

The Five Biggest Mistakes Beginners Make in the Gym (And How to Avoid Them)

By Pat Seastone

THE COMPLETE HANDBOOK

A BEGINNER'S GYM GUIDE TO **LIFTING**



PAT SEASTONE

Welcome

If you've never stepped foot in a gym before, or if you've tried and walked away feeling lost, overwhelmed, or like you didn't belong—this is for you. The hard part isn't the weights. It's the not-knowing. Not knowing where to go, what to do, or whether you're doing it right. And in that uncertainty, it's easy to make the same mistakes almost every beginner makes.

Here are five of the biggest ones, and how to avoid them before they cost you weeks of progress—or worse, make you want to quit.

Mistake 1: Overcomplicating the Start

You're motivated. You want results. So you either do too much — five sessions a week, every exercise you can find online — or you do nothing at all because you're waiting to find the “right” programme before you begin. Both come from the same mistake: believing that starting the gym requires a level of complexity it doesn't.

The fix is simple: train less than you think, and start before you feel ready. Two or three sessions a week is plenty. You don't need a 12-week plan. You don't need to optimise your rest periods. Pick one push, one pull, and one leg exercise. Do a few sets of each. Leave. That's a complete beginner session. For your first few weeks, stop every set with plenty of reps left in the tank. As you get comfortable, you can add more. But in the beginning, the only thing that matters is that you walked in and did something. Not the perfect thing. Just something.

Mistake 2: Ignoring Discomfort vs. Pain

Soreness after a workout is normal. In the first few weeks it can be genuinely intense—stairs become a challenge, reaching for a coffee cup makes your shoulder scream, and you might feel like you've been trampled by something large and unforgiving. That's DOMS (Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness). It's not an injury. It's your body adapting to a new stimulus, and it fades significantly as you get stronger and more consistent. The first two to three weeks are the hardest. After that, the soreness settles into a manageable background hum.

Pain is different. Pain is sharp. It's localised. It might be in a joint rather than a muscle, and it often gets worse when you repeat the movement. If you feel that, stop. Don't push through it hoping it will “warm up.” Swap the exercise for something that doesn't hurt—there's always an alternative that trains the same muscle without the same discomfort. The gym will be there tomorrow. Your joints need to be there for life.

Mistake 3: Comparing Yourself to Advanced Lifters

You see someone pressing heavy dumbbells or squatting a loaded barbell and think, "That's what I should be working toward." But the person you're watching has probably been training for years. They've built the mobility, the coordination, and the connective-tissue strength to handle that load. You're just starting—and that's not a flaw, it's just the truth.

Copying their exercise selection too early can hurt you. Comparing your progress to theirs can discourage you. Both come from the same mistake: using someone else's middle as a measure of your beginning.

But even beyond the comparison of weight and reps, there's a deeper truth that most beginners don't hear: you can't become a copy of someone else. Different people have different proportions, different muscle bellies, different strengths. Some people are naturally broader through the chest. Some have rounder arms. Some are leaner without trying. You can't train your way into someone else's frame, and you shouldn't try. Even the pros you see on magazine covers are working with the genetics they were given—and plenty of them wish they had someone else's chest, or arms, or shoulder width. Genetics are the one thing you can't change, and chasing someone else's look is a fast track to frustration.

The only person you can genuinely compete with is the one who walked in last week. You can only become a better version of yourself—not a version of the person on the bench next to you. And one day, when you're the more experienced lifter in the room, someone new will be looking at your triceps wondering how to get the definition you've built. The wheel keeps turning. Everyone is chasing something. The people who stick around are the ones who learn to chase their own improvement, not someone else's approval.

Stick with machines or lighter dumbbells at first. Let your body learn the movements before you add weight. And when you catch yourself wondering why you don't look like the person beside you, remember that they were once exactly where you are—and they got where they are by showing up, not by wishing they had someone else's body.

Mistake 4: Thinking You Need a Perfect Plan

You've read three different articles telling you three different things, and now you're afraid to start until you've found the "right" plan. Here's the truth: you don't need a 12-week programme. You don't need to optimise your rest periods or calculate your exact rep tempo. You need to pick one push, one pull, and one leg exercise, do a few sets of each, and leave. That's a complete beginner session.

As you get more comfortable, you can add exercises, change the order, or try different splits. But on day one, the only thing that matters is that you walked in and did something. Not the perfect thing. Just something. A simple session you actually enjoy will always beat a perfect programme you never want to do again.

Mistake 5: Skipping the Warm-Up

When time is short or motivation is high, the warm-up is the first thing people drop. It feels optional. It isn't. A cold muscle is shorter and stiffer. A cold joint has less lubrication. A cold nervous system fires less efficiently. Walking up to a loaded bar without preparing your body is not saving time — it's borrowing against future injury.

A proper warm-up doesn't need to be complicated. Five minutes of light cardio to get your blood moving. Then a few light, progressive sets of the exercise you're about to do — starting with very little weight and building up gradually until you reach your working weight. This gives your joints time to warm, your muscles time to lengthen, and your brain time to rehearse the movement pattern. The whole process takes five to ten minutes. The injury it prevents can take months. Warm up. It's the first act of every good session.

These five mistakes will cost most people weeks of frustration. The book walks you through everything else—every exercise, every angle, every “what do I do now”—at the same pace, in the same voice. No rigid plan. Just the next right step.

Want to go deeper?

The Complete Handbook: A Beginner's Gym Guide to Lifting is available on [Amazon UK](#), [Amazon US](#) and [Apple Books](#).

Visit patseastone.com for links.