



How Many Sets?

By Matt Brzycki

For many years, most people have done multiple-set training simply because that is what they have read or been told to do. The roots of this advice can be traced back to the time when virtually every authority in strength training came from the ranks of the professional strongmen, competitive weightlifters and, to a lesser degree, bodybuilders. In the early 1970s, the notion was advanced that people could improve their muscular strength (and size) with far fewer sets - and, thus, less volume of training - than had been traditionally thought. The debate concerning the ideal number of sets has been raging ever since.

THE SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE

Know this: Science has been unable to determine how many sets of each exercise are necessary to produce optimal increases in muscular strength (and size). But the overwhelming majority of scientific evidence indicates that single-set training is at least as effective as multiple-set training. An exhaustive literature review in 1998 by Drs. Ralph Carpinelli and Robert Otto of Adelphi University (New York) and later reviews by Dr. Carpinelli examined all studies that compared different numbers of sets (dating back to 1956). Collectively, their research found 5 studies that showed multiple-set training was superior to single-set training and 57 that did not. Two of the five studies that concluded multiple-set training was superior to single-set training involved only one exercise. One of these studies was done in 1962 and used