

Words of Wisdom for a Young Strength and Conditioning Coach

By: Emma Ostermann, Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach, Northern Arizona University

As a young, female strength coach there's a few things I've learned that's helped me get to where I am. I am by no means done learning, developing, or shaping my coaching style (I don't think I ever will be), but up to this point a few things have really stuck out to me. The following list are some of the things I've learned along the way or have witnessed with other young coaches trying to get in the field. This list is always changing, growing, and developing, but for now, it's a good start.

1. Be accountable. Whether it's showing up 30 minutes early to your first session or taking responsibility for something that went wrong – hold yourself accountable at all times. If you're late, it's hard to rely on you, and if you're willing to blame someone else for your mistake what kind of example does that show your athlete?
2. Take constructive criticism. You are not perfect. Your programs are not perfect. A coaching cue of yours is not perfect. Trust the people who have been in the business for a while, they have an idea of what's going on. Be willing to hear their advice. If you get defensive every time you are missing an opportunity to learn.
3. Support your programs/ideas with evidence-based research. If you are going to try something new with your athletes, make sure you have the research to back it up. Granted, there may be times the research just isn't there, therefore make a solid case why it will work. Your superior coaches will want to know why, the coaches you work for will want to know why, the athletic trainers will most likely want to know why, and so on and so forth. So many people will ask you why, if your response is, "Uhh, because I want to," then it most likely won't fly in the weight room.
4. Practice what you preach. If you are going to program any weightlifting (Olympic lifts) movement, then you better be able to do that movement. The worst thing you can do to your athletes is program cleans or snatches, or any of the Weightlifting derivatives, and not be able to properly demonstrate it. They're complicated movements. If you don't understand how it feels, or the difficulty learning it then you won't be able to connect with your athletes on what they're going through. This goes with any exercise you select for your program. Always be able to do at least one rep to demonstrate.
5. Intern at many places. If you are in undergrad or GA positions are not offered at your school, then intern. The best thing you can do is gain experience from different coaches and see different philosophies. If you want to see what this profession is all about, then you'll need to submerge yourself into it.
6. Being a collegiate athlete has helped. One of my mentor's once told me that since I was a collegiate athlete for four years, I basically did four years of interning. I understood how a weight room was run, I knew how to read program cards, and I knew the intensity the coaches brought to each session. When it came to learning everything else, it was ten times easier. If you weren't a collegiate athlete, see point number five.
7. Set your bar. Have a standard for your athletes. Don't lower your bar because the athletes decided to not work hard that day. For me, my bar is set, I know my athletes won't hit that bar every day, but we will strive to hit it every day. If you don't set this standard from day one, then your athletes won't know the expectations you have from them.

8. Build a network of strength coaches. This is a unique profession and being able to have connections with other strength coaches in different locations will help develop you as a professional. Networks can lead to learning opportunities, job opportunities, etc. Take the time to get to know those people, don't meet them once and never follow up with them and expect them to be a part of your network. Like anything else, building a network takes work.
9. Have a life outside of the weight room. Pulling 10-12 hour days can be normal, and is one of the reasons most strength coaches burn out so early. Balance your life with something else. Whether it's mountain biking, hiking, skiing, or any other hobby, find something you enjoy and go and do it. You should enjoy your job, not let it consume you.
10. Finally, don't stop learning or reading. We are forever students of this profession.