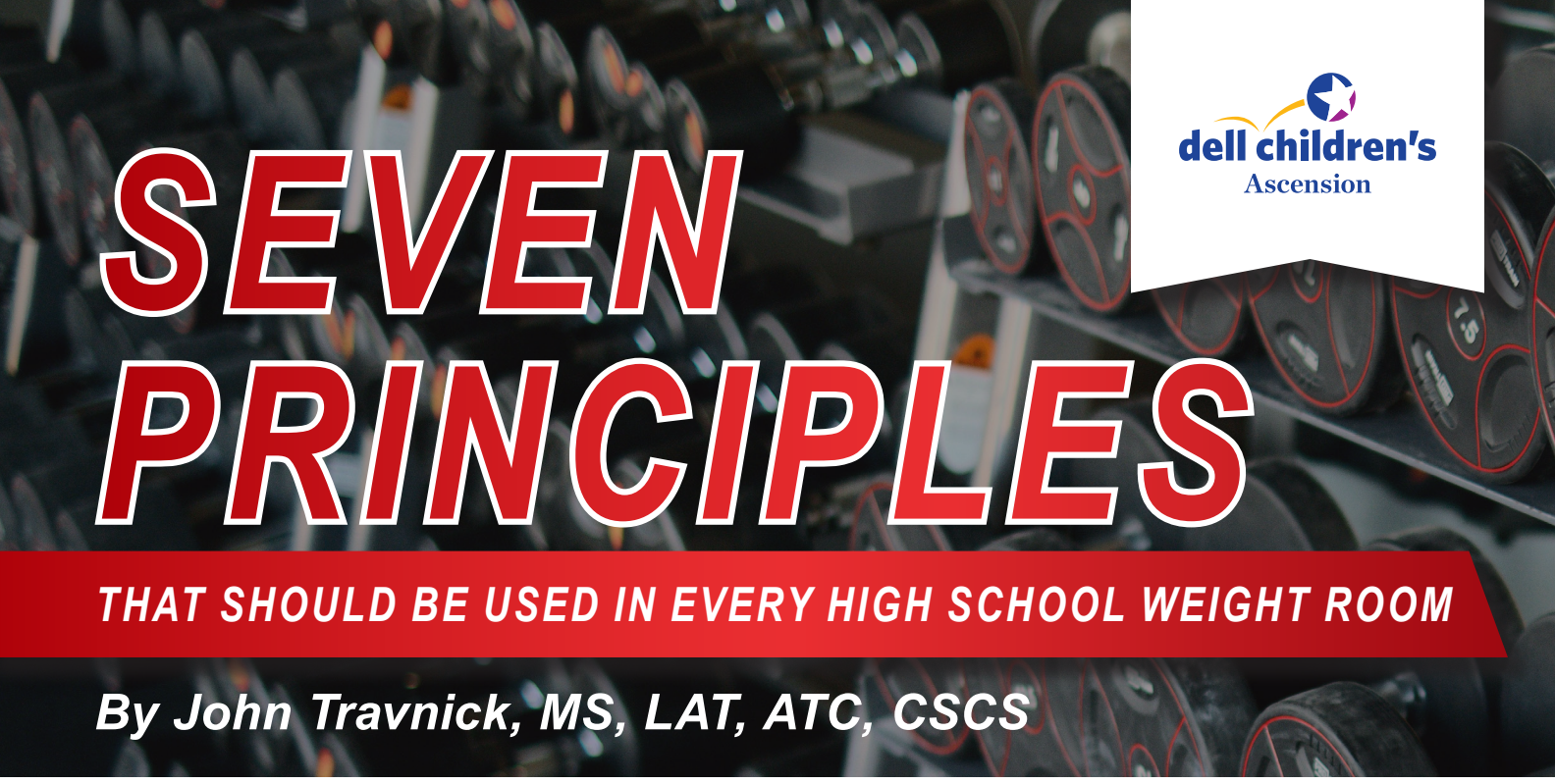

SEVEN PRINCIPLES

THAT SHOULD BE USED IN EVERY HIGH SCHOOL WEIGHT ROOM

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Ascension

I. ALLOW YOUR ATHLETES TO LEARN BODY AWARENESS.

Body awareness cannot be coached. Athletes must be put in a position that allows them to learn body awareness. There are two methods that can accomplish this:

Athletes new to a weight room must have time to observe and practice the movements. Heavy, compound lifts such as the squat, deadlift, or bench press should be performed in a technically sound manner early and often. The more often the athlete sees good technique, the greater the chance that they will engrain good movement patterns. Then they need to practice the movement pattern. Technique will break down under higher loads, so the use of low to moderate loads is essential in developing a good movement pattern that can be repeated. Novice lifters who develop a foundation of good movement patterns will outlast and eventually outlift those who are thrown under a heavy bar too quickly.

Outside the weight room, athletes learning body awareness need exposure to a wide range of movements. We've heard of offensive linemen practicing ballet, or baseball players performing yoga. As ridiculous as it sounds, these types of low-impact activities create connections in the brain that translate to athleticism on the field. Jim Wendler, weightlifting author, high school football strength coach, and 1,000-pound squatter, builds it into his program by incorporating gymnastics movements like cartwheels and summersaults in his team's warm up before every lifting session. Add variety to your athlete's movements and they will develop greater body awareness.

2. TRAIN SIMPLE, TRAIN HARD.

When developing a strength and conditioning program, the KISS principle reigns supreme. An effective weight training session can be completed in an hour with 4-5 exercises, 2-4 times per week, with very basic programming. Spencer Phillips, a collegiate Director of Strength and Conditioning states he bases his programming on "simple movements, executed as perfectly as possible." Complex does not mean more effective, and there are no secret movements that will unlock the true potential of any athlete. Have a main lift that is the focus for the day and end with accessory exercises that hit all main muscle groups by the end of the week. Attack the weight room for no more time than is necessary. Get in, work hard, and get out to start the recovery process.

3. USE THE WEIGHTROOM TO TEACH PREPARATION AND DISCIPLINE.

The weight room is about more than getting stronger. More importantly, it's an outlet to teach preparation and discipline. Be on time. Get enough sleep. Be well fueled. Be dressed properly. Bring a working mindset. These are the foundations for a winning culture that translate directly to the barbell. If the goal is simply to put up more weight and these principles are not set in stone, you'll be looking at a group of over-fatigued, tired

faces by the next practice. If the principles are at the forefront of every day in the weight room, the strength will come. At the high school level, the juice isn't in the special weight training program – it's in the discipline.

4. LEAVE REPS IN THE TANK.

In the last decade, an abundance of research has emerged showing that training to failure leads to decreased strength gains compared to leaving 1 or 2 reps left in the tank on each set. This is because grinding out the final repetition creates a type of fatigue that hinders performance through the remainder of the training session. There is also an increased level of risk when technique has broken down and the athlete tries to get the weight up any way they can. A tactic more often used in high-quality strength programs is to reduce the weight and move it as fast as possible. Specifically, use the amount of weight that an athlete can lift for 8 repetitions, and have them lift that amount for only 2-5 repetitions, as quickly as possible on the ascending phase. This trains power, which is more often what we want out of athletes rather than pure strength.

5. STABILIZE FROM THE CENTER, EXPRESS POWER THROUGH THE PERIPHERY.

The core and the hips are where we generate stability so we can express our power effectively against the environment. Often, I will see a lack of core and hip stability that leads to both ineffective and unsafe lifting. These common faults can be corrected with simple cuing.

"Brace like someone's about to hit you in the stomach."

This action creates stability around the spine. For this movement to be done correctly, the athlete should brace as if they may be hit in their gut from any direction, but they should still maintain the ability to speak normally. This takes practice, but taking time on the front end to practice could prevent weeks of lost time on the injury report.

"Screw your feet into the floor."

During a squat, this engages the larger muscles of the hips that prevent knees from caving inwards. During a deadlift, this directs tension into the legs and relieves some of the stress on the low back. Even while benching, this cue encourages maintaining foot contact with the ground, which enhances stability and efficiency.

"Push the floor away."

This can be used with the squat or deadlift. Athletes will often try to "peel" up from the bottom position, rather than use their legs to drive the weight up. Instead of having them think of moving the weight upwards, have them direct their attention to pushing against the ground. It may seem small, but this is one of the most effective cues that I use.

"Squeeze your pinkies."

On the bench press, tension is often lost in the upper back, and we see shoulders rounding forward. This tiny cue encourages engagement of the upper back muscles and sets the foundation for a strong press.

6. STRENGTH TRAINING IS LIKE A SLOW COOKER, NOT A MICROWAVE.

Gaining true strength happens over years – not weeks. We see an early significant strength gain when athletes start to lift weights for the first time. They may go from a 30lbs dumbbell press to 50lbs over 3 months, but this adaptation is largely neurological – their brain is forming a new connection to their muscles. Once that connection is formed, the effect tapers off and the strength gains they see become truly muscular. This type of strength develops much more slowly. The most effective way for an athlete to gain true muscular strength is through discipline of consistency, good technique, and proper programming. Forcing extremely high intensity within the first year of strength training is time and effort better spent developing good movement patterns and learning how to generate tension in various positions. Be patient and allow the necessary time it takes for the athlete's body to adapt.

7. BE AN EDUCATOR, FOSTER ACCOUNTABILITY, AND KEEP A WATCHFUL EYE.

Supervision of the weight room means more than being physically present. Create accountability by arming your fellow coaches and athletes with the knowledge of these principles. The National Strength and Conditioning Association recommends 1 strength coach for every 15 athletes in the weight room at the High School level, but even when this isn't feasible, ensure these practices are adhered to by fostering an atmosphere of accountability within the team. Connect with every athlete that enters the weight room that day and make sure they know that they aren't just being watched, but that their effort is seen.