

Quality is Paramount

By Leo Isaac

The use of percentages to indicate the desired level of intensity is a common practise in designing training programs in Weightlifting. But there is nothing magic about numbers on a piece of paper except that athletes tend to strive to achieve the percentages prescribed by the program.

The common use of percentages of 1RM to indicate desired intensity has advantages and disadvantages. For the coach, describing intensity in this manner is convenient. It allows the same training schedule to be distributed to a number of athletes who then work out their own target weights according to the stated percent of their best 1RM. It's simple because intensity can be expressed simply as a percentage.

The main issue in prescribing the intensity of training by the use of percentages is that it takes no account of the quality of movement achieved by the athlete on any given day. For example, the program might state that the target for Snatch on a particular day is 80%/3x3 (3 sets of 3 reps at 80%). As all coaches know, the athlete might achieve that target some days with excellent technique and no failures. However on another day the quality of movement is poor and this may be due to training fatigue, soreness or a whole host of personal factors. As a result the athlete struggles to achieve 80% for reps, suffers failures and is disheartened. What would a coach do in such circumstances? Most likely they would advise the athlete to reduce the target intensity. Similarly, what would a coach advise if they witnessed the athlete achieve the first set of 3 reps at 80% with excellence of technique and the greatest of ease? Most likely the coach would advise the athlete to go heavier.

In circumstances where a coach closely monitors the athlete's quality of movement and manipulates the exercise intensity accordingly, it is likely the value of training program will be optimal. The written training program provides a framework that organises the athlete's endeavour and progress. But adhering strictly to percentages has numerous limitations.

The limiting factor that determines how heavy an athlete should perform any exercise should be the quality of movement. The athlete will naturally fluctuate in form on a day-to-day basis, and when preparing a program it is difficult to predict the days on which it is most beneficial to attempt near best weights. Experienced coaches will therefore observe the quality of the athlete's movement, consider the ebb and flow of the athlete's form in recent training sessions and make judgments about the intensity limit that is appropriate for that athlete on that day.

The following are criteria that may assist in determining quality of movement:

- Movement is not restricted by soreness or pain
- Technical execution appears precise, consistent and "in the groove"
- Speed of movement (under the bar) is perceived to be equal or better than normal for the athlete
- Technical execution is not adversely altered in response to increasing heaviness of the bar
- Receiving positions are stable, balanced, with good lockout and measured careful recovery
- The athlete has a confident demeanour as they approach the target intensity
- There is no failure

If these criteria are met when an athlete reaches the target intensity, and there is high probability that a small increment will be achieved, then the athlete should go higher than stated intensity. In reality the pursuit of intensity is a most important training stimulus but quality of movement should not be jeopardised.