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A Platform for Great Coaching

Competition motivates any athlete to get stronger and faster. Learning how the best "Platform Coaches" help their weightlifters win on game day provides great lessons for trainers and competitors in any sport.

Bill Starr

An article about what's involved in coaching athletes on the platform at weight-lifting contests—the job title is "Platform Coach"—might not seem relevant to many CrossFitters at first. But think about it: competition works. That's why I think lifting contests are essential to any athlete who is serious about getting stronger. Once I teach aspiring Olympic lifters how to do full snatches and full cleans, plus jerks, I insist that they enter as many meets as possible—right away. The same goes for those who express an interest in powerlifting.

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Of course, they all balk at the idea, stating that they aren't ready for competition yet. While it's true that they aren't ready to win any trophies, they still need to get their feet wet by lifting on a platform in front of a crowd—or more likely, in front of a few family and friends. Competing is beneficial in many ways. It allows the rank beginners to observe the more experienced strength athletes, to see how they warm-up, prepare for their attempts on platform, and manage themselves while on stage. They can pick up points on training, nutrition, rest, and form, all of which can be used in their quest for greater strength.

On top of that, the energy and excitement generated at the competition is contagious. Weights that they struggled with in the gym suddenly feel much lighter. Seeing someone of the same size lift poundages that they haven't even dreamed about also is quite inspirational. I recall the feelings I had at my first meet: If that guy can do it, so can I. Contests force the athletes to focus more keenly. With only three attempts per lift, there isn't much margin for error, so they learn how critical total concentration is for success.

As part of the learning process, every lifter will make mistakes, but this is how he begins to assemble a formula that works for him.

Prior to a contest, each lifter has to go through a strict routine so that he's completely ready when he starts his warm-ups. If he's had to make weight, he quickly finds out what he can and cannot eat or drink. He has to make decisions on how to train during the final weeks before a meet. As part of the learning process, every lifter will make mistakes, but this is how he begins to assemble a formula that works for him. He slowly puts together a workable schedule through trial and error.

Meets are gatherings where information about the sport is freely exchanged. You find out where others with the same interest train; how a certain athlete gets past sticking points; tips on dropping weight fast. Even when

a lifter comes away from a contest rather unhappy about his performance, he is still jacked up from the rush of adrenaline he got when he walked out on the platform for the first time and felt that surge of satisfaction when he did the lift successfully. There's no other feeling that can equal it, and he can't wait to get back to his gym the next week so he can train even harder. This is called being bitten by the lifting bug. I can vividly recall the moment it happened to me.

In 1958, encouraged by the Physical Director of the Wichita Falls, Texas YMCA, I entered my first Olympic weightlifting meet, the Southwestern YMCA Championships in Waco, Texas. I had just turned 20 years old. Like most other beginners, didn't think I was ready for competition, but I was curious to find out just what went on at a contest.

There were only six other lifters in attendance, but one of them was Sid Henry from Dallas, a highly-ranked heavyweight. I strove to do my very best in front of him and succeeded nicely. I pressed 185, snatched 180, and clean and jerked 225 at a bodyweight of 181. All were personal records and I made all nine attempts.

I was elated when I accepted the small medal in the shape of Texas and realized that I felt differently than I did prior to the meet. It was as if I stepped through a portal and became a more confident, self-assured individual. I had set goals and, solely through my own efforts and determination, had achieved them on the lifting platform that

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afternoon. I was filled with pride that I had joined the brotherhood of Olympic weightlifters and believed that the sport would play a major role in my life. It turned out that I was correct.

Now, at that time, there were very few platform coaches. The lifters coached themselves, often with the help of fellow competitors. The most confusing part of the contest for me was figuring out how to complete my warm-ups so that I was ready for my first attempts. What I did was mimic another lifter who was starting with the same weight as I was, or close to it. This didn't work out well, but it was the best I could come up with at the time.

Over the years, I continued to pick up more and more tips, partly from experience and also from talking with the other lifters before, during, and after the contests. Riding home from a contest with a group of lifters always turned into a seminar. Various lifters' styles were critiqued, some criticized, others praised. By the time we arrived home, we were all ready to get back in the gym and move some iron.

So those lifters, like myself, who competed in as many contests as they could, began to know more about preparing for meets and lifting on platform than most of the other athletes. That's when we started acting as platform coaches for teammates and fellow lifters.

Basic Principles of Good Platform Coaching

1. All lifters aren't created equal:

The first step, and the one most overlooked, is that you must deal with each lifter on an individual basis. No two lifters respond to a situation in the exact same way. The more you know about the athlete you're working with the better. How he deals with pressure. How he handles big jumps. How many keys can you give him? Only one or two or three? How he reacts after a missed attempt, and so on.

Understanding an athlete's psychological makeup and his demeanor and temperament at a competition is critical for the platform coach if he is going to help the lifter do his very best. But, many have argued, there isn't always time for all that. I just met some of the lifters for the first time yesterday. Then do a crash course. Within minutes, you should be able to tell if the athlete is confident or overly nervous. Plus a great deal more when you ask the right questions. Get him to just talk about himself, something everyone enjoys, and you'll soon pick up enough information to help you size him up quite well in relationship to what you can expect when encountering certain situations during the contest.

2. Hang out together:

To facilitate the above point, the coach should be in attendance while the lifter trains. That way he can learn a great deal about how the athlete paces himself, sets up for the heavy poundages, and his ability to concentrate on what he's about to do. In addition, the coach can find out what music he enjoys, what else he likes besides lifting; girlfriends, family, future plans, et cetera. In other words, work up a profile of the individual, put meat on his bones and you'll be a step ahead in knowing what to expect from him in the heat of battle and at the same time you'll greatly enhance his confidence in you. Which, for some, is as important as the advice itself.

*3. Remember that **they** are the stars, not you:*

Perhaps the greatest attribute a platform coach can have is absolute dedication to his athletes and

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understanding that this isn't about him. It's all about the lifters. It's quite difficult for many who were very good lifters to set aside their egos and devote all their energy to helping their charges do their best.

This is why some top lifters are not good at coaching others. They're used to being in the spotlight and still want a healthy share of attention. They're easy to spot. They're unusually loud with their instructions and make sure that they're easily seen near the platform when their lifters are performing.

As I mentioned, some of the best platform coaches achieved little success in the sport when they lifted. Ironically, one of the best I was ever around had never competed at all: Dick Smith, the long-time trainer for the York Barbell Club. I once wrote that when "Smitty" worked with a lifter, he could count on an extra 20-to-30 pounds on his total. Smitty was always cognizant of the lifter's needs and willing and ready to do whatever it took to satisfy them. Need some muscle rub applied to your back? Smitty was there. Need a muscle cramp massaged? Smitty was your man. Smitty knew the lifters well, their strengths and weaknesses, and responded accordingly. He also knew their individual temperaments, which helped him deal with them when they were under great pressure. Some he would coax softly, others he would push to get more out of them. He would offer technical advice and suggest how much weight to take next, yet he allowed the lifter to make the final decision. What made him such a great platform coach was he honestly cared about each lifter. He was 100% behind him and dearly wanted him to do his very best. That is a profile of what it takes to be an influential platform coach.

4. Require a warm-up and respect the lifter's preparatory rituals:

Maybe the most important function of any platform coach is to be sure his lifter is warmed up properly, so that when his name is called, he's totally prepared for his first attempt. I'll get to a system of warming up that I utilized when I competed and have taught to many lifters through the years that is quite simple but extremely effective, but this deals with variations on the number of warm-up attempts different lifters use.

Two of America's best, Mike Karchut and Phil Grippaldi, both liked to do a great many warm-ups, a dozen or more, often twice as many as their opponents. At the opposite end of the scale were Bob Bednarski and Bill March. They needed just a

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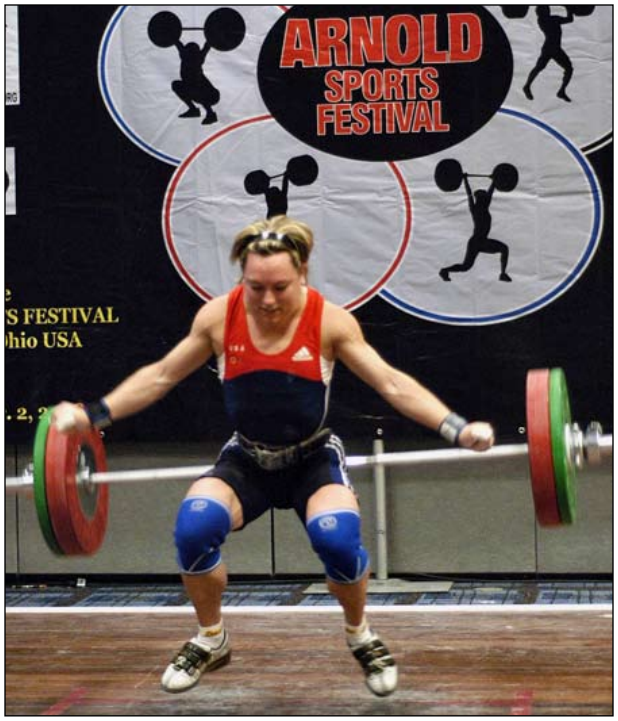

Those lifters who began making noteworthy progress soon gravitated to a gym where there was a coach. This was a huge plus. The coach would help plan workouts, give form tips, offer encouragement, and serve as platform coach at contests. Some of these coaches also lifted in meets, but most had hung up their lifting belts. Yet they still had a love for the sport and were delighted to be able to share their knowledge and time in helping others.

However, merely having an affection for the sport and a background of competing over a long career does not necessarily make for a good platform coach. Just as there are exceptional and mediocre coaches in football, basketball, and other sports, so it is in weightlifting. Some of the best train lifters in a home gym and never receive much recognition, while some of the worst have a long list of credentials behind their names and have obtained positions as team or national-level coaches, yet they are actually poorly-equipped to coach lifters at major contests for the simple reason that there's a lot more to knowing how to prepare an athlete for his final training weeks, how to warm up properly, and perform up to the best of his ability than having won a national or international title. In truth, some of the very best platform coaches were unexceptional liters.

few warm-ups before going on the platform for their opening attempts. This was a direct result of all the demonstrations they held for Bob Hoffman at York, sometimes as many as three a week. The crowds at these exhibitions weren't interested in watching strongmen handle light weights. They wanted to see heavy iron moved, and that's what they got. Two warm-ups for the press and they could elevate 350. March was particularly adept at this. In fact, he was able to press 350 off the rack without any warm-up. I know this because I saw him do it may times and a lot of people in the York Gym lost money on his unique ability.

These, of course, are extreme examples. My point being that if a lifter is accustomed to warming up in a certain way, he should not be swayed to change his approach at a contest. When a coach tries to alter the number of attempts in the lifter's warm-up routine, he disrupts the normal mental pattern, which can have a negative effect on the athlete's performance. Even when the coach is convinced that the warm-up schedule is ridiculous, he still should not attempt to change it at a contest.

This is exactly what happened at the '70 Worlds in Columbus, Ohio—or, rather, would have happened had I not stepped in. John Terpak was the Head Coach and I was his assistant. Smitty, thankfully, was the team trainer and, in truth, it was he and I who did all the coaching. Terpak rarely showed his face at the training hall, which was fine with the lifters since they were well aware that he knew virtually nothing about coaching. The only coaching advice he ever imparted was "just pull the hell out of the bar." Not really all that bad, but there's a bit more to the job than that phrase. The primary reason why Terpak was such a crappy platform coach was because he didn't really care for lifters. Seems odd, right, yet it's the truth. Actually, he resented them for reasons I will not get into, but the lifters understood how he felt and avoided him as much as possible.

However, it wasn't possible to avoid Terpak backstage at the meet. While everyone knew his was no more than a political position to make

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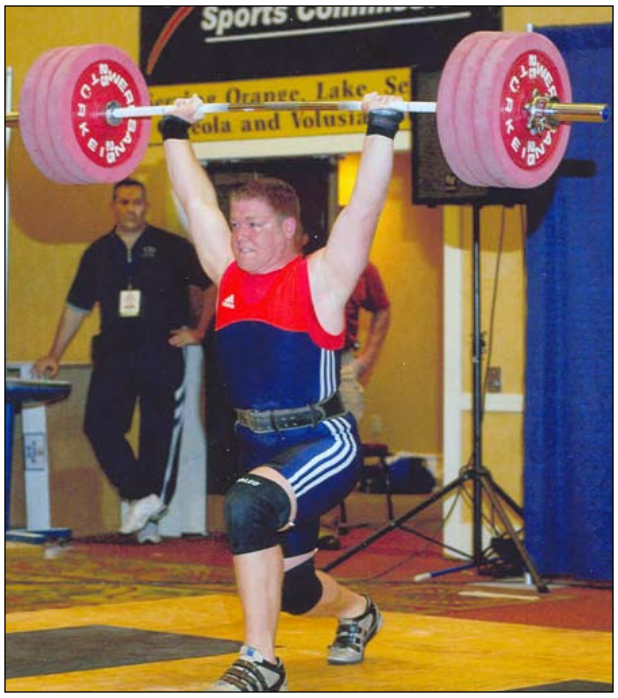
Being an effective platform coach is a complicated task and not everyone is suited for the job. Having said that, let me add that anyone who is interested in becoming a better platform coach can do just that. While I certainly don't know it all, I have picked up a wealth of information during the years I've been involved in both Olympic and powerlifting and later on as a collegiate strength coach. I'm going to share some ideas for those who enjoy being a platform coach and also for those who have gotten stuck handling a friend or fellow lifter.



The All-Important Warm-Up, Deconstructed

In regards to just-mentioned opening attempt, I need to reiterate the importance of the warm-up. As I mentioned, perhaps the key function of any platform coach is to make certain his lifter is warmed up properly, so that he is 100% ready when his name is called for his first attempt. I found this to be the most difficult part of competition when I began entering meets. It seemed every lifter had his own helter-skelter method of warming up.

The first thing a lifter or coach must do is note how many warm-ups he is planning to do. I find it helpful if these are written down, which allows the athlete to focus on the numbers as he proceeds upward. If there are any snafus, such as extra waiting due to unexpected misses certain that a representative of the York Barbell Club was in charge, he had the authority to make changes. And this is what he wanted to do with Grippaldi's warm-up routine. Grippaldi was an intense individual who took all facets of training and competing very seriously. He was used to doing a dozen or more warm-ups, and here was Terpak trying to convince him to drop about half of them.

Although I thought Terpak had a valid point, this was not the time and place to make a change in Phil's routine. What had started out as a friendly discussion between them quickly escalated into a full-blown argument. Grippaldi was already strung tighter than a piano wire and Terpak was messing with his head moments before he had to go out on stage for his opening lift.

I pulled Terpak aside and suggested that he go out to the judges' table and check on how many more attempts there were before Phil was up. He complied mostly because Grippaldi was about to explode and no one in their right mind wanted to deal with Phil when he was angry. He was 198 pounds of muscle and energy. So Smitty and I did our best to calm Phil down, telling him to continue with his warm-ups and to forget about Terpak and start focusing on his initial lift on stage. It worked out okay, but could have been a disaster—not for Terpak, but Grippaldi.

5. Don't force significant form and routine changes on game day:

The day of the contest is not the time to try and change a lifter's technique. All that is going to do is confuse him. Instead of using his normal keys, he will suddenly have to insert some new ones, which just doesn't work under a pressure situation. However, a smart coach knows how to slip in some useful advice on improving a lifter's current form—such as telling him to pull a bit higher before he moves under a snatch or clean, or suggesting he think about jerking the bar a bit further backward on the jerks. These reinforce current techniques and don't alter them. But trying to make radical changes is a mistake. It's similar to switching from being right-

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and extra attempts, the athlete's mental preparation will minimally affected if the coach is on the ball. Merely have the athlete spend that extra time going over his keys and staying warm.

I've also had the opposite occur when I was coaching my brother Donald at a National Masters in powerlifting meet. We had the warm-up schedule down pat and everything worked perfectly for the squat and bench, but we hit a snag in the deadlift. With one warm-up to go before we opened, I went to the scoring table to make sure all was as it should be. It wasn't, big time. Four lifters who were scheduled to do their lifts in front of him had dropped out after their first attempts. That was eight attempts and Donald had one attempt on platform before he was due up. As I hurried back to the warm-up area, I saw him doing his last warm-up. He'd heard his name being announced. It worked out okay, but only because he knew how to adjust his mental state.

How to Handle the Waiting Game

Unexpected delays occur all the time in lifting meets, and you have to ready for them. I find it most beneficial for lifters to get a feel of what it's like to have to wait for an extended period of time or get rushed. During the final two weeks of training, I have them go heavy and, at one session, make them wait for eight or ten minutes before doing an attempt. I also get them to do two or three heavy attempts with little rest in between. It's enough for them to realize that they can do well even when the situation isn't perfect.

There is also the matter of extended waits between attempts. If they're not too long, reinforce the keys to the lifter and provide him with some motivation. Again,

handed to left-handed with no prior notice and no time to practice.

The same idea holds true for weight selection on the platform. If the lifter has programmed certain numbers into his mental preparation, unless there's a significant reason for changing them, they should be left alone. Naturally, many circumstances that happen during the contest often force these pre-planned numbers to be altered, but to fiddle with them just to make the coach feel more secure is not a good idea. This is especially true when a coach wants the lifter to start with a much lower poundage than he previously figured on handling. One, this upsets his mental preparation. Secondly, it adversely affects his confidence. "If coach doesn't believe I can make that weight, maybe I'm not as ready as I thought."

Of course, there are times when the opening lifts should be lowered. However, this decision should be the lifter's and not the coach's. The coach should discuss why he thinks a lower starting weight is a smart idea and let the lifter determine if he agrees. A coach might say, "You don't have much snap in your pulls, so let's just get in that first attempt safely. If it goes well, we'll take a bigger jump on your second attempt." Or, "Either 303 or 308 will give you the silver, so take the lighter poundage and keep the odds in your favor. You'll have plenty left to go after the gold."

6. For the opener, have a flexible plan prepared in advance:

Ideally, lifter and coach will have discussed the starting poundages and considered alternatives prior to the meet. It's good to have set numbers, yet it's also smart to be flexible, especially with the opener. It needs to be understood that the initial attempt seldom decides the opener. It should be thought of as a set-up weight. I've known many lifters who were able to jump 40 pounds after their first attempt. The selected poundage needs to be heavy enough to make the lifter pay attention, but also not so heavy that he has to struggle. A proficient platform coach can alter his lifter's focus from one weight to another without any confusion.

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this varies from individual to individual. Bednarski loved praise; when the crowd was behind him, he thrived. So when I worked with him, I assured him that every person in the audience wanted him to do well. Tommy Suggs was just the opposite. In order to get his juices flowing, I would tell him that the entire crowd was rooting against him and would be delighted if he failed.

In the event there is an extended delay, say 15 minutes or longer, take the lifter back to the warm-up area and have him do a single with a moderate poundage. For instance, if he was planning on doing 303, have him hit 220 to keep his form intact and his muscles warm. Should the impediment drag on, have him do another single. There's no risk of him running out of gas with these extra warm-ups. The workload for a contest is considerably lower than it is for a heavy training session and there's the added plus of the excitement of the meet. This waiting time can be used to remind the lifter of the key form points for the upcoming attempt.

Motivating with a Cool, Calm, Positive Spin

Many coaches are very confused about how to motivate their lifters. Slapping and screaming is ridiculous. Most of it is nothing more that attention-getting behavior on the part of the coach. It also uses up energy that should be reserved for the lifting. True motivation comes from within. The coach can help, but it has to be the lifter, in the final analysis, that believes he's capable of lifting a certain weight.

A coach's advice should deal with technique, not numbers. And at all times before and during the competition, remember Johnny Mercer's classic, "Accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative." This should be the credo of every platform coach. Unfortunately, the majority barks out comments in negative terms. Words like "wrong," "sloppy," "terrible," and "don't" elicit negative reactions and are what the lifter thinks about when he goes out for his next attempt. Rather than tell the liter what he is doing wrong, tell him how to correct a form mistake in positive terms. An example: Instead of saying, "You're jerking the bar too far out front. Don't do that! Jerk it back!" say, "Drive the bar back more and it'll be in position to lock out better." It's just as easy to do with a bit of thought and will result in a favorable response.

The platform coach has to remain calm and collected in order to be helpful to the lifter. When he gets anxious, upset, and displays his worry in his actions and voice, the lifter picks up on this right away and begins to have doubts about his ability to make his intended lifts. At a Senior Nationals, I watched a coach from the Olympic Training Center who was in charge of our very best prospect become so frantic that he was shaking. His emotional state rubbed off on his lifter and he ended up doing much less than expected. The coach was worried that if his lifter did not do well, it would reflect on him and perhaps put his well-paying job in jeopardy. If a coach's main concern is his own welfare, he shouldn't be anywhere near the platform. Make him an administrator where he can do less harm.

For a lifter to perform at his very best, he must have complete confidence in his platform coach. Any doubt will have a negative effect. Good coaches know what they're doing and this self-assurance is conveyed to the athlete, who can then use all his energy to focus on technique and not the other aspects of preparation.

Plan for every contingency you can imagine, have faith in your lifter, let him know that you support him 100% and all will go according to plan.

Of course, I realize that there is a great deal more to understand about the role of a platform coach, but these ideas will help you do a better job at every level of competition and also in training strength athletes.

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About the Author

Bill Starr coached at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the 1970 World Olympic Weightlifting World Championship in Columbus, Ohio, and the 1975 World Powerlifting Championships in Birmingham, England. He was selected as head coach of the 1969 team that competed in the Tournament of Americas in Mayague, Puerto Rico, where the United States won the team title, making him the first active lifter to be head coach of an international Olympic weightlifting team.

Starr is the author of the books ***The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football*** *and* ***Defying Gravity,*** *which can be found at The Aasgaard Company Bookstore.*

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