

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO WEIGHT TRAINING FOR SOCCER

Ken Kontor, Publisher, Performance Conditioning Soccer with Andrew "Rudy" Rudawsky MS, P.T., A.T., C.

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The popular use of weight training for improving athletic performance and preventing injury started in the mid-seventies with the sport of American Football. Today, hundreds of thousands of the "just do it" generation of young athletes, male and female in a variety of sports, are gaining a competitive advantage in the weight room.

Weight training is "in." Kids do it to look better and meet new friends. In any school the weight room is a busy center of healthy physical and social activity. But, is weight training right for soccer?

There are tough questions a soccer family must consider. When should training start? What program should be followed? And most importantly, who will supervise the program?

Soccer athletes will be exposed to weight training and, just like any youngster, the pressure to be "one of the crowd" will lead to experimenting with the weights. Here are some helpful hints for parents of young players, which will help them decide if weight training is right for their son or daughter and how to get started on the right foot.

Is Weight Training Right for Young Soccer Players?

The American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement on the topic states: "Recent research has shown that short-term programs can increase strength without significant injury risk in programs in which the youthful athletes are trained and supervised by knowledgeable adults."

Although the statement says that the research does not address whether this improved strength means better performance and reduced injury, the overwhelming consensus of the athletic community is that improved performance and injury prevention are the two greatest benefits of a well designed weight program.

What Does Increased Strength Do for Young Soccer Players?

It improves joint, tendon and ligament strength and stability to prevent injury. This joint stability improves stopping, change of

direction, and provides more powerful acceleration in running. All are key factors to improving soccer skill. Often overlooked is that increased strength builds confidence to take on challenges and, more importantly, confidence to score goals.

What Weight Training Won't Do

- Make players inflexible. Strength exercises must be done with a full range of motion, paying attention to muscle balance and imbalances by avoiding development of only one part or side of the body. Dynamic flexibility movements specific to soccer skills are also essential.
- Throw off the shooting touch. This myth came from basketball. Improperly coached players would run out of the weight room, onto the court, and shoot nothing but bricks. Not enough time was allowed for the muscles to adjust from handling heavy objects to the fine motor skill of shooting a basketball.

When Should You Start?

The simplest answer is, when an athlete is ready. Soccer skills are the most important consideration. If an athlete's skill level is far enough advanced and s/he is emotionally ready for the additional task, it is time for weight training. This may be age 13, 16, or whenever. It is an individual consideration.

The American Academy of Pediatrics reiterates the need for qualified adult supervision and the program should be "appropriate to the athlete's stage of maturation, which should be assessed objectively by medical personnel."

What Program is Right for My Son or Daughter?

Here are some general recommendations.

- Start with a general program to gain overall, balanced strength.
- You don't have to start with barbells, dumbbells or machines. In fact, some authorities argue that starting with one's body weight is easier, safer and as effective.

- If you do use weights, never attempt maximum amounts of weight. Do between 6 to 12 repetitions. If proper technique is lost, stop the exercise immediately.
- Follow all rules and principles for safe and effective results.
- Don't overlook cross-training. For example cycling, cross-country skiing, roller blading, stair climbing will improve lower body strength. One-half to two-thirds of all soccer injury occurs in this area.
- A quality program can be performed on the soccer field with minimum equipment and can be very productive.
- Remember, the goal is to be a better soccer player, not a better weight lifter. Try not to be influenced and confused by all the popular body building magazines. If you want to look like a body builder you must train like a body builder. This emphasizes another very important principle of weight training: specificity. You train a specific way to get specific results. The only thing a body builder has in common with soccer players is the conditioning tools they use. The results they seek are much different.
- Once you have decided on a program, have it checked out by a proper medical authority.

Who is Going to Set Up the Program?

If your soccer coach has experience with weight training through college or post-graduate course work, start there. The coach offers the best of both worlds, with an understanding of strength training and knowledge of the game of soccer.

All too often, strength-training advice is sought from "experts" who may know how to get strong but are unable to properly put it into the context of soccer. Soccer is a high skill, high-speed sport, played under tiring conditions. It offers unique challenges. When getting advice from a strength "expert" be sure to plug in the soccer coach as to what you are doing. The coach will offer important

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input, keeping the program focus on soccer. Finally, be sure that the program is cleared by medical personnel. The family pediatrician is a good choice.

Gender Considerations

Should there be a big difference in the training for girls and boys? The answer is, very little. Much has been made of this issue in the past. Most discussion stems from cultural rather than physiological considerations. Weight training may, in fact, be more important to young female

soccer players because cultural considerations have limited the opportunities young girls have to gain a good strength foundation so important in injury prevention. The higher injury rate of female vs. male players may support this idea.

Final Thoughts

Weight training may not be appropriate for every soccer player. There are limiting factors such as proper supervision, facility, time, interest level of the players and many other real world situations. But, if the choice is made, be sure to do it right. By teaching your child the basics of good weight training, you are enriching

the soccer experience and providing a positive lifetime fitness experience that can be built on once soccer days are over. **O**

More Information, Please!

If you or your athletes are pre-pubescent, a good reference is *Policy Statement: Strength Training, Weight and Powerlifting and Body Building by Children and Adolescents*. Contact the American Academy of Pediatrics, Publishing Dept., P.O. Box 747, Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0747. Please send a check or money order for \$1.95 with your order and ask for AAP Publications Policy Statement #9196.