Iron John: 5 x 5 Variations
by Dan John

Editor's Note: Dan John writes a lot of articles for T-Nation that blend good training advice with a humorous dose of life-wisdom. We decided to start calling his column "Iron John" to reflect his unique approach.

The Art of the Follow-Up

One of the great lessons of life is to ask follow-up questions. When you're in college and meet a lovely young lady at a party, you may ask something simple like "So, do you have a boyfriend?"

Of course, she'll answer "yes." She's good looking after all. What, do you think you're the first guy to notice that she should have fold marks on her photographs? (Think that through.)

So she said she has a boyfriend, now what do you do? Most freshman would immediately say "Gotta get another brewski" and leave. Bad move. What you should do is ask a follow-up question: "Is your boyfriend here?"

Smooth. If she answers "He's back home," then you've determined a key principle to further communication. There may or may not be a boyfriend, but you're allowed to remain close to her, purchase her drinks and make an attempt to get even closer. If she responds, "Yes, he's standing behind you and crushing stones with his paws," my best advice is to say, "What a coincidence! My boyfriend is here too, and there he is!" and rush away.

The follow-up question is one of those odd little things that brings clarity not only to college parties, but also to the world of lifting, sports and body composition. Recently, I had a young man e-mail me several questions about a previous article of mine. Simply, he'd found himself baffled by what I consider one of the pillars of lifting: the 5 x 5 workout.

But then he asked me a follow-up question: "How do you do it?" Thanks to his follow-up, I realized that I knew literally dozens of variations of the 5 x 5 workout and, well, they all work. His question led me to think about how a simple workout (and 5 x 5 is about as simple as you can get) can lead you to years of subtle variations that keep pushing you to the top of your game.

5 x 5: The Five Variations

Okay, what is it? It’s simple: you pick an exercise and do five sets. Each set, you perform five reps. Rest between each set. At the completion of the fifth set, you're done. Now, why is there confusion?

This young athlete’s follow-up question drew me back through my years of lifting and reminded me about how something as "simple" as 5 x 5 can be as complicated as...well, trying to explain to someone at a party why you called them your "boyfriend."

I’m sure when I say the "5 x 5" workout, you know what I mean. Well, maybe you don’t. I once found myself pushing my bench press up to my annual attempt at 400 pounds. A fellow at the gym recommended that I really increase my max by performing 5 x 5 with my max five! At the time, I could bench press 365 for five. So, this workout called for:

365 x 5...Rest
Moreover, I needed to warm up to this 365 for five. I like to "ramp" my bench press warm-ups (I think benches are the only lift I really warm-up for on a consistent basis), so I’d also do:

135 for five or so
225 for three
275 for one or two
315 for one or two

Now, we're up to nine total sets. Some might argue that I should do sets of five to warm up, but let’s be honest here, this is going to be a long workout. I doubt that this would be a "repeatable" workout either. Simply, this isn’t going to be the kind of workout you do three days a week for a couple of years.

There are other, better 5 x 5 workouts out there. Let’s take a look at five of them.

Variation One: The John Powell Workout

My buddy, John Powell, is the former world record holder in the discus. He had an interesting yearly variation on the old 5 x 5 workout. Simply, each year, he’d set a goal of doing a weight for five sets of five. Yes, we all know that, but his variation was unique. If he chose our "365" as his target weight, he'd plop down on the bench once a week and test himself.

Workout One:

365 for 4
365 for 3
365 for 1
365 for 1
365 for 1

He'd then add up the total reps of the workout: 10 in this case. As the weeks and months progressed, he'd slowly work up in the teens then the low twenties. With a serious enough weight, it could take months to build up to the full 25 reps of a 5 x 5 workout.

The upside of this workout may not be obvious, but it allows you to use heavy weights and slowly, steadily build the volume up. Don’t worry if the fourth set has more reps than the third set or if it takes months to get that fifth set to come around: we're focusing on the big picture here.

Variation Two: "What most people really do"

Yeah, I know the truth. Most people do the 5 x 5 workout with essentially four slothful warm-up sets and one "work" set, like this:

135 for 5
145 for 5
155 for 5
165 for 5
365 for 5

They then brag to all their buddies about their "5 x 5" workout and mention 365 pounds. They don’t say that only one set was performed with this weight, but they're sure their buddies think that…if nobody asks any follow-up questions.

There's a lot of value in this workout, albeit with more logical weight choices on the first four sets. There used to be a school of thought that argued "last set, best set." Whatever weight you finished your workout would "set" your muscle memory somehow. I realize this may be akin to voodoo for some, but I know guys who swear by this idea that the body "remembers" only the last set. Hey, it might be true…

Variation Three: The Wave

Whenever I see crowds performing "the wave" at sporting events, I keep reminding myself that the song "Y.M.C.A." makes everyone in the same stadium stand up, spell out letters and "boogie." I refuse to boogie.

That’s not the wave I'm talking about here. It's simply the idea of increasing weight over several sets, dropping back for a set or two then going back up. Example, after a normal warm up:

315 for 5
345 for 5
365 for 5
335 for 5
355/365/370 for 5

Note how we dropped back on set four, then finished big. The upside of this workout is that you get a lot of volume with the big weights, but you also get that nice "light" set where the weights seem to just fly up. If the weights aren’t flying up, maybe you need another variation.

Variation Four: The Wave II

Maybe you need a few lighter sets, but still want to push the bigger weights. It helps here to have a good training log: where do you seem to be at your strongest during the five sets? If you find yourself at your best on set three, try this:

345/355/365 for 5
315 for 5
365 for 5
335 for 5
345/355/365 for 5

In this scheme, you have two back-off sets. Rarely does a person "peak" on set five, but if you do, use variation three. If you peak on set two, try this:

335 for 5
365 for 5
315 for 5
335 for 5
345/355/365 for 5

For sets three and four, you're trying to "hold on" to finish the workout. A few relatively easier sets will prep
you for a big finish.

Variation Five: Dropping Back

There are those in this world (often reformed lifters from "protocols that dare not say their name") that have one good set in them. Others may also like this variation as you get your hard set in first, then try to blow through the volume part of the workout. It could be as simple as:

365 for 5
335 for 5
315 for 5
295 for 5
275 for 5

This is a great adaptation for people who train in a situation where you can’t always be sure about spotters; not just the home gym trainer, but people who train in gyms where consistent, competent spotters can’t be found. I never count on spotters in any place that has a step aerobics class or a rule against using chalk…or a gym with more than half the men wearing Lycra pants.

Some Rules

Whatever variation you pick (and let’s be honest, there are plenty more of them), I suggest the following rules:

Rule #1: The most important: strive for the same rest periods between the sets for whatever variation you pick. I recommend that you choose either one minute, three minutes or five minutes, but stick to it. Judging improvement is crucial, but you need to be honest about the rest periods.

Rule #2: Rarely do you want to do an entire program of 5 x 5. You certainly could do it: squat, deadlift, bench press, row, military press and curl. The problem would be that you’d be doing some seriously heavy lifting, plus a surprising amount of volume. Now, if you choose Swiss ball hand chop cross-body L-raises, that’s another story.

Rule #3: Get out a calculator and figure the weight times the reps and add them up over the five sets. That number is a nice little measure of progress. As that number goes up, in any of the variations, you’re getting "stronger."

Hopefully, I’ve armed you with some new ideas for 5 x 5 training. If you have any follow-up questions, I’ll be around to answer them! Just don't ask me if I have a boyfriend, punk.

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