

The Neck

By

Alan Palmieri

When was the last time you read an article in a bodybuilding magazine on how to develop a strong muscular neck? Does your memory go back that far? If it does it's better than mine. Oh sure, I remember reading a couple of articles in magazines but that was years ago, back in the late 50's and early 60's. Today you can find a lot of articles on the Internet related to neck training but for whatever reason, there does not seem to be any real interest in neck work. Of all the requests I get the neck receives the least. Football players and wrestlers are not the only two groups of athletes that need to have strong powerful necks. Bodybuilders need well-developed necks also, so the neglect or lack of interest is somewhat puzzling.

Why then would I write an article about developing the neck if it's not a big interest item? I guess my response would have to be that the neck is a muscle and if anyone is interested in bodybuilding they need to develop all their muscles. The other reason, I had a couple of contacts this week from people asking specific questions regarding neck routines. Maybe there is more interest than one would suspect.

There is some thinking among bodybuilders that neck and trap development will make them appear narrower and for this reason they avoid direct heavy workouts on these two muscle groups. What these individuals are really saying is they don't subscribe to having a complete development and I personally don't think that makes a lot of sense. Sure excessive trap and neck development will distract from your width but excessive forearm development will distract from your upper arms as well. Bodybuilders are not supposed to "overdevelop" any one certain muscle group in the first place. Their goal is to achieve maximum muscular development with proportion and symmetry over the

entire body. Over development of any one muscle group is just as bad as the under development of any one muscle group.

The neck is not only a vital muscle group that should not be ignored by bodybuilders it is a symbol of health and masculinity. Even fully clothed, in the dead of winter, the neck is still visible and projects a signal of what is below. Admittedly rare but still a reality, some bodybuilders have exceptional physiques but can still be labeled “pencil necks.” Their development does not extend to the neck and this is a distraction. Look at any top bodybuilder past or present, do you see any “pencil necks?” Bet you don’t! I know, I know, some bodybuilders have the gift, genetic gift that is. They don’t have to do any direct neck work because their necks grow as a result of their back, traps, and shoulder workouts.

Having said all I have, the neck is a muscle group that does not need all kinds of special “Bomb and Blitz” super high intensity training programs. For all you may have heard or read, the neck is a relatively easy muscle group to develop and does not require anything special. In fact, of all the muscle groups the neck is the least troublesome. There are no special routines and programs required or necessary. Saying there is... is nothing but some hype and that’s garbage. Working the neck is not complicated and I’m not going to make it out to be.

I never had a “bull” neck but did get it up to over 19 ½ inches. My neck never had the appearance like some others did, thick muscular tube serving as a mantel for my head to rest on. Still at over 19 inches it was about the right size to blend in with the rest of my physique, not over or under developed. I remember my first attempts at developing my neck. What a catastrophe that was. Not once, not twice, but several times I had to make trips to the doctors office. To this day I have neck problems and always look back to the first incident I had as the culprit.

I didn’t think I needed to warm up the neck before working it. Foolish I know but I was young at the time and after all, it was just my neck muscles. Nothing like my chest,

back or legs. Without a warm-up I put on my head harness and put a bunch of plates on the chain. Those darn head harnesses, I use to have to hold on to the part that rubbed up against my ears because the rivets would cut my ears. Hunched over I began to curl my head back. “Pop”, oh no, I broke my neck! I somehow got out of the contraption and couldn’t move my head. Rushed to the doctor I was convinced I had broken my neck. Short version of the story... it was a bad sprain. For a week all I could do was rub ointment on it. Back then I didn’t even know a Chiropractor to go to. I wish I had.

Now the story doesn’t end there. Not one more time but two more times I went through the same ordeal. Is that dumb or what? The average person would have learned their lesson the first time, not me; it took a few more stiff necks for me to figure it out. To this day, my neck bothers me. Headaches and discomfort in various positions while lying down are the norm. When someone says, “dumb kid” I immediately think of my youthful experiences trying to develop my neck. Heck, I was the “dumb kid” poster boy. Oh well, live and learn. Do what you want when you’re young but you’ll pay for it when you’re older. Some words of wisdom I thought I would toss in so you would know I have become somewhat smarter than the “dumb kid” I was. Both my wife and mother would argue the point I’m sure.

As I said, neck work is not complicated but caution must be given to what you are doing and how you are doing it. From my experiences, I’ve found two workouts a week ideal for adding size while three workouts a week seemed better for conditioning. I have also worked the neck every day and four times a week depending on what I have been trying to do. I never used a great variety of movements and never used a “neck machine” some football and wrestling facilities have today. My neck work is uncomplicated, simple and effective.

Exercise 1: Head Rotation. After learning lessons from my youth, I never work the neck without a thorough warm up. Sitting up straight or standing, I will rotate my head around in circles, first to the right for about fifteen to twenty five reps then to the left for the same number or repetitions. This is a must to help prevent injury.

Exercise 2: Towel Pulls. I love this exercise as I can increase or decrease the resistance as needed. Once again this movement can be performed either sitting or standing. Take a fairly large hand towel. Place it behind your head with your hands holding the ends out in front of your face. Bend your head down and place your chin on your chest. As you curl your head backward apply resistance by pulling on the towel with your hands.

Exercise 3: Forward Press. Again, this movement can be done either sitting or standing. Interlock your fingers and place your hands on your forehead. As you curl your head down so your chin touches your upper chest use your hands to apply resistance.

Exercise 4: Using the head strap, head harness, or neck developer, depending on where you live the apparatus name seems to be different. Just make certain you learn from the experience I went through and don't add too much weight.

Exercise 5: Front Neck Curl. Lie flat on a bench facing toward the ceiling with your head extended over one end of the bench. Place a folded towel on your forehead and put a barbell plate on the towel. Now allow your head to go backward slowly and then bring it up trying to place your chin on your upper chest.

Exercise 6: Wrestlers Bridge. Perhaps one of the oldest, best known and most productive of all neck exercises is the Wrestlers Bridge. It is easier if you keep your hands on the ground next to your head and increases in difficulty if you cross your arms over your chest. Some even hold barbell plates on their chest performing the movement.

There you have it. I use to select one movement for the back of my neck and one for the front. There are some you can do for the sides of the neck and these are modifications of those listed above. Trap work is also an essential part of neck training and the movements hereto are relatively easy and well known. All types of shrugs, upright rows and cleans will develop your traps. Because of the relationship between the neck and traps, I would always work my neck on the days I did traps.

You should vary your sets and reps just as you would with any other muscle group. Personally I found 3 to 4 sets of 10 reps best for my neck routines. More seemed to be excessive and less seemed not to provide enough work.

Good Luck!

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