

Starting Strength

Appropriate Conditioning

by

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One of the most frequently asked questions that I receive both in the consulting end of my business and at the Starting Strength seminars, is when and how to add conditioning work to a strength training program. This is a valid question certainly, and a serious point of discussion for many. This article is designed to address the topic from my perspective, and convey my opinions on the matter.

When asked about conditioning, I typically reply with a simple question of my own: “Why do you want to do conditioning work?” This isn’t asked from a condescending, “who wants to do that sort of thing?” point of view, but rather out of a genuine interest to determine why conditioning may or may not be important in that person’s program. Answers range from the need to pass physical fitness tests at a person’s place of employment to the desire to be “well rounded” and able to take on any task that comes one’s way. The most common answer, although the one that often has to be extracted out of a somewhat uncooperative individual, is the perceived need to include conditioning work out of the erroneous belief that body composition is dependent on one’s exposure to that type of training – the irony being that diet is 99% of body composition. All of these reasons can be legitimate concerns in their own right depending on the situation. In most cases, however, a bit of education is required in order to help the inquisitor understand the best method of addressing the issue.

Before we get into the specifics, let’s take a look at the term “conditioning”. What does it mean? For our purposes we will define it as one’s ability to perform a given task. Terms like “General Physical Preparedness (GPP)” and “Work Capacity” have become buzzwords these days, particularly among people who do not compete in an activity that requires a specific conditioning adaptation. There is a widespread belief that one must train for any possible contingency, “the unknown and the unknowable.” It is my contention that becoming as strong as possible will have the most significant effect on one’s overall ability to perform a variety of tasks, and therefore represents the most intelligent use of training time for the purpose of conditioning, within certain limits. Let’s talk about this a bit.

All athletes practice their given sport. There are specific skills that they must learn and develop in order to excel at their game. Yet universally we see that when athletes become stronger, they perform better at their event. If this were not the case, then anabolic steroids and peptides like Growth Hormone would not be either as prevalent or as notoriously effective as they are for increasing one’s athletic performance. As Rip will say “there are no technique steroids”. Big Mac, Sosa, Barry Bonds, all the

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infamous baseballers who got caught or admitted to using drugs will tell you this as well. All of them knew how to swing a baseball bat and hit home runs. All of them had obviously been doing that for quite some time and quite well in order to even make it to the major leagues, let alone be recognized as famous players with notable careers. So then, why is it that when drugs came into the picture suddenly they're hitting more home runs than ever? Simple answer: they got stronger. The drugs made them stronger. The same logic can be applied to youth baseball players (minus the drugs): get them stronger and watch them hit the ball farther. Watch them throw from right field to home without bouncing the ball. Anyone who's spent any time around athletics at all has seen this demonstrated. Does this mean that one needs only to become ungodly strong in order to become a hall of fame quality baseball player? Of course not. This is where practice or "conditioning" for the given sport comes in to play. But I am saying that strength is the most important way to improve performance, and until it is acquired other "conditioning" is of secondary importance.

Let's look at another example. My gym is situated in the same parking lot as a firehouse. My dad has been a volunteer fireman since 1989 and is currently Chief Engineer of this Fire Company. Because of this, I have known many of the firemen that work there for many years. Occasionally one of them will pop in the gym to say hello. Numerous times now I have had similar conversations with a few of them that usually start by them telling me that they need to "get in here" (the gym) and do something, that their "cardio" sucks and that they find themselves getting winded easily doing things that were much easier for them ten years ago. Things like climbing ladders with gear and an air pack on, carrying charged hoses, and handling the large cumbersome tools that they use in rescue operations. They believe that if they improve their "cardio", they will be able to perform those tasks much easier and will feel like they did years ago. My normal response to this is to tell them that their primary issue is a lack of general strength much more than a lack of cardiovascular endurance. Typically this suggestion is somewhat offensive to a fireman, so they ask for an elaboration. I will say something to this effect:

"Ok, me, you, and your ten year old daughter are going to have a competition. We're going to take one of those ten pound dumbbells over there (don't ask, Bony uses them) and we are going to press it overhead with one hand as many times as we can before we have to stop. Now, which one of us is going to press it the most times"?

To this, they will invariably say that I (JP) will. When asked who will come in second they will always reply that they will. When asked who will be dead last, they say without any question that their ten year old daughter will. Then I ask them why they are able to say with such certainty that this will be the case. They conclude that since I am the strongest I will press the dumbbell the most times, and that since they are stronger than their daughter (unless she trains in my gym) that they will press it more times than her. I will then comment that the competition is one of repetition strength, strength endurance if you will, not of absolute strength in the manner that it would be if we were seeing who could press the most weight overhead for a single repetition. It is at that point that the proverbial "light bulb" comes on and they begin to see my point. When a person becomes stronger, meaning when they raise their absolute strength, every other physical task that requires a percentage of that strength becomes easier. Then I explain that since they are in their mid-forties, declining testosterone levels coupled with a lack of attention to diet and the absence of training for the last ten years has resulted in a measurable decrease in their overall strength. I then observe that a program based around getting

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them stronger will have a much more global effect on their ability to perform the variety of tasks that are asked of them than a program of running or ellipticalling or spinning or whatever else it is that silly people do these days.

So what does all of this have to do with the why's and how's of conditioning? If basic strength gives us the tools to better perform most any task that can be asked of us, then after we acquire that strength what is left is to prepare specifically for these tasks. This sounds simple, and has been practiced for ages by competitive athletes, but the concept escapes most people these days. What is it that you have to do? What does your life entail? What is appropriate "conditioning" in your given situation? For the athlete this is relatively simple to illustrate. An offensive lineman will at no point in the course of a football game be required to run at a slow pace for one mile. Nowhere in the history of football can anyone show an example of this being required of a lineman, or *any* player for that matter. Does it therefore make sense to have high school football players practice and test in the mile run? Absolutely not. Ironically enough, this is one of the tested events at school for the football kids who I have the pleasure of working with currently. One of my guys, Zack, a pulling guard and D-line hammer gets a raft of shit every time he comes in at the back of the pack during his mile run test. The kid is 5'9" and has driven his weight up to 235 over the last few months from 195 at the conclusion of last season. In a recent combine, he beat his school's star quarterback in the shuttle run, was very competitive with receivers in the 40, and manhandled everyone in the one-on-ones. On top of that he set school records in his "lifting tests," squatting 405 for 8 deep reps (while the non-Greyskull kids quarter-squatted much less). Obviously, my advice to Zack is to keep coming in last on his mile, and keep getting stronger and smashing kids on the football field, which is what he is supposed to do. The scouts that are pursuing him certainly aren't interested in his mile time, they being smarter than his football coach. This is an example of the inappropriate application of "conditioning" work. Zack is very well "conditioned" to play his position in football. Asking him to test a physical adaptation that he will never be required to use, and spending valuable training time and recovery ability practicing it can only be described as irresponsible and asinine.

Again, this idea needs to be applied to the design of anyone's strength and conditioning program. For many who read this article, who don't have a sport, who are getting into strength training either from an athletic or non-athletic background, and who simply want to not be a tub of shit and be "useful", as Rip often says, their first priority and their only concern for some time should be the acquisition of strength. That means that they should be following a program that will elicit the greatest increases in absolute strength that they are capable of at that point in their training career. For them, the simple addition of strength that they did not previously have will dramatically improve their situation in terms of performance in many tasks, in athleticism, and even in appearance and body composition if they are smart about what they are eating. This is all of the "conditioning" that they require at that stage. The addition of more dedicated "energy system work" or whatever you want to call it can come later when its stimulus is more warranted, but by then the foundation will have been built. The fat guy or gal just getting started will benefit immensely from the increased lean body mass in terms of it elevating their metabolic rate and making them consume more energy around the clock. The EPOC (Excess Post-Exercise Oxygen Consumption) value of their weight training will greatly exceed that of a bout of conventional "cardio" on a piece of equipment, and do much more in the long run (in the presence of a decent diet) to lean them out. The person who has requirements at work or elsewhere

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to be able to perform certain endurance tasks may require a bit more additional specific endurance work a bit sooner than those who aren't similarly bound. It is important in that case as well, however, that the training isn't disproportionately skewed or focused in the wrong direction out of fear of not being capable of performing adequately in endurance events to the extent that appropriate strength development is impossible. This leads to a life of frailty, leprosy, and involuntary abstinence.

Once the base of strength is established the decision is then made as to what is appropriate in terms of "conditioning" work. If something is going to be added to a program then one must understand that total recovery ability will be spread thinner than it previously had been. If someone was formerly lifting weights three days per week and resting on the other days, then they are in for a rude awakening if they attempt to add three high intensity conditioning workouts on the days in between. Often times, the simple addition of a single stress outside of a regimented program can bring progress in the program to a halt, or at the least slow it down considerably. This is particularly true if dietary and/or supplementation considerations are not made which would help with recovery from the added workload. We see this demonstrated frequently when people attempt to add several days of running, or worse, CrossFit, to the basic Starting Strength program. A program which can take a novice trainee from a 155lb Squat to a 315lb Squat in a matter of months then becomes a program which sees the trainee hover around the 205 mark for months unable to make gains, and then inevitably shit-talking the efficacy of the program on a message board somewhere.

It is therefore extremely important for the work that is added to make sense in the trainee's overall program. For instance, how important is it for an office worker who is skinny-fat and primarily interested in looking more Charles Bronson-like for the ladies, and being able to better smash softballs over the fence to impress his bar-league buddies to be able to run an impressive 5k time? If you ask me, I would say it's not very important at all. Where in the course of a day filled with excel spreadsheets, internet porn, X-box, and beers with "the guys" on the weekend will life present him with a 3.1 mile course that he needs to run in an impressive time? He'd be much better off focusing on the things that will be most conducive to *his* goals, not those that someone else feels that he should be able to reach. Much like the 55-year-old man with bad shoulders who is just getting into training, he has no need to do or any business doing ring dips or handstand pushups. His softball-swatting skills will be more improved at the batting cage, and in the gym moving progressively heavier barbells. His skinny-fat appearance certainly will be most positively affected by growing some shoulders and arms, legs and an ass, and about 3 inches of neck girth. If he gets his act together diet-wise, and by this I mean that he eats like a person who wants to look and perform like a powerful athlete, not like a 70-year-old woman with Crohn's disease, then his body composition will change dramatically in the process as well. "Conditioning" for him will not be what conditioning for someone with different goals and needs will be. This is one of the fundamental problems with group training. The pregnant woman, the above mentioned skinny-fat office geek, and the MMA fighter do not need the same things. Anyone who claims that they do is delusional or at the very least, usually drunk. One could certainly package training for an eclectic group like that very easily, but it would not be the most beneficial program for any one of them as an individual. The goals and imposed demands of the individual must be taken into consideration, and must provide the reasoning for the design and implementation of the conditioning portion of his training.

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So what about the hard-training individual without a sport, who just wants to be better than those around him? What about the individual whose life entails things like picking heavy stuff up, looking massive, carrying around abnormally-large genitalia, man-handling and ravaging women, and throwing the occasional sucker punch? What is *he* to do? What is appropriate conditioning for him? That is the subject of the next article in this series. Stay tuned for more on conditioning for the modern Viking.

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