

Soul of a Lifter

by

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Chapter 20

Unnatural Causes

The unchallenged body softens.

The unchallenged mind weakens.

The unchallenged soul rots.

40 years. 2,080 weeks. Over 10,000 workouts.

No stage, no judges, no medals, no trophies, no posing, no photo shoots, no endorsements. No anabolic steroids. Forty years of continuous lifting without a conventional purpose. Heavy weight, heavy metal, heavy lifting – between 200,000 and 400,000 sets ... two-million to four-million reps. Day after day. Six, sometimes seven days a week. Completely natural. Drug-free. No audience, no applause, no glory. On the surface, no apparent reason fueling a four-decade drive to tear down and rebuild the body for the slightest improvement.

There's a blurry line between obsession and passion. They share the same DNA. They look the same, talk the same language, drive at the same break-neck speed and ... no "off" switch. Just a jammed "on" switch. And neither obsession nor passion just happen. Nothing just happens. The key is to go deep. Then go deeper ... and deepest.

A 40-year heavy-lifting career is unnatural. But it makes a deep impact.



When we open our mouths, we can either be mind-numbing numblers or memory-makers. Like, "Say No to Drugs" speeches. They are either more mind-numbing than actual drugs, or memorable – depends on the impact. I used to tell my football players and wannabe-cop college students that steroids are for

cowards and chickenshits unwilling and incapable of working hard to achieve a goal. And that anything worth achieving involves a natural struggle. And that avoiding the natural struggle is not only a hideous form of laziness, but also an enormous disadvantage intellectually because you miss out on all the valuable insights and lessons learned from the natural struggle. And that bypassing the natural struggle keeps you in the dark. Unenlightened. And that the results of steroids are artificial, superficial and unofficial.

Their faces showed tension ... but not real attention. So I changed the speech.

“Here’s why you don’t want to do steroids. The last death I investigated is the best reason not to do steroids or jam anything into your arm or into your nostrils or into your lungs.”

2:00 a.m., a uniform officer arrives at a dark, dingy house in response to an “unknown problem” – a message just like we get in real-life over and over again. “Unknown problem” can paralyze you with fear if you let it because it’s made up of the two most terrifying elements known to wo/mankind – uncertainty and risk. “Unknown problem” forces you to fight through it or run from it. One makes you stronger, the other makes you weaker until you shrivel up and crumble.

The officer knocks. Silence. No one answers the door. No clue about what’s inside, but walks in anyway. Into the darkness and starts searching, with one hand on a flashlight and the other on his holster. Room to room – nothing. Until he goes downstairs, deep in the basement and sees him. The unclothed body of a man, slumped over, perched on a toilet in the bathroom. Bent-over like he had been beaten down. Lifeless. No pulse. Rigor mortis has set in, just like that stiff feeling after a brutal workout, except this kind of stiffness leads to decomposition instead of recovery.

I arrive next. The lead detective. I’m surrounded by people old enough to be my parents. It’s my job to determine what happened. Like arriving at the end of a movie. Or opening a book filled with

blank pages, except the last page that reads, “The End.” I have to write the rest of the book – the beginning and the middle – tell a story without having witnessed it. And it has to be a true story, not fiction. Even if it becomes a horror story, it has to be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I can’t make up parts of the story to entertain the reader.

Everything in the house sends a message, telling parts of the story. I search the house, in case someone – something – was missed. Nothing, no one. No other human to help tell the story. I have to look for clues – signs. But here’s the key. It’s impossible for anything to happen without there being signs left all over the place – a trail of clues. All I have to do is find them and figure out what they mean.

The house is unkempt – filthy. And it stinks. A nauseating stench that builds up with stillness – immobility. Non-movement. I walk downstairs into the washroom, look at the dead guy’s face ... and have a flashback, 15 years.

I’m an 18-year-old rookie cop working out in the basement of the hardest of hardcore gyms. No socializing. No cell phones. No tight shirts. No mindless chatter. Just the symphony of heavy metal. Two streams of it, mixing together. One from the radio, the other from the plates.

From my position at the squat racks, I see a guy casually walk to the main powerlifting bench. Jed. We nod to each other. An unwritten rule from the “Hardcore Gym Code of Conduct:” Non-verbal communication only. Talking is limited to essentials. SUAL – Shut Up And Lift.

Jed’s ritual starts. He takes ownership of the bench, even when he’s not using it, until he’s finished, violating another unwritten rule: Don’t hog the bench. Violators get tagged with the “punk” label. A pain-in-the-ass. An asshole. But in a place with zero tolerance for punk behavior, no one bothers Jed. He has earned the right to be a bench hog. Not through entitlement – earned.

Bigger, scarier lifters give him implied consent – go ahead, hog the bench. Performance counted.

Six days before this workout, I had encountered Jed at a call at a bar where he worked as a bouncer. The bar was a drug-infested assembly of sociopaths, a community of violent social misfits. Jed was a 27-year-old factory worker, moonlighting as a bouncer. His T-shirt was two sizes too small. Layers of clothes removed to show layers of another kind – vein-popping, fat-free, magazine-cover mass of muscle. I wonder what his workout program is? I wonder what his diet is? The gullibility of an 18-year-old rookie cop has no limits.

Three fighters were arrested at the disturbance. Jed never got involved. He never moved a muscle. Standing near the bar casually looking on, playing with his mustache, Jed looked bored. Like he always did. Like he did now, sitting on the bench with no shirt on, committing counts #3 and #4: Must wear a shirt, and, Shirt must be baggy.

Jed is in no hurry to start the first set. No intensity, no sense of urgency as he commits count #5: Grooming in the mirror. Staring at the guy in the glass without lifting a weight. Self-admiration. Like strong paper towels, self-absorption. I'm wondering if he is preparing to go on a date or getting ready to lift. Ripped, lean, massive, eight-pack ... and doesn't even work out hard! Must be genetics! Losing gullibility doesn't just happen. It doesn't leave automatically or mysteriously. It happens with experience – reps.

Jed is not a giant. Only 5'10". But he casts a big shadow because of what he's done in the past and is about to do now. His first bench press set has two 45-pound plates on each side of the Olympic bar. Twelve reps. A warm-up set. 225 pounds for 12 reps – strictly, slowly, effortlessly. No bouncing. He doesn't use his chest like a trampoline. No primal screaming. And nowhere near failure. The miracle of Maximum Muscular Failure (MMF) is one of the secrets to making big muscles. But Jed doesn't care.

He leaves at least 15-20 reps hidden inside. Plenty left in the tank. He wastes a glorious opportunity – a growth opportunity. 225 pounds is a heavy weight. It's the bench press testing standard used by university and pro football coaches to measure the strength of world-class athletes. Yet, here is a part-time bouncer using it as a warm-up set – effortlessly. And lazily. Does less than half of what he could, should do.

For set #2, Jed slides another 45-pound plate on each side for a total of 315 pounds. After a mini-vacation rest, he casually completes 10 reps. Again, strictly, slowly, effortlessly with plenty left in the tank ... leaving unused reps inside. Hiding them. Locking them up with the rest of his potential he keeps packed away. Afraid to go to failure. Fear of busting through limits – not even getting close to the edge. And, most of all, fear of pain. Scared of the thought of discomfort. The needle on the tank barely budes after two sets. Hidden reps, concealed potential, buried treasure, wasted growth opportunities – the road to misery.

He adds one more 45-pound plate to each side– 405 pounds. Set #3 has almost doubled in weight from the first set. Jed sits down on the bench like he's waiting for a bus. No rush. A few more glances in the mirror, another straightening of the hair, one more smoothing of his mustache. And silence.

“He'll wait forever to do the next set. Fuckin' asshole pisses me off.” A guy I would arrest three years later whispers the outrage shared by the entire gym. The hog is in no rush. The dual sacrilege of too much rest between sets ... and of not going to failure. But no one bothers Jed. No one challenges him. Jed gets a free pass. Left alone, he becomes a victim ... of enabling.

Spectating is prohibited – Code rule #6: No gawking – at women or men. Staring is reserved for tourists. So the best one can do is watch using peripheral vision while trying to look busy. There's no way he can bench 405. The naiveté of an 18-year-old is infinite.

There is one exception to the SUAL rule.

“Can you spot me?”

“Sure.”

But I forget to ask when he intends to lift.

“I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

After another long-weekend type of rest, Jed casually announces, *“Ready. Don’t touch the bar unless I tell you. Just stand there.”*

I’m not a spotter. I’m an eyewitness. Proof. Evidence of performance. People use a 400-pound bench press as the benchmark for fabricated glory days.¹ Like fiction novelists, they re-write the past – insert false realities – to entertain the present: “I used to bench four plates until (insert an ailment or a misfortune).” But, like information cops receive from a confidential informant, there is no way to prove a claim of a 400-pound bench press. It could be the truth. Or it could be bullshit. A heavy pile of bullshit.

Fictional bench press stories share three elements – no witnesses, no video and, a vague narrative ... no evidence and an abstract story – the red flags of deception.

“When did you lift four plates?”

“Oh it was awhile ago.”

“Where?”

“Errr, a bunch of places.”

Credibility depends on how the story is told. Abstract narratives are suspicious – inspired by some true events, but most likely out-right lies. Science fiction. Only concrete stories have substance.

Witnessing a 400-pound bench press for the first time is Culture Shock. Like a perfect game in baseball, it rarely happens. The odds are staggering. So when you see it, it’s memorable.

¹ A tribute to a masterpiece. Glory Days. By Bruce Springsteen.

Especially memorable because Jed never asked for any help to take the bar off the racks, lift it, or put the bar back onto the racks. And especially memorable since it was obvious he could have lifted it again. More hidden reps, more concealed potential. More waste.

One isolated, single rep at 405 pounds. And ... plenty left in the tank.



Witnessing incredible performance makes an impact. Huge impact. First, you face the realization of how far you have to go – what your competition is doing ... and what you're not. Secondly, it causes you to re-define "personal best." Mine was 85% of Jed's. An insult. A disgrace. A sign to get better. No, a loud message: You're not as good as you think you are. That being "good" at something is contextual. Third, seeing a remarkable performance plants the seed of passion – or obsession. A goal that becomes a basic survival need. Turning your goal into a survival need will help you build the most important muscle of all – mindset. Iron-will mindset.

Without iron-will mindset, it's impossible to break barriers – impossible to reach higher – reach your goal. Mental strength is the secret to all achievement. It is connected to physical strength yet it precedes physical strength. And it is made stronger by physical strength. The spiral effect. The mind gives out way before the body. Training the mind trains the body.

15% improvement. 15% more weight. 15% more strength. At age 18, it had taken me only six years to reach 85% of 400. According to the math, only 15% of six years would be needed to break the barrier – smash the limit. And then pass it. Far beyond it. Every pound would be added every workout – 401, 402, 403 pounds. And after 100 workouts, the 500-pound barrier, gone.

How can any of us know that the first time we see something will be the last? Never saw it happen again, in person. From any

position – not behind the bar, not under the bar. Never witnessed a live performance of a 400-pound bench press again.



“The Coroner said he’s on the way.”

Blood all over the place and on the crumpled body of a young man – Jed was only 42. Homicide. Theory #1 – the starting point. Always think dirty – then work backwards.

Searching a crime scene where a dead person is lying, is like walking through Culture Shock waves. Start near the body and widen the search. The search tells the story. An office near the bathroom. A desk and filing cabinet with business records. A cheap journal with bad handwriting – customers names with product orders: “Meth” ... “Coke” ... “Decadurabolin” ... “Winstrol” ... “Testosterone.” Probably a 3-D homicide – Drugs, Debt or Domestic. Unresolved conflict is the cause of all evil – no exceptions. The unresolved inner and outer conflict created by trying to fill a need, causes extreme behavior ... unpredictable, outside-the-box behavior.

“Look here ... post-mortem-lividity on the back of the legs but nowhere else. The body wasn’t moved. Time of death was over eight hours ago.” All that from a deep purple stain that develops after death, on an area of the body that touches a surface. Story-telling through purple haze.²

“The body is fully engulfed in rigor mortis, indicating time of death was 12-24 hours ago.”



An autopsy site is a morbid classroom, void of emotion. “No injuries from violence. No self-inflicted injuries. No overdose.” Everything is cut, measured, analyzed. Body parts sliced, scaled, bagged. Free PhD in forensics at the expense of a dead person.

² A tribute to a masterpiece, Purple Haze. By Jimi Hendrix.

“Hey, how do you write ‘bleeding outta his ass’ in professional medical terms for the police report?” Forensic guys have a warped sense of humor. It’s hard to tell when they’re kidding.

“He was bleeding out of his ass, his balls were shriveled up, his liver was shot and his heart failed. The acne on his back is one of the worst I’ve ever seen. A 42-year-old with the insides of an 80-year-old. That’s what heavy, long-term use of anabolic steroids will do to you.” Coroners speak/teach in simple language. No confusion about the message. No trying to impress with trainwreck vocabulary.

Every “sudden death” investigation needs one of four conclusions, representing “THE END” – homicide, suicide, accident, or natural causes. Jed’s death didn’t fit any of the conventional four causes. His death invented a new conclusion. Death by “unnatural causes.” An unnatural death in exchange for a 400-pound bench press.



“It’s the lazy, cowardly way to avoid the natural struggle. It’s the foolish way to bypass natural growth opportunities, natural lessons-learned, natural insights. The natural struggle is not only intended to separate the strong from the weak, it gives the weak chances to get up and try again. And a chance for the strong to get stronger. Avoiding the natural struggle results in extinction. It’s impossible to survive without fighting through the natural struggle. Shortcuts keep you weak and weaker. Using steroids is the equivalent of cheating on exams, cheating at sports, cheating at business, cheating at work, cheating in any relationship. All the rationalization in the world will not cancel the fact that sticking a needle in your ass is the chickenshit way out of a challenge, the coward’s way out of working hard. And it’s degrading – admitting you can’t handle the natural struggle. The natural struggle is where you grow balls. Steroids shrivel them up.

Using steroids is an admission of defeat – it tells the whole world you can’t handle pressure. It sends a bad message – scared shitless of an inanimate object, like a bar and some metal plates. Using

steroids sends a message: Can't count on the steroid guy for backup in an alley because ... no balls."

Every "Say No to Drugs" speech needs a backup – just in case the first was mind-numbing. A supplement. Another rep.

"One more thing about steroids and drugs. In case you think the first speech was bullshit, think of this. The two sickest criminals I ever dealt with were addicted to drugs. Enzo and Greg. Both had tons of potential – smart, strong ... but they wasted it. Threw it in the trash with their used syringes. Enzo was a meth addict who jacked every kind of anabolic steroid into his ass. His favorite was testosterone. Got wired up on meth, lost tons of weight, then built himself back up by injecting testosterone. A walking pharmaceutical laboratory. Endless cycles of down, down deeper, and up. And, he couldn't shut up. Motor-mouth.

Greg snorted, swallowed and injected every substance ever invented. Same thing – cycles of thinness and thickness, skinny and jacked. Both became violent sociopaths. They did unconscionable things that hurt many people. In and out of jail for violent crimes. And neither one gave a shit about the mess they caused in victim's lives. Both were cowards, picking on defenseless people. And they didn't even argue when it was pointed out to them that they were chickenshit cowards who terrorized senior citizens, women and anyone less than half their size. Psychopathic bullies. Why? Because their brains were scrambled – toasted, mush. And they needed tons of money because they could not control their addiction. Shriveled brains and shriveled balls."

Here's the point. Both came from normal Beaver Cleaver-like families. Both had decent hard-working parents. Drugs destroyed them and their families. They became toxic – radioactive P-Force – Poison Force. Poisoned inside, poisoned outside. Laid waste to everyone around them. Both admitted to me that drugs caused this mess. Addictions. Incurable addictions. Drugs made them crazy – hard drugs and anabolic steroids. Both tried to clean up but they kept failing. Round after round, kept getting knocked

down. Eventually, they lost the fight – by knockout. Greg is dead – died at a young age. Enzo is walking dead – technically alive but has never lived.

Steroids are like Enzo and Greg – home invaders – stealing, plundering, pillaging and wreaking havoc. Like violent thieves, steroids steal health and life but they also rob another valuable – the natural struggle, the chemical-free, substance-free battle to reach higher, get to the next level and fulfill God-given potential. The natural struggle is the most important part of working out. The lessons learned from any natural struggle represent the highest form of learning – a PhD in street smarts. Reality IQ. Nothing is more enlightening than the insights learned from the natural struggle.

Avoiding the natural struggle is the equivalent of wealth without work – one of Ghandi's "seven deadly sins" against humanity. Like insider trading, steroids dramatically increase gains by circumventing the natural course of growth. A false reality is built. A deadly one. A tilted playing field that is no longer competitive. A short-cut for the weak-minded. Missing out on the natural struggle keeps you mired in the darkness of an artificial, insular world. A brutal form of isolation, where self-absorption disconnects the self-immersed from the best mentor that money cannot buy – natural struggle.

Natural struggle paves the way to natural growth – physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. The bad news is that natural growth takes a long time. A very long time. The good news is that natural growth gives you lifelong learning – new material every day. It should never get boring. But, like cutting classes, you learn nothing from cutting the natural struggle from working out. Falsehoods are learned from false realities. Nothing of any value is learned from a false reality.

Muscles built by jamming needles in your ass is fraud. False pretenses. Bullshit muscles. Using steroids is the equivalent of a criminal's confession of guilt: Can't handle the pressure of

working out. Scared of the heavy metal. Engulfed in fear of lifting an inanimate object. Using steroids is an admission that the bar won – the bar beat you. And if an inanimate object, a piece of metal can scare the shit out of you, imagine what a human opponent can do.

“There is no logical way to rationalize ramming a needle up your ass to get muscles. None. And if you try to find even one justification, that search itself is evidence of a deeper, growing mental and emotional problem. Who in their right mind would chemically engineer themselves to get puss-infected acne, shriveled balls, falling out hair, a Goliath-sized skull, smoker’s voice and rotted internal organs? Who would intentionally transform into a semi-evolved Neanderthal? Every time you jam the syringe, you’re signing a confession – one that says, ‘Incapable of doing something the right way’ ... scared of hard work.”

There is a direct correlation between attendance and performance. Show up and you have a chance to get better. Show up and bust your ass while you’re there and you dramatically improve the chance to dramatically improve. But, “fail to appear” is a robbery-in-progress – it steals growth opportunities. Missing the natural struggle is the kind of skipping-out that can’t be made up. Steroid use is an artificial makeover – a superficial layer that masks a deeper issue.



There’s a crooked line that separates obsession, and passion for the perfect body. The soul of a lifter is not obsessed with a perfect body. The passion is for the perfect connection. And it’s fueled by the intense fear of being mediocre. Substandard. The soul of a lifter is attracted to risk. High risk. The kind of risk that causes separation. The kind of risk that beats down the monotony and the drudgery of existing instead of living. The kind of risk that fights the quiet fight – the regret of wasted potential.

Unfulfilled potential torments the soul. The gym is one place where you have total control of your potential. A place where every call you make shapes your destiny. A place where you exercise your free will to the fullest.

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