

THOR³ PROGRAM

Building Modern- Day Warriors

BY PAUL RAGUSA,
Managing Editor

It is fitting that the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) named its Tactical Human Optimization Rapid Rehabilitation and Reconditioning (THOR³) program after a mythological figure associated with strength and protection of mankind. The THOR³ program, based on the athletic training model used today by professional strength and conditioning coaches in sports settings, is building stronger, more resilient special operators who are in peak physical shape for deployment, less likely to get injured and able to return to action faster from injury than ever before. In essence, the program is building modern-day warriors like Thor.

“We have had great success with the THOR³ program, which is designed to increase combat performance, prevent injuries, improve health and longevity and facilitate rapid return to duty,” says Brig. Gen. Edward M. Reeder Jr., USA, commanding general U.S. Army Special Forces Command (Airborne). “These professionals are all working in the area of preventative care as well to enhance resilience and stress hardiness. As always, we continue to push the need to select only the most stress-hardy individuals, train them to hone these skills and provide monitoring support and/or treatment when needed to keep them supporting their mission.”

According to Ray Bear, a human performance coordinator who runs the THOR³ program for 3rd Special Operations Group (Airborne) at Fort Bragg, N.C., the training is having a positive impact on the overall readiness of these tactical athletes, creating more resilient and smarter special forces operators.

Jason Pompili, a strength and conditioning coach for the 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) THOR³ program at Fort Bragg, N.C., monitors an interval training session on the treadmill.

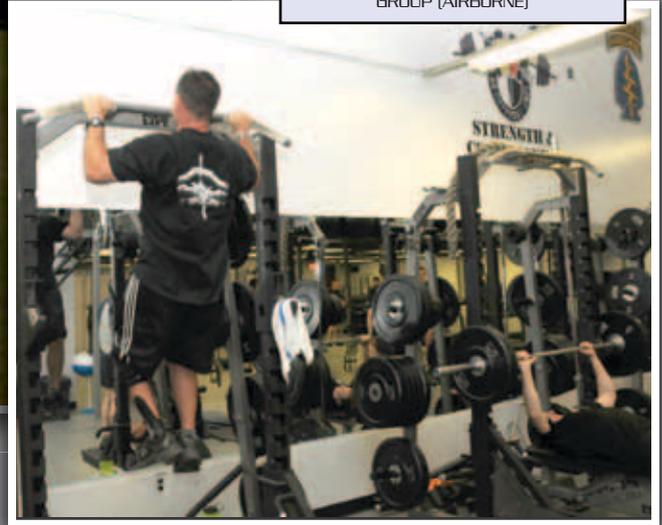
PHOTO BY CAPT. JENNIFER BOCANEGRA, 3RD SPECIAL FORCES GROUP (AIRBORNE)

Special Ops Fitness



A member of the 75th Ranger Regiment at Fort Benning, Ga., drags a 185-pound pulling sled during a mobile VO2 assessment, which monitors oxygen efficiency proportionate to activity level.

Members of 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) participate in weight training to increase their upper-body strength during a THOR³ workout at Fort Bragg. PHOTO BY CAPT. JENNIFER BOCANEGRA, 3RD SPECIAL FORCES GROUP (AIRBORNE)



“I have guys telling me that they wish they would have had this program 10 or 20 years ago because they feel stronger and better overall,” says Bear. “I think THOR³ has been successful. We get a lot of really good reports coming back from guys and good participation within our group and throughout the Army Special Operations Command as well. They come in here skeptical and they leave optimistic because they see how it is helping them.”

STANDING UP THE PROGRAM

Two years ago, Bear was hired to stand up the THOR³ program and facility at Fort Bragg with the ultimate goal to teach Airborne soldiers how to train like professional sports athletes, with tailored programs that are operation specific and emphasize physical readiness as it relates to the mission.

Before coming to Bragg, Bear worked as the strength and conditioning coach for several colleges and professional sports teams, including the Kansas City Royals and Atlanta Thrashers, and has been designing and overseeing performance-based training programs for more than 10 years. An impressive team of health and fitness professionals, including strength coaches, dietitians, physical therapists and cognitive enhancement or sports psychology specialists, joined Bear at Fort Bragg, bringing further legitimacy to the program.

“Our staff are the backbone of the whole THOR³ program, and they have to get the credit for making it what it is today,” says Bear.

Staff members include strength coaches Jason Pompili and Lance Stucky, two former collegiate strength coaches; dietician Laurel Wentz; physical therapists Mike Schuk, Tara Lillemon and one active-duty soldier; and cognitive enhancement specialist Britney Loney.

“The short-term goal for THOR³ is to train our soldiers as the athletic model that we do in college and pro sports, teaching

them to do all of the lifts correctly and teaching them to do a sound program, a periodized program so they can enhance their performance and actually have their peak performance while deployed,” Bear explains.

A big component of THOR³ is injury prevention – reducing injuries associated with training.

“Teaching the guys how to lift and train properly, to work on their nutrition side with the dieticians – it all ties into that injury prevention piece,” says Bear. “We have already seen some good results and have made great strides at reducing injuries – soft-tissue injuries caused by either improper lifting in the weight room or during training or combat.”

Bear says the key is doing performance-based, athletic training, which “is a little bit different than what these guys have done before,” he points out. “The goal is to help reduce sickness rates and lost time due to illness by increasing immune systems through the way they eat and train.”

The majority of the training is done at the THOR³ facility and outside, where trainers add components, simulate scenarios and put soldiers under stress while they do their movements.

The THOR³ facility houses on the strength side Powerlift free weight equipment, including glute/ham racks, benches (adjustable mobile), squat and half racks as well as Iron Grip dumbbells, PowerBlocks and Uesaka Collegiate Series Bumper Plates. Cardio equipment includes Woodway ProXL treadmills; Jacobs Ladders; VersaClimbers; Concept2 Rowers; Stairmaster step mills; Precor ellipticals; a Freemotion cable machine; and a Lemond Spin Bike.

Also available for use are smaller pieces of functional equipment, including First Place Medicine Balls; Dynamax Fit Balls;

Special Ops Fitness

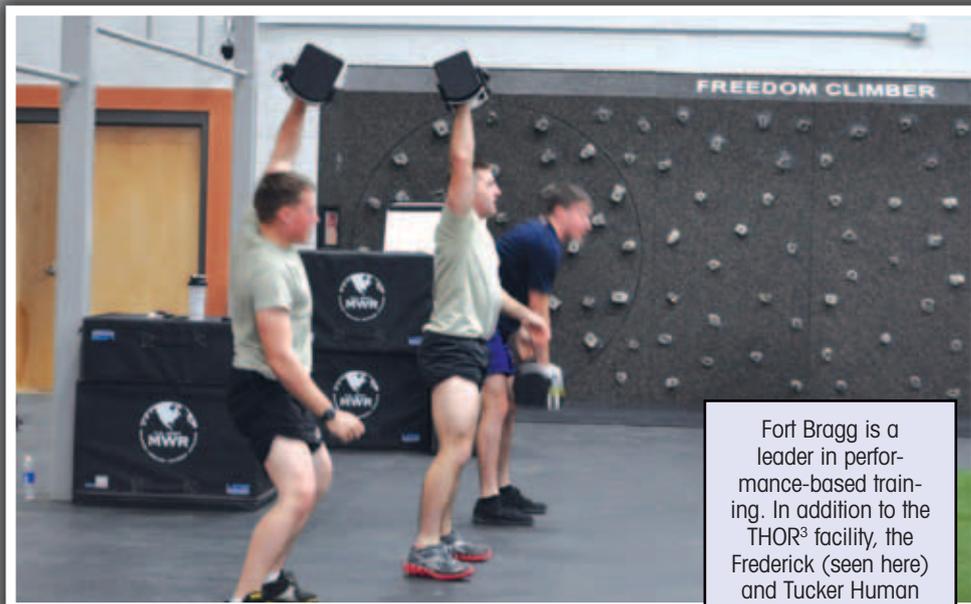
Jump Stretch Bands; and Power Systems jump ropes, stretching pads and other accessories.

“We do follow the athletic model so we do a lot of Olympic lifting, and utilize a lot of body weight exercises – so we teach them how to use their body the right way,” Bear explains. “So, we break down the components of the kinetic chain to try and teach them to use lower, middle and upper, and use them in the right way. Olympic lifting does accomplish that and we use traditional and nontraditional methods.”

The team also teaches soldiers to stay fit and sharp during deployment.

“A lot of our lifting that is done downrange is nontraditional for the fact of what they have by way of equipment,” he says. “So we try to incorporate into the training some of the things that they will have when they deploy. Simple things such as rocks or stones, so they will be able to squat with it, clean with it or throw it to train in the field. Some deployed locations are a lot more sophisticated than that, so they can utilize kettlebells and bumper plates and bars – everything that you would traditionally see in a performance center and weight room. So we are trying to keep the commonality between here and downrange as well, so we’ve got some kind of crossover.”

Bear and his team also built a deployment kit that includes Powerblock dumbbells; First Place Medicine Balls; Dynamax Fit Balls; Jump Stretch Bands; and Power Systems jump ropes



Fort Bragg is a leader in performance-based training. In addition to the THOR³ facility, the Frederick (seen here) and Tucker Human Performance Centers exemplify this.

and stretching pads.

“We created the kit so that if our guys have nothing where they are deployed, they at least have what is in that box,” he notes. “We also teach them how to use all of the equipment as well, and they are able to keep that component going all the time throughout their deployment.”

Soldiers are also taught the proper way to warm up.

“We teach them dynamic warm-ups, and not only the proper way but why we do it,” notes Bear. “And everything that we do has a ‘why we do it’ too. So they are not just doing the exercises and training but also learning the basis for why they are doing it.”

After the workouts soldiers learn some of the recovery aspects of training, including using foam rollers, stretching with bands and using the cold tubs that are available at the facility. “We teach them the importance of cryotherapy,” he notes.

RETURN TO DUTY

Providing proper rehabilitation and getting guys back to full strength in the shortest time possible is an important aspect of the program. THOR³ physical therapy staff members work closely with the medical side to provide care, support and therapy for the injured or wounded.

“We have a bridging program so we can stay in contact with each other because we are all located in the same building, and we need

to have continuity of care between physical therapy and the performance side,” notes Bear. “They will work with wounded guys



The combatives room on the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) compound at Fort Carson, Colo.
PHOTO BY PFC. MIGUEL SALADO

initially post-op, and then we work with them once they are cleared for physical activity to get them back to 100 percent so they can actually join their teams a lot quicker.”

One of the ways that THOR³ is making soldiers more resilient is by taking what SOCOM calls a “prehabilitative” approach.

“Within the program we put in what you would call prehabilitative movements where we work with joint flexibility and joint mobility through different stretches or different movements that the guys normally would not do or not train with,” Bear explains. “We do a lot of lateral movement, multidirectional rather than just linear. So whenever we are adding in those types of things, we work a lot on the shoulder girdle and hip joint because those two alone would be the majority of injuries that we see throughout the Army. Until now, that kind of flexibility and mobility was just not worked on enough.”

He continues, “So we add in exercises that increase the range of motion so we can hopefully equip our guys with the skills and knowledge to be able to handle the stress that these joints may have to move through injury free. Because if they are lacking in range of motion and flexibility or lacking in strength in certain movement planes – that is how injuries occur, and this is where ‘prehab’ comes into play.”

Overall, Bear says THOR³ is making a difference and win-

ning guys over.

“They feel stronger because their core is stronger,” notes Bear. “They feel better and can tell the difference in the way their bodies respond.”

Moving forward, Bear would like to see some additional staff hired to adequately handle the volume of guys who are coming through the THOR³ facility and program.

“We want to be able to really address all of the training that we need to have and that these guys deserve to have,” he points out. “We also want to be able to do a lot more outdoor operational training and go out with the guys a little bit more, which comes with increased staff. And also be able to look at our increased performance numbers along the way, so as our program grows we are able to quantitatively look and show that what we are doing is working. We have been able to do that already but I want to see that grow.”

Ultimately, Bear says that the success of the program can be attributed to the highly skilled staff.

“They have helped propel the program and enhanced all of the training that we are doing here,” he notes. “The high level of experience and expertise by our staff really adds credential to this THOR³ program, and I think our guys deserve that high level of support and training.”

—GRF