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Perfect Abs For Every Athlete

Our 10 Best Insider's Tips



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Perfect Abs For Every Athlete: Our 10 Best Insider's Tips

In the world of physique development, a finely etched set of abs—complete with clean, classic lines and top-to-bottom 3-D development—is often the elephant in the room. People say they're training for strength, size, or speed...and abs, too. Deep down, everybody kinda wants that show-stopping sixer, from the CrossFitter to the bro to the runner, but for that very reason, there's no single program that can be broadly adopted for great results.

For the moment, save us your “abs are made in the kitchen” retort. Yes, that matters, but the quality and intensity of your training matters, too. Happily, people who have been where you want to go left plenty of collective wisdom behind to help you redefine your midsection. What follows is our insider's list of the most effective abdominal-revealing methods. No matter what ab program you follow, this will help you get more pop out of every rep you do!

01

Use Front-Loaded Heavy Exercises Whenever Possible

Squats, deadlifts, and a number of other total-body exercises are great for strengthening the abs and core—especially if you don't wear a weight belt. On your heaviest sets, if you need a belt, by all means strap one on.

In particular, Cellucor athlete and coach Eric Botsford recommends developing a love for front-loaded moves like the front squat. These types of exercises, he says, force your body's deep core muscles, like the transverse abdominis, to work even harder to maintain a strong, erect torso. But you'll also find that other midsection muscles are helping to brace you, especially the internal and external obliques, which are often left extremely sore after a heavy front-squat day, as well as the erector spinae. Heck, even your rectus abdominis can be sore from this.

Front-loaded carries produce similar results to front squats, says Botsford. Perform any of these variations as a finisher at the end of your lifting session, and expect to be reminded where each muscle of your core is located the next day.

Front-load carry variations

- Goblet-hold dumbbell or kettlebell carry
- Single- or double-racked kettlebell carry
- Zercher barbell carry
- Racked barbell carry
- Bear-hug plate carry
- Bear-hug sandbag carry



02

Program Your Ab Training

Don't just finish your day with a few haphazard sets of ab work. At the minimum, this leaves room to cut things short or simply throw in the towel when you're tired. But it's also just boring, and your results will be appropriately stagnant.

If your core is a priority—which it should be—treat your abdominal training with the respect it deserves. That means observing proper muscle-growth guidelines on exercise selection, volume, intensity, and progression, just like you would for any other muscle group. After several weeks, you'll see your abs take shape and build strength, a great motivator for continued commitment.

If that sounds hard to do with bodyweight moves alone, you're right. This is when weighted movements or some type of gymnastics-derived strength progressions can be your best friends. While there's a greater degree of slow-twitch muscle fibers in your abs, which are more endurance-oriented and not prone to growth, that doesn't mean the remaining fast-twitch muscle fibers can't be targeted in the same ways you train other skeletal muscle groups.

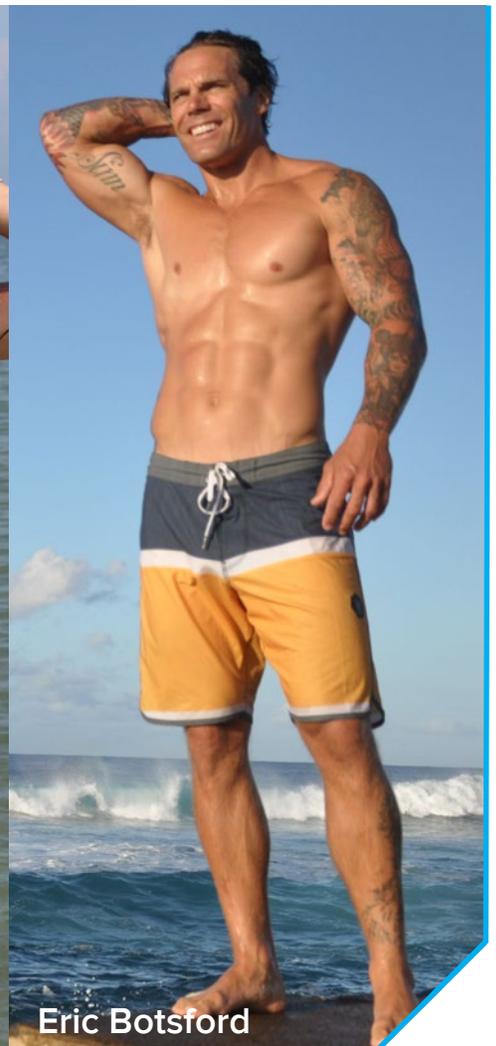
Looking for ways to program your ab training? Look no further than these four routines from Cellucor athletes Cade Cowdin, Jordan Edwards, Eric Botsford, and Ron "Boss" Everline.



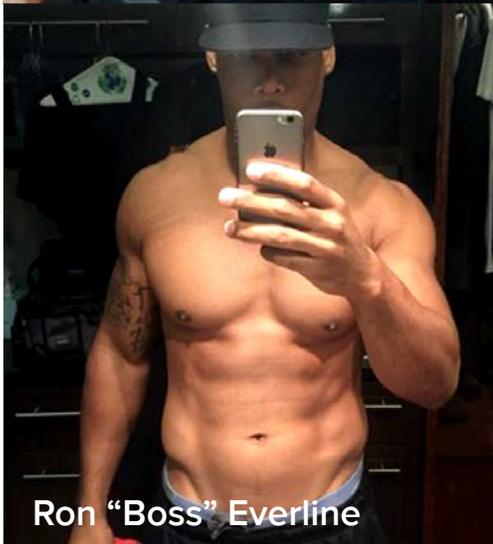
Cade Cowdin



Jordan Edwards



Eric Botsford



Ron "Boss" Everline

03

Prioritize Rhythm Over Reps

Look around the gym, and you'll see just about every movement occasionally being performed at a terrifying, reckless velocity. But this is especially true with abs. Why? A major reason has to be that people think they have to reach an ungodly rep count, like 30, 40, or 50 reps, in order to get any results. Sorry to rain on your crunch parade, but if it takes that many reps for you to "feel" a movement, it probably means that the quality of each individual rep is awful.

Looking for three words to describe how to best work your abs? Here you go: "slow and controlled." For the simple crunch, that could mean 1 second to go up, a 1-second pause at the top, and 1 second to lower. At the top of any movement, forcefully squeeze your abs once you reach peak contraction. You may only manage 15 reps that way, but you'll definitely feel them—and get a far superior training response.

04

Do Planks or Ab Wheels Between Other Movements

You may not feel you have time at the end of your workout for abs. But how about during?

A time-tested way to get your abdominal work in without stretching your day is to bang out sets between sets of other exercises. If you're doing crazy-heavy squats or deads, your rest periods should probably be reserved for rest. But for less taxing exercises, sitting there is just sitting there.

Done with your first set of lat pull-downs? Hit the deck for a set with the ab wheel. Leg curls? They go just fine with planks or side planks. Repeat this process strategically throughout the gym sesh, and you'll rack up all the volume your abs need.



05

Round That Spine!

This is blasphemy during big lifts, but it's essential if you want to see progress in, say, hanging leg raises, lying leg raises, crunches, sit-ups—actually, pretty much any exercise that's meant to target the upper or lower portion of your rectus abdominis or the front of your abs.

Your rectus abdominis has an antagonist muscle group: the spinal erectors. When a muscle group is active, its antagonist by definition can't be active. So, if you're contracting your back muscles, such as by a flat or slightly ached back, you simply can't contract the antagonist muscle. Sure, you can still “get a burn” while keeping a flat back, but it's a weak substitute for what you'll do if you start rounding your spine just a little.

Your back muscles aren't the only competition you're dealing with, though. When you do hanging leg raises, you start by bringing your legs up to a point at which they're only perpendicular to your body, or straight out. This gives your hip flexors a thrill but does very little for your abs. If you take that same motion a bit higher, your spine curls and your glutes start to turn up, tilting your pelvis toward your ribcage. This shortens the lower end of your rectus abdominis, making it the most important part of the rep. So, pause there for a count before descending.

Sure, taking a rep through that extra bit of range of motion is more difficult, but it's far more effective in the long run.



06

Don't Pull on Your Head

Any number of ab exercises require you to cradle your head in your hands, but please, for the love of Arnold, don't pull on it. This action doesn't engage your abs. In most cases, it doesn't even get your shoulder blades off the floor. All it does is jam your chin into your chest, placing stress on your neck, upsetting cervical alignment, and putting you into a position where nothing good can happen.

So what are your other options? Lightly place your hands alongside your head, or cup your head without pulling. For a greater challenge that also helps you ditch the habit, hold a medicine ball at full extension above your head as you crunch. With certain movements like hollow holds or rocks, you can also put your arms over your head in the classic “I surrender” posture. It won't be as easy as the head yank, but it will be better.

07

Get Rid of the Foot Anchor

You probably learned how to do sit-ups in P.E. class with a partner anchoring your feet. Some of you are sure to have carried this habit into adulthood. Consider this one time when your teacher failed you.

Why? Because pulling against a fixed object during a sit-up or crunch shifts the tension squarely onto the hip flexors, making the abs relatively minor players. Consider decline-bench crunches: If you feel the soreness first through your upper quads (hip flexors), this is a bad sign. Even if you're able to resist this urge at first, as you get tired or are deep into a second or third set, you're simply going to start letting those flexors take over.

You have a couple of options here. You can skip ab movements in which your feet are anchored altogether, or if you do them, be conscious of trying to relax your thighs, and instead keep the focus on your abs. This gets really difficult when you're gassed, though, so consider dropping these movements altogether.



08

Eliminate the Hidden Rest Periods in Your Reps

Hidden rest periods? Scandalous! But honestly, everybody is guilty of this sometimes. Say you just did a crunch: Do you allow your shoulder blades to come all the way back down, effectively taking tension off the abdominals and allowing for a very short rest? Be honest.

There are plenty of other movements that have these tiny opportunities to catch your breath. Be on constant guard for them! When you allow them to take over, you simply can't maintain the optimal tension on the muscle necessary for optimal development. It's the same as that game of "how close can I get it without actually touching" that many of us—rightfully—play with the cable stack during pulley movements.

When muscle growth is the goal, stop the negative motion of each rep just short of the endpoint before reversing direction. The muscle will kindle that deep muscle burn sooner in the set, yielding greater results.

09

Make Movements Harder Once You Can Rock Them

With weighted movements, it's easy to make a basic exercise harder; you just add another plate. But with bodyweight movements, you need to be more creative when dialing the difficulty up or down so you can train in the target rep range or timeframe.

Here are a few ways to take six common bodyweight movements to the next level.

Floor crunch or sit-up

Decline bench, greater decline bench, plate against your chest, plate with arms extended

Side crunch

Feet in the air, one leg straight, both legs straight, holding medicine ball in hands

Side bend

Side bend with weights at shoulder level, side bend with weights overhead (Saxon side bend)

Ab roller

Slow-and-controlled ab roller, ab roller with weighted vest, ab roller with band resistance, ab roller from standing (not for everybody's spine)

Front plank

Long-lever plank (arms out in front), alternating salute plank, alternating leg-raised plank, plank with reach, plate with added weight on back

Side plank

Side plank with rotation, side plank with top leg hovered, side plank with feet elevated, side plank with feet elevated in suspension straps

You have options. Don't get comfortable with your ab training! Look for ways to adjust movements so you can keep progressing.



10

Pair Ab Training With Cardio

“Spot reduction,” or body-part-specific fat burning, is controversial to say the least—and a myth, in the eyes of many. However, there is one research study that suggests you can burn some amount of body fat locally with the right approach.

A 2007 issue of the American Journal of Physiology documented a University of Copenhagen study showing that fat was burned preferentially from the thighs when a high-rep leg-extension protocol was followed by 30 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise.¹ A good approach to see if this works for you would be to perform several high-rep sets of an abdominal exercise—ideally between 25-50 reps with good form—and follow it with 20-30 minutes of low- to moderate-intensity cardio.

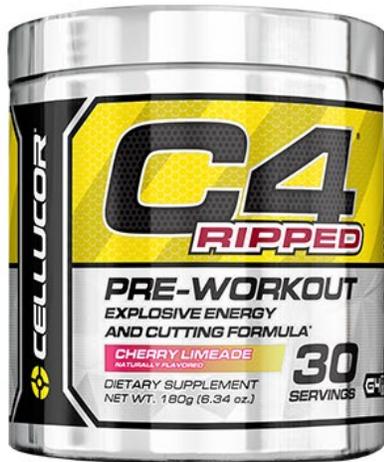
Will it work for you? Perhaps, to a small degree. But no matter what you do, do it right. Then, when you become one of those ab-baring insiders, pay it forward and share these secrets. Make the world a more ripped place!



Reference

¹Stallknecht, B., Dela, F., & Helge, J. W. (2007). Are blood flow and lipolysis in subcutaneous adipose tissue influenced by contractions in adjacent muscles in humans?. American Journal of Physiology-Endocrinology and Metabolism, 292(2), E394-E399.

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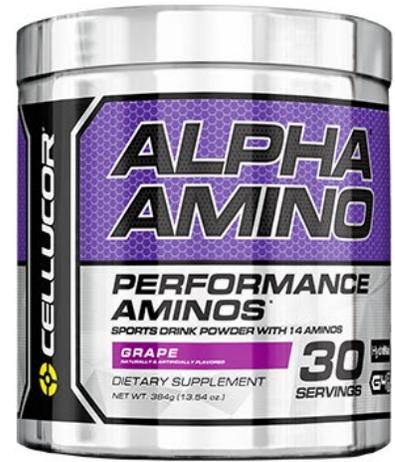
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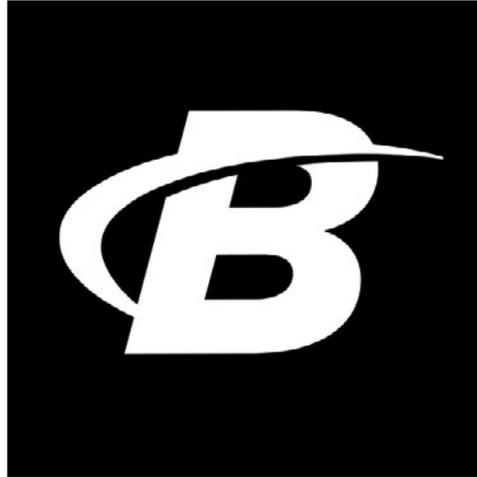
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