

# Strongman training for improved body composition and overall strength

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Most people's definition of cardio and fat loss is long treadmill sessions or a little jog when it is conveniently nice outside. For beginners, I don't see any problems behind that, but the constant need for our bodies to adapt gets this type of workout very inefficient, not to say boring. So a while ago, I decided to crank it up a notch and learned all I could on HIIT, energy system training and strongman training.

Every week, I give different types of strongman training classes. Modified for fat loss, energy systems or just plain all out war for strength gains. I also use them in actual workouts or as finishers, depending on needs and limitations of clients.

These unconventional exercises are tricky and you obviously have more chances of getting injured than just playing around with barbells with great technique. Even the pros have a hard time staying injury free. In the journal of strength and conditioning research<sup>1</sup>, Stuart McGill world-renowned spine biomechanics expert, has proven that strongman events clearly challenge the strength of the body linkage, together with the stabilizing system, in many ways different than traditional approaches. Some of these events, such as the farmer's walk, super yoke, Atlas stone lift, suitcase carry, keg walk, tire flip, and log lift place a great deal of stress on the spine so skilled coaches should be there to help you out and correct faulty technique the first few times.

"Nothing great has ever been achieved lounging in the comfort zone."

The fact of the matter is this, you will train harder, be stronger and if you are looking to shed a few pounds of fat and gain muscle at the same time, you may have found the best type of workout to do it. Beginner or advanced, everyone will end up having one hell of a workout.

According to the Journal of Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism, researchers concluded that [high intensity interval training \(HIIT\)](#) <sup>2</sup> is a very powerful method to increase whole body skeletal muscle capacities to oxidize fat and carbohydrates in previously untrained individuals. However, the fact that it was done on untrained individuals might have boosted the results. So if they have some kind of results, most people will, but due to one basic law, the principle of adaptation, your results will stagnate eventually.

So, by using strongman style exercises and creating circuit style workouts will bring in massive results. The intent of these workouts is to give you other options to rekindle the fire between your hypertrophy, strength gains and fat loss.

First, let's take a look at some of the rules and principles of strongman training.

1. Hardwork.

You are the master of your results. You can train in the best gym in the world, the most biomechanically advanced machines, the best supplement protocols known to man, but if you can't train hard enough, results won't be coming. You can train with one barbell, heavy weights and dumbbells, a few sandbags, tires, and a home made sled, all in the comfort of your basement and have the best results in the world. Your results are directly proportional to the effort you put into it.

2. Basics first

If you haven't mastered the basics, like benchpress, deadlifts and squats, get a good base in the first part of your program and I suggest you use the finishers listed below at the end of the workout.

### 3. Progression

Aim to increase each time that training comes around, meaning that you always have to beat the last weight you used on the last workout. If you were able to deadlift 305 for 5 reps, next workout should be 306.25 or do 6 reps.

"A workout unbeaten is a workout wasted. "

### 4. Time

As in time of work or under tension. For fat loss purposes, time of work (tension) would be greater than 45 seconds. Wait a minute you say? That is also what is recommended for hypertrophy! You got it Sherlock. Gaining a few pounds of lean muscle mass will help shed a few pounds of fat. The latest research in the journal of strength and conditioning<sup>3</sup> has proven that strongman training as the edge over traditional resistance training and will improve body composition and strength as much as functional strength.

"Metabolically active mass wins over dead mass. "

### 5. Awkward and heavy

That's how it should feel. Heavy is relative to the person that lifts things up and put them down. It goes without saying that what is heavy for you might be light for someone else, so my advice for any type of strongman workout is to ramp up the weights gradually, especially in a circuit style workout since it can bite you in the rear end sooner than you might think.

## 6. Mental toughness

I call it necessary roughness. Many get so caught up with their lifting "favorites" that they forget the adaptation principle. Gym rats will always use exercises that they feel strong and master well, however, as soon as they try something new they put their "tails" between their legs and find all the excuses why they sucked. Leave your pride at home, leave it to those big lifts and reap the rewards of real functional strength.

Let's have a look at some of the traditional strongman exercises.

### **Tire flips**

This one is tricky since the tires are usually hard to find. Most of the tire retailers are stuck with recycling old tires so for them, they have to pay to recycle, so the majority of them will be glad to give it to you free of charge, and even deliver. Having one for yourself in your backyard is great but will get you a few weird looks from your neighbors. The weight varies greatly, but it is possible to find the stats of the tires online.

#### Technique

The tire flip provides a high degree of physiological stress<sup>4</sup>. You can split it in 4 phases.

First pull – Deadlifting from the floor, up to the hips

Second pull – From lower hips to lower chest with the back leg following through with a lunge

Transition – flipping the hands from supinated to pronated

Push off – push to flip over the tire

The most common mistakes are having your feet too close on the first pull, which puts tremendous stress on the lower back. Having your feet under your hips and your chest against the tire (about 45° angle push off) will save your back and provide you the best leverage.

Another mistake is in the transition phase. On the second pull, you perform a forward lunge which helps you bring up the tire a few inches, enough to flip from supinated to pronated grip.

### **The farmer's walk**

For overall stamina and also, a great glutes exercise<sup>5,6</sup>, the farmer's walk is great for overall strength and conditioning. Best done with the actual farmer's walk handles since grabbing dumbbells will result in bruised hips. Grab the handles, choose a distance and go for it. You can have a figure eight circuit or every 3 steps, stop and go again which makes it even tougher for the grip, forearm and upper body.

The most common mistake is grabbing the handle on the edges instead of the middle. It makes the weight shift forward or backwards and makes you lose the grip faster.

### **The log**

The availability of this one is limited unfortunately to gyms that invest in these particular pieces of strongman equipment. However, it is the best all around upper body strength developer as with all overhead presses variations. The added bonus with the log is that instead of having the bar rest on the front of the shoulders which biomechanically, is where the tension is lessened, the thickness of the log makes this position a lot harder on the spine and believe it or not, the abs. Your upper body is tilted backward, stretching the abs and activating the lower back to stabilize the whole upper torso. Anyone who has done a great deal of training on the log can attest to that. Due to

the heavy loads on the spine and upper body position, I would consider this exercise as advanced and caution needs to be taken.

### **Sleds and prowlers**

These are probably the best and most versatile but most of all, very versatile. Lateral work (way better than speed ladders), heavy pushes, speed, rehab, belted, sport specific, etc. There are no real critical or faulty technique to consider so the amount of work and intensity you put in will be directly correlated with your results.

Other pieces of equipment such as the Atlas stones, yoke can be used depending on your resources.

### **How to incorporate it in your current training protocol**

Depending on training age, experience, and the coaches you are surrounded by, you can use some exercises into your workouts, after as finishers or add one or two days to your weekly training schedule. Let me give you some example;

Using the backward walk with a sled and straps as rehab is a great tool for those with limited knee flexion and low back issues. It is a simple way to put some stress in the lower back as well as training the vastus Medialis, which are closely related and cause of low back pain. It also can give the impression of a great workout even though they are limited physically.

Staying on the limited side, priorities come first. So if work needs to be done on the scapular chain or the whatever the need dictates, the majority of the workout will be based on those, but using some type of strongman circuit training style finisher at the end can kill two birds with one stone. Let's say the priority is VMO-hamstring, postural work and fat loss, here is a sample finisher;

A1 peterson backward sled pulls 100 feet

A2 Dynamic Sled row to neck with straps 100 feet (+- 10 reps)

Rest 90 seconds, repeat for 4-5 sets

Next post will be full on strongman workout templates and finishers.

Stay Strong!

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<sup>1</sup>McGill SM, McDermott A, Fenwick CM. Comparison of different strongman events: trunk muscle activation and lumbar spine motion, load, and stiffness. *J Strength Cond Res.* 2009 Jul;23(4):1148-61. doi: 10.1519/JSC.0b013e318198f8f7. PubMed PMID: 19528856.

<sup>2</sup>Perry CG, Heigenhauser GJ, Bonen A, Spriet LL. High-intensity aerobic interval training increases fat and carbohydrate metabolic capacities in human skeletal muscle. *Appl Physiol Nutr Metab.* 2008 Dec;33(6):1112-23. doi: 10.1139/H08-097. PubMed PMID: 19088769.

<sup>3</sup>Winwood PW, Cronin JB, Posthumus LR, Finlayson SJ, Gill ND, Keogh JW. Strongman vs. traditional resistance training effects on muscular function and performance. *J Strength Cond Res.* 2015 Feb;29(2):429-39. doi: 10.1519/JSC.0000000000000629. PubMed PMID: 25627449.

<sup>4</sup>Keogh JW, Payne AL, Anderson BB, Atkins PJ. A brief description of the biomechanics and physiology of a strongman event: the tire flip. *J Strength Cond Res.* 2010 May;24(5):1223-8. doi: 10.1519/JSC.0b013e3181cc61cd. PubMed PMID: 20386131.

<sup>5</sup>Stastny P, Lehnert M, Zaatari A, Svoboda Z, Xaverova Z, Pietraszewski P. The Gluteus Medius Vs. Thigh Muscles Strength Ratio and Their Relation to Electromyography Amplitude During a Farmer's Walk Exercise. *J Hum Kinet.* 2015 Apr 7;45:157-65. doi: 10.1515/hukin-2015-0016. eCollection 2015 Mar 29. PubMed PMID: 25964819; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC4415828.

<sup>6</sup>Gaviglio CM, Osborne M, Kelly VG, Kilduff LP, Cook CJ. Salivary testosterone and cortisol responses to four different rugby training exercise protocols. *Eur J Sport Sci.* 2015 Mar 6:1-8. [Epub ahead of print] PubMed PMID: 25743223.