Dare to Be Different

After a delayed year due to COVID, this summer my home region of Niagara finally hosted the Canada Games, a quadrennial multi-sport competition that brings together top developmental athletes from Canada’s 10 provinces and 3 territories. Canadian sport is fortunate to have a solid long-term athlete development (LTAD) model, and the Canada Games target “Train to Compete”-level athletes, 1 step below “Train to Win” and the focus on elite/international competition. Canada’s LTAD document is not just focused on developing elite athletes but, rather, physical literacy and activity through the life span.

As sport scientists working with athletes who are becoming progressively streamlined toward peak performance and competition, a gap can exist in not planning an appropriate off-ramp for individuals. This is an important consideration so individuals develop a healthy relationship with their chosen sport for the rest of their lives, along with establishing healthy habits and an open mind to new physical challenges. One of the ways forward may be to encourage cross-training and exploring new sports and physical challenges even during the peak competition phase of life.

I’m reminded of this issue by a recent profile of Wes Schweitzer, a professional American football offensive lineman who became a bouldering and rock-climbing enthusiast a couple of years ago. Schweitzer’s conversion began with lifting injuries to his elbows, with a trainer suggesting replacing the barbell and its standard grip—and its relatively minimal emphasis on finger, hand, and forearm strength—with climbing holds. Schweitzer found that he was able to lift pain-free and stronger and started varying the types of holds he would use to lift. Speaking of his first experience in a climbing gym a few years later, when he couldn’t climb a beginner V0 route, Schweitzer had an epiphany where “that experience showed me that there was so much more to what I thought strength and mobility was.” Nowadays, Schweitzer has moved almost completely out of the weight room, except when he returns to outlift his teammates.

In addition to pure strength gains, Schweitzer claims numerous advantages from his newfound sport, from an additional 7 kg of muscle gain to improvements in functional strength and even situational awareness that enhances his on-field performance. For example, Schweitzer feels that the intricate emphasis on body positioning from climbing provides him with huge stimulus and benefits when positioning his body to stop or move an onrushing defender. To the best of my knowledge, current research on physiology and performance lacks verification of the possible benefits of such cross-training methods. Accordingly, this shows how unique stories from practice may bring new testable hypotheses to our scientific table.

While the image of a 150-kg lineman is about the farthest imaginable from a typical lithie and wiry climber, there are also lessons that climbers can learn from Schweitzer. Whether in gyms or outdoors, climbers tend to fall and land in a sloppy fashion. In contrast, Schweitzer’s day job demands of catlike agility means that he can land safely onto a mat, often upright in a squat position. Schweitzer is also confident that many climbers can benefit from additional muscle gain to enable harder climbing, an idea often anathema to most climbers focused on power-to-weight ratio. Such observations highlight the potential benefits when sport scientists explore ideas or work across sports with different demands or cultures, similar to scientists making breakthroughs when bringing novel ideas across different scientific disciplines.

We have come a long way in strength and conditioning over the past decades. Gone are the days of cookie-cutter training plans, and the current evidence-based practice that we publish in the International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance and other performance-oriented journals is all about individualized strength and conditioning to match sport- or position-specific demands. Schweitzer’s outside-of-the-box and synergistic relationship between football and climbing shows the benefits that can accrue when we allow athletes to follow unconventional paths. This example should interest us as sport scientists but also speaks to how engaging in a new sport may spark a lateral shift in physical literacy and a lifelong passion for physical activity, especially when an athlete’s primary sport, such as American football, may not be sustainable across the life span.

As I was cheering on the Canada Games athletes, it got me thinking about my own physical literacy and long-term progression as an athlete. For the first 25 or so years after discovering cycling as a teenager, racing was my monomaniacal focus, despite my lack of talent and the obvious fact that it would always remain a hobby rather than an occupation for me. It is only in the past decade that I have expanded my love of cycling to other disciplines such as bike packing. And, like Schweitzer, I also became a keen rock climber several years back, finding a similar synergy in both performance and enhanced love of physical activity. With hindsight, I wish that an athletic mentor would have taken me aside and guided me toward that development off-ramp much earlier. Hopefully, we as sport scientists can provide more evidence of the various benefits both for performance and for physical literacy and activity through the life span, and we can pursue this for the athletes we are fortunate enough to mentor.

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References