



# The New Jersey Police Chief

*The Official Publication of the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police*

*Vol. 20, No. 5 • May 2014*

## Gordon Graham presents at NJSACOP Police Executive Institute



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## Is the 5-3-1 Program Effective?

By Matt Brzycki, Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, Fitness, Princeton University

Someone recently asked me for my opinion on the 5-3-1 (“five-three-one”) Program. He also wanted to know what I thought was the best program for building muscular size.

First, let’s talk about the 5-3-1 Program, a system of training that’s credited to Jim Wendler. In this program, an emphasis is placed on four “core” exercises: the squat, bench press, deadlift and shoulder press.

The program involves four “waves” or “rotations,” each lasting about four to five weeks. The first wave involves three sets of five reps. The second wave involves three sets of three reps. The third wave involves one set of five reps, one set of three reps and one set of one rep. And the fourth and final wave involves three sets of five reps. The weights in those sets are varying percentages of your one-rep max (1-RM). Besides the designated core exercise, workouts also involve two “assistance” exercises.

Still with me? If not, that’s one of the inherent drawbacks of the 5-3-1 Program: It’s unnecessarily complicated which could be problematic for many people with respect to long-term compliance.

But does the program work? It could. Over the years, an infinite number of programs have been prescribed as a means to increase muscular size (and strength). Despite differences that are often dramatic and even diametric, successful programs have some common denominators. For instance, *any* program will be effective if it encourages you to work in an aggressive and a progressive manner. Simply, a certain degree of effort (intensity) is required as well as the need to make a workout more challenging in comparison to previous workouts. Also, *any* program will be effective if it emphasizes the major muscle groups and permits an adequate amount of recovery. So if the 5-3-1 Program does those things, then it could be effective. Note that the operative word here is “could” since many other variables are in play such as nutritional habits, sleeping patterns, mental state and so on.

A bit off topic but why are some exercises like the squat and bench press pyramided up to a 1-RM (and often pyramided down) for a certain number of sets/reps but other exercises aren’t pyramided? Doesn’t it make much more sense that if you’re going to pyramid up to a 1-RM in one exercise then you should do this for all of the other exercises, too?

Quick question: What’s your 1-RM in the leg curl? Ask someone that question in a gym and you’ll likely get laughed right out of town. But why is that such a kooky question? Why is a 1-RM done in the bench press but not the leg curl or the lat pulldown or the vast majority of other exercises?

If you took a muscle biopsy from your chest, hamstrings, abs or any other part of your muscular anatomy and gave the tissue samples to a histologist or pathologist, he/she couldn’t tell which was which. So why train muscles differently? Sure, variety could be a valid and viable reason. But anyone who says that it’s done “to obtain a different response” – or words to that effect – is implying that your genetics can be manipulated.

Getting back on topic, what do I think is the best program for improving muscular size? Well, the “best” program is one that’s based on sound principles, is easy to understand and fosters long-term adherence. This might sound as if I’m ducking the question like a politician at a press conference but no program is the “best” for everyone. Plenty of programs are effective and everyone has different preferences. Remember, in order for a program to work, it must satisfy a number of criteria. This includes training with an appropriate level of effort; making workouts progressively more difficult over time; doing reps at a speed that minimizes momentum and maximizes safety; exercising throughout a full range of motion; allowing adequate recovery between workouts; and charting performances.

Bottom line: The 5-3-1 Program is overly complicated but could be effective as long as evidence-based guidelines are employed.

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