MARK'S CORNER

DROP SETS FOR GAINS: WHY THIS LIFTING FORMAT WORKS

Strength training research points to the importance of training to muscle failure in order to maximize exercise-induced muscle hypertrophy. Many gym-goers use a standard horizontal load system, also known as a straight-set, to reach this goal. This system works, but it can be time-consuming. If you're looking for a way to train your muscles to failure without extending the amount of time you spend at the gym, then drop sets might be worth a try.

WHAT ARE DROP SETS?

In a drop set, the lifter will perform as many reps as they can with good form until their muscles fatigue, or they can no longer maintain proper form. At that point, they immediately lighten the load and perform the same exercise to fatigue again, without resting between load changes. The lifter can drop the weight 2-3 times within the same set to further fatigue the muscles (beyond what they would have been able to by staying at the first weight).

GENERAL REP RANGES AND WEIGHT FOR DROP SETS

As a general guideline, you can choose a weight appropriate for 6-12 RM to start, and then perform as many reps as you can until you start to fatigue and/or lose form. You will immediately decrease the load anywhere from 5-25% for each drop. It's worth noting that the more you decrease the load (say, 20-25%), the more reps you'll be able to do before reaching fatigue. A smaller decrease in load (5-10%) will probably only allow you to complete 2-4 additional repetitions.
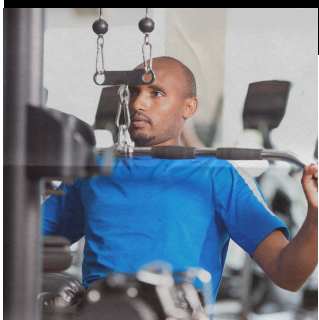
WHY DO DROP SETS WORK?

We've already established that reaching muscular fatigue is necessary for optimizing muscular development. Muscular fatigue is defined as "the point during a resistance exercise set when the muscles can no longer produce sufficient force to control a given load." An additional benefit to performing drop sets has to do with the amount of time spent training.

HOW TO DO DROP SETS

There are many variations in performing a drop set, but here is a simple example of how to perform one. Choose an exercise (multi-joint, or single-joint) and select a weight that allows you to perform 8-12 repetitions before you reach muscle failure (i.e., you are unable to complete the lift with good form). Drop the weight 20% and perform as many repetitions as you can before you reach failure (probably another 8-10 reps). Do the second drop of 20% and perform as many repetitions as you can before you reach failure.

DROP SET WORKOUT EXAMPLE: REPS, SETS, AND WEIGHT

A drop set can be applied in two ways, with examples of each (color-coordinated) below:

1. Drop set added to the last part of a straight set

OR

2. Drop set completely replacing the straight set for a certain muscle group

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Tempo	Rest	Intensity
Bench Press	3	10	Medium	30 Seconds	
Squats	3	10	Medium	30 Seconds	
Machine Chest Press	3	10+	Medium	30 Sec sets 1&2 *No rest between drops	5% decrease in weight for drops
Lunges	3	10	Medium	30 Seconds	
Seated Row	3	10	Medium	30 Seconds	
Seated Leg Curls	2	10	Medium	*No rest between drops	20% decrease in weight for drops
Lat Pulldown	3	10+	Medium	30 Sec sets 1&2 *No rest between drops	5% decrease in weight for drops

Exercises with a (*) perform as one drop set. Do 10 reps and then drop the weight by 5-20% for each drop (2-3 drops total).