

## **The Interval Training Myth**

By: Charlie Cates, CSCS

<http://selfmadefitness.com/>  
[charlie@selfmadefitness.com](mailto:charlie@selfmadefitness.com)

Interval training is all the rage today when it comes to fat loss. High-intensity interval training, in particular, has become such a buzzword among fitness addicts and gurus that the actual exercise prescription is a very, very far cry from the original intent of the training means. Between boot camps, group-ex classes, and cardio equipment all claiming to provide “interval training for fat loss”, a very effective training style is being twisted into another fad of the fitness industry.

Interval training is a training method used by competitive and everyday athletes to both burn fat and improve cardiovascular function. The idea is that you have a working period of intense, all-out movement followed by a recovery period of little to no movement. The biggest factor when using interval training effectively is the intensity level of both the working and recovery periods. This one aspect alone dictates the time of the working and recovery periods, the total time of the training session, as well as if an external resistance should be added to the athlete during the movement. The intensity of the working periods when used for fat loss or conditioning purposes is to be maximal, i.e. an all-out, gut-busting effort. Recovery periods where the intensity is near zero, i.e. standing or light walking, follow this.

Today, the majority of “interval” training is performed at a sub-maximal level, often times just above the point where the person could have a conversation during the working period and only slightly less intense during the recovery periods. Essentially, people are fueling their aerobic exercise addiction by continuing to perform lower-intensity training exercises for longer durations. With high-intensity interval training, you want to stay as anaerobic as possible. Not only will this lead to a rise in testosterone and growth hormone, but there is also evidence that proves training anaerobically has a very high transfer to aerobic performance.<sup>1,2</sup> Compare this to the more standard interval training of today where people spend most of the set in an aerobic state, which, if done too often, has been shown to spike cortisol, resulting in muscle degradation and power reduction.<sup>3</sup>

What does this mean for those who are staying aerobic? Well, for one, you could be furthering the problem you are trying to solve if your goals are fat-reduction related. Muscle is a metabolic regulator, and its degradation that is brought on by the cortisol spike leaves your body with little to go on once the stimulus (the training) has been removed. A perfect example of this is people who only do spin classes. As long as they keep going to the classes, they look and feel all

---

<sup>1</sup> *Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning, Third Addition.* Ratamess, Nicholas A. p. 108. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> *Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning, Third Addition.* Ratamess, Nicholas A. p. 112. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Essentials of Strength Training and Conditioning, Third Addition.* Swank, Ann. p. 131. 2008.

right. However, once they go on vacation for a week or can't make it because of work, they put on weight very, very quickly and often times regress three weeks or more because they don't have enough muscle to sufficiently regulate their metabolism once they've stopped going to the spin classes.

In order to stay anaerobic during interval training, you must keep your working periods to 30 seconds or less and allow your recovery periods to be at least one minute. If you feel that a 30-second working period is too short, you are not exercising at the intensity level that is required for high-intensity interval training to be most effective. Remember, you are trying to perform all-out maximal-effort movements, so after 30 seconds of that you should want to collapse. After your working period you will have your recovery period, during which you will do next to nothing. This period is two to ten times as long, although I've performed exercises where the recovery period is up to 100 times as long, as the working period. This is to allow you to catch your wind and also to allow the ATP to regenerate in your muscles. Because you are attempting a maximal-effort movement for each set, you want to be almost fully recovered before you begin your next set.

The length of the entire interval training session should be no more than 30 minutes, with 10 to 15 minutes being ideal. I recommend 10 to 15 minutes sessions because most people really struggle to keep up the intensity if they try to go longer than that. I have most of my clients stop after five to seven minutes because their effort starts to decline after that. Remember, maximal-effort movements are not the most pleasurable experiences for a lot of people, so even though they may think they are going all-out, because they know it is painful, they probably aren't pushing themselves quite as hard as they were at the beginning. This is something you have to regulate with your clients and yourself, understanding that there are times to keep pushing and there are times to end on a high note.

Interval training can be one of the most effective training tools in your arsenal if used properly. Performing low-intensity working sets of 60 seconds or more or hopping on an elliptical or stationary bike that only changes the resistance while you put forth the same relative effort are not going to get you or your clients the results you are looking for. Challenge yourself to train harder *and* smarter by picking up your intensity level and staying anaerobic with your training.

Get big or die tryin'.

Charlie Cates  
Self Made®, Owner

*Charlie Cates is a strength and conditioning specialist and the owner of Self Made® (<http://selfmadefitness.com/>) in Chicago, IL. He has worked with competitive and everyday athletes of all ages and ability levels, from 9-year-old kids to NFL MVP's. He can be reached via e-mail at [charlie@selfmadefitness.com](mailto:charlie@selfmadefitness.com).*

*This article may be reproduced with biographical information intact.*