

How to Get Through “Plateaus” in Training

By Leo Isaac

A plateau, in the context of training, is a period in which an athlete appears to make no progress in personal best performances, usually across the board. In Weightlifting, a plateau might entail failing to achieve any measurable progress over a period of 3 months or more in the full competition lifts, power lifts and/or various forms of squats.

In fact, plateaus are quite normal in Weightlifting training, although the sufferer might not think so. The athlete concerned will begin to have self doubts about their capacity to make further improvement, find training less motivating, and suffer increased anxiety at the approach of the next competition.

Many factors can bring about a plateau and more often than not it will be a combination of factors, most of which are avoidable. The following list represents some of the more common factors that lead to a plateau.

- Constant efforts in training to test one's capability. The athlete pushes themselves to maximal weights or trains to failure on a very frequent basis. In this circumstance, the athlete will suffer physiological and psychological fatigue. If prolonged, the athlete may enter in a condition known as “overtraining” from which it may take a long time to recover.
- Chronic injury that arises over time as a result physical issues such as soreness in joints and tendons which is not properly diagnosed, managed or treated. An example is a wrist injury which at first seems to be minor but after several weeks of failing to sufficiently rest the wrist, becomes painfully debilitating.
- Inconsistent attendance at training is a very common factor. The athlete may have no choice due to work, study or family commitments, or the problem may be self-inflicted such as failure to get up on a Saturday morning and go training because of social engagements the evening before. If an athlete trains only 12 times in a 4 week cycle and misses 2 sessions, that amounts to 17% loss of training time.
- Failures of “self-maintenance” such as a lack of sleep due to late night hours on the Internet, lack of regular quality nutrition, or overindulgence in alcohol (one heavy drinking session = 3 days lost training benefit).
- Poor competition strategies i.e. starting too high, setting target weights which are unrealistic
- Purposefully holding back in bodyweight to keep to a category limit rather than increasing to the next category.

It is quite normal for athletes to only achieve 1-2 sessions in a 3 month period in which they can equal or beat their personal bests on Snatch and Clean & Jerk. This does not usually present a problem to the athlete as they know that they are improving on power lifts (Power Snatch, Power Clean & Jerk), or squats (Back Squats, Front Squats), or indeed in other important assistance exercises (Snatch Balance, Jerk from Racks, Power Snatch from Knee, etc). If the athlete is improving in their results on assistance exercises, it is only a matter of time usually before the personal best Snatch and Clean & Jerk increases.

For athletes to make steady progress and avoid prolonged “plateaus”, it is a matter of being motivated enough to develop a methodical approach to training and competition. A methodical approach would entail rigorous attention to detail in technique, discipline in managing one's health and well-being, adoption of sensible goals, learning to intersperse light sessions into the training regimen to allow for the recovery from punishing heavy work outs and realising that training in Weightlifting is not just a matter of putting more weight on the bar and trying to lift it. A methodical approach is one which develops all of the attributes that the Weightlifter needs – speed, flexibility, balance, confidence, stability, agility as well as great force.

If an athlete does, for whatever reason, seem to be experiencing a plateau, the first step is to consider carefully what factors are contributing. If the problem is considered to be excessive heavy sessions, then solution should be to make a radical change to training intensity. Spend 2-3 weeks on intensities in the 65%-75% range and then build up from there using a system of peaks and troughs. The troughs (light sessions for recovery) should not be underestimated in their value.

If the problem is a lack of consistency or inability to attend training, then a discussion with the coach might help. On a temporary basis, the coach will likely alter the frequency of training, and adjust the training schedule to meet the needs of the individual. It is a far better approach to redistribute the exercise schedule rather than to simply miss out on certain exercises that are performed on the day the athlete misses.

If the problem is injury, then the athlete needs to take time out from training or limit training to prevent further exacerbation of the injury. Furthermore, the athlete should seek medical advice. Even if no treatment is available other than rest, sometimes diagnosis and reassurance is very helpful and quells anxiety.

If the problem is lack of self-maintenance, then the athlete must do some soul-searching and begin to take steps that will not only help their training but likely improve all other aspects of life including relationships, health, work or study effectiveness. Sport in general is an experience that helps people to learn self-discipline and for this reason, sport participation should be continued.