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WEIGHT TRAINING

Order of Exercise Essential

For Producing Optimal Improvement

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The order in which you perform your exercises is essential in producing optimal improvements in your muscular size and strength. The order of your exercises also determines which muscle(s) you emphasize or target.

PRIORITIZE!

For the most part, the idea is to exercise your most important muscles as early as possible in your workout. Clearly, it stands to reason that you would want to address those muscles while you are fresh, both mentally as well as physically.

The Neck

As a wrestler – or any other athlete who is involved in a combative sport - the most important muscles in your body are those found in your neck. The notion that your neck muscles should be your greatest priority might surprise some individuals. But think about it: It's one thing if you injure your knee, shoulder, ankle or other body part; it's an entirely different matter if you injure your neck.

At the end of your workout, you will be – and should be - physically and mentally drained. If you wait until this point to train your neck, you'll be less likely to address this all-important area with a desirable level of effort or enthusiasm. So ideally, you should begin your workout with your neck exercises.

The Lower Body

Thereafter, your strength-training program should generally proceed from exercises that influence your largest muscles to those that involve your smallest muscles. Your largest and most powerful muscles are found in your lower body, specifically your hips/buttocks and legs.

What is the best order of exercise for training your lower body? Consider this: Multiple-joint movements done for your lower body – such as the leg press, deadlift and squat - require the use of your upper legs for assistance. Your upper legs – your hamstrings and quadriceps - are the “weak link” in those movements because they have a

2001 National Cadet Duals USA Wrestling, Englewood, CO. Minnesota Storm Jeremy Pederson throws California Grizzlies Yuri Kalzka in a 167 lb. bout. Pederson was able to out point Kalzka in overtime 5-4. Minnesota defeated California 31-21. Photo by Dean Vande Berg.

smaller amount of muscle mass. So if you fatigue your upper legs first, you'll weaken an already weak link, thereby limiting the workload placed on the muscles of your hips/buttocks. Consequently, it is usually best to train your hips/buttocks before your upper legs.

What would happen if you did exercise your upper legs immediately prior to your hips/buttocks? In other words, what if you did the leg extension (for your quadriceps) and then the leg press (for your hips/buttocks)? That order of exercise would be effective in really fatiguing your quadriceps but you wouldn't get much out of it for your hips/buttocks.

That being said, do you follow your hips/buttocks with an exercise for your hamstrings or one for your quadriceps? If you did an exercise for your hips/buttocks that also provided a significant amount of work for your hamstrings - such as a hip extension or hip-and-back movement - then you might want to train your quadriceps next so that your hamstrings get a little breather and allow them to momentarily recover; on the other hand, if you did an exercise for your hips/buttocks that also provided a great deal of work for your quadriceps - such as a leg press, deadlift or squat - then you might want to train your hamstrings next so that your quadriceps receive a slight respite and allow them to momentarily recover.

But there's another reason why you might opt to exercise your hamstrings before your quadriceps. After performing the leg extension - and assuming that you did the exercise with a high level of effort - you should notice that your quadriceps are "pumped." This is because they became engorged with blood that was redirected from other areas of your body in order to deliver oxygen to your working muscles. With such a large amount of blood pooled in your quadriceps, it might be uncomfortable for you to do the leg curl in the prone position since your "pumped" front thighs would be compressed against the pad of the machine. This would not be an issue, however, if you elected to do the leg curl in a seated position where there's no compression of the quadriceps.

After training your upper legs, you should proceed to your lower legs. If you train your calves (on the front part of your lower leg) and your dorsi flexors (on the back part of your lower leg) in the same workout, the order in which you do so really doesn't matter.

So in general, you should start with your

hips/buttocks and literally work down your legs. In other words, the best sequence would be hips/buttocks, upper legs (hamstrings and quadriceps) and lower legs (calves or dorsi flexors).

The Upper Torso

Once you have exercised your lower body, you can now direct your attention to your upper torso. What is the best order of exercise for training your upper torso? Not to be redundant, but from a conceptual standpoint, it sounds quite similar to that which has been discussed previously for your lower body. Multiple-joint movements done for your upper body - such as the bench press, lat pulldown and seated press - require the use of your arms to assist the movement. Your arms - your biceps, triceps and forearms - are the "weak link" in those movements because they are smaller. So if you fatigue your arms first, you'll weaken an already weak link, thereby limiting the workload placed on the muscles of your upper torso. As a result, it is usually best to exercise your upper back before your biceps and your biceps before your forearms; and your chest and/or shoulders before your triceps.

What would happen if you did train your triceps immediately prior to your chest and/or shoulders or your biceps immediately prior to your upper back? In other words, what if you did the tricep extension and then the bench press or the bicep curl and then the lat pulldown? Those orders of exercise would be effective in really fatiguing your arms but you wouldn't get much out of it for your chest or upper back.

Having said that, do you follow your upper torso with an exercise for your biceps or one for your triceps? If your last exercise before training your arms involved your chest and/or shoulders with assistance from your triceps - such as a bench press or seated press - then you might want to train your biceps next so that your triceps get some relief and allow them to momentarily recover; conversely, if your last exercise before training your arms involved your upper back with assistance from your biceps (and forearms) - such as a lat pulldown or seated row - then you might want to train your triceps next so that your biceps (and forearms) receive a slight respite and allow them to momentarily recover.

Here's another reason why you might want to train your biceps before your tri-

ceps: After doing a movement for your triceps - and assuming that you did it with a high level of effort - you should notice that the muscle is "pumped" (for the same reasons expressed earlier when discussing the quadriceps). With such a large amount of blood pooled in your triceps, it might not be comfortable for you to perform a bicep

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curl in which the backs of your arms are placed on a pad and your triceps are compressed. But this would not be a concern if you chose to perform the bicep curl in a position where there's no compression of the triceps.

You have at least two options for the order in which you exercise your chest, upper back and shoulders. One way is to do all of the exercises for a given muscle – say, your chest – and then move to the next muscle. Another way is to alternate “pushing” movements with “pulling” movements. (To avoid confusion, it is important to note that all muscles “pull” when they contract; however, muscle contractions cause joints to extend and flex which produce movements that can be described as either “pushing” or “pulling.” Your chest, anterior portion of your shoulders and triceps are involved during pushing movements while your upper back, posterior portion of your shoulders and biceps are used during pulling movements.) In a “push-pull” application, you might do the following sequence for your upper torso: bench press (push), seated row (pull), incline press (push), lat pulldown (pull), front raise (push), bent-over raise (pull), tricep extension (push) and bicep curl (pull).

So in general, you should start with your

chest, upper back and shoulders and literally work down your arms. In other words, the best order of exercise would be upper torso (chest, upper back and shoulders), upper arms (biceps and triceps) and lower arms (forearms).

One final note: If you prefer, you can exercise your neck musculature just after you complete your lower-body exercises – that is, prior to beginning your upper-body exercises. This will allow you to “catch your breath” between training your lower body and upper torso.

The Mid-Section

It's important not to fatigue your mid-section early in your workout. Your abdominals stabilize your rib cage and serve as respiratory muscles during intense exercise to facilitate forced expiration. Therefore, early fatigue of your abdominals would detract from your performance in other exercises that involve your larger, more powerful muscles.

Your lower back should be the very last muscle that you exercise. Fatiguing your lower back earlier in your workout will also hinder your performance in other movements.

So the last area that you should exercise

in your workout is your mid-section. And the best order of exercise would be to train your abdominals followed by your lower back.

THE LAST REP

In summary, the best order of exercise in a total-body workout for wrestling would usually look like this: neck, hips/buttocks, upper legs (hamstrings and quadriceps), lower legs (calves or dorsi flexors), upper torso (chest, upper back and shoulders), arms (biceps, triceps and forearms), abdominals and finally your lower back. If you prefer to do the so-called “split routine,” this recommended order of exercise would still apply. In a workout that only targeted your chest, shoulders and triceps, for example, you should still address those body parts from largest to smallest.

Matt Brzycki has been involved in the strength and conditioning of collegiate wrestlers for more than 20 years. Since 1986, he has authored nearly 60 articles for Wrestling USA Magazine and is the editor of Maximize Your Training, a 455-page book that features chapters written by more than 30 strength and fitness professionals.

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