

Strength Hacking Course: Day 6

The “Fantastic 4”: 4 back-door strength secrets for amplifying your strength faster, easier, & simpler



When you break it all down, there are 4 specific physical qualities to train for all-over strength that will carry over into all 7 primal strength patterns, athletic prowess, and life in general. Here’s a brief look:

1. **Ab strength**
2. **Grip strength**
3. **Reflexive stability**
4. **Straight-arm scapular strength**

Individually, these are a game changer for just about everybody. Combined and used over the long term, they will turn you into an unstoppable force to be reckoned with.

So why these 4 qualities in particular? What gives them such power and influence over the 7 strength patterns and human movement overall?

I’m glad you asked! Let’s take a look by breaking these 4 qualities down into 2 categories that ultimately sum up the crux of what is required of you to get strong.

Category 1: tension

Strength training is nervous system training. You teach your nervous system to tense your muscles harder to help you lift more and with greater ease. And because your nervous system is one unit, a contraction in one part of the body will boost muscular tension in surrounding body parts and can even be used to channel extra tension to help out the efforts of “distant” body parts - a phenomenon known as irradiation. This means that in multi-joint exercises, you can get different areas of your body to work together as a team to help you lift more. The key element in this mix is being able to create tension and then use the appropriate amount. To that end, there are two primary areas of concern in generating the most possible tension

1. Grip

As it just so happens, the single largest collection of nerve endings in your entire body is in your hands, so the stronger your grip is, the more tension you can produce to help you through other movements –

from upper body movements such as pullups and presses to lower body movements such as front squats and swings. Old-school performing strongmen and weightlifters instinctively knew this, and as such spent a good amount of their time training their grip to be as strong as possible.

A tightly-squeezed fist is key to any successful strength movement – and the stronger your hands are, the tighter you can squeeze that fist, and the greater strength potential you can produce.

A cool demonstration of this is as follows: grab a training partner's hand and tell them to keep their hand tight. Squeeze your training partner's hand as hard as you can (consider pointing your index finger – this is for the safety of your training partner, not you!). Then, squeeze the other fist. Then add your abs. Then your glutes. You'll notice that with each major "nerve center" you add, the tighter your grip gets – including the opposite hand, since your hands are connected to one another through "nerve software".

What's more, as far as health is concerned, a major study conducted by researchers at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada showed that there is an even stronger correlation between your grip strength and your longevity than just about any other indicator, including some of the most common and reliable ones, physical activity and systolic blood pressure! So getting a strong grip truly means getting strong for life (once again an observation previously made by the old-school strongmen who knew that your grip strength is one of the last areas of strength to go before *you* go).

2. Abs

Most people train their abs simply for the aesthetic effect; they want to look good. And granted, that's a perfectly fine reason to do ab work, but I'd submit to you that your abs will not only **perform** a lot better if you left the high-rep burn exercises behind and picked up a hardcore strength focus, they'll also **look** a lot better, too (provided you're eating like an adult – a skill I'll address later in this issue). Let's look at why abs are so critical for your full body strength first.

Your abs are the crossroads for every major exercise you do. They help you transfer forces from your feet to your upper body in athletic movements – no minor role either, as researchers of "the sweet science" (i.e. boxing) estimate that only 20% of your punching power comes from your arms and shoulders, with the rest coming from your legs, hips, and abs! What's more, just like your grip, your abs have a high concentration of nerve endings, and the stronger your abs are, the stronger YOU are at bodyweight and kettlebell presses, pulls, and squats, ballistic kettlebell drills, and a litany of other badass exercises. Building this kind of core strength hinges on you doing it right, however – no high-rep crunches or anything silly like that. Low-rep, high tension is the way to go.

In much of the recreational strength training world, abdominal training has been knocked down to either planks (a great exercise, but easily outgrown) or simply skipped all together ("you don't need direct ab work – heavy squats and deadlifts work your abs plenty hard!" shout the gym bros on a steady path toward an inguinal hernia).

In reality, direct core work is a must for any lifter looking to attain long-term success (as well as a healthy back). There are a number of great approaches to train the abs:

1. **Isometric exercises** (planks, L-sits, hollow position holds)
2. **Dynamic** (roman chair situps)
3. **Added resistance, via:**
 - a. **Weight** (heavy one-arm suitcase carries)
 - b. **Leverage** (dragon flags, hanging leg raises)
4. **“Feedback” tension** (i.e. contraction as a muscular response to the load, such as in farmers carries or front squats)
5. **“Feed forward” tension** (i.e. contraction made by the mind telling the muscle to contract harder, such as in actively squeezing your muscles even tighter during an exercise)
6. **Reflexive stability** (crawling, dead bugs, rolling, rocking)

I may have missed a category or two, but you get the point. Given that the abs have a central role to play in the functions of both the upper and lower bodies, it stands to reason that they’d also have a wide variety of functions in order to fulfill that roll. Now, you can’t train all of them at once (unless you want to go crazy and waste training time), so your best bet is to focus on the few qualities of core training that are going to give you the biggest bang for your buck. Shortly I’ll reveal my vote for the best exercise to do to make the most of several of these approaches. But for now, let’s take a look into the next major category of strength: stability.

Category 2: stability

For strength success, the name of the game is tension. For movement improvement, the name of the game is complexity. Where the line gets blurred is in a “middle ground” between the two: stability.

Stability is integral to improving your ability to move gracefully and effortlessly, but it’s also critical in helping build mounds of strength, since a lack of stability – be it on the surface you’re training on or within a joint or region of your body – can quite often torpedo any strength effort, whereas a surplus of it may be just what the doctor ordered to ensure your success.

Stability is quite simply the ability to resist an undesired movement. If you stand on one leg and look at the muscles in your calf and on up, you’ll notice something curious: they move around a lot, no matter how successful you are at standing in place! Stability still requires movement, and movement is a skill that can (and should) be trained. For our purposes, we’ll be putting your stability to good use through both reflexive stability – your Original Strength – and scapular stability – a feed-forward strength discipline that will make literally every traditional strength exercise stronger, easier, and all around better.

Let's take a peek at the two stability categories:

1. Reflexive stability

Reflexive stability is your body's ability to anticipate and respond to movement before and as it happens. Unlike most of the strength training disciplines that we're familiar with, this requires quite a bit of "yin" to traditional strength's "yang" – which is to say, much more relaxation and reliance on reflexive activation of muscles. In some ways, it's not that dissimilar to the feedback tension you get when you lift a couple of heavy kettlebells off the ground – albeit generally at a much lower rate of contraction (though not always. A friend of mine told me about a reflexive strength drill he once did that lit his abs up harder than any ab workout he had ever done. But that's another story for another issue...).

This reflexive activation of muscles will help stabilize everything in your body – encouraging your stabilizer muscles to stabilize the joints as they're supposed to while letting your prime movers (i.e. your "beach muscles") do their job of lifting more weight and for more repetitions with greater success. You'll recruit more muscle to your favorite strength drills, vastly increase the cooperation, unlock stiff and achy joints, improve your mobility, and skyrocket your work capacity, while forging usable brute strength for your favorite kettlebell and bodyweight exercises.

Some of the best movements for engaging your reflexive stability come from the human developmental sequence, which is as follows:

- 1. Diaphragmatic breathing**
- 2. Head control** (via moving the head in a variety of directions)
- 3. Rolling**
- 4. Rocking**
- 5. Crawling, marching, etc.**

I was first exposed to these movements through the organization known as Original Strength, which has done a stellar job of organizing and simplifying these movement patterns into a variety of progressions and regressions held together in a system that can be used by just about anyone – from a young super-stud athlete to a 78 year old great-grandmother named Sue (one of my students – my "Sue-dent" as I call her). The net effect from regularly doing these movements is an increase in brute strength, athletic performance, movement quality (i.e. mobility and flexibility), increased recovery, and coordination. It's the ultimate addition to anyone's program.

2. Scapular stability

As movement maestro Ido Portal has pointed out, scapular strength IS upper body strength. The more stable, mobile, and strong you are in straight-arm movements, the greater your potential for massive

increases in upper body strength. Most importantly, your path to dominating even the toughest exercises for the heaviest of poundages is likely to skyrocket. Ido explains:

“Someone who is strong in the muscles surrounding the Scapulae is an upper body strong person in any endeavor, or if he is not yet strong in one specific discipline, he will be able to transform his strength into this new arena after a very short 'transformation phase'. This is one reason ex-gymnasts are able to transform their strength into various other fields after retiring, and very quickly. Gymnasts are the kings of Scapulae control, stability-mobility and strength - in any direction and vector possible. Especially in Russia you will meet a lot of ex-gymnasts competing in Arm Wrestling, Martial Arts and MMA, Powerlifting, Olympic lifting, various Athletic Disciplines and more...

The reason is that most complex movements in the upper body are originating and being stabilized by the scapulae.”

The complexity that the scapulae are capable of producing is great, but the number of exercises and drills you'll need to train it can be made mercifully simple – provided you're focusing on strength and really owning the progressions in each category (which will appear momentarily). In the case of bodyweight-based straight-arm drills (which constitute the majority of straight-arm strength training) the name of the game is leverage – and a small change in leverage can have a massive change in the difficulty of the exercise. For this reason, even at the most basic of progressions, if you do them regularly, you are likely to experience an increase in strength that you couldn't have otherwise prepared for or expected. To wit, some of the best exercises to practice to build straight arm strength can be divided into a few categories:

1. Mobility oriented

- a. YTWL
- b. Scapular control drill on rings (see video)

2. Strength oriented

- a. L-sit
- b. Handstand
- c. Front lever
- d. Back lever
- e. Planche
- f. Straight-arm pullover
- g. One- and two-arm crucifix holds

Now, for our purposes, we will keep the selection of exercises we choose relatively narrow (for now). If you have never spent much time on most of these, a skeleton crew of options in each category will help move you boldly forward without overwhelming you. I do, however, recommend getting familiarized with as wide a variety of these moves as possible as time goes on. At first, however, you'll get the greatest gains from a few choice selections (which will be covered in the Map for this section)