

Starting Strength

Experiences in the Iron Life

by
Jim Steel

I have a Black Labrador Retriever named Bas. Bas is a hunting retriever who specializes in 200 yard retrieves and knocking wounded geese over at full speed before he picks them up. He has a motor that never stops. He is, quite simply, “all out all the time.” Since I am a strength coach in the University setting, the days can run pretty long, and I envision Bas sitting in his basement “apartment” looking at the door waiting on me. Consequently, when I get home from work, Bas gets my attention first regardless of what time it is. He won’t have it any other way: when he hears me enter the house, he starts to whine incessantly. My nightly routine consists of going downstairs, opening up the door to Bas’s lair, and taking him to the park next to my house. We do retrieving drills with a bumper for about 20 minutes so he can get his fix, (his “crack” as my wife calls it) and I review the day in my head, and plan my next workout. One night as Bas was searching for the bumper in a thicket, something profound occurred to me. Man, I have been lifting weights for 30 years. *Thirty years!* I have been planning workouts and my training cycles for that long. I still get the same feelings when I think about my next workout, picture the workout in my head, and write down my goals to see them in print. That’s fun; it makes me feel alive. I have been around so many gyms and so many great lifters. I have so many stories and anecdotes that I have saved over the years, and I want to share them. Since training with weights has been a part of my life for so long, I figured that I would share some stories of interesting folks and some interesting experiences. You may learn something from them, you may not. For me, these stories were unforgettable and helped forge my philosophy of weight training and life.

Davrill Nash

My fascination with all things strength took hold in 7th grade and has not let go since. It seems like yesterday that I was in the weight room in Buck Lodge Junior High School in Adelphi Maryland in Mr. McClung’s Physical Education class trying to bench press 110 pounds on the Universal Machine. I was weak. I was big for my age, but the kid next to me – Davrill Nash – weighed 30 pounds less than me and bench pressed 30 pounds more than I did. I was irritated and fascinated at the same time; embarrassed but intrigued. I hit him up for advice. Just how did he get so darn strong? I wanted to find out more. And so the odyssey began. Davrill explained to me that he was going to the local Boy’s Club and training with some men after school. Now Davrill was a great guy, and he invited me to

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ride the school bus home with him, catch a workout, and learn some things. We motored out of the suburbs and went to his high-rise apartment building on the DC line. The first thing I noticed was that I was the only Caucasian boy on the bus. In fact I was the only Caucasian person that I would see all day. That was a new experience for me. Davrill said not to worry about it. Since I am ¼ Egyptian, he would always say, “Don’t worry Jimmy, you are Egyptian, everybody will be nice to you.” Not sure what that had to do with it, but it always made me laugh.

Anyway, it was the Brotherhood of Iron that mattered. As soon as we got to the Boy’s Club and I showed that I was interested, the men there started showing me the ropes. Lifters will do that – there are very few secrets in Irondom. And if there are, lifters will go out of their way to share them. The men showed me how to bench, put me through a workout. We did flies, too. I was sore for a week from them. Davrill was into it, man; he went there everyday after school, and those men at the Boy’s Club saved him. He lived in a rough area, his parents didn’t speak much English, and the guys we grew up with that came from that area didn’t always stay out of trouble. But weight training gave him confidence, it gave him recognition among his peers, it enabled him to transform an ectomorphic body into a high school football player’s body. He wasn’t a great athlete, nobody in his family played sports, but weight training enabled him to separate himself from his surroundings. .

Carlo

Carlo and I went to High Point High back in the 80’s. He was an All Metropolitan center and one good football player. He went on to make first team All-America at James Madison University. Hell of a man.

Anyway, Carlo taught me that short, basic workouts followed by rest and good food were the way to get bigger. Crush the weights, rest and eat. That’s what he did. Meanwhile in high school I was working out 2x a day, doing tons of volume and watching my calories. I was drinking skim milk on New Years Eve at the party. Anyway, I was shrinking while Carlo was growing. He was injury free and I was developing tendonitis in my biceps. He was squatting 405 for reps and I was struggling with 365. Carlo worked hard, no question, his squats were deep, and he was benching 315 for reps in high school. But he wasn’t going to failure, just making progress. I’d always say to him, “How are you getting so big?” Literally, he would squat, bench, do a couple of curls and dips, and head on out. Then he would go home, eat tortillas and take a nap. On the days that he wasn’t pumping gas at Adelphi Mobil, he would go to the Old Mill creek and run multiple 40s. The Old Mill was a creek that had an asphalt running trail with a few straightaways on it. He marked off 40 yards with some spray paint and would run until he got tired. Then he would go home to eat.

Carlo and his family lived in a small, cramped apartment in Langley Park, Maryland. They did however, have 2 fully stocked refrigerators filled with capicola, prosciutto, steak, and fresh vegetables. Carlo’s mom could *cook*. Every meal had a pasta dish, a meat dish, and a salad, a perfect recipe for feeding the muscles as they are growing. And Carlo was consistent with his eating. When we all would go to Ocean City, Maryland for a week, Carlo didn’t eat junk. He never had the taste for it – he still ate steaks and wholesome food. After dinner in the summertime, we’d hang out at our friend Ricky’s house and Carlo, around 11 o’clock, would say, “Its time to eat!” And we would order cheesesteaks. And he also, without fail, had milk and cookies before he went to bed. Chocolate chip cookies, I believe. So in essence, he was training smart, he was training in the easiest and fastest way to get bigger and stronger,

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and he was eating the calories to grow. The funny thing is, I'd always try to get Carlo to do extra workouts with me. I'd say, "Carlo, come back to the gym with me and do some bent rows and skull crushers." he'd laugh and always say, "Nah, man." Then he'd go home and grow some more. When he would come home from college, Carlo got back on the same program that worked for him in high school. He'd ditch the college program that called for high intensity training, and he'd squat, bench, dip and curl, all in our friend Ricky's basement. By the end of his college career, he was squatting 585 for reps and benching 405.

Stray and Solo Squatting

Solo workouts are where one learns the most, in my opinion. It's something that I've always done at various times. Sometimes I worked out alone out of necessity, sometimes just because I just wanted to be alone. I always figured that if you *need* somebody to motivate you to train, you probably shouldn't be training anyway. At various times one just has to get it done alone. For me, the weight room hasn't ever been about a social hour, a place to meet your friends and talk about the weekend. It was a heroic place, an almost poetic atmosphere, where people challenge themselves and steel themselves for what may lie ahead. You learn more during those training days. Although everybody needs a coach to watch their form at times or to suggest some programming option, weight training, in my opinion, isn't a social activity. I wanted to train, and everybody else wanted to talk about girls or the High Point High pompoms. I always figured that you only had so many words – real meaningful words – to use in a day, so why waste them?

I first learned of the value of solo workouts in high school. I used to train at my buddy Ricky's basement in Adelphi. I loved those workouts. I'd come home after school, hitchhike to Rick's house (can't hitchhike anymore!) go in the back door and down into the basement. Rick had an old dog, Stray, who'd be waiting on me. Rick had a power rack, a bench, and lots of plates. Stray would lie on the floor, happy as heck just to have me pet him between sets. Stray ran the neighborhood then; he was usually tired from roaming all day. The basement was dank and dismal and I loved it. It's the time to sort out your thoughts, to just get rid of it all, the time to decide what is really important. I'd squat, multiple sets and lots of reps, trying to make my legs feel as wobbly as possible. There was something about those workouts, really. For me, going to a public gym wasn't an option. I did my workout at the high school gym during weight training class, but the workouts alone were the ones that I really loved.

The Bodybuilding Show

After my senior year of high school football, I decided to compete in a bodybuilding show. I didn't know anything about dieting for a show at all. So I decided that I needed to get ripped. I was 218 at the time, the end of December. By March I weighed 169. I dieted, seriously, on frozen blueberries mixed with skim milk and multiple packs of Equal. And also lots of coffee. I was starving. The training was strictly old fashioned. I worked out four days a week. Monday and Thursday was legs, back, and biceps. Tuesday and Friday was chest, shoulders, and triceps. I did 8 reps per set, 5 sets per exercise. Leg day was front squats and stiff-legged dead lifts. Back was one-arm row and lat pulls. Biceps was barbell curls and dumbbell curls, the same thing both days. On Tuesday and Friday, I did bench press and flyes for chest, laterals and dumbbell press for shoulders, and pushdowns and one-arm

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dumbbell extensions for triceps.

What this experience showed me was that bodybuilding is the toughest activity to train for, bar none. The reason it is so tough is that you are doing exactly what your body doesn't want you to do: work out like a madman while on a severely calorie deprived diet. I mean, you are literally *dragging* yourself to get to the gym. You are forcing yourself to train when every cell in your body is saying, "Eat, rest". I would just grab the bar and start training without even thinking about it. If I had thought about it too much, the little voice in my head saying that this was all so stupid might have won out. It's amazing to train that way, you yearn for feeling strong and on top of the world because you just had a few good meals before you went to train. You worry about everything that goes in your mouth. You dream of food. I used to drive by fast food places and hate everyone inside for being so weak and soft. I was also riding an exercise bike or running for at least 45 minutes a day. It was in the end a rewarding experience. The sheer volume of consistent training ended up helping me gain some strength and some foundational muscle. It also taught me that even when you are tired or hungry, you can still train through it. I ended up finishing second. The day after the contest, after an all night binge, I weighed 212!

Big Chris

After high school, I went to play football at Montgomery Community College. At Montgomery; I learned that I wasn't very strong at all. Some guys on the team were much stronger than I was at the time. In fact, one of the offensive lineman on the team is still one of the strongest people that I ever met, Chris Konrad. Chris squatted 610x3 deep and benched 485. He seated-behind-the-neck pressed 315 for reps. We all did behind-the-neck presses in those days because Ted Arcidi and the Barbarian Brothers did them. We also trained in flannel shirts because the Barbarian Brothers did. What really impressed me about Chris was that he was so humble. He never brought up his strength, ever. He started out as a freshman weighting 195 and by the time he was a sophomore, he was 275. He would eat 9 bowls of Raisin Bran for breakfast. He'd pout if he missed a meal. He was one hardcore dude. Chris had some psych-up techniques that were really off the wall. One of these involved finding someone in the gym and secretly getting pissed off at them for no reason. He'd be getting ready to squat and say, "I hate that guy at the counter!" and I'd say, "What guy?" And he'd say, "Why is he looking at me?" I'd look over, see a few guys at the gym counter having a conversation and say, "Chris, nobody is even looking over here!" He would say, "Yes he is Jim, yes he is!" And then I would realize what he was doing, and I'd join in, "Yeah, man, I see him!" I'd say "He's saying, I own you, man! He says he's stronger than you!!!" And the one that would get Chris fired up the most, "He's laughing at you!" That would make him nuts, and he would be ready to do his set.

Rob Wagner

"Wags" was a top-level powerlifter and a brilliant strength training mind. I learned tons from him, about programming especially. Lifting-wise, Rob Wagner was better than good. A 799 squat at 198 in competition, dive-bombed. I spotted Wagner on his squat frequently, and we trained together often. One day he banged out 20 reps in a row with 405. I believe he was supposed to do 4x5 or

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something, and he said, “Count them out for me,” and I did. He just kept going. I think that around 19 he asked, “How many is that?” And after I told him, he banged out one more. Wags was an interesting case as a lifter – I called him “cerebral”. He pored over research studies, read all the Eastern European books. He taught me about Prilipen’s Table, had me read Matveyev. There are lots of stories about Wags’ excellence as a lifter and a coach. When he was training college athletes, he was totally professional, with great programming, positive coaching, and total dedication.

But every once in a while we would have someone from the outside who wanted a powerlifting program. Now, powerlifting was Wags’s baby, his pride and joy. He looked at it like his own personal Fight Club. You know that scene where Brad Pitt makes the prospects stand outside the door and earn their way in? Where they stand out in the rain and take insult after insult in order to earn their stripes? That was Wags’s attitude exactly – if you wanted Wagner to write your program, you had to earn it. One day he told me why. “When I was a teenager, my dad saw that I had some interest in weight training. He handed me a book and told me to read it and get started. After I got started he would give me tips and pointers to help me along.” But Wags’s dad wasn’t going to waste his time unless his son showed that he was serious. He didn’t appreciate it at first, but he did learn to appreciate it as his coaching career progressed. He had to learn on his own. So as he got into the position to train others, he remembered the lesson from his dad. He would write your program, but you had to show dedication to the program. He might start you off by saying “Train 3 days a week. Include a squat, a press, and one-legged exercise each day.” Then he would watch you. If after a few weeks, you were consistent and worked hard, he would get more specific with the workouts – maybe give you some sets and reps. He’d still test you though; he’d make you ask for a new week’s programming. He wouldn’t chase you down. He might also make you wait for a program. We’d be sitting in the office at the gym and some powerlifter would come by for a workout. I’d peer out the office window and there would be one of the powerlifters, notebook in hand, waiting. I’d say, “Wags, Bob is here, ready for his workout.” He’d say, “Uh-uh.” or something unintelligible. I’d say, “You know he drove all the way from Delaware to get his workout.” “I know,” he would say. The door would open, “We’ll be just a minute,” he’d say, “We are pretty busy.” It would be 9pm and we were just hanging out. And then he would eat some cottage cheese mixed with raisins and peanuts. Finally, he’d open the door and say, “Hey man, what can I do for you?”

And if you missed a workout, forget it! You were done. Then you would stand outside for a real long time.

Wagner may have had a tough side to him, but there was one thing for sure: once you earned his respect and you were dedicated and enthusiastic about training, he’d go to any length to help you. He’d wrap your knees, he’d warm you up, and he’d call out your training attempts. One time I was waiting for my name to be called at a powerlifting meet. He was standing behind me. He began rubbing my ear lobes with his thumbs, irritating them. I was like, “What the heck?” “The Eastern Europeans do it.” he explained, “It gets you psyched up!” Wags was a rare breed.

Kirk Karwoski

If there is one attribute that set Kirk Karwoski apart from other lifters that I’ve been around, it was his intensity level. When he trained, he shut off everything and got down to business. Nothing else mattered to him. He was truly driven to succeed in powerlifting. And all throughout his lifting career, he found his weak points and worked to eliminate them.

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He had a grip weakness - Kirk has small hands for such a thick guy. He and coach extraordinaire Marty Gallagher devised an exercise, "grip shrugs," a hybrid upright row/shrug done with a thumbless grip, paused at the navel. This enabled him to deadlift in the gym over 800lbs. He visited bench specialist Ken Fortano to fix his bench form. Another thing about Kirk: everything he did was explosive. His warm-ups with 135 were slow on the eccentric but fast on the concentric, violent even. This man lived powerlifting. And he was beyond dedicated. When he was going down to 242 and he had to eat every 3 hours, he set his alarm and had a chicken sandwich in the middle of the night. He even talked to the weights - watch his 1003 squat videos: he's talking to those weights after he squats them. "Gravity is just a theory" he always said. Another thing you notice about Kirk: he's brontosaurus thick. Huge rear end and thighs built to squat. He trained the way a lot of those powerlifters trained at the time - one all out set of 3-8 reps. Now that doesn't seem like a lot of volume, but when you are as strong as a Furnas or a Coan, or Kirk, it equals out to enough. For instance, he may squat 640x8 with no belt on his last set. That's 80% of 800 which is a heck of a raw single. So instead of breaking down into 2x4 or 4x2, he pushed it into 1 set. He loved getting fired up for that one all-out set.

In the off-season, he would also focus on bringing up one lift at the expense of another. For instance, if he wanted to push the deadlift he would go heavier on his pulls and lighter on his squats. Then after a few weeks, he would switch focus. A typical training week when I was around him looked like this:

Monday - Squat, Hack Squat

Tuesday - Close-Grip Bench, EZ Curls, DB Curls

Thursday - Deadlift, Grip Shrugs

Saturday - Bench, Wide-Grip Bench, Machine Laterals

Kirk also had an interesting theory about assistance training. He kept it to a minimum. Not because he was lazy - far from it. I asked him why, for instance, he didn't do skull crushers for his triceps for variety. He explained that after awhile, he got so strong that some exercises were more dangerous to his joints than anything else. So he settled on more "bang-for-the-buck" exercises like close-grip benches instead of the skull crushers. Eventually he stopped the hack squats, he told me, because they bothered his knees. So basically, he squatted, pressed, and pulled his way to all those World Championships.

After he stopped competing, I stopped by the Maryland Athletic Club to see him. It was Monday night. After all, Kirk squatted every Monday night, no matter what. There was 585 on the bar. We were having a conversation about training, always about training. He said, "Oh, give me a second here," and without a belt he squatted 585 for 5 rock-bottom reps. "Now I'm going to drink beer," he said. His training partner Bob Myers said, "That's something, isn't it - squatting 585x5 anytime you want?"

Kirk is a true character. Although we haven't seen each other in a few years, I was fortunate enough to spend some quality time with him a while back. An amusing anecdote about Kirk - he loved to bust chops when he wasn't training. One day I was slaving away on a treadmill at the Maryland Athletic Club, and I think that I was on an insane diet at the time. Probably zero carb or something,

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but it was zero fun. It was early on a Saturday. I was emaciated, but I was doing my best hamster imitation, running with nowhere to go. Kirk pulls up with a bag of Wendy's and stands outside the gym window, holds up the bag and starts giggling. He knew I was starving but he couldn't help himself.

In my thirty years of weight training I have run into some interesting people and have collected my share of great times and great workouts. Training with weights has been a part of my life for so long that I barely remember life without it. The great thing about training is that you learn something everyday from the workouts. You learn to persevere through a workout that just can't seem to get going. You learn to appreciate and be satisfied momentarily when you hit a new PR. And yet the weight always, always provides you with a challenge. You can never be truly satisfied as long as you have the desire to get stronger. You can however, learn from the interesting characters that you meet and the workouts that you go through in your quest to reach your strength goals. It is a heck of a worthwhile journey.

Jim Steel is the Head Strength and Conditioning Coordinator at the University of Pennsylvania. He has worked as a strength coach at all levels of education, from high school to D1. He is a competitive powerlifter, the current New Jersey state record holder in the squat (820 lbs.). Jim was an All-American defensive lineman in college, and he brings a personal appreciation of the practical applications of strength to his weight room.

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