

CADET PHYSICAL FITNESS

Modernizing the physical fitness program

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While it is universally agreed that physical fitness is important for cadets, there are many varied opinions on how best to promote and measure it. Our current fitness program was adopted in 2003, with a scoring change in 2006. While this model has worked well for certain segments of our population there are many who are left behind by the relentless testing and emphasis on performance. Modern understanding of fitness, particularly how it relates to young people, has grown and developed. This classic model of fitness is looking more and more outdated. It is time to respond to current research and update our physical fitness program.

Changing Ideas about Fitness

Civil Air Patrol's Board of Governors has recognized the shortcomings of the current fitness program and has included Cadet Physical Fitness Education in the 2014-2015 Strategic Plan. Objective 4.1.3 is to "build the cadet fitness program to reflect the latest evidence-based practices." In addition, the Presidential Physical Fitness Test on which the CPFT is based was discontinued after the 2012-2013 school year and is no longer recommended or supported. The physical fitness program needs to be updated, but how?

The major shift in thinking about fitness* from 1956 to today is the differentiation of physical fitness related to performance and physical fitness related to health. An Olympic gymnast and an NFL football player would both be considered physically fit. But if they switched sports for a day and were tested solely on their performance, they would both be considered to have poor fitness. The football player would struggle with agility, flexibility and balance. The gymnast would lack the necessary body composition, strength and power to play in the NFL. However, by gauging their fitness using criterion referenced, health-related tests, both hypothetical athletes would prove to be fit, with strong hearts and muscles, and at reduced risk for certain diseases. By distinguishing between performance-related and health-related fitness in our training program we can continue to encourage ever higher levels of health without an over-preoccupation with the problematic aspects of performance-related fitness.

* According to the US Department of Health and Human Services physical fitness is "an ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue, and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and to meet unforeseen emergencies." Many components contribute to physical fitness including cardiorespiratory endurance, skeletal muscular strength, power, speed, flexibility, agility, balance, reaction time, and body composition. The relative importance of any one attribute depends on the particular performance or health goal.

A New Model of Fitness Program

The stated goal of the cadet physical fitness program is "to make you physically fit and to motivate you to develop a lifelong habit of exercising regularly." Squadrons have been left somewhat to their own devices in determining how to meet this goal. Our fitness program pamphlet, CAPP 52-18, offers little more guidance than suggested calisthenics and grass drills. Many squadrons have created outstanding physical fitness programs for their cadets incorporating regular exercise, team sports, and motivational fitness activities into their

schedules. However, other squadrons do little physical activity beyond administering the Cadet Physical Fitness Test to all cadets once a month, every month.

The cadet fitness program should be more than just testing. Civil Air Patrol squadrons can offer a variety of enjoyable exercises and games to help cadets reap the benefits of physical activity. Yet even if a squadron were to promote healthy activities at every meeting, exercising once a week is not enough to make a significant difference in a cadet's health. The fitness program should support and encourage cadets to seek out regular physical activity on their own.

Civil Air Patrol must create a comprehensive strategy to establish squadrons as environments that support health. This includes providing fun physical activity opportunities and establishing a climate that encourages all cadets of diverse abilities. It must increase the emphasis on health education in ways that are interactive, engaging and relevant to the daily lives of cadets. By incorporating these health-related themes into the established curriculum the heightened emphasis on fitness can be woven seamlessly into the overall message of the Cadet Program.

Our Proposal

To modernize the physical fitness program we recommend the following changes:

- Remove current CPFT from cadet promotion requirements
- Adopt Presidential Youth Fitness Program with quarterly testing
- Rewrite CAPP 52-18 with updated activity recommendations, nutrition information and testing protocols
- Issue new Cadet Physical Fitness Activity Guide to support positive fitness activities at the squadron level
- Introduce new Fitness Excellence badge

Updating the CPFT

Since 2003, CAP has aligned its Cadet Physical Fitness Test with The President's Challenge, the nation's standard measure of youth fitness. Prior to our partnership with The President's Challenge, CAP's fitness test was homegrown, and not surprisingly, people in the field complained that the test was not a fair measure of fitness. The President's Challenge offered a comprehensive youth fitness test which was performance-based and used normative data (percentiles)*. Civil Air Patrol used that data to determine appropriate fitness standards for cadets- starting with meeting or exceeding the 25th percentile for Phase I and increasing to meeting or exceeding the 75th percentile to earn the Spaatz Achievement.

The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, sponsor of The President's Challenge, announced that it is taking a new direction, partly because The President's Challenge data set is 28 years old, and partly because physical education experts have learned more about their field over the years. The new fitness test is called The Presidential Youth Fitness Program and focuses on measuring health outcomes by referencing the Healthy Fitness Zone.

* Normative referenced standards rank an individual's performance relative to the performance of all other individuals in the group used for reference. Criterion referenced standards indicate levels of physical fitness needed for good health, irrespective of the level of physical fitness of the reference group.

Presidential Youth Fitness Program – Overview

The purpose of the PYFP is to “promote health and regular physical activity for America’s youth.” That goal is very close to the traditional goal of CAP’s own program, “to develop in cadets a habit of regular exercise.”

The PYFP fitness test uses [Fitnessgram assessment protocols](#). Test events remain about the same. We would still have a 1-mile run, push-ups, curl-ups, and a sit-and-reach, though the latter is slightly modified to measure flexibility on both the left and right sides of the body. One difference in the PYFP is that the shuttle run is replaced by an event called “the pacer.” The pacer’s objective is to run as long as possible across a 20 meter field (e.g. long hallway) at a specified pace that gets faster over time. Like the mile run, the pacer measures aerobic activity, and like the shuttle run the pacer is especially useful for northern squadrons who shouldn’t send cadets outside on a dark January night to run a mile run over icy roads. The Fitnessgram protocols offer further event alternatives but for the sake of simplicity and to reduce the administrative burden on busy testing officers, we will not look to add events.

The real difference to the test is in the scoring and interpretation of results. The Fitnessgram uses criterion-referenced standards. These standards have been established to represent a level of fitness that offers some degree of protection against “hypokinetic” diseases (i.e., conditions that result from sedentary living). Performance is classified in two general areas: “Healthy Fitness Zone” (HFZ) and the “Needs Improvement” zone. Attaining the HFZ for a test indicates that the cadet has a sufficient fitness level to provide important health benefits. The Needs Improvement zone should be interpreted as an indication that the cadet may be at risk if that level of fitness stays the same over time.

Muscular strength, endurance and flexibility standards are based on age and gender. Aerobic capacity is measured in maximal oxygen uptake (VO_2 max). Differences in body size can influence oxygen uptake so the cadet’s body mass index (BMI), computed from their height and weight, is taken into account. While the standards are differentiated, they remain objective. There is a clear standard for each cadet. Put another way, the run standard is individualized, rather than a static point for all cadets of the same age and gender. This is good news for a program like ours. We have cadets “come off the couch” and join our ranks. Many CAP leaders have told us that the CPFT standards are too tough too early for these new cadets. The PYFP offers some relief to those newcomers.

One other significant difference between the CPFT and PYFP is the frequency of testing. Cadets would take the test quarterly, rather than once per promotion. The less time spent testing cadets’ fitness, the more time may be spent doing fun, motivational physical activity. After the Wright Brothers milestone cadets would be required to be in their HFZ to continue advancing. For new cadets and those that have scored in the Needs Improvement zone, a remedial fitness program would be available. Cadets who remain in the Needs Improvement zone after 3 months in the remedial program would be retained in grade until they are able to score in the HFZ.*

* There are no plans to change the physical fitness categories. The testing will continue to make reasonable accommodations to maximize each cadet’s opportunity to participate in the fitness program.

Fitness Excellence Award

To continue to encourage excellence beyond the baseline of improved health CAP's new fitness program would also include a Fitness Excellence award. This award is modeled after the cadet merit list insignia at the US Air Force Academy. The badge would be awarded to recognize cadet achievements in personal fitness and would need to be re-earned each testing cycle.

Publication Support

CAPP 52-18, Cadet Physical Fitness Program, will be revised in its entirety. It will be updated to include the latest understanding of adolescent health, physical activity and nutrition. The emphasis will be on health and lifelong fitness. Detailed information about the new fitness testing protocols would be included.

To provide guidance to squadrons on how best to support the new fitness initiatives a new handbook will be produced. The Cadet Physical Fitness Activity Guide will detail positive fitness activities which can be conducted at the squadron level. It will include instructions for a range of sports, games, motivational fitness activities, and extensions for encouraging fitness beyond weekly meetings.

Why Not Another Approach?

Naturally members who like and are familiar with the current system may question the need for change. Some questions that might arise immediately are addressed here.

Why should we "lower" standards to increase fitness? The fitness program and standards have changed regularly since their debut in 1964. In that year to earn the Spaatz Award a male, 17 year old cadet needed to perform a gauntlet of exercises including the twister, the robot, the wing stretcher, chair pushups, standing broad jump and more. In 1975 he had to earn points documenting his physical activity outside of his weekly meetings and run a mile in 7:30. In 1984 the only requirement was to run a mile in 7 minutes or less. Today his Spaatz CPFT mile time to beat is 6:23 in addition to pushup, situps and sit and reach. We are not looking to raise or lower standards, but continually searching for the right standard.

Why not use the Air Force's fitness test? While that sounds reasonable on the surface, the Cadet Program serves youth so we need a test designed for youth backed by standards appropriate to twelve to twenty year olds. The Air Force's fitness program is not tailored to adolescents.

Conclusion

This paper marks the start of the discussion, not the end of it. The current fitness program places too strong of an emphasis on skill, performance and testing while failing to meet the needs of many cadets and accomplish its stated mission of encouraging lifelong fitness. Our proposal emphasizes the recommendations of the experts from the Centers for Disease Control, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. The changes would have a lasting impact on the health of our cadets, from top-performing athletes to the previously underserved individuals who struggle with personal fitness. The proposed changes will establish physical fitness as an important component of the cadet program, integrated into the fabric of the squadron. We welcome your feedback.