



PRECIOUS METAL

If you look beyond the grimaces and mankinis, powerlifting's principles can add real steel to your body – and mind

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It seemed like the weight of the world.

In my twenties, I'd watch the pro rugby league players in my gym punching out a few squats with 150 kilograms and think, "Man, I'll never be able to do that!" It seemed too far away, too scary to even contemplate.

These days, I crank out 150kg squats just for my warm-ups. At 41, I now hold Australian titles in powerlifting and bench press in the 66kg weight category. But my transformation didn't take 15 years. I was a relative stranger to heavy weights until just three years ago.

So what happened? Something that offers hope to anyone who wants to get strong, lift big and knock off their soft edges. Something that could happen for you.

Back in late 2008, I felt skinny and directionless after a stint of ultra-marathon trail-running that culminated in a 100-kilometre race. Having reached my goal, I went into the sort of aimless drift to which guys like me – men prone to depression – often succumb. ▶

I vowed never to be that guy in every gym who looks like Tarzan but lifts like Jane



I barely exercised for months. Working out just to get a bit bigger and look a little better seemed pointless. For the first time I had trouble returning to my usual gym routines.

After moving house, I finally roused myself enough to walk into the cheapest gym I could find – a rundown PCYC in North Sydney. Inside there was an unremarkable room with all the standard dumbbell racks and cardio equipment. But on the other side of the corridor, there was a room with startling noises echoing out of it. There were loud bellows of encouragement, epic grunts and the crash of heavy weights. This was the domain of the powerlifters.

Eventually, I mustered up enough courage to sneak in and use the bench press. The room was spartan in the extreme; almost bare apart from the mass of Olympic barbells, weight plates and racks. Yet it was welcoming, too. David “Chief” Cheung, who ran the room, instantly claimed to see potential in my puny 75kg bench presses and 90kg squats. “You should try powerlifting,” he insisted. At the time I felt flattered, not knowing that this was Chief’s standard answer to everything. Bad knees? Do powerlifting. You’re a boxer? Do powerlifting. Terrible tinea? Messy divorce? Same again.

Sure, Chief’s legs looked like thick mangrove trees, but for him powerlifting wasn’t just a physical act,

it was an emotional and mental anchor. “It doesn’t matter what’s going on in my life, I can always lift,” he told me. “Your work changes, relationships fluctuate, finances go up and down. But 180kg is always 180kg. It’s a constant in your life.”

Before long I’d been roped in to help out at a powerlifting comp, then at the national titles. Watching Brisbane lifter Theo Lagis deadlift 240kg – a load four times his own body weight – I quickly realised the sport didn’t revolve around huge dudes. In fact, the lower- to middle-weight classes were populated with guys who could never get big enough to make an impact in rugby union or league, or grow tall enough for basketball. This was a sport where your power/strength-to-weight ratio was valued, no matter what your size.

The variety of physiques was matched by the range of characters. There was the grey-bearded Max Bristow, who at 65 looks and talks like a Greek philosopher – except Plato probably couldn’t squat over 170kg at 67.5kg bodyweight. Then there was heavyweight lifter Damien Giles, with his fuzzy red hair and ever-present giggle. He approached the bar with the fixed concentration of a zombie heading to an all-you-can-eat brain

buffet. *The meet’s not over until the bar hits the floor – or you hit the floor*, was his catchphrase. He strained at a barbell of nearly 300kg with every fibre of his body, until he crashed to the floor. The determination was beautiful, the landing not so much . . .

I was hooked. Partly, I wanted to experience that glorious moment when you lift to your absolute maximum. Partly, I was fascinated by the tunnel-vision focus that turned these quiet individuals into pumped-up beasts. But there was also the fear of my genes. I was approaching the age of my father’s first spine operation, which had signalled the start of an unhappy slide into pain and restricted mobility. I didn’t want to repeat that. I needed to stay healthy and *strong*. An extra inch on my biceps was no longer my priority for weight training.

This change of mindset offered deeper motivation than the basic allure of getting ripped. As lifting guru Mark Rippetoe, the US National Sports and Conditioning Association coach, argues, training for visual results is a one-dimensional approach. “That type of thinking completely ignores the performance aspects of training – and performance is much more easily and rapidly influenced,” he says. “Rapid, quantifiable progress keeps motivation high – much higher than waiting for a six-pack that may or may not show up.”

I took this message to heart and vowed never to be that guy in every gym who looks like Tarzan but lifts like Jane. My training was no longer about “hitting” body parts to improve the look of individual muscles. Now it was about examining my body as a machine that had to be souped-up. While the bodybuilding approach to lifting is deliberately slow and inefficient to achieve muscle growth, powerlifting is about manageable speed to make every component work as a functional unit.

I said goodbye to primarily aesthetic exercises like calf-raises and curls. Instead, I focused on addressing my weaknesses in the three powerlifting disciplines: bench press, deadlift and squat. Here was a lesson that has since filtered through to the rest of my life: whether it’s at work, in the gym or in your role as a partner, husband or father, most of us have a tendency to show off our strengths while ignoring or hiding our weaknesses. For most guys in the gym, the tacit objective seems to be to get away with as much cheating as possible. But when your squat weight goes up because your

squat depth also goes up, who are you really cheating?

Powerlifting forces you to tackle your weaknesses head-on, because there’s nowhere to hide. It sets an objective standard, since competitions have three judges who check that each lift adheres to a stringent set of rules as long as the Constitution. It all comes down to three exercises, nine lifts, zero excuses.

After six months of dedicated training four days a week, I entered my first full competition in the 67.5kg division and achieved a 185kg squat, 140kg bench press and 200kg deadlift. All this took a lot of planning and preparation. And as my competitions got bigger, I noticed that other aspects of my life also suddenly had detailed timelines, priority lists and structured plans. It was no coincidence that many of the powerlifters I met revealed analytical skills in other areas. They turned out to be professors, doctors, physiotherapists, high school chaplains and educators. They were thinkers – not muscle-bound goons.

As lifting became more than a discipline, I understood what the Chief meant when he described it as an emotional anchor. Throughout my life I’ve had pretty good physical strength, but I’ve always felt mentally weak. The

biggest obstacles with depression are the sense of stifled progress, a lack of focus, low self-worth and an inability to deal with stress. Powerlifting helped because the path to every goal had almost nothing to do with luck, other people or random circumstances.

Instead, it was all about my own self-management and grinding progression, kilogram by kilogram. When things stop moving forward on the bar or in any other part of my life, I’m now better equipped to step back, analyse and focus on the weakness. Above all, I never thought I could handle a sport where I would stand alone in front of a crowd with everything hinging on a few seconds with a weight that had, until recently, seemed utterly impossible. Other stresses and anxieties in life soon began to fade by comparison.

Stephen Pritchard, Australia’s premier 120kg-plus lifter, confirms that when lifting heavy, mental preparation is as important as the physical. “Taking yourself to that point where failure is a real possibility is more than many can take,” he says. “I honestly believe most people have no idea what they are capable of because they lack the belief and self-confidence to push themselves. I am continually amazed at how my own perception of what I am capable of keeps changing. The one thing I still do not know is what I can do.” ▶



THE POWERLIFTING SQUAT

The bar is held behind your shoulders or lower, to decrease the leverage of the weight over your legs and hips. The stance varies, from heels at shoulder width to as wide as humanly possible – but the toes are always pointed out. In competition, the squat starts and ends with your knees and hips fully locked. The first action is to unlock your hips to steer your bum back and arch your back – only then do your knees unlock. Your face stays vertical or looking upwards as your bum goes down and back. The hip joint must descend to at least the top of the knee. When lifting up, the emphasis is on using the glutes to move the hips forward while forcing your head and chest up.

FIND THE POWER

Powerlifters very rarely hurt their knees or iliotibial bands (a common injury for gym squatters), despite the heavier and deeper squats. Here’s why:

- 1) With your heels at no less than hip width and toes pointed out, it is easier to track your knees in the same direction as your feet, while the femurs turn out in their natural direction.
- 2) Arching your lower back to set your hips back helps push your bum back while keeping your chest up, ensuring that much less of the body is going forward over the knees’ normal position.

- 3) Instability in the knees often starts at the floor. Powerlifters won’t wear trainers for squatting because their feet move around too much. Proper weightlifting shoes are very tight on the foot and have a block of wood in the heel for resistance, and to help minimise any movement.

“Most gym-goers squat to train legs – I train the movement,” says Pritchard, who has squatted a massive 375kg. “So I’m not thinking about smashing my quads; I’m totally focused on preparing myself to move more weight. I’ve found

that angling my toes out slightly, pushing my knees out as I descend and sitting back helps me squat deeper and recruit more glute and hamstring. Movement of the knee forward recruits more quad, movement of the hip backward recruits more glute. Glutes are stronger.”

BLAST YOUR MAX

Box squats

This helps train the bum to go back and makes you squat deeper. Find a sturdy box about two-thirds of your shin height and set it up so you have to reach for it with your bum when you do your normal squat. Pause for a count of two on the box, but don’t sit on it, just touch and hold. Do sets of five, working up to about 75-80 per cent of your five-rep maximum squat weight.

Overhead squats

Start with an empty bar or a stick, gripping it wide and standing wide, toes

pointed out. Extend your arms straight up over the line of your back, then squat down, forcing your bum back while keeping your head and chest up. If they drop you will either fall over or drop the bar. Start squatting shallow, progressing to parallel. Use around 40 per cent of your squat weight for eight reps.

Good mornings

This strengthens your lower back and the deep muscles of the glutes, while also forcing you to keep your chest up. Start in your normal squat stance with your hips and shoulders back, and your back arched.

Slowly bend forward from the waist, allowing your knees to bend slightly. As you go down, hold the arch all through your back and shoulders, keeping your eyes looking high. Gently come back up once your chest is level with your waist. Use about 50 per cent of your squat weight for eight reps.

MEN’S HEALTH WOULD LIKE TO THANK NORTH SYDNEY PCYC (PCYCNSW/NORTHSYDNEY) FOR THEIR ASSISTANCE WITH THIS SHOOT

Pritchard is right – the goalposts did keep changing. After just over a year, in my first open national championship, I unexpectedly won gold in the bench-press-only comp. Then, in just under two years, I achieved that rare moment, that one day when everything goes right, and won the Raw National Powerlifting title. But the real highlight was standing on stage this year at the World Masters in St Catharines, Canada, just a short trip down the road from Niagara Falls.

This was the first time I had been to a Masters competition, where competitors must be over 40. Just walking around the venue was awe-inspiring. Competitors from all over the world showed that physical decline was hardly inevitable but a matter of lifestyle choice. Here were men and women in their forties, fifties, sixties and seventies, standing tall with upright postures and solid, athletic frames that would put most 20-year-olds to shame. After two days of watching others compete, my day in the 66kg class finally came. I was clobbered in the squat – Ruso Karel, a Czech competitor with a crazed leer on his face, managed to hit a massive 260kg. Fortunately, I rallied in the next exercise, hitting consecutive PBs of 160 and 162.5kg on my way to the gold medal in the bench



I reminded myself why I lifted: the opportunity to push the limits of body and mind

press. Ultimately, however, it's your total – the combined kilogram tally of your bench press, squat and deadlift – that really matters. This is what powerlifting is all about. After a successful second deadlift of 230kg, I was assured silver in that discipline. But, adding my totals, I was still only fourth, with the top four competitors separated by just 7.5kg. My team plunged into a debate around me. Should I opt for a safe 232.5kg lift for bronze? Or should I go for gold and attempt 5kg more than I'd ever touched before? Blinking back the adrenaline, I reminded myself why I lifted. The truth was, I didn't do it to stick medals on the wall. I did it for the challenge, the opportunity to push the limits of body and mind. I was going to take on 237.5kg. As I walked up to the bar, I didn't think of the intimidating weight before me. I focused instead on the hours of training I'd done over all those months. I thought of my torn palms, the weeks I spent more time hugging ice packs than I did my wife, the hours spent awake in bed trying to mentally refine and improve my technique. Positioning myself over the bar, I could no longer hear the coaches behind me, or the cheering Australians in the crowd. The entire world reduced until it was just me and the barbell. Gritting my teeth, I pulled at the bar. And I pulled. The bar jerked



up from the ground, slowly inching higher, until, as I edged it past my knees, something seemed to lock and pop in my right leg and I was thrown to the floor, landing on my knees – the powerlifter's equivalent of the rodeo fail. Was I disappointed? Of course. Even so, I couldn't feel bitter. That failure just keeps me hungrier to learn and improve. Gravity is a cruel mistress, but it teaches you humility and discipline. And you know what? The body came while I wasn't looking: a harder, more vascular, leaner and more balanced musculature than I'd even had in my twenties. It's strong, efficient, fast and functional – but the real development happened in my head. ● *Dominic recently benched 165kg to set an Australian record for the 65.3kg weight class.*

BENCH PRESS

Powerlifting rules state that the head and bum must be in contact with the bench, with feet flat on the floor. Most powerlifters will have their knees bent at less than 90°. This puts the feet back under the body to create a drive from the legs to get the bar off the chest. Plus, it helps arch the back (considered the best spine position for heavy loads), which results from tensing the muscles of the lower back and pulling the shoulders back. Hold the bar comfortably outside the width of your shoulders with your thumb opposite your fingers. Start with the bar opposite your eyes, then tuck your elbows in towards the ribs as the bar travels to the lower chest or sternum – that is, the lift is slightly diagonal, not vertical. In competition, the bar must be motionless on the chest, then the referee will call "Press!" – so there's no momentum used to force the bar up. Halfway up the "transition" phase kicks in, with the elbows forcing out to engage the lats, and the bar moves backwards until it is opposite your face again.

FIND THE POWER

"Bench training is about recruiting as many muscle fibres as possible, as fast as possible, rather than isolating one muscle group," says Nathan Baxter, owner of a 300kg bench press. "Big pecs are a pleasant side-effect." A technical refinement that helped Baxter to a huge bench was to bench lower, aiming for the base of the sternum, with his

elbows tucked in. "This takes the stress off the shoulders and rotator cuff," he says. "I played years of rugby and baseball (sports that destroy shoulders), but I've never damaged my shoulders benching." Baxter also emphasises the need for bigger and stronger lats. "This came from heavy barbell rows – not chin-ups, lat pull-downs or fancy machines."

BLAST YOUR MAX

JM press
Powerlifting training often breaks the lifts down into parts. The JM press hits the top half of the bench press, including the "lockout" or straightening of the arms (required in competition). Set up as you would for a bench press. Lower the bar in a diagonal line towards the chest, turning your elbows in so they steer towards the base of your ribs. Halfway to your chest, hold the bar still, count to two, then extend your arms and push out your elbows to go back to the starting position. Do sets of five with 90 per cent of your bench-press weight.

Neider press
This is a bench press-oriented shoulder press for speed done in a standing position. In powerlifting circles, it is thought that guys who sit down to overhead press probably sit down to pee. Stand up for as

many weights exercises as possible and your core will get stronger. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, bum and shoulders pulled back, and back arched – like a vertical version of the bench press position. Hold a light barbell to your chest at a comfortable width. As quick as you can, extend your arms in front of you and upwards so the bar is out in front of your eyes, then bring it back fast. Pause briefly. Do sets of 10-15 reps. **Holding rows**
Attach a wide bar to a long pulley row and hold at your normal bench-pressing width. Sit with your hips and shoulders back, your back arched. Hold this position throughout. Extend your arms, pull the bar in under your sternum and hold for 10 seconds. This works the brachialis and lats isometrically to help stabilise the bar in the bench press. Do sets of five reps.

DEADLIFT

There are two deadlifting techniques: sumo and conventional. In sumo, the legs are wide apart with the feet pointed out and the arms inside the knees. The sumo stance reduces the distance the bar has to travel and, in theory, suits people with shorter arms and/or a heavy torso. The catch is whether your hips and inner thighs are flexible and strong enough to take the wide stance. For the conventional stance, the feet are no more than shoulder-width apart with the arms outside the legs – this tends to favour people with longer arms and strong backs. While the stances differ, most other principles are the same for both techniques: the arms go down to the bar in a vertical line from the shoulders, and the lower back is flexed and arched to get the spine into the most upright position at the start of the lift. Almost all powerlifters will hold the bar low in their hands close to their fingers using a mixed grip (one hand over the bar, one hand under), which counters the natural tendency of the bar to rotate towards the fingers and out of the hand.

FIND THE POWER

"Everyone will find that one style is always more comfortable than the other," says 75kg Australian record-holder Sean Muir, who took up powerlifting after two knee reconstructions. "When they're not suited to sumo, their knees go all over the place instead of travelling in line with the feet." Muir has deadlifted 275kg, but says he struggles in the top third of the lift. "I work lockouts in my normal stance, using 7.5kg

chains on the ends of the barbell," he says. "This makes the bar lighter at the bottom and heavier at the top of the lift." Muir sets his lower back in position before he even goes down to pick up the bar, arching and tensing it while pulling his shoulders back. "I also keep good alignment, making sure the bar is going straight up and down, not forward or back. When I grab the bar, I should feel the

weight going down through the front part of my heel – I know the alignment's right when the weight doesn't rock forwards onto my toes or onto the back of my heels." **BLAST YOUR MAX**
Single-arm dumbbell rows
This develops strength through the abs, lower back, hips and forearms. Stand with a 45° bend at your waist, your right foot under you, the left further back and both knees bent. Steady yourself against a wall or bench with your right hand. With a dumbbell in your left hand, extend your arm and drop your shoulder. Pull up your shoulder and lift the weight to beside your ribs, twisting your chest up to your left as you go. Alternate hands for sets of eight reps. **Rack pulls**
Rack pulls beef up lockout and grip strength. Set the bar on a rack at, or just above, knee level. Set up in conventional

stance: feet hip-width apart, hands in a mixed grip on the bar in a straight line down from the shoulders. Set your hips back, arch your back, pull your shoulders back and bring the bar in to the base of your thighs. Lift the bar up, keeping it moving in contact with your thighs. Pull your shoulders back and flex your glutes to force your hips forward so they're in line with your legs as they straighten. Do sets of five with 110-120 per cent of your five-rep deadlift weight. **Deficit deadlift**
The extra height here helps you to develop speed off the floor and forces you to tense and hold the arch in your back. Place blocks (or weight plates) 5-10 centimetres high on the floor and stand on these in your normal deadlift position, using about 75-80 per cent of the weight you could use when your feet are on the floor. Do sets of 5-8 reps.