

# IT'S ALL IN THE MIND

**Psych yourself up for your next workout — and reap the benefits**

**Y**OU PLACE THE D-HANDLE attachments on the cables and set the stacks. At the same time, intentionally or not, you're psyching yourself up to lift heavy. But what if you made a conscious habit of psyching yourself up? Would concentrating your mental power on building muscle have an effect? Scientists have wondered the same thing.

"Athletes usually have to do things in a short time or in a powerful manner," says Brad Hatfield, PhD, a professor of kinesiology with an appointment in neuroscience at the University of Maryland (College Park). "The kind of increased intensity [that psyching up provides] will help them match their physiological states with what the task demands." Psyching up, then, is an attempt to jump-start that match between the state of the body and the task at hand. "Once you start moving, a number of psychological parameters kick in to get the body into the right arousal state," Hatfield explains.

The reasons for this response are less clear. "Broadly speaking, the mind issues commands that direct muscles to work," notes David Tod, PhD, of the Centre for Rehabilitation, Exercise and Sport Science at Victoria University in Melbourne, Australia. But can the mind issue commands to make muscles work harder?

## GETTING PSYCHED

To determine the influence of mental preparation on muscle, Hatfield and his colleagues recorded the activity of the muscles along the spines of 15 strength-



**Bring the pain, baby! Jay Cutler readies for a set of presses**

## Emote to Lift Heavy

» Activating the emotional area of the brain might be the most effective psyching strategy, since it's networked with the motor areas of the brain. "It can very well be that something that makes you emotional, like anger... may be a damn good way to get you psyched up, in terms of recruiting more motor units and more force production in your muscle," says Brad Hatfield, PhD, from the University of Maryland (College Park). "Emotion is the bottom line."

Put this theory to work by recalling events in your life that have made you angry. If you don't have these types of experiences to draw from, try jumping up and down or breathing rapidly, which may produce the equivalent of the helmet-butting psyching strategy of your favorite football team.

trained men both after the subjects psyched themselves up for a lift and after they did a distraction task, like mental arithmetic. Though researchers found no difference in performance, Hatfield thinks the problem was with the subjects, not the psyching process.

"My feeling is that in both conditions the subjects psyched. The difference is that in one group, they had a few seconds to do it, and in the other they did it instantaneously. I think if we took some beginners and let them mentally prepare, then we might see a difference."

Tod agrees: "Researchers have studied self-reported psychological states and physiological arousal, but there haven't

been any consistent findings yet. The most consistent result from the research is that untrained lifters doing dynamic movements are likely to produce more force and have better muscular endurance [when properly psyched]."

The bottom line is that researchers know your brain sends more stimulation to muscles when you're psyched up; they just haven't found the perfect experiment to prove it yet. While they look for answers, why not spend a few seconds before each lift psyching yourself up? Odds are, you'll end up stronger.

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