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NCAA Workout plan

Weightlifting benefits all athletes

Laura Griffith Issue date: 3/28/06

There was no weightlifting program at Bob Spoo's school when Eastern's football head coach was an undergraduate in the 1950s.

Today, there is not a single NCAA Division I athletic program that does not have a strength.

Although there were some "well-groomed" athletes in his day, he thinks today's athletes are more educated about stretching, lifting and the importance of a good diet. They're "bigger, stronger, more developed," he said.

Even though it's also a sport of its own, weightlifting has the ability to help almost any athlete improve his game, and can increase his strength, speed and power as well.

"Most strength coaches will probably incorporate some of the variations of Olympic lifts into their training programs," said Olympic weightlifting coach Marty Schnorf.

The Olympic lifts are the snatch, and the clean and jerk. The snatch has the lifter start off with his palms facing his body, and he brings the barbell above his head. The clean has the lifter curl the barbell to his chest, ending up with his palms facing his body. The jerk has lifter curl the barbell to his chest and then lift it above his head.

The benefits associated with weight training are immeasurable, said Bob Spoo, Eastern's head football coach.

"I think the athletes today are better prepared," Spoo said. "(They're) more skilled overall, better conditioned because of all the advances that have been made in the technology of treating the body."



Media Credit: Eric Hiltner
Svetlozar Zahariev, a junior physical education major, performs a curl in the free weight area in the Student Recreation Center Monday evening.

In order for NCAA athletes to keep up with their competitors, schools have strength and conditioning coaches to work with each team on an individual basis to devise a workout plan that will build on the muscles or muscle group that will best benefit the athletes in that sport.

"I think there is nothing more important in terms of athletes," said Eastern's head strength and conditioning coach Matt Turner. "That's why everybody has strength coaches nowadays. The majority of schools are always trying to expand and renovate their weight rooms."

According to Turner, there isn't a single Division I school that doesn't have a strength and conditioning program. Turner has been working with Eastern athletes for about five months now.

Before coming to Eastern, Turner worked as an assistant strength and conditioning coach at the University of Arkansas for two years. He is certified with the USAW (U.S.A. Weightlifting), which works with Olympic weightlifters, is club coach certified and certified through the Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Association.

Turner works with 18 sports at a minimum of twice per week each, with the help of two graduate assistants.

"(We) try not to overlap any sports," Turner said.

Turner and each of his graduate assistants work with at least five sports apiece, but everyone works with the football team because of its size and the amount of time that must be put into the program.

Turner works with football, men's and women's basketball and track and field.

The football team is one of the most frequent groups of lifters, Turner said. Training for all Eastern sports is a year-round program, and football is no exception. When football is in season, the players lift two days a week. Players who are red-shirting do full body workouts. For those players, two days per week are dedicated to the upper body, and two to the lower body, which is also the rest of the team's workout plan during the off-season.

"(Turner) does a great job with our guys and I'm pleased with the progress they're making," Spoo said.

When drawing out a team's workout plan, Turner has each athlete tested to get a percentage on their one-rep maximum, how much they can lift. Based on that percentage, Turner determines how much weight they should start lifting, and they can gradually work their way up.

"If you feel comfortable with that weight, he suggests for us to move up maybe five pounds," said sophomore tennis player Samantha Lininger.

"We try to do some basic things to help straighten their joints and abs and lower back that will help them," Turner said.

Weightlifting helps athletes develop speed and explosive power, according to Schnorf.

Track and field is a sport where both men and women are reliant upon good training.

"Power equates to movement and carries over onto the athletic field," said men's head coach Tom Akers. "When you talk about the difference between power and strength, power is lifting in the quickest amount of time."

In comparison to the men, the women have the same workout, which differs only in individual intensities, said women's head coach Mary Wallace.

Coming into a season, the women's track and field team will aim for a higher amount of volume in their workouts with less intensity.

"Intensity increases as we get closer to the season and during the season," Wallace said.

For example, in the fall, the team will do 30 to 40 reps at about 60 to 70 percent effort.

"By doing more volume, less intensity, you're increasing muscular endurance," she said.

Next, they'll move into four to five sets of four to six reps each at 80 to 85 percent effort. When they enter the maximum strength phase, they do four to five sets of one to three reps at 80 to 85 percent, she said.

Training for every sport involves a full-body workout, although each has areas in which its athletes concentrate on.

In baseball, players need as much balance in their strength and musculature as they can get, according to head coach Jim Schmitz.

"We obviously want strength without the mass," he said.

Weightlifting helps build strength to get behind the ball, enabling players to hit harder.

Although strength benefits all athletes, there are also some exceptions in some sports, according to Schmitz.

"Baseball is a very high-level skill sport," Schmitz said. "Strength is one of the components, but there are those (players) that are just phenomenal, but not that strong as far as weightlifting. I think from our standpoint, neither one really overshadows the other. You have to have weight training and conditioning, but also skills."

Baseball players, as well as other sports, alternate the days they lift, especially pitchers, who depend on their arms and lift relative to when they pitch.

For example, if a player pitches on Saturday, he will have a running intensive workout Sunday, weightlifting on Monday and practice on Tuesday. The cycle repeats itself.

Tennis players work on their wrists and do exercises that are geared toward giving their bodies explosive power, Lininger said. They also aim for muscular endurance, since tennis matches can run for a long time.

Their routine involves warm-up exercises with smaller weights, and then squats using a barbell. Then, they work on either arms or legs, depending on the day. At the end, they do abdominal exercises, and then stretch and they're done in about an hour. Tennis players do this three times a week for about an hour on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Junior Robyn Harris and senior Brittany Brown, both multi-sport athletes in rugby and track and field, have lifted with coach Schnorf at the Charleston Weightlifting Club in addition to training with their individual sports. Although Harris hasn't lifted lately, Brown competes in weightlifting competitions when she can fit them into her schedule, Schnorf said.

The difference between lifting as a sport and lifting for conditioning is that, as a sport, the athlete will try to lift as much as he or she possibly can, Schnorf said. Olympic athletes only progress once they've mastered their techniques with low to moderate weights.

On the other hand, lifting as part of athletic training is a "means to an end," he said.

"(Brittany) would agree that it's made her a better competitor," Schnorf said.

Athletes who stand out in their sports as good weightlifters belong to The Iron Panther Club at Eastern. The club comprises students each year who have met weightlifting goals set by their individual sports. Players that stand out to Turner are Clint Sellers for football, Josh Gomes for basketball, Maren Crabtree for volleyball, and Stephanie Harmazy for tennis, just to name a few.

"They have standards for each sport: speed, agility, strength and jumping ability," Turner said.

These players stand out due to their excellent work ethic, leadership qualities and exceptional strength, he said.

Spoo said he is embarrassed that there are currently only five members of the football team in the Iron Panther Club. To increase this number, he is having season-ending interviews with each player, encouraging them to do more in the off-season.

"I expect a substantial increase in the number of players that we have in the Iron Panther

Club," he said.

As in any sport, there is a risk of injury, but it is not likely with the kind of lifts associated with Olympic weightlifting. The highest rates of weightlifting injuries are caused by bench presses, Schnorf said.

One risk with weightlifting is becoming injured from straining oneself. However, precautions are taken in the weight room to ensure that this isn't an issue.

"They do this in preparation to play a sport," Turner said. "If they get hurt in here, we're not doing their job. We just try and prepare our athletes for their sport. We will always err on the side of caution."

If someone does get injured, Turner modifies his workout around that injury. Eastern hasn't had any recent major injuries. Minor problems can occur, but players haven't hurt themselves badly enough to miss any games or practice, Turner said.

One actual benefit of weightlifting is completely the opposite of some people's fears of injury.

"(If) you're stronger, you're less susceptible for injury," Turner said.

It also shortens the recovery time of a player if he does happen to get hurt.

After college sports, Turner said he thinks many of the athletes will continue lifting on their own.

"Some of them will go as intense as they did during college, and some might do some different lifts," he said. "A lot of people will use weightlifting as their exercise of choice when they get out in the real world."