



# Master Fitness Trainer Course Explains Whys of PRT

*By Clifford Kyle Jones*

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**Y**ou probably know how to conduct the Army's Physical Readiness Training. But the new Master Fitness Trainer Course is here to tell you why Soldiers conduct PRT — and how they can do it better.

The Army's Physical Readiness Division of the Training Support and Schools Directorate of Initial Military Training at Fort Jackson, S.C., last month began rolling out MFTC mobile training teams at installations across the continental United States. During the four weeks of instruction, prospective Master Fitness Trainers will, of course, learn how to execute the PRT exercises with precision, how to train others to lead PRT and how to recommend unit-level fitness programs to commanders.

But that's just the beginning.

"You're going to learn how the human body functions in exercise," said Frank Palkoska, the PRD's director. "You're going to understand the muscles. You're going to understand how the physiology works. You're going to understand the application of diet and nutrition, and how it impacts exercise performance."

About half the course is classroom instruction; the other half is conducted on the physical training field. Both elements of instruction include a significant

amount of time dedicated to answering the questions these trainers-in-training have about why the Army chose the PRT system and how, exactly, the exercises are tied to Soldier readiness.

"If you're going to teach it, you also need to know the why behind: Why did we develop these exercise drills and activities?" Palkoska said. "They weren't just randomly developed. They were designed and developed to support task performance and to make the Soldier faster and stronger, with an ability to move better."

## Why it's needed

The PRD's latest Master Fitness Trainer program is a retooled version of the program that existed in the 1980s and 1990s but was discontinued in 2001. The end of that program, combined with the high operational tempo that came with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, left the Army in need of a systematic approach to physical readiness.

"So what happened? Without having that advisor to the commander or that subject-matter expert at the unit level, it created a void," Palkoska said. "What commanders did was they went outside to look at programs that



could enhance performance at the unit level, which is the logical thing that commanders would do. They'd always look to see if there was a new technology — applying the current science — because the Army wasn't providing them that expertise. That's why you have these varying (consumer) programs across the Army right now. And that's why you have some of the extreme conditioning programs that may not be applicable to all Soldiers because of their current fitness levels. You have to understand that with any type of unit, you're going to have varying fitness levels inside that unit. So you can't cookie-cut a program and say that one program fits everybody. That's why your program has to be baseline and foundational, and then you build from that."

By necessity, PRT is designed to be a fitness system that is effective for the vast majority of Soldiers — meaning it has to be beneficial for a population at a variety of ages and fitness levels; it has to be inexpensive to implement; it has to be mobile; and foremost, it has to physically prepare Soldiers for combat. Although there are a variety of private companies that claim to boost fitness — and they do — none of them will be as specific to the Army's needs as PRT, PRD staff and cadre said.

"CrossFit and P90X — they're all cool and sexy looking, but at the end of the day, they're form over function," said Master Sgt. Jeffrey Kane, a team leader for the MFT MTs. "Can you train 200 people simultaneously on the CrossFit workout of the day with all the equipment? No.

"On the other hand, you can easily train a basic training company of 200 on the (PRT's) climbing drill — like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "No issues. You can take PRT anywhere, whether it's an open field here at Fort Jackson, or a gymnasium up in Alaska, or a [contingency operating base] in the middle of Afghanistan on top of a mountain. You can still do all those drills, and everybody's the same: There's standardization and there's specificity."

Kane has been at the PRD since October 2012. Before that, he was the first sergeant and at times acting battalion sergeant major for Initial Military Training units at Fort Jackson. In those roles, he had already seen PRT in action. But the training he received at PRD made him appreciate the system even more.

"As a first sergeant, you're monitoring the drill sergeants to make sure they're executing the drills to standard as best they know how. But making the move from there to here, you learn the why behind it all, the science behind it all and then the Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills relationship to the movements themselves," he said. "So if a Soldier is doing the bend and reach, it's no different than sitting in a humvee reaching down between your legs to get a can of ammo to pass up to the gunner. Every movement that we do is done in combat in some form or fashion. Doing the windmill is no different than taking missiles and loading them onto a pod on an AH-64



Proper running form is among the lessons in the Master Fitness Trainer Course.

### More about the course

- **FM 7-22:** The training circular outlining Physical Readiness Training is now a field manual, FM 7-22, Army Physical Readiness Training. It's available electronically.
- **About the Mobile Training Teams:** The Master Fitness Trainer Course has six mobile training teams. Each one is made up of three members — an NCO team leader, another NCO team member and a civilian contractor. The MTs will travel throughout CONUS in fiscal year 2013, but one team will always be leading training at Fort Jackson. "As the teams travel around the Army, they eventually come back to Fort Jackson to teach an iteration here," said Frank Palkoska, the PRD's director. "That's where we have the ability to do our [quality assurance] of those instructors. ... Every single hour of instruction will be looked at to ensure that there's standardization in training and that there's quality training going on."
- **Skill identifier:** Enlisted graduates of the Master Fitness Trainer Course earn the Additional Skill Identifier P5.

(Apache). That's what I found so amazing — every movement, there's a reason for it, and you can definitely see it in combat. So whether you're jumping out of a vehicle or jumping over something, you have to land correctly in order to not be injured, and that all starts every morning doing PRT."

### About the training

For four weeks in January and February, the PRD conducted a course for the contractors who will be part of the MTs and NCOs from across the Army who represented division-level leadership.

"Every time we do a drill, I'll walk up to one of [the Soldiers] and ask, 'How does this relate to what you do in combat?'" Kane said. "Whether you're an infantryman or a mechanic, it's making each movement they do relatable to their job. It's selling it to a certain degree. If I can ingrain it into them now, then when they go back out, when their higher-level leadership asks them those questions, they'll be able to answer intelligently. Because that's where all the resistance is going to come from, the battalion level and brigade level that want to do the same things they've been doing for 15 years."

During the January-February course, Maj. David Feltwell, the PRD's physical therapist and medical liai-

son, taught an MFTC class called Advanced Trends in Physical Training.

"People think, 'Oh, "advanced trends," that must be the latest thing,'" Feltwell said. "But really what we're saying is: Look at how we have to do it, and how difficult that mission is — for combat — and how advanced the program has to be."

In the class, Feltwell describes the conditions under which an Army physical readiness program must operate, many of them regulatory. The training must be essentially free for the Soldier-athletes, it can't be equipment-intensive, it can't require the use of an indoor facility, it has to be able to be conducted anywhere in the world on a small piece of territory in almost any weather conditions, and it has to meet the needs of Soldiers from initial entry to retirement who have a variety of fitness levels and injuries and who may be active duty or in the National Guard or Reserve.

"You can't bring your own personal preferences or commercial product to this population with those constraints. Now you can do it — and that's what's being done — in itty-bitty units and sometimes on larger installations: 'We're going to use this program here.' OK, great, but what happens when you go from there and PCS to this program here. What happens to your

fitness level? And do either of those programs look like what we should be doing in combat? Or are they someone's best guess? With those programs, hopefully, you get lucky and they control your injuries and increase your performance. But let's put PRT in that location, and at least get the foundational fitness to the point where we know we've done that.

"We've taken care of the injury problem as best we can, as best we know. We've taken care of the fitness problem, the readiness issue — we're ready to go to combat," Feltwell said. "And then when we set that foundation — that kind of level playing field across the force — then you can do all kinds of stuff. But in your unit physical training program, we establish a foundation upon which you can do more things."

### Injury control

In the absence of that foundational fitness level, many Soldiers suffer from injuries, Feltwell said, noting that when comparing the "relative load" on the Army associated with



Master Fitness Trainer students do the V-Up, one of the exercises in Conditioning Drill I.





Master Sgt. Jeffrey Kane helps explain some of the benefits and drawbacks of weight machines during one of the lessons in the Master Fitness Trainer Course.

different conditions — “in terms of cost, in terms of hospital visits, in terms of Soldiers going into the hospital” — the load caused by injuries due to muscular-skeletal overuse or athletics far outweighs that of most other individual medical conditions, such as cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease or behavioral health issues.

As an example, Feltwell said that during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 to 2008, the main reason for medical evacuation out of theater wasn’t combat-related injuries or disease — traditionally, the biggest drivers of medical evacuations. It was muscular-skeletal injuries, such as those caused by overuse. And PRT can help, he said.

“I was involved in the most recent validation,” Feltwell said. “We said, ‘We know that this is the smart way to train; we know there are principles in here that have been researched. We need to apply these in places where they have higher injury rates.’ So that’s what we did. We looked at the installations that weren’t doing so well, and we said, let’s teach this program to that organization or installation and track what happens over time. And let’s see if before and after we’ve educated the force, there’s a change in injuries.

“It drops dramatically,” he said.

One of the practical exercises during the course requires students to outline the medical network back at

their home unit so that they are able to connect their commanders and Soldiers with the appropriate health-care providers. The students create extensive contact lists, Feltwell said.

“Not just to your unit, but who’s in the medical facility? Who’s the hospital commander? The sergeant major, physical therapist, registered dietician? Who’s [the Troop Medical Clinic] chief and NCO [in charge]? What are their phones numbers?” he said. Once the students have compiled the list, they “call them all and tell them who you are. They ask for an office call so that they can go in Week One when they get back, sit down and say, ‘I’m a Master Fitness Trainer. The objective of the Master Fitness Trainer Course is to establish a unit-level expert for the commander on fitness and readiness, as well as other health-care issues. I’m not a health-care provider; I don’t diagnose. But you need to know who I am so that I can help your team, and you can help my team better prepare Soldiers for combat.’

“The person in that classroom has to be very smart at relationships, at communication and in their knowledge that they’ve been given in the class,” Feltwell said. “And of course they will know how to conduct PRT as close to the principles and as precisely following the doctrine as possible. It’s the reconditioning, it’s the communication with the health-care team, it’s the broader range of instant access to expert knowledge that the commander will have and it’s the opportunity to control.”

Palkoska noted that there are financial reasons — as well as personnel reasons — for the Army to do everything it can to mitigate the risk of injury.

“Anything we can do to curb training injuries is going to directly impact the bottom line on health-care costs,” he said. “Injuries are one of the highest drivers that we have — lower extremities, lower back, knees, hips, ankles. And oftentimes, it’s due to overuse and overtraining. That’s why one of the things we preach in the MFT Course is, ‘More is not better; better is better.’ It’s the quality of the exercise, not the quantity of the exercise. And that’s one point that we want to get out to the Army: There’s that old-school mentality of how to train, and we know through advances in science that that’s not appropriate.”

As the PRD’s physical therapist, Feltwell is acutely aware of the injury information and accountability void

that existed across the Army. Too often, he said, physical therapists and other medical personnel were forced to work “right of boom” — they weren’t involved until after an injury took place.

“But at Fort Jackson, where we’ve trained and used this system, what we’ve found is that — especially in the physical therapy setting, where we used to have to increase the number of staff we had right of boom to take care of all [the injuries] — we’ve now gotten to a situation where there have been days that those people looked around for patients,” he said. “And so we can move those people into situations where they can take care of the injury before it happens.

“Where this has been taught,” he said, “commanders quickly realize that they have an opportunity to improve their readiness in a way that is cost-effective and efficacious. It does what it purports to do.”

### Height, weight, more

Another void created by the absence of the MFT program was the lack of proper knowledge and implementation of all the regulations and policies that are related to physical readiness, Palkoska said.

“We were one of the only functional courses that taught noncommissioned officers and officers how to execute the Army Weight Control Program to standard at unit level,” he said. “We went into significant depth where they understood policy and procedures as prescribed in AR-600-9 and then also did practical exercise and instruction on how to properly assess Soldiers in the unit who exceed screening table weight.”

One block of instruction is dedicated to the ins and

outs of measuring height and weight, and then taping Soldiers who don’t meet the screening table weights. It’s a thorough explanation and practical exercise that ensures the potential MFTs understand precisely how to execute the policy.

“That’s been somewhat of a problem across the Army,” Palkoska said. “Without training, it leaves the regulation open to interpretation and that can be problematic. We’re teaching it to standard, we’re executing as policy prescribes, and the Army’s going to be better able to uphold the standard specified by the regulation.

“There are several regulations and policy guidelines that impact the Physical Readiness Training program, and they’re covered in the course. So the student gets the Army perspective from the Department of the Army-level on down of how the program is designed and developed, how it should be executed, and what the regulatory requirements are at the unit level. ... An example of that is AR-350-1, *Army Training and Leader Development*, which outlines policy and procedures for the unit level commander to execute the Physical Readiness Training program. But there are other regulations that assist the commander, like AR-600-63, *Army Health Promotion*. You also look at AR-600-9, which is the Army Weight Control Program. There are several regulations that impact it. There are [Department of Defense] regulations that tell the Army how to conduct and execute their programs and how to do body composition assessment. We give all that information to the students so that they understand the *why* behind the program.

“So that’s the why, and that’s why the regulations we teach them — the Army Weight Control Program and



PRD Director Keith Palkoska (right) watches as MFT students practice taking tape measurements.



how to do circumference measurements; that's why we teach the exercise science that we teach; that's why diet and nutrition is so important. We're trying to take a holistic approach to physical readiness at the unit level, because we know the challenges that are out there today for the unit commanders."



MFT students conduct a practical exercise on training the Windmill.

Importance of training

It's a densely packed four weeks of instruction. But once students have completed the course, they not only have a thorough understanding of PRT but also a genuine appreciation for it, said Stephen Van Camp, PRD's deputy director.

"Yeah, I'd love to have eight weeks, but even after four weeks, they're night-and-day different — in the way they speak, the way they understand the program," Van Camp said. "I don't think we've had a graduate in these three pilots who would sit and argue against PRT. Instead, they would probably be a spokesman for us, because even though they were 'voluntold' to come here, now they understand all the whys behind it. They may have different individual fitness goals for themselves, but they know [PRT] is one of the better programs for the Army.

... This PRT that's done at zero-dark-30 will make you a better Soldier for the other 23 hours."

And that's why the Master Fitness Trainer Course is particularly important to the NCO Corps.

"Physical training is NCO business," Feltwell said. "Now, officers should supply the resources to conduct that business, and that might include the program and everything else that goes with it. But it's NCO business. I'm very lucky to be involved with NCO business. It's awesome. I'm fortunate to have been trained by some of the best on how to do this, so I can go out there and conduct physical training. And I know what that does to me as an officer. As an officer, if you can snap-link yourself to a Master Fitness Trainer and ride his or her tails, you're going to be a much better officer. ... NCOs are going to carry the burden, it's their job, it's their business —physical training. When they learn it in this course, all of them will be like, 'OK, this is the real deal. We've been doing PRT, but nothing close to where we ought to be.' It's exciting, it's fun, it's hard —but it's hard in a way that doesn't break you down. It's smart hard."

MFTC FY 2013 MTT schedule

- April 1-26: Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and Fort Knox, Ky.
- April 8-May 3: Fort Sill, Okla., and Fort Drum, N.Y.
- April 15-May 10: Fort Bragg, N.C., and Fort Hood, Texas.
- May 6-31: Fort Stewart, Ga., and Fort Jackson, S.C.
- May 13-June 7: Fort Sill, Okla., and Fort Drum, N.Y.
- May 20-June 14: Fort Bragg, N.C., and Fort Hood, Texas.
- June 10-July 3: Fort Stewart, Ga., and U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y.

- June 17-July 12: Fort Bliss, Texas, and Fort Drum, N.Y.
- June 24-July 19: Fort Bragg, N.C., and Fort Hood, Texas.
- July 15-Aug. 9: Fort Stewart, Ga., and Fort Campbell, Ky.
- July 22-Aug. 16: Fort Carson, Colo., and U.S. Army Reserve (at Fort Jackson, S.C.)
- July 29-Aug. 23: Fort Bragg, N.C., and Fort Hood, Texas.
- Aug. 19-Sept. 13: Army Reserve Readiness

- Training Center (at Fort Knox, Ky.), and Fort Campbell, Ky.
- Aug. 26-Sept. 20: Fort Carson, Colo., and Fort Lewis, Wash.
- Sept. 3-27: National Guard Bureau (at Fort Jackson, S.C.) and Fort Hood, Texas.
- Sept. 23-Oct. 18: Fort Sam Houston, Texas, and Fort Campbell, Ky.
- Sept. 30-Oct. 25: Fort Carson, Colo., and Fort Lewis, Wash.

More in this series

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