

Why don't we have beginner, intermediate and advanced groups at stretchfit?

BY ANTHONY LETT

I'm sometimes asked this very reasonable question by people who are new to the studio. Below I have tried to summarise my thinking about this without going on about it too much (hopefully!).

You can find more elaborate discussions on the subject in my books. (Search "Anthony Lett" on Amazon books). While classes that are divided into standards make some sense from a promotional/marketing point of view, I'm not convinced they are necessary. Here's why....

As you may have read in an earlier post, our approach is to isolate muscle groups, just like you do when using resistance training machines at a gym. (For a reminder on how muscles are found in compartments or groups in the human body, see below).

By design, gym machines are very good at isolating muscle groups, for example, the biceps or "guns," and fatiguing them. (See **Image A** below) It is this very focused degree of isolation that causes the muscles to fatigue and grow. Because the load is not shared around the body, a small group of muscles are near maximally exhausted. The resulting adaptation is that they grow back larger than

before. Irrespective of one's strength, the process works for everybody. The only thing that changes is the amount of resistance that is used.

Similarly, our equipment isolates muscles for the purpose of stretching them. No matter your level of flexibility in a muscle group, our equipment makes it simple to isolate and stretch them. The only difference for students is how far, or deep, they go into the stretch.

(Unlike the adaptation to strength training where muscles grow in cross sectional size, the adaptation to regular tensile stress (stretching) is for muscles and other soft tissues to grow longer rather than larger.)



Image 1

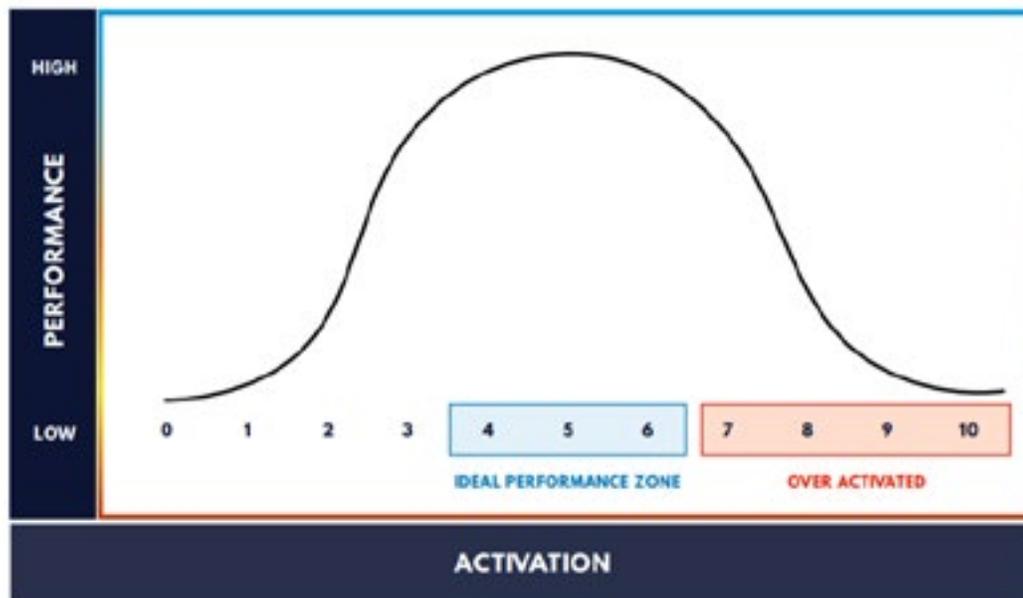
Image 1 shows a stretch for the quadriceps. If the client is “tight or stiff”, the heel will be brought towards the bottom until he or she reaches the “point of tension,” (see definition below)



Image 2

Image 2 As the client becomes more flexible, or if a client is more flexible than another in the same group or class, the bottom is brought closer to the heel before the “point of tension” is reached.

CALM CHART



RPE

In the field of sports science, RPE is used as a measurement of intensity. RPE stands for “Rate of perceived exertion.” As a runner for example, when you get “fitter,” your RPE might remain at 6 out of 10 although you are running a certain distance faster than before. This is because the heart and lungs have become stronger and more efficient. So, the intensity feels the same, but you’re going quicker. At StretchFit, we have an equivalent term. We call the RPE the “Point of Tension,” or POT. We encourage all students to find their POT which equates to around 4, 5, 6, or 7 out of ten in terms of intensity. Because of our equipment and isolationist/reductionist training approach, this can be done pretty easily, irrespective of the individual’s level of flexibility in the muscle group being stretched. It’s a matter of isolating the muscle group and then focusing on the sensations in the body slowly and carefully.

(And why do we keep the intensity at that level? Because greater intensity results in various protective reflexes

like the “Stretch reflex” firing up. This actually impedes progress. In the practice of stretching, it is “time under tension” that matters more than intensity. The “calm chart” below demonstrates the optimal level of activation/arousal, which is a psychophysiological phenomenon, for best results)

Flexibility

Flexibility is joint-specific. In my studio on a daily basis, I see clients with totally unique patterns of tension and stiffness in their bodies. Patterns that defy any theoretical perspective or expectation are almost the norm. As I have written before, each client is a totally peculiar blend of their interactions with the world that have been superimposed upon their unique inherited characteristics. With this truth in mind, it does not make much sense to ascribe anyone to a particular group or another. Granted, some clients will find some stretches “easier” than others, but they are taught to use the equipment and simply to “deepen it” or go further, until they find their “POT.” Unless they are a contortionist, this is almost always possible.

Simplicity

StretchFit is essentially very simple. As described above, we isolate muscle groups. There are no highly choreographed movement patterns or skills that take a long time to learn. In many disciplines like Yoga, calisthenics, and Pilates, for example, it is the learning and mastering of these skills that makes an exercise advanced. Combining balance, dynamic movement and complex repertoire requires coordination, time, and practice. At StretchFit there are not really any complex skills to master. Why not? Sports science research tells us that complex skills mastered in one discipline have very little if any “transference” or carry-over into any other aspect of life. For example, learning the “Hug a tree” exercise in Pilates will only serve to make you better at hugging trees, and then, only when sitting on a carriage that slides back and forth! So, we don’t do them. Our goal is to create flexibility in the body that can show up in daily life or sporting activities as increased relaxation, freedom of movement and awareness, decreased pain and stiffness, and increased energy and vitality.

Aesthetics

We don’t hold much stock in aesthetics. At StretchFit what you’re feeling is far more important than how it looks. If you’re feeling the stretch in the right place at the right intensity, you’re doing it “right.” This approach requires less physical correction, because alignment is important only in so far as you are feeling the sensations in the correct

region. The task of the teacher is to create an embodied awareness rather than a “right/wrong” corrective teaching style. Viewed from this perspective, there are no better or worse or more advanced/less advanced students. There are just clients finding the feelings that count.

Group Size

Our groups are very small. In a class with around 6 people, anyone can be assisted in finding a stretch

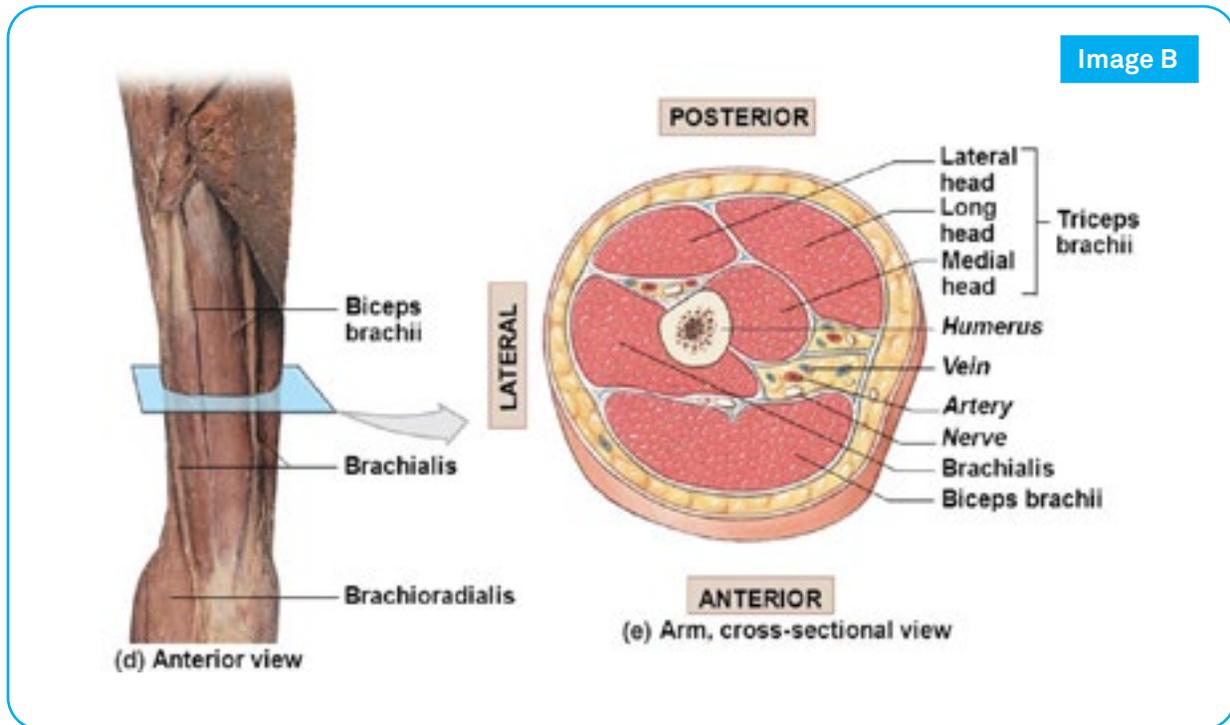
No Multi-Joint Poses

We don’t do multi-joint poses. Multi-joint stretches require flexibility through numerous joints like the spine, hips, and pelvis. When doing multi-joint stretches, sensations can be difficult to differentiate and locate, and greater assistance is required. (In addition, during such stretches the body will take the path of least resistance and movement will occur at the places/joints at which it is easiest. Avoiding the stretch in the place that needs it is quite likely. This makes smaller classes and an observant teacher all the more important and yet at commercial venues, this is rarely the case!)

So, there you have a brief explanation of the thought processes behind our approach to classes. For more information about how muscles are found in compartments throughout the body, and why it is efficient to stretch them this way most of the time, please read below.



Image A The “preacher curls” isolate the biceps or “guns,” and fatigue them.



Muscles are found in groups and separate compartments throughout the body.

Above is a cross-section of the arm. **(Image B)** The anterior group is where the biceps and several other muscles are found, while the posterior compartment houses the opposing group, the triceps. When stretching or strengthening any group or compartment, 99% of the time it is sufficient to focus on the group as a whole. Exceptions may be where a muscle within a group is injured, or less developed than another. For example, the lateral head of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s gastrocnemius muscles below (Image C) was always singled out by him for extra work because he felt it lagged behind the rest of his symmetrical physique. Of course, this was a special case. (There is also debate in the sports kinesiology community about whether or not specific parts of a muscle can in fact be activated at all.)

Image B

Cross-section of the arm, where the biceps and several other muscles are found in the anterior compartment and the triceps are found in the posterior compartment. Each compartment is separated by the humeral bone and strong connective tissue. Using the StretchFit approach you can isolate and focus/ stretch one compartment at a time. Such precision ensures that nothing is missed and that there’s no guessing “am I doing it right?”



Image C The lateral and medial heads of the gastrocnemius