

# Iron Evolution - Phase 1

---

 [www.t-nation.com/training/dave-tates-iron-evolution-phase-1](http://www.t-nation.com/training/dave-tates-iron-evolution-phase-1)

by Dave Tate |

George Santayana is famous for writing, "Those who fail to learn from the mistakes of their predecessors are destined to repeat them." Okay, so ol' George wasn't referring to weight lifters. Still it applies, oh does it apply, and few people are in better position to see the philosopher's warning come true than Dave Tate. Luckily, you, the reader, can thwart this dire prophecy by reading about Dave's early mistakes in the iron game.

–TC

Hopefully you were able to get through

[the introductory article in this series](#) without falling asleep on your keyboard. This installment, Phase 1, will describe the training that I did between 1982 and 1987.

As you might recall, this phase began with my dad signing me up at a neighborhood barbell club. I consider this to be the first "real" training I did after spending one stupid year jerking around with some weights in the garage.

The training was basic linear periodization, and although you'll see it was flawed as hell, I did make really good gains off of it. This phase laid the foundation for the lifter I'd eventually become.

## Some Back Story

For a young kid just starting out, I sure was anal.

Back then I recorded everything – and I mean everything. My workout log book not only had my sets, reps, and poundages, but also how I felt that day, my last meal before training, even my Biorhythm. (I'm not sure what the point of that was except to let me know that I should look forward to having a shitty day.)

I took this approach because I wanted to understand everything about getting strong so I could eventually tweak it and make it better. What's interesting is that despite all my record keeping, things changed very little – except for my poundages.

Basic linear periodization is essentially limited block training (which has been around for years), but with less exotic names. So instead of nasty Eastern European sounding phases like "accumulation" and "intensification" we have the user-friendlier hypertrophy and strength.

Interestingly, those old school Eastern European names are making a comeback as of late, but no matter how many different ways you try to dress up this pig, it's still a limited form of block training.

## Basic Linear Periodization – By the Numbers.

### Phase: Hypertrophy (high volume - low intensity)

Duration (in weeks): 4-6  
Intensity: 50-70% range  
Reps: 8-20  
Sets: 3-5  
Rest: 2-4 minutes  
Goals: conditioning, build muscle mass

### **Phase: Strength Phase**

Duration (in weeks): 4-6  
Intensity: 75-86% range  
Reps: 4-6  
Sets: 3-5  
Rest: 2-4 minutes  
Goals: strength

### **Phase: Power**

Duration (in weeks): 3-4  
Intensity: 86-93%  
Reps: 3-5 reps  
Sets: 3-5  
Rest: 3-5 minutes  
Goals: Power

### **Phase: Peak**

### **Phase: Transition (Active Rest)**

Break after training  
Duration (in weeks): approximately 4

### **Setting Up This System**

Set up is simple; which is also the system's greatest drawback.

You'd basically find a meet and count backwards in time. The volume starts high and the intensity (as expressed as percentage of one-rep max) was low. Every phase, and every week, you upped the intensity and dropped the volume.

The trick to avoiding problems is to be as accurate as possible when choosing your 1RM. If you guess that your 1RM in the squat is 540 but it's really more like 500, you'll be okay for the first couple phases, but God help you when it comes time for triples.

For accessory movement, there aren't percentages listed, something that has messed up many overzealous novice lifters. I received good advice early on that saved me a lot of trouble, namely to train the accessories easy until they needed to be hard.

In other words, in the first phase I'd do stiff-leg deadlifts for 3 sets of 8 with a weight that I could've likely hit 3 sets of 20. Leaving reps on the table here early on is key to avoid overtraining down the road.

By the end of the hypertrophy phase I was usually as heavy [bodyweight] as I was going to be, and my weight would then start to drop with each successive phase. I attributed this to the fact that all the hypertrophy work was gradually phased out, and eventually even the accessories were eliminated. If you're a young guy who likes his guns and upper pecs, this sucks.

Intensity wise, you never come close to failure until around week seven as the goal through each phase is to never miss a lift. If it's week nine and you start missing lifts, you definitely are concerned. "Is my training program completely retarded?" becomes a reoccurring anxiety.

After the meet, the idea was not to train at all for a good four weeks to recover before starting up again with the hypertrophy phase.

## Benefits of the System



There are numerous benefits to training in this fashion:

- Ease of setup.

As noted earlier, setting up a plan like this is a breeze, even for beginners. Once a proper 1RM is established, each week the intensity is raised and volume is lowered. Weights are rounded up to the nearest 5 or 10 pounds (no, no PlateMates)!

Gear is not introduced until well into the program, usually raw until the sets of 5. Then we add suits and go straps down; at 3's we go straps up.

I always preferred to go without gear for as long as possible; until I felt the percentages start to creep up on me.

- Gives time to get used to the heavy weight.

The biggest mistake rookies make is going too heavy too soon. The long buildup to heavy weights helps

keep the young guys reigned in.

- The specific goal per phase is good for beginners.

The different blocks allow beginners to avoid distractions and key in on one strength quality at a time.

Beginners often have what's know as training ADHD, where they want to blast up their bench while adding an inch to their arms and improve their body composition. This style teaches them to have their eyes on just one prize at a time.

For example, during the hypertrophy phase the goal is gaining size. The weight on the bar is not important. During the strength phase on the other hand, poundage is key while hypertrophy is no longer a concern.

- It's good for training in groups.

Because the goals are clearly defined, you can have athletes of differing strength levels train together and still make progress. It's very convenient for the overworked/underpaid college strength coach.

- These cycles are as old as time.

Every powerlifter has done some program like this. If it didn't at least sort of work, no one would have passed it on to the next generation; unless the next generation was a bunch of retards who didn't deserve to be strong.

### Here's a sample basic linear periodization program:

Week	Squat Day <i>Monday</i>	Bench Day <i>Wednesday &amp; Saturday</i>	Deadlift Day <i>Thursday</i>
1	Squat 55% for 3 sets 15 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 50% 3 sets 12 Close Grip Bench 3 sets 10 Incline Bench 3 sets 10 One Arm DB Press 3 sets 10 Pushdowns 4 sets 15  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 3 sets 10 Side Raises 3 sets 10 Front Raises 3 sets 10 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 10	Deadlift 50% 3 sets 12 Stiff Legs 3 sets 8 Barbell Rows 3 sets 10 Shrugs 3 sets 12 Abs 5 sets 20
2	Squat 60% 2 sets 12 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 60% 3 sets 10 Close Grip Bench 3 sets 10 Incline Bench 3 sets 10 One Arm DB Press 3 sets 10 Pushdowns 4 sets 15  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 3 sets 10 Side Raises 3 sets 10 Front Raises 3 sets 10 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 10	Deadlift 55% 3 sets 10 Stiff Legs 3 sets 8 Barbell Rows 3 sets 10 Shrugs 3 sets 12 Abs 5 sets 20

3	Squat 65% 3 sets 10 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 65% for 3 sets 8 Close Grip Bench 3 sets 10 Incline Bench 3 sets 10 One Arm DB Press 3 sets 10 Pushdowns 4 sets 15  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 3 sets 10 Side Raises 3 sets 10 Front Raises 3 sets 10 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 10	Deadlift 65% 2 sets 8 Stiff Legs 2 sets 8 Barbell Rows 3 sets 10 Shrugs 3 sets 10 Abs 5 sets 20
4	Squat 70% 3 sets 8 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 70% 3 sets 6 Close Grip Bench 3 sets 6 Incline Bench 3 sets 6 One Arm DB Press 3 sets 8-10 Pushdowns 3 sets 10-12  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 3 sets 8 Side Raises 3 sets 8 Front Raises 3 sets 8 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 8	Deadlift 70% 3 sets 5 Stiff Legs 2 sets 5 Barbell Rows 3 sets 6 Shrugs 3 sets 6 Abs 3 sets 20
5	Squat 74% 4 sets 6 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 75% 3 sets 5 Close Grip Bench 3 sets 6 Incline Bench 3 sets 6 One Arm DB Press 3 sets 8-10 Pushdowns 3 sets 10-12  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 3 sets 8 Side Raises 3 sets 8 Front Raises 3 sets 8 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 8	Deadlift 74% 3 sets 5 Stiff Legs 2 sets 5 Barbell Rows 3 sets 5 Shrugs 3 sets 5 Abs 3 sets 12
6	Squat 78% 3 sets 5 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 80% 3 sets 5 Close Grip Bench 3 sets 6 Incline Bench 3 sets 6 One Arm DB Press 3 sets 8-10 Pushdowns 3 sets 10-12  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 3 sets 8 Side Raises 3 sets 8 Front Raises 3 sets 8 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 8	Deadlift 78% 3 sets 5 Stiff Legs 2 sets 5 Barbell Rows 3 sets 5 Shrugs 3 sets 5 Abs 3 sets 10

7	Squat 82% 2 sets 5 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 85% for 3 sets 5 Close Grip Bench 3 sets 6 Incline Bench 3 sets 6 One Arm DB Press 3 sets 8-10 Pushdowns 3 sets 10-12  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 3 sets 8 Side Raises 3 sets 8 Front Raises 3 sets 8 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 8	Deadlift 84% 2 sets 5 Stiff Legs 2 sets 5 Barbell Rows 2 sets 5 Shrugs 3 sets 5 Abs 3 sets 10
8	Squat 87% 3 sets 3 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 88% for 3 sets 3 Close Grip Bench 2 sets 3 Incline Bench 2 sets 6 One Arm DB Press 2 sets 6 Pushdowns 2 sets 8  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 2 sets 6-8 Side Raises 3 sets 10 Front Raises 3 sets 10 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 10	Deadlift 86% 2 sets 3 Stiff Legs 2 sets 3 Barbell Rows 2 sets 3 Shrugs 2 sets 3 Abs 2 sets 8
9	Squat 90% 2 sets 3 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 92% 2 sets 3 Close Grip Bench 2 sets 3 Incline Bench 2 sets 6 One Arm DB Press 2 sets 6 Pushdowns 2 sets 8  Day 2 Light Day Dumbbell Presses 2 sets 6-8 Side Raises 3 sets 10 Front Raises 3 sets 10 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 10	Deadlift 90% 2 sets 3 Stiff Legs 2 sets 3 Barbell Rows 2 sets 3 Shrugs 2 sets 3 Abs 3 sets 10
10	Squat 93% for 3 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 94% for 2 sets 1 Close Grip Bench 2 sets 3 Incline Bench 2 sets 6  Day 2 Light Day Side Raises 3 sets 10 Front Raises 3 sets 10 Barbell Extensions 3 sets 10	Deadlift 93% 2 sets 1 Stiff Legs 2 sets 1
11	Squat 95% for 3 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 96% for 2 sets 1 Close Grip Bench 2 sets 3	Deadlift 96% 2 sets 1
12	Squat 97%-100% for 1 Good Morning 2 sets 15 Weighted Sit Ups 2 sets 20	Day 1 Heavy Day Bench 98%-100% for 2 sets 1	Deadlift 98%-100% 2 sets 1

## Pitfalls

There are many pitfalls to training in this fashion. Since this is familiar territory for many of you, I'll try to keep this brief:

- Percentage based training is always skewed. Always.

Let's get one thing straight: a competition max is not the same as a training max. Fact is, a good competition max is often 10% higher than a training max. This is extremely important because if you base all your numbers off an inflated percentage, you'll be in for a world of hurt.

Sure, at first you'll be fine, when that 70% is really an 80%, but wait until that 80% you're supposed to do 3 sets of 5 with is really 88% and tell me how those sets feel.

The end result is that guys start taking sets off because it's too difficult. Three sets becomes two or even one "HIT" set, which only leads to more problems down the road.

- Peaking can be tough.

This system is geared towards peaking for one meet per cycle. Most guys would usually shoot for three main meets per year, with the odd bench or deadlift-only meet thrown in along the way just to stay sharp.

Thing is, what if you were like me and you compete a lot? If you schedule two meets one week after the other it can be done; basically, you set the first meet of the series at 98%, essentially turning that meet into another training session, and peak as normal for the second meet.

But what if your meets are staggered four weeks apart? What do you do then?

- The breaks are long.

Some people just lose too much with the long active rest period. It never affected me that much, and I'd even schedule this active recovery period for when football training camp started up. Once the actual playing season started and practices became much less taxing, I'd start powerlifting training again.

Again, I was a young lifter and nowhere near my training or strength limits. An experienced lifter closer to the top of their game can't afford taking such a long period of non-lifting without risking losing much of the previous cycle's gains.

- Abilities aren't maintained from cycle to cycle.

In my experience, much of the size built during Phase 1 would be a distant memory by the Peak Phase, and obviously, much of the single-rep performance attained in the Peak Phase would be gone by the time Hypertrophy started up again.

- The accessory work isn't well planned out.

Looking back, I can tell we didn't have a clue what we were doing when it came to planning accessory work. Everyone just followed what everyone else was doing.

Look at the deadlift day, for instance: I think the accessory exercises were picked out of sheer laziness more than anything else.

You just finished doing deadlifts, "Hey, let's do stiff legs next. They help the deadlift, right, and we only have to strip some weight off the bar. Then we'll do bent over rows; shit, we don't even have to move!"

The fact that the accessories never changed throughout the cycle was another big problem.

- Very little attention paid to technique.

The biggest thing I learned after moving to Westside was the importance of technique, hands down. The fact that basic linear periodization programs put so little emphasis on it is a big negative in my opinion.

For example, take any multiple-rep set of deadlifts. It's really only the first rep of a deadlift set that actually "works."

If you watch closely, the second rep is always better and faster than the first rep, 100% of the time. It has to do with the stretch reflex, and the fact that during the second rep the hips are set higher and closer to the bar.

If they do multiple reps with a traditional deadlifting bar, which bends, the weights closest to the end of the bar will touch the floor before the bar has even settled. If you look closely, many times the weights closest to the lifters are still 3-4 inches off the floor when the weights on the far end touch. It's like doing a bench press and touching your chest on the first rep and having someone slip in a one-board for the rest of the set.

If you're going to do deadlifting for reps, you need to use a stiff bar. If you're looking for a real challenge try using a squat or fat bar.

Anyway, that's not an indictment of linear periodization per se, but an example of the type of technique that is never mentioned in typical periodization circles. I can think of dozens of examples just like this.

## Why I Moved Away From This System



I had a number of reasons why I moved away from this style of training, not the least of which being I had started college and was training at a gym that had zero powerlifters. So getting good training partners, even a good spot was a tall order, so I found myself looking to try something new.

Furthermore, I was young, in college, and wanted to be jacked. You'll see how well that worked out in the



next installment.

## How Would I Change This System?

A better question would be, How HAVE I changed it?

Despite the previously mentioned pitfalls, I've used this basic periodization model with some lifters, especially intermediates (gym rats with decent lifting experience, not raw newbies). I first take a good close look at the lifter before deciding on this route.

How's the lifter's technique? How strong are they? How well do they recover? What's their lifting schedule like? What about their work/school schedule?

All of these factors play a deciding role in whether this is the right road for them to go or not. Often, there are better – and faster – ways to reach their desired goal.

But if someone is hell bent on doing it, these are the modifications to make:

- Use compensatory acceleration on all warm-up sets.

Since there is no dynamic work whatsoever, perform all warm-up sets (between 40% and their first work set) as explosive as possible. Actually, do all sets over 40% as explosively as you can.

I would go so far as to add in 2-3 additional explosive warm-up sets to get in even more dynamic work. Just take small jumps as you work up.

For example, let's say the program calls for 3 sets of 10 with 255. A traditional warm-up might be 135, 185, and 225.

In this case, I'd go with dynamic sets of 5 for 135, 165, 185, 205, 225, and then start work sets.

- Select accessories based on weak points and cycle them.

Accessory work should still be meaningful and address the lifter's needs. I suggest sticking with the same accessories for three weeks before switching them up for something similar (i.e., stiff leg deadlift for Romanian deadlift). It's a good idea to try to hit a PR week three-rep maximum (not a 1RM). You should always be working on pushing your accessory work higher, either with heavier weight or more reps.

- Keep the volume more consistent.

The program starts with way too high a workload and comes down to an insufficient volume to maintain the abilities previously derived from the earlier phases. A more consistent, manageable volume throughout would help avoid this. Don't misunderstand – the volume needs to change and is a large part of programming, but the drop from week one to the end of the cycle is not the most efficient way to go about developing strength.

- Switch from a 12-week program to a 24-week program.

In between every week of the 12 week program should be a week of strictly dynamic work. This is a BIG change and something that will be covered in a future article BUT is one of the most critical changes I've seen to making this work.

So if week one calls for 315 for 5 in the squat, week two would be a dynamic workout, such as 8 sets of 3 with 40%.

- Use special movements at the front of the cycle.

I suggest only using "real" squats in the very last phase of the cycle. Until then, use variations like band squats, box squats, reverse band squats, etc.

This slightly changes up the squat recruitment pattern, but also the different squat variations have different rep maxes, so by changing the lift you cycle the workload.

For example, let's say you can do 405 for 5 reps on back squats; you might be able to do 315 for 5 on the box. You're giving the same effort with each exercise, but exposing the body to vastly different workloads ( $315 \times 5 = 1575$  lbs,  $405 \times 5 = 2025$  lbs). This is another huge – and very overlooked – lesson I learned from Louie Simmons.

You can combine weekly squat variations in your program with inserting dynamic work every other week:

Week 1 ME: Reverse Band Squat

Week 2 DE: Free Squat for Speed

Week 3 ME: Band Squat

Week 4 DE: Speed Squat off Box

Week 5 ME: Squat with Chains

Note: ME stands for "Maximum Effort," which means building to a 1RM or 3RM, while DE, which stands for "Dynamic Effort," implies speed work, i.e. 8 sets of 3 at 55%1RM with 60s rest between sets.

You get the idea.

- For squats, percentages should be based off a perceived max, not an actual squat max.

You never need to work up to a true 1RM. A perceived maximum is sufficient, and working up to a 1RM just isn't necessary and is often more trouble than it's worth (see: working off a training max versus a competition maximum).

- What you eat matters.

Guys starting out now have it easy. Today you have websites with real information, online stores to get the best gear, and supplements that actually work. When I look back at how I ate back then it depresses me. I feel like Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*: I coulda been a contender.

### **Here's how I typically ate back then:**

Breakfast Cereal and Ass-Flavored Protein Drink

This was back when all the shakes were not really shakes, just a nasty powder of mystery proteins that ended up floating on the top of the drink and looked like cottage cheese.

Lunch I bought lunch so I always bought two of them; typical school cafeteria kind of stuff.

Snack Coffee, Copenhagen, and corn nuts. I always had either early release from school (work related) or I cut class (long story for another day).

I would walk down to the local convenience store and buy corn nuts and Copenhagen and then spend the rest of the time sitting at McDonalds drinking coffee. After that I would head back for the last 1-2 periods of the day. How's that for wasted youth?

Training Meal This was always Mountain Dew and water.

Dinner Whatever my Mom made. She made great meals and we always ate as a family (table cloth, good dishes, etc.). Typically it was some kind of meat with vegetables and rice, potatoes, or yams. Thank God for this meal – it was about the only nutrition I consumed all day.

After dinner I'd eat whatever was in the house. Fortunately, we never had much junk food around that I could get into.

Before bed Another nasty ass shake.

Supplementation I can recall using those Weider Packs for a long time. I remember this because I worked part time to pay for them; had I put that money into a 401(k) I'd be better off financially and likely just as strong.

While I might joke about how it was a waste of money, the take away is that I used what I thought was the best at the time. In one way or another, supplements have been a part of my training since way back when – even when I was eating like a hog to get over 300 pounds. (You guys will love my supplement protocol when we get to that phase.)

You can get strong eating garbage, but you'll get there faster – and look and feel a hell of a lot better in the process – if you get in the habit of eating well. As for supplements, I have guys like [Ted Toalston](#) doing great on [MAG-10®](#) and [Plazma™](#). They have no idea how good they have it. Maybe I should find some of that old school ass-flavored crap that would never mix and have them take that for a couple phases.

## Conclusion

After taking a second look at this article, it does look like I'm dumping all over linear periodization when that really isn't my intention. Again, I made great gains off of this system and if it weren't effective, coaches would've abandoned it long before I ever showed up on the scene.

It's a good system – follow it with passion and determination and you'll do well. Make the modifications I suggested and it can be improved considerably.

I don't feel it's the best way to train, but it's not the worst either. Trust me on that one.

Until next month.