

# Starting Strength

## Train the Mind for Increased Strength

by

Tommy Suggs

*The secrets of how to get stronger by training your mind*

For some inexplicable reason my interest has always been drawn to and fascinated with the mind's capacity to influence the physical body. I remember watching a travel program back in the 1950s that took the viewer to interesting and mystical places. One program showed a yogi in India being buried underground without air. Hours later the yogi was uncovered and stood up and waved at the crowd. "How did he do that?" I wondered. The announcer informed me that the yogi was able to slow his bodily processes through the control of his mind, to a level that required virtually no oxygen. The idea of the mind being able to control the body to that extent intrigued me.

Within a few years of the yogi experience I read about an elderly woman pushing her car, with children inside, off a railroad track where it had stalled. How did she do that? The person writing the article indicated that the human being uses only a small portion of their true strength and during times of life-threatening situations the mind would override the mental limits that were in place and allow the full use of the available, but almost never used, strength. Mind – override mental limits – full use of strength: these were words, phrases and thoughts that set my mind to racing.

A year or so later I was watching our old black and white TV and happened to see a hypnotist act. Ordinary people were doing extraordinary physical feats. How was hypnosis able to work such physical miracles? My mind immediately recalled the yogi's control over his body and the little old lady's superhuman feat of strength. Could hypnosis enable me to lift heavier weights? What an interesting thought. I thought I would have a chance to explore in the near future.

It was the early 1960s and I had won the Texas State Olympic Weighting championship and desperately wanted to make the step up from the state to the national level of competition. Hypnosis as one of my stepping stones to imagined stardom remained in the back of my mind. Then a close friend developed a mental problem and was admitted to the mental hospital in Galveston, Texas. I drove an hour to Galveston several times a week to check on my friend. During the course of my regular visits I met a couple of psychiatrists who were responsible for evaluating and treating my friend. Of course I had to ask them about hypnosis. Both felt sure that hypnosis would enable me to lift more weight. One doctor, in particular, was interested in the fact that I was a lifter of some accomplishment and agreed to hypnotize me. Then at the last minute he backed out saying that he was afraid that

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the hypnosis would enable me to lift so much weight that I might hurt myself and he would be held responsible. *Lift so much weight through hypnosis that I might hurt myself?* The thought set my mind on fire, and I was ready to get a gun and hold it to his head to change his mind. But he offered a little more practical solution to my dilemma. He suggested self-hypnosis, also known as auto-suggestion in those days.

The good doctor recommended two books that were on the cutting edge of this new idea. They were available in the hospital's library. I quickly found them and spent many hours between visits with my friend reading and making notes. Then I would question my doctor friend to make sure I understood what I had read and, finally developed what I hoped would be a fail-proof self-hypnosis system. I believe the addition of this new mental aspect to my training helped me to reach a level of competency that allowed me to work up the courage to make my first trip to York, Pennsylvania, to meet the Olympic weightlifting coach. This trip resulted in me being given permission – after putting my best foot forward on the platform one Saturday – to train at the famous, and by invitation only, York Barbell Gym. This step eventually led to me being a member of the York Olympic lifting team, the perennial winners of the national Olympic Championship team title, and being hired as the managing editor of *Strength & Health* magazine. Could the addition of the mental aspect be partially responsible for all these wonderful things that happened to me in lifting? I truly believe so.

After my move to York, I of course continued with self hypnosis. Bill March quickly became my training partner and we trained on the power rack on the routine and method developed by Bill and Dr. Ziegler. Then Dr. Ziegler showed up unannounced one day, and a new energy entered the York gym: the exploration of the mental aspect of lifting heavier weights. What I am offering here is a chance to learn all that I learned and used, for only a few dollars attached to the coupon at the end of the article. (Just kidding. I couldn't resist saying that, as my first mail order physical fitness course just popped into my mind.) Here is what was finally distilled from my study, experience and time spent with many super athletes and a very crazy doctor who became a good friend.

Focus is what meditation and visualization is all about. Focus is the ability of the mind to focus on an object without interference from other thoughts – the static that is always present in our minds. When you focus the mind, the mind impresses the thought or visualization upon the subconscious. It is similar to the idea of the subliminal experiments conducted years ago where the word “thirst” was flashed upon a movie screen so quickly that the viewer watching the movie in progress never noticed it. However, the sales of soft drinks at intermission sky rocketed, proving the effectiveness of impressing ideas upon the subconscious. The method I used to impress positive images and ideas upon my subconscious will now be considered. I hope that the technique I developed and used to advantage for years proves as effective for you as it did for me.

The conscious mind never stops thinking; sleep is the only exception. Meditation and visualization provide a something for the mind to think or see that will be of benefit for you in your efforts to move up another rung on the ladder leading to your lifting dreams. *Meditation* places the attention of the mind on a certain object. The object can be a thought or a feeling. *Visualization* places the attention of the mind upon a visual act or movement. Both will be used in the method outlined below. Also, the thought, feeling or movement will change to fit differing goals and situations. For instance, certain images and movements will be different as the date of an important contest draws near, or if you just want to have a test day to learn what your limit poundage in a particular lift or lifts will be. The different aspects of the meditation discipline I ultimately developed to advance my lifting career are presented next.

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**Morning Practice:** The meditation and visualization practice described below should be performed the first thing in the morning. Set your alarm thirty minutes early so that this becomes a regular part of your day. Try not to miss, never. Regularity and repetition will provide the best results, and don't kid yourself with the thought that one day won't make a difference, it does. Wake up, go to the bathroom, put on the coffee and then go back to bed. Notice the time and then close your eyes and relax. Lie on your back with your hands at your side. Take three deep breaths; mentally follow the air in as it fills the lungs and out as the lungs deflate.

Then start at the bottom of your feet and think "relax" and consciously feel the muscles as they relax in that area. Move up to the calves, the thighs, the hips, the abs, the chest, the shoulders, the upper arms, the forearms, the neck and, finally, the head. Spend approximately thirty seconds on each body part. Don't let other thoughts enter your consciousness. If outside thoughts do appear return immediately to the body part prior to this intrusion and continue. **The more you learn to concentrate, the more you will benefit from the time spent doing this practice.** The ability to concentrate will not only amplify the effect of this meditation, but will prove a tremendous asset in training, in a contest, or when you want to break those personal records in training.

When you finish moving through the body parts, visualize the whole body as being completely relaxed. Hold this thought for a few minutes and when outside thoughts appear dismiss them and return immediately to focusing on relaxing the whole body. After a few minutes you will move into the second phase of the morning practice.

Shift your attention to the visualization of the workout you have planned. See yourself go thorough your routine exercise by exercise. Mentally feel the weight of the bar and how the movement will feel as you perform the exercise, heavy but performed in good form and with strength in reserve. Know that the weights will be heavy but also know that you will have the strength to handle it correctly for the designated number of repetitions. Feel the weights in your hands or on your back. Don't make the mistake of thinking the weight will feel light. Being unrealistic about how the weights will feel and the ease with which you will handle them will only lead to disappointment and a negative attitude when you find the weight you thought would feel like a feather instead feels heavy, like a training weight should feel.

Now for a visualization that may take some practice before you are able to accomplish it; practice and patience is required but the results will be worth the effort. I will be using two terms, *knower* and *observer*. When you visualize yourself under a heavy weight and mentally feel that weight you are the knower. When you step back and observe yourself performing the exercise you are the observer. Start out being the knower; you should concentrate on how the exercise will feel as you perform the first repetition. For the next repetition step back and see yourself performing the exercise in perfect form with strength to spare. On the third repetition again become the knower but with a background image of the exercise as seen when you were the observer. In effect you will be seeing what you are feeling – a split screen concept. This takes a little practice. When you become accomplished at having this twin sensation of being both the knower and the observer you should assume this status of knower and observer from the first rep. You will also begin to realize that your subconscious is playing a video, the exercise as seen during visualization as the observer, while performing the exercise for real. Concentration and practice makes this possible and the process will act as a point of focus while lifting in the gym or contest.

An important hint: If you feel your heart rate increase and your adrenaline start to flow when you are visualizing your workout, stop and relax and start over with no adrenaline. Don't waste valuable energy visualizing. Save it for the real deal.

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You should practice this visualization for ten minutes or so, making the whole practice take fifteen to twenty minutes. Check your clock when you finish and it won't take long before you will intuitively know how much time has passed. If it has only been ten minutes early on, don't worry. It won't take long before you will feel comfortable with the practice and the time factor will become automatic.

**The Mantra:** The mantra presented here is to be said every day and as often as possible. Say it out loud while stuck in traffic. Say it silently to yourself while waiting in the doctor's office. Just say it whenever you have a free moment. It only takes twenty to thirty seconds to say and visualize. I use the term "visualize" because this mantra contains two parts. The first part is a positive affirmation. The second part combines a positive affirmation with visualization, the split screen idea mentioned above.

The one thing emphasized by the books during my initial research at the hospital library was the effectiveness of reinforcing positive thoughts upon the subconscious by repeating, numerous times a day, an affirmation that contained key words or thoughts expressing the results being sought. This process was called auto-suggestion and was highly touted as being one of the most effective tools available for producing positive impressions on the subconscious, and eventually turning thoughts and words into positive habits and actions.

Here is what I came up with for the first part of the mantra I used: "Every day in every way I am getting better and better, stronger and stronger." This will be said first followed by the second segment.

The second segment needs a little explaining, and involves using the split screen idea where you will feel what you see and see what you feel as you visualize a lift. I developed this second phase as I was analyzing my pull for the snatch and clean and jerk. However, it can be used for powerlifts as well.

I divided the pull into three distinct parts. The first was from the floor to just above the knees. In this movement it was important to maintain the relationship between the shoulders and hips. If the hips rise faster than the shoulders the lift, literally, was lost before the bar got past the knees. In my mind it was very important to be strong so that I would maintain the correct position during the initial part of the pull. The word that came to mind was ***Strength***.

The second phase was from just above the knees, where the bar comes into contact with the thighs and travels the first few inches up the thighs. This is a very critical portion of the pull and involves considerable patience to make sure that the re-bending of the knees to bring the bar into contact with the thighs and the initial few inches that the bar travels along the thighs is done smoothly and controlled. This second part of the pull cannot be rushed if the lifter is to maintain the proper relationship between the shoulders, the hips and the bar. Rushing the movement at this point spells death to an effective pulling motion. The word decided upon to describe this phase of the pull was ***Patience***.

Once the bar started moving up the thighs, the final phase of the pull was set in motion. From this position the back and legs were in their strongest position to exert their maximum power, and the traps stood ready to add the final application of explosive strength. The increased speed added to the bar's upward ascent during this final part of the pull, the top pull, usually makes the difference between failure and success of the lift. The word that came to mind was ***Speed***.

**(Hint for Olympic lifters:** You will notice that when you do power shrugs (it is interesting how and why Bill Starr and I discovered this movement, and it may be part of a future article) how much higher you are able to pull a heavy poundage from the mid-thigh level than from the floor.

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This problem intrigued Starr and me, and we soon realized that getting the bar from the floor to mid-thigh with the shoulders, back, and thighs in the same position as that assumed while doing power shrugs **and** with the same readiness of the muscles involved in pulling from this position to exert their explosive strength was the key to getting the most from our pulling strength. Being aware of the readiness of the muscles involved when the bar reached the beginning of the top pull is very important. I see lifters who “blow past” this top pull phase and the muscles involved are more or less in neutral. Now back to our regular scheduled programming.)

So the words I came up with for the second half of my mantra were Strength, Patience, and Speed. Next a mental picture was attached to what these words represented. When I said, “Strength,” I visualized me lifting the bar from the floor with perfect form, keeping the shoulders and hips moving upward while maintaining the same relationship to each other. The same was true of the second and third segment of the lift.

The complete mantra is as follows: The words spoken: “Day by day in every way I am getting better and better and stronger and stronger.” Then the words: “Strength,” “Patience,” and “Speed” were spoken while visualizing each word. Remember, the more you say your mantra, the better the results. Also, focus on what you are saying and visualizing, as not much of a positive nature happens when your mind is off somewhere else and you are just mouthing the mantra.

**Night Practice:** The night practice will be the same as the morning practice except the visualization will change. Instead of visualizing your workout you will visualize yourself successfully performing the lift and poundage you have scheduled for your next contest or heavy day when you test yourself to determine your current strength level. It is important to see yourself making the lift in perfect form **and** with the bar loaded just the way it will be in the contest. Seeing the weights properly loaded is important, and I will explain why later. So visualize your three attempts of the Olympic lifts, or powerlifts, instead of your workout exercises. All else remains the same. Remember, don’t allow the adrenaline to start up. Stay relaxed and focused so that the subconscious will receive the full impression of what you are visualizing.

**Contest:** Focus is the name of the game at contest time or test day at the gym. Being focused before the contest means not letting outside distractions come into your consciousness; when something comes up that is not a matter of life and death, just say, “Later.” I would find an out-of-the-way corner in the warm-up room and lie down. I would then proceed to do my night practice and visualize the first lift of the contest. After the competition was over for that lift I would do the same thing for the next lift. Being focused also means keeping the adrenaline down. Save it for show time when you will need it. When you start your warm up slowly kick the adrenaline pump into action and accelerate its output as the weight become heavier. After you have made your three attempts, go back to your corner, relax, and start over. Consciously cut the adrenaline pump as much as possible and then repeat the sequence. Experience is the best teacher and I always encourage young lifters to enter contests to learn, through experience, how to get the most out of themselves at a contest; contest lifting is a learned skill, and you must master this skill if you want to reach the top.

All lifters have their own idea as to what they think and how they approach the bar. In preparation for a contest or those “show time Saturdays” in the York Gym, Bob Bednarski would imagine himself sitting in the audience watching himself lift those incredible weights that made him the best lifter, pound for pound, in the world. When it came time to lift he would stand behind the platform and gather himself for just a few seconds. He would then approach the bar and stand over the bar, raise his hands and look up momentarily and then precede to secure his grip and lift.

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And from the conversations we had about his watching himself lift, I feel sure that this video of him watching himself lift was being played in his subconscious and causing positive impulses to be sent to the muscles and nervous system indicating exactly what to do. Also there is no question of not being successful since this lift has been successfully completed thousands of times before. The experienced lifter knows this video is running but is not distracted; it is like background music that is hardly heard while in an elevator. However, I can assure you that it is running and having a positive effect.

Tony Garcy was an outstanding lifter during the 1960s; a world class lifter in every sense of the word. Most lifters have an approach to the bar similar to that used by Bednarski: a few seconds at the back of the platform and a few seconds over the bar. Not Tony. You could read the whole *New York Times* from the time his name was called till the bar finally left the platform. He was one of the main reasons for the time limit that is now in effect – a good rule. One day I came up to the editorial offices from the gym, and Bill Starr asked me if anyone was training and what they were doing. I told him that I had just witnessed Tony Garcy do ten sets of none. Starr said, “What?” Then I explained. Tony would approach the bar, after a very long time, and stand over the bar, again for a very long time. Then he would finally bend down, secure his grip and lower his hips into the desired starting position. Then he would stand up and leave the platform; many minutes later, the same scenario. This continued for many “attempts” and finally I went upstairs to the editorial offices. Tony was, in effect, physically acting out his visualization of a portion of the lift. When it came to the contest, I am sure that this video was playing for him just as a similar video played for most, if not all, of the top lifters.

Then there is the humorous story pointing out not only the need to focus but, in this event, refocus. It was told by Joe Puleo who could tell some very funny stories. Joe was lifting in an important contest, possibly the Nationals. Every time Joe reached down to secure his grip on the bar the loader on the right would say, “Let’s go!” Immediately the loader on the left would follow with, “You can make it!” The first time this happened Joe said it distracted from his concentration for a moment, but being the champ that he was, he was able to refocus and make a successful lift. This continued until his last clean and jerk. By this time he knew what to expect so the comments by the two loaders were just part of the process. Then on his last clean and jerk he reached down and gripped the bar. The loader on the right said his usual, “Let’s go!” However, the loader on the left said nothing. Joe said that he kept waiting and finally refocused and lifted. “I still wonder what happened to the second guy,” was Joe’s final comment followed by a laugh.

I developed a platform routine for contests that you might or might not find of value. Try it out and see how it works for you. If not, perhaps you can modify it to suit you. In fact, I modified it somewhat from the approach Bill March had told me he and Dr. Ziegler had worked out.

For several weeks before a contest or heavy day I visualized each of my three attempts for each lift. In those days competition included three lifts. When I visualized the lifts I always saw myself lifting the weight loaded just as it would be in the competition. When I was on deck to be called next I would chalk my hands and look at the weight. I had seen the bar loaded just like this many times and I knew I could lift it now just as I had a thousand times before. When my name was called I walked to the back and center of the platform and turned my back to the audience. Quickly I would see myself lifting this weight in perfect form. I would then turn around and look at the center of the bar; the plates on each end never came into my vision. I was going to lift the bar and the weights were of no consequence. I walked up to the bar and placed my feet in the correct position and looked slightly up with my eyes closed. I consciously felt the strength and power that surrounded me flow into the center of the bar. I knew this strength and power was sufficient to allow me to lift the bar as I had prepared for this moment and lifted this weight many times. I would then bend down, take my

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grip and tense my muscles in the order that I was accustomed; the bar would ease off the floor and I knew in my heart that the video had begun to play. I had honed my one-pointed focus to such a degree that I was completely conscious where the bar was in relationship to my body until a fraction of a second after I began my top pull. Then I was conscious again under the weight. All this happens very quickly, but if you have worked and practiced upon your focus and awareness you will be able to slow the real time down and be in the moment during the critical portions of the lift. It took me a considerable amount of practice to be able to reach this level of focus. However, I do remember that after beginning to train my mind seriously it was only a month or so before my lifting began to feel very different in a positive way.

This is how I trained my mind to help me become a more efficient lifter. If I had it all to do over the only thing I would do different would be to begin training my mind earlier in my career. One thing for sure, I would never consider training seriously or going to a contest without first training my mind.

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