"I live for moments like this."

I think if you say that to yourself sometimes, you might actually believe it. I was halfway up a hill in Ohio holding a 175 pound steel log in the "Zercher" position and dragging an 85 pound sled behind me. Remember, uphill.

I couldn't breath. Squeezing the steel log cuts off breathing and, as I've discovered, breathing is underrated for athletes dragging sleds up a hill while lugging a steel log. The heat and the humidity were making the contact points between me and the bar more and more slick with every step, although I think the word "step" is an exaggeration here.

My friends were beginning the process known as "heckling" by pointing out that I was only halfway up the hill. I wanted to comment on their parentage, but I couldn't yet speak. I wouldn't speak for a while, either.

The Secret to Long Term Success

A few days later, still nursing huge "hickey" marks from the bar (well, that's what I told the wife), I reflected that this was the secret to long term success in sports and body composition. Ah, what is this elusive secret?

Of all the articles I've ever written, I continue to receive the most feedback on a piece I wrote for T-Nation a year ago called The One Lift a Day Program. Too lazy to read it? Fine. Here you go, a summary:

1. Pick one lift a day and do it.
2. Um, there is no number two. I can't think of anything else.

Yes, that's it. I received tons of emails and forum posts with some interesting questions, such as:

"Dan, if I do benches and curls on Mondays, curls and benches on Wednesdays, and benches and curls on Friday, will that be like your One Lift a Day Program?"

Gentle reader, you may think I'm exaggerating (again) but, unfortunately, no.

Climbing up a hill in Ohio with a sled and a steel bar reminded me of one of the keys to the success of the program. No, it's not "stupidity." It's synergy. Yes, that overworked word that ranks right up there with "outside the box" and "paradigm" as the most beaten-to-death phrase. (Personally, I strive to avoid cliches like the plague.) Indeed, "synergy" is the magic that makes programs work.

In this case, my good friend, Greg Henger, brought the steel bars. My other good friend, Mike Rosenberg, brought the sled. An old friend of my father, Lonnie Wade, brought youth and vigor. I brought the idea of doing "just one hard thing" that day. So, within minutes, we had a challenge.

The value of going to workshops, conferences, and visiting T-Nation is the exposure to literally dozens of new ideas a day. Which is great. Which is also awful. In other words, you get all these new ideas — lifts you've never heard of, programs, and rep variations beyond anything you've imagined, pictures of women in outfits that make you wonder how to find that beach — but how do you put it into your personal workout program? On that Ohio hill, I offer you a glimpse of how I approach this issue.

A few housekeeping points before we begin:

1. When I talk about synergy, I'm using the idea that sometimes one and one make *three*. You can get "more bang for the buck" by focusing on those hard or difficult things in lifting (and life).

I'm still amused by Art deVany's response to the question, "How do I lose fat?" He answered, "Don't get fat in the first place." Harsh, perhaps, but if you spend the bulk of your training time working off keggers from college, it's going to be hard to do a lot of the wonderful new ideas that you picked up in T-Nation Prime Time.

2. Honest hard work trumps volume every time for long term success. Please don't bore me with how "heroic" some low-carb eating, stretchaholic distance runner is when he starts wobbling on the straightaway at the end of a marathon. I don't want to hear it. Put 405 on the bar. Put it overhead any way you can. Put the weight down. That's hard work.


Simple, though, like "Buy low and sell high" isn't easy. Saving ten percent of what you earn is simple, but not easy. My training programs are simple. Not easy.

The Rest Week

Since writing the article, people have hounded me about the idea of taking every fourth week off, the rep/set system I recommend, and if you can do two exercises on a one-lift program. Simply, the answers come from my experiences of running myself and others through the options.

We discovered, like the Soviet coaches did years ago, that taking a planned week off is miles better than being forced to do it because of injury or illness or "the end of the season." With a week off each month, there's no season's end; you strive to continue to build up over the years.

So, assume that each fourth week is "off." To a Highland gamer, you wouldn't lift, but you could certainly do some light drills. Same for the track athlete and most power athletes. For the body composition folks, maybe you need that week to focus on something you tend to enjoy ignoring (do I hear "calves?").

Strongman Training: One Lift a Day Style

Let's look at a few ideas. My friend Bernie recently trained for a strongman contest using these principles. He asked around and figured that the contest would have a surprise or two (strongmen contests often enjoy having variations on the variations of the variation), but he knew certain things would be there. Here's how he trained:

Day One

Farmers Walks...to death. It works every muscle in your body when you do a loaded farmers walk and you might as well do it fresh.
Editor's Note: If you don’t have strongman equipment, use the heaviest dumbbells in your gym.

Day Two

Clean and Press. Bernie added an interesting idea. He worked a number of "speeds" into his workout by starting with the classic pyramid (see Milo and his bull), then lightening the load and going fast, fast, fast, in a number of variations. He tried to get as much volume in 45 minutes as he could.

Day Three

An interesting squat variation that a few of us have been kicking around might help the strongman. Start off with a light squat exercise. So, do overhead squats. As the weight gets hard to manage, do front squats. Too heavy? Move to back squats.

The Overhead Squat

Finally, finish with some quarter squats or even a heavy loaded squat support. Try it. Think about fifteen to twenty sets with the weight on the bar going up each set. You’re done. Go home.

Day Four

Do the Day Three squat workout, but with deadlift variations. For example:

Frog stance snatch grip deadlifts
Snatch grip deadlifts
Clean grip deadlifts on a plate
Clean grip deadlifts
Sumo deadlifts
"Normal" deadlifts
Lockouts on a rack

Pre-press the "nine" and the "one" on your phone so you only need to press the final "one" for this workout...

Day Five - Rest Day

You can figure this out.

Day Six

Ah, the point of all this rambling: the "synergy" workout. Take a short tour of what you own or have available to train with. Maybe ask a friend, especially someone who you don't necessarily need to keep as a friend for long, to come over with their "toys," too. Line everything up. Now, with a stopwatch: GO!

Huh? Yeah, try to do a workout of "back to back to back" exercises. A favorite of mine: Hook up into a sled. Now, snatch two kettlebells (hooked into the sled) for as many as you can do in one or two minutes (your friend records the number). Drop the bells and sprint away to the next station.

Dump the sled and perform as many pull-ups as you can do. Grab the farmer’s bars and walk back to the start. Pick up a stone and run to the last bar loaded to 225 and get ten perfect deadlifts. Stop! Time? Just once, try that one. Now, your friend has to beat your time!

The funny thing about "synergy" is this: when your friend finishes with just a slightly better time, you find yourself slightly changing the workout and racing away again. I find that we tend to do three sets or groups or reps or whatever you want to call these medleys. Then, we stop. Funny. No one has ever asked for more.

Since the One Lift a Day program first surfaced, I've seen variations with kettlebells, gymnastics, Highland Games, and even machine training. Now, if you go the machine route, promise me you won't do leg adductors on one day. Well, let me rephrase that: don't tell me, please. You can tell your OB/GYN though. That would be important information.

http://www.t-nation.com/portal_includes/articles/2005/05-123-training.html
One Exercise A Day, One Hand A Day

One interesting idea is doing one-hand only work and combining the idea with the One Lift A Day program. So, as I'm noted for "leading from the front," I tried the following:

Day One

Left handed swings, snatches, and press. Five swings, 3 snatches, and 2 presses for as many work sets as I could do.

Day Two

Front squats. I decided that an exhausted "side of the body" might not be worth pushing too hard. Eight sets of 3 was my choice.

Day Three

Right handed swings, snatches, and press. Five swings, 3 snatches, and 2 presses for as many work sets as I could do.

Day Four

Rest

Day Five

Deadlift (I also did some easy walking, too.)

Day Six

Travel

Day Seven

Pull-ups to death

One could, I imagine, really push this idea. One of the lost bits of wisdom is that you're actually able to handle 60-70% of your two-handed max with one hand. (You still use both legs, your back, and stabilize like crazy with the off arm.) But, you're still only using what you think of as "light weights." I can't help it, but there's no way I can think of a kettlebell as heavy, even if I struggle to lift it. To me, the number tells me "light!"

In other words, you could do two right-arm days, two left-arm days, a full body day, and I'd still recommend a squat movement day. Something like this:

Week One:

Day One

Right arm clean and press

Day Two
Front squat
Day Three
Left arm clean and press
Day Four
Rest
Day Five
Right arm swing and snatch
Day Six
Deadlift
Day Seven
Left arm swing and snatch

I wouldn't repeat the next week, rather I'd recommend moving to a simpler second week with only four days of training:

Week Two:
Day One
Rest
Day Two
Front squat
Day Three
Rest
Day Four
Right arm day
Day Five
Deadlift
Day Six
Left arm day
Day Seven
Rest
Repeat for a total of four weeks. Then, test yourself somehow and see if this is working for you.

I like the idea, but what's missing (and some of our readers would have caught this) is that this program looks more like the plans for putting together a car on an assembly line than the "synergy" stuff I promised from the beginning. Yet, it is there.

You see, this program came from a reader who emailed me the idea of doing the One Lift a Day variation. So, always dumb enough for a challenge, I tried it. I wrote an article, a buddy added another layer of insanity, I used the lessons from kettlebellers and various crazies to put together a program, and jumped in. That is synergy.

Simple, Not Easy

The point of all this? Well, the biggest problem that most people have when they first start lifting is looking at others as having all the answers, especially those who wear golf shirts at a gym with their names on it.

"He must know what he's talking about; he has a golf shirt with his name on it for gosh sakes!"

In truth, the answers, the "secrets," are just not that hard to find out. Every T-Nation reader has at his fingertips (literally) a vast warehouse of information, but you need to add one little bit extra: you. Your experiences, your resources, and your sense of adventure.

When I discuss the One Lift a Day program, there's no question that it's the simplest program ever devised. Simple, but not easy.

Now, you have to take it to the next level. I'm looking forward to learning from you.

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.

He is also former number one in the world in the Highland Games, ages 45-49, broke the American record in the Weight Pentathlon, 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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