

# Starting Strength

## My Experiences with Starting Strength

by  
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Mark Rippetoe was kind enough to post on his forum about the existence of my humble blog, so I thought I would try and return the favor and post about just a few of the things I've learned from him.

Some of these things may seem obvious to any longtime devotee of his systems, but it wasn't until I started reading his stuff that I learned them or was finally convinced to put them into practice. I had read about strength and conditioning topics for years, and learned a few things at the tutelage of some legendary Steelers who really know their stuff. He reminded me of much I have forgotten and some stuff I'd never learned. Many of these things seem basic in retrospect, but a lot that is basic is also easily forgotten, even things that were well known in the past. And excelling at anything is more about being good at the basics than anything else.

**1. Keep things simple.** Programming doesn't have to be complex, particularly for beginners. Starting Strength is for beginners. People *starting* (ahem) strength. I admit to having known of the title for some time from the plethora of CrossFit obsessed Marines in my former unit. At the time, I thought it had something to do with building strength for the beginning of explosive movements, strength to build up a powerful "start" on a sprint or something. Then I read the book, and it was excellent! I was thinking there would be something complex about it, but it's really well laid out and all about mastering a small core of basic lifts. Coupled with this focus on the basic exercises using the best strength development tool ever developed is a great series of diagrams showing you how to master the lifts. To my chagrin I learned much about proper form for these lifts, which heretofore had seemed relatively straightforward and self-explanatory. Most of them I'd been doing for years, off and on, yet I improved my lifts and made the exercises feel much more friendly to my joints instantly once I started doing them right. Rip points out all the subtle things to do during a lift, but without turning a basic lift into rocket science.

I've heard high volume advocates try and tear down the program because it doesn't have tons of frequency and volume. If you like high volume training, well and good. But the thing people forget is that this is a program for beginners! Low volume is just what they need. Most people today are woefully out of shape, and however convinced you are that *Ultimate Warrior* is right, and that there is no such thing as overtraining, a beginning weightlifter is adapting to just doing actual exercise, is in

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fact atrophied beyond what nature intended him to be, and doesn't need high volume to grow. If he doesn't need it, then all he is likely to do is turn gain-time into recovery-time. What's the point in that? Once you get through the beginner gains – the reversal of atrophy, this program of getting to where you would be if you lived a life of real effort and toil – then up the workload if you are so inclined.

**2. Starting Strength goes back to the old school.** I had been trying out a lot of newer stuff, equipment and exercises, but the Starting Strength method of lifting brought me back to the way my father trained and gained enormous strength, no funky stuff required. A squat, a press, and a pull. Three exercises, hard work, and done.

There is a reason this is old school. Back in the day, if something didn't produce results, lifters usually decided not to do it. Sure, there were folks back then peddling all kinds of stuff, but how come nowadays every muscle or fitness magazine has the be-all-end-all article on developing (insert bodypart here) and then has another one the next month? It's not because the programs are working.

Ninety percent or more of the population could just do Starting Strength, as written, over and over again and meet all of their needs. But that sure doesn't leave much to write about next month, does it? It doesn't give someone a reason to take supplement after new supplement because they just can't seem to make any gains doing Kai Green's three-day split for each head of the triceps, does it?

**3. I learned that no matter how solid the information is you are putting out, no matter how simple and effective your program is, people will monkey with it.** Before I bought the book, and really understood what the program was about, I googled it to try and see what exactly it was. This was years before actually talking to Rip, or I never would have done it. I found a thousand and one variations on a relatively simple program, and everyone chimed in with their two cents that made it "better". They were missing the point. I think it's both a hallmark of human nature to want to change something, just a little, and personalize it – make it your own. And honestly, that's fine. Just don't say Starting Strength does not work when your own personal version of it has you doing curls, pec deck, and BodyBlades (remember those?) while on a low-fat vegan diet.

I've seen a ton of other trainers come out with identical, or very nearly so, programs. Some have the ingenious idea of guaranteeing you will put 110 plus pounds on your lifts, because, rather than have you start on a manageable weight and do a real linear progression (which can be expected for a rank beginner) the copycats have you start with the bar, and add five pounds a session. I am currently in a detrained state right now due to a non-weightlifting injury, but even so, I could do a version of Rip's program by a certain Belgian guy and do a "linear progression" that would last six months or more and finally put me right at what I overhead press now!

Now, at this point, a Starting Strength critic, if he'd by chance found his way to my humble blog, would be screaming, "But Rippetoe didn't come up with this all by himself! There were plenty of lifters doing sets of 5 and all that before he wrote Starting Strength!" This is true, but sometimes the best thing one can do is go back, grab the wisdom that lifters got from coaching experience and personal experience, and compile it for you. The copycats just read Rip's book, make it half as effective, sell you someone else's actual labor, and somehow make a good, simple program worse.

Not many people would be doing the heavy basic barbell training like they are today if it wasn't for Rip. I know tons of lifters who only gave up on Flex magazine routines and started training full-body, basic barbell training, and are stronger and more muscular because of Starting Strength or its influence. Lots of CrossFitters who used to be metabolic junkies have realized that by getting stronger, taking three months and just doing the basic lifts, those 95 pound barbells fly up with ease, pushups

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seem easier, and the metabolic stuff is far less taxing because they are using a much lower percentage of their strength to do the work.

The truth about lifting must be frequently repeated, because things start going all to hell the minute they don't. Rip may not have invented the type of program he espouses, he didn't come up with sets of 5, three day-a-week whole-body workouts, or invent the back squat, but he brought this method of training back more than anyone I can think of. In short, he most likely brought it to you.

**4. One of the best things I learned from Starting Strength was to deadlift less frequently.** I had done this three times a week in the past here and there, and I always stalled or got weaker. Power cleans are now one of my favorite exercises, and all I have to do now is jump and catch. I'm not a gifted athlete in any area outside of punching someone in the face, or a similar activity, like getting punched in the face (I am a champ at taking punches, just ask any of my old sparring partners – head like a brick), and the former methods and instructions of power cleaning looked like something the cat coughed up.

I read a critique by an Olympic lifter once of the jump and catch method as espoused in Starting Strength, carping about how this method of teaching the lift was too simple, ineffective, and one of the main causes for the impending apocalypse. He proceeded to lay out what sounded like the way a proper lady does a power clean, and to me it was akin to an admonition to always ride a horse sidesaddle. Now, his method may have been the way Olympic lifters do cleans, but not all who begin lifting weights aspire to a career in Olympic weightlifting.

One of the main points he made was that the "proper" way of cleaning was a long and complex method of learning the lift, which in his own words, would not allow you to use as much weight, since it was so much more difficult to do the lift this way. Perhaps this is due to some deficiency on my part, but that just didn't make sense. He didn't have any real issues with the safety of doing it the jump and catch way, so the point made little sense to me, particularly for someone training for general strength and power. His rigid adherence to this esoteric method of cleans when there was no safety issue involved seemed akin to a classical karateka complaining to a reigning MMA champ that his success was for naught given that he did not have to wear a uniform, carry stone pitchers of water up and down an ancient temple staircase, and do lots and lots of bowing.

When I jump and catch, I don't have to try and think through every portion of the lift, I just do it and it all falls in to place. Even if I were to have to do less weight, this is the method I would use for performing the lift. When you don't have to think through every portion of the lift but do things that make your body naturally and safely take over, that lift will fall into place, rather than rapidly thinking through a series of pre-flight, in-flight, and post flight checklists. Set the bar. Pull through the hips, second pull...now! Okay, make sure I'm not pulling with the biceps! Here it comes! Turn the wrists, bend slightly at the knees to receive the wrist...Crossfit girl, 11 o'clock! Focus! Okay, racking bar on shoulders, dipping down slightly, oh no! I don't have bumper plates! My God what will I do! Maybe I can just drop this next to the guy in the salmon colored singlet on the adductor machine, make it look like he did it, then run out of the gym and never come back! Ok, go!

Maybe I got a little carried away, but the point is that the simplest way to do something safely, works. I do remember being taught power cleans, of a form, in high school by a coach that had more AC/DC albums than knowledge of technique. I am having a hard time remembering the three and a half-hour session he used to teach it to us, but he didn't want us to shrug or pull the weight up, no use of the traps at all, basically he wanted us to do a deadlift then drop as fast as possible and get under the bar from about hip height. Using the more natural technique I could power clean nearly 300, with his method I struggled with even 185.

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Again, simple + easy to remember and implement + safe = BETTER!

Lots of folks quibble about using Pavel's method of sucking in or "packing" the shoulders vs. shrugging them for overhead work. I have tried a lot of things in regards to shoulders and helped more than a few others sort this issue out for themselves. Shoulder function seems to vary much with the individual, but nearly everyone can and should overhead press, but different people seem to find better effects one way or the other. I didn't like the shrugging technique at first, until I actually got it right, and instead of just raising my shoulders a little, I did it in such a way that flexed the hell out of my traps, and then learning occurred.

I hear from a lot of folks that prefer Pavel's pack over the Starting Strength shrug. I like a lot of Pavel's stuff, even if communism, his marketing schtick, is my sworn enemy. I'm not sure many have really tried different versions of the shrug on overhead movements, but again, people are different. What's not different is that when holding a barbell directly overhead, the traps hold up the scapulas, and the scapulas hold up the arms and therefore the bar. Not the same thing that happens with a kettlebell that is swinging.

**5. Starting Strength made me strong.** I do gain strength easily on a basic barbell program, but going back to the lifts and lowering my frequency a bit made me stronger faster than anything else I have tried. It works.

A common critique many have of the program is that it makes you gain weight. Well, if you are in a sport that requires staying in a weight class or simply maintaining a very low weight, then there's plenty of programs out there. If you just don't want to get big ugly muscles because your fella doesn't like it, then I think I still have a pair of 3-pound dumbbells from when I was four that I could sell to you for a good price.

Most people take the gallon-of-milk-a-day thing as if it is a required part of the Starting Strength program. From what I understand, this is a recommendation for skinny guys and "hardgainers" who just can't seem to get enough calories. If there's any time to do a "bulk", it's when you are first starting out. If you have any discipline at all then any fat gains you have are easily taken off without losing your strength.

Most decry the milk thing, but nothing short of steroids is more effective. I once had a friend in my first enlistment in the Marines that weighed 165 no matter what he did, and he was 6'3". He couldn't even gain fat, and he tried. He ate tons of food of just about every kind, bags of cheetos, tubs of sugary weight gain powder, almost everything. I didn't know anything about Starting Strength at that point, but I remembered how much milk my Dad used to drink when doing two-a-days in the heat, lifting weights, running and driving the sled at all hours of the day and night. I suggested he start drinking as much milk as he could. He gained 20 pounds in two months. He didn't look fat either. He eventually quit the milk, and lost what he'd gained pretty quickly.

If all you want is the Hollywood look, that can easily be achieved with little more than simple pushups and keeping your bodyfat under ten percent. Most people are walking around with what would have been considered a big fat gut a few decades ago, when Jim Belushi was a fat guy instead of being ripped in comparison to your average 20-something male wandering the aisles at your local Wal-Mart.

Other concerns I hear are that "People coming off Rippetoe's are significantly lacking in rear deltoid development," and "I did low-bar squats and they made my butt bigger!" For one, people, especially bodybuilders, tend to forget that the frontal delts are naturally much larger and stronger than the rear delts, and this is both natural, and actually, balanced. Look at what motions significantly

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involve the rear delts and you will see they are not contributing much to anything you do. Take a very symmetrically developed bodybuilder with huge rear delts, and see how much he can do in front raises vs. any isolation exercise for the rear delts. I shouldn't have to mention that bent laterals don't count unless you are squaring them off against dumbbell flies, though even with that comparison the anterior deltoid will win out, whether you take someone who lifts or someone who has never touched a weight.

If you think having a muscular, er, posterior chain is a bad thing, then clearly you are unaware of the preferences of the majority of the females of the species, or you don't appreciate the benefit of having your posterior chain as strong as it can possibly be. I can't think of a group of muscles that will do more for your athletic ability in life's demands or any sport that really matters. If all that fails, at least you will have something to sit on.

Lest I be accused of being a Rippetoe fanboy, as anyone who actually supports a program is sure to be so calumniated, let me point out a few of the things I think could be improved.

For one, it should have more pictures. Pictures of freakishly muscular people flexing and screaming into the camera, preferably with bleached hair and wearing uncomfortably small loincloths. I'm not sure what that has to do with an effective workout program, but almost all the other books have these photos, so Mark is clearly missing something here.

It should come with a new pair of pants and a T-shirt, at least one size larger than you currently wear. Even though my waist actually shrunk the last time I did the program, when I got back from Afghanistan (I was eating plenty of fatty meat, milk, and protein shakes, but your meals are not exactly your own and the Afghan sun is apparently much closer to the earth in that country – that, or my hatred for it actually increased the ambient temperature) I had to buy size 36 pants, even though my waist was 32. I found this inconvenient and expensive, and I blame Rip's program for that.

I got strong enough to give myself a hernia lifting the back end of an admittedly small Toyota pickup free of some rocks. Not sure if it was when I lifted it while it was stuck in the river or when it was stuck on a hill, I heard a pop one time, and the other was certain and loud. I'm having a hard time remembering which was which, now that I think on it, those days kind of jumbled together. It's worthwhile to note I had already lost some size by the time I returned and had to buy new pants in the story above. My thighs do get very muscular, very fast. My dad had to have some custom alterations for his wedding suit. Which was heinous. It was something like maroon dress pants and a plaid-ish brown and white jacket if I remember correctly. Hey, it was the 70s. I don't dress much better, as I am told.

I hate the way Rip points out faults on his youtube videos and how to correct them. This is going to come back to bite him someday, when someone's self-esteem is seriously damaged, perhaps irreparably.

And I remain upset that he turned down my last article recommending Trap Bar power cleans and Jefferson Lift high-pulls. I really think these will catch on.

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**Colin Webster** is a former Marine and [White Feather Press](#) Author, where he writes a very different kind of western. Colin blogs at [Apocalypse Barbell](#), a site dedicated to building the strength to survive life situations and events of a catastrophic nature, and telling stories about his dad.

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