

Q&A with Mark Christiani: Army Ranger to Tactical Strength and Conditioning Coach

By Mark Christiani with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | <https://doi.org/10.65832/mcehjc75>

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Mark Christiani's perspectives and do not reflect those of O2X or the United States' military.

Introduction

Mark Christiani is a Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach (RSCC) with the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), holds the NSCA's Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) certification, and has over ten years of experience in coaching various athletic and tactical populations. He has a BS in Kinesiology and Health from Iowa State University and a MS in Sports Medicine from Georgia Southern University. From 2013 to 2018, Mark was in the United States Army, specifically serving with 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment as a special operator, deploying to various combat zones.

Mark has served as a Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) Contracted Brigade lead strength and conditioning (S&C) coach for the for the 44th Medical Brigade, adjunct exercise science lecturer at Georgia Southern University, assistant S&C coach at Savannah State University, a football S&C intern at the University of South Carolina, and a human performance specialist at MetLife. Currently, Mark serves as a O2X Human Performance Contracted S&C Coach. As part of the O2X team, Mark built the first Army Reserve human performance program in the Tampa Bay and Orlando regions in Florida (FL), which encompasses over 5,000 Army Reserve Soldiers from seventy different units.

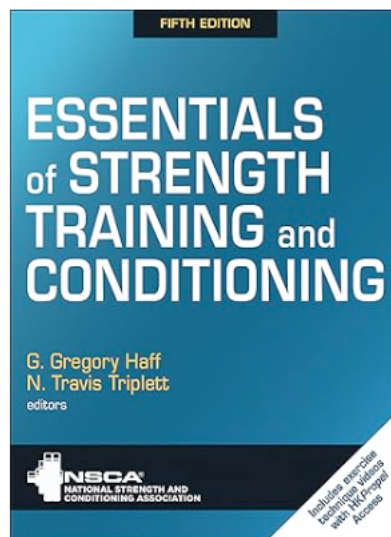
He is an active member of the NSCA and currently serves on the organization's FL State Board of Advisors. Furthermore, Mark has presented at various NSCA events, including the 2025 Tactical Strength and Conditioning Clinic. He has additionally written for various organizations and been a guest on several S&C and fitness podcasts.



Coach Mark Christiani (image provided by 207 PAO DET).

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

The first step to working in the tactical space, or really any space in S&C, is earning the NSCA CSCS. It's the baseline credential for almost every S&C job. A degree is required, but currently the degree doesn't have to be in exercise science or a related field. However, that will change in 2030, when the NSCA will require that any person holding the CSCS has a degree from a university certified by the CASCE [Council on Accreditation of Strength and Conditioning Education].



From there, proximity to a tactical organization is essential. Leverage relationships and find a way to get experience—internships, volunteer coaching, shadowing, drill-weekend

support. You can take this step while still in school or before earning the CSCS. What matters is getting exposure to the tactical environment; because tactical coaching is about understanding the culture, the schedule, and the constraints as much as the sets and reps.

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Next, look into the job market and the requirements in your area. Army H2F, for example, has a lower barrier to entry than most realize. The requirement of three years of experience can often be waived if you've worked with a tactical population as an intern or served in the military. The goal is to show that you can operate in a nontraditional training environment and communicate effectively with leadership.

Once you land that initial position, everything gets easier. Tactical S&C is a small community, and reputation matters. Show up consistently, coach well, adapt to the environment, and be someone whom people want on their team. If you do that, then opportunities will continue to open.

What advice would you give to undergraduate- or graduate-level students who want to

eventually work with the tactical population?

The best advice for students who want to work with the tactical population is simple: get experience. I often see students in their final semester say that they want to work in tactical S&C but have no coaching reps outside the classroom. Confidence with a group, communication skills, and the ability to explain your “why” aren't built through multiple-choice tests. They're built by coaching real people in real situations.

One of the biggest gaps that I see in younger coaches is communication. Many can design a solid program, but when asked to justify it to a commander or explain it to a group of Soldiers, they freeze. The only way to fix that is through reps. The best advice that I received early in my career was to coach everyone whom you can. Write programs for friends. Volunteer. Pick up personal training shifts. Intern anywhere that lets you teach, cue, and communicate. Every rep builds confidence and clarity.

After that, learn the environment that you want to work in. If you want to coach in the military, understand the basics, ranks, structure, acronyms, and training pipelines. If you want to work with firefighters or law enforcement, study their

schedules, job demands, and culture. Speaking the language goes a long way. It shows respect for the profession and makes it easier to build trust.

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

A master's degree isn't required for most tactical S&C positions. Some roles list it as preferred, and a few contract positions require it, but experience almost always carries more weight. If you can coach, communicate, and operate in a tactical environment, that matters more than the letters after your name.

Now, a master's degree can absolutely be beneficial. Graduate school gives you a deeper understanding of exercise science, research methods, and how to think critically about training. A GA [Graduate Assistant] position, in particular, is valuable, because it gives you coaching reps, mentorship, and a built-in network of professionals. Many coaches land their first full-time role through relationships formed during their graduate assistantships.

So, is it required? No. Can it help? Yes.

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Being a prior Army Soldier and Special Operator, what advice would you give (from a Service member's perspective) to a new S&C coach working with military personnel (either conventional or special operation forces)?

My biggest advice for new S&C coaches working with military personnel is to learn the language and step into their world. If you don't understand the terminology, ranks, and day-to-day realities of Service members, it's hard to connect. Take the time to learn how the unit operates.

Show up on time, with a good attitude, and be willing to participate when appropriate. Joining a run, a ruck, or a physical training (PT) session isn't about proving who is the fittest, it's about building trust through shared experience. And don't be afraid to let them teach you something. Jump into a penny drill, observe a medical lane, or learn how to prepare equipment for training. When you show genuine curiosity about their work, it builds rapport and gives you a better understanding of the demands that they face.

Service members respond to authenticity. They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. If you show respect for their profession, communicate clearly,

and invest in the team, they'll buy into what you bring to the table.

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Shown above is Mark Christiani presenting Minimal Effective Dosing at the 2025 National Strength and Conditioning Association's Tactical Strength and Conditioning Conference.

What have you observed as common yet suboptimal practices for fitness within the military that S&C coaches should be cautious of when working with this population?

The military deals with many of the same suboptimal training practices that you see in the general population, but they're amplified by culture, time constraints, and the "get it done" mentality. Even Soldiers who have been through military fitness courses may have only spent a few weeks learning

about training, so their understanding is often limited.

One of the biggest issues is poor warm-up habits. Soldiers will throw on a ruck or start lifting heavy with almost no preparation. It's not a lack of discipline, it's a lack of education along with a pace of work that pushes warm-ups to the side.

Another common problem is unit runs at a single, fast pace, usually dictated by whoever is the best runner. Half the formation is hanging on for dear life, and the other half isn't getting meaningful training. It's a perfect example of training to time instead of to a standard.

Across the board, I see a tendency to value volume over intention. The mindset is often, "If we crush ourselves, it must be good training." High reps, long circuits, excessive mileage, effort becomes the metric instead of adaptation. Coaches entering the tactical space need to understand that this approach isn't laziness, it's tradition. And tradition carries momentum.

There's also a strong focus on simply getting the work done, even when it's not done well. Soldiers are trained to accomplish tasks under pressure, and that mindset leaks into fitness as well. Movement quality, progression, and recovery are often afterthoughts.

For new S&C coaches, the key is to respect the culture

while gradually shifting it. Don't attack the current methods, show better ones. Teach intent, not just intensity. Help units understand that smart training improves readiness far more than endless volume.

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What are the unique challenges of working with Service members compared to athletic programs?

Working with Service members comes with unique challenges that you don't see in most athletic programs. In sports, trust is built into the system. If a head coach says, "Be in the weight room at 3 p.m.," then the team shows up. The athletes already understand the chain of command, the structure, and the role of the S&C coach. Compliance is expected.

In the tactical setting, none of that response is guaranteed. Service members don't have to use your services. Your position doesn't automatically come with authority or trust; you have to earn both. You're essentially selling yourself every day.

Another big difference is that athletes are used to being coached. They expect feedback, cues, structure, and progression. Many Service members haven't

had that experience. Some have only ever done group PT, self-directed workouts, or whatever the unit traditionally runs. Therefore, you're often introducing coaching itself, not just better programming.

There's also the reality that Service members view you differently than athletes do. In athletics, the S&C coach sits firmly within the coaching hierarchy. In the military, you're a subject matter expert, not a commander. Rank outweighs expertise, and you can't rely on positional authority to drive behavior. You have to build relationships that are strong enough that Soldiers want to listen to you.

Finally, military training is unpredictable. Schedules shift, missions pop up, and training gets interrupted. You're coaching in a world where readiness comes first, and your program comes second. That requires flexibility, humility, and the ability to make an impact in the time that you're given.

You have a five-part series on MOPs and MOEs regarding military readiness and training in the Reserves. In parts one and five, you emphasize the need to "create a culture of accountability." What are your recommendations?

In the Reserve Component, creating a culture of accountability starts with acknowledging the reality, most

of a Soldier's readiness is built outside of drill. We can't rely on two days a month to drive meaningful change. The culture has to support the other twenty-eight days.

Accountability begins with clarity. Soldiers need to know what "ready" actually looks like—physically, mentally, and professionally. When the standard is vague, the effort becomes vague. Clear expectations make it easier for Soldiers to align their training and for leaders to support it.

Next is ownership. Readiness improves when Soldiers understand that no one can do the work for them. Leaders can guide, coaches can program, but the day-to-day habits belong to the individual. When Soldiers track one or two key performance indicators—AFT [Army Fitness Test] score, two-mile run time, sleep, bodyweight—they start seeing cause and effect, which builds internal accountability.

The third piece is environment. Accountability grows when the culture rewards positive behaviors. When leaders train with their formations, when units celebrate progress, when fitness is framed as professional competence rather than a box to check, Soldiers respond. Culture is set by what you praise and what you tolerate.

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Part five of the MOPs and MOEs series focuses on support systems. Accountability isn't about punishment, it's about connection. Peer training groups, small challenge teams, shared goals, and leaders who check in between drills all strengthen follow-through. When Soldiers know someone is showing up with them, even virtually, they're more consistent.

Finally, keep the message simple, readiness is a professional responsibility. When Soldiers understand that their fitness directly affects their team, their mission, and their longevity, accountability becomes part of identity, not a task on a list. That's how culture shifts, one clear expectation, one small win, and one connected team at a time.



Shown above is Mark Christiani coaching the kettlebell swing to an Army Reserve Soldier.

In part three of your MOPs and MOEs series, you discuss the need to redefine training

while injured. What guidance can you provide here on redefining training while injured?

The mistake that many Service members make is viewing injury as an all-or-nothing event. If they can't run, they stop moving. If they can't lift heavy, they stop strength training. That approach stalls progress and slows recovery. The goal is to shift from a mindset of "I can't do this" to "What *can* I do right now that supports readiness?"

When you're working around an injury, start by identifying the training qualities that are still available. Maybe you can't run, but you can bike or ruck at Zone 2. Maybe you can't press heavy, but you can train lower body strength, core stability, or single-arm variations. There is always a capacity that you can maintain or improve, if you scale appropriately.

Redefining training also means reducing ego. Don't chase personal records, chase progress. Lighter loads, modified ranges of motion, tempo work, and unilateral training not only keep people engaged, they often improve weaknesses that caused the injury in the first place.

Most importantly, communicate that **training while injured is still training**. When Soldiers understand that modified work is not lesser work, compliance improves. You're building tissue tolerance,

maintaining aerobic capacity, and preserving momentum—things that pay off when individuals re-enter full training. Injuries can change the plan, not the purpose.

In part five of your MOPs and MOEs series on training in the reserves, you discuss the need to build a support system for unit accountability. What guidance can you provide here on building a support system?

Whether someone serves Active Duty, in the Guard, or in the Reserves, the reality is a lot of training happens away from structured PT sessions. Without a system that keeps people connected and supported, consistency can drop quickly.

Building a support system starts with connection. People stay accountable when they feel part of a team. Small groups, peer partners, or squad-level chats give Service members someone to check in with and someone who notices when they fall off. It doesn't need to be formal; a group text where people share training goals or weekly wins is enough to create momentum.

A good support system also includes feedback loops. Periodic check-ins, quick video reviews of movement, or short conversations with a coach or leader help adjust training before problems grow. When Service members feel supported

rather than judged, they stay engaged.

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Finally, leaders set the example. When NCOs [non-commissioned officers], officers, and senior personnel openly train, track progress, and participate in the process, the culture shifts. Accountability becomes something that the unit values, not just something that individuals struggle to maintain. I have seen a company commander take over a unit who was constantly struggling to get soldiers to pass their PT test; this commander valued fitness, trained with the soldiers every day, and encouraged them to train in their off time. They bought into H2F, and by the time this commander left the unit, the unit had one of the highest PT scores in the Brigade. When Service members feel supported and part of a shared effort, accountability becomes easier and readiness improves.

Over your years in athletic programs, SOF [Special Operations Forces], and coaching what traits are associated with winning cultures (i.e., teams that overachieve)?

Winning cultures are built on genuine connection, people care

about the person to their left and right, and they act on that. One of the quotes I've heard General Chris Donahue say, multiple times, is: "Be a good teammate." That simple statement defines a winning culture. When individuals commit to being the kind of teammate others can rely on, performance follows.

The best football teams that I worked with at Savannah State weren't the most talented; they were the most dedicated. What set them apart was complete buy-in. They trusted their head coach, their captains led from the front, and they showed up every day with energy. Practice wasn't something that they endured; it was something they took on together. They overachieved on the field and in the classroom because the culture demanded effort, consistency, and respect. No one was too important for the small things. They trained with purpose, supported each other through adversity, and took responsibility when things went wrong. These guys liked showing up to play ball with each other. In the military, the units who really like showing up each day usually do well.

Winning cultures, whether in sports or the military, don't happen by chance. They come from leaders who set clear expectations and model the behaviors that they want and from teammates who commit to

something bigger than themselves.

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Over your years in athletic programs, SOF, and coaching what traits are associated with toxic, losing, and bad cultures (i.e., teams that underachieve)?

Where winning cultures are built on connection and trust, bad cultures are built on separation. When leaders alienate their people, belittle them, or refuse to listen, the team stops believing in the mission and stops believing in each other. The common traits of losing cultures are surprisingly consistent. Communication breaks down.

Standards shift depending on who is watching. Leaders enforce rules instead of modeling them. People start protecting themselves instead of supporting the team. Bad cultures don't emerge from one big failure; they grow from a thousand small negative interactions.

I've seen this play out in both athletics and the military. As a head strength coach, I learned that small acts of trust matter. If one of my coaches needed to leave thirty minutes early for an appointment, I let them go. It wasn't a big deal as long as it didn't become a habit. That kind of flexibility built buy-in and respect. It was the reasons our team of coaches had one of the lowest turnover rates. I've also seen the opposite: leaders who refused to make any exceptions, who enforced rules without context, and who never looked out for their people.

Those leaders lost their teams quickly. In toxic cultures,

people stop communicating, stop taking ownership, and stop going the extra mile. Fear replaces initiative, and there is no commitment. Underachievement becomes the norm, not because the team lacks talent, but because the environment doesn't support effort.

Recently, a high school senior informed us that his parents did not want them to earn a kinesiology degree because "he could not get a job with a kinesiology degree." What would you tell others about the kinesiology field?

It's funny, people told me the same thing when I got my undergraduate degree; and, even in the very rough job market of 2010, I had a job the day that I graduated. A kinesiology degree isn't a dead end, it's a gateway degree into a wide range of performance, health, and human science careers.



Shown above is Mark Christiani with the 143rd ESC out of Orlando, Florida.

Kinesiology leads directly into careers such as: an S&C coaching (high school, college, professional, or tactical); physical therapy / occupational therapy (kinesiology is one of the top feeder degrees); exercise physiology; corporate wellness or fitness coaching; sports science / data analytics (very in-demand field); research and laboratory technician roles; health and fitness entrepreneurship (gyms, online coaching, performance consulting), and physical education teaching.

It's also one of the most flexible pre-professional degrees. Students regularly use kinesiology as a foundation for medical school, physician assistant programs, biomechanics, sports psychology, cardiac rehab, and more. I have more than one classmate from Iowa State University who is a medical doctor now.

The key is understanding that kinesiology doesn't train you for one job, it trains you in how people move, perform, adapt, and recover. It's also an area that artificial intelligence will have a hard time replicating.

Pictured in article: *The Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning* is the premier way to prepare for the NSCA's CSCS.



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