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STRENGTH AND CONDITIONS

BY EMILY BEERS

The NCAA says its regulation of strength coaches is aimed at benefiting and protecting athletes. Others say the motives aren't so noble.

Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

When the National Collegiate Athletic Association passed legislation in 2014 tightening requirements for Division 1 strength-and-conditioning coaches, it drew suspicion.

The regulation requires all Division 1 strength-and-conditioning coaches to hold a nationally accredited certification, citing athlete safety and a desire to meet athletes' performance needs as the impetus behind the rule change. But not just any nationally accredited certification is acceptable.

The NCAA wants the certification from one accrediting body in particular: the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).

One of the certifications the NCCA recognizes is the Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist credential offered by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA)—the same organization that, according to documents obtained by the CrossFit Journal, spearheaded efforts to institute the regulation that went into effect Aug. 1, 2015.

"This is a way for the NSCA to look good by saying, 'All Division 1 strength-and-conditioning coaches have their CSCS,' and it's a way for the NCAA to say, 'We care about athlete safety,'" said Colin Farrell, a strength-and-conditioning coach with the swim team at Marymount University, a Division 3 school in Arlington, Virginia. He also works part time as a CrossFit coach at Potomac CrossFit in Arlington.

He added: "Instead of (the NSCA) upping their game and providing a better service … they have tried to regulate themselves into relevance to (increase) their revenue."

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While the NCCA's website lists 16 personal-trainer and strength-and-conditioning-coach certifications under the banner "fitness and wellness," the CSCS is the safest bet for aspiring strength-and-conditioning coaches to pursue, as any Division 1 school will automatically accept it, said John Parsons, director of the NCAA Sport Science Institute.

The only other credentials Parsons named as a safe option were the Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Coaches Association's (CSCCA) Strength and Conditioning Coach Certified (SCCC) and Master Strength and Conditioning Coach (MSCC).

"If member institutions have people with (other) certifications … it will be up to them to determine whether those credentials are acceptable," he said.

Parsons did not elaborate on what the process would be to determine if any other certifications would be accepted. He did, however, note the NCAA's close ties to the NSCA.

"We have a very strong relationship with (the NSCA) and we'll continue to work with them."

NSCA-Driven Regulation

One reason Farrell is skeptical of the NCAA's new regulation is because it limits strength-and-conditioning coaches to NCCA-accredited certifications.

"(It) conveniently left out ANSI (accredited certifications)," he noted, referring to the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), which accredits CrossFit Inc.'s Level 1 Certificate Course.

The Certified CrossFit Trainer (CCFT) credential was accredited by ANSI in September 2015.

CrossFit's decision to become ANSI accredited—as opposed to NCCA accredited—was based on ANSI's more thorough review process for certificate courses and certifications.

Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

As in other industries, frivolous regulation limits freedom for practitioners and limits choice for clients.

CrossFit's decision to become ANSI accredited—as opposed to NCCA accredited—was based on ANSI's more thorough review process, explained Nicole Carroll, CrossFit's Director of Certification and Training.

"It was absolutely a conscious effort (to go with ANSI). We were impressed with ANSI's rigorous processes and standards. ANSI is recognized both nationally and internationally and undergoes review by third-party global accreditation organizations to ensure it is following best practices in its administration of the accreditation program. NCCA does not comply with any such global standards, nor does it undergo third-party review. In short, NCCA does what it believes to be best practice," she said.

Further, while the NCCA's process begins and ends with a paper application, ANSI requires an on-site assessment in which organizations have to prove they are doing what their application says.

"We get audited, so ANSI representatives actually 'visit' us to investigate processes and conduct interviews to ensure we actually are doing what we say we are doing on paper," Carroll explained.

Farrell said he believes the NCAA regulation is based solely around NCCA accreditation—and ultimately leaves out other high-quality certifications and accrediting bodies such as ANSI—because of the group that was pushing for the regulation in the first place.

Jay Hoffman confirmed as much.

In connection with a pending legal action, the former NSCA executive director said it was his role to convince the NCAA to sponsor legislation that would require all Division 1 member institutions to hire strength-and-conditioning coaches who held the NSCA's CSCS credential.

The NSCA's "Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning" contains pages of info on testing protocols, but the certification lacks a hands-on component that would help ensure competency.

Carey Peterson/CrossFit Journal

And in a 2014 press release, the NSCA praised the NCAA for acknowledging the NSCA's efforts for raised certification standards.

The NSCA had pushed for tighter regulations because of more than 20 athlete deaths since 2000, Hoffman said. His statement was reiterated in a May 1, 2014, NSCA press release.

Yet Parsons, the NCAA Sport Science Institute director, did not corroborate.

"It's hard for me to know whether there is a quality and safety concern or not," he said.

Parsons also wasn't able to provide any details as to how the regulation will improve athlete safety, nor was he sure how many current strength-and-conditioning coaches have been affected by the legislation and forced to become accredited since implementation.

"I don't have access to that data at this time," he said.

Ellen Gallagher, a former rowing coach at Boston College in Massachusetts and George Mason University in Virginia—both Division 1 schools—said she doesn't believe the regulation has anything to do with athlete safety.

"I don't think it's making the kids any safer. It's making the NSCA money," said Gallagher, who has held the CSCS credential for five years and owns CrossFit Old Bay in Maryland.

Taking the CSCS exam cost her US$475, and she pays $50 every three years to renew it. Access to the complete study guide cost an additional $417.60. Gallagher said she also spends between $800 and $1,000 a year on continuing-education credits to keep the CSCS valid.

If the NCAA were genuinely concerned about safety in strength and conditioning, topics related to the causes of the 20 deaths would be tested on the CSCS exam, Gallagher noted.

Neither sickle cell trait nor rhabdomyolysis —two common causes of the student-athlete deaths—appeared when Gallagher took the CSCS exam in 2010.

The test covered mostly topics related to anatomy, exercise physiology, biomechanics and some nutrition, she said.

Specifically, the CSCS exam includes two sections:

- Scientific Foundation
- Practical/Applied

The scientific foundation part of the test involves anatomy, exercise physiology, biomechanics and nutrition, while the practical part of the exam covers questions related to exercise technique, program design, organization and administration.

If the NCAA were truly worried about standards and quality control, wouldn't it also tighten regulations for sports teams' head coaches and assistant coaches? Gallagher asked.

"(The head coaches are the ones) who spend 20-plus hours a week with the athletes," she said. "The actual sport coaches—head coaches, assistant coaches, graduate assistants, volunteer coaches—are not required, as far as I know, to have any coaching credentials by the NCAA."

Jamie Pollard, director of athletics at Iowa State University, confirmed the NCAA does not regulate sports teams' head coaches and assistant coaches at Division 1 schools the way it does strength-and-conditioning coaches.

"Coaches of the various sports teams do not have general certification requirements," Pollard said.

When Gallagher was hired as an assistant rowing coach at Boston College in 2002, she didn't need any coaching certifications. She needed a bachelor's degree and one to three years of previous coaching or rowing experience, preferably at the collegiate level. Instead of passing a standardized exam, most college coaches are hired based on their proven coaching abilities to achieve results, Gallagher explained.

"It would seem that the only coaching credentialing body lobbying for stricter standards is the one that will be making money off of the stricter standards," she noted.

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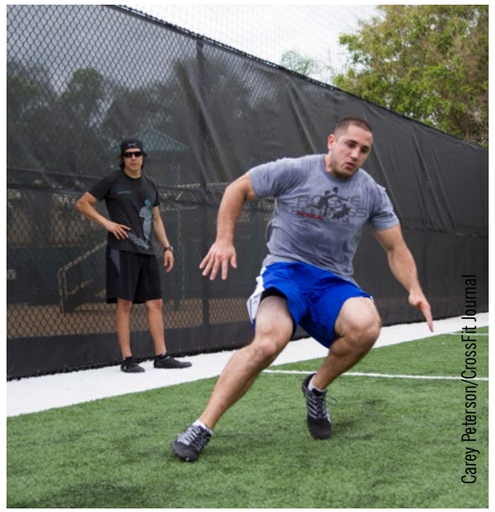
John Meeks (at right) chose not to renew the CSCS credential he held for six years.

Colin Farrell (red shorts) questioned why regulation only applies to Division 1 schools: "They're only interested in keeping Division 1 kids safe?"



CrossFit Inc. emphasizes hands-on training.

Not only does the new NCAA regulation not extend to team coaches, but it also doesn't apply to Division 2 or 3 schools.

"They're only interested in keeping the Division 1 kids safe?" Farrell asked facetiously.

Although the regulation doesn't yet affect Division 3 schools, Farrell recently changed his title from "strength-and-conditioning coach" to "dryland coach" in case the rule eventually trickles down to Division 3 schools.

"It was a pretty easy loophole to get through," he said. "The fact that the NCAA will just let you call yourself something different says a lot about their confidence that universities are already hiring good coaches. It doesn't say much for the NSCA."

The CSCS Problem

Cal Dietz has been a strength-and-conditioning coach at the University of Minnesota for 15 years. When the NCAA announced its new regulation, he didn't have an NCCA-accredited certification. Neither did three of his colleagues, including a 64-year-old strength coach who has been coaching at the school for 30-plus years.

To ensure he remained employed, Dietz signed up for the CSCS exam because the credential seemed relatively easy to achieve. He had to pay $475—which his school covered—and pass a four-hour exam.

Dietz studied the recommended exam material; he had no trouble passing. The test, he explained, was a formality.

"I didn't learn a whole lot of new stuff. Mostly I studied how they were going to ask the questions on the test. I basically had to learn about how to pass that test."

The CSCS exam, Dietz said, will do little to increase coaching quality at the Division 1 level.

"Taking an exam doesn't help you become a better coach. Hands-on learning is where you grow. It takes months to learn what we do."

Farrell, too, is concerned by the CSCS's lack of real-world training.

"Not having that hands-on experience was a big problem in my eyes. It didn't give me a lot of confidence in what the certification stood for or could offer me or my athletes."

Farrell decided against taking the exam.

"You need a four-year degree (to take the CSCS), but it doesn't have to be in a related field. My history degree was sufficient," he said. "I could obtain my CSCS without ever having observed an athlete or client or without demonstrating that I … could even so much as squat."

Strength-and-conditioning and coaching certifications should require a hands-on, practical component, said Chuck Stiggins. As executive director of the CSCCA, he said one of his goals is to "bridge the gap between theory and application" through the CSCCA's certification process.

The CSCCA's certification process is rigorous and time consuming, Stiggins said. It involves a written exam, an internship with a mentor coach, as well as a practical component in which aspiring coaches are tested on their ability to coach in front of a panel of judges.

Stiggins said he believes his organization prepares strength-and-conditioning coaches incredibly well, especially when compared with many other groups.

"I would never bad-mouth another organization, but there's a huge difference between the two certifications (CSCCA and the CSCS). We send hundreds of people to the NSCA who don't qualify to take our exam," he said. "I'll leave it at that."

CrossFit Inc.'s coach-development process is similarly rigorous in that it involves written and practical components, as well as continuing-education and performance requirements. The CrossFit Level 1 Certificate Course (CF-L1) is a two-day course with practical, hands-on sessions and a written test, while the CrossFit Level 2 Certificate Course (CF-L2) builds on the CF-L1 with even more interactive work and feedback in a setting with a smaller instructor-to-student ratio. The Certified CrossFit Trainer credential (CCFT/CF-L3) requires a computer-based test, and those who past the test must accumulate 50 hours of continuing-education credits (CEUs) and 900 coaching hours over the course of three years to maintain the credential. The CF-L4 is a performance test during which candidates are evaluated live as they instruct CrossFit movements; it also requires CEUs and coaching hours for maintenance.

Regulation and Quality

Increased regulation isn't the answer to improved quality, said John Meeks, owner of CrossFit Greensboro in North Carolina.

Meeks held his CSCS for six years but recently chose not to re-certify. The certification wasn't adding value to his coaching, he said.

"It isn't going to change anything. It isn't going to change (strength-and-conditioning coaches') knowledge. It's just a way for somebody to make money."

Farrell, meanwhile, would rather leave it up to the free market—and the employer—to decide whom to hire.

"Universities should have the ability to figure out on their own what makes a good trainer, a safe trainer," he said. "It's just token legislation, a piece of paper that doesn't actually do anything real."

About the Author: Emily Beers is a CrossFit Journal contributor and coach at CrossFit Vancouver. She finished 37th at the 2014 Reebok CrossFit Games.