

Ain't Got Time to Lift

Get strong and look strong in two short sessions a week

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Principles of the program.....	2
The program.....	3
The warmup.....	3
Main lifts.....	3
Main lift exercise selection.....	4
Starting weights.....	4
Progression.....	5
When to add weight.....	5
Assistance exercises.....	6
Assistance explained.....	7
Cardiovascular conditioning.....	8
De-loading, taking a break.....	8
You want to specialise a lagging lift or part (no).....	9
One session weekly.....	9
Question answered.....	10
Colophon.....	11
Version history.....	11

Program spreadsheet:

[Ain't Got Time to Lift spreadsheet](#)

Principles of the program

You can get strong and look strong by lifting 1h to 1.5h per week, across two lifting sessions¹. It's not optimal but it's better than nothing and it's genuine progress.

This is a two-days-a-week, hybrid strength/hypertrophy program for those with little time to lift and recover. Sessions should last no more than 45 minutes. It's possible to do them in 30 minutes. Example users would be busy parents, shift workers or students nearing exams.

The time-saving features of the program are:

- Sets across² for the main lifts. So we're not messing with plates and arithmetic between work sets.
- Use an AMRAP set instead of fourth and fifth sets to drive adaptation.
- Use a rest-pause set on assistance work instead of multiple sets with rest between them (the "bun-and-guts edit"³).
- Low variety of assistance exercises. So we're not searching, "What comes after the bench press this session?" Assistance work is usually just more of the main lift, like Wendler's BBB program.
- Avoid big setup changes in a session, like putting on squat shoes and knee sleeves after deadlifting, or setting up a bench after overhead pressing.
- Stay at the same station, platform or rack in a commercial gym.
- Super-set lifts where possible, without violating the principles above.

The program will necessarily be limited in some ways. In the ideal interplay of efficiency, efficacy, variety and balance, we can pick just two. Well, two and a half. We'll be effective, efficient and somewhat balanced. But we're only exposed to the big movements once a week. Rest periods are going to be limited to 60-90 seconds, conditioning will be limited or missing, etc.

Abbreviations

In what follows, exercise names are shortened in some tables.

SQ - squat
FSQ - front squat
DL - deadlift
RDL - romanian deadlift
SGDL - snatch grip deadlift
OHP - strict barbell overhead press (not a push-press)
BP - bench press
CGBP - close grip bench press
AMRAP – as many reps as possible

¹ Or even one session, in extreme circumstances. See the end of the book.

² Sets-across = the same weight for all working sets.

³ Named for 531 Discord user bunjaminbutton "bun and guts" who suggested it

The program⁴

There's an [accompanying spreadsheet](#) to plug in your numbers.

The warmup

First perform a general/systemic warmup. If you don't have time for this, then you genuinely don't have time to train.

You need to get limbered up and break a gentle sweat. Preferably you want to move the shoulder, knee and hip joints through a big range of motion. Good options include the elliptical, rowing machine, assault bike (gently!), kettlebell complexes, barbell complexes with an empty bar, etc.

Revisit this when you've read the program, because the 5-minute warmup is the place to cram in anything you're desperate to do that's not mentioned below. If you want to foam-roll something, or swing a kettlebell, or hang-clean an empty bar, or whatever, get it in here. Don't go longer than 5 minutes total.

There's a possible exception here where you might spend 8 or 9 minutes and fit in GXP, a specific type of conditioning work. See 'Cardiovascular conditioning' later in this document.

In addition, each main lift should get a sensible 2-4 warmup sets before going heavy for the day. These warmup sets should need almost no rest between them. See <https://warmupcalculator.com/> for suggestions.

Main lifts

Table 1: main exercises, sets and reps

Example day	Main exercise	Sets x reps
Mon, week 1	Strict press (OHP)	3x5+, 3x rest-pause
Thu, week 1	Deadlift (DL)	3x5
Mon, week 2	Bench press (BP)	3x5+, 3x rest-pause
Thu, week 2	Squat (SQ)	3x5+, 3x rest-pause
Mon, week 3	Strict press (OHP)	3x3+, 3x rest-pause
Thu, week 3	Deadlift (DL)	3x3
Mon, week 4	Bench press (BP)	3x3+, 3x rest-pause

⁴ I've finally accepted the ubiquitous use of the U.S spelling 'program' in lifting.

Thu, week 4	Squat (SQ)	3x3+, 3x rest-pause
Mon, week 5	Strict press (OHP)	3x1+, 3x rest-pause
Thu, week 5	Deadlift (DL)	3x1
Mon, week 6	Bench press (BP)	3x1+, 3x rest-pause
Thu, week 6	Squat (SQ)	3x1+, 3x rest-pause

Completing each rep range - fives, threes, singles - takes 2 weeks.

A plus-sign, e.g 3x3+, means the last set is an AMRAP set. Note we don't AMRAP the deadlift.

Squat and deadlift are followed by lighter variants for the back-off/hypertrophy work -- see "Assistance exercises", below.

“Rest-pause”: perform reps to positive failure (you *probably* can't fully contract the muscle or lift the weight again), count 15 breaths of rest, perform more reps to positive failure, count 15 more breaths, perform reps to failure a third and final time. Count total reps.

For our purposes that's three sets, though some sources will call it one.

To super-set rest pause exercises, perform the first sets of each exercise without a pause between, rest 20 breaths, perform the second sets of each exercise, rest 20 breaths, perform the third sets of each exercise.

Note that 3x1 (3 sets of 1 rep each) should not feel like 3 maximum singles. Well, not until many weeks have passed, then it'll be time for a break and a reset.

Main lift exercise selection

It's okay to replace any of the main exercises above, or the assistance exercises below, with a reasonable alternative. For example the bench press could be an incline bench or a floor press. The deadlift could be a trap bar lift. The squat could be safety-bar squat, etc.

But keep to the principles that make the lifting sessions brief. Don't alternate exercises week to week. Don't follow a main exercise with an unrelated assistance exercise that requires a different setup, or a different bar.

Starting weights

We start light and build momentum before the weights get heavy. Jim Wendler stresses this in his books and I've found it to be wise.

To begin, we select different starting weights for the 1-rep days, the 3-rep days, and the 5-rep days. There's an example below.

- Set the 1-rep starting weights to 80% of your 1RM for the lift. This is your usual 5RM⁵.
- Set the 3-rep starting weights to 75% of your 1RM for the lift. This is your usual 7RM.
- Set the 5-rep starting weights to 70% of your 1RM for the lift. This is your usual 10RM.
- For the rest-pause assistance work, start at 60% of your 1RM for the lift. This is your usual 15RM.

Example:

Suppose my bench max is 110kg. My starting weights for the program are:

- 3x5, 70% = 77.5 kg
- 3x3, 75% = 82.5 kg
- 3x1, 80% = 87.5 kg
- 3x rest-pause, 60% = 65 kg

I rounded these to the nearest 2.5kg which is the smallest pair of plates I use in my garage.

Progression

Each rep range (fives, threes, ones, rest-pause reps) **progresses independently**. This important concept is borrowed from Andy Baker, author of *Strength and Mass After 40*.

When to add weight

For example, when you can get all reps in the deadlift 3x5 session, you add weight the next time you deadlift 3x5. But if you don't make all reps in the 3x3 session, you repeat that weight the next time you deadlift 3x3.

This can look screwy. For example the weights for 3x5+ can become heavier than the weights for 3x3+. It's a feature not a bug. This system allows simple progress where progress is possible; a weak rep range doesn't derail the program and sooner or later the weights look more ordered again. This is Andy Baker's genius.

For the 3x rest-pause back-off sets, add weight when you get 25 reps across the three sets.

⁵ Epley

How much weight to add

For the DL and SQ, add 5kg. For the OHP and BP, add 2.5kg

Remember, we add weight only to the specific rep range where you got all reps. As noted above.

Assistance exercises

Here we can make some choices to add interest or strengthen weak points in strength or physique, without breaking our principles for brevity. If you want the fastest, most effective sessions, stick to my recommendations in Table 2 and don't change assistance exercises mid-program.

Table 2: assistance exercises, sets x reps

Example day	Session	Main exercise	Assistance A (3x rest-pause)	Assistance B super-set (3x rest-pause)
Mon, week 1	1	OHP 3x5+	OHP	- Barbell tricep overhead extension - Curl
Thu, week 1	2	DL 3x5	Choose more DL, paused DL, SGDL or RDL – not rest-pause, see below	- Shrugs - Barbell row
Mon, week 2	3	BP 3x5+	BP or CGBP	- Push-up (press-up) - Curl
Thu, week 2	4	SQ 3x5+	FSQ with same bar as SQ	- Calves - Abs, core or neck
Mon, week 3	5	OHP 3x3+	OHP	- Barbell tricep overhead extension - Curl
Thu, week 3	6	DL 3x3	DL variant as above – not rest-pause, see below	- Shrugs - Barbell row
Mon, week 4	7	BP 3x3+	BP	- Push-up (press-up) - Curl
Thu, week 4	8	SQ 3x3+	FSQ with same bar as SQ	- Calves - Abs, core or neck
Mon, week 5	9	OHP 3x1+	OHP	- Barbell tricep overhead extension - Curl

Thu, week 5	10	DL 3x1	DL variant as above – not rest-pause, see below	- Shrugs - Barbell row
Mon, week 6	11	BP 3x1+	BP	- Push-up (press-up) - Curl
Thu, week 6	12	SQ 3x1+	FSQ with same bar as SQ	- Calves - Abs, core or neck

Note that Assistance B is super-set, and can even be in a giant set with Assistance A if you like.

Assistance explained

You're unlikely to know your 1RM in these movements and trying to test it would be a time waste. But the movements are small enough that you can spend the first session of each movement feeling out a rough rest-pause weight to put in the spreadsheet.

The criteria for adding load to these movements is as above: add weight when the three rest-pause sets total 25 reps or more. Then add 5kg to shrugs and rows, 2.5kg to triceps, overhead pressing, bench work and curls.

For **deadlift assistance A**, pick a deadlift variant to meet your needs, and commit to it for the whole program. My suggestions are: if weak off the floor, paused deadlift; if weak locking out the hips and knees, romanian deadlift (RDL); if weak standing tall through the upper back, snatch-grip deadlift (SGDL).

Don't rest-pause deadlift assistance. Perform 3 sets of 8-12 sets with some rest between and progress the weight when you get at least 25 reps across the three sets.

Don't be afraid to use straps for any and all pulling work. The idea here is to work your body posterior. If you really want/need to build grip then it's fine to go without straps and even to use fat-grips for lighter sets.

Perform the **front squat** any way you like: olympic style, zombie style, California (crossed arm) style, even Zercher. But in keeping with our principles for speed, use the same bar as your back squat. Particularly, if you went to the trouble of setting up the safety bar to squat, also use it to front squat. The safety bar front squat is a great exercise.

Perform whatever **curl** you can do at the station where you OHP or BP. Either the same barbell used in the overhead tricep extension, or a loaded EZ bar or dumbbells placed at your feet.

Here's a time-saving tip for all future programs: the **shrug** and **standing calf raises** can be thrown in part-way through unloading the bar from deadlift and squat variations, respectively. Do them as 20 reps, or rest-pause style.

The **barbell row** can be ultra-strict like a Pendlay row, or with plenty of momentum like the deadlift row, or anything in between. Just don't say you'll do a strict row then allow it to deteriorate over the weeks as the weight increases. And don't for the love of all that's holy call your barbell row a Pendlay row if it's not. For the reality of the Pendlay row see YouTube where there's a video of Glenn Pendlay demonstrating the (real, actual) Pendlay row with Max Aita. For the deadlift-row look for an explanation by Cailer Woolam.

For "**bench press assistance A**" pick either the standard or close-grip bench press and commit to it for the whole program.

We use **push-ups** (press-ups) instead of dips for assistance B, because they're better tolerated by most people and faster to set up. Progress push-ups with a plate on your back and/or by raising your feet.

Abs and core (including neck) can be important, or it can be nothing-work. If you have a weakness, for example wobbliness in the press, address it properly here with loaded side-planks etc. But if you're thinking of chucking in some sit-ups because you feel you should, you're likely getting enough core work in the big lifts. Stop and go home - we're striving for brevity. If your neck is weak and needs to be strong, because you're a martial artist or motorcyclist or something, this is where you'd add some direct work.

Cardiovascular conditioning

This section became so detailed and useful, it's now its own free ebook: [*No Not HIIT: Time Efficient Cardio for Lifters \(That's Not Just HIIT\)*](#).

In summary though, The Graduated Exercise Protocol (GXP) is the method I recommend if you need to add conditioning to this program. Details are in the cardio ebook but in short:

On a treadmill, exercise bike, or some other activity spend a couple of minutes warming up to 80% of MHR. This is where you can speak but just beyond the level where conversation would be possible. Keep heart rate between 80% and 85% for 5 minutes. Spend a minute or two cooling down. If you do this before lifting there's little need to cool down and if you do it after lifting there's little need to warm up.

De-loading, taking a break

You should be able to go a loooooong time without a deload on this program. It's as brief as can be, and if you're really short of time you're likely to miss some sessions too.

When you miss a session, just continue with the planned session next time. This means planned lifting days will drift in and out of sync with the tables above. Sometimes you'll OHP and deadlift in a week, sometimes you'll DL then BP in a week. It doesn't matter.

When you must deload, you'll know it. It's a grinding fatigue that never goes away, loss of appetite for training and sometimes for food, and lifts stagnate entirely. Just take a week and a half off, reset the program with your new maxes, then begin again.

You want to specialise a lagging lift or part (no)

This isn't the program for it. You'd have to repeat one day, like the OHP, and remove another, like the BP. Then to compensate for the loss of a movement you'd take the BP assistance and put it after the OHP. And suddenly you have a different program that's not doing what this one is supposed to -- see the principles at the top of the booklet.

The same goes for trying to add extra work for forearms, delts, quads or anything else. It won't fit into our training time.

One session weekly

Contrary to toxic internet bullshit, there are times when lifting must and *should* be your lowest priority. If you never experienced this, you haven't yet lived a life.

No program will make meaningful progress under these conditions. But you can minimise strength and muscle loss until things settle down.

To convert temporarily to one session per week, combine the two days in each week. Perform both main lifts and alternate assistance A. Like this:

Table 3: one day per week

Example day	Session	Main exercises perhaps superset	Assistance A+B super-set (3x rest-pause)
Mon, week 1	1	OHP 3x5+ DL 3x5	DL variant Curl
Mon, week 2	3	BP 3x5+ SQ 3x5+	FSQ with same bar as SQ Push-up (press-up)
Mon, week 3	5	OHP 3x3+ DL 3x3	OHP Curl
Mon, week 4	7	BP 3x3+ SQ 3x3+	BP or CGBP Curl
Mon, week 5	9	OHP 3x1+ DL 3x1	DL variant Curl
Mon, week 6	11	BP 3x1+ SQ 3x1+	FSQ with same bar as SQ Push-up (press-up)

There's a little more curling here, but these are the times in life you need a pump to give you a lift.

Question answered

I put this program in front of the good people of the 531 subreddit Discord server. They asked great questions.

Q. Why no vertical pulls?

A. You either need to go to a pull-down machine or mess about adding load for pull-ups. Either one breaks some of our rules for brevity. This isn't a fully balanced or ideal program it's a fast one. But you won't really miss much doing just barbell rows.

Q. Why not rest-pause the assistance work, Dogcrapp style? It'll be faster than 3x8-12.

A. This is a great idea. My original argument about disappointing outcomes doesn't stand up when the overriding concern of the program is time-efficiency.

Older answer: My mind didn't go there because I've always found the results of Paul Carter/Dante Trudel style rest-pause sets a bit disappointing.

Colophon



Yes the title is from *Predator*.

- I do not use A.I in writing my programs. I was using em-dashes, semicolons and bulleted lists properly long before A.I stole everyone's work and I have writing samples from the 1980s to prove it. :0)
- To improve this program email ideas to personalwebsite.unnoticed059@passinbox.com
- If this was useful, [buy me a coffee!](#)

Version history

- 3.0 Added info on conditioning specific examples of setup, and removed the long example.
- 3.1 Answered questions from the Discord
- 3.2 Reduced starting weights by 5% thanks to testers. Also edited spreadsheet. Added version history into Colophon.
- 4.0 Changed assistance to rest-pause, per bun-and-guts.