

Starting Strength

Coaching

by

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Why is it a good thing to get coaching from different people when it is available? I'm not suggesting that a strength trainee find a bodybuilding coach, or an Olympic weightlifting coach, or a suit-and-wraps look-up-at-the-ceiling powerlifting coach to waste time, money, and patience with. If you're training with the Starting Strength method, I'm suggesting that exposure to different SSCs is very helpful to both your training and to your own development as a coach.

Training with different coaches allows you to benefit from the different backgrounds that different people bring to the platform, and to avoid the problems that result from the same coach in the same gym coaching you the same day at the same time for months on end. In case this is not obvious, let's discuss my reasoning for a few minutes. People are often reluctant to leave a comfort zone, and it's important to understand that comfort often equals stagnation – this obviously applies outside the gym as well, as do most things we learn under the bar.

In our first lecture at the Starting Strength Seminar, we define movement coaching as the profession that specializes in getting your athlete to move the way your knowledge of and experience with the *model* of that particular movement pattern indicates is the most efficient. The model of the movement in question is assembled by the coach from an analysis of it, and the better and more thorough the analysis, the better the model will be. A good coach can get his athlete to consistently and accurately reproduce his model of the movement pattern. A *great* coach can get his athlete to consistently and accurately reproduce his model of the *correct* movement pattern.

The coach brings four factors to the platform, each of which is critically important to his ability to coach. First, the coach brings **information** relevant to the athlete's performance that has been accumulated from academic study, personal experience with the movement models in question, and coaching experience with enough athletes using the model to be an effective communicator on the subject. Second, the coach has developed effective, concise, and broadly applicable methods by which his information can be converted to **teaching** the movement models. A coach may be an effective teacher of an ineffective model assembled from incomplete or incorrect information, but this is obviously suboptimal.

Third, the coach **observes and evaluates** his athlete in the process of executing the movement model, quickly and accurately comparing the athlete's performance to the model he has taught the athlete, identifying deviations from the model and the probable reasons for these deviations. Then

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fourthly, the coach applies **corrections** to the problems he sees the athlete having with congruence to the model, usually in the form of both additional instruction between sets and various *cues* – concise and abrupt reminders about what has already been taught – during the actual execution of the movement itself.

Looked at this way, there are obviously differences in every coach's preparation that produce differences in that coach's product. Our emphasis has been the development of the models we use for the basic barbell exercises, and the teaching methods that work best to communicate the models to the person under the bar. We cannot provide the experience, the intelligence, the basic background preparation, and the drive to improve that are the hallmarks of an excellent coach, so these remain the purview of the



individual and the factors that separate the adequate from the outstanding. Our credentialing process is the most rigorous in the fitness industry without exception, but variations in capability are always present as an inherent feature of the use of humans in this role.

Effective coaches possess above-average intelligence, the habits of dispassionate analysis and reading widely, and their own history under the bar that almost always resulted in a less-than-stellar personal competitive career. We have observed that very few great coaches in any sport were ever elite athletes themselves, to the extent that it is terribly unusual to find such a person. This dichotomy is almost axiomatic because of the nature of the difference between elite performance itself and the *understanding* of elite performance. (It is also responsible for the fact that great coaches are seldom found at the upper levels of sports performance, most noticeably in Division I and professional team sports, and I'll leave this as a topic for your exploration.)

Effective coaches don't come from the ranks elite performance, any more than great math teachers come from the ranks of great mathematicians or celestial mechanists. They are almost always very intelligent people who happen to be average athletes that had to work extremely hard for every bit of improvement they ever made, who paid close attention to the process while it was occurring, and who for various reasons became interested in helping others improve.

In contrast, elite athletes have in common a huge – 32+ inch – Standing Vertical Jump, they are exceptional visual learners, and they played sports with a high level of personal success, usually from a young age. These people never really have to grasp the movements they perform at any level deeper than the instinctive feel for them they obtain naturally. They have no need for an analysis of the mechanics of the movements, because they feel the mechanics when they are correct, and they can reproduce them very closely without the effort necessary for less-talented athletes. The only help they can be to others trying to perform them is to demonstrate them.

These two completely separate sets of ability reflect the differing natures of coaching and performance, and seldom if ever do they intersect within the individual.

Since the nature of coaching is communication of information, not the performance of the sport itself, the academic background and interpersonal talents of the coach have a profound effect on his professional success. An articulate, widely-read person with a science background and a long, mediocre record of placing third will probably be a good coach, if he's interested. Such a person prepares for coaching while being repeatedly defeated, trying harder next time, making a little progress

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each time as a result, taking notes on the process, coaching his training partners, getting his ass kicked again anyway, and stubbornly refusing to do something else.

This history is what informs the first factor in the list above – the basis of the coach’s ability to understand what the athlete is, or should be, receiving from him, the information upon which the coach’s ability to improve the movement pattern the athlete performs. Since every coach has a different history, more coaches’ eyes on your lifting means more opportunities for you to learn about your performance and how to improve it. They will all bring different strengths to the table, and you never know what you’re likely to learn from a different coach.

Another reason to periodically expose yourself to different coaching is the unfortunate fact that, just like a lifter’s technique over time, your regular coach will experience a gradual change in his perspective that can result in unrecognized and uncorrected problems with your lifting. Like “form creep” in your lifting, “coaching creep” can affect a coach who works with the same people in the same gym all the time.

You know what happens: you have the radio on at work all day, and most of the time you don’t really hear it. It’s just on, the sound hits your ears, and you don’t perceive it. You’ve “tuned it out” whether you wanted to or not. This can happen to your coach as well. I’ve walked into good gyms where everybody working under a good coach was squatting with a stance 2 inches too wide. The guy could obviously see it, but he had stopped *watching* for it, and it had either gotten slowly worse while remaining unnoticed, or it had started looking correct to him.

We’ve all done it. Coaches need a tune-up occasionally, just like you do. This is why SSCs have to audit a seminar every other year to keep their credential. It’s an intense exposure to a critique of everybody’s coaching – the people being evaluated, the platform staff, the auditors, and mine too. We go back to the basic analysis of the method, derive the model, teach the model, and coach the model in front of brand new lifters in a different facility under the supervision of each other.

Walking in to a new gym with new lifters and different problems than you see every day forces you to think, improvise, and handle the material a new way – *right now*, because we only have 8 sets and we go to lunch at 1:00. Actively solving problems in a different context/environment is far different than just “putting in the time” you might do at home. Just like driving to a place you haven’t been before is different when you do it the first time than it is the tenth time – it seems longer, you are aware of all the things on the trip as you are actually *looking* and *seeing*. By the tenth time it seems shorter, and you aren’t paying active attention or actively processing your actions. Your behavior is automated, because your results are a foregone conclusion.



If we don’t take steps to ensure our coaching skills remain sharp, we stop seeing mistakes. We fail to notice grip width, stance width, hip position, knee position, back angle, shin angle, arm angle, symmetry, depth, lockout, and every other picky little aspect of correct technique that may change slowly over time – not because we don’t care anymore, but because we watch the same people do the same things day after day, week after week, month after month, until we are watching without seeing. Just moving around the platform, switching observation angles, changing from standing to crouched down can help – shifting your perspective so that everything looks different helps return you to actively seeing the things you should be looking for.

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I have the benefit of exposure to many different people's lifting because of traveling to seminars every month – my eye doesn't usually go to sleep. Our staff coaches also benefit from broad exposure to dozens of new lifters every year. But if you're stuck in one gym, slap yourself around occasionally to wake up. Go on the boards, watch form check videos, refresh yourself with the books and the platform videos, coach at a meet so you get to watch dozens of different lifters, and then take your refreshed eyes to work.



On the other hand, if your only exposure to other lifters is video, a gigantic component of your coaching development and maintenance is missing: knowing whether or not your cues actually work in real time. People who make their money by coaching remote clients only will lack the experience provided by on-platform problem solving in real time.

Buying a program template is fine – if that's all the help you want. But if that's all the help you're getting, I assure you that your technique is *wrong*. A video-only coach is more susceptible to coaching creep than even a bored platform coach in a slow gym. Ask the coach you're thinking about hiring how many in-person clients he sees per month – if it's few or none, keep looking.

Coaching is a critical investment in your training, and training is a critical investment in your life. If you attach the appropriate level of significance to coaching, understand that there should be more than one vector for this critical addition to your training progress.

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