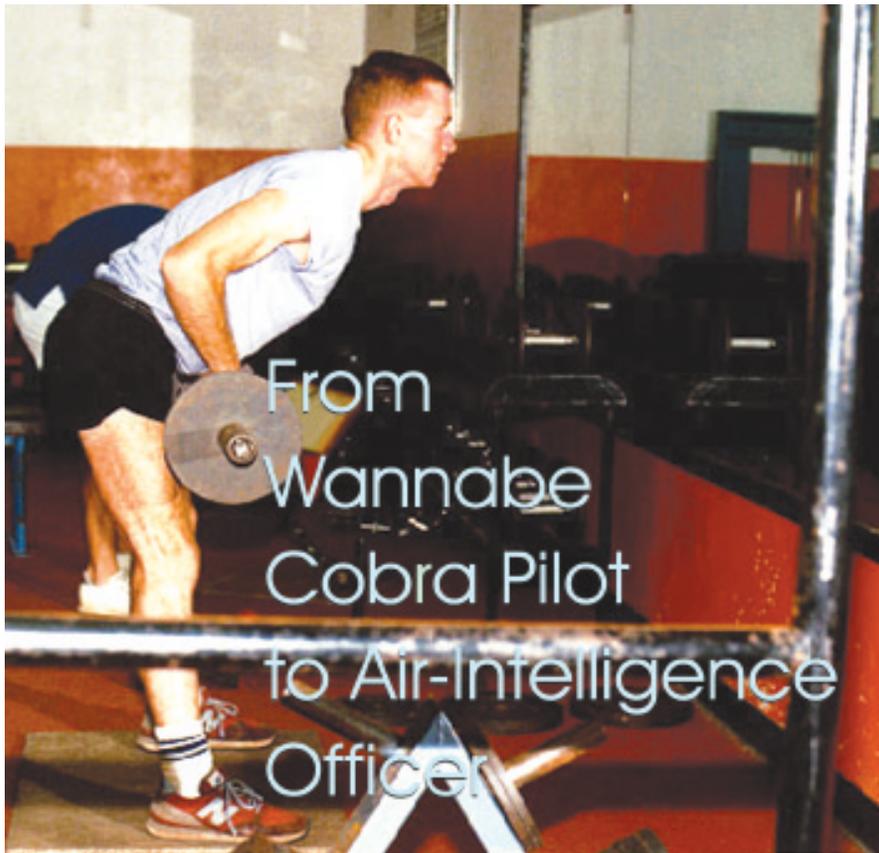


By Lt. Felipe DeVega,  
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It was Friday, and classes at the U.S. Naval Academy were done for the day. My friend, John, and I headed to Halsey Field House for a workout before we engaged in whatever buffoonery the weekend had to offer.

Workouts had become commonplace for John and me—we went to class, ate dinner, and worked out. Since plebe summer, I had gone from 175 pounds to 215. We were in the middle of a program in which heavy was the name of the game. On this particular day, we would be concentrating on the chest and back—our favorite workout.

After 10 sets of heavy bench exercises, we moved on to back exercises. We planned to do 10 sets of bent-over-barbell rows. I was up first, so I stepped onto a wooden platform (for that extra stretch), bent over from the waist, and gripped the barbell. Just then, something didn't feel right.



This man should be wearing a weightlifting belt—just ask the victim in this story.

The Motrin-popping days and sleepless nights that followed forced me to schedule an MRI at Bethesda Naval Hospital. The scan revealed two herniated discs in my lower back. Aside from being in constant physical pain, I received a dose of mental anguish in the form of being labeled NPQ—not physically qualified. This meant no strenuous Marine Corps activity of any kind, and, for a while, I even was considered ineligible for commissioning. As it turned out, I was granted a physical waiver and entered the Navy as an air-intelligence officer.

If I had taken a few precautions, I very well could have been flying USMC Cobras today as I had wanted. A simple weightlifting belt could have prevented all my problems. Without this support, the hundreds of pounds of pressure per square inch that weightlifting places on each disc in your spine can—and, in my case, did—result in herniation. Weightlifting belts aren't 100 percent effective, but they do reduce the number of injuries.

I shouldn't have been doing the exercise that caused my problem. Bent-over-barbell rows are a terribly engineered exercise unless you have support to the chest area, which will alleviate pressure placed on the lower back. Most gyms have an apparatus that combines the benefits of rowing with the support needed by the torso. The apparatus offers a padded, angled bench with a grasping bar attached under it to execute rows. A lifter simply lies forward on the pad, grabs the handles, and pulls the weighted bar up to the pad located under the chest. A back injury is nearly impossible if you use this apparatus.

I now use support equipment every time I lift weights, and I stop anyone else I see doing a particularly dangerous exercise. Abandoning safety in the gym could cause you to give up a career or an active routine for the rest of your life. **A**

*Some health professionals and others don't share this author's belief in the value of weightlifting belts. – Ed*