

# SECRETS OF THE STRONG

**ELITE STRONGMEN POSSESS THE KNOW-HOW TO BUILD HARD MUSCLE AND HEAD-TURNING POWER. MH'S RAY KLERCK WENT TO MUSCLE CENTRAL - THE GOLD COAST - TO DISCOVER THE TRICKS OF THEIR TRADE**

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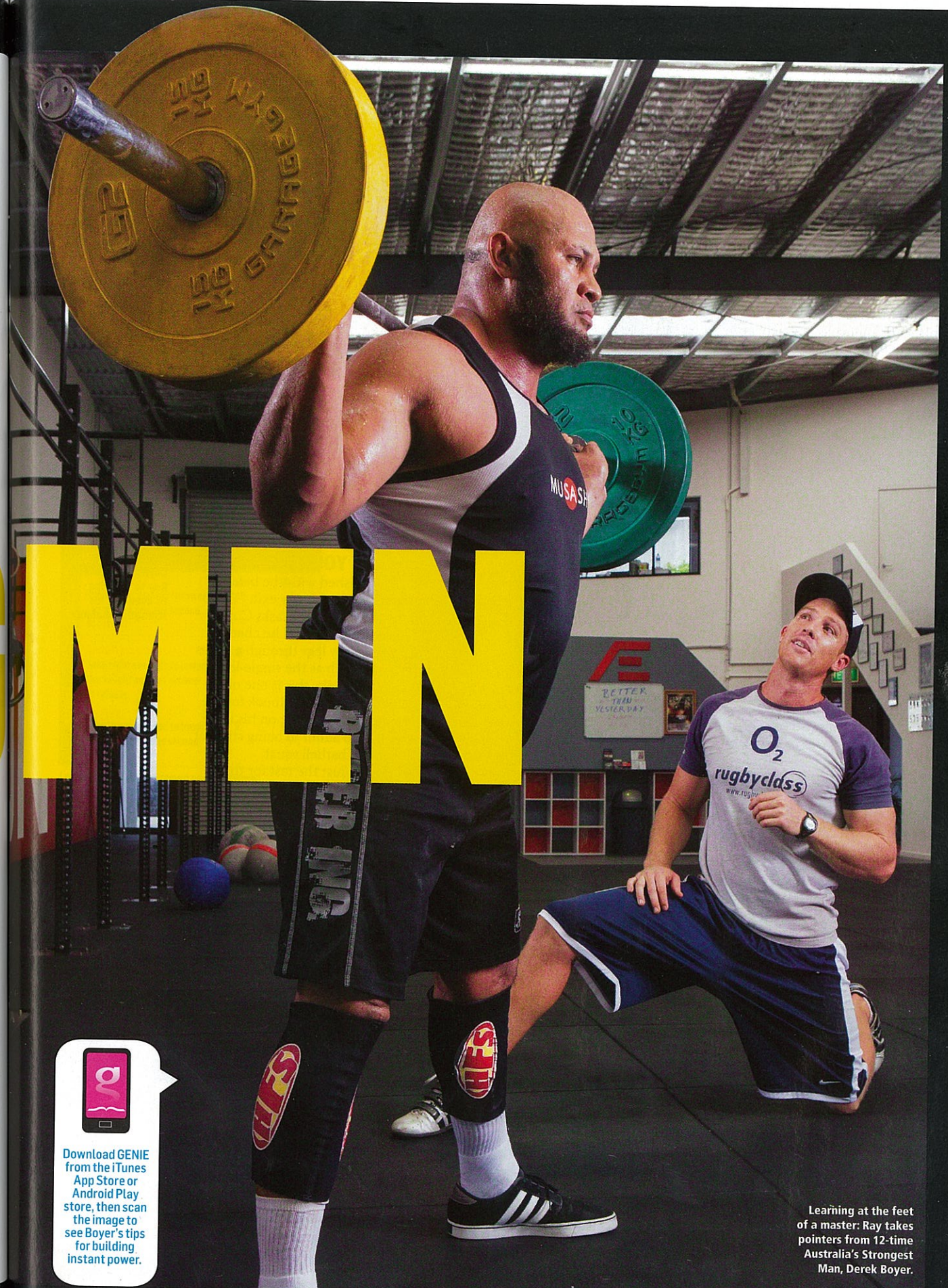
CAN YOU HEAR THAT REPETITIVE thwacking noise? The sound of violence meted out to soft flesh? Unfortunately, that's me on the receiving end of yet another bitch-slap from the mother of all training plateaus.

Today, in my Ballina gym, I'm busting my chops on the 100-kilogram "warm-up" set, before I shoot for my maximum bench press: 120kg. But I'll admit that today 100kg feels agonisingly heavy and, to be honest, it has seemed a little heavier each month for a while.

Here's the thing: years ago, I benched a respectable 180kg, deadlifted 170kg and, well, you get it - I was strong. Begrudgingly, I'm forced to recognise that I'm not that bloke anymore and I wonder why getting weaker feels so deflating. Perhaps it's because strength is so tightly yoked to youth that I'm constantly reminded of the forward passage of time. Whatever it is, I don't like it. It's not like I've given up. I still lift weights five days a week, but my

numbers have become progressively smaller. I'm not alone, either; my fellow gym-rats don't seem to be enjoying much more success. But why is this stagnation such a common scenario? As I try and fail dismally to bench my old maximum, I realise a better question would be to ask how some alpha males can maintain an upward trajectory when it comes to building strength and muscle. Because make no mistake, these beasts are out there, smashing new personal bests every day.

To understand how, I point my car north to the Gold Coast. Queensland's good-time capital has quietly become our nation's muscle mecca, home not only to Derek Boyer - 12-time Australia's Strongest Man - but a host of other incredible hulks with forearms the size of small children. Is it the water? I don't know, but I do want to find out their secrets so I - and you - can become more powerful than ever before. ▶



Download GENIE from the iTunes App Store or Android Play store, then scan the image to see Boyer's tips for building instant power.

Learning at the feet of a master: Ray takes pointers from 12-time Australia's Strongest Man, Derek Boyer.

**BALANCE OF POWER**

First stop is Burleigh Heads, the domain of Joseph Coyne. The exercise physiologist is founder of Australia's only strongman course ([strongmantraining.com.au](http://strongmantraining.com.au)) and also serves as the active release technique (ART) therapist to Boyer, the aforementioned man-mountain.

I'm here because despite regular jaunts with dumbbells, my right arm has always been a little stronger than my left (insert obligatory masturbation gag here). Something feels "off" and I reckon it could be holding me back.

Walking into Coyne's gym, the running track quickly tells me this is an arena for improving performance, not a Fitness First for mass-produced physiques. At 188 centimetres and 97kg, it's not often that I feel small, but Coyne is a genuine colossus. However, I'm pleasantly relieved when, in a thick Kiwi accent, he tells me that my session starts on the treatment table. Result!

"Your problem lies with the neural innervation to your weaker arm," says Coyne after an initial assessment. I learn that's a nice way of saying my nervous system is spluttering like an old tractor.

Soon, he's plugging his fingers into my collarbone, neck then shoulderblades and breaking down the knots. I'm wearing my best poker face, but inside I'm squealing like a schoolgirl. "Your nervous system isn't firing this arm properly and flossing the nerves through the muscle clears this up," explains Coyne. At this point, I'd rather have started in the gym.

After 30 agonising minutes, he tells me we're done and the real hard work is about to start. In the gym he hands me a pair of fat, blue handgrips ([fatgripz.com.au](http://fatgripz.com.au); \$39), which we clip onto the handles of some dumbbells. "These thicken the bar, forcing you to recruit more neural drive in each arm, evening out the strength imbalances between arms," explains Coyne with

a wry smile that stirs my suspicion "They take some getting used to."

Keen on impressing, I shoot for my heaviest weight, but come in 15 per cent short of my maximum. I came here to get stronger, not weaker. Must be the Gold Coast humidity, I reason.

Only then does Coyne tell me I should expect to feel weaker to begin with, but after 3-4 weeks of using the grips, I'll be stronger when I bench press without them. It's like sprinting with ankle weights then removing them to run faster. So although I'm not instantly stronger, I know these things take time and I'll soon have equal power in both limbs.

**USE IT**

**Symmetry isn't just important aesthetically, it's also vital in terms of pure strength. Research in the *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine* found that strength imbalances between your left and right side can limit athletic performance and cause injury. "If you feel one limb is stronger than the other, then you should see a chiropractor or ART therapist who can assess your nervous system for any blockages hindering your performance," says Coyne. Then you can strap on some Fatgripz to even out your barbell bench-pressing power using the chest program below.**

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
WEEKS 1-3 Fatgripz barbell flat bench press	4	8
WEEKS 4-6 Fatgripz dumbbell flat bench press	5	6
WEEKS 7-9 Barbell flat bench press	6	4

Do these workouts twice a week, resting for two minutes between each set.

**IT'S LIKE SPRINTING WITH ANKLE WEIGHTS THEN REMOVING THEM TO RUN FURTHER**



Trainer Joseph Coyne introduces Ray to Fatgripz to even out his strength imbalance.

**PINPOINT YOUR WEAKNESS**

After I'm finished with the bench press, I make for a hasty exit. "What about your legs, mate?" asks Coyne. I reluctantly return and he checks the power of my legs through a series of exercises such as the single-leg squat. Fortunately, this is one of my favourites and I use textbook form so as not to end up back on his table. However, I do admit to being stuck at 130kg on the barbell squat.

"We've got just the test for that," says Coyne. "Since you know your one-repetition maximum (IRM), we're going to get you to work up to a weight that's 120 per cent of your IRM, which you'll lower for eight seconds." He whips out his iPhone, does a few calculations and, smiling, shows me a figure: 156kg. I'm not smiling - I'm gasping in disbelief.

We start with 20kg plates on each side and gradually the bar is primed with successive loads of 115 per cent, 120 per cent and 125 per cent of my IRM. Each time I expect the bar to bend; sadly it remains spirit-level flat. I wait five minutes between bouts and somehow manage to lower the biggest load.

"This means you need to concentrate more on the lifting portion of the exercise so you can lift as much as you can lower," explains Coyne. "If you couldn't do it, then you'd need to work on the eccentric (lowering) portion of the lift."

I thank Coyne and drag my squat-ravaged legs to the next destination, Australia's strongest man, Derek Boyer. I wonder if things can possibly get any tougher. They do.

**USE IT**

The IRM test can be used for most compound exercises (squats, bench presses, shoulder presses, deadlifts), but always use a reliable spotter. Research at the University of Texas found that a program that includes concentric (raising) and eccentric (lowering) exercises results in greater strength and muscle gains than concentric exercise alone. In other words, it pays to lift slowly. "The leg program below is for the guy who can't take eight seconds to lower more weight than 120 per cent of his IRM," says Coyne.

Take four seconds to lower the weight and one second to raise it.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
WORKOUT 1 Barbell back squat Take eight seconds to lower the weight and one second to raise it	6	5
WORKOUT 2 Barbell back squat Take eight seconds to lower the weight and one second to raise it	8	4
Take three seconds to lower the weight and one second to raise it	2	6-8

Leave a day's rest between each of these workouts. Do them all in one week.

**OPTIONAL EXTRA**

Use this program if you can lower more than 120 per cent of your IRM

**Workout 1: maximum strength**

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Barbell back squat Take three seconds to lower the weight and one second to raise it	5	5, 4, 3, 2, 1

**Workout 2: power**

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Barbell back squat Raise and lower the weight as quickly and explosively as you can	5	4-6

**WORKOUT 3: repeated effort**

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Barbell back squat Raise and lower the weight as quickly and explosively as you can	4	12-15



Yep, this is an unevenly weighted barbell, but Boyer has a very good reason why.

**BUST A PLATEAU**

As I pull up to Boyer's gym of choice - Aeon Fitness in Varsity Lakes - I'll admit to a level of nervousness. Standing at 193cm and weighing 134kg, this is a bloke who growls at cars after up-ending them and sports guns as big as my thighs. I find Boyer sweating profusely next to an Atlas stone the size of a small planet.

The former *Gladiators* star doesn't even pause for breath when I ask him about the ultimate way to bust a strength plateau. "It's very simple, Ray, use the 'conjugate method'," he booms in a regal voice. "If you've got an exercise you'd like to get stronger in, say the flat-bench barbell chest press, then for three weeks you'd lift the most weight you can on that exercise's supporting exercises."

For the barbell bench press, the supporting exercises would be moves such as the incline bench, flys or

parallel-bar dips that all work your chest, but not in exactly the same way a flat bench press would. "Basically, you won't barbell bench press at all," explains Boyer. "But you'll do plenty of bench-press variations."

The logic here seems totally counter-intuitive. Boyer is telling me that to get a bigger bench press I must completely give up bench-pressing. Huh?

Fortunately, Boyer senses my confusion - because I'm hesitant to ask twice. "Following the Linear Method that almost every guy uses, you'd bench press a couple of times a week and add more weight each week, but after three weeks your strength gains will level out," he explains. "Conversely, the Conjugate Method has you maxing out on a new lift every day for three weeks and when you return to your normal bench you'll be much stronger." ▶