

The Real Secrets to Fitness

BY JOE CANNON, MS, CSCS

The fitness magazines headlines blare “A NEW Body in 1 Week,” “Great Abs in Just One Workout a Week (REALLY!),” “The Secret to Extreme Growth — Double Your Muscle in Half the Time.”

At best, these headlines are harmless marketing tools. At worst, they set unrealistic expectations and condone unhealthy practices. These concepts prey on our insecurities and reinforcing stereotypical pictures of health and fitness. Headlines like the above offer promises in three main categories: decreased size, increased size, or increased sex appeal/ performance.

Truth be told, sudden weight loss is seldom healthy or lasting. Building fitness takes time and effort. I am not even going to discuss the sex aspect, though being fit does increase your confidence, improve your appearance and improve your overall performance. Taking the high road, I suspect that many readers of these publications are actually motivated more by truth than hype. Enough editorializing: here are the three real secrets to fitness: consistency, intensity and recovery.

CONSISTENCY

The core of any fitness program is cardiovascular fitness. As I have referenced before, the gold standard is the American College of Sports Medicine’s guidelines that endorse six days with 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise. I know you have heard the cardiologists have recommended that 20 minutes three times a week, but fitness is more than the bare minimum needed for a healthy heart. Now, from the perspective of fitness, when the term “cardio” is used, this is at target heart rate. That does not mean taking the trash out or walking the dog is bad; it’s just not the same. I also know that when Lance Armstrong’s training secrets were “leaked” a few years ago, Chris Carmichael had Lance on a sub-aerobic routine. Let’s

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What works for the professional athlete is not a consideration until you reach that level of fitness. I am not going to go into a dissertation on that program, at least not in this issue. Consistency for progressive resistance training is also important, though not at this same frequency. Three sessions a week are generally sufficient providing you follow the principles below.

INTENSITY

Pick up a paper clip between your index finger and thumb. Concentrate completely, and slowly flex your hand to your shoulder. Repeat 8 times. Feel the burn? I hope not. The point is you need enough intensity to produce gains. This does not mean you have to go to absolute failure on every set or exercise but you do have to work hard and should work to fatigue. Not every exercise or every session needs to be completely intense; strive for balance. Study the principles of periodization.

If you are out of shape and spend any time above target heart rate, expect to get exhausted and sick. For the more seasoned athlete, doing interval training in the anaerobic zone followed by recovery is adding a dimension of intensity.

For cardio, nothing beats a heart-rate monitor...it is not hard to get your heart rate above target and go anaerobic.

RECOVERY

“Exercise makes you tired; rest makes you strong” is an old adage and captures the

value of recovery. Insufficient recovery will turn all your hard work into injury or lead to overtraining. A few points on weight training and recovery: if you are over 25 and working out hard, consider waiting 72 hours between muscle groups. If you are doing a negative workout, 72 hours should be the absolute minimum and don’t do negatives more than once every 3-4 weeks. I do have what I thought was an amusing situation that again illustrates this point. I had a French patient whose English was not great, but clearly better than my French. I put him on a program at the gym for general conditioning as an adjunct to his treatment. He made impressive gains quickly, but plateaued and then deteriorated in about 4 weeks. I carefully reviewed the program and everything seemed OK, until he explained that he did this program EVERY day. Needless to say, we had him take a period of relative rest until he could recover from what is called overreaching, the stage just before overtraining.

be clear. If you are at that level you don’t have time to be reading this article.

IN SUMMARY

Work hard. Work often and rest, really rest. These are not sexy headlines but if you are in this for the long haul these three secrets will get you beyond the six-week miracle programs before you know it.



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