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The Functional Training Craze

By Jesse Cannone

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by: **Jesse Cannone**

In the past few years I've seen a huge transition in the fitness industry. More and more people are using functional training, and some argue it's the only way to train. The purpose of this article is to give people an understanding of what functional training is, and what it does and does not do.

First, lets look at what functional actually means.

Func.tion.al 1. capable of operating or functioning, 2. capable of serving the purpose for which it was intended (Webster's Encyclopedia 2nd Edition, 1996)

Based on that definition, you can draw many conclusions as to what is functional. Depending upon who you ask, you will most likely get a diverse variety of responses as to what is functional. All human movement is a combination of various functions. Human movement cannot take place without muscular function. According to the functional training "experts", functional training uses bands, balls, free-weights, and plyometric exercises in an attempt to condition the body in an un-stable environment. Many of the experts feel that performing exercises that mimic activities or specific skills is the most effective way to train, regardless of ones goal.

What is the safest, most efficient and effective way to optimize human performance?

Factors Affecting Human Performance

In order to maximize human performance, you must have a good understanding of what affects performance. The factors that play the greatest role in performance are: Power (Strength and Speed), Agility (Flexibility/Mobility/Stability), Cardiovascular and Respiratory Conditioning, Sport Skill (Neuromuscular Coordination and Efficiency), and Genetic Potential.

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Let's take a look at each factor and determine which training methods are going to deliver optimal results. By optimal results, I mean the greatest amount of improvement, with the least amount of risk, and in the shortest amount of time.

Power

Power= Force x Distance

Time

Power can be increased three ways.

1. Increase Force (Strength)

What is the most effective method of increasing strength and/or muscle tissue? In my opinion, High

Intensity Strength Training is the most productive, safe, and time efficient approach available. I am not stating that one set of each exercise is the best choice. My definition of High Intensity Training is: training to momentary muscular failure, with brief and infrequent workouts in which all variables are prescribed based on the individuals: goals, age, current fitness level, fiber types, personal preference, and past experience.

The purpose of strength training is to increase strength and lean body mass, NOT for training a specific skill or movement—that's called practice! People strength train for many reasons and there are many methods that work. For years, many trainers and coaches have had their clients and athletes perform Olympic lifts because they feel it will transfer over into the performance of their skill. Numerous studies have shown that the neurological transfer of skills is not optimal unless the skill is practiced EXACTLY as it is performed in competition. Therefore, performing power cleans because you play football is NOT optimal. Performing power-cleans will only get you better at performing power-cleans! Focus on increasing strength and lean body mass, and practice your skill exactly as it is performed during competition.

2. Increase Speed

Increasing the speed at which a skill is performed is another great way to improve power. Speed is primarily predetermined by the individual's genetic make up. However, that does not mean that you cannot improve speed by practicing the skill EXACTLY as it is performed in competition. A great deal of focus should be placed on perfecting the technique. By practicing the skill in this manner, you will improve neuromuscular efficiency, which will result in faster and more accurate performance.

3. Increase Distance (flexibility/range of motion)

Increasing flexibility is another way to improve power. By increasing flexibility, you increase the distance that force is applied which results in an increase in power.

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The safest and most effective method to increase flexibility is by performing full range of motion exercises and incorporating a sound stretching routine.

Agility

Improving ones agility is another way of optimizing performance. Agility drills should be SPECIFIC to the activity or event. For example, having someone do Plyometric jumps off of boxes is NOT specific to someone who plays basketball! Yes, a basketball player jumps, but not off of boxes. Having the athlete practice jumping from the floor would be much more specific to their sport. Always ask yourself, "What is the goal?" "Is what I'm doing going to give me the outcome I desire?" "Is it optimal?"

Cardiovascular and Respiratory Conditioning

Increasing cardio/respiratory output and endurance is another factor that has a major impact on performance. This topic is one of such importance that it is beyond the scope of this article. In general, if you increase the individual's cardiovascular and respiratory output and endurance, there will be a corresponding increase in performance. Cardiovascular training should also be specifically geared towards improving the individuals conditioning in the metabolic pathway in which they compete or perform. For example, someone who plays tennis should primarily train at a slow to moderate pace and incorporate bursts of high intensity effort. Interval training would be a good choice for this

individual. Keep the training specific to the individual.

Sport Skill

This is an area in which there is a lot of confusion among many athletes, coaches, and trainers. Skill acquisition and strength levels are two completely different things. Therefore, they should be trained separately, and with different methods. In order to optimize the performance of a specific skill or movement, it needs to be practiced EXACTLY as it is performed in competition. It has been shown that each activity or movement has it's own neuromuscular pathway, and that just because a movement is similar does NOT mean there will be a positive transfer or carryover of skill. In order to maximize performance the individual should attempt to perfect their movement or skill with endless hours of practice. The goal of practice should be to improve the technique, accuracy, and increase the speed at which the skill can be performed. This topic was addressed earlier in the section titled "Increase Force."

Genetic Potential

This is the factor that I have found to have the greatest impact on human performance. Genetic potential is something many people overlook. Regardless of what methods of training I use, I will never be a world-class marathoner. I can train twice a week or I can train 5 hours a day, it still won't change the fact that my body wasn't designed to excel at endurance activities. I hear of too many coaches and trainers having people follow dangerous training programs in an attempt to drastically improve their performance. This is not to say that you cannot improve performance. When training yourself or a competitive athlete, always set realistic goals. As stated earlier, the best thing to do is utilize the most

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effective methods available and work hard!

Differences between Functional Training and Machine Based Training

Most, if not all of the so-called functional exercises, fail to supply constant and variable resistance. Most quality machines supply constant tension and variable resistance based on the strength curve of the particular muscle, and track proper joint function.

For example, compare dumbbell bicep curls on a Swiss ball to a bicep curl on a quality machine (such as Hammer Strength.) While performing the dumbbell curl, there is no tension on the biceps in the bottom or top positions. The resistance is greatest when the dumbbell is perpendicular to the floor. The amount of stimulus is also decreased due to the fact that the individual must balance his/her self on the ball. While using a machine, there is constant tension on the biceps and the amount of tension varies during the exercise based on the strength curve of the biceps muscle. Which is going to make the individual stronger? Which is going to stimulate more muscle fibers in the biceps?

In my opinion, machine based training is by far superior if the goal is to increase strength, and/or muscle tissue. Keep in mind that more muscle equates to a faster, stronger, and better athlete, providing they practice their specific skill or movement.

This is not to say that functional exercises serve no purpose. There are benefits to functional exercise; just not as many as some people are lead to believe. Exercise selection and the training methods used should be based on the individual's goals. Instances where functional training may be effective would be in individuals who need to improve balance, stability, and neuromuscular coordination. Below is a chart that shows the differences between Functional Training and Machine Based Training.

Machine-Based Training

Functional Training

Provides constant and variable resistance

Movement tracks proper joint function

Effectively overloads musculature (if used properly)

Safer to perform

Many machines available to work every muscle in the body

Very effective at improving balance, stability, and coordination

Does NOT effectively overload musculature

Does NOT provide optimal transfer of skill performance

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Very difficult to measure and monitor progress

Higher chance of injury

Conclusion

Functional training obviously has some benefit, and can be a great addition to a well-designed strength program. However, I personally feel it should never take the place of a structured strength training routine. I recommend using a combination approach, which utilizes machines, free-weights, bodyweight, balls, bands, and anything that is going to deliver the desired results. Always remember that training for strength and/or increases in muscle tissue and training for skill are two completely different things. When designing or assessing a training program the following questions should be asked. What is the goal? Is it time efficient? Is it safe? Is it delivering the desired results? Is it optimal?

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Jesse Cannone is a certified personal trainer, nutritionist, and best-selling fitness author. Sign up to receive his free email course, Muscle Building Tips which is full of powerful tips and techniques for maximizing strength and size.

Movement That Matters: Exercise With a Greater Purpose

By Gillian Hood–Gabrielson

You've seen the commercials I've fallen and I can't get up! While this has been a topic of many jokes and late-night comedy skits, the reality is falling is a very real danger for many people. Too often falls can lead to broken bones, hospitalization, and sometimes life-threatening illnesses due to being confined to a bed while recovering.

A less extreme, but still real situation is when a person lacks the leg strength to get out of a chair. Or someone who throws out their back just picking up a child or the groceries from the trunk of the car.

Did you know that this is not inevitable? With consistent and effective exercise, you will maintain your daily activities without injury well into your sixties, seventies, eighties, and beyond.

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You may have heard the buzzwords functional training and core training mentioned in the latest fitness magazines. While these terms sound complicated, they are really terms for the most effective and exciting system of strength training being used today.

Functional training strengthens your body for the everyday movements it has to perform. This could be any type of movement, whether for a sport, your job, or just picking up your kids. Most injuries occur in the course of our everyday lives. Strengthen your body for these activities and you will sustain less injury. Functional training also improves balance. This is essential for preventing falls. A combination of strength and balance will give you the confidence to move through your day with ease!

Core training works on strengthening your core, your abdominal and low back muscles. Just as a house needs a foundation to build upon, so does your body. Work on the core first and every other exercise you add will be more effective and make you stronger. Many functional training exercises incorporate core training. There are also exercises that isolate the core for maximum benefit. Core training is the idea behind Pilates and is also used in yoga.

You can incorporate both types of training into your regular workout with equipment such as stability balls, medicine balls, elastic tubing, slides, and dumbbells. Some exercises require no equipment at all! Several videos and guides on the market can teach you many of these exercises. You can also hire a personal trainer for a few sessions so you can learn the proper techniques. These methods are more effective than traditional gym strength training machines because more muscles are used and the body becomes more coordinated and strong as a result. Machines do play an important role, however. As a new exerciser, you may not have the strength or coordination necessary for functional training. I recommend a combination of basic core strengthening and the use of machines to develop basic strength before starting the more complex functional and core movements.

One of the best and simplest functional exercises is the squat. We use this motion all day long getting up from a chair, or picking an object up from the ground, as examples. Learn to squat properly and do it consistently and you will remain strong, independent, and less prone to injury. A great core exercise for beginners is one you can do anytime, anywhere. While sitting or standing, pull your navel towards

your spine. Concentrate on performing this movement without flattening your back it is important to maintain proper posture. This strengthens very deep abdominal muscles that are responsible for protecting your back. Try this exercise while driving when you stop at a red light, perform 10 repetitions. Your abdominals will thank you for it!

Think about it, do you walk around during the day doing leg extensions? What about abdominals crunches on the floor? While these exercises work targeted muscles and are good accessory exercises, functional exercises create a stronger, healthier body that will be protected from injury and provide a higher quality of life.

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