

Rules for Big Gains

Dan John: 2011

Supersize your muscles with these 8 simple growth principles

The gym has been my home for more than four decades. Spend that much time anywhere, and you figure out what works and what doesn't. Take muscle building, for instance. The greatest fallacy of the mass-building industry is that some big-armed expert is hoarding top-secret, burn-after-reading protocols that are worth whatever he's charging for access. (Usually way too much.) The truth? There are no secrets. But there are rules. And most of them are surprisingly simple. As an athlete, I used these rules to break the American record in the Weight Pentathlon. And as a coach, I've used them to help hundreds of athletes—including Olympians—pack on double-digit pounds of beef.

One warning: Some of these rules are the opposite of what you're used to reading in fitness magazines. That's because this isn't an article that tells you how to both build muscle and lose fat. This is all about supersizing your body as fast as possible. And all it requires is a little common sense and a lot of time with a barbell.

8 SECRETS OF MASS BUILDING

1. Have a Single Goal

Building muscle and losing fat have one thing in common: Each is best accomplished when you do it to the exclusion of all else. I can't tell you how many guys with 14-inch biceps have asked me about building mass but want a guarantee that they'll keep their six-pack. While you're bulking up, you can't obsess about single-digit body fat or your finishing time in the 10-K. Pack 2 or 3 inches onto your upper arms, and then we'll talk about those other things.

2. Use Medium Reps for Maximum Gains

You'll build the most muscle by doing sets of 5 to 10 reps. They hit a "magical" intersection between heavy loads and extended time under the bar. Each generation of lifters wants to rewrite the rule book, but they all eventually come back to this system, which is the basis for the workout on this month's poster.

3. For Squats, More Is Better

About two decades ago I received good advice that I foolishly ignored: Never do fewer than 10 reps of the barbell back squat. Yes, there are always exceptions. But for most people most of the time, the extra time under the bar seems to stimulate the entire body as well as the appetite. Both are key in helping you add mass.

4. Don't Chase Variety

Good mass-building programs have very few movements. At a time when there is so much equipment to use, it's difficult for many lifters to follow a system with just eight exercises. But that's all you really need. (See "The Best Exercises for Big Muscles" on this page.) In fact, if your singular goal is pure size, then you should do them almost exclusively.

5. Always Leave 1 or 2 Reps in the Tank

It's often said that the secret to adding size is pushing your muscles past their limit, squeezing out extra reps with the help of a training partner or by sacrificing form. But most of you will reap more benefit if you end each set knowing you could've done another rep or two. It's better to do another set than to roast your muscles with forced reps.

6. Let Your Body Tell You How Long to Rest Between Sets

As a general rule for building mass, most guys need about 3 minutes between sets of squats and bench presses, and 90 seconds between sets of other movements. If you're leaving 1 or 2 reps in reserve (Rule 5), you should be able to repeat your performance from one set to the next.

7. Eat Big to Grow Big

When the goal is mass, it's difficult to eat too much. Most men eat too little. A good workout plan not only burns lots of calories but also jacks up your metabolism. If you eat just a little more than usual, you're not even breaking even. You need to eat a lot. When I put on 40 pounds in 4 months my freshman year in college, I ate sandwiches before dinner.

8. Save Your Energy

A guy who's eating to grow needs to minimize his activity outside the gym. Work hard, and rest hard. If you're playing pickup basketball between workouts, you're not resting. And if you're not resting, you're not growing. Remember, a mass-building program isn't a lifetime plan for health. It's a short, focused attempt to become bigger than you are now.

THE BEST EXERCISES FOR BIG MUSCLES

The list is short. The results are spectacular. It's not any more complicated than that.

Dumbbell Clean and Press

Muscles grow through a combination of load and time under tension. By starting each rep with the weights at your sides and then lifting them to your shoulders, you effectively double the amount of time your arm, shoulder, and upper-back muscles spend working.

Barbell Squat

I've often said that if a movement is worth doing, it's worth doing in every workout. The squat is the most important exercise for building mass. That's why, like the other exercises listed here, it's included in each workout shown on this month's poster.

Straight-Leg Deadlift

You'll do this just after squats to give your hamstrings an extra stimulus. I call it a "tonic" exercise rather than a training movement because I'm looking for a specific effect in one set of muscles.

Chest-Supported Row

Five years ago, the barbell bent-over row would've been my choice. Done correctly, it's a marvelous exercise. Done the way you often see people do it in the gym, it strains the lower back. Performing a row with your chest against a bench solves this problem; you're removing the risk to your lower back.

Pull-up

The pull-up is a double-duty movement: a great lat builder and perhaps the best ab exercise I know. I have yet to find someone who can do more than 20 pull-ups who can't also dominate any test of abdominal strength.

Barbell Bench Press

Combined with the clean and press, the bench press provides all the work you need for your chest, shoulders, and triceps.

Barbell Curl

Many experts have abandoned the barbell curl because they think it's an "isolation" exercise. But I see the strict curl (elbows aligned with the torso, no rocking, back straight) as a window into an athlete's overall strength. After all, I don't think you'll ever see a guy who can curl a lot of weight who doesn't also have big arms.

Farmer's Walk

I hate being asked what the best movement is for size and strength. But my answer is the farmer's walk. Put half of your body weight in each hand and take some steps; every inch of your body will have an opinion about what you just did.