

## Critical Thinking????

Todd Hamer

As a strength and conditioning professional we must wear many hats. In our roles we must train our athletes to not only be better physical specimens but additionally we MUST make our athletes better people! I can not even begin to tell you how many times I have had to help an athlete with something outside the world of strength and conditioning. I have dealt with athletes and their family issues, helped with job hunting and even been to weddings of some of my former athletes. As I tell you this understand that I see my job as an educator. I work for Robert Morris University which is an institution that educates students and I am just a cog in the inner workings of RMU.

When I began my career as a strength coach I truly believed that my job was to make my athletes stronger, leaner, more explosive and create less injuries in these athletes. I still believe that this is a major part of my job at RMU. As I have aged I have really began to appreciate how educating my athletes will make them much better in their sport as well as in their lives. An obvious question you might be asking yourself (other than why do I read Todd Hamer's articles?) is what does any of this article have to do with critical thinking? To answer this question we must figure out what critical thinking is?

In order to write this article I searched many definitions of the phrase critical thinking. What I learned from my research is that critical thinking is the ability to think through a problem and come to a confident conclusion to the problem at hand. As a society we have begun to lose the ability to think critically through a problem. If you do not believe me read any of the books written recently or watch the news. We want "experts" to give us answers instead of allowing "experts" to give us information and for us to make an informed decision. To illustrate this point I will am going to tell you about two books I recently read and how each makes and does not make one think critically.

The first book is "In Defense of Food" from Micheal Pollan. Micheal Pollan's book gives the reader information tells the reader the facts and lets the reader make a decision. Whether it is the difference between organic and non-organic or free range vs. caged chickens, the reader is given the information and then asked to make an informed decision. To quote an interview I heard with Micheal, "I am not here to tell you what to eat." What this means is think for yourself and decide based on the information provided. This is critical thinking!

The second book is, "Skinny Bitch" written by, Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin. One of my female athletes gave me this book to read and give me her opinion on the book. This book tells you what is good and bad to eat. Also, it gives you sample meals as well as explaining to the reader why they should not eat meat (this is a touchy subject and I do eat some meat). But, my concern when one of my athletes reads this book is that it makes your diet right and wrong. This reduces critical thinking as it gives you information and then gives you the solution without letting you think through the problem.

As I hope I showed you with these two easy examples critical thinking skills are fading and authors of many popular books realize this. I will never say do not read book A or book B because I believe that all books will assist in educating us. That being said it is important for the reader or student to understand how to think through the problem.

Now as a coach you must ask yourself how does this affect me? This is simple, when you give your athletes a program or teach them an exercise do you give them the solution without letting them work through the problem? I tell all of my athletes that there are stupid questions. Stupid questions are the questions that you have not thought about before you asked the question. To make this even more specific for us as coaches let's imagine we are teaching a clean. As you teach the clean you teach the front squat, the power position and the difference between the first and second pull. Wait let me take a step back! Have you ever tried to teach the front squat, teach the power position and then tell the athlete perform the lift. I remember Leo Totten once saying name the lift, show the lift, then have the athlete perform the lift. Wow sounds too simple doesn't it? It is not too simple. Just let the athlete try to lift!

Do not over coach the athlete. I have seen many coaches over coach and others under coach and I will not even try to tell you I know the perfect mix, but this is your job as a coach and critical thinker. Give the athlete some information and then let them figure out the solution to the problem. This will teach them a new skill set that they did not have before. I stole a lot of these ideas from Cal Dietz. If you do not know Cal, Google him now (I am not going to spend time doing your work for you). Cal spends time training the brains of his athletes and more of us need to spend time doing this!

Please understand that I am not writing this to tell you how to coach your athletes or what books to read. I am trying to help more strength professionals open their minds so that they can begin to assist their students in thinking more critically. Now go read a book or watch a squat and do not answer anything just ask yourself some questions. Write them down and think about the questions you have before you. Now let your athletes ask some questions and let them think about the questions they just asked. How often will they find the answer is within them they just need to use the critical thinking skills that they have been robbed of as children.

**Todd Hamer** is the head strength and conditioning coach at Robert Morris. Hamer is responsible for designing and implementing programs for each of RMU's 23 Division I intercollegiate sports.

Named head strength and conditioning coach in May of 2007, Hamer came to RMU from George Mason University, where he served in the same capacity since 2004. At George Mason Hamer was responsible for the women's basketball, women's lacrosse, baseball, women's soccer, softball and women's track and field teams.

A graduate of Penn State with a Bachelor of Science degree, Hamer received a master's degree from Virginia Commonwealth University. Prior to George Mason, Hamer was the head strength and conditioning coach at Marist College from 2002 to 2004. He worked with each of the 23 intercollegiate programs for the Red Foxes and was also responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Marist College Fitness Center. Before taking the position at Marist, Hamer was an assistant strength & conditioning coach at The Citadel in Charlestown, South Carolina.

In August of 2001, Hamer worked as a graduate assistant for Virginia Commonwealth University. At VCU, he worked with soccer, field hockey, track and field and volleyball in all aspects of strength and conditioning. He also assisted in the design of a new 5,500-square foot weight room at VCU.

*A native of Moon Township, Pa., Hamer is a competitive powerlifter and competed in the International Powerlifting Association National Championships in 2002. He continues to compete and won the 2001 USAPL Virginia State Championship. In addition, he is a competitive member of the International Power Lifting Association. His best lifts are 545 pounds for squat, 375 pounds for bench and 500 pounds for deadlift.*