

Starting Strength

Recovery and Growth

by

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Judging from my e-mail and the posts on my [Q&A board](#), most of you guys are experts at losing bodyfat or maintaining low bodyfat. But you seem to have misplaced your understanding of the importance of getting bigger and stronger in the grand scheme of the things we call bodybuilding, strength training, or Life as an Adult Male.

I've said this before: you don't get big and strong from lifting weights – you get big and strong by *recovering* from lifting weights. And this entails more sleep and more food than the vast majority of you people seem to understand. When you, as a novice lifter, put more emphasis on staying “lean” than on getting big and strong, you demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the process that barbell men used to know quite well 50 years ago. Growth is much more important than bodyfat loss, most especially for a novice. And growth is what separates you from the rest of the gym members that don't ever get anything accomplished.

It's easy to lose bodyfat, and the web is encrusted with sites that are more than willing to teach you how and to explain why it is so damned important. A guy with a modicum of discipline – which it is assumed you possess – can drop a significant amount of bodyfat in 4 weeks, especially if he starts with a lot of muscle mass to help him. But lean and muscular at 165 and 5' 10" looks *exactly the same in clothes* as a guy that size who doesn't train at all.

My buddy John Welbourn, 10-year NFL veteran lineman and enormous human male, has pointed this out to me several times, because he enjoys preaching to choirs: nobody ever refers to Dorian Yates and Ronnie Coleman as *lean* – they are always *huge*, or *jacked*. “Big” is really an understatement, but it would be used as a description long before “lean” ever occurred to anybody standing nearby.

Are you content to merely stay “lean”? Or do you want to actually accomplish your goal – the one you set for yourself when you started, before all the diet websites distracted you? If you do, you have to train very hard and recover from that training.

Let's assume you're doing the program correctly, and that for some inexplicable reason you're stuck. No progress on strength, no weight gain for weeks. Just this second I answered a post like this on the board, and it's by far the most common topic of discussion for new guys. The answer is always the same: you're not eating enough, and you're not getting recovered. Recovery is made possible by sleep and food.

Let's get sleep out of the way. You have to sleep. Older guys like me sometimes don't sleep well, and it has a profound detrimental effect on our training. Accumulated injuries produce pain that wakes

Recovery & Growth

us up, and then worrying about silly shit (Is the dog comfortable tonight? Is lime scale accumulating in my pipes at the gym?) keeps us awake. The result is a lack of recovery, which makes the aggravating injuries worse, which gives us more things to worry about, etc. You can just imagine the problems we old guys have, and I hope you look forward to joining us.

But right now, you younger guys *ought* to be sleeping pretty well. If you're not, there's probably a reason that you can actually fix if you want too. It will usually involve light, temperature, or noise. Some modifications to the room windows will correct the light thing. If you live indoors in the northern hemisphere and can afford a gym membership, we'll assume you have some control over your room temperature. Opinions vary, but it seems that everybody agrees on a range of between 60 and 72 degrees. The noise may not be within your purview to alter; after all, you can't always make everybody *shut the fuck up*, and this is a shame. But Charles Staley told me a secret once: he uses earplugs. It works. I recommend them highly. But be sure you're sleeping in a place where you won't need to react instantly to an important noise, i.e. a pretty secure room. Zombies, grave robbers, etc. should be of low probability if you use earplugs. And make sure your alarm is of sufficient volume to get you up for work.

The bigger problem is your diet, and it is almost always due to a misunderstanding of the way things really are. Here's the deal: until you get big and strong, nobody else cares about your abs, and neither should you. Razor Abs on a skinny guy are like really nice clothes on a fat girl. Better for her to spend the money on better advice about diet and exercise, and better for you to get your squat up to 405 before you start timing your macronutrients and really "dialing in" your carbs. Until you get big and strong, the fine points of your subcutaneous detail will be far less important to your appearance than your overall proportionate size and the impression you make as a bigger guy. How much time do you intend to spend naked in public anyway? When you get big enough to be worth looking at, you can worry about your abs.

From a more practical standpoint, your muscular size and strength increases your value as a man, in the older, more important sense of work capacity. Bigger, stronger men are more valuable on the battlefield, the football field, the soccer field, and in any field of employment in which there is a physical component. You do not pick up your wounded buddy and load him in the truck with your Razor Abs. If you want to be a bodybuilder later, that's fine. But all the bodybuilders whose names you actually know are *big*, and they didn't get that way by trying to stay lean all the time. If you are a novice lifter, you have the opportunity to grow faster now than you ever will again, and the best way to fuck this up is to worry about your bodyfat instead of focusing on your strength and the diet that will produce it.

What diet is that? For a guy that currently weighs 165, stands 5' 10", and is 20 years old, that diet will be much more food than he'll be thinking he needs if his information has come from the typical sources of misinformation. He'll need 300 grams of protein, lots of good fat and moderately glycemic carbs, for a total of perhaps 5-6000 calories. I typically advise that 4 big meals and a gallon of whole milk per day will get the job done better than any other approach for a novice. Supplements are quite important later, but now all you need is this diet and some good vitamins to make sure the bases are covered. This is what is required to ensure recovery for a skinny guy from what is most assuredly a brutally hard training program.

Upon investigation, guys who are stuck in their progress are not doing this, and guys who are making progress are doing at least some more-or-less complete version thereof. I know this is a lot of food, and

Recovery & Growth

most of you aren't willing to eat it. If you perceive that it's easy to eat what you consider to be enough food, it's not enough food and you're not doing the program.

How much fat will you accumulate during this initial growth? A guy that starts out at 165 and 5' 10" with the typical 15% bodyfat of a 20 year-old guy will usually end up at about 205 and 20% bodyfat at the end of 4-5 months. This represents a gain of 40 pounds, 24 of which (60%) is lean body mass. Every time we've measured it, this is about what happens. About 60-65% of the gains experienced on this type of program are LBM, and this seems to be about the best you can do to balance rapid growth in strength and size with some fat accumulation.

So the question becomes: can you tolerate a 5% increase in bodyfat if it means an immediate increase in lean body mass? Most guys can, because a.) it can be taken off with a bit of effort, and b.) since you know this, you can just calm down and enjoy the immediate benefits of being bigger and stronger. You have to realize that the difference in appearance and strength between you at 165 and you at 205 is far, FAR more significant than an increase of 5% in bodyfat that nobody else is going to care about anyway.

The funny thing about this is that the guys who can't seem to tolerate the idea of gaining 5% bodyfat are the very guys that know the most about how to take it off when and if the time comes to do so. They're also the guys that need to gain weight the most, since they're usually skinny little insect-looking dudes who just appear to be starved, not *lean* like they seem to think. Remember: we can't see your Razor Abs – all we're likely to notice is your pencil neck and narrow ass.

If you're going to grow, you have to train hard and recover from that training. You have to understand why growing is important, why recovery is important, and how to do it correctly. You have to understand that it may even be the most difficult part of the program for you, perhaps physically or perhaps even psychologically – maybe harder than the training itself. If it is sufficiently important, you'll figure out a way to deal with it. And that's how you distinguish yourself from the rest of the gym – the guys who can't, or won't achieve the goal they have set for themselves.

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