



On RPE and Weightlifting

WEEKLY

By Mike Hom

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Recognizing that everybody has different capacities regarding volume of work, I find utilizing the concept of rate of perceived effort (RPE) to be extremely valuable in the world of Olympic-style weightlifting. Before this becomes a generalized statement, I also need readers to

understand that RPE is not necessarily the only approach I use when writing programs.

Without going into RPE as there are plenty of [other articles](#) for that, I'd like to start with how I use auto-regulation as a tool in my programming. For my purposes, my RPE based training programs focus on "mean effort", meaning the average of efforts over the course of a given exercise and over the course of a given training session. Through some experimentation I've found that having the mean effort of any given exercise be in the range of RPE 7.0-8.5 is a good baseline. That may seem a little low for some folks, but this is honestly what I would consider optimal. That is not to mean that I keep folks operating in the RPE 7-8.5 mark and staying there, though that can, and does, occur depending on where they are in their training.

To break it down, I include warm up weights (with the exception of empty bar work) within the calculation of effort, even if the working effort is above RPE 8.5. That may seem counterintuitive, but I would argue that there really is no wrong way to utilize RPE, especially when considering non-powerlifting endeavors (see [Adam Palmer's article, "Auto-Regulation for Weightlifters"](#)). The truth is that with the highest level of athletics, auto-regulation has worked for nearly every sport in one form or another.

Furthermore, I find that even at top end efforts (RPE 9-10), averaging in the RPE 7-8.5 range, just

like in percentages, allows for a maximum balance of good technique with challenging weight that allows for good progress and development in a weightlifter. Are there times for hanging out in RPE 9.5 and stay there? Sure, because I want people to understand the notion of approaching maximal energy output, muscular recruitment, and "emotional investment" into making lifts. But constantly doing that is exhausting physiologically, psychologically, and emotionally. That being said, there are those who have managed to derive many successes doing nothing but essentially maxing out. Ask Ivan Abadjev about it sometime.

RPE is also quite valuable because, just like most of you probably already intuitively understand, it allows people to regulate their volume day-to-day, week-to-week, etc. I have a mix of younger adults and older folks who have different tolerances for work volume. I don't need older folks exhausting themselves on one explosive compound



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movement with set after set, only to then have to drag themselves through a second two-part explosive compound movement. They generally groove at lighter weights until the movement feels and looks good, fast, and natural. Then, they generally work up fairly efficiently until they hit their top sets and move on. Some of the younger kids have the advantage of taking in more volume at each weight, and hanging out in the top end for several sets. All of it works, and everybody makes progress.

Going back to something I alluded to early on in the article, I mentioned that I don't only use RPE in my programs, preferring to still inject percentages if, when, and where it makes sense. I have people max out on certain exercises every time they do them. I continue to expose my lifters and athletes to different paradigms of thinking. But these are generally ancillary exercises to support their main focus, which is generally weightlifting.

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Why, then, do I focus perceived effort on the snatch and clean & jerk?

Here's my take: RPE, like percentages and raw numbers, is a paradigm of thinking. I don't necessarily want my lifters constantly thinking about level of effort, or level of intensity, based on numbers. This is a really hard thing to justify as it is very anecdotal, but I find that people who start looking at effort as a means of quantifying their workout, stop looking at their top end numbers. When they stop focusing on the numbers and start focusing their energy on the real matter at hand, which is the lifting, the perception of effort and numbers start shifting and suddenly, when a lifter is faced with RPE 9 or 9.5, they don't start looking at the weight on the bar and get into a mental war with themselves. They simply look at it and say, "Yeah, I guess it'll feel hard".



As an example, I have a female lifter who started with me a few months before I started implementing the RPE system. When she would approach a certain number, suddenly, her lifting mechanics would completely change. She could have executed a lift 5 minutes prior with 2kg less and it would look outstanding. Put another 2kg and suddenly everything changes. Why? The level of effort in her mind, jumped from RPE 7 to RPE 10 because of the number. This would happen week after week for nearly 2 months. After a few weeks of adjusting to RPE as a means of measuring effort via simply measuring "how hard it felt", she blew past this plateau and then hit a 8kg PR. Now, her progress could simply be attributed to the additional practice and some more of the "novice effect", but she clearly articulated that once RPE clicked for her, she started looking at numbers differently. And, she's not the only one. Almost everybody in my club has remarked that they now look at the numbers differently. They simply aren't the focus. Numbers are nice to know, but they just

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aren't as important anymore. And, when they're not important, my lifters are able to move past them.

Some people I talk to have commented that RPE has a steeper learning curve than other approaches of measuring effort or intensity. To that, I say, "I guess". I won't argue that there is an adjustment period to having someone trust their body and the responses their body gives. Some people simply do not know how to interpret what their body is saying. I get it. It is definitely a learning process, and no one person is the same in how long it takes them to grok the concept. But, there is a proverbial bouquet of benefits that result from someone finally "getting it" with RPE. First, and foremost, they simply know how to listen to their body. If there is anything that I want my lifters to carry with them for the rest of their athletic lives, this is it. Second, these athletes can better articulate when a lift doesn't feel right, for whatever reason. They have better tools to reason out what went wrong and what could have been done better. Third, athletes who understand RPE have a better tools to articulate feedback to their coaches on facets of their training.

I'll close with some thoughts that may or may not lead into future articles, but I believe it is important recognize and acknowledge these generalizations:

1. RPE is a great tool, but it is still just one of many tools that we can, and should have, in our toolbox for training.
2. Enabling your athletes to change their paradigm of thinking leads to a host of other benefits. Effort is no longer weight number juggling. Effort is now its own quantified skill to master.
3. There is really no wrong way to train.

About the Author

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