

## **Training and Age**

This article started out as a handout at a talk I gave to a small group of older athletes, of varying degrees of seriousness and fitness from a few power lifters to fairly serious recreational weight trainers, runners, and one grip strength trainer. I was asked to address strength, fitness, and health along with the plus's and minus's of heavy resistance exercise into one's 50s and beyond. I'm a 56 year old retired walking mailman, weight trainer, rock climber, and mountaineer. I have no degrees in fitness but do have 46 years in the gym and various sports. I compete in Masters Olympic weightlifting. Masters means over 35 years of age, not a master of the sport. I'm very involved in grip training – it started out as a way to climb better but has expanded greatly since I discovered the Grip Board. I have tried to adapt this writing to a wider range of people – this is the result.

I was fortunate enough to visit Westside barbell once and spend almost three hours talking to Louie Simmons. One of the biggest things he taught me was that there is no magic workout that's right for everyone all the time; the object is to learn to figure things out for yourself and adapt the workout to your changing strengths and weaknesses, so you'll find no magic routine or advice here. My hope is to give you food for thought about a balanced overall body, with no or at least fewer weaknesses, than you have now; as well as maybe start you thinking about how the things you do today affect your tomorrows. Plus maybe get you thinking about how to train as you reach your 40s, 50s, and beyond.

The thing that probably changes the most when you get older is that you don't "play" anymore, so you start to lose that athletic ability and the ease and freedom of movement you have when young. You can no longer move the way you used to, jump the way you used to, coordination isn't quite as good, balance isn't as good, hand eye coordination goes downhill, speed and quickness slow, etc. Heck, nothing works like it used to. Old injuries start coming back to haunt you, and new problems seem to crop up more often when you push hard. In spite of yourself, you have to learn to train smarter instead of just harder. I've learned the hard way that I'm not ten foot tall and bulletproof like I believed when I was young. And you need to learn YOUR body and how it works better than ever before. This of course happens at different ages for different people but it will happen, no matter who you are. And this stuff sneaks up on you, it happens so gradually you don't realize it's happening until it's already happened. Old age can be any age depending on the person involved. One mans 40 is another mans 50.

With age comes inevitable changes in life style. Instead of jogging down to the park and playing football and shooting hoops, it's working around the house or going to your kid's ball games. It's doing the same job and movements day after day. This lack of full range movement in all directions (or sometimes in any direction), the accumulation of stress and repetition from work, and just the effects of the ageing process all begin to add up. You soon begin to have various aches and pains that affect everything you do. The goal of working out, young or old, should be to feel better, perform better, and hold off the ageing process as long as possible.

What changes as you get older is more what you don't do outside the gym. The results of many workouts, especially those targeting maximum strength in a certain few events, may also result in another set of problems; that is uneven muscular development from the use of certain exercises out of proportion to exercises that target the opposing or stabilizing muscles. Over time these imbalances set up a scenario where you work your way closer and closer to an injury. You develop postural, recruitment, and movement pattern problems but you're still getting stronger in the one target movement so you ignore them. Then one day something goes wrong and you're injured. Now of course you can do everything right and still end up with an injury, the very nature of pushing your limits to the edge puts you at high risk. The fact remains that you can get stronger as you get older, but more attention needs to be paid to things like joint mobility, stabilizer muscle development, and even strength development across and around your joints.

Developing and keeping strength isn't that different as you age, you just should be more careful with warm-ups and technique. You'll have to come to grips with the fact that you are not going to get stronger forever, but that it's making the effort that's important. But after saying that, it's still possible find yourself setting new PRs at an age when your friends are having bypass surgery. What you must change is the way you look at the "complete process" of working out. The very invention of the word "prehab" in the training of elite athletes should tell us all something. For most strength trainees, the primary goal of training is the development of either 1 rep max effort strength or the development of relatively shorts burst of very high intensity. The concept of training the weak link, the idea of balanced overall development leading to a decreased chance of injury plus addressing long term physical health is the idea behind this article.

As you age, and especially as you approach the "senior citizen" class, general fitness doesn't come just as a result of your lifestyle. You have to actually do something to develop and maintain a healthy cardiovascular system. There are a lot of options for cardiovascular fitness and some are better than others, especially for larger people. Jogging down the highway might not be the first choice for a 300# athlete, or a retired mailman with multiple knee surgeries, but you still need to be able to climb a set of stairs or play with the grand kids without having a heart attack. You also need to consider your overall health. Do not mistake strength – endurance training for endurance work. There is a difference, and it depends on your goals which is appropriate for you. Sled dragging, farmers walk, etc is normally considered strength endurance and longer duration with lesser intensity like rowing machines, treadmills, walking etc are more for endurance. I have come to believe that both are necessary for overall health as you age. For health purposes, a certain amount of pure endurance works wonders.

When I reached my fifties, I found I was losing the ability to move well, even though I worked out regularly with weights and rock climbed once a week. What I found was a decrease in joint mobility, flexibility, coordination, and explosiveness. Flexibility is something I never thought much about when I was young. When young, I could bend enough to do everything I wanted to do; so why stretch? Well, that's also changed over time. I've found that proper stretching helps fix most of the things I break doing other aspects of my training. Ashtanga Yoga is something I tried several years ago to help my rock climbing. It certainly did that but I found that it also fixed most of the nagging little injuries I had as well. Now if I was just smart enough to do it on a regular basis instead

of waiting until I'm messed up, doing it long enough to fix myself up, then stopping again. I really should listen to myself more sometimes.....

You also have to constantly remind yourself that stretching is not competitive – more flexibility is not always better. You may not have the time or desire to try Yoga but a proper stretching program can help fix a lot of what ails you.

Adding some weight exercises that are more athletic in nature may also have benefits as we age. While you may have no interest in the Olympic lifts; the act of learning a full squat snatch, even if done less than perfectly and with only moderate weight, will tax your flexibility, balance, explosiveness, and overhead strength. If that's too much, just try overhead squats. An overhead squat of bodyweight is a decent feat in itself. I would recommend not doing these in a power rack but somewhere you can just drop the weights if you lose it. Full squat cleans and split jerks are also a nice addition to your power clean routine. The use of kettlebells can add a lot to the quest for a balanced body. One hand lifts work the stabilizers and switching hands and or juggling the bells helps with hand eye coordination and adds an element of just plain fun to a workout. Simple one and two hand swings can make a decent cardio workout as well.

Big basic movements like different kinds of squats, bench press, dips, and deadlifts, pulls, chins etc probably have been and should be the basics of almost any strength training program but working the opposing muscle groups is now more critical than ever before to staying healthy. The longer you train improperly, the greater your imbalances become. The most common example is the guy who's done heavy bench press for years but almost no rowing or upper back work. Besides looking a little strange, he probably has a couple sore shoulders, a hunched back, and is closer everyday to a major injury. He would also probably bench press more with stronger a stronger upper back.

Prehab – I'm not sure when that became a word but it sure is important. Maybe if we'd thought about it years ago when all our joints etc. were healthy, we'd have fewer problems today. The development of balanced strength around a joint may be the single most important thing you can do for injury prevention and strength development. And hitting the small stabilizer muscles and especially the opposing muscle groups is the way to do it; and do it "before" instead of "after" you need it.

If you have a hard and varied physical job, perhaps you have adequate overall and core strength from carrying bundles of shingles, plywood, plasterboard, bags of quickcrete, etc. along with shoveling and swinging a hammer – both big and small. But if not and maybe even then things like sandbags, stones, farmer walk, etc. can add what might be called "farmers" strength to your routine.

I'd like to add just a little bit about the sport of grip strength training and the feats of strength used to demonstrate and test it. It's a fairly new activity for many people, including a lot of serious strength athletes from other fields, and a lot of them are much more concerned about just doing one or more of the big feats of grip strength than about training properly to do them all. This is resulting in a lot of injuries that could possibly be avoided by building a base or foundation of strength in the complete lower arm and hand. Muscular strength develops much faster than the tendons and ligaments that connect them all and this can be an invitation to injury. There are dozens of exercises you should be doing for a few months before you specialize on any one event in grip training. A wide range of rotating accessory exercises with the goal of helping a rotating

main goal movement does seem to work well and seems to make old tendons and ligaments happier.

Often as we get older, our money and free time situation improves; spend some of it on your health and strength goals. Buy the equipment that might allow you to reach your goals, do better prehab, and plan rehab when you need it. Try a massage therapist or ART practitioner. Buy equipment to do contrast baths or a hot tub. Treat yourself to that shoulder horn to help rehab that messed up shoulder. Money can be a tool for strength development just like a barbell. Buy information – it may not end up being worthwhile every time but there are some people out there that actually know more than you do about training, as hard as you may find that to believe. And don't fall into the trap of thinking that everyone who's really big and strong knows how to train – they may or may not know anything except that they picked their parents well. On the other hand, most people who do know about health and training work out themselves and can or did in the past demonstrate at least some level of strength and ability.

Change your diet – a slowing and less efficient metabolism and less active life style may result in some changes that aren't that conducive to strength and/or health. Being fat is not a good goal as you get older even if it might help you lift a little more. Having a heart attack will not increase your lifts. Supplements can and probably should play a role in your diet strategy even more so than when you're young.

Also – compete and continue to set new goals – competition is a key to growth and reality in your training. Make your self a list of strength and endurance feats you want to accomplish and set a timeframe to do it. Don't be afraid that trying some new thing will set you back in your lifting – life is too short to not try new things.

But the main thing to remember as you age is to never quit. One definition of success is "The gradual attainment of a worthwhile goal". Take gradual to mean a lifetime, and worthwhile goal to be as strong and healthy as you can as long as you can. When I was young I rated strength as 90% and health as 10% of the equation. As you age you might reconsider that ratio closer to 50/50.