

BUILDING BETTER ATHLETES



Jerry Schmidt's strength and conditioning program is a mixture of high expectations, steely determination and sheer torture.

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

The thunderous clash of iron pounding against steel forms an impromptu symphony that takes on a life of its own, yet at the same time, almost manages to stay in rhythm with the hip-hop beat blasting from the overhead sound system. Muscles stretch and strain and are asked to do things seemingly beyond their capacity, again and again. The machines they pump demand every ounce of power, every drop of sweat.

Like the pistons in a racecar engine, the collective

“I think they all hate me at some point. When we’re in here, we work hard.”

force gathered in the Siegfried Family Strength and Conditioning Center is being pushed to its very limits. Anguish appears to be the common denominator among the rank and file. But it is a temporary state, soon to be replaced by other training rigors sprung from Jerry Schmidt’s voluntary off-season program from hell.

“Seriously, some days are like torture,” says senior tight end Trent Smith. “But you know whatever Coach Schmidt has planned for you during the summer is what you are going to need to be successful when the season rolls around.

“It’s tough. He pushes you as hard as you can be pushed, so you have to be mentally prepared for every workout. We hate him during the summer, but when it comes crunch time in the fourth quarter of games, you couldn’t be more grateful.”

Smith has endured three tours of duty in Schmidt’s demanding program, blossoming from a meager 215-pound redshirt freshman into a solid, 6-foot-5, 235-pound All-American candidate along the way.

“The man knows what he is talking about when it comes to training and conditioning. It’s that simple,” adds Smith.

He should.

Schmidt long has been considered one of the top sports enhancement specialists in the country, having helped revolutionize strength and conditioning programs within the world of college football. During a career that spans 15 years, Schmidt has worked with three Heisman Trophy winners and has coached 19 first-round NFL draft picks.

On top of that, he has been a part of three national football championships, including one at Notre Dame in 1987 and another nine years later at Florida. Most recently, Schmidt played a key role in the University of Oklahoma’s march to a seventh national title in 2000.

“Coach Schmidt has had as big an influence on our team as anyone on our staff,” says Bob Stoops, who worked with Schmidt at Florida and then hired him away when he took the head-coaching job at OU in December 1998. “What he has done is make us as talented as we can be, by making us as fast as we can be, as strong as we can be and as athletic as we can be. He helps us get the most out of each and every player on this team.”

Many believe it was Schmidt’s behind-the-scenes tough love that enabled Stoops, then in his second season, to reverse the

Sooners’ fortunes in such a short period of time. In the five seasons prior to Stoops’ arrival and his recruitment of Schmidt, the Sooners failed to post a winning record.

“I obviously don’t sit around and rank my coaches, but Coach Schmidt certainly is treated and thought of in the same respect as every single one of us, including me and all of our staff,” says Stoops. “He’s definitely a key figure, and that is true about his



Quarterback Brent Rawls, left, and defensive ends Jonathan Jackson and Dan Cody brave the hot July sun as they perform agility drills on the grass at the John Jacobs track facility, just one phase of the voluntary conditioning program for Sooner athletes in the off-season.

role in our winning the national championship.”

Now in his fourth year as director of sports enhancement at OU, the 39-year-old Schmidt continues to focus on his career objective of building better athletes. His backbreaking workouts remain legendary. And in reality, his propensity for demanding more and getting the most out of his athletes is what has set him apart.

“I think they all hate me at some point,” smiles Schmidt, referring to his varying popularity with the athletes he trains. “When we’re in here, we work hard. There’s no question about that. Over the years, I’ve learned, in the right progression, the body can handle more than you think it can. It’s just a matter of athletes having the confidence to accept what you are trying to do and getting the right amount of feedback.

“They know we care about them, and everything we do is to try to make them better. It’s hard, but with the proper dedication, it works.”

Schmidt, obviously, has been witness to the success that often

accompanies the dedication and sacrifice served up by so many young athletes. Much of his philosophy dates back to his own collegiate experience under the tutelage of mentor Boyd Epley, considered one of the pioneers of strength and conditioning in college athletics.

"It's not all fun and games. You're going to drive some people off," says Epley, who has been Nebraska's director of athletic performance since 1969. "But Jerry has always been able to relate to the players. He has a great passion for his athletes. Add in the fact he's a hard worker who takes so much pride in his program, and that's a pretty good formula for success."

Schmidt's expertise extends well beyond fitness, pumping iron and the proper diet. His work with athletes involves the senses and incorporates the human spirit at many different levels, thriving mostly on motivation and sacrifice. Despite his austere reputation, he has repeatedly built an undeniable rapport with countless numbers of young men who put their athletic well being in his hands on a daily basis.

Trust, says Schmidt, is one of the main keys to his program's success.

"If the athletes see the results, they are going to work that much harder for you. If they aren't seeing any progress, then there is no way to build that relationship with them," he says. "Not everyone responds the same way. You have to study people and learn what makes them tick. You have to be able to push the right buttons to get them motivated to work, so they get the most out of their abilities."

Stoops emphasizes the importance of a good training program, and he believes Schmidt's influence on young athletes in OU's system is immeasurable. That was one of the qualities that he originally noticed about Schmidt while the two were at Florida.

It did not take long for Schmidt's influence to take hold in Norman.

"Some of the things we do are almost impossible for your mind to conceive, but Coach Schmidt helps you through it," offers senior defensive back Andre Woolfolk. "He plays a big role in how we perform on the field. What he pushes us to do



LEFT: No stranger to Schmidt's strength and conditioning and Anderson's rehabilitation programs, OU's 2000 National Championship quarterback Josh Heupel, right, was on campus and in the Siegfried facility this summer working to overcome a wrist injury that sidelined his professional career and brought back memories of an agonizing senior season playing through the pain of an injury to his throwing arm.



Throughout the off-season, a steady stream of Sooner football players cycles through the Siegfried Family Strength and Conditioning Center in the Barry Switzer Center as part of the rigorous program designed by Coach Jerry Schmidt to maximize the physical and mental preparedness of the athletes in his charge. Demanding as Schmidt's routines are, players know that their summer suffering pays big dividends once the season begins.

physically really plays into your mental game and becomes a strength. He plants that in your mind."

Schmidt realized after his first meeting with Oklahoma players back in December 1999 that they were hungry for success and willing to do whatever it took to win.

"I knew right away they were willing to work, and that's where it starts," he says. "Then they went out and dedicated themselves to getting it done."

Just over 12 months later, the Sooners polished off a perfect 13-0 season by beating Florida State in the Orange Bowl. The victory gave OU the 2000 national title and opened the door of opportunity even wider for more football success.

Having experienced two other national titles, Schmidt knew his celebration period would be brief before turning his attention to the future.

"It's nice to know you won a championship, that's what we are working for every season. But before you know it, you've got

to go out and prove yourself all over again,” he says. “I think you’ve always got to raise the bar, raise the standard. You’ve got to make it tougher and more demanding, just making sure your guys don’t get complacent.

“When fall rolls around, everybody is at the same starting point again. You just try to make sure your guys have prepared themselves better than everyone else.”

Schmidt has a different routine planned for the Sooners every day during the voluntary summer workouts. He likens it to an actual game where the players never know what is going to happen from one play to the next.

“It helps keep their minds sharp,” he says. “I want them to always be on edge and always be ready for anything. That’s a big part of being a top-level athlete, being able to handle tough situations.”

Ironically, the 2001 football season tested the entire OU program with one tough situation after another. Any hopes of repeating as national champs were wiped away by a rash of injuries, a factor the Sooners barely had to acknowledge the previous fall.

In the midst of the growing casualty list, Schmidt’s staff found itself working around the clock with the OU training staff, headed by Scott Anderson. Their tag-team efforts were significant in keeping some players in the lineup and allowing others to rehabilitate as expeditiously as possible.

Quarterback Nate Hybl played with a serious shoulder injury over the final eight games, while backup Jason White, who became the starter midseason, suffered a season-ending knee injury in the Nebraska game. A week later, Woolfolk went down with a knee injury. As many as five other starters, including offensive lineman Wes Sims (knee), Terrance Simms (knee), Damian Mackey (spine), Josh Smith (head), also missed significant action.

“I want them to always be on edge and always be ready for anything. That’s a big part of being a top-level athlete, being able to handle tough situations.”

“You go into every season knowing it’s going to be different than the last. Our injuries were a lot smaller during the national championship season,” says Schmidt. “We didn’t train any differently, but obviously the number of injuries we suffered was greater. It proved how critical it is for a training staff and a strength staff to always be on the same page.”

A good line of communication is at the heart of that working relationship, according to Schmidt. He applauds Anderson’s staff for the significant effort it puts forth in the rehabilitation of players like White, whose knee injury required a six-month recovery process.

“Within that six-month period, there is a progressive return to different activities,” notes Anderson, OU’s head athletic trainer for the past five years. “Through communications with



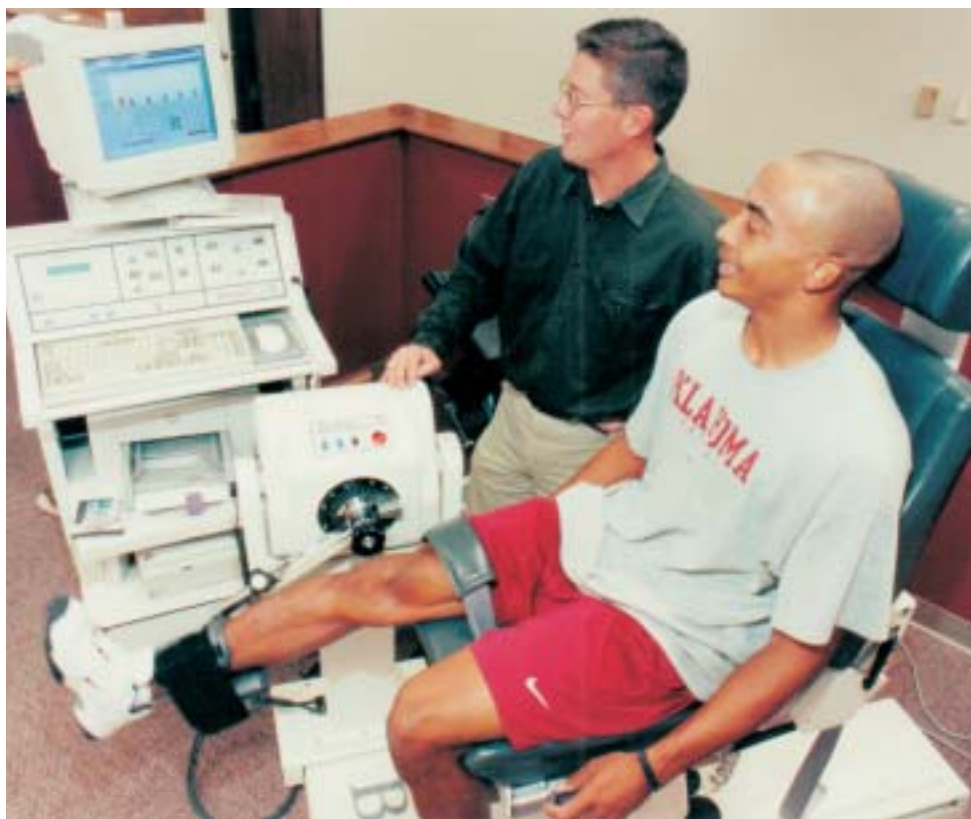
ABOVE: Under the watchful eyes of Jerry Schmidt’s assistants Scott Kolok and Tim Overman, at right, defensive back Andre Woolfolk, far left, goes through summer drills at full strength, a tribute to the team approach to rehabilitation that brought him back from a season-ending knee injury in 2001.

RIGHT: Last spring Woolfolk was a familiar sight in head athletic trainer Scott Anderson’s rehabilitation facility where he worked under the supervision of rehab coordinator Jim Hillis.

Jerry and his staff, we let them know at what point and time (White) could do select workouts. Typically, we are aware of what the strength staff is looking to do, and we’re going to have a plan and a protocol with our medical staff.”

The recovery of defensive back Michael Thompson, who missed the entire 2001 season after a near-fatal automobile accident, has been nothing less than miraculous. Anderson believes the work Thompson did in Schmidt’s program prior to the accident has worked heavily in his favor.

“The odds were definitely stacked against Michael. One of his injuries had only a 20 percent chance of recovery, and without that he doesn’t return to play,” says Anderson. “But Michael had being young and being in great physical condition on his side. The work he put in during Coach Schmidt’s off-season program was significant, and he has maintained a good attitude and work ethic throughout the rehab process.”



Jim Hillis, rehabilitation coordinator on Anderson's staff, began working with Thompson almost immediately after he was released from the hospital. Their dedication and teamwork allowed Thompson to return in time for spring practice, and he is expected to see significant playing time as a junior this season.

Schmidt has been around long enough to know injuries are among the intangibles that can either make or break a football program. He also knows there are ways to help minimize those issues.

"There's no doubt conditioning makes a difference in preventing injuries during the course of a season," says Schmidt. "The real key is to go into the season in the best shape you can possibly be in. Sometimes you have things happen you can't control, guys get in a bad situation in a pile or on a certain play. You just hope to avoid those as much as possible."

Schmidt credits athletic director Joe Castiglione for providing support and seeking resources, which include the \$7.5 million Barry Switzer Center, a state-of-the-art athletic facility featuring the 13,000-square-foot Siegfried Family Strength and Conditioning Center. He also credits his staff with much of the success that usually is pointed solely in his direction.

"My guys have a role just like everyone else," he notes. "It's like a big puzzle, everyone's got to bring their piece and make it fit before you can see the whole picture. Our part of the puzzle is to get these athletes in the best shape possible and to get them as strong as possible."

"We've got new equipment, and we try to stay up-to-date with all of the latest technology available to help all of our athletes, from football to tennis to soccer."

Schmidt's wife, Robin, is also a key figure within the OU Athletics Department, while working to enhance the women's side of things. As an assistant strength coach, her main focus is on the women's basketball program, and she is also the coordinator for nutrition education among all Sooner athletes.

"You learn new stuff every day in this type of work, and it's exciting. That's why Robin and I got involved. It's good to have someone who understands and shares that," says Schmidt. "Robin does a great job with the women's athletics here. She pushes her players maybe even harder than I push (in football)."

He would probably get an argument there. But no one is arguing the significant role Schmidt has played in the recent success of OU athletics, especially on the football field.

"There are a lot of factors involved in the coming together of this program, and I'd have to say Coach Schmidt is one of the biggest. I mean that," adds Nate Hybl, a 6-foot-3, 215-pound senior quarterback from Hazlehurst, Georgia.

"You could feel the whole atmosphere changing under his direction. It's been well-documented how ruthless his program is, but it really sets the tone for the guys we have on this team, and for the kinds of guys we don't have on this team, more importantly."

Maybe tough love isn't so bad after all.