

Starting Strength

In Defense of Simplicity

by

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As you travel around the online fitness world, or even if you collect more serious discussions in actual published books, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that there's a very strong tendency to complicate things. Numbers of exercises, set and rep schemes, Rate of Perceived Exertion, periodization schemes, therapy babble, "performance gyms" (so Elite!) muddled definitions, the list goes on. It doesn't require a habitually cynical nature to suspect there's a good bit of Bovine Feces being shoveled here. Let's see if we can cut through some of that by contrasting a few popular complex systems with the tried and true Starting Strength Novice Linear Progression.

Many of the self-styled sophisticates of strength training are fond of the periodization schemes popularized by "The Russians." Verkoshansky, Issurin, Medvedev, Zatsiorsky, Ozolin, et al. When somebody starts quoting *Supertraining* to you, you know you're in the presence of such. Another "tell" is a statement like "oh, you think you know more than Matveyev?!?!" with the attendant eye-rolling.

Or we're assured that our interlocutor is friends with a guy who trains under a coach from some former Soviet Bloc Commie hellhole, which is supposed to confer instant unimpeachable credibility. While it is generally pointless to argue with them, I usually simply point out that, without exception, those coaches were in the business of figuring out a way – *any way* – of putting another 10 or 20 kilos on the totals of the "professional" weightlifters the Soviets drugged up and sent to the Olympics *to avoid treep to Gulag ant proof superiority of Rosshian Seestem*.

I do not train Vasily Alexeev or David Rigert, and neither do 99% of the coaches you'll ever meet. We train Novices, and Novices can put more weight on the bar, lift it for 3 sets of 5, recover in 48-72 hours and repeat. Why would you employ some hyper-specific peaking program used by one coach on one international championship level lifter to peak one lift at one specific meet when more weight on the bar for *every lift every session* is still available?

But at least those guys care about strength. More irritating are the Movement Gurus whose shtick basically boils down to finding something that's "dysfunctional" with the way you're moving and charging you a whole bunch of money to prescribe an array of odd (they'd call them "unique," "specific," or "carefully designed") "corrective exercises." They will claim unique knowledge of your hidden movement "dysfunctions," spot them faithfully in everybody who comes before them, diagnose a problem which usually revolves around a "tight _____" (fill in the blank with your favorite obscure pet muscle – psoas, piriformis, quadratus lumborum, "hip flexors," sartorius, VMO, etc.) and they're

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off to the races, putting you in all manner of stretched positions on the floor, in a cage thingy, or draped over a foam roller, the exquisite pain of which proves it must be effective.

So by this point, you believe there's something "wrong" with you, that it's a precursor to injury, that this trainer knows how to "fix it," and that doing loaded movement at this moment would be "loading dysfunction" and so dangerous as to be borderline negligent. After training many thousands of people from every demographic imaginable, Starting Strength Coaches know that none of this is necessary, beneficial, or anything other than a waste of time. Proper coaching of the movements used in the Starting Strength system ensures a safely loaded movement, while the nature of the big barbell exercises themselves takes care of any "imbalance/ asymmetry/ misfiring/ sequencing/dominance/ adhesion issues" you may have. The correctly coached squat, deadlift, and press are [far better screens for movement](#) than the Functional Movement Screen.

"Performance Gyms" are very fond of using the word "Elite" in their titles or program descriptions. These guys are really good at convincing high-strung parents that Little Johnny or Little Jenny – their "gifted" child athlete – has the best shot at The Big Time if they'll sign up for their Bootcamp for the development of (pick any 3): speed, agility, power, balance, explosiveness, strength, winning attitude, coordination, quickness, the first step, or vertical jump.

This is where the muddying of terms obscures reality: strength is the ability to produce force against an external resistance. Every one of the above qualities being listed as training goals is improved the most by getting stronger. Let me say that again: strength is what underpins every athletic quality we can point to, so increasing it improves every one of them all at once. Therefore, the quickest, surest, and most efficient path to improving those qualities is to get your young athlete really, really strong.

The Bootcamp, if it works at all, will work through the mechanism of the Novice Effect, which in this context means that for an untrained or detrained individual, everything "works." But it won't work for long, because it can't be *trained* – methodically, progressively advanced in some quantifiable way. And it's terribly inefficient because it's not specifically designed for developing *strength*. Finally, contrary to popular belief there is no "quickness strength," and what little strength quickness drills actually develop will influence only how quickly you can get your hands on an opponent, not whether or not you can move him once you do.

On the other end of the spectrum lies Rate of Perceived Exertion, universally referred to as RPE. The problem here is similar to a minor version of the problem with Russian periodization: it's most likely just not appropriate for you or your trainees. I have zero doubt that RPE is useful for highly-experienced, highly-accomplished lifters for whom the correct titration of the training **stress** and the optimization of the subsequent **recovery** and **adaptation** is a razor-thin line. Stresses are not accumulated over a week like an Intermediate lifter and certainly not every session like a Novice. In that world, there needs to be a way to quantify and categorize the stress so it can be accumulated in a controlled way and converted into high performance on a given meet day.

Advanced lifters have extremely high levels of body-awareness, proprioception, and years of experience to guide their "perception" of their rate of exertion. They are "tuned-in" to their sleep, stress, diet, minor dents and dings, and have in their tool kits a bunch of recollections of what tends to happen when they train with a headache vs. a head cold, a bad day at work vs. a spousal spat, or car trouble vs. poor sleep. Less experienced lifters don't have that bag of tricks and positively stink at evaluating the difficulty of a set. I know this, because I'm a solid Intermediate with a reasonably strong grasp of "all of this" and I positively stink at it. Trying to put your newbs on an RPE-based system is not necessary because they're gonna do 3 sets of 5, adding weight every time, regardless of their feelz, until it stops working.

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Percentage-based systems are widespread, and to borrow a phrase from CJ Gotcher, they “intuit well.” After all, you can’t max-out every day, all the time. Much better to work in the 70-80% of 1RM load range. Again, you’re a newb and this is not for you. Rip has written extensively on why untrained or detrained Novices don’t really have a 1 RM. To briefly and uncharitably recap: newbs are spazzes at all the movements and spazzes don’t do the movements well enough to call what they’re doing a “max.”

The Novice LP neatly and effectively sidesteps this whole problem by choosing the starting load by observation. SSCs observe the bar speed while coaching the newb through the learning of the lifts while adding weight each set until the bar perceptibly slows down. This is the weight at which the new trainee can perform 5 reps without form breakdown. You could call this a 5 RM if you simply cannot stop referring to RMs. But at no time in the execution of the NLP will loading be based on anything other than what you did last time plus the appropriate increment of increase. Simple as pie.

“What’s the rush, dude? You’ve got plenty of time to get your lifts up.” This one annoys me too, as it dresses itself up as casual sophistication that can’t be bothered with pedestrian concerns like PR scorecards, while at the same time implying that a program of rapid strength acquisition by its very nature courts injury. But really, it’s merely a veiled justification for not being very strong, for not being a very knowledgeable coach because you haven’t been through the process yourself, and for therefore not actually knowing what’s possible.

A Starting Strength Coach has been through the Novice LP and on a very personal level understands how powerful it is. He has been where you are, knows it’s going to be difficult, and knows the rewards will vastly outstrip the discomfort and fear a new trainee is feeling. He knows that the trainee must press on through the trepidation of looking at a bar loaded with 5 lb more than what almost pinned him last session. He knows how powerful it is when you step under that bar anyway – knowing full well it’s going to try to stick your head between your knees on its way to the floor – walk it out, and squat that sucker to depth 5 times. He knows that programming changes and de-loads commonly prescribed for trainees when things get hard and scary denies them this incredibly powerful dose of mental stress, and the toughness that comes with it. These “you have the rest of your life to get stronger” coaches have never put themselves through such a program. They don’t know that the relatively low strength levels they personally display are the common result of only 5 months on a decently-executed Novice Linear Progression.

And look, friends, you *may not* have a whole bunch of time between today and when a genuine need to be big and strong presents itself. Illness, a fall, a car wreck, or getting sucker punched for wearing a MAGA hat and having to have a friend hold your Heath Bar Blizzard while you issue a couple impromptu beatdowns are almost always unscheduled events. You actually have no idea when they’ll arise, but as an adult you should by now understand that all of these sorts of challenges are more successfully faced with a bigger reserve of both strength and muscle, aka *size*. Starting Strength Coach Dr. Jordan Feigenbaum recently wrote persuasively [in his newsletter](#) on the performance implications of such thinking.

Apart from that, when in life do we *ever* wish the journey to someplace we want or need to go to take any longer than is actually necessary? This is not me lobbying for being a big jerk who’s permanently annoyed because people aren’t moving fast enough when I’m trying to get to Sonic for a slush before Happy Hour ends. I’m saying it doesn’t make much sense to wander aimlessly like Dirk Gently when you know where you’re going and how to get there. The direct route to strength does not imply a headlong, take no prisoners rush to put weight on the bar any more than the direct route to Sonic implies going 75 in a 30.

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There are many more opportunities to be sidetracked, beguiled, hoodwinked, or bamboozled. Some of these ideas are straight up nonsense. Some of them are products of incomplete analysis. Some of them are excellent, but just not yet appropriate for your training level. Looking at these topics through the lens of the Starting Strength system allows you to cut through the dense fog of misinformation. If you understand that strength is simply the ability to produce force against an external resistance, that strength underpins every discreet athletic quality, and that a significant base of strength can be built surely and rapidly if you focus on it, you will inevitably come to the understanding that there is a clear path between where you are and where you say you want to go – where you **MUST** go if you're an athlete or an [Athlete of Aging](#). You will come to appreciate the simple, direct approach, and you will eschew the distractions that present themselves as coequal alternatives, *because you will understand that they're not*.

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