

Starting Strength

Training in Cold Weather

by

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The colder months, from late fall through the winter and into early spring, are the very best times to get stronger. More overall work can be done without the risk of overtraining. Recovery is easier since heat depletes valuable nutrients more rapidly than the cold. Yet at the same time, certain rules have to be followed. Nearly all of those are nothing more than common sense, but as Voltaire once commented, “Common sense is not so common.”

The advice I am presenting comes from experience, and is empirical in nature. I’m sure there have been scientific studies on the effect of training in very cold weather on long-distance skiers, mountain climbers, and other athletes who compete in snowy conditions, but nothing that I have ever come across deals with weight training. There’s a great deal on training in the heat, but zilch for working out in the cold.

But I think my findings are valid since I have trained in rather extreme conditions on several occasions. When I left the employ of the York Barbell Company, I lived in a 13-room farmhouse near Thomasville. The property also had a large barn, corncrib, chicken house, and smokehouse that had been converted to a cozy two-room apartment. Kenny Moore and Karen Meyes lived there. Kenny and I were still competing in both power and Olympic lifting. We pooled our resources and set up a workout area in a space next to the barn meant for parking farm equipment. It gave us protection from the elements but was open front and back.

During the winter, when two-foot accumulations were the norm on a regular basis, we would have to shovel away enough snow to allow us to squat, clean, snatch, press, and deadlift. Except for when the wind came screaming through the space, we were fine because we bundled up and sipped from a thermos of hot coffee the entire time. While that was a bit extreme, I recall getting a photograph from a lifter in West Virginia when I was editing *Strength & Health*. He lifted on a platform in the open and before every session, he had to spend a solid half an hour clearing the platform sufficiently so he could secure his footing for the quick lifts. He got stronger and with no ill effects.

Yet of all the places I trained in during extremely cold weather, the most memorable were the winters at Fielder’s Shed. There was no insulation and no heat. Although there was a stove available, every year the chimney got clogged up by birds building their nests. The one time someone did build a fire, all that resulted was the small room becoming filled with noxious smoke and fumes. I can recall one workout right around Christmas time, and I was the only fool stupid enough to train. It was bitter cold, 17° F with wind chill in the single digits. I could easily have bailed, but I didn’t, and I ended up getting in a very productive session. The biggest problem I had was keeping my hands warm. I

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realize that many lifters resort to wearing gloves in these situations, but gloves didn't work for me. I couldn't grip the bar the way I liked and they intruded on my line of pull for the quick lifts and presses. Gripping the bar was like gripping an icicle; painful yet of short duration since I didn't do more than five reps on any exercise.

While the cold wasn't that extreme every afternoon or night at the Shed, it was always frigid. However, it attracted the best lifters in the country who braved the conditions just to train with others of like mind. Out of that shed emerged seven national champions: Sam Fielder Sr., his son Sam Jr., my brother Donald, Tom Battles, George Hechter, Jim Moser, and myself. And George went on to win a world title in powerlifting.

All of these athletes had access to gyms with heat, but they preferred the atmosphere where the intensity was high and where their desire rubbed off on one another. Training at Fielder's Shed was not considered a hardship in sub-zero weather, but an honor.

One extremely cold night in January, Jim Moser drove an hour from where he was living at that time in Baltimore over slick, icy roads to train with me rather than going to a much more comfortable facility only a few miles from his home. He wanted instruction on the Olympic lifts and had to clean, snatch, and jerk on a concrete floor which allowed him no margin of error. One forward step and he would be face-to-face with the stair-case squat rack. One false step back and he would encounter the second level of the small room. Stagger either left or right and the bar would encounter a concrete block wall. But having to be so precise with his form and all the while having to deal with moving his feet on cold concrete helped make him a better lifter. And I can still see him going through a set of cleans and snatches with steam coming off his entire body. He appeared to be some mystical creature performing an ancient ritual. Which in a sense, is what he was doing.

I also trained at the Hanover Y a few times in the dead of winter with Bob Miller and Kenny Moore. The weight room was on the third floor and for some reason, the radiators didn't work well at all. After every set, we would rush over and place our hands directly on them, seeking a bit of warmth for our tingling appendages. It made us stronger.

Yet all these stories pale in comparison to many of the exploits of pioneers and those who traveled to the gold fields in the frozen north in the late 1800s. Jack London wrote some of the most vivid descriptions of the hardships encountered of the quest for gold, but I recently read an account that relates to those of us who train consistently in all kinds of weather. In *Journey*, James Michener gives the account, based on factual information he painstakingly gathered, about the adventures of five men traveling from Edmonton, Alberta, up the MacKenzie River almost to the Beaufort Sea, in order to make their way to the gold fields in Dawson on the Yukon River in 1897 and 1898.

Before the winter set in, they pulled off the river, built a cabin and hunkered down for the duration, which in this latitude meant they would be locked in for seven or eight months. They had brought enough food and were able to find plenty of game, so that was no problem. They had also brought a supply of ascorbic acid to counteract scurvy. Yet the thing that caught my attention was that they exercised daily, despite the extremely cold conditions where the temperature would dip to -40° F on a regular basis.

As soon as the cabin was finished, Lord Evelyn Luton, the leader of the expedition, instructed the others to lay out a quarter mile track, and insisted that everyone, including himself, do three laps around it twice a day without fail. Which is exactly what they did and they all not only survived the long winter, they thrived. Seems unbelievable, but Michener is renowned for his accuracy of historical events, so I, for one, believe they did exercise every day just like he said they did. In addition, Evelyn,

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the Lord of Deal, walked from the cabin to a Hudson Bay outpost at Fort Norman in the dead of winter. He walked down the middle of the MacKenzie on snowshoes and skis. After he obtained the information he was after, he walked back, fifty miles each way.

In contrast, we have become a nation of wimps. The NFL cancels a prime time game because of a snowstorm. Parents pick up their children at the bus stop only 200 yards from where they live. I recently ran into a former training mate at the supermarket. I had helped him build a home gym in a building on his property. It was heated but very drafty, though nothing like Fielder's Shed. When I asked him how his training was going, he replied, "It's too cold to train right now, I'll get back to it when it warms up a bit."

I talked to an old high school buddy on the phone and inquired about how far he was walking, "I'm not. It's just too cold." Too bad. I find it much easier to walk when it's cold. I can move much faster, go further, and recover better than I can when it's hot.

Cold weather is the best time to get stronger, and it always has been. That's when competitive weightlifters and bodybuilders really went to work. This is the time of year to pack on some extra pounds. The added bodyweight helps you to train harder and use more weight on the various exercises. Add five pounds and the levers change favorably on nearly all of the exercises for the primary muscle groups. And it's so much easier to gain weight in cold weather than it is in the warmer months, mostly because appetite increases during the colder seasons. This is your body telling you to supply it with more fuel – fuel that's converted to energy to help you stay warm. A part of that new energy can also be applied to moving iron. You can train longer and handle a much greater load in the winter. Then when it does get warmer, it's a simple matter of shedding the extra pounds if you want to.

Since I do not use any heat, other than what the tenants below me provide, the room where I train is cold throughout the winter, usually in the low forties or even the thirties. Once cold weather arrives, I increase my bodyweight by four or five pounds every year. I do this by simply eating larger portions of what I normally eat. I really don't change much, except that I eat bacon and sausage for breakfast once a week and use gravy over my mashed potatoes. I continue to drink a shake after a workout and if I desire yet more bodyweight, I'll drink another before bedtime. Otherwise, everything is about the same.

It helps. I make most of my improvement during the cold months. For me, this means adding reps to the exercises in my program and adding in some new movements as I up my weekly workload. When warm weather rolls in, I just do the opposite to get rid of the extra weight – I eat less.

I'll come back to diet later on, but now I want to get to some practical advice for training in a cold or drafty weight room. Some of which I learned at the York Barbell. The gym wasn't cold, like the Fielder Shed. It had an overhead heater, but it was drafty as hell and if we didn't take precautions against the chills, we paid the price.

First step, bundle up. Pile on layers: double sweat shirts, double sweat pants, double socks, and a hat, if need be. A sweat shirt with a hood works well, but if it's really cold, a hat is even better. Right at 40% of your body's heat loss is through your head, so it needs to be protected. Gloves are optional. I never use them, but if they don't interfere with doing your exercises, go for it.

Muscle rub can be one of your best friends in a cold and drafty gym. Hoffman's rub was okay at first, but we got used to it and it didn't help much. Then Smitty would whip up a batch and leave out the alcohol which was used to dilute it for economic reasons. It was so hot it was dangerous. Honest. I'd be at a contest applying it to my shoulders or knees and a lifter from another club would ask if he

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could use some. I'd advise him to use just a bit, but since it was free, he would always splash it on. In about five minutes after he started warming up, he would be on fire and have to dash to the nearest bathroom to scrub it off. I'd just chuckle when he came back and say, "I told you it was strong."

There's nothing out there with that much punch that I know of, but Ironmind Enterprises has one that comes very close. It's called "Nicoflex", and is used by a large number of foreign Olympic weightlifters. Tiger Balm also does the trick. The Vitamin Shoppe has a good one too called Joint Cream, but it makes my clothing reek so I gave up on it because the smell outweighed the benefits. A tip about using any kind of muscle rub: warm up for ten to fifteen minutes before applying it. If your skin is already hot when you rub it into the muscles and joints it will react much faster than when you put it on cold.

Which brings me to warming up in cold weather. Allow some extra time to get your pulse and respiratory rate up before you start in on your planned program for that day. How long? Depends on how cold it is and how long it takes you to elevate your body temperature. Individuals differ greatly in this regard. Begin with some calisthenics or ride an exercise bike for five or ten minutes. Once you start breathing harder, do something for your abs: sit-ups, leg raises, or crunches, and then do back hypers or reverse back hypers for your lower back. That will warm up your midsection and back. Now use light dumbbells and get some blood in your shoulders. A set of lateral and frontal raises will do the trick.

When the room is very cold, it's smart to do some sets with really light weights before adding heavy plates. One of the strongest benchers I ever trained with, pound for pound, would always do two sets of fairly high reps, 20s, with the empty Olympic bar before adding 45s for his first work set. I've had lifters tell me they don't like this approach because those light sets burn up energy that can be used when they get to their limits. I tell them that if two sets of twenty with just the bar taps that much into their reserves, they had better do something to increase their overall workload.

Once you feel that your body is ready for the stress ahead, put on your muscle rub. And this is the right time to wrap any injured areas or a bodypart or joint that is susceptible to getting hurt. A step up from ace bandages or those wraps that powerlifters use are the elbow and knee bands made from rubber, the kind found in scuba suits. Tommy Kono came up with this idea in the late 60s and sent a pair to Bob Bednarski, Tommy Suggs, and me to test. They made all the difference in the world. All three of us suffered from aching knees as did just about every other Olympic lifter that we knew. The heavy cleans, snatches, and jerks were punishment enough, but when it was really cold, workouts were most painful. The knee bands allowed us to train heavy right through the winter months and with a bit of muscle rub to boot, we were in hog heaven.

Most know the story about Hoffman changing the name of the knee bands from TK Knee Bands to BH Knee Bands and marketing them on his own. But Tommy has the last laugh. He's selling them again, and Hoffman can't steal from him this time around.

They're also available in most fitness supply stores and I've seen them advertised in Powerlifting USA. The newer versions are covered with fabric, which is a good improvement since those made of just rubber were easy to tear. If your knees or elbows ache in the cold when you're training, these will be well worth the money.

As soon as you're thoroughly warmed-up, have applied the muscle rub and put the knee and elbows bands in place, get to work and maintain a fast pace. You can move from set to set much faster in cold weather and this will allow you to do more work in a regular session that you normally do. No dilly-dallying between sets. Stay in motion the entire time. Huffing and puffing is a good thing, it

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will help you build more stamina which is a plus for any serious strength athlete and especially for any competitive Olympic lifter or powerlifter.

I use coffee to help me sustain a fast pace, but I only sip a little at a time and don't start drinking any until I'm into my program. As with the muscle rub, I wait until my body is geared up to add in the caffeine. And knowing that caffeine acts as a diuretic, I do not overindulge. Others like colas and energy drinks which are loaded with caffeine. A bit more on that subject when I get to the supplements. Unless it's my light day, when I finish my intended workout ahead of schedule, I throw in another exercise or two for some area that needs more work. This allows me to improve my volume for that day with very little extra effort.

As soon as I finish, I drink a protein shake and take a gram of vitamin C and two multiple mineral tablets. By doing this right away, I replenish those nutrients that had been lost during the exercise bout, and this greatly enhances my recovery. One of the things that most who train with weights do not understand is that the need for taking certain supplements is just as high in cold weather as it is when you end up a session sweating like a pig. It's obvious when you go through a three t-shirt workout in hot, humid temperatures that you need to replace the water-soluble vitamins and minerals, but very few bother with those when they barely break a sweat in the weight room.

But the truth is, your body has been using a great many nutrients to get through the session. The B vitamins to help convert the foods you have eaten to energy and the minerals to convert a large part of that energy to heat in order to maintain a level of homeostasis. If your body temperature drops significantly below 98.6° F (37°C) hypothermia can occur. So in very cold weather, the primary job of your body is to keep you warm and out of harms way. In the process, lots of vitamins and minerals are used up and need to be replaced.

Keeping the body sufficiently warm also requires a lot of water, and again, few lifters bother drinking much in cold weather. But they should. Each day the average person loses at least 2 cups of water through breathing, another 2 cups through invisible perspiration, and 6 cups through urination and bowel movements. That's 10 cups a day without taking into account the fluids lost through perspiration during a workout. There's also the water utilized during the conversion of energy for heat and the body's metabolism. Approximately 4 cups are provided by the foods you eat, but that still leaves 6-8 cups of water daily just to keep the body functioning normally. For those who put in 2 hours plus exercising, that figure is even higher.

In cold weather, I don't drink quite as much water as when it's hot, but almost. I mentioned that I drink some coffee during my workouts, but I also drink water at the same time. Otherwise, I will get dehydrated and there's plenty of data to support the fact that dehydration is a common cause of poor athletic performance.

I also make sure that I supply my body with the water-soluble vitamins and minerals on a regular basis throughout the day. When I get busy and forget to take my multiple minerals, I am painfully reminded of my lapse of memory. I cramp. Usually it's in my hands and calves, but my hamstrings enjoy torturing me as well. When the temperature abruptly changes from mild to cold, I always tend to take less minerals and vitamin C because I'm not sweating nearly as much. Then during the night, I am jarred from my rest with eye-watering cramps in my calves. And later on, when I forget to add C and minerals to my late-night supplement list, it happens again.

And occasionally, even when I've dutifully taken the needed supplements, I still cramp. This usually occurs when it's extremely cold, which tells me that my body has gone into a higher gear to produce the necessary heat to keep me out of danger.

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The minerals are essential to good health and are most necessary to anyone wanting to make progress in the colder months. Some authorities believe that minerals are more important than vitamins because vitamins are functionless in the absence of minerals. Carbohydrates, proteins, and fats cannot be used, broken down in digestion and built into cells, turned into energy without a long chain of chemical reactions, and minerals play a important role in this process.

With minerals, like vitamins, the whole is better than the sum of its parts. Minerals never work single-handedly, but in a synergetic manner with each other. Which means you should take a multiple mineral tablet which contains all the essential minerals. Just about a hour before I plan to go to bed I take two calcium-magnesium tablets and also a couple of multiple mineral tablets along with a gram of vitamin C. This helps me maintain a balance in the minerals and I know that all of these supplements do a huge amount of work when I'm asleep.

To recap: Make sure you wear plenty of clothing when you train in the cold. Take plenty of time to warm up thoroughly, begin each set with a few light, high-rep, sets, then move through your workout with purpose. No long rest periods, stay in motion. Stretch while you're still warm, take a hot shower, down a protein shake and some vitamin C and minerals, and change to other warm clothes. During the workout, drink lots of water and your energy drink of preference.

Try to pack on some extra bodyweight by increasing your caloric intake. Eat healthy foods. Fats are your friend in cold weather and you can choose unsaturated fats over saturated ones rather easily. A simple salad of avocado, lettuce and hard-boiled eggs can provide a fistful of useful calories. Whole grains, fish liver oils, and fresh fruits will all aid your cause and, of course, never forget the strength athlete's best buddy, a protein milkshake.

Consider cold weather as the time that you can gear up in the weight room and get considerably stronger. That's when the lifters and bodybuilders of my era really put the hammer down, and it paid off handsomely for those who paid attention to the smaller points. But that's the case for everything in physical culture, paying attention to the smaller points.

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