



by Alex Morrow

Was that a good workout? If it was, how do you know? If you were to ask these questions to many of our military leaders, they would tell you that if you walk away sweaty, tired, and sore, you've had a good workout. To paraphrase a strength and conditioning mentor of mine, [Mark Taysom](#), if those are the criteria, I can give you the fastest workout of your life. Meet me in the sauna at 0200 and I'll punch you in the face. You'll be sweaty because you're in a sauna, you'll be tired because it's the middle of the night, and you'll be sore because you just got punched in the face. Mission accomplished, right?

Wrong. The issue here comes down to using measures of performance (MOP) when, in actuality, we should be using measures of effectiveness (MOE).

The DoD defines a measure of performance in [JP 3-0](#) as “[a] criterion used to assess friendly actions that is tied to measuring task accomplishment.” In simpler terms, they are measurable answers to the question “are we doing things right?” MOPs assess whether tasks have been completed to standard. In the world of Army physical training, this usually means filling the time from 0630-0800 (not a second less) and everyone displaying the outward signs of suffering as discussed above. Some additional criteria might include ensuring every Monday is a run day and every Thursday is a ruck day (as an example). Units tend to have no issues executing within these standards, yet we still struggle with fitness levels and injury rates. This is because we are not addressing measures of effectiveness.

Returning to JP 3-0, a measure of effectiveness is defined as “[a] criterion used to assess changes in system behavior, capability or operational environment that is tied to measuring the attainment of an endstate, achievement of an objective, or creation of an effect.” In contrast to MOPs, they answer the question “are we doing the *right things*?” Essentially, MOEs assess whether the tasks being completed are actually getting us closer to our goal. In strength and conditioning the distinction between “exercise” and “training” is that

training is planned around a goal. Ironically, despite our normal fixation on planning training, this is where the Army falls short.

By any reasonable metric, our current approach is not achieving the desired outcomes. In a given year, [over half of soldiers experience a new injury](#), and the vast majority of these are lower body overuse injuries attributable to physical training. [Over half of the force is overweight, and 17% are obese](#). Early statistics showed significant failure rates on the ACFT among both men and women, at a passing standard that shouldn't be excessively demanding for a soldier physically proficient in [warrior tasks and battle drills](#) (WTBDs). The ACFT didn't create this problem, *it revealed a lack of physical readiness that the APFT allowed us to ignore*. Given that much of the Active Duty component of the Army spends 5-8 hours a week on physical training, these results are unacceptable. We're meeting the standard (MOP), but that standard isn't producing fit, ready soldiers (MOE).

Most units use the physical fitness test as the "goal" without really putting much thought into it. For years, we routinely did push up/sit up drills with no thought as to whether that was healthy or made us any better at our jobs. Although the ACFT fulfills this role better than the APFT, it's still a sub-optimal basis for building a physical training program. This is not a criticism of the ACFT (no test will ever be perfect), we simply need to move past training for the test. Physical training, like all Army training, should be mission driven. Leaders need to determine their most physically demanding Mission Essential Task List (METL) tasks and determine how prepared their formations are for the physical demands of these tasks. For those organizations whose missions are less inherently physical, warrior tasks and battle drills can serve in this role.

In this process, it is absolutely vital that we embrace evidence-based strength and conditioning principles. More is not always better. Your body only improves with training when it's receiving appropriate rest and fueling. Cardiovascular training should consist of predominantly low intensity training, as opposed to constant threshold runs. Strength

training should start with an emphasis on fundamental movement patterns, and balance should be a priority despite the urge to focus on test events. These are radical cultural changes for an organization that often measures the quality of a workout by how much suffering is involved, but if readiness is the goal then we need to start somewhere.

This approach should be iterative, with regular reassessments to guide future training plans. Essentially, we need to subject our physical training to the same scrutiny as we do any other training. While we don't know what the next war will look like, we can all but guarantee that fitter soldiers will be better prepared for it. Firefighters have a saying, "don't show up with a \$500 helmet and \$5 fitness." Unfortunately, one could argue that many Army units are guilty of exactly that.

If this all sounds a little complex, that's exactly why other organizations employ strength and conditioning professionals with master's degrees and credentials. The contracts for strength coaches within the Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) program show that the Army is prepared to acknowledge that we might not all be experts on physical training. However, even hiring outside support won't automatically change our deeply ingrained culture; that will always require engaged leadership (willing to check their egos).

Back to the original question, how do we know if a workout is good? The only way to know is if it gets us closer to our goal. First, we must clearly define that goal. Only then can we start measuring progress. We also need to open our eyes to better solutions to our most common problems. For example, we must be willing to acknowledge that daily high intensity workouts may be excessive for some, active recovery days could improve results, and only the fittest individuals are likely to benefit from additional sessions. We currently assign our least fit soldiers the most training volume (through remedial physical training) when the reverse would be the case in any professionally run program. The way it has always been done might meet the standard, but it is not accomplishing the mission.

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