



## You Can Get Stronger Than Ever In Your 40s, 50s and Even 60s. We're Not Kidding. Here's How

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NEIL GRESHAM

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**You're in your late 40s, 50s or 60s**, keen as ever to crank, and unsure of whether to focus on strength or endurance. Your only certainty is that you want to avoid injury.

Over 50s, don't sell your hangboards. The picture is extremely optimistic, especially for doing steep, hard sport climbs. Take it from me: I climbed my hardest sport route (a new 8c+ / 5.14c at Malham Cove in the UK) at the age of 46.

Historically, a host of factors, from anecdotes to misleading literature, have conspired to make older climbers fear strength training. Most veterans will have come across the depressing stats about age-related performance decline. In brief, we are told to expect, from age 35-40 onwards: a significant decline in muscle strength and power; to be able to handle lower volumes of training; and to need longer recovery between sessions. Additionally, we're warned that when older athletes stop training, their fitness deteriorates more quickly than before, while regaining it becomes harder. Great.

Over the years, many climbing coaches have accepted these depressing stats and been prophets of doom about strength training for older climbers. A compounding factor was that many older climbers became injured back in the late 1980s and 1990s by training strength, leading me to write an article for this very magazine around the turn of the century advising them not to use hangboards and campus boards and to default to endurance training.

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Oh, how times have changed! Masters are defying the data by bouldering V10 and redpointing 8c-9a (5.14b-d) in their 50s and 60s. This level is very difficult to achieve by training endurance alone, and we now understand that there are safe and effective strategies for getting stronger well into our later years.

### Strength

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**While we now see that older climbers can get stronger**, how can this be true from a physiological perspective? Sure, climbers who didn't train in their earlier years will get stronger if they start training later, but we are also seeing climbers who trained hard all along hitting personal bests for strength beyond their late 40s. Who knows whether Chris Sharma or Margo Hayes will climb as hard at 60, but guys like me who've been training hard for decades are doing it.

Older climbers can and should train strength. While research indicates that gains will be lower than in our youth, the evidence is overwhelming that they can still take place and are likely to bring additional health benefits. In a 2019 article entitled "Your Guide to Strength Training Over 50," Elizabeth Quinn described strength training as "the only type of exercise that can substantially slow and even reverse the declines in muscle mass, bone density, and strength that were once considered inevitable consequences of aging." Quinn lists additional benefits for neurological function, sleep, joint health and mental health.

I believe the key is that strength gains don't come purely from hypertrophy (increased muscle size). Perhaps more significant in climbing is neuromuscular recruitment, which is associated with efficiency and coordination in strength.

## Neuromuscular Recruitment

**Over the years a chain of performance variables**—including technique, neuro-muscular-recruitment and mental skill—mesh to refine a climber, and many older climbers who train strength report an increased sense of "sharpness." Evidence from research into mainstream sports such as running, swimming and cycling is inconclusive, with some studies suggesting that neurological functioning decreases with age, yet others suggesting that it may improve. Either way, let's simply enjoy the fact that so many older climbers are reporting that they feel more efficient in the way they deploy their strength.

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Other factors as well have enabled them, the main one being that they are experiencing fewer injuries. Not only have training facilities become more user-friendly (gone are the sharp, tweaky edges and pockets we used to crank on), we now know more about preventative strategies: such as warming up, antagonist training and using recovery aids. Older climbers understand how to listen to their bodies—a mere concept in our youth. In my teens and 20s, I hurled myself into training and constantly suffered setbacks. The main reason I've hit strength-related PBs in my late 40s is because I know how to pace myself and pay attention.

A further factor is smart training. Seek to evolve and refine your game each year, rather than merely repeating the same routines—or mistakes. A 20-something climber will get strong by cranking on a campus board or hangboard any old way. However, climbers in their 50s may do so by targeting weaker grips, isolating finger combinations, doing supportive exercises with weights, changing rest-set protocols, and following a structured plan. There are always new things to do.

## Nutrition

**A refined approach to nutrition is also essential.** In your youth you may have been able to get away with eating junk, but a mature climber should eat right or there's almost no point in training strength. This vast topic is worthy of a book, but in a 2016 study, the Central Queensland University researcher Thomas Doering states, "Athletes over 50 require doses of protein around double currently recommended after exercise to facilitate the repair process."

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Many studies similarly suggest that athletes approaching 60 years of age should aim for approximately 40g of protein per meal (when consuming three meals a day), which is nearly double the intake guidelines for athletes in their 20s. Some people may choose an alternative such as having a protein shake (whey protein is recommended) post-workout. The more you learn about this subject, the more you stand to gain. For best results, nutrition strategies should always be personalized. If your energy levels are low, you feel you are recovering poorly, or you have special requirements (food allergies, etc.), see a dietician.

## Seven Strength-Training Protocols for Older Climbers

**So, OK!** Let's look at how to do all of this safely and effectively.

**1. Build a base.** It's more important than ever to precede any phase of high-intensity training with a phase of volume-based training, to prepare your body for the stresses.

**2. You can increase load,** but do it progressively. An example is to add small amounts of weight (1-2 pounds) to two-arm deadhangs every fourth or fifth session.

**3. Don't do max strength-recruitment** (with 90-95 percent load) all the time! If you've been training for decades, you may not need as much of this as you think. Do some sessions at 70 percent load, which is more conducive for recovery and builds more versatile strength. You may also be at less risk of injury this way, especially if you include strength-endurance work in the mix.

**4. Support climbing-specific training** (fingers, arms, core) with full-body exercises such as straight-leg dead lifts to maintain overall body strength.

**5. Speed up.** As you grow older, your default will be to slow down, yet to a large extent, especially in sport climbing, speed is efficiency. Try explosive, dynamic boulder problems, campus (if you're strong enough), and support the campaign with power exercises such as fast pull-ups and clapping push-ups.

**6. Plan and be consistent.** Establish a routine. Stick to it for a period (say, one or two months), take a brief break from strength work by switching purely to endurance or easy climbing, then resume. Avoid prolonged periods of time out.

**7. Let endurance take care of itself.** One of the few advantages of aging, as countless veterans report, is that endurance almost seems to be on tap. This will depend on body type and your training history. However, most vets find it easier to maintain endurance than strength. You can top up your endurance a few weeks before a climbing trip, but devote the majority of training phases to strength. The picture is, in fact, the opposite of the one I proposed on these pages over a decade ago.

## Injury Prevention

**Perform regular functional mobility work**—stretch your shoulders and upper body.

Antagonist training is crucial for preventing the injuries associated with muscular imbalance. Do forearm extensions with an elastic training device, and for the chest, shoulders and triceps, do push-ups or (better yet) use suspension straps. Train at least twice a week. No need to push too hard.

“Even less is even more!” Veterans need more recovery, but try to consider it an advantage. You can spend more time with your family and finish all your tasks! Three short or mid-strength sessions per week is optimum.

No recklessness! Be uncompromising in warming up and maintaining technique and form. Don't allow your concentration to lapse, even for a second. Do shorter, higher-quality sessions with sustained focus.

Address any injury concerns immediately—you may not have needed to see a physio to get over an injury in your youth, but that was then ....

Do everything you can to stay fit and strong when rehabilitating injuries. For example, if you have a finger injury—keep training the rest of your body.

Protect your shoulders, and perform a routine with light stretch bands before every climbing session.

It is not strength training (or even climbing) that is most likely to injure you—it is trying to be a hero in normal life, lifting things too suddenly and so

on. Stop and think before slinging things around. Be more mindful of movement in general.

## Recovery

**Take your recovery as seriously as your training.** Sleep is the elixir of recovery, so don't stay up late watching garbage TV.

Use forearm-massage devices and foam rollers. Experiment with hot-and-cold therapy. Stretch on rest days.

Split routines will help you ration out your energy and maximize recovery—for example, train finger strength in the morning and arms and core in the evening.

Raise your game with nutrition but don't beat yourself up when you lapse. Sip water all day and minimize caffeine, alcohol, sugar and refined/processed foods. If you relax periodically, tell yourself it's a positive.

Above all else, please remember: Brains over brawn.

*Neil Gresham is 48 years young and has been a climbing coach for nearly that long.*

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