Convict Conditioning

The Super F.A.Q.

By Paul "Coach" Wade

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I'm painfully aware that I'm a crumbum writer. (Given the endless help I received editing, re-editing and proofing ***Convict Conditioning***, I barely qualify as a writer at all!) Since the book was first published, I've got stacks of emails from readers about different aspects of the methods I set down. Often I was mailed the same questions, over and over. In the vast majority of cases, these were questions I never got asked when I was training students hands-on. The obvious conclusion? Parts of the book were just not as clear as my readers deserved. So when **John Du Cane** (a.k.a. "The Boss") offered me the opportunity to write something for users of **Dragondoor.com**, I nearly bit his arm off.

This F.A.Q. is the end result. It represents my opportunity to clear up any aspects of the ***Convict Conditioning*** strength system that might seem vague or ambiguous. I'm not an internet guy, and I got no desire to be a public figure, so this batch of Q&As also represents my final say on these matters. If you have used my book in your own training and have a specific question you'll probably find my answer to you in here.

Thanks John, for allowing me this space on your site; thanks also to **Brett Jones** for looking at (and correcting) some of these answers. I'd also like to thank my friends and students around the world who sent me questions. Many of these questions, complete with my responses, have been replicated word for word in this F.A.Q.

A final shout out goes to **Pavel Tsatsouline**—without you making bodyweight training cool again, I wouldn't have got published in the first place. Thanks, man.

—Paul John Wade

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CONVICT CONDITIONING —THE BASICS

Is it necessary to always start at the first steps for the progressions?

First off, it should go without saying that you should always start from step 1 of each progression if you are:

- Out-of-shape
- A beginner
- Carrying an injury, or
- Lacking in confidence

It's tough to talk about where an intermediate or advanced athlete should start when beginning a *Convict Conditioning*-based workout. It's tough because all athletes are different, but also because—in my experience—most athletes (especially young males) tend to overestimate their own athletic prowess. Many times, I've seen athletes skip earlier steps, convinced that they're a waste of time and energy. But those early steps are there for a reason. They gradually condition the joints and soft tissues, build coordination and skill, and kick-start the slow process of building permanent energy supplies into the muscle cells. Those same impatient athletes often either quit from aches and pains, or they find they eventually seem to suddenly "hit a wall" in their workouts. This is because they never took the time to gradually build momentum; they never "banked" strength from the early steps to help them carry their way through the later, more advanced steps.

Intermediate or advanced athletes will probably want to think about starting from steps higher up the series; but this is a decision they should make very carefully. I know a lot of very advanced, powerful inmates who have scoffed at the idea of starting from the initial steps. Taking two or even three months on "easy" exercises can seem frustrating and unproductive. But once they've worked through the easier exercises, they often feel like new men. Old injuries begin to heal; the joints and tissues become more flexible; the nervous system "reboots" and a new, rock solid set of balance and coordination patterns begin to dominate. Motivation skyrockets.

Isn't it worth investing a couple months of your life-long training career for that kind of payoff? Jesus, most of the bodybuilders I know lay off or vacation for at least two months a year!

To answer the initial question: no. Advanced trainees don't necessarily need to start with the first steps. But starting with the first steps is never, *ever* a waste of time.

I notice you feel the need to universally lay out “ten steps" for each movement, no matter what it is. I think this makes your system artificial. Why are there ten exercises for each of the Big Six?

There aren't.

This argument is based on a simple misunderstanding. I've set the progressions for each exercise into ten simple divisions: the "ten steps". *That does not mean there are only ten exercises per movement in the Big Six*. There are, in fact, many, many more.

Let's take close *pushups* as a good example. When you have mastered regular *full pushups* (step 5) I advise strength athletes to move towards close pushups (step 6), pushups with the hands next to each other. That's one progression, right?

Wrong. As I say in the book, if you need to you can break this step up. Instead of putting your hands close the minute you master regular pushups, you can put your hands just *one inch* closer. (Some prisoners I've known marked their hand positions on the floor when working through this step.) If your hands are twenty inches apart on a regular pushup, there's twenty progressions right there—not just one!

Close pushups are an easy example of how to break a technique up, but I could’ve equally described exercises like the *horizontal pull*, the *uneven squat*, half pullups or even wall pushups. In fact, there’s not a single bodyweight technique that can’t be made simpler or progressively harder through applying minor technical alterations. Most bodyweight guys only focus on more reps and slower movement speed to make things harder. That’s valid; but what about hand position, foot position, body angle, limb leverage? These can all make a huge difference.

To a degree, the idea of "ten steps" really is an artificial construct. It's supposed to be. In reality, every single step actually branches out into lots of potential mini-progressions, each consisting of slightly different technical variations. I call these "hidden steps", and they're an important part of progressive calisthenics. An athlete who knows how to find and utilize hidden steps can keep progressing pretty much forever. In *Convict Conditioning*, I've described plenty (though not all!) of these hidden steps. Just check out the *Perfecting Your Technique* section of each exercise page and you'll see them there in black-and-white.

So why did I settle on ten basic divisions, *ten* steps? ...Why not? People groove on tens. Ten is a magic number. We have a decimal number system; people have ten fingers, ten toes. If I'd wanted,

I could've kept most of the content of the book identical, and used just eight basic steps. Or I could've used twelve. Or twenty.

The number of steps are not an issue. No matter how many progressions you require, you'll find them in the book.

How long until I can move to the next step?

Nine out of ten of the dudes I've trained all seem to ask the wrong question: *how long until I can move to the next step?* Avoid this attitude. Try to be that one, rare trainee who asks the right question: *how much longer can I keep working on the step I'm already doing, and keep gaining something from it?*

Remember: moving up a step doesn't *build* strength. It *demonstrates* strength—the strength you actually built by knuckling down and working hard on earlier steps!

A point I always try to drill into newbies is that the earlier exercises are the key to success in the later steps. They are not the enemy—not something to rush. Take your time on each step. Don't be in a hurry. Slow down, and get everything you can from your exercises. Enjoy them. Master them, inside and out. When you can say to yourself that you've honestly done this, and providing you can meet the progression standard for each exercise, using textbook form, then it's probably time to move on up to the next step.

Sadly, it's impossible to translate this kind of approach into a time limit such as "one month per step". For some athletes, spending an entire month on the earliest steps might represent an overinvestment, particularly if they're coming in off a previous course of bodyweight work. At the opposite end of the spectrum, every athlete on the planet has to cope with the reality of *diminishing* returns—in short, the closer you get to your ultimate potential, the harder it is to get even stronger, all else being equal. This means that the further you progress through the steps, the longer it takes to hit the progression standard. This isn't always the case, but it's accurate as a general rule.

This focus on slow, methodical progress is particularly important as you approach harder Master Steps like prison pushups and one-arm handstand pushups. I've known some highly advanced, terrifyingly powerful bodyweight men who will spend maybe two months just working on improving a small nuance of a bodyweight exercise; hand position, speed, leverage. They might do this several times before they are able to move up a "step"!

When you're getting more involved in bodyweight training, it's very easy to start thinking in *numbers*. You become single-minded about hitting the progression standard, to move up to another step. But your body doesn't understand numbers. It doesn't care if you move up a step. All it understands is *effort*. If—by focusing on tempo, control, and cadence—you can make an earlier step seem harder, that's exactly what you should do. Those later steps aren't going anywhere, and the more growth and strength you can eke out of the earlier steps, the easier the later steps will be. This is what I mean when I talk about "putting strength in the bank".

How long will it take me to reach the Master Steps?

How long will it take you to get a 400 pound bench press? How long will it take to you get down to 5% bodyfat? How long will it take you to write that Great American Novel? How long will it be until you get laid again?

I get asked this kind of question all the time, and I really, *really* wish I could give people an answer. But—as any coach will tell you—reaching an elite level goal is dependent on a huge amount of factors. Calisthenics success is based on your age, your sex, your natural tendon strength/muscle strength, your fiber ratios, your hormone levels, your limb length, as well as a dozen other genetic factors. Controllable variables like bodyweight, nutrition, recovery and lifestyle also play a big role, and again these differ for different people.

In reality, you can't even tell how far someone will progress when you're training them. Sure, you can get an idea of their *potential*, but potential doesn't mean jack shit. A guy with crappy genetics but a barrel-load of mental strength will go further than a dude with all the "potential" in the world who slacks off in his training to drink beer and smoke weed every night.

I've said it before, but in a sense, the Master Steps are an illusion. I've seen many guys blast beyond them. They certainly needn't represent the end of your journey. The only goal should be progress. Focus on that. As long as you're making *progress*, you're putting money in the bank.

In *Convict Conditioning,* you recommend a 2-1-2 movement speed in a couple of passages. Is this speed set in stone?

I'm a big believer that athletes coming into a serious course of calisthenics should *always* apply smooth cadence to their movements. It's better to start off on the slow side, rather than moving too fast. I advise all my students to aim for a speed of two seconds down, two seconds up, with a one second pause in the hardest position. Athletes should try to keep to this speed in all movement series—at least until they reach at least step 5.

Working at a 2-1-2 speed conveys a lot of pretty potent benefits. For a start, it helps protect the joints, and builds soft tissue integrity. (I'm not saying that fast movements are *bad* for you—just that *strong* joints can handle explosive contractions better.) Smooth, slower movements help give athletes a grounding in control and coordination, as well as building a powerful mind-muscle link. Ironically, starting slow also helps you get stronger and bigger faster. As any bodybuilder will tell you, if the momentum is doing the work, your muscles aren't. As a result, going slower and taking the momentum out of your training really shifts the load onto your muscles and joints, literally forcing them into new growth. This is why so many CC newbies report a sudden jump in muscle size and tone right from day one.

Last but not least—and as many of my "victims" will have discovered—going slow makes the earlier steps harder. (*Which is tougher: ten pushups in twenty seconds, or ten pushups in a minute?*) This means that you can spend a big chunk of training time developing your strength and muscle by utilizing fairly low risk, therapeutic movements. It's a win-win situation.

But you don't need to keep to the slow speeds forever. After step 5, you don't have to slavishly follow the 2-1-2 protocol. Moving a little faster as you progress through the later steps is fine—provided you are *consistent* from workout to workout. It's no good using momentum to gain a couple of reps since last week, and fooling yourself into thinking that's "improvement". But don't be afraid of some speed increase. Truth be told, holding perfectly slow speeds might be next to impossible on some of the harder steps, and once you reach this level some "body English" or thrust is okay.

At this point (after Step 5) you should also think about adding some supplemental explosive work, if you haven't already done so. (For more information, see *Convict Conditioning and plyometrics*, below.)

I've read that *Convict Conditioning* is only good for beginners. Is this true?

It's bullshit. I've had several people tell me that Convict Conditioning is only good for beginners, or out-of-shape newbies. Where people say this, it's inevitably because they've tried the early steps, then quit before they started getting truly strong.

I've taken a lot of shit for adding *wall pushups* to the progressions. To this day, I just don't get why. Including easier exercises in the system is like handing an empty Olympic bar to a novice. It's helpful to begin learning great form, and getting basic conditioning. But you're not meant to work with it forever! You add weights to that basic bar as you gain power.

Likewise, if you've worked on the earlier steps—strictly, and with slower timing—and you find them too easy to build strength, *then move on to harder exercises, numbnuts!*

Get to the stage where you can do:

- 5 one-arm pushups (feet close)
- 5 one-arm pullups
- 10 handstand pushups
- 20 one-leg squats
- 20 strict hanging leg raises
- 10 stand-to-stand bridges

Then come back and tell me you aren't strong, and that *Convict Conditioning* is only for beginners.

I'm starting to get serious about *Convict Conditioning*, and I really want to take my bodyweight training to the next level. What should I do?

I've been asked this question several times, and I always give the same reply. Go buy a copy of *The Naked Warrior* by Pavel Tsatsouline.

I'm not telling you this for financial gain. I don't make a single cent if you buy his manual. I'm telling you because that man is light years ahead of all the other bodyweight thinking out there. Go get the book.

PROGRAMMING: VOLUME, INTENSITY, FREQUENCY, ROUTINES

I've heard that a lot of prisoners train in their cells for several hours every day, but in *Convict Conditioning,* you only advise very short workouts. I want to beef up and gain strength as fast as possible, so shouldn't I be training for a lot longer?

Ladies and gents, there's something you need to know if you want your body to adapt by gaining strength. Strength and endurance are polar opposites. *Strength* is a short-term thing. The stimulus for strength only happens over a small space of time. As a result, the stimulus for gaining strength is not cumulative.

I hear youse guys. You're asking: *but Paul, what the hell do you mean when you say that "the stimulus for strength is not cumulative"?* Just that, in training, sets don't have a cumulative effect.

Let me give you an example. If you bench press 500 pounds on one set, then 50 pounds on the next, the body doesn't think it just bench pressed 550 pounds. Your body will gain the strength it needs to adapt from the 500 pound stimulus. Since your body is already adapting to the 500 pounds, what was the use of the 50 pounds? There was none. It was wasted.

Bodyweight strength work is really no different. If you want to gain strength and muscle, give it your all (but not to failure!) over a couple of sets at most. If you're learning coordination for a new technique, three sets, even four is acceptable. But for gaining maximum strength and muscle, keep your sets low and your effort high. Work hard and you can gain well on just one set. I usually advise two "work" sets, just as a belt-and-braces approach.

Back when I was in jail, I often used a lot more sets—sometimes hundreds a day. They increased my endurance, but did jack shit for my strength. In fact, the more volume I used, the more my raw

power dwindled. Guys on the inside don't train all day to get stronger or more muscular. They train to fill the time.

If you're on the outside—with a life and commitments—you'd be nuts to train like those convicts who go for long, exhausting sessions over hours through the day. Extra training beyond what you need to stimulate strength and growth is a total waste. It not only drains physical energy that could be put to better use, it also extends recovery time and irritates the joints.

Any thoughts on the mental aspects of training? How do I stop myself quitting?

Convict Conditioning is a tough program. Like any intense strength training, it's physically tough; but more than that, it's tough on the mind. There's no flashy equipment to keep you interested. It's not a team sport—you train alone, and suffer alone. It takes a huge amount of patience and consistency to stick with a bodyweight program and add reps week after week. It's Spartan. The movements require a lot of control, a lot of discipline to master. These elements make Convict Conditioning one of the harshest training styles to have to weather. It only survived behind bars so long because there are just no alternatives—at least, nothing that really works.

On the outside, it's much harder to maintain a decent concentration span when it comes to training. I often write programs for guys, only to speak to them six months in and discover they've flipped back and forwards to different routines since then. I ask them why they quit the bodyweight work, and get all kinds of excuses; *I couldn't feel it working…I read about a different routine I thought would be better…I missed the weights…I was paranoid that I'd lose size*…and so on. But when I get to the nitty-gritty and ask these guys whether they were progressively increasing reps on a *Convict Conditioning* routine, they always answer "yes". In fact, most of these quitters were adding reps week-in, week-out to their exercises.

At its heart, bodyweight strength work is difficult to screw up. You pick a movement, work it hard, add reps, then graduate to a harder movement. It's progressive training at its purest. If you get this right, it's almost impossible *not* to grow and get stronger. The people who quit the routine never do so because of lack of *physical* progress. They inevitably quit for psychological reasons.

If I could pass on one big clue on how to keep on training long-term, it would be this: *athletes with the greatest training longevity are the ones who instinctively know how to make training more entertaining, more interesting for themselves*. Boredom is cancer. Avoid it by altering your routine every few months. Changes don't have to radical to be effective. Here are some options:

- Change the order of the exercises
- Change your rep range
- Change your volume
- Change your training speed
- Add in variants
- Set new short/medium term goals to hit
- Focus on some explosive work for a while
- Change your training frequency
- Add some spice: neck work, grip, calves, cardio
- Mix in some skill work; balance, gymnastics, acrobatics
- Cross-train: boxing, martial arts, wrestling
- Devote some specialist training to a single movement
- Shake things up with ultra-high reps

If you allow yourself to be flexible and creative, it's easy to shake off boredom. Don't lose your gains by quitting. Sure, if your training is just too tough, it's okay to take your foot off the gas from time to time, provided you come back harder. But if you do radically come off your program—maybe by going back to weight training—maintain your bodyweight gains by adding in just one total-body calisthenics workout per week. That way, if you do choose to go back to CC, you won't have lost ground.

In the end, no amount of tricks can make up for low discipline. This is just as true when it comes to fat loss as muscle and strength gain. John Du Cane has estimated that only 3% of athletes who seriously begin training in *Convict Conditioning* will see it through in the long-term. Resolve to become one of that elite group of bodyweight warriors.

Why shouldn't I train to failure?

Consistent hard work is the key to success in bodyweight training. I'm not a big believer in "light" or "easy" training sessions. Provided you are fit and healthy, and if you have followed through the early steps to get your joints and tendons conditioned to the heavier work, there's no need to slack off. You need to work hard when you train—real hard. The harder you work, the better your results. Training is serious business. Take it seriously.

This doesn't mean that you should train to failure. For those unfamiliar with this idea, "training to failure" means you continue your set until you cannot complete another rep.

Some very hardcore athletes—bodybuilders in particular—have taken this type of training to the limit. One of the major proponents of training to failure was Arthur Jones, exercise ideologist, eccentric genius and inventor of the Nautilus exercise machines. When Jones was training athletes,

he pushed them incredibly hard. When they could no longer lift a weight against gravity (the *positive* movement), he had them control the bar's descent (the *negative* movement) until they failed at that as well. Jones used to say that a set of curls wasn't over until the bar literally dropped out of an athlete's exhausted hands! That is true training to failure.

As anybody who trains this way will happily tell you, there are pros and cons to this approach. Like I said, the harder you work, the better your results, and training to failure can definitely bring home great results over the short term. But training this hard takes its toll on the body, not to mention the mind. Jones practically had to hold some of his athletes at gunpoint to get them to train this hard. It's not fun. It's brutal. After a few months of this kind of training, the body and mind start to rebel against the torture.

Despite the potential benefits of exploring this kind of extreme method, I don't believe that bodyweight athletes should train to failure. Bodyweight training, at its simplest, is about *learning to control your body*. *Control* is an essential principle of bodyweight training. But when you train to failure, you have *lost control*, by definition. Losing control can also be unsafe during bodyweight training. Hitting failure during inverse work means you can't hold yourself up—you crash to the floor, head first. You don't want your muscles to suddenly "fail" when you're hanging above the ground for pullups, either. When you are performing compound, total-body calisthenics, you should always leave a little energy in your limbs to complete your set safely.

Remember, Jones—the arch-advocate of training to failure—was, first and foremost, a *manufacturer of exercise machines*. He became a multi-millionaire in the 70's by selling his *Nautilus* range to gyms all around the world. Jones' training philosophy was originally designed to promote his machines. Training to failure on an exercise machine is a totally different animal than training to failure on a calisthenics exercise. The machine "locks" you into position and determines the arc of the movement 100%. When your muscles give out, you can't fall over or start moving in a different direction. This makes training to failure safer. Unfortunately this feature of being "locked in" also makes machine training inferior for building strength, because it robs the body of the need to stabilize itself. It's this stability factor that integrates the entire body into a unit; without this integration, true functional strength is impossible.

You don't need to work to failure to grow and get stronger. When you've become conditioned to your progressive calisthenics movements, you should work as hard as possible, but always leave at *least* one safe rep in the bank. This can be tough to gauge in the heat of battle; so as a good rule of thumb, you should terminate your sets when the quality of movement begins to deteriorate significantly. If you feel the need to work beyond this point, resist the temptation to keep going to failure. Instead, either continue on with partial movements, or take a brief rest and return to your set to perform a few more quality reps. *Negative-only training* should only be considered in special circumstances, by very advanced athletes.

Why do the progression standards you lay out all require such high (often 20+) reps? I thought low reps were better for strength.

Convict Conditioning is essentially based on the "double progression" method of training. This just means that you keep working at a certain level, building up your reps until you hit a pre-determined target rep goal. When you hit this rep goal, you increase the resistance of the exercise. This drives the reps down and you repeat the process.

Virtually every productive strength training system known to man is based around the double progression method. Whether you work with dumbbells, machines, or kettlebells, the basic principle remains the same: you work at a fixed level of intensity until you can handle a target level of volume, then you jack up the resistance and start over. You progress by increasing volume, then you progress by increasing intensity (hence the term "double progression"). The only difference between bodyweight strength training and strength training with external weights is that with bodyweight work the "resistance" you increase is the difficulty of the movement, rather than just throwing more weight on a bar.

In prison bodyweight programs, it's typical to use target reps that are in the higher range; at least ten, often up to twenty or beyond. The reason why has to do with the logic of bodyweight training. Often, the move from one bodyweight exercise to the next, tougher step, represents quite a hike in strength. The jump from half one-arm pullups (step 8) to assisted one-arm pullups (step 9) is a good example. Working with triple reps might be theoretically "better for strength", but if you can only barely do three reps on the half one-arm pullup, your chances of being able to move on to the assisted pullup next time is zero!

With bodyweight progressions, the best chance of moving on forwards is to gain as much strength possible from the exercise you are working on, before attempting something significantly more difficult. One of the best ways to really master an exercise is through high reps. In this sense, higher reps can be used by bodyweight athletes as a *strength tool*. (Who is *stronger* at one-leg squats? An athlete who can only do two reps, or an athlete who can do twenty?)

In contrast, lower reps are fine if you are training with weights. Let's say you can curl 100 pounds for three reps. If three reps is your progression goal, you can add 5 pounds to the bar and try again. That only increases the output of the set by 5%. With bodyweight training, it's much more difficult to add progress in such small, measurable increments. The most reliable way is by focusing on higher reps. Low reps sets make progress harder. If you can do four pushups, adding one rep makes for an output increase of 25%. But if you can do 20 pushups, adding one rep is an increase of just 5%. This is why higher rep sets are much more manageable and make progress smoother over time.

In addition to the math behind progression, higher rep sets convey a wealth of benefits that low-rep training just can't deliver. First off, higher reps are better for adding muscle. You can improve nervous efficiency without fatigue, but if you want to gain mass, you need to deplete those muscles. That means higher reps. Higher reps work the cardiovascular system, prevent and heal injuries, and increase muscular endurance. They improve the mind-muscle link so precious to bodybuilders. It's another overlooked factor, but higher reps also teach *control*. When you're working an exercise you can barely handle, it's difficult to master perfect control; but with a slightly lighter load, you have more wiggle room. Perfection is within reach. Sweet.

I'm not saying that low reps should be avoided like the plague. Once in a while, it's fine to change things around and go for low reps. Maybe you're toying with a new exercise; perhaps you are feeling strong; possibly you just want to add some variety into your workouts. At times like this, it's a great idea to throw some low rep work in. But if you want to progress in bodyweight strength over the long term, low reps just won't cut it.

Why can't I work the same bodyweight exercises every day?

Well, you can—and sometimes maybe you should. If your goal is to pick up some skill in a specific technique, you can work that move every day—provided you don't work too hard. Working this way is essentially, a form of motor learning. It trains the nervous system. The nervous system is capable of adapting at a fairly high speed—sometimes *seconds* (think of drilling a skill like a karate technique or a dance move). As a result, you can potentially train like this several times a day.

If you want to maximize your strength *and* size, however, this kind of neurological training won't get the job done. As well as training your nervous system, you need to train your *muscular system*. Your *nervous system* adapts by reconfiguring the software that's already there, essentially becoming more efficient. That's why it can adapt so damn fast. But the muscular system can only adapt by adding new hardware—by increasing size. This takes much longer.

Your muscles are powered by chemical energy. If you exhaust that chemical energy—through hard, fatiguing work—this triggers a survival response on a cellular level. Your body builds even more chemical energy into your muscles, in case you have to perform the same exhausting feat again. But regenerating then building onto these stores ain't easy for the body, and it takes time. That's why you should wait at least 48 hours before working the same muscle group again. For many average, drug-free athletes an entire week—or more—is better. If you keep repeating this "exhaust-rebuild" process, the chemical stores stack up significantly and your muscles get larger. So if you want to get big, train hard, exhaust your muscles, and let them rest a few days before hitting them again.

In the *Convict Conditioning* system, there's only one exception to this "exhausting and infrequent" rule—*consolidation training*. If (despite hard training and "putting strength in the bank") you find you move up to a nearly impossible step, consolidation work involves frequent, daily, low-rep, non-exhausting attempts at the movement. This is an advanced prison strategy that builds confidence, co-ordination, and trains the nervous system to leap the chasm and get a handle on the new feat without *burning* out the muscles. Unfortunately—as with any nervous adaptation—improvement happens quickly, and as a result the Law of Diminishing Returns is amplified. For this reason, inmates tend to only use consolidation for short bursts, to get the most out of it.

Inevitably, some people have likened the consolidation work used in jails to the *grease the groove* approach employed by Hardstyle practitioners. But (as far as I can see) the two are different, in both motive and application. Whereas grease the groove is a long-term strength methodology based on training strength as a skill, consolidation work is a short-term tactic designed to allow an athlete to "feel out" an intimidating or unusual bodyweight technique. Both methods are built on neurological/psychological adaptation, but GTG is potentially forever, while consolidation training is just a sneaky ploy to allow an athlete to "unlock" a new, advanced technique as quickly as possible, so that they can stash it in their training arsenal and get back to the business of building muscle. Another difference is that GTG can be employed in a variety of rep ranges, depending on your goals. Consolidation training, on the other hand, is only ever used for fairly low reps—if you could already get lots of reps on a particular movement, you wouldn't need to consolidate. You'd just work it hard and stick to regular CC-style progression.

The bottom line: If you want to see a big jump in muscle size over the shortest time possible, you need to fatigue your muscles over a brief period, and then rest and grow. There's no other way. This is true whether you are using bodyweight training, barbells and dumbbells, high-tech machines or sandbags. It doesn't make any difference. Daily consolidation work on a tricky technique can help train the nervous system, but it won't make you any bigger and it has a fast rate of diminishing returns, so use it sparingly.

Many of the training books and articles I've read are mostly made up of training routines. But *Convict Conditioning* only includes one brief chapter on programming. Why? Are these the only routines you endorse?

First off, a lot of people write to me telling me that they are "on the *Convict Conditioning* program". This is wrong. "*Convict Conditioning*" is not a program. It's an approach.

I can sum up this approach real quick:

1. Pick a handful of compound bodyweight movements that, taken together, work the entire body.

2. Work hard on each bodyweight exercise until you hit a target number of reps.

3. When you hit your target number of reps, move to a slightly harder version of the same exercises.

4. Repeat 2-3.

The bulk of the book is dedicated to 3. In the book, I'm trying to show how prisoners vary positioning, leverage and range of motion to take any given bodyweight movement from "easy" to "damn near impossible". Whether a reader likes my writing or not, I want everyone who reads *Convict Conditioning* to come away understanding that any bodyweight movement can be taken from beginner to elite level, in a series of gradual steps. If I can do that, I've achieved something very important. I'm helping to bring calisthenics back into the strength world.

If you think about it, this approach—meet a rep goal, then add intensity—is no different from basic barbell training. With *Convict Conditioning*, I'm just trying to hand down a solid, rusty old barbell used by myself and many others. It comes with plenty of plates—as many as you'd ever need. Once you have a barbell with a shedload of plates, you can pick almost any routine you like to work with it. Some will be bad, some will be good. But there are a great many to choose from, and they are independent of the barbell.

Convict Conditioning is like this. Don't confuse the *approach*—progressive calisthenics—with the programs used. Of course, I only put in a selection of the routines I think are the best. But don't become a routine zealot. Why? Because no single routine, however good, will take care of you your whole life. *So focus on your approach not your routine.*

As far as switching routines, you should give most routines a three month run to see some results. But beyond that, I'm a big believer in shaking a routine up every few months, just for sanity's sake. Learn to do this yourself—be your own coach. Experiment, move things around, change, invent. If you are increasing your reps, your form, or if you are moving to harder exercises (i.e., 2-3 above) you're doing something right. Keep on keepin' on.

Higher frequency program templates

I often get asked why I promote low frequency programs—routines where, for the most part, you work each movement hard, just once per week. The simple answer is that *these routines work*. I'm a big believer in optimizing rest and recovery for maximum strength and growth. Remember: you don't grow when you train. Training just damages muscle. You grow when you rest!

I'm hesitant to recommend higher frequency programs. Why? Because if you dish them out, most guys will start using them! That's not always a good thing, baby. It's a much better rule of thumb to start with a good, solid, lower frequency program (like Good Behavior) and see how you go. If you keep making progress every week, why add more frequency? That's why all the programs I really pushed in *Convict Conditioning* were lower frequency: *New Blood, Good Behavior* and *Veterano*.

But there may be circumstances where upping the frequency actually works. Perhaps for an athlete coming back after a layoff, where muscle memory allows them to progress faster; for trainees choosing to work at lower intensity; maybe in cases of men and women with unusually powerful recovery abilities; and so on. In these situations, I have a "little black book" of effective higher frequency programs I like to throw at people. I didn't want to include them in the book, because a big chunk of athletes (eager, young, or just plain impatient) would bypass the other, more helpful routines and start using the more frequent ones right off the bat. Since most drug-free athletes (like it or not) suit lower frequency strength work, these higher frequency routines would do nothing but slow up their progress. And guess who'd get the blame? Me, dammit!

I've listed four of these programs below. I didn't want these routines in the book, but I'm a lot happier tucking them away here—on a website which tends to attract more experienced lifters and bodyweight athletes. That said, don't go overusing these suckers or using them inappropriately and blaming yours truly. I ran down a puppy this morning and I got enough guilt in my life.

Here goes…

1. New Blood v 2.0

This version of the New Blood program involves training an exercise *three* times every two weeks, as opposed to *twice* every two weeks, as for the basic New Blood program. This routine would suit experienced athletes or people with good recovery abilities who are beginning to adapt to, and thrive on, the *Convict Conditioning* system. It would also work with experienced athletes coming back to *Convict Conditioning* after a lay-off.

New Blood v 2.0

MONDAY:	PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	LEG RAISES	2-3 WORK SETS
TUESDAY:	-	
WEDNESDAY:	PULLUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	SQUATS	2-3 WORK SETS
THURSDAY:	-	
FRIDAY:	PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	LEG RAISES	2-3 WORK SETS
SATURDAY:	-	
SUNDAY:	-	

REPEAT THE FOLLOWING WEEK, CONTINUING TO ALTERNATE THE TWO WORKOUTS

- New Blood 2.0 follows the same basic pattern of New Blood, but you work more often. You do pushups and leg raises on Monday, take Tuesday off, do pullups and squats on Wednesday, and return to pushups and leg raises on Friday. You then take Saturday and Sunday off to recuperate fully. The next week, you would begin with the pullups and squats, and perform those on Monday and Friday, doing the pushups and leg raises only on the Wednesday. On week three, you'd come full circle and repeat week one.

- This routine allows for some good recovery time, but it still may be a bit much for some people. Remember that although we are using weekly cycles for ease of explanation, these are not set in stone. There's nothing magic about seven days. If you experiment with this routine and find you need to add more recovery days to it, you can. For example, some people might like to perform the pushups and leg raises, take *two* days off, perform pullups and squats, take two days off, and simply repeat their training like that, with no need for a weekly structure. Remember, with prison bodyweight arts, you aren't tied to a gym which might be closed on Sunday. You can train whenever suits your recovery and personal timetable—not the schedule of the guy who runs the local gym.

2. Hard Time

A tough set of pushups are even more demanding than a tough set of bench presses. The average weight-trainer does one hard set of benches a week—why should pushups be any different? Another reason I tend to advise most athletes to do just one pushup workout a week is because handstand pushups work similar muscles. If you are doing both exercises, you're working out the same muscles twice a week. The following workout—Hard Time—balances this out by adding in a second weekly pulling movement, too: the horizontal pull. So you have four upper body movements to play with weekly (the *pushup*, the *pullup*, the *handstand pushup*, and the *horizontal pull*). This routine would suit more intermediate-advanced men; those beyond step five in most movements.

Hard Time

MONDAY:	PULLUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	HS PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
TUESDAY:	-	
WEDNESDAY:	BRIDGES	2-3 WORK SETS
	LEG RAISES	2-3 WORK SETS
	SQUATS	2-3 WORK SETS
THURSDAY:	-	
FRIDAY:	PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	HORIZONTAL PULL	2-3 WORK SETS
SATURDAY:	-	
SUNDAY:	-	

- The horizontal pull is an excellent addition to any routine. Whereas pullups work *vertical* pulling strength, *horizontal* pulls work horizontal pulling strength. This combo works very well with handstand pushups and regular pushups, because they work vertical and horizontal pushing strength, respectively. Combining these four exercises into one routine works the upper body from every possible angle.

- This routine is ideally for trainees who have already progressed beyond horizontal pulls—you should already be expert in this movement. When you incorporate the horizontal pull back into your routine, you'll have to work on it progressively to keep making it challenging. Just use *Convict Conditioning* principles; change the leverage (use a lower base over time); use an uneven grip (with one arm out, forcing more load on the other arm); use a close grip (to work the arm flexors—the weak links), etc. You get the picture, right?

- This program throws a lot of work onto the upper body; different push/pull movements are worked twice a week. Lower body (legs, posterior chain and waist) by contrast gets just one workout. It's a great choice for adding a lot of mass and strength to the torso and arms in a hurry—but only if you have the stamina to recover and adapt. It's also a good routine for trainees who want lots of upper body work, but who need to be careful about overdoing lower body stuff—athletes who are already dedicated to sports like running or cycling might benefit from this workout pattern.

3. Good Behavior v 2.0

Good Behavior 2.0 is the exact same schedule of three workouts used in the classic Good Behavior routine, but instead of being spread through the week, they are performed on sequential days. These three workouts are then repeated for the next three days, and the athlete follows God's example and takes a well deserved break on the seventh. This advanced version of Good Behavior is only for expert athletes who have been training several years, and who have above normal recovery ability.

Good Behavior v 2.0

MONDAY:	PUSHUPS	2 WORK SETS
	LEG RAISES	2 WORK SETS
TUESDAY:	PULLUPS	2 WORK SETS
	SQUATS	2 WORK SETS
WEDNESDAY:	HS PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	BRIDGES	2-3 WORK SETS
THURSDAY:	PUSHUPS	2 WORK SETS
	LEG RAISES	2 WORK SETS
FRIDAY:	PULLUPS	2 WORK SETS
	SQUATS	2 WORK SETS
SATRUDAY:	HS PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	BRIDGES	2-3 WORK SETS
SUNDAY:	-	

- This kind of routine is not for most people. It involves six workouts a week with only a single day off, and exercises are performed twice per week. It might look good to eager trainees because there's a lot of training involved, but a lot of training doesn't necessarily mean you progress any quicker. *Quality* of training is more important than *quantity*, and never forget that *you grow when you rest*. If this kind of training exceeds your body's natural recovery abilities—as it will for most people—you might actually slip backwards in your training.

- Even great athletes who are used to this routine will find it's just too much for them if they begin to compromise their sleep patterns and relaxation throughout the day. Like the other routines, this one can be altered if needs be. Add extra rest days if you are not recuperating, or if your reps are slipping back.

4. Revolving Door

One problem I often find with higher volume routines is that after the first two exercises, a trainee often loses motivation or just stops giving their all. Revolving Door is really a routine for athletes who find they have a lot of endurance, plenty of energy per session. If this is you, the routine works very well. Insert rest days wherever you feel progress is slipping.

Revolving Door

DAY 1:	PULLUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	SQUATS	2-3 WORK SETS
	PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
DAY 2:	-	
DAY 3:	HS PUSHUPS	2-3 WORK SETS
	BRIDGES	2-3 WORK SETS
	LEG RAISES	2-3 WORK SETS
DAY 4:	-	

CONTINUE TO REVOLVE THE TWO WORKOUTS,
WITH A DAY OFF IN BETWEEN

- You perform the Big Six movements over two sessions, focusing on three non-conflicting/overlapping movements per session. Both sessions revolve, with a day of rest in between. This routine is really a four-day program, repeating for as long as want, or need.

These routines all center around the Big Six. For those of you interested in inserting more cross-training into your workouts (cardio, reflex training, agility work, etc.) I'll be offering even more program choices in *Convict Conditioning 2*.

SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES

I've heard that a lot of prisoners train in their cells for several hours every day, but in *Convict Conditioning*, you I'm having a hell of a time with horizontal rowing. I can do plenty of pullups, but making the progression standard of horizontal pulls seems much tougher.

Horizontal pulls are step 2 of the pullup series. Horizontal pulls should not be harder than *full pullups*, which are step 5. In terms of difficulty, you should be finding horizontal pulls somewhere in between *vertical pulls* (step 1) and *jackknife pulls* (step 3) in terms of difficulty. If this isn't the case, you gotta change things so it is.

As I pointed out in the book, it's pretty easy to moderate the difficulty of horizontal pulls. In basic terms, the higher the bar is, the easier the exercise becomes, because your body is at a greater angle and more force can travel through your heels instead of your hands.

If you are really struggling with horizontal pulls as shown in the book—pulling off a base that's hip height—try the exercise with a higher hand position; up to as high as your sternum. (This isn't as complex to achieve as it might sound. Just find two sturdy objects at this height, and securely place a bar or pole over them.)

Work this exercise hard, diligently, and strictly as you gradually add reps to hit the progression standard. When you hit the progression standard, try some jackknife pulls on your next workout. If you can comfortably make the beginner standard on jackknife pulls, continue working with them. If you can't easily handle the beginner standard, or the jackknife pulls seem just too tough to work with, go back to the horizontal rows, and drop the hand position by a few inches. Work on this for a few sessions, and when you hit the progression standard again try the jackknife pulls one more time.

Wash, rinse, repeat. Keep on this way until the jackknife pulls are easy enough to work with safely.

Progressive calisthenics ain't brain surgery. You work an exercise in your difficulty range until you master it, find something more difficult, then repeat the process. If an exercise is too hard to really get a strict workout with, find something easier. If the exercise is too easy to really get a strict workout with, find something harder. The book, plus your body's own natural smarts, will show you how.

I've never seen a one-arm handstand pushup. Is this move even possible?

Yeah, the one-arm handstand pushup IS possible. I've done it, I've seen others do it, and I've taught others to do it. Naysayers who claim this move doesn't exist just because they've never seen it just don't grasp the potential of the human body.

The body does what it's told. Everybody said a four hundred pound bench press was impossible, before Doug Hepburn did it back in 1950. Three years later he did five hundred pounds. Elite athletes can now bench press more than twice that much. Never believe the naysayers when it comes to human potential.

If handstand pushups were as popular as the bench press, you'd see guys doing one-arm handstand pushups in gyms all over the place. But handstand pushups, sadly, have fallen out of favor—at least, on the outside. In prisons they are still more popular than the bench press in some places because you can do them inside your cell, anytime.

It's not just bodyweight exercises that become unfashionable and fall into decline as time goes by. It happens to weighted exercises too—even the best ones. The bent press is a great example. Over a hundred years ago, the great Arthur Saxon bent pressed 370 pounds under official conditions (he lifted a good deal more unofficially). Like the handstand pushup, this exercise has been neglected by the modern training world. Go look at Youtube—you won't find anyone bent pressing more than 200 pounds. Does that mean a 200-plus pound bent press is "impossible"? No way—back in the days before steroids and growth hormone, Saxon was approaching nearly twice that weight!

Next time somebody tells you that a one-arm handstand pushup is "impossible", just remember the facts. The human body can bench press over a thousand pounds; jerk 580 pounds; and bent press 370 pounds. Are you telling me that it's "impossible" for a 180 pound athlete to half press his bodyweight up with one arm (and maybe a kip of the legs)?

Nowhere near impossible, my friend. Not even in the same league as impossible!

Most of the "Master Steps" represent incredible feats of bodyweight strength. But hanging leg raises don't seem that hard. Why the disparity?

In prison culture, hanging leg raises are the king of gut training exercises. They are a basic, simple movement that works the entire anterior chain, plus the grip, while improving spinal flexibility and hip strength. They'll also give you a bitching six-pack if you work them hard.

Despite this, it's definitely true to say that there are harder movements you can do for your midsection, many of them drawn from gymnastics. But prison training is not gymnastics. The majority of very strong prison trainees prefer to preserve the majority of their energy for building their shoulders, back and arms rather than really focussing on super-specialist gymnastic abdominal training. This is just a fact of prison training culture, and it's reflected in *Convict Conditioning*.

The "Master Steps"—all of them—are illusory. They are not end points, but hypothetical stages in a personal journey of strength. That's all. If you get to the point where you can knock out a couple sets of 30 strict hanging leg raises fairly easily, there's nothing stopping you from finding harder abdominal movements to work with. But you will probably find that you're happy with your waist strength by the time you reach that level.

Remember, the waist is already involved in all total-body calisthenics movements. You work your core when you do pushups, pullups, squats and bridges. The muscles of the midsection have evolved to work in conjunction with the rest of the body, and developing the waist beyond those needs is pointless. That's why many incredibly powerful athletes don't perform specific midsection movements at all.

Here's the bottom line: if you do choose to work your gut, a few strict sets of hanging leg raises are all that's required to unlock all the functional power you'll ever need.

I learned to do pistols a while back, but since starting CC I'm still having trouble with the uneven squat. Any ideas?

Uneven squats are an amazing "secret" exercise for balance, flexibility and joint strength. Unfortunately, because it's flat out difficult to squat with your heel on a b-ball, very few athletes take the time to master this critical move. As a result there's a whole generation of bodyweight athletes who can perform one-leg squats—but don't have the skill or strength to tackle uneven squats.

This has led to some dudes mistakenly thinking that uneven squats are straight up harder than one-leg squats. This ain't even close to being true. If you ask an athlete who has been properly trained using the *Convict Conditioning* steps in the right order, they'll tell you that (after mastering *close squats*—step 6) uneven squats were easily approachable, *even if* full one-leg squats were still an impossibility. If you can't yet quite handle a one-leg squat, uneven squats will help you get there by providing just a touch of assistance to get you moving upwards from a dead stop—while simultaneously promoting stability in the bottom position and reinforcing a perfect sitting pattern.

Athletes who can perform one-leg squats but can't manage uneven squats should definitely retrace their steps and start working hard on the uneven squat. Mastering the uneven squat will definitely make their one-leg squat better; it'll feel tighter, better balanced, and more solid but "springy" in the bottom position.

Many people who find the uneven squat an impossibility just need to make some minor adjustments. For example, resting your heel on a basketball is fine for average-sized brothers and sisters. But for trainees with proportionately shorter legs, a basketball might prove a tad too high; shifting their centre of gravity back and threatening to topple them over. These athletes will have to find a slightly smaller ball. (A soccer ball is a tad smaller than a b-ball.) But even for most shorter-limbed or differently-built dudes, the uneven squat using a basketball is easily within the range of do-ability—provided they break the exercise up into more manageable chunks.

Remember: when faced with failure in calisthenics, you should always do what you can do—rather than hopelessly attempting to do what you can't do. If uneven squats using a basketball are impossible, raise your foot on a stable object instead. Maybe a couple of bricks, or books. When you can do squats this way, build up the level of the bricks/books until they are at the height of the basketball. Once you've hit the progression standard there, try the basketball again—you'll find (after weeks of gradual progress) that the b-ball version has "suddenly" become easier. So in this case, one step actually opens out into four or five progressions (a.k.a. "hidden steps"—although not hidden real well, as you can find 'em on page 96 of the book).

Why is the Convict Conditioning one-arm pushup done with the feet close together? I thought you were meant to spread your feet wide on this exercise.

Simple answer—because this is what I learned to do behind bars.

In modern jails you might see a lot of bench pressing in the yard gym, if there is one. But this is kinda recent. Even today, a lot of athletes behind bars don't work the bench press for a bunch of reasons. Instead, they work the same muscles with the one-arm pushup. But the regular one-arm pushup—with the feet spread, the arm out to the side, and the torso twisted—is just too easy to really test most strong guys. For this reason, real powerhouses tend to favor the one-arm pushup with the feet closer together. In some circles, these feet-close one-arm pushups are known as "prison pushups", to differentiate them from the easier type of one-arm pushup regularly seen on the outside.

Doing your pushups the prison way forces you to keep your hand *under* your body, rather than splaying it out to the side. This prevents the larger pectorals from doing all the work, and forces the stress onto the triceps and front deltoids (much more "functional" muscles, for reasons I discuss in the book).

A lot of athletes who can easily perform regular one-arm pushups, attempt prison pushups and get a shock. They find themselves unsteady, and too weak to go deep. Often they tip to one side. When this happens they get pissed, and either give up or assume that the movement is impossible. I've had several people tell me that they have "figured out" that the prison pushup is not viable for *balance* reasons. This is false. If it really was impossible to retain equilibrium during a the positive (upwards) motion of the prison pushup, then the negative (downwards) motion would be just as impossible, because the balance pattern is identical, but in reverse. But many athletes discover that they can do a strict negative on the prison pushup, even if they can't yet throw out the positive. I didn't show it in the book, but a body bend—not a twist towards the floor, but a sideways snake-like bend—can help guys master the balance factor, as strength is being developed.

The reality is that most athletes have trouble with the prison pushup because they lack the strength. Because the exercise is a part of calisthenics, most people just don't give the prison pushup the respect it deserves. Trust me—it's a serious strength feat.

Put this into perspective...depending on your build, you will press up to 70% of your bodyweight on a pushup. (A lot of guys say 50 to 65 percent, but this is an underestimation.) You can test this yourself if you want; just do some pushups with your hands on a bathroom scale, then do the math. If you weigh a solid 220, that means you're pushing about the equivalent of 154lbs—in other words, 77lbs per arm. When you put one hand behind your back to perform a one-arm pushup, the entire 154lbs has to be pressed by the remaining arm. Effectively, you're doubling the load.

Think about how that kind of force would equate to a barbell lift—the bench press. 154lbs per arm would equate to 308lbs on a two-arm bench press! In fact, the prison one-arm pushup is *harder* than a bench press, because whereas classical benching allows the pecs to take the load, the prison one-arm pushup places far more pressure on the elbows, forearms and front delts. It's much more like a close grip bench press, with hands only a few inches apart.

Think about this; for a fairly big athlete, the prison pushup can be the equivalent of a close-grip bench press...with 308lbs. That's a LOT of strength. By no means impossible, but freaking impressive. There are pro bodybuilders who can't do anything near that. Most men—strong guys, who train regularly—would be CRUSHED by that in a gym.

I often scratch my head when guys expect to approach this Master Step seemingly overnight. How long would you have to train to achieve a strict 300+ close grip bench press? It would take a lot of time and dedication. Possibly years of intelligent, progressive workouts—if you ever got there. (How many gymrats do you know who can close press 308?) And yet most guys drop to the floor and expect to do the bodyweight equivalent in a coupla weeks. Sheesh.

Remember also, that prison pushups require total body strength, including an iron midsection and back, as well as coordinated power. The *stability* factor is another significant issue. This means that, for most men, the prison pushup is *even harder* than the approximate weighted equivalent. In the joint I used to surprise people because I could bench press 315 (three wheels per side—welded on!) quite easily, despite never training with weights. This was purely due to my mastery of the proper, feet together one-arm pushup. All the big, porky lifters used to scratch their heads at how a guy could get so strong doing "just pushups". This is how. I learned my system from an older generation, who *understood* this shit.

Forget feet-wide pushups. Always keep your feet together from day one, and you'll not only build more useful strength and muscle, you'll build it faster.

MORE PRISON TRAINING

Is it true that there will be a sequel to *Convict Conditioning*?

Yes and no. There will be another book coming, but it's not a *sequel* in the sense of a "follow up".

Back when I was in jail—this was the late 90s—somebody told me I should write down all my training knowledge in a book, so people on the outside could access the kind of workout methodology prisoners were employing to get into peak shape. I became real passionate about this idea, and conceived of a total "bible" of prison training knowledge, containing pretty much everything worth knowing about prison training methods. I put this book together, but it really looked like a "bible"—it was over 700 pages. This was just too damn big for the world of modern publishing. A friend of mine who edited the original manuscript took a look at it and split it into two parts; the main strength training exercises, and "everything else".

The main strength training portion was further polished and this was put out as *Convict Conditioning*. This left "everything else", from shotgun muscles to diet, cardio, flexibility and other cell methods like reflex workouts. This portion will be published as *Convict Conditioning 2*.

Athletes who enjoyed CC will probably want to take a look at CC2, but CC2 isn't a sequel. The books complement each other, but you can use either book as a "stand alone" manual without missing out.

In the *Solitary Confinement* routine, you mention grip, calf and neck work, but you don't give any programs for these areas. What's up?

In the original manuscript, I included bodyweight programs for working the grip, neck and calves. Due to space constrictions, these programs have ended up as chapters in the sequel, *Convict Conditioning 2*.

In jail, these three areas are sometimes called "shotgun muscles", because they ride shotgun with the larger workhorses of the arms, legs and trunk. If you are working the Big Six hard, you may feel no need to perform extra work your neck, grip or calves. But if you want to know how to specialize on these areas using bodyweight-only progressions, CC2 will teach you everything you need to know.

Grip strength is a key part of total strength. But the trend for grip specialists today seems to be based around machines, grippers and other external equipment. In reality, the healthiest and most efficient way to work the hell out of your grip is with traditional bodyweight techniques. My grip program will show you how to turn your weak digits into steel vices.

At least the modern training world is getting turned on to the importance of hand strength. Seems like everywhere people are talking about grip power, grippers, etc. This is a good thing, but how many athletes are thinking about *foot* strength? Every time you lift a weight or move, force travels directly through the feet. Yet foot, calf and ankle training is something you just don't see discussed. I'll give you the prison perspective.

The same might be said of neck work. If you plan on getting into a fight, you had better have a strong neck to protect your noggin. That's why boxers, wrestlers and convicts still have a lot to teach about safe, advanced neck-building techniques, even if this valuable info has disappeared from modern gyms.

I'm interested in adding some bodyweight training to my regular training program at the gym, but I don't want to quit the weights. Any ideas?

I think that everyone who works out with weights—even die-hard iron fanatics—would benefit from adding bodyweight work into their routine. I included some programming tips on how to integrate bodyweight into your in-gym workouts in *Convict Conditioning* (towards the end of chapter 12).

For those who are still stalling, I wrote an article a while back detailing some bodyweight substitutes for regular weighted exercises. You might find it useful. Check it out here. (http://old-timelifting.com/articles/a-dirty-dozen/)

You haven't mentioned any cardio options in Convict Conditioning. Do you approve of cardio?

I am a fan of cardio exercise, but I believe that "cardio" should be just that—*cardiovascular* exercise, training that strongly works the heart, lungs and vascular system. This is NOT the same as aerobic exercise. The idea of long periods of ass-numbing cycling, rowing, or stepping up non-existent steps make me want to throw up.

Forget the expensive computerized machines that now line every gym. The best kind of cardio is *bodyweight*. Prisoners have understood this for a long time. Perform a set of stand-to-stand bridges followed by high-rep squats; your heart will be pounding, you'll be gasping for breath, and your vascular system will be working overtime to provide energy to your muscles, and remove waste products. Compare this to a boring, unproductive thirty minutes on a gravity walker and you'll start to understand what I mean.

The most fundamental form of bodyweight cardio is running. Running in a jail cell isn't practical, so prisoners who want to do cardio tend to turn to special bodyweight exercises which are intense and functional. By "intense" I just mean that the training conveys cardio ability geared to maximal bursts over a smaller time frame. (Long-term aerobic stamina is pretty useless in a hallway confrontation.) By "functional" I mean that cardio drills are designed to mimic real-life prison situations; from combat to getting up and down quickly. (Trust me, getting down on the floor real fast takes on a significant survival edge when an Armed Inspection Unit hits your cell.)

For those who want a little more info on how the convicts do their cardio, I've included lots of information in Convict Conditioning 2.

I've seen a lot of very scary-looking athletes working out behind bars. How do these guys get so big and strong on a crummy prison diet?

You're right. A lot of extremely muscular prison athletes survive (and thrive!) on diets which would be considered sub-par by most modern bodybuilding gurus. I've met record holders who achieved their PRs on fairly "insubstantial" diets full of "low quality" grub.

So what's going on?

The topic is too complex to discuss here. I've dedicated an entire chapter to my thoughts on "The Prison Diet" in *Convict Conditioning 2*.

I'll tell you now that while training in prison I built up many ideas about nutrition that are completely at odds with the status quo. The modern training public are usually fed a complete load of bullshit about the kind of diet that's essential for muscle and strength. These sacred cows are carefully constructed and protected for one reason, and one reason only—our old friend, *money*.

I still eat the way I ate in prison—three squares a day. You don't need any more than a basic diet to get very strong or lean. All the other stuff people say you need—like high protein—is bullshit. It's designed to make money. The magazines promoting high protein and whey powder and shakes and fat loss pills, they are the people selling that crap!

Many athletes and nutritionalists—and especially supplement companies—sure as hell won't like what I have to say.

MISCELLANEOUS TOPICS

What are your thoughts about combining *Convict Conditioning* with kettlebell work?

If you're going to use free weights, kettlebells are the best you can use.

Back when free weights were first invented, they were almost universally used in conjunction with bodyweight exercises. The Roman strategist Vegetius describes hand-weights used as a part of the Roman army's military calisthenics training. But the soldiers didn't *curl* these primitive dumbbells—they ran and jumped with them. They were used purely to enhance bodyweight skills.

The ancient Celts used ring-stones in a similar fashion. As far back as Tang Dynasty China, Shaolin monks used stone padlocks (arcane devices not dissimilar to kettlebells) in combination with kung fu bodyweight exercises.

To me, kettlebells follow this old school spirit. Kettlebells are easy to combine with one-leg squats, pullups, bridges, sit-ups, and so on. And that's exactly how kettlebells were first used in America, in Sig Klein's gym back in the 20's and 30's. It was only later that free weights and body-weight work became estranged opposites. Back in the day, they were usually fused together for maximum results.

One of my major bugbears with regular bodybuilding is the "elbows splayed" position, on bench presses, shoulder presses, etc. I was speaking to Pavel about this, and he put me straight on a few things. He explained that when you press (or pull) a kettlebell, your arms, wrists and elbows can move more freely than with a bar or machine. As a result, you tend to see less injuries with kettlebells than with other forms of free weight training. So if you are going to use a free weights program alongside *Convict Conditioning*, kettlebells are probably the best option.

That said, I'm not an expert on kettlebells, I'm not an RKC, and I certainly don't get sponsored for saying any of this. It's just my two cents worth, since y'all were nice enough to ask.

What are your thoughts on gymnastics training?

I have a huge amount of respect for gymnasts and their art-form. I've heard several people use mention *Convict Conditioning* in the same breath as gymnastics, but the kind of progressive calisthenics I learned while inside prison is very different from gymnastics. Both disciplines are derived from a larger, more ancient corpus of bodyweight techniques, but they are built around different goals. *Progressive calisthenics* is a stripped-down solo training method designed to build as much raw power and muscle as possible, using increasingly difficult compound bodyweight techniques. *Gymnastics*, on the other hand, is a regulated sport where athletes are judged on the presentation and difficulty of a series of bodily movements.

These different purposes result in substantially different training approaches. Progressive calisthenics is about building maximum strength and performance through developing the muscles and their tendons. Although gymnasts are often muscular and are ferociously strong, strength is not the end-goal of a gymnast; execution of perfect movements is what it's all about. Likewise, lots of bulk is unnecessary in gymnastics, and gymnasts tend to work their nervous systems rather than zoning in on the muscular system per se.

Prison strength trainees tend to favor relatively low skill movements. They would rather devote their energy to building monstrous muscle and power, rather than drain that energy worrying about factors like balance, grace, or flexibility. The handstand pushup is a good example. Most prison athletes like to find a wall (or ideally, a corner) to train in, to help eliminate the balance factor. Gymnasts are the opposite; they *need* to learn this movement free, balanced, and in transition from all positions. Although plyometrics and even isometrics are employed from time to time, the majority of Convict Conditioning training should be performed at a smooth, regular speed. In contrast, gymnastic movements vary widely from high speed, to slow, to static.

These are just a handful of basic differences, but I could list a lot more. Maybe the essential distinction to remember is that gymnastics is a much more complex pursuit than progressive calisthenics. Sporting gymnastics contains many sub-disciplines, from artistic gymnastics to rhythmic work and acrobatics. It comprises hundreds of techniques. By contrast, *Convict Conditioning* is about the basics; it's built around just six types of movements. To perform to a high level in progressive calisthenics, the most equipment you need is a softball, a basketball, some books and a place to hang from. When physical culturists began formulating "modern" gymnastics in the seventeenth century, they based the art around the vaulting horse—which in itself was a nod to the bodyweight training of ancient warriors, who needed to fight from horseback. Since that time, more and more apparatus events have been incorporated into gymnastics, including the parallel bars, the balance beam, the horizontal bar, the rings, the uneven bars, and so on.

I'm not suggesting that one discipline is better than the other. I'm just pointing out some of the differences between the two. I know as much as any man alive about prison bodyweight training, but I'm not an expert on gymnastics and I don't pretend to be. Luckily, the strength world is

getting wise to the incredible benefits and sophistication of gymnastics, and more high-profile coaches are entering the general fitness world. Let me tell you, some of these guys are true geniuses at what they do. Christopher Sommer, author of *Building the Gymnastic Body* is a prime example. Since Dragon Door released *Convict Conditioning*, I've been sent a ton of books by various people. *Building the Gymnastic Body* was one of them. I was amazed by Coach Sommer's knowledge and the efficiency of his approach.

Jim Bathurst is another top guy who understands gymnastics. Jim is kind of like the Renaissance Man of resistance training. He does it all—weights, gymnastics, old school calisthenics, hand-balancing, you name it. Getting Jim to agree to be the model for *Convict Conditioning* was kind of a deal breaker for me. If he hadn't agreed to do it, I wouldn't have wanted anyone else. The guy is amazing. Anyone who lives near Washington DC and who wants to improve their bodyweight skills or gymnastics should try and seek out Jim.

I'm getting into pushups, and I'm thinking of buying a pair of pushup handles. Are they any good?

It seems like there's no free activity in the world that can't be exploited to sell some kind of gadget, huh? Pushup training is a prime example. What do you need handles for? *Dude, you've got the floor right there!*

What's almost worse than this capitalist overkill is the consumerist compulsion the masses have to rush out and buy this kind of gimmick. I'm betting you've met someone who has suddenly gotten "into" fitness or strength training, whose first instinct isn't to *train their ass off*, but to rush out and buy stuff—the training gear, the supplements, the magazines, the DVDs, the gizmos. None of this crap will make you any fitter, leaner or stronger. That can only be done by effort, discipline and consistency. Unfortunately, these are things you can't pick up at Wal-Mart.

I'm not a believer in pushup handles. If you speak to heavy bench pressers, you'll find that all of them—at some point in their career—are plagued by elbow, wrist, and forearm problems. This phenomenon tends to get worse the longer you keep the exercise in your routine. Tendinitis, tennis and golfers elbow, and eventually elbow and wrist arthritis are just part of the game for loyal bench pressers. And yet, pushup experts very rarely suffer from the same type of nagging injuries. Why? Because gripping tightly while extending the arms under force is unnatural. It produces unbalanced muscular alignment in the forearms which irritates the soft tissues all the way up to the elbow joint.

If you look at humans instinctively pushing or pressing something (outside the gym!) they do so with flat hands. Imagine pushing an aggressor away from you, rolling a log or pushing a car. Gripping while pushing like this would feel weird—it'd immediately place extra strain on the forearms and elbows. But in the gym people just assume the position, because bars, dumbbells and machines are designed with "helpful" handles. Pushing with flat hands is a more natural movement pattern, and a much healthier way to press. It not only strengthens the entire hand and fingers, it also distributes force much more evenly along the forearm.

Companies selling these handles argue that you can get a better "stretch" with them. Before you buy into this, remember that pushups are a *strength* exercise—not a *flexibility* exercise. If you do want to strengthen your shoulders in a stretch position, there are better (and safer) techniques to work through, like uneven pushups. Besides, if you look at most guys using these handles, their torsos never go beyond the point where the floor would be a barrier anyway. Totally pointless.

My advice? Unless you are a gymnast specifically training to work the bars, you don't need parallettes. If you get to the stage where your pushups are getting too easy, don't purchase a pair of pushup handles—keep your hands flat on the floor and simply alter the leverage of the exercise to make things harder. If you've read my book, you'll already know full well how to do this. Do it.

What are your thoughts on flexibility?

The other day I asked Pavel if he could find some time to teach me how to do the splits. He said; "How flexible are you?" I said; "Well, I can't make Thursdays."

Yeah, the old ones are the best ones, right? Maybe not.

In San Quentin I met a lot of karate and kenpo guys, and my early flexibility training was built around martial arts stretching protocols. (This was back in the day when Bruce Lee was God.) But as I matured as an athlete, I began to see problems with the regular martial arts approach to stretching. Eventually, my attitude towards flexibility became very heavily colored by my philosophy of calisthenics, and changed accordingly.

I'll sum up my thoughts on flexibility as quick as I can. Not all "stretching" is the same. Broadly speaking, there are two types of stretching: *passive stretching*, and *active stretching*.

In passive stretching, you elongate relaxed muscles and soft tissues using an exterior force. This might be gravity (as in bending over and touching your toes), external weight (as in a stretch deadlift), momentum ("bouncing" a stretch), or simply pushing with another bodypart (for example, bending your wrist back with your opposite hand). You can even passively stretch with machines now; like those dumbass splits machines you see in kung fu magazines.

Active stretching is totally different. Whereas passive stretching involves elongating a muscle or body area using an *external* force, active stretching involves elongating an area using an *internal* force—namely, the force of the agonist muscles. To give an example of the difference, having someone raise your foot to elongate the hamstring is an example of *passive* stretching. Slowly lifting your leg under the power of your hips and quadriceps to stretch the hamstring is *active* stretching.

When most people think about flexibility, or work for it, they focus almost exclusively on passive stretching. This is a mistake. When a muscle is elongated, or stretched, during athletic activity, it is never when the body is fully relaxed. The leg muscles aren't relaxed during a kick. The arms and shoulders aren't relaxed during a punch or throw. Relaxing the body during force-transmission only makes the joints and ligaments more vulnerable—which is why passive stretching devotees often get injured much easier than regular athletes. The idea that increasing flexibility by passive stretching reduces the chances of injury is a myth. Muscles and joints should be powerful, responsive shock-absorbers, but passive stretching only trains them to be lax, loose and useless.

Don't get me wrong. Passive stretching *does* have some great benefits—in therapy, for example, or to teach relaxation—but, for superior performance and injury-proofing, athletes should build their flexibility training around active stretching. If you want to stretch your anterior chain (including the midsection and frontal hips), do it by contracting your posterior chain—i.e., *bridging*. If you want to stretch your posterior chain (including the lower back and hamstrings) do it by contracting your anterior chain—i.e., leg raises. And so on.

When you stretch a muscle using a force that's external to the weight—like momentum—you can push muscles and connective tissue well past their natural, safe range of motion. Some athletes mistakenly see this as a good thing, but in reality there's no point stretching a muscle beyond the point where you can control it. Doing so just builds in movement patterns that promote loss of control. This risk doesn't exist during active stretching, because your limbs and trunk work as a *system*, and the strength of your agonist muscles automatically limits your range of motion to the ideal level. It's one of nature's safety nets.

Generally speaking, stretching a muscle and joint *under tension* is always a better idea than just stretching via relaxation. Provided you do it right, stretching a muscle under tension not only ensures a desirable, healthy range of motion, it also builds powerful tendons and joints. A one-leg squat stretches the quad and knee under tension. Uneven pushups stretch the elbows and triceps under tension.

Can you see where I'm coming from? Bridges, leg raises, pushups, bodyweight squats—these are the safest, most functional forms of flexibility training. We're back where we started; progressive calisthenics. For a bodyweight master, there really is no difference between functional strength work and functional flexibility training. If you're doing things right, they're flip sides of the same coin. For more information on these ideas on flexibility, check out *Convict Conditioning 2*.

Which team are you on, Coach? Edward or Jacob?

F*** YOU.

I've been told that if I want to make progress with my strength and muscle mass, I need to use complex periodization methods and cycle my intensity and volume throughout the year. Why doesn't *Convict Conditioning* feature periodization?

It's not necessary to separate up your training methods into different periods (hence "periodization") throughout the year. Prisoners certainly don't do this—they just train damn hard! Back in the day, Olympic lifters and bodybuilders didn't divide up their training year, either. Sure, they might be motivated to push a little harder when a competition or physique contest was coming up, but that was about it.

When performance drugs came on the scene, everything changed. Competitive athletes began taking their drugs in line with the competition seasons. Athletes increasing their drugs stack were able to amplify intensity and still recover; while detoxing from the same drugs, athleticism plummeted and training objectives had to be altered accordingly. Coaches began to plan how to work through all this. This was how "periodization" was born.

The idea of a "year" is really a mental construct, so far as training goes. Non-competitive, drug-free athletes who divide their training year up do it for intellectual satisfaction. It's for the mind, not the body. Your muscles don't understand the idea of a "year". Your muscles really don't know whether it's winter, summer, fall or spring. They only contract and relax. They don't have a diary, and they don't fret about the weather. There are incredibly strong men who live in Arctic climates, and there are some real powerhouses who live in the desert.

Just because I don't buy into classical annual periodization, it doesn't mean I think you should work full-bore all the time. It's good to give your muscles a breather from time-to-time, just as it's also good to really push yourself sometimes. But you don't need any artificial program manipulation to achieve this. *Convict Conditioning* naturally allows for natural cycles of intensity, and it does so in balance with your body's own rhythms.

In CC, when you begin a new step your reps will be lower, and you should proceed with caution, "feeling out" the new technique. This gives the body and mind a bit of a break. As you get used to the movement, you begin to push yourself harder and adapt. Eventually, as you close in on the progression standard, you'll find you really have to give your all to reach your target reps. (For harder steps, this can take months.) Finally, when you reach your goal, you move up to the next exercise and begin by taking things a little easier again. The pressure comes off. Athletes who've worked up through several steps will know what I mean.

You recommend that bodyweight exercises are done at a slow pace. Why are you so "anti" plyometric training?

I'm not 'anti plyometrics' at all—in fact I strongly believe in the benefits of explosive training.

It's true that I *do* recommend that the majority of your progressive strength training should be done at a regular, smooth cadence. I advise this because your training load will increase over time, and the higher the load involved, the more important strict form is in keeping the joints safe.

This doesn't mean I'm down on "plyometric" training. In fact, if the majority of your training movements are fairly slow, I think it's real important that you speed things up from time to time, and move that body as quick as you can. If you only ever do slow movements—the way a lot of bodybuilders do—you can build up a lot of muscle mass, but at a cost to your nervous system. In other words, if you exclusively train slowly, you are training yourself to be slow. You don't want to get stuck in first, right?

The best way to offset this risk of slowing down is to perform some kind of explosive exercise from time to time. It doesn't have to be a huge amount; as with muscle-building, quality beats out quantity. And, as always, the best kind of explosive training should be based around bodyweight-only movements. This is how we evolved; to run, jump, climb. Your body is already programmed to move fast. Let it.

If you look at the *Variants* sections of *Convict Conditioning*, you'll notice that for every moment-type I included at least one kind of explosive or "plyometric" movement. Here are some more of my favorites:

Movement	Explosive variant
PUSHUPS	Clapping pushups
SQUATS	Dead leaps
PULLUPS	Clapping pullups
LEG RAISES	Kip ups
BRIDGES	Back handsprings/backflips
HS PUSHUPS	Clapping handstand pushups

These aren't the only explosive movements I advise, but they are fantastic fundamentals that serious bodyweight athletes should seek to master. Clapping handstand pushups are the exception—they are for the highly advanced trainee only. But an athlete who works up to this exercise will be able to exert explosive force to almost superhuman levels. (They'll be able to pretty much punch through walls.)

Another really excellent plyometric movement is the , a.k.a. the "muscle-up". Jump up into an explosive pullup, and keep going until your torso is above the bar, arms locked out. Sentry pullups are an awesome total-body explosive exercise, but be careful. They are an advanced movement. If you are looking to learn this exercise, I'd advise a course of clapping pullups and dips first. Once you can do several clapping pullups and a good number of strict dips separately, you'll be ready to tackle the muscle-up.

There are lots of different ways to include explosive sets in your training. Some athletes like to devote one week every couple of months to purely explosive work, just to keep sharp. Others will perform a single "explosive only" session every third or fourth workout. More dedicated speedsters—mixed martial artists or football players—will want to include an explosive set every time they train. It all depends on your goals.

I want to get a one-arm pullup, and I'm using controlled one-arm pullup negatives to get there. Did you ever use negs?

I mastered the one-arm pullup by using progressive steps, not unlike the ten steps in *Convict Conditioning*, but more broken. I also focussed on positives, which seems be kind of unfashionable now. Many guys zoning in on one-arm pullups seem to be using negatives these days. This is fine as a way to finish your workout, but be wary of relying on them as a power generator. To really master the pullup series, you need positives.

I personally advise that students closing in on the one-arm pullup start their session (after a warm up) with their maximum range partials—hopefully at least half range. After a couple sets of that, take a stretch and regain some energy. Then work a full range exercise to the maximum of your ability, focussing on the bottom position. If you are strong, some kind of assisted one-arm pullup is the way to go. Use something like a towel or rope to help you (*juuuuust*) get out of the bottom position. Two sets maximum, focussing now on *effort* and *ability* in the bottom range rather than high reps or volume. If you still have anything left after these four sets, now is the time for another break, then controlled negs. But they're not essential. Once in a while break things up by doing the assisted sets first, then the partials. This will give you a good idea of how you're progressing.

A lot of guys have written to me who are using negs for pullups, and are surprised they never make the progress they want to. For sure, negs make you "feel" the weight, and feel like you're doing something right, but positives are always the way to go—no matter what exercise you're doing.

I'm surprised one-arm pullups have become so associated with negatives, to be honest. This would never happen in the weights world, huh? Can you imagine a powerlifter trying to get a 400 pound bench press by only doing negatives with the weight? They'd never get there! The way to go is to focus on positives, getting slowly stronger over time. They hit 389, 390, 391, 392...over painstaking months and years. Eventually the 400 happens.

I know it sounds tough; drawn out, maybe. But that's why there are virtually no muscular guys performing one-arm pullups. If you want to be one of them, make positives the mainstay of your training.

Is Convict Conditioning safe for kids?

I've had lots of feedback from parents who notice, while doing CC exercises, that their munchkins try to mimic what their mom or pop are up to. I've had similar questions from parents who have older kids at school who are getting into bodyweight strength work, maybe to help with sports, and they want to know if I think it's okay.

Parents don't need to worry. When performed the way I described in *Convict Conditioning*, calisthenics are not just safe, they are the *safest* form of training possible for younger people. Certainly safer than most sports! Where athletic injuries occur to kids, they usually appear in the form of sports contact injuries—cuts, bruises, scrapes and (God forbid) broken bones. These kind of injuries come either from accidentally banging into other kids or from spilling onto the floor while running. Both these circumstances are not uncommon in kid-friendly sports like touch football, tee-ball or soccer. These kind of contact injuries just don't occur during calisthenics, because you're not in competition with anyone, and you're not running.

I understand that, despite this, many people have reservations about strength training for young people; especially kids who have not stopped growing. Some naysayers suggest that early strength training can damage the growth plates at the ends of the bones, and even interfere with growth. While it's definitely true that excess or lop-sided force on the growth plates is a bad idea, in *Convict Conditioning*, the basic movements should be performed smoothly, and under control. Sudden, unsymmetrical motions that can damage joints and cause tears to vulnerable tissues—like you get in tennis, gymnastics or football—are absent. Also, in the Big Six, no exercises (like barbell squats, deadlifts, heavy curls, etc.) exist which load the spine, and this is a big factor in safety for kids and teens regarding potential height retardation.

If I did have one concern with allowing younger children to perform *Convict Conditioning* exercises, would relate to inverse postures. Young kids should be taught how to go upside-down properly, and should be supervised when they practice it. We don't want anyone bashing their noggins. That said, even real little kids have been doing handstands against walls for fun for hundreds (maybe thousands) of years and I've never, ever heard of any of 'em getting hurt!

Don't be afraid to let your children explore bodyweight calisthenics, if they are interested. But keep it fun. The body was meant to move itself, and kids probably (intuitively) understand that better than big, grizzled adults like us. Due to their proportional size/weight, youngsters will actually find many of the exercises easier than full grown athletes. Plus, if they keep it up, by the time they get tested in that college gym your kids will be stronger than Spiderman—while all the others are wheezing on the floor.

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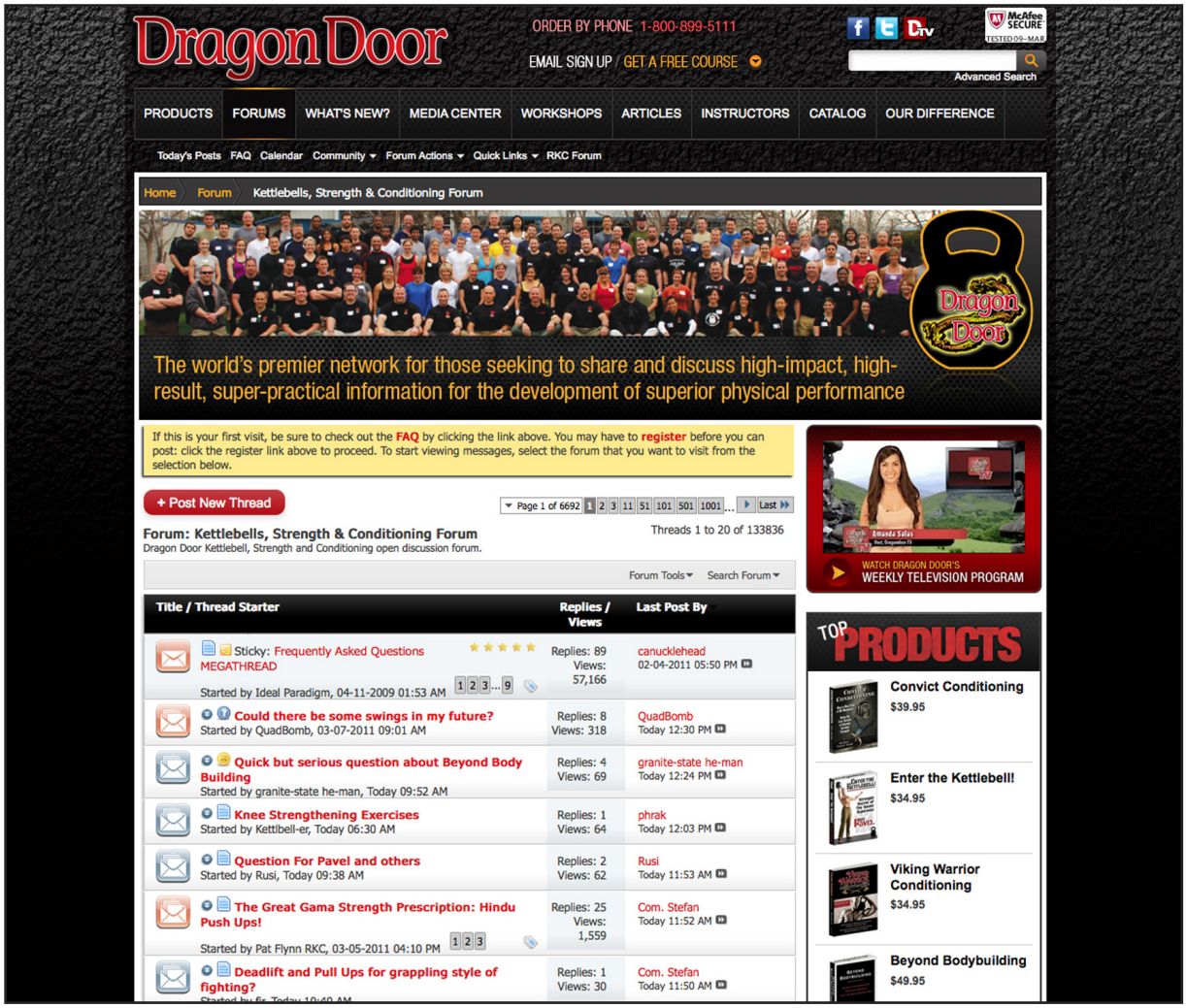

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