Strongman Training for Athletes

by Joe DeFranco

Mental and physical toughness, anaerobic conditioning, improved sprinting speed, muscular endurance, "man" strength… What if I told you that all of these characteristics can be trained simultaneously with one form of training? Would you believe me? You better, because it’s true! In this article, I’ll show you how to do it!

The Strongman Cometh

You’ve all been there. You’re on the couch late at night with your remote control in hand, desperately trying to find something interesting on TV. Your thumb actually starts getting a pump from changing the channel so much. Then you come across some freak of nature flipping over an 800 pound tractor tire!

Whether you’re a world-renowned strength coach or a 98 pound accountant, you can’t help but become engrossed in this unorthodox, yet oddly interesting, display. Well, strongman training is no longer a spectator sport, and you don’t have to be a World’s Strongest Man contestant to participate and reap the benefits.

One of the reasons people love watching strongman competitions on TV is that the events aren’t "normal." After all, flipping over a car, bending a steel bar over your head, dragging a 600 pound anchor, and carrying oddly-shaped stones aren’t everyday occurrences. Yet the "abnormality" of these events is the exact reason why this type of training is tailor-made for mainstream athletes and hardcore fitness buffs, not just strongmen.

This is because the events that unfold on the athletic field usually aren’t "normal." They don’t usually go according to plan. For example, how many times does a
football play happen exactly how it was drawn up on the chalkboard? The answer is almost never! This example holds true for almost every sport and, of course, life in general.

The beauty of strongman training is that there's no one way to perform the exercises. You usually end up improvising to complete the event. In other words, things don’t usually go according to plan! The tire doesn’t always flip over the same way. The sled doesn’t always glide easily over the surface. The farmers walk implements don’t remain stationary as you zigzag through your course and the sand in the sandbag moves all over the place when you try to lift it.

The awkwardness of these events builds true, "functional" strength from head to toe. This enables you to strengthen muscles that are nearly impossible to strengthen with traditional weight training.

Now, there are many strongman events to choose from and they all work. The problem with some of them is that they just aren’t practical because the implements are very difficult to obtain. Plus, many coaches and athletes seem to get confused with regards to incorporating this type of training into their existing programs. Below I provide you with the events I find to be the most practical, and I’ll also explain how to obtain the implements. Then, I’ll give you a sample strongman program for athletes.

### Strongman Events for Athletes

**Empty Keg Toss**

The keg toss is a great exercise for improving explosive hip extension and posterior chain strength. After a general warm-up, we usually use the keg toss as our first event. The keg toss acts as a final warm-up exercise and it also excites the nervous system for the more grueling events to follow.
It’s very easy to obtain an empty keg. Go to a liquor store, buy a keg, invite some hot chicks over, drink all the beer, wake up in the morning with a hangover, a strange woman sleeping in your bed, and an empty keg! Or you can just go to a liquor store and ask if you can have one of their empties. Most will just look at you funny and give you the keg. Some may charge you a couple of bucks for them. It’s that simple.

**Tire Flip**

This is a classic strongman event. I can’t think of a single muscle in your body that this exercise doesn’t strengthen! I also can’t think of an athlete who wouldn’t benefit from this exercise.

It's easier to obtain a tire than most people think, and you can’t beat the price: they’re free! Check your local phone book for the nearest tire company in your area. (Tire companies are pretty common; they’re just usually not located in recognizable parts of your town). Call the company and tell them you’re willing to take some tires off of their hands. They love for people to come and take used tires away from them. This is because they usually have to pay to get rid of their old tires. In essence, you’re doing these people a favor!

**Farmers Walk**
The farmers walk is an incredible tool for improving your muscular endurance, anaerobic capacity, grip strength and your upper back, trap and oblique strength. It's also great for building hip, knee and ankle stability. You can carry any awkward object or just use the heaviest pair of dumbbells you can find.

I like to perform the "zigzag" farmers walk. Get six cones and set up one cone every ten yards. Place the first cone at the starting line and off-set each cone to the left or right from the previous cone. This creates a "zigzag" path which requires a high-level of oblique and core strength in general.

This summer we got our implements from Brutestrength.com and we loved them. They were well worth the money.

**Backward Sled Drag**

Since we do a ton of posterior chain work in the weight room, we chose the backward sled drag as our strongman event. It's a killer! No other exercise crushes your quads like the backward sled drag! Simply face your sled, grab the rope, turn your toes slightly outward and walk backwards using short, quick steps.

I recommend the sleds I purchased from Elitefts, but you can drag anything, though. Hell, you can even wrap a rope around your tractor tire and drag the tire if you like!
Tug-of-War

The tug-of-war competition turned out to be one of the most competitive (and fun) events of the summer. We'd break our athletes up into teams or we'd perform one-on-one competitions. The competitive nature in everyone really comes out with the tug-of-war. (I even had a fistfight break out with two of my strongest high school kids during one of our competitions!)

We either award the winning team/player with a T-shirt or trophy, or we punish the losing team with extra sled drags! This "punishment" really got guys motivated to win. This event also acts as "vanity" work as your biceps will get one hell of a pump!

Try to get a rope that’s thick enough so your hands don’t get completely ripped apart. I’ve seen thick ropes sold in various hardware stores, boating stores, as well as any store where scaffolding equipment is sold.

Sample Workout

Now that you know my favorite strongman events, let’s put everything together into a structured program. Obviously, there are hundreds of variations that’ll work. I’ll provide you with a sample program I used this summer with great success.

This workout was usually performed on Friday or Saturday. We performed it late in the week so that it wouldn’t take away from our speed and conditioning workouts performed earlier in the week. Strongman training acted as our max-effort lower body strength day. We didn’t perform any max-effort lower body training in the weight room during the six weeks that we implemented this training. Dynamic-effort box squats with sub-maximal weights, posterior chain work and abs were performed on Tuesday or Wednesday during this period.

Here’s a sample of one of the strongman workouts we used this summer:
A) Overhead Keg Toss: 5 tosses, rest one minute between tosses

B) Tire Flip: 3 sets of 5 flips, rest 3-4 minutes between sets, or 3 sets of 30 seconds, rest 3-4 minutes between sets. (In the timed set variation, the athlete performs as many tire flips as possible in the given timeframe.)

C) "Zigzag" Farmers **Walk**: Perform 3 sets of 50 yards around cones. Rest 3-4 minutes between sets.

D) Backward Sled Drag: 2 sets of 40-50 yards. Rest one minute between sets. This is a great "finisher!"

E) Tug-of-War: The tug-of-war separates the men from the boys. By the end of this workout, most guys are exhausted. Perform a two-out-of-three or three-out-of-five series to finish your workout. We rest one minute between each "war."

**Are You Tough Enough?**

Besides all of the above mentioned benefits, there's one overlooked component I feel outweighs the rest: the psychological aspect of strongman training.

Completing a strongman workout gives you a feeling of accomplishment that you just don’t get with "regular" training. I witnessed complete transformations in mental toughness and confidence this summer with my high school, college and even my professional athletes.

After a couple of weeks of training in this manner, guys started walking around with chips on their shoulders. There was an "edge" to the athletes who participated in strongman training. It was as if they knew that no one in the world was working harder than they were. The workouts were tough, and by completing them they became tougher, both mentally and physically.

These workouts aren’t for everyone. Before you decide to give this type of training a try, ask yourself the following questions:

*Am I focused enough?*

*Am I strong enough?*

*Am I **tough** enough?*

If you answered yes, then the world of strongman training is waiting on you!
About the Author

Joe DeFranco’s training techniques have become a hot topic worldwide. This didn’t happen by accident. The training programs Joe develops and the athletes he produces speak for themselves. You can learn more about Joe, his athletes, and his techniques at **DeFrancosTraining.com**

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