

PAIN-FREE PERFORMANCE

MOVE BETTER,
TRAIN SMARTER, AND BUILD
AN **UNBREAKABLE BODY**



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with **GLEN CORDOZA**

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LAS VEGAS

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INTRODUCTION

“How many of you are currently in pain?”

I'm standing at the front of the room, teaching the Pain-Free Performance Specialist Certification (PPSC) to a group of elite trainers and fitness professionals.

When I ask that question, nearly half the room raises a hand.

Then I ask another:

“How many of you feel less than your best?”

Almost every hand goes up.

It always stops me for a moment. Because these aren't weekend warriors or casual gym-goers. These are some of the most skilled, experienced coaches in the industry—the top 1 percent. They know how the body works. They know what training is supposed to do.

And still, so many of them are stuck. Fighting through pain. Managing injuries. Dealing with that frustrating sense that something just isn't moving the way it should.

At first, it's hard to make sense of it. How can the people who know the most about exercise still feel broken by it?

Exercise is meant to be the fix. It's the tool we turn to for more strength, better movement, and a body that lasts. When used correctly, it recalibrates everything. It rebuilds posture, reinforces stability, restores range of motion, and reawakens the parts of us that go offline from sitting too long or moving too little. It's one of the most powerful levers we have for promoting physical health and longevity.

But only when it's done right.

Because when it's not—when training skips over the fundamentals or fails to match the needs of the individual—it stops being a solution and starts becoming a source of stress. It places more demand on a system that's already out of balance. And instead of promoting health, it pushes the body deeper into dysfunction.

Here's where most people go wrong.

They jump into training that's too advanced or too random. They chase intensity before they've earned it. They skip warm-ups, ignore pain signals, and let social media trends dictate which exercises they do—without ever asking whether those movements are right for their body.

Over time, those missteps add up. Movement quality breaks down. Injuries creep in. And training becomes another thing to work around.

At that point, it's no longer helping. It's holding them back.

That's what brought those trainers into the room with me. They were there to learn a system—one that integrates performance and pain prevention. One that would help them—and the people they coach—not only train harder but train smarter.

That's the system this book will teach you.

THIS IS WHAT YOU'RE REALLY AFTER

If you've picked up this book, chances are you're looking for a better way to train. You want to feel good in your body. You want to move with confidence and consistency. And most importantly, you want to know that your effort is building something sustainable.

That's the promise of pain-free performance. But to turn that promise into progress, it's important to understand what it means.

Pain-free means doing no harm while training. It means you are able to exercise without eliciting a pain response. It doesn't mean the absence of all discomfort. And it certainly doesn't mean you'll wake up one day and never feel pain.

After working with thousands of clients and coaches around the world, I've stopped expecting anyone to be completely pain-free. That mythical unicorn doesn't exist. Pain is part of life. But it exists on a spectrum. On one end, you've got minor aches that come and go. On the other, you've got the kind of pain that sidelines you and chips away at your confidence to move.

What matters is how you respond to it.

If you stop moving entirely—"let's take six weeks off and see how it feels"—you slide into deactivation. Muscles weaken. Posture collapses. You become a lesser version of yourself.

If you try to grind through with a "no pain, no gain" mentality, you stack wear-and-tear on top of dysfunction until something breaks—and then you're forced to stop.

Pain-free training is the middle path—one that respects your body's signals while continuing to build capacity. It's training in a way that improves how you move rather than pushing through or backing away. It means finishing workouts feeling energized, not broken down. Pain-free is about aligning your training with your individual anatomy, movement capabilities, and goals, ensuring each exercise fits you—not the other way around. Ultimately, it's about finding a sustainable approach that empowers you to move with freedom, intention, and trust in your body.

Performance is about how you feel and function in the things that matter to you. It's playing with your kids. It's excelling in your career. It's chasing a personal record in the gym, competing in sports, or completing a physical challenge you've never done before. At its core, performance is your health—how well your body supports your life, in and out of the gym.

Don't fall for the misconception that performance comes at a cost. It doesn't.

Pain-free and *performance* don't compete—they compound. You don't have to choose between feeling good and performing well. When your training stops creating pain and starts building resilience, better performance—and better health—will follow. That's pain-free performance.

PUTTING THE SYSTEM TO WORK— HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS BOOK



NEED A VISUAL? SCAN THE QR CODE.

Throughout this book, you'll find QR codes that link to demo videos for every exercise. These demos were created to help you apply the information more effectively—to give you a moving visual reference for all the exercises covered.

Scan the codes. Watch the demos. Use them as a quick reference for unfamiliar exercises or to verify that you're moving with proper form.

Safe and effective training requires structure. The better you understand how the system fits together, the more you'll get from the work you're about to do.

If you're the kind of person who likes to skip ahead or you want to start training immediately, you'll find detailed programs and training templates in Part 4. You can jump in today. But to get the most out of this process—to make your training more efficient, sustainable, and pain-free—it's worth understanding the why behind the how.

That begins with understanding what it means to move well. In Part 1, you'll learn the real meaning of *form*—not as a rigid set of rules but as a dynamic, personalized framework for safe and effective movement. You'll understand why bracing, breathing, and stabilization help you avoid injury and unlock better performance. You'll also step into the movement mastery mindset, a philosophy that places quality before quantity and intentionality at the center of every rep.

In Part 2, you'll learn the 6-phase dynamic warm-up: the go-to prep sequence that blends the best of physical therapy with the principles of performance training. More than just a warm-up, this sequence is your daily opportunity to refine your movement, alleviate pain, and create a consistent results-based practice that supports recovery and long-term progress. Each phase plays a specific role in helping you move with more control and confidence, whether you're getting ready for a workout, winding down after training, or simply restoring your body.

Part 3 is all about the core of human movement—the six foundational patterns: squat, hinge, push, pull, lunge, and carry. You'll explore how to train these patterns in the way your body was designed to move and how to select exercises that align with your anatomy and experience level. You'll learn how to screen and assess your movement to identify what your body can do well right now—and what needs to be refined, adjusted, or built upon.

You'll also discover the movement pattern pyramids—structured frameworks that clearly outline how to regress or progress exercises based on how you feel, function, and perform. These pyramids help you choose movements tailored specifically to your current capabilities, ensuring safe, effective, and continuous progress. From there, you'll dive into biomechanics, dialing in your setup and execution to ensure each movement is progressed appropriately.

In Part 4, the system comes to life. You'll get complete training programs built around everything you've learned—structured to match your movement patterns, address common pain points, and train the physical qualities that keep you strong and capable. Each program includes a dynamic warm-up, a structured workout, and a cooldown aligned with what your body needs most that day.

You'll also find linchpin blueprints—targeted mobility and stability sequences built around the 6-phase warm-up. These are designed to help you restore your most vulnerable areas, prevent and alleviate pain, and improve the way you move. Think of them as your go-to recovery and mobility plans.


Every part of this book serves a purpose. Not to overwhelm you with options, but to guide you toward clarity. To give you a starting point and process you can trust.

This is your blueprint. Your path to pain-free performance.

01



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PRINCIPLES OF PAIN-FREE PERFORMANCE

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PAIN-FREE PERFORMANCE

Form matters. We've all heard the adage that form matters—that to minimize risk of pain and injury and optimize performance, we must move with good form. But what exactly does “form” mean, and why does it matter?

FORM refers to the specific technique and alignment used during movement to enhance motor control and motor unit recruitment. It involves the proper sequencing, symmetry, and stability of the body to ensure movements are smooth and controlled.

And form matters because it promotes

▼
SAFETY:
Proper form acts as a safeguard against pain and injury by minimizing strain on joints, ligaments, and soft tissues. It encourages efficient biomechanics that avoid unwanted stress on vulnerable areas.

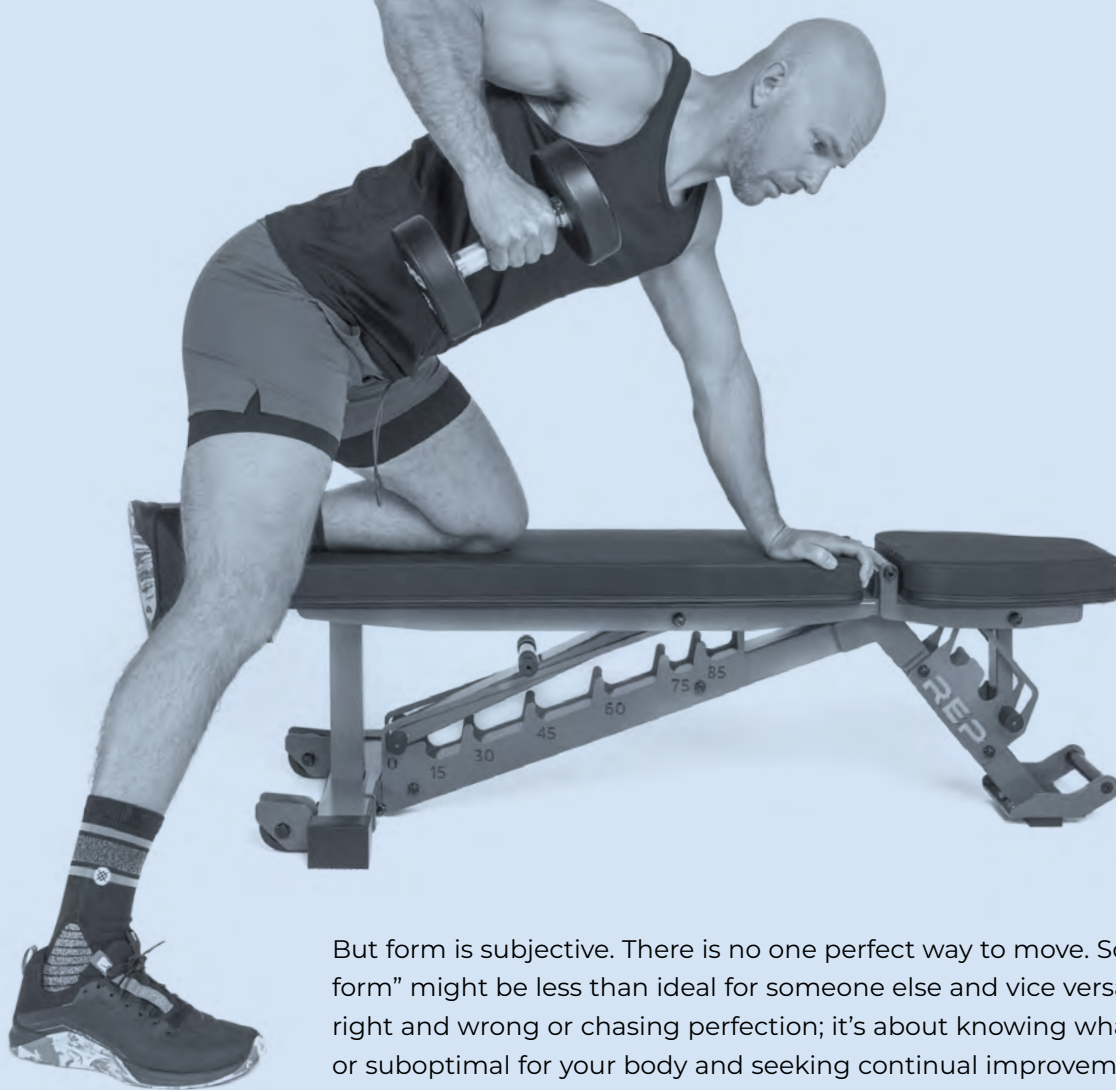
▼
EFFECTIVENESS:
Correct form targets muscles and muscle groups accurately. Dismissing exercise form based on your anatomy and functional abilities can undermine the intended focus by shifting the workload away from the targeted muscles, hindering performance and progress.

▼
PROGRESSION:
Form isn't static; it's a stepping stone to growth. It paves the way for gradual advancement and exploration of new exercises.

▼
EFFICIENCY:
Ideal form optimizes energy and effort, leading to better results in less time.

▼
CONSISTENCY:
Continual adherence to and progressive advancement of proper form amplify the exercise-enhancing, performance-boosting, and injury-protective benefits while promoting movement skills that transfer from the gym to everyday physical activities.

Knowing what form means—and why it matters—is central to pain-free performance because how you move influences your emotional and physical state, your resilience against pain and injury, and your overall performance in workouts and daily life.



But form is subjective. There is no one perfect way to move. Someone's "good form" might be less than ideal for someone else and vice versa. It's not about right and wrong or chasing perfection; it's about knowing what is optimal or suboptimal for your body and seeking continual improvements. It's about following universal principles and guidelines that unlock your movement potential and cater to your unique needs, regardless of the exercise you are performing, your experience, or your functional abilities.

This section delves into these core principles and guidelines (mindset, stabilization, and breathing strategies) that underpin safe, effective, and efficient form, marking the beginning of your journey toward pain-free performance.

MOTOR CONTROL refers to the nervous system's ability to coordinate and execute movements effectively. It encompasses the planning, execution, and regulation of movement patterns, integrating sensory input (like balance and feedback) with muscular output to ensure precise performance.

MOTOR UNIT RECRUITMENT is more specific and refers to the process by which the nervous system activates motor units (a motor neuron and the muscle fibers it innervates) to generate force. The greater the demand for force in a movement, the more motor units are recruited. It's about how many muscle fibers are activated to perform a task and how effectively they are used to produce strength or power.

In the context of form, **MOTOR CONTROL** ensures the movement is executed efficiently and safely, while **MOTOR UNIT RECRUITMENT** ensures the correct amount of muscle fibers are activated to meet the physical demands of the movement.

THE MOVEMENT MASTERY MINDSET

Moving meaningfully is a cornerstone practice for pain-free performance. Whether in structured training or unstructured physical activity, you must adopt a movement mastery mindset. That is an intention to become a master of your movement patterns—to critique, improve, and maintain the quality of your movement forever.



*I'm sitting in the bleachers closely observing my client—
an internationally ranked top ten tennis player—work with her
coach ahead of the Australian Open.*

Nearly three hours have passed, and I can't help but marvel at the level of meticulous detail they're pouring into her serving technique. They're making tiny, barely perceptible adjustments to her stance and body position to get her a fraction of a percent better. Every motion is an embodiment of finesse and precision. There is a reason she is one of the best competitors in the world. She has a deep respect for the game, and she's willing to spend countless hours refining movement skills, delving into the minutiae of form, all for the sake of optimized performance.

It's a trait that's common to every professional athlete I've had the honor of working with. They dedicate four to six hours daily to honing their intricate sport-specific skills, driven by an unwavering pursuit of movement mastery. For these athletes, movement mastery embodies a mindset characterized by purposeful intention, continuous refinement, and precise execution. It's about cultivating synergy between mind and body and embedding movements so deeply that they become second nature during competition. It's this fusion of acute mental focus and physical efficiency that defines their approach—the orchestration of technique that merges mindfulness with motion.

As the trainer to these athletes, I was brought in for a specific purpose: to help them achieve pain-free performance. With a background in sports performance and physical therapy, I designed strength and conditioning programs around the demands of their sport while addressing whatever pain or injury they had with individualized training. It was my job to keep them healthy—to build their strength and make them more resilient so they had less pain and better performance in their sport.

The tennis star, for example, was banged up from toes to crown. She had ankle and foot issues, hip and back pain, shoulder problems, and the list went on—and changed from day to day. Finding exercises that she could perform without pain was straightforward. I would simply scale the exercise and load to match her current level of performance for whichever movement pattern she was performing (an approach that you will learn how to implement in Part 3). However, getting her to perform these movements with the same level of intent and focus that she put into her tennis serve was a challenge.

On the court, she had a movement mastery mindset. She was focused on her body position, sequencing and coordinating her actions to be as effective and efficient as possible. In the gym, however, she essentially punched the clock, did the work, and went home. She did not apply the movement mastery mindset to training, which surprised me. After all, we're talking about a world-class athlete who routinely spends several hours focused on one sport-specific skill—and who often struggles performing to her true potential due to constant pain.

In our sessions, we're building foundational movement patterns that are intrinsic to human biomechanics, aiming primarily to improve the quality of her movement: enhancing muscle coordination, increasing joint stability, and ensuring pain-free motion. If she improved in these areas, she would have more capacity and less pain performing the skills in her sport. She would get stronger and more resilient everywhere—and for everything. But she hadn't connected those dots.

Interestingly, this disconnect wasn't unique to her. Many professional athletes I worked with over the years had a similar mentality. They pursued movement mastery within their sport, but rarely applied it to their exercise form in the gym. It's not that they didn't have the ability to perform exercise movements with pristine form. They have a level of movement mastery that most of us can only dream of. It's that they didn't make the connection between their exercise form and the positive impact it would have on their sport performance, longevity, and overall movement health.

We can all relate to this. We devote a ton of focus and energy to the things we enjoy (even if it hurts us) and half-ass the things we don't (even when it is good for us). What we need to do is shift our perspective and approach exercise form with the same level of intent we would have when performing the activities that we are training for. Whether you are perfecting a serve for the Australian Open, seeking an edge in the next pickleball tournament, or simply training to feel and move better, adopting a movement mastery mindset in the gym can lead to improved performance and resiliency in sport and in life. It will help you build your skills faster and prime your mind and body for better, safer movement. Because when you strive to improve the quality of your movement, you get stronger, faster, and more efficient. You will have fewer occurrences of pain and more reliable functional abilities in all areas and for every activity.

MOVE WITH PURPOSE

In the early 1990s, Anders Ericsson—a Swedish psychologist renowned for his research on human performance—published a paper along with his colleagues titled “The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance.” In this paper, they introduce the concept of deliberate practice, emphasizing the role of purposeful training to improve performance and expertise. Ericsson’s work debunks the mere reliance on innate talent and underscores the significance of quality over quantity in practice.¹

To achieve movement mastery, you must apply the concept of deliberate practice in your training. Deliberate practice refers to a systematic and focused regimen designed to improve certain aspects, offer feedback, and refine performance. It involves pushing beyond your comfort zone, identifying weaknesses, and making continuous, targeted improvements—every single time.

This is the exact approach that the tennis prodigy and her coach used when practicing her serve. They broke down the overarching skill into individual components (stance, body position, sequencing, etc.) with a keen understanding of each nuance, and then refined them based on her performance. She didn’t mindlessly repeat the movement. Together they sought ways to make every repetition better with a specific objective: improving the efficiency and repeatability of her serve.

Mastering the modality-specific movements in the 6-phase warm-up in Part 2, as well as the foundational movement patterns in Part 3, requires a similar approach with the same goal. You need

▼ MINDFUL AWARENESS:

To engage mentally with the movement, being present and in tune with your body’s feedback so you can recognize potentially problematic patterns and make the necessary adjustments.

▼ VALUE OF QUALITY:

To prioritize quality over sheer effort or speed.

▼ CONTINUOUS LEARNING:

To be open to feedback, whether from trainers, peers, or self-assessment, and adjust accordingly to refine your form.

▼ MIND-MUSCLE- MOVEMENT CONNECTION:

To develop a deeper connection between the mind, movement, and muscles being used, ensuring accurate activation, tension, and fluency.

▼ CONSISTENCY:

To engage in regular and deliberate practice, ingraining the proper movement patterns until they become second nature.

Put together, the components of deliberate practice provide a process not only for achieving a high level of skill but also for patterning efficient and automatic movement. When it comes to exercise form, intuitive execution is the ultimate goal. It’s the “why” that influences the “how”—the driving force behind your purposeful practice.

THE RELIABLE AUTOPILOT

Learning a movement, like a squat or a tennis serve, requires considerable mental engagement. Initially, each motion might feel awkward as your brain and body work to internalize the correct pattern. But as you practice and refine the movement, your nervous system becomes more efficient at coordinating the muscles and joints involved. With time and deliberate practice, properly executed movements become intuitive, requiring less conscious thought and more automatic execution. When a movement becomes second nature through repetition and correct motor learning, it's like switching on a reliable autopilot for your body. You don't have to think about every little detail of the movement; the body "knows" what to do, just as an autopilot manages the nuances of flight once activated.

This is the essence of movement mastery. The foundational movement patterns are *foundational* because they are the basis for human movement, meaning they are patterns buried in the daily activities of life. Your practiced movements in the gym translate to real-life situations. When you strengthen them, and you can control them through your full ranges of motion, you encode a reliable autopilot for movement that is there to assist you when your focus is elsewhere—whether that is catching yourself from an unexpected fall or moving in a way that places less wear and tear on your body. It's a protective mechanism against injuries, much like an autopilot can ensure the plane stays on a safe and efficient course even in turbulence or challenging conditions. Stated differently, you have a level of proficiency that is automatic, so you don't need to put conscious effort into moving effectively when it matters the most.

In this way, the gym is a place where you rehearse for life's unexpected scenarios. The more repetitions of quality movement you do, the better you can fortify yourself against unforeseen challenges. When a challenge comes, you've put in enough focused reps that efficient movement is reactionary. This isn't about forecasting every challenge but about preparing your mind and body to respond with precision. Whether you're performing an exercise in the gym or just moving through life, the goal is to program an autopilot for movement that is reliable—that will fly you where you need to go, regardless of the task or activity.



REPROGRAMMING THE INTUITIVE AUTOPILOT

What feels natural may not be optimal. Take the foundational movement patterns you perform daily: squatting, hinging, lunging, pushing, pulling, and carrying (locomotion). While these actions are intuitive and ingrained, their efficiency and reliability are not assured, especially if you haven't consciously refined these patterns or adapted them to your unique physical needs.

This is where challenge meets opportunity—to reprogram your intuitive autopilot. The goal isn't to discard what you already know about your

body but to unlock your movement potential by refining and enhancing what already exists within you. This demands a comprehensive approach, transcending mere adjustments to a squat or tweaks to a lunge. It's about awakening and optimizing the skills built into the patterns, custom-fitted to your anatomy and capabilities. Through this process, you will make quality movement not just a practice but a habit, effortlessly integrated into every action, ensuring a lifetime of pain-free performance.

THE MOVEMENT MASTERY FRAMEWORK

A reliable autopilot means using the correct muscles at the right time, with the appropriate force, and in a functional manner. To sequence and control your movement without having to think about it. That's what you're after.

But how do you get to that point? I realize that simply telling you to be purposeful with your training isn't that helpful, even if the concepts are clear and actionable. So, let's map out a path to movement mastery that you can apply to the modalities and exercises in the coming chapters.

It starts with an intention to move well.

Any voluntary movement begins with an intention in the brain. This intention generates a neural blueprint or plan for the movement. An intention to move well refers to a conscious commitment to optimize the quality of your movements in all physical activities, but especially the exercises you perform in the gym. This involves a proactive mindset that does the following:

▼
Prioritizes proper form, biomechanics, and body alignment, ensuring every motion is purposeful, efficient, and safe

▼
Grounds you in the present, enhancing your awareness of body mechanics

▼
Strengthens neural connections that power pain-free movement, enriching physical engagement with every activity you undertake

▼
Deepens your respect and appreciation for your exercise form, harmonizing your attention with the universal movement principles and guidelines explored in this book

Rather than mindlessly pushing through training sessions, you will engage fully with your body, transforming your workout into a mindful practice where every movement is imbued with intentionality and control.

With an intention to move well guiding your practice, channel it toward the development of motor control proficiency.

In the realm of exercise and movement science, *motor control* refers to the process of initiating and directing voluntary movements. It involves the coordination and integration of various body parts and systems—including muscles, joints, and the neurological system—to perform a specific task or activity.

COGNITIVE STAGE



Developing proficient motor control is a step-by-step process, often illustrated in stages.² First, there's the **cognitive stage**, which requires a high level of conscious involvement as you work to understand the nuances of what needs to be done. The key is to remain patient, move slowly, and stay engaged. Performance is typically inconsistent in this stage, and errors are to be expected. If you're squatting, for example, you may not know where to place your feet, how to coordinate your body, or how deep to go. This is the stage where you're working out the technique with the goal of cultivating a strong mind-muscle-movement connection (thinking about and feeling the muscles that power the movement pattern you're working to develop).

ASSOCIATIVE STAGE

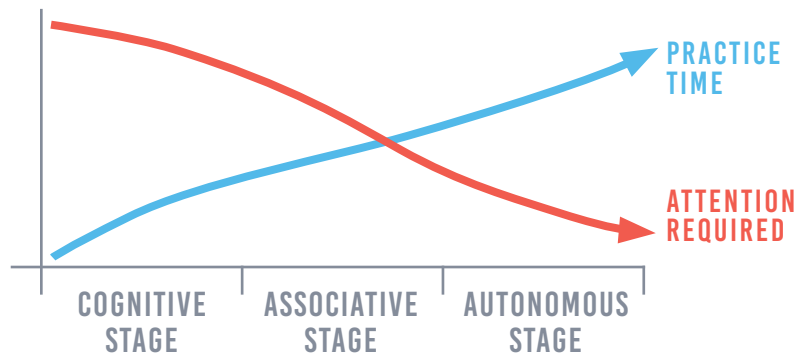


Second is the **associative stage**, which involves associating cues with the required motor actions. This is where you start to apply the components of deliberate practice to refine your skill, reduce errors, and become more consistent. Keeping with the squat example, you will start noticing areas of improvement. You might realize, "If I keep my knees aligned over my toes, I feel more stable," or, "When I engage my hips, shoulders, and core, I don't feel pain in my lower back." Every adjustment and refinement develops motor control proficiency. You will get stronger, enhance your mobility, and gain confidence as your movement quality improves.

AUTONOMOUS STAGE



The third stage is where you start to develop a reliable autopilot. It is the **autonomous stage** where the skill becomes automatic. You don't need to consciously think about the movement; you can perform it reliably and efficiently. For example, you will be able to squat without analyzing every detail, progress to more complex variations, and make intuitive in-the-moment corrections to maintain excellent form.



Once quality movement becomes automatic, direct your attention toward other aspects of performance and explore deeper levels of movement mastery.

With your mind freed up and your actions coordinated, it's time to get creative and find novel ways to challenge your body. Typically, this is achieved through progressive overload (doing more over time) by increasing the load, effort, volume, range of motion, and so on. These methods are valuable—ones that you should certainly utilize—but I want you to take it a step further by exploring variations that uniquely test your movement patterns.

The reason for this is simple. When you progress from having to think about every aspect of a movement to execution without conscious thought, you develop motor control proficiency—meaning you can control every aspect and position of the movement. If you were to pause the movement at any point, you could demonstrate control and positional mastery. This reduces your susceptibility to pain and injury by channeling strain to the muscles, which are the primary stabilizers for your joints, rather than to ligaments and tendons, which are secondary stabilizers. It also amplifies performance because your actions are coordinated and in sync with the rest of the integrated parts. You control every gap and range. This is what it means to move with good form.

But you can only control what you've trained. If you perform only one squat variation, from the same stance, using the same range of motion, with the same form, then you're only pursuing mastery within one narrow aspect of the squat movement pattern spectrum. You want to cast a wide net by hitting as many positions, angles, and depths as possible—to close the motor control gaps that leave you vulnerable to pain and injury.

As you expand your movement repertoire, you will reach higher levels of skill. You will reduce your vulnerability to injury. You will have the power to redefine your ability to move in a variety of situations, ensuring it's based on optimal, efficient, and safe movement patterns rather than limitations or inefficiencies.

HOW YOU MOVE BECOMES THE WAY YOU MOVE

There's an evergreen trend in the fitness industry to sensationalize opposite ends of the extreme when it comes to exercise form. On one end, you must move with picture-perfect, textbook form no matter what you are doing. If you fail to mirror this approach, you are destined for injury and suboptimal performance.

On the other end, form doesn't matter, even if it defies principles of movement science and biomechanics. Less pain and improved performance will come as a result of moving, not how you are performing the movements.

Like many things in life, the truth isn't in the extremes, but in the balance between them.

It's not about chasing an elusive “perfect” movement based on someone else—and it's not about moving with zero awareness or skill. It's about homing in on efficient and effective movement for your unique anatomy and functional abilities and then matching it to the demands of the activities you're engaged in. Understand this: your form doesn't cloak you in an impenetrable shield against pain and injury. However, when you tailor exercise variations, adapt your stance, and adjust your range of motion to align with your body's nuances, you become more resistant to them. Fewer injuries and less pain translate to more consistent training, refined movement patterns, and ultimately, peak performance.

This is why you must prioritize exercise form. **How you move becomes the way you move—and the way you move can make or break your longevity in fitness and in life.** You want an autopilot that is programmed for your body, not someone else's. I have anatomical variations, mobility restrictions, adaptations, and conditioned patterns that are specific to me. You have qualities that are specific to you. If I were to tell you to move exactly like me, then I would be neglecting the aspects that resonate with your unique body and objectives. What's more, if you dismiss form altogether, then your autopilot program might be setting you up for a crash. You're leaving your form to chance and surrendering to the environmental pressures and habits that can misshape your movement patterns in ways that can put your orthopedic health at risk.

Consider the modern-day desk jockey. Hours stuck in a chair, hips anchored at a right angle, and shoulders hunched in devotion to the digital world—a sedentary snapshot that we're all familiar with. The confinement to this posture shackles the hips, limiting hip mobility and driving unwanted forces into the lower back. Overstretched shoulder and upper back muscles jeopardize mobility and joint stability. Repetitive movement patterns can also cause biomechanical repercussions. Baseball and tennis players, for example, develop asymmetries from throwing and serving that can compromise their exercise form.

In Part 3, I will teach you how to screen for these asymmetries and offer strategies for improving them. For now, it's essential to understand that compensations (undesirable deviations in movement form) conditioned by your environment and activities can compromise joint stability, muscular activation, and place excessive strain on the joints, tendons, ligaments, and bones that support movement. It's a ticking time bomb: diminished stability coupled with muscular inefficiency invariably compromises movement health.

The ethos behind pain-free performance training is to counteract and preempt these widespread vulnerabilities that are both a bane to performance and a precursor to pain. Your mission? To fortify your body to withstand the challenges of daily life. To build the strongest engines with the highest capacities possible to overcome the demands that we inevitably face. But—and this is crucial—you must navigate this mission with individualization and customization in mind. While there are many universal principles and cues that apply to everyone, you still need to tailor the movement to suit your individual needs. That way, you pattern a pain-free way of moving that you can consistently replicate when it's time to perform.

In the next chapter, you'll learn how to stabilize and brace your hips, shoulders, and core (referred to as "the pillar"). Exercise form plays a huge role here. It's the basis from which all safe and effective movement stems. From there, you'll discover how to enhance and strengthen your pillar in the preparation phase or warm-up. Then you'll carry these lessons into the foundational movement patterns, where you will learn how to individualize them using targeted screens and assessments to find your optimal setup, stance, and range of motion—as well as how to select and progress exercise variations to match your abilities and goals.

Remember, the road to movement mastery doesn't have a final destination. It's a process that you must constantly undertake. Resolve to start that process now.

THE PILLAR

Movement mastery hinges on organizing your joints in optimal positions and then creating adequate tension to control those positions while moving. Your hips, shoulders, and core, including breathing and bracing strategies, synergistically work together to deliver safe and effective movement. They form the pillar that supports all your training endeavors.

I'm standing behind a mountain of a man—one of the strongest powerlifters on the planet.

“Wrap your arms around my body,” he tells me. We’ve been deep in conversation about bracing—the act of creating tension to stabilize the body—and he is poised to demonstrate its power by giving me a hands-on lesson. Given my relatively meager strength compared to his, I comply without hesitation, awkwardly hugging my arms around his massive torso.

“Tighter,” he bellows. Intimidated, I tighten my embrace, pressing my chest into his back and constricting my arms against his sides.

“You ready?” he asks.

Before I can respond, he draws an enormous breath, his chest, belly, and back swelling like they’re drawing in the power of a storm. In an instant, his entire body transforms into an unyielding statue, breaking my grasp as every muscle fires to life.

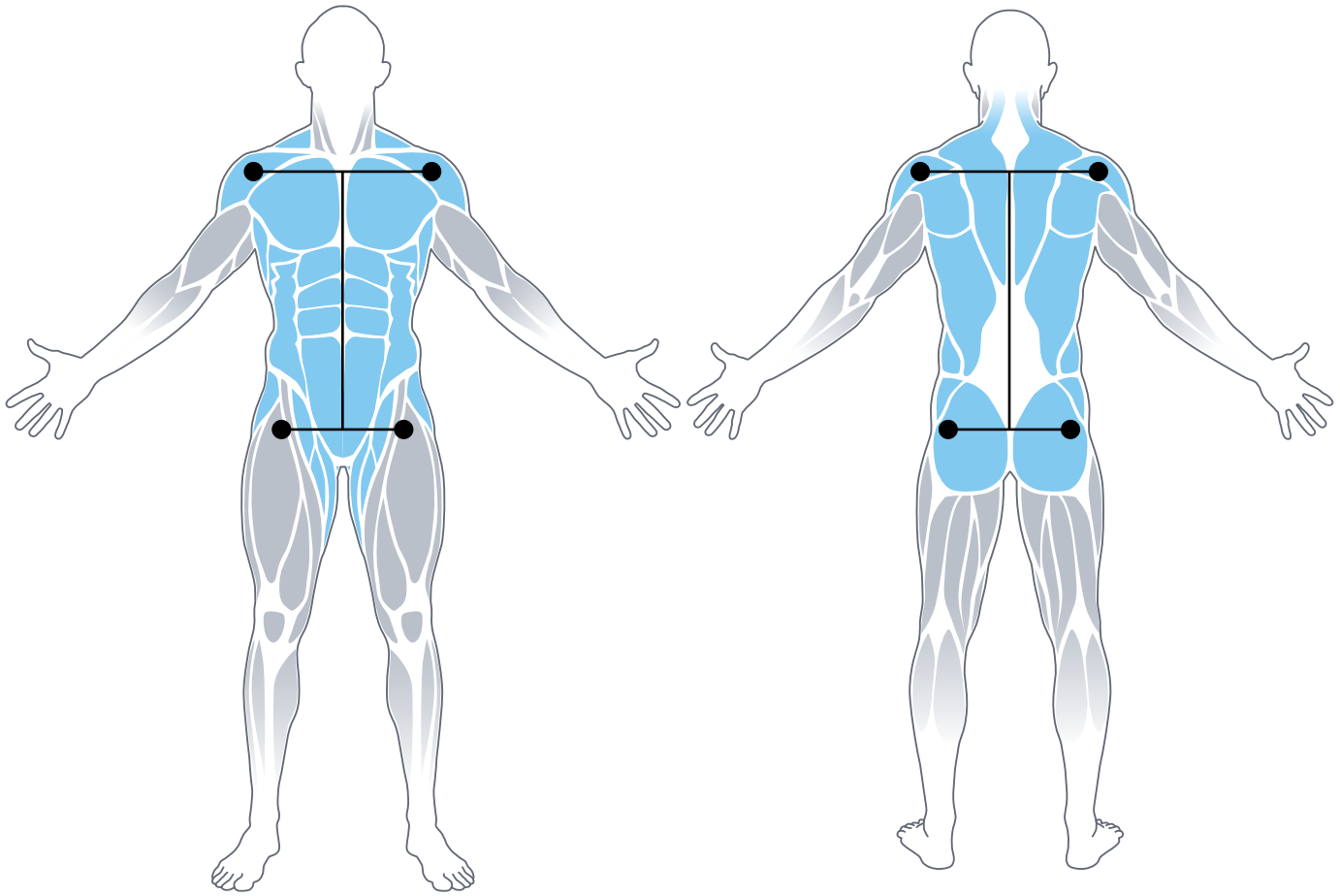
Having made his point, he turns to face me and states simply, “That is how you lift a thousand pounds.”

At the time, I thought I knew what it meant to brace. Every trainer has a commonsense understanding of “getting tight” when lifting heavy weight. Creating tension is necessary to maintain control during loaded movements and prevent the body from defaulting into potentially harmful positions. It’s a concept I learned early in my introduction to the iron game. And I had been practicing and teaching it to clients for years. However, I didn’t have a refined system when it came to applying this all-important skill. That is, until I started working with powerlifters.

When the objective is to lift the heaviest weight possible, there’s a greater emphasis on creating tension and stabilizing the body because the consequences of failure are amplified by the load. If one segment is lax, force seeps from the system, causing the body to compensate into weaker, less stable positions. Because of this, powerlifters focus on getting into the most stable positions possible before a lift, maximizing muscle engagement and strength in a way that protects their body. To them, getting tight is much more than just bracing the spine by contracting core muscles. It’s a deliberate and rehearsed sequence with the hips, shoulders, core, and breath working as one—a technique refined through focused repetition.

That’s exactly what this strange yet illuminating demonstration taught me—not only what it means to get tight but to approach bracing with a movement mastery mindset. When he asked me to wrap my arms around his body, he knew what was going to happen because he had done it countless times. Turning his body into an unyielding statue was part of his reliable autopilot, a volitional skill that he could turn on and off and scale up and down at will, which is the goal.

Fortunately, you don’t need to hug a powerlifter to get your “aha” moment and feel what it is like to truly brace. In this chapter, you will learn a systematic approach to creating tension and stability that is scalable and repeatable. That you can emulate, feel, and apply to your unique body, giving you greater control of your movement, improving your functional range of motion, and reducing the likelihood of flaring up pain or getting injured.



SHOULDERS, HIPS, AND CORE—TOGETHER

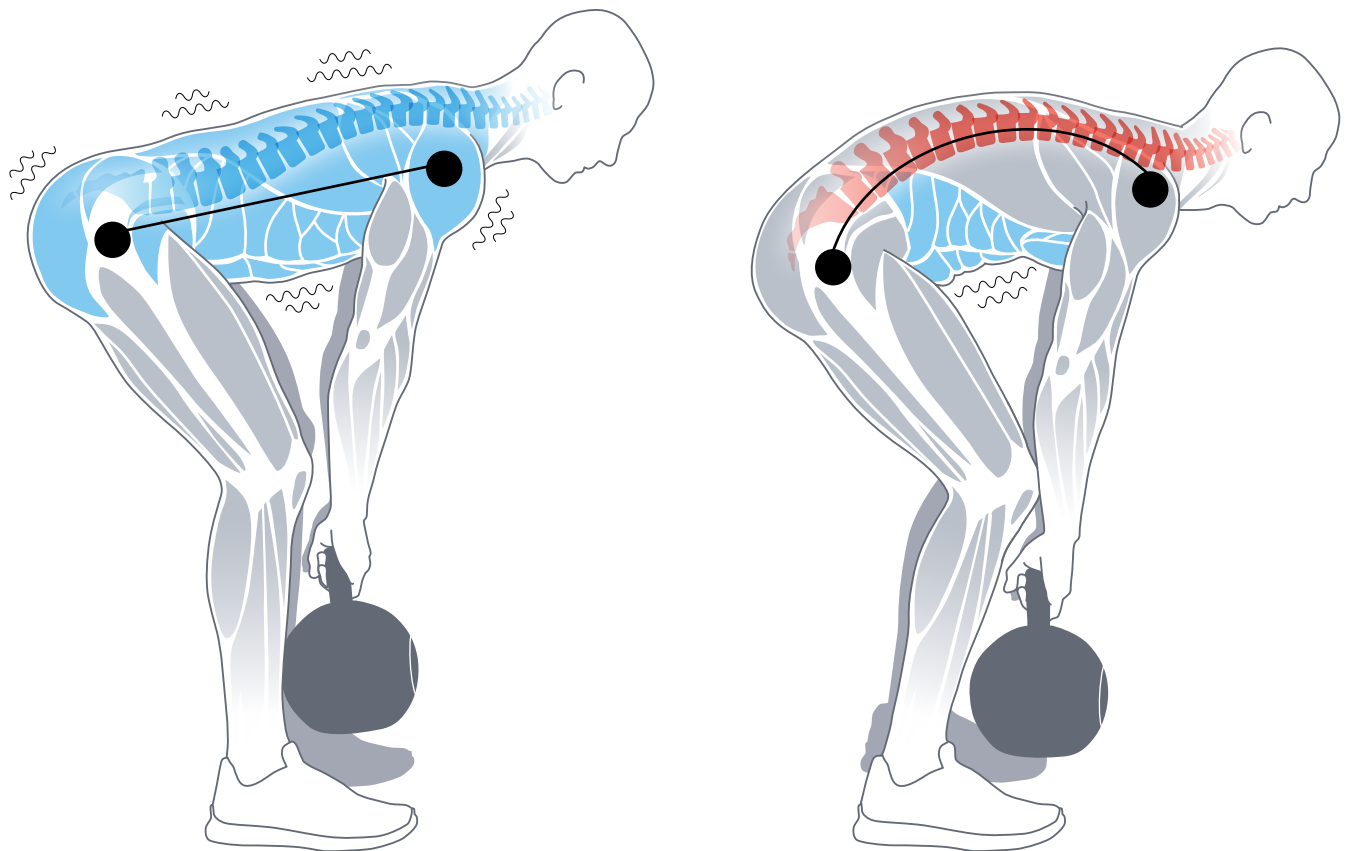
World-renowned powerlifter Dave Tate once told me, “Brace what you want to protect.” In the realm of strength training, much of the focus is on protecting the spine—and for good reason. Spinal injuries can be devastating, and the lower back is among the most common sources of pain for both novice and seasoned lifters. However, if you truly aspire to shield your spine, you must treat your shoulders, hips, and core as an indivisible functional unit. Together, they comprise the central stability line—the pillar—that supports the entire body.

Let's examine this concept through a rudimentary anatomical lens. At the core, there's the spine, the epicenter of our protective efforts. Above the core lie the shoulders, the most mobile joints in the human body. Below the core are the hips, our second most mobile joints.

Now envision a scenario where you brace your spine by contracting your core muscles but fail to create tension in your hips and shoulders. As you introduce a load and initiate movement, the shoulders and hips seek stability—often defaulting into positions with much less muscular control—and force bleeds into your spine. Even with a firmly braced core, the spine is ill equipped to withstand the additional force, leading to potentially harmful compensatory patterns that wear on the vertebrae (individual spinal segments).

When it comes to bracing, your aim is not isolated tension, but rather the harmonious integration of tension across all three segments of the pillar. To achieve such synergy, you first must examine the anatomical positions that facilitate maximal strength and stability for the shoulders and hips. Only then can you successfully brace the spine by creating tension through the core.

HARMONIOUS TENSION VS. ISOLATED TENSION



SETTING THE PILLAR

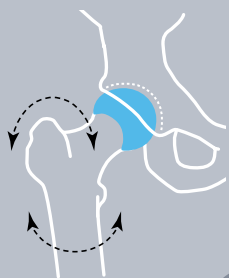
(THE NEUTRAL AND CENTRATION ZONE)

Your strongest position is your safest position. And your safest position is the one from which you can generate the most muscular activation and proximal stability to produce pillar-wide tension and control. You achieve it by aligning your shoulders, hips, and spine into a neutral position so that your muscles can effectively stabilize your joints.

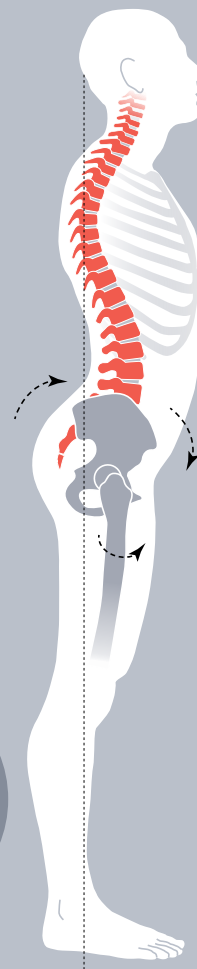
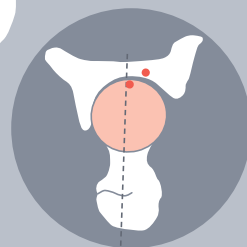
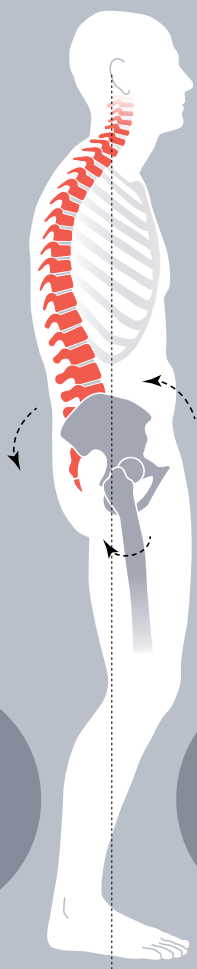
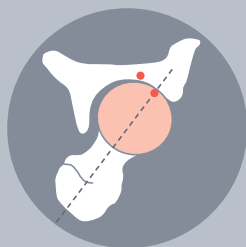
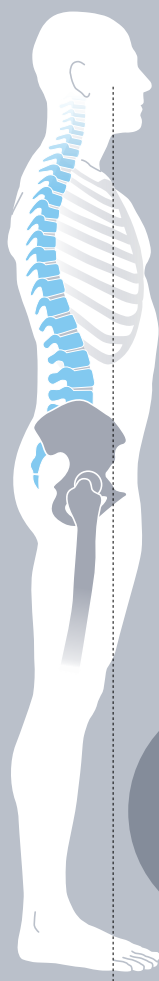
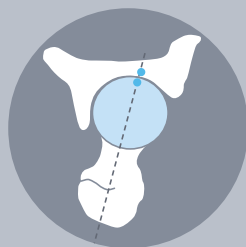
Interestingly, discovering your neutral alignment involves creating tension through muscular contractions. In other words, it's not about getting into the correct neutral alignment and then contracting your muscles to stabilize the position; it's about using muscular contractions to set your neutral alignment, which enables strong and safe positions.

JOINT CENTRATION

The hips and shoulders are ball-and-socket joints. The closer you get to aligning the head of the ball in the center of the joint socket, the more muscle activation you can generate and the stronger the position becomes. This is called joint centration, meaning you have maximal bony surface area contact in the joint.



HIP JOINT

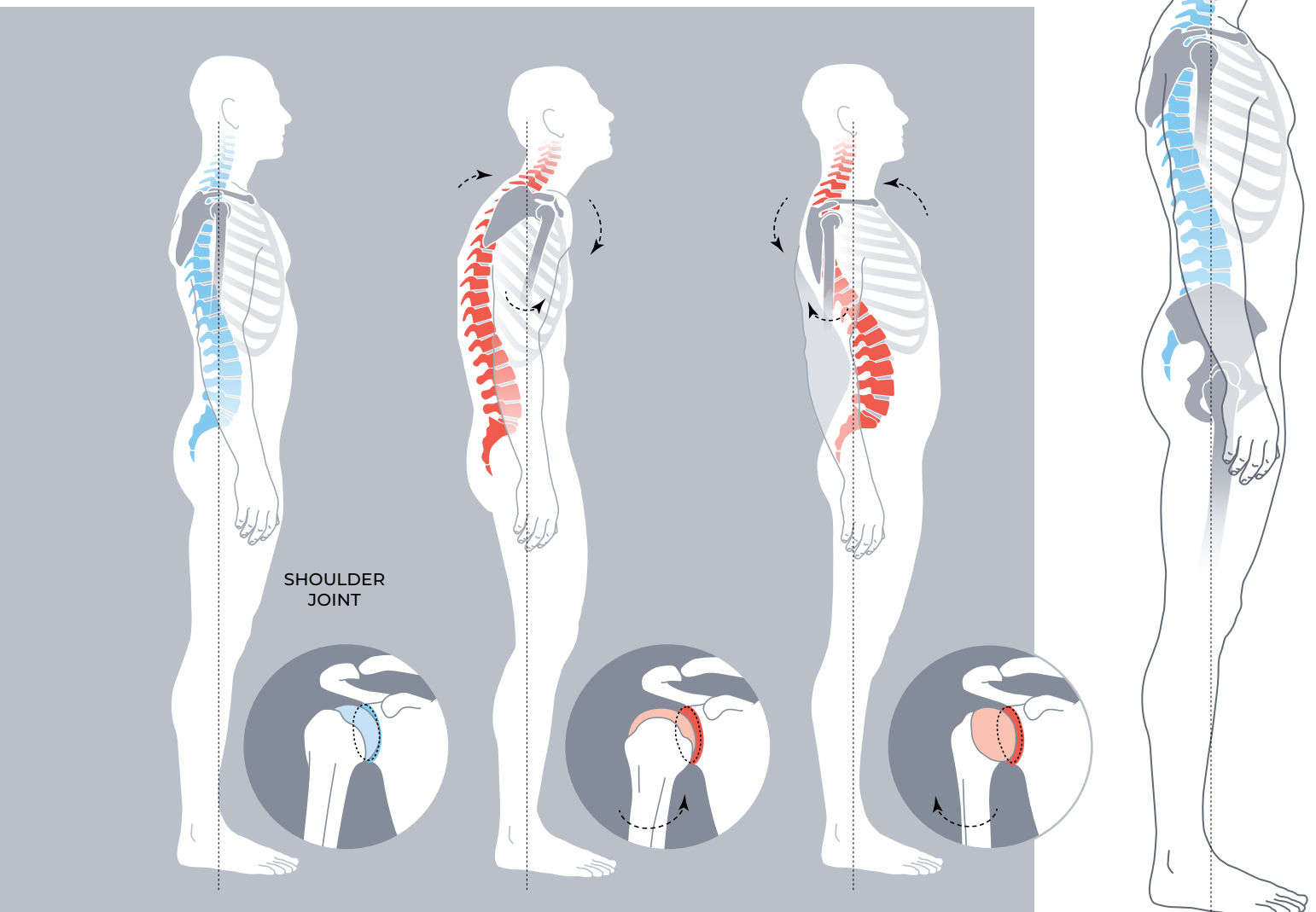


It just so happens that the neutral alignment that facilitates the highest levels of muscular engagement and joint stability is determined by the structural bony alignment of your hips and shoulders.

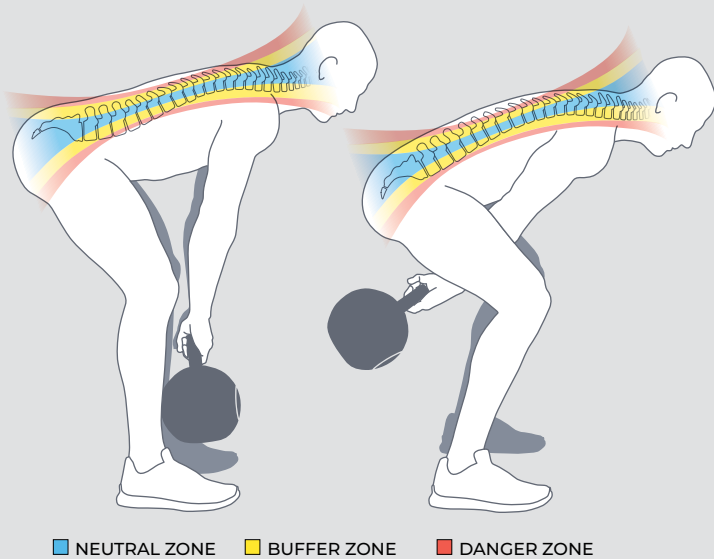
It's crucial to realize that neutral position varies slightly from person to person due to anatomical variations and postural adaptations. So don't worry if your neutral position doesn't precisely align with the illustrations or resemble someone else's seemingly perfect posture. **There is no universal neutral position that looks exactly the same on everyone. There is only your neutral position.**

With this understanding, let's explore how to stabilize the pillar—and how to achieve joint centration and your ideal neutral position by creating tension.

When your shoulders and hips are in a neutral position, the natural curvature of your spine automatically aligns within your neutral zone.



UNDERSTANDING YOUR NEUTRAL ZONE



While the directive is to seek neutral hip, shoulder, and spinal positioning, it's nearly impossible to stay perfectly neutral during dynamic and loaded movements. Take, for instance, a flawlessly executed kettlebell swing where the back appears to be perfectly neutral, meaning the spine stays rigid and there is minimal forward or backward (flexion or extension) motion. Studies show that, even with a neutral spine, there is up to 37 degrees of flexion at the L4-L5 segments.¹ This deviation from a perfectly straight line doesn't mean the movement is incorrect or harmful. In fact, our spine has a “buffering” zone, which allows for some degree of flexion and extension without compromising safety or performance. The same could be said for the hips and shoulders.

The reason you're putting tension in your hips, shoulders, and core is to create and maintain stability. Typically, the less movement that occurs from the pillar, the more stability and control you have over your body and the movement you're performing. But—and this is important to remember—there will be some movement. Your aim: to contain this movement within your neutral zone.

I'm saying “your” neutral zone, not “the” neutral zone, because just as neutral positioning looks different on everyone, your neutral zone is entirely specific to you. It might be a narrow zone or a wider zone based on several interconnected factors:

EXPERIENCE: Those with more movement and exercise experience tend to have better body awareness and greater capacities, which often translates to a wider neutral zone. Take powerlifters,

for example; many deadlift with kyphotic curves (forward rounding) in their upper back but can lift massive weights without pain or injury. They've expanded their neutral zone through gradual adaptation. However, it's a calculated risk. Some operate at the edge of their neutral zone to lift more weight, reducing their safety buffer.

Novices generally have less awareness of their bodies and should operate within a narrower zone until they've learned and patterned proper technique and execution. If you are learning a new movement, experimenting with a different way of performing a movement, or progressing to a more advanced variation, keep your zone narrow before testing your boundaries. Just because a powerlifter deadlifts with a rounded back, doesn't mean you should too. The more you train a movement, and the better you get at maintaining pillar stability during the movement, the wider your zone becomes. It's all about progressing based on your capacity, goals, and abilities.

PRESENCE OF PAIN: When pain is a factor, it can decrease muscle function, leading to reduced stability. This necessitates a more conservative approach to movement, maintaining a range that avoids flaring up the pain. If pain is present, it's prudent to restrict movement within a smaller, more controlled zone, even if you're typically capable of a broader range.

SENSITIVITIES: Like pain, specific sensitivities can alter your neutral zone. For instance, sensitivity to lumbar hyperextension (arching through the lower back) might mean that you have to reduce the range of motion for certain movements and maintain a rigid zone for exercises that stress the area, such as hinge movement patterns.

MOVEMENT PATTERN: The complexity and challenge of a particular movement pattern can vary greatly depending on individual factors such as past injuries, inherent mobility, and your level of experience with the movement. These factors can either expand or restrict your neutral zone. For instance, if you have a history of lower back pain, movements that place a high demand on the lumbar region may require a narrower neutral zone to avoid discomfort. Conversely, if you're highly skilled and conditioned for a specific pattern, you can safely access a wider range of motion within your neutral zone for that movement.

ANATOMY: The unique structural makeup of each person's body, including the degree of spinal curvature or the depth of the hip sockets, directly affects the range of motion that is safe and sustainable. Those with greater flexibility or hypermobility may need to be more vigilant and exert extra control to ensure stability.

INJURY HISTORY: A history of injuries often leads to the body's development of protective mechanisms, resulting in a tightened neutral zone to safeguard against re-injury. For instance, if you've previously strained your back during a kettlebell swing, deadlift, or by squatting too deeply, heightened pillar vigilance is crucial. Tailoring the movement to fit your body's current condition is key, and the assessments outlined in Part 3 will serve as a guide. These adjustments help not only in avoiding further injury but also in accommodating any sensitivities that have arisen as a result of that injury.

LOAD: The weight you're lifting has a substantial impact on your neutral zone. When managing heavier loads, your neutral zone usually narrows, demanding a more precise and controlled range to ensure stability and safety. Conversely, lighter loads can afford a more generous neutral zone, allowing a broader safe range for movement. However, this isn't a one-size-fits-all rule. The specifics—such as the type of movement, your personal lifting experience, and the interplay of other elements like your anatomy and injury history—all contribute to determining the appropriate breadth of your neutral zone under different loads.

SPEED: The pace at which a movement is executed has a direct effect on your neutral zone. For dynamic, unweighted actions such as throwing, the body naturally employs a wider range of motion, allowing for significant rotation and spinal flexion and extension. This means a broader neutral zone is acceptable and often necessary. In contrast, when speed is combined with load—as seen in exercises like kettlebell swings—precision and control become paramount. A tighter rein on the neutral zone is crucial here to maintain stability and to safeguard against the risks associated with the increased momentum and force.

FATIGUE: Fatigue dramatically affects the size and manageability of your neutral zone. As fatigue sets in, muscle endurance wanes, and the ability to maintain optimal form diminishes. This reduction in

muscular support demands a narrower zone, as the body is less capable of safely handling deviations from ideal alignment. The risk of straying outside this zone and encountering injury escalates with fatigue, emphasizing the need for increased pillar tension and careful monitoring of physical exhaustion levels during workouts. In the presence of fatigue, it's crucial to adjust the intensity, load, and complexity of movements to preserve stability and ensure safe practice within a temporarily constricted neutral zone.

By recognizing these factors, you can work on your stability within your specific neutral zone, which can be different each day, for each movement, and across various conditions.

Given the variability, there's no need to obsess over precise angles or textbook positions when it comes to your neutral zone. Instead, shift your focus toward internal bracing, breathing, and how your body responds to a movement or range.

When you feel stable, controlled, and pain-free, you're likely operating within your neutral zone, regardless of how it might look.

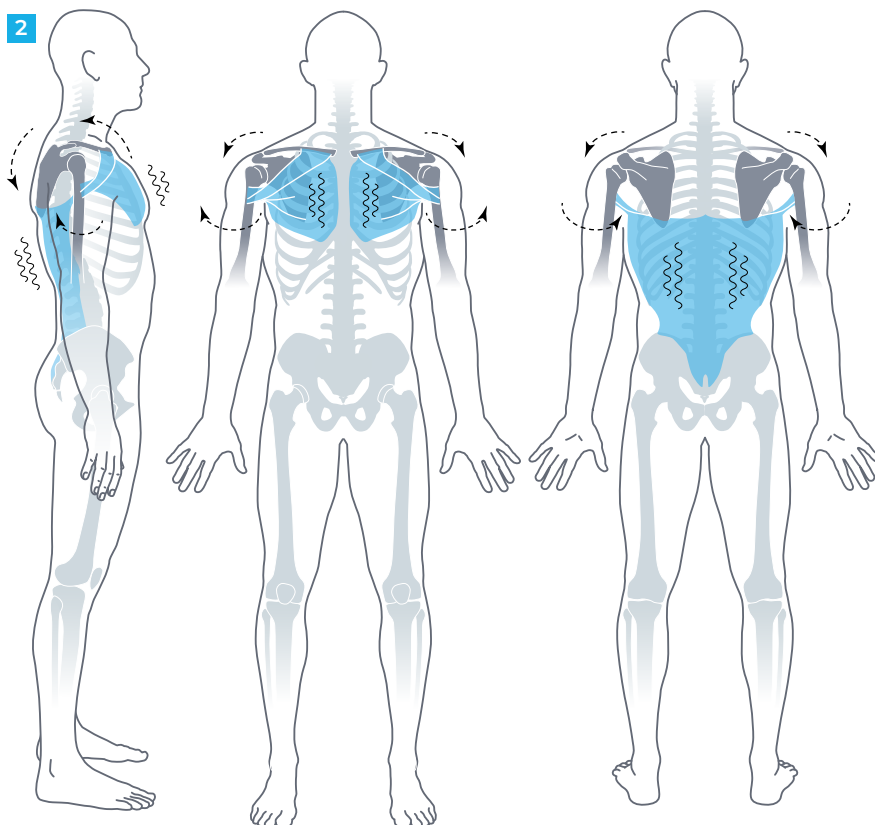
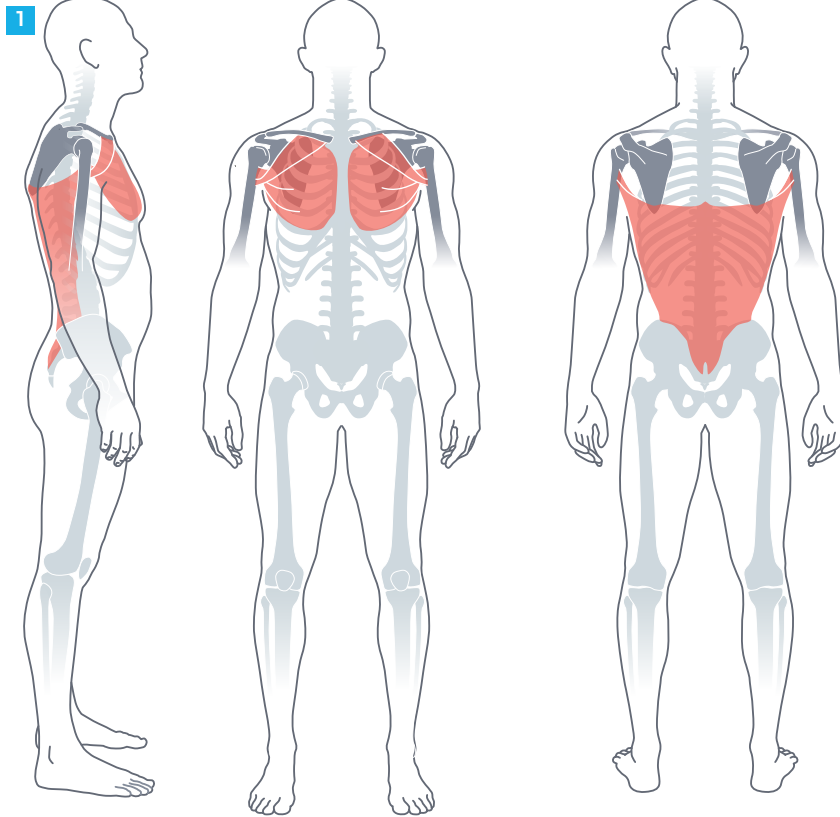
As a general rule, start with a narrow zone, especially when introducing new movements or loads. As you gain proficiency with the cueing sequence (page 34), test boundaries with caution, and only expand your neutral zone through strategic and incremental progressions.

Ultimately, injuries frequently occur due to sudden, uncontrolled deviations beyond your neutral zone, particularly during the eccentric or lowering phase of movements. For example, dropping into a squat, lowering the weight in a deadlift, or reaching the bottom of a kettlebell swing, are critical moments where the risk of moving outside of your neutral zone increases. With the combined pressures of the load as muscles are lengthening under tension and the need to manage movement against gravity, maintaining heightened awareness during eccentric motions is crucial.

Recognizing and respecting your unique neutral zone—and the factors that shape it—can lead to greater stability, control, and pain-free performance across all your movements. This awareness leads to a more informed approach to your workouts, allowing you to adjust your technique, load, and speed in a way that respects your body's current capabilities and limits. By leveraging the full extent of your movement potential within a safe range, you can minimize the occurrences of pain and injury, ensuring that each exercise contributes positively to your overall health and performance.

STABILIZING THE PILLAR

STABILIZING YOUR SHOULDERS



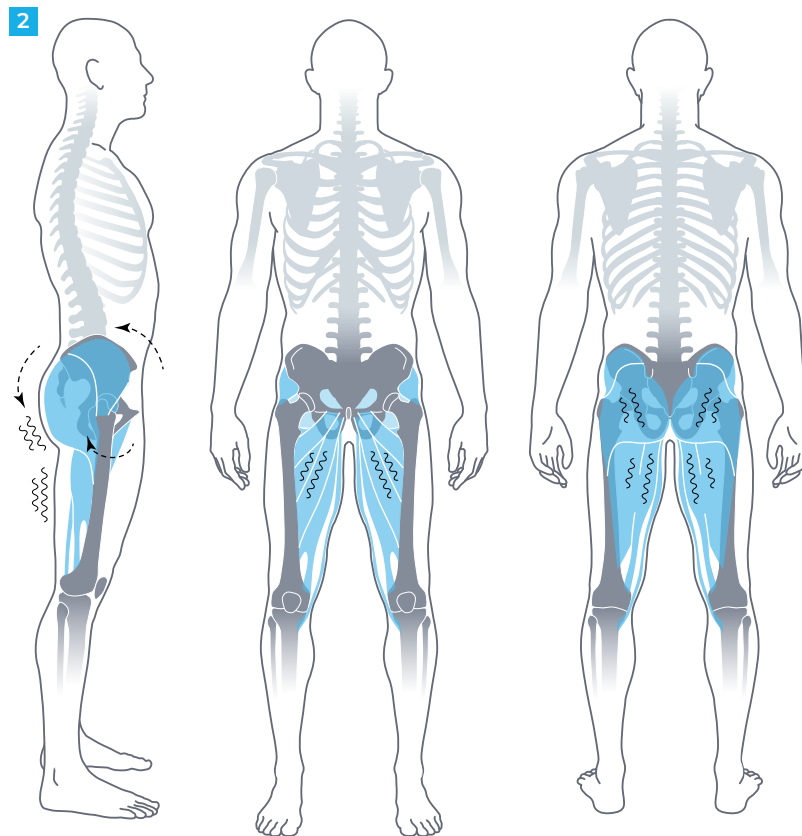
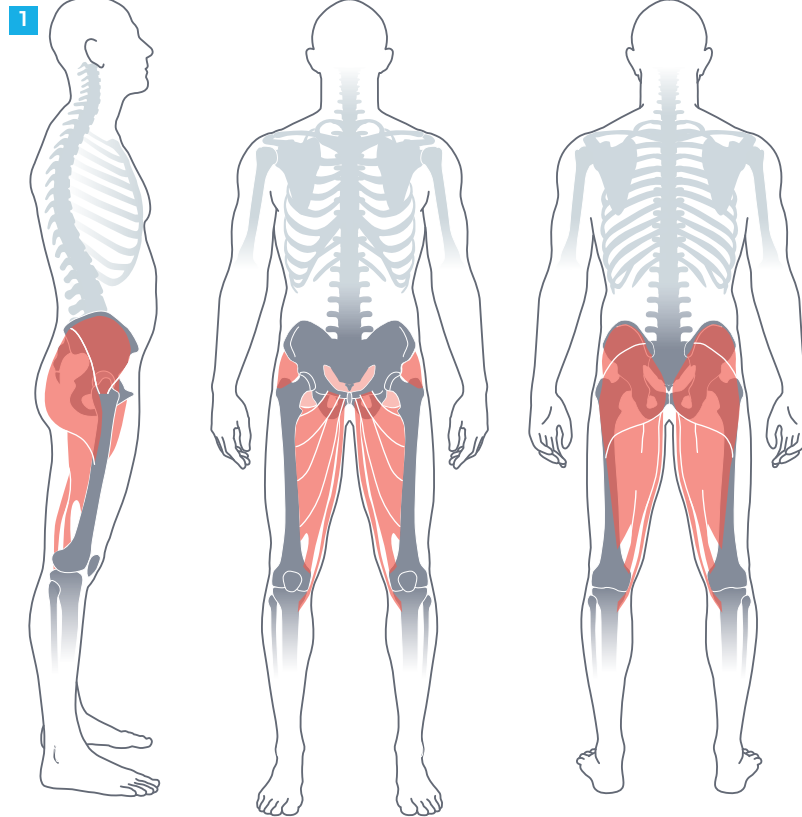
When the goal is to be strong, you want as much musculature involved as possible because—again—what is strong is stable; what is stable is safe; and what is safe is pain-free performance.

Finding your neutral and joint centration zone primes the biggest, broadest, and strongest muscles of the human body. Muscles provide stability, but to create that stability, you need to add tension to the system and let your body, with its unique structure, dictate your neutral position. There are two synergizing steps to this process.

1. Create tension from the inside out. This is achieved by simply co-contracting the muscles that connect and control movement for the shoulders and hips. The position that allows for maximal co-contraction is your neutral and joint centration zone. But don't just take my word for it; feel it for yourself with this simple test.

Stand with your feet straight or slightly turned out, positioned roughly shoulder width apart, and your arms relaxed at your sides. To stabilize your shoulders, create tension by co-contracting your pecs and lats. This is a simultaneous action. In other words, you're not contracting your pecs and then lats, but rather engaging both at the same time.

STABILIZING YOUR HIPS

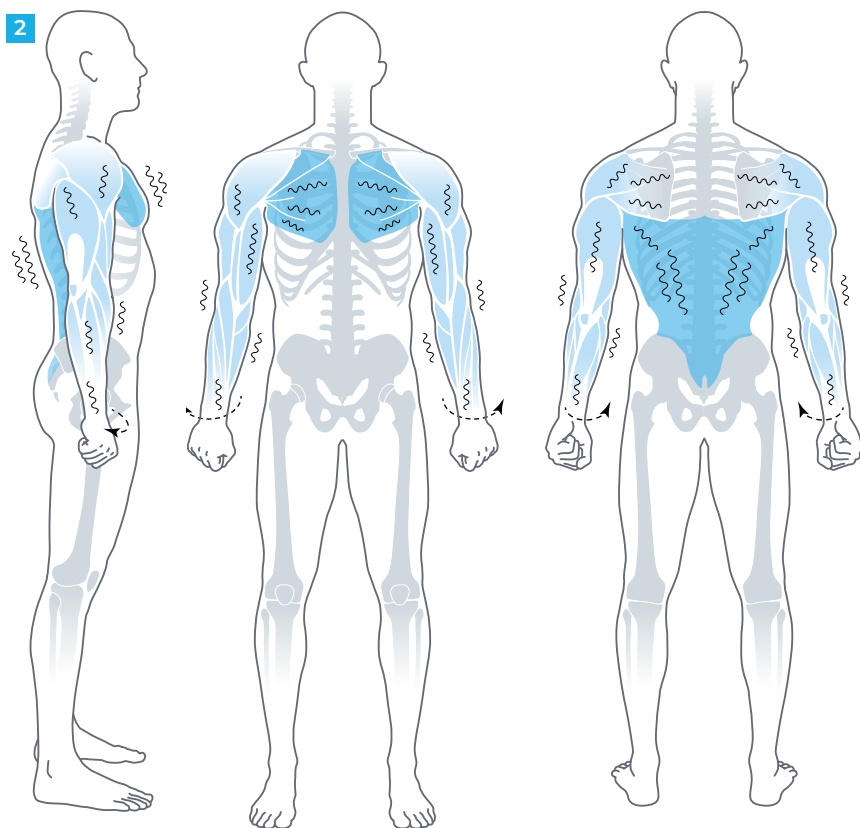
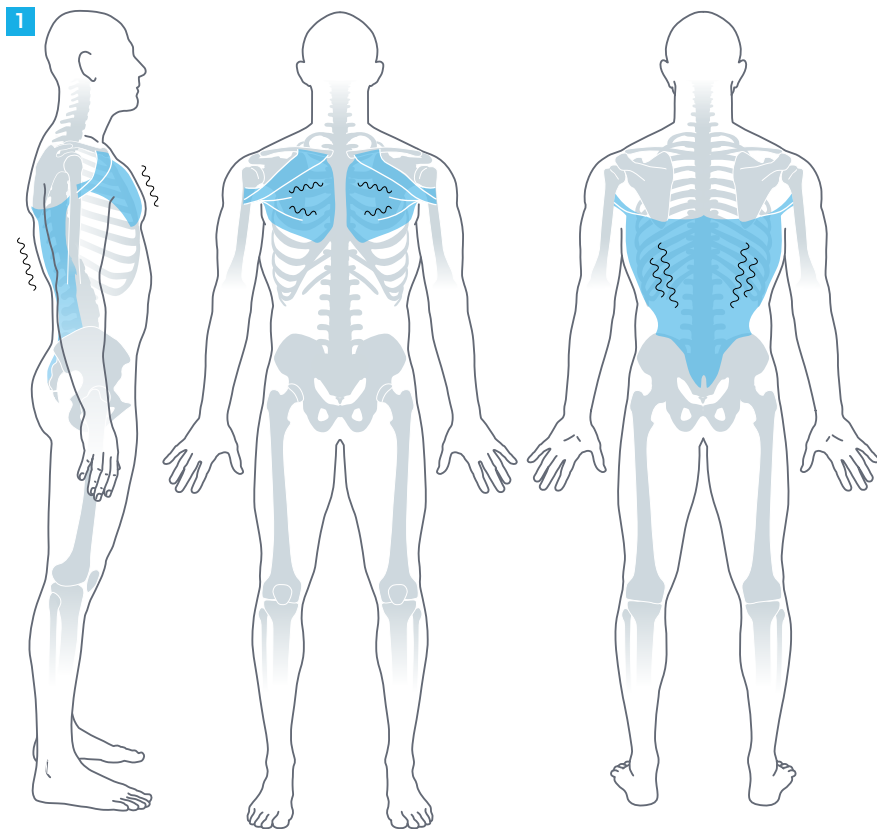


To stabilize your hips, create tension by co-contracting your glutes and adductors. Again, this is a concurrent action. It's difficult to engage your adductors without also contracting your quadriceps. However, maximally contracting your glutes also fires your adductors, so place your focus there—and notice that as you squeeze your glutes, the muscles of your adductors turn on.

Perform each in isolation—shoulders and then hips or hips and then shoulders—and test the level of activation you can achieve based on your position. For example, roll your shoulders forward and then contract your pecs and lats. Do the same thing by pulling your shoulders back. Notice that you can't generate equal levels of activation across both muscles when you venture outside of your centration or neutral zone.

The same is true for your hips and spine. When you dump your pelvis forward or backward (anterior or posterior pelvic tilt) and hyperextend or flex your spine, you can't maximally contract your glutes and adductors or the abdominal and back muscles to the same degree.

STABILIZING YOUR SHOULDERS



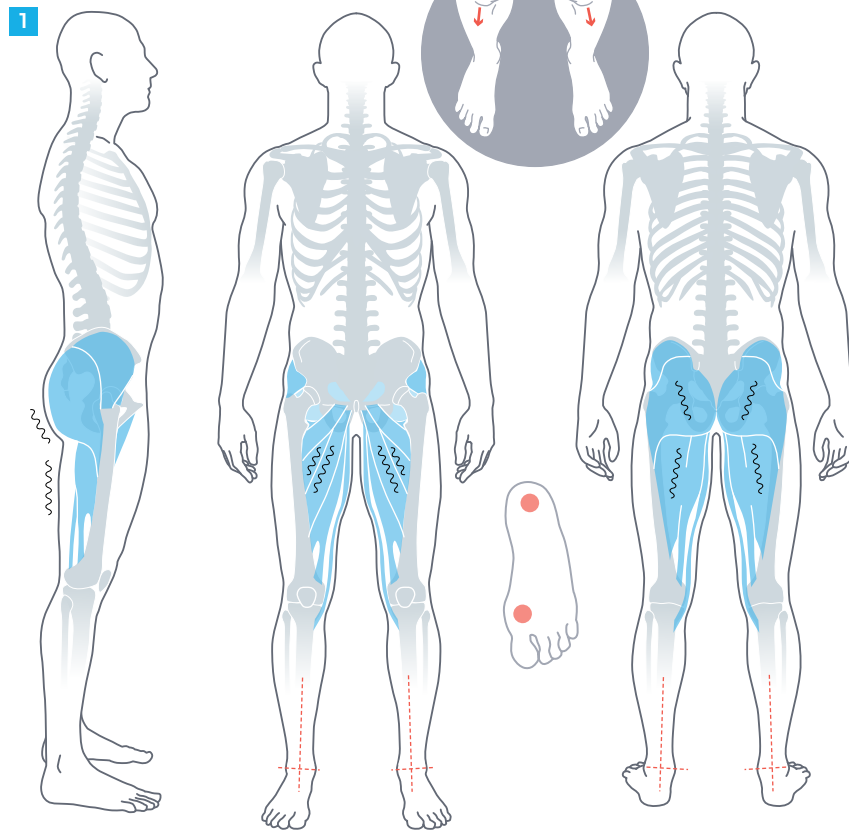
2. Create tension from the outside in.

This is achieved through torque and irradiation. Torque and irradiation work in tandem to enhance muscular engagement and joint stability by harnessing rotational forces and the spread of tension across connected muscle groups. Torque involves creating rotational force, which aligns joints and bones for optimal power and safety. Irradiation amplifies this effect by spreading tension from the engaged muscle to neighboring muscles, increasing overall stability and force production. Together, they ensure that movements are performed in the strongest, safest positions, optimizing the body's mechanical advantage and protective mechanisms against injury.

To test this concept, perform the previous test, starting with your shoulders. Co-contract your pecs and lats, and then clench both fists as hard as you can by engaging every muscle in your arms and shoulders to maximize grip strength. Notice the subtle, natural rotation that occurs through the wrist, elbow, and shoulder (torque), as well as the increased isometric contraction in your pecs and lats (irradiation).

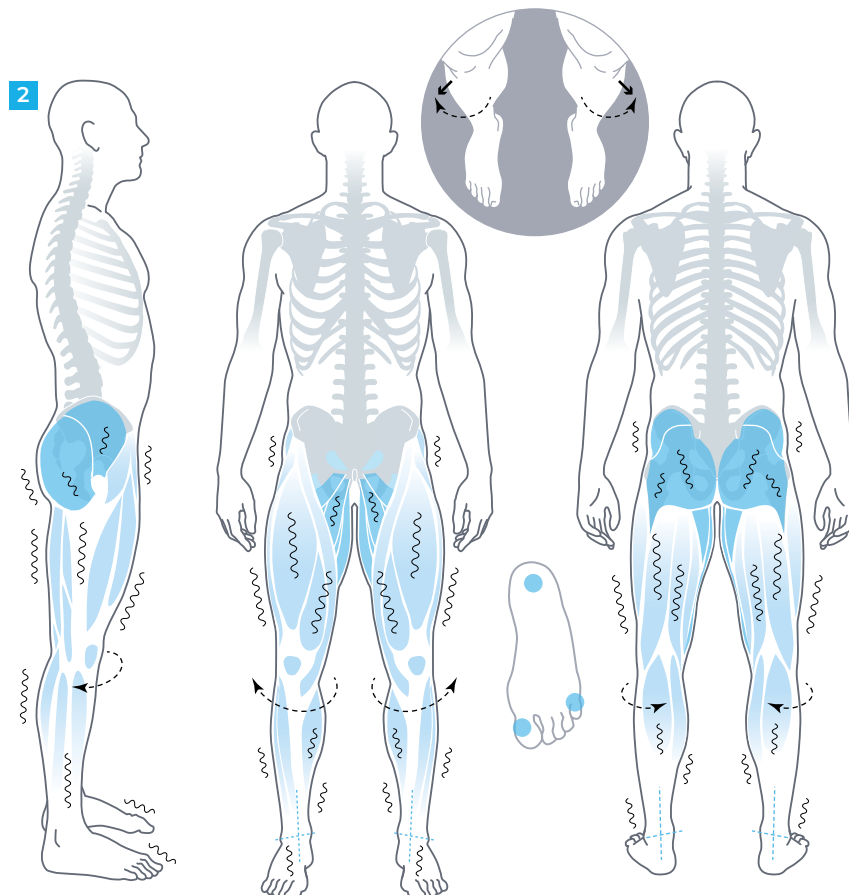
In practical terms, when you apply torque and irradiation—by gripping a barbell or dumbbell tightly, or even clenching the fist of your non-working hand during unilateral (single arm) exercises—you not only enhance the muscle activation in your primary movers like pecs and lats but also ensure greater strength and stability across your shoulders.

STABILIZING YOUR HIPS



Now let's apply this concept to the hips. Again, co-contract your glutes and adductors. Then "screw" your feet into the floor by pressing your big toes down and outwardly rotating your legs without moving your feet. Your big toes are a key driver of irradiation up the chain into your glutes, while the rotational aspect (torque) activates your adductors. Just as you experienced with your shoulders, screwing your feet into the ground creates a chain reaction that bolsters tension in your glutes and adductors, solidifying the stability of your hips.

Whether you are in a bilateral or unilateral (single-leg or lunge) stance, the process is the same. Think grip and rip. You're gripping the ground with your big toe and ripping the floor to stabilize the position.



Don't overcomplicate this step. You're simply creating torque in a way that amplifies the co-contraction. If you increase the engagement and feel more stable, then you're doing it correctly. If you lose tension and stability, then you might be overexaggerating the rotational aspect or rotating in the wrong direction.

Now that you understand how to create tension to find your neutral position—and how to amplify that tension through torque and irradiation—let's tie in the core and put it all together into one sequence.

THE CUEING SEQUENCE

(PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER)

The cueing sequence is a step-by-step process for establishing a stable pillar. It is the rooting mechanism for controlled and efficient movement upon which you can build a reliable autopilot—a trusted system that safeguards your body and optimizes performance for all loaded movements. Each step is marked by specific cues that initiate targeted actions. Approach this sequence with intent, adopting a mindset geared toward movement mastery.

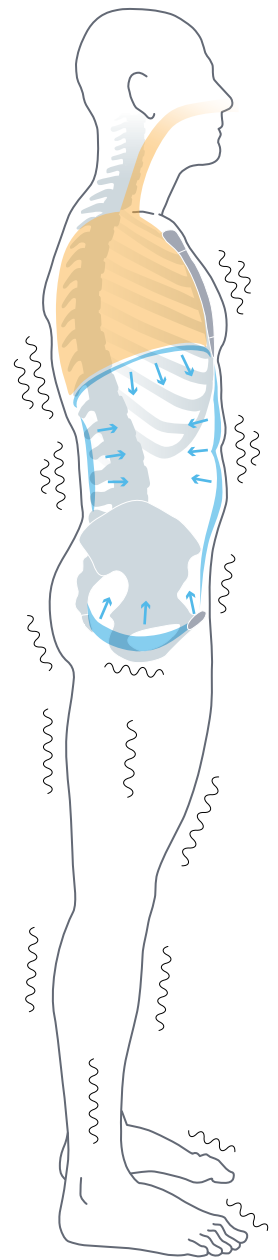
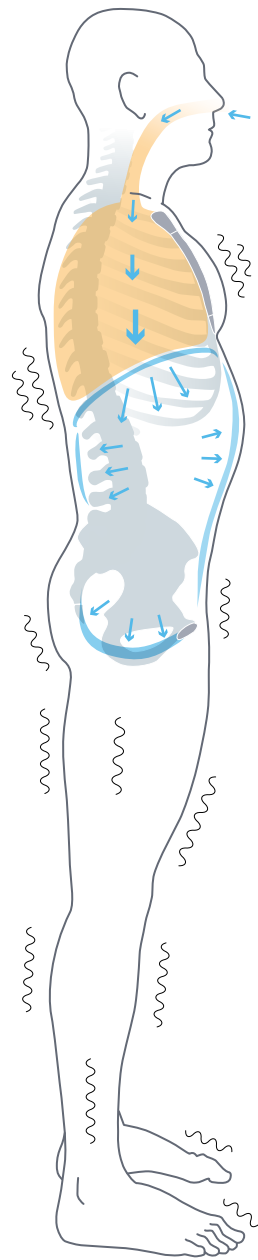
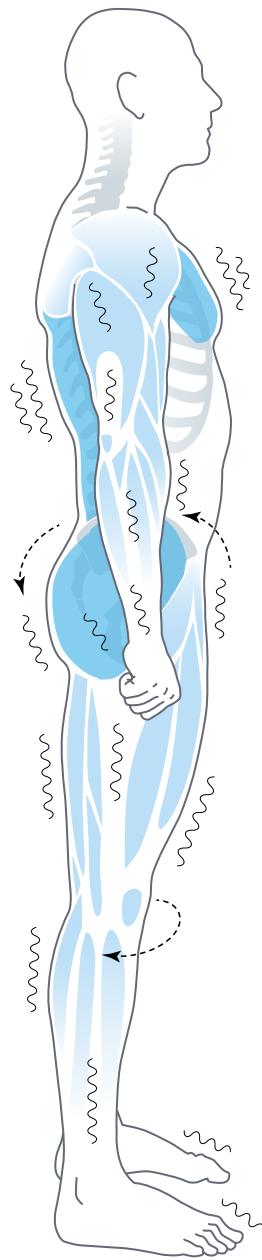
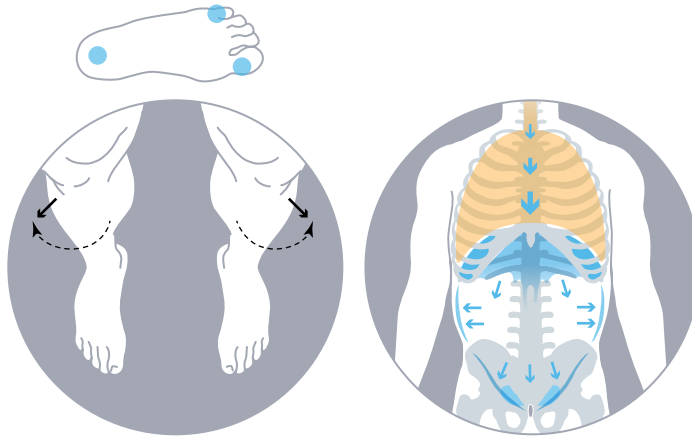
STEP 1:
SHOULDERS Stand with your feet under your hips and your arms at your sides. Co-contract your pecs and lats maximally. Holding this contraction, clench your fists, digging your fingertips into your palms and engaging all the muscles in your arms and shoulders.

STEP 2:
HIPS Co-contract your glutes and adductors maximally. Keeping your glutes and adductors engaged, screw your feet into the ground by pressing your big toes into the floor, creating an arch in your foot, and turning your knees outward without moving your feet.

STEP 3:
BREATHE Inhale fully through the nose, with a 360-degree expansion through your diaphragm.

STEP 4:
BRACE As you reach maximal tidal volume (the maximum amount of air you can voluntarily inhale), hold your breath and engage the muscles of your core. Think about creating tension through 360 degrees around your torso by “crunching” down the distance between the bottom portion of your sternum and top of your pubic bone. Keep everything stable and maximally tensioned for a few seconds. Then exhale and relax.

That’s what it feels like to brace. The purpose of the cueing sequence is to generate maximal tension correctly—as if you were getting ready to lift a thousand pounds. I want you to experience the feeling of turning your body into an unyielding statue because bracing is how you stabilize and protect your body. But it’s not enough to simply create tension while standing upright in a static position. You must be able to apply this sequence in different positions with movement, which you will practice in the 6-phase dynamic warm-up and when training the six foundational movement patterns. Equally important, you need to be able to scale your level of tension to match the stability demands of the task or activity.



START POSITION SHOULDERS HIPS BREATHE BRACE

THE PREPLANNED AND REACTIVE BRACING STRATEGIES

Not all bracing strategies are created equal—what works in a controlled gym setting may not directly translate to the unpredictable nature of sport and play. When it comes to bracing, you must adapt to the context of the movement and activity: whether it's the steady precision required for a heavy squat or the instant reactivity needed for a sprint. Navigating the spectrum from the meticulous control of a loaded barbell to the agility demanded on the field hinges on mastering both preplanned and reactive bracing. Let's explore how these distinct strategies underpin your movement and performance, ensuring you're braced for success, no matter the challenge.

THE PREPLANNED BRACING STRATEGY: FOR SLOW AND PREDICTABLE MOVEMENTS

In the gym, most exercises are performed in a single plane of motion, where movements follow a predictable path such as up and down, side to side, or forward and back.

Consider the squat: You begin standing, descend, and then rise again, moving in a defined up-and-down motion. The movement is predictable, with minimal directional variability, and is usually performed under load, requiring slow, careful execution. During a squat, maintaining the integrity of your hips, shoulders, and core—your pillar stability—is crucial. A loss of stability can lead to force being misdirected into weaker areas, making it difficult to regain a proper, stable posture under the constant weight.

Knowing this, it's essential to brace your body at the start, establishing a rigid, tension-filled base through a neutral pillar. This conscious preparation ensures that you can uphold that stability throughout the movement, preserving the effectiveness and safety of the pillar while in motion.

THE REACTIVE BRACING STRATEGY: FOR FAST AND LESS PREDICTABLE MOVEMENTS

In sports and daily life, movements typically involve multiple planes, engaging your body in complex, multi-directional patterns.

Imagine the dynamic actions in field sports—sudden cuts, jumps, and quick changes in direction. In such fast-paced situations, your movements are less predictable and more varied, often requiring rapid responses to changing scenarios. Here, bracing isn't about setting up a rigid, premeditated brace; it's about responding to stabilization demands on the fly. Whether it's channeling force from your limbs to the ground or vice versa, this form of bracing is less about muscular tension and more about force transference—it's a synergistic, reflexive response rather than a deliberate creation of tension.

Understanding the distinction between the two bracing strategies is vital: **With single-direction loaded movements, bracing is a conscious, deliberate act of creating tension, whereas with multi-directional high-speed movements, it shifts to a more instinctive, reactive brace (often out of non-neutral postures) to maximize speed and adaptability while moving.**

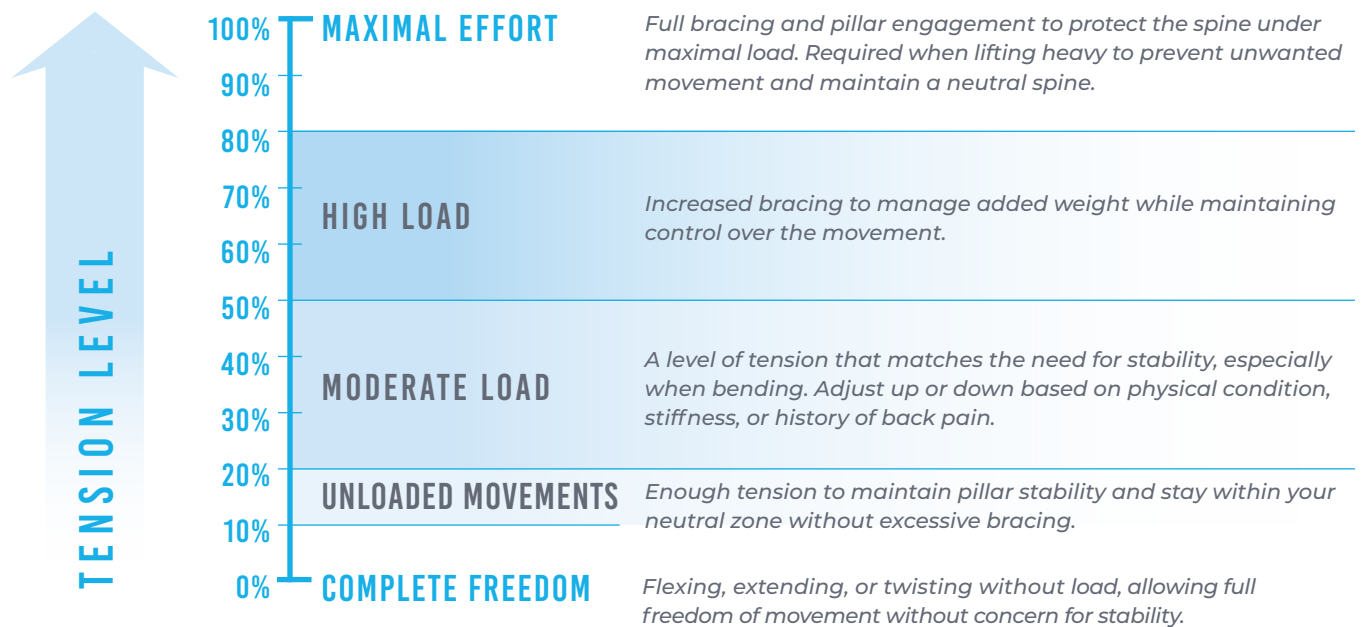
In this chapter and throughout the book, we emphasize the cueing sequence (the preplanned bracing strategy) because that is what you will utilize most in your training. However, it's important to realize that by mastering the cueing sequence, you are also building your reactive capabilities.

In other words, enhancing your preplanned brace with single-plane movements under load builds the foundation for a more efficient reactive brace with multi-plane movements under speed. You practice the cueing sequence in a controlled environment so that you develop a reliable autopilot that intuitively responds when the challenges are unpredictable, ensuring safe, effective movement regardless of the activity.

SCALING TENSION

When training, the mandate is clear: a stable pillar is non-negotiable. This isn't about rigidly locking down with maximal tension at all times; it's about fine-tuning tension to each specific movement and load. With unloaded movements, such as a bodyweight squat, you may only need 10 to 20 percent tension to maintain pillar stability, whereas with maximal-effort movements like a one-rep-max deadlift, you need 100 percent tension. Scaling tension—the art of bracing—involves creating just enough pillar stability to stay within your neutral zone.

SCALING TENSION TO LOAD



The only time you scale tension down to zero is when the activity demands complete freedom of movement and there is no threat to your body. Take yoga, for example. You can break the rules of tension and neutrality by flexing and extending your spine because you are not moving with load. Squatting ass-to-grass or hinging with a rounded back when there is no challenge on your body is very different from squatting or deadlifting with a heavy barbell.

Managing pillar stability through activities of daily living is another important consideration—you may need maximal tension or zero tension based on the interplay between your physical condition and the specific context of your movement.

For instance, picking up an object as light as a feather might seem trivial, yet it's often in these unsuspecting moments that minor lower back strains occur—especially when bending and twisting are involved. It's a common misconception that such injuries are reserved for moments of heavy lifting, but the reality is starkly different. The act of bending over to retrieve something from the ground, regardless of its weight, can be the very instance that sidelines you from training.

That's why adjusting tension in your pillar hinges significantly on your current physical state. If you're feeling strong, well-rested, and free from pain, minimal or zero tension might suffice for mundane tasks. However, if you're experiencing stiffness, feeling cold, or particularly run down, especially with a history of lower back issues, adopting a bracing strategy akin to preparing for a heavy deadlift might be necessary. These precautions are paramount when you're not at your best—when soreness, dehydration, or lack of sleep have taken their toll, making you vulnerable to injuries over seemingly inconsequential movements.

This variability underscores the importance of being both aware and adaptable. Being able to deadlift twice your body weight means little if bending over to pick up your laundry could cause a strain. Such paradoxes highlight the ever-evolving nature of controlling tension and managing your pillar stability. The art of scaling your brace isn't static; it requires continuous customization based on your individual state, the preparation you've undertaken, and the demands of the activity at hand. Over time, as you master the skill set to fine-tune your approach to bracing, you develop a more reliable autopilot. This refined intuition allows for seamless adjustment to your body's needs, ensuring you maintain optimal performance and protection against pain, without the constant need for conscious adjustment.

SCALING TENSION TO PAIN



As you start practicing these adjustments, it may feel like a concentrated effort—finding that sweet spot where you create just enough tension to maintain your neutral zone will involve some trial and error. You will overshoot it or undershoot it—and that is OK. With the right intention and practice, the process will eventually become intuitive. The 6-phase warm-up includes exercises that will help you develop it. And the movement pattern progressions will help you scale and refine your bracing strategies to match the exercise.

Remember, scaling tension is not on and off at 100 percent. It's a dimmer switch that you turn up or down based on the demands of the movement and the other factors mentioned. The controller on that dimmer switch—the mechanism that allows you to modulate tension—is regulated to a large extent by your breathing strategy, which is the focus of the next chapter.



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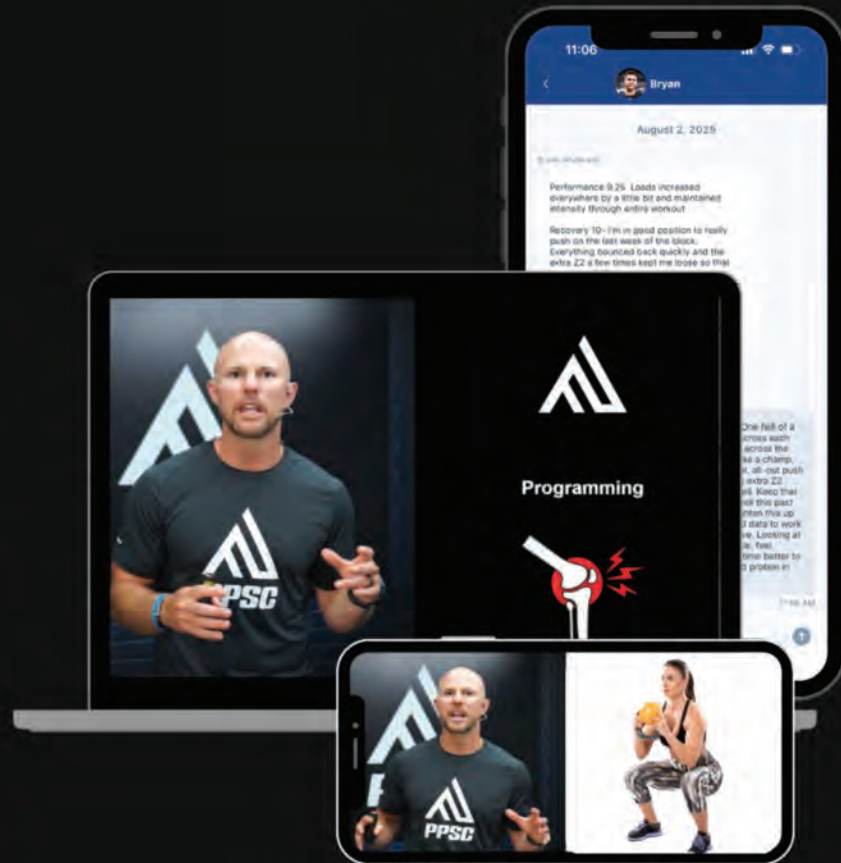
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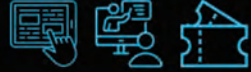
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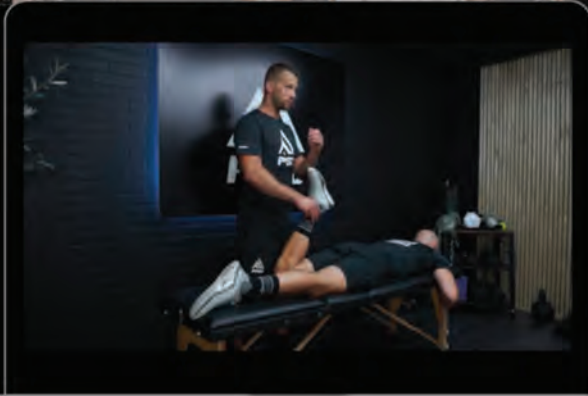
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