

Get OFF the Ball!

Everyone is looking for a magic formula; something new and different that will do twice the work in half the time. With this in mind, some trainers are getting their clients to do every weight training movement imaginable on an exercise ball, balance board or other stability apparatus. Their thinking is to develop muscle strength in one muscle group while developing core muscle strength at the same time. At first this seems like logical thinking. Who wouldn't want the chance to work on the six pack while training arms or chest or back? Upon further review though, this may not be the best approach depending on your purpose. Let's evaluate when stability ball training would be appropriate and when it's not.

General Fitness

If your purpose is to increase overall muscular strength, flexibility, range of motion, and improve your posture, then doing anything on an exercise ball or balance board is useful. This is usually a program in which the lifter is using a minimum amount of added weight and often where body weight is sufficient. Usually the main goal of this type of regime is to improve core strength, sometimes to alleviate low back pain.

Proprioception

Proprioception is an automatic sensitivity mechanism in the body that sends messages to the central nervous system. The central nervous system sends information to the rest of the body about how to react and with what amount of tension. Proprioception is somewhat different than kinesthetic awareness. Kinesthetic awareness is a sense of your *whole* body in space as opposed to where your limbs are in space and how much tension is required to do a task. Most proprioception is done unconsciously, but it can be developed with the use of stability equipment. Proprioceptors can be developed when a joint is unstable and the task involves stabilizing the body. Often a minimum amount of weight or body weight alone is needed for this type of exercise. Many rehabilitation exercises involve development of proprioceptors and kinesthetic awareness and any stability apparatus is useful to this end.

Sport Specific Training

Stability training is useful in developing athleticism or for sport specific training, that is, when you are training for a certain type of event or sport. If core strength is a requirement during the event, then training to develop core strength while training other muscles makes sense. For example, core strength and balance are important to a rower or kayaker so training back muscles simultaneously to core muscles could be a viable option.

Strength Training

This is where I take exception to the use of any stability equipment. If your goal is to gain muscle mass, then it's time to *get off the ball!* For example, if you want to train your chest effectively, then you need to lift as much weight as possible with correct form. Your ability to lift maximum weight is seriously compromised when you are lifting it in an unstable position (e.g. on a balance ball). You are an injury waiting to happen if you

try to lift weight that is enough to challenge the chest in this position or you need to lower the weight, in which case your chest workout is compromised. Your core muscles will be engaged, but why not train your core separately? This way, you can safely maximize weight lifted to engage the chest muscles and then later work the core muscles on stability equipment if desired. There really are no short cuts to developing muscle mass; gaining even an ounce can be difficult. You need to provide the optimum conditions for muscle development and one of those conditions is to sufficiently challenge and target specific muscle groups systematically. Often core muscles are taxed while doing many weight lifting maneuvers even in a stable position. Then if you want to train your core further, then train your core, but not at the expense of other muscle groups in the process. An entire workout can be devoted to core training in fact, just as you would devote an entire workout to lower body or upper body. You'll be less likely to be injured with this approach and core muscles will still be developed.

Balance balls and the like make a useful contribution to any gym. It's important to keep your training goals in mind when considering where, when and how they can help you meet your fitness goals.

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Shawna is a long time personal trainer and teacher. She has many academic and athletic achievements to her credit. See how she's helping others reach their fitness goals in the gym, or if you would like her to help you, check out her website at:

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