

Regression and Simplicity: The Keys to Progress in Strength and Conditioning **Anthony Donskov, MS, CSCS, PES**

I just had the opportunity to read an incredible book that was impossible to put down. Dan John's "Never Let Go" was a gem full of information from a coach with decades of experience in program design, application and trial and error experience. I enjoy learning so much from coaches like this. Whenever I look for good read, I always look at "suggested readings" from coaches that I respect. I also look for two variables that I think are important attributes the author must have: experience and application. Does he/she train athletes' regularly and what have they learned along the way? I want to learn from someone that doesn't sit behind a desk all day. I also want to learn what not to do through previous experience and mistakes. I want to learn from the great coaches that have gone before me. This is the essence of true understanding.

Coach John listed a series of four questions that have to be answered before considering when to add exercises to his programs. It truly is a simple list with basic concepts. It's interesting however how much these "concepts" get ignored in program design. I have added a fifth, which I think is extremely important as well. **"The only way to progress is regress!** Thanks to Coach John, I have adopted these concepts in my business to select exercises for my current programs.

- 1.) What's the learning curve of the exercise:** How long will the program run? Three months, one month, three weeks? Your not going to teach a group of young athletes a long list of Olympic lifts if you have three weeks to train them. Some lifts take years to master. In contrast some lifts (i.e. Kettlebell swings) may take five minutes. I will also add that the coach needs experience in ALL lifts currently in his/her program. Visual learning is key in strength and conditioning. If you can't perform the lift, it shouldn't be in your program.
- 2.) Can I coach the exercise in large groups:** I coach large groups of athletes. If I can't perform the exercise with 5-6 people performing it at once, I will not put it in my program. A coach also needs to run an inventory check before he/she adds exercises in the program. If you only have two Olympic bars, front squats may need to be replaced with RFESS or SL squats. It's a simple concept, but I've seen plenty of programs that don't have the "Inventory" to support the exercise protocol.
- 3.) Lowest Common Denominator:** Is the exercise "safe" to teach a large group of athletes? I know many coaches love the traditional deadlift; I however, think there are better alternatives such as the trap bar version. Imagine teaching 15 youth athletes how to deadlift from the floor. How many sore lower backs are there going to be the next morning?
- 4.) Will it impact the athlete:** This may as well be called the Principal of Specificity. Will it carry over and positively affect the athlete? Is spending an hour focusing on "drawing in" for core stability going to help young Tommy be a more explosive athlete? I will never forget Coach Boyle's mentorship

program when he told all the coaches “you should be able to defend every exercise in your program.”

5.) Is there an exercise progression: Can I break down the exercise and regress to teach progress? This is the key to mastering movements and exercise. You can do this several ways: master bodyweight first, static movement vs. dynamic; eliminate joints (i.e. tall half kneeling), teach certain lifts first (split squat before RFESS). I truly believe that this is one of the biggest faults in program design today. Look at this concept another way, if I have a youth hockey player on the ice for his first practice, how much time will we spend on systems? None! If you can't skate, you can't play the game. Strength and Conditioning is no different, if you can't squat, I'm not concerned with your bench press numbers.

These concepts are basic, but when put into practice, they build a solid foundation of choosing appropriate exercise. Knowledge is not power. Applied knowledge is power. What is your method for exercise selection? How do you choose exercises to fit into your program? Do you apply these principals? Why is something so simple not implemented more? Simplicity is a beautiful thing!

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