

No off-season for training More school teams, athletes look for edge at specialized gyms

By Mike Lipka, Globe Correspondent | August 10, 2006

MEDWAY -- When the high school football teams from Medway and Medfield face off on Nov. 10, they'll have more in common than their elite status in the Tri-Valley League and the first three letters of their names.

The rival teams will have a mutual respect born from summer Sundays, when Mustangs and Warriors have been brushing shoulders at one of the area's training facilities that offer the latest in exercise theory.

"Last year, Medway came in here," said Medfield running back Mike Lane, who is heading into his senior season. "I had to get our team in here to stay competitive with them."

Many players from both teams are working out this summer at the Athletic Performance Enhancement Center on Main Street in Medway. It is run by Franklin native Jason Shea, who trains more than a dozen local teams year-round in sports ranging from field hockey to pole vaulting.

Shea, a University of Massachusetts at Amherst graduate with a degree in exercise science, doesn't simply spot for players as they toil with weights. Shea creates a science-based, sport-specific regimen for his clients, stressing speed and encouraging drills that mimic on-field actions. Many of the drills also fool the mind with resistance, making actual play seem easier, he said.

As an example, Shea noted that bench-pressing weights builds strength, but the slow lifting motion doesn't prepare a football player for game situations. "He's basically going to have to express that power as quick as possible, drive that opposing lineman," he said.

Shea is not alone in the change of philosophy. Pro teams have been using so-called "functional training" for years, and it's becoming more and more common for high schoolers. Natick High and Algonquin Regional are among six area schools with players that spend long summer hours at Velocity Sports Performance in Sudbury, working within a similar training strategy.

The outlook is certainly gaining popularity, as 72 Velocity Sports branches have opened nationwide since the first in Roswell, Ga., in 1999. Sudbury's facility has been open for 2 1/2 years.

Brandon Smith, the head performance coach at Velocity Sports, doesn't stress as much on the individual sport, but like Shea focuses on the science of improving speed and agility.

It hasn't always been that way. Smith remembers his days playing hockey and baseball at St. John's High School in Shrewsbury in the early 1990s.

"All we really did was we lifted in the morning for preseason hockey," Smith said. Other teams might have had players try to make up for a lazy off-season with intense, running-filled two-a-days, he said.

Now, things are much more complicated. Shea opened his Medway facility three years ago, and he said he is constantly reading up on new scientific research in the field.

For now, he favors the Russian approach from the 1960s and '70s, which is relatively new in the United States. Back then, the Soviet national teams developed systems based on plyometrics, which focuses repeated movements on specific muscles.

At Shea's facility, that translates to people and weights moving in all directions -- quickly. For football players, the upper legs and hips draw the focus, with exercises based on quick, repetitive bursts.

Both Smith and Shea said the training also serves to prevent injuries and boost durability, so players will still be strong at the end of the season.

"It's still brand new," Smith said. "We're just barely scratching the surface."

That scratch, though, has been enough to make an impact, and the success stories already aren't hard to find.

Medfield's lacrosse team won back-to-back state titles in 2004 and 2005 after switching to a similar type of workout regimen. Natick football coach Tom Lamb sought help from Velocity, then took his team to a Division 2 Super Bowl title last fall. Lane, Medfield's captain and its leading rusher last fall, will tell you the difference it has made in his game.

“It's a lot harder than going in and bench pressing, but they're getting more out of it,” said Medway's football coach, Mike Regan, who brought some of his players to Athletic Performance Enhancement three times a week last summer and has twice as many there this year. Regan said his players enjoy the workouts more, and often build chemistry -- and composure -- before practice even starts.

“I can see it in their confidence level, for one,” Regan said. “If they've been through one of these workouts, they know anything we're going to throw at them, they can handle. Plus, when they get on the field, they know they've worked their butt off.”

Both Regan and Shea said coaches don't force their players to attend summer sessions. The players must come up with the fees, although Shea said in certain circumstances he awards scholarships to those in need.

Either way, many of the players are showing up, and Regan said those who aren't putting in this kind of work in the off-season are quickly losing their chance to compete.

“Those kids that are very motivated are going to do it. Those kids who aren't as motivated we won't see,” Regan said. “The difference is now those kids that are motivated are pulling further and further away because of this.”

Added Lane: “You have to start once your football season ends.”

Some are starting even earlier than that. Velocity Sports targets the age range of 8-18, while Athletic Performance holds classes starting at age 10. Smith said it's neither ridiculous nor dangerous to start a regimen that young -- it's actually easier to teach good form earlier in life, much like learning a language.

“You teach these patterns at a young age,” Smith said, “and they're less likely to develop bad habits.”

There's also another kind of bad habit that many coaches, trainers, and parents want their charges to avoid. Parents say they hope such intense workout plans will keep their kids from drinking alcohol or doing drugs. Smith said he knows high school athletes read the news and watch ESPN, and hear about steroid and doping controversies in sports from baseball to cycling.

“I get a lot of kids asking me about supplements and what they should take,” Smith said.

“We stress here good nutrition, staying hydrated, working out. Over time, in the long haul, you don't know what's going to happen with any supplement or illegal chemical.”

They usually do, however, know what will happen with specifically designed scientific training. As Smith said, some hard-working athletes are just hoping to make the junior varsity team, while others have aspirations of earning a college scholarship.

Either way, Lane said, one thing seems clear: “Everyone's just getting better.” ■