice for positions. If you don't have a winning football tradition, create tradition within your strength and conditioning program by how you run your program and award system. As athletes become physically stronger their personal confidence and pride will grow.

Make your weight room reflect your pride in the mission and program: Start by keeping your facility clean and orderly. It doesn't take money to demand that weights are picked up and stored properly. Try to have a well-lit facility. Keep the facility freshly painted. I've painted a lot of weights, equipment and walls in my career and it doesn't cost much money to paint. Create award boards to recognize achievement and reward accomplishment. If you allow music during training, control it. No profanity.

Be prepared: Have a well thought out training plan and if possible, a contingency plan. When the primary and contingency plans both fail, improvise, adapt, and overcome.

Final Check: Ask yourself, does your training and coaching philosophy match the experience that you would want for your son?

Strength and Conditioning Awards

Recognizing players for hard work and achievement in the strength and conditioning program is an important incentive. T-shirts and award boards are very effective in giving athletes the positive peer recognition they seek.

A well planned and administered testing and evaluation system gives athletes an opportunity to compete and achieve appropriate goals while giving you the opportunity to evaluate the program's effectiveness. The head football coach and strength coach should announce the athlete's achievement in the presence of their peers.

A young, inexperienced high school athlete may benefit greatly from receiving a strength and conditioning t-shirt which recognizes his participation and identifies him as part of the unit.

Coaching the Athlete: Seven Rules for Success

1. "Coach the kid, not the weight." (Johnny Parker, Super Bowl S&C Coach with the New York Giants).
2. The athletes MUST see that you care, about the program and them.
3. Demand respect from the athlete and show the athlete respect.
4. Do not show favoritism regarding rules. Be consistent.
5. Both praise and criticism are most effective when given specifically and immediately. If possible, praise in public and criticize in private. The exception – lack of effort.
6. Talk to the athletes about non-football subjects, such as school and family.
7. Don't use or excuse profanity.

Taking Care of the Coach: Seven Rules for Coaching Longevity

1. Seek to be a good role model. Care. Give effort.
2. Commit to lifelong learning and improvement, both personally and professionally.
3. You're a strength and conditioning coach - exercise and try to stay fit.
4. Interact and learn from other coaches from other schools.
5. Laugh. Laugh at yourself. Admit mistakes and try not to make too many.
6. Sharpen the saw. Take vacations. Spend time with your family. Re-create.
7. Develop your spiritual side. Be thankful.

The Best Reward

If you're fortunate enough to have been given the responsibility of training the football players at your school, you have the opportunity of impacting many young men in a positive way. It is certainly not an easy job but it can be very rewarding. You will be abundantly rewarded when a former player comes back years later to introduce you to his wife and children, sharing what a difference you made in his life. This is a truly awesome and humbling reward.

About the Author: Mike Gentry is Associate Athletic Director for Athletic Performance at Virginia Tech. He has been a head coach on the BCS level for 32 years. Gentry has a Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree and a Doctorate in Education. He won Samson Equipment's Strength and Conditioning Coach of the Year award in 2004. Gentry and Dr. Tony Caterisano recently completed a book on strength and conditioning - The Ultimate Guide to Physical Training for Football. Gentry was inducted as a Master Strength and Conditioning Coach by the CSCCA in 2003. Mike served two three-year terms on the CSCCA Board of Directors from 2006 to 2012. Gentry was inducted into the USA Strength and Conditioning Hall of Fame Collegiate Division in 2011.