

GetFastToday.com Interview with Dr. Erwin Valencia Director of training and conditioning of the NY Knicks

Gary: Alright. Hi, everyone. This is Gary Christopher with the Getfasttoday.com. Today we have the unique pleasure of talking to Dr. Erwin Benedict Valencia. Erwin is the director of training and conditioning of the New York Knicks team of the NBA, and he combines his knowledge and skills in manual, and sports physical therapy, athletic training, strength and conditioning, sports science, and mindfulness, as the leader of the team's medicine and performance team staff. Erwin was raised and educated in the Philippines. In addition, in July of 2012, Erwin founded the socially responsible global education company KinetIQ, which provides grassroots and next steps knowledge in sports medicine, wellness, and performance art, to institutions around the world with no ready access to it. Erwin, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule and talking to us today.

Dr. Valencia: Gary, no, thank you very much. I think that what you're doing here and being able to share the knowledge from others is a fabulous thing, which oddly enough is part of my own mantra. The gift of knowledge is something that no one can ever take away from us and if we gift that to other people, it is something that will, hopefully, create a ripple effect in this world.

Gary: Perfect. Well said. You've got many uniquenesses about you. One thing in particular, you've the opportunity to work with professional athletes on the baseball side of things but also currently now with the National Basketball Association players. How important is the warm-up to the performance? The things that I do with the kids that I work with, we really stress a warm-up and making certain that the core body temperature is raised. We go through a dynamic process with them through the warm-up. Is that something that's followed through on the professional side or are there differences?

Dr. Valencia: No, we do the same. Most of the literature that's out there will dictate what we do. Using evidence-based, and anecdotal-based programs, and protocols, we've learned that the warm-up is essential to any sport or any activity, that is. I think the fallacy in the past was about you get out of bed, you do some stretches, full on stretches, and then start running a marathon of some sort when in fact, it's the slow building up of the run or the movement of each part of the body in all planes of motion that actually gets you prepared for the sport that you're going to find yourself in, whether it was in baseball, which I was in for eight years, or currently with the NBA, not only to that effect but also understanding that where the mental aspect of things come from. Where we are now with the Knicks is not necessarily just really a physical aspect of things of how we've got to get warmed up but also a newer scientific/cognitive warm-up, as well.

Gary: Oh, that's interesting. Any specific examples that you can give on that front?

Dr. Valencia: There are certain things that we do, that apply, as we add to, let's say, getting a dynamic warm-up. It's making sure that when guys do an active warm-up that we keep, let's say for example, lines. When guys go through their lines, they have to make sure that they're conscious of their teammates within that line, and they kind of line them up, and they talk to each other, and allow them to then go as one unit.

Gary: Oh, terrific.

Dr. Valencia: Before, maybe playing games or early in the day, a number of our athletes will use a software program, an app, that's currently out there called HeadSpace that allows the basic foundation of clearing your mind using mindfulness in technology. In today's world, the world of Millennials, and kids, and iPhones, it's harder to try to get everyone to sit down in a group and try to do a little bit of meditation. If you tell them to go into their app in their phone, they're more likely to do it. [Laughs]

Gary: For sure. You're right. [Laughs]

Dr. Valencia: **[Crosstalk][04:53]** for the learning curve with technology, nowadays.

Gary: Oh, absolutely. Right, no question about it. Again, some of the players that you're working with and have worked with are some of the best players, some of the best athletes in the world. Is there anything that you currently work with them on to help them on their speed and their agility at this juncture, or are you just looking to keep it refined for them?

Dr. Valencia: Know that some of these guys have already developed themselves by the time they get to this level.

Gary: Right.

Dr. Valencia: With baseball, I work mostly with major league guys. Obviously in NBA, we would hope that some of them would be refined from coming from a great college or maybe even coming from an academy abroad in Europe. Oddly enough, in the world of speed and agility, it's been one of our big focuses for our off-season to implement, in essence, a proper mechanic posture than anything else where we get guys, basically, what we call a pre-plan **[phonetic][06:14]** metric prep work to understand triple extension, to understand what it's like to be in a position or advantage where your hips have to be used to propel yourself and using your arms as a spiral on the opposite side of your legs to be able to then create that winding effect in your body, as well. We, oddly enough, think that most of these kids, especially when they come on their rookie years, are already equipped with all of that. Most of them are just raw talent.

- Gary:** Right.
- Dr. Valencia:** It's not that you change them completely. You enhance, literally, what they already have. Hopefully then, allow them to be more efficient with the movement.
- Gary:** Wow, that's terrific, and all of that is done, it sounds like you're saying, in the off-season for them.
- Dr. Valencia:** Yeah, it's really tough to try to force a change in a habit or of a way to, let's say, accessing your head flexes **[phonetic][07:23]** is more as you push yourself in it. Basically, giving the guys an opportunity that could be more pushers than pullers to give you more running efficiencies. It's hard to try and change a guy during the middle of the season when they have a set amount of skills that they aren't using right. Off season is normally when we have to do the work.
- Gary:** Got you, okay. Then, I've realized that you have a number of qualities, and experiences, and education, on a variety of things. One of the things that I think has been pretty important, and I didn't know if you've had a chance to do much work on sleep, and the proper amount, or how important it is to the performance of athletes. Do you have any opinions on that, any thoughts on sleep that we can help some of the kids that we work with?
- Dr. Valencia:** Sleep is massive. I think a lot of people forget the value of sleep, especially in the realm of where I am. We're understanding a lot more about mindfulness, and neuroplasticity, and brain science. The effect of sleep under recovery of the brain is massive. We take that seriously. We follow a lot of the sleep literature that's coming out of the Stanford area, and some of the research they've shown, and how we can implement certain things like having them go through a sleep log and checking in with them every single day how much **[inaudible][09:07]** have and cross-checking, using, once again, technology today to be able to then determine that, whether what they're saying is exactly what they're doing.
- The easiest way to do that is obviously going through Fitbits and all these other wearable techs. There's companies now like ResMed that actually use radio waves to be able to then, in turn, see what actual sleep you get, both deep sleep, REM sleep, shallow sleep, how many times you wake up, what the efficiency rating is, and they give you an actual score of how good your sleep quality was. Sleep is a massive part of our recovery program. In order for us to make sure that our players are able to continue to be fresh, we find markers to be able to monitor them, and then find ways to adjust them. Sleep is one of those biggest markers that we have.
- Dr. Valencia:** In order for us to make sure that our players are able to continue to be fresh, we find markers to be able to monitor them, and then find ways to adjust them. Sleep is one of those biggest markers that we have.

Gary: That's terrific. You had mentioned before with the radio waves. Is that something that anyone can purchase, or is that something that...

Dr. Valencia: Yeah. I think you can get it on Amazon for 99 bucks or something like that.

Gary: Oh, okay.

Dr. Valencia: Yeah. I think it's readily available. We've, obviously, lucky enough being able to get it directly from the manufacturers, but I think for the general public, it's readily available. Adding to that, let's say, we don't give it to everybody because some guys just don't like to have to go through the process of playing shortened games and all that other stuff, so on the flipside, we also have a number of guys that love just having humidifiers and diffusers in their homes. I'm a massive proponent of essential oils and the use of essential oils. Not only for use physically on the body but also through the use with sleeping or changing moods in the room. A number of the guys who have some of these humidifier/diffusers, I suggest that they use lavender when they put in their bedrooms. Maybe a eucalyptus peppermint when they're in their living rooms so that one will allow you to affect a certain part of your brain that will want to go into a rest mood. Then while the other one will be in a more of an alert mood.

Gary: That's fascinating. That's great. Speaking of sleep, it often seems like they go hand in hand anymore, right? If I'm talking sleep, I'm also talking nutrition with the athletes. Again, it seems like athletes today, the youth athletes anyway, tend to ignore the nutrition piece of that. How do you go about that with professional teams? Is that something that you monitor as well, encourage, give them plans for, and then do you have an opinion on what that should like for youth athletes as well?

Dr. Valencia: All of the above. Everything you just said. We value nutrition almost as much as we value sleep. A lot of the research is showing that when the question is asked what is more important; is it what you eat or how much you work out; is it exercise or nutrition, most of the literature that's coming out now is saying that it is more nutrition than anything else. If you don't have fuel to fuel your body, then the engine that you have that is your body is not going to work appropriately. Then, in turn, what kind of fuel do you put in? You don't put diesel in a Ferrari.

Gary: Right.

Dr. Valencia: You wouldn't want to put garbage in unless it's the flux capacitor of "Back to the Future." You know?

Gary: Yes.

Dr. Valencia: If it isn't, always make sure to try to put proper fuel for the proper engine. It seems like everyone has a tendency to think that nutrition is expensive when, in fact, that it's actually not. It's the choices that you make. Because going with more organic stock, going with something

that your body absorbs, more fresh wall stuff, feels like it doesn't fill you up. It's a body's natural reaction to tell you don't sit down and eat a gazillion things that fills you up, and then just stays in your body all day. Rather, eat more multiple times but fresh raw stuff because your body will then be able to use that more in a cleaner way to run the engine properly.

Gary: Great point. Are there any supplements that are recommended for athletes? I know, obviously, you need to watch nothing that's banned, obviously, but I see that there are some groups out there now, Advicare and others. Not specifically them in particular, but just there are some groups out there. I have some of my athletes ask about supplements, and to be honest with you, I don't know enough about them to offer any opinions on it. I just didn't know if you had any opinions on supplements.

Dr. Valencia: First and foremost, we follow both a lot of the NBA's drug policies with regards to any kind of supplements. We run a pretty tight ship at understanding what supplements work. What we encourage and what we don't. First and foremost, they have to be NSF approved. NSF approved sport more than anything else if you do get a supplement, which means that they have to go through a pretty rigorous process to be approved for that or be, obviously, if it's FDA approved. We're noticing now that more and more supplements are going away from synthetics to going more natural-based supplement. We're finding that companies like BioSteel, which is like an alternative to Gatorade, is everything in there is organic. "Drink the pink." That's a Canadian brand, but if you look at the label, everything is organic.

Gary: That's interesting.

Dr. Valencia: If you look at certain other supplements that have beets in them, a lot of our guys like, I guess, the boost they get from beets to replace any kind of whether coffees, or Red Bulls, or any kind of activators like that. We also use things that are made out of raw food. We make shakes using the Vitamixers where there's ginger, putting ginger or putting turmeric, putting kale, putting all these things so that even though we encourage them to eat as properly as possible, this adds the natural supplementation to the guide. Then again, you think about that. Some people will think that's too expensive to buy kale, too expensive to buy ginger, beets, turmeric, and all that stuff. It just takes more effort, but the amount of nutrition that your body would get from it compared to just slapping on some powder is massively different.

Gary: Absolutely great, yep, for sure. If I could switch gears on you real quickly here, Erwin?

Dr. Valencia: Yeah.

Gary: I've been trying to learn a little bit more about long-term athletic development. Are you familiar with that term, by the way?

Dr. Valencia: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, being in baseball for eight years, you understand

what the word long-term development means.

Gary: Right.

Dr. Valencia: That's par for the course. That's what the Minor League system is. The same as the academies are in Europe. Teams like Manchester United, teams like Ajax, they start plucking kids out at the age of 8 if they think that they have a potential to become football superstars, and they really monitor them. Even up to the point of puberty when things shift, they have data to be able to show that XXX kids, you shouldn't push them too hard when it comes to lateral motion, so to speak. Because maybe they'll have a potential to increase injuries because they're going through a growing spurt, so to speak. I'm familiar with the term.

Gary: Yeah. It sounds like you're very familiar with it, and it's interested me because, again, what I do with working with kids. As you were just describing, there's that early mature and that late mature. Yet, we do treat them sometimes the same while their bodies may not be necessarily prepared to go through some of the same rigors, if you will, as kids that are now more mature than others. I didn't know if you've had any experiences with that development side of things and if you've looked at it from that perspective on the youth sample side. I know it sounds like a lot of your experiences have been with professional athletes, but I didn't know if you had any opinions or thoughts on the developmental side for the younger kids.

Dr. Valencia: Yeah. Oddly enough, as part of my history, I went through, I guess, every population. I started my athletic training career in a private high school in New Hampshire as an assistant. I had a part scholarship to go to school at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire. A small school where it was really farfetched from what I ever thought it was going to be, but one of my requirements was that I spend a year with one of the prep schools, the boarding school, so to speak. The development of the kids, it was interesting for to see some of them that would come as freshmen of a boarding school, high school and wanting to get into sports compared to the seniors and even the super seniors that they had because in the Northeast, hockey is massive. They're willing to get older guys from another country to play for that one year in order to get them to a good college. You know?

Gary: Mm-hmm.

Dr. Valencia: You'll have the super seniors. They're succeeding a person that, normally, you'll use a subset of 14 to 18. I give a subset from 14 to almost 20. You'll get maybe somebody who's just about to turn – who's 19 and at the brink of turning 20, so it's interesting to be able to see some of that. Also, as still currently the Director of Medical and Performance Services for Baseball New Zealand, I started creating the program of development of introducing baseball, I guess, parameter and strength and conditioning stuff for kids all over the country of New Zealand, and it's been an interesting challenge to this day to find out who works best. Is it the kids that already know how to play softball,

or is it better to get somebody from scratch? How do you develop that, and what do you do in order to make sure that they don't break down as fast? Do you allow them to continue to play rugby or soccer, or just continue to play baseball since nobody plays that much baseball anyways in New Zealand? Unlike here where people over do it.

Gary: Right.

Dr. Valencia: It's been an interesting study looking at that. A funny thing is that I was once in – in 2013, I was in the Philippines, and I went to one of the small island provinces there as I was going around helping social entrepreneurs develop programs within their communities. We stumbled upon walking into an elementary school, and there were these kids that started playing this game of throwing slippers like a dodgeball. Ironically enough, watching some of these kids throw these slippers, to get more accuracy to hit a kid in the center he threw the ball just like you would throw a baseball. It was interesting to me to see that natural human tendency of throwing something – these kids have never seen baseball in their life.

To see that and say is that somebody we develop? Is that a natural tendency for them to throw that way? Do we develop them within that same pattern, or do we allow them to keep that naturally and develop something else? The rest of the body, so to speak, since that's naturally there. That's always been the question. Do you develop the throw or do you develop the player? Most literature will show you it's developing the player.

Gary: There you have it. Yeah. I would agree with that. I look at kids today, and many kids that I'll see are athletically gifted. Similar to what you were referring to before, some of the rookies that you have coming in, you would think, well, they already know what to do, and yet, they don't. They haven't really learned that. They're just so raw talented.

The kids that I see are also very gifted, but they too also need to be refined, and helped, and encouraged, and nurtured, and the like. Yet, there are so many kids out there that aren't doing anything. I'm not certain exactly why. It might just be because we're so organized in our sports today that there's not any room for just allow kids to develop and help them with that development. Do you see that? I guess you might be pretty locked in on more of the adult side or on the professional side, but I can see a need for...

Dr. Valencia: Yeah. It's maybe a little bit different. Because I think what you probably also have to consider is some of these kids' background. As they come to you, as you're trying to develop an athletic manner, what is it that they do at home that would allow them to be able to find an optimal way to gain athleticism, so to speak? What do they do in school, or what do they do – are their parents genetically gifted? Are they athletes themselves? There are so many factors that you look at. I think more from you, I suppose from your side as opposed to my side, where they're already here. They're with me.

- Gary:** Yes. Yep.
- Dr. Valencia:** They have something, but imagine having something like that, a blank slate like that, and seeing what you could do. I don't know if you guys are familiar with "The Million Dollar Arm," the Disney movie, Rinku...
- Gary:** Oh, I am. Yes. Yeah. Yep.
- Dr. Valencia:** He was my guy. That was one of my guys right there.
- Gary:** Oh, is that right?
- Dr. Valencia:** Yeah. When Rinku and Dinesh were with our organization, they were really a blank slate. I mean, this was a true human experiment. Can you develop baseball players from people who've never touched a ball before or don't even know what the game is like? That was one of the biggest human experiments ever, and I think they're successful. I mean, Rinku was still able to hit, maybe, high A. Maybe would touch AA, but then he started having problems. The movie started popping up and stuff, so he became less of a baseball player and more of a motivational speaker/actor.
- Gary:** Okay.
- Dr. Valencia:** His world changed. His priorities changed, but he never forgets where he came from. Because when we first got him, he was an absolutely skinny boy whose parents made I think it was a hundred bucks a month or even less than that. He drank milk every day when he got here, practically a gallon of milk every day, and literally, his body changed just from the mere fact of drinking milk because he was malnourished and had nothing back in India. That was a crazy and human experiment, but great guy. I mean, Rinku and Dinesh first coming to America was such a blessing to me, both of them, and to see that they left something so far in a country by themselves and having nobody here, and they're trusting their lives, in essence, to an organization.
- Gary:** Right.
- Dr. Valencia:** It takes a lot of heart and a lot of passion to be able to do it.
- Gary:** You bet. Ton of courage, you're right. Oh, my gosh, I also know that you're involved with a program that you initiated, and I hope I'm saying it right. Is it Kinet-I-Q?
- Dr. Valencia:** No, KinetIQ, like kinetic movement with an I-Q.
- Gary:** Oh, I'm sorry, KinetIQ, I got it. I got it, my bad on that.
- Dr. Valencia:** No. No worries.
- Gary:** Can you talk a little bit about that? Because I think people would have some interest in that as well.

Dr. Valencia: Yeah. KinetIQ was, as I said earlier, born out of my desire to bring knowledge to the Philippines, basically. That's where it all started. When I was younger, we didn't have Google. We couldn't just go on the internet and find people we admired in the world or the industries that we were in. I had to go through catalogues and magazines. It's like, oh, this guy is the athletic trainer for the Lakers or the Sixers, Lenny, at that period of time of back in the heydays of the Sixers with A.I.

Gary: Yes.

Dr. Valencia: Their head athletic trainer was a sweet man named Lenny who was from New Hampshire and, obviously, going against Gary Vitti and the Lakers. It was such a different dynamic. To get opportunities to meet guys like that was so impossible for me coming from the Philippines. I said one day, when I start making enough connections, when I start having peers of mine who understand where I come from and what I wanted to do, that I would be able to do something about it, and after my eight years with baseball, I started getting a calling. I was in my eighth year with the Pirates, my seventh year in the Big League, and oddly enough, inspired by Clint Hurdle, our manager, who's a big motivational guy. Just to help wanting to live a life of purpose, I find myself raising money for kids in Florida, and Africa, and Dominican Republic, and in the Philippines through climbing Kilimanjaro. I climbed Kilimanjaro by myself in November of 2011 and raised about \$5,000 for people reading the book "Start Something that Matters" by Blake Mycoskie.

I said, well, this may be the opportune time not to think about the bigger factor of what is tickling my insides. It's to truly be able to be as a change agent and to be able to find a way to contribute something to create an impact in this world, and so in 2012, I started KinetIQ. KinetIQ is a play of words from kinetic as a movement and IQ, meaning intelligence. My company's slogan is "Moving intelligence." Both moving as in I move you, and I move your person, and also be as in constant movement but intelligence in the hope that we move intelligence across borders, that we move intelligence across oceans and lands. It started initially as thinking, oh, maybe this should be a nonprofit. Maybe this should be what it is.

It wasn't until I went and I got invited to a conference called Awesomeness Fest that I realized there's a word such as social enterprise. In my first year of KinetIQ, I didn't make any money. I was actually in the negatives. I was paying for my own flights everywhere. I was like, man, this is not an easy life, and I learned that there is such a thing as social enterprise where you can do good and still make money. It doesn't mean that your goal is to be a gazillionaire. Your goal is to be able to create social good. There are currently now people that do what you call B Corps, which are corporations that do social good, and that's the category I'm in.

What we do is we bring gurus, as I like to call them, who are experts

in the field; just like my good friend Sue Falsone who was the first female head athletic trainer of a Major League baseball team, to places around the world with no readily access to them. We would fly people like Sue and other experts, so to speak, that had public personas as well and brought them to places where people appreciated not only their knowledge and their experience, but the people, the person that they were. We asked them as a favor to fly for us. We said we'll take care of everything. We'll bring you over to Korea or Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, Prague, wherever Eastern Europe, but we can't pay your speakers' fee. We said I promise you we will give you the most unbelievable local experience, and that you will leave wherever that is thinking that you've done your service as a social impacter in this world through the knowledge and the experience that you've had.

It was formed, oddly enough, initially in the Philippines, and then we actually incorporated it in New Zealand with my business partner, Steve Hong, who's currently in Seoul Korea right now because he's a Kiwi Korean guy. While we were in New Zealand and I was in New Zealand with Baseball New Zealand, we formed this. We started doing stuff just for New Zealand too because New Zealand doesn't have – you would think New Zealand was a wealth of knowledge in all these things, but then because they're so far from everything, the access to great education on a personal level was difficult. We wanted to try to influence New Zealand as well. Not just in the realm of sports medicine but also with wellness so friends of mine who were nutritionists and maybe health coaches and performance art, which oddly enough comes from my passion of being a dancer. I started dancing at the age of 8 or started doing dance competitions since I was age of 8. Dancing, I believe, is part of movement, and so that then in turn has been part of the ripple effect of that because it has movement in it.

What we do is we bring these people in any kind of realm of movement and positive impact lifestyles, so to speak, to then these places, and hopefully, have them share a little bit of what they have. Particularly, they're present to the people who are there who would normally not get the chance to be able to sit next to them at lunchtime or to be able to share a beer after the workshop. Because, normally, you would go to these conferences, there'd be a thousand people. Really, your goal is to watch this one person, but then everything they talk about on stage is already on Google. What's the real reason why you're going there? Because maybe to see what that person's like, if what they're writing about is truly who they are and if that inspiration that you thought would have from a book was actually the inspiration from the person themselves. We keep classes small, a maximum of 50 people. We try to follow a lot of the educational advancements nowadays using Montessori-style teaching with regards to the amount of people that are there. Using TED Talk programming to make sure – the attention spans are so short, we only do the speaking part the maximum of maybe 18 minutes if the speaker's phenomenal or 13 minutes if it's not so phenomenal and then to have everything be moving.

Gary:

That's exciting.

- Dr. Valencia:** Yeah. We make it a fun experience for everybody.
- Gary:** It sure sounds like it. That's so rewarding, Erwin. I applaud you for that. Thank you for doing that.
- Dr. Valencia:** Thanks. No, thank you. My happiness comes from many others.
- Gary:** That's terrific.