BUILT FOR A REAL WEEK

Strength and Muscle After 40 for Men Who Carry a Lot



DON WILDER



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Don Wilder

Built Wilder

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This book is for education. It is not medical advice. Talk to your doctor before you start training if you have an injury, a heart or blood pressure condition, kidney disease, or any other health condition, and stop and get checked if something hurts in a way that feels wrong.

The studies in this book are summarised in plain words. Each chapter ends with notes that name the study, who it was done on, and how strong the evidence is.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Read chapters 1 to 5 first. They are the plan: why plans fail, what changes after 35, the three-day week, hard sets, and the bad-week version.

Chapters 6 to 8 are the parts that decide whether the plan works in your life: travel, food, sleep.

Chapters 9 and 10 are about the first 90 days and the years after.

The whole plan is on two pages at the back. If you only keep one thing, keep that.

1. MOST MEN DON’T QUIT. THEY DRIFT.

Nobody I coach ever decided to stop training.

Not one.

What happens is smaller than a decision. A missed Tuesday. Then a week with a work trip in it. Then a month where you keep meaning to get back to it. Then it’s been a year, and you tell yourself you’ll start again when things calm down.

Things don’t calm down. That’s the job. That’s the kids. That’s the life you built, and most of it is good.

That’s the drift. You never choose it. It happens one reasonable week at a time, until the gym is something you used to do.

This book is about stopping it.



THE PLAN WAS BUILT FOR A GOOD WEEK

Most training plans assume a week you rarely get. Five free mornings. Full energy. No travel. That week almost never comes.

Here are three signs your plan was written for a man who doesn't exist.

It needs five days. You've managed five days once this year, in a week with no travel and no late nights. The plan doesn't know that.

Every session is seventy-five minutes. Yours end at forty-five, because the car park closes or the kids need picking up. So you've never once finished one.

It assumes you slept. Half the sessions are at seven in the morning after a night with a toddler, and the plan still wants a new personal best.

When the real week arrives, a plan like that has no smaller version. The choice becomes everything or nothing. On a tired Thursday, nothing wins.

Your plan didn't fail because you're lazy. It failed because it was built for a good week, and you don't live in one.

YOU'RE IN LARGE COMPANY

If you've drifted, you're normal.

In one study, researchers went through the records of 5,240 members of a gym in Rio de Janeiro and followed each of them for a year. About six in ten had stopped before their third month. Fewer than 4% were still training steadily after twelve months.

That's one gym in one country, and the members weren't all men in their forties, so don't read those numbers as yours. Read the pattern. Stopping early is what most people do. It says nothing about your character.

I've watched it happen too many times to count. Usually something sets a man off. A rejection. A friend who's suddenly got fit. A film that fires him up. "I'm going to get fit. I'm going to get my abs." He goes all out for the first few weeks. Then he's gone.

You see it every year in January. The annual goals come out and the memberships go up. By February the new faces have gone and the gym is back to its regulars.

In my experience, the men who go hardest in week one are rarely the ones still there a few months later. The ones who last have something less exciting: a smaller version of the plan for the weeks that go wrong.

WHY I WROTE THIS

I never set out to be a fitness coach.

I'm a big guy, and in a gym people look at me and assume I know what I'm doing. So they ask. I've always been happy to answer. In time, friends started asking me more specific questions.

"I'm struggling to get back in the gym. What should I do?"

“I get nervous when I go, because I don’t know how to use the equipment. What should I do?”

Both are questions about how to start, and how to keep going, in a life that’s already full. I took on coaching because I wanted to help with exactly that, and because training has done a lot for my own life.

I’ve had my own version of it. In 2016 I was running a consulting company in Shenzhen, and training got squeezed hard. Some days it was mentally exhausting just to show up. I kept going because I didn’t want to be the guy who let his fitness slide. Chapter 5 tells what that year taught me.

The things that work are mostly boring, and most men already know some of them. The hard part is doing them in a real week, for a long time.

WHAT THIS BOOK GIVES YOU

This is the plan I give men who carry a lot.

- **Three sessions a week, forty-five minutes each.** Every session has the same shape: a squat or hinge, a push, a pull.
- **Hard sets, not long sessions.** Two or three hard sets of each lift, stopping about two reps short of failure.
- **A bad-week version**, written down before you need it.
- **A travel version** for hotel gyms and weeks with no gym at all.
- **Protein first**, then the food you like.
- **Sleep treated as part of training**, not something you fit in after.

It’s less than you could do in a perfect week. It’s more than you’ll do in a real one.

Every chapter also gives you the reasons, with the studies behind them. A plan you understand is a plan you can adjust on a bad Wednesday without throwing it out.

HOW IT’S ORGANISED

1. **Most men don’t quit. They drift.** This chapter.

2. **What changes after 35, and what doesn't.** What the research says about strength, muscle and recovery as you get older, and what training does about it.
3. **Three days, forty-five minutes.** The plan itself.
4. **Hard sets, not long sessions.** How hard to push, why you stop short of failure, and when to add weight.
5. **The bad-week version.** Two sessions, thirty minutes, and the rules that keep a bad week from becoming a lost month.
6. **The travel version.** One dumbbell, a band, and food on the road.
7. **Protein first, then the food you like.** How much you need, why every meal should carry some, and two meals you can make without thinking.
8. **Sleep, recovery and your testosterone.** What pushes it up or down, and what you can change. No drugs, no supplements pitch.
9. **The first 90 days.** Month by month, and how to get past the weeks where most men stop.
10. **The long game.** Training like you'll still be doing it at fifty, and beyond.

At the back, you'll find the whole plan on two pages and a log sheet.

HOW TO READ THE EVIDENCE

Each chapter ends with notes on the evidence: where every claim comes from, and how solid it is. Strong, moderate, early or contested.

One warning applies to the whole book. Much of the training research is on men in their twenties, often students. Most studies on ageing are done on people over 60. Men between 35 and 55 sit in the gap. When a finding comes from one end or the other, I'll say so. When something is my coaching judgment rather than a study, I'll say that too.

And I'm a coach, not a doctor. If you have an injury or a health condition, talk to your doctor first. Then train around it, not through it.

THIS WEEK

Open your calendar and count the sessions you actually trained in the last four weeks. The ones you did, not the ones you planned. Write the number down, with the days they happened on.

Treat that number as a fact, not a verdict. The days that survived your last month are where your new plan will live.

You don’t need to start over. You need to stop drifting.

Notes on the evidence

- **Most new gym members stop within months:** Sperandei S, Vieira MC, Reis AC (2016). *Adherence to physical activity in an unsupervised setting: explanatory variables for high attrition rates among fitness center members.* J Sci Med Sport 19(11):916-20. doi:10.1016/j.jsams.2015.12.522. Records of 5,240 members of one fitness centre in Rio de Janeiro (2005 to 2014), each followed for 12 months: 63% stopped before the third month and fewer than 4% kept up continuous activity for more than 12 months. Even the members with the best odds had a high risk of quitting within a year. Evidence grade: moderate for “early dropout is common”; early for applying any exact percentage to the reader (one gym, one country, membership records, not men aged 35 to 55 specifically).
- **The January rush and the man who goes all out in week one** are my own observations as a coach, not research findings. No study I’ve cited measures a January or week-by-week dropout curve.
- **“Nobody I coach ever decided to stop”** is my coaching observation, not a study.
- **The population gap:** throughout the book, training studies are mostly in men in their twenties and ageing studies mostly in adults over 60. Men aged 35 to 55 are rarely studied directly. Each chapter’s notes say which group a finding comes from.

2. WHAT CHANGES AFTER 35, AND WHAT DOESN'T

I noticed I'd stopped bouncing back after a few knocks. A sprained ankle. A strained shoulder. A weekend out with a few drinks.

What got my attention was how long each one took to get over. Around thirty, everything slowed way down.

If you're past 35, you've probably had your own version. A back that takes a week to settle. A heavy weekend you still feel on Wednesday.

Most men take one of two lessons from that. Some decide they're past it. Others decide to train like they're 25 and prove they aren't. The second one is the one I'd warn you off. Going crazy heavy to prove a point is, for most men over 35, how you end up injured, strained, or too beat up to come back for the next session.

There's a better lesson. To find it, you need to know what's actually changing, and what isn't.

Thirty-five isn't a cliff. Studies put the turn in strength nearer 40, and in muscle nearer 50.

STRENGTH: WHAT THE STUDIES SHOW

Strength climbs into your thirties and holds into midlife. Across twelve British studies of almost 50,000 people, men's grip strength peaked at a median of 51 kilos, somewhere between 29 and 39.

From about 40, it starts to slide. In a study that followed 847 people aged 20 to 100 for about nine years, grip strength declined "at an accelerating rate after age 40". Each decade, the slope gets a little steeper.

Strength also falls faster than muscle. In studies that measured both, strength dropped two to five times faster. In men in their seventies, leg strength fell by 3 to 4% a year, about three times faster than leg muscle.

Keep in mind who those numbers come from. The hard figures come from people over 65, and estimates of when decline starts range from 27 to 60. They describe the direction, not your exact rate at 45.

The direction matters, though. In older adults, losing strength is more closely tied to disability later in life than losing muscle is. That's why this book cares about how much you can lift, not only how you look.

You don't have to be 70 to feel the difference. Carrying my kid around for an afternoon makes me realise how many men don't have the strength or the stamina to lift heavy things for the people around them, from the car to the house, or on moving day. That's the strength this book is after.

MUSCLE HANGS ON LONGER

Muscle mass is more stubborn than you've been told.

In a study that scanned 468 adults aged 18 to 88 with MRI, a noticeable drop in total muscle didn't show up until about 50, and most of it was in the legs.

You may have heard that you lose 3 to 8% of your muscle every decade after 30. That figure gets repeated in reviews, but it's a summary estimate, not a measurement. MRI scans show little loss of total muscle before about 50.

THE LINE ISN'T FIXED

Here's the part the "all downhill after 30" line leaves out. In that same nine-year study, nearly three in ten people aged 40 to 59 lost no grip strength at all.

Decline is the average, and plenty of men don't follow it.

WHAT DOESN'T CHANGE: MUSCLE STILL ANSWERS TO TRAINING

This is the good news, and it's solid.

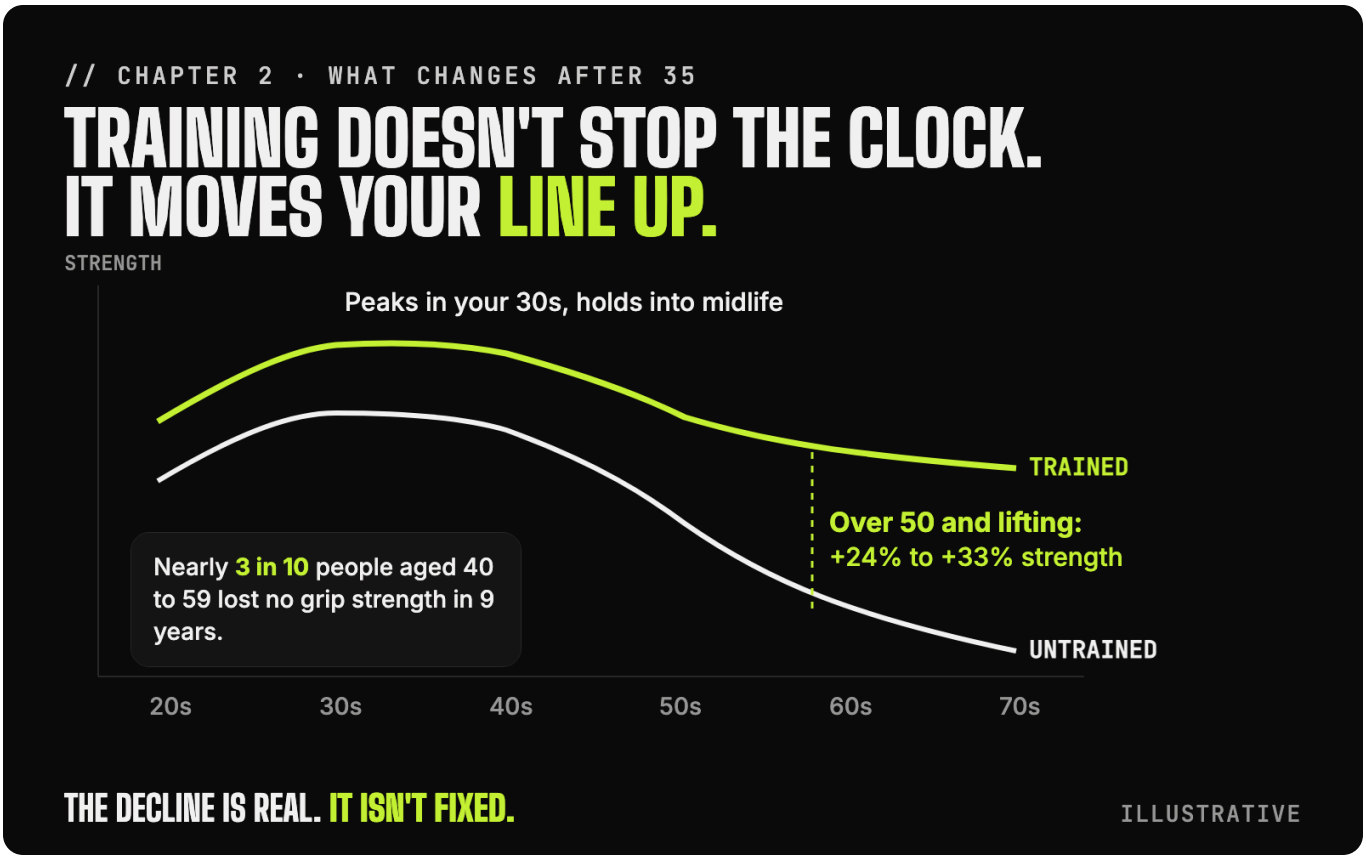
When researchers pooled 47 studies of more than 1,000 adults over 50 who took up lifting, their strength went up by roughly a quarter to a third, depending on the lift. Leg press went up 29%. Chest press went up 24%. A second analysis, of 49 studies, found that adults over 50 who lifted also added about a kilo of lean mass.

Most of those people were in their sixties and seventies. At 45, the direction holds. The exact sizes may not.

One small study shows what's possible. Eleven men around 71 who had lifted most of their lives leg-pressed 185 kilos on average. Untrained men around 22 managed 147. Sedentary men their own age managed 106. It's a tiny, selected group, and those men may have been strong to start with. Take it as a picture of the gap training can make.

A review of the research in 2022 called resistance training the only approach without drugs known to consistently improve muscle mass, strength and power, and so offset the losses that come with age.

No amount of exercise stops you getting older. What lifting does is move your whole line up.



RECOVERY: MAYBE A LITTLE SLOWER

I'll be straight with you. After 35, things are a little more uphill. It takes more effort to get the same effect you got in your twenties. You have to come to grips with that.

One small study backs me up. The wider research is mixed, and the effect looks smaller than most men assume.

In that study, trained men around 40 did a hard squat session, ten sets of ten, alongside trained men around 22. Over the next three days, the older men lost more strength and power and took longer to recover. Years of lifting didn't erase the gap.

But when a review gathered eleven studies on recovery in older men, the picture was mixed. Some found slower recovery. More found no difference. A couple found the opposite. Another review suggested that much of what looks like ageing is really inactivity.

So the honest answer is this: your recovery can be a bit slower. Not twice as slow. Not slow enough to stop.

The plan in this book already allows for it. You stop a couple of reps short of failure, which Chapter 4 explains. You leave a day between sessions where you can. And you don't cram missed sessions into one week.

If an old injury is the reason you backed off, see your doctor or a physio before you start. Then train around it, not through it.

WHAT I GOT WRONG IN MY TWENTIES

In my twenties I thought it was simple. Train, have some protein powder, and you grow.

I didn't think about how my sleep affected my body's ability to grow, or how much water I was drinking. I didn't pay much attention to calories or macros, including the carbs I needed to fuel a session. It was show up, train, and wait for the muscle. When the workout was done, I checked out. That was it.

Now I see how connected everything is. It's one reason I think bodybuilding is one of the toughest sports there is. At the top level it's 24 hours a day. You're always tracking, preparing or training.

You don't need to live like that. But the lesson carries.

Three 45-minute sessions are about two and a quarter hours of a 168-hour week. The session is where you ask your body to change. What happens in the other hours decides a lot of the answer. Your food and your sleep, which Chapters 7 and 8 cover. And your week itself: the work, the family, the travel that decide whether the session happens at all.



The way I see it, what changes after 35 is mostly a smaller margin for ignoring those hours. What doesn't change is that your muscle still answers when you train it.

THIS WEEK

Every night this week, write down two things: what time you went to bed, and whether you trained that day.

Don't change anything yet. Just look at the week your training actually sits in. We'll use it in Chapter 8.

Notes on the evidence

- **Strength peaks, holds, then slides from about 40:** Dodds RM, Syddall HE, Cooper R, et al. (2014). *Grip strength across the life course: normative data from twelve British studies.* PLoS One 9(12):e113637. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0113637. 49,964 people; peak, then maintenance to midlife, then decline; men's peak median grip 51 kg between ages 29 and 39. Kallman DA, Plato CC, Tobin JD (1990). *The role of muscle loss in the age-related decline of grip strength.* J Gerontol 45(3):M82-8.

doi:10.1093/geronj/45.3.m82. Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging, 847 people aged 20 to 100, about nine years' follow-up; grip "increases into the thirties and declines at an accelerating rate after age 40". Evidence grade: strong for the direction; moderate for any per-decade figure in men aged 35 to 55.

- **Strength falls faster than muscle:** Mitchell WK, Williams J, Atherton P, et al. (2012). *Sarcopenia, dynapenia, and the impact of advancing age on human skeletal muscle size and strength; a quantitative review.* Front Physiol 3:260. doi:10.3389/fphys.2012.00260. Strength lost two to five times faster than mass; at age 75, men lose 3 to 4% strength a year; loss of strength "is a more consistent risk for disability and death than is loss of muscle mass"; reported ages for the start of decline vary (27, 45 and 60). Goodpaster BH, Park SW, Harris TB, et al. (2006). J Gerontol A 61(10):1059-64. doi:10.1093/gerona/61.10.1059. Health ABC study, 1,880 adults aged about 70 to 79 over three years: leg strength fell 3.4% a year in white men and 4.1% in Black men, about three times faster than leg lean mass. Evidence grade: strong. The rates come from adults over 65.
- **Muscle mass holds until about 50:** Janssen I, Heymsfield SB, Wang ZM, Ross R (2000). *Skeletal muscle mass and distribution in 468 men and women aged 18-88 yr.* J Appl Physiol 89(1):81-8. doi:10.1152/jappl.2000.89.1.81. A noticeable decrease in absolute muscle mass "was not observed until the end of the fifth decade", mostly in the lower body. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **The "3 to 8% per decade" figure:** Volpi E, Nazemi R, Fujita S (2004). *Muscle tissue changes with aging.* Curr Opin Clin Nutr Metab Care 7(4):405-10. doi:10.1097/01.mco.0000134362.76653.b2. A review-level summary citing earlier reviews, not a measured meta-analytic figure, and at odds with Janssen's MRI data before about 50. Mentioned here only to explain why the book doesn't rely on it.
- **Decline isn't fixed:** Kallman 1990 (above). Grip did not decline over follow-up in 48% of under-40s, 29% of 40-to-59-year-olds and 15% of over-60s (men and women). Evidence grade: moderate.
- **Lifting raises strength and lean mass in adults over 50:** Peterson MD, Rhea MR, Sen A, Gordon PM (2010). *Resistance exercise for muscular strength in older adults: a meta-analysis.* Ageing Res Rev 9(3):226-37. doi:10.1016/j.arr.2010.03.004. 47 studies, 1,079 people aged 50 and over: leg press +29%, chest press +24%, knee extension +33%, lat pull +25%. Peterson MD, Sen A, Gordon PM (2011). *Influence of resistance exercise on lean body mass in aging adults: a meta-analysis.* Med Sci Sports Exerc 43(2):249-58. doi:10.1249/MSS.0b013e3181eb6265. 49 studies, 1,328 people aged 50 and over: +1.1 kg lean mass (95% CI 0.9 to 1.2); older participants gained less. Evidence grade: strong. Mostly people in their sixties and seventies, not men of 40.
- **Lifelong lifters at 71:** Unhjem R, Nygård M, van den Hoven LT, et al. (2016). *Lifelong strength training mitigates the age-related decline in efferent drive.* J Appl Physiol 121(2):415-23. doi:10.1152/japplphysiol.00117.2016. Eleven lifelong strength-trained men aged about 71: leg press 1RM 185 kg, vs 147 kg in untrained young men, 128 kg in recreationally active older men and 106 kg in sedentary older men. Evidence grade: early. Small, cross-sectional, selected athletes; not a general rule.
- **Training is the main non-drug lever:** Fyfe JJ, Hamilton DL, Daly RM (2022). *Minimal-dose resistance training for improving muscle mass, strength, and function: a narrative review of current evidence and practical considerations.* Sports Med 52(3):463-79. doi:10.1007/s40279-021-01605-8. Supported by Fragala MS et al. (2019), NSCA position statement, *J Strength Cond Res* 33(8):2019-52, and the ACSM position stand on exercise for older adults, Chodzko-Zajko WJ et al. (2009), *Med Sci Sports Exerc* 41(7):1510-30, which states that "no amount of physical activity can stop the biological aging process". Evidence grade: strong.
- **The strength-by-decade graphic** is an illustration of the direction in Kallman 1990 and Dodds 2014 (untrained line) and Peterson 2010 and Unhjem 2016 (trained line higher at every age). No study read gives a decade-by-decade curve for trained and untrained men, so it has no numbers on the strength axis.
- **Recovery after 40:** Fernandes JFT, Lamb KL, Twist C (2019). *Exercise-induced muscle damage and recovery in young and middle-aged males with different resistance training experience.* Sports (Basel) 7(6):132. doi:10.3390/sports7060132. 27 men (trained, about 22; trained, about 40; untrained, about 44); after 10 × 10 squats at 60% 1RM, trained middle-aged men had larger drops in strength

and power and slower recovery over 72 hours than trained young men. Fernandes JFT et al. (2021). *J Aging Phys Act* 29(3):544-51. doi:10.1123/japa.2020-0201. Review of 11 studies in older men: findings mixed; the authors conclude resistance training can be done "without concern for impaired recovery". Borges N, Reaburn P, Driller M, Argus C (2016). *J Aging Phys Act* 24(1):149-57. doi:10.1123/japa.2015-0021. In masters athletes the age effect on recovery "may be smaller than originally suggested", and sedentary lifestyles "appear to play a larger role". Evidence grade: contested.

- **"After 35, things are a little more uphill"**, the warning that going crazy heavy to prove a point is how most men over 35 get hurt, and the "everything is connected" lesson are my own experience and opinion, not research findings. The water I mention is part of that story; this book makes no claim about water and muscle.

3. THREE DAYS, FORTY-FIVE MINUTES

The best training split isn’t the one that looks best on paper. It’s the one you can still run in your busiest month.

A five-day split looks great in January. Then March comes. There’s a project at work, one of the kids is sick, and you’re on a plane twice. Five days becomes two, and because the plan needed five, those two feel like failure. So you stop.

A three-day full-body plan survives that month. Miss one session and you’ve still trained twice. Miss two and the one you did still hit everything.

This chapter is that plan: what’s in it, why it’s built this way, and exactly what to do on Monday.

WHY THREE DAYS

Here’s what the research says about frequency. Once the number of hard sets in a week is the same, how many days you spread them across makes little difference.

When researchers pooled 25 studies on muscle growth, they found strong evidence that training a muscle more often doesn’t meaningfully change how much it grows, as long as the weekly sets are equal. A pooled analysis of 12 studies on strength found the same: one day a week and three or more gave similar gains when the total work matched. A large 2026 analysis found that training more often helps strength a little, with smaller returns each time you add a day. Most of these studies were in younger adults.

So three days isn’t magic. I use three because of what it does in a real week.

- **Every session covers everything.** Miss one and you lose a third of the week, not a whole body part. On a five-day split, if legs are on Friday and Friday goes, your legs don’t get trained that week, and legs are always next week.
- **There’s a day between sessions** where you can, so you turn up fresh.

- **Forty-five minutes fits.** A lunch break. Before the school run. After the kids are in bed.

One honest note. I won't tell you three days a week is proven to build the habit. In a study on habit in new gym members, 111 people tracked over twelve weeks, the ones who built an exercise habit had trained at least four times a week for six weeks. Three is my call, not that study's. But the same study found the things that predicted the habit: doing it consistently, keeping it simple, training in the same setting, and enjoying it. That's what this plan is built around.

EVERY SESSION, THE SAME SHAPE

Every session has three lifts.

- **One squat or hinge.** A squat bends your knees and hips together, like a leg press. A hinge pushes your hips back, like a Romanian deadlift.
- **One push.** A press, away from your chest or overhead.
- **One pull.** A row or a pulldown.

That's a full-body session. A 2021 review on time-efficient training landed on almost exactly this as the minimum: one leg-pressing exercise, one upper-body pull, one upper-body push, and at least four hard sets a week for each muscle group. Most of the studies behind it were in people who were new to lifting or only lightly trained, which is where a lot of men coming back sit.

Using the same shape every time means there's nothing to decide at six in the morning. You know what's next.

MACHINES COUNT

A leg press counts. A machine row counts. Nobody is checking.

Remember the friend from Chapter 1 who didn't know how to use the equipment. If that's you, a machine is a fine place to start. The seat and the path are set for you, and you can put your attention on effort.

The 2021 review says machines and free weights can both be used, chosen on your goals, what's available and what you prefer.

So pick the versions your body tolerates. If squats bother your knee, try a leg press. If a lift takes fifteen minutes to set up and you have forty-five, pick the version that doesn't. The exercise you won't do doesn't count, however good it looks on paper.

If something hurts every time, not just feels hard, stop that lift and get it checked by your doctor or a physio.

THE PLAN

Three sessions a week. Leave a day between them where you can: Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. If the week won't allow it, two days in a row is fine. A session moved beats a session missed.

Each session, in this order:

1. **Warm-up, about five minutes.** A few minutes moving, then one or two light sets of your first lift.
2. **Squat or hinge:** 2 to 3 hard sets.
3. **Push:** 2 to 3 hard sets.
4. **Pull:** 2 to 3 hard sets.
5. **If there's time:** one extra, such as arms, calves or core, for one or two sets. This is always the first thing to go.

Reps: 6 to 12 a set. **Rest:** about two minutes between hard sets.

Hard means you stop about two reps before you'd fail. You finish the set knowing you had two more in you, and no more than that. Chapter 4 explains why, and how to judge it.

Progress: add a rep or a little weight most weeks. Chapter 4 covers that too.

Pick one from each row:

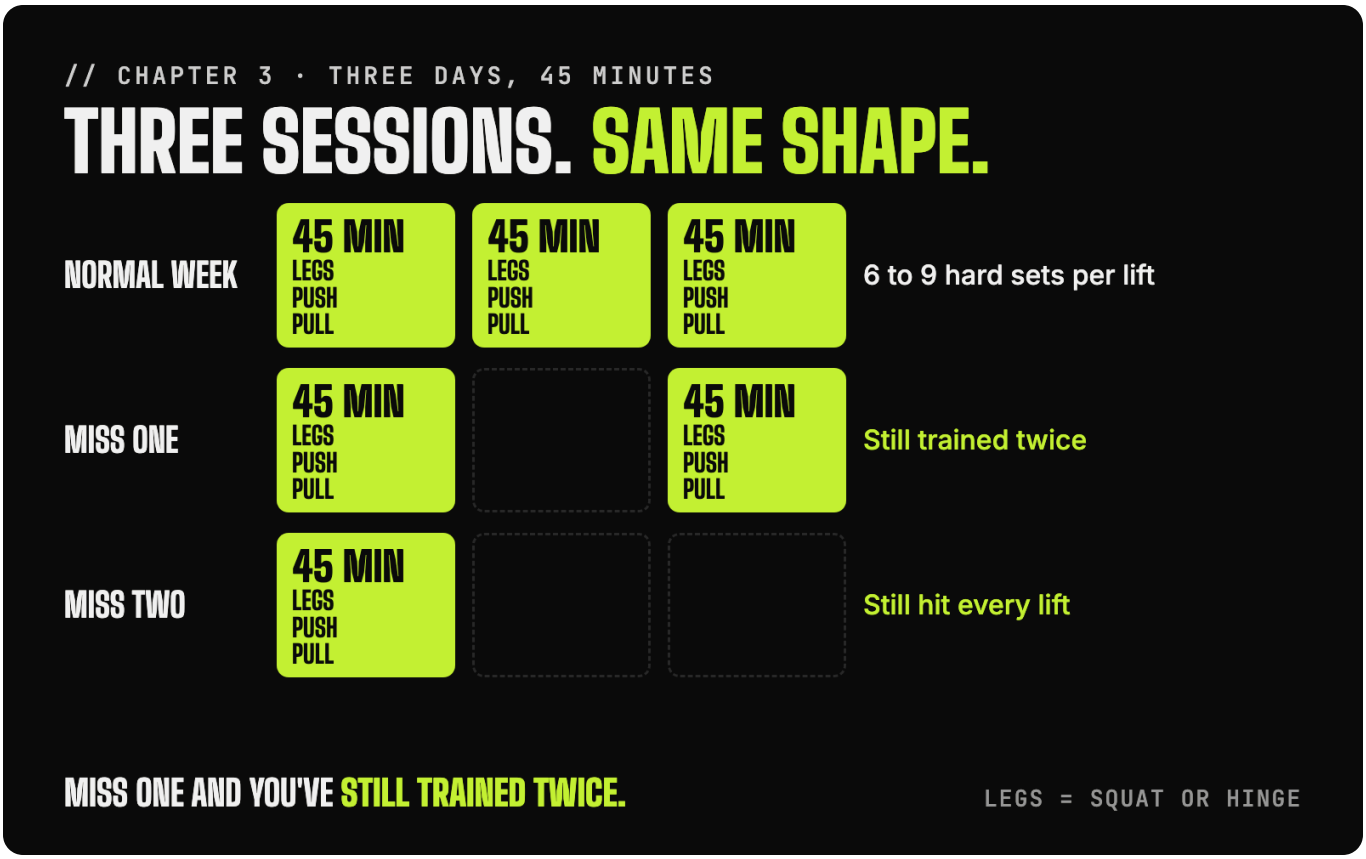
Pattern	Options
Squat	Leg press, goblet squat, hack squat machine, barbell back squat

Pattern	Options
Hinge	Romanian deadlift (dumbbells or barbell), trap-bar deadlift, back extension
Push	Machine chest press, dumbbell bench press, push-up, barbell bench press, overhead press
Pull	Seated cable row, machine row, one-arm dumbbell row, lat pulldown, chin-up

One way a week might look:

	Monday	Wednesday	Friday
Squat or hinge	Leg press, 3 sets	Romanian deadlift, 3 sets	Leg press, 3 sets
Push	Dumbbell bench press, 3 sets	Dumbbell bench press, 3 sets	Dumbbell bench press, 3 sets
Pull	Seated cable row, 3 sets	Seated cable row, 3 sets	Seated cable row, 3 sets

Keep the same lifts for at least a few weeks, so you can see them move.



WHY THIS IS ENOUGH

A guy will look at that and say it’s not enough. Compared to a five-day split, it isn’t. Compared to a plan you drop by February, it’s everything.

Do the sums. Three sessions with two or three hard sets of each lift gives your push and pull six to nine hard sets a week. In the sample week, the squat gets two days, so four to six. The hinge, done once a week, gets two or three, under the 2021 review’s floor of four. That’s fine to start. When you have the time, add a hinge as the extra on one of the squat days.

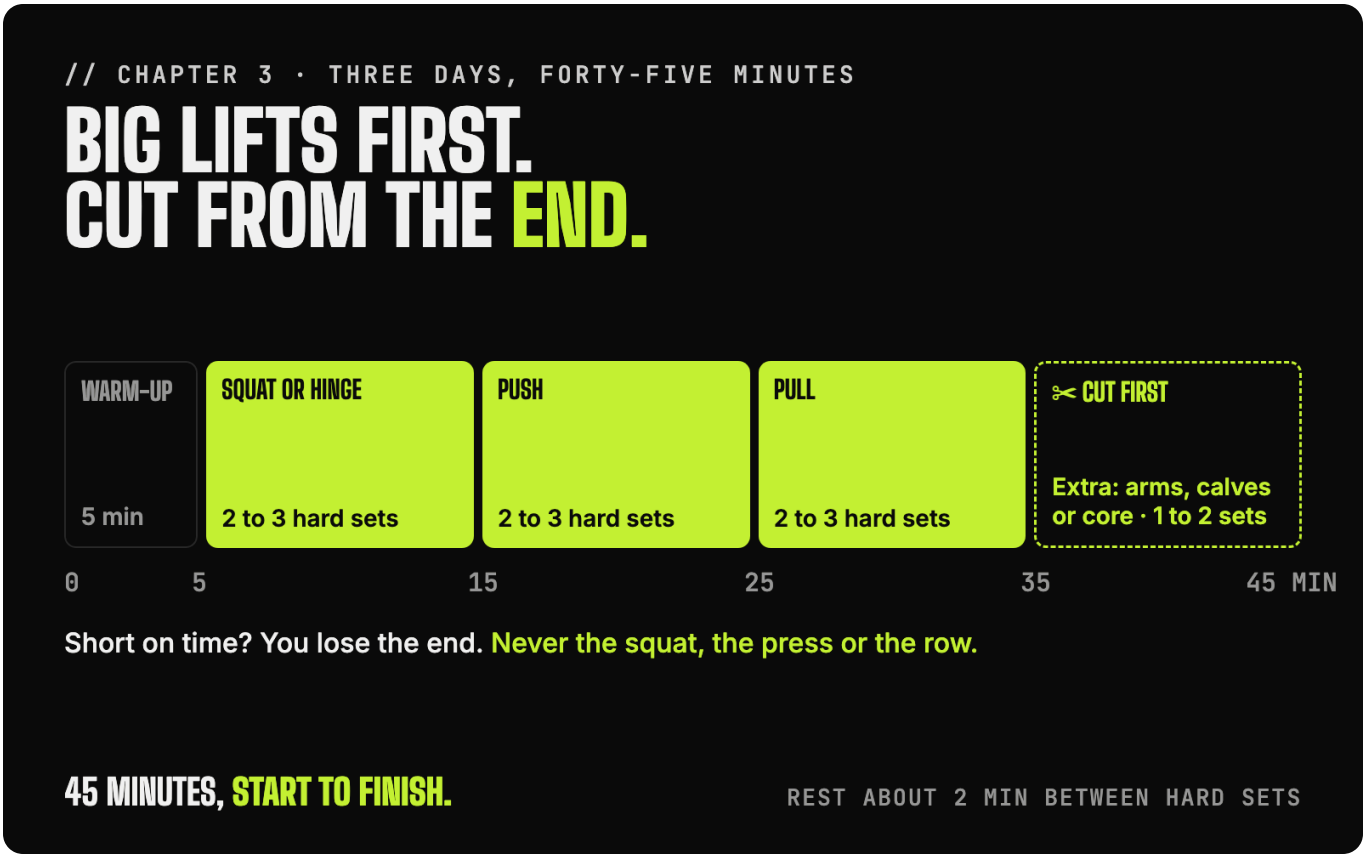
More sets do add more. Studies that compare low and high weekly volume find that a handful of hard sets gives most of the strength gain, and that each extra set after that buys a little less. So this plan stops well short of the most you could do, and still gets you most of the return for the time you actually have. Chapter 4 shows the numbers.

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES, START TO FINISH

The order matters as much as the lifts.

The big three go first, every session. Nine hard sets with rest takes about half an hour. The warm-up takes five minutes. That leaves ten minutes for the extra, if you get it.

If the session runs short, you lose the end. Your squat never gets dropped because the curls ran long. That's rule 2 of the bad-week version in Chapter 5: cut from the end, never the start.



THIS WEEK

Pick a squat, a hinge, a push and a pull from the table. Put three 45-minute slots in your calendar, on the days you wrote down in Chapter 1, with an hour for each.

Then do the first session and write down every weight and every rep. That's your starting line.

Notes on the evidence

- **How often matters little once weekly sets are equal:** Schoenfeld BJ, Grgic J, Krieger J (2019). *How many times per week should a muscle be trained to maximize muscle hypertrophy? A systematic review and meta-analysis.* J Sports Sci 37(11):1286-95. doi:10.1080/02640414.2018.1555906. 25 studies; "strong evidence" that frequency does not meaningfully change muscle growth when volume is equated. Evidence grade: strong. Ralston GW, Kilgore L, Wyatt FB, Buchan D, Baker JS (2018). *Weekly training frequency effects on strength gain: a meta-analysis.* Sports Med Open 4(1):36. doi:10.1186/s40798-018-0149-9. 12 studies; with equal weekly volume, one day and three or more days a week gave similar strength gains. Pelland JC, Remmert JF, Robinson ZP, Hinson SR, Zourdos MC (2026). *The resistance training dose response: meta-regressions exploring the effects of weekly volume and frequency on muscle hypertrophy and strength gains.* Sports Med 56(2):481-505. doi:10.1007/s40279-025-02344-w. 67 studies, 2,058 people, average age 25; more frequency helps strength a little, with diminishing returns. Evidence grade for strength: moderate. All three draw mostly on younger adults.
- **The minimum program (squat or leg press, push, pull; at least four weekly sets; machines or free weights):** Iversen VM, Norum M, Schoenfeld BJ, Fimland MS (2021). *No time to lift? Designing time-efficient training programs for strength and hypertrophy: a narrative review.* Sports Med 51(10):2079-95. doi:10.1007/s40279-021-01490-1. Recommends at least one leg-pressing exercise, one upper-body pull and one upper-body push, a minimum of 4 weekly sets per muscle group at 6 to 15 RM loads, and states that "weekly training volume is more important than training frequency". Machines or free weights chosen "based on training goals, availability, and personal preferences". Most underlying studies were in untrained or recreationally active people. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **Three days and habit:** Kaushal N, Rhodes RE (2015). *Exercise habit formation in new gym members: a longitudinal study.* J Behav Med 38(4):652-63. doi:10.1007/s10865-015-9640-7. 111 new gym members over 12 weeks; "at least four bouts per week for 6 weeks" was the minimum to establish an exercise habit; habit was predicted by consistency, low complexity, a stable environment and enjoyment. Evidence grade: early for the four-a-week threshold (one study). This book does not claim three sessions a week is proven to build the habit; three is coaching judgment.
- **A few hard sets give most of the return:** Ralston GW, Kilgore L, Wyatt FB, Baker JS (2017). *The effect of weekly set volume on strength gain: a meta-analysis.* Sports Med 47(12):2585-601. doi:10.1007/s40279-017-0762-7. Low volume (5 or fewer sets per exercise per week) produced a large strength gain (ES 0.82); high volume (10 or more) produced slightly more (ES 1.01). Pelland 2026 (above): more weekly sets give more muscle and strength, with diminishing returns that are "considerably more pronounced" for strength. Evidence grade: strong that low volume works and that more adds more with diminishing returns; moderate for the exact size of the low-volume effect, since study pools are small and mostly young or untrained.
- **Weekly set counts** (six to nine hard sets for the push and pull, four to six for the squat and two or three for the hinge in the sample week) are arithmetic from the plan, compared against Iversen's floor of four.
- **Exercise choices, order, rest times, rep range and "big lifts first"** are coaching practice, not tested findings. The rep range sits inside Iversen's 6 to 15 RM.
- **"Legs are always next week"** and the five-day split in March are my coaching view, not a study.

4. HARD SETS, NOT LONG SESSIONS

If you leave every session wrecked, you're not training harder than everyone else.

You're just making the rest of your week harder.

A lot of men carry an idea from their twenties. A good session is a long one. A great one ends with you on the floor. Ninety minutes, five exercises for chest, every set until the bar stops moving.

Then you're forty, with a job and two kids, and that session doesn't fit anywhere. So it doesn't happen at all.

Muscle comes from a few hard sets, done consistently, with enough recovery to come back.

Here's what I actually want from a guy with a job and kids. Two or three hard sets of each lift. Stop about two reps before failure. Add a rep or a little weight most weeks. This chapter is why that's enough, how to judge "two reps short", and how to keep it moving.

WHAT A HARD SET IS

A hard set ends near the edge. You stop when you think you have about two good reps left. Not five. Not zero.

Pick a weight that lets you do 6 to 12 reps before you stop. Do reps until the bar slows and the next one would be a fight. Stop there.

Warm-up sets don't count.

In the three-day plan, that's two or three hard sets of a squat or hinge, a push and a pull. Six to nine working sets. Forty-five minutes.

WHY A FEW SETS ARE ENOUGH

A guy will look at that and say it’s not enough. Compared to a five-day bodybuilding split, it isn’t. But the research on volume has a shape that suits a busy man. More sets build more, and each extra set buys a little less than the one before.

When the muscle studies were pooled by weekly sets per muscle, fewer than five hard sets a week gave about 5% growth. Five to nine gave about 7%. Ten or more gave about 10%. So the first handful of sets got about half the result of ten or more. The gap between the groups was only a trend, so treat the exact numbers loosely.

For strength, the curve flattens even sooner. In one analysis, five or fewer sets per exercise a week still gave a large strength gain, only a little smaller than ten or more. And in trained men, one hard set two or three times a week still raised the squat by about 17 kilos on average.

Now look at your plan. Three sessions, two or three hard sets of each lift, is about six to nine hard sets a week for each movement, fewer for legs if you alternate squat and hinge. That’s the middle band. More sets would add a little more. Six to nine gets you most of the benefit for a fraction of the time.

Most of those studies were on men in their twenties. In adults over 50, two or three sets per exercise, two or three times a week, made them clearly stronger. Men in their forties sit in between. The direction holds.

And the sets you’d add to get from nine to twenty are the ones that make a session ninety minutes long. That’s the session that gets skipped.

WHY TWO REPS SHORT, NOT FAILURE

Failure means you keep going until you can’t finish the rep.

You don’t need it. For strength, studies that compared training to failure with stopping short found no real difference. For muscle, stopping one to three reps short gets you nearly the same growth. Going closer may add a little. Two reps short gives you all the strength and nearly all the muscle.

Failure has a cost, and it's fatigue. In one study, trained men took squats and bench press to failure. They recovered more slowly over the next one to two days than when they did the same total reps and stopped well short. You've got a school run in the morning, a meeting at nine and another session on Thursday.

Failure won't hurt your gains. The case against it is the next two days. These studies were on young adults. Nobody has run them on men of 45, so treat the details with care.

There's an old piece of advice I think is nonsense for men over 35: that you have to go crazy heavy to build muscle. I mean ego loads, picked to impress the room, not a weight that's heavy for you. For most men past 35, chasing them is a mistake. They end up hurt, or strained, or without the energy to come back and train. It's a short-run approach. Your body isn't the same as it was in your twenties, and you have to work more closely with it.

HOW TO JUDGE TWO REPS SHORT

When researchers pooled 12 studies, people underestimated how many reps they had left by about one rep on average. So when you think you have two left, you may have three. Experience didn't fix it: trained lifters were no better at guessing than beginners. Guesses were better on heavier sets of 12 reps or fewer, on later sets, and near the end of a set.

So "two reps short" is a target you learn, not a number you hit exactly. Four habits help.

- **Keep the reps between 6 and 12.** Long, light sets are harder to judge.
- **Watch the bar speed.** When a rep moves clearly slower than your first rep, you're close.
- **Watch your form.** If the next rep would need you to twist, bounce or cut the depth, stop.
- **Check yourself now and then.** On the last set of a lift that's safe to take to the end, like a machine, keep going until you can't. If you thought you had two left and got five more, add weight next session.



SORE ISN’T THE GOAL

Soreness feels like proof. It tells you very little.

In one study of young men over ten weeks, muscle damage was highest after the very first session, lower by week three and minimal by week ten. The big early muscle-building response was mostly repair. Only the later responses tracked real growth.

So the soreness of a new program fades as you adapt, and it doesn’t tell you whether a session worked. What tells you is next week’s log.

You walk out with something left. You can still do the school run. You can still train again on Thursday.

Sore isn’t the goal. Coming back is.

HOW TO MOVE FORWARD: A REP, THEN A LITTLE WEIGHT

Give every lift a rep range. For most men, 8 to 10 is a good start.

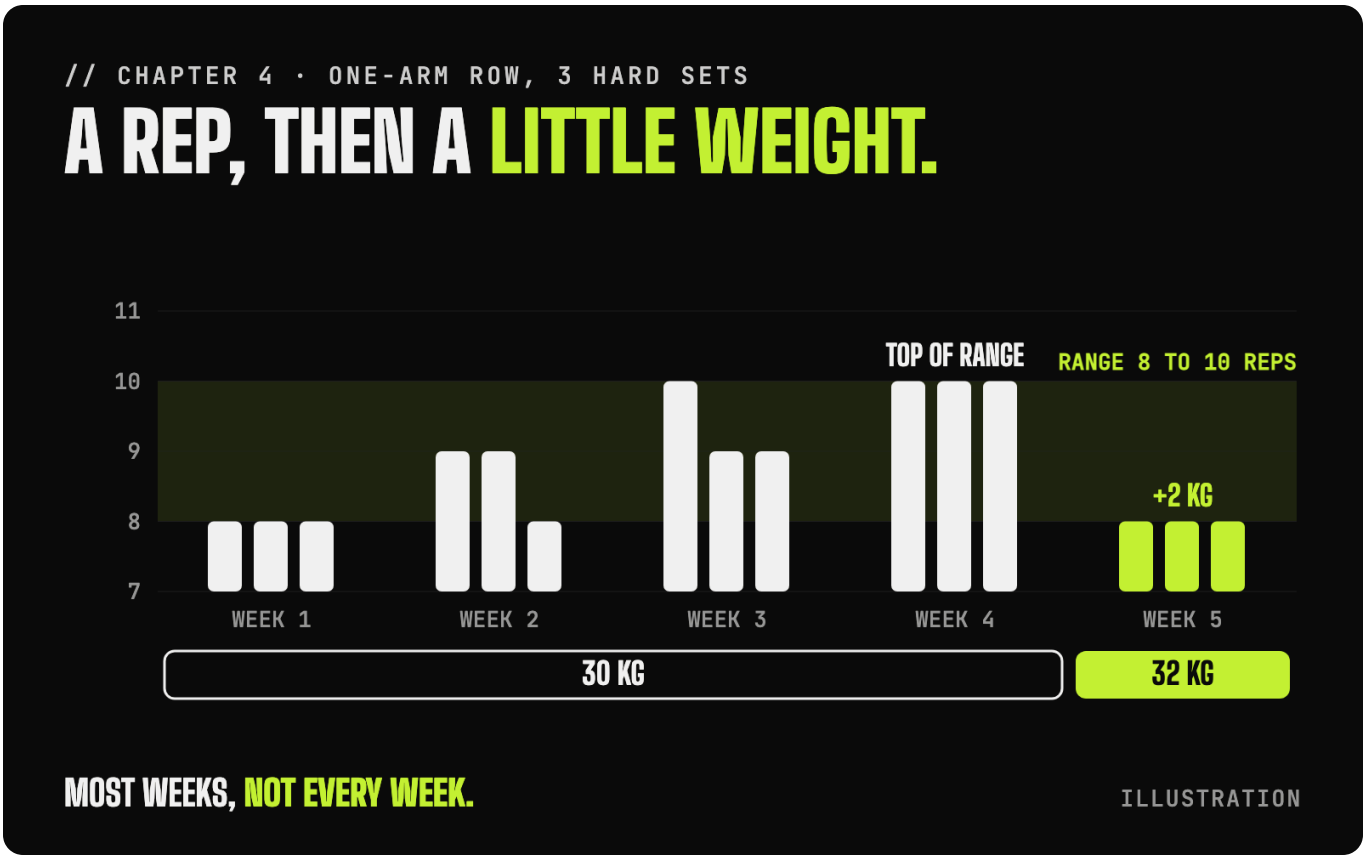
Keep the same weight until every hard set reaches the top of the range, still about two reps short. Then add the smallest step you can: the next dumbbell up, one plate on the machine, 2.5 kilos on the bar. Your reps drop back to the bottom of the range. Build them back up. Then add again.

Here's a one-arm row with a 30 kg dumbbell, three hard sets, range 8 to 10:

- **Week 1:** 8, 8, 8
- **Week 2:** 9, 9, 8
- **Week 3:** 10, 9, 9
- **Week 4:** 10, 10, 10. Next session, the 32.
- **Week 5:** 8, 8, 8 with the 32. Start climbing again.

Adding a rep and adding weight both count. In one study, trained lifters who progressed by reps and lifters who progressed by load ended up in a very similar place.

Notice the words "most weeks". Some weeks nothing moves, and that's fine. On a bad week you keep the weight and cut the sets (next chapter). Nobody adds weight every week forever.



THIS WEEK

Give each of your three lifts a rep range. Then log every hard set this week: the weight, the reps, and how many you think you had left.

Next week, beat one number on one lift. One rep or a little weight.

The session that leaves you destroyed feels productive. The one you can repeat for a year is the one that changes you.

Notes on the evidence

- **More sets, smaller returns:** Schoenfeld BJ, Ogborn D, Krieger JW (2017). *Dose-response relationship between weekly resistance training volume and increases in muscle mass.* J Sports Sci 35(11):1073-82. About 5% growth under 5 weekly sets per muscle, 7% at 5 to 9, 10% at 10 or more; the group comparison was only a trend (P = 0.074); figures verified via Iversen 2021. Pelland JC et al. (2026), *Sports Med* 56(2):481-505 (67 studies, average age 25): returns flatten faster for strength. Evidence grade: strong for the shape; moderate for exact sizes.
- **Low volume still builds strength:** Ralston GW et al. (2017). Sports Med 47(12):2585-601. Five or fewer weekly sets per exercise ES 0.82, ten or more ES 1.01, difference small. Androulakis-Korakakis

P, Fisher JP, Steele J (2020). Sports Med 50(4):751-65. Trained men, one set 2 to 3 times a week: squat +17.48 kg (95% CI 8.51 to 26.46), “suboptimal, yet significant”. Iversen VM et al. (2021). Sports Med 51(10):2079-95: push, pull and leg press, at least 4 weekly sets per muscle; mostly untrained or recreational participants. Evidence grade: moderate.

- **Adults over 50:** Peterson MD et al. (2010). Ageing Res Rev 9(3):226-37 (47 studies, 1,079 people aged 50+). Borde R, Hortobágyi T, Granacher U (2015). Sports Med 45(12):1693-720 (2 to 3 sets, 2 sessions a week gave the best values; low study quality). Mostly people aged 60 to 75. Evidence grade: strong that they gain strength; moderate for the dose.
- **Failure is not needed:** Grgic J et al. (2022). *Effects of resistance training performed to repetition failure or non-failure on muscular strength and hypertrophy.* J Sport Health Sci 11(2):202-11 (15 studies, all young adults; no significant difference; failure not harmful). Refalo MC et al. (2023), *Sports Med* 53(3):649-65 (trivial muscle edge for failure); Robinson ZP et al. (2024), *Sports Med* 54(9):2209-31 (exploratory; growth better closer to failure); Refalo MC et al. (2024), *J Sports Sci* 42(1):85-101 (same growth at 1 to 2 reps in reserve). Evidence grade: strong for strength; moderate for muscle.
- **Failure slows recovery:** Morán-Navarro R et al. (2017). Eur J Appl Physiol 117(12):2387-99. Ten trained young men; recovery faster between 24 and 48 hours without failure. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **Judging reps left:** Halperin I et al. (2022). Sports Med 52(2):377-90. 12 studies, 414 people; underprediction of 0.95 reps (95% CI 0.17 to 1.73); better at 12 or fewer reps, later sets and near failure; training status made no difference. Evidence grade: moderate. The four habits are coaching practice.
- **Soreness:** Damas F et al. (2016). J Physiol 594(18):5209-22. Ten young men, biopsies at weeks 1, 3 and 10. Evidence grade: early to moderate.
- **Adding reps or weight:** American College of Sports Medicine (2009). Progression models position stand. Med Sci Sports Exerc 41(3):687-708 (add 2 to 10% when you beat the target by one or two reps). Plotkin D et al. (2022), *PeerJ* 10:e14142 (43 trained adults; reps and load progression similar). Evidence grade: moderate. The 30 kg row is an illustration.
- **“Ego loads (”going crazy heavy“)” is a mistake for most men over 35:** Don’s coaching opinion.

5. THE BAD-WEEK VERSION

Your plan was written for a week that never happens.

No late meetings. No sick kids. No flight at six in the morning.

Then the real week shows up. A project lands on Monday. Your youngest is up all Tuesday night. Thursday you're in an airport. By Friday you've missed two sessions, the whole plan feels broken, and you tell yourself you'll start again next Monday.

That's the moment most men drift. Laziness has nothing to do with it. The plan had no smaller version, so the choice was everything or nothing. And nothing won.

Every plan I write has a bad-week version. This chapter is that version, why it works, and the rules that keep it working.

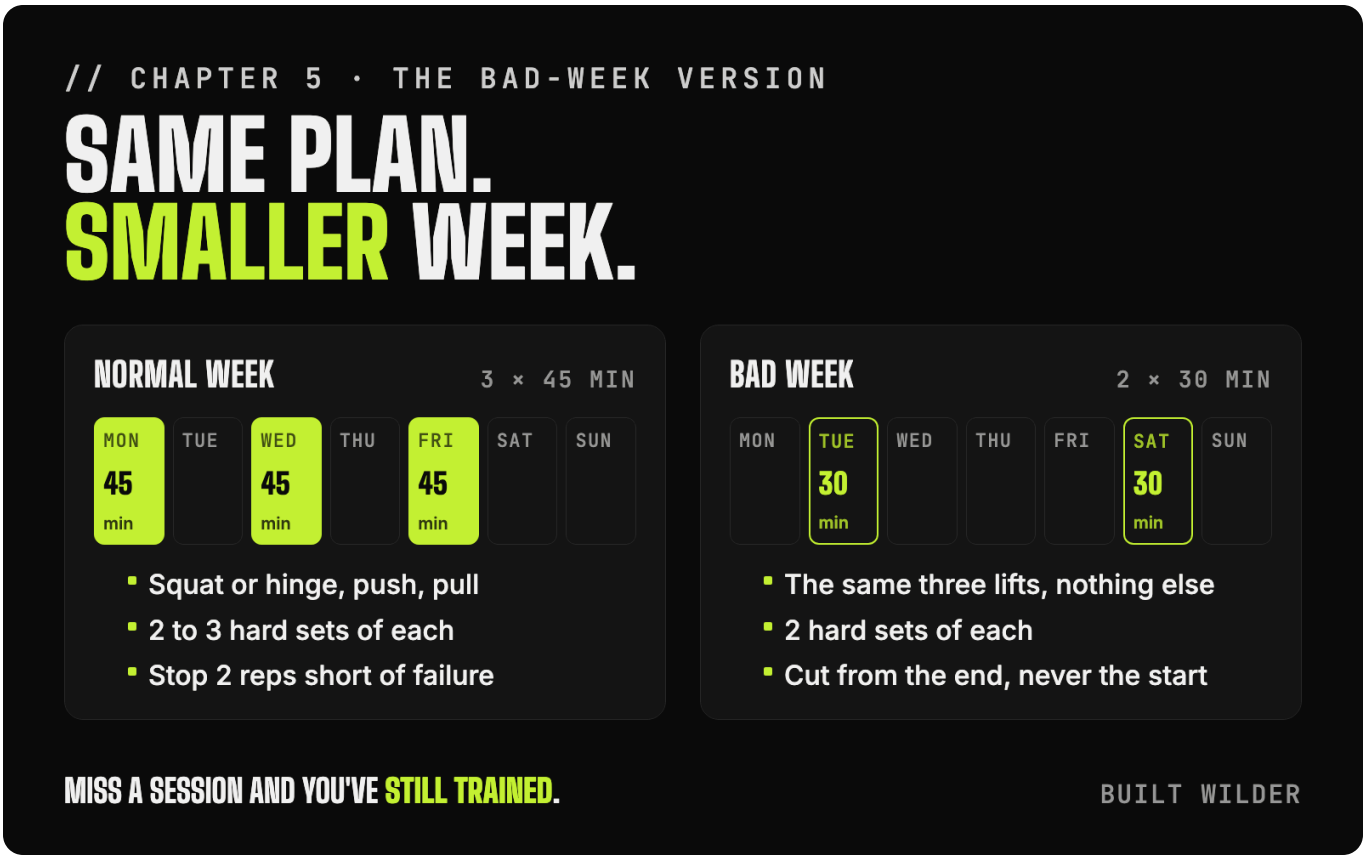
WHAT IT IS

The bad-week version is the same plan, made small.

- **Two sessions instead of three.**
- **Thirty minutes each.**
- **The big three only:** one squat or hinge, one push, one pull.
- **Two hard sets of each.** Hard means you stop about two reps before you'd fail, the same as a normal week.

That's six working sets in a session. You can do it in a hotel gym, in your building's gym at nine at night, or in half your lunch break.

It goes in the calendar like a meeting. Not "if I get time". Two slots, with a day and an hour.



WHY TWO SMALL SESSIONS ARE ENOUGH

You've probably spent years thinking that if you can't do the full plan, there's no point. The studies on breaks and minimum doses say otherwise.

A week or two off costs you very little. In one study, power athletes stopped lifting completely for two weeks. When they were tested again, their squat and bench press had barely moved, under 2%, too small to count as a real change. Some things did slip, and the losses grow the longer you stay away. Still, a bad week is just a bad week. Those were young athletes, not men in their forties, so don't stretch it too far. The direction holds.

Keeping strength takes far less than building it. In studies where people trained hard for a few months and then cut right back, one session a week, with one hard set per exercise, held their strength for months, as long as the weight stayed heavy. Most of those lifters were young. Lifters over 60 may need up to two sessions a week and two or three sets to hold their muscle size.

Now look at the bad-week version again. Two sessions. Two hard sets of each lift. It sits right on that line. It won't make you bigger in a bad week. It's built so the bad week costs you as little as possible.

A bad week is for keeping, not for gaining. The gaining happens in the normal weeks, and the normal weeks only happen if you're still in the plan when they come back.

THE RULES

1. Keep the weight. Cut the sets.

The easy mistake on a tired week is to keep every exercise and go light on all of them. It feels like training. It does very little.

The studies on holding strength agree on one thing: the part you keep is the weight and the effort. You can cut sessions. You can cut sets. Don't cut the load. If you squatted 100 kilos for eight last week, the bad-week squat is 100 kilos, for two hard sets instead of three.

One exception. If you're ill or something hurts, that isn't a bad week. Take the rest day.

2. Cut from the end, never the start.

Your big lifts go first, every session. If the session runs short, you lose the end: the arm work, the extra set, the stretching.

You never lose the squat or the press because you started with curls and ran out of time.

3. Move it, don't miss it.

Tuesday's session can happen on Wednesday. Thursday's can happen on Saturday morning before the kids are up. The week has seven days. The plan only needs two of them.

A missed session is a scheduling problem. Treat it like one. Find the next slot and put it in.

4. Don’t make it up.

If you miss Tuesday, you don’t do Tuesday and Thursday together on Thursday. You just do Thursday. No Sunday double. No punishment week.

This one is my rule, not a study’s. Catching up means twice the work on a body that’s already tired from the week that made you miss it. You feel wrecked for days, and then you miss the next week too. The catch-up is how one bad week becomes two.

The research on habits fits with it. In a study of how everyday habits form, missing a single day didn’t set people back. What mattered more was doing it consistently. So after a missed session, just turn up for the next one.

5. Write it down before you need it.

The bad-week version has to exist before the bad week. If you try to design a smaller plan on a Wednesday night when you’re exhausted, you’ll design nothing.

Put it on your phone, in your training app or on a note in your gym bag. Not in your head.

In 2016 I was running my own consulting company in Shenzhen. Small team, no investors, factory visits, contracts, the marketing. I could only train two or three times a week. What kept me going was deciding ahead of time. I blocked my training into the week, because otherwise the time came and I didn’t want to leave my work. I picked an apartment ten minutes’ walk from a gym. I laid my gym things out in the morning, so in the late afternoon I could just grab them and go. The bad-week version is the same idea for your program. The decision is already made.

WHEN THE BAD WEEK TURNS INTO A BAD MONTH

Sometimes the bad week doesn’t end. A month goes by. Maybe two.

Here’s how to come back.

- **Go back to the plan where you left it.** After a month or more off, start a little lighter for the first week or two. Rule 1 is for weeks you’re still training. No restarting from zero.

- **The first session back is about turning up**, not about the numbers.
- **No punishment week.** If you missed a month, you don't need a brutal session to make up for it. You need your next session.

Strength comes back quicker than it took to build the first time. In one small study, young men who took three weeks off between blocks of bench pressing ended up in about the same place as men who never stopped, because they picked it back up fast. That's not a reason to take time off. It's a reason not to panic when it happens.

Two weeks after you're back, you won't remember the gap. You'll only remember it if you used it as a reason to quit.

THIS WEEK

Write your bad-week version. Three lifts: your squat or hinge, your push, your pull. Two days that usually survive a bad week. Thirty minutes. Two hard sets each, at your normal weights.

Then put both slots in your calendar now, with a day and an hour.

Most men don't quit. They drift. This is what stops the drift.

Notes on the evidence

- **Two weeks off:** Hortobágyi T et al. (1993). *The effects of detraining on power athletes.* Med Sci Sports Exerc 25(8):929-35. Twelve power athletes, 14 days of no lifting; bench press and squat strength changed by under 2%, not statistically significant, though eccentric strength and fast-twitch fibre size did fall. Strength loss grows with the length of the break: Bosquet L et al. (2013), *Scand J Med Sci Sports* 23(3):e140-9, a meta-analysis of 103 studies. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **The minimum dose that keeps strength:** Spiering BA et al. (2021). *Maintaining physical performance: the minimal dose of exercise needed to preserve endurance and strength over time.* J Strength Cond Res 35(5):1449-58. One session a week with one set per exercise maintained strength for up to 32 weeks when the load stayed high; older adults may need up to two sessions and two or three sets to keep muscle size. Supported by Bickel CS et al. (2011), *Med Sci Sports Exerc* 43(7):1177-87, and Trappe S et al. (2002), *J Gerontol A* 57(4):B138-43. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **Keep the load:** Spiering 2021 identifies intensity (how heavy, relative to your best) as the key variable for keeping strength.
- **Habits and a missed day:** Lally P et al. (2010). *How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world.* Eur J Soc Psychol 40(6):998-1009. Missing one opportunity did not materially affect habit formation. Evidence grade: moderate. The "don't make it up" rule itself is coaching judgment, not a tested finding.

- **Coming back after time off:** Ogasawara R et al. (2013). *Eur J Appl Physiol* 113(4):975-85. Fourteen young men; three-week breaks between six-week blocks gave similar overall gains to training straight through, because retraining gains came faster. Small study; not a reason to plan breaks.

6. THE TRAVEL VERSION

If you travel for work, your plan needs a travel version.

The home version doesn’t survive a hotel.

At home you’ve got your gym, your kitchen and your routine. On the road you’ve got a breakfast buffet, an airport at six in the morning and a client dinner you can’t skip. The hotel gym is a small room with a rack of dumbbells that stops at 20 kilos, a bench and a treadmill facing a wall.

Trying to run your home plan out there is how a trip turns into a lost week. Then the week after goes too, because you came home tired and behind.

So lower the standard on purpose. On a trip, the job is to hold what you have. Two short sessions. Protein at every meal. Come home the same man who left.

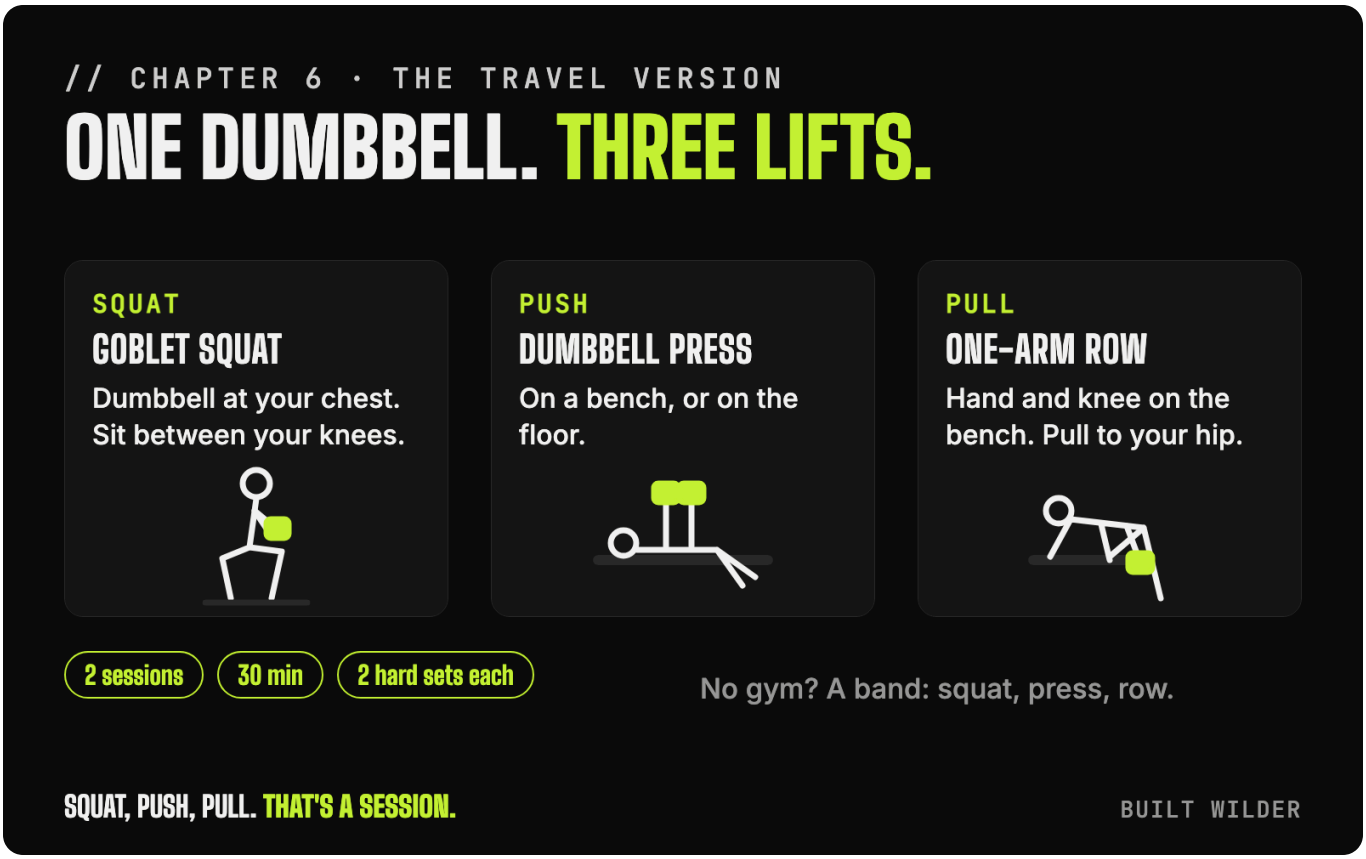
THE HOTEL GYM SESSION

You need one dumbbell, a bench if there is one, and three lifts.

- **Goblet squat.** Hold one dumbbell upright against your chest. Sit down between your knees, then stand up.
- **Dumbbell press.** On the bench if there is one. On the floor if there isn’t.
- **One-arm row.** One hand and one knee on the bench. Pull the dumbbell to your hip.

Squat, push, pull. The same shape as every session at home. That’s a session.

Run it like the bad-week version from the last chapter. Two sessions on a trip. Thirty minutes. Two hard sets of each. Before breakfast, or at nine at night when the dinner is done. If Tuesday’s slot dies in a meeting, move it to Wednesday. Move it, don’t miss it.



WHEN THE DUMBBELLS ARE TOO LIGHT

Here's where the rule from Chapter 4 changes. Chapter 5 says keep the weight. In a hotel you can't, so keep the effort.

At home you stop about two reps short of failure. In a hotel, the heaviest dumbbell might let you do 25 goblet squats. Two reps short of 25 is very hard to judge. People misjudge how many reps they have left, and they get it most wrong on long sets. Guesses are best at 12 reps or fewer.

The good news is that light weights still work. When researchers pooled 21 studies, light loads built about as much muscle as heavy loads. The catch: in those studies, every set went to failure. Heavy weights still won for top-end strength.

So a light set only counts if it ends close to the real end. With hotel dumbbells:

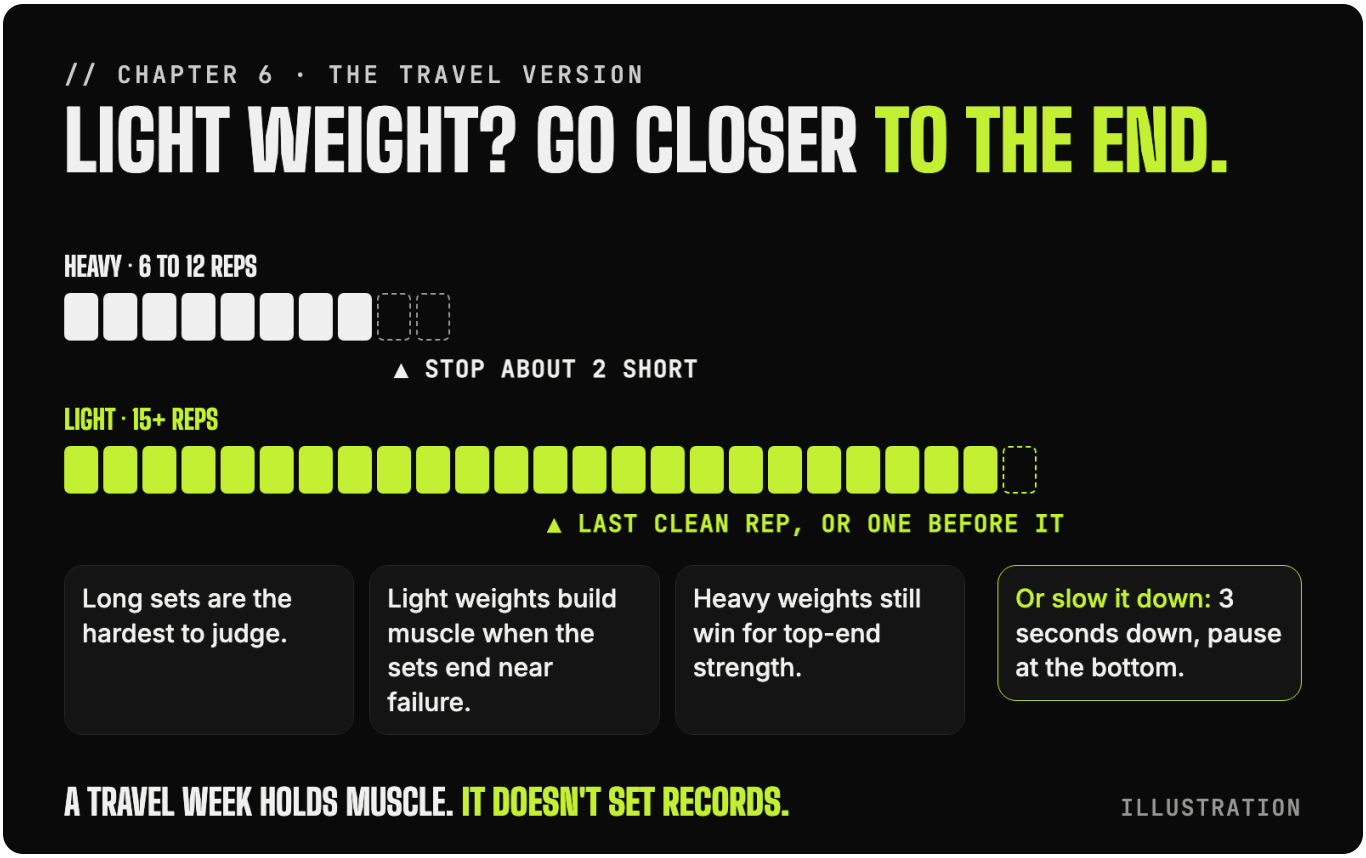
- **If you can do more than about 15 reps, go to the end of the set.** Stop at the last clean rep you can do, or one before it. If a lift is new to you, stay one short until you know it.

- **Slow the reps down.** Take three seconds on the way down and pause at the bottom. The weight gets harder without getting heavier, and you reach the hard part in fewer reps.
- **Make it one leg or one arm.** A split squat holding the dumbbell is much heavier for each leg than a goblet squat with the same weight.

Going to the end of a set is fine here because a dumbbell can be put down. Don't do it alone under a loaded barbell.

For most men over 35, I think lighter weight with better tempo and form is a better approach anyway. That's for muscle, not top-end strength. A hotel gym just makes the choice for you.

Expect a travel week to hold your muscle better than your top-end strength. That's fine. You're there to hold, not to set records.



NO GYM: PACK A BAND

Some hotels have no gym. Some have a gym that's closed. Put a resistance band in your bag. It weighs almost nothing and fits in a shoe.

Bands work. When eight studies compared elastic bands with machines and dumbbells, strength gains were about the same.

Same three movements:

- **Squat.** Stand on the band and hold the ends at your shoulders.
- **Press.** Band behind your back, press forward. Or do push-ups.
- **Row.** Close the door on the band at the hinge side, or use a door anchor, and pull toward the closed door.

Same rule as light dumbbells. Band sets run long, so take them close to the end.

No band and no gym? Walk. Push-ups and split squats in the room still keep the habit alive.

FOOD ON THE ROAD: THREE RULES

Your diet needs a travel version too. On a trip, trying to hit your home numbers is how one dinner becomes a lost week.

Three rules.

1. Protein at every meal. Even if it’s eggs at the buffet and a burger at the airport. At breakfast, go for the eggs, the yoghurt and the fruit. Skip the pastry table. Have one default dinner you can get anywhere: a protein, a vegetable and a starch. Keep one protein option in your bag for the day the meeting runs through lunch.

2. One real meal a day where you don’t count anything. Enjoy the client dinner. If there are drinks, decide how many before the first one, and have water between them.

3. No catching up when you get home. No skipped meals on Monday. No punishment week. Monday starts normal. It’s the same rule as the training: you don’t make up sessions, and you don’t make up meals.

Not gaining weight is the goal.

FIND YOUR CHICKEN SHOP

Where I live in Chiang Mai, there are about four places I go for clean, fast meals. One is a neighbourhood chicken shop that just does boiled chicken, boneless and without the skin, with plain steamed white rice and cucumber. A couple of gyms near me serve healthy food. All of them are cheap, fast and clean. I know the macros, and they're in my neighbourhood.

That's the travel trick too. Airports and hotels have the same few options everywhere. Pick your defaults once.

On the first day in a new city, before you're hungry, find two places near the hotel that do a plain protein and a plain carb. A rotisserie chicken counter. A noodle shop that will add extra chicken. A sandwich bar that does a double meat. Then you're not deciding at nine at night, tired, in front of a room-service menu.

THIS WEEK

Write your travel version in your phone: three lifts, two slots, three food rules.

Hold your weight on a trip and you've won.

Notes on the evidence

- **Light loads build muscle when sets go to failure:** Schoenfeld BJ, Grgic J, Ogborn D, Krieger JW (2017). *Strength and hypertrophy adaptations between low- vs. high-load resistance training: a systematic review and meta-analysis.* J Strength Cond Res 31(12):3508-23. 21 studies, all sets to momentary failure, 6+ weeks; muscle growth similar with loads at or below 60% of 1RM and above it; 1RM strength gains significantly greater with high loads. Iversen VM et al. (2021), *Sports Med* 51(10):2079-95, notes 15 to 40 reps can be used "if training is performed to volitional failure". Evidence grade: strong. A light dumbbell is not as good as the gym for maximal strength.
- **Misjudging reps left on long sets:** Halperin I et al. (2022). *Accuracy in predicting repetitions to task failure in resistance exercise.* Sports Med 52(2):377-90. 12 studies, 414 people; underprediction of about one rep on average; accuracy better with 12 or fewer reps to failure. Evidence grade: moderate. Changing the "two reps short" rule for light loads follows from this and from the low-load studies; it is coaching judgment, not a tested protocol.
- **Bands:** Lopes JSS et al. (2019). *Effects of training with elastic resistance versus conventional resistance on muscular strength: a systematic review and meta-analysis.* SAGE Open Med 7:2050312119831116. 8 studies; no difference in lower-limb (SMD -0.11, 95% CI -0.40 to 0.19) or upper-limb strength (SMD 0.09, -0.18 to 0.35). Mixed populations. Evidence grade: moderate.

- **Two sessions to hold:** Spiering BA et al. (2021). *Maintaining physical performance: the minimal dose of exercise needed to preserve endurance and strength over time.* J Strength Cond Res 35(5):1449-58. See Chapter 5 notes. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **Slower reps, single-leg and single-arm versions, and "lighter weight with better tempo and form":** coaching practice and Don's coaching opinion, not tested findings in the evidence pack.
- **The three food rules and "hold your weight on a trip":** Don's coaching rules. No study in the evidence pack tested them.

7. PROTEIN FIRST, THEN THE FOOD YOU LIKE

You don’t need to eat clean.

You need a plan for the food you actually like.

Every clean-eating plan I’ve seen a busy guy try lasted about three weeks. Then there was a birthday, or a trip, or just a Tuesday, and the whole thing was over. The plan had no room for a real life in it.

So this chapter is short on rules. One rule does most of the work: protein first, at every meal. Then eat the food you like around it.

HOW MUCH

If you lift, aim for about 1.6 grams of protein per kilo of bodyweight a day. That’s about 0.7 grams per pound.

For an 85 kg man (about 187 pounds), that’s about 135 grams a day.

- **75 kg:** about 120 g a day.
- **85 kg:** about 135 g a day.
- **100 kg:** about 160 g a day.

Past 1.6, the extra muscle from extra protein is close to zero on average. The range of that estimate runs up to about 2.2, so landing a bit above 1.6 is fine. You don’t need to chase more. Past that, more buys very little.

Most of the guys I coach are short on protein by about forty grams a day. That gap matters far more than which protein powder they buy.

If you have kidney disease or any other medical condition, talk to your doctor before you raise your protein.

WHAT PROTEIN DOES, AND WHAT IT DOESN'T

Remember the twenties version of me from chapter 2: train, drink a shake, wait for muscle. Here is what the research says instead.

Training builds the muscle. Protein adds a small amount on top.

When researchers pooled 49 trials of people lifting for six weeks or more, extra protein added about 2.5 kilos to their best lift and about 0.3 kilos of lean mass, compared with training alone. That's real, and it's small. It's on top of the training, never instead of it.

In the over-45 group (average age 67), the extra was close to zero and uncertain. They were also given very little extra protein, and the authors think older people may need more. That's the next section.

Food first. Eggs, chicken, yoghurt, fish. Powder is a convenience, not a requirement. It's for the meal where real food isn't going to happen. If you use one, pick the one you'll drink, then drink it.

WHY EACH MEAL NEEDS A FULL DOSE

The older you get, the more a meal needs to carry.

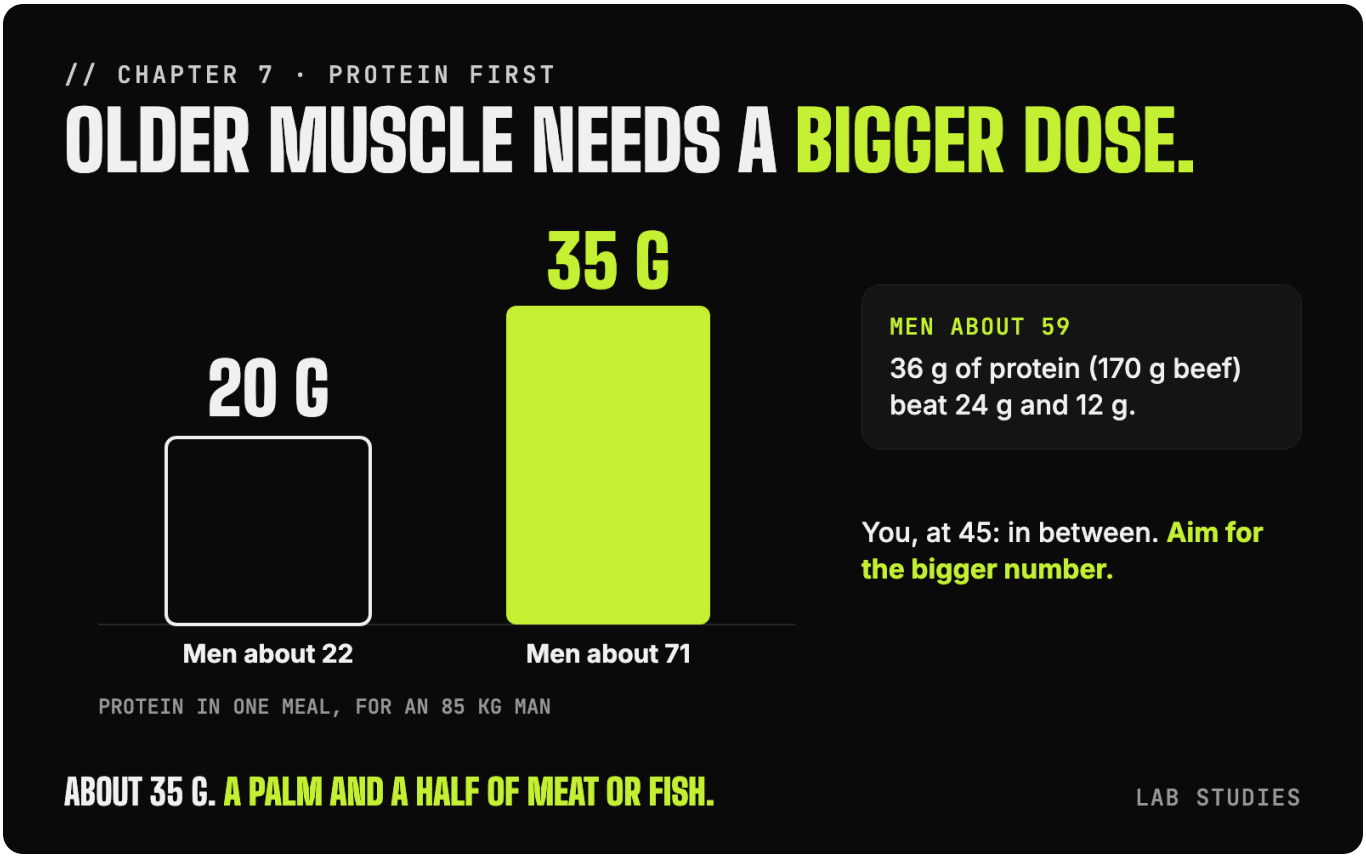
In lab studies, young men of about 22 got their full muscle-building response from about 0.24 g of protein per kilo in a meal. Men of about 71 needed about 0.4 g per kilo for theirs. In men around 59, a 170 g serving of beef, about 36 g of protein, raised muscle building more than the smaller servings did.

For an 85 kg man:

- **The young dose:** about 20 g.
- **The older dose:** about 35 g.

Nobody has measured men of 45 directly. You sit somewhere between those two groups, so aim for the bigger number. About 35 g at a meal is a palm and a half of meat or fish. A 10 g yoghurt doesn't get you there.

You'll hear that your body can only use 30 g at a time. The evidence doesn't back a hard limit. In one study, young men given 100 g after training had a bigger and longer muscle-building response than with 25 g. So a big dinner still counts. The problem is the small breakfast.



WHY EVERY MEAL: THE HONEST VERSION

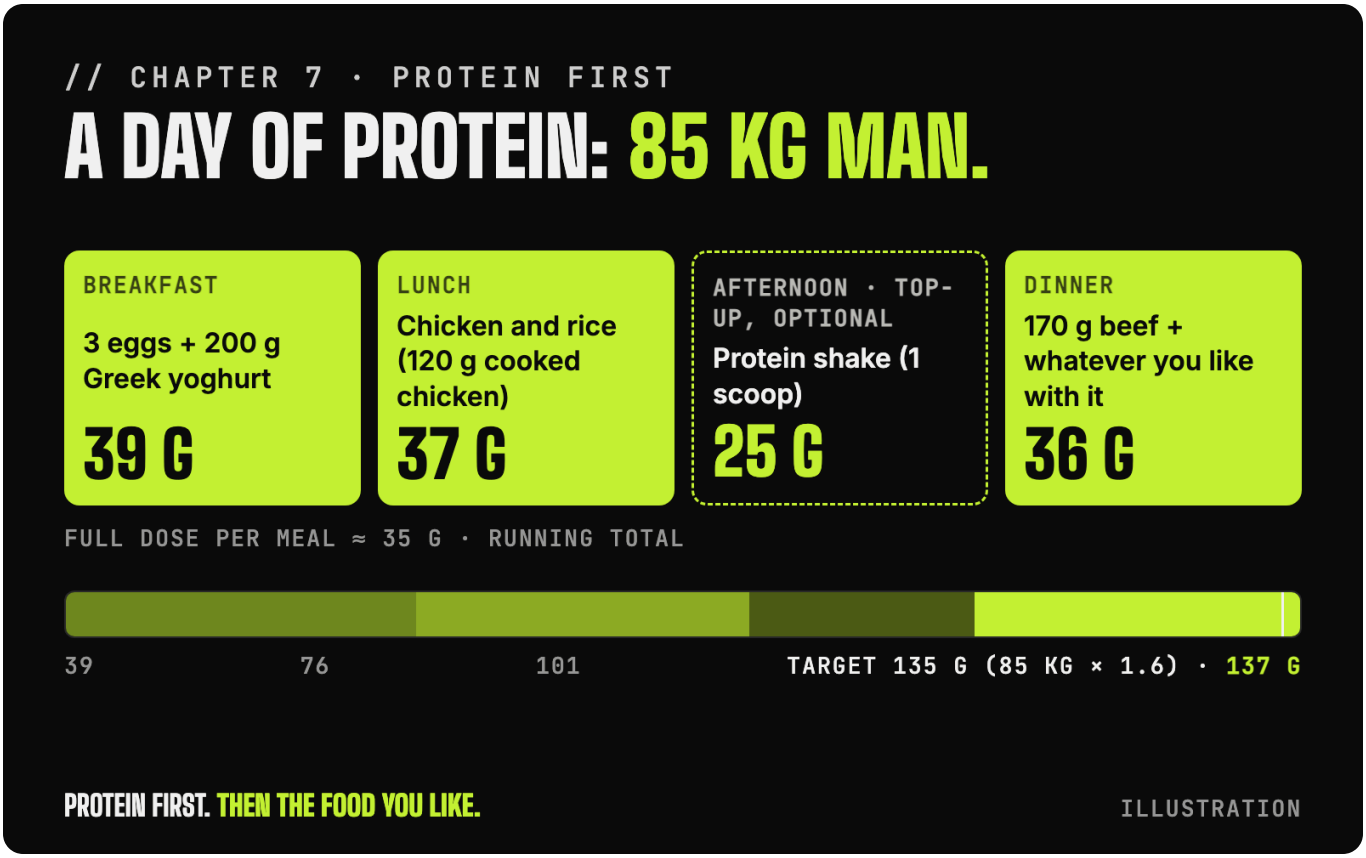
A common day looks like this. Eleven grams at breakfast. Sixteen at lunch. Sixty-three at dinner. That's about 90 grams. For an 85 kg man it's about 45 grams short of his number, and two of his three meals are under the dose.

Protein at every meal fixes both problems at once. Three meals of 35 to 40 grams, plus a shake or a yoghurt, and you're at 135 without thinking about it.

Will spreading it evenly build more muscle on its own? That isn't settled. One small study, eight adults around 37 for a week, found about 25% more muscle building over the day with protein spread evenly than with most of it at dinner.

Two trials in older adults, one lasting eight weeks, found no difference once the total was the same. A 2020 review called the evidence limited and inconsistent.

Dinner-only protein isn't wasted. Protein at every meal is just the easiest way to hit the total, with a full dose in each meal. The total is what matters most.



THEN THE FOOD YOU LIKE

Once the protein is in, eat the food you like around it.

- **Pick one protein you'll happily eat at every meal.** Something you don't get bored of. Mine is mostly chicken and eggs, with rice. One of my easy defaults is the neighbourhood chicken shop from the last chapter: boiled chicken, rice and cucumber.
- **Keep two fallback meals you can make without thinking.** Mine are tuna and salmon. When the plan falls apart, one of those with rice is dinner.
- **Decide dinner before you're hungry,** not when you're standing in front of the fridge.
- **Pizza on Friday is fine.** Have the chicken first, and two slices instead of five.
- **At a restaurant, build the plate around protein,** then pick one extra: the bread, the dessert or the drinks. Not all three.

No containers. No obsession.

Protein first is also the rule I lean on to stop the ten o'clock raid on the kitchen.

THIS WEEK

Work out your two numbers. Your bodyweight in kilos times 1.6 is your daily target. Times 0.4 is your per-meal dose.

Then fix one meal: breakfast. Get it to your per-meal number every day this week.

You're not going to eat perfectly for the next thirty years. So build something you can do for the next thirty years. Boring, repeatable, and yours. That beats clean every time.

Notes on the evidence

- **About 1.6 g/kg a day, then it levels off:** Morton RW et al. (2018). *A systematic review, meta-analysis and meta-regression of the effect of protein supplementation on resistance training-induced gains in muscle mass and strength in healthy adults.* Br J Sports Med 52(6):376-84. 49 RCTs, 1,863 people, training 6+ weeks. Extra protein added 2.49 kg to 1RM strength (95% CI 0.64 to 4.33) and 0.30 kg fat-free mass (0.09 to 0.52). No further gain beyond 1.62 g/kg/day (CI 1.03 to 2.20). Over-45 subgroup (mean age 67): +0.06 kg (-0.14 to 0.26), not significant; older participants got only about 20 g/day of extra protein. Supported by Nunes EA et al. (2022), *J Cachexia Sarcopenia Muscle* 13(2):795-810 (74 RCTs; small extra lean mass gain, SMD 0.22), and Jäger R et al. (2017), *International Society of Sports Nutrition position stand: protein and exercise*, J Int Soc Sports Nutr 14:20 (1.4 to 2.0 g/kg/day for most exercising people; whole food can meet needs). Evidence grade: strong for the target and the levelling-off; moderate for the size of the benefit in men over 45. The 75, 85 and 100 kg figures are 1.6 g/kg, rounded.
- **Bigger per-meal dose for older muscle:** Moore DR et al. (2015). *Protein ingestion to stimulate myofibrillar protein synthesis requires greater relative protein intakes in healthy older versus younger men.* J Gerontol A Biol Sci Med Sci 70(1):57-62 (pooled lab data; plateau at 0.24 g/kg in men about 22, 0.40 g/kg in men about 71; per kg of bodyweight the difference was borderline, p = 0.055, and clearer per kg of lean mass, 0.25 vs 0.60 g/kg). Robinson MJ et al. (2013). *Dose-dependent responses of myofibrillar protein synthesis with beef ingestion are enhanced with resistance exercise in middle-aged men.* Appl Physiol Nutr Metab 38(2):120-5 (35 men aged 59 ± 2; only 170 g beef, 36 g protein, beat all lower servings). Yang Y et al. (2012), *Br J Nutr* 108(10):1780-8 (men about 71: 40 g whey beat 20 g after exercise). Schoenfeld BJ, Aragon AA (2018), *J Int Soc Sports Nutr* 15:10 (about 0.4 g/kg per meal). Evidence grade: moderate. These are short lab measurements, mostly in men around 70; no study tested men of 40 to 50 directly. The 20 g and 35 g figures are 0.24 and 0.4 g/kg for an 85 kg man, rounded.
- **No hard 30 g ceiling:** Trommelen J et al. (2023). *The anabolic response to protein ingestion during recovery from exercise has no upper limit in magnitude and duration in vivo in humans.* Cell Rep Med 4(12):101324. Young men; 100 g gave a larger and longer response than 25 g. Evidence grade: early (one lab study).

- **Spreading protein evenly (contested):** For: Mamerow MM et al. (2014). *Dietary protein distribution positively influences 24-h muscle protein synthesis in healthy adults.* J Nutr 144(6):876-80 (8 adults about 37, 7 days; even about 30 g x 3 vs 11/16/63 g gave 25% higher 24-hour synthesis). Against: Kim IY et al. (2015), *Am J Physiol Endocrinol Metab* 308(1):E21-8 (20 adults aged 52 to 75; total protein mattered, pattern did not); Kim IY et al. (2018), *Clin Nutr* 37(2):488-93 (14 older adults, 8 weeks; no difference in lean mass, strength or function). Review: Hudson JL, Bergia RE, Campbell WW (2020), *Nutrients* 12(5):1441 ("limited and inconsistent"). Evidence grade: contested. "Protein at every meal" is offered as a practical way to hit the total with a full dose per meal, not as proven extra muscle. The "common day" uses Mamerow's uneven pattern as its example.
- **Food amounts in the day-of-protein graphic:** approximate label values (see the graphics spec); the 170 g beef = 36 g figure is from Robinson 2013.
- **Coaching views, not tested in the evidence pack:** "most of the guys I coach are short by about forty grams a day", protein first stopping late-night eating, the fallback meals, the restaurant rule and "decide dinner before you're hungry".

8. SLEEP, RECOVERY AND YOUR TESTOSTERONE

At some point after 40, you'll wonder about your testosterone.

You're more tired than you used to be. Recovery feels slower. And your phone is full of men selling you the answer in a bottle.

This chapter has no bottle in it. It covers how your body makes testosterone, what pushes it down, and which of those things you can change. Most of them are things this book already asks you to do.

HOW YOUR BODY MAKES IT

Your testosterone is run from your brain. It works as a loop.

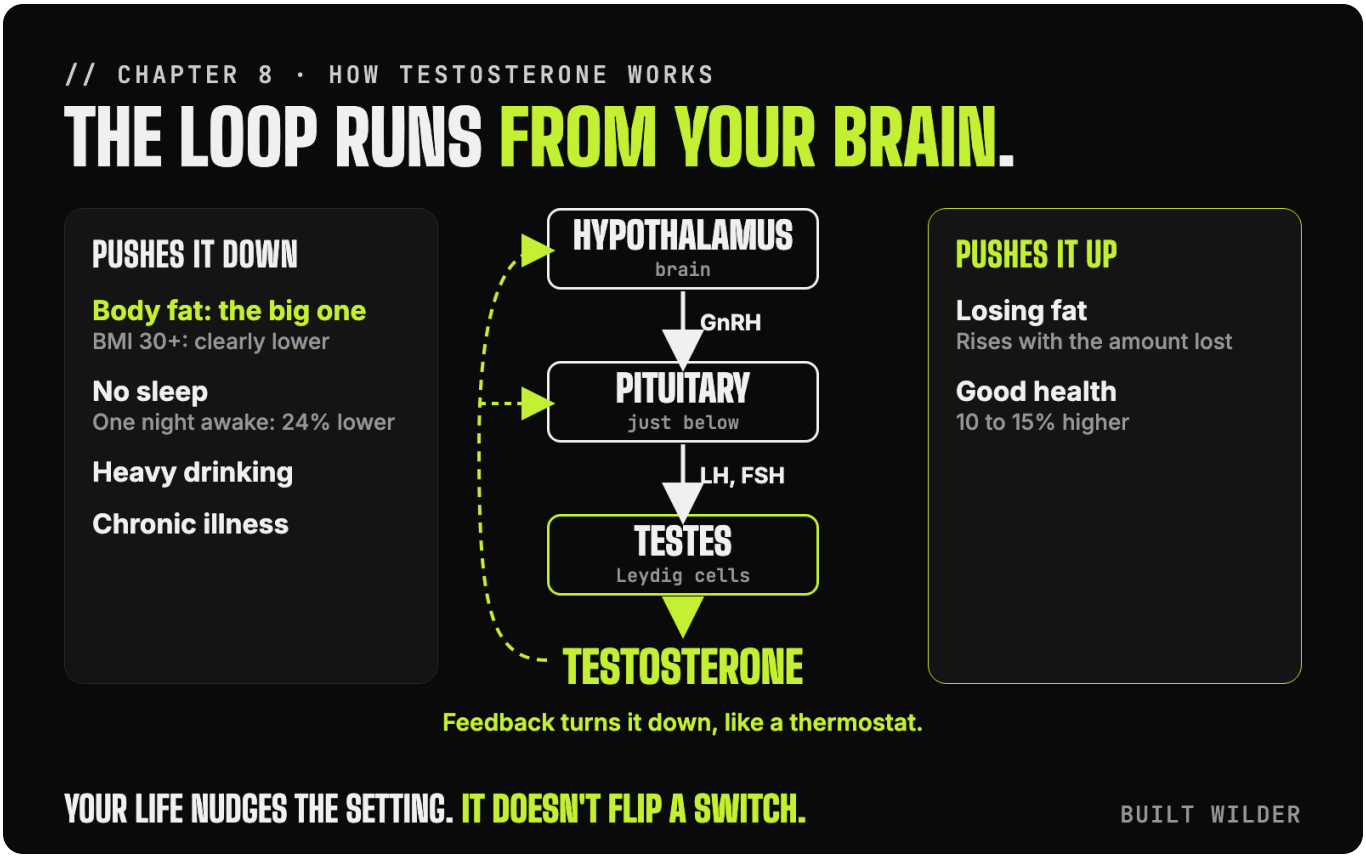
1. A part of your brain called the hypothalamus sends out a signal called GnRH, in pulses.
2. That signal reaches the pituitary gland, just below it. The pituitary releases two hormones into your blood: LH and FSH.
3. LH travels to the testes and tells the Leydig cells there to make testosterone. FSH looks after sperm production.
4. When testosterone rises, it signals back to the brain, and the brain turns GnRH and LH down.

Step 4 is the one to understand. The loop works like a thermostat. When the room is warm enough, the heating switches off. When it cools, it comes back on.

Two things follow.

First, your level moves through the day. It's highest in the early morning, which is why testosterone blood tests are usually done before 11 am. In older men that morning peak is flatter.

Second, the way you live shifts the setting by modest amounts. Body fat, sleep, drink and general health nudge the loop up or down. None of them flips a switch.



WHAT PUSHES IT DOWN

Body fat: the big one

If you take one thing from this chapter, take this.

In a European study of 3,200 men aged 40 to 79, men with a BMI over 30 had total testosterone about 5 nmol/L lower than men with a BMI under 25. Overweight men, BMI 25 to 30, were about 2.3 lower. For free testosterone, the unbound part, the gap linked to obesity was bigger than the gap linked to ten extra years of age in the same study.

The signs point to the brain end. Fat tissue sends out signals, such as leptin and inflammatory messengers, that can turn GnRH and LH down. Much of that comes from animal and cell work. The link itself is solid.

The good news runs the other way. When heavy men lose weight, their testosterone rises, and the more they lose, the more it rises. Across 24 studies, a low-calorie diet raised total testosterone by about 2.9 nmol/L on average.

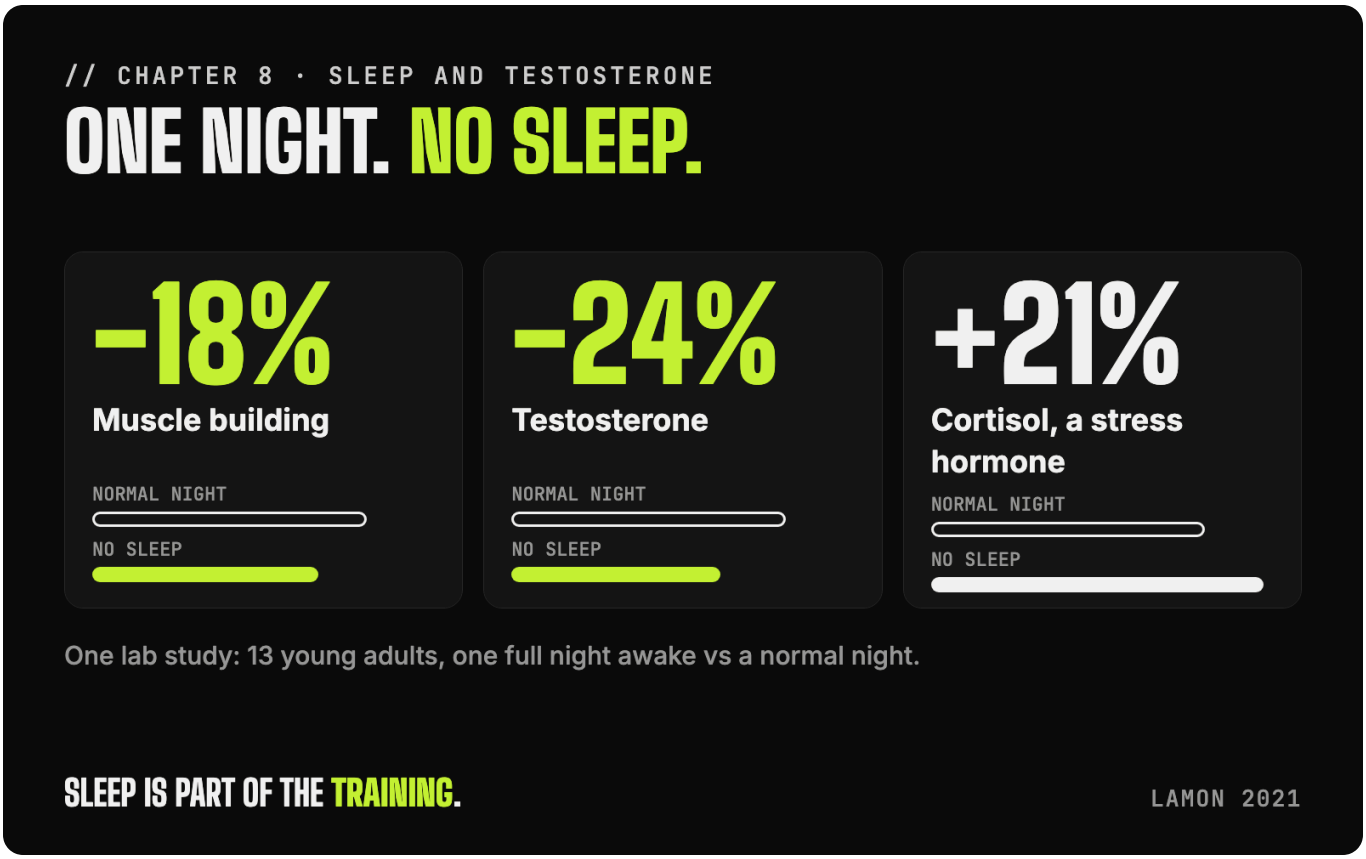
Be realistic about the size. A UK guideline says a clear rise usually isn't seen until a man has lost more than 5 to 10% of his bodyweight. For a 100 kg man, that's 5 to 10 kilos. Free testosterone may need a bigger loss again. This is a project for months, not a fortnight.

In those studies, eating less took the weight off. The training and protein in this book help you keep muscle while it comes off.

Sleep

In chapter 2 I told you that in my twenties I never thought about how my sleep affected my body's ability to grow. Here's why it does.

Here's what one lost night did in a lab. Researchers kept 13 young adults awake for a whole night and compared them the next day with a normal night's sleep. Muscle protein building was 18% lower. Testosterone was 24% lower. Cortisol, a stress hormone, was 21% higher.



That was a full night with no sleep at all, in people in their twenties. It doesn't mean a bad night cuts your gains by 18%. It means sleep is part of the training, not something that happens after it.

Short nights are less clear. In one well-known lab study, ten healthy men aged about 24 spent a week on five hours in bed a night. Their daytime testosterone fell by 10 to 15%. That's one striking study. When 18 studies were pooled, a few short nights had no clear effect. A full night without sleep did.

The study closest to your life is about fat loss. Ten overweight adults, average age 41, dieted for two weeks twice: once with 8.5 hours in bed, once with 5.5. On short sleep they lost less than half the fat, 0.6 kg instead of 1.4, and more lean mass, 2.4 kg instead of 1.5. Ten people, two weeks. Still, if you want to lose fat and keep muscle, short sleep works against both.

Alcohol

Heavy drinking is clearly bad for testosterone. Doctors list alcohol misuse among its causes.

Moderate drinking is murkier. In a controlled study, ten middle-aged men had about three drinks' worth of beer with dinner every day for three weeks. Their testosterone fell by about 7% against alcohol-free beer. But when 17 studies of everyday drinkers were pooled, light and moderate drinkers had no lower testosterone than non-drinkers.

So nothing here says two beers on a Saturday wreck your hormones. The bigger cost is what comes with them: worse sleep, extra calories, and a Sunday with no training.

My rule is simple. Decide the number before the first one. Two beers with your mates and six because the night kept going are two different Sundays.

Age

Age matters, slowly. In a study that followed 1,156 men aged 40 to 70 for seven to ten years, total testosterone fell by roughly 1 to 2% a year. The free part fell faster. But good health, meaning no chronic illness, no regular medication, no obesity and no heavy drinking, was linked to levels 10 to 15% higher. And the UK guideline says low testosterone in older men is mostly linked to obesity, type 2 diabetes and chronic illness, not age alone.

You can't change your birthday. You can change most of the rest.

WHAT LIFTING DOES

You've probably heard that squats raise your testosterone. A hard session does raise it, for about half an hour. Then it's back where it was. Over months, lifting doesn't reliably raise your resting level. In studies of men over 60, it made no difference. And in young men, those short spikes didn't decide who built more muscle. In one study, one arm was trained so a big hormone rise followed it, the other without. Both arms grew about the same.

So lift for strength and muscle, not for a hormone spike. Lifting helps your testosterone the long way round: it helps you keep muscle while the fat comes off.

SLEEP: WHAT I'D CHANGE FIRST

Here's what I'd change before anything else.

- **Seven hours most nights.** Not every night. Most.
- **The same bedtime on a Tuesday and a Saturday.**
- **The phone out of the bedroom.** Not on silent. Out.
- **No caffeine after two in the afternoon.**
- **The number of drinks decided before the first one.**

AFTER A BAD NIGHT

Some sessions are at seven in the morning after a night with a toddler. A plan built for an imaginary you still wants a new personal best that morning.

Mine doesn't. Do the session. Keep the weight. Don't chase a best. If the morning is short as well, run the bad-week session from chapter 5: the big three, two hard sets, then home.

Stay about two reps short, like always. This isn't the morning to find the end of a set. As chapter 4 showed, sets taken to failure slow your recovery over the next day or two, and you've got another session coming.

After a run of bad nights, the fix is the bedtime, not more coffee.

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR

Tiredness, low drive and slow recovery can be signs of low testosterone. They're also signs of a new baby, a hard quarter at work and five-hour nights. The guideline itself says the symptoms overlap with ordinary life.

So don't diagnose yourself from a quiz on the internet. If you're worried, see your doctor and ask for blood tests, ideally in the morning. What counts as low for you, and what to do about it, is your doctor's call. I'm a coach. My job is everything in this chapter that happens before that appointment.

THIS WEEK

Pick a bedtime and keep it for seven nights, Saturday included.

Sleep is part of the training. Put it in the plan like a session.

Notes on the evidence

- **The loop and the morning peak:** Hackett G et al. (2023). *The British Society for Sexual Medicine Guidelines on Male Adult Testosterone Deficiency, with Statements for Practice.* World J Mens Health 41(3):508-37. Hypothalamic GnRH drives pituitary LH and FSH; LH drives testosterone from the Leydig cells; testosterone feeds back to inhibit GnRH and LH; levels peak in the early morning, testing before 11 am, rhythm blunted in older men. Evidence grade: strong. Fat-tissue signals suppressing GnRH and LH: Genchi VA et al. (2022), *Int J Mol Sci* 23(15):8194, a mechanism review drawing largely on animal and cell data.
- **Body fat:** Wu FC et al. (2008). *J Clin Endocrinol Metab* 93(7):2737-45 (European Male Ageing Study, 3,200 men aged 40 to 79, cross-sectional). Versus BMI under 25, total testosterone 2.32 nmol/L lower at BMI 25 to 30 and 5.09 lower at BMI 30+; free testosterone 53.72 pmol/L lower at BMI 30+, against 3.12 pmol/L lower per year of age. "Ten years of age" is our arithmetic from those figures (10 x 3.12 = 31.2). Evidence grade: strong for the association.
- **Weight loss raises it:** Corona G et al. (2013). *Eur J Endocrinol* 168(6):829-43. Meta-analysis of 24 studies; low-calorie diet +2.87 nmol/L total testosterone (95% CI 1.68 to 4.07); amount lost was the best predictor. BSSM 2023: a significant rise is "not usually seen unless more than 5%-10% of weight loss is achieved"; free testosterone needed about a 20% fall in BMI in EMAS data. Evidence grade: strong for the rise; moderate for how much a modest loss helps.
- **One night without sleep:** Lamon S et al. (2021). *Physiol Rep* 9(1):e14660. 13 young adults (7 men), randomized crossover, one night of total deprivation: muscle protein synthesis -18%, testosterone -24%, cortisol +21%. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **A week of short sleep (contested):** Leproult R, Van Cauter E (2011). *JAMA* 305(21):2173-4. 10 men, mean age 24, eight nights of 5 h in bed: daytime testosterone 18.4 to 16.5 nmol/L (about -10%), afternoon and evening about -13%. Against it: Su L et al. (2021), *Sleep Med* 88:267-73, 18 studies, 252 men: partial sleep loss had no significant effect (SMD -0.22, 95% CI -0.50 to 0.06); 24 h or more of total loss did (SMD -0.64). Evidence grade: strong for total deprivation; contested for ordinary short sleep.
- **Short sleep while dieting:** Nedeltcheva AV et al. (2010). *Ann Intern Med* 153(7):435-41. 10 overweight adults, mean age 41, 14 days of calorie deficit twice, 5.5 h vs 8.5 h in bed: fat lost 0.6 vs 1.4 kg, fat-free mass lost 2.4 vs 1.5 kg. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **Alcohol:** Sierksma A et al. (2004). *Alcohol Clin Exp Res* 28(5):780-5. 10 middle-aged men, 40 g alcohol a day as beer for three weeks vs alcohol-free beer: testosterone -6.8% (95% CI -1.0 to -12.5). Moosazadeh M et al. (2024), *Int J Prev Med* 15:75: 17 observational studies, no overall difference between drinkers and non-drinkers. BSSM 2023 lists alcoholism among causes. Evidence grade: early to contested for moderate drinking; moderate for heavy drinking being harmful.
- **Age and health:** Feldman HA et al. (2002). *J Clin Endocrinol Metab* 87(2):589-98 (Massachusetts Male Aging Study, 1,156 men aged 40 to 70, followed 7 to 10 years): total testosterone -1.6% a year, bioavailable -2 to 3% a year; good health added 10 to 15%. BSSM 2023 links low levels in older men mainly to obesity, type 2 diabetes and chronic illness. Evidence grade: strong for the decline; moderate for exact rates.
- **Lifting:** D'Andrea S et al. (2020), *J Endocrinol Invest* 43(10):1349-71: 48 studies, men mean age 30, rise only within 30 minutes. Hayes LD, Elliott BT (2019), *Front Physiol* 9:1878: men over 60, no effect of resistance training on resting levels. West DW et al. (2010), *J Appl Physiol* 108(1):60-7: 12 young men, 15 weeks, one arm trained so a large post-exercise hormone rise followed it, the other without; arm size +12% vs +10%, no difference, and strength gains no different. Morton RW et al. (2016), *J*

Appl Physiol 121(1):129-38: in young men, post-exercise hormone rises did not predict growth or strength. Evidence grade: strong that the rise is brief; moderate for the rest.

- **Symptoms overlap with ordinary life:** BSSM 2023. Testing and treatment are a doctor's call.
- **The sleep rules** (seven hours most nights, fixed bedtime, phone out, no caffeine after 2 pm, the bad-week session after a bad night), the after-a-bad-night rules (do the session, keep the weight, don't chase a best) and "decide the number before the first one" are coaching advice, not tested findings. Failure slowing recovery: Morán-Navarro R et al. (2017), *Eur J Appl Physiol* 117(12):2387-99; see chapter 4 notes.

9. THE FIRST 90 DAYS

The hardest part of starting again isn't the first workout. It's week three.

Week one, you're motivated. Week two, you're sore. Week three, the novelty's gone and work picks up. In my experience, that's where most men stop.

I know it from the inside. When I start again after a long gap, week one feels like walking through a marshy swamp. Everything is heavy, slow and difficult. Week two gets a little better. Week three can get a little better again, but that's the week you can't break the chain, because if you do, it feels like starting all over.

And after 35, as I said in chapter 2, it's all a little more uphill. Your body doesn't work with you the way it did in your twenties.

This chapter is the first ninety days, month by month, so you get past week three.

WHY MOST STARTS DON'T LAST

You met him in chapter 1: the man who goes all out for a few weeks, then is gone. It can happen in any month, not just January.

The numbers point the same way. Remember the gym study in chapter 1, where most new members were gone before their third month. Stopping early is normal, and it says nothing about your character.

More motivation in week one won't fix it. You have too much motivation in week one and none left in week three. What gets you through is a start small enough to repeat.

MONTH ONE: TURN UP

Month one has one job: turn up. Not the heaviest weights. Not the hardest sessions. Turn up.

- **Three sessions a week**, the plan from chapter 3. One squat or hinge, one push, one pull, every session.
- **Leave two or three good reps in every set.** You should finish tired, not wrecked. The usual target is about two reps short. In month one, stay on the easy side of it.
- **Learn the movements.** Pick versions you can do well. A leg press counts. A machine row counts.
- **Write down every weight.** That's your starting line. In month three, it's your proof.
- **Add reps if they come.** Same weight, one more rep when it's there. Weight comes in month two.

You'll probably be sore for the first couple of weeks. That's normal, and it tells you nothing about whether the session worked. As chapter 4 showed, in young men starting out, muscle damage was highest after the very first session and settled by about week three, and only the later muscle building tracked real growth.

If you leave the gym wrecked in week one, you won't be there in week four.

What builds the habit

Chapter 3 covered what builds a gym habit: doing it consistently, keeping it simple, training in the same setting, and enjoying it.

So make month one boring on purpose. Same days. Same time. Same three lifts. Bag packed the night before.

How long until it runs on its own? There's no magic number. In a study of people building one new daily habit, the time ranged from under three weeks to the better part of a year. Missing a single day didn't set them back. So one missed session is nothing. Just don't let it turn into a missed week.

MONTH TWO: START ADDING WEIGHT

Now you start adding weight.

- **Top of the range, then add weight.** Each lift has a rep range, for example 8 to 10. When you hit the top of the range on every set, add the smallest jump next time, then build the reps back up. Adding a rep counts as progress too.
- **Hard sets now mean about two reps short.** Chapter 4 has the detail.

- **Protein at breakfast.** If you only change one meal, change this one. Eggs, Greek yoghurt, last night's chicken.
- **Sleep.** Chapter 8 is the reason. Seven hours most nights.

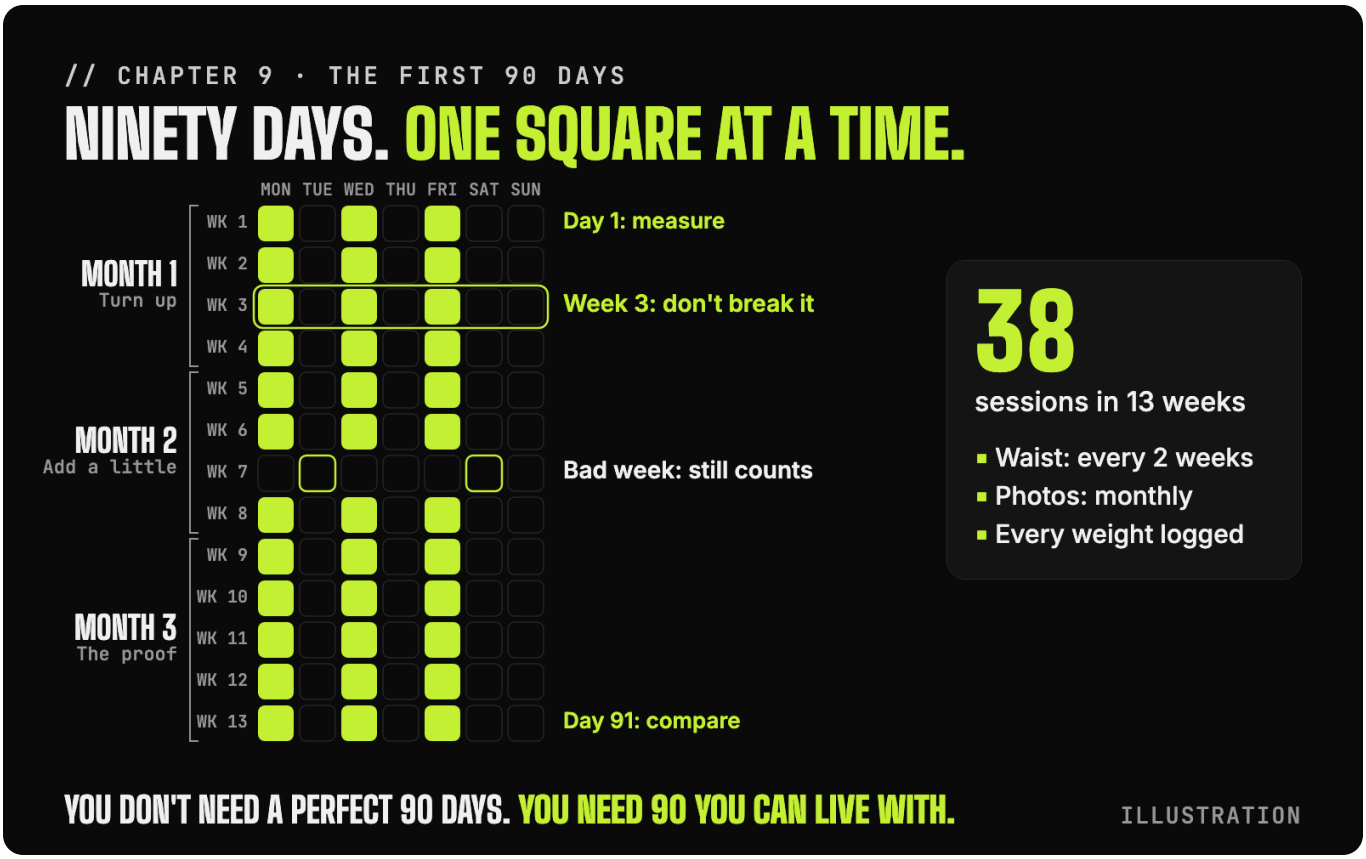
This is where it starts to feel like yours.

MONTH THREE: THE PROOF

Open your log at week one. The weights you wrote down then are your proof.

Measure what matters: your waist, photos, and the weights you lift. The scale is the least useful number on the list. It can't tell fat you lost from muscle you gained, and it jumps around from one day to the next.

- **Waist:** tape around your belly button, standing relaxed, first thing in the morning. Every two weeks.
- **Photos:** front, side and back. Same spot, same light, same time of day. Once a month.
- **Lifts:** they're already in your log.



Ninety days won't finish the job. It will show you that you can do it in a real life.

THE MISTAKES THAT END IT EARLY

- **Doing too much in week one.** You pay for it in week three.
- **All or nothing.** One missed session and the whole week gets called a loss. Move it, don't miss it.
- **Comparing yourself** to the man you were at twenty-five, or the man on Instagram.
- **Changing the plan every two weeks**, before it has a chance to work.

THIS WEEK

Take your day-one numbers this week. Your weights are in your log. Add your waist and three photos to page one.

You don't need a perfect ninety days. You need ninety days you can actually live with.

Notes on the evidence

- **"Week three is where men stop"** is my coaching observation, not a research finding. No study identifies week three as a dropout peak; the records study below gives a three-month figure, not a week-by-week curve. The January story is also my observation, not data.
- **Early dropout:** Sperandei S, Vieira MC, Reis AC (2016). J Sci Med Sport 19(11):916-20. One fitness centre in Rio de Janeiro; 63% abandoned before the third month. Full details and grade in the chapter 1 notes.
- **Soreness and early damage:** Damas F et al. (2016). *Resistance training-induced changes in integrated myofibrillar protein synthesis are related to hypertrophy only after attenuation of muscle damage.* J Physiol 594(18):5209-22. 10 young men, 10 weeks; damage highest after the first session, lower at week 3, minimal at week 10; only week-3 and week-10 protein synthesis correlated with growth. Evidence grade: early to moderate. A gradual start to the first 90 days is coaching practice; no study tested a 90-day ramp directly.
- **Habit in new gym members:** Kaushal N, Rhodes RE (2015). J Behav Med 38(4):652-63. Habit was predicted by consistency, low complexity, environment and enjoyment. Full details and grade in the chapter 3 notes.
- **How long habits take:** Lally P, van Jaarsveld CHM, Potts HWW, Wardle J (2010). *How are habits formed: modelling habit formation in the real world.* Eur J Soc Psychol 40(6):998-1009. 82 people analysed, one daily behaviour, 84 days: time to near-full automaticity ranged from 18 to 254 days (the upper end is a model projection beyond the study). Missing one opportunity did not materially affect habit formation. Evidence grade: moderate. No single number of days is given here as fact.
- **Adding weight at the top of the range:** American College of Sports Medicine (2009). *Progression models in resistance training for healthy adults.* Med Sci Sports Exerc 41(3):687-708: increase load 2 to 10% when you can do one or two reps over the target; novices 8 to 12 RM loads. Plotkin D et al. (2022), *PeerJ* 10:e14142: 43 trained adults, adding reps and adding load gave similar results. Evidence grade: moderate.
- **Waist, photos and lifts over the scale:** coaching practice, not a tested finding. No statistic attached.

10. THE LONG GAME

You don’t need to train like you’re twenty-five. You need to train like you’ll still be doing it at fifty.

That’s the whole book in two lines. Three days instead of five. Two reps short instead of to failure. A bad-week version and a travel version. Protein first, then the food you like. Every choice in this plan was made so you can still be running it at fifty, and long after.

THE QUESTION MEN ASK ME MOST

The question I get most is how to lose fat and build muscle. Most men want both at the same time.

If you can’t spend hours in the gym every day, and you don’t want to spend a fortune on supplements, there’s one healthy way to look at it: this is a long game. You build the foundation, the habits and the training, in the gym and outside it.

Some men want a shortcut. Which supplement should I take? What’s the one exercise that builds the most muscle? I understand the pull. There’s some vanity in it, and a wish to hack the system. But what works is the boring stuff. Most men probably know it already. They just don’t want to hear it again, because they want something shinier.

This book is the boring stuff, written for a real week.

WHY I COACH

Fitness has had real power in my own life. I want to see that reach other men’s lives too.

Here's a small version of what I mean. When I carry my kid around for an afternoon, I'm reminded that a lot of men don't have the strength and stamina to lift heavy things for their family or friends: from the car into the house, or on the day someone moves. Things that are hard for them are easy for me, because I'm conditioned for it.

That's why I call a strong body a shield. It protects the person inside it, and everyone who leans on him.

WHAT THE LONG GAME BUYS YOU

Your muscle will age. Lifting is the most reliable thing you can do about it. A 2022 review called resistance training the only non-drug approach known to consistently improve muscle mass, strength and power as we age, and so offset their decline. The big sports science bodies in the US back it.

Here's what the studies show.

- **It keeps working late.** In reviews of dozens of studies, adults over 50 who started lifting got about 24 to 33% stronger, depending on the lift, and gained about a kilo of lean mass on average. Most of those people were in their sixties and seventies. They started late, and it still worked.
- **Strength is the number to protect.** As chapter 2 showed, the slide isn't fixed, and in older adults strength falls faster than muscle. Losing strength is also a more consistent risk for disability and early death than losing muscle. That's why this book keeps asking you to write down the weight.
- **What a lifetime can look like.** Remember the men in chapter 2 who had lifted all their lives and, around 71, out-pressed untrained men of 22. Don't read it as a promise. Read it as what's possible.

Training doesn't stop the clock. It moves your whole line up.

WHAT THE LONG GAME LOOKS LIKE

Ninety days is proof. The long game is years, and years have bad stretches built in. A new job. A new baby. A year with too many flights. You will drift sometimes.

When you do, be pragmatic. Admit it, and get back on track. Go back to the plan where you left it. No punishment week. Your next session is the only one that matters.

Here's the whole system on one page:

- **Three days, forty-five minutes.** Squat or hinge, push, pull.
- **Two or three hard sets**, about two reps short. Add a rep or a little weight most weeks.
- **A bad-week version**, written down before you need it.
- **A travel version**, for the hotel gym or a pair of bands.
- **Protein first**, then the food you like.
- **Sleep** like it's part of the training, because it is.

None of it is impressive. That's on purpose. I've watched too many men go all in on something impressive for three weeks and then disappear for a year. You keep the shield by doing a boring, repeatable amount of work for a very long time.

When week three of some hard month comes, and it will, the long view helps. Knowing why you're doing this keeps you from getting stuck in one bad week.

THIS WEEK

Put your three sessions in your calendar as repeating events with no end date. In the notes of the first one, write one line: why you're doing this, for the man you'll be at fifty, sixty or seventy.

When a hard week comes, open it and read that line.

Train the man you are this month. He's the only one who turns up.

Notes on the evidence

- **The question men ask most, and why I coach:** my own answers, in my words. Not research.
- **Resistance training as the reliable non-drug option:** Fyfe JJ, Hamilton DL, Daly RM (2022). *Minimal-Dose Resistance Training for Improving Muscle Mass, Strength, and Function: A Narrative Review of Current Evidence and Practical Considerations.* Sports Med 52(3):463-79. Calls resistance training "the only non-pharmacological intervention known to consistently improve, and therefore offset age-related declines in, skeletal muscle mass, strength, and power". Supported by Fragala MS et al. (2019), *Resistance Training for Older Adults: Position Statement From the National Strength and Conditioning Association,* J Strength Cond Res 33(8):2019-52, and American College of Sports Medicine; Chodzko-Zajko WJ et al. (2009), *Exercise and physical activity for older adults,* Med Sci Sports Exerc 41(7):1510-30, which states that no amount of physical activity can stop biological ageing but regular exercise can limit the effects of a sedentary life. Evidence grade: strong.
- **Gains after 50:** Peterson MD et al. (2010). *Resistance exercise for muscular strength in older adults: a meta-analysis.* Ageing Res Rev 9(3):226-37. 47 studies, 1,079 people aged 50+: leg press +29%, chest press +24%, knee extension +33%, lat pull +25%. Peterson MD et al. (2011). *Influence of resistance exercise on lean body mass in aging adults: a meta-analysis.* Med Sci Sports Exerc 43(2):249-58. 49 studies, 1,328 people aged 50+: +1.1 kg lean body mass (95% CI 0.9 to 1.2); older

participants gained less. Mostly people in their 60s and 70s; the size of the effect in men of 40 is not measured here. Evidence grade: strong.

- **Decline not fixed, strength faster than muscle, lifelong lifters:** Kallman DA et al. (1990), *J Gerontol* 45(3):M82-8; Mitchell WK et al. (2012), *Front Physiol* 3:260, loss of strength "a more consistent risk for disability and death than is loss of muscle mass", with rates and risk drawn mainly from older adults; Unhjem R et al. (2016), *J Appl Physiol* 121(2):415-23, 11 selected men measured once, not a general rule that older lifters out-lift young men. Full details and grades in the chapter 2 notes.

APPENDIX: THE PLAN ON TWO PAGES

Tear this out, photograph it, or keep it on your phone. Everything in the book, on two pages.

THE NORMAL WEEK

Three sessions. Forty-five minutes each. For example Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Any three days with a day between works. Two days in a row is fine when the week won't allow a gap. A session moved beats a session missed.

Every session has the same shape:

1. **Warm-up, about five minutes.** A few minutes moving, then one or two light sets of your first lift.
2. **One squat or hinge.** For example, squat on Monday and Friday, hinge on Wednesday.
3. **One push.**
4. **One pull.**

- **Two or three hard sets of each.** Hard means you stop about two reps before you'd fail.
- **Reps:** 6 to 12 a set. Give each lift a range inside that; 8 to 10 is a good start.
- **Rest:** about two minutes between hard sets.
- **Progress:** add a rep or a little weight most weeks. When you hit the top of the range on every set, add the smallest jump next time.
- **Big lifts first.** Anything extra, like arms or calves, goes at the end and is the first thing cut.

Exercise options

Pick the version your body tolerates and your gym has. Machines count.

Pattern	Free weights	Machines	Home or hotel
Squat	Barbell back squat, goblet squat	Leg press, hack squat	Goblet squat, split squat, band squat

Pattern	Free weights	Machines	Home or hotel
Hinge	Romanian deadlift (dumbbells or barbell), trap-bar deadlift	Back extension	Dumbbell Romanian deadlift
Push	Barbell bench press, dumbbell bench press, overhead press	Machine chest press	Dumbbell press on a bench or the floor, push-ups, band press
Pull	Chin-up, one-arm dumbbell row	Lat pulldown, seated cable row, machine row	One-arm dumbbell row, band row anchored in a door

THE BAD WEEK

Two sessions. Thirty minutes each. The same plan, made small.

- **The big three only:** your squat or hinge, your push, your pull.
- **Two hard sets of each**, about two reps short.
- **Keep the weight. Cut the sets.**
- **Cut from the end, never the start.**
- **Move it, don't miss it.** Don't double up: if Tuesday can't move, just do Thursday.
- **Write it down before you need it.** Two slots in the calendar, with a day and an hour.
- **Ill or hurt?** That isn't a bad week. Rest.
- **Back after a month or more off?** Start where you left off, a little lighter for the first week or two. No punishment week.

THE TRAVEL WEEK

Two sessions. Thirty minutes each. Two hard sets of each lift.

- **Hotel gym, one dumbbell:** goblet squat, dumbbell press, one-arm row.
- **No gym:** pack a band. Band squat, band press or push-ups, band row anchored in the door.
- **No band and no gym?** Walk. Push-ups and split squats in the room still keep the habit alive.
- **Light weight or band, more than about 15 reps?** Go to the end of the set: stop at the last clean rep, or one before it. Two reps short is too hard to judge on long sets.
- **Make a light weight harder:** three seconds on the way down, a pause at the bottom, or one leg or one arm at a time.
- **Never go to the end of a set alone under a loaded barbell.** A dumbbell can be put down.
- **Expect to hold, not to set records.** A travel week holds muscle better than top-end strength.

THE FOOD RULES

1. **Protein at every meal.** It does most of the work.
2. **Aim for about 1.6 g of protein per kilo of bodyweight a day.** For an 85 kg man, that's about 135 g.
3. **Make each meal a real dose: about 0.4 g per kilo.** For an 85 kg man, about 35 g: a palm and a half of meat or fish, not a small pot of yoghurt.
4. **Then eat the food you like around it.** Pizza on Friday is fine. Have the chicken first and two slices instead of five.
5. **One protein you'll happily eat at every meal, and two fallback meals** you can make without thinking. Mine: chicken and eggs most days; tuna or salmon with rice as the fallbacks.
6. **Decide dinner before you're hungry,** not in front of the fridge.
7. **Weekends:** protein at breakfast, dinner decided, and the number of drinks decided before the first one.
8. **Travel:** protein every meal, even if it's eggs at the buffet and a burger at the airport. One real meal a day where you don't count anything. No catching up when you get home. Hold your weight and you've won.
9. **Eating out:** build the plate around protein, then pick one extra: the bread, the dessert or the drinks. Not all three. Have a regular order. Mine is boiled skinless chicken, plain steamed rice and cucumber from a chicken shop near home.

If you have kidney disease or any other medical condition, talk to your doctor before you raise your protein.

THE SLEEP RULES

- Seven hours most nights.
- The same bedtime on a Tuesday and a Saturday.
- The phone out of the bedroom.
- No caffeine after two in the afternoon.
- Bad night? Do the session, keep the weight, don't chase a best. Bad run of nights? Fix the bedtime.

THE LOG SHEET

One line per lift, every session. Write the weight before you leave the gym.

Date	Session	Lift	Weight	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Reps left on last set	Notes
Mon 4 Jan	Normal	Goblet squat	24 kg	9	8	8	2	
		Dumbbell press	22 kg	8	8	8	2	
		One-arm row	26 kg	10	10	10	2	Top of range on every set: add weight

Every two weeks, fill in one line here.

Date	Waist (cm)	Sessions done (of 6)	Bad weeks	Photos taken?	Average sleep	One note
Day one				Yes		Starting line
Week 2						
Week 4				Yes		
Week 6						
Week 8				Yes		
Week 10						
Week 12				Yes		Month three: compare with day one

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

This book is the system I give the men I coach: the training, the bad weeks, the travel weeks and the food.

You can run all of it on your own. If you want more, here are three places to go.

1. PRINT THE PLAN

The plan on two pages, the bad-week and travel versions, and a log sheet you can fill in at the gym. Free.

builtwilder.co/plan

Put it where you'll see it on a bad week. That's the whole point of it.

2. TAKE THE FIVE-MINUTE AUDIT

Seventeen questions about how you train, eat, sleep, recover and hold it all together. At the end you get a score for each of the five, and the two or three things costing you the most right now, in order.

No email needed to see your results.

builtwilder.co/audit

If this book gave you a plan, the audit tells you where to start with it.

3. IF YOU WANT SOMEONE IN YOUR CORNER

Some men don't need more information. They need someone who looks at their week, reads their numbers, and changes the plan when life does. That's what I do.

I take a small number of men at a time, and I review every check-in myself.

builtwilder.co

Whichever you pick, start with your next session. Not Monday. The next one.

Don