



Ulster GAA / CLG Uladh

29th October 2012

Elite Performance Seminar: Fitness Testing for Performance

This initial session of the Ulster GAA elite performance series focused on the area surrounding fitness testing. More specifically, those in attendance were offered an insight into the importance placed on testing in professional sports teams, the potential of testing to help increase performance level and this issues that are apparent within Gaelic games to hinder successful testing.

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Session Aims

- To investigate and demonstrate the importance placed upon fitness testing in professional team sport settings;
- To begin the process of improving communication throughout Ulster with an aim to establishing best practice throughout the province;
- To identify the key issues that limit the impact of fitness testing in Gaelic games

Long Term Objectives

- To establish an agreed assessment battery and protocol acceptable to all inter-county teams operating within Ulster;
- To establish a province wide network of relevant personnel to communicate developments and share best practice;
- To define the best schedule for fitness testing for the range of elite groups within Ulster;
- To collate province wide results to establish and monitor normative ranges for the selected assessment battery.

Background Research

Nicholas Walsh, Greater Western Sydney Giants (AFL);

"The big question we ask ourselves, Why test? And if you test, what do you do with the data? No point in testing for the sake of collecting numbers..."

Jonny Davis, Ulster Rugby (Rugby Union):

"The term fitness testing is not one that I like to use. We assess players progressions to programming through performance monitoring.... whatever the programme it needs to be monitored to assess the effectiveness of it, otherwise how do you know if the player is improving?."

"For example, if your aim is improve a player performance by 10% and that is achieved for that player and each of his team mates, in the case of rugby 15 x 10 , is a 150% improvement in the teams physical performance. The trick is then to convert that into a team technical and tactical performance improvement."

Bill Burgos, New York Knicks (NBA, Basketball);

"I believe fitness testing to be highly important in one's performance as well as the longevity and quality of one's playing career. It provides baseline information in order to create a monitoring system to reduce or prevent over-training/ overreaching along with prescribing the appropriate exercises for training."

Kenny McMillan, Celtic FC (Soccer);

"I don't do as much testing as I used to, I use Repeat Sprint Ability (RSA) exercises during training to help judge the players fitness mostly."

Bill Foran, Miami Heat (NBA, Basketball)

"Fitness evaluations are an important aspect of what we do as strength and conditioning coaches. We do fitness testing for accountability and to monitor progress. Every athlete that we bring in gets tested with a combination of anthropometric measurements as well as performance testing. At the start of each season, we perform a conditioning test to make sure that athletes are in proper shape to play. During the season, we test weight and body fat weekly. ."





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Key Issues as Identified by Ulster GAA

- Poor communication / cooperation between counties regarding best practice;
- Lack of an agreed set of assessments / timescale for assessments / results analysis;
- Facilities / Equipment / Cost;
- Player & Mentor Attitude

Key Issues as Identified by Those in Attendance

- Repeatability;
 - Player Availability;
 - Expertise Available;
 - Target Setting;
 - Cost
- Facilities;
 - Player Attitude;
 - Educating Players;
 - Progress;
 - Game / Position Specific;
 - Uncomplicated / Simple;
 - Results / Feedback

Discussion

It is clear from the background research carried out that 'fitness testing' is considered a vital aspect of any strength and conditioning program undertaken within the professional sports team setting. However, what is clear from the responses received is that the term 'fitness testing' appears to have been replaced by a range of other terms along the theme of 'progression monitoring'. What is even more striking is that those working in professional sports teams now view ongoing assessment as a vital tool to monitor the effectiveness of their coaching practices, and to guide subsequent training regimen. By contrast, within Gaelic games the status quo of fitness testing appears to be as resolute as ever. Testing sessions are carried out to satisfy the 'tick box' method of coaching, but the results are generally overlooked in order to continue along the already outlined training schedule.

Through the *elite performance seminar* it became evident that the impact of fitness testing is limited by a range of aspects as outlined above. The overwhelming feeling was that coaches are generally aware of the benefits of effective assessment, but many felt limited by a lack of confidence with regard to analysing and interpreting results and applying the findings to training. The solution to this problem may lie in the simplification and standardisation of the testing process across the province. While making player assessment straight forward and easy to carry out, this development could also allow for greater ease of results analysis. With coaches using the same tests consistently they should gain in confidence and proficiency with regard to interpreting results, but also it could provide an unprecedented resource in terms of normative data against which coaches could measure their squad.

Another key issue identified related to the general area of resources, in terms of cost, facilities, equipment and available expertise. The aforementioned standardisation and simplification of procedures could prove an ideal solution to many of the issues regarding resources. A set of tests designed to take into account resource limitation can prove to be just as effective as more 'high end' tests. Once again, following the lead of professional sports teams it is evident that many of the tests carried out regularly are simple, easily managed, easily controlled, repeatable and cost effective, despite the greater resources available to them.

It is fair to argue that a greater degree of openness and communication among Ulster's inter-county teams could aid the development of an agreed set of standard tests that could be applied across the province. The key to successful coaching is not in keeping secret the tests carried out, or even in hiding results of the tests; the key is how the results are interpreted and used to improve each individual for the greater good of the team.

A joined up approach to progression monitoring will benefit each county and the province as a whole, in particular with regard to establishing normative data from senior inter-county level down as a point of reference for underage coaches and players.

Recommendations Actions

- Discussions to take place with all inter-county management teams within Ulster to establish willingness to partake in a long term project to improve openness and communication with regard to best practice;
- Further discussions will be held with the personnel responsible for fitness testing within each inter-county management team to identify their current procedures and test battery;
- Using the already established Ulster GAA Fitness Testing protocol as a basis, efforts will be made to refine / amend / supplement this protocol to reflect the best practice evidenced through the initial meetings;
- An official protocol of core tests will be produced and circulated to all inter-county management teams including ideal scheduling of tests in accordance with the overall fixture calendar.

CONTACT DETAILS

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Challenges:

- Gaining the trust of all inter-county management teams;
- Achieving the open and honest input from all appropriate counties;
- Producing a concise protocol that will be acceptable to all parties;

