As I get along in my athletic career, I'm starting to understand more and more what Yogi Berra meant when he said, "The longer I've been retired, the better I played."

It's true, you know. I coached high school football for a long time and I never failed to get at least one dad who'd tell me, "Yep, I was All-American in high school." Clearly, the child inherited none of this talent... and I usually had doubts about the actual truth of the story. There just can't be that many All-Americans in one small corner of the country!

The mistake I made was never quitting sports. So, I can only be as good as the weight on the bar or what the tape measure tells me. I guess I can't wait to quit just to discover how good I am, if you don't mind a "Yogi-ism." What keeps me going? I keep learning so much every year that I can't wait for the next season! And the reason I keep learning? My approach to training is designed to keep expanding!

Let's talk.

The AIT Formula

For the past few years, I've become infamous for two heretical beliefs:

1. I don't believe in "peaking."
2. Connected to that, I really don't believe in "periodization."

Now, it's true that there are people who've peaked. I'd argue, however, that there are far more people who've trained to peak and failed to peak. For proof, just look at the Olympics. It isn't uncommon for an athlete to have his worst performance in years at the Olympic Games. One can argue that it's the pressure, and I'm fine with that insight. I believe, however, that the pressure is caused by the imagined need to peak, the change in training to "allow" a peak, and, ultimately, the pressure to respond to the need to peak.

As for periodization, my argument is simple: By the time you finish with all the charts, graphs, percentages, and number crunching, the athlete can barely load a weight on a bar. "I need to do six reps with 83.4% of my four rep max in a 9-3-2 tempo and a 26 second rest between sets for maximum hypertrophy." The math alone will paralyze the lifter.

True, I exaggerate, but not by much. So then, gentle reader, you may wonder how I train athletes. Years ago, I came across a simple formula that has elements of peaking and periodization, yet also allows for the natural fluctuations of this thing I call "life."

Life? Yep, think it through: How many times have you finally put together an ideal training program and training environment, only to have some "life" just sneak up and clobber you? You know, sick kids, sick dog, broken car, best friend's bachelor party, that "job thing," and just plain life.

This formula I came across is simple and natural. It works in three parts:

1. Accumulation
2. Intensification
3. Transformation
For those of us who grew up during the Vietnam War, AIT always meant Advanced Infantry Training, but for this article we'll be using AIT to focus on training for life and lifting. Let's break it down.

Part I: Accumulation

If I could highlight the single greatest error most lifting enthusiasts make, it would simply be this: they have no variety. I'm not talking about using the decline rather than the incline for your pec development. I'm talking about doing nothing save going to the gym, walking on the treadmill, hopping off and doing a set of benches, playing with a machine or two, and hitting the steam room.

This is far from an overstatement. The first part of the AIT formula is "accumulation," and doing just a few exercises a year is the antithesis of what I'm hoping you'll adopt.

Accumulation is actively seeking and learning new sports, lifts, moves, ideas, and games. One literally "accumulates" a number of new training moves and attempts a low level of mastery of each.

Growing up, I did this naturally. In school, we'd play basketball or touch football during recess. During P.E. we'd play kickball. After school we'd hit the local playground with its monkey bars, swings, tunnels, and a variety of other dangerous contraptions that I'm sure have been banned from most of America today, and then we went home to breeze through whatever school work was left.

Then, as fast as we could, we'd regroup and play street football, baseball, basketball, and a variety of games like tag, hide and go seek, and "one foot off the gutter." By the time I entered organized sports, I'd probably been fouled ten thousand times, caught hundreds of touchdown passes and, for the record, ran into one truck...that was still moving.

In school physical education classes, we had speedball, volleyball, dodgeball, wrestling, basketball, crab soccer, soccer, swimming, and a host of other classes. In addition, I competed in several sports at the interscholastic, community, and church levels. Like all my friends, I was exposed to a myriad of sports experiences and soon discovered that the "tricks" in one sport often worked well in another.

So, you get the point: we need to add some variation to our training. But, that isn't the entire point. The idea of accumulation is to actively seek out new training concepts, not to add some simple variation, but to challenge our long held notions of "strengths" and "weaknesses."

The General Idea of Variation:

1. I'll add wide-grip bench presses in addition to my normal grip bench presses.
2. I'll do decline bench press in addition to...

The General Idea of Accumulation:

1. I'll enter an Olympic lifting meet.
2. I'll enter a triathlon.

By taking on the challenge of Olympic lifting, certain things leap out immediately: Do I know how to snatch and clean & jerk? Am I flexible enough? Are my legs ready for all of this? Do I know how to use the hook grip?
The Hook Grip

After these simple questions, a whole other layer of questions emerges concerning registering for the meet, registering as a lifter, buying a singlet, buying lifting shoes, finding a place to train, and on and on. Taking on a triathlon at the same time would probably be too much, but let's look at a few of the questions: Can you swim? Let's just stop there.

Years ago I injured my back. Now, I'd like to tell you that it was on a triumphal third attempt at the Olympics, but what really happened is a secretary at school asked me to move her typewriter (an ancient device that made words appear on paper), so I leaned over, picked it up, and my back spasmed because of the odd position and I had a back cramp that laid me up for months.

I got some good advice: I should lose a few pounds, ride a bike daily, and learn to swim "bilaterally." Bilateral breathing is taking in air from "both sides" in the freestyle. Like most right-handers, I only breathed from the right. So, it took a few weeks to train myself to be a "left breather."

Since I had to do this for rehab, I thought, "Hey, let's do a triathlon!" I bought a triathlon suit, had my bike tuned and, literally, jumped in.

I learned an instant lesson: Triathlon swimming has nothing to do with what I learned in the pool. With about fifty people thrashing and kicking all around me, I quickly discovered that my nice breathing pattern in the
pool meant nothing when I attempted to breathe with someone's foot kicking me in the face. I accumulated a lot of knowledge in just a few strokes.

I ultimately entered three of these things. (It was always the bike section that killed me.) One thing I learned: I'd never do this again. But I came away from my triathlons with some insights about training that still stay with me today. Clearly, the greatest lesson I learned was that the more time you swim, bike, or run, the better you are at swimming, biking, or running.

If you come into triathlons as a champion biker, you'll dominate the bike phase probably your whole triathlon career. In other words, throwers throw, bikers bike and lifters lift... and if you want to play in another person's game, you might get whipped simply because they have, literally, more time in the saddle.

When my back healed I went back into throwing stuff and lifting. I noted immediately that I could train longer. It wasn't that I had more "throwing endurance" or anything like that, but after sitting on a bike for up to ten hours, hanging around a nice field tossing stuff didn't seem so boring. My "boredom index" had been expanded by all those hours in the pool and in the saddle.

That's the goal of the accumulation phase. Simply, you take on a new challenge, do your best to learn and master what you can, then apply any lessons you can in your chosen field. Some of the results may shock you.

I noted, like several other former lifters who've moved into endurance events, that my body fat went up. True, I lost weight, but my body fat percentage went up, which led me to believe that a high carbohydrate endurance diet mixed with an enormous volume of low intensity training doesn't lead to fat loss, but "merely" weight loss. The numbers didn't lie.

The "Rules" of Accumulation

1. Try something new. Join a team, a club, a sport, or take up a new hobby. Meet some new people; learn some new skills and have fun.

2. Continue your chosen sport or continue working on your body composition goals. Monitor your progress in all the usual ways: "before and after" photos, body fat measurements, and athletic achievements.

3. Through the lens of your new endeavor, rethink and re-imagine your primary goals. This, of course, is the key to the whole process.

I applied the third rule to my discus throwing a few years ago. I played in the "Fast Action 5 on 5" football league and I was "losing a step." Now, I was also forty, but my numbers in the weightroom were excellent. Then it hit me: I'd been doing hill sprints regularly for nearly a decade, but had recently changed training facilities and there was no hill. Sure, my lifts were good, but I was lacking my two days a week of charging up the hill.

I bought a sled and starting madly sprinting in the area behind my home. Within two weeks, I found my "lost step." Without the football league, I might have missed an obvious omission in my training. I'm always amazed at how easily we can lose sight of the big picture when we keep a single focus. Open your eyes by opening up to new opportunities.

Part II: Intensification

The second part of our formula is "intensification." Throughout your career, you should keep adding new ideas and challenges to measure you as well as keep you interested. But, there does come a time where we
need to ramp up to the next level. Now, everybody knows this, it's as old as Milo and the calf. But, I bet the bulk of the people you meet in a typical gym never "ramp it up."

The training focus I use with the athletes I work with comes from Olympic wrestling champ, Dan Gable. Dan said, "If it's important, do it every day. If it isn't, don't do it at all." Now, I have to leave it to each and every person to decide what's important, but this statement certainly is a challenge.

I always use a simple question to clarify your answer to what's important. Let's say, for some reason, you found you could only train for a total of 45 minutes a week. Maybe you became a political prisoner or something. You'll only be able to get in three workouts of 15 minutes each. What will you do? Think this through; this is going to be the core to the intensification program.

Would you:

- Train your core on a large inflated ball?
- Be sure to stretch all your muscles so you don't strain anything?
- Walk on a treadmill and slowly let your pulse climb?
- Be sure to leave plenty of time to cool down?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, I'd suggest you not read any of my work. Obviously, with only three 15-minute workouts, you're going to cut to the core of what you need. Here's the key: whatever you answered to the "political prisoner question" is what you need to focus on during intensification.

Yes, that can be hard. If your answer was front squats (not a bad answer, really), you're telling me that you need to take front squats seriously when you train from now on. Certainly, doing front squats three days a week is a challenge.

Classic front squats.

When I discuss this with throwers, very often they realize that "throwers need to do full throws," yet when they look over their training journals they noticed that very little of their training is dedicated to the full movement.

I asked a famous basketball coach this question a few years ago and he instantly answered that this question ties into what he thinks wins games:
1. Free throws when you're tired.
2. Transition defense (I have no idea what it means, but he nodded really hard).

Then, after saying this, he smiled and said, "You know, I know this, but I don't think my athletes do."

How Do You Do It?

Let's put this into practice now. Here's how:

1. You can do the old Arnold trick: Work your weaknesses first in a workout. In this example, do the most important thing for your training first. I'd argue that perhaps twice a week you do nothing but whatever lifts or exercises that you answered to the political prisoner question. My wife, Tiffini, has a one line time management system: "If you have to eat a plate of frogs, eat the biggest one first."

2. Measure your workouts only by how you answered the political prisoner question. All the extra stuff is great but it's only the icing on the cake.

3. Using the lessons from some of the information you gathered during the accumulation phase, try to see if you're making improvements in the areas you found in need.

So, there's only one rule in intensification: Do what you say you need to do. Good luck.

Part III: Transformation

The final part of the AIT formula is "transformation." I like to think that I'm a master at coaching athletes in this phase. Simply, the transformation program is taking all the skills, lessons, and progress made through the other two parts and then...be careful with the following, it could hurt...using what you've accumulated and intensified toward your goals!

I don't think anyone has ever said that before: your training should, in some manner or form, lead you, at some level, to achieving your goals. Sorry, it's true: your training should lead somewhere, ideally, to your goals. All too often, most people's training has almost nothing to do with their goals!

Hey, if you want to meet a nice churchgoing girl, you might not find her on ten-cent wings night at the strip club. I'm not casting stones; I'm just putting out a discussion point. Most people train like that: they want to be Mr. Universe, but please pass the keg, the bong, and the chips, thank you very much.

Here's what I discovered while working with athletes for several decades: you need to back off and let success happen. (Caveat: You, of course, need to have done a little accumulating and tapping up the intensity). Now, everybody knows this.

One of the things we began to notice years ago is that our "peaking" athletes were getting a little pudgy, a tad bit soft. We also began to see that without a lot of direction, the athlete who'd trained so long and so well began to play pick-up basketball games (and lose the season to an ankle injury), volunteer for the couple's dance in the school production, or find some other way to destroy a few years of work.

This observation led to the "transformation program." We drifted back in time to the simplest, most basic program we could find: three sets of eight with one-minute rests. We also decided to move to the weekly format of "push-pull-squat," too. The best decision was to take all the best "stuff" we'd learned through the year and keep those new toys, skills, or drills as part of our package.
We also decided to keep a weekly "game" day, realizing that our athletes needed a low key competition as well as some fun. Soccer and flag football were the best choices as they included a lot of running, yet little contact. Indoor games with big, powerful athletes is not a good choice. Trust me.

So, a typical transformation week:

Day One: Push Day

(We assume some skill and tactical work every day. Body composition people can work on details.)

Military Press: 3 sets of 8 with one minute rests. Judge weight by the last rep of the last set. Don't be too gung-ho the first set.

Power Curls: 3 sets of 8 with one minute rests. Again, judge the weight by the last rep of the last set. The power curl is basically a power clean with a curl grip and you can use some seriously heavy weights. This isn't exactly a "push," but it works well with the press.

Some kind of isometric ab work. I'd recommend simply hanging from the pull-up bar with your knees rolled up to your chest for as long as you can.

Day Two: Leg Day

Same 3 sets of 8 with a minute rest for everything, but today is leg day. This will look easy on paper, but beware:

Front Squats: 3 sets of 8

Overhead Squats: 3 sets of 8

Assuming you do some skill work every day in your given sport, we added two hill sprints. Two sled pulls would be fine, too. That ain't much, folks, but it keeps you going.

Day Three: Games!
Have some fun playing ultimate frisbee or flag football.

Day Four: Pull Day

We found that the best of all "pulls" for the peaking athlete was the clean grip snatch. We also included the "whip snatch," a simple wide grip snatch that starts almost upright with the bar in the hip groove (the crotch).

**Clean Grip Snatch**: 3 sets of 8

![Clean Grip Snatch](image1)

**Whip Snatch**: 3 sets of 8

Day Five

A nice full warm up, whatever it takes to get you loose and feeling warm, then go home.

Day Six

A couple of easy hill runs. Works like a charm to prep for a contest.

Day Seven: Compete

That's it — compete. Go do your thing.

You can shift the days around to fit any order you like, but the principles are the key.

1. Stay tight on the diet and keep the workouts fast to keep some of the pudge off.
2. Don't try to go crazy and make some massive leap overnight. Enjoy the benefits of all the work up to this point.
3. Have some fun; enjoy yourself. Reap what you sow.

What you actually do here doesn't matter. The key is that you keep yourself "in shape" and not give away all your hard work by blowing an ankle in a pick-up game on the schoolyard. You might find, like I have, that the rewards of achieving your goals may outweigh winning the game some afternoon over your buddies.

Summary

1. Be open to new ideas and new experiences (such as reading T-Nation) and don't be afraid to plug in some fresh approaches to your training.
2. When you learn something new, check to see where you struggle. It might be a hint that this is an area to look into for your biggest goals.

3. Take time to think about the "political prisoner" question. What's important?

4. When you do decide to test yourself, ease off. However, continue to keep an eye on your waistline and your general fitness levels. Also, keep an outlet for your new levels of energy. Don't blow all your hard work on a lay-up on a school court.

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's 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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