

Keeping the Standards on APFT

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By Michael C. Sevcik

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“Now, an army is a team. It lives, eats, sleeps, fights as a team. This individuality heroic stuff is a bunch of crap.” — George S. Patton Jr.

I read with keen interest the NCO Journal article by Maj. Jeff Jager and Aaron Kennedy, published Oct. 26. Several important “sweeping generalizations” from Soldiers and the article, [“Is Physical Fitness Overvalued in the Army?”](#) came to light.

1. “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.”
2. “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.”
3. “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-minute 2-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.”

4. “The subjectively defined ‘physical fitness’ has resulted in disproportionate focus on ensuring that Soldiers are able to pass APFTs ... 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.’”

I believe that comments such as these reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of what the APFT is for, how physical fitness fits in with overall training and how a comprehensive approach to standards-based training is part of unit readiness.

The objective of Army Physical Readiness Training is to enhance combat readiness and leadership effectiveness by developing and sustaining a high level of physical readiness in Soldiers as measured by strength, endurance, mobility, body composition standards, healthy lifestyle, warrior ethos and self-discipline. As outlined in the index G-9, AR 350-1, the objective is never listed as an individual goal; rather, all physical readiness training has as its fundamental objective to enhance combat readiness.

In this context, let me posit a sweeping generalization of my own: Any unit may rise to have a small percentage of their Soldiers get over 290, or even 300, on their PT test. We see this in the Army all the time when small unit leaders/commanders set up some arbitrary or capricious APFT standard, and we usually high-five ourselves as our PT studs finish running a sub-13-minute 2-mile run. But this exceeding the standard is meaningless to overall readiness of a platoon or company, because in many of these same units we see a significant percentage of Soldiers who cannot pass the minimum APFT standard. What we should be celebrating is the company command team that consistently gets 100 percent of its Soldiers to pass the APFT. And though accomplishing this standard is impressive, it is fundamentally part of a much bigger standard.

The higher standard is the overall readiness, which is outlined by hundreds of different “readiness” standards. Show me a platoon, company or battalion that consistently meets “every” standard, and I’ll show you the best unit in the Army. Said another way, show me a unit who is a flash-in-the-pan PT stud unit, and I’ll show you the same unit that consistently fails to meet medical readiness, vehicle/equipment readiness, property accountability readiness, crew/collective training readiness or a host of other critically identified Army readiness standards.

In a sense, this discussion, the surveys and article on APFT becomes a very shallow discussion if not taken in context with what Gen. Mark Milley, the chief of staff of the Army, has been hammering home to our Army for more than a year. Readiness is much broader than an individual APFT; it is a part of a collective and comprehensive view toward physical, social, spiritual, emotional and family resiliency for individuals.

But more importantly, standards outlined principally in AR 350-1 are not designed for individual Soldier fitness, but rather for Army organizational readiness. Every unit commander/first sergeant team in the Army today is busy and simply must risk compromising some aspects of training standards to best meet its readiness mission.

Finally, the authors conclude the article with a superb recommendation about the misplaced focus on high APFT scores and how this has turned selection and promotion boards and process into a breeding ground that places an overemphasis on PT at the expense of leadership and intelligence. To that I say, “Spot on.” A true test of intelligence and leadership at all levels is how creative, adaptive and inspirational leaders balance getting after the top goal — readiness.

Show me the leaders at any level who can meet all of the standards rather than a handful of arbitrary standards, and I’ll show you a command team that is truly ready.

Retired Col. Michael C. Sevcik served in the Army for more than 30 years and has commanded at the company, battalion and brigade level. He teaches at the Army’s School for Command Preparation, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.