

Training for Mass, Second Edition

Appendix A: Conan and the Wheel of Pain

Oddly enough, popular culture has had an inadvertent influence on the perpetuation of the volume training notion. It could not be more appropriate that the most famous volume-trainer of all time, Arnold Schwarzenegger, in a completely unintentional way helped to encourage the idea that endless hours of toil would create unusually great muscular growth. In his first major movie role as the title character in the Dino De Laurentiis classic *Conan the Barbarian*, a dramatic time-elapsed segment shows a pre-adolescent representation of Schwarzenegger shackled to the spoke of a giant revolving wheel—a machine that literature about the film refers to as the *Wheel of Pain*—along with other boys of similar age. As the years pass, Conan continues to push the Wheel around a never-ending circle, all the while gradually growing in height and musculature, and surviving what is suggested to be the deaths of fellow prisoners. By the time he reaches adulthood, Conan—now played by Schwarzenegger—is the lone survivor. He is also massive. We're left to conclude that the laborious pushing of the Wheel was the cause of his growth.

Of course, it was almost the duty of the filmmakers to offer *some* sort of explanation as to why Conan would have grown so large, so the Wheel of Pain was actually a pretty good idea. The concept was also able to adequately convey the idea that Conan was unbelievably tough. Who else could stand pushing that damn Wheel around for 20 years? Yet despite the fact that *Conan the Barbarian* is a fantasy film with an abundance of supernatural elements, some people actually accepted the idea of the Wheel at a literal level as a mass-building machine, or more often as a figurative representation of the notion that endless hours of brutal exercise will translate into massive growth.

The Friedrich Nietzsche quote that opens the film, “that which does not kill us makes us stronger” reinforces the deserted logic. In quite an ironic twist, the prevalence of misconception regarding the workload required for muscular growth can be adequately explained by another Nietzsche quote: “All things are subject to interpretation. Whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth.”⁴⁰ The volume training idea has prevailed because of the power of the weight of opinion of those espousing it, the power of intellectual carelessness, and strangely, the odd pop culture snippet that draws upon the notion.

Nevertheless, one aspect of the Wheel idea as presented in the movie is correct: Conan was forced to endure progressive resistance. With the death of each of his Wheel-pushing comrades, Conan had to work that much harder, until by the end he was pushing the Wheel around all by himself. As we have seen, progressive resistance is one of the essential—and one of the few universally accepted—principles of muscular growth. Apart from that, the Wheel idea is complete nonsense. Although it was obviously very hard work, Conan's toil included none of the elements of an effective muscle-building program: It wasn't brief, infrequent, or sufficiently intense. Anyone with an interest in building a substantial amount of muscle can therefore consider himself to be rather fortunate that he need not endure such labor.

If you haven't seen this film, do yourself a favor and pick up a copy. Although especially in his early movies Schwarzenegger's acting isn't exactly Academy Award-quality, De Laurentiis did a fine job of surrounding him with Hollywood veterans who more than make up for it. The style of direction, soundtrack, pre-CGI cinematography, art direction, and of course the great storyline make it a classic. And if you have in fact not seen it, read no further, because plot spoilers lay ahead.

A thematic subplot of the story involves something called the riddle of steel, the answer to which was a secret once possessed by ancient gods. By accounts of legend, the gods were careless enough to leave the secret on a battlefield. At the very beginning of the film Conan is informed by his father that objects of steel are to be revered. Later and off-screen he's told that above all else, he must solve the riddle before he dies. To fail is to forsake entrance to Valhalla, the warrior's heaven. Decades and many adventures later, just before Thulsa Doom orders his execution, he does Conan a favor and shares the secret: that true strength and power lies in human flesh, not with weapons of steel. As perhaps a final demonstration of this point, Doom decrees that Conan should be killed in a manner involving no metal objects whatsoever. One of Conan's earlier experiences in fact supports Doom's answer. Shortly after his escape from bondage, Conan, chased by wolves, takes refuge in a cave. After he lights a torch, ghostly images come into view. He realizes that he's in the tomb of a long-deceased warrior king, complete with some possessions left for the king's journey to the afterlife. Out of necessity, Conan takes the king's sword. Here the true significance of steel as an object of immortality is first suggested. Despite the threat of being cast out of Valhalla if the riddle is not solved to Crom's satisfaction, apparently swords—the most valued of all steel objects—are not important enough to make the journey to the other side.

Sometimes films make use of metaphor, imagery, dialogue, or plot lines to present deeper themes to the audience. The riddle of steel may be one such theme. The fantastic growth that results from being lashed to the Wheel of Pain actually forms the basis of two themes. In the first, the machine is an obvious device meant to demonstrate that something which doesn't kill you will make you stronger. Throngs of bodybuilders have latched onto a very literal interpretation of that message, something that can be witnessed every single day in weightlifting gyms throughout the world. Yet on occasion films present themes or ideas that are clearly beyond the intentions of the filmmaker. The Wheel's second theme falls into this category. If we are to inquire of what, literally, makes us stronger, the Wheel then becomes an antithetical object, and beyond that, a monument to mistaken beliefs—and in light of other themes, it's a rather ironic element of the story. It suggests the existence of a real-life riddle of steel, a mystery whose long-awaited answer completely debunked the ideas of which the Wheel was merely an exaggeration.