

POWERLIFTING USA

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POWER RESEARCH

dedicated to bringing Science to the sport of Powerlifting

POWERLIFTING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY TRAINING

as told to PL USA by Josh Bryant MFS, CSCS, PES, SSE ISSA-CFT, SSC, SPN

Have you ever been to a powerlifting meet and heard someone boast about colossal training lifts? These claims are commonly made backstage, or in the warm-up area. Very frequently these comments follow a poor meet performance. Why would a competitive lifter brag about training numbers after a pitiable performance? It is because these lifters, once on the platform, are overrun with feelings of anxiety, rather than the performance enhancing feelings of adrenaline. These men may be physical giants, but when coupled with their mental dwarfism, they will never achieve their maximum potential. In the pages that follow I will lay out a simple plan to help you, the competitor, achieve success not only on the lifting platform, but on the platform of life as well.

"Ideal physical preparation in sport will never compensate for deficiencies produced by psychological weakness which arise during competition." —Mel Siff, Ph.D. (2 P.13) Russian sport scientists and athletes realized early it is vital to recognize a training maximum, or TF max. (2 P.2) Since optimal motivation occurs under competitive circumstances, an athlete's TF max will be significantly less than an athlete's competition maximum; or CF max. On average, an experienced weight lifter will experience a 10% increase during competition lifts when compared to their TF Max (with an average variance of 2.5% either way). (3)

The importance of nervous system training must not be ignored. The development of strength is related to the number of muscle fibers firing simultaneously, which is entirely a function of the nervous system. (2 P.60) The rate and number of fibers firing depends on voluntary and involuntary processes. The voluntary ones are closely related to PERSONAL MOTIVATION and biofeedback techniques. (2 P.60) Guided mental imagery or self-talk, to produce more rapid efforts can recruit a great number of muscle fibers at a faster rate of firing. (2 P.60) The result being a greater production of force, and an increase in the amount of weight lifted.

Mental preparation is often overlooked in the sport of powerlifting, but in a sport that requires maximum one repetition strength to be performed while adhering to stringent rules, mental preparation can prove to be invaluable. If you beat the squat command, guess what happens? A missed lift and a missed opportunity to showcase your strength. Training is for building strength and the meet is for demonstrating that strength. Without proper transference between building and demonstrating strength, a lifter will never be the best that he can be.

Your conscious mind deals with things at face value: reasoning, logic, communications and things of that nature. Most people attempt to only operate in this part of their mind. This part of your mind, however, represents only a small percentage of your total mental capacity. The subconscious mind directly influences your concept of self. The power to achieve and do great things is in your subconscious mind. You must believe it in order to achieve. Powerlifting legend Anthony Clark once said, "We are not born winners or losers, we are born choosers."

A person's self image is the key to their behavior and will set the boundaries to their individual accomplishments. It will define what you can or cannot do. If you are able to expand your self-image, you will, in turn, expand

the possibilities of your accomplishments. (1 P.30) In the 1950's, clinical and experimental psychologists proved that the human nervous system is unable to differentiate between a real experience and a vividly imagined detailed experience. (1 P.30) This does not mean that you can repeat ten times a day, "I will bench 600," and it will happen. That would be a passive experience. For the nervous system to believe it is doing what you are imagining, you must create a vivid mental movie complete with the feelings, sights, sounds, and smells that would accompany the experience in real life. You need active experiences to positively affect your subconscious mind.

The discovery of self can not only help an athlete's training, but more importantly, it can aid in the athlete's meet day performance. T.F. James, was quoted fifty years ago in *Cosmopolitan* magazine as saying, "understanding the psychology of the self can mean the difference between success and failure, love and hate, bitterness and happiness." Our triumphs and failures and other people's reactions to these triumphs and failures, form our concept of self. (1 P.2) In other words, our experiences shape our self-image. It is not so much the actual experiences, but the way we perceive these events. The good news is the human nervous system cannot tell the difference between real and imagined experiences, which means you can train mentally with weights you are not yet physically able to lift. Here is an example; Johnny is a state level lifter who squats 600 pounds. If Johnny believes he is a state level lifter who squats 600 pounds, then he is precisely that. But if Johnny believes he is a rapidly progressing lifter on his way to a world championship, the odds of him becoming good are greatly increased. A good example of this is when a lifter makes excuses and blames his genetics for his poor performance. Genetics are one piece of the equation, but how many lifters have reached their genetic potential? I would be confident in saying that very few lifters, if any, have ever reached their genetic potential. To be successful in the sports arena, or in life, you have to have a positive self-image.

Most efforts to change one's self-image are directed at the superficial level, with bogus self-esteem programs. In order to achieve positive gains we must transform at the core of our being. Once we alter our self-image; it is easier to accomplish things within the realm of this new self-image. Prescott Lesky, who is considered one of the founding fathers of self-image psychology, conceived personality as a system of ideas all of which seem to maintain consistency with one another. Thoughts and goals that are inconsistent with this system of ideas are not acted upon. While ideas aligned with this system are acted upon. At the nucleus of this system of ideas is an individual's concept of self. (1 P.4)

The creative mechanism within every individual is impersonal. It can work automatically to achieve success or failure. This depends on the goals you set for yourself. (1 P.13) Present it with positive goals and the "success mechanism" will set in. Present it with negative goals, "the failure mechanism" will set in. Our goals are mental images developed in the conscious mind. The key is a realistic, positive self-image. Every living thing has a goal



Josh Bryant visualizes his lifts before each meet

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striving mechanism put there by God to sustain life. (1 P.16) A squirrel born in the spring has never experienced winter yet somehow squirrels know in the Fall to store nuts for the Winter. (1 P.16) People not only have these innate abilities for sustaining life, but also for achieving great things.

On a personal level, is your goal just to sustain life or to increase your total? Since you are still reading I can assume it is to increase your total. Man has the ability to use mental imagery, visualization, and imagination to tap into his "built-in" success mechanism, the one he is programmed with. This means not just surviving at a meet, but thriving at a meet.

The great Scottish philosopher, Dugold Stewart, once said, "The faculty of imagination is the great spring of human activity and the source for human improvement." You ever hear a coach say to their athlete, "see yourself doing the weight." These coaches are really onto something. The use of mental imagery doesn't just start at the meet; it should become a regular component of training if one wishes to be their best. Know what your current goal is and know, without a doubt, that you will accomplish it. Then look to the future at a target past your current goal and how you will achieve that next goal.

Our brain and nervous system react to an environment; but remember, this is the same brain and nervous system that tell us what an environment is. (1 P.33) Man is a goal oriented being, he is engineered that way. (1 P.114) This means you must set specific goals for your meet. If I am coaching someone at a meet, they have goals for that meet, goals that have been set since the very first day of preparation for that meet. These goals need to be specific, measurable, and realistic. Goals need to be established for the micro cycle, mesocycle, and macro training cycles. Each unique phase, has a unique goal to help you achieve the ultimate goal at your meet. What do you want to total at your next meet? Where do you want to be a year from now?

"To do my best" is not a proper goal; it is very convoluted and open to interpretation. In general, people with no goals feel their life is not worthwhile, the truth is they have no worthwhile goals. Man is hardwired to achieve goals and conquer obstacles. A great line from the film *The Rock* says volumes about this idea, "Your best? Losers always whine about their best, winners go home and (bleep) the prom queen!" In powerlifting, losers whine about their best, they make excuses about their jobs, money, or training partners; while the winners go to meets and set PR totals!

If powerlifting is important to you, the importance of a mental imagery program will prove to be invaluable. Brain activity precedes movement, and it is vital that correct movements are visualized long before those movements are performed. Visualization techniques were utilized by top Russian weightlifters and coaches. (2 P.72) No two great lifters lift exactly the same; Soma type, limb length, muscle fiber make-up, previous injuries, strengths, and weaknesses are all factors where lifters differ. Being able to visualize your optimal technique is crucial to becoming a "Master of Sport," as they would say in Russia.

THE PROGRAM

Every day set aside twenty minutes for mental imagery training. Find a dark, comfortable place to lay down and relax your muscles. A place where all the anxieties and troubles of everyday life can be forgotten. Start developing a "movie" in your head, a movie where you are the star. Visualize yourself lifting the weights you are going to be lifting in training. Visualize yourself arriving at the gym, warming up, psyching up, and lifting the weights with ease. You should use all your senses to make the visualization as true to real life as possible. This experience should be like a vivid dream,

the kind where you wake up and feel it has actually happened; you want your CNS to have a real experience. After experiencing this vivid dream the real life experience may seem like *deja-vu*; you have already experienced this, your subconscious mind says so, and that is where the power of achievement lies.

Garry Frank once told me, "When I walk up to the platform, the lift has already been done in my mind; I am just doing the required going through the motions." Amen, Garry! Visualization must be part of your daily routine throughout your entire training cycle. Training lifts have built the foundation, but unless performed under competitive circumstances, they are meaningless. Mental imagery is where an athlete bridges the gap. The goal should not be to equal training lifts, it should be to exceed them.

Visualize every detail of the meet; warming up, time between attempts, approaching the platform, and making your lifts "nine for nine." Visualize the people coming up to you after the meet and congratulating you.

A valuable technique I developed was loading my goal weights for the upcoming meet on to the bar. I did this two to three times a week. I would put the weight on the bar, put on my favorite music and visualize myself lifting that weight. Sometimes I would approach the weight and give it a good shake, reminding myself that come meet day, gravity no longer held supremacy; but that Josh Bryant did. I would set aside fifteen minutes for this activity, but many times it would last for a couple of hours. The first time I deadlifted 800 in a meet my previous best was 749, but because of my mental preparation, the extra 51 pounds was a cinch.

Visualization will not be accomplished through strain, or effort; it is instead achieved through relaxation. Try to systematically relax your muscles, one muscle group at a time. Then start to develop the movie in your head. Play back in your mind your past successes, like a successful competition or any event that makes you feel positive about yourself. Reflecting on past victories and successes is helpful in defining a positive self image. The key is to help these positive experiences build a base for your psyche. Realize with proper focus the future will be better and begin to view the past with nostalgia.

Louie Pasteur once said, "chance favors the prepared mind." Napoleon Bonaparte would role play, so would General Patton. Both of these men were prepared for almost any situation that could arise because they had mentally prepared for them. Envision yourself not only as a big time lifter, but also as a "big deal." As your total increases people will be coming to you for advice, envision your new role as one of powerlifting's elite and the admiration and notoriety that accompany this new status.

If you have the freedom it can be helpful to decorate your workout facility. Posters of past greats can serve as a great motivational tool. You should have heroes that you admire and that will motivate you to become better. Today's training methods are far more advanced than those of yesteryear, so you can conceivably surpass these past greats. Just remember they were way ahead of their time for their era; be thankful they paved the way for you, but never lose respect for these heroes.

Even the color of your training facility can have an effect on your psyche. If you are able to do so, painting your gym red is the way to go. Psychologists have linked red to aggressive behavior. (4)

You now know how to create a positive self image, but what about negative people and the negative energy they bring? If you can distance yourself from these negative energies, that is your best bet. If you cannot, simply pay them no mind. Do not hate these people, because hate and contempt breed resentment. And resentment, in and of itself, is a negative energy. Let your energy flow in a positive direction and not in the direction of someone you don't like. Save all the energy for yourself and the ones you love. Within every crisis lies some sort of opportunity! One time I asked John Inzer, "what if Nike made powerlifting equipment?" His response was, "that would be great; they would increase awareness of the product and market share." He was completely positive, no resentment, no victimhood, just complete focus on the task at hand.

By following this outlined mental preparation program, you will make it much easier to be in the ideal performance state—the goal of every athlete. This state is marked by psychological and physical efficiency. (5 P.188) The bottom line is, if you are able to lift more in the gym than at meets; something is wrong. The problem may be physical, but more likely than not, it is psychological.

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