

The Army must change the ACFT scoring system, allowing up to 100 points for Soldiers who have to perform alternate events. Doing so would instill a willingness to compete and excel and revive motivation and morale. (Graphic by *NCO Journal*)

# Rethinking the ACFT Alternate Cardio Events

*By Master Sgt. Grant C. Smith*

## Sergeants Major Course, Class 75

The Army has molded policies and regulations to fit today's Soldiers, and it made sweeping changes to grooming and appearance standards (including hairstyles, nail polish colors, and hair length). Other recent modifications provide religious head covering options and even exemptions for beards (Department of the Army, 2021).

The Army has also changed the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT), which now includes alternate aerobic events. However, the scoring system only allows Soldiers to achieve a maximum of 60 points (Department of the Army, 2020a). This limitation may diminish Soldiers' morale and sense of pride.

The Army must change the scoring system, allowing up to 100 points for Soldiers who have to perform alternate events. Doing so would instill a willingness to compete and excel, and revive their motivation and morale.

## Temporary Discomfort

Due to physical limitations, Soldiers seek temporary profiles that list their limitations on physical activities. According to the 2022 Health of the Force report, the top five causes associated with temporary profiles for injuries suffered by active-duty Soldiers in 2021 were musculoskeletal — with a total of 8.8 million limited duty days (Defense Health Agency, 2022).

The report shows that some Soldiers are active in their medical care. However, injury non-reporting remains a systemic issue. Additionally, 52% of Soldiers were diagnosed with a new injury in 2021, with most (70%) caused by overuse (Defense Health Agency, 2022).

This fact speaks to the rigors and demands Soldiers endure every day and highlights the probability of injuries (ranging from acute to chronic). According to Cohen et al. (2019), 37% of male and 47% of

female Soldiers surveyed wanted to avoid the negative perceptions associated with these injuries. So, what does this mean for those with a permanent profile?

### **Permanent Profiles Carry a Heavy Price**

Soldiers on permanent profiles must adapt to a different way of life. Conversely, many Soldiers still don't seek proper physical care because they fear a permanent profile and the stigma associated with it (Cohen et al., 2019).

Permanent profiles exclude Soldiers from certain physical activities geared toward unit morale and esprit de corps, and change the maximum score achievable on the ACFT. Both outcomes could demoralize Soldiers, making them feel inferior as units segregate them into two groups: those with the profiles and those without. Leaders must find a better way to separate these groups without causing division.

### **Alternate ACFT Events**

As stated in ATP 7-22.01, Soldiers who obtain a permanent profile for their injuries can take an alternate ACFT event (Department of the Army, 2020a). However, if a Soldier who takes an alternate aerobic event performs that event in record time or within the maximum allowable time, the score is still 60 points.

This policy reduces Soldiers' drive to push to their

limits and perform optimally. This pass-or-fail event diminishes the warrior ethos, because maximal or minimal effort yields the same results. Soldiers who take an alternate ACFT event will never earn points based on their individual performance. Instead, they will remain isolated and will never be able to earn 100 points.

### **Height and Weight Standards**

Army Directive 2023-08 exempts Soldiers who score 540 points or more on the ACFT from the body fat assessment program (Secretary of the Army, 2023). Soldiers must score at least 80 points in each of the six primary events to qualify for the exemption. This policy doesn't apply to Soldiers on a permanent profile, because they can't take all six primary events.

This policy is unfair to those with permanent profiles and stigmatizes those who complete an alternate ACFT event. While the Army has many guidelines and regulations that only apply to specific groups of Soldiers, this policy undermines the recent changes the Army has made to increase awareness and create supportive environments.

### **Encourage Reporting**

According to Cohen et al. (2019), avoiding a profile was the most common reason for not reporting an injury. Regardless of cultural changes the Army



If a Soldier who takes an alternate aerobic event performs that event in record time or within the maximum allowable time, the score is still 60 points. This policy reduces their drive to push themselves to their limits and perform optimally. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Ryan Rayno)



Soldiers who take an alternate ACFT event will never earn points based on their individual performance. Instead, they may feel isolated and demoralized as units segregate them into two groups: those with the profiles and those without. Leaders must find a better way to separate these groups without causing division. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class Theresa Gualdarama)

has made by implementing the holistic health and fitness program (H2F), those with permanent profiles are stigmatized and excluded.

Another critical factor for those not reporting injuries is prior negative experience seeking military medical care (Cohen et al., 2019). The Army must create an environment in which Soldiers don't fear obtaining profiles and can receive the care needed for acute or chronic injuries.

Creating a culture where all Soldiers can succeed will create positive change in all units.

### Historical Leadership Practices

Unit training and physical fitness is the cornerstone of the NCO corps. *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide* paints a clear picture that NCOs must supervise unit physical fitness readiness training programs and ensure Soldiers comply with the prescribed height and weight standards (Department of the Army, 2020b).

Can Soldiers with a permanent profile hold the highest levels of leadership? Can Soldiers who complete the alternate ACFT event still stand in front of their formations with their heads held high?

Leaders in the Army may harbor unconscious biases against Soldiers on permanent profiles. They may stereotype them as less capable or assume they lack

the physical fitness needed to contribute effectively — which can negatively influence career opportunities and evaluations (Holt & Davis, 2022).

Such biases reinforce perceptions that equate success solely with physical attributes, undermining cognitive variety and access within the force (Holt & Davis, 2022). With the growing changes in the Army, these views can evolve with updates to policies and doctrine as well as enhanced leadership training and engagement.

### Army Transformation Using DOTMLPF-P

The proposed solution doesn't involve simple, quick fixes or an unrealistic generational cultural shift. As with any other cultural change, it will take time.

When evaluating this problem against doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy (DOTMLPF-P), we find that doctrine, training, leadership and education, and policies can have the most significant impact. Implementing changes to existing doctrine and policies or creating new ones — along with improved training and leader development and education — will shape the shift from the strategic level.

Leaders at all levels are responsible for shaping, fostering, and creating a culture that supports the





Spc. Cameron Jones, 310th Expeditionary Support Command, Indiana Army National Guard, talks about his health with Theresa Justus, a health educator with the Camp Atterbury Army Wellness Center. Two factors for Soldiers not reporting injuries are prior negative experience when seeking medical care and avoiding profiles. The Army must create an environment where Soldiers don't fear getting profiles and receive the care they need for acute or chronic injuries. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Jarred Woods)

Army's most valuable asset: its Soldiers. While changing organizational culture presents challenges, leaders can implement policy and doctrine immediately.

### **Leader Development**

Change will never happen if the Army doesn't change the narrative from the top of an organization down to the lowest level. Leader development and improving leadership training will help combat this narrative.

While many have outwardly opposed the Army's sweeping changes over the past decade, change is inevitable. Does allowing Soldiers who bike or row as their alternate event mean they can't lead Soldiers? It's time for the Army to reevaluate its policies.

### **Changing the ACFT**

The proposed solution is to scale the alternate aerobic events of the ACFT. This change would require the same testing and procedural work from the H2F team and others to apply the same formulary model to allow a score range from 60 to 100 for each alternate event.

This solution would allow those on permanent profiles to retain their pride and dignity and instill the Soldier's spirit to fight, compete, and win at all costs. This

new policy would also allow those who take an alternate event to score a 600 on the ACFT. These changes involve updating the doctrine and directives associated with the ACFT standards and administration.

### **Changing the Height and Weight Standard**

As outlined in Army Directive 2023-08, Soldiers who complete all six primary events during the ACFT and score a total of 540 points with at least 80 points in each event do not have to complete the tape test if they exceed the screening table weight (Secretary of the Army, 2023).

This policy excludes those over the table weight who require an alternate aerobic event. Changing the Army doctrine would allow Soldiers who take an alternate event the same exemption outlined in the directive. This modification could be a rapid adjustment.

### **Conclusion**

The Army must change the alternate ACFT event scoring system. Allowing a scale from 60 to 100 will better include those injured and instill a willingness to compete and excel while boosting motivation and morale.

The changes made in the Army stemmed from evolving threats, evolving Soldiers, and cultural and

behavioral changes across our nation. Providing a scaled scoring option for the ACFT alternate events and updating the height and weight standards will significantly help injured Soldiers.

They deserve the best leaders, policies, doctrine, and organizations to support them. Taking a hard look at how we define military culture, leaders, and

organizations will allow more opportunities for those injured in combat and those who have suffered long-term chronic injuries.

The Army should do everything possible to increase Soldiers' resilience and readiness. It should continue to support and encourage Soldiers to excel and win despite injuries, stigmas, or antiquated policies. ■

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**Master Sgt. Grant C. Smith** is a Class 75 student of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy and has served honorably for more than 27 years in a number of leadership positions. He has an extensive background in military police operations and holds a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies. He is currently pursuing his master's degree in industrial organizational psychology.

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