

# Starting Strength

## The Truth

by  
Jim Steel

I am a college strength coach, and I am struggling. I am struggling with the state of strength training today. Whether it is training athletes or training the general population, there are a few basic tenets – commandments if you will – that have been thrown out the door and been replaced by soft workouts. I have gone back and forth with myself about either honestly expressing my opinions about the whole damn thing or holding it all in and risking a stroke. I believe that I have held this in long enough. So here goes: the truth as I see it.

I have at times in my 30 years of training and 20 year career of being a strength coach, seen all the weight room fads come and go. With the proliferation of “training centers,” personal trainers, and internet gurus, the whole industry has gone crazy. Gimmicks are in vogue. I am not talking about bands and chains; I am talking about the tendency of the industry to get away from hard work to focus instead on wimpy exercises that are supposed to work your “core” and your “balance,” when in reality they just make you weak as hell. The great debate in the ’70s and ’80s was the multi-set crowd versus the one-set-to-failure crowd. That debate is *nothing* when compared with today. It has gone beyond worrying about someone performing one set to failure on their squats because Mike Mentzer said to do it. At least he was squatting! Arthur Jones may have had some crazy ideas about just how great Nautilus was, but he had his early trainees squat until they passed out! All of the new training “ideas” today are basically – how do I put this? – WRONG. What about the perfect push up? What about the Navy Seal Workout? The Biggest Loser? The Ultra-Light Fit for Life No Holds Barred Workout? Kettlebells? Medicine balls and tug of war? Tire flips and keg tosses? Nope, none of them can replace the barbell. All can be considered adjuncts to barbell work. Everyone skirts the issue of getting stronger and what it really takes. What comes first in athletics, and, for that matter, in life? Strength comes first. The next question should be: what method should one use to get strongest the fastest?

What I struggle with is the unwillingness of people to work hard on the basics. My former boss and former powerlifting champion Dr. Rob Wagner wrote this email to me the other day:

I was going to mention this to you on Friday, but now is a good opportunity. *By getting strong all things are possible.* I know this is a play on Biblical verse but there is a truth in this statement. “Coach, I want to get faster!” Answer: are you as strong as you can be in your lower body? “I want to improve my clean.” Answer: Are you strong

## *The Truth*

on your pulls? It also applies to all areas of life not just lifting. Need to gain more knowledge? Strengthen your study skills. Need to improve your diet? Get strong on your nutrition. I am using this as the slogan for the year. It sounds hokey, but the more I use it the more I see it applies to a lot of things. Sorry for the long answer but when I see “new” stuff I look at it and ask, will it strengthen my ability to coach? If it doesn't I drop the thought.

Damn, that is perfect, and it gets to the heart of the matter: GET STRONG. Why wouldn't you want to do it in the most efficient way possible? The ideas bandied about today in the strength training world don't make much sense, but they are understandably appealing because they avoid the issue of hard work. All the coaches may think that they are right, and think such “unique” training methods are helping their athletes, but they aren't. Ready for this? *You are actually hurting your athletes by not telling them the truth.* The truth about training and what gets them strong. Of course, maybe some coaches may not know the truth; it seems like a long time ago when the basics were in vogue, past the ability of some to remember. I am tired of it, actually weary of fighting the battles. I have met many strong folks who have one thing in common, and that is that they got strong through the basics: basic lifts and basic foods. Why, why, WHY is everyone afraid of the basics? Now, I have to admit that I grew up in the 1970s and '80s, a pretty decent time when it came to weight training. Kazmaier was king, NFL players squatted and benched, and Dr. Squat was pushing 1000 pounds in the squat. The basics were still in fashion, and giants still ruled the earth in the sport and strength world. Can you picture the York crew in an LA Fitness? Suggs, Starr, and Bednarski not using chalk and drinking a smoothie from the juice bar? Kaz on the Smith machine? Picture Mike Webster of the Steelers doing hammer rows while a coach changes the weight for him and reads his workout to him off of a card. Hell, Webster and the Steelers trained in the *basement of a bar!* There weren't machines there; there were squat racks and benches. PERIOD.

It seriously depresses me and makes me question my choice of profession. When a coach says that the Bosu ball is the way to go, that the kids are going to train off campus with a personal trainer who is doing something, new, different, and – this is my favorite – “sports specific”, I nod in polite agreement, shake my head in private disgust, and struggle with it all. I sigh and wonder, Why? Why do they all try to do the easy thing? As my friends in Maryland say, “Listen to me!” *There is no easy way to get there.* Here is a great axiom: “If it is easy, it ain't worth it.” Your ears are supposed to ring after a heavy set of squats and you are going to feel lightheaded at times. Sometimes after a heavy set of deadlifts, you may have to put your hands on your knees until your eyes refocus. Again, it's supposed to be *hard*.

It's frustrating because I am wondering where we are headed. In my opinion, it is a microcosm of where our society is headed as a whole. Soft and weak. Football practices are now easy compared to 30 years ago, and still kids are passing out because of “dehydration.” I swear to you – and this was in 1982 – we chewed on ice chips instead of having water, and this was in the 90 degree heat and humidity of Maryland. Of course in my father's day, in the 1950s, water wasn't allowed at practice. Why have things changed so much today? The human body hasn't changed that much. I know that I am starting to sound like an “uphill both ways to school” guy, but damn, *what is going on here?* In my mind it has something to do with the work ethic, or lack thereof. My father loaded railroad cars to pay his way through college; I pumped gas and so did all my friends. We all worked at the Adelphi Mobil station

## *The Truth*

and had steak and cheeses for lunch with red hots spread, lettuce and mayo. Everyone had lawns to cut for a few bucks. Now it's light beer and cognitive therapy for everyone. Light beer? When you go to the doctor's office these days, it's about which drug will take away your anxiety and what will help you sleep. Man, life is tough, but now you don't have to deal with it, what with all the alternatives these days. I'm afraid it's gone – the day of the stoic, badass man is gone. Everyone is so concerned with overtraining, overworking, and overloading. How many times have I heard, “But coach, I just want to work on my form!” This usually translates as, “I don't want to train heavy.” The point here is that somehow it became accepted to take the easy way out in training, and in life. When I train folks that are 50 and up, I teach them about exercises that transfer over into life skills, like pressing stuff over their heads, shoveling snow, and picking up their grandkids. I have them deadlift, press, squat, and clean, to make them stronger. It doesn't matter what you are getting ready for in life – sports, weightlifting, bodybuilding, powerlifting, health, tennis, swimming, basketball, baseball, skiing – all of it requires strength. What is so wrong with putting a bar on your back, picking a bar up off of the ground, or pressing a bar over your head? I mean, herein lies the answer to what this multibillion dollar strength “industry” claims to be searching for in a nutshell: get strong with a barbell and hard work. Earth shattering, I know. But all you need is a barbell and some plates. Maybe a bench and a squat rack too. Nothing else. With the barbell you can do anything – get stronger, get bigger, get more explosive.

It has all become so tiresome: being questioned about squats hurting your knees, being asked to watch DVDs about Bosu balls, being told that milk is bad for you, having to explain why we don't need the latest version of Nautilus machines, and dealing with anyone who has ever lifted weights having an opinion on how to get strong. I'm tired of folks thinking that swinging a sledgehammer gets you strong. Part of it is because I have a football and powerlifting background, so they think that I am trying to make everyone into football players and powerlifters. If I were 145 pounds and had a collared shirt on with a Bosu ball under each arm maybe I would get more respect (gotta love those Bosu balls). I'm tired of pseudo-experts never even putting a bar on their backs and telling me that a new leg machine, hip flexor machine, or hybrid squat machine replaces squats, deadlifts, and cleans.

Man, I am rubbing my eyes and getting frustrated as I write this, so let's get to the bottom of it all without mincing words or worrying about hurting feelings. **IF ONE WANTS TO GET STRONGER, BIGGER, AND FASTER, ONE MUST LIFT WITH A BARBELL FOR MAXIMUM GAINS.** I have told myself that I shouldn't get so irritated about the fact that very few seem to understand that one must focus on the basics in the weight room to get anything out of it. The work must be done.

The way the strength training industry is going there will be no more room for hard, gut-busting work. There will only be “specialists” who make exorbitant promises with exorbitant claims along with charging exorbitant fees. It has been an enlightening experience for me working as a college strength coach. One of the problems in this industry is that there are no boundaries in the world of strength, no right or wrong way to do things, and everyone thinks they have the right to give their opinion on what they believe a strength coach should be doing. I was talking to a coach the other day who said that it wasn't important how strong his athletes were, he just wanted them, “in good shape.” I had a coach tell me that women should use only machines. Another coach told me that the only the reason his team won the championship was the “core” training they did. When it comes to the athletes being confused, who can blame them? I constantly have to remind my athletes not to believe

## *The Truth*

all the crap that is being peddled on the websites and magazines these days. Magazines are basically advertisements for supplement companies; they have always been that way and will remain that way. Unfortunately, impressionable young athletes do not know which way to turn.

On to another one of my favorite subjects, “cardio” training. Please, give me a break here. Unless they are injured, athletes should run and perform drill work specific to the sport. Putting a basketball player on a bike to perform long slow cardio for an hour to “get in shape” is counterproductive and unforgivable. When I worked at Gold’s Gym in the ’80s there was not one cardiovascular machine in the whole place. They are mostly unnecessary, designed so that equipment companies can make lots of money, and for others to get away from the truth: squat, press, run and train the basic lifts.

Next, “core” work. Ugh! It has also become a struggle to explain that when one is strong, when one can squat 600 pounds, their abs are strong. I was laughing the other day because I have a defensive lineman who can squat legitimately 550x2 rock-bottom with no belt. During our morning run, my assistant had the group do planks as an exercise. This kid was handling the exercise with ease. The smaller, weaker kids were dying, moaning and groaning. The defensive lineman is 5’11, 265 lbs. I asked if they were tough for him. He said, “Coach I can do these all day long.” He could – he was barely straining. All the workouts that don’t focus on squats, presses, deads, cleans, and benches are just taking the long way to get truly strong.

So, with all this in mind, here is my prescription for success. To put it simply enough for everyone (athletes, citizens, competitive lifters, etc.) these axioms should be followed when training:

1. Lift weights with a barbell and focus on several basic lifts: squat, deadlift, clean, press, chins, dips, bench press, good mornings or Romanian deadlifts. This will take anybody wherever they want to go as an athlete: bigger, faster, stronger, and more explosive. For a sport athlete, perform lots of sets with low reps in the 70 to 90% range. Do some higher repetition stuff for hypertrophy and do minimal abdominal work. You won’t need to do abs if you are doing the lifts that I just mentioned. Do your drill work that is specific to your sport. If you are a defensive lineman, pass rush your ass off, run 5 to 10 yard sprints with short rests, and do drills with someone in your face. If you want to do more, box or kickbox for extra conditioning and hand eye coordination. Never run distances unless you are a distance runner or playing an endurance sport! To put it simply, condition in the energy system in which you play. For someone looking to just get strong, Bill Starr’s 5x5 will do just fine. One should train with weights 3-4 days a week. Focus on short term goals that are reachable; don’t worry about adding 100 pounds to your bench in a year. Have patience and make progress, which is the key. Lastly, remember that a bad day is just that – a bad day. Learn from it and come back the next day stronger than ever.
2. Train like the apocalypse is coming. Ever seen the movie or read the book *The Road*? It’s both a great movie and book. It focuses on a father (Viggo Mortensen) and son trying to make their way through post-apocalyptic America. On the way they encounter many folks who want nothing more than to kill them and sometimes try to eat them. They must attempt to find food and shelter, and fight against the grim reality of a world that has no pity for them.

## *The Truth*

The father does everything for his son: fights off everyone, gives his last bite of food to his son, and basically sacrifices everything for him to survive. After reading the book by Cormac McCarthy, I came up with a saying for when I train myself and others: “One more for the apocalypse,” meaning that you can always push out one more rep if the apocalypse was upon you and you had to survive, if your life depended on it, or your son or daughter needed you. This book was especially rough for me to read because I have two sons. When one pictures himself in every situation that the book describes, some questions arise. The obvious questions become: how would I react when faced with a life or death situation? Will I be strong enough to protect my family? Will I be able to push myself to go on when I am exhausted?

3. Stop guessing and start lifting. Put the bar on your back, pick it up, press it. All the routines you read about don't do you any good unless you put them into action. Get started, and don't look back. Most of the time, learning should be done by doing anyway. Bill Starr never saw a snatch performed before he decided to snatch – he read about them and taught himself. Pretty amazing.
4. Use DVD's and books to motivate you. *Iron Mind's* lifting tapes always did the trick for me – they get the juices flowing. They also give you the “if they did it, I can do it too” attitude. I also love how the coaches in the European countries just watch their athletes train while they sit in a chair. Then they yell once in awhile and the athletes get back to it. Quite a difference from most of the athletes in America. Here we have to critique warm-ups in order for our athletes to succeed.
5. Never complain. You are going to do the work anyway, aren't you? People do not want to hear anyone else talk about how sore they are, how bad their day was, and how everything sucks. If it's that bad, just sit and watch and be quiet. Everyone, and I mean everybody, has some stuff they have to deal with that is tragic or messed up with themselves or with their families. Everyone is sore, everyone is tired. Think about the soldiers in the Middle East, think about folks who don't know whether their next meal is available, and then think about the fact that you don't feel like deadlifting because your back is tight.
6. The couch will kill you (this is courtesy of Henry Rollins). Get up, be different, set your self apart from the masses at Disney World and Wal-Mart. Getting strong and in shape will not happen while watching infomercials.
7. Use tough guys as your guide. I use football players from the past like Randy White and Johnny Unitas. Use folks that have overcome great odds to survive as inspiration. I just read the book *Tears in the Darkness* by Michael Norman about the Bataan Death March; read it and see if you ever feel sorry for yourself again.
8. Get in shape – even if you are not an athlete, you must be in shape. Be able to sprint in a moments notice. All the strength in the world doesn't do you any good if you can't run 10 steps without being out of breath.

## *The Truth*

9. Nutrition is important but it isn't everything, especially if you are a beginner. Get the workouts in first. Eat "good" food, meaning try to stay away from junk food. Can you still eat some junk? Of course. There is a cheese steak place in New Castle, Delaware called the Dog House that I will never pass by without stopping to eat. You have to live too.

Finding your way in your training and the training of athletes has never been more muddled and murky because of all the information and misinformation available. However, one thing is clear. It is tried and true: strength is the key to sports and athletics. Basic barbell lifting will get you there fastest.

---

Jim Steel is the Head Strength and Conditioning Coordinator at the University of Pennsylvania. He has worked as a strength coach at all levels of education, from high school to D1. He is a competitive powerlifter, the current New Jersey state record holder in the squat (820 lbs.). Jim was an All-American defensive lineman in college, and he brings a personal appreciation of the practical applications of strength to his weight room.

---

Starting Strength : [Home](#) : [Articles](#) : [Forums](#) : [Discuss This Article](#)

Copyright 2010 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.