

Developing game speed through conditioning

For most ball players this time of year is spent recovering from a long season and gearing up for the next year with an off-season strength & conditioning program. Whether it's a strict program like the ones I design for the pros or fun, developmental activities that my youth athletes participate in, it's highly recommended for athletes of ALL ages to engage in some form of off-season training program.

No matter what your age, experience or skill level the basics for increasing speed, strength, power and overall athleticism are the same. Here are my top three rules to developing speed and overall athleticism that you can incorporate into your practice and training NOW...

Train movements, not musculature

Technique is the key, whether you are throwing, swinging, pitching or weight training. Never sacrifice proper movement patterns for heavier weights (i.e. weighted bats or weight training using too heavy of a load). This will only develop improper movement patterns, which will create bad habits that are hard to break.

When a player is starting to fatigue in a skill movement, let him rest for a moment and then get back at it. The worst thing is allowing a player to break down as they get tired. Again, this develops bad habits. Of course if players are working hard they will begin to tire. This is okay; just don't let it get to the point where they begin to break down.

The focus for the athlete should be on movements that are smooth, free and quick--but always in control. This will take some practice to develop, but once it is watch out!

Posture is King

As soon as you lose your posture in ANY baseball-related skill you will immediately lose most or ALL of your power and leverage. Sadly, this is overlooked by many athletes but can be the quickest way to improve a player's athletic ability and performance.

The right way to do it

A surefire way to always maintain proper posture when weight training is to always keep shoulder blades pinched together. At first this may seem unnatural and cause you to be stiff. But that is just because the upper back muscles--that are so important to posture, safety and performance--are weak. Over time and with practice these muscles will get strong and great posture will become second nature.

In addition, always look straight ahead. This will keep your spine in proper neutral alignment and also help develop good posture and proper movement patterns.

Posterior chain for serious speed

The real secret to developing world-class speed is developing the muscles of the posterior chain. Hamstring, glutes and lower back especially. I don't mean these muscles need to get much bigger--rather they need to be strong and explosive.

Sprinting to victory

Some of my favorite exercises to develop the posterior chain are squats and sprints. I like to use sprints of distances between 15-60 yards with "rest" being a walk back to starting position and repeating.

The proper squat

Here is a quick description on how to safely and effectively perform the Squat. With bodyweight or a bar across the back, initiate the movement by pushing the buttocks back. Ensure the angle of the hips and knees are the same as you descend to parallel or rock-bottom position, and then begin to reverse the motion in your ascent as you drive up against the floor.

Note: Pay particular attention that the torso lean isn't too far forward. Typically because of weak hips, hamstrings and lower back, many well-intentioned lifters lean over too much and the lift becomes more of a back lift.

Other exercises I like to develop the posterior include power cleans, power snatches, deadlifts, and high box step-ups. For additional video description of these exercises please refer to Power/Speed Development Series found on my Web site below.

Also, for younger athletes, all of these exercises can be performed with a light (3-6 pounds) medicine ball for maximum safety, efficiency and fun.