

Starting Strength

Doug Furnas

The greatest strength athlete you've likely never heard of...

by

Marty Gallagher

Doug Furnas passed away of Parkinson's Disease on March 2, 2012 at age 52, leaving behind an incredible athletic legacy interspersed with episodes of triumph, tragic misfortune, and horrific injury, and finally, fatal disease contracted at an early age. If a fiction writer were to sculpt Doug's tale, tell it true without embellishment or ornamentation, it would likely be rejected as outlandish and unbelievable. We will tell Doug's tale simple and unadorned in an effort to inform the ignorant about this amazing man and his amazing athletic accomplishments. Periodically, Giants walk amongst us, and it is important that we examine them and learn from them – the great sin is to let them pass unnoticed, for they have lessons to impart that can assist us in our own quests.

Dwight Douglas "Doug" Furnas was born in Miami, Oklahoma in 1959 into an extended farm family. He was raised in Commerce, Oklahoma on a 200+ acre working farm where the emphasis was on the work. "My brother, three sisters and I were expected to perform hard physical chores that started at sunrise. My parents had a saying, 'the animals eat before we do,' and after sunrise and before breakfast we fed and watered the animals." Pre-teen Doug and younger brother Mike were often expected to perform the work of one grown man. "Mike and I were teamed up on work tasks. For example, the two of us might run behind a slow moving truck, together tossing 60-100 pound hay bales onto the truck bed. We would be at the business end of the conveyor belt in the hayloft stacking the heavy awkward bales as they came up from the truck. Fence post digging, carrying heavy objects, wrestling livestock and working long hours in extreme heat and extreme cold were just an expected part of our growing up." These intense farm tasks laid a fantastic physical foundation for the brothers' yet-to-come high-level athletic careers.

As a family the Furnas clan competed in professional rodeo: mom and dad competed in the roping events, his sisters would do barrels or calf roping, and Doug and Mike rode bulls and bucking horses. "The idea was for us as a family to win enough cash prize money to cover the cost of the trip – the gas, the hotel rooms, the entry fees and the meals. More often than not we did just that." Doug's friends and rodeo buddies went on to create the professional bull riding craze that dominates rodeo coverage to this day. "I could easily have stayed in the world of professional rodeo – I loved it and got better and better with each successive season." His rodeo dreams were derailed when the Furnas family,

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returning from a rodeo, crested a hill and were hit head-on by a drunk driver on the wrong side of the road. Every family member suffered severe injuries. Young Doug was hurt the worst and almost died.

“I was shattered – broken leg, broken arm, exploded spleen, concussion, internal injuries... they tell me I came very close to dying.” During his prolonged convalescence and recovery he was introduced to progressive resistance training. “It took me over a year to recover from the accident. During that time I began weight training as part of my rehabilitation. I took to it immediately and loved the quick changes that it produced in my body.” The accident also pushed Doug back a year in school. Now he and his brother Mike were in the same grade. “Our farm-boy chores, combined with our weightlifting and mom’s amazing cooking, caused me and Mike to grow a lot of muscle; we were tough and hard and strong and by the time we entered high school and became involved in team sports we were *way* more physical than our classmates.” The Furnas boys played football: taller Mike was an offensive and defensive lineman; Doug had sprinter speed and became a crushing fullback. The boys’ football exploits became the stuff of local legend.

The brothers played for a small local high school that won the state championship. They both captured all-state honors and both were selected to play in The Oil Bowl, an annual battle between the best high school football players in Oklahoma and the best high school players from Texas. Oklahoma won the Oil Bowl that year, and the brothers went on to play for Northeastern A&M, a small local junior college. The team, against all odds, won the junior college national championship. “We had scholarship offers from all over the country. Coach Johnny Majors wanted both of us and offered each of us a scholarship to play at Tennessee.” And play they did. The Tennessee team included future NFL star and Olympic gold medal sprinter Willie Gault. Also on the team was the most dominant NFL player of his generation: multi-time NFL defensive player of the year and hall of fame inductee Reggie White. Willie, Reggie, Doug and Mike carried the team to the Peach Bowl. On New Years day in front of 65,000 fans (while millions more watched on TV) Tennessee lost 26 to 24 in the final 60 seconds of the game.

Doug went on to play for the Denver Broncos. He suffered the first serious injury of his football career when he developed a chronic hamstring pull. He was relegated to the taxi squad and for the first time ever he wasn’t a starting player. “As much as I admired Coach Rogers at Tennessee, I detested Coach Dan Reeves at Denver. I decided to bag football. For the first time since junior high school, my time was my own; I was not obligated to play a team sport. I wasn’t obligated to practice. I had long been a follower of the sport of powerlifting and had wondered what I could accomplish were I to devote myself to it on a full-time basis. Now I had the opportunity.” Doug and Mike found an amazing power mentor and coach: national and world champion and Oklahoma strength legend,



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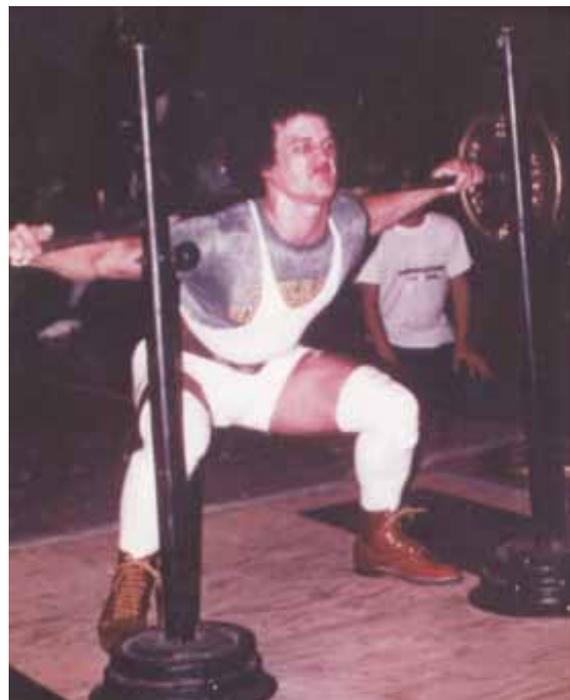
Dennis “The Driver” Wright. Dennis Wright turned out to be the perfect coach for these two athletic protégées.

“We were humbled and grateful that Dennis agreed to train us. Mike and I would show up thirty minutes early before a training session and sit in our car outside Dennis’s house drinking coffee and getting ourselves psyched up for the training session.” Asked why they didn’t head inside when they arrived, Doug said without hesitation. “That wouldn’t have been respectful to Coach Wright. We were supposed to be there at a certain time, and that is the time we would present ourselves to him. Not a single minute early or a single minute late.” And train they did. Dennis Wright was a squat and bench press maestro: the author saw Wright at age 50 (weighing 195 pounds) squat 800 three inches below parallel in front of the toughest judges on the planet, this at the 1993 USPF National Masters Championships. He backed this up with a 485 pound raw bench press.

Dennis had Doug and Mike “ghost him” (follow him) through his hellacious workouts. In the weekend training session, in the squat and bench press, the men would work up to “A big triple, then a big double and finally heavy single rep maximum.” Three days later they would return and perform five sets of five reps in the pause squat and 5x5 in the paused bench press. “It was intense work and we both developed a hell of a lot of muscle. We also developed our own signature techniques as a result of working with Dennis.” Furnas unlimbered his newfound post-football power muscles when he broke the world record in the squat: 881 pounds weighing 239. Doug began a four year run in the sport of powerlifting wherein he crushed all competition, set records that still stand, and became the first man in history to total 2,400 pounds twice. His best squat was 986, his best bench press was 600 (this wearing a size 60 bench shirt that offered no support but “kept my muscles warm”) and an 826 deadlift made with ridiculous ease.

Doug initially campaigned as a 242-pound lifter. At a height of 5'10" he was actually a bit too tall for the weight class. His 242-pound class competitors tended to be in the 5'6" to 5'8" range. International-level powerlifting is a game of leverage and density: there is the often overlooked pounds-of-muscle-per-inches-of-height ratio that explains why there are no 5'10" 175-pound world powerlifting champions. When Furnas allowed his bodyweight to rise to a full 275 pounds (sporting 9% bodyfat) his lifts shocked the world. I was honored to serve as his platform coach at both competitions where he totaled 2,400. His first 2,400 pound total occurred in Maui, Hawaii in 1986 at the inaugural APF World Championships. The second 2,400 pound total happened six months later at the APF National Championships held in Minnesota.

His degree of conditioning at 275 pounds was startling: he was so lean that he had cross-striations on his pecs and thighs and veins on his pec/delt tie-in and across his six-pack washboard abdominals. He squatted 986 in Hawaii and blew off my urging him to take a 4th attempt with 1,030 to shatter the all time squat record. “I am here to build a total” was his quiet and firm rejoinder, which he did by bench pressing 600 and deadlifting 814 pounds. He followed up in Minnesota with his



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second 2,400 pound total, this time deadlifting 826 pounds sumo style in a lift he rarely practiced. Again he had power to spare. At the time we were sure that this was just the start of a prolonged period of world domination. Had he continued there was no doubt in my mind that he would eventually have hit a 1,050 squat, a 650 bench press and an 875 pound deadlift.

Doug demonstrated his athletic ability in Maui after winning the Worlds by performing a standing back flip on the beach. In his warm-ups in Maui before squatting 986 he worked up to 855 pound raw squat without a squat suit or knee wraps. This lift was done in a casual fashion – he didn't even request spotters. This 855 raw squat was no big deal; just another warm-up; he didn't even bother to tie his shoes for the attempt, and he was shirtless.

Then he quit powerlifting.

It was shocking to power aficionados. We felt cheated. We wanted more. The most dominant 275 pound lifter in history walked away with not so much as a goodbye. Always the realist, Furnas had been presented with an opportunity to make a living in athletics. He became a professional wrestler, and for the next fifteen years Doug Furnas wrestled all over the world. He began his career in 1986 and soon moved to the All-Japan Pro Wrestling Federation. Furnas teamed with Dan Kroffat beginning in 1989 and together they formed The Can-Am Express. Furnas and Kroffat held the AJPW All-Asia Tag Team Championship five times between 1989 and 1993. The duo joined Extreme Championship Wrestling in 1996 and made their World Wrestling Federation debuts in 1996 at the Survivor Series pay-per-view.

A second horrific car accident ended his wrestling career. He was travelling with a group of WWF wrestlers in a van in rural Canada from one wrestling venue to the next when the driver fell asleep and drove off the road into a deep ravine. Furnas was horribly mangled, concussed yet again, and needed eighteen months to recover. One auto accident had started him off on his lifting career, and a second had ended his athletic career forever. Upon retiring Doug Furnas and his wife (a successful insurance executive) ran a group home in San Diego for abused boys. Doug raised rodeo bulls on his family's farm until he was forced to give up all activity as his condition worsened. The official cause of his death at age 52 was atherosclerotic and hypertensive heart disease.



He had been battling Parkinson's disease for many years. Furnas was a supporter of the Sports Legacy Institute and donated his brain to science after his death. It was his strong belief that the innumerable concussions he had suffered in football and pro wrestling (along with his auto wrecks) had caused his Parkinson's disease.

Doug Furnas had an athletic career that was meteoric in every phase, and he demonstrated world-level proficiency in a wide variety of sports. We will not see his like again any time soon.

Marty Gallagher has been a national and world champion masters powerlifter and is widely considered one of the best writers in the iron game. Since 1978 he has written over 1000 articles published in a dozen publications. He has authored more than 100 articles for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine

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and produced 230 weekly [live online columns](#) for the *Washington Post*. Gallagher has coached some of the biggest names in powerlifting and witnessed some of the greatest strength feats of the last half century. If you like his style pick up a copy of his masterwork, [The Purposeful Primitive](#).

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