The Intensity Factor

By Michael Lipowski, CFP

Ever feel like all the work you put into attaining your 'best body' just isn't cutting it? Here you are dragging yourself to the gym, running on the treadmill, slaving away with dumbbells, barbells and machines that resemble some sort of medieval torture device and none of it is working. You can't seem to lose any more body-fat, build any more muscle or increase your strength beyond what it's been for the past few years.

You ask yourself," *how could this be, I train hard*…don't I?"

How hard—or more appropriately—how *intensely* you exercise, is the biggest determinant of your success. If you are truly training hard (intensely) then you will, without question see some substantial improvements in your physique, your strength and the way you feel. The trouble is most people measure "how hard" they are training by "how much" work they are performing.

Just because you exercises 6 days a week for an hour and a half each time does not necessarily mean you are training hard. In fact if training this much or something close to this much you are probably not training hard at all. The reason for which will be explained later in this article.

Intensity as defined by the I.A.R.T. is the possible percentage of momentary muscular and volitional effort exerted. Basically, intensity refers to how strenuous an exercise is at any given moment during a set.

The only problem is that a person's percentage of effort can only be measured accurately at two specific moments. When they are exerting no effort at all (zero) or when they are exerting all their effort (one-hundred percent). We determine that a person's intensity is at one-hundred percent when they've reached *momentary muscular failure* or *fatigue*. This is when another repetition can not be completed through its full range of motion and with good form despite all of the physical and mental effort the person puts forth.

It should be noted that we do not know exactly how much intensity is actually required to stimulate gains in muscle size and strength. It is not improbable that 94%, 86%, or some other percentage of effort other than 100% may be enough to stimulate muscle development. However there is no way of measuring such percentages, therefore the only means of ensuring that you have at least met the proper requirements for muscle stimulation is to work until you've reached momentary muscular failure (100% effort).

The accumulation of strenuous exercises or sets determines how demanding the workout is as a whole and whether or not it will be effective in stimulating gains in muscular size and strength. Consequently if you predetermine before your workout that you must complete a certain number of sets per exercise, or workout for a certain amount time, instead of focusing on how intensely you need to work, then in all likelihood you will only work as hard as is necessary to complete the predetermined 'amount' of work.

A well designed training program considers first, the individual, but after that the single most important training factor is intensity. Only after establishing your training intensity can you then determine the proper workout volume (how much) and frequency (how often). The details of exactly how and what this process entails can be found in PURE PHYSIQUE: "How to Maximize Fat-loss and Muscular Development".

There are some individuals who are not capable of training with 100% intensity and others who should not because of various physical ailments or health risks. However even for these folks training intensity is still the first factor in program design, from which training volume and frequency can then be appropriately prescribed.

For a more in depth look at intensity and how it can be most effectively applied to optimize your muscle development click here.