

# Starting Strength

## Choosing the Path Less-Traveled

by  
**Bill Starr**

“You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it come true.  
You may have to work for it however.”

Richard Bach, *Illusions*

I believe that the change in attitude towards hard and heavy training began in the early seventies. There wasn't any single factor that accounted for the shift, but rather a couple of events plus an ongoing trend that exercise should be done in a condensed manner. Most certainly, the use of anabolic steroids helped the cause. Those using the various drugs suddenly found that they could make big gains using any form of routine, even very abbreviated ones, and they could also miss more workouts than prior to using any strength-enhancing products. Plus, the gains would come without having to struggle with heavy weights.

Then came the rash of well-engineered exercise machines, the most notable being the Nautilus line. Workouts were streamlined. Arthur Jones, the creator of Nautilus, wisely married the machines with a program that could be done in a very short period of time. Two sets to exhaustion on a battery of machines and the customer was good to go. And told not to come back for a few days. Naturally, owners of fitness facilities embraced the new concept wholeheartedly, and why not? Members were in and out of the place in half an hour, tops, and there were no plates, bars, or dumbbells to pick up. And best of all, there were no diehard muscleheads hanging around the gym for two or three hours. The fact that no one was actually getting any stronger using the machines didn't figure into the equation because the bottom line was never about fitness or strength – it was all about money.

This concept of quick and not too strenuous training blended in quite nicely with the country's ever-growing philosophy of instant gratification. Quick was better than slow, easy much preferred over hard. Fast food joints thrived. Not only are people too busy to prepare a meal for themselves or their families, they are too lazy to get out of their cars to go inside and make the purchases. They simply drive through and have their meals, no fuss, no bother. That's what Americans wanted and what they deemed their right.

Credit cards added to this mind-set. Lay-away was a thing of the dim past, when people were stupid enough to actually pay for a item they desired before they could take it home. Now a much-wanted cot, TV, or vacation could be charged and figuring out how to pay for the purchases would be dealt with in the future. After all, this was America, the most prosperous nation in the world and it would always be, so why wait for something when it could be had for a phone call?

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Training programs in the many fitness magazines that exploded on newsstands reflected this trend of fast and easy. Short workouts were recommended with ample rest between sessions. Going to limit in certain exercises was considered dangerous. *Stay in the comfort zone for optimum gains.* If a certain exercise makes you sore, drop it from the routine and find one not as demanding. Those seeking a quick buck jumped into the fray like starving piranhas. Magazines, catalogs, and TV programs were filled with ads for exercise programs and a wide array of machines and gadgets to make training something that could be done without great effort and with no difficulties. Follow the DVD and you'll end up looking just like those models demonstrating the apparatus or aerobic dance routines.

Since the midsection, or what the producers of these exercise routines and gadgets like to refer to as the "core", was the area that was in the worst shape, there were scores of ab machines to choose from. Their main selling point was that ab work could be done with a minimum amount of sweat and time. And all of the revolutionary devices guaranteed that you would stay comfortable throughout the exercise. There were well-padded neck supports to make certain that the individual's neck did not hurt at all while crunching. Everything was designed with ease and simplicity in mind. They sold – boy, *did* they ever sell – which naturally encouraged yet more charlatans to jump into the game.

Is anyone who has been associated with physical culture for any length of time really surprised that our nation is facing an epidemic of obesity? I'm not. There is no getting around the sad fact that Americans have become lazy. They want the results but are not willing to expend the necessary time and effort to achieve them. They want it for free, and this just does not happen in real life. And the truth of the matter is that these shortcut ideas simply do not work. I wish they did. I would love to only have to train for thirty minutes three times a week in order to maintain a high level of strength fitness, but I know that this is no more than a pipe dream. Progress requires hard work and a hell of a lot of it.

It's not just the general public that has embraced this notion of fast over slow and easy over difficult; it has also influenced those who are responsible for helping athletes achieve a higher level of strength in sports, i.e. strength coaches in scholastic, collegiate, and profession ranks, and Olympic lifting coaches. I'll start with the Olympic coaches.

Why is it that the United States is now getting its ass kicked by Third World countries whose annual per capita income is right at \$100.00? Years ago, those governing the sport complained that the foreign lifters had a huge advantage because they were supported by their governments. Yet during those years, the U.S was still turning out champions, or at least contenders. Now we have a fully-funded facility staffed with coaches who are supposed to know what they're doing since they're paid extremely well for their services. All the lifters have to do is train. They're fed and housed at no charge and even given a stipend, plus a chance to attend college.

So where are the results? If an American makes it to the top ten, which only happens occasionally, the weightlifting committee is ecstatic. It's sad, really, and there's no reason why this should be occurring. The reason that our Olympic lifting program is in such a pitiful state is that our lifters are not training hard enough. In the sixties Bednarski, Dube, Garcy, Patera, Pickett, Lowe, March, Bartholomew, Riecke, Cleveland, Kono, Puleo, Imahara, Vinci, Berger, Henry, Schemansky, Brannum, Knipp, Grippaldi, Karchut, Deal, Moyer, Holbrook, and others went up against the best in the world and did more than hold their own. None of these athletes got a free ride. They all had jobs and did their training on their own time. None had coaches. They trained themselves. And most of all, *they worked extremely hard.* It was not unusual for one of them to put in four or five 2½ hour sessions a week. None stayed in the comfort zone. They made themselves winners. They didn't depend

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on outside help. The only way American Olympic weightlifters are ever going to improve to the extent that we can challenge the rest of the world is for the lifters to take matters into their own hands.

The solution is not at all difficult, but few are willing to do what is needed to be done, and that is to work harder than your opponents. This has been a truism in sports for as long as I can remember and it hasn't changed. The athlete who puts in the longer hours in the weight room, polishing his technique and pushing his workload and top-end numbers up, will come out on top. There's no magic formula and drugs are no longer an option. It all comes down to who has the greatest desire to succeed.

When I first got into strength coaching, things were vastly different than they are now. When I ran the programs at the University of Maryland, the University of Hawaii, and at Johns Hopkins, I was the only strength coach. Same for when I trained the Baltimore Colts and Baltimore Stallions of the CFL. Now, I see that some universities employ over a dozen strength coaches, one for nearly every sport played. Little wonder that not much gets accomplished: too many cooks spoil the broth. In my various university positions, I was totally in charge. Every athlete from every sport started out on the same routine. There weren't separate programs for baseball, basketball, soccer, football, and lacrosse because there was no need for them. The purpose in the beginning is the same for everyone – build a solid foundation and learn how to do the exercises in the routine. The strength coach was given a free hand and there was no interference from the other sports coaches.

Then, in the mid-nineties, this began to change. The sports coaches wanted more say in what was done in the weight room. This usually came about after they had attended a convention where some authority on strength and conditioning gave a talk on a program he designed. The sports coach wanted to do that instead of the one I had been using with success. Or, more frequently, they wanted to add to what I was already doing, using plyometrics or some other gimmicks to enhance foot speed, agility, or balance. I argued that all of these attributes can be improved simply by doing high-skill exercises, such as full cleans and snatches. Yet they persisted, and since I then had no control over what they did with their teams, the strength gains were not nearly as impressive as before.

And since strength coaching has become a very lucrative profession (Last year, Harvard was offering \$75K for the top job), those who hold a position and are making excellent money do not want to trouble the waters and risk getting fired. For the record, the most I ever made as a strength coach was \$10K at Hopkins and when the politics became a pain-in-the-ass, it wasn't a hard decision to just walk away. It's been my policy all my life not to take a job or own a car that I couldn't walk away from.

However, I was not locked into the same situation that most strength coaches are currently. They are raising families, paying off mortgages and car loans and trying to put some money aside for their children's future education. Good positions are greatly sought after, and the competition is fierce. So they give in to the sports coaches' wishes and the once-solid strength program is watered down a bit. More ideas from the sports coaches, and yet another way to increase foot speed is added to the overall strength and conditioning regime. It doesn't take very long for the strength portion of the program to be so diluted that it is close to useless. If you didn't read Jim Steel's article on StartingStrength.com about the problems of the modern-day collegiate strength coach you should. It's well written and quite enlightening.

In the pro ranks, things are even worse. The one thing that is taboo for any strength coach at that level is to injure a player in the weight room. When I assumed that role for the Baltimore Stallions for pre-season conditioning, I was told by the owner that if I caused an injury to a player, I was gone. Which I thought was stupid, but many other strength coaches in pro football have told me they were given that same stipulation. I didn't alter a thing in my program because I was confident that I could teach them how to do an exercise correctly, and thus not get hurt.

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The reason I think this approach to strength training is ignorant is because football is a high-risk sport with 330 lb. behemoths blasting into opponents moving at warp speed, encased in what amounts to full body armor. The total structure has to be prepared for the impact, or else.

But they're not being prepared. A pro football game is war, and the participants should enter the stadium as ready as possible for all sorts of physical mishaps. Few are. Due to the fact that those responsible for the strength training have prescribed only those exercises that are low risk – and none that require a high degree of skill – the athletes' bodies are not ready for the relentless pounding they are about to take. Most pro programs focus more on the aerobic and agility aspects of the sport than on pure strength. This keeps them from getting hurt during training sessions, but it does little to help them get through a practice or a game without getting injured.

Bill St. John tells of the time he visited the weight room of the Philadelphia Eagles. After looking it over, he asked the strength coach why there weren't any platforms. "Where do you have them power clean and deadlift?" he asked.

In a gruff, annoyed tone, the coach replied, "We don't have them do any of that crap. They get beat around enough on the field. They don't need to punish their bodies in here."

Yes, they do. In my way of thinking, the games and practices should be a snap after a weight workout. Make them so damn strong that they can withstand anything that occurs on the gridiron. And in the event they do sustain an injury, it will be much less severe if the athlete is super-strong than if he hadn't been doing any serious weight work. This is a point that timid strength coaches and head coaches are missing. When you let up on the gas for any athlete who engages in a contact sport, you're doing him a disservice. He may curse you for having him crank out the sets of heavy goodmornings and squats, but in the end, he will thank you.

Whenever one of the football players from the University of Hawaii was invited to a tryout for a pro team, I trained him as if he were going to an Olympic event. While most of the players who showed up planned on using the two-a-days to get into shape, my athletes were hitting the ground running. And it paid off. Seven players from fair-to-middlin' teams made the pros: John Woodcock, Jaris White, Levi Stanley, Arnold Morgado, Charlie Aiu, Harold Stringert, and Dan Audick. Dan ended up playing in a Super Bowl for San Francisco. I would like to add June Jones, who I trained when he was a freshman, but he ended his college career with Portland State, so I can't take credit. Other than Jaris and Arnold, none of these young men were exceptional athletes. Their success in football came directly from the hard work they did in the weight room.

The best example of the lot was Charlie Aiu, an offensive lineman. No team drafted him, but the San Diego Chargers invited him for a tryout at their summer training camp. He learned that the Chargers had already signed three rookie offensive lineman and paid them handsome signing bonuses. So the odds against Charlie making the team were very slim. Charlie loved to lift weights so it wasn't a problem to motivate him to do more and more in preparation for the camp.

When I had assisted Tommy Suggs at the summer training camp for the Houston Oilers a few years before, I noticed that the entire team was required to do chins on their way out to the practice fields. So I got Charlie started on chins, telling him that if he could do a lot of them in front of the coaches, he might attract their attention. Charlie weighed around 265 and could only do three when he started. But by doing them at every workout and adding a rep whenever possible, he was able to do sixteen when he left for camp. He was duly noticed because what other player anywhere close to his size could do anywhere near that many? Most of the other lineman could only managed one or two. The three drafted rookies all got hurt and Charlie ended up with a contract and played for several years.

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He came to camp ready, and this is not happening lately. Check out the number of injuries that are occurring during the first few days of summer two-a-days. They're dropping like flies and for most there is no contact involved. They simply sprain an ankle or blow out a knee while running drills. They are not prepared because no one has pushed them into getting into superior condition for the upcoming stress. The so-called strength coach has made sure he doesn't overtrain them to protect his own ass, and a great many turn to a personal trainer to help them get ready for the season.

For those of us who know about personal trainers for strength training, this is a laugh. While pro strength coaches are afraid that one of the players might injure himself while lifting, personal trainers take it a step further, or I should say, a step backwards. They don't dare make their clients sore. The programs they give the players are no more than bodybuilding programs and are desired to work a lot of muscles without being difficult. Pure strength exercises are not part of the package. In truth, personal training isn't about fitness at all. Rather, it's a service that allows the clients to talk about themselves and be the center of attention for a few hours a week. It's pampered exercise, and lots of pro athletes like the idea that they have a personal trainer. It makes them feel special, although it does little to prepare them for the upcoming season.

It's rather easy to slip backwards in terms of strength training and many are not even aware that they have done so. What happens is they start substituting a less-demanding exercise for a much more difficult one. This usually starts with replacing good mornings with almost straight-legged deadlifts. Heavy pulls off the floor are dropped in favor of a variety of pulling movements done with machines. Back squats remain in the routine, but are done with much lighter poundages so the workout isn't so strenuous. High-skill movements are excluded entirely because they have proved to be much too demanding. Once this process gains momentum, it's difficult stopping it. Soon, the strength athlete who spent time making certain that all of his major muscle groups were receiving equal attention is suddenly spending nearly his whole workout on his upper body.

It becomes a downward spiral, and the only way to stop it is to step back and reexamine your goals. Do you still want to be stronger than the average bloke waddling around the supermarket looking for more junk food, or have you given up that idea? What the majority of the people in this country want is to have their cake and eat it too. They want to be strong and fit, yet they're unwilling to put in the effort to make that dream a reality.

Here's what it boils down to: you have to constantly force your body to extend itself, to do a bit more than what has been expected of it previously. This is true for older strength athletes just as much as it is for collegiate and professional strength athletes. The body only stays in a static state for a very short period of time, and then it's either moving forward or backward. This means that at every workout, you must be pushing yourself to the fullest so that you can jar the muscles and attachments out of their complacency. In other words, you have to overload your body with work. Most who train understand this principle, they're simply not motivated enough to put it into practice.

The concept of making the muscles, tendons, and ligaments stronger by continuously increasing the amount of stress placed upon them goes way back. I'm sure our cave dwelling ancestors utilized some form of overloading out of necessity and those who excelled at it ruled. Then came Milo, the first known example of someone who utilized the principle. He lifted a calf every day until it grew to be a stout bull and as the calf grew, so did Milo's strength. It was a systematic, effective way to get stronger.

Growing up, I was always interested in strength so I knew about Milo. When I was fourteen, my father bought me a calf for a 4-H project and I decided to try and emulate what the Greek strongman had done. I was small for my age – so much so that I could still get in a movie on a child's

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ticket, and I was desperate to trigger a growth spurt. I began lifting Elmer every day. Needless to say, Elmer wasn't the least bit happy about my experiment, but it turned out that he didn't have to put up with it for very long because I was unable to keep up with his rapid growth. After a couple of weeks, I couldn't budge him off the ground,

Many years later I came to understand why my plan failed. Elmer was putting on weight faster than my small body could keep pace. I was, in fact, trying to do too much too soon, an important part of overloading. The exercises a person does has to match his current strength level or the process doesn't bear fruit.

There are many ways to overload and because of this, many athletes and coaches get confused as to how to build the principle into their programs. Part of the principle is that you can only increase strength when you push your body beyond its normal limits, when you force it to work harder than it did previously and recently. What you did a year, or even a month, ago doesn't count. Also, the added work must be done slowly so that your body has adequate time to adapt to the new stress. Move too rapidly and the added workload becomes a detriment rather than an asset because it leads to overtraining.

Overloading as a training tool only works well if you keep accurate records of all of your workouts. You multiply the number of reps done by the amount of weight on an exercise, and when you get those totals you add them all together to get the total workload for that day. From those, you can find your daily, weekly, and monthly totals. This will give you a numerical picture of what you did during the month and you can use that information to lay out and revise your program for the following month.

If this sounds complicated, it isn't. It's simple math. What makes such a chart so valuable is that you can find your weaker areas at a glance and make the necessary changes in your program to strengthen them. Get a notebook and start writing down all of your workouts, including all the primary and auxiliary exercises, sets, tops, and how much weight was used. Then you'll be ready to calculate workload and be in a position to use the overloading principle sensibly.

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