

Starting Strength

The First Three Questions

by

Mark Rippetoe

By now, lots of people have done “the program,” and lots of people have gotten stuck – their progress has stalled at some point, having done what they thought was “the program” discussed in *Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training* and *Practical Programming for Strength Training* to the letter. Let’s examine the problem more closely, and find a way to keep this from happening.

Strength is simply the production of force against an external resistance – in this case, the loaded barbell. If the load on the barbell you’re lifting increases over time, you’ve gotten stronger. The simple idea is that, for untrained people, strength accumulates rather quickly if you ask it to, and the stronger you get/the longer you’ve trained, the slower your strength increases. We force the process to occur by adding a little weight every time you train, until that stops working. At that point it becomes more complicated.

But not until then. You just do the program and use every means at your disposal to keep from getting stuck.

By “the program”, I mean the novice progression detailed in both books. For a young novice training 3 days a week, the squat and deadlift will increase a little each workout for a while – 5 pound jumps work well for several months. Sets of 5 reps have proven their value over decades of experimentation, to the extent that the experiment is over. Likewise, 3 sets of 5 have proven to work for everything except the deadlift, which gets only one set of 5.

Press and bench press alternate, each increasing a little every time they’re trained, albeit with smaller increments – perhaps 1.5 to 2 pounds – because the limiting muscle groups are smaller and fewer in number. Shortly after you start, the power clean is introduced and alternates with the deadlift; it goes up a little every time too, 5 pounds at first and then slowing to resemble the press and bench press increments. Since the deadlift is always stronger than the squat at first, its head start keeps it ahead of the squat even though it gets trained half as often after the clean is introduced.

By “stuck”, I mean that the trainee becomes incapable of making workout-to-workout increases in weight on the basic exercises. No program in the world works forever. A human obviously cannot add 5 pounds to his squat 3 times per week for 15 years. He *can* for several months, the number of which depends on his ability to correctly execute the spirit and the details of the program. It is better to remain unstuck and making slow progress than it is to have to figure out how to get unstuck.

Most people have problems with the spirit and the details, and getting prematurely stuck is quite common. By “prematurely”, I mean within the first 3 months, surely, and probably the first 4

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months, which can almost always be sustained by just paying attention. So I get asked about this a lot: what do I do when I get stuck? Go to an intermediate program?

I'd rather ask this question: Why are you stuck when you shouldn't be? And then I always ask these 3 very important questions, in this order.

Question 1

How long are you resting between sets? This is usually the reason a kid is stuck, because he'll usually say, "Oh, *at least* 2 or 3 minutes." Strength training is not conditioning, and if you do not recover from the fatigue induced by the previous set, then accumulating fatigue limits your ability to complete the sets and reps required by the program. In a novice program, fatigue is not a variable we wish to introduce, because force production is the adaptation we want, not conditioning.

Strength is the goal of the novice program, and its close friend muscular hypertrophy. We're trying to get bigger and stronger here, and taking the squat from 115x5 to 335x5 accomplishes this task every time. With 4 months of constant progress, this can be accomplished even given a missed workout or two (for funerals out of town and such). So you do whatever you have to do to make this happen, and it's quite obvious that if resting 7 minutes between sets alleviates the fatigue from the previous set, which is necessary to complete all three sets of 5, then you rest 7 minutes. Maybe 8. We'll get hot, sweaty, and out of breath later – now, we're getting big and strong.

Again, this question is first because it is the Number 1 Error made by novice trainees. It's easy to fix, so fix it. If time is a factor, start the warmups of the next exercise, but rest enough between work sets to get *all* the work done.



A lifter adjusts the rest interval timer in the [Starting Strength app](#).

Question 2

How big a jump are you taking in weight on the bar between workouts? "Oh, 10 pounds on the squat – I missed that the past couple of workouts, in fact I lost a couple of reps – and 5 pounds on the bench and press. I need my bench at 300, you know. Got to get there *fast*, my man!"

This type of impatience is usually accompanied by the Number 1 Error as well. It is due to the failure to appreciate the fundamental process by which strength accumulates. *Stress* is that which disrupts homeostasis – the current level of physiological adaptation. Stress is a change in an organism's environment sufficient to cause the organism to adapt to the new requirements imposed by the change. Whether it is a mosquito population adapting to an insecticide or a weightlifter adapting to 5 pounds added to last week's deadlift, *adaptation* is the process we manipulate in order to get stronger.

A strength increase is the accumulation of gradual adaptations in force production, and training is the organization of this activity to produce the most efficient adaptation curve. If you attempt to use – through impatience or pigheadedness – incremental increases that are too large to permit adaptation, then adaptation cannot occur. You cannot go from 115x5 to 195x5 on the squat or the deadlift in one

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workout. Likewise, having started at 115x5x3 and gotten to 165x5x3 in 10-pound jumps, the continued use of 10-pound jumps will result in you getting stuck, because 5-pound jumps are sustainable for a long time and 10-pound jumps are not. Likewise, 5-pound jumps don't work very long on the press, bench press, and power clean, so you have to obtain the equipment necessary to take smaller jumps. We know these things from experience. It saves time if you learn it from us rather than from your own failures.



Question 3

How much, and what, are you eating, and are you getting enough sleep? Most kids will say, “I’m eating about 2500 calories, taking a really jacked supp that has a lot of protein! Cause I’ve heard you can’t gain more than 3 pounds a month or it’s fat. Got to keep my razorabzz.”

A critical part of the stress/adaptation equation is *recovery*. Really, the process is: stress + recovery = adaptation. You have to be able to recover from the stress before the adaptation can occur. Therefore, if the stress is too big, you can’t recover and adapt, and if the factors that enable recovery are absent or sufficiently lacking, you can’t adapt.

Food and sleep are the critical factors under your control. And the way to ensure that you are eating enough is to just eat more than you are now, especially if your progress seems to be slowing. Most human males cannot make progress on a strength program with a diet of under 4000 calories a day, and on less than 1 gram of protein per pound of bodyweight. The older you are, the more critical protein intake becomes, because as you age protein absorption out of the gut becomes a less-efficient process.

The bigger you already are, the more food you need. A guy who is 6’2” and skinny at 180 needs more calories and protein than a guy who is 5’8” and skinny at 155. Guys like this may well need 6000 calories a day.

But nobody – and I mean *no-body* – can get big and strong on 2500 calories a day. This is a ridiculous piece of government-inspired bullshit, and has interfered with the progress of most people who try to get big and strong. And if you’re not willing to eat more than you want to, you won’t get big and strong.

Sleep may be the most anabolic substance in the world. If you are not getting enough sleep – no matter what the reason – it is very hard to grow, because the most potent recovery occurs during the sleep cycle. You may need to reevaluate your schedule, your bedroom arrangements, or your mattress if sleep is a problem for you. Stop regarding sleep as either a luxury or a scheduled obligation, and start regarding it as a training tool on par with your diet.

These 3 questions should be asked of everyone whose progress in the early stages of the novice progression is interrupted. It’s much easier to get unstuck by correcting these simple mistakes than it is to train ineffectively and cost yourself time and progress. The initial gains that can be made using the Starting Strength approach to novice training are low-hanging fruit. But you can’t pick it if you cut off your hands.

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