Q&A with Dr. Chad Herring: From Training Athletes to Training Special Operation Forces

By Chad Herring with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/chscsc26

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Chad Herring's perspectives and do not reflect those of KBR, United States Special Operations Command, or the United States' military.

Introduction

Dr. Chad Herring has over fifteen years of cross-sector experience in tactical performance, collegiate athletics, private training, and technology-driven sports science. Dr. Herring earned his bachelor's degree in Exercise Science from Ithaca College (2009), his master's degree in Coaching, Sport, Recreation, and Fitness Administration from Angelo State University (2012), and his doctoral degree in Exercise Physiology from the University of Central Florida (2021). He has numerous certifications, including the National Strength and Conditioning Association's (NSCA's) Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS). He is additionally published in several journals, to include the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*, *Journal of Science in Sport and Exercise*, and *Nutrients*.

Dr. Herring's professional experience includes being a strength and conditioning (S&C) coach in Minor League Baseball (Houston Astros), the head S&C coach for Angelo State University, an exercise science product development specialist for Altis Movement Technologies, a CEO and director of performance for DIA Sports Performance, the director of sports science for Football at Florida Atlantic University, and an assistant fitness director at Hunters Run Country Club. Currently, he is the S&C specialist for United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). As the S&C specialist for USSOCOM, Dr. Herring oversees many aspects of performance for operators, enablers, and support personnel from each Service of the United States Military and each component of United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) (e.g., Marine Raiders, Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs).



Show above is Coach Chad Herring as the Director of Sport Science with the Florida Atlantic University Football program.

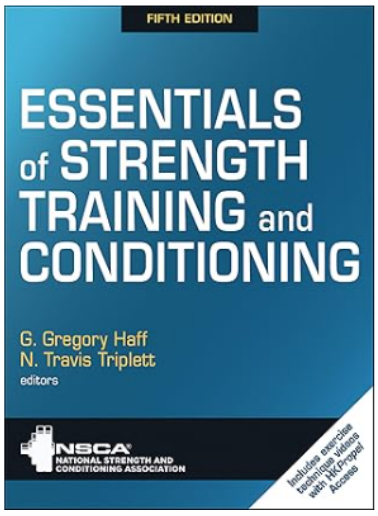
The question was recently posed to us on how to become an S&C professional with the tactical population. What advice can you give someone on how to enter this field and direction?

The pathway into tactical S&C can vary considerably depending on an individual's background and coaching experience. Broadly, advice tends to fall into two categories: those with limited coaching experience, such as undergraduate students and recent graduates, and more experienced S&C professionals who are looking to transition into the tactical setting from another environment.

For individuals with limited coaching experience, internships remain the most effective entry point into tactical S&C. Fortunately, the tactical field of S&C has grown in the past several years, so internships have become increasingly available through military units, private contracting companies, and other similar environments. At USSOCOM, for example, we've been fortunate to establish a relationship with the University of South Florida (USF) that has allowed us to host both graduate and undergraduate S&C interns. These experiences provide exposure not only to training methodologies but also to the unique operational, cultural, and organizational demands of tactical populations.

Recognizing that internships are not always feasible due to financial, geographic, or personal constraints, aspiring S&C coaches should also prioritize professional development opportunities such as clinics and conferences. Tactical-specific events, such as the NSCA's Tactical Annual Training, as well as regional or state conferences that include tactical practitioners, can be valuable for both education and networking. In my experience, professionals in this space are generally receptive to thoughtful questions when approached with humility and respect. For those seeking to further build experience, graduate assistantships—especially those directly supporting Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) or at a college or university that allows unofficial involvement with ROTC—can serve as another meaningful step.

For experienced S&C professionals who are considering a transition into the tactical setting, my first recommendation is to speak directly with practitioners who are already working in the field. Tactical S&C differs in meaningful ways from collegiate and professional sport environments (see question below). While many S&C coaches excel in traditional settings, not all thrive in the tactical space. Assuming this step has been completed, transitioning S&C professionals should proactively engage with hiring managers or regional directors at targeted organizations to confirm that they meet all the required qualifications (see question below). Due to the contractual nature of many tactical positions, minimum qualifications are often non-negotiable. Outreach through professional platforms or mutual connections can facilitate these conversations. Finally, continued engagement in clinics and conferences remains important for building relationships and maintaining awareness of opportunities within the tactical performance community.



Are there any prerequisites (education, certifications, experiences) for working specifically with USSOF?

There are no universally standardized prerequisites that apply across USSOF units; however, there are clearly defined minimum qualifications for S&C professionals under the Preservation of the Force and Family Readiness (POTFF) contract. These standards exist to ensure that practitioners possess the educational foundation and professional competence necessary to operate effectively within complex and potentially high-risk environments.

Generally speaking, the following prerequisites apply to S&C Specialists working under the POTFF contract:

- A bachelor's degree in an accredited exercise science, health science, or physical education-related discipline (a master's degree is preferred).
- Possession and maintenance of current certification from either the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) as a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) or the Strength & Conditioning Coach Certified (SCCC) credential through the Collegiate Strength & Conditioning Coaches Association (CSCCa).
- A minimum of five years or more of demonstrable accumulated experience (continuous and sustained experience preferred) of developing and coordinating short- and long-range sport- or mission-specific performance programs that produce attributable outcomes with individual athletes and groups of athletes at the levels of NCAA Collegiate Division, Olympic, professional sports, and/or SOF Operators in the accompanying, respective settings.*
- Current certification in basic Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), including Automated External Defibrillator (AED) training.
- Physical proficiency to demonstrate prescribed exercises and techniques, and the capability to meet the physical demands associated with training alongside SOF personnel, including movement over rough terrain, functioning in austere environments, and observing SOF training evolutions.

What were some unique experiences that contributed to your success in becoming an S&C specialist at USSOCOM?

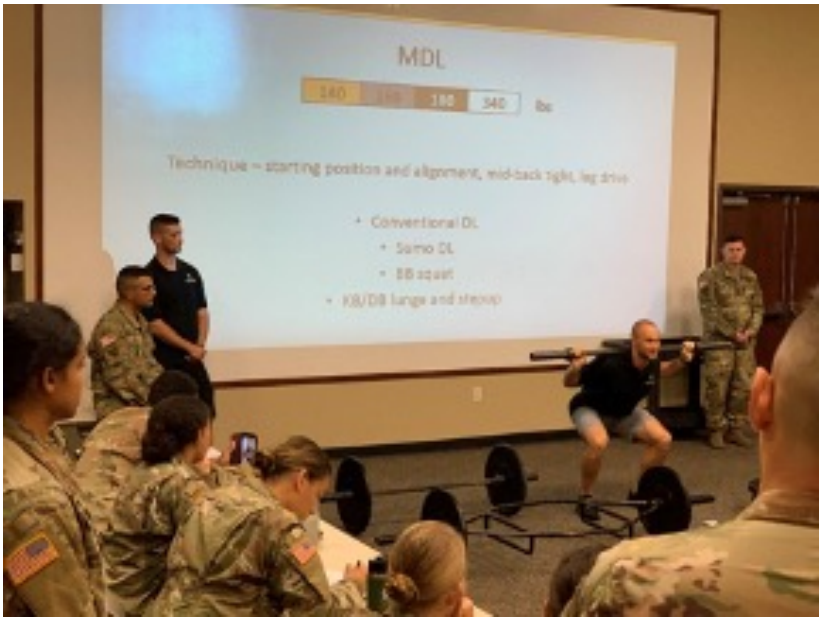
While each of my professional experiences contributed in some way to securing a role as an S&C Specialist under the POTFF contract, several experiences were particularly formative in preparing me for the demands of the position.

The first was my initial full-time role as head S&C Coach at Angelo State University (NCAA Division II). Obtaining this position at a relatively young age required rapid professional maturation and forced me to develop skills well beyond day-to-day coaching. In addition to program design and training oversight, I was responsible for departmental leadership, staff hiring and development, multidisciplinary collaboration, data and performance science oversight, return-to-play decision-making, compliance and risk management, budgeting, and the development of strategic internal and external partnerships. This role provided early exposure to accountability, decision-making under constraint, and the necessity of aligning performance initiatives with broader organizational objectives—core competencies that directly transfer to the tactical setting.

Another experience that significantly shaped my preparation was earning my PhD at the University of Central Florida (UCF). My primary motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree was to gain hands-on experience in evaluation of emerging human performance technologies and teaching others how to use and apply them to their

performance settings. This experience included assessing reliability and validity, conducting cost-benefit analyses, and determining practical feasibility, translating into skills that are essential when operating in mission-driven environments such as tactical settings. Earning my PhD also provided advanced critical thinking and communication skills. Furthermore, completing the Advanced Quantitative Methodologies in Educational and Human Sciences Graduate Certificate provided a superior understanding of how to integrate advanced statistical approaches in complex applied problems, allowing data to meaningfully inform decision-making rather than exist in isolation.

Finally, my experience as director of sport science with Florida Atlantic University's football program reinforced the importance of managing an integrated data ecosystem in a fast-paced, results-driven environment. Responsibilities included coordinating data collection across multiple technologies, overseeing data entry and cleaning processes, and developing clear reporting and visualization strategies. These processes supported daily decisions related to S&C practices, return-to-play protocols, practice periodization, workload monitoring, and recruiting. This role emphasized that data is only valuable when it directly supports action, a principle that remains central for my current role.



Shown above is Coach Herring coaching the barbell back squat to US Army Reserve Officer Training Cadets.

Collectively, these experiences developed leadership capacity, analytical rigor, and systems-level thinking, all of which were instrumental in preparing me for the complexity of performance support within USSOCOM.

Was there anything that you wish that you had known or had experience with prior to working with USSOF?

One area that I wish I had a better understanding of prior to working with SOF is the true demands of both training pipelines and high-tempo operational environments. It is one thing to read about, observe, or briefly visit these settings, but it is fundamentally different to experience those demands firsthand over time.

Similar to the athletic realm, coaches who have played often possess additional contextual insight that can be difficult to acquire through observation alone. While I do not believe it is essential for an S&C professional to have personally experienced these demands in order to be effective, I do believe that greater context improves judgment and decision-making. Without having lived those experiences myself, I have had to be intentional about listening, observing patterns, and learning from those who have operated—and continue to operate—within these environments.

This reality has reinforced the importance of humility in practice. Operational demands extend beyond physical training and include factors such as unpredictability, fatigue accumulation, and competing stressors that are not always visible in performance data. Recognizing the limits of my own experience has shaped how I design training, interpret readiness, and prioritize long-term availability.

Were there any experiences prior to your working with USSOF that proved unhelpful to your current role?

I believe that there are valuable lessons to be taken from every professional experience, even if the primary takeaway is learning what not to do. From that perspective, I would not consider any of my prior experiences unhelpful.

One thing that I would point out, however, is the vast difference between this environment and the sporting environment. Had I entered this role expecting those settings to operate similarly, it would have been a significant disadvantage. Recognizing and respecting those differences early was essential to adapting my approach and avoiding misplaced assumptions.

What are the unique challenges of working with USSOF in comparison to athletic programs?

One of the most unique challenges of working with SOF is the voluntary nature that the Service member has for working with an S&C professional. This dynamic contrasts sharply with athletic environments, where training is typically mandatory and enforced through structured schedules and formal accountability measures that are overseen by an S&C professional. While voluntary engagement with S&C staff can be viewed as a challenge, I consider it a positive aspect of the tactical setting. S&C professionals must earn buy-in by delivering training programs that produce tangible results, meeting Service members where they are in their training journeys, remaining adaptable, and building strong relationships. When done well, this approach promotes long-term engagement rather than compliance.

Another distinguishing challenge is the unpredictability of Service member's schedules. Athletic programs often have competition calendars established months or years in advance, allowing for long-term, structured planning. In contrast, operational demands, deployments, and temporary duty assignments can alter training availability with little notice. S&C practitioners must remain flexible while still providing structure. Developing multiple training options, such as programs for consistent attendance and alternatives for remote or temporary duty locations, can help maintain continuity despite frequent disruption.

Finally, the breadth of physical demands associated with many Military Occupational Specialties, particularly combat-related roles, presents a unique challenge. Service members may be required to run long distances, ruck under load, change direction rapidly, sprint, lift, carry, and sustain effort over extended periods, often under fatigue. This training environment is more comparable to athletes such as decathletes or mixed martial artists than to highly specialized sport athletes. Rather than emphasizing narrow performance qualities such as agility and change-of-direction abilities, top-end speed, or jumping capabilities, tactical S&C must develop well-rounded, resilient individuals who are capable of performing across a wide range of physical tasks. While complex, this breadth of demand is one of the most rewarding aspects of working in the tactical performance environment.

What advice would you give students, especially those at the undergraduate or graduate level, who want to eventually work with the tactical population?

Much of my advice for students interested in working with the tactical population is addressed in my response to the first question. Beyond that, I would encourage students to thoughtfully consider service themselves, if that path aligns with their personal goals and circumstances. There are many ways to serve in this capacity, as the Air Force, Navy, and Army have various military occupational specialties that align with human performance and professions, as well as service in the Reserves or National Guard.

As discussed previously, firsthand experience can provide valuable context that is difficult to fully appreciate through observation alone. While serving is not a prerequisite for becoming an effective S&C professional in the tactical setting, the perspective gained through direct participation can meaningfully inform judgment, communication, and understanding. Ultimately, students should focus on building strong foundational skills, remaining humble in what they do not yet know, and seeking experiences that deepen their understanding of the populations whom they hope to serve.

You earned your doctoral degree prior to working with USSOF. Is a terminal degree necessary for what you do today? If not necessary, is it beneficial?

For my current role, a terminal degree is not required; however, the skills and competencies that I developed while earning my doctorate have been extremely beneficial. These include advanced critical thinking; effective communication across oral, written, formal, and informal contexts; and the ability to evaluate emerging technologies through assessments of reliability, validity, and cost-benefits trade-offs. Additionally, advanced data analysis and the ability to interpret research have been particularly valuable when working within the SOF environment, where decisions must be informed but practical.

That said, I would caution against broadly recommending a PhD to individuals seeking similar roles. Much like the bias that can exist toward undergraduate degrees in kinesiology (see question and answer below), pursuing a terminal degree without clear intent, strong mentorship, and alignment with career goals may not yield the outcomes expected. A PhD is a significant investment of time and effort, and without the right program or purpose, it does not automatically translate into better job prospects within the tactical setting.

Ultimately, a terminal degree can be beneficial, but it is not necessary. Its value depends less on the credential itself and more on how the skills developed during the process are applied. For many aspiring practitioners, gaining applied experience, receiving strong mentorship, and holding relevant certifications may be more impactful than pursuing a terminal degree

Is a master's degree beneficial or need to work with the tactical population?

A master's degree is not required to work with the tactical population, but it is preferred by many contracting companies. Graduate education can provide deeper exposure to the areas of exercise physiology, exercise science, and kinesiology, while also strengthening critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are highly relevant in complex performance environments.

When paired with a graduate assistantship, a master's degree can be particularly valuable. These experiences often require balancing academic responsibilities with applied coaching, developing time-management skills, and making decisions with limited information, which all translate well to the tactical setting. While formal education alone does not guarantee effectiveness as a practitioner, advanced training can meaningfully enhance

preparedness and professional versatility when applied thoughtfully.



On the right, is Dr. Chad Herring after having earned his PhD from the University of Central Florida with his advisor, Dr. David Fukuda.

You host student interns for S&C at USSOCOM. How would somebody obtain the possibility of an internship with USSOCOM or a similar entity?

The most appropriate starting point for students interested in an internship within USSOCOM or a similar tactical organization is their own academic institution. Students should first speak with their program director and/or internship advisor to determine whether such an opportunity is feasible within their degree program.

If approved at the university level, the next step is for the program director or internship advisor, not the student, to initiate contact with the relevant organizational leadership, such as the POTFF Director or Human Performance Advisor. These partnerships typically require significant lead time, often months or even years, to establish formally and ensure alignment with institutional and organizational requirements.

Once a relationship is in place, communication occurs prior to each academic term to assess interest and capacity for potential interns. Students are considered only after being vetted by their academic program for both qualifications and fit. Those selected then participate in a formal interview process, which may include the human performance advisor, S&C specialists and other members of the physical performance domain, as well as the POTFF director(s).

This process reflects the importance of professionalism, trust, and institutional alignment when working within sensitive tactical environments. Students interested in these opportunities should plan well in advance, focus on being strong representatives of their academic programs, and recognize that these internships are built on relationships rather than individual applications. Lastly, if there is an ROTC program at the student's respective university, volunteering with the program demonstrates commitment to the military population and can potentially set those students apart from their peers. Additionally, many high schools have junior ROTC (JROTC) programs that undergraduate or graduate students can volunteer with for extra experience.

What advice would you give to a strength coach who is running his or her first program?

My first piece of advice is to seek guidance and be able to clearly defend the program being implemented. S&C professionals should be able to rationalize every major decision, from exercise selection to weekly structure and progression. Many academic programs address this through program design courses that require formal justification; and certain certifications, such as the Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Coaches Association's SCCC, include a formal explanation and defense of a training program. Regardless of coursework or certification requirements, having a trusted mentor critically review and challenge the program can be invaluable.

Once the program has been vetted and defended, the S&C professional can enter implementation with confidence, knowing that they have prepared as thoroughly as possible. However, confidence



Shown above is Dr. Herring (center) with two of his kinesiology students conducting an internship from the University of South Florida's Exercise Science and Kinesiology Program.

should not be confused with rigidity. One of the most important skills for a new coach is adaptability. Unforeseen issues will inevitably arise, including equipment limitations, undisclosed injuries, scheduling conflicts, or changes in athlete availability, to name a few. The ability to recognize when adjustments are necessary and make them without compromising the intent of the program is critical for long-term effectiveness.

Finally, effective communication is essential when running a program for the first time. It includes communication with the individuals in training, other S&C staff, and coaches or organizational leadership. In many situations, it is better to slightly overcommunicate than under communicate. Providing brief explanations to the individuals whom you are serving on the purpose behind specific training elements can significantly improve buy-in. Communicating with sport coaches or leadership about how sessions went, such as effort level, attendance, and necessary adaptations, also helps to establish trust. These updates can be delivered through formal systems or informal conversations, depending on context, but consistency and clarity are key.

Ultimately, early success as an S&C professional is less about having the perfect program and more about sound reasoning, adaptability, and trust-building through clear communication.

Throughout your experience with various athletic programs, what traits were associated with winning cultures (i.e., teams that overachieve)?

Throughout my experience, winning cultures consistently shared several common traits. In these environments, the best athletes were often the hardest workers, setting the standard rather than relying solely on talent. There was a clear belief in leadership, accompanied by trust in the vision and direction of the program. Individuals understood and appreciated their roles, regardless of visibility, and took pride in contributing to the team's success. These groups also demonstrated a genuine enjoyment of being around one another, which fostered cohesion and resilience. Selflessness was emphasized over individual recognition, and there was a consistent focus on the process rather than solely on outcomes. Collectively, these traits created environments where teams routinely overachieved relative to expectations

Over your time in different athletic programs, what traits were associated with toxic, losing, and bad cultures (i.e., teams that underachieve)?

Some of the traits include selfishness, lack of discipline,

disconnect between groups and individuals on the team, and a focus on outcomes over the process. Collectively, these traits created environments where standards went unenforced, trust eroded, and performance became inconsistent.

There is a bias against earning a degree in kinesiology due to concerns about a lack of employment and potential or limited income opportunities. What would you say to someone with either or both of those concerns?

These concerns are valid, largely because kinesiology is a very broad field. That breadth can be either positive or negative, depending on guidance and perspective. Without clear direction and applied experience, a student can graduate with limited immediate career leads. This risk is amplified if the student has not pursued internships, paid work, or shadowing opportunities during their degree program, and this reality applies at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

However, when planned appropriately, a kinesiology degree can be a powerful foundation. It offers exposure to human movement, physiology, performance, and health across many settings, while allowing students to tailor their trajectory toward academia, industry, medicine, research, sport, or tactical performance. With intentional planning, students can pursue what I believe is one of the most engaging and versatile academic disciplines available while still positioning themselves for strong employment and income potential. I have personally known individuals who earned undergraduate degrees in kinesiology and went on to medical school, which illustrates that the degree itself does not limit long-term outcomes and shows the versatility of a kinesiology degree.

That flexibility does require honesty, however. Admittedly, I have advised some students to pursue adjacent degree pathways with more defined credentialing processes, based on their goals. For example, an athletic training degree allows an individual to sit for the Board of Certification and become a certified Athletic Trainer (AT) while still qualifying for many of the same roles that a kinesiology graduate might pursue. The reverse is not true. Similarly, advanced clinical degrees—such as a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT)—open nearly all the same doors as kinesiology, with the added option of practicing clinically.

Ultimately, the value of a degree in kinesiology depends heavily on the student's initiative, planning, and willingness to gain applied experience. For students who approach it intentionally, it can be an excellent launch point rather than a limitation.

**Paid, full-time experience as a government civilian or contract employee at United States Combat Arms, Air Force Special Warfare, and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) communities units may be counted towards minimum qualification requirements, provided this experience was gained within the most recent, continuous three years, as a directly-embedded staff member, on-site with the respective Army, Navy, Air Force and/or Marine Corps entities.*

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