

## **The Importance of In-Season Strength Training**

Kurtis Bednarcyk, CPT

It is very common these days to see athletes making abundant strength gains in the off-season, only to have those gains slowly diminish due to lack of training during the competitive season. In my experience, most athletes fall into one of two categories as far as in-season training goes: either they abandon the gym right away due to the rigors of practicing and/or playing 5-6 days a week; or they attempt to continue their quest to gain size, speed, and strength, leading to overtraining and usually decreased performance and/or injury in both the gym and on the field/court/ice/etc.

Both of those scenarios tend to lead to very little net strength gain by the time the end of the season rolls around, and what good is that?! Rather than training like a mad man or woman all year round, the goal of an athlete's in-season training should be to maintain intensity to preserve the strength gains made during the off-season, and to control frequency and volume so he or she can compete at the highest level come game time. We all know how important it is for an athlete to train in the off-season to prepare for tryouts and/or training camp, but what about performance down the stretch of a long season? Most athletes are not content with just making their team; they want to WIN and contribute! Athletes should be at their peak performance as the playoffs approach. Practice and game play alone is simply not enough.

So how do we tailor an in-season program to allow for maintenance of performance objectives as well as adequate recovery and injury prevention? First, we cut way back on the frequency and volume. While it is not uncommon to see our athletes spending multiple hours in the gym up to five days a week during the off-season, in-season training is usually limited to about an hour for two days a week. By paying attention to the amount of extra work our athletes perform, we find they recover quite well, even to perform in a game the following day.

Since our gym time is reduced so drastically, something's got to give. If we consider a continuum from absolute strength to absolute speed, most sports themselves exist on the speed side – in other words, the sprinting, jumping, and abrupt rotating movements that sports demand are usually sufficient for maintenance of those attributes. Therefore, we spend a majority of the time we do have in the gym focused on the strength side of the continuum. Strength maintenance requires only a fraction of the stimulus of rapid off-season strength gain, provided maximum intensity is also maintained. This means that we are lifting challenging weights at full speed, if only for a few total reps each session. Due to the importance of intensity here we prefer that athletes train on the days that they feel most energized and ready to train. This requires a bit more responsibility of the athlete to "listen to the body," but we have found this to be well worth it. In many cases we still see improvements in strength, despite the major cut in volume.

Rounding out the lower volume strength work, we keep up with injury prevention and recovery methods in the form of mobility, small muscle exercises, myofascial release, and concentric-only sled pulls or plate pushes. We find this to be a solid template for keeping performance as high as possible throughout the season, which should be every athlete's goal. Not to mention, they can enter each off-season at peak performance instead of spending weeks or months returning to previous form. Participating in a quality in-season training program allows athletes to build upon the gains that they have already put in the work to achieve.