

Starting Strength

The Starting Strength Seminar: An Overseas Student's View

by
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It was 6.30 in the morning. A cold, dark, drizzly morning. I was sitting in the Departure Lounge at London's Heathrow Airport waiting for a flight to Dallas. That's Dallas, Texas, 5,000 miles from London, England.

"What the hell am I doing?" I thought to myself; 5,000 miles and a lot of money to hear some bloke off the Internet tell me to push my knees out when I squat.

It suddenly seemed a long way to go to be coached to lift weights.

Then I remembered the modular training course I'd looked at online, back at home. "Powerlifting training," it said. One module, if I had paid to take it, involved learning how to coach a trainee to throw a medicine ball against a wall and catch it. I was pretty sure the medicine ball module fell under the category of "Silly Bullshit," and at that moment traveling 5,000 miles to go to the Starting Strength Seminar in Wichita Falls didn't seem quite so extreme.

I'd planned my trip so that I had some time in hand to allow the jet lag to dissipate before the seminar started, and that gave me a few days to enjoy the delights of the town of Wichita Falls. Sadly, dear reader, I was too impetuous and I found I'd exhausted the local attractions after the first day. I'm not slighting Wichita Falls by saying this. If I point out that I live in Basildon, Essex, British readers will nod their heads sagely when I say that I live in a glass house and I'm in no position to start throwing stones. For American readers, all I can say is that Basildon is about the same size as Wichita Falls but not quite as up-market.

All of which is a long-winded way of saying that when seminar-time came around, I was eager to get started -- so eager that I was at the gym two hours early, clutching my sports bag, and wearing a keen expression. Carmen, the gym manager, took pity on me and made me coffee.

The four hours of Friday evening were all classroom-based. There was a wide range of students: young and old, male and female, and they varied from complete beginners to lifters who were ready to be assessed as Starting Strength Coaches. I was surprised by a few of the questions, because they indicated that the person asking had not read (or, maybe, had read but didn't understand) the book, *Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training*. I thought everyone would have at least read the blue book, but when I chatted to people over coffee I was surprised to find a few who hadn't. We dispersed at 9pm with eleven hours to eat, sleep and get back to the gym.

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Saturday was the start of what we'd been waiting for: on-the-platform, hands-on-the-bar squatting, deadlifting and bench pressing.

I remembered from Friday's session that a coach is someone who communicates in a way that makes their lifter move as desired, and I quickly identified the potential Starting Strength Coaches. They were the people who could clearly and succinctly communicate exactly what they wanted their lifter to do. As the day went on I realised there was another aspect to coaching: the coach's eye. These people had the ability to watch a movement which took maybe a second, a squat or a press, say, to identify which aspects of it were correct and which were incorrect and, of the latter, to prioritise the things which had to be fixed first. This prioritisation was then reflected in their verbal cues to the lifter. And all this in the blink of an eye.

After thirteen hours of lifting, coaching and being coached, as I climbed into the hire car and tried to remember how to get back to my hotel, my mind was a whirl of information and coaching cues. And I knew there would be more the next day.

When Lionel Richie wrote "Easy Like Sunday Morning," he had clearly never spent a Sunday morning learning to power clean in the Wichita Falls Athletic Club. I have no up-to-date information about Mr Richie, but I like to think he's spent the last few years "under the bar", adding 5lbs whenever possible, and that he now looks back on that song with a wry smile, because Sunday morning was anything but "easy."

I was apprehensive about Sunday's power clean session because I'd never managed to complete even one successful clean in my garage gym. I've been around weights and worked on my fitness for decades, but I was still an uncoordinated mess as two diligent and patient coaches worked hard to bring me and the power clean into some sort of convergence.

At first, I reckoned I was getting the movement roughly (all right, very roughly) correct about once in every five attempts. By the end of the session I was getting about one in three. I was first up when it came to Rip's "around the room", where each lifter performs the lift that has just been taught, while the coaches and all the other students look on. Given my failure rate so far, I should have been horribly nervous for this, but I wasn't. My philosophy in this sort of situation is, "What's the worst that can happen? In my last job they threw petrol bombs at me" (I'm a retired London police officer).

My first two attempts were obvious arm pulls, even I could tell that. Each of them resulted in a loud "No!" from Rip, which seemed to echo around the hushed gym. Frustrated, I swore quietly and tried hard to blank out everyone, and concentrate on what my coaches had told me. My third attempt came up and racked, and was enough to draw a "Yes" from Rip before he and the crowd moved on to the next platform. I was quite moved when members of my coaching group fist-bumped me and patted me on the back.

Next was the press, and then a question-and-answer session. The Q-and-A period really got going when it became a discussion, and it was fascinating to be in a room with people who shared a common interest but came with a wide range of experience. And then, all too soon, the seminar was over.

Although it was late on Sunday night, there was just time to go for a steak with a friend I'd made. As we entered the steak house the waitress, much taken with my English accent, asked me to wait before being seated while she went to fetch her friend, just so they could hear me speak.

The next day I had a few hours before the drive back to Dallas, so I walked into a gun shop and chatted with the owner about Second Amendment rights and gun control. He was a US Air Force veteran and his service included four years at Mildenhall in England, about an hour's drive from my house.

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On the plane home, I fished a crumpled piece of paper out of my bag and tried to work out if I had completed the objectives I'd set myself for this trip:

1. *Learn how to self-coach.* My ability to assess my own lifts had undoubtedly improved, and I felt it would continue to improve if I kept working on it.
2. *Improve my form on the main lifts.* I was confident that my form had improved. Like all the other students, I'd come away from the seminar with a written list of learning points for each lift. I've since typed out that list, pasted it into my training log, and I still refer to it each time I train.
3. *Learn how to power clean.* This was a steep learning curve, but I'm glad I did it. Although Rip told me I don't have to power clean because I'm 58, a month later I'm still doing it and it's getting better.
4. *[Learn more about becoming an SSC.](#)* Up close, I could see what a major piece of work it is to become a Starting Strength Coach. I'm convinced the UK needs more SSCs.
5. *Become re-motivated to lift.* Once home, I ate a vast quantity of porridge, eggs and bacon; slept for a few hours and then hit the weights. I'm still dead-keen. It was a privilege to train and be coached at the Wichita Falls Athletic Club, and to meet Rip. I defy anyone to attend the seminar and not be fired up to train afterwards.

If you're thinking of going to a Starting Strength Seminar, what advice can I give you?

1. *Go.* Even if you have to travel a long distance, go. There is simply nowhere else you can get this experience, and it will be worth it.
2. *Before you go, read the blue book.* Then re-read it and make notes. Then watch the [Starting Strength videos](#) on YouTube, especially the Art of Manliness videos on the squat, the deadlift, the press, the bench press, and the power clean. You will get more from the seminar if you already understand the basic principles and apply them in your training.

Looking back, a month after the seminar, would I go again? Too right, I would!

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