

## TRAIN LIKE AN ATHLETE

By Richard Bell

For several years now, I've spent summers helping teenage athletes prepare for their fall sports. Typically, these kids were small for their sport and needed both size and strength. When I begin, I don't even put them on programs specific to their sport, I just give them a crash course in hard-core bodybuilding. Nevertheless, they almost always reported great success at their sport within a few weeks.

At first, I couldn't figure this out, but after a bit of reflection, I began to see a trend. My young athletes had started out small and added muscle. A lot of their teammates might have been muscular, but they also were just plain fat. Lean kids outperformed fat kids every time.

In short, I believe that many athletes today simply carry too much body fat. Fat is basically non-functional tissue — it doesn't contribute to strength, speed, power, agility, or any other athletic trait you can name. The only reason I can think of to make your muscles carry around excess body fat around is if you're expecting an extended famine! The rest of you should remember that excess fat diminishes your strength-to-weight ratio, which is critical to athletic performance.

In my practice as a sports performance strategist, I've long noticed that you rarely see a particularly quick or agile male athlete who carries more than 10 percent body fat. (For women an optimum percentage is more like 12 to 16 percent.)

Obviously, diet is a huge factor in staying lean. But what about the weight room? Ideally, the exercises you choose should be sports specific. Barbell squats, for instance, for an athlete whose sport requires jumping, because this particular squat involves the same muscle groups and movement patterns as vertical jumping. Barbell squats make more sense for this type of athlete than leg presses, hack squats, or even Smith machine squats.

And while we're on that subject, consider this: I once witnessed a woman performing Smith machine squats while reading *Cosmopolitan*. What's wrong with this picture? Everything. Machine training bores the central nervous system and makes athletes one-dimensional. Machines move in just one plane of motion; athletes move in three. Machines require neither balance nor stability, and you can't develop a strong core using them.

Also remember that unilateral (single limb) movements tend to transfer to athletic skills better than bi-lateral. Every exercise you do should have an explicit purpose. Many, many people run through workouts with very little forethought at all — or worse, while reading a magazine! Don't let that be you.

Some moves to add to your routine:

- One-legged squats from a step-up box
- Lateral jump, with or without a medicine ball
- 3 way lunges: to the front, side and at 45 degrees
- Split squats: place your back foot on a weight bench, your front foot on the floor