

5 Fast Rules to Be Bigger, Leaner, and Stronger

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Lift Big to Grow Big

The longer you've been lifting weights, the heavier the weights need to be in order for you to see results. On one hand, it's a stupidly obvious point—of course you use bigger weights as you become stronger. But that's not exactly what I'm talking about.



When you were a beginner, you could gain size and strength as long as the weight you used on any given exercise was at least 60 percent of the amount you could lift for a single max-effort repetition. It's a weight you could lift 15 to 20 times in a single set. By any definition, that's pretty light.

That percentage, though, increases with experience. Most gym regulars need to use at least 80 percent of their 1-rep max to grow bigger and stronger. Now, we're talking about a weight you could probably lift about 8 times in an all-out set before there's nothing left in your tank.

Be honest: Do you really use weights heavy enough to fall into that range? If you typically perform multiple sets of 8 to 10 repetitions for each exercise, you don't. To use 80 percent of your max for 3 or 4 sets, each set would probably consist of 5 or 6 repetitions.

It becomes even harder from there. If you're beyond the intermediate stage—if you're a serious gym rat and have been lifting consistently for much of your adult life, you might need 85 to 90 percent of your 1-rep max to see genuine progress. In a normal workout with multiple sets of each exercise, we're talking about 2, 3, or 4 repetitions per set.

You can see the problem: Nobody can lift near-max weights on every exercise of every workout. You'd either burn out or hurt yourself, and it wouldn't take long.

Fortunately, there is one loophole.

Lift Fast to Get Big

You know you're supposed to lift weights slowly and deliberately and under control. I have no problem with the "under control" part—good form requires it. But I want to take serious issue with "slowly and deliberately."

The faster you lift, the better the results. If you're trying to increase size, fast lifts activate more of the muscle fibers that have the most potential to grow. If you're trying to become leaner, fast lifts do more to crank up your heart rate--and by extension your metabolism—than anything else. And if you're trying to grow stronger . . . well, how many feats of strength can you list that are performed slowly and deliberately? Even if something looks slow from the outside, you can bet that the guy performing the feat is trying like hell to get it done as fast as possible.

Anything worth lifting is worth lifting fast, as long as you control the weight and don't let it control you. That means you'll lower the weight a bit more slowly than you lifted it. You don't have to lower it at any particular tempo; just make sure you return it to the starting position without dropping it or shifting your body out of proper alignment.

Quit When You're Ahead

A fast lift with a heavy weight uses more muscle fibers than a slower lift with a lighter weight. But those big, strong muscle fibers poop out really fast—usually in 15 seconds or less. Once they've quit on you, you're left to struggle with the weight using fibers that aren't up to the task.

Your body has two ways of tipping you off:

1. The speed of your repetitions slows.
2. Your form changes, and you either shorten your range of motion or have to cheat to accomplish the full range.

At that point, it makes more sense to end the set than to keep going with compromised speed or bad form. I say that knowing it's one of the most unnatural things I could ask you to do in the weight room. After all, if the goal is to do sets of 8 reps and your speed slows down on the sixth, it takes discipline to end the set before grinding and shaking through those seventh and eighth reps.

Don't Sweat the Small Sets

Every page of the old muscle-building playbook includes some prescription for sets and reps: a fixed number of sets of each exercise and a fixed number of reps in each set.

But if you follow Principle 3 and quit each set when your speed slows down or your form changes, you can't complete a fixed number of repetitions.

The new playbook says this: Focus on total reps for each exercise, and let the sets take care of themselves. Say you're doing a workout that specifies 5 sets of

5 reps. That's 25 reps total. Now let's say you use my method of doing all your reps perfectly: It might take you 6 sets instead of 5 to hit your 25-rep goal. The reward is a better workout, because you're doing more work with your biggest, strongest muscle fibers.

Think Big to Grow Big

My final revision of the weight-lifting playbook makes it dramatically shorter and lighter: I've eliminated almost all the exercises that work only small muscles or single muscle groups in isolation. Instead, my workouts begin and end with the exercises that work your biggest muscles, with the goal of working as many of them as possible every time you lift.

Each workout is built around one lower-body exercise—squats, deadlifts, lunges, or stepups—and two upper-body exercises, one for pushing and one for pulling. Gone are the leg extensions and biceps curls.

If you're wondering how you're supposed to build big arms without curls, I have a simple assignment for you: Grab a chinup bar and try to pull yourself up without using your biceps. Impossible, right? Work your biceps with chinups or lat pulldowns, using an underhand grip, or any type of rowing exercise. As a bonus, you burn a lot more calories when you train your biggest muscles.