

Starting Strength

Deep Squats

by

Mark Rippetoe

One of the best ways to waste your most important training opportunity – the one you have when you're just starting out, and the one you don't ever have again – is to make yourself believe that it isn't going to be hard. The appeal of coming in the gym and going straight to the dumbbell rack instead of the squat rack is undeniably huge, and just as unproductive. The basic, heavy nature of an effective program is such that most guys want to deny its effectiveness, with their brains, based on its simplicity – they don't think they can actually make rapid progress *that* fast on such a simple program. You can, for a while, if you work on the basic movements. But they also end up denying, with their asses, the fact that hard work is the key. Basic heavy movements are hard, and easier sure is more fun. At least easier is not as unpleasant.

Exercise variety is not only unnecessary for a novice lifter – and yes, this probably means you – it is a counter-productive distraction. For a novice, EXERCISE SELECTION IS NOT THE VARIABLE TO MANIPULATE. Loading is the variable; you have to lift increasingly heavier weights on the same few exercises that cover all the bases until you're strong enough that a simple program is not enough. And that may never happen, if you don't stay motivated to train by making good progress at first.

This means not doing a bunch of stupid shit that might possibly be appropriate for an advanced man (but probably isn't, even for an advanced man) but that is NEVER appropriate for a novice. It does mean working hard on the very few things you have to do to make progress. Like getting your squats deep enough to make them actually work, while continuing to add weight *every time you train*, for as long as the process of novice adaptation can continue.

If I had a thousand dollars for every squat I see in my gym done above parallel, I'd be a broke motherfucker. This is because we do not allow partial squats on the premises. I had a drop-in just a couple of weeks ago that showed up on a Saturday night while I was trying to train. Wichita Falls not being the sort of place that still fascinates a 55-year-old guy with its nightlife potential, I was training, as usual, by myself. The guy shows up, pays his 8 bucks, and proceeds to warm up.

My hope was that the guy had read the book and was going to be on autopilot so that I could maintain my often-compromised training momentum, but I could tell pretty quick that I was going to be interrupted. He started off with 135 – not the empty bar – and most folks that look like this guy do

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not have a training history that justifies skipping the empty bar. I sure as hell don't; I squat the empty bar for 4 sets before plates get loaded. If a competitive lifter wants to start with 135 or even 225, that's fine, but the first indication that we're about to have to perform a squat intervention is when a skinny guy starts with 135.

He walked it out and did one set of five about 3 inches high, racked it, and loaded 185. With unwarranted optimism I watched the first two reps of the next set, hoping to see below-parallel perfection, like a dull person might watch his cousins fight, driven by my desire to not stop my own squats (which take about 30 minutes to warm up) to triage the guy's situation. They were the predictable 5 inches high, leading me to quickly speculate about what 405 was going to look like (a subtle unlocking of the knees?) before I walked over prior to the third rep and suggested that he rack the bar.

I asked him if he would like to learn how to actually squat with correct form, and he readily agreed, no doubt out of concern for my feelings. I went through our standard squat teaching progression, with no bar, then the empty bar, 65, 85, 95, and then 105 x 5 x 3 sets. And that was about all he had left in the tank with his squat down to proper depth. In other words, the guy had overestimated his squat load by at least 100% – I had gotten the impression he was going up from 185.

But, BY GOD, he had squatted deep in WFAC, even at the expense of my delayed workout, because at WFAC we do not squat high.

This is because squatting high is easier, and easier doesn't work. You actually know this already, even if you keep the secret buried down below your brain stem. Easier has *never* worked, and you figured this out in about the 5th grade, if you weren't in some remedial program mandated by your State. When you memorized all your multiplication tables, arithmetic was a lot easier, wasn't it? When you diagrammed all your sentences, the next semester's writing assignments were easier, right? When you did all your homework the test was easier.

Squats below parallel are your homework. The result of doing them is that you get stronger on all the other exercises, even the pressing movements, because squats make your whole body stronger – *if* you do them correctly. I know it's harder that way, and one of the ways you know it's wrong to do them high is that everybody else does them high. When was the last time the things everybody else is doing have turned out to be the right thing to do?

Deep squats done with a weight that's a little heavier each time you train affect your body in a way that no other exercise seems to do. And believe me when I say that "other methods" have been tried. They just don't work. And it's not that they don't work as well; they don't work *at all*.

You can quarter-squat or half-squat as much weight as you can load on the bar and growth will not occur at the same rate it does when you finally stop being a pussy and get below parallel with correct form every rep, with a constantly-increasing load on your back.

And I'm not really sure why. We know that the accumulating effects of the increasing load cause the accumulation of adaptations to those heavier loads. We speculate that loading the whole body causes a systemic hormonal response, and that deadlifts don't because of the shorter range of motion and the lack of a stretch reflex at the hardest mechanical position. But the truth is we don't actually know exactly why it's the squat and *only* the squat that produces this effect, and we're not likely to actually find out anytime soon because the exercise "science" community thinks you can do a squat study with a Smith machine. Really. Look it up.

I – however benighted I may be with regard to peer-review, academic rigor, and double-blinding – know what works and what doesn't. The way I know that deep squats work this way and that nothing else does is because I've been doing this for 35 years, I'm not actually a dull person, and I've seen first-hand the differences in attempting to gain weight and muscle both with and without deep squats.

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Many of you guys have been attempting to piss uphill for quite some time, and have never gotten any real progress out of your time spent in the gym. If you have been stuck at the same bodyweight while your “squats” continue to progress upward in weight, I can guarantee you that your depth has progressed upward as well. Squats done above parallel cannot be quantified – their performances cannot be compared because they use different amounts of muscle mass, different amounts of stretch reflex, and calculate to different amounts of work (the force-times-distance kind).

If the same depth, just below parallel, is used *for every rep of every set*, then you know that if your squat is going up you are getting stronger.

It may be that your intentions are wholesome and honest, and if so, the lack of objective feedback is your problem. There are many ways to deal with this, and I’ll not insult your intelligence by suggesting video or coaching. Just get the damn things deep.

But the problem, as I mentioned earlier, is really two-fold: it’s hard to train this way, and people don’t like difficult things – yet it’s simple, and people don’t think simple things can work.

This program separates the men from the boys, because coming to the gym three days a week knowing that every time you show up your squats are going to be heavier than last time takes balls. Not at first, because at first you’re not strong enough to stress yourself that thoroughly. But as you grow and as your strength increases, you’ll eventually be challenging more than just your ability to do the work – at risk will be your willingness to get under the bar for your work sets.

“It would be easier to do a new PR on a different leg machine,” you think. “Maybe I’ll try to max out the Hammer Strength Iso-Lateral Leg Press today. That’s hard, they say. Then Friday I’ll fry the shit out of my quads on the Linear Hack Press. Monday it’ll be the Squat High Pull machine, Wednesday the V-Squat, and then I’ll just cycle through the leg circuit, maxing out a new one every time. Yeah! FUCK yeah! That’ll be better anyway, muscle confusion, conjugate method, all that shit. More variety means better gains, I’ve heard.”

Except that it doesn’t work this way, especially for a novice. We don’t want your muscles confused. We want them to know precisely what they have to do next workout: squat more weight than last time, below parallel. The squat leaves nothing out – there are no holes in its kinetic chain to patch up, *unless you squat high*. And since a guy that squats 405 x 5 deep is a bigger, stronger guy than a guy that squats 185 x 5 (or a guy that half-squats 405), the goal seems rather clear. Until you can do that, everything else is just a distraction. Hard and simple are the keys to Big and Strong.

Don’t be distracted. We already know how this works. It’s worked for tens of thousands of guys for decades. Just squat below parallel, sets of five, and make sure that every workout is a little heavier than the previous workout. The rest of your training will follow suit, and you’ll have learned the most valuable lessons of the weight room: a simple, hard program works best, and that you get out of your training – and your life – *exactly* what you put into it.

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A version of this article originally appeared on T-Nation.com 05-02-2011

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