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THE WEIGHT TRAINING PUZZLE: SIX-SHOOTERS, ‘SIX PACKS,’ OR MEN WITH A SIXTH SENSE – WHAT DOES SF NEED?

Articles

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The weight training puzzle:

six-shooters, ‘six packs,’ or men with a sixth sense – what does SF need?

By Anna Simons



A number of years ago I committed to giving a paper at a promising, but ultimately very weird academic conference. The intent was to bring together people who study warfare and evolution. Participants included squishy social science types and academics with a mathematical bent. With a couple of exceptions, none of the attendees had spent any time working with or around members of the U.S. military, so I thought I might pique their interest if I tackled the puzzle of why Special Forces soldiers might engage in shirtless weightlifting in the middle of a sandstorm during an annual exercise in the Sahel.

I used a generic photo of someone identified as a Special Forces soldier to set the stage. My real intent was to raise questions about what a snapshot does and doesn't capture and what it can and cannot convey. I wanted to suggest that there is no neat or tidy way to bin context and that, without context, snapshots – to include snap judgments, as well as generalizations drawn from context-free data sets and the like – mis-assess reality.

The photo I found was from the web since it's not as though I'd ever taken photos of shirtless weightlifters myself. The question I posed was whether this picture depicted anything odd, to which the expected response was 'no.' Apart from the fact that this (alleged) SF soldier is pumping iron in the great outdoors, one could have seen young men doing something similar in gyms all around the world prior to Covid-19. Yet, thirty years ago – way back in the early '90s – such a scene would have been exceedingly rare in and around SF teams.

To be sure, soldiers have always worked out, just as they have long sported tattoos. Even a cursory search on the web turns up plenty of Vietnam-era images of shirtless soldiers. But compare photos from that era to those from post-9/11 and what you see is a fairly pronounced explosion of brawn, along with more public display of brawn, as well as more public display of how brawn is acquired.

So, why the shift, and what (if anything) does it signify?

The puzzle

Maybe, I thought, post-9/11 SF soldiers were simply following broader societal trends. After all, G.I. Joe dolls have likewise bulked up. Or look at football players. They are much larger today than at any time previously. Though, interestingly, athletes in contact sports other than football haven’t added heft to the same degree. So, the puzzle, or at least one piece of it, remained.

As for the second piece of the puzzle, what explained shirtlessness? I wondered: did shirtlessness and weightlifting have something to do with metrosexuality, a phenomenon that is said to be characterized by narcissism, feminization, and eroticization:

Metrosexual males, it seems, are narcissists in that they are openly obsessed with their own personal beauty. This leads them to embrace a female culture of pampering to enhance that beauty – feminization. It also encourages [1] metrosexual men to exhibit their bodies as objects of sexual desire – eroticization.

Apparently, sports figures were among the earliest metrosexuals thanks to the fact they were already involved in the business of ‘self-exhibition.’ Though the same could be (and was) said of Mark Wahlberg – “the non-sporting, but highly ripped and athletic rapper-turned actor... who appeared semi-nude in ads for Calvin Klein underwear in the early 1990s.”^[2] That Wahlberg then played Navy SEAL Marc Luttrell in the Lone Survivor movie seems almost too fitting, especially since SEALs were already posing for calendars in the early 1990s. I remember almost buying one in the Navy Exchange at Miramar Air Station.

Meanwhile, when asked why they go shirtless when deployed nowhere near water, SEALs have offered explanations like: why get shirts sweaty, especially when that gives them just one more thing to have to wash. Though as older (aka retired) Green Berets love to point out, SEALs have always been attentive to their appearance (especially those from the West Coast teams), and they have long engaged in weight training.

Caveat: am I really suggesting that today’s SEALs or Green Berets are metrosexuals, as in men who get manicures, wear make-up, and indulge in appearance-enhancing plastic surgery? Hardly. But the increased acceptance of and even expectation that American males will openly, visibly pay attention to their looks does seem to have paved the way for them to also call greater attention to *how* they improve their looks – which represents a striking shift for anyone who grew up in the ‘50s, ‘60s, or ‘70s.

For example, through much of the ‘80s, men’s magazines concentrated on self-improvement rather than self-enhancement, or on hunting, fishing, popular mechanics, and nude women, not skin care and smoothie recipes. Also, back in the day, men and women didn’t work out together in gyms, online dating sites were non-existent... Basically, almost everything having to do with men’s ‘presentation of self’ was different.

As for SF, the military has always been a bit more conservative than broader society and SF’s purported modus has long been to attract men who *aren’t* interested in conforming and/or aren’t the type to succumb to having to look or act just like everyone else. Or, that at least was SF’s old ethos, back when most of its NCOs were in their 30s. So, one has to wonder, what has changed? Why might so many Green Berets embrace these new forms of look-at-me self-expression?

Maybe the explanation lies in war zones. Without question, Afghanistan and Iraq got ungodly hot during the summer. Temperatures alone would seem to explain shirtlessness, while lifting weights had to help with heaving on body armor – a major post-9/11 development. Or then, too, consider tattoos. Increasingly skin has been used to memorialize everything from unit affiliations to lost comrades. Tattoos are more popular and common than at any time in living memory. So, why have them if not to display them?

Tattoos suggest it could be *wartime*, rather than just war zones that helps account for shirtless posing, especially since shirtless posing hasn’t just been confined to Afghanistan and Iraq. I’ve seen it in Africa too. In fact, by 2008 (if not well before), the trifecta of brawn, shirtlessness, and tattoos suffused SF culture. Yet, during this time, SF commands were still proclaiming that SF’s primary mission was to ‘train, advise, and assist.’ Advising has never really required bulk. Outside of combat zones, there is little about working with others that requires taking on and putting off unwieldy body armor. In fact, if part of the aim in acquiring muscle mass is to announce presence and draw attention, then one has to wonder how well brawn fits with advising, especially if advisors are supposed to personify ‘quiet professionalism.’ So (again), why bulk up? And why turn bulking up into such a display?

* * *

These questions struck me hardest on a visit to Flintlock several years ago, SOF’s annual multilateral exercise in the Sahel. One of my former students was anxious for me to see an outlying training camp, so within a day or two of my arrival off we flew from the exercise’s main base. We were only supposed to be gone a short time, but thanks to ‘weather’ in the form of a pretty ferocious sandstorm we ended up stranded, and one day turning into several. Over the course of those several days, as we were all being sandblasted, weightlifting was the only activity I saw anyone engage in. Initially, this seemed to make sense, since what else was there for team members to do? The blowing sand meant their small unit training had been suspended. But then, given all of the blowing grit, why lift weights shirtless, outdoors?

To set a bit more of the scene, I should explain that there were two SF teams at this particular location. Facilities were rudimentary and the environment was austere. In addition to the Americans, there was a Dutch contingent, some Italians, and a scattering of other NATO partners. The African forces were housed somewhere nearby, but well out of sight or hearing.

Most notably, no Western women were anywhere within at least a hundred miles of the camp and no women were on the premises at all. I mention this because the shirtless posturing that went on clearly wasn’t aimed at impressing women. Nor were there any mirrors, so it’s not as though anyone could check his form. Also, while the teams had brought the weights with them from the States, they had had to construct plywood benches and frames on site. Apparently, this was among the first things they did. Fair enough: the need to work out was clearly paramount. But this still didn’t quite explain weight training-as-display. I’d seen plenty of open-air gyms in Afghanistan and Iraq. Usually the PT (physical training) equipment was somewhere off to the side or tucked away. It wasn’t center stage, adjacent to the tables where everyone ate.

All of which got me thinking: maybe I was out of my generational depth. So, once we made it back to the main base, I asked several Sergeants Major for their Gen X assessment. I later canvased more of their contemporaries back in the States. Tellingly, everyone I asked agreed: shirtless weightlifting was a fairly new development. Most attributed it to youth, as in the chronologically younger age of team members, who were much younger than team members used to be (something I already knew). But then, practically to a person, they also volunteered comments about immaturity and vanity. (Better them than me.) The anecdotal consensus was that what appeared to me to be posing was, indeed, posing. Soldiers were trying to *look* strong. The proof? Too often the biggest, baddest-looking kids got smoked by their elders whenever it came time for them all to hump heavy rucks uphill.

Meanwhile, no one I asked ever volunteered a functional explanation for why SF soldiers might be striving to *look* a certain way, even though doing so had to fulfill some sort of instrumental purpose. For instance, maybe there were bona fide reasons to want to *look* strong. Or maybe there were other reasonable explanations for pumping iron.

Further explanations: what does social science suggest?

For instance, was it just a coincidence that Special Forces itself had also bulked up in the wake of 9/11? The Regiment hadn’t just grown in size, but in resourcing, buildings, stature, and attitude. Here is not the place to list all of the inversions that took place – from an organization that used to pride itself on making do with what it could scrounge to an organization that increasingly erected edifices to house its ever burgeoning staffs – but imagery does point to a pretty linear evolution. Take Vietnam- or even Gulf War-era photos. Special Forces soldiers weren’t bearded. Nor did they always (or even often) wear sunglasses. They weren’t slung with hardware. Nor were they so ‘built.’ Bottom-line: they weren’t trying to appear imposing. Nothing about them looked particularly intimidating. Menace wasn’t their style.

Let’s begin with sunglasses. I remember when Gargoyle and Oakley sunglasses first became popular on teams in the early ‘90s. Some commanders objected and banned the high-performance eyewear outright; they said the over-angled glasses looked too Terminator-like. Though it wasn’t long before team members were actually being issued these very same glasses. They were apparently being issued them for ‘eye pro’ (eye protection) reasons, not that this explains why exactly the I-am-a-professional-shooter style was chosen – a style that has now become so ubiquitous that to humanize themselves before interacting with locals, I’ve seen officers and operators consciously remove their glasses, a gesture that

speaks volumes about an overall *disinterest* in trying to foster rapport.

Rapport brings us to beards. For at least a decade, beards were among the most obvious feature to set SOF operators apart from General Purpose Forces (GPF). Typically, beards were justified as a force protection measure; from a distance or in a speeding car, bearded operators wouldn’t stand out as Americans. But beards were also considered essential to win over the ‘indig,’ especially in places where most locals wore them. The thinking seemed to be that by growing beards operators would convey their respect for local customs, a la drinking three cups of tea. Arguably, too, in remote locations the longer the beard the more mature young advisors could make themselves appear. Of course, team members were also cognizant that beards did separate them from the GPF and, to hear SF operators tell it, this too was extremely useful, especially since locals knew to beware of the ‘bearded ones’; unlike regular soldiers, the ‘bearded ones’ were ‘badasses’ and thus weren’t to be trifled with.

But to this day ‘beards’ remain contentious. Not everyone is convinced that SOF operators had to grow them. Some contend that what began out of necessity, when shaving was too difficult during the initial phases of both wars, quickly became a status symbol, and that guys grew beards simply because they could. From this perspective, beards had more to do with standing out and being ‘cool’ than they did with fitting in – since it is also somewhat doubtful that locals were ever likely to confuse heavily armed Americans for boys. However, just because the allure of being different might help explain beards, it doesn’t explain why vehicles also got brawnier.

While SF modified some of its vehicles for tactical purposes, the most significant makeovers came gratis the big Army. The transition started back when jeeps gave way to Humvees. Humvees are short and squat with slit windows; they brood. In comparison, MRAPS, MATVs, and RGs unmistakably project menace – and resembled tanks more than they did prior-generation personnel carriers. Their size, angularity, and number of guns and antennas suggested that the people inside weren’t just impervious to harm, but were capable of rolling right over whoever or whatever was in their way. Although, just because these vehicles projected menace did not mean they *were* invulnerable – far from it, making them an apt metaphor for the double-edged nature of appearances.

Other examples of things that grew bigger and brawnier alongside vehicles were firebases. While the aim of anything fortified has always been to make those inside appear impregnable, too much protection *can* end up signaling the opposite. For instance, why did Americans have to hole up on firebases? Clearly, they did so because they *feared* the enemy, or so the enemy often thought. Whether teams and soldiers really would have felt as comfortable as many say they would have had they been allowed to rove around more freely midway through both wars remains an unknowable unknown. But, more often than not operators did end up stuck, and spent more time *planning* movements than they did getting to move about, which brings us to yet another set of potential explanations for shirtless weightlifting: psychobiology.

* * *

Consider the parallels between being buttoned up on a firebase and being in jail. Lifting weights is the easiest kind of

work-out prisoners can do. Ditto operators.

Contrary to what most civilians (or even recruits) might think, operators spend an awful lot of time sitting in front of computer screens. To this day, they devote a tremendous amount of time to creating ‘product’ for higher-ups. This is especially the case for those who work on staffs. Small wonder that weight training became so popular. It’s an ideal outlet for getting to (re)focus on the physical. It’s also a rote and relatively mindless activity. Plus, it offers real practical benefits – in terms of improving balance, tone, overall health, etc. Though perhaps best of all, the sheer act of lifting weights releases endorphins. So, in alcohol-free, non-permissive environments, where running is difficult, pumping iron may represent the fastest shortcut there is to *feeling* better, forget just looking good.

Actually, weight-training might scratch a number of psycho-biological itches. Chief among these might be men’s **desire to appear formidable**.

1) Consider the normal human response whenever we are confronted by someone who **looks stronger** than us: typically, we will try to avoid a fight. Significantly, too, though it is often assumed that we use ‘body size’ to gauge fighting ability, some researchers point out that it is really men’s *upper-body lifting strength* that is the better predictor. According to those who study this, “lifting strength as measured on standardized weight-lifting machines” can be considered “a gold standard for measuring strength.”^[3] Their read: as a species, we humans are primed to track “cues of upper-body strength, such as muscularity, that are independent of body size.”^[4] Consequently, men (and women) read brawn as strength – even today.^[5]

2) Research also suggests that men behave differently when they **feel formidable**. For instance, “men with greater upper-body strength feel more entitled to advantageous outcomes and have lower thresholds for aggression in conflicts of interest.”^[6] Here the presumption isn’t just that our evolutionary past wires us to pay attention to certain kinds of cues, but that aggression itself is teed up or modulated by how strong a man feels, as in how strong he *literally* feels. According to this line of thinking, upper body strength is a more significant driver of aggression than testosterone is, suggesting that the stronger men feel, the more likely they are (and/or the greater their potential) to *want* to react aggressively.^[7]

Clearly, this has all sorts of implications for the combat arms. Indeed:

even when the rational effect of upper-body strength has been minimized owing to modern weaponry, comparatively low rates of violent interpersonal aggression, the existence of large and well-regulated police forces and judicial systems, and the extinction of or markedly reduced exposure to natural predators, a man’s mental faculties will still respond in predictable ways to his personal fighting ability.^[8]

As for how feelings of formidability assist individuals: “Combativeness functions through the shoulder and arm muscles as shown by the soldier, prize fighter, athlete, etc. and, well-developed, it imparts a feeling of enthusiasm, physical vigor and power of decision that no other faculty can give.”^[9]

3) Another way to think about **projecting strength** is as a PSYOP, akin to *acting dominant*. Imagine the best (as in, least costly) way to dominate others. Wouldn’t it be to convince others that they can’t physically best you and, thus, they shouldn’t even try? Or, as the British demonstrated at the height of empire: staying in control frequently requires little more than projecting the *aura* of being *in control*. Basically, whether the British were as invincible as their projection of control suggested didn’t matter so long as everyone *thought* they were invincible. All they had to do was to be able to prove it on occasion; select demonstration effects then doubled as an incomparable deterrent. Or to bring this back to weight training, if men are subconsciously wired to view upper body size as a proxy for strength, then they are always going to want more upper body strength, aren’t they? Particularly in situations when (and where) they know – but don’t want others to know – they control little else.

At this point, it hardly seems judgmental to characterize the ‘War on Terror’ as just such a situation on steroids.

4) Body building gives men something over which they *can* exert control. When they lift weights, they are at least able to feel and see the results; progress is discernible; effects are tangible. This may be especially compensatory when operators find themselves in otherwise untenable situations – when they feel stuck, stymied, frustrated, and/or powerless to change the course of events.

Flip this around, and the need to *feel powerful* then becomes its own driver. Especially when insecurity comes in so many different guises. For instance, insecurity can be literal, as it was every day on roads sown with IEDs. Or it could be policy-related, as in having to try to effect policies built on sand. Certainly, getting to eliminate bad guys could feel personally gratifying, especially initially. But by most accounts, whack-a-mole wore thin over time. Nor is it as though having to spend so much time away from home was cost-free. Distance from family could contribute to all sorts of feelings of impotence, as could other ambient concerns.

For instance, what about impacts caused by the blurring of gender roles or by changing conceptions of what it means to be a man in the 21st century? Given broader societal trends, it shouldn’t be surprising that some men would seek relief in weight-lifting, especially since making more, not less, of dimorphism is one of the easiest ways to (re)assert masculinity. As it happens, too, investing in upper body strength remains one of the few areas in which women *can’t* effectively compete with, let alone out-compete men. At the same time, weightlifting is an area in which all men can, or should be able to, compete against one another (a point I will return to).

5) In virtually all societies, warriors have been encouraged to **look good**, though what ‘looking good’ means clearly depends on societal norms. For instance, among herders in East Africa, Maasai, Samburu, and Rendille warriors are famous for long hair, beads, and ochre. In contrast, many of their neighbors and fiercest competitors (e.g. the Gabra, Borana, and Somalis) aren’t the least bit decked out. One likewise sees all sorts of historic variation across American

Indian tribes. Or take military fashions. Styles have changed fairly significantly even within the same army over time. All of which suggests that the extent to which a society permits males to be publicly vain will help shape what men then choose to accentuate: lace, wigs, brass – or biceps, ‘six-packs,’ and tattoos. [10]

6) Again, too, everyone has always *expected* soldiers to work out since so much of what they have to do is physical. SF rucks can weigh upwards of 90 pounds – it is small wonder that SF soldiers would be drawn to building muscle mass. Though this still doesn’t quite explain their need (or desire) to **show off muscle-building to each other**, a development that brings us back to looks. [11]

Interestingly, in a 1984 book on American toughness, British historian Rupert Wilkinson noted “the subtle persistence of the tough-guy tradition in milieus well removed from physical labor and hardship: among salesmen, academics, preppies”. [12] In other words, toughness became a pose, perhaps best described as the cool projection of “I can handle you.” Fast forward three decades, and toughness has since given way to menace, best summarized as “I can f--- you up.” The message that menace transmits is: “defer, or else.” [13]

7) Lots of weapons platforms **project menace**. Think: MRAPs, tanks, fighter jets, attack helicopters, Destroyers, Cruisers, etc. – or operators in combat gear. There are many reasons why combat soldiers have been loaded down with ever more gear, the end result of which is that they fairly bristle with weapons and antennas, much like the machines they ride in. But apart from the degree to which projecting menace serves a vital military purpose, wanting to *seem* menacing, and acting by, with, and through menace also has become a lifestyle choice.

Because acting menacing is fashionable well outside the military, this sets up an inescapable dynamic: any young soldier (or any soldier at all) who wants to signal “you may think you’re badasses, but I’m the real badass” has to up his game; he has to somehow prove he is badder. Consequently, for any operator who wants to wear his identity on his sleeve, this means doing (or sporting) *something* to signal who and what he is whenever he is out of uniform. Ergo beards or tattoos – and brawn. Or to come at this somewhat differently, if the ever-present status competition among males helps account for why soldiers, Marines, and others would hyper-cultivate a certain look and/or strive to project a certain image, where does this leave individuals who belong to even more elite units? Especially given the fact that the Pentagon has spent the better part of two decades referring to everyone in uniform as a warfighter. How *should* males prove to other males who among them is actually ‘baddest.’

8) Biologists, anthropologists, and others who study status from an evolutionary perspective write about something they call **‘runaway processes’**. Essentially, once competition gets going, then features that were only under mild natural selection pressure previously can become over-exaggerated. Two commonly cited examples are peacock tails and deer antlers. Not surprisingly, both are said to signal male worth to females. Supposedly, females consider peacocks with longer, flashier tails, and deer with bigger, ‘badder’ antlers, superior.

According to evolutionary biologists and others, male-male competition is shaped by female choice. Thus far, no one I know has canvassed women to see whether they find bulked up SF soldiers more attractive than slimmer Green Berets. Nor am I aware of anyone who has asked women how much brawn might be too much. But interestingly, male-male competition is also said to contribute to coalition-building and to cohesiveness. So, maybe females aren’t particularly relevant here. Maybe it’s actually their *absence* that matters more.

As it is, men often have a different conception of what women find attractive than women do. So, imagine: with no women present, what is to prevent men from overdoing it with bulk (or with anything)? Maybe pumping iron past the point of some utilitarian return is simply the consequence of a runaway process. Or maybe because males pay attention to brawn, and because males know other males also pay attention to brawn, brawn is ideal for non-verbal contestation.

Of course, just because evolutionary biologists and others fixate on inclusive fitness and reproductive success as the underlying drivers of human behavior (which is just a fancy way of saying that men are programmed to try to get as many copies of their genes into the next generation as possible), this does not mean that there aren’t equally plausible socio-logical explanations for male-male competition that have nothing to do with female choice. For instance, *what about* coalitions, cohesion, and group dynamics?

Further explanations: what does *social* science suggest?

SF teams consist of 12 individuals, and while each team has the same formal structure – with a captain (O-3); warrant officer; team sergeant (E-8); assistant team sergeant; 2 weapons sergeants (senior and junior); 2 communications sergeants (senior and junior); 2 engineers (senior and junior); and 2 medics (senior and junior) – relations among the six teams that make up a company are unstructured; they are acephalous. Acephalousness means there is no hierarchy; nor does any one team have leverage (or rank) over any other. The same can be said for each of the three companies in a battalion and for the three battalions in a Special Forces Group. Each Special Forces Group has a regional orientation, so in theory this should minimize the need for reputational competition among Groups. But since every Group commander is in the running to become a general officer, and officers on staffs compete against each other for follow-on assignments (and promotions), it seems safe to say that at every echelon in the hierarchy there is peer group competition.

In anthropological terms, this means that SF is tribal in many more ways than its members realize. Yes, there is a chain of command from the Group commander down through the battalion and then the company commanders to and through their team captains. But just as in so many of the places where SF soldiers deploy, where extended families have their own internal pecking order but no fixed or permanent hierarchy among them, there is nothing fixed about reputations among teams.

Reputations matter for a multitude of reasons in SF, just as they do everywhere, but they are especially important for helping to determine which teams get which missions. Consequently, there isn’t just heightened competition over

reputations among teams, but also competition *on* teams, especially when, say, the two men responsible for overseeing the team – the captain and team sergeant – don’t get along. Under these circumstances, whoever can pull the strongest personalities on the team his way can help set the team up for success and decent missions, or dysfunction.

Worth mentioning, too, is that the perennial challenge on all teams is that every individual has to figure out how best to fit himself to the other personalities on the team; individuals have to find their place if the team is going to gel. Another complication is that although SF, like the military overall, needs to consider every operator interchangeable, it also needs each operator to view himself as indispensably significant. This is key to helping ensure that everyone remains willing to give their all, though it can also lead to certain individuals thinking just a tad too highly of themselves.

To its considerable credit, the military has figured out how to harness social behavior unbelievably cleverly. For instance, there are numerous practical reasons why keeping men together in small units makes sense. Among the many benefits: forced interdependence makes it more likely that the whole will prove greater than the sum of its parts and will cohere *despite* everyone having an assigned position in a fixed hierarchy. Hierarchy is the ultimate orderer when it comes to the military’s division of labor, but the tricky thing about formal hierarchies and fixed divisions of labor is that they can only ever mitigate a bad dynamic; they can’t actually *ensure* that a team will stay cohesive over time.

In fact, for all of the attention paid to cohesion, and despite the current academic vogue of trying to differentiate between task (or ‘professional’, we-have-a-specific-job-to-do) cohesion and social (we-have-things-in-common) cohesion, SF teammates never just work together. There is far more to team life and to the allure of being on a team than just ‘getting’ to accomplish certain tasks. Team members also live together. Indeed, too many academics who think they understand cohesion overlook the fact that members of small units are inescapably stuck with one another for long periods of time. As anyone who has reached adulthood should recognize, too much togetherness can generate all sorts of friction. If we were to take a look at village life around the world, or examine how people in small-scale, face-to-face societies have traditionally handled social tensions, we would quickly notice that they have numerous methods for addressing and alleviating tensions, particularly when people can’t easily escape one another. However, few of these traditional methods – like accusing anti-social individuals of witchcraft – would work on an SF team. Nor would that more tried-and-true early American method of settling scores via duels. So, how might team members work out latent tensions, deal with rivalries, and safely blow off steam more reasonably instead?

How about by weight training? – or by adopting any activity that won’t cause individuals to call each other’s *professional* capabilities or integrity into question. Such an activity needs to be relevant to (or not totally dissociated from) the job, of general interest, and something anyone (meaning everyone) can do. I do not mean to suggest here that every team *needs* to engage in something like weight-training, but having a singular activity like body building can prove extremely useful.

Social psychologists and others distinguish between two types of signaling. Whenever members of a group do something to distinguish themselves from others, this constitutes out-group signaling. Out-group signaling might be conscious (think Dr. Seuss’s star-bellied Sneetches) or it might be unconscious (e.g. Americanized English and how it sets us apart from other English speakers). While any type of signaling can be made more elaborate over time (shades of runaway processes), we humans use signals to prove allegiance, and “the signal itself can be a sort of test to find particular types of

people to interact with...”^[14] Significantly, the same signal can perform both out-group and in-group functions. At the same time, the more ritualized something can be made to be, the better it will serve both purposes. For instance, religious rituals don’t just commit co-religionists to a shared set of specific practices, but adherence to these practices conveys that those engaging in them *are* committed. Not to compare weight-training to a religious ritual, but it also lends itself to formulation, doesn’t it?

We humans use all sorts of commitment tests to gauge trust: who’s really with us; who shares our values; who should/shouldn’t we trust? In settings where trust is critically important – like in small combat units – trust has to be tested in all sorts of ways, especially given personnel churn. And though one might think that making it through a rigorous selection, like the SF Qualifications (or Q) course, would suffice to bind everyone in SF together, it can’t. Not when passing selection is only the institution’s way of saying someone is good enough to be sent to a team. Individuals still have to prove themselves worthy to one another *on* that team – through job performance, by staying calm under fire, by being willing to take risks, etc. The vetting can be severe – especially since the military sometimes errs; if the military didn’t err, there would be no such thing as toxic leaders or toxic personalities. Or, to put this somewhat differently, while the military excels at social physics – at slotting personnel into billets and at keeping individuals moving up, through, and eventually out – chemistry remains a perennial challenge. Leadership teams in which leaders are temperamentally unsuited to one another, out of sync, and/or incapable of putting disagreements behind them create toxic cascades.

Weight training as de-tox?

Thanks to teams’ small size, and given the personalities attracted to SF, toxic anything is deleterious. This is especially the case when a team captain and team sergeant don’t get along. For instance, let a captain be overly directive or authoritative and he will automatically engender resistance. If, on the other hand, he is perceived to be indecisive or weak but is willing to defer to his team sergeant and the team sergeant is well-respected, the team will probably still cohere. Typically, team members will do their best to simply outwait a captain they don’t like since he should rotate off the team before they do. The catch, of course, comes with combat. Then a leader’s bad decisions – or anyone’s bad decisions – can get people hurt or killed. So, when faced with the prospect of deploying to a war zone with a problematic captain, what might a team sergeant do?

Beyond expressing his misgivings up the enlisted chain of command, a team sergeant might try to bring issues with his captain to a head. However, doing so directly is risky because if he then can’t get the captain removed, he will have poisoned their relationship for good. At a minimum he first needs to consolidate his standing with his men. If he does this subtly, he should have sufficient leverage to compel the captain to *have* to work by, with, and through him. Of course, smart team sergeants will use any number of strategems once they are sure enough of their soldiers have their back. The real point here is that when there is bad chemistry or a toxic relationship between the team’s top two leaders, one of them has to prevail or their continual vying with each other will do in the team.

As for how exactly shirtless weightlifting might fit into this: any status competition that helps build cohesion can yield something called an ‘identity good.’ An identity good retains its value as more members of the group consume it. Even better, because an identity good is an item or activity in which everyone can participate, whoever is most instrumental in

getting others to join in will automatically elevate himself in the process, especially if this is an activity at which he excels.

Or, to return to my real-world example of two co-located teams in the Sahel: it turns out that both teams had internal leadership issues. Had I not been told this I might have simply assumed men from each were lifting weights against each other, as well as showing off to their NATO partners – though this still wouldn’t have explained why only certain individuals were challenging only certain other individuals to repetitions. It was only once I was clued into some of the underlying dynamics that certain sub-currents began to make sense. For instance, the fact that there were dual internal rivalries helped explain why it was the more ‘ripped’ of the two team sergeants who kept walking around shirtless – in a naked display of informal power, blowing sticky sand be damned. He was clearly striding around like this in part to rally ‘his’ troops, who were unabashed in their admiration. As for those who didn’t work out alongside him, I couldn’t get a single one to say anything the least bit critical, to include members of the other team despite the fact – or maybe precisely because – their team sergeant didn’t doff his shirt or peacock in the same way, though he too was having issues with both his subordinates and his captain.

Of course, trying to analyze the scene from the perspective of inter-group dynamics hardly negates the other potential explanations for shirtless weight-lifting previously cited. If anything, the fact that some soldiers were persisting with this activity in a sandstorm underscores why any of them indulged in it at all. Not only was weight training an eminently portable activity that could be engaged in in the middle of nowhere, but once initiated, it enabled – or could be used to force – a running competition. Plus, there was no good reason *not* to lift weights, especially since working out was considered integral to staying in shape. Because, too, it was job related it represented one of the few things that subordinates could openly use to challenge higher-ups without repercussion. In an almost perverse sense, the combination of shirtlessness and weightlifting rendered this activity an ideal ‘weapon of the weak,’ particularly since bare chests evened the playing field *and* highlighted who was fittest. Nor was shirtless weightlifting just a superfluous identity good. Instead, it was a subliminal reminder of how important having to *earn* the right to dominate could still be, and conveniently harked back to and even underscored the classic (or now legacy) officer/enlisted divide of labor/doers vs. management.

But, is this all?

Conclusions and final thoughts

Without question, weight training helped scratch psycho-biological itches that individuals may not have realized they had. It definitely fulfilled any number of important in-group and out-group status functions. It might even have helped with cohesion for teams that weren’t gelling, particularly since they needed to find some way to achieve social cohesion and a stable pecking order in a 24/7 living situation, one in which they also knew they could count on few religious, political, socio-economic, or extra-curricular bonds in common.

Without pre-existing shared bonds, team members need *something* to help them want to stay tied together beyond the prospect of whatever might transpire if and when they get to venture outside the wire. *Something* has to help them

defuse tensions and ensure they stay pulling together rather than apart. At least as of recently, weight training would seem to fit this bill – though I would be remiss if I didn’t pose one final question: has weight-training performed this function totally cost-free?

On the face of it, the kind of competition that weight-training fosters certainly seems healthy. But – any kind of competition *can* get out of hand, and here I don’t just mean that weight-training can be misused for internal coalitional politics. Steroids pose a real and present danger. Though more to the point, weight training can turn brawn itself into too big a thing.

Consider that decades ago both of the following syllogisms would have made sense across SOF:

- SEALs : DA :: SF : UW/FID.

Or in translation, SEALs are to Direct Action (DA) as Special Forces are to Unconventional Warfare (UW) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID).

- Hard-charging youth : DA :: maturity : UW/FID^[15]

In contrast, neither syllogism accurately reflects reality today – not given the impact of the past two decades and what has happened to SOF culture across the SOF tribes. Whether these syllogisms can (or should) be restored remains an open question. A compelling argument can be made that the U.S. military will always need forces capable of direct action *and* unconventional warfare, along with some combination of youth and maturity *and* brains and brawn. As ever, though, the challenge lies in: in what proportions? Especially since direct action (or what used to be called ‘door-kicking’) is itself a lot like weight training – it isn’t just self-fulfilling *but* self-reinforcing. Nor does it take very long before self-fulfillment starts to become *too* self-reinforcing.

As we have seen, anything over-developed in the animal kingdom suggests a runaway process. In the human realm, over-development can signify a runaway process as well, but it can also signal something else: namely, that whatever attribute or practice is being exaggerated may have been essential once upon a time, but no longer is. In fact, often the ability to *over-indulge* suggests that the necessity for whatever it was receded quite some time ago.

Perhaps I am reading too much into the timing of when shirtless weightlifting became such a big thing, but it does seem striking that men whose Regimental motto is ‘to free the oppressed’ were bulking up on brute strength and not some other set of skills, like language or cross-cultural communication, just as Washington’s ‘freedom agenda’ was flailing. Taken separately, neither of these developments bodes well for the future – unless we examine bulking up from one last angle. In which case, maybe overdoing heft, like overbuilding dreadnaughts in a bygone era, is a wake-up call alerting us to the need to transition, *now*.

Indeed, if, as so many contend, we are already enmeshed in Great Power competition and our nearest peers have no intention of taking us on kinetically, where does this leave brawn, mass, bulk, and their analogues? Where does it leave SOF? If subversion represents the tip of the iceberg in terms of what 21st century unrestricted warfare will consist of, how might something like shirtless weightlifting help? Or, to flip this around: what might we want to see SF team members invest in instead? One obvious answer should be: nothing that lends itself to posing, or to posturing, or to photographs. Or, so a mature approach to SF’s ongoing evolution would suggest.

Post-script: as is typical of many, but mercifully not all conferences or workshops, the one for which I initially wrote a version of this paper ended up being hijacked in a couple of different ways so that we never really talked about evolution or warfare. Instead, the younger academic participants were consumed with getting help locating data sets, which would then enable them to perform endless regressions so that they could then just restate the obvious, which is one unfortunate way in which the social sciences have become less helpful recently. The second way in which the workshop went off the rails was thanks to a ‘social movement’ academic/activist who re-directed everyone’s attention toward the significance of non-violent protest. From the outset, I didn’t understand why she had been invited to a meeting where we were supposed to be discussing chimpanzees, aggression, why men are drawn to fighting, etcetera. But as annoying as I found her interventions, and as exacerbating as I found everyone’s head nodding, I also had to hand it to her: by the end she had successfully subverted the entire purpose of the workshop through sheer dint of personality. In terms of physical presence, she was akin to a bull in a china shop. But she also happened to be extremely facile with numbers and knew how to speak compellingly to the political scientists in the room. By using all of these attributes to advantage, I’d say she forcefully finessed the situation and prevailed. To say there might be a lesson in this for 21st century SF is probably a bit of a stretch, but she did illustrate what might be done with the right application of forcefulness and finesse. To her credit, too, she at least got us off the topic of bulked up data sets.

Post-post script: In a May 2020 article about Jordan Goudreau, the former Green Beret arrested in Venezuela for allegedly helping to orchestrate the overthrow of Nicolas Maduro earlier in the year, The New York Times reported that, “Mr. Goudreau’s Instagram account is filled with photos of him looking fit and battle-ready: shirtless and armed, shirtless and on the treadmill, on helicopters, in private airplanes and at Mexican ruins.” [16]

[1] Peter McAllister, *Manthropology: the science of why the modern male is not the man he used to be* (St. Martin’s Press, 2009), p. 188.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Aaron Sell et al, “Human adaptations for the visual assessment of strength and fighting ability from the body and face,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, 276 (2009), pp 582-3.

[4] Ibid.

- [5] Aaron Sell, Liana Hone, and Nicholas Pound, “The importance of physical strength to human males,” *Human Nature*, 23 (2012).
- [6] Michael Petersen et al, “The ancestral logic of politics: upper-body strength regulates men’s assertion of self-interest over economic redistribution,” *Psychological Science* 24:7 (2013), p. 1099.
- [7] Ibid, p. 1102: “... the association in men between upper-body strength and aggression is unlikely to be just the product of testosterone, as the effects of strength on aggression are substantially greater than the established effect of testosterone on aggression.”
- [8] Sell et al, 2012, p. 36. As Sell et al go on to suggest: “... the effect of physical strength on the minds of modern men in the Western world should be far greater than is warranted from a reasoned analysis.”
- [9] Rupert Wilkinson, *American Tough: the tough-guy tradition and American character* (Harper & Row, 1986), p. 39. Wilkinson is citing Clarence Darrow citing someone else.
- [10] “A survey by GQ magazine, for example, found that while no ads prior to 1984 depicted men semi-nude, or in sexually evocative contexts, thirty-seven ads in that year did so. By 1994 that figure had risen to forty-three” (McAllister, p. 206). And today?
- [11] There is also another way to read the degree to which warriors will expend effort on their appearance. While, in general, adolescents may be “narcissistically preoccupied with prowess and physique” (Wilkinson p. 111), some societies keep their warriors in a state of arrested development or suspended adolescence for several decades; warriors aren’t allowed to marry or become heads of household during this time. Instead, they are encouraged to preen. Their self-absorption only ends when they finally get to move on to the next, more responsible (and sober) stage of life. While this kind of arrested development hardly describes SF soldiers (many of whom are husbands and fathers), the military does treat all of its members as adolescents in at least certain regards, but particularly when they are given responsibility but insufficient autonomy; when they have to report their every move; and when they are endlessly micromanaged
- [12] Wilkinson, p. 111.
- [13] Anna Simons, “The Menace of Menace,” *The American Interest* (online), June 2014.
- [14] Steven Quartz and Anette Asp, *Cool: how the brain’s hidden quest for cool drives our economy and shapes our world* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2015) p. 222.
- [15] Along with UW and FID, there is Security Force Assistance, Building Partner Capacity, or whatever other advise-and-assist label comes down the pike next.
- [16] Julie Turkewitz and Frances Robles, “An incursion into Venezuela straight out of Hollywood,” *The New York Times*, May 7, 2020.
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Anna Simons is a Professor Emerita of Defense Analysis, Naval Postgraduate School. She joined the SO/LIC curriculum at NPS (1998-2019) after six years as an assistant and then associate professor of anthropology at UCLA. Her book about prior-generation Special Forces, *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces*, appeared in 1997.

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