

Starting Strength

How to Talk About Lifting to Novice Adult Women

by

Fran Mason

Despite the increased athleticism and sports participation of women today, there are still many women who have had no exposure to barbells and strength training concepts. This is a business opportunity for Starting Strength coaches. We can help more women if we accept and respect whatever level of knowledge they have, even when it doesn't meet our expectations. For these clients to progress, we must communicate in a clear, consistent, and trustworthy manner. I'm going to describe, mainly through examples, how I teach barbell training to women. I've learned to teach concepts such as why we lift, how we know how heavy to lift, and what the rewards are, using a conversational style and plain English. I find that this motivates women instead of confusing them with unexplained jargon, or intimidating them by assuming they already know why barbells are important.

This "concept teaching" is conversational – completely separate from coaching cues – and it takes place while standing around a loaded barbell during rest breaks. Learn the set-up, do a set of five. Questions form, or you anticipate them. Spend a minute answering questions. Explain the jargon you're going to use, because jargon is useful shorthand if everyone in the conversation understands it.

Teens can come into a gym and get strong by doing what the coach tells them, "because coach says so." Men come in and take for granted that they're going to lift heavy sooner or later – men grow up knowing their bodies are supposed to be strong, and often their expectations are too high at first. Adult women are different. Many women don't know we have significant strength potential, nor that we owe it to ourselves, just as men do, to explore it. Women's expectations are often too low, and their mental picture of people who lift barbells is an unsavory stereotype of shirtless men grunting and sweating.

On the bright side, it is exciting to establish expectations, clear up stereotypes, and see women start to set strength goals. And it's fun to explain how grunting is functional during a heavy lift, because this is very surprising to someone who hasn't done it, and you can see some of the skepticism start to fade.

I know they can get strong, because I did

This article describes my personal experience with adult women who had never been exposed to barbells before and who didn't know that they can get stronger and stronger for quite a while. These are people

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who had never even thought about having strength goals or doing really hard physical work for health and fitness, and this includes about half of my women clients. They came to me looking for a new workout, with no prior exposure to the attitudes, focus, jargon, etiquette, and expectations surrounding barbell training. This type of novice lifter has learned that she should train for strength, so to her credit, here she is.

I was one of these women. At 40, I wandered into barbell training, wanting to see if I could learn to “do something really hard,” compared to my normal routine of bicycle commuting. This was inspired by seeing how jacked my husband got by doing Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. I figured barbells were safer! Luckily, I found a communicative coach. Two years later I started teaching other people to lift because I couldn’t help myself, and I haven’t stopped.

In those nine years, I’ve been able to define at least two common misconceptions among maybe half of my adult women novices. Sometimes these misconceptions appear in the form of specific, really basic questions. Fortunately, I’m “relatable-to” as a middle-aged female, so they ask, giving me a chance to educate on strength training in language they understand.

Communicate More Thoroughly from the Start

To develop this person into a strong lifter, and not lose her to yet another boot-camp-in-the-park, you’ll do more teaching than most guys or sports-experienced younger women require. The trainer has to accept this client’s lack of background knowledge: it’s not her fault, and it’s not a reason to give up on her. And we have to teach these unfamiliar “concept” elements right alongside lifting technique. She probably doesn’t even know, at first, what questions to ask. So as a trainer or coach, you have to back-fill all your instruction with context. Just as often as I answer questions, I spot new lifters’ misconceptions through their behavior during the workout. I’ll talk first about the misconceptions that are expressed through behavior, and second about a few of the most common questions adult women ask about lifting.

Misconception 1: Thinking this is just another exercise. The lifter has no basis for comparison of difficulty levels. She has no idea how barbell lifting works or how it feels when it’s working.

Symptom of this misconception: Not concentrating! Lifter says, “This is really hard, oh my gosh, I’m not sure I can stand this up, wow, this is so hard,” *while squatting*, and successfully but slowly shimmying up with 35 pounds. She sees the squat, for the moment, as just another exercise, and it is puzzling to have the trainer make such a fuss over the details. For me, it’s exciting to see how much potential she has to learn great new things and get so much stronger. After she racks the bar, I say something like: “If you can talk while you’re lifting, it’s not hard yet. Don’t talk. Focus on technique only. This is not just another exercise. When it gets heavy in a few months, you’ll need to have learned to focus on nothing but the lift.” If I’m trustworthy and credible, she starts to get an inkling that there’s more to this than meets the eye on the first day.

Misconception 2: Thinking that when the barbell is heavy enough to feel the effort in the legs, then it’s “really heavy,” and that’s a stopping point. She says: “I deadlifted 95 pounds for 5 the last three times we deadlifted. It was heavy. I should just stick with that from now on, right?” This person is treating a barbell lift like an exercise she learned by herself, on a machine. She doesn’t understand the linear progression yet – although by this point I would have explained it, that doesn’t mean it has already sunk in – let alone the benefit of milking it as long as possible. This shows a temporary lack of purpose that is not hard to fix.

My response: “I saw you lift 95 last week, and I remember it looked so easy. It’s no wonder, if you were repeating it. Today try a hundred.” Trainee: “One hundred pounds? Really? Are you sure?”

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100? Wow, I don't know, that's really heavy." Me: "Here's a 5-pound plate. This is how much heavier it is. Do it exactly the same way. It is only a little heavier than your 95, and I've seen you lift with good form. You can definitely do it. Just do what you've learned to do."

After they lift triple digits for the first time, I congratulate them and then explain (again) the beauty of being a novice and using the linear progression. I tell them, "Lifting a barbell for strength is like putting money into a 401(k). Deadlifting 100 is like saving \$1000 – you're on the right track, but it's not enough to live on when you retire. Keep inching it up. You have no idea where the ceiling is. You might lift twice your own weight someday." This makes them open their eyes wide and plants the seed of ambition and enthusiasm. They start to feel intrigued and excited about next time they lift. My reward comes later, when they're familiar with the lifts: two or three women are sharing a barbell, crowing about how much they're going to lift today, and then holding each other to it. "This is your work set! This is what you said you were going to do, now let's see it!" They lift, and then they diligently write it down. It brings a tear to my eye!

Common Questions

When coaches are asked the same questions over and over for years and years, we get tired of answering them. But that's our own issue and not a reason to take out our impatience on the person asking the question. If a woman is considering barbell training, and she's asking you these very basic questions, it means she trusts you already. Good job! Do not roll your eyes. Pat yourself on the back and answer happily, especially if you want to maintain that trust.

"Will I get bulky? I don't want to bulk up."

My typical answer: First of all, building muscle is just like putting money into your 401(k). You wouldn't say you don't want to bulk up your savings account, would you? Muscle on your body is a savings account for your health. Strong women are healthier women. Second, I don't know if you will bulk up or not. Everybody is different. If you put on muscle easily, count yourself lucky! While I'd love to see you in here training with barbells and getting bulked up. I can say for sure you will not look like a woman in a bodybuilding magazine. They do that on purpose, and I wouldn't know how to make you look that way anyway. But I *do* know how to make you stronger. You should work on building strength and let your body do what it will do. It will become its best self.

"How long will I keep getting stronger?"

My typical answer: For a long time. Years. There will be gains and setbacks and pauses, and some lifts will be stronger than others or easier to make gains on. But if you keep training, and keep adding weight bit by bit, you'll get stronger for a long time.

"But how heavy is heavy enough? Do you expect people to lift heavier and heavier weights forever? Do we ever stop?"

My answer: The weight won't get heavier forever, but we won't stop either. Years from now you'll reach plateaus that will be harder to break out of, and you'll feel like you're maintaining rather than gaining strength. You'll adjust your workouts, and you'll gain a bit more. But at some point, realistically – especially since we are not 18 years old – we will get stuck. This stuck-ness can be complicated. Part of it is an unconscious risk-to-benefit calculation that can feel like fear of trying that next heavier deadlift or squat. How badly do I want to add another five pounds? I'm already stronger than I've ever been in my life and

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stronger than any other woman I know outside the gym. I never hurt myself doing daily activities, and I look great. So, do I really have to add more weight, or can I just maintain where I am? You can decide, and I can help you decide. You can trust that I'll push you when it's appropriate, but that in a few years I'll be able to help you think about how to maintain your gains while maybe picking up some new skills.

“What is the most someone can lift?”

Usually this question doesn't refer to any one particular person in the world. She wants to know how much someone similar to herself, or anyone she can see in the gym right now, might ever be able to lift. My answer: The strongest lift you can do is the deadlift – picking something up off the floor and standing up. It's possible that in a couple of years or so you might lift twice your own weight. I then take a wild guess how long it might take her to lift her own bodyweight, and then the person looks intrigued and kind of excited! I tell her she might never put the equivalent of her own weight overhead, *most likely*, but even *that's* not completely out of the question. We just don't know our potential without training. Just as men do, we owe it to ourselves to explore our physical strength. And that's why we ought to start right now.

If you're training middle-aged people, remember that most of them don't want to compete in powerlifting or weightlifting meets. They want to be strong for their health, or for a recreational sport, or they're runners and they want to be faster. Even if people are training for reasons you can't relate to, or only for general fitness, you can still be a good strength coach even if you let them be conservative on the weights.

Some women will be pretty vocal about wanting to set their own “ceiling” for a deadlift or a squat. They're afraid of getting hurt; they felt a “twinge” three weeks ago; they're already so much stronger and they feel great. For whatever reason, they have their own risk/benefit calculation. Push them gently. Don't assume that they're wasting their time by not milking the marvelous linear progression forever, the way you wish they would. If you maintain their trust, they will surprise you. Building and maintaining trust means being clear and consistent as well as helping them avoid injury. If you clear up misconceptions and get more women working with barbells, you're performing a valuable service. There are a lot of adult women looking for safe, effective fitness methods, we're willing to pay, and we bring our friends in too. Doing right by novice women barbell lifters is not only great for those women – it's great for business too.

Fran Mason is a Starting Strength Coach and is the owner and head trainer at [CrossFit 206](#) in Seattle. With a creative writing degree and a career as an editor and technical writer, Fran discovered barbell and kettlebell training at age 40. She soon wanted to teach strength training through barbells with other novices (especially women) as the primary emphasis of a healthy fitness plan for everyone. Her dream of owning an independent gym in which to explore barbell coaching and strength-focused CrossFit was realized in 2009 after several years as a part-time trainer. Fran has helped more than 300 women learn to get strong through barbell training.

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