



Reg Park's 5x5 Program

The Original Strength and Size Routine
by the Editors

Below are 2 articles about the original 5x5 program as developed by bodybuilding great Reg Park. He got big and strong in the pre-steroid era of strength training. Give it a look. The original routine is a little on the long and tiring side but it can be adapted to fit your level of training and schedule—that is why I included Mike Mahler's article as well. Enjoy! --JT

As far as the popularity of beginner's training programs go, five sets of five reps is right up there with 3x10, 10x3, and the ever-lasting 1x20 squat program, which inspired the weight room battle-cry, "Squats and milk!"

A few years ago, [Dan John wrote](#) an in-depth explanation of several versions of the 5x5 program. Bill Starr also created a popular 5x5 plan that focused primarily on the power clean, bench press, and back squat.

We're going to take a look at one of the very first 5x5 routines to be published, originally written in 1960 by Reg Park in his manual *Strength & Bulk Training for Weight Lifters and Body Builders*. The late Reg Park was a three-time Mr. Universe winner and he was one of the first bodybuilders to really push the size envelope by competing at a massive 225 pounds in the 1950s and '60s.



Oh yeah, Park is also the number one bodybuilder that little Arnie from Austria admired, respected, and hoped to someday look like. Upon seeing Park on a magazine cover for the first time, Schwarzenegger has said, "He was so powerful and rugged-looking that I decided right then and there I wanted to be a bodybuilder, another Reg Park."

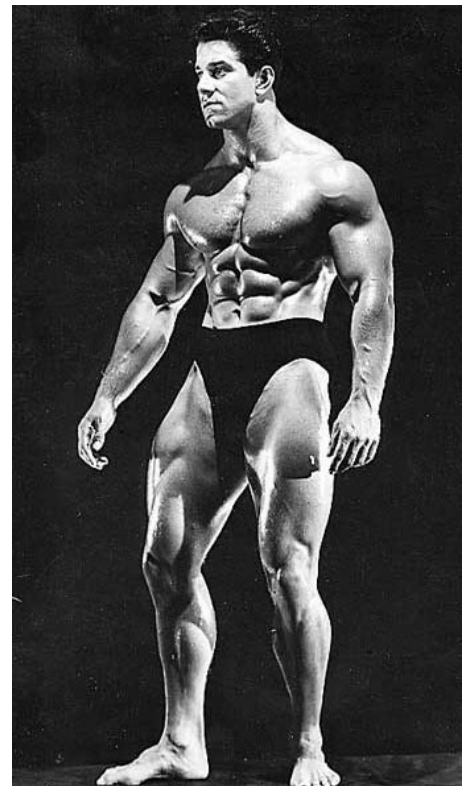
Reg Park's Three Phase 5x5 Program

Phase One

45-degree back extension 3x10
Back squat 5x5
Bench press 5x5
Deadlift 5x5

Rest 3-5 minutes between the last 3 sets of each exercise.

Train three days per week for three months.



Phase Two for Bodybuilders*

45-degree back extension 3-4x10
Front squat 5x5
Back squat 5x5
Bench press 5x5
Standing barbell shoulder press 5x5
High pull 5x5
Deadlift 5x5
Standing barbell calf raise 5x25

Rest 2 minutes between sets.

Train three days per week for three months.

* After the basic Phase One, Park had a different set of recommended exercises for aspiring Olympic weightlifters. It used a few different sets and reps, and included lunges and power cleans.

Phase Three for Bodybuilders

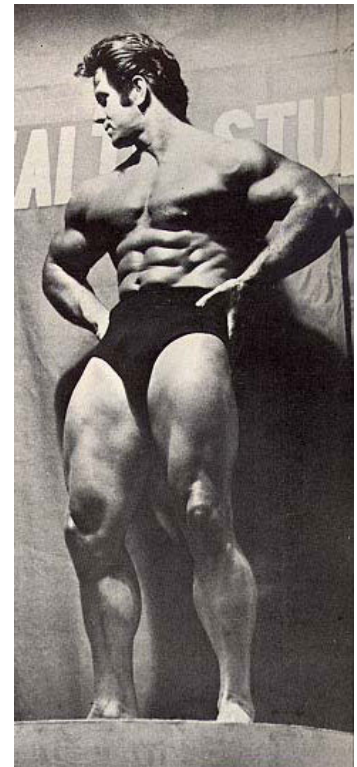
45-degree back extension 4x10
Front squat 5x5
Back squat 5x5
Standing barbell shoulder press 5x5
Bench press 5x5
Bent-over barbell row 5x5
Deadlift 5x3
Behind-the-neck press or one-arm dumbbell press 5x5
Barbell curl 5x5
Lying triceps extension 5x8
Standing barbell calf raise 5x25

Rest 2 minutes between sets.

Train three days per week for three months.

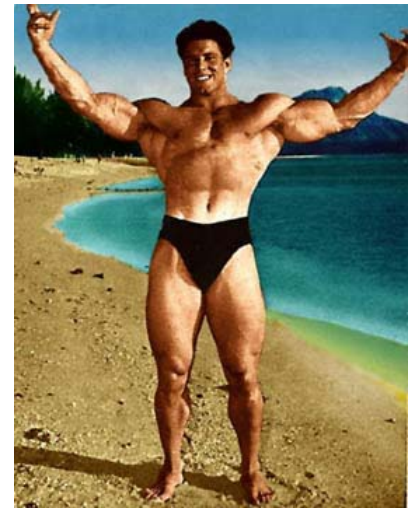
As Park explained it, 5x5 includes two progressively heavier warm-up sets and three sets at the same weight. He suggested increasing weights at approximately the same interval, for example:

Back squat: first set 135x5, second set 185x5, followed by three sets of 225x5.



When you can complete the last 3x5 at a given weight, increase the weight on all five sets 5-10 pounds. Also, he was strongly against training to failure, saying that it encouraged a negative mindset when attempting other heavy, near-maximal lifts.

You are, however, allowed to test for one-rep max at the end of each phase. Park recommends two warm-up sets (1x5 and 1x3), followed by three progressively heavier attempts at a one-rep max. So the max testing day would be: 1x5, 1x3, and 3x1 (for each lift). Take the next four days off from the gym, and then begin the next phase of training.



For the 45-degree back extensions, begin without added weight. Once you can complete all sets, increase your poundage each set while still getting all sets and reps. Park and his training partner often used 135 for the first set, 175 for the second, and 215 for the third, and 235-255 for the fourth.

That's the entire plan, and it's a doozy. Talk about volume training? Mike Mentzer just rolled over in his grave... once. Notice, there really aren't any isolation exercises until the third phase, when you've been training consistently for six months. Only then can you break out some curls for the girls.

As far as recovery goes, Park recommended plenty of sleep and plenty of food. His main sources of nutrition would include whole milk, whole eggs, steak, orange juice, salad, protein powders, wheat germ, and liver tablets. Interestingly, the foods would remain the same when cutting, but the portions would be reduced.

With such a high volume of work, it wasn't uncommon for these workouts to last two to three hours. That's typical of the training in that era, and it's a *far* cry from the, "get out of the gym in 60 minutes, or you'll sacrifice growth hormone levels!" warnings of today.

Does that make it much worse than programs designed today? Is this absurdly busy training day dangerous, guaranteed to break you emotionally and scare you out of the gym? Not necessarily.

While it might not be ideal, or even fun, to do for the long term, when was the last time you had a juggernaut session and *really* tried to destroy yourself in the gym? Once in a while, it's okay to break the rules, especially if you have a free Saturday with nothing else to do... and a free Sunday to lie in bed, eat steak, and curse us for daring you to try this plan.

The Reg Park Way To Serious Size And Strength

by Mike Mahler

"Training is like life, you get your ups and downs, but if you think about your problems hard enough and logically enough, you'll either solve them or reach a compromise."

— Reg Park



If your goal is to develop a powerful physique that is every bit as strong as it looks, you can't do much better than to follow the example of three time Mr. Universe, Reg Park. Arnold Schwarzenegger often refers to Reg Park as his childhood idol and the greatest inspiration and influence on his own bodybuilding and life successes.

In this article we'll take a closer look at Reg's training philosophy and cover his very popular and highly effective 5x5 program as well. Even if you don't care about getting bigger, if you want to develop a lean and strong physique, Reg is the man to emulate.

Rule #1: If you want to get bigger, then get *stronger*

Many people training today separate hypertrophy training from strength training. They think that when focusing on getting bigger, one should focus on the muscle not how much weight one is using. This explains why today's bodybuilders are nowhere near as strong as the old school bodybuilders like Reg Park.

Reg didn't separate strength training from bodybuilding. He believed that in order to get bigger, you must get *stronger*. Heavy weight training equals more recruited muscle fibers, which equals more

muscular growth. The only difference, says Reg, is that the pure strength trainer shouldn't increase caloric intake to avoid putting on size, while the bodybuilder should ramp up high quality nutrition in order to pack on more size.

Rule #2: Focus on compound movements

Reg believed in spending time on exercises that produce the maximum return. The cornerstone of his training was a healthy diet of squats, deadlifts, and bench presses, which he called the *primary strength exercises*. Secondary or supplementary exercises were cleans, high pulls, and clean and presses.

Personally, I'd replace the bench press with the standing military press, and throw in some pull-ups or bent over rows to balance the upper body. Regardless, Reg knew what he was doing, and had the results to back it up. Most trainees won't go wrong with a focus on the three primary lifts. Once you get your bench up to 300 pounds, and your squat and deadlift up to 400 pounds, you'll notice a big difference in how your physique looks.

The result of a healthy diet of squats, deadlifts, and bench presses.

If you don't want to get bigger, just keep your calories in check. For most trainees, worrying about getting too big is like worrying about making too much money. There are better problems to focus your attention on. Build a strong foundation on the three primary exercises, then add some supplementary exercises to round out your program and keep progress coming.



Rule #3 Don't let your lower back hold you back

If you've ever had a lower back injury, you know how important the lower back is to overall strength and power. We generate a lot of power from our backs and just because we can't see it in the mirror doesn't mean that it's not important.

Many trainees avoid doing any direct lower back work, because they don't want to strain their back. Then, ironically, they get lower back pains. The bottom line is if you have a weak back, you have a weak body. To avoid lower back pain and to build a strong and powerful physique, Reg believed that all training should include prone hyperextensions to keep the lower back strong and healthy.

Most gyms have hyperextension equipment, and if you're lucky your gym has Louie Simmons' reverse hyper machine. Start with a couple sets of ten with your bodyweight and then start adding weight. Progress slowly and carefully. You're not trying to set a PR on the hyperextension by seeing how much weight you can use for one rep, you're using it as a preventive measure to avoid lower back injuries and keep your back strong and healthy.



The Louie Simmons reverse hyperextension machine

After a few weeks of lower back work, don't be surprised if you notice a strength increase on overhead presses, deadlifts, and squats. Especially if you haven't done any direct lower back before.

Rule 4: Confidence is critical for increased size and strength

According to Reg, an effective training program focuses on increasing confidence. You should feel strong, empowered, and ready to take on the world after each workout. If you feel weak and defeated, then you're doing something wrong.

Imagine having a job in which you progressively work harder each month to make the same amount of money. Most people would find this absurd, and change jobs. Working smart means making *more* money for the *same* amount of effort, or better yet, working *less* and making *more*.

Training is no different. Rather than going overboard and burning out, focus on the minimum training dose that'll produce the maximum result. You can always add more if necessary.

Reg also believed that training to failure too often is a big mistake. If you train to failure too often, and miss a lot of lifts, your confidence will plummet, and so will your strength and size. Gradual progression is the way to go rather than having the illusion that strength and size will come in leaps and bounds. Have a long-term approach and enjoy the process.

Rule 5: You must know yourself to get the most out of training

Reg was a big believer in self-analysis. You must take the time to find out who you are, and what you're capable of. He stated that if you worry a lot, then you'll find great benefit from training, as it'll help

remove stress, and help you get a better handle on your life. You learn a lot about yourself through training that can help you in other areas of your life.

Trainees who make the mistake of compartmentalizing their training lives from the rest of their lives miss out on these lessons. We learn the power of discipline, perseverance, patience, and hard work from training. Carry over these skills into your business or job, and you'll benefit tremendously.

If you're strong in the gym but weak in your personal and professional life, then you're weak overall. Carry over what you've learned from effective training to other areas of your life and you'll experience the full benefits of training.

Rule 6: Layoffs and restoration are critical

We live in a workaholic society, in which we think that more is better across the board. We feel it's critical to work longer hours to get ahead and make more money, thinking that we will be much happier only to want more after we make more.

Many serious trainees take this workaholic mentality into the training realm, not only training far too often, but also not recovering enough. The idea of taking an entire *week* off would be unthinkable to them. Regardless, training must be balanced with adequate recovery.

Reg believed that layoffs are important to build up reserves, and to allow the body to rest. Moreover, when you take some time away from training you can't wait to get back at it and have a renewed enthusiasm to push forward. Just as it is beneficial to take time off from work and enjoy a vacation it is critical to take a training vacation periodically.

When you take a layoff, don't even *think* about training. Immerse yourself in other activities and enjoy the time away from working out. Don't read training books and magazines all day and analyze your workouts. A mental break is just as important as a physical break.

Get a relaxation massage at the beginning of your layoff. Many trainees always ask for a deep tissue massage no matter what, but this generic approach isn't the way to go. Find a high quality bodyworker who can give you a personalized massage based on the state you're in. He or she will know what you need.

Rule 7: Start reaping the benefits of the 5x5 program

Most people think they know all about the 5x5 program, Reg's favorite strategy for packing on strength and size. Just pick a weight and use it for five sets. When you can do five reps on all five sets, add weight. Don't increase the weight until you can do five reps for all five sets. This allows for a gradual progression and an avoidance of burning out. Simple, right? Yes, but this isn't the 5x5 version that Reg used and recommended.

In Reg's 5x5 program, the first two sets are warm-ups, and the last three are the primary work sets. For example, if you're using 200 pounds for the primary sets on the military press, it would look like this: 160 x 5, 180 x 5, 200 x 3 x 5. When you can use 200 pounds for the last three sets of five, increase the poundage by five pounds on all five sets to take it to 165 x 5, 185 x 5, 205 x 3x5. Reg referred to the three primary sets as the stabilizer sets.

When you can do a given weight for three sets of five, you've locked that weight in, and are ready to move up. You can start with lighter weights for the first two warm-up sets, but make sure the poundage jumps from the first to the second set and from the second to the third set are the same. The first two sets are confidence-builders. Thus, if you feel tired on the first confidence-building sets, do one or two more to build up reassurance to attack the three primary sets.

Unlike many of today's bodybuilders that take very short breaks in between each set, Reg recommended 3-5 minute breaks to recover fully from each set. Also, focus on using as much weight as possible for each set, to acquire the greatest return on your effort.



Reg Park-Inspired 5x5 Programs

Option 1: (Two sessions per week, for busy people or trainees with poor recovery)

Monday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

- A1) Standing barbell military press 5x5
- A2) Barbell bent-over row 5x5

Take two-minute breaks in between each set of A1 and A2. Go back and forth until all of the sets have been completed.

Barbell squat 5x5 (three minute breaks in between each set)

Thursday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

- A1) Weighted dip 5x5
- A2) Weighted pull-up 5x5

Take two-minute breaks in between each set of A1 and A2. Go back and forth until all of the sets have been completed.

Barbell deadlift 5x5 (three minute breaks in between each set)

Option 2: (three sessions per week, for trainees who have more time and adequate recovery)

Monday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

- A1) Standing barbell military press 5x5
- A2) Barbell bent-over row 5x5

Take two-minute breaks in between each set of A1 and A2. Go back and forth until all of the sets have been completed.

Barbell squat 5x5 (three minute breaks in between each set)

Wednesday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

- A1) Weighted dip 5x5
- A2) Weighted pull-up 5x5

Take two-minute breaks in between each set of A1 and A2. Repeat until all of the sets have been completed.

Barbell deadlift 5x5 (three minute breaks in between each set)

Friday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

- A1) Incline barbell press 5x5
- A2) Dumbbell renegade row 5x5

Take two-minute breaks in between each set of A1 and A2. Repeat until all of the sets have been completed.

Barbell squat 5x5 (three minute breaks in between each set)

Option 3: (3x per week for advanced trainees who have great recovery abilities)

Monday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

- Barbell military press 5x5
- Weighted pull-ups 5x5
- Barbell squat 5x5
- Romanian deadlift 5x5
- Barbell curl 2x5
- Close-grip bench press 2x5
- Calf raise 3x12

Wednesday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

Bench press 5x5
Barbell bent-over row 5x5
Power clean 5x3
Barbell deadlift 5x5
Dumbbell curl 2x5
Weighted dip 2x5
Calf Raise 3x12

Friday

Hyperextensions 3x10 (one minute breaks)

Dumbbell clean and press 5x5
Weighted pull-up 5x5
Barbell squat 5x5
Dumbbell lunge 5x5
Barbell curl 2x5
Close-grip bench press 2x5
Calf raise 3x12

Take one-minute breaks in between each exercise and three-minute breaks in between each set.

For more information on Reg Park, check out his booklet *Strength and Bulk Training for Weightlifters and Bodybuilders*, available at [Super Strength Training](#). Also, check out the official Reg Park [website](#).

About the author Mike Mahler is a strength coach and fitness information provider based in Las Vegas. Sign up for his free online fitness magazine at his [website](#).

