

Strength is a Skill

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'Naaat, did you do too many squats this morning, or have you been dipping into some old Soviet Union propaganda?' This was the stock response when I told my peers about the subject of this article. Laugh all you want, but strength is a skill just like juggling tenpins on a unicycle is a skill.

Don't take my word for it: experts like Pavel Tsatsouline (Master of Sport and Strength for the Russian and American special forces), Dr. Mell Siff, and Prof. Yuri Verkhoshanski all agree that strength is a skill that can be honed in various ways. Weightlifting, powerlifting, strongman lifts, kettlebell lifting, bodyweight and gymnastics-based exercises, and core abdominal exercises are the whetstones on which strength is sharpened.

Unfortunately the majority of Strength and Conditioning (S&C) specialists still believe that working out entails slapping on a sweatband and putting in the hard yards. To turn sweat into a science, four crucial aspects of strength development require attention: specialized and knowledgeable training, practice (no one juggles perfectly the first time), assistance and performance.

To make matters concrete, an example is useful. Let's say a S&C coach uses squats as a primary movement to increase an athlete's strength. Initially the focus will be on the method: how to move your body, what the purposes of the exercise are, and what benefits it holds. Subsequent sessions will involve repeated movement with uncompromised form and technique – practice makes perfect! Assistance from a savvy training specialist will not only aid motivation levels, but ensure pervasive

quality of movement. Performance, the last building block, involves gauging the athlete's strength by way of a 1RM (this refers to the maximum weight an athlete can manage with a single repetition).

To the four imperatives for strength development an aphorism may be added: strength equals tension. The ability of athletes to generate high levels of muscular action or tension is what determines their strength.

Generating tension does not depend on the size of the muscles but the size of the lightning! By lightning I mean electricity – the electricity that you create in your brain and nervous system to activate muscle fibres. The lightning effect is the reason why a wiry 75kg Powerlifter can deadlift 355kg. The average person can activate about 20% of their muscle fibres in a given muscle if

they put maximum effort into a lift. Top powerlifters, on the other hand, use up to 50% because they have honed their strength.

According to Pavel Tsatsouline, you can lift a car – you just don't know it yet. The fact that we do not know how to activate 100% of our muscle fibres in a given moment is probably a good thing for our own and others' health and safety, but it does leave room to explore the reserves our strength. For this reason S&C specialists need to become, well, more specialised; and strength shouldn't be viewed as an attribute but as a skill 🌩️

Resources:

M. Siff, Y. Verkhoshanski, Supertraining, Six edition expanded version
Pavel Tsatsouline, (1999) Power to the people. Russian strength training secret for every
American V. Zatsiorski, W. Kraemer. Science and practise of strength training, Second edition

