

A black and white photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a light-colored tank top. He is performing a deadlift with a barbell, with his back arched and legs bent. The background shows gym equipment like a squat rack.

MY FAVORITE EXERCISE FOR EACH BODY PART

BY JEFF NIPPARD



Hey there!

In the pages ahead, I have laid out my single favorite exercise for each body part; as if I could only pick one movement for each. In some sense, this is a silly task because in the real world, most people will combine a variety of different exercises to meet their muscle-building goals. But, with that said, I think it's still a useful thought experiment because it implies that if you're limited on time or resources, the handful of exercises I have chosen will most likely give you the best muscular "bang for your buck."

Of course, this doesn't mean that you should only stick to these exercises, or even that you need to do them at all. I believe that exercise selection should be tailored to the individual and that there are no mandatory exercises for building muscle. In other words, I think that you can maximize your growth using a wide spectrum of different exercises. There are, after all, many different ways to design an effective program. As you will read through the ebook, I do think, however, that some exercises are certainly better than others at stimulating muscle growth in an efficient or effective manner.

With the pedantic disclaimers out of the way, let's dig into the fun stuff!



CALVES

Favorite Exercise: STANDING CALF RAISE (PAUSED)

Reasoning: I am placing the tried and true standing calf raise at the number one spot here simply because it is a very accessible exercise that has been repeatedly shown to work when performed properly. Many people screw the execution up by “bouncing” out of the bottom, shifting most of the tension away from the calves and onto the highly elastic achilles tendon. If you’re merely “bouncing” up and down on the calf raise machine, chances are that momentum is playing a bigger role than your calves. To combat this common error, I recommend pausing for 1-2 seconds in the stretched position at the bottom of every rep.

Taken from my Calf Technique Tuesday video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qsRtp_PbVM

Honorable Mention: CALF JUMPS

Calf jumps are a more unorthodox exercise popularized by exercise science author, Menno Henselmans. This exercise takes advantage of the strength curve of the calves and prioritizes eccentric overloading. We demonstrate the exercise in more detail in this video:

<https://youtu.be/eUYY19p4lRY?t=705>



QUADS

Favorite Exercise: BACK SQUAT

Reasoning: It could be my “powerlifter bias” coming through, but in my 13 years of training experience, in both myself and in working with hundreds of 1-on-1 clients, I haven’t found a single exercise that can consistently and demonstrably add mass to the quads like the barbell back squat. That isn’t to say there is something “magical” about the squat, per se. Certainly, if the exact same cumulative tension was applied to the quads through use of a different exercise, it would probably result in a very similar outcome with respect to quad hypertrophy. My main argument in favor of the squat is that it is so motivating to overload. For me, setting a new PR on the squat is one of the most rewarding experiences I can have in the gym. I highly doubt the same can be said for setting a PR on a hack squat or a bulgarian split squat. For this reason, I think the back squat has a uniquely high potential for progressive overload in the real world. It’s just such a fun lift to make progress on. Granted, this is a bit of a double-edged sword because this same pursuit toward ever-increasing strength is what causes some trainees to bite off more weight than they can chew. Sometimes this headstrong mentality can lead to an injury that results in setting progress back much further than the marginal gains the squat would’ve provided in the first place. To combat this, I emphasize that proper technique always be placed ahead of weight, and as a bodybuilder, you should only handle loads that you are 100% certain you can handle with good technique, even on your worst day. To prevent injury or burnout, I also recommend staying at least 1-3 reps shy of failure. You can watch my full breakdown on the squat here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEv6CCg2BC8>

Honorable Mention: FRONT SQUAT OR LEG PRESS

Mindful of the safety disclaimer mentioned previously, I think the front squat is an underrated alternative to the traditional back squat for quad hypertrophy. This is because the front squat is able to recruit the quads very highly with much lighter loads. (1) For this reason, the front squat may be an inherently “safer” alternative to the back squat, with just as many upsides. You can watch my front squat tutorial here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-mQm_droHg



HAMSTRINGS

Favorite Exercise: ROMANIAN DEADLIFT (RDL)

Reasoning: The hamstrings are a biarticular muscle, meaning they cross two joints: in this case, the hip joint and the knee joint. As such, they can contribute to hip extension ("straightening your hips out" as you would in a deadlift) and knee flexion ("bending your knee" as you would in a leg curl). So to train the hamstrings most optimally, I would say that it is prudent to include both a hip extension-based lift (like a deadlift variation) and a knee flexion-based lift (like a leg curl) in your routine. Since the point of this ebook is to think about what single exercise we might pick if we could only pick one, for the hamstrings, I would go with a Romanian Deadlift because I think having a hip hinge-type movement pattern will have more general strength and size carry-over to the entire posterior chain than would a leg curl-type movement. A leg curl is an isolation exercise and as such, will "isolate" the hamstrings to a greater degree than the RDL. Since I am forced to pick between one or the other, I believe that the RDL will have a greater potential for more cumulative tension in the hamstrings through an increased capacity for overload. In addition, it has a more "complementary" role to other lifts in this "minimalist program".

Honorable Mention: GLUTE HAM RAISE (GHR)

The glute ham raise was almost #1 for me because it actually is one of the only hamstrings-focused exercises that trains both hip extension (isometrically) and knee flexion at the same time. The hamstrings are forced to keep the hips extended throughout the lift (assuming you don't "bend forward" at the hips) while curling the body up by contracting at the knee. The issue with the GHR is that it's often not found in many gyms and if present, can be a pain to set up. So as a whole, it fits very well as a (very) honorable mention, just behind the RDL from a practical perspective.



GLUTES

Favorite Exercise: HIP THRUST

Reasoning: At this point, the hip thrust has accumulated so much empirical support in the scientific literature that it would be tough to recommend a different exercise for training glutes. Many people think of the squat as a great glute builder, and while it certainly will target the glutes through hip extension to a degree, the hip thrust is unique in that it will load the glutes most heavily in the position where they are firing the hardest (near full hip extension). (2) The basic barbell hip thrust is the variation that I recommend. However, alternative hip thrust machines can be more comfortable and easier to load, if your gym has them. I've discussed the hip thrust at length here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDmFkJxPzeM>

Honorable Mention: WALKING LUNGE

The walking lunge is without a doubt the exercise that consistently gives me the most delayed onset glute soreness. While muscle soreness isn't necessarily a good gauge of an effective workout (Running a marathon might make your legs sore, but will it get your legs jacked?), it does imply that you've at least hit the target muscle. The reason behind this crippling DOMS is that the lunge loads the glutes in a highly stretched position, causing large amounts of muscle damage. And while the jury is still out as to whether muscle damage is a causative factor for hypertrophy or not, I'm still putting walking lunges in the honorable mention spot, even if it's just because of how much my glutes hate me the next day!



ABS

Favorite Exercise: DECLINE MEDICINE BALL CRUNCH THROW

Reasoning: Although this exercise may sound totally random, it's my favorite for a few reasons. First, and most important, is that the exercise is fun (for me at least). I'm not sure if everyone can relate, but I really hate training abs. I find that the basic core exercises like crunches and planks are super boring. The decline med ball crunch throw allows you to do something active and athletic with your body, while performing reps to keep the set more engaging. Second, because you're throwing the ball at the top of the exercise, you're forced to crunch more explosively, which may have benefit not only in terms of hypertrophy, but athletic performance as well. My third reason for liking the decline crunch is because it supports your lower back throughout the range of motion - unlike the hanging leg raise, which can cause many to swing back and forth if not done correctly. If you want to see this exercise performed properly, check out:

https://youtu.be/_xdOuqokcm4?t=418

Honorable Mention: HANGING LEG RAISE

Since I already mentioned it above, I should probably give the hanging leg raise the honorable mention spot. Leg raise-type movements tend to be better at targeting the lower abs (an underdeveloped, yet highly sought-after muscle group for many fitness enthusiasts). So including a hanging leg raise in your routine would be smart if you want the lower abdominals to pop more. I discuss that at length in this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RrGnjxSsiA>



BACK

Favorite Exercise: PENDLAY ROW

Reasoning: Contrary to popular opinion, rows don't only train "back thickness." By targeting the lats to a very high degree, they are also very effective for developing "back width." (3) This is especially true if you perform the row with a more "bent over" torso (closer to parallel with the floor) and pull the elbows back at a roughly 45 degree angle.

While the row can be performed more upright, I often prefer the more strict Pendlay Row variation, for reasons I describe in this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=axoeDmW0oAY>

Honorable Mention: WIDE GRIP PULL UP

Functionally, you need at least two basic movements in any well-balanced back routine: a horizontal pull and a vertical pull. Because the row activates the lats, traps and spinal erectors to a very high degree, if I had to pick only one, I would probably go with a row over a pull-up. But that could very well change depending on my mood. I discuss both of these exercises in these videos:

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hdc7Mw6BIEE>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAXkl-AdJFg>



TRAPS

Favorite Exercise: TRAP BAR SHRUGS

Reasoning: Most people think that the upper trap fibers run vertically (up and down) on top of the shoulders. In reality, cadaveric research tells us that these fibers run much more horizontally than many people realize. (4) For this reason, doing a standard barbell shrug where you lift their bar straight up and down is not the most effective way to hit the upper traps. Widening your grip on the barbell so that your arms are more out to the sides, will correct this problem. Even though many find this grip width awkward and some men find their “manhood” can get in the barbell’s path, I do recommend giving it a try. One solution is to lean slightly forward - as long as the stance doesn’t seriously limit tension on the traps by reducing the load you can comfortably handle. The ideal solution is to use a trap bar. For most people, their shoulders will be in some degree of abduction (meaning the handles will be wider than shoulder width) and because your body is “inside” the trap bar apparatus, you don’t need to worry about the bar rubbing up against you.

Honorable Mention: CABLE “SHRUG INS”

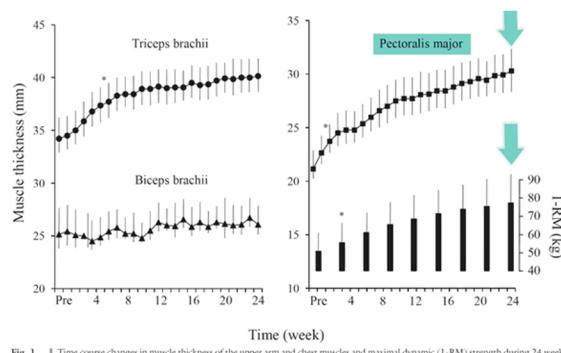
Again, because the upper trap fibers run more horizontally, it makes sense to “shrug in” rather than to “shrug up.” One easy way to make this happen is to use a cable set-up with the handles positioned further out to your side, as can be seen in this video:

<https://youtu.be/C6sYjDFuq9I?t=355>

CHEST

Favorite Exercise: BENCH PRESS

Reasoning: Research has shown that even a program consisting of solely using a bench press for pec hypertrophy is able to produce a considerable increase in pec muscle thickness, which occurs perfectly in tandem with increased bench press strength. (5) While correlation doesn't imply causation, when combined with my personal lifting and coaching experience, this data really makes me think that if you want bigger pecs, you should focus on building a bigger bench press. Of course, dumbbell pressing can yield a similar effect. Similarly to what happens with a squat versus other quad exercises, I think fewer people will be motivated to get consistently stronger on a dumbbell press than on a barbell bench press. This in turn, may limit overload potential over time.



Courtesy: Ogasawara et al, 2012

Honorable Mention: INCLINE BARBELL PRESS

The incline barbell press will target the upper pecs slightly more, but I think people blow these activation differences somewhat out of proportion. The standard flat bench press will very effectively target the entire pec: upper, middle and lower. Some trainees seem to be under the impression that an incline press ONLY hits the upper pecs and a flat press ONLY hits the mid and lower pecs. This is far from the truth. In reality, altering the bench angle will slightly shift the emphasis of activation, but total activation patterns across all heads of the pecs are fairly similar. I would say if you have a very lagging upper chest, focus a little more on inclines, otherwise focus on the traditional bench press and that will take care of a ton of chest growth on its own.



SHOULDERS

Favorite Exercise: EGYPTIAN CABLE LATERAL RAISE

Reasoning: Building a rockin' set of side delts might just be the single most critical thing when it comes to creating that highly desired X-frame shape. With the Egyptian lateral raise, you pass the cable between your legs and then lean into the direction of the raise. Passing the cable through your legs allows you to lift in the mid-frontal plane, causing the direction of the raise to line up perfectly with the orientation of the side delt muscle fibers. Leaning into the raise will take emphasis away from the very bottom of the movement, where the muscles of the rotator cuff are more likely to overpower the side delt muscle you're trying to target. Also, while dumbbells can be very effective as well, an advantage of using cables is that they provide a more consistent tension curve to the delts.

Honorable Mention: STANDING BARBELL OVERHEAD PRESS (OHP)

Some of you may be surprised to see this in the honorable mention spot, rather than at #1. That is a fair reaction. I do think that any complete training program should include some sort of vertical press like an OHP or dumbbell press. However, it's important to keep in mind that overhead presses primarily target the anterior (front) deltoid – a muscle that will already be heavily targeted with the bench press. From a pure aesthetics perspective, I think it is of higher priority to emphasize the side delts, which is why a lateral raise takes the #1 spot for me.

I discussed the programming implications of the lateral raise in this video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdNOahFD450>

Check out my lateral raise technique demonstration here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_ZkxWzYnMc

Check out my overhead press technique video here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RIRDWO2jfg



BICEPS

Favorite Exercise: BAYESIAN CABLE CURL

Reasoning: I really like the Bayesian Cable Curl because it allows for maximum stretch on the biceps at the bottom and has a more consistent resistance curve throughout the range of motion than a barbell curl or dumbbell curl would.

I discuss this in more detail here:
<https://youtu.be/eUYY19p4IRY?t=951>

Honorable Mention: BARBELL (OR EZ BAR) BICEP CURL

While the Bayesian Curl is great from a theoretical perspective, I do find that it isn't quite as conducive to progressive overload as the bread and butter standing barbell (or EZ bar) curl. I discuss the specific cues I use on this exercise in this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1YgFZB6all>



TRICEPS

Favorite Exercise: SKULLCRUSHER

Reasoning: I'm putting the skullcrusher in this spot because we've already included a bench press in our "minimalist program" – otherwise I would have probably chosen the close grip bench press as #1. The skullcrusher is a great exercise for targeting the beefy "long head" of the triceps (on the back of the arm) in the stretched position (see below). A common mistake when performing this tricep blaster is lowering the bar down to their forehead. Although this is what the exercise name would imply, it makes more sense biomechanically to lower the bar back behind the head, which will increase the degree of stretch on the long head.

Learn more about proper skullcrusher technique here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=popGXI-qs98>

Honorable Mention: CABLE TRICEP KICKBACK

Because the long head of the triceps is a biarticular muscle (it crosses the elbow joint and the shoulder joint), its degree of involvement will vary depending on shoulder position. Since the skullcrusher targets the triceps with the shoulder more flexed (arm positioned overhead), it would be wise to also include a movement like a kickback where the shoulder is hyperextended (arm positioned back behind the torso). I give more specific details on varying shoulder positions, in this YouTube video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94DXwlcX8Po>

SUMMARY

I hope you found this compilation of some of my favorite exercises informative! Keep in mind that while some exercises have a higher hypertrophic potential than others, exercise selection is inherently individual. That is, you should ultimately choose exercises that will not only be effective for your goals, but that you will be able to perform safely and consistently over time. For more background and theory on exercise selection I recommend watching my Exercise Selection Fundamentals video :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyiQw-qiv80>

You can find all of these exercise above, and more, in my Upper/Lower training program!

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