

Getting your bearings

The workouts I write are presented in a format designed for readability and ease of understanding – simplicity above all else! Things to know:

- Each workout (chest, legs, shoulders, etc), designated by the bolded name in the highlighted black cell at the top, is intended to be its own day. Avoid hitting multiple sessions in the same day, and *especially* avoid back-to-back sessions (chest followed by legs, in the same trip to the gym for example) in order to “catch up” or make up for a missed day. If you can perform consecutive workouts with appropriate intensity, you do not have a clear understanding of what “appropriate intensity” really means.
- Exercises listed individually are to be performed as straight sets – perform a set, rest, repeat as indicated before moving on to the next exercise
- Exercises that are paired are marked as a *superset*, meaning that the 2 are to be performed back-to-back, resting **only** after the 2nd one (or last one, if there are more than 2 grouped together like this).
- Reps can be given as a range or a specific number. In all cases, the target is an approximation (10ish, for example) and the reps actually performed should be noted in your log.
- Some of these plans may contain 4 workouts, some 6, some maybe even 7 or more. Treat these as a rotation, NOT necessarily your weekly “to-do” list for workouts. If you can get through a 4-day split in 5 days, great – start over on day 6. If it takes you 8 days to complete a 6-workout rotation, that is similarly fine. A good, general strategy is to aim to lift 5-6 days per week.
- Related to the above point: quickly break yourself of the habit (if you do this currently) of always hitting the same body part on the same day of the week (chest on Monday, arms on Tuesday, etc) and adopt the ‘rotation’ philosophy outlined above. Lots of guys will schedule legs on Wednesday (example) and then suddenly find a way to miss a Wednesday workout – coincidence? Also, if you miss chest day on Monday, it makes no sense to wait until NEXT Monday to make it up – just hit it on Tuesday and slide everything over a day to accommodate.

Basic Principles

Good programming is one thing, but **proper execution is everything**. When you focus on execution, you are treating each individual exercise as a skill – one that you can improve at over time, so long as you focus on how the movement feels and how effectively it’s working the target muscle(s).

Bodybuilding – and physique improvement with an eye towards the aesthetics, generally speaking – is about being smart in your training. It’s about making the muscle work, and pushing through a level of discomfort that signals that your body wants you to stop. It is **not** about lifting as heavy as you possibly can and throwing weight around. You can make gains doing this to be sure, but you also run a significantly higher risk of injury and it simply isn’t necessary. “But I enjoy it!”, I hear all the time – great, lots of people enjoy smoking too but that doesn’t mean it’s good for you or something you should do. Bodybuilding is about longevity and avoiding significant injury as much as it is about anything else – even a nagging “my shoulder really bugs me when I do blah blah” issue that isn’t diagnosed as anything in particular is going to hamper your shoulder, chest, and possibly arm workouts to a certain degree, and likely in the long-term.

Be smart! Start with moderate weight, focus on quality execution, slow tempos, hard squeezes, and getting those extra reps when your body is begging you to quit. If your form breaks down a bit before the end of a set, that's ok. If your form starts out sloppy, that's not ok. If you find that moderate weights make for an "easy" workout, this is a sign that your mind/muscle connection is lacking – working on isometric flexes and especially *posing* can help with this tremendously. Yes, even if you are not a competitor.

Rest periods should be kept brief – you probably have an idea of 45 seconds being a LOT longer than it really is. Modern gyms are built to distract you with TV's everywhere, etc – stay focused, don't get sucked in. Check out the rest periods noted throughout the plan and keep yourself on task.

And finally, put your phone away. This is the biggest distraction of all and can derail even the most dedicated bodybuilder if he or she lets it. Bluetooth headphones are great so if you use your phone for music, you don't even have to keep it in your pocket. Set up your playlist before you start, bury your phone in your gym bag and just let it run.

How to approach these workouts

A workout split is designed to last for about 4 weeks. Shorter than that, and you don't have sufficient time to get your bearings around the structure of it and progress. Longer than that, and you run the risk of getting bored as hell.

In order to progress in an intelligent way, you need to log your workouts so you can track not only the weights used, but also reps (if short of or in excess of the target) and other notes about the set (specific equipment used for exercises where you have multiple options, any abnormal pains or sensations your feel, etc).

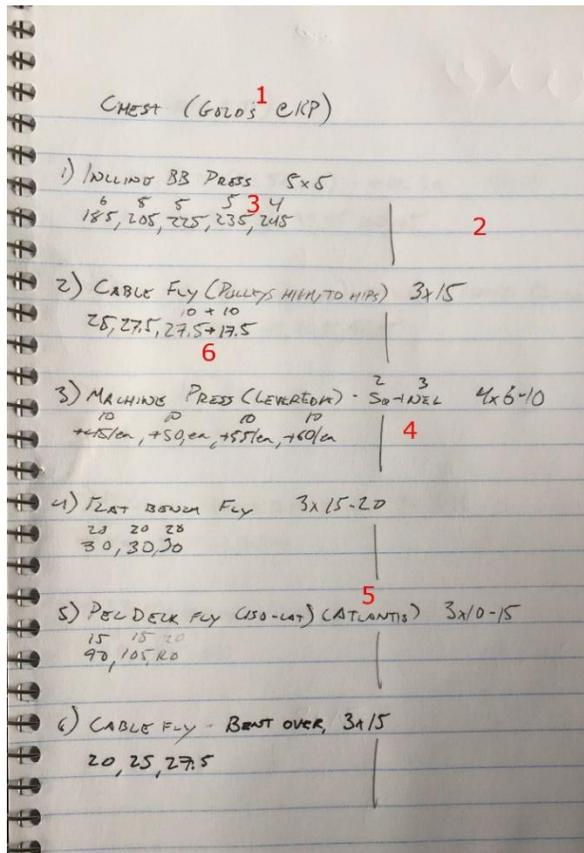
A very common question to ask is *what weight do I use?* I see workout plans written all the time that actually tell you what weight to use, and this is a horrible tactic that assumes everyone has the same base level of strength which is incredibly short-sighted. **I can't tell you what weight to use.** Some intelligent guidelines will help you figure it out, however:

- Do you understand the purpose of the exercise?
- Do you feel it working the target muscle(s)?
- Can you perform the specified number of reps with full range of motion?
- Can you use proper form and avoid introducing momentum/swinging?
- Did you live to tell about it?

If the answer to all of these is **yes**, increase the weight.

Since you'll be following a workout split for 4-5 weeks, it's helpful if your workout logbook allows you to *quickly* reference what you've done on a given workout before without having to thumb back and forth

through it to find your notes from last week. I recommend a format similar to the following example from my log book that easily allows you to track multiple weeks of a workout on the same page.



As to the numbered notes:

1. If you go to multiple gyms, mark where the workout was completed to avoid confusion in future sessions.
2. Space over here (and below the poundages as well) is reserved for a second, third, and fourth time through a workout – aiming to progress each time through a session.
3. The target for each set here was 5 reps, so above each poundage is noted the actual reps hit.
4. Tempo notes – if a workout specifies a non-standard tempo, note it here – in this case, “SQ” (squeeze, 2 seconds), and “Neg” (negative, 3 seconds).
5. Often in the gym you’ll have multiple options for a certain exercise, and not all machines are created equal. This Gold’s location has an Atlantis and a Life Fitness pec fly right next to each other but the poundages are nowhere near equivalent – important to track which exact machine you’re using if options exist.
6. The cable fly has an added drop set, noted with an arrow indicating the weight that I dropped to, and the reps hit at each weight marked above that.

Note that this is just an example of many different ways these variables can be tracked, but it works – clean, efficient, and packed with all the detail you need to ensure you know what to do the next time through. Here’s a general approach on how you can progress over the course of the life of a workout split:

- Week 1: this is all about establishing a baseline. Unless you’re brand new, you know about what kind of weight you can use on a given exercise for a given rep range, but the variables and the context of the workout will create their own environment that will change some of these numbers. Push hard, but focus more on keeping form strict and hitting all of the rep targets
- Week 2: now we start the process of improving upon the previous week’s performance. Check your logbook for obvious places you can increase. If you did 4 sets of an exercise last week at 25, 30, 35, and 40 pounds (following the “if you didn’t die, increase the weight” mantra), then clearly the first 2 sets were not at a particularly challenging weight and you should start higher. This is called “compressing the range”. Add a working set to half of the exercises in the workout.
- Week 3: compress the range further, and pick your spots (when it feels right) to attempt to increase the maximum weight as well, keeping with all of the previously established rules. This

is also a great time to A) shorten your rest periods slightly (lifting the same weight in less time = more work done), and B) add in isometric flexes and squeezes between sets to prevent the muscle from truly resting and getting fully recovered between sets. When you tackle the next set with a greater degree of fatigue and you're still able to hit the target weight and reps, you're progressing. Add a working set to the half of the exercises in the workout that you didn't already add to in week 2.

- Week 4: further range compression, reach for those last increases in top weight, keep the isometrics and short rest, and work in intensifiers (see below) as punctuation marks on 2-3 sets (final set of an exercise) throughout the workout.

Modifications and improvising

All of these workouts are designed for a typical, moderately-equipped commercial gym. Invariably, you will find that some piece of equipment is not available – either the gym doesn't have it, it's always in used, broken, or something else. Learning how to make substitutions is key – even if it's just to avoid waiting around for something to become available. Your goal in these workouts is to achieve a pump and sustain it – waiting around for **anything** is to be avoided, even for just a couple of minutes.

Generally speaking, you want to replace an exercise with something similar. A compound or multi-joint movement (press, squat, etc) should be replaced with something from the same classification (machine shoulder press is taken? Go grab the dumbbells).

On back exercises, be aware of the difference between horizontal (seated row, barbell row) and vertical (pulldown, pull-up) movements and find an exercise from the same family to replace it with.

While most gyms have this equipment, when evaluating the gym configurations for new clients I've found that the following pieces are most likely to be absent.

- Hack squat
 - Replace with: front squat, sissy squat, weighted step-up, stationary split squat
 - Do NOT improvise with a barbell hack squat. This is a mechanically poor exercise
- T-Bar row
 - Improvise with: barbell anchored down at one end.
 - Replace with: barbell row, any bi-lateral (both arms together) horizontal machine row
- Lying leg curl
 - Improvise with: Lying dumbbell curl (face down on bench, holding the DB between your feet)
 - Replace with: any other knee flexion exercise (seated curl, standing curl, etc)

Intensifying techniques

As mentioned above, as you progress to week 4 (or even earlier in some cases, or if the program calls for it), you will be employing certain 'intensifying' techniques, designed to squeeze as much performance out of the working muscle as possible. Think of a waterlogged towel – you twist it to wring the water out, but no matter how hard you squeeze there's always more water in there – and if you shake the towel out and twist it a different way, you can always get it a little drier. Your muscles need the same treatment to get every last bit of contractile ability out of them if we want to truly reach failure – and these techniques will help you do that.

- Drop set: take the set to failure, then immediately reduce weight and resume to failure at the new, lower weight. Easiest with DB exercises and selectorized machines. Referred to as a strip-set on plate loaded machines or barbell exercises. Often, multiple reductions in weight are called for. Typically, reducing weight to ~60% of the original weight is a good starting point for each drop (100lbs drop to 70lbs drop to 55lbs drops to 40lbs in a triple drop set, as an example).
- Rest/pause: take the set to failure, then pause long enough to take 2 very slow, deep breaths, then resume to failure. Usually most effective when the initial rep target is around 8 – you can expect perhaps 2-4 quality reps after the first pause, and then perhaps 1-2 more after a second identical pause. Not practical (or particularly safe) for exercises like a squat.
- Partial reps: when you can't complete any more full reps, perform then first half (or so) of the range of motion just to get a little more contractile ability out of the muscle. Only effective if you actually do full range of motion as your default rep (which of course you do!)
- Cheat reps: when you can't complete any more quality reps, it's not always bad to use some momentum to help the muscle out – typically this is combined with an extended focus on the negative of the exercise: cheat the weight up, then struggle and suffer through the negative.
- Forced (manual resistance) negatives: easiest with a partner in most cases
- Isometric squeeze – just flex the muscle as hard as you can, and HOLD it for 15-30 seconds (or more if you're feeling really masochistic).

Above all: be curious. Experiment. Don't be afraid to try variations on an exercise. Always be aiming to feel the working muscle a little better. Always aim to notice compensations when you're doing something to make a rep easier – and stop it.

Always improve.

And most importantly: **HAVE FUN**

-Darin