

Women, CrossFit, and the “Bulky” Myth

(Repurposed from CrossFit Oakland)

As I was pondering what to write for today’s post I noticed an article posted to Facebook—it is titled “LIES IN THE GYM”. It shows us that one does not have to go far in the average health club to find someone willing to hand out bad information. This article outlines many of the myths that women are hearing about fitness and strength training.

Let me summarize several of the myths this article touched on:

1. Weight training will make you huge and masculine.
2. Men Train. Women Tone.
3. There is a difference between toning, sculpting and firming.
4. Women should stick to machines and avoid free weights.
5. Women shouldn’t train their leg/butt muscles, otherwise they’ll get big.
6. Weight Training Turns Fat into Muscle
7. To avoid getting “bulky,” women should only lift light weights

To quote a famous fitness author, “Women are not a special population. They are half the population.” In an article written by Mark Rippetoe he points out that women *DO* respond to heavy physical stress (i.e. lifting heavy stuff) differently than men. However, women get the best results when they train for performance (the premise of CrossFit), because even though there are differences between men’s and women’s response to training, there is no difference in the quality of the exercise needed to produce the stress that causes our bodies to change. The different responses men and women see in training are not the ones that the *fitness industry*, media and popular culture have presented as fact. This unfortunately has had a detrimental effect on women’s training.

The answer to our questions on how to get there are right in front of us. The results, in terms of both performance and aesthetics, admired by the vast majority of women, continue to be routinely produced by advanced athletic programs, which then amazes me how “body-sculpting” sessions or low intensity machine based circuit programs were the approach sold to the public. But then again, “easier” is easier to sell.

The fact is that aesthetics are best obtained from training for performance.

It becomes very simple, if you want to look like a lean athlete (the standard most active women strive to emulate) you have to train like an athlete, and the unfortunate part is that most people lack the “grit” for that. Despite this unfortunate truth, the fitness industry continues to see appearances first, as though it is independent of performance. Appearance cannot be trained for.

Think about it: I know how to make your squat stronger, but how do you program Bun Blaster sets and reps for a tight ass? I may be able to double

your pull-ups in a month, but I don't know how to give your back that V-Shape everyone craves without increasing your pull-ups. Every single aspect of programming for resistance training that works at all does so because it increases some aspect of performance, and appearance is a side effect of performance.

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Appearance can't change unless performance changes, and the performance changes are what we quantify and what we program. Your appearance when fit is almost entirely a function of your genetics, which are expressed at their best only when your training is at it's highest level, and this level is only obtainable from a program based on an improvement in your performance in the gym. To top it off, the best improvements in the gym occur when participating in a program that looks more like performance athletics (i.e. CrossFit) rather than one that looks like waving your arms or legs around on a machine.

More Unfortunate Truths:

- Your muscles cannot get longer without some radical orthopedic surgery.
- Muscles don't get leaner...you do!
- There is no such thing as "firming & toning". There is only stronger and weaker.
- The vast majority of women cannot get large, masculine muscles from weight training.
- Women who do look like men have taken some rather drastic steps in that direction that have little to do with their exercise program.
- Women who claim to be afraid to train hard because they "always bulk up too much" are often already pretty bulky, or "skinny fat" (thin but weak and de-conditioned) and have found another excuse to continue life sitting on their butts.
- Only people willing to work to the point of discomfort on a regular basis using effective means to produce that discomfort will actually look like they have been other-than-comfortable most of the time.

You can thank the muscle magazines for these persistent misconceptions, along with the natural tendency of all normal humans to see reasons to avoid hard physical exertion.

Women will not get big bulky muscles because they just don't have the hormones to build them. It is the difference in the hormonal profile between men and women that causes their performances to also be different. There are several aspects of a woman's performance that will be different from those of a man, all of which depend on neuromuscular efficiency, and all of which are a direct result of lower testosterone (hormone) levels and the effects that testosterone has on motor unit recruitment, central nervous

system excitation and other neuromuscular factors.

Now, you might be thinking that because there are such big differences, then it must be true what the fitness industry says about the necessity of gender specific programs and exercises. This could not be further from the truth.

And this is key:

Women may lack higher levels of testosterone, but we are ALL built the same when you look at our body structures. We are not talking about apples to oranges here. Men and Women, however, both recruit motor units into the *same* patterns to cause muscle contractions...just to different degrees. A real world example would be that physiologically, Lance Armstrong and your grandmother operate the same way, in the same sense that Labradors and Toy Poodles are both dogs.

What does this all mean?

That the type of stress (i.e. training / heavy strength) will cause the best results in both men and women, only the degree of results will vary. For example, squats work better for everybody than leg extensions, leg curls, and the Bun Blasters because of the quality of stress they produce. "Squats are performed with the same muscles by everybody, they are hard for everybody, hard enough to produce system-wide stress for everybody – and this is why they work for everybody. Men are more efficient at responding to the stress of squats in terms of elevated testosterone levels, and in this respect men can get stronger and bigger faster." [Rippetoe] What this doesn't mean is that women are not served well by using "less efficient" ways to produce stress on their bodies. We just wont get as strong or big as men.

So what should ladies do?

Women need to be doing barbell exercises that demand strength, balance, power, coordination, and mental focus to produce a type of stress and adaptation that is superior to either low-intensity floor exercise (or walking on the treadmill) or isolation type machine exercises (i.e. bicep curls, leg extensions). It is the stress that causes the adaptation, and the quality of the adaptation is dependent on the quality of the stress. For example, an exercise that does not involve balance cannot cause an improvement in balance. The stress on the body must target the parameters that need improvement or these parameters will not see adaptation. It is this simple fact that is ignored and/or misunderstood – by the fitness industry, and thus the value of squats, deadlifts, presses, cleans, and combinations of barbell movements with gymnastic skills and track & field skills goes unappreciated and therefore causes an incorrect education of our society.

The other unfortunate aspect is that holding businesses to these truths would complicate their businesses. It is very hard to find qualified staff to train members at optimal levels of skill and intensity. And it will continue this way

as long as the standard fitness center pays minimum wage for trainers. Qualified coaches generally get paid more than fitness centers are willing to spend. All hope is not lost! This paradigm is slowly breaking down and we can thank CrossFit! As CrossFit grows and it becomes harder to ignore the results of honest hard work done at high intensities, the "fitness media" is taking notice. You see more stories featuring the benefits of weight training versus aerobics-only programs.

It honestly isn't rocket science, as most things in life work in a way that you get out of an effort what you put into it. This is something that we all know, however, we still crack and are willing to believe people who tell us otherwise. It's in our nature; we're a lazy species.

To summarize my experience as a CrossFit Coach and Affiliate owner for 1 1/2 years, on top of 10+ years in the fitness industry, is that not one of the 180+ women we have trained has gotten bigger and stayed bigger. I have seen a couple women get bigger as the body begins its transformation. However, bigger is temporary. Usually lean mass increases first. Shortly thereafter, a layer of fat melts off the top of the newly acquired lean mass. As soon as that happens, the women are thrilled. For the clients that incorporate a zone/paleo approach to nutrition, the results come quickly and without fail. For those that do not make dietary changes, the process takes longer. And don't forget that strength will have longer lasting benefits than the immediate tight ass or smaller waist. It will help you open jars, carry your kids, move your own furniture, stay mobile and osteoporosis free so you can enjoy a long active life! So get started and pick up some heavy weights to start making the changes that you want to see.