The Big 3

Bill Starr: 2005

Keep it Simple to Build Your Temple

During the past year I've received a pile of requests from IRON MAN readers and friends to look over their programs. They're all stuck and want some advice on how to move forward again. In every instance I find the same problem—they're trying to do far too much, either for their current strength level, their age or both. I look over a list of exercises that would make top competitive weightlifters and bodybuilders cringe.

Even so, when I suggest that they should eliminate at least half of the exercises, they insist that they need to do them all if they want a complete full-body workout. Well, I reply, if you're preparing for the Mr. Olympia contest or the Olympic lifting Nationals, then perhaps you do need to hit all those groups individually. That is, if you have a couple of hours a day in which to train, have a surplus of funds to buy all the supplements you'll need to aid your recovery and don't have to worry about earning an income. Otherwise, you're doing too much.

When a program includes a dozen or so exercises, you end up spreading your energy too thin to allow you to make substantial gains. You can't recuperate from the long sessions in the gym, and since you're not giving enough attention to any one muscle group, everything stays the same. Or worse. In many cases the numbers start slipping backward.

Keep in mind that I'm referring to beginners and intermediates. Advanced strength athletes can do a great deal more work in the gym and recover from it. That's due to the fact that over an extended period of diligent training they've established a wide, firm foundation of strength. Most trainees who will read this are not in that category.

The notion of simplicity in strength training has gotten lost in recent years. Currently, any program worth its salt must include lots of exercises done on specialized machines, and, of course, there have to be a few gimmicks such as large balls and chains thrown in for good measure. After all, that's what the modern athlete needs to be competitive—which is pure bullshit.

The truth of the matter is, gyms that feature only the most rudimentary equipment—like those found in basements and garages—where the athletes build their routines around a few primary movements, turn out stronger men than the multiexercise programs in la-di-da facilities.

Another primary reason that so many programs have so many exercises in them is the influence of articles that appear in fitness magazines. I look at programs that fill an entire page and shake my head, wondering, What is a beginner to think? Most likely that the authors are experts and know what they're talking about. If they say that I need to do 15 exercises in a session, that's what I'll do. And since the gym is filled with machines, it only makes sense to use all of them.

So, instead of hammering away on full squats, our beginner moves from machine to machine, working his legs in a variety of fashions. It's a good idea on paper, but it doesn't get the results that attacking a primary exercise and using a couple of machines for auxiliary work does. There's also the point that few like to admit: Working on a machine is easier than doing free-weight exercises.

Understand that your body only has so much energy for training, and once you've tapped that supply, you're not going to make any further progress on that day. When you continue to pound away, even on the smaller muscle groups, all you're doing is fatiguing the muscles and attachments, which will adversely affect your next workout. In other words, you're overtraining.

To gain strength, you need to do one primary exercise for each of the three major muscle groups: shoulder girdle, back and hips and legs. Then add a few auxiliary movements for the smaller groups, and leave the gym.

Whenever a beginner follows that course, gains come consistently—and there's no doubt in my mind that the greatest motivator in the weight room is making regular progress. Nothing—well, almost nothing—feels as great as improving one of your primary lifts. Achieving a personal record makes you eager to get back in the gym for your next session. In contrast, if you're stuck on every lift, you'll be inclined to skip the next workout, flop on the couch and watch TV.

I should mention that using too many exercises in a program is not a new development. I pointed a finger at machines for being partly responsible, but in truth trainees started doing it long before the machines came on the market. In the late 1960s strength training for athletes made a huge leap forward due largely to the articles published in Strength & Health and Iron Man about sports teams and individual athletes using heavy weights to improve their performances.

Football led the way. The San Diego Chargers, under strength coach Alvin Roy, had a tremendous influence on the mind-sets of college and high school coaches. If the pros lifted weights, we should too, was the thinking. Tommy Suggs and I took it upon ourselves to go forth and preach the gospel of strength training to the masses. We were in ideal positions to be considered authorities on the subject: Tommy was the managing editor of Strength & Health, and I was his assistant. We'd both won national titles in Olympia lifting and had represented the York Barbell Club, the national-team champion. That gave us an in, and we began putting on demonstrations and clinics at high schools and colleges in the area. Bob Hoffman understood the financial implications of what we were doing and backed us 100 percent—although, I should add, we never received anything extra in our paychecks for our efforts. Even so, we surged on. We were on a mission.

One of the biggest gatherings for football coaches in the east was a convention held in the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C. We secured a booth for York Barbell, lugged in weights, a bench and a power rack, boxes of magazines plus an array of Hoffman's nutritional products to put on display. For 2 1/2 days we talked with coaches and taught them how to do lifts that we thought would be beneficial for their athletes, and we told them of the value of protein milkshakes to help their kids pack on muscular bodyweight.

While we gave them information, we also learned a great deal from them. Those dedicated men were doing their utmost to put together functional routines for their athletes with a minimum of equipment and know-how. Unlike what happens today, there were no resources they could turn to for help in formulating a strength program. For the most part it was hit and miss. What they all had in common was, they had very little in the way of equipment, usually just a bar or two and some plates, and not much time in which to train the athletes. Many of the students had to catch the bus after school.

On the drive back to York, Tommy and I analyzed all the input we'd received from the coaches. We determined that what they needed was a very simple program that could be done in a limited space with a small amount of equipment and in a short period of time. Plus, the exercises had to be easy to learn.

We concluded that three exercises would be enough to get the job done. It goes without saying that our selection of three exercises rather than four, five or six was based on our background in Olympic lifting. Bodybuilders often did multiple movements in their routines, but weightlifters did only three: one for the back, one for the legs and one for the shoulders, all with the competitive lifts in mind—military press, snatch and clean and jerk.

The best exercise for the legs was a no-brainer. Nothing can compare with full squats. For back we toyed with the deadlift but decided that since these were athletes, the power clean would be more useful, as it actually enhances athletic attributes while improving back strength. For the upper body we believed that the incline-bench press was a better exercise for athletes than the flat-bench press because it put more emphasis on the shoulders. We also knew, however, that the coaches didn't have incline benches at their disposal. Some didn't even have flat benches. One coach told us he had his players do their bench presses on the benches in the locker room. So we chose the flat-bench press—easy to teach, and it did work all the groups in the upper body thoroughly.

Research revealed that the best formula for developing strength was to do four to six sets of four to six reps. Knowing that many of the coaches would be dealing with 40 or more kids, we kept the program simple as well. Five sets of five fit the guidelines and would make calculation much easier. Three days a week would get the job done, with the athletes using the heavy-light-and-medium system.

By the time we got back to York, we felt confident that we'd come up with a good program. We called it The Big Three. Still, it was only a theory. We needed test subjects, and we got them. Whenever we went to a high school to put on an exhibition, we handed out the program. We also wrote about it in the magazine and sent copies to interested parties.

The real boost came the following year, when we went back to the Washington convention. We gave out copies of The Big Three to every coach who came to our booth, which was all of them. We also put on a demonstration to show how to do the lifts correctly, allowing the coaches to try them as well. Many wanted to know what auxiliary exercises they might include in the routine. We gave them some ideas, suggesting ones that required no extra equipment, such as straight-arm pullovers and curls with the bar, freestanding calf raises and chins. You can do chins almost anywhere—if you use your imagination. I've done them off rafters and garage door frames. We advised the coaches to keep the auxiliary work to a minimum, no more than two sets of fairly high reps, 15 to 20.

A month later we got a call from Captain Ed Schantz, who was in charge of strength conditioning at the United States Naval Academy. He asked us to assist him in organizing his program.

When the Marine captain showed us the program he was using, Tommy and I looked at one another and chuckled. Tommy informed him that he was doing too many exercises, and the captain explained that he was trying to include one exercise for each bodypart. "You've done a fine job of selecting exercises to work the entire body," I said, "but it's too much of a good thing." Then Tommy and I gave him the

reasons why we believed that condensing a workout into three exercises rather than spreading it out over 16 was more productive.

The captain grasped the concept and agreed to give it a try—that is, if we'd teach him and his athletes how to power clean. And that's what we did, along with helping them with form points on the squat and bench. The following afternoon we received a call from the captain. He told us happily that he'd gotten so sore from doing power cleans that he could barely get out of bed that morning. He was a believer.

While the feedback we were getting from those using The Big Three routine was positive, it wasn't until we returned to the coaches convention in D.C. that we knew for certain that we'd formulated a good program. The coaches poured into our booth with glowing reports of their successes. Their players were much bigger and stronger than before, which resulted in a much better season.

The most impressive account came from a junior varsity coach in Virginia. The previous year his team had gone 1–9, and he was on the brink of being replaced. He installed The Big Three after talking with Tommy and me and encouraged his team to start drinking lots of protein milkshakes. With pride he informed us that he'd just concluded an undefeated season. His players had gained so much bodyweight that he was accused of giving them steroids—a fact that delighted him to no end. Since that time I've used The Big Three with athletes in every sport you can think of, and it works for all of them. A good program is one that produces results, and the best are plain and simple, not drawn out and complicated. Putting all your energy into just a few primary lifts is certainly not a new idea in strength training. It's the way all the great Olympic lifters trained. Most only did the three lifts and squats. Hell, Milo only did one exercise and became a legend.

I'd guess that every reader knows the story of when Arnold loaded a barbell and some plates in his car and drove with some lifting buddies into the country, where they spent the day doing full squats. Now, that's specialized training, and it got the results they were seeking. The concentrated work jarred their legs into another level of strength and growth. Had they gone to a gym and spent the same amount of time doing a variety of leg exercises, they'd never have achieved the same benefits.

Keeping your program simple doesn't mean you have to do the same exercises at every workout. Even The Big Three graduates to more advanced movements, although the principle of only working three primary exercises per session remains intact. So you might do power cleans, squats and benches at one workout; deadlifts, lunges and inclines at the next and finish up the week with squats, military presses and shrugs—or any variation of that idea.

At the extreme end of the simplicity scale there are those who thrived on doing only one exercise per workout. At one point a few of my former Hopkins athletes contacted me. They were so busy with their jobs—always in the financial field—that they couldn't find the time to go to the gym three days a week and train for an hour and a half. I suggested that they go to the gym as often as possible, perhaps during lunch hour, and do just one exercise for 30 minutes. If they could manage to get in four or five sessions a week, they would at least be able to stay in decent shape.

A few advanced strength athletes have taken this idea of one exercise per workout to a more radical level. George Hecter is a homegrown product who started training with me when he was in high school. After several years of training he did a routine in which he concentrated on one of the contested powerlifts for the entire workout, more than an hour and a half. They were extremely demanding

sessions and not for the fainthearted, but they paid huge dividends for him. He went on to win the heavyweight title in powerlifting and competed in the World's Strongest Man competition.

A perfect example of the type of program I'm talking about can be found in the January '05 IRON MAN. John Balik laid out a routine for his 15-year-old son, Justin, that consisted of three core exercises—deadlift, squat and bench press—along with four mild auxiliary movements and some ab work. The workload was low, which is an important consideration for any beginner. This is an ideal routine for any beginner, young and old.

So if you've hit a wall in your training, try simplifying your program. It may mean dropping several exercises or shifting them around to enable you to apply your full energy to a few primary movements. Do that, and I assure you that you'll start making gains once again.