

MASS MAADIE SIMPLE

A Six-Week Journey into Bulking

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On Target Publications
Santa Cruz, California

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ISBN: 978-1-931046-02-2 Print
ISBN: 978-1-931046-21-3 Ebook

Photos taken at The Weight Room, Santa Cruz, California

Also by Dan John
Never Let Go: A Philosophy of Lifting, Living and Learning

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On Target Publications
P. O. Box 1335
Aptos, CA 95001 USA
(888) 466-9185, Fax (831) 466-9183
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My “Overnight Success” in Mass Building 40 Pounds in Four Months

I didn't know it until I had been teaching for years, but a small decision in my youth had a massive impact on my life and athletic career. My birthday is about as late as you can get in August, and back then the cutoff date for starting school was September first.

As the youngest of six kids, and given the fact that nobody held their kids back when I was growing up, there was no question when I would march off to kindergarten. And nearly every day for the first month, I cried. I was the youngest in the class and far less mature.

Now, I must have loved tanks because everything I drew had tanks in it. One of my clearest memories of kindergarten, and frankly there are few, is my teacher asking me to draw something besides tanks. In fact, my mother had to meet with the teacher to convince me to do something besides draw tanks.

Even then, I guess, I was consumed with size and power. However, as a boy and, in this case anyway as a Celt, maturation was a long way away. While the other boys with Mediterranean heritages hit their growth spurt in the sixth grade and had facial hair by the ninth, I was lucky enough to not hit puberty until well into high school. I played ninth grade football at 118 pounds and bulked up to 130 pounds as a sophomore. Honestly, I didn't shave daily until my mid-20s.

But I wanted to be an athlete. Fortunately, I had the right idea: I needed to lift weights. I caught the iron bug early when my brothers bought a weight set after our Aunt Florence died and left us a little money. We went to Sears and got the Ted Williams weight-lifting set with 110 pounds. Frankly, I doubted I would ever lift those big 15-pound plates. For the record, I did...and a lot more.

Every month, I would walk over to the corner pharmacy to see if *Strength and Health* had come in. It was the only information available, and it was perfect for me at that time. All the lifters were heroes according to the articles, and lived on Hoffman's Hi-Proteen and drank the amazing Energol. Drugs were bad and clean living was the answer to all questions. Sure, I was young and believed it all—I only mastered cynicism in my 30s.

My lifting program was simple and I am amazed how much I still keep the same structure. The Southwood Program—see the extra stuff in the back of the book for the whole program, page 106—was perfect for me.

The program was based on this—

- Four lifts: *Power Clean, Front Squat, Military Press and Bench Press*
- A simple repetition scheme of 8–6–4
- We lifted in little groups. When we made all 18 repetitions with all four lifts, we moved up to the next weight during the next workout.

The descending-rep scheme was genius. It remains the cornerstone of my programming since 1970 and the four lifts are still the best movements I know for superior athletic performance.

Throughout high school, I had a love affair with the bench press. I saved up literally every quarter I had for over a year to buy an adjustable incline bench press. By this time, that original Ted Williams set had been expanded by “borrowing” plates from many of my neighbors; I could now get 132 pounds on the bar. So, nearly every morning I went early to school to get some bench pressing in, then I lifted after school with more bench pressing. At nights, I trained on our porch doing inclines and a host of other movements.

I got very strong in the bench press! How strong? Let’s just say this: As a senior in high school I was stronger in the bench than when I was a senior in college, the high point man on the track and field team. I was so strong in the bench press, kids from other schools came to see me nail the big lifts.

And, I weighed 162 pounds as a senior. I could easily bench press double bodyweight, but I was only a lean, mean benching machine. When I finished high school, I knew I had to get bigger to compete with the heavier college discus. I knew, too, that I had to learn the Olympic lifts.

A guy at school told me there was an Olympic lifting meet in San Francisco, so I drove my Honda 200 up there to see what was going on. During a break in the competition, I went to use the restroom. I was down a small hallway and I had to make room for the guy coming out. His name was Dick Notmeyer, and he changed my life.

Dick owned the Pacifica Barbell Club just over the hill from me. I got to talk with him and he said I should join up, but the fee was high: 25 cents a week. From saving all those quarters to a now paying a quarter a week for a gym fee is too poetic to miss.

The following Monday, I pulled up to a house and started having doubts. In a minute or so, Dick opened the garage door and took me into his back room gym. It was small, but filled with equipment. Starting that day, I began doing the Olympic lifts. Three days a week, I was on the platform snatching and doing clean and jerks. Two days a week, I stepped to the rack to do front squats and jerks. That’s right: two- to three-hour workouts just doing two lifts. Dick told me to “eat more” and “eat more protein.” I did.

Four months later, I weighed 202 pounds—I went from 162 to 202 in four months. That’s 10 pounds a month, two-and-a-half pounds a week, nearly half a pound a day. Go to a local fast-food place and order a quarter-pound burger. Imagine slapping 160 on those on your body in four months.

I came home one evening and my brother, Gary, was visiting. When I walked in, he looked up at me and said, “Holy shit.” That’s a bulking program.

Certainly, I grew larger in my career. Lifting as a 242-pound lifter, I often let my weight go up to as heavy as 273 before a contest. And, no, my friends, that is not a good plan. But, the gems of bulking have been laid out for you here—

- Mastery of the basic multi-joint barbell movements
- A commitment to getting stronger
- Real improvements come when you squat seriously (sorry!)

- ~~Bulking is best done in a short period~~
- Finally, you need to be physically ready to bulk up. It's not something a nine-year-old can do!

And, one caveat: We will be talking about lean body mass here. Anyone, and it seems more like everyone, is bulking up today with a slothful lifestyle and massive amounts of cheap sugar. That's easy. Bulking up, especially for long-limbed guys, is tough.

Now, another caveat: I reported in the fall to Skyline College at 202. For the next nine months I held steady, although I rose to 204 pounds. How did I go from 162 to 202 in four months, then basically stop progress for nine months? Simple. I started track and field with Coach Bob Lualhanti and he had us doing some running, some bounding, some sprints, some throwing, some of this and some of that. In other words, if you decide to do more than just add lean body mass, your progress is going to stop.

There, a story and a warning. Now, follow me.

As to methods, there may be a million and then some, but principles are few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble. ~ Emerson

If you want methods for bulking, the fitness world is brimming with them. The conversation on forums usually goes like this (for ease of reading, I will actually capitalize words and attempt to spell them right, unlike the internet)—

Q: Hey, my good lads, I need a superior bulking program that will put on lots of weight quickly.

Answer from *lovetobulkupandcruise2*:

Try this: Work your legs on Monday, arms on Tuesday, chest and back on Wednesday, arms on Thursday, Friday just rest, arms on Saturday. Rest on Sunday, my brother in iron, as you will need it.

Answer from *biggestgunzinthelargermetropolitanareaofrawlinswyoming*:

Wow, that looks good, but I would switch Tuesday and Thursday.

Alas, it is only a slight exaggeration.

Breaking up the body into smaller parts, called splitting, is a method. Oh, it works and it can work very well. But that is just a “thing.” Principle-based bulking is designed around four simple insights—

1. Everybody is the same, but just enough different to warrant some exploration.
2. Doing everything at once makes it difficult to discern what is working.
3. There is a need to spend time under a load.
4. There are some nutritional tweaks that work.

Everybody is the same, but just enough different to warrant some exploration.

In full candor, I believe in the absolute dignity of every human person. Having said that, I have also coached and played in sport for over four decades. Certainly, human size fits into a certain bell curve. As Nassim Taleb said, which I will paraphrase, if I told you that two people walking down the street had a sum of their heights at 12 feet, most people would get the idea that each of them was probably around six feet, give or take. It would be rare person who would guess a ten-footer and a two-footer were strolling together.

So, yes, we are all God’s creatures endowed with certain inalienable rights and our mothers love us. Now, let’s be honest: There are some people who are simply going to be stronger, faster and prettier than you and me and that is just the way it is. So, in discussing a bulking program, we have to accept

some variations.

That's the problem with most methods of bulking. It is a template we simply step into and on Day One do this and that and this.

By the way, this method works! Except for some...so let's get back to the principle.

Stu McGill, the great Canadian back specialist, spent some quality time with me recently and noted I had a "Scottish Hip." Instantly, certain things made sense. Years ago, I was tested with a little machine that measured maximal poundage in certain lifting positions. At the quarter-squat position, I maxed out the machine at 1,400 (I'm not sure I could support it, but the system said I was pushing that amount). In the half-squat, I was at 255. The next guy was literally 405 in both positions.

I mentioned this story to Stu and he said, "Of course. That is why you do the Caber Toss and throw things. You are built for it." McGill is the expert here, and he told me to look at the popular sports of my region and how they tend to reflect the small but crucial differences in body structure.

To sum up: You have this structure. It's not going to change, and it is going to impact your bulking program. Long-limbed guys with narrow shoulders probably will struggle with double bodyweight squats for max reps.

And, there is more. I know guys who can treadmill for long periods of time. I get bored after touching all the buttons. I'm not going to be doing a lot of boring, repetitive stuff in my career because it is literally not in my nature. I work with athletes who can groove in on one thing and just keep doing it over and over.

Well, what about you? Can you sit at a terminal and work on the Williewank Proposal or whatever for 10 hours? Or do you have to be stimulated? The way you are wired to work has a huge impact on your training. With luck, a *One Size Fits All Program* might be perfect for you, but most people seem to have little luck beyond a few weeks with any program.

There is no question that the axiom *success leaves tracks* is true. Part of the issue with bulking is making sure those tracks take you on the right path.

Doing everything at once makes it difficult to discern what is working.

If there is one bit of clarity from my coaching career, it is this: **Keep It Simple, Stupid.** The KISS method is certainly just a cliché too many, but time and again it is the secret to success for most people.

Recently, I AGAIN had this conversation with an elite athlete who was injured. "How did you get hurt?" "Oh, well, we had this idea to do..." The athletic careers of so many amazing athletes have been brought to a halt by adding one new great idea that looked so promising on paper or on the 'net and trashing a bodypart in the process.

Here is a hint: *Stick with what was working and be very mindful of adding anything new.*

In bulking programs, very often the person is given a long list of things to do, including food plans, supplements, secret voodoo stuff and lots of little other things. Well, which one works? Which one

counterproductive? I have tried many very expensive programs in the past, including one that set me back hundreds in supplements to train on an empty stomach then work to excess, but when one is mixing five or six or ten items, which one works?

Certain things make some people sick to their stomachs. Mix that with high-rep squats and you have the perfect recipe for a mess on the floor. You must take some time adding ingredients to the bulking recipe.

There is a need to spend time under a load.

To be honest, I think this is the most complex principle. Notice what I didn't say: You must do the exercise for this many reps and this many sets. Well, I will, but honestly the load can be any tool you want.

Barbells

Machines

Kettlebells

Sandbags

Rocks

Sleds

They all work. Now, some are obviously better for some things than the others, but the loading is the key. I made my biggest gains in bodyweight with weights that were not very heavy in hindsight, but they were killing me at the time. Why? Well, I had never done, for example, a front squat. The wrist flexibility issue alone was making my nights long. Add in all the other joints, the upright posture and the fact I had never done real squatting before added up to dead legs and tired arms and an aching back for a long time. My body responded, even to these relatively light loads, by exploding in growth.

Time is also a bit hazy, too. You can get freakishly big, if that's the way you are made, by doing just singles. I have never seen a waifish 800-pound deadlifter. The time it takes to deadlift a max attempt is far shorter than running a marathon, although you might feel the same after either finish. It does seem, by the eyeball test, that most guys who are long-limbed and a little taller need more reps and more time with a load in hand to gain size. If you are one of those 5' 2" fireplug-shaped guys, adding width might be pretty easy by just moving singles. If you are a 7' 2" NBA center, you need to spend some time with more repetitions.

There are great, simple ways of extending time under a load. Sadly, the two best are complexes and high-rep squats. Why sadly? They both make you feel awful! Now, if it is true that stomach upset is a sign of growth hormone release, at least you can feel happy that you are releasing GH for free.

There are some nutritional tweaks that work.

I feel bad for a lot of guys on bulking programs. In fact, in hindsight, I feel bad for me. I was on a gallon of milk a day to bulk up in the late 1970s. Later I found out I was lactose intolerant. That might

have explained the explosiveness of my day (let's just say "I was gassy" and move on), and the huge acne cysts on my face. I was literally drinking a gallon of what was for me a kind of poison. Modern protein powders are miles ahead of what we had "back in the day," so this is much easier to deal with today.

I give this advice, over and over, for most people's goals—

Eat more protein.

Eat more fiber.

Take more fish oil.

And, that is exactly the advice I will give for each and every program I ever design for any sport goal. But, we will go a bit farther. Instead of choking down as much as you can every day, we will build up to several very inventive techniques where we use the clock as much as we use the mouth to increase protein intake.

Creatine, for example, works wonders for some people and provides misery for others. In the traditional shot-gun approach to bulking, creatine would get added on Day One. We will do things differently. I would rather give you a few days to test your personal response to creatine. Should you have no issues, stay the course. If cramping or distress appears, we know the culprit.

Isn't getting bigger/more massive/bulkier bad for your health

For years I've promoted my *Do This!* list of 10 suggestions—originally I called it my Ten Commandments, but it seems this had been used before—as a simple toolkit for living, statistically, long life. Here you go—

1. Don't smoke.
2. Wear your seatbelt. Use a helmet when appropriate, too.
3. Learn to fall... and recover!
4. Eat more protein.
5. Eat more fiber.
6. Drink more water.
7. Take fish oil capsules.
8. Floss your teeth.
9. Keep your joints healthy.
10. Build some muscle.

I have given this list to large groups, small groups, one-on-one, to nuns, to elite warriors, to NFL players, to Olympic-level athletes, to grandparents and kids. I think I can stand by each and every point, and I don't see any changes. Certainly, like the helmet issue, feel free to add or subtract.

One of my favorite stories reminds us about this point.

A young scholar is coming home from school and he has his satchel of books and a lofty air of intellect and superiority. He takes a small boat to get across the river that blocks his road home and the boatman asks a simple question, "What do you study in school?"

The young scholar won't deign to look the boatman in the eye. "Philosophy. Theology."

"Ah. Did they teach you to swim?"

"Of course not. We were discussing important questions."

"Too bad. The boat is sinking."

This little story reminds me of some of the other things, but overall, for the bulk of us, this list is pretty good. I see no reason how building lean body mass can be bad for you—in fact Number 10 underscores its value here. Now, having said that, just putting on *pounds* might be an issue.

Folks, and you know this, getting fat is easy. You have plenty of role models for how to do it. It seems consuming massive amounts of sugar-laded deep-fried carbs washed down with more sugary drinks while maintaining very low levels of movement seems to be the ticket here. I'm advising you NOT to do that, thank you very much. Truly adding lean body mass is difficult—not impossible, of course, but piling on lean body mass is hard to do.

In the next few years, and honestly we have been seeing the evidence pile up, the notion of healthy in “healthy diet” and “healthy body” is going to see some revisionary thinking. A bulking program that builds lean body mass—I was recently told the measurement of lean body mass is practically a you need to determine the physical age, not the actual age of a person—might actually be as healthy as what we used to think about sprouts, wheat grass drinks and colonics.

One of the things the person seeking more mass will have to deal with is Fat Phobia.

It comes in two styles: first, and get ready for this, when one begins a mass program, somebody somewhere is going to say, “Well, it won’t be any good if it is all fat.” True. We have excellent fat building protocols. Eat lots of sugars, sit around and watch television and drink lots of calories. True, lean body mass-building is going to be a lot harder than that!

We also have a fear of fat in our foods. There has been a slow turning of the wheel concerning fats in foods in the past few years, but you really have to think about the image of the *Titanic* and the iceberg here. It’s not turning very fast! I don’t have a dog in this fight, but the hopeful mass gainer must be ready to hear the warnings about fat. There are a fair number of books published in the past few years with the words “Good,” “Fat” and “Lies” in the title, and any of them are worth a look.

When it comes to gaining lean body mass, I have some thoughts, some insights, some programs and some clues to point you in the right direction. But, one thing has been proven to me over and over again with people striving to gain lean body mass: Some things will work for you and some things will not work for you.

As simple as that sounds, that is the overriding principle of this book. I have often noted that we are a lot like house plants in a funny way: If you have aphids in your house plants and you toss in 10 things to combat them and the aphids die (and maybe your house plant), well, what worked? What was the poison? What helped? What hurt?

The mistake with most programs is what we used to call the Kitchen Sink approach, from the cliché *everything plus the kitchen sink*, and, no, I have no idea what it means either. On day one, you take this and that and this and that and do all of this stuff and that stuff, too. Within a week, you are a limping, barfing mess but your arms feel bigger. Well, what worked?

I know it sounds so simple but you have to add things a little at a time. Here is the upside, and I am giving you the secret of my four decades of sports performance: Once you know what works for you, it is always going to work for you to some degree. And, on the contrary, if something doesn’t...my friend, run screaming from it.

Oh, it sounds so simple. But, like all truths, I said it was simple, not easy. Enjoy.

The Toolkit for Goal-Setting: The Key to Bulking

Eat your way to SUCCESS!!!

I think I could make a fortune with a book entitled *Eat Your Way to Success*. I love to browse bookstores through the diet, fitness and cooking sections and just feast on all the delicious options for food or not eating food. Everything makes you fat if you look through enough diet books. That same “thing” is also the cure for your fatness in a book one shelf away. Walk over to the personal success aisle and you can learn to talk to yourself until you have a million dollars. Rather than talk to yourself like the nice lady on the midnight bus from downtown, I suggest eating your way to success.

Honestly, the three best mental images I have for success involve eating. From what I have seen across the vast landscape of America, eating is not a rarity for many here in these United States. I have been elbowed by many a moo-moored woman in a buffet line in Las Vegas and I have the war wounds to prove it. Sadly, my Frog, Elephant and Alpo Dog Food Diet might lose customers simply by the title. Every time I fly, I see an advertisement for something called The Cookie Diet. Now that can sell. Somehow, even if it was The All You Can Eat Frog, Elephant and Alpo Dog Food Diet, it still might not break the top 10 best-seller list.

If there is an axiom for a successful life and having any chance at achieving any goals, it would be the following—

“You can't do everything, but you can do something.”

Let that sit before you for a moment. If I could do anything for my legacy to this fine planet earth, I would hope and pray it would be *Do Something*. For years at workshops I have been preaching my “secret” two words to success: *Show up*. I need to add “Do something,” too.

In this approach to bulking, we are NOT going to do everything. We are going to add some basic things and see how the journey is taking you. But, you MUST do something: **SHOW UP!**

My favorite story about the magic of simply showing up happened in 1984. I was standing in line after a long train ride to get to there and probably no real sleep in two days, to register for my intensive Turkish language class. Quick, imagine me standing in line because that is all I was doing. If you have ever stood in line, use that image if that is easier for you.

A guy behind the registration desk slammed a phone down, looked up at me and asked, “Do you want \$1,500?” My answer...“Uh, yes.” It turns out that another student who had been given a nice stipend just to show up decided to quit. I was given a check in the next three minutes for \$1,500 for just standing in line.

If you want to be a national champion, you really need to get to the stadium on time. If you decide to get married, the ceremony starts at 11. Be there. Showing up is underrated as a life skills success clue.

Of course, showing up is only step one. Step two is to do something. When ~~counsel/mentor/coach/teach/help others in goal-setting~~, it often only takes a few minutes to outline a list of goals in every single area of life. Warning: Be careful about setting goals, because you may not attain them. Almost every time I have had one of these goal-setting experiences, the person looks up and smiles from this sheet of paper, then the eyes go wide and the question comes forth, "Well, uh, what do I do?"

Do something.

Easy to type. Easy to read. And, actually, easy to do. The problem for most people is the magnitude of a goal seems to explode like the Big Bang before them. You want to get your college degree? Well, you have to register, get a parking pass, find the cafeteria, buy a school sweatshirt, find a lifetime friend to have several funny experiences with, go on a road trip, write and lose the Great American Novel, read a book simply from Cliff Notes...hey, you have a lot to do! For me, when someone says college, I have a refreshing mental image of fun, study and free time. Why the disconnect? Well, I've done it! Talk to people who have done the goal you are interested in achieving, and, well, do what they say.

By following the path of generations of successful bulkers of the past, you are well on your way to success.

That is why I go to experts when I have a question. Years ago, as I often joke, I woke up fat. Many of you may understand that completely. Working two jobs, raising kids, mowing lawns, struggling with life and all the rest might just keep you from making excellent food and exercise decisions each and every day. And, one day, you wake up fat. So, I consulted a group of women called the 100-Pound Club. Each of the women had lost one hundred pounds through a variety of diets, exercise choices and attempts, and they discussed their findings freely. You see, they had been there. My friend Dave dropped one hundred pounds by simply making a new habit each month, from something as simple as drinking more water each day to walking each day. When it came time for serious goals, like running a half-marathon, his background of successfully nailing progressively harder goals led him across the finish line. If you want to learn about fat loss, ask a competitive bodybuilder. If you want to learn about persuasive speaking, read Lincoln or Churchill. If you want to learn the next step after showing up, listen to me. Let's do something!

To help you do something, we'll discuss my Frog, Elephant and Alpo Dog Food Diet.

The First Thing is To Do SOMETHING!

The first thing about getting things done is that there is always something, something big, sitting there that you don't want to do. Years ago, my wife Tiffini clued me in on how to deal with this.

“If you have to eat a plate of frogs, eat the biggest one first.”

Hmmm? Listen, this “system” works. If you have to do something today involving a crappy phone call, an awful meeting or a visit to the IRS, schedule it first. I made a career as a strength coach by teaching people to FIRST do the stuff they don't want to do in the weightroom or in the field of play. Eat the biggest frog first.

Imagine a plate of frogs sitting before you. Now, imagine you will get a billion dollars for eating the whole plate. Would you do it? Or is your revulsion from eating our little frog friends so great you will pass on the billion? For me, I am going to shove those guys down my throat as fast as I can for a billion bucks. Yep, I have standards about food and drink, but I will take the billion, thank you very much.

Which one should you start with? Tiff tells us to reach in and grab the biggest one and swallow it down and, from there, none of the little ones will wiggle down as much.

So, rule one of “Do something” is to pick the worst thing you perceive of the new direction or decision and get rid of it. Surprisingly, it is usually not that bad. Moreover, the **relief**—breathe out, wipe your brow, relax your shoulders, smile again—of dealing with this first big frog makes the rest of the goal pretty easy. I have been there many times in my life. As a teacher, it is dealing with the crazy helicopter parent (the parent whirling constantly around the child); as a professional, it might be the task that just feels like labor pains and you can fill in the blank for yourself here. Find the big frog. Eat it.

So,

1. **Show up**
2. **Do something—Eat the Biggest Frog/Deal with the Toughest Issue First**

That is why we are going to emphasize the high-rep back squat in our bulking program from the first day to the last day. You are free to hate them, loathe them and perhaps never do them again the rest of your life, but, folks, in a bulking program, the high-rep back squat is the biggest frog I can find.

Wipe your palate clean from the frog juice, try a refreshing gelato, and let's get ready for the next meal: Elephant.

One of the oldest motivational clichés I know is this: *If you have to eat an elephant, start with one mouthful at a time.* In goal-setting success, you need to take small bites, but keep on biting! I can remember fondly when my daughter Kelly first began to learn to speak. I was overwhelmed, to be honest. Think about it: the days of the week, the names of the months, holidays, clocks, street signs, the presidents, the political system...there was so much to teach her!

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