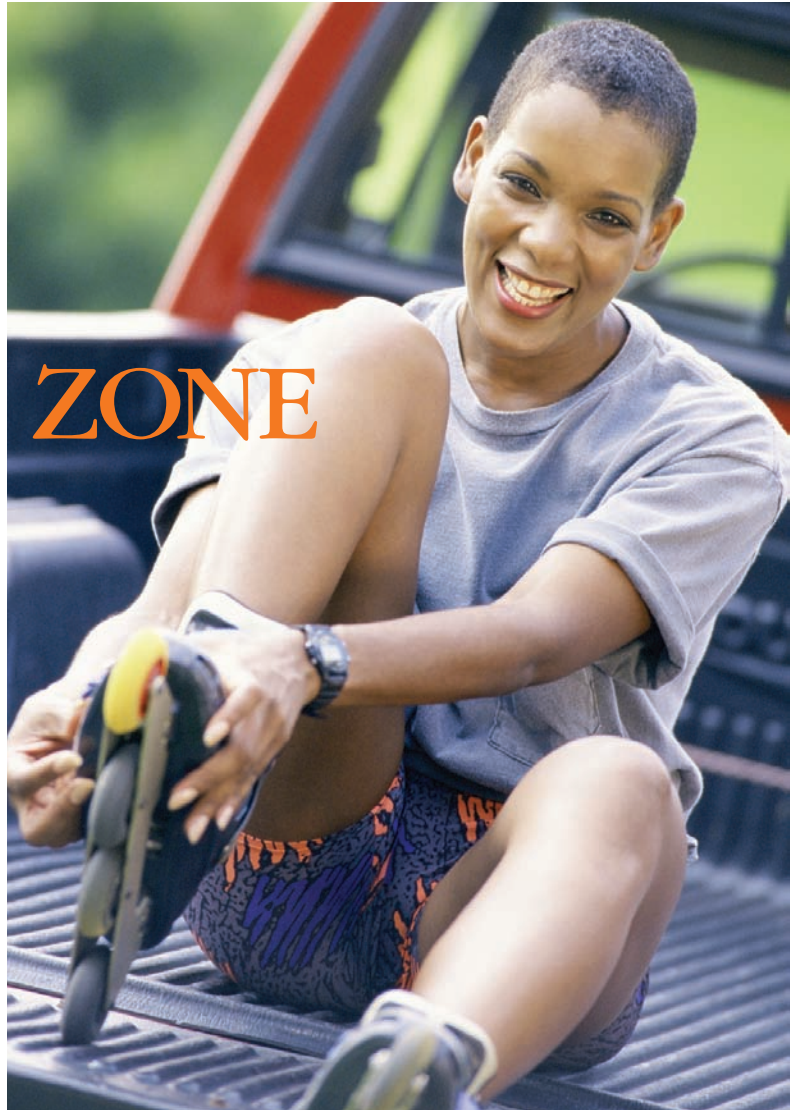


# Stepping Out of Your Comfort **ZONE**

By Jeffrey S. Harrison, CSCS, NSCA-CPT, ACE-CES

Everyone has a favorite place to eat, a favorite place to hang out, a favorite movie, a favorite song, and so on. Even when it comes to exercise, we all have a favorite piece of equipment, move, or even type of exercise. There is certainly nothing wrong with doing what you enjoy. As is generally our nature, we tend to gravitate towards the things with which we feel most comfortable. When it comes to exercise, however, playing favorites may be the one thing holding you back from achieving real success.



Few things are more comfortable than a big blanket and a roaring fireplace this time of year. Exercise rarely if ever conjures up feelings of comfort, yet it is comfort with exercise, or exercises, that most are guilty of indulging. As a fitness professional and avid exerciser, I have observed and learned a lot of things by simply putting my time in at the gym. For many years, I was under the impression that Mondays were designated bench press days and that treadmills and Stairmasters were designed to be used strictly by women. Now you may laugh at that observation, but I will bet you anything that the next time you go to the gym, specifically on a Monday, you too can make a similar observation. Even if you fail to notice that trend, I will bet you can witness many people, whatever the day, exercising the same way they always do. Perhaps you are even one of them. By now, you may be starting to ask yourself, "Isn't it good to be in a routine?" Yes-and no..

An exercise routine more appropriately defined is the consistent act of performing exercise and not a personalized script of specific exercises. While maintaining consistency is a key to success, it

is the performing of the same exercises repeatedly where most make their mistake. Make no mistake about it. Exercise is good for you, no matter what it is. Physical movement is what we need and unfortunately exercise is the only way most of us get it. But as is customary with a lot of things in our lives, we tend to stick to the things we like, or that, more specifically, feel comfortable to us. From an exercise standpoint, doing only the things that we feel most comfortable with greatly limits our potential. Exercise is a stress and that in order for that stress to continue to cause change, it too has got to change. Change can be daunting, but stepping out of your comfort zone certainly makes a lot more sense.

Case in point: let's take a look at bench press Mondays. Guys that spend a lot of time in the weight room generally focus a lot of their attention on the bench press. There is certainly nothing wrong with doing bench presses, but in their quest to get bigger and stronger, centering on them will do little to bring their goals to fruition. Bench presses represent a comfort zone, an exercise that in their mind is a sign of strength and masculinity. However,

what's often found missing in their quest for strength is the understanding that overall strength is more effectively developed through "meaty" exercises like squats, deadlifts, cleans, pull-ups, dips, etc. These are typically left out because they are hard not just physically, but sometimes emotionally as well. One of the most common weight room injuries is shoulder injuries. They are not necessarily caused by lifting too much, but by overuse and lack of paying attention to the support muscles. These issues could mostly be avoided through change and variety. Furthermore, familiarity with certain exercises such as the bench press blinds lifters from the vast array of other options and opportunities available to them while still working towards the desired goal.

Conversely, there are the "cardio-holics" as I like to call them, that spend endless hours doing nothing but cardio every time they come to workout. More specifically, they generally spend the majority of their workout time on one particular piece of equipment only, such as the treadmill. Again, while there is certainly nothing wrong with using a treadmill, just like with weight training, overuse injuries are also just as common among cardio enthusiasts. Most cardio-holics love of the treadmill or Stairmaster however most likely comes from the comfort of thinking that by doing hours of cardio they will burn more fat. Unfortunately, that could not be farther from the truth. Fat loss is consummate with a balance of cardiovascular exercise, strength training, and of course dietary intake. The people who stand to benefit the most from extended bouts of cardio are endurance athletes, such as marathoners, cyclists, or triathletes. As with weight training, variety in exercise type will lead to greater results and a decreased likelihood of exercise burnout.

Aside from just trying other exercises to step out of the comfort zone, it also involves being able to work a bit harder than the exerciser perceives as comfortable. While important, exercises also needs to be a bit more than just going through the motions of doing an activity. The topic of exercise intensity, while not the topic of this column, is a key component of an effective routine.. Stepping it up a bit, whether it involves super setting or decreased time between sets, is a good place to start. Monitoring exercise intensity by either using a heart rate monitor or through perceived exertion are time tested valid measures of working harder. That is not to say there should be pain, but a little sweat, a rapid heart rate, and slightly labored breathing is a real good indicator. After all, they don't call it working out for nothing!

Mind you, due to physical limitations, there are those who have to do the same exercises and have no choice in the matter. But to those of us that do have a choice and feel like they are stuck with their progress, stepping out of the comfort zone is not only the necessary thing, but also the right thing to do. If it is change you seek, then it is change you must cause. Change things up a bit and step out of your comfort zone.



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