

# Starting Strength

## Becoming a Starting Strength Coach: A Young Coach's Perspective

by

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At one point or another, you make up your mind and decide whether or not you're willing to follow the status quo. The norm in today's society is to sequentially graduate high school, attend college, and work in a safe and secure career where your future appears set. The ideology seems simple enough, yet the inherent challenges you face throughout the process often lead to an entirely different outcome than initially envisioned. As for me, that process led to becoming a Starting Strength Coach.

The path to becoming a Starting Strength Coach is unique for everyone who decides to make the attempt. Among the credentialed doctors, lawyers, engineers, entrepreneurs, college strength coaches, personal trainers, and whoever else I am leaving out, the reason to become a Starting Strength Coach is entirely respective to the individual. My path, however, from a Personal Trainer to Starting Strength Coach is painfully average. If my path were unique, there would be no point in writing this article because it would not apply to you. Nevertheless, let's dive into the perspective of the Starting Strength Credential from a young coach's point of view.

### The Fate of the "Exercise Scientist"

For most college students, the "What the hell am I supposed to do now?" feeling fully sets in about mid-way through senior year. As for an "Exercise Science" major, that feeling may or may not revisit the psyche once you painfully realize the staggering disconnect between training actual people and "the literature" on which your degree program is based. A small amount of this pain is rooted in the realization that a significant amount of what you have learned in the past 4 years is inapplicable in a practical setting.

However, the majority of the throbbing sensation is linked to the discovery that your friend, the business major, passed his [insert fitness certification here] at the local H&R Block the week after you. This means that you have done very little to separate yourself from the rest of the fitness enthusiasts who have the ability to read a book and pass a test. In fact, on paper you are no different than anyone with a "fitness" certification. So...what do you do next?

Call me a romantic, but when I began my pursuit of an Exercise Science degree I had high hopes that in 4 years I would have the knowledge and ability to make people better. Now, fast-forward

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to the summer before my senior year of college. I was an intern at a globo gym on Long Island, New York. My job was to “observe” the Personal Trainers and distribute towels to the members. One day when I was meandering through the rows of treadmills with a fake smile and baby blue “Trainer” shirt, I engaged in conversation with a gentleman who was some sort of doctor. I distinctly remember a point in our conversation when he inquired about my college education where I proudly stated I was an “Exercise Science student.” His response, “What the hell are you going to do with that?” sent me into a mini-shock because I could not answer his question. All I knew at the time was that once I graduated I sure as hell was not going back to a globo gym where I would hand out towels and babysit the middle aged rich folk of America.

## **The Fate of the Exercise Science Student**

At the start of my senior year, I moved in with a new roommate. Jim was about 10 years older than me and we happened to be in the same degree program. Jim had been coaching Crossfit, Olympic lifting, and the Starting Strength Model for years along with serving in the Air Force for 11 years prior to attending college. He had also completed Rip’s Crossfit Basic Barbell Certification and brought a unique perspective to class and eventually to my life once we became roommates.

Jim became a mentor and taught me how to perform the basic lifts described in the book. He even let me help coach the women’s swimming and diving team in the school weight room where we ran the Starting Strength Model. I was very young and entirely inexperienced, but Jim was a guide and taught me what it meant to be a coach. In a sense, it’s him I have to thank for helping me establish a great foundation in coaching.

I remember a class that he and I were taking together titled “Exercise Techniques.” The intention of this particular course was to teach us how to perform the basic exercises. I remember a large section of the course was spent teaching us how to use the machines in the campus clinic, which was frustrating and a waste of time and money. However, one afternoon towards the end of the semester we were given an assignment to instruct the class on an exercise of our choice. I chose to instruct the deadlift and afterwards, Jim chose to teach the class how to squat.

This was the first time that most of the students in class had been exposed to the correct instruction of the basic barbell lifts, but what was even more dumbfounding was how Jim ended up teaching our professor how to perform these lifts as well. It was the first time that *the Exercise Physiologist* was exposed to the correct instruction and performance of the basic barbell lifts. I cannot think of something more oxymoronic. It was at this point in time where I decided I would never become a Personal Trainer, but I would become a Coach, just like Jim.

By the end of my senior year, my perception of the Personal Training world was nothing more than that of a trivial profession filled with “functional” bullshit. I therefore concluded that my next-best option was to make my way into the college ranks. I desired to be a respected coach and I wanted my degree to mean something so I began interning as a Strength Coach at Cornell University.

I was eventually given a few small teams to coach where I was surprisingly able to implement the Starting Strength Model and had the women’s squash team squatting, pressing, bench pressing, and deadlifting. Once I finished at Cornell I earned a Graduate Assistantship teaching Racquetball and Bowling at Baylor University where I was also able to, once again, intern as a Strength Coach with the athletics department.

Coaching at Baylor was an eye opening experience that helped to change my outlook on pursuing a future in college strength and conditioning. At the time, Keith Caton was in charge of

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the strength program for football. Coach Caton took me under his wing and served as a mentor who helped me to figure out my next step in life. In fact, he was a much-needed support system at a pivotal point in my life where I had concluded that I did not want to pursue a career as a college Strength Coach. The idea of working with elite level athletes seems sexy, but for me, it paled in comparison to helping weak, out of shape people change their lives by getting them strong. Furthermore, long hours and low pay in something that I clearly was not passionate about deterred me even further from pursuing a career in college strength and conditioning.

Nevertheless, in the midst of these realizations Coach Caton knew that I was a strong advocate of the Starting Strength Method, and he happened to be friends with Matt Reynolds, a Starting Strength Staff Coach. Thus, Coach Caton introduced me to Matt who quickly became a mentor I greatly admired. Meeting Matt opened my eyes to the possibilities of the private sector. Along with being a Staff Coach, he owned Strong Gym at the time, which was the largest strength training gym in the country. Matt was encouraging from Day One, and played a significant role in fueling the fire that would eventually lead me to the Starting Strength Coach credential.

After finishing my Master's at Baylor, I moved to Nashville, TN where I was tempted into a physical education teaching career for the financial "safety and security," despite my lack of passion for the profession. Although Matt had begun to open my eyes to the possibilities of the private strength and conditioning world while at Baylor, I had yet to gain the courage necessary to take a chance and leap into the personal training industry.

I still had the preconceived notion that I would have to succumb to the trendy gimmicks and functional bullshit in order for me to make a decent living. Nevertheless, my conversations with Matt and passion for strength coaching provided me with the mental fortitude I needed to follow my gut and dive wholeheartedly into the private world. So, I quit teaching and took the first job I could find as a Personal Trainer at a private facility in Nashville.

I would be lying if I omitted the fact that the dreadful "What the hell am I supposed to do now?" feeling had lurked in my mind throughout this entire process. Nonetheless, my initial understanding when beginning my new job as a Personal Trainer was that I would be able to coach people through using the basic barbell lifts. I was sadly mistaken.

Not a few months after training at this facility, I began to endure the criticism of other professionals for being "too narrow minded" with regards to the number of exercises I had clients perform, and was told I was "going to hurt someone because barbells are dangerous." I felt defeated, and my previous assumptions that the Personal Training world would try and sucker me into having people perform trendy, "functional" bullshit had been proven true.

This scenario is not unusual. I am no different than the rest of the Exercise Science students looking to make a career out of training people. The advantage, however, was my fortune of having mentors along the way who helped to point me in the right direction. This guidance directed me towards becoming a Starting Strength Coach. It was the way out of the Personal Training world I had never wanted to enter to begin with. I slowly realized that this was the path I wanted to take in order to separate myself from the everyday Trainers. Thus, I booked my flight to LA and made the decision to take the seminar as a coach.

## **A Change in Perspective**

My perspective of the Starting Strength Coaching credential has changed since receiving the call that I had passed the exam. In all honesty, my initial belief was that by getting certified I would have a way

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to differentiate myself from the competition as well as a way to attain more clients. Despite the truth in these assumptions, the real value of the credential is deep rooted in the intangibles that go beyond making more money.

Immediately after learning I had passed the written exam, I logged into the Coach's forum on the website for the first time. I went back to the first post and began reading through the topics discussed on the boards. What I found was exciting and relieving, to say the least. I now had access to the wisdom and know-how of some of the best Strength Coaches in the country. This meant that I could read and learn from people who have been in the same situation as I am, now. Despite the value in learning from one's own mistakes, I would much rather learn from the mistakes of others.

Access to the most successful Strength Coaches in the country is truly priceless. Even if I had never attained one client through the [startingstrength.org](http://startingstrength.org) website, the sheer expertise that I now have exposure to is worth every single penny that I paid to earn the credential. One of my greatest professors used to say, "You need to take control of your own learning." I cannot think of a better way to take control of my own learning than having access to a group of people with extremely diverse backgrounds, who can challenge my thoughts, shed light on the grey areas of the industry, and motivate me to be better.

## **Become Better for the People You Train**

In addition to receiving 100+ new mentors and connections, simply going through the process of earning the credential has made me a better coach. In the preparation process, I obligated myself to furthering my understanding of the material in hopes that I would be able to pass both portions of the certification. In doing so, I gained a deeper understanding of the lifts despite having previously read the books. This is simply because I worked harder at committing the information to my long-term memory.

The entire time I thought I was preparing for the exam, but in all reality, I was educating myself and becoming an even more competent coach that could help other people get strong.

Despite the fundamental importance of understanding the material in the books, it is at the very least equally important to understand how to coach the material. It does not matter if you have memorized the written material if your ability to communicate that information to another individual is poor. This was something that I learned early on in my coaching career and therefore, in preparation for the platform evaluation at the seminar, I became a much more self-aware coach. In becoming more self-aware I began to look more closely at the results of my cueing tendencies. In doing so, I gained a much better understanding of how my clients would react to the verbal, tactile, and visual cues that I would use during a session.

More importantly, the heightened self-awareness served as a lens through which I began to observe my innate alterations in behavior and tone based on who I was coaching. For example, relating to an 83-year-old man is quite different than a 17-year-old high school kid. In essence, becoming more self-aware made me recognize what I did well and what I needed to improve upon.

## **Setting the Standard for the Profession**

At a young age, my father drilled into my brain that my results in life are a direct consequence of the effort I put into achieving my end goals. Therefore, the expectations I have set for myself are higher than any other person could demand of me. With that being said, the Starting Strength Coach credential

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matched my personal expectations of what should be required of an individual who is responsible for handling the physical health and well-being of other human beings. There is absolutely no shortcut to knowledge and experience. This credential eliminates the unprepared and inexperienced. It filters through the people who are simply not ready to coach and identifies those who have put in the time and effort necessary to become proficient at coaching the material.

This is what passionately attracted me to the credential. There is no other certification that requires you to have the ability to teach material along with the knowledge to pass an essay test that spans anywhere from 25-50 pages in length, single-spaced. Therefore, the standard is set: you need to understand this information so well that you could write a book. There is no other facet of the industry that requires such a rigorous examination.

Ghandi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Yes, I am about to relate Ghandi to Starting Strength because of the fact that the Personal Training world is in a tumultuous state. In a sense, the Starting Strength Coach credential *sets the standard coaches and clients need to see* in the personal training, strength and conditioning, and fitness world. The way you become better at anything is through practice, education, and setting expectations for yourself to achieve things you never thought possible. This is what the Starting Strength Coach credential provides to an industry that is starving for more qualified professionals.

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