



Q & A with Jim Slepica

DS: Give us a brief background about who you are and what you do.

JS: I'm a full-time teacher and a part-time coach at the moment, though for the past 25 or so years, I've probably spent more time in the weight room and on the track / field than I have in the classroom. My sports background is quite varied: having spent a good part of my life in racquet & aquatic sports and wrestling. I also enjoyed downhill & cross country skiing (when my knees allowed me to do them!) My primary sports, however, were football (as a running-back, DHB, and a punter / kicker) and track and field (where I competed in the horizontal jumps, hurdles and throws). I suppose if somebody with a bit of multi-event background had seen me back in the late 70's, I would have been pegged as a decathlete.

I strongly believe that this varied background was foundational to my philosophy of a multi-disciplinary approach to athletic training. I began my coaching career, quite early actually, when as a nineteen year-old, I was giving technical knowledge to my club coaches so they could training me better. I soon found myself helping a lot of athletes, some of whom were a lot older than me. I had begun to read a lot of the top sports training journals from all over the world as a teenager. I had my dad (who was multi-lingual) transcribe some of stuff that was coming out of Germany, Russia and the Czech Republic. At the time, it all seemed light years ahead of what was coming out of North America.

My strength training background began fairly early as well. I began in my shitty high school gym, where I had to improvise a lot, given the lack of equipment, benches and so-forth. My buddies and I used cinder blocks on the ends of our barbells to get enough resistance in our squats and benches. We would load old truck-tire inner tubes with sand and heave them, jump with them and carry them around. I also had my shop teacher weld handles onto heavy chunks of steel: these were our dumbbells and kettlebells. That's partly why I sometimes laugh when people try to pass some of these items off as "breakthrough" training techniques and methodology, when we were using these daily more than 30 years ago. Zach E and Pavel T would have been proud!

Today, I coach primarily in the realm of speed & power, working with athletes in a wide variety of sports, but specializing in track and football.





DS: When you coached track, what were some of the things you focused on with your athletes to get them bigger, stronger and faster?

JS: I used to hear the old adage that sprinters are born, not made. This never sat well with me. After my 2nd knee injury, I began using some crazy strengthening methods to get my quad-hamstring ratios more in line. This consisted of isometric and negative contractions, EMS contractions (almost to the point of tears!) and some hand-held stuff where I had my therapist hold my foot while I applied max contractions through a range of motion. Needless to say, I soon had some pretty amazing posterior-chain development and overall balance. I showed up to football practice after missing close to 3 weeks, and the boys were doing their nightly 40's. After slowly experimenting with my speed tolerance, I decided to jump in on a couple of reps. These were ridiculously easy to run. Our trainer ripped into me for trying to do too much, too fast.. and *especially*, for making my teammates look like they were standing still!

I immediately knew I was on to something, and I've been applying many of these principles in the training of my athletes ever since. My athletes always recognize the value of max-strength & neural power expressed in a timely manner: I always asked my athlete to be at or close to their all-time strongest at the time of their peak competition. This was contradictory to the more conventional training in the earlier years where most athletes would just drop their strength training once the competitive season began. I would always have my athletes perform max-lifts, jumps and throws during the week of, and in many cases, *the day of*, their most important competitions. Neural-activation methods are always practiced, and fatigue is monitored closely to get the largest super-compensation effect.

Speed is trained on a year-round basis, though its various components are given priorities and allocations at different times. Velocity work and mechanics are the centre-piece of most speed training. And though I have used every gadget known to coaches, nothing ever replaces near-max or max reps of short duration.

As far as body-size goes, this is rarely given singular attention. I have always contended that relative-strength is a far more useful quality than absolute strength. Hypertrophy pretty much takes care of it's self, especially with the younger athlete. In a few extreme cases, we even initiated growth-reversal because body-parts were actually getting too functionally big.

The final aspect of training, and maybe the most profound, was what I call "decreased inhibition". Athletes, who were properly trained for extended periods of time, would develop an enhanced state of self-confidence and self-regulation. As humans, we are all naturally regulated by innate self-preservation mechanisms. We tend not to want to explore the limits of our capabilities for fear of injury, fear of the unknown. It's only when we get close to our biological limits do we actually see what we might be capable of. Many athletes set goals well short of their true limits, and are often astounded when we surpass them and go on abilities that might have been un-dreamed-of.





DS: When it came to training, who were your influences?

JS: Initially, there were many writers and practitioners who were influential in my early training philosophies. Gradually, through trial-and-error, making lots of mistakes and weeding out the trash, I can identify those who I consider to be the “real-deal”. I’ve had the extreme pleasure of meeting, speaking and working with these gentlemen in various capacities over the last 25 years.

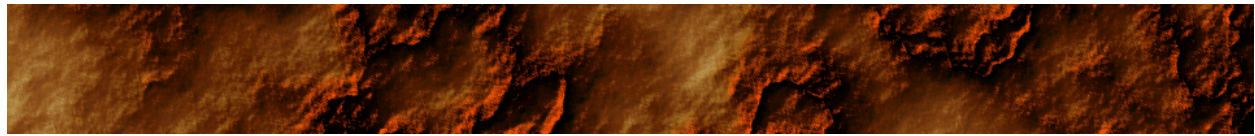
- Gerard Mach** Former Polish national sprints & relays coach who became the Canadian national coach in the early seventies. The grandfather of all current sprint-terminology and methodics. He was light-years ahead of his time.
- Frank Dick** Former Great Britain national coach who has the uncanny knack of taking complex training theories and applying them in simple, usable terms. One of the greatest coaches and coaching leaders of all time.
- Brent Macfarland** The 2000 Olympic Head Coach and author of the Canadian bible of sprints & hurdles in Canada “The Science of Hurdling”. He took Mach’s principles to a whole new level.
- Charlie Francis** The former (disgraced) national sprints coordinator who developed the worlds foremost training groups in the eighties. His NO- BS approach revolutionized modern sprint theory that became the norm for coaches all over the world. Most of us have, in one way or another, adopted many of Charlie’s methods, especially with regard to tapering & recovery.
- Andy Higgins** Canada’s pre-eminent combined events guru. He brought home the value of a multi-faceted approach to total athletic training.
- Dan Pfaff** An American coach who’s claim-to-fame is his work with many of Canada’s most prominent track & field athletes, including former WR holder Donovan Bailey and WC gold medalist Mark Boswell.
- Loren Seagrave** He devised some of the best training & instructional media ever to come out called “Speed Dynamics”. A terrific speaker, researcher, and technician.
- Charles Poloquin** After meeting and chatting with Charles, I can had to re-evaluate my entire philosophy on strength training. His most profound influence on me was what I now call NAM (neuro-activation-methods). These form the basis of all my warm-up patterns for strength and speed.





- Yuri Verhoshanski A pioneer of early Soviet manuscripts on training, primarily the scientific basis of sports movement. His studies on plyometrics and biomechanics were particularly outstanding.
- Dietrich Buchenholz DB is the brains behind the science and application of “Neuro-Dynamic & Auto-Regulatory” training. His philosophy and methodology is now the basis of all of my training prescriptions. His main influence has been the strict controls and monitoring of fatigue in the annual training plan.
- Dietmar Schmidtbleicher His work helped me to clearly define the progressive and accumulative aspect of “overload” in my strength training applications. The emphasis again is the relationships in intensity vs. recovery.
- Tudor Bomba / Peter Tsciene / A Bondarchuk These men introduced the concept of periodization to the western world. In one form or another, I have adopted many of their theories into my practice.
- Istvan Balyi My old mentor at Ottawa U is now Canada’s foremost authority on planning and implementing training practices for peaking at the most opportune time. His insights are brilliant, humorous, and productive. It’s all about the results.
- Dan Millman The original “Peaceful Warrior”. His writings are inspirational, almost spiritual. He made me realize the most important time in ones’ life is “this moment”!
- John M. Berardi No type or amount of training will result in anything if you don’t provide the body with the necessary fuel. This applies not only to pre-and-post training, but to everyday well-being. JB makes sense of all of the jargon and BS out there.





DS: What type of training did you do when you were playing football?

JS: They say hind-sight is 20-20. If I only knew then what I know now.. even 10% worth, I might have become something in football (especially be injury free!) Our idea of strength training was “Wow.. training camp starts in 4 weeks.. Better hit the gym!” Eventually, we recognized that this strategy may have caused more harm than good, so we started to do more in the off-season. We never had strength & conditioning coaches, let alone a program. Luckily, I was involved in track, so running of some sort was always part of the regimen. We did lots of stairs, hill-work, tire-pulls, etc But most of this was haphazard.. there was little to no structure. I would have been the first to get a personal trainer had there been any at the time. Luckily things have progressed quite a bit. Many elite teams now employ strength & conditioning experts, where little is left to chance.

I did believe, as I do now, that SPEED is the most dangerous weapon you can bring to the field. I always worked on my basic speed, and more than any other aspect, this probably took me further than any other attribute.

DS: Parents often ask if weight training is suitable for children. What would you recommend to parents if they are looking for a strength and conditioning program for their kids?

JS: For some reason, there is still a lot of controversy with this topic. Let’s put this one to bed once and for all: weight training is not only suitable for the young athlete, *it’s absolutely necessary!* Never mind that basic strength is fundamental to achieving higher levels of athletic functioning and acquisition of motor skills. From a merely maturational and preventative standpoint, the youngster can save a lot of frustration and potential agony by practicing sound strength training on a consistent basis. This will lead to greater longevity as an athlete, greater enjoyment with more positive self-esteem, and greater chances of future success.

Allow me to also say that, without qualified supervision (instruction, monitoring and feedback) this has the potential to do more harm than good. It is unconditionally important to get someone who knows what they are doing to oversee the training, using a hands-on approach.

Speed training at a young age can be the singular most influential determinant of future success for a young athlete. There is a very specific “window of opportunity” that exists in an athlete’s growth and development where the nervous system is most pliable and susceptible to adaptations from training. If this opportunity is missed, it will be exponentially more difficult to get the athlete up to full potential at an older age.

The best thing a parent can do for their budding young star is to enlist the services of a qualified speed coach. The age-span in question is between 10-13 years. Strength training should ensue sometime in this span, but again.. it must be supervised and delivered by a qualified instructor!





As far as conditioning goes.. this is where I am most leery. At all costs, the young athlete should avoid any type of movement that is repetitive in nature (eg. long distance training). The better approach is one that is more broad- based on a multi-planed scale. Participation in varied activities develops a more complete compliment of the bio-motor abilities required to excel in a variety of sports / events.

I'd like to end this topic with a mild warning to parents: short term, early (childhood) success does not necessarily translate to long term (adult) success. Pre-mature identification to a specific talent area or sport usually leads to an early drop-out of sports entirely. Allow your youngster to experience the enjoyment of a wide variety of sports for the pure enjoyment of it. De-emphasize competition, and emphasize participation.

DS: In your opinion, if a student had minimal equipment to work with, what would you have them focus on?

JS: Become the master of your own body-weight using exercises and activities that require you to overcome gravity and your own inertia. There are literally thousands of movements you can do utilizing circuits, stairs, chairs, hills etc, that can produce outstanding results. Begin with building and strengthening the core before working to the extremities. Base your actions on functionality, using “open” movement patterns on a multi-planer scale.

If I were to choose the minimal amount of equipment to train a student, I would choose the following:

- A set of adjustable dumbbells with the capability to work in the 5-40lb range
- A quality stability-ball (50-60cm)
- A med-ball (3-4kg) or a basketball infused with water for increased resistance.
- A set of blast-straps (or a variation using simple tie-down straps and handles)

I was able to train a 300lb professional lineman using only those items for close to a full year. He left most training sessions totally exhausted, but almost totally refined after the 1st 6 months.

DS: From your experiences working with athletes at all levels, what attributes do successful athletes possess? Who are examples of these attributes?

JS: Without question, the number 1 attribute was ***dedication to training***. This, more than genetics, initial skill-set, ambition, etc, leads to a more positive, long-term outcome. Following the training plan on a consistent basis, with true belief in it (and the coach), with a positive and passionate approach, will make all of the sacrifices worth it in the end.





I've been lucky enough to have athletes in this category, but unfortunately, far more who didn't.

This dedication to training has allowed them to overcome many deficiencies in genetics, technical competency, and innate inhibitions. It also made for a happier, more productive training environment that went beyond the mere coach / athlete relationship.

I can name quite a few athletes in this category, but let me begin with one: Carol Henry. I began working with Carol when she was in gr. 7. She was mostly there because of her older sister, who has in high school, and quite a prominent mid-distance runner. Carol would join in on some of the sessions, and even came to a training camp I held in Arizona one March break. By the time Carol got to high school, she acquired a wonderful work ethic. Though the extent of her talent was certainly not shown early-on, the training was definitely beginning to pay off. By the time she was in gr. 11, Carol was training 11 months out of the year: running cross country in the fall, skiing and indoor track in the winter, outdoor track in the spring & summer along with swimming and windsurfing. She & her training partners would train for 2hrs after school, 5 days a week, with an additional 1.5 hrs, 2-3 days per week in the weight room. On the night of her prom, I had scheduled a weight training session. While most of her friends took the entire day-off from school to prim themselves for the evening, Carol was blasting out sets of full-squats & pwr cleans in a basement gym. She and her training partner Dayna showered and threw on their prom dresses with soaking wet hair, to arrive late for the prom.

That year, Carol won her first gold medal in OFSAA Cross Country, 300m Hurdles, became Canadian Junior Champion in the 1500m and 3000m, and went on to have a hugely successful track career at the University of North Carolina.

DS: Do you have a philosophy or a particular training methodology that you prescribe to more than others?

JS: Sure: Give your athletes only *what they need* – no more, no less.

This over-simplistic approach is the basic framework for all of my programming. Of course, the coach must first know exactly what those “needs” are. Then he must address each of them in a thoughtful, systematic way. The coach must always be able to see the big picture, and know how each component is part a dynamic whole.

The science aspect of coaching must never be underestimated, but it's the ART of coaching that makes the coach / athlete relationship all the more meaningful and rewarding.





Jim Slepica Bio

Jim Slepica is a Physical Educator with an honors degree in human kinetics, specializing in sports physiology, training methodology and motor learning. Having been



a very accomplished coach for 25 years in the high school, university and Ontario track club system, he brings a wealth of experience, energy and enthusiasm to the realm of speed & power training. He is a certified NCCP Level IV coach in the Combined Events, Sprints & Hurdles. Slep is an associate member of the National Strength & Conditioning Association and the Canadian Professional Coaches Association. He has been an Executive Member of the OTFA Coaches Council, and served as the National Decathlon Event Development Chair for Athletics Canada's Speed & Power program. Slepica has coached numerous athletes in all age categories to more than 280 Provincial and National medals and records, and has placed himself and many personal athletes on Canada's National Athletics

Teams. He has organized and directed many training and sports camps & clinics, including numerous NCCP coaching courses and the annual SLEPSPEED S-PAQ Camps.

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