

# Starting Strength

## Managing Compromises

### Intermediate and Advanced Programming Applications for Personal Trainers

by

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*Starting Strength* offers us effective novice programming for barbell lifters. *Practical Programming for Strength Training 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* lays this out in more detail, and covers the adjustments needed for injured, younger, older and women trainees, as well as intermediate and advanced lifters. However, much of this programming assumes a well-equipped gym and trainees willing and able to spend significant time on their training.

Though this is a fair assumption for motivated trainees working on their own in their garage, and strength coaches working in sports teams' gyms, it's not for me – the personal trainer working in a mainstream community or commercial gym. With 5,000 members and 30-80 people in the gym at any one time, only around 5% of whom are willing to accept my instructions to “squat, dammit! And add a plate to the bar every now and then,” compromises must be made.

I don't claim these approaches are optimal, still less do they represent any “official” SS approach; they're simply what I've muddled through with, given the limitations of client personality, equipment, and time. This approach has worked in helping people I train achieve national records in lifting, and more importantly gotten more people lifting than any other trainer I know in a mainstream gym, but it can no doubt be improved on. Learning to coach, like adding weight to the bar, is a process.

### Limits to effective programming

**Client personality** limits us. The typical personal training client is not a highly-motivated athlete, or a healthy young person living at home whose parents cook all their food and wash their clothes and pay their bills (a common situation for many young non-professional athletes). They're in their 30s or older, with a full-time job and family, and their goal is a vague “get fit, lose weight, tone up.” Physical training is not their priority, other stuff is, and we must give them as much progress as possible in spite of this. It's true to say that they should just suck it up and do as they're fucking told if they want results, but when I tell them that I usually have to find a new fucking personal training client.

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On average, personal training clients miss 1 session in 6. These missed sessions are usually a surprise to the trainer, or missed with short notice. Illness and injury (always incurred outside the weight room), laziness – leading to my receiving a text message at 0554 “sorry, I slept in and have a headache” for a 0600 session, travel for work, holidays (“We’re away for two weeks next week, didn’t I mention?”), and so on. All these excuses mean people miss sessions. For the “trainer” giving random circuits this doesn’t matter much, but for the trainer hoping to add weight to the bar each session, this is a problem. With 10-20 clients, 1-2 will be completely reliable and show up even if they’ve got a temperature and are taking a plane after the session, 2-4 will miss around half the sessions, the rest are the usual 1 in 6. This person won’t be doing Smolov – percentage-based periodization is rarely useful for personal trainers.

The **equipment** in a mainstream gym has been bought over a period of ten to thirty years from different companies by different managers, and is cheap, worn, and crappy. The current gym where I’m employed has two power racks, two flat benches and one incline, and barbells for each. Each of these ten pieces of equipment is from a different company, but all are among the cheapest it was possible to buy. The gym manager who buys 12 treadmills at \$6,500 each will balk at paying \$500 for a bar. On 2 of these bars, the sleeves are completely seized up, a third has the chrome peeling off exposing the black steel beneath, a fourth is too thick, with soft knurling, and weighs 18kg, and a fifth is worn smooth in the snatch grip position from being in a rack with metal hooks for years. There’s also a 15kg “women’s” bar, but it’s shorter than standard and the sleeves end up inside the racks, so it doesn’t work for us. We have a sixth 20kg bar which is left on the gym floor next to a set of cheaper bumper plates (but no platform), and this is the best barbell in the gym. Since some “20kg” plates in fact weigh 21.5kg, the less said of the motley assortment of weight plates the better.

This means that when I put “25kg” on the bar, it will in fact be somewhere between 23 and 27kg. This makes microloading useless, since the microload will in fact be smaller than the random variation from one workout to another. Ideally we’d just use the same bar and plates all the time, but given that the 1-6 people I train in a PT session are sharing the gym with 30-50 others who are the sort of people who put bumper plates on the EZ-curl bar for bent-over rows, it’s just not going to happen. So we need a different approach.

**Time** is the third limitation. I’ve been reasonably effective in getting more people in my gym to squat, press, deadlift and clean or snatch, which is good but means that with just five places to do this, we in the barbell team can’t spend hours in each place; 20-30 minutes is about the most common courtesy will allow.

As well, the typical personal training client does two 30-minute sessions weekly. When a person’s squatting 40kg, they can do some presses in between. When they’re squatting 100kg they just need to sit down between sets, when they’re squatting 140kg they need to sit the fuck down for quite a long time. With someone squatting around their bodyweight, it might be half an hour just squatting. Tuesday at 0600-0630 they squat. I guess Thursday at 0600 they can press, but then next week...? And what about when they’re squatting 1.5x their bodyweight, half an hour is just the warmups. As they get stronger, they need to spend more time on their training. But are they able to pay for three 1-hour sessions weekly?

For a while I just gave them the extra time, but since I was working 3 hours for every hour I got paid, this made me broke. In the last year I’ve dealt with this by putting people together in small groups. If Anna comes Tue/Thu at 0600, and Bob comes Tue/Thu at 0630, then they can both come

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Tue/Thu at 0600-0700 and be training partners; if we get Charlie to come, they can all come Sun/Tue/Thu and have three good workouts a week.

When they were squatting 40kg and getting a full workout done in half an hour, they needed me to watch every rep. By the time they're squatting 80kg and taking an hour, they don't. So they can be in small groups. They're paying for 1 or 2 sessions a week and getting 3 hours, working out with new friends and engaging in some friendly rivalry and encouragement, and I'm getting paid the whole time, so everyone's happy.

I generally use 6-week training cycles. My experience is that most people can't push hard for longer than this, and it's about as much monotony as they'll tolerate; we don't need huge changes with each new cycle, but we do need some.

### **Programming: The honeymoon newbie period of the first three months**

**First cycle – Vanilla (more or less) Starting Strength.** Generally I put everyone on the basic SS program for the first 6 weeks (12 sessions with me, 6 on their own). I start them conservatively and have them progress the resistance in every session with me, and repeat the workouts with the same weights on their own. An example from a woman in her 4th week of training:

- Tuesday (with me) - SQ 50kg 5x3, BP 30kg 5x3, DL 60kg 5x3
- Thursday (with me) - SQ 52.5kg 5x3, OHP 25kg 5x3, lat pulldown 26kg 10x3
- Sunday (on her own) - SQ 52.5kg 5x3, BP 30kg 5x3, DL 60kg 5x3

Then next week she'll squat 55 and then 57.5kg with me, then 57.5kg on her own, and so on.

I'll usually teach them squats and bench press in the first session (remember it's only half an hour), in the second we repeat the squat, do presses if they can press the 20kg bar and dumbbell presses if they can't, and deadlifts. The third session adds a chinup if they can do them, or else a row or lat pulldown. Then their weeks go like this:

- *first session:* low-bar back squat 5x3, bench 5x3, chinup/row/pulldown 5-10x3
- *second session:* squat 5x3, barbell/dumbbell press 5x3, barbell deadlift 5x3 (dropping to 5x2 as they approach bodyweight, then a single set of 5 at bodyweight and beyond)

I tried having them deadlift every session but they got depressed and complained too much. I put deadlift second in the week since most people do Sun/Wed, or Tue/Thu, so they get the most rest after that. If they miss a session I simply pick up where we left off as though they'd not missed it. I encourage them to do a third session on their own repeating the weights for all five exercises, and around one in three do this regularly.

**Second cycle – Starting Strength with friends.** After this first six weeks I stick them in small groups. I usually don't have them clean or snatch in the second cycle; while they physically can learn it straight away they aren't yet strong and experienced enough to see the value in taking time to master difficult movement skills, I've lost clients giving them cleans in the first week. It usually takes 3-4 weeks of practice before people are comfortable with a quick lift, so we need a solid relationship of "trust the process" first.

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After their first 6 weeks alone and then 6 weeks in a small group, most healthy women under 50 have gotten to a 60kg squat for work sets, 40kg bench, 30kg press and 80kg deadlift. The men get SQ100 BP80 OHP50 and DL120. Depending on their background of injuries, physical training history, and their genetics, one or two of the lifts might be up to 20kg higher but are not usually lower. This is the usual pattern after 12 weeks or so.

With a typical PT client starting out, you can generally assume that at least one of either nutrition or rest will be poor and the other merely okay, which naturally will hold back progress. Over time you can educate them and get the poor one to okay and the okay one to good over the first 6-12 weeks, but it's rare they're both good. For example, this week a client with a month's training behind her went to her fridge to eat something extra, and found the milk and fresh fruit and veggies had all gone bad. She decided to go shopping this weekend.

An occasional client will start out with one *okay* and the other *good*, and this client can usually complete a third cycle of vanilla SS and its session-by-session linear progression; more commonly you'll get someone for whom both are *poor*; they usually quit within the first three months because it's all just *too hard*. Usually you get two 6 week cycles, though.

While we might hope for more rapid progress than 60/40/80kg or 100/80/120 in three months, when someone's in their 30s with an injury or two, a 40-60 hour per week job, a child or two, six hours' sleep and no breakfast, a chocolate bar for morning tea, fast food for lunch, and the only good meal is dinner, this is about as good as you'll get in that time.

## **Programming after the honeymoon period**

After the first three months, a decent strength base has been built and people have the interest to learn cleans and snatches. This will sometimes push progress on the slow lifts as people improve their coordination and get more explosive with their lifts.

Still, at this point it starts getting hard and we need a different approach. Session-by-session 2.5kg progress on SQ/DL becomes impossible, and microloading is not practical, as explained above. People also start chickening out – after a session of slow, grindy squats, the next time they approach the bar they say, “Actually I'd like to work on cardio for a while.”

The time required for Texas Method or similar intermediate programming isn't available, since the typical personal training client just won't spend that long in the gym and we can't hold onto the equipment that long anyway. And what about when they miss a week? Here are a few strategies I've used, remembering again the problems with client personalities, poor equipment and at best 3 1-hour sessions a week.

### **Slower weights progression**

Much as it sounds: squat and deadlift go up weekly or bi-weekly, with a weight repeated in 2-4 workouts before increasing it. This works especially well with older or less confident lifters – if they've squatted 80kg 5x3 on Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday, when they come in next Tuesday they're not as scared of doing 82.5 as they would be if I'd got them to do it in the next session. “Consolidation,” my oldest lifter calls it. This will add 7.5-25kg to their work sets in 6 weeks.

I generally use this with squat and deadlift. It's *usually* not so useful for bench and press since the person may look very confident and solid with 90kg and then just fall apart with 92.5kg. But with squats and deadlifts this usually makes good use of a third 6 week cycle.

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For cycles 4 and on, any of the following approaches can be used for a six week cycle.

### **Four steps back, five steps forward (-4/+5)**

The “step” here in the -4/+5 is either 2.5 or 5kg. For the first six weeks after the first 2-3 cycles, I’ll usually simply deload 10kg and build back up by 2.5kg a week to 12.5kg more (on bench and press), or 20 and 25kg (on squat and deadlift) This gets them on their work sets another 5-10kg on squat and deadlift, and 2.5-5kg on press and bench. Their max singles usually go up by more than that as they’re confident with the lift by now.

This deload is an excellent time to teach them to clean or snatch and start getting really picky with form on the slow lifts. When someone’s pushing hard on the big lifts they tend not to learn other things so well as when the weight is less challenging. It’s a refreshing time for them, doing solid lifts without grinding, and learning some new technique points.

Thus we might end Cycle 3 with squat work sets of 110kg, Cycle 4 begins with 90 and ends with 115kg, Cycle 5 begins with 95 and ends with 120kg, and so on.

In principle, this can go on for quite a while. In practice, most get bored. I can get them through another six week -4/+5 period by teaching them the clean for six weeks and the snatch after that, but that’s usually it. Now six months have gone by and the women are at 80/50/100, the men at 120/90/140 or thereabouts, and anyone who was going to do the first chinup of their lives will have done it by now (those over 50 and some overweight ones won’t do it).

We want to see them get further progress on squat, deadlift, press and bench. I don’t worry much about progress on clean and snatch since I don’t train weightlifters, and for the general gym member, getting the four slow lifts stronger will make the two quick lifts stronger anyway.

### **Building reps from 5 to 10**

From experience we know that press and bench tend to stall first. Even 2.5kg can be a big jump and absent microloading people may get stuck. This is particularly true of women and older lifters, who I often find will happily push out (for example) 30kg for 5, 5, 5, then struggle to do even 1 or 2 reps with 32.5kg. This doesn’t give us much to work with. So we need a different approach, and there are two ways to do this.

The first is to find a weight they can manage to do for 10 reps, say 25kg. When in doubt, I just deload the 10 or 20kg from the 5s work weight as I would for the “four steps back, five steps forward” approach above. Let’s say in the last cycle she got to 35kg for 5x3 then had three sessions where she couldn’t do more than 3s with 37.5kg. We do 25kg 5x3 this time, then 6x3 next time, and so on up to 10x3. If she can do 25kg for 10x3, she can certainly do 27.5kg for 5x3.

This will give her a 2.5kg bump every 2-3 weeks, or 6 weeks for older lifters adding a rep a week, which people with a 40kg bench press will be happy with. I find this useful for older lifters, and lifters who lack the focus and confidence to grind up heavy singles or doubles.

### **5, 5, “as many”**

The second approach is 5, 5, “as many as you can”, and when the “as many” is 10+, they’re ready to progress. The reasoning here is that people who are approaching their current limits may find they can confidently do 5, 5, 5 with one weight, but when even 2.5kg is added they can only squeeze out 2 or at most 3 reps, which doesn’t give us much to work with. But if they can do 10, when we add weight the worst they’ll do is 4 reps.

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What we find is that when we go to a new weight the person gets 5, 5, 5 today, 5, 5, 7 or 5, 5, 8 the next time, and 5, 5, 10 the third time. It's rare to get 5, 5, 9, since once they hit the 9th rep people tend to say, "Fuck it, I'm not doing this same weight again!" and grind up the 10th somehow. This approach is less useful for older lifters (who may be stuck on 5, 5, 7 or the like for some weeks), but good for those with a competitive nature, since a rep or two extra here or there is progress for them.

I find this approach is a bit much for people on squat and deadlift – anyone want to do 5, 5, 10 on deadlift? But it works well for bench and press as they aren't as tiring to do, and it gives them a 2.5kg bump every 1-3 weeks.

### **Assistance as main lifts**

Most will use exercises like dumbbell presses and Romanian deadlifts as assistance exercises, designed to help along the big five barbell lifts. The limitation of time means we can't always do this in addition to the main lifts, and personal training clients (not being highly-motivated professional athletes) will get burned out with relentless progression of weight on the bar for a particular exercise. Using an assistance lift as a main lift for a six week block will refresh them and give them the variety they want even if they don't need it, while not taking away from performance on the main lifts, and even adding to it in some cases.

Low-bar back squats become front squats. Barbell bench press becomes dumbbell bench press. Barbell deadlifts become deficit deadlifts. And so on. Progression here is done as with the SS big five – if you do the target reps, we add weight next time (generally 2.5kg for everything except deadlift-type movements, which are 5kg).

If we use dumbbells, these are all made with 2.5kg jumps, so progression on them from workout to workout won't last long. Here we use "reps before weight" again, with 8,8, "as many as you can," and getting the next heavier dumbbells when the "as many" is 15. Sets of 8 are used rather than 5s since adding 2.5kg to dumbbells is a lot tougher than it sounds, more like adding 7.5-10kg on a barbell. Since the person benching 90kg on the bar will be dumbbell benching with something like 25kg dumbbells, this lower load acts as a deload both physically and mentally, while still allowing progress, and their 90kg bench will generally be stronger after this. It's typical for younger people to go up 5-7.5kg in the dumbbell bench in six weeks, and older people 2.5kg.

### **Putting it together**

Rosemary is in her 60s, weighs about 60kg with a history of herniation in lumbar discs and osteoarthritis in her spine, along with high blood pressure. Deconditioning due to her injuries and ordinary age-related sarcopenia meant we could not start even with the empty bar. She had to use dumbbells for goblet squats, hip hinges and the like. After several weeks of this she could squat and do pulls from the rack. We lacked bumper plates at the time, so any sub-60kg deadlift would be a deficit deadlift, which I would not suggest for those with a recent lower back injury. After six months she had a 60kg deadlift, after twelve months a 60kg squat.

Her March 2014 meet had a lead-in of 10 weeks (the holidays interrupted, preventing it from being the preferred 12 weeks). She had in the past squatted 50 for her work sets and 60 for a single, deadlifting 70 for work sets and 80 as a single. We used the "four steps back, five steps forward" approach on this. For squats she had a heavy day of 5s, a 10kg lighter day with paused squats, and a lighter volume day of that 10kg less for 10s.

The paused squats were especially useful. In her previous meet Rosemary had bombed on squats because of depth, so we wanted her to be comfortable at the bottom, and also learn to grind out

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the heavy attempts. Each week we added 2.5kg to all the squats.

Now with 4 weeks to go we used the “slower progression” or “consolidation” approach; we took out the 10-rep squats on Thursdays and made them a repeat of Sundays, the idea being to build up to a peak of strength and have her *very* confident in using the heavier weights.

Deadlifts also used a “consolidation” approach in the first phase; they were kept at 20kg heavier than squats and done once a week in the first 6 weeks, doing a single set of 5 on Sundays, and light RDLs on Tuesdays. In the 4-week final phase, we did the new weight on Sundays for 3x3, then on Thursday for a single set of 5.

It all looked like this:

	Sunday	Tuesday				Thursday		
	<b><i>four steps back, five steps forward</i></b>							
Week 1	SQ 40 5x3	SQ-p 30 5x3	SQ 30 10x3	DL 60 5x1	RDLs 40 10x3	-		
Week 2	SQ 42.5 5x3	SQ-p 32.5 5x3	SQ-p 32.5 10x3	DL 62.5 5x1	RDLs 42.5 10x3	-		
Week 3	SQ 45 5x3	SQ-p 35 5x3	SQ-p 35 10x3	DL 65 5x1	RDLs 45 10x3	-		
Week 4	SQ 47.5 5x3	SQ-p 37.5 5x3	SQ-p 37.5 10x3	DL 67.5 5x1	RDLs 47.5 10x3	-		
Week 5	SQ 50 5x3	SQ-p 40 5x3	SQ-p 40 10x3	DL 70 5x1	RDLs 50 10x3	-		
Week 6	SQ 52.5 5x3	SQ-p 42.5 5x3	SQ-p 42.5 10x3	DL 72.5 5x1	RDLs 52.5 10x3	-		
		<b><i>consolidation</i></b>						
Week 7	SQ 55 5x3	SQ-p 45 5x3	SQ 55 5x3	DL 75 5x1	RDLs 55 10x3	DL 75 5x1		
Week 8	SQ 57.5 5x3	SQ-p 47.5 5x3	SQ 57.5 5x3	DL 77.5 5x1	RDLs 57.5 10x3	DL 77.5 5x1		
Week 9	SQ 60 5x3	SQ-p 50 5x3	SQ 60 5x3	DL 80 5x1	RDLs 60 10x3	DL 80 5x1		
Week 10	SQ 62.5 5,max	meet discussion				SAT – meet		
	DL max							

In this way, by the end of the ninth week she was using her old maxes of 60 in squat and 80 in deadlift as work weights. The Sunday before the meet I had her squat a single set of 5 with 62.5, then try 65 and 67.5 for singles. We also tried the deadlift, and found she could pull 87.5. The Tuesday before the meet we did a light workout, the Thursday was going through lifts meet-style with the commands and minor technical issues you could fail on, then the meet was Saturday, where she went 70/25/90, and did a 4<sup>th</sup> attempt on deadlift for a women’s 60s 67.5kg class masters record of 95kg.

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We're now preparing for Nationals in June, and with 13 weeks between them we could do two 6 week "four back, five forward" cycles. Squat work weights of 60kg dropped to 50kg and built to 62.5kg, then dropped to 52.5kg and are currently building to 65kg; if 60kg work weights gave her a 70kg successful third attempt, 65kg work weights should give her a 75kg one. Deadlifts have been the same but working up to 85kg work weights, hoping for a 100kg pull in June.

## **Conclusion**

These are some ways I've gotten around the limitations of equipment and time, along with the typical personal training client's lack of supreme motivation past the first 6-12 weeks of newbie gains. I believe that the SS model presents an ideal to be striven for. But if your limitations of personality, gym equipment, or time prevent this ideal from being reality for you or your clients, then the above are some approaches I've used with success. My reasoning is quite simply that *progress is progress*.

Increasing the weight on the bar is progress. More reps is progress. More sets is progress. Doing the same weight, reps and sets with better form is progress. Doing the same weight, reps and sets and form with less or no pain is progress.

If you want to get on a rugby team in three months, or have a powerlifting meet coming up, then yes, there's a hurry. But for the typical gym member or personal training client working out for general health, there's no hurry. The low-bar back squat is without doubt the best way to squat for the vast majority of the population, but it is always better to squat than not squat, so if someone's front squatting or high-bar squatting I won't bother them the way I do someone who's partial squatting. It is better to progress quickly than slowly, but it is better to progress than to not progress, so if you or your clients' circumstances mean you can only add 2.5kg to the bar every six weeks, well, progress is progress. I'm still learning and adapting, but they're a hell of a lot better off than they were with bosu balls and burpees.

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**Kyle Schuant** spent most of his childhood getting lost in the bush, so it seemed natural for him to spend a decade in the armed forces of Australia and New Zealand as an infantry soldier and instructor. At university he studied physics, history and English literature, and with no employable skills became a chef. After a while he figured out that what he really liked was helping people do difficult things they thought they couldn't do, so he became a trainer. He is a far better coach than he has ever been a lifter. He splits his time between mornings in a commercial gym and evenings in his own gym, [Athletic Club East](#), Melbourne, Australia.

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