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SPECIAL REPORT

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Common Bodybuilding Mistakes To Avoid

by Jerry Brainum

It's Not a Fool Who Makes a Mistake;
It's a Fool Who Makes a Mistake Twice.
—old Chinese proverb

Many bodybuilders make the same mistakes repeatedly. They aren't fools, as the title of this article might suggest; they just don't know any better. You'd think that with all the available information on training in books, courses, videotapes, magazines and from private trainers today, few people would err so often, but they do.

These errors stem from a common origin: ignorance. Often it's a case of the blind leading the blind. Some people, for example, are trained by self-styled experts who call themselves personal trainers. I've seen dozens of people hire a personal trainer, train with him or her for two months and then start their own personal training business. Such people are under the vastly mistaken impression that you can learn everything you need to know about exercise in two months.

Other sources of information are inaccurate. I once interviewed a top professional bodybuilder, who then was interviewed by two other writers within a two-day period. He told each of us a totally different version of how he trains. When questioned about this he replied, "Why should I tell my competitors what I'm really doing?"

Most bodybuilders aren't reticent about revealing their true training/dieting methods, but some are as insecure as the fellow mentioned above.

The problem is that many people believe the hogwash handed out in some magazine articles. The person who ends up in trouble is the hapless bodybuilder who tries to follow some of this poor advice.

Here, then, is a partial survey of common mistakes made by many bodybuilders. Since these mistakes often stem from false beliefs, I hope this article will serve to enlighten those lost in the mire of bodybuilding falsehoods.

General Training Errors

1) Using too much weight. It's true that muscles grow in response to overload; that is, to make a muscle larger, you must gradually increase resistance until a muscle adapts to the resistance through added size. Some bodybuilders take this truth too far, however. They sacrifice proper form for sheer weight. Very often this removes stress from the targeted muscle and disperses it to assisting muscles, thus reducing the benefits.



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In barbell curls, for example, some bodybuilders cheat by throwing the weight. This removes resistance from the targeted muscle (biceps) and deflects it to the lower back and shoulders. By lowering direct resistance to the biceps, you nullify the benefit of added weight and increase injury potential.

2) Overtraining. Contrary to what some people think, the human body has a finite ability to recover from intense training sessions. Some aspects of recovery, such as muscle glycogen repletion, can take 48 hours. If you train a muscle before its glycogen supply is replenished, you risk damage to the muscle and loss of muscle size. To paraphrase an old wine commercial, "Never train a muscle before its time."

What constitutes overtraining, however, varies with training experience. Arthur Jones, inventor of the Nautilus machines, was a bit dogmatic about what he called the "recovery factor." He claimed that no one needs to do more than two sets of any exercise. Later his follower, Mike Mentzer, a former Mr. Universe, echoed similar training ideas. The problem was that Jones and Mentzer were too narrow in their estimate of recovery ability. In essence, some people have better recovery ability than others.

There is a limit though. The only way to find your personal tolerance is through experimentation. If you feel burned out and tired, you obviously are overtrained. By cutting back on your training, you'll experience a new surge of both gains and enthusiasm.

3) Following someone else's routine. No two people are exactly alike; therefore, no training program is ideal for everyone. You must make adjustments for your body. Back in the early '70s I watched Arnold Schwarzenegger go through dozens of training partners. Arnold would train with anyone in those days, the only requirement being the other person use his routine. Arnold constantly improved, especially before a contest; but many of his training partners didn't fare as well. Their mistake was in believing that training exactly like Arnold produces similar results. Such a system would work only if Arnold had an identical twin (sounds like a good movie idea!).

This doesn't mean that you should completely eschew training partners; it means that you must make adjustments necessary for your body and not blindly follow someone else's exact routine.

Midsection Mistakes

Probably the most frequent training mistakes occur with abdominal training. Twenty years ago bodybuilders did hundreds of reps of ab work in the belief that high reps burned fat. What they were burning was calories; they could have obtained better results from aerobics, since spot reducing proved to be a false idea. Today we know that the body burns fat systemically, not just in one specified area.

Surprisingly, many people still do abdominal work to "reduce a gut." Abdominal exercise



photo by Mike Neveux

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does tone the waist area, but losing fat is largely a matter of combining fewer calories with aerobic exercise. Aerobic exercise is a superior fat burner because it uses large muscle groups (such as the legs) that burn larger amounts of calories. Because of the characteristic high oxygen intake associated with aerobics, this type of exercise is also the most direct fat burner.

While many abdominal exercises aren't bad in the sense that they hurt you, some are ineffective. This relates to the function of the abdominals, which is to shorten the distance between the sternum and the pelvic bones. It's a limited range of motion. The clearest example of this is the crunch, or partial sit-up. If you go past the crunch, you are no longer training abs; you are training the deep lying hip flexor muscles.

Most abdominal exercises are actually hip flexor exercises. An example of this is knee raises, by which you hang from an overhead bar and bring your bent knees up toward your chest. The only way to involve the abs in this exercise is to curve your torso and bring your knees up to your face. The way most bodybuilders do this exercise does little or nothing to develop impressive abs.

Regular leg raises are also a hip flexor exercise but have the added disadvantage of causing an inward curvature of the lower back (lordosis) that aggravates lower-back problems.

You may say at this point, "But why do I feel these exercises so strongly in my abdominals?" The answer is that the abdominals remain under tension when you're doing these exercises, but the muscle doesn't fully contract—so the exercise has little or no value. Imagine holding a barbell in a curling position but not moving the weight. You would definitely feel muscle tension, but would you get big biceps from such training?

Chest Training

The common error here is doing too many bench presses and neglecting the upper-pectoral area. In most people the lower pecs are easy to build, especially by doing lots of bench presses. But after doing only flat-bench work, you'll develop an imbalance between the upper and lower pecs, with a noticeable lack of muscle density in the upper area.

You can do bench presses, but make sure you include more upper-pec exercises, such as incline presses and incline flyes. Doing bench presses to the neck is also great for thickening a deficient upper chest.

Shoulder Training

While various types of shoulder press exercises help to thicken the shoulders, they do little to improve the shape in this area. For this you need to do side laterals and rear laterals.



Model: B.J. Quinn, Equipment: Ab Bench, Home Gym Warehouse, 1-800-447-0008

photo by Mike Neveux

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Many bodybuilders frequently neglect the rear deltoid, which results in a lopsided, unbalanced deltoid development that looks especially bad from side and back angles.

Usually, doing more than one pressing exercise during a shoulder routine is wasted effort. Top professional bodybuilder Vince Cornerford succinctly points out why he does only one pressing exercise for shoulders by noting, "Why travel down the same street twice." All pressing exercises concentrate mainly on the front deltoid, so why do two or three press exercises when they all work the same area?

Back Mistakes

The problems here involve poor form and incomplete range of exercise motion. In bent-over rowing exercises it's common to see excessive body motion, or throwing the weight. This places excessive strain on the lower back that often results in serious injury.

Another problem is not doing a full contraction. Many bodybuilders like to use a 150-pound dumbbell for one-arm rows and raise the weight about four inches. Then they wonder why they lack back development. Take a hint from Lee Haney, who uses only a 75-pound dumbbell in one-arm rows, yet he has developed one of the most impressive backs in bodybuilding history. He goes all the way up.



Thigh Training

When doing squats, some bodybuilders drop down too fast and bounce on their knees. This inevitably leads to damaged knees. Research shows that squats don't harm knee joints unless you use poor form. Do the exercise slow and controlled for best results.

If you do leg extensions, start the exercise with your knees in a 90-degree angle to your feet. Any more than this hyperextends the knee joint, which lacks protection at this angle. Doing leg extensions in poor form is just as dangerous as doing squats in poor form.

Calf Training

When doing standing calf raises, always keep your knee joint locked. Doing this exercise with bent knees shifts the focus from calves to the large, flat muscle lying beneath the calves (soleus). It's better to reserve the soleus work for exercises such as seated calf raises.

Arm Training

The primary error with arm training is excessive cheating and failure to do a complete range of motion. Make sure you do full reps, and lower the weight all the way for full muscle development. With triceps training it's important to warm up the elbow joint with a few light, high-rep (15 repetitions or more) sets to prevent injuries.

This list is by no means exhaustive but it does point out a few common errors that could slow down gains. **IM**