Targeted Fat Mobilization

by Christian Thibaudeau, Chris Shugart 11/18/13

Here's what you need to know...

• This plan isn't for those who need to lose a ton of body fat, but for those already on the fit side looking to target resistant fat deposits.

• By redirecting blood flow to a fatty area and then contracting the muscles adjacent to that area, you can induce "spot lipolysis".

• The right training strategy can shift calorie burning toward localized areas of fat storage.

Spot reduction is impossible. You can't lose fat predominantly in a specific area just by training that area. This is something every personal trainer or coach who's worth a damn knows.

Only one problem: it's simply not true. You can increase fat loss in a specific area. It's a fact – a fact that's been observed by successful bodybuilders and that's now backed by science.

Anecdotal Evidence

Many legendary bodybuilders believed in spot reduction. For example, they did hundreds, even thousands, of sit-ups not only to build the abs but to "whittle away body fat" from that area before a contest.

Since then, "smart people" have written this off, saying it was just a result of the pre-competition diet and increased cardio activity causing systemic (whole body) fat loss, some of which just happened to be around the midsection.

Sure, that's a factor too, but maybe these in-the-trenches bodybuilders – which included Arnold, Columbu, Zane, and Corey Everson – were unknowingly on to something that science just hadn't proven possible yet. As is often the case, the dedicated lifter often figures things out, then geeks in lab coats come along later to prove them correct.

Thibaudeau has experienced targeted fat mobilization as well:

"I got the first clue about this in 2001. I didn't put two and two together until much later though. As a competitive Olympic lifter at that time, I had very lean legs and a fairly fat upper body. I remember getting my body fat percentage tested and my legs were roughly 6% and my upper body 20%.

"I'd been training for the sport for three years at that point, squatting every day, sometimes twice per day, and doing lots of sled pulling. The fact that I did so much leg work very likely increased the vascularization of my legs. As we'll see later, the more vascularized an area is, the easier it is to mobilize fat from that area. Even to this day, even if
I'm in one of my fatter states (about 12%), my legs are super vascular and even cross-striated."

Christian experienced a similar effect when preparing for a bodybuilding show:

"I started going to the gym early in the morning to do my cardio. I always found cardio to be super boring and doing more than 10-15 minutes at a time was too mentally draining for me. So I'd do 10 minutes, then ab work, 10 more minutes, then ab work, 10 minutes of cardio, still more ab work, etc.

"My abdomen turned out to be by far the leanest section of my body. In fact, even when I get just as lean today, I never get the same tight midsection as I did back then when I used the cardio-abs combo.

It wasn't until years later that I read a T Nation article by Dr. Lonnie Lowery that explained the science behind real spot reduction."

The Science

Training is fun, science is usually tedious, so let's zoom through this. (A nod to Dr. Lowery for doing the boring research for us.)

• Blood flow is crucial for fat extraction. Poor blood flow to certain areas of the body – obliques and lower abs for example – equals poor fat loss from those areas. Researcher K. Frayne notes: "There is evidence that adipose tissue blood flow does not increase sufficiently to allow delivery of all the fatty acids released into the systemic circulation." Luckily, we can manipulate that with the right training.

• Calorie balance does matter, of course, but research is supporting what the old-school guys used to do. Calorie-burning is part of the equation, but calories come from different sources. Would you rather the calories you burn in a conditioning session come from the fat area around your navel or from the glycogen and triglycerides in your muscles?

• Increase blood flow and you can extract more fat from the troubled area. With techniques like microdialysis, you can actually see this occurring. Microdialysis involves sticking super tiny tubes into subcutaneous fatty areas like the lower stomach and measuring fat breakdown products, like glycerol and fatty acids, in the interstitial fluid. Increase the blood flow to that area and localized fat loss increases. "That's spot reduction," says Dr. Lowery.

• Blood flow and lipolysis are generally higher in subcutaneous adipose tissue adjacent to the contracting muscle. (Stallknecht, 2007) An acute bout of exercise can induce spot lipolysis and increased blood flow in adipose tissue adjacent to contracting skeletal muscle. That means if you train your abs the right way at the right time, the belly fat on the outside of the abs will "burn" preferentially.

• Another paper notes that there are well-documented regional variations in lipolysis: "The subcutaneous abdominal has an intermediate rate and the gluteal-femoral depots have relatively sluggish turnover."

"Collectively, this means when you contract a muscle, the adjacent body fat starts to break down more," Dr. Lowery notes.

The Workouts
The premise is simple: Go back and forth between an ab exercise and a conditioning exercise.

Abdominal exercise: Any movement will work. The goal is just to direct blood flow toward that area. For maximum effect you want the ab set to last 45-60 seconds. Less than that and you won't be getting as much blood flow to the region.

Conditioning exercise: Any demanding energy systems activity will work too. Sprints, hill sprints, Prowler pushing, battle ropes, tire flipping, etc. You want the whole session to be non-stop for 10-15 minutes. That's the key if you want maximum fat loss.

You can also use regular, moderate intensity cardio like Christian did for his bodybuilding show, but it's much less efficient than true conditioning work. You'd need to do at least 30 minutes of cardio, so three bouts of 10 minutes, with 3-6 sets of ab work between every bout. The results will be there, but each session is three times a long. If you don't have the conditioning level to do 10-15 minutes of intense work like Prowler pushing or sprints, this is a good option.

The Ab Shredder Plans

Here are two simple options to maximize fat loss from the abdomen to reveal that six pack:

**Workout #1: Prowler & Abs**

Ab Crunches: as many quality reps as you can get in 60 seconds
Prowler Pushing: 40 yards

Reverse Crunches: maximum in 60 seconds
Prowler Pushing: 40 yards

Repeat this superset of Prowler and ab work 8 more times.

**Workout #2: Sprints & Abs**

Ab Crunches: maximum in 60 seconds
Sprint: 60 yards

Reverse Crunches: maximum in 60 seconds
Sprint: 60 yards

Repeat this superset of sprints and ab work 8 more times.

**The Ultimate Ab Shredder: Advanced Athletes Only!**

This is the best possible option to increase abdominal fat loss while getting jacked!

Farmer's Walk: maximum distance in 60 seconds
Ab Crunches: maximum in 60 seconds
Rest 30 seconds
Farmer’s Walk: maximum distance in 60 seconds
Reverse Crunches: maximum in 60 seconds
Rest 30 seconds

Repeat this superset 4 more times.

Notes and Tips

• Females usually have poor vascularization in the lower body and therefore tend to store more fat there. The Prowler is the best option for them. Increase the push time to at least 90 seconds and up to 3 minutes.

• The glutes are another area of the body resistant to fat loss due to less blood flow, especially in females. To target fat storage on the backside, replace the ab work with dumbbell hip thrusts. Place a 100-pound plus dumbbell over your hips and perform 10 reps of full-range hip thrusts, then 20 reps of rapid “pulses” at the top of the range of motion. This will look a little ridiculous and work extraordinarily well.

• The leaner your upper body the more defined you’ll look. If you’ve always stored fat in the arms and shoulders and never see much definition there, use battle ropes for your conditioning work.

Target Fat Deposits and Destroy Them

This is not a plan for the very overweight, but for the decently fit person or pre-contest bodybuilder looking to trigger acute fat loss in hard-to-mobilize areas. We’d tell you that diet plays an important role too, but you’re not an idiot so you probably know that already.