

Team  
Building  
Through  
Positive  
Conditioning

A Team-Building Formula

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# Team Building Through Positive Conditioning

*“The coaches most powerful tool is love” John Wooden*

## CONDITIONING

Here is what I wanted:

1. To be in better game condition than any of our opponents
2. To have our condition be a source of pride
3. To not have to be upset to get them to run

Here are the steps I used to change the way players looked at conditioning. I introduced the theory by verbally asking them if they believed the following premises, which lead to the conclusion at the end.

**First Premise** – Being in great condition will make you a better player.

Being a better individual player will make us a better team.

**Second Premise** – Conditioning will allow us to have more success.

Conditioning is something the best teams at any level always have.

**Conclusion:** Therefore, conditioning should be looked at as a privilege.

Once they accept the conclusion, I was able to adapt the following ideas:

- The better practice they had, the more conditioning I would provide for them.
- Effort = Praise. Since great work habits are developed from praising **effort**, the coaches praised all *great* effort regardless of time or outcome.

- If you won a competition, you were *allowed* to run and if you lost, you did not *get* to run.
- As coaches we had to learn to reward our best workers, instead of getting upset at the poor workers. We also had to stop punishing our kids who are trying their best but happen to have been born slow, by making them or the whole team run again when they finished last or with a slower than established time. The immediate result was that more of them became good workers. If we had some players who continued to give a poor effort, we had made a mistake in squad selection and they must be eliminated if they cannot change their work habits. Less than your best effort is a selfish player-owned decision.
- By positively recognizing and reinforcing great effort, we consistently got great effort. Once you are getting your athletes best effort there will be a natural skill progression and also increased conditioning.

### **Positive Conditioning Drills**

The actual conditioning techniques are not as important as the consistency and reinforcement used to motivate the athletes toward their best efforts. Many coaches feel like they must create different conditioning drills constantly to keep their athletes from being bored. We have found that we were able to carry-over many of the same running sequences we had used before and just add the new reinforcement techniques. Think of the drills you currently use to condition your team and if they have provided a sufficient fitness level, see if you can adjust the reinforcement and use the same drills.

No matter what drills we have used for conditioning, we have tried to accomplish the cardiovascular fitness needed for the specific sport, and then also design them around the criteria we use for building teams:

- Depending on each other
- Achieving tough, common goals
- Balancing fun and discipline
- Relying on mutual respect by providing dignity
- Being positive but demanding in our leadership
- Encouraging athletes to abide by our one rule – Don't let your teammates down

All coaches must be involved in the verbal reinforcement of all great effort in any of the conditioning drills. One of the most important aspects of this kind of conditioning is to provide an opportunity for dignity. For example, allow players to take off extra clothing (in football, having the players take their helmets off allows the coaches to see effort on the faces of each player). Yes, they play with their helmets on, but I would rather see their faces and have them be able to hear our praise. We allow time for players to recover from the previous sprint so they can give their best effort. One of the techniques we used to ensure that all players were able to recover and also be ready and willing to give full effort is to have them individually raise their hands when they are prepared for the next sprint. This allows each player to recover at his or her own rate and also by putting his or her hand up it says, "I commit to full effort."

If you have players who want to excuse themselves from the running because they are not feeling well or any other reason, let them out. Do not force them to run, it should be a privilege. Do not let them stand there and watch the others run, have them go in while you give all the ones who are there full praise for the effort.

"Don't let you teammates down" was the only rule we had for our teams. During conditioning, that rule provides a different incentive for individual players to run. Outside of conditioning, that one rule encompasses all areas of athletic behavior and leaves the coach a wide amount of discretion. It covers, effort, attention, punctuality, academic progress and decisions on weekends.

“Don’t let your teammates down” is a way of reinforcing that the team is relying on each individual to make good choices and that the team will always be more important than any individual player.

Here are some of the conditioning drills we have adopted or created to fit the needs of our athletes.

### **Timed Running –**

We set a goal to have our players run for a certain amount of time (based upon distance and number of players). During this running, coaches are watching for every chance to verbally reward effort. The head coach is watching for players who might not be giving their maximum effort. If you see poor or marginal effort, the head coach should stop the running drill for the entire team. Without singling out in public who the offender was, the team needs to know that unless each player is committed to all out effort, the drill will not continue. Usually all you have to say is “At least one player was not giving his or her best and the team needs the best effort of EVERY player”. “We are depending on you, don’t let your teammates down and tomorrow will be another chance to have everyone give their best.” The better they want to be as a team, the more it will bother them to be stopped and the longer they will want to set their time goals. If the conditioning drill that had to be stopped occurred in the middle of practice, we just went on to the next section of practice. If it happened at the end of practice, we were done for the day, with the thought that tomorrow’s practice could be better and they could have another chance to earn conditioning.

You can use the same principles when doing strengthening exercises. If you tell your players to “Do 30 push-ups”, there may be some athletes who no matter how hard they tried, could not do thirty. And there may be some who are capable of many more than thirty and it is not even a challenge. But if you say, “see how many you can do in 30 seconds”, that allows the player who can only do 15 to give their maximum and be straining for number 16



### Half Court, Back, Full Court (timed running)

This is the same type of drill but using change of direction running. In diagram #2, players #1 and #2 line up on the starting line and player #3 lines up at the opposite end. This drill can be done on a basketball court (as shown in the diagram) or field with the distances varied. The first player in each line starts and goes to the half court line, reverses their direction and sprints back to the place they started, reverses their direction again and sprints to the far end to player #3. Player #2 tags #3 and stays there as #3 goes half court and back and then full court to exchange with #2. Players are seeing how many full effort sprints they can get in during the allotted time.

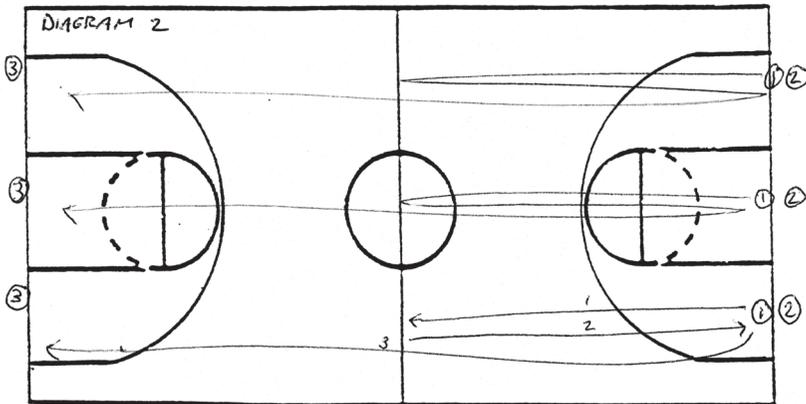


Diagram 2

### Individual Maximum Efforts (timed running)

Running for time may be as simple as seeing how many sprints each individual player can do during a specific time period. After sprinting, each player should rest so they can go all out on the next effort. Players will be going the same distances, but at different times and not on a command. The coach must establish distances and times that are challenging but possible and also ones that fit the needs of their sport. Players will attempt to challenge themselves to do as many quality, effort sprints as possible in the allotted time. Coaches need to focus on praising the maximum efforts of players who are running and not get side tracked by

players who are resting. If you are reinforcing correctly, players will do everything in their power to hear their name as many times as possible during this time.

If we are going to attempt to run this type of conditioning, we often we will begin this section of practice by allowing athletes to set the length of running time for that day. It is wise to discuss with team leaders the value of gradually increasing the time and number of sprints that they are able to do with maximum efforts. This style of running allows each player to work to their maximum capacity depending on how quickly they individually can recover. Recovery times will vary, so your stronger players will get an opportunity for more sprints and your less conditioned players will still be able to receive praise for the efforts they are able to give. Each player strives to achieve their personal best and not compare with each other. All players will benefit by improving their level of physical condition.

### **Run for certain number of sprints (not timed)**

We will allow the team leadership to set a goal for the number of sprints they want the team to achieve. Again, we will allow recovery time, praise all great effort, and stop the group if we have any one who is not putting forth their best. It is wise to meet with your team leaders throughout the season and talk about how to set realistic goals, how and when to increase the number of sprints they are attempting. This one is tougher on those players who are not as well conditioned, but adequate recovery time allows them to wait until they are completely ready.

### **Run after being successful or winning**

One of the biggest psychological changes in this form of reinforcement, is the thought of “winners run”. Usually, winning prevents players from “having” to run. We take the opposite tact. If you are unsuccessful, you do not get to run. One example of a drill where success allows running in basketball is, 1 and 1 and run. If you are interspersing the conditioning throughout practice

and your players are going to shoot free throws for 3 or 4 minutes, we would have each player shoot a one and one. If they miss either shot, they get back in their shooting line. If they make both attempts of the one and one, they get to run down and back.

### **Help your buddy**

Players get into lines of three or four at the starting point. On the command to start, the first player in each line (01) runs the established distance and returns to the starting point. The next player (02) in line watches his “buddy” who is running and can step in and run for them when they return to the starting point. We encourage the player (02) to watch the running form, speed and face on the teammate who is running. If he is straining, losing form or struggling with maintaining his speed, 02 can raise his hand and offer help (“I’ve got you buddy”) and decides when to step in. 01 must stop and allow 02 to take his place. It is entirely the decision of 02. 02 begins running his sprints and 03 now has the decision on when to replace him.

This drill promotes several things that improve conditioning and also build team feeling. The runners are attempting to go as long as possible without slowing or straining so they will not be replaced, and the person waiting is looking for a chance to assist a teammate in trouble. The idea of “helping your buddy” or “not letting your buddy down” is contagious and will be carried over into other areas of practice and games.

### **Ask for help**

This conditioning drill is set up exactly the same way as the previous drill. This time the first player in each line starts running the set distance on the signal and goes as long as he can without stopping, giving maximum effort. It is the runners call for help that allows the next runner to enter the sprint. Unless he asks for help, the next runner must stay and wait his turn. The concept of being able to push yourself and be your own judge on how long you can go is a natural motivator. The idea of trying to increase the number of consecutive sprints you can make before needing

help will improve the conditioning for each individual who pushes himself. The idea of running in a “spotlight” makes it difficult for any player to give less than their best effort.

The concept of being willing to “ask for help” is essential within successful teams. It is OK to say “I need help, and will you step in for me”. Often times the most difficult thing will be to get the runner to surrender. They will try to go too far. This is a dramatic change from the traditional athlete mentality of conditioning.

### **The Chain**

When we use the weakest link conditioning drill it can be done in small groups or large groups. The most effective is to have the entire team attempt to reach the goal. An example is to have all team members line up across the starting position. We will have them interlock elbows or hold hands to create a chain. The running goal is set and then the team all begins running together on the command. The goal for the team is to reach the running objective without ever breaking the chain (weakest link). An example of a running goal for football may be:

- Runners start at the goal line with hands linked.
- Run to the 10 yard line and stop
- Turn around, reconnect hands and on the command, sprint back to the original start line without breaking the chain
- Recover, sprint to the 20, turn and on command, sprint back.
- Repeat until you have completed 50 or even 100 yards.

Our players learned early that if they had two slower, heavier runners together, they would often get so far behind that the chain would break. Rather than look toward them as the reason for failure, the stronger faster players will quickly learn that to prevent the chain from breaking, they must stand on either side of the slower runners and help them along without breaking the link.

Again we are not only conditioning, achieving a tough goal but also they are helping a teammate succeed or being assisted by a teammate that wants to have the whole team achieve the goal.

## **Run With Other Teams**

If you have another team during your season that is also using the positive principles of positive conditioning, it often provides increased motivation to combine both programs in the same conditioning drills. Since you are looking for and praising effort, the speed or strength of the participants can be completely different. We have run with both genders combined in basketball, football and softball teams together or even high school athletes combined with youth teams. It is fun for both groups to cheer for each other and appreciate the effort of classmates, regardless of the age, sport or speed. We will usually intermix the groups in a three or four person exchange etc.- build own team as well as build respect for effort of other team – program pride and support.

## **Winner's Circle**

By setting tough but achievable goals your team can all end practice in the “winner's circle”. Set a goal for each group of runners so that the stronger runners can help teammates who are not as well conditioned. Once their group has reached it's individual goal they all go into an area designated as the “winners circle”. The objective is to have the entire team accomplish a set goal and all end up in the circle before time expires.

Examples are: Each group of three in basketball must run a full speed “half back- full back sprint and then make both ends of a one and one free throw. In football, a group of three or four players run cross-field sprints, all running at the same time. They combine their group total to try to reach a set number. As soon as your group completes the set number, they move to the winner's circle and encourage the remaining groups. Occasionally we will allow those players who finish early to go contribute to a team that has not reached the goal yet. Again, you have a group of players working together to achieve a goal with teammates and coaches encouraging or offering help. Coaches or group leaders need to balance the teams to give the entire team the best chance to succeed.

## **Eliminator –**

One of the most powerful drills used is the eliminator. Coaches can choose any sprint distance they want. (40 yard sprint, cross-court 16's, half court-full court) as long as it is equal for all competitors. We use this drill sparingly (two or three times per season). We only use it if the whole team has bought into the conditioning program and on the day we do this drill we will have already done other conditioning. For the first time we eliminate players based upon their speed. In traditional conditioning practices, the first several players who finish are done, and allowed to go in while all the other players are forced to go back and run another sprint. This usually continues until only the slowest runners are left. The other method often used is if the whole team doesn't finish under a certain time, the whole team runs again. This does nothing to promote team unity, and usually results in faster players being upset at their teammates who just happen to not be gifted with speed and cause the group to run again (forced labor based upon outcome not effort). The faster players can coast and still make the required time and the slower ones may be giving everything they have and have no chance to finish under the time limit regardless of how much they try.

The eliminator is just the opposite. Remember that "winner's run". In this drill the last players who finish are "eliminated" from further running, and the fastest runners can continue to condition.

Football example: All fifty players begin on the goal line and the distance is 40 yards for today's competition. On the start signal all players sprint for the finish line. Coaches praise all the maximum efforts but watch to see who the last five players across the line are. Those five are eliminated but do not leave the field, they join the coaches as encouragers for the players remaining. The 45 players left, jog back to the goal line and recover at their own rate. Each commits to maximum effort when they have recovered by raising their hand. Once all hands are raised, the coach can give the signal to start the next sprint. Again, the last

five are eliminated and join the encouragers and the 40 remaining players repeat the jog back and recovery process. Coaches eliminate by fives until the group reaches a total of ten players. At that point we reduce the participants two at a time until we reach the final four. When we get to four, we eliminate one at a time and use the other players to form a tunnel for the final players to sprint through. At the conclusion of each sprint the remaining players are allowed as much time as necessary to recover before sprinting and the players eliminated are encouraged by everyone if they have given their best effort. By the time we get to the final two, the fastest players have run quite a few competitive sprints. After the final two have run against each other, we will give the winner the option of running one by himself after he has recovered. Every player in this situation has always chosen to run one alone.

Players will dive for the line to try to keep from being one of the last five or to get to the next round. We have had the two final players both dive for the line to have the privilege of running one by themselves. Occasionally the final player, running by himself, will dive across the finish line as the tunnel of teammates cheers him through the forty yards

### **Push Day –**

“Push day” is used if you completely believe that your team has bought in to the positive conditioning and is doing everything in their power to push themselves and help each other. In other words, they have become a great team. For teams that reach this level, coaches will decide once a year to schedule a “push day”. We go through a normal practice, followed by the most strenuous conditioning session of the year. At the conclusion of the conditioning we bring our players together and talk about how much of conditioning is mental and how they are capable of so much more than they think or have ever done. When they think they have just completed the most difficult conditioning of their life, we ask them if they believe they are capable of more. Then we start over and repeat the entire conditioning section, doubling the most strenuous day of the year. It has become tradition for our

teams to anticipate and look forward to being challenged, knowing that the coaches must really think they are a special team to qualify for the push day. Teams will look back on that day as a standard for not quitting, for achieving a goal that they did not believe was possible and as a unifying moment. It is something they are proud to have accomplished and becomes part of who they are as a team and an individual athlete. It is something that they will remember long after all the games are finished. Athletes from 20 years ago will say “Coach, I will never forget Push Day, that was physically the hardest day of my life, but it is a great memory”.

## Summary

I encourage coaches to use their imagination and creativity to develop drills that serve your conditioning purposes and then just use the motivation principles of rewarding effort. You can use almost any conditioning drill, and just change the focus of the verbal reinforcement from *outcome* to *effort*.

The results will speak for themselves. Your most talented athletes will have a chance to be your best workers, and the best conditioned. This is what you need if you are going to rely on them to carry the physical load for the team. But possibly even more importantly, because they get their effort praised, your weaker athletes will be in better condition, feel good about themselves and their contribution to the team. Your bigger or slower players will love the reward of effort and will love being part of this system of reinforcement. They will hate to be cut out of the “eliminator”, and want to continue running.

One of the key elements in the success of the positive conditioning is that once your team has completely bought into the philosophy, give them ownership. Rather than seeing it as, “look what I have done as a coach”, it is “look at who you have become”. They are the ones doing the work and trying not to let their

teammates down. They are the ones who look at conditioning as a privilege and can see the benefits of being part of an unselfish unit.

You will find with teams that have made a conscious choice to buy into this concept that the worst punishment you can give them is to not allow them to run. If we have a practice where there is poor effort or poor concentration we do not allow the team to condition. Just like positive effort and behavior, poor effort or concentration are “student owned” choices.

This also needs to be a complete acceptance in from your entire coaching staff, not just the head coach. Once you have gone this direction, you cannot revert back to previous methods. One time of getting upset during practice and saying, “That was bad, get on the line and we are going to run” will cause you and the system to lose credibility.

If you are able to make this transition:

- You will not believe how hard your players will work
- You will not believe how they support and encourage each other
- You will not believe how much closer they become when they are pulling for each other instead of having to run as punishment for mistakes or outcome
- You will not believe how much harder you are able to push your team
- You will not believe how much better they feel about themselves and their team as they leave the practice field
- You will not believe how much different you feel as an encourager than a slave driver

In a profession that has lasting value to life, remember how I said that most of us coach as we were coached. If you are able to make this one change, consider what you are doing for the *next generation of coaches* as well as memories for your current athletes.

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**PROACTIVE COACHING** 

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