

ACFT 3.0: Exploring a more inclusive scoring assessment, planks stay

By Thomas Brading, Army News Service 22 March 2021



A Soldier receives instruction on proper form for the Army Combat Fitness Test during the ACFT Trainers Course.

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FORT EUSTIS, Va. -- The latest version of the Army Combat Fitness Test, or ACFT 3.0, is exploring the potential use of a performance tier program that accounts for the physiological differences between the genders, head of U.S. Army Center for Initial Military Training recently said.

The new evaluation system may have five performance categories divided and updated yearly based on Soldier performance, said Maj. Gen. Lonnie G. Hibbard.

Another change also adds the plank as a fully graded substitute for the leg tuck. Soldiers can now select either the leg tuck or plank test as their abdominal core assessment portion of the fitness test. The plank will be scored on a 100-point scale, like the other events.

The announcement is in line with the Army's previous guidance, which has been to make data-informed decisions to improve the Army's cultural fitness, Hibbard said. There are no other changes in the six-event physical fitness test and current changes were informed by compiled information, including Soldier feedback.

"Army senior leaders are listening to what our Soldiers are saying about the ACFT," the general said, adding that the updates address many of their concerns.

New scoring assessment

The potential new evaluation system may have five performance categories: green, bronze, silver, gold, and platinum. The categories will be developed based on ACFT performance by male and female Soldiers.

For example, Soldiers in the platinum category may represent the top 1% of all scores, while Soldiers in the green band may represent the lowest 50% of the total force. The scoring averages for male and female Soldiers may vary, but the minimum standard will remain gender neutral.

"Nobody wants to be in the bottom half of the Army," Hibbard said. "[They] want to be in the bronze, or above the top 50% of the total force."

In the future, the evaluation system, normalized across gender, could allow Soldiers to compete against each other, respectively, since Soldiers are naturally competitive, he said. These numbers would also give Army officials a yearly snapshot that gauges the overall fitness of the force.

Officials may rack and stack ACFT scores by gender, from 360 to 600. The ACFT raw cut scores for green, bronze and the others could be based on the percentage of Soldiers in each distribution.

If 1% of male Soldiers receive a raw ACFT score of 585 or higher the prior year, then 585 could be the brass ring for all male Soldiers to reach if they want to be in the platinum category. Females would have their own respective 1% cut score to achieve a platinum grade.

The new performance categories are expected to evaluate individual levels of fitness by helping Soldiers understand how their fitness level compares to their gender peers. It could also allow the application of scores for future administrative uses for all genders.

Although the scoring system may eventually open the door for Soldiers to

measure their fitness among gender peers, for now, performance will not be used administratively, good or bad, as the data collection period remains ongoing. The Army believes full implementation of the ACFT may start as early as March 2022, but full implementation will only be executed when sufficient data exists for Army leaders to make fully informed decisions.

By making the plank a fully scored option for the leg tuck, CIMT officials expect an uptick in scores.

Before, Soldiers who were unsuccessful on the leg tuck could perform the plank and only receive 60 points for passing the event. Now the plank can be chosen in place of the leg tuck for up to 100 points.

This change also helps officials collect more data on how the performance categories will be divided, Hibbard said.

Part of the justification for the plank resulted from some Soldiers, many years into their careers, who were not asked by the Army to build their upper body strength until recently. By opting out of the leg tuck, the plank will give them time to adapt their physical readiness training to the changing culture of fitness, CIMT officials said.

The leg tuck will still be the primary test of core strength, officials say, because it is a better correlation between the fitness requirements needed for warrior tasks and battle drills.

“Every Soldier should strive to lift themselves, but the plank allows Soldiers the time they need to train on this skill,” they said.

Reducing injuries, maintaining readiness

In 2003, officials began noticing Soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan were unable to conduct basic drills, like firing their weapons, moving to cover, or performing first aid. The Army then developed the warrior tasks and battle drills, a series of basic Soldier skills for all to train on.

By 2009, officials recognized the Army’s physical readiness training, or PRT, lacked the tools needed to prepare Soldiers for combat. Thus, the physical readiness training manual, known today as Field Manual 7-22 Holistic Health and Fitness, was unveiled.

But there was a disconnect between the new PRT strategies and the three-event Army Physical Fitness Test. Soldiers were told they needed to

develop more muscular strength and power, but all they needed to be considered physically fit was perform well on pushups, situps and the 2-mile run. This made it difficult to change the Army's physical fitness culture based on the new physical training manual. In contrast, the ACFT measures a Soldier's physical ability to execute combat-related tasks, and is intended to validate the Soldier and unit's physical readiness training.

'Take the test'

One of the biggest hurdles CIMT has faced has been testing anxiety often caused by online misinformation, Hibbard said. The simplest way Soldiers can overcome this is to just take the test.

"The more you take [the ACFT], the more you understand your strengths and weaknesses and how to train for it," he said. By taking it now, it helps enable them to be successful.

"Take the test," said Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael A. Grinston. "If we do that, I believe we'll see fewer injuries across the force, and we'll have an Army that is fit and ready for wherever we're asked to deploy, fight, win, and return home."

Overall, Hibbard said there is currently an 85% pass rate among the Soldiers who have taken the test. Army leaders expect the pass rate on the leg tuck test event to increase between 30-40% by adding the plank as a core abdominal substitute for the leg tuck.

Many of the changes being explored in the tier program were inspired by what foreign allies are doing, Hibbard said. Most times, when allies have overhauled their fitness tests, which took roughly five years to complete, the positive results were apparent.

As allied troops began training, and testing more frequently, their leaders noticed them building muscle memory. The results were consistently improved overall test scores, Hibbard said, adding that is CIMT's goal for the Army.

"We expect performance tiers will change the culture of fitness, because as the scores improve we believe the bands will get a little tougher," he said.

Grinston hopes the tactic will help inspire change in the Army's fitness culture.

"We are going to make policy decisions informed by the data collected through implementation," Grinston said. "Currently, less than 25% of the

total Army has taken the test. And most of that is from our [Army Forces Command] units.

“What’s more, is only 7% of the Army has taken it twice,” he added. “So, we aren’t able to see the impacts of these decisions.”

Regardless of the iteration, whether it is 2.0, 3.0 or 4.0, one aspect of the ACFT has not changed: it is here to stay and all decisions have been made to reduce injuries and empower Soldiers’ abilities to perform the basic tasks required of them, Hibbard said.