

2002 Provincial Strength and Conditioning Conference

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The Role of the Strength and Conditioning Specialist

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Presentation Summary

As a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS), you are part of a rare, new breed. Although the NSCA has been around since 1978 and the CSCS designation was initiated in the mid-1980s, we still have a long way to go, particularly in Canada, when it comes to making Strength and Conditioning a widely recognized professional field. The NSCA provides one of the more difficult training and conditioning certification exams, including ongoing continuing education requirements, yet the general public – as well as even coaches and athletes – are not fully aware of the presence or abilities of the Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist. The end result is that the average CSCS has a difficult time finding enough work to allow them to work as a full time professional. At present, there are only 70 Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialists in British Columbia. Are we to believe that only 70 individuals had the aptitude to pass the CSCS exam, or have many past certified members gone on to more lucrative careers?

Regardless of what the statistics may infer, there are numerous opportunities in British Columbia to maximize your income, using both the credentials and knowledge offered by the NSCA. However, your CSCS certification, along with your knowledge of training and conditioning, may not be enough to vault you into the world of financial success, or even financial independence. There needs to be a multi-pronged approach to improving the plight of the CSCS in BC. First, all certified members must take an active role in promoting their profession every chance they get. Second, certified members must actively pursue continuing education opportunities, formal and informal, whether or not they involve receiving CEU's. Third, the CSCS must not leave any stone unturned when it comes to finding different types of clients and diversifying the types of services they provide potential clients. Finally, all certified members should offer the highest quality of service in a highly professional manner, regardless of the level of athleticism of their client.

We must recognize the importance of promoting the designation of CSCS whenever we are interfacing with the public. When clients approach us regarding our background and credentials, we must explain to them that the CSCS designation is one of the most difficult fitness and conditioning certifications to achieve. And once we achieve our CSCS designation, we have to dedicate a given amount of time to retain that designation. Of course, all of the certification in the world will not be enough if we cannot back it up with quality service. Therefore, bolstering your CSCS designation with professional service, enthusiasm, little or no injuries and visible results will only help to instill confidence in the abilities of yourself and your peers.

Once an individual achieves the designation of CSCS, it is simply the beginning of a long process of personal and professional development. It is the explicit role of the CSCS to enter into an ongoing process of building his or her knowledge. This involves pursuing many formal means of education (i.e. NSCA CEU accredited events) when they are available. However, much of your education should be through less formal means, including:

- Reading books, journals and articles, as well as reviewing other videos, CD-ROM's and other multi-media resources.
- Attending non-NSCA sponsored educational events such as those provided by other sporting organizations. These types of events can include NCCP multi-level courses for sports such as Olympic weightlifting, track and field, swimming, gymnastics and many others.
- Attend educational events of sport support service providers such as sports medicine professionals (i.e. doctors, physiotherapists, chiropractors, massage therapists), sports nutrition specialists and sports psychology experts.
- Working with all types of athletes of all ages and abilities from a variety of sports. Just because you are a basketball, football and soccer conditioning specialist, doesn't mean that you can't learn from teaching athletes in other sports. The same goes for athlete ages and abilities. You may want to work with pro athletes, but you can learn a lot from working with very young children in terms of identifying appropriate load progressions and teaching motor skills.
- Observing and/or participating in strength and conditioning sessions provided by other, more experienced peers.

The last point is very important and should form the base of all strength and conditioning education. If you can learn under an apprenticeship-based system, whereby you observe and assist a veteran CSCS for an extended period of time (i.e. not just a week), you will have the opportunity to pick up the subtle techniques that separate the great coaches from the average coaches. While weekend seminars and conferences can provide you with useful information, nothing beats working day-to-day with an experienced professional, treating each athlete client as an individual challenge, not a generic subject. Internship and mentorship programs are similar in intent to an apprenticeship, but can involve different methods and commitments. However, beware of situations where so-called 'expert' strength and conditioning coaches charge hefty fees to impart their knowledge and provide you with potentially dubious 'certification'. If we are trying to build our profession and increase the number of quality strength and conditioning specialists locally in an effort to bolster our public image, we must make it easier for others to attain a status beyond competency.

One thing to remember through your education and practice as a strength and conditioning specialist is to have the confidence and self-security (rather than insecurity) to allow you to know when to defer to other experts or more experienced coaches. We see it all the time – a CSCS trying to make something out of nothing, taking a chance at teaching a skill or exercise that they do not know how to perform or teach themselves. Not only do they impact the quality of the service they provide, but they may also be putting their client at risk for injury. Do not feel any less of a coach if you have to bring in a more qualified person to teach or monitor a particular training component. If anything, both yourself and your client will benefit – yourself through gaining more knowledge and your client through improving his or her ability.

When providing services for clients, it is important to remember that your assessment of your clients' needs will determine the type of service you will provide. Do not fall into the trap of

convincing the client that they need a particular type of training based on the simple fact that you only have one type of training to provide. This is a perfect example of the need to diversify your talents. Too many strength and conditioning coaches rely on only a few techniques or tools to elicit a broad array of benefits. Unfortunately, many of these professionals rely on following the trends of the fitness and conditioning industry, only to find out later (or never) that they – through application of a narrow focus of training – are compromising the quality and effectiveness of their service. There is nothing wrong with having a specialization or a niche – in fact, we encourage that you develop a specialization. However, you must also have the professionalism of knowing when to apply your specialization strategically. “When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail,” is an important adage. Too many conditioning coaches are ‘hammering’ their clients with too few techniques.

Having said that, the CSCS community in general needs to realize that they can offer a wide variety of benefits to the athletic community and general public. While we would all like to have the luxury of working with professional athletes as a full-time strength and conditioning coach, we know that there are a finite number of jobs available for such positions. However, there are many other clients out there who need and can afford our services, including:

- Youth sport teams – particularly soccer, based on the participation numbers in BC
- Youth sport individuals, with parents who want the best for their child’s development
- School sports and physical education programs
- Recreational adult athletes who want to improve their performance
- Senior citizens wanting to increase muscle mass and retain bone density
- General personal training clients who want to get healthy, fit and strong
- Corporate clients who have sporting or fitness goals as a company (i.e. Sun Run)
- Rehabilitation clients who have finished their clinical rehabilitation, but who need help with that extra step to getting them back in full training and competition shape

Those are just a few of the client sources. In terms of servicing these clients, there are a number of ways you can provide your expertise and make a good income doing it, including:

- Group seminars and lectures for educating participants on proper conditioning techniques
- One-one-one training with young athletes, adult recreational athletes, seniors, etc.
- Small group training sessions with collections of friends or employees with a common goal
- Team training for different sporting teams
- Training camp settings for intensive training of different types of groups

By tailoring your services to your clients’ needs, listening to what they have to say, educating them to become self-sufficient and generally providing high quality service, you will find that keeping existing clients will not be a problem, and word-of-mouth will generate you more business. Before you know it, the demand for your services – and others in our profession – will increase, and charging appropriate fees will not be a problem. However, our status as CSCSs will improve only if our individual membership makes a concerted effort to promote themselves and offer the best quality of conditioning services available in the province.