

The truth about periodization

■ Once you get beyond the beginner stage of weight training—where you can do just about anything and see progress—you need to learn to “periodize” your workouts. Periodization is a general term for any plan that allows you to make long-term gains while avoiding plateaus and injury, but the concept itself doesn’t have to be as complicated as its name. “You can add weight to your exercises,” says Jason Ferruggia, a strength coach and author in Los Angeles, “Basically, change the exercises, do more reps, sets, or rest less between sets.” Change everything, in turn, over time, and then change again as needed.

Of course, there are more sophisticated and organized systems of periodization out there aimed at strength, muscle size, and sports performance, but one approach isn’t necessarily better than

another, provided it’s well thought out and goal oriented.

Try gathering a bunch of trainers together, though, and most of them will argue till their protein shakes turn sour that one system trumps all others. Fortunately, research is showing otherwise.

This year, the *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* compared two different programs and their effects on strength in rugby players. One was an old-fashioned linear periodization model, where subjects started off using lighter weights and a high volume of sets and then progressed to heavy weights and low volume. The other used undulating periodization, where the sets and reps change each workout. Ultimately, both groups made gains, and there was no significant difference between the groups.

Last year, a study in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* pitted linear peri-



Rope in the gains.
Learning to plan your own training is something to jump up and down about.

odization against block periodization, another common approach in which trainees work toward one specific goal (size, strength, power) at a time in specified training blocks. At the end of 15 weeks, the block group saw better gains in bench press strength, but there were no differences in lower-body

strength or body composition.

“I think [all types of periodization] work, and there isn’t a huge advantage in one over the other,” says Ferruggia. “This is especially true for guys at a novice to intermediate level—which is most of us.”

So if everything works, why are so few getting the results they want? “The guys who never get anywhere are the overanalyzers,” says Ferruggia. “They’re always searching for the perfect program, the best angle for their bench on incline presses.” They end up changing programs too often to give any one enough time to work. But if they (or you) knew the principles that make a good program, and follow them long term, they could make gains indefinitely. These include the following (at left).

For examples of programs that work, go to mensfitness.com.

HARD FACTS

OUR TRAINING DIRECTOR, SEAN HYSON, SOLVES YOUR WORKOUT CONUNDRUMS

“How much cardio do I need to burn fat?”

CEDRIC L., DANBURY, CT

■ Consider this: A hard aerobic workout can burn about 500 calories in an hour, but a meal of chicken, rice, and vegetables is around 400 calories. Even when you work very hard to burn calories you can easily replace them with food.

What about HIIT? Well, high-intensity interval training is helpful, but a bit overblown. Proponents argue that it revs your metabolism for hours after the workout, but this isn’t as dramatic as it sounds. A review in the *Journal of Sports Science* found that this metabolic effect only amounted to, at best, 15% of the calories you burned in the session. So if you burned 300 calories, you may burn an additional 45 over the next day. Whoop de doo.

I’m not saying to cut out cardio, but controlling calories with your diet is more impactful. With that said, a cardio regimen can include up to five days of moderate activity for 30–60 minutes, and two days of interval sessions for 20 minutes.

Sean Hyson, C.S.C.S., is the Men’s Fitness training director and author of 101 Best Workouts of All Time. 101bestworkouts.com.



JAMES MICHELFELDER

The Principles of Muscle Gain

Follow these four tenets to Shredsville

Balance. You won’t make any progress if you’re hurt. A program that doesn’t include at least as many sets of pulling exercises as it does pushing will set you up for shoulder injury. You also need time for recovery, so make sure your workouts are spaced appropriately and don’t lift heavy more than three times a week. “If you’re over 35, it’s never necessary to go heavy,” says Ferruggia.

Challenge. There’s a reason squats and bench presses are used frequently in studies that measure muscle and strength—they work. Base your program around hard exercises that work the most muscles, i.e., squats, presses, rows, chinups, deadlifts, and all their variations.

Specificity. If your goal is to boost your bench press, you need to train on the bench frequently and target your weak points. Doing a high-rep circuit routine won’t help you bench more. Focus on one goal at a time.

Variety. “Switch up variables in your workouts every one to four weeks,” says Ferruggia. “The more advanced you are, the more frequently you should change things.”