

## **The Evolution of Intercollegiate Athletics: An Athlete-Centered High Performance Model**

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**INTRODUCTION:** Within intercollegiate athletic departments there exists a growing divide between strength and conditioning coaches, sport coaches and administrators. At the source, lies a deficiency regarding specific knowledge of proper development and management of the physical demands facing athletes. The top-down chain of command that currently governs intercollegiate athletic departments only exacerbates these issues. As it applies specifically to strength and conditioning programs, the question arises about whether top-down governance from athletic directors (AD), associate/and or assistant athletic directors (AAD), head sport coaches (HSC), and even assistant sport coaches (ASC) serves the best interests of their strength and conditioning program and ultimately, the athletes (Hornsby et.al). Though excellent examples of collaboration and professionalism between administrators, sport coaches, and strength and conditioning staffs exist, truly cooperative programs, especially as it concerns interactions between sport coaches and strength and conditioning staff, may be a less common situation, particularly in collegiate sports, than most are aware (Hornsby et. al). Accordingly, it is the purpose of this paper to introduce an athlete centered High-Performance model (HPM) for intercollegiate athletics providing an improved structural framework through which athletic development will be optimally supported.

**CURRENT MODEL:** The current top-down hierarchical model of governance in collegiate athletics positions the strength and conditioning program at the bottom (Chu, 1985, 1989; Duderstadt, 2003; Mason & Paul, 1988). Strength and conditioning programs reside under the governance of the head strength and conditioning coach (SCC) who reports to the AD, who relies heavily on opinions of his/her assistant athletic directors and other sport coaches. The AD falls under the governance of the college presidents, (Chu, 1985, 1989; Duderstadt, 2003; Mason & Paul, 1988). This approach places the strength and conditioning staff in a subservient role, dependent upon several levels of oversight, and without the ability to implement immediate or direct change to the benefit of the athlete. However, the concept of providing ADs unilateral decision making authority is not without opposition – regarding structure, function, and organization is this structure best for higher education institutions (Besse, 1973; Birnbaum, 1988; The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1982; Veblin, 1957)?

**ATHLETIC DIRECTOR & HEAD SPORT COACH:** At the NCAA DI level there has been a decline in AD's having earned a degree in physical education or related field and a corresponding increase in AD's with degrees in sports management or business (Lumpkin, Achen, & Hyland, 2015). Specifically regarding the SCC, this highlights a point of divergence which is compounded by a lower frequency of direct communication with the AD as compared to the HSC. In fact, the disconnect can be so vast that, as one NCAA DI SCC confessed, the AD had never visited the facility to observe the strength & conditioning program first hand (Winkler, 2013). This illustrates an existing divergence regarding an interest and understanding of the importance of physical development and drives the question, "is the health and wellbeing of the student athletes the most important issue?"

Additional sources of contention arise from the AD's responsibility for hiring and firing the SCC. Such decisions are commonly seeded by feedback from coaches or the teams win-loss record and void objective evaluations measuring athletic performance variables (Stone, 2007).

With this in mind, the relationship between the SCC and HSC becomes paramount. The AD's trust resides with the HSC, who, among other things, is responsible for providing a safe environment for student athletes to practice and compete (Duderstadt, 2003). This being the case, the HSC monopolizing conditioning activities is not uncommon. Considering the expertise of the HSC, which reside in technical and tactical development such practice marginalizes the expertise of the SCC (DeWeese, 2012; Hornsby). Therefore, to ensure student-athlete safety in regard to physical training, the SCC may be better equipped to conduct conditioning activities. Based on these limitations within the top-down hierarchical model, the implementation of an athlete-centered high performance model is proposed.

**HIGH PERFORMANCE MODEL:** The High performance models (HPM) can be described as an organizational framework centered on athlete development with the establishment of facilities, resources and structure for optimizing athlete and team performance. Becoming more prevalent at elite levels of sport, HPM have been adopted by national governing bodies in Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain as well as professional sporting clubs in the English Premier League and Australian Football League. Although HPMs remain in their infancy in the United States, especially at the collegiate level. This is expected to change as professional sports teams in the NFL and NBA begin implementing HPMs (Gillett, 2014).

To achieve these desired outcomes, the HPM employs the expertise of a high-performance director (HPD) at the center of the organizational structure. The HPD creates a collaborative environment linking the many systems and developmental capacities underlying the future successes of the athlete. In addition, they facilitate a collaborative and effective relationship with program partners, ensuring the optimum daily training environment (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2013). To accomplish this, a high-performance team (HPT) consisting of specialists from various fields such as strength and conditioning, nutrition, physiology, biomechanics, and psychology is assembled under the guidance of the HPD. The HPT utilize principles of measurement, appraisal, action and monitoring to objectively guide physical training decision. Ultimately, a HPM strives to seamlessly integrate methods from each discipline to optimize individual and team performance, (Badau, Camarda, Serbanoiu, Virgil, & Bondoc-Ionescu, 2010). With the multifactorial nature of athletic development and performances, uniting expert practitioners from various performance related fields into a HPT provides a more holistic environment centered on meeting the specific needs of teams, coaches and individual athletes.

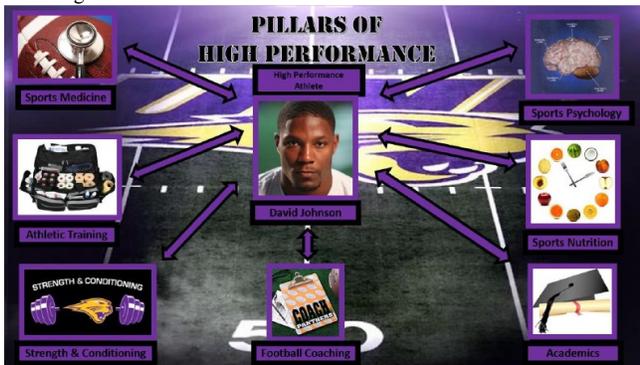
**HIGH-PERFORMANCE MODEL FOR INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS:** As identified by Duderstadt (2003) there is just cause for realignment of the traditional top-down hierarchical structure under which the SCC resides at the bottom. It is our contention that the benefits of implementing an athlete centered HPM will be multifactorial. Central to a HPM is the role of the high performance director. Drawing from Haff (2010) and DeWeese (2012), minimum qualifications for a HPD include certifications relevant to sports performance, a PhD in sports science or related field and 10 plus years of experience in competitive sports as a coach or athlete. From an administrative standpoint, the expertise of the HPD will be appropriately leveraged in hiring and firing decisions, the benefits of which better position the AD and HSC to more judiciously focus their energy on areas such as brand management and technical and tactical development. In addition, this realignment provides for more appropriate performance evaluations for the SCC and other HPT member based on their ability to develop physical qualities and deliver regular and substantial monitoring feedback to the HSC (Hornsby et. al).

Under the governance of the HPD, the SCC is removed from a subservient role under HSC and elevated into a role of greater equality to encourage the creation of essential, unconstrained collaboration between the AD, HSC and SCC.

The University of Northern Iowa have set the example, transitioning from a top-down hierarchy to a more collaborative HPM employing a HPD centered on better serving its athletes.

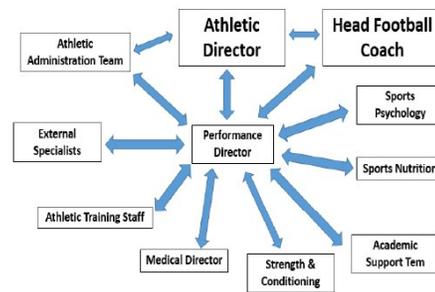
To accomplish this, data related to the defined pillars of performance (Figure 1) are being collected and centralized. The UNI HPM has defined pillars of success which are be used to objectively evaluate overall effectiveness of their HPM over three, five and ten year. Through this system, coaches and pillar directors will communicate with each other as well as with the athlete and UNI administrators, particularly using key performance indicators (KPIs), to evaluate and improve the system through shared objectives (Smith, 2014). Looking beyond the structure for athlete development, the SCC and sports science researchers at UNI collaborate, pooling resources to drive evidence-based practices and facilitate an environment conducive to cultivating the next generation of sports scientists (Smith, 2014). As early-adopters of a HPM model within college athletics, UNI’s athlete-centered HPM will serve as an example for other universities intent on implementing HPMs in the coming years.

Figure 1



(Smith, 2014).

Figure 2



UNI High Performance Model

(Smith, 2014).

**CONCLUSION:** As pointed out by Gillett (2014), the implementation of an athlete-centered high performance model in intercollegiate athletics, although in its infancy, is expected to become increasingly common. As was the case at UNI, turning these ideas into reality depends heavily on forward thinking athletic administrators and sport coaches. As has been the experience of national governing bodies and professional sport organizations having previously adopted HPM, all parties in the athletic department stand to benefit, most importantly the athletes. AD will be unburdened with the responsibility of evaluating strength and conditioning programs, HSC will be empowered to turn greater focus to technical and tactical preparation, and SCC’s will have increased opportunities to appropriately develop the physical qualities necessary for both athlete development and performance. Collectively, the expertise of a HPD, open communication and collaboration between athletes, coaches, and administrators combined with the pooling of resources between athletic department staff and sports science researchers, serves the over-arching goal of optimally supporting the development and performance of student-athletes.

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