DESIGNING A CIRCUIT SESSION

The general rule for designing a circuit for mixed ability classes is to alternate stations so as not to overload particular muscle groups e.g. squat followed by press up as opposed to squat followed by lunges etc.

The emphasis of the session along with the ability of the group will dictate the exercise selection along with the time spent on each station. For a whole body approach there are typically 8-12 stations; bear in mind that the greater the number of stations the more difficult the can circuit become to supervise.

Traditionally circuits have included a cardio vascular element along with muscular strength and endurance. This is achieved through alternating aerobic stations with strength stations. Activity time on a station is generally 30 to 60 seconds; this is largely determined by the fitness level of the class. Recovery time must be factored in. This is the rest time allocated between exercises.

General rules of thumb are that up to 10 seconds rest between exercises is appropriate for general conditioning and aerobic conditioning; however this should be extended for less conditioned exercisers allowing up to 1 minute to recover. If the circuit has a strength/power format then rest time can be extended up to 2 minutes to allow adequate recovery before the next exercise set.

For advanced or conditioned exercisers, active recovery could be offered. This involves them completing a cardiovascular type activity during the rest phase before moving to the next station. This works well with mixed ability groups as the less conditioned exercisers can use this time to rest and completely recover.

By manipulating the work to rest ratio the instructor can achieve the session aims and adapt the session to suit all levels.

Types of Circuit Session

The timed circuit is the most commonly used method. It is easier to plan as you know exactly how long the main component will last. It is also easier to supervise large groups of exercisers when they all move together to each new station. Work and rest times can be adjusted during the
session to suit the class needs and can be manipulated over a period of time as the group progresses.

A circuit can also be repetition based – participants complete a number of repetitions before they move to the next station. Guidance should be given to the group as to the required number e.g. Beginners 10 reps, Intermediate 15 reps and Advanced 20 reps.

This method allows all participants to work at their own pace and to complete the right amount of training. However this style can be more challenging to plan as you never know how long it will take someone to complete the exercise and stations can become congested.

**Circuit Cards**

Each station should have a circuit card which outlines the station number and exercise. Ideally it should contain a diagram/picture of the activity, key coaching points and an exercise alternative. Circuit cards are used as a reminder for class participants. They should always be used in conjunction with sound coaching, never as a replacement for it.

**Circuit Formats & Templates**

There are many options when setting your circuit up. The layout is generally driven by:

- Size of the room
- Expected number of participants
- Skill/fitness level of participants
- Equipment available

The following are popular format templates:
Central Circuit:

Participants work in pairs. Partner 1 will complete an exercise station; the other partner will run around the circuit. They will swap round and then move on to the next station.
Satellite Circuit:
Participants start at a circuit station and move round to the next station in a clockwise direction until they have completed all stations.

Once Through Circuit:
Plan enough stations to complete one circuit. Every row can focus on a body part, for example upper body, lower body, trunk etc.
Corner Circuit
Complete one corner and move on to the next corner, or do exercise in a corner and move to a new corner each time. Every corner can focus on an area of the body, for example legs, upper body, trunk and aerobic.
Radial Circuit:
Set the circuit stations in the middle of the room, the stations can be a mixture of body weight and free weight exercises. To make this circuit more challenging run around the outside between stations.

Follow the Leader Circuit:
Follow the leader format is suitable for small classes. The instructor will perform/demonstrate an exercise and the class will follow.
**Work Rest Play Circuit:**

Each line has a different function. The work stations could include exercises that develop strength, endurance or cardiovascular fitness. The rest stations could include light activities for example step ups. The play station section could include sports specific drills or motor skills.

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**1 Forward 2 Back Circuit:**

Move forward by 1 station and move 2 back every time to overload on every other exercise.

**Ton Up Circuit:**

This is a partner circuit. Partner 1 completes 10 reps of the first exercise, while partner 2 recovers, then partner 1 swaps with partner 2. Partner 1 then completes 10 reps of the second exercise and so on. This format continues for ten stations (10 x 10 = Ton).
Shuttle Circuit:
This is a partner circuit.
Partner 1 completes a shuttle run, while partner 2 completes the exercise station. Partner 1 will swap with partner 2. This format continues but the shuttle runs lengthen.
Cooling Down

After a tough class it is very important to allow for a gradual recovery. The aim of the cool down is to reduce the heart rate, but keep the core temperature relatively high. The cool down also facilitates blood flow through the vascular circuit during recovery to prevent venous return by allowing the blood to return from the extremities back to the heart and brain. It also aids the removal of lactate from the blood and muscles, allowing for a quick recovery from oxygen debt (McArdle, Katch and Katch, 1996). To achieve this, it is important that you reduce the intensity by decreasing the intensity progressively as the group recovers. The music should also reflect this reduction, and promote relaxation and highlight the fact that the session is coming to an end. The structure of the cool down should follow a pattern more like a series of steps than a steep line. This will allow the heart rate and the legs movement to reduce at the same time, thus preventing blood pooling, which will occur if you stop too quickly.

A post workout stretch should be completed targeting all the main muscles that have worked during the session. Maintenance stretches should be held for 15 seconds, developmental for 30 seconds.
Session Evaluation and Reflection
Each session should end with an evaluation by the Instructor and class participants. Encourage feedback from the group. Did they enjoy it, could the session be improved? Did it meet their needs? Try to get feedback from a number of the group; be mindful of an individual who may particularly vocal (and often critical) as they may not speak for the majority of the class. Add to this feedback your own evaluation of the session. Often the reality of a session is different from the planned class. Was the session safe and effective? Were there any difficulties? Could the session be improved? Self-reflection is a key skill for an Instructor to develop in order to grow and progress as a professional.

Things to remember when teaching your first circuit class

Before the class starts

- Set up before class members arrive
- Introduce yourself
- Screen class for injuries etc
- Talk through the general structure of the class so they can prepare
- Ensure bags are in changing rooms or safe distance from the circuit
- Ensure everyone has towels and water

Warm up

- Increase intensity gradually with appropriate activities
- Ensure warm up contains pulse raising and mobility activities along with a static or dynamic stretch

Main component

- Explain the structure and aim of the main component
- Use fun motivational and high energy music
- Keep an accurate measure of time with a stopwatch
- Encourage and coach your class
Cool down and Post-workout stretch

- Reduce the intensity and RPE with appropriate activities
- Ensure that all muscles worked during the session are stretched

After class

- Gather feedback from group
- Answer question from members
- Be the last to leave.

THANKS FOR READING!