

Whatever It Takes

Time-Tested Tactics
for Staying in the Game

by **Tony DiCosta** • Photography by **Michael Neveux**

Whether you believe that the amazing human body was fashioned by the fickle finger of fate from ancient primordial ooze or masterfully designed by God, there is one thing we can all agree on: Our bodies are not constructed to absorb the merciless pounding that serious bodybuilding demands.

Do they adapt? You bet! (Or there would be no bodybuilding.) Thankfully, our muscles, joints and tendons do grow stronger; however, in our continuing quest to improve our physiques, we frequently subject them to repetitive stresses beyond their ability to tolerate without pain.

To make matters even worse, we train ourselves to embrace the pain. We love the burn of a work set well done. We even cozy up to the next-day soreness that shouts, "Yeah, that muscle got done right!" Still, the more time you spend in the iron game, the more familiar you become with a different kind of pain. If you can bench 400 pounds but some days can barely turn a doorknob, you know what I mean.

Let's be clear from the outset though: I am not writing about the kind of pain that should send you scurrying to the doctor or emergency room; for example, the time I was doing incline dumbbell curls and tore my left biceps so badly, I heard it before I felt it—sounded like heavy canvas ripping. That kind of acute injury requires sound first aid treatment and recuperative care. Many superb articles on how to rehab injuries have appeared in *IRON MAN*. Bill Starr's recent "Rules for Rehabbing" [September 2011] is one of the best.

The topic here is the nagging, chronic, low-grade pain that most of us keep trying to ignore while working out—the kind that, left untreated, will eventually derail our training. How do you deal with that type of pain? What can you do to alleviate—or better yet, avoid—it?

What Is Causing the Pain?

Once it is determined that the pain is not from an acute injury—torn, separated or broken—an honest assessment of its cause is the next step. That's not as easy as it sounds and involves a rigorous self-evaluation. Is the pain the result of your forcing a joint or muscle to perform in a way that is inconsistent with your genetics (for example, not everyone should do behind-the-neck presses)? Is it from an old injury; from overuse or, conversely, from lack of use, resulting in weakness? Is it because of bad form? Or—and this is all too common—are you so committed to a certain exercise that you can't stop even though it's killing you?

Like the undersized mutt on the street who has to be smarter than the big dogs to survive, those of us who do not have the genetic advantage of a heavy-duty frame, the chemical advantages of anabolic steroids or even the advantage of youth must be smarter than the rest. As a relatively light-framed bodybuilder who has been training for more than 45 years, I've learned a trick or two that I would like to share.

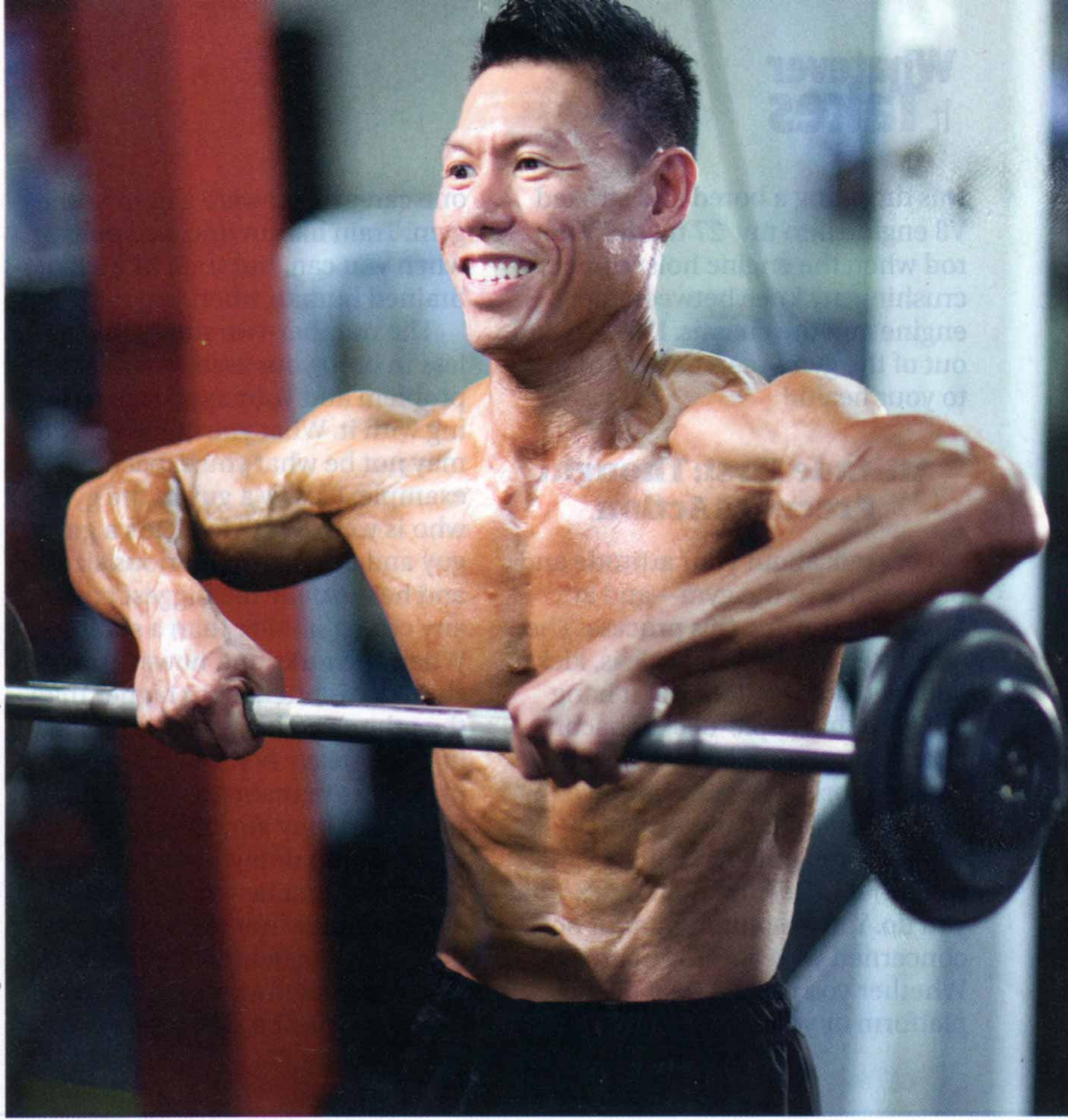


Whatever It Takes

My overall philosophy regarding staying in the game is something I call "Whatever It Takes." That means wrap it, strap it, ice it, avoid it—anything that you can do to continue training. Not that I've eliminated strategic layoffs—they, too, are a tool meant to facilitate growth and recovery and should be used as needed. Barring that, however, your goal is to keep on training by what-

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Model: David Yeung \ Location: Dave Fisher's Powerhouse Gym, Torrance, California



ever means necessary.

Why such a commitment to uninterrupted training? Because of factors the muscle mags rarely talk about: the ebb and flow of life's realities—those inevitable times when your career warrants your undivided attention, or maybe it's the demands of family life (the birth of a child, for example), or the days when illness gets you down. Life will throw enough unscheduled layoffs at you to provide all the off-time you'll likely ever need.

Viewed correctly, these can be positive training breaks devoid of lost-gym-time angst. Allowing only the most demanding issues to keep you out of the gym is the way you will progress in your sport. That's how I did it. I once trained with a broken leg. It was a "nondisplaced" fracture, so they gave me some crutches and a nifty fabric and polished stainless steel brace. I threw the crutches in the trunk of my car and hung my cell phone on the brace's metal hinges when I went to the gym. (I did only Hammer upper-body machines for a while—I'm not stupid.) By the way, that break occurred outside the gym while I



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was dropping a bored and stroked V8 engine into my '27 model T hot rod when the engine hoist tipped, crushing my knee between the engine and the chassis. Life—in and out of the gym—can be hazardous to your health!

Attitude First: Thought Precedes Action

Let's talk about your attitude and perspective in the gym—and at home—regarding this process. The absolute, number-one rule is, kick your ego out the door (let it hang out with that triple-decker bacon cheeseburger you know you can't eat anymore). "Whatever it takes" means just that: If using lighter weight (even embarrassingly light weight) is called for, then that's what you do. You absolutely cannot be concerned with your "gym image." Whether you end up on a posing platform or your local beach, no

one cares if you were a hero in the gym. Train like an uncaged beast when you can, but train like a large-brained human when you need to.

The number-two rule is, be fearless in both your assessment of the problem and your approach to dealing with it. What you come up with may not be what you expect. For example, I know a guy in the gym who is well over 6' tall. He's a great guy and packs some serious size, and he's usually the biggest guy in any crowd smaller than a stadium. When he works out, however, one shoulder is hitched up higher than the other, and his face is grimaced in pain. Heavy behind-the-neck presses are a mainstay of his routine—and they are killing him—but he can't stop doing them because he's afraid that he will lose size.

The point is not about the wisdom of doing behind-the-necks; it's about having the guts to risk losing something in the short term to gain

recovery and future progress in the long term. Indeed, my friend is not fearless, and he looks the same year after year.

Assuming your exercise form is good, you will need to address each pain problem both in the gym and out of it.

In the Gym

Your solutions here will include exercise selection, sequence and style; and training aids like straps and wraps. Exercise selection leads the list of solutions because it can be both therapeutic and preventive. If, for whatever reason, an exercise causes an inordinate amount of pain in a joint, find another exercise. After a reasonable period of adaptation, if dips hurt your elbows, then try a triceps movement that puts less stress on the elbow joint, such as bent-over kickbacks. It doesn't mean you can *never* do dips

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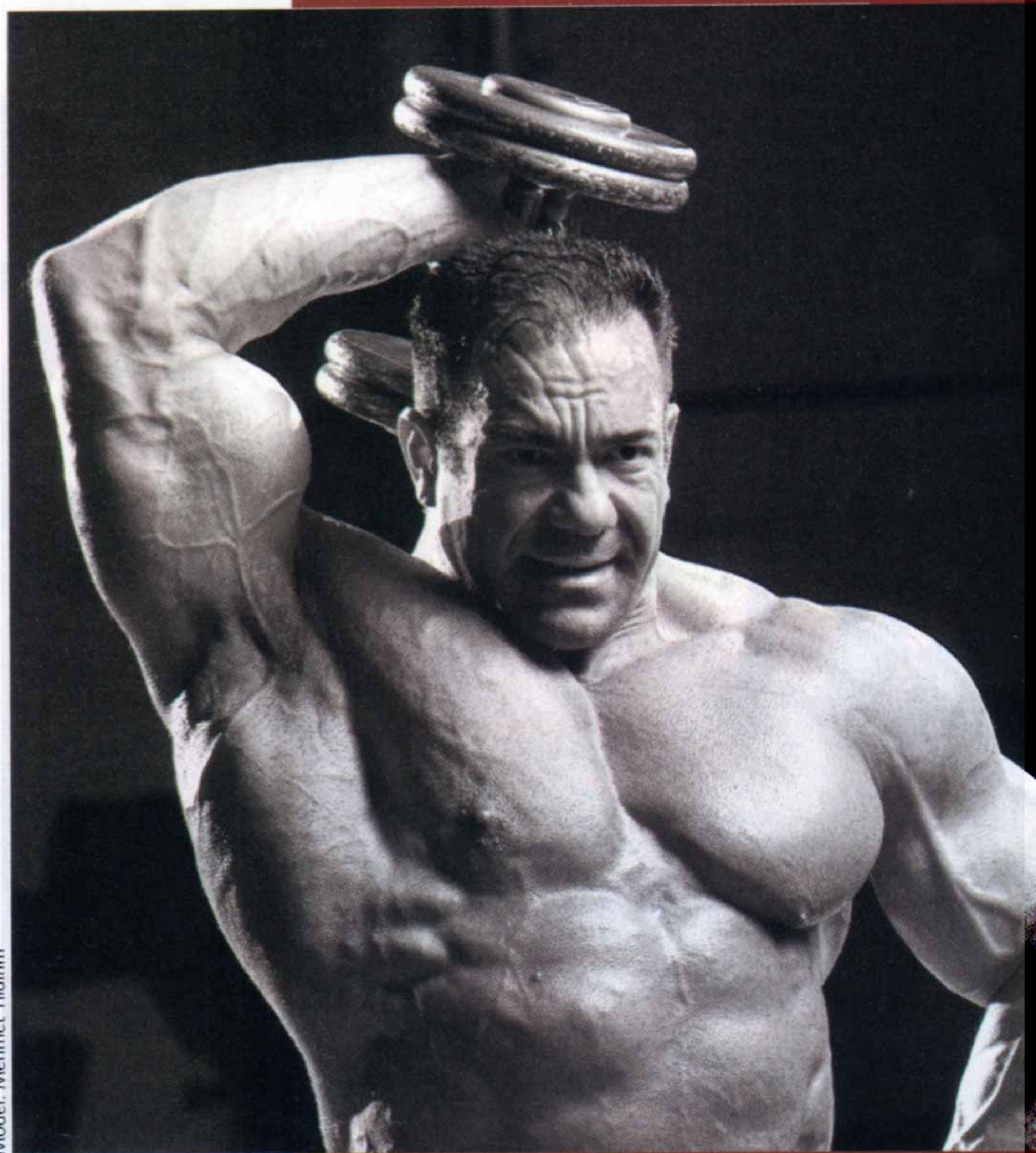
again, but being flexible in your exercise selection might save you from a nasty case of tendinitis and a lengthy layoff from arm work.

Some exercises are inherently harder on joints and tendons, often because of “disadvantaged lever” mechanics, such as where a tendon is stretched over a joint that has gone past a 90 degree angle—examples include deep squats and behind-the-head triceps extensions. Certainly those exercises have a place, but keeping your joints healthy should be your first priority.

Exercise sequence is another tactic for easing stress. Doing heavy, multijoint exercises first may have an advantage in terms of testosterone boosting and power production, but there are times when using single-joint exercises first to preexhaust a large muscle group can be just the ticket for dealing with your training pain. A classic preexhaustion combo is performing leg extensions and leg curls before squats or heavy leg presses. That also warms up the knees perfectly.

“But,” you protest, “I won’t be able to handle as much weight on the squat.” Exactly. That’s the idea—and it works wonders for grouchy knees and even backs.

Exercise style can also be manipulated to control or heal painful joints. Rather than using a bone-crushing pyramid progression of ever-heavier weights, try doing drop sets or the highly effective 4X method popularized by Steve Holman and Jonathan Lawson. It features using lighter weight than you can handle for 10 reps and resting only 30 seconds between sets. You



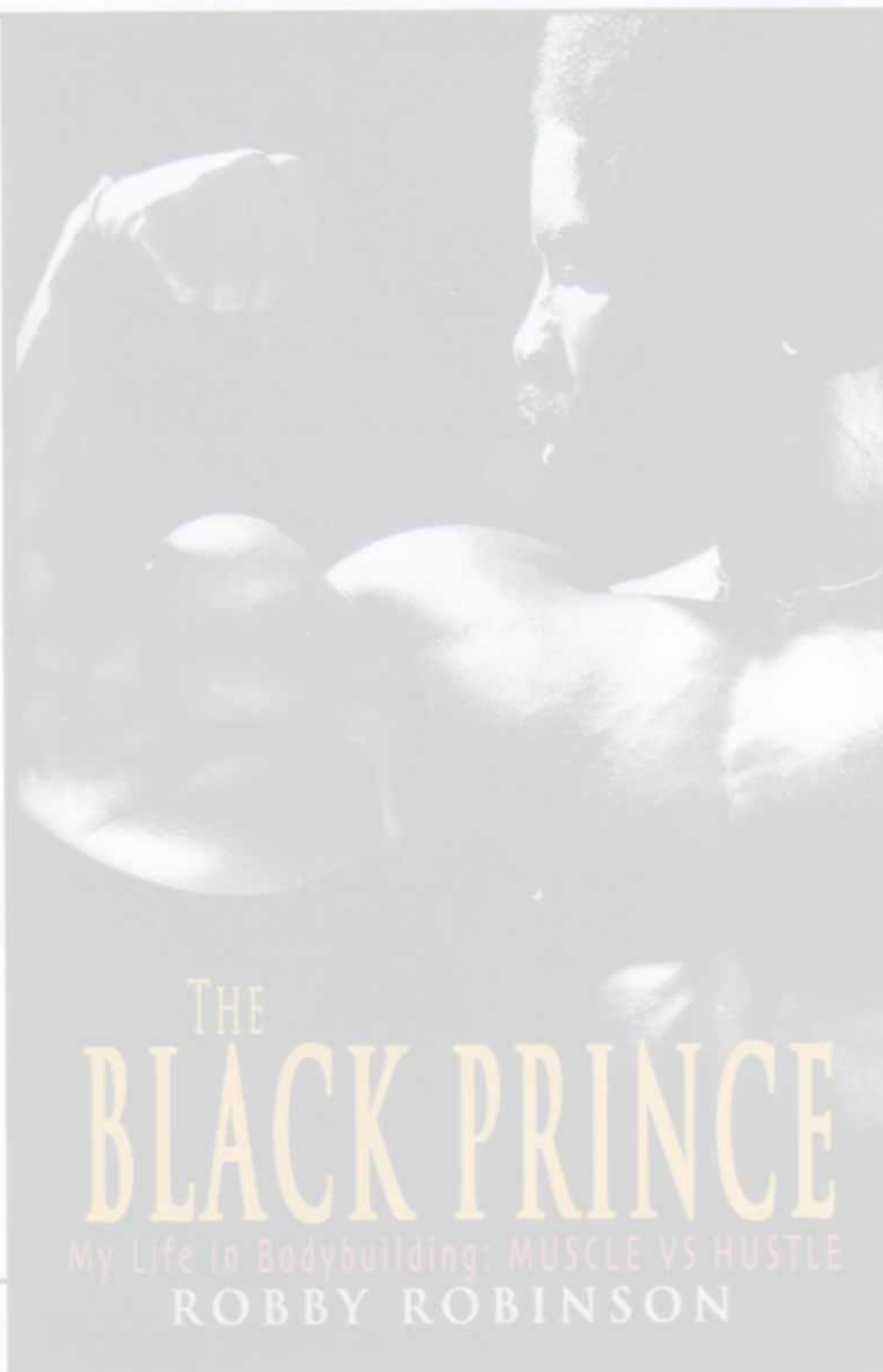
Model: Mehmet Yildirim

The absolute, number-one rule is, kick your ego out the door.

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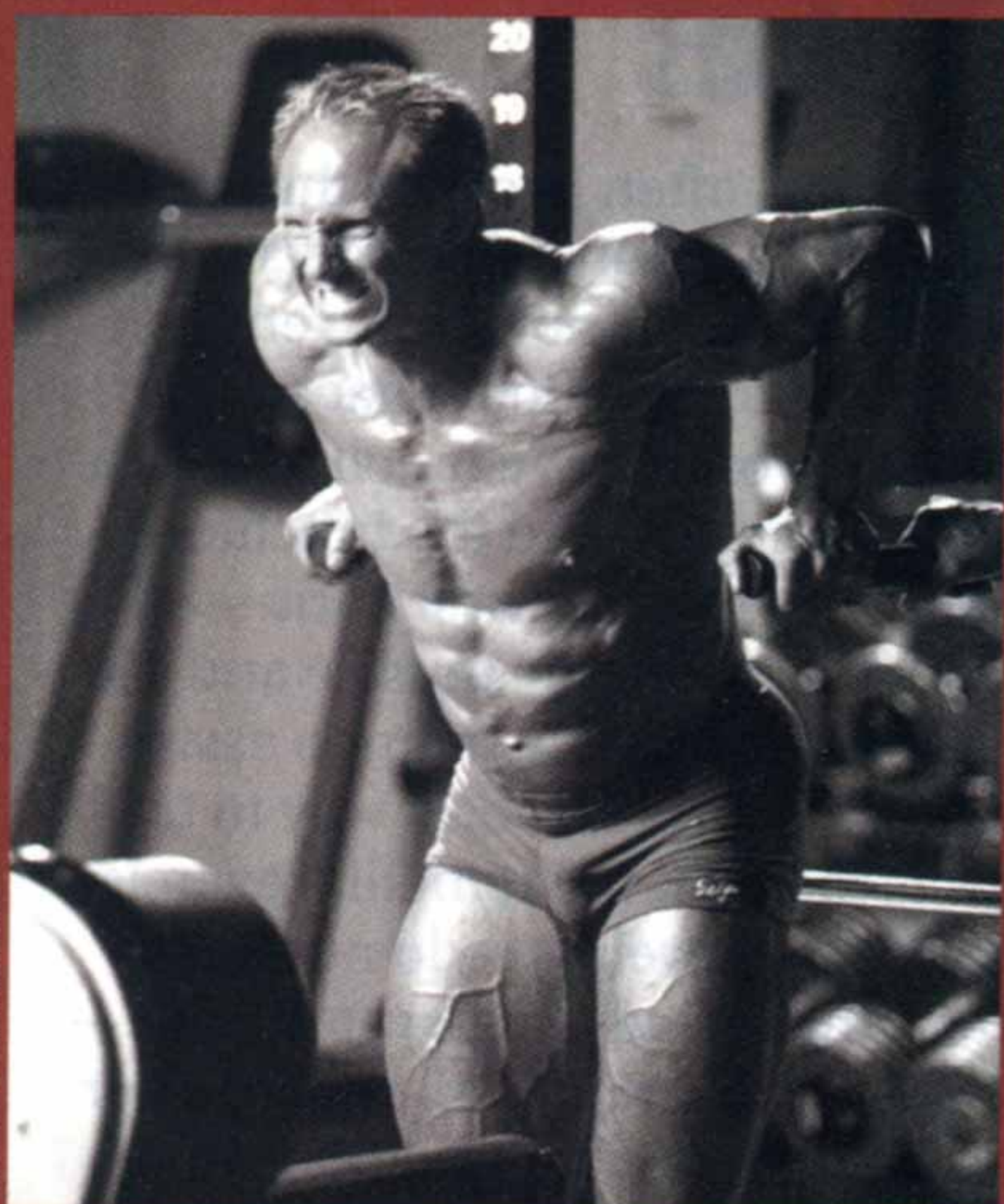
MUSCLE VS HUSTLE

should use enough weight to make the last reps in the fourth and final set right at failure. The 4X method is extremely effective at stimulating sarcoplasmic growth with resulting muscle-size increases plus providing the added benefit of being joint- and tendon-friendly.

One of the hardest tasks when dealing with a painful joint or muscle is determining whether the pain is the result of stress and/or injury or muscle weakness. If it is the former, proceed with the tactics outlined above. If it’s the latter, you may have to address the problem by working the muscle or joint in question directly.

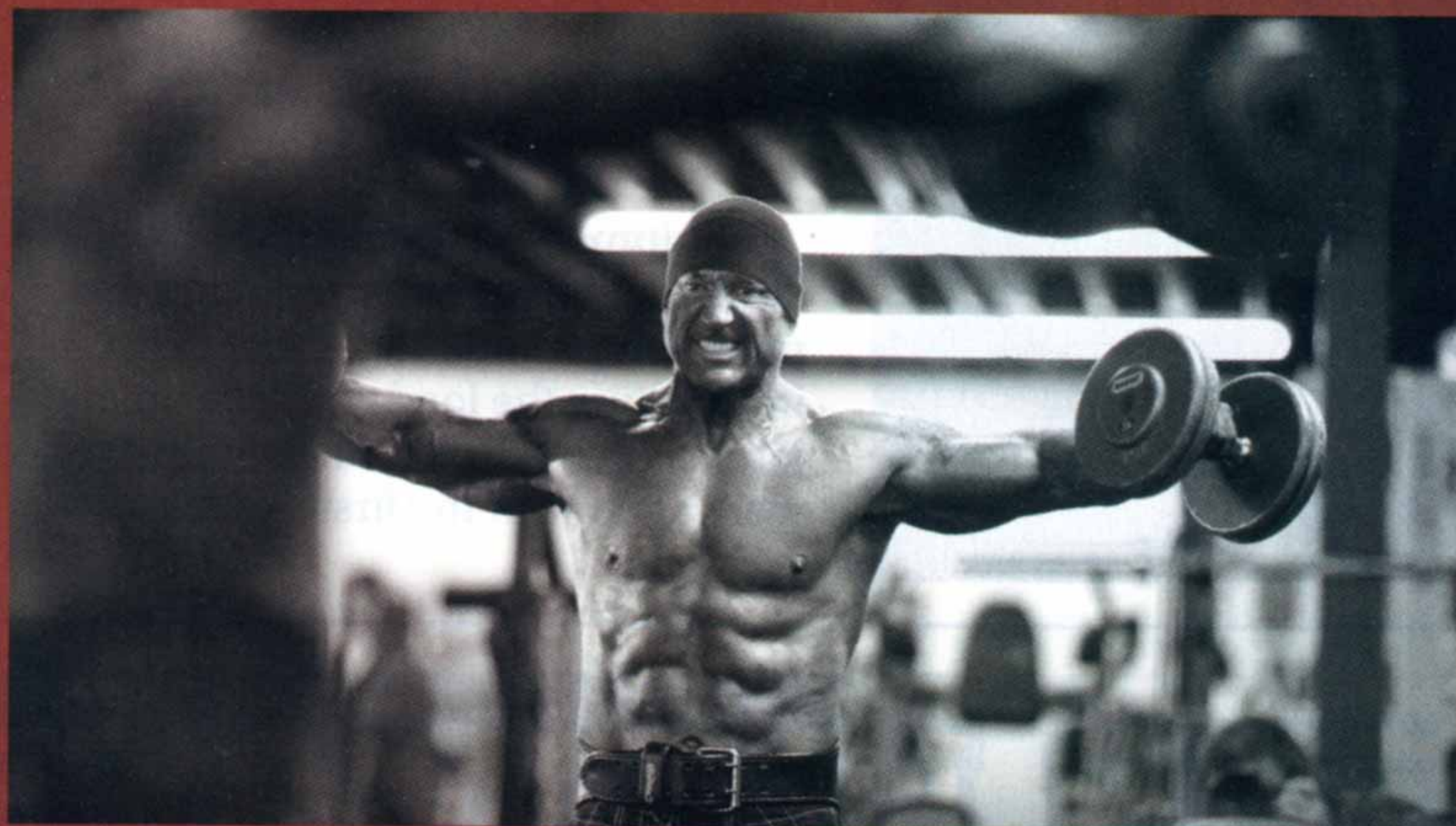
For example, many overhand pulling movements for lats strongly involve the brachialis as well as the brachioradialis of the forearm. If you experience pain in the front of your elbow from those move-

Model: Andre Nielsen

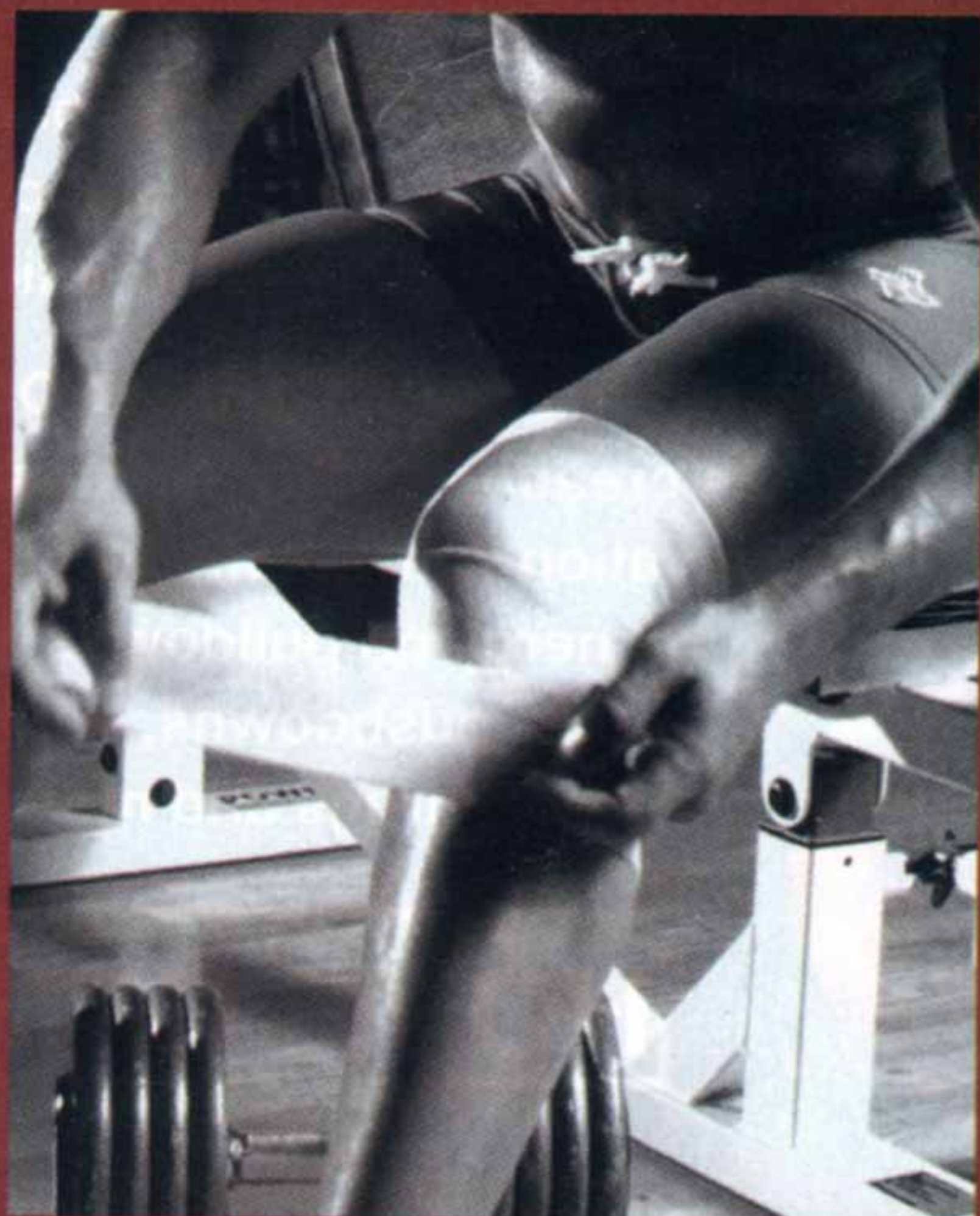


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Model: Robby Ross \ Location: Dave Fisher's Powerhouse Gym, Torrance, California



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The interesting thing about wraps is that they can sometimes cause problems.



Model: Dan Hill

A strong grip is definitely important, but if your traps—a huge muscle group—do not outgrow your forearms' ability to hold on to the heavy weights your traps demand, you are not training traps properly.

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ments, it is often because the lower brachialis tendon, which gets only indirect work, is not strong enough to handle the overload placed on it. Directly working the brachialis with hammer curls—and the brachioradialis with reverse wrist curls—will strengthen both the muscle and the tendons, equipping them to assist in the lat work. The best way to test this is to begin the remedial exercises with light weight—do not highly stress the already aggravated joint—and see if the pain is alleviated after a few weeks of strengthening. Lower-back issues can often be resolved in that fashion as well.

Wrap it, Strap it, Brace it, Cushion it...

Equipment manufacturers have done a superb job of producing the many wraps and braces that assist in handling the load we place on our joints. Knee wraps for heavy squat work are one of the first—and most

widely-accepted—workout aids trainees employ as they grow in the sport. Wrist straps for deadlifts and heavy shrugs usually come next.

Ironically, grip aids in any form often elicit a mixed response. It's not uncommon to hear so-called experts insisting that their use indicates that you are not paying proper attention to grip development. A strong grip is definitely important, but if your traps—a huge muscle group—do not outgrow your forearm's ability to hold on to the heavy weights your traps demand, you are not training traps properly. (Note that in the World's Strongest Man competition, the behemoth-size competitors wear straps when lifting cars.) One of the most common complaints among bodybuilders—at every level of expertise—is sore hands. So the point becomes not about showing off your awesome grip under the gym lights but showing off awesome traps under your shirt.

Even the use of training gloves comes under the nearsighted scrutiny of the "gym police." I have actually seen comments in print deriding the use of gloves because "your girlfriend doesn't want you to have softer hands than she does." Brothers, if your girlfriend (or, ladies, your boyfriend) is that concerned about the condition of your palms, you have a larger problem than a lack of calluses.

I love to train hard—but I have a relatively light frame. (A smart-aleck friend once called me a "pit bull trapped in a French poodle's body.") So if I wear gloves to protect my hands and straps to enable me to lift heavier weights, then that is the smart choice for me. Don't let anyone else make that decision for you. I have gone so far as to cut up foam beer can coolers and place the strips inside my gloves for heavy pressing movements. The absolute absence of hand pain enables me to give my full attention to the muscle being worked.

The interesting thing about wraps, however, is that they can sometimes cause problems. I quit doing heavy squats

somewhere in my 50s because I was working a lot of hours and did not have the recovery capacity I felt I needed. I believe if you look closely at an X-ray of a hurting joint, you will see an expiration date stamped on it in very small letters: "Best if used by...."). Before I quit squatting, however, I learned something surprising. I thought I had reached my knees' expiration date, but I found that wrapping them for set after set was causing my patellar tendons to become irritated. On a hunch, I stopped wrapping them and found the pain in my knees went away. In fact, in my 60s I have actually resumed careful squatting.

Outside of the Gym

In much the same way that Major League pitchers ice their throwing arm after a game, what you do at home after training can profoundly affect your next workout. While it is true that even our less-severe pains can benefit from accepted rehab techniques—rest, ice, compression and elevation—I have found that chilling the injured joint is the most therapeutic approach. You know the drill; 20 minutes on, 20 minutes off. Right after downing your postworkout shake is a good time for it.

Different forms of ice are available from cold packs to the old ice-filled water bottle. Strapping the pack in place with an Ace bandage helps, but you can be creative too.

Editor's note: Tony DiCosta is a successful over-60 masters competitor, freelance writer and veteran of 45 years of gym warfare. Currently at work on a training manual for older

bodybuilders, *Look Amazing at Any Age*, he can be reached at tonydico-sta@earthlink.net or on Bodybuilding.com's Bodyspace as "AmazingAt60plus." **IM**

