

A Conversation with Brad Schoenfeld, CSCS

Question: What made you decide to specialize in training women?

Women are generally much more in tune with their bodies than men. For one, guys are more apt to train for ego—the “How much do you bench?” syndrome—and for another, they tend to think if they just dropped a few pounds, they could step onstage in a Mr. America competition. Women, on the other hand, know every inch of their bodies. So when improvements are made in their physique, you see a tremendous increase in their self-esteem. As a trainer, playing a role in this transformation is what is most fulfilling to me.

Question: What are some of the key differences that women face in comparison to men when training?

Brad: Of course there are the obvious physical differences: Women tend to carry their weight in their lower bodies and have less strength in the upper body. There also are significant hormonal differences: Women have only a fraction of the testosterone of the average male (making muscle gain more difficult) and undergo hormonal shifts that can cause water retention and affect exercise performance. Perhaps the most significant difference, though, are the diverse physique goals that women generally have as opposed to men. While most men want to get big and strong, women are more often looking to be lean and toned. Since exercise follows the law of specificity—which states that you need to train specific to your goals—it’s essential to take these factors into account when devising a comprehensive routine. One of the biggest mistakes I see personal trainers make is that they train women the same way they train men.

Question: What do you think is the most important thing that makes or breaks a diet/fitness program?

Brad: A person’s determination. Contrary to popular belief, motivation comes from within. A trainer or nutritional counselor can provide a person with the framework to succeed and inspire by example, but they can’t motivate someone in the true sense of the word. Without the person having that inner drive, the program ultimately won’t endure over time. It requires a high level of determination to push your body to the point of discomfort week after week when you’d rather be hanging out or relaxing. That necessitates cultivating your motivation by constantly re-evaluating your reasons for exercising.

Question: Can you explain High-Energy Fitness?

Brad: High Energy Fitness is a three-phased system of training that I developed from working with hundreds of women at my private facility in Scarsdale (it is detailed in depth in my book, *SCULPTING HER BODY PERFECT*). In a nutshell, it’s a periodized program that takes a woman from beginner to advanced levels in stepwise fashion. It starts with a conditioning phase, then moves to a toning and shaping phase, and then to an advanced bodysculpting phase, becoming progressively more challenging as one

A Conversation with Brad Schoenfeld, CSCS

progresses from one phase to the next. It can help women of all ages and abilities achieve their ideal physique.

***Question:** How do you get a client motivated to stick to a fitness program?*

Brad: The most important part of maintaining motivation is setting goals. The first thing I do with a new client is to assess their reasons for undertaking an exercise program and then commit them to paper. Goals should be broken down into short-term and long-term goals. This keeps a person focused on why exercise is important to them. As long as a person stays focused on their goals, adherence to exercise is almost always assured.

***Question:** Tell us the biggest secret that trainers typically don't tell their clients, but should?*

Brad: To develop a mind-to-muscle connection. When you lift a weight, you should consciously visualize the target muscle and feel it working throughout the complete range of motion. Don't think about where you are feeling the muscular stress, think about where you are *supposed* to feel the stress. For example, when performing a bench press, you should focus on the muscles of your chest (i.e. pectorals) as you lift. Not only will this help to improve your form, but it will diminish the contribution of extraneous muscle assistance, ensuring that the target muscles perform the majority of the work. Employing this one simple technique can improve results by 25 percent!

***Question:** In all your years of training what do you consider the best non-weight related exercise?*

Brad: I tend to avoid using the term 'best exercise'—variety is the spice of fitness! The human body is the most resourceful of all organisms and intuitively adapts to repetitive stress, including that from exercise. The longer you use the same exercises in a routine, the less effective they become. To counteract the adaptive nature of the body, a person should aspire to vary exercises from one session to the next, using as many modalities (i.e. dumbbells, barbells, cables, machines, etc) as possible—that includes body weight movements. Your muscles are thereby forced to constantly adjust to new stresses, ultimately fostering their ongoing development.

***Question:** If you could only do only one strength training exercise what would it be?*

Brad: It would have to be the squat. Not only does the squat work all the muscles in the lower body, but it requires stabilization from much of the upper body musculature, too. In short, it's perhaps the most complete movement there is. What's more, it's an extremely functional exercise. So many movements in everyday life revolve around lifting items from a squatting position. Assuming there are no medical contraindications, it should be a part of everyone's workout.

***Question:** What is the exercise you see is done most frequently done incorrectly?*

A Conversation with Brad Schoenfeld, CSCS

Brad: The exercise that I see done most often incorrectly is the crunch and its many variations. Most often, people lift their torso far past the point where their abs are actively contracting. It's essential to understand that the thoracic spine has only about a 30 degree range of motion. Lifting the torso past this point only serves to activate the hip flexors, which far overpower the abs and thus take stress away from the target muscles. Worse, there is a lot of shear force exerted on the lumbar spine which can cause lower back problems. To perform the move correctly, the trainee should focus on pressing her lower back into the mat—only the upper back should come off the ground. It's a small movement that will have big effects when done properly. Also, place your hands across your chest, not behind the head! When the hands are behind the head, there is a reflexive tendency to pull on the cervical spine during exercise performance. This can cause serious injury to the muscles and soft tissue structures in the neck region.

Question: Can you tell us one strength training myth that we would be surprised to learn?

Brad: The myth that seems to surprise the majority of fitness enthusiasts is that a person should train their abs everyday for best results. It's somehow been taken as gospel that the abs are this 'special' muscle that can endure daily exercise. Truth is, the abs have the same muscle fiber composition as the biceps and quadriceps, yet I can't imagine anyone thinking they should train their arms and legs everyday! Training a muscle causes structural tears within the fibers that need rest to ensure optimal recuperation. The abs are no exception. The normal time course for protein synthesis (i.e. the time it takes for muscles to fully heal after a workout) is 48 hours. Thus, if your goal is to achieve six-pack abs, the midsection should be trained no more than three times a week, every other day. And along the same lines, training the abs won't make them any flatter. You can't spot reduce fat. It's a physiologic impossibility. There is no way to dictate what area of your body you lose fat from. So you can do abdominal crunches until the cows come home, but it won't help to whittle away that spare tire!

Question: If you could eat one forbidden or unhealthy food whenever you wanted without gaining weight, what would it be?

Brad: Sicilian pizza! It's my favorite cheat food. I could eat an entire pie and still want more. A good New York Cheesecake probably comes in a close second.

Question: What is the one food or meal you always eat before training? What do you advise clients to eat?

Brad: With respect to weight training, it's really the post-exercise meal that's most important. After training, your body is primed for anabolism (i.e. tissue building). I recommend consuming a drink of fruit juice and whey protein. This optimizes replenishment of glycogen stores as well as facilitating optimum protein synthesis. A good rule of thumb is to consume ½ gram of carbs and ¼ gram of protein per pound of goal body weight. Thus, if a woman aspires to weigh 120 pounds, then she should consume a drink containing 60 grams of carbs and 30 grams of protein.

A Conversation with Brad Schoenfeld, CSCS

Question: What's your favorite breakfast?

Brad: I basically eat the same breakfast every morning. I'll have an egg white omelet topped with black bean salsa, and a large bowl of steel-cut oatmeal with flax oil and diced fruit. It provides an ideal combo of complex carbs, lean protein, and essential fats that fuels my daily activities and keeps me mentally sharp.

Question: Do you ever cheat on your diet?

Brad: Every week! I eat in a very regimented fashion six days a week, then allow myself to basically eat what I want (within reason) on that seventh day. This allows me to satisfy any cravings that I might have so I don't feel deprived. It's something I preach in my books and to all my private clients—it really helps with dietary adherence.

Question: Do you have a pet?

Brad: I have a beautiful English bulldog named Winston. Dogs display unconditional love. He's been a true blessing in my life.

Question: What did you want to be at the age of 5 (as far as a career)?

Brad: A cardiologist—like my dad. By the age of six, though, I wanted to become a baseball player for the Mets. I was a fickle kid :)