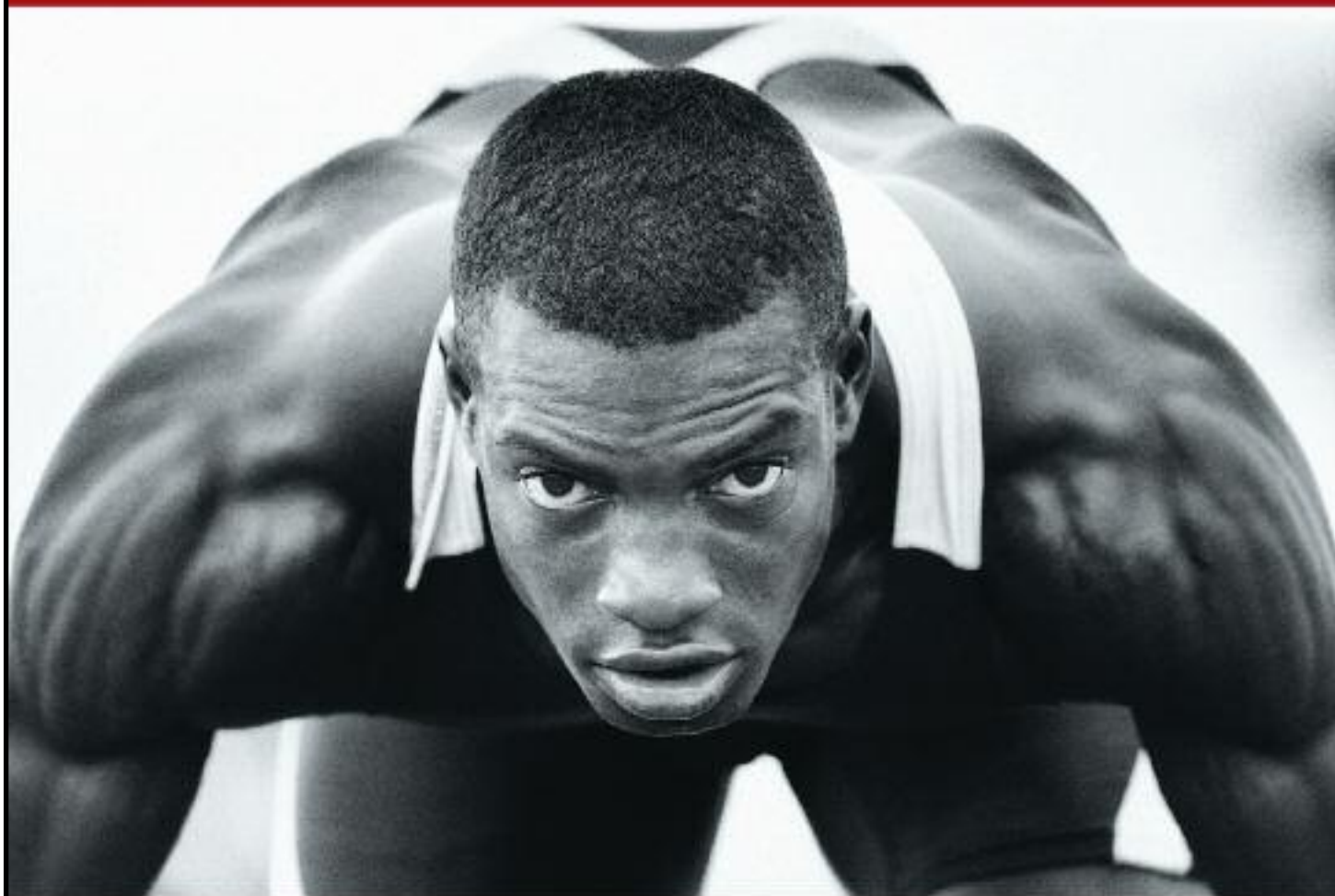


EASY STRENGTH

*How to Get a Lot Stronger than Your Competition
—and Dominate in Your Sport*



Dan John and Pavel

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—and Dominate in Your Sport*

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Published in the United States by:
Dragon Door Publications, Inc
P.O. Box 4381, St. Paul, MN 55104
Tel: (651) 487-2180 • Fax: (651) 487-3954
Credit card orders: 1-800-899-5111
Email: dragondoor@aol.com • Website: www.dragondoor.com

ISBN 10: 0-938045-80-6 ISBN 13: 978-0-938045-80-9

This edition first published in October, 2011

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Printed in China

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Dedicated to the memory of John Faas, Christian, warrior, American.



SOC (SEAL Operator, Chief) John Faas
KIA 2011, Afghanistan

The authors would like to thank the following individuals
for their suggestions about this manuscript:

Boris Bachman
Thomas Fahey
Steve Freides
Marty Gallagher
Rob Lawrence
Jeremy Layport
Chip Morton
Jeff O'Connor
Jack Reape
Mark Reifkind
Barry Ross

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FOREWORD

Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1997. My eye was caught by a series of brash ads in the local seminar-company's catalog. For \$25.00 per three-hour class, a young émigré, Pavel Tsatsouline, was promising to challenge many of our Western World's most cherished fitness beliefs—and replace them with a rack of more practical, more scientific and flat-out more effective training protocols. Billing himself as the “Evil Russian”, this mysterious “ex-Soviet Special Forces physical training instructor” offered a giddy set of powerful new “Iron Curtain Secrets” for rapid strength gains, dramatic stretches and iron abs.

With my 26-year background in Kung Fu, Chinese internal martial arts, yoga, qigong and traditional weight training, I was intrigued, to say the least. An eternal seeker for the Holy Grail of supreme fitness, how could I resist?

What if even 10% of Pavel's wild claims were true? I'd already be in like Flynn. And imagine if it was more?

When Constantinople fell in 1453 and its scholars fled across Europe, the resulting wisdom-blight helped fuel the Renaissance of Western Culture. With the advent of Glasnost and the Fall of the Wall in 1989, we appeared to be witnessing a similar storming of the barricades of ignorance. The original vision of AK-47-wielding Russkies scything across Europe, morphed into a more stealthy invasion. Secret training-wisdom carriers, clutching tattered Cyrillic scripts, were spied snaking through the ripped Iron Curtain. Their objective: the Western Fitness Citadels and their deluded denizens—those woeful worshippers of ferns and mirrors, of aerobics, of Nautilus, of dieting and repping to failure.

And no such infiltrator brandished his promised secrets with more panache than this expat from the Evil Empire—now a self-declared “running capitalist dog” and proud of it.

So I signed up and showed up for the Evil Russian’s Flexibility Training seminar. The room was packed with a startling spectrum: gnarly, tattooed gents of dubious pedigree were rubbing shoulders with petite ballerinas, soft-handed but quietly lethal martial artists, recovering bodybuilders, lil ‘ol grandmothers and out-of-shape desk jockeys. Oh, and who was that man in black, in the corner, with shades and a frozen jaw?

But whoever they were, their attention was riveted on the colorful, charismatic Russian athlete who upbraided them for their current ignorance but promised them great and glorious gains—if they would only heel to his barked commands. “Comrades, it is not that you *will* stretch five more inches, it is that you *shall*—or else!” Not even the tattooed, scarred bikers or the grim Man in Black appeared ready to take on the “Or Else” part. 100% allegiance was demanded and secured.

The Evil Russian proceeded to lead his excited and obedient flock to a veritable Promised Land of flexibility and stretching breakthroughs. Everything the man said made sense—and everything he ordered us to do—worked in spades! How about that? The promises were real! 10% real? How about 110%?

Yet, for all his charismatic delivery and astounding results, I could see that the Evil Russian did still have one weapon missing in his bid for World Domination. The seminar handouts consisted of some shorthand hieroglyphs and chicken-scratch diagrams.

Hmmmn...this needed to be remedied. With some diffidence—yet with a rapidly developing sense of kinship—I approached Pavel at the end of the seminar and asked him a set of three simple questions:

“Do you have a publisher?”

“Would like to have a publisher?”

“Would you like to have Dragon Door as your publisher?”

The rest is history—not to mention the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Dragon Door collaborated with Pavel on a series of landmark titles that have contributed to a seismic shift in the Western World’s fitness landscape: *Super Joints*, *The Naked Warrior*, the great strength classic *Power to the People!*, and finally one of the most influential fitness titles of all time: *The Russian Kettlebell Challenge*—which launched the modern world-wide Kettlebell movement in 2001.

Why has Pavel—the Evil One of yore—been SO successful? Well, I have many answers to that, but here are the most significant points:

Pavel has a remarkable ability to cull through the most arcane research and make glorious, practical sense of it for us lesser mortals. Pavel goes wide, to take us deep—very deep. He does the

work for us, like a Master Chef, culling the best of the best—and he serves it to us on fine china, impeccably presented.

Pavel is a sponge for anything that truly works and has an uncanny eye for a method that can be tweaked and refined into a world-class, world-beating technique. Give Pavel the right ball and he'll run a mile with it. I've seen it over and over and over.

Pavel is a master of style: mixing succinct, brilliantly crafted text-play with superlative insight, extensive wisdom and unassailable research.

Pavel honors the masters of the past and pays generous respect to the modern greats—so, with him, we may stand on the shoulders of giants.

All of these qualities make Pavel the great teacher and author that he is. However, to me, his most admirable quality remains his generosity with peers and colleagues. Pavel is the Keith Richards of his métier, ever-eager to “jam” with like-minded artists of the strength game—while quick to acknowledge and give acclaim to those who have influenced him. And it is undoubtedly this admirable quality that led to the birth of *Easy Strength*.

At Pavel's invitation and prompting, many stars have been encouraged to shine more brightly from the Dragon Door firmament. They have included greats like Gray Cook, Marty Gallagher and Ori Hofmekler. And they have included Dragon Door's elite cadre of RKC Masters and Seniors, both past and present. Well, as big a star as any in this Dragon Door pantheon, has got to be Fulbright scholar, National Champion athlete and coach-extraordinaire, Dan John.

Dan John—polyglot, polymath and all-around Renaissance Man—wears his experience and learning light, spinning his wisdom out in an almost aw-shucks manner, an Irish story teller who leans in to you across the table, nursing a Guinness, enlightening while entertaining. Dan is a man who has bitten deep into the apple. And Dan is a man who has willingly risked his own body, again and again, in the experiential quest for athletic excellence—like the never-let-go, never-say-die, Holy Grail seeker that he is. Dan is a leader whose battle scars are only matched by his impressive list of achievements. And, anyone who has been around the RKC knows Dan has been making a magnificent contribution to the development of this preeminent “School of Strength”.

So, what do you know? Pavel and Dan became fast friends. Their mutual “love of the game”, their mutual enthusiasm for the Quest, their mutual drive to push the envelope—and their mutual respect—led to long deep discussions into the late of night. The synergy of their intellectual excitement led to some profound insights and some groundbreaking conclusions. And surely, they should share these great insights with the world, as they had always been wont to do—in their own very different ways?

What to do and how to do it? Clearly, a book was sitting here that needed to be outed. Pavel called me and explained the dilemma: “But how on earth could two authors with such dramatically distinctive voices possibly co-author a book?”

You know, there have been attempts by great writers in the past to co-author works together, but I have yet to read one that I thought worked. Really worked.

This was a tough one...could this project be simply “inconceivable”? Born to die on the vine?

Then I remembered one of my favorite movies of all time: *My Dinner with Andre*. By one of my all time favorite directors, Louis Malle. Starring one of my all time favorite actors, the inimitable hoot, Wallace Shawn.



“Inconceivable!” Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory debate the meaning of their lives, in Louis Malle’s masterly *My Dinner with Andre*.

In *My Dinner with Andre*, two close friends meet for dinner and have an impassioned discussion that pushes both of them—and of course, the viewer—to reevaluate the meaning of their lives. The dialog is rich, volatile, intense, vibrant, funny, absurd, penetrating, entertaining, puzzling, astonishing, improbable, emotional and reflective. Actual friends, actor/playwright Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory—an experimental theater director/playwright with spiritual links to Gurdjieff—play a kind of

enhanced, dramatized version of themselves. The results are dizzyingly, engrossingly brilliant. They argue, they counterpoint, they banter, they agree to disagree. Wow!

Okay, well how about Pavel and Dan write their book using the *My Dinner with Andre* concept as their structure? Two friends, shooting the breeze as it were, about their subject of passion—and going deep as all heck in the process?

I overnighted Pavel a copy of *My Dinner with Andre*. Pavel loved it. In fact, he watched it five times.

We were on. Yup, things were starting to look conceivable after all...

So Dan and Pavel embarked on exactly that organizational concept. One of them would make a statement, drop a pearl of strength-wisdom; the other would comment—elaborating, elucidating, extending the conversation. The other would respond back and so it would continue. And the more the conversation continued, the deeper they would go, surprising and inspiring each other with the gathering momentum of insight.

The concept worked liked gangbusters. More than I think any of us could have imagined. And I think I know what has made it so special. Despite all their differences in background, culture, experience and proclivities, Pavel and Dan managed to form one of those extremely rare creative partnerships, where two individuals combine to produce a work whose whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

Because *Easy Strength* is not a Socratic dialog, it's not a series of arguments, but rather two masters of the craft jamming together. It's the strength world's equivalent of Keith Richards and Mick Jagger at their peak writing and composing, say *Sticky Fingers*—then unleashing it on an unsuspecting but deeply grateful and appreciative world.



"Conceivable!" Pavel and Dan, captured live at an undisclosed location, while creating their masterwork, *Easy Strength*.

Now, let me tell you, when you read the final masterwork that is *Easy Strength*, don't be misled by the almost magical smoothness of the Pavel-Dan dialogs. There was agony and there was ecstasy and it took two hard years to get it done. But that's great art for you.

The result, I proudly present to you: *Easy Strength*, a book of wisdom for the ages. A book by two "warrior athletes" I deeply admire.

Thank you, gentlemen.

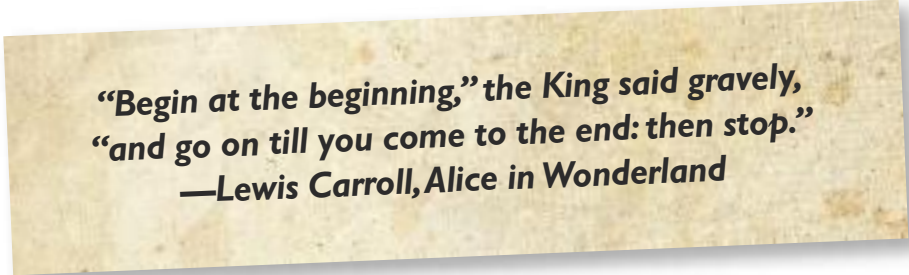
May these two men and their *Easy Strength* inspire you—as they have so inspired me—to continue your own, never-ending quest for athletic excellence and supreme physical cultivation.

By John Du Cane
CEO, Dragon Door Publications

P R E F A C E

Not the **ROLE** of the **Strength Coach** but the **IMPACT!**

Dan John



**“Begin at the beginning,” the King said gravely,
“and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”
—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland***

Although reviewing the influences in my athletic career might take an entire book (and it did!), the single most illuminating moment of my strength coaching career came to me in a nervous sweat in San Jose. Pavel had asked me to speak about “The Role of the Strength Coach” at the Russian Kettlebell Challenge (RKC) Certification. (For the record, I may be the only participant ever to have been asked to speak at his own certification.)

The role of the strength coach? Well, now, let’s see: We get people stronger, we prevent injuries (maybe), we teach some skills, we do some of this and some of that, and—well, I don’t know.

That was the problem! Literally, every fool knows the role of the strength coach: *to coach strength*. So, my workshop notes read simply this: “The strength coach teaches/coaches strength. Then play banjo, sing funny song, sneak out the back.”

I have no issue with the fact that I am sitting at the feet of greatness when I speak of DeLorme, Hack, and Jessee, but the people who come to the RKC are often very tough characters. I didn’t want to disappoint! As members of the RKC community began to drift into the room, I knew I had nothing. In my little moment of panic, I sat back and listened to two guys talk about how strength coaches can affect wins and losses.

Wait! The IMPACT on wins and losses? The *Bigger, Faster, Stronger* (BFS) magazine has remarkable turnaround stories in every monthly issue about struggling high school programs that go from 0 to 11 and being undefeated and state champs in a season or two. While I have great respect for BFS, I've always felt the turnaround in wins and losses usually comes from having commitment and enthusiasm—literally, some paradigm-changing event—not the decision to do 5 reps or 3 reps. (If you watch the BFS videos, I'm the guy in the power clean video.)

How does hiring the finest strength coach the world has ever seen IMPACT a team's win column? Well, it depends. Let's be honest: An American football team can have outstanding weight room numbers, staggering sprint times, and outstanding "conditioning" (whatever that means anymore) yet still lose a game because the football coach goes for it on fourth and one and tries a magnificent pass play that clanks to the ground or tries to trick the opponent with a double-reverse that leads to a fumble and thus the game. If football were played in the weight room or on the track, I could guarantee that each year, the team that won the championship would NOT be the team that won on the field of play.

And that is absolutely true in every sport and every game. It's a rare track meet that you don't hear someone rhapsodize about training numbers and then see him or her lose badly. In football, we have a phrase for this: "Looks like Tarzan, plays like Jane."

Sitting there in the overflowing classroom at the RKC, it came to me: *The impact of strength training on success in sports really depends on the sport!* If you want the world to listen to every word you say about weight training, then you must discover a way to increase the deadlift or the vertical jump that works for everyone, every time. "I can show you the secret to a 750 deadlift!"

The evidence for this claim would be, of course, a gym or a program with lots of 750 deadlifts (not the internet kind where you just type in the numbers either). As a coach, it is a rare week when I don't receive a letter, e-mail, poster, or catalogue promoting at least a few items that promise a vastly improved vertical jump (VJ) or deadlift (DL).

A small caveat here: Please don't send me any more items bragging how you got little Billy from a crappy 19-inch vertical jump to a 25-inch vertical jump. Improving from "awful" to "bad" is not a sign that anything is really happening. But give me a program or device that gets an elite athlete from a 38-inch VJ to a 43, and I am all ears!

As I sat there at the RKC, it became clear to me that anything that a strength and conditioning coach can do to increase the DL or the VJ is, well, clear. If changing the grip gets an athlete from a 455 DL to a 505 DL, then honestly, we can step back and say that that works.

A continuum began to form in my head. My brain works best in continuums—a way of seeing how things gradually transition from one state or condition to another, without any abrupt changes. I see the movements of the human body this way, as well as nearly everything regarding morality and the human condition. I can't help it.

So, when I thought about the exact OPPOSITE of the impact of strength coaching on a sport, I quickly came to American football. Strength and conditioning is one of the foundations of coaching football.

Until recently, weightlifting in some sports—basketball and baseball come to mind first—has been considered at best wrong, at worst flat-out evil. I have probably dozens of books on training athletes for football. Football coaches love the simple answer to strength work. Honestly, if you ever had to train 100-plus athletes, you, too, would embrace a straightforward approach using functional isometric contraction (a set of fixed racks next to the field), Universal gyms (one big machine and a whistle), or Nautilus equipment (big, shiny, blue machines that tire out an athlete in less than half an hour). There are problems with other approaches, including the Olympic lifts (proper coaching and time are needed to teach everyone the movements) and the powerlifts (it is a rare mom who doesn't blanch when she sees Junior pick up weights "with his back!"). Another challenge is the sheer number of athletes you need to make bigger and stronger.

But here is the rub: If you recruit, legally or illegally, five superior athletes into your football program, you will win more games. A few years ago, I worked with a high school student who scored a touchdown every sixth time he touched the ball. The correct response is "Well, why didn't they give him the ball more?" A great high school athlete can turn an ordinary five-yard gain into a game-breaking score.

Folks, that's "fuzzy," I know. Sadly, I can't yet coach genetics, but I wish I could. I can, however, give you some specific, time-tested advice: *You MUST strength train to compete in football, rugby, or any of the collision sports.* The sad thing—for me, anyway—is that it will be nearly impossible to gauge whether the winning record that results will be due to your commitment to doing 3 sets of 10 or the fact that your admissions office has absolutely no scruples.

Track and field is an interesting study. The shot put, for example, isn't affected by much, so anything that brings improvement is something I want to hear about. The discus, however, loves certain winds, hates rain and cold, and rewards the athlete with a great throw just for showing up under the right weather conditions. The discus—one of the great loves of my life—is a terrible mistress! She is "fuzzier" than the shot, so to speak.

Before you get too far into your journey of studying strength and conditioning, spend a moment thinking about the actual impact of strength training in your sport. Be careful in making your first judgment. A raw powerlifter can add weight to his bench press by simply purchasing and mastering some of the new "wonder gear," including bench shirts, elbow wraps, and wrist wraps. So even in obvious cases, putting in a few minutes of thought can work wonders.

My talk at the RKC was astounding, according to observers. (I blush!) As I told them, the clarity of this point shaped my coaching: *Everyone knows the role of the strength coach, but few have ever considered the impact of the coach on actual performance.*

Pavel and my goal in writing this book is to clarify the role and impact of strength training in fitness, sports, and life. We are committed to clarity, even though at times, it's impossible to navigate the sea of conflicting information regarding the lifting sports. Pavel's experience and research provides grounding and a confidence to "Do this!" as we often joke.

What can you expect from reading this book?

- You will learn some history. You will discover that almost everything discussed in the fitness industry has been done before—and often better.
- You will reexamine the role of strength training as it applies to sport. Doing so may serve as the greatest timesaver in history!
- You will find that, like a medical doctor, a strength coach must be committed above all to "Do no harm"—a pledge that's often disregarded.
- You will be exposed to the concept of systematic education and the need to build an athlete (or anyone!) using some kind of intelligent approach.
- You will be exposed to another educational system—along with a way to harness its powers—that will give you clarity into all the various fitness, health, and nutritional information being tossed at you daily.
- You will discover the tools for teaching an entire team to improve in a sport—and why these great tools may be of no value to you in your training!
- You will be exposed to what the best in sports do in the weight room, and you will discover why it will apply to everything you decide to do.
- You will learn many of the "champion's secrets" and be amazed at the simplicity, as well as the insightfulness, of what the best do.

CHAPTER 1

The Continuums and the Quadrants

*“Look with favor upon a bold beginning.”
—Virgil*

So, what is the great insight? The impact of the strength coach on the performance of the athlete has always seemed simple:

Get the athlete stronger.



Recently, this idea has been sharpened up a bit, due mostly to the contributions of Gray Cook and Mike Boyle: *“Increase the number of quality workouts/performances.”*

Not a bad idea, really, as many strength coaches think it’s their God-given duty to smoke the athlete each and every time. Certainly, it is fun to do, but it leaves the athlete a physical wreck.

The great insight was this: Although we all “know” that every sport requires a different set of skills, strength and conditioning coaches were painting all their athletes with one color and one brush. And they knew if they got that right, their athletes would thrive. (Sometimes.)

Thinking about American football is what made everything clear. At the risk of repeating myself, let me say this again: If a college football coach has an admissions office with a very generous door, if the alumni are not afraid to bend the rules, if the coach is willing to turn his back on

“little things”, and if the program can get the biggest, fastest, wildest athletes available, then the team will win. Whether the strength coach does three sets of five or five sets of three doesn’t really matter. Of course, if you lose a few games, the correct answer will be “Fire the strength coach.”

In other words, the impact of the strength coach on football is fuzzy. So, I put football on the far end of one side of the continuum. On the other far side, I put the deadlift and the vertical jump. Listen, if you come up with a drill or idea that knocks the deadlift up in an experienced athlete by really any difference (I used to say 70 pounds, but really, 20 pounds is amazing), the lifting world will be buzzing about it tomorrow. Why? Improving the DL or the VJ is “perfectly clear,” Mr. Nixon. If an upper-level athlete improves on something basic or simple, I want to know what you did.

Improving the shot put is clearer than improving the discus, for example. The discus is aerodynamic, the shot cares little about anything. Short-track speed skating, with its falls and collisions, is fuzzier than the long, smooth striding of long-track speed skating. If you take a few minutes, you can think through any sport. The more complex—the more factors, generally—the more fuzzy the strength coach’s impact on this sport.

And that was pretty good, I thought. At least, I could explain to a fired coach, “Hey, man, your sport is so fuzzy!” But I also realized that there was something missing from the continuum. (I still use it as the continuum really gives one some clues concerning the role of training for various sports.)

So, I began thinking: What is needed for a football player? What is needed for a deadlift? The answer was simple: it’s all about *qualities*.

Qualities are those things that we strive for in training: flexibility, stability, power, speed, technique, lateral movement, joint mobility, hypertrophy, prehab and rehab work—and the list, honestly, could take up reams of paper. In some sports, like rugby and American football, the list of qualities needed to perform is really long. In some things, like a deadlift specialist, the list would be shockingly short—like absolute strength.

So, I began to spin these ideas in my head. I realized that an elite discus thrower needs to be strong. But an elite powerlifter might laugh at those maxes. “Oh, yeah? Race me!” might be the throwers response, and I would bet on the discus thrower. But the powerlifter, even a subelite one, would outlift the best thrower. I began to see that there is a bit of relativity in sports and performance in the weight room. And that was the key: there are sports where “strong enough” or “fast enough” or “flexible enough” is, well, enough. The quadrants were born from that insight.

The four quads are determined by two simple concepts:

1. The number of qualities the athlete needs to master the sport
2. The relationship to the **Absolute Maximum** of each quality

The number of qualities needed by in some sports is amazingly high—football, rugby, basketball, probably all collision sports. In other sports, like that of this deadlift specialist we have invented, the number of qualities is rather low. If you want to be an elite sprinter or Olympic lifter (as far from fuzzy as you can probably get at the Olympics), we are probably talking about less than a handful of qualities.

Go ahead, raise your hand: “Um, excuse me, but shouldn’t a lifter jog, so he can get his aerobic work in and so he can keep his cardio and his core functional?” Let the beatings begin! The answer is, “If the lifter wants to be the best: no.” And this is what I found so refreshing about studying the quadrants. The world of sports training finally made sense.

The graph below is very simple: As you move to the right, you have a sport that requires less and less qualities. As you move down, the Relative Absolute Maximum goes higher and higher. What does that mean?

Well, at the extreme of QIV, we are thinking 1000 pound deadlifts and bench presses, sneaking up on 600 in the clean and jerk, and doing well over 40 inches in the vertical jump. In QII, think about the NFL player I recently worked with, who looked very lean but, as he said, “can’t play in the league this light.” He weighed 310 pounds!

Let’s briefly highlight the quadrants. Here’s the simplest way to think of each one:

Quadrant I (QI)

Physical education classes that honestly introduce games, sports, and movements in a broad and organized system



Quadrant II (QII)

The collision sports and occupations



Quadrant III (QIII)

Where most people are in life and sports—a simple yin-yang relationship between strength training and the goal at hand



Quadrant IV (QIV)

The “rare air”—the sport is so narrow and the level of competition so high that there is nearly total focus on one goal



QI: Lots of Qualities at a Low Level of Relative Max

Physical education classes that honestly introduce games, sports, and movements in a broad and organized system

This is what's done in a typical good high school PE class:

- Two laps and an obstacle course
- General stretching
- Push-ups
- A ball game with the rules covered—next week, another game!

Over the course of a year or four years, the youth will be exposed to lots of sports and games (probably including weightlifting) and will learn a variety of movements, rules of sport and the ability to enjoy many of them as an athlete and spectator for the rest of their lives.

There is probably just one rule: *Do no harm!*

I swear by Apollo, the healer, and Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panacea, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following oath and agreement: I will prescribe regimens for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone.

There is NOTHING wrong with this quadrant! It's very important!



The Chinese have a saying: “A step in a wrong direction in the beginning of a journey takes you a hundred miles away from your goal.” Start your QI training right by building a broad and solid base. QI is GPP time.

“America got into ‘sports specific’ training 15 to 20 years ago and forgot the fundamentals,” laments leading sports physical therapist Gray Cook, RKC. “This created throwing athletes without legs and running athletes who could not do a single push-up correctly. It created swimmers who could not control their body on dry land and cyclists who could not stand up straight.”

Soviet sports science made it clear: Premature overspecialization delivers a quick increase in performance followed by stagnation. Extensive research and experimentation have demonstrated that athletic specialization must be supported by all-around preparation. That means GPP.

But what exactly is GPP?

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. When several of my books were translated into Russian (consider the irony), I asked to check the translations. What I discovered could have come out of the game “telephone.” Almost every paragraph carried a meaning different from the original. Some went off on weird tangents, and some even stated the exact opposite of what I had written. It took me weeks to fix most of the damage.

I suspect that many Russian texts dealing with *general physical preparation (GPP)* and *special physical preparation (SPP)* have been translated into English by equally competent people, because in America, GPP has been mysteriously narrowed down to anaerobic smokers. “If it’s not sled dragging or burpees, it isn’t GPP!” Nonsense, Comrade!

GPP is not limited to a couple of subtypes of endurance but encompasses a wide range of physical attributes, including strength, joint mobility, work capacity, etc. What makes GPP different from SPP is its aim to “perform any physical work more or less successfully,” according to Professor Nikolay Ozolin (whose name you will see again and again in this book), as opposed to improving strength or another quality specific to a given sport or task. SPP is what Americans know as *sport-specific training*.

I often ask this trick question at seminars: “The 3 RM deadlift—is it GPP or SPP?” Usually, the students give the answer that appears obvious to them: “SPP, because it’s heavy and doesn’t make you throw up.”

The real answer is, “It depends.” For a powerlifter or strongman, the 3 RM DL is SPP, because it is so close to his competition events. For everyone else, it is GPP—even for a weightlifter, because such a heavy pull has little in common with snatches and cleans. The fact that the load is heavy has no bearing on whether the exercise falls into the GPP or the SPP category.

One more time: General physical preparation* is training aimed at raising one’s many fitness components applied to a wide range of tasks. Think Crossfit. I am not endorsing that training system but mentioning it because Crossfit’s goal is clearly GPP: being ready for a wide range of challenges. GPP also includes addressing weaknesses and imbalances.

Another subtlety lost in translation is related to the relationship between GPP and SPP. In the Russian model, GPP is seen as the foundation on which SPP is built. An estimated 80% of a young Russian athlete’s physical training is GPP. Practicing the specific without the general leads to short-term gains, usually followed by injuries and unavoidable long-term plateauing of sports results. Having a wannabe sprinter who can barely squat his bodyweight hang a kettlebell and lift his knee to strengthen his hip flexors (“I have seen it in a Russian book!”) is irresponsible. Having him do “plyometrics” is even worse. As the youngster lands, his heels fail to roll back to the ground, his knees collapse inward, his back folds . . .

* Note that the proper word in this context is preparation, not preparedness (or podgotovka, rather than podgotovlennost, in Russian). We are talking about a process, not a static state.

Rubber-band-and-pulley functional stuff, while too light to injure, will not build an athlete. And those “speed camps” for weak kids ought to be banned and replaced with “strength camps.”

GPP should constitute most of a young athlete’s physical preparation. Work on general strength, endurance, etc., not on its sport-specific manifestations. Listen to Professor Nikolay Ozolin, a remarkable athlete who broke the USSR and European pole vault records too many times to mention and won an unprecedented 12 national championships—his last, at age 43. One year, he won the ski-jumping nationals, just for kicks and giggles. Ozolin is one of the founders of Soviet sports science, one of the mentors of young Yuri Verkhoshansky, and a Distinguished Coach of the USSR. He is a man to listen to.

As Ozolin reminds us:

GPP contains the idea of all around physical development. Which is why the qualities developed by GPP may be called general as they express the ability of the organism and its psychological sphere to perform any physical work more or less successfully. Hence general endurance, general strength, general joint mobility, general coordination, general psychological preparedness.

GPP presumes exposure to a variety of sports, games, and activities. Russian sports scientists point out that the bigger an athlete’s “baggage” of movement skills, the easier he will master new forms of movement. Exposing a kid to gymnastics and martial arts will give him a great foundation for any sport—as long as the coach or instructor is a professional. An amateur will give him injuries to remember.

The strength portion of GPP is called GSP: *general strength preparation*. For a young athlete, GSP exercises should meet the following requirements:

1. **Safety.** Remember: “Do no harm!”
2. **Simplicity.** The young-un’s attention span demands this.
3. **Teaching basic movement skills.** Squatting, hinging, bracing, crawling, jumping, falling, running, etc.
4. **All-aroundness.** A mix of static and dynamic loads, a mix of energy pathways, a mix of loading directions.
5. **Strength** carryover to as many applications as possible. GSP’s focus on a wide range of attributes does not excuse using what Master RKC Mark Reifkind calls “random acts of variety.” Seek maximally efficient exercises, which give the biggest bang for the buck.

Ozolin underlines that “general strength . . . is characterized by many-sided musculature development and expression of strength in different regimes, a variety of movements.”

In our opinion, the following exercises fit the bill:

Top 16 Q1 GSP Exercises

- Plank
- Pull-up/chin-up
- Push-up
- Jump rope
- Barefoot running on uneven surface
- Kettlebell or dumbbell goblet squat
- Kettlebell get-up
- Kettlebell sumo deadlift
- Kettlebell swing
- Side-step swing
- Triple extension kettlebell swing
- Farmer’s walk (single side)
- Bottom-up racked kettlebell walk
- Waiter’s walk
- Kettlebell or dumbbell “batwing” (bench row for rhomboids) or TRX® body row
- One-arm dumbbell or kettlebell bench or floor press (the free hand is not holding on to anything)

Here is why: The plank teaches the essential skill of bracing and strengthens the midsection.

In the majority of athletic movements, the spine does not move, and the back and waist muscles do not generate power but stiffen up the spine and turn the torso into a “transmission” for passing force through the body—for instance, from the feet to the hands. This “tranny” must be stiff in order to maximize the transfer of force and protect the back. The plank is the first step in teaching and testing this ability.

Here is a stronger way to plank, as explained by physiologist Bret Contreras:

A while back, a colleague of mine named Joe Sansalone taught me how to do an RKC plank. Basically, he had me get into my normal plank position, and then made adjustments. First, he had me place my elbows slightly further out in front of me and closer together to increase the lever arm length and reduce the width of the base of support. He then had me forcefully lock out my knees by contracting my quads. Finally, he had me contract my glutes as hard as possible to the point where my pelvis posteriorly rotated. These adjustments left me quivering like a schoolgirl. I highly recommend experimenting with this new variation, as it blows away the core activation of a normal plank. (In fact, I suggest you stop reading right now, drop down to the floor, and try it for yourself.) Chalk up another one for the kettlebellers!



Contreras took EMG measurements of the RKC plank compared them with those of the traditional plank. (An EMG measures muscle activation.) He discovered that while the lower back did not work as hard in the RKC plank, the internal obliques fired twice as strong, the abs three times as strong, and the external obliques four times as strong as in the traditional plank.

USAPL National Champion and IPF Team USA Head Coach Dr. Michael Hartle, Senior RKC giving “tough love” to Masters’ IPF World Champion Doug Dienelt, RKC to improve the latter’s RKC plank.

Although the push-up is as basic as it gets, don’t touch it until the plank is on the level. It makes me cringe to watch kids—and adults—do “hungry cow” push-ups, with the lower back sagging and the scapulae sticking out. Gray Cook insists that stability must come before strength, and he knows what he is talking about.

Pull-ups not only build the “pulling” muscles but also develop the abs. I dare you to find someone who can do 20 strict reps and does not have rock-hard abs. Use many pull-up variations: change grips, do pull-ups off ropes and rings, etc.



Pull all the way to the top.

Jumping rope will make kids light on their feet and prep them for more intense jumps. A few calf raises will not hurt, either. Professor Yuri Verkhoshansky explains the calves business:

If calf muscles are not the most important contributors to a high vertical jump, in any case, they are important because in the execution of vertical jump they are involved as an organic part of explosive legs extension movements in the last part of push up phase.

The calf rises are not the main exercise for the vertical jump height increasing, but they cannot be eliminated in the training program. . . . The preliminary increasing of maximal strength of calf muscles is needed to assure the subsequent increasing of their explosive strength, starting strength and reactive ability.

Calf muscles are strongly involved in the shock absorbing phase of run and bounces. The preliminary enforcement of calf muscles, before the use of jumping exercises, is needed also to avoid legs injuries (calf muscles strain).

Running barefoot on an uneven surface will strengthen the feet and ankles and develop a natural running style. Vibram FiveFingers “foot gloves” and similar “no shoes” may be worn to protect the feet. Even if you are not a runner (and Dan and I certainly are not), Christopher McDougall’s book *Born to Run* makes for very worthwhile reading.

In Gray Cook’s instant classic *Movement*, he explains the benefits of barefoot running:

Self-limiting exercises make us think, and even make us feel more connected to exercise and movement. They demand greater engagement and produce greater physical awareness. Self-limiting exercises do not offer the easy confidence or quick mastery provided by a fitness machine. . . . The clearest example of self-limiting exercise is barefoot running. While running barefoot, the first runners connected with the sensory information in the soles of their feet. This works perfectly—this is the very reason the soles of the feet have such a uniquely dense distribution of sensory nerves. . . . The information provided by sensory nerves in the soles helps all . . . continually adjust their movement, stride, rhythm, posture and breathing to meet changes in the terrain.

The modern running shoe allows us to ignore a sensory perspective of running that is only second to vision, and, as you know, the increase in running-related injuries paralleled running shoes development. When running barefoot, over-striding and heel striking is not an option—it produces jarring, discomfort and pain because it is not authentic. Is it not a bit peculiar that the quick twinges of pain refine the barefoot runner’s stride to help avoid running injuries, while the comfort of the modern running shoe later exchanged those friendly twinges for debilitating pain? . . .

Self-limiting activities should become the cornerstone of your training programs . . . as movement authentication—to keep it real. The limitations these exercises impose keep us honest. . . . Used correctly, self-limiting exercises improve poor movements and maintain functional movement quality.

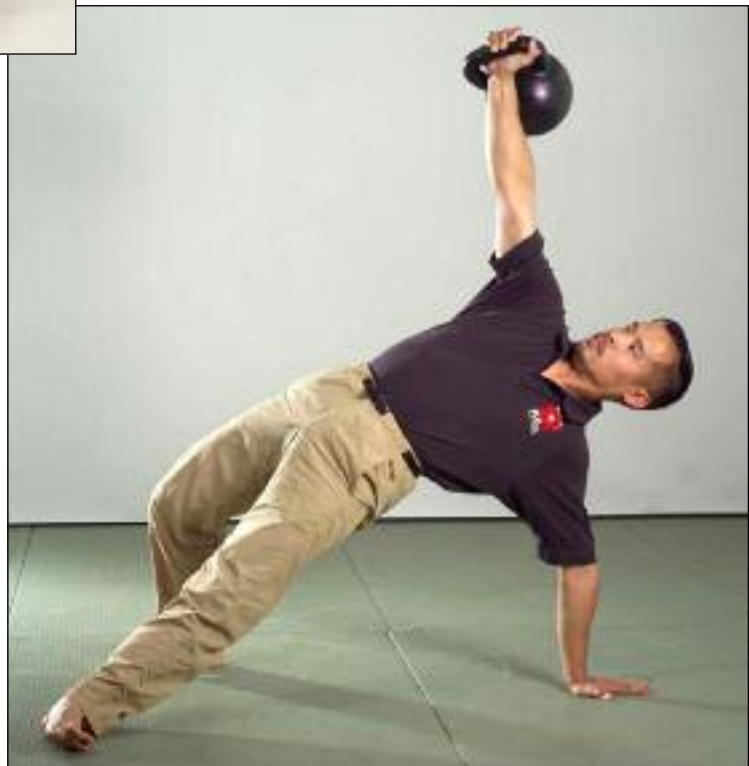
And if you add the requirement to breathe only through your nose to being barefoot, you will get an exercise that is twice self-limiting. More about that later.



K.C. Reiter, RKC II demonstrating a perfect goblet squat.

Dan likes to say that an athlete's body is "one piece." The kettlebell get-up is what puts the little pieces together into that big piece.

The goblet squat is the best way to teach the squat, bar none. Not surprisingly, it improves hip mobility. Surprisingly, it builds strength.



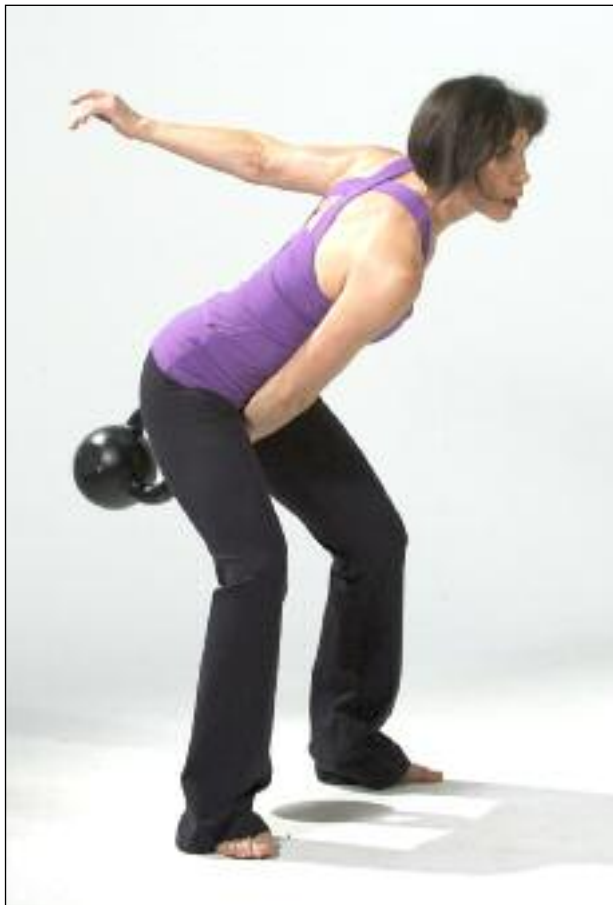
Senior RKC, Dr. Mark Cheng, is a get-up master. Courtesy of Black Belt Magazine.



The sumo deadlift with one or two kettlebells will not only strengthen the hips and back and develop a useful “functional” skill, but it will start teaching the athlete jumping mechanics: stabilizing the spine and hinging through the hips.

The sumo deadlift is indispensable, a kilt is optional. Senior RKC Doug Nepodal.

The kettlebell swing introduces the dynamic strength component, further preps the kids for jumping and landing, and builds conditioning. The swing is as athletic as an exercise can get.



Master RKC Andrea Du Cane shows how the swing is done.

The side-stepping swing will teach the kids a thing or two about lateral movement in a safe yet loaded manner.

The triple extension kettlebell swing, developed by Master RKC Jeff O'Connor, is the last stepping stone before jumping. Once the athlete is competent at swings, have him elevate the toes and the balls of his bare feet on a 2 x 4. When he feels comfortable swinging that way, have him come up on his toes on the top of each swing. The drill mimics a vertical jump remarkably, both the take-off and landing, and teaches perfect extension timing—without the landing impact. Another subtle benefit: This swing style forces one to get a complete triple extension in a self-correcting manner. I anticipate breakthroughs in Olympic weightlifting coaching.



A young athlete coached by Jeff in the triple extension swing. Courtesy Jeff O'Connor



Single-arm farmer's walks will strengthen the grip, the traps, and the waist. Professor Stuart McGill is a big fan of this exercise, because it strengthens the quadratus lumborum—a pelvis-tilting muscle on the side of the spine. In his work with elite strongmen, the Canadian researcher discovered just how important this muscle is for performance and back health. And Dan dug out a study that concluded that QL strength prevents ankle injuries in girls, so we have a double winner.

Single arm farmer's walk.



"Kettlebell Goddess" and the bottom-up racked single kettlebell carry.

Overhead walks will develop shoulder stability while maintaining mobility. The kettlebell's offset center of gravity is of big help here.

The kettlebell lockout walk, Philly style, by Brian Petty, RKC. Photo courtesy Brian Petty.

McGill also is a big proponent of the bottom-up racked single kettlebell carry, which lights up many muscles of one's midsection. So is Cook, who does strength magic with bottom-up kettlebell drills—like having a lady go from two to eight pull-ups almost immediately.



The bench row or bodyweight row addresses everyone's weakness: the rhomboids. We do not recommend bent-over rows, as they are easy to cheat on and fatigue the lower back. We would rather fatigue our backs with something more useful, like swings or deadlifts.



Dan putting a student through the bench row iso hold or "bat wing."

The one-arm supine press, Dan's favorite, will teach athletes not to flare their elbows in push-ups and barbell bench presses. It will also strengthen their obliques and teach them to root when benching. The free hand may not hold on to anything—this is the key. The drill may be done on a bench or, if you are in the field, on the ground. In the latter case, keep your legs straight and your feet shoulder width apart.



Senior RKC Shaun Cairns is doing the one-arm bench press under a stern eye of Master RKC Dave Whitley.



For the absolute novice and the completely detrained athlete, QI is the time to address qualities at a very low level of absolute relative strength. In other words, coaches and trainers must be vigilant in lowering standards to meet individual skill levels. Crushing a middle-aged man with a first workout filled with 400-meter runs and front squats may give him a ticket to the hospital or the morgue. And putting a younger athlete through a Marine Corps bootcamp-style workout might make the child swear off sports and fitness activities.



This is not an idle comment. My mother used to be a professional ballerina. She started training at the age of 6 and practiced for eight hours a day, in addition to doing her regular schoolwork, which was intense as well. (There is nothing feel-good, “Everyone is a winner” about Russian education.) When she graduated from the university, she quit ballet. She hates exercise to this day. This is typical of a great many Russian athletes, robbed of their childhoods.

Premature intensification, like premature specialization, does not pay off in the long run. According to Verkoshansky, Soviet sprint coaches were guilty of that mistake for years. They were forcing the young sprinters’ results:

This led to early mobilization of reserves possessed by young athletes which exhausted their capabilities and as a result, at 18–20 years of age, to stabilization of results in comparison to stronger foreign athletes. . . . The reason for Soviet runners staying behind . . . is in the premature intensification of training. . . . At the same time it was established that on the beginning stage of sports specialization, improvement in the functional and physical preparation is the base for future mastery. With less intense but more varied exercises, not only was there no decrease in the level of increase in sports results, but it created better conditions for further sports improvement of young runners specializing in the short distances.

In the beginning, a strength coach should focus on instilling in the youngster what Yuri Vlasov calls “muscle joy.” If one develops a taste for movement and strength early on, adding intensity later will not be a problem.

Of course, this does not give you an excuse to go to the other extreme and treat your athletes like fragile wusses.



Everything needs progression in Quadrant I. A basic fitness test for general upper-body strength assessment is the one-minute push-up test. It is a good test and can be charted over decades of the individual’s career. But with detrained and untrained athletes, it is wise to establish some kind of progression. The plank—an isometric position held for time—is ideal at this level. Ideally, we will build on this until the athlete can do much more with body-weight than simply remain rigid.

An area often overlooked in schools today is tumbling. I have a short list on how to live longer statistically:

- Don’t smoke.
- Wear a seatbelt.
- Learn to fall.

Oh, I agree that fish oil is great and a nice kettlebell swing is helpful, but these three rules will survive any hard look at the numbers. (I wonder what the Freakonomics guys take on this would be?)

Here's the actual progression I use in my class. After a basic orientation in falling and head position, we build immediately into this:

Tumbling

Forward roll

- From stand
- With legs crossed
- Forward roll to a stand
- Cross-legged roll to cross-legged stand
- Roll into leap, turn, repeat

Shoulder roll

- Alternate shoulders in a series
- Shoulder rolls without arms

Dive rolls

- Walk into a dive roll
- Run into a dive roll
- Dive rolls over obstacles (crouched people, mats)
- Dive rolls for height (within reason)

Side rolls

- Monkey rolls

Leapfrogs

Wheelbarrows

Squat hand balance

- Head and elbow handstand
- Forward roll to squat hand balance
- Walk on hands

Head and hand balance

Hand balance

- Cartwheels
- Round-offs



Forward roll from stand by SWAT officer
Joey Williams, RKC.



Dan demonstrates a handstand.

Don't worry about the names or the specifics. Just about anything works to build confidence and skill on the mats.

Now, just for a moment, think about how many skills are necessary to simply bring a ball up a basketball court and make a lay-up. Progression is king at this level. Later, we will discuss the

concept called accumulation. QI is all about *accumulation* of skills, movements, rules, and body knowledge.

Since **QUALITIES** (with a big S in the plural here) are being addressed, it is important to really be free to open the vast closet of experiences in the learning of sports, games, activities, and movements. This quadrant epitomizes the goals of a generalist, and there are three important lessons here:

First, *exposure* needs to be used in the classic sense. I have often wondered if I could have been a world-class kayaker or saber fencer. Alas, no exposure. Ideally, all the winter sports, the Olympic sports, the professional sports, and the lifetime sports would be given their due in a QI setting. If it sounds like a tough task, it is.

Second, *exposure* in the more common usage: when a group of 100 normal people get together, one person will simply be faster than the rest. Moreover, although my heart might be set on being in the NBA, my height is set on being a jockey. The more opportunities you have to be exposed, the more honest the process of discerning what sport might be right for you.

Third, if the participants are going to move through their careers to higher levels of a focused single sport or activity, the skills and rules of learning a variety of sports and games will carry over in two ways: One, there are some patterns and movements in sports that carry over from one arena to another, like feints, fakes, and double moves, for example. Two, just for simple variety and recreation, it is always nice to have the skill set needed to play any sport at some low level of ability.

QI is about *accumulation*. If I could highlight the single-greatest error most lifting enthusiasts make, it would simply be this: They have no variety. I'm not talking about using the decline, rather than the incline, for your pec development. I'm talking about doing nothing except going to the gym, walking on the treadmill, hopping off and doing a set of benches, playing with a machine or two, and hitting the steam room.

This is far from an overstatement. The first part of the AIT formula is "Accumulation" and doing just a few exercises a year is the antithesis of what I'm hoping you'll adopt in QI. Accumulation is actively seeking and learning new sports, lifts, moves, ideas, and games. One literally "accumulates" a number of new training moves and attempts a low level of mastery of each.

Accumulation is part of a simple method of looking at training that someone simply tossed out to me years ago. I was told in passing by Andy, a gym rat of mythical stature in downtown Salt Lake City, that the best way to look at training is *accumulate, intensify, and transform*.

I never heard Andy's last name. (He might not have one for legal reasons, or if I found out, he would have had to kill me.) But his AIT formula is the clearest way to look at "all of this." And what is "all of this"? It is the thousands of movements, machines, pieces of equipment, and games that we could possibly engage with.

The AIT formula works like this: You should *accumulate* lots of skills and tools and ideas and movements over time. Then, when you decide to focus on a specific goal, you *intensify* your work in the areas that will support the goal. The T stands for *transform*, and it can be one of two things: (1) simply having the confidence to allow the work to carry over into performance (or the wedding or the reunion, if it is a body composition goal) or (2) recognizing that it is time to reassess your goals and move in a different direction.

This might all be so obvious that you'll just shrug your shoulders and say "So?" Well, as Lee Corso would say, "Not, so fast!" The AIT formula is a simply elegant way to look at training. For the parent, it is a reminder to focus on multiple games and sports and not to "go specific" too soon for the young child athlete. For the elite athlete, it gives some clarity about adding all the new "toys" that show up in our industry every year. It is also a fine reminder for the older athlete to continue adding new ideas and insights but to use some kind of system to ensure intensity and transformation.

It is a simple tool. So, simple, you might ignore it!

Growing up, I did this naturally. In school, we'd play basketball or touch football during recess. During PE, we'd play kickball. After school, we'd hit the local playground, with its monkey bars, swings, tunnels, and variety of other dangerous contraptions that I'm sure have been banned from most of the United States today. Finally, we'd go home to breeze through whatever schoolwork was left.

Then, as fast as we could, we'd regroup and play street football, baseball, basketball, and a variety of games like tag, hide-and-go-seek, and "one foot off the gutter." By the time I entered organized sports, I'd probably been fouled 10,000 times, caught 100s of touchdown passes, and, for the record, run into one truck—that was still moving.

In school PE classes, we had speedball, volleyball, dodgeball, wrestling, basketball, crab soccer, soccer, swimming, and a host of other classes. In addition, I competed in several sports at the interscholastic, community, and church levels. Like all my friends, I was exposed to a myriad of sports experiences and soon discovered that the tricks in one sport often worked well in another.

So, you get the point: We need to add some variation to our training. But that is not the entire point. The idea of accumulation is to actively seek out new training concepts, not to add some simple variation, and to challenge our long-held notions of strengths and weaknesses.

This is quadrant I. It is the important—and perhaps even decisive—period of a young athlete's training, when every quality is developed at a minimal level. Throughout a long athletic career and the life well beyond it, the athlete will be able to enjoy a variety of sports and games as both a participant and a spectator. Moreover, some of the qualities will actually carryover to the mastery of the techniques of the elite athlete. Ball movement, for example, is a quality of both soccer (football) and basketball, but it also applies to handling the puck in hockey. Lessons learned "here" provide a ramp for lessons learned "there."

The key to QI is the courage of a coach (or parent) **NOT** to drool over the apparent edge that a young girl or young boy has at a skill or game at an early age. Oddly, I now believe that the person who struggles with a skill will actually eclipse the shooting star within a short time.

George Leonard's work on mastery has been proven to me in my years on the field, on the track, and in the weight room. It is odd to think that someone's natural talent might not manifest itself for years. While the new mantra is that 10,000 hours is the secret to being an "overnight sensation," my experience tells me that the easy learner stops improving after winning that first medal at the Middle School Track and Field Jamboree. Excellence demands time.



Dr. Ed Thomas has made a thought-provoking comment that things went awry in Americans' physical preparation decades ago when sports got organized. Athletes started getting in shape for sports by practicing those sports. The rich tradition of physical culture, with its gymnastic apparatus, barbells, dumbbells, kettlebells, and Indian clubs, practically died.

The absence of physical education in American schools did not help, and the final nail in GPP's coffin, in my opinion, has come courtesy of our "nanny" state education system. The principal at a California middle school banned the game of tag and even forbade all forms of physical contact between the kids, including pats on the back and handshakes. No more wrestling, no more fooling around, no more childhood, no more strength and health.



This notion of GPP is often linked to something that we now call variation in the weight room. The usual idea of variation looks like this:

1. I'll add wide-grip bench presses to my normal-grip bench presses.
2. I'll do decline bench press in addition to . . .

My idea of variation is much more in depth. For instance, an off-season track athlete might decide, "I'll enter an Olympic lifting meet." By taking on the challenge of Olympic lifting, certain things leap out immediately: "Do I know how to snatch and clean and jerk? Am I flexible enough? Are my legs ready for all of this? Do I know how to use the hook grip?" After these simple questions, another whole layer of questions emerges about registering for the meet, registering as a lifter, buying a singlet, buying lifting shoes, finding a place to train, and on and on. Taking on a triathlon at the same time would probably be too much.



Ideally, these out-of-the-way challenges ought to be undertaken by young children. But if you try on another sport for size as an adult, treat it as a noncompetitive "activity." You cannot serve more than one master, but you can sure dabble in a few other events. V. Gorinevsky wrote as far back as 1922: "One may not be a universal athlete. . . . Such universality is amateurism." L. Matveev added half a century later: "This principle [of specialization] states that a focus of time and effort on the chosen [sport] is the objectively necessary condition for achievement of elite results."