

# Deltoid training – Shoulder this!

**FOR SUCH SMALL MUSCLES** deltoids receive a hammering in the gym. A lot of weight trainers will do a compound shoulder exercise or two and follow this up with isolation exercises for one or more of the three deltoid heads (anterior front, medial side and anterior rear). This is often in addition to chest work which also gives the deltoids a fairly hard workout. This may all be too much. Consider the following points and think about whether your deltoid training program, or those of your clients, needs adjusting.

## Front deltoid

The front deltoid must be the most over-trained muscle in the world of resistance training. This is because in most chest, triceps and, of course, shoulder exercises, it is working. And for some movements, like the bench press, it's working extremely hard. Yet no sooner have many trainers finished a heavy chest and shoulder workout, than they begin hitting the front deltoid even harder with three or four sets of heavy forward raises.



*Forward raises with plates or dumbbells are unnecessary for most people but may be useful for rehabilitation or sport-specific work*

There may be a case for performing forward deltoid raises, such as for rehabilitation or sport-specific work, but in most cases the average trainer can get by perfectly well without them. There are two basic reasons for this. Firstly, it's a small muscle which doesn't need specific work. Secondly, it will be worked by other exercises anyway.

Yet for many trainers, particularly young males, heavy bench presses and side and front deltoid work take precedence. This has potentially serious consequences in terms of posture,

muscle imbalances and joint health around the shoulder, as the overworked, under-stretched muscles at the front slowly tighten over time and draw the shoulders forward. There is often insufficient strength in the upper back and the rear deltoids, to counter this effect. In extreme cases, the resulting round-shouldered appearance can look quite strange.

## Side deltoid

Working the side deltoid hard is not such a problem. Sure, it's another small muscle, but unlike the front deltoid, it tends not to be overly taxed during the performance of other exercises. Also, and very importantly for people concerned with appearances, it contributes to the shape of the upper body to a degree which is out of proportion to its actual size. A few more grams of muscle on the side of the deltoids adds a great deal to the illusion of upper body width. For individuals who want to appear broader across the shoulders, side deltoids are worth the effort.



*Compound shoulder exercises such as the upright row and the overhead press should provide sufficient stimulation to develop the side deltoid*



*Lateral raises are an advanced isolation exercise that does not offer the basic strength and size benefits of compound movements*

The compound shoulder exercises that most people do – upright row, overhead press and so on – should provide sufficient stimulation to develop the side deltoid well if they are performed properly. Lateral raises are also an option but the more experienced trainer might consider these more of an isolation movement, unable to offer the basic strength and size benefits of compound movements, and better left

to the end of a workout. In short, the side deltoid is well able to handle most strenuous compound and isolation movements without being in danger of being over-trained. Note, though, that for most muscles, particularly small ones, training intensity is more important than volume. In other words, it's not how long your sessions are, it's how hard they are that really matters.

It is also important, if you intend working the side deltoid, that you do exactly that. Doing exotic exercises which work both the side delts and the front delts at different stages of the same movement, alternating exercises such as single upright rows and forward raises in the same set, or performing an exercise with sloppy form can subject the front deltoid to undue stress. Unless specific exercises have been prescribed for rehabilitation or sport-specific purposes, the key is to keep it simple.

Another point to consider when combining front and side deltoid work in the same movement or the same set is that the front delts tend not to be able to move the same resistance as the side delts can. So combining front and side deltoid work will often result in either stressing the side delts appropriately but straining on the front delts, or stressing the front delts adequately but going too easy on the side delts. At best, this can be a waste of time and energy; at worst, you can injure yourself.

## Rear deltoid

If front delts are the most over-trained muscle, rear delts must be the most under-trained (along with calves, come to think of it). It doesn't help that we can't see them - for many trainers, it seems to be a case of 'out of sight, out of mind' for many muscles, particularly the smaller ones.

Another problem for rear delts is that, while they play an important role in maintaining posture and shoulder joint health, they are very hard to work in isolation - the bone structure in the upper back doesn't allow for the degree of isolation or range of movement that the other

delts enjoy. This means that the upper back and trapezius muscles can sometimes take the load meant for rear delts unless a trainer is very careful with technique. A range of exercises work the rear deltoid, though, and most are quite effective if performed properly. Bent-over dumbbell raises are still probably the most popular rear deltoid exercise. Larger gyms also often have useful machines which are specifically designed for rear delts, and which target this muscle group very well.

In many cases, a trainer who doesn't do any isolation front deltoid work will probably not need to do any specific rear deltoid work. Regular back and shoulder work will keep the rear delts strong enough to counteract the effects of the work done in the front of the shoulder girdle. An exception may apply to people who, while they may not do front deltoid work, choose to make decline, flat and incline bench presses a high priority. In these instances, some rear deltoid work wouldn't go astray.

## Other considerations

- The specifics of deltoid training detailed above will not necessarily apply to everyone we train. Beginners or people who don't have the time or inclination to make weight training a big part of their life will often get by quite well with one compound shoulder exercise in their program. The aspects of training mentioned in this article will tend to apply to intermediate trainers or new trainers who spend a lot of time in the gym.
- The location and orientation of the deltoid muscles make dumbbell work particularly useful for isolation exercises. As always, make sure that any dumbbell work performed using one arm at a time is worth it for you in terms of the extra time and effort you will outlay. Many trainers do side dumbbell raises one arm at a time when they could do exactly the same exercise, just as effectively, both arms at a time.
- Stretching is very important for shoulder joint health.
- If you are working shoulders strenuously, it becomes easy to strain your neck. Take care. ■



*The bent-over dumbbell raise is the most popular rear deltoid exercise*



### Tony Podpera

Tony is a Canberra-based fitness instructor. He began bodybuilding in the early 1980s and has advised clients on weight training and strength and conditioning issues for 20 years. He has been teaching group fitness classes since 1994 and has taught throughout the ACT and internationally.