

New training promises a 'stronger, faster' soldier

By Stephen Samaniego

Introducing new concepts in the Army is never easy. The Army is deeply rooted in tradition and is typically resistant to change. While that mindset does have its benefits it can also hinder the military from moving forward. That has been the case for its physical training. For decades it has gone unchanged but now things are moving in another direction.

When Jason Carroll and I arrived at Fort Campbell we were introduced to Eagle Tactical Athletic Program or ETAP for short. This new training program was born out of a realization by the Army that soldiers were suffering a 40 to 60 percent injury rate during training.

They brought in Dr. Scott Lephart of the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Sports Medicine and Nutrition who has had success with reducing injury in professional sports teams. Lephart and his team spent 3 years compiling data on soldiers looking at what puts the most stress on soldiers physically and how to train them so their bodies can best withstand that stress.

The result is the ETAP program.

ETAP is a big step away from the traditional calisthenics that the Army has put its soldiers through. Through 45 second interval circuit training, it focuses on boosting a soldier's speed, agility, flexibility and balance. When we spoke to the soldiers going through this program their enthusiasm for it was clear.

"I was kind of skeptical," says Sgt. Brad Ohlman. "After the first three days I noticed that I was actually working some muscles... I think that if everybody gives it a chance and tries it they, will come around to actually liking the program."

The program isn't just popular with the soldiers going through it, their leaders are also on board. The division surgeon for the 101st Airborne, Lt. Col. Brian Smalley has seen soldiers with all types of muscular skeletal injuries due to training. "We've kind of neglected things like core strength and dynamic strength," according to Smalley. "This program focuses on that... and the end result will be a stronger, faster, soldier that'll be less prone to injury."

One of the main selling points for this training is that it is adaptable to any situation. Depending on where a soldier is being deployed it can be specifically tweaked for a certain type of environment. The commanding generals had been complaining that their soldiers in Afghanistan had been suffering from unusually high amounts of ankle injuries due to the rough terrain there. So, the program was modified. "We were able to integrate new exercises that would specifically focus on the soldier's agility and balance," says Lephart. "[This would] likely reduce the amounts of ankle sprains."

While researchers are still gathering data on injury rates to soldiers enrolled in this program, their efforts have already proven to be effective in other ways. ETAP soldiers have been tested to be 30 percent more fit than soldiers that go through traditional physical training.

