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Awesome Abs — Stage 3
12 Weeks to Astounding Abdominals
by Ian King

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

Wow! Halfway through this abdominal program and you're sticking with it! Well done! So let's ramp it up a notch further! This stage sees us getting more into external loading and variations with a higher level of difficulty. I want to stress the need to not only have performed the prior two stages, but to have achieved a degree of mastery in each. Pay your dues before you move on and up.

As you've been sticking with the program to date, I can entrust you with some higher level, self-accountability directions. Here they are:

1) Recognize that one movement may progress at a different rate than another.

Realize that the rate of change or improvement for any given exercise/action/muscle group may not be the same as another. For example, your lower abdominal drills may be improving slower than your upper abdominal drills.

When this occurs, don't feel obliged to shift up to the next level of difficulty just because I've introduced the next stage. If you feel that the movement deserves a few more workouts or weeks to master it, go right ahead. On the other hand, you may feel that you're ready to go to the next level.

2) Before or after?

As I said in the last installment, the traditional approach has been to do abdominal training at the end of the workout. Somewhere along the way, someone came up with a paradigm that executing ab training early in the workout would cause increased injury potential due to weakened stabilizers. As you know from reading that discussion, I don't buy into that paradigm.

I went on to say that in stage one and two, if you were lacking in abdominal strength and control, I'd expect the abs to appear first in the workout. However, in stages three and four, *provided* you've achieved your minimal abdominal standards, you could move them to the back of the workout.

We're now at a point where I raise that question for you to answer — should you, in stage 3, be performing the abdominal exercises at the start or end of the workout? To help you answer this, simply compare your current position or ability in the abdominals relative to your current position/ability in the exercises that make up the balance of your workout. Whatever is lagging should be done first!

One More Consideration

Before we get into the workout for stage three, there's another topic I'll share with you, one of a higher level of discussion. I consider it "higher level" not so much because you need a PhD to participate, but more so because it's a lesser-recognized area. If you don't want or don't feel the need for details, by-pass it and get into the workout!

Here we go. I've found that it's sometimes not wise to place the lower abdominal exercises on lower body days. This is because I feel that many "lower ab" drills have the effect of pulling the top of the pelvis forward (anterior rotation). I don't believe this is an ideal temporary state to be in for the execution of loaded lower extremity exercises such as squats and deadlift. I prefer, therefore, to do "upper abdominal" drills on lower-body days.

So if you share this conclusion, or don't want to find out the hard way, you may want to adopt this. Now, as this four stage program is only for the abs, I don't know what remaining workout you had planned for each day. So if you had lower body down to be done in conjunction with the "A" day workout of stage three, you may want to switch either the lower body workout for an upper body workout, or switch the abdominal "B" program to become the "A" day (i.e. done first), and the "A" day to become the "B" day. Just a thought.

Enough talk. Let's do it!

Stage 3 Weeks 7-9

A — Days 1 and 3 (Mon/Thurs)

Warm up: If you're going to do the abdominal training as part of the workout, conduct the recommend warm up/stretch first. If it's an upper body day, I don't generally push for a cardio workout but it's an option. If it's a lower body day, I lean toward 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/stretch.

Knee-up on vertical

Warm-up: 15 reps on incline

Sets: 1-2 x 5-15

Speed: 311

Rest: 1-2 minutes

Modified V-sits

Warm-up: 15 reps at bodyweight

Sets: 1-2 x 5-15 with external load

Speed: 311

Rest: 1-2 minutes

Side raises plus twist on Roman chair

Warm-up: 10 per side at bodyweight

Sets: 1-2 x 5-15

Speed: 311

Rest: 1-2 minutes

* You only need to do a warm up set if you plan to use external resistance (added weight) in the work sets.

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

Knee up on vertical

If in the prior stage you chose to perform this exercise lying back on the ground, then you should progress to the incline version (as described in the prior stage). If you were doing the incline version of this exercise last time, you should look to do the vertical version in this stage.

There are a number of options you can choose from to perform the vertical knee up variation. These include:

1) Hanging from a chinning bar, gripping shoulder width with palms facing in the direction you are facing.

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2) Supporting your body on your lower arms on a frame designed specifically for this exercise (lower arms are parallel to the ground). Dipping stations sometimes allow for this.

3) Hands through straps that hang down from supports above.

No matter which device you choose, the guidelines remain constant. In the first instance, start the movement with the knees and hips at ninety degrees. Keep them at these joint angles

throughout the movement. Then lift the knees to the chest, bringing them as close to the chest as you can. This will involve the lower back rounding.

The greatest challenge you face in this movement (apart from the obvious of lifting the knees to the chest) is to lift and lower the legs within minimal or no body sway. The technique I recommend is to lift your legs in a smooth, controlled, non-accelerated method. Pause them at the top and then lower them taking three seconds. Using this controlled method will minimize the body sway. It'll also reduce the number of reps you can do!

If you need more resistance (and I don't think this will apply to too many people), here are two progressively harder options:

Option I: Start with your legs full extended and as you lift (flex your hips), bring your knees up to your chest by bending also at the knees. Lower back down in reverse, i.e. extending your legs out as you lower down.

Option II: For an even higher level of difficulty, start with your legs straight and raise them up keeping them straight at all times. Lower them down in a mirror image of this.

This is one lift I strongly suggest you be smart about. It's possibly the abdominal exercise that places the most stress on the lower back (through the pull of the hip flexors). So this is no time to aim to impress the audience. Just stick with what you can do well. And if you experience lower back discomfort, look to lower the level of difficulty!

From a purist's point of view, your pelvis should remain at a constant angle throughout, rather than rolling forward from the top (anterior rotation) during the most difficult ranges. However, my coaching philosophy is to drill you in lead-up movements such that this control happens automatically, rather than attempt to coach or have you cue yourself during more complex movements. I see so many coaches and trainers cueing finer points during a complex lift and for the most part they're wasting their time. If it isn't happening by itself, I usually go back to a lower level of difficulty and progress back up.

I also want to share another teaching philosophy I use. As the level of difficulty rises, I don't demand the same level of "perfection" technically. Rather, I allow some drop off — not to the extent that the person's health is at risk, but a more relaxed view on technique. And then we aim to perform at a higher level technically the next time.

Notes:

Speed of movement — Controlled dynamic movement at 311.

Selecting appropriate level — Start conservatively in your load selection and progress over the subsequent workouts and weeks. Ensure that no inappropriate loading is being experienced in the lower back.

Modified V-sits

Lie on your back on the ground. You're going to flex (lift) the hips/legs and trunk at the same time. The end goal is to be in the nearly full seated position with the thighs close to the chest.

Your body will create a V-shape at the top, with the trunk leaning back about 45 to 60 degrees and your upper legs also forming this angle. Just imagine your trunk and thighs creating a V-shape.

As your legs lift, bend your knees and aim them toward the chest. Lift the legs at the same rate as the trunk. Don't get one ahead of the other! This lift can be a challenge from a coordination perspective, but mastery of this is rewarding!



As you flex the hip/legs and trunk simultaneously, your arms will raise, but keep them parallel to the ground at all times. If you want to make it even harder, don't allow your heels or upper back or arms to rest on the ground when you lower down to the bottom position!

As with the knee ups, this exercise can place considerable strain through the hip flexors, so ensure that you're not aggravating the lower back in any way by performing this movement. The pull of the hip flexors should be countered to some extent by the pelvis rolling backward (posterior rotation) as your trunk flexes up.

Now should you require an increased resistance (which I don't believe will apply to many people), you can place a weight plate on your chest, holding it with your arms crossed over your chest like an "X."

Side Raises with twist on Roman chair

You performed the basis of this variation in the previous stage. The variation I'm applying for this stage is that as you flex upward, begin progressively rotating your trunk until you're faced upward to the roof as much as possible at the top position. As you lower the trunk down, you simply reverse this rotation until you get back sideways toward the bottom half of the lowering.



As I explained in the prior stage, 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, I suggest you cross the arms on the chest.

Notes:

Arm positions — Start with arms crossed on the chest but take them out further above the head or hold a weight plate on the chest as is needed to provide appropriate loading.

Selecting appropriate level — The only way to really know what level of difficulty is appropriate is to perform a rep or two at each level, starting from a light load, until you're being challenged. Do not continue on looking for failure; work with a level that's manageable.

B — Days 2 and 4 (Tue/Fri)

Warm up: Same as "A" day.

Curl up with load

Warm-up: 15 reps at bodyweight

Sets: 1-2 x 10-20

Speed: 20X

Rest: 1-2 minutes

Wrist to Knee Curl Up

Warm-up: 15 at bodyweight

Sets: 1-2 x 10-20

Speed: 20X (the "X" means to explode up)

Rest: 1-2 minutes

Extended body holds

Warm-up: nil

Sets: 1-2 x 30 to 120 second holds

Speed: 201

Rest: 1-2 minutes

*Again, you only need to do a warm up set if you plan to use external resistance in the work sets.

Here's a description of the exercises involved in B day, stage three:

Curl up with load

This is the same body position that I've had you use throughout the ordinary curl up. In other words, lying on your back on the ground, knees bent to about 90 degrees and feet flat on the floor. Your feet are not to be anchored under anything. Then you sit up or curl up the trunk, ideally to a full sitting position. In this stage however, I want you to hold a weight plate on your chest. Start out with a very light one!



If you plan on using external load in the work sets, do a bodyweight set to warm up first. Like any loaded strength training exercise, if you lose the ability to complete the range you used on the first rep, terminate the set.

Notes:

Speed of movement — Attempt to explode up, then control down. No pause needed.

Arm positions — Assuming you're up to it, the arms will be across the chest holding on to the external load.

Wrist-to-knee curl ups

Lie on your back on the ground, each hand touching its own side of the forehead with the fingers, elbows out at 45 degrees. Don't change the elbow angle during the exercise. Starting with legs out straight, raise (flex) the trunk and one leg simultaneously. As you continue into flexion, rotate the trunk so that the elbow (or preferably the wrist) on the opposite side to the knee that's been lifted touches the opposite knee. Then return to a fully straight body position, repeating the next rep on the other side.



If you do need to add resistance, you can hold weight on your chest or add light ankle weights, or both. This would mean you wouldn't be touching the wrist to the opposite knee, rather looking to bring the knee as close as you can to the opposite side of the chest/shoulder.

Notes:

Speed of movement — Perform this movement explosively during the lift and then control down. No pause needed.

Arm positions — Have the fingers lightly touching the front of the head, elbows out at 45 degrees from the body, and arm/elbow angle not changing during the lift. The placement of the hands will alter the level of difficulty. The further the hands are above the head, the harder the movement.

Extended body holds

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Place your feet on a bench and place a Swiss ball or another bench out in front of you. Rest your elbows on the ball or bench so that you're extended out as far as you can.



Once in that position, hold it for as long as you can. If you exceed two minutes, which I doubt, and you're not able to safely extend your arms out further, have someone place a medicine ball or weight plate on your hips or lower back.

Notes:

Speed of movement — Hold each extended position for somewhere between 30 and 120 seconds. If you can't hold the position for at least 30 seconds, look to make the position easier by bringing your elbows under your body — not during the movement ideally, but prior to starting the hold.

Arm positions — Start with the elbows under the shoulders, shoulder width or inside shoulder width. Extend the elbows forward to make it harder.

Conclusion

That's it! Remember some of the decisions I want you to make:

- Whether you do abs before or after the workout.
- Whether to progress in all exercises in level of difficulty or whether to spend more time on some with the prior stage exercise.
- Whether you feel the need to shift "lower abdominal" training away from the lower body workouts.

So get into it! I look forward to your feedback!

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 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.