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Awesome Abs — Stage 2
12 Weeks to Astounding Abdominals
by Ian King

This is stage two of Ian's killer, four stage, ab-training program. If you missed stage one, just click [here](#).

Abdominal training is an interesting topic, fraught with emotion. Abs could be described as the science and religion of strength training: everyone has strong opinions and they're prepared to fight to the death defending them! It's kind of scary putting out an ab training program. As soon as someone trots out a program or philosophy, everyone else is ready to pounce while promoting their own bigger or better one!

Here's some of the dogma I've seen over the last ten to twenty years:

- Never do straight leg sit-ups.
- Hip flexor involvement is bad so only crunch up a few degrees.
- Weak abs prevent transfer of force from lower to upper body.
- Doing abs on your back is a waste of time as it's not specific.
- Swiss ball ab training is more specific.
- Lower abs are always weaker than upper.
- You can't separate lower and upper abs in training.
- Only do high rep ab training.
- Only do low rep ab training.
- Never do ab training at the start of the workout.

I could go on, but I suspect you get the point. Personally, I don't buy into any of the above. There's a time and a place for everything. The fact is, most of what each of us perceives as

our reality is based on our previous personal experiences or observations. My conclusions are based on my experiments with athletes more than experiments on my own. I like the bigger sample size. And just because I write a sample program one way doesn't mean that's the only way I do it. You can rest assured I take all the variables and play with them differently in different situations. So this program is just an example of one way to train the abs.

About 60% to 80% of professionals in this industry (strength coaches, personal trainers etc.) have inadequate basic abdominal strength. I'd put the figure for the general population at about 90 to 99%. I feel the performance-enhancement aspects of abdominal training are overrated and the injury-prevention aspects are underrated.

Sure, lip service is given to injury prevention through ab training, but I question the value of most exercises prescribed for this purpose. And in the area of performance enhancement, I question the transference, especially from the so-called "specific" exercises. For example, not too many sports are conducted on plastic, air-filled surfaces, right? Okay, I better stop before I have to get out my trusty soapbox!

In stage one I provided a list of anticipated questions about this program and their answers. I'd like to add one more here:

Should I train my abs before or after my regular weight training workout?

The traditional approach has been to do ab training at the end of the workout. Somewhere along the way, someone proposed that training abs early in the workout would cause increased injury potential due to weakened stabilizers. I'm not sure how this came about, but it's a simple misinterpretation that has made a major contribution to weaker abdominals in our society.

I understand that if you did back extensions on a Roman chair and then deadlifted, you'd be deadlifting with prior fatigue in the spinal erectors. But the example most cite to support the "abs at end of workout only" paradigm is the alleged negative impact that fatigued abs are going to have on the safety of the squat. Now I don't pretend to be an expert in EMG or biomechanical analysis, but I struggle to share this view based on my understanding of the limited role of the abs in squatting!

What I've always proposed is this: if your abdominals are your weakest muscle group (or your priority), they should be done first! If you do have concerns about residual fatigue, you could alter your exercise selection in respect of this. But this may well be just another one of those unrealized fears most live their lives by. (One of my favorite authors is Denis Waitley, who has an acronym for everything, including FEAR: False Evidence Appearing Real).

Does that mean I always suggest that abs be worked first? No! But if they're weaker than the rest of your body and if this weakness is increasing the risk of injury, then do them first! Generally speaking, the reason I put them at the end of the maximal strength phases of a program is to reduce the CNS fatigue, thus saving yourself for the bigger lifts.

So in stage one and two, if you're lacking in abdominal strength and control, I'd expect the abs to appear first in the workout. In stages three and four, provided you've achieved your minimal abdominal standards, you could move them to the end of the workout. But you can

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and should be making this decision as you go based on the progress and standard you expect in your ab strength and control.

Enough talk. Let's do it!

Stage 2 Weeks 4-6

A — Days 1 and 3 (Mon/Thurs)

Warm up: If you're going to do the ab training as part of the workout, conduct the recommended warm-up and stretching first. If it's an upper-body day, I don't push for a cardio workout but it's an option. If it's a lower body day, I lean towards 10 to 20 minutes of light cardio. If the abs are going to be done at the start of the workout, do them after the warm-up and stretch.

Knee up (on flat or incline)

Sets: 1-2 x 10-20

Speed: 313

Rest: 30-60 seconds

Knees to sky

Sets: 1-2 x 10

Speed: 5-10 second hold

Rest: 30-60 seconds

Side raises on Roman chair or bench

Sets: 1-2 x 10-15 per side

Speed: 311

Rest: 30-60 seconds

Seated thin tummy (squeeze cheeks and lift alternate leg)

Sets: 1-2 x 10-15 lifts per leg

Speed: 311 (leg lift portion)

Rest: 30-60 seconds

Here's a description of the exercises involved in A day, stage two:

Knee up (on flat or incline bench)

In this exercise you get to choose between the lower level of difficulty of lying on the ground, or the higher level of difficulty of lying on an incline ab bench or similar. If you choose the incline bench, you have another decision to make as to what angle to set the incline at.

Lie on your back on the ground or on the incline bench. Bring your knees and hips to 90 degrees of flexion. Now press your lower back flat against the floor or bench (ideally using your "lower" abdominals). Now lift your knees to your chest, maintaining the 90 degree knee angle. Once there, lower the legs down allowing them to extend as soon as you start lowering. Lower down until your legs are almost parallel to the ground or bench. Don't rest the legs on the floor or bench between reps.



So how do you decide which surface to use? It comes down to your perception of quality. If you wanted to apply a higher standard, you'd only use a surface or incline that would allow you to maintain a posteriorly rotated pelvis (top of pelvis pulled backwards) all the way during the lowering. Use whatever angle you want unless it causes discomfort to the lower back. Just remember there's a difference between what you can do and what you can do well.

If you don't have a traditional slanted ab board, you may need to improvise. One simple way is to place one end of a prone bench on a low block, or to gain adjustable options, on a Reebok step. Lie on the bench with your head at the higher end, holding the bench with your hands on either side of your ears.

Notes:

Speed of movement — Controlled dynamic movement at 313.

Selecting appropriate level (lying on the ground, lying on an incline, etc.) — The only way to really know what level of difficulty is appropriate is to perform a rep or two at each level, starting from the least difficult, until it appears that you're being challenged. Don't continue on looking for failure; work with a level that's manageable. In this exercise you really need to learn to feel when you lose the set position. This goes for most exercises in this program.

Knees to sky

This is a more advanced version of the "toes to sky" exercise from the prior stage. If you feel you haven't mastered the prior version, perhaps you should continue on with it.

Lie on your back, arms out on the ground at 90 degrees to the trunk, legs together. Bend your knees and hips to 90 degrees of flexion so that your upper legs are vertical and your lower legs are parallel to the ground.



I identify at least three levels of difficulty in this drill. Ideally you'd have mastered level one and possibly level two in the first stage, and be focusing on level three in this stage.

Level 1: Lift the pelvis as far off the ground as possible whilst maintaining a totally vertical leg position (initially this may not be very far at all) and hold for 5-10 seconds.

Level 2: As above, but bend one knee to 90 degrees; alternating on each rep which leg is bent and which is straight.

Level 3: As above, but bend both legs so that the knees are at 90 degrees.

Notes:

Speed of movement — A controlled lift, a steady hold for 5-10 seconds, no use of momentum, keeping legs (or upper leg at least) always totally vertical.

Side Raises on Roman chair or bench

This is a slightly different body position, but offers a higher level of difficulty than the lateral trunk flexion exercise on the ground as used in stage one.

Lie on your side on a bench or use a Roman chair. Your hips and legs are supported by the bench or Roman chair, and your trunk is off the bench. In the case of a normal bench, you'll need someone to hold your feet. In the case of the Roman chair, hook your feet under the heel pad. Lower the body down, maintaining this sideways position. Go as far down as is safe and comfortable and return to the starting position.



The placement of the hands will alter the level of difficulty. The further the hands are above the head, the harder the movement. In the initial position, cross your arms across your chest. Placement of external resistance (weight plate, medicine ball etc.) on chest is another method for increasing loading.

Notes:

Speed of movement — A controlled lift, use a speed of 311.

Arm positions — Start with your arms crossed on your chest but take them out further above your head as needed to provide appropriate loading.

Seated thin tummy (squeeze cheeks and lift alternate leg)

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Sit on the end of a prone bench or even on a Swiss ball. (There you go; this shows I don't dislike Swiss balls to the point of exclusion!) Keep your knees and feet together, feet on the ground, chest up and back straight.

Now create that thin dish abdominal position I described in the regular thin tummy drill in stage one: make the lower abdominal thin and contract them. You can use your hands in the same way as explained in Stage 1 for feedback on the quality of this contraction. Now also squeeze your cheeks in a manner that results in you "levitating" an inch or so off the bench. You may find that sucking up the pelvic floor (a nice way of saying to use the sphincter) contributes to the quality of the contraction.

With that foundation, raise one leg off the ground a few inches in a controlled manner before lowering it down. During this action, maintain the ab and cheek tension, the thinness of the abdominal, and the parallel, flat line between the two hips. Then work the other leg in the same way.



Notes:

Speed of movement — Set the abs and cheeks and then conduct 10 to 15 lifts per leg in a continual manner, using a speed of 311.

B — Days 2 and 4 (Tue/Friday)

After a general warm-up and stretching, perform the following:

Curl up for rhythm

Sets: 1-2 x 15-30

Speed: 311

Rest: 30-60 seconds

Bar roll-outs

Sets: 1-2 x 10-20

Speed: 3X1

Rest: 30-60 seconds

Russian twist

Sets: 1-2 x 15-30 full rotations

Speed: 202

Rest: 30-60 seconds

Push-up position on hands (alternate arm/leg lifts)

Sets: 1 x 5-15

Speed: 5 second holds

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Exercise Descriptions

Curl up for rhythm

Lie on your back on the ground, knees bent to about 90 degrees and feet flat on the floor. Don't anchor your feet under anything. Sit up or curl up the trunk, ideally to a full sitting position.





In this stage, I want you to do sit-ups for numbers, i.e. looking to increase work capacity, but not allowing total fatigue or excessive slowing of movement. If the consistent speed of movement drops, terminate.

Notes:

Speed of movement — I like to see a rigid adherence to pre-determined speed in this phase (three seconds down, one second pause, one second up).

Arm positions — Each of these levels of difficulty have at least five different arm positions that provide further variety and challenge.

Level 1: Arms remain parallel to ground, pointed towards feet

Level 2: Upper arms remain parallel to ground, hands on opposite elbow

Level 3: Upper arms remain parallel to ground, hands on opposite shoulder

Level 4: Hands touching forehead, elbows out at 45 degrees to front of head

Level 5: Hands touching side of head, elbows forming a straight line either side

Bar roll-outs

Kneel on the ground, placing a barbell loaded with small plates in front of you. Grip the barbell with your hands at shoulder width. Keeping your arms relatively straight, roll the bar out in front of you and lower your trunk down towards the ground. If you can, go all the way down until your body is nearly touching (but not resting) on the ground.



Keep the hips and trunk in line as you lower and lift. That is, your body should form a straight line between your knees and shoulders at all times. Resist the temptation to stick your butt in the air, particularly during the up phase. Yes, there'll be a degree of arm and upper trunk strength involved!

Notes:

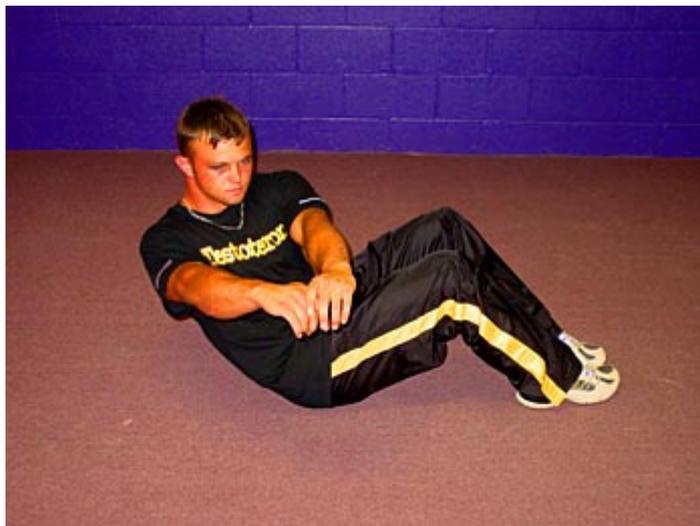
Speed of movement — Control down for about 2-3 seconds, lift as fast as you can without losing the appropriate line between the knee and hip.

Arm positions — Keep the arms relatively straight and don't change the elbow angle during the movement.

Selecting appropriate level — The variable you control is mainly how far you go down. Only go down (trunk towards the ground) as far as you can come up from. Another variable may be the height of the bar off the ground, but I suggest using only smaller plates.

Russian twist

Sit on the ground. Have your knees bent to 90 degrees, feet flat. Feet can be anchored or not. Lean the trunk back to a 45 degree angle or further. Keep the spine as straight as possible. Rotate the trunk from side to side along this axis. Where greater resistance is desired, hold a medicine ball or weight plate out at 90 degrees from the angle of the trunk.



Notes:

Speed of movement — A controlled lift, use a speed of 202.

Arm positions — The position of the hands will influence the load. The easiest load will be with the arms crossed on the chest. The further the load is held from the body the greater the resistance.

Selecting appropriate level — Work with a level that's manageable. For example, don't allow arms to bend and don't change the angle relative to the body. Don't round the back or rotate only from the arms instead of the waist.

Push-up position on hands (alternate arm/leg lifts)

Get in a push-up position. Each time you lift a leg or arm that counts as a rep. When you lift the leg or arm (or in some cases both), lift only until the limb is in line with the trunk. Aim to keep the trunk flat throughout the lift. You can manipulate the difficulty of this exercise by which activities you select from below. You can also vary the duration in which the limbs are held up.



Notes:

Speed of movement — Hold each limb raise for 5 seconds. Recover for 1-2 seconds at the bottom position (resting in push-up position between reps).

Arm positions — Start with the arms under the shoulders. Levels of difficulty for alternate limb lifting include:

Level 1: Raise one arm only, then the other only, then one leg only, then the other only etc.

Level 2: Raise opposite arm and leg simultaneously.

Level 3: Raise opposite arm and leg simultaneously and abduct in the plane that the body is in for 45 degrees (legs) and 90 degrees (arms).

Selecting appropriate level — When you fall flat on your face you know you've gone too far! Seriously, before that occurs you'll be changing the shape of the body (varying from the recommended parallel to ground through the body position) and this isn't what I'm looking for.

Conclusion

That's it! A little more fun than stage one and a little more challenging! If you've achieved the standard expected during stage one, this should represent an appropriate progression. If you're still struggling with any movements from stage one, stay with the stage one option until you're ready to move on to the relevant drills from stage two. Yes, you may be doing exercises from both stages concurrently. So get into it and learn by doing! Stage three is coming soon!

Note: I realize that many of the exercises in this program are challenging to teach through words and still photos alone and therefore my video, *Ian King's Guide to Abdominal*

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Training, may be of value to those who wish to exploit fully the potential of these programs. This video can be ordered at GetBuffed.net.