

Starting Strength

Is It Training or Exercise?

by Maj Ryan Whitemore

The Army's FM 7-0, *Training for Full Spectrum Operations*, states, "Properly presented and executed training is realistic, safe, standards-based, well-structured, efficient, effective, and challenging." (p. 4-35) In order for Commanders to meet this definition, they must approach training as a three-part problem. First, they must identify their training objectives, or their goals. Secondly they must construct a training plan which will improve the unit over its current state, to meeting the training objectives. Lastly, they must determine which personnel possess the necessary expertise in the subject to plan and execute the training. These three steps are required to make any type of training effective. While we call it "Physical Training" (PT), in most units it rarely receives the necessary detail and planning that it deserves.

Let's take a look at PT, using the aforementioned criteria. Most commanders would tell you there are three goals for the unit's PT program.

1. Improve the combat readiness of the unit's Soldiers
2. Prepare Soldiers for the required Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) and height/weight/body composition standards
3. Team-building

In order to meet these goals, a training plan must be designed, implemented, and supervised. We cannot come in early each morning and just "exercise". If we are "training" we must be training FOR something. Each day should be a well planned step toward our stated goals with the accumulation of these steps contributing to a combat readiness end-state. Arguably, the most critical components of training are the people who do the planning and implement the program. At present, passing the APFT and meeting body composition standards is either left up to the individual Soldier to do in any way the Soldier wants to do it, or the Soldier is forced to conduct a PT program designed by his immediate supervisors. In either case, the wrong people are doing the program design. This is where the Army shortchanges PT, and for some reason does not treat it in the same way as other combat-essential tasks.

Take the example of training Soldiers to shoot. While it differs by unit and the stage of a Soldier's career, Soldiers are always trained to qualify on their assigned weapon while supervised by qualified personnel according to a Program of Instruction (POI) developed by Subject Matter Experts (SME). Whether it is Basic Rifle Marksmanship in Basic Training, or Special Forces Advanced Urban Combat preparing Green Berets for deployment, Soldiers get virtually no choice in what or how they will shoot. Instead they are all trained with their service weapons, to the same standard, which has been proven effective in combat. I can't show up at the rifle range with daddy's shotgun or a .357

Training or Exercise?

Magnum – why is PT any different? The shooting example is one of many: demolitions, medical training, parachuting, SCUBA diving, are all routinely trained to a detailed POI developed by SMEs. In some cases those SMEs are Soldiers; sometimes they are civilian experts in the field.

WHY IS PT ANY DIFFERENT?

It is strange to me that PT would be treated so differently than other mission-essential training. TC 3.22-20, *Army Physical Readiness Training*, states, “Military leaders have always recognized that the effectiveness of Soldiers depends largely on their physical condition.” (p.1-1) It is not unusual to hear a commander state, “PT is the most important thing we do each day.” They refer to it as the “foundation” of everything we do. Its importance is further indicated by its inclusion on a daily basis on almost every unit’s training schedule. No other type of training appears so frequently. So we are saying the right things about it and scheduling PT more than anything else, but there is a disconnect. The problem is that PT has become a “hand wave”; we rarely have a solid plan that is developed and implemented by SMEs.

Commanders are responsible for PT, just as they are responsible for all training in their unit. Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO’s) implement the training. I believe each are performing to the best of their abilities, and most believe that they are fully qualified to design and implement PT programs. The only feedback mechanism they have is usually the APFT score. FM 7-0 offers guidance in this area as well, “All leaders are trainers, but not all trainers are leaders. A junior Soldier or subject matter expert may be the best person to train a particular collective or individual task.” (p. 4-34) So unit commanders are authorized to delegate PT to more experienced and qualified subordinates; sometimes they should.

For many years, I conducted my own misguided PT program and still maintained an APFT score of over 290 on a scale of 300. This made me “fit” in my own mind, so why make a change? What I now know is that I was solely focused on only one of the three goals I stated earlier: preparation for the APFT. Even leaders who have multiple combat deployments are not necessarily qualified to conduct a needs analysis and design a PT program which meets those needs. It’s not the fault of these leaders, they chose to be Soldiers, not Strength and Conditioning Specialists. What we typically see from these officers/ NCO’s in PT program design is one of three things:

1. A PT program which is anecdotal or plays to the leader’s strength. It’s only natural to conduct PT just like your platoon sergeant or commander used to do it. If it got your APFT score above 290, then it must be effective, right? If a leader simply likes to run, then his unit is probably going to be subjected to large doses of long, slow distance running. This may be somewhat effective for team-building, but it does little to prepare a Soldier for the rigors of combat.
2. PT which is lifted straight from a bodybuilding or other “Health” magazine. Randomly implementing a program designed for an elite bodybuilder or hotshot MMA fighter will rarely be effective for a Soldier’s needs in combat. Strength Coaches know this, most Soldier/unit commanders do not.
3. “Crushing” Soldiers with a high intensity, randomly designed, long-duration workout in which little attention is given to proper form in conducting the exercises. Soldiers tend to be competitive, Type “A” personalities who want to be the best. They will push each other to the point of extreme fatigue and severe Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness (DOMS) which, in the absence of real training goals, may be mistaken for progress.

Training or Exercise?

The aforementioned programs are typically conducted by Soldiers at the company level and below. They have no choice but to execute the programs designed by their squad/section/platoon leaders. At the battalion level and higher, there are those who generally do not get any supervision at all for PT. Staff officers and NCOs are in a unique position where they are more loosely supervised. I have spent 13 of my 16 years in service on some type of staff. In some units, we occasionally conducted “Staff PT”. It was usually a “team-building” event such as ultimate frisbee, or soccer. The vast majority of my PT time has been spent doing whatever I wanted to do. My only feedback was my APFT score, and my primary planning factor was keeping my workout intensity low enough that I could conduct the program 60 minutes a day, for five days a week. My PT has almost always been elective, not directive. By the time I reached age 36, I was so unfit that I finally sought to fix it.

HOW DO WE FIX IT?

The fix for physical training is a coherent training program designed and implemented by commanders, Strength Coaches and NCOs. The commander must be clear about the training objectives of the program. The smart commander will go heavy on combat effectiveness, with a little bit of team-building, and will understand that APFT excellence will be a by-product of the program. The Strength Coach will conduct a detailed needs analysis based on the type of mission. For the example of Special Forces, programs will differ for mountain, HALO (High Altitude Low Opening), dive, and ruck teams. Support Soldiers will be on different programs than Green Berets, since their duties are different. In the conventional Army, programs should differ by Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) and upcoming missions.

Design of the program is only the first step. The real money will be made in its implementation. The Strength Coach needs to provide direct supervision for the more technically difficult aspects of the program. Weight training is not entirely new to most Soldiers, but proper form is rarely seen in on-post gyms. Just as Strength Coaches closely supervise scholarship athletes at major universities in order to protect the school’s investment, they must do the same with Soldiers. The Army and the nation have a sizeable investment in all Soldiers, and Special Operations Soldiers are particularly “expensive” and difficult to replace.

This directive approach to PT will no doubt meet resistance from many Soldiers. Whether they read it in a muscle magazine, or got the information from a buddy, most will tell you they already know how to lift weights. The commander/ Strength Coach/NCO team *cannot break* in the face of this resistance. All must stay on the same page, and conduct the PT program that is needed by the unit’s Soldiers, and not permit the “elective” type program which most units currently utilize. The NCOs still have an important role in a “directive” PT program. Not every PT activity needs the supervision of a Strength Coach. There will still be running for active recovery/team-building, there will be ruck marching, and some lower intensity circuit training that can be very effectively run by NCOs in accordance with the commander’s intent and the Strength Coach’s program design.

While this program does require buy-in at the top from the unit commander, it must also be sold from the bottom up for it to truly take hold and change the PT culture of the Army. Strength Coaches can be effectively utilized in Non-Commissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) and Officer Education System (OES) environments as well, so that a more effective PT structure is built into Army leadership education. The PT program at most Army schools is APFT centered, and is even more elective than in a Soldier’s assigned unit. In fact, it’s been my experience that NCOES and OES

Training or Exercise?

students can often “elect” to stay in bed rather than perform PT. Leaders of these schools are missing the perfect opportunity to teach the future leaders of our Army how to conduct quality PT. With no Soldiers to supervise and a predictable schedule, NCOES and OES Schools are the perfect time to get leaders into the best shape of their lives with a well thought out program designed by a Strength Coach. Leaders can then bring some of that knowledge back to their unit and assist in the effective training of their Soldiers.

DON'T I GET A SAY IN THIS?

The short answer is no, you don't. I understand that there is psychology involved in this, and force-feeding a PT program to Soldiers does have a downside. It would be better if all Soldiers suddenly and simultaneously came to understand PT in the same way most Strength Coaches do. The truth is that we don't look for Soldier buy-in when it comes to training plans for shooting, diving, parachuting or medical training. A team sergeant who is a hobby skeet shooter could not train his team for combat by teaching them to shoot skeet. Why would a team sergeant who enjoys triathlons be any less wrong in training his team on strictly low-intensity endurance PT events? Training for combat is directive, not elective. Why should PT be any different?

FINAL WORD

It is time that the Army as a whole treated PT as training, and not just as exercise. Commanders who properly utilize SMEs in Physical Training to design and implement a PT program, will result in an improvement in the combat performance of Soldiers, as well as a reduction in non-combat injuries. It's my opinion, based on multiple combat deployments with both Special Operations and conventional Army units, that a strength-based program is far superior to what we currently see in most units. In the future, I plan to work with military Strength Coaches in further defining how those programs should look.

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