



[Strength Training Nonsense](#)

A reader recently told me that he was following this weight-training routine: [The Best Damn Workout Plan For Natural Lifters](#). The routine, while it gets some things right, is all but unsupported by scientific evidence, can lead to overtraining, and is an example of strength training nonsense. The plan's summary is this:

1. The number one mistake by natural lifters is doing too much volume. You need to trigger protein synthesis and then stop training.
2. Frequency is also super important. Hitting a muscle three times per week is the optimal frequency for natties.
3. The key to growth is to have a big disparity between protein synthesis and protein breakdown. The more volume you use, the more you break down protein.
4. The best split for the natural is the push/pull split. It's both physically and psychologically beneficial.

No evidence is offered for any of these points.

Too much volume: While I agree that many lifters do too much volume (too many sets per exercise or muscle group), whether it's the "number one mistake" is open to question. Other mistakes that come to mind are bad form, using momentum, not lifting to failure, doing isolation instead of compound exercises, and spending gym time looking at your phone.

Frequency: It's allegedly "super important". No evidence is offered. This program has you in the gym 6 days a week, which is far too much and not even necessary.

Protein synthesis and breakdown: Allegedly the "key to growth". Sounds reasonable, but doesn't take into account genetics, nutrition, or recovery time.

Push/pull split: Allegedly the "best split". Why?

Unfortunately, most strength training advice is much like this: little evidence to back it up and complicated, and they often contradict each other.

Asking a trainer if you need to work out more is like asking a barber if you need a haircut

Trainers exist to make money by, hopefully, helping people get better results, but they have a conflict of interest.

You want to get in shape; they want to make money.

This goes for anyone or anything connected to weight training, such as magazines, gyms, and websites. If strength training were simple and required only short, infrequent workouts, then there would be no need for the endless stream of articles and advice on the topic. So they make it complicated and tell you that you need to be in the gym a lot. Supplement companies tell you that you need their "Pre-workout Blast" or whatever.

Not only does their advice make things more complicated and confusing, but it stops lots of people from training with weights. If I have to be in the gym 6 days a week, learn complicated exercises and routines, then I'm just not going to try, is what many people think.

Advanced routines are unnecessary

Strength training is simple. You lift a weight or place other resistance against a muscle, then repeat until you can't do it any more.

Making this complicated does little to nothing more. The American College of Sports Medicine wants to make it [as complicated as possible](#) – otherwise, why would you need their advice?

The ACSM claims that the programmed manipulation of resistance-training protocols such as the training modality, repetition duration, range of repetitions, number of sets, and frequency of training will differentially affect specific physiological adaptations such as muscular strength, hypertrophy, power, and endurance. The ACSM also asserts that for progression in healthy adults, the programs for intermediate, advanced, and elite trainees must be different from those prescribed for novices. An objective

evaluation of the resistance-training studies shows that these claims are primarily unsubstantiated.

The ASCM thus claims you need the help of their coaches, that you must be in the gym a lot, that their complicated advice makes a difference.

In fact, the preponderance of resistance-training studies suggest that simple, low-volume, time-efficient, resistance training is just as effective for increasing muscular strength, hypertrophy, power, and endurance—regardless of training experience—as are the complex, high-volume, time-consuming protocols that are recommended in the Position Stand.

[Keep it simple.](#)

[Breakdown sets, or drop sets](#), do not result in greater muscular adaptations than a simple, full-body workout. “The present study supports previous research that the use of advanced training techniques stimulates no greater muscular adaptations when compared with performing more simplified RT [resistance training] protocols to momentary muscular failure.”

In reality, progression in resistance training is simply adding enough resistance, which is a consequence of getting stronger—not a requisite—to stay within the desired range of repetitions and maintain a specific degree of effort. This is achieved while maintaining the precise exercise form for each aspect of the chosen protocol. Complex manipulation of any or all of the previously discussed resistance-training variables in an attempt to enhance gains in muscular strength, hypertrophy, power, or endurance in novice, intermediate or advanced trainees is primarily based on unsubstantiated opinions, and lacks sufficient scientific evidence – empirical or theoretical – for support.

Hard work required

The dichotomy between aerobic exercise and weight lifting, which has been standard dogma for decades, [may not even exist](#). The fact is, [weight training increases aerobic capacity](#). Depending on how you lift can make a big difference in how it affects cardiovascular health. In general, short rests between sets and the big, compound exercises are better for cardiovascular conditioning.

I wonder whether [the superiority of strength training over aerobics for metabolic health](#) isn't largely due to the amount of effort.

Aerobic exercise, at least the way many people do it, doesn't require nearly as much effort as lifting weights. Too many people go to the gym, get on a treadmill or stair-step machine, and treat the whole thing almost like a walk

in the park. Then they wonder why they don't see results.

Lifting weights, while simple, is hard. To maintain progression, you must always be pushing muscles to their limits.

While I doubt that's the whole story behind the difference between aerobics and lifting, it's likely a big part of it. Many physiological adaptations of exercise are determined not by type of exercise, [but by effort.](#)

Genes and bodybuilding

One reason why trainers and others can get away with making weight training much more complicated than it needs to be is that so many people – mainly men – want to get a bodybuilder's physique. They feel that if they can only get the right routine, the secret methods, the right supplements, etc., then they could look like a bodybuilder. When they fail to attain a bodybuilder's physique, they think they're doing something wrong.

If you don't have the right genes, that may be difficult no matter what routine you adopt. Men with "solid" builds evidently put on muscle [much more readily than those with slender builds.](#)

The genes you're born with may be much more important to the amount of muscle you can put on than any particular lifting routine.

As far as I can tell, to look like any bodybuilder from the past several decades, steroids are required. (And I don't recommend them.)

Making strength training complicated is a real disservice

Strength training is a superior form of exercise, and many more people than currently should do it. It [increases insulin sensitivity and lowers glucose in diabetics](#), and [increases metabolic rate, lowers blood pressure, and heart disease and cancer risk.](#)

Research also indicates that virtually all the benefits of resistance training are likely to be obtained in two 15- to 20-min training sessions a week. Sensible resistance training involves precise controlled movements for each major muscle group and does not require the use of very heavy resistance.

When trainers and others advocate complicated routines, or high frequency of workouts, most people just tune out, and refuse to consider taking up strength training.

Strength training need not be complicated.

Most of the complication arises from those who sell products or services, and is unsupported by scientific evidence.

See also [my article on science-based weight training](#).

PS: For more on strength training and its importance, see my book [Muscle Up](#).

PPS: [You can support this site by purchasing through my Supplements Buying Guide for Men](#). No extra cost to you.