

# CORE SENSE

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If you've come within a thousand miles of the fitness industry in recent years, you've surely been exposed to the latest round of core training mania. Everyone's doing it, or some version of it. Everyone is either on a program, considering a program or promoting a program.

Professional trainers and coaches are doing great work in this area, but sadly, even their most refined and well-considered work has been eclipsed by "pop core," the magazine-cover version of core training that gets the lion's share of the public's attention. According to the pop version, core training is either a) a breakthrough new way to lose weight and gain a hot bod, b) an immense mystery that requires an advanced degree in biomechanics to understand or c) something that is done on a physioball.

This has led to immense confusion in the mind of the average exerciser. Beginners are likely to find the entire field problematic or even incomprehensible. They may get the impression that there are certain "magic moves" that will give them the results they desire in almost no time. They eventually come to the conclusion that core training is something that they must do, but they're not really sure how or even why.

## HUMAN AND ANIMAL EVOLUTION

Given this state of confusion, it's vital that we take a step back and ask some fundamental questions about the assumptions behind core training. Is it truly necessary? And if it's really necessary, how do we do it? And even more important, how do we communicate the fundamentals to our clients, athletes and one another?

We take core training for granted, but when we look at the bigger biological picture, our assumptions begin to look questionable. Think about other non-human animals for a moment and you'll see what I mean.

All vertebrates, quadrupeds and primates have a core. All have abdominal muscles that are strikingly similar to our own. All animals—both human and non-human—depend on integration between hips and shoulders to generate effective locomotion. And yet, in no case do we see non-human animals doing core training of any kind. This begs an obvious question: if chimps and lions and dogs don't need core training, why should we?

After all, there were no physioballs in the Paleolithic. We can be sure that no hunter-gatherer ever laid down on the ground to crank out a set of crunches or mounted a machine for abdominal training. It's also the case no anthropologist has ever witnessed native peoples doing anything resembling "core training." If core training was truly necessary for

human locomotor function, we'd see evidence for it throughout our history. In fact, we see no such thing.

Now you might say that chimps, lions and native peoples lived in a perfect harmony with ideal natural environments and therefore required no special training. We, on the other hand, live in a modern, alien world that demands a new kind of exercise. Perhaps this is the case. Perhaps it's true that cars, chairs and couches compromise the sensory-motor capabilities of our bodies and that special core training is required to waken sleepy circuits and muscles. And maybe it's the case that we need this special conditioning to compensate for the ravages of inactivity and sedentary living. Maybe we really need professional core training as a remedy for the modern epidemic of low-back pain. But if that's the case, maybe we'd do just as well to mimic our ancestral lifestyle. Maybe what we really need is lots more walking and a lot less sitting. If people were out walking the hunter-gatherer average of 5-10 miles per day, the need for core conditioning would probably disappear.

## THE EIGHT S'S

In any case, core conditioning is probably here to stay and we would do well to make the most of it. Fortunately, there's no reason that it should remain a mystery. We can learn most of what we need to know by following a few simple principles, all of which begin with the letter "S."

### **synergy**

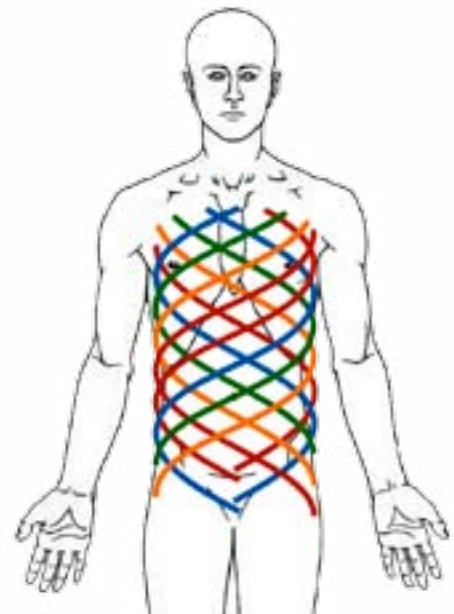
To be effective, the core needs to work in harmony with muscles above and below it. In other words, we're after orchestration and integrated movement. Isolation of the core might be called for in cases of extreme sensory-motor amnesia, but this should be seen as remedial education, not a life-long practice.

### **speed**

Core muscles should be fast, fast enough to manage the ever-changing relationships between hips, spine and shoulders. It doesn't matter how strong your abdominals are: if they fire slowly or at the wrong time, they won't perform their function. The faster the movement challenges you face, the faster your core needs to be.

### **strength**

Yes, your core should be strong, but only in relationship and in context to movement and the rest of your body. The ability to crank crunches with weight behind your head means almost nothing. What's important is the ability to be strong in those athletic circumstanc-



es that demand it.

### **sensitivity**

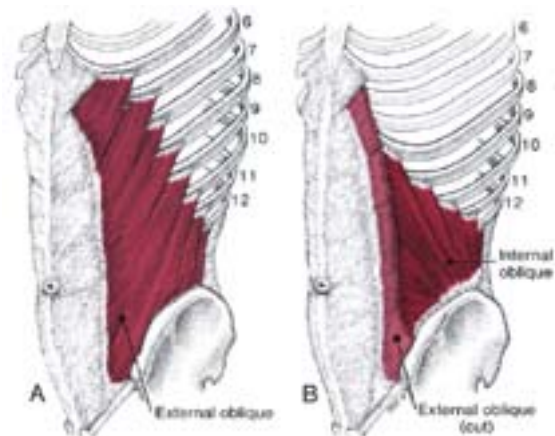
The orchestration between hips and shoulders is only possible when the muscles of the torso know when to fire; this requires sensitivity to position and momentum. If muscles don't fire at the right time or with the right intensity, your core isn't going to work properly.

### **stamina**

Endurance yes, but only in context to the challenges that your body actually faces. The number of crunches you can do is only relevant if your life or your athletic event requires crunch-like movements. More likely, you'll want the stamina to maintain good posture in both the sedentary postures and movements that you actually perform in your life.

### **support**

Again, it's all about integration. Yes, the layers of your core can and do provide three-dimensional, wrap-around support for your lumbar spine and may even protect you from injury. But this support can only take place as an orchestrated effort with kinetic chains working in harmony. Isolated abdominal training does little or nothing to improve support.



### **specificity**

The capability of your torso should match up with whatever physical challenges you have to face during the course of your life. The closer the match between your training and the projected challenge the better. The best core conditioning is done in a functional position: usually standing and moving. After all, how strong does your core need to be when you're laying down?

### **smarts**

It all adds up to building an intelligent core, and this means training the nervous system as much or more than the actual muscles. Appearance is a distraction. Highly-chiseled muscles may in fact be slow, stupid or poorly coordinated. The absence of adipose tissue means nothing: Function is everything.

## **A FULL-TIME PRACTICE**

As it stands, core training is usually administered to clients and athletes in a gym, clinic or training facility. Nevertheless, it's a mistake to think of core conditioning as a special,

isolated thing that we do once or twice a week. We might do better to think of it as a continual practice. In this sense, it's all about attention and engagement throughout the day and in whatever athletic pursuit you might enjoy. Coach Vern Gambetta has long advised us to “make every exercise an abdominal exercise.” This is a great way to think of it, but we can do even better. That is, get your torso involved in everything that you do. All core, all the time.

That way, you may never have to do another crunch.



Exuberant Animal is an innovative health leadership organization that promotes performance, team cohesion and physical happiness. We offer a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach that's invigorating, liberating and intensely meaningful.

Exuberant Animal is the creation of Frank Forencich, author of *Play as if Your Life Depends on It*, *Exuberant Animal* and *Change Your Body, Change the World*. Frank is an internationally-recognized leader in health education and performance training. He earned his B.A. at Stanford University in human biology and neuroscience and has over 30 years teaching experience in health promotion. He holds black belt rankings in both karate and aikido and has consulted to major corporations, human resource groups and health professionals.

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- Guest lecturer: Stanford University Institute of Design, April 2009 and 2010
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