

Starting Strength

The Three Most Effective Ways to Waste Time in the Gym

by

Mark Rippetoe

Time is money. Money is scarce these days, everywhere but DC. You want to be stronger, so you go to the gym. The best use of your time there is the simple progressive barbell training program we have discussed before, one that drives an upward strength adaptation with a programmed increase in load over a full range of motion using as much of your muscle mass as possible. This approach allows you to lift a gradually increasing amount of weight, thus making you stronger. Stronger means only one thing: you can apply more force with your muscles. The process of getting stronger improves the capacity of every aspect of your physical existence. So, getting stronger in the gym is the best reason to go there.

But it is incredibly easy to waste precious time once you're inside. Here are the top three:

Stretching

Long regarded as the first thing you should always do inside the gym, stretching – for most people, and by “most” I mean you, probably – is not only unnecessary, it may be counterproductive.

What a way to start an essay, eh? The most fashionable aspect of modern fitness is the newly-rechristened “mobility.” Same thing as “flexibility,” except that it sounds more Californian. And here I go again, pooping on the most popular thing in the gym. It is a part of every trendy approach to fitness in existence, from CrossFit and “functional training” to Pilates and yoga. In fact, Pilates and yoga are mobility/flexibility/stretching, and that's about all.

It has been assumed by almost everybody for the past 40 years that every workout should begin with the physical preparation known as “stretching.” Stretching is an attempt to increase the range of motion (ROM) around a joint, like the knee, hip, ankle, shoulder, elbow, or around a group of joints like the spinal column. The common method is to force the joint into a position of tolerable discomfort and hold it there for a while, thus hopefully increasing the ROM.

More recent approaches to increased flexibility have used techniques that affect the muscles themselves, which actually control the ROM around the joints. Massage, Active Release Therapy, “foam rolling,” and other techniques applied to the muscle bellies themselves are much more effective for increasing a tight ROM than stretching. The Hip Bone's Connected to the ... Thigh Bone, the Thigh Bone's Connected to the ... Knee Bone, etc. So stretching is really all about the muscles anyway.

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Every operating room professional knows the truth here: perfect “mobility” is obtained only under general anesthesia.

The assumption is always that your current ROM needs to be increased. Here are some Facts, cheerfully provided without citations, so that you can look them up if you want to:

1. Hypermobility is a medical condition – a “Pathology,” in fact – that often involves defects in the proteins that form the ligaments, the connective tissues that connect the bones to each other at the joints. The problem with being too flexible is that it results in unstable joints, which can assume positions they are not anatomically designed to occupy. A subsequently injured joint is not healthy: it is injured. This is not good. And here you are, trying to become hypermobile.

2. Tendons and ligaments **do not “stretch out.”** You cannot make them longer, and it would not improve their function if you could. Their function is to transmit force, like a chain or a cable; in the case of tendons, which connect muscles to bones, the force of muscular contraction is transmitted to the bone it’s attached to, thus moving the bone. Tendons are indeed *elastic*, in that a sudden dynamic load causes a very small temporary change in length and a subsequent rebound, seen typically in the Achilles tendon complex. But during normal muscle contraction, if the tendon changed its length not all of the force would move the bone – some would be lost as the tendon stretched. Just like a short piece of chain, a tendon pulls the bone with *all* the force of the contracting muscle because it does not stretch during the contraction.

Ligaments behave likewise. They anchor the joint as it moves, so that the bones which articulate at the joint change their relationship only with respect to their *angle*. This allows the joint to serve as a fulcrum in a system of levers. When ligaments move enough to allow the joint to change from its normal inter-articular arrangement, it is said to be “dislocated.” You’ve heard of that, right? When tendons and ligaments are stretched excessively, they rupture.

Most importantly, you cannot change the length of either a tendon or a ligament with stretching of any type, massage of any type, or therapy of any type. And why would you want to? Tendons and ligaments are force transmission components. They are very *very* tough, and they cannot be permanently lengthened by non-invasive means. The only connective tissues that you can affect with stretching are the *fascias*, the thin “silverskin” that covers the muscle bellies. If they become a problem, usually caused by tiny scars called “adhesions” that form between them and their underlying muscle or between adjacent fascias, they can be stretched with the previously-mentioned forms of therapy.

3. Since neither ligaments or tendons are designed to stretch, an increase in flexibility primarily involves the muscles that control the position of the skeletal components they operate. Sometimes, but not that often, the muscles behave in a way that requires you to teach them to lengthen more readily. And the best way to do this is with the aforementioned Full Range of Motion Barbell Exercise. Since full ROM is, by definition, all you need to do, anything beyond that is either a simple waste of time, or a counterproductive waste of time.

4. Stretching does nothing to a.) prevent soreness, b.) alleviate soreness, c.) or improve strength or any other measure of fitness. In fact, the vast majority of the studies done on stretching not only support this summary, but also indicate that stretching prior to either training or performance produces a significant decrease in power production. That’s right: tighter muscles can contract harder and faster, and this has an obvious application in performance athletics.

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The upshot is this: if you are already flexible (okay, “mobile”) enough to operate efficiently within the ROM of your required training and performance movements, you are flexible enough (your “mobility” is sufficient). And you don’t need to stretch. If you want to, go ahead and enjoy yourself, but you are not using your time wisely.

Warmup

After you stretch, you’re supposed to “warm up,” right? Warmup is an important part of the preparation for a workout, if its function is properly understood and its role in the process is correctly facilitated. But for most people, unless it’s cold – and I mean *cold*, where the temperature is low where you’re training – your warmup is probably excessive, and you’re wasting time doing it.

The pre-workout warmup serves two purposes. First, it prepares the *tissues* for the work. “Warm” is a specific term: it refers to the temperature of something, a measure of the thermal energy in a system. In this case, it’s you. If *it’s* cold where you’re training, then *you’re* probably cold too, and you will need to devote enough time to some general movement to elevate the temperature of the tissues – the muscles and joints you’re going to use in the workout. A stationary bike, rower, treadmill, or a short run around the building or the block can do the trick.

This is not always necessary, because sometimes you’re already warm. If your workout is being done in August in North Texas in an un-air-conditioned building, or anywhere in Houston ten months of the year (it is effectively impossible to air-condition a building in Houston), you’re already warm. If you’re already warm, this aspect of the warmup has been conveniently taken care of already.

If not, the question becomes, how long do I need to spend getting warm? The answer is, probably not as long as you think. Most people can spend 2-3 minutes on a rower or stationary bike and get warm enough to train. If you’re spending 20 minutes doing any repetitive movement before you get under the bar, you’re spending about 2 minutes warming up and 18 minutes wasting time, as well as energy that could be more productively used to lift weights and get stronger. Strength training and conditioning are two completely separate activities, and they must be kept separate if either is to improve effectively.

The second function of warmup is to prepare the *movement pattern* you are about to perform. Barbell training is movement pattern training – it is not about the constituent muscle groups that cause the movement to occur, it is about the movement pattern itself. When we squat, we don’t “do quads,” we just squat, and quads get done, along with everything else below the bar on the shoulders. The emphasis in the squat is the correct execution of the movement pattern with an increasingly heavy weight, and this requires that the movement pattern be *practiced* before it is loaded to a heavier-than-the-last-workout weight.

Warmup is this practice, and it is obviously best done as the weight increases. Start with the empty bar, do a few sets with it, add weight gradually, doing fewer reps as you approach your new heavier weight, *taking as much time as you need between sets to rest from the previous set*, and you have effectively prepared the movement pattern. You have prepared the muscles – they are now “warmer” – as well as the nervous system that controls the muscles, for the movement you are about to execute with the new heavier weight.

Most importantly, the preparation has incorporated everything it needs to include for an effective execution of the work to be done *without getting fatigued*. The purpose of warmup is to prepare, and it is valuable because it gets you ready to improve. *But the warmup itself does not produce*

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improvement. If it also produces fatigue, then its purpose has been compromised. If the warmup is excessive, you are not only wasting time, you are subtracting from your work capacity.

Failure to Progress

Throughout my career in the fitness industry, I have heard the following phrase repeated *ad infinitum, ad nauseum*: “I think I’ll just stop here at 90 pounds until it gets easier, and then go up.” This excuse – and that’s precisely what it is, a lame-ass excuse to not do something perceived as *harder* – has wasted more time after stretching and warmup than any other single lame-ass excuse ever uttered in the gym.

People: *90 will be easy when 135 is hard*, and not before then. The way you get from 90 to 135 is to do 95, 100, 105, 110, 115, 120, 125, 130, and 135, adding 5 pounds per workout. The process of going from 90 to 135 is *training*, and staying at 90 is not training. It is merely fooling around in the gym. You have to understand that if you cannot make yourself load 95 next time and move it in the required manner, you are not going to get stronger. And if you don’t get stronger than 90, *90 won’t ever be easier*. Ever. Why would it be? How would it get that way? Why should it?

Stronger is simple: stronger means you’re moving heavier weight. When your training has taken you to 135, 90 will be perceived as easy, and this process requires that you gradually make the adaptation occur. Five pounds is pretty gradual, but in your particular circumstances 1 or 2 pounds might be necessary. Whatever the increments you find necessary, they must be added on a regular basis, and for 99% of you this means *every single workout*. If you don’t go up, you won’t get stronger. And on a strength program, if you’re not getting stronger you’re wasting time.

So, let’s stop being less-than-productive and learn to embrace efficiency and brevity. If you don’t need to stretch, don’t stretch. It doesn’t accomplish anything and it wastes time. If you don’t need to get warmer than you already are, just do the part of the warmup that actually accomplishes something – the part that you were going to do anyway, under the bar, the part that makes the heavier weight you’re using today possible. The heavier weight is the part you want anyway, the aspect of the workout that makes it training, and all the stretching and warmup in the whole entire Universe cannot accomplish what that 5 extra pounds can do over time.

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