

THE
CrossFit JOURNAL

SCOPING OUT YOUR PRACTICE

Personal trainers are encouraged to define and take ownership of their profession.

BY LON KILGORE



In the fitness industry, scopes of practice appear to overlap and create identity crises.

How does a personal trainer's practice differ from that of a fitness trainer, an exercise instructor, a strength-and-conditioning specialist, a fitness instructor, a tactical-fitness instructor, a functional-fitness instructor or any other practitioner in the realm of exercise and fitness?

Does each of group of practitioners have an associated scope of practice describing the duties and limits of the work associated with that group?

The term "scope of practice" describes the procedures, actions and processes that a worker within a particular occupation is normally permitted to undertake. It is also a legal term that largely refers to occupations that require government-issued licenses in order to work within the field; for example, a physician's scope of practice allows prescription of drugs but a nurse's scope of practice does not.

As personal training is not a government-regulated occupation, it is up to its certifying organizations, not legislative bodies, to establish and adopt scope-of-practice statements for their credentialed members. If an organization is truly the authority and represents the occupational rank and file, it will have a well-considered, applicable and accessible scope-of-practice statement. Failure to have such a statement invites confusion and lack of occupational identity, and it increases the risk of legal exposure to members, who have no guidelines on the limits of their occupational activities.

The American College of Not Personal Trainers

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) is notable among academic organizations that sell certifications to high-school-educated individuals. One would assume an academic group such as the ACSM would provide its credentialed personal trainers an evidence-based and applicable scope-of-practice statement or document, and "ACSM's Resources for the Personal Trainer" (1) does have the following statement buried on Page 481 in the Legal Issues and Responsibilities chapter:

A concise, well-considered scope of practice brings an occupation into focus and helps its practitioners succeed.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal



CrossFit Trainers are presented with a scope of practice that is specific to their work in the CrossFit system.

“According to the American College of Sports Medicine’s Code of Ethics for Certified and Registered Professionals, ‘[Personal Trainers] practice within the scope of their knowledge, skills, and abilities. [Personal Trainers] will not provide services that are limited by state law to provision by another healthcare professional only.’”

The bracketed presentation belongs to the ACSM, and “personal trainer” is a replacement for the original ACSMCP, or ACSM certified professional, a catch-all term that does nothing to add any clarity to the discussion. In addition, the statement lacks any type of description of what a personal trainer should do. As such, this statement cannot be used to describe the duties and limits of clinical and non-clinical occupations. The ACSM provides no authoritative and direct statements of scope of practice for personal trainers.

The National Not-Personal-Training Association

The National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) offers a single-sentence definition of “scope of practice” in the glossary on Page 665 of “NSCA’s Essentials of Personal Training”

(3): “Legal boundaries that determine the extent of a personal trainer’s professional duties.”

“Scope of practice” does not appear in the index, and a direct statement or description of the scope of practice for personal trainers cannot be found within the body of the text.

Personal training is an unregulated occupation, and as the specific “legal boundaries” are not defined in any way, the reader is never presented with information to specifically define the duties and tasks that the personal trainer should or should not perform.

The most cogent statement promulgated by the NSCA is not a defined scope-of-practice statement but rather a description of what a personal trainer is. The text can be found on the NSCA’s [Certified Personal Trainer \(CPT\) page](#): Personal trainers “are health/fitness professionals who, using an individualized approach, assess, motivate, educate and train clients regarding their health and fitness needs. ... (Personal trainers) design safe and effective exercise programs, provide the guidance to help clients achieve their personal health/fitness goals and respond appropriately in emergency situations. Recognizing their own area of expertise, a personal trainer will refer clients to other health care professionals when appropriate.”

Interestingly, with only one complete sentence—“special populations include those with chronic and temporary health conditions”—and a few minor qualifiers added, this text becomes the description for the NSCA’s [Certified Special Populations Specialist \(CSPS\)](#). As Figure 1 on the CSPS page indicates, the credential requires a bachelor’s degree.

So which occupation’s scope of practice is accurately described by this basic wording? That of a non-degreed NSCA CPT who works with apparently healthy populations or that of the degreed NSCA CSPS who works with special populations?

In reality, all NSCA credential descriptions have virtually identical wording and concepts. Essentially only the population served differs—athletes, tactical athletes, special populations or the apparently healthy. The limits of practice are never articulated. This is a woeful circumstance for a body proposing to represent those within the personal-training occupation.

National Academy of Not Personal Training

The National Academy for Sports Medicine (NASM) provides no scope-of-practice statement in its “Essentials of Personal Fitness Training” (2).

A “sports medicine” organization that provides only personal-training credentials but no clinical credentials? How did this misleading nomenclature make it into an organizational title?

This non sequitur might not be all that surprising: The organization’s three executive officers have backgrounds in marketing, business administration and sales, and wholesale electronic sales, with no training or experience in personal training noted in their biographies. Could it be that sales and marketing are at the forefront of operations rather than service to the occupation of personal training?

We cannot really single out the NASM for the lack of relevant executives at the helm. The NSCA is currently searching for a [senior director of certification and education](#). Notable in the job requirements are “knowledge of certification industry,” “three years of experience working in the certification industry,” and academic preparation in “education, measurement, or similar concentration.” Under essential duties and responsibilities: “Lead the development of new certification and certificate programs as directed.”

The job description does not mention experience, or even a familiarity, with strength and conditioning, personal training, tactical training or special populations (the four training tracks offered by the organization).

The continuing identity crisis of personal trainers and the large interest in regulation are in part due to the lack of accurate, appropriate and agreed-upon scope-of-practice positions and statements.

Microscope of Practice

Having no scope-of-practice statement or a generic scope-of-practice statement creates confusion with regard to occupational boundaries. But it can be just as bad to have a defined scope-of-practice statement that, if implemented, prohibits normal training services.

The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) publishes a [scope-of-practice statement](#) for personal trainers credentialed through the organization’s testing service. However, the CSEP statement is restrictive to the point of ensuring that clients can make no progress in fitness. In CSEP’s world view, the personal trainer cannot do any maximal testing—any testing that assesses maximal endurance or strength. The personal trainer also cannot program training that includes any maximal exertion (strength or endurance); only submaximal exercise can be programmed and delivered.

Also per CSEP, the personal trainer cannot work with anyone under 15 years of age or over 69. So personal trainers cannot work with healthy youth to combat the pandemic of obesity and low fitness. And they cannot work with healthy older adults to maintain function, improve quality of life and reduce the risk of mortality.

For any trainer to use these unwarranted and narrow guidelines is a recipe for business failure as clients will almost certainly be unable to achieve their goals with these restrictions.

A Perspective

The bottom line is that the continuing identity crisis of personal trainers and the large interest in regulation are in part due to the lack of accurate, appropriate and agreed-upon scope-of-practice positions and statements from credentialing and educational bodies related to personal training.

While personal fitness training is not a licensed profession, it does require a scope of practice for its workers. But little guidance exists. Further, the guidance available is not uniformly adopted or agreed upon.

It is obvious that there is a significant need for the development of a scope-of-practice statement—a practical and specific statement—for all exercise-related occupations. This need should have been satisfied long ago.

Within the industry there are bright spots. For example, CrossFit Inc. includes a scope-of-practice statement within its Certified CrossFit Trainer (CCFT) Candidate Handbook. It states that a CCFT:

- Designs and leads CrossFit workouts for both groups and individuals, from beginner to advanced, that are safe, effective, and appropriate for individuals who are apparently healthy or have medical clearance to exercise. The trainer recognizes the limitations of his or her own knowledge and skill set and refers clients to other healthcare professionals when appropriate.
- Assesses, monitors, and develops exercise programming based on the athlete's current and ongoing fitness and performance goals, fitness level, readiness for training, performance (relative to goals, level, and readiness for training), lifestyle patterns, diet, and nutritional needs.
- Teaches functional movements.
- Minimizes risk and facilitates sound movement patterns.
- Educates and motivates athletes towards exercise-program success and sound nutritional and lifestyle strategies.
- Runs an ethical practice operating with professionalism and integrity.
- Minimizes and manages risk for the athlete in the training facility, is prepared for emergency situations, and responds appropriately when they occur.

One interesting observation regarding the CrossFit scope-of-practice statement is that trainees are referred to as athletes. The rationale is that every person has the capacity to be an athlete, every person who wishes to become fit competes with himself or herself to achieve progressively higher levels of fitness, and every CrossFit athlete/trainee can measure himself or herself against measurable standards of performance. While all CrossFitters might not participate in official competitions, they train and progress just like competitive athletes—but they do it in a much more scaled and supportive environment.

Creating a Scope-of-Practice Statement for the Personal Trainer

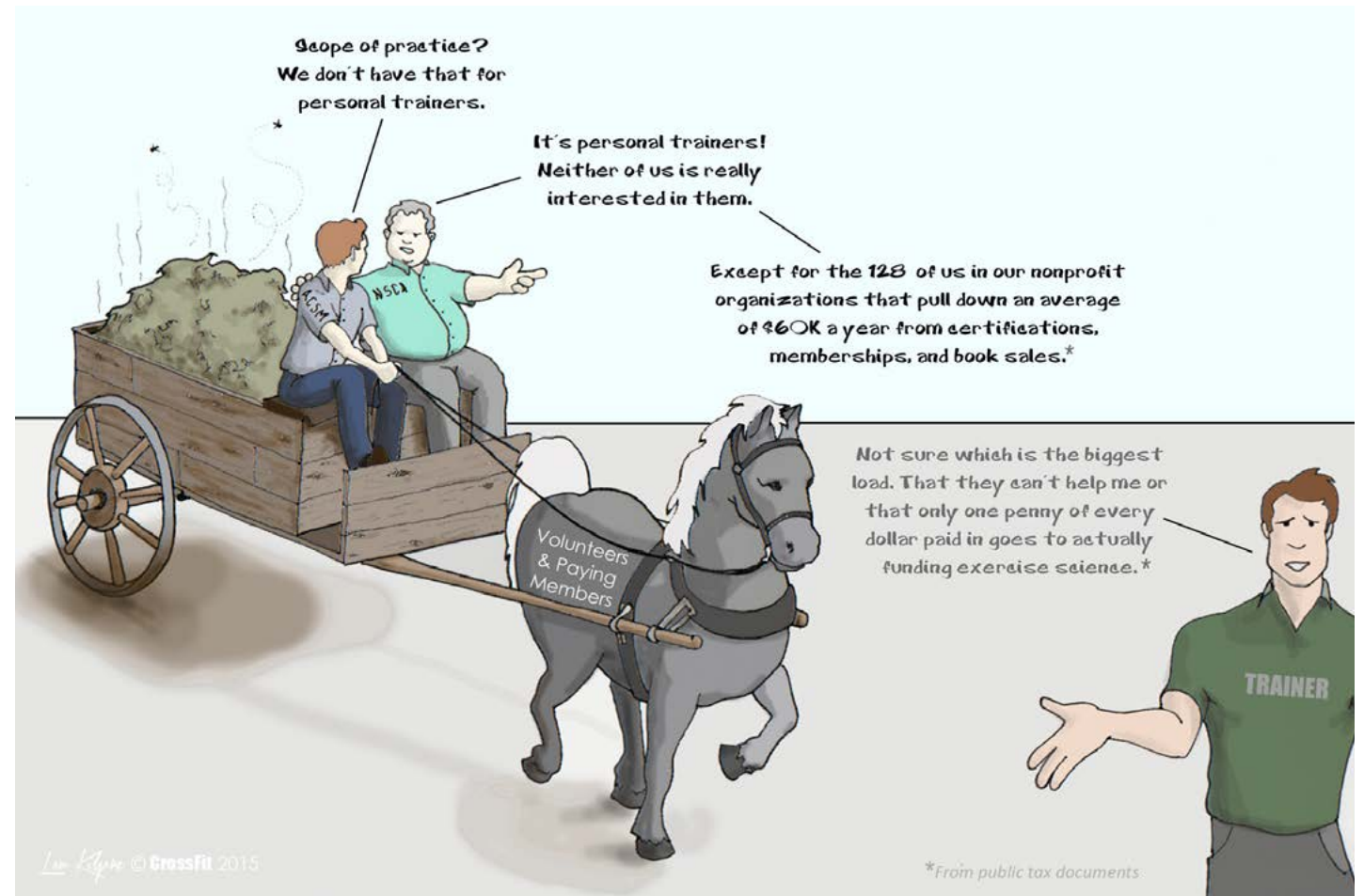
If we consider the CrossFit statement and apply it across the breadth of work done by personal trainers, we can divide the activities within their scope of practice into primary, secondary and tertiary activities.

Primary activities within a trainer's scope of practice are those that directly relate to delivering fitness training to an apparently healthy client:

- Screen for risks, contraindications and limitations to exercise prior to client participation.
- Work with clients to reach their fitness and fitness-associated health goals.
- Design and deliver exercise programs for apparently healthy populations.
- Document client progress.

Secondary activities are activities that are contributory to support of fitness gain or are referent to working with diseased or injured populations.

- Motivate clients to support exercise adherence and healthy behaviour change. A personal trainer should not provide any counseling intended to treat or modify a psychosocial disease or condition.
- Provide general information on healthy eating. A personal trainer should not provide any nutritional advice or guidance intended to treat or modify a disease or condition.



- Follow physician or therapist exercise advice or exercise prescriptions provided to the trainer in respect to a diseased or injured client until the client has been cleared for medically unsupervised exercise. A personal trainer should not independently prescribe any exercise as a therapy or curative for a disease or condition.

- Refer a client to a relevant specialist if the needed service lies outside the personal trainer's scope of practice and training.

A tertiary item within the trainer's scope of practice lies in the business of personal training.

- Conduct business according to common principles and applicable law.

In this context, the Certified CrossFit Trainer scope of practice can inform the wider body of trainers and exercise organizations on the issue of scope of practice.

Intentionally out of Focus?

It has become too common a practice to use the argument that the exercise occupations are so broad and many that a scope-of-practice statement from an organization must necessarily be general to accommodate them all. As the examples here demonstrate, this approach is nonsense and results in failure to describe a scope of practice for any of the occupations to be served, and it leads to confusion as to what a trainer can or cannot do. Organizations whose mission statement refers only to exercise science, clinical practice or strength-and-conditioning coaching cannot effectively represent anyone other than those specifically named in their missions. So who actually represents you?

It should be apparent that any organization claiming to represent an occupation and its members should have true expertise in the occupation it claims to represent. Organizations should provide occupational guidance that is specific, relevant and accessible to their members, and organizations should also be honest and steadfast in their representation of those working within the occupation.



Jeff Rhode

Josh Samra

Kathryn Rowan

The scope of practice frames trainers' work by determining how they motivate and support clients and how they conduct business.

Organizations whose mission statement refers only to exercise science, clinical practice or strength-and-conditioning coaching cannot effectively represent anyone other than those specifically named in their missions.

The failure of the ACSM and NSCA to deliver anything more than a general, nondescript statement that's irrelevant to personal trainers clearly identifies two organizations that have not systematically considered the realities of the personal-training occupation in terms of theory or practice. This may seem a harsh statement given these organizations have produced text-

books on the subject, but if they will not or cannot describe what a trainer can and cannot do in order to develop a relevant scope-of-practice statement, how can they publish anything authoritative on the topic?

Do personal trainers need quasi-relevant guidance from disinvested parties? No. They need qualified and experienced leadership invested in the occupation they propose to serve. Is it appropriate for organizations to dabble in occupations outside their intended and stated missions? No.

Trainers need to take active ownership in, contribute to direction of and be able to trust any organization that promises them representation and the betterment of their and their client's conditions. ■

References

1. American College of Sports Medicine. ACSM's Resources for the Personal Trainer (third edition). Philadelphia, Pa.: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2008. p. 481.

2. National Academy of Sports Medicine. Essentials of Personal Training (fourth edition). Clark MA, Lucett SC, Sutton BG eds. Burlington, Mass.: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2013.

3. National Strength and Conditioning Association. NSCA's Essentials of Personal Training (second edition). Coburn JW and Malek MH eds. Champagne, Ill.: Human Kinetics, 2011. p. 665.

About the Author

Lon Kilgore earned a Ph.D. from the Department of Anatomy and Physiology at Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. He has competed in weightlifting to the national level since 1972 and coached his first athletes from a garage gym to national-championship event medals in 1974. He has also competed in powerlifting, the first CrossFit Total event, wrestling and rowing. He has worked in the trenches, as a qualified national-level coach or scientific consultant, with athletes from rank novices to the Olympic elite and as a consultant to fitness businesses. He was co-developer of

the Basic Barbell Training and Exercise Science specialty seminars for CrossFit (mid-2000s) and was an all-level certifying instructor for USA Weightlifting for more than a decade. He is a decorated military veteran (sergeant, U.S. Army). His illustration, authorship and co-authorship efforts include several best-selling books and works in numerous research journals. After a 20-year professorial career in higher academia, he currently delivers vocational-education courses through the [Kilgore Academy](#), provides online [commentary and analysis](#) of exercise-science papers, and works as a writer and illustrator. His training concepts and fitness standards have been included in textbooks and numerous websites. You can download free PDFs of his exercise performance standards [here](#).