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Some Thoughts on Proper Terminology

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We English-speakers have, over the years, introduced a number of expressions to describe different disciplines or practices related to resistance training. Since this activity is so popular with coaches, athletes, sport scientists, medical professionals, members of the lay public, and the sports media, we do them all a disservice by the continued failure to properly identify these activities.

Let's start simply with the term resistance training. This is the most correct, all-inclusive term to describe the various methods of bodyweight or external resistance exercise for whatever athletic or cosmetic goal. In the U.S., nearly everyone refers to his or her use of resistance training as "strength" training. Certainly one syllable is easier than three and I suppose the shorter term implies a bit more importance. However, most of these individuals are far off-target in terms of actually training for improved strength. True strength training requires the use of an appropriately high intensity and low repetitions to have a positive effect on one's strength.

Simply stated, while those who use moderate or light resistances and perform many repetitions are engaged in resistance training, it is not typical strength training. Now, should they choose to use weights as their form of resistance, we can then use the term weight training to describe their efforts. But, for example, if they employ bodyweight, surgical tubing, or water as resistance, then obviously resistance is not being created through the use of weights. This is not weight or typical strength training.

For those involved in competitive sports, we again must deal with some confusing terminology. The oldest sporting event that involves adjustable external resistance is weightlifting. Some years ago, long before any other competitive event involving a barbell existed, English-speaking nations adopted, for some unknown reason, the term "Olympic weightlifting" or "Olympic lifting."

True enough, weightlifting is performed every four years in the Olympic Games. As has been pointed out by Dr. Michael Stone, these particular athletes at the Olympic Games are correctly referenced as Olympic weightlifters. At any other time they are simply weightlifters. Weightlifting is NOT a generic term to be applied to all that use weights. If anything, these individuals are known as weight trainees. Weightlifting is what the sport has always been called on the Olympic program. The sport's governing body is the International Weightlifting Federation. This term seems quite clear in its intent. And, note it is one word, not two, as often referenced by some.

No other Olympic sport has experienced the need to identify itself this way. True enough, in the U.S., the sport of amateur boxing adopted the term "Olympic-style" as a preface to differentiate between itself and the professional version. There is reference to the

"Olympic distance" in triathlon to differentiate from other distances. But in no case has a sport felt a need to change its name. Needless to say, the term "Olympic" is owned and controlled by the International Olympic Committee internationally and its member nations nationally.

As an outgrowth of weightlifting, in the late 1930s and early 1940s individuals began to compare their muscular development in a competitive arena. The activity became known as body building, sometimes referenced as one word, but again, let us look to the International Federation of Body Builders, the governing body, to decide the correct emphasis. In the U.S. this sport is sometimes referred to as physique. The purpose of this particular phrase is lost on me. Body building certainly seems to be the more appropriate term for this activity.

Also coming from competitive weightlifting was an off-shoot sport originally dubbed "odd-lifting" in the U.S. This was soon changed to powerlifting. When international competition in this sport first began in the 1960s, the British quite correctly pointed out to the Americans that this sport should be called strength-lifting. True enough, the squat, bench press, and deadlift are more appropriate measures of strength than power. However, the correct terminology was lost in a politically determined vote of the International Powerlifting Federation.

In addition to common errors in the proper identification of resistance training and its various disciplines we often see incorrect references to equipment, exercise, or training protocols. As examples, the weightlifting belt (or weight lifting belt) is often written up as a "weight belt" (better known to SCUBA divers). The bench press (once erroneously referred to as the prone press) is often called the chest press (these are two entirely different exercises). Many studies reference a "heavy" resistance training protocol when the actual repetition scheme involved 10-12 repetitions, a load more appropriately labeled as "moderate."

Normally, the scientific community prides itself on the correct use of terminology when presenting the results of a particular study and its effects on the subjects. While the correct terminology referenced in this brief article seems simple and straightforward, numerous errors are regularly seen. Use of the proper terminology in coaching or scientific venues is important, if for no other reason than to be sure all parties involved are reading "from the same page." Perhaps this takes a little more effort, but in the long run it seems the use of similar terms by all involved makes for a greater exchange of information.

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