

Odd Lifting for the Masses

There is something very different on the horizon for the future of training. We are about to take a trip to the past to advance our knowledge and training. This sounds contradictory? Have you ever heard sometimes you have to take a step back to move forward? I am suggesting our future lies in a very old form of training that will be revitalized to help athletes and nonathletes experience more success than ever. Sounds like a sales pitch? Not at all, I am suggesting we take a hard look at the benefits of implementing modified strongman training into our programs and thoughts processes.

Trust me, I can completely understand why some of you right now are rolling your eyes at the idea of another fad coming along. The obvious questions come up “why can’t I just use dumbbells/barbells, and how does this make me any stronger or bigger?” First, let me guarantee you this isn’t an either or situation. Using odd objects such as sandbags, kegs, stones, and logs can be easily integrated into any training program that also incorporates dumbbells, barbells, and cables.

Are not all these implements various forms of functional training? With all our advances made in the past twenty years I must argue we still haven’t met many of the needs that are placed on the general population and athlete. We talk so much about moving in multiple planes, core strength, balance, and stability, have we really looked at what our clients need? For example, when a parent picks up their child, we could see this as a form of deadlifting. However, is the parent going to be able to maintain a perfect arch in their back? Is the child going to be a still, balanced object or are they going to be moving with all their weight not perfectly balanced throughout their body? Chances are the second option, no? Where do we ever teach people how to handle such a situation?

How about an athlete? How about the running back that has been initially hit, is slightly off balanced and out of position and then is hit again at full force? Do they have an opportunity to be in perfect postural alignment with their core activated? Doubtful, their body has to be preprogrammed to handle such situations as effectively as possible.

What I am specifically referencing is the idea of imperfection training. This was a concept highly utilized by the former Eastern Bloc countries in the training of their athletes. The idea was to prepare the athlete for the worst case situations. Many injuries do not occur when we are moving slowly, in perfect posture, or lifting an equally distributed load. They often occur during large eccentric actions and end ranges of motion. It seems obvious that most orthopedic problems do happen when someone moves into a position that they are weak. This is of course why many promote multi-planar training.

While this is one viable option, however, trying to lift objects that are unbalanced and awkward provide another important aspect of injury prevention. Allan Hedrick, Head Strength Coach for the Air Force Academy, has been using odd object lifting with his teams for several years. He has written and lectured on using odd objects (often in the

form of water filled kegs) to increase performance and decrease the risk for athletic injuries.

“But, applying the concept of specificity, it makes sense that training with a fluid resistance is a more sport-specific method of training as compared to lifting exclusively with a static resistance, because in most situations, athletes encounter a dynamic resistance (in the form of an opponent) as compared to the static resistance. Further, because the active fluid resistance enhances the need for stability and control, this type of training may reduce the opportunity for injury because of improved joint stability.” (NSCA Journal, Vol.25 Number 4)

This type of instability is perfect for training stabilizers in the hips, trunk, and especially shoulders. One way old strongmen were able to perform their amazing feats was using such methods for stability training to compliment their barbell lifting. In the famous book, Dinosaur Training, Brooks Kubik states, ““You feel sore as you do because the bags (sandbags) worked your body in ways you could not approach with a barbell alone. You got into the muscle areas you normally don’t work. You worked the “heck” out of the stabilizers.” (Kubik, p. 115)”

This leads us into the issue of grip strength. It is shocking horrifying how many people possess very poor hand strength. This used to be a staple of classic strongmen, in fact, the famous George Jowett credits iron bending in helping him build real 19 inch arms! Now, you don’t all have to go to the local iron shop and start bending metal (although wouldn’t be a bad idea), but grip strength needs to be addressed in a more serious way.

It is my contention that many elbow, shoulder, neck, and back issues are due to poor hand strength. Why? The old saying “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link” holds true to the body and when we think of most movements involving lifting I can’t help but notice the role of the hands. Many try to avoid such a weakness with the use of straps and other contraptions, but this will only provide a situation with a high risk of injury. It amazes me that so many people have gotten away from using weight belts, yet many still do the same to hands by using different equipment. Chances are if you work with the general population you have noticed the large amount of people that complain of finger, wrist, and general hand aches and pains. Training with odd implements goes a long way in helping such cases.

Using odd implements help train the wrist, crushing, and pinching grip. Most people know of wrist strength, and most will also associate hand strength with only crushing grip strength. However, pinching grip strength is equally as important and possibly more so as the fingers and thumb are rarely trained yet constantly we are placing great demands on them. Sandbags and stones are amazing for improving all three, but for different reasons. Sandbags constantly shift their weight and will alter their shape as you lift them. This causes the lifter to find new grip positions for the ever changing aspects of the bag. Stone lifting with the hands is a classic way to tell who has strong hands and who doesn’t. Being able to hold onto a round heavy object without the ability to wrap the fingers

around is a huge challenge for most. The fingers and thumb will be challenged in a way most have never experienced.

Where would a discussion of functional training be without speaking about the core? Odd lifting could be seen as the MOST functional way to train the core. How many times do you see people train the ability to carry weight, especially odd objects? All the time, is this not what many people do when they carry their laundry, their children, or opponents (even if it is brief) in sports like wrestling and football? The core must work in conjunction with the upper back, low back, hips, and arms to be really stable. If you don't believe me pick up a relatively heavy object and start carrying it for about one minute in a bear hug position in front of your body. What fatigues, what hurts?

Carrying weight is not only amazing for core development, but for developing general work capacity as well. It is fun and you can use an array of objects to help people learn how to lift and carry all types of uncooperative objects. This is going to get them prepared for life's demands!

The core training with odd objects isn't limited to just carrying though. Many of the classic lifts such as shouldering is an amazingly challenging core activity as it allows for the body to be unilaterally loaded with some significant weight. Being able to maintain good posture during such lifts helps identify true weakness in trunk development. These unilaterally loaded exercises don't only train the abdominal area, but the low and upper back as well. This is an extremely effective and fun way to help muscle imbalances and correcting postural problems.

Squatting, lunging, and many other classic weight room activities take on a whole new dimension when you try to perform them with an odd object on your shoulder, held in front of your body, or overhead! What appears to be sagittal plane exercises quickly turn into movements that are being challenged in all planes of movement.

I can't possibly remember the amount of people that have told me they have a strong core, but when it comes time to demonstrate their strength they fail miserably. Sandbag and keg lifting are brutally effective as you can load the body in unique patterns while trying to maintain proper posture. One can use heavy and slow movements as well as very explosive lifts to train the various components of trunk strength. Sandbags have long been a favorite training tool of wrestlers and combative athletes. In John Jesse's famous book, Wrestling Physical Conditioning Encyclopedia, he states,

“The use of heavy sandbags and their large circumference forces the lifter to do his lifting with a round back instead of the traditional straight back lifting with a barbell. It is this type of lifting that truly develops a strong back. It develops the back and side muscles in movements that are identical to the lifting and pulling movements of wrestling.”

Can anyone think of better sport-specific types of training?

Odd objects are also fantastic medium for training explosive work. Exercises such as Olympic lift variations and throws make odd objects such a valuable tool for training. What keeps coaches from using such great lifts such as the snatch, clean, and jerk is knowing that their clients do not possess the flexibility to perform the lifts well. This is especially true in case of the wrists for cleans. With using sandbags and kegs, this problem is eliminated as anyone can quickly learn how to perform a safe and effective clean or snatch in just minutes. Don't be mistaken though, Olympic lifts are not just for athletes. Everyone needs to learn how to move fast, have a stronger posterior chain, and increase body coordination.

Olympic lifts are one benefit, however, an even more fun method may be throwing odd objects. Such feats of strength are classically demonstrated in Highland Games all over the world. Throwing objects was a staple of athletic development and can still be seen in mainstream sports such as baseball, softball, discus, hammer, shot put, football, etc. Throwing is a full body activity that can be done in many different patterns and directions. It can be a wonderful conditioning tool just as it is strength building. You haven't seen a great smile until you have seen a sixty year old woman throw a sandbag over her head!

The benefits of odd object lifting are obviously numerous and should give rise to serious consideration in program design. One of the best things is that the type of training I have spoken about doesn't require expensive equipment. This lends them perfectly for group training, team training, aerobics classes, and bootcamps. They are easily to learn so people can feel successful in no time at all. If training is fun and effective it will greatly increase adherence from your clients as well as lead to constant referrals. There should be nothing stopping you from reaping the benefits of odd object lifting!

References

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