

Shoulder Blasting with Chris Cormier

Contributed by Ron Harris
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A Precocious Little Guy

Chris Cormier was basically rushed through primary school- and I am having a hard time believing his whole story- not that I would ever call him a liar. But Chris claims he started kindergarten at just two years old. Come on, Chris, you can't be serious, I begged of him. "For real, I used to come home all the time in loaner clothes because I wasn't potty trained." He was obviously sticking to his story on this. And it seems he showed his most precocious tendencies when it came to muscle-related matters.

"When I was just five years old, I was already doing that pose where I roll my abs, hit a vacuum, then pop out the six-pack," he claims. "I see guys trying to copy that in their twenties and they can't do it. I always had a knack for the mind-muscle connection that came naturally. When I was nine, I could pose my hamstrings. I would curl my leg up and there would be this little ball. People used to get scared for me, thinking it was some kind of cramp and I needed to go to the hospital. I used to mess with them and start making faces and howling in pain, just for laughs. I could hit a good lat spread back then, too- something even some pros never quite master, though I won't name any names."

Weights in an Attempt to 'Catch Up'

Because Chris started school too

early, he was always smaller and lighter than his peers. This situation is bound to give anyone a complex (trust me, I know firsthand) and by the age of 12, Cormier decided that beefing up with weights could be his ticket to closing the yawning gap in physical development that was an endless source of insecurity. A friend of his had a simple weight set in an austere spare room they called the Dungeon where he first started his physical transformation. Soon after that, he moved on to the local weight room at the Desert Highland Community Park where his older brother Rob and a couple of his friends worked out in a space not much bigger than a prison cell. Ironically, there were a few neighborhood guys with decent physiques who trained there, who had, in fact, been in and out of jail. Thanks to Chris, I now know Palm Springs has something of a 'hood. And here I thought it was only elderly, rich white folks wearing pastel colors and playing golf.

By the time Chris got to high school (at what, 12 years old?) and had access to better training facilities at the local Boy's Club, his physique was starting to blossom. Though he was only 5-foot-5 and 120 pounds with a mighty 120-pound bench press to his credit, the unique muscle shapes and clear delineations between the muscles we call separation were already evident. I wondered if his shoulders, so wide, round and melon-like now, were one of the first muscle groups to blow up. "Naw, the only thing on me that grew fast back then was my arms. My arms were bigger than my shoulders until about halfway through high school."

By now, he was reading Muscle Builder (the precursor to Muscle & Fitness) and Muscular Development, seeking out knowledge and inspiration. "Mr. Universe John Brown was on a couple of covers at that time, and I really wanted to look like he did," Chris remembers. A teacher in high school named Cathy Lauria told him to start competing in bodybuilding, as he was good enough to win at the teenage level. It took him a couple of years to build up his nerve to actually get on stage, but once he did, the wins started coming. He will always miss the now-defunct NPC Palm Springs contest, where he won his first teenage contest and later, his first open show. "I almost forgot," he said. "The first color picture I ever had in a magazine was MD, when I won the light-heavyweight class at the 1987 Teenage Nationals." Who would have thought that 17 years later he would be on the cover of the same magazine and have a popular monthly column in it?

Shoulder Training - Not a Whole Lot Has Changed

Chris confessed that not a great deal has changed in the way he trains his shoulders over the years. "Shoulders aren't that complicated, and there's only so much you can do for them," he explained. "But you can learn a lot of different angles, subtle little shifts that hit the muscle in a way it hasn't been hit before." Several years of training under the tutelage of MD's own resident Trainer of Champions, Charles Glass, has helped Chris out tremendously in learning new takes on established exercises. Here are the core exercises in his current shoulder regimen. All are done for four work sets of 12-15 reps.

Overhead Press

Presses have always played a major role in Cormier's shoulder training, though these days he has the luxury of a wider variety of equipment to select from. In addition to barbells and dumbbells, Gold's Venice has machines from Hammer Strength, Cybex, Flex and numerous others. Chris scowls when he hears that pressing on a machine doesn't work the muscle hard enough. "Oh, please; you're telling me you can put four 45s and a quarter on each side of a Hammer Strength behind neck press, knock out 12 good reps, and that's not gonna make the shoulders grow? Get your head out of your ass."

I speculated that all the fancy equipment he has access to must make it a little easier to sustain his motivation to train after a full quarter-century of lifting. "It's not the equipment," he corrected me. "It takes a special type of individual to stay enthused about working out when you've done it all thousands of times over. Charles Glass helps a lot in that aspect. No matter how long you have been at this, he can always keep you guessing and come up with something you've never tried before." Thus, from week to week, Chris might do his presses with a barbell, dumbbells, a Smith machine, or a number of other machines.

Wide-Grip Upright Row

Upright rows are often thought of as an exercise for the traps and upper back, but that's only true when using a narrow grip on the bar. When your hands are set at shoulder width or even a little wider, upright rows become a killer way to nail the side delts. Chris starts with a slight bend in the arms, not quite a dead hang, and pulls the bar up to chest level. The correct way to picture the form would be pulling up and back, with the elbows wide. Cormier can handle 185 pounds for all four work sets most of the year.

Dumbbell Lateral Raise

When you get into lateral raises, this is where the special tricks from the Charles Glass School of Advanced Training Techniques become apparent. Notice how Chris' hands are positioned as he performs his dumbbell side

laterals. Rather than merely tipping his hands downward as if he were pouring out water from pitchers at the top of the rep, Chris has his thumbs rotated downward from start to finish. "You can't go as heavy on these," he explained. "When I did my laterals the regular way, I could go up to 80s with straps. Doing them the Charles Glass way, I only need to use 40s or 45s at most, but the contraction is so much more intense in the side heads. Do them in front of a mirror and you will see how they pop right out."

Seated Front Raise

And for front delts, Charles has yet another innovative variation we are now lucky enough to learn without having to be one of his clients. Starting with the dumbbells at his side, Chris brings them up and together with his hands angled toward each other like the roof of a steeple. "This is even better than a hammer grip," says Chris. "But don't take my word for it; get in the gym and try it out and you'll be sold."

Shrugs

Chris still remembers the first set of traps he ever saw that made him say, "Whoa." "There was this kid on my high school football team and I wish I could remember his name, but he had these monster traps," Cormier recollects. "They were so high they almost went up to his ears, kinda like Johnnie Jackson's. But get this- the thing that really freaked me out was that he had all these stretch marks running up and down them. Stretch marks on your traps! I had seen plenty of guys with stretch marks where the chest ties into the front delts, or under their armpits, but to this day I have never seen anything like that."

Chris watched this teenage trap titan to see if there was any rational explanation for this anomaly. "All the other kids would be benching and curling any chance they got, but this kid was always doing shrugs and upright rows. Right then and there I said to myself that I was gonna get me some crazy traps like he had, and I think I came pretty close." Chris trains traps with shoulders and his favorite movement is still dumbbell shrugs. "Most guys don't really use a full range of motion because they go too heavy," he related. "It's not enough to just shrug up with your arms hanging straight down. That's just a little more than half the rep I do. From that point I let the shoulders and arms come into play to pull the 'bells way up so my hands are just over the level of my hipbones. I tell bodybuilders who say they can't build their traps to cut the weight they are using by a third or a half and try it my way. They all come back later to tell me how sore their traps got and within a couple of months, their traps are noticeably bigger."

Chris will usually keep the dumbbells directly at his side, but occasionally he will hold them more toward the back to target his middle and lower traps. "A little extra development there helps you out down the road when you're up on stage hitting a rear double biceps," he notes. The weights Cormier will use for shrugs are around 120-140 when he holds the 'bells at his sides, and 90-100 in each hand when he shrugs toward the rear.

Real Deal Redeemed and Reloaded

Though he didn't win the Arnold Classic as planned (instead setting the dubious record of five consecutive runner-ups), Chris Cormier definitely served notice that he is still one of the best bodybuilders in the world when he is on his A game. The return to top form we saw in Columbus is just a sneak preview of what he has in store for the Olympia. "After getting sick and missing the Olympia last year, you have no idea how hungry I am to kick some ass this October in Vegas," he stated calmly. "Anybody who thinks they don't have to worry about me anymore is in for a big surprise. And that's the Real Deal, boys and girls."

Real Deal's Top Three Tips for Dense Delts

- Don't miss out on behind-neck presses.

"The behind-neck press has become a taboo exercise because it's assumed that doing it will wreck your rotator cuffs. This is too bad, because it's an excellent mass builder for the shoulders, and involves all three heads much better than presses to the front. The key is in doing the exercise at the beginning of your routine when you're fresh and less likely to use sloppy form, and to only lower to the point where your upper arm bones are parallel to the ground. I see some guys lower the bar all the way down to their traps, which is an unnatural range of motion. Do that and of course you will hurt your rotators. But I can honestly say I have been pressing behind the neck for years and have never had a problem because I observe those rules when I do it."

- Use a weight you can handle for at least eight reps.

"Shoulders are not a body part you hit with super-heavy weights and low reps. Do that with overhead presses and you can get hurt real easy. Do it with laterals and upright rows and you probably won't get hurt, but you won't be doing jack shit to make your shoulders grow. If you're not getting a pump when you train shoulders, you're probably using too low a rep range. Occasionally, if you're properly warmed up, lower reps for presses can be a good shock tactic. But for lateral movements, I think you're wasting your time if you're doing less than eight reps in a set. I know I get better results with 12-15 reps, as do most guys I have trained with over the years."

- Make the shoulders do the work.

"If you ask me what I think is the number one reason a lot of guys don't ever build great shoulders, I would say it's because they employ way too much momentum. This is usually most evident on lateral raises. Guys are afraid of looking like wimps, so they don't use the proper weight for them. Maybe they could get a great set with a pair of 30s, but they want to look tough so they pick up a pair of 50s instead and start thrusting their hips and jumping from the knees to get them moving out of the bottom, and proceed to swing the weights around. Come on, how can anyone really believe their shoulders are going to grow from that type of crappy form?"

Training Split
A.M.

P.M.

Day One

back

calves

Day Two
and traps

shoulders
biceps, triceps, abs

Day Three

chest

abs and glutes

Day Four

quads

hams

Day Five

REST, repeat