

HOW SAFE IS YOUR TEEN'S STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING PROGRAM?

Acclaimed Wisconsin-area high school strength and conditioning coach advises parents to ask these 10 important questions

It's a common scene across America: Parents dropping off their kids at the high school's curb, so that they may participate in high school athletics. Parents often assume that the strength coach has training in the exercise sciences and hours of practical experience that will keep their child safe from preventable accidents. But that may not always be the case. A strength and conditioning coach's lack of formal training and the use of substandard equipment can lead to injuries as well as poor performance. "Maybe the math teacher is a great sport skills coach, but does he or she understand how to design a strength and conditioning program for a 12- to 18-year-old?" asks acclaimed certified strength and conditioning coach Mike Nitka, MS, CSCS,*D, RSCC*E, USAW, FNCSA.

Nitka, an award-winning coach who has trained thousands of middle school and high school athletes, including those in Muskego, before his retirement, is calling for better understanding of the necessary credentials when hiring a high school strength and conditioning coach. He is a two-time former board of directors member of the National Strength & Conditioning Association (NSCA), a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization setting the strength and conditioning industry's gold standards worldwide. Nitka and other high school practitioners are asking the NSCA to support a goal to have a certified strength and conditioning coach in every American high school.

The Benefits of a Long-Term Structured Training Program vs. a "Flavor of the Day" Workout

"A Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist[®] (CSCS[®]) is qualified to design and implement structured age-appropriate training programs in keeping with the most up-to-date research. Serious weight room injuries can be minimized when following age-appropriate training progressions," says Nitka.

He adds that qualified strength coaches also bring an understanding of proper training to the athletic department. This will benefit all sport coaches by being the go-to expert in the school. It should benefit all the student athletes, as they will be able to follow a well-designed program with similar core exercises year round. This yields multi-sport athletes. "Sport coaches will relax knowing that an athlete will be training under a knowledgeable and experienced certified strength coach from season to season. This consistency will enable these kids to improve their athleticism during the whole year. As the saying goes: A football player plays football. A soccer player plays soccer. But an athlete plays anything they want."

Nitka says that whereas some strength coaches may train athletes with "the flavor of the day workouts", putting kids through a well-designed, long-term structured training program will improve their confidence as they experience success. "We progressively trained our athletes so they peaked during their junior and senior years."

10 Questions Every Young Athlete's Parent Should Ask a Strength and Conditioning Coach

Nitka explains that certified strength and conditioning coaches have the expertise to help develop 12-year-old kids into 18-year-old athletes. "You shouldn't just take a professional or division-1 training program and have your son or daughter follow it. They aren't miniature adults."

He adds, "Your school may not have the biggest weight room or the newest equipment but you can and should have the safest and most efficiently run facility based on the published NSCA standards and guidelines." To ensure your child is learning good athleticism and is training safely, Nitka suggests asking these 10 questions:

1. **Who is supervising my child?** “Are their strength and conditioning sessions supervised by a qualified NSCA-certified strength and conditioning coach or registered strength and conditioning coach who can identify risks before they lead to injuries?”
2. **Are you and your staff teaching lifting techniques in a progressive manner?** “Is the staff formally trained in the science of teaching the approved lifting techniques and do they have several years of experience?”
3. **How large is the weight room?** “The NSCA’s standards specify there should be 100 square feet per participant.”
4. **What is the coach/student ratio in the weight room?** “The NSCA recommends a 1:15 ratio for high schools and 1:10 ratio for middle schools. What do you observe?”
5. **Are there security cameras in the facility?** “Weight rooms today often have cameras monitoring both coaching supervision and an athlete’s lifting technique. If someone were to get hurt, tape can be reviewed to prevent future accidents from happening.”
6. **How clean is the facility?** “Does the weight room look like a place in which you would want to train? Feel free to ask how often the equipment is inspected and disinfected.”
7. **Have you purchased commercial-quality equipment from a reputable manufacturer?** “The equipment should be commercial grade purchased from a reputable manufacturer, and used as suggested.”
8. **What happens if there’s an emergency?** “Is there an emergency action plan for indoor and outdoor activity? What if there’s a tornado warning and your child is out in the field? Where do they go? What if an athlete breaks an ankle? Who do they call? How often does the staff practice for emergencies?”
9. **May I have or view a copy of my child’s program?** “Parents should have an opportunity to view their child’s training program to monitor progress and ask questions.”
10. **What happens when you have special needs kids?** “It would be a great idea to notify the staff in advance. The staff would then have adequate time to prepare. Great staffs will provide this child with a great experience when given advance notice. Working with the special needs population helps all of us to become better strength coaches because we need to take what we thought we knew, and modify it to fit this person’s needs.”

Nitka reminds parents that strength coaches are charged and trusted with the great responsibility of developing young bodies and minds. “A certified strength and conditioning coach will give you peace of mind, knowing that this professional will be focused on your child’s immediate welfare as well as their long-term athletic development.”

Biography: Mike Nitka, MS, CSCS,*D, RSCC*E, USAW, FNCSA

Mike Nitka is the former Director of Strength and Conditioning and an instructor of Physical Education at Muskego High School in South Eastern Wisconsin. With 38 years of experience, Coach Nitka has been frequently honored for his contributions to the field, including receiving the Strength of America award from the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition five times. He was elected twice to serve on the NSCA Board of Directors as the Vice President of Youth and Adolescent Activities, was voted the NSCA High School Coach of the Year in 1996, Chaired the NSCA Special Interest Group for High School Coaches, as well as several other committees.