Weightlifting Nurtures Strength, Patience and Character in Colorado Students

Issue: "My kids have always been active, but they have been pushed in other programs to advance too quickly, causing them to quit or sustain injuries," notes a parent of two high school students in Windsor, CO. It's a familiar scenario for many parents eager to nurture their child's athleticism by enrolling them at a young age in a competitive sports league or program. As the stakes get higher, the pressure to win and be the best can lead to emotional burnout and injuries that can plague them for a lifetime. Some may give up on sports and exercise altogether.

How about a sport that teaches patience and consistency, encourages students to work within their own comfort level, and demands they fully master a technique before advancing to the next one?

Matt Cooper had this vision five years ago when he began teaching physical education at Colorado's Windsor High School. Both a competitor and USA Weightlifting National Coach, Cooper knew firsthand about the sport’s physical benefits — balance, flexibility, speed, raw strength and core stability — and the emotional benefits such as patience, confidence, and motivation to adopt a nutritious, healthy lifestyle.

"In weightlifting, students learn how to work toward something and focus on the details," says Cooper, a SHAPE America member. "They learn that if you're going to commit yourself to something, you need to do it exactly right to achieve your full potential."

Having heard many competitors lament that they wish they had started weightlifting earlier, he decided to bring the Olympic-style sport to his own students.

The Big Idea: Cooper’s plan was to introduce students to the sport as an elective in his PE class curriculum and create an after-school club, where more serious students could train for local and national competitions. But, much like the nature of weightlifting, he had to pass a series of hurdles himself before realizing his vision.

The first thing I had to do was completely change the weight room, which was a hodgepodge of old machines," he says. "Most, like the leg press, were 'one-trick ponies' that took up a lot of space and didn’t allow the class to work on the same thing at the same time."

With no budget for an overhaul, Cooper teamed up with the local CrossFit gym to stage a fundraising competition. The publicity garnered the attention of a local truckyard owner, who gave another $3,000 after club members spent a day picking up trash and pulling weeds. In addition, a fitness equipment manufacturer donated a $2,000 gift card.

The money allowed Cooper to dismantle the weight room and start from scratch. Students now train in an uncluttered, 2,400-square-foot space, with adjustable benches and weights along the wall that offer "efficient platforms with infinite possibilities." And, the CrossFit event has become an annual fundraiser, netting about $15,000 in the last four years.

The other obstacle was a liability issue: The school district’s liability insurance did not cover unpaid positions. Because the weight room supervisor stipend position happened to open up at the time of Cooper starting the club, it allowed him to run the after school club while being covered under the district’s liability insurance.

"I’m not doing it for money," he says. "I've fallen in love with it. I have kids who trust me and dedicate themselves to it, and as I watch them get stronger and more..."
motivated, that makes me more motivated. I’ve also been very fortunate to have an open-minded principal and administration.

There are even a few junior high students, including three incoming freshmen who have trained with him for a year.

**Results:** The Windsor High School Weightlifting Club already has had 14 students qualify for Nationals, 12 of whom competed in cities around the country. Four have finished in the top 10 — including Donte, a senior who has made weightlifting his primary focus. “He will not miss a day and trains year-round,” says Cooper. “His family went to the mountains for a summer vacation and I reached out to a local gym so he could train there while he was away.”

Donte’s dedication has paid off: Weighing just 128 pounds himself, he can snatch 170 pounds, clean-and-jerk 230 pounds (placing third overall at the 2018 USAW Junior National Championships) and back-squat 315 pounds. His younger brother Jeremiah followed him into the club, prompting their mother to write Cooper a letter of appreciation.

“The individual strength, physically and mentally, that weightlifting requires is priceless,” the students’ mother said. “You must push yourself to be the best you can or want to be. So, when Donte asked if Jeremiah could join him in the weight room, I was overjoyed.” At age 11, Jeremiah has already qualified for Youth Nationals.

“The boys now constantly encourage each other, not only in the weight room, but also at home,” adds the dad. “They push each other to better themselves in everything they do, from chores to school to sports. They talk to each other about accomplishments and fails. But fails are now mere trials for the next opportunity, because, in their perspective, there is no hurdle (or weight) they can’t overcome, they just keep trying.”

**Takeaway:** Another parent, whose son and daughter have embraced weightlifting, observed that the patience and commitment that the sport requires translates to all areas of students’ lives:

“The confidence my kids have gained has enabled them to resist peer pressure, learn to make independent decisions, and speak more confidently with others,” he said. “It’s fun to watch them have lengthy conversations with adults instead of the typical, one-word responses of teenagers. They also seem to be more resilient when things don’t go well. They focus on the positive, adjust their workout, review their technique, and move on. This attitude has helped them with disappointments outside of lifting and will certainly serve them well as they move into adulthood.”

Note: The USA Weightlifting High School Development Committee wants to help more teachers get weightlifting into their schools. They are offering $150 discounts to any PE teachers who want to get certified. For more information, write to Suzy Sanchez at suzy.sanchez@usaweightlifting.org.