

Starting Strength

Time to Train

by

Jim Steel

It's noon on a Sunday and I am irritated as hell. I got up around 5am and let my Labradors outside to play fetch with them, and then I drank some coffee and then rode the exercise bike for 30 minutes, which didn't do a damn thing for my disposition except make me sweat a little. The irritation level went up a few degrees after that waste of time. Then I wrote some lifting programs on the computer. And then I got more and more irritated as the morning went on. I knew the problem.

I had given myself a day off from lifting weights, and it pissed me off. On days that I don't train, life moves slowly. There is no point to anything, I don't look forward to anything and nothing else takes on any meaning. And the fact that I thought that I needed a godforsaken rest day pissed me off also. Who decided on that one? So what if you like to lie around and be thankful for a rest day? For what? Who said that you have to have a rest day? If the weights are your friend and therapy and the answers to life magically appear so clear after a training session, why not go ahead and train whenever the hell you want to?

I also got pissed at myself because, as I said to myself (out loud, in fact), "You have been lifting weights for almost 40 years and you don't think that you are smart enough to cycle your training to where you can still train as much as you want to and still make gains?"

And then I got to thinking about all the baddasses that have come before me that didn't know the meaning of rest, and then I screwed up and read an article about Gino Marchetti, the former Baltimore Colt who grew up in San Francisco but went to World War II as a 18-year-old kid, and his quote about the Battle of the Bulge "The first time that I saw snow, I slept in it." And dammit, if that didn't make me feel like a little soft ass sitting there wondering if I should squat or not because if I do, I might not, well, I might not *recover*? Who made that shit up? Are you lying in the snow worried about dying while artillery screams over your head? I think that I can manage 5 sets of squats.

But still I resisted. And I started thinking some more. Let's see, I could pick up some dog crap in the back yard. Nope. I could go to Home Depot and get some screws for the lantern out front that falls off during a windy day. Boring. It's a perfect day to chop some wood! Alas, I have no wood, or woods for that matter, and no fireplace for the chopped wood.

I miss doing that, chopping wood, working. Not working for anyone else, not that, but laboring for yourself, by yourself. Any real labor I do for me is done only in the weight room.

When I lived in the country or when I grew up in Maryland, there was always wood to chop or dirt to shovel or something to do outside that makes you feel like a man when you finish. You get

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done with doing that stuff and you earned the right to shower and watch the dirt from your body swirl on down the drain and then drink an ice-cold beer and feel satisfied.

So then I figured I could help one of my sons with baseball, hit him some grounders. Some family stuff would be good. Off we went to the little league field, but after about fifteen minutes the heat started to get to my son and he said that he was dying and we had to go. And then I'm kicking myself in the ass for letting him sit inside in the air conditioning and maybe I have let him get soft, but then you start thinking, what if really something happens to him? So we load up in the truck and go home. And it's building up in me because I spent twenty minutes putting sunscreen on my kids so we can stay outside for a few minutes and then bring our asses right back home.

And all of this makes me question the way life is today, and I think about all that my dad did for me, the things that he probably didn't even realize that he was doing. Putting a few tons of dirt at the top of our hill and having me wheelbarrow it down to build up his garden. And that was mostly done on hot, humid days where you learn to persevere, and then after a while the hot humid days are welcomed because it means work – satisfying work.

You see the wood pile? Here is the beginning. Over there is the end. You know where to begin and end, and when it is over you feel like you are worth something, like you accomplished a task set before you. You are sweaty, exhausted, and the world feels just right. And then my mind wanders to what my parents gave me and how they raised me, and how bad I am screwing all of this up.

And what did my parents give me? An appreciation of things when I got them. Gifts and presents were only given at birthdays and Christmas. Hell, my kids have everything they want or ever need and they get it whenever they want it. They are great boys, don't get me wrong, but maybe I have lost my way, the way that the parents who grew up in the depression raised my friends and me. You appreciated stuff when you got it, but here is the kicker: you didn't expect to get a damn thing, and you damn sure didn't think that you deserved it at all.

Little League is huge where I live, and it's a lot of fun, but it takes the fun out of just playing. With everything set up by adults, with the snack stand and picture day, and two hundred dollar bats and with batting coaches and pitching coaches and four coaches per team, the kids just have to show up and play. Shouldn't really be any adults around, just the kids playing and smiling.

And so we go back to training and the importance of it all. I don't have the labor in front of me anymore and I have let my kids get soft, and I just want to train, man, because that's where I have to prove that I work, that I know how to sweat. And when I do train, it wrenches something way down inside of me, stirs up some feelings that bring me back to being a kid and busting my ass, and feeling some deep satisfaction and sweat that means something.

So after all of that, I just went downstairs and did some squats. I couldn't take it anymore. Everything around me was pissing me off. I have two squat stands in my basement, a mess of old Olympic plates, a York bar and a safety squat bar. My dogs, my two Labradors, have their crates in the basement where the squat rack is, and one of my favorite things is to do a set of squats and then put the bar back and sit down and pet the dogs. My youngest dog, Storm, is coming into heat today, which is no fun for my 12-year-old Lab, Bas.

Bas doesn't see too well and he has an artificial shoulder and his hips cause him to collapse sometimes, but when Storm is in heat he is all a mess, and he whines and tries to sneak up on her and she growls and tries to bite him, so I put him in his kennel while Storm gets petted, understanding that



Bas and Storm.

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Bas is not himself during this time. But I squatted. Sets of 8. Around 5 sets or so. Just enough sets and reps to get that leg and lung burning sensation. Do a set, pet Storm, do a set, pet Storm.

And after about the second work set the sweat started pouring off of me, and then all of a sudden the skies opened up and I felt okay – alive again. After squatting I jumped immediately on the exercise bike again and started pedaling. My 3 sons were watching “A Football Life” and the featured player was John Riggins, and they were talking all about his life and he was, lo and behold, using a Bobcat working on his land and chopping wood. And then his strength coach from the Redskins, Dan Riley, came on and told a story of Riggins calling him and saying that he had to be in a duck blind at sunup and would you meet me early that morning? Dan said, “How about 3:30?” And Riggins met him there and then did his workout and went hunting.

Watching Riggins chopping wood, working, was so perfect for me right at this time, and *damn* it was inspirational, and of course it made me think about how great all of that was and is, and although I didn’t chop any wood, it made me feel a little less “modern” and soft because I at least did some squats with my hunting dogs around me.

I am 48 now, and I still lift weights 6-7 days a week, and every year, my exercise selection gets smaller and smaller. Shoulders, back, knees, elbows can’t take the pounding of some of the big exercises that I used to enjoy so much. Whatever, I don’t care one bit. Do what you can do, because what is the alternative? Not training? And that will never happen – prop me up in the squat rack and let me go, it’s the answer to all that ails me, so I cannot and *will not* stop.

So I get under the bar, and half the time I am doing it to prove to the goddamn softness of the world that I’m better than you. I read one time where Jon Defendis, Mr. USA, had a good dog that died. He wrapped his dog’s collar around the bar and just kept squatting. I love it and I get it. When my son Donald was in the hospital for his multiple operations, kidney surgeries, hip surgeries, I always pulled or squatted some rep records. The hospital is right next door to my work. I’d get the nurses to watch my son for an hour and go pull some weight. I did 515x15 on the deadlift one night, I remember.

I learned a few things from all those surgeries and workouts: one, you are supremely focused when your son has tubes sticking out of him, and believe me, you don’t feel a damn bit sorry for yourself. And you don’t need a bit of warm up to get ready. You run over to the weight room, pull 225 for a couple and then 315x1, 415x1 and put 515 on the bar and before you begin, just before you pull, you see your son’s face and the expression of pain, and then you think to yourself, “I can’t pull this for 15? But *he* can endure all of the shit that life throws at him?” And so you yell, “Rip it up” and the bar leaves the floor and 5 turns into 10 and then 10 turns into 15, and you feel that callus under your middle finger start to rip and you could give a damn because, what’s next door? More blood tests and pain for my son. Get that fucking set.

And I learned a long time ago that there are no rules when you are lifting weights. There are guidelines from experience, and when you are a beginner it is probably best to have a set program while you learn, but as you progress and get on with it and have many years behind you, you become an *artist* in the weight room. *You* decide the “rules” in there, and the popular rules regarding training, well, you may just decide that they aren’t for you, that the weight room is a place to flow with what you are feeling at that moment and maybe the connection to your inner self, your instincts about this thing are so strong that you can listen closely to your body and know just what to do. Seems too new-age? Maybe. You have your crystals and your gurus and your hot yoga and bosu balls and retreats where

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somebody tells you how you are supposed to live and your self-help books (that sell by the millions), and hey, go for it, have a blast – I will not judge you. If it works for you, please proceed.

I have my own therapy. I will choose the iron to feel what most other people only feel when someone else tells them to. Those that use the iron as therapy and as an escape really get it, because the mind and body are one – working, thriving, and alive.

And another thing: there is a freedom when one gets away from the *crap* of life: the endless texts, emails, and damn, the advertisements blaring their wares at you constantly! I looked up the price of some goose decoys online and decided not to buy them and from then on, any page that I go to has the damn decoys, picture and all, on the side of the page, like, *you sure you don't want to buy these decoys?* Yeah, not now that you have bludgeoned me with them, I will definitely shop elsewhere.

So you escape.

I think that you can put utmost importance on things, the things that mean so much to you and you only, and that don't have to mean anything at all to anyone else. What means the most to you can't be given away and no one can take it from you, and I have always felt that if you speak of it too much or tell others about it in too descriptive a manner, it loses some of its power – the specialness and uniqueness, and so you keep it tight to your soul. It is just yours. Just yours.

And you need this thing that's yours – you *must* have this – as you fight against all the never-ending demands made of your time. To have it, a moment or two to string together, these moments that are yours to have above the constant barrage that gouges out your soul.

I feel like you must have an escape in order to survive. As you get older you realize that the heroes of your youth are fading away or are not so perfect, and this is what you have as your life, that there is not a whole lot that is going to change from here on out. You ask yourself, what do you have left? You have the *training*, to escape within and to get deeper and deeper into as the world scurries around you, hurrying from one place to another but really not going anywhere very fast.

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Jim Steel is the Head Strength and Conditioning Coordinator at the University of Pennsylvania. He has worked as a strength coach at all levels of education, from high school to D1. He is a competitive powerlifter, the current New Jersey state record holder in the squat (820 lbs.). Jim was an All-American defensive lineman in college, and he brings a personal appreciation of the practical applications of strength to his weight room.

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