

Effort

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I recalled the first of my high-quality efforts in bodybuilding. The effort level was so intense, embodying such exhilaration and such a quantum leap from previous workouts that the mere act of recalling it nearly takes me into the Pain Zone.

Around 1972 I began to be seriously committed to becoming a bodybuilding champion. I was training with a couple of dedicated Washington, D.C., policemen. I remember I was doing Scott curls with a weight that had normally limited me to 5-6 reps. As I was curling the weight, I became aware of a surging power and energy. My law-and-order training partners sensed that something out of the ordinary was taking place within that mysterious youngster named Mentzer. Now I was on my sixth rep, showing no signs of slowing down or weakening.

By the time I had performed eight reps, I ceased being aware of my partners. My concentration focused more and more intensely on the weight and my biceps. As I continued to 9-10 reps it was as though I'd surrendered to the momentum of the process. I eked out one more rep, for a total of 11, about six reps better than my previous best performance in the Scott curl.

Not until I put down the weight did I realize that something unusual had happened. As I sat down to catch my breath and wipe my brow, I was seized by the full significance of what it meant to train with 100% intensity.

No longer was the notion of intensity merely an abstract concept floating in my brain. Intensity was now a living, breathing entity that pervaded my entire being and would direct all my future actions. The training approach of all or nothing became the basis of a philosophy that could be applied to life in general. Stated simply, the concept is if anything is worth doing, then give it everything you've got or don't attempt it at all.

Because such peak efforts occur relatively infrequently, they tend to stand out in our memory. They are typically marked by a greater-than-usual focus on the present, attended by a sense of enhanced personal power. When we transcend, if only by a degree, our previous levels of effort, we invariably make quantum leaps in progress. These peak efforts help us break through to higher functional levels and as such are powerful learning experiences. They put us closer in touch with what psychologist William James calls "hidden reserves."

EFFORT AND SURVIVAL

Nature does not allow living creatures to be inactive. In all levels of biology, inactivity spells death. Life is growing: When not moving forward, it falls backward. We survive, then, only as long as we advance. Humankind evolved through continuous struggle and effort. Since men and women are distinguished from other creatures because they have a mind, they will get the best out of themselves when they employ their rational ability to focus on the future, that is, attaining their goals. The individual who wants to evolve physically and mentally must be willing to exert continuous effort.

Since life by its nature involves struggle, we are also faced with the constant possibility of defeat. Hence, humankind derives intense pleasure from successful effort, as it confirms the possibility of success in life.

An individual's self-esteem stems from a sense of control over reality. Whenever we carry out a conscious effort, such as when we struggle against an opposing force like doing a 400-pound bench press, we feel a specific power rising in us, a sense of "will." The abundant self-esteem associated with champion bodybuilders stems precisely from their having achieved goals by generating the proper effort. They took the time and expended the necessary energy to develop their self-respect. They sufficiently value life and happiness to exert compete effort. As a result they rightfully feel pride.

Individuals who avoid effort may end up with problems stemming from the meaning and value they attach to life. The chronic avoidance of effort eventually will cause the person's inner resources to atrophy. This sense of impotence with life makes such individuals feel helpless in the face of even minor adversities.

The will needs a rallying point around which it can gather its force. Bodybuilding always served as a powerful stimulant that heightened the sense of meaning in my own life. The following excerpt from my training journal before my 1978 Mr. Universe victory chronicles this heightened sense of meaning associated with my contest preparation efforts:

"The notion that all this torturous preparation, privation and relentless pursuit have lifted me to a new and higher level of existence has become increasingly apparent to me. Life has assumed greater meaning in the process. While there is an element of tension and discomfort associated with this elevated existence, I can only say I thrive while caught up in it, and am generally most stimulated in every area - intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually"

The sum of my life's activities - outer, inner, muscular, emotional, sexual, and yes, even spiritual - in short, my essence, was never more profoundly or intensely felt than during periods of great effort. The cumulative effect of this rise in my total power elevates me to a higher level of life.

QUALITY OF EFFORT

Intense efforts result in specific increases in muscular size and strength. Intensity refers to the percentage of momentary effort generated. The closer one comes to exerting 100% of his or her momentary capacity, the greater the likelihood that that person will stimulate increases. Duration of effort, as opposed to intensity, refers to the actual time spent on an effort. Efforts of long duration, such as long-distance running, result in an increase in cardiopulmonary endurance, but do little or nothing to increase skeletal muscle size or strength.

The quality of effort - the intensity factor - is the most important to bodybuilders and strength athletes. Intensity of effort must be high enough to induce an adaptive response, growth. As a rule of thumb the intensity factor must exceed 50% of one's capacity, with greater intensity producing a greater rate of improvement. Those interested in maximum muscle growth must regularly exercise at the 100% intensity level.

VALUES, MOTIVATION & EFFORT

Quality effort of the high-intensity variety requires an abundance of motivation, and actual physical and mental courage. Obviously a well-trained highly conditioned body is capable of all-out effort at practically any time. Because all-out effort places enormous demands on the body's adaptive mechanism, the mind balks at such effort. All of us at one time or other don't feel like engaging in all-out physical effort except in an emergency.

Do you recall ever going to the gym and feeling tired and out of sorts, looking for an excuse not to work out? You find it nearly impossible to focus on what you know you should be doing; a weight that you can ordinarily curl for 10 reps flatly refuses to go up after five. Now picture this: At the point when you're ready to throw in the towel, some sinister looking character puts a pistol to your head and snarls, "Pick up that weight and curl it 10 times or I'll blow your brains out!"

What do you do? You pick up the weight and curl it not 10 times but 15!

Motivation is fueled by desire to gain and maintain a value. The more value we attach to something, the more motivation we'll have to acquire that particular value. It's the concept of life that gives meaning to the concept of value. When that value is threatened, you find that you possess a potential for effort you didn't know you had. It's amazing what you can do when your life or that of someone you love depends on it.

The more value you place on owning a strong muscular physique, the more likely you'll attain that goal, since motivation will not be a problem. Establishing that value requires a person to focus his or her awareness, clarity and intelligence to make a choice - to commit to an effort.

You are the agent of your own destiny whether you realize it or not, or whether you act on it or not. Only you can find the motivation to exert the quality of effort to achieve your full potential as a bodybuilder. No one else can do the work for you.

Developing a personal philosophy of effort based on objective principles requires time and dedication, but the rewards are more than commensurate. As that philosophy takes shape, you will grow increasingly directed and purposeful, and your personal power and charisma will affect everyone you come in contact with. But you can't just think about it, you've got to act on it! So take pride in your power to achieve your values and goals. Be a champion of choice and make the effort to achieve the kind of physique you want.