

# Starting Strength

## Reaching the Top with the X-Factor

by  
**Tommy Suggs**

**In a [previous article](#) I wrote:** *When I moved to York in 1963 to train with Olympic coach Bob Hoffman at the famous York Barbell Gym, my training facilities changed little. It was a large room with two platforms complete with Olympic bars, lots of plates, a power rack, an iron staircase for squatting, a leg press, a lat machine, a rack full of dumbbells and several flat and incline benches. The York gym didn't need more equipment as it had the most important of all the ingredients necessary for becoming a champion – the X-factor. Again, the X-factor is a story itself and would take considerable space to discuss. In brief, the X-factor is a combination of individual enthusiasm, an attitude of succeeding no matter what it takes, and a huge ego with all of the above bouncing off each other. It was individuals generating dynamic energy that spawned winners. There have been gyms since then, there are gyms now, and there will be gyms like this in the future. Serious lifters find them and their energy just adds to that which is already there. If you are a serious lifter, find one. Enough said.*

Rip has asked me to expand upon the subject of the X-Factor and it is my pleasure to do so with the goal of providing dedicated lifters an insight into an important key to manifesting their dream of becoming a champion.

The X-Factor refers to a group situation and, of course, a group is made up of individuals; individuals that bring their own brand of the X-Factor to add to the total energy of the group. What makes the group so important is synergism – cooperative action where the total effect is greater than the sum of the effects taken independently. Since the energy of individuals determines the energy of the group, I will address the X-Factor on the individual level first.

**Three in one:** The X-Factor consists of three primary aspects 1) enthusiasm, 2) aspiration, and 3) will. Although each aspect is independent in action, synergism suggests that each, in the final analysis, is amplified by the others. I will point out how each aspect stimulates the other two and is stimulated by them.

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**Enthusiasm is:** 1) a strong excitement of feeling or 2) something inspiring zeal or fervor. After I entered my first contest I was bitten by the barbell bug; excitement, zeal and fervor to be a world class lifter entered my life in spades. All I could think about was lifting. I would sit in class and make up the best ever routine that would propel me in a single bounce, like Superman, to world titles and records. Falling asleep at night was difficult because of the tremendous weights I was visualizing myself lifting while winning the Olympics.

However, enthusiasm is often fleeting. It is a product of the ego's desire to achieve, to be better than others. Enthusiasm – *excitement* – is the ego's way of getting what it wants. The complicated action of the ego is best left to psychologists. The fact that you are enthusiastic about your training is all that counts. You can worry about your motives later. Right now just enjoy the strength and development enthusiasm makes possible. Just know that enthusiasm starts your journey to the top. Without it you will not even start, much less progress, towards being a champion.

It is evident that you must have enthusiasm to embark upon the demanding road that leads to the top. You no doubt are enthusiastic about reaching a higher level of physical accomplishment or you wouldn't be reading a useless (to non-enthusiasts) article like this one. We know that enthusiasm is transient since it readily comes and goes like the wind. So how do you keep your enthusiasm at a level that will get you into the gym and push you to lift heavy weights and fulfill your dream of setting records and winning titles? If you don't know what I am talking about, you probably haven't experienced "fatal enthusiasm" – a level where nothing matters but getting bigger and stronger.

Initial enthusiasm is not the point, as the assumption has been made that you know and have experienced what I am talking about. However, keeping enthusiasm is a topic of concern. My guess is that there has never been a champion that hasn't depleted his enthusiasm, probably to the extent that quitting training has been a real consideration.

There are a couple of things that a lifter can do to regain "enthusiasm lost." First, [enter a contest](#). Contests are the best place to get fired up. If you do well you are buoyed by the success. If you do poorly you will vow to put in the work necessary to make the gains of your dreams. The energy at a contest, particularly in the warm-up room, is a perfect example of the X-Factor in action. It is short lived, but has the ability to lift your enthusiasm for training in one giant step.

Don't "chicken out" of entering a contest when you, your enthusiasm, and your lifts are down. Just enter. Put your ego on the back burner and get a new supply of weightlifting rocket fuel that will lift you out of the doldrums where you have been drowning in self pity.

If you don't have a training partner, get one. Or if your training partner doesn't share your aspiration, get a new training partner. Later I'll tell a story about how one of my favorite training partners, Bill Starr, helped me get in the best shape of my life when my mind had been set on retiring from competitive lifting.

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If your enthusiasm is hard to maintain because of a lack of a stimulating gym environment then look for another gym – one with the X-Factor. When I moved to York it was my very good fortune to train with Bill March who was one of the top mid-heavy Olympic lifters in the world. I was overwhelmed by this good fortune and my enthusiasm soared. Bill was a training partner who not only shared my aspirations, but was living them. Add my bolstered enthusiasm to the fact that we were training in a gym with an X-Factor to the max and it is evident why my lifts soared. Put yourself in a similar situation and you will experience the same results, guaranteed.

Now a story and a warning about all this enthusiasm stuff. It was a couple of weeks after arriving in York before I started training with Bill March. My first three days in the York gym saw me training hard. I couldn't restrain myself. My runaway enthusiasm and accompanying surge in adrenaline levitated the weights. Then the bottom fell out and my lifting was in the toilet for a week. The point of this story: Don't let new-found enthusiasm override good judgment. Enthusiasm is essential to reach the top, but it can lead you astray. Bill Starr in a recent letter reminisced about how the first several years of our lifting careers we were overtrained. We were young, didn't know better as there were no coaches in those days, and enthusiasm was our middle name.

Don't overdose on enthusiasm, when you lose it, find it, and understand that it will run in cycles. A characteristic of energy is that its action is cyclical and this is definitely true of the energy associated with enthusiasm. It takes the valleys to make the mountains. Keep these suggestions in mind when it becomes a challenge to keep training: just ease off heavy training for a while and find a new training partner – if that is the problem. Start training for a contest and soak up the rarified energy you will find there, or consider moving to a different gym known for the progress made by its members because of the abundance of the X-Factor.

Sacrifices are often necessary. To reach the next level of accomplishment it may be necessary for you to relocate in order to find a training facility where the attitude of becoming a champion is not only present, but is actually producing top athletes. I have no idea why being a champion Olympic weightlifter was so important to me; psychologists and psychiatrists would have a field day analyzing the motives of champion athletes. In my mind, moving to York to train with the Olympic coach and world-caliber lifters was the only way for me to reach where I wanted to go. I had a family to consider and, fortunately, I was able to meet my responsibly to my family and make the move. My family's sacrifice was small compared to those made by some lifters. The bottom line: There are very few world-level athletes who have not made sacrifices in order to reach their goals. However, don't allow your selfish ego to disregard your personal responsibility to others.

**Aspiration** is defined as a strong desire to achieve something high or great. Enthusiasm starts you on your journey to the top. Aspiration determines how far you will go. You will never reach a level higher than your aspirations. If you are satisfied with being a state championship-level lifter, then chances are you will never rise above that level unless you aspire to higher levels of accomplishment.

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Enthusiasm often provides the impetus that continually nudges your aspirations to ever higher levels. My daydreams early on consisted of designing the perfect workout that would continually enable me to add ten pounds a week to my Olympic lifts. My enthusiasm allowed my mind to run wild and in no time I pictured myself as a world-beater. But this enthusiasm and daydreaming are necessary ingredients to continued progress and the mental attitude that keeps pushing goals higher and higher. When I was cleaning and jerking 225 pounds my goal was 300. However, as my level of strength and form allowed me to reach this lofty (to me) goal, my thoughts suddenly turned to 350. But in the back of my mind somewhere there was this image of me receiving a gold medal at the Olympics. In other words, I had intermediate *and* long term goals; intermediate goals help to keep the reality of having to add 150 or 200 pounds to each lift from appearing impossible. Aspire to be a champion, but do so in 25 and 50 pound steps.

Just as enthusiasm prods aspiration higher and higher, so aspiration often stimulates and renews enthusiasm during inevitable periods of the doldrums. Many times during my career my dreams of being a champion lifter pulled me back from the lack of enthusiasm that seemed to regularly cause my championship dreams to be rained on. During times of low enthusiasm, thoughts often turned to retiring and putting an end to my dream chasing; “it’s just not worth it” would become a recurring thought. But then I would see myself receiving the gold medal and that thought continued to haunt me until I was again back in the gym. The next thing I knew my attitude and enthusiasm improved, I entered a contest, I talked with someone at the contest who inspired me, and suddenly I was back on the path to feeling that gold around my neck at the next Olympic Games. Never stop dreaming.

Enthusiasm can push your aspiration ever higher and your aspiration can stimulate enthusiasm; both energies are independent but benefit each other. But there is a third partner to this dynamic duo of enthusiasm and aspiration, will.

**Will** is defined as the power of control over one’s own actions. On the journey to the top, enthusiasm will get you started and keep you moving and your aspirations will define how far you will go – *if* you have a strong enough will to get into the gym and do the work. Often have been the times when the night before a scheduled workout my enthusiasm had me all fired up only to have me looking for excuses not to train when it was time to put thoughts into action. Will gets the work done. Without will there is nothing but emotional enthusiasm and dreams, and neither of these separately or together will get you bigger and stronger. You must do the work, and an application of your will is necessary to get this done. Your will is the battery needed to power your Tonka toy. Your enthusiasm will motivate you to get the toy out and the toy is perfectly capable of fulfilling your expectations with its performance. But nothing is going to happen without a battery – your will – to provide the energy to make it move.

Consider all the gifted athletes that fail to reach their potential because they are unable to discipline themselves – lacked the power of control over their own actions – to do the work necessary

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to excel. Some individuals seem to be gifted with a strong will while others struggle to will themselves to do anything. But will can be developed and strengthened just like muscles. Every time a person wills themselves to do something they know they need to do but, for one reason or another, just don't want to put forth the effort required to do, the will is strengthened. Continually putting a demand on your will, and meeting that demand, strengthens your will. The next time you are looking for excuses not to train because you just can't face the squat rack and the work it holds for you, *force* yourself to train. That right, I said, "Force." Let's not pussy-foot around here. Consciously forcing yourself to do what's necessary is how you increase your control over your actions, and your will. It may not be an easy task, but no one said manifesting dreams was easy. Just do it.

The individual's relationship to the X-Factor has been the object of our discussion. Now for an examination of the synergistic effect when several individuals exhibiting the X-Factor train together as a group.

**Group** energy dynamics reflects the characteristics of its individual members but with an amplified energy identity of its own due to synergistic action. There is something almost mystical about group energy. The individual has the X-Factor aspects of enthusiasm, aspiration and will. These mix, amplify, and compliment each other within the individual. A group has all these characteristics plus individual personalities and egos bouncing off each other. This additional element of energy interaction elevates group X-Factor to a considerable higher level than what may be achieved by an individual. I promised a personal story about how the X-Factor can made a considerable difference in a lifter's progress. Here is my story.

It was 1968 and I had decided to retire. No more competitive lifting for me. The aches and pain and general mental fatigue had gotten the best of me. It was several months out from the 1968 National Championships. Bill Starr and I had trained together for a considerable length of time. We were friends and valued each other's decisions and desires.

One day Bill turned to me while we were working on getting *Strength & Health Magazine* ready for the art department and said, "I know that you don't plan on entering the Nationals this year, but would you consider training along with me? It would be a great help for me and I would appreciate it. You don't have to train heavy, just do what you want to do but give me a hand or coaching advice when I need it." Bill was a friend, and I needed to do some training just to stay in shape, so I readily agreed. We started training together and with the other lifters at the York gym, and the group X-Factor started to slowly but surely pull me into a place I never expected to find myself: training for the Nationals. We trained together with me sitting out a set or two. Soon I was training hard. However, I still told myself that I was through with competition. One day I woke up and discovered that I was in the best shape of my life and enthusiastic about entering the Nationals. A second place and a National Championship record in the clean and jerk were the direct result of interaction within a group with the

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X-Factor. Starr had awakened the X-Factor in me. Without his presence I would have never entered competition again.

In a group, the resurrection of the X-Factor within an individual very often begins between two people and later gains momentum from other members of the group. Once the smoldering aspects of the X-Factor had again become a blaze within me, my positive energy soon joined that of the other lifters. Soon I both received and contributed to the energy of champions that was the hallmark of the York gym. Individuals helping one or all members of the group to excel creates the synergistic effect of the group.

Through my years at York there were many stories similar to mine. One lifter would be down and out, so to speak, and then another lifter or group of lifters would get him back in the swing. Group dynamics can accomplish more than the individual alone. The point here is this: find a gym that has lifters with the X-Factor training there and you will find a gym with the X-Factor. Then expect miracles.

You may not be able to locate a gym of this quality, or you may, due to circumstances, not be able to make a move to take advantage of the rarified atmosphere of an X-Factor gym. All is not lost. There have been many lifters that trained with only one or two other lifters with the X-Factor. World record holder in the snatch, Louis Reicke, never had more than one or two training partners. But they were important to his success. I remember Lou telling me how he would be just about out the door when his training partner would say, "Do a few sets of high pulls with me before you leave." Lou credits such incidents with helping him as he moved up the ladder to the top.

Bob Bednarski's coach Joe Mills continually turned out one or two lifters through the years. One or two lifters with their X-Factors bouncing off each other can make the difference between a lackluster career and one that reaches the national level. At the very least, you need a training partner who shares your ambitions. Even better is to find a coach who has a proven track record and the athletes to train with.

If you are just starting your move up the ladder to the top, your immediate needs are less than when you start aspiring to the level of regional and national competition. As you progress keep in mind that you must continually seek a higher level of the X-Factor. The University of Texas weight room and the Texas Athletic Club provided plenty of what I needed to reach the state and regional level. When it came time to address the possibility of advancing to the national level, I moved to York.

What should you do if you feel the need for a boost of the group X-Factor in your training? This question came up at the Round Table Discussion sponsored by Rip and his organization. Actually, the question had to do with what was wrong with US lifting officials and the US Olympic training camp. I commented that there was little anyone could do to change the situation regarding the officials at the top, although Rip suggested Ebola as a solution. My suggestion then was that it was the responsibility of individuals to find what they need in the way of coaches and training partners. That

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is my suggestion now. Don't wait for someone to do something for you. Instead, take responsibility and do what is necessary yourself. Aspiring lifters that reach the top don't whimper and feel sorry for themselves.

If you are a lifter who is currently training alone or with a training partner who does not share your ambitions, take the responsibility for changing your situation. Go to a contest, meet the lifters and find out where they train. Contact them and see about training with them. A little change can make a big difference. Jerri Pugh would drive an hour from Houston to train with me once or twice a week. She has done well nationally and a recent email indicates that she is still competing on the national level. You can do the same, and when you outgrow your new situation look for a higher level of the X-Factor. There are some good lifting clubs around. Find them, and find a way to train with them even if it is only every week or two. The internet is another means of locating lifters and clubs of like mind.

Now you know about the X-Factor. It is a reality that you can manifest within yourself and recognize in other individuals or groups. First develop the three aspects of the X-Factor within yourself and then locate a group or another individual that possesses them; get acquainted and train together. Where there is a will there is a way.

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