Non-Linear Periodization for General Fitness & Athletes

by

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Periodization of resistance training or planned changes in training volume and intensity are used to maximize strength and fitness gains. Several types of periodized resistance training plans have been developed. The most common of these plans is linear also termed classic or strength/power periodization and nonlinear periodization. The biggest difference between these two types of training plans is with nonlinear periodization changes in training volume and intensity are made more frequently. The most common type of nonlinear periodization is daily nonlinear periodization where substantial changes in training intensity and volume are made from one training session to the next training session. Periodized resistance training does result in greater strength gains than non-periodized programs. While both linear and nonlinear periodization plans result in significant strength and fitness gains some research indicates greater strength gains with daily nonlinear periodization.

Key words: periodization, linear, nonlinear, youth

Introduction

Training periodization has long been used by athletes and coaches in an attempt to maximize fitness gains and physical performance. More recently fitness enthusiasts and personal trainers have also begun to utilize periodized training plans. Although all types of training (aerobic, sport specific, interval training) can be periodized here only periodization of resistance or weight training will be considered. Periodization of resistance training refers to planned changes in the acute training program variables of exercise order, exercise choice, number of sets, number of repetitions per set, rest periods between sets and exercises, training intensity, training volume, and number of training sessions per day in an attempt to bring about continued and optimal fitness gains. The main goals of periodized training are optimizing training adaptations during both short periods of time (e.g. weeks, months) and long periods of time (e.g. years, an entire athletic career). Some periodized plans also have as a goal to peak physical performance at a particular point in time, such as for a major competition. Another goal of periodized resistance training is to avoid training plateaus.

A large number of studies and a meta-analysis indicate periodized resistance training programs result in greater strength increases in both sexes, untrained individuals and trained individuals compared to non-varied programs or performing the same number of sets and repetitions per set for the entire training program (Rhea and Alderman 2004). Changes in the acute training program variables result in a virtually limitless number of possibilities and so a limitless number of both short- and long-term periodized training strategies. However, two major types of periodized resistance training: classic, linear or traditional strength/power periodization and nonlinear periodization have received the most attention from the sport science, coaching and fitness enthusiast communities.

Types of Periodization

Long-term programs of classic, linear or traditional strength/power periodization programs begin with high volume-low high-intensity training and progress towards low-volume high-intensity training. Normally the
entire training plan takes several months to complete. If training is continued the entire plan beginning with high-volume low-intensity training is repeated. Typically with linear periodization different training phases of different volumes and intensities last approximately 4-6 weeks. Thus 4-6 weeks of training may be spent predominantly training with a particular training zone, such as 8-10 or 1-3 repetitions per set. Different training phases in many linear plans have a specific training goal and name, such as hypertrophy, strength, strength/power and power. One goal of many linear periodization programs is to peak or maximize strength/power after the last training phase typically termed a power phase.

While with nonlinear periodization training intensity and volume are changed much more frequently (Fleck and Kraemer 2004; Kraemer and Fleck, 2007). In fact the most common type of nonlinear periodization is termed daily nonlinear periodization. In this type of periodization training zones are changed in successive training sessions that is a different number of repetitions per set are performed from training session to training session. The simplest pattern of daily nonlinear periodization uses three training zones, such as 4-6, 8-10 and 12-15 repetition maximum zones, with each training zone being used for one training session per week for a total of three training sessions per week. Nonlinear programs have also been developed where a particular training zone is utilized for one- or two-week periods before a change in training volume and intensity is made. Such programs are typically called weekly or biweekly nonlinear periodized plans.

No matter which type of periodized resistance training is used other changes than the number of repetitions per set can also be made. Number of sets per exercise can be increased or decreased to change total training volume. Different exercises can be performed as the training progresses. Typically this change involves removing single joint exercises while keeping multi-joint exercises as training progresses. In many training plans other changes in the type of resistance exercises are also made, such as variations of the Olympic lifts, are emphasized when a training phase emphasizes power. In many periodized plans changes in intensity and volume are utilized mainly for multi-joint or multi-muscle group exercises. Thus in many periodized plant single joint or single muscle group exercises are not periodized. Although all of these changes are used in periodized plans research has predominantly examined the effect of different numbers of repetitions per set, which is a change in intensity and volume, when comparing periodized training plans.

**Periodization Comparisons**

Most research comparisons of periodization models are between daily nonlinear and linear periodization with training durations of between 9-15 weeks. Some comparisons show significantly greater strength gains with daily nonlinear periodization in college-age males (Rhea et al. 2002; Monteiro et al. 2009). While other comparisons show nonsignificant differences between the two types of periodization, but favor nonlinear (Kok et al. 2009; Prestes et al. 2009) or the linear periodization (Bufford et al. 2007; Hartman et al. 2009; Hoffman et al. 2009) for percentage gains in maximal strength. Most comparisons involved healthy young males and females with limited or no resistance training experience, while one study trained collegiate American football players (Hoffman et al. 2009). So research training experienced weight trainers and athletes is needed. The above studies indicate daily nonlinear periodization is at least as effective or possibly more effective than the linear periodization for maximal strength gains.

A limited number of studies indicate motor performance and power increases are not significantly different between daily nonlinear and linear periodization (Hartman et al. 2009; Hoffman et al. 2009). Additionally, body mass and body composition changes with these two types of periodization are similar and do not significantly change during the training durations investigated (Rhea et al. 2002; Bufford et al. 2007; Hoffman et al. 2009; Kok et al. 2009; Monteiro et al. 2009; Prestes et al. 2009). However, all but one of these studies (Rhea et al. 2002 used pleismography) used skinfolds to estimate body composition which may not be sensitive enough to determine small changes in body composition or differences between training programs.

Comparisons of weekly and biweekly
nonlinear to linear periodization also show little
difference in fitness gains between periodization
plans. For example, a comparison of biweekly
nonlinear periodization, linear periodization and
a non-varied training program (3 sets of 6
repetitions) has been performed. The results
showed all training types significantly increased
maximal strength, vertical jump and fat-free mass,
with no significant differences between training
types (Baker, Wilson and Carlyln 1994).
Collectively the above comparisons indicate
nonlinear and linear periodization show little
difference in body composition or motor
performance changes.

Flexible Nonlinear Periodization
Flexible nonlinear periodization is a
relatively new type of periodization. Flexible
nonlinear periodization uses the nonlinear
training model but allows changes in training
based upon the readiness of a trainee to perform a
specific training zone. The decision to change the
planned training zone for a specific training
session is made using several pieces of
information. A test, such as a maximal vertical
jump, standing long jump or medicine ball throw,
can be performed immediately prior to a training
session to help determine the readiness of a
trainee to perform a specific training zone. The
beginning sets of the first few exercises in a
training session can also be monitored to help
determine the physical readiness of a trainee to
perform a specific training session.

For example, if a standing long jump is
performed immediately prior to a training session
and the trainee cannot achieve at least 90% of
their previous maximal standing long jump, the
trainee may be fatigued. Similarly fatigue is
indicated if an individual could previously
perform 10 repetitions of an exercise with a
specific resistance and at the start of a training
session can only perform seven repetitions with
this resistance. The fatigue or other physiological
factor, such as delayed onset muscle soreness,
could be due to previous resistance training
sessions or other types of training (interval
training, sports skill training) being performed as
part of the total training program. Psychological
stress due to work or any other factor could also
prevent performing up to previously
demonstrated abilities. No matter what the reason
in this example if a moderate-intensity moderate-
volume (4 sets of 10-12 repetitions) training zone
was scheduled to be performed the training zone
would be changed to a different zone (3 sets of 12-
15 repetitions).

It is also possible to change from a low-
intensity high-volume training zone to a higher
intensity and lower volume zone. For example, a
standing long jump is performed and 100% of the
best standing long jump is achieved or sets of 8-10
repetitions are planned, but the trainee achieves
12 repetitions per set in the first exercise of a
training session. In this case rather than
continuing with a training zone of 8-10 repetitions
a higher intensity zone (4-6 repetitions) may be
performed because fatigue is not indicated and it
appears the trainee is ready to train at a high
intensity. Flexible daily nonlinear periodization
and training zone changes have been previously
extensively discussed (Kraemer and Fleck 2007).

To date, little research has been
performed concerning flexible nonlinear
periodization. A variation of this type of
periodization has been employed to maintain and
increase physiological markers in collegiate
Division I soccer players throughout a 16-week
season (Silvestre et al. 2006). Resistance training
sessions were changed to meet the players
readiness to perform a specific type of training
session based upon the strength and conditioning
coaches subjective evaluation and heart rates
during soccer practice sessions and games. The
flexible nonlinear periodized program resulted in
the maintenance of vertical jump ability, short
sprint ability and maximal oxygen consumption
throughout the season. However, significant
increases in total lean tissue, leg lean tissue, trunk
lean tissue, total body power (17% increase in
repeat push press power) and lower body power
(11% increase in repeat squat jumps followed by a
short sprint) were shown pre - to post-season. This
study did not compare flexible nonlinear
periodization to a different type of training.
However, the results indicate the flexible
nonlinear periodization did maintain or increase
fitness markers throughout a soccer season.

A comparison of a flexible daily nonlinear
to nonlinear periodization indicates flexible
nonlinear periodization offers some advantages
(McNamara and Stearne 2010). Students in a
college weight training class performed either a
flexible nonlinear or planned (had to perform the
planned training session on a specific day) nonlinear periodized program two times per week for 12 weeks. The individuals performing the flexible nonlinear program could choose prior to a training session which of three training zones (10, 15, 20 repetitions per set) they would perform. However, at the end of the 12 weeks of training trainees in the flexible nonlinear program had to perform the same number of training sessions in each training zone as the planned nonlinear program.

Pre- to post-training one repetition maximal (1 RM) chest press ability and maximal standing long jump ability significantly increased with both training plans with no significant difference shown between plans. However, 1 RM leg press ability increased significantly more with the flexible nonlinear program. These results indicate the flexible nonlinear periodization plan did not result in a significant greater increase in upper body strength, but did significantly increase lower body strength to a significantly greater degree. Although little research has been performed on flexible nonlinear periodization this type of training plan appears promising.

Periodized resistance training does result in greater fitness increases than non-periodized programs. Nonlinear periodization results in similar fitness gains or possibly even greater fitness gains than linear periodization. While flexible nonlinear periodization has received little study by the sports science community it appears to be a promising periodized type of training. Thus coaches and fitness enthusiasts can use nonlinear and flexible nonlinear periodization plans with confidence that these types of periodization will result in significant fitness gains.

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