

The Marine Corps PFT: Not equal, not fair

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The Marine Corps physical fitness test (PFT) is essential in evaluating the total Marine. Being a Marine is an inherently physical vocation, and the example a Marine sets, morally, mentally, and physically, influences their ability to lead. From the senior leadership to the most junior Marine physical fitness is associated with being a Marine. Through the PFT and its direct link to junior enlisted promotions, the Marine Corps has institutionalized this concept. However, a disconnect exists. Female Marines have a PFT scoring advantage over their male counterparts. This is best illustrated by examining PFT scores from Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, South Carolina. In an environment in which females and males undergo almost identical training for a substantial period of time, females do markedly better on the PFT. The current PFT scoring system is outdated, creates inequities between male and female junior enlisted Marines and should be updated to alleviate this problems.

Background

The Marine Corps' concern for physical fitness was first referenced in a letter from First Lieutenant H.C. Cochrane dated 1 October 1875 "...proposing requirements for the elimination of the unfit from the Corps."¹ However, the first requirement was directed in 1908 when President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 989 requiring

a physical test every two years.² The first Marine Corps directive was MCO 6100.3 issued on 9 August 1956; this order did not apply to female Marines. MCO 6100.3C dated 29 October 1962 excluded women from the physical readiness test as well but did allow commanders to utilize the United States Air Force XBX program standards.³

The first required test for female Marines was directed in MCO 6100.3E on 10 May 1968. The female program, tests, and standards were completely separate from the males.⁴ Over the years the female test has grown more similar to the males. Most recently, Change 2 to MCO 6100.3J dated 3 Nov 1997 directed females to run the same distance as males, but run to a different time standard.⁵

Current Scoring

The current PFT is detailed in MCO 6100.13 "MARINE CORPS PHYSICAL FITNESS PROGRAM" dated 1 August 2008, Chapter 2, "PHYSICAL FITNESS TEST." The test consists of the Marine executing gender-appropriate events as directed by the order semi-annually for active Marines and annually for Reserve Marines. Performance for each event is calculated by referencing the appropriate table in the order. The three scores are then summed, yielding a score from 0-300.

The male and female PFTs for the youngest age group (17-26) are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1: Male PFT scoring summary

	Minimum	Maximum
Abdominal crunches	50	100
3 mile run	28:00	18:00
Pull-ups	3	20

Table 2: Female PFT scoring summary

	Minimum	Maximum
Abdominal crunches	50	100
3 mile run	31:00	21:00
Flexed Arm Hang	15 sec.	70 sec.

Passing the PFT is directly linked to a Marine's retention and promotion. Failing a PFT can have drastic effects, such as adverse fitness reports, substandard proficiency marks, ineligibility for reenlistment, and administrative separation.

Although no order indicates why male and female Marines do not execute the same PFT, one can assume it is in the Marine Corps' best interest for the genders to execute different tests evaluated differently. However, since the tests are scored on the same scale, and male and female scores are weighed equally in many of MCO 1600.13's references such as MARCORPROMMAN, VOL 2, ENL PROM, and the SDAMAN, the male PFT and female PFT should be equally difficult.

Problems

In Fiscal Year 2007, the average PFT score for graduated male recruits at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island was 233.9. The average PFT score for graduated female recruits at Marine Corps

Recruit Depot Parris Island was 246.3. The difference is 12.4 points.

Physical fitness training for recruits at Parris Island is substantially the same for males and females. Just before the recruits are turned over from their processing drill instructors to their training drill instructors, they take an initial strength test (IST). The IST consists of the same events as the PFT with the requirements reduced: The run is 1.5 miles and the non-running events have reduced minimums. The IST's intent is to determine the recruit's fitness to begin recruit training. Recruits who are not allowed to start recruit training due to failing the IST will go to Physical Conditioning Platoon (PCP). At PCP, a recruit's mission is to get in shape to begin training. The recruit will stay in PCP until they are ready to begin training.

Throughout training, recruits will execute numerous physical training evolutions. These include traditional physical fitness sessions in PT gear, hikes, Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP), obstacle courses, confidence courses, and endurance courses. On training day (TD) 35 recruits take an initial PFT which is a standard Marine Corps PFT. On TD 60, recruits take their final PFT, also a standard Marine Corps PFT. Failure to pass this PFT will result in the recruit being recycled back in training. Consequently, no physically unfit recruit is allowed to participate in The Crucible (TD 63 - TD 65). On TD 65 recruits who pass the Crucible will

participate in the Emblem Ceremony and formally become Marines.

Physical training after the final PFT consists of The Crucible and the TD 69 Motivation Run. Recruit Training graduation is on TD 70.⁶

A recruit depot is a place where every second is accounted for. Males and females get the same amount of sleep, take the same classes, and do the same exercises. There are minor differences in the POI. Some of these differences are diets designed to address specific gender needs, appropriate classes on health and hygiene, and minor differences in physical training designed to decrease female lower body injuries. Male recruits and female recruits typically run the PFT at the same time on the same course with the same test administrators. Fleet factors that could account for any gender bias do not exist in recruit training. With such equality in training and testing, one would expect the two groups to have nearly the same final PFT average. This is not the case, so there must be some reason for the inequity.

One explanation could be that females start recruit training in better shape than males. However, around 32% of females fail the IST compared to 12% of males.⁷ Females are, on average, less fit than males at the beginning of recruit training.

If more females fail the IST, more females go to PCP. If more females go to PCP, the average female does more physical training than the average male. This extra physical training time may be the source of the inequity. Recruits who go to PCP do have

more PT time. However, PCP trains a recruit up to a minimum passing score. A recruit, regardless of gender, who gets a minimum score on the IST is just as fit as a recruit who has spends a month at PCP just to get that minimum passing IST score. The IST establishes a common baseline to train up from and does not contribute to a PFT inequity.

If males and females start recruit training at the same level of fitness relative to their PFTs (one starts recruit training when one passes the IST) and execute the same physical training plan they should perform the same on average. If they start the same, train the same but get different results on different tests the tests, the tests cannot be valued the same.

Morale Effects

Informal polling and discussion with both genders indicates a general perception that the female PFT is easier than the male PFT: This is inherently bad for unit morale. No group in the Marine Corps likes the perception that they are treated differently. In an organization like the Marine Corps it is even worse to be perceived as having it easier. Twelve points is approximately two minutes faster on the run, or just over two pull-ups, or twelve crunches, or between six and twelve seconds on the flexed arm hang. For the male who cannot break a barrier at eighteen pull-ups this could be a source of frustration.

Promotion Effects

Another issue is the impact a twelve-point PFT error has on promotion. For Marines whose promotions are dependent on cutting scores, the inherent PFT error is equivalent to two to three months time in grade, three to six months time in service, or a whole college course. The average female's extra twelve points on the PFT results in earlier promotions to corporal and sergeant by a month or two. This time can be even longer when the cutting score goes up by five or more points in consecutive months or if the MOS is closed for promotion. Two months can be measured in a difference in pay, lost opportunity, and lost responsibility. As an institution the Marine Corps is not ensuring that the best person is in the right position at the right time. When it comes to screening for special duty assignment (SDA) or being a member of a deploying detachment, the effects can range in excess of six months.

Solutions

The Marine Corps has determined that it is in the Marine Corps' best interest to have separate PFTs with separate scoring. As long as separate PFTs are conducted claims of inequity will exist. Since males and females are physiologically different it would also be unfair for females to run the exact same PFT. While being fair to the individual is important for morale, the Marine Corps must look out for its own interests first. What events Marines should execute

or exactly what the standards should be is a larger issue and beyond the scope of this article. No matter what those events and standards are an underlying problem is how the scoring tables are developed and how they are or are not updated.

Outdated

The female PFT was last changed in 1997, when the run doubled to three miles. The scoring table for the female run is the same as the table for the male run except three minutes slower.⁸ The male run scoring table has not changed since 1972 when the three-mile run was introduced. Since then there have been significant advances in physical training, particularly in female physical fitness. Chief among these have been legal and societal changes with regard to female athletics: Title IX for example.⁹ Additional improvements have included improving how Marines train, how Marines eat and, to a lesser degree, technology.

The most critical factor in out-dating the current tables is the simple fact that the tables were developed using Marines who had not trained for eleven weeks to take the test, such as those in Recruit Training. Nor do the tables account for the experience those who have taken the PFT can pass on to those junior to them. These factors apply to both the male and the female scoring tables.

The male and female scoring tables for the PFT need to be updated regularly to reflect the population as it is now, not how it was in

in 1972. Doing so is step to ensuring equity now and in the future.

The tables need to be updated every year to reflect change in the test population. Unanticipated changes will always exist and the changes may be too gradual to recognize. However, by carefully examining the previous years MCRD Parris Island recruit population final PFT scores the tables can be adjusted so the average final PFT score for males and females is the same. Table 3 below illustrates this.

Hypothetical average recruit male	Performed	Score (run @ 1 pt/10 sec over 18:00)	Score (run @ 1 pt/20 sec over 18:00)
Pull-ups	13	65	65
Crunches	93	93	93
Run	22:00	76	88
Total		234	246

Table 3: Adjusted Scoring Table, running only

Above, running is calculated to bring the hypothetical average male recruit up to the females average. Essentially the run was made easier based on last years data. The opposite could have been done and the females run made harder. Or any of the other events could have been changed. In theory it what event is changed does not matter. However, in practice it would be less traumatic if all events for males and females were changed a little bit, rather then one large shift in running or pull-ups. It should also be noted that the above radical correction adjusts for years of built up error. Subsequent, annual, corrections would likely be less radical and be far more reasonable then the table above. The tables below

makes less radical changes by distributing the changes between genders and across multiple events.

The current scoring for males is essentially -1 point for every ten seconds slower than 18:00 on the run, -5 points for every pull-up less than 20, and -1 point for every crunch less than 100. The current scoring for females is -1 point for every ten seconds slower than 21:00, -2 points for every second less than 70 on the flexed-arm hang (becomes -1 pt per second at less than 40 seconds), and -1 point for every crunch less than 100.¹⁰ At the time of this writing, MCO 6100.13 dated 1 August 2008 contains the official scoring table.

Table 4: Modified scoring for males: -1 pt/11 seconds on run slower than 18:00; -3/4 pt every crunch less than 100

Hypothetical average recruit male	Performed	Current score	Modified Score
Pull-ups	13	65	78
Crunches	93	93	65
Run	22:00	76	95
Total		234	238

Table 5: Modified scoring for females: -1 pt/9 seconds on run slower than 21:00; -2.5 pts/sec under 70 on the flexed-arm hang

Hypothetical average recruit female	Performed	Current score	Modified Score
Flexed-arm hang	60 seconds	80	73
Crunches	90	90	75
Run	25:00	76	90
Total		246	238

Counter arguments

The concerns with implementing this concept are the amount of data required and work involved. This method will require that someone compute a new scoring table, or scoring formula, every year based on information Parris Island currently maintains. The Marine Corps already computes dozens of cutting scores every month, and adjusts BAH, COLA and other entitlements annually. Recalculating PFT scoring tables is certainly less complicated. Annual PFT recalculation can be done on a simple spreadsheet or with a computer program. The update could be propagated through Marine Online's PFT calculator if using a formula proves too difficult.

Another opposing point could be that female Marines should have a PFT advantage since they do score lower, generally, in certain areas. Historically, female recruits do much worse on the rifle range than males. 40% initial qualification failure is not unusual for a female recruit platoon. This results in their being able to qualify no higher than marksman and that affects their composite

score until they re-qualify. That may very well be the case, and it may equal out. However, two wrongs do not make a right.

Finally, junior promotion rates are essentially identical between genders across the Marine Corps; therefore, females really do not have an advantage.¹¹ Possibly enough "wrongs" exist in the system that the female PFT advantage is offset. However, two wrongs still do not make a right. Additionally, PFT inequity affects more than raw promotion rates: Marine of the Quarter? Special Duty Assignments? Fitness Report Directed Comments for a PFT score of 285 or above? Outstanding PFT recognition? The composite score is easy to quantify, but other considerations exist.

Conclusion

The current PFT is outdated, inequitable, and possibly denies the Marine Corps some of its best junior leaders. By updating the PFT scoring tables through a documented, regular, consistent procedure, the Marine Corps can ensure it evaluates Marines fairly and consistently. By using carefully controlled data the Marine Corps can decrease the variables it cannot control. PFT scoring needs to change; the Marine Corps owes it to its Marines. [Word count: 3016]

Notes

1. *United State Marine Corps. Report on Progress of Women in the Marine Corps, 1984, 4-19.*
2. "WHAT PRESIDENT TEDDY ROOSEVELT EXPECTED OF HIS MARINE CORPS OFFICERS" <<http://www.scuttlebuttsmallchow.com/teddysmarines.html>> (30 December 2008)
3. *United State Marine Corps. Report on Progress of Women in the Marine Corps, 4-19.*
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5. United States Marine Corps, *MCO 6100.3J Change 2*, 1997: 3.
6. "Recruit Training Matrix"
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7. Timothy Bockelman, "RE: One last question," 19 February 2009, personal email (19 February 2009)
8. United States Marine Corps, *MCO 6100.3J Change 2*, 1997: 3.
9. United States Congress, *The Education Amendments of 1972*, 1972, Title IX
10. United States Marine Corps. *MCO 6100.13*, 2008, 2-6
11. Shaahn Williams, "Promotions, PFT: Study Crushes Myth of Inequality" *Quantico Sentry*, 25 January 2007.
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