

Why is Strength Training Important to Athletes?

By Joe DeFranco

The improvement of performance in athletics over the past few years has been phenomenal. For example, twenty years ago the average football lineman weighed 250 pounds and ran a 5.2-second 40-yard dash. This was considered to be nearing the genetic limit for a player. Now running backs that weigh what the lineman used to weigh are running 4.4-second 40-yard dashes! Strength training has made the single, most positive contribution to this type of improvement. Today strength training influences every athletic program in the country, no matter what the sport - male or female. Athletes now find it necessary to lift weights and participate in conditioning programs to better prepare themselves for the competitive rigors of the athletic season.

Just a short time ago, most coaches thought that strength training would cause athletes to become muscle-bound and would be counterproductive to good technique. Now it has been proven that athletic performance depends either directly or indirectly on qualities of muscular strength. We must remember that strength builds the foundation for ALL other athletic qualities. For example, if you do not possess great relative body strength (strength in relation to your body weight), you will never be able to run fast. This is due to the fact that all aspects of proper running technique require high levels of muscular strength. In other words, if you can't achieve the proper knee drive, arm swing, posture and push-off, you can't be fast! And this is just one example. Many university studies have also found a high correlation between an athlete's jumping ability and agility in

relation to their relative body strength. What this means is that an athlete who is strong for his/her bodyweight will possess the ability to jump higher and move quicker, compared to their weaker counterparts.

The number one purpose of complete conditioning – including the physical, technical, tactical, and psychological aspects of training – is to improve the player's ability to make the big play. Strength training is a vital part of complete conditioning. The primary function of the body's 600+ muscles is to contract (shorten in length) to move body parts. And remember that only muscle can cause movement. The stronger the muscles and the more forceful the contractions, the faster the athlete will run, higher he will jump, further he will throw/kick, and harder he will hit. It's that simple!

An added bonus of strength training is injury prevention. Athletes who strength train tend to have fewer injuries. This is because strength training strengthens the muscle attachments and increases density of bones at the sites of muscle origins and insertions. And if an injury does occur to an athlete who has been strength training properly, it will probably not be as serious and will tend to heal faster.

So next time someone tells you weight training is just for bodybuilders, think again. A proper strength training program just may be the final piece of your training "puzzle" to success!