

<http://www.strengthcoach.com>

## Common Mistakes of a Mixed Martial Artist From a strength and conditioning perspective

Dewey Nielsen, Performance Enhancement Specialist

**There are many mistakes that I see MMA athletes do every day in the gym, especially when it comes to preparing for a fight. This article comes to life from conversations with other coaches (far smarter than I) and frustration with athletes. My goal is to shed some light on common mistakes I see and offer some strength and conditioning education on the sport I love and coach. Although we can argue that there are many other mistakes, I thought these are some of the big ones that should really be addressed.**

### Preparing for the demands of the Boston Marathon instead of an MMA fight

This is the single most common mistake that I see in the sport of mixed martial arts. Not only do you see this in probably every athlete at the amateur level but it is a viral infection among professional MMA fighters. Just turn on an episode of the ultimate fighter and you will see guys taking heavy hits of LSD (Long Slow Distance). In other words, these guys are going jogging along with other types of slow endurance type conditioning. This is the kiss of death for the sport of MMA. First you must realize that MMA is NOT an aerobic sport. I'm sure that's not a shocker. But it is absolutely jaw dropping how many guys are literally conditioning for a marathon type event before a fight! MMA is an anaerobic sport with repetitive bouts of power output, hence why we will use an oxymoron "Power Endurance", for lack of a better term. Georges St. Pierre is a perfect example of an MMA athlete training correctly for the sport. Georges' strength coach, Jon Chaimberg, is the best in the sport and I will guarantee that you won't see Jon giving his athletes doses of LSD.

Second, our body adapts to the demands that we place on it. Plain and simple: Train slow, Perform slow. High intensity interval training with progressions toward negative rest to work ratios (ex: tabatas) should be the staple of an MMA conditioning program.

Here is an example of a common interval progression we use (note that you can use various equipment for this, sprinting, airdyne, slideboard, etc.):

- 2-3 weeks -- work = :30/ rest = 1:30 (start with 5 sets and add one per week)
- 2-3 weeks -- work = :30/ rest = :60
- 2-3 weeks -- work = :30/ rest = :30
- 2 weeks (modified tabatas)-- work = :10 / rest = :20 x 4 minutes (that's one set)
- 2 weeks (modified tabatas)-- work = :15 / rest = :15 x 4 minutes (that's one set)
- 2 weeks (tabatas) -- work = :20 / rest = :10 x 4 minutes (that's one set)

This can be modified to whatever is right for the athlete. Some athletes may spend more time in a specific progression than others, depending on their current conditioning, age, goals, fight notice, etc. It should be of the most importance that the athlete gets to negative work to rest ratios as soon as possible (without overtraining). So again, this is just an example.

For an MMA athlete, classic endurance work like jogging, etc, makes about as much sense as punching yourself in the zipper for an hour. Next time you watch a fight and see the fighter gas out quick, its more than likely he has been having heavy doses of LSD. In fact, see if you can get a look at his strength and condition program online and have a look for yourself.

Some athletes and coaches may make the argument of using classic endurance work for weight management. Again, interval training reigns supreme here. But this brings up a very important component called "Nutrition". Do yourself a favor and pick up a copy of John Berardi's book "The Grapplers Guide to Sports Nutrition".

### Neglecting corrective exercise strategies

MMA guys, along with most combative sports, walk around with Neanderthal like posture. Because we try to have hunch back posture (shoulders elevated and rounded, chin tucked, rounded upper back) when we box and kick box, we should pay extra attention to our posture outside of training. Having performed the Functional Movement Screen on a lot of MMA and BJJ athletes, I have seen many common limiting factors. Many of these being in the thoracic spine and glenohumeral area.

Other commonalities I have seen with these athletes include:

- Poor ankle mobility
- Weak hip stabilizers along with poor hip mobility
- Poor core/rotary stability
- Poor scapular stability
- Poor shoulder mobility (commonly a problem because of the mobility problems in the thoracic spine)

Let's face it. The demands of our sport are vicious at times (and some of us aren't as young as we once were). It is in our body's best interest to stay healthy. There is a reason why your shoulder keeps hurting, why your low back keeps hurting and why that left knee keeps irritating you. Take some time to learn some corrective exercises that are for you and then take the time to apply them. Oh yeah, and stop playing rubber guard! Unless you are already hyper-mobile like Eddie Bravo or BJ Penn, stay away from the rubber guard. Your knees will thank you.

### **Being generally weak in terms of relative body weight strength**

Strength is arguably the most important physical quality a person can have and even more so for an athlete. Strength is too commonly measured only in terms of the bench press. But we need to look at strength in a more balanced approach. So the question should not only be, how much can you bench press? But also how much can you squat? How much can you deadlift? Now, in my opinion these are still traditional views of strength. I think we really need to look at unilateral strength and strength relative to your own body weight. So my question to you is:

How much can you single leg squat?  
 How much can you single leg deadlift?  
 How much can you chin or pullup? Or, can you even do a pullup?  
 How many pushups or inverted rows can you do with a 50 lb weight vest?

These are some of my questions of strength. I have seen many fighters surprisingly weak in these "bodyweight type" exercises (not truly bodyweight because we add external resistance like weight vests). And remember, the days of David versus Goliath fights are almost extinct. Nowadays you will compete against an opponent in your weight class.

### **Not training for POWER**

In general think of "strength" as the amount of force that an individual can produce and think of "power" as the rate at which that force is produced. Of course, strength and power are components of each other and neither one can be eliminated. But you can more specifically train for one than the other.

MMA demands power over and over again. Yet MMA athletes train next to zero for power development. Things that are missing from many programs are:

- Olympic lifts
- Plyos
- Medicine ball work
- Speed/Sled work

These are things that are absolutely essential for the mixed martial artist. Not only is power of an extreme importance but so is power endurance. The MMA athlete must demonstrate repetitive bouts of power

production. Along with power we must train for elasticity. So if we are thinking of power as how much force you can put forth going from point "A" to point "B", then think of elasticity as how quickly you can get from point "A" to point "B". An example would be performing a jump squat trying to get as high as you can. Now for the elasticity component, try that same jump squat six times trying to limit your ground contact time. Really trying to be like a bouncy ball, store the energy and go!! Training for power is the only way to become an explosive athlete.

### **Having unbalanced training programs**

This is actually very common in every strength training program. Many of the programs that I see are far too dominant in upper body pushing and knee dominant in the lower body. The lack of upper body pulling and lower body hip dominant movements are probably the cause of a lot of the micro trauma, muscular imbalances and injuries we see in lifting. You should strive to have equal amounts of sets and reps of the following:

#### **Upper Body**

Horizontal Pushing -- Bench press, pushups, etc.  
 Horizontal Pulling -- Inverted row, DB row, facepulls, etc.  
 Vertical Pushing -- Overhead pressing variations  
 Vertical Pulling -- Chinup and pullup variations (notice I did not say Lat Pulldown)

#### **Lower Body**

Knee Dominant (Bilateral) -- Squat variations  
 Knee Dominant (Unilateral) -- Split squat, 1 leg squat, etc.  
 Hip Dominant (Bilateral) -- Deadlift variations, slideboard leg curls  
 Hip Dominant (Unilateral) -- 1 leg deadlift, slideboard lunge, etc.

Now take a look at your program and see if it is balanced. If it is not a 1:1 ratio of these movements, your program needs some fixing.

### **Not giving tempo the respect it deserves**

There are three movements to a lift:

- Eccentric (decelerating the weight)
- Isometric (stabilizing the weight)
- Concentric (accelerating the weight)

Traditionally we just lift a weight and don't think twice about the tempo. The benefit of including eccentric and isometric work is far too great to neglect. Unlike most sports, the isometric demand in MMA is very high and constantly present. Including isometric work is a must. Do yourself a favor and pick up a copy of Christian Thibaudeau's Theory and Application of Modern Strength and Power Methods. In this book Thibaudeau outlines many eccentric and isometric training techniques that can blast an athlete's strength into overdrive! Until then, the next time you are squatting (use around 80% RM), try a 5 count down and drive up fast. The bad part is you may have some deep muscle soreness in the next 48 hours.

### **Not having a Strength Coach**

No this is not shameless self promotion. A quality strength coach is essential. If you can't afford to have a trainer with you every time you work out, don't sweat it. You don't need to spend a fortune. Find a reputable trainer. Hire him or her. Learn the basics and get follow up sessions as you feel you are ready for a progression. I see too many MMA athletes make the mistake of designing their own program. A good strength coach will show you how to put all of these things together. There are also some good books and videos on the topic of

strength and conditioning for mixed martial arts. Even if you get a good book or video, it would be a wise investment to hire a strength coach to nail down your technique and individualize the program to fit you better.

### **Becoming gimmicky**

So by now you probably think from the relative strength talk that I'm a bodyweight-training-guy. No. I'm a right-tool-for-the-job-guy. It seems like everybody wants to belong to some group or gang. There are kettlebell guys, strongman training guys, bodyweight only guys, HIT guys, stability ball guys, etc. It's like the old saying goes, "If all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail". We need to stop being gang members of training and start looking at training as what is the right tool for the job. Dumbbells and barbells are great for some things, as are kettlebells, as are weight vests along with many other things. Just because you see a top notch fighter do things like conditioning with a snorkel in their mouth, don't jump on the bandwagon just yet. So coaches and athletes, when designing a program, ask yourself "what is the best tool to get the results you want, while keeping your athletes healthy?"

This article was heavily influenced by the coaches I look up to and have the highest respect for. Mike Boyle, Mark Verstegen (along with the Athletes' Performance coaches) Gray Cook, are where the list begins but certainly does not end.

*Dewey Nielsen is a Performance Enhancement Specialist and Certified Personal Trainer from the National Academy of Sports Medicine. He is the founder/owner of Impact Performance Training and the co-founder/owner/coach of Impact Jiu-jitsu. Dewey is primarily located in Newberg, Oregon and can be reached at [www.impact-pt.com](http://www.impact-pt.com) , [www.impactjj.com](http://www.impactjj.com) or [dewey@bjjnewberg.com](mailto:dewey@bjjnewberg.com).*

© 2001 - 2008 StrengthCoach.com  
All Rights Reserved. Reproduction without permission prohibited.