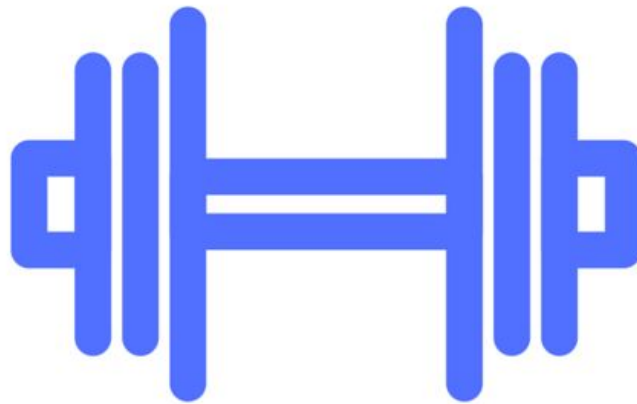


Strength Training:

A Brief Guide on How to
Burn Fat and Build Muscle



James Clear

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How to Build Muscle: Proven Strength Lessons from Milo of Croton

Nearly 2,500 years ago, there was a man of incredible strength and athleticism roaming the hills of southern Italy. His name was Milo of Croton and he was almost certainly the most successful wrestler of his day.

Milo was a six-time wrestling champion at the Ancient Olympic Games in Greece. In 540 BC, he won the boys wrestling category and then proceeded to win the men's competition at the next five Olympic Games in a row. He also dominated the Pythian Games (7-time winner), Isthmian Games (10-time winner), and Nemean Games (9-time winner). [1, 2]

In the rare event that an athlete won not only the Olympic title, but also all three other games in one cycle, they were awarded the title of *Periodonikes*, a grand slam winner. Milo won this grand slam five times.

Now for the important question: What can Milo's incredible strength teach you about how to build muscle and improve your health and fitness?

The answer is covered in a story about how Milo developed his strength...

How to Build Muscle Like Milo

It is said that Milo built his incredible strength through a simple, but profound strategy.

One day, a newborn calf was born near Milo's home. The wrestler decided to lift the small animal up and carry it on his shoulders. The next day, he returned and did the same. Milo continued this strategy for the next four years, hoisting the calf onto his shoulders each day as it grew, until he was no longer lifting a calf, but a four-year-old bull. [3]

The core principles of strength training are encapsulated in this legendary tale of Milo and the bull.

Strength Training: The Core Principles

“When you first start to study a field, it seems like you have to memorize a zillion things. You don’t. What you need is to identify the core principles – generally three to twelve of them – that govern the field. The million things you thought you had to memorize are simply various combinations of the core principles.”

—John T. Reed

The health and fitness industry is filled with unnecessary complexity and thousands of experts sharing conflicting ideas. If there is anything I've learned during 10 years of strength training, it's that mastering the fundamentals is more valuable than worrying about the details.

As an example, let's discuss three of the core principles of strength training that are hidden in the story of Milo and the bull.

Here they are...

1. Start too light: Focus on volume before intensity.

Did Milo try to lift a full-grown bull on day one? Of course not. He began with a newborn calf. Given his wrestling prowess, it is very likely that this was a weight that was easy for him.

It works the same way for you and me. When you begin strength training, you should start by lifting something easy. It is only by focusing on volume, repetition, and easy weights in the beginning that you build the capacity to handle heavier weights later on.

2. Don't miss workouts.

Milo's strategy wouldn't have worked very well if he tried to pick up the bull on its birthday each year. The calf would have grown too much and Milo would have grown too little. And yet, this is exactly the strategy many of us employ. Once or twice per year, often around the New Year, people will try to "pick up a bull" by getting incredibly motivated and exercising like never before—only to fizzle out a few weeks later.

A more useful strategy is to start with something incredibly small, an exercise that is so easy you can't say no to it, and then repeat and improve slowly. If you want to make progress, you have to make a reasonable, sustained effort.

As an example, when I started my pushup habit, I began with a number that was very small and easy to do. Because the workout didn't intimidate me, I was more likely to follow through each day and not miss workouts. In short, do things you can sustain.

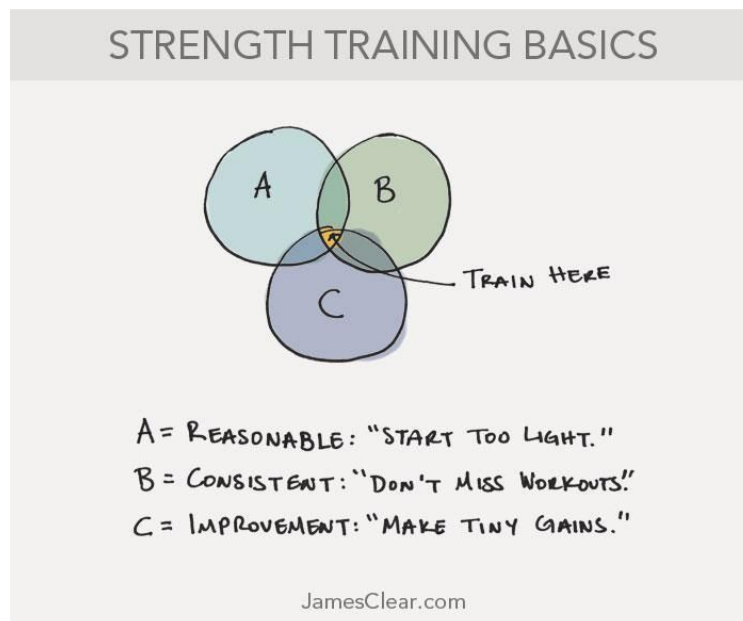
3. Increase in very small ways.

Every day, Milo's calf grew just a little bit. An ounce here, a pound there. And yet, these tiny gains added up to a very significant weight in a relatively short amount of time.

It works the same way in the gym. Do you think you could squat one more pound this week than you could last week? Most people probably could. And if you added just one pound per week for two years, you could be squatting 100 pounds more than you are today. How many people do you know that are squatting 100 pounds more today than they were two years ago? I don't know many.

Tiny gains add up fast. Average speed can take you far if you just keep walking. The weight on the bar should grow like a calf in a field: slowly, gradually, reasonably.

Strength Training Basics



Thanks to my main man Austin Kiessig for reminding me about the story of Milo of Croton.

6 Truths About Exercise That Nobody Wants to Believe

Success in the gym, as with most things in life, comes down to mastering the basics.

With that in mind, here are 6 exercise tips, weightlifting basics, and training essentials that nobody wants to believe, but everyone should follow.

Take these ideas to heart and you'll reap major benefits. While most people waste time debating the endless stream of supplements, "new" workout programs, and diet plans, all you really have to do is focus on these simple concepts and you'll see results.

1. Commit for the long-term.

Most people workout with a short-term goal in mind. I like looking at health in a different way...

- The goal is not to lose 40 pounds in the next 12 weeks. The goal is to regain your health for the rest of your life.
- The goal is not to bench press 300 pounds. The goal is to be the guy who never misses a workout.

- The goal is not to sacrifice everything to get your fastest time in next month's race. The goal is to be faster next year than you are today. And faster two years from now than you will be next year.

Ignore the short-term results. If you commit to the long-term process, the results will come anyway.

Furthermore, stop acting like living a healthy life is a big deal. You can go to the gym every week. That can be "normal" for you. Not a sacrifice. Not an obligation. Normal.

What's funny is that when you commit to being consistent over the long-term, you end up seeing remarkable results in the short-term. That's the power of average speed.

2. Set a schedule for your training.

Most people never train consistently because they are always wondering when they are going to train next.

They are always wondering...

- *"Will I be motivated to workout when I get home from work?"*
- *"Will I have enough free time to exercise today?"*
- *"Will I have enough willpower to wake up early and run?"*

In other words, most people train when they feel motivated or inspired.

Here's a better idea: stop treating exercise as something to do when it's convenient and start setting a schedule for yourself to follow. This is what makes the difference between professionals and amateurs.

For example, I train every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 6pm. I don't have to think about when I'm going to train. I don't sit around and wonder which days I'll feel motivated to lift. I don't hope that I'll have some extra time to workout today. Instead, I put it on the schedule and then organize my life and responsibilities around it (just like you would organize your day around your class or your meeting or your kid's baseball game).

Setting a schedule for your training becomes even more important when life gets crazy. There will always be occasional emergencies that prevent you from working out. It's part of life. The problem is that most people miss one workout and before they know it, they haven't been to the gym in 4 weeks.

But when you have a schedule for your training, you have a way of pulling yourself back on track as quickly as possible.

Top performers make mistakes just like everyone else. The difference is that they get back on track quicker than most. Miss your workout on Friday because you were traveling for work? Guess what? Your next training session is already scheduled for Monday at 6pm. I'll see you there.

Let your schedule govern your actions, not your level of motivation.

3. Focus on the best exercises.

Great results come from great focus, not great variety.

Too many people waste time in the gym because they bounce around without any real goal, doing a little bit of this machine and a little bit of that machine. Thankfully, there is a simple rule that will always guide you toward the best exercises: **the more an exercise makes you move, the bigger the benefits it will deliver.**

This is why the clean and jerk and the snatch are the kingpins of weightlifting. They are the exercises that force your body to move the most (and the quickest). As a result, the people who do these exercises see incredible results.

Here's a short list of the best exercises. In my opinion, at least one of the first five exercises should be included in every workout.

1. Squat
2. Deadlift
3. Bench Press
4. Clean and Jerk
5. Snatch
6. Sprints
7. Overhead Press
8. Good Mornings
9. Pullups
10. Pushups

4. Start light and train for volume before intensity.

Ask most people if they had a good workout and they'll say things like, "Oh yeah, it was so intense." Or, "I'm going to be so sore tomorrow." Or, "I finished my workout by doing a set to failure."

It's great to push yourself, but the biggest mistake that most people make is not building a foundation of strength. Everyone wants to jump in and max out with a weight that is "hard." That's exactly the wrong way to do it. Your workouts should be easy in the beginning. (See: [How to Start Working Out](#).)

Training to failure is a good way to wear yourself down, not build yourself up. You should have reps left in you at the end of your workout (and at the end of each set). Take point #5 (below) to heart and your workouts will get hard enough, fast enough. Trust me.

The phrase that I like to keep in mind is "train for volume before intensity." In other words, I want to build the capacity to do the work before I start testing my limits.

Just to be clear: volume doesn't have to mean "do sets of 20 reps." (I rarely do more than 10 reps in a single set.) Instead, I like to think of volume over a period of weeks and months.

For example, right now I'm doing a 5×5 squat program (5 sets of 5 squats). I started light. The first week, I lifted with a weight that was very easy for me. Then, I slowly added 5 pounds each week. For weeks, it was still easy. Eventually, when I built up to a weight that was heavy, I had the capacity to handle it because I had already done dozens (if not hundreds) of sets over the previous weeks and months. Focusing on volume now allows you to handle the intensity later on.

5. Make SLOW progress each week.

Most people walk into the gym every week, do the same exercises with the same amount of weight, and wonder why they aren't getting stronger. You'll see people step onto the same treadmill, run two miles like they always do, and wonder why they aren't losing weight.

Here's a little story that explains the problem and the solution...

Imagine that you are in a quiet room and someone turns on a loud and noisy fan. At first, it's obvious and irritating. But if you are forced to stay in the room long enough, the fan starts to become part of the background noise. In other words, your body registers the sound at first, but eventually it realizes "Oh, this is the new normal for this environment."

Your body adapts and the noise fades away. Something similar happens when you exercise.

When you start to train, it's like turning on the fan. Something new is happening in the environment, and your body registers the change by getting stronger and leaner. But after a few workouts, your body realizes "this is the new normal." Your body finds a way to adapt to this new environment, just like it did with the noisy fan. As a result, you stop getting stronger and stop losing weight.

What got you here won't get you there. If you want to see different results, you have to do something different. If you want to see progress each week, then you have to *progress* each week.

This is actually very simple to do. Add 5 pounds each week. Add an extra set this week. Do the same exercise, but rest for 15 seconds less between sets. These are all ways of changing the stimulus and forcing your body to slowly and methodically get better.

6. Record your workouts.

What gets measured, gets managed. If you can't even tell me how many sets and reps you did with a particular weight two weeks ago, how can you guarantee that you're actually getting stronger?

Tracking your progress is simple: get a small notebook and write down your workouts. (I use a little black moleskin notebook that I bought at a bookstore.)

At the top of the page, write the date of your workout. Then, simply write down the exercise you are doing. When you finish a set, record it in your notebook while you're waiting to do the next one.

Recording your training is especially important because it brings all of these points together.

You can look back and see how you're making long-term progress (point #1). You can see on which dates you trained and how often you were on schedule (point #2). You can verify that you did the best exercises each workout (point #3). You can see how you are slowly building up volume and developing a foundation of strength (point #4). And you can prove that you're making slow, methodical progress each week (point #5).

What You Should Do Now

You could spend your entire life mastering these six points, but these are the basics that will make a real difference in your training.

Here are your action steps:

- Set a schedule. When and where, exactly, are you going to train?
- Get a notebook and pen to record your training.

- Focus on the best exercises that make you move a lot.
- Start with a weight that is very light and train for volume before intensity.
- Slowly increase the weight each week.

Happy lifting.

How to Start Working Out When You Don't Know What You're Doing

What do you do when you're trying to start a new workout routine?

Maybe you've been training your entire life and just want a new exercise to keep things fresh. Or maybe you're getting started with exercise for the first time and don't know how to start working out. Either way, starting a new training routine is something we all deal with from time to time.

For example, I recently added sprint training to my workout routine. There's just one problem: I've never done sprint training before.

In this post, I'll outline the strategies I used to get started with a new workout routine and how you can use them to kickstart your own training.

How to Start Working Out

Step one: decide what you want to be good at doing.

I've written previously about [how important a sense of purpose can be](#), and that holds true for exercise and training as well.

The more specific you are about what you want to become good at doing, the easier it is for you to train for success. In my case, I want to become good at 400m sprints. That's a clear goal and it helps provide direction to me in the process.

If you're confused about how to start working out, then make a decision. It doesn't even have to be the "best" decision. Just choose something that you want to become good at doing and start moving in that direction. There will be plenty of time for adjustments and optimization later.

Ask someone who has been there.

In the beginning, I had no idea what a typical sprint workout even looked like.

How did I find out? I asked people who did know. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask questions. Everybody is a beginner at some point. The people around you are your greatest asset.

I went to my strength and conditioning coach from college, my old teammates who had done sprint training, and a friend who ran track competitively. I asked each of them for suggestions and programs for 400m sprint training and for general sprinting tips.

My hope was that by asking five different people instead of just one, I would get a more well-rounded view. As expected, everyone pointed me towards different programs and routines.

While all of this different information might seem conflicting and confusing at first, it's important for the next step.

Get the main idea, skip the details.

This is where most people give up and never get going with their new routine. (Don't worry. It's happened to me as well.)

Fitness is one of the worst industries if you're looking for clear advice. It seems like everyone has a different way of doing things and they are all convinced that their way is the only way.

As a result, it's easy to stress out over the details of a new workout routine. Should I do 5 sets or 6 sets? Program A says I should rest for 90 seconds, but Program B says I should rest for 60 seconds. This website says to workout on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, but my friend did it on Tuesday and Thursday. Which one is right?

Let's all take a deep breath.

Here's a little knowledge bomb for you: **the details don't matter in the beginning.**

You'll have plenty of time to figure out technique, rest periods, volume, training schedules, yada yada yada. When you're starting a new workout routine, the only thing that matters is getting started. Get the main idea, stick to the schedule, and the details will begin to fall into place.

Here's how I did it with my sprint training...

I read each of the resources and workout programs that my friends sent me. Then, I wrote down the common ideas from each program.

Here's what they looked like...

- run sprints that range from 200m to 500m
- rest for 2 or 3 minutes between sets
- run between 3 to 6 sprints per workout

- do sprint workouts 2 or 3 times per week

Did I leave out a lot of details? Yes. But with the main ideas above, I could go to the track and get my first sprint workout done.

And in the beginning that's the real goal: make it as simple as possible to get started.

Go slow.

Most of the time, when we decide to start a new workout routine it's because we're motivated to do it. It's great to have motivation, but as I've mentioned before, it can be a double-edged sword.

Why? First, because motivation fluctuates. This means you can't rely on it. That's why you want to build good habits instead of getting motivated.

But secondly, motivation can fool you into biting off more than you can chew. (I wrote about why this is an issue, and how to avoid it, [here](#).)

In the beginning, you want to start slow. Remember, the goal is to get in the habit of doing the workouts, not to do intense workouts.

Here's how I started with my sprints...

The first workout, I did 3 sprints of 200m at 50% intensity. It was easy and slow. I was simply trying to get my body used to running again.

The second workout, I did 2 sprints of 400m with 3 minutes rest in between. Again, this wasn't a particularly taxing workout.

In the beginning, you want the workouts to be easy. This is true for the first 3 or 4 weeks. Your only goal is to stick to the schedule and build the capacity to do the workout. Performance doesn't matter.

It seems like this is the exact opposite of what most people do. The typical approach is to go from sitting on your couch to doing P90X for six days every week. With a switch like that, it's no wonder that most people give up after a week.

Don't miss workouts.

If I could summarize everything I've learned in 10 years of strength training it would come down to these three words: **don't miss workouts.**

If we're being honest with ourselves, here's what our workout calendar usually looks like:

- Workout consistently for a month or two.
- Get sick. Miss multiple workouts. Spend the next month getting back in shape.
- Workout consistently for a month or two.
- Schedule changes. Life gets crazy. Miss multiple workouts. Spend the next month getting back in shape.
- Workout consistently for a month or two.
- Travel. Vacation. Time off. Miss multiple workouts. Spend the next month getting back in shape.

And on and on.

Now there's nothing wrong with your schedule changing or taking vacation, but you need to have a system to make it as easy as possible to get back on track. This is especially true when you're just getting started with a new workout routine.

When I started my pushup routine, I managed to get 17 consecutive workouts in before I missed a day. And I got right back on track after that one day off. In total, I've done 93 pushup workouts over the last 8 months.

The individual impact of each workout has been very small, but the cumulative impact of sticking to that schedule has been huge. (I've doubled the amount of pushups that I can do.) And it all comes down to not missing workouts.

I'm planning on applying this same strategy to my sprint workouts and I suggest you do the same.

Pick an Exercise and Get Started

There are more exercises in the world than I care to count, but I think you can list the important ones on two hands.

- Clean and Jerk
- Snatch
- Squat
- Deadlift
- Bench Press
- Pushups
- Pullups

- Sprints

Pick one that you would like to be good at and get started.

Remember, you don't need to worry about the details in the beginning. Just get the main idea, start slow, and don't miss workouts.

And now if you'll excuse me, it's time to hit the track.

Nobody Says It, But This is the Greatest Weight Lifting Lesson I've Learned

You'll never walk into the gym and hear someone say, "You should do something easy today."

But after 10 years of training, I think embracing slow and easy gains is one of the most important lessons I've learned.

In fact, this lesson applies to most things in life. And it comes down to the difference between progress and achievement.

Let me explain...

The Difference Between Progress and Achievement

Our society is obsessed with achievement. This is especially true in the gym.

I'm just as guilty of this as anyone else. Last week, a guy at my gym clean and jerked 325 pounds and made it look easy. My first question to him was, "What's your max?"

I didn't say, "How is your training going?" or "Have you been making progress recently?" but rather, "What is the absolute maximum weight you can do?"

My question was all about what he could achieve, not how he has progressed.

And you'll find that mentality everywhere. Nobody is going to celebrate you for going up 1 pound per week. Everybody wants you to try for 10 more pounds *right now*.

Here's the problem: a focus on achievement in the here and now usually comes at the expense of slower, more consistent progress. Achievement is so ingrained in our culture that we often ignore progress. (Of course, focusing on progress would ultimately lead to higher achievement, but it's easy to dismiss that fact when you want to set a new PR today.)

I'm still learning to embrace this principle myself, but I'm getting better at it. And here's what I've learned about training for slow progress rather than immediate achievement.

1. Slow Gains Add Up Really Fast

Here's the thing about taking it slow: it adds up really fast.

Here's an example...

I want you to go into the gym this week, pick your favorite lift (squats for example), and lift 1 pound more than you did last week. You are not allowed to do 2 pounds more. Only 1 pound.

Do you think you could do that? Most people would be like, "Of course. That's easy." And they're right.

But here's the funny thing: If you do that every week, then you're going to add 50 pounds to your lifts in the next year. Stick with that for 2 years and you're lifting 100 pounds more.

How many people do you know who are lifting 100 pounds more than they were 2 years ago? I don't know many. Most people are so obsessed with squeaking out an extra 10 pounds this week that they never find the patience to make slower (but greater) long-term gains.

It all comes down to the power of average speed. The next two years are going to come and go. The time will pass anyway. Might as well be climbing the whole time.

2. Slow Gains Help You Handle Intensity Later On

For some reason, we think that starting easy and going up slowly is a waste of our time. It's not.

When you start with easy weights (and I think this is especially important in the beginning), you build the capacity to do work. If you're getting back in the gym after a long layoff, then I think that *at least* the first month of lifting should be easy.

For some reason, society has convinced us that if your heart rate isn't above 150 beats per minute and you don't feel gassed at the end of your workout, then you haven't done yourself any good. I disagree. If you actually add a little weight each week and don't miss workouts, then it will get hard enough, fast enough. Trust me.

Build a foundation of strength with easy workouts and a lot of volume. Do 1000 reps over the next few months and let your body learn how to move through space. Slowly go up each week. By this time next year, you'll be able to handle the heavy weights with ease.

3. Slow Gains Foster Recovery

The body has an amazing ability to adapt — if you give it time to do so.

When you place a stimulus on the body, it will either find a way to handle it or die. In the case of weightlifting, your body will build muscle and bone tissue, and you'll gradually become stronger. Small, consistent gains give the body just enough stress to grow and just enough time to recover.

But if you try to push the body too far, too fast, then it will find a different way to adapt. Namely, inflammation, injury, and stress. You might be able to add 10 pounds per week for a few weeks, but pretty soon it will catch up to you and you'll be sitting on the couch trying to get healthy.

Hard, Hard, Hurt vs. Slow, Slow, Never Stop

If you want to get in shape, to get stronger, and to reach your full potential, then what is the most important thing of all?

Answer: not missing workouts.

There is nothing more important than building the habit of getting in the gym and not missing workouts. Stop trying to make up for the fact that you're inconsistent by going harder when you're there. Long-term progress doesn't work that way. Instead, train yourself to not miss workouts and slowly add weight.

At the end of the day, it comes down to this: Are you just trying to put up a big number right now? Or are you really in this for the long haul?

Most people train in this cycle: hard, hard, hard, hurt.

I'd rather go slow, slow, slow, never stop.

3 Surprising Reasons Why You Need to Rediscover Slow Growth

We all have goals that we'd like to reach.

And, if we had the choice, we would prefer to reach them sooner rather than later.

There's nothing wrong with achieving a goal quickly, but the insatiable desire to enjoy results now — with little regard for the process — is hurting our health, our happiness, and our lives in general.

The media and society are continuously glorifying the end result (earn more money, find love, win the Super Bowl) and it's becoming dangerously easy to think that the goal is what validates us and not the struggle of the process.

If you want to fulfill your potential and become something better, then you need to rediscover the power of slow growth.

Here's why...

A Surprising Lesson From the Life of Young Chinese Weightlifters

Yesterday, I read an interesting article about the disciplined approach that China takes when cultivating young Olympic Weightlifters. (If you're unaware, China is overflowing with depth in the sport of weightlifting.)

If you're not a weightlifter, stick with me here, because this is an important lesson for you too.

Here's what the process looks like for becoming an Olympic weightlifter in China...

Age 6+ — *playful gymnastics and bodyweight exercises to train their coordination and help them understand their bodies better. This is important to ensure that future athletes enjoy their training and consider it as an activity rather than training. Gradually, they shift focus to technique drills with a stick.*

Ages 8 to 10 — *mostly the children are still playing as they move, but 10% to 30% of the time is spent focusing on weightlifting movements like pulls and squats. After 18 months of this, technique has been pretty solidly ingrained into these kids and they start to toy around with the bar.*

Ages 10 to 14 — *from here onwards, the training time increases and becomes more serious. They start to train with a massive array of exercises from snatch and clean and jerk to pulls and overhead squats to duck walks and frog jumps and tons of stretching.*

Age 14+ — *now athletes begin working on their specific problems and work to develop the right balance of flexibility, power, strength, speed and technique. At the beginning of this phase, the athlete would have had about 5 to 7 years of training, including at least 3 years under the barbell. The next 4 years will be spent working towards*

securing a spot on the Chinese National Team and eventually competing in the Olympics.

—Kirksman, original post

Regardless of how you feel about the Chinese society or process, there are some important lessons here about the power of slow growth.

1. Slow Growth Teaches You to Believe in Yourself

Of all the skills that could help you achieve your goals, I would argue that a belief in yourself is the greatest one.

And I only know of one way to develop a belief in yourself: prove your abilities over and over with small wins.

Do you think the Chinese weightlifters believe in themselves? Of course they do! By the time they are 12–years–old, they have put in more repetitions than most Americans will put in during their entire lifetime.

And most importantly, they don't begin focusing on performance goals until they have spent years becoming comfortable with their bodies and proving their identity to themselves.

There's no secret formula here. If you want to achieve something you need to believe in yourself. Slow growth allows you to spend time developing the identity of a winner first. You can move on to performance later.

2. Slow Growth Removes Pressure and Allows for Passion

When we work hard on something we believe in, it's called passion. When we work hard on something we don't believe in, it's called stress.

—Simon Sinek

In the beginning, the goal of the Chinese is to let the young weightlifters *enjoy* the process of moving and becoming athletic.

Think about how different this is than the typical process. When was the last time you took 3 years enjoying a process before focusing on the goal you want to achieve?

Most of time we set our sights on a goal (lose 30 pounds, make more money, etc.) and instead of enjoying the process of developing new skills, we decide that we are a failure because we haven't achieved the end result yet.

What would it feel like if we let ourselves enjoy the process of success as much as the product?

If you think about some of the most enjoyable activities in your life, how did they start? It's unlikely that you fell in love with something if you started by immediately pursuing a goal. Most of the things we love started with exploration and a slowly growing curiosity that evolved into a passion over time.

Forget about performance for now. Allow yourself to enjoy the process of becoming something new and better. Give yourself permission to enjoy the journey to greatness.

3. Slow Growth Teaches You How Change Actually Happens

It's so easy to overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making better decisions on a daily basis.

Almost every habit that we have — good or bad — is the result of many small decisions over time. And if this is true, if the problems you're facing now are the result of thousands of small decisions made over the course of years, then wouldn't it make sense that path to success, joy, fulfillment, meaning, happiness, and vitality would also be through thousands of daily decisions?

And yet, how easily we forget this when we want to make a change.

When we become obsessed with achieving a result quickly, the only thing we think about is how to get to our goal, but the value of slow growth is that it allows you to realize that your process for achieving goals is just as important as whether or not you achieve them at all.

In fact, I'd say that living a healthy life is more about how you approach your goals than whether or not you achieve them.

For example, healthy leadership isn't defined by winning an election or being named captain or being selected for a promotion. Healthy leadership is having your teammate's back every day. It's being an advocate for your employees when nobody else will. It's asking the first question, taking the extra minute, and sacrificing for something bigger than yourself. It's a thousand small decisions every day.

It's About the Process, Not the Product

The desire to achieve results quickly fools you into thinking that the result is prize.

Slow growth teaches you the truth...

That becoming the type of person you want to become — someone who lives by a stronger standard, someone who believes in themselves, someone who can be counted on by the people that matter to them — is about the daily process you follow and not the ultimate product you achieve.

Let's spend less time putting people who achieved the numbers and results on a pedestal — the athletes, the political leaders, the blockbuster entrepreneurs — and more time learning from the type of people who live their daily lives by a standard that we want to replicate.

It doesn't matter what you win, it's how you win it.

Why Trying to Be Perfect Won't Help You Achieve Your Goals (And What Will)

We all have goals that are important to us. But is it our drive to achieve a certain outcome that makes us better? Or something else entirely?

In the book Art & Fear, authors David Bayles and Ted Orland share a surprising story about a ceramics teacher. This story just might reframe the way you think about setting goals, making progress, and becoming better at the things that are important to you.

Here's what happened...

The ceramics teacher announced that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the quantity of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its quality.

His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the "quantity" group: fifty pounds of pots rated an "A", forty pounds a "B", and so on. Those being graded on "quality", however, needed to produce only one pot — albeit a perfect one — to get an "A".

Well, grading time came and a curious fact emerged: the works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity!

It seems that while the “quantity” group was busily churning out piles of work — and learning from their mistakes — the “quality” group had sat around theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.

Start With Repetitions, Not Goals

It’s not just art studios where repetitions matter. Whenever you put in consistent work and learn from your mistakes, incredible progress is the result.

This is why I force myself to write a new article every Monday and Thursday. I can’t predict which articles will be useful, but I know that if I write two per week, then sometimes I’ll hit the bullseye.

And it works the same way with almost any goal you could have...

Art. If you want to be a great photographer, you could go on a quest to take one perfect photo each day. Or you could take 100 photos per day, learn from your mistakes, and hone your craft.

Strength. If you want to be stronger, you could analyze every movement and phase of your technique until you’re blue in the face. Or, you could get under the bar, learn from your mistakes, and focus on doing more reps.

Writing. If you want to write a best-selling book, then you could spend 10 years trying to write one perfect book. Or, you could write one book each year, learn from your mistakes, and trust that your books will get better each time.

Business. If you want to be a successful entrepreneur, you could scheme and think and try to plan out the perfect business idea. Or, you could try to get one customer, learn from your mistakes, and experiment with new ideas until something comes easily.

It's not the quest to achieve one perfect goal that makes you better, it's the skills you develop from doing a volume of work.

In other words, when you think about your goals, don't just consider the outcome you want. Focus on the repetitions that lead to that place. Focus on the piles of work that come before the success. Focus on the hundreds of ceramic pots that come before the masterpiece.

Put in Your Reps

When you look at goals this way, you start to realize that setting up a system for putting your reps in is more important than choosing a goal.

Everyone wants to make progress. And there is only one way to do it: **put in your reps.**

The goal is just an event — something that you can't totally control or predict. But the reps are what can make the event happen. If you ignore the outcomes and focus only on the repetitions, you'll still get results. If you ignore the goals and build habits instead, the outcomes will be there anyway.

Forget about the goals this year. What is your plan for getting in the reps you need? What is your schedule for putting in a volume of work on the things that are important to you?

Thanks to Dan John for inspiring this post.

Hacking the Workout Journal: How to Track Your Workouts in the Simplest, Most Effective Way Possible

Today I'm going to share my system for recording my workouts.

In my opinion, tracking your workouts (whether it be with a workout journal, a fitness app, or something else) should accomplish 3 goals...

1. It should be quick and easy, so that you can spend your time exercising. Your time should be spent doing the work, not recording it.
2. It should be useful. Our modern world is overflowing with data and most of it is never acted upon. I prefer a system that records the essential information of what I have done (so I can see my progress), that reduces errors while I am working out (so that I can be more effective with my time), and that helps me make informed decisions about what to do during my next workout.
3. It should be versatile. I don't want to have to find a new app or develop a new system every time I want to do a different style of workout. I should be able to adapt my current system to any style of training.

With those goals in mind, here's the workout journal tracking system that has worked best for me.

Hacking the Workout Journal

To start, I use a ruled Moleskine notebook. Obviously, any notebook will do, but I like this particular one because it is small enough to fit in your pocket and it has a firm cover that doesn't bend or tear with repeated use.

Here are three notebooks I've filled with workouts. (They are also lovingly covered with sweat and chalk—as they should be.)



STEP 1: Write the date and your bodyweight (if you wish) at the top of the page.

I typically do this once I show up to the gym. It's part of the pre-game routine that I go through before working out. I put on my lifting shoes and knee sleeves, get out my lifting belt, write the date at the top of the page, and weigh myself.

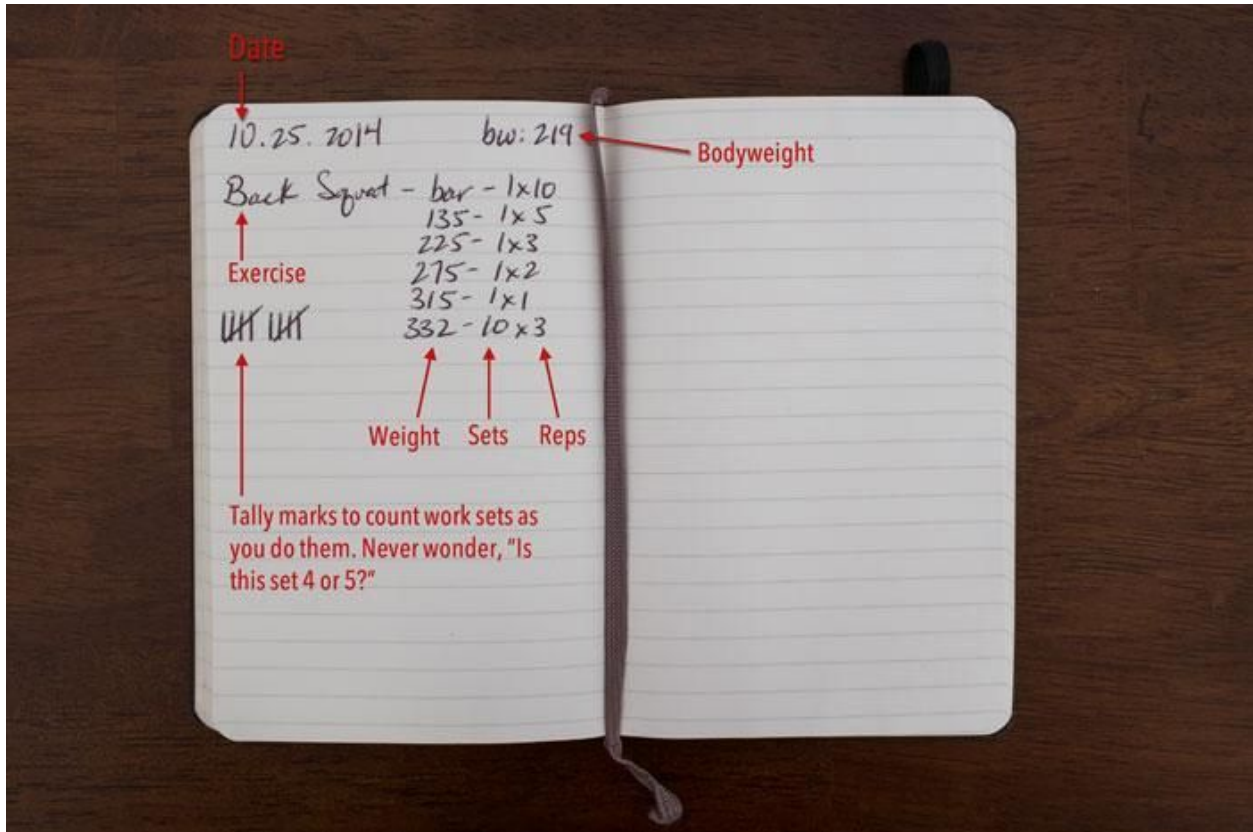
STEP 2: Write your planned workout routine for the day in the following format:

[Exercise] – [Weight] – [Sets] x [Reps]

At this point, I write out what I expect to do for the day. In the beginning, you may need to think about this a bit or spend some time finding a program that you enjoy. After the first or second time, however, writing down your workout is a very quick task.

Currently, this process takes me less than 60 seconds because I usually measure backward and base the weights I lift today on what I did the week prior by simply adding 5 more pounds or an extra set. (This is another advantage of using the notebook. Your recent workouts are just one or two pages away, so you can pull information instantly.)

I prefer to write out every set I'll do, including warm up sets, because it makes the process of working out even more mindless and automatic. Once I have a plan, I can just pick up the weights and go. In the rare case that I don't know exactly what weight I will hit (for example, if I'm maxing out on a particular day), then I'll just leave a few blank lines under that exercise so that I can write in the numbers as I do each set.



STEP 3: Record tally marks as you complete your work sets.

When you're in the middle of a workout, it can be easy to forget what set you just completed. This is especially true when the weight gets heavy and you're too busy huffing and puffing to remember if you just finished set 4 or set 5.

To avoid this occasional mental lapse, I like to use tally marks to note when I finish each set. One quick mark and I always know where I'm at in the workout.

For me, the lifting sequence usually goes like this:

1. Do the lift.

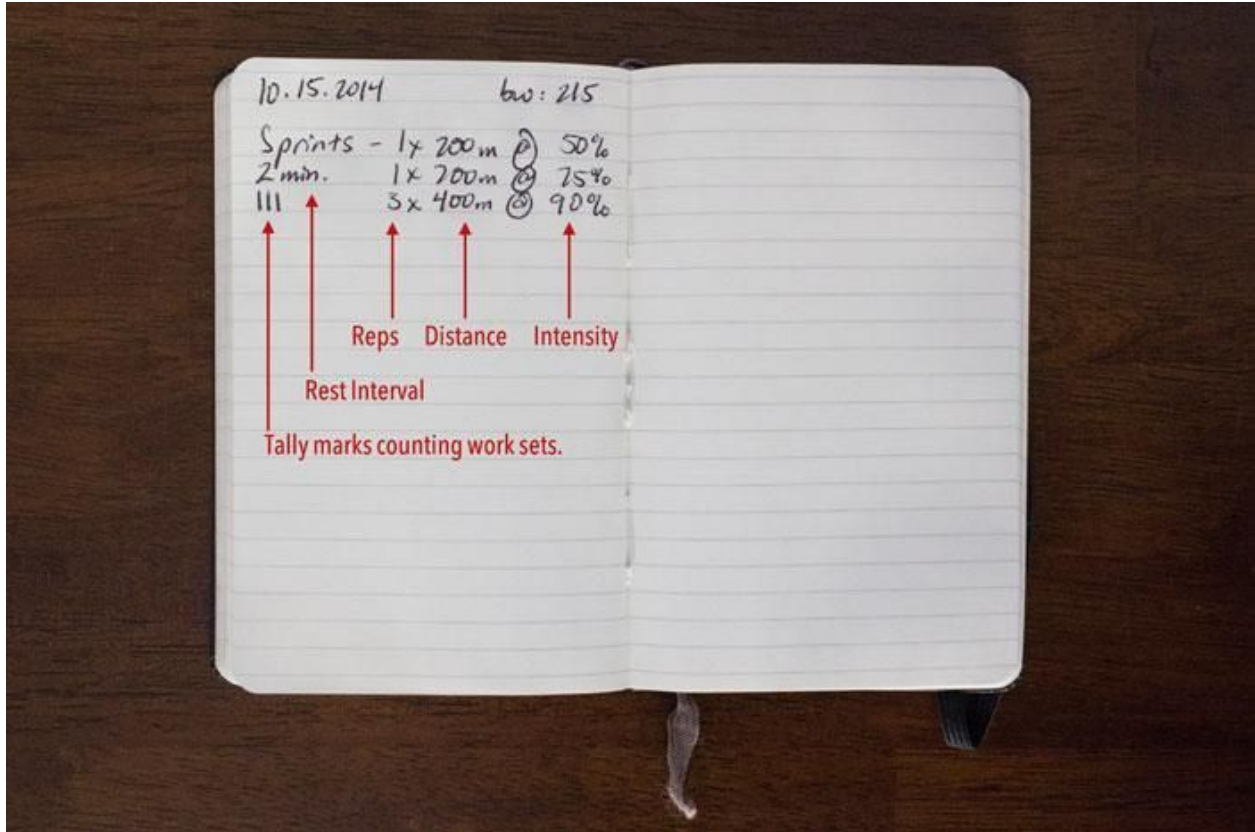
2. Make a tally mark.
3. Start the stopwatch to record my rest interval. (I use the stopwatch application on my phone to track rest intervals, but a regular stopwatch or a glance at the clock on the wall works just fine as well.)
4. If necessary, change the weight for the next set.
5. Repeat.

STEP 4: Vary this basic structure as needed for the training session.

The beauty of this system is that it's incredibly versatile while still being clean and simple for any given workout. (Most apps and pieces of software meanwhile are either simple but limited, or versatile but bloated with features.)

For example, I rarely add rest intervals to my strength training sessions because they are almost always between 3 to 5 minutes. When I sprint, however, I prefer to have the rest interval listed because it is more integral to the workout. No problem. I just add it to the line under the exercise.

Here's what a typical sprint workout looks like for me...



And that's it.

Bodyweight workouts, strength training workouts, sprint workouts—it works for all of them. It's simple, it's adjustable, and it works.

Note: In the examples above, I only listed one exercise per workout so that I could lay out the format clearly. Obviously, when you are doing multiple exercises per workout, you simply follow the same structure and add each additional exercises under the previous one.

The Theory of Cumulative Stress: How to Recover When Stress Builds Up

It was my first year of graduate school and my professor was standing at the front of the room. He was telling our class about a mistake he made years before.

About a decade earlier, my professor had been one of the senior executives at Sears, Roebuck & Company, the large department store chain. They were in the middle of a massive national campaign and preparing for a major brand launch. My professor was leading the operation.

For almost two months prior to the launch day, he was flying all over the country to strike up buzz with major partners and media companies. While criss-crossing the country on flight after flight, he was also trying to run his department from the road. For weeks on end he would meet with the media and business partners all day, answer emails and phone calls all night, squeeze in 3 or 4 hours of sleep, and wake up to do it all over again.

The week before the big launch day, his body gave out on him. He had to be rushed to the hospital. Major organs had started to fail from the chronic stress. He spent the next eight days lying in a hospital bed, unable to do anything as the launch day came and went.

Your Bucket of Health and Energy

Imagine that your health and energy are a bucket of water.

In your day-to-day life, there are things that fill your bucket up. These are inputs like sleep, nutrition, meditation, stretching, laughter, and other forms of recovery.

There are also forces that drain the water from your bucket. These are outputs like lifting weights or running, stress from work or school, relationship problems, or other forms of stress and anxiety. [4]



The forces that drain your bucket aren't all negative, of course. To live a productive life, it can be important to have some of things flowing out of your bucket. Working hard in the gym, at school, or at the office allows you to produce something of value. But even positive outputs are still *outputs* and they drain your energy accordingly.

These outputs are cumulative. Even a little leak can result in significant water loss over time.

The Theory of Cumulative Stress

I usually lift heavy three days per week. For a long time, I thought I should be able to handle four days per week. However, every time I added the extra workout in, I would be just fine for a few weeks and then end up exhausted or slightly injured about a month into the program.

This was frustrating. Why could I handle it for four or five weeks, but not longer than that?

Eventually I realized the issue: **stress is cumulative**. Three days per week was a pace I could sustain. When I added that fourth day in, the additional stress started to build and accumulate. At some point, the burden became too big and I would get exhausted or injured.

In extreme cases, like that of my professor, this snowball of stress can start to roll so fast that it pushes you to the brink of death. But it's important to realize that cumulative stress is something that you're dealing with even when it isn't a matter of life or death. The stress of extra workouts or additional mileage. The stress of building a business or finishing an important project. The stress of parenting your young children or dealing with a bad boss or caring for your aging parents. It all adds up.

Keeping Your Bucket Full

If you want to keep your bucket full, you have two options.

1. Refill your bucket on a regular basis. That means catching up on sleep, making time for laughter and fun, eating enough to maintain solid energy levels, and otherwise making time for recovery.
2. Let the stressors in your life accumulate and drain your bucket. Once you hit empty, your body will force you to rest through injury and illness. Just like it did with my professor.

Recovery is Not Negotiable

I'm in the middle of a very heavy squat program right now. (It's called the Smolov squat program. If you're interested, [I put the spreadsheet up here.](#))

I've spent the last two years training with really easy weights and gradually working my way up to heavier loads. I've built a solid foundation of strength. But even with that foundation, the weights on this program are heavy and the intensity is high.

Because of this, I'm taking special care to allow myself additional recovery. I'm allowed to sleep longer than usual. If I need to eat more, so be it. Usually, I'm lazy about stretching and foam rolling, but I have been rolling my little heart out every day for the last few weeks. I'm doing whatever I can do to balance the stress and recovery deficit that this squat program is placing on me.

Why?

Because recovery is not negotiable. You can either make time to rest and rejuvenate now or make time to be sick and injured later. Keep your bucket full.

Thanks to Mark Watts for originally sharing with me the idea that stress is cumulative.

10 Lessons Learned from Squatting 400 Pounds

Last week, I set a new personal record by squatting 405 pounds (184 kilograms).

If you're interested, here is a short video of the lift...



I have plenty of friends who can squat more weight—and a few who regularly squat over 500 pounds—but this was my first time passing the 400-pound mark so I'd like to share a few lessons I learned along the way.

10 Lessons Learned

1. Live in the arena instead of judging from the crowd. Every Monday and Thursday, I publish a new article on JamesClear.com with my ideas on habits, performance, and improvement. I enjoy writing and I try to make each article a great one. That said, anyone can share an opinion. It is easy to sit in the crowd and offer suggestions (or point fingers). It is much harder to step into the arena and do the work. This is one of the reasons why I lift: I don't merely want to share ideas, I want to live them out.

2. Don't miss workouts. Here's the recipe for squatting 400 pounds:

- Squat two or three times per week.
- Increase by about 5 pounds every week or two.
- Don't miss a workout for two years.

I would wager to say that most young, healthy men could squat double bodyweight if they followed that simple program. That said, the exact numbers aren't the point. The point is that it doesn't matter what program you do, how smart you think you are, or what genes you were or weren't born with. Unless you fall in love with boredom and do the work consistently, everything else is irrelevant.

3. When in doubt, go slower. The name of the game is to not miss workouts and make small improvements and that means one simple thing: don't get hurt. For the last 18 months, I have been training on a basic 5×5 program, but in recent weeks I switched to the more intense Smolov squat program. During the fifth week of Smolov, most people add 10 pounds from the

previous week. I decided to only increase by 5 pounds. It was still an improvement, but a slightly smaller, safer, and more sustainable one. The best program in the world is useless if you're injured.

4. You are a reflection of your daily average. Your results in nearly any area of life are often a reflection of what you do on an average day. Increase your average speed and you'll increase your results. Previously, I was averaging about 25 reps per squat workout (typically 5 sets of 5 reps). During the past two months, my squat volume increased to about 35 reps per workout (and often with heavier weights). Guess what? My average went up and my maximum strength went with it.

5. Self-care is crucial. Stress is cumulative and recovery is not negotiable. I knew the intensity of my workouts would increase with the Smolov squat program and so I made sure to learn how to get better sleep. There were multiple days when I slept for 10 hours. I also did something I almost never do: I stretched my legs and used a foam roller nearly every day. Despite the intensity of the program, my increased focus on recovery balanced things out. There were even a few days when my legs felt fresh.

6. Push yourself past the point of comparison. There is something magical about physical struggle that can remove mental fear. It can be easy to walk into a gym and fear what others around you are thinking.

- “Does that guy think I'm weak?”
- “Do I look stupid?”
- “Am I doing this right?”

- “Are other people comparing themselves to me?”

If you push yourself far enough, these questions fade away. When the weight gets big enough, it commands all of your attention. You don't care what the girl across the room thinks. You don't care if people watch you or ignore you. You don't care if it's raining outside or if your shorts and shoes don't match or if the guy in the checkout line this morning was rude to you. The only thing you care about in that moment is surviving. I think there is something powerful about that. If you can learn to ignore what the world thinks for a few seconds when you're holding onto the bar, maybe you can learn to do it in other areas of life. Keep your eyes on your own paper.

7. Focus on volume before intensity. I have been lifting weights for over a decade, but many of those years were spent training for other sports. It really wasn't until the last 18 months that I dedicated time to focusing solely on weightlifting and particularly on squatting. I started slow and with easy weight. Then, I built a foundation of strength over the next year by focusing on doing a lot of repetitions. Not only did I avoid testing my one rep max, I didn't do less than a set of five for almost a year. Only after handling a lot of volume did I decide to dial up the intensity. The Smolov squat program has a reputation for being particularly intense, but because I prepared with so much volume, I was ready to handle the intensity. This method requires patience, but it works.

8. Measure something. We spend most of our days living in a gray area. Are you a better person today than you were yesterday? Are you a better parent? A better leader? A better friend? It can be hard to tell on most days. This is why I believe that we should test ourselves and measure our progress.

Seven weeks ago, I tried to squat 405 pounds and failed. Last week, I succeeded. I can tell you without hesitation that I am better today than I was seven weeks ago. No debate. No ego. No fluff. Black and white proof. Perhaps more importantly, I know who I am and who I am not.

When you measure your results, you cannot hide from yourself. You cannot lie to yourself. You cannot pretend to be something else. Best of all, there is no reason to fear failure because no matter what the outcome, you understand yourself better. What are you measuring in your life?

9. Short-term results are only useful when considered through a long-term context. History is filled with examples of people who have sacrificed their values, morals, friends, and families to achieve short-term results of some kind. If you're obsessed with a particular goal, then it can be surprisingly easy to find yourself making exceptions and just-this-once choices you may regret later. If, however, you view your short-term choices within the context of your long-term values, then it becomes much easier to celebrate in the moment without losing sight of what really matters.

I was proud and happy when I squatted 405 pounds. I celebrated the feat. But I also know that the process is more important than the goal. I'm going to enjoy this one, but I'll be back in the gym on Monday.

10. 500, I'm coming for you.

Sources

1. Greek Athletes and Athletics by H.A. Harris. pp. 110–113.
2. There are seemingly endless stories of Milo's feats of strength and although some of them are certainly embellished (his daily diet reportedly included 20 pounds of meat, 20 pounds of bread, and 18 pints of wine), there is no doubt that Milo was one of the greatest strength athletes of his time and that the lessons we learn from his stories hold true today.
3. Human biology (5th edition) by Daniel Chiras. p. 229.
4. My image of the bucket was inspired by the original idea of the stress and recovery bucket mentioned in Paul Chek's book, How to Eat, Move and Be Healthy!