

Proper Exercise Application Defines Fitness Success

So, do you know how to properly set-up, monitor and modify your workouts to meet your needs, goals and functional capacity? Most people do not because they are not trained to do so. That is where a personal trainer steps in and provides physical solutions for you.

Today, I will focus on the first and perhaps most important facet of exercise application: selecting the right training methods for your body. What does this mean? To put it simply, it means two things.

1. Choosing the correct exercise movements
2. Selecting the correct resistance mode (e.g. free weights, machines, bands, etc.)

I will begin by addressing how to choose the correct exercise movements. Let's assume you are a 35 year old male who plays softball every spring/summer. Aside from training for general fitness, you should also think in terms of function and injury prevention relative to the sport of softball. This is where most people screw up. Former athletes or not, they just assume they can go out and throw, bat, field and run each year without preparation and expect to play well without injury. Wrong! While you may get away with this for a while, eventually, I will see you in the clinic for a rotator cuff injury, muscle strain, tendonitis, or some related injury.

The body is a wonderful machine, but as we age it begins to lose its resiliency and requires longer preparation and longer recovery. Did I mention, we naturally lose strength, flexibility, balance and begin developing arthritis in the thirties? Consequently, life comes at you fast (to borrow a phrase from Nationwide) and so do the injuries if you fail to prepare. Now, I am not trying to paint a bleak picture here, but I want to educate you how to be your physical best for years to come rather than spend your time taking stats and reliving the good old days at the bar with the youngsters now laying your position.

Okay, let's get back to the exercise part. So, softball players need base strengthening (total body movements like lunges, squats, chest press, rows, abdominal strengthening, etc.), but they also require some very specific exercise relative to the sport. Those things include:

1. Chest and shoulder specific stretching
2. Rotator cuff and scapular strengthening (prior to and during the season)
3. Plyometric training to improve power
4. Footwork drills
5. Balance drills
6. Targeted core work to increase bat speed and throwing mechanics

You may be thinking to yourself I am crazy if I expect you to do all that, work, tend to family matters and play at the same time. My answer – it is all about prioritizing the training and applying it based on your life. Preseason workouts can be done 2-3 times per week in less than an hour. In season workouts can be reduce to 1-2x/week for 30 minutes each. The take home message here is learning to adequately prepare your body to perform and last through the season without injury. After all, how fun is softball if you play poorly or can not play at all?

Now on to the second point of today's discussion: choosing the correct mode of resistance. In most of my training today, I gravitate toward bodyweight training out of the gate with most of my clients. Why? If you can not control your own body weight, you should not be loading it up with external resistance. This is usually a recipe for disaster. Most people have a hard time controlling their body on one leg, so I spend a great deal of time on single leg strength and balance work as well. This increases strength and stability. Sample exercise include single leg squats, single leg forward and lateral reaches, forward and lateral cone reaches with the hands, and ball hamstring curls.

In regard to upper body, I like variety and will incorporate free weights, cables, medicine ball and bands. The important thing here is balance. You should **always** do more back exercise than chest exercises! A ratio of no less than 3:2 is safe but often I will go to 2:1. In addition, softball players need to maintain good strength in the rotator cuff to prevent overuse and eventually tears as they age. Core exercises should include functional rotational and three dimensional movements that simulate the movement demands of the sport and position of the player.

Finally, I will briefly mention plyometrics. I utilize body weight hops and jumps to improve acceleration and explosiveness and gravitate toward medicine balls to build upper body power. Olympic lifting techniques can be used with perfect form and strict supervision, but I use little of this with my recreational athletes as the risk usually outweighs the reward.

In closing, I want to say that getting these two variables right is the foundation of your program and critical for success. The frequency, intensity, volume and recovery absolutely depend on the exercise mode and selection, so getting this right makes all the difference in program design and progression. While I chose to talk about softball as a reference today, keep in mind that these principles apply to all athletes. Working with a qualified professional will determine how far your body goes in life and dramatically impact your results.