

Starting Strength

Training and Discipline

by

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I know that you have noticed the same thing I have in recent years: everybody's attention span has gotten shorter. This website, [Statistic Brain](#), offers some very interesting statistics on the subject. For example, the average attention span in 2015 is 8.25 seconds, whereas it was 12 seconds in 2000. It seems certain that the vast increase in information availability and data variety amounts to an overwhelming increase in external stimulus. Many people – especially younger people who grew up without the handicap of only 3 TV networks, a phone hanging from the wall, and having to wait for the postman – have yet to develop that which for us older guys was a simple side-effect of the times.

I refer to *discipline*: the ability to sustain an effort past the point of comfort, past the next whim, the next immediate impulse in a different direction. I sit here in front of my desktop computer, struggling with the same problem that has shaped the past 20 years of western culture – I must wait to check my e-mail and the Drudge Report until I finish these thoughts, dammit.

Despite my occasional failures, I have an advantage that lots of kids don't have. The barbell has taught me some valuable lessons they have not yet had a chance to learn. Strength training makes your body stronger in many important ways. It makes muscles stronger, bones harder and denser, joints more stable, and the whole body tougher.

It also strengthens the mind, by giving it a task it must finish once you start it.

A set of heavy squats is an amazingly attention-dependent event. You take the bar out of the rack for 5 reps, and the set takes maybe 45 seconds to complete. If you have the discipline to even start the set in the first place, you'll finish it, because the last rep is the most important rep of the set. So you're committed to the 45 seconds, and during that time you cannot afford any distractions.

You take your grip, go under the bar, stand up with the weight, walk it back from the rack, set your stance, fix your gaze on the floor ahead of you, take a big breath, and start down. You follow the carefully-scripted procedure for each of the 5 reps, trying for technical perfection and identical movement patterning every time. Your knees, hips, and back do precisely the same thing 5 times in a row. Focus is necessary, focus is what you do, and focus is what you improve.

If you don't know how to focus, a set of 5 can be a difficult 45 seconds. So you learn to focus, because *if* you have the discipline to start the set in the first place, the necessary focus to finish it must be developed, along with the physical strength the work demands. The two develop together, because they have to.

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And for those who lack focus, the process of developing the discipline to focus is an important part of strength training – maybe even more important than the physical strength improvement that got you into the gym.

Advanced lifters sometimes do sets of 20-rep squats. These are not terribly productive, and I'm not recommending them. But they are very *very* hard: you pick a weight you can do for 10 reps, and then just stay under the bar until you've done 20. They are like being in a suicide pact with yourself. Their primary value is that they teach you about the limits of your psychological abilities. The set may take 3 minutes, and during that time many interesting things run through your head, among them being the intense desire to *rack the bar right now*.

If you can just make yourself stay under the bar in spite of what rapidly begins to feel like your approaching death, you can finish the set. If you can make yourself do this for 6 weeks, you can finish *anything*, because after the sixth workout, everything else will seem very easy.

The discipline learned and earned from this harsh lesson goes a long way towards replacing that which might have been missed growing up after the turn of this century. As inundated with data as we are now, the only thing we know for sure is that as technology advances it will get worse. Strength training has the capacity to replace a more primitive society's physical stimulation, returning the body to its intended state.

It can do the same thing for the mind. Like meditation, strength training develops focus and mental clarity. Unlike meditation, it increases physical strength too. Makes you wonder why more yogis aren't getting under the barbell.

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