

Weight room has positive impact on Eagle athletics

By Kevin Gordon

During almost every weekday after school, Eastwood's high school and middle school athletes are working hard to become bigger, faster and stronger.

The school's traditional weight room and auxiliary weight room at the east end of the gym are full of activity. The work in the weight room is one of the major reasons for the success of Eastwood's boys and girls track and field teams, as well as the school's other teams.

Kevin Gordon recently talked to Brian Sabo, Nikki Sabo, Andy Friess, Kelly Royal and Austin Kieper about the weight room and its impact on the Eagles' athletic teams.

The Sabos are Eastwood's head track coaches, while Brian Sabo and Friess oversee the weight room. Royal is a thrower on the track team, while Kieper plays football, and is a thrower on the track team. Kieper and Royal are seniors.

Q: What do you want the athletes to get out of using the weight room ... Friess estimated 50-60 athletes use the weight room after school during the academic year, while 120-150 use the weight room daily during the summer?

BRIAN SABO: "It depends on the age. If you're younger, you're a novice, you're in middle school, the first thing we're going to try to build is neuromuscular coordination. We're going to make you more coordinated, in the movements we do, the body weight, some might be just with the bar or light weights. We want to improve coordination through movement. If the movement is good, we're going to load the movement, and we're going to make the movement more efficient. Therefore, we're making you stronger in the long run. Once we get you more coordinated with the movements, we can load it more and, in theory, you're getting stronger. If you've been lifting for a little while, now we're going to go to different rep schemes or more specific movements. Now, we'll try to gain strength and power, which is moving the weight with a time component."

FRIESS: "Ultimately, our goal is to build a fun environment where they commit to a work ethic, commit to showing up, commit to working hard, being self-disciplined. This isn't osmosis where you can touch the bar and immediately become stronger. You have to work at it. They can see the progress they're making because the results are tangible."

Q: Do you have specific programs for each individual sport?

BRIAN SABO: “I’m always open to that, and I’m always doing research on lifting weights, in general, for the different sports. I don’t believe there’s one specific program, and everyone should do it. If you’re really consistent in what you’re doing, kids will improve all of those things I mentioned before. There are certain things that can make you successful. But you’re always going to see gains if kids are coming in consistently and doing something. The overwhelming majority of middle school and high school athletes need roughly the same things from the weight room. After a couple of years, some sports might be more specific. Volleyball, it might be improving their vertical jump. Football, it might be increasing their strength and 40 time. Baseball, it might be rotational power for the core. Cross country, you might want to be more fit, so you break down less from the all of the running. But for the most part, everything is pretty well rounded, and every kid should get the same thing.”

And you’re exposing the athletes to a healthier lifestyle in the long run?

BRIAN SABO: “We’ll show them a number of lifts so they’ll feel comfortable to be in a weight room or a room where there’s weights. There’s exercise for a healthier lifestyle, so they’re not intimidated by the weight room. They can, hopefully, go any place and see the equipment they have and utilize it and use it because they’re familiar with it. We expose them to a lot of different things here — strength training, fitness, weight training.”

Q: Does the weight lifting help prevent injuries?

BRIAN SABO: “If we’re doing the right things, there’s less likelihood of non-contact injuries. When there’s contact, you stepped on somebody’s foot or somebody collides with you, you hit the ground, that has very little to do with what we’re doing in the weight room or how somebody warmed up. If we can do movements right and things that have injury prevention to it, that should take care of itself. The better you move, the stronger you are. You’re going to break down less. You have less chance of being injured. And if you’re injured, you’re going to recover faster.”

How do you get athletes interested in the weight room?

BRIAN SABO: “We provide an environment that is extremely positive, extremely welcoming. The weight room has become its own social hangout, but we want you to work hard first, and then some people will hang out for a while, and sit on the boxes and chat, or foam roll and chat for a while. We’re okay with that. That’s down time for us to maybe talk to the kids when they’re done. It’s just an all-welcoming place where you can work hard and be a part of a group, a culture.”

NIKKI SABO: “It has to come from their peers. Success, whether it’s been on the court, on the track, on the field, the generations coming through Eastwood now have seen the benefits of the previous generations. Basically, they know this is what we do. If you want to be good, you work out in the weight room. We need to get there on a consistent basis. A lot of it is positive peer pressure, from their teammates, the entire coaching staff. When track is over, they’re immediately back in the weight room for soccer, for volleyball, for cross country, for football, it’s an expectation of all the programs, not just track and field. The weight room also helps them mentally because it makes them more confident. It lets them know when they’re facing a challenge, they’ve already met challenges before in the weight room, and they can do it again, whether it’s on the court, on the track or on the field.

“The weight room provides a positive atmosphere for the athletes. Just seeing the older athletes helping the younger athletes and seeing them being helpful is great. They can build friendships.”

What has been the result of your time in the weight room?

ROYAL: “You get a lot of confidence working out on a regular basis. You get stronger, and it gives you the confidence you compete physically. Before I started coming to the weight room, I was going more off technique. But after coming into the weight room and coming every other day, it really helped me feel better about myself, even if I wasn’t there mentally. I knew I had my strength to back me up.

“We build off each other. All of us understand why we’re here and what we’re here to do, and we push each other to improve. I’ve become a better leader and I’ve become more confident in taking charge of a situation, whether it’s in the classroom, the weight room, on the track.”

KIEPER: “All of my sports have improved because of the weight lifting and training. It’s always a good environment, a lot of fun, and it’s always positive. It’s a great place to be. It makes you feel good, and you want to keep coming back because you’re making improvements, and you want to improve even more. It’s an amazing feeling being here every day. You feel like you can accomplish anything to help your team win. It gives you a sense of being able to step up, the confidence you can be successful.”

Friess’ presence has played a major role in the success of the weight room. What do the athletes enjoy him?

BRIAN SABO: “The kids love him because he loves them. He gives first. He’s euphoric when they succeed or do well, says hello/goodbye to them, calls them by name. He goes to a lot of different athletic events to see them

compete in their sports. He dives in first and then gives feedback, and they enjoy him. He brings a lot of ability and loves being around the kids.”

NIKKI SABO: “He has an outgoing personality. He wants everyone to improve. He brings a lot of experience, a different perspective. He’s here all year long. He’s so positive, and he wants every single person to improve. He has knowledge of the different types of lifts and communicates that to the different athletes.”

Why do the athletes enjoy being around Friess?

ROYAL: Mr. Friess and Mr. Sabo are really positive. They encourage you and help you improve, and that makes you want to work harder and get in the weight room. Even when you don’t feel like lifting, as soon as you get out here, you’ll see Mr. Friess or Mr. Sabo with a smile on their face and that really helps you get going.”

KIEPER: Coach Friess is always willing to help you, to spot for you and give you encouragement. He always brings positive energy, and he’s always pushing you to improve.”

Friess’ House of Pain Challenge is popular with the athletes. The competitions are difficult, and will push the athletes to improve and work as a team ... how does making the weight room fun help the attendance?

FRIESS: “The kids become your best advocates. If you give positive vibes, positive attitude out, they’re going to respond to that. When you show the attitude and bring it, and (Brian Sabo) and I both still like to lift with the kids, it’s reciprocated from the kids. I’ve never considered the weight room coaching. When you’re coaching, there’s always that little bit of separation between the coaches and the athletes. In the weight room, I’ve never felt that. You can talk to the kids. You can lift with the kids. You can get to know them on a totally different level.”

Social media is used to help generate interest in the weight room. How has that helped? Videos of athletes are posted to the weight room’s social media accounts.

BRIAN SABO: “It’s a good way to show what we’re doing, a good way to promote the kids. We want to promote the kids. I’ve always said I’m not going to apologize for celebrating the successes of our kids. If somebody has worked hard, and they’re seeing some real gains and they’re really happy with the weight they’re cleaning or squatting, we want to promote that, and their successes as well.”

Do athletes who aren’t involved in a sport use the weight room?

BRIAN SABO: “The weight room is open to everyone. In the past, we’ve had band kids. Kids who have never done a sport eventually come out for a sport because they felt more confident after being in the weight room and wanted to give it a try. That’s happened many times. Some kids come in for their physical education and strength training classes. Some just like lifting. A lot of times, we see kids coming out for a sport because they felt more confident lifting after being in the weight room.”

The weight room is a place where Eastwood alums can work out when they’re home for the holidays or during college breaks. Do you enjoy seeing them return?

FRIESS: “The alums coming back, that’s my favorite. I love the holidays because the alums always come in. I hope they know and they should know, it’s a place they can always come back to, at least to come in and say hello.”

BRIAN SABO: “We love it when they come back. It makes you proud you provided them with an environment they want to come back to and at least say hello. But it provides them with an opportunity to work out, if other places are closed. It’s really exciting to see them, and they’re always welcome.”

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