

My First Half-Century in the Iron Game

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I first became involved in what we then called “Weight-lifting” in 1938; as best I recall, the term “Bodybuilding” had not yet been coined. At that time there were probably less than fifty weight-lifting gyms in the country, and only a few thousand people in the entire world were then lifting weights for the purpose of exercise.

It was then widely believed that lifting weights would make you “muscle-bound,” would ruin your heart, would rupture you, would make you slow and clumsy; so lifting weights was not encouraged by many people associated with athletics or the scientific community.

But there were a few exceptions: Tom DeLorme was a very weak child and started lifting weights in his early teens in an attempt to increase his size and strength; was so successful that he was accepted as a team member in the 1936 Olympics while still in his teens.

Later, during the Second World War, having graduated from medical school and entering the service as a doctor in the meantime, he applied the lessons he had learned from his own experience to the rehabilitation of a large number of wounded servicemen; the results of which exercise-based rehabilitation were published in a medical journal in 1944, and then remained largely ignored for the next thirty years, and are still being ignored by most people in the field of rehabilitation even now.

Nearly a hundred years earlier, in Sweden, another doctor, Gustav Zander, designed and built a large number of exercise machines that were intended for rehabilitation; some of these machines were very sophisticated and are the equal of most exercise machines being sold today. The man was a genius, was at least a hundred years ahead of anybody else in his field.

Thousands of years earlier, in several countries in Europe, weight-lifting exercises were used for the purposes of increasing athletic ability and rehabilitation; were used for centuries, and then were forgotten for more than a thousand years.

So weight-lifting is certainly not new; but its application in this country is relatively new, and still remains largely misunderstood and ignored.

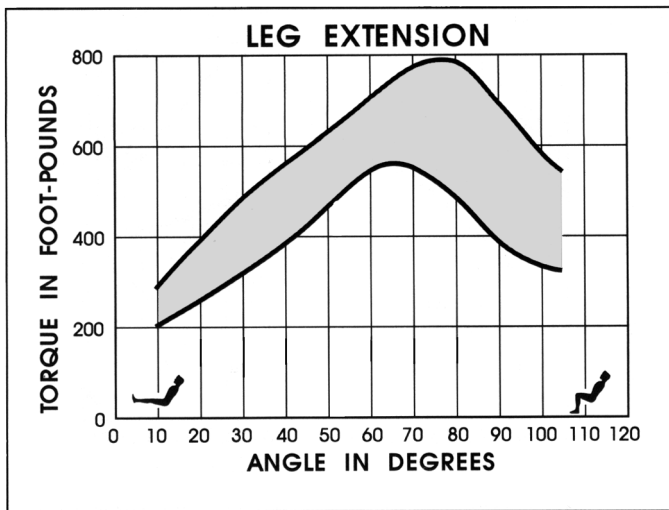
When I started, in 1938, there were only two sources of information on this subject that I was aware of: Strength and Health magazine, published by the York Barbell Company, and Physical Culture, published by Bernarr McFadden. In some of his ads, Joe Weider claims that he has been the “Trainer of Champs since 1936,” and if true this means he attained that position when he was only fourteen years old. I first became aware of a Weider magazine in 1945. Early editions of the original Iron Man, published by Peary Rader, came to my attention in the late 1940s.

So I read anything and everything that I could find on the subject of weight-lifting, and in general I believed a large part of what I read; after all, the pictures in these early magazines made it obvious that at least some people had produced what appeared to be outstanding results from their efforts.

Interest in weight-lifting increased during the Second World War, and at least a few military bases provided gyms; but there were still very few commercial gyms, and the ones that did exist were crude by today’s standards.

The first commercial gym that I ever visited was operated by Vic Tanny in Santa Monica, California; it was dark, dirty, and very crude, and was not a financial success.

A few years later, Vic Tanny and his brother-in-law, Bert Goodrich, started several gyms that were intended to attract the general public; gyms that were copied by several other people and that eventually led to the modern health club or fitness center. Thousands of such gyms are now in operation and are being used by millions of people. So the situation has certainly changed during the last fifty years; but most of these changes have been in scale, much bigger but not always much better.



Most of the people who started lifting weights in the early days trained for various periods of time and then quit; dropped out because they failed to produce the results they expected. And the same situation exists today: a very high percentage of people who start an exercise program today do not continue with it very long; quit because their expectations were too high. With very few exceptions, exercise programs in schools are worthless for any purpose; usually do more harm than good.

Which state of affairs is a damned shame; because the very real good results of exercise are beyond dispute. But this situation will continue until the actual benefits of exercise are far more widely understood.

There are no magic "secrets," the knowledge required in order to produce the best-possible degree of results from exercise is actually quite simple; in effect, you need to know what kind of exercise, how much exercise is actually required, how often such exercise should be repeated, and of perhaps greatest importance just what style of performance is best. And you must also accept the unavoidable fact that your final results will be largely dictated by your own potential; you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Do not make the common mistake of asking somebody with an outstanding physique what to do; even if they tell you the truth, and they seldom will, the most they can give you is an outline of what they did. Such advice being generally worse than worthless, because people are different and have different requirements.

None of what I know now came quickly, and it certainly did not come easily; it took me twenty years to discover that two sets of each exercise during each workout is usually far better than four sets of each exercise; and then it took another twenty years for me to realize that one set of each exercise is usually better than two sets.

For many years I believed that three hard workouts each week were required for best results, but I now believe that better results will be produced in most cases if only two workouts are performed each week; and, in some cases, best results are produced by only one weekly workout. The most common mistake in exercise is to assume that "more is better," that if some exercise is good then more is better.

You must clearly understand that exercise does not "produce" results; instead, it "stimulates" results, or will if it is performed properly.

The above illustration shows the results that were produced by thirteen weeks of exercise for the quadriceps muscles (leg extension); during that period this subject performed a total of only 21 workouts, with only one set of the exercise during each workout.

The lowest curve on this chart shows the fresh strength of his quadriceps muscles at the start of this program, while the higher curve shows his fresh strength at the end of the program. This subject had been training hard for fifteen years prior to the start of this program; had been performing three sets of the exercise for these muscles during each of three weekly workouts, a total of nine exercise sets each week, but had made no increases in either strength or muscular size for more than five years.

The enormous increases in strength (and in muscular size) shown by this chart were produced by doing "less" exercise, not "more," for a period of several years this subject had been over-training to such a degree that he was preventing any additional increases in size or strength.

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Exercises should stimulate increases in size and strength, but then the body requires a period of rest between exercise sessions in order to be able to respond to this stimulus for growth; any growth that occurs can occur only during the period of rest between workouts, cannot occur during the exercise.

While it is certainly true that some people can “tolerate” more exercise than this, it is also true that few if any people actually “require” more exercise. Try to determine just how much exercise you need, do not try to find out how much you can stand. Which last statement is not original: a very similar statement was published in Strength and Health magazine over forty years ago, but I was stupid to understand it at the time.

About twenty years ago, at a national convention where we were showing Nautilus exercise machines, somebody asked me ... “Why are you against training with barbells?” To which question I responded ... “I am not against training with barbells, and have never spoken against barbell training; by comparison to any tool that existed prior to its invention, the adjustable barbell was practically a miracle.”

But it does not follow that a barbell is a perfect tool for exercise; and I have devoted about fifty years of my time and millions of dollars of my own money in attempts to improve barbell exercises. Yet it is still rather widely believed that you must train with barbells in order to produce large muscular size or high levels of strength; that training with exercise machines is not as good. Which, of course, is hogwash; a muscle does not know, and certainly does not care, just where the required resistance for proper exercise came from.

Exercise performed with machines is not as “good” as exercise with barbells, if the machines are properly designed and used then the results will be “better.” In some cases, results that can be rather easily produced with a good exercise machine are simply impossible to produce with a barbell.

Within the last seven years, we have discovered (and have clearly proven) that most of the exercises now being performed for the muscles of the lower back are utterly worthless for their intended purposes; these exercises will increase the strength of the muscles of the hips and thighs, while doing absolutely nothing for the muscles of the lower back.

Unfortunately, proper exercise for the muscles of the lower back requires a very complex exercise machine that totally isolates the muscles of the lower back; if the pelvis is free to move during the exercise, then the muscles of the hips and thighs perform all of the work, and the muscles of the lower back are provided no stimulation for growth. Such machines are large, complicated and expensive, and require the assistance of a very carefully trained therapist; which means that while they are both practical and cost effective in clinical use for rehabilitation they are not going to be available in most health clubs in the near future.

The most expensive, generally non-life-threatening, medical problem in this country today is chronic lower-back pain; total costs of such pain is estimated to be in excess of one-hundred-billion dollars a year, more than two billion dollars a week, or about three-hundred million dollars a day. Most of the treatment modalities now being used for lower-back pain are worthless, but are still being used, and will probably still be in use a hundred years from now; in the meantime, hundreds of clinics are producing very good results with more than eighty percent of all cases of chronic lower-back pain; such good results coming from treatment performed with the MedX Lumber-extension machine.

Universal application of this machine for both rehabilitation and prevention would probably reduce the total costs of chronic lower-back pain by eighty percent; which would represent an annual savings of \$80,000,000,000.00, or nearly ten million dollars an hour, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. A potential saving equal to about a fourth of the total costs of all military expenditures in this country.

If true, then why are these machines not in use by everybody? Because anything that is “new” or “different” suffers from the NIH Factor (Not Invented Here); the self-proclaimed “experts” in this field, in general, will not even bother to investigate anything new or different. As I have stated in an earlier part of this series of articles, do not look to the scientific community for the answers; in general, they provide far more in the way of problems than they do in the way of solutions.

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But there are exceptions: Dr. Vert Mooney of the University of California School of Medicine in San Diego is now training more than 700 chronic lower-back patients each week with MedX equipment, with outstanding results. And most of these cases have failed to benefit from any other type of treatment. Dr. Brian Nelson of Minneapolis has treated more than 4,000 chronic cases with equally good results. Dr. Mike Fulton of Daytona Beach has also treated more than 4,000 cases with outstanding results. And I could name several hundred other examples.

So our equipment is now being used in several hundred clinical facilities for the treatment of hundreds of thousands of patients; but in the meantime millions of other patients are being treated with a wide variety of protocols that are utterly worthless.

So if you are suffering lower-back pain, seek out a facility that is using MedX equipment; and while such treatment is not perfect (what is?) it is about ten times as effective as whatever treatment is in second place.

And in the meantime read my continuing series of articles in Iron Man; if you fail to find the answers in these articles, quit looking; there is no other meaningful source of such information.