

SIMPLEST Step by Step Beginner Guide

1. The Lifts

Why the Barbell

Strength training and athletic culture centers around the barbell. I could write a small book on why that is (as others have), but here's a summary:

- **Economical:** a bar and some plates is pretty cheap, considering the tens of thousands of dollars worth of machinery you would need to mimic it's results (while still likely falling short)
- **Accessible:** barbell movements are technical like making an ommelette is technical; there's definitely a right way to do it... but anyone can figure it out
- **Versatile:** There are a ton of variations of the main lifts, supplementary movements and isolation movements that can be used to solve any problem in your training. You can use a barbell for size, strength, speed, stamina... even for simple 'stethics.
- **Scalable:** Weight can be adjusted for someone coming out of a coma or a challenger to a world record, jumps can be made as big or small as you want, and the most developed strength athletes actually do more barbell work than anything.
- **Simple as all hell:** Says it all...
- **Effective as hell:** Barbells allow loaded movements that the body just really, really likes to respond to. There are a lot of reasons why that give insight into the way human physiology works. But you just need to know that the developmental power of the barbell has been a consistent observation for some 150 years.

The Big 5

You've heard of the Big 3: squat, bench press and deadlift. You might have seen a bunch of programs that add on the overhead press and call it an even Big 4. These staples haven't changed, I just have my own pet preferences for how to prioritize them.

For one, I firmly believe S/B/D/P is missing an R, for rowing. Bent barbell rows make a big back the way squatting can grow your legs, it's a movement that is vital developmentally and is only left out because there isn't a bent row contest. Everyone, especially beginners, should treat bent rows as if there is. Assume that the next person to ask "what's your bench?" is going to be follow it up with, "that's good, but I really want to know what you ROW?".

Variations

I also believe that variations are absolutely crucial. The beginner program is going to focus on just these 5 lifts, with a couple of small bits thrown in, but as soon as the beginner has a basic handle on the main lifts, has seen some progress, and is ready to progress, I believe variations should come in as fast as possible.

In every sport, younger athletes benefit from a broad base of physical skills; the guys getting million dollar contracts before they can legally drink a beer were overwhelmingly active as kids, played different sports, and had a crazy base of physical skill. In short, they did not specialize until they were already studs. Similarly, new lifters will be better off with some variety in their training, even if they only care about squat, bench and deadlift.

Each of the S/B/D/P/R have a laundry list of variations that are viable and have a specific benefit. My go-tos for just about everyone are as follows:

- Squat - Front Squat
- Bench - Close Grip
- Deadlift - Romanian Deadlift
- Press - Behind the Neck Press
- Bent Row - Upright Row

Each of these variations either reinforce a vital movement pattern (front squats and RDLs), train the muscularity in a different and useful way (close grip bench, behind the neck, upright row), or are generally effective at slapping muscle on your frame and plates on the bar just by themselves (all of them).

Notice most of these are 'disadvantaged' movements; they are more difficult by virtue of the bar position or by going through more range of motion and that means they are just really damn good at growing muscle. That is intentional as the goal early on is to accelerate physical development: for someone who is new to training, that means muscle growth (yes, even if strength is your primary goal). As you advance in strength and require more advanced training, 'advantaged' movements that use heavier loads (like partials, lockouts, etc.) will be immensely useful for getting your nervous system to recruit more muscle tissue and thus generate more power. When you do get to that point, the well rounded distribution of muscle you've accumulated will actually give your nervous system something to work with.

Supplementary Work

In addition to these variations of the main lifts, I put in some direct arm work as well. The reasoning is simple: while your biceps and triceps will grow some by doing pushes and pulls, they just do not grow as fast or as much as they would with direct arm work. The upper body is not like the lower body, where a few compound movements do most of the heavy lifting in a

program. The extremities need work to grow and your pressing and pulling is always better when your arms are bigger.

Some will be curious about adding blocks of other work into the program, like calisthenics, plyometrics, grip and ab work, or dumbbells and machines. These frameworks are minimal for a reason: to prevent overscheduling but to also allow flexibility. As long as you are getting the meat and potatoes in, there isn't a good reason you can't add more work at the end of the workout or on off-days. *(note: if there is ANY chance you are going to become frozen with paralysis by trying to think of how to tinker with the program... don't change a thing)*

I would advise against stacking extra barbell lifts in (unless you are more advanced, in which case you probably don't need a beginner program anyways). Safe bets are movements and protocols that are easier to recover from so they don't interfere with the big barbell lifts you are trying to push forward.

Examples of easy recovery:

- Dumbbells, machines and cables
 - Body weight movements
 - Smaller muscles (abs, arms, grip/forearms, most isolation work)
 - Reps above 5
 - Conditioning (not crazy Crossfit wods, just simple cardio or sprints)
-

2. Programming for Beginners

New lifters have a huge advantage; they don't have bad habits yet and they grow from everything. Our goal at the start is to foster excellent habits and take advantage of the fact that there are almost no wrong answers. If you, as a new lifter, are A.) using good exercises, B.) improving skill, C.) applying lots of effort, and D.) showing up a few days later to put some more weight on the bar.... weeds will wish they grew like you. And better yet, you will learn so much about your body and how it responds to these lifts that programming for yourself after the fact will be just ridiculously easy.

As a long time coach and once gym-owner, I have personally sampled the habits of literally hundreds of new lifters.

Here are the most common traps:

- **Overcomplication**
 - Cause: following your favorite lifter, reading advanced texts not yet appropriate for you, taking shitty advice from people on Reddit, or just simply feeling like you have to

do it all

- Solution: KISS method, 80/20, whatever you like.... focus on the big rocks. Everyone else is trying to take turns going 300mph their first day on the track and wondering why it goes sideways. To make the podium, I just need you to drive like your grandma. And get off Reddit.
- **Lack of consistency**
 - Cause: not in love with the gym yet, life stuff gets in the way, or you love the gym and want to hop around between 20 different things while getting good at none
 - Solution: make training as focused and as easily accessible as possible. Fewer bells and whistles, just the basics that give the biggest return and set you up for more advanced stuff later on. You're less likely to bail on the gym for happy hour or scrap your program to go wing it with your buddies if all your focus is on the set of squats from yesterday where you did 12 but you know you had 15. A good beginner program makes sure that you can see the carrot you should be chasing.
- **Lack of effort**
 - Cause: fear of injury, fear of recovery, or fear of being uncomfortable. Or, likely adopting principles from programs designated for stronger lifters that need to worry about injury and recovery.
 - Solution: realize that the biggest predictor of success is the ball busting, aneurism inducing effort you exert in the beginning. As a coach, I can do a ton with an athlete who goes too hard. But I can't teach or force someone what it is to strain. Beginner programs should ease you into truly hard work, making sure that technique is preserved while you learn what it is to die under a barbell. The sets to failure you do as a beginner is not just a massive driver of progress, but it's also just like Drivers Ed for your body.

These are almost never traps for new lifters:

- **High Effort**
 - Early lifters are generally too weak to injure themselves or overreach in their training (not that they can't, it just isn't an epidemic). You absolutely have to worry about that when you get stronger, but strong lifters still need effort. The key is that you learn as you go how to balance effort with recovery, and that's why these early steps are so important. Learn to strain in the context of skill, then pay attention to the effect on your lifts, your training and your body.
- **High amount of work**
 - The discussion on 'junk volume' makes me nauseous. The misconception that people ruin their gains by 'doing too much' has likely scared away droves of lifters from learning about and using volume, which is one of the biggest tools they have in their arsenal. You won't be starting out with high volume, but it is something that will

increase as you advance if you want to keep growing and, at that point, you will have to learn how to wave it up and down so you don't fall apart from the work. So don't shy away. I've never seen a young lifter fail to grow from 'too much work', but I've seen countless suffer from shitty training. They are not the same.

- **Obsession on one particular lift**

- In the first months of training, laser focus on one particular goal can supercharge your progress and take you farther than any perfectly balanced, 'optimized' training program can. The reason is this: newbies are at the bottom of the learning curve and the more breaks you take from mastering one skill, the longer it takes. Since squats, presses and pulls drive just crazy growth by themselves, it's in your best interest to ascend that curve as fast as possible. Put your blinders on and turn these lifts into an unhealthy obsession; by the time you need a change of plan, you'll likely have doubled your strength.

- **Linear progressions**

- Novice programs are almost always driven by "LP"s, linear progressions, which means the lifter does a workout on day 1, then adds a few lbs on day 2, a few more on day 3, etc. etc. These don't work very well for stronger lifters (unless you do some heavy tweaking, which is what intermediate programming basically is), but for the untrained individual or relatively new lifter, it works like a damn charm. The key is not to add as much weight as you can, but to keep it to the smallest possible jump so you can run the program for longer. This let's you get adequate skill work in, gives your body more time to adapt so you can weight yet again, and keeps your life nice and simple.

So if we're going to get a beginner started off on the right foot, we have to abide by this list. Which brings us to....

3. The Beginner Program

****A/B ALTERNATING**

| | A | | B | |
|--|---------|------|----------|------|
| | | | | |
| | Squat | 4x6+ | Deadlift | 4x6+ |
| | Bench | 4x6+ | Row | 4x6+ |
| | UR Row | 3xF | Press | 4x6+ |
| | Triceps | 3xF | Biceps | 3xF |
| | | | | |

This is an A/B structure that might look familiar. It's an old-school favorite for new lifters because it simplifies your split into 2 easy-to-track workouts. It also limits slots for exercises, which you might think is a bad thing... but for green lifters it's a GREAT thing. As the saying goes, "when water is limited, only the important things get washed", and in this case it means there is only room for key barbell movements (and maybe a few minutes at the end for some direct arm work).

- You CAN grow off 2 workouts a week but, life circumstances aside, aim for AT LEAST 3 days per week, going as high as 4 or 5. I recommend jumping into the next workout as soon as you have time and feel good.
- 4x6+ is one of my staple progressions: it means '4 sets with the same weight, but the 4th set is done as an amrap (as many reps as possible)
 - Example first workout: 200 x 6, 6, 6, 15 (so think ahead, the weight should be almost 'too easy' for the first 3 sets)
 - Simply add a small amount of weight each workout; 2.5-5lbs (1.25 to 2.25kg) to upper body movements, 5-10lbs (2.25 to 5kg) to lower body movements.
 - DON'T GET GREEDY. The point is to last through as many workouts as possible, not jump ahead as fast as possible.
 - By the time set 4 is a hard set of 6, it's time to move on!
- 3xF means '3 sets to failure, or as many as you can without getting sloppy'
 - your goal is to fail in the 8-12 rep range on each set
 - if you go above 12, add a bit of weight, if you go below 8, drop some

For true beginners, who are likely lifting by themselves and haven't quite developed an irrational love of the gym yet, it is a very smart strategy to limit your work to the Big 5. Doing so will keep you from jumping around to a bunch of different things or, worse yet, scheduling too much work that you bail on when you get tired or bored. We need to build good habits at the start, and that means aiming for 100% completion, even if it means scheduling less work.

Focusing on fewer lifts also will provide a ton of skill-specific practice for those lifts, no different than a gymnast or figure skater working on their flips and spins. You won't REALLY see gains until you get over the hump of awkwardness that prevents you from putting out max effort (hard to PR on a squat or deadlift when every rep has you feeling like a knock-kneed baby giraffe). This is where the 4x6+ progression shines; the 3 sets of light 6s to 'grease the groove', as they say, will build confidence, refine technique, and more importantly, make everything automatic. Many athletes talk about "the Zone", where focus is crisp and effortless and every shot is nothing but net. In lifting, that's the point where you can shut your brain off and let pure aggression fuel the set.

Skill plus effort. You can't beat it.

3 DAY WHOLE BODY

| | DAY 1 | | DAY 2 | | DAY 3 | |
|--|---------|------|----------|------|-----------|-----|
| | Squat | 4x6+ | Deadlift | 4x6+ | Front Sq. | 3xF |
| | Bench | 4x6+ | Row | 4x6+ | CG Bench | 3xF |
| | UR Row | 3xF | Press | 4x6+ | RDL | 3xF |
| | Triceps | 3xF | Biceps | 3xF | BTN | 3xF |
| | | | | | | |

This is a logical jump from the A/B alternating progression. A third day is added that includes the variations listed earlier which is going to be a welcome change after drilling the same basic movements so often. Here are the problems that this split solves:

- **Recovery:** When lifters get stronger, it is harder to improve a lift multiple times per week. If they try, fatigue accumulates, they feel like crap, and lifts eventually go down. By using slightly different lifts and different set/rep protocols, the same structures aren't being hit the same way and the lifter gets a shot of recovery (even though they are still doing productive work).
- **Physical development:** Developmental movements like these (remember 'disadvantaged' = 'growth') done with a typical bodybuilding approach like 3 sets to failure is HARD... but it also results in nasty growth. It's easier to program these movements to failure because the weight is lighter, so repeated hard efforts won't cause the same systemic wipeout and unpredictability as if you did them with deads and squats numerous sessions in a row.
- **Weak points:** It's very easy to develop in a lopsided way when you only do a few lifts on repeat. By adding variations, you prevent weak points while also accelerating growth in areas that would otherwise hold you back.
- **Technical reinforcement:** Front squats teach you to be strong in an upright position, which can make your once-awkward back squat feel like a dream. RDLs teach the ever-missing 'hinge' component of a deadlift, which is more efficient and sustainable than the 'drunk worm' deadlift you see so many people settling for. Even the upper body movements will teach you to position better and more deliberately in your main lifts.

The easiest schedule for this is a simple 3 days per week with at least a day in between: MWF, MThS... whatever fits your life. There's going to be someone who obsesses over the drop in frequency; if someone was doing the A/B split 4 or 5 days per week, got pretty strong, then moved to this, then the 3 days represents less total work in the same amount of time.

That's perfectly OK for the following reasons:

- **Training is cyclical:** Periods of reduced frequency after periods of very high frequency can be beneficial. It may be that the increase in recovery leads to some new gains and, after a time, you want to seek higher frequency again.
- **Day 3 is going to be a mother:**compared to the previous split, anyways. It will take you time to adapt and that might merit extra recovery in the meantime.
- **You're stronger, so rules change:** If you did go from A/B to this after developing a lot of strength, a lower frequency approach allows you to do more work each session without burning out. Remember, there is going to be a theme of 'longer periods between hard workouts' as you get stronger.
- **You don't need to 'optimize' gains:** And you shouldn't try, either. You aren't entitled to get "100% of all possible gains" and people who try usually wish they had 1%. The goal is to grow consistently without running into problems (remember, drive like your grandma). The big benefit of lower frequency is that problems are fewer.
- **You can increase frequency if you think it's justified:** These templates are not holy commandments etched into the fabric of reality... they are pretty good guidelines that are vague enough to apply to a lot of people. If you want more frequency, just repeat the 3 days listed here over a 4 day work week.

4 day S/B/D/P (BULLMASTIFF)

| | SQUAT | | BENCH | | DEADLIFT | | Press | |
|------------|------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Main | Squat | 4x6+ | Bench | 4x6+ | Deadlift | 4x6+ | Press | 4x6+ |
| Variation | <i>Front Sq.</i> | <i>3x12</i> | <i>CG Bench</i> | <i>3x12</i> | <i>RDL</i> | <i>3x12</i> | <i>BTN Press</i> | <i>3x12</i> |
| Supplement | Leg Press | 2x10 | DB Press | 2x10 | Back Ext | 2x10 | DB Shoulder | 2x10 |
| | Leg Ext. | 2x15 | DB Fly | 2x15 | Ham Curl | 2x15 | Lateral Raise | 2x15 |
| | Cable Row | 2x10 | Hammer Curl | 2x10 | Bent Row | 2x10 | Overhead Tricep Press | 2x10 |
| | Pulldown | 2x15 | Barbell Curl | 2x15 | DB Row | 2x15 | Rope Pressdown | 2x15 |

This is my Bullmastiff program, which is yet another logical step forward from the previous template. You might look at this and say, "that's just bodybuilding with extra steps". It is somewhat of a 'powerbuilding' program, but there was a time when this was just called 'training'. The focus is still on the main barbell movements, but by moving away from a whole

body split and committing to one lift per day, 4 days per week, we can do a lot more work in each actual workout and still recover. This is great for a few reasons:

- **Variety for the sake of it:** When you've milked a program for all its worth, 'new' often gets you out of a rut
- **More general base building:** By increasing the amount of volume on supplementary stuff, you continue general growth and develop specific weak points. All of that pushes your potential higher.
- **More time for specific work:** With an entire day to focus on one lift, you can make time for specialized exercises or allocate much more volume. Both are highly appropriate for more developed lifters.
- **More recovery:** You can go hard as hell in the workout without fear of interference, as with a full body high frequency program. This is something you want to leverage.

Even as a cookie cutter template, this program was so productive for masses of intermediate lifters. The reason, I believe, is because it exposed them to an amount of work that previous programs in popular culture didn't. It was a shock to their system to do multiple pressing, squatting and deadlift exercises in sequence, along with repeating sets of accessory work. They likely hadn't done so many double-digit working sets at very high effort and they absolutely didn't follow a set progression scheme that forced them to do more work than they would've thought to otherwise. *(note: the progression scheme changes week to week from what is seen here; for the full kit and caboodle, you can check out my book "Base Strength".... or find it on a forum somewhere)*

By the time you are ready for this amount of work and complexity, templates like this should be serving as a guide only: while new lifters need to serve a method long enough to learn from it, seasoned lifters require personalization to reach their potential. For the stronger and more experienced, each bit of progress is a bigger ask and your program has to reflect your needs, your weaknesses, and your tolerances. The benefit of programs like Bullmastiff is that adjustments and additions are super easy to implement without destroying the engine that drives progress.

If you are ready for that degree of personalization...

AND want to side-step the millions of programming possibilities that make simple training decisions seem impossible, consider checking out BaseStrengthAI. It takes my templates and adjusts all the dials to you based off of your feedback. The workout changes in real time as you plug in your numbers, so there is no guessing as to whether you went too heavy or did enough work. Better yet, it learns from you and updates each training block with the information from the previous one.

An online coach can't give you this detailed feedback, and it's 1/10th of the cost. Is 2025 the year you get strong? Go to BaseStrength.com to find out.