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"Sticking Points" in Training

Progress as a result of training should be both steady and rapid – and it will be if all of the involved factors are clearly understood and allowed for; but viewed on a short-range scale, occasional "sticking points" will be encountered where additional progress seems impossible.

In almost all cases, such sticking points are a direct result of overtraining – and many of them can be overcome by a brief layoff from training; but in some cases, another answer to the problem is required –one of several possible answers.

Upon encountering a stubborn sticking point, many subjects eventually assume that they have reached the maximum level of their individual potential –but that is almost never the correct answer to the problem; the potential levels of attainment are actually so high that very few individuals ever even closely approach them.

Insofar as strength is concerned, it is literally possible to build the power of the muscular structure to such a point that the skeleton is unable to support the loads that the muscles can easily lift. BUT BUILDING SUCH GREAT STRENGTH DOES NOT REQUIRE EXPOSING THE FRAMEWORK OF THE BODY TO SUCH DANGEROUS LOADS.

Digressing for a moment to the latter point, I want to clearly point out that maximum possible squatting strength – for example – can be produced without ever performing a squat with more than 400 pounds; although it will be necessary to "support" much greater loads in various positions if such strength is to be used without resulting damage to the tendon attachments.

When a subject is capable of rapidly performing 20 repetitions in the full squat with 400 pounds, then his squatting strength for one repetition is about as high as it will ever be, regardless of the system of training he follows; and if not, then it can be built to a maximum level of strength by continuing the practice of full squats with 400 pounds until such time as 30 or 40 repetitions become possible. But in all cases, a point will eventually be reached where the ability to perform a certain number of repetitions with 400 pounds will clearly indicate the ability to squat once with a maximum-possible amount of resistance.

And – while such training will almost entirely remove the potential hazards imposed by squatting with very heavy weights – it will also produce literally enormous increases in "wind", in cardiovascular efficiency, in overall muscular mass, and in overall muscular strength.

Now returning to the initial subject; when a sticking point is encountered that does not respond to a brief layoff from training – or is encountered immediately following a layoff – then one of two possible methods will probably produce results.

If the subject's strength level has not already reached a point where additional resistance would be unwise because of safety considerations, then the resistance should be markedly increased; for example, if a subject has been "stuck" at a point of 10 repetitions in the curl with a resistance of 100 pounds – then the weight should be increased to 120 pounds (by twenty percent). Such an increase in resistance will probably reduce the subject's ability to the point of about three or four repetitions – but if all sets are performed as maximum possible sets, then progress will usually be almost immediately apparent; and in most cases, the subject will soon be able to perform ten repetitions with the increased resistance.

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However, if the subject's strength level is already so high that additional large-scale increases in resistance are unwise because of danger to the framework of the body, then it is usually advisable to discontinue that particular exercise entirely for a while – and in such cases, the exercise should be replaced with a somewhat similar movement. For example: if the subject is stuck at a certain number of repetitions in the bench press with 350 pounds, then it might be advisable to discontinue bench presses entirely for a period of several weeks – while replacing them with a similar exercise, bench presses performed with dumbbells, or incline bench presses.

But if none of these methods – layoff, markedly increasing the resistance, or substituting a similar exercise – produce the desired result, then overtraining should be suspected; another layoff is not usually indicated or desirable – but the length and/or frequency of workouts should be reduced. If three sets of each exercise have been practiced, then reduce the number to two sets – and/or reduce the weekly workouts from three to two.

And if results are still not forthcoming, the fault will usually be directly due to the maturity factor – or, if the subject is above the age of twenty-five, then nutritional factors should be suspected.

But such total failure to produce continuing progress is almost never encountered in practice – and when such cases are encountered, the subject is usually suffering from an undetected illness or is not devoting the proper intensity of effort to his workouts.