

HOMESCHOOLED



HELPING YOUR YOUNG ATHLETE BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION: *Part One*

BY: MARIA MOUNTAIN, MSC, CSCS

When I am at conferences and meet with other fitness coaches who work with athletes, I often hear griping about working with young athletes. Is it the kids themselves? No, not at all, these coaches are complaining about the parents! I feel so fortunate because the parents that I talk to, for the most part, just want to know what is going to be best for little Suzy's long term development. They are not looking for Olympic gold or a seven-figure NHL contract, just trying to help the child express their passion for sport in a healthy way.

At Revolution Sport Conditioning I do not train athletes under the age of twelve. Up to this point, I want them to be involved in a variety of sports and the focus should be on having fun. I do not care in the least if Johnny makes the travel competitive soccer team at nine years old. All I care about is whether they are having fun and developing a love for sport. It does not matter how good the fitness training is if your child decides at the age of 14 that they hate sport and do not want to practice 20-hours per week anymore.

I have had a few phone calls over the last few weeks from parents with younger athletes and although I will not work with them because they are under the age of twelve, I wanted to give the parents some tools to use at home which will help develop a strong foundation for their sporting activity. The areas I will focus on are; posture and core control, basic strength and plyometric foundation. I will give you 1-2 exercises that require no equipment for each foundation area.

Posture & Core Control

1. I don't think you can beat the ***Perfect Plank*** if core foundation is your goal. Not only is it scientifically studied to show that it reduces the stress on ones lower back and strengthens the true 'core muscles' not just the abdominals. Like many things in life a great idea gets taken up by the general public and comes out the other end looking nothing like the original. Have you ever had a coach ask you to hold the plank for 2, 3 or 4 minutes? Why? Because your core muscles need to be constantly contracted while you are playing soccer? No, the exercise has been adapted to make it harder, not more effective.

My interest is making sure young athletes perform exercises effectively and with perfect technique. In actual sport (and real life for that matter) the core muscles rapidly turn on in response to an impulse or stimulus and then rapidly relax. So it makes sense to train them by turning them on and off again throughout a set.

Begin with 5-10 repetitions of a 5 second hold. Add one second per week until you have reached a maximum of 10 second holds. Remember if the athlete loses proper form, the set should be terminated immediately. A loss of perfect form occurs when the athlete lifts their hips, drops their hips, rounds or arches the back or shifts the hips to one side. If the athlete cannot hold form from the toes, then have them perform the exercise from their knees.



2. Most young athletes have poor posture – lots of adult athletes have poor posture. We spend way too much time sitting down these days and we round our shoulders forward in a slouched posture. Remember how much you hated it when your Mother told you to sit up tall all the time? Well, sorry, but she was right.

Rounded shoulder posture can create problems with the shoulder, the neck, the back and even affect an athlete's breathing. A great cue for instantly fixing posture is to tell the athlete to imagine that they are trying to touch the ceiling with the top of their head. You will see them elongate their spine restoring the natural curves of the spine, their shoulders will shift back and they will actually activate their core muscles without even thinking about it. So that is exercise number one for posture!

When I was in University I had the posture that is typical of a student. One day my Athletic Injuries professor told me to not bother trying to change my posture because it took a lot of focus and practice. I think he knew me better than I thought he did, because that was just the thing to say to get me going. I would practice walking between classes with perfect posture just so I could prove him wrong. Over approximately three months I completely changed my posture and I still occasionally get asked if I was in the military because my posture is so nice. Thank you Dr. Lapenski!

The second exercise helps with posture, but also with shoulder stability. The athlete will sit up tall with her hands resting on the tops of her thighs. She will try to squeeze her shoulder blades together slightly. I imagine that someone has

placed a thick magic marker between my shoulder blades (following the line of my spine) and that I am just trying to bring my shoulder blades together to gently squeeze the marker. Just make sure she does not shrug her shoulders as she squeezes the shoulder blades. Hold the 'squeeze' position for 3 seconds and then slowly relax. Perform 5-15 perfect repetitions.

This is a very difficult exercise, for some athletes it will feel like they are trying to wiggle their ears; they will have trouble finding the proper muscles. So start slowly and with only a few perfect repetitions. This is a very subtle movement, you should feel/see a very small movement of the shoulder blades, but there should be minimal movement at the shoulders and the elbows should not move back.



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