Dan John

40 years of Insight
I have a box in my storage room that contains all my training journals. Besides sets and reps, I toss in what's going on in my life. Often, I find long essays about the future, lists about "what works," and funny little tidbits about my life that I would've quickly forgotten had I not wrote them down.

It hit me when I picked up this box the other day that I've been recording workouts since 1971, five years after first picking up a weight. That's forty years! I started to think about the lessons I've learned and, before I knew it, I had a list of forty lessons that I had to learn the hard way.
Lesson 1: Keep a journal of some kind.

It makes me smile to see my attempt at neat handwriting in my first journal entries. The bench press workout was 85 x 8/8/4. I noted, "I was supposed to do six on the second set but it was too easy." In the summer before my freshman year, I benched 100 pounds; my sophomore year, I benched 200 pounds; and I got 300 during my junior year in track season. I would write what I benched as a senior weighing 162 pounds, but you wouldn't believe it.

I have a few notes about my coach's son who came to our weight room one afternoon to see if I was "really as strong as my dad said I was." I told him I'd already lifted and he said something that questioned my lifts. So, I put a low 300-pound lift on the bar and it went up so fast that he told me to stop. "I believe you...wow, I believe you."

The value of a journal is seeing the progress (and the regress) of your training and training philosophy. I believe a thorough review of your old journals is probably as good as a training session.
Lesson 2: Eat like a man

This article pulled together some wonderful disconnected links that had spun in my brain for a few years. Yes, low carb is good, but carbs are not evil. For the strength enthusiast, or someone who wants to just be powerful, this article gives the template. The carb-depletion workout fit perfectly with a weekly volume day. The carb-up fit perfectly with life!

Now, you can agree or disagree with the diet, but all the athletes I had use this template found that their ability to train longer and harder was enhanced naturally by this simple eating program. And, as the author notes, people fear you in the supermarket!
Lesson 3: You must master the squat movement.

You may not need to ever squat heavy, and you may also discover that there are some better tools for you (for you, read that carefully) like Bulgarian split squats or pistols, but mastery of the squat is worth every second you spend on it.

In past articles, like this, I've given you a template to follow. However, I still feel that the message has NOT been delivered. You must master this basic movement. Spend years on it if you have to, as I did, but learn to do this.
Lesson 4: There are several "Modern Classics" that will support your training goals.

Yes, these are "books," but the depth and insights will astound you.

Cormac McCarthy's "The Road." It still stuns me and scares me. The diet advice is unsupported by research.

T. H. White's "The Once and Future King." The first part is "The Sword in the Stone" and the book changed my life.

Frank Herbert's "Dune." The book is a science fiction legend, but the respect for education, in all its forms, makes it worth reading.

I would also tell you to read all of Harry Potter. Any book that introduces a character in the first chapter that's so crucial to the whole story, yet won't be seen again until the third book, and a question from the very beginning that isn't answered until literally the end, deserves one's time and energy.

There are others, of course, but the idea is that at times big goals and big stories also include epic tragedy and overcoming failure.
Lesson 5: Lift outdoors.

When I first made waves as a writer, I was usually quoted for insisting we go outside and train. It's still great advice. I think that carrying equipment outside and working out in a communal gathering is the single best way to train. As a discus thrower, bringing my kettlebell to the field to do a few movements "now and again" was a game changer in helping me improve my throws. Grab some food and drink and a training tool and go outside and have some fun lifting.
Lesson 6: The Southwood Program works.

I wrote on this a few years ago here. It's very simple. The Southwood Program is to be performed three days a week in the gym:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Reps</th>
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<tr>
<td>Power clean</td>
<td>8-6-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military press</td>
<td>8-6-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Front squat</td>
<td>8-6-4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bench press</td>
<td>8-6-4</td>
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Although I learned this while Nixon was President and nobody traded with China, it still holds fast as a great training program. You don't miss a single bodypart, it's simple to learn, and a bit rigorous to do. It also demands that you clean and military press which we'll get back to later.
Lesson 7: Learn to meditate or relax "on command."

If there's a skill that's overlooked it's the ability to nap when necessary. If my athletes struggle with getting or staying asleep, we're going to have issues down the line. Training oneself to relax is the first step. I recommend squeezing a muscle tight, then breathing out and releasing it. This helps enable falling effortlessly asleep literally any time, anywhere.

Sleep is the best recovery tool I know, but the skill of sound sleeping is often overlooked. Although I recommend ZMA®, Z-12TM, and eyeshades and earplugs to just about every audience I speak to, I still say that one also needs to practice relaxing. There are many CDs, DVDs and downloads that walk you through this skill and I can't comment on them all, but it's worth your time to practice this underrated skill.
Lesson 8:
Never pass a pull-up bar without doing some pull-ups.

I learned this from Pavel. It's a "truism." My all-time best number of pull-ups was 14 when getting ready for my senior year of high school football. I know this because of my journal (see Lesson One!). As I grew larger, I let myself slide all the way down to four reps. I also noted my shoulders hurt.

Taking Pavel's advice, I started doing one or two pull-ups throughout my training workouts. When two became ridiculously easy, I moved to three and soon four. I am now back to nine pull-ups and "miraculously" my shoulder health is back to being fine.

One surprising point about pull-ups is that they're also a wonderful abdominal exercise. I don't know why that is, but it will be evident the day after a long pull-up workout.
Lesson 9: The old time weightlifters had it right: "Fixed" weights are better for most of us.

I love pictures of the old time strongmen with the huge kettlebells and fixed bars. When I first started training, gyms had fixed barbells in a rack, so you could grab a 75-pound barbell or a 105 pounder, just like the dumbbell rack today.

There's some beauty in this. Originally, all I had was a 53-pound kettlebell and a 70 pounder. So, when I trained, I had two options. The "lack of options" made me dig down harder for certain movements. A few years ago, I noted that most of us should toss out the bulk of our weightlifting plates and just use 45s and 25s. One would have thought I'd blasphemed! I got negative feedback for weeks from that.

I stand by it. Yes, it's a jump to go from 185 to 225. It means you have to own 185 and you'd better be ready for the load at 225. It's also how we trained in college as the small plates were all broken and the football team stole all the 35s to stick on their machines (I won't comment).

So, my first group of recruits when I began coaching learned to lift with 95, 135, and 185 pounds in the snatch and clean. They mastered the loads quickly because, well, we had no other options!
Lesson 10: I believe that for overall health, you need to help the body cleanse.

At nearly every talk I give, I note the importance of dental floss. Flossing is really good for you and it seems like it makes a difference in heart health. It takes about a minute to do it, too. But I get emails from guys who tell me, "I'll do anything to get to X, Y or Z." When I ask them first to floss twice a day, I get a return email that says something like "that is a problem as..." Listen, if you don't have the discipline to floss twice a day, good luck with the Velocity Diet.

I do all the weird stuff. I use a Neti Pot for my sinuses, and I no longer take allergy medicine, so it "works." I use a tongue scraper every morning, and learned that some foods really do make mucus, and I always supplement with fiber. Now, I don't go so far as to do some of the higher-end stuff like colonics, but that's not a judgment on my part.

I think that taking a little time each day to "cleanse" is worth it to your overall health. To me, it's like eating vegetables and fruit. It's got to be good for you at some level. And, let's be honest, it's pretty easy to do.
Lesson 11: "90% of success is simply showing up." Woody Allen

When I first began throwing the discus as a 118-pound tower of terror, I won a lot of meets. No matter what, the kids at the other school would tell me, "If (insert name of fat kid) would've been here, he would've beaten you." I used to believe that crap. Whenever I win something, especially now in the Internet age, I always find out later that "somebody else" would've won it if, of course, they'd just shown up. Folks, it's a truism that should be stuck to your bathroom mirror. "Show Up!"

I've fond memories of helping a friend off the floor as he was dieting down for an amateur bodybuilding contest and he was doing depleting workouts. He was in a brain fog for probably three weeks. Of course, on the dais under the lights, he looked magnificent and won "easily."

The dude showed up. If you're gunna gunna, you have to show up to prove it. "Gunna gunna" was a phrase my mom used for people who were "gunna do this and gunna do that." It's like graduating from high school or college. I swear to you, if you just show up, you're gunna gunna do just fine.
Lesson 12: Safety must be part of performance.

One of my favorite books is Steve Ilg's "Total Body Transformation." Published in 2004, the book has amazing insights into human performance and reflects on Ilg's courageous victory over a terrifying back injury. In the book, Ilg looks at a quote made about Mark Allen that he had become the World's Greatest Athlete by winning a series of triathlons. Ilg came up with an interesting contest to see who actually was the world's fittest human.

Ilg's contest included basic gymnastic movements, weightlifting maxes, and yoga moves. My favorite section was the third day's endurance event, a mountain bike race to an uphill finish. His genius is realizing that downhill is where the injuries happen, so why not test the athletes' fitness as safely as possible?

I've had a lot of injuries that have caused me to spend a lot of time in hospital beds. One thing I've learned is that it is "almost" okay to get injured in competition, but it's insane to get hurt in preparation. Stopping several reps short of failure or injury may not sound courageous on paper, but coming back to train tomorrow is more important than an additional "junk" rep.
Lesson 13: We tend to be "glib" about our weaknesses.

I love the word "glib." Usually, it means nonchalant (that has to be a French word; we need to find a way to say this glibly), but it also means "lacking depth and substance." Now, most of my ex-girlfriends say that about me, but I digress.

I've always taken about six weeks a year to assess, reassess, and deal with my weaknesses. It's always around the same few issues:

- I'm too fat.
- My hamstrings are too tight.
- I need to work on X, Y, or Z.

So, how does one usually address these issues? Most people usually address weaknesses while also doing literally everything else. So, what happens in a typical six-week assessment program is we continue doing everything we did before and hope the weaknesses vanish magically. Without Harry Potter, that isn't going to happen.

In the last decade I've discovered that weaknesses demand full concentration. As I've argued before, if you want to really address fat loss, do the Velocity Diet. Oh sure, there are other fine options, but do the V-Diet once and then decide how "grueling" Atkins or Ornish or the Zone are in terms of sacrifice.

Weaknesses need to be given full attention. If you have flexibility issues holding you back, then you need some kind of challenge. In the past I've recommended the Bikram Yoga 30-Day Challenge (you promise to go to the 90 minute sessions every day for thirty days) and I still can't think of a better way to address the issue.

Weaknesses need to be attacked with depth. I charge you to examine every possibility in your search for ridding yourself of this issue. I've had people squat five days a week to address poor squatting technique and do 1,000 full turns a month to deal with discus throwing issues. If you have a clear weakness, total focus with every tool and weapon you can muster has to be the plan.

Don't be glib.
Lesson 14: Conditioning isn't just jogging.

Neither is it treadmilling, or whatever machine you think of right now. Conditioning is more than that. I gave some insights in this article, but few people were interested in trying out the tumbling. This little workout is the finest "finisher" I know and you only have to do it once.

- Five forward rolls
- Five right shoulder rolls
- Five left shoulder rolls
- Three cartwheels followed by three cartwheels to the other side
- One set of bear crawls (about ten meters)
- Sprint to waste basket

I think the intensity of conditioning trumps the duration most of the time. I have more to say on this later, but most people don't train hard enough to get in and get out.

That said, I also think most under-appreciate hiking, biking, and long, easy treks along the beaches and meadows of this fine planet. As noted earlier, go outside and breathe real air.
Lesson 15: It's the movements you're NOT doing that are impeding your progress.

Recently, I wrote a series of articles on the five basic human movements.

- Push
- Pull
- Hinge
- Squat
- Loaded Carry

Now, you can certainly add vertical and horizontal and rotational and many other things to this list, but if you're skipping one of the basic five human movements, your training isn't optimal.

You're probably missing loaded carries and squats. The one lesson I've learned over and over is most people ignore these two things. So, start doing farmer walks, waiter walks, suitcase walk, sleds, and pushing cars a few days a week and master the basics of squatting.

You won't believe the progress you'll make!
Lesson 16: There was a touch of brilliance in the Atkins Diet, and most people missed it.

I still love the Atkins Diet. I keep some correspondences from 1999 from a group of women who lost 100 pounds each doing the Atkins Diet and a little weightlifting. I probably learned more from them than I ever learned from those with a bunch of initials after their names.

Here was the genius behind Atkins, in case you missed it. Dr. Atkins notes in his book that to become obese, you did something "unbalanced." To get yourself back to sleek, lithe, firm and fantastic, you honestly can't do a balanced approach. Finding balance at 100 pounds over-fat will keep you there. He recommended an "unbalanced" approach to get back to your target.

I've used this contrarian thinking process ever since I read this. In coaching the throws, I teach athletes with bad habits to throw with the "other" hand, do things backwards, try throwing with the 56-pound weight, and a variety of things that I'd consider "unbalanced." Now, if I'm working with a raw beginner, obviously I'd consider and model the best technique possible, but with someone with ingrained bad habits, I look for ways to completely rework the system.

If you've been training for four years and never really squatted, I'd recommend you squat five days a week for two years. Crazy? Yes! But that's exactly what Dick Notmeyer had me do, and not only did I add forty pounds of lean body mass in four months, I also mastered the movement.

This "theme" seems to be a reoccurring lesson in my career.
Lesson 17: You can't do everything at once!

But if you do decide to "do everything at once" for a while, there may be benefits at the other end of the wormhole.

By the time I was a senior at Utah State University, I'd lifted at least three days a week, usually five to eight, for seven and a half years. I played football, soccer, wrestled, and competed at a fairly high level as an Olympic lifter. Oh, and I was a Division One thrower gathering points as a discus thrower, hammer thrower, and shot putter.

In January of my senior year, I hit the wall. I was sick of lifting and just couldn't keep up trying to do everything. This "plan" worked perfectly. After all those years of training half the year as a thrower and the other half as an athlete in another sport AND keeping an enormous load in the weight room, I backed off everything.

I never went over 385 that winter and spring in the squat. I did clean and snatch, but always within reason. I didn't play in pick up games or intramurals or, honestly, anything. I went to school, lifted a little, and threw a little. I ended up with what Coach Ralph Maughan called "the greatest season in the history of USU throwing," which, at the time, was quite a big deal.

The lesson? Well, after doing seven years of "everything," backing off to just one thing propelled me to a level of success that simply shocked me with the ease I attained it.

Less is more. This is a fundamental truism in the strength arts. But you first have to really put a lot of "more" in. Like Earl Nightingale used to say about the fireplace, many people walk up to the fireplace and say "give me heat." The right way to do it is to get some paper, some kindling, some logs, and light a match. Then you get some heat.

You have to explore and learn and try many things to be able later to whittle them all down into a simple package. I can show you some short cuts and so can all the other authors here, but you need to put the time and effort into the "more" before you can master the "less."
Lesson 18: You want "less"? Let me give you less.

My friend, Pavel Tsatsouline, handed me this great two-day a week training program. I shared it with a young, busy guy who told me it was too easy. I knew he was lying, so I tweaked it for him. Here's the "King of Less Training Programs":

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day One</th>
<th>Day Two</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bench press</td>
<td>Bench press</td>
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<tr>
<td>Squat</td>
<td>Deadlift</td>
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That's it. It's the minimalist's minimal workout. Now, let's look at my tweaks:

Only 45 and 25-pound plates!
No less than ten reps on every set of bench and squat until the last set.
No less than five reps on every deadlift.
So, the bench press workout was sets of ten, add weight, until the last set where you grind out as many as possible.

A bench example from 1993 when I did this same basic program:

135 x 10
225 x 10
315 x 10
365 x "as many"

For the squat, the last set should be around bodyweight, usually 185 or 225, and you go for at least 30 reps.

In the deadlift, keep grinding out those sets of five. Over time, feel free to slide this down to three reps, then two reps.

On paper, this looks so easy!
Lesson 19: If you really want a breakthrough, teach someone else. And if you need mastery, teach 65 fourteen-year-old sophomore boys something all at once.

Whenever I talk with someone who has been around gyms for a long time, usually this story comes up:

"I was just a young kid and I wanted to lift. So, I signed up and tried to do what I thought was lifting. Some of the more experienced guys would take time to show me how to (fill in the blank) and, boy, did I make progress after that!"

The interesting thing is the experienced guy probably got more out of the exchange than the neophyte. When you try to teach someone something you know, you begin to pick up those subtle points that you may have forgotten or, perhaps more common, you may know but never knew you knew it! Teaching someone to squat might make you rethink how you move the whole system down and not just bend the knees.

Oh, sure, you can lose your mind helping someone learn the basics of weight training, but for most the time spent teaching others is like finding a vein of pure gold.
Lesson 20: When reading something over the top, that has the markings of "secret" or "exotic" or even "expensive," don't leap in with both feet and break your ankles.

I've been there. I read those massive ads for Nautilus in Scholastic Coach and Athletic Journal and thought, for sure, that this was the ticket to success. Plyometrics had me leaping off tall buildings with a single bound and limping up flights of stairs. Don't even get me started with the stupid things I've tried.

Most of "it" is crap. From the magic supplements, like B-15 (better than 14!) to the promises of this huckster or that guru, I've rarely discovered much beyond the basics that works.

I remember fasting for 14 hours before a workout and doing set after set after set of compound leg exercises and consuming a whiff of some exotic herbs to enhance my growth hormone. It enhanced someone else's wallet. If it sounds too good to be true, it is.
Lesson 21: Put your money where your mouth is.

One thing that Laree Draper, wife of former Mr. Universe Dave Draper, finds interesting about me is that I sit in the front row at conferences. Each year I go to camps, clinic, workshops, conferences, and gatherings. I buy nearly every new book and DVD on the market. I read and comment on a lot, although as a rule I only comment after I read something and only universally after I've tried it.

Now, this might seem counter to Lesson 20 ("When reading something over the top, that has the markings of "secret" or "exotic" or even "expensive," don't leap in with both feet and break your ankles), but as the saying goes, an intelligent person can hold conflicting opinions in his head.

Here's the thing: I appreciate Mike Boyle's insights about single-leg training. Why? Because I've listened to him talk about it three times. I like his logic, I like his decision making process. Moreover, I also like the hour-long conversation we had discussing this topic.

I strongly believe in spending money to get exposed to the cutting edge of what's going on in the field of strength and conditioning. I read and reread books, magazines, eBooks, and blog posts, trying to cut away the extraneous and hone the message.

It costs me money to do this. And I'm okay with that.
Lesson 22: You want to know about fat loss? Ask a competitive bodybuilder!

This is so obvious I'm embarrassed to write it. I've had the opportunity to sit with some fairly high level bodybuilders and train with some of the best of all time. I can promise you that the training tools of the elite bodybuilders are basically the same weapons you use in the gym.

When it comes to diet, though, you need to listen up. There's this thing called "protein" and that seems like the only thing you need to think about when cutting fat. Carbs and even fat becomes a misty island far off in the distance that one may or may not see again for a while.

These guys are serious. My friend Lance once described his sodium loading cycle for an upcoming contest and it was like sitting in the front row of a chemistry class, except I'd missed the first few months. He lost me at "hello." Lance was eating chicken breasts, which isn't surprising, but also a hefty amount of fish. Now, to call this "fish" is a reach as there was no salt, no seasoning, and really no nothing.

One of my coaching principles is "success leaves tracks." If you really want good advice about fat loss, talk to a competitive bodybuilder. Avoid the weekly magazine advice you see at the supermarket check-stand and get some real information.
**Lesson 23:** You may get another injury. But do you have another recovery?

This one is near and dear to my heart. I've an unbending training principle that's as old as medicine. "First, do no harm." I think any coach, program, or training system that injures people is wrong. If you're an athlete in a sport that has an age or year ceiling (high school or college eligibility) and you lose a year to an injury, you don't get that back.

My doctor said something interesting. If you're 75 and have a major joint repair, its purpose is to literally to help you go to the toilet on your own. At 55, the same surgery might ensure a quality of life that will keep you young. At 15, this surgery is a tragedy for an athlete and one may never be able to compete again at the higher levels of sport.

Recovery from injury and surgery may take tremendous resources to attain. Besides the financial toll – which can be overwhelming – there's a physical and emotional toll from injuries. I've been on crutches several times in my life and there's not a single aspect of life that's easy on crutches. From bowel movements to escalators, every action and move has to be thought through before attempting it.

Again, sure, you can get injured, but you may not have another recovery. In high school, my mom and sister could help out if I was hurt. When my daughters were little and I had wrist surgeries, I had to buy shoes without laces because when my wife wasn't around, no one was there to tie them!

Plan your training with intelligence and foresight. Train hard, but try to avoid things that can't be fixed without a surgical team.
Lesson 24: Yes, intensity trumps everything. But...

There's no question that running hills or doing Tabata front squats is the "best way" to heat up your system, burn fat, and make the world a safer place. However, I think we've lost sight of the importance of "easy," especially in the fat loss race.

The Tabata protocol comes out to 3:50 minutes a week, as the last ten-second rest doesn't really mean anything. And you can make progress in those four minutes. However, don't throw out the importance of long, easy cardio like walks or heavy hands. A long walk won't hit your fat stores like a furnace or whatever the ad copy says, but it will give your body a chance to recover and perhaps find some gentle, easy ways to lose the muffin top.

The principle here is to move away from "either/or" in strength and conditioning. My career has been built on the idea that "everything works, for a while" and while Tabatas might be fun to watch, there's nothing sinful about a nice long walk. Moreover, like hiking, long walks tend to be more open ended, and rarely does one look at the watch worrying about "getting it all in."

Keep those tough HIIT workouts, the hill sprints and the hard stuff, but don't forget to keep those long lazy "workouts" as part of your palette.
Lesson 25: Stop judging everything!

Train hard, but enjoy competition. Compete hard, but enjoy your training. One key point that must be kept in mind always is to never judge a workout or competition as "good" or "bad" solely on that single day.

I often tell my new throwers, "Sorry, you just aren't good enough to be disappointed." Judging one's worth as an athlete over the results of a single day is just idiocy and will lead to long-term failure. Epictetus, the Roman Stoic philosopher tells us, "We must ever bear in mind – that apart from the will there is nothing good or bad, and that we must not try to anticipate or to direct events, but merely to accept them with intelligence."

If that's too complex, I have a favorite story.

A farmer had a horse and a son. One day, the horse died. All the neighbors said, "Oh, how bad." The farmer said, "We'll see." The next day, the neighbors got together and bought the farmer a new horse. They all said, "That's a good thing." The farmer said, "We'll see." The following day, the horse threw the son while trying to break the horse. The son broke his arm. The neighbors all said, "Oh, how bad." The farmer said, "We'll see." The next day, the army came into the town, drafted all the young men, save the son with a broken arm. They all died in the first battle. The neighbors said to the farmer, "Oh, how good it was for your son to have a broken arm." The farmer said, "We'll see."

So, get in the gym and train. Finish your plan and shower off. Then, be sure to come back and do what Woody Allen says and "Show Up!"
Lesson 26: Press weights over your head.

When I was in the ninth grade, one quarter of my training was the military press, and I made progress. Then I dropped it. My progress stalled. When I met Dick Notmeyer, literally everything was over my head and I made progress again.

As I aged, I dropped the overhead stuff and everything went to my belly. I started up with one-arm kettlebell presses and my waistline shrunk back in weeks to a reasonable girth.

If Janda was right and certain muscles weaken with age (and he is, trust me), a quick study of that group should give you an idea of why you should press.

- Rhomboids
- Mid-back
- Triceps
- Gluteus maximus
- Deep abs
- External obliques
- Deltoids

There's no question that one-arm overhead presses work the obliques better than all those odd side bends and twisties I see in the gym every day. Now, you might argue that the glutes don't work, but try to press one-handed anything over 100 pounds with a sleepy butt. I've tried it many times and I think I may have done it once.

When in doubt, press overhead.
Lesson 27: For volume, do ladders.

I hate workouts like 10 sets of 10. For one thing, I never remember what set I'm on. I know I'm supposed to use matches or cards or something, but I'm old and never remember them, either.

I like ladders. A ladder is a series of reps that usually go up. The first set is always easy as the reps and load are low. The last set seems hard, but it's odd because you feel like you recover in an instant. The standard ladders are:

1-2-3-1-2-3. You do a single, rest, a double, rest, a triple, rest, a single, ad infinitum!

1-2-3-4-5-1-2-3-4-5-1-2...

And my favorites:

2-3-5-2-3-5...

2-3-5-10-2-3-5-10-2-3...

I love 2-3-5-10 for hypertrophy. If you do that cluster five times, that's 100 quality reps and you'll storm through the doubles and the triples with practically no rest. You'll finish strong and pumped.

2-3-5-2-3-5-2-3 is my favorite variation of the standard 5 x 5 protocol. Again, how quickly you get through the reps and the ease of adding more plates is a pleasant surprise.

I know of no easier way to add volume than to do ladders.
Lesson 28: Last lift/best lift. Last throw/best throw.

These are mantras I repeat to myself and to my athletes. I've won National Championships in lifting and throwing on the very last lift or throw. I do it with so much regularity that Don Bailey, a good friend and fellow thrower, has told people I do it on purpose for "the theater." It's not true, but I do like the point.

It always works well in training. Charlie Francis, the late, great sprint coach, would end workouts when his athletes got a personal record in anything. His idea was "there you go – you peaked – now rest." That is an extreme, but I wish I would've known this when I was younger. Injuries tend to show up when you want to add just a little more to your lifetime best. Learn to celebrate success and keep improving over the long haul.

This skill has to be practiced. You have to draw a line in the sand and say, "This is it. This is the last thing I do today and it's going to be my best effort." Now, I know most lifters don't do this, but I also know that most don't make any gains!

Always strive to leave practice and workouts "on top."
Lesson 29: Recharge.
This is a new idea for me. After a hard workout, come back the next day and, at a low level, move through the basic patterns of the human body in a kind of movement massage. The loads are light, the reps are unimportant, but the movement is key. With an adult, I often recommend up to three of these easy recharge workouts a week. It can be as simple as doing the basic patterning movements.

Push
Pull
Hinge
Squat
Loaded carry

Follow with an easy walk. It doesn't have to be much, but you'll thank me as your mobility, flexibility, and patterning improve without much residual soreness.
Lesson 30: The value of "Two."

Dick Notmeyer smiled and nodded as I told him about my weightlifting career. I thought I’d done it all. I had a big bench and could do pull-ups with the best of them.

Dick stopped me. "Here, you're going to do snatches and clean and jerks." That was basically it. For two years, I did the Olympic lifts in the summer sun and foggy blindness. It was rep after rep after rep. And I made tremendous progress.

When Pavel came out with "Power to the People" and suggested five days a week of deadlifts and side presses, a few brave souls took on the challenge and expanded their work capacity. His "Program Minimum," of nothing but swings and get-ups, is still my "go to" recommendation for someone exploring the goals of general conditioning.

In the book, "Beyond Bodybuilding," he sets up a hypertrophy program consisting of five days a week of deadlifts and bench presses under the direction of deLorme and Watkins, the founders of what we now call progressive resistance exercise.

I'm a fan of minimal workouts. The biggest reason is there is no wiggle room for "coulda, woulda, shoulda." The very essence of this training idea is "do this!" It's not the kind of training for someone who needs music, TV, Internet, and conversation during sets. Folks, it's dull work – actually, it's work.

Every so often, try two weeks of just two movements. Make the combination cover the bulk of the body and strive for mastery of the movements. It can change your career.
Lesson 31: The stronger you are, the more you can get away with.

My friend, Josh Hillis, notes that when a woman can do three pull-ups and deadlift or squat 135 for five, almost universally they're around 19% bodyfat, which is what he calls "Rockstar Hot." Since he told me this, I've been carefully watching the physiques of women, although to be honest I've been doing that since early puberty.

There's another issue. Women who can do three pull-ups and show some numbers on the barbell can also go out after a clinic and have a good time. Recently, a top female physique contestant told me at a bar that, "Oh, I can go out and party and not watch every single bite when I'm not peaking." Unlike the "skinny fat" women who you normally see in the weekly magazines, this woman was strong enough that when she trained her body had to gather up a lot of resources to adapt and recover.

What does this mean for you? I've seen it many times at workshops and clinics. The skinny, weak guys bring their own weighed chicken breasts and magic protein bars for the whole day. When we do something physical, they fade into the corn rows. The big, strong guys who've never seen a strongman event will jump in and flail around dangerously close to death and dismemberment, but fight the good fight with the anvil, axle, or stone. Then, they eat passionately and without apology.

In other words, as Brett Jones taught me, absolute strength is the glass. Everything else is the liquid that goes into the glass. The bigger the glass, the bigger everything else can be for you. So get stronger and eat more without freaking out about it.
Lesson 32: List out your "Highs" and "Lows."

Twice at the Olympic training center, we were asked to take some time to do an "autobiography." Really, we simply listed the best and worst of our athletic career. We were allowed to add life events, too.

I still have my lists. They're odd to look at from a decade-plus distance, but I still smile when I see "Turkey Day Football" and "Picked to Start for Brentwood," and "Winning hit in 1967" mixed in with performances that are worthy of national ranking. I don't want to address the "Worst" list, but that was the point.

After a fairly long wait for everyone to finish, we were asked to look at the lifetime lows.

"Put your finger on it," we were told. Now, look at the high side and see if there's a match.

"Huh?" Just do it.

Incredibly, for the bulk of us, every low, every "worst moment," lead directly over to a best moment. We have to keep Lesson 25 in mind (don't judge everything), but the lesson was clear. Our lows are often the steppingstone to the greatest moments of our lives.

I've used this little exercise for my athletes and in my classrooms. Sadly, there are some who argue that they have very few "best" moments. It should come as no surprise that these timid souls often have no "worst" moments either.
Lesson 33: Keeping the "Little Red Book."

I have an extremely damaged tiny spiral notebook. It's red and falling apart. Since 1973, I've been keeping quotes in here that inspire me.

"The guy with the biggest butt lifts the biggest weights."
Paul Anderson

"Arnold's Three-Part Secret"
Self-confidence
Positive mental outlook
Honest hard work

"Greatness comes to those that dare to sweat, dare to strain, and dare the pain."
Dick Notmeyer

"Quality is the key, not quantity"
Bill Koch

"Never, never give up. Never give up."
Winston Churchill

"Yield to all and you soon have nothing left to yield."
Aesop

I also include training programs from people that I admire and odd snips of ideas that still are forming in my head. Here's one final one.

"Do something different, something unique; make yourself stand apart."

I wrote that as a senior in high school in my English class to answer something along the lines of, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"
Lesson 34: Follow the Leaders.

I was lucky to have the magazine "Strength and Health" growing up. It wasn't just bodybuilding information; this magazine really respected all areas of strength. So several times a year I could read about throwers or football players. An article on a discus thrower named Gary Ordway came at a great time in my life as I'd embarked on an attempt to be a thrower and they listed his workouts. I'll only list his top lifts in his preseason workout:

- **Squats:** 505 x 3
- **Deadlift:** 455 x 3
- **Power clean:** 285 x 2
- **Incline press:** 325 x 3
- **Sit ups:** 4 sets of 25

As a kid inclining under 100 pounds, the direction was clear. I needed to get stronger. I knew the path – lift weights.

To be a strength athlete, you have to engage in a progressive program to lead you to your goals. The nice thing about lifting is the numbers are crystal clear. I'm benching 95 and you're benching 405. I have to get stronger!

This is why I still like the Olympic lifts and the deadlift for comparing generations. The O lifts and the DL have essentially stagnated for the past twenty years. Certainly there are amazing lifts, but there's been less than stellar improvement across the board.

My good friend, Marty Gallagher loves to point out that outside of gear (in this case, squat suits, squat briefs, bench shirts, wraps and the like), there's been almost no progress in powerlifting. Yes, there are exceptions but like O lifting the sport has slowed to a crawl.

Find out what the best are doing. Look at what you're doing. Now shrink the gap.
Lesson 35: If it improves a track and field athlete, then I'm all ears.

This is a criticism that gets tossed in my face sometimes. I'm a snob, a prude if you will, when it comes to track and field. I love reading how this magic program, device, or herb is the "do all and be all." Fine. Take your profits, invest in some athletes, and prove it at a track meet.

The response is always something along the lines of, "Well, this isn't sports specific," or, "Track depends on perfection of biomechanics." Okay, fine.

It's easy to convince someone that a weight "feels lighter." It's not so easy to add three feet to the shot put or drop time off the 200-meter sprint.

If your idea does work for sprinters, throwers, and the rest of track and field, I'm going to sit in the front row and take notes. Even if I disagree with everything you say, if you get it right in Track and Field, and probably swimming, too, you're right and I'll listen to this grand scheme.
Lesson 36: It's not "hydrating," it's drinking some damn water.

This looks like a rant, but it drives me crazy. Moms show up to practice and ask, "Are the boys hydrating?" No, first perspiration, then hydration.

The area from your hips to your shoulders is now the "core." Today, Grandma asks me if discus throwing "builds your core." Is shot putting "functional?" To play a one-hour game of soccer – or 20 minutes of standing and 40 minutes of picking daisies – my daughter used to get a sports drink, an orange, cookies, and a treat. This was to counteract the incredible efforts of a group of seven-year-old girls who usually forgot which goal to kick the ball towards.

I'm tired of it. Let's bring an end to this pseudo-quasi-scientific language that's permeating youth sports, recreation, and fitness. American children are getting fatter at a rate that no one predicted twenty years ago and yet parents flock around their kids like paparazzi around this week's latest Lindsay Lohan scandal.

It's called "water." Deal with it.
**Lesson 37:** You will wish you did it earlier than later.

I have an axiom when asked for advice. "Well, in four years, you're going to be four years older no matter what, but if you go to college, you'll have your degree." Or, "In thirty years, you're going to be thirty years older no matter what, but if you save ten percent of your income, you'll have a comfortable retirement."

The longer you put off something like "squat mastery" or eating clean, the more you'll regret it later. Now, I don't know when and what's going to happen, but life seems so much easier when you master the basics, make yourself a slave to good habits, save ten percent of your income, and nurture quality relationships "now" versus "later."

Get the degree, finish the thesis, buy good insurance, see your dentist twice a year, and do all the boring things of life as often as you can. Trust me, your health – financial, physical, spiritual, and emotional – will benefit from taking care of business early on.

Some of the athletes I first worked with are now sneaking up on age fifty and two are already over the half-century mark. Whenever we talk, the most common "gift" that I bestowed on them was this understanding to get 'er done.
Lesson 38: Fat loss exercise is about being as inefficient as you can be.

Aerobic dance continues to flourish in community centers. There's a lot of "woos" as you walk past. What you don't see is progress. For the record, if I took the introductory class, I would get the workout of a lifetime. Why? Because I would suck at it! Fat loss exercise, however, and it breaks my heart to say this, is about being completely inefficient.

Aerobic dance and most of the TV offers work for a few weeks. Then, you get good at it and progress stops. This is why I like the kettlebell swing for fat loss. It's a massive body move that eats up a ton of energy and you move nowhere. In fact, as you improve, you probably attack the movement harder, causing you to still move nowhere.

Len Schwartz's HeavyHands was the same principle. You load up a couple of dumbbells in each hand and go for a walk. With these big pumping arm movements, you waste a ton of energy up and down and turn an easy walk in the park to an extremely wasteful use of energy. And you burn fat.

I love the combination of swings and push-ups, or goblet squats and push-ups for fat loss. The secret to fat loss is that wonderful pause after finishing the push-up when you have to get back up. It would be "better" to press as that would save you energy, but in this case, that's "bad."

For fat loss exercise, discover things you're terrible at and do them. If you've never skated before, pad up and see how a quarter mile can ruin you for hours. As you get better technically, find something else! It's the polar opposite of getting good at a sport or skill, but this is why consistent fat loss is so elusive for most people.
Lesson 39: A workshop or clinic is better than a workout.

I said this at the Test-Fest in Washington, DC, and it still holds true. I've argued for years that taking a weekend to listen and learn is far better than doing the "same old, same old" thing in the workout.

And as I said that at Test-Fest, a guy walked in with his wife beater, his belt, and his little bag filled with gym gear. I couldn't have planned it better. There's a need for all of us to humble ourselves and open up to some new ideas. You probably should hang on to 80% of what you know, but be willing to throw out that other 20% and fill it with something that will get you to the next level.

This sounds similar to "put your money where your mouth is," but there's more to this. I think the hotel bar after the talk or the lunch between sessions or the hallway outside the conference is an opportunity to grow in ways you can only imagine.

You might get a chance to fill out a napkin (don't lose that napkin) with a training program from one of the great names in the iron game. You might get invited to something like a dinner or a party and meet people that will change your life. You must go to these events to understand the idea behind the ideas you see presented here at TNation.
Lesson 40: In forty years, a lot of great people are going to pass over to the next existence.

It’s a rare day I don’t think of my mom and dad, Coach Ralph Maughan, some of my heroes, and some of my friends who are no longer alive. I carry on, as best I can, but it’s becoming woefully obvious to me that my torch is burning dim and I’ll be passing it along sooner than later.

That’s why I write. That’s why I keep lists. That’s why I answer the same questions over and over and over again.

Our time on this precious earth is short. Good health and a measure of strength can help you live a better quality of life. And that’s the greatest lesson of my life.
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