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# Making Soldiers Fit to Fight, Without the Situps

By **JAMES DAO**

FORT JACKSON, S.C. — Dawn breaks at this, the Army's largest training post, with the reliable sound of fresh recruits marching to their morning [exercise](#). But these days, something looks different.

That familiar standby, the situp, is gone, or almost gone. Exercises that look like [pilates](#) or [yoga](#) routines are in. And the traditional bane of the new private, the long run, has been downgraded.

This is the Army's new physical-training program, which has been rolled out this year at its five basic training posts that handle 145,000 recruits a year. Nearly a decade in the making, its official goal is to reduce injuries and better prepare soldiers for the rigors of combat in rough terrain like Afghanistan.

But as much as anything, the program was created to help address one of the most pressing issues facing the military today: overweight and unfit recruits.

"What we were finding was that the soldiers we're getting in today's Army are not in as good shape as they used to be," said Lt. Gen. Mark Hertling, who oversees basic training for the Army. "This is not just an Army issue. This is a national issue."

Excess weight is the leading reason the Army rejects potential recruits. And while that has been true for years, the problem has worsened as the waistlines of America's youth have expanded. This year, a group of retired generals and admirals released a report titled "Too Fat to Fight."

"Between 1995 and 2008, the proportion of potential recruits who failed their physicals each year because they were overweight rose nearly 70 percent," the report concluded.

Though the Army screens out the seriously obese and completely unfit, it is still finding that many of the recruits who reach basic training have less strength and endurance than privates

past. It is the legacy of junk food and video games, compounded by a reduction in gym classes in many high schools, Army officials assert.

As a result, it is harder for recruits to reach Army fitness standards, and more are getting injured along the way. General Hertling said that the percentage of male recruits who failed the most basic fitness test at one training center rose to more than one in five in 2006, up from just 4 percent in 2000. The percentages were higher for women.

Another study found that at one training center in 2002, 3 recruits suffered stress fractures of the pubic bone, but last year the number rose to 39. The reason, General Hertling said: not enough weight-bearing exercise and a **diet** heavy on sugared sodas and energy drinks but light in **calcium** and iron.

The new fitness regime tries to deal with all these problems by incorporating more stretching, more exercises for the abdomen and lower back, instead of the traditional situps, and more agility and balance training. It increases in difficulty more gradually. And it sets up a multiweek course of linked exercises, rather than offering discrete drills.

There are fewer situps, different kinds of push-ups and fewer long runs, which Army officials say are good for building strength and endurance but often lead to injuries. They also do not necessarily prepare soldiers for carrying heavy packs or sprinting short distances.

“We haven’t eliminated running,” General Hertling said. “But it’s trying to get away from that being the only thing we do.” (The new system does include plenty of sprinting.)

Some of the new routines would look familiar to a devotee of pilates, yoga or even the latest home workout regimens on DVD, with a variety of side twists, back bridges and rowinglike exercises. “It’s more whole body,” said First Lt. Tameeka Hayes, a platoon leader for a class of new privates at Fort Jackson. “No one who has done this routine says we’ve made it easier.”

The program was largely the brainchild of two former gym teachers who now run the Army Physical Fitness School based here. They are a military version of Click and Clack, finishing each other’s sentences and wisecracking with the alternating beat of gas-fired pistons.

One, Stephen Van Camp, is a former professional kick-boxer who unwittingly ran a marathon with a fractured ankle. “That’s not tough. That’s stupid,” he now says. The other, Frank Palkoska, is a former Army officer and **West Point** fitness instructor who adorns his office here with black-and-white photographs of 19th-century exercise classes and an assortment of retrograde equipment like medicine balls and wooden dumbbells.

“It’s back to the future,” Mr. Palkoska says before starting into a lament about the Xbox generation. “Technology is great, but it’s killing us.”

As he and Mr. Van Camp started developing what became a 434-page manual, they began by considering what combat soldiers do and came up with a checklist of things like throwing grenades and dodging gunfire.

Then they matched those needs with exercises. Some of those are already in use by the Army, but others are new and still others are drawn from century-old routines. There are drills that mimic climbing, that teach soldiers how to roll and that require swift lateral movements. Some are done in body armor.

The old style of physical training, he said, was less relevant to soldiers’ tasks, which entail lots of jumping, crouching and climbing. “What we did in the morning had nothing to do with what we did the rest of the day,” Mr. Palkoska said.

Under General Hertling, the new regimen will also include a makeover of the mess halls at its training bases. At Fort Jackson, there are more green leafy vegetables, less fried food, and milk instead of soda. The food line includes color-coded messages to encourage privates to eat low-fat entrees (marked in green). And there are other changes: no more assaulting tires with bayonets, but more time spent on rifle marksmanship and fighting with padded pugil sticks.

The trick now will be to push the program into the rest of the Army, where evidence suggests many soldiers are becoming overweight, particularly during or soon after deployments. The Army Training and Doctrine Command recently distributed the new fitness policy to the entire Army, officially replacing a physical fitness field manual that was first published in 1992.

While the training posts will have to follow the new program, since they are under General Hertling’s command, it is not mandatory for officers in the field. Every unit’s exercise routine is determined by its commander, and the current generation of officers has been indoctrinated under the old system.

The key, Mr. Palkoska says, will be to revamp the Army’s fitness test, which is taken twice a year. It measures a soldier’s ability to do situps, push-ups and a two-mile run. Since soldiers often train to the test, those are the exercises most of them do.

Mr. Palkoska and Mr. Van Camp hope the Army will revise that test by including new kinds of exercises and perhaps eliminating the situp.

“We know kids today are less fit,” Mr. Palkoska said. “We have to adjust.”

### Soldier Held in Slaying

FORT McPHERSON, Ga. (AP) — Sgt. Rashad Valmont of the Army Reserve was fasting to meet strict military weight guidelines and nearly catatonic when he shot and killed a supervisor, the soldier’s lawyer said.

Details of the shooting were revealed for the first time Monday at a military hearing to determine if there was enough evidence to go to trial.

The lawyer, William Cassara, said that Sergeant Valmont, who faces a premeditated murder charge, was dehydrated, exhausted and delirious when he burst into Master Sgt. Pedro Mercado’s office in Fort Gillem in June. Mr. Cassara said Sergeant Valmont had spent weeks trying body wraps and sauna treatments and starving himself.