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## Aged 18 Years

Chris Moore offers seven lessons learned from 18 years under the bar.

By Chris Moore

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All photos courtesy of LMac Studio

*"Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from bad judgment."*

— Fred Brooks

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1 of 6

Training is just like whiskey.

You start with raw, coarse ingredients. After careful preparation and sustained heat, you can produce something recognizable: a foundation. In time that product will improve. You might even call it good, but that's only because you've never experienced anything better. After years of persistence, you will finally begin to taste the real thing—something that is more than the sum of its parts.

A brewer may fail countless times before producing something noteworthy. It's no different in the gym. Early, easy gains often turn into periods of frustration. These moments are opportunities for refinement. The craft of programming requires the removal of elements that are not useful and the addition of new ingredients, subtleties and distinctions.

When I first touched a barbell, I was raw. Like many, I began to train in high school to prepare for sport. I lifted just about every day, played a lot of shitty metal music over the weight-room speakers, loaded up the leg press and always made sure to do my curls. There was no reason to doubt what I was doing. I was strong and a decent athlete, but I was ignorant. Refinement came one training session at a time, one competition at a time. Each misstep along the way was an opportunity to learn.

After 18 years of training, I still make mistakes. I no longer listen to shitty metal music, but my training doesn't always go as planned. However, my time under the bar has revealed some evident truths. This is what I have learned.

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**“Well, most lifters don't understand work. You have to work hard. I mean really hard.”**

**— Dr. Mike Stone**

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*A lifter bears a tattoo meaning “discipline” in Hebrew—an ever-present reminder of what it takes to succeed.*

### Hard Work Is Paramount

Years ago, I was sharing a beer with one of my mentors in sport science, Dr. Mike Stone. By this time, I was managing to become a pretty good powerlifter. I was always looking for some new training ideas, fresh research findings, old gym stories—anything that could give me insight into my own training and help me grow even stronger. I asked a question thinking the answer would be rather complicated:

“What do you feel is the key to strength?”

“The key?”

“Yeah. What’s most important?”

“Well, most lifters don’t understand work. You have to work hard. I mean really hard.”

Dr. Stone went on to tell me a story about Naim Süleymanoğlu, arguably the best Olympic weightlifter of all time. From what he could gather from direct observation and from coaches who were close to the lifter, Süleymanoğlu worked his ass off. After days filled with multiple training sessions, it was common for Naim to require assistance getting into bed at the end of the day—only to rise early for more.

I thought then what most of you are thinking now. “Well, lifters on that level have a lot of advantages that I don’t. They have the best coaches. They don’t have to worry about working or paying bills. They have the best genetics. The drugs ...” These are just excuses. While they do in fact have their fair share of advantages, the simple truth is that the world’s best lifters work the hardest. Programming, nutrition, recovery—these are all important. But if you’re not getting stronger, start with an honest question. “How hard am I really working?”



*Above all, training and competition should be fulfilling. Find romance in the gym and on the platform.*





**Find good training partners who will push you.**

### Have Perspective

Runners once believed in a natural speed limit. It was sort of like the speed of light. Try all you want, you're just not going to travel faster than 299,792,458 meters per second. Running was the same. No matter how many miles you put in, you were never going to run faster than 15 miles per hour. No one had done it. Therefore, it could not be done. That changed when Roger Bannister recorded the first four-minute mile in 1954 (he did it in 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds to be exact). In the time since, this monumental achievement has been duplicated thousands of times over—but Bannister cracked the barrier. Because of his efforts, a new generation of runners could make the unimaginable ordinary.

In 2006, I had the rare opportunity to witness a Bannister-esque moment in person. In April of that year, Andy Bolton became the first man in the history of the barbell to deadlift over 1,000 lb. His 1,003 pull ranks as one of the most impressive feats of strength ever. Arguably, it may be *the* most impressive. Just as with running, no one believed such a lift was possible. How could anyone hold onto that much weight, much less lift it from the floor?

Until 2005, a 900-lb. deadlift was still considered to be the pinnacle of strength, and only a handful of men had ever achieved that. Then, out of nowhere, the definition of *strongest* changed by 100 lb. The barrier lay shattered on the platform. My deadlift had always been relatively poor, but now it just seemed pathetic. Time to train harder.

Seek out those who can run faster, lift more or go longer. By doing so, your expectations will change. Your definitions will change.

### Establish Honest Goals

In *Hamlet*, the character Polonius offers some wise advice to his son prior to a voyage. He instructs the boy to control his thoughts and behavior, to cherish true friends, to maintain his appearance, and to avoid the borrowing or lending of money. But famously, he also instructs, "To thine own self be true."

We need role models in the gym. Talking to other athletes and observing their training is incredibly useful. But ultimately, we must be true to who, and where, we are. What achievements are important to you? Where do you want to be after a year of training? And most importantly, where do you stand now? A great goal would be to clean and jerk 300 lb., but first you must lift 200. A few pounds at a time. Less seconds here and there. Program for short-term, modest progress and you will achieve your ultimate long-term goals.

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a brutal 5x5 squat session  
with maximal loads, what  
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or kettlebell swings?**

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*For long-term success, focus your programming on short-term goals.*

### Keep It Simple

For years I found myself caught up in trying to figure out complicated periodization strategies, always looking for a new way to organize the dozens of exercises I was attempting to perform. More was better, until I realized I was not getting stronger. For over 100 years, people have been getting very strong, powerful and fit by keeping to the basics. They used barbells. They moved the heaviest weight they could move and did it as fast as they could. They added weight to the bar when they were able. That's it. There are no secret methods.

Simple training works for two reasons: it suits your mind and your physiology. In his book *The Paradox of Choice—Why More Is Less*, Barry Schwartz lays out an argument against complexity. The distinguishing characteristic of modern times is too much choice. When I go to a Mexican restaurant, I am bombarded with menu items numbered 1-100. Should I have the plate with two tacos and one burrito or two burritos and one taco? It's impossible to be happy with your final choice. Choosing one option means you have to forgo the others. What are you missing?

It's easy to be consumed with complexity in the gym. There are so many effective exercises and so many ways to utilize them. But when we move beyond basic movements, it just takes too much effort to keep track of it all. We lose sight of our goals. We forget about progression, about effort.

Physiologically, simple training allows us to keep the training stress high and recovery optimal. If you can make it through a brutal 5x5 squat session with maximal loads, what energy is left for back raises or kettlebell swings? What stress can these exercises offer that the squats could not? You should be left gasping, begging for mercy. Legs quivering. If not, you didn't train.

If your workout goal is to stimulate strength gains, then let that be your sole focus. Keep the assistance exercises for conditioning sessions.

### Know When to Attack

Anyone who has taken high-school biology should remember the fight-or-flight response. When challenged, animals make an instant decision: stay and fight or run away. A similar thing happens in the gym. Sometimes a workout is just not going to go your way. Your joints will ache. The weight will feel too heavy. There will be too many reps. You have to know when to back off in order to fight another day. However, you also need to understand when to attack. Sometimes you are going to feel invincible. Now is the time to push your limits. Now is the time to challenge those around you. A good training partner will fight back, rep for rep. If not, find a new one.

### Find Romance

Alfred North Whitehead was an English mathematician and philosopher. In 1929, he published a series of essays on education. In "The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline," he described learning in terms of passion and focus. At first, students should be given the freedom to explore new subjects, to ask new questions. There should be no set curriculum. The only thing that is important is exploration. With time, interesting ideas are identified. Students focus in on specific topics. It is at this time that discipline is introduced. Students are tested. Essays are written. Grades are given. Without discipline, one will never reach full potential. But without romance, one will never identify true passion.

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**When was the last time  
you sprinted? Never  
dreamed of running a 5K?  
Now's the time.**

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When we focus on the same goal for too long, progress will always stall. Training is no longer fun. Whitehead's advice would be to find some romance. Have you always really wanted to learn the Olympic lifts? When was the last time you sprinted? Never dreamed of running a 5K? Now's the time. Do not worry about losing progress. If you take the time to explore new training ideas, you will gain additional insight into who you are as an athlete. You will develop a deeper understanding of how you adapt. When it comes time to focus once again, you will have the wisdom to achieve new levels of performance. You will be prepared to train harder than ever before.

### Always seek Knowledge

One day it will all pay off. All those seminars you attended, those certifications, the trips to other gyms to train with the best athletes ... . You will achieve levels of performance that you did not think were possible.

You'll train other athletes to reach their potential. Your programing will be perfect—or will it?

The truth is that every program runs its course. What works now will not work in the future. Your body is too smart for that. Its physiology has been forged over generations and generations of struggle. It will adapt. You must stay hungry. Keep reading everything you can. Attend every seminar you can. Find new gyms to visit. You will continue to break records. Sometimes you will fail. But hey, isn't that why we train in the first place?

Refine.



### 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](mailto:christophermoore57@gmail.com), or visit [FactionSC.com](#).*