

# Starting Strength

## Competition Makes the World Go 'Round

by  
Matt Reynolds

### Introduction: My Story

I am embarrassed to admit that I grew up a complete pussy. Moving in the fifth grade to a new town and to my first public school (after being home-schooled by my parents), left me unprepared and naive about the world according to 11-year olds. My dad was a Baptist minister, and he taught my brother and I about doing the right thing, and the importance of good grades and an excellent work ethic. But he neglected to teach us how to be men – how to be confident, or how to stand up and defend ourselves. I didn't know how to dress like public school kids, or talk like them – I knew nothing of their music or television shows, and I couldn't have been more shy around the girls in my class. As a geeky preacher's kid in my Dollar General gold-stitched jeans and 1950s parted hair (in 1990 mind you), I was picked on and bullied daily. I was painfully average at best, and my new surroundings left me with low self-esteem and without a scrap of self confidence.

My only relief came from my love of sports. I certainly wasn't the best, but I wasn't bad, and it gave me a chance to "fit in" somewhere. But the more I played, and the more I competed, the more I loved it. It wasn't so much playing the actual sport, but rather the intense competitive platform that the sport provided. Off the court or field I was a complete pansy, but on it, something changed in me. I became a fierce competitor, wanting nothing more than to win – and to beat the asses of the guys who gave me a hard time because of how I dressed and looked and talked. And an interesting thing occurred as I got into high school: the more I competed, the more confident I became off the court. Today, (at 31 years old) I thrive on competition as much as I ever have. To be honest, I am probably the most competitive person I've ever met – perhaps to a fault. I can not start something without putting 100% of myself into it. On the positive side, it has driven me to succeed as a coach, gym owner, and educator. It kept me focused while double-majoring for my undergrad and then completing my masters degree in 16 months. But, the fault: I also have to be "the best" in everything I do. Hobbies quickly become obsessions as I strive to be the best in my fantasy football league, the best player in my poker league, have the best yard in my neighborhood, or be the best junior high football coach in the area. You name it, and I'll compete at it.

However, NOTHING can compare to what competition has done to help me reach my goals in the gym. Of all the things that have helped me become an accomplished lifter – from excellent mentors, to consistent training partners, to great gym atmospheres – the thing that stands out that has helped me the most is training for a competition.

## *Competition*

### **Competition Makes Everything Better Except Communism (and it makes it better too...)**

Competition makes EVERYTHING better. Period. The simple act of someone trying to do a job better than another person leads to dramatic increases in work productivity. It drives performance in business, causes students to “compete” in education for awards and scholarships, instigates guys to fight over the most attractive women, has given us the Super Bowl, and has led to the \$1 double cheeseburger – all great things. It stands to reason that competition will drastically improve performance in the weight-room.

Our history has been painted with the importance of competition. There was a day when our lives depended on it. We competed with other men for the best women. We competed to kill food to provide for our family. We competed to be predator and not prey.

Competition is what our country was founded on. Capitalism, democracy, an entire government, built upon the shoulders of competition. It has contributed greatly to the United States being the most powerful nation in the world. Consider also, ironically, that in the few places where competition was allowed to thrive in the Soviet Republic, it succeeded. Communism and Socialism are founded on a non-competitive world view. It is the antithesis of Democracy. And while a society, government, and economy built upon a lack of competition failed, the two places where competition was encouraged – the space program and the Olympics – succeeded incredibly well for the USSR.

We now live in a country where everyone has a sense of entitlement, part of which is learned though the “everyone is a winner” mentality. We no longer keep scores in elementary-level sports, and every kid on the team gets a trophy and a ribbon. We actually had the mom of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade kid who participated in our “field day” last spring call up the superintendent of our school, infuriated because her son did not receive a ribbon when she saw that only 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> place students were awarded ribbons in their various events. Anti-competitive viewpoints such as this, coupled with the pussification of America, is leading us down a dangerous and emasculating path.

Lack of competition is the single biggest problem with our public school system. There are no incentives for one school district to be better than the next district down the road, no incentives for teachers to be excellent, and no incentives for the students to compete and perform. As a middle school Industrial Technology teacher, I became frustrated a few years ago with the quality of the balsa wood bridge projects my students were building. The simple act of changing the project to a competition – where the bridge that held the most weight got the highest grade in the class and a small gift certificate to a restaurant in town, and the one who held the least got the worst the grade – *dramatically* improved the design, quality, and craftsmanship of the bridges all-around. Competition gave the project a *purpose*.

### **How Competition Improves Weight Training Performance:**

In the same way, competition gives your training purpose. In the simplest terms, competition is the difference between “training” and “working out.” We all like to think we “train” in the weight room. “Workouts” are for people who do P90X. But if you aren’t competing, then what are you training for? Unfortunately, you have to come to the realization that if you aren’t competing (or actively training with the desire to compete in the near future) then your “workouts” are most likely little more than gratuitous “wheel-spinning” with no real purpose. Competition gives your training that purpose.

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As a lifter, you fall into one of just a few categories. Some of you may lift but have no desire to compete. Some of you have the desire to compete, but that desire may be a far-fetched dream that you doubt will ever actually occur. Some may have a genuine desire to compete but feel you are not yet strong enough and are afraid to embarrass yourselves. Finally, there are those who have taken the plunge and train to compete and already know the benefits that competing provides to your training. I hope, for those that fall into one of the first three categories, that I can help convince you that competing will do more for your performance than you could ever imagine, and that the benefits of competing extend far outside the realm of just setting PRs.

If the question is whether you should compete, then the answer is yes. If the question is when, the answer is now. NOTHING will take your training to the next level the way training for a competition will. There is literally something magic in the physical act of filling out the entry form, writing the check, putting it in the mailbox and officially signing up for a meet. That simple step will immediately change your training, because now the *competition* drives the training. It drives the nutrition. It drives the rest. It drives every facet of your life to help take you to a place you didn't know was possible. Without competition, those little aches and pains often lead to missed workouts or a reduction in intensity or exertion. But when competition drives the training, then you learn how to train around those little aches, pains, and nagging injuries. This is another reason why committing to a meet as early as possible is advantageous, because until the check is in the mail its very easy to back out.

As a current competitor, high school strength coach, and the owner of a real black-iron strength gym (STRONG Gym in Springfield, MO) I can attest to the dramatic improvements that competition makes on performance. We believe its so important at STRONG, that we do everything we can to facilitate that environment in the gym, as well as push our members to compete whenever possible. When a new member joins our gym, we give them "Our Philosophy on Weight Training." In that document we note:

*"First and foremost, we believe that helping each other is the key to our success. We are a gym who genuinely desires every member to succeed, regardless of what their personal training goals may be. We celebrate that success whether it's a 100lb squat or a 900lb squat. When you walk into STRONG you'll notice that everyone is always coaching, spotting, offering advice, and listening to one another. This is not an accident, but rather a very deliberate means to help educate our members so they can better themselves, and in turn, help others."*

*"We believe that individuals must have goals to help them gauge success in the gym and to assess the quality of their progress. We believe the simplest and most gratifying assessment tool of these goals is the Personal Record (PR). We believe so much in its power that we focus a vast majority of our work around the PR and celebrate it no matter how big or how small."*

*"We believe that competition with others as well as oneself is foundational to help an individual reach their goals. The competitive, but supportive atmosphere at STRONG is also completely deliberate. We push our members to compete with each other in the gym, and strongly encourage them to compete in strength sports as well. We know that a self-confident, mentally-tough man or woman is not the norm, but rather the exception in America. Our goal is to produce the exception. We believe training for competition, and in a competitive environment is one step towards that goal."*

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I would guess, after years of owning a hardcore strength gym, where we have members of every strength level, that the single greatest reason people don't compete in strength sports is fear. I have members in our gym tell me every day that they are worried about embarrassing themselves on stage with behemoths lifting world-class totals. This could not be farther from truth or reality, of course. One of the great things about competing in a strength sport (powerlifting, weightlifting, or strongman) is the encouragement and camaraderie you receive from the other lifters. Its not at all like the "big-wang syndrome" in the junior high gym-class shower. You know, the guy with biggest cock gets the most respect, and the guy with the smallest is doomed to a lifetime of jokes and humiliation. Rather, the guy with the biggest or the lowest squat respect each other, because they are part of the few that know the incredible commitment and the courage it took just to step on that platform.

We have a guy in my gym, Kyle, who is a typical, every-day, working class dad. He's in his mid-30s, lifetime drug-free, an accountant, has four kids, not what you would call "athletic," and never had any desire to compete. He began training at my gym because his government job paid him to train for one hour every day. The guy had a great work ethic, however; we put him on a basic Starting Strength program, and his numbers consistently rose until he was squatting around 350, benching 275, and deadlifting around 400. Those of us who compete began encouraging Kyle to throw his hat in the ring and enter a nearby meet that was coming up in a few months. After a fair amount of tooth-pulling, he took our challenge, filled out the entry form and mailed off the check. That very day his training went to another level. We put him on a basic 5/3/1 peaking program to help prepare him in handling heavier weights for the meet. At his first competition, he squatted 420, benched 325, and deadlifted 505 (all raw), going 9 for 9 and setting 3 personal records in the process. Kyle left the meet encouraged by the other lifters, and he couldn't wait to compete again. Kyle's story isn't a rare one – it's very typical for average lifters who put their fear on the back burner and decide to compete. Kyle wasn't the strongest guy at the meet, by far, but the lifters and crowd celebrated his PR's with the same enthusiasm they did when someone hit a 715lb raw squat or 500lb raw bench.

We've seen our gym explode with some pretty staggering numbers over the last year – a tribute to our commitment to competition. We have 27 guys who deadlift over 500 at my gym, 13 over 600, and 5 over 700. That's with a membership of around 50 people. We have 32 who bench over 300, 17 over 400, 3 who bench over 500, and 1 right under the 600lb mark – all raw. This is in a town of only 150,000 people, and virtually all of our lifters developed their strength in the trenches of STRONG rather than moving in and just adding another name to the record board. In my own training, my deadlift has gone from 505 at my first powerlifting meet to 725 this past summer and I've gained my elite status in powerlifting and my pro card as a 105k strongman. All of these accomplishments can be attributed to hard work in a competitive atmosphere, and a willingness by our members to step on stage, even when that meant stepping out of their comfort zone.

Many of you have discovered the Starting Strength program and adjusted to simple, basic, hard, and totally effective training. However, some of you have begun to transition from novice to intermediate lifting, where simple linear progression will no longer consistently produce gains. Programming will need to be tweaked to allow stress to accrue for periods of loading, and then for that stress to be recovered from, during periods of deloading. As an intermediate lifter, you will be able to handle heavier loads, and concepts such as a 1 rep max or 3 rep max need to be introduced into the program. Peaking through programs such as the Texas Method or 5/3/1 would be totally appropriate for this level of training. And the simplest, most gratifying, and most productive thing you can do for your performance during this time is make a conscious decision to compete. You don't need to be a

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national level lifter (or even a state-level lifter) before competing. You just need to have a desire to take your training to the next level and have a real hunger to set PRs. Find a local meet, fill out the entry form, and mail off the check. Your training, PRs, and confidence levels will thank you for it, you'll learn a ton, and build some amazing relationships along the way.

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Matt Reynolds is an elite powerlifter, 105k pro strongman, teacher, football coach, and strength coach at a 5A high school in Missouri. He loves training heavy and learning everything he can about strength, but is still pretty sure he isn't very smart or very strong. He is also the proud owner of STRONG Gym, in Springfield, MO - home of the strongest lifters West of the Mississippi and East of Big Iron.

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