



WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



Luke Allison Interviews Jason Paris

LA: This is Luke Allison from CriticalBench.com and I'm here with Jason Paris. Jason, how are you?

JP: I'm great, Luke. Thanks for inviting me on the call. How are you today?

LA: I'm good, thanks. Glad to have you here.

JP: Thank you.

LA: Take a second and sort of introduce yourself, give some of the listeners an idea about your background working with athletes.

JP: Okay, sure. I originally started out in track and field. I've been a competitive track and field runner in college myself. After I weaned out of the track and field running myself, I started to get into speed work. I continued with the track and then from the

track I continued speed work with rugby players. And then from that, I moved into the strength and conditioning aspect of it. And then from there, I branched further. I currently work with a college football team and I also do some private training on my own.

LA: Okay, and as you look at sort of the training necessary for college football players, what really stands out?

JP: I think the biggest thing, especially with like football, is the intensity. Football players and football teams from Division I to Division III, you go through the weight room and you go on the field for conditioning and the practices, every drill, every step you take is 110%. And I've found that's a little bit different from other sports. That's by far the biggest stand-out that I find with football, is the intensity level is so much greater.

LA: There's a lot of money involved, so that intensity is necessary, I think, at this point. Is there a kind of training methodology that you prefer, maybe not something you're using now, but something you've come across?

JP: I basically do...I've tried a bunch of different things over the past years. There's always something useful that another guys has, so you just kind of put that all together and I kind of almost developed kind of a hodge-podge. But, for football, and actually any sport, explosiveness isn't going to hurt anybody in a sport. So, I do believe the Olympic lifts are very good at developing that explosiveness. Any program that involved athletes, I definitely have Olympic lifting aspects to it.

LA: Has anything ever happened to cause you to significantly change the type of training that you like to prescribe for athletes?

JP: With me in particular, nothing has happened, but being in the field for a while now, I've seen stuff and I've heard stuff. So, I've definitely heard of athletes getting hurt when they do maxes. So, there becomes a point where you're squatting, for instance, you'd say 500 pounds is enough. So, then you don't... A guy could look good and still hit 500 pounds fairly easily, but then you say, do we need to risk going any higher?

The same with some of the Olympic lifts, I've heard of people banging their elbows on their knees when they catch it nice and deep and breaking their wrist because of that. So, again, I guess my thing is I cut people off a little earlier than what they have in them. We're not Olympic lifters. We're training athletes and football players. So, the weight lifting is to enhance their sports. So, they're not going to be super perfect at the weight lifting when it comes to the Olympic lift. So, I always will cut them of a little lighter than what they can actually do. I really don't do true, true maxes.

LA: So, something like a circuit max, do you like to leave them like two to three reps or just a lower percentage of what they can lift?

JP: The general cutoff is when I find the technique is...I start to see a major decline in the technique. That's my cutoff. If I find a two rep or three rep max is almost the same thing, because you can't do another rep. So, it's the same as a one rep max. You can't do another rep anyway. So, I still, if I'm doing a two rep max and you see that the first one was kind of shaky, there's no sense doing the second one. So, I don't find there too much of a difference between doing like a three rep max or just going a full out max. It all depends on the techniques.

LA: There's some controversy and some difference of opinion about whether football players should dead lift just because of the sort of technique involved with mastering that lift. Is that something you have strong feelings one way or the other one?

JP: Personally, myself, I like dead lifts. Every program is different. I do some private stuff and I also do work at a university as well. At the university, you have 110 to 90 kids on a football team. So, depending on how many coaches you have available, it's hard to watch all those kids. I've heard of some programs that have 3 kids per coach. They space it over the day. So, in that situation, I think you could do dead lifts.

But, I've heard of other schools that you have one coach that has to watch 30 or 40 athletes. So, the amount of weight that's used in the dead lift, you can't effectively put it in a program where you have to watch so many athletes. But in a private setting, I always have people do dead lift just because it's such an effective lift and I can keep a close eye on them. So, I feel that it can be fairly safe when I watch it so closely.

LA: I think that's probably a good rule of thumb for anyone that's working with a large group of athletes to keep in mind. Do you use any lifts as indicators, and if so, how do you sort of regulate when you're waiting for people to sort of progress or not respond?

JP: We do the typical squat, bench and power cleans for the indicators. The cleans, power clean is a good measure of like your power, like your strength to your weight ratio. That's a very effective measurement tool. The squat and the bench aren't as effective, but for some reason it's been around for a long, long time. So, every school that I know of will do a squat and a bench.

In the NFL combine, you do a 225 bench test. So, the bench isn't really something you're going to get away with, so it doesn't really prove too, too much, let's say, our athletic ability or your ability to play football, but it's something that coaches often look for, like I say, it's in the combine. So, it is a test that is performed, the same with as squat. A squat is definitely a good lower body predictor of strength. So, that

one I don't have as much of a problem with. But, I still do all three, but the power clean is the key one that I really put the emphasis and the focus on.

LA: And those are things that will sort of be cycled-in in different ways and sort of different weeks and things like that. I assume it's got a different structure in season and out of season.

JP: Yes, it does. This is the out-of-season now. As you get ready for...the two-a-days will come here in another three or four weeks. So, this is where we get our quality work in in the summer. We run two days a week, we lift three days a week and we build up. The maxes were done in about midsummer. So, you want to give kids time to...you're going to transition a little more from the heavy stuff to a little bit more of the conditioning work so they can be ready to do the two-a-day practices.

But, throughout the year you also incorporate all those lifts as well. They generally, if you compare it, you're going to do heavy squats and power cleans and benches throughout the year. You're going to cycle. In season, you keep it pretty light. But then in January, February you can start up again and then you start building up heavy again until you get to the summer. The summer's where you'll be able to do the max testing.

LA: Is it fairly easy to maintain during the season? Or, is that something that varies a lot between athletes?

JP: It does vary between athletes. But, it is difficult to maintain during the season. There are a number of reasons why it's so difficult. One is that the kids play every week. You get banged up. Football's a contact sport, so you're not going to feel very good for a couple of days. So, you need a couple of days rest and recuperation. So, you're going to miss a few days of lifting there.

We don't want to go heavy because you don't want people to be hurt, and you don't want them to be tired. So, you can't really keep up that same kind of intensity throughout the season. Plus, school's in so they have a full course load, and they have football practice on top of that. So, you really have to be very efficient and really attach what's important. So, you just want to keep them healthy and not worry so much about getting as strong as possible. So, there are definitely some kids that trail-off as the season progresses, and other kids that seem to be able to maintain a little better than others.

It depends, too, on...schools are different. You have some kids that are starters and they're going to play ever week. Then, you have other kids that are red shirting. They will keep developing throughout the year and then you have other kids that are like 3rd string that chances are they're not going to play or they're only going to get in for one

play or two plays. So, they can lift a little bit harder. Usually the 3rd string aren't usually as big and strong anyway, so they can use the extra work. So, when they're called upon, they'll be more physically ready for the challenge.

LA: Okay, that's a nice lead-in to my next question. I've become aware of a concept that Dan John uses. I don't know if he's someone you're familiar with, but he calls it "Shrinking the Gap," this idea of the disparity between your strongest players and your weakest players, trying to make sort of whatever that amount is as small as possible so if one of your starters had to be replaced by a 2nd or 3rd teamer, you're not sort of dropping several hundred pounds on the power clean or on the squat. Is that a focus, is that something you even think about?

JP: Yes, that's definitely a concern. It depends on the position, too. So, you have your linemen, are usually the bigger, stronger guys that you definitely want. You don't want a lineman that can only squat 200 pounds or such. They don't all have to be a 500 pound squatter of 500 pound plus, but you definitely want...you don't want a huge, huge margin. There's going to be kids that are going to be exceptional that can squat 600 pounds plus without a problem. Not everybody needs to be at that level because there'll come a point where I'm not sure what the magical number is, but there's definitely a diminishing return at a certain point.

We can continue with the squat for example. After 500 pounds, that really has that much of a benefit to you on the field, chances are not too much, you don't notice that. But, if you're not close to that at all, you definitely need to be up there because you'll get pushed around. Even if your technique is fairly good and you're a fairly good athlete, again, this is a contact sport. So, you need to be a certain strength and a certain size to just kind of take the beating that you're going to get on a daily basis.

LA: I guess that's important for you to maybe keep the kids out of the weight room that may be like lifting weights more than they like playing football, because at the end of the day, they have to play football also. How much weight in size can you put on a freshman, one that just arrives on campus, the four years that they're there?

JP: Wow, that varies. You can pack a lot of weight on some kids. I know some schools have different sponsors. We get sponsored by Muscle Milk. So, after each lift we can give the kids Muscle Milk to drink which has some extra calories, extra protein, extra carbohydrates to help them grow and recover. But, we've had freshman that respond super, super well, and they can gain...if they have to play in September, they can gain 30 pounds by the time that they step on campus at the end of their high school year, in the summer, until September when they play.

So, over the course of four years, if a kid has aspirations in the NFL, and he's good enough to play and he needs to really be that kind of size, it won't be a problem for him to gain over 60 pounds over the course of that time.

LA: That's pretty serious. I think most people would sort of identify with that and say, that's a lot of weight. But, if you're preparing for the NFL, you're doing that at least four years out. So, that's a very serious commitment and impressive at the same time.

JP: I think... You're right about that. That's a lot of weight. You're also talking, there are different levels of kids that go through a program. So, if you're looking towards NFL, you have a special gift, a special genetics to start with, so it's a little easier for you to gain weight. There's something special about you and that means you may work a little harder in the weight room, you may pay extra special attention to when you have nutrition guidelines and you're usually just a little bit different. That really makes it a little bit easier for you to gain weight. So, that's not the typical kids, but there's definitely...there's no question there are kids that come through that that can happen.

LA: I guess that raises sort of what's at the other end of the scale? Do you have kids that come in maybe skill position players that came from a program in high school where they didn't lift weight, maybe they don't like it. Maybe they're just not any good at it. What is that like for you as a coach?

JP: There are definitely kids that have come from programs that didn't lift. Or, they had programs that is more like you could lift on your own. It wasn't as supervised. So, as a freshman, you spend a lot of time working on technique. So, the first month that they're there, if they've come from a program that they haven't really lifted before, you're not going to put a bunch of weight on the bar for them. They may be squatting 135 pounds. You may keep them there for a while until they can get the depth and they can get the form.

The same with the clean. They might not even clean 100 pounds. You're just going to keep them light and until they can start progressing towards a reasonable technique, then you can start adding some weight to them. So, those kids, they're set-back. There's definitely a disadvantage when it comes to them to gain weight because they're already going to be behind because they haven't had the development in high school. Now, they're starting behind at the college level, too, because they're going to be more focused on the technique.

LA: Yeah, it seems that you basically have to lift weights at this point. That wasn't always the case. It doesn't seem, approaching 2009/2010 season that you can do that anymore. Talk a little bit about what characterizes the successful strength and conditioning program. Can you find sort of objectives, metrics, sort of aside from maybe win/loss record or bowl appearance or something like that?

JP: I think the goal of a good strength and conditioning program...of course everybody wants the win/losses. But, in the gym we can't always...there's much more to football than just how strong you are. So, you don't really have too, too much control over that. But, what we can and what we want to do is we want to have well conditioned people and you want to have...the best metrics is the injuries. There are some injuries that can be prevented and there's some that are obviously going to happen just because of how rough the sport is.

I think if you want to look at something, you want to look at your program. You want to look at how few injuries you have, how many starters start at the beginning of the year, how many of those starters are playing in the last game of the season. I think that's a very important aspect of a strength and conditioning program.

If you build a team that's in shape, you have a better chance that they're going to be able to take every play at full speed. I think it's when you're not going full speed is when you can start to develop some of those unnecessary injuries. So, I find that the injury, looking at the injuries is the best indication of how well of a program that you have.

LA: And is that because injuries are just...they're so common that if you're playing sort of at a high level, sort of big bodies moving so fast, that a certain amount of people are just going to get hurt eventually and sort of finding a way to avoid that is sort of a good goal.

JP: You're right. There's definitely going to be no question that injuries are going to happen. You're big and fast. When you get two big and fast things coming together, something's going to give. So, we do want to minimize that, but there are some injuries, like you can see people get hamstring pulls, for instance. So, you can kind of look at why did they get that hamstring pull? Is that something that could have been prevented in the weight room through extra work on the posterior chain? Or, was it just a freak accident? Like I had mentioned before, too, we have somebody that's running 100%, somebody that's running 85%, chances are the 85% person's going to get hurt, and that can come back to the conditioning aspect.

If you're not able to give 110% every play, chances are you're going to be run over and yeah, more susceptible to getting injury then as well. So, if you're not in the best shape that you can be, you're definitely going to want to take a few plays off. So, you have to make sure that you're in good shape and you just kind of work some of those areas that you know are susceptible to get a little more injuries than others. Like I said, like your hamstrings. Obviously, people get hamstring pulls. Shoulders is another touchy area that you often have people get injury, too. So, you want to pay particular

attention to make sure that those areas are strong and as healthy as they can be at all times.

LA: Sure, just to prepare them for those sort of inevitable collisions. In your experience, what are the boundaries that sort of separate the strength coach's responsibility from those of other coaches on the staff, whether they be coordinators or positional coaches, or sort of anyone else?

JP: I think the biggest thing, the biggest difference, the one that stands out most to me is as a strength coach, your job is to have every kid ready and to be prepared to play football. So, you don't have to really... Obviously we don't reach them how to play football, but they have to go into... Like I said, two-a-days are coming up soon. So, as a strength coach, the head coach is expecting every kid that's going to come to those two-a-day practices to be ready to give 100%.

So, the head coach is not around too much, not in the weight room. So, he's relying on the strength staff to make sure that the kid are ready for when they come to him to start the two-a-days. And the some kind of goes throughout the season. The coach takes care of the positional stuff, but you need to make sure that your kids are ready and in the best shape and the healthiest, that they will come and be ready to play.

There's some other little things that the coach will put on. Like you had mentioned before about gaining weight, so there are definitely kids that come in under-sized, so the coach will expect you to, as a strength coach, the head coach will expect you as a strength coach to make sure that kids of half decent sized. It also works the other way as well.

There are some kids that have... I guess the university life can get a little too much and whatever happened, they part a little too much or whatever and they get a little too big. So then the head coach will also want you to get some of the kids to drop some weight.

LA: Is that a responsibility that you're sort of able to take on just because you're not, I guess, working with them or game-planning or things like that? You have those hours to give?

JP: Yes. We do the strength and the conditioning aspect. So, we have a certain amount of personal time with the kids so we can do little extra things like you know what kids need to gain weight. You can get them to bring in the diet and we will go and say, "Hey, this is where you can kind of increase or decrease your calories to fit your needs." And then after you lift weights, you can also get kids to do...if you have enough time, we can also get the kids to do some conditioning or some other work that will help them get to their goal, either losing weight or gaining weight.

But, the football coaches, they just have a very rigid schedule and you go to practice, everything is laid out. You go to practice, you do your drills. In the weight room you have a little bit more flexibility at the end of the weight training session, so that's when you can address the needs of the weight gain or the weight loss kids.

LA: Now, because of your background in track, I wanted to ask you, it seems like there's a movement for strength coaches to be teaching sort of really involved running mechanics. Things like the sprinter's start for the 40 yard dash and more other sort of lateral quickness things. Do you think that's an appropriate responsibility or is that sort of maybe a private sector thing for someone with other track and field and speed experience?

JP: Well, I think it's a good thing to do in the strength and conditioning. Like I said, we do agility and running twice a week, and we're lifting three times a week. So, we have those two times a week that we're running. So, it seems like a natural fit to at least bestow the basic mechanics to them. There's a slight difference between a 100 meter sprinter and a football player. A football player very rarely gets to be at full speed. The mechanics are important, but they're not quite as important as they are in track. So, it's not like we need to go into it too, too detailed.

But, we definitely do. I do feel that it's something that needs to be covered and we do spend time teaching the basic fundamentals. We don't go beyond the basic fundamentals, but that is definitely something that's covered more so in the beginning of the season or beginning of the off-season training. We kind of hope that the kids will know by the time that the season or the end of the off-season, they should have those mechanicals pretty sound.

You kind of work in the warm-up. We do dynamic warm-up. You would just do some more...that's another opportunity for you to get a little more of those mechanics into the neuromuscular memory system.

LA: Sure. I think we're running out of time, but if people are interested, I know you mentioned you have private services that are available. Tell people about sort of where you are and how they can get in touch with you.

JP: I am in Atlanta, Georgia. You can email me at JasonCSCS@gmail.com. I also do some online programming for people as well. I know not everybody can afford to have a private one-on-one session, but they definitely want a little extra. So, I do do programs and we do phone consultations and such as that. Again, the name is JasonCSCS@gmail.com.

LA: I think that about does it for us, but, Jason, I want to thank you for the time and willingness to share some pretty good information, I think. The listeners are going to really appreciate this.

JP: Well, thank you. I enjoyed speaking with you.

LA: Okay, take care.

JP: Okay, bye.