Motivation and Social Support in Weightlifting: A Coach's Perspective

By

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Abstract

This narrative review examines the benefits of motivational support in sports and academically related skills. The purpose of the review is to explore the results of social and professional influences on classroom and athletic endeavors. Many, but certainly not all, individuals come to the gym or classroom motivated to improve themselves. Their initial motivation may or may not be strong. This article takes a coaching perspective in examining social and technical effects on the development and nurturing of motivation through positive and negative input from coaches, teachers and family.

The review forms a comparative investigation of social motivation; however, the primary focus is on serious weightlifting. The author uses data from research, the words of successful competitors and personal experience in three case studies. The first two examine events in academia. The third and main study follows one athlete's growth from novice to experienced intermediate lifter. All three are intended to illustrate factors and techniques affecting motivation in positive and negative ways.

Findings indicate that socially assisted motivation through positive feedback is helpful and often necessary for both physical and mental development in any discipline and at any age, and that techniques can transfer from one area to the other. The article is not meant as an end in itself but rather as a stimulus for further research and discussion. The emphasis and suggestions focus on helping interested, prospective athletes reach their full potential and not just "get in shape."

I am a former powerlifter with a shelf of regional titles and one state weightlifting title, all in the 148 and 165 pound weight classes, and I have coached competitive powerlifters and university level varsity athletes. I have also served as a judge at powerlifting meets. The other day, my wife, a cancer survivor with a bodyweight of 115 pounds and less than two years of experience, beat me in the leg press, and I was happy about it. The main question is not really How much did she lift? or How did she win?, but rather: *How did she get to that point, and how can other novice lifters achieve similar success*?

"A coach is someone who tells you what you don't want to hear, who has you see what you don't want to see, so you can be who you have always known you could be."

Tom Landry, former head coach of the Dallas Cowboys
250 career wins
20 consecutive winning seasons
13 Division titles
2 Super Bowl wins

Disclaimer—-*This report is in no way meant as a guide for coaching the typical lower level client: the casual, Selfie* (Look at me; I'm in the gym!) *type in questionable or worse physical condition and with dubious long-term exercise intentions. Although nice, friendly people, I have no experience working with those individuals. I have neither been in that group nor coached them. My first sports coaches were old-school, hard-nosed football players and varsity level track and wrestling athletes, and I benefited from their teaching. In a sense, I started by diving into the deep end. My only "clients" have been fellow powerlifters, bodybuilders, varsity athletes and healthy novices with serious objectives. The following is also not intended as a guide for coaching the elderly (referring to the state of mind and body, rather than age), acute care therapy patients or the disabled. Although those groups definitely warrant assistance—and many have done well—I have no experience coaching them either. Anyone in questionable physical condition with strong aspirations to work hard at weightlifting or aerobics should get a* **knowledgeable** *doctor's clearance before starting a program as well as a follow-up physical exam a few months into the first training cycle—and should consider themselves admirable*[1]*. Certified personal trainers in the United States should judiciously follow (or at least read) the NSCA Strength and Conditioning Professional Standards and Guidelines when dealing with paying clients to keep your ass out of trouble.*

Motivating Those with Potential

Glimpsed from outside the weightroom, most people probably see lifting as an individual endeavor. They may notice partners, couples or football teams working out together, but, for the most part, they see lifters slam the iron in their solitary routines, each closed within his or her own specific objectives, similar to the way they think of writers. Athletes do and should motivate themselves is a common belief. That may work for some of the athletes, some of the time. In my experience, a majority of athletes, whether they admit it or not, live more akin to John Donne's words: "No man is an island, entire of itself."[2] Mike Clancy says, "Even the most educated and experienced health professional utilizes some sort of social support" (Par.6). Consciously or not, many serious athletes at any level (myself included), but especially novices " (Anshel Par. 8), rely on others for motivation or inspiration at least to some degree, and positive or negative feedback can affect performance and achievement.

My wife Liz Marbella began as a sedentary individual with no significant weightlifting or aerobic experience. She had only a basic desire to share an activity with me and perhaps to improve her physical condition and reduce her job related stress a bit. She showed no clear motivation beyond what teachers refer to as achieving the minimum passing grade, but she demonstrated a lot of physical potential. Many coaches and teachers encounter untrained but interested people in similar circumstances. Herein lies the challenge: to motivate them to higher goals.

A Short Literature Review

Motivation forms one crucial key to psychological training. Jim Taylor, PhD says, "Motivation is the foundation of all athletic effort and accomplishment" (Par. 1). That may sound like a personal problem, something athletes should have when they enter the gym or should build on their own. So, how does motivation relate to coaching? "Simply, the coach's role is to create the environment and to provide the opportunity for the athlete to express their motivation in all that they do" (Goldsmith 38).

A solid text to begin study of the concept is Aiden P. Moran's book *Sport and Exercise Psychology: A Critical Introduction,* 2004. Moran covers topics including mental toughness with full chapters on motivation and goal

setting, staying focused and mental imagery. Another good overview is Alan Kornspan's book *Fundamentals of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 2009. A reviewer says, "Rather than focus on theory and concepts, this text answers basic questions for newcomers to the field by providing information on what sport and exercise psychology is and what it has to offer." It also has an interesting first chapter on the history of sport psychology from the 1900s to the 1990s.

For a more weightlifting specific text, one, among many, *must read* (I hate that term, although relevant here) book is *The Poliquin Principles* (1997) by Charles Poliquin. Poliquin is a well-known coach renown for using weightlifting techniques to help not only those in the elite levels of the iron sports but other athletes earn medals in Olympic sports such as track and speed skating. You may have to take his book with a grain of salt if you are heavily into aerobics or circuit training: "The problem is that the aerobically fit individual is normally weaker and usually has the physique of a pre-pubescent tropical fish breeder. It's also been my experience that these individuals (dare we call them athletes?) tend to rush between heavy sets to maintain a high heart rate" (33). There is controversy everywhere. An excellent book focused on nutrition is *Everything You Need to Know about Fat Loss* (1997) by Chris Aceto. The title is a bit restrictive because it covers more than just fat loss. The book has sections on carbohydrates, protein and fat, as well as insulin resistance, thermogenesis, eating habits and exercise.

Many articles (see **References**) suggest personal motivational strategies such as setting small goals, finding a good workout partner, watching motivational videos, etcetera, all good ideas. For example, in her article, Jamie Eason opens with the informative suggestion: **"Everyone is motivated a little differently. Learn what type of motivation best suits you and then use that knowledge to attack your awesome fitness goals!"** Jackson Yee considers music as a motivational tool in "The Simple Trick That Will Skyrocket Your Motivation." It is not exactly what you are probably thinking. Jim Taylor's article also lists some of these motivational strategies, including a discussion of the concept of *The Grind*, the point where many potential athletes quit.

A very significant article is Michael Berg's profile of RSP-sponsored athlete Kieon Dorsey. Berg says, "Kieon Dorsey is living proof of what can be accomplished through sheer will and hard work" (1). The most impressive motivational article comes from a story by Animal on Frank McGrath who returned to professional bodybuilding from both a torn—and initially misdiagnosed—biceps tear and then a near-fatal automobile crash: "Backing It Up: Back Training and Motivation with Frank McGrath." The accompanying video is also worth a watch.

An excellent article directed toward coaches is Wayne Goldsmith's "The Ten Habits of Highly Effective Coaches." Although it seems to address nearly every sport except weightlifting, it does give good advice on principles applicable to all athletic coaches.

Background

Coaching or learning any skill, be it weightlifting or writing for instance, requires more than teaching or mastering the basic lifts and nutrition or, in writing, paragraph structure and grammar. Essentially, "The coach [or teacher] is responsible for engaging, contributing and influencing the atmosphere of the organization and program" (Tyler 2). There are further considerations. **A strength coach would find it advantageous to have a current and at least basic knowledge of the human body, including studies in anatomy, exercise physiology, nutrition, biology, biochemistry, bioenergetics and biomechanics[3], as well as some competitive experience in the sport,** whether it is technically legal in your country to discuss any of these topics with official, paying clients or not**.**

Similarly, a writing teacher formally educated in grammar, structure, literature and style who has also published can teach the skill better than one who only holds a degree. I have seen this personally many times from both sides of the classroom, as it were. **It also helps for the weightlifting coach to have some experience in other tangentially related sports such as football, boxing, tennis, gymnastics, wrestling, track or martial arts.**Finally, experience or research in the psychological aspects of training, the focus of this article, is important.

The necessary psychological attribute of **motivation** arises from several factors such as confidence, encouragement, positive social feedback, discipline, focus, and education.

Coaching helps with these factors. However, more is needed. **"Creativity is the defining difference between good coaches and great coaches"**(Goldsmith, *Ten Habits* Par. 11). This creative dynamic is needed to instill or enhance these psychological factors by getting untrained athletes or students to first believe in themselves, and then to set standards higher than they thought possible. One of the coach's jobs is to nurture that belief and to know what the athlete or student *can* do—-short of injury or embarrassment—-and to coax that level of performance from the athlete or student.

For coaches to instill that belief takes honest confidence in the athlete or student and reachable challenges. Few if any novice lifters are going to squat double bodyweight for reps or look like Ronnie Coleman or Cory Everson in a couple of months, and many beginners see such goals as unreachable in any event. Believing in the possibilities of the process represents an important first step.

The following case studies explore the effects of positive and negative feedback with a creative focus on improving the motivation and performance of athletes in the gym.

Case Study 1: Instruction in English composition and grammar for university level varsity athletes in south Florida (2004)

When I taught university level English in Florida, I also worked as a tutor for the athletic department. Consequently, the head football coach generally enrolled his players in my Freshman composition course. In most of their university classes, the football players sat apathetically in a group in the back of the room, and many professors held a derogatory attitude toward them, expecting little more than barely passing grades.

The fault lay with both sides. In my experience, many of my university colleagues held a low opinion of sports in general and of athletes in particular (not counting a philosophy professor who lifted with me once in a while at the university gym back in Colorado. He had two PhDs and a 400 pound bench press.). On the other side, more than a few varsity athletes thought little of their studies, looking forward to lucrative NFL contracts. Consequently, many varsity football students had low confidence levels in their ability to succeed in class and even less belief in the necessity of hard work in academics.

To overcome those deficits, I had the football players all sit in the front row, and I told them (i.e. challenged them) that they could write at least as well as any other students. Most of them did through rising confidence gained by shifting priorities, encouragement and resultant hard work.

Two techniques in particular helped. For the first, I tried to teach by example. I sometimes read my own work-in-progress to the class, so they could see that I used the same writing techniques that I taught them. Resultant discussions showed an increased level of interest and motivation in the whole class. In the second technique, I

had the practice of reading the student essay with the highest grade aloud to the class, with the student's sometimes reluctant permission. Reading a football player's essay to the class, upon earning the top grade, seemed to ignite a competitive spark in the rest of them; they worked harder, and their performance rose. **Even casual competition boosts motivation**.

You may find that a lot of people do not associate the concept of hard work with exercise and fitness. They think of their gym time as a casual hobby, like shooting pool or planting flowers, and that a quick, sweaty circuit of twenty or thirty repetitions for each exercise will quickly cut fat and build muscle. Exercise is something they do when nothing else calls for their attention (In this situation, "they" often includes family, friends and coworkers.). Time in the gym, focus on the exercises at hand, and consistent, intense effort hold relatively low priority for them, sometimes through a simple lack of knowledge and motivation. Those are the people who skip workouts and spend their time between sets with *Whatsapp* (The first thing I do upon entering class is make a point of turning my cell phone off).

Prospective athletes must be shown that *intense effort* translates to focus on the workout and lifting heavy weight. Arnold Schwarzenegger*, seven-time Mr. Olympia,* says it best*:* "The last three or four reps is what makes the muscle grow. This area of pain divides the champion from someone else who is not a champion."(Scotti, Par. 1). Chris Aceto concurs: "Type 2b fibers come into play at the end of a set. The last few reps are the growth reps!" (*Champ.* 19). In Colorado, when I served as assistant strength coach for the varsity football team, my head coach had me train with the players to show them what hard work, focus and heavy weight mean.

The technique is similar to sharing my writing with students. **Working out hard with athletes—teaching by example—can sometimes help to improve their motivation, lifting technique and expended effort.** The idea worked. Ronnie Coleman , *eight-time Mr. Olympia* , says, "There's no secret formula. I lift heavy, work hard, and aim to be the best" (Scotti, Par. 4). Prospective athletes must learn through coaching and direct observation that results don't come easily or quickly. In his *West Coast Offense* Playbook, Coach Bill Walsh says: "Don't be afraid to work hard, and don't be afraid to fail. We want you to play smart, but also play hard!" (10). The concept does not only relate to sports. Ernest Hemingway is credited with saying, "Writing is easy. I just sit in front of the typewriter and bleed."

Compare the challenge at hand to something the athlete understands. Hard work and confidence can be instilled in any field through education and tough but reasonable challenges. The academic underachievers on the football team had a study table which I monitored. At that time, all composition students at the university were responsible for learning fifteen points of English grammar for their essays. The football players complained that the list was too hard; they couldn't do it. Their attitudes were negative and defeatist from the start. My intention here was to inspire them to apply some of their on-field motivation to the classroom.

I asked them how many plays they had to learn in their playbook. They answered: about fifty. I said that from the time they get to the huddle on the field and hear the play to the few seconds they have to set up on the line of scrimmage and snap the ball, they had remember how to perfectly execute any one of *fifty* plays, and they claimed not to be able to master *fifteen* points of grammar. "I don't believe that there is any one of you here who can't do that." With that challenge, reinforced by positive encouragement, patient instruction, and their own hard work, their attitudes became more positive. They all managed the grammar requirement a few weeks into the semester.

Case Study 2: A California community college remedial course in English Grammar

Sometimes the challenge and work ethic can likewise require a bit of creativity. Several years ago (This would have been 1992–1995), I taught English composition, creative writing, grammar and literature at a northern California community college, as well as serving as strength and conditioning coach for the soccer team. One remedial grammar class that I inherited had a standard series of modules, with one test a week, each with a minimum passing grade of 77 (an odd number, I admit). When I took over a section of grammar, the average grade for each module was 79, barely passing. I asked the previous, outgoing professor about the low scores. He shrugged and said, "It doesn't matter. All they have to do is pass." He taught well, but his methods resembled those of an emotionally distanced clerk or accountant more than those of a motivator or coach. To my mind, a minimum competency level does not indicate a good level of proficiency in an academic course, and it certainly will not result in a productive, much less competitive, level in sports.

The previous professor's low standards and casual attitude consisted of negative input, something that athletes and students can sense in a coach, teacher or family member. Athletic parallels include the resident gym trainer who teaches the new member the proper use of the machines, perhaps explains a decent routine, and then walks away (which I have seen more than once in the higher priced, chrome type gyms).

This same type of casual attitude can be seen also in the fat, weak, sedentary individual who enters the gym and says, "I don't want to get big muscles; I just want to lose some weight and get fit." Low standards, an avoidance of the truth and low motivation produce poor results, in any endeavor. I therefore make no apologies for my politically incorrect use of the term *fat.* Both the remedial student and fat—or abnormally thin—sedentary individual need the same things: tough honesty, encouragement, motivation and reasonable goals to achieve high objectives[4].

At the beginning of the semester of the remedial English grammar course, I taped a sheet of paper to the wall at the front of the class and wrote in marker at the top: *100% Club*. I told the students that anyone who had a perfect score on a module test got his or her name on the list. It was as simple as that: students needed a specific and reasonable but tough challenge. In three months, the average score for the class rose to 92, and the sheet was full. I had to tape two more sheets to the bottom of the list.

During that first *100% Club* semester, a student came to my office with a problem. He was about twenty years old and of Mexican descent, the first of his family to be bilingual and attend college. His problem was that he was nearly failing the class and was thinking of dropping out of school. His self-esteem was obviously low.

The student had the desire to succeed, or he would not have come to my office. Also, he seemed quite intelligent, so I was perplexed. In my conversation with the student, I learned that his adviser had declared him mentally disabled because he was bilingual and his native language was Spanish. Once I controlled my rage, I told him that I was studying Spanish, including grammar, and I asked if he thought that I was trying to become disabled. He blinked at that and shook his head. I invited him to come to my office twenty minutes before every class. We worked on his grammar. Within a month, his grades were above 85% and climbing weekly. I don't recall if he ever made the *100% Club*, but he reached the point where he was helping his native English speaking classmates with their assignments, and he stayed in school.

Both authority figures, the outgoing professor and the counselor, had given negative feedback that adversely affected student performance. With positive inspiration, however, the bilingual student and his classmates discovered a reason to work harder. **Remember that there just may be a future champion, or at least a hard**

worker, somewhere in that bony or fat body(See **Notes 3**). Those remedial students came to believe in themselves and then strove consistently and successfully to achieve the higher standard. **Try a ten-rep bodyweight bench press or double bodyweight squat club at your gym. I have seen them work successfully.**

Be cognizant of hidden barriers to success. Ironically, an interesting negative parallel can surface in the gym. I have noted a tendency—not an absolute, but a *strong* tendency—to allow a goal or challenge to become a limitation. In my experiences as a lifter and a coach, I have watched people set a goal in a lift of, say, ten repetitions. I have noted when lifters, myself included, sat on the bench or setup under the squat bar and focused on those ten reps. Perhaps the lifter achieved six, eight or the full ten reps. Good. However, it is a rare thing for the lifter to get eleven reps. The goal of ten reps has essentially become a *limitation* of ten reps. **A better, more confident, mindset, when a maximum of ten reps is envisioned, might be to try for as many reps as possible or perhaps to shoot for twelve reps.**

It becomes a mind game. The day's goal may be ten reps or whatever at that set, but with a little mental imagery under the bar, the lifter may just be able to beat the ten rep ceiling or hit that super heavy, pre-competition triple. In the United States, I had a friend who, when I was a week or two out of a powerlifting competition, could talk me into making a heavy squat triple. He sat beside me as I wrapped my knees and told me how strong I was and how light the weight was until I felt so motivated and confident that the lift went with no problem. I definitely owe some of my competitive success to my friend Matt's encouragement.

Case Study 3: the first two years of a novice, female's progress as a weightlifter in central México

The case study focuses on my wife's first two years of weightlifting and how positive and negative feedback affected her motivation and subsequent performance in the gym.

The concept of self-confidence and higher standards continues in weightlifting with my wife Marbella's achievements. We live in an area of México with little knowledge of exercise physiology and without the highest standards or motivation for physical development, although there are a few big, chrome/treadmill gyms, including a Gold's Gym, in the area. Let's say that our city will probably not produce a Mr. Olympia, IPF World Champion or even a national lifting champion any time soon. Some here, women especially, are of the USA 1950s era mindset that exercise in general—and weightlifting specifically—is useless, aesthetically unpleasing or harmful.

"You should not stress the body," said a *doctor* in our city, my wife's aunt[5]. My wife Liz Marbella, who had never lifted before, was of the initial, cultural opinion that she did not want big muscles, especially on her back. In fact, during her first several months of training, she refused to do some beneficial back exercises such as dumbbell rows or lat cable pull-downs.

Nevertheless, as mentioned, Marbella wanted to go to the gym with me so that we would have an activity to share, much to the aggressive dismay of some of her immediate female family members, especially the aforementioned doctor and a retired nurse who claimed that exercise was harmful. Not surprisingly, all of the negative comments came from family members who are overweight and have high cholesterol, which they claim is hereditary. (As often happens, my wife's family is divided on the issue, with positive support coming to us locally from a better educated doctor cousin, another young cousin whom I coach in weightlifting and a related family in México City with a son in martial arts, as we shall see later).

Unfortunately, as is usually the case, the early negative feedback from my wife's family members seemed more forceful for a time, specifically in the first six months of our program. Marbella's budding motivation and productivity suffered as she frequently asked me if a given exercise could cause her bones to break. It is difficult for anyone to lift with intensity toward achieving any goal when fearful of breaking bones or getting a hernia.

The issue of negative feedback and induced fear becomes relevant because **support from family and friends is important in building and maintaining motivation in an activity as time and labor intensive as bodybuilding.** "Support from family and significant others at 'key' transitional phases (such as changing schools) was essential to maintaining participation [ín sports]" (Allender, et al. Par. 17). Fishbach suggests "positive feedback increases people's confidence that they are able to pursue their goals, leading people to expect successful goal attainment. Negative feedback, in contrast, undermines people's confidence in their ability to pursue their goals and their expectations of success" (1). I have seen negative social feedback affect many aspects of gym performance including motivation, intensity, appetite, goal-setting, focus and scheduling.

Marbella and I therefore trained alone for the majority of the first year, difficult with mostly negative family feedback. I had been in powerlifting, weightlifting and bodybuilding competition before—and for many years—but, at 59 years of age, I was about five years or so out of the game. My wife Marbella began lifting perhaps a month or so after I did. She had spent the first few weeks of my "comeback" sitting in the gym, watching me and grading her students' assignments, until she finally expressed an interest. She was 42 years of age, seven years after her successful cancer surgery[6]. We had been married for five years, so I was familiar with her medical condition. She had regular check-ups and had no blood pressure or respiratory problems, although her cholesterol was a high 240. The cancer was gone. She drank little and rarely, and she did not smoke.

We are both ectomorphs, so cutting fat was not really a problem, but I was out of shape, and she was a novice, so I started us together on a similar, albeit relatively light, hypertrophy cycle (my fourth week), along with giving her a heavy dose of current education in anatomy, physiology and nutrition. Despite our relatively lean forms, nutrition *was* an issue due to the high-fat food content and poor eating habits of most people in our area.

In addition to the obvious benefits of bodybuilding, I wanted to work on reducing my wife's cholesterol and increasing her bone density. She was, at her age, pre-menopausal; her aunt (the retired nurse who said that exercise was harmful), smokes heavily, has high blood pressure, high cholesterol and osteoporosis; and studies show that in cancer survivors "bone mineral density is lower than normal" (De Backer et. al., 1149).

My wife jumped right into the workouts with me. Despite the universally low cultural standards regarding poundage lifted, even among athletes, Marbella, as the novice, was still about the weakest lifter in the gym. She began to worry about that as well as about negative family comments. However, she showed a lot of physical potential. Potential, while good and necessary, is not enough. In light of her apprehensions about the other stronger lifters around her and especially the lack of immediate familial support, motivation was one of my prime concerns.

Over the course of our first year of lifting, my wife's confidence grew slowly, although she still fretted about other women who were lifting more. That worry actually proved to be an indirect benefit because **she was beginning, on her own, to display a competitive spirit**. I tried to **teach patience with an emphasis on learning the correct form of the lifts before adding a lot of weight**. She seemed to understand.

For the novice, focus on motivation and lifting fundamentals to instill good habits. During the first six months, in addition to teaching current aspects of exercise physiology, nutrition and basic form in the lifts, I

showed Marbella photos and motivational videos of some of the classic female professionals, not too massive by current standards, but formed and strong. I also showed her an interesting, culturally relevant weightlifting video titled "My Girl Is Stronger Than You." Using my own past competitive and martial arts experiences as examples—-particularly in the case of injuries—-I explained the need for warming up and stretching properly before the workout. To her credit, Marbella listened, watched and learned, and consequently she paid less attention to what others were lifting and to what her family was saying. Education and practical gym experience helped as positive turning points in her low motivation.

During that first cycle, we incorporated some aerobics on the off days (2–3 times per week). On Saturdays, my wife did Zumba while I worked out on the heavy bag. Both of us also worked on the stationary bike. We ate better. Her cholesterol dropped from 240 to below 200. Her glucose came in at 87. Her doctor described her physical condition on our program as "Excellent." In addition to the workout techniques and health benefits, I included plenty of positive, honest encouragement, and she responded with increased strength, discipline and confidence. She began to really enjoy what we were doing. Her motivation to work out grew steadily.

Nevertheless, she and I lost a total of over two months of training due to negative familial pressure related to rigid, outdated opinions regarding physiology and nutrition. The failure of consistency in our workouts resulted in a degrading motivational effect as well as a loss in practical weightlifting and aerobic gains. Those lost workouts amounted to ten percent of productive time, sufficient to get a worker fired from many jobs. **Consistency, among other factors, produces results in the gym.** Those who show up for *every* workout are less likely to backslide. "The secret to maintaining consistency is having a social system. Social support has many elements that promote adherence, such as accountability, motivation, and a sense of belonging/influence" (Clancy Par. 3).

Negative feedback, as seen in the academic case studies earlier, can damage both motivation and results. However, positive input can have a beneficial effect on motivation and athletic potential. "My senior year of high school, when I was getting recruited for college, my dad goes to me, 'You can become an Olympic champion.' And that's the first time that I'd heard someone else say that to me" (Ryan Lochte, 12 time Olympic medalist in swimming, www.brainyquote.com/topics/champion). Studies have shown that positive input can affect not only young athletes, but women specifically. "For example, families' positive opinion about women doing physical exercise and the positive emotion that fitness instructors transmit in each session could make women feel valued and respected within their social context" (Moreno-Murcia, et al, 2).

Spend more time with positive people. Dr. Mark H. Anshel says, "Social support is effective only if exercisers surround themselves with people who are positive, optimistic, encouraging, caring and sensitive to their needs" (Par.9). Dr. Anshel's stated condition would be difficult to meet in most circumstances and may be a bit strong. However, his general idea is accurate from my years of experience and observations, including the present case. Making friends in the gym clearly helped my wife's motivation and performance. Entering our second year of training, I enjoyed watching Marbella grow from the weak novice to one of the strongest veterans—stronger in absolute poundage lifted than some of the male athletes---as she and I joined the lifting group. Her improvement was far better than average but not unique. "What is typical is that with the right training and nutrition, trainees in their first year of weight training should always be able to increase their strength and build muscles"(Champigny, Par. 12). The nice owners of *Samy's Gym* where we train hosted a Christmas party that we attended, one example of positive social support. Spending that time with a large group of athletes and partaking of nutritious food (not including the beer, I suppose) seemed to boost Marbella's motivation further.

The cousin whom I also coach sometimes trains with us, and we occasionally spend time with his supportive family. Interestingly, the positive feedback from Marbella's young cousin Adauto and his parents proved

beneficial to both novice lifters. Ten months after Marbella and I started training together (over a Christmas vacation dinner), Adauto came to me to request coaching in weightlifting. At eighteen years of age, he had already participated in high-school football as a quarterback and later in mixed martial arts with the support of his parents. His father, a truck driver, surprised me with his knowledge of physiology, especially in muscle hypertrophy, and on a visit to their home, his mother, Marbella and I got into a long discussion of nutrition, during which she asked several intelligent questions. I was happy to see Marbella correctly answer many of them.

As months passed and her cousin occasionally lifted with us, Marbella, a few months into her second year of training, began to open up more and started giving him helpful pointers which further improved the motivation and knowledge of them both. In addition, and as an unexpected benefit for me, Adauto has proven himself one of the most disciplined, attentive, respectful and appreciative lifters I have coached. He never fails to send me a message of thanks after training sessions. We therefore motivate each other as he also benefited from positive support. A high-school teacher once remarked, "I learn more from my students than they learn from me," which I think a bit ridiculous. Nevertheless, **in the gym, motivation *can* go both ways with astute and disciplined lifters and coaches providing inspiration for each other.**

Lately, Marbella has begun to take pride in showing off her developing biceps to her sedentary friends and family. Marbella actually started to tell me to pay no attention to the negative, inaccurate comments of others, whereas before she had listened to them. That seems to suggest that she is developing positive self-motivation and a sense of self-sufficiency.

Marbella now receives admiring comments from her students and colleagues at work, especially the women. (One positive female colleague of hers in particular—-with a young daughter in martial arts—-has invited us to family functions.) Such **contact with positive people can counteract negative social input.** This phenomenon coincided with the motivation of many joggers of our age group, as expressed by Allerdon, Cowburn and Foster: "Joggers were more motivated by the health benefits of running and the increased status afforded to them by non-exercisers who saw them as fit and healthy" (Par. 22). We both improved in the gym as a result; but although her confidence was growing, she initially balked a bit as the weight got heavier.

Get novice lifters used to heavy weight as soon as possible. "Heavy weights is the most basic stimulus causing **maximal muscle fiber recruitment**" (Aceto Championship…112). On one particular back day, retracing our steps to a couple of months into the first cycle of her second year, Marbella and I were doing deadlifts. The previous week, she had successfully done 115 pounds for two sets of ten reps. Nevertheless, a week later, she was nervous when I loaded her bar with 135 pounds. She gave it a try, but the bar did not budge from the floor.

I had wanted to accustom her to the heavier weight and use a bit of the *Muscle Confusion* Principle (Weider 1). The technique also relates to the neuromuscular concept of relative strength training (Poliquin 15), which I believe is important to incorporate into early cycles, once basic techniques have been mastered. That day, I was hoping to see her get four reps, but the big plates intimidated her. "Tan pesada," [too heavy], she said.

I told her that was okay and gave her a few pointers to sharpen her form, but when I started to lower the weight on the bar, she said, "Espera," [Wait]. Surprised, I smiled to myself, hoping the time was right. I sat quietly beside her (Sometimes, it's good for a coach to know when to shut up.). We drank a few sips of a carb, protein and water mix. She sat her drink aside and said that she wanted to try the lift again.

After a two minute rest, she stood wordlessly. I repeated the pointers I had told her earlier. She nodded, went to the bar and pulled it with perfect form for four reps. After my turn, she then did a drop set at 115 (about her bodyweight) for eight reps. Her smile told me that she was proud of herself. I was ecstatic. We continued with the heavier weight the next week. In two weeks, she had increased the deadlift repetitions at 135 pounds to six. Soon after, I took her to order us matching T-shirts, inspired by the above video. Beneath matching dumbbell emblems, in Spanish, mine says ***My Wife is Stronger than You***. Hers says ***Strong is Sexy***.

Teach athletes the *Why* of what they are doing. "In order to be a really good bodybuilder . . . it is essential to learn as much as you can about training, exercise physiology, and nutrition" (Aceto Championship… 16). Going a few months into Marbella's second year, the time had arrived for some serious, detailed education. When I coach, I don't just show proper lifting form and tell athletes to eat more protein and less fat and to drink plenty of water. I take the position, influenced somewhat by former *Dallas Cowboys* Coach Tom Landry, that I am teaching future coaches. In my experience, **the more athletes know about what they are doing *and the why,* the better will be their motivation and results**.

Aside from teaching English, my experience in truly educating athletes here in México began in México City, an area only about an hour's drive away but much more progressive than where we live. My wife has family there, whom I love deadly, including a couple with a young son, nine years old, who practices Tae Kwon Do and Karate. Since I was coaching weightlifting and had practiced Hapkido some years previously, the parents Alfredo and Fabi, the boy's grandmother, Jamis a supportive aunt, Marbella and I got into a discussion of conditioning and nutrition for the young boy.

Alfredo, who addresses me as Primo [cousin], much to my delight, asked if weightlifting was harmful to bones, a very different reaction to my wife's immediate family's firm opinion that weightlifting breaks bones and causes hernias. In México City, I explained some things to our cousins about bone growth and absorption, especially during youth, and I mentioned the minimum age for powerlifting competition at fourteen (IPF 14). They listened and asked additional, informed questions. The simple act of holding a family discussion about sports boosted both Marbella's and my morale and motivation.

Fredy Junior's (Mexican spelling) parents had the intuition to know that martial arts did not just deal with kicks and punches, and they fully supported their son and us in our sports. They wanted to learn more about conditioning. In discussing his playing experiences, Chuck Howley of the *Dallas Cowboys*said: "When I came to camp, they handed us a playbook, a big fat thing two inches thick. Tom [Landry] did his best to make us [players] responsible as coaches. He wanted us to know the responsibility of every man around us . . ." (Golenbock 138).

Essentially, my young cousin's parents became coaches to their son, an immense help to his motivation, education and subsequent earning of a youth black belt in Tae Kwon Do as well as a brown belt in Karate. "In longitudinal studies of children between 8 and 11 years researchers found that the mother and father's beliefs about the value and utility of involvement in sport by the child explain beliefs about their children's competence and skills of sports" (Al Sudani 120). The same seems to apply to adult athletes.

When possible, provide current, accurate, reviewable information. On our next visit to México City, I gave our cousins a packet of reputable and current articles in Spanish on anatomy, exercise physiology and nutrition, for which they were very grateful. After my wife's deadlift success, I showed her a more inclusive packet of information in Spanish and English, which she has been reading, not difficult since she is a bilingual secondary teacher of biology. She sometimes demonstrates her expanding knowledge base at family gatherings and in the

gym. Walsh says, “Help each other learn. If you understand something better than another player, help them out. It will only make the team better and other players will respect you for it” (10). One of my objectives has been to bring my wife up to my level in the gym in terms of endurance, knowledge and relative strength, to raise her to the level of lifting partner more than client.

Through our discussions during workouts, as well as program decisions that Marbella now makes, I can see that her rising level of expertise is working to improve her motivation, self-sufficiency and performance in the gym, along with other members to whom I have given similar packets. That has worked as a pleasant surprise for me. Such improvements through education have additional benefits.

“Players have views and opinions about their own performances that can add real value to their coaching program” (Goldsmith, *Leadership* Par. 10). When novice lifters learn enough to warrant having more control over their own workouts (reps, sets, warm-ups, machines to use or not use, etc.), the results can include a more positive attitude, more dedication and self discipline, pride and self confidence, as well as heightened motivation to rise farther. **Sometimes sharing the workout responsibility, when the lifter is ready, can boost morale more than constantly listening to *Do this* or *Do that* from the coach.** In the near future, I intend to let my wife design a complete training cycle for us. She now does an excellent job of planning our nutrition, a huge improvement over the typical high-fat diet and poor eating habits of our area, to which she had been accustomed.

That works well for us and for other lifters who have coaches, personal trainers or nutritionists, but what about the majority of novice lifters who train alone and don’t have the initiative to ask? They don’t know that, in competitive gyms at least, most experienced lifters are happy to help novices hungry for their first trophy. Sometimes, a gentle push will suffice. **Try putting up a couple of signs: *If You’re Not Sure, Ask*** or ***Want Big Biceps? Ask the Guy in Here with the Biggest Arms; He’ll Tell You How!***

Bring novice lifters up to a competent educational level. Well into her second year of lifting, Marbella has, in fact, already started to coach in the gym. Recently, she has begun commenting to me on the bad form and low poundage other lifters are using. Usually, I just agree and shrug, saying that I am retired. It’s really more than that. I have learned that many people in our culture here—outside of México City—either do not listen to advice or disregard it with excuses. Ideas here, no matter how antiquated, are difficult to change. As a middle-school teacher, however, Marbella is a bit more assertive in that regard.

On a recent leg day, we were working on one of the two leg press machines. After urging me through my set, Marbella stepped to the other machine where a couple of high-school age boys, not much older than her own students, were also doing leg presses, albeit at a much more modest weight. Marbella suggested that the lifter up should add more weight. She also told him how much, which I thought an appropriate amount. He said that he couldn’t do it.

She looked up at the boy, who was about my height and bodyweight, not counting fat percentage, and she said in Spanish, “You are bigger than me, and I can lift it. If I can do it, so can you.” The gym where we lift is close to the school where Marbella teaches, so several members are her former students or parents of her students. Either out of respect for her or the challenge or simple shame, the boy set the higher weight she suggested and, with some useful difficulty, lifted it successfully. Marbella came back and sat beside me as if she thought little of it. I was proud of her. She was passing her newly found motivation and education down the line.

Give lifters a taste of competition. Education does not work well without broader experience in which to use it, however. At my (younger) level, both personally and as a college level varsity coach, I found that the best

motivational experience comes from competition. How does a coach instill that type of experience in novice athletes? One effective method of increasing motivation is intra-gym competition. Organization in a meet-like setting is effective but time consuming, somewhat expensive and not crucial (another lesson I learned through experience). As a beginning powerlifter, I learned from national level coaches that informal competition in a gym is possible among lifters of opposite sexes, in different weight divisions or of different levels of experience.

To boost motivation (and add a bit of fun to the workouts), my coaches created a competitive atmosphere by inventing numeric handicaps to account for varied experience levels or took weight percentages to adjust for body weight differentials. For a simple example: if two lifters of different body weights trained together and performed the same exercise at the same weight for the same number of reps, the lighter lifter is obviously stronger. The motivational effect proved significant. We apply the concept in a similar manner now when Marbella and I train together.

We simplify everything to reps. When we do an exercise, she has her weight on the bar, dumbbells or machine, and I have mine. We usually have the same goal reps, but whoever manages the most reps wins. Over the last year, I always came out ahead until one day on the leg press, I got my intended twelve reps—barely—but Marbella got fourteen. Her satisfied grin made my day. Finally, in addition to her other motives, my wife wanted to lift for its own sake: to get stronger. It was the first time that I was happy to lose.

Results

My wife Marbella started weightlifting as a 42 year old novice with a low level of motivation and no previous athletic experience. Over the course of her first two years of training, she experienced both positive and negative social feedback. As with the previous **Background** academic examples, encouragement, challenges, positive support and education seemed effective motivational measures in overcoming the harmful effects of negative feedback. With resultant improvements in strength, body composition, overall health, confidence, discipline and knowledge, she has become nearly self-sufficient in the gym.

Over the two-year period, Marbella's motivation and confidence have risen to what can be considered good for a high-level lifter, and her gym performance improved dramatically. In one family outing in a restaurant, Marbella also demonstrated the positive effects that motivated weightlifting can produce in one's life outside the gym. In a conversation about lifting, Marbella said to her sister that one of the best results of training with me is that she now has the confidence to try things that she previously thought she could not do.

Discussion

Limited case studies and isolated examples do not seem to present sufficient scientific or statistical evidence to form broad conclusions alone; however, similar results from the disparate cases lend validity to the review results. My accumulated experiences and my wife's case study strongly suggest that positive or negative social feedback can affect athletic or academic performance and results to a significant degree in many individuals, especially novices and underachievers.

Many such athletes or students go unnoticed until they ask for assistance or actually produce something. Few ask, and production is often difficult without external inspiration. I try to teach by example and with encouragement here where we train. That occasionally helps. Sometimes, someone will ask, "What is that exercise for?" or "What is that stuff you two drink between sets?" However, the lifter asking is generally already

in fairly good or above average condition. One young man, whom I have been advising and pushing occasionally was in excellent shape when we met and has since won a local bodybuilding title.

The silent ones are the problem. Like students with barely passing grades who sit silently in the back of a classroom, many novice lifters may be stumbling through their workouts, afraid or simply too ignorant to ask for help. Both situations can prove harmful to motivation, leading to unnecessary failure. Overall, it seems that more research, education and active coaching participation are necessary to improve motivation and performance in a meaningful way.

Report Limitations

Background data, although from two universities and a community college from different regions, nevertheless is limited to the reviewer's personal experience and is focused on the specific issue of how positive and negative feedback can affect motivation. It neither shows nor suggests the opinions of all, or even most, professors regarding student athletes or remedial students.

The *case studies* are limited in terms of numbers to three. Although two regions of the country are represented in the principle study, this data is also focused on the same specific issue as noted above. Besides asking my wife and me relatively neutral questions such as, "How are the workouts going?" or "Are you still doing your exercises?" most family members, colleagues, friends and neighbors expressed no specific opinion regarding weightlifting or exercise; thus, their reactions were not included.

No questionnaires were administered to non-expressive social, familial or (present, past or potential) academic members or professional contacts.

The principle case study data comes from a close personal contact, also technically an ongoing client and lifting partner, which may add intuitive as well as concrete conclusions to the observations.

For the purposes of including tips and suggestions for motivational techniques and highlighting feedback effects (as well as through necessity), the background data is presented as hindsight. For the same reasons, the case study data is also presented in a mix of hindsight, present observations and future plans, rather than as an ongoing, immediate, observational study in a strict time sequence.

Notes

1. Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, grossly overweight and diabetic, was told by his doctor that he "probably had 'at most' another ten years to live" (Kennedy 75). Huckabee managed to not only lose the weight and eliminate the diabetes through a program of running and weightlifting but also to complete a full marathon.

2. The complete quote with the original spelling from the times goes as follows: "No man is an iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a clod bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee." John Donne (1572–1631), Meditation 17, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.

3. An excellent reference on biomechanics is Nelson Montana's PDF book, *The Bodybuilding Truth*. Aside from informative—and eye-opening—-chapters on the bodybuilding industry, genetics, nutrition, steroids and bodybuilding history, Montana includes several chapters (actually articles) wherein he uses true anatomical function and joint angles to present exercises and routines to enhance muscle growth. Another good reference is the article by Paul Swinton, et. al: "A biomechanical comparison of the traditional squat, powerlifting squat, and box squat." Although obviously focused on squatting, and sidestepping the box squat controversy (I don't favor box squats because of the potential for back injury), the article has a good discussion regarding controlling anterior knee displacement during the squat, which is itself notable for injury prevention.

4. When I first entered a competitive gym in Denver, everyone seemed big and muscular. I thought I was too thin to amount to much. My coach, a rock-solid powerlifter in the 181 pound class, told me: "Yeah, you're bony. But I was fat when I came in here. Look around. Everyone in here started with a body they didn't like. You do what I say, and next year, you will be bigger, and you will place in the top three in a regional level meet." I did; I was, and I placed second. More impressive examples include Jesse Shand who lost 450 pounds with constant help and positive feedback online from the people at *Bodybuilding.com*. The most moving part of the video comes near the end when Shand's mother says on camera, "You are actually saving my son's life."Another overweight lifter since childhood, Lyss Remany, lost over 200 pounds, and she won a bodybuilding title. She attributes her success to the unwavering and unconditional support of her family.

5. This quote by my wife's aunt, the doctor, "You should not stress the body," actually occurred last year in 2017 and not, as you probably imagine, many years ago. Dr. Fred Hatfield says, "Our body reacts to stress by overcompensating, so that it can handle stress again in the future. This principle is why beginners at any sport see great improvement when starting their programs" (Marker Par. 8). Two physically stressful forms of exercise, if done effectively, are the aerobic High-Intensity Interval Training and weightlifting. "High intensity interval training sessions are commonly called HIIT workouts. This type of training involves repeated bouts of high intensity effort followed by varied recovery times"(1). "The incorporation of interval training into a general conditioning program will optimize the development of cardiorespiratory fitness as well as numerous other health benefits"(Kravitz 2). In addition, according to a conference sponsored by The Longwood Seminars at Harvard Medical School: "Exercise plays a key role in slowing bone loss. Muscle is tethered to bone by cords of tissue called tendons. Tendons tug on bones during physical activity. This *stress* [ital. added] increases bone strength and density" (Davis and Arany 10). An effective exercise program to produce this effect is, of course, weightlifting. The guys at *Underground Strength Coach* say it best: "Always aim to break records and that means overload the muscles with heavier loads as often as your body can handle" (3). The well-known *Progressive Overload* Principle (Weider 2) does, I believe, qualify as physical stress.

6. According to *Cancer Care Nova Scotia*: "Though physical activity has not yet been widely adopted as a part of standard practice for cancer patients and survivors, available evidence across the cancer continuum provides credible data to recommend its inclusion"(1). The American College of Sports Medicine recommends "strength-training exercises at least two days per week." Studies by De Backer et. al. support the recommendations: "We conclude that a supervised, high-intensity strength training program seems to be an effective means to improve muscle strength, cardiopulmonary function, and HRQOL and should be incorporated in cancer rehabilitation programs" (Abstract). "In addition, other tissues such as bone also respond more favorably to such heavy loading" (De Backer et.al, 1149). Zack Zieler is an impressive case study of the benefits of weightlifting for cancer survivors: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr-iSvthO90

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