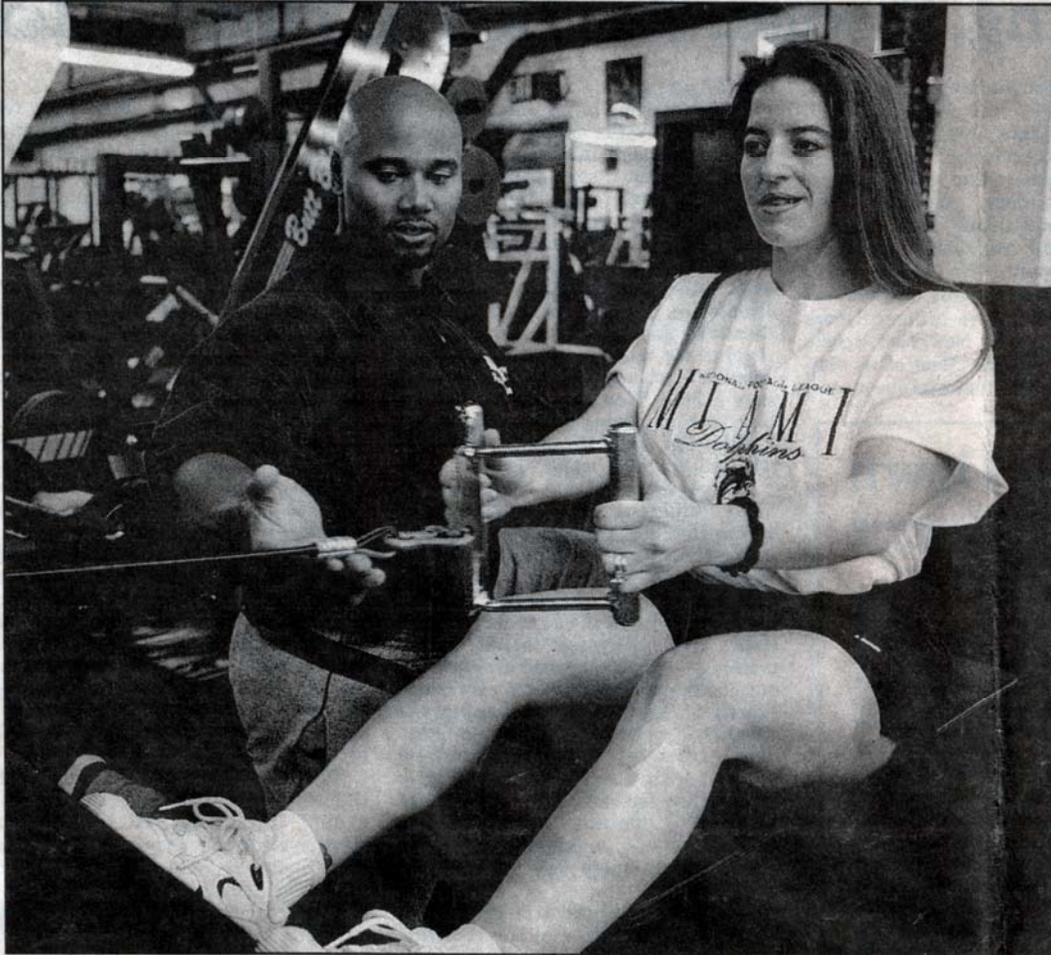


FITNESS FILE



FITNESS FILE / WEIGHING THE DIFFERENCES / In strength training, women can be too timid, men too rash

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WHEN it comes to strength training, you probably can boil down the differences between men and women to something like this: "Women lift too little weight with perfect form. Men lift way too heavy weight with horrible form," in the words of personal trainer Matt Sulam of Eastern Athletic Clubs in Melville.

Men grunt, groan and go for the gold, visions of bulging biceps and tank-top-ripping pectorals dancing in their heads. Women dutifully learn correct technique but are often held back by the fear that lifting a pair of even 5-pound dumbbells will somehow transform them into a hulking freak of nature.

An oversimplification? To an extent, sure. But generally, that's what you see in the weight room of most health clubs. Yet the very fact that there are enough women in the weight room to make this comparison shows how things have changed: According to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, the number of women working out with weights increased from 8.3 million in 1990 to 18.5 million in 1998, making it the single most popular fitness activity in America among women. In addition, a recent Health magazine/Gallup Poll found that 57 percent of women said they'd rather be strong than slender.

Still the gender differences remain, starting with goals. Women generally lift because they know they should, because it can help protect against osteoporosis by increasing bone density, improve posture and functional strength, and boost metabolism and help burn fat by increasing the percentage of lean muscle tissue. To guys, size really is what matters: Getting big is the dream of most males in the gym, especially the younger ones, who see pictures of chiseled bodies like the New York Giants' Jason Sehorn (on the cover of the February issue of Men's Fitness) and think, "I wanna look like that."

The truth is, most of them can't. Nor can most women achieve the dense muscularity of such sprinting stars as Marion Jones or the late Florence Griffith Joyner. And yet women seem to worry about "getting big." "This is puzzling, and it seems unique to weight training," says Vince Scalisi, editorial director of *Hers*, a new muscle magazine for women. "Rest assured that competitive bodybuilders, much like any other elite athlete, work very hard, for a very long time, and literally make careers of their training."

Beside the desire and work ethic, female bodybuilders, sprinters and strength athletes usually have a genetic makeup and anatomical structure that favors growth. "No female should be afraid of lifting weights for that reason," says Ann Marie Miller, fitness training manager for New York Sports Clubs in Manhattan. "Most of us simply don't have the testosterone necessary to 'get big.'"

Fear of getting big is one thing; fear of working hard is another. "Not training with enough intensity, not lifting enough weight," says trainer Sulam, "that's definitely one of the most common mistakes women make in the weight room." Women, particularly those 40 and over, tend to learn some basic lifting exercises from a tape, an orientation at a gym or a book - and then they stick with it, using the same weights for months, even years. "You shouldn't get locked into one routine," says Miller. "You should vary it from time to time. Doing different exercises in different ways stimulates the muscles and provides better results."

"There are so many variables, so many different lifting techniques," agrees Doug Sheppard of J + D Fitness in Westbury. "I think that they all have something to bring to the table." Some of the techniques Sheppard uses with his clients who work out at Bev Francis Gold's Gym in Syosset include circuit training - a briskly paced lifting workout, in which you move from exercise to exercise, using lighter-than-normal weights - and pyramiding, a standard, three- set lifting progression, starting with a warm-up set (using a weight that you can lift 15 to 20 times), a second set of about 10 to 12 reps and a third, all-out, maximum effort set, performing as many repetitions as you can.

That kind of workout is most effectively and safely done in the company of a personal trainer or a knowledgeable training partner. But other techniques for spicing up your lifting regimen can be done alone: Varying repetition speed, for example (try lifting the weight a little slower), adding new exercises (don't be afraid to add barbell and dumbbell movements) or adding extra "sets" (performing the same exercise more than once during a workout).

The American College of Sports Medicine recommends one set of 8 to 10 exercises for the major muscle groups; a regimen that should be followed two to three days a week (but not on consecutive days: You should give your muscles 48 hours' rest between lifting sessions). The college's guidelines point out, however, that "multiple-set regimens may provide greater benefits if time allows."

Seems pretty clear, right? But in the strength-training world, the issue of single versus multiple sets has sparked heavy debate. Here's the bottom line: There is good evidence to show that women who are newcomers to resistance training can make substantial improvements in strength by performing one set of 8 to 12 reps an exercise. It's also a great time-saver: With a total of 8 to 10 sets, you'll be in and out of the health club in a jiffy.

But don't get locked into the notion that single-set training is the only way to go. "If you take all the research, there is really no clear-cut proof that indicates one is better than the other," says Ken Leistner of Valley Stream, a chiropractor and nationally recognized strength coach. "It really depends on other factors, especially the intensity of the workout. In order to get results, you have to expend a certain amount of effort. And that means more than just showing up to the gym."

An intense workout doesn't mean women have to bellow at the top of their lungs like the guys. Leistner offers this formula for safely, gradually - and quietly - increasing workout intensity: Focus on one movement to start and find a weight you can do comfortably for about 12 reps. Over the next few workouts, try to add one repetition every time you perform that exercise, up to a total of 15. Do that for your next two workouts as well. "Now you know that you own that weight," he

says. Next workout, increase the weight by 5 pounds and repeat the process, starting again from 12 reps. "If a woman would do that over the course of a year on every exercise," says Leistner, "she would make stunning improvements. And at no time would she be intimidated, because the progression would be

constant but done so gradually and in such small increments that she would accommodate the increased levels of effort and have minimal risk of injury."

Leistner specializes in working with top male strength athletes, such as Stephen Boyd, a Valley Stream native who now stars with the Detroit Lions in the NFL, and Peter Hawkins, the nine-time wheelchair division winner of the Long Island Marathon. But, Leistner emphasizes, high intensity training is not limited to athletes. His own mom follows his program, and if 78-year-old Doris Leistner can pump iron with authority, so can you.

RESOURCES

HERE ARE two good books for women interested in starting or accelerating a weight-training program:

"Strong Women Stay Slim," by Miriam Nelson (Bantam Books, 317 pp., \$11.95).

"Your Personal Trainer," by Douglas Brooks (Human Kinetics, 264 pp., \$19.95).- Hanc

When You're Feeling Down

YOU'VE worked hard to keep yourself in shape. But physical fitness is no guarantee against a cold bug or a flu virus, especially this season. What should you do when you get sick? Stop exercising completely? Or can you safely continue to work out without further compromising your health?

"There are a few factors to take into consideration," says Dr. Thomas Scandalis, director of Academic Health Care at the New York College of Osteopathic Medicine in Old Westbury. "Most important is the severity of your illness. While it's probably safe to exercise even fairly vigorously with a common cold, if there is a fever present, if the illness is severe and if it involves the chest, then you should refrain, or at least cut down on intensity."

In other words, if your symptoms are from the neck up - scratchy throat, stuffy nose - you can safely exercise (providing you have no fever). If your symptoms are below the neck - congestion in your chest - take a rest. If you have the flu, you probably won't be in a position to (pardon the pun) exercise any option other than staying in bed, which is exactly where you should be.

"When your head's pounding and you can barely get off the pillow, you're not likely to even be thinking about working out," says Scandalis.- John Hanc

[Illustration]

Newsday Photo by Ken Spencer - Trainer Doug Sheppard helps Patti Pinto exercise: Hard work is OK.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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