

# THE HYPERTROPHY HANDBOOK



JEFF NIPPARD

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# THE 6 PURE BODYBUILDING PRINCIPLES

In this handbook, you will find simple summaries of the most important factors for building muscle. As we progress through the program, we'll be putting these 6 key principles to use.

## 1. TENSION OVER EVERYTHING

Tension remains undisputed as the main driver of hypertrophy [1]. Without tension, very little muscle growth can occur. Tension is the force created within a muscle as it is pulled and stretched during lifting, kind of like a rope in a tug of war.

When the muscle senses tension, a bunch of anabolic signals are sent, telling the muscle it needs to get bigger.

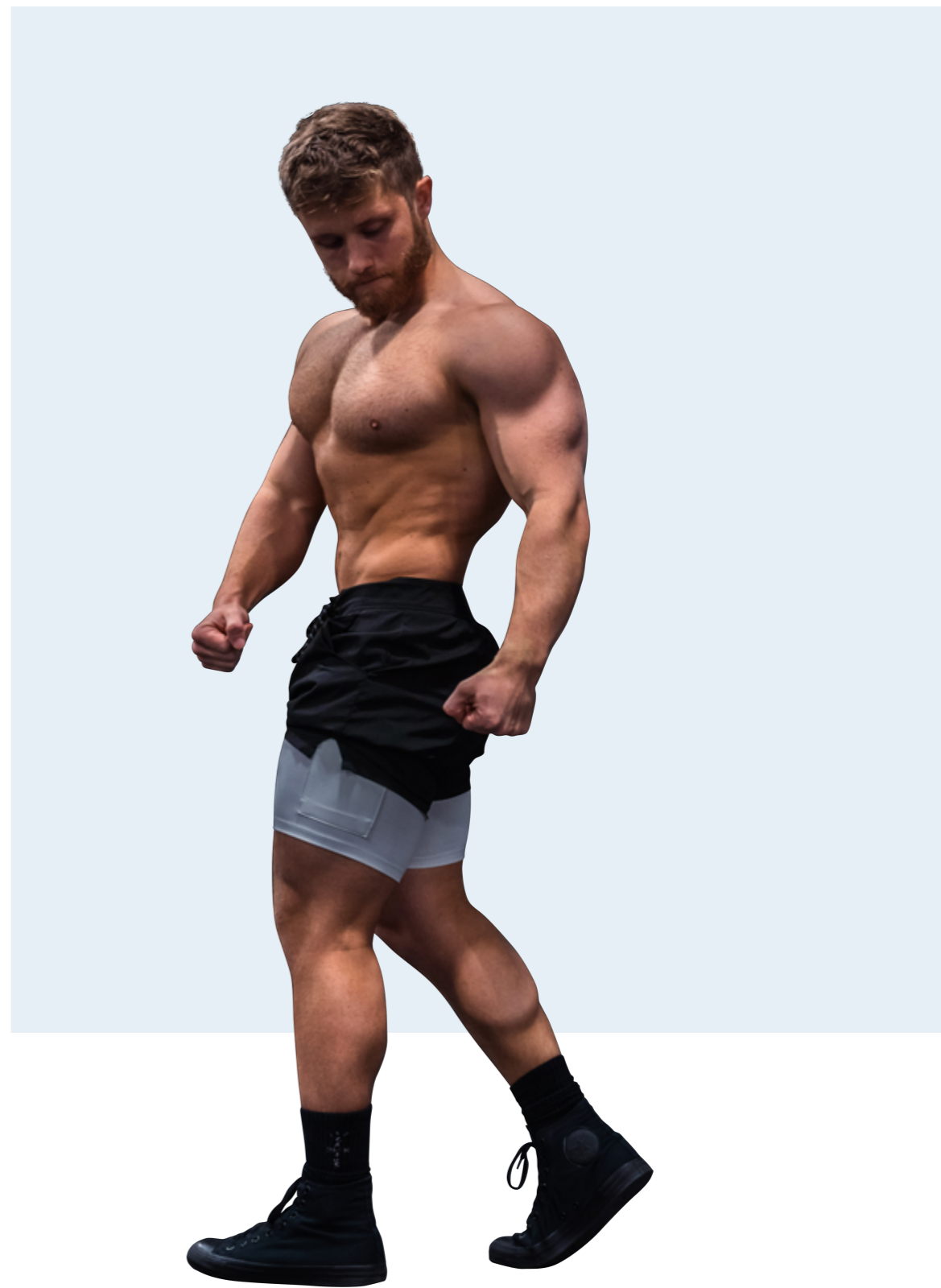
So how do we maximize tension on a muscle? Answering that question leads us into the five remaining principles.

## 2. TECHNIQUE

In order to ensure that tension is being applied to the muscle, we need to perform exercises with good and consistent technique. There are detailed videos demonstrating proper technique for every exercise included in the program sheets but, for now, here are a few important things we'll be focusing on:

### The Negative

A controlled, slightly slower negative is a pillar of good technique. I was at the gym today, looked around and noticed how many people just let the weight fall during the negative. Most people seem much more concerned with "getting the weight up" than they are with lowering it back down under control. But getting the weight up is most likely less important than lowering it back down. Research indicates that the eccentric (negative) phase is more important for hypertrophy than the concentric (positive) phase of a lift. So, if you're one of those people who tends to just let the weight free fall on the negative, in this program, really focus on resisting the weight on its way down.



Generally speaking, we'll be using a 2-4 second negative on most exercises. That's a fairly slow negative compared to what most people do, but it's not super slow. New research on rep tempo suggests that: "the most favorable [tempo for muscle hypertrophy] is a combination of slower eccentric movements, paired with faster concentric movements" [2]. In other words, on most exercises, we'll be moving the weight slower on the negative and more explosively on the positive. A few exercises, such as cable reverse flyes for the rear delts and cable triceps kickbacks, don't lend themselves as well to an explosive positive, so on these, we'll use a smoother positive. If you're confused about what your tempo should look like for each exercise, pay attention to my rep tempo in the video demos for each exercise. A safe general assumption, though, would be a 2-4 second negative and a forceful positive.

Another good cue I like to think about on the negative is treating it as if it were a "failed positive." On every rep, you're not just lowering the weight, you're resisting it. It's kind of like you're trying to push the weight up, but it still keeps moving down against your might. The idea is to really feel the muscle streeetttchhhhhhhh as you lower the weight back down. This will create much more eccentric tension than just allowing the weight to free fall.

## **The Range of Motion**

More and more research is pointing toward the idea that full range of motion isn't always better per se, but rather getting to the deepest, most-stretched aspect of the range of motion is what really matters [3]. In other words, the stretch is, for the most part, more important than the squeeze. The bottom half of a squat is more important than the top half of a squat. The bottom half of a cable curl is more important than the top half of a cable curl. You need to get the muscle stretched while lifting. When performing the exercises in this program, regularly ask yourself if you're getting a deep stretch at the bottom. If not, you may be missing out on some gains!

## **Momentum**

Another thing I've been noticing a lot at the gym is that most people do quite a lot of cheating on their form – too much cheating. Again, it seems as if they just want to get the weight up. It's as if the lifters are thinking that as long as they can get the weight from A to B, it's mission accomplished. The problem, though, is that you can get the weight from A to B without actually applying much tension to the target muscle. Take bicep curls, for example. If I "curl" the weight up while leaning forward and backward, I'm most definitely taking loads of tension away from the biceps and dispersing it onto the lower back. This isn't ideal. On each exercise, we want to always be in control of the weight. This generally means minimizing momentum and swinging while keeping our target muscle in mind.

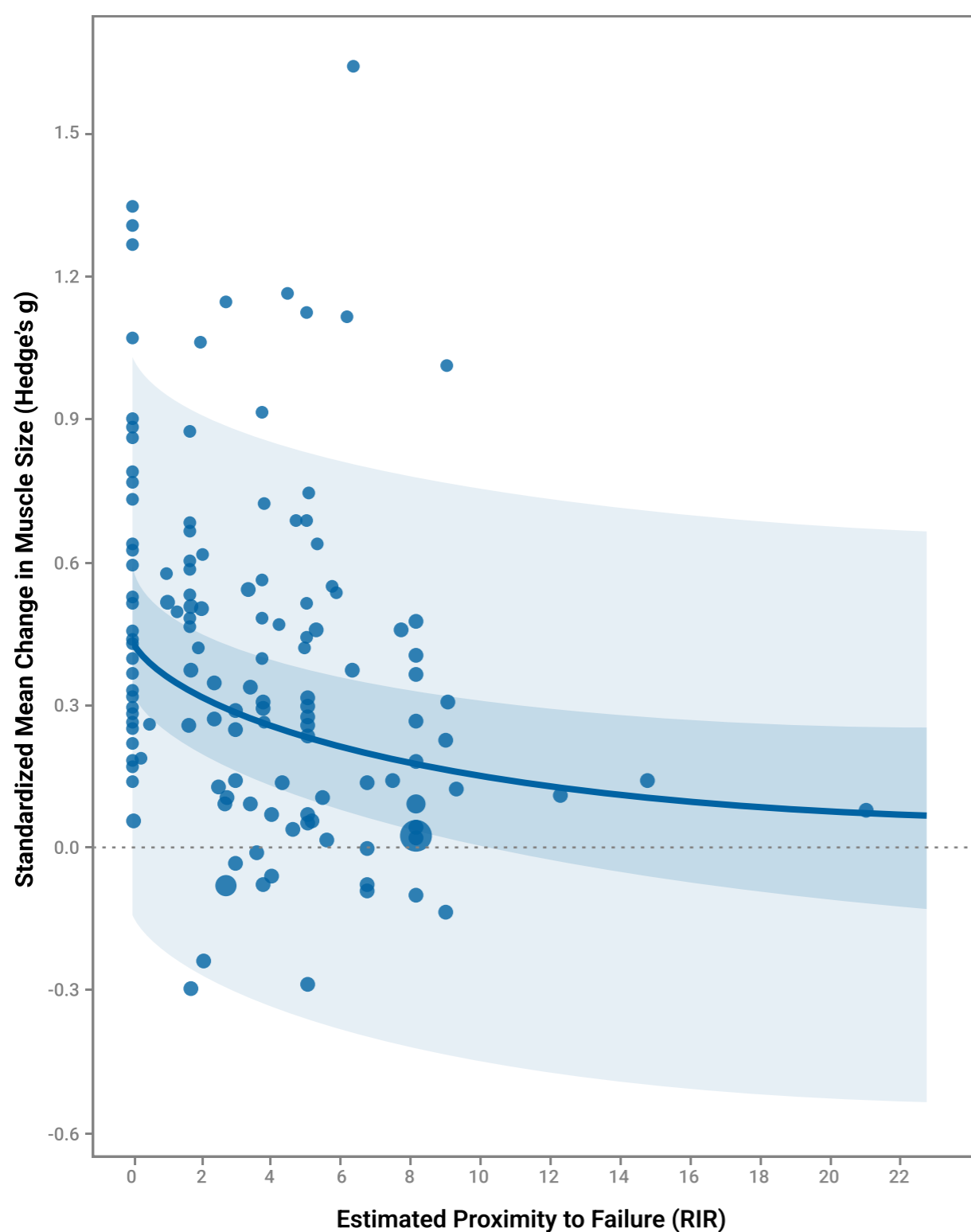
## **Form Consistency**

Another point worth mentioning is that you should do your absolute best to keep your form consistent from week to week. As you add weight or reps, it will be tempting to alter your form for the sake of "progression." This is a kind of fake progression though. If you just got other muscles involved by cheating the weight up, you didn't actually apply any additional tension to the target muscle. It's better to keep the form in check than increase the weight at all costs. We're putting technique over weight in this program ... always.

### 3. EFFORT

You need to push sets hard to maximize muscle growth. And, unfortunately, research consistently shows that most people simply don't push sets hard enough to do that [4]. It's common to see people at the gym going year after year but making no noticeable progress. In most cases, this isn't because they've maxed out their natural muscular potential. Rather, it's because they simply aren't pushing their sets close enough to failure to stimulate new hypertrophy. Beyond the beginner stage, triggering muscle growth will be uncomfortable. You can't just go through the motions. You need to really grind some reps out. Of course, "just showing up" to the gym will reap all kinds of wonderful mental health benefits, may increase strength, improve metabolic health, and prevent muscle wasting. That's great, but this is a pure bodybuilding program and "just showing up" won't be enough to build new tissue. For that, you need to really make the muscle work. And it needs to be hard.

So how hard is hard enough? The answer to that question isn't black-and-white because, to some extent, it depends on the specific exercise you're doing and how much volume you're doing. But one more-or-less fool proof way to ensure that you're training hard enough is to push most sets either to failure or about one rep shy of failure. In fact, a new meta-analysis suggested that as one gets closer to failure, one tends to see more hypertrophy [5]. This trend can be seen in the figure below, where there is a clear increase in growth as you get closer and closer to 0 reps in reserve (0 RIR).



Some people are using this study as definitive proof that failure training is king, and I can sympathize with why. The results look quite convincing. However, a little context is necessary before jumping to conclusions. Just as one example, this other meta-analysis of 15 studies on failure vs non-failure training came to a different conclusion: "There is no evidence to support that resistance training performed to momentary muscular failure is superior to non-failure resistance training for muscle hypertrophy" [6].

What's going on here? It seems that depending on how you run the statistics, you can either walk away from the current body of literature concluding that going all the way to failure really is better for muscle growth, OR that going all the way to failure doesn't actually offer a meaningful benefit over stopping a few reps shy.

Reps in reserve (RIR) and muscle size according to Robinson et al, 2023

The evidence on failure is mixed and conflicting. So, what should we do, practically speaking?

Let's see what experts and high-level bodybuilding coaches are saying.

You'll hear two main lines of reasoning from experts in this area.

One camp argues against failure. They say that going to failure often isn't worth it because it limits the amount of volume you can do. Failure training is very fatiguing and imposes a greater recovery demand. Because of this, if you constantly go to failure, you simply won't be able to recover from as much volume as if you left a rep or two in the tank. Also, studies do consistently show that volume matters for muscle growth, up to a point. All else being equal, increasing volume usually increases muscle growth, up to a point [7, 8]. If the research on failure is mixed, but the research on volume is clearly positive, it seems that maybe we should prioritize volume over failure after all.

Hmmmm...

Another camp of experts would dispute this. They would argue that, sure, volume does matter, but failure matters more. It's better to push your sets to failure and let the volume naturally land at a level that allows you to still recover. In other words, rather than letting volume be the driver, let intensity (effort) be the driver. Don't sacrifice intensity for volume, they would say.

There isn't any real universal consensus amongst experts either.

So where does this leave us?

Well, this program offers at least one potential solution that gets the best of both worlds. This is the philosophy we will be using around failure in this program.

The fact that there is high-quality evidence showing that failure is substantially better than non-failure training for muscle growth, we'd better make sure we have at least some failure training in our program. If we never ever go to failure, we'd almost certainly be leaving gains on the table. But does this mean every single set must be all the way to failure? I don't think so. I think there's also some merit to the argument that too much failure training can impair volume tolerance. Too much failure training may also impose an unnecessary injury risk, especially on certain exercises. So here's the solution:

We're going to break down all of our working sets into "Early Sets" and "Last Sets". Early Sets refer to every working set other than the very last set.

For example, most exercises in this program will have 3 sets. In this case, sets 1 and 2 are the Early Sets and set 3 is the Last Set. If an exercise calls for 4 sets, sets 1, 2 and 3 would be the Early Sets and Set 4 would be the Last Set. If an exercise calls for 2 sets, set 1 would be the Early Set and set 2 would be the Last Set. It's worth mentioning that Early Sets are NOT warm-up sets. Warm-up sets are separate and to be done before the Early Sets. Dividing working sets into Early Sets and Last Sets is simply a way for us to apply different intensity levels to different working sets.

Here’s how that will look in practice.

For the Early Sets, we’ll generally avoid going all the way to failure, usually stopping with ~1 rep left in the tank. In the program, I’ll refer to this as an RPE of 9-10, which simply means that you didn’t quite get all the way to failure and you might have had 1 more rep in the tank, but certainly no more than that.

In case anyone is confused, let me back-up and explain RPE in a little more detail. Here’s a very quick primer on RPE.

RPE stands for Rating of Perceived Exertion. It may sound fancy, but it’s extremely simple once we break the acronym down. RPE is your rating of how you perceived your exertion on a set. In other words, you rate how hard the set felt on the scale of 1-10, and that’s your RPE. Usually, to make the scale a bit more objective, coaches will set up the RPE scale based on how many reps you think you had left in the tank. For example, if you think you had 0 reps left in the tank, that would correspond to an RPE of 10. If you think you had 1 rep left in the tank, that would correspond to an RPE 9. And so on down the line. I’ll break it down in more detail in the table below. Even if you’re very familiar with RPE, I’d recommend reading through the table as some of the information is unique to this program.

RPE	Meaning	When It’s Used In The Program
10	You reached failure. You actually tried and failed to get the weight all the way up.	Used on the Last Set of almost every exercise in the program. The only exercises we won’t hit an RPE 10 on are: leg press, RDLs, hack squats, sissy squats and reverse lunges.
9-10	You didn’t actually reach failure, but you were very close. You might have been able to add a little more weight, but you definitely didn’t leave more than 1 rep in the tank.	Used on Early Sets of most isolation exercises in the program and on Last Sets of some compound exercises.
9	You could’ve done one more rep if you really tried. This is still a hard set.	RPE 9 work is mostly only used for lower body compound exercises that carry a big recovery demand. It’s also used a bit more in the first few weeks of the full body program as you adjust to the higher frequency.

RPE	Meaning	When It's Used In The Program
8-9	You could've done 1 or 2 more reps if you really tried. It wasn't a brutal set, but you're still pretty close to failure here.	Similar to RPE 9 work, RPE 8-9 work is mostly reserved for exercises that carry a disproportionately high recovery demand, where pushing the set harder comes with a bigger cost than it's worth. It's also used a bit more in the first few weeks of the full body program, as you adjust to the higher frequency.
8	You probably had 2 reps left in the tank. It wasn't a super hard set, but will still certainly stimulate hypertrophy.	RPE 8 work is only used on select exercises in the Full Body version of the program. You won't find it in the Push Pull Legs or Upper Lower versions of the program, except for on deload weeks.
7-8	There are 2 or 3 reps in the tank here. Depending on the exercise, this is usually not going to feel like a truly hard set.	RPE 7-8 work is reserved for RDLs and Sissy Squats. In the case of RDLs, so much muscle damage occurs that pushing really close to failure is rarely, if ever, actually worth it. With Sissy Squats, most people are clunky with the technique, so the slightly lower RPE will help you get the form locked in.
7	You have 3 reps left in the tank. On most exercises, this would feel like something between a tough warm up set and an easy working set.	There is no RPE 7 work in this program, except for on deload weeks.
6-7	You have 3 or maybe 4 reps left in the tank.	RPE 6-7 work is used on Paused RDLs. Because RDLs pose a uniquely large recovery demand, it's better to focus on technique and steer clear of failure.
6	You could've done 4 more if you really tried.	RPE 6 work is only included on Early Sets for Paused RDLs in the Full Body version of the program.

RPE	Meaning	When It's Used In The Program
5	You could've done 5 more if you really tried.	There is no RPE 5 work in this program.
1-4	More than 5 reps left in the tank. These are warm-up sets, not working sets.	RPE 1-4 sets are warm-up sets. There's not enough effort to stimulate meaningful hypertrophy on most exercises in experienced trainees.

To summarize this further, we'll essentially be taking the Last Set of most exercises to failure (RPE 10) and taking the Early Sets to an RPE 9-10 most of the time. On exercises where there's either a higher recovery cost or injury risk, we will stay a bit further from failure, usually in the RPE 8-9 range, depending on the specific exercise and the program variant.

By reserving failure for the last set of each exercise, we'll strike the best balance of volume and intensity.

You may also notice that in the program I use a “~” sign before most RPE ratings to imply that your RPE estimates will never be perfectly accurate. This sign denotes that being off by about 1 RPE unit is totally normal. Just do your best to be within +/- 1 RPE of the assigned RPE. Also, you can use the Last Set of most exercises to see how accurate you were with your Early Set RPEs by sending it all the way to failure and comparing it to how many reps you got for the previous sets.

## 4. PROGRESSIVE OVERLOAD

The simplest explanation of progressive overload is when you increase some training variable over time. It's widely accepted that progressive overload is crucial for ensuring continued progress because you need to continually provide the muscle with a new stimulus to adapt to. Without overload, the muscle will reach the current challenge level and have no real reason to continue growing.

There are a large number of ways to apply progressive overload. Here are the main ones we'll be emphasizing in this program:



## Adding reps

This will be the main method of overload on exercises that give a rep range, instead of a fixed rep count. For example, if the program calls for 3 sets of 10-12 reps on Hammer Preacher Curls (as it does), you'll pick a weight that will sufficiently challenge you for either 10, 11 or 12 reps. Let's say you get 10 reps on all 3 sets in Week 1. In Week 2, you will try to add a rep to at least one of those sets. Over the coming few weeks, try to max out the rep range by getting 12 reps on all 3 sets. Only once you've maxed out the rep range you should add some weight and then reduce reps back down to the bottom of the range. Coaches refer to this as double progression since we are progressing both reps and weight, in that order.

## Adding weight

There are a few exercises in this program where we'll be adding weight at a fixed rep count (i.e. there is no rep range and no rep progression). Leg Press, RDLs and Tricep Bar Pressdowns are a few examples. In this case, you'll keep the reps the same and try to add weight when you can, without sacrificing form.

On all other exercises, only add weight once you've maxed out the top end of the rep range, as explained above.

## Improving form

Even if you can't add some reps or weight during a given week, you can always do minor things to improve your technique. Improvements in technique cues, especially improvements in controlling the negative, can increase tension on the target muscle and totally counts as progressive overload!

## Improving the mind-muscle connection

If you can't add reps or weight, you can focus on feeling the muscle working better. Improving the mind-muscle connection is most likely not as effective as adding reps, weight or improving form at increasing tension, but research has shown that the mind-muscle connection can increase hypertrophy in some cases [9]. It's certainly worth keeping in mind as an overload option, especially on isolation exercises where adding reps and weight may become impractical at a certain point of strength development.

## 5. HIGH-TENSION EXERCISES

You'll quickly notice that this program is **not** a powerbuilding/strength program. There are many machine-based and cable-based exercises and only a select few free-weight movements. Even the over-hated and under-appreciated Smith Machine makes a number of appearances over a free weight barbell option (gasp!).

Why is this?

Well, first of all, the best evidence shows that machines are at least equally effective as free weights in stimulating hypertrophy [10], and in some cases, may be superior [11].

That shouldn't be surprising as machines and cables have a few clear advantages to free weights when it comes to bodybuilding. Here's a short list of a few:

- Generally, you can push sets to failure more safely on machines. If you fail a rep on a machine, the weight is usually safely supported by the machine after you fail a rep. On the other hand, if you fail with free weights, there is less support for the failed attempt, which may come with a higher risk of injury.
- Good machines are also generally designed to have good resistance profiles. Free weight exercises tend to have much more variable resistance profiles, meaning that the exercise may feel very hard at one point in the range of motion, but very easy at another point in the range of motion. Machines tend to apply resistance more evenly, which is a good thing because as you approach failure, the muscle won't fail just because it hit a tough spot in the free weight's resistance profile. Instead, it'll be because the muscle has reached exhaustion. Let's compare the standing dumbbell curl versus the Bayesian cable curl, for example. With the dumbbell curl, your biceps experience the highest level of tension when the elbow is at 90 degrees and virtually zero tension when the bicep is fully stretched at the bottom. Wouldn't it be nice if there was a way to keep even tension on the biceps throughout the entire range of motion? Luckily, there is a way! It's called a Bayesian cable curl. Unlike dumbbells, cables offer much more continuous tension on the biceps throughout the entire range of motion.
- Machines also tend to offer higher stability than free weight exercises. Unstable exercises are not ideal for hypertrophy. Think about doing a squat on a Bosu ball. You're so challenged with trying to keep your balance that you aren't able to properly apply tension to the quads. Increasing the stability of an exercise, generally speaking, increases the efficiency of the force transfer to the target muscle. This is why, for hypertrophy purposes, getting "locked in" on an exercise is smart. The less locked in you are, the more opportunities there are for tension to leak – which is not great. Since machines usually offer very high stability, there is minimal leakage of tension.
- Machines also generally require fewer warm-up sets. This means you can get to your working sets faster without wasting time and energy doing as many non-stimulative warm up sets. For example, when I do barbell back squats, I usually need to do 4-5 warm-up sets before I feel ready to hit my first working set. However, on Hack Squats or Smith Machine Squats, I feel ready to tackle my working sets after only 2-3 warm-up sets. That means less time and energy spent doing work that isn't helping with muscle growth and more time and energy spent on the good stuff.



Despite these advantages, I don't want to overstate the supremacy of machine-based exercises. Remember that research indicates that both machines and free weights are effective for building muscle. And free weights have advantages too. They're more accessible, they tend to have better strength carryover, they may activate smaller stabilizers better, and they're more versatile (you can do a lot more exercises with a barbell than you can with a hack squat).

But when it comes to our main goal with this program specifically, which is to build muscle, I do believe that machines have a slight edge in most instances. That said, there are a few cases where free weight exercises are included. There are RDLs in this program, dumbbell presses, dips, and some free weight arm exercises. But overall, you will notice that machines and cables are emphasized.

However, just in case you don't have access to machines and cables, for every exercise, I've included at least one free weight substitution option. Making these substitutions will absolutely allow you to still get the job done and make great gains while running this program with minimal equipment.

Beyond an emphasis on exercises that have high stability and good tension profiles, this program also prioritizes exercises with a long length muscle bias. This means we'll be focusing on exercises that load the muscle while it is being stretched. Examples of very long-length biased exercises include Paused Dips, Paused RDLs, Behind-The-Back Cuffed Cable Lateral Raises, Bayesian Cable Curls, and plenty more.

6. INTENSITY TECHNIQUES

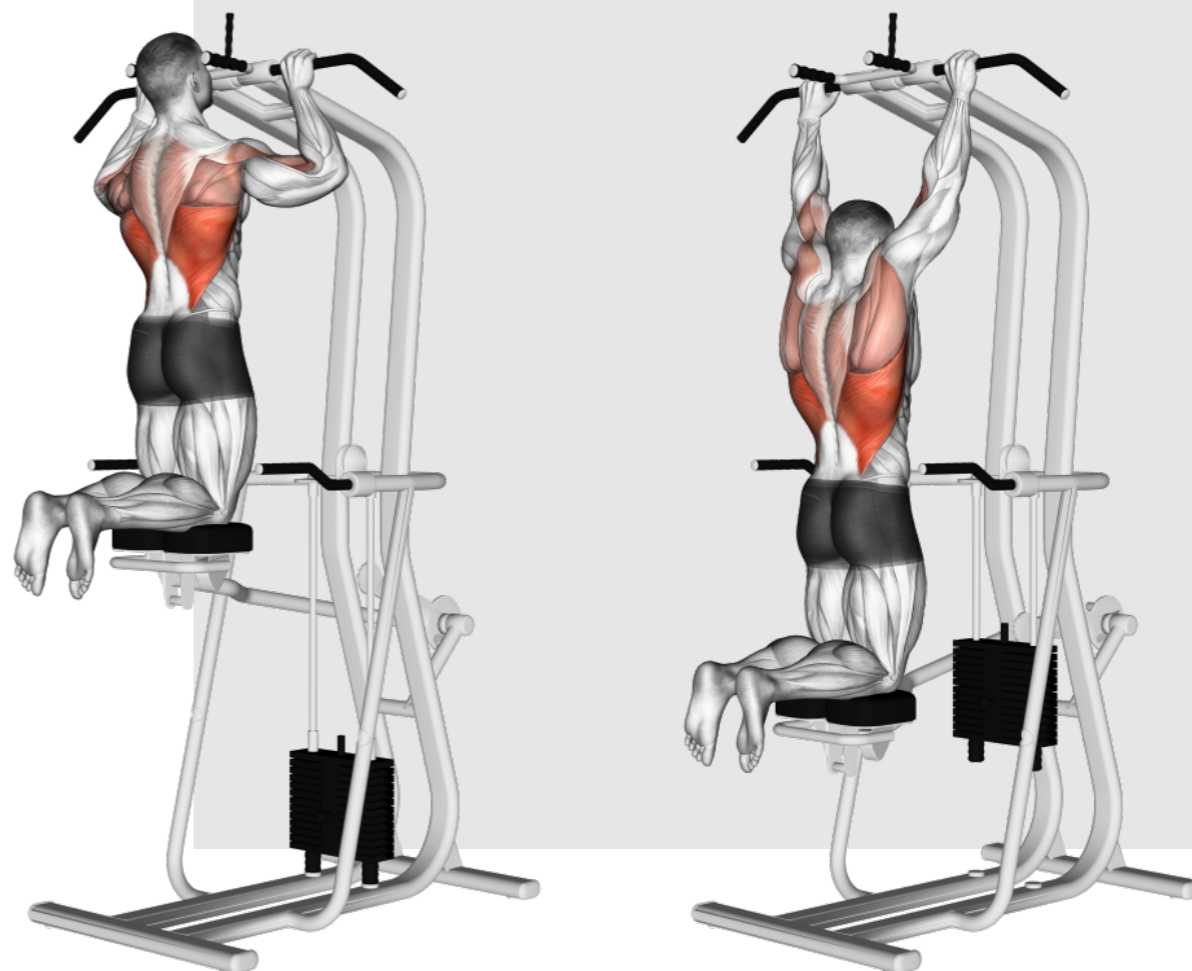
Intensity techniques are also a big part of this program. In fact, there is a full column in the program dedicated to the intensity technique we'll be using on the last set of each exercise. If you've run any of my programs before, you'll know that this is a new addition that I'm really excited about.

WEEK 1		LAST-SET INTENSITY TECHNIQUE		ARM-UP SETS	WORKING SETS	REPS	LOAD	EARLY SET RPE	LAST SET RPE	REST	SUBSTITUTION OPTION 1	SUBSTITUTION OPTION 2	NOTES
PULL #1 (LAT FOCUSED)	Cross-Body Lat Pull Around	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1	3	10-12			~9	10	~2-3 min	Half-Kneeling 1-Arm Lat Pulldown	Neutral Grip Pullup	Try to keep the cable and your wrist aligned in a straight line throughout the pull. Feel a nice, deep lat stretch at the top.
	Snatch-Grip RDL	N/A	2-3	2	8			~6	~6-7	~3-4 min	DB RDL	Nordic Ham Curl	The RPE is intentionally low here because these will cause a lot of muscle damage. Don't be tempted to go too heavy. 1 second pause at the bottom of each rep. To keep tension on the hamstrings, stop about 75% of the way to full lockout on each rep (i.e. stay in the bottom 3/4 of the range of motion).
	Chest-Supported Machine Row	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1-2	3	8-10			~9	10	~2-3 min	Chest-Supported T-Bar Row	Palms Row	Flare elbows out at roughly 45° and squeeze your shoulder blades together hard at the top of each rep.
	Straight Bar Lat Prayer	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1	3	12-15			~9-10	10	~1-2 min	Machine Lat Pullover	DB Lat Pullover	Lean forward to get a big stretch on the lats at the top of the ROM and then stand upright as you squeeze your lats at the bottom.
	Hammer Preacher Curl	N/A	1	3	10-12			~9-10	10	~1-2 min	Fat-Grip Preacher Curl	Hammer Curl	These will target the brachialis and forearm hard. Squeeze the dumbbell hard in the middle of the handle and curl about 3/4 of the way up (i.e. stay in the bottom 3/4 of the curl).
	Lying Paused Rope Face Pull	N/A	1	3	10-12			~9-10	10	~1-2 min	Rope Face Pull	Bent-Over Reverse DB Flye	Pause for 1-2 seconds in the squeeze of each rep. Contract the rear delts hard!
		N/A											

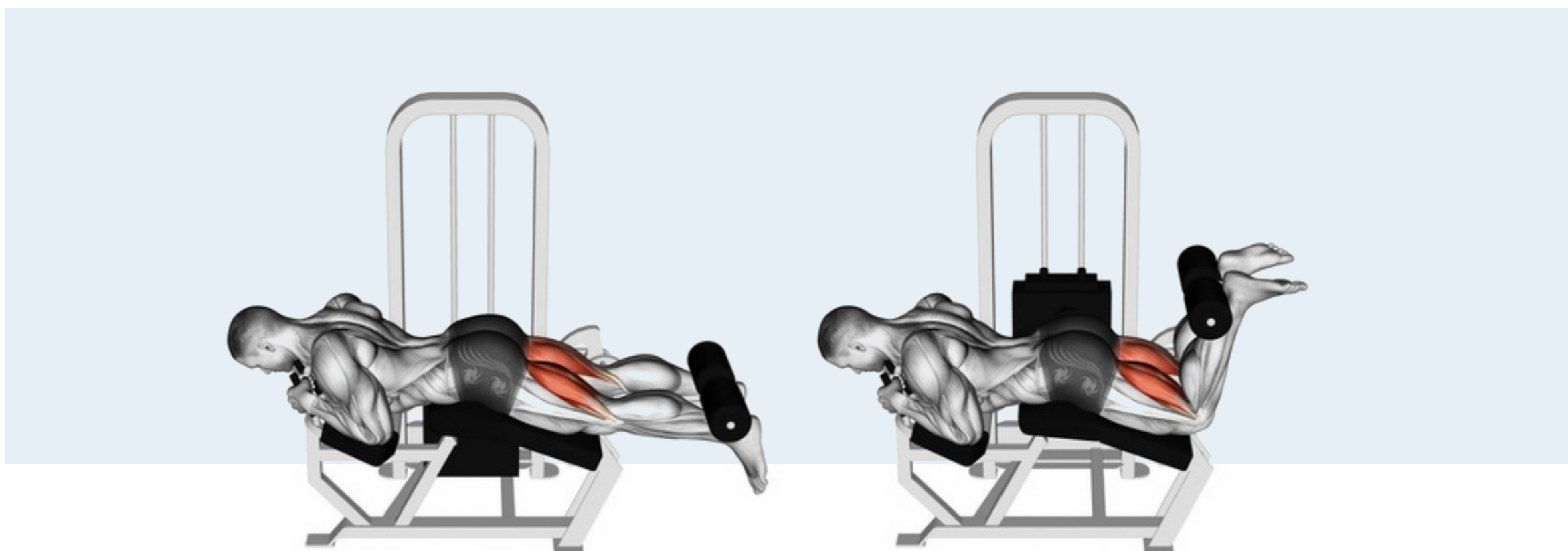
Here's a list of the ones we'll be using:

### Long-length Partial

A long-length partial is simply a partial rep in the stretched aspect of the lift. For example, if we're doing long-length partials on an assisted pull-up, we would come about half way up, doing partial reps in the bottom part of the pull up.



As another example, if we're doing long-length partials on a lying leg curl, we would do partial reps in the bottom half of the curl, where the leg is more straight rather than more bent.



More and more research is showing that the stretched/lengthened aspect of the lift is better for hypertrophy than the squeezed/shortened aspect of the lift [3]. Long-length partials allow us to spend more time in the most hypertrophic aspect of the range of motion.

**IMPORTANT!** Note that when long-length partials are included in the program, they are to be performed on every rep of the last set for an exercise. For example, on Day 1 we are doing 3 sets of 10-12 reps on cross-body lat pull-arounds. On set 1 and 2, we will use a full range of motion on all reps as normal. Then on set 3, we will do long-length partials on ALL 10-12 reps. So long-length partials are NOT being done to extend the set beyond failure in this program, but rather they are to be done on every rep of the last set only, when listed under the intensity technique column.

## Static Stretches

Static stretching is when you hold a stretch in a fixed position. In this program, we'll be holding specific stretches for certain muscles after the last set of an exercise. For example, after finishing 3 sets of 8 reps on the leg press, we'll hold a 30 second static stretch for each quad, like so:



This 2019 study and this 2022 study both found that inter-set stretching can enhance muscle growth for the quads and calves, respectively [12, 13]. This makes sense, given what we know about the value of the stretch for inducing hypertrophy. However, research is mixed in this area. Not all studies show a benefit for muscle growth. For example, this 2023 study found no benefit of inter-set stretching on bicep growth [14]. Looking at the research broadly, I suspect the effect of stretching is likely muscle specific. The studies that do show an effect found a benefit in the quads and calves, so we'll be focusing on using static stretching on these muscles in this program. We'll also be including some static stretches for the lats because it can help people "connect" with their lats better and seriously improve the pump. In addition, we'll be hitting some static stretches for the pecs because it can massively increase blood flow to the pecs.

Oh, and don't worry – we're only static stretching after the last set of an exercise. By doing so, you won't need to worry about it negatively impacting your performance. Besides, research shows that static stretching only seems to hurt performance when you hold the stretch for longer than 60 seconds [15]. The 30 second holds we'll be doing are well within the safe zone.

## Myo-reps

Myo-reps are when you extend a set beyond failure by taking short mini-rests and cranking out a few extra reps in between mini-rests. For example, this is how we'll be using myo-reps on the cable crunch in this program:

When the program calls for "Cable Crunch 3 sets of 10-12 reps (+ Myo-reps)"

- Do sets 1 and 2 as normal
- On set 3: do 10-12 reps (reach failure)
- Then rest for ~5 seconds
- Do another 3-4 reps
- Then rest for another ~5 seconds
- Do another 3-4 reps
- Repeat until you can no longer get at least 3 reps
- At this point, the set is finished

Myo-reps are great because they allow you to squeeze out some extra reps while the muscle is near full exhaustion. The reps close to the end of a set are more "effective" for muscle growth than reps toward the beginning of a set. Myo-reps allow us to get in more of these "effective reps".

## Dropsets

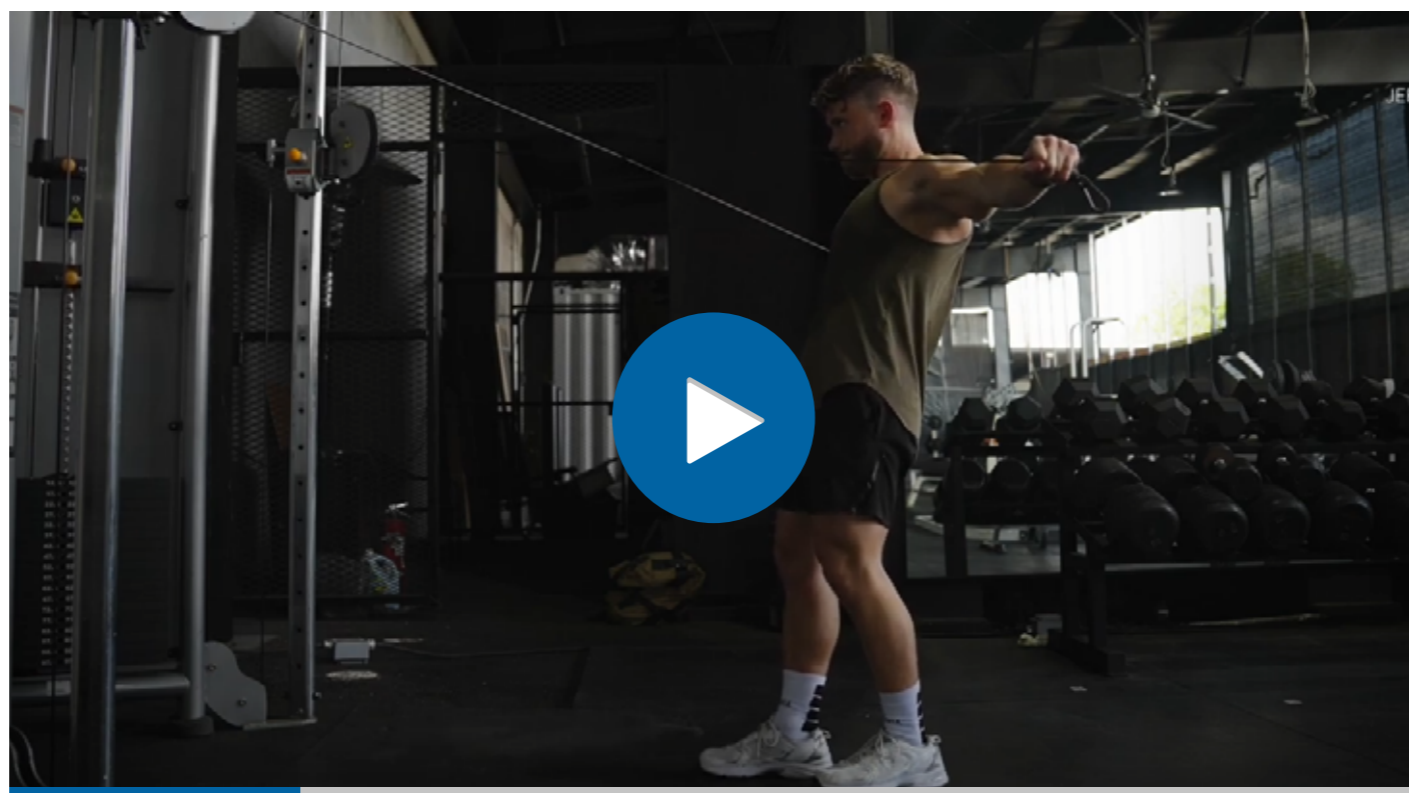
A dropset is when you drop the weight back and perform more reps at the end of a set. For example, in this program we'll be doing a dropset on the overhead tricep extension (and a few other exercises). Here's how that will work:

- You finish your last set and get 10-12 reps with 60 lbs
- After finishing your last rep, immediately drop the weight back by 20-30% (in this case, you drop the weight back to 45 lbs)
- Perform however many more reps until you get to failure again with good form

In this program, we'll be doing small dropsets, not big dropsets. It's generally smarter to drop the weight back by a small amount so that you only get another few reps. This way, we can guarantee that all of the extra dropset reps are actually effective and you're not wasting a bunch of time and effort doing "ineffective" dropset reps that are far from failure. So when doing dropsets in this program, only drop the weight back by 20-30% and then get back to work.

## Mechanical Dropsets

A mechanical dropset is similar to the traditional dropset explained above, except instead of dropping the weight back, you make the exercise easier by strategically modifying your technique in some way. This technique modification will allow you to squeeze out some extra reps. For example, we'll be doing a mechanical dropset on the Cable Reverse Flye for the rear delts in this program by taking a step toward the cable machine at set rep intervals. This is probably more easily understood by watching [this video](#).



## Integrated Partial

Integrated Partial is a type of long-length partial where, instead of doing all of the reps in a set as partial reps, you integrate them throughout the set by alternating between full ROM reps and long-length partial reps. This is what integrated partials will look like on the pec deck in this program:

- Do 1 rep with full ROM
- Do 1 rep with partial ROM (do a half rep in the stretched aspect)
- Do 1 rep with full ROM
- Do 1 rep with partial ROM (do a half rep in the stretched aspect)
- Repeat until you hit the target rep count

By placing the partial reps in the middle of the set and alternating full ROM reps with partial ROM reps, you get any potential benefit of full range of motion while spending roughly twice the time in the lengthened aspect of the range. The reason we don't do integrated partials on all exercises is that it can feel disruptive to the flow of the set for some people. Also, there isn't actually any research on this method. I'm simply including it as an experimental method that has theoretical merit.



# UNDERSTANDING THE PROGRAM

The program is laid out in a PDF and an Excel spreadsheet. Below is a brief explanation of what each column in the program means.

WEEK 1	EXERCISE	LAST-SET INTENSITY TECHNIQUE	WARM-UP SETS	WORKING SETS	REPS	LOAD	EARLY SET RPE	LAST SET RPE	REST	SUBSTITUTION OPTION 1	SUBSTITUTION OPTION 2	NOTES
PULL #1 (LAT FOCUSED)	Cross-Body Lat Pull-Around	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1	3	10-12		~9	10	~2-3 min	Half-Kneeling 1-Arm Lat Pulldown	Neutral-Grip Pullup	Try to keep the cable and your wrist aligned in a straight line throughout the pull. Feel a nice, deep lat stretch at the top.
	Snatch-Grip RDL	N/A	2-3	2	8		~6	~6-7	~3-4 min	DB RDL	Nordic Ham Curl	The RPE is intentionally low here because these will cause a lot of muscle damage. Don't be tempted to go too heavy. 1 second pause at the bottom of each rep. To keep tension on the hamstrings, stop about 75% of the way to full lockout on each rep (i.e. stay in the bottom 3/4 of the range of motion).
	Chest-Supported Machine Row	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1-2	3	8-10		~9	10	~2-3 min	Chest-Supported T-Bar Row	Helms Row	Flare elbows out at roughly 45° and squeeze your shoulder blades together hard at the top of each rep.
	Straight-Bar Lat Prayer	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1	3	12-15		~9-10	10	~1-2 min	Machine Lat Pullover	DB Lat Pullover	Lean forward to get a big stretch on the lats at the top of the ROM and then stand upright as you squeeze your lats at the bottom.
	Hammer Preacher Curl	N/A	1	3	10-12		~9-10	10	~1-2 min	Fat-Grip Preacher Curl	Hammer Curl	These will target the brachialis and forearms hard. Squeeze the dumbbell hard in the middle of the handle and curl about 3/4 of the way up (i.e. stay in the bottom 3/4 of the curl).
	Lying Paused Rope Face Pull	N/A	1	3	10-12		~9-10	10	~1-2 min	Rope Face Pull	Bent-Over Reverse DB Flye	Pause for 1-2 seconds in the squeeze of each rep. Contract the rear delts hard!

1. Intensity techniques to be done after the last set only.
2. Record the weight you used for each set here.
3. Rough guidelines for how long to rest between sets.
4. Here you will find exercise-specific coaching cues. Always read the notes before doing your warm-up sets so you can practice any new cues.
5. Each exercise has a clickable demo link.
6. Warm-up sets should be light and easy.
7. Early set RPEs are often a tough lower than last set RPE. See handbook for an explanation of RPE.
8. Two substitution options for each exercise. If you can't do the exercise listed feel free to swap it for either one of these.

THE TRAINING SPLIT

How you split up your training days throughout the week will depend on which version of the program you are running.

If you are running the **Full Body version of the program**, your split may look like this:

Week Day	Workout
Monday	Full Body #1
Tuesday	Full Body #2
Wednesday	Rest Day
Thursday	Full Body #3
Friday	Full Body #4
Saturday	Weak Points & Arms
Sunday	Rest Day

Note that this is simply one example of how to set up the week of full body training. You can feel free to shift the workouts to different days of the week to fit your schedule best. You can also feel free to shuffle around the rest days, as long as you are getting two rest days per week and are still feeling recovered between workouts.

If you are running the **Upper/Lower version of the program**, your split may look like this:

Week Day	Workout
Monday	Upper #1
Tuesday	Lower #1
Wednesday	Rest Day
Thursday	Upper #2
Friday	Lower #2
Saturday	Weak Points & Arms
Sunday	Rest Day

Note that this is simply one example of how to set up the week of upper/ lower training. You can feel free to shift the workouts to different days of the week to fit your schedule best. You can also feel free to shuffle around the rest days, as long as you are getting two rest days per week and are still feeling recovered between workouts.

If you are running the **Push/Pull/Legs version of the program**, your split will look asynchronous, something like this:

Week Day	Workout
Monday	Pull #1
Tuesday	Push #1
Wednesday	Legs #1
Thursday	Arms & Weak Points #1
Friday	Rest
Saturday	Pull #2
Sunday	Push #2
Monday	Legs #2
Tuesday	Arms & Weak Points #2
Wednesday	Rest
Thursday	Pull #1
Friday	Push #1
Saturday	Legs #1
Sunday	Arms & Weak Points #1

Note that this is simply one example of how to set up the week of push/pull/legs training. You can feel free to shift the workouts to different days of the week to fit your schedule best. You can also feel free to shuffle around the rest days, as long as you are getting at least two rest days per 9-day cycle and are still feeling recovered between workouts.

As you can see above, you will not hit the same exact workout on each day of the week and the workouts will run on a 9-day cycle instead of the usual 7-day cycle. You will also notice that in the program there is an optional rest day included between Push workouts and Legs workouts. If you feel that you are not recovering well (very sore, tired, etc.) then please take this optional rest day. In this case, the workouts will run on an 11-day cycle instead.

Which split should you run? This is mostly a matter of scheduling and personal preference. The overall volume and exercise selection is very similar between all three versions of the program. If you have all three versions of the program, I would suggest running all three and monitoring which one works best for you. The push/pull/legs and upper/lower versions of the program will be appropriate for people of any level of training advancement without any serious recovery considerations. The full body version of the program is a touch trickier because you will be hitting some of the same muscle groups on consecutive days. To avoid recovery issues, it is important to stay away from failure on most exercises for the first two weeks of the full body program. Outside of this consideration, I would suggest watching [this video](#) if you are unfamiliar with high frequency full body training.

WEAK POINT EXERCISES

An important aspect of bodybuilding is building up lagging muscles. To accomplish this, in each version of the program you will find a “Weak Points & Arms” day where you will pick two exercises from the table below depending on the individual weak point you’re trying to improve the most.

IMPORTANT! For the Exercise #1 and Exercise #2 options simply pick ONE of the three listed options. **Do not do all 3 options listed each day.**

Feel free to rotate these exercises from week to week, if you wish, as long as you are still tracking your load and reps and aiming to progressively overload over the long term.

THE WEAK POINT TABLE		
Weak Point	Exercise #1 Options	Exercise #2 Options
Shoulders	<div><div>1. <u>Cuffed Behind-The-Back Lateral Raise</u></div><div>2. <u>Machine Lateral Raise</u></div><div>3. <u>Dumbbell Lateral Raise</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>	<div><div>1. <u>Machine Shoulder Press</u></div><div>2. <u>Smith Machine Shoulder Press</u></div><div>3. <u>Standing DB Arnold Press</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>
Lats (“Back Width”)	<div><div>1. <u>Cable Lat Prayer</u></div><div>2. <u>DB Lat Pullover</u></div><div>3. <u>Machine Lat Pullover</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>	<div><div>1. <u>Lat-Focused Cable Row</u></div><div>2. <u>Elbows-In 1-Arm DB Row</u></div><div>3. <u>Half-Kneeling 1-Arm Lat Pulldown</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>
Quads	<div><div>1. <u>Leg Extension</u></div><div>2. <u>Reverse Nordics</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>	<div><div>1. <u>Single-Leg Leg Press</u></div><div>2. <u>Sissy Squat</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>
Glutes	<div><div>1. <u>Machine Hip Abduction</u></div><div>2. <u>Cable Hip Abduction</u></div><div>3. <u>Lateral Band Walk</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>	<div><div>1. <u>Barbell Hip Thrust</u></div><div>2. <u>Single-Leg DB Hip Thrust</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>

Weak Point	Exercise #1 Options	Exercise #2 Options
Chest	<div><div>1. <u>Low Incline DB Flye</u></div><div>2. <u>Low-To-High Cable Crossover</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>	<div><div>1. <u>Chest Press Machine</u> (incline if upper pecs are lagging, flat if entire chest is lagging)</div><div>2. <u>Dumbbell Chest Press</u> (incline if upper pecs are lagging, flat if entire chest is lagging)</div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>
Neck	<div><div>1. <u>Plate-Loaded Neck Curls</u></div></div>	<div><div>1. <u>Head Harness Neck Extension</u></div><div>2. <u>Plate-Loaded Neck Extension</u></div></div> <div>Pick one of the options above. Do not do all of them in one day!</div>

Weak Point	Exercise
Hamstrings	There is a lot of hamstrings volume in this program. If they are a weak point for you, simply focus on executing the exercises listed with your best effort and execution rather than adding more volume.
Calves	Rather than adding more calf training volume, focus on the execution of the sets given in the program first. Ensure you are pausing at the bottom of each rep and reaching a high level of effort. Feel free to sprinkle in 1-2 extra sets per exercise if they are a major priority for you.
Mid-Back (“Back Thickness”)	There is a lot of mid-back volume in this program. If this is a weak point for you, simply focus on executing the exercises listed with your best effort and execution rather than adding more volume. Really focus on squeezing your shoulder blades together on the positive and feeling your back pull apart on the negative when doing mid-back focused rows.
Upper Traps	The upper traps shouldn’t require a high level of volume to grow, especially when there is a lot of mid-back work. Before adding sets, focus on the execution of the sets given in the program first. Ensure you are squeezing your traps at the top of each rep and reaching a high level of effort. Feel free to sprinkle in 1-2 extra sets per exercise if they are a major priority for you.
Abs	The abs shouldn’t require a high level of volume to grow. If you are wanting to see your abs, your diet will be mainly responsible for lowering your level of abdominal fat to allow them to show through. Before adding sets, focus on the execution of the sets given in the program first. Ensure you are allowing your lower back to round on crunches and leg raises as you squeeze your abs. Feel free to sprinkle in 1-2 extra sets per exercise if they are a major priority for you.
Biceps	Because there is a dedicated arm day in this program and the biceps will get plenty of indirect work back exercises, adding even more sets would probably not be productive and would most likely fall under the “junk volume” category.
Triceps	Because there is a dedicated arm day in this program and the triceps will get plenty of indirect work from pressing, adding even more sets would probably not be productive and would most likely fall under the “junk volume” category.

SUPERSETS

Some exercises are listed as supersets. This means you are to perform these exercises at the same time, alternating sets back and forth. This is simply done to save on time. If you have more time to train you don't need to do them as supersets. It shouldn't impact the effectiveness of the sets either way.

Do these exercises together as a superset. Do one set of pull-ups, then one set of dips, back and forth, until all sets are done.		EXERCISE	LAST-SET INTENSITY TECHNIQUE	WARM-UP SETS	WORKING SETS	REPS	LOAD	EARLY SET RPE	LAST SET RPE	REST	SUBSTITUTION OPTION 1
		Superset A1: Assisted Pull-Up	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1-2	4	8-10		-8-9	10	-1 min	Lat PullDown
		Superset A2: Paused Assisted Dip	N/A	1-2	4	8-10		-8-9	10	-1 min	Decline Machine Chest Press
Superset B1 and B2 indicates that this is a separates superset of two different exercises paired together.	FULL BODY #3	Superset B1: Seated Leg Curl	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1	3	10-12		-7-8	-8-9	-0.5-1 min	Seated Leg Curl
		Superset B2: Leg Extension	Long-length Partial (on all reps of the last set)	1	3	10-12		-9	10	-0.5-1 min	DB Step-Up
		Cable Paused Shrug-In	N/A	1	3	10-12		-9-10	10	-0.5-1 min	Machine Shrug
		Roman Chair Leg Raise	N/A	0	3	10-20		-9-10	10	-1-2 min	Hanging Leg Raise

For any supersets in the program, you do not need to go immediately from one exercise to the next. I'd recommend resting 0.5-1 minute between each superset. So, in practice, our supersets should look something like this:

Do 10 reps of assisted pull-ups (Set 1)
Rest 0.5-1 min
Do 10 reps of assisted dips (Set 1)
Rest 0.5-1 min
Do 10 reps of assisted pull-ups (Set 2)
Rest 0.5-1 min
Do 10 reps of assisted dips (Set 2)
Rest 0.5-1 min
Do 10 reps of assisted pull-ups (Set 3)
Rest 0.5-1 min
Do 10 reps of assisted dips (Set 3)
Move on to the next exercise

## EXERCISE SUBSTITUTIONS

For each exercise, there are two alternative substitution options given. Here is a list of suitable reasons for making a substitution:

- You don't have access to the main exercise
- The main exercise causes you pain
- You really dislike the main exercise (but love one of the substitutions)
- You just don't "feel" the main exercise working at all, even after giving it an honest shot for several weeks (and you do "feel" one of the substitutions really well)

Here is a list of less suitable reasons for making a substitution:

- You haven't done the main exercise before (no better time than now to learn! Watch the exercise demo and give it a shot!)
- Someone at your gym is using the main exercise (instead of swapping, move onto a different exercise and come back to it later. If it's still unavailable and that's derailing your workout, then you can feel free to make the swap).
- The main exercise is harder than one of the substitutions. Don't be tempted to always go for the easiest exercise option! Your hard work will pay off.

You can substitute either Option 1 or Option 2. They aren't arranged so that Option 1 is necessarily better than Option 2; they are just different options!

## TRAINING BLOCKS

This program is split into two training blocks: a Build Block and a Novelty Block. Each block lasts 5 weeks. Both blocks have the same overarching goal: maximum hypertrophy. The main difference between the two blocks is exercise selection. As the name implies, the Novelty Block is intended to introduce some new exercises, rep schemes and intensity techniques to create a new stimulus for continued growth into the second half of the program.

Week 5 is a semi-deload week and separates the two training blocks. Training volume is slightly decreased during this week and the RPEs are lowered on most exercises. Avoid going to failure this week and instead focus on your technique and mind-muscle connection.

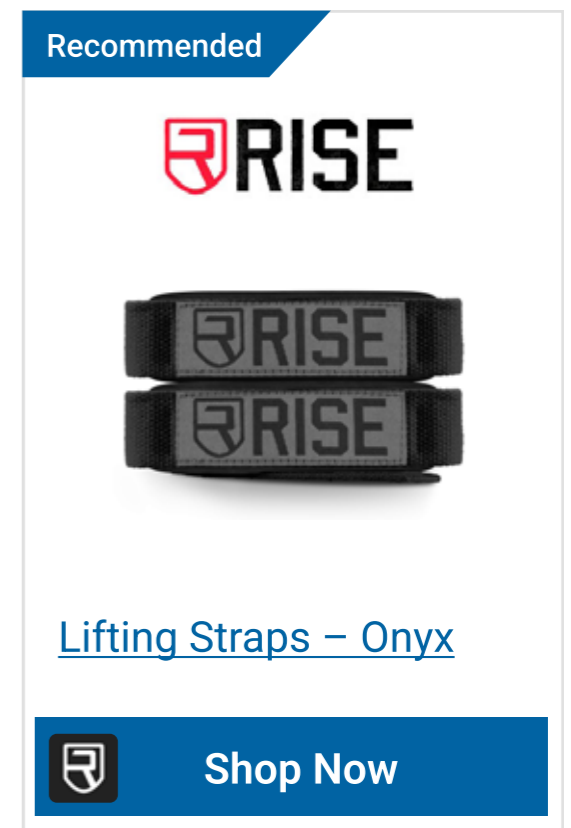
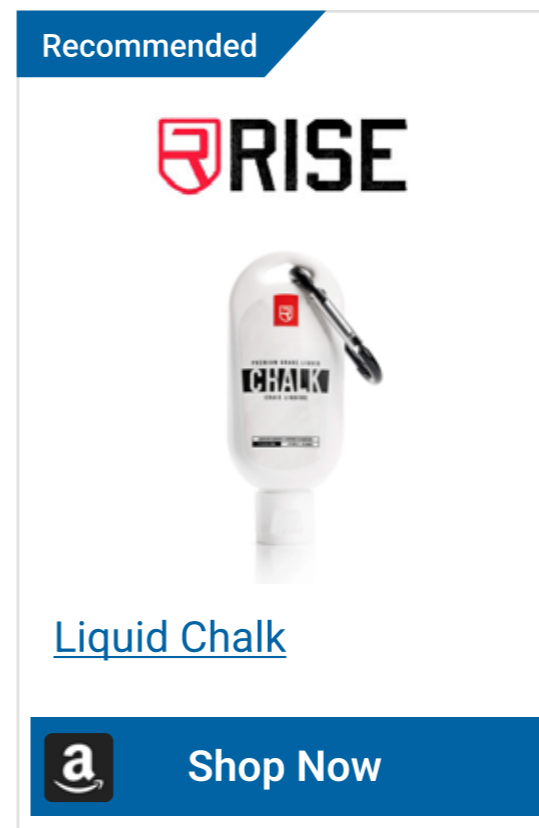
A man is shown from the chest up, wearing large black headphones and a light-colored t-shirt. The t-shirt has some text on it, including "Wisdom" and "The body of knowledge and principles developed through experience and good judgement; the quality of being wise." The background is a blurred gym setting. The overall image has a dark blue overlay.

# SUGGESTED TRAINING GEAR

In the table below, you will find a list of training gear that can help you make the most out of this program. None of this training gear is required and there is a level of importance column that will help you decide which items you may want to consider more than others.

Please note that all of the Amazon links and Rise links below are affiliate links. I will get a small commission if you purchase any items from these links. While I greatly appreciate that support, I want to emphasize that these are all supplemental items and are absolutely not needed in order to make great progress while running this program. That said, I personally use all of the items on the list and I do find they make a difference (some more than others). If you only get two items on this list, I would get liquid chalk and lifting straps over anything else.

As an  I earn from qualifying purchases.



Gear	Link	Why	Level of importance	Exercises to use on
Angles 90 Handles	<a href="#">Link</a> <a href="#">Cheaper Option</a>	Allow for more secure grip and better mind-muscle connection on pulling exercises.  A regular D-handle can be used without issue.	Low-Moderate	Lat focused pull downs and lat-focused rows
Liquid Chalk	<a href="#">Link</a>	Prevent grip slipping from sweaty palms. Usually allows for more reps and/or increased loading.	Moderate-high	Any exercise that relies on grip strength (usually pulling exercises like rows, pullups, RDLs, etc.)
Lifting Straps	<a href="#">Link</a>	Prevents grip from being a limiting factor on heavy pulls, allowing you to overload the target muscles better.	Moderate-high	Most back exercises and RDLs

Gear	Link	Why	Level of importance	Exercises to use on
Knee Sleeves	<a href="#">Link</a>	Knee sleeves provide comfort and cushioning around the knees during squat-type movements and create a small performance boost.	Moderate	Squat-type movements and leg presses
Bodybuilding Belt	<a href="#">Link</a>	Belts are more helpful for strength/powerlifting training but can still help with bracing on some compound exercises in this program. A thicker powerlifting-style lever belt can be used if it's comfortable for you.	Low-Moderate	Squat-type exercises and RDLs. Some find it helpful on presses.
Cable Triceps Attachment	<a href="#">Link</a>	Long ropes allow you to get a bigger range of motion on certain exercises.  Two ropes can be used instead without issue.	Low-Moderate	Rope facepulls, triceps diverging pressdown
Wrist Cuffs	<a href="#">Link</a>	These ankle straps can be used as wrist cuffs for the cuffed lateral raises throughout the program. The cuffs will prevent your forearms from taking over on lateral raises and often helps improve the mind-muscle connection. They can also be used to do cable hip ab/adductions.	Moderate-high	Cuffed behind-the-back lateral raises, cable hip abductions, cable hip adductions
Lacrosse Balls	<a href="#">Link</a>	Holding onto two lacrosse balls during cuffed lateral raises can improve tactile sensation and for some people makes the movement feel better than having your hands floating with nothing to hold onto.	Low (personal preference)	Cuffed behind-the-back lateral raises



# PROGRESS TRACKING

There are 3 main tools we'll be using to track progress on our bodybuilding journey: strength performance, progress photos, and bodyweight.

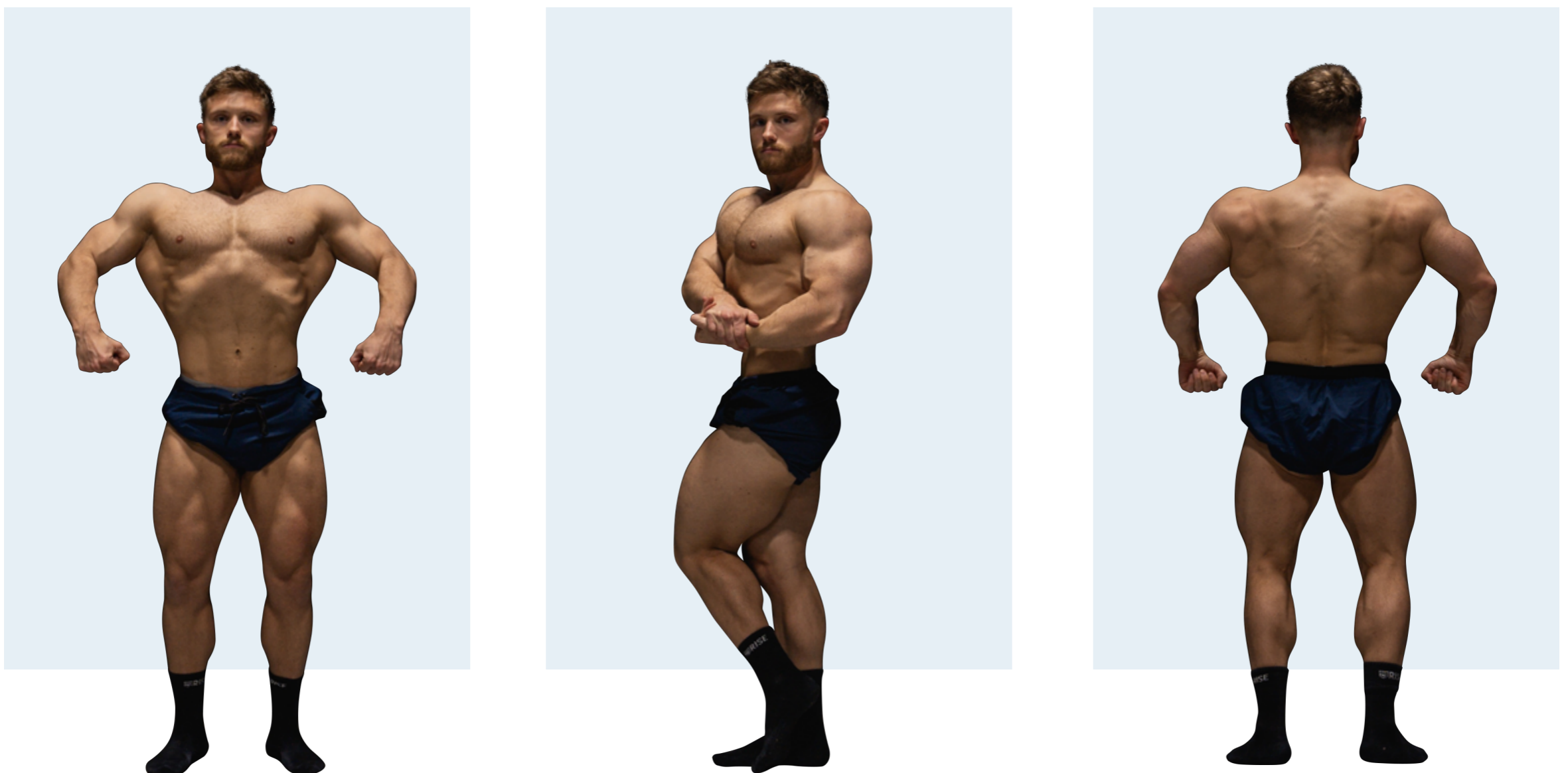
## 1. STRENGTH PERFORMANCE (PROGRESSIVE OVERLOAD)

The single best indicator that you're gaining muscle is if you're gaining strength in the gym. This doesn't mean your 1 rep max strength, but rather your strength within the rep ranges given in the program (usually around 8-15 reps). If you are either lifting more weight or doing more reps at the same weight within the rep ranges given in the program, you're most likely adding muscle. This is why it's really important that you track your weight and reps used for as many exercises as possible while running the program. Not only will tracking your performance keep you accountable to "beat the logbook," it will serve as a reliable proxy for physique progress (which can be harder to gauge visually, especially as you get more advanced).

## 2. PROGRESS PHOTOS

Since getting more jacked is the goal, progress photos will be the most direct method of measuring progress. However, depending on your level of advancement, you may not notice visual progress in photos as easily or quickly as you will strength progress in the gym. For this reason, I suggest taking progress roughly once every 2-3 months and ideally no more than once a week.

When taking progress photos, ensure that you use the same camera, background and lighting whenever possible. Remember to take at least one photo from the front, side, and rear.



### 3. BODYWEIGHT

Bodyweight is a surprisingly useful tool for tracking progress when used in combination with the other two. On its own, it can be deceptive because it doesn't tell you if you're gaining weight from fat, water, or muscle. However, when used alongside the other two tools, some common sense reasoning can give you a very good idea of what type of tissue you're gaining. For example, if you're getting stronger, you're looking more jacked in your photos, and your bodyweight is increasing at an appropriate rate, you can rest assured that the weight you're gaining is muscle. However, if you aren't getting stronger, you're looking significantly softer/flatter in your pics, and your weight is increasing rapidly, then you're most likely gaining fat.

Gaining roughly 1-2% of your bodyweight per month will ensure that you are gaining mostly muscle. For example, if you currently weigh 170 lbs (77 kg), gaining ~1.7-3.4 lbs (0.7-1.5 kg) per month will ensure that most will be lean mass. Generally speaking, the slower you gain, the leaner it will be.

If you have simultaneous fat loss goals while running this program, you will need to be either in a caloric deficit or at caloric maintenance. Generally speaking, for fat loss, I suggest losing weight no faster than 0.5-1% of your bodyweight per week. For example, if you currently weigh 220 lbs (100 kg), as you cut, aim to lose 1.1-2.2 lbs (0.5-1 kg) per week to retain as much muscle as possible. If your goal is body recomposition, aim to roughly maintain your body weight while using progress photos and strength gain as your main guide for progress.

While tracking your weight, be careful not to get too consumed with individual weigh-ins. Single weigh-ins can be impacted by water fluctuations, digestion changes, sleep disruptions, how late you ate the night before and a number of other short-term factors. Instead, observe weekly trends. If you take more than one weigh in per week, get the weekly average and compare weekly averages for a more accurate representation of how your weight is trending.

There is a much more detailed explanation of body recomposition in my [nutrition guide](#) on the topic. While other tools for tracking body composition such as calipers, DEXA scans and other bodyfat testing devices can be useful in some situations, given their low accuracy and high error margins, I generally don't recommend using them for tracking progress [16]. The three tools outlined above will be plenty for getting the job done and fully informing you on whether or not you're moving in the right direction.

A muscular man is shown from the waist up, holding two dumbbells. He is shirtless, revealing his well-defined muscles. The background is a gym setting with a tiled wall. The title 'MUSCLE ANATOMY' is overlaid in large, bold, white capital letters.

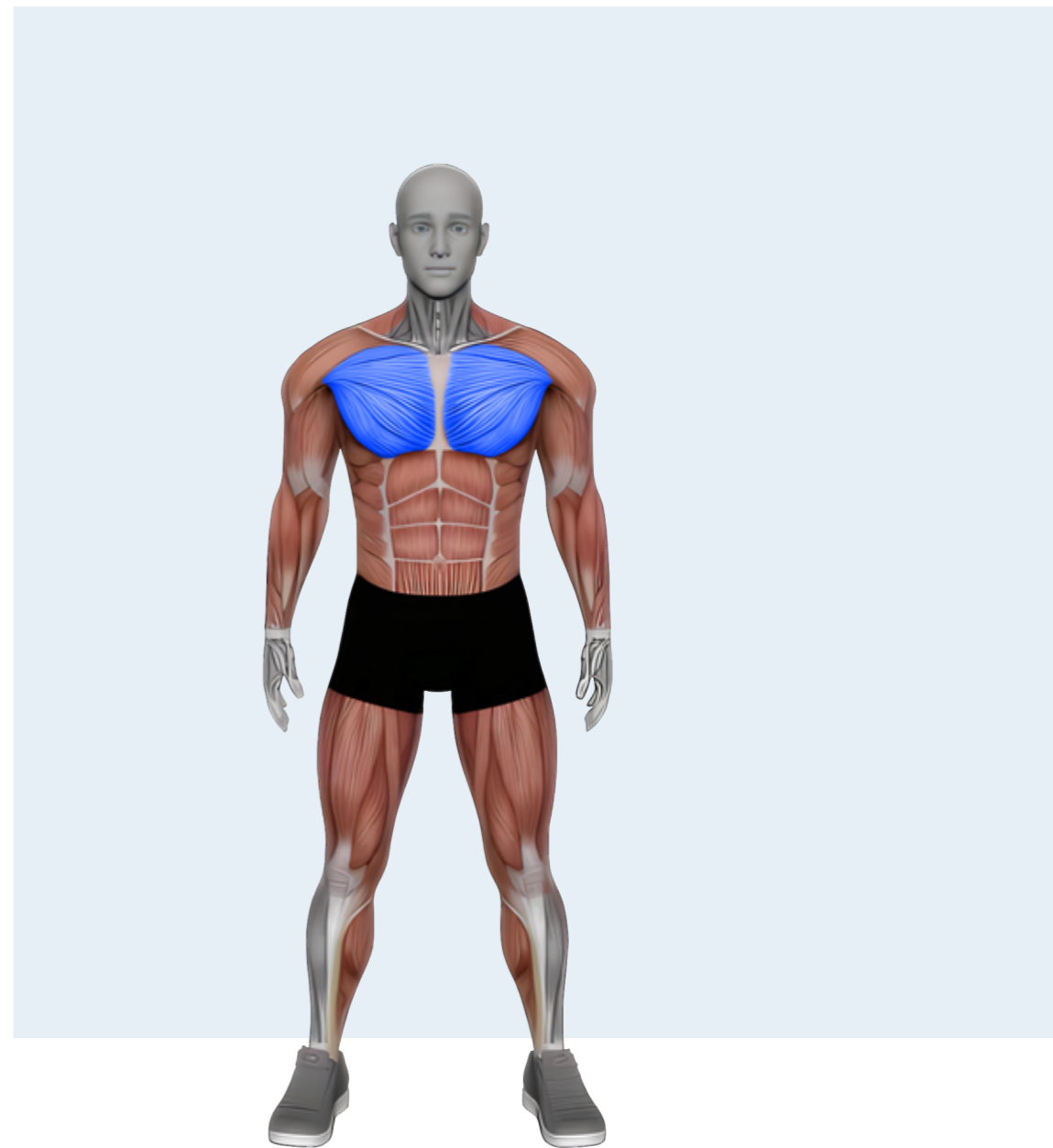
# MUSCLE ANATOMY

Below, you will find a description of how we plan on hitting each muscle in this program.

## CHEST

The chest is worked with any exercise that pushes the arm across the body. This includes movements such as presses, flyes, dips, and push-ups. The pecs can be split into a clavicular (upper) head and a sternal (mid & lower head). All exercises in this program will target both heads. However, incline presses and closer-grip pushes tend to emphasize the upper pecs slightly more, while decline presses and dips tend to emphasize the mid and lower pecs slightly more.

Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the chest: Low Incline Smith Machine Press, Pec Deck (w/ Integrated Partial), Paused Assisted Dip, Low Incline Dumbbell Press, Bent-Over Cable Pec Flye (Integrated Partial), Diamond Pushup, and Decline Machine Chest Press. You can find demos for these exercises as clickable links within the program sheets.



## LATS

The lats are worked with any exercise that pulls the arm down to the front or in from the side. The lats are often one of the hardest muscles for people to “feel” which can make them a tricky part of the back to hit. Throughout this program, we'll be using a variety of novel exercises and cues to maximally activate the lats.

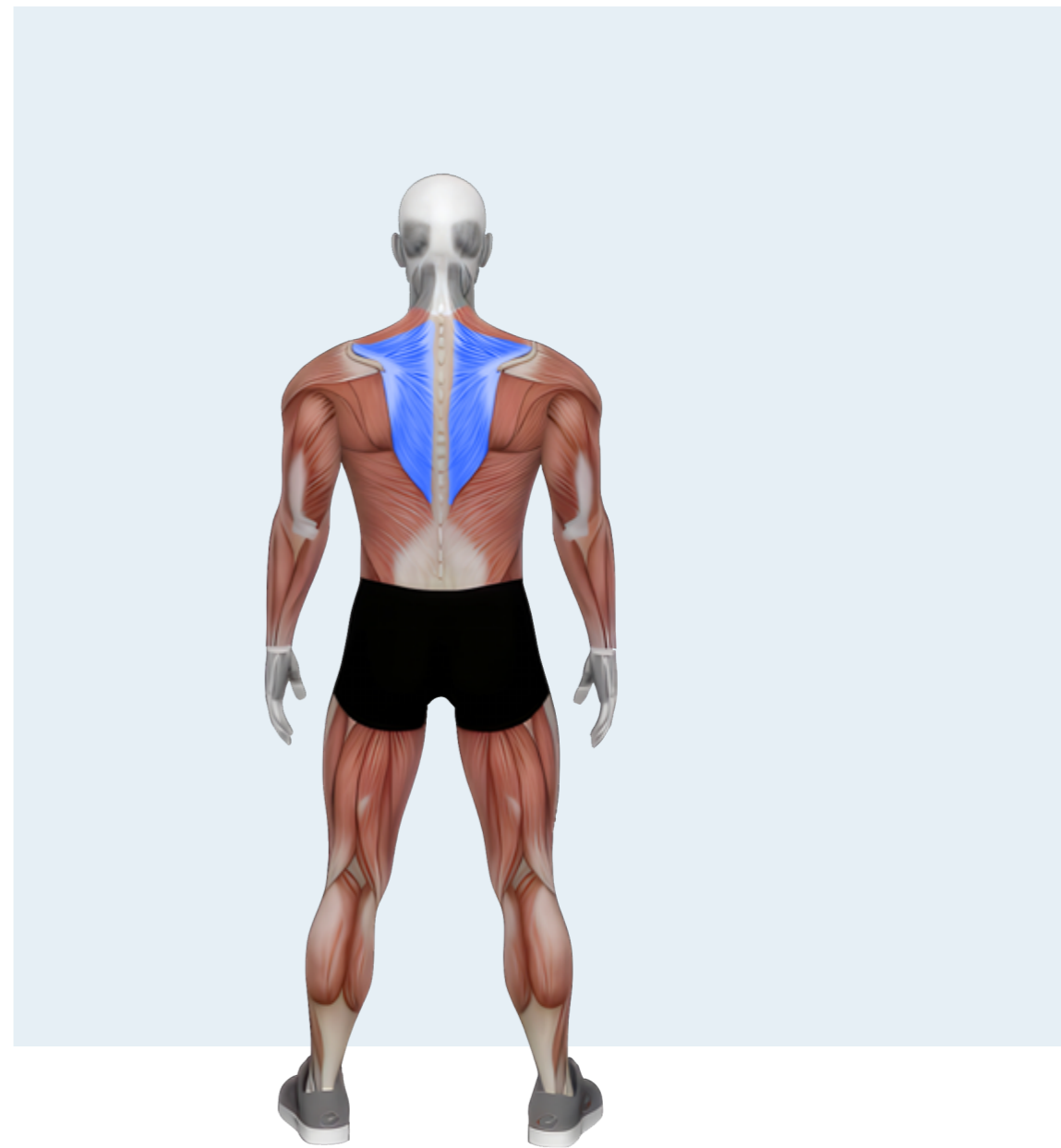
Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the lats: Cross-Body Lat Pull-Around, Straight-Bar Lat Prayer, Lean-Back Lat Pulldown, Lat-Focused Cable Row, 1-Arm Lat Pull-In, Dual-Handle Lat Pulldown (Mid-back + Lats), Neutral-Grip Lat Pulldown.



## MID BACK

The mid-back muscles, such as the mid-traps and rhomboids, are worked with any exercise that squeezes the shoulder blades together, like various kinds of rows and face pulls. To ensure that the mid-back is working as efficiently as possible, and not being compromised by overactivity in the lower back, most of the rowing we'll do in this program will be chest-supported.

Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the mid-back: Chest-Supported Machine Row, Lying Paused Rope Face Pull, Super-ROM Overhand Cable Row, Cable Reverse Flye (Mechanical Dropset), Chest-Supported T-Bar Row, Reverse Pec Deck (w/ Integrated Partial), Dual-Handle Lat Pulldown (Mid-back + Lats), Rear Delt 45° Cable Flye, Lean-Back Lat Pulldown.



## BICEPS

The biceps are worked with any exercise that flexes (bends) the elbow. As such, they'll be targeted directly on any kind of bicep curl and indirectly on most back exercises, like vertical pulls and rows. Because the biceps cross both the elbow joint and the shoulder joint, they can be activated in slightly different ways by varying your arm position. For this reason, we'll be performing a variety of different curl variations. The bicep variety in this program may feel like overkill, but this isn't a generic strength program. This is a pure hypertrophy program; and big biceps are a vital part of bodybuilding!

Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the the biceps: Hammer Preacher Curl, Bayesian Cable Curl, Bottom-2/3 Constant Tension Preacher Curl, Inverse DB Zottman Curl, Kneeling Overhead Cable Curl, N1-Style Short-Head Curl, Slow-Eccentric Bayesian Curl, Reverse-Grip Cable Curl, Concentration Cable Curl, Hammer Curl.



## TRICEPS

The triceps are worked with any exercise that extends (straightens out) the elbow. As such, they will be targeted directly on triceps extensions, pressdowns and kickbacks, and targeted indirectly on vertical and horizontal presses. As a tiny wrinkle, the long head of the triceps will also be active to some degree on back movements like pull-ups and pullovers. Like the biceps, the triceps also cross both the elbow joint and the shoulder joint, meaning varying your arm position can impact which region of the triceps is emphasized. Because of this, we will be performing a variety of different tricep isolation movements; some with the arm held up overhead, some with the arm positioned down by the side, and some with the arm hyperextended behind the torso. If the tricep work also feels like overkill, remember that they make up over half your upper arm musculature and contribute enormously to your appearance of muscularity from the side and rear!



Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the triceps: Smith Machine JM Press, Overhead Tricep Extension (Bar), Triceps Pressdown (Bar), Cable Triceps Kickback, Paused Assisted Dip, Katana Triceps Extension, Cable Skull Crusher, Tricep Diverging Pressdown (Long Rope or 2 Ropes), Dual-Cable Tricep Press, Diamond Pushup, Slow-Eccentric EZ-Bar Skull Crusher, Seated DB French Press.

## SHOULDERS (FRONT, SIDE & REAR DELTOIDS)

For our purposes in this program, the shoulders can be split into 3 different divisions: the anterior (front) deltoids, the lateral (side) deltoids, and the posterior (rear) deltoids.

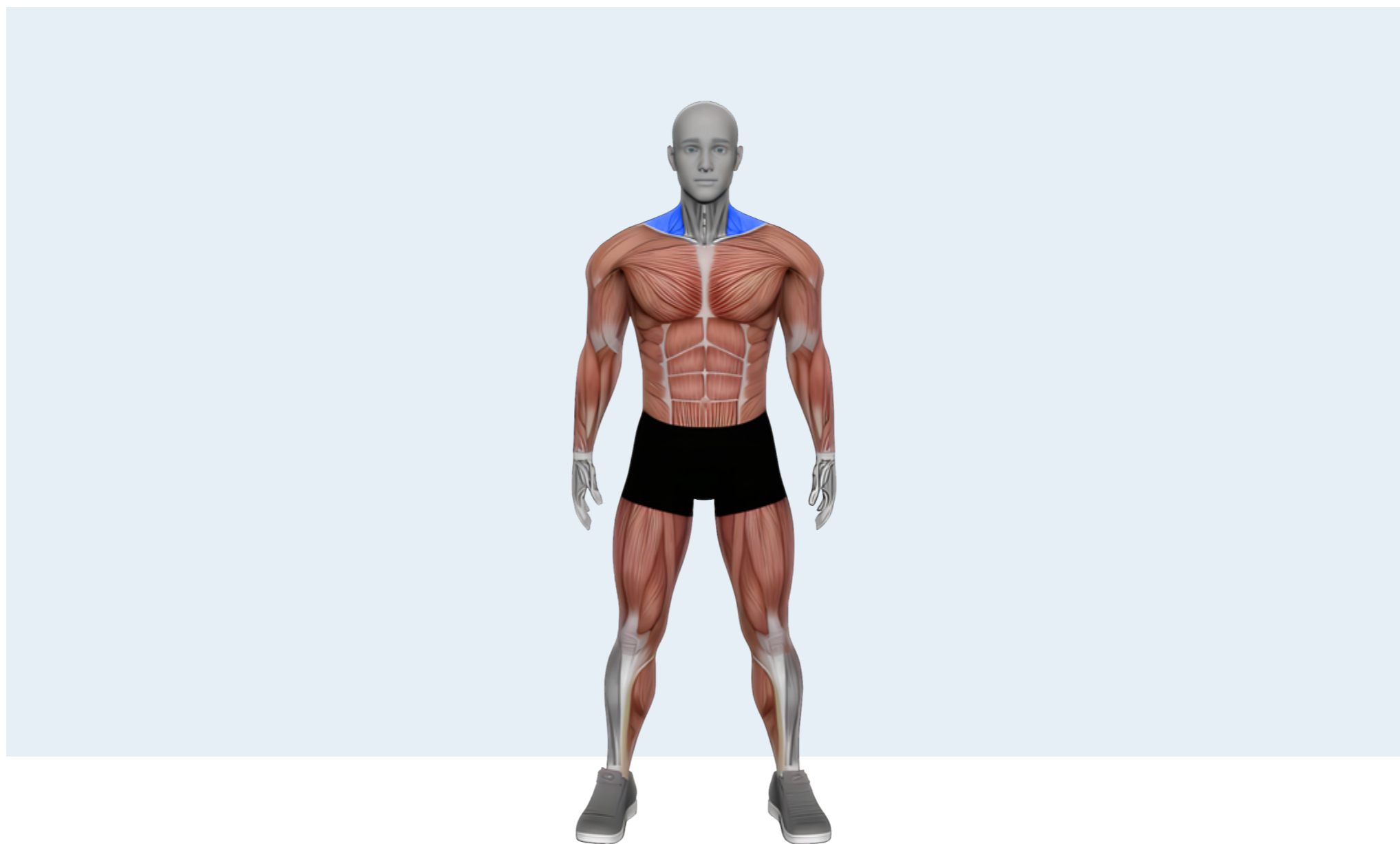
The front delts will be hit, to a very high degree, on all horizontal and vertical pressing and as such, won't be getting any isolation work in this program. The side delts will also be hit on horizontal and vertical presses, but to a lesser degree. Because of this, we'll be doing a variety of isolation exercises for the side delts. In contrast with the other two divisions, the rear delts aren't hit with pressing movements, but will instead be targeted on any horizontal and vertical pulls in the program. However, because the larger and stronger lats and mid-back muscles tend to take over on these exercises, we will be isolating the rear delts as well through the use of exercises such as reverse pec deck.



Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the shoulders: Cuffed Behind-The-Back Lateral Raise, Machine Shoulder Press, Cross-Body Cable Y-Raise, Seated DB Shoulder Press, Super-ROM Lateral Raise, Low Incline Smith Machine Press, Paused Assisted Dip, Low Incline Dumbbell Press, Diamond Pushup, Decline Machine Chest Press.

## UPPER TRAPS

The biomechanical function of the upper traps is still the matter of ongoing scientific debate. Most experts contend that the upper traps don't actually elevate the scapula (like in a traditional shrug) because the muscle fibers of the upper traps run much more horizontally than vertically. Instead of pulling the shoulders up, they actually rotate the scapula up. The simple implication of this is that the traps would be better targeted by shrugging "up and in" instead of straight up. Of course, even if this is fully true, there are still other muscles on top of the shoulders that are responsible for shrugging the shoulders, such as the levator scapulae, and they will still grow in response to shrugging exercises. Regardless, we will be using cable shrug-ins, Kelso Shrugs, and super-ROM lateral raises in this program as our main exercises for targeting the upper traps. However, it is worth keeping in mind that many of the upper trap fibers will assist with horizontal rows, lateral raises (especially super-ROM raises), and will be worked isometrically on Romanian deadlifts.



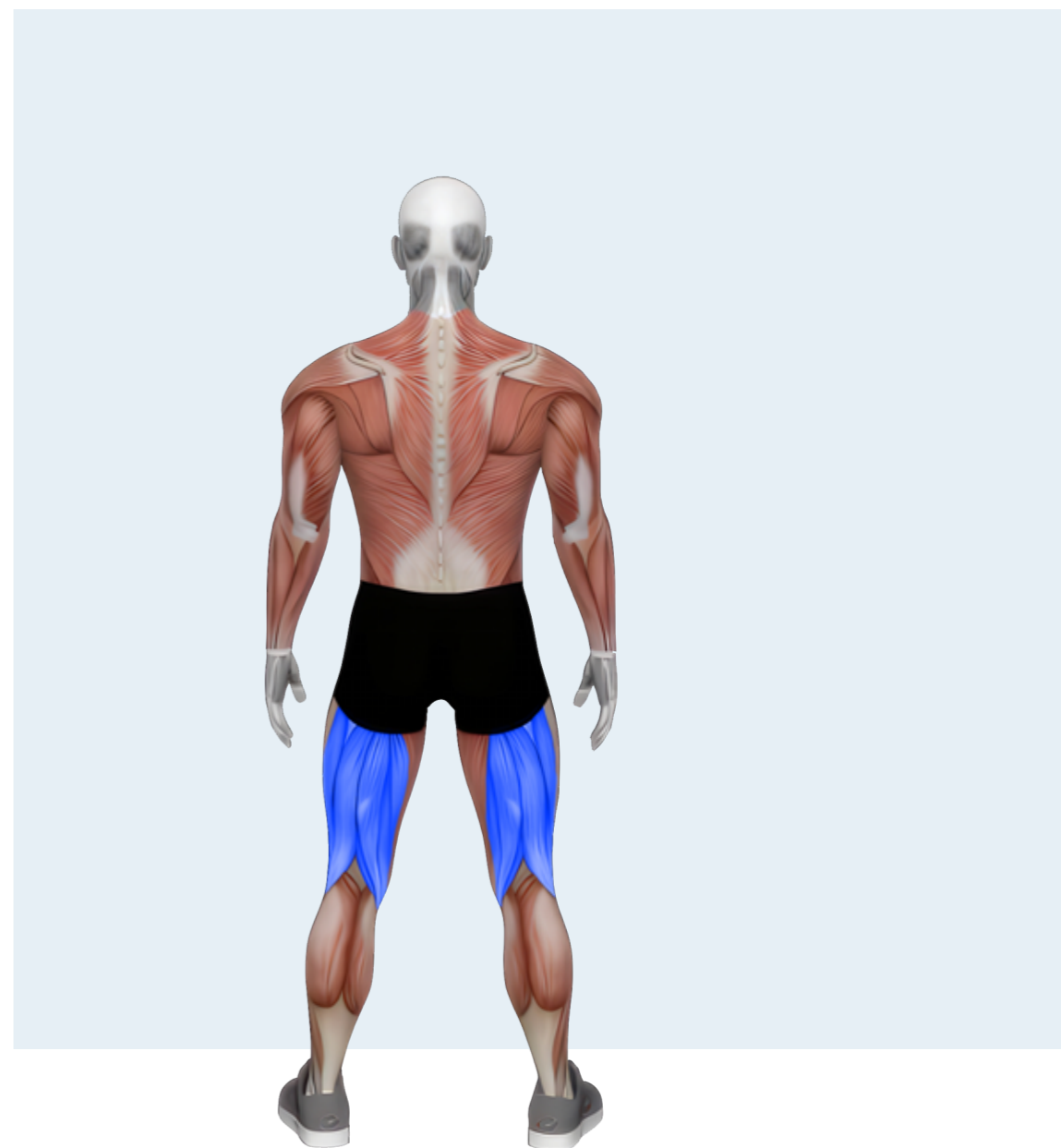
Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the upper traps: Cable Paused Shrug-In, Kelso Shrug, and Super-ROM Lateral Raises.

I should note that I didn't include direct neck work in this program simply because most people aren't interested in direct neck training. However, if you are interested in incorporating direct neck training into this program, I'd recommend watching [this video](#) for suggested exercises. Even just adding 3 sets of neck extension and 3 sets of neck flexion 1-2x per week should be enough to gain muscle size in your neck, if you are new to training it or haven't been training it consistently.

## HAMSTRINGS

The hamstrings are worked with any exercise that flexes (bends) the knee and/or that extends (straightens out) the hips. Basically, we're talking about leg curls and hip hinges like Romanian deadlifts. Because the hamstrings cross both the hip joint and the knee joint, similar to the rectus femoris of the quads, the hamstrings aren't hit particularly well on squats or leg presses either.

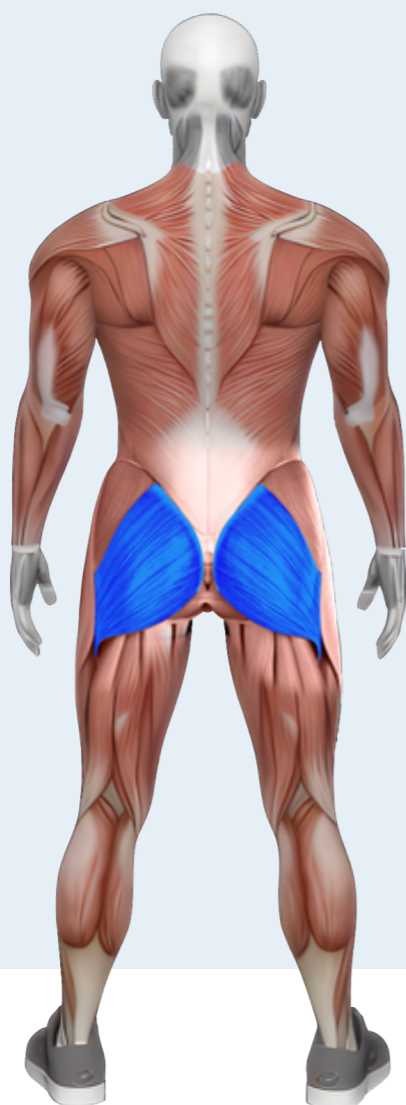
Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the hamstrings: Snatch-Grip RDL, Seated Leg Curl, Arms-Extended 45° Hyperextension, Lying Leg Curl, Paused RDL, Glute-Ham Raise, Slow-Eccentric DB RDL.



## GLUTES

The glutes are a complex web of muscles that perform many different functions, but their main action in a bodybuilding context is hip extension (straightening the hips out). This means they'll be hit on all squat variations, leg presses, lunge and deadlift variations. The glute medius is mainly responsible for hip abduction and will be targeted via any direct hip abduction work in this program, but it'll also play a big stabilizing role on virtually every lower body compound exercise.

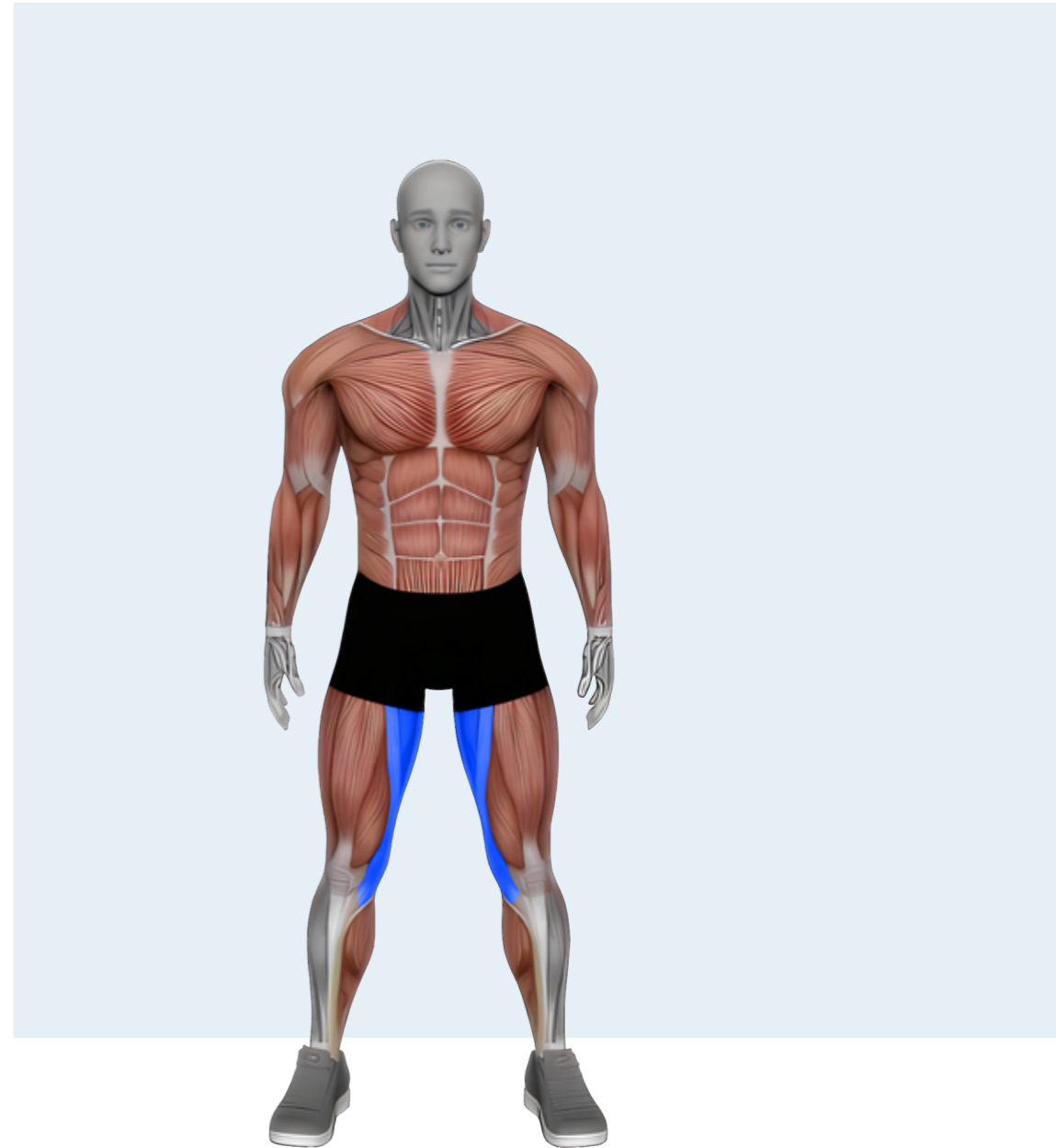
Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the glutes: Snatch-Grip RDL, Hack Squat, Arms-Extended 45° Hyperextension, Leg Press, Paused RDL, Smith Machine Reverse Lunge, Glute-Ham Raise, Super-ROM Machine Hip Abduction.



## ADDUCTORS

The adductors run down the inner thigh and are a commonly neglected area by bodybuilders. While they will be hit to a substantial degree on squats, the adductors are crucial for adding mass to the lower body from the front and back. Because of this, we'll be including a good deal of direct hip adduction work in this program.

Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the adductors: Machine Hip Adduction, Hack Squat, Leg Press, Smith Machine Squat.



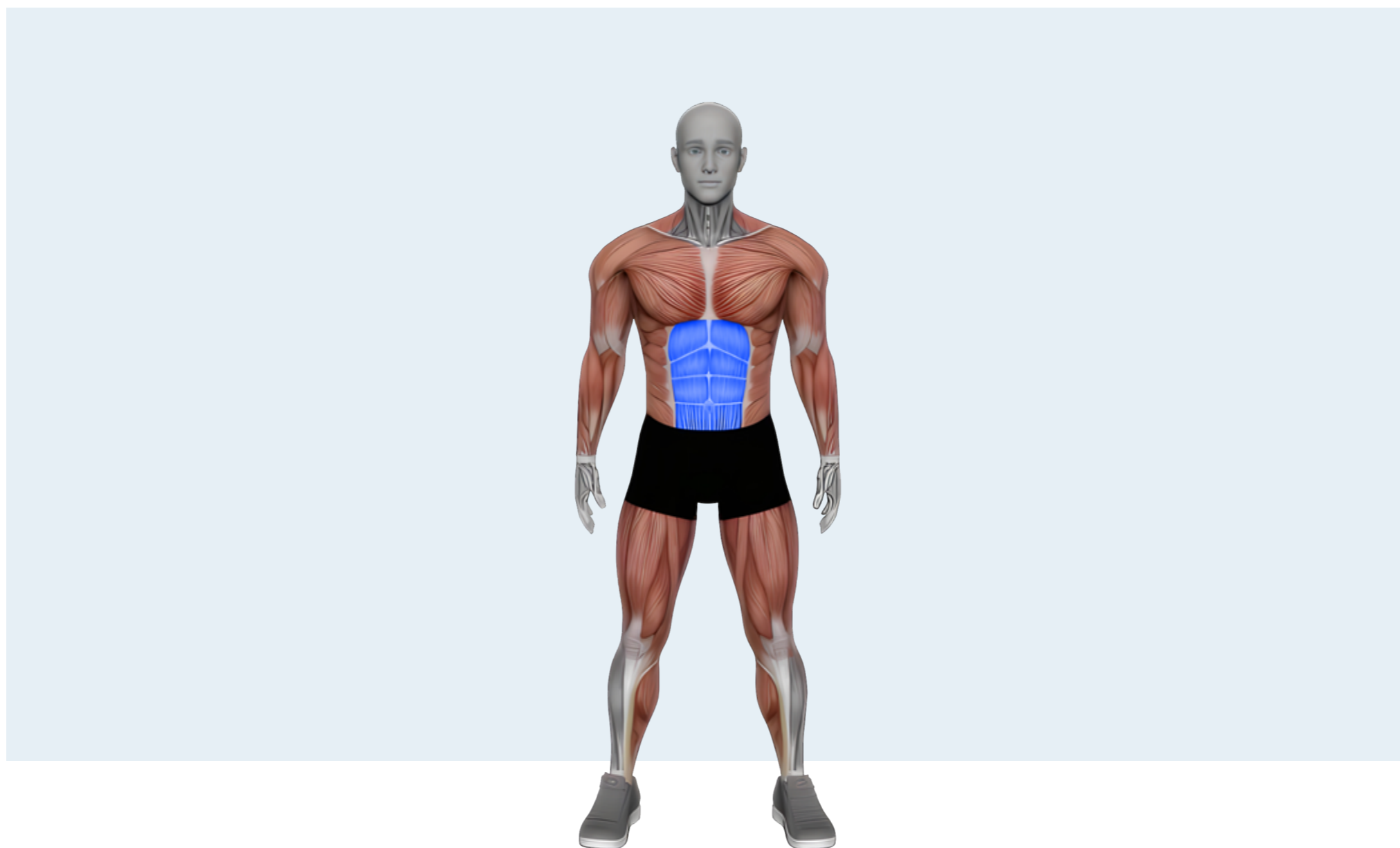
## CALVES

The calves are worked with any exercise that plantar flexes the ankle (points the feet down like in a calf raise). The gastrocnemius muscle of the calves crosses the knee joint as well as the ankle joint and as such will be indirectly targeted on leg curls where it helps out the hamstrings. Although the calves are notoriously one of the most stubborn muscles to grow, like any muscle they will respond to proper hypertrophy training by growing. We'll be using specific cues and some novel exercises in this program to help break through any calf growth plateaus you may have encountered previously.

Here is a list of exercises we'll be using in this program to target the calves: Leg Press Calf Press, Standing Calf Raise, Dumbbell Calf Jumps.

## ABS

In the context of this program, by the “abs” we’re referring to the rectus abdominis, also known as the 6-pack. The main function of the 6-pack is to round the spine. This will happen in exercises that bring the upper torso down toward the legs (like in a crunch) and in exercises that bring the legs up toward the upper torso (like in a leg raise). Both are included in this program. There’s also some direct work for the transverse abdominis and obliques, although these muscles will play an important stabilizing role in many exercises throughout the program.



Here is a list of exercises we’ll be using in this program to target the abs: Cable Crunch, Roman Chair Leg Raise, Ab Wheel Rollout, Cable Crunch, Stomach Vacuums, Medicine Ball Russian Twists.



# FAQ

**Q:** Why are there no barbell squats, bench presses or deadlifts in this program? Are they bad for hypertrophy?

**A:** The squat, bench, and deadlift are some of my favorite exercises and they're fantastic movements for strength development. They also activate a large amount of muscle mass and can be very effective tools for building muscle. However, there are a few things that make them less suitable for a pure bodybuilding program, where strength is not a priority.

Instead of barbell squats, we'll be doing hack squats and smith machine squats (except for cases when a substitution must be made due to lack of equipment access). Instead of barbell bench press, we'll be doing low-incline smith machine presses, dips, and dumbbell presses. Instead of deadlifts from the floor, we will be doing Romanian deadlifts.

These more bodybuilding-style movements tend to offer a higher stimulus-to-fatigue ratio than the Big 3 Powerlifts. In other words, we get a similar (or higher) stimulus for less fatigue. The powerlifts are very systemically demanding and generally require more recovery. If we can get the same hypertrophic stimulus for less recovery demand, why not go for those instead?

The powerlifts also require a lot of warm-up time – that's time and energy that could be spent placing tension on the muscle.

For me, it ultimately boils down to efficiency. The powerlifts certainly can be effective muscle building tools, and they're in virtually every other program of mine. However, because they're so fatiguing compared to other similar exercises, they aren't the most efficient tools for getting the job done when the goal is hypertrophy. For this reason, they aren't included in the program. However, if you really prefer these movements to the ones given, you can feel free to make a substitution for a similar movement pattern, keeping the sets and reps the same.



**Q:** I can only train 4x per week. How should I modify the program?

**A:** If you are running the Push Pull Legs version of the program, simply take an extra rest day and it will become a 4x per week asynchronous split (i.e. you will hit the workouts on the same days each week). Here is how that might look:

Week 1	
Monday	Pull 1
Tuesday	Push 1
Wednesday	Rest
Thursday	Legs 1
Friday	Weak Points/Arms 1
Saturday	Rest
Sunday	Rest

Week 2	
Monday	Pull 2
Tuesday	Push 2
Wednesday	Rest
Thursday	Legs 2
Friday	Weak Points/Arms 2
Saturday	Rest
Sunday	Rest

Note that you can feel free to rearrange the rest days to best fit your weekly work schedule.

If you are running the Full Body version of the program, there are two ways to convert it to a 4x per week program. The first option is to simply add an extra rest day between any of the workout days and it will become a 4x per week asynchronous split (i.e. you will hit the workouts on different days each week). For example: If you are running the Full Body version of the program, there are two ways to convert it to a 4x per week program. The first option is to simply add an extra rest day between any of the workout days and it will become a 4x per week asynchronous split (i.e. you will hit the workouts on different days each week). For example:

Week 1	
Monday	Full 1
Tuesday	Full 2
Wednesday	Rest
Thursday	Full 3
Friday	Rest
Saturday	Full 4
Sunday	Rest

Week 2	
Monday	Weak Points/Arms
Tuesday	Rest
Wednesday	Full 1
Thursday	Full 1
Friday	Rest
Saturday	Full 3
Sunday	Rest

Week 3	
Monday	Full 4
Tuesday	Rest
Wednesday	Weak Points/Arms
Thursday	Rest
Friday	Full 1
Saturday	Full 2
Sunday	Rest

Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Monday	Monday	Monday
Tuesday	Tuesday	Tuesday
Wednesday	Wednesday	Wednesday
Thursday	Thursday	Thursday
Friday	Friday	Friday
Saturday	Saturday	Saturday

Etc.

The other option would be to simply skip the Weak Points/Arms day. If you don't have any obvious weak points that you want to work on and you don't really care about giving your arms extra attention, you can replace this workout with another rest day and simply run the full body workouts 4x per week as written.

If you are running the Upper/Lower version of the program, there are also two ways to convert it to a 4x per week program. The first option is to simply add an extra rest day between any of the workout days and it will become a 4x per week asynchronous split (i.e. you will hit the workouts on different days each week). For example:

Week 1	
Monday	Upper 1
Tuesday	Lower 1
Wednesday	Rest
Thursday	Upper 2
Friday	Rest
Saturday	Lower 2
Sunday	Rest

Week 2	
Monday	Weak Points/Arms
Tuesday	Rest
Wednesday	Upper 1
Thursday	Lower 1
Friday	Rest
Saturday	Upper 2
Sunday	Rest

Week 3	
Monday	Lower 2
Tuesday	Rest
Wednesday	Weak Points/Arms
Thursday	Rest
Friday	Upper 1
Saturday	Lower 1
Sunday	Rest

Week 4	Week 5	Week 6
Monday	Monday	Monday
Tuesday	Tuesday	Tuesday
Wednesday	Wednesday	Wednesday
Thursday	Thursday	Thursday
Friday	Friday	Friday
Saturday	Saturday	Saturday

Etc.

The other option would be to simply skip the Weak Points/Arms day. If you don't have any obvious weak points that you want to work on and you don't really care about giving your arms extra attention, you can replace this workout with another rest day and simply run the upper/lower workouts 4x per week as written.

**Q:** How do I know what my weak point is? What should I choose for that?

**A:** If you are a less experienced lifter, it may not be clear yet which muscles are lagging on your physique. You could have a more experienced coach or friend have a look at your progress photos and give you an opinion. Otherwise, I would suggest choosing the shoulders as your weak point by default. Most people would benefit from wider shoulders from a bodybuilding standpoint and they can almost never be "too developed" – especially the side and rear delts. If you are a more experienced lifter, it should become clear over time which body parts are more stubborn and harder to grow on your physique. If this isn't obvious for you, feel free to simply pick any body part that you would like to give a little extra love. Maybe you want to bring up your lats – feel free to pick them as your weak point. Or maybe you've been skipping leg day – in that case, pick the quads, hamstrings, glutes or calves. If you're really not sure, you can't go wrong with picking the shoulders – they generally can tolerate higher volumes and tend to recover quite quickly.



**Q:** The volume is lower than what I'm used to, should I add sets?

**A:** I wouldn't recommend it. I've been running this program as an advanced-elite level natural bodybuilder with over 15 years of serious lifting experience, and the volume feels perfect to me. The volumes included in this program are also in line with science-based recommendations from high level natural bodybuilding coaches. If you are more advanced than me, you can consider adding 1-2 sets per week for a specific body part that you feel needs a little extra love. However, before turning to increase the volume, I would first ensure that your intensity/effort is on point. Are you truly pushing the last set to failure on most exercises, as suggested in the program? On these sets, are you pushing yourself as hard as you possibly can, as if \$1,000,000 was on the line, and despite this maximum effort, you still can't get the weight up with good form? This should be your first course of action, before turning to a volume increase. I suspect that the volume is not too low for >99% of people running this program. If it feels too low, you may not be executing the sets to the exertion level that I've prescribed in the program.

**Q:** Can I choose to do a Substitution Option even if I can perform the original exercise?

**A:** Try to do the main exercise listed if you can. I spent a lot of time curating the main exercises in this program and I do think they have some unique advantages in terms of tension profile, long muscle-length bias, and stimulus-to-fatigue ratio. However, if you don't have access to the equipment to perform the main exercise, absolutely feel free to make a substitution. Also, if you try the main exercise for a few weeks and just aren't feeling it, try one of the substitution options instead. The program was designed so that all substitution options will elicit a very similar training effect.

**Q:** Do I need to time my rest periods in between sets?

**A:** No. Generally speaking, longer rest periods are associated with better hypertrophy because resting longer in between sets allows you to recover more and perform more volume as a result. The most important thing is that you feel recovered between sets. However, you also don't want to rest so long that you lose focus and the workout starts dragging on. You can time yourself in between sets if that helps keep you on track, but just keeping a rough eye on the clock is fine too.

**Q:** My gym is crowded. Can I switch up the exercise order?

**A:** Yes. Try not to completely scramble the workout, but switching a few exercises around won't severely interfere with your ability to recover in between exercises and complete the workout properly.

**Q:** How much muscle can I expect to gain?

**A:** How you respond to training will be largely determined by genetic factors and your specific training history (i.e. how close you are to your genetic limit). As a rough ballpark estimate for untrained male individuals, 1-2 lbs of muscle gain per month is reasonable (12-24 lbs of muscle gained in your first year). For early intermediates with about 1 year of lifting experience, progress will likely slow down to roughly 0.5-1 lbs of muscle gain per month (6-12 lbs of muscle gained in your second year). Beyond that, muscle gain from person to person will be highly variable, depending on how much you've already been optimizing your training and nutrition. For practical purposes, women can divide muscle gain estimates in half.

**Q:** I'm not getting sore from my workouts. Is the program not working?

**A:** Muscle soreness is not required for hypertrophy to occur and it isn't even a reliable proxy that you had an effective workout. Plenty of activities can make your muscles sore, but be wholly ineffective at building muscle, such as running a marathon or getting a "charlie horse". In fact, reduced soreness over time can be a good thing as it may indicate that your body is adapting and recovering. If you are pushing yourself hard, executing the exercises with good form and being consistent with the workouts, soreness isn't something you need to be chasing.

**Q:** I'm getting very sore from my workouts. Should I skip the gym until I'm not sore?

**A:** You may experience increased soreness when you first begin the program because it is presenting a new stress to your body. Some research shows that foam rolling can help reduce soreness [17, 18]. So, if you are consistently getting sore week after week, consider adding a short 3-5 minute foam rolling routine at the end of the workouts. Otherwise, training while sore is not inherently problematic for muscle growth. If you're having a difficult time getting into position for any of the planned exercises, or finding it difficult to complete a full ROM due to soreness, it would be wise to skip that exercise until you feel properly recovered. Otherwise, in the case of mild soreness, perform a slightly longer warm-up for each exercise and use your own discretion as to whether you should complete the exercise or leave it for another day.

**Q:** Why is there such little exercise variation from week to week?

**A:** Changing exercises from week to week is more likely to flatten out the strength progression curve. Within each 4-5 week block, exercises are kept mostly constant to ensure both progression (by adding volume incrementally to these specific movements) and mastery of exercise form and technique. Then, after 4-5 weeks, the exercises and the exercise order are switched up to keep things fresh and novel.

**Q:** Should I add cardio to this program?

**A:** The main point of cardio from a bodybuilding standpoint is to establish a caloric deficit for fat loss. I would recommend prioritizing the deficit from your diet first, rather than relying heavily on cardio.

As a general rule, I recommend keeping cardio to an effective minimum on this program. If you wish to do cardio to achieve your fat loss goals or for general health and fitness, try to keep it to 4-5 low-moderate intensity sessions per week, around 20-30 minutes in duration. High intensity cardio should be used more sparingly, up to once or twice weekly at your own discretion. Cardio won't kill your gains, but it can interfere with your recovery if performed excessively. Monitor your own recovery, and if you're progressing fine, then whatever cardio you're doing isn't a big deal. If your progress is slowing and you feel very fatigued during or after workouts, you may want to cut back on the cardio.

**Q:** I am doing the full body version of the program. Is it overtraining to hit some of the same muscles on back to back days?

**A:** Overtraining occurs when your training demands consistently exceed your body's ability to recover over time.

First of all, true overtraining is pretty rare. When it does occur, it doesn't just "happen" all of a sudden. There are all sorts of warning signs that can hint toward overtraining territory including: a clear and continued loss of progress in strength/size, disturbed sleep, persistently achy joints and muscles and an extreme lack of motivation to train. Regardless of what training split you are running, it is important to pay attention to your own body's feedback to determine if you are recovering properly and then to adjust accordingly.

Secondly, overtraining typically results from either too much volume and/or too much intensity (usually both). Generally speaking, most truly intermediate-advanced trainees will not experience overtraining using the weekly set volumes in this routine, which are slightly lower than usual to allow for increased intensity.

Additionally, the period of rest required for recovery from just 3-6 sets per muscle group is probably much shorter than you think. For intermediate-advanced trainees, hitting the same muscle within 24 hours is perfectly viable, especially when volumes and intensities are appropriate.

Granted, I think there is slightly more of a concern for fatigue accumulation on a full body program, even if weekly volumes are re-distributed appropriately, especially if it is a unique set-up for you. For this reason, the RPEs are lowered for weeks 1 and 2 until you adapt to the increased training frequency.

Remember that there is no "rule" stating that you cannot train the same muscle group on consecutive days. In fact, most athletes tax the same muscles and the same systems on consecutive days all the time, making muscle-heads and bodybuilders the exception to typical athletic training practices.

**Q:** What do I do after I finish the program?

**A:** Stay tuned to my [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#) and [YouTube](#) so that you don't miss the release of Phase 2! Other than running Phase 2 (release date TBD) you have the option of running back through the same program again, trying one of the other versions of the Pure Bodybuilding program (i.e. swap for either the Push/Pull/Legs, Full Body or Upper/Lower version of the program) or you can try out one of the other training splits available on my [website](#). Feel free to contact my coaching team if you would like some suggestions or guidance moving forward.

# COMMENT FROM JEFF

For customer support please visit [jeffnippard.com/contact](http://jeffnippard.com/contact). As much as I love connecting on social media, I am not able to reliably respond to the questions I receive across platforms so please direct any questions to the email above. Please allow **3-5 business days** for an email reply.

Thank you so much for your support and good luck with the training!



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