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Men's basketball gets bigger, stronger, faster

Strength and Conditioning Coach Michael Bradley Q&A:

"There are several aspects to the strength and conditioning program. There is the obvious component, the strength training component. There is the conditioning component. There is flexibility. There is rest and recovery. There is a bit of a nutrition component. There is skill development. All of these things need to be kept in perspective with a degree of balance, so something doesn't get out of whack with something else. The emphasis for us needs to be spread pretty equally across the board." "The purpose of the strength training component is obviously to get guys stronger and more powerful, let them reach their potential to carry muscle. The other big part of the strength routine is to get them stronger so they can prevent injuries. So they can practice and compete at the highest level. We do it so they can reduce injuries, reduce the severity of injuries, and reduce the incidents. Also, it helps with the recovery if they are unfortunate enough to get dinged. That is the purpose of strength training."

"The purpose of conditioning is to get ready to be able to go through practice. If you would consider March a level 10 conditioning level, in other words everybody has been really going after it for months, then your conditioning program by design can get you to about level 7 or 8, if you consider March level 10, the best you can be in for game shape. You are going to have to practice yourself into level 8 or 9 and even then you are still going to have to play games to get to level 10. It is so specific, that you can see a difference in the conditioning level between an exhibition game, a preseason, and a regular season game and then a conference game. The intensity level increases and the only way you can replicate it is to go through it. So you can't replicate game conditioning no matter what you do in your conditioning program. What you can do is get yourself in a position that when that stress is applied to you, you can adapt faster to it. Instead of it taking you four or five weeks to adapt to that stress, it now takes you four or five days. That is what we try to get out of our conditioning program."

"Right now the best conditioning that they are doing is practice. Because it is up-tempo, to use that phrase, it is pace-driven by the coaches, very fast, very demanding, very rigorous, maybe even grueling, but that is the best thing they can be doing conditioning-wise in order to start preparing now for being in games. All the running that we have done, all the conditioning, all the biking, all of that which we have done since last season ended has allowed us to start practice fast but it does not put us in Final Four shape, it puts us in a position to just be able to get going in practice at full speed."

"Because we train year-round, our kids never really come off to much of a peak condition. Because we go year-round we are never at a point where we are in a panic mode and wondering how we are going to get these kids ready to go. Our strength training does continue year-round and that has to be sustained because there is no stress that occurs out on the court that is the same, or anywhere near the same, as what you can get in the weight room. The weight room is a completely different stress. It is a high-tension, high-intensity stress. We get a tremendous conditioning effect from our work on the court, but you can't match that sort of strength training out on the court. They are two separate things in that sense."

Tell me a bit about the metabolic program?

"Our metabolic conditioning program can only be understood if you first understand how we do our normal weight lifting. Our normal strength training is done in a high intensity fashion, it is done all-out, meaning we literally take everything to the point where we can't do another repetition. We train to the point where we can't move the bar or the weight stack another inch. That is standard for us. So when you watch our kids train everything is all-out, they are not just doing sets and stopping at random points or stopping at a number. We don't lift to a number, we lift to an intensity level. The other thing that needs to be understood in our regular training is that it is also a forced pace. We go from exercise to exercise with very little rest. I am either pre-setting weights, or setting seats, or adjusting equipment so that when we are getting off one thing we are moving onto the next. We don't have a lot of downtime. That is our normal day of training or lifting." "Metabolic conditioning does one other thing, that is we increase the conditioning component of the lifting by putting sprints in between the lifts. So you would do perhaps a chest press followed by a sprint, a pull down followed by a sprint, a shoulder press followed by a sprint, we follow that for 10 movements and 10 sprints. The concept being that you are going to be driving your conditioning to a high-level while at the same time you are going to demand that your body produce an all-out effort muscular-wise. So the concept of metabolic conditioning needs to be understood within the concept of how hard we are lifting to begin with. If we were doing submaximal lifting, then the spring component won't make any sense. It is the two combined, the sprint component with the maximal lifting, and what is happening there is that if you take someone who is untrained, you can literally put them in a position where you can put them for a lack of a better word, into metabolic shock. In other words, their heart rate is not in a dangerous place, they are perhaps going through an exercise where that muscle is fresh, but you might be four or five movements in and they just can't go on anymore. Something else is happening there and we suspect you are under a metabolic stress - you can't clear the metabolites of that high intensity training. So it is very difficult to be able to replicate this training in any other way, we really like it, we think it is super productive. It is safe but it is very, very intense. It is very time efficient. It is the one thing where if you take pretty well conditioned guys and throw it in, you will see and feel another kick-up in their conditioning level, almost instantaneously."

How do the players respond to it?

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"They take to it in a couple of different ways. A little bit of it has to do with a player's background. If a player has a background of a lot of hardwork, then the way they take it is as another work challenge. Most athletes, because at this level most athletes are so talented that they play on talent for the most part when they are young, because they are genetically superior, infinitely superior to anybody around them - anybody in their neighborhood, town, or city - players that play at this level, they are so far beyond norm so learning to work at this level to a vast majority is a new thing."

"You typically go through three mental phases when it comes to training hard."

"The first phase is that there is a fear almost, a fear of the unknown, you are scared of training or scared about being sick or nauseated from the training or scared of the discomfort, that is phase one for most people. Most people start there."

"The vast majority of our players quickly move onto phase two which is where training becomes a duty in terms that it is something that is extremely intense, extremely hard, but it is nothing that you panic about. It is a quote around here, that this is just what we do in this house, this is how this house operates. It is not something to panic about or that you fret about all day or think about for hours at a time. You psych up a little bit before you come in and train and then you come in and hit it hard. So the vast majority of athletes stay at that level two, phase two, of a mental approach to training. It is a duty, an approach to preparing for what they are really here for, and that is basketball." "The third level of mental approach for people that train is something that we term or call the training mentality. That is a little different and there are very few people that really have a training mentality. It is not an indictment against anybody, it is just that they don't. There are just few people that do. Somebody with a training mentality brings a whole different aspect to the game because they are looking at everything as a test and everything to them is a challenge. It is almost as though everything to them is a test of their manhood. But at the same time it goes beyond that, they enjoy the battle. While they may not enjoy being uncomfortable, they enjoy being in the competitive battle training at a really high-level of intensity. They view themselves in that way, as somebody that really, really gets an intangible out of it. A whole lot of their identity comes from it. Those sort of people are rare, and they are priceless."

"That is what we would like for our guys to get to."

Have you had guys like that in the past or currently?

"Al (Thornton) was a training warrior. Toney (Douglas) was a training warrior. We have some guys here who are becoming training warriors. Andrew Wilson was a training warrior. He would finish metabolic conditioning up, and for five straight years, after every single metabolic training session, would walk down to the training room and lay there crumpled up for 45 minutes and not move. I would go down there and check with him, Sam would be looking - he would just exhaust himself, push himself to a place that crumpled him. Sometimes guys are able to do that. That is what we are trying to get to with every player."

Who are some of the guys who made positive gains with you since last season wrapped up?

"Well all of our guys have gained a lot because we train so consistently, year-round. But each of them had some things that were a little bit unique and that needed to be addressed."

"For instance, we wanted Luke (Loucks) to get leaner. He has."

"A guy like Terrance (Shannon) comes in and he is in a whole other situation because he is coming off that knee injury. He comes in and his leg at different measuring points is two inches smaller than his other leg - that is a big difference. He has almost evened that up in the summer here. His strength levels are darn near evened up."

"Derwin (Kitchen) has drastically improved his conditioning. He has drastically improved his mindset. He is like a lot of guys, he went from something where training was a little bit fearful to something where he is almost starting to approach it like a warrior."

"Xavier Gibson has made great improvements in his conditioning. This isn't a normal thing for Xavier. This was all brand new to him - competing at this level, practicing this hard, practicing this consistently, training this hard. But he is such a good guy with such a good heart that he improves because that is what he wants to do. Our program is so structured that once you are in the program, you are going to improve."

"Then we have guys who are just so consistent in their effort every day, they are pouring their effort into it every day. Guys like Pierre Jordan, he drives himself every day. Deividas Dulkys, every day. They are just no excuse guys. We try to run a no excuse program. Jordan DeMercy drives himself everyday when he comes in to train. Solomon (Alabi) just pushes himself. It is about effort and we have young men who consistently give us that effort to improve."

"Our guys really make a big jump their first year. I don't mean just physically in here. The way they play is completely different. I think that if you watch Luke, Chris, Deividas, Xavier, and other guys who have been in this program for a year, you will see a lot of improvements. I don't think they will look anything like they looked a year ago. Everything about them is better - they play better, physically they are better prepared, they are in better shape, they are bigger, stronger, and all those sort of things. Our program is so structured in regards to year-round development and the focus that Coach Hamilton places on the kids that all of our guys kind of make that big jump in their first year."

Additional Comments:

Leonard Hamilton

"Many years ago as a young assistant coach I worked for a coach at Austin Peay named Lake Kelly who had gone and studied weight training and conditioning and how it applied to basketball players," Hamilton said. "Early on I became interested in it and then at Kentucky we had more an Olympic weight training program. I had the chance to be exposed to both. I said that once I became a head coach I knew exactly what type of program I thought was better suited for basketball players."

Derwin Kitchen

"My wind, last year I used to be dead out there on the court after a couple trips up and down the floor, but now I am capable of playing for longer stretches," Kitchen said.

"Nothing we do here is anything I have done before," Kitchen said.

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