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The Name of the Game

Progressive Weight-training" – or so it's called; but in fact, there is absolutely nothing progressive about the training of most bodybuilders – and without unceasing efforts in the direction of progress, little or nothing in the way of worthwhile results will ever be produced by any amount of training. Once having learned to spell your own name, you cannot then improve your spelling – nor your vocabulary – by writing your name over and over again; your writing, perhaps, in effect, your form or style, but not your spelling.

And much the same thing is true when it comes to attempting to improve your existing physical ability; you cannot increase your strength by mere repetition of things that are already easy – and for much in the way of muscular growth stimulation, you must constantly attempt the momentarily impossible. Below a certain intensity of effort, no amount of exercise will produce growth stimulation – and for maximum-possible growth stimulation, an intensity of effort at least approaching your momentary limit is an absolute requirement. Yet most weight trainees – bodybuilders, power lifters, and olympic lifters alike – seldom continue an exercise to a point anywhere near the required intensity of effort; while usually attempting to justify their easier styles of training on the grounds that they compensate by performing more exercises or more sets of each exercise.

But in fact, more exercise will never produce the results that are possible from harder exercise – regardless of the amount of additional exercise that is involved; and if much in the way of additional exercise is employed, then growth will be impossible even if growth stimulation is being produced. In practice, most trainees quickly fall into a rut of training wherein their workouts almost totally deplete their recovery ability – and then it takes them years to produce the same degree of results that could have been produced in an equal number of months.

In very simple terms, best results seem to be produced when the exercises are as hard as possible – but as brief as possible; which statement, unfortunately, is easily subject to misunderstanding. For example: logically extended, "as hard as possible, but as brief as possible" would obviously mean one repetition of one exercise with maximum intensity of effort – but in practice, the results produced by such a program would be far less than optimum. For several reasons; for one thing, you could never be quite sure that the one repetition actually was "as hard as possible"- since you would be required to guess the exact level of existing strength, you would seldom if ever select the correct poundage. If you guessed too high, then the attempt would fail – and if you guessed too low, then it wouldn't actually be a maximum-possible effort. And other factors are involved; but since most of these factors will be mentioned in the last chapters, I will not attempt to list them here.

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In practice, the most productive method of training requires the utilization of one or more "sets" of several repetitions; a weight should be selected which will permit the performance of at least six repetitions – but not more than twenty repetitions- and each set should be carried to the point of absolute failure, to a point where any slightest degree of additional movement is impossible.

The first repetition of such a set will seem quite easy – but in fact, it is the hardest repetition and the most dangerous repetition; because you are strongest during the first repetition, and following repetitions merely seem harder because you are growing progressively weaker. For that reason, the first repetition should be performed at a speed somewhat below maximum possible speed – in order to reduce the possibility of injury; in most cases, the first three or four repetitions of a set should be performed in a similar manner- but later repetitions should be performed with as much speed of movement as possible. By the time you reach the end of a correctly executed set, you should be moving as rapidly as possible – but at that point, actual movement should be literally zero.

A "guide figure" of a particular number of repetitions should be selected – and for the purpose of this example I will use ten repetitions as the guide figure; but a set should NOT be terminated simply because a particular number of repetitions have been performed – instead, complete as many repetitions as you can in good form, and then "cheat" at least two more repetitions, and stop only when additional movement becomes impossible. If the number of repetitions performed in good form is less than the guide figure, then use the same amount of resistance during the next workout; but if you can perform ten repetitions in good form (ten being the guide figure in this example), then the weight should be increased for the next workout.

You might, for example, be using 100 pounds in the barbell curl – and during your first workout with this weight you might be able to perform eight repetitions in good form and fail during an attempt to perform a ninth repetition; in that case, you should then perform another two "cheated" repetitions – using just enough body swing to make the additional two repetitions possible. You should NOT cheat enough to make those extra repetitions "easy" – just enough to make them barely possible.

Then, during a later workout, you might be successful with nine repetitions in good form – with the same resistance; in which case the resistance should remain unchanged. But eventually you will be able to perform ten repetitions – OR MORE – in good form; and that is your signal to increase the resistance in that particular exercise – during the next workout you should add at least five pounds to the workout being used, bringing your curling resistance to a new total of 105 pounds. During the next workout – using the increased resistance – you might find that you could perform only eight repetitions in good form; but again you should do as many repetitions as possible in good form – and then cheat two additional repetitions.

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Eventually you will be able to perform ten (or more) repetitions in good form with 105 pounds – and that is your signal to increase the resistance again, by another five pounds, to a new total of 110 pounds. And so on – and if you continually strive to increase both the number of repetitions performed and the resistance employed, you will eventually find yourself capable of curling 150 or more pounds for eight or nine repetitions in good form; and when you can, your arms will be far larger than they were when you could use only 100 pounds in the same exercise.

Such training is PROGRESSIVE training – and this required progression is the basic principle involved in any form of worthwhile physical training; but the very name of the game seems to have been forgotten by most current trainees – who seldom make any real efforts in the direction of true progression. Instead, they select a given amount of resistance and then perform a certain number of repetitions – stopping well short of the point of failure; but no amount of such training will ever produce anything even approaching the results that are possible from an actually very small amount of properly progressive exercise.

We will probably never understand – and we certainly do not now understand – all of the involved factors; that is to say, we cannot fully explain "why" the body reacts to such progressive training – but it is nevertheless perfectly clear that it DOES RESPOND to such training, and it is equally clear that no other presently existing style of training is capable of producing equal degrees of results.

Some of the factors apparently are understood – but it is at least likely that many of the actually involved factors are not even known; but again, since the known factors will be mentioned in later chapters, I will not list them here.

But this much is clear – if you are not willing to perform actually progressive exercise (and it certainly is NOT an EASY style of training), then you will never produce the final results that could have been produced, and your rate of progress will be far below that which truly progressive exercise would have produced.

But it is equally clear that you literally cannot stand a large "amount" of such training; when training is conducted with the intensity of effort required for producing good results, then such training WILL BE VERY HARD – AND MUST BE VERY BRIEF.

Twenty years ago, most weight trainees apparently understood this – but today it seems to have been largely forgotten, or misunderstood.