With the opening of the $2.5 million Atkins Functional Fitness Facility at Fort Drum, N.Y., on Nov. 16, 2012, soldiers on post have a facility that provides all of the fitness tools and equipment necessary to get them “mission ready.” The 22,000-square-foot facility was created to establish a comprehensive functional fitness program that focuses on combat-specific training and exercises that mimic in the facility what they will be asked to do on the battlefield or in austere deployed locations.

“In order to survive in combat, you have to be fit,” says Maj. Gen. Mark A. Milley, USA, Fort Drum and 10th Mountain Division commander. “We owe them resources to make sure they stay fit.”

According to Randy Gillette, manager of the Atkins Functional Fitness Facility, the new space provides the perfect setting for soldiers to train and prepare for the mission, both physically and mentally. “We focus on strength, agility and also self-defense training for mission readiness, preparing them through proper full-body exercises with multiple planes of movement, for what they will be asked to do downrange,” he explains. “Functional fitness is training your whole body, and building muscle memory is important because when they are doing the box jumps in here, it is in preparation for when they are jumping out of a helicopter, for example. Whatever exercise or movements we are doing in this gym, they are going to be asked to do in combat or when deployed.”

“One of the keys to these newer types of facilities is that there is a ton of open space, so that you can incorporate weight training into agility, power movements and multiple planes of motion that can truly replicate how they would do it in the field,” adds Maj. Robert Montz, USA, chief of Occupational Therapy at the Army Medical Command, and special projects officer at 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum. “We can mimic the same type of activity and load here in the facility as they would experience out on the battlefield, with combat-focused workouts incorporating the whole body.”

The facility is also geared to the family, and Gillette says that his staff also focuses on encouraging spouses to come and experience the benefits of functional fitness training. “This facility and the program are applicable for spouses as well, because they are training to be able to improve their everyday function, from bending down to pick up their child or carrying groceries, for example.”

Response from soldiers and family members has been phenomenal. In just the first three months after opening, the facility had more than 20,000 people come through its doors. “We average between 250-300 per day,” notes Gillette. “It is well-used all day long with a variety of patrons from spouses to platoons.”

**Functional Space**

The functional facility is broken into three large rooms, including the main strength training room, a combatives room and a sprint training area with cardio and cross-training equipment around the outside.

Much of the main floor is poured rubber, which was provided by Dynamic Flooring, and the sprint training area has artificial turf that was provided by FieldTurf. Throughout the facility is state-of-the-art equipment from Concept2, Endless Rope, Hammer Strength, Jacobs Ladder, Life Fitness, Livestrong, Muscle Driver, Rogue, TRX, VersaClimber and Woodway.

The strength training room features half-racks and numerous weights and benches; two sets of dumbbells that go from 5 pounds to 150 pounds; kettle bells that go from 20 pounds to 80 pounds; standard weight bars with racks on them that go from 20 pounds to 110 pounds; and numerous bumper plates on one side of the room. Pike boards are also available, as well as two climbing ropes with large mats underneath them, and a cargo net that goes to the ceiling, with padding underneath for climbing and training.

Off the strength-training room is the combatives room, which can hold 175 people, and is used for level 1 though level 3 combative training for soldiers. “The floor has poured rubber as well as additional matting that covers the floor for safety, which can be rolled back in sections,” notes Gillette. “We can do PT and kickboxing, punching and heavy and speed bags in there, and there is an 18-foot boxing ring for sparring. We have a projector for training videos on the screen, and a sound system is available as well.”
The Atkins Functional Fitness Center was created to support the principles of the Mountain Athlete Warrior Program, a four-phased approach to fitness.

“There is the functional piece, as well as sports medicine, sports nutrition and mental toughness pieces,” says Montz. “A lot of it is about the education and training that we can provide to the soldiers and leaders—at all levels—so they can operationalize performance across the military spectrum. In order to do that, having the proper equipment and resources helps to facilitate that quite a bit, especially meeting some of the unique environmental needs that we have up here at Fort Drum with the harsh winters.”

Montz explains that the sports medicine piece involves a two-pronged approach. “The first part is the whole injury prevention/wellness piece, or the pre-habilitation part, ensuring that soldiers are lifting correctly, whether it is a squat or deadlift or a carry, that they are optimizing the proper form and technique,” he explains. “We know from the research and the literature, if we establish those correct movement patterns early, the odds of us preventing injuries when putting soldiers under extreme conditions—having to lift extreme weights—are very good, because they are training using good, sound biomechanics, and will better utilize those techniques in the field, and decrease those injury rates and improve recovery time.”

All facility staff is certified in combatives and functional fitness, and have gone through the 40-hour Mountain Athlete Warrior Certification Program. “We offer the program at the facility each month, and it trains and certifies you in all the functional fitness that goes on at the facility,” explains Gillette. “We try to make it so every soldier can obtain the course, which teaches them the right way to do the program, learn the sports science behind it, and the importance of nutrition, injury prevention and mental toughness. There is a classroom and hands-on component, showing proper technique and form, as well as ways to design and set up workouts of the day and routines, whether it is for an individual or a large unit, platoon or group of spouses.”

In regard to running, Montz points out that it is important to educate fitness leaders that they can increase soldier performance without having them run five to six days per week. “A lot of mileage on the body has its effects long-term, so it is about educating the squad, team and all leaders in terms of the correct principles of exercise,” he says. “The other part is, if and when they do get injured, a good sports medicine mindset needs to be used to employ those same strategies to get them back to the fight quicker than they would otherwise. We know a more physically fit body before an injury will rehab and return to duty a lot faster than a body that was not as fit.”

Another important aspect of this new approach to the rehab process is having the right resources available at all levels. “We put more medical assets within the division, so at the battalion level they have medics and a physician’s assistant, and at the brigade level, they also have a physical therapist, who not only helps leaders on the proper biomechanics of lifting, but also helps streamline a lot of the rehabilitation protocol so that when soldiers do get injured, they have those assets with their unit, and don’t have to go somewhere else for guidance or PT and rehab.”

Overall, Montz says he has seen a decrease in injuries as a result of this new approach to training. “At previous units that I have been at, we did keep numbers and we did see a significant trend in the decline of overall injuries and sick calls (medical visits) that were reported,” he explains. “We also saw soldiers getting back to the fight a lot quicker. As we try to work with IMCOM, TRADOC and FORSCOM to make this concept Army-wide, that is something that we want to start capturing in the near future, so that we have those hard numbers here at Fort Drum to prove what it is we are advocating for.”

The program also prepares soldiers for training no matter where they are stationed, and regardless of space or equipment. “We educate them on the components...
of fitness, have them marry that up with their operational needs of what they need to do, and develop a program that accomplishes that mission, which is the intent of the program,” says Montz. “We go over all of the different pieces of fitness equipment available to them, including what they can do with body weight, so no matter how remote they may be, they can still carry on from a fitness standpoint what they need to do to maintain their physical fitness readiness.”

BUY-IN AND SUPPORT

Both Montz and Gillette have seen soldiers embracing the principles of functional fitness.

“I am seeing a huge buy-in from soldiers,” says Montz. “They come in here initially skeptical, but when you break it down for them from all the different components of the program, they are very receptive, and they see that we are providing them with a lot of tools and ways to add variety to their workouts, and properly progress it and incorporate different things. When key leaders move from here to other locations, they are requesting this type of training.”

“We can’t overstate the importance of this facility and others like it,” adds Gillette. “It is critically important that we train them functionally in this way, because what we teach them here they will be asked to do once they are downrange, which is where the muscle memory comes into play. And the spouses say that training in this way has improved their everyday living and given them more energy and strength.”

Montz points out that the key to the success of the program is the support at Fort Drum, including the Commanding General, Division Command Sgt. Major, Squad Leader, Team Leader and all within the Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation division.

“Our command has allocated funds to create our Atkins facility and combat readiness training facilities within the brigade and company footprint in terms of allocating and resourcing the units with the additional equipment that they need,” he says. “We have had buy-in from all levels.”

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