

Fundamental flaw: Is the coaching sector failing to provide athletes with basic conditioning training?

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Jason Lear

'You see a lot of kids come to us, and you ask them to do some basic functional movement, and they can't,' says Jason Lear, pictured

Our young generation of sports performers are badly lacking in fundamental movement skills, which can have major ramifications when it comes to their chances of realising their potential. ConnectedCoaches member Jason Lear examines the full scale of the problem.

Society has a lot to answer for.

As you read this, somewhere in the country, a performance coach is shaking their head in disbelief as another of their talent programme recruits is unable to perform a correctly executed squat, lunge or other variation of fundamental movement.

Just thinking of this type of scenario is enough to make ConnectedCoaches member [Jason Lear](#) wince.

The Level 2 strength and conditioning coach and Level 3 sports performance analyst, based in Lisburn, near Belfast, has seen it time and time again.

Talented individuals hell-bent on reaching the pinnacle of their sport, enthusiasm oozing out of every pore and with their focus entirely on advancing their progression, suddenly find their impetus interrupted, ambushed by what they perceive to be an overzealous coach.

In a huge reality check, they are informed they will have to go back to basics and learn to execute simple movement patterns as their linear body motion is just not up to scratch. This, they are shocked to hear – for the first time – is a necessary requirement if they want to be successful at the highest level.

Tackling mobility and agility

In his role of Performance Director at Lear Training (an athlete performance services business), and Therapist and Physical Preparation Coach at the SCRAM Centre (Sports Conditioning Rehab and Massage) – both based inside the National Badminton Centre multi-sport facility – Jason’s remit covers a cross-section of sports, dealing with athletes aged 8–21.

‘It’s simple mechanics,’ he says of the well-hidden affliction affecting much of society. ‘For you to run fast in a straight line or laterally, you require functional movement, and no restrictions in muscle tightness.

‘But we see a lot of kids come to us, and you ask them to do some basic functional movement, and they can’t.

‘Society is causing a lot of that. Kids are running around with 25kg school bags on their backs or carrying them on one shoulder so they end up with asymmetrical shoulder muscles.

‘They are used to prolonged sitting, either at school or playing the Xbox at home, so they get a tightening and shortening of muscles. This means, when they come to playing their sport, they may look like they are running straight, but if you really drilled it down, there is a lot of poor posture.’

The scale of the problem becomes apparent when you test athletes’ movement patterns – by asking them to do a straightforward squat, for example. To the trained eye, the restrictions in their mobility are alarming.

‘A simple instruction, like moving laterally with a band on, will often result in some caving in of the ankles and the knees,’ says Jason.

Governing bodies have recognised that a [multi-skills](#) upbringing leads to longer-term ability and success, and have begun incorporating these building blocks into their early level qualifications.

But more still needs to be done. And while he doesn’t blame coaches for this basic failure, he does believe there is a reluctance on the part of some coaches to teach their athletes fundamental movement skills, and that this reluctance is born out of fear.

Set long-term goals

The very mention of the words ‘fitness’ and ‘conditioning’ when used in the same sentence are enough to bring some coaches out in a cold sweat as they see that enclave of the profession as occupational territory they don’t belong in.

To dabble in this field, the assumption is that you have to have a degree in the subject or, as a bare minimum, have received some appropriate training.

The image that first comes into people’s heads if you mention strength and conditioning is people in a gym being asked to lift weights.

But that is wide of the mark. ‘We aren’t training people to be weightlifters,’ says Jason, who is quick to debunk that myth.

‘Fitness is a natural part of sport, and just because the kids run about with a football or rugby ball, and

they do their drills every session, coaches think they are doing their job to improve fitness levels. They have learnt how to do that and so are confident in that area.

‘But there are elements to coaching, like fitness competency, that as an industry, we maybe need to spend a little more time on so coaches understand the basic principles of fitness.’

The benefits of developing well-conditioned athletes will only be seen long term, and therein lies one of the drawbacks as some coaches expect to see immediate gain for their efforts.

Again, you could argue, society has a lot to answer for.

‘Humans are so ambitious and hungry to win by nature, it sometimes gets in the way of us developing kids,’ explains Jason of this inherent infatuation with being able to identify short-term success.

What percentage of coaches, I wonder, could honestly say they would be happy to lose most of their games if there was a guarantee that their current crop would be better all-round players by the time they hooked up with their next coach?

‘We should be looking at kids and asking what we want out of them over the next 12–14 weeks, not the coming weekend,’ says Jason.

Earlier the better

There are coaches who are masters at planning [fun](#) sessions, helping boost children’s hunger and enthusiasm for sport; coaches who are experts in tactical and technical delivery, helping hone and broaden their athletes’ skill set; coaches who have risen to Level 1 and 2 or above who are confident and competent at putting on creative sessions and utilising various games-based models such as [Teaching Games for Understanding \(TGfU\) and Constraints-led Approach \(CLA\)](#), helping develop players’ in-match problem-solving and [decision-making skills](#).

A great number will be able to combine all of the above.

But few coaches, truth be told, will give the same priority to conditioning their athletes as they do to the aforementioned coaching skills.

It is not fitness per se that concerns Jason, more the poor fundamental movement of a lot of our young athletes during the transition years, when their bodies are going through the biggest changes.

‘A lot of people play for fun so a lot of that won’t matter to them, but it’s good to have proper functioning movement anyway,’ says Jason, who stresses that mechanical problems are much more difficult to correct, the older people get.

‘With kids who do have potential, if we could just address that within our coaching a bit earlier, it would make life easier for them as they progressed up the ranks.

‘Performance coaches shouldn’t have to be addressing basic functional movement, the athletes should be kicking on when they begin working with them.’

It is a fallacy too to argue that biomechanical fitness work, such as stretching and posture exercises, is perpetually bland and sucks the fun out of sessions.

‘Movement patterns don’t have to be driven to fitness and involve standing around with no ball.

‘If you come to one of my tennis sessions, very rarely will you see athletes training without a racket and a ball. The actual drills are designed to work the movement patterns – getting them

dipping down, into squat positions, back up again, repeating the actions – but at the same time, it is fun and very game-associated.

‘We’ll do medicine ball tennis, with 1kg and 2kg balls, and they’ll have fun with it, but it’s all about stretching, hip rotation and throwing so you’re building strength in the shoulders and hips. It’s great fun, but it is hard work on the physiological side – a bit of a lung-buster – looking at deceleration and acceleration and weight transfer.’

So the key is to introduce strength training into the sport in an innovative and piecemeal way, rather than telling athletes to go and pump some iron in the gym, where they will quickly lose interest.

A winning edge

So, at what age should coaches consider cranking things up by creating vigorous workouts of high intensity anaerobic exercise specifically aimed at improving fitness?

This approach, of course, assumes first of all that your group of athletes buy in to embarking on progressively more gruelling regimes.

Those who participate for fun, or for the social interaction club sport brings, will baulk at the thought of having to put themselves through anything akin to Navy SEALs’ training. But for teams who are driven by success and the hunt for trophies, or individual athletes who harbour ambitions of making it to the top of their sport, improving their conditioning and hitting peak fitness are crucial to their chances of glory.

Depending on how people are progressing ability-wise, which sport they play, and how driven they are, Jason recommends introducing more individualised programmes sometime around the ages of 13 and 14.

‘That’s the time to shift away from more generic fitness work. So, by the time they are 16, it is specific training to what their sport requires. They should be kicking on at that stage.’

But even then, the emphasis remains quality over quantity, says Jason.

‘The technical performance of each exercise is more important than completing the prescribed repetitions.’

Coaches should not be kicking off training with a bleep test, stopping the session midway through for an encore, pausing every five minutes with the order to ‘drop and give me 30’ and then finish by telling their troops to run round the adjacent track until they feel sick.

The dangers of overtraining are ever-present, and athletes can be their worst enemies at times, gawping at their coach, convinced they have lost the plot for suggesting they have been pushing themselves too hard.

‘Most cyclists we work with overtrain,’ says Jason. ‘You try and convince a cyclist that they have to drop their heart rate!’

‘But when you finally get them to trust you, they come back a week later and it’s, “Wow, I felt so fresh during that race on Saturday.”’

Round and round, we go

Jason chuckles as he calls into question the value of the traditional warm-up protocol: sending athletes round the outside of the pitch.

‘No chance. I will create a 20-metre grid and do a range of exercises, then start to introduce some functional movement patterns. The drill keeps going up to the point when you introduce a ball, or whatever it may be in the sport you are involved with, and this functional warm-up lasts a total of

eight minutes.

‘I’ll be there with a stopwatch, and then I’ll be saying things like, “Jonny, just hold that squat for me, your right knee is turning in slightly. Let’s get you to 90 degrees, as long as it’s right.” So we’re looking at quality, not quantity, while also ensuring it is individualised – watching who is going deep, who only halfway down – and being close enough to the action to be able to intervene.’

Jason is conscious of the need to stick to the eight-minute time frame, and to introduce the relevant tools of the trade to every drill – especially important for the younger athletes.

‘Get a ball involved. Start it off as just a movement, then progress to doing it with the ball at your feet or in your hand. It’s so important to pay close attention to how you structure your training sessions.

‘Remember that a strength and conditioning coach is a coach just the same as a football or rugby coach.’

Jason’s wish is for a wiser coaching workforce – one that does not teach athletes to run before they can walk.

Core movement skills are required for athletic success. And if the mechanics are broken, fixing them becomes harder with age.

In the creation of an all-round athlete, strength and conditioning is just one of a number of **primary factors** associated with their development, but it is an element that is often overlooked.

We owe it to the young generation to get the basics right as ineffective conditioning at an early age can also be a **limiting factor** that inhibits an athlete’s chances of ever reaching their full potential.

Do you agree that there is a reluctance on the part of some coaches to teach their athletes fundamental movement skills? If so, why is this? Should applying basic strength and conditioning techniques fall under the remit of a grass-roots coach?

If you found this ConnectedCoaches blog interesting, you may also like to read the articles [‘How far should coaches push their players in training?’](#) and [‘Revolutionary research inspires new approach to coaching Fundamentals of Movement’](#)

Jason's top tips

- Use Feedback: Every session counts, so reinforce your coaching by applying knowledge the right way, educate your athletes about the desired outcome and let them have input. Buy-in creates trust.
- Never Stop Learning: Reflect on every session and take every opportunity you can to learn from others. This does not have to be in a formal setting - job shadow, read articles, networking. Which brings me to number 3 below.
- Make connections and use experts: Identify the expertise amongst your own team and your network, and make sure you use them. Do not try to be everything to everyone, you will be respected for admitting there is someone better than you to deliver specific elements of the coaching.
- Use a System: I use the Acronym TIPS (Training Intervention Procedures and System). If you don’t have a system then you are just administering haphazard training.

An effective system will ensure your training interventions are an actual need.

- Use Variety: Use as many resources within a systematic approach as possible. This does not mean showcase your entire repertoire of exercises, drills, resources and technology just because you can. Be true to your values and system and most importantly the individual needs of your athletes when planning variety in your sessions.
- Last but not least, Give Everyone a Chance.

Next steps

If you are interested in learning more about coaching fundamental movement skills, sports coach UK has just launched a brand-new workshop '[How to Coach the Fundamentals of Movement](#)'. As well as providing you with a thorough grounding in fundamental movement skills, it will equip you with the knowledge and confidence to incorporate key elements into every one of your sessions – irrespective of the age group you coach.

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