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Rogowski takes scientific approach to shaping up Rockets



Jamaal Ellis

As rookie Isaiah Canaan is finding out, Joe Rogowski, left, is bringing "a different culture in strength and conditioning" to the Rockets.

By Jonathan Feigen

Their story begins like so many others, or at least like so many others if romantic comedies are to be believed.

Paris in springtime. Where better to launch a budding romance? Sidewalk cafes. Strolls along the Champs-Élysées. The Louvre. The Arc de Triomphe.

Well, no. When Joe Rogowski met Diana Lopez, there was a gym, a taekwondo competition and an injury.

"She was beating some German girl in a fight," Rogowski said of how he met his wife, the 2008 Olympic bronze medalist from Sugar Land's Lopez family of taekwondo champions. "She just got done getting disqualified for punching a girl in the face. She got injured. She caught my attention."



Rogowski, the Rockets' new strength coach, was an athletic trainer for the U.S. team competing in Paris and helped Lopez through her rehab. As "meet-cute" stories go, theirs would be considered too implausible for even the most ridiculous Katherine Heigl vehicle. But it is in keeping with much about Rogowski's background spent going from traditional to unusual, conventional to cutting edge.

Rogowski, 35, might refer to himself as a "strength coach," in part out of respect for those who inspired his career, but his title with the Rockets - in a basketball operations department that generally avoids titles - is director of science and research.

"My background's always been science," Rogowski said. "My master's (degree) is in physiology. That's an area I really strive to get better at and see what the new trends are, not do what everybody else is doing, and not only that, but why. When I was an athlete, I always asked, 'Why? Why are we doing this?' As a strength coach, I do the same thing with the players."

As an athlete, when he was a safety at Division III DePauw University, Rogowski needed a place to work out at home in Chicago. He contacted the Northwestern football staff and got to know its longtime strength coach, Larry Lilja. That led to an internship as an athletic trainer with the Buffalo Bills where he worked with Rusty Jones, whom he tellingly describes as "not a meathead strength coach, but a science strength coach."

From that relatively conventional start, Rogowski's path to the Orlando Magic and now the Rockets took unique turns.



Jamaal Ellis

Rockets new strength and conditioning coach Joe Rogowski, center, tries to make every rep count as he pushes several rookies through the paces at Toyota Center.

"(Being a traditional strength coach), that's first and foremost the most important thing," Rogowski said. "Once you have that taken care of, you can start going into other areas. I taught at the University of Central Florida. Before the Magic, I was a high school teacher. I taught marine biology and biology. That's always been my background, being a teacher. This is very similar. It's not like talking to a colleague. You have to put it on a level that anyone can understand analogies and what they can apply."

Beverley a believer

With that in mind, Rogowski is determined to have players understand his demands. He won't expect 12 reps because it is two more than 10. They won't go from weights to sprints because they always have.

"I want them to understand this is a system we're doing and this is why," Rogowski said. "There is a

reason for doing this number of reps or sets or exercise. It's not something we're picking out of a hat or at random. There is a method to the madness.

"The goal obviously first and foremost is to have our athletes strong and to be able to tolerate the loads of an NBA season. There's a lot of fluctuating during the season on the stress levels on them. The goal as a strength and conditioning staff is to meet the stress levels they acquire during a season and address that so they are able to tolerate that during a long 82-game season and playoffs."

He will share little about what he, athletic trainer Keith Jones, director of strength and conditioning Darryl Eto and director of performance rehab Jason Biles will do, particularly as it differs from what strength coaches have always done. That is in part out of respect for traditional strength coaches and in a large measure because the Rockets consider much of the program Eto and Biles began instituting in the past three seasons to be proprietary.

"We've changed it up a little now to where the players will notice a different culture in strength and conditioning," Rogowski said. "In our approach to lifting, we're not just lifting weights to lift weights. We're breaking down each lift to different pieces.

"We're going into more of the science and research of the training. We looked at the physiology of training, neurologically why we're doing things, which drives a little more to how the body reacts to certain stimuli. Everything we've looked at from pregame tones to get guys away to recovery tones to different health recovery things, vitamin D, magnesium, looking at heart rates and taking that to the next level and correlating that to actions on the court, looking at muscles through ultrasound."

He has pushed players through workouts at Toyota Center this summer but also has had them boxing at Lou Savarese's gym, running at the University of Houston track, swimming at the Hilton, and of course, doing taekwondo training with the expert in the family.

"I think it's definitely been beneficial, especially for me," Rockets guard Patrick Beverley said. "I've put on some good weight (about 10 pounds). I've gotten stronger. It gives you a lot of confidence to attack more, be confident on the court. I always want to do stuff different. Rogo's been great. He's into it. Not talking. Not resting. Not joking around. We get straight to business."

Reuniting with Howard

In the coming days, Rogowski will begin working with Dwight Howard again, offering a chance to attend to unfinished business from their time together in Orlando. Rogowski laughed at the idea that he was hired in part to entice Howard to sign with the Rockets.

"We're comfortable with each other," Rogowski said. "We had a lot of success together in Orlando.

We've both been to the (NBA) Finals. We haven't won it. We're on the same page from that standpoint. To work with probably the best athlete in the NBA is a great thing."

Howard also did not recruit Rogowski to Houston. There already was an athlete in town better qualified to do that.

"You have a team going the right direction, management is fully supportive of the sports medicine side and my wife is from here and works out here," Rogowski said. "It was a perfect situation."

Even Paris could not match that.



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