

## The fine art of spotting

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By Kat Ricker

You're sitting at a pec-deck flye machine on chest day. It's your second set and you know you're nearing your peak. Your eyes are closed. The blood burns into your pecs with the slightest move. They're swelling like balloons. You realize you're grunting. The pump is so intense you see visions. Just one more rep left in you. You go to complete and utter failure. Climb the mountain and slide down the descent until your muscle just peters out and rolls to the ground and stops. That was it. Perfect. The kind of set you will try to recreate in all other workouts. A landmark. You open your eyes. You're startled to see that someone had been spotting you, and you have no idea how long he was there.

That's what the art of spotting is all about. A good spot can make all the difference, no matter what your goals. Although everyone has probably given or received a spot at some point, and though many lifters incorporate spotting into their regular routines, few realize just how critical proper spotting is, and even fewer are actually good spotters. In fact, a good spotter is a rare find. If you find one, don't let him go. Buy him protein drinks and box seats to the game. If you are one, use your gift wisely. You have one lucky lifting partner.

### All roads lead to the spotting bridge

When you're going for hypertrophy, you generally work with a high load, ten or less reps per set and short sets – 30 to 60 seconds is all it takes to max out an ATP cycle. And you must take your muscles to failure. Failure means squeezing out the very last rep that you can *while maintaining perfect form*. That means that you can't use your other muscles to help out – say, kicking out one more standing dumbbell bicep curl by recruiting your anterior deltoids, or letting your big back muscle group generate momentum by extending (arching) to propel the weight up against gravity's pull. Now you're probably thinking, "Of course. Those sad schmucks. I've seen it." But the thing is, you probably do it yourself, unconsciously. It's just so logical for the body to do: Why fatigue one muscle/muscle group, when there are others designed to assist in the task? And if you are conscientious and educated enough that you don't actually cheat even a little bit, then chances are good that you stop working before you reach failure.

That's the situation with hypertrophy. But cutting up your physique has a similar obstacle. When you're working specifically to reduce bodyfat, you traditionally go for lighter weight, more reps and longer sets – 90 seconds to as long as three minutes. You've gone past ATP energy stores, past fast-twitch muscle-land and vaulted into aerobic energy, recruiting medium and slow-twitch muscle fibers. This brings its own set of fuel requirements, and if every one of them isn't met – nutrition, rest, oxygenation, hydration, the ideal workload – then you cannot push your muscles to perfect fatigue for fat-burning goals. The end result is the same: you and the muscles you're working get tired and can't contract one more time.

Either way, you could perform better with some form of assistance, and nothing beats a good spotter. Yes, some inventions can help spot you, such as machines designed to incrementally decrease load, to load negatives/eccentric contractions higher than positives/concentric contraction, and devices pitting leverage against form (the Arm Blaster™, for instance). Even leaning against a wall in certain movement to brace your form is spotting yourself in a sense, if it gets you a well-disciplined rep that you wouldn't have had otherwise. But they all face the same shortcoming: they're not human. You are.

**Machines operate in a world structured on constants, but that's exactly why you need a spot – because your body is not.** You fatigue unexpectedly, in different degrees, your muscles unexpectedly cramp, your tendons pull, nerves cross and burn, your grip slips, people drop weights and startle you, mosquitoes bite you, and the sky's the limit on the tricks your mind is playing on you to make you stop working so hard. The list could go on and on. That's why your

body is unpredictable, and, when it comes down to the millimeters game of bodybuilding, needs something far more intuitive and versatile than any mechanical spotting device can ever be – a human being.

### **The perfect spotter – a rare treasure**

It is a rare and wonderful thing to find a good spotter. The cardinal mistake that most people make in spotting is wanting to help too much, too soon. Again, it goes back to body logic and even propriety – when you see a body trying to accomplish a task, you are trained to contribute as much power as you can, ideally equal to the amount of the force lacking in the other party to achieve the task. It's a mindset.

A good spotter has a different mindset, and has developed specialized skills to complement it.

First, a good spotter knows when to help because he is keenly observant. His/her trained eye picks up on the smallest signs of fatigue onset as if they are telegraphed. When working with a good spotter for the first time, a lifter is likely to marvel at how the spotter knew when he needed help, because he's sure he his movements didn't change.

Secondly, a good spotter knows how much help to give. Nothing can blow a fantastic set faster than when a well-meaning fellow lifter gives too much assistance, and what was a fiber-tearing, full-pump throttling contraction disappears and the weight flies out of your control. When your muscles start to fatigue, they're usually not hitting the wall; that is, they can still work the task, they just lost the capacity to handle *quite* that much load. No matter how much weight you're moving, it's usually only fractions of a pound worth of load that needs to be allayed to keep the muscle fully loaded. (The exception to this is in single-to-three-rep max-out situations such as powerlifting, where it is the nervous system that quits, not muscular.) A good spotter can give you the set of your life by spotting with one finger.

Thirdly, a good spotter is intuitive. There's just a sixth sense involved in providing a spot so exact to the lifter's needs. Remember the description at the beginning of this article about finishing a fabulous set and not even knowing you were being spotted? That's a good spotter. He doesn't even change the tempo of your rep. That's the second cardinal sin of a poor spotter - if you're working at a slow, controlled, gut-wrenching pace, he'll figure you're going slow because the weight's too heavy, and so rush in to fix that problem. No, a good spotter doesn't try to impose anything on the lifter; he carefully observes what the lifter is doing and needs, and responds precisely to that. When you find one, don't let him get away!

Getting a good spotting partner is often a matter of experience. When two people work together in the gym over time, they learn to anticipate each other's needs and read the small signals their bodies project. Then there are those rare, gifted folks who have perfected the art of spotting in itself, and they can step in and spot a complete stranger perfectly from the start. Be vocal about what you want from a spotter. If you have a regular partner, take some time outside the gym to sit down and talk about your lifts and how to maximize the potential for ace spotting between you. If someone asks you for a spot, ask her what she wants. She may want a light assist to get them over the hump at the crux of the set. She may just want someone to stand by and catch the bar if it drops. Ask where she'd like your hands. There's a big difference between a squatting spot with someone's hands on the bar versus on your ribcage. Don't assume you know what someone wants just because she asked for a spot.

Spotting is a critical factor in your success. There's nothing worse than a bad spot, and nothing better than a good one. A good spot can make the difference between achieving failure and stopping short of reaching your full potential.

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