

Functional Fitness: *The Case for the Army*

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In 2018 I had a rare opportunity to attend a functional fitness coaching certification course in Boston while serving as a tactical officer at the U.S. Military Academy Preparatory School in West Point, NY. After years of strict weightlifting and good old-fashioned Army physical training (PT), I was naturally skeptical and a vocal antagonist against the functional fitness movement. I would often cite unfounded evidence in order to attempt to disprove the functional fitness phenomenon, really only to justify my own fitness programming, which often included hours of isometric exercises focused on single muscle groups. With some peer pressure, I decided to jump on the opportunity and take the trip to Boston to give it a chance.

More than two years later, I have remained committed to functional fitness, in large part because of the amazing support community I found as well as the drastic improvements in my health. Old injuries and unneeded weight disappeared. To my surprise, my strength improved; I gained improved range of motion and mobility, and completely revolutionized my cardiovascular endurance. Functional fitness changed my life, work performance, fitness, and overall well-being for the better. I am confident that had I stayed on the course I was on, I would have ended up nearly immobile at an early age, given the wear and tear I was self-inflicting on top of the stress my job as an Infantryman was already having on my body. I am now a vocal supporter of the sport and work to share it with my colleagues as often as possible. This article aims to make the case for an increased presence of functional fitness in the Army in order to help change our fitness culture and improve the mental, physical, and emotional resilience of our formations by correlating the nuances of functional fitness to the everyday demands of Army life and combat.



Soldiers flip a tire during a team-building physical fitness training session on 11 September 2020 at Fort Riley, KS. (Photo by LTC Aaron Teller)

As the Army adopts the new Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT), which is inherently functional in nature, our physical readiness training (PRT) strategies have begun to shift. Although the average Army formation can still be found doing the same old things like long-distance running, ruck marching, and push-ups and sit-ups, there has certainly been a shift in our culture as units begin to try to prepare their Soldiers for the functional nature of the ACFT. However, what I still find is that the average unit has a very myopic view of fitness. They often focus on a singular low or moderate intensity activity, usually with very little attention given to warming up, mobility, stability, or cooling down. As we think about the rigors of combat, however, it is fair to say that in battle Soldiers are required to move rapidly, conduct a high-intensity activity, and then repeat this process. Those activities often require agility, speed, balance, strength, mobility, power, skill, and even a certain degree of gymnastics ability, like climbing a wall or jumping through a window for example. Further, the daily rigors of garrison training require a great deal of resilience, mental fortitude, endurance, confidence, and adherence to high standards. Functional fitness, as a comprehensive program, provides Soldiers with the tools to be successful in both contexts.

Functional fitness is a microcosm for Army life in several ways, to include:

1. Balance of multiple skills to be ready for the unknown
2. High standards and accountability
3. Planning and programming
4. Preparation and recovery
5. Mental toughness and resilience
6. Competition and winning
7. Community support and mentorship
8. Professionalization and certification of leaders
9. Self-discipline and self-development

The most salient of these comparisons is the multi-modal nature of functional fitness. Readiness in the Army is essentially the ability of a unit or individual to be ready to, with little notice, tackle any mission in all conditions. Units must balance all of their assigned skills, like marksmanship, land navigation, offense, defense, and urban operations, to name only a few. Too much focus on one area decreases readiness in others. We prefer our combat arms units to be trained on a variety of skillsets rather than be experts on any singular skill. Functional fitness is the same. In this model, athletes focus on balancing proficiency across all domains (power, agility, balance, strength, etc.). Too much focus in one area lets you atrophy in other areas. Athletes continuously manage this tension, trying to keep as many “plates” spinning as possible without letting any drop. The best functional fitness athletes are well trained across a diverse portfolio of activities, in contrast to marathon runners or body builders who are only highly skilled in one domain. This “ready-for-anything” approach allows athletes to tackle any fitness challenge with a high degree of ability. They may not beat the marathon runner in a race or the body builder in a bench press competition, but holistically they are more fit across all areas. This is exactly what we ask our Soldiers to be: ready for any unknown enemy or battlefield, at any time.

Functional fitness, like the Army, relies firmly on standards and accountability. Athletes learn early on that quality is better than quantity. Coaches and teammates hold each other accountable, and individual athletes are expected to remain disciplined in their form and technique. Only properly performed repetitions count during workouts, and technique is by far the most important aspect of training. As a community, poor form is not tolerated, and perfect execution of performance standards is highly coveted. This culture of high standards and accountability is exactly what we aim to achieve in our Army formations.

Functional fitness, like training management in the Army, requires detailed planning and programming in order to ensure athletes are actively working to meet certain goals as part of a larger long-term plan. Each workout has an intent and goal. Athletes begin the workout knowing what they are aiming to achieve and which skillsets they are aiming to improve upon. These short-term goals are nested with longer term goals to reach a desired state of fitness. This should sound familiar, as it is a direct representation of how we think about training in the Army. Good programs are “varied not random,” meaning they offer a large variety of skills training to maintain balance and are actually part of a comprehensive direction that is uniquely tailored to the individual needs of each athlete.

As we focus in on a “METCON” (metabolic conditioning), or WOD (workout of the day) as it is commonly referred to in the functional fitness community, we can also learn some strong lessons for Army Soldiers. METCONs are



A Soldier with the 174th Infantry Brigade conducts the deadlift event of the Army Combat Fitness Test on 27 May 2021 at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, NJ. (Photo by SSG Armando R. Limon)

generally high intensity, requiring athletes to adequately warm up, mobilize their joints, perform short-duration exercises at maximum effort, and then cool down and stretch, often with additional strength, skills, or midline conditioning baked in before or after. We similarly ensure our Soldiers conduct pre-combat inspections (PCIs), reconnaissance, and rehearsals prior to training, and we conduct after action reviews (AARs) and recovery after training. Like Army operations, preparatory activities and recovery activities are often just as, if not more, important than the event itself. Nutrition, rest, stretching, recovery, and mobility are just as important to good functional fitness performance as PCIs, rehearsals, AARs, maintenance, and recovery are to Army training and operations.

Functional fitness workouts also require athletes to push themselves well beyond their comfort zone. They train athletes to endure great physical and mental stress while still maintaining prescriptive standards. Every workout shines a bright light on the unique strengths and weaknesses of each athlete, forcing them to constantly evaluate where they can improve. These workouts are often designed to stretch an athlete physically, mentally, and emotionally, and because of the large variety of skill sets, nearly every athlete finds a weakness exposed. This dynamic is directly correlated to the general nature of Army life and certainly to combat. The nature of the Army profession is inherently risky, dangerous, uncomfortable, and physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing, requiring a great deal of fortitude and resilience. Functional fitness reinforces the resilience required to persist in the face of these adverse conditions.

Senior Army leadership have often used the slogan “Winning Matters” to capture the culture and mindset that we aim to instill in all of our Soldiers. Similarly, functional fitness rests firmly on a foundation of competition. It is widely understood that although it is a community sport, all athletes get better by competing with each other and the community as a whole. For those who belong to a gym, every workout is designed to force athletes to compete against each other, with scores posted and winners declared. Athletes challenge each other, but they also support each other when they struggle or fail, encourage each other when they are struggling, and provide positive feedback when they complete a workout. For individual athletes, countless digital applications exist to allow athletes to compare scores to their peers. Functional fitness is a great venue to continue to reinforce a winning attitude and competitive nature in our Soldiers.

Like the Army, functional fitness is a community of practice — a collective team focused on a common pursuit. As the Army highly values leader development through teaching, coaching, and mentoring, so does the functional fitness community. Very few athletes can go it alone. At some point in all athletes’ journey, they require coaching and certainly mentorship from more experienced athletes to learn new skills or to just generally navigate the arduous nature of the sport. Even the best athletes in the world have coaches, if not teams, dedicated to their development and success. The Army can learn from this dynamic and just how heavily the functional fitness community invests in supporting their athletes.

The functional fitness community invests equally as heavily in the certification of its coaches and gym owners to ensure the professionalization of the sport. Just as the Army requires professional military education for all of its leaders, functional fitness leaders must be certified and tested by a standardized assessment program in order to perform their duties. Only certified instructors can lead workouts, judge competitions, or coach individual athletes. Coaches are offered four levels of certification as well as additional courses designed to increase professional knowledge on unique skill.

Functional fitness requires a great deal of self-discipline, sacrifice, and investment in self-development. The taxing nature of the sport dissuades many from staying the course, especially in the beginning of the journey when the learning curve is the steepest. The sport never gets easier, as the metaphorical goal post continuously moves as you get better and better. No matter how good you get, there is always more to work on. This requires immense personal discipline to persevere and keep the end game in mind. Many athletes falter, quit, or take short cuts to decrease this burden. Only those who remain dedicated and steadfast in the midst of the natural adversity of the sport see the inevitable growth that comes with sticking it out. Like in Army training, to really succeed in this sport, there is a certain degree of investment in personal development that is required. Athletes who are serious about doing well typically invest in equipment, coaching, memberships, and self-education through reading materials or videos. There is also a certain time and energy commitment to succeed. Typically, a minimum of three days on and one day off, each day with at least one hour of activity, is required to see substantial progress, often at the cost of other daily pursuits. The same type of commitment is required of Army Soldiers and leaders to grow in their military development.

Conclusion

If Army leaders are serious about changing the fitness culture of their formations, they would be well served by considering the benefits of functional fitness. Further, they would also benefit from adopting a long-term view of sending people away from their units to developmental opportunities like getting certified in functional fitness coaching. The cost benefit is undoubtedly weighted in favor of the benefits. For a relatively low time and financial cost, my short trip to Boston had a lasting impact on my personal fitness, the fitness of those who I have had the pleasure of sharing the sport with (to include my family), and hopefully with the Soldiers I will lead in the future. In closing, functional fitness is a better option for the overall health and fitness of the force. An increased investment in functional fitness will undoubtedly improve mental and physical toughness, increase readiness and resilience, reduce injuries, improve morale, and build more cohesive teams.

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