

Starting Strength

A Clarification

by

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Okay kids, it has come to my attention that quite a few of you are not doing the program and then bitching about the results of The Program. Here's the deal: the novice linear progression, as described in both *Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training* and *Practical Programming for Strength Training 2nd Edition* is very specific in the details of its application, and there is not much room for wiggling. Later, yes, but not at first. In addition, the diet that must be followed is the one that best facilitates the program, and this will be different for everybody depending on age, body composition, program adherence, and genetic potential. The goal of the program is not to make you fat. The program is for increasing strength and muscle mass. The idea is that you must gain some bodyfat in the process if your bodyfat is low, and that you should lose some bodyfat if it is high. I don't want you fat, but I don't care about seeing your abs. If you want to see your abs, fine – worry about that later. I want you to get big by getting stronger, and to do this it may be necessary for your bodyfat percentage to go up in the process. Later, if necessary, the process of losing it can be more easily accomplished when you have more muscle mass. But right now, just worry about getting *strong*, and *big* will be a side-effect, as will improved body composition. And if you don't stop misinterpreting this, I will have you all killed.

It is common to want what you cannot have. But it must be kept in mind that the phenomenon of cause and effect cannot be argued with or circumvented by your wishes and desires. Everyone that has been a kid or has raised them is familiar with the phenomenon of the “growth spurt,” which happens naturally during all stages of normal development. Growth occurs sporadically as we develop and mature; it is not smooth over the course of the whole infant/child/adolescent/teenage continuum, but within the growth spurt itself there occurs a period of smooth linear increase. We are creating an “artificial” growth spurt with our training, and if the stress is sufficient and the diet adequate to facilitate recovery amazing progress can occur. This is why proximity in age to the normal growth window makes for a more efficient response to this stimulus: the processes by which it is accomplished are still functioning, and the system is not yet cemented in its final form. The older the trainee, the further the remove from the capacity to generate a growth spurt. But the stimulus/response relationship is axiomatic – you get out of it what you put into it, within the context of your ability to respond. You maximize this ability by training, eating, and resting in the best way possible.

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But if you misinterpret The Program, things will not be optimum. To wit:

I want to get big and strong. I'm currently 22 years old, 5'9", and around 150 lbs, 12% bodyfat. I've been doing Starting Strength for 3 months now, and my weight has come up 8 lbs. since I started. My squat is stuck now at 135x5 and I'm thinking that I need to move to the Texas Method to get unstuck. Any advice you could give me I'd appreciate.

Or this:

Hello coach. I'm 25, 6' 1" and I weigh 235. I think I'm a little too fat but I've been doing your program anyway since you say it can work for anybody to fix their body composition. I started off squatting at 155 x 5 and I'm up to 185 x 5 after 3 months and I haven't seen a lot of fat loss even though I really don't eat that much. Do I need to do the Zone diet?

If you do the program as written, and you are a novice male between the ages of 18 and 35, the first five or six squat workouts will see the work sets going up 10 pounds every time. If your first day is 135 x 5 x 3 sets across, then 185 x 5 x 3 will be the sixth workout. (We'll use the squat as our example exercise for this program, and if you've read the books you know that the other movements go up at different rates but that the squat is a good proxy for general progress on the program.) I have yet to see someone in that demographic who is eating and resting correctly that is not able to do this. Eating correctly may mean 6000 calories/day with a gallon of whole milk, or it may mean 3500 calories/day on a paleo-type lower carb no-dairy diet, depending on your initial body composition. If this or its equivalent did not happen, you're not doing the program. During this period of time it is common to gain 5-10 pounds of bodyweight if you are underweight, or to stay about the same if you are in need of bodyfat loss. In this demographic you're too fat if you're over 20% and underweight if you're less than 10%. A bodyfat under about 10% is not the level a performance athlete carries, and growing a significant amount of muscle mass will entail an increase in bodyfat level, so this number – since we need to choose one for you – serves well as the bottom line. A bodyfat level over about 20% means that you're headed in the direction of carrying around more than is required for an anabolic environment and more than is efficient for moving either the bar or an opponent. But really, you already know where you are when you start; guys who feel the need to start training always know *why* they did it.

I know it's hazardous to assign underweight/overweight designation on the basis of bodyfat, but it usually works pretty well, and in the absence of height/weight/bodyfat tables that take all three variables into account it's about the best we can do. I also know that most of you guys reading this are really and truly bodybuilders, in love with your visible abs, and will not appreciate the advice to increase your bodyfat if you're below 10%. The fact is that about 10% or lower *for most people* is too low to sustain a metabolic environment for a novice to gain muscle mass, and 10% bodyfat – if you do not have genetically low bodyfat (you know who you are) – is not healthy, the conditions that are required to produce and maintain it are not compatible with high strength and power performance levels, and those levels are necessary to get big and strong. Or rather, strong and thus big.

This probably means you. Make up your mind that, at least for the first year or two, you're not going to worry about bodyfat levels if you're already lean, because lean is easier to get than strong. This current

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emphasis on lean at the expense of all other things by most of you guys is the direct result of Joe Weider having done his job very well. Pictures of big bodybuilders at 4% bodyfat in contest shape have been viewed by you so often at the checkout counter that you think it's normal, desirable, and always possible. You forget that there are drugs involved, along with enough other odd dietary behavior that Mr. Weider should be flogged for forgetting to mention that part. I may be trying to piss up a rope here, but you guys have to get realistic about these things and quit letting the physique magazine/supplement industry make you stupid.

On the other hand, if you're a little fluffy around the belly, you have obviously already created the conditions necessary for growth. You'll start out stronger than the skinny guy, and strength gains have the potential to come easier for you if you eat correctly because your body hasn't got the problems with growing that skinny guys do. You still eat a lot, but you don't drink the milk and you cut your carb intake if you don't see bodyfat levels drop during these first couple of weeks.

So, if your squat didn't go up 40-50 pounds between the first and the sixth workout, you're either not in that demographic or you're not doing the program. If you're one of these guys who thinks you gained a lot of strength because your squat went up 30 pounds in three months, you're not doing the program (which I shall henceforth abbreviate as YNDTP, to save myself some time). If you think the program is hard because your bodyweight at 5' 8" went from 148 down to 146 and you got stuck on the third workout having gone up 15 pounds, YNDTP. If you're a fat guy that has decided to go on the Atkins diet at the same time you started the novice progression, are continually sore, and are stuck at 30 pounds of squat increase, YNDTP.

After the first couple of weeks, the increase at 10 pounds per workout becomes unsustainable and 5-pound jumps become the rule. This provides for a long, steady linear increase in strength that has the potential to go on for months. It translates to a 15-pound per week increase in squat strength, half as fast as the first two weeks but still very significant at about 60 pounds per month. This adds up to a 225-245 x 5 x 3 squat workout after 6-7 weeks of training for our novice male, ***IF HE HAS BEEN EATING CORRECTLY***. And eating correctly is part of the program. If he started the program at a bodyweight of 165, he should probably weigh 185 by then, more if he's taller. If you're squatting 30 pounds more than you started at six weeks into the program, YNDTP. If you started at 5' 9" and 155, and six weeks later you weigh 160, YNDTP. If you started at 5' 9" and 235, and six weeks later you're only squatting 50 pounds more than you started with at a bodyweight of 235, YNDTP.

Realistically, gains on the squat will slow after this to an average of about 10 pounds per week due to the fact that most people will get sick occasionally, miss a workout or two because of school, work, family, etc., or get a minor injury that will need to be dealt with. Ideally this does not necessarily occur, but you'll find that in most cases the extremely rapid growth in strength and size experienced during the first 6-8 weeks is not sustained. But the program does not change, because 5-pound jumps are theoretically possible for this entire novice period. The bumps are dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and the diet is held constant as long as things are improving predictably. This will therefore usually mean that by 10-12 weeks another 40 pounds has been added to the squat, resulting in about 265-285 x 5 x 3 for our generalized guy's squat. During this period your bodyweight should be continuing to increase if you're the skinny guy, or your bodyfat should be continuing to moderate if you were the fat

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guy. Skinny guys by now have added perhaps 40 pounds, and fat guys might have started to actually gain bodyweight as well, depending on how fat they were when they started.

So, if you're three months into the program and your squat has gone up 50 pounds, YNDTP. If you're 3 months into the program at 10% bodyfat and you have only gained 6 pounds, YNDTP. If you're 3 months into the program at 30% bodyfat, your waistline has not gone down 4 inches and your squat is not up 175 pounds, YNDTP. Again, the program uses a diet that facilitates progress, and not everybody will progress towards the same goal of more muscle mass using the same diet, since we don't want to let bodyfat get out of control. And out of control is not the same thing as a moderate, necessary, healthy increase.

After the first three or four months, a change will be necessary for most guys that started off skinny. If you have done the program correctly, you will have gained quite a bit of weight, about 60% of it being lean body mass – muscle, tendon, and bone. This means that your bodyfat may have also gone from ~10% to 18-19%. This is fine; it was necessary to produce the LBM increase. But now it's time to modify the diet to reflect your body's approach to its limit of fast LBM growth. It obviously can't go on forever, but it must occur at first to get our goal accomplished. Now, we need to drop the milk down to a half gallon a day for a while, and then perhaps less than that. At the same time, daily caloric intake should drop to about 4000/day, accomplished by cleaning up the carb intake and focusing on dietary quality instead of quantity like you did at first. This will allow your bodyfat levels to drop back to where they need to be, in the range of 15-17%, normal for athletic males in our demographic. The fat guys should be approaching this by now as well, since their diet has been about the same since the beginning; but their *bodyweight* should have started back up by now as bodyfat loss has slowed and LBM increases have begun to exceed the loss. In this way the two extremes converge at about the same dietary intake levels, with the guys that were skinny maintaining a slightly higher caloric intake that reflects their natural tendency toward being skinny.

Along with these changes have come another 30-40 pounds of squat. The program has not changed significantly, but the gains have begun to taper as the complexities of life and adaptation accumulate to further interrupt your good intentions. But if you have persisted on the program and have not used these tapering results as an excuse to drop it and move "on" to Super-Slow, or HIT, or Jay Cutler's Pre-Olympia Contest Preparatory Routine, you'll still be accumulating progress. This will mean that your squat may be up 200 pounds.

So, if you're still drinking a gallon of milk a day eight months into the program, YNDTP. If you have only gained 8 pounds, either as a skinny guy or above your low point when you were losing bodyfat, YNDTP. If your squat has only increased 50 pounds, YNDTP.

Training drives strength acquisition, the strength increase drives mass gain. These gains approach a limit asymptotically. The younger you are the steeper the curve. Caloric/protein surplus is necessary, which will produce some bodyfat accumulation that can be dealt with later. The training stress has to constantly increase by as much as you can tolerate every workout. The load is the variable, not the number of exercises, sets, or reps. The ability to tolerate a rapid increase in load and to continue to adapt quickly slows after a few months. During this period, don't waste your opportunity to grow

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quickly. After this, the program and diet must change to reflect the reality of slower progress. I hope this clears up some of the confusion.

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