

Strength Hacking Course Day 11

Strength training heresies: using bodybuilding, high reps, and isolation exercises to break PRs

“Beginners must learn the rules, intermediates must follow the rules, but the advanced must make their own rules.”

- *Kenneth Jay*

One funny phenomenon that I’ve noticed with any person attempting to learn any new skill – be it working out, learning a language, starting a business, etc – is that they tend to start at the “top of the pyramid” (i.e. at the most complex and nuanced stuff) and try to work their way down toward the fundamentals.

The number of people who successfully navigate an absurd challenge like that is roughly Jack Shit. And Jack just left town.

Let me assure you right now: until you’ve reached certain standards in your go-to exercises (see yesterday’s lesson for a chat on this), you don’t need anything advanced. A good example of some advanced stuff that you can probably overlook (for now) include the highly periodized programs that are all the rage among beginners who are “too good” to do 5x5, as well as various isolation exercises.

Case in point: Russian bodybuilders from the golden era of bodybuilding in that country believed that until you could bench press 150% of your bodyweight, you had no need to do direct triceps work – doing so would simply overtrain them. Past that point, direct triceps work would be a major help in getting you past the plateaus that creep up as the pounds crawl higher.

So that means that you need to be hitting prodigious poundages before you even think about doing more advanced strategies, right?

Not so fast: if your rationale is solid enough, and the outcomes of your decision bear it out, you can do a lot of things that general wisdom would suggest you not do just yet.

Using the isolation exercise example, Australian personal trainer and athletic coach Andrew Read has spoken of having his female clients do bicep curls to help them get their first pullup – and it works.

The key when using advanced programs and techniques to increase your strength is that you need to be very well attuned to what you’re doing – and unless you’re a coach (and sometimes even then), it’s typically best left to the sidelines.

With that said, there are some “intermediate” strategies that will absolutely come in handy for you sooner than later, and I’m going to show you how to employ them.

Plateau-busting strategy #1: higher set and rep scheme

If you've dipped your foot long enough in mysterious and sometimes murky pool that is strength training, odds are you've heard some of the following:

"More than 5 reps? That's cardio!"

"All you need is low reps and high patience levels to get stronger"

"Bodybuilding is for vain, self-absorbed gym rats."

Hyperbole, all of it.

As the good book says "There is a season for everything under the sun." In other words, there's a reason – and an application – for all of the things strength training purists like to talk trash about. Here are a few facts to keep in your back pocket:

- Your body must obey the law - the Law of Accommodation, that is. This law states that the response of a biological object to a given constant stimulus decreases over time. That means that your body gets used to your favorite "pet exercises" that you do most often, but it ALSO gets used to doing low-rep sets of 3-5. And when it gets used to it, it stops handing you adaptations (i.e. gains).

Read that again – your body gets used to (and stops adapting to) BOTH your favorite exercises and your favorite rep ranges.

- You can't break the law, but you can skirt it by doing short interludes between your strength programs where you "flip the script" and do some things your body hasn't gotten used to. So if you've been doing loads of squats for sets of 3-5 for the past few months, switch it up to sets of lunges for higher-rep sets for a few weeks and then go back to squatting heavier again.

If that's not good enough for you, consider this:

- Age related muscle loss – sarcopenia – begins in your 30s, accelerates in your 40s, and is practically in a dead sprint by your 50s. You are not doomed to forever shrinking IF you actively work to keep on some muscle mass.
- Sets of 8-12 reps – traditional bodybuilding rep ranges – work wonders at building muscle, and more endurance-based rep ranges – sets of 15-25 reps – also help put muscle on your frame AND train your slow-twitch muscle fibers, which typically don't see all that much action from low-rep sets, since they require longer efforts before they get on board.

Why should this matter to you? For a few reasons:

- 1) Because more muscle = more potential for strength. You can absolutely build strength without putting on muscle, but you will be limited by the amount of "hardware" you have (i.e. your

muscles). While neural strength (i.e. 3-5 rep strength) is the perfect foundation to build on, you will not likely be able to build a decent amount of strength in a wide variety of movements unless you've put on at least a little extra muscle. A good example of this is lightweight Olympic lifters who have very high strength-to-bodyweight ratios. They tend to be good only at the snatch and the clean and jerk, and not much else. Great movements, but I'm guessing you want to be able to do more than just two movements, right?

- 2) Because a loss of lean tissue as you get older puts you at a greater risk of reduced mobility, frail bones, frequent falling and the injuries that come with that, and a loss of independence. These may seem extreme, and they're certainly not going to happen overnight, but all it takes is a stubborn adherence to doing things only one way for long enough that you eventually find that you're starting to backslide on a number of other things. A little bodybuilding can take you a long way.

As Master SFG Mark Reifkind has noted, "Nobody ages as well as natural bodybuilders". And with good reason – they are the ones fighting hardest against one of the biggest factors in aging: sarcopenia.

With this in mind, let's take a look at a few rep ranges that can go a long way at jumpstarting progress and paving the way for new and lofty strength gains:

Hypertrophy (i.e. building muscle): 3-5 sets of 8-12 reps

Endurance: 2-3 sets of 15-25 reps

These can also be used in existing programs, though that complicates things a bit and will be covered in a few days. For now, be ready to switch to a program (eventually) that has you doing the above rep ranges in movements you've not done in a while. The transformation will be pretty profound.

To get an idea of how to do that, let's take a look at the map for today's lesson.