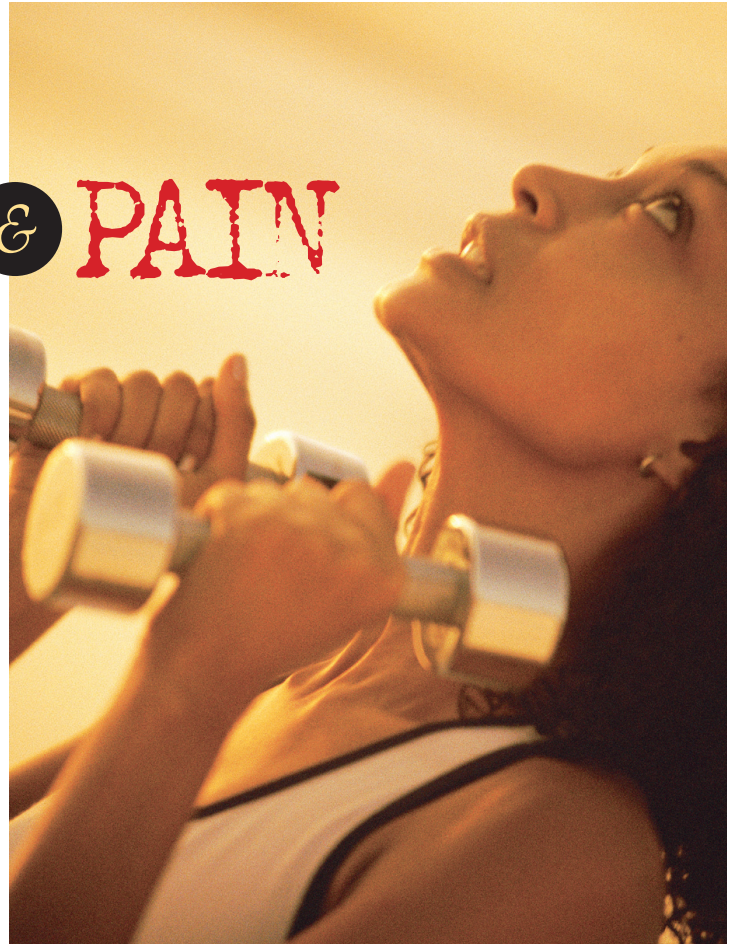


The Fine Line Between

Pleasure & PAIN

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

Pleasure and pain. Pain and pleasure. Never have there been two words when paired together that can elicit either feelings of fear and enjoyment or both at the same time. For most, these two words are polar opposites. For others, they are one in the same. Before exercise science was introduced to avid gym goers, the only training principle ever applied was, "No pain, no gain". As advances in strength training and common sense became more mainstream, the, "no pain, no gain" principle was greatly frowned upon if not totally dismissed. But were our exercise predecessors really off there rocker or were they on to something? After all, isn't exercise supposed to be good for you, and should something that is good for you cause pain in the process? Of course exercise is good for you, but it should not exactly be a walk through the park either.



The principle of "no pain, no gain" was popularized during the old school weight lifting and body building years; a time when the gym was nothing but concrete walls, hard, cold iron, and lots of sweat and tears. Back then, you were not exercising unless you were grunting and groaning with buckets of sweat pouring off of your head. But is exercise really, or should it be, that much different today? As previously stated, advances in both exercise science and basic trial and error have developed more effective and efficient ways to get to the desired end result. While the desired outcomes have generally remained the same (decreased body fat, increased strength, improved overall health and fitness, etc.) our approaches have been somewhat different. Today, we have a multitude of choices regarding exercise: weight training, cardio, yoga, Pilates, etc. Perhaps the real problem is not so much the principle behind "no pain, no gain", but the choice of words.

Most people have negative feelings towards the word pain. Pain can be physical, emotion, mental, etc. and it generally does not conjure up ideas of a good time. Examining "no pain, no gain" a little more closely, however, and there is a lot more to say about the old mantra. Exercise in all its forms is a physical

stress. Activities above and beyond our normal daily functions (standing, sitting, moving, eating, sleeping, etc.) can be collectively termed stressors. One of the many benefits to exercise is that it imposes a demand or stress on the body greater than is normally required, or more precisely put, burns more calories above our daily requirement. In order to initiate a change, a stress must be introduced and to make sure that change never ceases, that stress must also change. For that stress to be effective to cause change, sometimes it is necessary to push a little more beyond what is perceived as comfortable. Unfortunately for most, to have to work harder than where they are comfortable is like asking a baby to relinquish their blankie.

Before I continue, let me make it clear that I am not advocating people work out until their head explodes. Exercise should at least be something that you enjoy doing, not something you dread. People need to understand how the human body works and that being in your comfort zone will only keep giving you the results that you are currently getting from your present workout program and nothing more. When you begin to exercise, the body immediately shifts from a state of rest to a state of action or movement. During that process, the heart begins to beat faster to pump blood to the working mus-

cles; breathing rate also increases to bring in more air to oxygenate the blood and expire carbon dioxide; energy substrates carbohydrate, fat, and protein are mobilized to provide the proper percentages of fuel to get the engine moving. All of this occurs in the blink of an eye without a single thought. Obviously, heart rate and breathing rate can be observed and felt as work rate increases. What is not so apparent but can clearly be felt is the utilization of our fuel sources, specifically carbohydrate. Carbohydrate is stored in our muscles as glycogen, an almost ready to use energy source. Glycogen needs to be broken down to be used for fuel through a process known as glycolysis. One small caveat of this process is that lactic acid is produced as a by product. Under normal circumstances this is not a bad thing because our bodies naturally buffer this acid accumulation and remove it before it has a chance to accumulate. However, as workload increases, so does the rate that lactic acid is produced. At a point known as the lactate threshold, lactic acid production exceeds lactic acid buffering and a burning sensation is felt throughout the working muscle, possibly to the point that it is unbearable. It is at this point where exercise may become "painful" for some although no real trauma is happening to the body. For others, this burning of the muscles is pleasurable and no workout is complete for them until that happens. The pain in the "no pain, no gain" principle therefore relates more to the burning of the muscles through lactic acid accumulation, not real physical pain. Our exercise forefathers were indeed on to something! Understanding the difference between pleasure and pain in this regard could mean all the difference between reaching the goals you set forth to achieve and watching the train go by.

There should be a clear distinction between pleasure and pain with regard to exercise. Real physical pain should always be an indicator that something else is wrong and that the exercise should stop. The pleasure should come from knowing you have done something good not only for your body, but your well being also. In addition, the endorphins that are released as a result of a good workout will make you feel good all over, mentally if not at least physically. Differentiating between real physical pain and muscle burn is not only safe and critical, but also paramount if change is what you seek. Hard work goes a long way and nothing great was ever achieved easily or with comfort. Exercising through pain is stupid, but exercising above what is normally a comfortable level of effort, could be the difference in enjoying the pleasure of your labors. Everyone is capable of taking it up another notch; you just have to really want it and have the strength to work through it. When thinking about challenging yourself in your next workout, remember this quote from Lance Armstrong, a phenomenal athlete who knows something about dealing with pain and pushing on when the body just wants to quit. "Pain is temporary. Quitting is forever."



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