

Is physical fitness overvalued in the Army?

By Maj. Jeff Jager and Aaron Kennedy

Oct. 26, 2016



Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Ash runs during the Oregon National Guard Best Warrior Competition in August 2016. (U.S. Army photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

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Anyone who has spent even the shortest amount of time with the U.S. Army recognizes immediately the importance that is placed on physical fitness. Every weekday morning, at U.S. Army facilities around the world, Soldiers do Physical Training; this might be the one of the few universal truths in the Army. As Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey explained to the Army Times, "PT might not be the most important thing you do that day, but it is the most important thing you do every day in the United States Army. The bottom line is, wars are won during normally scheduled physical training hours of 6:30 to 9 a.m."

The U.S. Army is a profession of arms, and physical capability is necessary to achieve the mission. U.S. Army Field Manual 7-22 explains that: Military leaders have always recognized that the effectiveness of Soldiers depends largely on their physical condition. Full spectrum operations place a premium on the Soldier's strength, stamina, agility, resiliency and coordination. Victory — and even the Soldier's life — so often depend upon these factors. To march long distances in fighting load through rugged country and to fight effectively upon arriving at the area of combat ...to lift and carry heavy objects; to keep going for many hours without sleep or rest — all these activities of warfare and many others require superb physical conditioning.

According to a survey we conducted in June and July 2016, 80 percent of respondents agreed with FM 7-22's view on PT. According to the same survey, though, a large portion of the force misunderstands the reasons the Army does PT, asserts that Army PT is not done in accordance with doctrine, and believes that both the ways physical fitness is measured and how physical fitness test scores are used in administrative processes is misguided. NCOs can lead the charge in correcting each of these issues.

The value of physical fitness

We asked survey respondents to define acceptable physical fitness standards. Answer trends, as shown in the word cloud below, indicate that "able," "job," "physical" and "combat" were prominently used words in these descriptions.

able job physical combat

Balance Shoot Determined by MOS Evaluate
 Specific Leader Standards Crawl Fitness
 Level Required to Perform Job
 Professional Military Able Higher
 Physical Opinion Combat Cardiovascular
 Ability to Perform Healthy Capable Stamina Guy

Image 1

On the other hand, many survey respondents stated something close to "being able to do your job" was the acceptable physical standard; many others said something close to passing the Army Physical Fitness Test was the acceptable standard. The following is representative of many given responses: "Acceptable fitness is possessing the physical strength, endurance and mental toughness to overcome the stress of harsh, austere environments as well as the physically demanding tasks associated with full-spectrum combat operations."

We also asked respondents to explain their views of the APFT. In summary, the APFT is not very popular or viewed as effective: 53 percent of respondents were not satisfied with the APFT; 69 percent said the APFT does not accurately measure fitness; and 59 percent said the situp should be replaced. Unfortunately, however, 47 percent of the survey respondents serve in units that focus physical fitness training on ensuring Soldiers can pass the APFT.

The word cloud below highlights the thoughts of survey respondents about the purpose of the APFT.

Look Hard Strength and Endurance Promotion
 Overall Fitness Leadership Service
 Way to Measure Physical Readiness
 Snapshot Test Check the Block
 Physical Fitness Appearance
 Soldiers Set Level Tool Combat
 Check the Box Baseline Accountable
 Cardiovascular Metric Minimum Standards
 Serve Weed

Some of the key concepts regarding fitness (for example, physical fitness, physical readiness, combat, overall fitness) are represented in this word cloud, perhaps best captured by the response that APFTs are meant as "a tool to give commanders and other leaders a general idea of individuals' and units' physical readiness. With results, leaders can adjust routines to prepare Soldiers and formations for future efforts."

However, other ideas, such as "check the box," "look" and "appearance" also take places of prominence. The following assessments represent the more negative perceptions of the force on the purpose of the APFT:

APFTs are "supposed to physically prepare Soldiers for combat but in my opinion it's more of a 'check the box' feature and not capable of adequately training Soldiers for deployment."

"What it is: A base line objective way to measure a very specific set of physical tasks. What it should be: It should prepare Soldiers for the physical and mental strain of war."

"Well, I think the purpose should be to gauge a Soldier's ability to perform his or her job in combat. But in reality the Army PT test is more about ease of administration, maintaining appearance — a very narrow subjective view on what it means to be physically fit."

Or, as Sgt. 1st Class Zach Krapfl of the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group put it, "The APFT is a horrible metric, and there is too much stock placed in it. Neither the pushup or situp has ever helped me out in combat, and although I can run sub 13:00 two-mile, I am certain I will never outrun any caliber of round. The APFT does not translate and cannot assess a Soldier's ability to fight and win in combat."

The subjectively defined "physical fitness" has resulted in disproportionate focus on ensuring that Soldiers are able to pass APFTs, even though the guidance and directives in Army doctrine are worded to avoid such practices. This disproportionate focus has created an approach to physical readiness training in which individuals and units "train for the test" instead of "training how we fight."



U.S. Army Pvt. Sean Hussey, assigned to 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, performs sit-ups during the Army Physical Fitness Test at Joint Multinational Training Command Best Warrior Competition at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, May 8, 2013. (U.S. Army photo by Specialist Gertrud Zach)

We also asked survey respondents about perceived or actual links between PT and leadership. A majority of the respondents, 78 percent, believe that leaders should exceed minimum APFT standards. Almost half (49 percent) of the respondents view those who achieve low APFT scores more negatively, although a low APFT score results in no change in impression according to 41 percent of the respondents. This mindset carries over to 43 percent of the respondents who think that those who fail an APFT are "unfit to lead" and the 31 percent who believes that an APFT failure should equate to reassignment to a nonleadership position. Based on these views, it is not surprising that 63 percent find that a link

APFT failure should equate to reassignment to a nonleadership position. Based on these views, it is not surprising that 60 percent think that a link exists between physical fitness and leadership. On the other hand, based on the views above, it is surprising that 55 percent of the survey respondents did not believe that one must be physically fit to be a good leader, and that 83 percent think someone who is not physically fit can be a good leader.

These results suggest that a problem exists in the way in which physical fitness, as measured by the APFT, impacts administrative processes such as assignments, selections and promotions.

APFT incentivization

APFT scores impact these processes in a variety of ways. For example, by deriving a large percentage of points in enlisted promotion processes from APFT scores, the Army overly incentivizes the importance of a high APFT score (noting, meanwhile, that a high APFT score does not directly correlate to high physical fitness). At the junior enlisted level, this reinforces the idea that a high APFT score is of the utmost importance, above concepts such as military professionalism, education or accomplishments. This condition exists even though survey respondents ranked duty performance and potential as more important than physical fitness for junior enlisted personnel. 42 percent of the respondents believe that physical fitness is given excessive consideration in promotion, selection, assignment, schooling and retention decisions. The promotion points process for sergeants and staff sergeants similarly assigns undue importance to APFT scores. For promotion points, APFT scores are worth almost half of the military training points. Points for APFT scores are comparable to the maximum points given for awards, and exceed the value for completion of the Basic Leader Course or the Advanced Leader Course, which are both mandatory professional military education courses. Finally, it has become routine for leaders to screen a Soldier's APFT score before recommending promotion, education or future assignments.

As the over-emphasis on APFT scores begins with administrative processes for junior enlisted Soldiers, a "trickle up" impact exists, where Soldiers who reap the benefits of the system (i.e., those with high APFT scores) exacerbate the issues as they rise through the ranks. This is not to say that physical fitness standards should not be part of evaluation for promotion, selection for educational opportunities and consideration for future assignments. The Army needs to promote, select and assign those who are qualified and not promote, select, assign or retain those who are not qualified. However, performance on the APFT has become too incentivized, leading to a tendency to prioritize the "fit but dumb" over others in administrative processes. This incentivization occurs in the sense that good behavior (i.e., high scores on the APFT) is rewarded, while perceived bad behavior (i.e., lower but not failing scores on the APFT) is punished.

Because of this disproportionate focus on APFT scores, leaders often ignore other important leadership characteristics. Many serving in the military would rather have leaders, peers and subordinates who can achieve high APFT scores, look good in uniform, and conform to certain expectations than ones who are physically capable of doing their jobs and healthy from a physical/medical standpoint. Or, as suggested by the survey, excellent personnel leadership skills are thought by only 25 percent of the respondents to be the most important leadership trait; almost 60 percent believe that leadership skills are equally important as a high APFT score and job competence or that job competence and physical fitness are simply components of leadership skills. Many subordinates are likely to dismiss a leader if the leader does not meet ideal physical expectations.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, physical fitness in the Army has become more of an uncontrolled experiment where the exaggeration of specific traits (how high one can score on the APFT) results in the unintentional culling of the traits that are actually desired and important: actual physical fitness, leadership, competence, potential and intelligence. This misplaced focus on high APFT scores has accidentally turned promotion, selection and assignment processes into something akin to a breeding program that selects primarily for high APFT scores instead of more important physical fitness, intelligence and leadership traits. This unintentional breeding program creates a systemic issue in which previous generations in the military are affecting the newer generations.

Although physical fitness has many direct and indirect benefits to leadership, it is a poor way of measuring leadership itself. Worse yet, because protecting the homeland, closing with and destroying the enemy, and winning the nation's wars (the major functions of the military) are heavily reliant on Soldiers capable of performing tasks requiring high physical prowess, an indirect correlation has been applied to the major philosophy of the military — leadership.

Though the array of new Army physical fitness initiatives are positive developments, they are unlikely to break the false connection perceived between leadership and physical fitness.

Breaking this false linkage between fitness and leadership, or the "strong but dumb" mindset, is imperative. The NCO Corps can assist in this process by helping to dethrone high APFT scores from their dominate position in administrative processes; focusing physical readiness training on actual physical readiness versus the APFT; and rethinking the relative importance of physical fitness as compared to intellect, potential, duty performance and education level when conducting administrative processes for enlisted and more junior NCOs.

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Survey details

The survey cited in this article ran from June 24, 2016, to July 24, 2016 on SurveyMonkey and collected 272 responses from across a defined population of 16,638,288 active-duty, former and retired servicemembers. Limiting the survey to those currently serving in the Army, 172 responses were received. As of July 2016, there were 473,844 Army active-duty, 345,679 in the Army National Guard, and 198,971 in the Army Reserve. This adds to a total of 1,018,494 Soldiers. With 172 responses and a studied population of 1,018,494, the margin of error for the survey is about 8 percent, with a confidence level of 95 percent.