

Starting Strength

Reflections in Iron: Mike Webster's Training Methods

by

Colin Webster

I've been asked from time to time about the training methods of my father, Mike Webster of the Pittsburgh Steelers. This is recollection will, of course, be colored by the lens of youth, and for the life of me I can't remember the exact poundages or set/rep schemes he used for the most part, having been so small that my own workouts alongside him consisted of straining to deadlift the empty curl bar. But I do remember a lot...

He used to take me along frequently to the stadium, and to what was then the Red Bull Inn, a restaurant near our house in Lindenvale, Pennsylvania that doubled as an underground strength gym. It was real old school stuff, a few barbells and homemade welded racks and benches and such, much like the equipment at our house. Dad was particularly fond of a pair of "uprights", metal poles cemented into two semi-truck tire rims, which wobbled and occasionally tipped over when you would try to rack the weights. The plates he had were probably top of the line back then, as was the barbell, but everything else was pure crap. The important thing was it worked. It's even harder for me to guess at the weights used in some of his workouts, even the ones I remember with perfect visual clarity. The problem was he was using some kind of foreign plates, in kilograms. I didn't understand this until much later when I loaded up the bar with "25 pound" metal plates rimmed with thick rubber bumpers. I was trying to put 300 on the bar, to warm up for squats, and was nearly crushed as soon as I took the bar to my shoulders and began to squat down. These days there are a lot of kilogram-only plates floating around most gyms, and I still check to make sure what I'm loading.

I do remember him saying that for a long time, his bench press was just around 350 or so, but his best workout was 445 pounds for six sets of eight reps on the bench. I think he said he finally jumped up in progress when he started really tucking his elbows in, it took a few weeks to adjust, but once he did his bench went up. As his career went on, most of his workouts were with an almost close grip on the bench, more for the reason that he needed to focus on involving his triceps as much as possible, not a muscle isolation thing. His hand placement needed to be inside the other guy's to control him, and it carried over better.

Just recently I was reading an old journal he kept – he kept hundreds of pages of notes and thoughts on all kinds of things. I think he was trying to begin a book on lifting weights and strength training specifically for the high school football player. He might have just been designing a program

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for a young athlete he had met too; he did things like that. Guess what it involved? Five sets of five on heavy barbell exercises like squats, deadlifts, power cleans, and bench presses. One instructive note he had on the sheet of scrawl was that once a player had built up a lot of strength in the bench press and the press, he should start rotating in the incline press due to the angle at which the arms are required to push when blocking and trying to stay low. He recommended three days a week, and two or three days of sprint training, either before or after legs. He did this himself, either running first, usually for distance, and then working posterior chain barbell exercises, and sometimes doing sprints after heavy squats, or after driving the sled. He believed you could train the legs to retain more of their strength when exhausted, and conversely train the legs to retain the ability to move quickly, even when tired by strength exercises. He included much less distance than he used to do himself, and prescribed 10 repeats of 40 yard dashes. One of the notes says that with warm-up sets, anything over eight reps just exhausts the muscle, and to do about two, but no more than four warm-up sets before launching into your work sets.

His workouts were basic, traditional barbell lifts: lots of bent rows, bench press, overhead press, squats and deadlifts, even the occasional clean and jerk. He'd lift in the basement of our house in the off-season, or go and meet Steve Courson, Tunch Ilkin, and Craig Wolfley at the Red Bull Inn to push some steel. I was always excited when Dad would take me to the Inn, because I knew it meant getting set down at a table in the back room and fed my favorite dish of fried flounder. I was convinced it was the secret to getting big and strong because Dad, in an attempt to get me to finish my dinner there one night, told me it was. I never left a bite on that plate, and I never noticed that it failed to put much mass on me at 6 years old (I was working with three pound gold plastic dumbbells at the time).

Eventually, I would get bored and wander downstairs to the gym, which smelled like sour sweat and athletic tape. It probably didn't help that the "gym" was in a boiler room, and filled with almost a ton of sweating NFL players. The space was somewhat cramped, but the guys would shuffle around each other and take turns pressing weights and having me count the reps for them on occasion. It was often Dad's way of taking time to involve me in his workouts. The weights would clank and the bars would bend – to this day I long for a place like that to train. There was a kind of ethos – an aura, if you will – that these guys were here to work, not to talk. Pile on weight and see who could lift the most. It was about keeping their jobs, getting another step, making darn sure number whoever didn't get past them even one time this year. It was training. There was no jewelry or flash, just old cut off sweats, jeans, and suspenders, and some real old school lifting. Afterwards we'd sit back upstairs with a nice cold glass of milk and cool down from "our" workout. You'll see that milk is a recurring theme here, as are squats.

He used heavy weights for lots and lots of reps. He used to explain that he trained a lot like a bodybuilder, not just because he needed the size but because having a lot of strength endurance kept him strong, while the football players who trained like powerlifters using singles and triples lost their strength quickly in the game. He never used isolation exercises, but just did lots and lots of work with the basics, then went outside in the snow and drove the blocking sled all around the yard wearing shorts, a shirt, and his helmet. I remember watching him walk up and down the incline in our backyard in the winter with a heavily loaded barbell on his back, occasionally dipping down a bit and exploding up, kind of like a push press without the press. The snow was knee deep, and he would just trudge back and forth in it, stopping to drop down for a lunge or two and a few squats at each end, but never setting down the barbell until he had walked back and forth for several hundred yards. Knowing Dad, I am almost dead-certain it was shortly after Rocky IV that he started doing this. I also think that's why he really liked training in basements and using homemade racks and benches. He would try

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and sing *Eye of the Tiger* from time to time, but Dad's singing voice was really, truly terrible, as well as his sense of rhythm, occasionally horrifying house guests as he liked to sing *The Impossible Dream* along with the self-playing piano he was so excited to get. I take after him that way.

One of the most important things to him was getting as much power and explosiveness in his hips and legs as possible, so he could explode off the snap and get his hips positioned to explode up and into a much heavier tackle or two trying to bust through the line. His legs were truly huge. I don't know what they measured, but I remember that he had to have suits specially tailored with legs wide enough to fit him. Sometimes he used so much weight on squats the bar would whip up and down at the top of a rep enough to almost fly off his shoulders.

He squatted religiously, as is probably no surprise. I remember when I started really weight training for the first time, and Dad walked in. I had read all about this stuff in the articles of a bodybuilding magazine, so I totally knew what I was talking about. Wrong. I was doing squats to exact parallel, having set up a bucket and everything so I would know exactly where my depth was. Dad moved the bucket out of the way. "Go all the way down," he insisted. "You'll not only get stronger where it matters, but it'll feel better on your knees too. I've hurt my knees plenty, but never from squatting low." He always absolutely insisted on doing them until the glutes hit the ankles, though he used different term. If your rear doesn't hit the calves, it's not really a full squat. That was drilled into me to the point of redundancy, and I still hear his words ringing in my ears every time I do a rep.

He ran for miles and did 400 and 800 meter dashes, feeling that those combined with higher-rep cleans, squats, and deadlifts allowed him to stay stronger longer, and keep the pace up during a game without worrying about tiring himself out. I remember watching him do one particular workout; he'd either front squat or back squat heavy for about twenty or twenty five reps, then drop the bar and continue on with perfect form deadlifts, resetting and letting the weight settle before each rep, continuing on for another twenty five pulls.

He would run the stadium steps pretty much every workout – that's usually the first thing you will hear from Wolfley, Ilkin, or the other guys. They said they always just wanted to go shower after practice, and Dad would start running the steps, trying to train his legs to stay fresh and ready for more no matter how much "football" activity they had done, so he could always turn it on 100 percent for the whole game. They'd feel obliged to go and run it with him, so they wouldn't look lazy in front of Coach.

Practice, practice, practice. That was the mantra I heard constantly when I was growing up, and it was how he lived his life, leaving the house constantly on the off season to go watch game tapes and scribbling in a notebook different plans and ideas to improve his performance. He practiced driving a sled almost daily it seemed. He worked the basics, over and over again. I'd be outside watching, just to see him stop in the middle of his workout to pause, reset, and check his position, and then make sure again and again he was in the strongest possible position to use the most leverage he could. He just didn't have the weight to do otherwise, no matter how strong he was. He'd practice snaps too, at various times through the day, measuring the distance out, then setting up a target to hit with the ball. I offered to catch for him a few times, but that was usually a short-lived effort. A football will bruise you up pretty good from short range.

He did drills to make his hands and first steps faster, and although he wasn't fast at all for a 40-yard dash, he could take his first step and explode off the ball with blinding speed. He said it was a matter of survival. If he didn't get his hips in place and explode fast enough, he'd get buried. He'd practice coming up out of the snap and exploding forward with his hands to smash the blocking sled,

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hunching under and driving it back with his feet. He'd do other drills too, using a big bag he had filled with sand, picking it up from his stance and pushing it forward fast and hard, sprinting up to it, doing it again and again. Steve Courson once told me a story of when Dad and Lynn Swann went trap shooting. Dad was noticeably faster to raise the shotgun and get off perfectly accurate shots. "It's okay, Lynn," he remarked, "you've just got to get faster..."

He almost always did full body workouts, occasionally splitting his upper and lower body lifts to separate days, but he always seemed to go back to doing his whole body at once, then adding in conditioning. His workouts took hours, far longer than was probably necessary or appropriate, and he later told me he grossly overtrained for much of his career. He couldn't help it; he was just determined to out-work the other guy. One of my earliest lessons wasn't about self esteem in spite of lack of accomplishment, the current norm; it was about failure. Dad had a way of making a point with gentleness, but sheer honesty. He told me that his biggest driving force was the fear of failure. Being small as he was, even though he had some of the thickest bones I've ever seen on anyone, he couldn't afford to be outworked. "Son," he said, "I'm not a great athlete, and I'm not quick or coordinated, so my only chance is to tire the other guy out, hit him hard and never let up."

When he began playing for the Kansas City Chiefs, he did most of the lifts he could with dumbbells, and relatively light ones at that. He was mostly just trying to maintain his conditioning, and at that point his body had taken a lot of abuse, so he moved to a one body part per week routine and just repped out with sets of twenty five and fifty, sometimes even a hundred. He said the blood flow to his muscles and joints made them feel better. He played the last season with three broken ribs, and had to take painkillers the entire time to be able to keep playing. It led to problems down the road, most of which was that he never stopped being in massive pain, but he always tried to hide it.

Even in his later years, he was amazingly strong, even after giving up the weights for almost a decade. It seems he lifted so much his entire life the strength just sort of stayed with him, even in a depleted state. He almost died a few times when a staph infection flared up, and in the last few years all he could seem to keep down were pecan twirls and cold Pepsi. I remember coaxing him to a steakhouse, where I finally got him to eat about half of a regular size sirloin, and though it seems physically impossible, the next day he looked like he'd gained twenty pounds of muscle. He just had a different sort of system. He used to sleep about an hour a night in the last years, and had to shock himself with police grade stun guns to relax. He didn't even twitch, just got a look on his face like people do when they sink into a hot tub.

He remained able to literally uproot small trees, and one time I was doing deadlifts with 450 lbs., and he wandered in. I asked him a question about squats, and he proceeded to heave the weight up onto his deltoids and carry it over to that same crappy squat rack I wrote about earlier and set it down on the rack, so he could get under it and show me. I usually say he power-cleaned the weight, but really it was more of a sheer *heave*, since he had trouble with regular movements at that point, having several herniated discs in his back, a torn right rotator cuff, calcified feet and a heel that was literally in two pieces from having been broken and never allowed to heal properly. He played most of his career like that.

The thing he played most with was diets and natural supplements. He was a devotee of desiccated liver tablets. I have relatives who still tell stories of riding in the car with him and having to roll the windows down at -30 below in the Northern Wisconsin winter as a result. Every week he seemed to have a new vegetable juice drink or vitamin he took. One of the constants were the old

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“Uptime” pills – a herbal stimulant with caffeine, vitamin C, wheat grass, cayenne pepper, ginseng, bee pollen, and microspirulina algae – and loads of vitamin C chewables. Post workout recovery? Iced milk. He drank it when it was hot, and especially during two-a-days. He said it was the most refreshing thing he could think of, and it restored his energy best. He found it hard to get down a lot of food in between practices in the heat, and it let him take in enough calories. I think we went through two or three gallons of milk a day at our house, much of it being consumed by the big lumbering man coming up from the basement weight room on shaky legs to take in a few glasses.

He used to make these awful vegetable juice concoctions; they'd be green and black, he was always trying new ones, and they were all just awful. I made the mistake of asking to try one, and nearly vomited. I guess it was really expensive stuff, and he insisted that I finish it. I don't think I've ever forgiven him for that. “Km” juice, for those of you who remember it, was a staple for him, and usually half-filled his closet. Royal jelly was another favorite, though I don't know that it ever benefited him, Dad swore by it and almost always had some.

He broke with the thinking of the time concerning pre-game and pre-workout nutrition. During two-a-days and before a game, the trainers stuffed the players with steaks and other high protein foods, and this was their thinking for much of his career. He said nothing was worse than having something that looked like “the old 96'er” in your stomach while trying to practice in the August heat. He later settled on just a little bacon, rather than a heavy dose of protein or carbs as the ultimate pre-effort meal. He claimed the fatty acids kept his energy levels higher and steadier, without making him feel like he had something bouncing around in his gut while on the field. I don't know about the science, but before running a Marine Corps PFT to this day I try and get some bacon in, and by experimenting, I found I perform markedly better because of it.

He ate steaks and drank milk in large quantities at mealtimes though, whether it was a sort of GOMAD thing or just the drink of choice for a farm boy from Northern Wisconsin I'll never know. Dad had a thing for potatoes too, with lots and lots of butter. He never gained an appreciable amount of fat, probably because his two and three hour workouts (and occasionally longer) would eat up all those calories, and also because he actively tried to avoid weight gain after he reached 245 or 250. He said the programs at the games and trading cards always listed him as 260 or 265, but he never got that big. In fact, in later years he tried to drop a few pounds every season, he said it was necessary for an older player to stay quick off the ball.

I think for the most part it was just lots of good solid food, meat and potatoes-style when he got hungry, mostly just three meals a day. I'd say milk was his snack, with perhaps a few of the world-class chocolate chip cookies or walnut brownies my mom used to constantly make thrown in. In those days he didn't really have to worry about calories, so he piled it on. I remember we would pretty much always sit in the evenings, and Dad would be having some milk and cookies before bed, or a big chunk of cheese. He'd make sandwiches for lunch, some good thick hearty bread and lots of roast beef piled on. He liked turkey, with some mayo and thinly sliced onions, with a big glass of milk of course, and we'd chow down. He'd make cheeseburgers too, with bacon, and man, he could really cook them up. I've yet to have one anywhere that tasted as good as Dad used to make. He had a big cast iron pan he'd fry them in for lunch, he'd usually grill for dinner, and we'd eat that. I'd say his plan, other than to eat a lot of solid food, at least early on, was three big meals and snacks when he wanted them.

Later on in his career, when he played with the Chiefs, he'd go in a lot for pasta. I remember him telling me one time as a skinny eleven year old trying to start training that I should try and eat a lot of pasta and lean meat, in several small meals a day. This would have been about the time he

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went for more of a bodybuilding-type split, and that sort of training and eating style was coming in vogue. Around that time he really started eating a lot of carbs, particularly when it was hot and he didn't feel like stuffing himself with meat. It was a rare day when I wouldn't get up at 0530 to lift before school, and he'd have a loaf of fresh bread just coming out of the oven, brushing the top with butter and carving thick slices and buttering them to hand to us as we came downstairs.

That was always accompanied by a plethora of vitamins he dished out to us after breakfast, mostly lots of vitamin C, with an occasional dose of B vitamins and zinc. One of the bags he used to always carry with him had about twenty different bottles of vitamins, all bought separately (he didn't buy multi-vitamins much). He always had a few bottles of Uptime, and of course the royal jelly.

There are plenty of reasons NFL players die at an early age. The brutal beating encountered in every game adds up over time. "Oklahoma" drills, which left internal scarring around the internal organs and the brain, head slaps, and the like don't help either. Dad's heart was in great condition in the years before his death. I remember going to the doctor with him and seeing his resting heart rate test out at anywhere from 45 to 53. He had a serious ticker that wasn't on the verge of quitting.

Unfortunately the autopsy wasn't able to reveal much about what actually happened. By the time I made the drive up from Camp Lejeune to visit him in the hospital, where he went after feeling faint and in some mild discomfort, he had suddenly expired after an injection, and his blood was immediately drained for some reason. I was told it was a free service to save us money on the burial expenses. To this day I have a lot of questions. Dad always told us never, ever to take him to that hospital if he was sick, due to the fact he was in a legal battle with the NFL and he feared what might happen there. His very words.

I've always tried to avoid talking about just how bad things got towards the end, other than a few things, but this story sort of bears on the man and who he was. For me I guess it's the last real picture I had of Dad's soul and where his heart was.

We were living at the time near Beaver Falls, there was a large running trail (when I say trail, I mean a dirt path through the woods) that wasn't really used much, but it was a pretty big stretch of woods. Dad was getting to the point where sometimes he was getting lost on the way to the store, though he used to be able to drive on the back roads all through the country, remembering where to go from decades before. This was something he used to do pretty often, mostly in winter, at least after football when things got bad and the stress of trying to rebuild a shattered life got to him.

He'd wrap himself in an old Indian blanket, and in just his pants go off into the woods, shirtless and barefoot, for weeks at a time. He'd be out of contact and we couldn't find him or get hold of him. I was out of high school and getting ready for college, which later turned into the Marines (funding issues) – it was just me and him living together, my siblings were too busy hitting him up for money to care at the time – and he was just gone.

I waited two days, the truck was there, and he hadn't taken his three bags full of books and notebooks that went with him pretty much everywhere, so I couldn't figure out where he was. I remembered what he told me before about going off into the woods to think, so I went to the woods near our house and started poking around. The snow was thick and deep, and after a mile or so of wandering around – I liked the woods too – I came across a bare footprint, rather large in size, and knew there could only be one guy that would be wandering around barefoot in the snow for fun and stress relief. My dad.

Shaking my head, I followed the tracks to a clearing. Dad was there in some beat up khakis and sweating profusely. At first I thought he might have finally caught fever, but he was smiling. He

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dropped the log he was holding and it thumped heavily to the ground, sending a small shower of powdery snow over his little campsite. The log had two broken off branches on it, and you could grip it as long as you had hands the size of his. He greeted me as if this whole thing wasn't out of the ordinary at all. He was the most emaciated I've ever seen him, but he still looked like a powerhouse. He wasn't eating much during that time at all, and you could see every muscle in his abdomen and his ribs; he still probably carried more muscle than most ever will. He didn't look like a bodybuilder, but more like a thick and tightly-packed caveman, especially since he was letting his hair grow longer at the time. He went back to the log and sort of power-snatched it overhead. He'd shift it around a little so he was holding it up with his palms and lower it to his chest and squat up and down with it, pausing to toss it up and catch it before doing some more. He was just playing, getting in some exercise and trying to feel better in one of the few ways left to him. I looked around his "camp", not really sure where to go with all this. There were a few rather large stones, don't know where he found them, and a bunch of baseball bat-thick logs and sticks broken in half scattered here and there. It didn't appear to be firewood, and there was no evidence of fire anywhere, just a few large human body shaped spots melted into the thick snow. It was cold. It looked like fun, but it seemed that the proper thing to do was to try and get him to come home and eat some food.

I tried to lift the log after he set it down, I had two dumbbells I kept at the house, 60 pounders, and I'd clean and press them for twenty-rep sets, nothing special but all I had to work with at the time. It had never occurred to me to go to the woods and lift branches. The log went up an inch or two, and I settled on getting one end of it up after a few tries. Dad was really something else.

We finally went home. He had a notebook and a pen with him, and he was trying to organize his thoughts. He could still write eloquently, he had a great vocabulary and a command of the language, but he couldn't string thoughts together; you could read and reread the pages and not make any sense of what he was trying to say. The problem was, he knew it. He felt being out in the fresh air and walking around would get him some exercise. He actually looked better, pleasantly flushed and not a hint of frostbite or other cold injury – the cold never really bothered him at all.

This was late 1999, he'd pass away in 2002. So in the end, when he really needed to just get back to the things that inspired him, the things that were healing to his soul, to make sense of the world again, he turned to the outdoors in midwinter, and lifting. A few-hundred pound log was what gave him relief.

As Rip said in his e-mail, Mike Webster was a lifter, probably first and foremost, along with all the other wonderful things he was. I hadn't thought about that incident in a long time, hadn't shared it, but what he said brought it back into my mind, and it seemed important to share. I guess to a lot of people it would seem a sad story, but he was anything but sad that day. In fact I think he would have preferred to spend more time just like that, out in the woods, just him and a weight to lift, to play with.

Finally I'd like to pass some things along, from him, and maybe they'll get out. Mike wanted everyone to know that the reason he wore his sleeves high and tight was to keep opponents from grabbing them, not to intimidate other players. It bothered him that people thought that. Second, to all sports artists who may ever paint or draw a likeness of him – though I don't think there are any coming out anytime soon – I'll pass along the following, verbatim. "I wish these guys would stop drawing me with blood all over my face. I don't ever remember having blood all over my face. It looks like I got beat up or something..."

To all who read this and remember number 52, my sincere thanks and appreciation. Thanks for helping me remember.

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Colin Webster is a United States Marine with a vested interest in staying as strong and fit as possible, and helping others to do so. He first learned to squat over 500 pounds by one of the Steeler greats, Mike Webster, and learned to box under Craig Wolfley. He's tried almost every type of training and diet there is, with varying results. He's back on steaks and squats to stay, and the better for it.

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