

CERTIFIED COACH GIVES YOUNG ATHLETES SKILLS THAT ARE BIGGER THAN SPORTS

Coach Jay Spearman's mission is to have a positive, lifelong impact on his students

Former University of South Carolina cornerback Jay Spearman is teaching local young student athletes a lesson he learned after injuries ended his football career. "You must have faith in something you can't see just yet," he says. His passion for athletics led him to become one of a growing number of strength and conditioning coaches, certified by the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), who are training middle school and high school athletes to safely achieve their dreams.

Now the Director of Strength and Conditioning at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School in Columbia, SC, Spearman gets tremendous satisfaction from helping kids develop a foundation for life. "It's not just about the sport. It's about encouraging kids not to limit themselves. I teach them safety first. That's number one. From there, it's teaching them to move efficiently, move strong, move fast, and to adjust and adapt. The combination of these specific principles promotes the last principle, which is striving to get better each day. This field is very similar to everyday life. It's never linear. The kids enjoy learning to work beyond their limits. And when they have fun, they tend to work hard."

Dispelling the Myths About Kids and Athletics

Spearman says he stands for, "connecting, learning and teaching." He wants kids, parents and coworkers to understand the purpose behind the training, led by research and practical experience. "I want them to understand why everything I do is a process." He also believes that he learns by interacting with the kids, and the kids learn from one another. "It's a spider web of ideas and actions that are all connected."

Part of his role is to connect with parents and address the misconceptions about youth and athletics. "Some of the common statements I hear are that certain exercises are bad for you ... things such as, 'lifting weights stunts growth'. I hear that one a lot! The truth is that there are effective and ineffective ways of teaching movements. Done correctly, there are major benefits in training. Once we talk, and I show them why we do things and how I teach them, parents are more comfortable. I invite them to watch a session so that they can see for themselves that I always want to help the kids. Once parents hear me say that my job is first to keep their kids safe, they are relieved."

Spearman gives an example of how proper training and education is helping young athletes build confidence. "Last year, when a group of ninth-grade females walked into the weight room on the first day of class, they looked terrified. They'd never been in the weight room before. We talked, and I guided them through why we would do what we do every day. Then I started them with our basic progression. After four weeks, a few could lift their body weight. They'd never done that before! One student told me she went home every day and tried to jump and touch an object hanging from her ceiling. Every week, she got closer. By the time we were done with class, she proudly told me she could do it."

What the Scouts Look For

With so many kids today wanting to become professional athletes, Spearman encourages his student athletes to explore multiple sports. "There is a common perception that, to succeed, student athletes have to work only at one sport. But if they work on the same skills every single day, there's not much diversity there. Research has proven that kids who play only one sport are more likely to get hurt and burn out. Mentally, they are done with that sport. Or worse, they are done with all sports. That may also lead to a major downturn in their academics. I tell them, if you play three sports and you work hard at all three, chances are you'll do well in at least one, if not all three." He stresses, "Parents and kids need to ask themselves, 'What happens if they don't achieve in that one sport? What happens after sports?' We may not know when that time will be over for us."

Spearman also explains that college coaches evaluate high school-level athletes on the mental components. Student athletes are being recruited because they attract attention with their ability to play a sport. “Beyond sports skills, coaches look for multi-sport athletes because they are confident that the student athlete can manage time well and because the student athlete exemplifies a certain level of commitment. Both time management and commitment are necessities at the collegiate level, as well as in everyday life.”

Training is Bigger Than Sports

Spearman says becoming an NSCA-Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist® (CSCS®) has given him the right foundation to teach future generations of athletes. “Being certified is the first step to being able to impact the life of a kid on a positive level. Being certified is the first step in breaking into the field of strength and conditioning. Staying current on research and appropriate training practices is all in addition to being certified. My purpose is to make sure that I am consistent with this in order to become a better coach for my kids. I can tell my students, here’s why we’re going to do this, how it’s done and what’s going to happen based on all of that.”

He says his students know that he played sports in college, and that injuries ended his playing days. “We talk about the things that life has given us. The main thing is having faith in something that you can’t see. When we talk about that, I say in four weeks you’ll be better than you are right now. But it takes work every single day. I also show them that their passion will lead them to their purpose. They learn to work with other people. I also teach them to commit to things. That’s what scares most people, even adults. Commitment involves change.

“Then I teach them about effort. I tell them to give 100 percent every day. They might be physically at 80 percent some days, but they need to give 100 percent of that 80.”

And one of the most important lessons Spearman teaches is resilience. “From day one, I tell them you may fail in here. It’s highly likely you will. What you do after you fail determines if you will grow or not. Understanding this gives kids the freedom to continue getting better. Those are life skills we should use every day no matter what.”

Biography: Jay Spearman, MS, MPH, CSCS, FMSC

Jay Spearman is the Head Strength and Conditioning Coach, and assistant football coach, at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School in Columbia, SC.