

Wising Up: The Education of a Strength Coach

Tim Adams has gone where few professional strength coaches have gone before



Tim Adams, a few years ago when he was the head strength coach of the Oakland Raiders.

When we first visited Tim Adams in our Fall 2003 issue, he was very busy as the head strength coach of the Oakland Raiders. A lot has happened since then. He still works with professional athletes, but now as a private consultant. He is now one of the most financially successful and sought-after coaches in his profession, so we thought we'd check in with Coach Adams and see what it takes to reach the top in this highly competitive field.

To understand what joining the Oakland Raiders meant to Adams, you have to understand what came before. Several years after graduating from the Air Force Academy in 1991 and serving his military commission as a financial manager at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, Adams was able to return to the Academy to serve as an assistant strength coach for the Falcons.

However, in 1998 Adams faced a tough decision.

To continue coaching meant making two sacrifices: Adams would no longer be able to remain in the military, as he would soon be reassigned to another base; and he couldn't stay on as a strength coach at the Academy, as the head coach had offered the civilian strength coaching position to another coach. Adams' choice was either to take a secure, well-paying job in a career field that did not interest him or to start from scratch by coaching in the private sector. Adams' passion for coaching won out.

When Adams gave up his military commission, he moved to Denver and began getting work as a performance enhancement coach for all types of clients – athletes and non-athletes alike. Several times a week Adams would make the three-hour round trip drive

to Colorado Springs to work with figure skaters at the famous Broadmoor Skating Club; he also worked with local Denver athletes at several health clubs in the area. All the while he volunteered his services to several professional sports organizations, such as the Denver Broncos, to try to break into that market.

"It was a tough period, going from a secure job in the military to exchanging my time for money and making about half of what my pay had been in the Air Force," says Adams. "I was married at the time, and the financial strain and the stress of trying to make it in this field were definitely factors in the breakup of my marriage." All Adams could do then was look toward the future.

"Everything you do is an opportunity to learn and enhance your skills," says Adams. "Working with those figure

skaters, who were some of the most highly ranked skaters in the nation, was a great opportunity – I was privileged to work with the best of the best. At the same time, I was working with athletes on an introductory level, so I had to refine the programs accordingly; and that was useful in helping me hone my skills as a coach. Yes, it was a struggle, and yet it was also an extremely great learning experience.”

Adams saw the value in working with all types of athletes, but soon it became clear to him that he was most interested in working with professional football players. Now he had to get a job in the field, and that wasn’t easy. “I was sending letters to every NFL organization, and I didn’t hear back from any of them; but I was persistent and eventually got some work training some of the Denver Broncos in the off-season.

“Now that my foot was in the door, my goal was to position myself in such a manner that the players could see I was different from the other coaches and knew what I was talking about.” As a result, when Adams’ contract expired, there were a half-dozen players asking him to continue working with them. “That really started off my career in working with professional athletes, because when the guys I was working

with got traded to different teams, I began working with players from other teams.” He also got the opportunity to work with draft prospects, and in 1991 he had trained six players who were picked in the first round of the draft and four who were picked in the second!

In 2003 Adams was hired as the head strength coach of the Raiders, but eventually he returned to the private sector to achieve even more success. How much? Adams does not like to drop names but says that his clients are “topnotch” and admits he has coached Olympic medalists, world champions, Super Bowl champions, NFL Pro Bowlers, Heisman Trophy winners, X-Game champions, collegiate All-Americans and Hollywood entertainers.

“My clients respect my job and appreciate what I am trying to do for them; otherwise I wouldn’t work with them,” says Adams. “I’ve unfortunately had to fire several clients because, well...there are some real jerks out there.” That being said, Adams also says the media and the public shouldn’t



In addition to playing halfback at the Academy, Adams was also a top collegiate weightlifter who could clean 130 pounds over bodyweight.

always judge athletes by their on-field antics or on-field personas. “These athletes have to put on a show – they are entertainers. You’ll find that many of these athletes who are labeled as characters are often great people off the field and, for those with kids, great parents who spend as much time as possible with their kids. There are exceptions, of course, as some young professional athletes can’t handle sudden fame and money; but I know that professional organizations such as the NFL and NBA are very proactive in trying to help young people from abusing their success.”

Words of Training Wisdom

One of the things Adams has learned is that being a strength coach is much more than teaching athletes how to do exercises properly.

“I started believing everything was about cleans, but if an athlete had tendonitis and couldn’t do cleans, then my job became about therapy and cleans. Next, I found that although an athlete can be explosive and powerful, if they can’t move, then they can’t make a play – so now my job was about cleans, therapy and speed of movement. But then I found that you just can’t be fast; you also have to be able to change directions quickly. One thing just led to another.



Adams is a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy and has earned two graduate degrees.



In addition to training athletes, Adams also has had the opportunity to train many celebrities. Here he is shown with Rob Schneider and some of the crew that worked on the movie *Benchwarmers*.

When I got to working with pros, my job was more about the mental side of sports – everyone in the pros is genetically gifted, so what distinguishes one great athlete from another is really their mental capacity.”

The factor that is a source of the biggest problem with athletes is “early specialization,” says Adams. “It’s not so much overtraining, because as a young adult your ability to handle stress is significantly greater than at any other time of your life. But I’ve found that for a lot of the kids coming from high school into college, their ability to handle work is horrible; and I attribute that to spending too much time specializing on one sport. Yes, there are certain sports such as figure skating and gymnastics that you need to specialize in at a young age, but with the core American sports such as football, basketball and baseball, your training in high school should be as generalized as possible.”

Another problem is nutrition. “The diets of American athletes are getting worse,” says Adams. “Here’s my take on it. I hate supplement bars, as they are basically modified candy bars and as processed as anything else. And I believe too many of our young people are dependent on fast foods; they are not getting enough vegetables and good-quality meats. They are often relying on supplements and protein powders,

which is a huge mistake because they are missing out on the nutrient-dense foods that you need to really grow and sustain proper function.”

The Bottom Line

If Adams had to do it all over again, this is the advice he would have given himself at the time he left the military: “I would have looked for a mentor to help me manage the business aspect of my job. I spent those first three years struggling to grow my business, often giving away my services while working my butt off. I wouldn’t trade that experience for the world; but had I understood a business model more effectively, I would have been able to position myself more effectively and get to where I am now sooner.”

On a personal level, Adams is now happy and successful, and he recently became engaged. He also wants to share his success with others and has found a publisher for his book, *Punch It In*. Says Adams, “I’ve always been interested in learning what separates one athlete from another, and the answer is in the mind. I don’t care how good a strength coach you are, if your athletes don’t have the will to win, they are going

Adams book on mastering the mental aspects of sports will be available soon. Check out his website, Punchitin.com for more information.



Adams with J.J. Thomas, a snowboarder he trained who won a bronze in the 2002 Olympic Games.



Adams was trained in an aggressive soft tissue treatment called Active Release Techniques®, and he is shown here working with a client who is obviously enjoying himself!

to get beat. Great athletes will have a way to impose their will upon their opponents and find an edge, a way to intimidate them and wear them down. It’s a game within a game. That is the most important key to success in sports. Period.” **BFS**

