PVC Philosophy

I recently started a new job at a high school. In my first few minutes on the job, it all made sense. What made sense? The reason people are herded to the treadmills, steppers, and cycles for twenty minutes to warm up; the long stretching periods where hyperflexible Barbies stretch beyond what anything in real life could ever demand; the whistle blowing coach who announces "two laps!"

You see, class had started for me for the first time in a decade. Taking roll ate up about a minute and I was left with an hour and twenty minutes to eat up time with 65 students. Fortunately, it wouldn't be simple. Sure, half the class was varsity football players with years of perfect technical training and a wealth of knowledge about all the particulars of lifting and training (at least, that's what I was lead to believe).

But what about the freshman girls who were also in the class, and the ten "international" students who were here on exchange and spoke as much English as I spoke Korean, Croatian, Japanese, and Chinese?

In that moment, nothing would've been easier than to have them all lumber away for a few laps of joint crushing and fast-twitch fiber-sapping jogging followed by a half hour of injury-inducing overstretching. It would've been so easy.

(Time passes... fall comes. People marry and die. The instructor goes about transforming his students... )

Six weeks later, I walked into the same room. On this day, all the students were holding four to six foot lengths of PVC pipe. The room looked like a scene from Revenge of the Sith except, you know, interesting. Nobody, however, will practice their "light saber skills." That is being punished. Being "punished" is bad.

After roll call, "Sticks up!" The whole room grabs the PVC pipes with a snatch grip and everybody does three sets of eight in the overhead squat. The "Down on a knee!" command orders the class into a hip flexor stretch.

"Up position!" readies everyone for pushups--clapping pushups or pushups with feet elevated on a box. Again, three sets of eight before we move on to pull-ups (three sets of eight) and medicine ball abdominal throws (one set of 25).

Ten minutes after taking roll, we have a class of 65 warmed up and ready to go. This, my friends, is the warm-up. It's more work than most of my athletes usually do during their practice sessions. Now, we begin!

Paradigm Shifts and Presuppositions

Great, you might say, but how will the organization of some high school weight lifting classes help me? I have a simple albeit clichéd answer: paradigm shift. Let me just say this: Having a roomful of people stare you in the eye with a look that says, "Okay, what's next?" makes you reconsider everything you know about strength training.

The world-changing paradigm shift for me is that I realized that certain aspects of my training are comfortable. Certainly, they are hard; no question about that. Pulling a loaded sled with a 150-pound backpack while holding two 100-pound dumbbells is hard. Just getting the stuff going is one step from sticking your hand in magma.
Yes, it's hard, but I became very comfortable with my "presuppositions." (My toilet paper with the "big word of the day" printed on the sheets comes in very handy at times.) Here are some of my presuppositions:

1. When we move from the front squat to an upper body exercise, the athlete will have an incredible cardiovascular hit.
My athletes: "What's a front squat?"

2. The snatch and clean & jerk are both essential lifts and fundamental to athletic success.
My athletes: "What?"

3. The athlete needs to eat fiber and protein at every meal and supplement with fish oil capsules.
My athletes: "Coach, what foods have protein? I couldn't find any on the side of the bag."

Folks, I'm telling you that this is the reason your personal trainer tosses you on a treadmill, makes you do the ab/ad leg machine, and insists upon twenty minutes of stretching before and after anything you do; there's a lot of teaching that needs to go on before you can even begin to train. And, both the coach and the athlete want results now, not some basic beginner level introductory BS that they're well past because, well, damn it, they're special!

Rethinking Your Presupps

What I'd like to challenge you to do is to begin rethinking your presuppositions. Here at T-Nation, you can literally browse hundreds of articles in a few minutes and look at dozens of workouts and training ideas. Yet, how do you apply these ideas? I have three areas that I want you to address:

1. How do you approach "learning" a new lift, exercise, or sport?
2. How do you gauge the intensity of all your training?
3. When we talk about nutrition, do you think supplements, diet, and food or "whatever is set before me I consume?"

Let's look at a typical workout from my facility:

Warm-up

Overhead squat (with PVC pipe): 3 sets of 8

Hip flexor stretch

Push-ups (3 sets of 8)

Medicine ball ab throws (1 sets of 25)

Pull-ups (3 sets of 8)

A minute or so to stretch anything "tight"
For time:

10 Dumbbell squats
10 Swings (with the same dumbbell)
10 Dumbbell squats
10 Swings
10 Dumbbell squats
10 Swings (just about everyone finishes under two minutes)

Workout of the Day

Front squats with chains
Bench press with chains
Pull-ups
Box jumps (a variety of boxes used)
Deadlifts
We do these in "conga line" style: one athlete starts at the front squat, then over to the bench, then pull-ups, then box jumps, then, finally, deadlifts. Once the first athlete finishes the front squats, the second starts front squatting, then follows the first athlete through the workout.

The reps are: 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1. We have five squat stations, five bench stations, seven places for pull-ups, about twelve boxes, and nine deadlift options. The front squats and bench presses are loaded up to 95 (not including chains) on the heaviest station and the heaviest deadlift bar is 185.

An athlete can change lines to increase or decrease the load, and the loads are as light as 35 pounds on the "easy" station. To finish off this workout, we do an isometric abdominal hold on the floor and a quick walk with dumbbells (farmers bars).

The number of skills required to do this "simple workout" is larger than you might first think. Note this: we don't have snatches or cleans or overhead presses on this day; this is considered a volume day. The teaching progression needed to teach the quick lifts takes coordination, foresight, and patience by the coach.

The warm-up alone will confuse many people. Let's be honest here, I answer dozens of emails a month about the Olympic lifts and the biggest stumbling point is the overhead squat. Yet my athletes have learned them in just a few weeks. Why? We do them every day! Everybody does them.

I tell the students this: "Look around. If everybody is doing one thing and you're doing something else, maybe you got it wrong. Fix it!"

Lesson One about Presuppositions: You might have been wrong the first time. The tenth time, too. If squats make your knees hurt, maybe what you're doing isn't squats, but simply your own version of knee-ripping knee bends. Stop. Relearn.

Lesson Two about Presuppositions: If a world class athlete is doing a drill, lift, exercise, or whatever, and you get "nothing" from it, consider two things: one, see lesson above. Two, and more important, maybe you aren't doing it at a very high level.

True, you can get a whale of a workout with PVC pipe. Doubt me? Do this:

Take a PVC pipe to an outdoor track. Do 15 deep overhead squats. Sprint a lap. Repeat this five times and finish with 15 deep overhead squats. If you don't walk at all and you honestly run, you should finish this under ten minutes, maybe nine. Do this and learn the power of PVC!

Back to lesson two, though. Maybe you aren't doing it at a high level. My first day with my varsity football athletes I tell them this: "I expect everyone on the field to be able to bench press 200 pounds and deadlift 400. By the way, whatever you bench, you should front squat and clean, too." So, day one and the prospective football player looks at this list:

Bench press: 200
Front squat: 200
Clean: 200
Deadlift: 200

Every time I post strength standards, I always get one fretful email: "Danny, I'm an adult and I can't do these lifts!" This will be followed by a seven page description of the guy's current training protocol including the letters "A" and "B" and several mentions of cadence and joint rehab work.

My answer: You're too damn weak. Toss out all that crap and add some plates! Which leads us to the next presupposition...

"I think I'm advanced."

Have you trained more than a year?

"No."

Not advanced. Can you bench bodyweight?

"I'm working toward it."

Sorry, not advanced.

To me, an advanced lifter:

1. Has competed in one of the strength sports: bodybuilding, Olympic lifting, powerlifting, or strongman.
2. Doesn't get his information from magazines at the airport.
3. Can look at one of my typical workouts for high school athletes and complete it without trouble.
4. Has at least pressed bodyweight and deadlifted double bodyweight.
5. Understands that food and supplements are partners in diet, but one can't live on creatine and beer alone.

Give me four out of five, at least, before I consider you advanced.

Learning New Stuff

So, let's review the three presuppositions concerning "learning new stuff."

1. You might have been doing it wrong since the first time you tried something. You've simply been repeating "wrong."
2. You might be doing something "right," but at such a low level you might consider not doing this anymore.
3. You might think you're advanced and able to skip the beginning steps, but really you're just beginning. Beginners, by definition, should start at the beginning. I'm not making this up.

With this in mind, let me make some suggestions about what I want you to consider over the next few workouts, weeks, and months.
Using the presuppositions list, let's review these:

1. How do you approach learning a new lift, exercise, or sport?

2. How do you gauge the intensity of all your training?

Presupposition One: Is it possible that my technique in lifting is truly wrong or simply really bad? You know, it took breaking my wrist into a lot of pieces to make me reconsider how I do the Olympic lifts. As a fairly successful lifter, I relearned the lifts and discovered a terrible truth: I could've been very, very good if I would've relearned the lifts when I was younger and healthier.

For those of you who carry the flame of "train to failure," how do you really determine failure? I've been involved in an interesting challenge several times in my life: squat bodyweight for reps. Simply slap on bodyweight, do as many squats as you can, then put out a number.

I was thinking I was great at twenty reps until a buddy of mine did thirty. At the next contest, I did fifty to win (ultimately, I did 51 with 225). What was the difference between "failure" and "failure?" Someone else doing more.

Presupposition Two: I knew some guys once who won the local church league basketball tournament. They were watching the video of their game at the same time they had the Utah Jazz game on television. One guy said to me, "You know, we thought we were great, but we were so slow and so bad compared to the pros that we had to turn the video off. It sorta ruined the party."

Wise man. These guys, in their defense, were doing a lot "right," but at a low level. It could apply to you, too. I had "illumination" simply by sitting at a local Olympic lifting meet as an 18 year old. After seeing real lifters lift, I knew that being the strongest kid on my block really didn't matter that much. Short advice: Get out there and compare.

Presupposition Three: Occasionally, restart your training with the Zen notion of the "beginner's mind." Find a book or T-Nation article that has a two week beginner's program and follow it. Have a buddy watch your lifting technique and allow comments. Hey, here's one: During a pull-up, go from straight arms to chin over the bar. Really, try it that way. It's called the "right way."

Nutritional Presuppositions

Now let's look at our presuppositions list with nutrition:

Presupposition One: You might have been doing it wrong since the first time you tried something. You've simply been repeating "wrong."

The great example of this is guys who try macro-diet cycling – you know, five days of zero carbs, two days of high carbs or whatever. During those days of zero carbs, they drink protein drinks twice a day that include massive amounts of sugars/carbs. A total disconnect that never seems to connect!

Oh, I could go on forever: people who eat fruit for protein, avoid fiber because it's starchy... don't get me started. Basically, take five minutes to read a high school health textbook on diet and get the basics squared away.

Presupposition Two: You might be doing something "right," but at such a low level you might consider not doing it anymore.
This is more common than you think. Somebody goes on the Atkins diet and has one egg for breakfast. Lunch is a piece of string cheese. Dinner is nine pizzas.

Hey, if you're going the low carb route, gorge yourself on bacon and eggs, cheese, duck, chicken, tuna, steak, and a celery stalk, then worry about hunger after six o'clock! If you're going to eat, *eat*.

Presupposition Three: You might think you're "advanced" and able to skip the beginning steps.

My universal short list for all dieting advice:

1. Eat protein at every meal.
2. Eat fiber at every meal.
3. Take fish oil capsules.
4. Drink a lot of water.
5. Eat at least three meals a day, never missing breakfast.

Yep, beginner stuff. Which of the rules do you break every day? Take a few honest weeks of following the basics of diet and you might be amazed at your results.

Conclusion

You could argue that this is just another one of those "back to basics" articles and ignore some of these simple tools that can revitalize your training. Just don't let your presuppositions strangle your career.

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. Dan will also be speaking at the upcoming DC Test Fest.

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