The Best Lesson You’ll Ever Learn
Systematic Education for Lifters
by Dan John

It happens every time I write an article or give a workshop. Someone asks me, "So, uh, Dan, do you think I should do it five times a week or should I do it twice a day?" It doesn't matter what "it" is — one arm lifts, Tabata front squats, Olympic lifts—I always get the same perplexing response.

I understand perplexity. As the father of two teenagers, being perplexed defines most of my life. But only recently have I understood the issue from both sides of the question. Responses like the above mystify me because I've been training since 1967, and therefore I can discern whether or not something works. Perhaps more importantly, I understand the steps needed to take to add something (an exercise, training protocol, a supplement, etc.) to my training.

Some people have no idea how to do this. If you're one of them, then this article is for you. I'll give you a hint: you must begin by understanding how we learn.

How We Learn

To begin, imagine asking a five year old to figure out how many square yards of burnt orange shag carpet would be needed in a room.

Issue One: This fiveyear-old still counts "one-two-free-four-five-uh…"

Issue Two: Not only does this young scholar not know what a yard is, but he thinks a foot is only made for kicking a ball.

Issue Three: Sure, it's a simple issue of length times width. Says the kiddo: "What's 'times'?"

To learn math, you followed a progression that we call **systematic education**. Math skills were based on first learning the numbers in the correct sequence. (Now, this doesn’t apply to me when I'm doing high rep squats. I count by fives when I get tired.) Second, we might approach simply adding two numbers together to get a "sum." I have 33 inch arms, for example.

After learning addition, we learn subtraction, then multiplication. Finally, we learn about feet and yards so we can figure out our carpet problem: take the width and multiply it by the length to discover that they no longer sell burnt orange shag. However, they do have a lovely lime green on sale.

See, systematic education is the best way to learn anything. But how the heck does this relate to chunking weight around in the gym?
Dan John tortures, er, trains an athlete with Tabata front squats.

Why Can't Billy Make Progress?

Pick up any bodybuilding magazine on the rack in any grocery store. Open it up and find Mr. Great Galaxy’s "official" training program and supplement schedule. Let me say this for you: "Yeah, right." Having said that, let’s move on.

So, young Billy, who wants to impress his 14 year old female classmates, buys this magazine, takes it home, drags his older brother's weights out from under the bed and tries to follow Mr. Great Galaxy’s training program. In a few years, he's done every curl imaginable and performed so many "skull crushers" that his I.Q. has dropped. (Note to Billy: These aren't designed to be a bouncing, ballistic exercise.)

He then joins the local fitness center and discovers bench pressing five days a week and the indisputable fact that "squats hurt the knees," which, of course, is quite disputable. By this time, Billy has also joined an Internet forum and is an expert on biochemical reactions inside the human body, trash talking beginner’s questions, and making fun of old guys who Olympic lift.

Then, Billy goes to a workshop or, worse, reads one of my articles. You see, Billy doesn’t have a systematic education. He never learned to squat correctly, deadlift correctly, nor learned the basics of the sport. He doesn’t eat breakfast because he's on the "Warrior Diet," he drinks five Super Huge Gulps of cola a day because he heard that was the best way to get creatine to work, and he thinks the only way to get a bodyweight bench press is to be on drugs.

At the workshop, he hears someone like Mike Burgener discuss the Olympic Lifts. Mike breaks down the lifts to the key points and hammers them over and over while the group does the lifts with PVC pipes. The next presenter might be someone like Coach Christopher Sommer discussing the one hour warm-up that he has his
young elite gymnasts perform each workout. Each drill is amazing and certainly would fit into any athlete’s program.

And maybe they ask me to speak at this workshop and I explain the joys of sprinting with heavy boulders, tossing long wooden poles end over end, and mixing chains, rocks, thick bars, kettlebells and isometrics into one exercise. Young Billy stares up at the ceiling after the workshop. He just doesn’t have the time to train on the Olympic Lifts two hours a day, train to be an Olympic gymnast, train to become a Highland athlete and a terror in the neighborhood, or continue training for the Mr. Great Galaxy contest.

You see, Billy doesn’t have the background to discern what to do and when to do it. He "knows" a lot, but he can’t sift through the process. Billy is right: he doesn’t have the time to do all the things he learned at the workshop, nor should he attempt it. So, what should he do?

The problem with systematic education is that it takes a long time. Now, the fact that you can read this shows the value of the process, but unless you had an extraordinary elementary physical education teacher, opportunities to train in a wide variety of sports, an elite level high school program, and the finest coaching in the world in college, it can be difficult to pick up all this info in the typical gym.

For the adult learner, especially those that use T-Nation as their on-going lifting education (college credit should be given, by the way), I propose another method.

You Are A Tree. (Yes, Dammit, A Tree!)

Systemic education is based on understanding a simple model. You can use the image of a ladder as a basic model, but as the cliché goes, be careful when you get to the top of the ladder because you might have it on the wrong wall. In systemic education, we use the image of a tree. If you don’t know what a tree is, move out of the city.

You are the tree. The seed that you came from is your genetic inheritance. Some of you are oaks, others are cedars, and a few of you are Bonsais and for that I am sorry. The soil can be considered the environment you grew up in. If you grew up in a town with phenomenal success in wrestling, you might be a wrestler.

I don’t want to beat the model to death, but the tree rings represent your years of experience. Like many of us, I have some thin years and some thick years, years that went bad and years that went well. The key to this model is this: your continued growth relies on the previous rings!

Let me cut to the point: you go to a workshop and hear about a wonderful new supplement. What do you do? This is the core of systemic education. When you add something to the "soil," you need to test it by the "fruit" that it bears." The problem? Well, when you go to a workshop you tend to add fifty new things to your training and you can’t measure what worked and what didn’t work!

When young Billy reads an article or goes to a workshop, he's enthused beyond anything he's felt in years. So, he begins to take twenty fish oil capsules an hour, depth jumps off the boxes with the bar in the overhead squat position, sprints like a Canadian Olympian, performs ring work, eats extra chocolate protein Wizzbangs, and snorts six hits of sugar-free psyllium every hour. Within days, he's a mess. What happened?

Well, if you have a tree and add ten ingredients to your soil, nine of them good for the tree and the tenth poison, how will you figure out which one is which? That, my friends, is the issue. When I'm learning all these wonderful new things and ideas, how do I discern what works and what's killing me? You need to do it systematically!
The author, poised to smack those who talk during his presentation with his "whuppin' stick" (patent pending).

DJ's Systematic Approach

This is how I approach new training ideas: First, I immediately fall back on one of two workouts. I have two basic workout models that I've used over and over and I have a feel for what's going on with the balance of training load and recovery over a few weeks.

The first standard workout that I use is the "Transformation Program." Don’t worry about the name; basically, it's three days a week of lifting with one day devoted to pulling movements, one day to pushing movements and one "leg" day. I only do two exercises and keep the rest period at strict one minute intervals. Generally, I like three sets of eight, but any reasonable rep/set combination can work. One other day a week, I do a few hill sprints (very few!) and on another day I do a fun activity like hike, bike or a team sport. This is an easy program to manage and I know that my joints will feel good, I'll have a lot of energy and I generally look "okay" doing this program. The other standard workout I may do is the One Lift a Day Program. I might even simplify the workout a bit by just doing a push day, pull day, squat day, and whole-body day (snatch, clean and jerk).

By choosing to train in a program that basically covers everything at a very easy to moderate level, I'm pretty sure I'm ready for the experiment. The experiment? Yes, now I add the new groovy thing I learned at the workshop. If, after two weeks, my knees hurt so bad I can’t use the gas pedal, I'd deem this a "failure." If, after three weeks, young supermodels are throwing themselves at me (again), something good is going on and I'll keep doing this new thing!

You know, it sounds so logical, so simple, but very few people do this! If you learn five new things, it might take a few months to run these through your training program to figure out whether or not they work for you. Keep testing the fruits of your labors, not the hype in the advertisements.

The Rules

Let's review:

Rule #1: Set yourself up with a basic training routine that you can count on to keep you fresh, but in shape. Whatever "in shape" means to you might be different than what it means to your training partner, but I like basic lifting measurements or throwing distances. It could be a ratio of upper arm measurement to waist measurement. (My long term plan is to have a 1:2 ratio in the arm to waist. I just need to get my arms to 27 inches.)
Rule #2: Add new lifts, variations, and ideas to your training program one at a time. I bought a set of chains a year ago and I only used them with front squats for the first month. The next month, after discovering how excellent these chains were for acceleration, I tried them with deadlifts. Now I use them for all squats, deadlifts and presses, but I might not have realized their benefit if I'd added a bunch of things at the same time.

The next simple idea is that some things only work for a short amount of time. I use the term "quiver" to describe all the lifts, exercises and routines that I can draw on through a training year. For example, thick bar deadlifts are a real value sometimes. You don’t want to constantly train with oversized bars because even though your grip gets better and better, you never truly push your posterior chain.

Rule #3: Some great ideas work sometimes, but not all the time. In fact, I keep a chart of all the training tools at my disposal and reread this list anytime I feel like having a little "instant variation."

In nutrition, the formula is a little harder. I live by this two part mantra: "If it works immediately, it's illegal. If it works quickly, it's banned." Again, I'd recommend that you set yourself up with a standard eating plan. Here at T-Nation, you have the advice of lots of brighter people than me, so read some of the back issues regarding diet. A couple of things I insist upon for your standard diet:

1. I like my athletes to eat three meals before they train with me: breakfast, lunch and a snack somewhere. This almost instantly helps most modern teens.

2. Eat protein at every meal. I like the simple rule of "about a fistful at least."

3. Water should be your base beverage.

If you're doing this consistently, now try to add the "magic food." I did this a few years ago with fish oil capsules and became an instant missionary for this inexpensive, but wonderful supplement. Again though, think "systematic!" In dietary changes, you may not notice any difference!

I look for improvements in blood profiles (I get an expansive, yet inexpensive blood profile done once or twice a year), skin health (less acne, more "glow," better elasticity) and, the hard one for you to notice, your moods. Ask your friends about your moods. If they all smile and back toward the exit, this isn't a good sign.

The Point (In Case You Missed It)

So, what's the point of all of this? You have to learn what works for you through personal experience. It's not perfect, but find a basic training regime that you can count on for a few weeks and a basic approach to diet that you can live with for a month or so. Then, add the magic, add only one new thing at a time, and see what happens.

After that, of course, you can pester me with questions about whether doing the clean and jerk with 400 pounds will build your biceps.

About the Author

Dan John is the Diocesan Director of Religious Education for the Diocese of Salt Lake City and a full-time "on-line" religious studies instructor for Columbia College of Missouri. Originally from South San Francisco, Dan came to Utah to throw the discus for Utah State University and never left. He has Masters degrees in history and in religious education, as well as having done intensive work at the American University in Cairo, University of Haifa, and Cornell.
Currently, Dan is ranked number one in the world in the Highland Games, ages 45-49, broke the American record in the Weight Pentathlon last August, holds numerous National Championships in weightlifting and throwing and maintains a full-time free internet coaching site at http://danjohn.org/coach.

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