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Superstitions and Myths

Perhaps the heading of this chapter is misleading – since it is not my intention to discuss superstitions and myths "about" weight-training; but, rather, the false beliefs that are so common among weight trainees themselves. Insofar as mention of the literally hundreds of false beliefs about weight training, I will limit my remarks to the few brief mentions made in preceding chapters and the even briefer attention that will be given to such ideas in following chapters; without single exception, such beliefs are totally false and highly prejudicial, and none of them deserve more than passing attention – in any case, thirty years of experience has taught me that attempts to combat prejudice usually have the opposite effect from that desired, so I do not intend to give even more widespread circulation to such ideas or waste my time jousting with windmills.

But while such common beliefs deserve little or no attention, the same is certainly not true in the case of many of the equally false beliefs being circulated among the ranks of present-day weight trainees – people who should know better, but for the most part do not. Many of these beliefs are nothing short of outright fanaticism, and some of them are actually dangerous – yet they are commonly practiced by tens-of-thousands of weight trainees and are supported by no small number of self-appointed "experts", these latter almost always being people with direct commercial interests in the field.

As a result of some of these beliefs – and the fanaticism that they inspire – literally millions of people have been denied the very worthwhile results that weight training could have afforded them; many people – probably most people – treat the whole matter of weight training as a joke, looking upon it in the same light in which rational people view astrology or some way-out religious cult.

While, in fact, there is nothing at all "mysterious" about weight training; on the contrary, it is a perfectly simple, well proven method for inducing physical improvement – by far the most effective method of exercise ever devised. And perhaps that is the reason for its undoing in the eyes of the average man – it is simply too effective; by comparison to the possible results producible by any other method of physical training, weight training produces such large degrees of results that they sometimes appear literally unreal.

But in no small part, the widespread skepticism of weight training is due to the actions and statements of many weight trainees; the very people who should be most interested in promoting something of great value – but who, on the contrary, seem to be determined to cast it in the worst possible light. But of even more direct importance to themselves – since most weight trainees have no commercial interests in the field – such people give widespread acceptance to training ideas that greatly retard their own progress.

Many such trainees pride themselves on their knowledge of anatomy – while having no slightest idea of the actual functions of even the largest of the muscular structures in the body.

For bodybuilders, such lack of knowledge – and such willingness to practice worthless training methods, or methods of far less value than might be desired – is of no real importance to anyone besides themselves; but to others – to athletic coaches interested in employing weight training as supplemental training for sports – the same lack of knowledge can be of very real significance. Training time and training energy is always at a premium in any sport, and it should be employed only in the best possible ways – athletes have neither time nor energy to waste on anything less than the best possible methods of training; weight training is the best possible method of supplementary training for any sport, by far the best – but the best systems of employing this method are certainly not common knowledge among bodybuilders.

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I have asked literally hundreds of bodybuilders, "... why do you use wide-grip bench presses?" And the answer has invariably been the same, "...because they stretch my pectorals more than narrow-grip bench presses." But in fact, they do not; on the contrary, wide-grip bench presses actually prevent any stretching of the pectorals – the pectorals attach the upper arms to the front of the chest, and in order to stretch the pectorals it is necessary to move the upper arms as far back as possible, and with a wide grip on a barbell it is literally impossible to move the upper arms far enough back to stretch the pectorals at all.

Exactly the same thing applies to wide-grip "chinning" movements; these are practiced because they supposedly stretch the latissimus muscles – while in fact, they actually prevent any such stretching.

The list is almost endless, I could give hundreds of other examples of similar false beliefs; but my point is this – out of the literally hundreds of commonly practiced barbell exercises, only a few give the results that most weight trainees think they do. And most of these few really productive exercises are avoided by most bodybuilders upon one pretext or another, probably because they are simply too "hard".

A bodybuilder reading this bulletin will probably find no mention of many of his favorite exercises; for the good and simple reason that there are other, far better exercises for the same body part – exercises that will actually produce the results that he thinks he is getting in another way. Variations in training are of value if for not other reason than the fact that they prevent boredom – but such diversity of training should be contained within the actually very narrow limits of a few very productive exercises; if not, then results will be far less than they should have been.

In later chapters devoted to exact training programs, the selected exercises have been included only because they are by far the most productive exercises for the particular purposes stated – without single exception, no other exercise will produce as much in the way of results from an equal amount of training time.

The very fact that some poorly chosen exercises and systems of training are capable of producing fairly high degrees of results is no excuse for their employment – much better results can be produced in far less time if training is restricted to better exercises and better systems. And while no system can possibly produce the best results in all cases, a logical approach to the matter will clearly indicate any slight changes that might be required in some individual cases – and the information required for making such judgments is clearly spelled out in the chapters on the proper performances of exercises and the chapter on planning workouts. Close attention should also be given to the priority of exercises.