

The Red Zone



Russian Pavel Tsatsouline's Unique Perspective on Muscle Building, Strength and Kettlebell Training

Part 2

by Ori Hofmekler • Photography by Michael Neveux

Pavel Tsatsouline is a former Soviet Special Forces physical training instructor and currently a subject matter expert for the United States Marine Corps, the National Nuclear Security Administration/U.S. Department of Energy and the U.S. Secret Service. His approach, in particular his kettlebell training, is considered by many sports and strength experts to be brutal and effective.

Here's more of Ori Hofmekler's conversation with the master trainer.

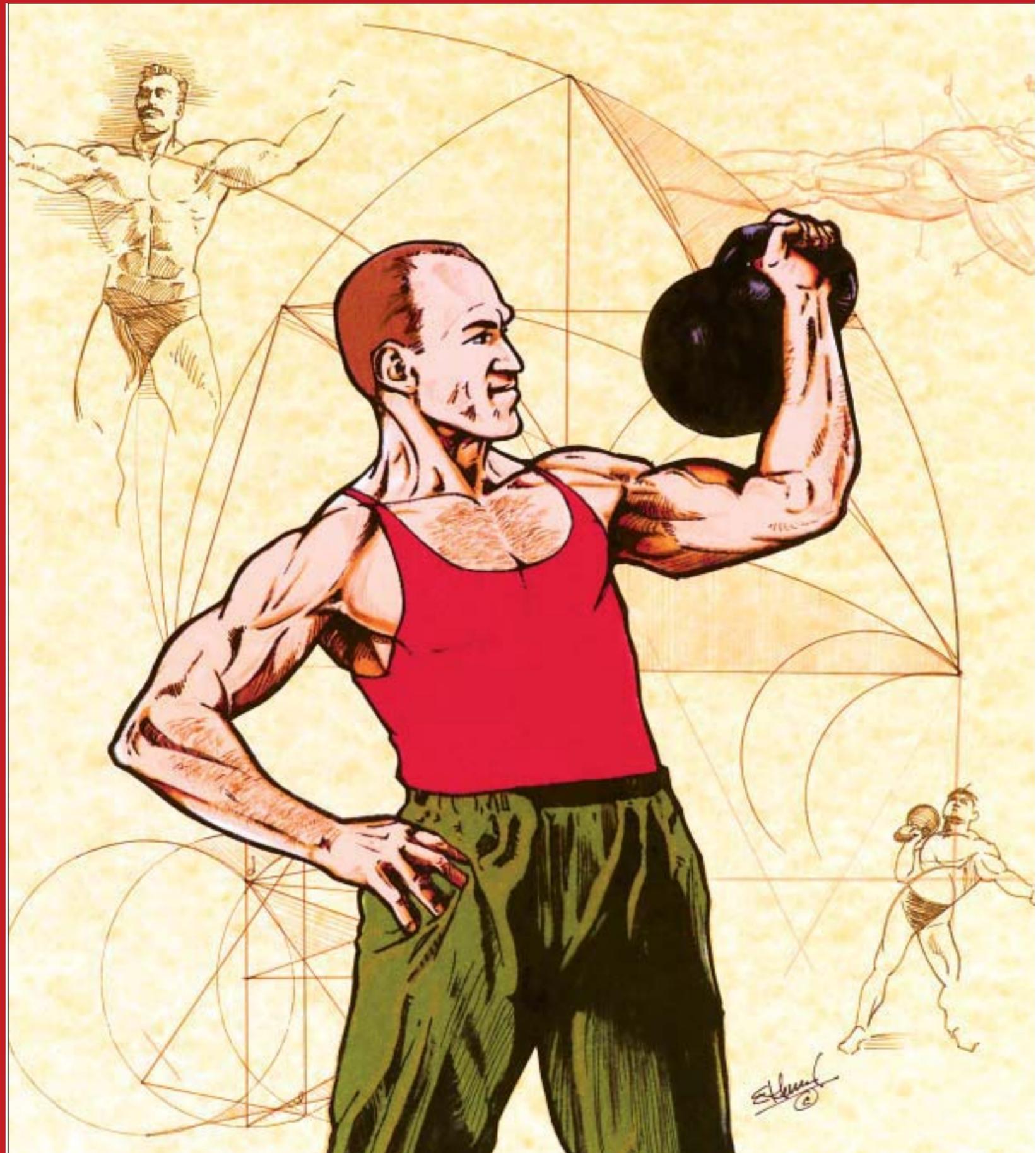
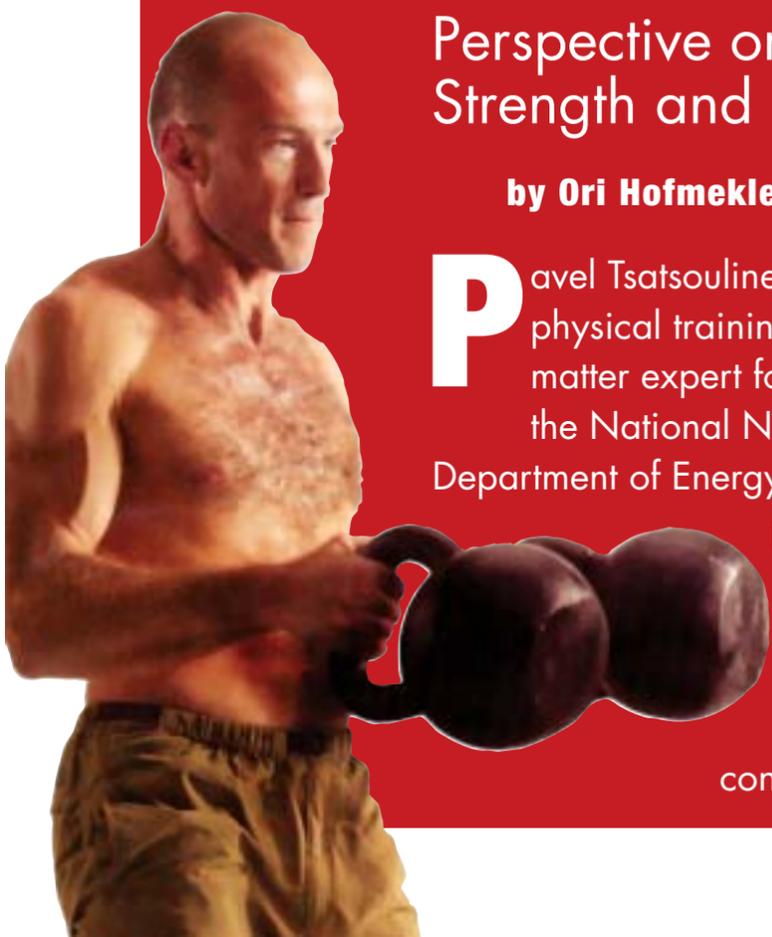


Illustration by Larry Ekund



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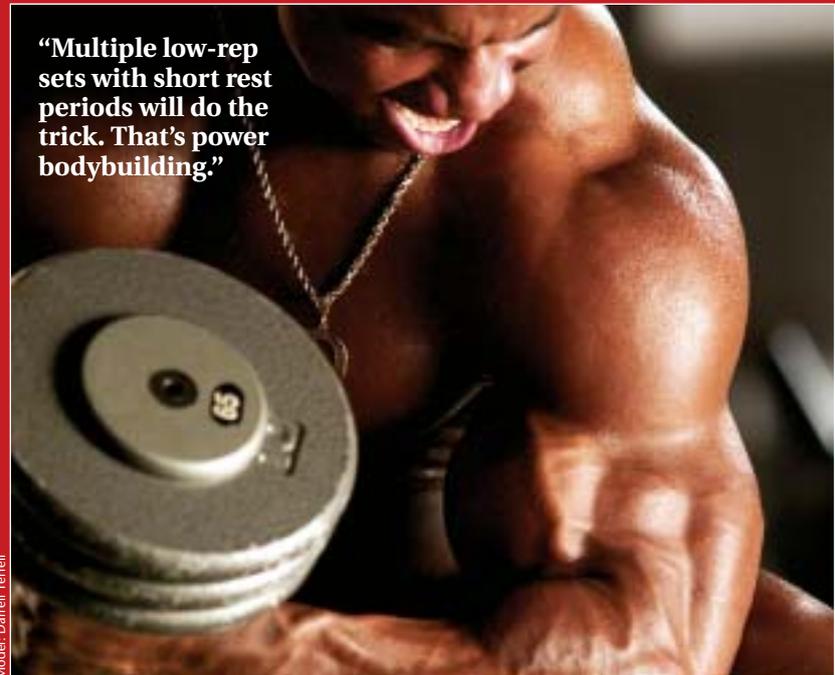
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OH: What's wrong with conventional resistance-training methods?

PT: The thing that infuriates me the most is when time-tested training methods are replaced with flavors of the month. Too many of what are claimed to be new training methods were designed out of ignorance or for the sake of dishonest marketing or sometimes just to be different for the sake of being different. That may be okay for women's fashions but not in the gym.

The topics of sets, reps and muscle failure are still controversial. The question remains, Why reinvent the wheel? The hard truth is that with very few exceptions the strongest people have trained, still train and will always train the same way—low reps, not to failure. A bodybuilder like Reg Park would do 10 to 20 sets of five where a weight-conscious weightlifter would do singles, doubles and triples and rest a lot between the sets. No matter what, it's still the same time-tested formula—low reps, not failure.

I don't know a single individual who failed to gain strength with that approach. Not a single one. Yet, I have met countless failures of the trendy low-set, higher-rep training to failure and only a hand-



Model: Darrell Terrell

“Multiple low-rep sets with short rest periods will do the trick. That's power bodybuilding.”

ful of successes.

Iron game innovations must come as refinements to the reliable methods of the old-fashioned golden age, not coups that tear them down.

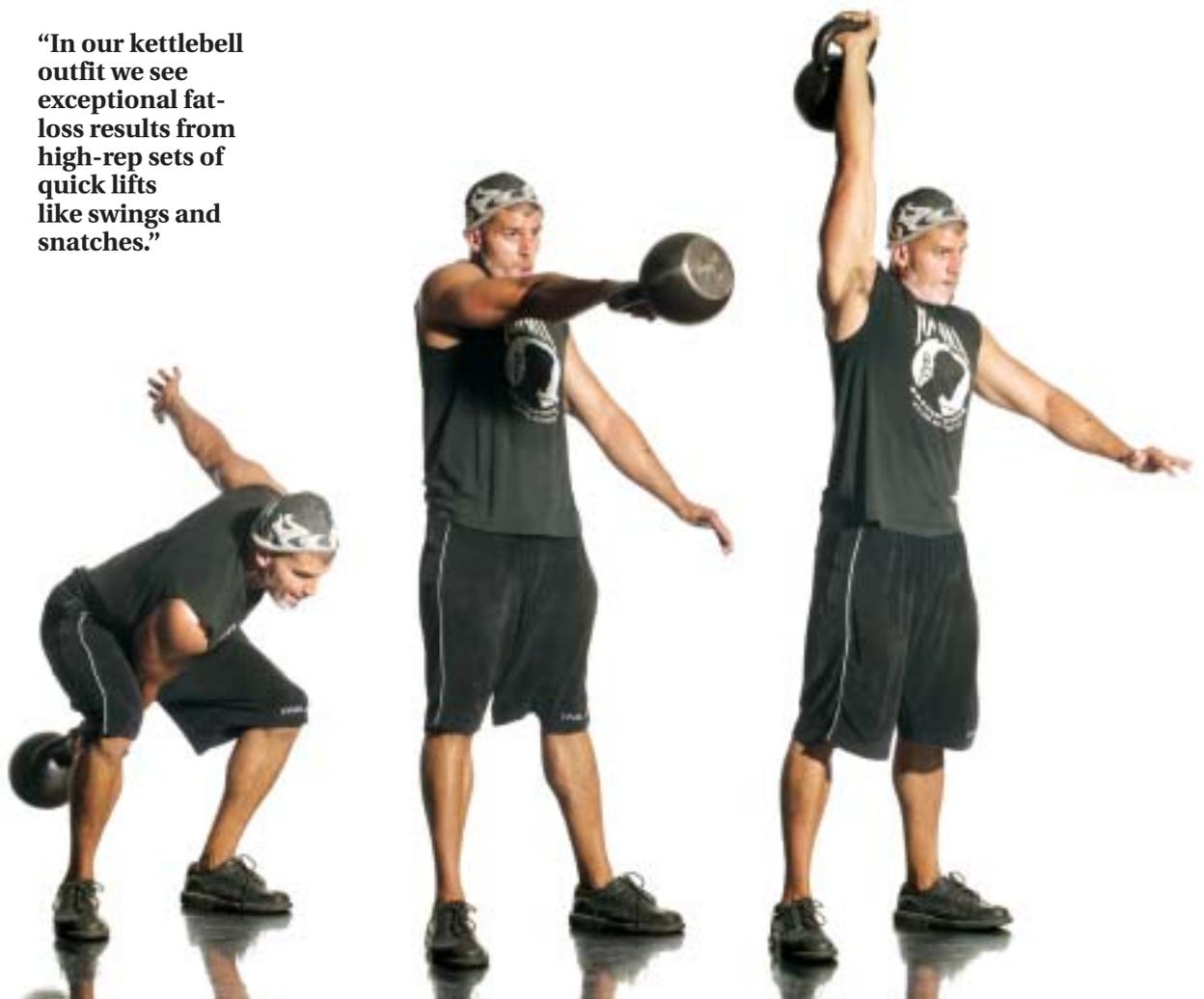
OH: You have endorsed performing sets of up to five reps. What's wrong with more reps per set?

PT: Low reps build muscles that

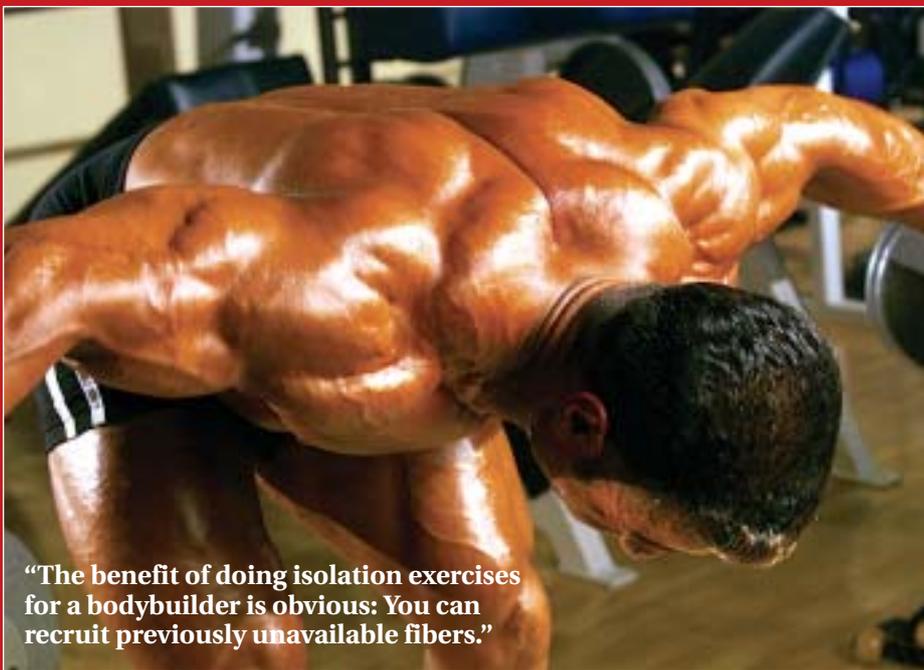
are as strong as they look. Low reps are safer, contrary to popular opinion, than high reps. Low reps have an unblemished track record of building strength and size, whereas higher reps are hit and miss.

Here's what I read in a 1940s *Iron Man*, “While high numbers of reps are successful with a few unusual men, the majority finds that a more conservative number of repetitions are best.” The author, Charles Smith, mentions a

“In our kettlebell outfit we see exceptional fat-loss results from high-rep sets of quick lifts like swings and snatches.”



Model: Mike Mahler



“The benefit of doing isolation exercises for a bodybuilder is obvious: You can recruit previously unavailable fibers.”

physical culturalist named George Walsh who failed to make gains by doing too many reps per set, seven specifically. Isn't it funny that these days seven reps qualify as low! And “when he dropped to three reps per set, he was eminently successful.” Some things never change.

OH: Is training to gain muscle mass the same as training to gain strength?

PT: Low reps are the only similarity. Strength is a skill and should be practiced as such—fresh, frequent and perfect. As Vladimir Zatsiorsky, Ph.D., put it, “Train as heavy as possible as often as possible while

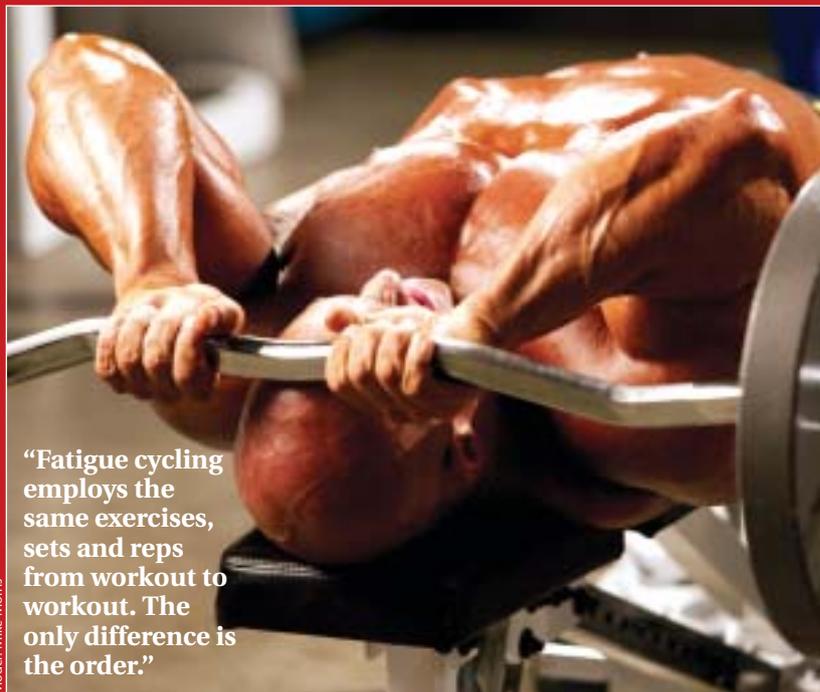
staying as fresh as possible.” Most top Russian powerlifting coaches have their athletes deadlift four times a week. That builds wiry strength. If you want to be a lot stronger than you look, this is your ticket. I have explained the strength-is-a-skill concept in great depth yet without big words in my book *The Naked Warrior*.

To build muscle, one should strive to get a pump with heavy weights and low reps. If you want to know the reasons behind the madness, read up on the energetic theory of hypertrophy. Once more: Pump up with heavy weights and low reps. Multiple low-reps sets with short rest periods will do the trick. That’s power bodybuilding. Reg Park and other greats did 10 to 20 sets of five and achieved the total package of great strength and muscularity.

Many solid strength and size routines lie between the above extremes—the classic 5x5 (five sets of five reps) approach, for instance.

OH: Can resistance training effectively maximize fat burning?

PT: In our kettlebell outfit we see exceptional fat-loss results from high-rep sets of quick lifts like swings and snatches. Beyond that I will defer this question to the fat-



Model: Mike Morris

“Fatigue cycling employs the same exercises, sets and reps from workout to workout. The only difference is the order.”

loss experts. The focus of my work is strength for combat applications; fat loss is a positive side effect of our training, not the goal.

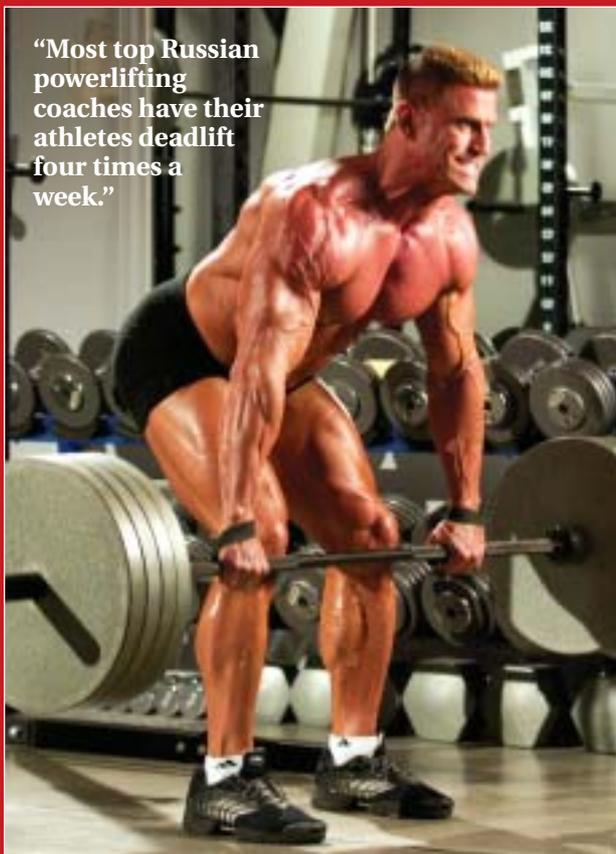
OH: What are the best methods of breaking training plateaus?

PT: Here’s a plateau-breaking strategy from *Beyond Bodybuilding*, an anthology of my articles Dragon Door just published [www

.DragonDoor.com]. It’s called fatigue cycling; Russian bodybuilders and powerlifters had great success with it. Fatigue cycling employs the same exercises, sets and reps from workout to workout. The only difference is the order.

Here’s a sample fatigue-cycling routine. Train twice a week, for instance Mondays and Thursdays, rotating the three workouts.

“Most top Russian powerlifting coaches have their athletes deadlift four times a week.”



Model: Lee Apperson

you wish, you can do some light beach work, such as curls, on Saturdays.

OH: How should one work through sticking points?

PT: Watch an expert powerlifter bench. His lift is seamless—all muscles working from top to bottom. A beginner benches like he’s driving a car with a stick shift for the first time. The bar stalls, then jerks through the sticking point as one muscle group passes the load to the next.

Notice that your muscle groups are hooked up neurologically to work in a given segment of the range of motion and then pass the load to the next group. An example is the pecs driving off the bottom of the bench press and the triceps working near the top. The best lifters train themselves to drive with all the available muscles from start to finish. That skill of lifting without changing gears takes patient practice. The payoff is power. In practical terms, the simplest technique to drive through sticking points and develop seamless strength is pausing at the bottom of your lifts for a few seconds—and staying tight!

OH: You advocate training through a greater range of motion, yet you endorse using partial reps as an effective way of scoring strength and size. How come?

PT: Because you get to use heavier weights and generate greater muscle tension. Here’s an interesting wrinkle about partials that I learned from strongman extraordinaire Bud Jeffries. Rather than moving a weight you have no right to

move at all an inch or two, make your partials long, just above the sticking point. It makes perfect sense neurologically—but everything makes sense in hindsight.

OH: What is the concept of functional strength, and how does it relate to bodybuilding?

PT: Started as a rebellion against the machines, functional training has gone too far to the other extreme. Consequently, some guys really believe that unless you’re balancing on a ball on one foot, you aren’t functional. My point is, keep it simple. Ask yourself, Does the exercise I’m doing make me feel like a) a man, b) a circus seal or c) a beauty queen? If you answered b or c, you need to overhaul your training. Strength is about self-respect. Stop obsessing over your looks, and get strong.

OH: In *The Naked Warrior* you endorse weightless training. Why?

PT: I love iron, but I happen to spend a good deal of my time on the road and I’m not willing to compromise my strength. In *The Naked Warrior* I teach extreme bodyweight exercises, such as one-leg squats and one-arm/one-leg pushups that will challenge the strongest bodybuilder—and a progression for beginners to use to work up to that level.

OH: You’ve stated that spotting is a setup for failure. Yet, lately you’ve endorsed performing forced reps with the help of a spotter as an effective way of grinding through one’s limits and improving strength. Explain.

PT: It depends on how the forced rep is done. Watch a weak bencher press his max. He blows the bar off his chest, stalls a couple of inches later and gives up. Now watch an experienced powerlifter. When the awesome poundage slows down to a crawl and threatens to crush the big dude, he somehow finds the oomph to grind the bent bar to the top.

Scientists explain that slow exertions such as the powerlifts require a special type of endurance—neural-drive endurance. Your force output tends to drop after two seconds, and

Workout A

- Bench presses 6 x 4
- Squats 3 x 4
- Deadlifts 3 x 4

Workout B

- Squats 3 x 4
- Bench presses 6 x 4
- Deadlifts 3 x 4

Workout C

- Deadlifts 3 x 4
- Squats 3 x 4
- Bench presses 6 x 4

Say you put up 250 on the bench for the prescribed sets and reps in workout A, when you’re fresh. Next time you will have to work harder to make the same numbers, as you bench after squats. And in the third workout you’ll be dealing with the double fatigue of doing deads and squats before you bench. Once you have matched your fresh P.R., performed in workout A, in workout C when you’re in a fatigued state—and not any sooner—increase the weight in the fresh workout.

Wrap up each workout with some ab work, also done for low reps. If

you must train to keep it up for as long as a max attempt lasts. As one rising powerlifting star put it, “You’ve got to learn how to grind.”

One way to improve neural-drive endurance is through intelligent use of forced reps. Say your bench max is 250. Do 185x2, 205x1, 225x1, 235x1, 240x1, (250-255x1) and then a forced repetition with 260. Not 275 or 300! This is not your training partner’s trap day. Insist that he gives you just the right amount of assistance. The bar must slowly grind through the sticking point rather than blast through or sit there and make you squirm! Just as it does in a successful max lift. You need an experienced spotter; recruiting a random comrade is not a bright idea.

Do not fail! If your muscles shake and give out, you’re compromising your strength gains. A bit of advice on sparing your wiring: Do not get psyched up for your forced reps. Put them up with calm confidence. The weight is supramaximal, but you know for a fact that it will go all the way up.

Do two to three forced singles. Not more. Chase them down with two to three back-off sets of five. I guarantee that you’ll see off-the-charts strength gains—provided you keep your ego at bay.

OH: You don’t believe in iso-

lation exercises. Why?

PT: So-called isolation in the sense of making one muscle or muscle group do all the work while keeping the rest of the body relaxed—no. But I do believe single-joint exercises performed for low reps and with full-body tension might have value.

Canadian researcher Digby Sale, Ph.D., discovered that individual muscles within muscle groups and even motor units within individual muscles have activation patterns that are highly movement specific. In other words, you won’t be using the same part of your quads during squats as you do during leg extensions.

The benefit of doing isolation exercise for a bodybuilder is obvious: You can recruit and possibly stimulate to grow previously unavailable fibers. The benefits to power athletes are not as apparent, and the reason is that the newly activated motor-unit



Model: Eric Domer

pool refuses to fire in the context of a different exercise. No transfer. But what if there's a way to circumvent the Sale law and activate the isolated leg extension muscles during squats?

Here is a hypothesis based on Paul Anderson's training. The Wonder of Nature, as the Russians nicknamed him, used to perform his powerlifts and assistance exercises in a circuit. He would do a few squats, rest a bit, do a set of good mornings and then more squats. Big

Paul did that to coordinate the strength built with the assistance exercise with the powerlift. Today we understand that the neurons, which regularly fire close together, tend to get cross-wired and become a part of a single neural network. As a result, the muscles and fibers used during the good morning that were previously not used on the squat become integrated into it.

It might work with single-joint exercises too. Heavy sets of triceps extensions alternated with benches

might strengthen the bench. The single-joint exercise would build and neurally strengthen some new fibers—and alternating it with the target compound lift would integrate those fibers into the lift.

If you choose to test this theory, train your isolation exercises as you would the powerlifts—with high-tension techniques, heavy, and for low reps. Pat Casey, the first man to bench 600 pounds, did insanely heavy one-arm laterals. Try alternating triples of a single-joint assistance exercise with triples of a powerlift or some other pet lift.

It's not clear what rest periods you should use, but it *is* clear that you should alternate, not superset. Experiment and drop me a line with your results.

OH: What's your weekly routine—workout days and rest days?

PT: Provided I am not on the road putting a hurt on someone, I alternate deadlift days with kettlebell days (snatches, swings, presses and so on) with an occasional day off. I do heavy, never-more-than-five reps, ab work and splits almost daily. The purpose is wiry strength.

OH: Pavel, with such a tough training routine, how do you support yourself nutritionally? What is your diet?

PT: I have been on your Warrior Diet for over a year. It's great. I've never had more energy and felt so in control of my day. I got leaner too, although I did not set out to do so. I went on the Warrior Diet due to its simplicity and effectiveness—just to save time.

Editor's note: For more information on Pavel Tsatsouline, visit RussianKettlebell.com. You'll find books, DVDs, a directory of certified instructors, free training articles and a forum.

Ori Hofmekler is the author of *The Warrior Diet* and *Maximum Muscle & Minimum Fat*, published by Dragon Door Publications. To contact him, write to ori@warriordiet.com For more information or for information on Warrior Diet products, visit www.warriordiet.com or call toll free to (866) WAR-DIET. **IM**

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