

StrongLifts 3x3

How to Break Through Plateaus And Keep Gaining Strength Without Switching To A Different Program Yet



By Mehdi Hadim

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Introduction

If you've read my StrongLifts 5x5 report, you must have seen me talk about doing 3x5.

Here's how it works: when you're no longer gaining strength on StrongLifts 5x5, switch to three sets of five reps. This decreases the workout stress once the weights have become heavier, makes you fresher and more recovered by the next StrongLifts workout, and thus allows you to break through frustrating plateaus so you keep gaining strength.

I originally discovered this strategy from weightlifting coach Glenn Pendlay. It's him who told me about switching from 5x5 to 3x5 and even 1x5 to break through plateaus and keep gaining strength when using the 5x5 method. And as the last few years have shown, this training strategy has worked for tens of thousands of guys from all over the planet...

...until we discovered something that worked even BETTER...

Some StrongLifts Inner Circle Members who milked everything out of 3x5, didn't switch to 1x5 as I recommended in my StrongLifts 5x5 report. They felt a single set of five reps each workout wasn't enough work. And since they saw advanced Members doing programs that included triples (Korte 3x3 for example) they too started doing sets of three reps.

I've always been interested in improving what we're doing, in finding strategies that could lead to even faster progress, all while keeping things as simple as possible. So this idea of switching to 3x3 in order to bust through plateaus and keep adding weight on the barbell each workout WITHOUT having to change to an intermediate program yet – well it got my attention. Especially since I wasn't skeptical – I was familiar with programs that included lower rep work and knew this worked well for building strength with non-beginners – guys who already have mastered proper form and who are lifting intermediate weights.

So I began to test 3x3 on private clients. And since it turned out to work better than our previous training strategy of switching from 5x5 to 3x5/1x5, I wrote about StrongLifts 3x3 in the StrongLifts Gold Newsletter that StrongLifts Inner Circle Members receive each month. This way all StrongLifts Inner Circle Members became aware of this new 3x3 program and could use it to bust through plateaus and keep gaining strength each workout.

Results we got plenty. Three of the strongest Members inside the StrongLifts Inner Circle used StrongLifts 3x3 as part of their journey towards their 400lb Squat...

- Gold Member Troy Dennis (43y, Canada) currently Squats 410lb, Bench Presses 285lb and Deadlifts 465lb. When he joined us in October 2011, he was Squatting 125lb for 5x5. He kept doing five sets of five reps, adding weight each workout, until he got stuck with 310lb in March 2012. Then he switched to 3x5 (three sets of five reps) until he got stuck with 330lb one month later. Troy then switched from 3x5 to 3x3 (three sets of three reps) and increased his Squat by another 25lb, from 330lb to 355lb. He switched to an intermediate program after this.
- Gold Member Chris Dehoog (45y, Canada) currently Squats 405lb, Benches 290lb and Deadlifts 445lb. When Chris joined the StrongLifts Inner Circle in October 2011, he was Squatting 155lb for 5x5. He kept doing five by five, adding weight each workout, until he got stuck with 285lb in April 2012. Then he switched to 3x5 (three sets of five) and got to 300lb by June 2012. Two months later, on August 16th 2012 he Squatted 360lb for 3x3. He switched to Madcow 5x5 after that.

- Gold Member Cyrus Koewing (42y, Latvia) currently Squats 419lb, Bench Presses 225lb and Deadlifts 375lb. When he joined us in December 2012, he was Squatting 195lb for 5x5. He kept doing 5x5, adding weight each workout, until he got to 320lb. Then he switched to 3x5 and increased his Squat by 30lb, to 350lb. After this he went to 3x3 and got his Squat to 375lb, another gain of 25lb. This is when he hit is Squat PR of 419lb for a single repetition.

Note that these Members are in their 40s. A guy in his 30s or 20s will achieve even better results as he recovers faster. But the point is that 3x3 works for breaking through plateaus and continue to gain strength when deloads no longer works. And there's another benefit: switching to 3x3 keeps your training program SIMPLE. You don't have to change to a more advanced program yet. You can keep making gains using the StrongLifts workout you've already had success with: three times a week, three exercises, alternate workout A/B, add 5lb each workout, retry up to three times if you fail reps, deload if you failed three workouts in a row with the same weight etc... BUT instead of doing 5x5 or 3x5, you do 3x3.

Inside the StrongLifts Inner Circle we call this "milking everything out of StrongLifts 5x5". It's the mindset of keep doing what works. Don't fix it until it's broke. Rinse and repeat. That's why 3x3 quickly became popular inside the StrongLifts Inner Circle: it allowed Members to break through plateaus and keep gaining strength without changing program.

The only problem: as more and more new Members joined the StrongLifts Inner Circle, more and more questions popped up like this one: "What is this StrongLifts 3x3 everybody is doing here?" As well as the classic "Should I switch to 3x5 or 3x3? Which is better?"

So it became time that I create a definitive guide about StrongLifts 3x3 so that all the new Members joining the StrongLifts Inner Circle quickly got up to pace with what the Members who had been here for six months, 12 months, in some cases 18 months... used to bust through plateaus and accomplish their strength and muscle gains.

This is that guide.

The Difference Between StrongLifts 5x5, 3x5 and 3x3

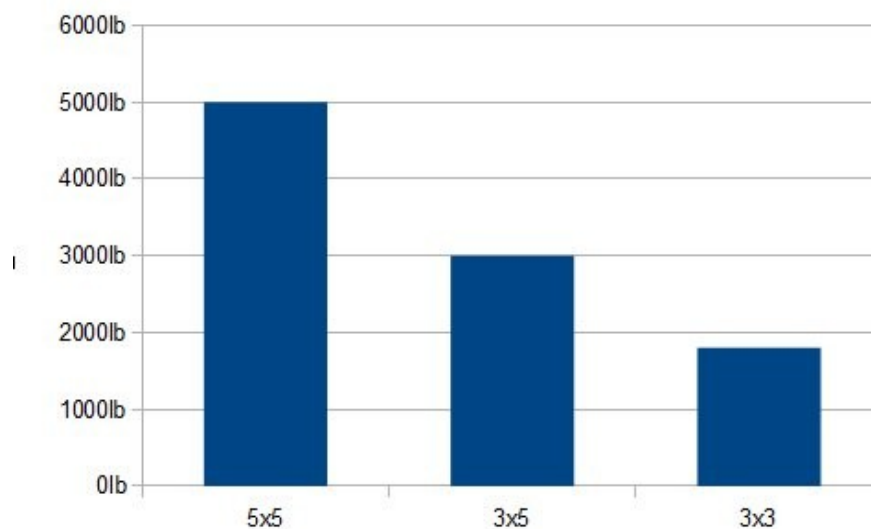
5x5 means five sets of five reps using the same weight on each set, after you've warmed up properly. 3x5 stands for three sets of five reps, also lifting the exact same weight on each set, after you've warmed up properly. And 3x3 is three sets of three reps, with the same weight on every single set as well, after you've warmed up properly here too.

So there's no difference in the way your program will look like. You're always doing three to five sets, for three to five reps, using the same weight on each set, after you've warmed up properly. And you're alternating between workout A/B each workout, adding five pounds on each exercise (or microloading in case of the Overhead Press/Bench) as long as you can. If you fail reps then you repeat the same weight up to three times for that exercise only. And if you still can't get all your reps on each set after three attempts with the same weight, then you deload by 10% for that exercise only and work your way back up.

The only difference is how the sets and reps you're doing changes the amount of volume you're exposed to. Volume is sets times reps times the weight you've lifted. And according to Powerlifting champion Mike Tuchscherer (who Squats 800lb and who I've been lucky to train with several times) volume is the main driver of stress in your workouts. It increases your strength and makes you build lean muscle while burning fat. And this is especially the case for drug-free, natural lifters with average genetics.

So let's say you're Squatting 200lb. Then here's how much volume you'll be exposed to depending on how many work sets and reps you're doing with that weight...

- 5x5 200lb = 5000lb
- 3x5 200lb = 3000lb
- 3x3 200lb = 1800lb



Here's what this means: if you Squat 200lb for 5x5, your body will be exposed to 60%

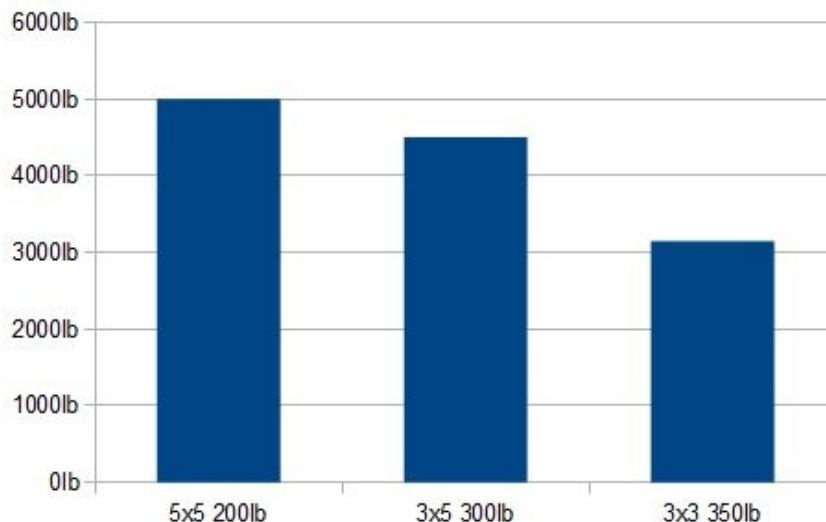
more volume than if you Squatted the same weight for only 3x5. It will also be subjected to 74% more volume than if you Squatted those 200lb for just three sets of three reps (3x3).

And again, as Mike Tuchscherer said, volume is the main driver of workouts stress. It's this stress that gives your body a reason to grow stronger and more muscular. But since it IS stress, your body has to recover from it. With StrongLifts 5x5 you always have at least a day off after each workout for your body to recover. 4 days off each week. And in the first 12 weeks of StrongLifts 5x5 most guys will find this to be enough recovery between two sessions to do 5x5 with 5lb more than last time.

However, every guy eventually reaches a point where the last workout was so stressful that they aren't full recovered by the next workout where they have to lift 5lb more. Many factors influence when you'll reach this point, more on that later, but what's certain is that sooner or later, you'll miss reps because you aren't full recovered yet.

You could take extra days off between two workouts – two days off instead of just one. But that would not just lower your total training volume, it also decreases frequency. Better is to stick with your regular schedule but just drop the volume. How? By switching to 3x5 and 3x3. This drops the volume by 60 to 74%. It thus reduces the stress of your workouts by more than half. And so it also lowers the time you need to fully recover between two workouts. The result: you arrive fresher the next workout...

... for a while. Because the weight on the bar will continue to increase every workout, and thus also increase the amount of volume you're exposed to. Eventually the volume will get excessive as well even when you switched from 5x5 to 3x5 or 3x3.



As the above graph shows:

- 5x5 200lb is 5000lb
- 3x5 300lb is 4500lb – now only 10% less volume
- 3x3 350lb is 3150lb – now only 37% less volume

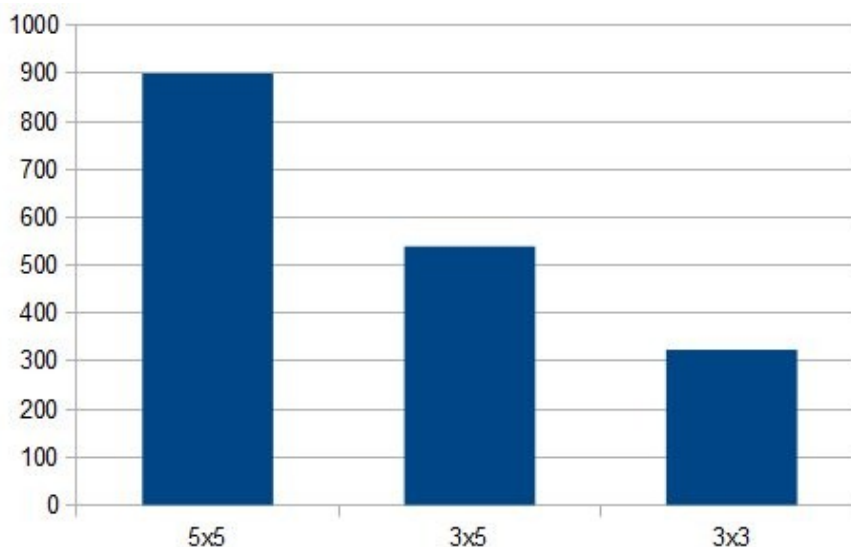
The point is that when you switch from 5x5 to 3x5, you'll be able to get all your reps, bust through plateaus and keep adding weight each workout because you dropped the volume by 60%. But that volume will increase again as the weight on the bar increases. Eventually it will get close to what it was right when you switched from 5x5 to 3x3. On top of that, the weights you're lifting are now much heavier as well. This can cause fear of heavy weights which also acts as a stressor. So you're getting double the stress now:

- Stress from the volume: sets x reps x weight lifted
- Stress from the intensity: psychologically arousal from lifting that weight

And this is why eventually you'll start missing reps on 3x5 just like you did on 5x5. That's also why starting out with 3x5 because *"5x5 3x/week will cause overtraining"* is bullshit piled high and stinking strong. One, because you WILL get stuck on 3x5 as well sooner or later because it will also lead to excess volume as I showed previously.

Two, 5x5 3x/week isn't too much volume when you start out with the frigging empty bar. You should have no issue adding weight every workout on your Squat during the first eight weeks at the very least. Heck, most never miss a Squat rep during the first 12 weeks of StrongLifts 5x5. But let's assume for a second that it was actually causing "overtraining". If that was the case, then I think that after six years of teaching StrongLifts I would have gotten the memo and changed the frigging program we were using. But I didn't because it has and continues to work for thousands of Members worldwide. 5x5 has been proven to work for Reg Park and many others well before StrongLifts even existed. Don't believe that crap about 5x5 3x/week causing overtraining. The guys who claim that are *"undertraining"*.

Three, the most important one, proper form is key to gaining strength and muscle without getting injured. And the quickest way to master proper form is to do more reps. Doing 5x5 Squats three times a week totals for 300 Squat reps a month (that's not even including the warmup). On 3x5 you'd only get 180 Squat reps. That means that after 12 weeks, the guy doing 5x5 will have Squatted 900 reps while the 3x5 guy only 540 reps and the one on 3x3 barely 324 reps. Check the huge difference in how much practice you get with each...



The guy who started out doing five sets of five reps will have better form to show for after twelve weeks than the guy on 3x5 because the former did more reps. And this is especially true for guys who aren't natural when it comes to the Squat, who don't want to get injured, and who are learning proper form on their own – without hands-on feedback from a coach. These are the guys who'll benefit the most from the almost double amount of reps on 5x5 because it gets them a ton more Squat practice than 3x5 or even 3x3 does.

Arnold Schwarzenegger would agree by the way: in his last book *“Total Recall”* he called this strategy *“reps, reps, reps”*. There are no shortcuts. Everything is a matter of repetition. And this is especially true when it comes to mastering proper form which, as a reminder, is THE foundation to gaining strength and muscle. There's no way you're going to get strong if your form sucks. You need good form because you'll use your muscles more efficiently to lift the weight, all without hurting yourself. But for that you need practice. You need reps. And that's why doing 5x5 is superior to 3x5 or even 3x3: you have more total reps to practice and master good form. That's also why you should always start out with 5x5.

Anyway, so eventually 3x5 will no longer work either. Its volume will turn excessive and you'll start missing reps because your body isn't fully recovered by your next workout. Here too how much weight you'll be lifting by then depends on too many factors (more on that later in this book) for me to come up with a rule that I know you'd like me to come up with. What's sure is that if you fail to get five reps on all three sets on an exercise, even after retrying that same weight for that exercise for up to three workouts, and you've now have to deload for the second time... then it's time for 3x3.

There are a several reasons why 3x3 is so efficient for busting through plateaus and for adding 5lb on the bar every workout for a few more weeks. The reasons...

1. As the charts show, switching to 3x3 drops the volume which results in less stress. So you'll feel fresher next workout, get all your reps this time and be able to add five pounds each workout for a few more weeks.
2. You're only doing three reps per set instead of the previous five. The less reps you do during a set, the less fatigue sets in and thus the heavier the weight you can lift. This is why you can lift a heavier weights when doing five reps than 8 reps. And this is also why you can lift heavier weights when doing 3 reps instead of five. You'll be able to lift weights closer to your one repetition max (1RM) by doing triples.
3. You'll find yourself “grinding” less when doing sets of three reps than with fives. This is because, again, fatigue sets in as you do more reps. But since each set only lasts for three reps now, you're cutting it short before fatigue has time to creep in. This leads to less grinding which is otherwise tough on your recovery.

One drawback is that you aren't getting a lot of reps to practice technique when you are only doing sets of three reps. However, by this time you should be lifting for several months and have gotten enough reps under your belt to have good enough form.

7 Deadly Mistakes That Will Make You Hit Plateaus Before You Should

Many guys want to know the exact weight they should be lifting before they can switch from StrongLifts 5x5 to 3x5 and 3x3. These kind of questions routinely pop up inside the StrongLifts Inner Circle with Members wondering when other guys dropped the volume. I've even been asked for a formula to determine the right time to switch to 3x5 and 3x3.

And I wish I could come up with hard rules and formulas, but so far I haven't been able to find something that would work. The reason for this, as I wrote earlier, is that MANY factors influence failing reps and the need to deload/drop the volume. In a lot of cases the volume isn't excessive *yet*. Instead, it's the lifter who is making one or several of the seven deadly mistakes listed below, mistakes that could rob you of the gains you could really achieve...

1. **Using Bad Form.** You're going to have a hard time reaching a 300lb Squat if you go down on each rep in a straight line with your knees traveling forward. You can't engage your stronger hip muscles this way, and so it shouldn't be surprising if you plateau at lighter weights than other guys using the hip bounce technique. Worse, letting your knees travel forward stresses your knees which can lead to pain, injuries and skipped workouts. That's why proper form is crucial on every exercise: it allows you to use your muscles to their full potential, achieve better leverages and thus lift heavier weights without plateauing early on or hurting yourself.
2. **Neglecting to Mobilize.** Sitting behind a desk all day will tighten your hip muscles. This will in turn make it almost impossible for you to Squat down with your hips going back. Instead, your knees will want to travel forward/in which is inefficient and dangerous. Again, proper form is crucial to lifting big weights without hitting plateaus early on. But it's hard to lift with proper form if lack of flexibility is holding you back.
3. **Not Sleeping Enough.** You need 8h/night on average for optimal recovery. It's okay to sleep less on some days, you can actually get away with less than 8h/night if you nap for 30mins during the day. But chronic lack of sleep will hurt your progress. From my experience, it's especially a motivation killer that prevents training hard.
4. **Under-eating.** Your body needs lots of high quality food in order to recover between workouts. As a thumb of rule: you need about 16xbw in calories – so if you're about 75kg like me, that's $75\text{kg} \times 2.2 = 165\text{lb} \times 16 = 2650$ calories. There's a big chance that you're taller and weigh more than me, so you're most likely going to need closer to 3000 calories a day just to MAINTAIN your weight and fuel your workouts. Forget about achieving spectacular strength gains on a 1200cal/day diet.
5. **Doing Excess Cardio.** You're already Squatting three times a week. So when will your legs recover if you're doing 30mins cardio on your off days? Right, they are never going to recover fully because you're training them almost every day. So it's no surprise that guys who started out later than you, but who aren't doing any kind of cardio on their off days, end up passing you by.

6. **Lifting Slow.** Forget about “time under tension” and similar bodybuilding crap. It's not “feeling the muscles” that matters for building muscle. It's lifting heavy – more strength is more muscle. And in order to gain more strength, you have to accelerate the bar as fast as you can on the way up because this recruits more muscle fibers. It ain't cheating, it won't get you injured. It's training smart.
7. **Rushing Workouts.** You won't become strong if you care more about getting out of the gym quickly than achieving your reps. Rushing your workouts by taking little rest between sets works when the weights are still light. Check the StrongLifts youtube channel, I'm doing the StrongLifts workout A/B in less than 30 mins each. But as you get stronger, as the weights get heavier, you'll need up to 5 mins rest between sets. You can even wait up to six seconds at the top of your rep before going for that last hard rep that you feel like you might be able to get. Don't rush it.

Notice that I didn't mention the usual excuses: age and genetics. Of course a guy in his 50s doesn't have the same recovery ability than a guy in his 20s. Similarly, guys with long arms as I have aren't built to Bench big weights. Yet we have Members like Peter Rideout who are Squatting 400lb in their 50s. I have long arms, my 250lb bench sucks compared to my 419lb Squat, but it's still stronger than average.

More important: what can you change about your age and genetics anyway? Right, you can't change anything about it. So you're either going to be the guy who gives up and talks himself into believing he's okay with the way he looks/how strong he is, even though deep down he really isn't... OR, you're going to stop making excuses, play the cards you've been dealt and give it your best. That means stop focusing on what is outside of your control – your age, genetics, built, whatever – and focus on what you CAN control: all the seven factors I listed above. The same factors that are in most cases the REAL reason why so many guys hit plateaus way earlier than they really should.

While we're at it: I've noticed that when guys aren't blaming their age and genetics for their lack of progress, then they're blaming the training program they're doing. It can't be that their form is all over the place, it must be the program that is no longer working....

Well guess what? You can change training program faster than you change underwear, but if your form sucks, you'll get stuck eventually anyway, regardless of the shiny program of the month, because you didn't fix the true cause of the plateaus you hit – that bad form.

This is why it's crucial to take a honest look at yourself and check that you are indeed lifting with proper form. There's always room for improvement, 13 years in I'm still working on my technique. So post a form check. Let Members give you advice on what you could do better. Start doing mobility work every day. Get more sleep. Eat more whole foods. Drop the cardio on your off days and focus on StrongLifts SOLELY for now. Accelerate that bar as fast as you can. And rest up to 5mins between hard sets to make sure you get all your reps. Only when you've done all of this and you're still not breaking through plateaus should you start considering switching from StrongLifts 5x5 to 3x5 or 3x3.

Let's talk about that.

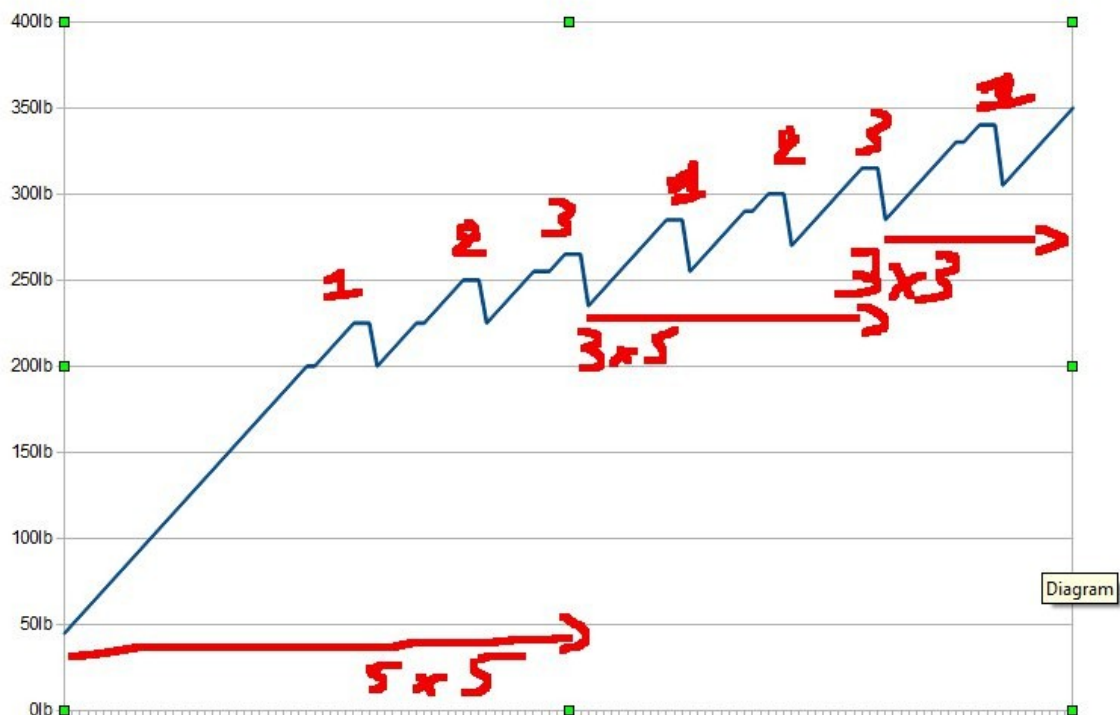
When Should You Switch to 3x5 and 3x3?

Again, too many factors influence how long you can add weight each workout without having to switch to 3x5 or 3x3. So don't look for target weights to hit, don't worry about how far another Member was able to take his Squat for 5x5 for. Instead, focus on your own progress to determine when it's time to switch from StrongLifts 5x5 to 3x5/3x3.

Here's how:

- If you fail to get your reps => repeat that weight next time
- If you fail 3x in a row with the same weight => deload 10% on that lift only
- If this is your 3rd deload on 5x5/3x5 => switch to 3x5/3x3 for that exercise only.

The graph below shows how your progress on an exercise will look like if excess volume is the ONLY thing holding you back from getting your reps and gaining strength.



You can see straight progress from 45lb to 200lb for 5x5. Missed reps there, but you got it the next workout so you keep adding weight each workout. Until you reach 225lb – fail to get 5x5 three times in a row for that exercise, so you deload by 10% for that exercise only, going back to 200lb. From there you add 5lb each workout again. And you fail reps with 225lb, repeat the weight the next workout and get it this time. So you keep adding weight until you get to 250lb. Here you fail to get all your reps even after retrying that same weight the next workout you do that exercise and the workout there after. So you deload for the second time, taking 10% off the bar for that exercise only, going back to 225lb.

Once again you add weight each workout, fail to get your reps two workouts in a row with 255lb, but then make it the third workout. So you keep adding weight, no deload. But then at 265lb you fail to get all your reps three workouts in a row, so you deload by 10% for that exercise to 235lb. However, since this is now the 3rd time you deload for that exercise, you switch from 5x5 to 3x5 – three sets of five reps – for that exercise only.

The progression is exactly the same from here on. Add weight each workout, if you fail to get all your reps (3x5 now) you repeat the weight the next time you do that exercise. If you still don't get all your reps after having tried three times in a row, then you deload by 10% for that exercise only. From there you work your way back up. And when you have to deload for the third time on an exercise, you switch from 3x5 to 3x3.

This means that you'll be switching to 3x5 and 3x3 on some exercises while still doing 5x5 and 3x5 on other lifts. Most guys plateau on the Overhead/Bench Press first because these use smaller muscles. So you'll usually have to switch to 3x5/3x3 on these lifts first. Squat and Deadlift use bigger muscles so you should be able to stick on 5x5/3x5 longer for these exercises. After a couple of weeks, your program could look like this...

Workout A	Workout B
Squat 5x5	Squat 5x5
Bench Press 3x5	Overhead Press 3x3
Barbell Rows 3x5	Deadlift 1x5

It is possible however that you miss reps and hit plateaus on the Squat earlier because of bad form, lack of flexibility, pains, whatever. This is why it's important that you retry the same weight up to three workouts in a row if you fail reps instead of switching straight to 3x5 or 3x3. This is also why it's important to deload if you fail to get all your reps after three attempts instead of switching straight to 3x5/3x3. By going through this process, you have the opportunity to look at what might be the real cause of the plateau you hit.

Similarly, you'll have a hard time finding a lot of training logs of StrongLifts Inner Circle Members who have graphs like the one on the previous page. Most Members don't have linear progress where they only take steps back to drop volume. You're most likely going to encounter more roadblocks like bad form, pains, injuries, skipped workouts, you name it. And this will cause your graph in your training log to show more ups and downs. Here too going through the process of retrying the same weight 3x and deloading allows you to look at what might have caused the plateaus. Switching straight to 5x5/3x5 doesn't.

About The Author



Mehdi Hadim is the author and founder of StrongLifts.com.

He was never born to be big or strong, and never did any kind of sports before he started to lift weights in 1999. Prior to that he used to be skinny-fat, partly due to his coach-potato lifestyle, partly due to this lousy genetics. Many guys will call Mehdi “ectomorph” due to his small built – his thumb overlaps his middlefinger when he grabs his wrist, which makes him fit the description of a “hardgainer”. As a result, he used to be so weak that he couldn't even do a single pushup. Worse, he once lost at armwrestling to all his friends and then a girl. It's this humiliation that motivated him to change his life and start lifting weights.

Mehdi spent the next couple of years trying every technique in the book in an attempt to gain strength, build muscle and get rid of his belly fat. After wasting four months on curls, situps and flies with little to no results, he met his mentor which introduced him to the Squat and taught him to train regardless of whether he was sick, tired, sore, not in the mood or even injured. It's by training with him that he learned to be consistent.

But his real breakthrough came three years later when he stumbled upon the 5x5 routine from Arnold Schwarzenegger's mentor, the legendary Reg Park. Coming from body-part split routines with high reps and ton of isolation, Mehdi was obviously skeptical that it could be possible to gain strength and muscle doing only three exercises per week, for low reps without going to failure. But he decided to give Reg Park's 5x5 workout a try anyway... and much to his surprise, not only did he never lose muscle, quite the opposite, by training for strength, his physique became denser and more balanced. He never looked back.

In 2007, Mehdi's mentor told him to build a website on how to gain strength and muscle while burning fat. At first he was skeptical because there were plenty of bodybuilding sites already, he couldn't write a grocery list in English (French is his primary language) and he already had a stable job with steady income working as tech support in corporate Belgium. However the idea lingered in his mind during the next couple of days, and after realizing that every website was pushing those bullshit split routines that he wasted years on, Mehdi decided to start StrongLifts May 1st 2007. 12 days later he quit his job at corporate

Belgium. StrongLifts.com wasn't make any money yet and he was forced to live at his parents' place because he had no income. Everyone called him nuts.

Yet the effectiveness of Reg Park 5x5 routine re-published on StrongLifts.com, coupled with the simplicity of Mehdi's articles quickly established it as the biggest strength training resource in the world. Today, StrongLifts.com reaches over 1 million guys each month from all over the planet. The StrongLifts Inner Circle is the largest paid strength training support community in the world with thousands of Members Squatting 300lb, 400lb, 500lb, some even 600lb raw. Tens of thousands of people have used the free Stronglifts 5x5 workout to gain strength and muscle while burning fat... without using drugs or supplements and training only three times a week. Go to any online fitness community and you'll find people who changed their bodies and lives using StrongLifts 5x5.

Mehdi's present goal is to help 100 million of guys a year with his website Stronglifts.com before 2017, StrongLifts' 10th anniversary. You can help him achieve this goal by sharing the free StrongLifts 5x5 workout with as many of your friends as possible.

Mehdi has been lifting weights for 13 years now, and although he's extremely busy due to the success of Stronglifts.com, he still makes time to lift at least three times a week. His current best lifts are a 418lb Squat (2.5x bw), 253lb Bench Press and 500lb Deadlift (3xbw). This gives him a wilks of 378 points. By gaining strength, he has gained 43lb of muscle while losing his belly fat and without ever using drugs or steroids. His current goal is to reach an elite Squat (37lb away from doing so) and elite total in his weight class.

Mehdi currently lives in Belgium, not far from the capital Brussels.