

Photos by Jim Burgess



Kenny Boynton

# Hoop Strong: Gator Basketball

An interview with Florida's basketball strength coach, Preston Greene

The winningest coach in University of Florida's history is Billy Donovan. His legacy includes three appearances in NCAA championships games, two of which were victorious. This year Donovan has another strong team – ranked sixth in preseason by *Sports Illustrated* – and a secret weapon in strength coach Preston Greene.



Strength coach  
Preston Greene

This year Greene joined the Gators as Coordinator of Strength and Conditioning. The previous strength coach had gone to work for the San Antonio Spurs of the NBA, so several head coaches Greene had previously worked for made calls to the UF head coach on Greene's behalf. In addition to working with men's basketball, Greene works with men's tennis and men's golf. Joining him are one paid assistant and two interns. Says Donovan, "We're

excited about the addition of Preston to our staff. He brings a wealth of knowledge and experience."

Greene played several sports in high school, but his passion was strength coaching, so that became his focus. His commitment to this profession enabled him to receive, while still an undergraduate, a full-time graduate assistantship as a strength coach at Clemson University. He went on to the University of Minnesota to complete a master's degree in kinesiology. Greene has also been a strength coach for Stanford, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and for the University of Arizona.

In this exclusive interview Greene shares his insight into training elite athletes and specifically his approach to working with one of the best college basketball teams in the country.

**BFS:** *How much do you work with Coach Donovan?*

**Greene:** We meet on a daily basis. I am at every daily practice, film session and staff meeting. I also travel with the team and staff to all our road games. And I should add that Coach Donovan is a workout fanatic and trains daily, so I get face time with him in that aspect – he's always asking me questions about nutrition and supplements.

**BFS:** *How would you describe your facility at the University of Florida?*

**Greene:** We have a \$10 million, state-of-the-art private basketball practice facility. We have a separate practice facility, with a 1,900-square-foot weightroom, training room, video room, players' lounge, hydrotherapy room, practice courts and locker room, as well as offices for the entire basketball staff.

**BFS:** *Some young basketball players believe that they can succeed on the court without any weight training – just so long as they have the skills. How do you respond to this?*

**Greene:** There is definitely some truth to this, but skills will only get you so far. A deeper reality comes into focus when you consider the longevity of a player's career. When you get into a high number of games, especially with the speed and physicality of the game at the higher levels, all that takes a toll. That's why it's so important to train properly – to achieve structural balance and prevent injuries, as well as to increase the skill set. In the game of basketball there's no such thing as jumping too high, running too fast or being too strong.

**BFS:** *What are the major structural balance issues you find with incoming basketball players?*

**Greene:** Neck extensor strength is a major weakness; these athletes are generally very tall, and as such they look down their entire lives. Patellar pain, usually due to weak hamstrings and VMO, is usually a given. These guys run and jump every day of their lives, but they rarely train the posterior chain properly or consistently.

**BFS:** *What are some common mistakes you see high school strength coaches make when training basketball players?*

**Greene:** Not performing full squats, full split squats or lunge variations. Most players I see as freshmen have never trained their legs with a full range of motion. Also, many high school coaches are worried their players will get “too big,” yet they consistently perform high reps instead of heavy weights. Makes zero sense.

**BFS:** *What are the most important weight training exercises you have your basketball players perform?*

**Greene:** It depends on what the player is structurally able to handle, as well as how long I have trained him. Training age is a major factor. If he has progressed through my training regimen long enough and the exercise is beneficial for him, there are no limitations. Having said that, the power clean and power snatch are great for the vertical jump, and strongman training is great during the off-season. Every exercise is important, as long as there is a reward to performing it, once he is structurally balanced.

**BFS:** *What are good auxiliary exercises for basketball players?*

**Greene:** It depends on what phase of training we are in, off-season versus in-season. We will train the grip a lot during the off-season (the stronger the grip, the fewer turnovers). Split squat variations, leg curl variations and step-up variations are all used in-season. Seated rows to the neck with a rope and Powell raises are great during preseason, when the players are forced to be in a defensive stance constantly during long practices.

**BFS:** *What are the injuries you commonly see with basketball players?*

**Greene:** Ankles. And there are always jammed fingers from getting deflections. I tell our players that a stronger grip and higher bone density achieved from strength training would prevent them from always wearing tape on their fingers. I joke with them that the tape is a bad fashion statement.

**BFS:** *Do you have your athletes perform any “pre-hab” work for the ankles?*

**Greene:** We do a lower body structural balance assessment through the PICP. If a player has weak ankle pronators, then we may do some Sit-Fit variations of a split squat, and so forth. That is more efficient and effective than doing such exercises as wall drills and band stretches.

**BFS:** *Is there a problem with basketball players being able to squat all the way down?*

**Greene:** Yes, a mental problem. And bad advice. If there are structural

limitations, then those areas will be addressed. By using PIMST, various forms of manual therapy and proper exercise prescriptions and progressions, there are zero reasons that a player should not eventually be able to squat all the way down. This doesn’t mean all our players are doing full back-squats with 500 pounds, but they will still perform the movement, or a variation of it, with whatever load they can handle for the prescribed rep bracket and with proper form.

**BFS:** *Do taller players tend to have more problems with the lower back?*

**Greene:** Not always. The lower back problems I see tend to be in relation to their fascial restrictions or feet – some players wear a size 19 shoe.

**BFS:** *Do you do cleans from the floor or from mid-thigh?*

**Greene:** Both. Which type we perform is influenced by such factors as how long of a training cycle I have with the athlete and how fast or slow he is.

**BFS:** *Do you perform plyometrics or any other special speed exercises?*

**Greene:** Very rarely. Maybe four weeks out of 52. These guys run and jump every single day of their lives. I’ve found that by doing fewer plyos, their vertical jump actually goes up. However, Olympic lifting exercises and their variations are movements that I consider “plyos” for a basketball player. Some of our explosive medicine ball drills involve jumping and throwing in tandem, to work on the transfer for



Forward Erik Murphy demonstrates three auxiliary exercises for the abdominals, grip and quadriceps.

speed and power. As such, you can still train for speed and power, without doing conventional plyos.

**BFS:** Can you give examples of especially impressive weight training performances by any of the players? Such as a big squat or clean?

**Greene:** We had a 6-foot-9 player full front-squat 420 pounds. Another player who was 6-foot-8 performed a power clean with 320 pounds. One player could perform a chin-up carrying an additional 110 pounds.

**BFS:** How about vertical jumps? Do you test both from a standing position and with a step? And can you give any examples of big vertical jumps?

**Greene:** I do three different vertical jump tests: a standing jump, a one-step jump, and three consecutive standing vertical jumps. As for impressive test scores, one of our players had a standing vertical jump of 41 inches.

**BFS:** Does each player have an individual program, or do you have special programs for each position?

**Greene:** Individual. Players come in all shapes, sizes and forms, so position isn't as important as individuality. A player who I've had for three years would train differently from a freshman. Some guys need to gain lean mass, some need to get stronger without increasing lean mass and some need to get more explosive. Training programs are based on that.

**BFS:** What type of energy system training do you have your athletes perform?

**Greene:** Strongman medleys during the late off-season. During pre-season, we will have two conditioning sessions. One is a traditional conditioning session of court-length runs and sprints. The other is movement-based conditioning with such drills as defensive slide series, offensive cuts, and transition defense series. The goal is to get them prepared for practice, and to perform and think when they are tired.

**BFS:** Do you have your athletes perform any aerobic training?

**Greene:** No.

**BFS:** Do you train hard in-season?

**Greene:** Absolutely. Volume is somewhat based on the amount of minutes guys played in the game, etc. The team lifts a minimum of two days a week in-season, and some guys train four days. Training in-season is crucial to keeping lean mass on. I would rather keep a session 20 minutes long and see them three days a week (for a total of 60 minutes), instead of two sessions that last 30 minutes (also a total of 60 minutes). This gives me greater opportunity (frequency) to see them and to hit them with regeneration and postworkout supplementation for caloric and nutrient intake.

**BFS:** Do you have a general periodization plan you use with athletes throughout the year?

**Greene:** That depends on who it is, but for simplicity's sake we are moving heavy weight for very low volumes at the end of the season and at the beginning of postseason play.

**BFS:** What are the common problems you see with the diets of basketball players?

**Greene:** I design all the menus for when we travel as well as pre-game meals. The most common problem is that collegiate athletes don't eat consistently. They would rather get up at 7:50 for an 8:00 a.m. class, instead of getting up at 7:15 so they could eat breakfast.

**BFS:** What advice would you give a high school basketball player who wants to earn a scholarship?

**Greene:** Practice, practice, practice. I've heard many of our players talk about how they were the only ones in the gym, street or courtyard working on their games, at all hours of the day and night. Nothing beats hard work.

**BFS:** What advice would you give a



Guard Kenny Boynton demonstrates a lunge variation at top, and center Patric Young prepares to perform a power clean as Coach Greene helps him achieve the proper start position.

strength coach who wants to emulate your success?

**Greene:** Read everything you can get your hands on, and get practical experience. Take the PICP courses, and seek out the advice of legitimate strength coaches who have actually trained someone. There are too many internet experts who have never trained an athlete.

**BFS:** How does the team look this year? Many polls had you ranked very high.

**Greene:** Preseason polls mean nothing. Where you finish is what matters. We are off to a good start, but we have a very, very challenging nonconference schedule ahead of us. Hopefully this helps prepare us for conference play as well as making a very deep NCAA tournament run. **BFS**