

Circuits – Intensity vs Volume

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This topic is one that central to my weekly running circuits at a local gym.

The traditional circuits you might attend (Les Mills, F45, etc) will have a routine that looks something like this:

- 10-20 exercises.
- Each exercise is completed 2+ times
 - Tactical routines often have ladders with reps starting high and reducing by one each time until the client reaches 1.
- Each exercise is typically expected to be completed over a time frame of 35sec to 60sec.
- The exercises will be a combination of body weight and free weights/medicine ball/kettle bell, etc.

A couple of things happen within these classes that are unavoidable due to the way the circuits are structured:

1. Firstly, it requires a very conditioned person to be able to do quality "PUSHUPS" or "BURPEES" for 35-60 seconds.
2. Often there is little recovery time b/w exercises resulting in excessive fatigue if there is any attempt to complete these exercises with intensity (quality).

The result of the above are twofold:



1. The client will drastically modify their exercise technique to be able to complete the 45+ second exercise period.
2. The client will reduce their intensity to "SURVIVE" the session – not possible to give your all for 45-sec and then back up 15-sec later and repeat (Particularly if you have to do this for 45-minutes!!).

This then leads to the following outcomes:

1. The client learns poor technique which inhibits future improvement and drastically increases the chance of injury.
2. The client loses all ability to perform exercises with higher intensity – I regularly try to add very high intensity components to my routines and most clients just don't know how to push themselves (their intensity inhibition system is on full because of their conditioning of performing grind out circuits previously).
3. The client often doesn't improve over time (I know of clients who have been attending circuit classes for years with little to show for it!).

Some may argue that they attend circuit classes purely for the metabolic workout (calories burnt), and that is a fair comment – except you can still get a great metabolic workout AND do the exercises correctly and with an increased intensity.

A classic case in point is the now famous TABATA workout – It should consist of 8-rounds of 20sec-work, 10sec-rest – The 20sec work efforts should be ~100% so that by the end of the 4-minutes you are looking for a place to lay down and die!!!

But go online and you will find plenty of "TABATA" programs that suggest you complete 4-5-sets of TABATA within a single workout!!!

IT ISN'T TABATA JUST BECAUSE IT IS 20-10 WORK/RECOVERY PROTOCOL.

IT IS TABATA BECAUSE IT IS 20SEC @ ~100% THEN 10SEC RECOVERY!!!

I have been trying to address these issues with the following modifications to my circuits:



1. There is a high emphasis on technique – I tell all clients that I would rather they only go down a part of the way to the floor when doing pushups (for example) whilst keeping good form than to try to get their heads to the floor with poor technique.
2. I now reduce the total time each exercise bout runs for. Currently I am experimenting with 20sec work-10sec recovery x 2 per exercise. Most clients feel they can do a particular exercise well for 20-seconds - leading to a positive experience when completed.
3. I tell all clients that even during the 20-sec work phase, that they should stop the moment they can't maintain good technique. Start again once they have recovered enough (I am constantly running around the class commenting on technique to ensure that clients are taking note of this aspect of their conditioning).

I have reduced the overall training time within the hour, I will require clients to workout for ~30-35min giving us plenty of time to warm up and in particular, cool down (I have been adding 10-minutes of quality stretching at the end and this has been probably the biggest hit of all the changes I have made).

Interestingly, when I reduced the total training time I had a few clients comment that it wasn't long enough - by focusing on an increase in intensity and an enjoyable cool down routine these concerns are now gone.

It is common knowledge that if you exercise with more intensity (HIIT), you don't have to exercise as long – I am just applying this principle within a single 60-min circuit class allowing more time to prepare and recover post session.

CONCLUSION: Anything we can do to assist our clients in training correctly and in ways that ensures continued improvement should be seen as a positive step forward.