

# Starting Strength

## Eating Through the Sticking Points

by  
Matt Reynolds

*“You have to eat your way through the sticking points” – Hugh Cassidy*

This is not an article on how to look good. It's not really an article on how to be healthy either. It's an article on how to get big and strong. I couldn't care less if you look like a bodybuilder or a Hollister model or anything in between. I don't care if you have abs. I don't care what your cholesterol numbers are. What I do care about is that you're weak. And since this is an educational website and a culture focused around getting strong, then you should care too. So let's talk about how to eat to get strong, because strength matters. (And for those of you who still care about the way you look, 260 pounds and strong with a little extra body fat looks better to almost everyone than 160 pounds and weak anyway).

### **It Ain't Easy**

Eating to get big isn't easy. I know. I graduated high school in 1997 at 6'1" and 155 pounds. I got married in 2000 at 170 pounds. In 2001 I competed in my first powerlifting meet in the 242-pound class, a bodyweight gain of 70 pounds in a year. Since then, I've competed in the 242 class, 275s, and the 308s. So I figured something out along the way about how to eat to get big and strong. I was also blessed in my journey to train with some absolute monsters of both strength and size. Here's what many of us did along the way to add copious amounts of body-weight in order to push our PRs up – not by 5 or 10 pounds, but by hundreds and hundreds of pounds.

Last year we had a bunch of the guys at my gym preparing to compete in the same powerlifting meet. Even though there wasn't a team competition, we still thought it would be cool to win every weight class from the 181s on up to Superheavyweights. Myself, and one other lifter (Justin Winder – pro powerlifter) were planning on competing in the 275-pound weight class when my 308 lifter (Jon Gold) herniated a disc in his back on his final heavy deadlift of the cycle. He ended up being able to bench only at the meet, so 10 days out from the meet I asked Winder if he wanted to move up to the 308s, or if he wanted me to. We both got on the scale – Winder was 274. I was 277. So I decided to move up to try and win the 308s. For 10 days I ate everything in sight. I ate McDonald's at least

## *Eating Through the Sticking Points*

twice a day where my typical meal consisted of 2 double cheeseburgers, a McChicken sandwich with mayo, large fries, a 42oz soda, a 42oz Powerade, and 2 apple pies. 10 days later at the weigh-in I tipped the scale at 304. That's 27 pounds gained in 10 days. Guess what happened at the meet? I PRd my bench press by THIRTY pounds. My 3rd attempt, 450 pounds, shot straight to lockout and I ended up leaving at least 25 pounds on the platform that day. All because I pushed my weight up 27 pounds before the meet.

In order to get from 175 to 250 pounds in one year I ate so many crazy things, it's almost embarrassing to mention them. I did all the normal stuff: eating 6 meals a day, drinking a gallon of whole milk a day, drinking lots of protein shakes (actually I've drunk a gallon of milk a day for 8 of the past 11 years now). But I did a lot of unconventional stuff too. I'd eat a large beef pizza dipped in olive oil. I'd pour oil in my protein shakes. I'd eat double cheeseburgers and eggs and peanut butter and cans of cashews like I was a starving Somali child. I'd try to get thrown out of all-you-can-eat Chinese buffets 2-3 times per week. I'd eat until I felt sick. Then I'd eat Fruity Pebbles or other cereal because no matter how full I was, it always seemed I could get down a big bowl of cereal. As soon as I felt like I wasn't going to be sick, I'd eat again.

There is no doubt – at all – that eating this way is much, much harder than dieting. I have also dieted down from 280 pounds to 231 pounds to win my lightweight pro card in Strongman. I just cut my carbs out, except around training. That was a piece of cake compared to eating all day long to gain weight.

Speaking of cake, one of my training partners from the early 2000s, Kyle Gulledge (275-pound lifter, who deadlifted over 800 pounds as a teenager, and deadlifted 830 pounds both conventional and sumo in the same calendar year) once ate a 9"x13" pan of cake EVERY DAY for a month, from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Kyle had a meet in early February. On Thanksgiving weekend our training crew got together in Kansas City for one of our epic training days. At 265, Kyle looked a little leaner and smaller than the last time I had seen him. He worked up that day on the bench press to a slow 545 pounds (in an old time bench shirt). He then called for 600, a weight he had done several times before. I could tell he wasn't going to get it, and sure enough, it stapled him. Kyle had this type of intense focus like no one I had ever seen in the gym, and missing the weight made him irate. He swore off losing weight and getting lean, and on the way home he invented "the cake-a-day diet." Every day that month he ate either a 9"x13" cake or a pan of brownies equal in size, along with a gallon of milk. In that month he went from 265 pounds to 295. And at the meet a month later he benched 630 with ease.

But how did he get to 265 in the first place? Kyle told me his junior year of high school he weighed 169 and graduated the following year at 250. His diet consisted of cheeseburgers 4+ days per week and 4 gallons of milk per week, in addition to what he was already eating.

Kyle's brother Dave Gulledge wrote me about his weight gain. "I finished playing college soccer at 180 pounds and I looked like I was going to die. I was super lean but very thin. To fix this, I dropped all cardio and started squatting heavy on Mondays, benching and training shoulders on Wednesday and I did deadlifts and back on Friday. I drank a ton of milk and ate everything I could. It was simple, but it worked. I remember on Nov. 6th I was 180 pounds, and on Christmas I was 215. That's 35 pounds in 50 days only taking protein, milk and a ton of food. Along the way I discovered powerlifting; a sport that actually encouraged this type of behavior, which only motivated me to get bigger and stronger. I kept this up and by the end of college I had reached 300 pounds. I had benched 600, squatted 800, and pulled 725, all in competition."

## *Eating Through the Sticking Points*

My training and business partner, William McNeely, wrestled at 5'2" and 103 pounds in February of his sophomore year of high school. He started lifting and eating and was 200 pounds and 5'5" by end of his senior year. His diet consisted of milk, protein, chocolate chip pancakes, and buffet competitions three days per week with his lifting partners.

Another close friend and part of my powerlifting team in the 2000s, Nate Gentges, (5'6" 165-pound class to 220-pound class in 4 years) tried to push his weight up even further to 242 pounds 2 years ago to compete at the APF senior nationals. The last 4 weeks out from the meet his last meal of the night was a large glass of milk and 6 eggs with a half a bag of Jimmy Dean Skillet Mix. The result? He benched a junior world record in a PR total.

Nick Leadbetter, who likely has the best deadlift coefficient at STRONG, went from 198 to 242 in 2 years, pushed his weight up on Little Caesar's \$5 large pizzas, sweet potato fries, biscuits and gravy, brown rice with peanut butter, and broccoli and beef with extra beef from cheap Chinese restaurants. This took his deadlift from 585 to 725 in two years.

My training partner, Jon Gold (308 lifter, 677 raw squat, 500-pound raw bench, 765 raw deadlift), graduated high school at 6'1" and 205. On weekends in college he worked security till 2am, then immediately went to IHOP and ate country fried steak and eggs, hash browns, biscuits and gravy, and milk. Then he'd go home and sleep, get up for church the next morning, then eat at Ryan's buffet with all-you-can-eat steak until he was sick. On the way home, he'd go through the KFC drive-through and order a family bucket of chicken and eat it all while watching football. Dinner on Sunday nights was a large "meats" pizza from Papa Johns. This added 30 pounds of muscle in one summer and got him to his first 400+ bench.

Phil Pierce trained with Jon Gold and me this past Spring, where he took his bodyweight from 190 to 230 (at 5'7") in ONE TRAINING CYCLE. His favorite weight-gaining meal was two boxes of Kraft Mac & Cheese and two cans of tuna in one sitting, which provided 2500+ calories and tons of protein for under \$5. He cut to the 220-pound class 24 hours before the meet and put all the weight back on the day of the contest. His squat PR went from 550 to 630 raw, bench PR from 325 to 375 raw, and deadlift from 550 to 585, narrowly missing 605 at lockout.

One of my ex-high school athletes who is now a Division 1 thrower, Zach Thompson, said, "I graduated high school at 254, and when I went to Neosho County College the following December I was up to 297 (40+ pounds in 6 months). It had a lot to do with increased food intake, supplements and heavy lifting. I tried to drink all the milk I could and got so tired of it that at every meal in the cafeteria I would eat two or three bowls of cereal to trick myself into consuming more milk. When I left Neosho and got to UCM, I just went to eating Pizza Hut's creamy chicken alfredo Tuscani pasta. I'd get the family size and eat that about 4 times a week for lunch as well as after practice just about every day. Always alfredo though. I ate it because my teammate worked at Pizza Hut and I got it for free. I've always liked the mix of pastas and protein, like Hamburger Helper. Since I'm a thrower there isn't a certain diet, but weight pushes weight."

One of my good friends, who I used to compete against in strongman, Kevin McNease, pushed his bodyweight up from a 198-pound bodybuilder to a 286-pound heavyweight strongman in one year, almost entirely on Jack-in-the-Box Tacos. He would order 20 tacos at a time and smother each one in buttermilk ranch dressing. He went from being unable to compete at strongman, to one of the top heavyweight strongmen in the Midwest in just under a year.

Our best geared powerlifter, Justin Winder, 275 at 5'8", with a 1050 squat, 750 bench, and 705 deadlift, and a 2455 total, always eats as his pre-workout meal two hours before training McDonalds dipped in chicken broth, "for the bloat."

## *Eating Through the Sticking Points*

### **It Works**

We've established that eating to gain weight isn't easy. Actually, at times, its downright sickening. But it works. We've heard Rip say before, and experience certainly tells me he's right, that any amount of weight gained will lead to an increase in both muscle and fat; its virtually impossible for someone strength training to gain one without the other. This means that bodyfat percentage will increase with a gain in lean body mass, and thus, an increase in fat accompanies an increase in leverage. The increase in leverage occurs because bigger muscles (i.e. an increase in contractile tissue) increases efficiency in the barbell lifts four ways: 1) an increase in contractile tissue leads to increase in contractile force, 2) an increased steepness (closer to 90 degrees, where maximum force is produced) of the fibers pulling on the prime-moving skeletal structures, such as the upper fibers of the pecs and delts on the humerus in the bench press, 3) a reduced range of motion (also an example of increased pec size on the bench press), and 4) the increased "tightness" in the bottom position of the lifts serves like a compressed and loaded "spring," ready to explode to lockout.

As most of you know, I own STRONG Gym, in Springfield, MO, where we have an incredible amount of really strong lifters. I have yet to see a single lifter who failed to get significantly stronger by pushing his weight up. And here's the reality – they ALL got much stronger, regardless of whether the weight gain was mostly fat or mostly muscle.

### **What would I do differently?**

In spite of all the crazy stories, there are still some things I'd do differently if I could go back in time. The reality is that we were young and ignorant and poor. We didn't know as much then as we do now concerning processed carbohydrates and the differences in how the body responds to fat vs. carbohydrates for recovery. We didn't really understand nutrient timing either. We were poor as dirt and \$1 double cheeseburgers provided as many calories for the buck as anything else we could find.

It's safe to assume that everyone who gains weight would rather skew that weight gain towards muscle, rather than fat. Therefore, if I could do it all over again, I would continue to pound protein and fat at virtually every meal. The recovery benefits of protein and fat cannot be underestimated. However, I probably would eat less sugar and processed carbohydrates, and would try to get my food from less processed and more natural sources. Remember that fat contains 9 calories per gram of weight, while carbohydrates contain only 4 calories per gram. So gram-by-gram fat will provide you with more than double the calories of carbohydrates. I would try to drink less soda, eat less McDonald's french fries and fewer Krispy Kreme donuts. I'd replace those foods with milk, cheeseburgers, and eggs. Rather than eating that epic meal of burgers, fries, soda, and pies at a fast food drive-through, I would choose about 3 double cheeseburgers and a quart of milk. Not healthy by your doctor or dietician's standards, but a heck of a lot better than the aforementioned meal with fries, soda, and pies – just as convenient and better for recovery as well.

Some things I try to get my clients to focus on eating are ground beef, eggs, whole milk, protein shakes, and nut butter. I also get them to stock up on tuna, nuts, jerky, peanut butter sandwiches, and meal replacement powder and keep these in the car and at work or school, because they don't have to be refrigerated. Nothing will halt the progress of weight gain like missed meals – it's totally unacceptable – so having these foods that don't need to be refrigerated is a necessity.

### **When you're beat up and don't feel like eating**

One of the toughest times to eat is actually when you feel beat up and overtrained. One of the classic signs of overtraining is that full body achiness and lethargy that just seems to wipe out your

## *Eating Through the Sticking Points*

appetite. These are the times when I find it best to make a high calorie protein shake (my favorite – whole milk, chocolate protein powder, a banana, natural peanut butter, and little ice) to help with recovery. Another trick I use to help facilitate recovery is a “green” shake, where I put handfuls and handfuls of kale or spinach in a blender with water, fresh berries, and yogurt. The high vitamin, mineral, and antioxidant content definitely seem to help with recovery. And the recovery is when we grow. This is also when I try to take extra naps any time I can. I can’t tell you how many naps I’ve taken in my truck, just to get in extra sleep for recovery. If I get to work early, or have some extra time during my lunch break, I’ll grab a quick nap reclined in the seat of my truck. I’ll also try to take a 30-minute nap before almost every training session, as well as a long 2-3 hour nap after my heaviest session on Saturday afternoons; this additional sleep is invaluable for recovery.

### **What to eat before a meet or big PR attempt:**

One of the most important times to eat big is the day before a big meet or PR attempt. This is the time to eat copious amount of carbohydrates, salt, and fluids in order to “bloat” as much as possible. If you have never done this, you will not believe how much it will help with strength. Things like Chinese food (with lots of soy sauce), pasta, Cheez-Its, Pop-Tarts, Gatorade, broth or Ramen noodles, and SpaghettiOs or other canned pasta are golden because they provide tons of carbohydrates, salt, and water to help your body to retain as much fluid as possible for big attempts in the weight room or competition.

The day before our meet this summer, Jon Gold, Phil Pierce and I had a competition to see who could eat the most food in one day. We were constantly sending texts with pictures of our meals, which was hilarious and urged on our competitive spirit. We all ate similar amounts, but Jon still has the pictures on his phone. He had a dozen donuts with milk, table full of Cracker Barrel – which consisted of consisted of a piece of salt cured ham that hung off the sides of his plate, 3 fried eggs, hash-brown casserole, 3 pancakes with maple syrup, fried apples, biscuits and gravy, milk, orange juice, and coffee, a box of Cheez-Its with two quarts of Kool-Aid (double sugar), Hibachi steak and noodles, a bag of Double Stuff Oreos and gallon of milk, Chinese buffet, and chicken alfredo from Olive Garden.

I typically will eat this way from 24 hours out down to the last 6 hours or so before a competition. The last 6 hours before a competition, I’ll continue to get salt, fluid, and carbs, but will do so with things that are a little easier on my stomach like fruit, Pedialyte and Gatorade, broth, oatmeal with honey (sits well with me, but can irritate some people), peanut butter and honey sandwiches, and a whey/waxy maize shake in water. I’ll continue to eat and drink this throughout the competition as well since most of it is easily digestible and not irritating to my stomach.

### **“You have to eat your way through the sticking points”**

Hugh Cassidy used to say that “you have to eat your way through the sticking points,” and he was right. Big guys who lift big weights have learned this lesson. Unfortunately there are far too many little guys out there who think they want to lift big weights, but really just want to keep their abs. Getting strong is hard. Eating big is hard too, but it makes getting strong quite a bit easier. The amazing thing is that once you’ve gotten big and strong, then cutting any excess bodyfat is far easier than getting big and strong was. Virtually every guy from the beginning of this article who told stories about the ridiculous amount of food he ate to gain weight, had, after accomplishing that goal, cut back down to 10% bodyfat or lower, and usually in less than 3 months. Only now, the lifters are 240 pounds with single digit bodyfat instead of 160 pounds with single digit bodyfat. Cutting the bodyfat is easy with the metabolic increase gained from 60 additional pounds of muscle. Eating big and gaining some

## *Eating Through the Sticking Points*

excess bodyfat are the means to an end: to perform and (for you vain people) to look like you want to. So keep your eyes on the prize, especially as we go into the winter and holiday season – there is no easier time to eat big than now. Start eating your way through the sticking points today, and you'll be hitting PRs in no time.

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**Matt Reynolds** has 16 years of experience competing in the sports of powerlifting and strongman and coaching barbell-based strength and conditioning. He first totaled “elite” in powerlifting in 2004, and has best meet lifts of 600 squat, 455 bench press, and a 705 deadlift (all raw). He won his professional status in the sport of Strongman in 2006, and currently owns one of the strongest gyms in the country, STRONG Gym, where 43 of his members have deadlifted over 500 pounds. Since 2005 he has served as strength coach for a 5A high school in Springfield, Missouri. He also serves as a staff coach for Starting Strength Seminars.

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