

# My First Half-Century in the Iron Game

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Having become interested in a particular subject, it is only natural that most people will then attempt to find anything in the way of published information that will help them reach a better understanding; advice that will help them reach their goals. Even in 1938, when I first became interested in exercise, quite a lot had already been published on that subject; today, nearly sixty years later, hundreds of articles on the subject of exercise are published every month in both several muscle magazines and in a long list of supposedly scientific journals, so there is certainly no shortage of such articles on the subject.

But there is a shortage of facts; at least 99 percent of everything that has ever been published on the subject of exercise is nothing short of outright bullshit; and while many (if perhaps not “most”) of the authors of these articles are at least sincere (that is, they at least “believe” their published statements), it does not follow that their opinions are even true.

While quite a few people associated with exercise, Joe Weider, Fred Hatfield, Gideon Ariel, James Peterson, and others, have been at least consistent in their attacks upon my published statements (that is to say: if I say “up” they say “down”), there has been a much longer list of interested people who have given me the credit for many of the advances in knowledge that have been produced during the last twenty-five years. Among others, both Mike Mentzer and Dorian Yates are now telling people the same things that I started publishing in 1970 in IRON MAN and several other publications. While he has now chosen to attack me, James Peterson published a book nearly twenty years ago that was actually written by me; it consisted of twenty long articles that I had published in the Athletic Journal, and he published it with my permission and without any compensation to me.

At the time those articles, and hundreds of other articles, were written by me, I did not know many of the things that I learned later; thus, if I wrote the same articles today, some of my earlier statements would be changed; but by far the largest percentage of my earlier statements would now remain unchanged since they have clearly stood the test of time. I said then, and I still say now, that the two most common mistakes in the field of exercise are results of two factors: one, most people exercise too much; and two, most people do not train hard enough.

You have a choice: you can exercise a lot, or you can train hard, but you cannot do both. Hard exercise is required to stimulate increases in muscular size and strength, but it also produces a level of fatigue that requires a lot of time between workouts to permit full recovery and following growth. Without such required rest between workouts, hard exercise will inevitably produce overtraining, and the result will be losses in size and strength rather than gains. As I have said many times in earlier articles ... “If some exercise is good (as it certainly is), it does not follow that more is better, and it is usually worse.” In the case of exercise, at least, more is seldom the solution and is frequently the problem.

Which opinion I did not arrive at either quickly or easily; quite the contrary, I was guilty of gross overtraining for more than twenty years; it took me many years to discover that two sets of each exercise in every workout produced much better results than four sets of the same exercise. When I finally got around to reducing my workouts from four sets to only two sets, I quickly added more than an inch and a half to the size of my upper arms; a size that I previously had found to be impossible to reach. Together with that increase in size came dramatic increases in strength.

Later, I discovered that I could produce even better, and quicker, increases in both size and strength by using only one set of each exercise during my workouts; and I now believe that my gains would have been even better if I had trained only twice each week rather than three times. Some of the most dramatic increases in muscular size and strength that we have seen were produced by only one set of the exercise each week, or even (in the case of lower-back muscles) with one set every two weeks.

But we have also learned that just what is best for one of your muscles may not be best for another muscle; that is, the program of workouts, sets, and repetitions that you find best for your quadriceps muscles may not be the most productive for the muscles of your arms. But determining just what is actually best for any of your muscles is something that you

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can only learn from experience, by trial and error; nobody can tell you just what is best for you except in very general terms that may be right for one muscle and wrong for another muscle. May be right for you but wrong for somebody else.

Just how big, and how strong, you are capable of becoming as a result of training is a result of genetic factors that were determined before you were born; your potential for increases may be outstanding in some muscles and very poor in other muscles, and that certainly applied to me. My calf muscles, biceps and to a lesser degree my forearms had then above average potential for growth, while the rest of my muscles did not have such good potential; the result being that I was able to greatly increase the size of some muscles but found it very difficult to produce similar gains with other muscles. But while I considered that situation to be a serious problem for many years, I later discovered that it was, in my case, a great advantage; because my problems with some of my muscles caused me to keep trying to find a way to increase their size and strength levels up to the same standards reached with other muscles. People like Sergio Oliva, Casey Viator, Mike Mentzer and his brother Ray, Arnold and a rather short list of other men having outstanding potential for muscular size in all (or almost all) of their muscles, and thus find it relatively easy to reach levels of size and strength that are simply impossible for most people.

So the real “secret” to being able to compete with top bodybuilders is selecting the right parents; but, that being impossible, the rest of us will have to settle for doing the best we can with what we have, muscular potential that is good, bad or in between. The top figures in professional sports are certainly not average people in any sense of the word, and most are little short of being outright freaks; genetic freaks that were blessed with unusual physical characteristics that give them enormous advantage in their chosen activity. But while being seven feet tall is certainly an advantage (almost a requirement) for success in basketball, it would be a disaster for a gymnast.

During the rather brief period that I went to school, I was too short for basketball, too light for football, and had no interest in other sports apart from weightlifting; but my older brother, who was both shorter and lighter than I was, did well in wrestling. Weight-training will help you in almost any activity you can think of, but you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear; and while most coaches are at least trying to use weight training to improve their athletes, it does not follow that many (if any) of them really know just how to go about using such training to the best advantage. In fact, many of the weight programs now being used by coaches probably do more harm than good, hurt far more people than they help. Which, in my opinion, is nothing short of an outrage: while the actual potential benefits of proper exercise are generally being overlooked, many of the potential problems are being produced. Things like having football players perform exercises like jumping squats and jerking a barbell are nothing short of insanity, do little or nothing in the way of stimulating increases in either muscular size or strength while exposing the athletes to dangerously high levels of impact forces that frequently lead to serious injuries.

Rather than helping to either increase or test the athletes’ level of strength, such fast movements against resistance come much closer to providing a test of structural integrity, frequently exceed those limits and thus produce an injury. You should, instead, be trying to discover how much force you can stand; which limit can be determined only by exceeding it, which also means an inevitable injury.

If, instead, you train properly, which primarily means rather slow movement against as much resistance as you can handle for a reasonable number of repetitions performed in good form, “lifting” the weight rather than “throwing” it, then you will probably never hurt yourself but will increase both your size and strength.

Fast movement against resistance does not produce fast muscles, produces increases only in the skills required for such movement, skills that are of no slightest benefit for anybody except a competitive weightlifter, and skills that cannot be produced without grave threat of injury from impact forces.

Ignore the above advice if you choose, but if you do so you will almost certainly doom yourself to repeating many of my earlier mistakes, and if so you damned sure will not like the results.