

Starting Strength

The White Noise of Heavy

by

Carl Raghavan

People ask me what it's like to lift a heavy weight, and this is the best I can do to describe it: a heavy weight is like a loud white noise blaring full blast into your ears. A heavy weight tries to distract you from your technique; it tries to disrupt your focus and composure.

There's a time and a place to be technical and analytical, perhaps even to overthink a lift. But in a set of five reps, two cues – three at the most – should be the only things in your head. More than that and you'll fuck up. (And by cue I mean “tight grip” in a press or “knees out” in a squat.) Entering a flow state of total focus is essential to prepping yourself for a good set. Be present and focused, expecting the outcomes and planting positive seeds in your head: tell yourself you're a bad motherfucker.

A high percentage of my clients are novice lifters when they arrive for their first coaching session. I can put most of them into two main groups. The first type of client usually requires a lot of technique adjustments, as they've been doing it all wrong even if they swear they've been following the method, reading all the books and watching every video. The second type are the complete beginners, the blank canvases who have never been under a barbell in their lives. If they continue to train, both types will eventually run into the inevitable situation: a heavy barbell.

Now, load is relative. What's heavy for one person is light for another. But when that barbell speed slows down – and it will – that's when you run into the problem.

I've seen it time and time again. The effect of the weight is almost like white noise, creating physical and mental stumbling blocks that didn't exist when the bar felt light. Even if “light” was only a few kilograms less, sometimes a marginal difference is all it takes for the numbers to feel impossible.

How a lifter reacts in this situation tells you instantly whether they're experienced or a novice: the novice panics while the veteran stays calm.

What happens when I see a client hit a really tough set for the first time? He gives me the look – the look that says he's hoping I'm about to wrap him in an emergency blanket and run for the hot cocoa. He's waiting to be told he did a great job, that the session is over and it's time for high fives



The White Noise of Heavy

all round. In fact, this is the moment my eyes light up, because I know his strength journey has now begun.

This number is now seared into his brain. It felt to him like he wasn't budging at all for the last two or three reps. I'll say with a smile, "No, that was good, that's what we want. This is called grinding speed – [aka the grind](#)." I know what he's thinking: "No way can I do another two sets of five, let alone add 2.5kg more next session." Fear kicks in and the lifter starts doing things that are out of character, embellishing the lift with new movement patterns and errors. It can be bizarre to watch, especially if the client crushed almost the same weight in the previous session.

This set is a milestone. Afterwards, the lifter's body language and attitude changes. When he next approaches the barbell he's sheepish and disconcerted. Once they reach a certain load – the exact number is irrelevant – it adds a new dimension to the lift. It's not as fun anymore, or as achievable. There's a little demon of fear and doubt planting seeds in their mind. I can usually spot it straight away, and I've found the best way to deal with this issue is to face it head on.

It's a matter of perspective. The lifter needs to understand that the technique remains the same – [you just need to push a little harder](#). They're only panicking because they've never been in that situation before, whereas an advanced lifter is only too familiar with heavy, grinding reps. All the reps you've done in the past have been practice for this moment, preparing you to move correctly under a heavy barbell. You already know what to do. The only difference is that the stakes are higher and the margin for error gets narrower as you stack on more weight.

In terms of approach and performance, your focus should be almost tranquil. All that matters in that moment is those five reps. Nothing else. No thinking about your day or how you're feeling, no wondering if you're making a difference in the world – nothing but those five lifts. At the same time, you don't want your focus to be too intense: getting hyped up for every rep will cause burn-out, and it's unnecessary anyway. Keeping calm, being focused and staying strong in your form – those are the keys. Of course, when competition lifts and PRs are on the line it's a different story. Turn up the DMX and let's get it on! But this is three-sets-of-five territory, so we aren't close to that level yet – that's a different article altogether. Filming the lift and watching the bar speed can be a big eye-opener. It's a trick I've used many times with lifters, especially the ones who give up early. It helps them realize the barbell wasn't traveling as slowly as they thought and that they could have closed the rep if only they'd kept pushing. And I do get it. Speaking personally, my issue has always been the deadlift: I love to give up after three reps. Five-rep deadlifts are my kryptonite. The last two usually feel like I'm grinding for an eternity. When that happens I use a classic Matt Reynolds cue: "keep hold of the bar and keep pushing hard for five seconds." That usually works. Veteran or novice, we all feel the fear when the load gets heavy. So when my clients reach that point, I tell them I understand. Part of my job is teaching them to block out the white noise – to know deep down that they can do it. They've practiced the lift; they're well prepared. They're going to crush that barbell.

[Starting Strength](#) : [Articles](#) : [Videos](#) : [Podcasts](#) : [Training](#) : [Forums](#)

Copyright 2019 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.