



Practical Strategies for Returning to Training After a Break

by Hayden Pritchard • Articles, Programming

Returning to training after a hiatus can be intimidating. In this article, you'll learn practical tips for managing training load and selecting exercises for your first few weeks or months back in the gym.



Since I began hosting the [Stronger Dad's Collective Podcast](#), I have become more aware of the impact of the seasons of life. We go through phases: You might be studying for a number of years, working in a particular industry for a period of time, living in different locations, or raising young children. Each of these represents a different season of life and has a direct impact on the things we prioritize and the choices we make – including our training habits.

It's not uncommon for someone who once put a lot of time and effort into their strength training to have it drop right down – or even completely off – their list of priorities. I've heard such stories from a number of guests on the podcast, as well as through conversations I have had with friends and colleagues.

Sometimes life forces your hand, or perhaps motivation to train fades, and the next thing you know you haven't trained for a number of months or even years.

If that sounds like you, then I hope you can take some encouragement from this article. The primary objective is to provide you with practical strategies that can help you effectively get back into strength training. So let's get into it.

Keep the Enthusiasm in Check

If you're still reading this article after the introduction, it probably means you're keen to get back into training. So this first section may seem a bit counterintuitive. But it's an important one to ensure your motivation doesn't quickly wane due to being overzealous at the beginning. If you are smart in the way you approach the first few weeks, I think you'll have more success over the long term.

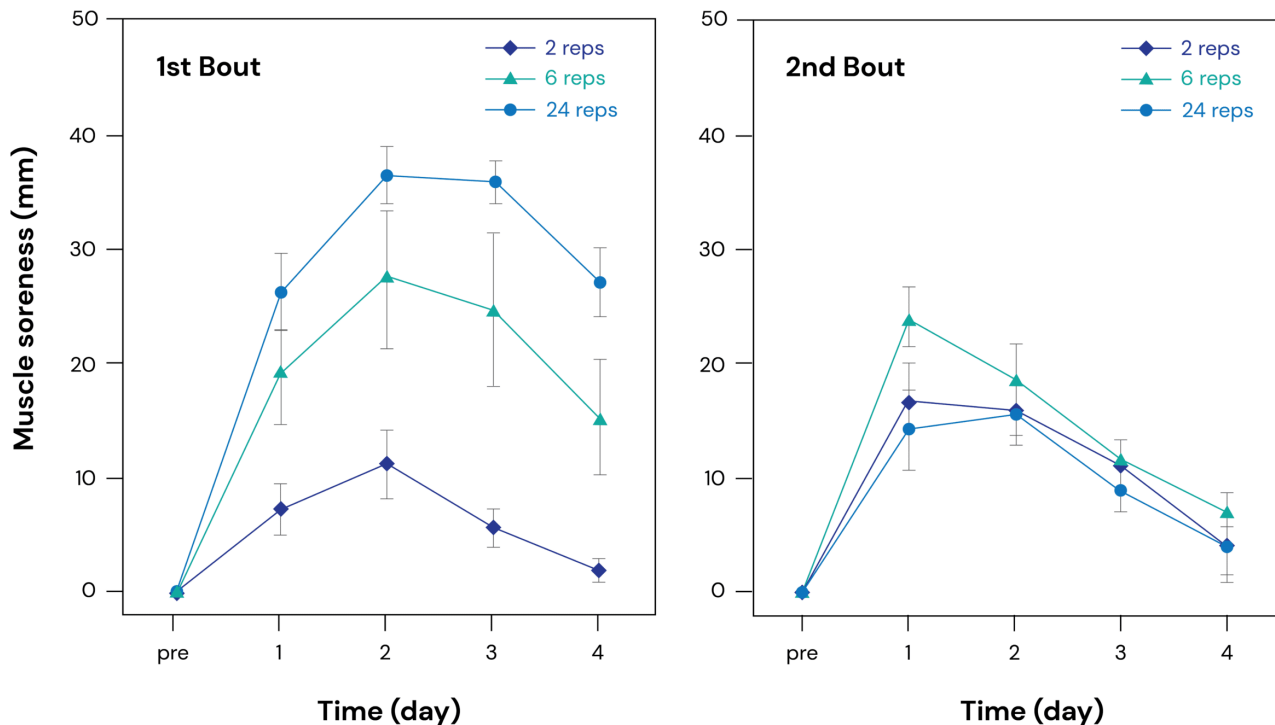
Most of us have experienced the soreness that comes from undertaking a new training plan or performing unaccustomed exercises for high volumes. I've experienced this myself on many occasions, usually when jumping straight back into higher volume work within those first few weeks post-competition; the muscle soreness can end up fairly debilitating. Thankfully, there is a better way.

That way involves an introductory week – or even a few weeks. The purpose of this introductory training is to take advantage of the repeated bout effect, and thus blunt the soreness and fatigue that can come following unaccustomed training. It is an effect that has been regularly demonstrated in the literature.

For example, [Nosaka et al. \(2001\)](#) found that when groups of participants performed initial training sessions with only two or six maximal eccentric bicep contractions, they experienced less muscle soreness than a group performing 24 maximal eccentric bicep contractions ... not surprising. However, even the group that performed only two maximal eccentric bicep contractions – and experienced minimal soreness from that training session – received enough of a stimulus that soreness was reduced when they undertook a bout of 24 maximal eccentric bicep contractions two weeks later (see Figure 1 below). Interestingly, the group that performed an initial bout of only six repetitions actually achieved as great of a protective effect against muscle soreness as the group that performed 24 repetitions in their

initial session – showing that you don't need a large dose of training to get the protective benefit of the repeated bout effect in subsequent sessions.

Figure 1 Higher training volumes cause more soreness initially, without conferring greater protection against subsequent soreness

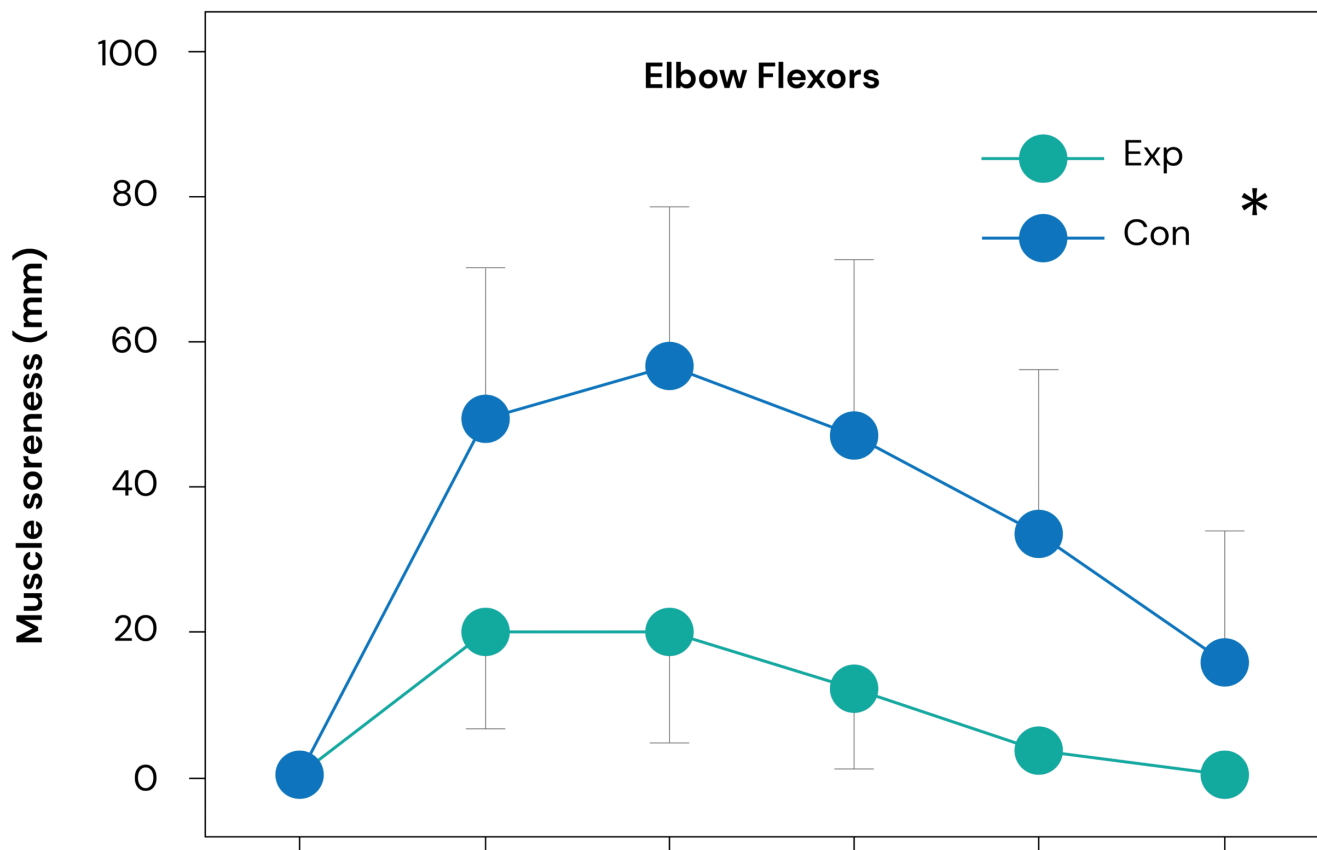


From [Nosaka et al. \(2001\)](#). Muscle soreness following an initial session of 2, 6, or 24 eccentric reps (1st Bout), and following a second session of 24 eccentric reps two weeks later (2nd bout). Despite causing significantly more soreness following the initial session, higher volumes of eccentric training in the first bout didn't seem to provide more protection against muscle damage in the second bout than lower volumes of eccentric training.

Similar protective effects have been shown for low-intensity training. [Huang et al. \(2019\)](#) found that performing eccentric contractions using loads of only 10% of maximal isometric contraction strength was able to induce protective effects to subsequent high-intensity eccentric contractions at 80% of maximal isometric contraction strength. In this study, the experimental group performed 50 low-intensity eccentric contractions. Whilst a high number of repetitions, it did not induce muscle soreness. The low-intensity contractions were performed by the experimental group two days before 50 high-intensity eccentric contractions, whilst the control group did not perform any prior activity. Nine different muscles were tested, and protective effects were found across muscle groups – although the magnitude of these effects did vary. For comparison with [Nosaka et al. \(2001\)](#), the results for soreness of the elbow flexors are

included in Figure 2 below. Together these findings show that the repeated bout effect can be attained with both low-volume and low-intensity approaches.

Figure 2 A single session of low-intensity training significantly mitigates muscle soreness after a subsequent session of higher-intensity training



From Huang et al. (2019)

What does this look like in practice? Well, a tactic I sometimes use is simply aiming to incorporate a smaller dose of training – maybe around 50% – in a “Week Zero” that is performed prior to beginning a new block of training. Table 1 below provides an example series of bench press sessions that could occur over a mesocycle when incorporating an introductory week. Week Zero represents the introductory week and the prescriptions are read as sets x reps at a corresponding RPE.

	Week Zero	Week One	Week Two	Week Three	Week Four

Bench Press	2×8 @6-7	3×8 @7-8	4×8 @7-8	4×8 @8-9	x8 @9-10, 3×8 @ 90% of above
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You will notice two key points in the program within Week Zero above:

1. The number of sets is less than Week One;
2. The RPE is lower.

This ensures that the overall training volume is less than what will be experienced in later weeks, as well as the intensity (or load on the bar) being less. Overall, the total training load is much lower.

There isn't anything magic about the above plan. In fact, if you have had a long time away from training, you could probably use only one set and perhaps an even lower RPE. You'll still get the benefits of less initial muscle soreness from that first session, as well as less soreness in the subsequent weeks. Win-win.

Thinking Longer Term

Given you are likely going from zero – or very limited – training, you need to be wary of adding too much too soon. Some researchers have found associations with rapid increases in training volume and the incidence of injury. Whilst such rapid increases in training aren't going to guarantee an injury, it is worth being aware that there might be an increased risk of injury when one tries to add too much training load too quickly ([Gabbet, 2016](#)). Also, muscle soreness when going from 0 to 100 percent effort has the potential to demotivate you, as mentioned earlier. So it is best to start small and build your way back into it.

What could this look like? Let's again use the bench press as our example and show how we might progress week to week over a few four week training blocks for someone who hasn't lifted for a few months.

Block One	Week Zero	Week One	Week Two	Week Three
Bench Press	1×8 @5-6	3×8 @5-6	3×8 @6-7	x8 @7-8, 2×8 @ 90% of above

Block Two	Week One	Week Two	Week Three	Week Four
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Bench Press	3×5 @6-7	4×5 @7-8	4×5 @7-8	x5 @8-9,3×5 @ 90% of above
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Block Three	Week One	Week Two	Week Three	Week Four
Bench Press	x3 @7-8,2×5 @ 80% e1RM	x3 @7-8,4×5 @ 80% e1RM	x3 @8-9,1×5 @ 80% e1RM	Testing Triplex3 @9.5-10

Again, the above program isn't anything magical or special. It's written to demonstrate some key principles to consider after several months (or more) out of the gym:

- Total training load should be added slowly and progressively;
- Take your time before pushing towards max efforts.

This plan has an intro week of less volume than the initial example for that concept. The lifter has gone from a training load of zero, so the intro week (Week Zero of Block One) reflects that. This first block then progresses first in volume (adding sets) and then in intensity (increasing RPE).

The first week of the second block adds to overall intensity by reducing the number of reps whilst maintaining intensity, then adds to both (just slightly) and holds for the next two weeks. The final week gives a chance for the lifter to push a bit harder, prescribing up to a 9 RPE.

In block three, over the course of several weeks, the lifter builds to hitting a maximal effort triple in week four, with a slight taper in volume in week three. Overall though, the concepts applied reflect those we discussed in earlier weeks. Note for the percentage work, an [e1RM can be calculated](#) from the prior block's final week.

This program spends 12 weeks building before pushing to a maximal effort. It doesn't mean that length of time is required before testing; but in a situation where a person is rather untrained, I want to ensure we spend some time rebuilding a foundation before focusing too much on the load on the bar.

Exercise Selection and Training Frequency

If you can keep your enthusiasm in check and manage your training load, you're most of the way there. However, exercise selection and training frequency will also play a big part in the total training load each day and across the week, respectively.

When referring to exercise selection, I am primarily referring to the number of exercises in a day, as this will have the largest impact on total training load. During the initial phases of returning to training, I would consider doing fewer exercises per day – maybe as few as three exercises a day. On each of these exercises, you'd follow similar recommendations for introductory weeks and volume progression as outlined above.

Major compound lifts should also be the focus – think pushes, pulls, squats and hinges. Each week I would be aiming to hit 1-2 of each type of lift to begin with. The below template shows two examples: a shorter, minimalist, daily plan with only two days a week, and the other slightly longer daily plan with three-day weeks.

Day One	Day Two
Squat Exercise	Hinge Exercise
Vertical Push	Horizontal Push
Vertical Pull	Horizontal Pull

Day One	Day Two	Day Three
Squat Exercise	Horizontal Push	Hinge Exercise
Hinge Exercise	Vertical Push	Squat Exercise
Vertical Push	Horizontal Pull	Horizontal Push
Vertical Pull	Vertical Pull	Horizontal Pull

During your first few months back, I would keep exercise selection simple, like above. I'd also try to ensure you rest at least a full day between sessions. Over the course of the months that follow, you could add in more exercises, increase your training frequency, or otherwise gradually build toward a style of training that works for you.

Also, it is worth noting that the repeated bout effect has been shown to have effects across similar exercises ([Zourdos et al., 2015](#)). This means if you are doing variations of an exercise, we could anticipate it may reduce soreness to some degree on these similar exercises. Meaning a very low-volume introductory week may not always be required from block to block if exercises are similar.

Wrapping Up

If you're looking to get back into training, I hope this article has provided you with some practical strategies that can help in this endeavor.

The concepts above are pretty simple: Start slow. Build gradually. Be patient.

They're easy enough to say, and they make sense in principle. The challenge comes in being able to be sensible in the short term so that you can continue to train in the long term. Be intelligent in your approach.

I wish you every success as you get back into training!

Read more about returning to training

- [A Guide to Detraining: What to Expect, How to Mitigate Losses, and How to Get Back to Full Strength](#) by Greg Nuckols
- [Returning to Training After a Break](#) by The MASS Research Review Team
- [Risks of Returning to Training](#) by Jason Eure (DPT)

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2. Huang, M. J., Nosaka, K., Wang, H. S., Tseng, K. W., Chen, H. L., Chou, T. Y., & Chen, T. C. (2019). [Damage protective effects conferred by low-intensity eccentric contractions on arm, leg and trunk muscles.](#) *European Journal of Applied Physiology*, 119, 1055-1064.

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