

# How to Design Small Group Training Programs

by Jon Rimmer

Small group training is a growing trend in the personal training industry. Sometimes by choice and sometimes by necessity, trainers face the challenge of training from 2 to 10 people at once with the goal of getting results for everyone simultaneously. The fact that those participants likely have a wide variety of physical abilities, goals and limitations can make the programming for such an environment a daunting task.

Below is a "how to" guide to help you complete that task. And although it is challenging, with some practice and some minor adjustments you'll be able to accommodate an entirely new set of clients and with it, increase the potential to positively impact your bottom line.



## Small Group Training is NOT...

Before we get into the specifics of what constitutes small group training, let's first establish what it is not.

Small group training is NOT a "boot camp." The expression alone brings to mind random exercises far too advanced for the majority of people in the group, increasing the likelihood that their overzealousness will overcome their bodies' ability to recover. With this, plateaus and increased chance of injuries will be inevitable. Simultaneously, the instructor screams highly informational, scientifically based instructions such as "TWELVE MORE!" and "COME ON, MAN UP!"

Small Group Training is NOT group fitness. Group fitness is surely not the way to go if results are the goal. Programming is at the complete opposite end of the boot camp spectrum with a repetitive memorized workout. This creates not only a situation where the participants will adapt to the stimulus almost immediately, but also creates a severely increased chance of injury because the repetitive movements are performed with limited changes in difficulty progression, planes of movement, or sensory environment.

## What is Small Group Training?

I've come to define small group training as a systematic, periodized program designed for 2-10 people covering all aspects of exercise designed to get results with the majority of clients the majority of the time, in spite of the presence of multiple skill sets and goals.

## Tips on Working with a Program Template

A template of a small group program is provided below. There are a few things of which you should be aware when utilizing the template:

### It is only a template.

We modify and adjust ours pretty regularly, as you may have to modify yours. We have found, however, that it is a great starting point. Although changes and/or alterations may be necessary, avoid the temptation of making changes for the sake of making changes. The whole point of a program is to avoid randomness; if you find yourself changing the program because you're bored or you saw some new cool exercises on YouTube you're probably making a mistake.

### The program design is based on a three-month undulating periodization model.

Clients will go through three stages where the emphasis will be on core strength and stability one month, then strength for another month, then conditioning for the last month. Again, this scheduling can be flexible. It certainly isn't a huge issue of changing every 3½ weeks or every 5 weeks instead of monthly. At the end of the day, if you still see your clients progressing there really isn't too much reason to change. We set up the model to change monthly for two reasons: first, this seems to be when clients that train consistently hit a plateau, both mentally and physically. This observation, admittedly, is rather subjective, but does seem to be supported in our experience. Secondly, we have our clients on either a three-month program or a 12-month program where they are billed each month. We like to know in the event a client is only with us for three months, they will get more or less the same amount of focus and intensity, as well as the same amount of rest, from all three phases.

### Typically, most exercises are listed with one progression and one regression.

These modifications will accommodate clients with varying levels of physical conditioning. Obviously you may have participants that need to be progressed or regressed even further, which isn't too difficult with any of the listed exercises.

### The program is flexible enough to different-sized groups.

For the core and strength sections there are two circuits listed with four exercises each. This allows you to get two groups of four training simultaneously with the groups switching sides after the first completed circuit, easily accommodating eight participants. In the event there are more than eight participants, we simply add a body weight exercise to each circuit.

**It's almost impossible to do these workouts without an interval timer of some sort.**

Having an interval timer truly is like having a second coach in the room. We have had success with both Gymboss and Workout Muse (but have no financial ties to either), and highly recommend them.

**Each workout is divided into sections.**

All workouts begin with a mobility/activation period followed by core, strength, and conditioning circuits. The only exception is in the third month where there is no core circuit. This is done in an effort to save some time as the conditioning circuits are a little longer and require slightly longer rest in-between circuits than in the previous two phases. Don't worry though; core exercises are included in the strength section. Additionally, because we'll be hitting the ground running with a strength circuit, the mobility and activation sections are a little longer in Phase Three as well.

**This program is just a starting point.**

There is one workout for each phase included here. In our facility there are two workouts per phase that we alternate throughout the phase, but for the sake of brevity, only one is included. Your homework is to write a workout "B" on your own.

**The Program Template**

The three-month program is divided into three phases:

- core/stability
- strength
- conditioning

This does not mean that you'll only be doing core training during the core month, only strength training during the strength month, etc. It simply means that aspect will be emphasized in order to simultaneously illicit maximal results in that area while having a passive recovery period for the others. Every workout is divided into four sections: mobility/activation, core, strength, and conditioning. How much time is spent in each section and the volume and workload vary from phase to phase depending on what the goals are for that phase.

**MONTH ONE: CORE AND STABILITY PHASE**

**Mobility/Activation (3 minutes)**

Trainer cues participants through the following movements for approximately 3 minutes:

- prisoner squats
- moving push-ups
- bird dog

**Core (12 minutes total for both circuits)**

Split participants into two groups. One group starts with Circuit 1 and the other starts with Circuit 2 in each program segment, switching sides upon completion.

- Participants will perform each exercise for 30 seconds, then rest for 15 seconds.
- Repeat each 3-minute circuit 2 times before moving to next circuit.

**CORE CIRCUIT 1: 3 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Parallel stance squat	DB staggered stance squat (L)	SL squat
Elevated arms/body	Plank	Body saw
Static SB bridge	SB bridge w/MB pullover	Alt. arm KB pullover
Parallel stance squat	DB staggered stance squat (R)	SL squat

**CORE CIRCUIT 2: 3 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Reduce weight	Frontal plane cable press (R)	Increase weight
Reduce weight	Frontal plane cable press (L)	Increase weight
Move feet under body	TRX superman	Single leg TRX superman
Static hold of SB push-up position	SB push-up	Elevated feet SB push-up

**Strength (18 minutes total for both circuits)**

- Participants will perform each exercise for 30 seconds, then rest for 15 seconds.
- Repeat each 3-minute circuit 3 times before moving to next circuit.

**STRENGTH CIRCUIT 1: 3 MINUTES, REPEATED 3X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Push-up w/elevated hands or body	Spiderman push-up	Spiderman push-up on Valslide or disc
DB staggered squat	DB Valslide reverse lunge (R)	DB lunge w/stabilization
DB staggered squat	DB Valslide reverse lunge (L)	DB lunge w/stabilization
TRX push-up with feet under body	TRX push-up	Single leg TRX push-up

**STRENGTH CIRCUIT 2: 3 MINUTES, REPEATED 3X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Lighter weight	Horizontal cable row	Add weight and squat and row
Traditional push-up	MB push-up	MB push-up with alternating triple extension
Staggered stance curl	DB lunge with curl	DB single leg squat and curl
Reduce weight/range of motion	KB or BB squat	Increase weight/range of motion

**Conditioning (8 minutes total for both circuits)**

- Participants will perform each exercise for 20 seconds, then rest for 10 seconds.
- Repeat each 2-minute circuit 2 times before moving to next circuit.

Regressing and progressing these exercises is simple. With all these movements, the participant can:

- limit or increase the range of motion
- limit or increase the speed
- limit the time by stopping at failure if it's before 20 seconds
- change the weight in the case of the kettlebell

**CONDITIONING CIRCUIT 1: 2 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Exercise
KB swing (R)
Battling ropes
KB swing (L)
Ice skaters

**CONDITIONING CIRCUIT 2: 2 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Exercise
Lunge jumps
Plyometric push-ups
Lunge jumps
Plyometric push-ups

**MONTH TWO: STRENGTH PHASE**

**Mobility/Activation (3 minutes)**

Trainer cues participants through the following movements for approximately 3 minutes:

- wall touch
- moving push-ups
- prisoner squats

**Core (12 minutes total for both circuits)**

- Participants will perform each exercise for 30 seconds, then rest for 15 seconds.

- Repeat each 3-minute circuit 2 times before moving to next circuit.

**CORE CIRCUIT 1: 3 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Reduce weight and/or range of motion	KB or DB stiff leg DL	Single leg
Elevate arms/body	Plank	Elevate feet
Reduce weight and/or range of motion	KB or DB stiff leg DL	Single leg
Elevate arms/body	Plank	Elevate feet

**CORE CIRCUIT 2: 3 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Reduce length of time	SB Bridge	Lateral roll in bridge position
Elevate hands or limit range of motion	Staggered hand push-up	Elevate feet
Reduce length of time	SB Bridge	Lateral roll in bridge position
Elevate hands or limit range of motion	Staggered hand push-up	Elevate feet

**Strength (24 minutes total for both circuits)**

Participants will perform each exercise for 40 seconds, then rest for 20 seconds.

Repeat each 4-minute circuit 3 times before moving to next circuit.

**STRENGTH CIRCUIT 1: 4 MINUTES, REPEATED 3X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Lighter weight	DB scaption	DB squat and scaption
Staggered stance squat	Rear foot elevated squat (R)	Add weight
Staggered stance squat	Rear foot elevated squat (L)	Add weight
Elevated hands/body	Push up with stands	Elevate feet

**STRENGTH CIRCUIT 2: 4 MINUTES, REPEATED 3X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Lighter weight	½ kneeling cable row	Increase weight
Limit weight/range of motion	KB squat	Increase weight
Elevate body	TRX pull-up	Elevate feet
Reduce range of motion	Kneeling SB roll	½ kneel

**Conditioning: (10 minutes for both circuits, including 2-minute rest)**

- Participants will perform each exercise for 15 seconds, then rest for 15 seconds.
- Repeat each 2-minute circuit 2 times before moving to next circuit.
- Rest for 2 minutes between Circuit 1 and Circuit 2.

**CONDITIONING CIRCUIT 1: 2 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Exercise
KB swings
Battling ropes
KB swings
Ice skaters

**CONDITIONING CIRCUIT 2: 2 MINUTES, REPEATED 2X**

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Reduce speed/range of motion	Speed lunges	Lunge jumps
Hand touches from	Hand step ups on box	Plyometric push-ups

push-up position		
Reduce speed/range of motion	Speed lunges	Lunge jumps
Hand touches from push-up position	Hand step ups on box	Plyometric push-ups

### MONTH THREE: CONDITIONING PHASE

In order to increase the duration of the mobility/activation and conditioning sections, there is no separate section for core training in this phase. However, core exercises are included in the strength section.

#### Mobility/Activation (8 minutes)

Trainer cues participants through the following movements for approximately 3 minutes:

- prisoner squats
- isometric plank
- lunge with rotation
- thoracic mobility
- push-up with ankle mobility
- wall touch

#### Strength (30 minutes total for both circuits)

- Participants will perform each exercise for 40 seconds, then rest for 20 seconds.
- Repeat each 5-minute circuit 3 times before moving to next circuit.

#### STRENGTH CIRCUIT 1: 5 MINUTES, REPEATED 3X

Regression	Exercise	Progression
DB staggered squat	DB lunge w/elevated front foot	Increase weight/raise step
Moving hands push-up	Valslide push-up	Elevate feet
Decrease weight or ROM	KB or DB squat	Increase weight
Elevate hands/body	TRX push-up	Elevate feet
Elevate hands/body	Push-up on push-up stands	Elevate feet

#### STRENGTH CIRCUIT 2: 5 MINUTES, REPEATED 3X

Regression	Exercise	Progression
Isometric SB bridge	SB bridge w/lateral roll	Smaller SB
Decrease tubing resistance	"Swimmers" w/tubing	Increase resistance
Reduce weight	Staggered stance DB curl	Squat/curl
Decrease ROM	MB squat w/press	Increase weight, speed or ROM
Just row	Cable squat/row	Increase weight

#### Conditioning (16 minutes total for three circuits, including 2-minute rests between circuits)

- **Circuit 1:** Participants will perform 4 exercises for 20 seconds, then rest for 10 seconds. Repeat the 2-minute circuit 2 times. Rest for 2 minutes before moving to next circuit.
- **Circuit 2:** Participants will perform 4 exercises for 15 seconds, then rest for 15 seconds. Repeat the 2-minute circuit 2 times. Rest for 2 minutes before moving to next circuit.
- **Circuit 3:** Participants will perform 4 exercises for 10 seconds, then rest for 20 seconds. Repeat the 2-minute circuit 2 times before moving to next circuit.

Exercise selection can vary. We choose from the following:

- KB swings
- MB slams

- speed squats
- burpees
- battling ropes
- ice skaters
- lunge jumps
- plyometric push-ups

### **Final Reminders**

These systems, philosophies, and programming are only a template, which you may or may not decide to copy exactly. More likely you will take what is here and adjust it to your own situation.

But the take home lessons should be:

- Follow a systematic program, not randomness.
- Certain aspects of exercise should be emphasized while others de-emphasized on a rotational basis to optimize clients' ability to improve work capacity and recovery in each area.
- Exercise selection needs to be based on simplicity and easily regressed and/or progressed movements.

Give it a shot and have fun with it!

### **References**

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