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## M&F Guide to Intermediate Bodybuilding

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS  
Photo by Robert Reiff

"Men perish because they cannot join the beginning with the end," wrote Alcamaeon, the first recorded anatomist, circa 500 B.C. Were the Greek physician-philosopher alive to study the anatomies of bodybuilders circa A.D. 2002, he might conclude the same of any training regimen that fails to transport a beginner to advanced status.



Between those two extremes, of course, lies that vast, rocky terrain known as intermediate bodybuilding, and while that isn't the most exciting term ever coined, don't let the name fool you into thinking it's some sort of training purgatory. The intermediate stage should be the most exciting time of your bodybuilding life, combining the freshness and excitement of starting out with the knowledge and results that come with experience.

Although time is an unreliable yardstick, most bodybuilders need a good six months of consistent, informed training to develop a sufficient anatomical and physiological foundation to be deemed intermediate. A great starting point would be having completed the "M&F Complete Guide to Beginning Bodybuilding"; better still would be having continued training for another three months or so beyond that. Other signposts indicate that you're probably ready to make the transition from beginner to intermediate:

- Your physique has undergone visible improvement consistent with your goal, whether that's gaining muscle, getting stronger, leaning out or some combination thereof.
- Your strength and muscle endurance have undergone significant improvement as measured by poundage, volume, etc.
- You've mastered proper technique for a minimum of 2-5 exercises per bodypart.
- Your dedication to training has made it an integral part of your schedule and lifestyle, similar to school or work.

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## Divide & Conquer

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS

If you feel you're ready to begin training as an intermediate, the first change you should make is subdividing your full-body workout. The main advantage of "splitting" your training is that you can train each bodypart with more intensity (a measurement that technically incorporates things like poundage and rep speed, but which is often simplified as a percentage of the maximum amount of weight you can lift for one repetition of an exercise). A split system also adds variety and flexibility to your training, which will become increasingly important as you advance.

Bodypart training can be arranged any number of ways, but your first intermediate split should divide them into just two groups. Some bodybuilders train lower body on one day and upper body on another. Others use a so-called push-pull system, which combines muscles whose main purpose is to pull things toward them through flexion (for example, biceps, back, hamstrings) in one workout, and muscles that primarily push things away from them through extension (for example, delts, pecs, triceps, quads) in another. Or you might follow the lead of two-time Mr. Olympia runner-up Shawn Ray, whose first training split combined back and legs one day with chest, shoulders and arms the next.

After three months of intermediate training, you may be ready to begin splitting your bodypart training over three days, which would allow you to subject each bodypart to even more intense training. Again, you might favor a modified push-pull approach, setting aside the extra day expressly for leg training so that you can cleave your upper body along push-pull lines. Another option is to anchor each of the three days with a major bodypart - chest, legs and back - and simply add a smaller bodypart or two to each. That's the approach IFBB pro Laura Creavalle says she used extensively as an intermediate, and she has gone on to compete in a record 11 Ms. Olympia contests.



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## Frequency: Why Less Is More

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS

No matter how you arrange your bodypart workouts, you'll likely find yourself training each less frequently than before, even though you'll be in the gym more often in absolute terms. That probably sounds counterintuitive - after all, shouldn't you be able to train bodyparts more frequently as you get bigger and stronger? Well, no.

You know that growth occurs after you train, not while you train. In fact, training actually breaks down protein filaments in muscles, which grow when those filaments rebuild. As your workouts impose progressively greater demands on your muscles, the latter will need more time to recuperate if they're to adapt as thoroughly as possible.

As a beginner, you trained each bodypart three times a week. As an intermediate, your average frequency should fall to no more than twice a week per bodypart, although that might fluctuate a bit. Many advanced bodybuilders achieve serious gains by training a bodypart once every 7-10 days, because their workouts are so intense.



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## Selecting Your Exercises

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS

As you train a bodypart less frequently, your volume for that bodypart will normally increase. (Volume is the total amount of work you perform in a workout or over some period, often measured as total repetitions.) Rather than simply increasing the number of sets and reps you do for the exercises you mastered as a beginner, try adding new movements to the mix. That doesn't mean taking a "dart board" approach to exercise selection every time you train, but rather periodically switching to different movements and always keeping an eye out for new alternatives.

During months two and three, you began adding selected compound exercises, which involve more than one joint (like the squat and bench press). These exercises may take a little longer to produce tangible results, in part because it takes a while to develop the neuromuscular coordination needed to master them. Yet over the longer term, they're more effective and efficient at packing on lean body mass.

To help you expand your individual workouts, we've provided some [new exercises](#) as well as a number of [alternatives](#) for each bodypart. These exercises are particularly well-suited for intermediates and complement what you've already learned.



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## Periodizing Your Volume & Intensity

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS

The main reason your bodypart training frequency will fluctuate as an intermediate is that you should now begin "periodizing" your training. Periodization simply means manipulating the different variables of your training regimen to maximize results. Even bodybuilders who train and compete for a living don't go pedal to the metal year-round. Instead, they vary their intensity in cycles. Both Shawn and Laura follow the intense training and dieting that precedes a major contest with a month or more of downtime. (Shawn doesn't even set foot in the gym during this time; "I let my body heal," he says. Laura does light, maintenance-type work.) When each resumes serious training, they ease back into their routines by starting out with lighter weights and build up to heavier, more intense workouts.

Just as you can split your bodypart training into any number of groupings, so too can you periodize your training in any number of ways. Like most periodized schemes, the intermediate one we offer (see "The Intermediate Program") is based on microcycles, which here encompass a week's training; mesocycles, which here amount to three two-month periods; and macrocycles, which here represent approximately six months of training. Within each cycle, the typical progression is from higher volume and lower intensity (that is, lighter poundages) to lower volume and higher intensity. Each phase of any periodization scheme has its own objectives, but those must always contribute to the long-term goals of the program.

Periodized schemes should also include periods of both rest and reduced intensity. Don't think that the "unload" weeks included here will rob your body of muscle, strength or both. Instead, reducing your intensity and workload on occasion ensures continued growth and development. Each mesocycle here begins with an unload week, and we recommend taking an entire week off before you even start the program.

Just because you'll use the same sequence of one-rep max (1RM) percentages doesn't mean you'll use the same poundages over and over. Rather, your one-rep maxes should increase gradually over time, which means that the weights corresponding to those percentages will increase, too. To stimulate muscle growth, you must apply progressively heavier weights to them. The heavier the load, the more muscle fibers you recruit.



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## Don't Train in Vain!

Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS

Ever heard the corporate catch-phrase "It's more important to work smart than to work hard"? Yeah, we're sick of it, too, but successful bodybuilding really does require both. Training smart doesn't mean charging into the gym every day and taking every set to failure. Little in the way of research suggests that constantly training to failure promotes gains in strength, power or lean body mass. In contrast, it often appears to lead to overuse-type musculoskeletal injuries, and almost inevitably results in overtraining, defined as "a decrease in performance due to a maladaptation to . . . exercise stimuli."

Overtraining is triggered by biochemical and neural reactions to inadequate rest and recovery, and once those reactions kick in, your neuromuscular and metabolic systems lose some of their capacity to handle physical activity. Symptoms include lethargy, loss of appetite, training plateaus, weight loss and heightened anxiety, to name a few.



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## On to Advanced

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS

How long you'll be an intermediate bodybuilder depends on any number of factors. At one extreme, you could pass through beginner status in six months, pass through intermediate in another six and be a legitimate advanced bodybuilder in one year. Or it could take several years of slow but steady progress before you're ready to have ADVANCED tattooed across your bulging biceps. Regardless, don't deviate from a periodized approach.

How will you know when you're advanced? Along with the obvious markers - dramatic improvements in your physique, strength, etc. - you should be better educated about training science, and more in tune with the feedback your body and mind send back and forth. Laura says: "As you move past being an intermediate, you should start to sense intuitively when you're overtrained, or when a particular exercise isn't working well for you, or when your development is becoming unbalanced." In other words, once your training becomes simultaneously informed and instinctive, you're there.



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## Intermediate Exercise Descriptions: Quads/Glutes; Hamstrings

By Jeff O'Connell, Staff Writer, and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS, Health & Science Editor  
Photos by Robert Reiff

### Quads/Glutes: Front Squat

Place the bar in a squat rack at about chest level, then position yourself so that it rests across the upper part of your pecs and front delts. Place your hands on the bar slightly wider than shoulder-width apart, palms up; bend your wrists back so that your elbows point straight ahead. Walk out of the rack and plant your feet just wider than shoulder-width apart, toes turned out slightly. Take a deep breath, then descend by sitting back while keeping your back upright. From the squat position, explode back up, holding your breath until you pass through the sticking point. If you find yourself leaning forward, or the bar starts to slip, raise your elbows higher.

*Additional exercises: squat, hack squat, dumbbell lunge.*



### Hamstrings: Good Morning

Position a barbell on your back as if you were going to squat, albeit with a closer foot stance. Take a deep breath and, maintaining the natural curvature of your spine, unlock your knees slightly and begin leaning forward at your waist. Lower your torso as far as your flexibility allows, but don't go significantly lower than the point at which your chest is parallel to the ground. Raise your torso back to the start position, maintaining your back position and exhaling as you pass the sticking point.

*Additional exercises: lying leg curl, standing leg curl.*



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## Intermediate Exercise Descriptions: Calves; Chest

By Jeff O'Connell, Staff Writer, and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS, Health & Science Editor  
Photo by Robert Reiff

### Calves: Slide Raise

Position yourself firmly in a calf-raise slide machine with your feet no more than shoulder-width apart, so that only the balls of your feet touch the foot board. Take a deep breath and, maintaining a solid body position, lower your heels below the balls of your feet. Once you feel a good stretch, contract your calves to drive the slide up until your toes point down as far as possible. Exhale as you ascend.

*Additional exercises: leg-press calf raise, seated and standing calf raises.*



### Chest: Bench Press

Lie faceup on a flat bench and grasp the bar above so that your hands are anywhere from slightly beyond shoulder-width apart to all the way out to the narrow "grooves" found on most quality bars. Wrap your thumbs around the bar and plant your feet on the ground. Keeping your head, upper back and glutes in contact with the bench throughout, lift the bar off the rack and take a deep breath. Lower the bar to your lower pec/diaphragm region and allow it to gently touch your body. Press the bar explosively back to the start position, exhaling as you pass through the last third of the lift.

*Additional exercises: incline barbell press, dumbbell press, cable crossover, dumbbell flye.*

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## Intermediate Exercise Descriptions: Delts; Abs

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS  
Photo by Robert Reiff

### Delts: Military Press

Grasp a bar with a slightly-wider-than-shoulder-width, overhand grip, your thumbs wrapped under the bar, and hold it across your upper pecs and collarbone. Plant your feet shoulder-width apart, take a deep breath and press the bar overhead to near-full extension. (Don't forcefully lock out your elbows.) Lower the bar back to your shoulders under control.

*Additional exercises: bent-over lateral raise, lateral raise, front raise.*

### Abs: Crunch

Lie on the floor with your knees bent at about 60 degrees, feet flat on the floor about shoulder-width apart. With your hands lightly gripped behind your head (not pulling), curl forward to bring your shoulder blades just off the floor.

*Additional exercises: V-up, hip thrust, side knee raise.*



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## Intermediate Exercise Descriptions: Back; Lower-Back

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS  
Photos by Robert Reiff

### Back: Pull-Up

Grasp an elevated bar with a wider-than-shoulder-width, overhand grip. Keeping your legs straight or slightly bent, pull your body up until about chin level in a smooth motion. Squeeze your lats at the top for a peak contraction and lower yourself back down.

*Additional exercises: dumbbell row, bent-over barbell row, pull-down, T-bar row.*



### Low Back: Power Clean

Grasp a barbell on the floor with an overhand, shoulder-width grip, "squatting" over it so that your shins almost touch the bar. Your thighs should be roughly parallel to the ground and your torso angled forward roughly 45 degrees as you maintain your spine's natural curvature. Straighten your legs to pull the bar to knee level, then thrust your hips forward and continue straightening until the bar is above your knees. Mimic "jumping" by straightening your hips, knees and ankles, and drive off the balls of your feet. Once you're on your toes, shrug your traps and pull the barbell upward. Rotate your elbows and forearms under the bar and "catch" it with your wrists bent back and your palms at collarbone level.

*Additional exercises: deadlift, back extension.*



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## Intermediate Exercise Descriptions: Biceps; Triceps

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS  
Photos by Robert Reiff

### Biceps: Barbell Concentration Curl

Stand and hold a barbell at arms' length with your hands 4-6 inches apart. Unlock your knees slightly and lean forward at the waist until your flat back is nearly parallel to the floor. With your upper arms hanging straight down, curl the bar upward, stopping an inch or two in front of your face. Lower the bar slowly.

*Additional exercises: incline dumbbell curl, standing barbell curl, preacher curl.*



**Triceps: Bench Dip** Move two benches parallel to each other, 2 - 2-1/2 feet apart (slightly wider if you're tall). Place your hands close together on the bench behind you and your feet up on the bench in front of you. Slowly bend your elbows to lower your glutes to between the benches. Descend for a good stretch and then push yourself back up. To increase the resistance, have your training partner lay a weight plate across your thighs.

*Additional exercises: close-grip bench press, overhead dumbbell extension, pressdown.*



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## Intermediate Exercise Descriptions: Forearms; Traps

By Jeff O'Connell Senior Writer and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS  
Photos by Robert Reiff

### Forearms: Zottman Curl

Stand and hold two dumbbells at arms' length. Keeping your upper arms pinned against your sides, turn your left palm up and curl that dumbbell toward your shoulder. At the top, rotate your wrist so that your palm faces down. As you lower that dumbbell, begin raising the opposite dumbbell palm-up. Continue curling the weights in this seesaw fashion for the duration of the set.

*Additional exercises: wrist curl, wrist roller, grip exercise (this can range from a machine gripper to simply squeezing a tennis ball for reps).*



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### Traps: Power Pull

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Hold a barbell or dumbbells at arms' length with your knees bent and your back straight but angled forward, so that the weight rests at knee level. Lift the bar or dumbbells toward your chin by driving through your feet to straighten your knees and hips, keeping your back straight, rising on the balls of your feet and pulling your elbows back at the top as you shrug. Reverse the movement to return to the start position. Additional exercises: power shrug, shrug (dumbbell, barbell or Smith machine), upright row. Note: Many exercises listed secondarily work additional muscle groups to the ones listed.



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B.

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## Rules of Splitting

By Jeff O'Connell, Staff Writer, and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS, Health & Science Editor

Photo by Robert Reiff

### Work downward

Regardless of how you split your bodypart training, normally train your bigger muscle groups (quads, glutes, back and chest) first and then work progressively downward. Don't be afraid, however, to turn this rule on its head occasionally. The smaller bodypart will benefit from being a priority for a change, and your main muscle will receive unusual stimulus because assistance muscles are now prefatigued.



### Avoid conflicts

Some exercises recruit more than one muscle group, and you need to factor that into your split system. For example, triceps are recruited not only during triceps movements but also during many chest and shoulder exercises. If you were to train those bodyparts on consecutive days, your tri's could quickly become overtrained.

### Don't overdo it

Just because it took you an hour and 15 minutes to train your entire body, don't assume that each workout of a split system requires the same time investment. Since you'll hit fewer bodyparts at a time, you don't have to hammer away at one bodypart for an hour or more.

### Get plenty of R&R

Don't make your split so elaborate that you never get a day or two off from training. Even if you give each bodypart sufficient time to rest between workouts, overtraining can still rear its ugly head if your body's overall energy stores are depleted. As an intermediate, you generally shouldn't train more than five times a week; also make sure your body has adequate rest and nutrition to sustain split training.

### The M&F Guide to Intermediate Bodybuilding

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## Intermediate Intensity Boosters

By Jeff O'Connell, Staff Writer, and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS, Health & Science Editor

If you've read MUSCLE & FITNESS before, you've no doubt heard of the Weider Training Principles. The three listed below are particularly well suited to intermediate bodybuilders, but use such techniques judiciously, if not sparingly, within this periodized system. As a general rule, intermediates shouldn't use such high-intensity techniques more than twice a week.

**Superset:** Performing two exercises for opposing muscle groups together - for example, biceps curls and triceps pressdowns - back-to-back, with little or no rest in between.

**Iso-Tension:** Flexing a muscle while it isn't being exercised, holding that contraction for 3-6 seconds and repeating 3-4 times. Alone or in combination with stretching, iso-tension is a productive way to use your between-sets downtime. "Flexing a muscle between sets helps you focus and concentrate on feeling the target area contract," says three-time Mr. Olympia Frank Zane. "Feel it, get control of it, and you'll train it better."

**Partial Reps:** Performing any exercise deliberately with less than a full range of motion, although most bodybuilders exploit the beginning or end of a range of motion. Partials can constitute your entire set, allowing you to use more weight and hence apply new stress to muscle fibers, or you can do them after failure on a set to avoid sticking points and fatigue muscles more thoroughly. "Partials are most applicable to machine work - there's a great safety factor in using a machine," says pro bodybuilder Ian Harrison. Performing partials on exercises such as the squat and bench press requires a spotter.

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## The Intermediate Program

By Jeff O'Connell, Staff Writer, and Dan Wagman, PhD, CSCS, Health & Science Editor

### General Guidelines

- Train your body according to a split system.
- Train each bodypart twice every 7-10 days, adjusting your frequency slightly up or down on occasion for variety.
- Perform 3-4 sets per exercise. Whereas two exercises can fulfill the workload during a low-volume (eight sets) week, use 4-5 exercises to complete a high-volume (15 sets) week.
- You don't need to reach failure on every set; in fact, you shouldn't.
- Gradually learn and incorporate new exercises, including the ones described here.
- Periodize your training by manipulating intensity and volume. The percentages listed under "Intensity" are based on your one-rep max (1RM) - the most weight you can lift once but not twice - plus 10-20 pounds for single-joint exercises (like the dumbbell concentration curl) and 15-35 pounds for multijoint exercises (like the bench press and squat).

Let's say the most weight you can bench once is 135 pounds. Adding 15 pounds to that equals 150. In the first week of Phase 1, then, perform your bench presses at approximately 55% of that total, or 82.5 pounds. (Most gyms have 2-1/2-pound plates, by the way.) If you're more comfortable calculating your three-rep max, add 25-35 pounds for single-joint exercises and 40-60 pounds for multijoint exercises, and use that sum as the basis for calculating your percentages. Recalculate your one- or three-rep maxes at the end of each training phase.

To account for individual variability - that is, 70% of 1RM might be harder or easier for you than it is for the next person - the program also lists what are called ratings of perceived exertion (RPE), which allow you to benchmark the accuracy of those percentages. The RPE scale basically ranges from a "very easy" set through a "very, very hard" one. For example, in Week 4 of Phase 1, completing 10 reps at 70% should require a "moderate" effort on your part. If it's easier than that, add a little weight; if it's harder, subtract weight.

### Phase 1

#### Goal: Developing a Basis

Week	Intensity (%)	RPE	Sets*	Reps **
1	55	Very easy-easy	8	8
2	55	Very easy-easy	10	8
3	65	Easy-moderate	10	10
4	70	Moderate	10	10
5	75	Moderate-hard	12	10
6	85	Hard-very hard	12	8
7	90	Very hard	15	6

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8	95	Very hard-very very hard	15	6
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**Phase 2****Goal: Strength Endurance & Growth**

Week	Intensity (%)	RPE	Sets*	Reps**
1	65	Easy-moderate	8	8
2	75	Moderate-hard	8	10
3	80	Hard	10	10
4	85	Hard-very hard	10	10
5	85	Hard-very hard	12	10
6	85	Hard-very hard	15	10
7	85	Hard-very hard	15	10
8	85	Hard-very hard	20	10

**Phase 3****Goal: Strength & Growth**

Week	Intensity (%)	RPE	Sets*	Reps**
1	65	Easy-moderate	8	8
2	75	Moderate-hard	10	10
3	85	Hard-very hard	12	8
4	90	Very hard	12	5
5	95	Very hard-very, very hard	10	3
6	90	very hard	8	5
7	95	Very hard-very, very hard	8	3
8	100+	very, very hard	8	Max out

\* Per Bodypart

\*\* Per set

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## ARE YOU READY TO ADVANCE TO INTERMEDIATE BODYBUILDING?

Take this poll for the answer.

Find out in seconds whether you're ready to leave the title of Beginner behind and make your way to the status of Intermediate Bodybuilding. Answer these four questions either 'yes' or 'no.' If you answer 'no' to any of the four questions, you may need to spend a little more time perfecting your craft as a beginner. But don't worry, you'll catch up in no time. If you answer 'yes' then you're ready to step up to the Intermediate level. Click onto our comprehensive Intermediate Training Workout and start to work out like the big boys.

### 1. Can you correctly perform at least three exercises per bodypart?

Yes No

### 2. Have you made visible improvements in the past 6 months?

Yes No

### 3. Have you trained regularly for the past 4-6 months, 3+ times a week?

Yes No

### 4. Have you made measurable improvements in muscle strength/endurance?

Yes No

### SUBMIT YOUR ANSWERS