# Q&A with CJ French: The Method Is Flexible—the Purpose Is Not

By CJ French with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Mark Christiani | https://doi.org/10.65832/cjehmk26

*Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Christina "CJ" French's perspectives and do not reflect those of the United States Air Force.*

**Introduction**

Christina "CJ" French has spent more than twenty years working in human performance across military and tactical environments. She currently serves as a human performance program manager and strength and conditioning specialist with the 308th Rescue Squadron at Patrick Space Force Base, Florida, where she supports the readiness and long-term health of combat search and rescue operators and support personnel. In 2026, the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) named CJ its Tactical Strength and Conditioning (TSAC) Coach of the Year. She holds a master's degree in health education and a bachelor's degree in exercise science, along with several professional certifications in strength and conditioning (S&C), exercise physiology, corrective exercise, performance enhancement, and health education.

CJ's career includes developing the first human performance program for the Tactical Air Control Party (TACP) Schoolhouse training pipeline at Hurlburt Field, building the first embedded human performance program and training facility for the 31st Rescue Squadron in Okinawa, Japan, and helping to integrate the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) system across brigade-level organizations. During her time with the Army H2F Integration Team, she contributed to doctrine, coach onboarding, and human performance education for future brigade and battalion command teams. Her experience gives her a rare perspective that includes coaching operators directly, building multidisciplinary teams, and developing systems intended to work across an entire organization. In this Q&A, CJ shares lessons from more than two decades in tactical human performance, including building sustainable programs, coaching in unpredictable environments, working overseas, and helping the next generation of tactical S&C coaches.




Shown above is CJ receiving the 2026 Tactical Strength and Conditioning Coach of the Year Award.

**You have worked in tactical human performance for more than twenty years. What originally pulled you into this field?**

I found tactical human performance because a door was closed in my face in all but a literal way. My original career plan was baseball. Tactical S&C did not really exist in the capacity it does today, and working with the military was nowhere on my radar. I had secured a tentative internship with a well-known professional baseball organization, packed up my home, and drove to the stadium ready to begin what I thought was the start of my career. Instead, I was rejected in the parking lot because of my gender. I was devastated, but I also needed a new plan. I called the internship coordinator at my alma mater and asked if she knew of any other opportunities. She mentioned an internship at McConnell Air Force Base. She could not tell me much about it, which intrigued me; so, naturally, I said yes.

That decision changed my life. I quickly discovered that S&C could mean something much bigger than preparing athletes for competition. In the tactical environment, human performance was connected to readiness, resilience, mission success, and helping people physically prepare for jobs that could demand everything from them. I fell in love with the mission and the people behind it. More than twenty years later, I am still here. Looking back, I am grateful that my original plan did not work out. That parking lot rejection felt like failure at the time. Instead, it redirected me toward a career that I never knew existed and a purpose that I never could have planned. Sometimes the moment that feels like the end of your plan is actually the beginning of your purpose.

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**You have entered several organizations where you had to build a program or improve what was already there. When you first enter a new unit, what are you trying to learn before you start making changes?**

When I enter a new organization, my first priority is not to change anything. Instead, the priority is to understand why things are being done the way they are. I believe in conducting a complete needs analysis before making any significant programmatic changes, and that process should take at least sixty to ninety days. I want to understand the mission, operational demands, training environment, injury trends, physical requirements, available resources, current programming, performance gaps, and systems already in place. I also want to know what has been tried before—what worked, what failed, and, perhaps most importantly, why. But a needs analysis is not just about collecting data; it is about collecting context.

During those first sixty to ninety days, I am intentionally building relationships with the athletes, coaches, operators, and leadership. I want to understand leadership's intent, but I also want to understand the culture on the ground. What do people value? What frustrates them? What are they proud of? Where is the friction? And what problems do they actually want help solving? That combination of objective data and human connection usually reveals the low-hanging fruit. Those are the opportunities where a relatively small change can create an immediate and meaningful improvement. Addressing those areas early demonstrates value, layers trust, and creates buy-in for larger changes later.

One of the biggest mistakes that we can make as human performance professionals is walking into a new organization assuming our expertise automatically gives us the answers. Expertise matters,

but context matters more. My goal is to listen, observe, measure, and build relationships before trying to transform anything. Sustainable change rarely begins with a new program. It begins with understanding the people and the mission that the program is supposed to serve.

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Shown is CJ presenting on the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness System at the 2024 NSCA's Tactical Annual Training in Norfolk, VA. CJ has been an active member of NSCA and involved in the Tactical Professional Development Group.

**You helped build human performance programs at the TACP Schoolhouse and the 31st Rescue Squadron, then you helped integrate H2F across the US Army. What makes a program become part of an organization's enduring culture instead of something that only works because one good coach is driving it?**

Creating the unit's historical account is incredibly important. When a new coach or employee arrives, the new staff member should not have to rediscover years of lessons through trial and error. There should be a standardized onboarding process that clearly communicates leadership's intent, roles and responsibilities, expectations of the program, established processes, and the reasoning behind them.

Historical documentation provides the context for understanding not only what they are being asked to do but also why. Expectation management is equally important. The organization should understand what the human performance team provides, and the incoming professional should understand exactly what they were brought in to accomplish. Ultimately, enduring programs are not built around personalities. They are built around systems, relationships, institutional knowledge, and a willingness to continuously learn. My goal has always been to leave behind something that the next person can pick up, understand, improve, and carry forward. That dynamic is when a program stops belonging to one coach and instead starts becoming part of the culture.

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**S&C coaches in the tactical setting are often expected to influence training without having formal authority. How have you built trust and influenced leaders when you could not simply tell people what to do?**

One of the most important lessons that I have learned in tactical human performance is that you do not need formal authority to lead, but you do need trust to influence. I start by being transparent about my role, what I can provide, and—equally important—what I cannot provide based on my current resources. I never want to overpromise simply to gain buy-in. Establishing clear communication from the beginning allows us to define how human performance can support the mission and creates an opportunity for expectation management on both sides. That conversation also cannot be one directional. I need to

understand what leadership expects from me, but I am equally clear about what I need from the key players within the organization for the program to be successful.

When each person understands their role and what success looks like, it removes ambiguity and creates shared ownership. From there, trust is layered through continued communication and, most importantly, follow through. If I say that I am going to do something, then I need to do it. If circumstances change and I cannot accomplish or complete something as originally expected, then I need to communicate why. This type of consistency over time is what turns a professional relationship into a partnership.

As coaches, we are always in a leadership position, regardless of what our organizational chart says. Our influence is demonstrated through our behavior, our words, our actions, and our ability to follow through on what we promise. In tactical environments, you may not have the authority to tell someone what to do, and I do not necessarily think that you need it. If you consistently demonstrate competence, communicate clearly, respect the mission, and prove that you are there to help people succeed, you rarely have to demand influence. You earn it every single day.

**Coaches can learn as much from what did not work as they can from success. Can you share a time when your approach did not earn the buy-in you expected? What did you get wrong, and what did you change?**

Early in my career working in the military environment, I saw several behaviors that concerned me from a human performance perspective but were socially accepted within the culture. Tobacco use and excessive alcohol consumption were two that stood out. I thought education was the answer. I used every opportunity that I could to talk about the negative effects of tobacco and alcohol on health, recovery, readiness, and performance: I had the information. I had the research. I genuinely wanted to help. What I could not understand was why providing people with all of those resources did not compel them to change their behavior.

What I eventually realized was that I was approaching behavior change from my perspective instead of theirs. It did not matter how much I wanted someone to make a healthier choice. They had to be ready and willing to make that change themselves. Constantly pushing facts and information toward someone who had no intention of acting on it was not only ineffective but also exhausting.

An easy way for a coach to burn out is measuring their own effectiveness by decisions that ultimately belong to someone else. The whole experience of applying an approach and ultimately realizing why it was not working fundamentally changed how I coach. I still educate, provide resources, and have difficult conversations when they are necessary. But I have learned to recognize someone's willingness to embrace change. When someone is ready to make a commitment to change, I can then invest significant energy and have tremendous impact. As coaches, we sometimes believe that leadership means convincing everyone to change. I have learned that leadership can also mean planting the seed, keeping the door open, and being ready when someone decides to walk through it. You cannot want change more than the person you are trying to help wants it for themselves.

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**At the 2026 NSCA Tactical Annual Training Conference, you presented on training in managed chaos. Tactical athletes rarely have perfect schedules, recovery, training conditions, or equipment. How do you adjust the plan without losing the purpose of the program?**

The biggest lesson that I have learned from working with tactical athletes is that the plan is rarely going to survive exactly as written. The mission changes, sleep gets disrupted, equipment is unavailable, weather becomes a factor, or an athlete arrives carrying fatigue from something that I never anticipated when I wrote the program. None of those circumstances means that we abandon the plan. It means that we understand the purpose well enough to adapt the plan as needed. I call this training in managed chaos. The key is knowing the intended adaptation of the session. If the goal is strength, power, aerobic development, or recovery, I can change the exercise, volume, intensity, equipment, or even the duration while still protecting that original intent. The method is flexible. The purpose is not.

I encourage coaches to think in terms of adaptation without degradation. More is not always better, and completing everything written on the board does not automatically make the session successful. Sometimes the best coaching decision is reducing volume, changing the modality, or selecting the minimum effective dose that allows us to create the adaptation that we seek without unnecessarily degrading the athlete. It's a discretionary call that requires coaches to communicate with their athletes, understand the operational environment, and be comfortable making decisions in real time.

Programming provides direction, but coaching requires judgment. Ultimately, tactical human performance is not about creating athletes who perform perfectly under perfect conditions. Those conditions rarely exist. It is about developing people who can consistently perform when conditions are unpredictable. The same should be true of our programs. A good program has structure. A great program has enough structure to provide direction and enough flexibility to survive reality.

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**You spent several years living in Okinawa and working with the 31st Rescue Squadron. What opportunities are available for S&C coaches who are willing to work outside the United States—and what should they understand about living overseas, adapting to another culture, and supporting a military unit in that environment?**

There are more opportunities for strength and conditioning coaches to work outside the Continental United States (CONUS) than many people realize. As tactical human performance continues to grow, we are seeing S&C positions at Outside the Continental United States (OCONUS) locations through both civilian and contractor opportunities. For a coach willing to step outside of what is familiar, those positions can provide incredible professional and personal growth. My biggest recommendation is to leverage your network.

Organizations like the NSCA and large-scale conferences are great places to start. Do not just ask people where they work. Ask what they do, where they have worked, and what opportunities they know about. If you meet someone who has lived overseas, ask about the experience. What did they love? What was difficult? What do they wish they had known before they moved? Those conversations can provide insight that you will never get from a job posting.

Once overseas, staying professionally connected becomes even more important. I spent a significant amount of time researching English-speaking conferences, courses, and educational opportunities because access was not as easy as it had been stateside. Fortunately, organizations like the NSCA have continued expanding their presence and activity in Asia and Europe, creating more opportunities for coaches abroad to remain connected to the profession.

Living overseas also requires humility and a willingness to adapt. You are not simply supporting a military unit. You are living within another culture, often while navigating different resources, facilities, schedules, and professional networks. Such an experience can make you a much better coach. When the resources or opportunities that you are accustomed to are no longer readily available, you learn how inventive and creative you can be. Working OCONUS can be challenging, but that aspect is also what makes it so rewarding. Sometimes professional growth comes from putting yourself somewhere unfamiliar and figuring out how to thrive there.

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Pictured above is CJ with arguably the most famous Pararescueman of all time: Charlie, the PJ. Charlie is more than a statue. He represents the legacy, sacrifice, courage, and brotherhood of the Pararescue community. For generations of PJs, he has stood as a reminder of those who came before, those still answering the call, and the promise behind the words: "These Things We Do, That Others May Live."

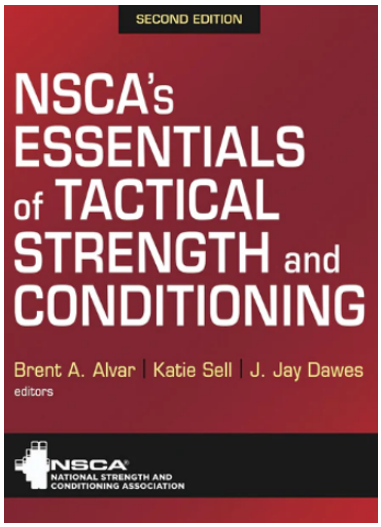
**Tactical S&C is still a predominantly male field. How has being a woman shaped your experience, and what advice would you give to women who want to work with military or other tactical populations?**

Being a woman in tactical S&C has absolutely shaped my experience, but I have never wanted it to define what I was capable of accomplishing. I entered this profession at a time when there were very few women working in tactical human performance. There were moments when I had to work harder to establish credibility, moments when I was the only woman in the room, and certainly moments when I questioned whether or not I belonged there.

Ironically, my career in tactical human performance began because I was turned away from an opportunity in professional baseball because of my gender. What felt like a door closing ultimately led me to a profession where I have spent more than twenty years helping to build programs and to advocate for the people we serve. For young women considering this profession, I want them to understand something important: You do not have to become one of the guys to be successful in this environment. Be yourself. Become exceptionally good at your craft. Ask questions. Find mentors. Attend conferences. Introduce yourself to people whose careers interest you. Get comfortable saying, "I don't know, but I'll find out." Then follow through. Your credibility will come from your competence, consistency, humility, and the way that you treat people.

There may be times when you walk into a room and nobody looks like you. Walk into the room anyway. There may be an opportunity that intimidates you because you do not think that you have enough experience. Apply anyway. And when you earn a seat at the

table, remember that you may be making it easier for the next woman to imagine herself sitting there too.




Above depicts the premier textbook to prepare for the National Strength and Conditioning Association's Tactical Strength and Conditioning- Facilitator Certification.

Tactical human performance needs talented coaches with different experiences, perspectives, leadership styles, and ways of solving problems. Women belong in that conversation. If I could speak directly to the undergraduate student wondering whether she can build a career working with military or tactical populations, I would tell her this: Do not wait for someone else to decide that you belong here. Learn. Show up. Be curious. Do great work. Build relationships. Take the opportunities that scare you. You never know which unexpected opportunity might change the trajectory of your entire life.

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**Receiving the 2026 NSCA TSAC Coach of the Year Award recognizes the influence that you have had within the field. Which parts of your work are you proudest of that people outside those organizations may never see?**

The work that I am proudest of would probably never appear on an award citation. It is the athlete who finally trusted me enough to tell me that they were struggling. It is watching someone accomplish something physically that they previously did not believe that they were capable of doing. It is the coach I mentored at one point who eventually became a better coach than I was. It is seeing a program continue to grow after I left because we built something sustainable rather than something dependent on one person. Those moments mean more to me than any metric or recognition ever could.

Throughout my career, I have had opportunities to build programs, influence policy, integrate human performance initiatives, and work with some incredible military populations. But behind every program are people, and I think that can sometimes get lost when we talk about human performance at an organizational level. Some of my proudest moments have simply been earning the trust of the people I served. Tactical athletes do not care about your résumé nearly as much as they care about whether you are competent, whether you genuinely care about them, and whether you will still be there when things get difficult.

I am also incredibly proud of the people I have helped develop along the way. If I can teach another coach something that makes them better and then they use that knowledge to positively influence hundreds of athletes throughout their career, that impact extends far beyond anything that I could accomplish alone. Receiving the 2026 NSCA Tactical Strength and Conditioning Coach of the Year Award was an incredible honor, but I see it less as recognition of what I have accomplished and more as a reflection of the people who trusted me enough to let me be part of their journey. The work that I am proudest of is not necessarily what people can see. It is knowing that the people I invested in and the programs

that I helped to build will continue making a difference long after my time in this profession is over. The reality of that kind of change and potential, to me, is the true measure of impact.

**If a young coach called you tomorrow and said that they wanted to work in tactical S&C, what would you tell them to prioritize during their first five years? What do young coaches tend to overvalue or misunderstand?**

If a young coach called me and said they wanted to work in tactical strength and conditioning, then I would tell them to spend their first five years being relentlessly curious. Learn as much as you can, but do not limit that education to sets, reps, programming, and exercise selection. Those things matter, but they are only part of what makes someone successful in the tactical environment. Learn about the population you serve. Understand their mission, culture, terminology, schedules, leadership structure, and operational demands. Ask questions and, more importantly, learn how to listen. I would also encourage them to seek out experiences that make them uncomfortable. Work with different populations. Attend conferences. Volunteer. Find great mentors, but do not look exclusively for people who think exactly like you do. Build a network of professionals from S&C, sports medicine, nutrition, psychology, research, and the operational community.

Some of the most valuable lessons in your career will come from people outside your specialty. I think that young coaches sometimes overvalue how much they know and undervalue how well they can connect with people. You can write the most scientifically sound program in the world, but if your athletes do not trust you, understand the program, or believe it helps them to perform their job, then it will have very little impact.

I would also tell them to not be in such a hurry to become the expert. Your first five years should be about collecting experiences, making mistakes, asking questions, and developing your coaching philosophy. Be willing to sweep the floor and take the trash out without being asked. Watch other coaches. Ask why. Admit when you are wrong. Follow through when you say that you will do something. Technical knowledge might get you into tactical S&C, but your ability to build relationships, remain curious, adapt, and serve the mission is what will keep you there and ultimately allow you to make an impact.




Pictured above is CJ with the military's only fully-geodispersed human performance team, which CJ created and led. She declares this project to be her favorite and most rewarding one so far throughout her entire career.