Variations and rational use of the Good Morning exercise

Andrew Charniga, Jr.
Livonia, Michigan

Editor's Note:
The reader needs to be aware of the advanced nature of these exercises, and that appropriate and mature muscle structure is necessary before these movements are attempted. Also, it is described by the author as an assistive weight training exercise, to be applied to sports where trunk extension is common (e.g. offensive line play in football, jumping in basketball, etc.).

The Good Morning exercise is an assistance movement utilized primarily by weight lifters to strengthen the extensors of the torso—the gluteus, hamstrings and erector spinae muscles (1-8). There are a number of ways to execute this exercise depending upon the purpose it serves. One variation involves executing the movement with the legs straight, the heels together and allowing the back to round, as the hips are shifted rearward. This is a potentially valuable prophylactic/therapeutic exercise and as yet has not received sufficient attention in the exercise-sports literature.

The fundamental purpose of the Good Morning in the training of weight lifters is to serve as an assistance exercise to strengthen the extensors of the torso and to aid in perfecting the "explosion" phase of the pull. Consequently, the suitable variations are usually done once every 7 to 10 days. However, other variations of the movement which have potential prophylactic (against low back injury) and therapeutic (for low back stiffness and soreness) effects can be utilized more often, separately or combined in one workout.

Variations and Methods of Employing Good Mornings.

Variant I. The purpose of Variant I is to strengthen the torso extensors through duplication of the basic structure of the "explosion." A barbell is placed on the shoulders. With the back straight or, better yet, arched in the lumbar area (10), the knees slightly bent, the feet at pelvis width and toes turned slightly to the side, bend forward allowing the hips to shift backwards somewhat until the trunk is parallel to the floor. The back should remain straight throughout. This can best be achieved by

Figure 1. Starting position of Variant I and II

Figure 2. Low position of Variant I

Figure 3. Completion of Variant I
forcefully sticking the chest out and up, which automatically tenses the lumbar muscles and arches the back (Figures 1 and 2). From the parallel position, rapidly and fully extend the torso and the legs, and subsequently rise up on the toes (Figure 3). Return to the initial position and repeat. One can hold the parallel position of the torso for a 2 to 3 second count before straightening up. This preliminary isometric tension followed by a rapid contraction is a way of making the exercise more difficult. It is effective for developing speed-strength and for improving kinesthetic sensitivity to body alignment and balance. Weight lifters typically include this exercise once every 7 to 10 days for 4 to 5 sets of 3 to 5 repetitions. The appropriate amount of weight is 50 to 70 percent of the best snatch, and/or is dictated by correct form, the repetition/set scheme, the volume of the other exercises in training, etc.

**Variant II.** The purpose of this variant is to duplicate the "explosion" or jumping phase in weight lifting. It is executed in the same manner except that there is less bending of the torso-30 to 45 degree of forward tilt--and the movement is completed by fully straightening the legs and torso and actually jumping upward (Figures 4 and 5). Great care must be taken to land properly by absorbing the fall with the ankles and legs so as not to place excessive stress on the lumbar spine. The degree of torso inclination is less than the first variant, and one strives to switch from bending to straightening as quickly as possible. This action is very similar to the "explosion" phase of the pull and likewise the vertical jump. Furthermore, this movement has greater specificity to the vertical jump than some commercially available devices which have a fixed starting position (no switching from eccentric to concentric contraction phase) and a speed governor. Three to 4 sets of 4 to 5 repetitions with up to 50 percent of the best snatch once every 7 to 10 days is appropriate for this movement (3).

**Variant III.** The purposes of this movement are to exercise the erector spinae (in flexion/extension) and gluteus muscles while eliminating hamstring tension, and to improve/maintain range of motion in the spine by subjecting the erectors to a lengthening type of tension. Sit on a bench/chair 14” - 18” in height, and place a barbell on the shoulders or in the cervical curve of the neck (Figure 6). Lean forward, allowing the back to bend until the chest is touching the thighs or falls below this level (Figure 7). If mobility permits, the thighs can be spread apart allowing a larger amplitude of movement. Return to the starting position smoothly and repeat. The tempo of movement is moderate to slow to avoid injury and obtain the full benefit of the exercise.

Great care must be observed in adding weight in this exercise. A large amplitude of movement and correct execution are more important than the amount of weight utilized (2). Begin with a stick or an empty bar and practice the movement over a period of weeks (if necessary) with no additional weight until flexibility permits a fairly large range of motion. Four to 6 sets of 4 to 6 repetitions with a weight that is individually determined by the aforementioned factors of mobility, volume of other exercises, etc., is an appropriate training scheme for this exercise.

**Variant IV.** The purpose of this movement is to place more stress on the gluteus and hamstring muscles by creating a long resistance arm, i.e., the distance between the resistance (the barbell) and the axis of rotation (the hip joints). The barbell is placed on the shoulders; the back is straight or arched and the feet are at shoulder width. Bend over at the waist without allowing the hips to shift rearward (keep the legs vertical). Stop at parallel and return to the starting position. This
variant is not typically utilized by weight lifters (9) and, in our opinion, is not a suitable assistance exercise because the lumbar area is subjected to a lot of shear stress, and the likelihood of overstrain injury is high.

**Variant V.** The purpose of this movement is to exercise the erector spinae, the gluteus and hamstrings with a movement of large amplitude, and to serve as a potential prophylactic/therapeutic exercise for weight lifters. This exercise may also be suitable for runners, jumpers and other athletes.

Place a barbell on the shoulders. Arrange the feet with the heels together and the toes turned slightly to the side. Now place the barbell in the cervical curve of the neck (Figure 8). Keeping the knees locked, bend over at the waist, allowing the spine to flex and the hips to shift significantly backward such that the tips of the shoes are raised slightly off the floor (Figures 9 and 10) at the lowest point of the movement. The torso should descend significantly below parallel. Allow the neck to round somewhat at the lowest point of the movement for maximum amplitude and begin the return to the starting position smoothly. The hips are shifted rearward a little more as one straightens up (Figure 11). The movement tempo is a slow to moderate rate of lowering and a smooth quicker return to the starting position with some acceleration through the mid-point range. Once again, the amplitude and correct execution of the movement are more important than the amount of weight (2). Four to 6 sets of 4 to 8 repetitions with a given weight is suitable for this exercise.

This variant is a rather difficult movement to execute because of the large amplitude of movement and the narrow base of support. It may be difficult for some athletes to maintain balance during this exercise. Furthermore, the positioning of the bar in the curve of the neck would appear awkward and difficult. However, practical experience has shown that this positioning of the barbell feels natural and is appropriate for this movement. Although the purpose of this exercise is not to lift heavy weights, the author has employed this movement regularly over a period of 8 years and has utilized 100 kilos for 5 sets of 6 repetitions.

**Variant V** of the Good Morning exercise has some interesting features and therefore merits further explanation. In many athletic activities, such as Olympic weight lifting, the back is held straight during the fundamental exercises—snatching, jerking, cleaning, etc. Consequently, the erector spinae muscles are, for the most part, working isometrically, and are in a shortened state. A possible cause of low back pain resulting from a large volume/intensity of the aforementioned activities is that the erector spinae muscles seldom are exercised dynamically or stretched at the same intensity with which they are normally utilized. Furthermore, the hamstrings are not subjected to a stretching-lengthening type of tension and may be disproportionately weak and lacking in flexibility. **Variant V** of the Good Morning is a potential prophylactic/therapeutic movement because the erector spinae muscles are lengthened and exercised dynamically (flexion, extension); and the hamstrings are subjected to a static-lengthening tension throughout a large amplitude. From the description and the figures it would appear that this is a potentially dangerous movement. However this is not the case. The shear stress on the spine is lessened and there may even be decompressional influence on the lumbar vertebrae because the hips are shifted rearward.

In our experience, good results (in prevention and alleviation of lumbar stiffness) have been obtained utilizing this exercise after a large olympic lifting type of workout. Weights of 50 to 55 percent of the best snatch for 3 to 4 sets of 4 to 8 repetitions are used. Variants III and V can also be utilized effectively in active rest types of workouts (3). For example, on the day following a large training session (6 to 8 exercises) one can do a small workout consisting of:

1. Press behind neck, snatch grip: 6 x 4 repetitions
2. Good mornings, seated on a bench (Variant III): 3 x 6
3. Good mornings, legs straight (Variant V): 6 x 4

The amount of weight is determined individually and is dictated by the set/repetition scheme.

Another interesting use of Variant V is to perform this exercise after several sets of hyperextensions. Here, one receives the benefit of a large tension at the muscles’ shortest length (“peak-contraction”) followed by a lengthening-stretching type of tension. The effectiveness of this
scheme has been documented (11).
In conclusion, the Good Morning
is a valuable special-assistance
exercise and has a place in many
strength-training programs. There
are a number of ways to do this
exercise (all of which have not been
covered here, of course) and each
method can have a special place in a
training program depending on the
purpose for which it is used. Variants I
and II are utilized as assistance
exercises for the pull in weight lifting.
Variants III and V are utilized in
weight lifting primarily as prophylactic/
therapeutic exercises, and are not
only of value in this context, but may
be useful in the strength training
programs of other athletes.

Figure 9. Low position of Variant V.

Figure 10. Low position of Variant V.

Figure 11. Rising from low position of
Variant V Good Morning. Note
significant angle of inclination
of the legs relative to the
vertical.

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