

Year-Long Exercise Program for Overall Fitness

A well-rounded exercise program you can run back year after year.



Doing lateral raises in my basement gym/office (I didn't ask for this photo to be taken — I'm not that vain).

Little excites me more than a well-structured exercise program.

So when I stumbled across a **practical year-long program for overall fitness** in [this Huberman Lab podcast](#), I couldn't wait to break it down and share it with you.

What to expect:

- Program overview
- Deload and rest protocols
- Annual fitness testing protocol
- My analysis (pros, cons, suggestions)

Even if you're *not* looking for a new exercise program, I think you'll learn something new here that will help you train smarter.

Buckle up, this will be fun...

[Subscribe now](#)

Overview: Year-Long Exercise Program for Overall Fitness

This program was developed by [Dr. Andy Galpin](#), professor of kinesiology at California State University, Fullerton, and world-renowned Scientist of Human Performance.

Andy has worked with the general population and professional athletes from baseball players to cage fighters. When it comes to exercise, he knows his stuff.

The program is structured around quarterly objectives and designed so you can run it back year after year.

It covers all your bases — **stay lean, maintain physical strength, stamina, and stability, and sustain energy all day long** — to ensure that no aspect of your fitness is left behind.

(**Note:** If you live in the Southern Hemisphere, flip the quarterly objectives below to align with your winter/summer months.)

Quarter 1: Add Muscle

January — March

Logic:

For most people in the Northern Hemisphere, January to March are cold, dark months.

The days are short and the weather is bad which creates the perfect conditions to sleep more (sleep is critical to muscle growth) and exercise within the warm confines of a gym.

Calorie Intake:

Eat slightly above your calorie maintenance (10-15% more) without intentionally overeating.

Most people need to be in a caloric surplus to build muscle, but you want to avoid or minimize fat gain.

Exercise:

- 1 indoor sport per week
- Weights 3-4 times per week
- Long walk outdoors 2 times per week

After 12 weeks, you'll have added muscle and strength, feel motivated with your progress, and be ready to switch it up.

Quarter 2: Get Lean

April – June

Logic:

Q2 is about getting lean (fat loss).

The days are starting to get longer, the weather is getting better, and people are eager to get back outside.

Summer is on the horizon along with its beach days, social gatherings, and events which makes Q2 a good time **to shed winter weight, so we can look and feel good with less clothes on.**

Calorie Intake:

Bring your calories down to 10-15% below maintenance (caloric deficit).

Eating in a caloric deficit for long periods of time is challenging. But after being in a caloric surplus in Q1, your willpower and discipline should be strong.

Q2 is the only Quarter that targets fat loss, **so you have a clear end date of when this caloric restriction phase is over.** Plus there aren't many food-centric holidays in Q2 to tempt you or stifle your progress.

Exercise:

- 1 exercise class per week
- Weights 2 times per week
- Outdoor sport 1-2 times per week
- Long walk outdoors 2 times per week

During Q1, you were probably working out alone and programming all of your own workouts. The exercise class takes the pressure off programming and gives you variety and social interaction.

For the two weight sessions, focus on movements or muscle groups you didn't hit in the exercise class, or any areas that are important to you.

Shifting from an indoor to an outdoor sport gives you more time in the sun while still improving your **proprioception** — a critical aspect of longevity we'll cover in the *Pros* section.

Quarter 3: High-intensity Cardio

July — September

Logic:

Halfway through the year, you've built some muscle and strength and leaned down but may have lost some cardiorespiratory fitness.

You shouldn't feel burnt out because of the variety and fun built-in through an exercise class and outdoor sport in Q2.

The goal over the next six months is to improve your cardiorespiratory fitness and bring up things like your VO2 Max, aerobic efficiency, and cardiac output.

For Q3, our focus is high intensity short to moderate duration endurance training.

Calorie Intake:

Bring your calories back up to maintenance (not gaining or losing weight).

Exercise:

- Weights 2 times per week
- Outdoor sport 2 times per week
- Long walk outdoors 1 time per week
- Anaerobic power or VO2 Max workouts 2 times per week

Q3 weightlifting is for maintenance — you don't want to lose the muscle you worked hard to put on.

You should be able to maintain muscle mass with as little as 5-10 sets per muscle group per week. Focus on the big exercises and muscle groups plus any areas you're trying to develop.

The weather is beautiful, so continue with an outdoor sport but consider trying something new. Bonus points if the sport requires high-intensity bursts of energy.

Anaerobic power and **VO2 max** are both high-intensity endurance training. The difference between them is the duration of intervals.

- **Anaerobic Power:** working as hard as possible for **30-60 seconds** at a time (e.g. sprints, burpees, rower, assault bike).
- **VO2 Max:** working as hard as possible for **4-12 minutes** at a time (e.g. 800m run, 1-mile run).

These sessions can be any interval work that gets you breathing really hard. For example:

- Hill sprints
- Track workout: sprint the straights, walk the corners.
- **4x4 Protocol:** 4 minutes at the max pace you can sustain, 4 minutes easy to bring your heart rate down ~100 bpm. Repeat 4-6 times.

Aim for one session each of **anaerobic power** and **VO2 max** per week. Each effort should be super intense, going as hard as you can for the selected duration.

The weather is beautiful so do these outside when possible.

Quarter 4: Long-duration Endurance

October – December

Logic:

After emphasizing short to moderate duration endurance in Q3, Q4 is focused on moderate to long duration endurance.

If it works with your schedule, you can even do two workouts some days.

Calorie Intake:

Generally, people expend more calories in cardiovascular training which aligns nicely with this time of year due to holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Since we tend to eat more in these months anyway, slotting higher calorie-burning exercise in this period just makes sense.

Exercise:

- Weights 1 time per week
- Indoor sport 2 times per week
- Long walk outdoors 2 times per week
- Medium to long duration cardio 1-4 times per week

Continue lifting weights with the goal of maintenance.

With the weather turning again, transition back to an indoor sport.

Consider trying combat sports (Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, kickboxing, etc.).

They combine intense exercise, social camaraderie, self-defence, and novel stimuli to challenge your brain.

For your cardio sessions, do a combination of **VO₂ max** (described above) and long-duration endurance (**Zone 2**) training.

- **VO₂ Max:** 4-12 minutes intervals.
- **Zone 2:** 20+ minutes of continuous work (aim for 45+ minute sessions).

Deload and Rest Weeks

Galpin suggests following this deload and rest schedule for each 12-week Quarter:

- **Week 1-5:** Go hard.
- **Week 6:** Deload week.
- **Week 7-11:** Go hard.
- **Week 12:** Rest week.

At the end of the rest week, roll right into Week 1 of the next Quarter.

Deload week: Follow the same exercise protocol, but drop the intensity from 100% to 70%.

Rest week: Back off entirely. Continue walking outside and use the time you would have been working out with family, at work, or on vacation.

My Take on Deloads

Deload and rest weeks are important.

But in my experience, I don't think they should be scheduled.

Between sickness, unexpected travel, chaotic schedules, and weeks you feel rundown, life seems to schedule deloads for you.

Adding preplanned rest may result in too much time off.

Counterargument: By scheduling deload and rest weeks in advance, you might avoid burnout and sickness caused by overtaxing your body. Experiment and do what works best for you.

Annual Fitness Testing

To track your progress and recalibrate your goals, Galpin recommends fitness testing once per year.

For most people, the third week of December is a logical time to fit this in. But it's up to you.

Our Longevity Combine series covered fitness testing in-depth:

- [Assess & Improve Your Exercise Form with a Zero-Cost Test \(Pt. 1\)](#)
- [Assess Your Speed, Power, and Strength \(Pt. 2\)](#)
- [Assess Your Muscle Size and Muscular Endurance \(Pt. 3\)](#)
- [Assess Your Aerobic and Anaerobic Endurance \(Pt. 4\)](#)

My Analysis

I love certain aspects of this program but have a few concerns.

I might adopt parts of this program, but will probably make a few adjustments to cope with the *Cons*.

Pros

Flexible and well-planned.

This program plays into the seasons of our lives so we're working with them, not against them. It's also very flexible, with lots of space to modify the program to meet your needs.

Variety and well-roundedness.

I'm guilty of following the same routine year-round. This program blends together sports, time outdoors, and social interaction, and ensures we tend to *ALL* aspects of our fitness.

It's human.

This program is built for humans. It considers what our body needs to stay fit while accounting for our busy lives.

While many programs are based on what the science says is "optimal," Galpin designed this program so that we enjoy our exercise, adhere to the program (consistency is key), and don't burn out partway through the year.

Prevents burnout.

The variety, social interaction, time outside, and new weekly structure every quarter will help prevent burnout — something we all encounter as the year goes on.

Time saver.

Most programs break fitness and wellness activities down until they consume your entire day. By blending exercise with the outdoors, sports, and social time, this program saves time while enhancing our fitness and improving our overall well-being.

Proprioception work from sports.

Proprioception is your ability to adjust to external stimuli.

[Studies show](#) that proprioception work helps stave off late-onset dementia and Parkinson's. It's also really important for us to continue living independently in old age.

We don't get proprioception work from programmed exercise, but we do from being outside and playing sports. This program ensures we get at least one session per week that challenges proprioception.

Cons

Neglects cardiorespiratory fitness for six months.

This is my biggest grievance.

The first six months don't include aerobic or anaerobic endurance training. You might get some from the sport you select, but for overall longevity and disease risk management, it's important to tend to all aspects of your fitness year-round.

If you want to follow this exact program, I suggest choosing a cardio-intensive sport for Q1 and Q2.

Doesn't account for stability/flexibility/mobility work.

Your stability will likely be trained through your sport, but to maintain flexibility and mobility, you'll need to add some training hours to this program for things like [yoga and static stretching](#).

More weights in Q4.

Even at just five sets per muscle group per week, it will be challenging to maintain muscle and strength in one weight session per week.

In Q4, I recommend choosing a sport that engages your muscles like BJJ (or other combat sports), or upping your time in the gym to two days per week.

My Suggestions

Modify, add, eliminate.

You can copy this exact framework or customize it like crazy to meet your needs.

Specific goal?

Modify the quarterly objectives based on a specific goal or your fitness needs.

For example, if you're a long-time runner and have great cardiovascular fitness but are lacking muscle and strength, you can emphasize weights in Q3 and Q4.

Walk every day, especially after meals.

Although this program specifies long, outdoor walks a few days per week, try to walk at least 8,000 steps every day. Go longer on your "walk days."

Don't fix what isn't broken.

If you already have an exercise program that works for you, stick with it. You can always revisit this in the future when you're looking for a change.

Exercise Resources:

Unsure how to design your "weight" sessions or "cardiorespiratory" workouts?

These articles have you covered:

- [How to Build Muscle: The Quick Guide to Hypertrophy Training](#)
- [The "3 to 5" Approach: The Only Strength Protocol You'll Ever Need](#)
- [How To Train For Endurance: 4 Exercise Protocols To Optimize Your Endurance](#)

What do you think? Are you going to implement this program? Or part of it?

[Subscribe now](#)

Leave a comment on the [original post](#). **I'd love to hear your thoughts!**

Much love,
Jack