

# McConnell Leads Good Athletes to Greatness

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**Julio Jones captured the hearts of Alabama supporters in his freshman outing against Clemson in the Georgia Dome in 2008. Every game since has heightened the crowd's anticipation of his exploits. He reigns as one of the most gifted athletes ever in Bryant-Denny Stadium. Where did the sensational performer acquire the competitive edge to flourish in a league dominated by superior athleticism?**

Nestled in The Shoppes at Fairhope Village located on the Eastern Shore of Baldwin County's US Highway 98 is **McConnell Athletics**, a 3,500 square foot exercise facility nurturing more than just strength training.

Owner **Vince McConnell** is the prime architect tailoring a program designed to empower athletes with an attitude and philosophy fostering gridiron success. Incorporated with the sport specific physical exercises, students adhere to learning techniques augmenting their mental capabilities thus improving the body and mind.

He speaks the language of exercise fluently describing movement complexities with the intellectual depth equaling an English professor waxing profoundly about a Shakespearean classic. Every meticulous drill has a purpose and is analyzed with a critical eye. The comprehensive program encompasses all three planes of human anatomy – sagittal, coronal and transverse – prescribing resistance in each direction.

McConnell's exceptional training methods were brought to **Julio Jones'** attention by current McConnell athlete, Vigor High School's **B.J. Scott**, in late winter of the Foley High School legend's senior year. "B.J. had asked me 'can I bring my good friend with me?' I didn't know who this friend was at the time. B.J. said, 'he's got to get ready to go to Tuscaloosa in June just like I do'. I like guys to be able to work together from the standpoint of teamwork and the type of workouts we do," agreed McConnell embracing the partnership of Scott and Jones.

His initial consultation began with a direct opened ended question to the eager athlete knowing full well the answers would be evident after the first few sessions. "What do you need to work on?" inquired McConnell gauging the student's self-perception. Jones, blessed with uncommon speed and strength along with measurable physical numbers every coach covets replied "everything". "Julio has never been one of these guys who thought he's arrived," he alleged about the humble receiver. McConnell has years of experience with kettlebells, the cast iron weights resembling a cannonball with handles. During their first encounter wishing to impress, he introduced an exercise to the novice which required McConnell a decade of training to successfully master.

Unleashing raw power and strength, Jones proceeded to snatch the seventy plus pound kettlebell and complete the exercise with minimal strain albeit not technically precise leaving an indelible impression on the veteran trainer.

McConnell said, "I didn't specifically need to increase his 40-time, vertical leap or his bench press. What we needed to do is make those numbers more consistent effecting the performance. Consistency is going to separate you from the pack." "We already know he has the skills and athleticism, however they could be improved in the way they transfer over to the football field," he explained. The practicality of McConnell's workouts enhances the function of a student's existing strength. "My prime focus and specialty is to serve as the bridge between the weight room and football field," he asserted.

"Hip mobility is the most important area that I find athletes lack. Even guys that are very fast and explosive, we need to improve their ability to change directions quicker and be more efficient with the way they change directions." Drills concentrating on flexibility, range of motion and correcting balance issues were daily staples of the routine. The majority of lower body exercises were performed unilaterally, „one side at a time to make sure each side was firing off efficiently which a barbell squat does not address“ according to McConnell describing a technique foreign to Jones.

Superior athletes have common deficiencies. "The ones that are really good athletes lack structure even more so because they really never have had to do a whole lot different than what comes natural to them," said the fitness consultant and trainer of nearly three decades. "When I work with a young athlete that is getting ready to go to college, the first thing on my mind is not so much trying to enhance their physical strength per say but its more about teaching them the absolute necessity of focusing on the present moment - concentrating on the right here and now about everything they are doing."

Challenges perceived by young players as insurmountable can lead to inappropriate choices such as associating with the wrong crowd or a total retreat from the process. "If everything comes natural to him he's probably not good at paying attention. When something new is presented to him which is exactly what happens when they step foot on campus - if they are not able to pay attention enough to what is new, they get intimidated by it. One of two things happens. Either they are totally just overwhelmed to the point where they are immobilized or they sabotage themselves," he emphasized.

McConnell preaches "one play at time" echoing the daily mantra uttered by **Nick Saban** and his staff. "It starts in the weight room," he stated. "The physical part of it is only a partial picture. I make them have to balance on one leg and do certain exercises where if their mind is some place else, they're not going to be able to balance. They are learning to call on that concentration on command."

Coordinating the body and mind to consistently cooperate in harmony produces a distinct advantage versus the opponent. "When I train an athlete the first thing I do is teach them certain movement patterns requiring attention to detail in terms of how they move their body and posture for the specific exercise," he said.

An athlete's natural instinct is to be preoccupied with moving the weight from point A to point B. He conveys the simultaneous goals of maximum production and consistency of performance with an anecdote. "If I hired you today for 30 minutes and I wanted you take as many of these delicate China dishes out of this warehouse and place them in the back of a pickup truck and you were paid for just the unbroken ones and docked two dishes for every broken one, how would you approach the task?", he proposes. "Would you try to take more dishes than you could handle?" stating the counter productive option to his students. The scenario creates a firm impression in the athlete's mind to train vigorously yet be disciplined with the technique. Integrating the two tasks produces the desired progress affecting positive results.

Jones struggled the past season uncharacteristically dropping the football but redeemed himself with subsequent receptions. "He doesn't get into a pattern of two drops in a row," McConnell said. "He is able to let the last play go." Natural athletes like Jones have a tendency to look beyond the mundane catch in anticipation of eluding the defenders. "I'm so amped up out there. I love the game and love to make plays. When I get it I'm thinking touchdown," Jones explained. "I just have to settle myself down and catch the football first."

McConnell's tempered enthusiasm bubbles over describing a routine relevant to football. "When this kettlebell comes up into the clean position which is right at your shoulder, I want you to brace your abdominals just like your taking impact out on the field. You're making the reception and you're able to brace your body to absorb that impact. Julio said, "Coach Vince taught me to kettlebell train in a way where I brace my body right when I'm making the catch so that I don't lose the ball and I don't lose my balance", he proudly recited.

The muscularly svelte washboard-abled trainer is a walking advertisement for the principles he preaches. You might mistake him for a carefree California surfer if you judged him solely by the bronze tan and golden streaked unfettered locks. Students are devoted because they know the teacher has participated in every phase of the strenuous regimen. He modestly acknowledges his role of applying the finishing touches to the masterpiece athletes he trains. "If you watch, I'm not saying that I'm responsible in any way for his athletic ability but if you watch the way he catches the ball going across the middle and the way that he takes first contact, it's probably as good as any receiver certainly in college football," he declared about his star disciple. "He is very difficult to bring down. What I taught him is the ability to relax the body and to contract it when needed to take the contact," he said. "If you run when you're tight and bound you're going to be

slow. You have to have both. You need to be loose as a ragdoll at times when you're running but then right on impact you must be able to brace yourself but not anything too soon or too late."

Alabama's strength and conditioning program challenges campus newcomers mentally and physically. McConnell's students are well versed in the rigors of the ordeal prior to their arrival at the Capstone. "No doubt, I have never been able to wear that guy (Jones) out. He laughs at my workouts," echoed **Scott Cochran**, Alabama's Associate Head Strength and Conditioning Coach, at a BCS National Championship Game press conference. "My priority first and foremost is when you walk on campus for your preseason workouts to eliminate the possibility of being intimidated by anything Coach (Scott) Cochran can throw at you. You can't depend on the Fourth Quarter program to prepare you," said McConnell about the famed physical test based on repetitive sprints. "You have to be prepared for the Fourth Quarter program."

The two fitness enthusiasts have developed an alliance. "We do brainstorm with each other and share ideas," detailing the relationship with Cochran. "We understand our places in working with the athletes. Scott (Cochran) is really a master at working with large groups of individuals. He doesn't have the luxury of being able to take one or two athletes at a time pinpointing the areas like I do," he indicated. Another superbly conditioned Vigor High School athlete under McConnell's tutelage is Alabama January enrollee freshman **Jalston Fowler**.

The prize student was beaming with pride to call the teacher one day after a few weeks of training in Tuscaloosa. "I received a call from Julio and he said "I'm leading all the drills up here. Coach Cochran is frustrated because he can't wear me out". "Julio is a very attentive athlete who is very aware of his body," McConnell confided. Skilled players are sprint demons frequently coping with an adrenaline rush requiring a quicker recovery between plays. Jones, pushed by his conditioning mentor to the brink of exhaustion, was taught to hone the instinct of backing off the activity so the body's recuperative ability allowed him to endure throughout the entire process thus achieving maximum productivity. "It is a kinesthetic sense of knowing when your body is getting out of rhythm," he professed about the intuitive concept new to Jones. "You have to experience it in order to learn the value as opposed to something you just hear about or read in a book and start to practice."

Julio's bedazzling physical prowess was on full display galloping down the sideline with a fourth quarter 73-yard touchdown scamper reclaiming the lead against LSU last November. Tiger defenders in vigilante pursuit gradually become spectators watching the fleet-footed receiver accelerate towards the goal line.

Most SEC skill players possess straight ahead drag racing speed but the top echelon individuals accelerate and decelerate with the effortlessness of a Ferrari. "Even a guy like Julio can learn how to move better," McConnell said. Exercises

were devised to engage the muscles required for bursting out of the pass tree running routes to improve his ability to separate from defensive backs. Surprisingly McConnell refrained from any on-the-field running during the 4-5 month period prior to Jones's entering the Capstone but concentrated on the mechanics of movement. "Julio's been running his whole life," he noted.

Kettlebell exercises, high-tension resistance bands, sandbags, pulleys, body weight conditioning and core activation stabilizing drills were the substitute choices enhancing the balance, coordination, power, and strength. "When you're thinking about any football player, everything branches from the middle of the body out so if that is weak, then everything else will be compromised," he expressed.

The endurance training targeted the fast twitch muscle repetitive activities unique to football. "My objective is to get each individual to recover quicker between plays while sustaining consistent performance throughout a game," McConnell specified. Fatigue jeopardizes performance acting as a primary culprit causing on-the-field mental and physical lapses but McConnell's martial arts background provides one solution to counter the tendency. "You want to regulate fatigue through conscious breathing as opposed to letting your breathing get out of control like a runaway train," he commented. "When you breathe from your chest, you are only using half the capacity of your lungs. I teach these guys to breathe deep down low from their bellies." Proper breathing enables the body to recover quicker between bouts of activity.

A trainer's proximity enables a peak of the athlete's soul. The character, sense of humor and idiosyncrasies are exhibited during those close-knit moments. "The thing about Julio is he is very slow to embrace you and quiet at first," McConnell observed. Once the trust was forged, the shyness was shed revealing the fun and light-hearted nature of his personality. "He encourages with words when they are necessary but his leadership by action was very evident to me by the second workout." Jones is a devout student intent on absorbing all the knowledge he can about the body and biomechanics he can.

He possesses a reservoir of perseverance McConnell has never witnessed in his career. "I am not satisfied. I don't want any limitations on what I can do as a football player," Jones professed to the trusted confidante. "He sets the bar himself to go to the next level. The potential he sees in himself is far beyond what he has already achieved," he stated. Reciprocating, the understated Jones was effusive in praising McConnell at the podium in California. "He is a great trainer. I would have worked out on my own but I wouldn't have been as intense," he acknowledged about the fast paced environment.

"You have to get your mind right and go out there and perform," said Jones during a BCS National Championship Game press conference referencing the

winter workout sessions. “I go out and prepare like I’m playing against the best team in the world.” The union of the world-class athlete and the fastidious trainer has been productive. McConnell’s exercise tutoring program equivalent to an advanced placement curriculum prepped Jones’s body and mind to excel in any football universe.