

A P.R. at Every Workout

Shock Your muscles—
and Yourself—With
Record-Setting Sessions

by Bill Starr - Photography by Michael Neveux

When I tell athletes at the start of an off-season strength program that I expect them to never miss a workout and that I want them to break a personal record at every session in the weight room, they look at me as if I were crazy. I know they're thinking, "What about the bad days? And what if I get hurt or sick?"

All of my wacky ideas are based on experience. The reason I know that it's possible to break a P.R. at every workout for an extended period of time is that I've done it. It was during a time when I wasn't actively coaching. I was training for strength fitness, usually alone. I wanted something to make my workouts more interesting—a motivational gimmick. I came up with the P.R.-at-every-workout idea and put it to the test to see if it was feasible. For 12 straight months I set at least one P.R. at every session, lifting four times a week.

Model: Skip La Cour



Since then I've challenged my athletes to do the same, and a great many have been successful. I coached one Olympic weightlifter who continued breaking P.R.s for two consecutive years. The reason more lifters don't is simply that they don't think in those terms. They assume they're going to have bad days and are content to have mediocre workouts when that happens. It doesn't have to be that way.

When I first decided to see if I could, in fact, make some sort of gain every time I lifted, I went at it as if it were a game—which, in reality, it was. I approach all my

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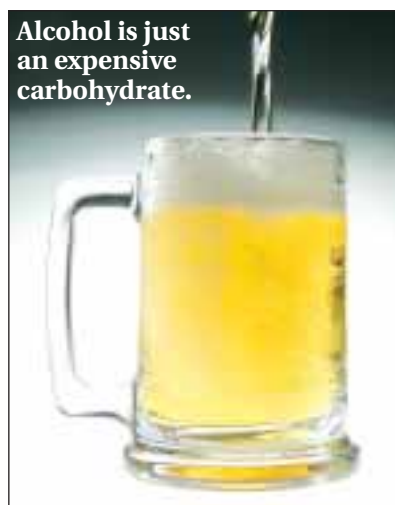
training that way. I want it to be enjoyable, not a task that I dread. Trying to figure out how to make a P.R. four times a week was often a challenge, especially when things weren't clicking. I'd be forced to get very creative in order to figure out some way to break a P.R., but I al-

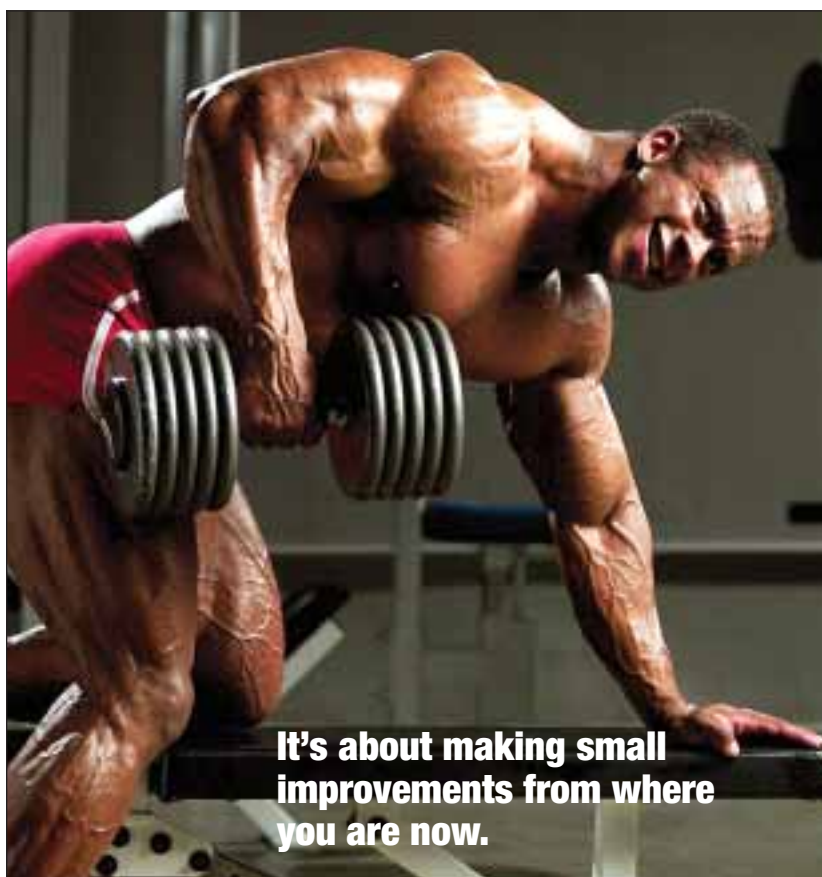
ways did. The process of solving the problem was most useful when I trained alone, adding some zip to what could have been a dull workout. The most positive benefit of training this way was that it improved not so much my total workload or top-end numbers but rather my attitude. After each session I left the weight room with a sense of accomplishment. I had won the battle for that day. Like everyone else I had off days, yet I was still able to leave the gym feeling good about what I'd done because of that P.R. The positive frame of mind carried over to my next workout. Had I not achieved at least one P.R., I would have walked out of the gym in a sour mood, which would negatively influence my next session.

A bit of clarification is necessary. When I write about breaking a personal record, I'm not referring to your all-time best. That's a different level of accomplishment. If you've been lifting for many years or are an older athlete, that just isn't going to happen. It would be foolish for me to think about trying to squat, clean or bench more than I did when I was training for competition.

What I'm talking about is making small improvements at each workout. When football players finish the season and start back into an off-season strength program, that's when they start using the P.R.-at-each-workout method. People who train primarily to maintain better-than-average strength can benefit from it also, as can strength athletes who are making consistent progress and are at the (continued on page 148)

Alcohol is just an expensive carbohydrate.





It's about making small improvements from where you are now.

Model: Steve McLeod

every workout. Concentrate on improving your primary lifts. On some days you'll be able to break P.R.s on every exercise. Good. Take them all. Never hold back—for example, if you know that you could move up your bench another five pounds but hold back, thinking you could do it for a P.R. at your next workout. Don't do that. Take every gain you possibly can.

After a month or two things will get tougher. Once that happens, you want to try to gain that P.R. early in your routine, when you have the most energy. Eventually, though, the numbers on all of your lifts will plateau. In order to continue to break P.R.s, you'll have to do some planning. That's another reason I like this concept. It helps you learn how to prepare mentally for a workout—a skill that can be applied in all sports.

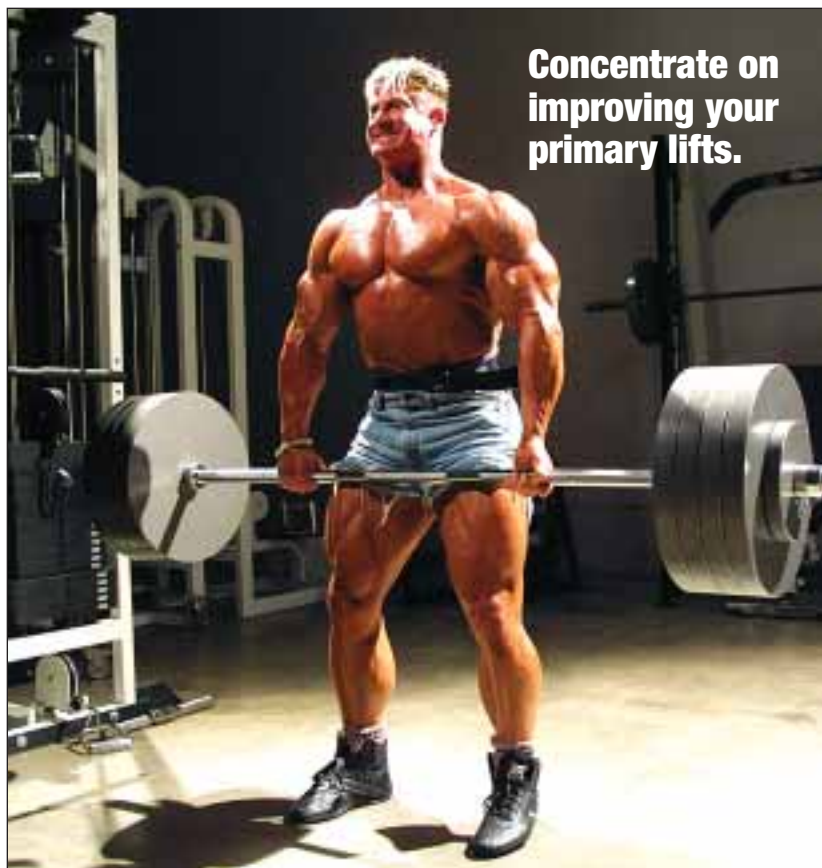
On the night before your next workout decide on which lift you're going to break a P.R. Let's say you select the back squat because it comes first in your routine and is also the lift you want to improve the most. Your (continued on page 152)

(continued from page 144) peak of their physical maturity.

My point is that you use this technique to increase your strength from where you are now, not from where you used to be. As the saying goes, "Ol' man Usta died." I'm talking particularly to older athletes who did well on the competitive stage. While it's fun to look back at those glory days, it's not very smart to try to match them when you're 20 or 30 years older. Time requires that you make adjustments in your training or pay the price. Of course, if you should happen to exceed one or more of your former lifts along the way, that would be icing on the cake.

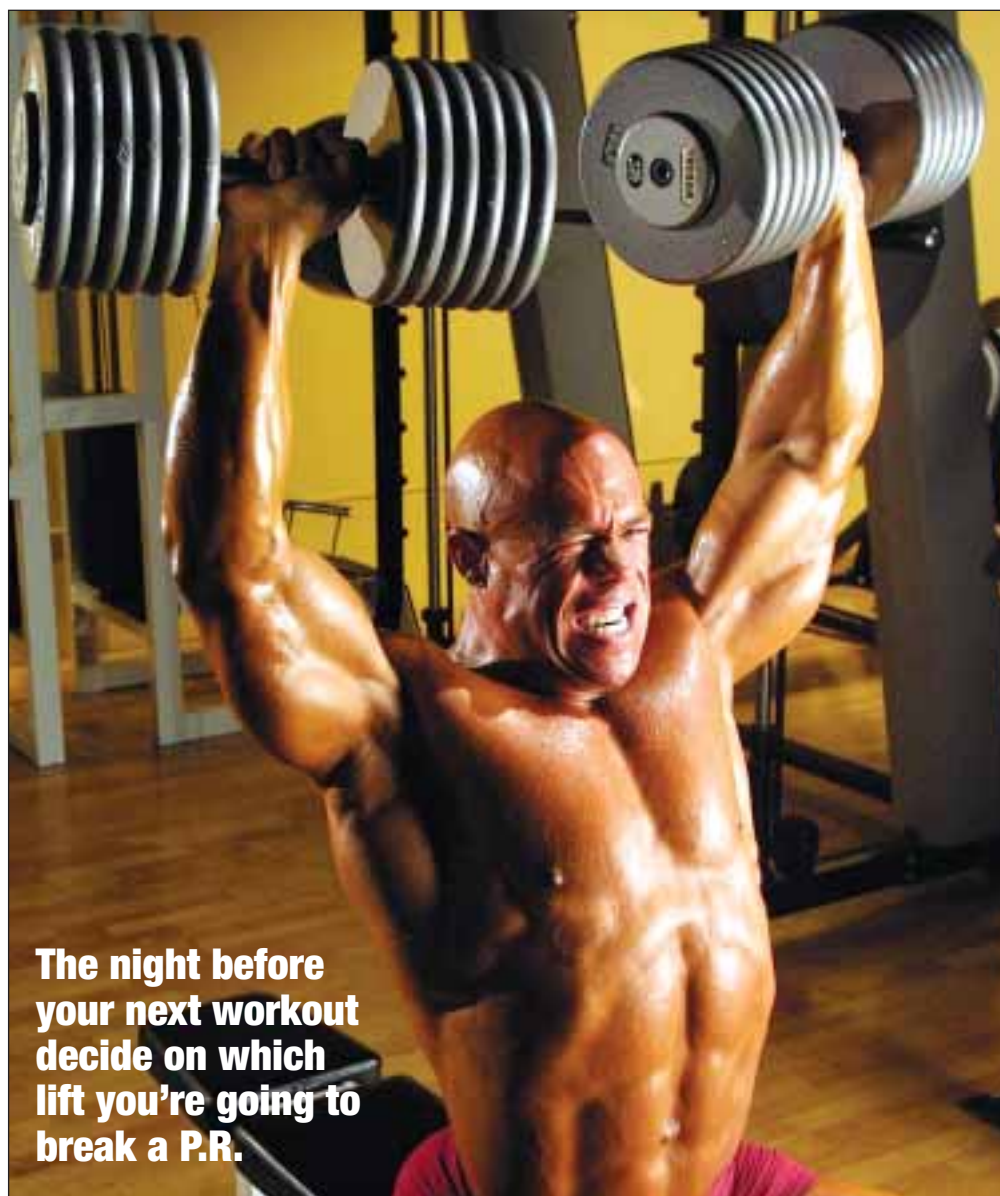
Starting from where you are, strengthwise, will mean that when you first incorporate this idea into your training, you'll be successful at

On some days you'll be able to break P.R.s on every exercise.



Concentrate on improving your primary lifts.

Model: Chris Cook



The night before your next workout decide on which lift you're going to break a P.R.

P.R.s are taking a huge effort. So make small changes. Instead of hammering away at the bench, give priority to the incline. When that flattens out, substitute overhead presses along with some push presses. After that make weighted dips your primary upper-body exercise for a month or so.

You can also help your cause by switching the sequence of the exercises. If you always begin with a leg exercise, start with pulls for three or four weeks, and then move your pressing exercise to the front of the line. Some trainees find that rotating the sequence of the three primary lifts at every workout is effective. They do legs first on Monday, upper body on Wednesday and back on Friday or some variation of that theme. It doesn't have to be a major change to help you achieve a P.R. on at least one exercise, and that's what you're after.

Model: Skip La Cour

(continued from page 148) previous best is 350 for five, and you want to move it up by five pounds. Write down all of the warmup sets you plan to do leading up to that final attempt with 355. Now picture yourself performing each rep of every set, emphasizing the key form points. Do that several times until you're absolutely positive that you'll succeed with 355 for five reps. The next day, when you walk into the weight room brimming with confidence, half the battle is already won. The technique is even more useful if you're going for a lifetime personal best. As with any other discipline, practice improves the skill. I found it very helpful to repeat the mental drill while driving

to the gym.

Change is another way to keep the P.R.s coming. You may find that a drastic change works best; for example, switching from a program based on the big three to one revolving around the Olympic lifts. So instead of benching, you do overhead work—presses and jerks. Instead of back squats, you do front squats, and you also do more pulling movements, including the snatch and clean. Since all, or at least most, of those lifts will be new to you, P.R.s will come on a regular basis for some time.

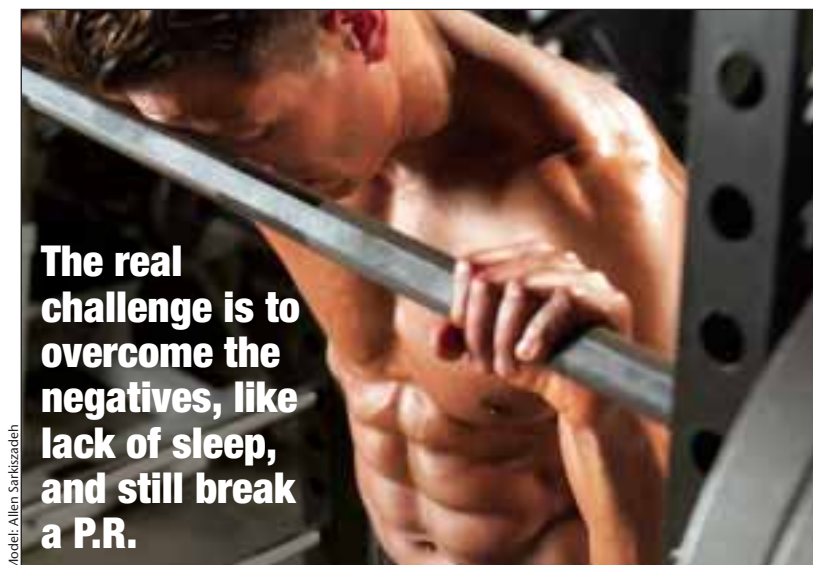
Maybe you don't want to make such a radical change, but you think you need to do something because you're feeling stale and the

Be adaptable. Many dedicated athletes follow their predetermined routines to the letter at every workout. That's a good thing because it builds consistency, which is necessary for long-term progress. At the same time, however, you may run into trouble on a bad day unless you're flexible. Bad days are the flies in the ointment when it comes to making P.R.s at every workout. Regardless of how well you plan ahead, how well you eat, rest and take care of yourself, bad days are still part of the deal. No one can avoid them completely. Injury, illness, undue stress, low biorhythm and lack of sleep are all part of life, and you have to deal with them in the weight room.

When one of those dreaded days comes along, rather than banging your head against the wall and ending up with a terrible workout, make some adjustments so you can still achieve your P.R. and leave the gym feeling a certain degree of satisfaction. True, you won't be nearly as happy as if you'd completed a great session, but a small victory is better than a failure.

As I've often said, I don't believe that illness and injury are valid excuses for missing a workout. Either may necessitate altering your program, but missing the workout is not an option. It breeds poor training habits. If you skip a session due to a severe cold or a sprained ankle, it becomes much easier to miss another when you have a splitting headache or are dragging from lack of sleep. The real challenge is to overcome the negatives and still break a P.R.

How many times, while watching sports on TV, have you seen an



Model: Allen Sarkisazadeh

athlete who's nursing a case of the flu turn in a stellar performance? I've seen more than I can remember. I've watched Olympic and powerlifters set American and world records while they were fighting terrible colds. Whenever that

happens, the announcer always marvels, "How is he able to score more points today than he has all season when he's been in bed the last two days with the flu?"

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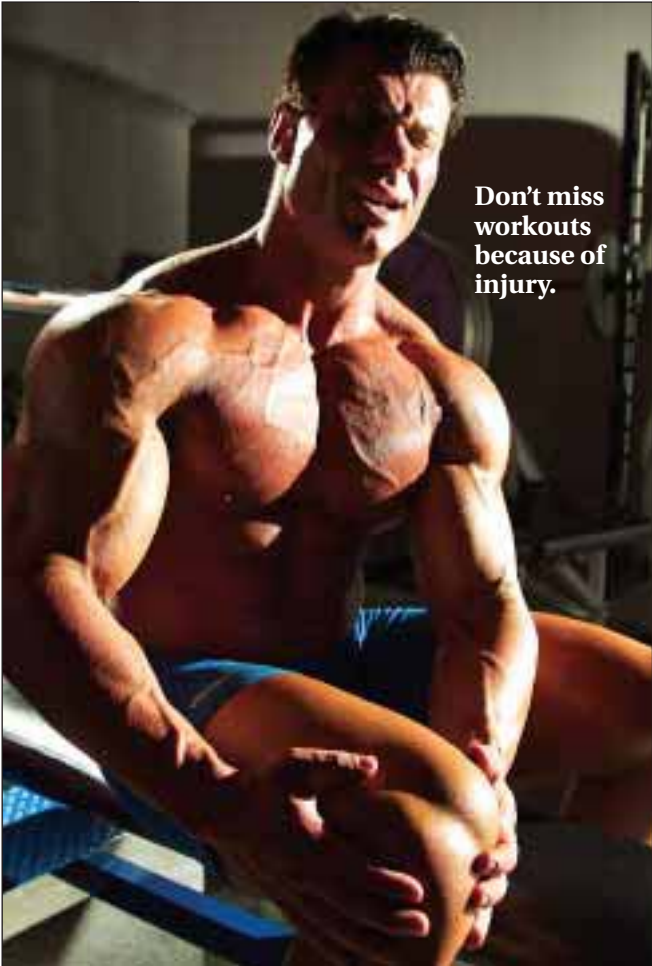


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If your regular squats stall, substitute front squats for a few week.

Model: Idhise Ward-EI



Don't miss workouts because of injury.

Model: Berry Kabov

lots of antibodies through your system to combat the invading antigens and toxins. The antibodies are strength enhancers, especially when you're in the early stages of an illness. Plus, a respiratory malady isn't going to adversely affect your muscular system. You can still lift heavy weights; that is, if you can convince yourself that you can do it. A cold or flu will have a direct influence on your breathing and recovery. Knowing that, you train accordingly by taking longer rests between sets and shortening your workout. Drop the back-off sets and all auxiliary work. You can make them up later.

This is also a good time to try a new exercise in order to make a P.R. Perhaps you're scheduled to dead-lift but can't talk yourself into doing something that demanding. Substitute bent-over rows, which you've never tried before. You can stay relatively light and still gain your P.R. for the day, leaving the weight room feeling a tad better than when

you came in. One other point about training when you feel punky. The exercise is therapeutic and will help you get well faster than you would if you didn't train. Movement causes healing nutrients to flush through your body, and the enhanced circulation carries away the toxins and waste material. That's the reason you're always in higher spirits after a workout than when you started on those bad days. The exercise releases endorphins, which have an analgesic effect.

An injury shouldn't prevent you from your quest to make a P.R. at every workout either. It's just a matter of how much you want it. I had two football players at John's Hopkins who were so determined to make P.R.s at every session during the off-season that they came to the weight room on the day after they had arthroscopic surgery on their knees and set P.R.s. One achieved his by doing dips, and the other by bettering his previous best on the low- (continued on page 158)

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Model: Jay Cutler

If you know that your coordination and timing are in the toilet, change your routine.

(continued from page 155) incline press. Another football player who had a broken ankle set a P.R. at every workout while he was in a cast—and he continued doing so once his ankle mended.

Sound a bit farfetched? It isn't. Having a hip, knee or ankle injury is actually an ideal opportunity to

make improvements in your upper body or parts of your back. Lat pulls and seated good mornings work well for the back, and everyone knows a wide array of upper-body exercises. It comes down to a test of character. If you really want to make steady progress despite any obstacles, you'll find a way to do it.

While I'm on the subject of excuses, I need to mention hangovers. Drinking is a part of the social life of nearly every college athlete, so it has to be dealt with. Having consumed large quantities of alcohol is often thought to be a detriment to training on the following day. I don't agree. I tell my athletes that alcohol is just an expensive carbohydrate. What they did last night was carb load,

and they should take full advantage of it. Once they get it in their foggy brains that their head isn't actually going to explode when they squat or deadlift, they end up having a productive workout. And because the exercise helps expel the alcohol from their system, they leave the gym as part of the living once again. It's a win-win situation.

Then there are those days when, for no apparent reason, you feel like a cow on ice skates. Olympic lifters understand exactly what I mean. If you know that your coordination and timing are in the toilet, change your routine. Instead of making failure after failure on the snatch, drop snatches and do wide-grip deadlifts, which are less dependent

on athleticism. Bingo, there's your P.R. for the day, and the wide-grip deadlifts will benefit your snatches in the future. You salvage what would have been a lousy workout and leave the weight room in a positive frame of mind.

You can make your P.R. by doing more sets with a certain weight. For example, if you normally do three sets of three on the power snatch and have worked up to 175 pounds, do four sets of three with that weight, and you've set a P.R. Doing more reps on a back-off set also counts, and in a pinch you can break a P.R. on an auxiliary exercise.

Dan Dziadosz, a.k.a. "Monkey Boy," was a defensive back and a member of the Hopkins Olympic

weightlifting team. He was one of my hardest workers, never missed a workout and was attempting to break a P.R. at every session in his off-season program. During finals week he came dragging into the weight room on Friday. He was a premed student and had stayed up all night preparing for an especially tough exam. I gave him a couple of my high-potency B-vitamins and some strong coffee and told him to stay with light weights for higher reps and drop all his back-off sets.

When he finished, he looked like a whipped hound. I tried to encourage him by saying, "Well, at least you got through it. Most would have bailed."

"But," he grumbled, "this is the first workout all spring that I didn't break a P.R. I'm pissed."

It was obvious that he didn't have much left in his tank to do anything strenuous. I asked, "What's the most reps you've ever done on back hypers?"

"I do 50 as part of my warmup." "Do 55."

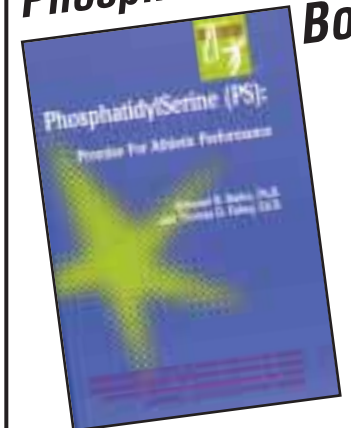
His face lit up as he understood what I'd said. When he left the weight room, he was beaming with delight. He'd kept his P.R. streak intact, which meant he'd won the battle that day. As the saying goes, There's more than one way to skin a cat. So it is with breaking a personal record at every workout. Use your imagination, and you'll be able to come up with some creative methods to help you achieve your goal. Making a P.R. at every workout is only a game, but it's incredibly rewarding to be able to leave the gym with a positive attitude every time.

Long-term progress in strength training doesn't come in giant leaps. Rather, it's the result of many small achievements, sometimes mere baby steps. Breaking a P.R. every time you train is one way to gain those valuable victories that will eventually lead to success.

Editor's note: Bill Starr was a strength and conditioning coach at Johns Hopkins University from 1989 to 2000. He's the author of *The Strongest Shall Survive* and *Defying Gravity*. **IM**

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