

Kevin Vost, Psy.D.

# Fit for Eternal Life

A Christian Approach to  
Working Out,  
Eating Right, and  
Building the Virtues of Fitness  
in Your Soul

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## Acknowledgments

This book would be mostly blank if I had been unable to draw upon the wisdom of the unlikely collection of philosophers, theologians, exercise theorists, and nutrition experts you'll meet in the pages ahead. My task is merely to help you literally "flesh" out their ideas in stronger muscles, sturdier bones, more powerful hearts, and more devout souls.

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## Author's Note

We want you to be fit for eternal life, not to get there before your time! The information in this book is intended for healthy men and women. But even people without known health problems should consult their physician before starting any new exercise or dietary program. The material in this book is not a substitute for the advice of a personal healthcare professional. Any application of the advice in this book is at the reader's sole discretion and risk. The author and publisher disclaim any liability, personal, professional, or otherwise, resulting from the application or misapplication of the suggestions in this book.



Foreword

## “Be Perfect”

*“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”*

I Corinthians 6:19

*“You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

Matthew 5:48

*“The Church, without any doubt whatever, approves of physical culture, if it be in proper proportion.”*

Pope Pius XII



Since you've picked up this book, I suspect that you are already someone striving for spiritual perfection. Thank God for that. But meanwhile, have you let your body fall into a state of disrepair?

Perhaps you've become too accustomed to swimming against the current of our modern world, with its vain and superficial glorification of physical appearance. Or maybe work and family obligations have just left you too busy to get to the gym.

Or, maybe you've been putting so much focus on things spiritual that your body has gone neglected. After all, why should we waste time wrapping our hands around a barbell when we could be folding them in prayer? Shouldn't we be whipping our bodies, rather than whipping them into shape?

Not according to St. Paul. In his letter to the Corinthians, he tells us to treat the body as the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and to glorify God with it. God gave us our body as a most precious gift, and it is our Christian duty to care for it — indeed, to *perfect* it. In so doing, we show due reverence to the Holy Spirit who dwells within.

Of course, the modern world usually errs in the opposite extreme: treating the body as a god rather than as the dwelling-place of God. Physical indulgence and pleasure reign. But pious souls need not leave the world of the body to the hedonists. Yes, spiritual things are higher, but God made us beings of *both body and spirit*, now and for eternity. We are “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” it's true, but please recall: at the end of time, we are to be resurrected, soul *and* body.

### The Glorified Body

That's surely why, in his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas (the saint most closely connected to things of the *mind*) spends dozens of pages examining scriptural, traditional, and philosophical insights regarding the nature of our glorified body. He gives reasoned answers to all kinds of questions, from whether we will all arise with bodies of the same age and stature, to whether we will have internal organs, hair, and nails!

In Question 84 to the Supplement of the *Summa Theologica*, “On the Agility of the Bodies of the Blessed,” St. Thomas writes:

[T]he glorified body will be altogether subject to the glorified soul, so that not only will there be nothing in it to resist the will of the spirit, for it was even so in the case of Adam's body, but also from the glorified soul there will flow into the body a certain perfection, whereby it will become adapted to that subjection: and this perfection is called *the gift of the glorified body*.

In our glorified state, our bodies will fully obey the dictates of our spirits, unlike in our present state, where all too often the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. Without this interior conflict, our very bodily movements will become fluid, agile, and effortless.

But we don't have to wait for heaven to enjoy greater harmony between body and soul. St. Thomas also writes that “those in whom the motive power is stronger, and *those who through exercise have the body more adapted to obey the moving spirit*, labor less in being moved” (italics added). There are exercises, both physical and spiritual, that we can employ in *this* life, to make our body more completely subject to the rule of the soul, as well as more powerful and effective, more agile in its movements, and more beautiful in its form. Indeed, perfecting our bodies through proper dietary and

exercise habits may prove a very apt earthly preparation for the glorified body of the resurrection.

Followers of Christ, you see, are not like St. Thomas’s great nemesis the Manichees, who taught that the flesh itself is evil. Jesus himself took on human flesh in the Incarnation and thereby glorified it. Jesus came not to destroy the body, if you will, but to fulfill it. He showed us the way to perfection of our entire being, which includes our physical bodies — bones, sinews, and all.

### **Muscular Christianity and a Muscular Christ**

The New Testament does not preach much directly about the value of sensible diet and exercise, but their value is there in principle, and through example. For instance, close your eyes and try to imagine the physical characteristics of Jesus Christ himself. He must have been magnificently fit and strong. The Virgin Mary herself nursed him and then helped establish his eating habits. Being free of sin, his dietary practices would have been guided by perfect temperance. His earthly father, St. Joseph, a hardworking carpenter, was the young Jesus’ earthly model for physical strength and endurance. And Jesus himself, working without modern power tools, would undoubtedly have developed lean, powerful muscles. After he had begun his public ministry, we can barely read a chapter of the Gospels without hearing about his long journeys, mostly on foot, over hilly, unpaved paths. In his humanity, he would not have had the stamina to carry out his exhausting public work had he been in anything less than peak physical shape.

We find diet lessons too. Much ink in nutritional circles today has been devoted to touting the health and longevity benefits of the so-called “Mediterranean diet,” some characteristics of which — such as bread, fish, olives, figs, wine, and water — will surely sound familiar to readers of Scripture. And who can forget those

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miracles wherein Jesus made wine from water and multiplied the loaves and fishes? If we are to be true imitators of Christ, shouldn't we also pay at least a little attention to how he sustained and used his bodily strength and endurance?

Further, we know that true Christian living is a matter not only of belief, but of action. St. James tells us clearly that "faith apart from works is dead."<sup>1</sup> What kind of works? The Church has for centuries preached two kinds of "works of mercy," one spiritual and the other corporal (or bodily). The corporal works of mercy remind us of those important needs of the body. We are to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, provide shelter for the homeless, and more. When we do these things for others, we do them for Christ himself.<sup>2</sup>

Modern exercise theorist (and Nautilus-machine inventor) Arthur Jones has noted that the muscles are the body's engines; therefore, they're also the engines of corporal works of mercy, since *our muscles are the movers that make those charitable actions physically possible*. The more powerful we make those engines, the more horses we'll have under the hood to do those powerful acts of good.

### Papal Blessings for Physical Culture

Please take a second glance at the words of Pope Pius XII that grace the beginning of this foreword. He made that statement in 1948. Perhaps you've never heard the term *physical culture*, or you think it has an archaic ring, but I'd like to see it make a resurgence. *Culture* derives from the Latin word *cultura*, referring to tilling of the land. In the process of agricultural cultivation, man sets up

<sup>1</sup> Jas. 2:26.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 25:31-46.

special conditions to improve the soil and enhance the growth of crops. Perfection in agricultural growth requires a delicate balance, a golden mean of water and sunshine and nutrients in the soil. So, too, does the concept of *physical culture* imply a careful, reasoned perfection of our physical selves. It implies in itself the criterion of “proper proportion.”

What exactly did Pope Pius XII (a most athletic pontiff who had a gymnasium installed in the Vatican) mean by *proper proportion*? He said that exercise remains in proper proportion when it:

- ♦ does not lead to worship of the body;
- ♦ strengthens and energizes the body rather than draining it;
- ♦ provides refreshment for the spirit;
- ♦ does not lead to spiritual sloth or crudeness;
- ♦ provides “new excitements” for study and work; and
- ♦ does not disturb the peace and sanctity of the home.

Physical culture, then, is a wonderful thing when it brings us closer to bodily perfection, to spiritual renewal, to vocational achievement, and to health and harmony within our homes. It is anathema when it becomes a god to us — an end rather than a means. We must avoid the pitfalls of overweening self-pride and vanity, and of judgmental attitudes toward those who do not practice healthy lifestyles. We must avoid becoming so overly wrapped in the things of the body that we ignore the spirit it encloses.

It’s critical to note, however, that attending to the needs of our body’s perfection does not inevitably lead us to those vices. On the contrary, the cultivation of physical fitness can and should go

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hand in hand with the cultivation of moral virtue. *Physical culture and spiritual culture were literally made for each other — by God himself!*

Another great pontiff, Pope John Paul II, urged the world to have greater appreciation for the *theology of the body*, for a deeper understanding of the place of our physicality, sensuality, and sexuality in God’s grand scheme of the universe. I think the time is right for a “*theology of bodybuilding*,” as well: for greater appreciation and deeper understanding of the body’s capacity for strength, endurance, and robust fitness, to serve as a dynamo of charity toward our neighbor and for the greater glory of God.

Introduction

Confessions of an  
Iron-Pumping Psychologist



Who am I to talk about fitness, be it for this life or the next? That's a fair enough question.

What I'm not is a professional theologian, let alone a theological innovator. I'm a layman, just a guy sitting in the pew (and occasionally standing behind the lectern), trying to be faithful to Christ and his teachings. But although I'm very much a theological amateur, I do try to borrow my ideas from the very best of the professionals — especially St. Thomas Aquinas, the Universal Doctor himself. Also, I do have two areas of expertise that target physical and spiritual fitness within their crosshairs.

First, I've been involved in the fields of weightlifting and fitness training for almost forty years now. The first time I ever saw a lifter on television, when I was but in the second grade at age seven or eight, I implored my parents to buy me a barbell set, and happily, they complied. In fact, to this day, my own sons use some of the same old, red, plastic, sand-filled discs. Those old barbell plates still bear the duct tape my boys' grandfather used to patch them in the 1960s, so that no precious grains of muscle-bestowing sand would be lost as I put myself through my exercises.

In my teens, I was quite obsessed with the worlds of muscle-building and fitness training, at a time right before they moved from being a quirky subculture to a widely popular and visible part of the mainstream. My training became a regular habit that persists to this day. I went on to compete in bodybuilding, in Olympic-style weightlifting, and in power lifting, not to mention such

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sideshows as ten-man tug-of-war teams and team human tractor-pulling competitions. In seven years of competition, I went from a 135-pound teenager doing a clean and jerk with 165 pounds to a 205-pound young adult, benching 400 pounds, and squatting and deadlifting over 550.

I also worked my way through college as a weightlifting instructor at a YMCA and at two fitness centers, immersing myself in the muscle-building literature of the 1960s through the 1980s (and eventually collecting several bins of well-worn books and magazines). My lifting buddies and I traveled all around the Midwest, attending contests and seminars featuring the era's greatest bodybuilders.

Later, in my thirties and early forties, I branched out into endurance activities such as running, but I stayed involved in strength sports through Scottish Highland Games competitions: heaving and tossing cabers (tree trunks), 56-pound iron balls, hammers, hay bales, and large stones (all while clad in a kilt, no less). Then, in the late Nineties, I also began writing fitness and sports-psychology articles for websites and magazines.

In recent years, I have kept up my learning in the field, seeking personalized guidance through the late Mike Mentzer, a brilliant former Mr. Universe who was at one time bodybuilding's heir-apparent to Arnold Schwarzenegger, and from Clarence Bass, a former Olympic weightlifting champion, over-forty Mr. USA winner, and current master in the fields of total fitness and leanness.

My special focus within the field of exercise science is something called High-Intensity Training, or HIT. This is a system of strength training that produces maximum results in strength and muscle tone from a minimal investment of time. I will tell you all about it in the pages ahead!

## Confessions of an Iron-Pumping Psychologist

Over the course of my nearly forty years of involvement in the world of fitness, I'm pretty sure I've learned a lot of important things, and I'm absolutely certain that I've made a boatload of mistakes. I hope to help you benefit at least as much from my mistakes as from my knowledge!

### **Mind Over Matter:**

#### **The Psychology of Physical Perfection**

My other area of expertise? I'm also a Doctor of Psychology in Clinical Psychology. (That's what the "Psy.D." means.) I think that in fitness training, knowledge is only half the story, because it's one thing to know *what* to do, but another thing to know *how to get yourself to do it!*

That's where psychology can help. To become truly fit, healthful exercise and eating behaviors must become *habitual*. Habits must build upon human nature, and part of psychology's job is to help us understand our human nature, both its potential and its limitations.

Most people fail in their efforts to attain a total fitness lifestyle because they hold unrealistic expectations about what diet and exercise can do for them, and about their abilities to change their own behaviors. We might get fired up to get in shape because of a scary cholesterol-screening result, or just because our pants button explodes from the sheer force of the protruding waistline beneath it, yet whatever the motivation might be, if our exercise program doesn't produce the desired results, we won't be able to maintain it.

But, drawing on psychological knowledge about human nature, and the potential capacities of our own intellects, desires, and wills, we discover that we are best able to stick with exercise and diet programs and see long-term results when we:

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- ♦ grasp the logic of the basic interrelated principles of exercise and diet, and how to adapt them to our own needs and life routines;
- ♦ understand the principles of habit formation and realize that acquiring good habits means acquiring virtues;
- ♦ train ourselves to desire and obtain a feeling of accomplishment (and fun) from our exercise programs;
- ♦ acquire the self-discipline of will to seek small positive results in the short run (virtually every workout for strength-training sessions for months to come);
- ♦ learn how to enjoy our daily diets, thinking neither too much nor too little about our daily bread;
- ♦ obtain the peace of mind and fortitude of will that comes from the realization that God wants us to perfect our human natures — soul, mind, *and body*.

These things are more easily talked about than done, but they *can* be done. (Near the end of the book, I'll cap off my “confessions” by showing you how it wasn't until the age of forty-five that I really began to put those points together myself.) And by the time we're through, you'll have all the tools and knowledge you'll need to do it.

### **KISS: Keep it Simple, Samson**

St. Thomas had a great gift for making the complex simple and understandable, and in these pages, I will try to do likewise. For I believe that physical fitness and diet have become needlessly overcomplicated. Even in a short book like this one you *can* find enough guidance in the fundamentals to get your body in good

## Confessions of an Iron-Pumping Psychologist

working order, without having to earn a doctorate in exercise physiology or nutrition first. It will take a fair measure of effort, sweat, and perseverance, to be sure, but it will all be simple, straightforward, and commonsensical. Let's get to it!

Chapter 8

Form Must Be the Norm

*“The earth was without form, and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving on the face of the water.”*

Genesis 1:2

*“The upper body is bent forward, taking the weight of the left leg, which must be thrown upward and go along with his right side . . . He turns his head to the far right and bends his body so as to see his ribs and to throw upward as if drawing water and throwing with his whole right side.”*

Philostratos



Have you seen a picture of the famous statue by the ancient Greek sculptor Myron called *The Discus Thrower*? Can you recall the perfectly proportioned physique, the placid facial expression, body twisted at the waist with discus held high, cocked and ready to be hurled? If so, maybe now the quotation from Philostratos at the beginning of this chapter will make sense to you, since in it he was describing that very statue. But why am I describing his description? Good question.

We've all heard the saying, "Anything worth doing is worth doing right." Who can argue with that? Well, in any kind of athletic endeavor, execution of correct *form* is essential to "doing it right." Proper posture and proper execution of bodily movements are required to maximize physical performance, but not *only* physical performance. Calling to mind again our hylomorphic human nature of intertwined body and soul, I'm sure you'll agree from personal experience that our physical postures also influence our *mental* operations and our *spiritual* attitudes.

Consider the bodily postures associated with formal prayer and liturgy: from the Sign of the Cross, to folded hands, to genuflection, to the planned alternations of sitting, kneeling, and standing. And those postures and gestures have their own proper form as well. (Picture a kind but stern old nun taking a grade-schooler to task for a sloppy, hasty Sign of the Cross; *she* knows that bodily forms can affect the mind and soul.) Even in our acts of private and public worship, our bodily postures serve the purposes of

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showing respect for God and of instilling in us a mental set of reverence and meditation. They focus our attention, still our irrelevant bodily motions, and prepare us for important spiritual business. When they have become habitual through regular practice, those very bodily motions will begin to trigger the proper spiritual response.

So, too, does form serve a very important purpose in our strength-training exercises. Without correct form, or the *manner of exercise performance*, strength training can be unproductive or, worse, lead to bad — and even dangerous — habits.

It's simply impossible to give our muscles a high-intensity stimulus if our exercises are not performed in the proper manner, *and yet*, form is often the most neglected aspect of strength training. Believe me, from my several decades of working in and working out in several gyms, I can tell you that proper exercise form, although *not* difficult to do, is quite rarely seen, because it is so seldom taught and understood.

Poor exercise form is most commonly exhibited by:

- partial range of motion;
- excessive speed of movement;
- improper body positioning.

Chances are our nun corrected her young student on these same three points. In like fashion (without scolding, though!), allow me to explain to you the three principles of proper form.

### **Full Range of Motion: No Cheating!**

Perhaps the most common mistake in exercise performance is the failure to work through a muscle's entire range of motion. Remember that in order to stimulate muscles to grow, we must work them intensely within a set, thus calling into play the largest possible number of muscle fibers. To recruit the greatest number of

muscle fibers, we must make the most of every exercise by moving through the greatest range of movement possible for the given exercise.

For an example, let's take a simple pressing movement such as the barbell bench press. This exercise has a pretty simply defined range of movement. You're lying on your back. The bar can go no lower than the point at which it rests on your chest, at about sternum level. The bar can go no higher than the point at which your arms are fully extended and your elbows are locked. So, there you have it. Just move the bar from a position resting on your chest until your arms are completely extended. Lower, repeat the complete motion until failure or near-failure, and your pectoral, front deltoid, and triceps muscles will thank you for it by growing a little bit stronger next workout.

Easier said than done, however. The most common mistake people make, even on a simple bench press, which has a limited range of motion to begin with, is to reduce its range of motion even further — in order to be able to lift (and be seen lifting) more. For, in a “compound” exercise, such as the bench press, that uses several muscles at once and ends up in a locked-out position, you can handle much more weight near the *end* of the motion than at the start, down there on your chest. Just look around at the gym sometime. Many people “cheat” this exercise by failing to bring the bar all the way down to their chest. They can handle more weight that way initially, but they are robbing themselves of the full muscle stimulation of performing the complete motion.

Let's watch Bubba and Joe, two eighteen-year-old weightlifting buddies. Bubba benches 150 pounds for ten repetitions, bringing the bar only halfway down to his chest. He chortles a little bit when Joe has to reduce the weight to 120 pounds for his set of ten, but Joe performs the exercise through the full range of motion.

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Bubba might relish his illusion of superior strength, but it won't last long. Joe's muscles are receiving greater stimulation, and he'll soon be using far more than 150 pounds for good full reps, and his muscles will show it.

But wait. Well-intentioned but poorly informed lads like Bubba tend to drift into other ways to cheat on their form (and to cheat themselves in the process). A second way also ties into range of motion. For a barbell-pressing exercise, the farther apart you place your hands on the bar, the less distance the bar will travel. The muscles receive less stimulation, but you're able to lift more in the short run. Guys like Bubba tend to be real wide grippers, with hands spread well beyond the shoulders.

It's easier to obtain full range of motion on properly constructed (and adjusted) strength-building machines, but even here, be it a press like a chest press, overhead press, or leg press, or a pulling or rowing or curling motion, many trainees will make the mistake of performing only half or partial motions, usually at the end of the range of motion. Again, this may create an illusion of greater strength, because more weight can be used in this manner, but it does not stimulate as much future growth.

There's another benefit to using a full range of motion. Some exercises start by placing the muscles in a mildly pre-stretched position, which can enhance your flexibility as well as your strength. (I saw this myth of the "inflexible," "muscle-bound" weightlifter exploded in the early 1980s, when a bodybuilder named Tom Platz, owner of the most massive and muscularly developed thighs and hamstrings in the world, sat on a table and touched his head to his knees, with his legs straight and knees locked, right before my very eyes! I've *never* been able to do that myself.)

All right, enough on range of motion for a while. Let's move on and look at the next trick up young Bubba's sleeves.

### Speed of Motion: Easy There, Lightning

You'd better look fast if you want to catch Bubba's next set, because he's really going to be moving! Bubba has found that he can lift greater poundage through the course of a set if he moves *really* fast. And if he brings the bar all the way down to his chest, chances are he's there for some quick rebound action. Bouncing a barbell off your chest, or simply contracting your muscles as hard and fast as possible right from the start, will bring the forces of momentum into play, allowing you to move more weight. This will give the appearance of more strength, but in reality, fewer muscle fibers will be recruited and less actual muscle strength and growth will be stimulated.

From my days at my local YMCA's dungeon-of-a-basement weight room in the 1970s, I remember a young guy like Bubba who milked momentum on the bench press for all it was worth. In fact, he so forcefully bounced the bar off his chest that he had a perpetual open wound over his sternum. He would compensate for this injury by placing a padded cushion made for barbells around the center of the bar. This in turn helped him generate even more momentum, thus further reducing actual muscle stimulation. It *also* reduced range of motion. So he was left with a big sore on his not-so-big chest.<sup>18</sup>

What is the *proper* speed of movement, then? As I relate in one of our Muscle Mastery Tips, most authorities of the HIT school recommend taking about two seconds to raise the weight and about twice as long, or four seconds, to lower it, thus ensuring that

<sup>18</sup>Please bear in mind, I'm not relating stories like these to put anyone down. I have my own share of fitness follies, and we'll come across some of those in the pages ahead. But I share these "Bubba stories" to help you avoid making the same silly, and sometimes dangerous, mistakes.

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momentum will have little chance to rob the muscles of their rightful labor.

Elsewhere in this book, we'll talk about some variations on the theme of repetition speed that employ slower repetitions and even holds or pauses. For now, let's move on to the last important area of form.

### **Body Positioning: Keep It Straight and Firm**

Looks like young Bubba is bench-pressing again, and this time he's going for his record and pulling out all the stops. Notice that he's arching upward from the hips. His behind is actually in the air, no longer in contact with the surface of the bench. Note, too, how his arms extend unevenly, as he seesaws the weight upward, boldly defying gravity, inch by awkward inch. You guessed it — the last common affront to exercise form that I'll address involves unseemly bodily contortions — wiggling, squirming, writhing, or tilting during a repetition.

Although I don't endorse weightlifting competitions for everyone, the sport of power lifting undeniably promotes proper form. Folks like Bubba who do partial repetitions, bounce the weight, writhe and twist and use uneven arm extension might be surprised to find that in official bench-press competitions, the bar must be allowed to sit motionless on one's chest before a judge claps to signal the start of the lift. Further, if you raise your bottom from the bench or extend your arms unevenly, the lift is no good. These rules are not arbitrary, like a fault line in tennis; rather, they flow from the principles of good, safe body positioning. They are just as important to Mom's or Grandpa's strength-training regimens as they are to high-level competitive power lifting. Following them will maximize muscle development and minimize the risk of injury.

## Form Must Be the Norm

There are other elements to proper form, such as breathing naturally and not holding your breath. A good fitness trainer can help you learn these and all the proper body mechanics specific to a given exercise. This is usually more easily done with machines than with free weights ( barbells and dumbbells). Further, many of the advanced strength-training machines (like the MedX line) you find in gyms today even come with detailed laminated cards attached that illustrate proper form.

Recall once more the book of Genesis. The world itself was all void and darkness after all, until God's Spirit gave it *form*. With that in mind, let's move now to the bottom of the order, the last strength-training principle on our list: that of order itself.

MUSCLE MASTERY TIPS AND FACTS #8

*Free Weights Versus Machines*

Some strength trainers still debate the virtues of free weights ( barbells and dumbbells) versus strength-training machines (such as Nautilus, Hammer Strength, Kaiser, Life Circuit, et al.) as if one were forced to choose one way or the other. In truth, they are all helpful tools for building muscular strength. Free weights have some advantages in that a host of exercises can be performed with a few simple bars and barbell plates. They also require balance and work many supportive muscles during each exercise. They can be dangerous, however, and most free-weight exercises do not provide resistance through a muscle's full range of motion. I built most of my own strength from free weights. Now, in my mid-forties, I still lift very heavy weights, but I use mostly machines, because they're easier to use and more time-efficient (no loading and unloading), they tend to work muscles through a more complete range of motion, and they leave me less prone to minor injuries, even when I'm working exceedingly hard. I know many other former serious weightlifters who adapt to the aging processes by lifting lighter weights for higher repetitions, and accepting smaller, weaker muscles as an inevitable result of aging. I prefer to keep my workouts short, sweet, and as heavy as possible, using impeccable form and mostly machines.

Actually, even in my peak days of power-lifting competition, I used both, but sparingly. Free weight *versus* machines? Why the *either-or*? They can both get the job done.