Arnold A To Z: Superset Man

When it comes to chest and back training, Arnold's philosophy could be described as 'pair and pair alike.' It worked.

by Shawn Perine Sep 14, 2012

After all of the box-office successes (and failures), all of the State of the State speeches and ballot initiatives, all of the fame and fortune, it's easy to forget that at his very core Arnold Schwarzenegger is, first and foremost, a gym rat.

Long before he ever uttered a one-liner or sparred with a hostile legislature, the five-time Mr. Universe and seven-time Mr. Olympia spent untold hours toiling away in shoebox-size gyms across the globe, pushing, pulling, and pumping iron. The aim of his efforts was to become the best bodybuilder on the planet, and it was a goal he achieved year after competitive year throughout the 1960s and '70s.

Ever the student, Arnold continually honed his skills, applying the same rigorous discipline to his gym work as he later would to his film and political careers. Just as
important, he was fearless (another common Schwarzenegger theme) in his training. While many of his bodybuilding peers were content to follow the staid dictums that had been laid out decades earlier with blind obedience, Arnold always looked for ways to up the intensity.

During the early to mid-1960s, at the start of his competitive career, he followed a rudimentary training plan that had been designed for him by the elder bodybuilders at the gym in Austria where he first trained. The routine was basic and sound enough, but not the kind that would turn a small-town Austrian kid into a world-class success. As his own development surpassed that of his mentors, Arnold realized that without finding ways to increase the intensity of his workouts he'd probably end his career being known only for having won the Mr. Europe title.

Arnold began scouring Muscle Builder (the forebear to Muscle & Fitness) for ways to amp up his workouts and eventually discovered the Weider Principles—a compendium of techniques designed to increase workout intensity.

By the end of the '60s, he hit upon a formula to his liking—one that involved six days of training twice a day and featured several Weider Principles, including his favorite: supersets.

Ready... Superset... Go!

"One of the most important reasons why a chestback superset program works so well is the fact that most chest exercises are pushing movements, while all back exercises are pulling exercises. The chest muscles are resting during the lats exercise and the lats are resting during the chest movement. While each muscle is alternately resting and working, it stays fully flushed and pumped up.... When the chest and upper back are pumped simultaneously, there is an indescribable feeling of growth stimulation and massiveness." -Arnold Schwarzenegger

Supersetting involves the grouping of two or more exercises performed in sequence without rest. There are two ways of supersetting: one that groups exercises for the same body part, and another that pairs exercises for opposing body parts. Arnold was a fan of both variations, and he applied supersetting most faithfully to his chest-back workout.
"There are several advantages to alternating chest and back exercises," he has said on multiple occasions:

1. It saves time and the workout goes much faster.
2. You can handle heavier poundage, for more mass and power.
3. You get a greater pump and a continuous flushing effect of both areas for the entire workout, and you keep the pump longer.
4. Greater muscle-density results because you can work to the absolute limit of your physical capacity.

In his seminal training tome, The New Encyclopedia of Modern Bodybuilding, Arnold explains in detail the benefits of chest-back supersetting.

**The Routine**

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<th>Morning</th>
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<td>4. Shoulders, arms</td>
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Nowadays, few bodybuilders perform double-split routines, believing that two workouts per day will overtax the body. It didn't seem to do Arnold any harm, though, and the double split wound up being de rigueur for most of the pros who trained at Gold's Gym in Venice, CA, during its halcyon days of the 1970s.
Arnold's chest/back routine consists of nine exercises-four for chest and four for back, followed by dumbbell pullovers, which is a combination exercise that works the lats while stretching the pecs. In total it's 45 working sets done with no rest during the supersets and only a minute or so between supersets, after which he would spend a few minutes forcefully flexing the muscle groups he had just trained.

From start to finish the workout takes about 45 minutes, and by the end of it the Austrian Oak would be drenched in sweat and gasping for air. Legend has it that Gold's Gym would keep an oxygen tank on hand to assist Arnold and his training partners in making it through such physically taxing workouts.

Clearly, the effort wasn't wasted; Arnold's chest would eventually stretch the tape to an improbable 57 inches, due in large part to pecs and a back that still rank among the best in bodybuilding history.

While following Arnold's chest-back routine may not give you a jacket size greater than the average woman's height, it should prove a grueling but effective way to add quality mass to your torso.

**SUPERSET #1//**

**BARBELL BENCH PRESS + WIDE-GRIP BEHIND-THE-NECK CHIN**

The first superset of the routine would begin with a warmup of 30-45 reps on the bench with 135 pounds, followed by 15 chins. For the next five sets, Arnold would shuttle back and forth between bench presses and chins, pyramiding up in weight for the bench press while reducing reps for both the bench and chin. Typically, his rep scheme would be 15, 15, 12, 8, 6 for each exercise. It's worth noting that Arnold was diligent about his breathing and made sure to take extra deep breaths during this particular superset.
SUPERSET #2

INCLINE BARBELL PRESS + T-BAR ROW

After resting the two to three minutes he needed to set up for his next exercise pairing, Arnold was good to go. T-bar rows were a favorite for their ability to add thickness and width as well as provide a great stretch in the lats.

Again, he would pyramid his weight and reps, going from an initial 15 reps to sets of 12, 12, 10, and 10.
Superset #3

Flat-Bench Dumbbell Flye + Wide-Grip Barbell Row

Arnold was a master of training technique, and nowhere was this more evident than in the way he performed dumbbell flyes.

Typically, you'll see guys bring the dumbbells about as low as their chests and then clank them together at the top of the movement. Arnold's form was nearly the opposite - he made it a point to bring his elbows down as far as possible, with the dumbbells around bench level. As he brought them back up in a perfect arc, he'd stop when they were about a foot apart - just at the point when tension on his pecs was lessening.

Similarly, for barbell rows he'd stand on a bench or high box-the better to get a full stretch at the bottom-and, with his torso nearly parallel to the floor, perform picture-perfect reps. No jerking the weight for him; it was all back taking the load.

Typically, he would perform sets of 15, 12, 10, 10, and 10 reps for each exercise.
SUPerset #4//

**WEIGHTED DIP + CLOSE-GRIP CHIN**

By this point Arnold would be sucking wind pretty good. He'd have been at it for more than a half hour, and the dual pump in his pecs and lats would be stretching his tank top.

Still, he would soldier on.

He'd strap a dumbbell weighing as much as 80 pounds around his waist and aim for 15 reps in each of the five sets of dips.

For the close-grip chins, he preferred using a V-bar attachment that he'd drape over the overhead bar. If none were to be found, he'd take a narrow, overhand grip and shoot for five sets of 12 reps.

**THE FINALE//**

**STIFF-ARM PULLOVER**
Whether one can actually expand the rib cage via exercise is open to debate, but Arnold believed it and so performed pullovers throughout his bodybuilding career.

The fact is, regardless of its purported rib cage-expanding properties, the pullover is an excellent exercise for targeting both the lats and the hard-to-reach serratus, and for providing the pecs with a great stretch.

Arnold liked to lie across the bench to better sink his hips toward the floor and get an even stretch throughout the thoracic region.

"You'll not believe the ache in the sternum that this movement will produce!" Arnold said. "It literally pulls your chest apart and forces it into new growth."

Despite his state of near-total fatigue, he'd knock out five sets of 15-20 full, breathing-intensive reps to finish the workout.

**POST-WORK OUT**

**ISO-TENSION CONTRACTIONS**

Arnold always finished up his workouts with a few minutes of flexing and posing. He liked the idea of further flooding each body part with oxygen-rich blood, and he believed this gave his muscles a harder, more defined look that would carry over to onstage success.

Finally, after 45 minutes and a few pounds of lost sweat, Arnold's morning workout was done. "As I head for the shower, I feel exhausted but exhilarated, like a boxer who has just gone 15 rounds with the heavyweight champion and beaten him with a knockout in the final round!"
Chest/Back

Superset

- **Barbell Bench Press**

  1 warm-up set of 30-45 reps, 5 sets of 15, 15, 12, 8, 6 reps

- **Wide-Grip Behind-The-Neck Chin**

  1 warm-up set of 15 reps, 5 sets of 15, 15, 12, 8, 6 reps
Superset

- **Incline Barbell Press**
  5 pyramid sets of 15, 12, 12, 10, 10 reps

- **T-Bar Rows**
  5 pyramid sets of 15, 12, 12, 10, 10 reps

Superset

- **Flat-Bench Dumbbell Flyes**
  5 sets of 15, 12, 10, 10, 10 reps

- **Wide-Grip Barbell Row**
  5 sets of 15, 12, 10, 10, 10 reps

Superset

- **Weighted Dip**
  5 sets of 15 reps
- **Close-Grip Chin**
  5 sets of 12 reps

- **Stiff-Arm Pull-Over**
  5 sets of 15-20 reps
Arnold Schwarzenegger's Secrets For Building Mind-Blowing Arms

Arnold hit every muscle group with unparalleled intensity. Build epic arms by following his principles and workouts!

Arm training for Arnold Schwarzenegger wasn't simply about hitting the gym and doing a few finishing sets. Not Arnold.

He hit every body part with mind-numbing intensity and developed every muscle group to its maximum. To build the massive upper appendages that allowed him to win seven Olympia titles, Arnold employed every trick in the bodybuilding book.

What follows is a detailed look at what arm-training techniques Arnold employed, as well as two programs, one basic and one advanced, based on the Oak’s methods. Use them to develop your own massive guns, if you're up to the task!
Arnold's Arm Training Principles

When aiming to build his arms, Arnold would use his brain and instincts as much as sheer strength. He advised all who aim for similar development to do the same. The following are some of the major principals he applied to arm training.

Aim For Equal Development

Arnold always believed that since the arms can be seen from all poses and from every conceivable angle, they should be trained from all angles.

"You don't develop championship-winning arms simply by throwing around a heavy barbell doing curls or blasting out some reps for triceps," he said. Clear visible development between all muscle of the arms with equally full muscle bellies and perfect balance is what Arnold constantly sought.
To achieve balance, proportion, size and shape in the arms, work all arm muscles with equal intensity. Break the individual muscles of the arms down into separate categories. This is where planning your arm training routine is all-important.

**Keep Things In Perspective ///**

Although Arnold advocated training biceps, triceps, and forearms with equal intensity, he also liked to draw attention to the fact that the triceps are the larger and more complex muscle group of the upper arm. The biceps have two heads, while the triceps have three.

As such, Arnold suggested viewing your arm as being one-third biceps and two-thirds triceps, because while it is possible to hide your biceps in some poses, it is almost impossible to hide your triceps. Therefore, he advised, the triceps need to be trained from more angles. When training the triceps, use a variety of exercises to hit all three heads.

**Focus ///**

Concentrating on every rep of every set was something Arnold did religiously. It is often said that once Arnold began to focus on his set, nothing could distract him.

After training, Arnold was a lighthearted guy, but once in the gym he was all business. At no time was this more evident than when he trained his arms. Arnold would visualize what he wanted to achieve, believing that this would actually force gains in muscle size.

His visualization quote has been repeated countless times, but the image is vivid enough to deserve revisiting: "In my mind I saw my biceps as mountains, enormously huge, and I pictured myself lifting tremendous amounts of weight with these superhuman masses of muscle."

For anyone who wishes to gain boundless muscle size and shape, the power of the mind cannot be underestimated. It was Arnold's secret weapon in the fight for huge arms.

**Shock The Muscles Into Change ///**

Arnold always believed that the body was amazingly adaptable and could "accustom itself to workloads that would fell a horse."

However, he knew that even training at a very high intensity level will elicit no new gains if it is all done in the same manner, with the same routines, day in and day out.
Arnold advised "shocking" the arms by integrating tricks like switching up weight amounts, adding reps and sets, speeding up training so as to lift more forcefully, decreasing rest between sets, performing unfamiliar exercises, and doing your normal exercises in an unfamiliar order.

To meet the overarching goal of keeping the muscles constantly guessing as to what each new training stimulus will bring, he also advocated integrating "intensity methods" such as:

- **Forced Reps**: Forced reps are employed by having a training partner assist you with a final rep that would otherwise be impossible to achieve on your own. This method to shock the muscles should be used sparingly, perhaps once every second workout for one set per exercise.

- **Partial Reps**: Except in the case of lying triceps work, partial reps can be completed without the assistance of a partner. To perform partial reps, continue with reps of decreasing range when muscle fatigue begins. For example, upon completing a set of barbell curls, continue with partial (half- or quarter-reps) until the bar can no longer be moved even an inch. Again, use this technique sparingly.

- **Negative Repetitions**: This muscle-shocking technique can be incorporated two ways. The negative, or lowering half, of the repetition can be emphasized in the normal course of the workout, rather than just to set up the contracting, or raising. In the second method, a partner can assist a forced negative at the end of a hard set. For partner assisted negatives, have someone assist you on the upward phase of the movement and complete the negative on your own. Do two to three such reps and then have your partner rack the weight.

While emphasizing the negative can, and should, be done often, forced negatives can be used every second or third workout to stretch out the muscle fibers and assist new growth. Negatives will also build ligaments and tendons faster than conventional reps and, in the long run, this will enable the muscle to lift heavier weight, which will translate into new growth.

**Use Perfect Technique ///**

To fully isolate the biceps muscle when curling, Arnold would advise newcomers to perform this movement with their backs against a wall. When doing strict curls he believed that the arms, and only the arms, were to do the work. Any other muscular involvement would dilute the isolating effect the exercise aimed to achieve.

"You also need to find the right groove, and do any curl movement through the longest range of motion," he said. "When you do a curl you must bring your hand directly up to your shoulder. If
you change that line an inch to the inside or the outside, you are taking the stress off the biceps and you won't get the same results."

The same thing applies to triceps and forearm training. Engage each rep through its full range of motion in a controlled fashion for optimal results.

Arnold also believed hand grip to be all-important to his success. He would advice against starting off a curl movement by bending the wrist back and up. He said, "All this does is take stress away from the bicep by using forearm strength rather than biceps strength, and the result will be huge forearms and mediocre biceps."

**Cheating ///**

Although he stipulated perfect form as a rule, Arnold saw cheating as an effective way to fully tax the muscles while arm training.

In fact, Arnold was one of the first advocates for cheating, and his mentor Joe Weider eventually standardized it as one of his Weider training principals.
Arnold's specific brand of "controlled cheating" was acceptable, he said, because it actually made the exercise more difficult. Here's how he explained it in The New Encyclopedia of Modern Bodybuilding:

"Say you are doing a heavy barbell curl. You curl the weight up five or six times, and then find you are too tired to continue to do strict reps. At this point you begin to use you shoulders and back to help you in the lift slightly so that you can do another four or five reps. But you cheat just enough so that you can continue the set, and your biceps continue to work as hard as they can. By cheating you have forced the biceps to do more work than they could have done without help from the other muscles, so you have to put more stress on them, not less."

The cheating method can also be applied to dumbbell curls and other curling variations.

**Use Supersets ///**

Always a big believer in maximizing his time in the gym, Arnold often employed supersets in his training. He was especially noted for using this method to build his superior arms. The second arm workout featured in this article is comprised primarily of supersets that maximize stimulation of the biceps and triceps.

Supersets work to shock the muscles by compounding the stress the entire muscle grouping receives. This forces as much blood as possible into the target area, leading to superior growth.

**Prioritize Weak Points ///**

If you have a body part that is especially lagging, Arnold advised priority training it. This principal, when applied to arm training, is most often used by those with severely underdeveloped forearms, which are often a result of a genetic weakness more than anything else.

To prioritize weak forearms, Arnold suggested training them "by themselves when you are rested and strong." This can be done either before training any other arm muscle or on a separate day on their own. Alternatively Arnold suggested training lagging forearms on leg days when the rest of your arms are being rested.

However, even though you may do everything to plan and execute his suggestions perfectly, there may still be weak points that need specific attention. These should be targeted and should be trained accordingly. For biceps, triceps, and forearms Arnold recommended targeting weak points in several ways.
• **Use Dumbbells:** Using dumbbells with one arm at a time instead of barbells with both arms will allow a greater degree of focus to be applied on each side of the body. This helps to bring out the best in each individual set of muscles. Said Arnold: "Doing an entire set with just one arm at a time allows for maximum concentration and intensity, and ensures that each arm works to its maximum."

• **Start With Your Weakness:** Training your weak point first will allow this muscle to work harder, as it will be fresher and more receptive.

• **Emphasize Technique:** Maintaining correct form is even more difficult for a weak muscle group, as it will not often have sufficient strength to allow the weight to follow the correct movement arch. Therefore special emphasis must be placed on technique when training weak groupings.

**Posing ///**

One memorable scene from *Pumping Iron* shows Arnold flexing and posing his muscles between sets, when they are pumped to the limit. Arnold believed that posing between sets allowed him to gain mastery over the muscles he was training and lengthen the individual muscles for more complete development.

Running through the basic compulsory poses, ones that employ to a large extent the arms, and holding each pose for a minimum of three seconds, is one way to further peak contract them and flush them with blood.

**Change Hand Position ///**

Arnold's proclivity for changing his workouts around to continually stimulate the muscles extended to his hands as well. He advised changing his hand spacing regularly, as the subtle differences caused by hand position can help to completely stimulate all the different areas of a muscle.

This can be applied to biceps, triceps and forearms training as a further way to shock the muscles into new growth. For example, biceps and wrist curls and pressdowns can be done with a wide, narrow, reverse or medium grip.

**Arnold's Recommended Arm Exercises**

**Biceps**

*For Height (Or Peak):*

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**Concentration Curls**

- **Arnold (Dumbbell) Curls**

  Note: To perform Arnold Curls, begin movement with knuckles facing forward. Simultaneously curl the weight while turning hand into a supinated position - with little fingers facing outer arms - and end with a peak contraction. Performance key: Always supinate the wrist - with each rep on concentration or Arnold curls, turn the little finger outward (toward outer forearm) for a peak contraction.

  **For Overall Mass With An Emphasis On Outer Thickness:**

  - **Wide-Grip Standing Barbell Curl**

  - **Alternate Hammer Curl**

  - **Wide-Grip Preacher Curl**

  - **Alternate Incline Dumbbell Curl**

**Triceps:**
For Overall Mass:

- **Close-Grip Barbell Bench Press**

- **Dips - Triceps Version**

- **Lying Close-Grip Barbell Triceps Extension Behind The Head**

- **Bench Dips**

For Overall Mass With An Emphasis On Upper Triceps:

- **Triceps Pushdown**

- **Reverse Grip Triceps Pushdown**
Kneeling Cable Triceps Extension

Tricep Dumbbell Kickback

Forearms:

For Upper Forearms (Or Wrist Extensor Muscles):

- Reverse Barbell Curl

- Alternate Hammer Curl

- Seated Dumbbell Palms-Down Wrist Curl

For Inner Forearms (Or Wrist Flexor Muscles):

- Seated Dumbbell Palms-Up Wrist Curl

- Standing Palms-Up Barbell Behind The Back Wrist Curl

The Arnold Arm Workouts

Arnold's Basic Arm Workout
The following 30-minute basic routine is not as complex or extensive as Arnold's superset routine (to follow). Done once a week, it works to lay the foundation for the additional separation and refining targeted in his advanced routine.

**Arnold's Basic Arm Workout**

- **Barbell Curl**
  2 sets, 8 to 12 reps

- **Flexor Incline Dumbbell Curls**
  3 sets of 8 to 12 reps

- **Concentration Curls**
  2 sets of 8 to 12 reps

- **Close-Grip Barbell Bench Press**
  3 sets of 8 to 12 reps

- **Dips - Chest Version**
  3 sets of 8 to 10
Arnold's Advanced Arm Workout

The following workout is one that Arnold actually used during his peak years in the early to mid-70s.

Due to its intensity, I would recommend performing it either as the first or second session of a daily split, or on a separate day by itself. Arnold's superset routine encourages ultimate muscle separation while further building mass and enhancing shape.

This workout is also assumes that forearm training will be done, as Arnold suggested, on a separate training day to prioritize this stubborn grouping.
Seated Dumbbell Palms-Up Wrist Curl

4 sets of 8 to 12 reps

Seated Dumbbell Palms-Down Wrist Curl

4 sets of 8 to 12 reps

Standing Palms-Up Barbell Behind The Back Wrist Curl

4 sets of 8 to 12 reps

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Advanced Arnold Biceps And Triceps Workout

Superset one:

• Barbell Curl

4 sets of 10 to 12 reps for each superset (combination of two exercises) minimal rest

• Lying Triceps Press

Superset two:
**Alternate Hammer Curl**

4 sets of 10 to 12 reps for each superset

**Triceps Pushdown**

*Superset three:*

**Incline Dumbbell Curl**

4 sets of 10 to 12 reps for each superset

**Kneeling Cable Triceps Extension**

*Superset four:*

**Concentration Curls**

4 sets of 10 to 12 reps for each superset

**Standing One-Arm Dumbbell Triceps Extension**

*Regular set:*
**Bench Dips**

2 sets of 26 reps