

Slug Days

Bill Starr: 2005

And Other Valuable Recovery Aids

I've written in this space about pushing your workload higher and higher—even to the point of becoming overtrained for a short period. I've also advised you to pull back, then gradually move forward once again. Making consistent improvement depends entirely on your ability to recover sufficiently from the hard work you've done in the gym.

Recovery is closely linked to diet and rest. As there are many excellent pieces on diet in IRON MAN each month, I won't address that subject except to say that I think it's smart to follow what Peary Rader called "the shovel method" when taking supplements such as protein, vitamins, and minerals. In other words, taking more is better than taking less when you're hitting the weights heavy.

Your body can't recuperate from any strenuous exercise unless you get enough rest. What enough means is an individual matter. The notion that everyone can get along just fine with eight hours of sleep a night is ridiculous. Some people can operate well with just six or seven hours, whereas others require more. When I increased my workload to any great degree, such as when preparing for a national contest, my sleep requirements soared. I needed at least two more hours each night, or I was in deficit. So if you're dragging in the morning after sleeping eight hours, start going to bed an hour earlier.

Extra sleep costs you nothing and can make a huge difference in your training. There's more to recovery, however, than sleeping longer. If your body's going to recuperate fully and be primed for more work in the week ahead, you need to reserve a day, or at least part of a day, for making rest and relaxation the only items on your agenda. That will give your mental and physical resources a chance to regroup. Quite often, it's mental weariness more than physical fatigue that holds back your progress in the weight room.

Your day of unadulterated hedonism enables you to recover from the mental and physical stresses of the week and sets you up to improve all your lifts the following week. These pleasurable days are imperative. Missing them, whatever the reason, adversely affects your progress.

I call them slug days because if you handle them right, you'll resemble a slow-moving gastropod. It doesn't matter what day of the week you select as your slug day, just so you slug on one out of seven. A friend of mine makes Wednesday his slug day; the break in the middle of the week is perfect for his busy schedule.

My slug day has always been Saturday—not for religious reasons but because it fits my needs. I start my training and work week on Sunday, and by Friday my brain is fried and my body weary. I have to do lots of talking to myself to get through the final workout of the week. Knowing that the next day is my slug day helps a great deal.

Slug days aren't luxuries; they're necessities. I must have them if I want to continue to train at my present level and stay productive with my work.

Slugging is certainly not an original concept. It's been around for a long time. I suspect it began when a cave man first brought home that hunk of mastodon, after he and his associates had battled it for the greater part of the day, then quietly slipped to the back of the cave for an extended period of inactivity.

One of the finest examples of pure slug behavior is the character Ensign Frank T. Pulver, as portrayed by Jack Lemmon in the movie "Mr. Roberts." He elevated slugging to an art form, going so far as to employ a reaching stick to open his locker and take whatever he wanted out of it without leaving his bunk. He slugged 16 hours a day and was so successful at avoiding any form of activity that he was onboard ship for 14 months before he finally met the captain. Now, that's slugging.

Slug days aren't just for prolonged lounging, napping or consuming mass quantities of food, though they may include all those things. Slug days can take many forms. For some, the perfect way to relax and energize is to take a scenic drive or stroll through a wooded park. Others find fishing to be recreational. Keep in mind that the word recreation means to re-create, so whatever activities bring you pleasure and lift your spirits are the ones for you. A slug day is for rejuvenation, a time for recycling and recharging—a day to amass energy for future use—and no one needs that more than the hard-training strength athlete.

People have told me that they don't engage in slugging because it makes them feel guilty—with all that needs to be done around the house. The fact is, there's always something that needs to be done. Even in my modest apartment that's true. The trick is, don't look.

Let me ease your conscience about slugging with some theological support. Every religion I know of encourages one day of rest during the week. Some insist on a day of nonactivity, setting definite limits on which activities are allowed.

Slug days not only enhance your physical and mental states but also benefit you spiritually. How do we know? Check out the Ten Commandments: "Six days shalt thou labor, and do all that thou hast to do; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt do no manner of work" (Exod. 20.9-10). But wait! There's more: "And on the seventh day God finished his work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all His work which He had done in creation" (Gen. 2.2-3).

The scriptures of Christians and Jews aren't alone in advocating a day of slugging. One of my favorite religious philosophers, Lao-Tzu, teaches his followers to "retire when the work is done. This is the way of heaven." Additionally, every disciple of the Buddha knows that he enjoyed a slug day at regular intervals, often lounging under a bodhi tree for an extended period to get his thoughts straight.

Now that you have the full backing of higher powers, you can stop feeling guilty about giving yourself some genuine pleasure and factor the concept of the slug day into your weekly routine. Light exercise is the balm that soothes some people. That's fine. Just remember, on an honest-to-goodness slug day your activities have to be mild, not demanding, in nature. Otherwise they don't fit. Walking is okay; jogging is not. A leisurely drive is relaxing; driving 300 miles is not.

As a devout slugger for some 20 years, I feel that I'm well qualified to advise you how to achieve the ideal day of rest and relaxation. The following guidelines are aimed at the individual who's serious about becoming more proficient in the art of slugging. They're also for those of you who want to do some pure

slugging. They don't much apply to the more active set. That group can modify the rules to fit their lifestyles.

Rule Number One: Be prepared. You must make sure that you have ample provisions on hand for your designated slug day (DSD). You don't want to have to go to all the trouble of getting dressed, driving to the nearest supermarket or convenience store, standing in a long line and driving home and unpacking. When that happens, you've already blown the perfect slug day. It's a real bummer to discover that you're out of eggs, bread, milk, beer or whatever else you planned to indulge in on your DSD. Your mood immediately alters from mellow to irritated. I do all my food and liquid-refreshment shopping on Friday, along with any necessary errands, so that there's nothing I have to do on my DSD.

On the other hand, should I decide to drive to Havre de Grace and meander along the Promenade and perhaps stop at Goll's Bakery and pick up some cheesecake, it's a horse of a different color. That's something I want to do, not have to do. The choice determines whether I maintain the pleasant attitude that underlies the DSD. So a successful slug day requires planning; it doesn't just happen. Or, I should say, it rarely happens without some prior thought.

Rule Number Two: Less is preferred over more in terms of activity. For example, never walk when you can ride, never stand when you can sit, and never sit when you can lie down, or at least recline. You get the idea. Slugging requires that you expend as little energy as possible. While you do have to eat, keep your DSD meals simple—unless you enjoy cooking. Otherwise, spend as little time in the kitchen as possible. Often I fix my meals for my DSD ahead of time. Leftovers fill the bill nicely, as do sandwiches, soups and omelettes. Since I'm not using up many calories on my DSD, I don't require much in the way of nourishment. Even though I'm not a great fan of frozen dinners, I occasionally pop some fried chicken in the oven. Going out to eat and ordering delivery also work, but both have financial implications.

Rule Number Three (this is a biggie): Never, ever take on an assignment on your SD. Be extremely wary of any statement that begins with, "Would you mind...?" or "Could I get you to...?" or anything remotely similar. The simplest task can and usually does completely destroy a well-planned DSD. Recall when your wife insisted that you go to the airport to pick up Aunt Molly? Harmless enough, right? It's only 15 minutes away. Her flight was two hours late, you got ticketed by the airport police, and you had a flat on the way home. As a result your plans for a restful day were shot. To add insult to injury, you missed a semifinal game of NCAA basketball.

Family functions are notorious for disrupting DSDs. I never allow family pressure to stand in the way of my DSD. Unless the relative is a close one, I skip weddings, anniversaries, birthdays and funerals. If a distant cousin is being dropped in the ground on my intended DSD, I don't agree to go, no matter how much anyone tries to persuade me out of guilt or family obligation. I merely send flowers. Trust me—the deceased isn't going to care whether I showed up. When an event involves someone I'm quite fond of, however, I do attend and move my DSD to another day of the week.

Rule Number Four: Unplug your phone. The telephone is the most annoying, intrusive device invented by man. Can you ever remember anyone calling you to give you something? Callers always want something. Usually it's money, although sometimes a friend just wants to unburden his or her soul for a half hour or more. Meanwhile, the football game is in overtime, and you're missing it. Or the country-music award show has just started and Shania is the opening act. I'm often advised to get a cell phone. Then, I'm informed, I can watch TV while I talk. I have an even better idea—turn the ringer off the phone

I already own. Whenever I do have the urge to speak with someone, I can make the call and sign off when I feel I've talked long enough.

Lastly, I want to mention sex on the DSD. The rules concerning that satisfying act aren't cut and dried. Sex is permissible on DSDs only if it doesn't entail a great deal of time and trouble. In the words of the great Casey Stengel, "It isn't sex that wrecks these guys, it's staying up all night looking for it." Same holds true of sex on DSDs. If your entire day revolves around getting lucky or you spend hours engaged in what amounts to sexual combat, then you're defeating the purpose of the DSD. On the other hand, if the missus just received a set of lingerie from Victoria's Secret and wants to see what effect it will have on you, seize the opportunity. Or if a loose leg unexpectedly shows up at your door, don't pass it up. From what most of my lifting friends' wives and girlfriends tell me, the sex act with their partners is so brief in duration that it can't remotely be considered physically demanding. So sex is okay, as is anything else you enjoy that doesn't tap your mental and physical reservoirs too deeply.

While gardening or tinkering with your old Ford truck might be relaxing for you, they both reek of work in my world. I much prefer watching TV and country videos, or reading or drawing. The point: Whatever fits your personality is what you should do.

Many of you may be at a stage of life where you're simply too busy to consider having a DSD. Family and/or work obligations are so demanding that to set aside a day for total relaxation is out of the question. I've been there. During those periods of life, partial slug days (PSDs) can serve as welcome breaks. Just a few hours spent at your hobby can help recharge your emotional and physical resources and set you up for a more productive week ahead.

Then there are the times of life when finding even a few free hours for self-indulgent activities is difficult. When I lived in Oahu, I worked two jobs: as the strength coach at the University of Hawaii during the day and as a bouncer at Hula's Bar and Lei Stand at night. At one stretch I worked 100 consecutive days without a break. I did manage to slip in a few PSDs, but not many.

Naps were my salvation. To me, naps are gifts from the gods. Between jobs I'd fall asleep for 20 or 30 minutes and wake up revived and invigorated. The brief respite enabled me to stay active until 3 or 4 a.m. I was good at finding places to nap. When I worked for the YMCA, I used the massage room. When I was unable to come up with a couch or vacant floor indoors, I resorted to the backseat of my car. Naps have always renewed me and form a part of my daily routine.

Naps frequently get a bad rap in our society. Those who nap regularly are considered lazy. I don't agree. Some of the most productive people in American history were nappers. Thomas Edison was said to nap on anything, anywhere and at any time. Eleanor Roosevelt had similar talents, often napping while sitting in a chair. Benjamin Franklin liked to nap in the morning, while Winston Churchill preferred early afternoon. Ronald Reagan was known to slip in several naps throughout the day.

Sleep psychologists have found that, far from being counterproductive, as many believe, napping has a positive effect on mood, mental functioning and workplace performance. Researcher Dr. Frederick Evans discovered that there's a brief lull after waking from a nap but that once you're past that, both motor and cognitive skills are much better for the duration of the day. "There is a general feeling of well-being," says Evans, "and a feeling of being alert enough to do difficult mental tasks."

Dr. John Taub, former director of the Sleep and Performance Lab at St. Louis University, reports that habitual nappers feel increased relaxation, decreased anxiety, an increase in euphoria and a decrease in fatigue. Sure sounds good to me, and I think it's high time we gave naps the respect they deserve.

Recovery is based on rest more than any other variable. Get the sleep you need every night and start incorporating DSDs and naps into your weekly schedule. When you're fully recuperated, the weights suddenly feel lighter, and nothing feels better than that to a serious strength athlete.