



## **Preparing For Your First Meet**

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Preparing yourself for your first meet or someone else for their first meet is not an easy task. The unknowns leading up to meet day and the nerves when that day comes makes preparation for new lifters difficult. While I don't claim have all the answers and there are many other ways to prepare, these methods have worked successfully for me both personally and with lifters I coach.

### ***Choosing a Meet***

For some new lifters, this can be a difficult decision. They may feel as though they aren't strong enough to compete yet and they don't want to embarrass themselves. Perhaps they need more time training before they compete to try and get a little bit stronger. I believe, however, that how strong you are is of little importance, particularly for your first meet. The powerlifting community is very accepting, and regardless of the weight on the bar, your fellow lifters will support you and be there to give you guidance. Choosing a meet is also great motivation. Setting a date and knowing you have a deadline to get as strong as you can is excellent motivation to work as hard as possible in the gym. Realistically, you should choose a contest 12-16 weeks away, to allow you to complete a solid training cycle to prepare yourself. When meet day comes, establish numbers for yourself and work on improving upon them. Obviously winning is great, but when it comes to your first meet, worry less about winning and more about setting PR's and enjoying yourself.

### ***Meet Preparation***

#### ***Rules and Equipment***

Once you choose a meet to compete it, it's time to begin preparations for it. First and foremost, you must know how each lift is judged. This way, you can "practice like you play" and when meet day comes, hitting depth on your squat or pausing your bench will be a nonfactor, because you've been training to depth and training with pauses leading up to the meet.

You will also want to make sure you have proper equipment. An entire article could be written simply on equipment, so rather than launching into a long winded discussion on equipment; I will say that consulting the rulebook to determine what is required is the best idea. Certain aspects, such as determining whether you want to squat in shoes with a raised heel versus flat shoes, wearing a belt, deadlifting in slippers or some other kind of footwear, is a matter of personal preference, style, mobility, and many other factors. Experimenting with different things and getting opinions from other lifters can be helpful in this regard as well.

### *Training*

Whether you're just starting to lift or have been training for a while, the way you train is likely to change leading up to a meet. After you read and understand the rules of performance, you should begin training based off of those. It can be very helpful to have another experienced USAPL lifter look at squat depth or give you press commands on bench in order to help you become accustomed to these differences.

Oftentimes, new lifters try to do far too many things at once with their training. Most younger (and even some more experienced lifters) would be better off keeping it simple and training using the competition lifts with some basic assistance exercises. The competition lifts should be the meat of your program. Specific assistance movements should be there to bring up weak points and build more strength. These movements should typically be performed in moderate rep ranges (4-8) and bare some similarity to the competition movements. For instance, specific assistance for the squat could be a pause squat, safety bar squat, or a front squat. Specific assistance for bench may be benching with long pauses, close grip bench press, or dumbbell bench press. Deadlift assistance could include RDL's or your non competition deadlift (if you pull sumo, pulling conventional as special assistance). General assistance for each exercise should strengthen the supporting musculature and may include exercises such as split squats, lunges, good mornings, single leg deadlifts, rows, etc. It is *very* important for younger lifters to do a fairly high volume of rowing. This will both help the bench press, and help keep the shoulders healthy by counteracting all the pressing that is done in the program. Reps for rows should generally be kept higher; using sets of 10-15 as the upper back musculature typically responds better to greater volumes of work.

Young powerlifters need to keep in mind the principles of *training volume* and the *minimum effective dose*. Training volume (sets x reps x weight) is one of the major driving forces when it comes to improving strength (Klemp et al, 2016). Increasing training volume will typically lead to increased strength if done over a training cycle. For instance, if a lifter performed 3 sets of 5 reps at 250 pounds, their training volume for that session would be 3750 pounds. If the next week they performed 3 sets of 5 reps at 260 pounds, training volume has increased and they are setting themselves up for increased strength. This takes advantage of the principle of

progressive overload, which states that in order to continue to make increases in strength, there must be overload placed on the muscle throughout a sensible progression. Increasing volume is one very effective way of doing that.

While training volume is extremely important, the principle of minimum effective dose is also important for new lifters. Lifters, new or old, should try to make progress from a little training stimulus as possible. If you are making progress performing 1 set of 5 for each exercise, continue to progress using that set and rep scheme. Once progress slows, adding in another set and performing 2 sets of 5 will likely allow you to maintain progress and is still not a very large amount of total work. If you immediately begin your program performing 5 sets of 5, once that progress slows, you are going to have to do even more volume to continue progressing. This can be very difficult to do, especially if a lifter only performs each lift once per week. Increasing frequency could be a way around this, but that is another discussion in its own right. If a new lifter keeps the principles of training volume and minimum effective dose in mind, they will be able to see sustained progress leading up to their meet.

All lifters should train using a periodized program. A periodized program allows for sustainable progression and will allow for proper peaking for meet day. While there are many types of periodization, a linear progression has shown to be just as effective as any other type of periodization for beginners. A linear progression starts out with higher volumes and lower intensities, and as competition day approaches, intensity increases while volume typically decreases. Maintaining volume to some extent may be slightly more optimal, and a 10 week example of this is below:

Week 1: 3x6 @ 65% 1RM

Week 2: 3x6 @ 70% 1RM

Week 3: 3x5 @ 75% 1RM

Week 4: 3x5 @ 77.5% 1RM

Week 5: 4x4 @ 80% 1RM

Week 6: 4x4 @ 82.5% 1RM

Week 7: 5x3 @ 85% 1RM

Week 8: 5x2 @ 87.5% 1RM

Week 9: 4x2 @ 87.5%, 2x1 @ 90% 1RM

Week 10: 3x2 @ 87.5%, 1x1 @ 90%, 1x1 @ 92.5%

This is a very basic progression based off of percentage of a lifter's one rep max. Some coaches train based off of rate of perceived exertion (RPE) or using other methods, but I have found basing training off of percentages to be very effective. This progression is also just an example, as there are many ways to use linear periodization to increase strength. By following a periodized plan, any lifter, but particularly a young lifter, is going to put themselves in the best position possible to set some PR's at their meet.

### *Nutrition*

This will be short and sweet, as it could also make up an entire article by itself. Most importantly, I do not believe a lifter should try and cut weight leading up to their first meet. The added stressor of making weight, combined with the likely loss of strength that will occur, is unnecessary, particularly for the first meet. If, after a few meets, the lifter decides that they are carrying too much weight and would be more competitive at a lighter weight class, they can then consider cutting. However, I think that during the beginning of a lifter's powerlifting career, their focus should be on gaining strength and setting PR's, and less on trying to make weight on competition day.

In terms of nutrition for performance, I recommend following a flexible dieting approach. Protein, carbohydrates, and fat are all necessary for optimal performance. While the amount of each is individual to the person, limiting macronutrients or restricting foods can lead a person to have very poor relationship with food and lead to problems outside of just poor performance. I encourage lifters to look into principles of flexible dieting and apply them to fuel your lifting performance.

### **The night before**

The night before a meet is when the butterflies typically start. Make sure you have everything packed up the night before. Double and triple check to make sure you have everything. Make sure you have a spare t-shirt and spare briefs. Make sure your belt and squats shoes and deadlift shoes are packed if you use them. Do not leave anything to chance. Try your best to get a good night's sleep and not be too nervous about the next day, although that's easier said than done even for more experienced lifters. Make sure you eat well the day before the meet, perhaps do some light stretching and stay hydrated. What you've worked so hard for is almost here.

### **Meet Day**

### *Pre-meet*

When meet day arrives, you may be confused, particularly if you don't have anyone there to help you. I encourage new lifters to arrive early so they can have plenty of time to weight in. Once you arrive, you will need to pick up your lifters card, get your equipment check, set rack heights, and weigh in. Once all that is done, there is typically a rules meeting about 30 minutes before the meet begins. Go to the meeting and ask any questions that you may have. Don't assume you know the answer and cost yourself a lift because of it. Depending on what flight you are in, you may have to start warming up as soon as the rules meeting ends. Flight sheets are typically posted for you to look at. Find out what flight you're in and see how many lifters are in the flights before you and your flight. Each lifter has a minute to complete their attempt. Knowing that, you can attempt to estimate how long you have to warm up. If the flight before you has 10 lifters, you likely have 20-30 minutes before your flight is up. Always give yourself more time than you need, that way you don't have to speed up your warm-up or cut anything out.

Don't do too many reps in the warm-up room and expend too much energy. Warm up the exact same way you do for training. Meet day is not the time to change anything. If the weights aren't moving as well as you hoped, don't worry. Everything changes when you unrack the bar for the first squat. If things are going really badly, you have until 3 minutes before your flight is up to change your opener.

### *Attempt selection*

Regarding openers, I belong to the Matt Gary (owner of SSPT and Coach of Sioux-z Hartwig Gary and Ray Williams, amongst others), school of thought. Your opener should be a weight that you can do even on your worst day. Someone could beat you up in the parking lot and you should still be able to do your opener. The weight will likely be somewhere in the 90-93% range. If you lack confidence in that particular lift, even opening as low as 85% is acceptable. Making your first attempt is extremely important. If you miss it, you are very likely to miss your second and that puts you up against the tall odds of making your third. Get yourself in the meet with your opener, then build off of that. Opening with your old PR, then using your second and third attempts as chances to break it, does not put you in a place to succeed and while it may work sometimes, it is not optimal in the long run.

Your second attempt should build your total. It does *not* have to be a PR. If your opener felt good, take a confident jump, but don't get greedy. This attempt should likely be somewhere between 96-97.5%. Taking too large of a jump will be a lot for your body's central nervous system to handle. Build your total with this attempt, and set yourself up for a PR.

Your third attempt is the time to put it all together. If your second attempt felt great, go for a big PR. If it felt okay, go for a smaller PR. If it felt bad, take what's there. Do not feel bad if you don't hit a new PR on your third attempt. Sometimes that happens. Do the best that you can on that day, whatever that may be. It's a much better idea to take what you can get and make your third attempt than to struggle and miss it. Missing your third attempt on squat may increase your chances of missing your third attempt on deadlifts, and there is a strong relationship between the two.

### *Putting it Together*

Once your flight is up, it's time to do your job and execute. You've trained hard for the chance to get on the platform and compete. Do not panic, do not make any large scale technical changes. Do not worry about other competitors. It's your first meet. Worry about making your lifts and trying to set PR's. Worry about enjoying yourself. Go out and do what you trained to do. The feeling you get when you hear "bar is loaded" and approach the bar is unlike any I've ever felt. Use that feeling, be confident, stay true to your technique, and get it done. If you choose intelligent attempts and make the majority of your lifts, you will have a great time and understand why so many of us love this sport so much. And I'm willing to bet you'll come back for more.

### **Final thoughts**

Preparing for your first meet can be a hectic and confusing experience. Having a coach can make this much easier for the novice lifter. However, if you don't have a coach, hopefully some of the information in this article will help you with your preparation. I encourage you to check out [www.usaplmi.com](http://www.usaplmi.com) for more information. It's an exciting time in our state as powerlifting continues to grow. It is an amazing sport, one that is suited for all comers. If you are interested in competing, I highly encourage you to pick a meet and begin training. You will not regret it.

May your weights be light and your lights be white!