

Starting Strength

Two Lifts a Day for the Post-Novice Master

by

Scott Acosta

Nearly all of my clients are Masters Athletes; 80% are over the age of 40, with 46% over the age of 50 and my oldest is 67 years old. The Masters population is arguably the most challenging to train. I constantly have to work around a blunted recovery capacity and the typical age-related issues. I also have to face reality: the overwhelming majority of my clients aren't prepared to do everything necessary to maximize their results. Insufficient diets, busy work schedules, vacations, illness, and family obligations have to be worked around.

Once novice programming has run its course I can usually take a Masters Athlete to Heavy-Light-Medium for a time. However, this eventually becomes too stressful for most of them. Doing 3 barbell lifts, even when loads and volume are adjusted, can be mentally taxing, and for most, boring. The sessions become long and by the end there isn't enough energy for anything else. Nearly all my clients demand some sort of cardio and by the time they're into H-L-M they're eager to diversify training with some accessory work. Depending on their particular needs this may not be an optimal approach to training, but I'm in the gym *business* and I have to keep clients happy while also getting them results. It doesn't matter how efficient and effective a program is – if coming to the gym becomes a chore they will become non-compliant, which renders the program useless. If they leave the gym the opportunity for me to help them is lost.



What to do?

A 4-day upper/lower split could be an option, spreading the stress of a 3-day program over 4 days. This is more manageable, both physically and mentally. Getting through 2 barbell lifts leaves extra time and energy for accessory work and/or cardio. However, cost is a huge factor for some. Paying for an extra day of group training a week just may not be an option.

Using a 2-day per week fixed schedule would certainly be less total stress, but they would be marathon sessions. Most clients would run out of gas and the last couple of lifts would suffer. This

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isn't an option with the current business model either, where group sessions are 60 minutes. In my experience it's hard to get people to commit to 90-minute sessions anyway.

A 1-on-2-off structure would offer ample rest between workouts and still provides the needed frequency of each lift. The problem here is the weekly schedule would fluctuate and require the lifter to sometimes train on the weekend. It's hard enough to get someone to train on a Saturday, and I take Sunday off without exception. So, this usually means I'm stuck with restructuring 3-day templates.

My Solution

I've started using 2 lifts per day, 3 days a week with some well-selected accessory work and cardio sprinkled in, if needed. This seems to provide the necessary stress in the barbell lifts while not beating my clients into the ground. The frequency of each lift also affords much needed practice for a population that is prone to form creep. The accessory work staves off boredom while adding a little hypertrophy to the arms and back. In addition, 10–15 minutes of HIIT cardio after the session helps with body composition and intra-set recovery.

In a 2-week period the lifter performs each barbell lift 3 times. Each week is either a squat/press or a deadlift/bench focus, and every week ends with a medium squat or deadlift. The press and bench press alternate just as in the LP. The medium day loads are a 5–10% reduction in weight from the heavy day and I often eliminate a set. This allows the lifter to recover while preventing detraining. A light day can be used in place of the medium day when the lifter is showing signs of physical/mental strain. A 10–20% reduction in weight is called for and I'll eliminate 1–2 sets. Occasionally the heavy day has to be reduced to a medium day. Older folks don't tolerate external stresses as well as their younger counterparts. A bad night's sleep, a cold, or relationship turmoil could make the heavy days workout inadvisable. The rule of thumb to follow is: keep as much weight on the bar as possible and reduce the stress by reducing total reps.



Sets, Reps, and Adding Weight

The squat typically sees 3–5 sets of 3–5 reps for 9–15 total reps. The deadlift tends to stay in a range of 1–3 sets of 3–5 reps for 3–10 total reps. Back-off sets are used frequently at a 5–10% weight reduction. The pressing movements follow the same rep range as the squat.

When first starting this program, I can usually add weight to the bar every heavy day (every 5–10 days). Once a rep progression becomes necessary I can add weight every 3rd or 4th heavy day (every 14–23 days). For example, when a new weight is added to the squat the lifter may start with 3×3. The next heavy day will be 4×3 and then 5×3. Weight is added to the bar on the following heavy day and we drop back to 3×3. Some lifters may not need to stay at the same weight for



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3 workouts. They may do just fine with a 4×3, 5×3 progression or something similar.

At first, I can get away with a few 5-pound jumps, but after that the squats and deadlifts may increase by 2–3 pounds, maybe less, while bench and press could be 0.5–2 pounds. Older males can get away with more frequent 5-pound jumps on the squat and deadlift. This provides a conservative and sustainable rate of improvement for a client who has already plucked the low hanging fruit and/or doesn't put a whole lot of focus on their recovery variables.

Accessory Exercises

The most common accessory exercises I use are lying tricep extensions (LTE), tricep pushdowns, lat pulldown (wide and close grip), glute/ham raise, T-bar row, barbell row, and leg press. If the lifter can do chin-ups or dips, that's even better. Three sets of 10 is the default for most accessory exercises. Once the weight becomes challenging I'll move to a rep progression. When the lifter gets at least 1 set of 15 the weight goes up and the reps drop back to 10.

A more advanced lifter can use supplemental barbell lifts for the medium day, but caution must be used when doing so. Supplemental lifts can confuse a client who already struggles with memorizing technique. Deficit deadlifts and stiff-leg deadlifts are useful, but not when they introduce form creep into the conventional deadlift.

Layoffs and Resets

Resets after vacations or finishing a training cycle provide a good opportunity to go back to sets of 5. The first workout back can be just 1 set of 5 and the second workout can be 2–3 sets at the same weight. From this point I can use 3×5 for a short time and even bump up the medium day to a heavy day. For a layoff of 2 weeks or more I just go back to the traditional A/B NLP for a couple of weeks before switching back to 2-lifts a day.

Cardio

Cardio is usually limited to bikes, rowers, and ellipticals for 10–15 minutes of intervals 2–3 days a week. If they can handle pushing the treadmill I'll toss that in also (thanks Andy Baker for this gem). These are all pretty low impact on the joints and won't contribute much, if anything, to soreness. To start, the typical protocol is 45 seconds slow, 15 seconds fast for 10 minutes and the distance is recorded. One minute is added each time the event is repeated until they reach 15 minutes. Then I can take them back to 10 minutes and switch the intervals to 40/20×10 minutes. For the treadmill push it's 30–60 seconds on with 30–60 seconds rest. Cardio is sometimes omitted on any given day if I see the client is out of gas at the end of the session.

Putting It Together

Let's include some of the detail from above for a clearer picture of what 2 weeks on this setup could look like.

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Week 1

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Squat 3×3	Deadlift 1×5	Medium Squat -10% 2–3×3
Press 3×5	Bench 3×5	Press 3×5
LTE 3×10	Lat Pulldown 3×10	LTE 3×11
Bike Intervals		Bike Intervals

Week 2

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3
Deadlift 1×5	Squat 4×3	Medium Deadlift -10% 1×5
Bench 3×5	Press 3×5	Bench 3×5
Lat Pulldown 3×11	LTE 3×12	Lat Pulldown 3×12
	Treadmill Push	

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