Q&A with Rachel Snyder: Learner, Competitor, Coach

By Rachel Snyder with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/rsehjc26

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Rachel Snyder's perspectives and do not reflect those of O2X Human Performance, the United States Secret Service, or the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Introduction

Rachel Snyder is a tactical strength and conditioning (S&C) coach with O2X Human Performance. Rachel has trained various high-level tactical law enforcement units, to include the agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and United States Secret Service (USSS). She also gained experience in the tactical human performance domain through her work supporting the Army's Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) program. Prior to transitioning fully into tactical human performance, Rachel worked with organizations including the University of South Carolina and D1 Training.

She received her undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Charlotte and played Division I soccer at UNC Asheville, which ultimately sparked her passion in the S&C field. Rachel received her master's degree from the University of South Carolina. During her master's program, she was a Graduate Teaching Assistant, where she taught human anatomy and physiology laboratory classes. Rachel is an active member of USA Weightlifting and the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA). She possesses the NSCA's Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist certification and USA Weightlifting Level 1 certification.



Shown above is Rachel Snyder in one of the weight rooms at the University of South Carolina. This picture was taken during her graduate program.

What made you interested in the S&C profession?

My interest in S&C began with how much I genuinely enjoyed training. As a Division I soccer player with UNC Asheville, I looked forward to being in the weight room and challenging myself physically. That enjoyment, combined with my curiosity about how the body worked and adapted to training, ultimately led me toward the profession.

Throughout high school and college, I had a strong interest in sports medicine and initially thought that I would pursue a career as an athletic trainer or physical therapist. I always enjoyed anatomy and physiology courses and developed a particular interest in exercise physiology. Even after graduating with my undergraduate degree from UNC at Charlotte, however, I was still unsure which career path I wanted to pursue.

That changed somewhat unexpectedly when a Redline Athletics location opened near my parents' home. I walked in one day, intending to ask about internship opportunities, and ended up getting hired. I primarily worked with youth and high school athletes, ranging from those aspiring to compete at the Division I level to those simply trying to make their middle school team. I also had the opportunity to help run the S&C component of the Junior Carolina Hurricanes summer hockey camps. I loved working with athletes outside of soccer, learning about different sports, and continually challenging myself as a coach.

Most importantly, I cherished the relationships that I built with the athletes and enjoyed watching them succeed, regardless of how big or small the goal was. My time at Redline was when I realized that coaching was what I truly wanted to do. I went on to earn my Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) certification with the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) and pursue graduate school to expand my knowledge and create more opportunities within the field. At the time, I initially envisioned becoming a collegiate S&C coach, but my career ultimately led me toward tactical human performance.

You originally started off training the non-tactical population. What made you want to switch to training the tactical population?

My transition to the tactical population was not something I had initially planned. Throughout graduate school, I worked as a teaching assistant, trained primarily baseball athletes and general population clients at a local sports performance facility, and interned with the Olympic S&C staff at the University of South Carolina before eventually becoming a part-time member of the staff. I knew that I loved what I was doing, but I still felt uncertain about what was next and where I wanted to take my career.

During my time at the University of South Carolina, the dietitian who worked with the Olympic sports staff was transitioning into the tactical human performance space. He encouraged me to explore that career path, particularly because a new US Army Holistic Health and Fitness (H2F) program was being established at nearby Fort Jackson. At the time, I enjoyed living in South Carolina and wanted to stay in the area, so I decided to take a chance on something new and applied for an S&C position with the program.

The opportunity appealed to me because it allowed me to continue doing what I loved—coaching, building relationships, and helping people become better—while working with a population that I had never experienced up until that point in my career. I was also intrigued by the different performance demands and the opportunity to apply S&C in a setting where physical preparedness directly impacts occupational performance.

Taking that position ultimately opened the door to a career that I had not originally envisioned. I quickly realized

how much I enjoyed working with tactical populations and the unique challenges that come with the job. What started as a decision to try something new while staying in South Carolina became a career path that I have continued to pursue and grow within.

Many future and current S&C professionals are unaware of the opportunities in the tactical S&C profession. What guidance can you provide to break into this community for those interested?

I would encourage anyone interested in tactical S&C to start by getting involved with the NSCA and learning how to network. Attending NSCA conferences and events is a great way to meet professionals in the field, learn about different career paths, and make connections that can lead to opportunities. Networking has been one of the biggest ways I have seen people come across opportunities in this profession.

Another resource that I would encourage people to explore is the NSCA Tactical Professional Development Group (PDG) Mentorship Network. Individuals interested in getting started in tactical S&C can complete a form and be paired with a mentor based on their interest—including location, jobs, experiences, tactical populations, etc. I am currently a mentor in the program and have had the opportunity to connect with individuals who are interested in pursuing careers in tactical S&C. I have enjoyed being able to help them navigate the field, answer questions, provide guidance, and connect them with potential opportunities.

I would also encourage aspiring coaches to be willing to start wherever they can and gain experience working with different populations. You do not necessarily need tactical experience to get started, but you should be willing to learn about the population and understand that tactical professionals have unique occupational demands.

Ultimately, be curious, ask questions, and build relationships. The tactical S&C community is relatively small and continues to grow; many opportunities come through conversations and connections that you may not have expected. You never know which relationship or conversation may open the door to your next opportunity.

Do you have any advice for an undergraduate or graduate student seeking to achieve an internship with the tactical population?

My biggest piece of advice is to be willing to start anywhere and take the time to learn. Tactical S&C is a relatively small and growing field, so internships may not be as readily available as those in collegiate athletics. That reality makes networking and building relationships highly important.

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National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) Tactical Professional Development Group (PDG) Mentorship Network flyer.

Again, I would encourage students to attend NSCA conferences, get involved with the Tactical PDG, and connect with coaches who are already working in the tactical setting. Ask questions, express your interest, and be willing to learn from people who have experience in the field. An internship may not always

come from a formal application; sometimes it comes from a relationship that you have built over time.

Once you get an opportunity, make the most of it. Don't limit your experience to the weight room. Ask to attend training events and learn what the job actually looks like for the population you are aiming to serve. Observe, ask questions, and participate when appropriate. Some of the most valuable lessons that I have learned in tactical settings have come from simply being present and trying to understand the culture.



Rachel participating in a ruck with US Army drill sergeants and trainees at Fort Jackson.

Finally, be a good coach and a good teammate. Your work ethic, curiosity, and ability to build relationships will often be just as important as what you know. The tactical community is small, and the people you work with today may be the ones who recommend you for your next opportunity.

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What advice do you have for a person initially starting their career serving the tactical population?

My biggest piece of advice is to learn to adapt to the culture and prioritize building trust and buy-in before trying to change it. Tactical human performance is still a growing field, and we are often entering environments where people are accustomed to doing things a certain way—running, push-ups, sit-ups, and training until they feel like they have been pushed to their limit. There can be some initial resistance to strength training or approaches that look different from what they have traditionally done.

If I had entered Fort Jackson or started working with the DEA and tried to implement training exactly as I had at the University of South Carolina or based on my own experiences as a collegiate athlete, I probably would not have been successful. I had to take the time to understand their culture, ask questions, and learn what their jobs actually required.

One of the most valuable things that I did was attend as many training events as possible. I didn't just observe; when appropriate, I participated. With the Army, one of the first ways that I built credibility was by joining them for a seven-mile ruck at 0400 (4:00 a.m.). Experiences like that one demonstrated that I was willing to step outside of the weight room and understand their world.

You have to earn the credibility to coach before you can expect people to buy into what you are doing. Once you understand the population and build those relationships, you can better explain how the training that you are providing in the weight room or on the track directly applies to the demands of their job. Ultimately, meet people where they are, learn before you try to change things, and remember that trust is the foundation for effective coaching in the tactical setting.

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What coaching advice can you share from your

experiences training DEA agents?

One of the biggest coaching lessons that I learned while training DEA agents was the importance of explaining the "why" behind training. Unlike the military or many other federal agencies, the DEA does not currently have an annual physical fitness test; agents are primarily tested during the academy. This timeline created a unique challenge in getting recruits and agents to see the value of training beyond simply preparing for a physical training (PT) test.

Recruits would often question why we were squatting, lifting, or performing other exercises when their test consisted of push-ups, sit-ups, and running. To help build buy-in, I started writing the "purpose" of each workout on the whiteboard alongside the programming. I would explain why the workout was structured the way it was and connect the exercises to something meaningful—whether that was improving a component of the PT test, reducing injury risk, improving quality of life, or preparing for the physical demands of the job.

That experience reinforced for me how important it is to make training relevant to the population that you are coaching. Tactical professionals need to understand how what they are doing in the weight room or on the track connects to their job and their lives.

At the same time, I think that we have an opportunity as coaches to expose tactical professionals to different types of training that they may not otherwise seek out. Longevity should be a major consideration when working with tactical populations. They will not be agents forever, and our goal should extend beyond helping them perform their current job. We should help them develop an appreciation for physical activity and find forms of training that they enjoy so that they can continue to train, stay healthy, and maintain a high quality of life long after they no longer have access to a coach.



Shown above is Rachel collaborating on heart rate monitor data with an athletic trainer during a training event with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

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What coaching advice can you share from your experiences training United States Secret Service (USSS) agents?

One of the biggest coaching lessons that I learned while working with USSS agents was the importance of understanding and communicating the mission. The USSS has a unique operational environment. Unlike agencies where agents may conduct surveillance and have a plan before executing an operation, USSS agents often do not know when a threat will emerge, who the threat will be, where it will come from, or exactly what they will encounter. They must be prepared for the unexpected.

When working with tactical populations, it can be easy for training to become disconnected from the operational environment. If someone does not understand why they are performing a particular exercise or conditioning session, it can be difficult to create meaningful buy-in. I found that consistently connecting training back to the demands of the mission helped agents

understand the purpose behind what we were doing.

My advice to coaches is to learn the job before prescribing the training. Talk to the people whom you are coaching, ask questions, and understand what they may be required to do when the situation is unpredictable. Once you understand the mission, you can better explain how physical preparation contributes to their ability to perform when it matters most.

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Both the DEA and USSS agents must maintain their fitness and readiness, despite regular traveling, performing long hours of work, and sometimes having zero access to gym facilities. What guidance can you provide for maintaining fitness and readiness for someone with a demanding, non-supportive schedule?

One of the biggest messages that I emphasize with both DEA and USSS agents is to focus on what you can control. Their schedules can be unpredictable, with long hours, frequent travel, and limited access to training facilities. While we cannot always control the demands of the job, we can make small decisions that support recovery and readiness.

At both agencies, I give a "recovery" presentation that covers sleep, nutrition, hydration, mobility and soft tissue work, and mental recovery. We discuss simple, practical strategies such as bringing your own pillow when traveling, using caffeine strategically, practicing breathing techniques, and packing healthy snacks. None of these changes are revolutionary on their own, but small improvements made consistently can have a significant impact over time.

The same approach applies to training. We cannot always fit in a long workout or have access to a fully equipped gym, so I emphasize making the most of the time and equipment available. I teach the five fundamental movement patterns—squat, hinge, push, pull, and carry—and how they can be combined into efficient full-body workouts or circuits. These movements can also be incorporated into high-intensity interval training when conditioning is the priority.

Ultimately, the goal is to make fitness and recovery sustainable within the realities of the job. A perfect training program that someone cannot consistently complete is not as valuable as a simple, effective program that they can maintain. Teaching tactical professionals how to adapt their training and recovery strategies to whatever environment they are in helps them maintain readiness while also developing habits that they can carry throughout their careers.

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Your job places you in two male-dominated sectors (the S&C profession and the tactical domain). What advice do you have for a female who is seeking to break into either the S&C profession, the tactical domain, or both?

My biggest piece of advice for women entering S&C or the tactical domain is to not let being a woman become a self-imposed limitation. When I first started at Fort Jackson, I was the only female S&C coach on a team of ten coaches. I initially felt out of place and struggled to find where I fit within the team. I was also completely unfamiliar with the military environment. I did not come from a military family and had to learn an entirely new culture, including military ranks, acronyms, and how the Army operated.

I give a lot of credit to the lead S&C coach on our team for helping me step outside of my comfort zone and recognize that I was a valuable part of the team. Once I gained confidence in my own abilities, I started finding ways to contribute and make an impact. I built consistent training within my battalion, worked with the women's mentorship program and hosted workouts, and eventually created and led a Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) train-up.



Depicted above is Rachel (right) warming up with a fellow female S&C coach for the workout at the annual O2X offsite event.

Those experiences taught me that your value is ultimately demonstrated by the relationships that you build, the culture that you create, and the results that you deliver—not your gender. I have found this to be true everywhere that I have coached since my early days with the tactical population. If you come into an environment willing to learn, adapt to the culture, build meaningful relationships, and consistently deliver, being a woman becomes far less relevant.

Looking back, I don't think that being a woman was ever truly the limiting factor. The biggest limitation was my own mindset and the level of confidence that I had in what I could contribute. Give yourself permission to be uncomfortable, learn from the people around you, and trust that you have something valuable to bring to the table.

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What advice do you have for continually operating in the S&C and tactical professions?

My biggest piece of advice is to stay curious and continue learning. Both S&C and tactical human performance are constantly evolving, and you cannot rely solely on what you learned in school or what worked with your last population. Every environment and every person you coach will teach you something new.

I also believe that coaches should experience different types of training for themselves. Throughout my career, I have followed programs written by different coaches and intentionally sought out training environments that challenged me in different ways. I have competed in local CrossFit competitions, completed my first HYROX race, trained for a half-marathon, and been a member of a barbell club focused on Olympic weightlifting. Each experience has given me a better understanding of different training methodologies, what they feel like from the athlete's perspective, and how different people may respond to them.

Being a participant in different training environments has also helped me become a better coach. It gives me personal experiences that I can draw from when communicating with athletes and tactical professionals and has helped me better understand different S&C concepts. More importantly, it gives me another way to connect with the people I coach. You don't have to be an expert in every type of training, but experiencing different approaches can make you a more well-rounded and relatable coach.

Finally, be adaptable and invest in relationships. The tactical environment is constantly changing, and what works in one setting may not work in another. Take the time to understand the culture, ask

questions, and learn from the people around you. Continue developing yourself as a coach, but also remember to remain a student of the training process.

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What advice would you give yourself when you were an undergraduate student?

I would tell myself that it is okay to not know what you want to do. As an undergraduate student, I was constantly stressed about figuring out what job I wanted after graduation and where I saw myself in ten years. I felt like I was behind because I didn't have a clear plan, when, in reality, I was putting a lot of pressure on myself to have everything figured out too early.

Your undergraduate years are an incredible opportunity to explore. Take different classes, try different experiences, ask questions, and expose yourself to careers and populations that you may not have considered. I had no idea that tactical human performance existed as a career when I was an undergraduate. If you had asked me ten years ago what I would be doing today, I probably would have said that I would be a physical therapist.

Even now, I don't necessarily know what my ultimate "end goal" is, and I have become much more comfortable with that. My career has developed through a series of opportunities, relationships, and decisions to try something new. Some opportunities have worked out better than others, but each one has taught me something and helped shape where I am today.

I would encourage students to focus less on having the perfect five- or ten-year plan and more on finding something that they enjoy, becoming good at it, and remaining open to where it can take them. Your first job does not have to be your forever job, and your career does not have to follow a straight line. Enjoy the process, take advantage of opportunities, and trust that you can figure things out along the way.

Any final thoughts you want to provide to the reader?

Coaching is fun! It is easy to get caught up in the science, programming, certifications, administrative work, and pressure to constantly improve, but at the end of the day, we get to work with people and help them reach new levels of performance, build confidence, reduce their risk of injury, and become more capable. It is a pretty rewarding job.

Stay curious, stay creative, and don't be afraid to try something different. Not every program, training method, or idea will work perfectly, but experimenting and learning from those experiences is part of becoming a better coach. Some of the most valuable lessons that I have learned have come from stepping outside of my comfort zone and trying something new.

I would also encourage coaches to remember that there is more than one way to be successful in this profession. Your career may not look the way that you initially imagined, and it is okay. Be open to opportunities, learn from the people around you, and enjoy the process. Most importantly, have fun. Bring some creativity into your coaching, build meaningful relationships, and don't lose sight of the impact that you can have on the people you coach.

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Shown above is Rachel competing at a local CrossFit competition



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