



by Summer Lancette

It's no secret that the Army has a long lasting foundation of standards and regulations. These regulations are in place to ensure Soldiers are physically in shape, but also ensure they are presentable as members of the armed forces. In the United States Army, one method by which these standards are upheld are physical fitness and body composition tests, but at what expense?

Simply stated, the DoD's tape test to measure service members body fat composition no longer reflects what we are demanding of our Soldiers' bodies.

Body composition and physical expectations have changed over the decades (especially with the implementation of the ACFT); Soldiers are more focused on strength training than ever before. With strength comes muscle mass. As it stands right now, muscle mass is not conducive to the current tape test which historically favors the thinner aesthetics you would see in a distance runner's body. Culturally, we are still living with the mindset where being skinny automatically equals being fit and having a muscular build equates to being in the height/weight "danger zone."

When Soldiers were only required to perform push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run to pass the APFT, it was understandable to expect them to conform to a leaner body type. However, our physical fitness test has changed; we have to allow our body composition standards and testing to change as well.

To be clear, I am not advocating the removal of standards for physical appearance. As professionals, we should always be concerned with our appearance. There will, and always should be, a body fat requirement.

However, we need to update the way we measure body fat so that it falls in line with our updated fitness test and what we are demanding of our bodies. The body fat percentage test should only be applied to those Soldiers who are truly struggling with physical fitness, not the Soldiers who choose to stay in the utmost shape using powerlifting, [CrossFit](#), or other forms of exercise that commonly cause service members to be taped.

## **Recommendations**

- A soldier that can score in the 90th percentile, regardless of MOS, in all six of the ACFT events, should be exempt from any height, weight, or tape standards. Their performance and capabilities should supersede their weight.

Using the deadlift standards as an example, in combat, I would much rather have a Soldier who can lift and drag an average 220lb body to safety, than a Soldier who struggles to lift the bare minimum of 140lbs but appears “in-shape.” To drive this point home, if an individual can perform well above average and look presentable in uniform, should it matter what they weigh?

- Address, and improve upon, the relatively outdated and less accurate tape test currently being used. The [Army Tape Test](#) is a method that has been used by the

military for decades. Some [studies](#) date it back to the Navy in 1984. But perhaps that's the problem, the tape test does not always accurately reflect the body fat percentage of an individual. It can have a +/- 14% margin in both directions. For males, the tape test involves measuring the neck and waist but the female tape test requires measurement of the neck, waist, and "most protruding part" of the hips.

I wholeheartedly agree with [Kristen Griest](#) in her recently published article with the *Modern War Institute*. However, to add to her point, if we are going to be held to the same standard as our male counterparts, we should take another look at how it can change and affect women's bodies.

For example, and as a general rule of thumb, for females to achieve the best body fat percentage requires a bigger neck, smaller waist, and smaller hips. With that being said, although females anatomically carry most of their weight in their hips, the same can be said about how we carry most of our strength and muscle.

So why are we measuring a female's strongest asset, and suggesting that the smaller it is the better?

More so now than ever before, we are asking female Soldiers to deadlift heavy weight, sprint-drag-carry 90 lbs, and perform events that require significant amounts of upper and lower body strength. By practicing these heavy lifting exercises, muscles such as the hamstrings and gluteus maximus will inevitably strengthen and grow. Frustratingly, these are the same muscle regions we are mandating to be smaller according to the current tape test. It is clear that the tape test and screening table weights were not built or implemented with the expectations in mind that we have of our Soldiers today.

- If the counter argument suggests that body fat percentage standards can not change, we could at least do our due diligence and offer our Soldiers more options for

measuring these standards. There are multiple ways to test a person's body fat percentage that prove to be more accurate. The military has the technology and money to support these options, so why do we rely on this outdated, inaccurate assessment?

There are [BOD PODS](#) available on most installations located at the Wellness Center. Equally, there are other affordable methods such as [Bioelectrical Impedance](#) or the [Pinch Test](#). Individuals should have the option on which method they choose to measure their body fat. Physically fit soldiers who struggle with or fail the tape test can usually pass another body fat test with ease. If National Guard Units or small posts don't have access to methods such as the BOD POD, they should be provided transportation to the nearest post that has one, and all units should be able to afford a Pinch Test or Bioelectrical Impedance test.

The current tape test has been exhaustively [studied](#) and is notoriously known for negatively labeling and categorizing muscular and athletic builds as being overweight. As such, the Army is flagging and losing extremely capable and strong Soldiers because of an outdated body fat test that inaccurately reflects their body fat percentage. The current tape test discourages Soldiers from lifting and building muscle in fear of being taped and flagged. As we begin to shift our focus and change our physical demands towards achieving ACFT standards, it is time to also look at changing and updating the way we measure body fat to promote and parallel what we are asking our Soldiers' bodies to perform.

Ultimately, we need to ask ourselves, do we want Soldiers who *look* fit, or Soldiers who *are* fit?

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