

## **Athletes, Non-Athletes, Condition and Conditioning, Part I**

By

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I went back and forth on this article trying to decide if I should make it one long article or split it into two smaller articles. While it is clearly long enough to be two articles, I was afraid to break the continuity, since the first part revolves somewhat around my experiences with conditioning, condition and jujitsu, and the second part revolves around applying this information to racing pigeons. These two topics have a hard time standing alone, so I am going to have to ask the reader to be patient and possibly reread the first article once the second article is published.

When most of us think of athletes, we think of young, healthy, and determined individuals. In reality, athletics is about conditioning, survival, and learning to deal with constant nagging injuries. I am not an athlete, but I am an intense competitor, and I have worked myself into condition on a number of occasions. To do so, I needed a motivating factor, a competitive desire, athletic ability, health, and luck. My personal struggle was with the last three items on this list.

Before we begin, it became very clear during editing that I needed to define the use of some words. In this article the term “in shape” is meant to define some that is fit and trim. A person that is in condition is ready to compete at any level. In pigeons we might refer to this as “form.” Therefore, a person that is in condition is at a higher physical and mental level than someone that is in shape. There are several levels of condition depending on the distinctions that you want to draw. For the sake of this article, I want to leave it at good condition and peak condition; otherwise, you are in shape. The difference between condition and conditioning is that conditioning is something that you do to get into condition.

For some reason my editor believes that you, the reader, should know what I am talking about. I can’t see it myself, but she is usually right.

### **The Athlete vs. the Non-Athlete**

From a physical standpoint let’s divide the world’s population into two groups: athletic and non-athletic. As a whole, true athletes make up a very small percentage of the population. Athletic ability is not made, it is inherited. What separates athletes from everyone else is an innate inner strength that is not found in the non-athlete. (If this sounds familiar, it is because I have been saying this about pigeons for weeks.) What defines all athletes is the ability to perform at a top physical and mental level for a given sport or activity. The reference to a “mental level” is not to suggest that athletes are any smarter, but their physical abilities and level of condition does help them to better focus on the task ahead even when they are tired, and, as I am sure your are aware, most

competitive events are really about performing under fatigue during the last seconds of a given competition.



Instructor rests in preparation for cage fight

Most sports require another definition for athleticism -- the ability to perform at a top level for an extended period of time, which is measured in years, not days or weeks. It isn't possible to gain the experience to become a skilled athlete without staying power. This is especially true in contact sports that require physical exertion and take a physical toll on the body, especially over time. When you are talking about sports like football, wrestling, boxing, track, bicycle racing, and basketball, the ability to avoid sickness and remain uninjured becomes extremely important. Kurt Warner, the former quarterback for the St. Louis Rams, is a great example of flash stardom. He (or his team) won the Super Bowl, and then he suffered injury after injury. Now everyone questions his ability (including himself). What you could do if only you weren't hurt!

In a win-or-lose situation on the last play of the Super Bowl, Joe Montana, the quarterback for the San Francisco 49er's, supposedly came back to the huddle and asked if anyone had seen the blond lady in the third row. This type of looseness is the mark of the true athlete. He knows his job and the task ahead, yet he is so confident in his abilities that even in a pressure situation he is able to take the pressure off the rest of the team, making everyone around him perform better.

There is something of a cycle built around winning. Joe was a very gifted athlete right from the start, but he also followed his athleticism with staying power. Staying power requires great health and a lot of luck. With staying power comes experience and with experience comes confidence. In the later years when athleticism starts to wane, experience and confidence help to offset the drop in athletic ability. This is called job efficiency.

Non-athletes can be coordinated, somewhat athletic, and even reasonably strong, but this is not enough for them to be considered a true athlete. They will lack at least one of the essentials -- speed, quickness, strength, and the health needed to compete at a true athletic level. Training at any serious level requires good health on a consistent basis. Without good health, it is very hard to gain experience and confidence.

I understand the distinction between the athlete and the non-athlete better than most, because I have been on the top end of the non-athlete scale my entire life. What this means is that I am well coordinated, determined, and reasonably strong. However, this just isn't enough to be a true athlete. Flatly, my biggest problem has been health. By the average standard, I am as healthy as a horse. I have missed five days of work in the last 12 years and most of those were for appointments. However, while competing, I have been constantly injured.

Through years of competing as a non-athlete, I have had various injuries, several of them still requiring regular visits to the massage therapist. One day while I was laying there on the massage table getting the crap beat out of me, I remembered reading an interview with Piet De Weerd. The interviewer asked Piet some question about muscle. His response was that he (the interviewer) would do better to ask a massage therapist questions about musculature.

Well, here I was in a perfect position to ask. Talking through the little hole in the massage table, I started off by asking if she had many clients that were athletes. She responded, "Yes." Then I asked if there was a difference in their muscles from those of the average person. Without hesitation, she answered, "Flexibility." She knew that I had competed in jujitsu, so she said, "Your muscle is tense, bunched, and inflexible. That is why you are always getting hurt. A true athlete has long, flat smooth muscle. In many areas that your muscle is stuck to the bone, athletes have muscle that rolls easily away from the bone."

I thought about this for a while and then I asked, "If you were to massage 50 people, could you tell me which ones were likely to be athletes?" She responded, "To a great degree, I could tell you physically which ones were capable, and that is an important first step. For the most part, people who try to be athletes, when they are not, end up exactly like you by the time they are forty. I see five or six of you a week. You are here because you need a massage to help 'fix' your muscle; the athlete is here because he would like a massage to loosen his muscle. There is a big difference!" Based on her honesty to this point, I saw no reason to ask her if she thought I was good looking. I can hear it now, "You can't handle the truth."

### **Conditioning and Jujitsu**

Let's start out by once again rehashing my jujitsu days. I don't like to lose any more than the next guy, and I will probably go to greater lengths than most to win. I don't know if you have heard the quote, "Win if you can, lose if you must, but always cheat." That is

jujitsu. If my competitor should happen to be crushing my head against his chest in an effort to smother me, and my chin should happen to somehow dig in between the upper ribs of his chest forcing him to let go, well then, while not everyone might consider this to be pure jujitsu, he did let go and to me that is what was important at the time.

While attending jujitsu, I was faced with surviving every minute of a two-hour class at least three times a week. For those of you that don't know that much about jujitsu, there are two types. The first type is standing jujitsu. This is sort of a cross between karate and judo. The second type is basically a more lethal form of wrestling. My style happens to be the second type, called Brazilian jujitsu. In class, participants usually wear very heavy uniforms called gi's, which tend to get very hot, and during a two-hour class, it is not uncommon to lose ten pounds of water weight from your body.

Jujitsu is very much like pigeon racing because jujitsu is all about conditioning, conserving energy, and oxygen utilization. The point of jujitsu is to wear your opponent out while conserving your own energy for the attack. Every move has to be considered for its success versus the exertion necessary to obtain the success. You can lift another 200-pound man if you have to, but it is going to cost you a tremendous amount of energy. Exertion and heat forces your heart rate to climb dramatically. When this occurs, you can't displace body heat fast enough. I happen to be very fortunate in that I can withstand heat better than most, tolerate a much higher heart rate than most, and, for some reason, go much longer without water than most (all of which may, in the long run, be bad for my body).

As there are a number of matches occurring at any given point in time, body heat becomes a very big factor for the entire room. Through all of this, you are being choked, squeezed, or smothered. When you think of wrestling, you probably think of one guy tossing another guy around; I think of heat.



Student looking for arm-bar is about to get choked.

One time, we did exercises for two hours before a test. The idea was to tire everyone out so that they wouldn't use strength. After the exercises, we each wrestled eight matches. My first match lasted 45 minutes, and all eight matches took two solid hours. My heart rate went above 200 several times during that period. By the time I got home I was running a fever of 103, and I couldn't get out of bed for three days. I was 39 at the time. As a side note, the guy that I wrestled was 25 years old. The following Saturday, I heard him telling another competitor, "Yeah, I wrestled Bill for 45 minutes. What a load. I was really tired that afternoon!" That was the first time I really felt old.

Prolonged exertion leads to suffering. During class, the better your condition, the longer it takes for the suffering to begin. Conditioning is partly achieved during class (since you are stretched to the maximum of your physical and cardiovascular capability) and partly out of class (through regular workouts). I always worked very hard during my out-of-class workouts. In a way, these workouts were a form of suffering, but it was what I called "controlled suffering," meaning that I had control. I benched 315 pounds and could do 165 pushups and 1200 sit-ups in 20 minutes without stopping. Every week I did at least 10,000 sit-ups and 2,500 pushups. I had a standing heart rate of 55, and I could go prolonged periods with my heart rate above 190 BPM.

Most martial artists say, "Mind over body." My teacher use to say, "Except in Bill's case -- then it is body over mind." I don't think anyone would argue that I gave my 110%, but at that age, I was fighting a constant battle with fatigue and injuries.

If you are in condition, heat can be your friend, and if you are not in condition, can't stand heat, or are new to the game, heat is your worst enemy. If you use too much energy in the early matches and get overheated, then you will suffer throughout the whole class. Athleticism, condition, health, and skill are the keys to success.

So why would anyone in their right mind do all of this? Well, I can tell you that it wasn't always to win; sometimes it was just to survive. In jujitsu, winning is about creating opportunities and then taking the risk at the right time to attempt to win. Failure while taking the risk to win will deplete a significant amount of energy and usually leave you in a bad position and under attack, which will in turn cost you more energy. On average one attack uses up more energy than five minutes of defense.

The more athletic, conditioned, and skilled you are, the more you are willing to attack, because you can recover easier from failed attacks that leave you in a bad position. Against a more skilled opponent that is in shape, endurance and not making mistakes are your only hope. This generally works pretty well unless of course you are wrestling a skilled athlete that is also in condition, in which case, "Relax my friend, it will be over soon." All you can really do is attempt to survive as long as possible. Unfortunately, it is these matches that require you to use strength to combat skill and athletic ability. However, when you are forced to start pushing against your opponent, it means that you are about to lose by arm-bar. In jujitsu, the skilled athlete feels you pushing and immediately starts looking for ways to use it against you. You look for the attack that he lets you see, but you get beat by the one he is setting you up for. He is conditioned, athletic, and skilled, and he is in total control of the situation.



Instructor has Nick in an arm-bar

### **Condition**

There are several levels of condition, including being in general shape, cardiovascular condition, and muscle condition. There is also peak condition, which includes extremely high levels of mental, cardiovascular, and muscle condition.

For the most part, jujitsu is about being in good condition, not peak condition. Good condition would allow you to wrestle hard three times a week. Peak condition is

something that takes careful long-term preparation, and it can generally only be maintained for a couple of weeks. If you were trying to win a tournament, then you might want to attempt to attain peak condition. Boxers attempt to achieve peak condition on a specific date. If an opponent cancels, he replaces his opponent rather than rescheduling. When coming down off peak condition, the athlete will require significant rest. If he fails to get this rest, he will likely suffer sickness, depression, or injury.

Peak condition is an extremely fine line between not quite enough work and too much work. When attempting to obtain it, it is critical that you are always on the build, not the decline. If you exceed peak condition on the decline, fatigue will set in and you will either get sick, depressed, or injured. You never want to compete in any sport on the decline from peak condition.

This is where health plays a very important role in the success of conditioning. Conditioning is an ongoing process which relies on extensive workouts that stress the body. Being in shape probably is of some benefit to good health; however, good condition is a whole level up from being in shape. To get into condition, there are going to be many times where the body is extremely tired.

Oftentimes when I was working out with the weights, I would still be extremely tired from wrestling the night before. I would be so tired that soon I would just find myself sitting on the end of the bench press bench looking off into space. My muscles felt tired, I was mentally drained, and I still had five more sets of my pyramid to go. By this point you are at such a high level of training that you simply can't miss days.

If you listen to your body, it will tell you that it is tired before every workout, and you will never gain condition. However, as you continue to build toward condition, you will find that there are days when you just don't have it. Often before a workout, you will think that you don't have it that day, but after getting warmed up, you will often find that this is one of your best workouts. The only way to find out for sure what type of workout you are going to have is to "Just Do It." However, if it still isn't there after about ten minutes, pull the plug. When your body tells you that you are not ready, and it happens to be right, injury or sickness is right around the corner. Because you can't trust your body to tell you the truth, fatigue can be something of a surprise when the day starts out feeling like any other day.

When gaining condition, you don't have to get very sick for it to really cause a problem. A simple head cold is enough to kill a workout. Just try to do pyramids with the weights when you have a head cold. So now, because of sickness, you are off for five, seven, or ten days. Guess what? You get to start over. Sickness in jujitsu is an especially big problem, since the guys you are wrestling are doing the same thing, and since you are always in close physical contact, if they are sick, you are sick and vice versa. Once you get better, you first have to get back into the workout routine, followed by the constant pounding of jujitsu.

In jujitsu, someone is always attempting to rip off one of your limbs. In fact, I have had four shoulder, one elbow, and two knee dislocations to prove it. At the end of the average night, I usually have a dozen new bruises, especially on my biceps. Through this process, muscles get slightly torn, out of place, or stiff. You never really know what condition your muscles are in until the next workout. If a muscle gets a slight tear, it has to be rested, and, while that doesn't stop your workout, it will limit some exercises.



Nick getting another student in an arm-bar

Jujitsu and flexibility go hand in hand. As I have mentioned, I am not a true athlete and flexibility is one of the big reasons why. Lifting weights doesn't help flexibility because it causes your muscles to bunch. Every day at lunch, I did my pushups and sit-ups in approximately 20 minutes, and then stretched for 40 minutes. While I had pretty good flexibility for a non-athlete, I wasn't in the same league with the true athlete.

Let me point out a difference here. Some people have flat smooth muscle, but no muscle volume. When they stretch, they have great flexibility, but this is in part because they are not fighting against any muscle volume. Without muscle volume, it isn't possible to

measure their flexibility against most athletes. The truth comes out when comparing the stretching flexibility between the athlete and the non-athlete when both have some muscle volume. I have mentioned wrestling the two-time NCAA champion wrestler. He was a true athlete in every sense of the word. I had good muscle volume; he had great muscle volume; and he could do stretches at the age of 45 that I couldn't have done when I was 20. I have outstanding balance; his was on some other level. Until I met up with him, I have always been able to "compete" with anyone that I have wrestled simply on balance. That isn't to say that I always won, but balance would make them take the long road to beat me. Through his superior balance, he used my own balance against me. It is a very tough day when you get beat by your own strength. In fact, it was mentally debilitating.

Once you are down the conditioning trail, each workout become so intense that it takes very little time off to disrupt your conditioning program. If I am doing 165 pushups and weight lifting, and I have to take even a week off, it may take me two weeks to catch up. If I miss jujitsu for a week, it will also take me two weeks to catch up, but if I miss my workouts and jujitsu, both are tiring enough to take a month to fully catch up.

Injuries and sickness require rest, and a rest of longer than three days means stepping backwards in the conditioning cycle. For me, by the age of 39, sickness and injuries started to mount up faster than I could maintain my conditioning program, and I had to back way off. When I did, I lost physical strength, which prompted more injuries. Unlike running and bicycling, you can't wrestle slower, so age really starts to become a very big factor.

Most people think that there is a formula to obtaining peak condition, and to some degree there is. The USA Olympic team has a number of the best athletes in the world. These are true athletes, and, having that in common, there is more of a consistent formula to bringing them into condition.

Speaking of the USA Olympic team and great athletes, let me tell you a true story. I went to school with a girl named Melanie Hofman. When we were in the sixth grade, she ran the 660-yard dash in 1 minute and 49 seconds, which happened to be faster than any boy by 5 seconds. (I happen to remember this because I was the fastest boy.) She also cleared 8 feet in the broad jump (jumping like a kangaroo), and she did pull-ups until they told her to get down. I don't think there was anything that she couldn't beat the boys at, except that one of the boys threw a softball 230 feet, and she only managed something like 150 feet.

I kind of lost track of her after grade school, but she happened to show up at the class reunion about eight years ago. I hadn't seen her in probably 25 years, but knew her the second I saw her. She wasn't married, but she brought along a guy that I think she planned to marry. You know me and attempts at humor, so it won't surprise you that I had to start recounting all her grade school feats to her boyfriend. He took them all in without saying much, and when I was finished, he said, "And she was on the Olympic rowing team." This probably explains why I lost track of her because it sure doesn't

sound like anyone from my circle of friends. As you can see, athletes are not made, they are born.

Individually, each of us is at a different athletic level. Collectively, as a species, we make up many different levels of athleticism. Individuals within a specific level have comparable abilities; therefore, they can handle about the same level of physical conditioning. When you attempt to apply a single formula across all levels, you are asking for trouble.

For me as a non-athlete, “being in condition” equated to being a skilled athlete in “decent shape.” However, should I wrestle a skilled athlete that was “in condition,” then I would be at a disadvantage. In fact, as a skilled athlete, he would be capable of higher levels of conditioning and therefore be in better condition and have a further edge with his athleticism. Day in and day out, you just can’t beat the athlete at his game.

Whenever I would wrestle a new competitor, I would generally run a series of tests unless that person was substantially bigger or held a higher belt than me. I would always test strength. If they were stronger than me, I would test balance and then skill. If they were more skilled, then I would resort to balance and condition and attempt to wear them out.

Looking back over this article, there is so much to learn or think about. I hope you will read it more than once and give it serious consideration. There are many hidden clues to subjects that are just not openly discussed. If you can apply the logic and then make the transition to pigeons, you can really learn something here.

Remember this is a two-part article! [Editor’s note: it ended up four articles.]

Until Next Time!

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