

Strength Training Dos and Don'ts

By Brian Copeland, RKC

Ladies and Gentlemen: please allow me a few moments to erase the brainwashing that has been imposed on you by the bodybuilding magazines and the local gym-rat with the backwards baseball cap and striped spandex shorts.

We are going to cover a favorite topic of mine, strength training dos and don'ts. This is just the basics folks. So sit back, relax and open your mind for a few minutes.

Strength Training Don'ts:

1. Don't wear running shoes or weightlifting gloves
2. Don't wear weightlifting belts
3. Don't train to failure

Strength Training Dos:

1. Train as heavy as possible, as frequent as possible while staying as fresh as possible
2. Train with 6 or fewer repetitions per set
3. Perform full body multi-joint lifts (compound lifts)
4. Learn to pressurize your abdomen and core for safety and strength
5. Cycle the volume and intensity of your training sessions

Before you think I'm outta my mind I suppose a few explanations are in order.

Don'ts:

1. Don't wear running shoes or weightlifting gloves

"Running shoes or any shock-absorbing shoes suitable for the aerobics class are potentially unsafe in the gym," warn Prof. Verkhoshansky and Dr. Mel Siff. "Increased height of the heel can shift the center of balance forward thereby increasing the stress and sheering forces on the knee joint and altering natural, optimal patterns of movement for safe maximal lifting." Not only this but it can also cause instability during lifting. You don't want to be unstable with several hundred pounds on your back for a heavy squat!

Another good reason not to wear squishy shoes is called the positive support reaction. This reflex is caused by a sensor in your heel that senses the pressure of a heavy weight. It basically sends a signal to the body that says, "HEY, THIS IS HEAVY, TURN ON THE STRENGTH OR WE WILL BE CRUSHED!" This highly scientific explanation means that the body will sense the pressure of a heavy weight

supported by your feet and will cause your leg muscles to contract harder. Wearing squishy athletic shoes diminishes this response and will sacrifice the amount of strength you can summon.

Many Powerlifters and Olympic Weightlifters wear special lifting shoes with a flat sole, kind of like ballet slippers. If you want to retain your masculinity by not wearing pink ballet slippers then you can invest in a pair of \$30 low-top Chuck Taylor Converse. Many elite powerlifters opt for these hard-core shoes with their flat stable sole.

Now on the gloves, the same applies to the pressure in your palm. There are many such reflexes in your body that serve to protect you from injury. In fact, the squishy part of the palm near the base of your hand on the little finger side has such a reflex sensor in it. Ever see a Karate master bust through bricks, ice and other things that make you say Ouch!? They are hitting with that part of their hand; the same place you should hold the barbell for any presses. Squeeze the bar to pulp the whole time and you will notice that the bar is stable, relatively comfortable and it adds even more to your strength. More on that in a future article.

2. Don't wear weightlifting belts

Say no to artificial lifting aids and develop a 'virtual belt' out of rock hard abs like Yuri Spinov the human crane from the Ukraine who does not bother to wear belts even when he squats 914 lbs!

"But you will get a hernia!" warns the men's fitness magazine article written by a guy who can bench press the bar... on a good day. People who never lift anything heavy get hernias from coughing and die on the toilet from a stroke when they strained on the toilet too hard. In reality, you will encourage hernias by never learning to create your own virtual belt, which will protect you and has the added bonus of making you WAY STRONGER!

How do you create a virtual belt? To start, tense your abs like someone was going to punch you in the stomach. Don't suck-in or push-out your abs; rather make a flat wall and tense hard. If you need someone to hit you I can arrange that! Next, tense your butt like you were trying to hold a quarter in-between your cheeks. Do a rectal sphincter lock as if you had the runs and were wearing white linen pants. Finally, take a deep breath into your tensed abs; but don't let your midsection expand. Feel the tension? This is what a virtual belt is. Your core is very stable and you are much stronger. Practice this for a while before lifting really heavy; it takes time to build the coordination.

3. Don't train to failure

C'mon Brian, everyone knows you have to train to failure to get really buff dude! The guy who told you that... does he wear stripped spandex shorts and have a mullet haircut? Better yet, have you seen his bench press go up in the last year...2...3?

There are many great reasons not to train to failure, psychological and physiological. I'll cover a few of them here. Have you ever heard "success begets success and failure begets failure"? Well that is true with lifting. If you are constantly 'failing' during your lifts it has a profound, if not realized, effect on your training sessions. You begin to dread them, you get used to failing instead of succeeding.

"I'm not affected by that psycho-babble stuff!" Ok fine, when you fail on your last rep, your last rep looks like crap. You are shaking, clumsy and the rep gets sloppy. A couple of things happen. First you open yourself up to injury as your technique moves out of a safe groove and you don't have the strength to control it. Second, to get stronger you must lift as heavy as possible as frequent as possible. If you end a few reps short of failure you are stronger the next set than you would be if you went to failure. Hence you can lift more weight for more reps. Third, the body gets stronger through coordination not muscle size (too much to go into in this article, trust me on this one). Your body is a remarkable piece of equipment; if your last rep was sloppy, that will be what your body's nervous system remembers as an ideal rep. The next time you lift your body will want to do the sloppy rep's form, not clean form.

Bottom line, the world's strongest men and women, powerlifters and Olympic weightlifters know that to make progress you need to stop short of failure or face burning out your central nervous system. As renowned Russian strength coach Pavel Tsatsouline says, "If training to failure works so well, how come your bench press has been stuck at 185 since Arnold's first movie?"

Dos:

1. Train as heavy as possible, as frequent as possible while staying as fresh as possible

"When I began training," recalls powerlifting great Mike Bridges, "I did many repetitions and sets without too much success. When I stopped working on reps, I began to increase in strength rapidly. I believe you can cut unnecessary reps and sets, and discover an ability to recover much faster. And, you will make bigger gains."

The body will respond to the way you train it very specifically. If you lift a light weight for many reps, you will get better at lifting a light weight for many reps. To get strong you need to lift a heavy weight. The ideal weight will allow you to do between 1 and 6 reps. To make the fastest progress you want to lift as often as possible. Many eastern block champion lifters will train 2 days per week 7 days per week! This may be a little extreme but for a regular Joe like us who has a job and hopefully a life, 1 time per day, 5 days per week is about as much as you want to do. "Won't I overtrain?" Not if you keep your sets low, like 3 sets of 3-5 reps AND you ALWAYS AVOID TRAINING TO FAILURE! If you train to failure you will sacrifice any real strength gains anyways but you will also burn out your central nervous system and overtrain easily. By keeping the sets and reps low and not training to failure you will stay fresh and be a little stronger at your next workout. As an added benefit to this training, you have gas left in your tank for any sports or other activities you participate in; great for athletes.

* NOTE, if size is what you seek then we will add sets, not reps, to your training sessions.

2. Train with 6 or fewer repetitions per set

Did you read the section above?

3. Perform full body multi-joint lifts (compound lifts)

Isolation exercises build dumb muscles. They are inefficient, they negatively affect your athletic performance and make you more injury prone. It is much more natural for your body to perform movements that involve your whole body or at least several joints. When you help your buddy move his couch to another room you don't try to isolate your biceps as you curl the couch. No you use your whole body, legs, midsection, grip, back, etc. to lift the couch. If you didn't the couch wouldn't budge. In terms of athleticism, your nervous system develops coordination to manage a team of muscles. This inter-muscular coordination is one of the main factors determining how strong you are when you lift a barbell or move a heavy refrigerator. Add more pounds to your deadlift and you will run faster, jump higher and pull that heavy suitcase out of your car's trunk easier.

4. Learn to pressurize your abdomen and core for safety and strength

Go back and read why not to wear a belt... 'nuff said!

5. Cycle the volume and intensity of your training sessions

This is a difficult subject to cover in a short article; there are many factors involved that I can't cover so just listen and learn... so to speak since you are reading this.

The body gets stronger as a result of stimulus caused by training. It does this because it thinks it will get injured or die if it does not get stronger. Sooner or later with the same old training the body realizes that it is not going to get hurt and does not need to get stronger. Gym rats call this a plateau and it is unavoidable if you continue doing the same weights, sets, reps, etc. all of the time.

Most gym rats will tell you to switch exercises, don't! For reasons that are too long to go into here you will waste your precious time and effort doing this unless you really know what you are doing... and I'm sure you don't or you would be a strength coach for the Olympic Weightlifting Team.

Instead you need to stick with the same exercises but lower the training intensity (read weight) so that the body gets temporarily weaker. WHAT!!!! DUDE, I DON'T WANT TO GET WEAKER! Hold your horses! This is a temporary phase and all of the strongest people in the world do it. It is called a de-conditioning phase by many in the powerlifting community. What it does is allow your body to get just a little bit weaker, which makes your body more sensitive once you go back to the heavier weights. Your body will forget that you lifted heavy before and will give you more strength than previous in order not to get hurt or die.

Here is an example of how to do a basic cycle of the intensity:

Let's say you started bench pressing 165 lbs on your bench press and worked up to 200 lbs but have hit a 'plateau.' If you drop the weight back (cycle) to 175 lbs and then work your way back up, 5 lbs per training session you should be able to reach a new personal record of 215 or so. Then you will need to cycle back to 10 lbs more than your last cycle start weight, 185 lbs, and begin again. Hopefully ending at 225 or 230.

Yes it seems like a game of seesaw but the important thing is that at the end of each cycle you are stronger than you were before. There are many effective and in-effective ways to cycle; if you think it is too difficult to figure out then please contact me to design a personal program for you. Reach new strength potentials and have your buddies at the gym accusing you of taking steroids!

Folks these are just some basics of effective strength training; to learn more or if you are ready to make real progress, contact me for some personal program designs. If you feel guilty forking out a little dough, then consider that my services generally cost less than you spend eating out for lunch in a 2-week period.

What do you have to lose except a couple pounds of body fat and a lot of bad lifting habits?

Brian Copeland is a Denver, Colorado based strength and conditioning coach, personal trainer and Certified Russian Kettlebell Instructor. Brian specializes in functional strength and athletic training, conditioning for martial artists, kettlebell lifting, fat loss and muscle gain. Brian has also rehabilitated several severe lower back injuries, including his own, through the use of "proper" strength and flexibility training.

Brian is available for private and group lessons and personal program design. If you are tired of not seeing results contact Brian, he will design a personalized program based on YOUR goals, YOUR time and YOUR lifestyle.

Visit me today at www.bccorefitness.com