

Starting Strength

Utilizing Intuitive Training

by
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Intuitive training, also called instinctive training, was how everyone put together their programs when I first became interested in getting bigger and stronger. What it means is that the athlete listens closely to what his body is telling him about what he is doing in the weight room. Then he uses this information to guide him through his upcoming session where he continues to monitor what is happening to his various systems.

This was done out of necessity. In the fifties and sixties, there were very few publications that presented any news and information about strength training. *Strength & Health* was, by far, the best, but Peary Rader published two magazines that also catered to those wanting to gain size and strength, either in Olympic weightlifting or bodybuilding: *IronMan* and *Lifting News*.

So that source of information wasn't always available to young, aspiring strength athletes. In fact, I had been lifting for almost two years before I ever saw a muscle mag. The Weider brothers, Joe and Ben, and Dan Lurie published magazines, but they were strictly for bodybuilders and had little of interest to those seeking a higher level of strength.

And at that time, there were very few coaches in the country who knew enough to help others get through the rough spots. Diehard lifters typically trained alone in facilities they put together in a garage or shed, with a small group in those same home gyms, or at a YMCA. But in all of those situations, the strength athletes were in charge of their own training. Seldom was there a coach present who knew more than they did. Now that has changed drastically. There's information available from every direction: DVDs, books, articles on the internet and in countless magazines. Courses can be ordered, personal trainers hired, and clinics attended. It's all there for the taking for anyone who is serious about getting stronger.

But what has happened in the process is that the beginning and intermediate strength athlete no longer bothers to *consult himself*. He has reached a state where he is completely dependent on others for advice. This is particularly true for scholastic and collegiate strength programs. In many D-1 schools, there is a strength coach for nearly every sport. There they go through a regimented routine designed by one of those coaches. Which is good – it can save a lot of time and injuries to have the proper guidance in the early stage of training. But at some point, any athlete who really wants to move ahead of the pack has to take it upon himself to adjust and revise his routine. Doing what everyone else is doing works well in the beginning, but to continue following the herd even when things get sticky is not the right path to the top.

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And while I do believe that having a vast storehouse of information available to a great many people is helpful, at the same time it's very confusing to those who do not know how to separate the wheat from the chaff. What most end up doing is diving into some program presented by a champion in some strength sport without adapting it to his own needs and background. Typically, he ends up slipping backwards rather than moving forward, since that program was far too advanced for him. So, undaunted, he finds another program to follow, hoping this will be the one that magically propels him to a higher strength level.

This seldom happens because the eager athlete has overlooked one of the most important truisms in strength training – each of us is an individual with very specific needs and requirements. The cookie-cutter method just doesn't work very well past the elementary stage of training. The program has to be constantly redesigned so that it fits what is happening with your body and mind at the present. The reason why most don't follow this course of action is simple – they're too lazy to take the time to revamp their routines. It's so much easier just to buy another DVD or book on the subject. And, in fact, figuring out how to make the needed changes in their routine is beyond their scope. Since they've never had any experience in using their intuition in this way, they're at a loss as to how to proceed without assistance.

Those of us who started on our quest completely on our own came out better in this regard than those who are starting out currently. We had no choice but to make decisions about our training. In many instances there weren't even any training partners to turn to for help. At my first two duty stations in the Air Force, I trained alone. I mean, *really* alone. There was no one else in the weight room. This meant I had to figure out how to do several exercises that really needed some assistance on my own.

I had purchased a course from George Jowett when I was still in high school, and even though I didn't have the equipment to do his recommended program, I remembered all of the exercises he had presented. And one of the most important was the back squat. I should mention that the only weight equipment I had at my disposal at those bases was a standard bar, two adjustable dumbbell handles, and an assortment of plates. There were no squat racks or benches with uprights. Ab work was done on stall bars and all lifting was done on mats.

With no one to advise me on what to do about my problem, I was forced to figure it out on my own. And I did. I power cleaned the weight, flipped it over onto my back, did my set, flipped it back over to the front of my shoulders and lowered it back to the mat. This, of course, restricted how much weight I could handle, yet having to clean what I was squatting during a session helped to greatly improve the strength of my back. As I felt my back get stronger, it dawned on me that I should do more power cleans because I believed my back was as important as my legs in the total scheme of things.

Jowett had high praise for the flat bench press as well, but all I had was a narrow bench used in locker rooms to sit on to change clothes. I thought about it, and then gave my idea a try. I would clean the weight, sit on the bench, lay back, do the presses, then sit up and flip the bar over and place it on the bench. That worked for a short while. Whenever I attempted to use more than I had previously, I had a hell of a time sitting up with the weight on my chest. So I scrapped that method and tried another. I would place the loaded barbell on the mat at the head of the bench, I would lie down on the bench, reach back, grip the bar, and pull it up and over to my chest. Then I would do my reps and lower the bar back down to the mat. I finally gave this up as well for a couple of reasons. I wasn't yet strong enough to be able to do a pullover with very much weight, so the benches were really too light

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to be useful. And lowering the bar after doing a set was starting to be very stressful to my elbows and shoulders.

So until I found a weight room with a bench with uprights, or one with other people working out, I used the overhead press and jerk as the exercises for my upper body. Which, in hindsight, was probably a good thing. Too many beginners get so enamored with the bench press that they chronically overwork it and end up with battered wrists, shoulders, elbows, and pecs. When I finally did have training mates and they handed me the bar while I was lying on a bench and relieved me of it after my sets, my shoulder girdle was well prepared for the new form of stress.

During the formative stage, my mind was always on my program. I would write out routines, revise them, and then do more. Even in the beginning I made some correct decisions based solely on my gut instinct. For example, I felt that if I wanted to gain bodyweight – and I desperately did since I was always small for my age – I needed to stimulate the larger muscles much more than I did the smaller ones. In addition, I needed to exercise these groups first, before I did anything for my arms and calves. But this was just my notion of how to go about the process. I wasn't positive I was right, so I would test my theory in this manner. I would do my presses, power cleans, and back squats before any calf raises, curls, or specific triceps movements. Then, in the following session I reversed the order and did the small groups first.

I quickly discovered that I was right in the first place. Not only did the large group exercises go much better when I gave them priority, the biceps, triceps, and calves responded more favorably at the end of the program.

I also felt that I should only lift weights three times a week, so that I would have a day in between, at least, to recover from the new form of physical and mental stress. I had never read this, and certainly no one ever told me this because I had yet to meet another person who lifted weights seriously. Plus, I had never used that concept before – in all the other sports I had participated in, I practiced every day, weather permitting, and was none the worse for wear. Yet I somehow knew that more than three days a week would be too much for me because everything I was doing was new and quite demanding. It's a lot less stressful to the body to shoot baskets for an hour every day than it is to move iron for that long. Again, I checked out my idea by trying to train back-to-back for three straight days. That's was plenty to let me know I was on the right track with three sessions a week with a day of rest after each session. All I had to do was listen to my body.

What I was doing was using intuitive training, although I never heard this term until many years later. All it really means is that an individual is tuned in to how his body is responding to some outside influence. This is wired into our systems, but what has happened over the years of being told how to do everything from dial a phone to what to eat, that we have virtually lost the ability to think in this manner. The attribute is still there, although dormant. It can be revived and utilized with practice. This, at first, has to be a conscious effort to renew what was at one point in your life an unconscious reaction to a stimulus.

What is required in order to incorporate intuitive thinking into your training is patience and self-examination. It also means that you have to come to the realization that if you do indeed want to enhance your strength and overall state of health, you have to take matters into your own hands and stop relying on outside experts to tell you how to train. This doesn't mean that you should disregard ideas and suggestions made by others who are seeking the same goals as you are. But in the final analysis, you have to coach yourself, and this can only be done well if you are very much in tune with

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your body and take time to check it out on a regular basis and be willing and able to adapt when situations arise that interfere with your regular routine.

Listen to your body and you'll be fine. Fight it and you'll lose. Those who have been in the sport of Olympic weightlifting or using strength training for another sport for a long, long time can make this adjustment much more readily than those just starting out. Mostly because all of them used some form of intuitive training somewhere along the way. They learned to depend on their own counsel and guidance out of sheer necessity and can pull up those memories and practices later on, when they're once again needed.

While paying close attention to an inner voice is helpful in the early stages of weight training, the longer you stick with it, the more essential intuitive training becomes. This is because almost any program will work for a rank beginner if 1.) he's consistent and never misses a workout, and 2.) he fully applies himself to his routine. I've written many times that a poorly-designed program done regularly and with enthusiasm will bring better results than a perfect program done haphazardly and with a half-hearted effort.

In addition, there's an abundance of excellent advice out there now that is very available to anyone seeking it. However, when a strength athlete graduates to the intermediate and high intermediate levels, that information is not going to be nearly as beneficial. Why? Every single one of us is an individual with very specific needs, and no one can identify these needs as well as we can ourselves. There's no doubt that knowledgeable coaches can help a great deal, but they still do not understand how everything ticks in your body and mind as well as you do. In short, your best coach is you. You have inside information and you certainly care more about what transpires with your life than anyone else.

When I moved to York from Marion, Indiana in 1966 to become Tommy Suggs' assistant editor at *Strength & Health*, the thing that struck me most about the training systems of those remarkable men of strength was that they all trained themselves and they all used a great deal of intuition in doing so. Most outsiders like myself assumed that there was a master plan laid out by Bob Hoffman, and most likely Doc Ziegler and several of the other old-time champions who worked there like Grimek and Stanko. Dead wrong. Bill March, Bob Bednarski, Tony Garcy, Homer Brannum, Ernie Pickett, Bob Bartholmew, Jeff Moyer, and Tommy set up their own programs without any outside help.

They had become national champions by paying close attention to signals from their bodies and responded accordingly. Another thing I found interesting was that none of them trained the same way. Every program was unique for that individual. March, for example, did the three lifts – press, snatch, and clean and jerk – and added in back squats and a great deal of power rack work in the form of isotonic-isometric contractions. Tommy followed a similar routine that was a great deal shorter in duration. Tony Garcy was far enough advanced that he could handle a monster workload, doing over 35,000 lbs in a single session. Homer got in and out of the gym in a hurry, typically getting everything done in just over an hour.

Bednarski was also a very hard trainer and began doing two-a-days soon after he arrived at York. He would push to limit on every exercise in his routine at every session, unless he felt he was off that day. Then he would make changes on the spot and reduce the amount of weight he was using on some exercise and drill for form. No one told Barski to do this. He just knew it was right because he was very tuned in to how the exercises were affecting him on that given day.

This I found remarkable. It had, up to then, been my concept that once I had a program outlined for a certain day, I would stick with it regardless of whether it was like pulling teeth. I believed it was necessary to work right through those terrible days if I wanted to keep getting stronger. But after

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watching greats like Garcy, March, and Barski make adjustments on a regular basis, I started paying closer attention to how I felt and followed their example. It helped right away. I began recovering better when I made changes on a bad day, and when things felt extra right I shucked my intended routine and went after PRs.

By listening to my body more and spending time checking out how I felt after a session later on that night and the next day, I slowly but steadily began to learn how to constantly adjust my program to fit my needs at each and every workout. My programs were no longer chiseled in stone. They were outlines for me to follow just as long as everything felt right. Of course, like everyone else who had embarked on a journey to get stronger, I had days where nothing went right. I vowed from the beginning that I would not quit in the middle of a session no matter how bad things were going, so I got my workout in by changing the exercises or the sets and reps. Even on lousy days, I could do higher reps and that's usually what I did. Then I'd come back and make up the difference on the other days of that week.

Not everyone at York followed that sort of reasoning. Barski, when he knew he was not on, would often leave the gym and come back with a vengeance the next day. Having one bad day isn't a disaster. But stringing two, three, or four together could well be the start of a reverse in your progress, so that must, at all costs, be avoided.

Using intuition helps. This is where introspection comes in – taking the time to study what you've been doing to be in such a funk. Being intuitive extends to your rest and nutritional patterns as well as your actual training in the gym. Again, I return to the idea that you are an individual – that you have to pay attention to what works for you and not try to follow what others recommend.

Take supplements for example. Some strength athletes need a lot, while others seem to get all the vitamins, minerals, and protein from the foods they eat. Or there may be one specific vitamin, such as vitamin E, that makes a huge difference in how your body reacts to a heavy workload.

Perhaps the most critical factor of all for the majority of those who train extra hard is rest. Not getting a sufficient amount of solid rest for an extended period of time can wreck a strength program quickly. Do not bother going by a norm set down by some study. All you're interested in is how much sleep *you* need in order to go through a tough workout and come out on top. Some of the strongest men I ever trained with could manage nicely with only a few hours of sleep, but that was never the case for me. Without a proper amount of rest I might as well not go to the gym. Although I have managed to squeeze out a decent session on very little sleep when all the other factors were above average (biorhythm, diet, and prior training), I could never pull off two in a row, so rest was always one of my main priorities when I was training heavy. Now that I'm doing a high-rep routine, I can get by without as much sleep as I had to have in my competitive days, but one bad workout is enough, so I make changes right away.

Introspection is extremely valuable at any level of training, yet it's very necessary for those pushing towards the advanced level. What this means is that you must take the time to review what you did in the gym that day and to give yourself a physical exam. Keeping a written record of all your workouts is one of the keys to success in strength training and any form of competitive weightlifting. As you write down the numbers, amount of weight used, sets, and reps, you can easily recall how the various lifts felt. Why were the deadlifts harder today than they usually are on a Monday? And why was that last work set of squats so much easier? At the same time you're thinking about the other variables that play a role in your training: rest, supplements, diet, and any unusual physical activity such as

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helping a neighbor unload a truckload of wood. By writing down your entire workout and thinking through what else may have had some influence on your lifts, all this data is being run through your personal computer – your mind – and when you do this systematically every day, the answers to your questions will emerge.

Now for the physical. Every night, after I'm completely relaxed and my mind is unburdened from the petty problems of the day or week, I check out my muscular system and all the corresponding attachments. Starting with my wrists and forearms, I squeeze and probe with my fingers and thumb. Then I proceed to my upper arms, shoulders, chest, traps, neck, midsection, glutes, hamstrings, adductors, abductors, calves, ankles, and feet. Next I inspect my joints, with particular attention to my elbows, shoulders, and knees. When I come across a sore spot, I check it out more closely to determine what attachment is causing the pain. If it's on the inside of the knee, I know something is amiss with that adductor. Outside, the abductor. Below the patella, quads, and if the back of my knee doesn't feel right, I know the hamstring is involved.

For the shoulders, I want to determine if it's the frontal, lateral, or rear head of the deltoids that don't feel right. Same for the elbows; I trace the tendons to find out whether the discomfort is being caused by the triceps or biceps. From that inspection, I can make changes in my upcoming workouts to remedy the situation. To find out how my back and hips are faring, I stand up and bend forward, backward, twist and turn, squat, lunge, and do freehand shrugs, bent-over rows, and shrugs. Then I move my arms around and do overhead presses, presses against the back of a chair, and some freehand dips.

What I'm doing is searching for sore spots, both good ones and bad ones. A slight soreness tells me I hit that muscle in the last couple of days, and by examining my workouts I can easily find out the reason why there is some soreness. If my probing elicits a sharp response from the muscle or attachment, that tells me it has been recently overworked or abused in some manner. A problem may occur because form was not perfect that day, or it could be the load was too much. That's where the recording of the day's activities in the gym come in again.

When I have finished, I have gathered a great deal of valuable information on the current condition of my body. This enables me to make the necessary adjustments on my future workouts. However, it's only *after* I obtain this data that it can put it to use, churning it around in my brain until the answer pops out. That's how intuitive training works. Ideas don't jump out and bite you in the ass like an epiphany; your mind must have the raw facts before any useful decision can be made. It's not magic – it's effort, and the more you do it, the better you get at it.

It's comforting to know that many of the strongest men in the world trained themselves and did a great deal of intuitive training. Most notable are David Rigert and Vasily Alexiev, but that list also includes a host of Americans: Tommy Kono, Dave Sheppard, Chuck Vinci, Ike Berger, Norb Schemansky, Jim Bradford, and John Davis, plus all the York lifters I mentioned earlier. And no one in the history of the sport did a better job of using intuition to set his own course than Doug Hepburn of Canada.

Some of these great athletes had coaches earlier in their careers; a few went from start to finish on their own. What all of them did was to take what they had learned on their own or from others through the years of competing and applied it to their own unique situation. That's what allowed them to rise above the rest.

This is really what intuitive training is all about – constantly feeding your brain pertinent information about your current state of fitness and putting together programs to help you to grow stronger and stronger. This is a never-ending process, because our bodies are constantly changing as

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we grow older and experience various types of set-backs. To some, the process of keeping records and taking the time to examine the results of a workout is a pain-in-the-ass, and they can't be bothered. To me, it's a challenge. After all, if I have the power to do things to keep my body and mind in the best state of health possible, I'm all for it, and I'm most grateful that's it's possible.

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