

Neophytes – A Call to “Arms”

by Dan Edwards

The greatest amount of misinformation is not only readily accessible to beginners, but it's also exceptionally well written. How do trainers stand a chance against magazines, fitness trainers from the local hole in the wall gym articles, and a few (we'll leave unnamed) websites that suggest things like, “*Six Weeks to Massive Arms*”?

The first place beginners will turn are the professional bodybuilders. It makes sense to them because they look like they hold all the secrets. They crack open the latest magazine and see these 5-6 day high volume splits accompanied by a couple pictures of the pro flexing huge, ripped arms. They never stood a chance as the pictures took away their critical thinking. Without a second thought, they will cut and paste the exact routine those pros are doing and hit the gym. Almost right away they start to see results. Months of weight gain follows and ultimately, the appearance of success.

So, what's the problem?

The problem is that beginners don't realize they are moving from *nothing to something*. Take any trainee that has never spent one day in the gym and put them on the Arnold Schwarzenegger advanced 6 day blue plate special and they'll report instant results. Those “successes” get engrained in their minds. I must continue doing advanced splits because that is all I know. More importantly, *that's all I know that works!*

What ends up on the forums is a slew of new threads asking how their 5 day split looks. They don't want to hear any advice other than which exercises they can incorporate or small tweaks to their overall volume (sets x reps). All others need not apply. Remember, they're beginners, and all they have experienced is results. How those threads play out in the forums is a textbook case of confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias is a tendency for people to favor information that confirms what they already know or think they know regardless of whether the information is indeed accurate. They will interpret any responses they receive in their own biased way. That could mean disregarding advice even from very reputable members and only selectively responding to those few posts that reflect what they want to hear. One of the greatest enigmas I have seen over the years is that other beginners are the ones that are posting responses that feed into that bias. This is why you have to be careful and put everything into context. As you read through the responses, look at their avatar. Read their profiles. Would you really take advice from a person that's only been lifting for less than 2-3 years, weighing a buck sixty soaking wet with rolls of quarters in their pockets? Of course you wouldn't. However, there are a lot of beginners out there that are not

computer savvy. Many others aren't familiar with the boards. They may mistake post counts for experience. It becomes very hard for them to contextualize who is giving the advice or how to interpret what they are reading when they have no experience themselves to draw upon and compare it to.

Here is an example of a common question along with the proper analysis and response.

I am following the training program "Six Weeks to Sick Arms Guaranteed".

Monday: Triceps/Biceps

Tuesday: Chest/Shoulders/Traps/Abs

Wednesday: Back/Biceps/Triceps

Thursday: Off

Friday: Legs/Calves/Biceps/Triceps

Saturday: Off

Sunday: Repeat

What do you guys think?

First, take a step back and use some deductive reasoning. Do the smallest muscles in your body really deserve the most attention? Using that logic, why do I never see anyone spend a day or two on just calves? Or a few days training only abdominals? The reason is a human one. The most recognizable body part that garners the most attention is the guns. Everyone buys tickets to the gun show. I've never heard anyone compliment a great set of calves. If that were the case, all the guys would wear shorts to the bar instead of the t-shirts.

Second, that "routine" has you hitting your arms every training day either directly or indirectly. Go ahead and blast away on Monday's arms day and see how that affects Tuesday's presses. Yeah, I'll have the tendonitis please, and the Mrs. will have the Outback Special. That's a lot of attention for what is the smallest muscles in your body! What ends up happening is that the beginner will do whatever is necessary to incorporate every recommendation in that routine – even at the expense of the weight used. Progression should be about always getting stronger and stronger. That is how to increase your size. Sacrificing load to accommodate volume and frequency is extremely counterproductive.

Third, beginners are not in the refinement stage of their development. Beginners should not be targeting body parts with 5-6 day splits. That is the wrong mindset. The first few years of training should be devoted to training *exercises, not body parts*. You can try to bypass gaining strength, but sooner or later it will be time to pay the piper. It's very alluring to start building the house without a foundation in strength. It's much more appealing to target body parts because it feels like you're getting bigger. Never mind the beginner is only using 20 lb concentration curls,

closegrip benching 135 x 10, or hammering out an ultra-tough set of 30 pound DB flies. All that matters is that they a) feel a wicked muscle pump in the targeted area and b) experience a few days of wicked DOMS (muscle soreness).

Why? Simply put, beginners equate a + b to growth. If it's sore, I must've damaged it enough to where it'll repair and grow! C'mon now, think critically for a moment. If I thought along those lines, then I would include breaking a good sweat conducive to growth as well. Hell, if muscle soreness is an indicator of an effective workout, then why not do sets of 25-50 reps per set? You'll get real sore, but I wonder how much growth you'll register from doing that?

What beginners don't realize is that soreness and/or a muscle pump does NOT equate growth. The biggest mistake they make is that the #1 answer for anything is to throw more volume at the problem. Stopped growing? Add some more sets or another exercise. Hey, add another day to your routine to increase the frequency. Try rest pausing or drop sets. All wrong. Do you want to know the one thing that will never fail you? LOAD. No matter what you do, as long as you rely on progression, you will succeed in reaching your goals. Progression could be increasing weight, reps, adding another set, or even decreasing your rest periods. **Your goal is to somehow increase your performance from last time.**

Here is what I've learned that got me up to 19.25 inches.

1) Triceps make up 2/3 of your arm size, so that should tell you something - Less bench work on the biceps and more time with the *heavy* triceps pressing.

2) Arm size is largely influenced by genetics. My brother is 18" and trains full body 2-3 times per week in his basement on a Bow-Flex. My dad reminds me of Popeye. He still has massive arms, forearms, and calves. He also hasn't hit the gym with any regularity since he was in high school about thirty years ago. I came back from Operation Iraqi Freedom eating 2 MRE's per day for four months, lost almost 20 pounds, and still had 17" arms easy.

3) You don't need to spend an entire day on arms. I've seen trainees yield the best results training most of the body every session (either an upper / lower or a chest/shoulders/tri and back/bi/legs) focusing primarily on the heavy compounds and reserving the last 5-10 minutes satisfying the urge to blast away with the curls and extensions within reason. In the order of hierarchy, they're last because if you're plugging away on the heavy back or pressing work, your arms will be worked hard. A few curls and extensions afterwards are what we in the military call "expend all remaining ammo".

If you still decide it's necessary as a beginner that is out of my hands and I wish you the best of luck. My only recommendation for you is to not spend your entire day doing all types of kickbacks, concentration curls, et cetera. Limit all isolation curls and extensions as much as

possible. Instead, spend the bulk of your time doing heavy compound work like Dips, JM presses, Dick's Press, heavy DB or Barbell Curls, et cetera. What that will do is at least provide some indirect work to your major muscle groups.

4) Refinement - Once you reach this stage, you're looking for areas that need special attention. *No beginner is at this stage in their development, but most of them train as if they are!* Upper intermediate and advanced trainees may want to reduce the frequency and increase the volume to get some additional work in.

5) If a trainee has 14" biceps, should they start putting a lot of time into curling or should they bring their squats and deadlifts up another hundred pounds? There was an excerpt from *Brawn* I really enjoyed reading from Stuart McRobert called, "*Squatting for Big Arms*". Most beginners take that article at face value and think to themselves that it's impossible since you're not actually using your biceps while squatting. There's two main points from that excerpt I wanted to highlight.

First, all of the focus must fall on squats, deadlifts, and rows to develop your legs, hips, and back. If you structure your routine around these lifts and put the time in under the bar, they will transfer over to the rest of your exercises. Those lifts also provide one hell of a full body growth response. Add in some pull-ups, presses, and a little beach work at the end of your workout and you'll grow, period... Provided of course you are in a caloric surplus.

Second, no trainee is going to start growing big muscles on their arms, calves, shoulders, or chest unless he first builds a considerable amount of muscle around the thighs, hips and back. I remember Arnold's Encyclopedia talking about approaching bodybuilding like a sculptor. Look in the mirror; add a little mass here and there with special exercises. What's the context? The context is that he is talking about himself and his experience already at the advanced level. That is the refinement I referred to earlier. How can you refine your physique when your deficiencies encompass your entire body from your head to your toes?

One thing missed, and something else McRobert would hammer on is that you aren't going to have much arm size without some kind of weight gain. The 170 lb. guy who starts with 13 inch arms and thinks he will have 17 inch arms at 175 lbs. is confused. He will likely have to be well into the low 200's to see this kind of size gain. In my experience, every 10-15 lbs. of legitimate lean body mass gain equals another inch on the upper arms. Your mileage may vary.

In a perfect world, beginners would invest all of their time on their heavy presses and pulls. Heavy weighted chins, rows of all shapes and sizes, closegrip bench, dips, et cetera. If you want to work arms, ask yourselves if you'd rather isolate and/or spend a day on the smallest muscles in your body or get more bang for your buck? Beginners need to focus on training economy.

Personally, I'd rather focus on developing my yoke, back, and rear delts with bigger biceps as a byproduct of doing so from my heavy chins and rows.

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