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On Deadlifting

by Bryan Furuness

The first time I picked up four hundred pounds, I thought my eyeballs were going to explode. That's what I remember most—the tremendous internal pressure through my entire body, but especially in my stomach, ass, and eyeballs. A heavy deadlift is like getting a bear hug from God.

A moment earlier, before approaching the loaded Olympic bar, I told the guys next to me to call my wife if I collapsed. That was supposed to be a joke, but by the time the bar started scaling my shins, collapse seemed like a real possibility. Jon Pall Sigmarsson, the legendary strongman, had died in the middle of a deadlift. By the time the bar stalled around my knees and I realized that the terrible groaning noise filling the air was coming from me, collapse seemed like one of the milder outcomes.

But then the bar was up. And back down in a controlled crash. Lift completed. Nobody clapped. In fact, everyone pretended not to notice.

Then came the shittiest part of the deadlift, the only part that I really hate: stripping all those plates off the bar and putting them away.

I'm not a big man, but I have a powerful ass. This makes it hard to shop for pants, but it also makes one hell of a fulcrum. In other words, my ass makes me good at picking up heavy shit from the ground. That's all the deadlift is, essentially: see heavy object, pick it up, then put it back down. It might be the simplest move you can perform in a weight room.

But here's another way to look at the lift: on the floor is an Olympic bar loaded with more than double your body weight. After chalking up your hands to get a sure grip, you pull up your long socks so the bar won't drag a trench through your shins on the way up. Step up to the bar in your Chuck Taylors, the shoes of choice because they're flat and the soles won't compress (trust me: you don't want your heels squishing around while you're pulling hundreds of pounds off the floor). Grab the bar with a mixed grip—one hand overhand, the other underhand—so the bar won't roll out of your hands. Dip, grip, and rip. Feel everything inside of you strain to get out. If you have any gas in your body, watch out. If you have a fart in your *future*, it's coming out.

The deadlift is the king of all lifts.

Deadlifting is not a popular exercise. Step into any weight room in America, and you'll find a crowd of skinny dorks jockeying in front of the mirror to watch themselves do bicep curls, but you're much less likely to see any of them put a bar on the floor. While deads activate more muscles than any other single exercise, the move doesn't really pump up your pecs, biceps, or any of the other "mirror muscles" that most guys want to

show off in the gym. Instead, by making you bend down to the bar, the only thing deadlifts show off is your ass.

So the lift is a combination of the two things most casual lifters try to avoid—incredible strain and mild humiliation. But once you start, it's hard to stop.

“There is no point in being alive if you cannot deadlift,” said Jon Pall Sigmarsson. I don't know if he said this before or after a doctor discovered his congenital heart defect. All I really know is that a few months after his doctor told him to stop lifting, he collapsed in the middle of a deadlift. His official cause of death was a torn aorta, but his death certificate might as well have read “addiction.”

I don't think of Sigmarsson as a badass for ignoring his doctor's orders. But it's hard for me to dismiss him as a meathead idiot, either—probably because I've also been told by a doctor to knock off the heavy deadlifts.

A couple of years ago, some time after the four-hundred-pound lift, I took a tumble down my stairs. My back was a little stiff the rest of the day, but when I woke up the next morning, I could hardly move. The pain in my lower back was intense and constant, like I was being bathed with electricity. Heaving myself into the car to drive to the doctor's office will forever count as one of my greatest physical accomplishments.

The orthopedist was a brunette with eyes like green mica chips. She looked to be in her early thirties, about my age. For some reason, this made my struggle to climb up on the exam table extra humiliating. It didn't help that she tapped a pen against her clipboard impatiently while she waited on me.

We looked at my x-ray, which showed all the discs along my spine. They looked like fat, puffy scallops—except for one. “Flat as a silver dollar pancake,” she said.

I had a degenerative disc. The condition wasn't caused by the fall, she told me, or even by lifting. It was just my rotten genetic luck, and it would only get worse with age.

“Think of a disc like a jelly doughnut,” she said, her third reference to food in our consultation, making me wonder if she'd skipped breakfast. Or maybe she was just used to working in Indiana, where food is always on our minds.

Each disc is filled with fluid, she explained. “When you're young, it's fresh and spongy. It can take all kinds of abuse and spring right back into shape, like a fresh doughnut. But when the doughnut gets crusty and old and kind of deflated . . .” She tapped her pen on the x-ray picture of my squished disc. “It's easier to crack it. And if all that jelly comes splooging out, we've got a real problem.”

The good news was that surgery wouldn't be necessary. A couple of weeks of carpet-bombing my system with Celebrex should put me right. The bad news came as I

shuffled out of her office. “Take it easy on the deadlifts,” she said. “No more maxing out. Don’t pop that doughnut.”

I thanked her. I ate the Celebrex. I took it easy. For a while.

Now I’m thirty-six years old. My doughnut is crustier than ever. And I’m training to pull five hundred pounds.

* * *

From: E_____

To: Bryan Furuness

500 pounds! That’s several of you, isn’t it? Bryan, have you given this enough thought?

Signed,

Concerned

* * *

To: E_____

From: Bryan Furuness

Dear Concerned in Columbus,

I have thought about it, long and hard. Long enough? Hard enough? I don’t know. But I do know that a)I’m not all that far away (at 465 currently), and b)in all likelihood, this is my last shot to do anything physically extraordinary. I can already feel my testosterone draining away like water from the tub. Glub glub glub. Call it menopause.

Once I hit 500 though, that’s it. I’ll walk away. No more big deads after that, I promise. It would be too hard to write if my arms tore off my body.

* * *

I wrote that email a couple of months ago. Reading it now, I’m having a hard time believing my promise about walking away. Something about it sounds like that old chestnut of heist movies: *one last score*. The career criminal goes for one final robbery—the biggest of his career, naturally—after which he’ll get out of the game and spend his golden years puttering around the Keys.

But the plan never works out, does it? Something goes terribly wrong, and the thief often ends up dead. It might be interesting—take note, screenwriters—if, just once, the caper actually *worked*, so we could all see if the thief would walk away as promised.

Jon Pall couldn't walk away. I'm not sure I can, either.

Why do I want to pick up 500 pounds? I get that question all the time, but I've never been able to answer it to anyone's satisfaction, least of all my own. Thinking about it now, though, the most precise answer might be as simple and terrible as this: I can't stop.

A confession: I have never been considered a particularly manly guy. Maybe it's because I like reading and cooking, and because I tend to be self-deprecating in conversation. Hell, maybe it's because I like conversation.

On the other hand, I love football, hoppy beers, and dick jokes, so why don't I get more masculine credit? I know plenty of guys who have gaps or feminine counterpoints in their masculine profile, and they're still considered *manly* (is there a more effete word?), but not me.

Take Christmas, 2003. My mother-in-law bought Carhartt jackets—those rugged, brown work coats—for “all her boys.” Except for me. I got an apron.

With my name embroidered on it.

In cursive.

To be fair, I should say that “her boys” would actually use those jackets for their jobs, whereas I would have pulled mine out of the closet twice a year to shovel snow off my driveway, and, okay, the apron was actually a thoughtful gift because she knows how much I hate it when my clothes get all spattered when I'm cooking—but still, that Christmas told me how she saw me.

My wife tells me I shouldn't care about this stuff, and my conscious mind knows she's right. I should be secure in my masculinity, but the truth is, I'm not. I should at least be comforted by the knowledge that I could pick up “all her boys” at once, but I am not comforted. I wish I didn't care, but I do.

Am I trying to prove something through deadlifting? If so, to *who*? It's not like picking up that weight will magically change how people see me. My friends won't care. My wife, God love her, will use it as comedic fodder: *see the wet towel you left on the floor? Pretend it's 500 pounds and pick it up.* And my in-laws? They probably won't believe me.

I should also say that while 500 pounds might sound like a lot of weight to you and me, it is not considered impressive by real powerlifters. Which means that this goal is a big deal only to me.

No utility, no function, no real point. Deadlifting is autotelic: a closed loop, complete unto itself.

L'art pour l'art, as they said in 19th century France.

Which makes me an artist with a powerful ass.

Last month I held five hundred pounds in my hands. This was during a rack pull, which is like the top half of a deadlift. In the squat cage, you start with the bar up on safety rods around knee level. Then you grab it, and pull it up to your waist. *Voilà*, it's a rack pull.

The internal pressure was every bit as intense as the first time I pulled four hundred, but this time my knees waffled, too. Like flags in the wind, or at least that's what it felt like.

If one of those knees waffles out too far, I thought, *it's going to blow*.

But they didn't. So I did two more sets.

For the better part of the last decade, I worked as a health insurance agent. I saw a lot of health insurance applications, which gave me a pretty good idea of prescription trends. Several years ago, I witnessed the tidal rise of Lipitor and other statins among my male clients over the age of forty. As of a couple of years ago, these guys were still on Lipitor, but they were also getting into a new class of drugs: testosterone gel. And let me tell you—this stuff is not cheap. According to my clients, though, it's worth every penny.

My last month in the business, I met with a senior client who was switching to a policy with no drug card. His test gel was going to cost him hundreds of dollars a month, and I asked him if he could live without it. He gave me a look like I'd asked him to consider cutting off his ears to streamline his head. "*No*," he said. "I'll drop insurance altogether before I lose the gel."

He didn't want to lose his drive again. That's the word—*drive*—he used as he tried to explain what the gel did for him. It's important to note that he wasn't talking about erectile dysfunction; at least, that's not all he was talking about. He seemed to be talking about his energy, ambition, hope, the way he approached the world. Though I might be reading too much into his response, because he mostly said the word "drive" over and over.

His struggle to explain his need for the gel makes me think of my own struggle to figure out why I deadlift. Both of us are looking inward, only to find that we don't have the words, and that's the problem: there is no language of masculinity.

Another confession: I've been hedging my bets on this deadlifting goal. For weeks now, I've been stuck on a max of 465, failing to move 475 more than an inch off the ground. If I don't make it to 500, I've been telling myself, I just won't finish the essay. I'll kill the whole project—the writing half and the lifting half—and no one will need to know that I failed.

Now I think I've been missing the point. According to Philip Lopate, to *essay* is to attempt, to test, to make a run at something without knowing whether you are going to succeed. This attempt involves risk and commitment, which often leads to failure. The same is true of chasing a new max. And if you hedge your bets—in any endeavor—you've already failed.

Nearing the end of this essay, it's only natural, I suppose, for my thoughts to turn to endings. I've spent a truly shameful number of hours fantasizing about an attempt at pulling 500, but lately I've been imagining beyond that point, to how my career in deadlifting will end.

It might come with a bang—blown-out disc, spinal surgery—or a whimper: a fade in my drive, a lapse in gym membership, a slide into the softness of middle age.

At thirty-six, I'm not getting any stronger. I don't need any test gel, but my t-levels are not what they used to be. When I get sore, I ache. Right now, sitting in my office chair, my ass feels like it has a cold. But later this afternoon, I'll be in the gym, loading up the bar, looking to pull 405 for five reps. Why? How does my mind put all of this together without exploding from cognitive dissonance?

I could say that I'm exploring the outer boundaries of my strength before it starts slipping away, but ultimately, I think that's intellectualizing something that isn't intellectual in nature. In the end, the lure of the deadlift is in the way you feel when you approach a bar stacked with more weight than you have ever lifted in your life. Every eye in the gym is secretly on you, and your heart starts banging around your chest like a lotto ball.

There's nothing like the feeling of all that weight coming off the ground, the bar actually bending under your hands, the plates jouncing and jingling. Nothing like the feeling of the bar dragging up your shins and across your thighs, nothing like pushing your hips forward and squeezing your shoulder blades back to lock it out, and letting out all that pressure in one grunt. Nothing like feeling like you could hold that bar all day, your body as solid as concrete, like a monument for all the ladies on the StepMill and the jerk-offs doing curls by the spit-flecked mirror. In that moment, you feel like you could do anything, but what you want, more than anything, is to do this, again, heavier. To get more of this feeling, agony and ecstasy all at once, before it leaves you forever.