



# Performance Triad Fosters Professional Soldier Athletes

*By Martha C. Koester*

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**A** rmy officials are looking to usher in a new era of the professional Soldier-athlete, led by graduates of the Performance Triad course, which was piloted at three Army installations this year. The course focuses on three tenets — nutrition, sleep and activity — as the keys to optimizing Soldiers' performance. After the data and feedback collected is reviewed, which is expected to be complete in the spring, the Army will determine if the Performance Triad concept will be rolled out to the rest of the force.

"This is the stuff that [Soldiers] already do," said Sgt. 1st Class Darin E. Elkins, who works in the rehabilitation and reintegration division of the Office of the Surgeon General of the Army in Falls Church, Va. "They already eat, they already sleep, they are already active. We are giving them a guide on how to use those tenets better."

## **Don't call it a 'program'**

Not to be dismissed as just the latest Army program, Elkins said, the Performance Triad offers an opportunity for real change.

"We see it over and over again," he said, "that Soldiers come into this thinking it is just another Army program, another rock in their rucksack, and they are only there because they have to be. But within an hour of understanding what it actually is, the light goes on, and their attitude changes."

Soldiers are supplied with a guidebook and a Fitbit Flex wireless wristband, which helps track their nutrition, sleep and activity levels. A host of apps for mobile devices, including ArmyFit, MyFitnessPal and Fitbit Dashboard, are also recommended for Soldiers to further record their progress.

"We want to build a more resilient, more ready Soldier," Elkins said. "A stronger Soldier that we can develop into a Soldier-athlete — that's the mission."

## **Prevention counts**

As health insurance costs continue to rise, the Army believes preventive care is crucial in its quest for healthier Soldiers. Long-term health benefits, reducing the risk of diseases and reducing the risk of



health-care costs are behind the Army's commitment to the Performance Triad.

"It's very expensive to bring a new Soldier in, train him, feed him, clothe him. And then, if they're broken, they're of little or no use," Elkins said. "The Soldier's Creed says, 'I will maintain my arms. I will maintain my equipment. I will maintain myself. But how do you maintain yourself? This is a guide to show how you do it.'"

"As a medic, I think the Performance Triad is really good for overall wellness — that the body being healthy can overcome illnesses on its own," said Sgt. Aaron Ormerod of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., the site of one of the pilot courses. "It's a great idea for helping people to help themselves, rather than relying on the Army always handing out antibiotics for every little thing."

During the 26-week course, which was also piloted at Fort Bliss, Texas, and Fort Bragg, N.C., squad leaders educated Soldiers on the importance of nutrition, sleep and activity, using an informal type of setting. Leaders were encouraged to use personal experiences to connect with their Soldiers during discussions.

"Whatever your approach is, we want you to look at your approach, whatever you do to motivate your Soldier," Elkins said during a leaders' course at Fort Bliss. "Again, it's not a program. It's a change in the DNA of the Army, so we change the DNA of society."

"If you are a good squad leader, you are the center of your Soldier's Army universe," said Sgt. Maj. Michel Pigford, a Performance Triad instructor from the Office

"Some of the guys come in here drinking three Monsters a day," said Sgt. First Class Darin Elkins, senior enlisted advisor for the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Division and Performance Triad instructor. "There is an app called Fooducate, and we show them that this is a D- quality food, and these are all of the products that are in it. They are always shocked and say 'I don't want to drink that!' The Performance Triad shows them that there are better options for performance and how it affects their day to day life — in the Army and then beyond." (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

of the Surgeon General of the Army. "The knowledge you get from your sergeant is like no other."

The 3rd Squadron, 38th Cavalry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division at JBLM; the 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division at Fort Bliss, and the 189th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, 82nd Sustainment Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg took part in the pilot course.

"[The Performance Triad] is a tool just like anything else," said Sgt. Brendon Wellendorf of JBLM. "As an NCO, my job is to ensure that my Soldiers are ready for their mission at hand. If they aren't healthy, or they're not physically fit enough to complete the mission, then I failed my job. So this is just another excellent tool to put in the toolbox."

"I want to use this class to learn about the tools ... and how to better talk to my Soldier," said Staff Sgt. Christopher Stambaugh of Fort Bliss. "I know he eats some fruits and vegetables, and he doesn't eat fast food too often, so that's good. But I know he could use more exercise."

## Recipe for success

The Performance Triad formula is simple for building healthier Soldiers. It calls for at least 150 minutes of activity per week, eating eight servings of fruits and vegetables daily, and getting seven to eight hours of sleep a day. It also means cutting out popular energy drinks such as Monster and Red Bull, and cutting back on cheeseburgers.

"I am amazed at how just wearing the FitBit Flex on your wrist makes Soldiers constantly think about that stuff," said Staff Sgt. Adam Wolf of JBLM. "I had a couple of guys who decided not to go eat at Burger King because they didn't want the additional calories on their nutritional sheet. So it's a constant reminder throughout the day that they need to be trying to do things that optimize their performance."

"We're going to give you information on those Monsters [drinks] you love so much," said Pigford during a squad leaders' course at Fort Bliss. "There was a Soldier yesterday who found out that [the drinks] had the same properties as the carpet you walk on. He decided he wasn't going to drink that anymore. But we're not asking Soldiers to cut out everything they do."

Physical activity is another important component of the Performance Triad concept.

"With the Fitbit Flex, we have had an increase in what Soldiers are actually doing," Wolf said. "Now, I

have Soldiers who no longer drive to work from the barracks or drive to the motor pool. They actually walk, because we have a competition to see who can get the most steps in a week. We're seeing Soldiers become more active in their everyday activities versus just doing physical training at one period of time."

When it comes to sleep, the Fitbit can help track the number of hours each Soldier gets, as well as offer insight into patterns and whether a deep sleep was achieved.

"If [a Soldier is] out eating junk food every night and only getting four hours of sleep because they're out playing video games as soon as they get off work, you're not going to have a very effective Soldier the next morning," Wellendorf said. "[The Fitbit] is something that allows you to see exactly what [the Soldier's] performance is when you're not monitoring."

Pigford and Elkins offered a list of information on sleep to a class of squad leaders at Fort Bliss.

"You have lost 20 percent of your cognitive ability just by not getting 6 to 8 hours of sleep," Pigford said. "You wake up 20 percent dumber."

"That means you pull your trigger slower," Elkins added. "That means you drive your vehicle slower. That means you can't process questions as fast. You're not able to respond as fast."



Sgt. Maj. Michel Pigford; Performance Triad senior enlisted advisor; speaks to a classroom of NCOs during Performance Triad training Oct. 3 at Fort Bliss; Texas. (Photo by Meghan Portillo)

## Change afoot

NCOs are the focus of the Performance Triad pilot course because Soldiers and squad leaders are the ones who make things happen, Elkins said.

“If you look at Army programs across the board — Sexual Harassment Assault Response and Prevention, Operations Security — it’s from the leadership down,” he said. “This, on the other hand, is from the Soldier up, how it impacts the unit and on up.

“That’s why we’re doing this — for you,” Elkins told Soldiers in one of the pilot courses at Fort Bliss. “This is not a program, this is a lifestyle. If you want to invoke change, you have to take part. Be part of the change.”

Ultimately, the goal of the Performance Triad plan is not to change people’s minds, Elkins said, but to show that

there are better options to attain an optimal performance.

“I found that Soldiers became significantly more involved, that everyday they were saying things like, ‘Hey, man. It’s 9 o’clock, and I met my goal: 10,000 steps. I think I’m going to up my goal for the next week and see if I can do that,’” Wolf said. “Guys are actually bragging about it. It creates a healthy competition, I think” ■

*NCO Journal* Writer Meghan Portillo contributed to this story.

## For more information

Learn more about the Performance Triad and find some helpful tools at <http://armymedicine.mil/Pages/performance-triad.aspx>.

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