



Model: Dan Decker

For many people a new year commonly comes with the resolution to get in shape. Perhaps you're new to bodybuilding, or perhaps you're coming back after an extended layoff. Either way, this article will provide a rock-solid strategy so you can proceed and succeed during your first three months.

[Note: Before you start—or restart—exercising, visit your doctor to get his or her consent. Remember, weight training can be an intense physical activity.]

The Six-Point Plan

Here's what you need for bodybuilding success:

1) Great desire to improve your physique and training. Establish training consistency right from the first week. Fix your workout days and times, and then never skip a workout unless you're sick.

2) Appropriate training routines—practical routines for busy people.

3) Correct exercise technique and smooth, controlled rep speed.

4) Full satisfaction, every day, of the components of recuperation from training—nutrition, rest and sleep—and the adoption of a healthful lifestyle. It's imperative that you stay healthy. Without your health you can't train hard and consistently.

5) Progressive poundages—increase your exercise weights *gradually*.

6) Apply points 2 through 5 with persistence and patience.

Bodybuilding Beginnings

A Quick-Start Program for Beginners—
or a Fresh Start for Getting Back to the
Gym

by **Stuart McRobert**

Photography by Michael Neveux

The Training Routine

Choose two well-spaced training days, such as Tuesday and Saturday or Wednesday and Sunday. By scheduling one workout on the weekend, you may have the chance, at least one day a week, to train at a time that's optimal for you.

The routine has three major components: strength training, **stretching** and cardio work. Doing all three at each workout simplifies training and may be an especially useful approach for beginners.

Here's the four-part structure of exercise in the gym, to be done in this order:

- 1) General warmup
- 2) Weight work/strength training
- 3) **Stretching**
- 4) Cardio work

Start out conservatively with any type of exercise routine or with any change in a routine. Your body has tremendous abilities of adaptation—provided that you start out comfortably and *gradually* increase the demands. That applies to *all* forms of physical training.

1) General warmup

This should be a constant before every weight-training session—even if it's warm when you train. Spend five to 10 minutes on a zero-impact piece of cardio equipment, such as a rower, stationary bike or ski machine. A full-body exerciser—rower or ski machine—is preferable to a lower-body-only piece because you warm up your entire body. Start out slowly, and increase the pace sufficiently that you break into a sweat within five minutes. The aim is to slightly elevate your core temperature.

Note: The older you are—or the colder it is—the more time and care you should devote to the general warmup.

You want to get a good sweat going during your general warmup.



Stretch after your weight-training workout.

Model: Jim Shebler



Spend five to 10 minutes on a zero-impact piece of cardio equipment before you train.

Model: Tamer Eishahat

2) Weight work

Most bodybuilders don't invest the necessary time in learning correct exercise technique and ingraining it into their subconscious before they start training hard. Without knowing it, they learn poor exercise technique at best and awful technique at worst. Then, using poor technique, they add weight to the bar too fast and build up to intensive training over just a few weeks.

The combination of poor technique and intensive training produces a vicious circle: injury, missed workouts, recovery, reinjury and so on. And that produces frustration, disillusionment and loss of passion for training. It's no surprise that many people give up training within 12 months of starting.

The conservative approach I recommend leads to consistent progress without setbacks. Use an abbreviated routine, focus on learning and ingraining correct exercise technique over the early months, incrementally build up exercise weights and intensity (without compromising technique), avoid injury and doggedly apply patience and persistence. Make haste slowly.

**Week 1
(Full-body routine performed twice a week)**

- 1) Squats: bare Olympic bar (45 pounds, or 20 kilos), 2 x 8
- 2) Standing calf raises: 40 pounds or 20 kilos, 2 x 15
- 3) Bench presses: bare Olympic bar (45 pounds, or 20 kilos), 2 x 8
- 4) Deadlifts: bare Olympic bar (45 pounds, or 20 kilos), 2 x 8
- 5) Seated back-supported dumbbell presses: 10-pound or 5-kilo dumbbells, 2 x 8
- 6) Pulldowns: 40 pounds or 20 kilos, 2 x 8
- 7) Dumbbell shrugs: 20-pound or 10-kilo dumbbells, 2 x 8
- 8) Seated dumbbell curls: 10-pound or 5-kilo dumbbells, 2 x 8
- 9) Basic crunches: no weight, 2 x 12



Learn and maintain correct form from the beginning.

Model: Rehan Jalali

Routine Notes

- When you see 2 x 8, that means you do two sets of eight reps, with a rest between sets.
- Rest 60 seconds between sets of exercises 2 and 5 through 9. Rest 90 seconds between sets of exercises 1, 3 and 4.

- On the deadlifts don't let the bar descend past the midshin point—or a little higher; ideal placement depends on individual body proportions. Use a power rack and set the long pins at a point where, when the barbell rests on them, it's at the midshin point or slightly higher.
- Remember to use correct ex-

Use controlled movement and try to feel the target muscle contracting.



Calf Raises



Squats

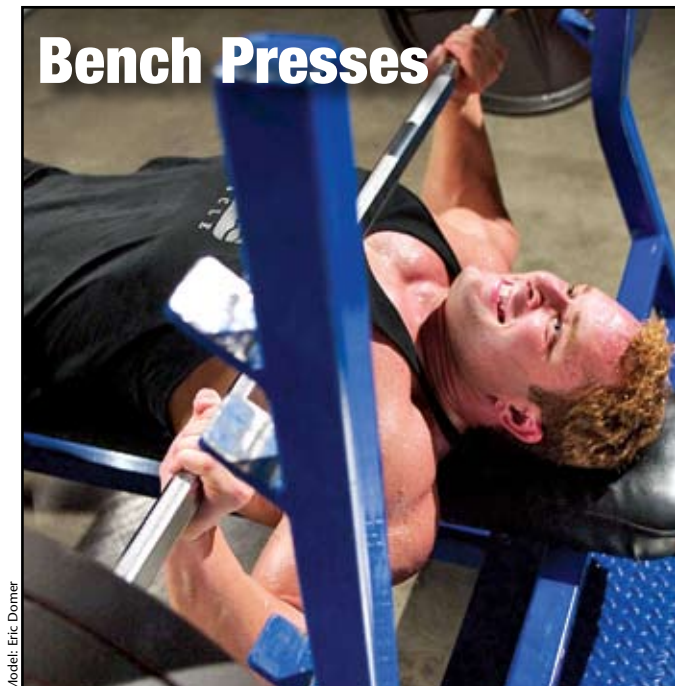


Model: Darryl Cree



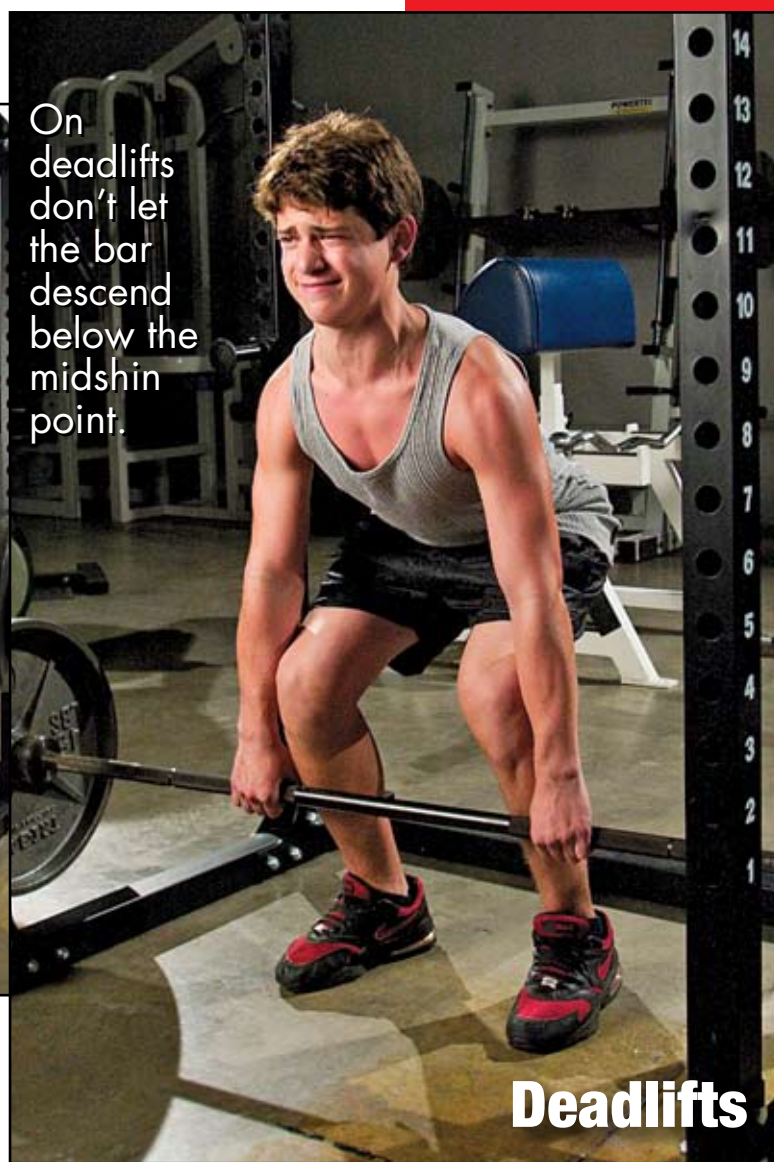
Don't get impatient. Make weight increases slowly and gradually. The big exercises will progress at a faster pace than the smaller ones.

Bench Presses



Model: Eric Domer





On deadlifts don't let the bar descend below the midshin point.

Deadlifts

Model: Justin Balik

ercise technique and a controlled, smooth rep speed no faster than two to three seconds up and another two to three seconds down—no exceptions.

•Start a training log. Buy one that's already designed for that purpose, or get a notebook and design your own. Record precisely what you do in each workout, especially the weights you use and the reps you perform on each set. An accurate log is essential because it tells you exactly what you did last time around and what you need to do next time to notch up progress. You also need a record of equipment setup details—such as which holes in the power rack you set the long pins in for your deadlifts.

•The suggested starting weights are for typical adult males. Most women will want to start with about half the weight listed. You may, however, have to adjust the weights for you. They must feel very light. If any weight feels anything other than very light, reduce it.

The above full-body routine mixes multijoint movements with

single-joint moves. The weights are minimal because the emphasis during the initial months is on technique. You must not strain at this stage because pushing too intensely, too early, is a death sentence for correct exercise technique. And you can't ingrain the habits of correct technique with just a few workouts.

You must learn what correct exercise technique is for each movement and then practice it. Incorrect exercise technique is the norm in most gyms. Don't assume that others in the gym practice correct exercise technique or even know what it is.

At least for your first few months of training it would be ideal if you worked out at quiet times so that you don't feel self-conscious or pressured by others.



Model: Jonathan Lawson

Shrugs



If you don't complete your target reps and sets comfortably, you haven't qualified for a weight increase at your next workout.



Seated Presses

What If You're Not a Beginner?

If you've been training for a few weeks or months, consider yourself a beginner, and follow the routine as written. Even if you're had a long layoff, follow the guidelines as written, but you can increase the exercise poundages a little faster. Don't rush, though, or you'll injure yourself and perhaps end up with an enforced layoff.

If you've trained in the past, you'll al-

most certainly have technique errors to correct. Learn correct technique first, and then build up the weights gradually. That's one of the reasons it's necessary to restart as a beginner. The other reason is to condition your body to the rigors of exercise from an easy start.

Week 2

Use the same weights, reps and rest intervals as in week 1. The only change is that you perform three sets per exercise rather than two.

Week 3

Use the same full-body routine, two times a week. At the first workout do the same exercises, sets and reps as you did in week 2.

Provided the weights used in weeks 1 and 2 were very light for you, add weight to all exercises in week 3. If the weights on any specific exercise or exercises didn't feel very light in week 2, wait another week or two before adding weight there.

For example, at the first workout hold a small plate on your chest for the basic crunches, add five pounds or 2.5 kilos per 'bell on the dumb-bell exercises and 10 pounds or five kilos for the other exercises. Women should add half those poundages. One rule is the same for everyone, however: *Never* add weight to an exercise if, during the previous workout, you struggled to get your target reps. Should any exercise be a struggle, reduce the weight.

At the second workout of the third week follow the same exercises, sets and reps as in the previous workout, but add 10 pounds or five kilos on exercises 1 through 4 and 6 and 7. (Once again, women should add half that amount.) If, however, the weights you used in the previous workout didn't feel very light, *don't* add weight.

Thereafter, *slow* the pace of your poundage progression. Of course, the big exercises can progress at a faster pace than the smaller ones.

The Next Nine Weeks

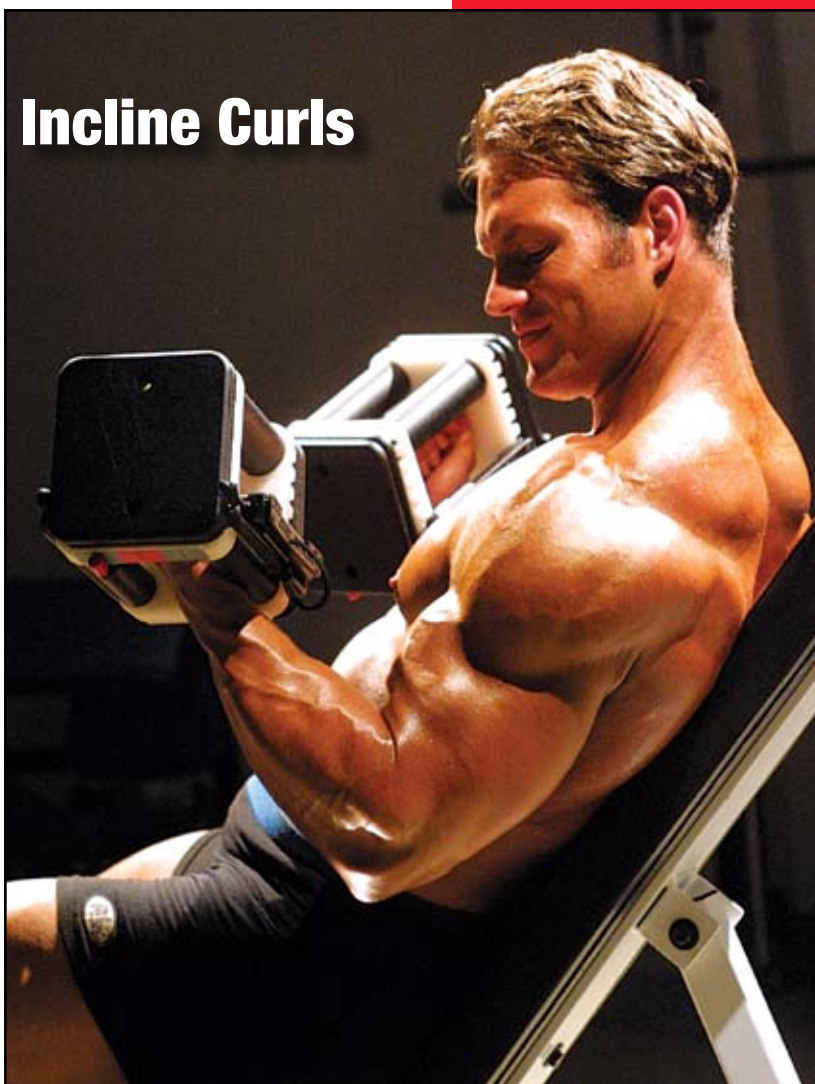
The routine remains unchanged other than the poundages until the end of the third month of strength training. The rate at which you add weight is critical. If you add it too quickly—which is common—your exercise technique will degrade, and you'll start training intensively too soon, using poor technique, which is a recipe for injury and frustration. If, however, you add weight too slowly, you'll delay your progress.

After three weeks on the routine you'll perceive a variation of effort across the nine exercises—all nine won't require the same degree of effort. Over the next nine weeks or so even out the perception of effort so that it's comparable on all nine exercises. You can achieve that through incremental weight progression appropriate to each exercise—different exercises progress at different rates.

The target, at the end of your first three months of strength training, is that all exercises involve nearly hard work of a comparable level of exertion. "Nearly hard" training means working until you're about two reps short of what would be your limit if you were pushed to the maximum on the final

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Incline Curls



Start out conservatively with any type of exercise routine or with any change in a routine.



Model: Jeff Dwell

Crunches



Model: Bob Donnelly

Warmup Sets

After you've been on the routine for around six weeks, add a single warmup set of eight reps with about two-thirds of your work-set weight for squats, bench presses and deadlifts. Perform the warmup set, rest about 90 seconds, and then perform the first work set. For example, you may use 60 pounds on the warmup set for squats, followed by three sets of eight repetitions with 90 pounds.

Between-Set Rest Intervals

For the first two months the recommended rest intervals were 60 seconds between sets of single-joint exercises and 90 seconds between sets of multijoint exercises. For the third month you should increase your rest times: Take 90 seconds before each set of single-joint exercises

work set of a given exercise and a rep or two more of slack on the other work sets, when you're fresher.

The progression schedule given here is only a guideline. Remember, if you don't manage to complete your target reps and sets very comfortably, you haven't qualified for a weight increase at the next workout. Wait until you've built up the required capacity on an exercise before increasing the weight.

Do You Think You're Not Training Hard Enough?

Hard training will come later, when it's appropriate. Correct exercise technique and smooth rep speed must be entrenched first. That takes at least two months of consistent training. Then it takes more time to develop the discipline needed to *maintain* correct exercise technique and smooth rep speed under maximum exertion. If technique breaks down during hard training, injury is almost inevitable. You must work into hard training progressively.



Start with no weight on crunches. Learn the precise form that allows you to get in touch with your abdominals on every rep.



Model: Jonathan Lawson

Don't try to increase your training poundages too fast, or injury will be inevitable.

and two minutes before each set of multijoint exercises. If that makes your workouts too long, perform two work sets for each exercise rather than three.

How to Make Small Poundage Increments

There are a number of ways you can make small increases in your training poundages.

•Custom little plates

The ideal is to have a selection of little plates: one pounders, half-pounders and quarter-pounders. There probably aren't any such plates where you train. Small-weight plates may never catch on in commercial gyms because they can easily be stolen.

If your gym doesn't have a stock of small plates, get your own—perhaps have them engraved with your initials or name—and take them to the gym with you. Use them for

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You must not strain at this stage because pushing too intensely too early is a death sentence for correct exercise technique.



Pulldowns

adjustable barbells and dumbbells. (Another alternative is to use wrist weights, which puts the weight on your wrists rather than on the dumbbells.)

•Custom small magnetic plates

Platemate is one company that produces magnetic weight plates that weigh under a pound each and that are perfect for use on weight stacks and barbells and dumbbells.

•Spring collars

These are available in most gyms and can be used in pairs to add weight in approximately one-pound increments. This alternative



Platemate magnetic weights make small poundage increments easy and safe.

is especially important if your gym doesn't have little plates and won't allow you to bring your own. Use the spring collars to progress pound by pound from one multiple of five pounds on a barbell to the next. If even the lightweight collars aren't available where you train, it may be time to find a better gym.

Stretching

Stretch after your weight-training workout. With **stretching**, the progression isn't measured in terms of resistance or volume of work but in terms of gradually increased flexibility.

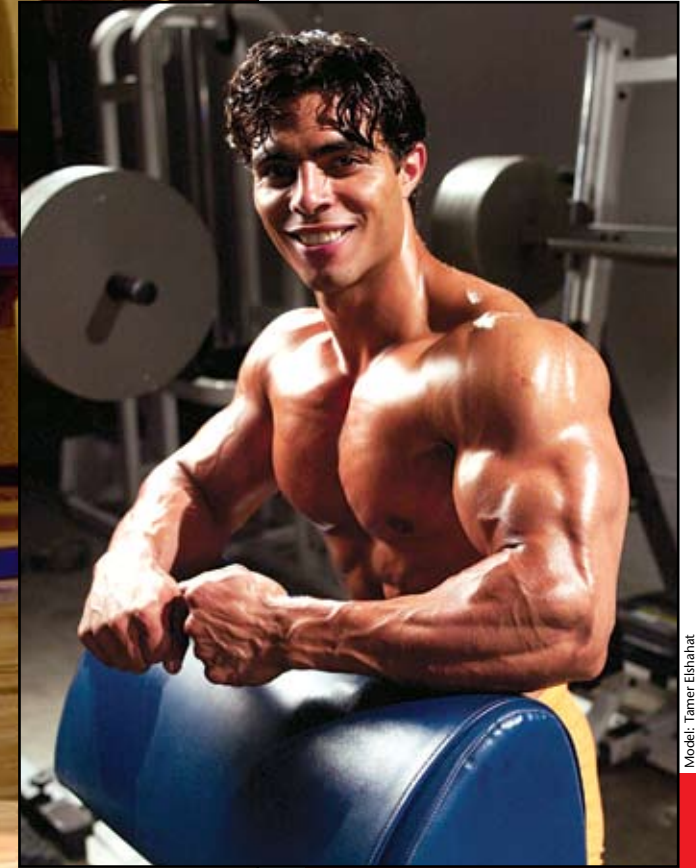
Most people lack sufficient flexibility because of inactivity or limited

Stretch



activity. A flexible body is a requirement for correct exercise technique. If, for example, your hamstrings—the backs of your thighs—are tight, that will keep you from squatting correctly because it will lead to premature rounding of your lower back. A flexible body is also required for youthfulness, regardless of age. **Stretching** is dangerous if done

Remember, **stretch** after your workout. A flexible body is a requirement for correct exercise technique.



Model: Tamer Elshahhat



Model: Jonathan Lawson and Steve Holman

Record precisely what you do in each workout, especially the weights you use and the reps you perform for each set.

incorrectly. If you try to rush, you'll get hurt. Never force a **stretch**. Work progressively—within a given workout and from week to week—until you reach the level of flexibility that you'll maintain. Never bounce while **stretching**, and avoid holding your breath—breathe rhythmically.

Refer to a reputable book on **stretching** or yoga, and choose one **stretch** for each of these areas: calves, groin and thigh adductors, hip flexors, hamstrings, buttocks, quadriceps and shoulders.

Don't move immediately into your usual level of flexibility for a given **stretch**. Work into that over several progressive **stretches**, each one taking you a little farther than the previous one. You should feel only slight discomfort as you

stretch.

Do the minimum of three reps of 20 to 45 seconds for each **stretch**. Be cautious—do more rather than fewer progressive **stretches** before getting to your current limit **stretch**.

Never force yourself to feel pain, but you must feel tension during each stretch. Never have anyone force you into a **stretch**. And never be in a hurry.

Cardio Work

Finish each workout with a bout on an elliptical machine or a ski machine. Start with 10 minutes at a gentle pace. Your breathing should quicken a little, but you should never be short of breath. Each week add five minutes, but once you're at 30

minutes, keep it there. Don't increase the duration further, but do *gradually* increase the resistance and speed each week. Make the first five minutes an easy warmup and the last five a repeat of the warmup, done as a cooldown. For the 20 minutes in between make it progressively more demanding every week. After 10 weeks or so, you should be working hard enough during the 20-minute work period that you're breathing heavily but not gasping.

There you have it: a three-month plan to get you off to a great start if you're a beginner or to get you safely back into training if you're coming off an extended layoff. No excuses. It's time to get to it. **IM**