PREFACE

Training for Stones? Yeah, the REALLY BIG ONES! The Inver, Turnbull, McGlashen and the Dinnie Stones in Scotland. Erik is not screwing around with this article when he talks about building a solid foundation of strength. Get ready to be impressed!

Read on…

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Training for Stones

By Erik Sauve

There’s a mystical quality to stone lifting that only a few get to experience. I have been fortunate to be among them. Have you ever come upon a field in which a solitary stone may lie? Do you have the wonder to ask how it got there, or why is it there? Very few people can see the wonder in this, even less can ask the inevitable question. Has anyone ever lifted this stone? Can I lift this stone? Stone lifting is like life, a simple task, problems arise and you must be able to conquer them and continue. How fulfilling would life be if we merely plugged along on our everyday journey refusing to challenge ourselves? How can someone become better, stronger, faster, or smarter if there’s no challenge? Can you just exist and be happy? If your reading this, then the answer for you is NO. No, I will not be happy just to exist. No, I will not settle for the mundane. I will see the stone in the field, and I will lift it.

So, where do we begin on this journey of stone lifting? Let’s get the legalities out of the way first. Do not, and I mean do not attempt to embark on any serious training regimen without approval from your doctor. That being said, be smart about your training. Train
hard and push yourself but listen to your body. The body is a wonderful machine. It will adapt to almost anything, it will endure so much more than we can imagine. It has more strength than can seem possible. We’ve all heard the story of the woman who lifted the car off of her son. Where did that freakish strength come from? We all have that strength inside of us, in fact, I have read that our muscles are so strong that the only thing keeping them from tearing themselves apart is our mind.

The old saying of the weakest link in the chain becomes evident in stone lifting. You may have a strong back but not enough hip strength. You may have great leg power but are limited by your grip. For stonelifting we need to be able to train, to adapt, to something not meant to be lifted. I have seen 500 lb bench pressers that can’t lift a 200 lb stone. You’ll first need to develop the core strength. You can accomplish a lot with just lifting stones but the body will always fall back on its foundation. Without the strong foundation you will not succeed with the really big stones.

We should go over some simple principles that will apply to our entire training philosophy. No belt unless absolutely needed! We’re trying to build trunk strength and a belt will only limit that. No wrist straps! You’re going to need a strong grip to hold onto stones so why cheat yourself with straps? Leave them for the max attempts only. Wrap your knees when the weight gets heavy. A simple neoprene slide-on wrap will work fine, we just want a little more support for the joint but not so much that it cuts off blood circulation. Chalk is OK, if you train at a gym that doesn’t allow the use of chalk I’d suggest finding another gym. If they don’t want you using chalk you can be sure they
won’t like seeing you deadlifting 600lbs. Keep your body warm, nothing weakens the joints more than cold does, layer up if you have to but stay warm.

Train the weights two or three times a week, this depends on how heavy you go and how quickly you can recover. Here’s a good way to see when your body is recovered enough for your next heavy session. Take a couple of weeks off, every morning during the two weeks measure your pulse before you get out of bed and write it down. At the end of the two weeks, average the measurements, this is your target rate. Once you start training again you’ll find your pulse rate is slightly higher the morning after a heavy workout, sometimes this higher rate will last for a couple of days. When your pulse rate returns to your target rate, or within 2 or 3 counts, you’re ready for another heavy workout. Try to get one day a week of stonelifting, if that means sacrificing a gym day, so be it, we’re here for the stones right?!

Let’s begin with the simple, basic core movements. We won’t detail a specific workout but we will touch on the finer points of a few exercises. The single, best movement for core strength has got to be the deadlift. If you do not deadlift you will never build the back power you need. Typically the lower back is everyone’s weakness, but most people are afraid to train it. Why would you train every other muscle but avoid the lower back? Fear, fear of getting hurt. You will only get hurt if you do something stupid. Again, do something stupid and you will get hurt. I can not emphasize that enough, if you hurt your lower back you will be out of training for a long time. Don’t bounce through the movement, don’t let the weight crash back to the floor, and don’t round your back. Think
of pushing your feet into the floor, drive the hips forward through your arms and don’t
over exaggerate the lock out. Deadlifts are easy to do, grab the bar and stand up. Don’t
over think it, your body will automatically move itself into the strongest position. Let it
happen.

Reps and sets are up to you. Find what works. We all know that no one is the same, yet
we still try to follow the routines laid out in the musclemags. Here are some guidelines.
Cycle your heavy deadlifts at 8-10 week periods. This means after 2 months of heavy
deads lay off them for about a month. When you come back to them, there’ll be a few
weeks of catch up but you’ll be fresh and the weight will feel lighter. Train the deadlifts
every 7-10 days, any more frequent will only delay the gains. Remember we are training
for strength here so no high rep sets, any more than 10 becomes too aerobic for strength.

The next exercise on our list has got to be squats. These are also great foundation
builders, but we need to tailor them to our specific goals. Heavy back squats will develop
leg and hip power but can easily become detrimental. Standard squats can cause lower
back injuries if you can’t keep your trunk solid, and can cause knee problems if you lack
sufficient ankle flexibility. One way to avoid these concerns, and direct the exercise more
towards stone lifting is to perform Front Squats. Front squats will force you to keep your
back as upright as possible, if the weight becomes too heavy it will fall out forward. In
regular squats the weight will pull down on the neck causing the back to take the load
instead of your hips and legs. In doing front squats you will also notice that your knees
will have more of a tendency to remain behind your toes, eliminating much of the pain
that’s caused from pushing the knees forward.

Front squats simulate stone lifting more adequately than regular squats will. When lifting
stones the weight will be in front of your body forcing you to not only stand up with the
weight but pull the weight backward as well. This same feeling is quite evident when
doing front squats. Some people may say you can’t move enough weight with front
squats to be effective. I disagree, if you can front squat 500lbs you’re a whole lot stronger
than if you were squatting 600lbs in a regular squat. We can also push the envelope a
little with front squats, just try doing them while holding a heavy stone on your chest and see how you feel after that. Just as with deadlifts, I’ll leave the reps and sets to you but try to keep as many days as possible between the deads and squats. Push the heaviest weight you can without blowing out the form, remember, stupidity will cause injuries.

Overhead pressing is the next foundation builder. All pressing movements should be done from a standing position. This will allow your hips and trunk to move slightly to offset the weight as it travels upward. When you’re seated, the hips will rock fore and aft transferring the load directly onto the lower back, not a good situation. Barbells, dumbbells, stones, it doesn’t matter, press them all. Work with dumbbells for awhile to get all the stabilizers to function and then change to a bar to overload the muscles. You’ll find you can push a lot more weight after a couple months of dumbbell presses. Good, clean presses are hard to beat for upper body strength, push-presses are great for moving more weight but we’re going to focus on pure shoulder driving strength. Take the weight at your shoulders, I don’t care how you got it there, clean it from the ground, take it from a rack, it doesn’t matter. Lock your hips and drive the weight upward. Allow your elbows to move from in front of your body out to the side as the weight moves above your head. Push your head forward between your arms and lock them out. Lower with control and repeat the movement. Keep the weight heavy enough to struggle with 5 or more reps, any heavier and it can force you to lean back and transfer the weight onto the lower back instead of the trunk and hips.
That’s it. Yes, that’s it. We’re building good, solid foundation strength here not pretty muscles. If you want to add in some assistance exercises here’s a few suggestions. Bent-over rows, they’re okay during the off cycle from deads, but don’t waste your time while doing heavy deadlifts, they won’t add anything. Bench presses, try staying away from a bar with these, a bar will force your rotator cuff into some pretty awkward positions, using dumbbells will allow for a more comfortable range of motion. You may find that presses and benching is too much punishment on the shoulders, drop the bench. You’ll be much stronger with overhead presses. Pulldowns and pull-ups are pretty good exercises to add. They’ll help stretch out the back and build a good base for presses. That’s correct, strong lats will help you with the initial push overhead. Forget about arm exercises, if you’re pulling heavy deads the biceps will have to work and if you’re pushing heavy weight overhead, you triceps are getting a pretty solid workout as well.

Ok, let’s hit the stones. Round stones, square stones, or odd-shaped stones they all require the same effort. The best advice I can give is DO NOT STOP PULLING! This is the biggest mistake I see beginners make. They start the pull and as soon as it gets heavy they stop. Wrong! When you begin the pull you may get an initial movement of the stone but to keep it going you will have to really buckle down and not quit. As you move the stone upward your body alignment is going to change, this will move the actual weight of the stone to different areas. This shift in weight location is what usually throws off the novice. You need to be able to transfer strength from one side to the other, from hands to arms, from back to legs, and then back again, and you need to be able to make such an adjustment quickly. Gym training will not help with this. If you want to lift heavier stones…lift heavier stones.

We’re going to explain 3 stonelifting techniques. First, we’ll be placing the stone on a barrel or platform, such as is done with the McGlashen stones. Second, we’ll lift the stone up and onto our shoulder, like you’d want to do with the famous Inver Stone. Third, we’ll press the stones overhead like is done at the World’s Strongest Man.
We’ll start with the round stones, and we’ll be placing them on a 48’ high platform. The pull from the ground is the most important aspect of the lift, that’s when you know you’ll either hang on or not. The hand position is critical at this point. Bend over the stone, place your arms directly down along the sides of the stone and bend your hands at the wrist placing your fingers under the stone. Your fingers should be pointing towards each other. Start the pull with your upper back, sort of a modified shrug. This movement is very strong once you learn how to position your body to accomplish it. Quickly transition your pull from the upper back to the lower back and pull the stone above the knees. Here we have a decision to make, can I pull this straight up or do I need to place it on my thighs and re-grip? Let’s be strong and say we can pull it straight up.

Once the stone has passed knee height, you really need to hold the modified shrug to keep the stone in tight against your chest. The majority of the stone needs to be above the midsection, and you use your stomach to help lift it. Raise the stone with mostly back strength, remember the modified shrug should have pulled the stone into your chest from the very beginning of the lift, hold it there and stand up. You may need to lean back a little in order to clear the top of the platform, the shorter guys will, of course, have to lean a bit more.

Let’s go back to knee height again. This time the stone is too heavy to lift straight up so we’ll need to place it on the thighs and re-grip. Once the stone is on your thighs you’ll need to squat down a little so as to position the majority of the stone above the midsection. It’s an awkward position but rather comfortable, the weight on your thighs offset the tendency of your body to fall backward. Now we have another decision to
make, grab from the side or top roll. This is up to you, you’ll have to experiment with both forms and see what works for you. I’m a top roller so that’s the form I’ll go with here. Place your arms over the stone, about halfway between the side and the top, with your hands in front of the stone. Pull the stone into your body and roll it up your chest as you stand up. You’ll need to lean back quite a bit more than if you had you arms on the side of the stone but it does work better for some people.

Now, let’s take the same round stones and place them on our shoulder. We’ll use our right shoulder for this example. The beginning of the movement is the same, except I would suggest to always place the stone on your thighs, don’t attempt to pull the stone straight up to your shoulder. As you stand up from the squat position you need to explode the stone up and reposition your hands so your left hand is under the stone and your right hand is out to the side. Your left hand is providing support underneath and your right hand is preventing the stone from falling off the shoulder. Keep the stone moving and roll it onto your shoulder, resting it against your trap. Celebrate your accomplishment, it’s not everyday you have a large stone resting on your shoulder.

Round stones are easy, the weight is balanced and the stone will roll along your body fairly easy. Rectangular, square, or odd shaped stones are a totally different animal altogether. The form is basically the same, but due to the unbalanced form of natural stones, the movement will affect the muscles in a different way. Heavy natural stones are a great training tool for round stones. You can really overload you grip by pulling extremely heavy stones to the thighs. You may not be able to stand up with them, but the next time you hit the round stones they’ll leave the ground mighty fast. Focus on pulling with the modified shrug, and holding the stone tight into the body. With really large
granite blocks you’ll find it much easier to place the stone on your thighs and then lock your arms around it as you stand up.

OK, we now need to press a stone. Round stones are extremely hard to press, which is why you usually see rectangular stones being pressed in WSM competitions. As you press a round stone it has the tendency to separate your arms, not a good thing to let happen with a heavy stone overhead. You need to squeeze your hands inward against the stone as you press it. Keeping this in mind, we’ll press a rectangular block for this exercise. The starting position is the same as when you pull to the shoulder, again placing the stone on our thighs to re-grip. This is a critical point, you need to think about your hand placing now because as you lift the stone you’ll need to get your hands underneath it with as little exertion as possible. If you have to fight the stone for a hand placing once it’s on your chest you won’t have much strength left to press it. The object is to almost flip the stone as you stand up, it’s a hard movement to explain but here goes.

Lift the rectangular stone onto your thighs, placing it the long way across your legs. The top side of the stone should be pressed against your chest with your hands out on the sides pulling the stone into your chest. When you stand up, try to keep that position, this will put the top side of the stone on your chest with your hands placed underneath and out to the side. You’ll need to find a good balance point before attempting the press. You can bounce the stone a little to get an idea of which way the stone wants to go. Once you’ve found that sweet spot, lock the hips, tighten the back, and explode the stone upward and
lock it out. We’re not doing a push press, that’s a slightly different movement that we
won’t go into here. From a sheer power perspective, there is nothing more impressive
than pressing a heavy stone with pure strength.

So there you have it, a beginner’s guide to the wonderful world of stonelifting. I’ve given
you a basic foundation to start your stone lifting experience but be warned, once you start
you’ll be hooked for life. Spend your time in the gym wisely, find out what you’re there
for and focus on that. Get together with some friends and try lifting whatever stones you
can, the more stones you lift the stronger your entire body will become. No more “limp
fish” handshakes for you, stone lifting will strengthen your hands beyond belief. It will
strengthen your will as well, once you’ve lifted heavy stones everything else will seem
easy, almost effortless. I hope this will help you on your stone lifting journey, and let me
be the first to welcome you to The Brotherhood of Stone. Enjoy.