

Learn the ability to learn

In my work with bodybuilders and athletes I am finding that all too often the workouts are finite and not transitional. In other words, the workouts that are used are the workouts that will continue to be used until there is an injury or some other problem. Usually there is a set number of exercises and workout routine for every session in the gym.

When you have the ability to learn, however, there is no finite workout. All workouts are progressive and lead to new and different workouts. This is the method that should be used to become better than someone before you in both bodybuilding and in athletics.

For example, when you know the results of a particular performance, regardless if it is one of the best athletes in the world, you should determine the physical and psychological requirements needed to achieve that level. If you can then train to be as good as that performer or achievement, it will not make you better than he or she was. You will not break a world record in this manner.

In essence, you merely equal what has been done in the past. This is what typically occurs when you follow someone else's workouts. You do not develop the physical ability to go above and beyond the levels of achievement seen.

This does not happen when you have the ability to learn. In essence, you learn from other successful individuals and you incorporate some (or all) of the good ideas. But you also do other things to develop your body in such a manner that you become capable of doing new and different things never before experienced by another individual.

Granted you must have some of the right genes, but from what is now known about training, genetics, as important as it is, does not determine the final product—your training does. Thus, what you do beginning with the earliest years can play a very important role on the accomplishments that you can achieve.

For example, if you participate in many different sports as a youngster you will develop the different kinds of coordination that are necessary to perform the skills needed. In essence, you develop the ability to throw, to catch, to do calisthenics and weight exercises, to jump, to run, to maneuver in and out of situations, to balance yourself in various poses, etc. As you learn all of these skills your nervous system develops many different motor pathways that when fully developed, become engrained in the body. They will be with you the rest of your life.

As a result, after you have a multitude of such motor pathways developed, when a new element comes up it is much easier to learn it. In many cases, the learning of a new element is possible only if you have the necessary coordination already developed. This enables you to constantly change with the demands of the game or activity. This also holds true in learning exercises.

For example, many individuals begin doing the squat very early in their training program. However, the squat requires ample amounts of strength and flexibility (especially, of the hamstring muscles), together with well-developed intra-and inter-muscular coordination, before it can be done safely and effectively. If you begin doing the squat without the necessary prerequisites it will take a long time before you are capable of doing it well. In some cases, if you do not gain the flexibility, lower back strength and muscular coordination that is needed, an injury will usually cut your workouts short.

But, by developing all of the coordination and physical qualities needed, you become what is sometimes known as a natural athlete or quick learner. People marvel at how some individuals regardless of the sport or skill at hand, seem to conquer it with little trouble and in a very short period of time. Others may take months before they can achieve the same level of mastery. Thus, the greater your range of coordination and all-around physical development, the more readily you can tackle new and different skills.

This can be illustrated quite vividly with the use of gymnasts and divers. Gymnasts and divers appear to come up with seemingly impossible stunts in competition every year. The stunts that were done 10 years ago and considered difficult are now considered easy and have been replaced by even more difficult and complex skills. Thus if you are in one of these sports, you should never train to be as good as the best today because in 2 to 5 years the ability requirements will be even greater.

To a good extent the same is true in bodybuilding. A comparison of winners of ten years ago will show major differences with today's winners. That the requirements are becoming greater each year can be seen in almost all sports especially the physical and psychological demands. To a certain extent better genetics from more selective mating plays a role in this area, but it still comes down to the type of training being done. You can have all the potential in the world from your genetics, but if you do not train and fully develop your capabilities they will be of little value to you.

For example, if you have a predominance of white muscle fibers (which have the greatest potential for growth), but you do not do exercises that tax these fibers, in time some of them will begin to act as red fibers. This is especially true if you do slow, long duration movements.

An analogous situation occurs if you only do one sport in the very early years. This limits your all-around development so that when you become an adult the ability to master new and different skills is as difficult for you as it is for young beginners. Thus being great in only one sport does not mean you can be great in another sport, unless you have the ability to learn.