8 Common Sense Mistakes, Part 1

Ben Dearman

In every gym, in every state, there are people doing stupid things. I know, I know, you were already aware of this; however, I'm talking about **common sense** mistakes. There is a difference between "sheer stupidity" and "lack of common sense"…or as I like to call it, "being a dumb ass."

This article was spurred by a client who was "missing the boat" when I explained to her why we were doing an exercise a certain way. I had no idea what to write about, so while she was doing her vertical core work I was deep in thought when she asked me why we were working our core standing up. She was used to always working her core lying down, and she couldn't understand my aversion to feet up crunches or toe touches, as they are sometimes called. I explained to her the three jobs of the core: stabilize the body, transfer power and acceleration/deceleration. She was a tennis player, so her core had to be especially strong. I asked her how she played tennis. She replied, "On my feet." I then asked her, "If you play on your feet, don't you think we should work your core standing up?"

Silence.

Her reply, "Yeah I guess so. That's kind of common sense, huh?" (DING DING, WE HAVE A WINNER!)

Common sense mistakes are encouraged by the muscle magazines hawking their repetitive wares. "Do this program and gain 20 lbs of muscle in 3 days, GUARANTEED!" "Get big and be somebody with our 12 week ass blowing work out!" These magazines make outlandish claims about their programs, most of which spit in the eye of both conventional and scientific program design. As trainers, we know a lot of these programs don't work. The average gym go-er, however doesn't. Why shouldn't the programs in "muscle mag A" work? These publications are endorsed by pro bodybuilders! So the average high school or college student picks up these magazines and follows the work out, only to also pick up a case of "over training", followed with a healthy shot of "Geez, it says here if I follow this program then I'll be HUGE!!! It must just be my genetics." Their over training is then capped off with the inevitable slip further into the hang over that is poor mobility and muscle imbalances.

Believing the media and entertaining these thoughts is not a common sense mistake. These weekend warriors don't know any better. You can't blame them too much. They are merely sheep in the herd.

On the other hand, the following is a list of common occurrences that I see in the gym on a regular basis. Now keep in mind, I have a biased opinion. However, I feel that the list is a fair representation of common sense mistakes. These mistakes are easily corrected with a little thought and having an open mind to challenge what the media says. Read on, and agree.

1. **"The warm up must fit the demands of the subsequent work out."** – If you're going for a run, why would you swim to get ready to run? Seems pretty simple, right? Then why, if it is simple, are there still those who drive to their local basketball game, get out of their car, stretch, and then proceed to rip their hamstring clean off the bone the first time they land from a rebound or take off down the court? Or better yet, the coach who has his players run long distances for a sport in which they primarily sprint (soccer, football, LAX, field hockey, etc.). Trainers are not blameless either. I still see trainers instruct their clients to walk on a treadmill for 5 minutes then immediately have their client start pressing or rowing. How does a lower body exercise get your upper body ready to work?

Common sense – Match the warm up to the work out. At the very least pick 3 exercises (upper push, upper pull and lower body, if you don't know what I mean, then a proper warm up is the least of your worries) and perform 2-3 sets at 50-65% of your working weight, i.e. if you're going to bench 200 lbs for 8 reps, then put 100 on the bar and rep out a few for the first set. Then go to 130 and hit a few more.

While you're at it, some mobility work wouldn't hurt.

2. **"The exercise selection must fit the goal"** – A scenario that I am sure every trainer has experienced:

Person: "Can you take a look at this program and tell me if this will help me increase my vertical?"
Trainer: "Sure let's see what you have"
T: "Ok…….so you have leg extensions, leg curls, calf raises, squats….hey man when do you jump?"
P: "Oh no, I don't jump. I don't want to tire myself out. I figured my vertical will increase when I get stronger"
T: "Cool, let me know how that goes for you"

If your goal is to jump higher then start jumping. Do you want to do more pushups? Then start doing more pushups (or 1 correct). Think pulls up are cool, but you can't do one? Do a pull up assisted with bands or resisted with weights. When was the last time you saw a football team get in the pool and swim before their practice? Never, they have enough common sense to match the warm up with the activity (albeit in a broad run-2-miles-slow-to-get-ready-to-sprint). I recently asked another trainer how they would get someone to do a pull up. Their reply, "Well, first, I would have them start doing pull downs to get the form right. Then switch to seated rows. Then I'd go to assisted pull ups, work my way down the assistance, and have them attempt one pull up." I sat there stunned. "Why don't you just have them do a negative pull up, that is their goal, right?"

Common Sense – Match the exercise to the goal. If you can't get the goal, and it has to do with body weight anything, (pushups, pull ups, single leg squats) match the exercise as closely as possible to the

goal.

3. **<u>"If you don't see an increase in something measureable every time you work out…something isn't working."</u>** – You would think that this one is common sense also, but it's not. Every trainer knows "that guy." He is the guy in the gym who has been at the same weight, same reps and same sets for three months. One of the main principles of exercise is the SAID principle, i.e. Specific Adaptations for Imposed Demands. Basically, if you challenge your body (imposed demands) with a load or stimulus, it will respond by getting stronger (specifically adapted).

Every time you go into the gym, you must strive to increase something measureable; i.e. finish your session in less time, complete more reps or sets, lift more weight, use more volume (sets x reps x weight moved), etc. If you do not increase the stimulus every time you work out, then you will not see results. For instance, a simple effective program:

Day 1
Front Squat 4 x 8 = 200 lbs
Pull ups 4 x 8 = BW
RDL 4 x 8 = 150 lbs
Incline DB press 4 x 8 = 60's

Day 2 (2-3 days later)
Front Squat 4 x 8 = 202.5 lbs
Pull ups 4 x 8 = BW
RDL 4 x 8 = 152.5 lbs
Incline DB press 4 x 8 = 60's, did 10 reps on the 3rd set, and 9 reps on the last set.

Comparing these two days, it's obvious what exercises went up. The person still experienced results, even though the weight and rep increase was minimal, i.e. a total of 2.5 lbs and 3 more reps over 4 sets. With good nutrition and recovery habits, this individual would continue to see increases over the next few weeks, at which point the program would cycle through another phase.

<u>Common Sense –</u> Something must increase every time you exercise. If nothing increases take a look at the following, in the order listed:

- Nutrition (are you eating enough to support the trauma on your body?)
- Recovery (are you foam rolling, stretching, cold plunging, sleeping enough and doing your active recovery?)
- The program (decrease your sets and reps, a general rule of thumb is to try and keep total reps around 25-35 for each exercise).

Notice how the program is the last component to be evaluated. Don't screw with the program. Most people don't eat well enough or practice appropriate recovery techniques. Chances are you're not either. If you do change the program, keep it simple. Decrease a few reps per set, or a few sets per exercise. However, you should always error on the side of conservative with your programs. It's much better to under train and experience slow results than to over train and get quick results then slip into over training.

4. **<u>"You do not know everything, nor does your local trainer, but they know more than you! So go talk to him/her."</u>**

If my car is making funny noises, I take it to a mechanic. It costs me more money but I get better and faster results. If I want to learn how to golf, I would find a pro to educate me. I might only take one lesson, but taking one lesson from someone who can teach me more than I already know is well worth the time and money. So, why the hell do people still work out without guidance? Or get advice from a trainer that they disregard because (I love this excuse) "I know my body better than someone who has never met me before."

When you go see a doctor, and he/she tells you that you have pneumonia, would you reply, "Nah doc, it's just a head cold, I'll be fine in a couple of days, I know my body." That's not very smart. So why, if a trainer gives you advice, don't you listen? Yes, you might know your body better than that trainer. However, they know the science behind exercise better than you. They know anatomy better than you, and they probably know how to get quicker results. So shut up and listen!

<u>Common Sense –</u> You take your car to a mechanic a few times a year and you take your taxes to an accountant once a year. Why not take your body to a trainer a few times a month? After all, your car will come and go. The IRS can only throw you into jail for doing your taxes wrong, which come to think of it, probably won't be that good for your health either. However, if you mess up your body, you have to live with that error for the rest of your life.

That's it for part 1. Check back in a few weeks for part 2.