

Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers
The best exercises for scary size gains!
by Ian King

PUBLISHED 08-06-04

King, I., 2004, Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers, t-mag.com Aug 2004

No Limit Thinking

Have you ever said, "I don't want to get, you know, *too big*"? Well, don't worry about it. With that attitude you never will! Not everyone wants to be massive, I understand. Some just want to develop a quality visual appearance in selected muscle groups. I don't know why, but perhaps Dr. Phil does...

But before you switch off because you may be in the "I only want to look big when I have my shirt off and no one is standing beside me" category, allow me to let you in on a little secret:

Any limiting belief about your desire for size will limit the outcome of whatever you pursue.

When I hear statements like "I don't want to get too big," I believe that person is putting the brakes on his results before he even gets started. In essence, what he's really saying is "I don't believe I can get big, so why not aim lower and not be disappointed?"

Don't go there. Understand that being massive isn't that scary, and yes, you can do it!

What I'm encouraging you all to consider and accept is your right to get massive if you want. Don't allow limiting beliefs about your potential to smash your results to pieces before you even get started!

Size Matters

Back in my rugby days we joked that if you weighed less than 220 pounds, you couldn't get on the team bus. As you can imagine, I'm still a little biased in favor of mass. What do I mean by "mass?" I mean you should look big even with your shirt on. You shouldn't need to be asked, "Do you lift weights?" It should be readily apparent!

An experienced lifter can see a physique and make an educated guess at a number of variables, including what exercises that person has dominated in and how long he's been training. Where I believe many fall short is the long term planning of their mass program. What works in the short term and what works in the long term aren't necessarily the same thing. Developing mature, deep muscle mass will take time, but even time won't make up for poor exercise selection.

Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers

I know the jury of political and scientific correctness is still out on the ability of an exercise to shape a muscle, but allow me to share with you from an empirical perspective: there are certain strategies that will give you greater mass long term than others. In this article I'll touch upon exercise selection as one of the variables within this long term mass development strategy.

I'll start out with discussing and explaining a simple underlying concept I have in relation to mass development. It's very simplistic (which may not be impressive enough for those pursuing complexity); it may not be currently scientifically supported (which may not be impressive for those who want the comfort of being able to say "research shows..."); it may not be original, as I can't claim to be the first to make this conclusion; and it may not be popular (which may not turn on those who want to do what everyone else is doing).

This final point is critical, because what I'm about to share with you doesn't conform with instant gratification, and that may be a hard pill to swallow. Let's do it anyway. Let's imagine you have only two muscle groups. I'll call them *core* and *peripheral*. Peripheral muscles are the ones further from the spine — lower arms, lower legs, upper arms and to some extent shoulders. Core muscles are the ones closest to the spine, the biggest ones of the body. Think lats, quads, spinal erectors, chest, etc.

Core muscles are bigger; peripheral muscles smaller. Increases in core muscles make more difference and have greater impact on visual size and total bodyweight. These are the upsides. The downside (at least the downside to those who want instant gratification) is that prioritizing the core muscles isn't going to give you the instant recognition you may believe you need.

Before I go any further, let's clarify this — when I say "core" I'm not talking about that over-rated bullshit involving irrelevant abdominal exercises and other stabilizer/control drills. Leave that to the brainless herd of sheep who don't have a clue and don't want to develop one. My definition of "core" is more likely to appeal to the old-world lifter than the new age, brain dead personal trainer.

Most people starting weight training pursue instant gratification. They want to experience the "Golly, you have big arms" phenomenon as fast as possible so they start out with prioritizing what I call the peripheral muscles. Or perhaps they do this because there's less pain and effort involved? Either way, if you start there and don't shift your focus to prioritizing the core muscles for the majority of the time, you'll never optimize your mass.

I'm not saying you can't have periods of peripheral muscle focus, just that you need to spend more time prioritizing the core muscles. And I'm not going down that path of bullshit which suggests you need to increase your total body mass by "X" amount before you can add "X" amount of upper arm mass. And just in case you misunderstand this, I'm not supporting the concept (usually presented as a fact) that the abdominals are the key to transferring lower body power to the upper body. That's another over-rated myth that we can chat about another day.

What I'm saying is that to maximize your total body weight, and more importantly to develop the look that you obvious lift even when fully clothed, you're going to need to

respect the concept I'm discussing: that look of *power*. To get it, you need to focus your efforts on the core muscles. Period.

Long Term Mass

Now that I've laid out my underlying concept of mass development and before we get into some exercise examples, let's go through some examples of long term plans.

A powerlifter who abstains from bodybuilding movements at all times is the extreme example of this core development. The opposite end of the continuum is occupied by the bodybuilder who's never done less than fifteen reps and avoids spinal loaded movements. Everything else is in between. All you need to do is get a visual image of those two extremes and decide where between them you want to fall on the continuum:

Continuum of mass development as influenced by long term training balance between core and peripheral lifts.

Non-bodybuilder	Bodybuilder	Bodybuilder	Bodybuilder
Powerlifter	Powerlifter	using core lifts	using high reps & avoiding core lifts

After you make that decision you can plan the long-term training allocation — as a balance between core and peripheral lifts — accordingly. Remember, it's not what you do in a program, workout, week or month; it's the balance of your training over the *years* that will determine to a large extent your shape and mass.

Movements for Mass

Time to talk exercises. Some of the exercises I'm going to recommend will come as no surprise. Some will. The order I'll progress through them will reflect to some extent how I rate them, but in some cases it's difficult to say one is better than another. Also, you'll see the inclusion of peripheral exercises, but only those with the greatest ability to contribute to mass development.

#1 Deadlift

When I think about mass, thickness, and unadulterated *bulk*, I think of the deadlift. And no, I'm not talking about the stiff leg deadlift or any fancy variation. I'm talking about the bent knee, rip-the-weight-off-the-floor deadlift — the real thing!

Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers



Classic deadlifting by
Franco Columbo.

Why did I list the deadlift first? Why not the squat? Well, it could've gone either way. What swayed me was the fact that fewer people deadlift than squat, so if I raised the awareness and perceived value of the deadlift, it would benefit many.

Keep in mind that if you deadlift like a circus freak and are only concerned with standing up with as much weight as possible, then I wouldn't rank this exercise number one. But if you do it the way I teach the deadlift, then it deserves its place at the top.



Do I say this just to give myself a feeling of self-importance? No. I say it because the way I teach the deadlift optimizes muscle recruitment and gives you the greatest transfer to life and sport (not to mention safety.) For a refresher course, check out my old **Question of Power** column.

#2 Squat

Now this comes as no surprise. You've probably heard that 67% (or something like that) of total muscle mass is recruited during a squat. As per the deadlift, I prefer my approach to squatting: seeking to optimize muscle recruitment. See my article, **Five Ways to Go Deeper**, for more info.

Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers



Now, when I say "squat" I mean back squat. The front squat is a nice option with similar results, but not the same as the back squat when selecting the number one most beneficial variation.

3 Bench Press



I know I don't need to justify the selection of this exercise. (Well, at least not unless you have defected to the cult of "bench pressing isn't functional or specific.") In fact, I suspect many will race to exercise #3 and pretend I listed it as #1! Generally speaking, I don't need to reinforce the inclusion of this lift, so instead, I think I'll get on my handy soapbox and hold court!

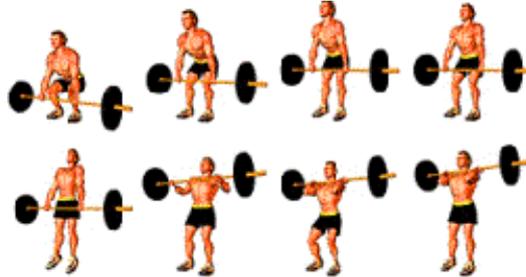
The first time I heard about the "You should only go half range because it's too dangerous to go full range" cult, I nearly fell over backwards. Let's not give any further credibility to that one! But if that wasn't enough, the human over-reaction appears to have infected the bench press with theories presented like facts, suggesting that the bench is either not functional or not specific to human movement or sport. Those who believe this think the lift should not be done (or only be done lying on the floor). Poor souls. The greatest losers here are the athletes training under these morons!

Okay, I'll step off the soapbox now.

Remember, this list isn't about ensuring injury prevention or muscle balance; this list is about ranking the greatest contributors to overall mass. The bench press deserves its place here. It's your challenge, as with any lift, to negate the muscle imbalances the bench press presents. If you deadlift, that generally won't be a problem. If you don't deadlift, you're going to need to become very strong in the bent over or seated row!

Notice anything about the first three lifts I've chosen? Does the word "powerlifting" give you a hint? It's no surprise that these three lifts are the chosen ones for this sport. It's also no surprise that those who train long term in this sport have great mass development in the core muscles!

4 The Clean



I could've placed this exercise higher but I wanted to allow at least some upper body lifts higher on my list! I know some may wonder why this exercise made the list at all.

Firstly, from purely a muscle mass perspective, it's similar to but perhaps a poorer cousin of the deadlift. "Poorer" only because most won't lift anywhere near in the clean what they can in the deadlift.

But the key that really attracts me to this lift from a mass development perspective is my respect for the development of the upper back. There's no other single exercise that'll give you upper back mass like this lift (well, except for the snatch lift, but I've selected one that may be easier for you to master). Just look at the upper back of elite Olympic lifters and you'll see what I mean.

I've seen great bodybuilders train like powerlifters to gain that mass advantage, but it's rare to see anyone pay their dues in the Olympic lifts. If learning is an issue (there's this dominant belief that these lifts are tough to learn), get a coach or order my video or DVD set titled "Ian King's Guide to the Olympic Lifts" from www.getbuffed.net.

Another alternative is the substitution of the clean with one of the many Olympic pulling assistance lifts, e.g. power clean or snatch pull (or even the high pull). If you're going down this path and using the high pull, consider taking the wider grip option (snatch pull) as it'll be easier to get more range in the high pull.

I'm not the only one to value this lift. Although perhaps for different reasons (he may have been thinking of the athletic transfer), Bill Starr in his classic 1970's book *The Strongest Shall Survive* replaced the clean for the deadlift as part of the big three — clean, squat, and bench.

In short, cleans and Olympic lifts build mass. Do them!

5 The Chin-Up

Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers

The lats are a massively large muscle group and no exercise works the lats like a chin-up (except maybe the heavy deadlift, but that's another discussion!)

I'm aware that this lift is called different things in different countries, including pull-ups. Bottom line — the bar doesn't move; you move the body to the bar. That should breach the international language barriers!



Despite similar movement patterns between the lat pulldown and the chin-up, for various reasons (known and unknown), the chin-up beats the lat pulldown hands down for impact on muscle mass. Another advantage, unlike the bench press you won't be competing with too many people trying to use the chin-up bar in your gym!

For the best mass developing results from heavy loading, my favorite chin-up variation is palms away (prone), medium-width grip.

#6 Shoulder Press



As with the chin-up, the shoulder press has various titles that cause unnecessary confusion, including military press. Without denying the contribution of the military rifle pressed overhead to the history and popularity of this lift, the movement is simple — you press a bar overhead.



Yes, I said *bar*, because all my preferences in mass development are based on bilateral bar movements. No, this doesn't mean I don't use unilateral movements, but rather I don't dominate in unilateral movements over time unless there's a very compelling reason within an individual to do so, such as serious muscle imbalance, injuries, etc.

Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers

For the best mass developing results from heavy loading, my favorite shoulder press variation is the seated, behind the neck barbell press with a medium grip.

Nothing beats this lift, not just in shoulder development either. The great bench presser Ted Arcidi was a big fan of shoulder pressing to assist his bench.

Unfortunately, the diminishment of range at the shoulder is epidemic and makes this lift too painful for some. But this is only one of many side effects from the way "most people" train with weights. They're as common, varied and frequent as are the pollutants in our environment.

#7 Bent-Over Row



I'm almost getting teary with nostalgia! This is another lift you don't see too often in the so-called "modern world."

Before the advent of pulley based equipment, this was one of the few options you had to load the horizontal pulling movement. Of course that's changed, and in addition to some really nice seated row machines, I wouldn't be surprised to hear of a machine that actually did the rowing for you!

Just as with the chin-up, the bent over row requires minimal equipment — just a bar and some plates! For the best mass developing results from heavy loading, my favorite bent over row variation is palms down (prone) medium-width grip, pulling to the upper middle of the trunk.

Now, from a pure muscle mass perspective this is a great lift, but not the best as you can see by its ranking in this list. But remember, the bent over row counterbalances the bench press. If you focus on the bench more than the horizontal row, you'll likely develop muscle imbalances and symmetry deficiencies and run the risk of injury.

All that being said, if you stick to this list and focus a lot of your energy on the deadlift and power clean, then you won't have to worry so much about horizontal muscle balance.

On the other hand, if you're deadlifting/cleaning deficient, then you need to be scared, very scared...

Ian's Top 10 Mass Makers

Okay, so I'm being a bit melodramatic. But only a bit. The risks you face from benching without appropriate rowing or pulling to act as a counterbalance are very real.

"But isn't rowing back for your back?" whine the limp personal trainers. "Not if you use good form!" replied the big Australian coach!

#8 Dips



Anyone who's read *The Book of Muscle* published by *Men's Health* will know that I have a soft spot for the dip. It's not perfect, and like anything in life there are opposite disadvantages by virtue of its advantages. But as the number one triceps movement it comes with a lot of benefits. It can give your triceps mass like no other, and because of its multi-joint nature, it can also contribute significantly to your bench strength.

Any bodyweight based movement disqualifies itself from the majority, so the dip bar in your gym won't have the same high mileage as, say, the assisted dip machine and definitely less than the pec deck! So again, you won't be waiting in line to use it!

The dip and chin are two great examples of bodyweight exercises where (with the addition of external loads) the training needs of anyone can be met, no matter how big or strong! My favorite dip variation is the palms-in, medium-width grip (just outside the body).

#9 Biceps Curl

To compliment the mass development of the upper arm from dips alone, you need to select a biceps movement. Or, like they say in *The Lion King*, "A king must select a queen, so Simba chose Nala..." (You can see the bedtime reading I've been engaging in over the last few years!)

You don't need to look any further than the standing biceps curl with a barbell. My favorite mass building biceps curl variation is the underhand, medium-width grip, using a straight bar or defaulting to an EZ-curl bar if you have forearm issues. Be selective with your use of the cheat technique, and always use full range in extension.

#10 Calf Press

In the absence of at least one calf exercise, I'd be concerned for your lower leg development. With the exception of a clean or snatch pull movement, there's no significant calf stresses in any of the other movements above. My favorite mass building exercise for the lower leg is the standing calf raise with weight on shoulders (if using a calf press machine).

Inability to develop mass in the calf from this lift is often blamed on genetics or some other excuse. Before you start thinking of clever excuses, try this routine below. Be sure to perform it first in the week and first in your workout if you truly need some calf size.

1) Single-leg standing calf press to failure using body weight, done at a 321 tempo. (That's three seconds down, two seconds pause, and one second up.)

No rest, then:

2) Same leg, single leg bodyweight calf press to failure with your torso bent forward, at 321.

No rest, then:

3) Same leg, single leg calf press on incline leg press machine at 321.

No rest, then:

4) Same leg, single leg calf press on seated calf press machine at 321.

No rest, then:

5) Same leg, single leg toe ups (dorsi flexion: you can do this on the lying leg curl machine by putting your toes under the bottom roller pad and raising the foot toward your body) to failure at 311 tempo.

No rest, then:

6) Same leg, single leg hopping for between 60 to 120 reps, without any heel contact on ground (height of hop isn't that important for now, just get the volume in, the more the better).

No rest, then:

7) Same leg, single leg balance for 30 seconds to 1 minute (if you find it to be easy, close your eyes.)

Now you can rest for a minute or two or go to the hospital. Then make sure you do the other leg.

Conclusion

In review, my top ten mass building exercises are:

#1 Deadlift

#2 Squat

#3 Bench Press

#4 Clean

#5 Chin-Up

#6 Shoulder Press

#7 Bent Over Row

#8 Dip

#9 Biceps Curl

#10 Calf Press

My goal in writing this article wasn't to simply list my favorite mass developers. I also feel a duty to ensure you're influenced to develop at least some degree of muscle symmetry, and have therefore sought to cover the body in the broadest sense.

Ironically, what I wrote above looks no more advanced than the strength program provided in Phillip Rasch's classic 1960's book, *Weight Training*, which is testament to how advanced the information was then. Some things are what can be called "generalized principles" in that they apply forever.

The message is powerful: there was enough info around four decades ago to develop muscle mass and a great physique, and many did so. So don't get caught up in the latest fad, at least not to the point of neglecting these proven mass building exercises. Make these movements a regular part of your program today and get ready to gain some real size!

PUBLISHED 08-06-04 05:21