

Periodization or instinctive training?

WRITTEN BY ROBERT TAYLOR

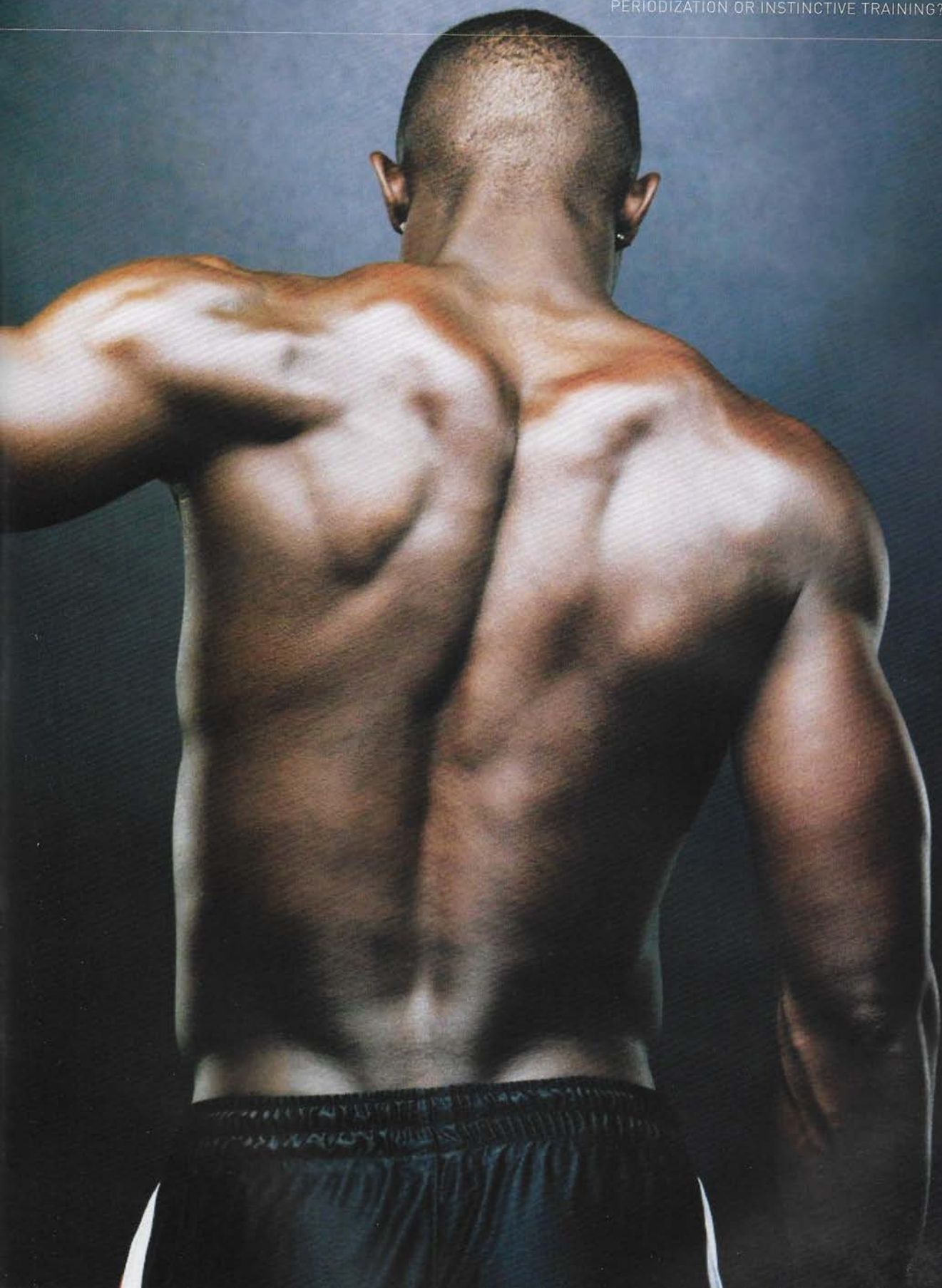
RECENTLY AT MY GYM, A GUY APPROACHED ME AND SAID, "I'M NO ATHLETE. SO WHY SHOULD A REGULAR GUY LIKE ME ORGANIZE MY TRAINING PROGRAM DURING THE YEAR?"

He continued, "Right now, I sort of train instinctively. I'm not a novice – I do have a general idea of what to do when I come to the gym. When I train, I try to connect with my muscles to see if I can do that extra rep or not. I make sure not to over-train a particular body part, and if I'm feeling sore I'll rest that day."

All of this led up to the real burning question he had: "Is periodization still my best option?"

For him, a seasoned gym-regular with no real athletic goal in mind, the idea of a regimented program may seem silly. Could he be right?

Is 'periodization' – a regimented program structured around various training cycles – only for competitive athletes?



Periodization.

According to Fred Hatfield, co-founder and president of the International Sports Sciences Association, periodization can be defined as the organization and division of a training program into smaller, progressive cycles during a specific period of time in order to achieve peak results.

The components of periodization can be broken down into three training cycles: Macrocycles, Mesocycles and Microcycles, aptly named to reflect their respective timeframes. The Macrocycle refers to an entire training period, which is usually from six months to a year or longer based on the individual's goals.

The Macrocycle is made up of Mesocycles and Microcycles. The Mesocycle is a period in the Macrocycle, usually lasting months or weeks, where goals are mapped out to fit into the larger scope of the Macrocycle for optimal performance in a specific event. Mesocycles must blend together seamlessly for optimum results. Thus, foundational training must be done in such a way as to make the individual transition smoothly into sport-specific training.

The Microcycle is the shortest training cycle, typically lasting a week or two within the Macrocycle, where specific goals are worked on in training. Once one goal is reached, the individual should move on to the next one until all goals are achieved for duration of the Macrocycle.

For Hatfield, who is also a world champion powerlifter, this type of periodization is key to achieving peak performance. Athletes preparing for competitions will benefit the most from a regimented approach to keep their focus.

However, anyone can benefit from periodization. Breaking down all of the important parts of a training program into simple, measurable tasks enables both the professional athlete and the novice to conceptualize and realize his/her progress over time.

Instinctive training.

On the other hand, there is also significant merit to what can be termed 'instinctive training'. As described in the scenario of the guy at my gym, working with your instincts may seem most applicable for those who do not have a specific athletic goal or timeframe.

Joe Weider, co-founder of the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB), refers to this school of thought as the Instinctive Training Principle. This involves constructing diets, routines, cycles, intensity levels, reps and sets that work best for an individual based on his or her experience. Quite simply put, it means that you train based on how your muscles 'feel', rather than in accordance with some regimen or guideline.

The greatest benefit of this type of approach is that, for a seasoned gym regular (whether an athlete or not), 'listening' to your body means that you can adapt at any given time to get the results you know to expect from experience. For instance, it can be helpful when one trains according to their energy level on that day – using high-energy days to push harder, and low-energy days to do lighter exercises. In this instance, if one were sticking to a regimen, it may result in pushing too hard at the gym when their body really isn't up to it, which can result in injuries.

However, it is important to note that instinct of this nature comes from one's own intuition, which ultimately comes from learning and experience.

Not every person who purports to be 'going to the gym for some time' and 'knowing what to do' is actually as in tune with their bodies as they may believe.

Ultimately, leaving it up to the individual to 'do what their muscles feel like' can result in injuries if he/she does not truly understand how each muscle connects to the other, or feels mentally psyched up to train when his/her body may not be quite as ready. Even experienced athletes who have been doing 'instinctive training' for years can one day make a dangerous miscalculation when pushing that extra mile.

Periodization vs instinctive.

So... what to tell the guy seeking advice in my gym?

Having an understanding of both principles and how well they can work together, I eventually explained that even for 'regular guys', structure is needed where physical fitness is concerned; yet conversely, there are times where we must part from that set structure and use our instincts.

The most important aspect of physical fitness is the psychological component. Breaking down all of the important parts of a training program into simple, measurable tasks enables both the professional athlete and the 'regular guy' to mark consistent progress or note errors that can be corrected along the way as the particular cycle unfolds.

Generally, periodization prepares the individual psychologically for training at any level. Notably, even retired athletes who may no longer 'need' to periodize, often still do – even though their years of experience have rendered them extremely in tune with their bodies and more than capable of training instinctively.

That said, periodization may become necessary for the 'regular guy'.

It may in fact be crucial for certain life events. For instance, if you are getting married in July and it is now January, and you want to lose 40lbs to look svelte in your tuxedo

(particularly since your bride-to-be will no doubt be starving herself till her zip can barely close!), then depending on 'instinctive training' to shed the extra spare tyre around your middle may not be feasible, even if you are a gym regular.

A PERIODIZED REGIMENTED PROGRAM CAN BE COMPLEMENTED BY THE PRINCIPLE OF INSTINCTIVE TRAINING – BUT INSTINCTIVE TRAINING SHOULD NOT BE USED IN ISOLATION.

If you are, however, serious and realistic about your goal and the timeframe, it will be much more achievable if you break it down into shorter timeframes and focus on a plan for each cycle of periodization. Ultimately, this may not only bring you closer to your goal but may result in a much more thorough approach to the sculpting of your body as you desire – whereas instinctive training without a clear plan may over-emphasize one body part to the detriment of another (this, folks, is how we get the Johnny Bravo lookalikes!).

Instinctive periodization

With this particular 'regular guy' at my gym, I urged him to try combining both ways of thinking, as it is possible to be both relaxed and focused where his physical fitness regimen is concerned.

A periodized regimented program can be complemented by the principle of instinctive training – but instinctive training should not be used in isolation. It is a principle developed so that the individual can get the best possible result – not an excuse to be lazy and do your own thing!

While you can train instinctively, the knowledge of some basic training periodization principles can make your training more productive. For instance, training instinctively can be erroneously considered to be training 'hard' all the time – knowledge of periodization will enable the individual to mix in 'light', 'medium' and 'hard' workouts to achieve the best results.

The key thing to be noted when adopting a principle based on instinct is that one must first understand that the relationship between training and instinct is one that is developed over time, which may be highly subjective in most cases. Acquiring that connection with your body may take a good few years of training under the belt. But for the more advanced, instinctive training can be your best friend. **U**