

## **Functional Strength training Vs Bodybuilding** ***Is Bodybuilding the Worst thing that ever happened to strength training?***

**By Tom Venuto**

Being involved in the strength and bodybuilding world for the last 20 years, including 14 years in the health club and personal training business, has given me a very unique perspective on a trend that's been taking place recently. It's one that's somewhat disturbing to me, the dyed in the wool "old school" bodybuilders. Quite simply, we are being attacked! We are being accused of training "all wrong!" Those machines we use? Utterly worthless. The leg press? Non-functional. Our strength? Pathetic compared to our size. Our speed? Bwahhhh haa haa ha! Our flexibility? Like taffy at the north pole. "Big, slow, weak, stiff, bloated, useless muscles" – that's us – the bodybuilders. Or so says a certain group of vehement strength and athletic coaches. One well-known strength guru even went as far as saying, "The worst thing to ever happen to strength training was bodybuilding."

Well, after being "picked on" for a long time for being a "vain" bodybuilder only interested in how I look (not caring about my athletic abilities), I figured it was time someone finally tackled the "functional" strength training versus "cosmetic" bodybuilding issue head on. In this article, you will learn the answers these questions: What is "functional" training? What is "cosmetic" training? What's the difference between the two? Should bodybuilders train like athletes? Should athletes train like bodybuilders? Will the two ever meet in the middle? How should you train if you're just an "Average Joe" (or Jane) who wants to look good, feel good, play recreational sports and stay injury free? Do you listen to the heavily-muscled bodybuilding champ at your local gym, or to the strength/athletic coach?

Truth is, bodybuilders really can learn a thing or two from strength athletes, but ultimately, neither bodybuilders nor strength athletes have a training methodology superior to the other. Each is simply training to achieve the specific requirements of their respective sports – and those requirements can be very, very different indeed.

### **What is the difference between "Bodybuilding training" and "Functional Training" anyway?**

***Bodybuilding training***, by definition, is "cosmetic." In a bodybuilding competition, you are judged on the way you look, not by the way you perform. Whether you use light weights or heavy weights, slow reps or fast reps, long workouts or short workouts is completely irrelevant. The only thing that matters is that on the day of the contest, your physique is visually the best one onstage. This means having the perfect package of low body fat, muscular size and classical symmetry.

Bodybuilding training therefore, is not aimed at increasing strength, flexibility, speed or other athletic factors as ends in themselves. In competitive bodybuilding, improving performance is only sought to the extent to which it helps the bodybuilder build more muscle and stay injury free so they can ultimately, *look better* onstage. (Or as one functional training expert kindly put it, "The only athletic component bodybuilders encounter is having to walk across a stage and selectively spasm muscles to their favorite tune!")

***Functional training*** emerged primarily from the sports conditioning and rehabilitation world and refers to the prescription of exercises that contribute to

better, more efficient and safer performance of real world activities or sports movements.

For example, functional training would help the average person develop strength that carries over into daily activities such as pulling open a heavy door, hiking up a rocky, uneven trail, starting a lawnmower, carrying a child, unloading heavy packages from the trunk of a car, or reaching up and pulling down a bulky box from an overhead shelf.

If you're an athlete, functional training will help you improve your performance in your event. You will improve your swing, kick or throw further, run faster or increase your vertical jump - and do these things without getting injured.

The terms "core training" and "functional training" are often used interchangeably, although core training is just one modality of functional training. Core training means doing exercises that activate the "core" muscles of the torso, neck, pelvis, lower back and abdominals. Basically, your core is everything except your arms and legs. Core training doesn't just work the muscles you can see - it also works the deep muscles like the quadratus lumborum and transversus abdominus (aka the TVA), which are important in strengthening and stabilizing the lower back and torso.

The most common example of a core-training apparatus is the "stability ball," which is used for full range abdominal work, resistance training and numerous other exercises to develop balance, stability, coordination and core strength.

### **Why functional training caught the eye of an "old school bodybuilder"**

Functional training is old news in the sports and rehabilitation world. I've been aware of the various functional training modalities for a long time, but it wasn't until just a few years ago that it REALLY came to my attention because I started seeing it catch on in a big way inside our health clubs. All of a sudden, the trainers had medicine balls, core boards, rubber tubing, stability balls, rollers and foam pads all over the place, whereas just five years ago, there wasn't a single ball to be found in the entire joint!

One day, as I was doing my weekly "white glove" gym inspection, I witnessed a jaw-dropping spectacle that literally stopped me dead in my tracks. I watched open mouthed in astonishment, as one of our trainers did full squats standing on top of a stability ball while holding a medicine ball at arms length out in front of him. I later observed him take his clients through workouts including lunging and leg pressing off of foam pads, jumping on and off platforms, "playing catch" and doing all kinds of "weird twisting stuff" with medicine balls and a variety of other "unique" movements that you hardly ever see bodybuilders doing.

At the time, I thought this was interesting, but very bizarre. It looked to me like they were training for Cirque Du Soleil rather than getting in shape, so initially I just ignored them and continued on with my merry old bodybuilding ways, rowing, squatting and bench pressing for multiple sets of 6-12 controlled reps.

A few things finally made me take a closer look, however. First, client retention for these trainers went up. It seemed that all this new variety was a great motivator for the average Joe. Second, it seemed like the personal training clients were actually *HAVING FUN* (which could also explain the increased retention). Third, I saw the

trainer (the one who was doing the circus act on the ball), doing one arm dumbbell presses with a 110 pound dumbbell on a stability ball. Now THAT I thought was VERY interesting. I also saw him doing inclines for reps with the 120s on a regular bench. That may not seem like a *spectacular* feat for an advanced bodybuilder, but this guy was NOT a bodybuilder. He had an athletic, but otherwise pretty average-looking build, yet he was a LOT stronger than he looked. Again, I was intrigued.

So, being a humble guy who admits he doesn't know it all, I started picking his brain and doing some research to learn more. I then tested out some of these techniques on myself, found the answers to all the questions that had been burning in my mind, and came to some interesting conclusions.

### **DOES FUNCTIONAL TRAINING HELP BODYBUILDERS BECOME BETTER BODYBUILDERS?**

To the casual observer, a bodybuilder walking shirtless down the beach represents the epitome of health, fitness and athleticism simply because they "look" like they're in great shape. However, a trained strength and conditioning coach would be likely to spot a lot of problems in many bodybuilders simply by looking at his/her posture, gait and exercise performance. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link and many bodybuilders have some inconspicuous, but potentially dangerous weak points. Functional training can help the bodybuilder strengthen these weak links, which left unattended, could lead to major injuries that might set them back for months.

Bodybuilders also get tend to stuck at strength plateaus quite frequently, while certain "in the know" athletes with half the muscle mass continue to get stronger and stronger – even though they might not "look" as strong as they are. Functional training can help bodybuilders make steady gains in strength and power, which, while not the primary goal of the bodybuilder, can help the bodybuilder gain mass later on.

### **DOES BODYBUILDING TRAINING HELP ATHLETES BECOME BETTER ATHLETES?**

Functional training can definitely help the bodybuilder become a better bodybuilder, but is the reverse also true? In some instances yes, bodybuilding training can help the athlete. For example, when an athlete needs to add 15-20 pounds of muscle, a bodybuilding style program could be incorporated into a carefully periodized schedule in order to achieve the hypertrophy desired.

However, functional training has more application to bodybuilders than bodybuilding training has to athletes. For example, most bodybuilders train with a controlled tempo and more time under tension. Bodybuilders generally perform little or no explosive exercise, usually opting instead for slow reps such as a 2-3 second concentric and a 3-4 second eccentric. Time under tension is an important consideration for the bodybuilders.

If an athlete requiring explosiveness and strength used a traditional bodybuilding protocol of 6-8 reps on a slow tempo such as 4031 or 9-12 reps on a 3020 tempo, they would not be training the qualities they wanted to improve. As many strength coaches are fond of saying, "train slow, get slow."

Athletes are not primarily interested in cosmetic improvements or pure muscle mass– they want functionality! They want strength, power, flexibility, coordination, agility, balance and endurance. They want to run faster, jump higher and hit harder.

Athletes need very high levels of neuromuscular integration and recruitment of fast twitch muscle fiber. They require activation of postural and stabilizing muscles. If the athlete focused on muscular isolation and machine work as many of the bodybuilders do, once again, they would not be training with the proper specificity.

The best thing an athlete can do to improve their sports performance is to use free weights, explosive movements and functional training modalities that are as specific to the requirements of their events as possible. Therefore, it's only logical to conclude that athletes should NOT train like bodybuilders.

## **BODYBUILDERS CAN EMPLOY FUNCTIONAL TRAINING WHILE STILL BEING BODYBUILDERS**

Bodybuilders can and should train in a functional manner, while still keeping their unique goal of cosmetic improvement clearly in focus. There are many ways this can be accomplished:

### **(1) Do more unsupported exercises, which activates stabilizers and core muscles.**

Many years ago, I ruptured my 4<sup>th</sup> lumbar vertebrae and my training was quite limited for some time. As I began to rehabilitate myself, I figured that to “be safe” and keep the stress off my lower back, I should do every exercise possible with my back and torso supported. I chose exercises like incline dumbbell curls instead of standing dumbbell curls, lever rows and machine rows instead of bent over barbell/dumbbell rows, Leg extensions and horizontal (supine) leg presses instead of squats, and seated dumbbell presses with back support instead of free standing barbell or dumbbell presses.

While this strategy was probably wise during the acute phase of my injury, it unfortunately stuck as a habit for a long time afterwards until I learned about functional training. Little did I know that by doing all my exercises with my torso supported, I was NOT allowing my core to become stronger or my back to become completely rehabilitated. I may even have caused my back to become weaker by “babying” it all the time.

To make your workouts more functional, get off the machines and torso-supported exercises and get onto the free weights and unsupported exercises. To progress even further, you can begin to incorporate stability ball work into your regimen as well.

### **(2) Use the Stability Ball**

Bodybuilders should definitely do some work on the stability ball. I admit it- I was VERY hesitant to start using it. (In fact, I did my first few stability ball workouts after the gym was closed when no one was looking - no kidding). The first time you use the stability ball, expect it to feel quite awkward... after all, it's... ummm... unstable! Start with light weights and build up gradually. You'll not only benefit from a stronger core, you'll also get a nice spurt of growth because such movements are a shock to your muscles and central nervous system when performed the first time.

### **(3) Perform integrated AND isolated movements for your abs including rotational movements... and avoid using ab machines exclusively.**

Some of the functional strength/anti-bodybuilding advocates have been known to make statements such as, "Crunches are totally worthless." I wouldn't go that far. No, crunches are not "worthless;" they're simply over-used. Crunches can be an excellent addition to a bodybuilder's ab routine, but if you do *nothing but* crunches off the floor and ab machines, it's like working out in one dimension. You miss the benefits of full range ab work and integrated ab work. Bodybuilders could also stand to do more rotational work such as Russian twists, twisting sit-ups and the Paul Chek favorite, the "Wood Chop." Bodybuilders should be cautioned, however about doing heavy weighted side bends, as this tends to build the sides of the waist and ruin the symmetry that bodybuilders require.

### **(4) Do more unilateral dumbbell work (and more dumbbell work in general)**

Bodybuilders tend to use too many machines. When working on dumbbells, they often to forget that virtually any dumbbell exercise can be done one arm at a time or in an alternating fashion. One arm dumbbell movements add functionality while still doing a great job building muscle mass. Strength coach Charles Poliquin says, "Dumbbell work is the foundation of strength." This is true not just because dumbbells often allow a greater range of motion, but also because dumbbell work is functional – it requires more stabilization

### **(5) Emphasize free weights over machines**

Machines have a definite place in a bodybuilder's routine, but machines should not come first in the hierarchy of importance. Machines will help hit the muscles from a wide variety of angles – which bodybuilders need – but they are generally not functional and they lock you into a fixed path

### **(6) Use exercises that allow you to move freely through space rather than those which lock you into a fixed path**

Remember the ab roller? They were all the rage for a while, selling by the hundreds of thousands on late night infomercials. Ironically, despite their popularity, they are NOT as effective as abdominal exercises that allow free motion through a natural path. Although crunches on a supine (or vertical) ab machine or on the floor using an ab roller can certainly be included as a part of anyone's routine, these exercises lock you into a fixed path and decrease the activation of the core and stabilizing musculature. You should never depend 100% on machines for your ab workout. The applies to machines for all other body parts as well - including the popular Smith machine.

### **(7) Use more compound, large muscle mass, multi-joint exercises and fewer isolation movements**

Isolation movements often provide the finishing touch that gives bodybuilders the "polished" look that many strength athletes lack. As such, bodybuilders should certainly use isolation movements such as cable flyes, leg extensions and lateral raises to round out their routines. However, doing *primarily* isolation movements is a mistake. Compound, multi joint exercises like squats, presses and rows are

unsurpassed for strength, muscle mass, power and functionality and should remain in a bodybuilder's program year round – even before competitions.

## **CLARITY OF PURPOSE IS THE ANSWER TO ALL YOUR TRAINING QUESTIONS**

Here is the ultimate solution to all the questions and issues that have been brought up in this article: GET CLARITY OF PURPOSE! Any confusion you have about the multitude of training methods being promoted today will evaporate when you get clear about what you want. Why are you in the gym? What, specifically are your goals? Only after you have 100% clarity can you intelligently select the exercise modalities that will accomplish your objective with maximum efficiency.

Bodybuilders often talk about things like "instinctive training," "muscle shaping," "creating an illusion," "feeling the muscle," "going for the burn," "squeezing the muscle," and so on. Some strength coaches hear such statements or observe a bodybuilder training with light weights on very slow tempos and ridicule them. They don't realize that a bodybuilder may have spent years developing the mind to muscle connection and the instinctive bodily wisdom that enables them to work a muscle extremely hard through strict form and tempo manipulation using isolation movements and what appears to be very light weight.

Die hard anti-bodybuilding advocates can cause a lot of confusion by prescribing training absolutes such as, "*always* train in the 3-6 rep range," "*never* do crunches" or "*always* train with an explosive concentric." Just as the strength and power athlete must train with specificity to improve their performance, a bodybuilder must do the same. The difference is that "performance" to a bodybuilder means looking good. Bodybuilders are literally "physique artists."

The really smart bodybuilder understands how his or her training should differ from sports training and the smart athlete know the difference between strength training and cosmetic bodybuilding. It really boils down to knowing what you want (clarity), then choosing the appropriate tools to help you get there the fastest.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many bodybuilders have become closed minded to trying new things such as functional exercise or working on a ball. As a result, they are finding themselves developing imbalances, getting injuries and falling far short of their potential for muscle mass. On the other hand, many strength coaches and athletes wrongly accuse bodybuilders of faulty training, when the bodybuilders are in fact, doing exactly what they are supposed to be doing: Training to look good. Bodybuilding is NOT the worst thing that ever happened to strength training. Strength athletes, for the most part, should simply train like athletes and bodybuilders should train like bodybuilders. However, as this "old school" bodybuilder discovered, functional training DOES have a place in the bodybuilder's routine and the bodybuilders could certainly stand to learn a thing or two from the athletic community.