Tier System primer for program design

If you listened to Joe Kenns free speech with us, he talked a lot about the history of coaching, how it was in the 80s and 90s, and how those coaching styles led him to develop a system of training that implemented the three main coaching styles of the day: powerlifting, bodybuilding and Olympic weight lifting.

If you think of all 3 of these as different physiological responses to different training methods, and all desirable for athletes, it makes sense that the tier system was developed to allow you to program for your athletes using all 3, concurrently. And this is exactly what the tier system does – it allows you to organize a system of training that trains athletic movements in conjunction with loading protocols designed to improve all athletics of athleticism.

At its core, the tier system is simply a way to organize exercises in a training program so that athletes train full body multiple times a week. And if you consider that athletics is a full body sport, it makes sense to train the full body in practice as well – even in the weight room. When you stack the tier system organization of exercises onto a concurrent training program that trains the three main loading mechanism (dynamic, effort and repetitive / speed, strength and volume), you create a full body, concurrent undulating system of training that allows your athletes to improve all aspects of the whole body throughout the year.

Now, these terms are fluid and the training program DOES allow you to adjust the loading protocols for season specific goals, and you can adjust the tiers to be sport specific or season specific as well. But this tier system of organization does allow you to do exactly that – organize your protocols so you can better prepare your training programs, and build better more comprehensive training programs throughout the year.

First, lets look at a typical tier program. You have 3 main tier categories: lower, upper and total. You organize these 3 tiers over the course of the week, like so:

DAY 1	**DAY 2**	**DAY 3**
Lower	Upper	Total
Total	Lower	Upper
Upper	Total	Lower

Next, you have your loading protocols: dynamic, effort, repetitive. Lets place this in a similar grid, for a very generic program for a generic sport during the middle of the offseason:

DAY 1	**DAY 2**	**DAY 3**
Effort	Effort	Effort
Dynamic	Dynamic	Dynamic
Repetitive	Repetitive	Repetitive

So how could this look in theory on a program?

DAY 1	**DAY 2**	**DAY 3**
Lower - Effort	Upper - Effort	Total - Effort
Total - Dynamic	Lower - Dynamic	Upper - Dynamic
Upper - Repetitive	Total - Repetitive	Lower - Repetitive

Now, lets fill it in.

DAY 1	**DAY 2**	**DAY 3**
Back Squat – 5x3 @ 80%	Close Grip Bench – 8x2 @ 80%	Deadlift – 531 Protocol
Clean – 8x2 @ 60%	Box Squat w/Chains – 6x3 @ 55%	Clap Pushups – 5x5
DB Bench – 4x10	Trap Bar Deadlift – 6x5	BB Split Squats – 4x8 EA

So we made our categories for exercises and loading protocols, then we filled in the chart based on the categories we made to create a 3 day, 3 tier system. By rotating the exercise tier but keeping the desired physiological outcome the same for each tier, we have a truly undulating, full body athletic based program.

Everything else in the tier system is an exact iteration of this – it takes the tier system and manipulates the tiers based on the sport, the season, the desired physiological goal, and then fill in the blanks with a program that works using those principles.

Also remember, this framework has a lot of wiggle room to use in your specific protocols – you can make super sets out fo these, by adding accessory work that will not interfere with the ability to do these lifts in this tier, or following tiers. With your effort back squats, you can add in dumbbell rows, band pullaparts, and ab wheel. This will allow you to maximize the work done within an hour without compromising quality.

When building your programs, it always starts with the following questions:

- How many days per week?
- For these athletes, what is my primary goal (this dictates the loading parameters for tier 1)
- For these athletes, what should the 3 primary exercise tiers be? (should cross country have 3 upper tiers during peak?)
- Do my loading parameters match the goals ive outlined for these tiers?
- What exercises within these categories are appropriate for these athletes?

A few things to note – a tier based program CAN coexist with a block based loading protocol. A block system has concentrated loads towards a single physiological goal, whereas a concurrent program (like the one we built above) trains multiple qualities simultaneously.

Most athletes can and will adapt to multiple qualities at the same time – the more highly trained an athlete is, the more concentrated loading they will need to improve a single quality, which is where block based programming can enter. For younger or lesser trained athletes (the vast majority of athletes out there), concurrent programs work great, and allow a great deal of flexibility throughout the season.

For example, if you are near the beginning of the season for basketball (a long season with a sustained peak), you may drop the effort tier entirely to allow the athlete to hit their speed work and some retained repetitive work:

DAY 1	**DAY 2**	**DAY 3**
Lower - Dynamic	Upper - Dynamic	Total - Dynamic
Total - Dynamic	Lower - Dynamic	Upper - Dynamic
Upper - Repetitive	Total - Repetitive	Lower - Repetitive

This again all fits within the goal of the tier system which is simply a way to organize exercises (and loading protocols) to develop an appropriate full body program.

Cool, right?