

'Never Lift on Game Day': Exposing One of the Biggest Myths in Sports

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The first time you hear it, the idea of lifting before a game sounds ridiculous.

Because before that moment, you'd likely been led to believe—either through words or through actions (or both)—that resting up and saving all your energy for competition is the smartest play.

Why lift before a game? Are you such a meathead it can't wait until later?

Tell that to world-class performers like Brooks Koepka, LeBron James and Mike Trout. The reality is that many top-level athletes and teams get in the weight room on game days. So when an amateur athlete says they can't lift on the day of a game or even the day *before* a game because it'll hurt their performance, it just doesn't add up.

"We always had excuses from kids—'Oh, my dad said I'm not supposed to do anything because I've got a game tonight,'" says Scott Meier, head strength and conditioning coach at Farmington High School (Minnesota) and the current Minnesota state director of the National High School Strength Coaches Association. Meier is a big proponent of young athletes training on game day, as he believes the physical and mental benefits it provides give them both a short and long-term edge.

If team sport athletes want to maintain the progress they made during the offseason, they must continue training during their season. That much we know. If athletes who compete in multiple competitions per week, such as baseball, basketball, volleyball and lacrosse players, are told they cannot train on game days, that's going to make it extremely difficult for them to maintain or build on their progress. For pros, it'd be nearly impossible.

For example, during the month of June 2019, Mike Trout played 28 games. If he decided he "couldn't work out on game days", he'd be left with just 1-3 days each month to train. MVPs don't roll like that.

And when guys like Trout, James or Koepa lift on game day, it's not just warm-up weight. These workouts, which are typically conducted several hours before the start of competition, require significant effort and utilize substantial loads. In other words, it's the type of exercise conventional wisdom says should be totally avoided on game day. But the research paints a completely different picture.

Athletes often feel that a game day lift will negatively impact a sport-specific skill. They're worried resistance training so close to a game messes up their shot, swing, etc.

A project involving the 2016 Texas Rangers sought to "determine if there was a difference in offensive performance (batting average) in games in which Rangers players participated in a resistance training program before the game and games in which they did not participate in a resistance training program before the game."

By tracking each player's resistance training workouts, the researchers were able to determine their batting average in games where they had worked out beforehand and their batting average in games where they had not worked out beforehand. The researchers looked at the first 81 games of the 2016 MLB season. The results were pretty mind-blowing.

From **Baseball Strength**:

The data indicate that the mean batting average for the 13 players studied was 18 points higher when they worked out before the game (.273) than when they did not workout before the game (.255). The mean batting average when players did not work out before the game (.255) was also lower than the team average for the first 81 games (.260)...One can conclude that lifting before the game helped improve or had no detrimental effect on offensive performance for the players in this study.

A game day lift has also been found to enhance more traditional measures of athleticism, as well.

A game day lift not only delivers an in-season training stimulus many athletes so desperately need, but there's reason to believe it actually helps you perform better during your competition. It's important to note this is all dependent on an athlete having a solid base of training coming into the season and up until the actual date in question. Performing a workout that uses intensities, volume, and movements an athlete's not accustomed to shortly

prior to a game is a bad idea. You can't not touch a weight for eight weeks and then lift before a game and expect it to go well.

But for trained individuals who are on a routine, this is not a concern.

For high school athletes, signing up for a weight training class—if your school offers one—can be a great way to ensure consistent in-season training, even on game days. This can be especially attractive for athletes who play two or three sports throughout a school year, as in-season lifts are crucial if they want to make consistent progress in the weight room.

"The majority of our football kids actually take a class in-season. Our weight training class is an elective, so they sign up to take it," say Meier. "We're going heavy. We're cycling through, it's a 12-week training cycle. Our kids are getting after it during the day...It's usually about a 50-minute workout. We'll scale back the volume a little bit, but really, not a whole lot. Especially if they've got the class in the morning—high school kids recover fast enough that for a 7 p.m. game, it's not an issue."

But there is research indicating a low-volume, lightweight "power" workout can have much longer-lasting potentiation benefits. For example, **one study** found that performing five sets of four Jump Squats at 40% of one-rep max and with three minutes rest between sets led to increases in vertical jump height and isometric leg press rate of force development both 24 and 48 hours post-workout.

Many team sport coaches anecdotally report that a short lift prioritizing bar speed conducted within a few hours of the start of competition has positive results. This may wake-up the central nervous system and help burn off nervous energy.

Meier implemented such a lift with Farmington's football team several years ago. Shortly before the team's pre-game meal for a 7 p.m. kick-off, the team comes into the weight room for a quick lift. The protocol is three sets of three reps for three different exercises. The exercises, which are done in circuit fashion, usually include some sort of squat pattern, some sort of Olympic lift-type action, and an upper-body push or pull. The focus is on fast bar speed and crisp, explosive movement.

Here are two different sample "primer" workouts from Meier:

Primer Workout 1

- Front Squat 3x3 (50%)
- Hex Bar Deadlift Jump 3x3 (30%)
- Med Ball Overhead Slams 3x3

Primer Workout 2

- Hang Clean 1x3 (40%), 1x3 (50%), 1x3 (60%)
- Back Squat 1x3 (40%), 1x3 (50%), 1x3 (60%)
- Bench Press 1x3 (40%), 1x3 (50%), 1x3 (60%)

"We preach that it's not a 'workout' workout, it's to get ready for the game and to get everything activated and ready to go. The kids all get that and understand that, and we're preaching fast, fast, fast on everything," says Meier.

"The workout only takes 15, 20 minutes."

Many programs utilize such a workout in the hours leading up to competition, and while there isn't much research on this type of procedure and what exact timing works best, there's no shortage of positive anecdotes.

"After the first game or two, coaches were coming up to me and saying they could notice a difference immediately," Meier says.

"Right from the kickoff, we were ready to go. It was top speed right off the bat. In years past, it would take a series or two to get into the flow of games. Coaches were saying, 'Oh man, we were ready to go, right from kickoff.'"

While young athletes might initially be hesitant to lift within a few hours of a game, if the workout is well-designed and intelligently integrated into their pre-game routine, buy-in can occur quickly.

"After a couple games, kids could really see the benefit. They felt like it helped them get ready," Meier says. "In fact, I think if for some reason we couldn't do a pre-game lift, I think mentally it might kind of mess things up with kids. 'We're not going to be ready if we're not doing this.'"

Don't discount that potential psychological edge. Meier's found many of his multi-sport athletes who were introduced to a primer lift through football will request to perform it before other sports, too, such as lacrosse.

"Everybody and all sports could benefit from this, without a doubt," says Meier.

If you're still buying the idea that training on game day is some deadly sports sin, get with the times. Several different types of game day workouts are proven performance-enhancers, and many world-class competitors reap the benefits