

Wrestling USA

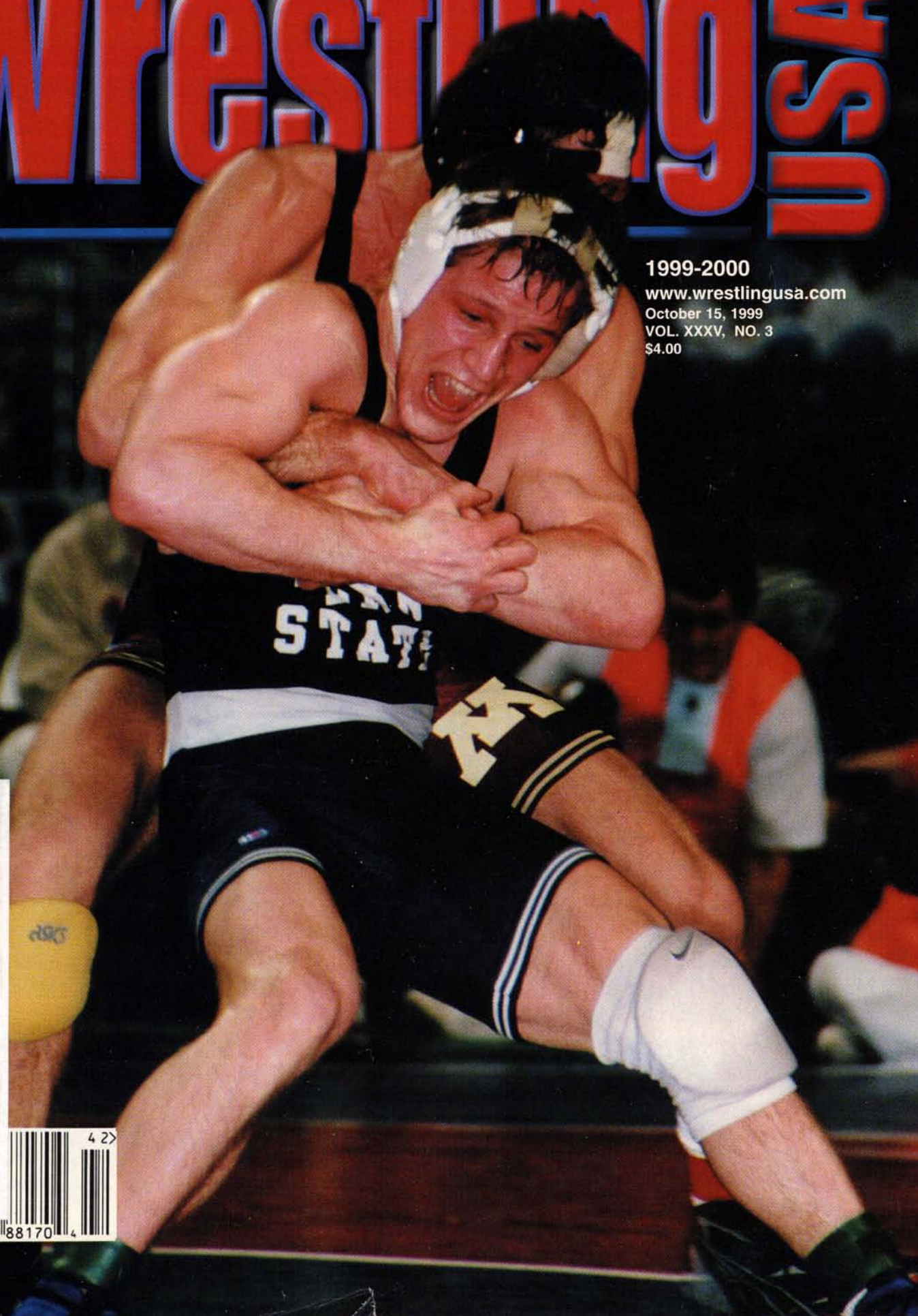
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EXERCISE PRESCRIPTION

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GET A GRIP!

By Matt Brzycki

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When I was the Assistant Strength and Conditioning Coach at Rutgers University in the mid 1980s, our wrestling team traveled to Florida to compete in the Sunshine Open. While in Florida, the team met an old friend of mine named Tom Laputka. Tom had played professional football for several years (in the Canadian Football League and the World Football League). He was a very powerful man -- one of the world's first 500-pound bench pressers -- and his gripping strength was legendary. When our team returned to New Jersey, I asked our Head Wrestling Coach, Deane Oliver, if Tom had a strong grip. Coach Oliver said, "Are you kidding? His grip could bring a grizzly bear to its knees!"

Indeed, a powerful grip is a sign of a powerful individual. On the wrestling mat, virtually every single offensive skill involves your grip strength -- from sparring to completing a single-leg takedown to cradling your opponent. Defensively, grip strength is important in a number of skills including freeing yourself from your opponent's control. And in the weight room, your grip strength is involved in many multiple-joint movements that target your upper torso.

So, the importance of having a strong grip is well established. Yet, very few athletes perform any type of direct work for their gripping muscles.

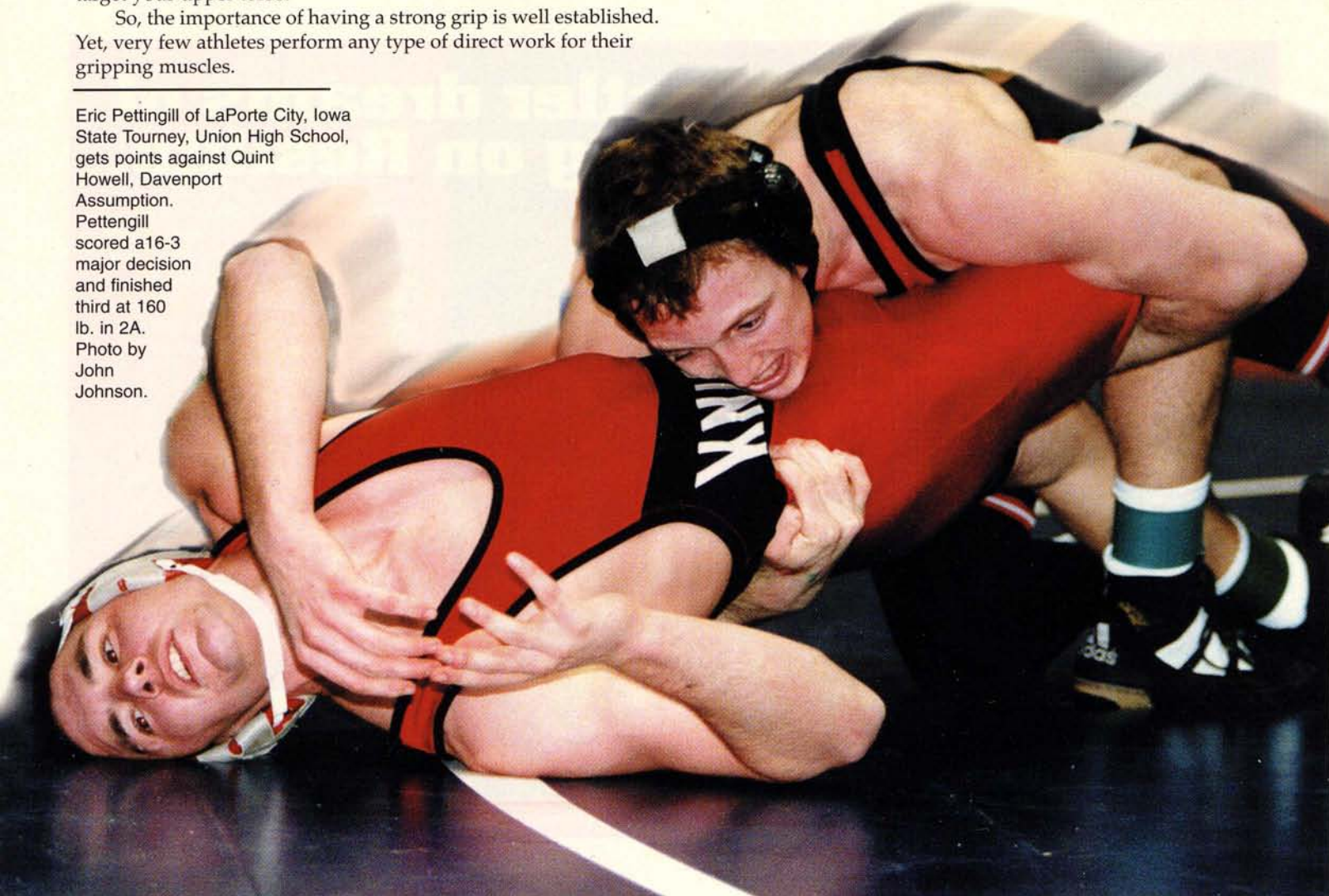
Eric Pettingill of LaPorte City, Iowa State Tourney, Union High School, gets points against Quint Howell, Davenport Assumption. Pettingill scored a 16-3 major decision and finished third at 160 lb. in 2A. Photo by John Johnson.

ANATOMY AND MUSCULAR FUNCTION

Your lower arm is made up of 19 different muscles with such exotic-sounding names as extensor carpi radialis brevis and flexor digitorum profundus. Fortunately, you won't need to have taken a course in Latin as it is well beyond the scope of this article to discuss the muscles of your lower arm in such great detail. Instead, these muscles can simply be divided into two groups on the basis of their position and functions. The anterior group on the front part of your lower arm causes flexion and pronation (turning your palm downward); the posterior group on the back part of your lower arm causes extension and supination (turning the palm upward). These muscles effect your wrists and hands, which play a significant role in all tasks that involve gripping.

CONVENTIONAL METHODS

There are a few conventional methods -- with barbells and dumbbells -- that you can use to strengthen your grip. However, it is only necessary to perform one or two of these in any given workout. As a



general guideline, you should reach muscular fatigue within about 8 - 12 repetitions.

The Exercises

There are several basic grip-building exercises that can be done with conventional equipment. They are as follows:

1. **Wrist Flexion.** This exercise involves your wrist flexors on the front part of your lower arm. To begin the exercise, grasp a barbell so that your hands are spaced about 4 - 6 inches apart with your palms facing upward and your thumbs alongside your fingers. In other words, your thumbs should be under the barbell next to your index fingers (i.e., a "false grip"). Your lower arms can be positioned directly over your upper legs or flat on the bench (between your legs). In this position, your lower arms should be roughly parallel to the floor. (This may require placing a pad underneath your feet.) Lean forward slightly so that the angle between your upper and lower arms is about 90 degrees or less. Your wrists should be directly over your kneecaps (or directly over the edge of the bench if you placed your lower arms on the bench). To do the exercise, pull the barbell up as high as possible to the mid-range position of each repetition. Pause briefly in this position and then lower the resistance under control to the starting position (wrists extended) at the end of each repetition to provide an adequate stretch. Do not throw the barbell by using your legs or by swinging your upper torso back and forth - movement should only occur around your wrist joints. Besides using a barbell, you can also do this exercise in a similar fashion using a dumbbell (one limb at a time), a machine (either selectorized or plate-loading) or manual resistance.

2. **Wrist Extension.** This exercise involves your wrist extensors on the back part of your lower arm. To begin the exercise, grasp a dumbbell so that your right palm is facing downward. Your right lower arm can be positioned directly over your right upper leg or flat on the bench (between your legs). In this position, your right lower arm should be roughly parallel to the floor. (This may require placing a pad underneath your foot.) Lean forward slightly so that the angle between your upper and lower arm is about 90 degrees or less. Your right wrist should be directly over your right kneecap (or directly over the edge of the bench if you placed your lower arm on the bench). To do the exercise, pull the dumbbell up as high as possible to the mid-range position of each repetition. Pause briefly in this position and then lower the dumbbell under control to the starting position (wrist flexed) at the

end of each repetition to provide an adequate stretch. After performing a set for your right lower arm, repeat the exercise for your left lower arm. Do not throw the dumbbell by using your legs or by swinging your upper torso back and forth - movement should only occur around your wrist joint. This exercise is more comfortable when it is performed one limb at a time with a dumbbell rather than both limbs at a time with a barbell. You can also do this exercise in a similar fashion using manual resistance.

3. **Finger Flexion.** This simple yet highly effective exercise isolates your finger flexors -- important muscles which hardly anyone works directly. To begin the exercise, grasp a dumbbell in each hand with your arms straight and your palms facing the sides of your body. To do the exercise, pull the dumbbells up as high as possible to the mid-range position of each repetition (without using your arms -- just your fingers). Pause briefly in this position -- while squeezing the dumbbells as hard as possible -- and then lower the dumbbells under control to the starting position (fingers extended) at the end of each repetition to provide an adequate stretch. Attempt to lower the dumbbells all the way down to your fingertips -- to the point where the dumbbells almost drop from your fingers. Do not throw the weight by using your legs or by swinging your upper torso back and forth -- movement should only occur around your finger joints. Besides using dumbbells, you can also do this exercise in a similar fashion using a barbell (with the bar in front of your body using either an overhand or an underhand grip), a machine (using a short bar attached to a low pulley via a cable) or manual resistance.

The Thick Bar

Another way for you to improve your grip strength is to use a thick bar or other unorthodox bar. A standard bar is about an inch or so in diameter. On the other hand, a thick (or "fat") bar ranges anywhere from 2 - 3 inches in diameter. The extra-thick bar forces you to use your gripping muscles -- specifically those in your lower arms, hands, wrists and fingers -- to a much greater degree than a regular bar. Several productive exercises can be done with the thick bar including pressing and curling movements such as the bench press and bicep curl.

A specialized thick bar can also be fashioned from metal or heavy plastic tubing. Cut a piece that is about 2 feet in length and securely fasten a sturdy hook to its middle. This makeshift thick bar can then be attached to high and low pulleys and

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allow you to do a few additional exercises such as a seated row and lat pulldown. Another option is to purchase 2 pieces of heavy plastic tubing that are about 6 inches in length. You can slide these thick sleeves over the handles of many machines -- such as a bench press, incline press, seated press and bicep curl -- to create the effect of using a thick bar. Finally, one of the latest gadgets on the market is a special thick grip that can be quickly secured to dumbbell handles which again produces the effect of using a thick bar.

Whenever using a thick bar, make sure that you do not use a "false grip." In this case, it is important that you use your opposable thumbs!

UNCONVENTIONAL METHODS

You can also implement unconventional methods to strengthen your grip. From time to time, one or two of these activities can be performed to augment your workout. As a general guideline, perform each activity for about 60 seconds.

Ten Activities

There is a wide variety of unconventional activities for grip-building. These are ten more ways to strengthen your grip:

1. Do wrist rollers. This activity involves the use of a short bar with a rope or cable attachment. One end of the rope or cable is secured to the center of the bar and the other end to the resistance (which is usually weight plates). Stand upright with your arms straight and parallel to the ground. Then, simply "roll" the bar by flexing your lower arms in an alternating fashion. To make this activity progressively more challenging, you can increase the resistance or the length of the rope. For example, Bob Whelan -- a Strength and Conditioning Coach in Washington, D.C. -- has athletes stand on the roof of his building and do wrist rollers over the side using a rope that is 20-feet in length. But Jeff Watson -- the Strength and Conditioning Coach at Villanova University -- takes this activity to new heights: He has athletes do wrist rollers over the side of their football stadium using a 40-foot rope!

2. Pinch grip plates. To begin this activity, place two weight plates together with the smooth sides facing outward. Grasp the plates with one hand such that your thumb is on one side and the rest of your fingers are on the other side. Grip the plates with the full length of your fingers and thumb. Pinch the plates together for as long as possible. Keep the plates from resting up against your body. Repeat the activ-

ity for the opposite side of your body. To make the activity progressively more difficult, you can use heavier/thicker plates or increase the duration of the hold.

3. Climb a rope. An activity that requires a great deal of grip strength (and skill) is rope climbing. This is especially true if you climb the rope without assistance from your hips and legs. To make this activity progressively more challenging, you can climb the rope with additional weight secured around your waist or in a backpack.

4. Dry a towel. After your workout, go into the locker room or bathroom and wet a large bath towel. Simply wring the towel as dry as possible by twisting and turning it with your hands. Rewet and repeat. Too easy? Try wringing out the towel without using your thumbs.

5. Use a hand gripper. A pair of hand grippers with lightweight, plastic handles are reasonably adequate but can break fairly easily with continued use. As your grip gets stronger, you'll need to incorporate grippers with heavy-duty, iron handles (which come in varying levels of resistance). As a variation to doing repetitions, pinch a coin between the ends of the handles. See how long you can squeeze the handles together without dropping the coin. In fact, hold a dime between the han-

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dles and try to squeeze it into two nickels!

6. Squeeze a ball. This activity has its shortcomings in that the resistance is somewhat limited. Nevertheless, it makes for a great "finisher" at the end of a workout. You can either squeeze a rubber ball as hard as possible for 60 seconds or do 60 seconds worth of slow, deliberate repetitions.

7. Hang from a chinning bar. Simply grasp a chinning bar and hang onto it for as long as possible. To make this activity progressively more challenging, you can hang from the bar with additional weight secured around your waist or in a backpack.

8. Grip a towel during chin-ups. Take a towel and wrap it once around the middle of a chinning bar so that its ends are hanging straight down. Grasp the ends and pull yourself up as high as possible. Do as many repetitions as you can. To make this exercise progressively more challenging, you can pull yourself up with additional weight secured around your waist or in a backpack. Or, you can increase the number of repetitions.

9. Pop bubble wrap. This unique activity involves the use of bubble wrap that is often used in shipping packages. At the end of a workout, simply take a sheet of the bubble wrap and pop each of the bubbles

by pressing your finger tips to your palms. Don't press with your thumbs -- just use your finger tips.

10. Do the Farmer's Walk. Although this is a total-body movement, it is excellent for strengthening your grip. The activity isn't very complicated -- just hold a dumbbell in each hand and start walking! You can perform this activity outdoors on a running track or indoors. For added pleasure, you can do the Farmer's Walk up and down stairs or stadium steps. Here's a possibility for you and a training partner: One wrestler starts by doing the Farmer's Walk around an outdoor track. When this wrestler can no longer hold onto the dumbbells, the partner takes over. Continue the Farmer's Walk around the track, taking turns carrying the dumbbells. As they say, "Misery loves company."

THOUGHTS ON WRIST STRAPS

Wrist straps are usually made out of a nylon and cotton blend. They are about 12-14 inches in length and about an inch in width. Wrist straps are used to assist in holding onto a bar or a dumbbell when performing multiple-joint "pulling" movements for the upper torso.

Up until the end of 1990, I was adamant-

ly opposed to using wrist straps. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was a powerlifter and the use of wrist straps wasn't allowed in competition. Plus, I felt that they provided artificial assistance. During the last few months of 1990, I was performing shoulder shrugs with dumbbells in my routine. In this exercise, I couldn't manage to do more than 13 repetitions with 100-pound dumbbells. Then, for whatever reason, I decided to do the exercise while wearing wrist straps. In that workout, I suddenly did 14 repetitions with 100-pound dumbbells. Six workouts later, I had progressed to 17 repetitions. Did my trapezius muscles suddenly get stronger? No, but the wrist straps allowed me to adequately work my trapezius by preventing my gripping muscles from fatiguing too quickly. Stated otherwise, without wrist straps I was underworking my trapezius.

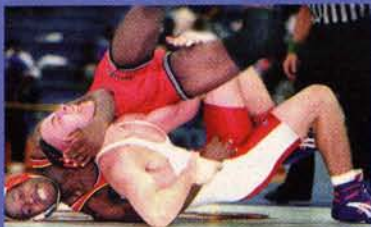
Wrist straps should not be thought of as a replacement for doing exercises to strengthen your grip. However, they are certainly beneficial in exercises that are meant to address your larger muscle groups. Wrist straps may be warranted during the chin-up, lat pulldown, seated row, and bent-over row, upright row, dead lift and shoulder shrug.

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