No Pain, No Gain?

You want your athletes to dig down and get the most out of their workouts. So what is the fine line between pushing them hard and pushing them too hard?

By Vern Gambetta


Sometime in the 1500s, an English poet named Robert Herrick used the phrase "no pain, no gain" in his writings. He was conveying the idea that if you don't work really hard at something, you won't benefit from it. A good, noble phrase from a well-respected poet of his day.

Ben Franklin and, a little closer to home, Adlai Stevenson, also used the maxim with success. They, too, were promoting the idea of hard work.

More recently, "no pain, no gain" has been linked with athletics. Today's coaches motivate their athletes with the phrase and it has become the mantra of the hard-working team.

The problem is that many coaches and athletes take the phrase too literally. For many athletes today, experiencing pain has been linked with working out. They approach the weight stack with the assumption that a little hurt is what will get them to the next level.

In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. For sure, proper training in the weightroom or on the field demands that athletes be pushed to their limits. And there is no doubt that a good sport or strength coach can get athletes to accomplish things beyond what they ever thought possible. But achieving this does not mean you have to inflict pain. In fact, pain is a red flag that something is wrong with the workout.

Why Not Push It? The main reason not to push your athletes to their threshold of pain is that it won't help them achieve their strength and conditioning goals. To make gains in the weightroom, it's critical to follow a progression. An athlete should not move to a higher weight until he or she has mastered the weight he or she is at. If an athlete has pain, his or her body is struggling to adapt and needs rest. If you push more weight on a
body in pain, it will lead to more pain and no adaptation. It may even eventually lead to injury.

It is important to understand the various stimuli that cause an adaptive response to strength training and how they correspond to your specific goals. If the goal is hypertrophy, then volume is the stimulus. If the goal is more neural, then intensity is the primary stimulus. To make gains, it is necessary to achieve a certain stimulus threshold. This threshold is dependent on the individual and the objective of the training.

In addition, some workouts should be very difficult and others should almost seem easy. This ebb and flow of challenge intensity is essential for proper adaptation.

The question I always ask coaches when I am teaching at a clinic is: Are you making your athletes better, or are you making them tired? If you are just making them tired, I suggest you reconsider your approach. You need to continually keep the big picture in mind: achieving the training objective entails more than just pushing to pain at every workout.

Another reason not to push your athletes to their limit is that it can simply wear them out at a time when you don't want them worn out. It is important to remember that the weightroom is only one facet of the athlete's total preparation. If you expect them to peak in the weightroom, what will they have left for practice? And, more importantly, what will they have left for gameday?

I believe the "no pain, no gain" approach is a direct outgrowth of the fact that historically, strength and conditioning was a field driven by football. Often, the football strength and conditioning coach set the tempo for all the sport programs because he was also the head strength coach. The mentality that pervaded football served to reinforce the "no pain, no gain" approach. The goal was to make the players tough, so without pain there was no gain!

I don't know about you, but I want my players tough on gameday. That should be the goal of training. A thoroughly conditioned athlete who is supremely confident in his or her preparation will be mentally and physically tough. But an athlete can only go to the well so many times before it will begin to run dry. Push a "no pain, no gain" message in the weightroom, and you risk depleting that well and leaving the athlete with nothing for competition.

Know The Line The obvious question, then, is: What is the line between
working hard and not overdoing it during weightroom workouts? I tell my athletes that they are finely tuned race cars. To stay finely tuned, they must work with high energy and push themselves. But just like race cars, they cannot be at red line all the time or there will be a breakdown.

The test of work done in the weightroom is soreness. There is good soreness and bad soreness. Good soreness is soreness in the muscles involved in a particular movement, such as the glutes in squatting. If the glutes are sore after a heavy squatting session, that is good.

However, if there is soreness in the joints, that is not good. For example, if the knees are sore after squatting, that is a bad sign. It often means the training is being performed incorrectly.

In addition, soreness that persists is a red flag. The inability to recover for the next workout often indicates that the athlete is at red line all the time, or the workload was excessive. Soreness should dissipate after a good thorough warm-up the next day.

An unexpected performance plateau is another sign that an athlete is doing too much. During a time when performance should be rising, a plateau or decline indicates that there is a problem. The athlete may very well be pushing too hard.

**Holding Them Back**  Even if your workouts have the proper progression and you're asking your athletes about any soreness they are experiencing, you need to be on the lookout for those who take the "no pain, no gain" mantra literally. There will always be athletes who want to go past their limits every day, and they need to be reined in.

As coaches we are teachers, and it is our job to teach our athletes how to train. I certainly do not want to discourage an athlete from working hard in the weightroom—or anywhere for that matter—but I feel I must teach them that training is more than feeling the burn. It's sometimes hard for a young athlete to think about the big picture, so I try to make it very clear where they are going and outline the steps they must take to get there.

The first thing I explain is that training is cumulative. Progress is not made through one heavy max session in the weightroom, but through the cumulative effect of many sessions over a period of weeks and months. I also talk about how workouts in the weightroom correlate to their performance. I tell them why and how a certain lift will help them on the field, and why overdoing it will hurt their performance. If they are very driven on a daily basis, I ask them to put that effort into performing their
lifts with concentration and intensity—making their technique perfect and exploding at the perfect moment.

Another part of the solution is giving athletes strength and conditioning goals—the more individualized, the better. This provides direction and purpose to the training. It helps the athlete see each workout not as a one-time heroic effort, but as part of the big picture.

It is also important to provide a lot of feedback, especially for the very driven athlete who has formerly worked with a "no pain, no gain" coach. For this athlete, the hurt that comes from training may be seen as a form of feedback. If it hurts, that's good, they think, and it gives them the incentive to keep going. This is not an easy athlete to work with, because in their eyes you are taking away the opportunity to get better. The solution is to provide this person with a lot of feedback and motivate them in different ways. Also, they must not be allowed any leeway in their workouts.

Testing is a great way to provide feedback to all your athletes, and show them they are achieving gain without pain. The tests should be carefully chosen to accurately reflect what is going on in training at the present time. Young, developing athletes, especially, want to see tangible progress. Testing reinforces the positive effects of proper training.

Some day-to-day solutions include providing close supervision and structuring the training away from big lifts. I have seen too many athletes get caught up in the moment and try lifts they had no business attempting. It should be clear what the protocol is every day, and coaches should circulate around the weightroom to ensure that athletes aren't trying to do more than what is prescribed.

I know some strength coaches who make a conscious effort to downplay any competition over who can lift the most weight, and that tends to work well. One way they have gotten away from this is by not emphasizing one-rep maximums. Instead, they use three-rep maximums and project a one-rep max off of that. This can help.

**Not A Punishment**  Part of the problem with the "no pain, no gain" mentality is that it is ingrained in many sports. Coaches and athletes think: More is better and the more weight someone lifts the better, regardless of the technique (or lack thereof).

In addition, some coaches use workouts as a type of punishment. If you aren't listening to the coach, you have to do 100 pushups. But training is not punishment, and it should not be thought of as such. It is an
opportunity to get better.

If we can shift our thinking in these two areas—more is not always better and training has a specific purpose—then the "no pain, no gain" school of thought will have a lot less credibility. And our athletes will, ultimately, make the most gains.

Sidebar: Legally Speaking  Here's one more good reason not to push your athletes to the point of pain during their workouts: It can result in injury. And injuries that may have been preventable can lead to lawsuits.

Last year, Scott Koffman, a former baseball player at Brigham Young University, filed a $9.2 million lawsuit in U.S. District Court against the school and one of its strength and conditioning coaches, claiming a weight-training injury ended his hopes of pitching professionally. The suit said the pitcher suffered three herniated disks in September 2001 after being forced by the coach to lift too much weight.

While performing an elevated leg press, Koffman says that he tried removing some weight from the press and was stopped by an assistant strength and conditioning coach who called him a vulgar name, added another 100 pounds, and ordered him to lift. The lawsuit indicated that Koffman suffered the injury on the first repetition he attempted.

Although Koffman participated in 16 games during the season following the injury, he says the pain eventually became too severe to continue his career. He claims it also affected his ability to study, causing his grades to drop. Once drafted by the Baltimore Orioles, Koffman says he is no longer able to be even moderately active and that he will be affected physically and financially for the rest of his life.

In February, BYU and Koffman settled out of court, though terms have not been disclosed. School officials claim they provided Koffman with adequate medical care, although they have not commented on the strength coach's actions. —R.J. Anderson