

## THE HARDENING OF THE BODY, THE SOFTENING OF THE SOUL

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[Assignment: Write about how you were influenced by a group or how you influenced a group.]

Weight lifting is a sport in which distinctive friendship bonds are formed. Other sports develop a spirit of camaraderie in which all players are striving for a common goal such as a touchdown or a basket. In these team sports, it is easy to see that bonds of friendships become stronger and stronger as the team works together as a whole. On the other hand, many may think that it is less likely that a more individualized sport, such as weight lifting, would build these special bonds. I believe that there exists a unique bonding experience which takes place only under the iron bars and metal plates. This practice which seems to be commonplace in the gym, unfortunately, is not so common in everyday situations. The weightroom is filled with all sorts of builds, from the husky football types to the beginners who stepped into the gym for the first time that day. In this diverse community, a feeling unites both the jocks and the wimps. It is difficult to pin-point the exact phrase for this emotion that I personally experience when I lift, but it is that feeling which brings me back into the gym day after day. For me, this bond goes beyond the physical thrill of total exertion, the feeling of accomplishment, or the increases in muscle mass. This weight room attachment that drives me there each day reaches a higher emotional level than any non-weight lifter would ever dream possible. Only those lifters who have had the experience know what this weight room companionship can mean.

The lifters station themselves randomly throughout the room along with their lifting partner for that exercise. When I start my workout, I concentrate on the larger muscles first, starting with the bench press. I feel that the bench press is at the heart of this bonding experience. I enjoy beginning with this exercise because it motivates me for the rest of my workout. In this position the spotter literally holds the life of the lifter in their hands. A spotter may be a life-long buddy or at times a complete stranger. I met Jim, my current lifting partner, in the weight room under the latter conditions. He simply asked me if I needed a spotter and from that weightroom bond grew an even stronger bond: a friendship. These bonds are nurtured and flourish in a weightroom setting as partners encourage the lifter with positive remarks, such as, "you can do it" or "just a little bit more," while the lifter utters a grunt of exasperation from the pit of her/his gut on completion of the second to last repetition. Even though I must endure one last impending, treacherous rep, I know that Jim will be behind me all the way with words of encouragement that lift the bar as easily as physical strength. When the set is complete, the spotter encourages the lifter with a word of congratulations. Typically Jim gives me chummy punch in the arm; unfortunately, he does not know his own strength. Sometimes I cannot squat or bench the desired weight. At these times Jim inspires me as he gives me that extra push to finish the last set.

This encouragement typically found in the weightroom is often not found in everyday situations. It is often the case that guys will put down their friends in a joking manner either to make them feel better about themselves or to impress others by the malicious comments they make. I can remember all the times my friend Dave put down Ricky by scoffing about how much Ricky "stunk" at one-on-one basketball. Sometimes people put down their friends to build a wall to protect their own egos. For this reason, the type of bonding which occurs in the weight room is atypical. For in the case of team sports, it is necessary to work together, and cheer on fellow teammates in order to accomplish the goal. As I see it, the comments and words of encouragement in the weight room are directed solely to the lifter with no extraneous outcomes in sight. For example, when Dave and Ricky would lift together, I would overhear Dave say things like "Come on Rick, don't give up!" This event was particularly unusual because I have never heard Dave say anything positive to anyone. He usually strives to keep up his "manly" shield. This is what makes the experience so unique and so genuine, leading to stronger, more intimate bonds. It gives the spotter the chance to express their friendship to the lifter in a way which, under normal circumstances, would be left unsaid. In the case of a stranger being a spotter, this sets up a nice scenario to form a basis of a friendship like the one that Jim and I have. For one thing, the spotter and the lifter obviously have a common interest. Second, the spotter can relate to the lifter because with every grunt of exasperation, the spotter can also feel the lifter's pain and exhaustion, as well as accomplishment.

There are numerous theories that could explain the reasons behind this unique experience of the weight lifter. Possibly it is the idea of a two hundred and forty-five pound weight hovering over the lifter's neck like a guillotine, or it could be the empathy between spotter and lifter which helps create this unique weight room bond. No matter what the reason or cause, this bond is indeed special to the circumstance which in no other case could be as effective. The experiences that I have encountered in the crypts of the weight room seem to make the heart stronger than the biceps.