



WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



Luke Alisson Interviews Luka Hocevar

LA: This is Luke Allison with CriticalBench.com and I'm here with Luka Hocevar. Luca, how are you?

LH: Good, thanks for having me on your call, Luke. And, you got my last name right, too, that was great.

LA: Good, I was worried about that. Important detail, for sure. You're new to the listeners at Critical Bench, go over a brief introduction, tell them about your athletic background.

LH: I grew up just playing a lot of sports. I'm originally from Slovenia, or former Yugoslavia. But, my first love was basketball. I ended up playing all the way from high school to college and pro ranks. I played overseas professionally for four years, NBA

semi pro league. But, in the mean time I also fell in love with training. I've been trying to improve my performance since I was 15 to 16, reading performance journals, you name it, just to get better.

That ended up turning into basically my hidden love. And in the mean time, I was still playing pro basketball, actually became a strength and conditioning coach and opened one facility with my brother overseas on Slovenia. Now, I moved to Seattle because my wife's from Seattle and opened another facility out here in a warehouse.

LA: Okay. So, you have your own gym and it's a warehouse gym. Explain what that means to people if they're not sure what that entails.

LH: Basically, warehouse gyms have been popping up. Some people will say that who kind of popularizing them was...maybe most of the listeners are familiar with familiar with Joe DeFranko. But, it's basically just a gym within the warehouse and no fancy equipment that you're going to see in a regular health club. You come to my place you're looking at squat racks, half racks, bench, kettle bells, tires, ropes, sleds, Prowlers. I don't know if everybody's familiar with that. But, there's basically no foo-foo stuff. I mean, everything gets used, everything works and there's nothing in there that's big and clumpy, that's going to take up space and not give a lot back, put it that way.

LA: Now, obviously you've opened two gyms. You've made an investment, you have equipment. Talk a little bit about your motivation to work with athletes and sort of help them with their goals and their dreams.

LH: I mean, a lot of it, I think, stems from where I came from, just from the fact that... I would say I was just about an average athlete, nothing spectacular and I always just had a lot of coaches tell me, "Hey, you're a hard worker, but I don't know if you can do it. I don't know if you can do it. This restricts you, this restricts you." And it just made me push myself even harder.

I'm motivated to help out the athletes that do have it in them, they go and seek out and will do whatever to improve themselves. Because, I know that from even with an average or below average genetics, I would say. You can not only improve your performance, but you can take your career to a really high level. It may be a college scholarship. It may not even be that, but what it will teach you, from the training in the sport will teach you in live is a great lesson in itself. So, I'm always willing to give back and I guess I see myself in a lot of the athletes that I train.

LA: It sounds like the importance of having a smaller gym, a more local gym, in each neighborhood, in each large city is so that the people that need that, that identify with that, they're the ones diving on the floor for loose balls and things like that, that they have a place to come, because they have people to identify with. Is that right?

LH: I mean, I think one of the biggest things in the environment, if you hear a lot of top strength coaches talk about it, is programming is definitely critical. But, one of the facts that not enough people talk about is the environment. You've got a small gym and you got six, eight guys going after it, everybody's pushing each other. And somebody might come in on a down day, not feel that great. Well, guess what? You've got six or seven guys to pick you up. They're going to challenge you. I mean, there's no way you're excelling like that training by yourself or training with other athletes that really don't give a crap. I mean, it's just not going to happen.

So, it kind of, I would say, gels together. You've got the motivation. You've got guys coming in that really want it and you've got this environment that's a no-bullshit environment. It's made to...there's no mirrors. There's nobody to look at you while you're doing what you're doing. It's all about you.

LA: What ideas or people have influenced your sort of philosophy or style about strength training?

LH: Wow! That's a long list. But, I think would start off with just some of the people that really I took off after and I guess, Eric Cressey was a huge influence, and still is kind of my mentor since...it's been quite a few years back. But, I went to a seminar that he had in London while I was still living in Slovenia. Made the trip out there and listened to the seminar, bought all his stuff. I mean, he kind of, I would say, directed me in what I do now, but I would say my strength training is definitely bits and pieces of all different influences.

I learned a lot from Pablo for kettlebell training. Joe DeFranko's a huge influence. Alwyn Cosgrove, man I could keep naming them. There's just a lot. I really do follow all the best in the industry and try to take as much information and then kind of blend it into my own. Sometimes it's like you can't argue with something that works. But, if I apply it and if it doesn't work, then it really doesn't matter what it says in the book or the journal what this guy says. If I've been doing it and it doesn't work, it's out the window. But, it's been gelled through a lot of different people. But, yea, I'll keep the list shorter.

LA: Fair enough. That's plenty to chew on, I think, and a good start for sure. How do you balance the need of sort of a wide group of athletes? Obviously as the sports change the demands change. Do you prefer to work with athletes from a smaller selection of sports?

LH: You know what? It used to be a smaller selection of sports, but it has become... I train a lot of basketball players, obviously. Then once I came to the States it was quite a few football players and some really good baseball players. And it's been turning to quite a few MMA guys and wrestlers. And it really just becomes a challenge and an

interesting to me to dive into new sports because I mean, once you understand training, it's a lot easier to go into other sports. But, I think that you do have to, I would say dive into it. Like, I'll watch game footage... If I'm training somebody for a sport, I'm going to sit down and watch the game for this. I'm going to start watching that sport more.

I've been going to tons and tons of MMA fights, amateur. I've started picking up MMA training, because I want to know how it feels like and what the guys are going through and put myself through it and it makes me understand it a lot better. So, I wouldn't say that I'm limited by anything. I would say that maybe I have a little bit of favoritism towards basketball, football and MMA, but I definitely...I don't draw lines there at all.

LA: Okay, I think I can understand that. I can see where you're coming from. That's actually a great segue into my next question. MMA is blowing up around the world. Many people have said it's the fastest growing sport in the world. One of the problems seems to be it's difficult for people to find good quality strength and conditioning information. Explain sort of how difficult it is to actually prepare fighters for MMA and how that preparation differs from other sports.

LH: Yea, first off, it's definitely tougher and I think that people tend to just put it in a little box and say, oh, this is MMA training and you can just go do cross fit and everything's okay. It doesn't necessarily work like that. I mean, first you have to understand the demands of the MMA fighter. I mean, they're in the gym doing skill work, mitts and grappling and wrestling six days a week, five, six, sometimes seven days a week. Depending on what camp they're in, you might not have an influence over that.

So, the first thing that you have to do is you have to be...I think it's really important to have a relationship and be in close contact with everybody else that's training that fighter. Because otherwise, it becomes just this broken-up training where somebody might be training 3 or 4 hours a day doing skill work and actual fight training, and then he's going to come to your gym and he's going to be like, okay we're going to do this and this and that and you're just going to have to burn him out. I mean, you're not going to peak their performance.

So, that's a big factor that I don't think is even mentioned that much. Everybody says, well, this is good for MMA and this is not good for MMA. But, really, it depends what camp they're in, what they're looking to. You need to try to get a relationship and work in the best, I would say, the best efforts for what's going to be best for that athlete.

Then, it also becomes individualization. You can't... I mean, you go around, some people have issues with....a lot of MMA guys have issues with they don't have good relative strength. Some have poor power endurance. Some have poor mobility

and you've got to assess that and built a program from there. I think that's the starting point before you even start going into anything else.

LA: Okay. Back in December of 2008 you wrote a blog and I want to quote quickly from that. You wrote, "What I have found is that the majority of athletes are weak and not powerful at all. So, even if they continuously express power, they do not have much anyway and they will continually express low levels of power." Talk about that for a second.

LH: Well, when you look at mixed martial arts, I mean the things that you need are power endurance, strength endurance, speed endurance. But, if you don't have good amounts of strength, speed and power, what are you really enduring? You're just going to produce low levels of power. So, yea, you can go consistently with a certain amount of power the whole fight, but there's not much power so it's not really going to phase the opponent.

Basically, relative strength, I think, is a big... It's kind of like the cup. All the other things, power endurance, strength endurance, speed endurance, they're water in the cup. And one you fill that cup up, and you can train all the other aspects, it's just going to overflow. So, the only way to make...to get more water in there is you've got to make the cup bigger. And the cup is maximum relative strength.

So, that's the one thing I see. I mean, I go around gyms and I study and I look at training and talk to fighters and nobody really trains relative strength. I don't want to take this to an extreme and say, hey, you need to be power lifting and dead lifting 600 pounds to do MMA, but most guys would... I mean, just doing that would improve their performance so much it would be incredible.

I mean, if you have 30-40% more strength than you had, even once you're more tired, you're still going to be producing more power than you did before in the later rounds. So, it just makes perfect sense, but sometimes you've got to step back and look at the situation and say, yea, this is what I need or maybe even just understanding that side of it.

LA: Now, you described some of the upper end of sort of power lifting comparable statistics, what is just absolutely too weak for an MMA fighter? What's someone that just has not put the level of time into their strength and conditioning? Are we talking about weighted chin-ups, body weight bench press, what are some numbers for people?

LH: It's hard to say number, but some people will say, well, you've got to do this and that. I mean, if you can't squat about 1 ½ times your bodyweight, or maybe that's not...maybe you don't have good body mechanics for the squat. Then, you might try a

bar dead lift. But, if you're...I'm just going to round it up because if you're a 200 pound fighter and you can't squat 300 or bar dead lift 300, I mean, there's probably a problem.

If you're not squatting 500, I don't have an issue with that, or you can't do 10 bodyweight chin-ups. But, you're an MMA fighter. I mean, those are things that you can right of the bat say, hey, your base level of strength is just really, really bad.

And I'll get a lot of guys in that will do very, very, very simple things and the fighters won't be able to do it. They just won't be able to do it. I'll ask them what they've been doing and literally they'll just do fight specific stuff and put into circuits, do some callisthenic sprints and/or like go on YouTube and watch some videos and put some circuit together.

LA: Are you comfortable sort of being the person that confronts someone that wants to fight and say, you know what? You're not strong enough. And chances are, you're going to get put in the position where you could be hurt really, really badly. Are you comfortable with that or do you think that's a technique coach or a manager or someone like that, that's their position?

LH: I mean, I think that I'm going to state my opinion regardless or not, because at the end of the day, it's the fighter's best interests that are my best interests. If at the end of the day somebody's associated to you and they get smacked, it's not great.

But, MMA fighters are going to fight. It's hard to say, hey, don't fight. You've got to get fights under your belt to get better at what you do. I don't think that saying, hey, let's get tons and tons stronger before you can have your first fight, is the way to go either. I think that everything can be done as you go along.

Like I said, it's kind of swinging the pendulum to the middle. Some people go to extremes and say, oh, you need to get so much stronger and train so much more and just wait. But, at the same time, I think you can train skill and set up a fight and get stronger and do all that at once. It just takes good programming, a good team and good communication.

LA: Now, just to sort of completely cover the things that maybe people are doing that they shouldn't be doing. Circuit training and barbell complexes with really light weight seem to be very, very popular for MMA conditioning if you check YouTube, if you look around, because they improve muscular endurance. Is that really what people need to be spending their time on if they're already wrestling, if they're already doing jujitsu and things like that. Isn't that sort of the same thing?

LH: I think that barbell complexes are a good thing. The question is...it goes right back to assessing the athlete. Usually it's just a punch in the dark. It's like hey, we're

doing barbell complexes because this guy's doing barbell complexes. Or, because the coach said, let's all do barbell complexes. But, not why I need to do them or what are my weak points.

Once again, you do barbell complexes and you're using Jaffa Cakes to put on the bars, what are you really doing? So, why not get stronger then do the barbell complexes with a heavier weight. And I mean yes, it's training and aerobic endurance and I think that those muscles do have to get used to that lactic acid buildup. Sprints won't do that. Sometimes fighting won't do that. That's why you got to split up training and fighting.

But, like I said, it's kind of like...barbell complexes are actually, I think, a great way to go about doing certain types of strength and conditioning for MMA, but it goes back to assessing the athlete and saying, hey, what do they need? What's priority? What's going to fall within the program?

A lot of times my guys will do the barbell complexes at the end of a speed training workout. We'll be doing speed squats, speed box squats and we'll go through a lower body training workout, then at the end we'll finish with barbell complexes. So, it's not something that I don't use, because I think they're great. But, once again, I know that a lot of guys use them and that's all they do.

LA: That was going to be my follow-up because it seems that Randy Couture had sort of put his spin onto a barbell complex, which basically looked like something that Javorek would have come up with to sort of help much more explosive athletes, Olympic lifters and their development. And then people said, well, that's the Randy Couture routine and they wouldn't even give credit and then they would sort of misinterpret the purpose of it.

LH: I mean, the complexes all started with Javorek and then everybody puts their name on it once they add an exercise. If I want a complex named after me, then just throw something in there that's extra.

But, like I said, in the strength and performance industry, there's so many trends. So, somebody does something, and because of the media now and the big stars, I mean, how many times do you watch TV and here's the BJ Penn workout? Oh, my God, the BJ Penn workout, let's all do the BJ Penn workout. You know, for most strength coaches, they watch the BJ Penn workout and they hold their head like, what the hell is going on right there?

So, it's kind of like the same thing. These guys said it's good, let's all do it. But, nobody knows why.

LA: Yea, and I think that that's sort of difficult to get people...to raise their level of awareness and education to be sore of a little bit more discerning. I guess the last thing we'll run through is cross fit. How applicable is something like cross fit, which isn't structured, it doesn't have periodization, for fighters if they're just doing something like that workout of the day?

LH: I mean, here's my thing. I don't necessarily hate cross fit. I disagree with some of the things they do. I mean, we'll do circuits that will be similar, if you want to call it similar, but we're not going to do Olympic lifts for a lot of reps under like crazy fatigue and be doing clean and jerks and things like that. But, we'll do EDT things like escalated density training or we'll do time circuits and try to beat them. But, everything will be controlled to where it doesn't get too crazy.

And I think it's the same thing with the cross fit, is it doesn't have...there is no...basically there is no programming to it, or progressive overload, necessarily. And it just becomes just like the...I can't remember the exact words that one person put it, but hey, we make the same workouts for everybody, it's just that the elite athletes are at a higher level than the 50 year old man that has a regular job and that's far from the truth. I mean, you're looking at different sports that are more or less specific and different athletes that have different needs.

There's no way, I mean, you tell me...you ask any top coach whether they'll do the same workout for, you know, five different levels of athletes that have five different needs. It's not going to happen. I mean, I think there can be some generalizations, but I think that's pushing I too far.

LA: Having covered sort of the things that you're not supposed to do and briefly touching on maybe what you should do if you're an MMA fighter or you're training MMA fighters, given your choice, given freedom, how would you train an MMA fighter?

LH: Are you saying give an example of...I don't know a training?

LA: Something you'd do...yea, as specific as you'd like to be.

LH: It depends how far a guy's out from the fight. But, usually I'd have them do two full body workouts a week. We might do three and split it up if they're far away and the needs ask for it. But, otherwise, we'd do two full body. We'd do basically, once again, this is all kind of individualized, but we'd do more... Always start with dynamic mobility, foam rolling. That's extremely, extremely important. These guys are so, so tight in terms of myofascial restrictions. I mean, you name it. And very, very tight in the hips, very tight in the pec minors, hunched over a lot of times. So, really important to get more thoracic mobility. So, we'll spend 10 to 15 minutes on that.

Go through dynamic mobility, a good amount of warm-up and then from there on we'll go and do speed work or plyo's or like I said, dependent on the need for it. And then go to max strength work and then we'll work on weaknesses and finish off with conditioning, if it calls for it. Like I said, it really depends how in-tune we are with the camp and if they're doing tons and tons of conditioning. We'll lay off of that and just work on speed and strength and explosiveness.

LA: How long, if you had your choice, of a camp would you run? Would you run 10 weeks, 12 weeks, 8 weeks, something like that?

LH: Well, I mean it preferably would be from the onset... First of all, I don't like fighters going and taking too long of breaks after fights, which a lot, a lot of them do, and then start coming back within whatever amount of time they've got. But, I think you should constantly train. You should have the low periods, you should have times where you take off. But, I like for the fighters to be with me the whole time.

That way, first of all, it's a lot easier to control that they're doing. It's a lot easier to program. It's a lot easier to know how tired they are, what they need. So, I mean, I've got guys as close to as three weeks before a fight, which I don't like, and as far out as 12 weeks. I think even 14, 15 weeks.

It's really different. It's kind of like if you get a guy three weeks before a fight, it's limited how much you're going to be able to work on his strength and speed. So, we'll work on basically strength endurance, power endurance, just get him ready that way. If it's further out it's a lot easier to plan. You can work on more things and it's definitely going to be a lot better for him long term.

LA: And the degree to which you can help someone, it's probably relative to your familiarity with them. So, if you have them sort of several days a week and then they have a fight several months away, you can really sort of map things out and sort of make a structure for them to fit into.

LH: Yea, it's a lot easier because... Yea, go ahead.

LA: No, finish, please.

LH: No, I was going to say, it's a lot easier that way because, too, there's the mental aspect, the psychology of it, and a huge one which is nutrition. I can be the first one to tell you that there's so many fighters still doing the old school cutting tons and tons of weight and that way, the more I have and the more I can engrain in their brain how important nutrition is, staying within 5 to 7% of your fighting weight and you can't do that. you can't do that with having three to four to five weeks. You just can't. It's a lot, lot harder and it's not going to make that much of a difference. But, the longer out you

are, the more of a difference it is and the more these guys can really start believing in your program and saying, well, okay. He knows what he's talking about, start seeing results and then they can be more and more compliant with what you say because they believe in what you're doing.

LA: If you have fighters for a longer duration, maybe for a year, six months, whatever, how comfortable are you with sort of being able to work on different attributes or sort of facets of their personality that really sort of feed into their style of fighting, whether they have really good conditioning, whether they're really strong mentally, whether they like to pick up people and slam them and sort of really differentiate themselves from other fighters.

LH: Well, whether you like it or not, when you spend a lot of time with somebody, you're going to influence their psychology. So, what you talk about with them, what you talk about during the training, is really, really going to influence them. I kind of relate everything in the gym to life.

I mean, I've had a lot of guys that came in the gym and they don't talk much. They train hard, but there's more inside of them than what they're showing. Once they get into that competitive environment, it slowly starts coming out because people have to get to know you. They have to get to know the people that they're around before they get comfortable. But then, when it starts coming out, see, now not only have you increased I would say their strength and speed and power, but you've let them loose the extra 20, 25% of that mental edge.

I always say, when my guys train, I tell them, nobody's doing what you're doing. So, when you step in the ring, when you look at the guy across from you, you know that he didn't do what you did. He didn't work as hard. There's just no way. So, right over there, you've got the confidence and you got that mental edge and at the end of the day, that's all it is. People, even though they have skills, they don't completely believe in themselves. And sometimes basically the gym is the way to get that out and make them confident about what they can do. They didn't know they could dead lift 400 pounds. But, hey, like two, three months into they're dead lifting 440. They look at themselves like, holy crap, I didn't know I could do that. That just basically starts a whole wave of things that's going to carry over into whatever sport they're doing.

LA: Yea, it's just the opportunity to sort of improve their capacity for things and put their trust in other people, for sure.

I think we're more or less exhausted MMA for now. in terms of your business, maybe personal goals, what's next for you and what does the rest of 2009 hold?

LH: Right now I'm actually spending more and more time at my business. I've been actually flip-flopping between a bigger gym and my own. I'm just basically cutting down slowly, days and hours at the other place. So, June 1st I'm opening another athlete training program which is basically going to be age 13 to 18 group, mostly high school athletes.

I'm going to open up another strength camp which is...I don't want to say...kind of boot camp style, but, it's just going to be strength training with Strongman implements, Prowlers, things like that. People just like that type of training more, especially for A type personality. So, that's going to come up.

I'm definitely trying to do more and more writing and getting my blog more up to date. I'm putting up a couple more sites. So, things...sometimes there's always new opportunities coming up. Also, in a month we're opening up a speed camp here in Seattle. It's going to be basically... I haven't seen a lot of quality speed camps or put it this way. Not being promoted enough and there's so many kids out there that need that type of training. So, we're going to...got a couple of partners where we're going to start running speed camps for different sports, some general, some more specific. Making it number one, affordable, but number two, really, really quality.

So, that's the things that are in the near future. There's a whole bunch of other things that are coming up that are a little further away for me to talk about, but definitely a lot of great opportunities.

LA: And if people are interested in getting in touch with your or finding what you've written already? Where's the place for them to do that?

LH: They can go either to my blog which is HocevarPerformance.com. My gym site is going to be up and running in two or three weeks, the design is already done. That's HocevarPerformanceGym.com. Then, we're going to have Seattle Speed Camps and that's going to be up in about a month, too. But, you can contact me at Luka@HocevarPerformance.com If you've got any questions about things we're talking about today or any opportunities, let me know.

LA: Well, I think that about does it. We seem to be out of time. But, Luka, I definitely appreciate the detail and the willingness to share, it's very helpful. Thank you.

LH: Thanks for having me on the call, Luke.

LA: All right, take care.

LH: Take care.

About Luka Hocevar

Luka Hocevar is the president of Hocevar Performance and the performance director of Elite Athletics LLC, as well as Owner of Hocevar Performance Gym in Renton, WA and co-owner of the Kettlebells Center Ljubljana in Slovenia.

Luka has made a name for himself as one of the premier trainers in Washington state as well as one of the up and coming strength coaches in the country, helping clients and athletes from all walks of life achieve their personal physique and performance goals.

Luka has spent his whole life in the training and sports industry. He is a former professional basketball player that played years in the European leagues as well as the NBA Summer Pro League. During his career Luka started his training career by opening a kettlebell training center in his hometown of Ljubljana, Slovenia, which has now grown to be one of the premier kettlebell gyms in Eastern Europe.



Luka's journey continued to the U.S. to take his knowledge of training to the next level, studying everything he can get his hands on, as well as learning under some of the world's top strength coaches while applying it with hundreds of clients in the real world. Over a decade of knowledge and training, as well as a lifetime of experience has come together as Hocevar Performance.

Luka's training methods include a mixture of powerlifting, Olympic weightlifting, Kettlebell training as well as many other methods to produce significant strength & performance gains. His specialty is his versatility to provide the highest quality training for every ability level from the young athlete, fitness enthusiasts to elite/professional athletes.

Luka has trained national and world champions, Euroleague basketball players, NBA, MLB players, UFC and other mixed martial arts fighters, as well as players from multiple other sports. He commits the same passion to all of his clients that are committed to reaching their goals regardless of what they are striving to achieve.

Luka has written a number of articles for international magazines and newspapers as well as being featured in the local newspapers and mentioned in the local KOMO 5

News. Luka's gym in Slovenia has been featured in the international Men's Health as well as being one of the hosts of the Men's Health challenge 2009.

Luka is a certified strength and conditioning specialist (CSCS – FZS) and a certified fitness trainer (ISSA – CFT). He is also a Russian kettlebell instructor (RKC) with close to a decade of experience with kettlebell training.

Luka's passion of training the youth has also led him to become a youth fitness specialist through the gold standard for youth fitness certifications – the IYCA.