

By Isaac Wilkins, M.Ed, CSCS, NSCA-CPT

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The 7 Secrets of Strength and Health

Thanks for picking this book up! The fact that you're reading it tells me that we're of the same mindset that being strong of mind and body is better than being weak. Congratulations on making the choice to follow the path of strength and success!

What we're going to do is go over the seven key areas of focus that I feel are the most important to achieving a successful strength lifestyle. Some of them will deal with your physical body and how to train it for strength, athleticism, and health. Other keys deal more with the mental aspect of strength and how to maintain mental focus, overcome adversity, and keep a healthy balance in life. I'm of the opinion that in order to be truly strong as a person you must develop the whole person which means the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of your person and that's what we're going to focus on.

Your **physical body** is of great importance as it's what you walk around in. Your body is your temple, so to speak. No matter what your genetic ability or situation, there are ways for you to improve the function your physical body. If you're not healthy and strong physically then every other aspect of your life will be compromised and you'll be a step behind (sometimes literally) your whole life.

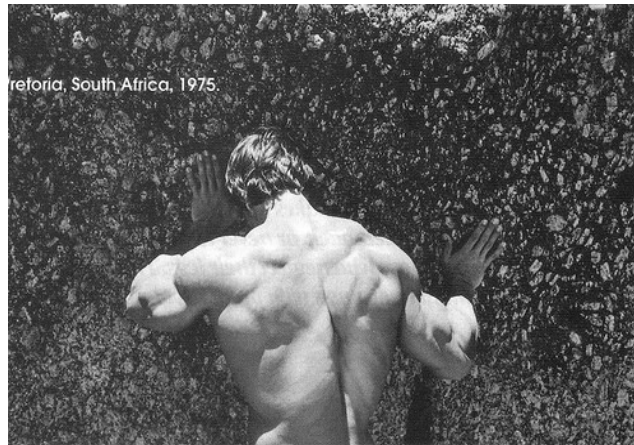
Developing your **mental abilities** is a must for a strong lifestyle. I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here, but if you're not always learning new things in this world then why are you in it? We've got a great, exciting, and challenging world out there! Go out, learn more about it, and carve out your place in it.

The third leg of a strength-based lifestyle is **spirituality**. When I speak of spirituality I'm not necessarily speaking of religion, although if you find a religion that resonates within you then by all means look into it. Many have found their place in the religions of the world and I would be the last person to try to pigeon-hole you into a certain set of spiritual beliefs.

When I speak of spirituality I instead speak of a strong sense of self. Who are **you** as a person? Many people go through their whole lives without asking themselves that question or even developing a clear view of themselves. That's the weak way to go about it. Instead of merely schlepping your way through life and taking whatever comes your way, approach from a position of strength. Look yourself hard in the eye and determine who you are, who you want to be, and how to get there. Then, as Nike has so succinctly put it... Just *do* it.

Without further discussion, let's get into the seven pillars of developing strength!

Strength Principle #1: Strength Train with Progressive Overload



Why Train for Strength?

The backbone of a strong and healthy body and lifestyle is strength training. Plain and simple. I know that sounds sort of basic and many of you reading this are avid strength trainers, but I wanted to get all of the cards out on the table. If you're not exercising your body with some sort of resistance training then I think you are sacrificing the strength and vitality that you hold in your potential.

How you train for strength can consist of many different methods such as the standard of barbells and dumbbells, kettlebells, sandbags, bodyweight training/gymnastics, or a whole host of other methods. In fact, I recommend that you don't stick to any one method of training exclusively and that you find several that you like and feel develop strength for you. Variety is the spice of life and a big part of becoming stronger is a) feeling motivated to train by having fun, and b) exposing your body to different types of stimulus to keep it guessing and progressing.

Before I get too carried away let's talk about why you should be strength training in the first place.

-Strength training makes you stronger. Right, I know, that's obvious. Since you're reading a book titled *7 Secrets of Strength and Health* I'll go ahead and assume that being stronger is already interesting to you and not spend any more time convincing you that stronger is better, which it is. As I like to paraphrase from the classic, and hysterical movie *Animal House*: Fat, slow, and weak is no way to go through life.

-Strength training increases muscle mass. The primary method by which we are able to increase our current muscle mass (assuming you're an adult) is through exposing it to resistance and giving the body a reason to grow. Strength training allows you to place a potentially great load on your muscles to give them the reason they need to grow.

Increasing your muscle mass is important. You'll look better, feel stronger, be leaner, and be more physically resilient. All other things equal, having more muscle mass will be an improvement for most people and athletes.

-Strength training can reduce body fat and keep you lean. Strength training has the potential to lower body fat and keep you lean far easier than just doing a bunch of cardio does. The reason for that is called nutrient partitioning. Nutrient partitioning basically means the destination of the nutrients you eat after you eat them.

When you eat something, your body breaks it down to its useful nutrients and then has to decide where to send them. Some of those nutrients are going to go to useful things like healing your body, building new cells, and powering your movements. Others go to storage... which is a nice way of saying that they're stored as **fat**.

The problem is that most people who lead a fairly sedentary life don't have a very high demand for energy. They don't spend much energy moving around so they don't cause a lot of cellular turnover, and therefore they don't tend to need a lot of nutrients throughout the day. That would be fine if they didn't consume much in the way of nutrients. However, in our society food is everywhere and we tend to consume far more than we need. Any excess nutrients are quickly stored as fat by the body.

Enter strength training. The reason that strength training makes you stronger and builds bigger muscles is because you cause damage to your muscles when you train them with a (relatively) heavy load. The body responds to this damage by rebuilding muscles bigger and stronger so as to withstand further attacks. This is the process by which bigger and stronger muscles are developed.

All of that training and the subsequent rebuilding requires nutrients and energy. Where is your body going to get those building blocks and energy? It'll grab them from the foods that you eat and, if necessary, from stored body fat. So now when the formerly sedentary person who's taken up strength training eats a meal the body has a good use for those nutrients and will be far less likely to store them as fat. The more advanced this person becomes in strength training the the more efficient this process will become.

-Strength training is the key to skeletal health. This is probably not on the forefront of most people under the age of 50's minds, but it does matter. As we age we can quickly lose bone density and that can cause all kinds of problems, especially for women who are far more susceptible to bone loss. Strength training is one of the best ways to keep bone healthy and strong. When you use your muscles to move some sort of resistance they pull on your bones. This stress forces your body to continue to build strong bones and keep the bone density you currently have.

I used to train on occasion at the gym of a world class powerlifter. He injured his arm and had to have surgery to reattach his triceps tendon to his elbow. The surgeon who did the procedure broke several bone drill bits and said that he'd never encountered bone as hard as this guy's elbow. That is a real world result of heavy duty strength training! I highly doubt osteoporosis is going to be a big worry for him later in life.

-Strength training is the key to improving in all other physical aspects of your life. If you become stronger then you'll find that everything else you do will be easier. All other things being equal you'll hike better, run faster and farther, jump higher, play sports better, carry groceries easier, and in general feel more confident about life if you're stronger. Remember, it's not just about how much weight you can push in the gym (although as a gym rat I think that's pretty cool), it's how that extra strength affects your life.

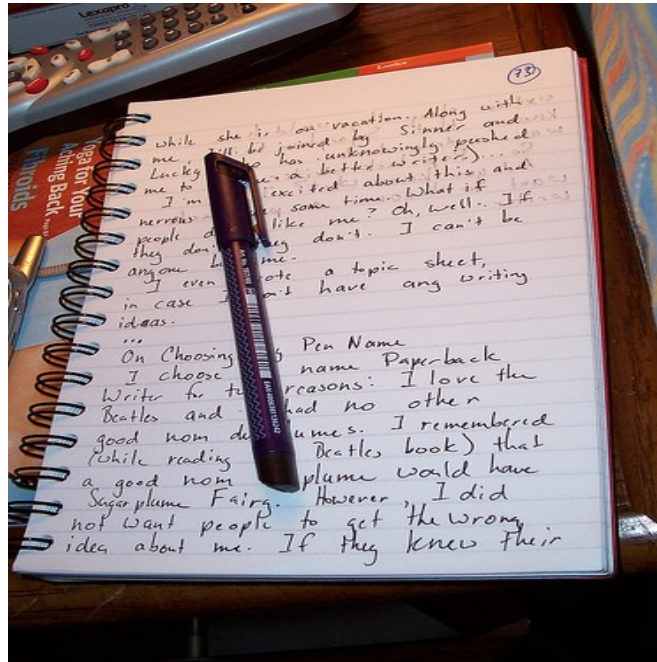
How to Get Strong

Have you noticed that the vast majority of people spend time in the weight room but never see any real progress? Why is that? Well, they're forgetting one of the key components of a strength training program: *Progressive Overload*.

Do you remember what I said before about strength training causing damage to the muscles and they subsequently adapt and repair themselves against further damage? Well, that's the problem for these people. They cause some initial damage when they start training but then once their body adapts most tend to stay in that "comfort" zone of strength. Their bodies and muscles have adapted to that level of stress and now they're not pushing it further! Essentially they're just spinning their wheels in the gym. Even if they're breaking a sweat or getting a little short of breath, they're still not really doing anything that's going to force their body into further adaptations and continue improving.

In order to have success in strength training it's important to utilize progressive overload. Make small, incremental increases in weight and challenge of your exercise plan. Your body will adapt to these small increases (much better than huge jumps) and will respond by growing stronger and stronger as time goes by. The important thing is to stay challenged by the weight and keep in mind that your goal is to improve in some way every time you work out. This is where a workout journal or log can be very helpful. A training log will give you consistent data and allow you to determine if you're improving and if your program is working.

Strength Principle #2: Train with a Purpose and to be Strong



Have a Plan

There's nothing worse from a trainer's perspective than watching the guy or girl who comes into the gym hoping to improve themselves just sort of wander around aimlessly. Those people simply aren't going to make any progress.

There's a famous old quote that says something to the effect of "Those who fail to plan are planning to fail". When it comes to building strength, improving athleticism, and getting less fat that's definitely true.

When you come into the gym with a [good training plan](#) then it's much easier to keep your workouts brief, crisp, and constantly improving. Rather than wandering around aimlessly and being distracted by every shiny machine you see you will know exactly what you need to do in order to improve yourself from moment to moment.

Careful planning of your training will also help to ensure that you're consistently doing what you need to in order to progress. We all have a tendency to stick with certain exercises in the gym that we like and we're good at. That's all well and good but usually these aren't the exercises we should be doing. Often we should be doing the exercises that aren't our favorite, because those exercises probably expose a weak spot on our body or they're just exercises that we're not proficient at. Be sure that your plan is based around developing the strengths and qualities that you need to in order to improve, not based around your favorite gym exercises.

Another group of people who don't usually see much progress are the gym chatters. They spend more time exercising their jaws than they do the rest of their body! The gym is not a social hour. Sure, it's fine to be social, but you're there to do work. If you're serious about changing your body or building the best and most athletic body you can then standing around chatting about last night's game isn't going to help you. Get your work done, then if you want to hang out with sweaty people go ahead and talk.

Strength Principle #3: Perform High Intensity Energy System Work



Rats On a Wheel?

So far we've talked about getting stronger, lifting weights, and all that good stuff but that's not all there is to building your body into a great high performance machine. What about making sure the ol'ticker is doing well? What about "cardio"?

When most people think about performing cardiovascular exercise, or “cardio” in the traditional gym sense they think about sitting on a bike or wandering on a treadmill for twenty minutes to an hour and being done with it. Well, for the most part, that's crap.

First of all, let's get away from the term “cardio”. You will train your heart or cardiac muscle when you perform this type of exercise, but that's honestly a secondary goal. Just getting a good scare at the movie theater will get your heart pumping and in effect “train” the cardiac muscle to a mild degree. That obviously doesn't count as exercise and isn't going to make you any healthier.

Instead what you really should be doing with your more repetitive-based exercise is targeting your *energy systems*. Your energy systems are the biological processes which your body goes through to create the energy that you use to move, perform any biological function, and basically continue to be alive. Your body creates this energy, called adenosine tri-phosphate or ATP, from the food that you eat.

It's in targeting these energy systems most people go wrong and to best show you how we'll hit a quick overview of them. I'm gonna hit you with some light science here, so bear with me.

The Basics of the Human Energy Systems

There are three primary systems that operate within the human body to provide it with the energy it needs to perform all of its functions. As I mentioned above the basic unit of energy in the human body is adenosine tri-phosphate (ATP).

Energy is created through breaking of ATP's chemical bonds to create a molecule of adenosine di-phosphate (ADP) and a loose phosphate group (P).

Cells only have a limited supply of ATP, however, so they must recycle the ADP + P back to ATP so that it can be broken again. The systems of the body use substrates, or fuels, to provide energy to make that happen.

The **phosphagen system** is our quickest energy producing system. It is used primarily in high intensity activities such as sprinting, jumping, and heavy weight lifting. An amount of creatine phosphate is stored in the cells and provides the energy through enzymatic reaction to recreate ATP. Only small amounts of creatine phosphate are maintained in the cells, so this system can only provide short bursts of energy before it needs to be regenerated. The phosphagen system can sustain about one second to five or six seconds of very high level activity.

The next system as far as speed of energy production is **glycolysis**. Glycolysis is the breakdown of carbohydrates to create energy. This could be stored carbohydrate in the form of glycogen or it could be free carbohydrate in the blood called glucose. While the phosphagen system can only power the body for a few seconds, glycolysis provides energy for fast-paced activity lasting from a few seconds up to two minutes.

Most of the energy produced through glycolysis is produced without need for the presence of oxygen. Since oxygen is not used in glycolysis it is called the anaerobic, or without oxygen, system and exercise that targets glycolysis is called anaerobic exercise. This exercise can consist of middle intensity/higher rep sets of strength training, middle distance sprints, and any fast paced activity that can't last longer than a minute or two.

The slowest but most efficient producer of energy for the body is the **oxidative system**. The use of oxygen in the oxidative system gives us the term “aerobic”, meaning with oxygen. When most people think of “aerobics” and “cardio”, they think of a type of exercise that is known to primarily stress this system.

This system relies primarily on fatty acids and oxygen to provide energy for the body. When exercise continues for a longer period of time and thus intensity is lowered the body makes use of fat as fuel. When the human body breaks down carbohydrate or fat for energy, each gram of the initial substance, or substrate, has a certain amount of energy that can be extracted. For carbohydrate, this is about four calories of energy per gram. Fat, on the other hand, has around nine calories of potential energy per gram. This is why the body preferably utilizes fat when it can as it is a much more efficient storage unit of energy. The only downside of using fat for fuel is that it's much slower for the body to manufacture energy from so it's only used as the primary energy source for long, slow exercise.

If you want to think about it in physical terms, the phosphagen system is like gunpowder, glycolysis is like gasoline, and the oxidative system is like wood. All will burn, all will provide energy, but they all have different rates at which they provide this energy.

High Intensity Energy System Work is Superior to Longer, Slower Work

Now, which method of training is the best to perform or which energy system is the best to target? The answer is “it depends”. The answer can vary depending on your goals and your current situation. However, for most people reading this and for most in the gym, they should be targeting their phosphagen and glycolytic systems much more than worrying about their oxidative systems.

When it comes to most applications high intensity exercise is going to trump lower intensity exercise every time. There are a few reasons for this.

-High intensity exercise results in greater fat loss. I know that sounds counter-intuitive. I mean, if you wanted to burn fat, you'd do the exercises that burnt fat as energy, right? That's a great theory, but it doesn't stand up to the real world test.

Let's say you walk on the treadmill for an hour, and you burn 500 calories, mostly from fat. That's great. You're done, you've worked up a little sweat, burnt some calories, and you're good.

Now, let's say you performed a high intensity interval program that took you 15 minutes and burnt about 300 calories, mostly from glucose. That's not nearly as many calories as the slow walking, although you only spend a quarter of the time. However, because that high intensity exercise was intense enough to heavily stress your body the training will result in a much greater metabolic burn throughout the day as your body tries to recover from it.

In addition to the heightened metabolism after your workout, high intensity energy system training will enhance your nutrient partitioning (that we talked about before in regards to strength training) so that more of what you eat for the rest of the day will go to where you want it to rather than toward your fat cells. Your body burns fat at rest, so while you're going about your day not exercising you'll still be burning a lot more calories from that stored fat that you're trying to get rid of than you would have if you'd just walked a bit before.

-I mentioned it in passing above, but high intensity work is much faster. I don't know about you, but I certainly don't want to spend an hour slogging away on the treadmill when I can get better results from less than half that time.

-By training at a high intensity on a regular basis you'll be able to increase your performance in many sports and overall athletic pursuits. Not only will you be better off simply because you're used to higher intensity activity, but all activity below your peak level of ability will seem easier. So in effect, by doing high intensity work (phosphagen and anaerobic systems) you'll be improving your lower intensity ability (oxidative). While you won't actually increase the uptake of the oxidative system much, you'll decrease the need for it to shoulder a heavy load during exercise.

Let's take running for example. Let's say you normally run three miles at a pace of 8:00 minutes per mile. That's what you run, and that's what you train. It's going to be awfully hard to get better that way. Even if you try running longer, as long as you keep that 8:00 minute pace it's going to always seem harder to run faster.

However, if you really train hard to get your one mile run down to about 6:00 minutes you'll soon discover that your 8:00 minute three mile pace will be very leisurely. You might not be able to hammer out three 6:00 minute miles, but three at 7:00 minutes might suddenly be possible. That's because your peak ability is better and everything under that is more and more submaximal.

From my years of training a wide range of clients and my own athletic training, I can say this: If you're not sprinting in some way, shape, or form at least 1-2 times per week then I'd suggest that you're probably not maximizing your fitness results. Ideally this would be actual sprinting. There's something about running fast that creates whole body change, increases mental confidence and clarity, and just makes you *feel* fast and confident.

If you're not used to sprinting, don't just go out there and hammer it. Chances are you'll injure yourself and hate me. Instead take a few weeks to slowly build up to full speed stuff. Trust me, it's worth it.

Strength Principle #4. Pay Attention to Your Mobility and Flexibility Training



More Than Stretching

Another area of training that people often neglect but is integral in being strong and healthy is their mobility and flexibility. Now I'm not just talking about getting down and stretching, although there are times where that's warranted. What I'm talking about is focusing on improving your joint function, balance, and your ability to move and perform tasks at different and unusual directions and levels.

For most people their issues with flexibility aren't so much the stiffness in their joints as they believe. Instead most people suffer from a lack of coordination, tight or impinged musculature, and muscular imbalances. This is why simply static stretching is not usually the best way to improve your mobility.

These issues are variable from person to person, but they generally are treated through dynamic stretching, mobility drills, and restorative methods such as foam rolling, soft tissue massage work, and perhaps osteopathic/chiropractic or active release therapy in more advanced situations.

Mobility Quick Tips

Rather than get into great detail about this topic, since it's so variable from person to person, I'll just give three basic tips when it comes to mobility and flexibility.

1. Always start your workout with a good dynamic warm-up. This warm-up should consist of a variety of athletic movements, primarily body weight, and move from simple to more complex skills as you get warmed up. The goal of the dynamic warm-up is to:

- Raise your body's core and muscle temperature so as to elevate your metabolic processes and improve your muscles' elasticity
- Lubricate your joints so that they move more smoothly.
- Move your joints through extended ranges of motion to increase their overall flexibility.
- Fire up your nervous system and prepare you for exercise.
- Mentally get you "checked in" to your workout.
- Improve and increase athletic skills and coordination.

2. Perform your static stretching after your workout, or even a couple of hours later, rather than before your workout. Static stretching has a tendency to overstretch the muscles which can reduce your power output. This is why some people have jumped on the “Static Stretching is the Devil” bandwagon over the last couple of years. The truth is that static stretching is just fine, but it isn't that great before a workout.

In addition to reducing power output during your workout, static stretching pre-workout can put you at risk of injury. A cold, stiff muscle is not the best recipient of static stretching and it's a good way to get a muscle strain or tear. It's surprising how many people have injured themselves stretching. If you get hurt during your stretching/warm-up **before** you actually work out... that's not good.

Instead perform your stretching after your workout is over. Your muscles will be warmed up and ready to stretch. It will also help you relax post workout so that your body can begin the healing process.

3. Learn how to use a foam roller and/or ball (such as a tennis ball or lacrosse ball) to perform some light self-myofascial release. Basically this means that you'll roll around on these objects using them to rub out adhesions and tension in your muscles. This isn't always the most fun of procedures but it will do wonders to keep you flexible, mobile, and pain free.

Strength Principle #5. Eat Like Your Ancestors



Eat Strong to Be Strong

A huge portion of the strong and healthy lifestyle is maintaining a healthy diet. In today's society there are so many conflicting messages about “health foods”, most of which are put out by the food industry trying to peddle their wares, that people don't know what to think. For example, one week eggs are great for you, the next you're doomed to a heart attack if you so much as sniff one. Sometimes carbs are the enemy, other times they're the greatest thing since sliced bread (pun intended). And chocolate? Who even dares get into that argument? Obviously nobody who lives with women (oh yeah, I just went there).

Look, you are a product of the several thousand years of dietary evolution. Human beings have been eating many of the same things long before our highly processed industrial food complex took over. Go back 1000 years. Heck, even go back a couple of hundred and you'll see that in general our obesity was lower, diabetes was uncommon, and most of our nutrition-based health issues (other than a few deficiencies that we have significantly improved) were almost non-existent.

We can make nutrition very complicated if we want to, but the basics are pretty simple: Eat like a caveman. If a caveman could have found it and eaten it, then probably you'll be all right. I admit that I've not traveled the whole world yet, but I don't recall seeing any Twinkie trees or Devil Dog plains out there in my travels. The bottom line is that most of the unhealthy shit we eat is the stuff that we produce!

Get Your Protein In.

The base for a successful healthy lifestyle diet is protein. Every meal should have some element of lean protein in it. Some good choices are beef, poultry, game meats, fish, eggs, and beans. Protein helps keep your metabolism going, gives you the building blocks necessary to repair and grow your muscles, and keeps you feeling full.

What's a Little Fat?

The next important nutrient to talk about is fat. Fat's been demonized in the media the last few years, but the truth is that fat is a necessary part of our diet. Some fats, including the omega-3 fatty acids, have a myriad of health benefits and cannot be produced by our body in any appreciable amount. They must be consumed. Good sources of fat include meats, cold water fish, nuts, and oils such as olive or coconut.

The Carbohydrate Conundrum

Carbohydrate is actually not a required nutrient for the body. Though we use carbohydrate (sugar) to fuel our activity, our body can produce it from the protein we consume. That's not a very efficient process and I'm not suggesting that you don't consume any carbohydrates, but just know that it is possible.

Carbohydrate intake is a double-edged sword. Carbs are our quick energy source and the body doesn't have a lot of ability to store them. So when we perform some type of strenuous exercise it makes sense for us to have some carbohydrate for quick energy. However, when we're sitting around (like most of us do for the majority of our day) we have little use for carbs. If we consume a lot of them it's likely that they will be stored as fat.

There's a good line that we like to use in the fitness industry: "Earn your carbs". That basically means that if you perform some sort of carb-intensive activity, then by all means consume the amount of carbs you need to replenish yourself and aid recovery. However, if you're not going to be using carbs, then chose mostly fat and protein instead.

Eat Your Veggies

Since we don't need a lot of carbohydrate most of the time, I limit my carbohydrate intake throughout the day to mostly fruits and vegetables. These sources aren't nearly as concentrated as grain or sugar sources, plus they pack a ton of other great micronutrients such as fiber, vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and other phytonutrients. Because they're high in fiber and low in carbohydrate (and calories) they'll fill you up and keep you from overeating. Nobody ever got fat from some broccoli and an apple.

Whole Grains for Health?

As I said before I tend to stay away from grains and processed carbohydrates and when I do eat them I try to center it around a workout ("Earning my carbs"). Right before, during, and after a strenuous workout is the ideal time to eat a carb-heavy meal as your body will be scrambling to replenish the glycogen that you burnt up training. Since it's in need of that energy and those nutrients it will send the majority of them to fuel your muscles rather than to be stored as fat.

A note on grains: In general our physiology isn't that well adapted to eating grains, although some ethnic groups are better adapted than others. These people tend to get along just fine with a lot of grain in their diet while other people have a real problem with inflammation and allergens in grains. If you're one of those people that have trouble eating grains, in that they make you feel bloated, mentally fuzzy, tired, or extra hungry then (common sense check here) you should probably avoid them.

Even if grains don't particularly bother you to consume I want you to weigh in as to whether or not you really need a concentrated source of carbohydrate energy in your diet. Grains in general don't provide nearly the overall nutrient value of fruits and vegetables as far as the vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients as mentioned above. So other than energy there's just not a lot of value to most grains. I'm not saying you need to cut them out of your diet in total, but be aware of what they are good and not good for and then decide if it really benefits you to eat them.

Strength Principle #6: Play and Have an Active Lifestyle



Live Hard and Play Hard

I can hear you now. “What’s this hardcore strength guy talking about “play” for? Doesn’t he know I’m an adult? Playing is for kids!”

In the words of Lee Corso... “*Not so fast, my friend!*”.

One of the things that happens when we reach adulthood in our society is that we start taking things very seriously. Now, anyone who knows me will tell you that I’m a pretty serious guy. However, at some point you need to drop the stress of life and just enjoy something. You’re only here once so you might as well enjoy the ride, so to speak.

Setting aside time to have fun, relax, and play is important for a bunch of reasons. First of all it changes your mindset and helps you shed the stress of your normal life. This alone can be a lifesaver. With less stress you'll sleep better, store less body fat, be less at risk for stress-related health conditions, and think more clearly. If those don't sound like positive benefits to some play time, I don't know what is!

Play to Win

By playing actively you'll improve your athletic ability by stimulating your body in a different manner than it's used to. Let's say that, like many people, your lifestyle is fairly sedentary other than your time in the gym where you do some strength training and cardio (we talked about that before). Minus gym time you pretty much sit in the car, sit at work, mill around the house and sit watching television when you're not working. Even if you change your program regularly (and you should) your body gets pretty used to the type of exercise that you perform and while you might get pretty good at it you'll suffer overall as athlete from your lack of varied movement.

However, if you find a way to enjoy some physical activity outside of the gym such as pick-up basketball, snowshoeing, or beach volleyball you will expose yourself to a whole new set of athletic stimuli. These different activities, while not strict "exercise" in your mind, are providing challenging physical tasks which will force your body to adapt, grow, and improve itself.

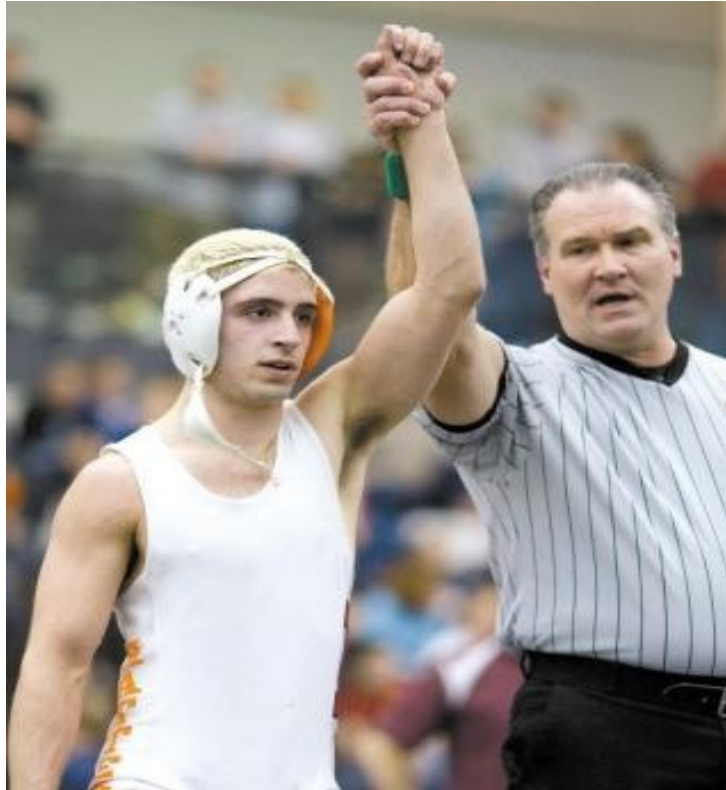
Playful activities are great ways to "sneak" in exercise, too. Let's say you get out with your buddies and play pick-up basketball for a couple of hours. Between the trash talking and normal competitiveness things get rolling and it turns into a pretty tough game. After you're done chances are you'll be spent but you'll also have a big smile on your face. Great, right?

Now let's say that I told you we were going to go into the gym to run, jump, twist, dive, push, and shove for two hours straight. Chances are you'd be exhausted before we even started! However, since you were hanging out with friends and playing a challenging game it seemed much easier. Your body, muscles, and waistline don't know the difference, though.

Some great active play activities can be:

- Recreational basketball, flag football, and softball leagues
- Adult competitive sports
- Martial Arts
- Playing with your kids
- Outdoor activities like camping, hiking, fishing, and so on
- Racquetball, Tennis, or Golf
- Dance groups or lessons

Strength Principle #7. Set Goals and Face Challenges. Find Purpose in Your Life



Get Busy Living or Get Busy Dying

One of the worst things you can do if you're pursuing a healthy and strong lifestyle is to stagnate. I mean, who wants to just settle? That doesn't sound like a particularly strong lifestyle to me.

Look at what happens to people who work hard their whole life and then retire. If they don't find something else that they're passionate about, be it golf, gardening, the gym, or whatever they soon find themselves sitting around staring at the television. It's not long before their health starts to fail and often times they're dead within a year or two of retirement. The thing is that there's really not much wrong with these people as far as their health goes. They've just lost what they were living for. Who wants that?

I'm firmly of the belief that we should all be working towards new and exciting goals and challenges. It's the constant pursuit of improvement that keeps us fresh, sharp, and always getting better. Without that goal of improvement it is easy to get caught in the doldrums of satisfaction and soon find that you're not satisfied at all with your life... you're simply in a rut.

I think back to the best and worst times in my life and it's this principle that rings true time and time again. When I was in some of my worst places I didn't have clear goals or was not making progress towards any goals. I was merely treading water. On the other hand, when I was making strong, regular steps towards my goals I found that pretty much all aspects of my life from personal to business to physical were improving and going well.

Goal Setting 101

So now that you are thinking about your goals for the future let's talk a little bit about how to go about achieving them. It's all well and good to set goals, but that's just the beginning. Unfortunately that's also where most people stop. They choose a goal and then basically sit on their hands and get depressed when it doesn't happen. *That's some bullshit right there.* Come on, people! You need some action to make things happen!

First of all, let's set your goal. Your goal begins with picking your destination. I want you to be specific. Here's where people usually go wrong right off the bat. They start brainstorming some things they'd like to do and settle on a goal like "I want to lose weight" or "I want to be healthy". Those are both great things, but what do they *mean* exactly? The problem is that nobody, including the person choosing the goal, really knows what's meant by those statements. It's going to be awfully hard to map out a path to a goal if you don't know where you're actually trying to end up.

So rather than just coming up with some vague idea of a target I want you to pick out a specific, measurable goal. Even if you don't know exactly where you want to end up by the time your journey is over, pick a goal for the future that you can identify and measure. For example, a more specific goal might be: "I want to lose 15 pounds of fat". Ok, now that's not bad. It's specific and measurable. We know what 15 pounds of fat down is, and we can now formulate a plan to get there.

Rather than stopping at simply setting a clear goal, let's pick how long you're going to give yourself for your goal. If there's no sense of urgency associated with it, you'll be much less likely to achieve your goal. So the second revision of the goal could be "I want to lose 15 pounds of fat in the next three months".

Now that's a good goal. You've picked a specific target that you can measure, plus you've given yourself a strict time line to keep you motivated.

Now that you've got your goal squared away the next step is to plan your path to achieve it. Start by looking at where you are now and at the end goal. Then take your end goal and work backwards to your current position. Keeping with the above example, we know that you want to have 15 pounds of fat gone in three months. So we're going to have to average five pounds of fat loss per month for the next three months. To be successful you need to map out the steps necessary for you to achieve that.

As I said before, sometimes with very large goals you won't be able to make a truly detailed map the whole way. You just don't know when you're starting how to get to the end. However, you should be able to come up with a rough plan and several concrete steps that you can take at the beginning that will give you launching points towards more detailed steps in the future.

Taking Your Goal From Concept to Realization

Finally we've reached the most important part of goal setting: Taking consistent action! Lots of people set goals. They may even set great goals and build perfectly good plans to achieve them. Sometimes they even take the first step to achieving those goals. Then suddenly they stop. Why do they do this?

The old cliché of goal setting is “a journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step”. Very true, but then you need to take a second step! And then a third! Do you see where I'm going with that? The only way you're going to reach your goals is to take consistent, positive steps towards them.

What happens when things go wrong? Look, life isn't perfect, and even with great plans in place stuff happens all the time to derail you. Overcoming challenges is all about how you view them and using the tools available to you in order to continue finding success.

When something comes up that gets in your way you need to look it right in the eye and take it on. Look at your end goal and the challenge ahead of you. Determine the best way around the obstruction, create and follow another plan if necessary, and get right back on track.

Honestly I view challenges as positive events, even if they're stressful at the time. Hell, I'll admit that sometimes these challenges totally suck! The thing is, though, that we don't tend to learn much from success without adversity. When things go right we tend to just roll right along with it. There's so much to be learned by the problem solving aspect of a challenge, though. Challenges keep us sharp, test our motivation, and encourage us to be creative in our approach.

The Strength Lifestyle

Living a lifestyle of strength and achievement doesn't come easy to everybody. Instead, it's that very difficulty that makes it rewarding. By choosing to seek a path that improves yourself you have chosen to set yourself apart from the common sheep of our society. By continuing to grow and further your development you will be able to push yourself to greater heights of satisfaction and success in your life.

There's a phrase I'll leave you with that I tend to use a lot. Strength is a skill. By that I mean that most of us are not born strong, but we can become stronger physically, mentally, and spiritually through constant practice and improvement. Just as the first time you tried to throw a baseball it probably wasn't your best throw, but with practice you improved, so too can you improve all aspects of your strength with practice. Always take the opportunity to test yourself and get stronger.

As I said, the road might not always be the easiest, but it will definitely bring you the greatest rewards. I'll see you at the top of the mountain.

Strength is a skill,

Isaac Wilkins

About the Author



As long as I can remember I've been interested in strength. My favorite superheroes growing up were those that had abnormal strength and size. As a chubby kid I was active in physical sports but was not particularly strong. I got to feel firsthand how strength, or a lack thereof, is a big factor in sports and what being on the losing side of it was like.

After a mildly successful high school sports career due to learning to outsmart my opponents and work around my lack of strength I entered college and started recreational weight lifting. The results I achieved, even with what I now know to be a very sub-par program, were astounding and I was hooked on the strength and fitness lifestyle.

As I completed my B.S. in Finance in 2002 I had started personal training on the side and it changed my career path from banking to training athletes and athletic-minded adults full-time. Since then I've earned a Master's degree in Exercise Science and refined my training immensely. I've also earned the Certified

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Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) certification from the National Strength and Conditioning Association.

Over the past nine years in the training industry I've worked primarily with athletes and hard training adults who are looking to take their game to the next level in both Bangor, ME and Charleston, SC. My clients have ranged from a 94 year-old stroke victim to a nine-year old child. These clients have included elite national and NCAA caliber athletes to clients with nervous system disorders and a myriad of injuries. This range of experience has greatly improved my ability as a trainer.

In addition to the above training, my writing has been published both in print and online at a variety of outlets, most notably in Oblique Magazine and at www.wannabebig.com. I publish a busy blog on the strength lifestyle at www.newpolymath.com.

I have extensive personal experience in football, baseball, wrestling, and martial arts. In my own training I continue to pursue improved athletic ability, health, and strength. The primary sports I train for at this point are powerlifting, strongman, and martial arts.



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