

# Starting Strength

## Explorations in Lifting and Liberty: A Free Market Look at the Fitness Industry

by

Michael Wolf, SSC

April, 2011, New York City. I was about to hit my six year anniversary as a personal trainer at a mainstream fitness industry gym. My desire to leave the company had been building for over a year when something happened that finally pushed me over the edge. I gave notice the next day, and haven't looked back.

I worked at an extremely busy club with over 5,000 members and about 1500 different people visiting the club on an average day. Unlike most gyms, the place was busy even during off-peak times; the phrase "packed like a sardine" was probably invented to describe this gym at 6 pm.

As a trainer trying to put my clients through a linear progression, the situation was increasingly frustrating. Finding a rack to work on with my clients was a tough proposition. Using it for more than ten minutes before being pestered with "How much longer you gonna be on there, anyway?" by gym bros who wanted to use it for upright rows or quarter squats was a pipe dream.

I distinctly remember the evening in question that April. I had a client who had agreed to dedicate our session time to barbell-based strength training. But that night, no matter where we went, we simply could not find a rack or bench press to work on, nor were any dumbbells available at the weights he needed for any kind of reasonable second-best substitution for the bench press.

The situation was frustrating but typical. What tipped me over the edge that night was seeing why none of the three racks were available: a colleague was using a rack with his client, a man who looked to be in great shape. Wearing a tank top and showing off his tanned, bulging biceps, his trainer had him doing double-underhand rack pulls for sets of 10 with one plate per side. And the guy was struggling. I watched as he completed a set, veins bulging and out of breath. I looked around for a few minutes to find a space for my client, and when I came back, the guy was doing another set. Still 135, still double-underhand, still a rack pull and not even a full deadlift, still a set of 10, and still struggling.

This trainer had the same company rank as I did and was getting paid the same as I was, for wasting space on one of only three available racks, to have his client do this silly exercise. Further, he had done such a bad job with the guy up to this point that he hadn't even prepared a muscular man for the task of doing sets of 135×10 rack pulls. I couldn't take it anymore, and gave notice the following morning. I had some very difficult financial moments over the next year, but I've never regretted that decision.

## Trainer vs. Coach

If this article is just about my personal story, that wouldn't hold your attention for very long, so why spill ink on such a long anecdote? Because the lessons it teaches us, if we look for them, are very important for understanding why licensure for personal trainers is a bad idea, and how things actually do improve over time in the fitness industry, if we leave it alone.

In general, being a personal trainer at a mainstream fitness industry gym is more akin to being like a fitness butler or waitress, than it is to being an educator and coach. You bring the people what they ask for, you make a small part of their day more pleasant, and they're more likely to come back for more. Having done it myself for six years and managed hundreds of other trainers for four of those years, I know this personally, but it's easily observable if you walk into a globo gym chain and watch what 99% of the trainers are doing, as opposed to the work of a coach, who is hired for his expertise and sometimes even specifically to tell the person, "No, you're going to do it this way."



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Exceptions to this rule certainly exist: there are, here and there, good trainers at mainstream fitness industry gyms. And even respected coaches need to have a degree of flexibility. As anyone who makes a living working with real people in real time can attest, being absolutely hard-line on every issue is a good path to needing a new career. A true coach, however, won't compromise on core principles to please and retain a client. A coach strives to educate his clients, lifters, and athletes and achieve buy-in to his system, so he can get to the more important work of producing results. Much like in teaching and parenting (so I've heard), a strategy of complete mollification eases tensions in the short run but letting the children run the school doesn't ultimately help the children.

Why is this mollification strategy employed almost universally by globo gym personal trainers? And why was I so put off by it that it made me quit a relatively stable job? Because, as the economists tell us, *incentives matter*.

Thousands of mainstream fitness industry gym locations dot the landscape of America, each employing anywhere from a few to dozens of personal trainers. These trainers only get paid for their billable hours with clients, normally receiving only about 30–40% of the cost of the session, and get no paid vacation. There is also a very low barrier to entry, since showing up to the interview and being reasonably personable are often all it takes to get the job.

What are the odds that most of these trainers are competent teachers of loaded human movement and serious students of the relevant science, who can truly bring value to their clients? About the same as socialism actually working this time ("We just need the right people in charge!"). Of course exceptions exist, but everyone who spends a lot of time in mainstream fitness industry gyms

knows these exceptions are few and far between. The incentives for really good coaches to be at global gyms just aren't there, and even if they start there, they eventually move on.

## Value As the Incentive

The primary value the average trainer brings to the table is the accountability and motivation that keeps the client coming to the gym. That's enough for some clients to continue paying for training indefinitely, but not for most. Most clients figure that once they get on regular routine and schedule, they can stick with it without the trainer after a while. They may be wrong, but that's what they think. Trainers know this, but without the higher-level skills and knowledge that their compensation structure doesn't incentivize them to acquire, they struggle to create additional value.

This partly explains why we see so many shenanigans coming out of these places. Their trainers are attempting to create more perceived value, so people will continue using their services if accountability and motivation are no longer perceived as sufficiently valuable for the cost. From "muscle confusion" to coming up with an endless array of progressively sillier ways to use the same limited set of equipment, i.e. using the prone hamstring curl machine to do "butt blasters" or having clients stand one legged on a BOSU doing 3-lb dumbbell curl-to-press with the left arm while doing a one-arm cable incline fly with the right.

Some other often-employed strategies are spotting every rep excessively, so the client uses either far more weight than he can on his own, or ridiculously light weights that don't actually require a spot. Or the trainer simply becomes an armchair psychologist or "problem dumpster" who clients can talk to about all their issues for an hour and leave feeling better, even if no actual physical improvement is ever accomplished. The strategy is the same: create greater perceived value to keep clients paying.

But all this happens because incentives matter. The trainer needs clients, clients who will pay the rate are hard to come by, and it's easier and faster to come up with new circus tricks to entertain clients than it is to spend months or even years developing the harder skill set necessary to become an effective coach.

## Licensure vs. Competence

Now we can come back to my story. The trainer taking up that rack with his client straining and struggling to do 135×10 double underhand rack pulls wasn't giving the client anything he *needed*. He was giving that client, in some way or another, what the client *wanted*. I don't know what it was – likely some kind of pump and the feeling that he had worked hard – but he was voluntarily continuing to pay for a service he saw as valuable, regardless of whether I agreed with his assessment.

It took me a few years to realize this, and when I finally did, it made me much less frustrated and much more hopeful about the future of our industry. It also helped me understand why government licensure is a terrible idea.

Over time, more and more people have become interested in learning to do the barbell lifts. Some even commit to long term *training* – as we define it – and to getting stronger. At the time of my story from 2011, I had prodded and cajoled about one third of my clients into focusing on barbell training. Seven years later, I run a successful business coaching about four times as many people, with 100% of them focusing primarily on strength and the barbell lifts. How did this happen?

## The Free Market

It happened because people were allowed to innovate, to try new things, and to spread the word about their non-conforming practices. Crossfit spread like wildfire and *Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training* has sold over half a million copies because there were no laws in place restricting the practice of personal training or fitness. **The free market directly facilitated the shockingly massive increase in the number of people squatting, pressing, deadlifting, cleaning, and snatching today.**

I worked at a mainstream fitness industry gym for well over two years before ever witnessing a single person – trainer or member – squat below parallel or wear lifting shoes. That was the state of the industry in the mid 2000s. Now, many of those same globo gyms have racks and platforms, and most even have multiple sets of bumper plates. You can now find dozens of CrossFit affiliates in major cities with adequate equipment to train on, and even many specialty strength and/or Olympic lifting gyms across the country.



There was no dictate from on high and no law passed that this is now That Which Must Be Done, no regulation that personal trainers and fitness instructors must now teach everyone to squat below parallel. It was solely and completely the freedom of people to choose what they wanted to do that allowed it to happen, coupled with the rise of social media, another free market innovation that began around the same time as both Crossfit's increase in popularity and the publishing of the first edition of *Starting Strength*. That all three of these things happened around the same time (2004–2005) is no coincidence. All contributed to the market's improving upon the situation, much to the benefit of everyone.

And this is an often misunderstood thing about the market. It doesn't mean that right here, right now, in this very moment, everything is perfect. That certainly wasn't the case in 2011 and it isn't now, either. But it's *much* better now in 2018 than it was in 2011. The truth is that the free market is the best mechanism to allow improvements to our situation over time. Of course there are mistakes made, but markets allow entrepreneurs and business owners and managers to learn from their mistakes, so they or others will do better the next time.

But once a scope or standard of practice is legislated into place, codified by a bureaucracy that exists primarily for the purpose of its own continued existence, experimentation and different approaches become *illegal*. Whatever the current conventional wisdom is now becomes the only way that trainers are permitted to practice, or they risk losing their professional license and their ability to make a living.



## A State License for Trainers?

If there had been government licensure in place in 2003, CrossFit would never have gotten the chance to grow the way it did. The conventional wisdom at the time in the fitness industry was – and to some extent still is today – all about balance and coordination and stability balls and light weights and variety. Olympic lifting, powerlifting, and general strength training would never have gotten a chance to grow exponentially since then, as they have. People who appreciated Rip's combination of clear instruction, cranky humor, and persuasive analysis would not have gone on to coach others using it, because it would have literally been *against the law*.

Thankfully government licensure wasn't (and still isn't) in place, and the market has created a large and growing space for niche coaches to actually make a living coaching their niche in the private sector. Crossfit is so mainstream that it can hardly be called a niche anymore. Meanwhile, powerlifting coaches, Olympic lifting coaches, and general strength coaches can make a living without having to be employed by a national team, professional sports team, or university. If they get results for their clients, they can do things the way they want, on their own terms, and make a living doing it. This is unprecedented, and those who have been coaching these things for more than 10 years understand how game-changing it is.

The incentives are now in place both to recognize and abhor people charging large sums of money for glorified babysitting or worse, as well as for competent coaches to open up separate businesses and programs that cater to the people who now specifically want to train for strength.

So the useless trainer giving his client a stupid exercise and a facilitating a complete lack of progress for \$110 an hour back in 2011 wasn't really useless after all. He was giving the client exactly what he wanted, while playing a very useful role in a system that may eventually lead to no one ever doing that anymore, because the free market is in the process of making lifting so popular and well known that no one would *want* to waste their time that way anymore.

The free market is what allowed me to learn and explore more about training and lifting than was taught to me by the multiple alphabet soup certifications I had collected. The free market is what allowed me to leave that company and hang my own shingle when I was sufficiently irritated by what I saw. The free market is what now allows me to decide how best to safely and effectively coach my own clients to help them get stronger, instead of being bound by the dictates of a board of orthopedic surgeons and physical therapists who have no experience or education regarding barbell training, but act as if they do.

Sure, the market also allows trainers, like the one I saw, to waste their clients' time. For all I know, the same guy is still wasting people's time at the same gym. But no one is forcing his clients



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## *A Free Market Look at the Fitness Industry*

to pay. They're getting exactly the service they want, and if not, they can stop or find a new trainer. It is the classic Nirvana Fallacy to compare the admittedly imperfect market to a fictional unicorn-regulated system where somehow the people in charge are both all-knowing and benevolent, and who create perfect standards of practice and education.

Anyone who lives in the real world knows this isn't what actually happens, and anyone who has been following CREP's attempts to get state licensure of exercise prescription legislation on the books knows that the people who would be in charge under such a system have no business regulating barbell squats or strength training at all. Feel free to read the articles and watch the lectures by Rippetoe and Butland on this topic to get specific details, but it's obvious that this would be the case, and has indeed been the case in practice. CrossFit's and Starting Strength's continuing fight against licensure is one we should all get behind.

The actual real world comparison is between an imperfect market which allows things to get better over time, and which has done so to a mind-bendingly tremendous degree in the last ten years on the one hand, and a much worse and far more imperfect regulatory regime on the other, one that would stifle our ability to improve the system over time by permanently codifying standards of practice that don't allow us to teach our clients to do heavy below-parallel squats, deadlifts, and presses for all the bad, uninformed reasons you've heard a million times before.

As strength coaches who care about both the integrity of our own industry and the success and safety of our lifters, we should care deeply when we see silly bullshit masquerading as fitness *and* poor, uninformed barbell coaching. But we shouldn't make the mistake of jumping in and saying, "Well, this is a problem – the government should do something!"

There is, in fact, a problem. But what's fixing it faster than anything else would or could, without infringing on anyone's personal choice as to how to practice their profession or how to spend their consumer dollars, is letting the free market run its course. Just get out of our way and let us spread the word through client success, through social media, and through articles like this one and hundreds of others on the web and in print. People are getting the message, and will continue to do at the pace they are willing to learn and try new things, unless the law forbids them from paying a professional to learn something else. Sounds to me like the best success we can hope for, in our imperfect world filled with imperfect but amazing humans.

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## *What is “Starting Strength”?*

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