BUILD STRENGTH, WITHOUT MASS

Looking like a herculean beast may suit heavyweights like Overeem, yet many athletes would rather be the freight train of their weight division by gaining strength without piling on the muscle. THF shows you how...

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It’s no secret that having superior strength can give you a huge advantage over your opponent. If both you and your foe are equal in striking and grappling skills, it’s going to come down to who possesses the highest levels of strength and conditioning which will determine the winner when the smoke clears. Even if you’re opposition is more skilled than you, being physically stronger can really balance out the odds in the OCTAGON, or even away them in your favor. Just look at Kailo Valenca vs Satib Putnam at UFC 112; although the pair were evenly matched on paper, Valenca possessed far more strength and was able to completely dictate the fight, leaving Putnam around like a rag doll.

Yet MMA is a weight class sport. Gaining strength can give you the edge, but not at the expense of going up an entire weight division where you will be facing much bigger and stronger opponents. Luckily for the aspiring warrior, there are ways to gain superhuman strength without piling on the pounds, enabling you to become the ultimate powerhouse of your respective weight division.

There are two ways to get stronger and get in shape without bulking up: physiologically and neurologically. In this case, physiological strength training involves building muscle whereas neuromuscular strength training involves improving your Central Nervous System (CNS). Most fighters are not taking advantage of the neurological aspect of gaining strength.

TRAINING YOUR CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM
You don’t have to hold a PhD to understand that your Central Nervous System is in charge of everything your body does. Your CNS is responsible for fast, explosive actions as well as controlling coordination, balance and agility. With strength and speed comes power. Your body is made up of muscle fibers, so by training your CNS you’ll be able to increase the activation of all these muscle fibers as well as the speed they contract. This will give you speed and strength, bringing more of your muscle power into the game each time you punch, throw a kick or clinch with your opponent.

A simple way of understanding CNS is to think of your body as a computer. Physiological (muscle based/bodybuilding) training improves your hardware (the exterior). Neurological (CNS based/athletic) training improves your software (the interior function). An athlete that is fast, explosive, coordinated, well balanced and agile has good software, whereas bodybuilders have tremendously developed hardware through huge amounts of muscle mass and connective tissue strength.

If you’ve got the most advanced software with superhuman hardware, you’re in a perfect position to build and maintain an amazing body that’s incredibly fast and powerful for its size. You’ll be able to hold your own with everyone from the fighting-quick José Aldos to the power-units such as the Brock Lesnars and the Shane Carwins. Essentially, you will become the ultimate fighter.

MOST FIGHTERS NEED BETTER SOFTWARE, NOT HARDWARE
If you are one of those people who struggle to gain weight and you don’t have the luxury of training to upgrade your hardware (gaining more muscle mass) instead you must focus solely on training that will get your software working as well as possible. In other words, your focus will be on CNS-dominant training.

But if you’re one of those guys who’s always on the light side of your weight class or even trying to bump up a weight class, throwing in a few bodybuilding style training concepts will help you upgrade your hardware and get stronger through physiological means.

Yet regardless of where you stand weight-class wise, all fighters should focus their training primarily on CNS-dominant training since you’re trying to out-perform your opponent, not out-fight them.

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TRAIN MOVEMENTS, NOT MUSCLES

Essentially, athletes need to move better while bodybuilders need to look better. That said, performing a bodybuilding-style workout that’s split (chest day, back day, legs, etc) is not how any athlete should be training especially a weight-class athlete. Again, all great athletes have great nervous systems. Since your CNS does not recognize specific muscles (it only recognizes movement patterns) it makes sense to focus your training on improving your ability to perform the four basic movement patterns: pushing, pulling, level changes (squatting, bending, standing) and rotation. Training these four movements is sure to craft a well-balanced body that is strong in every aspect of motion, making you much more lethal in the cage. 

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STRENGTH & CONDITIONING

When training the CNS, you’re really trying to improve motor-unit (muscle fibre) recruitment. As stated earlier, this is simply being able to bring more muscle into each and every movement you perform. These are two ways to ensure maximum motor-unit recruitment: lift a heavy load and/or move fast.

When lifting a heavy load, as a general generalisation, you can assume that the load must be 60–100% of your one repetition maximum (1RM) to recruit all your motor units, according to Chad Wadsworth, a neurophysiologist and author of Five Tricks to Burn Abdominal Fat.

So if you can normally bench 100kg for one rep maximum, to make sure you’re recruiting all your motor units, you’d need to be lifting a minimum of 60kg with reps. Also, to develop explosive power rather than just pure strength you need to rep the weights as fast as possible. When moving as fast as possible, you are recruiting all available motor units because you are stimulating your muscles to their highest potential.

SETS AND REPS FOR GAINING STRENGTH WITHOUT WEIGHT

In this workout programme (right) you’ll see the rep ranges are no more than five. This means that you’ll be using weights that will feel quite heavy for you to move. Lifting weight at 80%–plus of your 1RM with reps in the three to eight range with two to four minutes rest produces the largest changes in myofibrillar volume and density (muscle gain), found research in Science and Practice of Strength Training. This means that if you lift weights at six reps or above, you’re likely to gain some muscle size as well as strength. If you don’t want to gain muscle mass but you want to gain strength, keep the reps at five or less. Doing this will ensure that all adaptations are neuromuscular and improve your software (CNS) rather than physiological, improving your hardware by building muscle.

Not all the exercises included in the workout right are done for reps. Some are actually performed for time. The time frame provided right is eight to 12 seconds.

While conventional weight lifting wisdom dictates you should be lifting the iron slowly for maximum gains, that has to be adjusted when you’re seeking to jack up strength without amping mass. To destroy your weight class without turning the scales back on one thing: speed. Move as fast as possible.

Exercise: Linear movements

The Load/Expload Workout Programme

This programme consists of two types of exercises: loaded exercises and unloads, explosive exercises. On the loaded exercises, you lift a weight load that allows you to achieve five reps with perfect form. On each rep, control the eccentric (lowering) portion and explode into the weight on the concentric aspect (raising). Since the weight load is quite heavy, you may not actually move fast. Regardless, as long as you’re physically trying to move the weight up as fast as possible, you’ll be training maximum motor units.

On the unloads explosive exercises, you’ll either be using a lighter external load or just your own body weight. You’ll perform each rep with maximum speed, in good form of course. Try to move as fast as possible in the time frame given. Since you won’t be holding a heavy load, the action here will be much faster than the high load exercise described above.

“**If you can normally bench 100kg for one rep maximum, to make sure you’re recruiting all your motor units, you’d need to be lifting a minimum of 60kg with reps**”

SPEED FOR STRENGTH

On the loaded day (Day 1) you’ll use enough weight to challenge yourself for the reps indicated. The load should feel quite heavy. That said, it should not be so heavy that you cannot perform each rep with perfect form and consistent lifting speed.

On the explode day (Day 2) your focus is on one thing speed. Move as fast as possible for the reps or time frame given.

**The Load/Expload Workout Programme**

**Day 1 - Load**

1a. Barbell clean (5 x 5)

1b. Any kind of abs workout (for 90 seconds x 4 sets)

2a. Romanian dead lift (5 x 5)

2b. Dumbbell inclined chest press (4 x 4–6)

3a. Barbell squat (4 x 4–6)

3b. Single-arm dumbbell row (4 x 4–6)

4. Cable torso rotations (3 x 6 each side)

**Day 2 - Explode**

1a. Kettlebell swing (5 x 12 seconds)

1b. Any kind of abs work (for 90 seconds)

2a. Band jumps (5 x 6)

2b. Clap push-ups (5 x 4–6)

2c. Squat jumps or box jumps (5 x 4–6)

3b. Band speed rows, alternate arms

4. Medicine ball rotary wall-throw (4 x 5 each side)

**How to use the Load/Expload Workout Programme**

Perform this workout two to three times per week. After at least two, days between workouts. All exercises labelled with ‘a’ & ‘b’ should be performed as a paired set. Perform exercise ‘a’, rest 45–60 seconds, and then perform exercise ‘b’. Rest another 45–60 seconds, then repeat the exercises again. Do so for the amount of sets indicated right.

Perform each exercise with maximum intensity. Move as fast as you possibly can and explode into the weight with as much effort as possible.

Never sacrifice movement quality for movement quantity, never use bad form. If your form becomes poor stop the exercise immediately. You may have to reduce the weight load or time frame of the exercise on the next set to accommodate your level of ability.

**SIX WEEKS TO A STRONGER, MORE POWERFUL BODY!**

Power = strength x speed. The Load/Expload Workout Protocol will improve both your strength and your speed. Use this workout for six weeks and, in that time frame, you’ll have a much stronger and more powerful body that will surprise any opponent who dare lock horns with you in the cage.