

The Jewel of the Crown

Abdominals are the visual centerpiece of the body. They tell everyone immediately what condition you are in. They demand respect unlike any other bodypart because they convey your discipline outside of the gym. Whether it is right or not, the public respects a 150 pound person with defined abs more than the 250 pound monster who hides his behind a tank top. And abs are even more crucial for competitors. You can slave away for years to create a massive physique but you will be dismissed from the second you step onstage if you are less than ripped in the midsection. They are the visual indicator of how hard you dieted and prepared for a show and can absolutely make or break your chances of winning. So with all the importance of the abdominals, why are they treated in such strange fashion? Short range, low intensity, high repetition, unweighted movements are the norm for abs, but would never be considered for any other bodypart. Odd theories abound as well, such as abstinence from moves that are believed to distend the midsection, and even not training them at all during the majority of the year! Now we also have a new wave of BS infiltrating our camps, that of “functional training”, or “sports specific training”, which demands that we train our abs by doing much of work on unbalanced objects and with bizarre floor exercises. Let’s sift through the nonsense and compose an efficient abdominal routine.

I used to think that abdominal work was unnecessary during most of the year. “Let the diet take care of it”, was my motto. Honest retrospection reveals that attitude was due to laziness and getting overly fat in the off season. However, it would have continued except that I ran into a wall. My abs were not improving. Diet was taking all the fat off, and they looked good, but no different than when I was many years younger. In contrast, my other bodyparts were developing as they should. It just didn’t look right. What was wrong with me? I began to look at photos of great midsections, such as Mohammed Makkawy and Pierre Vandenstein and compared them to my own. The difference was actual thickness of the abdominal muscles. In short, they had more mass. So I saw the problem with my abs, but how to correct it? What to do? Oh my, I might try actually training them for starters. So I began following my typical ab routines twice weekly during the off season, and three times weekly precontest, instead of just sporadically. These routines consisted of lots of crunches, both on the floor and machines, done with 20-50 reps and about a dozen sets. I also did some giant sets precontest; five or more moves back to back without rest. After a year, I revealed my newly constructed abdominals! They looked....

Okay, I guess. Not outstanding. A little more development, but nothing like I had hoped. So much for the power of visualization, as I had a clear picture in my mind of what they would look like, and it was NOT how they turned out. What gives? I had radically increased my workload, and swallowed my pride, and yet the improvement was only slight. Do I continue with the horrid ab work for another couple of years, hoping that eventually it will pan out, or say screw it and return to my original ways? The latter was starting to look like better sense, but I wasn’t quite ready to give up. There was only one option left, and it was the most dreaded of all: I was going to have to think for myself. That’s right, no reliance on common dogma or gym lore, and actually figure something out on my own. Scary, but I had no alternative.

What it boiled down to was that I lacked mass. Not a hard thing to believe, because as a very ectomorphic person, I lacked mass throughout my body. Why would my abs be any different? And why would I think that high rep, unweighted exercise would suddenly cause them to fill out? If I had those kind of genes, I could just do isometric moves for my arms a couple of times weekly and have twenty inch guns! Not the case. So if the aerobic class type of training wasn't doing the trick, I needed to apply the same logic to my abs that I did with other bodyparts. This meant to find the moves that best stress the area over the longest range of motion and allowed for the heaviest resistance to be applied. I came up with hanging leg raises and crunches.

I took the hanging leg raises through the full range of motion: all the way up until my toes touched the ceiling, and all the way down until they were slightly behind my body. Those are hard to do by themselves, but I stuck with it until I could eventually use a fifteen pound dumbbell between my feet. For the crunches, I tried many varieties before hitting on a winner. All I do is lay on a flat bench with my head slightly off the end, hold a dumbbell in a pullover fashion grip against the back of my skull, and crunch upward in explosive fashion. I trained them like I would any other bodypart for size and strength: once every five days, with reps in the 5-8 range. It only took a couple of workouts to realize it was working.

So now I had a winning formula, but the battle wasn't completely over. I had to deal with the nemesis of all intelligent trainees, the dreaded New Wave Trainer. You know the type: the guy who loves to tell others how to train in the latest fashions, who doesn't seem to train much himself but loves to profess his wisdom. I was bombarded with advice, all of which told me that I was causing irreversible damage to my body. My abs would protrude worse than a pregnant woman's, for sure. My lower back would explode any day. Symmetry? No more. Now my waist would be thick and hang off my hips. What helped me to dismiss such advice was to first look at the source. Most of the people advising me did not possess abs or sometimes, any other muscle in their body. All the same, I kept close watch to see if any of the changes occurred. What I found was interesting. Not only did the negative changes not manifest, but the opposite did. My abs were crisp and delineated, and could be sucked into a vacuum more easily than before. My intercostals and obliques were pronounced and tapered better than before. And my back? It never felt so good! I had an entire season injury free. I left the know-it-alls to themselves, where they were balancing on slant boards and half balls, chanting their doctrine to the masses.

Common sense also dictates a sensible approach to off season dieting. If you get too fat, not only will you be unable to see your abs, which can be embarrassing, but you run the risk of loose skin and wrinkles when you cut up. Bulking may be useful as a teenager, but after the first few years of training, it loses its value. Maintaining a manageable bodyfat during the off season, such as 10-12%, is much easier than dieting all that excess off. So no more binge and purge for me; I keep the off season diet very similar to precontest, just a few more carbs. Slamming down thousands of additional calories off season doesn't make much sense anyway, as your activity level is much lower than during the insanity of ripping up, and building additional mass only requires a few hundred calories daily over maintenance levels. Another fallacy dispelled that benefited my abdominals.

So the moral of the story is that the abs are not unlike the rest of the body. Forget all the junk about postural muscles and so-called stabilizers. Think of the abs as you do your other bodyparts. Train them hard, heavy and brief most of the year. No marathon, thousand reps routines done daily. Keep track of your workouts to insure improvement and set goals for ab training to instill enthusiasm. Hopefully this advice will make you look at abdominal training in a new light. That new light will also shine down on ripped, corrugated washboards that attract a judge's attention! Train hard, and stay natural.

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