

The Litvinov Workout by Dan John

An amazing thing happened in 1983. I went on a date. Okay, that was a joke, because everybody knows that during the 80s I was covered with black and blue marks from being touched with ten foot poles.

Actually, the World Championships of Track & Field began in Helsinki, and the list of winners is a "who's who" of the sport. You'd find the names of Carl Lewis, Mary Decker, Edwin Moses, and Sergei Bubka littered among the gold medal winners.

It was also the year of an important failure. John Powell, who'd led American discus throwing for a decade, failed to make the finals. Powell came away with two important lessons and inspired a generation to rethink training from his observations.

The Two Lessons

1. The discus trials were at nine in the morning. Powell had never trained – *ever* – to throw at nine in the morning. He thought he could just walk out and throw the qualifying distance.

He learned *after* the competition that it took him a lot of time in the morning to get the snap that he had in the mid-afternoon. This is a good lesson for a lot of us who take performance for granted in life and sports.

2. When Powell looked around to see how the rest of the world was training, he noticed that his training hadn't advanced much, if at all. He noted that the throwers from the rest of the world were leaner, faster, and more muscular.

Especially impressive was the young gold medal winner in the hammer, Sergey Litvinov. If any of you are interested in becoming leaner, faster, and more muscular, keep reading.



Sergey Litvinov

From Powell's observations of Litvinov, I put together some training ideas that completely reshaped my approach to training athletes *and* completely reshaped my athletes. It's such a simple training idea that you may discount it at first. Let's start by looking at what Sergey Litvinov was doing that awoke Powell's imagination.

It's truly a simple workout. Litvinov, a 5' 10", 196 pound hammer thrower, did the following training session:

Eight reps of front squats with 405 pounds, immediately followed by a 75-second 400-meter run. Repeat this little combination for a total of three times and go home, thank you. Let's just stop here and marvel at what Powell observed. A 196-pound man front squatted 405... eight times!

"Dan, do you have any advice for my quad development?"

"Dear reader: Front squat 405 eight times. I'll now debit your account for this expensive advice."

Moreover, Sergey racked the bar and ran 400 meters... then did this two more times.

After listening to Powell's story, I invented a workout combining front squats with running. Let's look at the basic workout: the "Litvinov."

The Litvinov Workout

Perform any "big" lift and then drop the bar (gently) and run. My charges and I have used the following lifts:

Cleans
Clean & Press
Clean & Jerk
Deadlift
Front Squat
Overhead Squat
Snatch

Any and all variations of snatches and swings with kettlebells and dumbbells.

Over time we discovered that the 400 was far too long a run for the needs of my athletes. But, if someone really desires a fat loss blast, by all means run the 400!

I found that strength athletes weighing in the mid-200 pound range just didn't recover very well from the full 400. Now, I have to ask myself: if the world champion weighs 196 and my chubby little body weighs 260, how does that extra 64 pounds help?

The devil is in the details with this workout. Back squats don't work because racking the weight and running away involve way too much care and planning. We also discovered that even our lightest racks were a hassle to pack up into the bed of a pickup truck and haul to a place where we could combine the lifting and running.

Also, I hated having my bar, weights, and rack outside in lousy weather collecting rainwater and mud. Plus I got tired of burning my hands on the hot plates in the summer sun.

Some lifts don't work very well either. Yes, we tried other lifts like military presses and one attempt with the bench press, but it seemed foolish – lots of work and set-up for not much of a return on the time and effort. The clean & jerk never seemed to work right either. The lift has to be simple and easy to push quickly with little mental effort. So, the best lifts are:

Front Squat

Overhead Squat (if you're good at them)

Snatch

Swings with kettlebells or dumbbells (But really knock up the reps; try doing more than thirty.)

The Litvisprint

Soon, the Litvinov became re-imagined as the "Litvisprint." As we played with lifts and distance, we found ourselves one day with a kettlebell and a hill. We soon discovered that the speed and intensity of the run had a bigger impact on the workout than the lift itself.

Kettlebell swings followed by a hill sprint of thirty yards or so seemed to leave the athlete burning oxygen for *hours* after the workout. Moreover, massive amounts of meat and analgesic liquids (beer) did little to revive the athletes.

Once again, the most obvious lesson of my coaching life has been reinforced: the more intense you can train,

the better. Yep, you knew that. So did I. Why then don't we follow the rule?

A nice little spin-off benefit began to emerge from Litvisprints: if the athlete is learning a lift, very often the overhead squat, doing the sprint after the lift seems to speed the learning process. Why? I have two ideas:

1. When most people try to learn a new skill, they think too damn much. I'll try to show someone how to snatch or clean at a clinic and the questions just keep coming out:

"Where do I put my thumbs?"

(Um, near your fingers.)

"Where do I put my elbows?"

(Between the upper and lower arm.)

By making the new lift even more complex by adding sprints, the athlete stops with the questions and just does the movement. By magic, it looks "okay."

2. Moreover, they attempt perfection on the new skill the first time they try it. I've probably squatted near 100,000 reps and I still learn new things each time I read a Dave Tate article. Ain't gonna happen on the first set people. The challenge of sprinting seems to get the athlete to forget perfection and focus on completion.

There's a lot to be said for this workout:

One, you can bring one piece of equipment outside, or if you're lucky and have a gym with a nice area to sprint next to your weights, just get going. You'll get an unusually demanding workout with a minimum of mental effort.

Two, and this is the interesting part, as you finish the lift and "attempt" to sprint away, you'll instantly understand how well this workout will impact your overall conditioning. Usually, the first two steps feel like running in waist deep water as the legs send up this response: "Could someone please tell us what the hell is going on?"

Third, I contend that this combination is the single best crossover training idea *ever* from the weightroom to the sports arena. Athletes who do Litvisprints note the improvement on the field, track, and court within a few workouts. "Something" is different and performance improves.

Litvisleds

Not content with leaving well enough alone, I began experimenting a few years ago with "Litvisleds." There are some equipment issues here: beyond the bar or kettlebell or dumbbell and the need for an area to run, you'll also need a sled and a harness.



First, choose the lift you'll be performing before you start dragging the sled. I'd cut our list down to these simple moves:

Front Squats

Overhead Squats

Swings with kettlebell or dumbbell

The reason why you have to simplify is that you hook yourself up into the harness *before* you lift. You're hooked to the sled when you lift so you can drop the bar and sprint/drag away.

A caveat: lift to the side of the path of the sled. Obvious, yes, but more than a few people have started their sprint/drag and snagged the weights and got yanked back to the ground. It's funny to watch, but it may also really hurt you. I'll still laugh at you, but you will be hurt.

I have no idea how much you should load on the sled. I've found that hooking a 70 pound kettlebell so that it drags is about right for most people. The drag is nice, but don't overdo it like many who think that you need to pull a building. What's important isn't wallowing around like a pig in slop, but flying away like an athlete. So, less wallow, more speed.

I also encourage my athletes to go for about five seconds and not worry about distance. Otherwise, you lose the quality of effort almost immediately.

Summary

Litvinovs, Litvisprints, and Litvisleds are a very simple idea. The quality of effort is far more important than the quantity – a concept that'll be missed by many. Don't do 25 pound squats then hop on the treadmill for a four minute walk while watching Oprah and consider this "Litvinovs."

To summarize:

You may find this the "fastest" workout you've ever done. Don't be surprised if the workout seems too light or too easy at first. Judge the workout on the last set, not the first set.

1. Pick a lift you know. Hit eight good reps with it, then sprint away for five seconds. Rest and repeat this two

more times.

2. Next time you try the workout, try another lift and maybe go a bit longer on the sprint.
3. Do this easy progression about twice a week. If you choose to make this your whole leg workout, you've "chosen wisely." If you're preparing for an athletic competition, try to see if this workout carries over to your field of play.
4. Don't measure rest periods the first few workouts. Let yourself recover fully. As the weights go up in the lift and the sprint gets around ten to twenty seconds, then try to zero in on three to five minute recoveries. You'll need it.

Oh, one final note. Four years later, at the 1987 World Championships in Rome, John Powell--noticeably leaner, faster and more muscular--took second place in the discus. He was 40 years old--ancient in track and field--and this accomplishment is still considered one of the most amazing feats in Track and Field history.

About the Author

Dan John is the former number one in the world in the Highland Games, ages 45-49, broke the American record in the Weight Pentathlon, holds numerous National Championships in weightlifting and throwing, and maintains a full-time free internet coaching site at <http://danjohn.org/coach>.

© 1998 — 2006 Testosterone, LLC. All Rights Reserved.