

Starting Strength

The Texas Method

by

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There are many advantages to being a young man. The problem is that you're young and you don't know this yet. In fact, you probably won't know it until it's too late to do anything about. If I could go back and do it over again, there are several things I'd do different. I'd spend more time on my calculus homework. I'd drink better beer. I'd spend less time trying to date more women and spend more time trying to get other things accomplished (yeah, *sure* I would). And I'd apply a few simple things I've since learned about training to my own program.

Being young has profound advantages to a guy who wants to get strong, if being young does not also prove to be an insurmountable obstacle to learning how. It is obvious to me at 35 years remove that I didn't take advantage of the simple ability a young man has to stress himself hard physically, recover from it relatively easily, and then stress himself again – and to thus rapidly accumulate the effects of training and recovery in a more or less linear fashion. I'd have just done a simple program of squats, benches, presses, deadlifts, and cleans, going up a little bit every time I trained, three days per week, until I was much bigger and stronger. And until this simple program quit working. But I was young, and I didn't know.

You do, now. We've talked about it many times. I learned it from running a gym for decades, showing everybody how to use the barbell exercises and watching what happened to them. It's called the Novice Effect: guys who have started out with a simple program, approached it diligently and intelligently, and have gained 30-40 pounds of useful bodyweight in just a few months while more than doubling their strength and power. They simply used the fact that young men adapt quickly if they are stressed, fed, and rested enough. They added 10 pounds at first and then 5 pounds to their squat and deadlift every time they trained the exercise. They added 5 pounds at first and then 1, 2, or 3 pounds to their bench press, press, and power clean every time they trained the exercise. They didn't do much else at first, no other exercises except chinups and maybe some curls. They didn't run, they didn't waste time in front of the dumbbell rack, and they didn't do a bunch of situps. They ate a lot of good food, and the smarter ones drank a lot of milk because it makes baby mammals grow; our young man is a baby mammal again, for a short while, if he's smart.

But it's just a short while. The ability to adapt this quickly and this thoroughly doesn't last long. While it's not just confined to young men, it works better for them than for any other class of organism,

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because of Youth. They haven't had time to accumulate a lot of injuries, to lose their hormonal edge, or to develop the many responsibilities that will later make such a frivolous distraction too hard to justify.

More importantly, this short window of adaptation capacity closes as you get stronger. The very fact that you are experiencing the adaptation means that it has started the process of slowing down, imperceptibly at first, and then more rapidly as you approach the limits of your capacity to recover from each increasingly difficult workout. The rotten, irritating, sorry-ass fact is that as you approach your genetically-predetermined physical limitations, it becomes harder to make progress. This shouldn't come as a surprise to anybody with any sense, because we observe this throughout nature and throughout our lives. It is the principle of Diminishing Returns, and it functions in every system, from race cars to piano lessons. The first improvements are easy and cheap, and the more improvement you want the longer it takes and the more it costs.

But if you don't take advantage of the opportunity while you have it, you leave things undone and perhaps un-doable later. Let's say that you were old enough to take advantage of being young enough, and put in five good months of simple linear progression. You were prudent enough to ignore the fools who told you that undulating periodization was the Way To Go, you were smart enough to see the elegance of the simplicity, you were greedy enough to want more every time, but your greed was tempered by the good advice of your elders. You made the best, most rapid, and most important progress you'll ever make in the weight room, and now you're committed enough to the potential of barbell training that you're willing to do the hard work that comes next.

Next comes more progress, of course, but at a slower pace. You are now strong enough that each workout represents a stress that takes longer to recover from. You are lifting weights that are heavy enough that your increases in load must be accomplished every *week* instead of every workout, three times per week. This means that progress is one-third the pace it was previously; it also means that it has the potential to occur for a longer period of time, if you're careful.

Balancing the higher stress of the increasing loads is the fact that not only has strength improved, but your ability to recover has improved with it, so that more tonnage at a higher intensity can be trained. In fact, it is necessary to subject the body to increasing amounts of stress at a level that challenges recovery ability so that the adaptations continue to occur. But since these are now higher-intensity efforts that more fully tax the system, they require longer periods of time to recover from. If we design the program correctly, we can plan workouts that place optimum stress in the optimum pattern to continue the adaptive drive of the program for a long time. A high level of tonnage-stress early in the week, a lighter workout in the middle to aid in recovery – “active rest” it is sometimes called, and then a higher-intensity lower-volume workout at the end of the week has proven to be the right combination. Stresses of different types and adequate recovery from the stress are in balance if the program is to work for an extended period of time.

We call the program The Texas Method, because we are in Texas and it is a Method – a very good one that has proven itself for years. It was originally based on Doug Hepburn's classic bench press workout, as told to me by Bill Starr many years ago. Hepburn was said to do 5 heavy singles across followed by 5 sets of 5 reps. I tried applying this schedule to our workouts on the bench and the squat, and found that we couldn't recover from the combination of volume and intensity, so we tried splitting the workout into 5 sets of 5 the first day (Monday, it happened to be) and the singles across on the second day (Friday, it was). This didn't seem right, the singles by themselves, so we started using one heavier set of 5 on Friday, and the combination worked better for us than the murderously long horrible thing Hepburn was supposed to have done. I'm sure it worked for Doug his way, but our way worked pretty well for us mortals.

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In its basic form, the workout consists of a volume day for the major lifts on Monday, a lighter recovery/variety day on Wednesday, and a high-intensity day on Friday for the major lifts. The days can obviously vary based on your schedule, but the pattern of rest days and work days is important.

For volume, 5 sets of 5 reps across (the same weight repeated for the work sets) have proven to be the optimum combination of volume and intensity. Higher reps require a weight that is too light; lower reps with a heavier weight do not accumulate to the optimum volume, but cause too much structural stress. Many people have tweaked the sets and reps, and time after time they come back to 5 sets of 5 across as the best driver of long-term progress. The weight should be such that all five sets of all five reps are possible to finish without more than 8-10 minutes rest between sets. For most people, this works out to about 90% of 5RM; if your 5 rep max squat is 345, then 315 x 5 x 5 would be Monday's squat workout. The bench press and the press respond this way also; they alternate every other Monday for 5 x 5 with about 90% of 5RM.

Deadlifts are another story. There is no volume day for deadlifts, because deadlifts are too hard to do for sets across – most people find that they cannot be recovered from if you do more than one heavy set. This is especially true if you're doing 5 x 5 squats too. Experience with this has shown that it is best to do just one heavy set of five deadlifts on Monday, after squats and benches or presses are finished. It won't be a true 5RM, since it follows all the squat work, but it should increase every week.

This makes Monday a real bastard of a workout, and this is the point: it sets up the rest of the week for recovery and a focus on intensity in Friday's workout. If it were me, I'd limit any assistance exercises to some brief arm work on Monday. I'd also limit any excessive weekend frivolity that might affect the workout, like staying up all night Saturday chasing pussy with Jim Beam.

Recovery starts right after the last set of the workout. At this level of training intensity it is imperative that you eat and sleep with both sufficient quality and quantity if you want to make progress. The TM will overtrain your ass very quickly if you don't pay attention to recovery. Remember: you don't get big and strong from lifting weights – you get big and strong from *recovering* from lifting weights. Do not fail to pay attention to this, or Monday's workout will murder the rest of the week and you will get stuck.

Recovery continues with Wednesday's workout. Squats are 80% of Monday's work weight for 2 sets of 5. Benches and presses alternate: if presses were 5 x 5 on Monday, benches are done Wednesday with 3 sets of a little lighter weight than the last bench press 5 x 5, so that you can feel the load but so that it doesn't tap into recovery. Light day presses done on Wednesday are a little heavier relative to 5RM than the rest day benches, since their absolute load is lighter anyway. Finish the workout with chinups and back extensions; I like 3 sets to failure for chins, with 5 minutes between sets, and 5 sets of 10 back extensions or glute/ham raises. Chins are the more important of these two, being the only specific arm and lat work in the program. Back extensions are optional if you're tired, since experience has shown that they really don't contribute to your squat or deadlift – they are placed in the program as active rest for your back.

Friday is intensity day. It focuses the tonnage from Monday into a new 5RM, or close to it – within 2% to allow for training-quality technique. Do most of your warmup work light, with the empty bar and 135, then take doubles or singles up to the work set. The squat and the press or bench work is done this way, making sure that the load is higher than Monday but that form *does not break down* on the last reps. If it does, you picked the wrong weight.

Since deadlifts were done on Monday, Friday is power clean/power snatch day. The Olympic lifts are the best way to train explosion and athleticism under the bar, and to allow you to increase your power in a way that is incrementally programmable. Dynamic Effort work has become popular

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as a way to do this, and using explosive deadlifts on Friday would be a way to incorporate DE into the Texas Method. But the Olympic weightlifting-derived power clean and power snatch represent a different level of neuromuscular activity. Deadlifts are pulled fast because you *want* to pull them fast; power cleans are pulled fast because you *have* to pull them fast or they won't rack on the shoulders. The volitional-explosion aspect of a clean is actually minimal, since the explosion is inherent in the top of the movement. Cleans and snatches are both lighter and more powerful than deadlifts, and they are perfect for the Friday workout. If you want to call yourself a lifter, you need to know how to clean and snatch, even if you don't intend to compete in Olympic weightlifting. After your warmup, do power cleans for 5 sets of 3 reps across, or power snatches for 6 doubles.

Note that the TM workouts are still very simple in terms of the number of exercises. Actual progress in the weight room is based on an increase in the loading of the basic structural exercises, not in the number of the different ways you know how to do arms. Very few successful lifters or bodybuilders confuse complexity with effectiveness.

The size and strength gains you will see on the Texas method will not be as dramatic as the novice progression produces, because of the fact that the easy gains have already happened. We're further along on the curve here, or we wouldn't be using an intermediate-level program. If your novice progression took you to a 315 x 5 squat at a bodyweight of 200 in 5 months, TM will take you to 405 x 5 in a year at a bodyweight of 225. This is fine with you because you're older now, and committed to the project.

The time you spend in the gym can be either productive or wasted, and a few seconds spent thinking about this will yield the conclusion that any real progress is a quantifiable improvement in strength. Strength gains are the basis of an increase in size; in effect, size is a side-effect of strength, and strength can be driven by an intelligently designed and applied program. At any point in your training career, quantifiable progress must be your objective. It's easy at first when you're a novice to the barbell. The Texas Method is a good way to carry you through the next step: maintaining the trend of handling increasingly heavy weight. The Texas Method doesn't work forever – nothing does. But it does work well as your introduction to the more complicated programming necessary to continue strength and size gains into the more advanced stages of strength training.

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