

WOMEN AND WEIGHT TRAINING

From Ingo Logé

If you want lean, sexy & hard, train with weights.

A desirable female physique is one that can only be achieved by moving some serious iron in the weight room! But what about all the talk about weight training making women big and bulky? First, it is physiologically impossible for you as a woman to put on large amounts of muscle mass; you're body's hormonal makeup is not one that will allow you to do so.

God never intended for women to look like men (go figure), so he made the chemistry of each gender's respective bodies different. Regardless of how you train, how often you train, how much protein you eat, etc, you're not going to even come close to the big, bulky physique of a female bodybuilder.

It will not happen. That look is only obtainable by one means: steroids. Because their natural hormonal profiles would never allow them to get that "big," they resort to changing their body's chemistry through the use of illegal drugs. Secondly, if the right training method is chosen, the hypertrophic (growth) response to resistance training can be even further reduced.

If you want lean, sexy & hard, TRAIN HEAVY.

This is what they told you: "Lighten the load and go for the burn." To comprehend why this is indeed nonsense, you have to understand a few things about muscle tone in general. There are two types of muscle tone; myogenic and neurogenic. Don't get thrown off by the scientific words; the first simply refers to your muscle tone at rest. It is affected by the density of your muscles; the greater the density of your muscles, the harder and firmer you will appear. Heavy training increases your myogenic tone through the hypertrophy (growth) of the contractile proteins myosin and actin (myosin and actin are by far the most dense components of skeletal muscle).

Training in higher rep ranges promotes more sarcoplasmic (fluid) hypertrophy, which in turn yields a "softer" pumped look. If you want to be hard, firm, tight, etc, the latter is certainly not the way to go. The second aspect of a muscles' tone is neurogenic tone, or the tone that is expressed when movements or contractions occur. Again, lower rep training comes out on top as training with heavy loads will increase the sensitivity of alpha and gamma motor neurons, thus increasing neurogenic tone when conducting even the simplest of movements (i.e. walking, extending your arm to point, etc).

Finally, as alluded to in point number one, training with heavy loads and low volume (sets x reps) is the best way to get hard and strong, but not big. Muscular hypertrophy is generally a response to a high volume work output; therefore, by keeping the sets and reps low with heavy training, you won't have to fear getting overly big (this really isn't even an issue due to the physiological reasons mentioned earlier).

Why then is it commonly recommended that women train with lighter loads? Well, there are a couple reasons. First, there is the typical stereotype that women are weak, fragile creatures who can't handle anything more than pushups on their knees and bicep curls with pink dumbbells. Try telling that to 123 lb Mary Jeffrey who bench presses a world record 275 lbs and you'll likely get smacked upside the head with a 45 lb plate. Give me a break. Secondly, the belief that high-rep training increases muscle tone is 100% myth.

Strength training guru and Muscle Media contributor Pavel Tsatsouline explains this quite nicely, "Your muscle fibers are like mouse traps... they go off by themselves, but need energy to be reset to contract again. A dead body is out of ATP, the energy compound that relaxes the muscles... A high rep workout exhausts ATP in your muscle and leads to temporary hardness... The only way to make such 'tone' last is by killing yourself." Pavel goes on to note, "You better get on a first name basis with heavy dead[lift]s if you are after a hard butt!"

If you want lean, sexy & hard, train with compound, multi-joint movements.

Forget the butt blaster, forget leg extensions and leg curls, and forget "muscle sculpting" with Susie the hyperactive personal trainer. As stated in point number two, if you want to sport a hard body, you better start training heavy. Big, compound movements such as the deadlift and the squat are superior to machine, isolation-type movements for hardening up your thighs and butt as they allow you to use maximal weight while training a number of muscle groups simultaneously.

Another benefit obtained by performing multi-joint compound movements is increased confidence. With strength comes confidence. Also, there is nothing like claiming your ground in the gym by loading up the squat bar and proceeding to execute a few heavy, crisp repetitions. After all, 90% percent of the guys in your gym probably don't squat, and those of them that do most likely resort to using the smith machine and/or doing partial repetitions.

Why? Because free squatting with a full range of motion is hard. It takes will power to get under that bar week after week and squat all the way down. Simply put, most people fear the squat and the deadlift (along with anything else challenging in life). So, after that macho guy gets done barbell curling in the squat rack, throw the bar up on the J-hooks where it belongs and show 'em what kind of woman you are!

Don't get the impression that you need to be able to lift "x" number of lbs to obtain a hard physique. Heavy is a relative term; 600 lbs is considered "light" to some of the guys on the Westside Barbell powerlifting team; however, the average gym goer would deem that same load monstrously heavy. It's not important that you move big weights; what is important is that you are selecting and lifting loads that are heavy for you. Over time, you will get stronger and the poundage you can handle will increase.

So, for you as a female trainee, a "heavy" load can be defined as a weight that you can lift in good form for 3-6 repetitions. This is in agreement with the recommendations of Canadian

strength coach Christian Thibaudeau as he notes, "Women do not have the capacity to recruit as many motor units as men do. As such, they'll need 1-2 more reps to fully stimulate their muscles. So when training for strength, a man should use between 1 and 5 reps while a woman will benefit more from doing 3-6 reps. Also, most women will need to perform 1-2 more sets of an exercise to achieve the same degree of stimulation as a man, once again because of their lower motor unit activation."

REGULAR TRAINING ROUTINE - LIFTS

The following lifts aren't the easiest to execute; you may have to spend a couple weeks practicing them with a small amount of weight to really get the form down. But, no matter how awkward they may seem at first, stick with them!

DO NOT, for any reason, give up! Any small sacrifice you make learning how to conduct these lifts will pay it's price in full when you look in the mirror just a short while from now. Remember, if obtaining a hard body were easy, everybody would have one! It takes hard work, dedication, and discipline to be lean, sexy, and hard.

The following are the exercises that you need to be using with the weight-training program provided at the end of the article.

SQUAT

Position yourself within the confines of a power rack and unrack the loaded barbell from the J-hooks; the bar should rest comfortably on your traps (not too high, not too low). Slowly walk the weight out by taking a few steps backward; your stance should be about shoulder width or slightly wider. Once stabilized, tightly arch your lower back; this arch must be maintained during the entire lift.

Next, press your neck back into the bar and look straight ahead; maintain this head position throughout the entire exercise as doing so will help to keep your torso from drifting forward. Start the squat by first pushing your butt back (remember to maintain the tight arch in your lower back) and then continue to flex at both the hip and knee joints.

Breathe short and shallow on the way down and continue to descend until a point just below parallel (partial squats are unacceptable and a waste of time). Pause very briefly in the bottom position and then explosively drive the weight upward through your heels; do not allow the weight to shift to the balls of your feet. Hold your breath during the concentric. Lock out and repeat for the desired number of reps.

NOTE: Do not resort to performing this movement on the smith machine. Put the time in to learn how to free squat properly; once you do, you'll never have to worry about it again and you'll be able to enjoy the many benefits of free squatting for the remainder of your training career.

DEADLIFT

Grab hold of a loaded barbell with a staggered grip (i.e. one hand supinated and one hand pronated); your hands should be positioned about shoulder width apart and your knees should lie within your elbows. Your shoulders should be slightly rounded and directly above or behind the bar. If your shoulders start in front of the bar, you will have to pull up and out before you can pull back. Your lower back should be tightly arched, your knees and hips flexed, and you should be looking straight ahead. Before starting the lift, maximally inhale into your stomach.

If you want to know if you are breathing correctly, Powerlifting great Dave Tate of Westside Barbell recommends performing the following drill: Stand in front of a mirror and take a deep breath. Did your shoulders rise? If so, you are breathing into your chest, not your stomach. When done correctly, the shoulders should remain immobile and the gut should inflate like a balloon. Next, tightly grip the bar with your triceps contracted (this is to avoid pulling with your arms), violently contract your glutes, and drive your heels into the ground as you begin to pull the bar up and back by extending your hips forward.

Hold your breathe during the concentric. Your lower back should remain tightly arched throughout the lift. Rounding this region can make this stellar exercise a very dangerous one. Once you lock out at the top of the movement, exhale and pause for a second. Quickly lower the bar to the ground, take a few seconds to get back into the starting position, and repeat for the desired number of reps.

SUPINE-GRIP (palms facing you) PULL-UPS

Grab hold to a chin-up bar with an underhand grip (palms facing you); your hands should be about shoulder width or slightly closer. Lift your feet off the ground and interlock your ankles behind you so that your lower legs are parallel with the floor. Maximally inhale into your stomach. Lean backward and arch your back as you begin to pull yourself up; maintain this arch throughout the entire exercise- this will really overload your lats.

Hold your breath during the concentric. Continue to pull yourself up until your forearms come in full contact with your biceps. Once they do, hold that position for a count of one as you exhale, and then slowly reverse the motion until your arms are fully extended (breathe short and shallow on the way down); you should really feel the stretch in your lats and biceps while in this position. Inhale maximally and repeat for the desired number of reps.

DIPS

Position yourself between two parallel bars and boost yourself up so that your elbow joint is fully locked out; you should be looking straight ahead. Lift your feet off the ground and interlock your ankles behind you so that your lower legs are parallel with the floor.

Begin to lower yourself under control by flexing at the elbow joint. As you drop, breathe short and shallow; also, rotate your lower body backward (this will be pretty natural) in order to

produce a forward lean; this will load the sternal head of the pecs. Do not allow your elbows to significantly flare out; however, a slight flare is okay.

Continue to lower yourself until your shoulders are below your elbows and your biceps come into full contact with your forearms; you should feel a good stretch in your triceps, anterior deltoids, and lower pecs in this position. Explosively press off the bars with the meaty part of your palm (this will send a neural signal to your triceps to contract stronger) by extending at the elbow joint and rotating your lower body forward (again, this will be natural). Lock out and repeat for the desired number or reps.

STANDING DUMBBEL MILITARY PRESS

Start with your forearms parallel to the floor; they should remain this way throughout the entire lift; they will naturally want to drift inward, but don't allow this to happen; doing so will load the triceps while taking the emphasis off the shoulders. Inhale into your stomach, squeeze your glutes together hard as if trying to pinch an imaginary coin between them, and explosively press the weight overhead. Hold your breath during the concentric.

Do not allow the 'bells to touch at the top of the movement, but rather keep them roughly 6" apart; this will keep the tension on your delts. After a short pause, begin to slowly lower the weight; be sure to keep your forearms perpendicular to the floor. Breathe short and shallow during the eccentric. Continue to lower the weight until your elbows fall significantly below the plane of your shoulders. Pause briefly and repeat for the desired number of reps.

JANDA SIT-UPS

Lie back on the floor with your knees flexed to 90 degrees and your feet flat on the floor; do not anchor your feet. Your arm positioning can either be straight out in front of you or crossed on your shoulders. Contract your glutes and slowly begin to curl upward- jerking movements are unacceptable and take the emphasis off the abs by recruiting the hip flexors. Once you reach the top of the curl, maximally exhale; you should feel an intense cramp in your abdominal region.

Continue to hold your breath and slowly lower yourself to the floor; move especially slow during the last six inches of the movement. It is okay to let out short bursts of air during the eccentric portion, but do not lose the tightness in your abs. Your feet are not to come off the ground at any point during the exercise. If the concentric portion of the lift is too difficult at first, do negatives only. Repeat for the desired number or reps.

30-DEGREE INCLINE DUMBBELL BENCH PRESS

This movement is very similar to the standing dumbbell military press, only you will be performing the movement while lying on your back. Grab a pair of dumbbells and position yourself on an incline bench set to about 30 degrees; your feet should be flat on the floor. Pull your shoulder blades together, push your chest out, and tightly arch your lower back to place the pecs in a prestretched position.

Inhale into your stomach, squeeze your glutes together hard as if trying to pinch an imaginary coin between them, and explosively press the 'bells upward. Be sure to keep your forearms perpendicular to the ground at all times during the lift as we did with the military press.

Hold your breath during the concentric. Do not allow the 'bells to touch at the top of the movement, but rather keep them roughly 6" apart; this will keep the tension on your pecs. After a short pause, begin to slowly lower the weight; again, do not allow your forearms to drift inward. Breathe short and shallow during the eccentric. Continue to lower the weight until your elbows fall significantly below the plane of your shoulders. Pause briefly and repeat for the desired number of reps.

CALF PRESS IN LEG PRESS MACHINE

This one is pretty easy. Position yourself within the confines of a leg press machine, push the weight upward, and then position your feet so that only the balls of your feet are on the edge of the sled. Explosively push the weight forward by moving at the ankle joint only. Pause for a second and then reverse the movement. Be sure to use a full range of motion; you should feel a great stretch in your calves when in the bottom position.

LEAN, SEXY AND HARD WEIGHT TRAINING PROGRAM

A1 and A2 are explained below along with sets & reps.

DAY 1 - CHEST AND ABS

A1: 30-degree incline DB Bench Press

A2: Janda Sit-ups

DAY 2 - QUAD DOMINANT LEGS AND CALVES

A1: Squats

A2: Calf Press in a Leg Press Machine

DAY 3 - BACK AND TRICEPS

A1: Supine-grip Pull-ups

A2: Dips

DAY 4 - HIP DOMINANT LEGS AND SHOULDERS

A1: Deadlift

A2: Standing DB Military Press

DAY 5 OFF

Casually alternate between exercises A1 and A2 until you complete the desired number of sets and reps for each exercise. For example, perform A1, rest one minute, perform A2, rest one minute, perform A1, etc. Also, for all exercises (with the exception of the deadlift and the Janda Sit-up), lower the load under control for a period of 3-4 seconds and then explode the weight upward on the concentric by lifting it as fast as you can.

Repeat the 5-day rotation back to back for the duration of program. A fundamental element of this program is that is comprised of short, frequent training sessions; this is to prevent you from overtraining. When performing overly long workouts, especially workouts that are comprised of big, compound exercises, the central nervous system can easily become overtrained.

If your motivation drops off and you start to loathe the thought of having to train, you're progress will be close to zero. It is essential that the sessions remain short and sweet; this way, you leave the gym feeling fresh and motivated, not tired and run down.

PHASE I

Phase 1 of this program will be conducted for four weeks; the set/rep scheme will be 6 sets of 5. Select a load that you can handle for 5 repetitions in good form. If you successfully perform 5 repetitions on all 6 sets, bump the weight up 5-10 lbs the next time you perform that particular exercise.

Do not perform more than 5 repetitions on any set. If you do not successfully perform 5 repetitions on all 6 sets, stick with the same load until you can do so.

PHASE II

Phase 2 of this program will also be conducted for a period of four weeks; this time, the set/rep scheme will be 10 sets of 3. Again, select a load that you can handle for 5 repetitions in good form. If you successfully perform 3 repetitions on all 10 sets, bump the weight up 5-10 lbs the next time you perform that particular exercise.

Do not perform more than 3 repetitions on any set; your first few sets will seem easy- this is exactly the way it is supposed to be. If you do not successfully perform 3 repetitions on all 10 sets, stick with the same load for the next workout