

Starting Strength

New Year's Resolutions for Your Lazy Ass

by

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The “New Year’s Resolution” must be one of the most ridiculous of human customs. You identify a problem you’re having, and then you wait until January 1 of the next year to address it, in the spirit of a group-participation event that nobody completes and nobody approaches seriously. You decide that you’re going to quit eating chocolate or stop scratching your feet. You stop until January 5th. You’re typical.

In the gym business, New Year’s Resolution business used to be a bigger factor than it is now. Twenty five years ago, fewer people participated in the fitness industry during the regular course of the year, so more people were free to buy memberships in January they weren’t going to use. Back then, New Year’s business was a significant percentage of the year’s gross, and the leveling off of this spike is really a good thing for everybody – the gym isn’t as crowded with amateurs for the three weeks after their hangovers are gone, and more people are using the gym more of the year.

But if you fall into the category of die-hard NYRers that insist on giving it a shot this year – *again* – let me suggest a different approach this time: strength training.

Training is the systematic approach a person employs to improve a physical ability. Preparing for a marathon, a football season, or a weightlifting meet are examples of training. They require an analysis of the specifics of the task, an assessment of where you are now in relation to where you want to be, and a plan for getting there. The plan and its constituent components are the *training*. The constituent components are the *workouts*, and each workout is important because together they produce an accumulation of increasing physical capacity. The plan that controls and directs the process is what makes training different than what you did last year.

Exercising is what you did last year. When you stop by the gym after work, change clothes, go to the dumbbell rack and do some curls or sit on your favorite machines and wiggle the levers around, ride the treadmill for 20 minutes while you watch the news, take a sauna and a shower, get back in the car and go home, you’re *Exercising*. If Training is a process, Exercising is what you do without a process in mind.

Exercising is what you do for *today* – for the way it makes you feel when you get through doing it. Hot. Sweaty. Out of breath. Tired. The “pump.” It’s about the positive feelings of accomplishment it produces *Right Now*. Exercise is the act of penance for your urban sins on the way home from work, and no plan/process/goal need be involved. The only thing it really requires is that you punch the ticket. Do the time. Get something – *anything* – done.

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The problem with Exercise is the absolutely incontrovertible fact that it stops making things change almost as soon as you get used to the idea of doing it. *Adaptation* is the change that happens to your body when you push it harder in a direction it hasn't been pushed before, so that next time you push it's ready. The pushing-part is called *stress*, and a stress event is the "damage" stimulus that makes an adaptation occur. *Recovery* is the physiological activity within the body that allows the damage to be repaired and the adaptation to occur. It's the remodeling made necessary by the stress. The adaptation is the change that enables your body to withstand the stress next time. Adaptation is a feature of all living things. Basic biology in action.

Training harnesses the power of the stress/recovery/adaptation cycle. It allows the adaptation to follow a specific direction, one that produces the physical result you want, when you want it. Planning your workouts is all it takes, and a little planning prevents both a lot of wasted time and the failure of your New Year's Resolution, again. Here's why.

Most people have something in mind when they start going to the gym. Nobody actually *plans* to get nothing accomplished. That just what happens when no plans have been made. The process of stress, recovery from the stress, and adaptation to the stress must be managed so that it continues in a definite direction, because once an adaptation occurs, it takes a bigger stress event to make the process continue.

Messing around on the machines and riding the treadmill for 20 minutes is not training, because after you do it the first time, you adapt to it. It's not hard the second time, because it wasn't really very hard the first time. Repeating it over and over causes nothing new to happen, even if you still get sweaty, hot, and tired, because sweaty, hot, and tired (SHT) happens as a result of just burning calories at a higher-than-baseline rate. It happens at work for years on end, if you have that kind of job.

This is very important: SHT doesn't necessarily mean that an adaptation is taking place. SHT just means that you're working hard enough to activate the adaptations that have *already* taken place. Face it, kids. Getting SHT may only mean that you have a job in Houston. If you don't do more work at the gym than you did last time, nothing is going to change, *because you haven't made it change*. You can go to the gym every single day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, get SHT, and still not make anything adapt. I know this, and so do you. I've been in this business for 40 years, and you've been in this business every January since you got out of college.

And since physical adaptations are so different – a marathon obviously requires a different set of physical characteristics to perform than a weightlifting contest – the process of getting better at one of them must be specifically directed. In other words, running 26.2 miles very fast and becoming very strong are mutually exclusive options. You can't be very good at both, at least not at the same time, if you're a normal human. So you have to plan to get better at something, and then do that thing a little more or a little harder, progressively.

But you know enough about yourself to realize that if you see some continuing progress, you'll be motivated to Stick With The Program (SWTP). The reason you quit last year was because you saw no point in continuing, since you weren't getting anything accomplished. I don't blame you. If I went to the gym every other day and all I got was SHT, I'd quit too.

So here you are – a brand new year and a brand new Resolution. Training offers the prospect of continued improvement, and planning to cause a continuing adaptation is a great approach to the problem of Sticking With The Program. With several options to choose from, which one do we train?

Choose to get stronger.

Strength is the production of force with your muscles against the things in the environment you have to interact with. Strength is a fundamental aspect of being an effectively-alive human being.

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People who are strong have bigger muscles, denser bones, and more enjoyable and longer lives than weaker people, because the process of becoming and staying strong has these positive effects on the human body.

But one of the best things about strength training – done correctly, of course – is the SWTP aspects of it. Correctly performed, a strength program involves regular incremental increases in the load being lifted on very few carefully selected exercises. If strength is force production, stronger means more force production, which means gradually *heavier* weights get lifted. It doesn't mean that lots of *different* exercises get performed with the same light weights.

Contrary to what you may have been told by the pin-setter – the kid in the shirt that says “Trainer” – at your standard fitness industry gym, you can in fact increase the weight essentially every time you work out. *If* you have chosen your exercises correctly and *if* your incremental increases are appropriate for your ability. In fact, this is absolutely necessary if you're going to be Training, and not merely Exercising like you did last year.

Strength accumulates over time, and it accumulates fairly rapidly if you don't miss workouts. Five pounds added to a bench press twice a week means that 45 pounds can be added to your bench press in a month. This obviously won't happen forever, but it will happen for a while, and as long as it can happen you can get stronger – and bigger and healthier, and everything else that comes with stronger – faster than you ever have before.

Written down in your training journal, this is powerful motivation to continue the process. Looking at its effects in the mirror is motivational too. SWTP is one of the differences between Training and Exercising, because Training provides its own motivation: you get to write bigger numbers in your book every time you finish a workout. Bigger numbers are very cool, for everybody who explores the process of training – young, old, men, women, athletes, salesmen, housewives, doctors, attorneys, criminal masterminds, and hereditary monarchs.

I know it didn't work last year, what you did. Do something different this time. Plan. Train. Succeed. Maybe it will start some good new habits that you won't have to make a Resolution about next year.

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