

SOME IDEAS ABOUT MUSCLE GAIN

Dan John

First, and foremost, I think that the two most misunderstood and difficult concepts in strength training are 1. fat loss and 2. muscle gain.

The same principles apply to both fat loss and muscle gain. The overriding concern is that either goal is very specific and outside the norm for most people in the United States. A typical approach leads to fat gain and poor sports performance. In my humble opinion, I offer these ideas for “muscle gain:”

My first idea is to “embrace puberty.” The greatest growth spurt of my life was my first four months with Dick Notmeyer and the Pacifica Barbell Club program. What I often fail to mention is that I also went through that “secondary growth spurt” that most men go through in their teen years. I was eighteen, but for Irish guys, late puberty is not uncommon.

So, how do you embrace puberty? One thing all parents of teens complain about is that “my kid sleeps all day.” First, sleep more. Second, sleep more, third, sleep more. The Cuban Olympic lifters reportedly sleep nine and a half hours at night, plus a two and a half hour nap each afternoon. My math skill may suck, but sleeping twelve hours a day comes out to half the day asleep!

You will ignore this point, everyone does. The first thing to do to increase muscle mass is to sleep more. Cover your windows in your bedroom with an additional blanket, toss a towel over your LCD on the alarm clock, and stuff towels under the door to block out light and sound. Quit talking to sexy vixen in the chatroom, stop watching reruns of “Friends,” and go to bed early. Now, when I went through my growth spurt, I had a helluva time falling asleep, but couldn’t get up in the morning. I later “taught” myself to fall asleep with Bud Winter’s book, “Relax and Win.” There are dozens of tapes and books available now to help one fall asleep faster. I combined several of my favorites and made a “sleep tape.” Now, I can fall asleep quickly and anywhere. Weekends are another thing: if you party every weekend evening, not only do you risk other problems, but you are cutting into a great opportunity to sleep. I am not trying to be a martyr, but I gave up “partying” in Junior College so I could get my goal of an athletic scholarship. It worked, a short-term sacrifice led to long-term success.

I have always used acne breakouts with my athletes as a sign that “something” was going on. Very often, acne shows up when they were overtraining. I would discover that they were on a CYO basketball team that played and practiced four nights a week plus doing the throwing sessions and the lifting work. Or, they were cheating on their nutritional stuff. But, keep a “zit chart” in your diary. It is often a great way to plot problems and find answers.

Along with this, you need to eliminate soft drinks and simple sugars. Arthur deVany has a lot of information on this in his new book, but the simple answer is that these addictive substances also play havoc with your Insulin system and can smash natural hormone production. Don’t believe me? Go to Las Vegas and look at “your fellow Americans.” Go to Disneyland and watch “the balloon people.” The single best diet decision I ever made was giving up soda for Lent in the eighth grade. I never went back and I have reaped the benefits of a long athletic career (there are other reasons, too).

Weight gain advice, step one: Sleep more and dump sugar. Obviously, you are going to lift weights. The essential truth of the whole thing comes in a few layers. One, the really important muscles in sports are the ones you see “when you are walking away.” The traps, the spinal erectors, the glutes, the hams and the calves usually don’t get a lot of media attention. But, this chain of muscles are the ones that make the discus fly and the running backs fall hard. I looked at a picture of myself in Junior College that my daughter has in this collage and I don’t look impressive. People thought I weighed 170-180, but I snatched 260, clean and jerked 319 and was an All-American JC disc thrower. But, I didn’t look all that big at 208. That is the next hard truth, go to McDonalds and buy forty quarter pounders and stick the meat patties all over your body. That represents ten pounds of muscle gain. It might get you arrested, but these ten pounds are going to really improve your athletic ability. But, it might not “look” that different.

If you focus on the pecs and biceps, you will see it in the mirror, but not on the field of play. I would recommend that you first master an excellent back squat technique. Chest up, lower back locked in, and “ass to the grass.” I like the sequence of a young Dimas, although they seemed to have removed it off of his website. (I could email it to you.) He sits deep and comes up. Next, you should master the power clean. I follow Bob Bednarski’s advice on weight gain: squat three times a week and power clean twice. It works. Now, if you are working with me, I would teach you to snatch, too, but a deep squat and power clean is going to do wonders for you. But, I am serious about “mastery” here: read all you can, look at pictures, ask questions, and take these lifts seriously. A good idea is to go back to last year’s football programs and find the weight of the heaviest guy you will play. Make it a goal of power cleaning that “gentleman” for reps. I play in a five on five league and I can snatch anybody we play. I win a lot of close plays. Supplements are for health only! Go cheap. My mom got me on Vitamin E and I continue to take this today. I also like Magnesium and Potassium. These three will cost pennies a day. Again, most of your real “bang” comes from food, but I have yet to work with a high school kid that doesn’t want to hear supps before supper.

Food? I am a high protein nut, but you are going to have to have protein at every meal. The Zone guys recommend splitting your plate into three parts: protein, veggies, and grains. (I don’t eat grains.) Not a bad idea, really. Every meal, eat a third of a plate of protein. It is simple and mom won’t freak at the grocery bills as much. (In my case, mom used to really get angry because I used to have a meal before we would have a meal.)

You will regret fat gain either during the season or as an adult. Focusing on muscle gain is probably a better way to go. Have some kind of measuring stick: I always liked the standing long jump. There just aren’t many tricks with this thing and you can gauge your training successes. Take some practice attempts weekly, but only do it serious every three weeks or so. Finally, if you don’t have a journal or diary, you are spinning your wheels. Record your mood, your weight, your day, and your training. Add little insights, too, like I said before, the zit chart has some value, if applicable. In addition, I kept a little “Red Book” where I kept ideas, programs and quotes that caught my eye. One of my favorite lines: “The Russians recommend squats and power cleans for success.” Just a gem I came across and I still add little lines now and again. I had been working on a little article, but the following is a rough draft of it. It is a summary of my thoughts on the real secret: It is a hard concept to understand. It comes under many titles, but I like “hard work.” As simple as it may sound, the ability to “train hard” is almost unfathomable to most young trainees.

As a high school football coach, I dealt with a lot of injuries. Football is a series of collisions and people get hurt. The ability to play “hurt” is one of qualities that separates the good players from the poor players. Trust me: it is not a question of speed or size. In fact, we have a little mantra: “Looks like Tarzan, plays like Jane.” Sexist, yes, but every coach has stories about the number of athletes who look great in the uniform yet you would be liable for manslaughter if you let them in a game.

Injuries happen to the good players, too. In fact, I often found that a good player returns from an injury (a non-season ending injury) as a better football player than when he got hurt. Why? I usually asked the injured athlete just to do one thing: watch practice.

As a teacher, I also asked them to write a one-page overview of what they watched all week. Pat, a sophomore quarterback, couldn’t stop at one page. In fact, he couldn’t stop talking about what he had seen during his short layoff.

“It is all so clear,” Pat said. “I see why you are always yelling ‘push it’ and ‘let’s get going.’” What had become obvious to Pat is that the team was outside, they moved around and there was a football. But, we weren’t practicing hard. In a week off with a shoulder injury, he understood what I had preached all season. Yes, we were sweating and breathing hard, but not really getting over the threshold into hard work. Not surprisingly, we didn’t lose any more sophomore games that year. When the quarterback understands hard work, the team follows. But, without the injury, I couldn’t really explain it to him.

During my college years, Arnold’s book, “The Education of a Bodybuilder,” hit the bookstores. For a few years, every college weightroom in America had dozens of frat boys lining up to get their supersets and five sets of leg extensions finished before moving to calf raises. What I also witnessed was a complete misunderstanding of Arnold’s methods: yes, there was the screaming and the shouts of “one more rep,” but most trainees weren’t doing hard work!

What? They screamed, they shouted and, I am sure, they ended up sore. But, like my good friends Doug and Ace, they didn’t make any progress. Why? In their quest for more reps and more soreness, they missed the guiding principle of progression: **MORE WEIGHT!**

Instead of adding plates each workout, they stayed with 135 on the squat, well, half-squat. Rather than pushing the iron from floor to ceiling, they grabbed a dumbbell and isolated the muscle. But, there wasn’t any muscle to isolate! Screaming, yelling, and soreness are all too often mistaken for hard work. Try to find a bodybuilding spa that you can have a conversation. Beyond the screaming, the music is played so loud it is impossible to concentrate. But, that is not hard work.

So, what is it? You know, ... I don’t know, but I know it when I see it. Go to a local Olympic lifting meet and watch a teenager pull his first bodyweight snatch. Look at the face, the technique and the effort. Go watch somebody flip an eighteen-foot caber at a Highland Games. These examples represent the effects of hard work. Watch someone try to achieve that crazy standard of fifteen reps with bodyweight in the overhead squat that was pushed by that maniac throws coach in California. This is just another way to measure hard work.

You see, that is the point: you can’t always measure hard work by the workout! It may be better to measure by the effects. In a recent issue of the Dino Files, we were all given the Bob Hoffman “Gold, Silver and Bronze” chart. The challenge is simple: pick out a number of these lifts and try to get the standard. To be honest, I was humbled by the one-arm snatches. I realized how much

more I needed to do to get to that “bronze medal” level. Let’s not even talk about the Gold for a few months. Maybe years. Hard work. It may be impossible to measure hard work in the tight confines of a single workout. So, how can we start measuring, testing if you will, our approach to really understanding? As a theologian, I can’t help myself but with starting with the “not’s.” First, don’t measure hard work by the completion of a set workout. True, York Course Three is one of the toughest programs ever outlined with its combination of one-arm movements, Olympic lifts, and classic moves. But, simply finishing a program by going through the motions with underweight bars and dumbbells is, well, toning! A seventy-page workout with spreadsheets and percentages weigh more than most of the lifts some people use in training. It isn’t the paper, it’s the plates that matter.

Second, be careful about using the mirror and measurements to check your hard work status. Having a wasp waist and Herculean Shoulders is as much the luck of the genetic draw as anything else. And, yes, you can build a marvelous body on a steady diet of drugs and pumping. Of course, you might look like Tarzan, ...

Third, don’t measure hard work by noises you make, chalk you eat, sweat pools on the floor, or smell of the gym. Step aerobics’ classes are loud and sweaty. But try to get our leotarded steppers to launch a caber. Yelling, shouting, screaming all have their place, but NFL games have the same thing.

So, how do I measure hard work. Simply, achieve difficult goals. As one of my favorite authors, Cervantes, wrote: “It’s the road, not the inn.” The journey to difficult goals is hard work. Pull out Hoffman’s Gold, Silver and Bronze list and circle ten lifts. (The Hoffman Standards ...I will save you the work)Stepping up to the Bronze standard, especially in the one-hand lifts, is worthy of any strength enthusiast. Anyone able to do the entire Gold standard would certainly be in the top one percent of the strength community.