

The Ian King Cheat Sheets, Part II by Chris Shugart

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Think of this as the Cliff Note's to the Ian King 101 class. Here you'll find the highlights of Ian's training principles that have changed the way most of us workout. If you missed part one, you can find it [here](#).

Stagnant Rep and Set Protocols

"When I see 3 x 12, I think timewarp...."

Poll the average gym rat and you'll find that most people stick to the old 3 x 10-12 reps protocol. Well, guess what? According to Coach King, that isn't the best choice. There are many reasons for this.

Most trainees perform over seven exercises per workout. Using the 3 x 10-12 approach, that gives you at least 21 sets per workout. Remember, Ian thinks that the genetically average, natural lifter can only afford to perform 12 to 15 sets per training session or he'll likely overtrain. Also, the 3 x 10 approach may not be appropriate for all exercises. If you do 3 x 10 on the bench press, that doesn't mean you should do 3 x 10 on the triceps exercises that may follow.

Ian also teaches that exercises performed *later* in the workout should get a lesser number of sets. This is because neural and metabolic energy levels dwindle during the workout.

The 3 x 10 method is also neurally ineffective. The neural activation may reduce from set to set if you always use the same number of reps and sets, meaning that the inhibition mechanisms of the body aren't being forced out of their energy conservation mode. This will lead to a reduced work capacity.

So how do you fix these problems? For one, you can use more variety. For example, instead of doing three or four sets for a couple of exercises, do one or two sets for *many* exercises. That means that instead of doing three sets of standing curls then three sets of preacher curls, try two sets of standing curls, then one set of hammer curls, one set of cable curls, one set of reverse curls, and then one set of preachers. That's still six sets for biceps, but you've greatly increased the variety and the stimulus and lessened the chance for any "use" injuries caused by doing the same darned thing all the time.

You should also cycle in some specific neural (strength) training. That means lifting heavier and doing fewer reps. Try four or five sets of two to four heavy reps for a few weeks. Throw in a "back-off set" if you want, or use the 6/1/6/1 method (both explained below.)

Ian also says that the more experienced you become, the more important it is to include variety in your workouts. Beginners, those with a lower training age, can get by with less variety. (Does this remind anyone else of sex, or is it just me?)

Back-off Sets

"In one set you can develop power and hypertrophy all at once..."

Here's a bona fide gem which Fred "Dr. Squat" Hatfield wrote about in the 80's and has been resurrected by Ian for the new millenium. It works like this: Perform a few sets with a heavy weight using low reps, say around four. Now grab a lighter weight and knock out 15 to 20 reps. That's your back-off set.

This is one of those cool neurological tricks Ian is famous for. Basically, when you come back to a light weight in the back-off set after lifting heavy, you can do more reps at a given weight than you would have if you'd done them as your first set. Plus, you can do them with a greater degree of acceleration in the concentric (lifting) phase. Pretty cool, eh?

Ian recommends that you use back-off sets after heavy sets of six reps or less. He also notes that the greater the contrast between the high load set and the back-off set, the better the effect. For example, going from a negative-only set to a back-off set works extremely well. Ian warns not to use this technique on every set in the workout, though, as it's very draining and eats into your energy reserves more than a normal set.

Warm-ups

"My warm-up guidelines are aimed at people who want no regrets and the best quality of life after years of lifting weights."

When you read Ian's 12-week programs here in T-mag, you'll notice there are a lot of warm-up sets. Many would say that these are excessive, but Ian has his reasons. Most people would knock out a warm-up set or two for bench press and then go right into heavy benching and other exercises. Ian recommends not only several warm-up sets prior to benching, but a warm-up set for your other chest exercises that day as well.

This is because warm-ups aren't just about warming up. They act as a test run (watch for any "twinges" or unexpected pain) and a neuromuscular rehearsal for the lift, plus they aid in joint lubrication. Neuromuscular rehearsal basically means you warm-up to learn the skill of the lift and get a feel for it. Warm-ups also help you test out your equipment. After all, there's nothing like psyching yourself up for a big bench only to find the bar is bent.

The take home message is twofold. First, don't skimp on warm-ups and 2) you need to warm-up every time you change exercises, not just on the first exercise of the workout.

1 1/4 and 1 1/2 Reps

"Loading isn't the be-all and end-all that some make it out to be. In fact, relatively speaking, I think that it's overrated."

That's right, Ian doesn't necessarily believe in the "Go heavy or go home!" motto. Instead, he thinks you should do everything you can to make the weight feel heavier than it is, at least if your goal is hypertrophy. This makes a lot of sense. Think about it; who's working harder, the guy who's benching with a controlled tempo and a slow eccentric movement, or the guy who's going heavier but bouncing the weight off his chest like a dork and lifting his butt twelve inches off the bench? Load isn't everything.

There are several ways to make a light load feel heavier. One of the most grueling and effective methods is to use 1 1/4 or 1 1/2 reps. Here's an example using squats. Squat down and pause at the bottom. Now come up only one-half or one-fourth of the way and pause again. Go back down, pause and come all the way back up. That's one rep. One *painful* rep! You can use the same technique with just about any movement: bench press, curls, leg extensions, skull crushers (tricep extensions) etc.

Many people ask if it matters whether you add the half rep at the bottom or the top of the exercise. You can do both, but Ian prefers you do it in the weaker end of the movement, like coming out of the bottom of a bench press or squat.

This little trick extends the TUT (time under tension) and gives lifters added work in a specific range of motion. It can also be used when you have a minor injury and may not be able to go as heavy as you'd like. Just remember you won't be able to go anywhere near as heavy as you normally do using this method. But you know what? Your muscles will never know it!

Wave Loading (or the Contrast Method)

You usually see wave loading in the form of the 6/1/6/1 protocol, but you can also use others like 5/1/5/1 or 4/1/4/1. This means you'll do six reps of an exercise, rest, then do a single heavy rep and then repeat.

Ian has written, "The aim of the first set of six is to enhance the loading potential of the first single rep and second set of six. The second set of six and second single are aimed at exploiting the neural dis-inhibition created by the first. If you don't respect this — if you go too heavy in the first set of six or first single — you won't experience this neural dis-inhibition, as it'll be clouded by fatigue." In a nutshell, that means you can trick your nervous system and be able to lift more weight for a set of six than if you hadn't done the near-maximal single.

Here's an example of wave loading using 6/1/6/1:

1 x 6 at 220 pounds (about 100 kg)

1 x 1 at 275 pounds (about 125 kg)

1 x 6 at 230 pounds (about 105 kg)

1 x 1 at 285 pounds (about 130 kg)

Here's another way to use wave loading. Perform a "wave" of sets, like one set of four, another of three, and the last of two. Increase the weight each time, but don't train to failure. Now you're ready for another wave. Do it all again except start the first set with a heavier weight than you used in the first wave. Do that with the other two sets as well. What you'll notice is that you'll be able to use a heavier weight in the second wave than what you might've been able to do if you hadn't done the first wave. Nifty, huh?

Wave loading is a really interesting and effective way to lift and you'll see it turn up in many of Ian's programs.

Specialization and Maintenance

"Remember, all things being equal, the weakest muscle group should have the greatest percentage of time in which it's being prioritized."

According to Ian, if an experienced lifter wants to bring up a certain body part, then he'll need to prioritize. Beginners can make good progress training every muscle group and/or lift with the same intensity and volume, but as we all know, it gets harder to progress the more years you spend in the gym. The answer for the person of advanced training age is to do specialization work for that group of muscles while doing only "maintenance" work for the rest of his body.

Here's how you can do this. First, if you want to bring your arms up, train them first in the workout and first in the training week. You'll also notice that in many of Ian's specialization programs he's written for T-mag that the prioritized muscle group is hit twice a week, although usually with different exercises. (Ian's Great Guns link to <http://www.testosterone.net/html/107guns.html>] program is a perfect example of this.)

While you're focusing on one set of muscles, you'll still want to train the rest of the body, but therein lies the catch. Bringing that lagging muscle group up to the next level will take not only intensity, but a higher amount of volume than usual. This means your body is going to have to focus its recuperative mechanisms on that prioritized muscle group. It can't do this if you're blasting out intense, high volume workouts for all the other muscle groups too!

So if you're focusing on your arms, then you need to take it easy on leg, chest and back day. You won't shrink away and look like Leonardo DiCaprio so don't panic. The password is "maintenance" and Ian says it doesn't take much work to maintain a muscle's size or strength. Just remember to keep the volume low (don't do many sets, probably around 12 or even less) and avoid training to failure or doing things like forced reps or negative-only training, which can really sap your ability to recovery.

Check our [FAQ](#) section for a list of Ian's specialized programs for the arms, chest, back, and legs.

Stretching — Old News and New news

"If your stretching time is any lower than 25% of your strength training time, you're setting yourself up for a major injury in the near future."

Yeah, yeah, you gotta stretch. That's about as revolutionary as *Muscle and Fitness* telling us we have to drink more water when it's hot outside (which they seem to do in every freakin' issue. All together now — Duh!) Yes, Ian says to stretch, but the way he says to do it may surprise you.

First off, Ian gives us plenty of reasons to stretch. He says training of any type can potentially shorten connective tissue, so you need to stretch not just for the sake of your muscles, but for your ligaments, tendons, and fascia. Stretching maintains what Ian calls a *specific joint relationship*. He writes,

"Put simply, if the bones get drawn closer together than desirable, the impingement of connective tissue at the joint can cause all sorts of problems, especially nerve pinching. This can set off a range of neural activity, all the way from muscle spasms to feelings that the muscle has been torn."

Regular stretching also allows you to obtain joint angles in your strength exercises that'll provide greater training effects like higher amounts of hypertrophy. That means stretching can make you bigger and stronger in a round about way. Now that should get your attention! Lastly, stretching can help prevent injuries and accelerate recovery.

Ian prefers static stretching as opposed to ballistic or dynamic stretching. Static stretching is basically stretching a muscle to its farthest point and then holding that position for ten to thirty seconds. The other types of stretches involve more movement. He also bucks the current trend and recommends stretching *before* a workout, although he does suggest you warm up first on an exercise bike or similar before you stretch.

For all the details, read Ian's [Lazy Man's Guide to Stretching](#). He also has several videos available at his [website](#).

Sorry, Regis, there is no final answer!

"There are no rules, just options!"

I have to admit this was once something that frustrated me about Ian. When asked a question with a seemingly black or white answer, Ian's response would always start with, *"It depends..."* There was no cut and dried answer to anything it seemed! Which is better, volume training or HIT? Both can be used effectively within a larger periodized plan. Best rep ranges? All of them! Best exercises? All of them! Best tempo? It depends. Worst exercises? None of them really. Is cardio counterproductive? It depends....

Finally, I realized the reason Ian never gave a succinct answer was because his level of knowledge was so great. Think about it, a person with only a year of training experience

usually thinks he knows everything. Just ask him and he'll tell you. (Proving that the old adage, "A little knowledge is dangerous" is very true.) The more we study training and nutrition the more we come to realize that there are very few final answers to anything. Ian's work reflects this and teaches us to always be open-minded and flexible when dealing with weight training topics. And as Ian would say, don't major in minor issues.

Conclusion

Much like reading the Cliff's Notes to a piece of literature, if you only read this article you'll be missing out on a lot of great information. But hopefully this has helped those new to Ian's work grasp the methods behind his ostensible madness. For those already serving in the court of the King, maybe this has at least been a nice refresher course.

Now, don't think for a minute that class is over. Ian has volumes more to teach us about the art and science of strength training. I have a feeling the best is yet to come.

For more info, you may want to stop by the [Biotest store](#) and pick up a copy of Ian's book, *Get Buffed!* or the video he made just for T-mag readers called *Killer Leg Exercises for Strength and Mass*.

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