

The Skinny on Weightlifting Belts

Los Angeles, CA – Here's another addition from Zone Ready Coach Chris Gizzi that has graced the pages of Muscle & Fitness magazine. As always, here is the original version – unedited, just the way you like it. In this article, Coach Gizzi explores using a weightlifting belt to enhance strength gains and prevent injury during certain lifts. This work is to read like an anecdote rather than a scientifically rendered viewpoint. All info is scientifically validated, just not documented. Enjoy...

Let's take a closer look into that classic piece of leather frequently adorned by the weight room faithful – the weightlifting belt. Conventional gym wisdom offers speculation that the belt provides additional back support and encourages proper lifting technique. Is this really the case or is it an old wives' tale that has evaded scrutiny all these years? No need to swing the gavel today on weight belt efficacy – after all, we're all responsible for our own well being. Instead, let's familiarize ourselves with the facts and see if belt usage fits our training needs.

Popular opinion holds that belts provide additional lower back support. Though partially correct, this benefit is minimal only when technique has been compromised. Combined with a false sense of security to push beyond reasonable limits; when things go wrong for the belt user; they go wrong big time! In other words, the belt only provides support when technique is bad and may sustain improper lifting mechanics. Still some claim technique and postural enhancement with the belt. This is attributed more to the tactile feedback that a snug belt provides to our postural awareness, rather than to the actual mechanical leverage thought to bolster the lower back.

It's not all rain for the belt aficionado. When used appropriately, a major benefit is an increase in strength due to facilitation of intra-abdominal pressure. Anyone who lifts has felt this sensation of contracting muscles around the midsection, along with the increased pressure within the head and torso. This abdominal response is critical for stabilizing your center of mass so that your limbs can generate the force needed to move big weight.

Well that is good news - the belt does facilitate a rise in intra-abdominal pressure which may increase your high intensity poundage. But be forewarned those with compromised cardiovascular systems: studies have shown that such an increase in blood pressure and heart rate can increase risk for heart attack and stroke. Also, this increase in intra-abdominal pressure *does not* reduce the compressive loading on the spine as was

previously thought. So for those with back pain history; you may not be solving a problem, only delaying and compounding it.

For the body builder: Unless you are going for a one rep max, the belt can only cause problems. If you fall into the camp that uses a belt so your back doesn't hurt and you can keep training – continue to do so, but find a few sub-maximal core strengthening exercises to address the root of the problem. Also, loosen the belt in between sets to allow your blood pressure to normalize. If the belt is purely for aesthetic reasons, then at least find one that matches your untied Timberlands and sleeveless flannel.

For the competitive lifter: First off: ensure that the belt's specs are authorized by the meet's sanctioning organization. If all systems are go – then “train the way you are going to fight” and exclusively use for your competitive lifts at 95% or more of your one rep max. Perform your sub-max efforts and ancillary lifts without the belt to enhance the ability to harness superior intra-abdominal pressure and the development of low back stabilizers.



For the performance athlete: If you compete wearing a weightlifting belt, then go ahead and use one in training. Catch my drift? – by using a belt in training you can be building the metaphoric equivalent of a house of cards. Go beyond your structural limits and the whole thing will come crumbling down. Obviously there are exceptions to training with a belt and neglecting the development of those vital trunk stabilizers. But exceptions are just that – exceptions! Optimal training for athletes should continuously promote the rapid musculature contraction and relaxation paramount in all sport specific movements. The belt discourages this coordination and inhibits the fluidity and efficiency that all athletes need to perform their best.



Additional comments:

It was after speaking with California Palos Verdes Peninsula High School Head Football Coach Adam Boyd that Coach Gizzi would like to draw ZoneReady members' attention to a possibly unrecognized exception for the weightlifting belt. In his own words, Coach Gizzi tells the story:

"It has been long standing tradition at Peninsula to wear belts during their entire weight training workouts. The Panthers have a rich tradition in harvesting some really strong players and the iron culture is very healthy – I like it! In the same breath, I wanted to push the envelope and see if we could get the guys stronger and more developed in terms of abdominal stabilization. I brought this up to Coach (Adam) Boyd and as always he was really receptive. I gave him a lot of the ins-and-outs of ZoneReady policy on weight belt usage for performance athletes. He trusted our judgment and added a justification why he liked his guys in a belt more often than not. He simply said – 'it gets our guys focused and they know they have to perform when the leather goes around the waist.' What a wonderful outside the box way of looking at things – I agree with Coach Boyd. If putting the belt on has the guys engaged in the task at hand – that's more valuable than anything. As a performance coach, we must temper the optimal application with the essential intensity. Sometimes effort's gotta come first."

