

The Strength Coach's Guide to Winning Over the Athletic Director



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1. Understanding the Economics Behind Coaching

Let's start from the beginning: Every athletic director is in charge of evaluating the economics behind their athletic program. This will include the salaries they decide to pay positions in the athletics department. While athletic coaches are necessary for competing, other positions sometimes must prove their return-on-investment. Understanding the economics behind your position will help you see "eye-to-eye" with your AD.

Convincing cash-strapped school districts that a strength and conditioning salary makes sense is no slam dunk. "Expense is an issue," says Mike Nitka, Director of Strength and Conditioning and a Physical Education Instructor at Muskego (Wis.) High School, who puts an S&C coach's salary at the level of a starting teacher — \$30,000 to \$35,000. "Districts do not seem to value this position, and many try to combine two positions."

Strength coach Liane Blyn widens the salary range from \$20,000 to \$55,000, with stipend positions falling somewhere between \$900 and \$7,000. In an era of scholarship-seeking parents willing to pay for private personal training, a high school athletic department can actually recoup some of its investment in a strength and conditioning coach. "The goal for the offseason fall, winter and spring workouts wasn't necessarily to make money for the department; it was to offer a great service to our student-athletes. The small charge covered the stipend for the strength coach," says Blyn of their school's approach, adding, "Our summer program cost was \$150 and brought in a good chunk of money to the department — more than \$100,000 — and after paying the staff there was a net of approximately \$60,000."

Numbers don't tell the whole story, nor should they lead the discussion, according to another AD, Mr. Spearman. "When you're thinking about presenting this to a school board, you want to keep the kids in mind first," he says. "If you want to gain the parents' trust, make sure that the kids and their safety is put first. If you have kids training under a person who is not certified or not qualified to do that work, that could be a legal issue."

"Sometimes being a strength and conditioning coach at the high school level is seen as entry level, but it's not," Spearman says, "because you're at a point where you may be the kids' introduction to actually developing who they'll be after high school."

That entry-level attitude is hamstringing American athletes, adds the NSCA's Pat McHenry. "In other countries, the coaches with the most knowledge work with those who need the most help — the younger athletes," he says. "They realize how important it is to start the athletes off on the right foot."

2. Communicating the Benefits to the Students

Perhaps the best way to create a strong bond with your AD is to continuously communicate the benefits the S&C program brings to the students. For example, are you running reports on injury rates, or are you relaying testimonies of female athletes stating that their physical confidence has grown? Something as little as creating a poster board where students can write down positive experiences goes a long way in demonstrating how the weight room is improving the livelihoods of student-athletes.

At the very minimum, your strength program should have a written mission statement that outlines and highlights the following:

1. **Reduce injuries:** A qualified strength and conditioning professional can play a pivotal role in preparing young athletes for sport and thereby minimize or offset the incidence and severity of sport-related injuries common to young athletes.
2. **Improve long-term athletic development:** A qualified strength and conditioning professional understands the many variables that go into designing training age-appropriate programs and can produce more positive results.
3. **Improve performance:** Athletes who participate in a well-designed strength and conditioning program typically will be faster, stronger, more powerful, move more efficiently, and be more athletic than they would be without it.
4. **Improve confidence:** Athletes who invest time in strength and conditioning tend to develop confidence through changes in their body composition and increased physical literacy, as well as the knowledge that the development that occurs as a result of their training can give them an advantage in competition.
5. **Improve health:** In addition to increasing muscular strength, power, and muscular endurance, regular participation in a youth resistance training program has the potential to influence many other health- and fitness-related measures, and can play an important role in alleviating many health-related conditions.

3. Communicating the Benefits to the School

Similarly, a strength coach should always be able to communicate the benefits the strength program to the school in general. Write the below points down and outline how they currently apply to your school, or how your school can improve at achieving them through the strength and conditioning program:

1. **Limit liability:** A qualified strength and conditioning professional can help limit your school's liability and implement procedures that support risk-management.
2. **Increase professionalism and safety:** For the same reason schools require a certified athletic trainer to work with their injured athletes or a certified lifeguard on pool decks, the same should be true for the coach who is designing and supervising the strength and conditioning program.

3. **Extra coach on staff for all sports:** A strength coach allows the sport coach more time to focus on the day-to-day practice schedule while the strength coach oversees the strength and conditioning of the team.
4. **Due diligence:** Demonstrates due diligence in properly equipping athletes for the physical and mental demands of a particular sport and establishes a greater commitment to injury prevention.
5. **Gender equity:** Assists an athletic department with implementing strength and conditioning programs that are gender specific.

4. Emphasizing the Domino Effect

Like most things in a competitive world, success breeds imitation. Prioritizing strength and conditioning at the high school level through the hiring of full-time experts is no different.

While nationwide hiring numbers appear modest, there are expanding hotbeds of high school strength and conditioning. Athletic Director Dr. Spearman says,

"It's a domino effect. If I'm at a competing school and I see that you hired a strength guy – and your program got better, kids can move better and injuries are decreasing – I'm going to go out and hire a certified coach, too. Not to say that everybody will do it, but I would recommend that people start looking into getting a certified coach to work with all the kids, because it's so important."

What's a good way to provide evidence of correlated success at other schools? Well, take a page out of *CEO Strength Coach* and "talk shop." In other words, go and visit other schools that have strength programs you would like to emulate. Take pictures and video, ask their coaches and AD how the strength program has impacted athletics and the student body overall. Chances are your AD will mingle with other AD's at a conference once per year, but if you visit ten schools in the area and report back the pro's and con's, your AD will see you as a source of information and critical observation.

5. Propose a Combined/Unified Strength and Conditioning Curriculum

AD Scott Garvis of Newton High School says that combining the S&C and PE departments was a huge measure of success and helped bolster their school's strength program to where it is today. He

believes the same model would work for other schools and recommends it. However, Garvis also noted that every school is different and that the model may not be universal although every high school should pursue a formal strength program.

Proposing a unified strength program also ties into the feasibility of the economics of the strength coach position. For an Athletic Director, justifying a salary for a strength coach that coaches seven periods a day in order to promote injury prevention, physical well-being, confidence, and performance enhancement is a much stronger sell than taking on a strength coach to only train athletes. It's also a much bigger sell.

A strength coach considering this proposition would likely need to seek out additional resources from support groups such as the NHSSCA, NSCA and certain individuals within those groups such as Kevin Vanderbush. To date, the NHSSCA has made available troves of information that demonstrates the value - in many ways - that a strength coach can provide a high school athletic program and student body.

6. Get Certified

Any quality AD will appreciate a coach who holds some sort of certification; an even better AD would know which certifications are worth more than others. And in the unfortunate case where an AD does not understand the importance of a certification, it is the strength coach's job to educate them.

1. **Certification:** A qualified strength and conditioning professional should achieve and maintain a professional certification credentialed by an independent accreditation agency—for example, the NSCA Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) certification—as well as standard first aid, cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), and automated external defibrillation (AED).
2. **Education:** A qualified strength and conditioning professional should acquire expertise, and have a degree from a regionally accredited college/ university in one or more of the “scientific foundations” for strength and conditioning (i.e. exercise/anatomy, biomechanics, pediatric exercise physiology, nutrition), or in a relevant subject (e.g., exercise/sport pedagogy, psychology, motor learning, training methodology, kinesiology).

Conclusion

Like any journey, demonstrating long-term value in an investment requires a combination of effort and excellent communication. For most coaches, working their way into a full-time position did not take place overnight. Rather, consider it a process that will present itself with many challenges as well opportunities. As the software provider to thousands of strength coaches in a variety of settings - public and private, full-time and volunteer - we are committed to publishing and sharing information that helps the industry as whole become more successful and more valued.

Appendix:

Example “Mission Statements”:

“Strength and Conditioning is about more than lifting weights – it encompasses the entire development of the athlete and what is needed to reducing the likelihood of injury & improving physical performance. This includes improving power, speed and agility, acceleration and deceleration, endurance, stability, mobility, flexibility and preventative/corrective exercises with strength training being just one piece of the jigsaw. In addition, strength & conditioning challenges each athlete mentally, in order to mold better leaders, teammates and young men & women that will go on to lead & inspire others.”

Joe Aratari, Penfield Central High School

“To provide an environment that inspires, educates, and encourage both our students and staff to live a well-balanced lifestyle through excellence in strength and conditioning. The strength and conditioning program provides a holistic approach that will positively enhance the athlete’s performance. Continuous evaluation of the athlete’s progress will allow for determining specific goals, as well physical strengths, and limitations. Special needs for athletes with pre-existing injuries will also be a major focus working in conjunction with the athletic training staff to ensure the best course of action to determine how to safely prepare our athletes for return to his or her athletic activity.”

Rob Kirkland, Naperville North High School

MISSION & VISION

STATEMENTS THAT EMANATE FROM OUR PURPOSE & GOALS

The graphic features three black boxes with white text. The left box is titled "MISSION" and contains the text: "To **engage, educate** and **empower** the student-athlete to develop skills that will translate to improved sport performance and a lifetime of wellness." The right box is titled "VISION" and contains the text: "#**WEWILL** be recognized for impacting the lives of every student we come into contact with both on and off the field of play by reflecting excellence in all we do." In the center is a circular logo with a grey background and a gold border. The logo contains a stylized figure holding a staff with a caduceus-like symbol. The text "MY SOUL MY TEAM" is at the top and "MY BODY MY TEAM" is at the bottom of the circle. At the bottom of the graphic is a black banner with the "SPARTANS" logo on the left and the hashtag "#BUILDINGMONSTAHS" on the right.

Gary Schofield, GACS

Example "Statement of Benefits":

- An environment that strives towards safety first in everything we do
- A training system that is both comprehensive and easy to follow that will measure daily progress
- Help each athlete reach his or her goal and provide accountability to remain consistent with established goals
- Building character that will transcend the field of play
- Maximize performance in sport

Rob Kirkland, Naperville North High School

D156 P.E. Department Priority Character Traits

- Students will demonstrate a positive attitude and work ethic toward fitness as integral parts of their character.
- Students will demonstrate sportsmanship and respect during competition as integral parts of their character.
- Students will demonstrate characteristics and attributes of leadership as integral parts of their character.
- Students will demonstrate teamwork, communication, and collaboration skills as integral parts of their character.
- Students will demonstrate an understanding of the physical, mental and social benefits exercise has as part a healthy lifestyle.
- Students will demonstrate an understanding of the importance of proper nutrition as integral parts of their character and a healthy lifestyle.
- Students will demonstrate an understanding of the importance of overall wellness and lifelong healthy behaviors as integral parts of their character.

John Beerbower, McHenry High School

- Design and administer the best strength and conditioning program for our athletes that reduces the likeliness of injury and promotes long-term athletic development.
- Develop training programs to account for biomechanical and physiological differences between individual athletes, taking into consideration their age, sex, training status, physical limitations, and injury status.
- Educate athletes on the importance of good nutrition as well as sleep and its role in health and performance.
- Educate athletes about the effects of performance-enhancing substances and their abuse, relevant school policy and legislation.
- Maintain a modern well-kept facility that provides a safe, clean environment for our student-athletes.

Jason Timberlake, Corydon Central High School