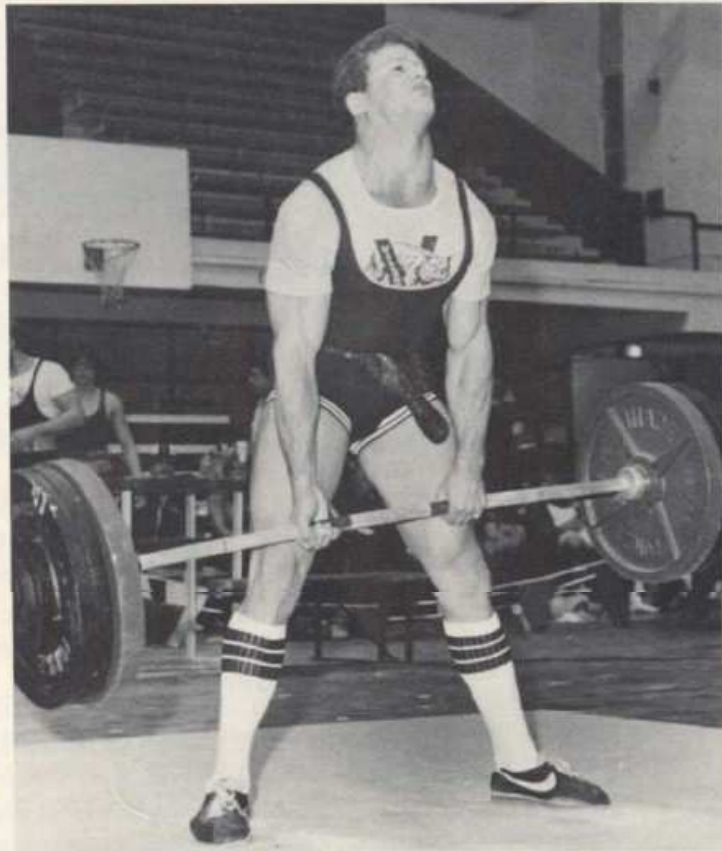


# STARTIN' OUT

A special section  
dedicated to the  
beginning lifter

## SETS & REPS as told by Doug Daniels



**Optimum Set & Rep Schemes...** will put more pounds on your total in the long run. Photo of Brian McKenna, former Villanova lifter, by Jim Gallagher.

Many methods of doing things are followed for long periods of time and seldom questioned because that's the way they were done by those before us and those before them. Weight training methods are no different. In our quest of the attainment of maximum strength, we use many training methods, religiously, just because others have enjoyed success with them previously. In some cases this may be the thing to do. Using proven techniques can save you precious time and frustration and bring about the desired results, but who says that even proven methods should not be analyzed for maximum efficiency?

The set/rep system we follow is one of the most important factors involved in training. With the exception of a few new machines, very little has changed in power training lately. This can be seen by examining old issues of weight training magazines. What has changed in powerlifting is the entry of more and better athletes, anabolics, and supportive equipment.

I like to question the current state

of things. For example, what is the advantage of the '5x5' or '4x8' set/rep systems? What is the advantage of adding weight each set and cutting reps as you go up? Many lifters follow this type of set/rep system and never look farther. Let's look at some common set/rep systems used today and analyze them for merit.

First, let's examine set/rep systems where the reps remain constant for an exercise, such as '5x5' and '4x8'. This is a very old system and has produced results countless times, but let's take a new look at it. Generally this system entails performing an exercise for a given number of sets with the same weight or increasing the weight each set with the reps remaining constant. For example a typical system of '4x8' of benches would go: 255x8, 275xx8, 295x8, 315x8 (increasing the weight with each set) or it could be 300x8, 300x8, 300x8, 300x8 (constant weight per set). Certainly if you work hard at either of these systems you will progress, so what's wrong with that?

In the first example, each set increases in weight and intensity. It would follow that the set with the highest intensity would be the last set of 315x8. Out of the four sets, the last one produces the most results. In addition, the three previous sets only decrease the amount of weight you are capable of on the last set. Without the three previous sets (but with a warmup, of course), you could have benched 335-345 x 8. A set with that weight, properly performed would be more result producing.

The way to make this '4x8' system more effective would be as follows: 245x8 (added warm up set), 305x8 (intermediate warm up), 345x8 (peak set), 305x8 (decreasing weight per set after third set), 275x8. Performing this progression you could stimulate the muscles exercised to a higher degree. Decreasing the weight after the peak set would enable you to perform the '4x8' routine with a lighter weight as you tire from each preceding set. This way the intensity would not decrease, only the weight used would. The '5x5' set/rep and similar systems can be modified this way also.

The set/rep system with the weights held constant could follow the same analysis and modifications. However, these old systems can be used for light training days when intensity is purposely held low, like after competition or injury, so they do have some merit.

Next, let's look at a typical system where you add weight and cut reps each set. 200x12, 225x10, 245x8,

265x6, 285x4, 305x3, 325x2. It can be criticized similarly. Each preceding set only lowers what you can do on the succeeding one. A better method would be a pyramid system in which reps would decrease as weight increases to a peak. Then the process would be reversed and the weight used would drop as the reps increase. For example the same lifter could follow this progression: 200x10 (weights increasing, reps decreasing), 245x6, 285x2, 325x4 (peak set), 300x6, 275x8, 255x10 (weights decreasing, reps increasing - 'down sets')

You will notice that the third set (285x2) has fewer reps than the following peak set (325x4). This is done to save energy for the more intense sets to follow. With this system all remaining sets are result producing. Why waste energy? Warm up adequately, then hit it! The down sets can be worked to failure if desired. The drop in weight on each of the down sets will allow you to continue the set/rep scheme.

I hope I have caused you to think a little more when following or designing your training routines. Make each set and rep count in training. Don't waste energy on non-effective sets and reps. Make sure you get adequate warmup without restricting what you can perform on the sets that count. Standard routines don't always produce optimum results. The word **optimum** is the key. Even proven routines can be open to improvement.

## Choosing a Gym

This is a subject that should be discussed so lifters don't make mistakes when choosing the training facility that's right for them. When deciding on a gym, check out each one in town. Don't get suckered into joining the first one, and then find out that the one across town has better equipment and more reasonable rates.

The major things to consider when joining a gym are: Does it have adequate equipment? Is it workable?, and How's the environment? When considering equipment, new doesn't always mean better. I have seen new equipment that couldn't handle enough weight for really strong trainees. I have also been in gyms with all-new equipment that didn't have squat racks or even dip bars. When evaluating gyms make a checklist of the equipment you will need in your workout and bring it with you.

The next thing to consider in a gym is workability. By this I mean: 1. Is the gym open during the hours you want to work out? Some shift workers might find this a critical consideration. 2. Is the equipment all in one place and arranged in good order? In one gym I went through all the benches and squat racks were on a different story than the dumbbells and the pulley machines. There was no way you could do supersets or a high intensity workout which would require the use of many different types of equipment.

Environment has two components; 1. Safety and 2. Music. Is the gym safe? Are there spotters when you need them, and is there enough room to lift in. Cramped gyms may pose a safety problem when too many people are trying to lift at once. Even though you are careful someone else might not be.

Music might not be very important to most lifters, but for some, like me, it can mean the difference between a good workout and a great workout. I really don't listen to the music, but the sound and beat keep me interested and keep my energy level higher. Top 40 and country music are terrible to lift to. Some gyms let you bring your own music. Gyms aren't social clubs and most serious lifters are there to work, so they won't mind your music unless it is something real radical. If the gym continues to play bad music, don't lift there or, better yet, don't join. The gym is for your benefit and most reasonable managers will let you have your way if you are nice about it.

I hope these thoughts can be of some help to those of you out there who are ready to either join a gym for the first time or graduate from the home gym. Remember, check out all the gyms. If you are going to take the time, spend the money, and exert the energy to work out, you don't want to have to fight a bad situation. Be selective and your workouts will be one step ahead.

Doug Heeren, 1986 Iowa ADFFA Champion, 165 lb. class