

Nine of the Biggest Exercise-Related Lessons I've Learned

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I was born in 1958, in England. I started resistance training at age 14, when I got a set of chest expanders. In 1973 I started weight training in a gym. Bodybuilding was an obsessive focus of my life for many years. I wanted to be a professional bodybuilder, but it was an unattainable goal because my heredity didn't provide me with the potential to build huge muscles, and because I was unwilling to take bodybuilding drugs. Although I didn't become a professional bodybuilder, I did transform my physique, and I made a career out of writing about my passion for exercise and physique transformation.

Here are nine of the biggest lessons I learned, not given in any particular order, to help you to transform your physique.

BIG LESSON #1

At college I trained in a gym where one of Europe's leading physiques worked out. We often trained at the same time. This man helped me to learn a major lesson – perhaps the biggest one in bodybuilding. He was on bodybuilding drugs and, generally, was a genetic phenomenon for bodybuilding. But I had better calf development even though I was drug-free and had been training for far fewer years. He even asked me for advice on how he could improve his calves.

The explanation for the difference in our calf development was in our heredity. I had better genetics for calf development, but he was much better off in all other body parts. I trained my calves like I trained my arms, chest, and shoulders, but my calves were much more responsive than those other muscle groups. And he hadn't neglected his calves – he knew they were his weakness.

Lesson: Provided you train sensibly, and fully attend to the components of recuperation, the most important factor determining your level of bodybuilding and strength-training success is GENETIC, over which you have no control. But while accepting your genetic constraints, do not use genetics as an excuse not to seek progress.

BIG LESSON #2

For many years muscles were more important than everything else in my life. I craved to be a professional bodybuilder. School work, social activities, and sport were neglected in my quest to build a great physique.

My education suffered, my social skills suffered, I became a near recluse, and I didn't pursue sports where I had some natural talent. Had I built the physique I wanted, I could argue that the price I paid was worth it, but I gave my pound of flesh WITHOUT the reward I craved.

I spent a HUGE amount of time training, thinking about training, studying training, and thinking about everything related to bodybuilding. That amount of time, otherwise applied, could have earned me several doctorate degrees, for example.

Lesson: Don't make bodybuilding an obsession. Train well, recuperate well, live with whatever your genetic potential produces, but DON'T NEGLECT other aspects of your life.

BIG LESSON #3

Despite 100% commitment to bodybuilding, my initial gains were only modest. After getting even more ‘serious’ about my training – increasing its volume, frequency, and intensity – progress came to a halt. Then started my appreciation of ‘hard gaining.’

I learned that there was much more to account for bodybuilding success than effort and dedication. As well as the critical role of heredity, I also learned about the need to use training routines appropriate to an individual, and not to imitate the training methods used by people who have great genetic advantages for bodybuilding. Then, instead of further years of stagnation and frustration, I had years of training progress, and satisfaction.

“Train like a champion, to become a champion” has been trumpeted by almost all bodybuilding and strength magazines, and by most trainers and gyms, too. It sells magazines, books, courses, food supplements, and gym equipment. Although it’s been a commercial success in some respects, it’s been disastrous for the training masses.

The most influential books on bodybuilding come from famous bodybuilders (or their ghostwriters), or from people who have been involved directly with big-name physiques.

Some of the genetic phenomena are highly dedicated to bodybuilding. It’s that dedication TOGETHER WITH their natural talents and drugs that make them extraordinary. But they live in another world relative to typical trainees, and what works for the phenomena is often harmful to others. Furthermore, drug-assisted training methods have been presented as appropriate for drug-free trainees. Sham training instruction has produced failure on an enormous scale.

Lesson: Train on routines that are appropriate to YOU, not that are appropriate for genetic freaks and drug users.

BIG LESSON #4

One of the most memorable sentences I’ve ever heard came from Charles A. Smith shortly before his death in 1991. (Chas was a major figure working on Joe Weider’s bodybuilding magazines in the 1950s, and one of the final links with the pioneers of bodybuilding.) Here’s what he told me: “You never know how important good health is, until you no longer have it.”

Think about this. Dwell on it. Make it one with you.

Health is great wealth and should be revered, and preserved. Avoid all harmful habits, activities, and environments. Look after yourself! When you’re healthy, all problems and challenges can be tackled. Without your health, the problems and challenges of life are magnified.

During my youth I sought muscle and strength primarily for aesthetic reasons – due to vanity and narcissism – and I mistakenly thought that training was for young people only. Today, I still have aesthetic concerns, and I still love to train; I would continue to train for those reasons alone. But it’s the health-related benefits of muscle and strength that are most important.

As well as building strength and developing muscle, strength training strengthens bones, improves overall fitness, increases the body's caloric consumption, helps control bodyfat, improves posture, slows the effects of aging, and increases resistance to injury. No other single form of exercise can produce all these benefits. That's why strength training is the most important element of any exercise program.

While I made many mistakes with my training and nutrition when I was young, I never got into drugs. While I injured myself repeatedly due to training ignorance and foolishness, I had enough sense to stay drug-free. Consequently, today I'm not dealing with drug-related health problems in my middle age, unlike many of my peers who did take performance-enhancing drugs – primarily anabolic steroids.

Train for health AND physique, not just physique. Health comes first. You may not believe it now if you're young, but you will believe it later on when you're not-so-young.

Being well-developed, strong, and fit doesn't necessarily mean you're healthy, although it's better to be strong and fit, than weak and unfit. Many strong, well-developed bodybuilders and strength athletes neglected their health because they felt so strong and vigorous. The neglect eventually caught up with them, and they lost their strength and development. Exercise can't compensate for abuse and neglect in other areas.

Dangerous bodybuilding drugs are endemic in the training world. Train without bodybuilding drugs!

Some former, highly successful bodybuilders and strength athletes are testimonies to lives ruined by a drug-fueled obsession. Many have ruined their health as a result of taking performance-enhancing drugs, and some have died prematurely. When young and vigorous, and seemingly indestructible, they took big risks with their health with little or no consideration for future repercussions.

Bodybuilding drugs and related problems have done enormous damage – not only to individual users and their families, but to the public perception of bodybuilding. Most people find modern, elite competitive bodybuilding grotesque, and repulsive.

The view that bodybuilding drugs are safe if used 'properly,' is untrue. Bodybuilding drugs have dramatic effects on physiology, and produce serious negative side effects.

Some famous bodybuilders, and some drug 'experts,' suffered premature deaths or serious health problems largely if not wholly because of their use of bodybuilding drugs. There'll be further HIGH-PROFILE premature deaths with strong suspicions of drug involvement, but for each of them there are many NO-PROFILE premature deaths related to drug use, and extensive health, relationship, family, financial, or crime-related problems about which the public never hears.

Never take good health for granted. It needs to be worked at – for your sake AND those who depend on you.

Lesson: Your health is your most important possession. Take great care of it!

BIG LESSON #5

Even exercise itself can be harmful to your health. Because of ignorance or foolishness, many trainees have damaged their bodies through exercise. I was one of them. Due to training stupidity – and I knew better but just didn't apply what I knew – I injured myself seriously, and it took about ten years before I finally got the problems sorted out.

When I was a beginner I had little or no time for anyone who talked or wrote about the possible dangers of training. Being a teenager I could, at first, get away with foolish training methods without much immediate discomfort. Therefore, I continued with harmful practices that included squatting with my heels raised on a board and the barbell too high on my shoulders, old-fashioned hack machine squatting, Smith machine squatting, bench pressing with a wide grip and to my upper chest, round-back deadlifting, explosive lifting, specific cheating movements, and gross overtraining. A few years later I was plagued with serious injuries, especially to my knees and back. Countless others have experienced similar problems.

All the training injuries I suffered were avoidable. I suffered them because I used incorrect exercise technique, or because I was so charged up emotionally that I performed something stupid that I knew was beyond me, or because I grossly overtrained.

Properly done, strength training IS safe, but the use of correct exercise technique is the exception in nearly all gyms. Gyms are usually terrible places for learning correct exercise technique. Few trainees practice correct technique because hardly anyone knows what it is, and this includes most gym instructors, and personal trainers. Exercise technique isn't secondary to program design and training intensity. Technique comes first!

Lesson: Use correct exercise technique, ALWAYS.

BIG LESSON #6

Food supplements are mass-produced, consumed quickly, and need to be replenished often. They provide a huge potential for repeat sales, and the profit margin is large. A barbell set can last a lifetime, as can a book on training instruction, but a can of protein powder, for example, may last only a week or two.

Exaggerated claims, dishonest reporting, abuse of editorial responsibility, nonsense, and shameless lies, are used to produce demand for food supplements. Some food supplement companies publish bodybuilding magazines, or are intertwined with the publishers, and use those magazines to promote the supplements.

Lesson: Don't believe ads for food supplements.

BIG LESSON #7

PROVIDED you've trained SENSIBLY and CONSISTENTLY for five years or so, and paid FULL attention to the components of recuperation, you've probably pretty much reached your potential for muscular SIZE, although you may still be able to get a lot stronger.

Of course, I'm specifically referring to DRUG-FREE training. Drugs change everything, but for my position on bodybuilding drugs, see Lesson #4.

At this point of diminishing returns for muscle mass, you need to ask yourself whether extraordinary commitment to bodybuilding for the return of POSSIBLY adding a mere few pounds of muscle is worth it, when there are other issues in your life that potentially can contribute FAR MORE to your happiness and well-being.

Some people's extraordinary dedication for year after year – into their second DECADE or later of training – merely to add a few pounds of new muscle, produced neglect of their families, relationships, career, education, and even health. Are a few pounds of temporary muscle worth all of that?

At some point you've got to accept that you're pretty much at your limit as far as muscle size goes. If you've trained sensibly for the last year or so without seeing any new growth, following several years of sensible training, chances are you're at your drug-free limit.

BUT, even if you've pretty much reached your muscle size potential, that DOESN'T mean you've reached your physique potential. If your concern is with aesthetics, substantially reducing your bodyfat level will do far more for your appearance than adding a few pounds of new muscle. And fat loss can be achieved without having to become obsessive.

In my experience, most bodybuilders in their thirties, forties and later who have trained for many years and HAVE decent muscle mass, are over 15% bodyfat, sometimes well over. But rather than get their bodyfat down to 10%, which would transform their appearances, they stick with the 15% or even 20%+ bodyfat, and seek more muscle mass.

Of course, if you've NOT trained consistently well for several years, you HAVE the potential to make a lot of muscle growth IF you do train well for a few years.

“What is ‘sensible’ training?” you may ask. There's a general formula, but many interpretations. Some interpretations will be more suitable to you than others, and you'll need to do some trial and error experimentation. But my point is: PROVIDED you already train sensibly and seriously, and fully attend to the components of recuperation, there ISN'T some wondrous routine that will give you vastly more progress than any other one.

No matter how much you read about training, and no matter how knowledgeable you become, the following will still provide you with the ‘secrets’ people hanker for in order to build bigger and stronger muscles.

Are you really using abbreviated training routines of no more than about eight exercises each, and no more than three work sets for each exercise? Are you really using a training frequency within your recuperative abilities – weight training AT MOST three times a week? For example, alternate two different routines over three workouts each week: Split your program so that Routine #1 trains your lower body, and Routine #2 trains your upper body. Train Routine #1 on Monday, Routine #2 on Wednesday, Routine #1 on Friday, Routine #2 on Monday of the following week, and so on. OR, you could do an abbreviated FULL-BODY routine twice a week or three times every two weeks.

Are you really focusing on the big compound exercises? Are you really using excellent technique and a controlled rep speed? Are you really training hard?

Are you really consuming five or six feeds daily and enough calories and nutrients to grow on?

Are you really sleeping well for at least eight hours every night?

Are you really keeping written tabs on your workouts and recording an extra tad of iron on each big exercise every week or two WITHOUT compromising on your exercise technique?

If you can't answer yes to ALL of these questions – which summarize 'the essence' of successful bodybuilding – you only have yourself to hold responsible for slow or non-existent progress. I don't mean to sound harsh, but this is the reality. No attention to any issue will compensate for deficiencies in 'the essence.' You've got to get 'the essence' in 100% order, and no one can do that for you other than yourself. Get everything in good order EVERY SINGLE DAY on an UNRELENTING basis. THEN you'll make good progress.

Lesson: Train sensibly, but don't expect to be able to make gains in muscular size indefinitely.

BIG LESSON #8

For many years I hated my physique because of shame and dissatisfaction, although I was much better built than most men, and healthy, strong, vigorous, and young. I sought an imaginary view of physical perfection, and nothing less than 'perfection' would make me happy, or at least so I thought.

Through experience and observation I learned truths that shocked me. Many people who attained what most trainees would consider to be physical perfection, or something close to it, were miserable, a few took their own lives, many propped themselves up with drug abuse, and because most of them focused on what they DIDN'T have, they failed to appreciate what they DID have (including their outstanding physiques).

No matter how much physique improvement I could have made in my youth, I still would have wanted a bit more, a bit more again, and then a bit more still. I would never have been satisfied.

My heredity prohibited the physique I craved, but even if I had been able to build the physique I hankered after, it would have led to the discovery that even physical 'perfection' doesn't produce happiness.

I'm not saying I should have accepted mediocrity. I should have striven just as hard for improved physique, strength, and fitness, but not with the anticipation that, someday, it would yield happiness.

Delaying happiness until the attainment of a specific goal meant that I failed to enjoy the process of living and training; that I was able to train hard and regularly was great wealth, and should have been a source of joy. But I failed to see that, and appreciate it, because of my fixation on an unattainable final result.

Although I don't regret taking up bodybuilding, I regret having had a perspective that caused me years of emotional pain

Lesson: Enjoy your life AS YOU LIVE IT, including your training, and don't live with the expectation that meeting some physique goal in the future will make you happy.

BIG LESSON #9

There's a long-standing belief in the bodybuilding world in particular that women are attracted to men with big muscles. Advertising sometimes shows women fawning over men with big muscles.

I used to believe that big muscles were attractive to women. It was many years before I accepted the truth. All the closest females in my life – wife, daughters, mother, and sisters – DISLIKE big muscles. I haven't met any woman who likes VERY BIG muscles. Only very few women like them. In my experience, most women do like well-trained, lean men with moderate muscular development, but big muscles are usually a turn off, and huge muscles are repulsive.

For most women there are many qualities in a man that, collectively, are far more attractive than muscle size. They include – in no particular order – thoughtfulness, affection, humor, compassion, honesty, tolerance, financial good sense, and friendship. Physical attraction is important to most women, but big muscles usually aren't part of it.

But having big muscles doesn't preclude the qualities that women really find attractive. It's possible to have those qualities AND big muscles.

I also used to believe the hokum that very big muscles are desired by most men. In truth, most men aren't interested in very big muscles.

I'm not denigrating bodybuilding and strength training. Done PROPERLY, building bigger and stronger muscles is enjoyable, healthy, and tremendously rewarding. I'm all for it.

Part of the reason why I strove to get big and strong was to impress or perhaps even intimidate men. Why I was motivated so raises questions about my self-image at the time.

Lesson: Train for your own satisfaction and well-being, NOT for any kudos or interest you think you may get from others if you reach a certain standard of physique.