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EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

Degree or no degree, fitness trainers who lack practical experience are still students.

BY LON KILGORE



The state of personal training is such that criticisms are often leveled at anyone who does not have certification A, B or C or doesn't have a college or university degree.

Strangely glossed over in most dialogs of the occupation is experience—or lack of it. Experience obviously affects both personal trainers and their clients, but let's refine the context: A personal trainer who has gone only through an educational pathway without experiencing the rigors of training and the challenges of teaching fitness remains a student and is not an independent and prepared trainer. This is not a bad thing; it simply means that the trainer's education is incomplete.

Trainers who work hard to gain a vocational education and certification are most frequently criticized for being trained and certified without acquiring practical skills. But experience in personal training of clients is largely absent from all preparatory pathways for the trainer, including college and university programs.

Don't Blame the Student

Let's consider the instructor, assuming he or she has completed some type of pre-practice education—which is not a requirement. What is the instructor's background and what teaching is he or she delivering?

Can you learn how to teach fitness from someone who has never trained for fitness or has no experience using those methods on others? You can learn the underpinning science and principles and about the methods to be used in such a circumstance if the teacher providing the instruction is using appropriate source material and if it is presented in a relevant manner linking it to the scope of practice for a personal trainer. But it is unlikely someone without relevant practical experience will be able to deliver instruction effectively without external contextualization.

An instructor who has not gone through an educational pathway, mastered the contents and previously applied those contents to actual trainees is not in a position to satisfactorily teach and assess the competency of others.

Personal training is not just getting someone on a treadmill according to a text. Personal training is not just getting someone to go through a machine-based weight-training circuit following a manufacturer's recommendations. Personal training is not teaching someone how to play a competitive sport according to a national governing body's coaching manual. Personal training is not preparing someone for the narrow physical requirements of a single sport, although similarities exist in some instances.

Personal training is creating fitness to match the desires and goals of the individual, and it requires broad knowledge and practical skills. Practical skill is a noted weakness across education in the fitness industry. So how does a neophyte trainer fresh out of an educational program gain relevant experience before working

with customers? In an overwhelming number of instances, he or she doesn't but actually gains all experience on the job, often with no supervision.

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Learning and Practice

Personal training is skill based, and it is imperative that any educational initiative attend to the practical aspects of training by actually placing the student in a practical learning environment, not just in a lecture hall or library.

A **plumber apprentice** will have about 200 hours of classroom instruction per year and about 2,000 hours per year under the supervision of a master plumber. This is a long-term process leading from apprentice to journeyman to master in a very technical occupation.

Much more similar to the demands of a personal trainer is a home health aide. Such an aide must have about 150 hours of classroom instruction and approximately 550 supervised experiential hours to receive an **entry-level certificate**, and he or she is required to complete an additional two levels of apprenticeship to be fully qualified (approximately 2,100 hours in total).

Only one educational system in the fitness industry supplies a similarly robust set of educational and practical requirements. The CrossFit system is a pathway of combined instruction and practical experience. To become a **Certified CrossFit Trainer (CCFT)**, a student must acquire 32 hours of lecture and practical study when earning CrossFit Level 1 and Level 2 certificates. This is about the same as a two-credit-hour university course. The CCFT candidate must also acquire 750 verified practical hours training clients in the CrossFit method. (An alternate path requires 1,500 hours of verified general-physical-preparedness strength-and-conditioning instruction at the collegiate level or higher.) Finally, the candidate must pass an examination. The CCFT credential, accredited by the American National Standards Institute, requires maintenance through 50 continuing-education units and 900 coaching hours (300 per year) every three years.

All this does not consider the amount of independent study in the preparatory process—probably about another 64 to 96 hours, as would be recommended for any college or university study. The



Practical education is common in many fields, but not in personal training.



At the CrossFit Level 1 Seminar, attendees learn by coaching and being coached.

750 required practical hours would be equivalent to 12 hours of university credit if applying standards of 60 work hours per credit ([Michigan State University kinesiology internship](#)).

Trainers with the CCFT credential can later take a performance exam and achieve the Certified CrossFit Coach credential (CCFC).

An apprentice home health aide spends 62 percent of time in class and study and 38 percent of time in a practical work environment. Prior to qualification, an apprentice plumber spends 30 percent of time in class and study, with the other 70 percent spent in a practical environment. Before qualifying to take the CCFT exam, a trainer will have spent 13 percent of time in class and study, with the remaining 87 percent of time spent in required practical work experience.

All other major personal-training certificates or certifications are based completely on class and study time, with no required person-to-person practical elements. It is also apparent that CrossFit is much more similar to apprenticeship programs than it is to university exercise-degree programs, in which it is typical to find 93 percent or more of the student's time in class or study and 7 percent (or much less) spent acquiring practical experience in the workplace.

Anyone Can Do It?

It is often thought anyone can be a personal trainer because it is simply an extension of training yourself at home. This sentiment was created largely by the advent and availability of home exercise equipment and fitness magazines, and we know it is incorrect. Without proper preparation, success in training is an accident of parroting and not the result of an individual's ability to create fitness in another.

This concept also crosses over to higher academia, in which it is extremely common for instructors to be assigned courses in areas where they have limited knowledge—an issue of economy. This is why so many instructors of all ranks in higher academia frequently select textbooks based on availability of instructor support packages—publisher-prepared PowerPoint lecture slides, instructor notes and test-question banks based on the text selected.

This is not specifically a criticism, as historically all academic ranks below professor are in the process of learning. Traditionally, entry-level academics assisted with writing down what professors said in order to create transcripts. Middle-level academics would read those transcripts to students who would copy them down (the origin of recitation and note taking). Professors would think and research on their academic area, then pontificate in addresses to students and lower-level academics.

In modern academia, the lower ranks (lecturers, instructors,

senior lecturers and assistant professors) are seen to be educated but still requiring development—but the context has changed. The development now required is creation of a line of research, publication and grant awards. This is academic development that is generally not applicable to actually teaching students how to train a brand new apparently healthy gym member. There are no professors of personal training.

And we can't single out colleges and universities. Similar to the widespread concept that anyone can be a personal trainer or coach, the fitness industry is negatively affected because it appears that owning or leading a personal-training corporation does not require education in, training in or an intimate familiarity with the field of personal training.



The executive staffing of commercial fitness certifying corporations is an interesting mixed bag of qualifications:

- **Linda Pfeffer**, the founder and CEO of the for-profit Aerobics and Fitness Association of America (AFAA), is a registered nurse with no evidence available of any work with clients in a fitness setting. Formerly the largest certifier of personal trainers in the world, with approximately **350,000 certified since 1983**, the AFAA was recently **purchased** by the National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) in August 2015. The AFAA at one time required passing a practical test, but it appears that this is no longer the case per its website.

- The NASM is led by **Andrew Wyant**, a Wharton School of Business graduate with a wealth of high-level marketing experience. Brad Tucker, the immediately past vice president, was a sales specialist with two years' experience as a minor-league baseball pitcher. Its founder, Micheal Clark, is a doctor of physical therapy. With the acquisition of the AFAA, the NASM (which began operations in 1987) became the largest credentialing organization for personal trainers. The NASM currently offers one personal-training certification with two levels.

- The next largest certifier of personal trainers is the International Fitness Professionals Association (IFPA). Established in 1994, it has delivered approximately 300,000 personal-training credentials to date. The IFPA is owned by **Jim Bell**, who holds a master's degree in management engineering, an MBA, and a master's degree in exercise physiology. He was later awarded doctorates in sports and fitness training and medical fitness specialization by the Fitness Institute of Technology, an unaccredited for-profit school-college-university he also owns.

- The International Sports Sciences Association (ISSA) is the fourth-largest commercial provider of personal-training credentials, with approximately 200,000 granted since it began operation in 1988. **Sal Arria**, the co-founder and CEO of the corporation, was a practicing doctor of chiropractic from 1976 to 1996 and was also a nationally ranked powerlifter (third place in the 220-lb. class in the 1988 United States Powerlifting Federation nationals). Fred Hatfield, the co-founder and president of the corporation, is a former world-champion powerlifter who holds a doctorate in sports sociology. At one point in its history, the ISSA added Charles Staley, a long-time sports strength-and-conditioning specialist with personal-training experience, to serve as vice president of program development and bolster the executive knowledge base specific to personal training. The last of the executives, Patrick Gamboa, the COO, is a former biology teacher and track coach with an interest in natural bodybuilding.

- CrossFit is fifth in delivering trainer credentials. Unlike the other top companies, it was established as a partnership of two working personal trainers and is currently owned and directed by **Greg Glassman**, one of the original personal trainers. The certi-



Christopher Nolan/CrossFit Journal

The CrossFit Level 1 Seminar is characterized by breakout groups in which attendees watch an expert improve movement in a group setting.

fication system evolved over many years from a small training system completely designed and taught by the owner to a multi-national education and assessment system. CrossFit has credentialed approximately 120,000 trainers, and in respect to experience, CrossFit is the only major credential available for trainers that provides formative practical assessment in its courses and requires occupational experience in a gym working with clients in order to advance within the system.

If having leaders who have personal-training experience is important for creating and delivering a certification that is responsive to both trainer and client need, work is needed at the highest levels of most for-profit corporations in order to make applicable education and experience at least as important as marketing. With the presence of personal trainers at the executive level, CrossFit and the ISSA seem to have considered the need for executive preparation and experience in their staffing.

But it is not only profit-generating corporations that market and deliver certifications. Not-for-profit corporations (US 501c3) also market and deliver personal-training certifications. These are corporations that are, by definition, organized and operated exclusively for religious purposes, charitable purposes, scientific purposes and so on. They operate essentially the same way as for-profit corporations, except their profits—more appropriately called “surplus”—are used in furthering the mission of the corporation and are not taxed (thus a larger surplus to spend). Many fewer not-for-profit corporations offer personal-training credentials, and these organizations are frequently presented as being of higher quality than for-profit corporations. This, however, is not the case in respect to corporate leadership (among other areas).

- The **American Council on Exercise (ACE)**, with more than 67,000 credentials sold, is the largest nonprofit corporation in the personal-training market. Its CEO, Scott Goudeseune, comes from a background of 30 years working in sales and marketing. One of the executive group, Cedric Bryant, does have related but not specific experience in teaching and programming exercise, with four years of experience as an NCAA strength coach working with athletes in a sport context. He also has five years in higher education and eight years in development of commercial fitness equipment, after which he joined ACE as a vice president responsible for education services and science. Graham Melstrand, another member of the executive group, has a bachelor of arts in physical education but has been in sales-executive positions since 1995 (16 of those years with ACE). Another member, Kerri O'Brien, holds an MBA and is certified by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), but she has spent all of her professional career in marketing and sales. The other two executive members—Carolann Dekker and Amanda Cass—are from business and accounting backgrounds.

- The NSCA is the second largest nonprofit corporation selling personal-training credentials—approximately 40,000 to date. **Michael Massik**, the NSCA's new chief executive officer, spent over a decade as a marketing manager for The Brown-Forman Corporation (owners of Jack Daniel's, Finlandia and many other brands of liquor and wine), ran his own marketing consulting firm specifically targeting national governing bodies for sport, then sequentially acted as CEO for USA Fencing and USA Weightlifting. Marketing is a key feature of the NSCA executive, with 40 percent being marketing staff. Contrast this with one mem-

ber—Keith Cinea—with 18 months' work experience in strength training at a local YMCA, one member—Torrey Smith—with a little over four and a half years of work experience in a clinical rehabilitation setting, and one other member—Carwyn Sharp—whose NSCA bio claims 14 years of coaching experience (marathon and triathlon sport coaching, not personal training). The remaining executives represent administration, accounting, engineering and event planning.

- The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) is the third largest nonprofit corporation selling personal-training credentials, approximately 25,000 since it began credentialing operations in 1975 (see pages 28-30 for executive staff directory). ACSM CEO and executive vice-president Jim Whitehead has degrees in history and political science and has been in organizational executive positions for nearly 30 years, first with the American Academy of Otolaryngology (1987-1990) and then the ACSM (1990 to date). Lynette Craft, vice president for evidence-based practice and scientific affairs (responsible for position stands), has degrees in psychology and kinesiology with specific clinical

interests and experience in higher education. Adrien Hutber, vice president for Exercise Is Medicine, has degrees in physical education and sport science, kinesiology, and physiology. His work history encompasses seven years working for a textbook publisher developing online learning, one year at the ISSA, and eight years (to date) overseeing a “unique global health-care focused program.” Paul Giese—vice president of strategic partnerships, who states his **impact on the ACSM** includes increasing conference revenues by 35 percent and new funding by US\$500,000—is a marketing specialist with a journalism degree. His previous experience was in sales and marketing. Richard Cotton, national director of certification and registry programs, has degrees in economics and exercise science, and he worked in clinical-exercise environments for 11 years before working for the ACE in an executive role, then moving to the ACSM.

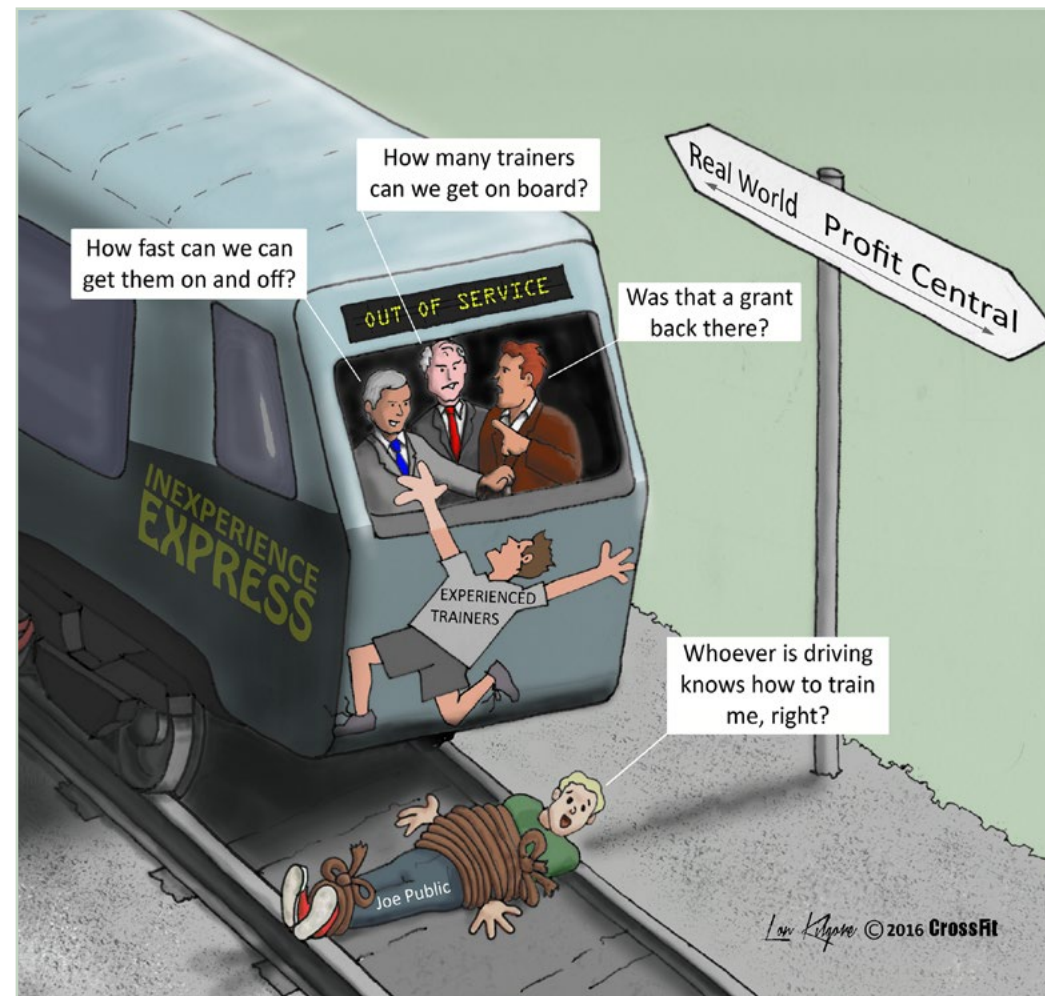
Persons with experience in personal training are not present in these executive groups, so is it any wonder that information from those organizations is lacking in quality and applicability to everyday practice in personal training? With sales-and-marketing staff leading most of these organizations, it appears they are most intent on selling their wares, not on leading and developing the occupation of personal training.

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On a mission?

When we consider a not-for-profit organization's offering of personal-training credentials, we really need to consider if it is truly qualified to be a not-for-profit corporation. According to the IRS interpretation, nonprofit status is not warranted if an organization's “approach is not aimed at developing the audience's understanding of the subject matter because it does not consider their background or training.”

ACE—“ACE's mission is to ensure people have access to well-qualified health and fitness professionals and health coaches, and science-based information and resources on safe and effective physical activity, so they may get active, establish healthy behaviors, and live their most fit lives.” Source “ACE



Certification Candidate Handbook.”

NSCA—“As the worldwide authority on strength and conditioning, we support and disseminate research based knowledge and its practical application to improve athletic performance and fitness.” Source: [NSCA website](#).

ACSM—“The American College of Sports Medicine advances and integrates scientific research to provide educational and practical applications of exercise science and sports medicine.” Source: [ACSM website](#).

Do we see an obvious consideration of developing personal training in the mission statements of the top not-for-profits? It really appears that ACE is the only leading not-for-profit corporation to overtly identify and directly attend to the body of personal trainers it serves in its mission, but it still does not require some demonstration of practical ability or experience in its education system.

Is it fair to criticize an organization’s leadership if they were hired simply to increase membership, add and sell products to those members, and to conduct standard corporate operations?

Certainly it is. If no one speaks up, can things change?

Hard Decisions

So, if experience is absent from the vast majority of personal-training preparation systems—for-profit, not-for-profit and academic—and absent from their leadership, what can we do to improve? How does one become a more complete trainer?

To quote Kevin Smith, “All I’ve ever lost by trying is inexperience.”

The first step is always to work at applying and developing your craft. Education and even mentors cannot make you a better trainer unless you immerse yourself in the information available and practice your teaching skills, just as you would have your trainees practice their exercise technique.

Future trainers should seek out those educational systems that actually have a practical requirement. They are going to be called upon to use a set of skills to earn a paycheck, and having an opportunity to develop and demonstrate those skills as part of a qualification system is essential.

As members of these credentialing organizations, you have a voice. And those voices from within are needed to move the executives to deliver on their organizational hype. Currently, little more than lip service is given to personal trainers. The cohort of marketing specialists who operate the majority of certifying organizations for personal trainers might be attracting new members in record numbers, but they are woefully ignoring the long-term effects of their actions on trainers and the public.

If experience has taught us anything, it’s that not having any is a liability. ■

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, as a small business owner, 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.



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