Steps to Strength

Introduction -

Welcome to the splendid world of weight training! This concise but effective program is intended for anyone who is interested in incorporating strength training for general health and fitness.

Addressing Common Concerns Regarding Weight Training -

Concern is a natural response to any new or daunting stimulus. For anyone who has not consistently participated in weight training as a form of exercise, there are likely a few questions which are conjured in relation to the results one can expect from the practice of lifting weights.
Here I will address two of the most common questions associated with starting a weight training program:

Won't lifting weights cause me to become stocky and overly muscular if I do weight bearing exercise too much or too often? - Lifting weights can prompt many positive changes in the human body, especially in the skeletal muscles. It cannot, however, add a single pound of muscle to your bodily structure on its own. Surprising, eh? You see, exercise invokes change within the human body, but it does not have the power to create matter (in this case, muscle fibers) without a surplus - more than the body needs to maintain its current weight - of calories or without essential amino acids, aka protein. Truly, you are made of what you eat, and muscle composition is no different. Additionally, even in a caloric surplus, the human body cannot grow inordinate amounts of muscle all at once; it often takes years of dedicated training to achieve a heavily muscled physique. So, if you are trying to tone up your physique and see improvements in your health metrics but you do not want to get bulky, rest assured, exercise alone will not result in tremendous gains in muscle over a short period of time.

Isn't lifting weights bad for your joints? - This is a completely understandable concern. Many people erroneously think that participation in weight bearing exercise causes irreversible damage to the synovial fluid and cartilage found in the major joints of the body, particularly in the appendicular joints like the elbows and

knees. In order to dismantle this common misnomer, there are three aspects to this question that I will address here:
(1) Sloppy *form* - the body positioning and range of motion for a given exercise - is a common culprit when injuries do occur in relation to exercise or sports. If one's body is misaligned with the motion being expected of it, undesired outcomes, such as a shearing force across a joint, can occur. These negative outcomes like shearing forces can generate degradation in pivotal structures like joints. That being said, proper form is the antidote to this potential issue in most instances. Proper alignment of joints prevents shearing forces from negatively impacting joint health and longevity.
(2) Dramatically increasing one's *weight load,* - the amount of weight being used for a weight bearing exercise - without having worked up to such a relatively heavy weight load before, can lead to joint injuries. The very power of exercise is in its transformative nature. Given manageable and recoverable doses of exercise over an extended period of time, a human body can achieve incredible feats of which it was previously incapable before being exercised. When lifters attempt to bypass this natural process of growth and adaptation by attempting astronomical weight loads for which they have not properly trained, they can become injured. Exercise does not just lead to growth of muscle tissue, it leads to growth of bone tissue and other supportive tissue as well. In this manner, gradual increases to weight loads on stable, repeatable movement patterns can actually lead to an improvement of bone and joint health! The key word here is gradual.
(3) Incomplete *nutritional intake* is another common culprit behind aggravated and inflamed joints. Healthy fats, such as Omega-3 fatty acids, are essential to joint health as they contribute to the lubrication surrounding joints. Adequate hydration through water and electrolyte intake also plays a vital role in joint health. Basically, a healthy joint is a strong and lubricated joint. Healthy nutrition and moderate exercise really are the perfect pairing when it comes to muscle and joint health!

In summary, joints can become injured or degrade over time from improper form, attempting weight loads that far exceed one's level of training, or from deficits in nutrition. That being said, exercise itself is not the culprit when it comes to joint problems; the real problems lie in improper or ill-prepared movement patterns and nutritional deficits. Additionally, exercise in moderate doses with gradual increases in weight load can actually lead to a strengthening of bones and joints!

The Lifter's Almanac

Tips and Anecdotal Advice for An Aspiring Lifter of Weights

- Finding a stable, repeatable lifting pattern for each exercise is not just the safest way to lift, it's also the most productive. Scalability is the goal here; we want to perform movement patterns which are smooth, consistent, and capable of bearing increasing weight loads as we grow in muscle density, strength output, and conditioning. In the next section, I will briefly touch on the kinesiology and biomechanics behind the core movement patterns used in this program. In the meantime, it is useful to note that weight bearing exercise is not a departure from "real life", it is at its best a composite of focused and challenging versions of everyday actions and motions. Exercise should make everyday life *better* and *easier.*
- *Steps to Strength* is designed to be a straightforward, no nonsense approach to weight-bearing exercise coupled with adequate amounts of cardiovascular conditioning work. It is not exhaustive of the possibilities and avenues available by which enjoyable and fruitful exercise can occur. I would highly encourage you to participate in any health and happiness promoting physical activities which you find fun and engaging while running this program. The total workload, or *volume,* of this program is not prohibitive to going up and beyond with "extracurricular" outings. Bike riding, walking, pickleball, basketball, soccer, tennis… you name it. If it is a non-contact sport (combat sports like boxing and wrestling, comparatively, *are* extremely demanding), it will likely pair well with this training program. So by all means, live your life and do the activities that bring you joy, even if they are not specifically a part of this program. The best form of exercise is the form you enjoy enough to want to do it with regularity. Please know this - If you end up not liking weight bearing exercises, that is A-Ok. There are plenty of effective and enjoyable ways to exercise that do not involve hoisting dumbbells. :)

A Brief Overview of Movements of The Body Used in Everyday Life -

In writing *Steps to Strength*, I saw the potential benefit an approachable yet thorough explanation of movement patterns and body positionings could offer, especially in regards to the practical applications the exercises I have meticulously chosen for this weight training program offer. In short, I will attempt to do something far too many program creators and innovators fail to do: *explain the why behind the what.* Below, I will discuss the reasoning behind the movements selected for *Steps to Strength. Steps to Strength* is <u>not</u> an exhaustive resource on the subjects of functional exercise and weight training. In fact, *Steps to Strength* is, by intention, a spartan and lean training program. This is due to the overwhelming prevalence of training programs which teach a beginning lifter of weights how to exercise individual muscles, but fail to teach a beginner how to perform and gradually progress on *core movement patterns.*

If one were to take a record of every minute angular motion of which the human body is capable, the list of movements would be nearly endless. Our shoulders and hips especially are capable of tremendously broad, sweeping motions. That being said, the *core movement patterns* of the human body are predictable and carry over to the more obtuse angles of motion that the hip and shoulder joints are capable of performing. Below I will outline a few *core movement patterns* and I will give example exercises which coincide with these essential movements:

Presses (movement away from the body):

In everyday life, pressing occurs less often than pulls and squats, but when they do occur, they are often of great importance. Being able to push oneself up off the floor and being able to hold an object at arm's length overhead are two examples of everyday uses for pressing power.

Examples of common pressing motions and their associated exercises:

- While lying face down, pushing one's own body away from the floor is a core pressing movement. Additionally, lying face up and pushing an object away from one's body is another example of a *horizontal pressing motion.* Associated exercise(s) = ***Push-up*** and ***Flat Bench Press or Floor Press***

- While standing or sitting, pushing an object upward away from one's body is a core pressing movement. This is an example of a *vertical pressing motion.* Associated exercise(s) = ***Standing Overhead Press or Seated Press***

Pulls (movement toward the body):

If I had to name the two most common movements found in everyday life, I would confidently say the two movements are pulling and hip hinging. Pulling occurs every time one picks up an object and moves it closer to their body.

Examples of common pulling motions and their associated exercises:

- While bent over, picking up an object from the floor and pulling it closer to your body is a common pulling motion. This is an example of a *horizontal pulling motion*. Associated exercise(s) = ***Bent Over Row or One-Arm Row***
- While standing upright, bringing an object up from waist level to chest or face level is a common pulling motion. This motion is used when raising a mug to drink or picking up a pet to snuggle. This is an example of a *curling motion*. Associated exercise(s) = ***Bicep Curl***
- The least common form of pulling movement in everyday life, *vertical pulling motions* are extremely useful if one finds oneself dangling off a precipice, needing to pull oneself up and off of the ledge. Like I said, pretty uncommon in everyday life. :) That said, *vertical pulling motions* in general, like the aforementioned pull-up movement, are worth training as they also improve core stability and overall back development. Associated exercise(s) = ***Pull-up or Pulldown***

Squats and Hip Hinges:

Squatting and hip hinging are two of the biggest reasons humans have legs! We can sit; we can stand; we can bend over; and we can do all this while bearing weight.

Examples of squats and hip hinges with their associated exercises:

- Squatting is perhaps the easiest movement pattern to describe, as it is simply the act of descending from a standing to a sitting or squatted position and then ascending back to a standing position again. This motion is used anytime one arises from a seat. This is an example of a *squatting motion*. Associated exercise(s) = ***Front-Loaded Squat or Back Squat,*** and ***Lunges.***

- The hip hinge sounds complicated, but it is actually simply defined as movement occurring at the hips and waist, enabling descent and ascent of the torso without needing to bend the legs. This motion is used whenever one bends over at the waist and then returns to a standing position. This is an example of a *hip hinging motion*. Associated exercise(s) = ***Deadlift or Stiff-Legged Deadlift,*** and ***Bridges.***

Auxiliary Movements:

In addition to the core pulling, pressing, and squatting/hip hinging movement discussed above, I have found it beneficial to include a few other movements to round out *Steps to Strength*. The added movements touch on three areas of the human physique and its associated functions which are not so easily generalized under pulls, presses and squats/hip hinges. These movements are: *weighted walks, abdominal bracing exercises,* and *tricep extensions.*

Examples of squats and hip hinges with their associated exercises:

- ***Weighted Walks*** have been included in this program both for their beneficial impact on the muscles of the upper back, neck, and forearms, and for their ubiquitous nature. Carrying objects while walking is a commonplace action, and as with every exercise included here, training a commonplace action with added weight helps to reduce the difficulty of that commonplace action in everyday life.
- ***The Bird Dog*** and ***The Leg Raise*** have been included to provide direct exercise stimuli to the abdominal muscles. Well-developed abdominal muscles are *extremely* useful for everyday life. Strong abs contribute to healthy posture and they help to prevent common injuries to the body by providing needed stability. Abdominal exercises are especially beneficial for beginning lifters of weight, as strong abs enable efficient progression in weight loads due to the stability they offer in many of the *core movement patterns.*
- ***Tricep Extensions*** have been included in *Steps to Strength* in order to provide a direct stimulus for the tricep muscles found in the upper arms. When it comes to pressing strength and to upper arm stability in pulling movements, the triceps are integral muscles. They also comprise the

majority of the upper arms' mass, and as such, directly training the triceps can result in noticeable physique changes in a relatively short period of time.

For video demonstrations of the aforementioned exercises, see this playlist - https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLrAnZ_4ARKK_WamKqrFyxo1z8nJXG0upu&si=dsxexN16LSACPFtb

Method of Progression -

As with many strength training programs, progression in *Steps to Strength* ideally comes in the form of adding weight to the prescribed movements once a predetermined level of mastery with the current working weight is reached. Put in other terms, the purpose of this program is to produce positive physiological changes in one's body. In order to produce these positive changes, the difficulty of the provided stimuli must be gradually increased over time to continue pushing one's body past its current state of being to a stronger and more durable state. The human body does not inherently know how to *want* to be stronger than it is at baseline (aka untrained/uninterrupted homeostasis). This statement should not be taken to mean that increasing one's athleticism or strength potential is unnatural; quite the contrary, as the human body unquestionably benefits from receiving moderate exposure to exercise and other physically engaging activities; historically, a central component of a "natural" lifestyle. The truly "unnatural" part of modern life is how sedentary the average person's lifestyle has become!

The last statement I will make on the subject is this: The difference between *not doing anything*, intentionally or incidentally, to challenge and invigorate one's own body and doing *something* to exercise and engage one's own body is *astronomical*. The difference between doing *a lot* and doing *a little* is a less extreme divide. It is entirely possible to do *too much* exercising or engaging in physically laborious activities, but the negative effects of doing nothing are equally as limiting as being burnt out and exhausted all the time.

All actions in moderation, even the good ones…

Back to the task at hand: explaining how to progress with *Steps to Strength.* As you will see in the actual training template below, *Steps to Strength* keeps its dosages of

exercise simple. Three sets (instances of exercise) are prescribed for each movement with rest periods in between the sets. The first two sets are to be performed to an exact number of specified repetitions. The third and final set is to contain as many repetitions as can be performed with strict and stable form. For example, 1st Set = 8 reps, 2nd Set = 8 reps, 3rd Set = 10 reps with strict and stable form.

How does one know when it is time to add weight? -

The progressionary indicator is reached when ***3 reps above the target rep goal*** is hit with strict and stable form on the third set (the + set), at which point weight is to be added. In this fashion, progression occurs in the form of adding weight once each new progressionary indicator is reached.

10lbs is to be added for lower body movements, and 5lbs is to be added for upper body movements once the repetition indicator is met.

Weight load additions will be applied to that particular movement in the subsequent week of training.

Example: *The movement to be performed is the front-loaded squat. 3 sets of 8 repetitions is prescribed. One is able to accomplish the following: 1st Set = 8 repetitions, 2nd Set = 8 repetitions, 3rd Set = 11 repetitions. In the week following this performance, the front-loaded squat movement, being a lower body movement, will have 10 lbs added to it.*

Note for Home Gym Users*:* I am aware that it is not always possible to simply "add 10 lbs" in a home gym environment; especially if one is relying on dumbbells for their weight loads. In the instance that one does not possess heavier weight load options, it is acceptable for a time to progress by adding repetitions to each set performed. If you find yourself performing 3 sets of 10 or more repetitions due to weight load limitations on the majority of your exercises, I would highly recommend investing in a heavier weight load option or joining an affordable local gym in order to continue progressing.

How to Read The Steps to Strength Training Template -

Front-Loaded Squat:
Exercise to be performed

Front-Loaded Squat: 3x8+
Number of sets to be performed times the number of repetitions to be performed per set. In this case, 3 sets, or individual instances of exercise engagement, times 8 repetitions, with the third and final set being a plus (+) set where as many repetitions with good form are performed as possible. Weight progression occurs when 3 or more repetitions are accomplished beyond the prescribed number of repetitions on the last set.

Front-Loaded Squat: 3x8+, 3 minute rests
The recommended period of rest between sets of the exercise. It is not necessary to be precise down to the second, but keeping within one minute of the recommended time is advised for consistency. Exercise is about movement in a given period of time. Rest is an essential component of exercise. If you do not take rest periods you will fatigue quickly and you will miss out on the potential to do more quality repetitions. If you take too long of rest periods you will end up being inefficient in your time usage. Being relatively consistent in the amount of rest between sets will help you to more accurately track your progress as well.

The next section of *Steps to Strength* is the actual training protocol! The first option is for those who plan to attend a gym or who have a home gym equipped with barbells and a cable stack machine or a pull-up bar.
The second option is for home gym setups where only dumbbells are available.
I hope you have a great time exercising! 🙂

Steps to Strength
Week One

Day One - Lower Body Emphasis
Back Squat - (Barbell or Smith Machine) - 3x8+, 3 minute rests
Deadlift - (Barbell, Dumbbell, or Smith Machine) - 3x6+, 3 minute rests
Lunges vs Leg Raises - 3x8+ each leg vs 3x10+,
1 minute rest between movements

Day Two - Cardiovascular Health #1
Cardiovascular Exercise -
Recommended - 20-40 minutes of fast walking or
30-45 minutes of a moderately engaging sport

Day Three - Upper Body Emphasis
Pulldown/ Pull-up - 3x8+, 3 minute rests
Flat Bench Press - (Barbell, Dumbbell or Machine) - 3x8+, 3 minute rests
One-Arm Row - (Dumbbell or Cable) - 3x8+, 2 minute rests
Tricep Extension - (Dumbbell, EZ Bar, Cable) - 3x10+, 2 minute rests

Day Four - Cardiovascular Health #2
Cardiovascular Exercise -
Recommended - 15-25 minutes of alternating difficulty on a cardiovascular exercise such as rowing, biking, jogging, or jumping rope. Alternate between moderately easy pacing and moderately challenging pacing with a 1 minute easy to 1 minute challenging ratio.

Steps to Strength
Week Two

Day One - Lower Body Emphasis
Front-Loaded Squat - (Barbell or Smith Machine) - 3x8+, 3 minute rests
Weighted Walk - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x30sec+, 2 minute rests
Bridge vs Bird Dog - 3x10+ vs 3x8+ each side, 1 minute rest between sets

Day Two - Cardiovascular Health #1
Cardiovascular Exercise -
Recommended - 20-40 minutes of fast walking or
30-45 minutes of a moderately engaging team sport

Day Three - Upper Body Emphasis
Push-up - (Strict or Bent-Knee) - 3x8+, 3 minute rests
Bent-Over Row - 3x8+, 2 minutes rest
Standing or Seated Overhead Press - 3x8+, 2 minutes rest
Bicep Curl - (Dumbbells, EZ Bar, Cable) - 3x10+, 2 minute rests

Day Four - Cardiovascular Health #2
Cardiovascular Exercise -
Recommended - 15-25 minutes of alternating difficulty on a cardiovascular exercise such as rowing, biking, jogging, or jumping rope. Alternate between moderately easy pacing and moderately challenging pacing with a 1 minute easy to 1 minute challenging ratio.

Steps to Strength
Home Gym Edition
Week One

Day One - Lower Body Emphasis

Front-Loaded Squat - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x8+, 3 minute rests
Stiff-Legged Deadlift - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x8+, 3 minute rests
Lunge vs Leg Raise - 3x8+ each leg vs 3x10+, 1 minute rest between sets

Day Two - Cardiovascular Health #1

Cardiovascular Exercise -
Recommended - 20-40 minutes of fast walking or
30-45 minutes of a moderately engaging team sport

Day Three - Upper Body Emphasis

Standing or Seated Overhead Press - (Dumbbell) - 3x8+, 2 minute rests
Bent-Over Row - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x8+, 2 minute rests
Floor Press - (Dumbbell)- 3x8+, 2 minute rests
Bicep Curl vs Lying Tricep Press - (Dumbbell) - 3x8+ each arm vs 3x8+,
1 minute rests between movements

Day Four - Cardiovascular Health #2

Cardiovascular Exercise:
Recommended - 15-25 minutes of alternating difficulty on a cardiovascular exercise such as rowing, biking, jogging, or jumping rope. Alternate between moderately easy pacing and moderately challenging pacing with a 1 minute easy to 1 minute challenging ratio.

Steps to Strength
Home Gym Edition
Week Two

Day One - Lower Body Emphasis
Front-Loaded Squat - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x8+, 2 minute rests
Weighted Walk - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x30sec+, 2 minute rests
Bridge vs Bird Dog - 3x10+ vs 3x8+ each arm/leg, 1 minute rest between sets

Day Two - Cardiovascular Health #1
Cardiovascular Exercise:
Recommended - 20-40 minutes of fast walking or
30-45 minutes of a moderately engaging team sport

Day Three - Upper Body Emphasis
Push-up - (Legs Up or Bent Knee) - 3x8+, 2-3 minute rests
One-Arm Row - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x8+ each arm, 2 minute rests
Standing or Seated Overhead Press - (Dumbbell) - 3x10+, 2 minute rests
Hammer Curl vs Tricep Extension - (Dumbbell or Kettlebell) - 3x8+ each arm
vs 3x8+ each arm, 1 minute rests between movements

Day Four - Cardiovascular Health #2
Cardiovascular Exercise:
Recommended - 15-25 minutes of alternating difficulty on a cardiovascular exercise such as rowing, biking, jogging, or jumping rope. Alternate between moderately easy pacing and moderately challenging pacing with a 1 minute easy to 1 minute challenging ratio.

Closing Remarks -

Thank you for taking the time to learn about strength training with *Steps to Strength*! It is an absolute honor to get to introduce you to the challenging and rewarding world of training with weights. If I can be of help by providing further insights regarding proper form, methods of progression, or other topics regarding health and fitness, please don't hesitate to reach out to me via email - info@rhyslyon.com

I hope that you had a great time running the *Steps to Strength* program! Here's to you and your blossoming health and fitness journey! 👋😀

If you find that you would like to expand upon your strength training, please consider checking out my intermediate strength program, *Increasing Muscle Composition*. *Increasing Muscle Composition* is a free strength and conditioning training protocol which introduces its readers to a much broader and more diverse collection of movement patterns and repetition ranges than is provided in *Steps to Strength.*