



Not All Fitness Professionals are Created Equal

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Every year more lacrosse players are recognizing the importance of training and how it relates to and improves their ability to play the game. Becoming bigger, stronger, and faster will translate to greater in-game performance. The off-season is the best time to make improvements in these areas. However, some players make major gains while some make only small if any improvements even though they are training just as often. While genetics may be part of the reason the main reason is usually a lack of knowledge of how to make these changes properly. There is a big difference between going to the gym to ‘workout’ a few times a week and going to the gym to ‘train’ a few times a week. The person who is working out is usually just going to the gym and lifting weights randomly, with no long term plan in mind. The person who is training has a well thought out, balanced program that focuses on improving all aspects of sports performance including flexibility, joint mobility/stability, strength, speed, power, agility, and conditioning, and progresses so that you peak on a certain date (usually the start of training camp or the season). If you are serious about making improvements in all these areas then you certainly need to find a professional to help you along the way. As well, having someone train you will help motivate and push you harder than you can push yourself. However, not all fitness professionals are created equal and you should be very selective about who you are going to trust (and pay) to help you reach your goals and maximum athletic potential. Your goal should be to try and find a ‘strength and conditioning coach’ rather than a

‘personal trainer’ and ideally one that works at a facility that is geared towards training athletes rather than just at a commercial gym.

The absolute most important thing you can do when searching for someone to train you is ask questions. A lot of questions! I am amazed at how few questions I get from prospective athletes as to my background and what qualifies me to train them. I would think that if you are going to pay this person to help you reach your goals you would want to know how they are qualified and able to help you. I cannot stress enough the importance of asking questions. As a member of the fitness industry, I can say that as a whole there are many, many problems with it. The biggest problem is that there is not a minimum requirement mandated by the government to be a personal trainer. This means that you may go to a gym and find a trainer that is not certified in any way. Most of the commercial gyms will hire people to train based solely on how they look with the understanding that within 6 months of being hired the person will get a certification. Then to top it off, almost all of the personal trainer certifications are just a weekend course with an open book test at the end and where the minimum requirement to write the test is that you must be 18 years old. This clearly is not the level of knowledge that you would want to entrust with your playing performance for the next season. These are mostly people who just happen to have good genetics but absolutely no knowledge of how to properly prepare an athlete. For this reason you will find that truly qualified and educated strength and conditioning coaches will get very upset if you call them a personal trainer!

Having said that, I must state that the strength and conditioning field is not immune to these problems as well. Again there is no mandated government requirement so anyone can refer to themselves as a strength coach. To further complicate things there are many different titles that strength coaches are using due to the changing nature of the job. In the past it was to get someone strong and improve their conditioning. But now with the field evolving to do more (running technique, movement efficiency etc.) titles such as Sports Performance Coach and Athletic Development Coach are being used. Just remember to not be fooled by any title a person gives to themselves, you MUST ask questions to find out the true qualifications of the person. If a potential trainer/strength coach seems put off or upset by being asked questions about what they do or their education there must be a reason for it. A qualified person will gladly explain everything you want explained.

With all this uncertainty in the industry what should you be looking for in a qualified strength coach? The growing standard certification is the Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) through the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA). You should look for someone with a University degree in a related field (Kinesiology, Exercise Science, Human Kinetics). Experience is also a must. There can be many people that have a degree in Kinesiology and have attained their CSCS that have never actually trained an athlete at all. In fact, experience and success with athletes is a big requirement you should look for as many of the more experienced coaches are the pioneers of the industry but back then the certification wasn't around so they may never have pursued it. Once you have learned about their background you are not done with the questions you should ask. You should know their training philosophy to find out how they are going to make you better (know that more is not always better. Anyone can make you tired, that doesn't mean you'll become better. If a strength coach brags about making his athletes throw up during workouts you should look elsewhere). Do they have knowledge of movement skills? Running mechanics? You should know what they do for continuing education. Do they read books/attend seminars/watch DVD's/discuss current topics with other strength coaches to stay on top of the latest research? Does it seem like they have a passion for what they do while you are talking to them? And lastly, you need to ask what their level of knowledge is with the sport of lacrosse. While they certainly don't need to have been a player to know how to train you (it's better to have a qualified strength coach who knows nothing about lacrosse than a player who's not a qualified strength coach), they should have a basic knowledge of the sport or at least be willing to do what's called a 'demands analysis' of the game so they can design a proper program specific to the game for you.

You now have the knowledge of the biggest problem in the fitness industry and have a good idea of how to make sure you don't end up with an unqualified trainer. When you go see a doctor or a dentist you know they have a certain level of education and are qualified. However that is not the case in the fitness industry. I cannot stress enough the importance of asking as many questions as you can before you decide to pay someone for a very important service. You are entrusting them with not only your performance in the next lacrosse season, but also your health. The number one goal of any good strength coach should be to prevent/reduce the likelihood of injury as it doesn't matter how strong or fast you are if you are standing on the sidelines injured and can't play in the games.

Find a qualified person, work hard, and watch your game improve dramatically!!