

SMALL GROUP TRAINING – IS IT PERSONAL TRAINING OR GROUP EXERCISE?

By John Platero

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As club owners, department heads or fitness professionals, we have to earn a living like everyone else. Some members can't financially afford to purchase a private one hour session with a personal trainer so we began offering half hour sessions in the late 90's. As a personal trainer I resisted this concept, however, as a program director I could see the financial benefits. The shorter sessions are more economical and allowed more people the financial flexibility to experience personal training and hopefully upgrade to an hour session. In fitness we often don't have the ability to get what we want from the public so we end up lowering the benchmark. It's like having a classroom full of unruly children who refuse to learn. Since they aren't our children we can't make them do anything, therefore in lieu of failing them all we grade on a bell-curve and a C becomes an A. It's gotten to the point where we're even begging people to take the stairs or park further from the grocery store to meet some basic exercise requirement. Now, we're marketing small group training classes and charging for them in hopes to gain or regain personal training revenue.

DOES IT WORK?

Financially, it does. IDEA listed small group training as 9th in the Top Ten Programming Trends for 2011. A trainer was quoted stating she felt clients received the same or better-quality training from the small group. Is this possible? If the trainer is the constant then the only

"better-quality" training received would have to come from the participants. Matching the participants successfully is the key.

Here's where I believe we need to plan better. If we're going to separate small group training from group exercise in general then there should be some difference other than just the number of participants, otherwise riding in a chauffeured limo would be the same as riding in a bus. The benefits of one-on-one personal training is that the program can be constantly personalized every workout to adjust for improvements, sickness, work schedules, unexpected travel or *unexpected life* for that matter. Some fitness goals require specialized equipment and acute exercise variables that must be closely matched to reach those particular goals. This is very difficult to obtain in a small group unless the participants not only have the same goals but are at the same level in pursuing those goals. This is where the success lies with the instructor. A good instructor can modify an activity very quickly to serve the participant who is having difficulty completing the task or the task has become too easy for the participant.

My suggestion is to create specific guidelines in a macro-cycle for general specific goals. Selling personal training in macro-cycles also allows us to present long-term packages over a period of a year; which is really the way we all should train. There are four components to any workout:

- Strength
- Cardiovascular

- Proprioception
- Flexibility

Like four legs on a table they should be conceptionally balanced for the client's specific goal. Some goals may require more of one or more of the components based on their goals and their bodies, but a trainer must consider these four components anytime we design programming. For example:

MACRO-CYCLE 1 (8 WEEKS)

Stability and aerobic exercise is the focus. Here's an example of using one exercise and progressing over the macro-cycle for a small group meeting three times a week. The group begins the exercises on stable ground and slowly progress to unstable surfaces.

- WEEK 1: Stability ball wall squat
- WEEK 2: Two legged body weight squat
- WEEK 3: Back squat with a bar
- WEEK 4: Squat on a balance board
- WEEK 5: Squat on a ½ foam roller
- WEEK 6: Squat on a dyna disc
- WEEK 7: Squat on a BOSU ball
- WEEK 8: Asymmetrical squat (descend with both legs but ascend with one)

As you can see, there is a progression. If a participant were to join the group in week 5 they might not be able to perform this type of exercise. Here's another simple example of progression using a basic exercise like the dumbbell press while keeping the goal of stability in mind.

- WEEK 1: Lift with both hands standing with the legs at shoulder-width wide stance.
- WEEK 2: Progress to a single-handed or unilateral lift. Keep the dumbbells in both hands but only lift with one arm at a time.
- WEEK 3: Now drop one of the weights and lift

with only one arm at a time.

WEEK 4: Stand with a wide stance and lift one leg off the ground. Begin by pressing with both arms.

WEEK 5: Now progress to lifting with one arm and one leg; right foot is off the ground and right arm is pressing, however, you still have weights in both hands

WEEK 6: Still loaded on both sides, progress to the opposite arm over the unsupported leg.

WEEK 7: Now, drop one of the dumbbells and repeat the same progression as above. Right arm over the right stance leg, then left arm over the right stance leg.

WEEK 8: Begin the entire sequence from the top with the non-dominant eye closed then repeat the entire sequence with the dominant eye closed.

By sitting down and planning different groups for different goals you'll be able to match the participants correctly, have them look forward to their next macro cycle, train them correctly and easily substitute trainers when needed. Otherwise your small group training is really group exercise with less participants. This isn't a bad thing, we get people exercising, but it might help in your validation for the extra fees for the small group classes.



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