



The “Base Hit” Strategy for Training Consistency & Success

The Base Hit Strategy for Training Consistency and Success

Part 1.

Listen, if you are an adult living in the real world this is a plain truth: **Some days you feel like you are sitting on top of your world. Other days your world feels like it's sitting on top of you!**

Then you go to the gym thinking you are going to take the day's stress out on the weights, but the weights end up taking it out on you instead. So then instead of relieving stress, your workout just added more stress to the pile. Does that make any sense?

I want to outline for you the mindset of the “base-hit strategy” for **training consistently while living in the real world**.

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a former client. This guy was at one time a National Bodybuilding Champion. I remember him well. He was always a real hard-training athlete and one of the few who could “hang ‘em and bang ‘em” with me back in the day. But I hadn’t heard from him in about 15 years. He wrote to ask me for help with his struggle to get back into regular training again. He had been away from training for several years. He had a family and a good job. He now has two kids under 5 yrs. of age at home and another one on the way. He works a job that is very stressful and he is also completing his degree in his “spare time.” And let’s not forget he is also now 15 years older than when I knew him and trained him.

He wrote to tell me of his struggle:

“Coach, I’m trying to get back into training. I’ve gone back to one of the 5 Days programs you had me on when training for my pro card. But by the time I make it to the end of the week, I’m just completely wiped out. Sometimes I don’t even make it to the end of the week I’m so tired. And I’m getting all this joint pain as well in my shoulders, hips, and even my knees. I don’t understand Coach. Why is this so hard? Why am I crashing like this every week?”

The answer was pretty simple to my eyes, and I see it all the time. He isn’t that 20-something trainee anymore, with no responsibilities and no outside real-life stress. He is trying to train the same programs in the same way he did 20 years ago and this has led him right to where he is at: crashing and burning each and every week. I had to explain to him about the mindset of the **“base-hit strategy” for training consistently**. This “was” a guy who used to be able to go the gym and swing for the fences and aim to make every single workout “a home run.” There was only one training gear for him then: “on.” But I had to explain to him that *he isn’t that person anymore*.

That mentality will no longer serve him.

I taught him how to employ the “base-hit strategy” and I want to explain this to you all as well.

Home Runs and Base Hits

Training “should be” a strategy game. Baseball “is” a strategy game. For those who understand baseball, it’s not about just getting up to bat and trying to hit a home run or trying not to strike out. There is much more to it.

More often than not you hear managers and coaches tell the players, *“just a base hit now – just put the ball in play – keep the inning alive.”*

What a great way to look at training and training intensity. Some days you may have to workout and while you planned a home-run effort, **a base hit strategy makes more sense.**

Your body just isn’t “feeling it.” So why swing and miss? Why strike out? Just get a base hit – keep the inning alive. But in the case of training the “inning” is your training week. If you have a real life you just can’t show up for the gym and think you can apply a home run effort for every workout. ***Every kind of stress – physical, mental, and emotional, takes a toll. And they all tap into your overall energy reserve.*** It’s simply not realistic or wise for that matter to think you can give a homerun effort in every single workout.

I know we live in the era of “train till you puke” and all this other ego nonsense. But none of that has to do with planned, progressive, personalized programming.

Worse than this is when you go to the gym trying to make up for lost time or for cheating on your diet and so you swing hard and strike out. You haven’t learned to follow the biofeedback your body is sending you. Sometimes “a base hit effort” is all your body can muster for you. If you leave your ego out of the equation, then you

will come to understand that this is more than enough to keep you going and to “keep you in the game.” Like my former client above, you need to learn the importance of consistency over intensity and to ***work ‘with’ your body instead of always working ‘on’ it.***

Follow me here with this base-hit baseball analogy:

In a game I watched recently the visiting team comes up to bat first. The first 6 players get base hits. The next player hits a long fly ball and is out. The player after him strikes out. The next three players all get base hits as well. And then the next batter grounds out to end the visitor’s inning at bat. Before the home team even comes to bat, they are down 7-0, and no one had hit a home run yet.

In the home team’s bottom of the inning, they are so desperate to erase a 7-0 deficit that they try to make it up all in one inning as well. The first batter swings hard and strikes out. The second batter hits a long fly ball to the warning track and he is out. The third batter, trying to get something going – swings at a really bad pitch and strikes out. Inning over. The home team, trying to hit home runs to make up a big deficit ends up going into the next inning even further behind.

This is what was happening to my former client trying to get back in the game. Every time he couldn’t finish a training week he went in the next week trying to make home run efforts to “catch-up.” He kept striking out and ending up further and further behind, eventually out of the game entirely. I know this analogy resonates with many of you as well.

Listen, applying intensity is all about nuance and subtlety. It’s not about being either on or off.

The other day I saw a T-Shirt that read “**Go Hard or Go Home**” – this is just ego bull\$hit and nonsense. My former client I mention above could train as hard or harder than anyone I knew back in the day. He was trying to go back to the gym with the “go hard” mindset, and all he could do then was “go home.” That’s not efficient, it’s not a good strategy, and it’s no way to build training consistency in a

way that works with real life and doesn't steal energy from it. What good is it if you can "go hard" in the gym and then be too tired to function in the rest of your real life? "Go Hard or Go Home" is for kids and people with giant egos. It's a recipe for burnout if you are a real person with a real life influencing you, hormonally and otherwise.

The truth is that it's not just how hard you train that matters, but how efficiently you train as well. This means understanding biofeedback and application of intensity. Applied intensity is a lot like using the gas peddle in your car. It's not always meant to be "peddle to the metal" to get where you want to go. ***Smart training matters.*** It especially matters if you have cosmetic fitness/physique goals but a real-life that this goal must fit into as well.

You need to embrace the benefits of the "base-hit strategy" and keep your home-run ego in check.

The base hit strategy means showing up for your workout, but just keeping the inning alive. The base-hit strategy may mean training at a slower pace, or with a lighter load, or doing less sets. It may mean all three. It may mean applying this strategy for one workout or for a whole week of workouts. **But the base-hit strategy certainly makes a lot better sense than the "if you can't go hard, go home" strategy.** That isn't a strategy. It's a t-shirt.

In the future, I'll get deeper into the base-hit strategy. I'll explain why you can't just put the rest of your real-life aside and treat workout intensity as a separate entity. I'll explain why ***consistency trumps intensity every time.*** But for now, you need to at least begin to consider adopting the base-hit strategy. How many times have you gone to the gym trying to train for home runs because of missed workouts or diet-indiscretions you want to make up for? That isn't logic. It's ego run amok.



The “Base Hit” Strategy

Part 2.

The Physiology of the Base Hit Strategy

In **Part 1 of this base-hit strategy series**, I explained a training strategy I employ with many of my clients. I explained it by comparing the mindset between a home-run effort and a base-hit effort when it comes to training intensity.

The fact is that life-stressors cannot be compartmentalized and separated from your training. **Training intensity is a physical stress and this adds to mental and emotional stressors of living our day-to-day lives**

...and the reverse is true as well.

We have only so much vitality and energy stored up for day-to-day use. Then it must be replenished. My “base hit” strategy is all about real people living in the real world, and it’s about the fact that training intensity is not a mere one-dimensional idea that either intensity is there or it’s not.

So now in Part 2 I want to get a little deeper into the **physiological concepts** involved here, and why and how ***training consistency is more important at any given time than is training intensity.***

Unless you earn your living as a pro athlete of some kind, you need to have “a healthy perspective” toward your training efforts. ***“All out to burn out”*** makes no sense!

Experts have defined the art of productive and progressive adaptive response to training as finding the optimal balance of two requisites that determine results: work and rest/stimulus and recovery, both general and specific. For every trainee — for every one of you that is — this balance is different and it depends on many different things as well.

There’s training hard and then there’s training smart. Training smart includes the element of training hard, but within reason. However, training hard doesn’t always include training smart. As I said in Part 1, this nonsense of “Go Hard or Go Home” makes for a good t-shirt or bumper sticker, but it doesn’t have much relevance in consideration of how to blend training hard with training smart for people living in the real world.

The fact is that average regular people who have very regular real-life stressors need to know that these daily life-stressors affect recovery as well.

The more stress you have in your life outside the gym, the more you should be applying the base-hit mindset strategy inside the gym!

You don’t have to go hard or go home every workout. More often than not, It’s ok, to just make sure you “go” ...then go home.

It isn’t just the average regular trainee that this applies to either. The seasoned and experienced weight-training trainee in his or her physical prime, frequently handling maximum efforts is both doable and necessary for optimum progress of course. But the majority of you training with weights will be doing so for a purpose

other than competition. ***Family, careers, travel, age, injury or chronic conditions, and quite frankly a lack of discipline and motivation will prevent most trainees from doing all that is necessary to prepare for a schedule that calls for a maximum efforts output at every training session.*** You simply can't "get it up" to go all out 5-6 days per week, neither physically or psychologically, and nor should you.

For so many of you – especially for hardgainers – **you have also likely noticed that the harder you push your body, the more stubbornly it refuses to change.** Then at some point you just burn out on all that applied 'home-run' effort.

Furthermore, we know that the more advanced a trainee becomes, the greater the importance of understanding this stress/recovery/adaptation model and its approach to balancing these two elements of constructive human adaptation to training: ***1) the workload must be sufficient to disrupt biological equilibrium enough to drive an adaptation, yet not be so excessive to the point of constituting an unmanageable level of stress, and 2) recovery must be sufficient to enable the adaptation to occur.*** This is why not all training should be "load-focused" It's not always about "lifting heavier." If you read my book **The Abel Approach** then you understand that important "*internal cues*" of biofeedback should supersede "*external cues*" like how much weight you lifted this week compared to last week, or whatever.

And in terms of applied intensity levels, things like age, gender, lifestyle stressors, injuries, and recent training history should always exert more influence over where to start programs, and how to execute a program, than does a loose or solid relationship to a previous way of doing things. As I talked about in **Part 1**, how you used to train years ago may *now* be something that holds you back or burns you out. I know for myself I could never go back to training like I did in my 20's and 30's. It would be silly of me to think I could.

Maybe, like me, back in your younger years of working out you trained every day and sometimes you stayed up all night and still trained the next day; and you did

forced reps and extended sets and you slept all day if you wanted to. That likely isn't your reality anymore.

Maybe you were a young female figure competitor working as a personal trainer with not a lot of stress in your life. But now you are a busy mother with a hectic schedule and kids to take care. You can't apply your training intensity the same way anymore, and nor should you. This is when the flexibility of the base-hit strategy comes in.

Sure, you can still do tough programs. You can still apply yourself. But some days you may just have to back off intensity in terms of training pace, training load, or overall volume. This is what the base-hit mindset strategy is all about. It's about **respecting your stress levels and acting accordingly** when going in to do your workout. The important thing is to be able to be consistent – not to flash and burn out because of not listening to your body – and trying to hit a home run in every training session. Now, let's talk about intensity and stress and the cortisol connection as well.

The Cortisol Consideration

Consider that cortisol is a normal stress hormone in the body. A little is normal, but a lot is a red flag that you are ignoring your stress levels. Cortisol is secreted in response to both the physical stress of a hard workout, and the psychological stress of the many factors that play upon our psyches, such as personal relationship problems, sleep deprivation and insomnia, psychological issues related to disease processes or illness, the loss of a loved one, or simple disruptions in lifestyle like job loss, schedule change, or even a vacation. Even daily schedules of "busyness" can be a source of stress that must be paid attention to. Too many people don't pay attention to the cumulative effects of daily stress and they do so to their own detriment.

Normal cortisol secretion promotes protein degradation and the conversion of proteins into carbohydrates, and conserves glucose by promoting fat utilization. But at higher levels cortisol promotes hyperglycemia, depresses immune function, intensifies perceptions of fatigue, and is also likely one of the mechanisms that produces the symptoms of clinical depression often associated with severe overtraining. (I'll discuss that in an upcoming article on overtraining.)

Since exercise-induced cortisol levels are elevated transiently, a **chronic** elevation in cortisol could be the result of the effects of overlapping workouts that may not allow sufficient time for levels to drop back to baseline.

This, coupled with the adverse psychological factors associated with overtraining or training too hard and too often, and with the worry and stress associated with other real-life events and circumstances... well then chronically elevated cortisol levels are more than likely, and they will become a major potential contributor to overtraining or burnout.

You can't just go to the gym for every workout seeking a "home run" if you have many other life-stressors already heavily influencing and impacting your day. These mental and emotional life-stressors impact you physiologically as well in the form of stress hormone response and in particular cortisol (and aldosterone).

Every trainee responds differently to stress to some degree, and age, gender, and recovery status will produce wide variations in these hormonal responses. Essentially, a good coach must make an educated guess as to how to tailor the training program to induce the necessary hormonal changes required to drive improved performance. That has to do with the art and nuance of program design.

But YOU as a trainee, you need to know when you can go to your workout with a mindset of home-run intensity vs. being smart and mature and following through your workout for consistency's sake, but with more of a "base-hit strategy." It is better to leave the gym thinking you could have done more, than to leave the gym with no energy for anything else.

The late strength expert Charlie Francis was on to something. He said, “it is always better to undertrain than to overtrain. You will still produce adaptive stress, but maybe not to the same degree.” Once you overtrain, your body’s resilience will plummet and fight to retain a balance. Smaller CNS demands over a longer period of time result in more acceptance and greater improvement, while the rush to get more done “right now” because of excitement and enthusiasm leads to consequences down the road like burnout. This latter consequence is the equivalent of swinging for that home run in terms of applied intensity, only to find out that in real terms, you just struck out.

The take home message here is that **you can still make gains and progress when you undertrain, but when you reach overtraining, you lose everything.** A base-hit mindset strategy keeps the inning alive and keeps you training consistently. But a series of strikeouts from swinging for the fences with every workout – does not.

The closer you are to your individual physical potential, the more important ***the cumulative effects of a series of workouts become.*** The less important any one single “standout” workout session becomes. Consistency always trumps intensity. So you can keep up with some personal trainer pounding you into the ground today. Well that is today. And that may well zap you from performing tomorrow or next week. It’s time to consider that the cumulative effects of applied training are more important than the immediate effects of one hard training session. It’s ok to back off training intensity today so that you can still be training tomorrow.

This may not sound “hardcore.” But “hardcore” also refers to lifestyle. As I said in Part 1, real people with real lives need to consider variations and flexibility in terms of applying intensity. It isn’t “pansy” or “pussy” to back off when your body is telling you it’s just not there today. To do so, is the mature intelligent approach to training. And it will keep you from burning out from the over-application of the “home-run” mindset to your workout. It’s important not to just have your body and your heart in your workout, but your head as well! I will continue this in Part 3: Meantime



The “Base Hit” Strategy

Part 3. What About Periodization?

I’ve been explaining the idea of embracing a “base hit strategy” that I use with many of my clients when their biofeedback warrants it.

The base-hit strategy is a way to get your mind in command of your workout. I will often assign people a base-hit week of dialed back workout intensity and they will write me a week later saying they can’t believe the difference: everything comes back to them, including their strength, energy, and vitality. All it took was actually listening to biofeedback, factoring in life stressors, then responding accordingly. As I said in both **Part 1** and **Part 2**, this whole “Go Hard or Go Home” notion is nonsense for people with real lives.

“But What About Periodization?”

When I explain the base-hit strategy to some clients, I sometimes get comments or questions about “**periodization training**.” Some neophyte trainee will think none of this applies to them because they are on a “periodization schedule.”

Well, first, that usually sets me off as this term is being misused more and more. If you read my book *The Abel Approach* you will know I am not fond of the term “periodization.” It has an extremely limited application as far as I am concerned. Sure, for powerlifters, and strength performers the term and the application both make sense in a limited context, but for people training for other reasons, and for those of you training for weight-loss or cosmetic physique enhancement, the term really has no value.

I prefer Vern Gambetta’s term “planned performance training.”

Planned performance training (or PPT) allows for **subjective variances** in training intensity based on the reality of today and the right now. It doesn’t try to pretend that real life can be 100% managed for 12 weeks or several months down the road.

Strength and lifting expert Dan John said, “Clearly, contemporary models of periodization and peaking have severe limitations.” Experts know this and accept this. It’s when concepts get out of the hands of experts and into the hands of eager trainees that the concepts get misunderstood, misapplied and bastardized.

Linear periodization programs and ones that include “**back-off weeks**” all look great on paper. But very few people can train in a vacuum away from the real-world of ‘other’ concerns. Real-life always enters the picture and disrupts whatever you’ve got planned on paper. It’s fine to plan to call up and escalate training intensity or strength increases on a week to week basis. But real-life issues can get in the way of that. The base hit mindset is about employing ways to still workout and stay in the game, while honoring that your body may be too drained to hit that workout like a piece of paper says you should hit it.

What if you get into a fender bender on your way to the gym today? Is your workout still going to go exactly as planned? Maybe you had a serious disagreement with your spouse last night and you barely slept at all. Is it going to make sense to go to your workout the next day and try to “max out” because a piece of paper (or, worse, an online calculator) tells you you’re supposed to “today.”

There are dozens of circumstances that can make your day turn on a dime in terms of mood, available energy and your sense of vitality. The base-hit mindset allows you *to still stay consistent* with your training without exhausting and depleting yourself in the process. The linear periodization plan of numbers and percentages just doesn’t realistically account for day to day life variances.

Periodization in real life: an example

Take for instance Kevin “The Machine” Weiss. The guy is a two-time World Champion Powerlifter (!). Because he competes in powerlifting Kevin is someone for whom a periodization plan actually makes sense, and he has his own version that he uses.

But while preparing for one competition Kevin tweaked his back a bit during training. He knew he couldn’t just go into the gym and do his training as it was planned “on paper.” Life got in the way, and he accounted for that. He had adapted and made concessions. He still won his contest, as usual. but he didn’t attempt any serious PR’s.

Had he been trying to follow the periodization plan to the letter would likely have never even made it to the competition.

This is where the base-hit strategy comes in.

There will always be some combination or variation of mental, emotional, or in Kevin's example "physical" reasons to employ the base-hit mindset to training – for a session or even a week. **This base-hit mindset keeps you in the game,** and keeps your training consistent. You still make good progress this was as well.

No one is saying you should under-train all the time and dog it, but if the mind and body are tired you need to be smart about training. That is not the time to let your ego dictate training intensity.

And while what I am about to say may "seem" counter-intuitive if you remove your ego from the equation, then the truth is this: Any time a trainee working very hard and consistently is allowed a bit of extra rest and recuperation, even in the form of "dialing it back" then performance will increase. ***"More work" or "harder work" are seldom the answer to stalled progress for someone who trains hard and consistently.*** This is especially true of an advanced trainee with many years of training under their belt. Active recovery in the form of the "base hit strategy" fits this application perfectly, whether it be for a single workout, or a whole training week.

Remember. in baseball, a base hit keeps the inning alive, and keeps the offence on the field. A base hit workout keeps you and your program in concert with each other as well. Just because you can't "go hard" doesn't mean you "go home."

Conclusion

And there you have it.

This 3-Part article on my ***"base hit strategy"*** toward workout intensity outlines training *intelligently*. That means factoring in real-life, and factoring in your daily

available energy resources, including your physical, mental and emotional resources.

Now having said all of that above, I want to include this caveat as well in regard to specific exercises. There are certain exercises that should never be trained to absolute failure either because of neural exhaustion or risk of injury as form breaks down. Lunges, bent rows, deadlifts (of course), and squats come to mind. Training to absolute failure for multiple sets on an exercise like the squat is a *tremendously* taxing event, and makes recovery for the next day or week very difficult.

So many trainees never make that connection between overdoing it one week and underperforming for the next few weeks that follow. Then they're left wondering "What's wrong? What happened?"

The base-hit strategy is an important training strategy to adapt for real people living in the real world with real life stressors that can vary day to day and influence both the desire and the willingness to train hard. The base-hit strategy is a way to vary intensity levels for training that allow you to stay consistent with your training program in spite of other things going on around you.

And consistency is more important than intensity.

(Have I said that already?)