

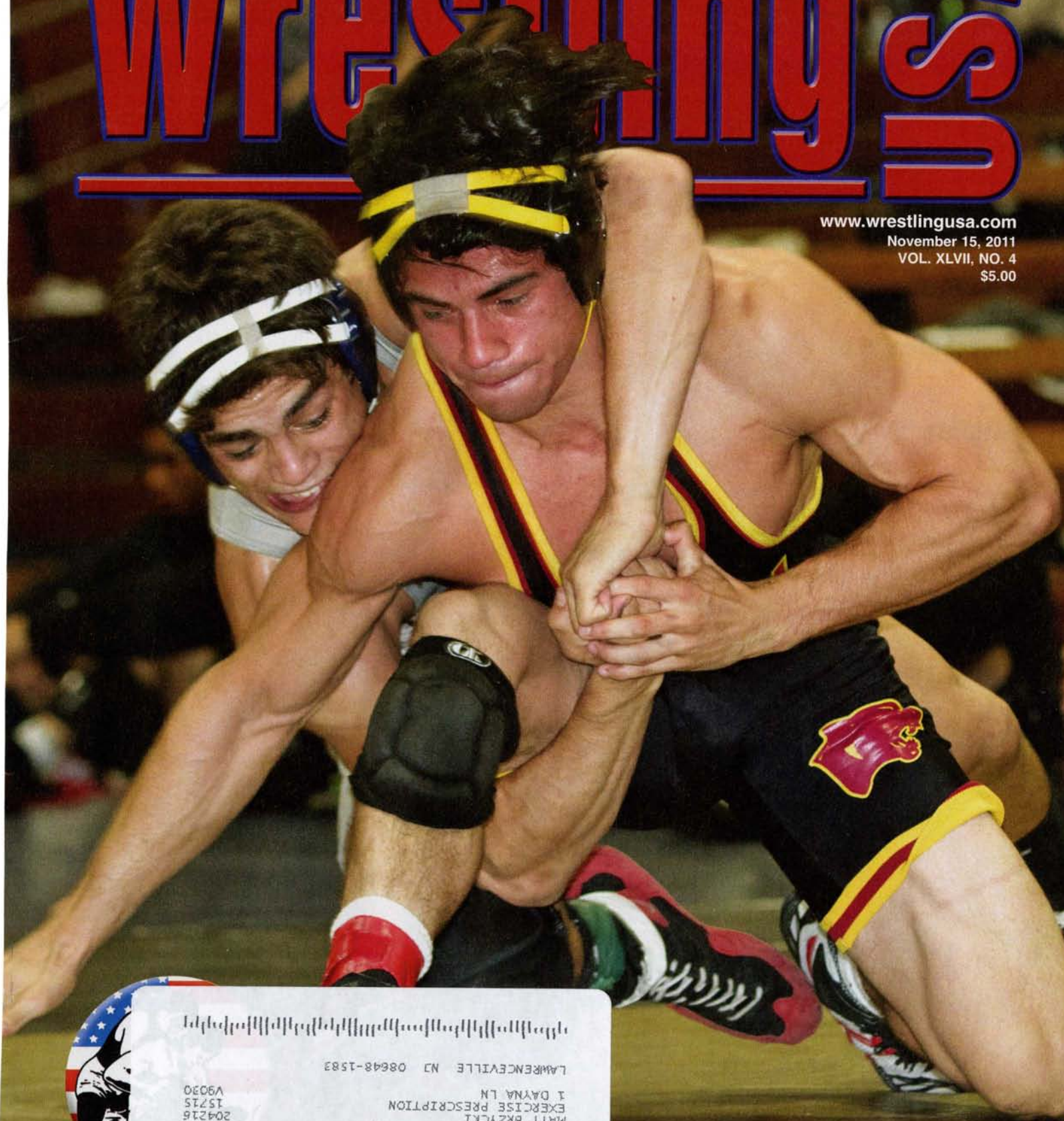
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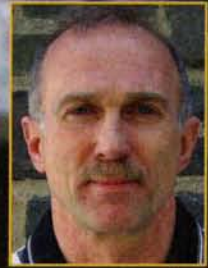
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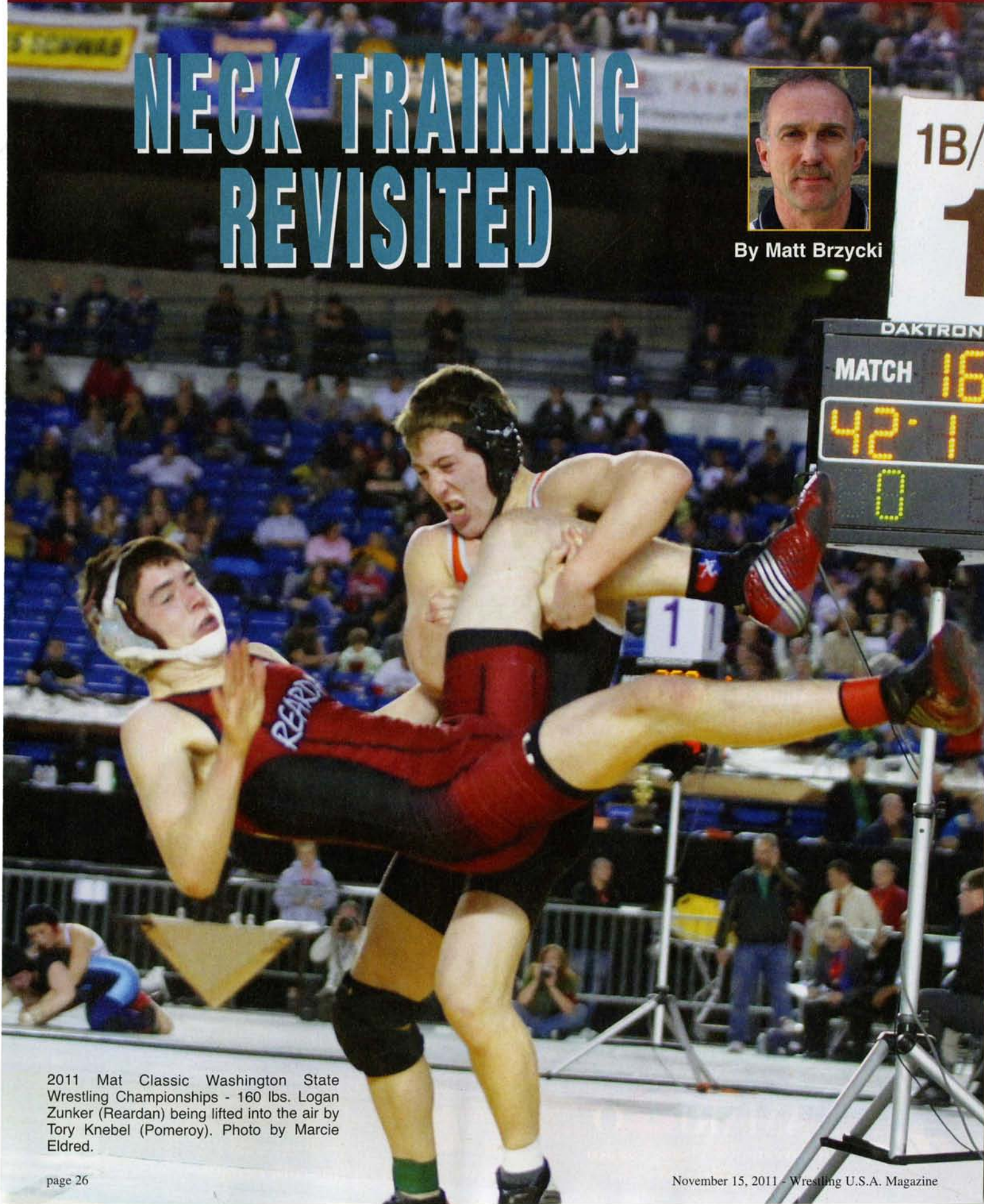


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# NECK TRAINING REVISITED



By Matt Brzycki



2011 Mat Classic Washington State Wrestling Championships - 160 lbs. Logan Zunker (Reardan) being lifted into the air by Tory Knebel (Pomeroy). Photo by Marcie Eldred.

**T**he February 15, 1998 issue of this magazine published an article that I wrote on the importance of neck training. With the recent awareness about concussions and the realization that a strong neck is a valuable countermeasure against head and cervical injuries, neck training is a topic that's worth revisiting.

## MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

A number of myths and misconceptions exist about neck training. Let's take a look at some of the more popular ones.

**1.** There's no need for wrestlers to do neck training. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. Workouts for wrestling should include exercises for the neck as a means of reducing the risk of head and cervical injuries. Neck training must be mandatory for all wrestlers.

**2.** Female wrestlers don't need to do neck training. Wrong. Females can sustain injuries to the head and neck the same as males. It stands to reason, then, that female wrestlers should train their necks.

**3.** A legitimate reason for skipping neck exercises is when a school doesn't have a neck machine. Bad idea. Pardon the triple negative but not having a neck machine is not an excuse for not training the neck. In the absence of equipment, excellent alternatives are manual-resistance exercises and self-resistance exercises.

**4.** The neck bridge is a great exercise for strengthening the neck. Sorry. Although a wrestler does a neck bridge when he gets caught on his back, it's not a good exercise for increasing the strength of the neck. The main concern is that bridging produces high compressive and shear forces in the cervical spine. This is never a good thing.

**5.** You don't have to target the muscles of the neck with specific exercises if you perform exercises like the high pull and power clean. Nope. These and other related exercises offer little or no direct work for the neck muscles. The best way to strengthen the neck is by doing specific exercises for the cervical area.

**6.** Neck training can wait until the end of a workout. No. Neck training should be done at the beginning of a workout. It's important to devote full attention to exercises that target the cervical area. This is best done at the beginning of a workout when a wrestler is fresh physically as well as mentally.

**7.** It's okay to train the neck prior to practice or a meet. Big mistake. True story: In the 1983-84 season, I knew a collegiate wrestler who decided to train his neck just before a meet. During his match, he injured his neck and was unable to continue. In fact, he never wrestled another match again. Never. Wrestling with a fatigued neck is an injury waiting to happen.

**8.** Neck training shouldn't be done because a larger neck will make other muscles look smaller. Uh-uh. A high school strength coach told me that one of his wrestlers didn't want to train his neck because it would make his shoulders look smaller. And his shirt collars would be too tight. This makes absolutely no sense whatsoever. From a functional standpoint, a larger and stronger neck will reduce the risk of head and cervical injuries. And from a physical standpoint, a larger and stronger neck will make a wrestler look more powerful.

## BASIC ANATOMY AND MUSCULAR FUNCTION

The muscles on the front of the neck can be referred to as the "neck flexors." These muscles are used in neck flexion (bringing the head toward the chest), neck lateral flexion (bending the neck to the side)

and neck rotation (turning the head).

The muscles on the back of the neck can be referred to as the "neck extensors." These muscles are used in neck extension (bringing the head backward).

The trapezius is a kite-shaped muscle that covers the uppermost region of the back and posterior section of the neck. The "traps" are used in shoulder elevation (shrugging the shoulders), scapulae adduction (pinching the shoulder blades together) and neck extension (bringing the head backward).

## GUIDELINES

You can improve the strength of your neck by following these five guidelines:

- Strength train the neck two or three times per week on nonconsecutive days.
- Do 8 to 12 reps per set or about 50 to 70 seconds of sustained effort per set.
- Perform the reps in a slow, deliberate manner. (Each rep should take at least six seconds to complete.)
- Inhale and exhale normally without holding the breath.
- Exercise the neck throughout a full, pain-free range of motion.

## EXERCISES

What follows are descriptions for a variety of exercises that can be done to strengthen the muscles of the neck. Working on the assumption that many schools don't have a neck machine, most of the neck exercises will be detailed here using manual resistance (MR) in which the resistance is provided by another person or "spotter" and self resistance (SR) in which the lifter provides the resistance.

Even if your school has a neck machine, it's still a good move to include MR and SR. Remember, designating the neck machine for multiple exercises and/or sets will result in a conga line of wrestlers waiting to use it. You can sidestep this scenario by including some MR and SR exercises.

Note: When doing MR and SR, the resistance should be applied throughout a full, pain-free range of motion during both the raising and lowering phases. Also, the lifter should resist the entire time.

## NECK FLEXION (MR/SR)

This exercise works the neck flexors. The lifter lies supine on a bench and places his feet flat on the floor. His head is positioned over the end of the back pad with his fingers interlocked and resting on his chest. The spotter stands or kneels near the lifter's side and applies resistance against the lifter's forehead with one hand and his chin with the other.

To do the exercise, the lifter pulls his head as close to his chest as possible as the spotter applies resistance. The lifter pauses briefly in this position (his chin near his chest) and then resists as the spotter pushes his head back to the start/finish position (his chin away from his chest).

This exercise can also be done with SR in a similar manner as described here.

## NECK EXTENSION (MR/SR)

This exercise works the neck extensors and trapezius. The lifter lies prone on a bench and places his hands and feet on the floor (or his legs across the back pad). His head is positioned over the end of the back pad. The spotter stands or kneels near the lifter's side, places one hand on the lifter's upper back and applies resistance against the back of his head with the other.

To do the exercise, the lifter extends his head backward as far as possible as the spotter applies resistance. The lifter pauses briefly in this position (his chin away from his chest) and then resists as the spotter pushes his head back to the start/finish position (his chin near his chest).

## NECK LUNGE (MR/SR)

This exercise works the neck flexors. The lifter lies supine on a bench and places his feet flat on the floor. His head is positioned on the back pad with his fingers interlocked and resting on his chest. The spotter stands or kneels near the lifter's side and applies resistance against the lifter's forehead with one hand.

To do the exercise, the lifter raises his head directly upward (not toward his chest) as high as possible as the spotter applies resistance. The lifter pauses briefly in this position (his head away from the back pad) and then resists as the spotter pushes his head back to the start/finish position (his head near but not resting on the back pad).

This exercise can also be done with SR in a similar manner as described here.

## NECK LATERAL FLEXION (MR/SR)

This exercise works the neck flexors. The lifter lies supine on a bench and places his feet flat on the floor. His head is positioned on the back pad near his left shoulder with his fingers interlocked and resting on his chest. The spotter stands or kneels near the lifter's right side, puts his right hand on the lifter's right shoulder and applies resistance against the right side of the lifter's head with his left hand.

To do the exercise, the lifter brings his head as close to his right shoulder as possible (without moving his torso) as the spotter applies resistance. The lifter pauses briefly in this position (his head near his right shoulder) and then resists as the spotter pushes his head back to the start/finish position (his head near his left shoulder). After performing a set for the right side of the neck, repeat the exercise for the left side of the neck.

This exercise can also be done with SR in a similar manner as described here.

## NECK ROTATION (MR/SR)

This exercise works the neck flexors. The lifter lies supine on a bench and places his feet flat on the floor. His head is positioned on the back pad and turned to the left with his fingers interlocked and resting on his chest. The spotter stands or kneels near the lifter's right side, puts his right hand on the lifter's right shoulder and applies resistance against the right side of the lifter's head with his left hand.

To do the exercise, the lifter turns his head to the right as far as possible (without moving his torso) as the spotter applies resistance. The lifter pauses briefly in this position (his head turned to the right) and then resists as the spotter pushes his head back to the start/finish position (his head turned to the left). After performing a set for the right side of the neck, repeat the exercise for the left side of the neck.

This exercise can also be done with SR in a similar manner as described here.

## SHOULDER SHRUG (BB/DB/TB)

This exercise works the trapezius. The lifter stands and holds a pair of dumbbells against the sides of his upper legs with his palms facing each other. He straightens his arms and spreads his feet about shoulder-width apart.

To do the exercise, the lifter keeps his arms fairly straight and pulls the dumbbells up as high as possible. He pauses briefly in this position (his shoulders near his ears) and then lowers the weight to the start/finish position (his shoulders away from his ears).

This exercise can also be done with a barbell and trap bar in a similar manner as described here.

## PROTOCOLS

Every workout should include the shoulder shrug plus two or four exercises for the neck. The exercises should be grouped in such a way as to achieve balanced development. (Note: Since neck lateral flexion is done twice – once for each side of the neck – it counts here as two exercises; so does neck rotation.)

If your athletes do two exercises for their neck in a workout, there are four possible combinations: (1) neck flexion and neck extension; (2) neck lunge and neck extension; (3) neck lateral flexion (both sides); and (4) neck rotation (both sides).


If your athletes do four exercises for their neck, there are four possible combinations: (1) neck flexion, neck extension and neck lateral flexion (both sides); (2) neck flexion, neck extension and neck rotation (both sides); (3) neck lunge, neck extension and neck lateral flexion (both sides); and (4) neck lunge, neck extension and neck rotation (both sides).

Your athletes can vary the exercises that they perform. For example, they might do neck lateral flexion and shoulder shrug on Monday; neck flexion, neck extension and shoulder shrug on Wednesday; and neck rotation and shoulder shrug on Friday. (Remember, too, that for variety, the shoulder shrug can be done with a barbell, dumbbells and a trap bar.)

## THE LAST REP

You must do everything that you can to prepare your athletes for the demands of wrestling. This includes having them do neck training on a regular basis to reduce their risk of head and cervical injuries.

*Matt Brzycki has authored, co-authored or edited 17 books on strength and fitness including four that are devoted to wrestling. His latest book is Youth Fitness: An Action Plan for Shaping America's Kids.*







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