



Part 1: The 3 principles of getting strong

by **Stuart Martin**
Head of Weightlifting
Performance

“There is no secret to getting strong, it’s just hard work”

... is something I hear a lot, and it’s true, and false like most overly simplified statements.

What’s true is that there are no secrets and it definitely takes hard work... what’s not true is that getting strong after the beginner gains have slowed down gets a little more complicated than just turning up and doing your squats. It isn’t so complicated that it’s impossible for someone without a PhD to solve but there are some key principles that will help you to create your own formula for consistent gains.

This 3 part article will focus on high level principles that (described in my own words) are used by the strongest people and best coaches from around the world that I have had the privilege to spend time with over the last decade plus working in across weightlifting and a number of other Olympic and team sports. The sections of this article should hopefully sound familiar (which is the intention)

1. “The what” - Specificity (this issue)
2. “The how” - Progressive overload
3. “The why” - individualisation



JUST Get strong

What do I need to get stronger at, to get better at the snatch and clean & jerk? It's a simple enough question so why isn't the answer always simple... well in short the "tools" you use to build yourself up will eventually wear out and you'll need to replace them or revive them in order to keep making progress.

Choose the right challenge.

In weightlifting as in life you will often feel like there are more challenges than you have the resources and capacity to handle. The trick is to figure out which of them are important and solvable inside the time available.

Keep moving forwards!

Effective decision makers think critically but do not get distracted by the urgencies of "life" when they randomly appear. The better you get at weightlifting the longer, harder and more effectively you will have to practice the same things to achieve the progress you are looking for.

Establish a process of review.

Variations in the environment and person will always occur and always make it difficult to make accurate assessments of exactly how our training impacted our performance, but if we maintain a consistent process for prescribing training, changing only a small number of variables at a time, then we can make sensible and moderately accurate assumptions on their impact.

Specificity

Established strength ratios can be a helpful tool to help create a process of review for your training and help objectively identify areas that may be holding your competition lifts back:

As a beginner lifter (0-6 months) practicing the competition lifts consistently until you have developed the foundations of an effective technique alongside the big 3 strength exercises (squats, pulls, press) and improving the quality of your other fundamental movement skills (split squats, upper body pulling, bracing, rotating, jumping and landing) will be sufficient for you to get better at lifting.

As a novice lifter (6 months - 2 years) the derivatives of the competition lifts can be a great guide for growing your tool box. Just working through these exercises and practicing them once your progress slows down can provide valuable variation that keeps the ball rolling.

As an intermediate lifter (2-5 years) start looking at which derivatives or strength exercises are furthest from the normal range and put a concerted effort into improve them with a consistent focus for 4-6 weeks. While you follow this process keep a record of the impact that these exercises have on your competition lifts recognising that there is often a delayed training effect for the competition lifts that often happens in the subsequent 4-6 weeks as you move closer to your target competition. Repeat this process until performance in these exercises plateaus / reaches “normal” levels.

As an advanced lifter (5-8 years) you should have developed an awareness of which derivatives lead to the best improvements in your competition lifts (and which do not transfer). Knowing this information can help you individualise your approach, it becomes important to practice these more consistently as part of your on-going training process and align other exercises such as accessories and partial pulls to ensure maximal transfer.



It takes a village to raise a child

In high performance teams the confidence and alignment of the team to the agreed goal is critical, failure to clearly articulate or mutually decide on a goal will spread an athlete's resources too thin. Great athlete's might sometimes seem superhuman but they still have a certain capacity for doing "the work". Like the rest of us.

Great support teams focus on what they agree on not what they don't agree on to help athletes identify and prioritise their development needs. They are committed and relentlessly driven to achieve their goals and respect that diverse thinking and iteration will be necessary to nudge their way along the rocky road to their shared ambitions.

When conflict hits aim for a goal that everyone is "slightly unhappy with"! It might sound counterintuitive at first but think about it like this... if one person is getting everything they want it probably means that others team members aren't getting anything they want and may well stop working towards the theoretically agreed goal (especially if they're not being paid to). In contrast if everyone is a little bit unhappy the chances are that everyone will accept both the mutually agreed areas and the areas of compromise required for the team to function and succeed.

Autonomy should NOT be confused as the opportunity for people to do whatever they want. Creating boundaries for autonomy in a team is difficult but essential to help people remain motivated and feel like a valued contributor to the team's outcomes. When agreeing a goal, it is critical to establish clear roles and responsibilities for each team member. The team (including the athlete) should organise itself with recognition for both the goal and the super strengths the individuals it has access to.

Consistency is key!

In the real world consistently turning up and doing rubbish work will still get you fired! Once the skills or qualities required to achieve the goal are identified and “best” exercises to develop them an athlete needs to consistently practice. Good prescription goes one step further and clearly articulates the standards of practice that should be met.

Constraints will often have a bigger impact on the outcome than any amount of cues. You probably do this more often than you think already... a common example that’s been deployed in weightlifting for years is to set a peak height goal for pulls rather than a specific load.

Option 1 - Snatch pull to navel (belly button) will allow use of heavier weights and will drive more maximal strength related improvements.

Option 2 - Snatch pull to sternum will force the use of lighter weights and will drive greater improvements in rate of force development.

Weightlifting has a number of these constraints naturally built into the existing training methodology but that doesn’t mean you can’t build your own if you think beyond the reps, sets and exercises when you prescribe.

Hang, block, pause variations and partial movements are all examples of natural constraints we use regularly to better focus practice. Wagers & time constraints are other examples that can be deployed to create competition or pressure.

Well prescribed constraints can guide an athlete towards better weight selections, better awareness of correct technical execution and the ability to understand or cope with the pressure of competition.

Specificity

Knowing how to do it doesn't mean you can! Physical capacity is often more limiting than cognitive understanding of how to execute the skill better with experienced athletes. Interventions and execution must be complimentary of each other throughout the training process. For an experienced coach this often is as simple as identifying a chain of exercises running through the training that compliment both each other and the goal.

Example: Athlete lacks hamstring strength and doesn't keep the bar close in the second pull which leads to an incomplete extension.

The following exercise chain might help.

Goal - keep bar close during second pull and get stronger hamstrings.

Competition Lift - Snatch

Derivative - Hang snatch

Strength exercise - Pulls to sternum

Partial pull - Hang pull to navel

Accessories - Nordics & Hamstring curls

Consistent execution in line with the minimum practice standards for the task will determine the impact / transfer of the practice task on the performance outcome, especially when it comes to the specific strength / skill relationship required to improve in the competition lifts.

See you next time!



BRITISH
WEIGHT
LIFTING