

# Starting Strength

## Swogger's Revenge: A Back Injury Story

by

**Matthew Swogger**

On 11 June 2004, around midnight, I fell 40 feet off a building and broke my back. Since that time, I have been through an interesting rehabilitation. The story is lengthy, but barbell training figured into my recovery. Strength training is the basis upon which I continue to keep myself functioning on a day-to-day basis, and my experiences may be of use to you the next time you get hurt, or just cannot seem to find the motivation to go and do your squats.

At the time of my injury, I was a Private First Class in the Army and stationed at Fort Bragg NC. I landed on my feet in what was apparently a textbook parachute landing fall (PLF), if the six inch deep heel marks I dug into the dirt are to be believed. You could also say that it is an excellent example of the effectiveness of Airborne schools' teaching methods for the PLF, which was to perform them all day long for two weeks straight. If you don't break, you get to jump out of a plane. Yippee.

I don't actually remember the fall. I remember right up to the moment that I slipped and then laying in the fetal position with my platoon sergeant and team members standing around me asking what I remember. I remembered nothing about that night until a month later when, with a little healthy ribbing from my platoon, I was given the unfortunate news that I was laying there singing a "No Doubt" song when they got to me. The fall itself is still to this day a blank spot in my mind.

Standing around me it was very apparent to each and every one of them that I was in bad shape; there was a rather obvious softball shaped protrusion on my spine. I don't really remember being in any pain while I laid there waiting for the ambulance. I assume I was in shock, and thank my body for this response still to this day. When the ambulance showed up the first thing the paramedics did was stick me with morphine, a lot of morphine.

Copious amounts of morphine were a running theme for about the next three weeks of my life. I arrived at Womack Army Medical Center and the orthopedic surgeon on call got a look at me, threw his arms in the air, and said it was beyond his expertise. Things were not looking good, so they put me in a helicopter and sent me down to Fort Gordon and the Eisenhower Medical Center where the Army's Spine specialists were located.



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The surgeons at Eisenhower had been sent all the x-rays and imaging that were taken back at Womack and were formulating a plan about how they were going to glue me back together. They were under the assumption that I was paralyzed, but I was not. It was an understandable assumption on their part. My x-rays made it look like there's no way I was not paralyzed. When I got to Eisenhower and I wiggled all ten of my little toes for them, it cranked the surgical difficulty up to Eleven.

They had to somehow put me back together and not paralyze me in the process. Back to the drawing board for them. The medical term for the type of break I suffered is an L4 (fourth lumbar vertebra) burst fracture and L3 through L5 dislocation. I also had a fracture of the seventh thoracic vertebra (T7), but we weren't really worried about all the simple little fractures I had just then.

It took them over a week to figure it out. During that time, I'm lying in my hospital bed mashing the morphine button in my hand as often as it will allow me and wiggling around trying to get comfortable as if my spine were not in two separate pieces. This is a good time to mention that one of the simple little fractures I had was my left arm, both the Radius and Ulna. This was not really a big deal but I'm left handed and they strapped it up in a way that I couldn't use it. This pissed me off, and in my morphine induced haze I would continually forget and then get pissed off about it all over again.

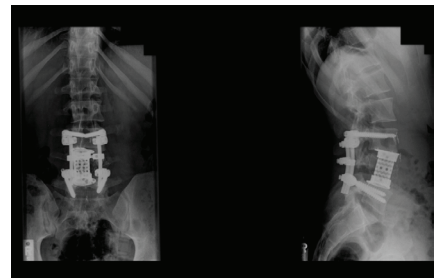
Fortunately, after only a day or two my mother did what all good momma bears do – she showed up at the hospital all the way from Texas and took charge. She promptly told me to stop fidgeting around before I cut my spinal cord in half. I didn't listen. Now, you may be wondering why I didn't listen to my mother? It wasn't out of some sort of stubbornness towards her. It was because in my mind there was just no way I was going to come out of this in any other condition than like new. I didn't have to convince myself of this. It wasn't a flip of a coin situation. There was only one possible outcome, and it wasn't losing the use of my legs.

I don't completely know where this mindset came from, although I've thought about it a lot. I assume most of it was a combination of being 20, the mindset you develop in a combat arms Military Occupational Specialty (MOS), and perhaps my personality. If you find yourself in a similar situation, you need to understand that this type of mindset is the only way you get through something like this, because you're going to be told otherwise. I imagine the morphine also helped.

The issue the surgeons grappled with the most was into which side of my body they would cut first. They had to go in through the back to place the Harrington rods and screws to hold my spine together. However, they also needed to go through the abdomen to place the mesh fusion cage where my L4 used to be. The day of the surgery came, and after a week of discussions and phone conversations with other spine surgeons they had a plan they felt really good about.

The surgeons were going to start with my abdomen. So they put me under, told my mother that there was a 50/50 chance that they would paralyze me during the surgery, wheeled me into the operating room, and immediately decided to cut my back first. I have no idea why they changed their minds, but they picked right. It took a team of five surgeons eleven hours to put me back together.

A few hours before my surgery ended my Commanding Officer (CO), First Sergeant, and my entire platoon showed up to show their support. Each and every one of them was greeted with a hug



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from my mother. The CO drove, and everyone else was lit. They spent the entire drive down drinking because what else are you going to do for a three hour drive? How my mom didn't know they were drunk I'll never know, but apparently she didn't. I guess she was a bit preoccupied, and now she knows. Sorry mom.

When they started letting my platoon see me in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) the surgeons still didn't know if they had paralyzed me. As far as they could tell during the surgery my spinal cord was still intact, but because I was still so sedated, I wasn't responding to anything yet. The hospital staff started letting my friends in to see me in the ICU a few at a time. There are pictures of me still intubated with members of my platoon smiling and glassy eyed floating around.

My mom and platoon sergeant were the first two people in to see me, and because this is what platoon sergeants who are also very drunk do, he yelled, "AIRBORNE, WAKE UP!" I responded with what has been described to me as a "body spasm" of sorts. They both looked at each other, realizing that they had both just seen my legs move, even if it was just a millimeter or two. After they had all come in and seen me – and I'm sure got one more hug from my mother – off they went, back to Fort Bragg, but not before one last stop at Hooters. Once there, I'm sure they represented the 82nd with pride. I sometimes wonder how many thousands of dollars my CO spent on that trip.

The real fun began as they tapered me off of the morphine and my mind started to clear. As my senses came back, I started to find new things that I had broken. Apparently when you hit the ground as hard as I did, even if you hit feet first, the pressure that builds in your chest is huge and has to go somewhere in a hurry. Your throat just isn't quite up to the task of getting rid of that much air that fast so it went out my chest. You instinctively use a Valsalva during a PLF, so my glottis was probably closed. The first thing I noticed was a knot on my rib cage right where the Sternum, Xiphoid Process, and Left Costal Cartilage meet. A few weeks later I found a large deformity in my Left Costal Cartilage around the 9th or 10th rib area.

When I brought this up with the surgeons they said that it was just some dislocated ribs/cartilage, and that since it didn't seem to hurt at that point not to worry about it, so I haven't. The knot actually makes the perfect target for the bar when I bench. If it hurts after the set I know I was touching in the right spot. Once I got feeling back in my tongue, I started to feel all sorts of rough stuff on my molars. It turns out I had bitten down so hard that I cracked most of them. It was a good thing I didn't stick my tongue out. I was also told that I had fractured my Sacrum and some part of my Pelvis. Most of this has never really been an issue, although the dentists aren't really a fan of my fractured teeth.

The feeling you get when they sit you up for the first time after laying down for two weeks is not joy, excitement, or relief. It is nausea and dizziness, followed by a warm wet feeling running all the way from your chest to your knees from the vomiting that quickly follows. The world spun, hard and fast, for what felt like an hour. When it finally stopped, I was so exhausted and in so much pain that I had to just lie back down. Once I showed that I could sit up for a few minutes at a time before lying back down due to the exhaustion and pain, it was time for the next step, getting on my feet.

By this point they had poked, prodded, and ran that little spur thing up and down my legs and feet a dozen times, and they continued this the rest of my stay in the hospital. I had no feeling in my left leg and no feeling from my right knee down, and my left quad wasn't firing in any sort of noticeable way. It's amazing what happens to a muscle that is no longer innervated after only a little over a week. The first thing that happens is that it loses all tone; it simply turns to jello. After just a few days it begins to atrophy at an alarming rate.

Right before I left the hospital, still plenty of morphine in me, I commented to my mother that I didn't recognize my own legs, they were already that small. But you gotta try, right? The nurses

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sat me up in bed, slid my legs over the side, and picked me up. At first I just stood there sweating from the amount of focus it takes to simply not tip over from exhaustion. That exhaustion threshold got stretched out just a little bit longer with every new thing I did.

In reality, the first time I stood up it was probably 5% me and 95% the nurses standing beside me. However, I was still on a large enough dose of morphine that it felt like it was all me. In short order, it was time to walk. The key to walking when your quad doesn't really work is to do your best impersonation of Frankenstein's Monster – not the book version but the original movie version. Your knees can't bend because if they do you fall straight to the ground, hard fast and loud.

The day I first walked I took 21 steps, and it was Father's Day. So we called my dad and told him the news. The way my mom tells it to me makes me think that I was more than ecstatic. I had walked 21 steps! I told you I wasn't going to be paralyzed! Turns out I had walked a grand total of one hospital tile. 21 steps to cover the distance of one tile. I never even left the side of my bed. I still had a ways to go.

Hospitals are the worst places to try to heal. I was put on 60 days convalescent leave, the doctors loaded my mom up with pills and equipment, and off to the airport we went. The surgeons told me my back brace should not come off for the first 30 days – airport security disagreed. My mom told them it wasn't coming off. They said it had to. She would have gone to jail before she let them take it off. So out from their offices the TSA supervisors came, and onto the airplane I went without ever taking my back brace off. Maybe I got my stubbornness from my mom.

For about my first month at home it was my mom taking care of her 20-year-old baby, because that's basically what I was. I couldn't do anything for myself. I was still at the wobbly toddler stage of walking, using my walker in the same way toddlers use the coffee table, and any loss in concentration ends in a very loud fall onto a hardwood floor. My left arm was in a cast up to my armpit and eating was annoying but manageable. Wiping my ass was another matter. As much as my mom did for me, like get me on and off the toilet, I just couldn't make her wipe my ass, so I just accepted that I was in for a messy ride.

During my convalescent leave I made some pretty big strides in getting myself moving. I started being able to get around pretty well with my walker. You know, similar to the 90-year-olds you've seen with their walkers scooting around your local pharmacy, tennis balls and all. The first time I walked myself to the point of passing out I got really lucky. My mom and I decided to take a walk up and down my street for the first time. It went really well and it felt good to get outside. On the way back into the house we ran into our neighbors and started talking. While we were standing there my mom noticed an absence in my eyes and at the same time my walker started drifting forward. They stopped me from falling and got me inside. Fortunately I remembered all of it, and was then able to recognize what is about to happen when the walls start closing in and your hearing goes fuzzy, early enough to warn someone.

I also started to get cocky and decided to make a few laps around the room without my walker even though my mom protested. It was going great for about the first two or three laps; but the difference between standing and lying on the floor for me was still only a degree or two of knee flexion. When my bony knees and ass hit the wood floor it was so loud that I'm sure my mother thought we





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were about to take a trip to the ER. I was fine, nothing broke and it didn't really hurt due to still having very little feeling in my lower body. This was the first time I cried with frustration.

As you may imagine, I was in a lot of pain. From day one at home I tried to take as little pain medication as I could because I didn't like how they made me feel mentally. Turns out NSAIDs work the best for me, but I wasn't allowed to take them until the ground up bone that they put back in the mesh cage had completely fused back together. Wait six months they said. But whatever, right? I have a high pain tolerance. I can deal with six months or maybe even a year of pain. I told myself, "Just concentrate on getting better and you can deal with a massive amount of pain."

Unfortunately, it didn't work out like that for me, even with the amazing power of NSAIDs on my side. This is the difference between acute and chronic pain. If you're tough you can deal with acute pain, a lot of it, in fact. Maybe it really hurts and it starts to sap your energy and you're just not in the mood to do anything or deal with anyone. That's okay if it's *acute pain*. Maybe you just want to take meds and drink because it helps a lot with the pain. That's also okay. Maybe you go so far as to be kind of a dick to the people around you trying to help. Even that's okay if it's acute, because it will eventually pass and they'll forgive your behavior because you were in pain.

But if this behavior goes on for a year or two, or maybe even ten, it stops being okay, and you're just an antisocial drug addicted asshole at that point. It's certainly easier, even human, to do all of that, and I think it would be an understandable choice when it is done to deal with an acute problem. But if the pain becomes *chronic* and those months stretch into years you only have one choice at that point if you want a life; you have to face that pain head on and become stronger than it is, or you're not really living.

Two months of convalescent leave and back to Fort Bragg and my platoon I went. At this point I was able to get around pretty well. I was moving like a spry 85-year-old with a walker instead of a decrepit 95-year-old with a walker. I could also get up and down stairs using my right leg while taking it one step at a time and dragging my left along for the ride, although someone was always just one step behind me ready to grab me before I fell. I was still useless to my platoon and spent the days doing nothing. I didn't even put on a military uniform for probably the next six months.

Amusingly enough, this is not much different from a typical day in a combat MOS when you are not deployed, except for the uniform part. Unless you're training, uselessly unpacking and repacking your Conex box (a big-ass storage container), or doing some sort of detail (pointless busy work), you sit around playing video games and hiding from anyone above the rank of about Sergeant First Class.

During these six months my left thigh started to wake up and I started to be able to walk with more and more confidence. Somewhere around the four or five month mark I decided to do away with the walker and switch it out for a cane. I could move pretty well with the cane, just a small limp. I was also strong enough and light enough at this point that with the assistance of my cane the few falls I had weren't catastrophic. I could confidently push myself and know I wouldn't hurt myself. I also got down to my lowest weight of 125 lbs. During that time, I just wasn't hungry – I looked anorexic.

Seven or eight months after my injury, my platoon decided I didn't need my cane anymore. I didn't really agree, but they were right. It was time for me to get rid of my wooby. My new first sergeant also decided that it was time for me to put the uniform back on and do something – anything. Even though I had now been moved onto powerful arthritis medicine, that worked so much better for me than any other types of meds, I still wasn't able to stand or sit up for more than about an hour without the pain getting so bad that I would start to shake and sweat. The solution to this problem was simple. I just needed to lie down off and on.

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My platoon and I had been doing this for a long time already. Anytime we went anywhere after they were released for the day I would just lay down in the back seat of the car to and from wherever we were going. At movie theaters I would simply lift the arm rests up and lay down sideways in three or four of the seats during the movie. People would sometimes look at me weird but never really did anything about it. I had some corn-fed *men* in my platoon and no one was going to give us a problem.

At restaurants I would sit up while eating and for at least some of the rest of the time. If there were booths, I would lay down in the booth for a while. If there weren't booths I would just lay down on the ground under the table. Pain and the desire to be with friends will make you swallow your pride really fast. It would confuse servers as well as scare quite a few when crawling out from under the table, but my buddies were all too ready to tell everyone and anyone that I had broken my back. So everyone I came in contact with knew I had broken my back, and I didn't have to tell a single one of them. A cot was placed in the company office near the phone so I could lie down when I needed, and I turned into a secretary for the rest of my time in the military. No more hiding from the chain of command for me.

In December of 2005 I was medically discharged from the Army and headed back to Texas and university. At this point I was still around 130 lbs and could move around in normal society like nothing was really wrong because I had been able to get rid of the limp when I walked. Of course, anyone reading this knows just how little strength is actually required to simply walk around, but I was fully ambulatory. I was able to go to college by spacing my classes throughout the day and finding a place to lie down, do homework, and prepare myself for another hour and a half or so of sitting up during class and paying attention. When all you can think about is pain, you figure out how to schedule your life around it.

It was at this time that I decided to step into the gym. I can't remember exactly what drove me to do this, but I'm pretty sure it was not that I was 130 lbs and weak as shit, even though it should have been. I'm pretty sure – and this is kind of crazy to think about now given what I know – it was only to look good. Gaining lean body mass simply wasn't a thing that existed in my reality. My plan was to get huge shoulders, biceps, and of course abs while not gaining any weight, by... I don't know, breaking the physical laws of the universe, I suppose. Like I said, I lived in a different reality. I secretly still want all of this, by the way.

I started benching, and seated dumbbell overhead pressing, and bicep curling 14 different ways, and triceps kick-backing, and shrugging, and rowing, and side lateraling, and chest flying. For how many reps? *All* the reps, of course. I could tell you that I was terrified of hurting my back and that's why I didn't do anything for my legs and lower back. After all, it had only been a little over a year and a half since my fall. This would seem to be a reasonable concern, and all the doctors had already told me not to.

However, the truth is – and it took writing this article to realize this – that I was terrified of looking weak, simple as that.

The first time I did anything for my legs was about two years after the accident, and the only reason I did was because I started going to a gym that had a leg press machine, the type with a weight stack of probably no more than 200 lbs. The key for me with this machine was that I was able to lay the seat back like a car seat, thus allowing me to simultaneously keep my ass and low back all the way against the pad because I wasn't flexible enough to do it any other way.

At this point, if I tried to touch my toes I was a good foot and a half away from them. Your typical plate loaded leg press was completely out of the question because of that. My flexibility has improved over the years but I've given up on ever being able to touch my toes. To this day I can't use a standard leg press machine.

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The second important thing about this machine was that it happened to be tucked away in a corner where I could leg press to my heart's content without anyone really being able to see me. Because my left leg was so much weaker than my right leg, I only did single leg presses. Given the huge disparity in strength between my two legs coupled with the lack of any coaching, this may not have been a bad idea. I got stronger, although it was very slow. My left leg just didn't seem to respond to the stimulus very well. Even when using the same weight for my left and right leg, my left would not seem any stronger when I came back for the next workout, but my right would be noticeably stronger. There just wasn't a whole lot of my quad that was firing at the time and, in fact, a chunk of it still doesn't work. I guess those nerves are probably not coming back at this point.

I don't remember what exactly prompted me to put a bar on my back and bend my knees for the first time, but I assure you that it was one of the bro-iest "squats" ever. This was about two and a half years post-accident and it didn't take me very long to get to 225 lbs. This is not a testament to the size of my balls. Rather, it is a testament to just how easy it is to unrack 225 lbs and bend your knees a little. If a crippled boy who is missing half his quad can do it, anyone can do it.

As much of an abomination as these squats were, they weren't without their value. I was, after all, loading my spine with 225 lbs, which the leg press does not do, for the duration of the set. It was better than nothing and I was moving further away from being injured, which was the whole point. And no, I didn't use the pad. I brilliantly put that bar directly on my cervical spine because it just sits there so well.

Not too long after my first knee bends I also started doing a deadlift of sorts. I remember being really conservative with these because my back was really weak. I don't think I was able to get 135 lbs off the ground. I found a way around this, though. All I had to do was start the movement from the standing position by unracking the bar and then taking a step back. By doing it this way I was able to hold my baby erectors together and get a bit stronger. Looking back, I think the problem was I simply didn't know how to make my erectors do what they are supposed to do from the floor. This is kind of a big deal when half of your lumbar spine doesn't bend. I remember pushing the weight all the way up to a whopping 185 lbs. I had firmly entered mastodon territory at this point.

Yes, I was in pain during all of this, and a lot of it. I was still taking lots of arthritis meds, but no opiates, even though they were offered to me during doctor visits. Because of my desire to stay opiate free I started looking into all of the different options that are out there for chronic pain management. I need to say up front that while everything I am about to talk about, from the conventional to the unconventional, didn't end up working for me, maybe it could work for you. At the end of the day it didn't matter to me if I was taking sugar pills, if it reduced my pain I didn't really care and I'll let someone else figure out why it helped.

The first procedure I tried out was a series of steroid injections over the course of a year right into my lumbar and sacrum area. In spite of the use of what felt like a straw sized needle and very large amounts of cement being injected into me this did nothing for me. The next procedure I tried was a facet joint nerve ablation procedure; unfortunately after the preliminary nerve block test it appeared that my facet joints were not part of the cause of my pain. There were other procedures that were discussed but they were starting to get more and more invasive, and in the end I never went through with them. I spent some time using a TENS unit, while it did seem to block/distract some of the pain it only really works when you can sit around all day. Since I had more planned for my life than that, they were also not an option.

Now for the unconventional and somewhat embarrassing solutions. I was in pain and I was getting desperate. Despite helping some, chiropractic work did nothing for me. When you have an

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injury and hardware as unique as I do, chiropractors are terrified to work on you. They completely shy away from the injured area, making it useless. I get it, though. I'm not in the books they read to become chiropractors. If your back has exploded at some point, maybe you can skip getting adjusted.

The chiropractor shared an office with an acupuncturist, so I spent a shit ton of money. Military medical doesn't cover chiropractic visits nor time spent with needles sticking out of the body. I had cups suctioned to my back and I had hot stones placed on me, none of which did a thing. It was a relaxing atmosphere at the office, for sure, so there's that, I guess. I had little balls taped to spots on my ears that are "connected" to other parts of my body and acted as pressure points. The only way I could get the ear balls to do anything was to smash them into my ear until the pain distracted me from the other pain. You know, like punching yourself in the face (I've done that too), but more expensive. I don't think that's how they were supposed to work.

The very last thing I tried was essential oils. I went to some lady's house. We talked about what my problems were and where the pain was. She mixed up a blend of rose oils and who-the-hell-knows-what oils. I don't think I ever actually bought into this actually working for me, so maybe it's my fault that they didn't. Then again, if you have to believe in something in order for it to work, can it be said to really work? I hadn't even finished the bottle before I gave up on this route. It obviously didn't work but, fortunately, didn't cost very much.

In the summer of 2007 I moved to the mountains. It had been three years since my injury. At this point I had figured out that a squat should be below parallel although my 1RM was still only 225 lbs, I had also realized that it would be a good idea to figure out how to start a deadlift from the floor. I also began to do a lot more hiking in the mountains. This is when a new and exciting lifelong issue decided to present itself to me: muscle cramps.

The first time it happened I was conveniently located on top of a ridge at about 7500 ft, way off trail, with minimal gear, at about 5pm, and of course by myself, because *brains*. They were in my legs and when they started they put me on the ground immediately, unable to breathe due to pain, clenched teeth and adrenaline fueled. After ten or 15 minutes of lying there they finally went away, so I tried to get up only to be immediately told not to when the cramps came right back. After a few more hours lying there and watching the sun get closer to the horizon I was finally able to get back up on my feet, and while I'm sure the sunset would have been gorgeous it was gonna be a cold ass night. While I think the night would have been survivable, it wouldn't have been much fun.

Fast forward a few years later while I was screwing around getting an outdoor rec degree, I woke up to a phone call and everyone had decided that we weren't going to class because it was snowing and we're going to Tahoe instead. I got all my stuff together, maybe I ate something, got in the car and off we went and it was an amazing powder day. On the drive back home I realized that I didn't take my pain meds that morning, but how could that be? I felt like I always did, meaning that there was pain but no more than usual and my back wasn't any stiffer than it usually was. I was usually really stiff in the morning and it would take meds and about an hour of being awake before I would get to a place that I could handle. Even though it was already the late afternoon and I hadn't taken anything that day, I felt like I usually did. What in the hell just happened?

Pain does not have a physical, measurable existence, at least not in so far as we currently understand it. It is a creation of the mind. It did occur to me that I may have actually just forgotten that I had taken them that morning, in which case how I was feeling wasn't out of the ordinary at all. So what does this mean? I thought about this for a long time, and came to the conclusion that I have some control over this. While I can't make my back better – that hardware is in there for life – I do have control over how I experience that pain. I have control over how I feel.



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I weathered my mid-life crisis in my 20s, but I didn't have to break down and buy a Corvette. I started to spend less time in the outdoors and shifted to spending more time in the gym. For someone in my situation this has been a good thing for injury prevention and overall pain management. The less people you have daring you to do stupid shit on skis or a bike, the easier it is to not break stuff. On more than one occasion friends have been convinced that they had just killed me.

The gym has a hell of a lot fewer variables to control for than the outdoors. There is also a pervasive ideology held by the majority of the outdoor community that being lean is the number one thing you can do to improve performance. The result of this is being chronically underfed and undernourished, yet they wonder why they have back pain. Because of this extra time spent in the gym, somewhere along the way I found the Starting Strength website and all of the books. I have a science background, so reading the analysis of the lifts was one of those "how in the hell did this not dawn on me earlier? This makes so much sense" moments. I started to get a bit stronger and for the first time in my life my weight crested 150 lbs.

But even after reading the books, I was still convinced I was a special snowflake. I mean, I've got a titanium spine and all sorts of nerve damage in my legs so the rules can't apply to me, right?

Ummm... Nope. What if I have form issues, that means I need like seven different corrective exercises right? Nope, I just need to reset and STOP doing it wrong. Avoiding bad habits under heavy weight is difficult but essential for me, and probably you. My body doesn't tolerate a very wide range of form problems, so I have to be diligent about how I lift. Deviating from perfect bites me in the ass every time.

The same basic rules apply for me when it comes to the adaptation process as well. I've gotten myself past the novice phase and to a point where I add a few pounds a week to my press, often not even five pounds a month. I've found that planning for a stress/recovery/adaptation cycle on a weekly timeframe is working well for me. This weekly plan is predicated on the assumption that I eat enough; when I don't I still get through the recovery part but don't make it into the adaptation part. And if I really don't eat enough I just get hurt.



How does training help me with my back problems? If you are reading this, you probably already know what strength does for an unbroken body. Everything that applies to them applies to us brokebacks as well, but we (or at least I) have some additional considerations. For starters, my spine is more delicate. I am missing two points of articulation and shock absorption now that three lumbar vertebrae are just one big clumsy vertebrae. I'm not okay with having a delicate spine. I will never allow myself to be someone who hurts their back just bending over, so I train.

In the eleven-plus years since my accident, I have engaged in numerous idiotic stunts, but I've only really hurt my back once. Thankfully it was minor. It involved a snow covered mountain side and somersault after somersault right down it; I left a path of skis and poles behind me but once I came to a stop I realized that I would be fine in a couple days.

A repeated refrain in the outdoor world is that flexibility is essential for injury prevention. I disagree. I know plenty of people who complain about back pain who can bend themselves into a pretzel. These same people seem unable to pick something up off the ground with a neutral spine. They wonder why their back hurts even though they look like a cat stretching when they bend over. What

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has always saved me from injury has been my ability to hold my spine in a neutral position while I load it. The ability to touch my toes, which I still can't do, did not factor into it at all.

Keep in mind that this doesn't mean I don't have back pain. I am always in some pain. What this means is that I don't experience more or new back pain due to a new injury that has just occurred. Even with the constant pain, I have found that my symptoms are reduced when I load my spine with something at least moderately heavy. Turns out that when I completely do away with squats and deadlifts, even if I'm staying very active, my back pain noticeably increases within about a month. I've found that I have to keep at least a squat or a deadlift at a moderate weight in my schedule about twice a week to stay at my baseline pain level, so I guess I'm stuck with this barbell bullshit for life.

And that just about brings us to where I am now, training for those small PRs. But what motivated me to come back from something like this? How did I convince myself to get better when everything, and I do mean *everything*, was telling me to give up? Should I have just been okay with the limp and go get a prescription for every narcotic known to man because every doctor would believe I was in tremendous pain when they saw my x-rays? Or should I have just self-medicated with booze and some of the other fun drugs? What motivated me?

Many things, some are internal and some are external. Sometimes I'm not even sure I understand all of them myself. But for a long time one of my main motivators was being able to be the same person I was in the military: running, rucking and jumping out of airplanes. I told all of my battle buddies the first time I saw them after my fall that I was going to get better, get back to my old self and do what I had planned to do with my military career. At the time, and for many years after, this was a certainty to me and was a huge driving force to just deal with the pain and do what I had to do to get better. I had a promise to keep.

It took something like six or seven years for me to truly understand that even if I could pass all the tests and was in zero pain that that wasn't going to be enough. There was no way around it, no matter how badly I wanted to be 100% – the truth is that I would be a liability in that kind of uncontrollable environment, unlike the very controllable environment of the gym. Another huge motivator for me from the very early stages of my recovery – and it continues to be to this day – is the desire to prove everyone wrong.

Everyone being the surgeons, doctors, physical therapists, society at large, the military, the yogis, people with “bad backs,” and my own brain telling me the next 2.5-pound jump will be the one that shoots spinal fluid all over the gym floor. In other words, *everybody*. They can all go screw themselves. Don't ever underestimate the power this can have; amazing things have been achieved with this type of chip on someone's shoulder. Is it a healthy motivator? I don't know, maybe not, but I don't think I care.

As of this writing I can proudly call myself a powerlifter. In competition and at a bodyweight of 180 lbs I have squatted 385 lbs, benched 235 lbs, pulled 415 lbs and overhead pressed 165 lbs; but I'm not suppose to be able to do any of that, because *none of that is possible for someone like me*. It's not



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enough though, I know I've got more in me, so I'm going to go put a little bit more on the bar and lift it until every one of you is chasing me.

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