

When Practice Ends, The Work Continues For High School Athletes Seeking An Edge



PHOTO GALLERY

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[By Cailin Riley](#)

Two years ago, Ana Sherwood was a wisp of a girl who stood out on the field hockey pitch not just because of the uncommon skills she possessed as a tenacious freshman on Pierson's varsity squad, but also because of her seemingly incongruous size and stature, the thick padded gloves she wore dwarfing her small frame.

Last week, she was at the MuvStrong fitness studio in Springs, on her knees on a padded mat, fiercely tossing a large medicine ball against the wall, catching it, and tossing it back to the wall over and over, muscles twitching and flicking in her arms with each throw. Nearby, East Hampton soccer player Luis Aguilar did a series of lunges from one end of the room to the other, waiting for his turn with the ball. Both athletes were under the watchful eye of trainer Mike DeLalio, part owner of MuvStrong with Gordon Trotter.

Sherwood and Aguilar are two of a growing number of high school athletes who have made a serious commitment to offseason strength and conditioning training, with an eye toward improving overall physical agility, speed, and power, specifically as it relates to their sport of choice. It's a commitment student-athletes are making not just because they want to be better producers for their teams—both Sherwood and Aguilar have their sights set on college, and they know that improving their overall physical prowess is just as important as the skills they hone on the field. For college athletes, strength and conditioning training—often simply called "lifting"—isn't just a bonus; it's a crucial component of any collegiate program, and increasingly college coaches are expecting incoming freshmen to have, at minimum, a basic familiarity with the weight room.

MuvStrong, which opened its 2,400-square-foot space off Springs Fireplace Road a year ago, is catering to athletes like Sherwood and Aguilar, and members of the East Hampton baseball team go to the studio on a regular basis for training and exercises geared for "rotational" athletes—think golfers and baseball players.

Trotter and DeLalio say that most of the individual athletes who come to MuvStrong are cut from the same mold.

"They're the motivated group that have an eye on college placement," Trotter said.

DeLalio said the trend of athletes seeking out strength and agility training to enhance their ability to succeed first started in "power-based linear sports" like football, lacrosse

and throwing events in track and field.

"But more and more," DeLalio said, "Kids are realizing they need to do it for other sports.

"You can do skill-based stuff all you want, and play travel ball, but you need the strength to back it up," DeLalio continued. "Talent will take you far, but talent and hard work will take you even farther."

Trotter added that strength training also helps prevent injuries, especially in sports like baseball where athletes are forced to use one set of muscle groups more frequently than others.

"You want them to have a good base of strength and mobility so they can play much longer in the sport," Trotter said.

Sherwood and Aguilar said they've noticed a difference in the time they've been working out at MuvStrong.

"I feel a lot stronger than I was awhile ago, for sure," Sherwood said. Sherwood is being pursued by several top-notch field hockey programs, including Division I Villanova University, as well as Towson, Skidmore, and Hobart and William Smith. She said DeLalio is in tune with her goals, and they do a lot of exercises focusing on speed and leg strength, crucial in field hockey.

Sherwood says she likes what DeLalio brings to the table, and she also likes training alongside like-minded athletes like Aguilar, saying she enjoys the camaraderie and also likes the spark of competition it can provide.

"Working with other athletes is really fun for me," she said. "You have another person going through the same thing, and it's kind of like a friendly competition with the exercises, because you want to keep up with them."

Aguilar, who is looking at Franklin Pierce College and Merrimack, was a talented midfielder for the Bonackers but also played in goal in the fall to help fill a hole for his team. He's currently on the Bonac lacrosse team, and like Sherwood, said he's noticed a difference, particularly in his speed.

"It's serious, but they make it fun," he said. "I'd really like to continue doing it because it's really worked for me."

And while improved strength, power and speed are results the athletes can see and feel, DeLalio says the workouts have another benefit that can't be discounted.

"That's where the weight room cements itself in athletics; being able to look at a number and say, 'I can move this,' then on the field being able to say, I know I've outworked that person," DeLalio said. "It gives you that confidence boost to outplay them."

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