

Training to be the Last One Standing!

By Mike Young

The explosion in popularity of reality TV shows hitting the airways over the past decade has brought many interesting programs. Of all the shows, none are more physically challenging than the tribal-based reality shows that pit servicemen, athletes, and outdoorsmen from a variety of backgrounds against each other in physical challenges from a variety of cultures and environments. *One such show is the BBC's "Last Man Standing."*

This show places men from a variety of Westernized countries in to foreign tribal cultures where they battle in a series of tests to determine the "Last Man Standing." In each case, the participants face off in completely novel challenges that are specific to the tribal culture of that particular episode. The challenges are as varied as Mongolian Wrestling to Andean Ice Racing in Peru. The winner is the one who wins the most challenges over the course of the season. To make things more interesting, the participants have little opportunity to prepare for the challenges before entering the particular tribal culture for that week's episode.

This format makes for great drama but presents the participants with some interesting and unique challenges when preparing for the widely varied and completely novel tasks seen in each episode. So what should the participants do to prepare? This article will examine the specific demands of this and similar events and provide guidelines for physical preparation. Although these guidelines will be aimed specifically for "Last Man Standing" and similar physical challenges of reality TV, the points made will be highly applicable to any fitness enthusiast looking to expand their functional capacity and achieve extremely high fitness levels across a wide range of activities.

"Last Man Standing" requires participants to do the seemingly impossible...prepare for an unexpected series of activities that challenge a variety of skills, energy systems, and biomotor abilities. Competitors cannot focus on any one training method because the challenges are so diverse. They need to become "expert generalists" with fitness levels that span a wide range of capacities. In essence, they need to become the ultimate cross trainer.

A quick look back through previous tribal challenges and the backgrounds of the competitors that did well over the course of the series reveals some clues on how a competitor should prepare. The competitors that seem to do best are those with multi-disciplinary backgrounds and competitors who have experience in combat sports. This is to be expected because these types of athletes train across the broad spectrum of fitness and performance.

In most sports, you need a high level of specialization to achieve elite level performance. Only in multi-disciplinary sports like the triathlon, decathlon, and modern pentathlon, do you see elite athletes achieve success with more generalized training. However even in these sports, the athletes are still spending a considerable amount of time to train a limited number of activities that they know they will be contesting in advance of the competition.

At first glance, one might think competitors should just prepare with completely random, haphazardly organized training that throws modern training theory out of the window. Doing so, however, would be like throwing the baby out with the bath water. Sport science research, previous training theory, and time-proven anecdotes provide clues on the best way to train a competitor in events such as these to maximize performance gains.

One of the main considerations competitors will need to address is what is known as the Interference Effect. This refers to the decreased adaptation that occurs when high and low intensity activities are trained concurrently. More specifically, recent research has indicated that when high intensity training methods (like heavy weight lifting, sprinting, or plyometric training) are trained at the same time as endurance activities (like most aerobic training or muscular endurance training) that the adaptation to both stimuli will be significantly compromised compared to if only one training stimulus was used. In laymen's terms, the contrast in training methods confuses neuromuscular system to the point where it doesn't 'know' what to be. The negative impact is especially big for strength and speed development.

A photograph of a tribal man with long black hair, wearing a red loincloth, aiming a bow in a river. The background shows a lush green forest.

A New Challenge for Ultra Athletes,
Tribal Sport's!

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With these points in mind, competitors should look to minimize the interference effect while still training in all areas of physical performance. In a nutshell, participants need to raise their all-around physical capacity to the maximum and minimize the compromises that naturally occur with non-specialized training. To do this, I have several recommendations:

Be prepared to work hard AND smart. Preparing for something like “Last Man Standing” will be tremendously challenging and require commitment and effort. But the effort will not be effective if the training is not intelligently designed, organized, and implemented.

As mentioned competitors should include a wide range of activities across a broad spectrum of fitness domains in to their training. These training methods should extend beyond traditional gym training. Activities as varied as manipulating heavy, awkward objects (like sand bags, tires, and rocks); participating in combat sports; and long distance wilderness hiking are all appropriate training means based on what has been encountered in previous challenges.

Functional movements should be the foundation of training. Not only are functional movements more time efficient because they work more muscles simultaneously but they provide better carryover to ‘real world’ activities. Movements focusing on multi-joint pulling, pressing, squatting, and hoisting heavy objects from various positions should be employed.

Daily training means should be paired to be compatible. Compatible training means grouping elements of similar stimuli together. So for example, low intensity callisthenic training would be a good match with lower intensity, longer duration endurance activities. Likewise, high intensity heavy lifting sessions would be better paired with jumping, sprinting and other short duration, maximal effort activities. This will minimize any training interference effects that result from mixing training means on opposite ends of the spectrum in the same session.

Elements of a daily session should be paired to be complimentary. Complimentary training involves including training methods and means that can actually produce a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts (of training). An example of this would be pairing high intensity plyometric or sprinting activities with heavy weightlifting. In such a case, the neural potentiation of one activity will produce acute benefits on the others that should lead to a more effective training session.

Vary training types and intensities on alternating days. This will permit the participant to train hard every day of the week because they’ll be stressing different energy systems and placing varied neuromuscular stimuli on to the system. As a result, the athlete can train one biomotor ability or energy system hard on one day and rest it on the next day while focusing on a different biomotor ability or energy system hard. This will ensure recuperative resources for any given adaptation will not be overly stressed.

Now that I’ve laid out some general guidelines, let’s take a look at 4 different training themes that need to be addressed at least once a week to expect to be fully prepared for a challenge as daunting as “Last Man Standing.” As each one of these themes are fairly separate and distinct it would be advantageous to stick to one theme per day for training.

- 1. Maximum Strength Development:** This type of training involves lifting heavy objects. Because of the loads necessary to meet this criterion, the total training volume will be relatively low. Functional movements should be used exclusively.
- 2. Explosive Power Development:** This type of training involves performing whole body movements for speed. Because fatigue can quickly undermine the intent of explosive power training, rest intervals will generally need to be longer to ensure high quality of movement. Sprinting, Olympic weightlifting, jumping activities, agility drills, and throwing heavy objects are all examples of training methods that can fit in this category.
- 3. Muscular Endurance and Aerobic Conditioning:** This type of training involves performing movements that maintain elevated heart rates and / or moderate level muscular contractions over sustained periods of time. Longer runs, bikes and swims, hiking, exercise circuits with minimal rest, and higher repetition weight training all fall under this theme.
- 4. Metabolic Conditioning:** This type of training can be thought of as the meeting ground for two or more of the three previously mentioned themes. As such it can involve a variety of methods and means. Interval training, full body lifting protocols performed against the clock, and medium-duration (2-12 minutes) combinations of any of the methods used above are appropriate. This type of training can be especially challenging and requires high effort levels for maximum training effect.

By implementing the concepts presented in this article, athletes preparing for diverse challenges like “Last Man Standing” and fitness enthusiasts alike will be able to minimize interference effects of concurrent strength and endurance activities while ensuring that they are still training all of the energy systems and biomotor abilities necessary to be the **“Last Man Standing.”**

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