Q&A with Whitney Tramel: Leading Through Service–Insight into Tactical Strength and Conditioning

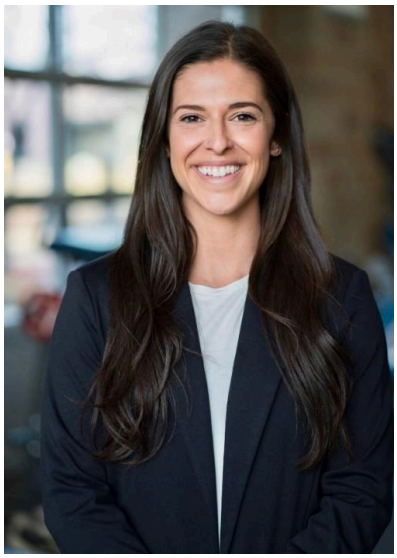
By Whitney Tramel with Jillian Emma Hatcher and Jeremy Carter | https://doi.org/10.65832/wtehjc26

Disclaimer: The views in this article represent Whitney Tramel's perspectives and do not reflect those of the National Strength and Conditioning Association.

Introduction

Whitney Tramel is the current Tactical Strength and Conditioning (TSAC) program manager for the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA). She holds both the NSCA's Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) and TSAC-Facilitator (TSAC-F) certifications and is a Registered Strength and Conditioning Coach (RSCC). In her current role, she leads the development, administration and growth of the NSCA's Tactical Program by overseeing educational initiatives, managing partnerships, and coordinating events. Additionally, she works to collaborate with external stakeholders to expand the program's impact, develop resources, and support the professional development of the tactical community.

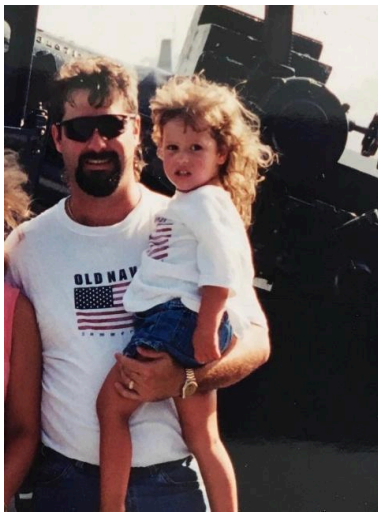
Whitney has over ten years of experience in tactical human performance, physical readiness, and sports science. Prior to being with the NSCA, she spent her career as a strength and conditioning (S&C) coach, working within a variety of high-performing military settings and with multiple fire departments. Whitney earned her bachelor's degree from Texas Christian University in Kinesiology and her master's degree in Sports Medicine: Strength and Conditioning with the University of Colorado Colorado Springs. She is currently enrolled in a PhD program in Health Sciences and Medicine with Bond University in Australia. Her research emphasis is on psychophysiological stress in tactical personnel.



Whitney Tramel, Tactical Strength and Conditioning (TSAC) Program Manager for the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA).

What made you interested in the tactical S&C profession?

I was fortunate early in my career to be exposed to tactical S&C by my graduate school advisor and mentor, Dr. Jay Dawes, who does much of his research with police, military, and fire. I knew right away this was what I was called to do. My dad was a special agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and passed away when I was very young, so I've seen the toll that these professions can take. I've never felt more fulfilled in my work to be able to give back to a profession—and to the families who are connected to it—that otherwise can take so much away from those who operate in it. I always say, "I get to serve those that serve my community and country, and I couldn't ask for anything more."



Shown above is Whitney with her father, Royce Douglas Tramel.

"I get to serve those that serve my community and country, and I couldn't ask for anything more."

What is most challenging, rewarding, and meaningful about the tactical S&C profession?

I think if you truly care about whom you're working with, the most challenging part is visibly seeing what these individuals go through, whether at work or personally. The weight room is the easy part—I've gone to school and spent countless hours doing internships under great mentors to learn to be a good coach and improve athletic abilities. But no one prepares you for the experiences these professionals live and work outside of the weight room. At the same time, that aspect makes it incredibly rewarding to see what they are willing to fight for and how much they are willing to push themselves to be the absolute best at what they do. My work is meaningful because I know that it translates to the job and, ultimately, I'm helping these individuals be better.

You have worked with several tactical populations, to include those seeking to enter or those who are currently in the United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) community. What are some universal truths when working with the tactical population, regardless of their experience, unit, or goals?

These folks are humans too. I find that most of the individuals I've worked with, even those entering or already in SOF units, just want to be heard or listened to. They receive orders from top-down all the time. The last thing that they want is for their coach to bark orders at them as well. As the old saying goes, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Show up, take time to get to know them, jump in on their personal workouts to find out what they like to do, and then slowly start to sprinkle in the things they need. It could all be so simple!

As someone who works with tactical populations without prior experience yourself (e.g., serving in the military, law enforcement, or firefighting), what advice would you give to someone wanting to work with the tactical population who does not have personal experience?

It's so important to take the time to understand *whom* you're working with. These aren't athletes with routine schedules. Because of the job, most of them struggle to get consistent sleep, to have the time to consume the calories that they need, and, in some cases, to have the time to work out around their already busy schedule. Additionally, these jobs take a strong mental toll on folks, which research shows can negatively affect one's performance—both on the job and in the weight room. Despite all of that, most of them can still perform at high levels, because their bodies have learned to perform under chaos over time. This reality doesn't mean that you disregard those things, you just have to understand who they

are, what they do, and meet them where they're at. One thing is for certain: these fellas will not listen to you if you act like you know more than them and think that you can fix everything.

I also think it's important to note that you aren't working with elite or professional athletes. You may get a few one-off individuals who left athletics to enter the military, but you are mostly working with folks who have little experience in the weight room, and even less experience being coached by someone who knows what they're doing. This situational feature is important because you can't come in on day one putting people on your Division 1 (D1) off-season football program. You'll only do more harm than good. Stick to the basics and do the basics stupidly well.



Depicted above is Whitney teaching firefighters with the Fort Lauderdale Fire Department on movement patterns and techniques.

"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

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

I would first recommend attending the NSCA Tactical Conference every year. Outside of my role at the NSCA, I have attended almost every year since working in this field and it always proves to be the best way to connect and meet other coaches. After all, a lot of this field is who you know—for better or for worse.

When I started in this field and knew nothing about the professionals I was working with, I relied heavily on asking questions to connections that I made at conferences. I'd also recommend reading research around the populations you want to work with to better understand the needs or demands of that population. The research on the tactical S&C side is growing so fast and there's so much out there.

In any interview (graduate school, internship, or job placement), if you have never worked with tactical professions, you can at least reference research and conversations you've had with other coaches that are in the space. On top of knowing about the tactical professionals whom you would be working with, there is a wide variety of opportunities in the tactical space. For example, I've held roles as an S&C coach; performance consultant for data software, education and curriculum development; and now as a program manager. This progression has allowed me to build a broad skill set and develop qualifications for a variety of positions. Although I may be slightly biased, I feel like traditional collegiate and professional S&C takes you down a narrow path. The tactical S&C profession is rewarding—if you give your all to it, it won't go unnoticed and it will be given back to you. If the reader is interested in tactical strength and conditioning, they are encouraged to visit the National Strength and Conditioning Association's website on "Breaking into Tactical Strength and Conditioning" at: https://www.nsca.com/breaking-into-tactical/.

Over your time with the tactical community, you have been fully integrated into training with the tactical personnel, to include doing various tactical training yourself (i.e., close quarters combat accuracy, long-range precision marksmanship, etc.). What advice do you have for a tactical S&C professional when it comes to fully integrating into the entire training spectrum?

Integration is arguably *the* most important part, in my opinion. A good strength coach will put themselves through a workout or exercise before assigning it to an athlete. I also believe that, in sport, a coach should attend some of the athletes' practices to gain a better understanding of the sport itself, especially if they didn't play the sport.



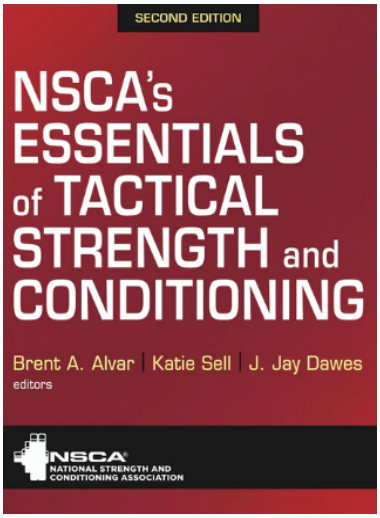
Depicted is Whitney firing an M4 at close range on Fort Carson.

While most of my experience has been in the tactical setting, I worked with sport athletes during my graduate assistantship, and I would try to attend practices and go to games when I could. The same goes for military, police, and firefighting populations. If your unit spends a lot of time on the range, you had better get out to the range with them. If they're going for a ruck, go on the ruck with them. If the police department does marksmanship training or any other specific training related to the job, you had better get out and do it with them. If the fire department is doing training in gear, you better throw some heavy gear on and train with them. Reading research and talking to the people whom you work with can only get you so far in understanding the job. The first time that I threw on a full kit and shouldered a semi-automatic weapon, I quickly realized the strength it takes to 1) maintain a steady stance and 2) simply just hold the weapon up for a long period of time. I would never have gained that understanding if I had never tried it myself.

"Stick to the basics and do the basics stupidly well."

As the manager of the NSCA's Tactical Strength and Conditioning Program, what are some resources available for those interested in the tactical S&C profession?

The NSCA offers a resource online called "Breaking into Tactical," which includes videos, lectures, and other resources for individuals who are interested in learning more about a profession in tactical S&C. The *NSCA's Essentials of Tactical Strength and Conditioning* textbook and the NSCA's TSAC Report are both great resources for taking a deep dive into the needs and demands of tactical professions. I'd also recommend reading *The Human Weapon System* and *Strength and Conditioning for the Human Weapon System* by Christopher Myers. Both books help the reader better understand the job demands and how to apply basic and advanced S&C principles. Aside from books or websites, the greatest resource that I've ever encountered is other coaches! I have a group of coaches whom I keep in contact with on a regular basis, and we always bounce thoughts and ideas off each other.



Pictured is *NSCA's Essentials of Tactical Strength and Conditioning*, Second Edition, edited by Brent A. Alvar, Katie Sell, and J. Jay Dawes.

What advice would you give to an undergraduate or graduate student seeking to achieve an internship with the tactical population?

These internships can be very hard to come by, and they usually aren't publicly posted. I started attending S&C conferences and clinics during undergrad and making that effort was the only way that I found out about some internships—or even jobs—that were available. So, networking early on will be a student's best bet for developing meaningful opportunities. Even if someone a student meets doesn't have an internship available, they can hopefully connect the student with someone who might. When an individual is looking for graduate programs, I would heavily base school choice on what population someone desires to work with. There are lots of great graduate programs with professors that are doing great

research in the tactical space and are very plugged in—which will also help with finding internships.

What advice do you have for a person starting their career by serving the tactical community?

Always be a servant to those you work with. If you're in it for "better money and better hours," you're in it for the wrong reasons.



Shown above is the author presenting on "Stress in Tactical Populations" at a National Strength and Conditioning Association's Midwest Regional Conference in March of 2025.

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?

Don't play small. Don't sell yourself short. Don't be afraid to speak up when you know what you're talking about. Most importantly, use your "lady strengths" to your advantage. A good coach and a good leader are caring, empathetic, and charismatic. Those are generally natural traits of women.

"Always be a servant to those you work with. If you're in it for 'better money and better hours,' you're in it for the wrong reasons."

Are there any venues, professional groups, and opportunities with the NSCA for the female S&C professional?

The NSCA has a women's committee that coordinates, monitors, and advocates action to increase the participation of women within S&C and the NSCA. You can apply to be a member of the committee—but even if you are not a member, there are meetings held every year at the national conference that any woman can attend and take part in. To be transparent, I've never been a part of the women's committee. However, I have always found it useful to find and connect with other women in the field.

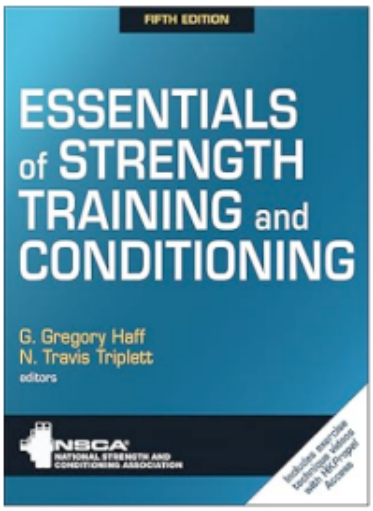
What advice would you give yourself as an undergraduate student?

Get as much experience as you can before you even graduate! Interning, personal training, working at the college recreation center, getting involved in your school's exercise science research studies—it all counts as relevant experience, and you'll have things on your resume before you have your degree in hand. I'd also add to grow your network as much as you can. If you can't make it to the national-level conferences, attend local, state, and regional conferences, and talk to as many coaches and presenters as possible.



Depicted is Whitney firing an M110 Semi-Automatic Sniper Rifle at targets ranging up to 950 meters.

"Don't play small. Don't sell yourself short. Don't be afraid to speak up when you know what you're talking about."



Pictured is *NSCA's Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning*, Fifth Edition, edited by G. Gregory Haff and N. Travis Triplett.

BREAKING INTO TACTICAL STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING

Build a career supporting the readiness, resilience, and longevity of military and public safety professionals.

Tactical strength and conditioning applies evidence-based training to distinct occupational demands across military, law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical services (EMS) settings. Whether you are new to strength and conditioning, transitioning from sport, or building on related experience, there is a path for you to **help those who serve stay ready and resilient.**

See where you fit and how the NSCA can help you move forward.



To learn more on tactical strength and conditioning, visit the National Strength and Conditioning Association's website and view their "Breaking into Tactical Strength and Conditioning." resource page.



Whitney Tramel | Accepted Breaking into Tactical Strength and Conditioning

To hear more from Whitney Tramel, the reader can listen to her on the National Strength and Conditioning Associations' Coaching Podcast with her episode on "Breaking into Tactical Strength and Conditioning."