

# Starting Strength

## Barbell Training as Rehab: Brian Jones' Story

by  
Karl Schudt

“I’m glad you didn’t listen to your doctors.” – Mark Rippetoe

“I can’t go the gym. Weightlifting is hard. I’m too old. I’m a hard-gainer.” There are lots of excuses that people have for not getting under a barbell. We want life to be easy, and look for reasons not to do hard stuff. You think you have excuses? Brian Jones fell twenty feet off of a building, broke his legs, and was told that he would never walk again. How’s that for an excuse?

Here’s Brian’s story in his own words:

“My name is Brian Jones. I am a forty five-year-old father of six in Lexington, Kentucky. In April of 2011, during the course of my duties as an insurance adjuster, I fell over twenty feet from a roof in North Carolina; landing in a standing position on the concrete drive. Imagine grabbing a rebound from your second floor and coming down with it. Long story not as long – I incurred severe pilon fractures in both legs.”

What’s a pilon fracture? The talus bone, in the foot just below the tibia and the fibula, gets pushed up with extreme force into the tibia, and breaks the bone near the joint. It’s often seen in car accidents because of the force of the impact on the feet through the pedals. Imagine lying down and having someone swing a sledgehammer into your heels, and what this would do to your lower legs. In Brian’s case, the pilon fractures were particularly bad, shattering the ends of the tibias where they meet the talus. And both legs were fractured. Usually, in a car accident, only one pilon fracture will be suffered, since only one foot is on the pedal. To help you visualize the injuries, here are the x-rays:



## *Brian Jones' Story*

The fractures were bad enough that they required pins and hardware to fix. This hardware was supposed to be permanent, but more on that later.



His doctor told him that it wasn't a matter of whether he would be disabled, but how severely. A man who had been working to earn the money for a wife, six children, and a Chinese foreign exchange student was now bedridden, living in a hospital bed in a room of his house, with the prospect that he would never walk again and the fear that he would never be able to fulfill his responsibilities to his family again.

"I thought I was done with it all, you know?" said Brian. "We were so convinced by both the doctors and the physical therapists that my lot in life was going to be spent either in a wheelchair or behind a walker that we had work done on our home to accommodate what was going to be my new disabled lifestyle. My neighbor and father-in-law built a 35-foot handicapped ramp off the front of the house." Brian eventually become so despondent over his situation after hearing his five-year-old daughter

say to someone, "my daddy doesn't walk," that he even considered suicide so as not to burden his wife and family any further. Fortunately this was a just a brief temptation, a fleeting moment of gray depression. Brian determined that he was in an unacceptable situation and he refused to participate in the disability. What Brian had in his favor was a high degree of motivation to control his recovery and change his life.

## **The Training**

Brian describes his self-rehabilitation: "Eventually I had to have eight surgeries. I ultimately got a staph infection in the left leg and nearly had to have an amputation. I was bedridden from April to nearly October – no weight bearing. With the prognosis of being crippled and never walking normally hanging over my head, I figured I had nothing to lose. Even though I could not put weight on my legs, no one said anything about me crawling. I had my wife get me some hardshell kneepads and some weightlifting gloves and I started crawling around the house. Hell, I hadn't moved in a long time so sometimes I could go all of 2 minutes before being exhausted. I eventually made it to the front door, the porch, the sidewalk and would then crawl up and down the street. It was frustrating – sometimes I would crawl up the street just so my wife and kids would not see me crying at the state I was in.

"Crawling eventually gave way to a wheel chair, which gave way to a walker. I did physical therapy for 12 visits." The prescribed rehabilitation consisted of crunching a towel with his toes, pointing his toes toward his knees for a ten count, an exercise bike, and light leg presses. "The physical therapist could not believe that the file describing my injuries was really my file, as I was progressing fairly well. I spoke with my orthopedic surgeon once. He saw that I was able to totter around with a limp, which was more than he expected, so he kind of wished me luck and sent me on my way."

## *Brian Jones' Story*

Note that at this point Brian had already exceeded the expectations of the doctor and physical therapist, simply through effort. Physical therapy is limited by a lack of knowledge of strength training, and by the assumption that the patient won't do anything hard. This is true for most patients, but not for Brian.

The doctor told him that he would certainly be crippled for life, and probably wouldn't be able to walk unassisted. If you were in his situation, what would you do? Would you accept the prognosis, and sit in a chair for the rest of your life? If you are a regular reader of this website, you wouldn't, because we know that strength training promotes healing. It's almost a panacea. Dr. Jonathon Sullivan wistfully writes of wishing he could give people barbell prescriptions: "If I could get you under the bar, I could change your life." Brian took this to heart, and got himself under the bar in a situation that would make most of us quit, sit in a chair, and wait to die.

Apart from physical therapists and a doctor's care, Brian would make a very slow trek to his local YMCA daily. He was alternating between the use of a walker and walking sticks at this point. Every day he spent 15 minutes on one of the cardio machines. This cardio extended to 30 minutes, then to an hour. He was losing some of the extra weight he had put on due to forced inactivity (at one point surpassing 360 lbs), but Brian was still very weak. He had difficulty lifting his youngest child, Kyra. By his own admission, he was fat with significant muscle atrophy. In addition, he had constant pain and swelling in both areas of the injuries, the ankle joints at the end of the tibias.

Brian found Starting Strength by accident, having dropped his iPod between the exercise bikes at the YMCA. Squatting down (below parallel) to pick it up, Brian felt a pop in his ankles, and found out, as many of us have discovered, that squatting makes your legs feel much better. Squatting was good, and deserved some investigation. Searching around the internet led him to the Starting Strength website, and, after posting a question about his injuries, he got a personal phone call from Mark Rippetoe, and began the Starting Strength program.

Brian readily admits that first phone call from Rip began a change in the course for his life and the lives of his family. Rip told Brian that he was sending his *Starting Strength* DVD and book, and also offered his services via phone, email, and the forum. Together they would get him strong.

In order to begin his training, Brian traded an air compressor for a barbell and a few plates. At first the plates were too heavy, and so he cut some homemade training plates out of particle board, made by tracing around a standard 45 and cutting out a disc of wood. Weight was added, sometimes by the ounce, with the use of various washers and zip ties. Barbell training is almost infinitely titrateable, since one can get bars as light as 15lbs, and can increase the weight by ounces, if need be. Anyone who can stand can train with barbells. He asked his shattered body to get stronger, bit by bit, and it did.

Using the Starting Strength model, a simple linear progression, 3 sessions a week, beginning in April of 2012, Brian began to train. This consisted of two alternating workouts: A: squat 5x3, bench press 5x3 and deadlift 5x3; Workout B: squat 5x3, press 5x3, rows 5x3.

The traditional Starting Strength program has the power clean as part of the second workout, after the deadlift has progressed enough to make it difficult to do it every session. Due to his injuries, Brian was not able to do the power clean. The dynamic nature of the movement, which involves a jump with a barbell, was too much for his healing limbs. There was also the memory of the last time he had jumped, which ended in a twenty foot fall and matching pilon fractures. So the power clean was replaced temporarily by the usual expedient of the barbell row. Rip did say to Brian that when the time came, "I will teach you the power clean personally." More on this later.

Due to muscle atrophy and inactivity, Brian started his training weights on all lifts as "bar only". He trained alone in his garage, accompanied only by his dogs and Jackson, his six year old

## *Brian Jones' Story*

son and biggest cheerleader. From hundred degree heat in the summer to sub-zero temperatures in the winter, Brian continued to train, adding 5 lbs every session. When he wasn't training he would religiously watch his *Starting Strength* DVD and pour over the technique checks other people had posted on the Starting Strength forums. Every milestone he hit, he would share with Rip and the community: 1-plate squats, 2-plate squats, 3-plate squats, and so on. He was constantly looking for and accepting feedback.

His bones and muscles responded to the training, to the extent that bone growth pushed the pins and hardware out of his ankles and into the soft tissue. Within seven months of training, his bone growth, driven by the stress of a linear progression, had compromised the hardware in his left ankle. "I could see where the pins were protruding and beginning to poke out, just under the surface of the skin," says Brian. The hardware in his left leg, which was supposed to be a permanent, lifelong addition to his body, was removed via surgery four months after beginning the Starting Strength program.

Brian returned to training with a heightened sense of purpose. He was determined to train that other set of hardware out of his leg, and he did. Less than four months later, in November of 2012, the hardware in the right leg was removed. Brian was now hardware-free despite the prognosis that these would be permanent additions to his anatomy. Putting an increasing load on the bones, as in a linear progression, causes them to adapt to the stress by making more and stronger bone. Barbell training does not merely help the muscles get stronger, it helps the entire body get stronger, and is much more effective than crunching up towels with one's toes. A simple course of barbell training allowed Brian to exceed every expectation of his doctor and physical therapist.

Also important in Brian's recovery via barbell training was Jim Steel, of Bas' Barbell and occasional contributor to this website. Jim is the strength coach at Penn University. He and Brian connected via Jim's website, [www.basbarbell.com](http://www.basbarbell.com). Jim gave Brian a copy of his "Bas' Barbell Book of Programs." This provided Brian some alternative training and insight while he was working through the periods of time when he was recovering from hardware surgery. Additionally, like Rip, Jim made himself available to Brian pretty much any time for questions, coaching and encouragement. It was Jim that pushed Brian to enter his first powerlifting meet.

After having the hardware removed, Brian resumed his training. By July of 2012 he had a 315lb deadlift, by August, he was squatting 255x5 and deadlifting 365x5. Barbells have given Brian his life back.

## **The chronology**

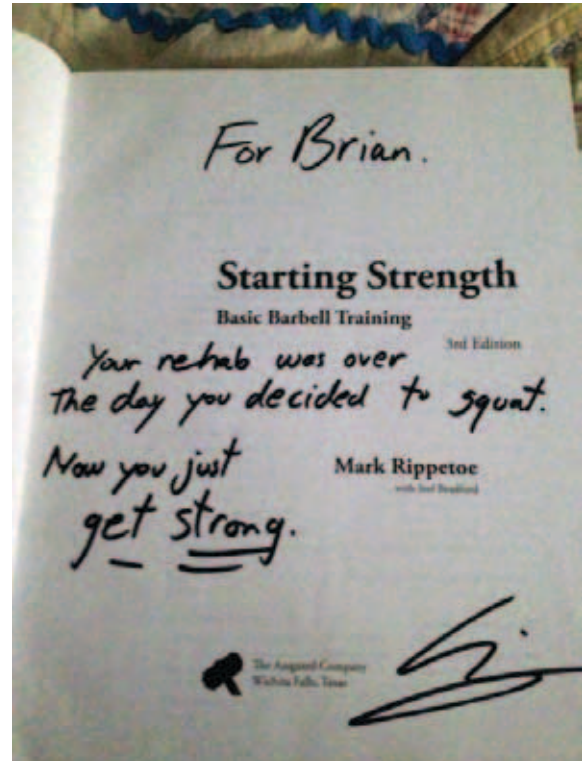
4/23/2011	The accident. Pilon fractures in both legs.
5/2011 – 10/2011	Bedridden.
10/2011 – 3/2012	Crawling and pedaling at the gym.
4/2012	Began Starting Strength.
6/2012	Bone growth pushed out the pins in the left leg.
7/2012	Pins removed from left leg.
11/2012	Pins removed from right leg.
5/11/2013	Totaled 1093lbs in a powerlifting meet, and pulled over 500lbs.

## *Brian Jones' Story*

Brian has a signed copy of *Starting Strength: Basic Barbell Training*, sent to him in April of 2012, in which Rip has inscribed: "Your rehab was over the day you decided to squat. Now you just get strong."

So, rather than just get himself able to walk, Brian has taken up powerlifting. His first meet was May 11 of this year, where the crippled-for-life, probably-never-walk-again patient managed to squat 330.5, bench 264.5, and deadlift 501.5, for a total of 1096.5lbs, winning two divisions. Brian is happy that his story has become known, and has already inspired others to take up their barbells and walk. He has recently attended a *Starting Strength* Seminar, and hopes to learn enough to help others in his community. Another goal is to deadlift 650lbs by the beginning of 2014, at the age of nearly 46 with a "disability" according to the doctors.

It doesn't end there. Brian's story has struck a chord with many. He has been contacted time and time again by members of the *Starting Strength* community. He has been told that his story has inspired others to work on recovery, to attack the challenges in their lives, to never give up. Brian decided that he was obligated to help others as he was helped himself. He began working with other injured people locally in Lexington, Kentucky including an ATV crash victim and a soldier that fell from a helicopter during training exercises. Brian understands what it is like to be up against something that feels overwhelming and be told by the medical authorities that you will never be any better than you are right now. He doesn't accept the limitations commonly set by the medical profession, and believes others shouldn't either.



### **“5 inches to 500 lbs”**

“In July of 2011, I was bedridden with no real time-frame for knowing when I would put weight on my feet again, if ever,” says Brian. “We remodeled our sun room, and it had become a hospital room. Each day for me was spent in the same position, lying in that bed. I decided I had to do something. This was before barbell training, before *Starting Strength*. I had never lifted a weight or trained in my life. But I knew I had to do something. So I started moving my leg. Understand this, when I say moving my leg imagine laying on your back in a bed with your feet pointing up at 12 o'clock. Now move your right foot from 12 o'clock to 2 o'clock. For two weeks that was my initial workout, five inches of moving my toes. The next time I would move it six inches...even then I accidentally understood the concept of linear progression.”

This is significant because of the progress he made from the time of the injury. Brian continues, “Two weeks ago, I deadlifted 502 pounds in my first ever powerlifting competition. It was only 13 months prior when I was thrilled that I could move my foot 5 inches. I went from 5 inches to 500 lbs because I refused to participate in my disability and injuries. I know there are others out there that do not realize that have the same capacity for success. I need to help them.”

## *Brian Jones' Story*

Crystal Coast Strength and Conditioning is Mac Ward's facility in Newport, North Carolina. Brian has just returned from a Starting Strength Seminar at CCSS as a guest of Mark Rippetoe. The guy that was most likely going to be in a wheelchair, or perhaps, if things went well, using a walker, is now working towards a new goal: the Starting Strength Coaching Certification. Brian's time at the Starting Strength Seminar was spent both in lecture and lifting. He was taught the Starting Strength model and the lift techniques. "It is important for me to learn and ingrain the Starting Strength Model both in to my mind and my muscles. I know that there are legions of people out there that, due to age, weight, confidence, or injury, feel they are at a dead end. I truly believe I can assist them finding a path to improvement. Coaching the program and the lifts correctly for a diverse group is crucial for me to be able help others. That is why I am taking another step – becoming a Starting Strength Coach." It's not easy to get this certification, but it's probably easier than rehabbing one's broken legs.

Mark Rippetoe holds a special place in Brian's recovery. "Rip gave me that initial shove that I needed and supplied me with the tools. Yes, I did the work, but Rip has been there along the entire way. Trust me, there have been no 'kid gloves.' Rip has high expectations for all of his trainees. I am no different."

The pinnacle for Brian during the Starting Strength Seminar was when Rip used him to demonstrate the power clean. Remember: Brian had at least two things going against him:

1. He had never performed a Power Clean.
2. The last time he "jumped", it was unintentionally off a 20 foot roof.

Within a matter of minutes, in front of an entire seminar, attendees and Starting Strength coaches, Coach Rip had Brian correctly performing Power Cleans, complete with the jump. "It was one of the few things I thought might have been a 'never' scenario for me. Doing the Power Clean, that is. I didn't think I would ever jump again. Rip got me through it." It wasn't without some struggle. Later when performing the move in small groups, incrementally increasing the weight, Brian began to have difficulty maintaining the integrity of the lift. Things began to break down and the mental aspect of the jump came in to play. "My body, my mind all of sudden realized that it was doing something that the last time it had happened, had caused me significant trauma (the fall). I began to experience some type of panic/anxiety/PTSD type thing. I was on the platform in front of four other lifters and Coach Stef Bradford. I felt as if I were going to vomit, I was getting lightheaded, my chest was tightening and I was losing control of my arms and hands from the shaking.

"As I stood there looking down at the bar Rip came up to the platform. He pulled me aside and talked me down off the ledge. It was a HUGE breakthrough for me on a variety of levels. I am not going to go too far into the psychology aspect of things, nor will I share what he said, as it was personal, but what Rip said to me was right on point and allowed me to get past the fear and anxiety. Furthermore it provided me with an example of how to coach someone that is having issues more in their head than their muscles. Trust that Mark Rippetoe is a master of all aspects of his craft and he knows that it isn't just about the barbell at times." This is an important point: often, the problem is not physical, but mental.

If you've never explored the Starting Strength website, there is a forum which is a thriving online community. It is, like all internet forums, often filled with silliness, but for those who are trying to get strong, it's very supportive. This is where Brian and Rip first encountered one another. Brian used the name "Brian Broke Legs" over the past year on the forums. While at the Starting Strength Seminar, Coach Rip advised Brian that he was no longer going to be "Brian Broke Legs" on the forum.

## *Brian Jones' Story*

As far as he could see, Brian was now a strong guy getting stronger and that the old forum name held no more relevance. “Brian Broke Legs” is no more on the Starting Strength forums. Now, it’s “Brian Jones.”

Brian has returned from the Starting Strength Seminar and resumed training again. He chose not to pursue the Starting Strength Coaching Certification during this seminar as he wanted to establish a foundation for both the lifts and coaching. He plans on using this summer to train several people including his wife and several neighbors. After gaining more experience with hands-on coaching and continued exposure to the Starting Strength model, Brian hopes to attend a future seminar and receive his Starting Strength Coaching Certification. “If for no other reason, earning my certification would allow me to assist, with credibility, Rip, Stef, and the staff at future events and become a contributor for Starting Strength. That alone makes it worth it. While Coach says I owe him nothing, I owe Rip,” says Brian.

People have reached out to Brian to see if he would be interested in doing some public speaking engagements. This is something he is planning on as it will increase the number of people he can touch with his story and hopefully provide them with an inspiration to continue on and breakthrough their barriers. Brian says, “Isolation is one of the biggest enemies to advancing. I used every avenue I could find to keep people abreast of my progress. Get a plan and tell everyone that you are going to do it. Keep the increments small, whether it be pounds on the bar or pounds off the scale. But do a little more every day. My 500 lb deadlift started with moving my leg 5 inches. When I finished moving my leg, I wasn’t upset that I couldn’t walk. I didn’t feel all was lost because I couldn’t jump. I was excited because I knew that the next day I was going to move 6 inches, then 7, and that progression moved me to plywood weight plates and zip ties with washers hanging off an empty bar, and that led me to my 500 lb deadlift.”

When asked what advice he has for others facing similar challenges, Brian stated, “You have to be patient with yourself and your body when you are doing something like this. However, don’t confuse patience with accepting anything less than your best effort for that day. Always push yourself. Always make a difference. Never cheat yourself out of the opportunity to improve. We all have a limited amount of days to do this. Use them. I have no doubt that anyone who gets their mind right can accomplish, achieve, and surpass the results that I have seen. Injuries or inactivity with bones and muscles may be the reason you are where you are – your head and your heart control where you can go and what you will be.”

Besides the community at Starting Strength, Brian is clear about where he feels the majority of the credit lies for his recovery. “Every single aspect of my recovery, my success, my life is a direct result of my wife Summer. There was a period when I was nothing more than a helpless baby, unable to do



## *Brian Jones' Story*

anything – *anything* – for myself, and Summer took care of business for us. She fed me, cleaned me, everything. The weight that I move now on the bar is *nothing* compared to the burden she placed on her shoulders when faced with a disabled husband and what would be over \$700,000 in uninsured medical bills beginning to pile up, the loss of our business, six children, and just trying to keep it together for months on end. I had the easy part. They handled my pain with narcotics, so I was oblivious to how bad it was getting for us as a family. Summer made sure that this was one thing I would not have to worry about. She handled it all. I owe her my life.”

If a doctor tells you that recovery is not an option, that you ought to take it easy, that you can never be strong again, that your healthy life is over, well, that might be true for most people. But if you have the guts to put a bar on your back, you can get your life back. Just ask Brian.



---

[Starting Strength](#) : [Resources](#) : [Articles](#) : [Forums](#) : [Discuss This Article](#)

Copyright 2013 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.