The "One Lift a Day" Program
by Dan John

The Anti-Fitness Magazine Workout

When I was a teenager, I turned from comic books to "men’s magazines." Not just the notable one with Hugh Hefner at the helm either; I also began to thumb through fitness magazines. At the time, there was Strength and Health, the old (and always bizarre) Ironman and an assortment of pure bodybuilding rags.

In the last decade or so, a whole new fitness genre has appeared, as well as men’s magazines with "attitude," which usually means one paragraph of writing for every three near nude women holding a chainsaw. Call them "Strength Lite," if you will.

I admit these magazines are the best airline flight reading I've ever found. Turn one page and you have thirty bulleted items detailing everything from quick fixes for spills to how to care for a pet. But what caught my eye recently was a very interesting article about casual wear for men…written by women. It wasn’t the suggestions that stopped me, it was something else:

- Shirt: $245
- Pants: "Flat front and sexy," $210
- Belt: $105
- Socks: $29
- Shoes: $285

This is casual wear? I buy my socks in bags that have six pair, my suits cost as much as this guy’s shirt and I’m not sure I’ve ever bought a belt…don’t they come with pants?

After flipping a few more pages, I found the "Training Program of the Month." Forget squats, rows and presses. This article is all about Reverse Grip Rubber Ball Axe Twists combined with Hungarian Cross Leaps. I have no idea what these exercises are in the real world, but the guy modeling them seemed to be getting a workout.

I don’t think I'll ever make a living selling exercise programs. Why? Because the single finest training system I've ever used continues to be the only training program I can recommend. The problem? Well, the problem with this training program is: it's really hard. No, really.

It's really hard, but really simple. Still, a fitness magazine would never run it because the average reader would never even try it. Will you? We're about to find out.

One Workout, One Lift

I call it the "One Lift a Day" program. Its roots are in the dim past of Olympic lifting, but it cuts past all the BS of modern training. It's so simple that it can easily be overlooked. It cuts gym time, but increases recovery time. It also may cause you to miss work.

First, let’s discuss why anyone who tries this is going to hate it. I'd bring this up later, but there are some subtle and not so subtle issues regarding the One Lift a Day program. The biggest issue for most people trying this for the first time is hard to fathom: you don’t get to spend a lot of time in the gym…because you can't spend a lot of time in the gym.

The other issue is closely related: since you're only doing one exercise, you can’t slip away from squats to the leg extension machine to convince yourself that you're working your legs. If you're only doing squats, you do squats. If you're only doing chins, you're going to chin for 45 minutes!

Doing "just chin-ups" might have sounded like a grand idea in the car on the way to the gym, but I guarantee that you'll be looking around after about five sets for the "relief" that changing exercises brings to the body and the mind. On the One Lift a Day program, you just aren’t going to get that relief.

The biggest problem is that there are no excuses. If you choose to do squats, it's a squat day. There's no place to hide in this program. You can’t convince yourself that you had a good day because you did 41 different lifts or a lot of volume or you did a lot of abs after blowing off the stuff you hate.

It's as simple as this: you pick one lift each day and do it for the entire workout. The first advantage,
obviously, is the simplicity: you don’t have to bring in a computerized printout of all the exercises, seat
positions, alignments, tempos and order of lifts. You do one lift for an entire workout. It sounds easy, doesn’t it? Yeah, it can be deceptive that way.

Reps and Sets

Before considering exercise choices, let’s look at approaches to reps and sets. One thing that may help when attempting the One Lift a Day program is to look at the training week a little more "globally" than most trainers view a typical month or week. One idea is to cut volume by half each successive week simply by changing reps and sets:

Week One: 7 sets of 5

This is a tough workout for any lift, but when doing "big" lifts like squats, benches, deadlifts, presses, snatches or cleans, it can become very exhausting. Through a little trial and error, I discovered that a simple "wave" with the weight selection made for a better result:

Set One: 225 for five
Set Two: 245 for five
Set Three: 265 for five
Set Four: 275 for five (getting tired, tough lift, might not be able to get another set)
Set Five: 235 for five (nice refreshing drop in intensity)
Set Six: 255 for five (nice, challenging set…but not hellish)
Set Seven: Either 275 or 285, depending on spotters and energy

Another idea which works well for bench presses (if you have great spotters) and squats (even better spotters) is to use max weights. Lower the bar on your own, but have your spotters help you through the lifting to insure a smooth rep. After finishing the five reps, rack the bar and perform eight to ten quick jumps for height (if squatting) or eight to ten explosive push-ups (if benching).
This is the workout that's caused more days lost from work or school than any workout I've ever recommended. Seven sets of five max squats followed by jumps seems to burn every fiber of the legs. My athletes, in some cases, literally can't get out of bed the next day.

I know of only two athletes who've ever done the "seven sets of five" with jumps and made it to work or school the next day. But, as I tell them, "One day you'll thank me. Today is not that day."

Week Two: 6 sets of 3

At 18 reps, this week is basically 50% of the volume of Week One (35 reps versus 18). Repeat the exact same weekly format of week one, but try to go a little heavier. After the volume of Week One, Week Two seems rather easy… on paper.

Week Three: 5-3-2

This may be my favorite sets and reps selection. Basically, we're considering the double as a max. I learned, like many coaches, that all athletes lie about max singles, but seldom do we find "fuzzy logic" with doubles. One thing you can generally count on is that whatever someone can do for a double, they can usually do for a single.

Trust me, athletes and coaches lie all the time about maxes. Go to any college football locker room in America and ask for numbers. Recently a college football player claimed a 540 clean as a max. The American record in the clean and jerk is 517.

Week Four: Off!

On paper, the first three weeks look so easy. When you look at this week, many people scoff at the idea. "A week off! I scoff at thee!" Try the One Lift a Day idea, then get back to me. If the week off sounds wrong, I'm willing to bet you didn't push the big exercises!

**Exercise Selection**

Exercise selection should match your goals. It should also match your life. If you like to hit the bars or go dancing on the weekends, slide those squats away from Thursday or Friday. You literally won't be able to move from one leg to the other. Come to think of it, that's how I dance anyway.

For a powerlifter or someone who uses a "power bodybuilding" approach, this One Lift a Day program would be perfect. Consider a weekly approach like this:

- Monday: Bench Press or Incline Bench Press
- Tuesday: Row or Row Variation
- Wednesday: Squat
- Thursday: Off
- Friday: Military Press
Saturday: Curl, Deadlift, Whatever

I can hear some of you already: "What about abs? What about serratus?" Trust me, a forty-five minute workout of Military Presses will work the abdominal muscles as well as any machine advertised on late night television.

A Few Things to Think About

The One Lift a Day Program is really hard. Certainly, it's the most productive program most people have ever tried, but it's simply too hard. It isn't fun, except for your buddies who laugh at you as you try to walk after the squats. You probably won't even complete the whole month. (Is that a double dog dare? Yeah, I think it is.)

Interested in trying it? Think about a few things:

• Big weights, short workouts. It's hard to go heavy for a long workout. If you don't believe me, enter a strongman contest or a Highland games.

• If the whole idea sounds crazy, just try an occasional "One Lift Only" day. It certainly breaks the mold of what most trainers do and is actually fun.

• One Lift a Day might open up a new training paradigm for many lifters: core exercises are core and assistance exercise assist! In the past decade, many trainers have forgotten this basic truth.

• The worst thing that can happen from squatting once a week is that your thighs might outgrow that $210 pair of pants that are "flat front and sexy."

You've been warned.

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. Dan 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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