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Awesome Abs — Stage 4
12 Weeks to Astounding Abdominals
by Ian King

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

We're on the home straight now! If you've been diligent and consistent, the rewards for your efforts will be apparent now. You'll notice less back pain if you had it before, better stability in all your movements, and shorter, stronger and tighter abs. As to whether you're ready for the cover of a fitness magazine, that would depend a lot on the tissue that lies between the muscle and the skin, meaning how much fat you're carrying around!

Don't get me wrong, I don't think fat is bad. From a heavyweight perspective in a weight division sport, or from an absolute strength sport perspective (where heavier generally means better performance), fat is somewhere between okay and great. Of course, you may think fat is your enemy if you have a desire to show the ab definition of a competitive bodybuilder!

Just keep things in perspective. Most competitive bodybuilders don't stay that lean all year round; in fact, some of them get quite fat, relatively speaking! Some individuals do, however, retain the magazine-cover look all year round, but my question is, are they compromising all around size for that appearance? It really depends on what you want out of your training and whether you're going to need to get your clothes off to show the goods or whether you want to look big when you've got your clothes on! It all lies somewhere on that continuum.

The bottom line is, I want to assure you that fat is only bad if it's not what you want! Just make sure that your desires are *yours*, not someone else's marketing driven perception of what's ideal!

Okay, enough philosophizing! I introduced some additional concepts in stage three and I want to touch briefly upon them again.

1) Rate of Progression: I trust you've been progressing in each exercise at your own speed, realizing that not all movements will progress at the same rate. For example, you may find you progress in lower abdominal movements faster than upper abdominal movements.

2) Sequence for abs relative to remainder of training: If there were ever a stage you'd more likely put the abs at the end of the program, it would be stage three and stage four. However, please be prepared to make this decision as it fits your situation now! If your abs are still lagging or if you're appreciating the benefits of placing them first, don't feel bad about retaining them first in the workout.

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At the same time, placing them back to the end of the workout in stage four — knowing in your next program you can bring them back up to first in the sequence — is quite acceptable! My main concern is that you don't fatigue neurally in a maximal-strength phase by placing them first.

Stage Four Considerations

Now for some new points. In stage four, I've applied a periodization technique I often use that's simple but effective, and no, it's not the only one I use. (This last point was for the black and white thinkers!) I've reduced the number of exercises and raised the number of sets per exercise. The advantage of this, irrespective of muscle group, is that you provide specialization through increased rehearsal and fatigue on lesser muscle groups. The downside is you may lose or detrain in those muscle groups not as highly targeted as before.

Now, any downside can be handled in the short term by addressing it in subsequent programs. So any downside experienced in stage four by reducing the number of exercises can be addressed in stage one of the next phase by raising the number of exercises. So no big deal, except in some cases handling the psycho-babble in your head of "but am I really doing enough different exercises?" My recommendation is to give it a go and learn by doing. You don't have anything to lose.

Overall, the volume may be lower than the earliest stage and that's in respect of the general expectation that you'll be more focused on the remainder of your workout in stage four. If this isn't the case, you can raise the volume (number of sets) and place the abs first in the workout, or just raise the number of sets and keep them at the end. Bottom line, don't raise volume just for the sake of it. Have a good reason for this action.

Enough talk. Let's do it!

Stage 4 Weeks 10-12

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 ball

Warm-up: nil
Sets: 1-2 x 10-20
Speed: 201
Rest: 2 minutes

Partner Leg Throws

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Warm-up: 15 easy ones
Sets: 1 x 5-15 with external load if needed
Speed: XIX (See below)
Rest: 2 minutes

Full V-Sits

Warm-up: nil
Sets: 1-2 x 5-15 with external load if needed
Speed: 10X
Rest: 2 minutes

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

Knee up on ball

This is a progression from the "knee up on vertical" movement you learned in the last phase. You could move on to this new exercise no matter which level you got to in the last program, unless of course you find this movement just too difficult (or if you don't have access to a Swiss ball). In either case, work on progression from where you were in the last stage of this program.

Place the ball in front of a prone bench. Ideally the ball height will be similar to the bench height. If not, look for a different size ball or different height bench! Now place both knees on the ball and both hands on the bench. You will be roughly in what I'd describe as "doggy position."

Keeping your hands (palms) parallel on the bench, arms straight, extend the knees backward until the body is almost straight from the shoulder to the knees. The body won't be parallel to the ground, but can and should in the ideal end position, form a straight line between the knee and the shoulders.





Two things here. Firstly, you may find the need to adjust the knees on the ball in the start position so that in the end position you're not rolling off the ball. If you find yourself rolling off the ball (in the sagittal plane or the long axis of the body, not sideways off), don't panic, just experiment with your knee position in the start until you get it right! (If you're falling off sideways, you really do have some serious balance issues! And no, mastering these won't mean you can transfer this balance to any sport or daily activity of your choice, despite what they say in the promotional brochure or latest book on the Swiss ball!).

The other point I want to discuss is the end point. Is everyone going to be able to straighten out the knees to this point and be able to recover? No. Give it a go. Worst case, you fall on the floor. Ideally the floor is not too far away! But if you can't recover from the position and continue to do at least a minimum of five reps, don't extend out as far. In subsequent workouts, look to improve the range you use or the reps you do or both.

If you're very advanced you can look to take the arms off the vertical in the end position, angling back to the body. This will require some upper body strength also (as will the base movement), and again, despite what the trends say, Swiss ball exercises are rarely, if ever, isolated movements! Don't feel the need to go fast with this movement. Take it slow, get the range and build on the reps!

Do I have any fine tips like how to hold your hips? No. As I discussed in the stage three article, my training philosophy is to drill the movement in the early days in a manner that you do, without thinking, the technique you want, at least generally speaking. This low level coaching/personal training technique of giving you 100 tips to think about when doing a high level movement, most of which are impossible or irrelevant, is not the approach I recommend!

Are there any back issues with this movement? Remember what I say — the only one who will be able to make that judgment is you. If it hurts or you suspect it may cause harm, don't do it! Also note that I recommend you go to a straight body position (straight line from shoulders to knees), not a saggy back position! This could increase lower back stress and there's no need to go there!

Notes:

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Speed of movement — Controlled movement at 201.

Selecting appropriate level — Start conservatively in your range and progress over the subsequent workouts and weeks in range and reps.

Partner Leg Throws

This exercise requires a partner, and for heterosexual males with female training partners, gives you the opportunity look up her shorts. (TC made me say this! I think it's disgusting personally! Bad TC!)

Lie on the ground and get someone to stand over your head, his or her feet on either side of your ears. Grab hold of his ankles with each hand. This is a dynamic, high stress movement so if you have lower back issues, look for an alternative straight away!

Have your partner grab your ankles as a result of you lifting your legs up to him. Keep your legs together throughout this exercise. Now have your partner throw your legs to the ground. In the first set (the warm up set), have him throw or push them down gently and only in a straight line. In the work set, get him to progressively increase the amount of force he pushes with and vary the angle at which he throws your legs down.





Your goal is to resist the movement before the legs touch the ground and get your legs back up to the partner as fast as you can. This is a great movement when you get into the higher levels of force and greater angle variations (where you can have your legs thrown almost 90 degrees to the long axis of your trunk).

A tip to remember: Have your partner grab your legs and pause after each rep. If he doesn't, you tend to anticipate the movement and use elastic energy. It's much harder work if he pauses in the holding of your legs before throwing them. Also, have your partner use basically a chest pass technique. Let him know that provided you're up to it, by the end of the work sets he can be using his full force in the throw!

Another tip for the person throwing: Have him vary the angle, be balanced in how many he does to each side, and try to avoid you being able to anticipate where the next leg throw is going!

Notes:

Speed of movement — This is a dynamic movement. Go both down and up as fast as you can, but no touching the feet on the ground! Your goal should be to minimize the amount of range that results from the partner's push.

Selecting appropriate level — Have the partner start conservatively in his throws, both in force as well as angle variation.

Full V-sits

You had better have done the ground work in the lead up to this variation! Lie on your back on the ground with your arms out over your head, parallel and resting on the ground, and your legs out straight also. Just like a diver reaching up to the sky, only you're on your back on the ground.

While pivoting from the waist, raise (flex) your legs and arms simultaneously, keeping both legs and arms straight, and have them meet (ideally) at the top where the legs and arms are equal distance or angle from the ground. It's a lazy option to meet one side or the other of the

vertical line. For example, if your trunk flexion was weak but your hip flexion strong, you might be tempted to meet the legs and arms closer to the head side of vertical. If your trunk flexion was strong and your hip flexion weak, you may be tempted to meet the legs and arms on the feet side of the vertical. Do the hard yards — have them meet in the vertical position!



Don't be surprised if this takes a bit of practice and coordination, and don't expect to do too many reps, at least not initially! I find this movement less stressful on the lower back than the modified V-sit from the previous stage, but that will depend on how you execute the movement. If you're doing it in the way I describe, the pelvis will round with the body (hips should posteriorly rotate). But if you lift the legs ahead of lifting the arms, for example, you could strain your lower back with the anterior rotation of the pelvis.

Do I give any specific cues? No more than the information above. I keep it simple — the arms and legs leave the ground simultaneously and meet in the vertical position. Simple!

Do you need external load? Not many will! But if you did you'd be looking for ankle weights and holding a weight in the arms. Don't get delusional — get it right before even contemplating this!

Notes:

Speed of movement — Explosive movement. Lift as fast as your strength and coordination allow, and lower under some control, but no need for going super slow.

Selecting appropriate level — There's pretty much only one level in this variation. If you find it too much physically, then return to lower level variations. If coordination is a problem, just keep practicing!

B — Days 2 and 4 (Tue/Fri)

Warm up: Same as "A" day.

Partner resisted sit-up

Warm-up: 10 at light resistance
Sets: 1 x 10-20
Speed: 303
Rest: 2 minutes

Full range curl ups

Warm-up: 15 at bodyweight
Sets: 1 x 10-15
Speed: 301
Rest: 2 minutes

Medicine ball sit-ups

Warm-up: 1 x 15-25 with light ball
Sets: 1 x 15-20 with heavier ball
Speed: 10X
Rest: 2 minutes

Note: 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 four:

Partner resisted sit-up

You're going to need a partner again. Make sure he's smart and listens to you. A sadistic partner here could make things very tough! This is the same body position I've had you use throughout in the curl up — 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.

The only difference now is that you're going to have your partner apply light resistance to your chest during the sit-up, and again against your back during the lowering. I stress here *light resistance*. You won't need much resistance to give you the outcome I'm chasing. For example, you don't want your sit-up speed to be much slower than it would be with a weight on your chest. You'll find that with excessive partner force you'll either be too slow in the lift or you may not be able to sit-up at all. And you may also require your partner to reduce the force during the set as you fatigue. So you need a smart partner who understands what you're trying to achieve.



Now in the lower part of the exercise, you may think you can handle more force applied by the partner, and this may be the case, but believe me, it's a lot less force than you may think! Your lowering should be smooth and constant, not collapsing at any stage. So also have the partner receptive to your force curve, i.e. the fact that your strength changes as you go through the joint angles. As you hit a weaker joint angle, you want him to back off on the force. You want to maintain a constant lowering speed, taking about two to three seconds to complete the lowering. So don't turn the lift into an arm wrestle!

Notes:

Speed of movement — Attempt to accelerate up, realizing that the force applied by the partner will cause the movement to appear slow. No pause needed. Control the lowering aiming for a constant speed, no collapsing.

Arm positions — Pretty irrelevant, but it's probably best to keep the arms parallel to the ground rather than across the body if you want the chest unobstructed so your partner can apply force.

Selecting appropriate level — The only way to really know what level of force from the partner is appropriate is to have him experiment during the first few reps. If in doubt, get him to push less.

Full range curls ups

An option with this exercise is to use a Swiss ball. (I can hear the Swiss ball brigade celebrating in the misguided belief that I've finally "come across"!)

Lie on your back with the upper back across a Swiss ball or a prone bench. If you're using a prone bench, your body will be perpendicular (at right angles) to the bench. The advantage of the ball is more comfort and support, but both bench and ball are options.

You're probably going to need to have your feet anchored, but this isn't a necessity. If you want to reduce the hip flexor involvement or if you don't have a partner or way of hooking or

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anchoring the feet, no problem — as long as you don't fall off the device you're using and provided you're not compromising your range because of this.

Now, with your arms across your chest (or higher on the head if you want more resistance), allow your upper body to extend as far as it can. In most cases — unless you have physical weakness or other limitation — it will be until your head is nearly on the ground, then sit back up from there.



If you do need to add resistance (and I don't think this will apply to many), you can hold a weight on your chest, but don't assume this until you do the required reps at bodyweight!

Notes:

Speed of movement — Perform this movement with control during the lowering and then control again on the way up. No pause needed.

Arm positions — Start with arms crossed over the chest. The placement of the hands will alter the level of difficulty. The further the hands are above the head, the harder the movement.

Selecting appropriate level — Don't rush into external loading. See if you get the reps with bodyweight first, with your arms crossed on your chest. If you then feel you need more load, touch your head with your hands, and then move them above the head, before moving to external load. With external load, placing it on the chest is the most comfortable option but holding it at head level or above will increase the resistance.

Medicine ball sit-ups

This is a great exercise if you enjoy catching and passing. If not, look for an alternative! You're going to need a medicine ball (preferably a range of medicine balls in varying weights) and a partner.

One of you needs to lie on the ground with your knees bent and then sit up. The other stands in front of the lying person with the medicine ball. How far in front? How far do you want to throw and catch? Basically, the further away, potentially the harder. Start off by standing about a meter away from the feet of the lying person.

The standing person throws the ball at the lying person, who's seated with their arms out in anticipation. (Hard throwing is never really needed, it's more of a dropping motion.) The lying person catches the ball, takes it over his head as he lowers back down, and has the ball touch the ground above his head at the same time he's lying flat down on the ground. He immediately sits up and bring the ball up with them, throwing the ball as he reaches the top of the sit-up. There's also a variation where you can throw the ball as you sit up but that's more difficult.





Now as the person on the ground warms up to the movement, the thrower can do a few things to make it harder, more challenging and basically more fun. These include:

- Use a heavier ball (usually use a lighter one in the warm up sets, a heavier one in the work sets). How heavy? Depends on how fast or slow you believe the movement should be conducted. If you want to specifically rehearse explosiveness, don't go so heavy that the speed of the sit-up is compromised too much!
- Throw the ball harder. You don't need a heavier ball in this case, but you need a reason to do this. For example, you may want to increase the forces in the eccentric phase more than the concentric phases. Or maybe you just don't like the person...
- Throw the ball in varying directions, but all in places that can be caught. Instead of straight at the chest/arms, try throwing off to the side or a bit higher above their head. Remember for every throw off-center to the right, do one to the left. Again, apart from the fun, you need a reason. One could be that you're working a greater variety of trunk muscles in doing this and this is a very valid reason! Another may be that the person on the ground will benefit from being challenged in the reaction and catching skills. I find this to be great with basketball players.

Now, there's an option where you both get down on the ground and work together, or at least taking reps in turn. This is more time efficient and a great option. It may not have the complete control compared to the standing above position, but it doesn't lose too much otherwise.

Notes:

Speed of movement — Go down and up as fast as you can.

Selecting appropriate level — Start with a lighter ball and an easier throw. As the person gets warmer and as their abilities indicate so, increase the weight of the ball, how hard you throw, and/or the direction you throw it.

Conclusion

So there you have it! Enough information to complete a four stage abdominal program and more! In the wrap I want to say that I haven't attempted to be too specific to any one area, rather giving you a general program. Considering my belief that strength is a general activity (even for athletes) rather than a specific one, this should work for most people most of the time. However, there are going to be times when in a given situation you want more of a certain thing — like control, speed of movement, or loading — in which case you're going to want a more individualized program than this.

Beyond that, there may be many variables that over time you learn you respond better to. Throughout these articles I've attempted also to educate you on the topic of abdominal training so that you could apply this knowledge in the future to a more individualized program, or guide your coach or trainer to this end result.

In conclusion, I trust that your diligent involvement produces a combination of both short term (physical) and long term (knowledge) changes that have a positive impact on your life! This program has been one of the final missing links in the programs provided through the medium that *T-mag* provides. Their support of these 12-week-program series has been appreciated by myself, and I trust you've also appreciated this.

Finally, thanks for your participation and support and I trust your commitment has been rewarded with the results!

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.