

Core strength more important than a 6-pack

So much of the information available out there is designed to make you look better, but it really doesn't do the most important thing: help you perform better on the field and in life.

This applies to abdominal training. Chances are good of seeing ads on the cover of a fitness magazine like "Five new ways to obtain a 6-pack" or "Tone your abs in just 3 weeks" or my favorite, "Three-minute abs!" Magazines rarely disclose the additional information that contributes to the "6-pack," like regular good eating habits, endurance training and loss of body fat, to name a few.

A 2004 study that looked at college students' abdominal regions through electromyography during consecutive repetitions of conventional trunk curls and trunk curls using the Ab Roller, Abslide, and Fitball found similarities. Basically, conventional trunk curls were just as high in recruitment of the abdominal region as were the other modes.

Apparatuses create imbalance between hip flexors, neck flexors and your lower abdominal wall. For example, the Ab Roller is marketed as improving your abs while being easier on your neck. Easier on your neck is true, because it

carries your head, not allowing the neck muscles to work with your abdominals.

The body is designed to function in balance. Groups of muscles function together. The exception is a body builder who trains one area of the body for form. Don't confuse form with function. It is essential to work muscles together. Using

apparatuses for just one area decreases the amount of proportion between your hip and neck flexors, which can lead to an imbalance, forward head posture or cervical injury risk.

Abdominals are designed for stabilization of the core and forceful explosive movements. Stabilization yields high performance on long road rides, mountain bike maneuvering and trail/flat running. In particular, the transverse abdominus muscle is a part of

the deep inner core of muscles that wrap around and above the waist like a belt. This muscle is the first one recruited when almost any limb movement occurs. It acts as part of a bracing system for the spine and abdominal area. The abdominals help the stability of the core during long bouts of activities like backcountry hiking or triathlons.

Forceful explosive movements play an important role. The lower abs

require the most complex of movement and have at least 51 percent fast-twitch muscle makeup. If you are doing the same abdominal routine since your New Year's resolution, new types of ab exercises and progression are advisable. The lower abs play a large part in throwing a baseball/football, serving in tennis, rotating downhill or performing aerial tricks in skiing or snowboarding, or paddling and controlling a kayak.

Few athletic events are performed lying, sitting, or kneeling; most are performed standing up. Baseline crunches and sit-ups are great, but a good proportion of abdominal training requires contact forces and progression. Contact forces are where the hands or feet are grounded to the floor or a stable surface while performing fast contractions of the abdominals.

To progress, don't do the same on-your-back crunch you've been doing since high school. Instead, use a Swiss ball crunch with a dumbbell above your head. For abdominal exercises to transfer to the mountain sports, they need to be specific to the needs of the activity.

Augustine (Augie) Hernandez Jr. is the founder/owner of Training to be Balanced LLC. He is a movement specialist is most sports providing core performance training. Reach him at augie@t2bb.net or www.trainingtobebalanced.net.



Training to be Balanced

Augie Hernandez

Make core do more

1. Establish pelvic bracing. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat. Squeeze the lower abdominals (transverse abdominus) as if someone was going to tap or punch you in the stomach. Without losing that hold perform a Kegel (the muscle that prevents you from going to the bathroom). Both of them together provide a strong brace of the pelvis, but do not change any part of your posture (i.e., flattened back or excess curved neck). Perform a million times!

2. Establish a foundation with crunches and sit-ups and quickly progress. Methodical crunches do a good job but little to stabilize your whole core.

3. Progress to abdominal exercises that use whole body movements, like pulling a pulley from low to high in rotation or rotating around your center vigorously with a Medicine ball while feet are grounded to the floor.

4. Change the tempo of the movements, always with proper technique.

5. Perform an equal amount, if not a few more, of back extension exercises to balance the stability.

6. Perform whole body movements. Remember, the body does not move in isolated function; it moves in balance!