What's the Hurry?
For a faster, stronger you, take it slow (with a grain of salt)

By Brad Wieners

FOR A STRETCH, it appeared as though slow-motion strength training—better known simply as Super Slow—would take its place alongside the fleeting exercise fads of yesteryear (OK, it was only two years ago—but it seems like forever). The claims sounded outrageous: Spend just 20 to 30 minutes, twice a week, doing traditional lifts at the speed of continental drift, and you'll build strength 50 percent faster than you would with conventional resistance training, kick your metabolism into high gear, reduce body fat, and raise your levels of HDL (the good cholesterol). When the hype over Super Slow quickly died down to a murmur—for reasons to be explained—people soon glommed on to the Next Big Thing (wobble boards, anyone?).

Tortoise power: Go the opposite of fast and make it last (Photograph by Mark Hooper)

But it turns out that a handful of curious athletes and researchers stuck with Super Slow's program and, facing incredulity from their peers, now swear by its effectiveness. My own cynicism remained intact until I began trying to crash into shape for an upcoming kayak expedition that, if I hadn't been ready for it, could have become a lesson in boat-bound misery. Fortunately, I ran into Renjit Varghese, 32, a largely self-taught exercise trainer and owner of Time Labs, a new five-story downtown Manhattan facility devoted to slow lifting. Born in Kerala , India , and raised outside Cincinnati , Varghese has been slow-training former pro athletes and business professionals for six years. Varghese contends that slow training is superior to multiple-set, clean-and-jerk approaches because (1) it eliminates the ballistic movements that cause many weight-room injuries; (2) strength improvements come faster; (3) you spend far less time in the gym, leaving more time for your sport; and (4) it's more precise—you keep a record not of the number of reps, but of the exact amount of time your muscles are stressed, known as "time under load," or TUL.

After following Varghese's program for six months, I realized that at least some of Super Slow's claims are legit: I shed ten pounds and toned up my legs, chest, and arms. During my ten-day kayak trip above the Arctic Circle in Norway , I found I could pull through the chop for hours at a stretch. My body recovered faster between paddling days, and I even had better control of my breathing—a welcome asset when I came close to panicking in rough, freezing seas.

Photograph by Mark Hooper, Prop tortoise (this page and previous) styled by Ann Wilson/Red Chair Props

THE IDEA FOR SUPER SLOW came in 1982, when Ken Hutchins, a 50-year-old entrepreneur from Conroe , Texas , pioneered the technique after conducting a study at the University of Florida Medical School. Armed with $3.5 million from the Nautilus Corporation, Hutchins sought to devise a weight-training regimen that increased the bone density of retirement-age women who had osteoporosis by building their muscles and improving their circulation without harming their joints. On a hunch, Hutchins had the women lift relatively heavy weights very slowly over extended periods. It worked. Some of the women in the study actually dispensed with their walkers and took up ballroom dancing again.

Convinced he'd hit on a breakthrough program suitable for all ages, Hutchins published a 1989 how-to manual, Super Slow: The Ultimate Exercise Protocol, and began building his own custom exercise equipment.

The word spread, and by the dawn of the 21st century athletes of all types (and fitness trend-watchers) had embraced the idea. At the elite level, 20-year-old professional trials biker Jeremy VanSchoonhoven took up slow training during last year's off-season. After three months of slo-mo lifting, VanSchoonhoven had put on seven pounds of lean muscle. "This sounds ridiculous, but my whole workout is only about 15 minutes long, once a week," he says. "But now I can compete longer at a top level, and I make fewer mistakes late in competitions." His increased strength helped him place 16th—the highest finish ever for an American—at this year's UCI World Championships.

Last summer, Jason Watson, 30, a Washington State Patrol SWAT team member, took home seven swimming medals from the Can-Am Police-Fire Games after slow training, sometimes only once a week, under Greg Anderson of Seattle's Ideal Exercise. While such results are tempting, beginners should take note: This efficiency involves a sadistic level of intensity. At first, Watson had to pop a Tums before each workout just to keep from puking.

SUPER SLOW IS NOT without its critics. "I don't like it," says fitness consultant and six-time Ironman champ Dave Scott. "Especially if you're an endurance athlete. Imagine you're this lean runner strained under this huge, unnecessary load. You come to the gym, you're already fatigued, and now you have to drop your weights 20 pounds to do just one rep: How do you stay motivated? It can be psychologically destructive."

Wary of the opinions expressed by road warriors like Scott, I nevertheless signed up to be trained by Varghese, following Ken Hutchins's original protocols. According to Hutchins, each exercise should be 10/5 per rep—that is, ten seconds on the positive contraction, or push, and five on the return, or negative contraction. (By contrast, a typical rep might be 1/1, 2/4, or 4/4.)

During my workouts, I do exactly one set of as many reps as I can until my muscles fail completely. At the end of each rep, Varghese tells me to make the transition from easing the load down to pushing it back up imperceptibly. Any faster and I'm using momentum to cheat. All along, Varghese reminds me to take controlled, quick breaths: "Pant like a sprinter." Holding my breath, he tells me, will just make me dizzy. At the end of the set, my muscles feel torched by a fresh, white-hot rush of lactic acid.

Because of slow lifting's difficulty—one Super Slow chest press can be harder than ten quick ones—the program suffers a high rate of attrition—another reason it's no longer the fitness flavor of the moment. Wayne Westcott, fitness research director at the South Shore YMCA in Quincy , Massachusetts , has conducted two studies on slow lifting. The results, published in the June 2001 Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness, indicated that, yes, single-set slow lifters realized a 50 percent greater increase in strength over eight to ten weeks than did those lifting weights at a faster pace. However, only two of Westcott's 147 test subjects opted to continue the slow-lifting regimen.

"The psychological aspect is just as important for a successful fitness program, and this was just too tough," says Westcott, who adds that slow lifting is perhaps best applied as a plateau buster. "Do it for six weeks. But then return to what you're more comfortable with week in and week out."

Positive testimonials and my success with slow lifting aside, Westcott and Scott do have a point. The happy medium may be to see it not as strength training's silver bullet, but rather as a valuable addition to your arsenal of fitness techniques. Periodically fold it into your existing routine (see "The Slow-Motion Workout," next page) and you'll soon reap the performance rewards. "There's this kind of undercurrent in Super Slow circles that almost makes us sound antisports," says Ideal Exercise's Anderson . "But the point of its high intensity is to give you more time to play, and better results when you do."