

Starting Strength

Training With A Hangover

by

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Over the years, I've had occasion to visit with many collegiate strength coaches, and one of their concerns always seems to be what to do with the athletes who show up in the weight room with gigantic hangovers. While colleges and universities are certainly citadels of learning, they're also Party Central. This is more the case at some places of higher learning than others, of course, but even at the most academic of institutions, there is a great deal of chugging and toking going on.

For some athletes at some schools, partying takes precedence over studying or even going to classes. It's the primary reason for being there. This is what I encountered when I assumed the job of Strength Coach at the University of Hawaii in 1974. I was hired by the football coach, but in a short period of time I was also working with all the other sports teams, both men and women. Fine with me. The more the merrier. I loved my job. What's not to like? Working with enthusiastic, highly-motivated young athletes, and the strength coach is in the unique position of never having to bench anyone. All he's trying to do is get them stronger, and with the males, significantly bigger as well.

I was, of course, aware of the wild drinking parties at the frat houses, and the ensuing party raids and "streaking" by large groups of males through campus, though I had never had to deal with it before. But at UH, it was a major concern since it was affecting my program. And it wasn't alcohol that was the problem – it was weed. Some of the finest marijuana in the entire world grew on the islands, and the Hawaiian athletes had access to all of it because it was their relatives who were growing it on Oahu, Maui, Kauai, and the Big Island.

Not only was excellent weed readily available, it was not expensive like it was in other parts of the country. Twenty bucks for an ounce and because it was of such high quality, that oz. lasted a long time. In addition, the athletic dorm, Hale Anuenue, was the main distribution center for the users on campus, both athletes and non-athletes. That's where I lived when I moved in from the village of Kaaawa on the North Shore. You could get a nice buzz just walking in the building.

The problem wasn't the weed, per se, but rather the way the athletes, especially the locals, were using it. I should mention that of the entire football team, I only knew one player who actually attended all his classes, Keith "Hoot" Gibson. There were some who never went to a class and just before the finals they would go in a group and intimidate the professors. They always got a passing grade. So the football players had lots of time on their hands. They would get up late, drive to one of the many beaches in Waikiki, off Diamond Head, Koko Head, Makapu point, and all the way around the eastern tip of the Koolau Range to Waimanalo Beach.

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They would get high on weed, sometimes adding in a few beers for good measure, lay on the beach, swim, snorkel, surf, and, of course, hit on the babes. Which were plentiful and looking for a good time as well, particularly on those strips of sand that were loaded with tourists.

Then they would come dragging into the weight room for their workouts. At first, I was completely at a loss as to what to do. It wasn't because I was unfamiliar with marijuana. I am a product of the sixties and started smoking weed when I was at the York Barbell. It was the drug of choice for nearly all of the lifters. We used it to relax, it helped with mental preparation, and no one ever abused it. We only smoked about once a week and then a joint would be enough for a group of four people. And no one ever dreamed of getting high before a workout.

I knew there was no way under the sun that I was going to get the athletes to change their habits. It was too ingrained in their culture. Yet they were all eager to pack on more muscle and get considerably stronger. The Hawaiians, in particular, respected strength and they wanted all they could get. Since I wasn't going to get them to stop their pre-training partying, I was going to have to teach them how to train when they were high.

While it sounds like a daunting task, it wasn't. I started with the leaders of the two main groups that were always off to the beach every morning: the Hawaiians, and the "Haoles," the local name for Caucasians. The black players, Popolos, weren't any problem. They didn't frequent the beaches nearly as much.

The first thing that I did was to tell them that they weren't allowed to miss a single workout and they had to do whatever was scheduled for that day. What had been happening was when they got really stoned, they would skip the session and later on come to me with some lame excuse. I knew they were testing me and I didn't buy it. Or they would show up on time for the workouts, but had piss-poor sessions.

They wanted to see if I would rat them out to the head football coach, Coach Price. If I did that I would never be able to gain their confidence again. The one thing you never wanted to do was shame a Hawaiian. This was true for every islander: Samoan, Tongan, Tahitian, Fijian, or any other Polynesian. I learned this when I taught Anthropology at York College, and it was reinforced even more strongly by living with them for six months out in the country. And this was also the case for the majority of the Haoles, which were mostly rednecks, and everyone understands how a redneck responds to any sort of insult.

So what I did was tell them that if they skipped training or failed to do the entire workout, I would not allow them to train in the weight room. I would not say a word to Coach Price unless they complained to him and if they did, I would tell him why they were 86ed.

This hit home. Like I mentioned, they coveted the idea of getting bigger and stronger. I also came with credentials, having worked with the Baltimore Colts and Houston Oilers, so they respected me and believed that I could deliver on my promise to make them considerably stronger. And now that I had their full attention, I told them how they could continue to get in plenty of partying and still get very, very strong.

They listened. Basically, I suggested that they go easy on the weed and alcohol and the psychedelic mushrooms they found on the island the night before a workout and also to back off on intake on the morning of the workout. "Don't drink any alcohol if you're going to be training that day. It's harder on your body than the weed. And only smoke about half as much as you normally do when you're at the beach. A couple hours before you train, drink some coffee and eat some fruit. Then when you come to the weight room, you'll be ready to handle some weight."

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For the most part, they heeded my advice, but invariably they overdid it the night before a tough session. Usually some party for someone's birthday or something of that nature. Then I had to work on them, *psychologically*. I impressed upon them the importance of informing me if they were feeling punky. They trusted me and knew it was in their best interest to confide in me. The first thing I did was have them drink some extra strong coffee which I brewed in a percolator in my minuscule office in the weight room. Whenever I needed a boost, I double perked it and it gave me, and everyone else who drank any, an excellent jump-start.

Then I had them do about ten minutes of warm-ups to get their pulse rates up: sit-ups, back hypes, and even some calisthenics. If I hadn't trained yet, I worked out with them. It was never one individual, but always a small group who hung out together, usually with their own kind. Once they started, I pushed them harder than normal. From experience, I had learned when you're nursing a hangover, the hardest part of the workout is the rest periods. It's during the breaks that you feel like death warmed over. During the execution of the exercise, you're forced to pay attention to what you're doing and the headache or uneasy gut isn't your primary concern.

Once I had them in motion, I never let up and soon they were huffing and puffing like they'd run a fast mile. This is what I was after. The strenuous exercise helped flush the toxins out of their bodies and the further into the session they got, the better they felt.

And I made it a point to push them to personal records on several of the exercises in the program for that day. I wanted to show them that they did have control over their bodies, even when they wanted to throw up or just go lie down on the sit-up boards. I told them that even though they felt like crap, the circulatory, respiratory, muscular, and nervous systems can still work at full throttle if their will was strong enough.

Since they wanted to prove to me that they were capable of pushing through the pain and nausea, they ended up moving more weight on the various movements than they had ever done before. They were both delighted and somewhat stunned when they finished their sessions. No one had ever forced them to do that before. Before I arrived, the weight program was run by an assistant coach. When the athletes complained to him that they felt crappy, he always allowed them to do an abbreviated program or let them skip that day entirely. What they had learned was they had control over their behavior if they also had the desire to get stronger.

From that point on they were hooked. Now they knew, for certain, that they could get in a solid workout even when they had a hangover. Yet I advised them not to make a habit of training when they were loaded. I told them that it takes a toll on the nervous system to have to go through such an ordeal, and it was harder for the nervous system to recover than the muscular system.

After the workout, I advised them to eat a hearty meal with the emphasis on protein foods, and then get some rest. And to get to bed a bit earlier than usual that night in order to give their spent bodies more time to recover.

After that grueling, they all eased up on their partying the nights and mornings before a workout. While they now knew they could get through a tough session, they didn't relish the idea of going through another Bataan Death March again real soon.

In the first three months on the job I had to put just about the entire team through workouts when they were hammered. Once they understood that I wasn't going to let them back out of doing the difficult exercises simply because they had overindulged on alcohol, Pakalolo, mushrooms, or any other substance that altered their natural states, they all started planning ahead much better and began making greater gains on all their lifts.

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Another thing they all learned was the workout following the one where they had a hangover was a piece of cake. They breezed through those, and the contrast was so great, this prompted them to take it even easier the night and morning before a taxing session.

Plus, they all got considerably stronger a lot faster because being able to still work hard when they were under the weather gave a huge boost to their self-confidence.

But, after all, they were young men who were always seeking a good time, and some still arrived at the weight room looking like the cat dragged them in. But they no longer begged off. They did their work, taking advantage of my coffee and advice. Nothing could stop them from working out now that they knew how to override their bodies with their minds.

An extreme example of this happened one night, very late, when four of the football players, all Haoles, knocked on my door and asked for the key to the weight room. I could feel the energy vibrating off them and asked what they were on. "Sunshine acid," one of them said and the others dumbly nodded in agreement. It was well after midnight and I was not going to get dressed and go with them to the weight room. "Are you sure you want to train in this condition? I'm not going to babysit you idiots."

No, they all reassured me, all they wanted was the key. They wanted to see if they could train under the influence of LSD. It seemed absurd, yet I had watched Jack Hill win the Teen-Age Nationals in 1969 while he was on the drug. I gave them the key.

About an hour and a half later, they woke me up to give me back the key, although I had distinctly told them not to. "So" I asked, "How did it go?"

"Once we got into it and could focus long enough to do a set we did fine. Except," he added with a laugh, "John forgot that he had the bar on his back when he was set up to squat and let go of the bar to pull up his pants."

They all broke out in hysterical laughter. When they finally settled down, I asked, "What happened?"

"The bar crashed to the floor and it sounded like a bomb. Scared the shit out of us. I think it helped sober us up some. He wasn't hurt at all because he didn't try to fight it."

"I wouldn't spread this around. Coach Price may not like the idea of me giving you guys the key when you're under the influence of acid."

"Oh don't worry about that, once was enough, but it was fun in a crazy sort of way. Bet nobody else has ever done that," the spokesman of the group said. I had to agree.

They were all stone sober. The exercise had burned off all the effects of the LSD and they were back in the weight room the next afternoon for their scheduled session.

In 1979 when I worked with the football team at the University of Maryland and later on, 1989, when I became the Strength Coach at Johns Hopkins University, I once again had to deal with athletes coming into the weight room with hangovers. However, marijuana was not the culprit at these schools. It was still used, but in moderation because of its price. What could be obtained on Oahu for twenty bucks was now ten times that much. So the athletes chose a more legal and inexpensive method of getting high: they drank beer, and sometimes lots of it.

Parties always included games and contests that revolved around chugging mass quantities of beer. The rushes at frat houses were notorious for consuming multiple kegs of beer. Reports of passing out and throwing up were measured against other wild parties to see how they compared. It was a watered down version of *Animal House*.

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Even when a group of athletes went out for an evening of drinking, many overdid it, and as a result I often had several of them to deal with in the weight room the following day. Compared to how ripped the athletes at UH got on a regular basis, these stateside athletes were easy to deal with. For one thing – and this was particularly true for the Johns Hopkins athletes – they were much smarter than the majority of those attending UH. Not only smarter, but more motivated to achieve. This college degree was the first step for them toward making their mark on the future. At UH only a few even got a degree. They were there to play, not study.

So it was much easier to convince the University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins athletes how to handle their party times.

The first thing I taught them when they stumbled into the weight room with giant hangovers was that the alcohol was nothing more than expensive carbohydrates. Which means it can be used as fuel for physical activities. I also advanced the rather foreign notion that just because they feel terrible that doesn't mean that they can't get in a solid workout. Their muscular and skeletal systems and all their organs are still going to operate exactly the same. All they needed to do was override the splitting headaches and upset stomachs and they could still get stronger.

As with my UH athletes, this had to be proven first hand. It just seemed too illogical. "How is it going to be possible for me to squat four hundred pounds today when I had trouble walking up the steps to the Athletic Center?" one football player asked me.

"I'm about to show you," I replied.

I didn't brew my own coffee at Hopkins or Maryland, but I always carried a large thermos of strong coffee to the weight room for my own use. I also added another step that I hadn't used at UH – B-complex tablets. I kept a bottle in my gym bag.

I had them take two B vitamins and a cup of coffee, then had them spend ten or fifteen minutes warming up making sure they did something to get their pulse rates up. Usually it was some form of calisthenics. Nothing elaborate, just jumping jacks or squats or power cleans with an empty bar worked fine.

Then I followed the same procedure as I did at UH. I pushed them through their planned workout at a fast pace. For anyone battling a hangover, or a cold for that matter, the worst part of any workout is the rest periods. Plus, once I got the blood rushing through their systems, I wanted to keep it in motion. When you're doing an exercise, all your thoughts are centered on the necessary technique, but when you're at rest, those thoughts dwell on your sad condition.

They soon discovered that what I told them about alcohol being a fuel was true. They had plenty of energy available since they had carb-loaded the night before. All they had to do is concentrate and focus on what they were doing, and they ended up with a most productive workout. About halfway through a session, they started to feel more human as the intense exercise burned off the booze. And again, I leaned on them to break at least one personal record just to prove they can when they feel like dog shit. They always did, partly to prove to me that they could and also because they had unknowingly provided their bodies with some extra high-octane energy.

When they finished, they were rather stunned that they had been able to do what they just did. They didn't believe it was possible because no one had ever taught them it was possible. While I wanted them to learn that they were capable of doing difficult physical tasks when they had a hangover, I didn't want them to get in the habit of coming to the weight room loaded or nursing such a headache from drinking. On a regular basis, I told them that if they did this frequently they were not going to continue to make the same progress they had been making, because having to push through a hard session too many times because of a hangover was just too demanding on the nervous system.

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What they needed to do was make strength training their number one priority. “This is a special time in your life, and you don’t want to screw it up by smoking weed too much or getting loaded on alcohol too often,” I lectured them. “What you must do is learn moderation, the Golden Mean.”

I advised them to set quotas on their alcohol consumption during the week in accordance with what they were planning to do the next day. Since Monday is always a busy day in both the classroom and weight room, abstaining on Sunday is the smart idea. Wednesday is the light day in the weight room, so two or three beers are okay. What I have found is that the most troublesome workout of the week is on Friday, the medium day. Bars close to college campuses always have specials on Thursday nights to lure the students in to get a jump on the Friday and Saturday night attractions.

Low drink prices and having fun with the gang are just too hard to pass up, and this is usually the night that most overindulge. This has a negative effect on the Friday workouts. Many sports teams do not practice on Fridays, which makes going out and partying hard on Thursday even more tempting.

“You don’t have to skip going out with your friends on Thursdays, but set a limit on how much you drink and what time you’re going to call it quits. Then you’ll be ready for the Friday workout.”

In many cases, it isn’t the amount of alcohol that the athlete consumes that causes the problem, but the fact that he stayed up so late he didn’t get his needed rest. The lack of rest is a greater deterrent to performance in the weight room than how much he drank.

This is simply a matter of discipline. If getting stronger is important to the athlete, he will make sure he gets plenty of rest. Then if he wants to get blasted on Friday night, go for it. I tell them to think of their partying in terms of heavy, medium, and light. Balance the intake of cannabis, beer, wine, or the latest designer drug with your schedule that week.

How to have a productive workout when you’re hung over is a most valuable thing to know, even if you happen to be a teetotaler, because I guarantee that you’ll encounter someone in your gym who can benefit from the knowledge.

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