

Maximum Fitness magazine is and who I am. Maximum Fitness magazine is a Robert Kennedy publication for men between the ages of 20-35 who are serious about fitness. Maximum prides itself on providing the best information to get men in shape quickly and effectively.

--Pam Mazzuca

Core Wars Interview

Tue 23/05/2006 10:08 AM

1. How would you describe core training to someone who is unfamiliar with the term?

I wouldn't. I don't use that term. I do of course educate athletes (clients) on this topic, and I would only tell them what I felt they needed to know at that time based on who they are, where they are in their training and education. My approach may be a bit different, but essentially I chose not to tell every client everything I know, or even a standard script of any sort. Each client is an individual and the level of information should reflect their individuality, needs and interest.

2. Could you please explain what the Australian philosophy is when it comes to core training – what are the key muscles? What are some of the exercises and/or equipment used? How do you believe Australian training differs, if at all, from North America? Europe?

I didn't realize there was an Australian philosophy? I understand what you are saying but am continually amused/intrigued by this attitude. I see it most in reference to the former Soviet Union e.g. 'Secrets of Russian training' etc. Yes, countries have cultural biases, but it is not accurate to say 'this is how people train in Russia', or 'this is how Australians perceive abdominals.

I have also seen this mentality used by people in the physical preparation industry attempting to give the perception that are 'internationally trained', saying they have studied the 'Australia approach to physical preparation'. I chose not to endorse this.

Tragically, most Australians simply copy North American trends under the mis-guided belief that North Americans have superior knowledge on how to train. Nothing could be further from my truth, however I don't spend too much time (or any) convincing any Aussies to the contrary.

Really, we are just one Men's Health edition behind you....

3. Everyone within the fitness industry has developed their own philosophy of core training through individual experience and personal beliefs. Could you please explain what your philosophy is and how it is you developed it?

Great to see that everyone in the industry has developed their own philosophy on 'core training' (and I use that word to be consistent with your word selection only). It would be a concern if individuals had totally lost their belief and ability to think for themselves. Having said that, we have both reinforced my philosophy above, that individuals may do things differently, not necessarily a nationally determined approach to any given topic.

So I too, as you have indicated have a philosophy about 'core training'. I individualize my approach. That's my philosophy.

However I know that you perhaps want more, and whilst I will give you more, I caution that this approach reinforces the stereotype that we take one set of values and apply them to all, an malaise within this industry.

How was it developed? Through trial and error. In the early days I may have been more influenced by popular rules and trends, but shed them very quickly. Basically the only way to determine if something is effective or appropriate on any given person is to try it. Over time, experience can narrow down the options, but even with amazing experience and years of gaining insights, I still just take an educated guess, and look for feedback from the training results.

One particular experience really reinforced to me that I was thinking for myself and differently to others, was when some of my training approaches become public domain eg. Sample programs published in magazines, and people saw how sometimes I put abdominals first in a strength workout. That's heresy! You can't do that! Why not? Because some one somewhere said that you can't, and these were backed up by flimsy lines such as 'you will destabilise and cause injuries in the loaded movements if you do abs first'. It's great to know you are not following the herd, but sometimes you need strength of conviction to tolerate the pressures to be 'normal', like 'everybody else'!

So I guess in this example brings out one of my 'philosophies'. The priority of the abdominal training is determined by the relative needs within the individual. For example, if they are lower in this ability than the rest of their bodies, and this is an issue that may affect them, then I raise the priority of this training. This is achieved by lifting the abdominal exercises in the sequence of the workout, and / or raising the volume.

Another philosophy that I share with you is that 'core training' is over-rated'. There is a popular belief for example that it is the link between the upper body and the lower body – is it really?

4. What do you believe are some of the biggest misconceptions when it comes to core training?

There is no shortage of them. The first one is failing to think for oneself, being endlessly influenced by the most recent trends. Here's some more

- The belief is that if you have a defined abdominal region you are strong. My five year old son is convinced of this, but then all his super hero toys have carved abs! I've seen pictures of prisoners of war with great abdom definition and I doubt it was brought on by mornings working the ab roller!
- The belief that if you do say lower abdominal exercises you only work your lower abdominals. The role of muscle activity in abdominal training is for me not that simple.
- Another more recently popular theory is that you have to perform all your abdom exercises in 'specific positions'. For example, the 'wood chop exercise' is raising in popularity. But is this justifiable? Or just another misunderstanding of the relative value of apparent specificity vs

transfer to performance. The commercial marketing of swiss balls made mileage on this 'specificity' trend.

- One from the rehab area – where the ab muscles are found to be weaker than they were before, simply doing more training of the abs is not necessarily addressing the cause. Often there is a nerve or similar inhibition limiting firing of the muscle, and this needs to be addressed concurrently or first.
- Another concern for me is the rush to apply integrated (complex) movements on so many, when they don't have the ability to recruit selectively and appropriately given abdominal groups. It's like asking an athlete to run as fast as they can and change their running style at the same time – it is not an optimal approach and raises injury potential / damages movement patterns and posture.

This last point is an extension of a philosophy of mine – develop the ability to do things in an isolated fashion before challenging the systems of the body in a more complex way.

5. In your opinion, what are the major benefits from adhering to a well-developed core program are?

Was is the definition of a 'well-developed' core program?

If it is that the client has well developed abs, visually, then I don't support any necessary value in the program.

If it is that the program has high volume abdominal exercises in it, again, I cannot support that as being a major benefit.

If the program includes some of the latest trends in thoughts (eg. Specificity trends) and / or toys (eg. Swiss ball) again, I cannot support any necessary value in the program.

However, if the program meets the needs of the client – not based on the perception of the programmer – but based on the real results achieved AND the value/benefit in the life/goals of the clients – then if this is your definition of a 'well-developed core program' – I see massive value.

Keep in mind that the program could look like anything – and we cannot judge or value it until we have the answer to what the clients needs are and how the program met these.

6. How will proper core training affect a person's workout? Will it allow the person to lift more weight in the long run? Will it help prevent back injuries and the need for a weight belt?

What's proper? If proper is based on compliance to industry or social trends, or what appeared in the last issue of magazine x – then I don't know if that is very important.

The only way we can judge (if at all) 'proper' is by asking and answering the question – does it achieve the clients goals with minimal risk to their health/safety?

Will it allow a person to lift more in the long run? In what exercise? There are in my opinion a number of mis-conceptions as to the correlation between lift strength and abdom strength. To cut a long story short, for the most part, improving ab strength will not necessarily enhance maximum strength – it will just keep you less injured and healthy to keep training and keep getting stronger, if that is your goal. (Let's not reinforce the presumption that the primary or even goal of all is be stronger.)

Will it help prevent back injuries? Now you are getting warmer. Yes, I firmly believe that appropriate levels of strength (or whatever word you want to use to describe the qualities of strength involved) will or can reduce injury incidence and severity, particularly around the pelvis and into the lower extremities.

Will it help prevent the need for a weight belt? I hope that people are not wearing weight belts because they feel their abdominals are not strong enough!!! Doing so only makes their perceived problem worse!

For me the role of the weight belt is two fold

1. to lift more load in an exercise involved spine/hip extension eg. Squat and deadlift;
2. to provide some support in times of challenged ability to support the trunk eg. If someone had a back injury and still chose to do a lift that challenged their ability to support the body and load.

The latter point requires the question of why they would be doing something so contrary – doing a lift or using a load that may be in excess of their ability to stabilize it, and in doing so potentially reducing their bodies natural support mechanism firing. Bit like shooting yourself in the foot. But that may need to be a topic for another day.

So does improved abdom strength reduce the need for a belt? Improved abdom strength would address the issues raised in point 2 above, but I would have you wearing the belt anyway to address those issues, so for me, it would not. Perhaps for those who use the belt for this reason it may.

7. How would you describe how to set your core to someone who had never properly engaged in core training?

I don't. If I have read you write, it sounds like the 'over-coaching' I hear often from personal trainers. My approach is to provide drills that create the outcome rather than having to process endless cues. The less information the better.

Just the use of the words 'set the muscles' infers a conscious effort in various other exercises. I would prefer a un-conscious or automatic/natural movement.

Finally, I believe that in many cases the involvement of the abs is over-rated. The few exercises I cue the abs in are deadlift, squat and variations of these lifts. The cues are usually simply – 'suck' (the tummy in the lower region - to posteriorly rotate pelvis) and squeeze (the cheeks to support and maintain the pelvis position). However the pelvic position in these movements in itself is another discussion so perhaps best not to open that Pandora's box in this article.

In the abdominal exercises, the main one I would cue the abdominal 'set' is in what I call 'thin tummy variations', in which I seek to create a dish (sucked in) lower abdominal, and 'switch on' the obliques, keeping the upper abdominals inactive and still.

8. Who would you say are the people and/or countries at the forefront of core training?

Again, I don't lump countries in a stereotype. However sometimes there is research coming out of one country that shapes the trends in the years to come, then it might be another country. Both North America and Australia have contributed well in this regard. However to some extent research is like sports history. They simply refine and qualify. For example, in the 60's or even earlier you would see bodybuilders of that era sitting on a bench with a broom stick on their shoulders rotating at the waist.

At first research denounced this but more recently support it with a variation – simply a change in the direction of the loading. The recognition that muscle firing around the trunk is supported by contraction in the legs as per a seated position has driven this trend.

However keep in mind that most contributions occur in abstract – ie. One idea here, another there. This is not enough for the individual who is training. They need a wholeistic (all abdom/trunk) muscle approach, that reflects their stage of development and other individual needs. This individualization is more likely to be shaped by intuition and science at the coal face, than by science alone in the lab.

We have all benefited from contributions of both empirical and academic learning, and it is important not to rush to throw out the old to fit in the new, as often the old becomes new again. Take straight legged situps for example. They reappeared in the last decade after peaking about 30 years ago!

9. Most people realize that the "core" is made up of a number of muscles and although we know that it is the rectus abdominus that creates the infamous 6-pack what do you believe is the primary muscle in core training?

The primary muscle in core training is the number one muscle group or action that any given individual needs at any point in time to take them to the next level. Obviously this shifts. If I join the simplistic stereotyping of saying one muscle group I only serve to reinforce then non-thinking application of practitioners to clients.

Find out what are the clients needs in order from first or most important abdom exercise through to least and reflect this in their training program, understanding this will be transient.

10. What is your opinion on the belief that the core can be divided into an inner unit and outer unit?

Great in theory, and worthy of recognition, however needs to be taken with a grain of salt. In few situations do we act in isolation. In training or life. However on the continuum of isolated to compound, I believe we do need to move along and re-visit the points on the continuum over time.

However it's great to raise the understanding of the complexities of the wholistic training of the abdominals. When I say wholistic, I do not simply mean exercises aimed to target all abdominal muscles – rather I refer to an approach that includes exercises that address all areas needed by a client.

11. It has been said that the Australians are the ones responsible for the focus of core training being on the Transverse Abdominus and that somehow this theory made its way into mainstream North America. In your opinion, does this statement hold any validity? Why or why not?

I know there has been some great work by Australians, and I know that many in North America respect information only when it appears to have been generated by someone from North America, so it would be understandable that this has occurred. It's no different that the race for the moon – all countries wanted to be the first.

But let's view the world as one connected country – get away from nationalistic boundaries. Ideas travel like this, and are built on by people in one country after learning about them from someone in another country.

If a person creates a genuinely new idea or concept and this is hijacked or falsely claimed by someone in another country, that's unfortunate, and does happen.

Ideally we all recognize the author of work or those who have contributed to us building our concepts at all times, and we would not have these situations.

12. In your opinion, what are the benefits of diaphragmatic breathing?

There are many ways to do anything and they can all contribute at some time. I don't get too carried away with the 'one way' of doing things, be it a new or old idea. The question I ask and encourage any service provider to do the same is – 'what is the best thing for this client at this time?'

13. Are there any changes that need to be made to the North American core training philosophy (i.e. muscles to focus on)?

Again, I would be reluctant to treat all in America as thinking only one way. The whole world is becoming smaller so to speak, and the cultural and national differences are becoming less. There are more issues in the cultural bias of North Americans that I would recommend adjusting and more globally the way individuals are taught / discouraged to think/not to think, before focusing on smaller issues such as one muscle group. For example – what does this client need based on their individual needs, not what are the trends so I can apply them.