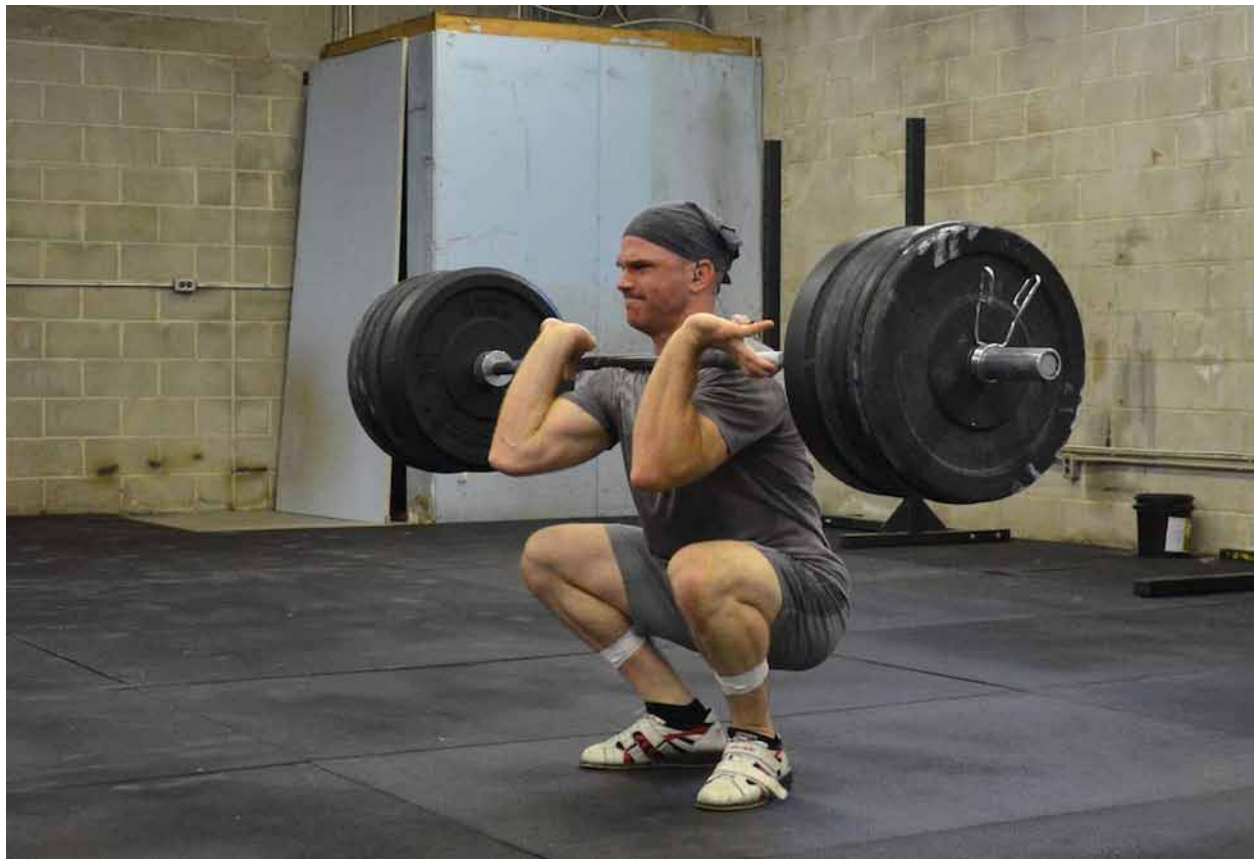

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Squat Heavy and Often

Powerlifting affiliate owner Chris Moore challenges the CrossFit community to train strength way more often.

By **Chris Moore** CrossFit Memphis

August 2011



Mike Warkentin

"Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature's inexorable imperative." —H.G. Wells

Some of my favorite childhood memories come from watching movies during late summer nights.

1 of 8

Squat ... (continued)

My dad always worked hard second shifts. By the time he got home, he didn't mind that I was still awake and running around the house in an ADD-fueled frenzy. I think he looked forward to those moments. It was a chance for us to spend some time together, basking in the late-night novelty.

Our ritual was always the same.

First, you had to have a big wedge of fresh-cut watermelon. You couldn't sit down to a movie without that. Second, we always seemed to watch whatever HBO had to offer. Usually it was the stereotypical 1980s action flick.

For some reason, I recently recalled a memory of watching "Kickboxer," the old Jean-Claude Van Damme fight-fest. I don't remember much about the plot, and I really don't care to. The movie's probably as terrible now as it was then. But I'll tell you what was great about it: the training montage.

I'm a sucker for a good montage.

Frequent, hard, highly novel training leads to rapid improvements in performance. ... There is perhaps no exercise better suited to this approach than the squat.

Some of the details escape me, but I can still see a young, shirtless (always shirtless) Jean-Claude moving slowly through a misty Thai jungle. He was eager to train. Sure of himself. Maybe too sure.



Mindy Bush

Doug Larson demonstrates perfect position with the cambered squat bar.

It wasn't long before his wise old master started laying into him. First, there was kicking. Lots of kicking. He kicked fast. He kicked slow. He kicked in dramatic slow-motion while underwater. You could tell this was all terribly important to the training.

I made note.

Action-movie lesson No. 1: Repetition is key.

Next, I can see a grimacing J.C. being forcibly stretched by the ankles between two palms. This guy wasn't going to be happy until full anal prolapse was achieved. It could be that this was the very first mobility WOD I ever witnessed—my first glimpse at a true supple leopard.

But the pain didn't stop there. No. There were high-altitude coconut drops to the abdomen. Repeated leg strikes to a tree trunk. It was all quite intense.

Action-movie lesson No. 2: You're not going to defeat Tong Po without laying your weakness upon the altar.

Slowly, you begin to see method to all the madness. Repetition ensured proper technique during the stress of the fight. Knuckles and shins grew hardened. Soon overconfident, shirtless J.C. was replaced by a highly trained, resolved, shirtless J.C.

The final action movie lesson: Extraordinary training leads to extraordinary, fast results.

Of course, we all recognize these montage moments are entertainment. But these scenes also allude to a damn effective training strategy: frequent, hard, highly novel training leads to rapid improvements in performance. Maybe it doesn't happen as fast as it does in the movies, but it can certainly happen sooner than we expect.

Strength is a skill, and just like with any other skill, practice makes perfect. Squat more and you will become really strong, really fast.

There is perhaps no exercise better suited to this approach than the squat. The heavy barbell compresses and gnarls. Repeated, heavy eccentric loading commands systemic adaptation. Every completed rep is a small taste of victory and affirmation.

You might dread the squat. You might be hopelessly stuck at the same weight. You might think you're strong enough already. Well, I think it might be time for a bit of an experiment. Maybe you just need a little time in the jungle.

Here are three squat lessons for your consideration.

Squat Lesson No. 1: You're Probably Not Squatting Enough

A few months back, one of our new lifters shared a bit of news with me. He had recently paid a visit to his former gym. From what I gathered, this was a typical commercial gym.

It turns out, he ran into the reigning meathead alpha male of the joint while there. I don't recall the name of this guy, so let's just call him "Meat."

"Did I tell you? I ran into Meat at my old gym the other day," Jordan said.

"Oh, yeah?" I replied, as I busily prepared for the day's training. I did recognize the name. We'd talked about him before. As far as I could tell, this was the typical pharmacologically enhanced local bodybuilding hero. His primary hobby appeared to be the intimidation of pubescent high-school-aged males. I suppose everybody needs an audience.

"Yeah, I told him about our training, about my progress. He didn't believe me, though."

"Didn't believe you? And why is that?" I asked.

"He said there was no way I could be squatting three days a week and still be getting stronger."

"Is that right?" I said, smiling. "Well, we better get you back on the leg press ASAP!"

I completely understand Meat's point of view. I shared that mentality for years and years. During my high-school and college-football days, I absolutely hated to squat. It hurt my back every time. My performance in the lift was not nearly as good as, say, my bench press (yes, I could easily bench more than I squatted as a Division 1 college-football player).



Mindy Bush

Jordan Carroll struggles to complete a max-effort squat under heavy chain.

That didn't change until I started competing in powerlifting. For the first time in my life, I recognized the indisputable benefits of squatting heavy. I understood my troubled history with the exercise was linked to shitty coaching, not to the exercise itself.

Rapid progress was easy. I never missed my weekly speed-squat session. Once or twice a month, I would take a heavy squat on a max-effort day. But I was careful. You had to make sure you didn't exceed three total lifts at or above 90 percent during any four-week period. If you made that fatal mistake, as sport science had told us, you would suffer the irreversible effects of the infamous overtraining syndrome, right?

No. It turns out that was bullshit.

I am a man. And as a man, I have to stand up and admit when I am wrong. So, here I am rubbing my own nose in shit. For pretty much the entirety of my powerlifting career, I was wrong. There, it's done. I feel better.

It was stupid to ignore the advice of all the Olympic weightlifters I trained with for years. It was wrong to ignore my better judgment. Strength is a skill, and just like with any other skill, practice makes perfect. Squat more and you will become really strong, really fast.

Today in our crew, I consider squatting three days per week to be the absolute minimum. Anything less is a waste of time. In my own training, I'm slowly working my way up to squatting six days per week. Consequently, I've never felt better.

Now, if I could only convince Meat to come out to the gym for open-house Saturdays.

I have a hunch that many CrossFitters are happy with their strength simply because they haven't surrounded themselves with strong people. They haven't really ever seen a big squat.

Squat Lesson No. 2: Heavy Relativity

There's a simple truth: If you want to squat more, you must squat heavy. Notice that I did not say, "You must squat what you think is heavy."

I have a hunch that many CrossFitters are happy with their strength simply because they haven't surrounded themselves with strong people. They haven't really ever seen a big squat.

No, YouTube doesn't count. We've all watched videos of huge lifts—powerlifters, weightlifters and strongmen crushing weight we can only dream of lifting. Those types of lifts are so far removed from our ability it really doesn't have much of an effect. They're really not that motivating.

Do you want to know what is motivating? How about being out-squatted by a strong, good-looking girl? One who weighs less than you, even. No matter how you slice it, dude, that shit ain't cool. It happens more than you think.

Remember, there are no hidden Soviet strength secrets. No magical combination of sets, reps and percent loading will get you the results you are after. You just need to surround yourself with lifters who will bring the best out of you—people who will challenge you.

The best example I can think of to illustrate this point just occurred in our gym.

My crew was performing box squats with the safety-squat bar, and about 200 lb. of chain added for good measure. This is a lot of chain, I can assure you. Our goal for the day was to do work up to a heavy single.

The weights all felt pretty easy, so I was confident I would hit a good lift. After 5 or 6 quick sets, I arrived at 450 lb. Now it was time to focus. I huffed and puffed, growled a bit, then grabbed the bar out of the rack. Arching hard, I popped my hips back, then sat down onto the box. Fighting to keep position, I flexed my hips as hard as possible and drove the bar slowly, but surely, to lockout.

The bar flew back into the rack.

"That's all for me!" I shouted out, satisfied.

To my surprise, one of my training partners, Dave, stepped up to the bar and slapped on another 50 lb.

The thing you need to know about Dave is that he is very game—quick to step up to any challenge. He's also about 100 lb. lighter than me. I was sure he would be buried.

That's not what happened.



Mindy Bush

Matt Baird grinds through a heavy box squat.



Mindy Bush

Shepherd Tate fights to stay upright under the yolk of the safety squat bar.

He took the massive weight out of the rack, sat down, and then started the grind. I'll never forget that rep, ever. Dave fought the bar so hard that about two-thirds of the way up, he began convulsing and pretty much blacked out. But the crazy thing? The bar kept hovering towards lockout. His unconscious body kept fighting for every inch of that rep!

Remember, there are no hidden Soviet strength secrets ... You just need to surround yourself with lifters who will bring the best out of you.

After a moment of shock and inaction, we finally took the weight from him. Unloaded, he fell back to the box.

We rushed in to make sure he was all right. All Dave did was smile.

Dave Passing Out: [.mov](#) [.wmv](#)

In an instant I was recalibrated. The feeling of satisfaction vanished in vapor. That weight I had amped up for no longer seemed worthy of such theater. These are the moments that make us stronger.

Be driven.

Squat Lesson No. 3: Get Novel

I can hear your thoughts, dear reader.

"So, I'm supposed to just squat all the time? As much as I can?"

Yes. I would say no less than three days per week.

"And I'm supposed to go heavy all the time?"

Yes. Not always to a max, but you need to have heavy weight on your back often. You just won't adapt without it, no matter how many kettlebell swings you do.

"So, how do I keep from falling apart? I mean, I'm no Bulgarian here, dude."

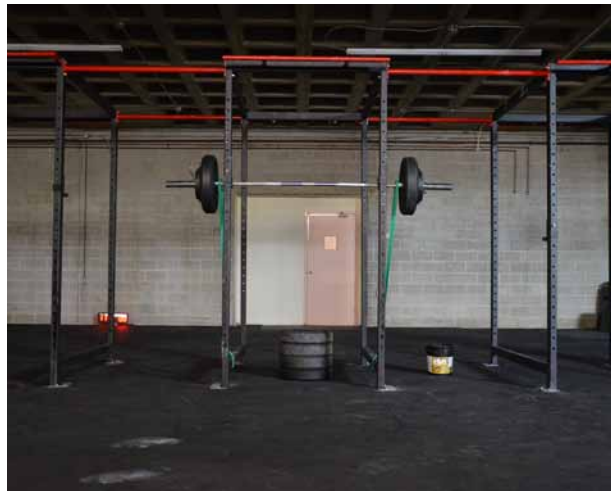
Ah, that's where a little strategy comes in, my friend. I've got just the twist you need.

By now, just about everyone has been exposed to chains and bands. To a lesser extent, many lifters have also seen specialty bars at one point or another. I could talk about force curves, or about how accommodating resistance triggers some sort of specific physiologic response in the body. We could review complicated powerlifting waves, where different types of bars are used with specific combinations of bands and/or chain. But you know what? I think that is all a bit convoluted.

I need to have fun under the bar. That's where all the variation and toys come in.

I see it differently. All these tools are simply ways to keep you squatting hard session to session. That's all.

I know I do not have the discipline of a highly trained, world-class Olympic weightlifter. I cannot come into the gym and only front- and back-squat every day. I need to have fun under the bar. That's where all the variation and toys come in.



Mike Warkentin

Bands can add some spice to your squatting.

Here's an example of how we organize our training.

On the first squat day, we might choose to squat with a standard squat bar with no additional band or chain. On the second day, we'll use a cambered squat bar with a little band tension. On the final day, we'll pick a third exercise, usually the safety squat bar with a lot of chain.

The rotation does indeed keep the training fun and fresh. But there's a very important fatigue benefit as well.

Even though you're squatting heavy three times a week, each exercise is placing a different stress on your body. For example, the cambered squat bar tends to put a large stress on the hips and lower back. When you come back into the gym a few days later to squat again, it would be tough to repeat that same workout.

But you don't.

By choosing the safety squat bar, for example, you move the stress from the lower back to the upper back. That's just the way that bar works, much like a front squat. If you add chain, the "folding" stress is even higher as you pick more and more weight off the floor. By the way, if you need to learn how to arch during heavy lifts, this is the exercise for you.

If you add together all these benefits, you will be training the squat very, very hard but will still allow room to recover between sessions, week to week.

Try something different, something that seems a little extreme. Establish the true limits of what you can adapt to.

If your box doesn't have some of these toys, no worries. All you need is a regular barbell. A very good and simple alternative would be to rotate the high-bar back squat, front squat and low-bar box squat. That'll hit every muscle you have, guaranteed.

Squat ... (continued)

Make all the progress you can on these exercises for three to four weeks, then just switch around the order. Use a band or chains on another exercise. Instead of a low-bar box squat, you can try the front squat off a box. You're only limited by your imagination, grasshopper.

Look, in the end you must bust your ass, but you also must have some fun while you do it. Without that, you just won't be able to keep putting in the work.

The Take Home

Every day, I see dozens of CrossFitters pushing their conditioning to the max. It never fails to impress me. It's just that I don't think they look at a heavy barbell the same way. Many don't know strength.

I say join the experiment.

Try something different, something that seems a little extreme. Establish the true limits of what you can adapt to. To paraphrase the late, great Hunter S. Thompson, the only people who have ever really seen the edge are those who have gone over.

I'll leave you with a question. What are you really capable of?



CrossFit Memphis

About the Author

Chris Moore is writer and powerlifting coach at [CrossFit Memphis](#). Prior to his lifting career, Chris played Division 1 football at the University of Memphis. During this time, he began his study of human performance, eventually obtaining a master's degree in exercise and sport science. In 2007, Chris joined Mike Bledsoe, Doug Larson and Rob Conner to found Memphis' first CrossFit gym. Today, CrossFit Memphis has grown to include powerlifters, weightlifters and mixed martial artists, all training and competing under the banner of Faction Strength & Conditioning. As a drug-free lifter, Chris' best competitive lifts include a 975-lb. squat, a 675-lb. bench press and 675-lb. deadlift. You can reach him at christophermoore57@gmail.com, or visit FactionSC.com.