

Ab-solute Power

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Maintaining a Strong Midsection

Throughout this series I have stressed the importance of maintaining proportionate strength in all muscle groups, both large and small. That certainly applies to the midsection, since all power generated by the hips and legs must pass through it, and all power produced by the upper body is thrust downward onto it. By midsection I don't just mean the abdominals or the lower back. The midsection is not really two separate planes but rather a continuous girdle, and all the parts of that girdle need some attention.

Since I discussed the lumbar muscles at length in the May '02 issue ("Erector Set"), I won't dwell on them other than to say that all strength athletes should include either good mornings or almost-straight-legged deadlifts in their routines. The subject here is the abdominals.

Abs rank high on most athletes' list of essential muscles—defined abdominals are the ultimate symbol in physical fitness. Out-of-shape people don't have cut abs, period. And no matter how large your arms, chest or shoulders may be, if you have a flabby gut, you won't be an object of admiration.

Of course, diet plays a key role in developing impressive abs. The late Dr. John Gourgott never did any specific ab work, and he always had definition in his midsection. He believed in doing some aerobic activity and eating wholesome foods for acquiring a fit midsection, and it worked well for him. I'm also a proponent of aerobic activity in that regard. Burning off excessive fat helps to highlight the muscles you create with various exercises. More than one athlete has told me that his abs always look the best right after a vigorous run or ride on an exercise bike.

Appearance aside, however, I believe that you have to work your abs diligently if you want to keep them strong. A flat stomach doesn't necessarily mean you have strong abs—and if you're planning on squatting, pulling or pressing heavy weights, you absolutely must have strong abs.

I was reminded of the value of midsection training and the need to do something for all the various parts of the abdominals when Uncle Buddy came for his semiannual visit. For once he'd actually sent me a fax to warn me that he was coming. Usually he just shows up at my door unannounced. On this occasion, however, he needed someone to pick him up at the dock in Baltimore and, two days later, deliver him to Philadelphia International Airport.

I couldn't help but envy his lifestyle. Uncle Buddy is a merchant seaman who stays at sea for six months, never taking any liberties, pulling extra duty and saving all his pay. Then he takes the next six months off and roams around, visiting friends and partying with a bevy of stunning females. I found out after he arrived that he was flying to Stockholm to stay with Catherine. I met her once and have to state that she was the most enchanting lady I ever had the pleasure of talking with. How Uncle Buddy charmed all these magnificent creatures was a mystery to me because he was certainly not much to look at. On the short side, stocky, bald and with a wrinkled face caused by long hours spent at sea—and in the sun—he looked more like a bouncer than a lady's man.

I once asked him if he ever planned to give up his wandering lifestyle and settle down. He provided me with a puzzled look, broke into laughter and then asked, "Why should I?"

For all his wanderlust, though, it was Uncle Buddy who taught me the necessity of training consistently. Wherever he was in the world, he never missed training three times a week. Sometimes he was forced to do the workouts on three consecutive days, but he still got them in. He trained in cramped storerooms on ships, often with meager equipment, and in some cases with no equipment at all. One of the main reasons he always visited me was that I provided him with a place to train. For free. Now, Uncle Buddy was not cheap. In fact, he was extremely generous, always bringing me nice gifts and paying for all the meals when we ate out, but there was something that irked him about paying a fee to train.

Until recently, we never had any problem finding a place to train for free, but Fielder's Shed turned into a garage, and the gym on the Army base has been off-limits since 9/11. So I took Buddy to the Harford Barbell Gym in the basement of the old Aberdeen High School. The gym is really a co-op, like the old Muscle Beach facility, where all the money collected for yearly dues was used to purchase more equipment. Since I give free training advice when I'm there, I've never been asked for any dues.

I introduced Uncle Buddy to the other members, and we started on our warmups: situps and hyperextensions. Lonnie was complaining to Kenny, who was in charge of making yearly purchases, that the gym needed one of the new ab machines. Kenny informed him that there wasn't enough money in the pot to buy one yet, and he added that space was also a problem.

We finished our warmups, and Lonnie was still fussing. "There's no way I can get a decent ab workout when all we got in here is a slant board," he complained.

I knew better but kept my mouth shut. Lonnie was the type of individual who liked to argue just for the sake of arguing. Uncle Buddy, who also enjoys a good verbal battle, stepped right in. "Son, I can show you plenty of exercises you can do for your abs with what's here in this room. You don't need a machine to build strong abs if you're willing to do some work."

Lonnie was a bit startled at this outburst from an old man with a bald head, but when Uncle Buddy lifted his T-shirt and showed him a set of abs worthy of a physique contestant, his frown turned to a friendly smile. Prior to leaving his ship this time, Uncle Buddy had concentrated on his abs, so he was in prime condition.

"I don't mind working hard," grumbled Lonnie. "What exercises you talking about?"

"Well, for starters, you can do crunches, situps, leg raises on the slant board, knee lifts sitting on the end of a bench, frog kicks hanging from a chinning bar, plus a few where all you need is that broomstick over there. They all work. I know because that's what I've been doing lately. I didn't even have a padded situp board. Used a two-by-12 and propped one end on some blocks to get an incline."

He had Lonnie's full attention now, along with several others'. Swimsuit season was only a few months away, and none of them wanted to be seen on the boardwalk at Ocean City with a flabby gut.

John, who'd been listening to this interchange, asked, "Are regular situps safe? I mean, I heard this guy on TV who was selling one kind of ab machine say that situps can hurt your back and that they hit the hips more than the abs."

"If you keep your knees bent when you do them, they shouldn't bother your back," Uncle Buddy replied. "If they do, you need to spend more time strengthening your back, especially your lower back. The abs and lumbar are closely connected. Matter of fact, you should bend your knees on all your ab exercises."

"But that guy was right about the hips being involved in regular situps. That's one reason I do them as part of my warmup. Situps are great for warming up the many hip muscles and attachments, as well as those in the higher part of the legs. If situps do bother your lower back, try doing a set of hypers or reverse hypers before you do the situps."

"Why not just do crunches?" countered John. "I heard they're better."

"I'm not sure they are better," said Buddy. "I think they hit the abs differently, which is a good thing. I came to this conclusion because for a time there just wasn't any way I could do situps on a slant board, so all I did was crunches. Then the first time I came across a slant board, I did as many situps as I could, and I got sore to the touch. That told me the two work differently. Not much but some, so now I do both. Besides, variety is always good. Sometimes I alternate them from workout to workout, and sometimes I do both in the same workout."

While Uncle Buddy took a break from his presentation to do a set, I added, "There was a time when the only piece of equipment for working the abs in any weight room was a situp board. And many of them didn't have a strap or any padding. We used our lifting belts to secure our feet and put a towel under our butts to keep from rubbing them raw. But despite such primitive equipment, we built some impressive abs just doing situps and leg raises."

I usually carry a few magazines in my gym bag in case I end up training alone, so I happened to have an old Strength & Health with a photo of Zabo Koszewski in it. I leafed through it until I found the photo, held it up for John and Lonnie to see and said, "Here's the best example of what I'm talking about. This is Zabo Koszewski, a legend in the sport of bodybuilding for his great ab development. There was a time when they gave out awards for different bodyparts in the Mr. America competitions, and he dominated the Best Abs category for many years. He built his abs by doing lots of situps and leg raises—nothing else—and he sure didn't have any machine to work on."

"Impressive," muttered Lonnie.

Uncle Buddy resumed his lecture. "The main reason most people don't have good ab development isn't because they don't have the right equipment. It's because they're lazy. When it's done right, ab work is hard work and not the least bit fun. Most people I watch like to do lots of sets of 25 or 30 reps, take long breaks between sets and never really have to put out much. If their abs start hurting, they stop. But what they should do is one set to exhaustion, and that set should make them grit their teeth. The abs just don't respond if you stay in a comfort range. They need to be punished, like the calves."

"Are you saying I can get a six-pack just by doing one set of situps and one set of leg raises to failure?"

“Not exactly.” Uncle Buddy sounded annoyed. “They’re good for starters, but you should also hit the other parts of your abs. And if you do several different exercises, you’ll have better overall development than if you only do one or two. So mix in some crunches and some kneeups off the end of a bench. Frog kicks are also good, and there’s some real good ones you can do just using a broomstick.”

“Will you show me how to do the leg raises, those kneeups and the frog kicks?” Lonnie asked. “I’m pretty sure I know the form on situps.”

“Sure,” Uncle Buddy replied. He lay down on the slant board, gripped the strap tightly, bent his knees and then proceeded to lift his legs and lower them for about three feet.

“That’s all the range of motion you do?” John asked.

“That’s all you need to hit the lower abs,” returned Uncle Buddy as he got off the board. “Try them. See if you can do a hundred.”

John managed 50, got up and said, “You were kidding about doing a hundred, weren’t you?”

“Nope. In fact, your goal should be 200. Same for the situps.”

John and Lonnie each gave him incredulous looks. “But not right out of the box,” he added. “That should be your goal. Start out with as many as you can grind out, and add a couple at each workout. Keep adding to the number, and you’ll get to 200 in no time.” He sat on the edge of a bench, grasped the sides, bent his knees and then lifted his knees up toward his chest. “Now these’re a lot tougher than leg raises on a slant board, so you won’t be able to do nearly as many. No matter. Do all you can and try to add to it each time you do them. One thing I like about these is you can do them anywhere. All you need is a bench or a chair, and you’re in business.”

After John and Lonnie each did a set of kneeups, Uncle Buddy led them to the chinning bar. “There was a time in the mid-1960s when these were as popular as the machines are now. Bob Hoffman named them frog kicks and wrote about them every month. Of course he claimed to have invented them, but he also claimed he helped invent the telephone and light bulb. You can use the straps if you want, but I just use a hook grip. Lock onto the chinning bar, bend your knees, and try to lift them up just as high as you can. I used to be able to touch my chest with my knees, but those days are long gone. These are killers, so you’ll never be able to do high reps. If you decided to use these for your lower abs, you’ll need to do a number of sets.” He dropped down, saying, “Try them.”

Being young and flexible, both John and Lonnie were able to touch their chests with their knees—a fact that caused them to beam in delight. Lonnie, in particular, was excited about learning all this new information. “Let me see if I got this so far. The situps and crunches hit mainly the high portion of the abs, while the leg raises, kneeups and frog kicks hit the lower.”

“That’s correct.”

“Well, that pretty well covers all the bases, doesn’t it?”

“Not completely. You have to deal with your obliques.”

“You mean the love handles.”

“Partly and also the muscles that turn the trunk from side to side.” He looked at me. “What’re they called? The technical name?”

“Transverse abdominis,” I replied.

“I already do a good exercise for my love handles,” said Lonnie. “I do them at home on my nontraining day. I hold 20-pound dumbbells and lean from side to side.” Lonnie demonstrated the movement.

“I hate to burst your bubble, son, but not only won’t those help you git rid of your love handles; they’ll make the problem worse.”

Stunned, Lonnie mumbled, “What do you mean?”

“When you lose weight, you end up making them stronger, but in the process you also make them thicker. While they may be more muscle than fat, they’re still going to look like they’re all fat.”

“Damn!” blurted Lonnie. “Well, is there anything I can do about them other than diet?”

“Try these,” Uncle Buddy said as he grabbed the broomstick that was leaning against the wall, held it straight over his head and then leaned to one side, back erect, and to the other side. “These hit the love handles, but the only trouble is, they’re boring as hell. You have to do a couple of hundred, minimum. You can do ’em at home at night, when you’re watching TV.” He stopped, handed Lonnie the stick and said, “Do 50.”

Lonnie began, and Uncle Buddy watched briefly. “Go lower,” he said. “You should feel your obliques stretch. That’s better.” When Lonnie finished, Uncle Buddy said, “While you got the stick, let me show you another good exercise for hitting those transverse abdominis muscles, which are responsible for rotating your midsection. Hold the stick behind your head like you would a bar for squatting, then twist from side to side. That’s right. I do those as part of my warmup routine. And like the side-to-side things you can do them at home.”

Lonnie did about a hundred. “Yeah, I can feel them, and I like those side-to-side ones for my love handles,” he said. “What’s your take on the wheel? My wife bought one about 10 years ago but only used it once or twice.”

“I like the wheel,” Uncle Buddy offered. “I used to carry one with me on my ships, but somebody lifted it. The thing you have to know about using the wheel is that it’s an advanced piece of ab equipment. An awful lot of people tore muscles the first time they tried them, so start out conservatively and only do 10 or 12 reps. Then work up from there. That’s another good exercise to do at home.”

“So I gather that you’re not a fan of the ab machines?”

“That’s not true. If there was one in here, I’d use it. I think they’re great, but they’re not always available. Here, let me show you a way to duplicate how the machine works.” He sat on the lat machine with his back to the weight stack. He put the bar against his forehead and pulled it downward until he was in a full-crunch position. “It’s smart to put a towel around the bar if you’re going to do a lot of reps. Try some.”

Lonnie wrapped a towel around the bar and knocked out several reps before saying, "Sure, I can feel those. Great. Oh, I know what I wanted to ask you. Should I use weight when I do situps?"

"Some Olympic weightlifters used to use weight because they wanted to get really strong abs to help them with the start of their presses. But like the side bends with dumbbells, it will make the abs appear larger. Since they didn't care about that, they held plates behind their heads. What is useful, if you can figure out a way to do it, is to add weight to your feet when you do leg raises."

"How about ankle weights? I got some of those."

"They would work."

Lonnie held out his hand, saying, "Well, I'm running late, so I have to go. I sure do thank you for all your help. Hope you drop by more often. Any final words of advice?"

"Make sure you work the muscles of your lower back hard while you're concentrating on your abs. If you can't stand good mornings, do lots of hypers with weights and also some reverse hypers."

They shook hands, Lonnie left, and we completed our workouts. That night, over a huge meal at Grumpy's, I noted, "You sure came up with plenty of ab exercises today."

He laughed. "A couple of days ago I read an article you wrote on abs."