



THE ONE SET OF 8-12 CONTROVERSY

By Dr. Greg Shepard

The one set of eight to twelve philosophy has certainly been one of the most interesting phenomena in strength training history. Probably no other system has received so much vituperate criticism than has the one set of 1-12 system. Yet, it has survived for some twenty years. For those preparing to relish this article, hold on. You may be surprised.

The one set of 8-12 strength system began its popularity with Nautilus in the early seventies. Basically you do only one set of 8 to 12 reps on every exercise. You are not supposed to mess around. That one set is supposed to be done with all out intensity. Ideally, the athlete should experience total exhaustion during that set. Whenever the twelfth rep is attained, the resistance or weight should be increased for the next workout. You can follow this system with machines or free weights.

THE CRITICISM

I've interviewed, some of the very best Discus, Shot, Hammer and Javelin throwers in history, perhaps fifty of the world's best over the last twenty years, and everyone, without exception, has ridiculed this system. Most of these athletes could do 12 reps with 500 pounds on the Parallel Squat and up to 400 pounds on the Bench. "There's no way I'd come in without warming up, put on

400 pounds, bench it 12 times and then go home. That's crazy. Besides that, they don't even do cleans," say the throwers.

Now all of these throwers could outrun, outlift, and out-jump any football player so it had to be very intimidating to the 8-12 people. Also, the vast majority of university football players do not do the 8-12 type program. What do they say? Nearly all of the 100 plus football greats that I've interviewed for articles for the BFS Journal have been critical. Not only that, some very good high school football players have purposefully not signed with a certain college primarily because they used the 8-12 system.

OK, what about the players who have gone through the system. At the major college level, there are only several schools who do it but they are among the elite, like Penn State and Michigan. It should be noted that some sports at these schools won't do the 8-12 system but it is formally done by their football teams. I talked to one Michigan starter who could bench 600 pounds. Amazed, I asked, "Do you do one set of 8-12 reps?" He answered, "Only when the coach is watching." That answer speaks volumes.

Since we speak to literally, hundreds and hundreds of coaches on our toll-free number, it was just a matter of time before a Penn State grad called. One such grad coaching at the college level told of his experience. "We hated it." (We means

5 other teammates and should not be construed to mean the whole team nor should it be construed to mean this feeling was felt by more than these five players.) "We started working out, our way, at a local gym. They found out and forbid us to continue. We then rented a house and bought equipment. Again, they found out and stopped us. Finally, we went about 30 miles away to another gym. This time they threatened to take away our scholarships, so we gave up and did it their way. Thank God our players don't have to do that system."

At the pro level, more and more pro teams are adopting the 8-12 system principally because of the Washington Redskins great strength coach, Dan Riley. However, here's a story from a non-Redskin pro player who's supposed to be doing one set of 8-12 reps. During the off-season, his strength coach made a trip to his home state to check this player's progress. "All I did," said the player, "is to stop my program the week before he came out and practiced the 8-12 program. When he arrived, I performed, but after he left, I went back to doing what I knew was right."

Whew! That's a lot of bashing to dish out but now, let's look at the good and why it has survived.

THE GOOD

At BFS clinics, I always tell the Jason Buck story. It's one of the greatest inspirational



football stories ever. Jason was a walk on junior college player who became an Outland Trophy Winner for Brigham Young University. He has since enjoyed an outstanding pro football career and currently plays for the Washington Redskins. Jason is a great Upper Limit person, father and husband. Jason also has a long history of hard all out training. I probably respect Jason's opinion on training more than any other pro player and he gives Dan Riley's Redskin program rave reviews.

"I really like Coach Riley," stated Jason. "He's very strict on technique. He keeps very accurate records and everything is computerized. Coach Riley is very big on variety. We have 13 different workouts at different angles. I used to over train and Dan Riley changed that. He has three assistants and we workout in pairs. There is a coach in your face all the time. It's very intense.

"The Redskin weight room is a fun place to be. Dan Riley is fun. You just like being with him. I think weight training is more motivation than anything else, so as you can see, I'm happy. Before, when I trained, I'd start out weighing 260 and drop to 250 by season's end, but last year I started at 260 and ended at 270 with Dan's program. Right now I weigh 280 with less fat. Look, I've lost two loops on my belt.

"I knew Stefan at BYU (Stefan is featured in many of our BFS videos and is a Discus Thrower who runs a legitimate 4.25 forty weighing 275 pounds). I knew what he was doing was right but I just couldn't get it out of my head that I had to workout harder than anyone else. (Jason was one of those guys who'd workout over two hours per day,

six days per week.) Now, with the Redskins, I'm not nearly as fatigued. I'm fresher. It's totally better."

Wow! What a difference. Let's analyze some of Jason's comments. Faithful BFS readers may be in shock when I say there are many similarities between the BFS Program and Dan Riley's Program. Here's a few: Demand great technique, create great intensity, use a lot of variety, coach hard, get excited, keep workouts shorter in duration and keep accurate records.

MY CONCLUSIONS

I will draw my conclusions based on being a pro strength coach the last 12 years with the Utah Jazz, a college strength coach at three Division I Universities, a head football coach for six years and personally doing over 300 BFS clinics representing all fifty states.

First of all, there are some vast differences between the pro level and the college-high school level. The most obvious is age. The Utah Jazz has Mark Eaton who is 37 while Luther Wright is only 21 years old. The average age on our team is 28. You wouldn't believe the extensive physicals conducted on our players. Discussions of each player's limitations takes place between medical doctors, physical therapists, the trainer and myself.

I classify players into three categories and would do the same for pro football players. The first category is the **Injury Prevention Program**. Mark Eaton is an example. Our goal is to see if we can get him to play just one more season. The second category is our **Maintenance Program**. Usually our veterans are placed in this category. The goal is to produce

another season at the same level as the previous season. The third category is the **Development Program** and is usually reserved for younger players who perhaps are not starting. In fact, for these players, we treat the in-season like the off-season.

Now, as far as the one set of 8-12 program, it would work well for our first two categories. We often do two sets of ten reps and could probably just as well do the one set 8-12 program. However, I will never believe that his would work best for those in this Development Program. Plus, I know deep down, when Power Cleans are done correctly, they will develop explosive jumping power.

Another insight on the pro level difference is their availability to even workout. During the off-season, they are harder to track down than the "Fugitive". They even hide from the front office. These guys have families, business interests and are trying to have some personal time from playing nearly 100 games in just one season. Also, when you are older, it is harder to recuperate. Most pro players are grateful to keep a workout short but intense so they can go about their business and not feel drained. Sometimes it is also the effect of signing a guaranteed multi-million dollar contract.

OK, what about the high school level? There are vast differences besides just age. Self concept, team togetherness, winning attitudes and the attainment of standards, loom large with high school athletes. The one set of 8-12 program offers extremely limited benefits in these important areas.

Picture this. A sixteen year old athlete with average



ability and size is asked, "How much do you Bench?" He says, "Well, I'm not sure but I can do 135 pounds 12 times." A monumental selling job must be done by a coach to get that boy to believe in that program when another guy from another school says he can Bench 200 pounds. Of course, there will be satisfaction when that same boy is able to Bench 140 pounds 12 times but I guarantee you, it's not the same as the one rep max for self concept development.

The attainment of strength standards are much more visible and meaningful by doing something like the BFS program. There is something magic about a 200 pound Bench or Clean. When a high school athlete can Bench 300, it is a big, big day for that young man, the coach and his teammates. Parallel Squat standards are 300, 400 and 500 pounds. Dead Lift standards are 400, 500 and 600 pounds. Our All-State Standards for the Power Clean is 235 while the All-American Standard is 300 pounds. Now, as athletes hit these standards, it builds self concept, team togetherness and winning attitudes.

High school athletes forced to do the one set of 8-12 program will constantly hear how stupid it is to do from body-builders, power lifters, olympic lifters and the big majority of college athletes. Whether these people are right or wrong does not matter. The salient fact is, can your program stand that kind of criticism? If you're a high school football coach with a great winning tradition, you may not be adversely affected by doing one set of 8-12 reps; however, if your record is mediocre or losing, I'd say you are leaving yourself wide open for trouble you may never be able to over-

come.

It has been proven numerous times that constant variation with sets and reps will greatly aid athlete's ability to overcome plateaus. I don't care whether one does 5 X 5, 3 X 10 or one set of 8-12 reps, you will have burnout problems in six weeks if you don't change and use some variety. As I previously discussed, Dan Riley creates variation by changing angles or exercises. This may not be that easy in a high school situation. Using one set of 8-12 with auxiliary exercises such as Leg Extensions, Leg Curls, Lat Pulls, Tricep Pushdowns, etc. could work out well but with Core Lifts like the Bench, Squat and Clean, you need constant set-rep variation.

The one set of 8-12 philosophy claims its system to be safer saying that one rep maxes are more dangerous. Well, yes and no. At BFS, we never do more than five reps on the Quick Lifts like the Clean, Snatch or Jerk Press. We also like to stay with five reps or less on the Trap Bar or Dead Lift. Our reasoning postulates that when an athlete becomes fatigued on those particular lifts, the lower back has a greater tendency to get into a bad position. Thus, higher reps could be more dangerous than lower reps. However, I would agree there is more potential for serious injury on a single rep Bench or Squat Max than doing reps in the 8-12 range. Let me stress again that correct technique should be emphasized on every set and every rep no matter what system you are using.

Another high school difference is that of the volunteer effect. Pros are paid and major college athletes have scholarships. If they don't like the program, they'd have to give up the money or the scholarship.

Obviously the high school athlete is in a different position. The BFS program makes a highly attainable guarantee: "You break 8 or more personal records every week for as long as you're in high school." Contrast that to doing one set of 8-12, week after week, and month after month. I'm absolutely convinced there will be a lot more "volunteers" to play in the high school situation while having a lot more fun if you do a BFS type program.

My last point is the consistency factor. The pro strength coach is lucky to see his athletes consistently six months per year. He is almost always training his athletes in-season and his players are coming and going at all kinds of crazy intervals. At the high school and college level, it is a 12-month a year cycle for up to five years with the same athletes. It is not uncommon at the major college level to have nearly all of the entire football team stick around for the summer. The college strength coach works his athletes most of the time in an off-season mode. Therefore, in my opinion, the one set of 8-12 system, loses much of its effectiveness experienced by the pro teams.

In conclusion, the one set of 8-12 system has a proven place in the pro ranks as shown beautifully by Dan Riley. High school and college coaches can learn much from men like Coach Riley. Things like keeping workouts shorter in duration, coaching hard and demanding great technique, keeping accurate records, using a lot of variety and just plain gettin' after it. However, to truly reach an athlete's fullest potential at the high school or college level and to give their team the best possible chance to win, you can't do the one set of 8-12 system.....□