Lunchroom Purgatory

There's a movie, *Office Space*, that didn't do very well when it first came out, but became an "underground" success in DVD rentals and sales. The reason most of us like the movie is because, well, it describes our work day.

"Hawaiian Shirt Day," endless weekly birthday parties, and all the paperwork for a meaningless job seems to define some of us. But there was one thing missing: they forgot to discuss lunch at work.

Lunch at work could be a movie itself. I've had the following scene happen literally dozens of times. I sit down to eat lunch. I'd appreciate little or no conversation. By God, I just want to eat my damn tuna fish, chunk down my salad that was a good idea four hours ago, and eat those two pears that I swear were yellowish green when I put them in my lunch sack.

As all of us know, my hope of little conversation ain't gonna happen. "You know, if you substituted yogurt for mayo on the tuna fish, you could save thirteen grams of fat," says the co-worker on my right. Across from her, another one chimes in: "But then you have to be careful with the carb count. That's why I toss in a bit of sour cream with the yogurt and add spices."

For some past sin of either omission or commission, I've been sentenced to eat every meal with a "fat counter" and a "carb counter." Ah, each of these ladies has locked into their brain volumes of information concerning every food and possible way to prepare each, and every food and the corresponding fat and carb grams associated with these foods. I'm just trying to eat my damn tuna.

Later that day, during the afternoon break, we celebrated (for the fourth time that week) another staff birthday. Out came the goodies, treats, and cake, plus the vending machine was opened up so we could enjoy some cold beverages. As usual, I was offered a piece of lard with sugar and politely said, "No."

My two coworkers who argued for the better part of forty minutes about prepping tuna fish with sour cream versus yogurt versus imitation sour cream and yogurt, well, they consumed pieces of cake (the lard and sugar confection) large enough to be declared sovereign states by the United Nations.

Here's what I've discovered about most of us: If we were given a thirty question test about nutrition, most of us could correctly answer questions regarding vitamins, minerals, and amino acids. (Hell, we could answer questions on Vitamin C use in barometric chambers!)

And there's the problem. Take the same person who fully understands amino acid barriers and ask him to go into his kitchen and make a good breakfast and you might find him lost. (For the record, grab the eggs and a little cream, whip them up, and have some scrambled eggs.)

You "Know" What To Do

The same exact problem hits most of us with our training. With the modern issue of the "big box gym," where you're literally in a facility that houses perhaps one hundred machines and countless dumbbells, bars, spinners, climbers, walkers, and rowers, you might find yourself like my two officemates: you know what to do; you have the info; you read T-Nation, but you end up eating cake and drinking soft drinks each workout.
Folks, I'm here to help you with this issue. Oh, what's the issue? You "know" what to do in terms of strength training, body composition work, fitness improvement, and fat loss techniques. But, you can't apply this knowledge because:

1. Your machine doesn't look like the machine in the picture in the magazine.

2. In your spa, whenever you're trying to do squats mixed with jumps, by the time you get a drink someone has taken all your weight off the bar and is staring at his "guns" while doing curls in the squat rack. (Oh, he's also wearing a "doo" rag on his head, fingerless gloves, a weight belt, Spandex pants, a muscle shirt, and cranking the tunes on his iPod. While curling 45 pounds.)

3. You like the workout that you saw in T-Nation, but you don't know how to do _______ (fill in the blank). It could be Romanian deadlifts, clean grip snatches, reverse batwing flying Hungarian side twists...you know the issue.

4. You're convinced that "if I could just afford _______ (again, fill in the blank), then I could make progress."

I've been there. I remember nearly quitting lifting when the Nautilus machines first came out and were advertised in massive spreads in athletic and bodybuilding magazines. Some of the ads were over a dozen pages long. As a kid, how could I argue with such overwhelming evidence...all these ads said I must purchase a full line of machines to train on every third week, otherwise I'd never achieve any success!

Your Training Assets

Let me suggest a few ideas to help out. First, and maybe there's no second, is to do something that I've been doing since the Nixon Administration. Ready? It's simply this:

Write down your "training assets." What? All I'm asking you to do is to write down what you have to train with in your home, your neighborhood, and your place of lifting worship. Do you remember that ab roller you bought from the late night girl in the Lycra tube top on television? Write it down. Doorway chin-up bar? Write it down. Track near the house? Park within walking distance? List what you have.

If you take the twenty minutes to do this, you'll be well on your way to begin the process of "applying what you know." Within walking distance of my home and work, I have three "par-courses" available to me.

The concept of combining basic callisthenic moves to walking or running (I almost said "jogging," please forgive me) began in the 1970's. It's a wonderful idea: you walk for a hundred meters and then do dips. After that, you saunter over to pull-ups, push-ups, bar jumps, squats, and a host of other things.

Here's what's wrong with it: it's free, open 24 hours a day, never crowded, a great workout, a wonderful way to train, and probably one of the best ways to burn fat I know.
Now, you may ask, what's wrong with that?

Well, you don't have the guy in his doo-rag doing curls with a weight that a ten year old girl tosses around in her purse. There might not be one hot babe doing steppers either! And no one to hassle you about lifetime memberships or the rules that don't allow you to use chalk in the gym.

In other words, you might have some great resources for your fitness goals passing you by each time you drive to the gym. Listen, I think many of us think this way: if it's free or simple or easy to understand, it can't be as good as something that's expensive, complicated, and difficult to figure out on your own.

Buy a Box

After reviewing the neighborhood, look at what you own. About a year ago, I went to a discount store and bought a "storage box" for lawn tools and put a lot of my stuff in there. Why? Because the moment I saw what I had lying literally all over the place and put it all in one spot, I realized just how good my home gym had become in the past few years. Not including my weights, bars, and various lifting pieces, this $24 box contains:

1. A set of farmer bars
2. A set of thick handled farmer bars
3. Cones
4. Volleyball net
5. Soccer balls, footballs, volleyballs
6. An assortment of medicine balls
7. A huge array of throwing implements from highland games to track and field
8. A couple of kettlebells
9. A sled for dragging stuff
10. An 85 pound stone for running and carrying and throwing
11. A 150 pound backpack for lugging around
12. Various pieces of PVC and broomsticks for whatever comes up
Here's a great workout: Empty the contents of the box and do everything at least once and make up a couple of combinations of things, like dragging a sled while carrying farmer bars...and call it a day. This, in fact, is one of the reasons people fly from all over the place to train with me. I show them how to piece together a workout with practically anything you can find.

Not convinced? Try this workout, a typical workout my athletes perform about three times a month:

Do 15 overhead squats with only PVC. Upon completion, sprint 200 meters. Repeat three to five times, finishing with a last set of overhead squats.

Overhead Squat
Sprint 200 meters
Overhead Squat
Sprint 200 meters
Overhead Squat
Sprint 200 meters
Overhead Squat

Some may recognize this as the workout named "Nancy," but the amazing thing is that I've had elite level athletes go quite pale with this quick workout.

Somehow, this combination seems to make the legs and cardiovascular system stage some kind of rebellion, even without guns and rum. The PVC barely registers during the first set, but by the last set it seems too much to ask.

I've also found that I can get a great workout just by playing with my gym toys. Sure, just by doing pull-ups, some kettlebells swings, some one-arm lifts, and some deadlifts, you can get a fantastic workout. A year or so ago, I decided to push the idea of "gym toys" a little farther. I decided to train for an Olympic lifting meet by organizing my toys.

At the time, I owned a thick Olympic bar, a good standard Olympic bar, one set of chains, and a nice box, the kind you find in powerlifting for box squats. I designed this simple program:

Day One:
Snatches (a power snatch followed by an overhead squat followed by a hang squat snatch followed by a full squat snatch): 8 sets
Front squats with chains: 8 sets of two with a reasonable weight

Day Two:
Thick bar deadlifts: 8 sets of "as many" with a good solid weight.
Military press with chains seated on the box: 8 sets of five (Note: If you don't sit on something, the chains don't really work; they just swing back and forth).

Now, don't worry about the exercises or how to do them. Focus on the concept: I was training in my garage...
with a minimal investment in equipment, but having a "cutting edge" workout. In other words, take what you spend on your spa membership and buy stuff for your home gym!

Taking an honest look at your local free fitness assets, combining them with what you already have around the house, and making a thoughtful investment or two in training equipment, might be the single best thing you ever do for your particular goals.

Master The Lifts

The second bit of advice is something that I've wanted to shout to T-Nation readers for the past few months: Write down the list of lifts that you've mastered. Now, when I say "mastered," I have some funny thoughts that this would include certain lifting standards to go along with it. For this assignment, I'll give you one or two examples of the standards.

So, do you know the Olympic lifts (snatch, clean and jerk)? Variations of these lifts? The powerlifts (squat, bench press, and deadlift)? Classic bodybuilding lifts? Classic bodyweight exercises like pull-ups, burpees, push-ups? You know, gym class? How many kinds of squats and deadlift variations do you know?

This is just a rough list, but very helpful. I think that "mastery" would be a double bodyweight deadlift and a bodyweight press as a simple standard. Certainly it can be more than this, but you get the idea: don't critique the world record holder if you can't lift the PVC.

One of my favorite workouts is simply listing these exercises, then doing one of those lifts each day for a few weeks. (See the One Lift a Day Program for a better explanation). Oh, and by the way, don't dismiss just doing pull-ups only for the better part of half an hour. Try it. Wait, before you do, get a buzz cut haircut: you might not be able to reach up to comb for a few days.

Review The Best Programs

My final piece of advice to transform "what you know into what you do" is to reread your favorite T-Nation articles, your favorite magazine training programs, and perhaps your favorite book training programs, and look at them through the lens of our first two points:

1. Do I have this equipment and environment available to me?

2. Do I know how to do the exercises and movements involved in this training program?

Environment is extremely important. Let's be honest, quality football players come from Texas and Florida year in and year out because of the expectations and amazing level of competition. Like it or not, your chances of making the NBA from a small town in Utah are rather low unless you're sneaking up on eight feet in height.

In fitness, California seems to have certain built-in benefits for bodybuilders. Beyond the beach and quick access to Mexico, there's no question that the worst bodybuilders in some gyms in SoCal are far beyond the best in most parts of the world.

As you review your classic favorite programs, I'd suggest two directions. If you find a recommendation for a piece of equipment that you don't have, I'd substitute it for something else. Sure, the glute-ham raise is a cool thing to have, but reverse hypers are pretty good, too. No reverse hyper? Then do Romanian deadlifts.

Now, if you don't know how to do Romanian deadlifts or any other exercise on your favorite program, I'd
first argue to "learn the lift!" The time spent learning a new lift (or even a new sport) will be an investment in pure gold over the course of your career.

Certainly, you can modify, but the discipline and skills learned in mastering a new movement will provide amazing benefits throughout your life. For example, once you push bodyweight over your head, it's a breeze to bench press the same amount.

Summary

To summarize, I don't want to appear "anti-gym." I'm not. I'm not anti-fitness magazine either. What I want you to learn is how to apply this knowledge into your training. How?

1. Make an honest assessment of the tools you have available to you. You might be amazed, as I was, to find that you have accumulated a small fortune in training equipment. Use it in fun and creative ways.

2. Make an honest assessment of what you know how to do. If you have serious gaps, like you don't know how to squat and deadlift, take care of that today. Try to learn a new lift or a new sport at least once every few months.

3. Finally, after making these two assessments, review the articles and training programs that seem to mean a lot to you. Challenge yourself to not only master these programs, but to improve upon them.

Oh, and if I'm wrong, I'll eat my words. It seems that if I mix sour cream with yogurt...

About the Author

Dan John is the 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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