



The Pitfall Programs

By Chad Hydro

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Photos by [Chad Hydro](#)

It's becoming a cliché to remark on how society seems to be so focused on the notion of instant gratification. As with all generalizations there is most likely a grain of truth to be found within it. One has to look no further than the online strength training and powerlifting communities to find individuals that fit this stereotype. Cookie-cutter programs abound and your next Squat PR is only a run-through of Smolov away.

If you are a novice lifter and you approach an online strength training community for advice they're more than likely to recommend a cookie-cutter program. Essentially, "shut up and lift". This is fine at the novice stage. They're going to make progress on just about anything. The problems start deep in the intermediate phase. At some point the gains are going to stop coming. This is where things get interesting. Several possibilities are likely: the individual will program hop

attempting to find something that'll get them unstuck, or they'll go back and ask for more advice.

It's not uncommon for someone with a stuck squat or an individual longing for that first 3 plate bench to be recommended a variation of the Smolov program. Smolov is designed as a peaking program, a plan with a ton of volume to shock your system in preparation for a meet. These programs come attached with a ton of testimonials on how they helped the trainees attain a 30-50 pound PR. It's easy to see how someone could fall for this trap. The trainee is used to saying "just tell me what to do" and getting an appropriate answer. They're used to getting strong quite quickly. Beginner and intermediate programs have the trainee getting PRs weekly or even daily. By all respects, Smolov appears to be a quick, plug-and-play PR. However, the problems arise after the individual finishes the program, assuming they survive.

Fall in love with the process and plan for long-term success. Don't sacrifice long term gains for short-term PRs.

Volume is one of the main drivers of strength. Over time you'll need to do more work to get stronger. For the longest time my deadlift was stalled. I was stuck thinking that the deadlift was special, harder to recover from. I only trained one heavy set a week. I'd grind and grind up to the limit eking out small gains here or there.

Funny thing happened when I added in some dropsets, I got stronger!

This is why programs like Smolov work. They present you with an extreme amount of volume your body is probably not ready for. It has no choice but to get stronger. However, just as we said, if you want to get stronger you'll need more volume. So what happens after Smolov? Do you think you'll be able to drop back



Training that adapts to you.

to your lower volume program and keep making progress? Maybe. Probably not.

So what's a powerlifter to do? What's a better way to get stronger that focuses on long-term progress? The truth of the matter is, if you're serious about powerlifting and can't or don't want to hire a coach, YOU are your coach. It's up to you to determine what chances are worth taking. Deciding to run Smolov is a trade-off. You're making the decision to potentially sacrifice long-term progress for short term gains, namely a quick PR. This is fine if you make it a conscience decision. However, if you intend to make a go at being competitive in powerlifting it's probably in your best interest to avoid such programs.

There are individuals out there who make it work running these programs. You'll often see them running Smolov or one of its derivatives as their main program or almost like an accumulation cycle. And some can do this unscathed. But what if you could still get strong just with less work? Wouldn't you want to do the least amount of work possible to continue progress?

One aspect to the solution I'm presenting is changing how you view the process of getting stronger. Smolov is a product of the get-strong-fast mindset and getting out of that can have many positive benefits to the trainee. Getting strong is a process that often takes many decades. I'm calling for a focus on the process rather than the goals; the journey rather than the destination. I'm not saying forget progress and PRs, those are of course important parts of the journey. When we recognize that and honor the length and difficulty of the process rather than dismiss it we become a much more robust trainee.

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Since you're the only coach you've got it's a good idea to learn more about powerlifting programming and periodization. Become a student of the sport. Read Science and Practice. Sign-up for RTS Classroom. Invest in your progress and your knowledge. Programming really isn't the mystical process some make it out to be. Jim Wendler didn't climb a mountain and receive 5/3/1 on several stone tablets. Program development requires time, knowledge, and practice like any other skill.

Writing your own programs can have enormous benefits. You become your own personal guinea pig. This is a great way to learn more about yourself; your strength, weaknesses, and the differences that set you apart from others. Start with something simple, something like linear periodization with Daily Undulating intensity. See how you respond and then start making changes. Not making much progress? Now's the time to slowly increase the volume.

Smolov is a product of short-term thinking. If your lifts are stuck make the commitment to education so that you can modify your own programs. Make small increments to your volume over time to drive consistent progress. Fall in love with the process and plan for long-term success. Don't sacrifice long term gains for short-term PRs.



About the Author

Chad Hydro is a powerlifter who competes in the USAPL. He actively blogs at forcexdist.com in order to prevent inundating his wife with training talk. He resides in Fremont, California with his beautiful wife and two cats.