

Beyond Barbells and Treadmills

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I began wrestling as a 135-pound high school freshman and didn't win a match the entire first season. Desperate for victory, I adopted an unorthodox training regimen during the off-season that I continued to build on throughout the remainder of my high school career. Part of the regimen included walking the mile to and from school carrying in a five-gallon bucket of roofing tar that weighed about 60 pounds in each hand. About midway through my sophomore year I was finally able to make it all the way to school without setting the buckets down. At that point I started wrapping a layer of tape around the bucket handles each morning, gradually making them thicker and more difficult to grasp. The remaining three years of high school I won over 100 matches and placed in the state championships, owing primarily to the prodigious gain in strength I gleaned from my training. I remember overhearing a coach from a rival school tell his wrestlers, "When that Lajcik kid grabs you, boy, you're gonna stay grabbed."

While tearing down an old shed at my Mom's place during a recent visit I came across the two buckets of tar, dented and rusty, their tape-covered handles as thick as a heavyweight's wrists. It started me thinking about unconventional training methods of other fighters I've known over the years and the extraordinary results their unique regimens yielded.

UFC veteran Eugene Jackson, my training partner, possesses the most brutally effective guillotine choke I've ever encountered. Gladiators' Training Academy, our gym, originated years ago in an unused warehouse of a trucking company where Eugene worked as a dispatcher. He developed his formidable constricting strength upstairs in the dispatch office using an old truck inner tube. Eugene tied off a foot and a half section of the tube and wrapped the section in duct tape so that he could inflate it to high pressure. Then, Eugene squeezed the inflated section of the tire in the crook of his elbow like it was a neck. Using various locks (guillotine, rear naked choke) he'd squeeze against the tube's air pressure repeatedly, or hold the lock for minutes at a time to build his muscular endurance.

Using this novel piece of training equipment Eugene has developed the grappling equivalent of a knockout punch. Always dangerous, he's finished several fights with his guillotine choke, even at times when the bout seemed to be firmly in his opponent's favor. I've even seen Eugene break a thug's jaw during a scrape at the gym when he couldn't get his arm under the guy's chin while applying a rear naked choke.

In 1997, Townsend Saunders, a two-time Olympian and silver medalist wrestler, competed in the groundbreaking Contenders event which pitted wrestlers against submission grappling experts. There he beat the accomplished Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu stylist Andre Pedernerais. Shortly thereafter, he squared off against Pat Miletich and Mikey Burnette in early UFCs. Pound for pound, Townsend Saunders was as powerful and muscular a combative athlete as I've seen. When he was a freshman at Cal State Bakersfield and I was a junior at UC Davis we frequently competed at different weight classes in the same tournaments. At the California Collegiate Championships that year I was mat-side warming up during one of Saunders' bouts and witnessed an uncanny display of his devastating hip and leg power.

After circling each other on their feet for a few moments, Townsend secured his opponent's head and arm and executed a beautiful and supremely violent hip throw. The opponent's legs arced through the air with frightening velocity and smashed against the side of the referee's head, knocking him out cold. Meanwhile Saunders' opponent hit the mat with such force that he was rendered unconscious as well.

The resulting picture was one of utter devastation. Townsend stood in the center of the mat, two motionless bodies strewn at his feet, no one to raise his hand and declare him the victor.

A couple years later I was an assistant coach at Arizona State University where Townsend had transferred and become a two-time NCAA All-American for the Sun Devils. There I was amazed to find out that despite his chiseled physique and explosive strength, Saunders' training regimen didn't include a lot of weight training, save for one particularly grueling exercise. Townsend would clutch a 45-pound Olympic plate tight against his chest and perform walking lunges, dropping a knee to the ground with each step, around a 400-meter track. If you've never performed walking lunges you likely won't appreciate the difficulty of this feat. Sometime, when you won't require the use of your legs for a few days afterwards, try to walk-lunge for 100 meters without any added weight. You'll understand the enormity of the task.

Aleksander Karelin, the Russian superheavyweight, generally recognized as the greatest wrestler in history, thoroughly dominated his weight class over an undefeated 13-year period that included three Olympic championships. Shortly before retiring from athletics to a political career in his native Russia, Karelin had a brief foray in MMA, beating Akira Maeda in a RINGS bout in 1999. Back in 1989 my old training partner and friend Matt Ghaffari, an Olympic silver medalist who'd also later compete in MMA, encouraged me to enter an international Greco-Roman tournament in the 100 kilogram (220 lbs.) class, though my international experience to that point was exclusively as a freestyle wrestler. There I first encountered Karelin, then 22 years old and fresh from his first Olympic championship.

After the tournament's seeding meeting Ghaffari informed me I'd drawn the 1988 Olympic 100 kg gold medalist from Poland in my first match. I wasn't familiar with the names on the international Greco scene, so I didn't know what my opponent looked like. The weigh-ins were held in a large room next to the arena and since the athletes were stripped of their uniforms I wasn't able to discern which country any of them represented. Across the room, however, I noticed a group of Eastern European-looking wrestlers sitting, talking. The largest one was looking at me and pointing me out to his teammates. I assumed it was my Polish opponent and sized him up as best I could from 50 feet away. He looked pretty strong and athletic, but at least from that distance, didn't appear to be anyone I couldn't physically manage.

Half an hour later, while warming up in the arena, the same wrestler walked by me. It was, of course, Karelin and it became immediately clear he wasn't in my weight class. I'd spent my collegiate wrestling career as a superheavyweight and competed at a high level as a defensive lineman in football, so I was generally unfazed by a competitor's size. Karelin's proportions, however, unlike anything I'd ever seen. His wasn't the ridiculously exaggerated physique of a bodybuilder. Rather, the musculature on his 6'3", lean 290-pound frame looked entirely functional. Appearance proved to be reality, as he lifted and smashed each competitor to the mat with an astonishing combination of power, balance and flexibility.

Years later, in the summer of 1995 I traveled to Russia. In Moscow I had the good fortune to observe the training of the Russian weightlifting team at their training center. After a workout session I spoke with some of the lifters and at one point brought up Karelin's name and asked what they knew about his training. The lifters nodded their heads and looked at each other as if collectively acknowledging a great and reverent truth. One of the Russian lifters spoke for them all, saying simply, "Oh, Karelin... he's a very strong man." To hear these Russian lifters, considered to be among the very elite of the world's strength athletes, speak of the great wrestler's physical might with such deference confirmed my impression of Karelin as a true marvel. One of the cornerstones of Karelin's training, they told me, was encircling his arms around heavy barrels and that lay sideways and lifting them off the ground. That aspect of Karelin's training, lifting awkward objects of great girth from the floor, helps explain

the ease with which he would squat down, his butt nearly touching the ground, grasp a nearly 300-pound opponent around the waist, hoisted him overhead, then hurl the terrified wrestler back down to the mat.

Each of these examples falls outside the realm of conventional workouts and demonstrates how a thoughtful, creative approach to conditioning combined with sufficient intensity can produce astounding results. Examine your own workouts and think beyond treadmills and barbells. You're likely to fall upon a mode of training that elevates you above the common herd of fighters.

Train smart, fight hard and enjoy yourself.