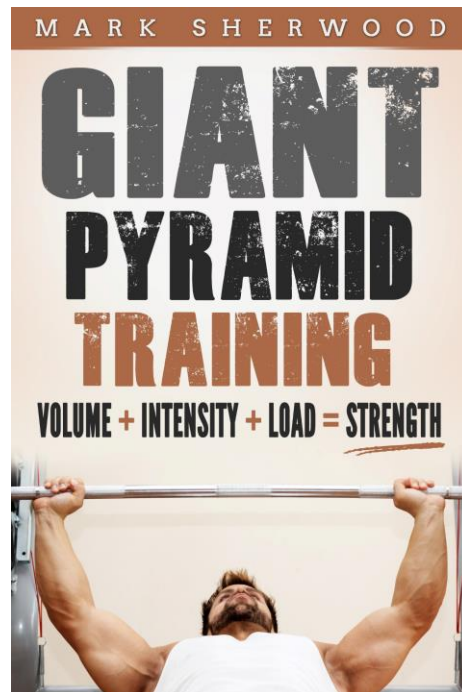


Giant Pyramid Training

Volume + Intensity + Load = Strength



Mark Sherwood

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Giant Pyramid Training: Volume + Intensity + Load = Strength

By Mark Sherwood

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: Are You Willing To Start Light?

Chapter 2: 45's On Your First Set?

Chapter 3: The Masters of The Giant Pyramid

Chapter 4: Variations of Giant Pyramids

Chapter 5: Constructing Your Own Giant Pyramid

Chapter 6: Individualize The Concepts

About The Author

Additional Resources

Introduction

This book is based upon a personal misconception that needed to be corrected. It began when I read an article in which an elite powerlifter was asked how many sets of an exercise he performed. He said he just did one or two sets of each exercise, and he did each exercise once per week. In my way of thinking, that didn't sound like very much training, but then I had a chance to see what he meant by one or two sets. I watched a video of his workout as he started doing squats with 135 pounds. He then did warm up set after warm up set as he worked his way up to a final set with over 900 pounds.

What shocked me was that he did about ten sets total. The first nine were warm up sets so he didn't count them as work sets, even though some of his "warm up sets" were done with 700 and 800 pounds. As far as he was concerned, only the tenth set counted as a set. As I watched, I kept thinking to myself, "he's doing a lot of sets," but according to him, he only did one. It suddenly occurred to me that my perception of how this lifter trained had been very distorted. After initially reading his interview, I pictured him doing low volume workouts consisting of a few warm up sets followed by one or two hard work sets, but he was doing tons of work before he reached his final work set. **What I discovered was that his workouts included much more volume than I had imagined in the form of warm up sets.**

Is the practice of doing bunches of warm up sets common among elite lifters? I can't say that all elite lifters do an extensive amount of warm up sets, but it is not unusual. Richard Hawthorne is a world record deadlifter; Eric Spoto is a world record bench presser; Andrey Malanichev is world record squatter; Charles Staley is a top masters lifter. I have observed each of these lifters doing what I thought was an endless amount of warm up sets as they worked their way up to a heavy set. I refer to the practice of doing a lot of warm up sets while working up to a heavy set as a **giant pyramid**. This method provides volume, plus intensity, plus load. The sum total of these three factors equals strength. If there are world class lifters who use this method, why not you? The purpose of this book is to show you how successful lifters design their giant pyramids so that you can benefit from their methodology.

Chapter 1

Are You Willing To Start Light?

Eric Spoto has bench pressed over 720 pounds. This being the case, 300 pounds would be an easy warm up weight as it would only be about 40% of the maximum weight that he can lift. If he started with a 300 pound warm up set, it would be the equivalent of a bencher with a 200 pound max doing a warm up set with 80 pounds. If you suggested to a 200 pound bencher that he should start with 80 pounds on his first set, there's a good chance that he would be insulted by the thought of using such a light weight.

Let's look at a lifter who can bench press 300 pounds. If he were to use 40% of 300 for his first warm up set, he would be using 120 pounds. I'm guessing many 300 pound benchers would feel belittled if they had to start a workout with only 120 pounds.

What I want to emphasize is that Eric Spoto does not start with 40% of his single rep max, he starts with only about 20% when doing his first warm up set with 135 pounds. This is the equivalent of a 200 pound bencher warming up with 40 pounds, and a 300 pound bencher warming up with 60 pounds. Are there very many 200 or 300 pound benchers who would start warming up with 40 to 60 pounds? Probably not; it would be too demoralizing. If they were forced to use such light weights, it would probably feel similar to returning to kindergarten.

The problem is that many people don't think that Eric Spoto is starting out with super light weights. After all, he's starting with 135 pounds. This would be a fairly substantial amount of weight to warm up with if your best bench is 200 pounds. However, you must consider that 135 pounds is not a substantial amount of weight for Eric Spoto, it's a baby weight for him, and it looks like he's bench pressing a whiffle ball bat when using 135 pounds.

Why does Eric Spoto start out with 20% of his single rep max? Because he wants to do a lot of reps to create a lot of training volume. Training volume contributes to strength gains. Those reps are creating blood flow and are giving his nervous system a chance to practice firing over and over again. Not only that, but doing a lot of repetitions will help his form to improve, assuming he is practicing perfect form on every rep; which he does.

The fact that Eric is doing a lot of reps with light weights allows him to get in a lot of volume without developing a lot of fatigue. The heavier training will come later in the pyramid of sets. If he starts too heavy with a lot of reps on his first set, he will develop too much fatigue to do a lot of sets at full strength for every set of a giant pyramid. He wants to do a lot of reps, a lot sets, and still be at full strength for his last set, which will be his heaviest set. This can only be accomplished by starting out with very light weights.

Are you willing to train like Eric Spoto? Then don't be insulted by warming up with light weights, it will help you to get stronger.

Chapter 2

45's On Your First Set?

In the second semester of my freshman year in college, I had the opportunity to enroll in my dream class, which of course was weight training. This was back in 1981 and weight training was still somewhat new to mainstream society. This being the case, a lot of the students had no experience with weight training and the class was designed to be very simple; our job was to learn how to do some basic exercises and start working out.

It didn't take long for me to meet a few classmates and make some friends. These friends became my training partners for the whole semester. One of the training partners was named Glen. He was pretty tall and appeared to have a fairly good build, however, he had never worked out with weights before and had never really developed his strength.

I was much smaller and lighter than Glen, but over the previous two years, I had already built up my strength quite a bit. My previous training enabled me to put a 45 pound plate on each side of an Olympic bar which amounted to 135 pounds. This is the amount of weight that I used for my first warm up set when doing squats and bench presses. Glen couldn't lift that much yet, so he had to start out with 25 pounds on each side of the bar. As for me, do you think I would warm up with 25's when I could use 45's? My ego wouldn't allow it. I always felt compelled to start with 45 pounders on each side of the bar for the very first warm up set.

Since many of the students in the class were absolute beginners, they were like Glen and had to start with 10 or 25 pound plates on each side. Those who could slap on the 45 pounders before working up to heavier weights were in the minority. This being the case, Glen would often joke around and call the 45 pounders "hero weights," which was his sarcastic way of saying that you would finally be a strength hero when you could lift them. As the semester progressed, Glen got stronger. In the process, he eagerly anticipated the day when he would be one of the students who could put on the big 45 pound weight plates instead of the embarrassing little 25 pounders.

The day eventually came when Glen was strong enough to load the 45's on each side of the bar. At last he had become one of the strong guys who actually belonged in a weight room. Glen was elated when he put those 45 pounders on the bar and did about six reps.

Do you think Glen ever put a 25 pound plate on the bar again for the rest of the semester? Not a chance. He put 45's on each side of the bar on his very first set, even though it was hard to squeeze out six reps with 135 pounds.

What I want to point out is that Glen would do 135 pounds on his first set, but it was hardly a warm up set. He basically bypassed the warm up and went straight to a hard work set with 135 pounds. Why? Because he loathed the 25 pound plates that he started out with. They were a sign of weakness. He had been using baby weights and he didn't want to go back, he only wanted to use the big weights. Over the years, I have seen many other lifters who perceive that the 25 pound plates that they are starting with are measly little beginner weights. They eventually gain enough strength to put a 45 pound plate on each side of the bar, or even two 45's on each side of the bar for their first set, and they never want to go back.

They end up having to push really hard on their very first set. This is the equivalent of an elite powerlifter starting out with a 400 pound bench press, or a 700 pound squat on on their first warm up set.

The truth is that Glen did get stronger by pushing himself on his very first set, and a lot of beginners will also be able to gain a substantial amount of strength by trying to go heavy on their very first set. This may also be true of you, but eventually you may find that you need the benefits of the extra reps and extra volume that can be obtained from starting out with light warm up sets.

Think about your own workouts. How much weight do you use for your first warm up set?

Chapter 3

The Masters of The Giant Pyramid

Every powerlifter is unique and has their own style of training. Not all powerlifters use giant pyramids to warm up to a heavy set, but some of the most successful lifters do. A couple of the most notable lifters who take the concept of a giant pyramid to a maximum are Eric Spoto and Richard Hawthorne. Spoto is known for his bench press, and Richard Hawthorne is known for his deadlift.

Both start out with close to 20% of their single rep max on their first warm up set.

Both do close to 20 reps on their first warm up set.

Both continue to do a bunch more sets with 8 to 10 reps per set while increasing the weight each set.

By the time they reach their final set, they've done around eight to twelve sets and a lot of reps. Let's take a look at a sample workout that each of these lifters has performed.

Eric Spoto

Eric Spoto's best raw bench press in competition is a world record of 722 pounds. In a video where Spoto works up to a heavy single with 705 pounds, he starts out with 135 pounds. A set by set description of his workout is listed below:

Set 1: 18 reps x 135 pounds (19% of his single rep max)

Set 2: 12 reps x 225 pounds (32%)

Set 3: 10 reps x 315 pounds (44%)

Set 4: 10 reps x 405 pounds (56%)

Set 5: 10 reps x 495 pounds (69%)

Set 6: 3 reps x 585 pounds (82%)

Set 7: 1 rep x 635 pounds (88%)

Set 8: 1 rep x 675 pounds (94%)

Set 9: 1 rep x 705 pounds (98%)

Notice that Spoto accumulates a lot of training volume by doing 60 total reps within his first five warm up sets. This is a lot of reps. If you were to do this same number of warm up sets and reps, but failed to start out with light weights, you would be totally gassed by the time you reached your heaviest weight on the last set. This is why Eric Spoto starts out with only 19% of his single rep max on his first set.

As Spoto continues with his giant pyramid, he is still below 50% on his third set, which he does for ten reps. By his fourth set, he has worked his way up to about 56% for ten reps. This would be the equivalent of 112 pounds for a 200 pound raw bencher, and 168 pounds for a 300 pound raw bencher. Both would find it to be a fairly easy set. Spoto is really only pushing himself on his fifth set, his eighth set, and his

ninth set. What is he accomplishing with the rest of his sets? He's accumulating volume, volume, and more volume.

If we were to use Eric Spoto's same percentages in order to create a workout that would be the exact equivalent for benchers who max out at 200 pounds, 300 pounds, and 400 pounds, it would amount to the following workouts shown in the Equivalency Table on the next page:

Equivalency Table			
	200 Pound Bencher	300 Pound Bencher	400 Pound Bencher
Set 1: 18 reps 19%	38 pounds	57 pounds	76 pounds
Set 2: 12 reps 32%	64 pounds	96 pounds	128 pounds
Set 3: 10 reps 44%	88 pounds	132 pounds	176 pounds
Set 4: 10 reps 56%	112 pounds	168 pounds	224 pounds
Set 5: 10 reps 69%	138 pounds	207 pounds	276 pounds
Set 6: 3 reps 82%	164 pounds	246 pounds	328 pounds
Set 7: 1 rep 88%	176 pounds	264 pounds	352 pounds
Set 8: 1 rep 94%	188 pounds	282 pounds	376 pounds
Set 9: 1 rep 98%	196 pounds	294 pounds	392 pounds

Hopefully the poundages in the equivalency table give you an idea of how much weight you would be using for each set if you worked out in a similar manner to Eric Spoto. The sets start very light, and end very heavy.

Richard Hawthorne

Let's move on to Richard Hawthorne. Richard has deadlifted 650 pounds at a bodyweight of approximately 130 pounds. He does a lot of reps and a lot of sets for each exercise. Like Eric Spoto, Richard starts out with light weights on his first warm up set. Of course by light, I mean light for Richard. Let's take a look at one of Richard's deadlift workouts where he works up to a heavy set for three reps:

Set 1: 20 reps x 135 pounds (21% of his single rep max)

Set 2: 20 reps x 135 pounds (21%)

Set 3: 10 reps x 225 pounds (35%)

Set 4: 10 reps x 225 pounds (35%)

Set 5: 10 reps x 315 pounds (48%)

Set 6: 6 reps x 315 pounds (48%)

Set 7: 6 reps x 405 pounds (62%)

Set 8: 3 reps x 405 pounds (62%)

Set 9: 1 rep x 500 pounds (77%)

Set 10: 3 reps x 515 pounds (79%)

Set 11: 3 reps x 545 pounds (84%)

Set 12: 3 reps x 570 pounds (88%)

Richard calls this routine, "3 sets of 3," because he considers his last three sets his work sets, and they are each done for three reps. Three sets of three doesn't sound like much, but if you look at the actual

workout, Richard is accumulating a ton of training volume with an extensive warm up. He believes when a high amount of training volume is included within a workout, each exercise only needs to be trained once per week. Richard admits that the extensive amount of warm up sets may slightly cut into his strength by his last set, but he believes that this makes him work harder when using his heaviest weights and helps to develop more strength over the long term.

Richard is fanatical about using perfect form on every rep and believes that it is the key to consistent progress; especially if you can maintain perfect form while in a state of fatigue on your last two or three sets with heavy weights. It's one thing to do a lot of work, but he believes it must be done with precision form.

If we take Richard's percentages and use them to create equivalent workouts for lifters with a max deadlift of either 200 pounds, 300 pounds, or 400 pounds, the workout poundages that would be used are provided in the following equivalency table on the next page:

Equivalency Table			
	200 Pound Deadlifter	300 Pound Deadlifter	400 Pound Deadlifter
Set 1: 20 reps (21%)	42 pounds	63 pounds	84 pounds
Set 2: 20 reps (21%)	42 pounds	63 pounds	84 pounds
Set 3: 10 reps (35%)	70 pounds	105 pounds	140 pounds
Set 4: 10 reps (35%)	70 pounds	105 pounds	140 pounds
Set 5: 10 reps (48%)	96 pounds	144 pounds	192 pounds
Set 6: 6 reps (48%)	96 pounds	144 pounds	192 pounds
Set 7: 6 reps (62%)	124 pounds	186 pounds	248 pounds
Set 8: 3 reps (62%)	124 pounds	186 pounds	248 pounds
Set 9: 1 rep (77%)	154 pounds	231 pounds	308 pounds
Set 10: 3 reps (79%)	158 pounds	237 pounds	316 pounds
Set 11: 3 reps (84%)	168 pounds	252 pounds	336 pounds
Set 12: 3 reps (88%)	176 pounds	264 pounds	352 pounds

The concepts behind the giant pyramid workouts are pretty simple:

Start out with very light weights. Do a lot of reps when using light weights. Most of your training volume should come from lighter weights, not heavy weights. This doesn't mean that heavy weights should be neglected as you must still include heavy lifting, but it should take nine to twelve sets to reach your last heavy set. Volume is emphasized in the beginning and middle of a giant pyramid, intensity and load are emphasized at the end.

Chapter 4

Variations of Giant Pyramids

Eric Spoto and Richard Hawthorne utilize the concept of giant pyramids to the fullest extent. There are other powerlifters who also use some of the concepts of giant pyramids, but not to the same extent as Richard Hawthorne and Eric Spoto. An example of this is Andrey Malanichev, a world record holder who has squatted over 1,000 pounds.

A High Amount of Sets with Low Reps

Andrey starts out with 135 pounds for his first warm up set. This is only about 13% of the maximum weight that he can lift. It would be the equivalent of a 300 pound squatter starting out with 40 pounds on his first warm up set. Andrey then proceeds to do a lot of warm up sets when working up to his heaviest set. What makes Andrey different than Richard Hawthorne or Eric Spoto, is that he only does one to five reps per set; including his lightest warm up sets.

The emphasis of Andrey's workout is not so much on accumulating a lot of volume, but on thorough preparation for his heaviest set. Andrey avoids injury by starting out very light. He wants his body to slowly adjust to heavier weights over the course of a substantial amount of sets. This helps him to avoid shocking his body with big jumps in weight from set to set which would occur if he reached his top weight with only a small number of warm up sets. By the time Andrey hits his last set, his body will be prepared to lift a very heavy weight from having performed numerous warm up sets.

In the workout below, you will see that Andrey does ten sets, which is a lot of sets. However, he only accumulates a total of 26 reps after performing all ten sets.

1st set: 5 reps using 13% of his single rep max weight

2nd set: 5 reps using 22% of his single rep max weight

3rd set: 3 reps using 31% of his single rep max weight

4th set: 3 reps using 40% of his single rep max weight

5th set: 2 reps using 49% of his single rep max weight

6th set: 2 reps using 58% of his single rep max weight

7th set: 1 rep using 67% of his single rep max weight

8th set: 1 rep using 76% of his single rep max weight

9th set: 1 rep using 85% of his single rep max weight

10th set: 3 reps using 91% of his single rep max weight

If you respond especially well to training volume, you will probably prefer the way Richard Hawthorne and Eric Spoto warm up. If the high work load volume is too much to recover from, you are more likely to prefer Andrey Malanichev's approach to performing warm up sets.

Even though Malanichev's warm up is different than Richard Hawthorne's and Eric Spoto's, the two common factors that exist between all of these lifters is:

1. They all start out with very light weights relative to their single rep max.
2. They all do a lot of warm up sets when working up to their heaviest set.

Ronnie Coleman: A Condensed Giant Pyramid

The last version of a giant pyramid that I am going to discuss is a bench press routine that Ronnie Coleman did when training for the Mr. Olympia, which he won eight times. Ronnie doesn't do as many sets for a single exercise as the lifters that have been discussed so far, but he does a condensed version of a giant pyramid. He does this by starting out with light weights and doing a lot of reps as he works his way up to a heavy weight over the course of five sets. What makes his workout different than the others is that instead of doing approximately ten sets of an exercise, Ronnie only does five sets.

What does Ronnie's pyramid look like? You can view the sets and reps of his bench press workout below (note: the percentages are based on an estimated max of 575 pounds):

Set 1: 135 pounds x 20 reps (23%)

Set 2: 225 pounds x 16 reps (39%)

Set 3: 315 pounds x 12 reps (55%)

Set 4: 405 pounds x 10 reps (70%)

Set 5: 500 pounds x 5 reps (87%)

As you can see, Ronnie starts out with light weight and a lot of reps by doing 20 reps on his first set. He is getting in a lot of training volume over the course of his first four sets which consist of 20, 16, 12, and 10 reps for a total of 58 reps. If Ronnie did 12, 10, 8, and 6 reps while proceeding through his first four sets, it would just be a normal pyramid, but since he does a larger amount of reps, it has some of the characteristics of a giant pyramid. Ronnie doesn't drop below ten reps until his fifth and last set. When doing his last set, he is going very heavy and must push hard to reach five reps.

If you watch Ronnie train while performing this five set pyramid, you would see that he's not pushing very hard on his first three sets. The main purpose of these sets is to warm up while accumulating a lot of volume. His intensity starts to increase substantially during his fourth set, and he is achieving both high intensity and a very heavy load during his fifth set.

I think it is important to point out that as a bodybuilder, Ronnie only does five sets of bench presses because he does several chest exercises in addition to the bench press. Even so, he is tremendously strong at the bench press, and we can learn from his methods.

Obviously, Ronnie knows how to achieve the right combination of volume, intensity, and load with a condensed giant pyramid in order to produce enormous size and strength. If you don't like performing an entire giant pyramid with tons of sets, you can condense the pyramid to five sets and try using Ronnie's approach.

Chapter 5

Constructing Your Own Giant Pyramid

In this book, I have given you three different examples of giant pyramids.

The first example consisted of the way Eric Spoto and Richard Hawthorne train. Each of these lifters start out with light weights and do high reps on their first warm up set. They both do a ton of total reps and accumulate an enormous amount of training volume by the time they reach their heaviest set.

The second example consisted of Andrey Malanichev who also starts out with light weights and does a lot of warm up sets before reaching his heaviest set. However, Andrey avoids high reps and only does low reps on each of his warm up sets.

The third example consisted of Ronnie Coleman. Ronnie, like all of the others, starts out with light weights on his first set. He also does a lot of reps on his warm up sets, but he only does four warm up sets before reaching his last set with a very heavy weight.

When considering these three examples, which one is the best? When it comes to your own training, the method that works best for you is the best. Try them out and see which one produces the best results. You may also find that the best pyramid is a hybrid between the methods. For example, you may learn that you shouldn't do as many sets as Richard Hawthorne, but you should do more than Ronnie Coleman. The exact amount of sets and reps that someone else uses to succeed is not as important as finding the right combination for yourself.

I also think it is important to point out that many lifters will only need to squat and deadlift once per week when doing giant pyramids because of the high volume. Some lifters will also be able to get by on one session of giant pyramids per week for the bench press, but others may need two sessions. If you find that one session is not enough, and two sessions is too many, you can try doing one session of giant pyramids, and a second session in which you only do three or four warm up sets for the bench press. Every lifter must train within the context of their own capacity and adjust their workload and frequency according to their own abilities to tolerate volume and recover.

Chapter 6

Individualize The Concepts

After reading this book, you may choose to try some giant pyramids in your own training. One of the concepts that I believe in is that you should be close to full strength when you finish working a muscle group. This holds true, even when doing a giant pyramid. This means that your first set of a giant pyramid must be light; and light is relative. If your max bench is 150 to 200 pounds, you shouldn't be starting with more than 30 to 50 pounds on your first set. If you ignore this advice and start with 100 pounds for ten reps on your first set in order to work up to 150 pounds for six reps by your tenth set, you'll be wasted long before you ever reach the tenth set. Even if you are very strong and can lift 350 pounds for 6 reps, you'll be gassed if you start with 300 pounds for your first set and take ten sets to reach 350. You must start out light if you are going to do a giant pyramid.

Another concept that I believe to be important is to train with the right amount of intensity. If you are struggling to push out slow strenuous grinder reps on your last sets of a giant pyramid, you are probably pushing too hard. You should be able to do all of your reps using good form and an even rep pace. The lifters that I have discussed in this book may occasionally grind out slow strenuous reps, but they don't do it habitually. My advice is to stay within the boundaries of maintaining excellent form and a steady rep pace during each set.

The giant pyramids are designed to be done in conjunction with basic exercises such as squats, deadlifts, and bench presses. Some of you may be wondering whether you should do assistance exercises, such as incline presses, overhead presses, or triceps extensions after doing a giant pyramid for the bench press. When squatting or deadlifting, you may wonder if you should follow your pyramid with assistance exercises such as hyperextensions or leg curls. I will answer by saying that Richard Hawthorne and Andrey Malanichev do little if any assistance exercises. Eric Spoto does do assistance exercises as do other lifters who do a lot of warm up sets such as Ed Coan and Charles Staley. However, if you choose to do assistance exercises, I recommend just doing one to three sets, don't do giant pyramids for your assistance exercises, and please don't do giant pyramids for two or three exercises for the same muscle group. For example, do not do giant pyramids for bench presses, incline presses, and decline presses within the same workout. Such training will quickly lead to burnout and overtraining.

At this point, you should understand the basic concepts of how to perform a giant pyramid. Just remember that you are an individual and should adjust every method and concept to fit within your own capacities. Also recall that three versions of giant pyramids were presented in this book. If you try one version and it doesn't work for you, adjust, adjust, and adjust until you create your own version that does work. If you are willing to keep learning and individualize your training, you will improve. I wish you much success and the best of training.

About The Author

Mark Sherwood is a long time fitness enthusiast who has pursued weight training and other fitness activities for over thirty years. His educational and professional background include a B.S. degree as an exercise specialist in physical education from the University of Wisconsin Madison, and positions as a fitness instructor and physical education teacher.

One of Mark's passions is to distinguish between strength training concepts that are consistently effective as opposed to those that are effective for a short time period. Through his education, research, and personal trial and error, he has endeavored to gain the necessary knowledge to share effective training strategies with those who desire to maximize their training results.

Mark resides with his family in Southern California. For more training resources from Mark, you can visit www.precisionpointtraining.com. In addition, you can view more books on strength training that he has authored on the next page.

Additional Resources

A Quick Guide To Strength

Beginning Strength Training

Cluster Set Training

Force And Frequency Training

High Frequency Strength Training

High Volume 5's

Heavy Frequency Training

Individualized Workouts For Hardgainers

Never Miss A Lift

Overcoming Strength Training Plateaus

Quick Workouts For Quick Muscles

Rest-Pause Training

Strength Challenge 20/20

Strength Training Capacity

Strength Training Thresholds

Strength To The Max

Strength To The Max And Beyond

The 1 x 100 Challenge

The High Frequency Training Pyramid

The Peak Strength Principle

12-10-8-6: A Workout Plan For Building Size And Strength