

Timed Sets For Auto-Regulation

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Auto-regulation is a field that I have become increasingly interested in over the course of the past nine months. What first intrigued me was how individualized each and every training session would become once auto-regulation was applied. It was a level of individualization I had not run across before, a level that looked at not only what each and every athlete had to specifically work on to maximize their potential, thereby dictating which exercises would be performed, but also what each athlete's work capacity was for that particular session, which in turn dictated the number of sets and reps that would be performed of the aforementioned exercises.

This thought of individualizing a training session based on strength deficiencies and movement pattern abnormalities, combined with the physiological changes that would take place within an athlete before, during, and after each set, was ground-breaking to me. Despite how complicated this method of training seemed I was bound and determined to make it work for myself.

After spending countless hours and training sessions trying to figure out how to apply this science perfectly within my own training, I was finally struck with an epiphany. During my internship in the summer of 2009 I was taught a way of efficiently training large groups of people by having a central stopwatch dictate when the groups of people would switch from one exercise to the next. This way, everybody got as much done as they could in a given amount of time. This training method served as a guide as I figured out how to apply this way of training to a more strength-based regimen as apposed a high calorie burning one. This was the easy part though, and within a day or two I had a plan as to how I was going to incorporate this into my own training program.

What I came up with for myself was to use an extended length of time for my main lifts and shorter periods of time for my subsequent exercises. I would rest as much as I needed to between each set instead of timing out my rests. Finally, I would try to get as many sets in of each exercise as I could in the amount of time I allotted for them. The total time for each session, not including warm-up and cool-down, would be an hour.

So this is how it works in the SMS training series, starting with SMS 7. For the four main lifts each week (squat, bench, dead, military) you get 20 to 25 minutes to do your warm-up sets, your working sets, and to clear the bar for your first pair of subsequent exercises. At the 25-minute mark (20 minute mark on Day 4), you begin arranging the weights for your first pair of C exercises, which you perform for 15 minutes, getting as many sets in as you can. After 15 minutes, you should have cleaned up and put back whatever equipment you have used for those exercises and began the D exercises, which you perform for 10 minutes, getting as many sets in as you can and putting the weights away before the 10 minutes are up. Then you move on to your E exercises and so on.

Training using this format allows your body to dictate how many sets you will get in, so on days when you feel great you may get six or seven sets in, resting

very little between each set. On others days you may not feel as sharp and then you may only get three or four sets in. However many sets you get in is fine as long as you are pushing yourself. This type of format will not work well with someone who is unmotivated to train or wants to take the easy way out of everything. However, for people who are motivated and like and are able to push themselves then this format will be very effective.

I figured out how much time to assign to each exercise by timing how long it would take me to complete the number of sets that I had been assigning for the first six SMS training programs. I did not take into consideration the amount of time I spent putting away my weights between exercises, but what I have found is that even with this time now added in I am still able to consistently get more sets in throughout my workout. For example, the first time I used timed sets on my deadlift day I performed eight working sets, whereas before I was only performing four in the same amount of time.

Not only have my working sets increased on the days when I feel well, but on the days when I'm not feeling as well I don't have to grind out sets when I'm fatigued, greatly reducing the chance of injuring myself as well as allowing me to recover quicker for my next training session. This has been vital to my body not falling in to an overreached or overtrained state. The time limits also force my workouts to be shorter than they previously were, allowing me to get in and out of the gym in a timely manner and still enjoy great progress in strength and size.

The SMS training series doesn't incorporate timed sets until you train in a more traditional fashion for six months so you can learn to listen to your body and learn the signs and symptoms of your body telling you it is fatigued or to press harder. Having this self-awareness and mind-body connection will only increase the effectiveness of a timed sets training program. While this isn't a completely pure form of auto-regulation, as the exercises and reps are pre-determined, it does allow for a very simple form of what would otherwise be a very complicated and confusing process. As I talked about earlier, this type of training isn't for everybody. If you are unmotivated, unfocused, or unwilling to push yourself when you are in the gym then a more regimented training program may be a better option for you. But if you do not fall along these lines then I would STRONGLY recommend incorporating timed sets into your training program.

Get big or die tryin'.

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Charlie Cates is the owner and head performance coach of Self Made (<http://selfmadefitness.com>), and is a Certified Personal Trainer and Performance Enhancement Specialist through NASM. He has worked with 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.

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