Don’t Lose Momentum with Interruptions to Your Training

By: Barbell Logic Team

When you train consistently, you are used to the feel of heavy loads and the exertions of hard training. You build momentum that allows you to train with increasingly heavier loads. But a loss of momentum from vacations, breaks, or other interruptions to your training affects more than just your strength, and many lifters struggle to return to regular training after even short breaks. Here’s some information about what causes this struggle and how you can help prevent a loss of training momentum.
Perception has a lot to do with performance. Think of how you instinctively approach a warm-up set compared to a new 1RM. It’s the difference between something you know you can lift and a feat that remains an unanswered question, at least for the next 20 seconds.

Coaches know that knowledge is power, and its use for the benefit of the lifter is discretionary. Translation: We’ve all lied to a lifter about the weight on a barbell to help get their heads out of the way of their performance.

There are, however, mechanisms of perception that are not so easily fooled. Even if you do not know the exact weight of the bar, you can intuit the immediate impression of “this is heavy” or “this isn’t so bad” as soon as you unrack the bar.

As you train, you condition your body to handle increasingly heavy loads. You create an environment where hard training, heavy compressive forces on your body, are your normal state. And a big part of your ability to lift increasingly heavier loads is your developed perception that heavy does not also mean dangerous to your system. Because if your body senses instability or that a weight you are about to lift is “too heavy,” your brain will reduce the amount of force you can apply to move the weight. Most lifters experience this when their deadlift grip starts to become a lifting factor for training the lift. When your hands slip, you will have a much more difficult time recruiting the motor output to lift the weight. For the same reasons, untrained
or de-trained people tend to wilt under moderately heavy loads, whereas trained lifters tend to respond with more fight than flight. This conditioned response accompanies consistent training, taking the form of an upregulation of your force production capacity to meet the increasing demands of training.

You might, more simply, think of this as training momentum. When you train consistently, you are used to the feel of heavy loads and the exertions of hard training. You build momentum with consistency, and most lifters will attest that their biggest PRs came after long bouts of consistent training.

Many lifters will also bemoan the struggles that come from a loss of training momentum, too. You return from a 2-week vacation or a short illness, and suddenly it feels like the gravitational field around your lifting platform has become about 50% stronger, everything feels heavy, even your warm-ups threaten to staple you to the floor.

This loss of momentum may be related to how the CNS works to regulate performance during exercise. There is a theory of central fatigue known as the Central Governor Theory. “The Central Governor Model of Exercise Regulation proposes that the brain regulates exercise performance by continuously modifying the number of motor units that are recruited in the exercising limbs.” (Noakes “Fatigue is a brain-derived emotion that regulates the exercise behavior to ensure the protection of whole body homeostasis” Front. Physiol. 11, (April 2012).) According to this theory, your biological ability to handle a load or perform a task (i.e., your strength) is only one of many types of input that affect the regulation of your force production capacity. Others include your emotional state, your mental fatigue, the amount of sleep you had, your current motivation, and your prior experience; even self-belief and superstitious beliefs may play a role. (Id.) When you have a break in your training momentum and the weights feel particularly heavy, that perception along with your conscious interpretation of the effort (something along the lines of “Oh S**t, this feels heavy!”) may actually cause your central safety mechanisms to kick in and prevent you from lifting weights that you are strong enough to lift. (But see, Anish “Exercise and Its Effects on the Central Nervous System” Current Sports medicine Reports 4:18 (2005) (“The extraordinary complexity of the bidirectional communication that occurs between the CNS and peripheral organ systems during exercise creates an enormous challenge to understand definitively the role of the CNS in the development of acute fatigue.”)) Whatever the mechanism, the experience is real…and awful.

You cannot always maintain your regular training schedule. But, you can ease your return to regular training by trying to keep some momentum instead of taking full-on breaks from lifting. The mechanisms above and our experience suggest that what we are calling a loss of momentum is more due to the loss of regular intensity rather than the overall training volume.

One option is to adapt the One Lift Per Day Program to fit a shorter workout time and focus on intensity: Choose one of your main lifts to train that day and work up to a heavy single. This doesn’t have to be maximum effort or a new PR, but it needs to be challenging for the day for 1 rep. If you finish and know you could have performed 2 or 3 more reps, it was too light. Then for a decent amount of training stress, follow the heavy single with some back off sets. One to two AMRAP sets at about 80% of the heavy single will usually do the trick. Keep 1-2 reps in the tank.
(don’t kill yourself with the AMRAP sets). This isn’t a long-term training plan, but it is an adequate stop-gap to prevent the kind of neuromuscular losses during short-term interruptions to your training. You will be thankful when you return to normal training and don’t feel like you lost a month of progress during your week-long vacation.