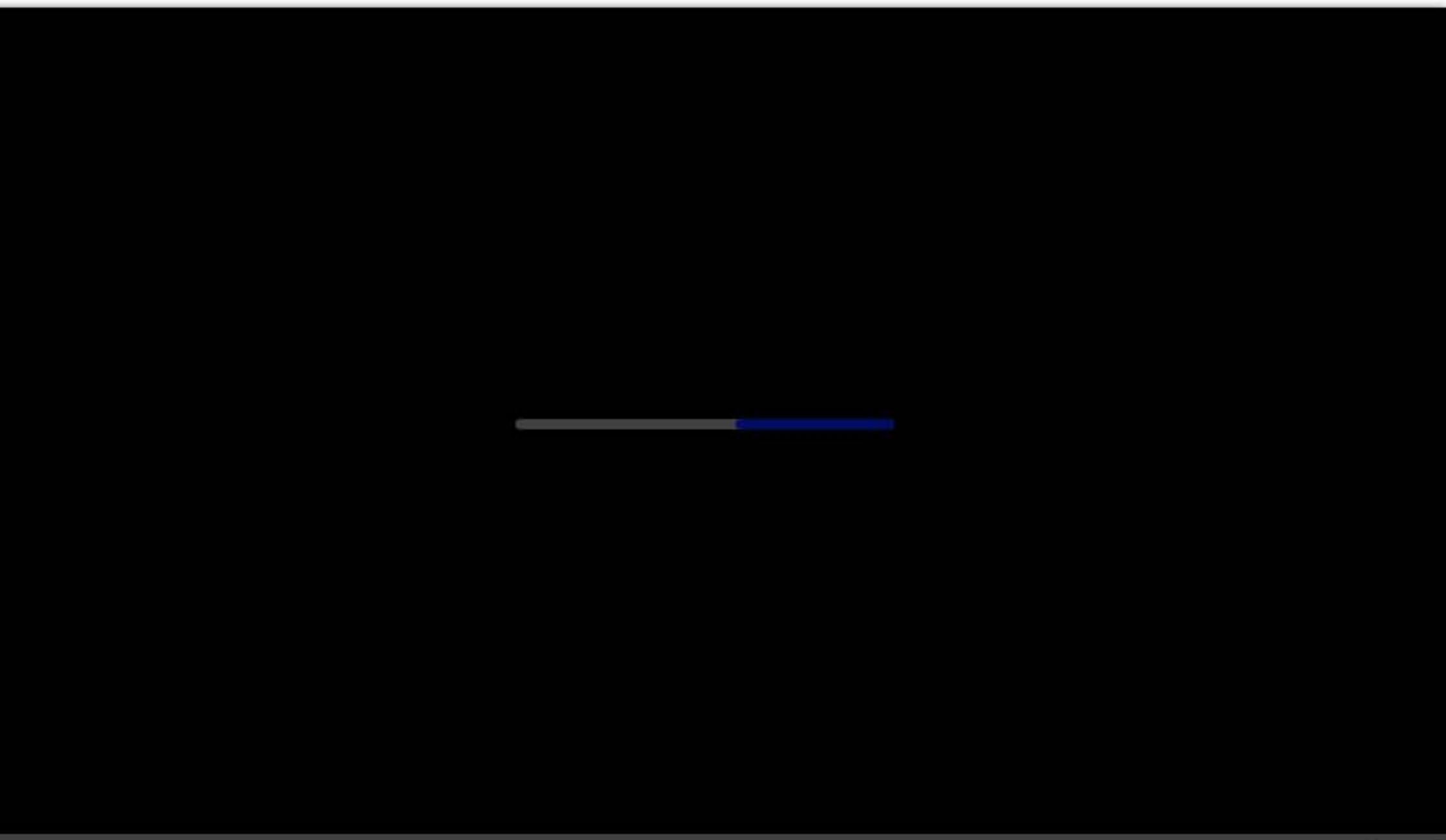


Coaches.Strength Training.Youth Athletes.Youth Sports

The Biggest Mistake in Youth Strength Training Programs

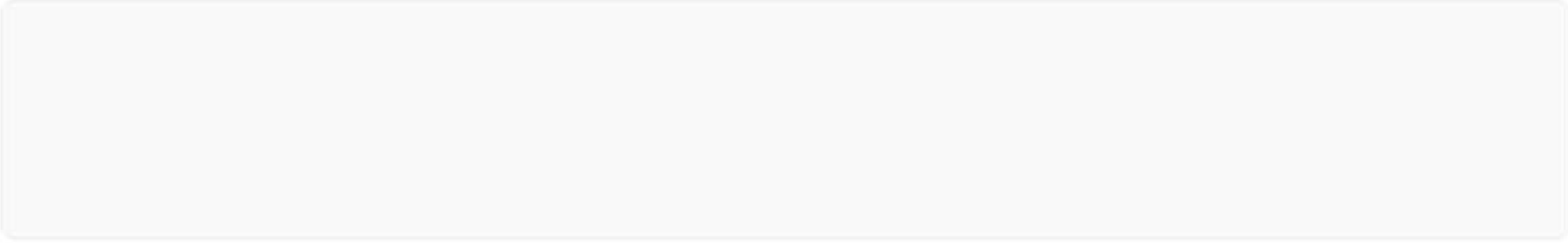
By Yunus BariskPublished On: 2022-02-05



Among the few hundred junior hockey players I've coached over the years, I've noticed a trend that keeps repeating itself like a horrid nightmare on Elm Street.

Whenever a young athlete joins us from another team, his **strength levels** and especially his lifting technique rarely match up with our standards in the weight room.

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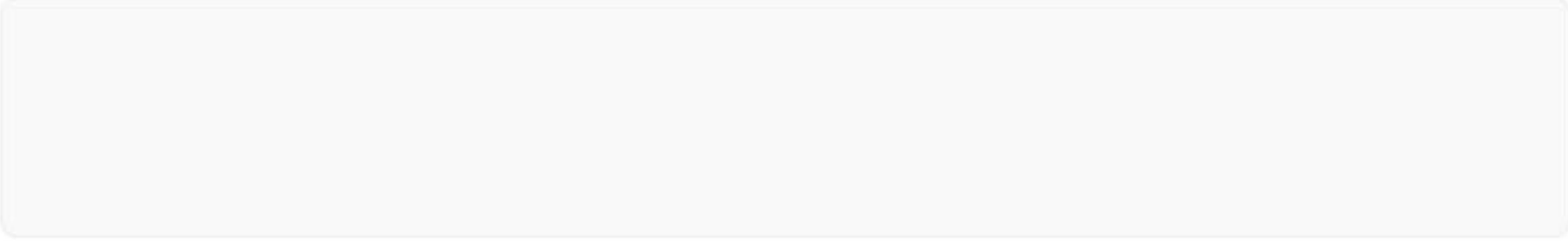


Despite many athletes claiming to be in top shape after having supposedly trained hard following a youth strength training program at their previous club, I've yet to come across a 16-year-old who could demonstrate good lifting form on the basic strength exercises the first day they walk into our gym.

For example, take the Power Clean, one of the most common lifts taught to young hockey players all around the world.

The athlete's hip hinge pattern often looks too squatty, his hips do not extend fully on the way up, he pulls with his arms too early, his elbows stay down in the catching position, and so on.

Then he might tell me that his previous coaches had him doing Power Cleans all summer yet didn't really teach lifting technique.



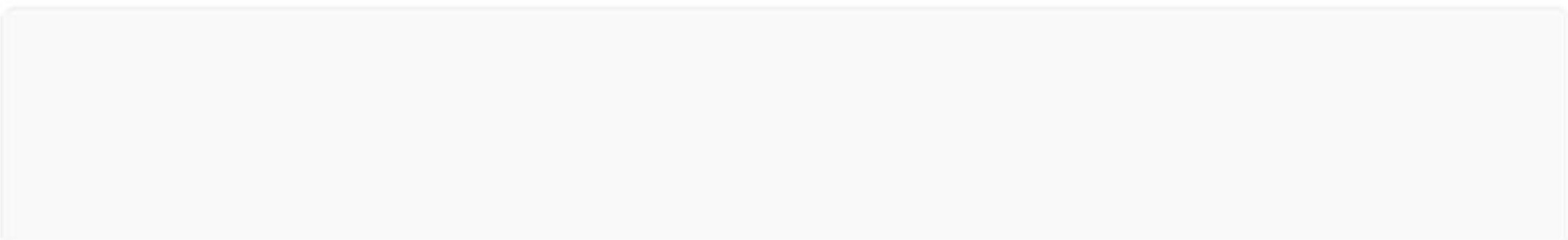
Are you kidding me?

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You could argue that maybe the athlete in question is one of those motor morons who can't get the hang of a complex Olympic lifting variation, no matter how well he has been coached.

Fair enough.

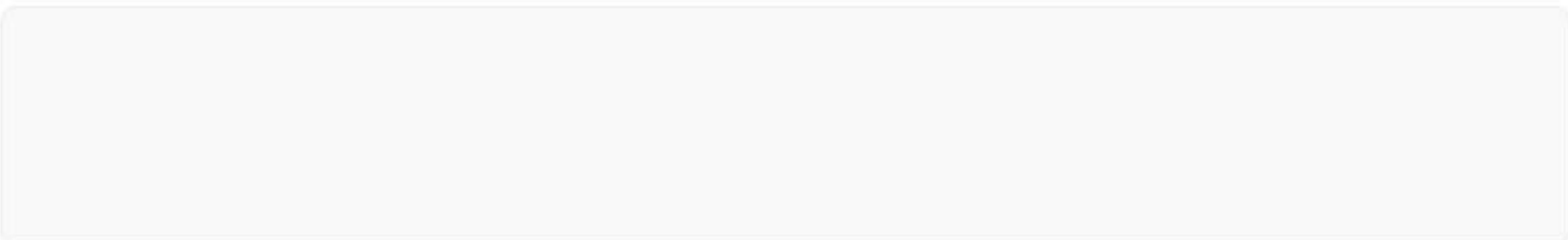
But what happens when we move on to something simple like a basic bodyweight Push-Up?



Elbows flare out, hips sag, head shoots forward, zero core control.

And don't get me started on the athletes who come in claiming, "yeah, I can do 15 Chin-Ups" with a swagger that would make Denzel Washington proud.

That cockiness vanishes faster than a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough at a Weight Watchers meeting when we have them perform Chin-Ups with a full range of motion instead of arms remaining bent at the bottom, and without their using their legs to kick themselves over the bar like they're used to.

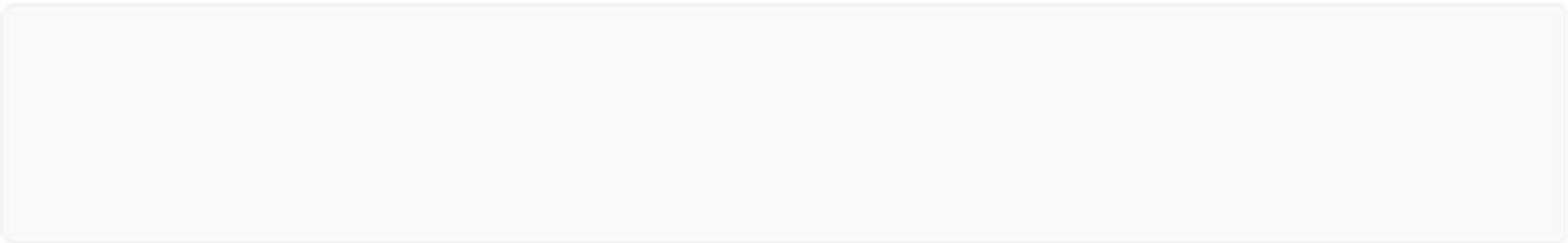


Maybe hockey is special in that subpar off-ice training practices are the norm, not the exception, at the youth and junior levels.

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But having also observed dozens of young soccer, basketball and football players in the gym, and having talked with coaches involved in training these athletes, I'm convinced the problem spans multiple sports.

For a high school athlete, general physical preparation could and should be as simple as bodyweight calisthenics coupled with the more common unilateral and bilateral strength exercises.



At that age, it's about learning proper form on basic exercises such as Chin-Ups, Push-Ups, Squats, Split Squats, Lunges, Romanian Deadlifts, etc. and creating a movement foundation to build upon when training becomes more serious as they get older.

The problem is that very few coaches possess the knowledge, and even fewer have the patience, to teach solid form to young athletes over weeks, months or even years.

Improving movement quality over time takes a back seat to chasing the burn and just "getting after it" today.

After all, if the athletes didn't get sore and come close to puking, the workout was a waste. Right?

Wrong.

You can't let training volume dictate the effectiveness of a training session.

That's because volume causes fatigue. And fatigue kills technique in beginners.

Coaches and parents emphasizing quantity over quality in training are making the biggest mistake in youth training programs. I see it happening all the time and I simply can't take it anymore.

What's the point of hammering these kids with tons of reps if those reps are all done poorly?

Anyone can make someone tired and out of breath. But turning a kid into a better, technically more proficient lifter who moves well? That takes serious coaching skills.

And let's be realistic here. A beginner (which all youth and junior athletes are by default because their training age is so low) doesn't need more than a couple of quality sets per exercise or movement pattern per workout to witness strength gains week to week.

What's the purpose of all that extra work if it doesn't make an athlete better?

On several occasions, I've witnessed how 14-year-olds drop down and flail around as if they were having a seizure beyond the first five reps on Push-Ups after their coach yells "Gimme 20!"

It's not the technical execution and mastery of the movement that counts, just that the athlete gets the randomly prescribed number of reps done—no matter how bad his form.

It's a sad, sad sight indeed.

Of course, this practice isn't limited to bodyweight movements only.

The real problems start when forces exceeding an athlete's own bodyweight come into play, such as with single- and double-leg Jump variations or the big barbell lifts.

I've had several young hockey players come to me with overuse injuries in their knees and lower back because they've been performing Jumps and Squats incorrectly for years, ready to quit the sport at age 15. In what world would serious injuries be deemed an acceptable result of youth strength training?

As coaches, we need to teach quality movement first. Loading comes as a distant second. If a coach is not capable of doing that, he or she has no business training young athletes. Nobody can argue that hammering teenagers with tons of reps with little regard to proper technique would constitute good, hard, productive training.

Yet that's exactly what's going on in more weight rooms around the country than you can imagine.

That's why I always tell my beginner athletes it's better to do three good reps than 10 ugly ones, because making someone stronger and better down the line is easy if they have a solid foundation in place.

So to all young athletes and their parents or coaches reading this, my message is:

- Train smart.
- Get really, really good at the basics.
- Stop chasing numbers that mean nothing if your form is weak.
- Do it right from the get-go, build a solid foundation, and then you earn the right to train hard.

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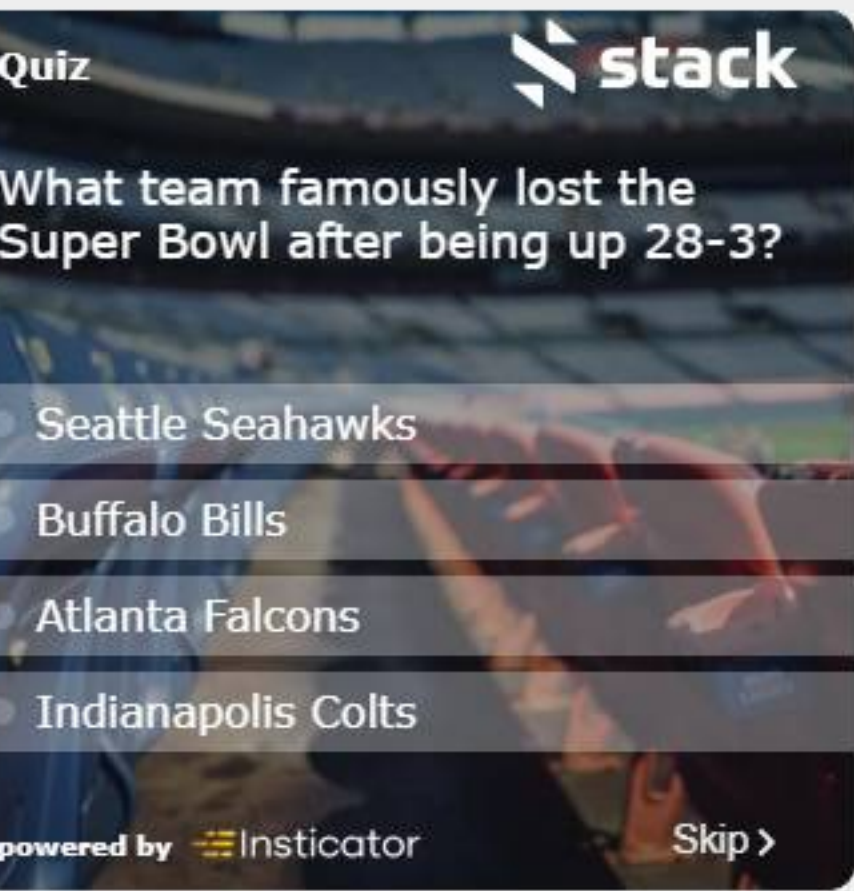
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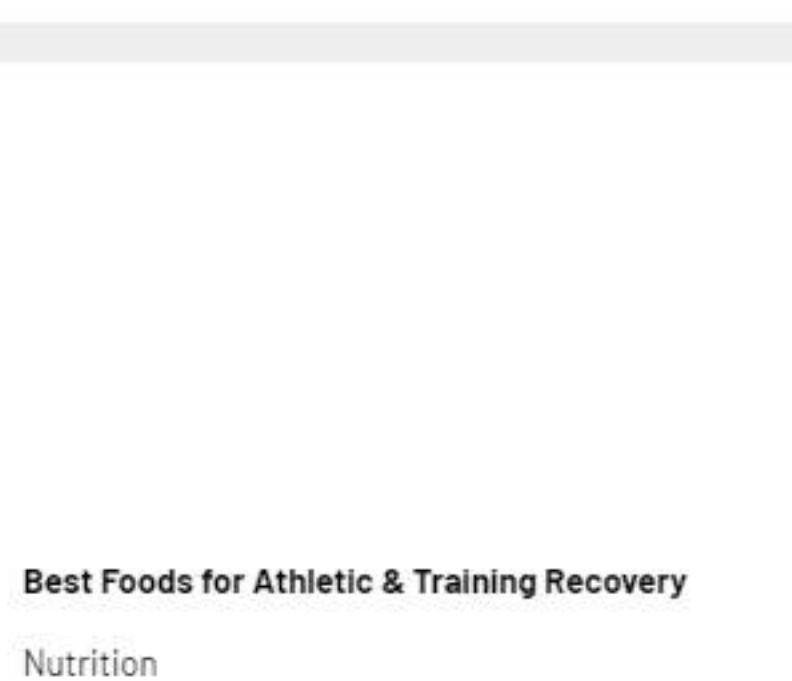
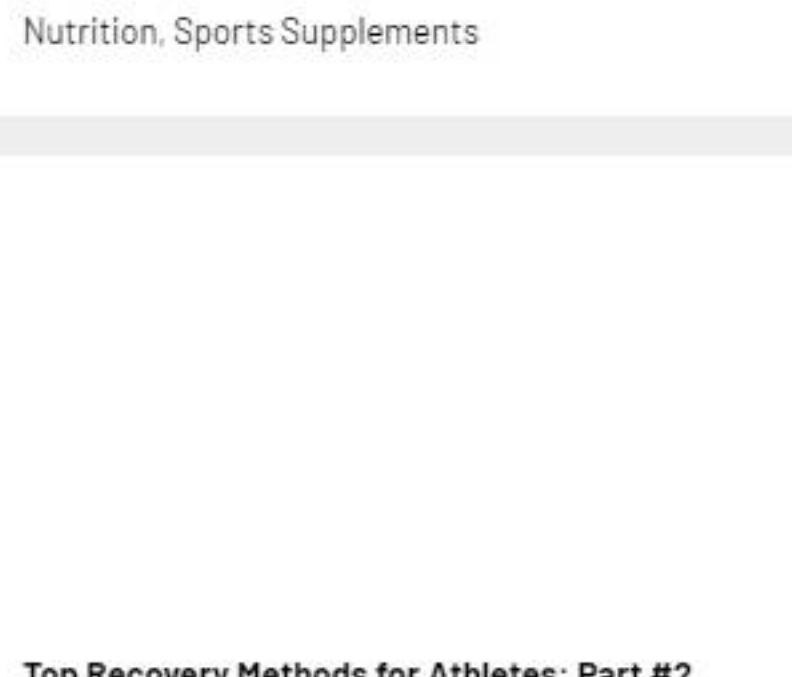
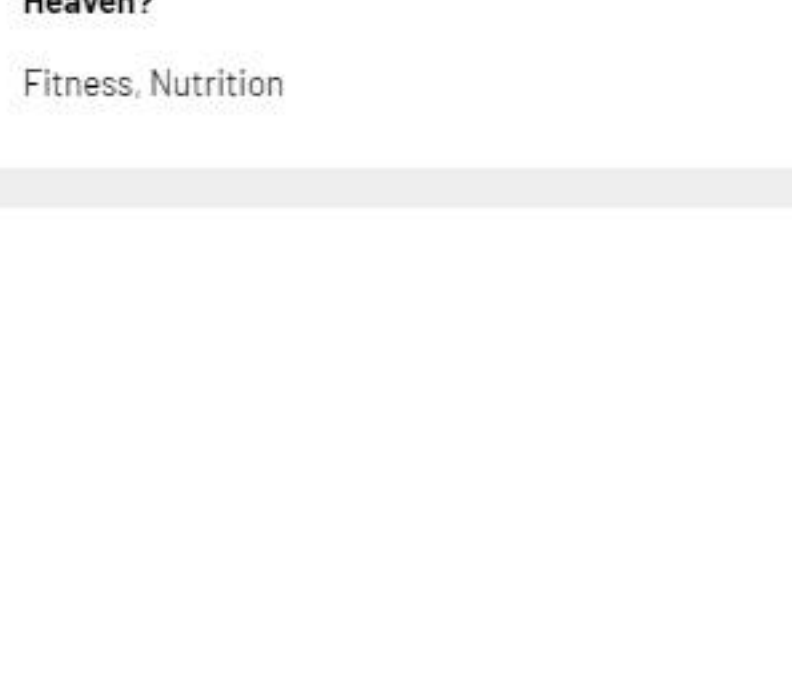
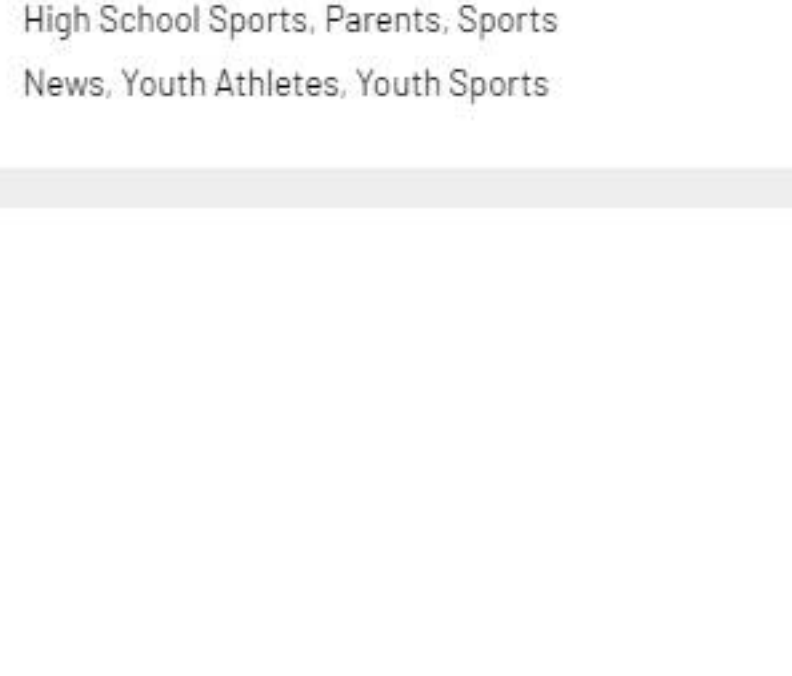
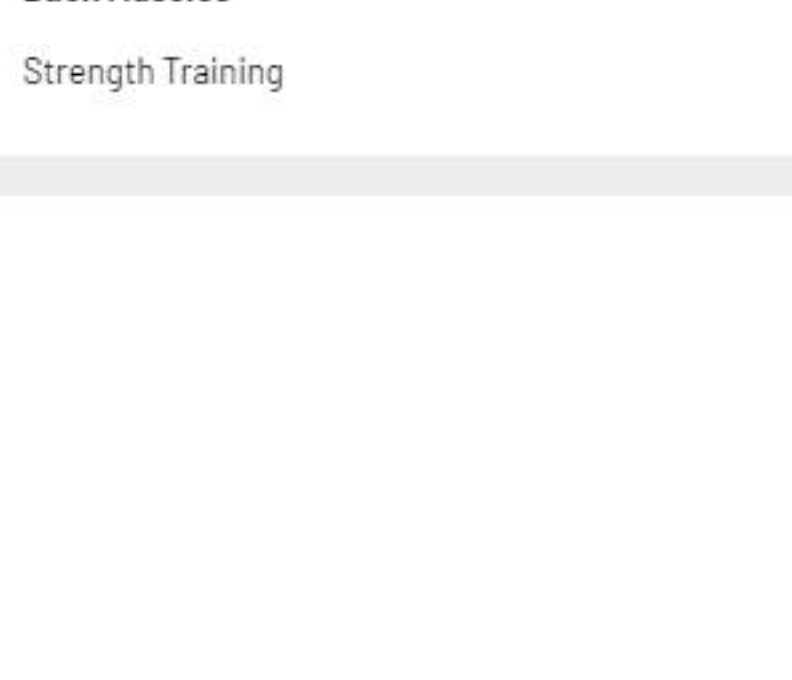
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