



*You*  
**CAN'T  
GET  
BORED**



ADDING VARIETY TO THE

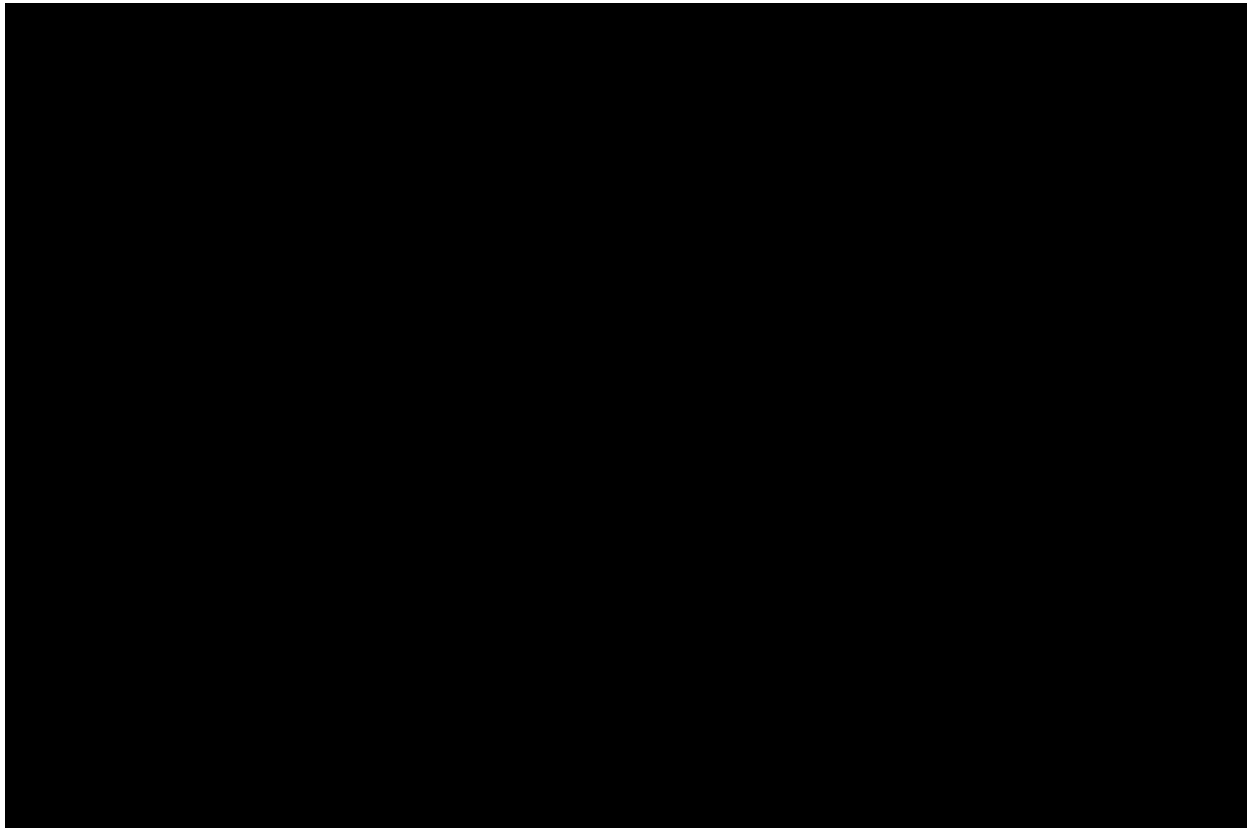
BASICS OF

PROGRAM DESIGN

CHRIS MERRITT

One of the most important jobs we have as fitness trainers is to make sure we put our people in the best positions to be successful. However, in the world of program design, all too often trainers attempt to make sure that boredom never finds its way into training. Workout of the day, constant introduction of novel exercises, and other counterintuitive, yet well-intentioned approaches find their way into the process.

Back in December of 2015 we had a strength coach join the Strength Faction QnA whom some of you may have heard of, Dan John. At one point he delved into the notion of success and boredom in training:



Here's a link in case that video didn't load on whatever you're using to read this:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52VTNt0XShU>

Results are never boring of course, but does that mean we need to completely ignore the idea of fun in helping our clients to reach their goals?

Of course not!

In fact, if their programming has no variety outside of volume, intensity, or density, and is, as Dan so eloquently states, "boring as shit," then we may very well lose them in the long-run anyways.

Well, damn.

BUT! I propose to you that this is mostly avoidable, and all it takes is a little variety.

I know, I know—seems like I've lost my mind going from *stick with what works*, and *YOU CAN'T GET BORED*, to *add a little variety*.

What gives?

Well, what if I told you we could keep our people in the best positions to be successful, which often can mean training with a basic, limited exercise menu, while also providing years of variety without even changing exercises? Sound enticing?

We'll dive into how that can be in just a bit, but there's something really important we need to cover first...

## Application of Intent

People come to see us for help in accomplishing their transformation goals. And whether that transformation is physical, mental, or performance—or any combination thereof—part of our job is writing a fitness plan that will play a part in helping them to get there.

What can possibly go into that plan when it comes to exercise selection? A damn-near infinite number of things, actually.

Therefore, I would argue that we need to select exercises with an intent in mind, and when we do, it makes selecting exercises a whole lot easier.

Sure, that process starts with the consultation, the clients goals, an assessment, etc... But after that?

Is the barbell hang power clean a good exercise? I don't know, why do you want to use it? Strength? Then I'd rather see you use that barbell to do something like deadlift, squat, bench press, bent over row, etc.

And even if the exercise matches our intent, is it the best fit for your client? Once again, I don't know. How's their skill?

Let's say you had answered that the hang power clean mentioned earlier was going to be used for power in their pursuit of a performance goal.

Now is it a good exercise?

From an intent standpoint, it sure is. But, if your client doesn't know how to do a hang power clean very well their skill may get in the way of their execution.

It goes without saying, but this is no bueno for their goals...

Of course, you could teach them how to do the hang power clean, and, if time is on your side, that might not be a bad idea. But what if they just want to get after it and train hard? Is there another exercise that they have a base level of skill that will allow them to express the proposed intent—power—so that they can reach their performance goal? Do that.

This is all so seemingly obvious, I know, but I've seen many my share of situations where these basic principles have been overlooked, only leading to frustration for both the client and the trainer.

So, if we can accept that successful expression of intent is vitally important for a desired outcome and is only possible by the result of proper exercise selection, then I think we can all agree that our clients don't need the constant introduction of new exercises in their programs.

Rather, we just need to make sure that we:

- a) have our fundamental human movement bases covered
- b) make appropriate exercise selections to put our people in the best positions to be successful
- c) deliver a program that will allow them to train consistently and aid in leading them to their goals.

So how do we keep them interested?

Well for one, as Dan said, results are never boring. Second, there's an oft forgotten variable we can manipulate, and we refer to it as loading type.

You already use loading types in your programming, I'm certain of that much, but this book will lay out a large menu of different types that will, in effect, provide near infinite ways for you to provide variety to the basic exercises.

Let's dive in!

# Adding Variety to the Basics

When I present on loading types at my programming workshops, I typically use an example like the goblet squat and demonstrate that I could provide YEARS of programming variety without ever changing the exercise.

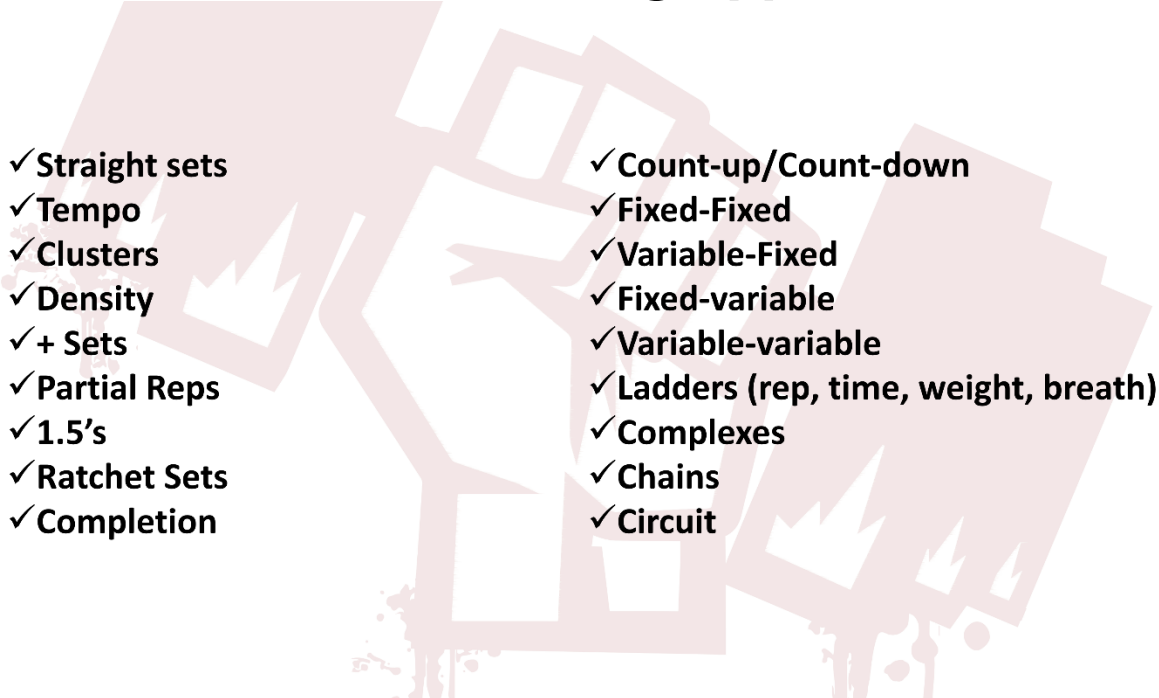
Would I actually do that? Maybe, if the client was limited to kettlebells in their equipment choices, but more than likely no, and I never have.

But as you read through the following loading types, I want you to keep one implement in mind and, for most of them, one exercise—like my goblet squat (kettlebell + squat). This will help you to get a glimpse of the sheer magnitude of ways which you could tweak but that one basic exercise.

After that, go back and refer to this list often, especially when you're tempted to change exercises to *spice things up* for your client.

After all, novel exercises require time to learn. Time spent learning an exercise is time that can't be applied to expressing intentions (power, strength, conditioning, etc...) towards achieving the client's desired goal.

## The Loading Types

- 
- ✓ Straight sets
  - ✓ Tempo
  - ✓ Clusters
  - ✓ Density
  - ✓ + Sets
  - ✓ Partial Reps
  - ✓ 1.5's
  - ✓ Ratchet Sets
  - ✓ Completion
  - ✓ Count-up/Count-down
  - ✓ Fixed-Fixed
  - ✓ Variable-Fixed
  - ✓ Fixed-variable
  - ✓ Variable-variable
  - ✓ Ladders (rep, time, weight, breath)
  - ✓ Complexes
  - ✓ Chains
  - ✓ Circuit

## **Straight Sets**

The most basic of the loading types—think traditional sets and reps. You can ride this one out for a long time, and they're in every single program I think I've ever written... Further, multiple straight set exercises done together create the traditional supersets, tri-sets, etc...

- Goblet Squat 3 x 5
  - 3 sets of 5 goblet squats

## **Tempo**

Manipulating exercise tempo has probably been used since people started lifting weights, but Cal Dietz and Ben Peterson delivered an awesome system in their book, *Triphasic Training*. I do not always use it 100% how they laid it out, but I am heavily influenced by their approach.

When working with new clients I find people learn movements more efficiently by starting with an eccentric focus. However, I don't necessarily jump right into isometric and concentric emphasis phases from there—like anything, it depends on the situation...

- Eccentric Emphasis Goblet Squat (3XX1)
  - 3 second eccentric (lowering), no pause, explosive concentric (up), and 1 second pause before the next rep
- Isometric Emphasis Goblet Squat (X2X1)
  - fast descent, 2 second pause in the bottom, fast ascent, and 1 second pause between reps
- Concentric Emphasis Goblet Squat (XXX1)
  - full-speed reps with a 1 second pause between each one

## **Clusters**

Think of clusters as mini sets within a set, sometimes referred to as rest-pause sets. I commonly prescribe breaths (2-5) or time (:05 - :30) for rest between clusters. These are great for raising the intensity of a given set. For this example, imagine picking a weight that you could only get about 3-4 reps with...

- Goblet Squat 3 x (2, 2, 1)
  - 3 sets of 2 reps, rest for time or breaths, 2 reps, rest for time or breaths, and then 1 rep—still totaling 5 reps per set.

## Density

I commonly see these used as EMOM's (every minute on the minute), but don't limit densities to 1:00—any time can be used here.

- 1:00 Density Goblet Squat 3 x 5
  - 3 sets of 5 reps every minute on the minute

Further, you're not limited to one exercise at a time. You can do density circuits as well. For the following density circuit, you would do 3 sets of 5 reps of each exercise every 3 minutes—yes, 20 reps every 3:00—starting each set at the top of the three minutes:

- 3:00 Density Circuit 3 x 5/
  - Goblet Squat
  - Inverted Row
  - Kettlebell Deadlift
  - Push-up

Lastly, you could do superset/tri-set/quad-set/etc. densities. Using the same exercises as the above example, this one would involve doing 5 reps of one exercise at the top of the minute, resting the remainder, then the next, resting the remainder, the next, rest, the next, rest, and then back to the top, repeating until all 4 exercises have been done for 3 total rounds:

- 1:00 Density Goblet Squat 3 x 5
- 1:00 Density Inverted Row 3 x 5
- 1:00 Density Kettlebell Deadlift 3 x 5
- 1:00 Density Push-up 3 x 5

## + Sets

You're probably familiar with these from Jim Wendler's 5/3/1 program, and they're exactly what they sound like...

- Goblet Squat 3 x 5+
  - 3 sets of at least 5 reps

Most of the time, you will see these being used on the last set only...

- Goblet Squat 2 x 5, 1 x 5+
  - 2 sets of 5 reps, 1 set (last set) of at least 5 reps

Be careful with form, always of course, but asking someone to get after + sets can turn hairy in a jiffy... use judiciously and always leave at least one rep in the tank.

## ***Partial Reps***

Simply doing partial range of motion on a given exercise. I commonly use these to handle more weight than we could in a full range lift (i.e. rack pull deadlift or pin presses), to break down complicated exercises to digestible parts (i.e.  $\frac{1}{4}$  get-ups and  $\frac{1}{2}$  get-ups before programming the full get-up), to train around injuries (i.e. limited depth squats), and to stay within ranges that we can demonstrate maximum control.

## ***1.5's***

1.5's are exactly what they sound like...

- 1.5 Rep Goblet Squat
  - Lower to the bottom of the goblet squat, come back up half way, return to the bottom, and then all the way up. This completes 1 rep of a 1.5 rep goblet squat.

## ***Ratchet Sets***

Ratchet sets are what you use when you really don't like someone, and I'm only partially kidding... Like the 1.5's, ratchet sets involve starting the movement and then going back, but with many more layers. Let's use the goblet squat as an example:

- Ratchet Goblet Squat (in  $\frac{1}{4}$ 's)
  - Lower to the bottom of the goblet squat, come back up a  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way, return to the bottom, then up  $\frac{1}{2}$  way, back to the bottom, then up  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way, back to the bottom, and then finally all the way back to the top. That's one...

You're not limited to 4 steps with these, feel free to be as sadistic as you wish!



## Completion

Work until goal is hit, reps or distance, usually recording time of completion and working to beat it in future sessions.

- Goblet Squat x 15 reps (to stay with our 3 x 5 example)
  - You don't really need an explanation, do you? Get 15 reps however you deem reasonable. Keep great form. Break it up into sets.
- Assault Bike x 1 Mile
  - Knock out 1 mile as quickly as possible, record time, and aim to beat it in future sessions...

## Count-Up/Count-Down

I use count-up and count-down sets most often in conditioning, but they could be done in a variety of places in programs. Further, they're commonly combined with density work, but don't need to be.

- **Count-Up Density** involves a prescribed time to complete said repetitions or distance, using the remainder of the time to rest and increasing repetitions or distance per set.
  - 1:00 Count-Up Density Goblet Squat 3 x 8, 10, 12
    - 8 goblet squats, rest remainder of minute, 10 goblet squats, rest remainder of minute, 12 goblet squats, rest remainder of minute, done.
- **Count-Down – Density** is the same as count-up density, only you'd start from the higher number and work your way down. Here's a distance example:
  - 1:00 Density Rower 5 x 150m, 125m, 100m, 75m, 50m
    - 150m, rest remainder of minute, 125m rest remainder of minute, 100m, rest remainder of minute, 75m, rest remainder of minute, 50m, rest remainder of minute, done.

I also like to combine an exercise for straight sets with count-downs or count-ups to control tempo instead of densities at times.

- **Straight Sets-Countdown (for time)**
  - Perform straight sets exercise for set reps per set, alternated with countdown reps exercise for descending reps per set. Record time to completion:

- A1. Goblet Squat 10 x 10
- A2. Inverted Row 10 x 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, ...
  - = 10 squats, 10 rows, 10 squats, 9 rows, 10 squats, 8 rows, 10 squats, 7 rows, 10 squats, 6 rows, 10 squats, 5 rows, 10 squats, 4 rows, 10 squats, 3 rows, 10 squats, 2 rows, 10 squats, 1 row, done. Record time and aim to beat it in subsequent weeks.
- **Straight Sets – Count-up (for time)**
  - Perform straight sets exercise for set reps per set, immediately followed by count-up reps exercise for ascending reps per set. Record time to completion.
    - A1. Kettlebell Swing 10 x 10
    - A2. Push-up 10 x 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, ...
      - Same idea as above, but fixed sets of swings and counting up on the push-ups now...

### **Fixed-Fixed**

Fixed time for work, fixed time for rest

- Goblet Squat 6 x :20/:40
  - :20 work, :40 rest, then repeat for 6 total sets (rounds)

### **Variable-Fixed**

Work to set heart rate, rest for set time.

- Rower 6 x 85%/:40
  - Work to 85% max heart rate, rest for :40, then repeat for 6 total sets

### **Fixed-Variable**

Work for set time, rest to set heart rate.

- Assault Bike 6 x :20/75%
  - Work for :20, rest to 75% max heart rate, then repeat for 6 total sets

## **Variable-Variable**

Work to set heart rate, rest to set heart rate.

- Rower 6 x 85%/75%
  - Work to 85% max heart rate, rest to 75%, then repeat

## **Ladders**

There are four types of ladders that I commonly use:

### **1. Rep ladder**

Multiple, or single, exercises performed for escalating reps per round, with a single implement.

- Single Arm Kettlebell Rep Ladder (Swing, High Pull, Snatch) 3 x 1-3
  - 1 swing, 1 high pull, 1 snatch, then 2, 2, 2, followed by 3, 3, 3, and then switch arms

You can do this complex style, where you don't put the implement down, or you could prescribe rest between ladders.

If it is done with a single exercise you would set the rest between the 1 rep, the 2 reps, the 3 reps—so on and so forth...

### **2. Time (Density) Ladder**

There are a lot of options here. I'll lay out a few examples...

- Same reps, less rest.
  - Kettlebell Swing 3 x (3 x 8 @ 1:00, :45, :30)
    - 8 reps, rest the remainder of the minute, then 8 reps, rest the remainder of the 45 seconds, and finally 8 reps, rest the remainder of the 30 seconds, then repeat for the remaining two rounds.
- Same reps, more rest.
  - Kettlebell Swing 3 x (3 x 8 @ :30, :45, 1:00)
    - 8 reps, rest the 30 seconds, then 8 reps, rest the remainder of the 45 seconds, and finally 8 reps, rest the remainder of the minute seconds, then repeat for the remaining two rounds.
- Increasing or decreasing time.

- Kettlebell Swing 3 x (3 x :10, :15, :20)
  - Swing for :10 seconds, rest for prescribed time or breaths, then repeat for :15, and then :20

### 3. **Weight Ladder**

- Increasing Weight
  - Hang Power Clean Weight Ladders 3 x (1 light, 1 medium, 1 heavy)
    - 3 sets of 1 light hang power clean, 1 moderate hang power clean, and 1 heavy hang power clean
    - Rest for prescribed time or breaths between each one
- Decreasing weight
  - Hang Power Clean Weight Ladders 3 x (1 heavy, 1 medium, 1 light)
    - 3 sets of 1 heavy hang power clean, 1 moderate hang power clean, and 1 light hang power clean
    - Rest for prescribed time or breaths between each one

### 4. **Breath Ladder**

A great option for getting some time under tension with isometric portions of our lifts. These could be done while locked out (top of a squat, bench press, deadlift, etc.) or while in the bottom of a lift (bottom of a squat, bench press, RDL, etc.), and anywhere in between. Just be careful with where you make people spend time! Always make sure the cost of doing business is worth it...

- Single Reps, Increasing Breaths
  - Goblet Squat Breath Ladder 3 x 5 + 1-5 (bottom)
    - 1 goblet squat w/ one breath at the bottom, 1 goblet squat + 2 breaths at the bottom, 1 goblet squat + 3 breaths at the bottom, 1 goblet squat + 4 breaths at the bottom, 1 goblet squat + 5 breaths at the bottom, done.
- Single Reps, Decreasing Breaths
  - Kettlebell Snatch Breath Ladder 3 x 5 + 5-1
    - 1 snatch, 1 breath at the top, 1 snatch, 2 breaths at the top, 1 snatch, 3 breaths at the top, 1 snatch, 4 breaths at the top, 1 snatch, 5 breaths at the top, switch arms and do the same process, done.
- Reps + Breath Ladder Hybrid
  - Kettlebell Snatch Rep + Breath Ladder 3 x 1-5/

- 1 snatch, 1 breath at the top, 2 snatches, 2 breaths at the top, 3 snatches, 3 breaths at the top, 4 snatches, 4 breaths at the top, 5 snatches, 5 breaths at the top, switch arms and do the same process, done. P.S. Why do you hate someone this much?!

## **Complex**

Multiple exercises performed for multiple reps, with a single implement, consecutively (i.e. no break).

- Barbell Complex: Clean Grip Countermovement Jump, Hang Power Clean, Push Press 3 x 3/
  - 3 clean grip countermovement jumps, followed by 3 hang power cleans, followed by 3 push presses, all without putting the bar down—that's one set.

## **Chain**

Multiple exercises performed for single reps, with a single implement, consecutively for rounds (chains).

- Single Arm Kettlebell Chain (Swing, High Pull, Snatch) 3 x 3 chains/ = 1 swing, 1 high pull, 1 snatch, repeated for a total of 3 rounds before switching hands, and heading straight to the other hand. Once done with other hand, you're done with one set.

It can also be fun to add in breaths here as well... same example + breaths:

- Single Arm Kettlebell Chain (Swing, High Pull, Snatch, Breath) 3 x 3 chains/ = 1 swing, 1 high pull, 1 snatch, 1 breath at the top, repeated for a total of 3 rounds before switching hands

## **Circuit**

Perform exercises as prescribed, sometimes with built in rest between exercises, other times continuous movement.

- Circuit 2 x 2 Rounds/:60
  - High Handle Sled Push x 20yds

- Push-up x 20
- Low Handle Sled Push x 20yds
- Inverted Row x 20
  - Go through all of the exercises twice, one after the other, then rest for :60 and repeat for the second set.
- Fixed-Fixed Circuit 2 x :20/:40
  - Kettlebell Swing
  - Push-up
  - High Handle Marching Sled Push
  - Chin Up
    - Perform each exercise for :20, then rest :40 before moving on to the next one. As written here, two full rotations through the circuit, done.
- Heart Rate Circuit 20:00 x 120-140bpm
  - Battling Ropes x :10
  - Carioca x 10yds/
  - Forward Leopard Crawl x 10yds
  - Farmer Carry x 40yds
    - Perform each exercise for time or distance prescribed while maintaining a tempo/intensity that keeps your heart rate in the prescribed range (120-140bpm in this case) for the duration of the session. This is a great alternative to traditional cardio, especially when performed at these lower heart rates.

## Of Course, There are More

Someone out there is saying, “*Oh man—that idiot, Chris, forgot about (insert magical loading type here).*” And I’m sure if I racked my brain I could come up with even more, but the above should be one hell of a starting point, right?

And, to be honest, these are the most common ones that I use!

But I digress... If you have ones that you commonly use, and I didn’t put in here, I’d love to hear about them. Shoot an email to [Chris@beyondstrengthperformance.com](mailto:Chris@beyondstrengthperformance.com) and maybe they’ll make their way into a future edition of *You Can’t Get Bored* (with credit to you, of course).

# Loading Types in Action

Here's what a handful of these loading types look like in action on the Strength Faction programs. You'll notice that in workout A, taken from Summer '18 Hips, we notate in parentheses what types of loading types we are using for the corresponding section of the program. What do those letters stand for? Good question...

- P = Power
- S = Strength
- A = Assistance
- C = Conditioning

## Workout A (P = Straight Sets/S = Clusters + Eccentric Focus/A = None/C = Fixed-Fixed)

Exercise Name	(1)	RPE	(6)	RPE	(11)	RPE	(16)	RPE
<b>A1. Upper Power</b> (pick one for month)	3 x 5	5	3 x 5	5	2 x 5	5	4 x 5	5
▪ <a href="#">Tall Kneeling Chest Pass MB Throw</a>		6		6		6		6
▪ <a href="#">Overhead MB Slam</a>		-		-		-		-
▪ <a href="#">Short Response Depth Jump Push-up</a>								
<b>A2. Supine Core</b> (pick one for month)	3 x 6	5	3 x 6	5	2 x 6	5	4 x 6	5
▪ <a href="#">3-Month Band PNF</a> (3 reps/side)		6		6		6		6
▪ <a href="#">3-Month Kettlebell Pullover</a>								
<b>A3. Single Leg Lowering w/ Band</b>	3 x 5/	-	3 x 5/	-	2 x 5/	-	4 x 5/	-
<b>B1. Deadlift Clusters*</b> (pick one for month)	2-3 x (3, 2, 1)	7-8	2-3 x (3, 2, 1)	7-8	2 x (3, 2, 1)	8	3-4 x (3, 2, 1)	7-8
▪ <a href="#">Hex Bar</a>	:20-:30 between clusters		:20-:30 between clusters		:20-:30 between clusters		:20-:30 between clusters	
▪ <a href="#">Rack Pull Deadlift</a>								
▪ <a href="#">Rack Pull Sumo Deadlift</a>								
<b>B2. Eccentric Focus Push</b> (pick one for month)	2-3 x 6 (3XX2)	7-8	2-3 x 6 (3XX2)	7-8	2 x 6 (3XX2)	8	3-4 x 6 (3XX2)	7-8
▪ <a href="#">Dumbbell Chest Press</a>								
▪ <a href="#">Bench Press</a> (2 or 3-board if available)								
▪ $\frac{1}{2}$ Kneeling Overhead Press w/ <a href="#">Dumbbells</a> or <a href="#">Kettlebells</a>								
<b>B3. Quadruped Hip CARs</b>	2-3 x 2/	-	2-3 x 2/	-	2 x 2/	-	3-4 x 2/	-
<b>C1. Fixed-Fixed Circuit</b>	3-4 x :10/:30	-	3-4 x :10/:30	-	4-5 x :10/:30	-	2-3 x :10/:30	-
▪ <a href="#">Battling Ropes</a>		8		8		8		8
▪ <a href="#">Dumbbell Batwings</a>								

We notate each of our main lifting days this way. Then, on our conditioning and recovery days—Workout B, from the same program as above, in this example—we typically write out more of a description. On this program we went with Fixed-Fixed Weight Ladders:

**Workout B (Carry Ladders!)** – Your goal, whether farmer or rack carry, is to start with a light weight for :30 seconds, rest :30, then a moderate weight for :30, rest :30, and then a challenging weight for :30, rest :30. Once you have done that, you have completed one ladder. Start over, repeat for prescribed rounds.

Exercise Name	(2)	RPE	(7)	RPE	(12)	RPE	(17)	RPE
<b>A1. Pick one, may switch week-to-week</b>	8 Ladders	6	8 Ladders	6	10 Ladders	6	6 Ladders	6
▪ <a href="#">Farmer Carry</a>		7		7		7		7
▪ <a href="#">Double Kettlebell Rack Carry</a>		8		8		8		8

# Just Because You Can, Doesn't Mean You Should

Before I let you go... Don't go adding in crazy loading types for variety sake. People can make considerable progress on straight sets and the same exercises, only making minor adjustments to volume and intensity from program to program. Eventually a time will come where you will need to shake things up either because the clients requested it (it's still your job to make sure that's in their best interest...) or they plateau on their progress.

And, when that time has come, you'll want to think through some questions as you go about selecting loading types:

- What's the goal (what do you/the client want)?
- What loading type(s) fits the goal?
- What's your "why?" for the one(s) you choose— You should be able to rationalize everything on the program!

Does Variable-Variable make sense as a loading type when the goal is strength? I think we can all agree on a simple no here. In fact, while some of these may have carryover from one focus to the next, many of them make sense for one goal/area of programming.

The last thing I'll leave you with is to categorize these based on where you'd commonly use them in programs, using as many or as few as you'd like, ultimately saving you a ton of thinking time in the future—something like this:

## Common Loading Types for Power, Strength, Assistance, and Conditioning

**Power:** Straight Sets; Clusters; Complexes; Chains; Ladders;

**Strength:** Straight Sets; Eccentric and isometric "Triphasic;" Clusters;

**Assistance:** Straight Sets; Density;

**Conditioning:** Timed; Fixed-Fixed; Variable-Variable; Count-up/down;

What would your most common look like?



If you have questions, comments, or feedback, please feel free to send them to me at [Chris@beyondstrengthperformance.com](mailto:Chris@beyondstrengthperformance.com). I'm here to help!

Don't you get bored!

- Chris