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The 10 Rules of Successful Exercise

Regular physical activity is important, and everyone pretty much agrees, but life gets in the way. Most of us end up trying to fit exercise in around a busy schedule rich in sedentary behaviors. We're sitting all the time. We're spending countless hours at jobs we may not necessarily love. Responsibilities pile up and time slips away before we notice it was even there. We need to make our exercise count. We need to get it right. So today, I'm going to lay out the ten most important rules for successful exercise. These are the rules I use to form my exercise philosophy. These ten items have helped me get fitter, healthier, and happier than I ever was as a professional athlete, and I think they'll help you out, too.

You might not need to follow all ten rules. And not all rules apply to all training regimens. That's fine. But in my experience, both personally and as a coach, the people who get the most out of their workouts adhere to most of these rules.

Do the thing you love.

Some fitness people like to talk tough. They'll say things like "pain is weakness leaving the body" or "if you're enjoying yourself, you're not training." I get where they're coming from because hitting the truly elite levels of performance does require enduring pain and sacrifice and unpleasantness and, frankly, momentary bouts of abject misery. But even the triathletes subjecting themselves to crippling pain do so out of love. There's some hate there, too, but love is the foundation.

The biggest benefit to doing something you love for exercise is that you'll actually do it. Since the most effective and beneficial exercise is the one you can stick with, this is one way to ensure you obtain the benefits.

There's not a ton of research on the matter, but what little exists suggests that "forced exercise" isn't even as helpful as "voluntary exercise." In mice with colitis, for example, forced treadmill running exacerbates intestinal inflammation enough to kill the mice, while voluntary running attenuates it and keeps them alive. And in a rodent model of Alzheimer's disease, voluntary exercise was superior to forced exercise at reducing plaque deposition and memory impairment. That's pretty huge, I'd say.

Do what you love. You'll actually do it and it'll probably give you better results.

Get a workout buddy (or buddies).

Besides the workouts themselves, one big reason CrossFit has become so popular and so effective for so many people is the group dynamic it offers. You're not just toughing it out on your own anymore. And it goes beyond having a spotter. With CrossFit, you have a tribe of likeminded individuals pushing each other, shouting encouragement, suffering and succeeding together. Research confirms the benefits of this kind of camaraderie in the gym:

- Working out in a group boosts the stress reduction we get from exercise.
- Just working out in the presence of another person reduces the perceived effort of the exercise.
- Train with someone who's stronger/faster/fitter. If you think your workout partner is doing better than you, you'll work harder.
- Guys might also want to work out with a lady nearby, as exercising with a member of the opposite sex has been shown to also reduce perceived exertion. I'm not sure if the same applies to women working out near men; I'd expect it might.

You don't have to join a CrossFit box (though it's not a bad idea!). Simply gathering a friend or two for regular workouts will do the trick. And hey, social contact is a nice bonus!

Work out outside.

Taking in a sunset snuggled up with your sweetheart is amazing. Going camping for a half week really recharges your body and soul



(and resets your circadian rhythms). Simply being in green space has health benefits. But we're not only meant to passively and calmly experience the great outdoors on a regular (as close to constant) basis. We should be physically engaging with them, propelling our bodies through three dimensional space at high speeds while immersed in fresh air, and unfiltered sunlight.

Exercising outdoors makes exercise more enjoyable. The more enjoyable it is, the more likely we are to do it. There are also psychological benefits, according to a 2011 meta-analysis. Outdoor workouts resulted in greater revitalization, increased energy, and more positive engagement with the activities, along with less depression, anger, confusion, and tension. I mean, the love of exercise in an outdoor setting even smashes the divisions between species and phyla. If a slug will do it, you have no excuses.

Oh, and if you need the boost, the sunlight will increase testosterone levels via vitamin D production. That's always nice and helpful for workout recovery.

Incorporate play to make the workouts fun.

One surefire way to make exercise more enjoyable – and thus more sustainable – is to play. Instead of pounding out an hour on the stationary bike, go mountain biking. Instead of doing box jumps, play leap frog with a friend (or do leap frog burpees). Instead of lifting weights, lift oddly shaped objects or oddly shaped people. Instead of running aimlessly, go play sports where you run to get places and catch balls and make baskets (might I recommend Ultimate?).

Or you could overhaul your entire workout program and base the whole thing on play from the ground up. If this sounds interesting, you'll want to attend a Primal Payout hosted by Darryl Edwards. The guy lives for play and has built up an impressive physique and a lot of strength and power and athleticism simply by having fun. Follow his Twitter and if he's coming to a town near you, go see him (he's also a regular presenter at PrimalCon, so check that out too).

By framing your workouts as a "fun activity," they become their own reward and you're less likely to reward yourself with junk food afterwards. Oh, and fun is really fun.

Make your workouts meaningful and purpose-driven.

A big problem that prevents people from working out is that it all feels so meaningless. And let's face it: going to the gym to lift some weights just so you can put them back down or walking on a treadmill for an hour without going anywhere feels pointless on some base level. It wasn't always this way, though. Humans used to perform physically demanding tasks on a regular basis in order to live, eat, and thrive. It wasn't "exercise" or a "workout," but it made us fit, strong, and fast just the same.

Most of us can't create a life where regular exercise is a prerequisite for survival (nor would we want to), but we can inject meaning and purpose into our movements. Simple things like working with your hands and building useful things, helping friends move, cleaning up a park or nature area, commuting to work on bike or on foot, or doing physical labor can give you a great workout and produce tangible and useful results. Those probably aren't enough to get you as fit as you'd be lifting barbells or running sprints, but you can do both and still retain the sense of meaning.

Find flow.

Have you ever had a workout that feels effortless until it's over at which point you collapse under the weight of suddenly realized exertion? That's flow. When he scored 13 points in 33 seconds, Tracy McGrady was deep in the flow state (or "the zone"). Software developers seek flow to improve their coding. Meditation is stationary flow. That guy wearing shades in the gym, flexing for the mirror in between sets on the pec deck? He's probably not experiencing flow.

How do you do it?

According to the father of flow research, Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, we must engage in doable but difficult challenges that tap into our individual curiosities and interests while giving immediate feedback. Luckily, an engaging workout tends to promote the flow state fairly easily as long as you're looking for it. Try eliminating distractions that pull your attention from the task. Instead of running on a flat track, for example, go running on a trail that forces you to dodge rocks, jump roots, and pay close attention to where your feet go; the time will fly by and you'll probably go longer than you would have on the track. Jogging with a podcast in your headphones can be nice, but it's important to lose yourself in the task at hand sometimes.

You can always flex in the mirror after your workout.

Savor how exercise makes you feel.

Exercise is psychedelic. It expands and alters consciousness. It's an escape from the drudgery of real life, of bills and deadlines and stress and neurotic thought-loops.

It's a narcotic, literally causing your brain to produce endogenous opioids and cannabinoids that get you high.

Good workouts reveal the extremes of subjective human experience. We get butterflies before a big lift or a particularly grueling sprint and feel the real anxiety of knowing you're about to push your body to its limit. We know the joy of victory (even if it's against your last workout's self) and the crushing dejection of defeat. The ups, the downs, the all-arounds.

A good workout relaxes you. All is right with the world after a heavy lifting session or a hike in the back country. Food tastes better. The sunset's prettier. Work stress is somehow less pressing.

You're confident after a workout. "Yeah, I just lifted that." You feel sexier, too, because you've proven to yourself and the world that you know how to use and inhabit your body.

Even the unpleasant aspects of exercise – the sweat sting, the burn of the quad, the intense mental effort required to lift this weight or run that hill – should be savored. Drawing away from the pain is pointless; it's there. By meeting it head-on, by enjoying it, we co-opt it for our own devices.

Know these feelings. Savor them. They may not be "fun" or "pleasant," necessarily. That's not the point. They're proof that you're still alive and that these workouts are doing something.

Release your attachment to the outcome.

As a high-level endurance athlete, I was obsessed with the outcome. During events, I'd strap the outcome onto my chest like a baby carrier and he would help me reach the finish line. And when I'd languish in bed trying to avoid the day's training, it was the outcome tugging at the sheets and bringing me a cup of coffee. If I didn't have the outcome – the finish line – I couldn't have faced all the grueling torture required of elite endurance athletes.

But that's no way to live. Detaching myself from the outcome and focusing on the journey to wherever it is I'm going has proven to be a game changer for my health, my happiness, and ultimately my fitness. When you can immerse yourself in the journey, in the exercise itself as you're doing it, great stuff happens. You hit the flow state more easily. You find yourself having fun again when you work out. You discover that training can be an end in itself, and your workouts are reinvigorated and more fruitful.

Keep your goals, of course. Just don't forget to savor the journey and don't let yourself fall to pieces in despair if the outcome differs from your expectations.

Decide if you're training or just exercising.

Which is it: training or exercising? Are you interested in being active, moving your body, getting generally fitter and stronger, staying fit, staying strong without adhering to any specific performance goals? Then you're exercising. You have goals. They're just more diffuse, like "get healthier."

Or maybe you have a specific performance goal, like "deadlift 500 pounds" or "compete in Master's marathon and actually compete." Then you're probably going to be training, which means a training program consisting of progression, regimentation, and maybe periodization. Training is stricter.

They're both great, depending on your goals, but exercising when you should be training or training when all you really need is to exercise can make you miserable and render your workouts ineffective and meandering. So make a decision so you can achieve your goals.

Me? My goal nowadays is to play until I'm old, so I train to maintain my fitness, my muscle mass, the strength of my connective tissue, and my bone mineral density enough that I'm able to go out and have fun every single day.

Try something new.

Humans are novelty seekers. It's kind of what drove us to walk the entire globe, explore new surroundings, test our limits, and become the apex predators on this planet. That hardwiring affects our relationship with everything- the media we consume, the games we play, the hobbies we spend time on, the relationships we forge, and the exercises we do.

One way trying a new workout or exercise can help is by boosting enthusiasm. If you're bored with your workout, you're bored. You're going through the motions. You're doing the minimum and getting minimal results. If you're excited about what you're doing in the gym, on the track, or on the trail, you'll be more into it and you'll get more out of it. Novelty seekers often feel bad about their desire for something new; they shouldn't. They should indulge it, especially when it comes to movement.

And when it comes to strength training, it might even be more effective to change up the exercises you do than simply increase the intensity (weight, volume, etc). In a recent study, researchers tested the effects of exercise variation in both beginning strength trainees and early advanced trainees. Compared to varying the intensity, varying the exercises yielded significant strength and hypertrophy gains in both groups. In the words of the lead researcher, changing up the exercises you do in the gym "seems to produce a more complete muscle activation hypertrophying all of the heads of multi-pennate muscles."

As I said earlier, you don't have to do everything on this list.

But it wouldn't hurt.

That's it for today, folks. What other tips do you have for people looking to improve their exercise game?

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