

## Hard Work and the Athlete

I have had this thought on my mind for a while: a kid walks into a weight room, takes his sheet of paper out of his pocket and begins going through each of the movements and exercises listed on his/her sheet to a “tee.” Now, the first thing you’re probably thinking is that, what is on that sheet of paper, does it read “back squats” or “front squats,” “bench press” or “push-ups,” and what are the given number of sets and reps. Perhaps even the tempo of the exercise is on your mind and maybe even the rest period and order of the exercises. I agree, all of the above are important to the overall program and the “training effect” of that program to the athlete. But the one critical element missing on that sheet of paper is something I would like to coin: hard work.

A recent Dan John article made me sit and think as I was going for an easy (quite ironic I know) ride on the spin bike as one of my recovery days; what is hard work? How is it defined and how do you know that you are working hard? I am not sure I have an answer, but I’ll try my best to define and maybe at the least help you be able to define it on your own.

First, I couldn’t help but think about the pool of athletes that I regularly train on my own (30-ish athletes) as well as teams that I work with, coaches/school I’ve consulted with, friends I write programs for, etc., that hard work is everywhere and no where at the same time. I have seen some athletes come and go—usually it’s the athlete that comes in expecting to gain freakishly huge size (and somehow look like a genetically gifted classmate), improve their speed and agility (they want to appear like Landalian Tomlinson on the field), and at the same time they want to do it in about 3 months of time training 3 days a week. Now, maybe I’m not giving myself enough credit, but for some reason, this seems like a goal that I won’t be able to accomplish. However, after the few over-ambitious and under-worked athletes go on their merry way, I am left with the core group of athletes that I will see for years to come. So within that dedicated group of athletes you would think that I would have a large number of kids who work really hard on a regular basis...and I do, or at least I think I do?

### *What is Hard Work?*

I’ve recently started toying around with some programming that is set up with the last work set being listed as “X” reps or “\_\_\_” reps. The whole premise behind this empty number is that the athlete push themselves to see how many reps they can actually complete before going to failure. Just the other day I had a young athlete who had completed his next to last set at 6 reps, before going on to his set to “failure.” Two interesting things happened: 1) He asked me how many reps he thought he should be able to do (we used the same weight as the set before with 6 reps). My response was somewhere between 6-12 reps. 2) He completed 20 reps each leg before hitting failure! That’s right, not a typo. More than 300% the number of reps that he just did when he thought he was working hard.

Now, I have come to two quick conclusions from this: 1) Athletes often don’t know what they’re capable of until you put them in a situation where they are tested and pushed to reach the absolute maximum level at that given point in time. 2) Athletes often find themselves working a “comfort” level of training where they like to think they are

working hard because they feel a “burn” or it requires *some* “effort.” In no way is this a knock on that athlete or any athletes that I have. Rather, it is a refreshing discovery that athletes often have untapped potential both physically and mentally that they don’t themselves don’t realize and sometimes even as coaches we don’t realize.

I am pretty sure the athlete was working “hard” on the first two sets. I saw every single rep of each of those, and between his feedback and my own, I can confidently say that he was working “hard.” However, when pushed a little bit on his last set, he found out that he could push himself significantly “harder” and that what he once thought was hard work was now just looked at as an “easy” set. In my eyes this means that hard work comes down to the perception of the athlete and coach. There is no quantifiable number, weight, amount of sweat, or heart rate that can tell you if the athlete is actually working “hard.” I have come up with one sentence to describe hard work. It should be looked at as: **putting in an amount of effort that delivers the fastest, most efficient and effective results possible.** Is it very broad? Absolutely. Hard work is a broad term. As Clark Griswold’s father in National Lampoon Christmas Vacation says (in relation to Clark working hard on the lights), “...so do washing machines.”

It depends on the goals to define what hard work may be. Showing up is the first part of the battle. If you aren’t where you need to be to get things done, it doesn’t matter how bad you want it. Want to gain 20 lbs of muscle but you only train 75% of the time you’re supposed to? Expect less than 75% of the results. I can’t help but think of one of my athletes who is in college now who gets up and goes to the gym at 6am because it’s the only time he can have access to the weights so he can do the workouts the way I want them done. He does this 4 days per week and does it nearly the entire time he is at school. That’s dedication and hard work. I don’t know many college kids who are willing to get up at that hour on their own time to make sure they get the needed work done.

Secondly you must get things done as efficiently as possible when you are there. That means maximizing the movements, exercises, drills, etc. to have them parallel your goals as an athlete. If you want to improve your speed but don’t want to train your legs with weights, you’re going to have a long road ahead of you to make the progress that you want to make. As much as upper body movements are needed and useful to help in total body movements like running, you can’t only work with half of the body and expect to see full results. It’s like the high school boys who do lots of curls and triceps push-downs to build up their arms, but there isn’t anything to build up...they can’t do a set of pull-ups, and they aren’t able to bench their bodyweight ten times, but they are enthralled with doing curls and push-downs. Wasting time and energy.

Very simply put: hard work is something that is often missing. Even the best programs in the world aren’t going to produce the desired results if the athlete isn’t working hard. And to be honest, an athlete who does only the basic compound lifts but works incredibly hard at adding weight and moving the weight as fast as possible (on the lifting portion—concentric) will make a lot more progress. Bottom line, you need to show up first, do it second, and make sure you do it as well and as efficiently as you possibly can every single time! No athlete would be ok with starting a game with only 75% of their team on the field...why would you want to train to reach a goal by only showing up 75% of the time?

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