"We hold these truths to be self-evident."

Thomas Jefferson was onto something with the Declaration of Independence. There are self-evident truths in the world of fitness and strength training, too. Here's the problem with them, though: you knew them once but forgot.

Seriously, you did.

Everything I'm about to discuss is information you once "knew," but somewhere along the line, someone convinced you (usually with slick marketing involving a lovely young thing in a bikini and lots of posing oil) that you were wrong.

Hey, we've all been there. I remember spending a lot of hard-earned money for a training program and a couple of cans of stuff that contained virtually undetectable amounts of amino acids. It only contained tiny amounts because the aminos were supposed to work "synergistically." Uh huh.

The training involved working out only after a 14 hour fast (so the body would be primed for an anabolic environment!) and a quick boost from "Miracle Fuel 5000" or whatever. The program involved four or more circuits of four or more exercises using drop-down sets, where you keep taking weight off the bar so you can keep going. The program promised "steroid like" results in only thirty days.

I gave it my best shot. I'd squat like a demon from hell on crystal meth, drop some plates off, give it another go, pull off a few more plates, squat again, then leap up and try to touch the ceiling for as many reps as I could get. Instead of resting, we were asked to stretch vigorously between sets to "allow more growth."

Good job. One set down, three to go... then three more circuits. Hey, I bought it. I tried it, I hated it, and I quit it. The money back guarantee worked just like this: If you could do that for three months and not make gains, you'd get your money back. But, what person in his right mind would do that to himself?

I promise you one thing about the "self-evident truths" that follow. They'll save you time, money, and embarrassment. Now, I can't promise miracles in thirty days (my miracles take about ninety days), but I can promise you that you'll feel smarter and realize that you can train longer... not just in minutes, but years.

The Self-Evident Truths

First Truth: You are just working out or playing a game. You aren't scaling K2.

Now, why do I say this? Go to any gym and look at what people are consuming. We have pre-workout drinks (900 calories), an oxygenated power drink to swallow while treadmilling (300 calories), an instant gel to sustain the first set of walking to the water fountain (500 calories), a candy bar and a power drink to survive the lat pulldowns (900 calories), and a post-workout drink to "get anabolic" (1200 calories). Total caloric intake: 3800 calories. Calories burned during training: 211.
You don't need this after walking on a treadmill for five minutes, folks.

A few years ago, my daughter, Lindsay, played in the county rec league for soccer. I'm actually thankful for the experience as Lindsay developed a lifelong loathing of anything related to this sport. Here's a nod to bad coaching and crazy parents! The thing that drove me mad about this particular team was that the parents and the coaching staff spent the bulk of our time at practice and parent meetings organizing the food and drinks.

I'm not kidding. We had rules, contact sheets, telephone lists, back-up parents, and probably twenty pages of information regarding food and drinks. The athletes consumed two or more fruits each game, a plethora of sport drinks, and finished with a treat. Again, they consumed far in excess of any calories they could have possibly burned off on the field of play. Generally, at least two of the girls sat on the field and picked petals off the dandelions.

Now, reconsider your intake. Do you really need to be sipping carbs while treadmilling? It's a warm-up, right? Do you need a sports bar (read: candy with protein) after doing a set of benches with ten minutes rest between sets? No, you don't.

There are a lot of us out there who used to train in the summer twice-a-day with a psycho coach who thought "water will make ya a pussy!" Twice per day, three hour practices, ninety degree weather, full pads, no water. That's one extreme. Don't go to the other extreme either.

Second Truth: Follow "Mom's Rules" First

Here's my ultra-secret training diet regime:

1. Eat breakfast every day.
2. Be sure to eat three meals a day.
3. If you're hungry an hour or so after a meal, you didn't eat enough protein.
4. Water should be your major beverage.
5. There's nothing that more fiber can't cure. (I might be betraying my age on that one.)

You've heard it all before from Mom. She was right. Do you follow it? I'm serious. Recently, I had an "athlete" pass out during one of my workouts. In fact, anyone who works with teens will tell you that our next generation of warriors doesn't last as long as their age would indicate. When the man-child came around, I
asked the question: "What have you eaten today."

It was two in the afternoon and he answered, "I had, like, five fries at lunch."

"Five servings?"

"No, just five."

No breakfast, no lunch, no snacks, and no protein. And the young lad shows up to train with me. Mom wouldn't have allowed that!

Here are a few more rules:

1. The hours you sleep before midnight are better than the hours after midnight. Sounds odd, but it's sure true. Now, my mom once said: "If it hasn't happened by ten o'clock, come home because it isn't happening." I was afraid to ask what she meant, because I knew what I was thinking. Anyway, try to get the bulk of your sleep while the sun is down.

2. Don't take supplements if you don't buckle your seat belt. (Think this one through from a cost-to-benefit perspective.)

3. Be careful what you wish for, because it might come true. You want to put on 50 pounds? Just wait. The last time I visited the mall it seemed everybody had figured out how to put on 50 to 100 pounds.

Third Truth: There's pain and there's being injured. Learn the difference.

I have a sliding scale concerning pain. Just about everyone I know has had this happen: you get up in the morning, walk around, and catch one of your toes on a chair leg. Your eyes roll back in your head, you drop F-bombs like a B-2, and you can barely focus on anything but the blinding pain. A minute later, you're fine.

It's the same with a "brain freeze." As teenagers, we used to go over to a little place called Carl's and order up something called a "slush." It was filled with tiny ice balls and imitation flavoring. When we hear the word "go" we'd race to the bottom of the cup. (Yes, we were stupid, but we were also bored.) Halfway down, I'd become incapacitated by brain freeze and try to soldier on. Ah, youth.

Folks, that's pain. It comes in all forms. Recently, I worked with a young man who went to a therapist the morning after a high school football game. He was informed that he had some kind of "serious blood contusion formenting the rheonarcissism of the conobal antordia."

"What?" I asked.
"Well, it seems I have some blood in my muscles," he said. I silently thought that this would actually be a good thing.

Another coach and I examined him again. By Zeus, my good friends at T-Nation, he had a bruise! What a champion! Fortunately, modern medicine has been able to solve the great mystery of sports: getting whacked by another human (or anything else really) leads to a bruise. Do nothing to it for a few days and it'll magically disappear. I'll send my bill.

Injured is different. I've joked a few times that "surgery is nature's way of telling you to slow down." Injuries require medical attention, often medical intervention. Soreness, some bruising, and scraped knees dictate the following medical procedures: do what mom used to tell you to do. There's going to be some pain on the journey to reach your goals.

Back to our sliding scale of pain. Often, a sign that there's an injury is that the athlete actually feels nothing. I was once the first person to arrive to help a guy who'd been driving a bullet bike at extreme speeds. He ran into the rear wheel of another car and did his best imitation of the ski jumper on the Wide World of Sports opening. When I got there, I noticed he was in shorts and a tank top. He no longer had kneecaps, shoulders, elbows, and the bulk of his blood. Don't worry, he looked up and told me he was fine.

Often, one of the big signs of injury is that it doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt right away. Rule one: Stop what you're doing. Rule two: Go see somebody who can help you. Rule three: Do what they say.

Fourth Truth: That's not what they meant.

We rarely get the real story. The best example of this is "aerobics." The first thing to remember is that Dr. Ken Cooper invented the word in 1968 to mean, well, whatever it means to us today. Unfortunately for American health, the jogging wave that emerged from this book also coincided with the high carbohydrate diet craze, and Americans are proudly fatter than any generation in our history.

But, in Cooper's defense, the original program suggested building up to a quarter mile "run/walk" over a few weeks. Getting up to a mile might take you the better part of the year or longer. You see, Cooper was talking
about one thing, but what most people heard was something else.

He later came out with books (largely ignored) that advocated supplements and lifting weights. Your crazy neighbor who wakes up every day to stretch out for the better part of an hour, then runs for a quick marathon and finishes it up with several bowls of cereal and a soda is a far cry from the original teachings of Cooper.

The same truth can be found in bodybuilding. I had the great opportunity a few decades ago to train in the same room as Robbie Robinson, Lou Ferrigno, Danny Padilla, and a host of other bodybuilding legends. One of the small truths that I picked up that day is that none of them were doing anything remotely like what I read in the magazines... especially the mag that has the owner's head stuck on top of a statue of Robbie Robinson's body.

I mean, the guys trained... normal. Lou was in the corner using half of California for calf raises. Padilla was doing a bunch of variations of rows but nothing like the magazines claimed. And Robinson? He was simply working out like everybody else I'd ever seen.

Yet when the muscle magazines reported their training (if not just made up from thin air), it usually reported last minute detail work for a major competition. The bulk of the top bodybuilders training, as Robinson told me, was basically getting the big lifts done and striving for more weight and more reps with more weight. I know this is true.
Hey Lou, I'm gonna say in my magazine that you do 78 sets of pec deck five times per week. You just nod, okay?

I can't tell you how many young Highland Games athletes have asked me, "Waddaya bench?" Calmly, I tell them they need to do this and that to become a better Highland Gamer. "Do you ever bench?" they ask. Well, sure, I tell them. The next day they post on an internet forum: "Dan John sez all you need is bench, bro."

In other words, it's always worth getting to the source before you run a marathon carrying a barbell with jump shoes on.

The Fifth Truth: I can tell everything about your training... by what you do first.

There are a few simple things that I can guarantee will lead to you achieving your goals. First, keep a food log of everything that you eat and drink in the next month. Figure out your calories, your carbs, your fats, and your proteins. Then, be honest.

The second thing is simply this: work your legs first the whole month. It's that simple. Squat deep or do deadlifts (or realistic variations like front squats) the first thing for a month. Unfortunately, many of you will nod about the food diary, agree it's a grand and glorious idea, then forget it. It's the other idea, working your legs first, that we might be able to pull off.

Throughout my time in coaching and training, no other observation has been more important: whatever you do in the first ten percent of your workouts will determine your level of success for the long haul. Honestly, can you even imagine the Arnold of Pumping Iron hopping on a treadmill with a carb drink and a headset cranked up to Brittany Spears?

Well, I can't. Get in the gym and start doing front squats. Give it an honest five sets of five with the weight rising each set. Then, do whatever you like. Really, it won't be long before you find the quality of your workouts and your body improving before your eyes.

Dull, Boring, and the Keys to Your Success

These are the self-evident truths. These are ideas that are so dull and boring, we like to ignore them. But, they're also the pillars of elite training. Following the self-evident truths might prevent you from being the person in the spandex pants gumming carb gel while peddling three miles per hour next to grandma on the stationary bike.

Don't be that guy.

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.

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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