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STRENGTH SPEAKS

★ ★ ★

THROUGH THE STORIES OF

★ ★ ★



Taylor Trump
Ashton Rouska
Jess Putland
Emma Jarman
Nick Gagnon
Charles Griffen
Chad Smash
M. Riebe & G. Vega
Reijuana Harley
Kevin Kartak
Scott Sullivan
Meana Albersworth
Brad Neitzel
Jimmy Her



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MICHAEL ★ CHERNIN

Strength Speaks

Michael Chernin

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Leanpub

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Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	3
Taylor Trump	6
Ashton Rouska	30
Jess Putland	49
Anonymous	50
Emma Jarman	51
Nick Gagnon	52
Charles Griffen	53
Chad Litherland	54
Madi Riebe and Gabriel Vega	55

CONTENTS

Reijuana Harley	56
Kevin Kartak	57
Scott Sullivan	58
Meana Albersworth	59
Brad Neitzel	60
Jimmy Her	61
Conclusion	62
About the Author	63

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And, of course, thank you, dear reader. This is for you.

Introduction

Lifting weights is not just a physical endeavor. For those who reach the top in the strength sports, training takes on a life of its own and entwines itself in the life of the lifter. This process has always fascinated me. After twelve years of serious training and continuous reflection on the meaning the pursuit has held at various points in my life, I wanted to find out what high-level athletes in the strength sports thought when they undertook the same process of introspection. I knew that every dedicated, advanced lifter has their own story that brought them to the gym in the first place and their own motivations that kept them coming back, day in and day out, to brutalize their bodies and minds in order to become the best. The only way to find out was to ask, and thus this project was born.

This book is a collection of fifteen interviews with highly accomplished strength athletes from various disciplines. Some of them are national or world champions. Most hold or have held very high rankings in their sports. Several interviewees were selected not because of their competitive record, but because of the length of time they had spent training consistently. I tailored my questions to achieve the following: Obtain an overview of each interviewee as

a person; understand how their training evolved with time; explore the lessons they learned in the process and how those lessons manifest in their lives outside the gym; and delve into philosophical and existential themes of training. I was especially interested in a concept I call the lifting space, which I define as the size of the role that training, competing, and everything to do with the lifestyle plays in the athletes' lives.

A major reason this project was possible is that the gym where I have trained for the past ten years, Los Campeones Gym of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is the gym where some of the lifters I interviewed train. I have been very fortunate to be surrounded by top-level lifters this entire time because it showed me what was achievable and what it would take to attain those levels. Because I am personally acquainted with those athletes, some of those interviews took a more informal tone. I feel that the familiarity allowed the interviewees to speak more openly and candidly when we delved into sensitive topics. In addition, the beginnings of an oral history of an iconic gym began to emerge. But that is another discussion for another time.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim with only minor edits for clarity and conciseness. Utmost care was taken to preserve the original meaning of what was said. All interviewees had the opportunity to review their transcripts before their inclusion in this

book. The images within are property of their respective owners and were used with their explicit permission. You are, of course, welcome to read at whatever pace you prefer, but give yourself permission to pause and reflect if an interview particularly strikes you.

Strength speaks. Let's see what it says.

Taylor Trump

Taylor Trump has been a member of Los Campeones, an independent gym in Minneapolis, since its inception in the 1980s. He has done two decades behind bars and did not waste a single moment of his time. His experience will speak for itself.



Taylor Trump during prep, at a body weight of 129 kg (284 lb).

Michael Chernin

Taylor, how long have you been training?

Taylor Trump

Since fifteen or sixteen.

MC How old are you now?

TT Sixty.

MC So about forty-five years?

TT Yup.

MC What's been your main interest as far as training goes?

TT Size.

MC Size?

TT Always about size.

MC Tell me more.

TT I came up in the era of Victor Richards and the mass monsters.

I came up in a few different eras. Era of Frank Zane. Those things didn't appeal to me. I wanted size. Not fat and sloppy, but muscle, size. So that's what I trained for.

MC What's the biggest you've ever gotten?

TT Three fifty-six.

MC What are you now?

TT Three fifty.

MC So you've been over three hundred for most of your life?

TT Since I was twenty-eight. Yeah.

MC Tell me your life story briefly.

TT I came here when I was young from Chicago because of the gang violence. My parents didn't want us to have to go to school through that, so we went to school in Minnesota. The day school was out, I was back in Chicago. Eventually joined a gang, grew in the gang, and ended up running the gang in Minnesota and another state. Did all the things you do in a gang, pretty much. But we were different from these guys. We were organized and structured. We had to get permission to do things, we had literature, we had to go to school. I have two college degrees. I run an incredibly successful, the biggest restaurant, steakhouse bar downtown. Currently I'm no longer in the gang. Still have affiliates, but that's about it from that perspective.

MC And you've been training this whole time?

TT Without fail.

MC I remember when I've talked to you outside of this interview, you mentioned you've done time.

TT Total of twenty-one years. Off and on. Twenty-one years in federal prison.

MC Did you train in prison?

TT Like a monster.

MC What was that like, training there? I imagine the conditions

aren't the best-

TT The conditions are superior. There, the training is much more intense than it is here. The level of intensity here and the level of intensity there, there's no comparison. There are no words for it. Dorian Yates used to say, "Grab a weight you can pick up six times and pick it up twelve times." And everybody out here talks about it, but in there, we lived that. We picked up a weight we could only pick up six times, but we picked it up twelve times. And that's how you got your size. Of course, the food. Our bodies, our central nervous system was always under stress from the environment, but the lifting added more stress and the body adapted. And the body will adapt to stress.

MC What were your best lifts?

TT We never did best lifts. We just trained. You know? It got to the point in there where I would damn near warm up on the incline with 315 and was doing sets and reps with 465 on the incline, and that was my favorite movement, too, so it came easy for me. I have buddies that did skullcrushers with 225. Everybody squatted six, seven hundred. Everybody benched five hundred. Shoulder pressed 365 behind the neck. All that type of shit on a regular basis. Stuff they don't do outside because they don't think they have to. And they don't.

MC Do you think it would have been possible to achieve lifts like

that in an environment that wasn't a prison?

TT There's no way. None of that would have happened. In there, you lift to survive. You grow strong to survive. You get big FAST to survive. All that shit about "it takes this many weeks to grow muscle," "if you train the muscle every day it won't grow," that's all bullshit. Guys was squattin' every day and had legs like tree trunks.

MC What initially drew you into training?

TT Gary Haines, who's a member here! I was at this thing, and they had Gary Haines, and Buddy Barge, and Big Boy Bursten, they all got on stage, and I was like, "my God, I never seen nothing like that!" I was maybe fourteen, fifteen years old when I saw that. And the next day I went to the YMCA. And all we had was a Universal, but I used that. And I just kept going. Met guys along the way, and found different gyms, and over thirty-three, thirty-four years ago ended up at Los Campeones. And guys here was gettin' it in. They weren't playing. Also, how I found Los Campeones is, in the federal system, I don't care where you're at, if you're leaving and you're going to Minnesota, everybody tells you, "go to Los Campeones!" It's, you know, the gym for felons. And I mean, it reflects that when you get in here. But felons aren't badasses or assholes. They're just people who did things un-

der a certain set of circumstances. The gym is full of felons. But it's one of the nicest places in the community. It's a true community. There's no bullshit in here. There's none of that. Everybody's treated as an equal. You know, you're a member. You know how it goes in here. If you come in here on that weird shit, you get shown the door. You come in here, you don't like gays and you express that, you can leave. You don't like blacks, you express that, you can leave. You don't like Jews or whites and you express that, you can leave. This is probably the only safe space for all people of color and religion and background, everything, in the state right now, based upon what's going on.

MC Have you found this to be true in most hardcore gyms that you've been in?

TT No. You know, Olympia Gym, that my buddy Ken Sherman used to own, Hulk Hogan was a member there, Jesse Ventura, all the pro wrestlers, it wasn't segregated, but everybody stayed in their lane, you know? Los Campeones isn't like that. That's why it's been here for so long. That's why I train out here and that's why I'll only train people here, 'cause it's a true community in every sense of the word.

MC When you first started lifting, how'd you learn what you needed to in order to progress?

TT By failing. By doing it wrong, by getting hurt.

MC How'd you build your psychological skills?

TT That happened as a side effect. We had cars back then, three or four guys in a car. So you get in the car and they call money and you have to pay your money. So some guy is hyped up out of his mind, he squats 405 for twenty. Shit, that's the money you gotta pay! You gotta do that 405 for twenty or you gotta get out the car. And not many people wanted to get kicked out their cars 'cause once you get kicked out of one car, it was hard to find another car.

MC Were there any specific programs or training plans you followed as a beginner?

TT We did everything to failure. Lot of people say, "that's over-training!" You can't really overtrain. We didn't count sets and reps per se. A lot of guys come to the gym, they read Muscle and Fitness, "I'm gonna do five sets of sixteen!" Well, if that doesn't give you a training effect, if that doesn't put enough stress on the muscle, you ain't did shit! So we came in and we grabbed a weight we could pick up six times...and we picked it up twelve times. That's what we did.

MC Was that your method before prison, too?

TT Yep.

MC Is that your method now?

TT That's my method now.



On stage.

MC I can relate. What are some mistakes you've made or regrets you have as far as training goes?

TT Not eating properly. Not paying attention to what I put in my body. There was a time when people said "a calorie's a calorie." But a calorie is not a calorie. It's constituted differently. We ate a lot of protein, but we didn't eat enough carbs per se,

or enough fat. We made sure to get our protein in. And we turned out well. I think I turned out pretty phenomenal with my size and shape. But what I could have been is something totally different than what I turned out to be. We didn't know a lot about diet back then. Nobody talked about diet. Well, shit, you go to the grocery store and buy one of them ready-made hens on the rotisserie, and then a gang of eggs, and eat that shit. Some Kool Aid, that's what we did. You know? Protein powder, cheap-ass bogus protein powder that had you fartin' and shittin' all the time, that was garbage! But the technology was not there. The science was not there like it is now.

MC What would you say you're excellent at, whether in terms of the gym or outside?

TT Motivating people. I'm excellent at taking a person who doesn't believe in themselves and showing them that they're no different from the substance that created them, and if they're no different from the substance that created them, how can they ever be a failure? That's my claim to fame, that's my gift, that's the thing I have to offer people. How could you be any less than all that you see? And I ask them to really think about it. How is that possible? How is it possible that a wave in the ocean leave the ocean and be less than the ocean, and why do

you think that the ocean would even give a damn about that, because the ocean knows that the wave is delusional, because the wave don't exist without the ocean. And so I try to tell people stuff like that, and what I tell them is God, whatever God is for you, that created all things, and all things perfect, also created you, and you were there to help God create all that is. How could you be separate from that? But in our delusion-I mean, we're the only creature that thinks we're separate from anything, everything else thinks it's connected-we think we're separate and that's our downfall. That's our nightmare. And I tell people, in the Bible it says God put Man to sleep, but nowhere does it ever say Man woke up!

MC I remember having this conversation with you years ago! Still think about it, actually.

TT Yeah! And Man has been dreaming ever since. Man has been dreaming that he's separate from all that there is. But that's not God's fault. God doesn't even pay attention to that. God looks at that and says, "Aww, poor little creature!" But that's also in the story of the Prodigal Son. One day the Prodigal Son wakes up and says, "you know what, I can't make it without my source. Let me go back to the source and see if they will let me eat with the pigs." But the source says, "I'm not mad at you. Come on back." So free will is not you get to do what you

want. ‘Cause you don’t get to do what you want. You don’t get to jump off a cliff and say “I can fly like a bird!” Free will is you get to identify what you are when you’re ready to. That’s free will. Free will is not “I get to punch somebody in the face!” That’s stupid. That just guarantees that one day somebody’s gonna punch you in the face, because you reap what you sow. Everybody reaps what they sow. Whatever you plant, that’s what the fuck is gonna grow. I used to ask my teachers, “is it all right to shoot people in the head?” And they said, “Boy, shoot as many people as you want! As long as you don’t mind getting shot in the head.” And I said, “well, see, that’s a problem.” Said, “exactly, it’s a problem not for you, but for everybody.” So I don’t behave that way. So that’s my gift. That’s my saving grace.

MC What are some injuries that you’ve had to deal with?

TT The gunshots or in the weight room?

MC Either.

TT I’ve been shot quite a few times, so that weighs on me in the summertime when it’s humid, like today. I’ve tore hamstrings, lower back issues, mainly just those. I got a weak posterior chain ‘cause we never trained the posterior chain.

MC Any major illnesses in the forty-five years?

TT Yeah, last year I was on life support for four or five days ‘cause

I caught Legionnaires'. They tell me it was Legionnaires', but I think it was COVID. Because I had all the signs of COVID. Legionnaires' and COVID mimic each other so they didn't have a name for it at that time, and they called it Legionnaires'. Eight months later, COVID hit. So go figure.

MC Tell me a few unforgettable experiences that you've had or seen that have to do with training.

TT As far as what?

MC People doing things you wouldn't expect, or things that made you go, "Wow, did that really happen?"

TT Yeah, I've seen guys do leg presses and bench press at the same time. I just saw that video last week. A guy was telling me, "man, I'm a beast in the gym, let me show you some videos!" And he was on the leg sled and pressin' at the same time, and I was like, "Okay! Okay." Guys that weigh 145 pounds curling eighty pound dumbbells. You see a lot of that. Guys put a thousand pounds on a rack and do shrugs, they weigh 150, two hundred pounds. The weight never even leaves the rack, then they walk away from the rack like they did something and don't put their weights away. You see all kinds of things in the gym. You try to correct them, but after a while you realize you're offending them, so you leave them alone.

MC So, for a philosophical question, there's this concept that I like to call the "lifting space," which is the size of the role that training plays in your life. How has that evolved over time and what's that like for you now?

TT Where I started off is where I'm at right now. It hasn't grown, but it has not shrunk at all. It was all-encompassing the first time I picked up a weight and it was all-encompassing the last time I picked up a weight. I was fully present. I was totally engaged. It was like sex, when I lift weights. I mean, for a lot of people, a lot of runners, they get the runner's high, when we lift weights, it's us against that weight, and what we build, no one can take from us. At that particular time, we realize we are God, literally and figuratively. We're creating and no one can stop us from creating. What we create depends upon the effort we give. And you can't give an effort if you're half-minded. I think about Prince, who I grew up with. People talk about him, and all this...and I just listen. Because I heard Prince play in the sixth grade, and until the moment he died, he never got any better. That's how good he was. He never got any better. And people say, "well, if you feel that way, why did he practice?" I say, "he practiced so he don't get worse." You don't get practice to get better! You practice so you don't get worse. Michael Jordan, he didn't practice to get better. He

was already at his best when he picked up a basketball the first time. He practiced so his skills did not diminish. That's what practice is. In the West, we're taught life backwards. Upside down, inside out. You work hard, you do this, you do that, no, that's not how it really works. You work. You don't work hard, you work completely. You work totally. Working hard isn't gonna get you shit but tired. But working totally, working completely brings you to enlightenment and once you hit enlightenment-and that's a lot of different things for a lot of different people-you know. Too many of us in the West don't KNOW. We pontificate, we talk shit about this subject, that subject, but we don't know. We spend our time not knowing. In other spaces, people spend their time knowing. And once you know something, you don't have to tell nobody you know it! When you walk by them, they can sense your knowing. And that's what life is all about. Not guessing, not believing. With my level of intelligence, I can change anybody's belief system in five minutes. But if you know that fire's hot, it don't matter what I tell your ass. You ain't touching it, and that's the difference.

MC Does lifting and training give your life meaning that can't be found anywhere else?

TT Yes, it does. When you're lifting and working out and you're

tired, and some blonde walks in with an incredible ass, and all of a sudden you find the strength for five more sets. True or false?

MC True.

TT You find the strength for five more sets... with heavier weight... with better form! You just find it within yourself. But there are other days you come into the gym where you're already tired mentally, emotionally, spiritually, physically, whatever, and there's nobody in there, and you say, "You know what, I gotta get this done, for me. This is for me." And you have the best lifting session ever and there's nobody to witness it but you and yourself, and that's when you begin to remember not just who you are but WHAT you are, and you begin to see that what you're capable of is otherworldly. But it doesn't happen when your ego gets in the way. When you're done with your workout and that blonde comes in with that hot ass, that's your ego talking now! Your ego says, "Hey, I got more work to do!" No, you don't got more work to do. You just want to look at her ass, you want her to see you. That's all ego. That's fine too, if it gets you more stress on the body. I'm all about more stress and stress management, but it's those times when there's nobody there, when there's nobody looking, and you pour out your heart or you're throwing up

because you just did a set of squats that you just didn't have the momentum to do but you dug within yourself, down deep in your nutsack and pulled out that set of fifteen reps. That's what bodybuilding is about, that's what strength training is about, that's what powerlifting is about. It's about beating yourself every time, like when you're playing golf. It's just you and that little white ball. And you get so mad at that little white ball, but this little white ball is just looking at you like, "What did I do? I didn't do nothing!" Because from its own side, it's just a ball, but from your side, because your ego's involved, it's your enemy. You don't have an enemy except your mind. And once you quiet your mind, you begin to see what green really looks like. You begin to feel what love and joy and peace really feel like. But until you do that, these things can't happen. One way to quiet your mind is get up under some heavy-ass weight that you can only pick up six times...and pick it up twelve times.

MC I think that's why a lot of us are here.

TT A lot of us are here for that reason, because we know that without that...I know that without this, I'd be back in federal prison doing life without parole. I know that my buddy and brother (name redacted) would have been a sniper and would be locked up. I know that my buddy, pro bodybuilder

Charles Griffen would be on drugs. I know that you would probably have four, five kids somewhere and be dodging child support! I'm just keeping it real, Mike! True or false? We're here because we need this. We're here because this is where we find our manhood. We're here because this is where enlightenment is. That's why this place has withstood the test of time. That's why! It's just like the Pyramids. Everything has fallen around them, why not the Pyramids? Because they're still needed. I was raised here. My son was raised here. I've seen other people raise their kids here. This is a very special place. I've watched people vibrate in and vibrate out.

MC Has training taught you anything about human nature or influenced your worldview that you haven't mentioned yet?

TT No, training has taught me that, like anything, it can make you a better version of you or it can make you a worse version of you. It can turn you into a humble, compassionate, understanding, open-minded creature, or it can turn you into a complete asshole! But these things were in you anyway. You just decided to listen to one and ignore the other. And that's what this does for a lot of people. It brings you to yourself. It reveals you to yourself. It's like you look out into the abyss, and you see what's looking back at you.

MC Nietzsche.

TT Yeah, that's what this is like. I'm telling you, you get up under-you've done it-you get up under five hundred pounds and you come up of that rack, you ain't thinking about nothing else. You have one focus: to sit your ass down and stand your ass back up. It's like the parable of the kid that goes to the wise man and says, "Hey, I want to be wise." The wise man says, "Come back in three days." So he comes back in three days and says, "It's been three days," wise man says, "Come back in three more days," and this goes on and the kid's like "Listen, man, I ain't comin' back no more!" He says, "well, come with me!" And so they walk for three days to this large body of water. They get in this canoe. And the kid says "What's this got to do with wisdom?" He says, "Just be quiet." So they get out to this large body of water where they can't see land no more, and he tells the kid to stand up. He kicks the kid in the ass, the kid falls in the water, and he holds him under the water. Then he brings him up, dunks him back down, brings him up...after a while the kid starts drowning. And just before he drowns, the man brings him on the boat. The kid's spitting, and cussin', and vomiting. And he says, "what the fuck does that have to do with wisdom?" And he says, "when you want wisdom like you want that breath of air, come back and see me." The people who last at Los Campeones, they want it, that

rep, like the average person wants a breath of air, and every rep is like that. Every rep is like that. That's why we have what we have when we walk in these doors. You walk in these doors, you get results by default. The results you get are a side effect. It's not a direct result. The direct result is something else that takes place in you spiritually. That's what happens. In here, we get up under serious weight. That serious weight calls forth your manhood. Every iota of it. And if you ain't got it, you don't last here. How many people have you seen come and go?

MC Many.

TT Yeah, many. They're still working out. They're just not working out here. They ain't quit working out, now. They just ain't working out here.

MC What are some of your other hobbies and interests?

TT Meditation. Yeah. Meditation is like lifting weights. When you have that one workout and you're like, "If I die right now and never work out again, I'd be complete." Meditation. I read voraciously. I love hiking, you know, the woods. I grow bonzai, plants, starting a rose garden. So I have quite a few hobbies that I love.

MC Does training ever get in the way of those?

TT All those accentuate my training. Training is the focal point.

Everything starts with Iron. You know why? The Iron never lies. Do you? Exactly. Five hundred pounds is five hundred pounds, 365 days a year. So you can lie about everything else, but you can't lie about that Iron. That Iron sits in there and it waits on you. It's not disrespectful, it's just sitting there, waiting on you. So the Iron don't lie. It gives you what you give it. If you love it, it will love you. If you cheat on it, it will cheat on you. The highest form of reality is dedication. The highest form of mental health is dedication to reality at all costs. That's what lifting heavy iron is, dedication to reality. 'Cause the reality is that five hundred is five hundred, all day, whether you like it or not.

MC Can you imagine being done with training?

TT Of course! Oh yeah. I think about it all the time. When I'm in my casket. That's when I'm done with training. I'll die in a gym. And people hear that and they think it's a cliché, but it's not a cliché. When I got out of prison the last time, I didn't go see my kids, my wife, I came from the jail to Los Campeones Gym. Straight. Stopped to take a piss and get some Snickers, and came straight here before I went to see anybody. 'Cause my wife can stop loving me and divorce me, my kids can get mad 'cause I won't buy 'em a new car and stop fucking with me, but Los Campeones is gonna be here smiling at me all the

time. This is something I can depend on. Five hundred pounds is five hundred pounds whether you like it or not.

MC What would you like to tell beginner or intermediate lifters reading this?

TT Make up your mind. That's all you gotta do. Make up your mind. In the West, we don't make up our minds. In the West, we don't work 'til that ten thousand hours. In the West, we like new shiny shit. That's why we jump around. All of Man's problems come from not being able to sit alone in a room and do nothing. We get afraid of boredom. But that's where the magic happens, in boredom! Think of Miles Davis, what made Miles so incredible? He practiced all the time. What made Kobe the Black Mamba? He practiced all the time, not to get better, but to not get worse. Michael Jordan was never the best basketball player on the NBA court. He just worked harder than everybody else. Michael Jordan made up his mind. "Either I'm gonna beat you, or I'm gonna die," and that was the end of the matter. And he meant it. You have to make up your mind. You can't be fickle. In the United States, our divorce rate is incredibly high because people are fickle. We have so many people who were almost champions, and then they gave up because their mind was weak. So you gotta make up your mind before you do anything. People think they're

responsible for their actions. You're not responsible for your actions. You're responsible for your thoughts because your actions come out your thoughts. You can't do anything without thinking about it first. Like I said, we're taught backwards over here. Start being responsible for your thoughts. Free your mind, your ass will follow. But you gotta make up your mind. Without a made-up mind, you ain't gonna do shit. Not in this life, or the next life. You're not. Me? I've always made up my mind. Always. One hundred percent of the time. I bought my first Rolls-Royce when I was twenty-one. I'm sixty. I still have one. I'll always have my mind made up.

MC Is there anything else you'd like to say that I didn't ask about?

TT Yeah, what about the shower? We still gonna take a shower after this interview?

MC [*Laughs*]

TT I want that in there!

MC It will be. Thank you for your time.



Instagram: @twin_cities_fat_loss_coach

Ashton Rouska

At the time of this interview on October 24, 2020, Ashton Rouska held the #7 all-time ranking in powerlifting for drug-tested lifters across all weight classes with a 920 kg (2,028.2 lb) total at a body-weight of 99.1 (218.4). Shortly after this interview, he rose to the #2 all-time ranking, totaling 950.5 kg (2,095.5 lb) at 98.4 (217), with a Wilks score of 589.06.



Ashton Rouska approaches his second deadlift attempt of 383 kg (844.3 lb) at the USAPL Virginia Winter Wrecker.

Michael Chernin

How old are you and how long have you been training?

Ashton Rouska

I'm twenty-three years old right now. I've been training since I was thirteen years old, and I've actually been powerlifting since I was sixteen years old.

MC How did you initially get into training?

AR During that time, I was getting into martial arts and sports and everything else, so I got into the weight room, and that's where I started actually lifting weights.

MC How did you get into powerlifting from that?

AR At the end of my sophomore year of high school, one of my wrestling coaches approached me and told me I should try a state powerlifting meet. Of course, then, I had no idea what it really all entailed. I had been watching videos of people lifting weights heavy and training videos at that point, anyway, so I thought, why not give it a good shot? I did the meet, fell in love with it, and have been competing since.

MC What are your most significant accomplishments? I know you just put together a monster total at a USAPL meet.

AR I would say, I remember when I won Open Raw Nationals in 2017. I was twenty years old in the 205 class. Also, back in '14, I won the IPF equipped Junior World Championship in

the 183 pound weight class. I would say those two meets in particular and then the way that I won them stand out to me the most out of all the meets I've competed in.

MC How so?

AR I would also say 2019 Collegiate Nationals, my senior year of undergrad, when I won that meet in the 231 weight class weighing, I think, 206. I had a 1,930 total that day and just absolutely destroyed that day.

MC You recently destroyed the competition at your most recent meet as well, right?

AR Yeah, I was planning to train that day anyway and lift those weights. I heard there was a meet, and I thought I might as well make the two thousand-plus total official, so I went ahead and signed up for it about four days out.

MC Congratulations on getting that done!

AR Thank you! I got my next one three weeks from today.

MC When you were a beginner to lifting weights, powerlifting, how did you train?

AR I did a lot of hypertrophy, a lot of high volume, and I would lift to failure quite a bit. It's probably a miracle that I didn't get injured a lot more, but I pushed myself really, really hard those first couple years, day in and day out.

MC How did you first learn what you needed to? Did you have a

coach or a lifting mentor, or are you self-taught?

AR That depends on the time period. Sometimes there were a couple coaches along the way. They weren't my actual coaches, but they were the coaches for the athletic teams I participated for, and I would do strength and conditioning training with some of the plans they would give me. I would modify some of the plans for myself, I would add or remove weights depending on how I felt, and I looked into a lot of different weight training methods. But, you know, being a thirteen or fourteen year old boy, I just wanted to hit it every day and get really big and strong.

MC How did you build your psychological skills for training to the level that you've gotten yourself to?

AR Well, the way that I saw it was at the end of the day my goal was, and still is, to be as strong as I possibly can, and every session, whether I feel good or bad, has meaning. It has value attached to that goal in some meaningful way. So every session is important. Every session matters. No matter how big or small. The bigger ones are funner, sure, but smaller ones still contribute to the ultimate goal. When it comes to breaking limits and barriers psychologically, I usually try not to get myself psyched up too much, but I definitely get into the zone, and I can get pretty intense at times. It's kind of like

a switch that I have. I flip that switch, and once I do, I feel stronger. I feel much stronger.

MC Are you normally a pretty calm lifter, or do you need to get amped up for the big lifts that you do?

AR I would say that's evolved over time and it changes. Sometimes I'm very intense, very amped up. Sometimes, like now, I'm a bit more, I don't think "calm" is the right word, I think more so "collected." "Composed" is a better way to put it. I definitely still bring intensity, but I'm more composed now. Rather than just raw aggression, raw hype, it's much more channeled and focused now.

MC Yeah, people that start out as very emotional lifters usually become a lot more collected over time, from what I've seen.

AR Oh yeah, absolutely, and I think you'll see that a lot with the younger athletes anyway, just because they're young, they're getting into it, they're excited. It's totally normal. I'll say it's a shared experience.

MC What are some mistakes you've made throughout your training career or any regrets that you have?

AR Remember earlier how I said that every training session, no matter how big or small, contributes to the ultimate goal in some way? I don't regret any of my sessions. I don't regret any of the injuries that I've experienced, because they've all

contributed to where I'm at now or where I'm going. I will say there are mistakes made along the way. Close to the beginning, when I was really excited, and I was just pushing and pushing and pushing, it got to the point where I got hurt pretty bad towards the end of high school. For three, four years after that, some of the areas that were hurt, I would definitely feel pain there while I was lifting. I was able to manage it pretty well and keep pushing, and once I hit the last year or so I began to prioritize things a little bit differently. The ultimate goal is to still get as strong as I possibly can, but I realized that in order to accomplish that, I have to be as healthy as possible. So I've really focused a lot on maintaining good health and prioritizing my health throughout all my training now. And it's evident with the things I've been able to do.

MC Has it gotten easier over time to prioritize the staying healthy versus going to the limit every session, or is that still challenging?

AR It's gotten a lot easier for me because, like I was explaining earlier, every session has a purpose, and you have to keep in mind what the purpose of that session is. If the purpose of that session is to get blood flow, just do some pump work, or if that session is to lift really heavy, to move weight that's

really close to the max, that session should build it. Every session has its purpose, and I always try to keep that purpose in mind. When I do, I'm a lot more adept to navigating my training a lot better, and I see a lot of success.

MC Does the purpose of the session ever evolve during the session itself, or do you usually have the purpose decided before you even go to the gym?

AR Nine times out of ten, it's decided before I even go to the gym. I'm very methodical; I definitely think a lot of things way out in advance. Before I got my recent coach, I'd actually been training myself for the past five years. And people see one side of me on Instagram, but the other side that no one else can see, the hours of planning, research, and everything else that I have done to develop these plans and ideas that I have to see how they would work for me, and I've had a lot of success over the years with that. Of course, some mistakes, too, but it was all a great experience, it was all valuable data. Most of the time, to circle back to the question, it's decided in advance.

MC What are some injuries that you've dealt with?

AR Definitely hurt my back before. There was a time period in high school I actually had a bit of trouble walking. Putting anything on my back hurt like hell, and it was like that for

several months. I definitely was hurting and at the same time that happened I got really sick that year. And with that, I had a lot of other stressors at that time. I was a senior in high school, I was getting ready to figure out what to do with my life. I think all those things compounded and exacerbated whatever I had going on and amplified the effects of whatever had happened. Whatever injury it was, I never really got it checked out. I just attempted to heal it over time. I also had a year where I had hip issues, particularly after the US Open, and it made squatting pretty difficult for a while. But lately, the past year and a half, two years, I have none. This is the time frame where I began to prioritize health. Fortunately, I've never had nerve damage, as far as I know. I've never broken any bones. Nothing significant like that. Within the past year, I've strained my pec twice. I've never torn it or anything like that, thankfully. And that's because I've really focused on health and nursing it back to health, so now it's pretty much at full health.

MC Can you think of some difficult decisions that you've made in training?

AR Deciding to move away from equipped lifting and focusing exclusively on raw lifting. Raw lifting was just getting so competitive. The talent pool is increasing every year; more

and more people are coming out of the woodwork. And as that talent pool diversifies and grows further, I realized that I needed to put my stock into one or the other if I wanted to continue being not just a top contender, but to give myself the best chance possible to win. That's the goal, to win, at least for me. I decided at that point that I should start getting into raw lifting, because that's what I'm more passionate about. It's what I enjoy doing. And equipped lifting had its place in the past, but raw lifting is what I enjoy to do. It's not to say that I wasn't getting stronger in equipped lifting, because you are, but equipped lifting is a whole different beast. It's a lot more technically focused, and becoming adept at the gear and mastering it, and it's definitely different than raw lifting. It has its own dimension of challenges, and I think a lot of lifters would benefit from at least trying it, a couple of blocks or something. I know that not everyone has access to equipment, not everyone is able to do that, it's not realistic for everyone; that's why raw also has such a massive appeal, because you really don't need a whole lot to do raw lifting. The reality is, at bare minimum, you need nothing. You just need a singlet, socks, and a t-shirt. You don't have to have a belt or knee sleeves. All that stuff's optional. I think that's one of the big decisions I had to make, ultimately, deciding

between raw lifting and equipped lifting.

MC What's an unforgettable experience you've had in training or competition, aside from winning the titles you've mentioned?

AR I will say one unforgettable experience in particular that I've had was earlier this year, actually. I was training at a friend's garage in Maryland. And I remember that day, I put up my first 2,100 training total. That day was massive for me because I had never done anything like that before. And I still had more in the tank after I did it. I was just absolutely shocked at how strong I had gotten over the quarantine period. That, to me, was a pivotal moment that really solidified in my mind that I had potential to be one of the best.

MC I think that was the first video I ever saw of you lifting. I remember thinking, "Wow, holy shit!"

AR Yeah, it was good times!

MC So for a philosophical question, there's this concept I like to call the lifting space, which is essentially the role that training has played in your life. How big is that lifting space for you and how has it evolved with time?

AR I will definitely say, in my lifetime, I've had a lot of experiences, I've had a lot of ups and downs. At the end of the day, training and being able to do that, having the space to do what I love, is the one thing that I've always had no matter

what. When things got hectic when I was younger, things happened, situations weren't always ideal, circumstances weren't always ideal, I could still train. I could still train for an hour or two, even if it was once, twice, three times a week, I could always do some sort of training. Training, for me, getting stronger, working towards my lifetime goals, was the glue that held a lot of things together for me over the years. And yeah, for a lot of people, it's just lifting weights, but for me, it's something I really have enjoyed doing and get pleasure out of doing. And I feel like I'm actually doing something, you know? No matter how big or small it is. To me, it's big. To me, it's played a huge role in my life. It's also taught me, even in the face of overwhelming odds, it's taught me persistence, extraordinary persistence, even in the face of difficult circumstances. It's taught me how to stick with something for a long period of time, to just consistently go at it over and over again. That has definitely carried over into what I do career-wise, what I do educationally. It's definitely a feature about me that has carried over into other aspects of my life, and I think it really started with training. I can attribute most of the success I have now to this extraordinary persistence. It's a difficult path, and it's what it takes.

MC Can you talk a little more about how it's carried over to other

aspects of your life and how it manifests there?

AR That was really the main thing there, the extraordinary persistence. It's literally just the ability to stick with something nonstop and not give up, and by virtue of being in it for so long, over time, acquiring skills and acquiring technical mastery, and staying focused. That's an invaluable skill, trait, to have in other endeavors. If you can do that in everything you set out to do, you will reach some level of success in everything you set out to do. If you're focused, if you're persistent, if you don't give up...I think there are times that people are on a sinking ship and they don't realize that maybe they should cut ties with that particular thing, but if you really commit to something and you want something that will take you months, years, decades even, and you stick with it and stay focused, the sky's the limit. You can achieve a lot. And other people will admire you for your effort, and hopefully you'll motivate them.

MC Does lifting give your life meaning that can't be found anywhere else?

AR I'm not sure I've ever thought of it that way. A quick answer, a quick yes, mainly because there are goals that I have, specific strength goals that I can't do if I don't do the main primary movements like deadlift and squat. From a very early age I've

set goals that I've wanted to hit, and I still haven't hit those goals yet, and I'm very much working towards it, and part of my life has been dedicated to achieving those goals, so I would say yes.

MC Has lifting taught you anything that you haven't mentioned yet about yourself? You've mentioned extraordinary persistence, any other character traits or attributes?

AR Focus. I think I've also learned a lot about how to manage pain and how to be strong in the face of difficulty, or when things are painful or when things are hard, how to keep pushing even though everything hurts or you have a lot of other things going on. That's definitely been a valuable asset that I've gotten from training.

MC Has it taught you anything about human nature or influenced your worldview?

AR I'll tell you one thing I've noticed, an observation. This isn't to bash people, but a lot of people don't like doing things for the long term. They like quick, easy results. They like things that come relatively easy. They're willing to some degree, but if you really want to recomp your body or gain more muscle mass or get stronger, it's going to take you years. That's a pretty intimidating and daunting thing for a lot of people, telling them that it's literally going to take them years. A

lot of people don't necessarily think on the bandwidth of years, so when you approach them with that, it can be really intimidating. So I've noticed that while it's good to have long-term goals, if you are in it to win it for the long term and you're dedicated, if you are still unsure or you're new to it and you're just getting into things, I think setting a lot of short term goals along the way and working towards those for weeks and months, over time, and seeing how you can slowly adapt to the lifestyle of training and getting stronger and being fit. I've noticed that a lot of people are really intimidated by the long-term answer for training, getting stronger, and gaining muscle, because it does take years. There's really no way around that. It just takes a lot of hard work, persistence, effort, and focus. I know people aren't always willing to do that. People have a lot of other things going on in their lives. But if someone really wants something, when there's a will, there's a way. And that way may take a long time, but hey, some people are willing to pursue it relentlessly, and some people aren't.

MC What are some of your other hobbies and interests?

AR I really do enjoy studying human behavior, particularly psychology. I also like watching horror movies, like a lot. Like, A LOT A LOT. I used to like writing quite a bit. I'm thinking

when I get older, I might dabble in it again, but things have been so hectic and busy that I haven't been able to write in graduate school, and I drifted a little bit away from that, mainly because I've put my focus and stock in other areas, but I might come back to it later. And I also enjoy reading scientific literature regarding fitness, and, of course, regarding psychology. Those are my main, primary interests.

MC Does lifting ever get in the way of those?

AR No. I won't say it ever gets in the way, but I will say that lifting and those things do affect each other to some degree. I have to prioritize time to each thing. We all have limited time. We all have a finite amount of time, and you allocate it to the things that matter to you. The amount of time you allocate to something is probably proportionate to how much you actually care about it. At different times, some things matter a little more. At different times, some things have to take the back seat. And that's OK. I won't say they necessarily get in the way of each other, but sometimes I'll allocate more time to one thing over another.

MC Can you imagine being done with training?

AR Not anytime soon!

MC Hopefully not, you're just getting started!

AR Yeah, that probably won't ever happen.

MC You see it being in your life forever in some way, shape, or form?

AR Yeah. I may not be competing forever, but I'll definitely be training forever as much as I physically can.

MC Final question. What would you like to tell beginner and intermediate lifters reading this?

AR Are we talking about straight up beginners or those that are committed to it already?

MC If you've got different things to say to both of those groups, then I would appreciate hearing them both.

AR I have some advice for those who are interested in competing and then for those who generally just want better fitness. To address those who are really interested in competing one day, and they're new to the sport, and they're starting to train, trying to find a coach and everything else, I would tell them, especially before that first meet, it's a big step. With that big step comes a lot of commitment and dedication to your training, and I would say don't get so overwhelmed. Don't worry so much about making weight, don't worry about having all the newest and nicest equipment and gear. Put up a total, go to the meet, have a good time, meet people. Lift within your means, prioritize your health, don't get injured, and leading up to that meet, stay dedicated and consistent in your training

as much as you possibly can. And really just have a good time with it. If you like getting hyped during some of your training, get hyped during some of your training, especially if you're a younger lifter! You don't have to be boring, you don't have to lift like the best people lift. Just lift, be you, enjoy it, and enjoy the process. And over time, you'll grow anyway, if you stick with it. You might change, so don't freak out about everything, you won't have all the answers. You're in for a great ride. Relax, buckle up, and really enjoy what you're doing and the process.

MC How about for the people who are just seeking general fitness?

AR For those individuals, I will say do a little bit of your research. Look into the pros and cons of weight training, of aerobic and anaerobic exercise, look into what exactly what your goals are. Try to establish some concrete goals. They don't have to be long-term goals that take you years to achieve. They can be short-term goals. Let's say in two months, you want to lose five or ten pounds. Do some research on how you can do that. If you want to recomp your body, if you want to stay around the same body weight but have more muscle mass, look into ways it can be done. Try to make your goals as specific as possible, and concrete, and quantifiable and measurable. I'm

going to stress this, reiterate this: have a good time as much as you can and enjoy the process as much as you can. Take pride in the progress you make along the way. Take pride in the baby steps in between those goals, and appropriately celebrate those baby steps that you've accomplished. You're certainly welcome to train alone, but it's also good to be around other individuals that are training who have similar goals. If you can, seek out a gym, become a member of a gym, and if not, you can gather your own equipment as well, but I would just caution you to do a lot of research and investigation before you get a bunch of things, have a whole setup, and still not know what you're doing at all. Try to find a sense of direction, try to establish concrete, quantifiable short-term goals, celebrate the baby steps along the way, and enjoy the process.

MC Anything else on your mind or anything that I didn't ask that you'd like to add?

AR I think I've said everything I wanted to say! Thanks for having me.

MC Thank you!

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