



WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



Luke Allison Interviews Mike Robertson

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

MR: I'm doing well. Thanks, Luke.

LA: I'm going to assume that most of our listeners are familiar with you and that they've seen some of your material. Give us just an update on what you're doing at about the midpoint of 2009.

MR: Well, obviously keeping pretty busy. Bill Hartman and myself opened a gym last August and it is growing at an exponential rate right now. So, that's taking up a good portion of my time. Along those same lines, obviously, I'm trying to keep up with my own website, the blogging the articles, that sort of thing. But, really, right now, the gym is my primary focus and it's been really good to me, because it's been a great situation, it's been a great way to help a lot of different people.

LA: Is that a sort of change in focus for you, sort of getting back in a gym as opposed to possibly having an online presence?

MR: Yeah, I think there's that healthy balance and I'm not very good either way. For a couple of years I was really focused on growing my online presence, getting articles out there, letting people know what I was doing. When I was in Fort Wayne and when I was doing in-home training a little bit more, I just had a lot more free time, to be totally honest. I had a lot more time away when I could sit down and work on projects for an hour or two and get things knocked-out, whereas if you're spending ten, eleven, twelve hours in a gym, even if you're not working directly with training clients, per se, you've always got open gym people. Some of my people that pay me the least are the power lifters and the Olympic lifters, so obviously I'm going to give them a high priority and I want to help them succeed. So, absolutely, I think you've seen probably more of a shift back into the coaching side of things for me in the last couple of years.

LA: What strikes you as being a major benefit of having your own facility and having that sort of environment to yourself?

MR: Well, I think the best thing about having my own facility and having people come to me is, I think it's really fast-tracked my coaching skills. When you're working with just a ridiculous amount of clients or athletes every day, you just get to see so many people, see how they move, see the compensation, and most importantly, just seeing what they do well and what they don't do well. I think if you're really serious about getting good at coaching or working with clients or athletes, the more people you can get your hands on, the better.

I actually interviewed a new intern yesterday and I told her, I said, "The most important thing when you come here is I want you to spend four months working with clients. You can read books, you can watch DVD's, all that stuff is important. You can do it on your own time. But, while you're here, the thing that's going to give you the most bang for your buck and the thing that's going to make you the best trainer or coach possible is just working with a lot of people."

LA: Now, is that a lot of people in terms of variety or in terms of just quantity, just large amounts of people?

MR: Yeah, you know, the quantity is there, but we have a very broad demographic that we work with. I don't want to lull the Critical Bench listeners to sleep, but we get everything from injury and rehab type people to your typical overweight, out of shape, fat loss clients, all the way up to elite and professional level athletes.

So, one of the things we always say about our gym is the common thread that everyone has there is they're motivated to achieve their goals, whether it's getting

healthy, whether it's losing body fat or whether it's just getting freaky fast or freaky strong. Everybody there has at least a common motivation and they're all focused on achieving their goals.

So, there's just a wide variety of people out there and I think that's one of the things that I really like about our gym. It doesn't cater specifically to any one demographic and it works out pretty well for my ADD type personality.

LA: Where are you located, just in case people are within sort of an acceptable distance?

MR: Absolutely, we're in Indianapolis. So, obviously people around the Indianapolis area come in a little bit more frequently, but we've had people come from St. Louis, Detroit, I mean, hell, people have even come as far as Japan and Bulgaria to work with either Bill or myself. So, if you're somebody that has issues or has needs, we're more than willing to take you on and take a look at you and work with you.

LA: Now, in between the time I set up this interview and today, I realized that you and Eric Cressey have been working on a new project. Can you talk a little bit about that and sort of give people an idea of what to expect?

MR: Absolutely. I think people are probably most familiar with Eric and I's Magnificent Mobility DVD. About a year after that, Bill Hartman and I created an upper body warm-up called Inside Out. Those were both created about 2 1/2 to 3 years ago. And one of the things that we got a lot of feedback on was the fact that people had some issues with figuring out what stretches or what mobility drills they really needed.

So, what we did, the three of us kind of put our heads together and figured out, okay, what do people really need and what's going to benefit them the most? So, our new project is called Assess and Correct. We don't have the whole tagline and all that stuff, but the premise is, we've put in an entire 2 DVD set essentially, not only assessments that you can do on yourself, but an entire series of exercises in progression.

So, let's say, for instance, you think your hamstrings are tight. Well, there's a specific assessment in there that's going to allow you to test yourself and determine if your hamstrings are in fact tight or not. And if that's the case, we've outlined three, four, even as many as five exercises that you can start to incorporate into your warm-up or even throughout the day, to start improving that limitation in your movement.

So, I think it's going to be a really cool project, because that's the biggest issue. People are kind of throwing darts. They don't really know what they're aiming at. So, in this case they're going to have an assessment, they're going to have an idea of what

issue is holding back their movement, their performance or possibly even getting them injured. And then, we're going to develop ways for them to correct those issues.

LA: It seems if there's a trend now to really provide people with quality information in terms of the corrective exercise, the pre-habilitation, the foam rolling. It's coming in a wave. It wasn't here previously and it's so much now. Is this sort of your attempt to kind of break this down for people?

MR: Absolutely. You know, I think the problem is, people are really quick to react in the short term and a little...they have a tendency to under react over the long term. So, what we're really trying to do is show people the correct way to do these things, because as with anything, whether it's kettlebells or functional training or whatever the new fitness fads are. Any time, like you said, there's a way, you get some people on that way that don't really understand how things are supposed to work.

So, what our goal is is to try to really water it down, make it as simple as possible so even just the average end-user, Grandma Betty that wants to move a little bit better or wants to get out of hip or shoulder pain, can use these assessments and use these exercises to improve our movement, improve our function. That's one of the biggest things, I guess, it's kind of a pet peeve of mine, where people have this really slanted skew on corrective exercise in general.

My passion has always been improving athletic function or improving strength and the corrective exercise is really just a medium to help me to that. So, the more we can educate people and show them what true corrective exercise really is, the better off we're going to be.

LA: Talk a little bit about the importance of corrective exercise as it relates to sort of performance, but also sort of the other demands, people's rest and people's actual training. Where does corrective exercise fit into that mix?

MR: Sure. When we talk about performance athletes, so when we talk about strength athletes, one of the things I always try to relay to people is when you watch their career, especially strength athletes, I mean, you think about power lifters, for instance. Power lifters are very interesting because they can continue to get better well into their early to mid forties.

I mean, look at a guy like Brad Gillingham, who's been at this 20+ years now, I'm sure. The guy is still setting PR squats and dead lifts. The limiting factor, I really feel like, for most of these people is the ability to stay healthy. And that's where corrective exercise comes in.

It may not necessarily give you 100 pounds on your squat. It may not give you 50 pounds on your bench press. But, what it's going to allow you to do, it's going to allow you to continue to train at a high level. And that's what you see. I see it all the time with the clients and athletes that come to me. It's not that they don't know how to get strong, or they don't know how to improve their sport performance. But, the fact of the matter is, their body breaks down time and again.

So, my job is to come in, figure out the limitations, figure out what corrective exercise or what mobility drills or what activation drills they may need so that we can keep them healthy. Because, that's the limiting factor, time and again. People start to build up, they start to get stronger, all of a sudden they have an injury, now they're out for three months, six months, a year and they have to start back over and they go through that same building process again, and then they have another injury. It's just this very vicious cycle. So, I look at my view as, with a lot of these guys, if I can keep them healthy, they can get strong on their own.

LA: It seems as if what you're saying is, the importance is for people to not miss workouts because they're injured. And it seems that some people are resolute in their belief that they're not going to get hurt or that imbalances are not going to manifest. Talk a little bit about that.

MR: When it comes to missing workouts, I think the big thing that you see is, when you start to lose consecutive workouts due to injury, that's when you really see that de-training effect. If you look at some of the other guys out there, some of the higher level power lifters, they're not really following a program as much, per se. What they're doing is kind of following how their body feels on a day-to-day basis.

I think, while it's not corrective experience, they still have a mindset of, on the days you feel good, you really crank it up and you push it and you try to set PRs. And on the days you're not, you back off, you just kind of punch the clock, get some lifts in and go home.

I think that's one of those fundamental things that, again, when you see people change over the course of their career, when you're 18 or 19, you can follow a workout as scripted, day-to-day, and just get through it. Your body's responsive enough in that regard. But, as you get older, I mean, I'm 30 now, so I don't think I'm old, but I've been in power lifting for eight, ten years now. The longer you're in it, the smarter you have to train. So, I think that's where kind of that intuitive training and the corrective exercise kind of come together. The better you understand your body, the limitations that you have, how you're feeling on a given day, when you start to melt all those things together, it's not so much a training program as it is a training process.

I don't know if I answered your question, but...

LA: No, no, certainly, yeah. It seems a way of developing a certain sensitivity to sort of what's going on in the body. Briefly, you talked about sort of the different sections of corrective exercise, activation, mobility, things like that. briefly describe those just for people that might be unfamiliar with sort of the boundaries that separate those.

MR: Sure. Well, whenever we have somebody workout, they're basically three or four sets we're going to have them do before they ever touch a weight. How much of each section they need is really dependent upon how they're moving. The better somebody moves, the less kind of preparation they're going to need before they workout.

But, the main components that we put in everybody's workout is, first off, we're going to have some sort of soft tissue work, either using the lacross ball, a foam roller, some people are familiar with the stick. We're going to do some sort of soft tissue work to kind of loosen things up and to try to prime the body so when we move into dynamic flexibility or mobility exercises, the body's already a little bit looser. It's already moving a little bit more freely.

So, step one is foam rolling or soft tissue work. Step two is dynamic flexibility or mobility training and then the third thing, before we have somebody actually start lifting weights is what I call acute corrective work. This could be different between people. For some people it's going to include some sort of static stretching. If they have a chronically short or stiff muscle, we'll statically stretch them.

It could also include activation work. In this case, a lot of times, we're going to have work for the hips, whether it's the psoas, the glutes as in glute max or glute medias. If somebody's got some sort of shoulder issues, we'll even put in some sort of scap pre-habilitation work in there, whether it's just basic I's, T's and Y's that you can see just about anywhere on the internet, just basic stuff like that. So, we kind of...I describe it as like a sculpture. You kind of start to sculpt the body and put it in the positions that you want so that when you do start to strength train, you've got better alignment, the right muscles are turned on and they're that much more likely to be used when you're actually going through your workout.

LA: Now, how prevalent is the problem of people having muscles firing in the wrong sequence. Is that something you see a lot of with athletes, or is that common in the general population?

MR: I see it almost across the board. The interesting things is, athletes...they obviously move better than your average person. The problem with athletes are, they are the best compensators as well. Because, if you've been any athlete or you've worked with any number of athletes, you know, they've all got injured. They've all got little things that have crept up over time, whether it's a sprained knee, a sprained ankle, or they strained a shoulder, whatever the case may be. They've all had injury.

The unfortunate side effect is, a lot of times those injuries weren't rehabbed properly in the first place. And their body has figured out ways to compensate over time. So, that's kind of where we come in. When we take somebody and we start off with them, we go through a very thorough evaluation process to determine flexibility, their mobility, what muscles are turning on, what muscles aren't turning on, their predisposition to specific injuries and then we develop a training program that's built around that. So, whether it's athletes or average everyday clients, you're going to see a lot of the same compensations. The big difference is, how well they mask them.

LA: I remember some time ago, you had some contact with Nate Green and basically had outlined some corrective exercises for him, and I think somewhere in there, there was a postscript that talked about, this is for your own good. This is sort of the bad tasting medicine, but it's important. Talk about that mentality, if you can.

MR: Well, you know, the interesting thing with Nate is, I mean, if you just look at his pictures and you watch some of his video clips of him squatting and dead lifting and jumping and bench pressing, the guy is an absolute freak. So, he makes my job extremely easy, but when I started with Nate, he was 23. I mean, he's 24 now, so we've worked together about eight or nine months. The thing with Nate was, he was already having some of these nagging little issues.

His shoulder was bugging him, his hip was bugging him a little bit, and it's kind of a tough love approach. I told him, "Look, I want you to squat heavy. I want you to dead lift heavy. I want you to be athletic. But, if we're going to do that over the course of the next, 10, 20, 30 years, we've got to start rebuilding your foundation now."

I think the great thing about Nate was, being 23, he had a pretty good idea of where I was going with things. A lot of times, 23 years old, your just thinking about the next day or the next couple of weeks, let alone 20, 30 years down the line. So, he was very responsive to me and I kind of explained to him, "Look, if we rebuild your foundation now, if we get you moving the way that I want, then all we have to do for the next 10, 20, 30 years is try to maintain that movement capacity."

So, the great thing about Nate is, like I said, he makes me look really good, he followed everything that I want him to do. He's probably as strong as he's ever been. He's absolutely as athletic as he's ever been, because if you read his recap of training with Joe DeFranco, back for combine prep, I think he bench pressed 225, like 23 or 24 times. He vertical jumped almost 35 inches. So, the guy is an absolute freak. He makes me look good, but the great thing about him was he stuck to the program, he followed it the way that I wanted and I think you're seeing the results of that now, because really looks and moves well.

LA: How important for you is it to have an advocate, someone like Nate, to point at something, to say, this is what it could look like if you follow it as prescribed?

MR: You know, it's absolutely huge, because a big bench press is easy to sell, or, a huge vertical jump is easy to sell. Corrective exercise really just doesn't sound that sexy, unless you're somebody that's beat-up and injured.

So, I think it really helps to have somebody like Nate out there that says, "Look, this is how I look. These are my lifts. This is what I can do," and, "Oh, yeah, by the way, this is how I got there." It's huge to have an advocate like him, because I think it shows people corrective exercise isn't just flopping around on a foam roller, doing some ab and glute exercises and calling it a day. It's a really comprehensive process and I think when you see how Nate moves and the things that he can do, it makes it a lot easier for me to sell what I'm doing.

LA: What is the Justin Ware project?

MR: The Justin Ware project is like the Nate Green project times ten. Justin's a buddy of mine that I've honestly known, I think, since I was 24. So, I've known him at least the last six or seven years. Even back when Justin started power lifting with me back in, I think it was '01, he was already on the verge of having some shoulder issues. Now, at that point in time, I don't think I had anywhere near the education that I do now, and as well, I wasn't writing the programming for the power lifting team at Ball State.

So, over the course of the next couple of years, we kept in touch. I moved around a little bit, he moved around a little bit. About two years ago, we both settled in Indianapolis and started working together. This last August, when we opened the gym, it was kind of one of those deals where I'd see him for a while, I wouldn't see him for a while, or wouldn't see him for a while, his shoulders are always kind of always chronically bugging him. And I basically said, "Look, in August, when we open this gym, you're coming in three, four days a week and we are going to put you back together."

So, that's kind of how the whole Justin Ware project started. Our goal was to get Justin healthy and moving the way that we wanted. We're looking at a guy that sits at a desk eight, nine hours out of the day. Then, he wants to come in and power lift, basically. So, his shoulders were pulled over. I mean, his shoulders hurt, his back hurt, his hips hurt, his knees have hurt from time to time.

So, he was a really challenging guy and he's just naturally stiff to begin with. What made him a good power lifter works against him, to some extent, from an injury prevention perspective. So, basically, over the course of six months, we got him to a point where everything was hurting, to a point where at this point in time, he can bench press pain-free. He can squat and dead lift pain-free. He can front squat below parallel

without any change in his low back position. We're slowly kind of working him down in the back squat. And from there, now that we've got him moving better, the next goal, the guy's a bodybuilder at heart. So, we're kind of giving him some bodybuilding type training because that's what he enjoys.

Again, he bought into the program. He knew that it was going to take him a while to move the way that he needed to feel the way he wanted to. So, he really bought into the program, took the six months that were necessary to move and feel that way that he wanted, and now I think you're starting to see the benefits.

But, the thing that I love about these guys is, they understand, training isn't a one month block. It's not two months that you do with a personal trainer. Re-laying your foundation and really working long term to achieve your goals, it's a three, five, up to ten year process. So, I think that's why I've been lucky, because I do have great guys like Nate, like Justin that buy into the long term process of training and they are starting to reap the benefits of those.

LA: From what I remember about the blog post on your site about Justin, you gave him a pretty sort of strict diet of sort of limited pressing. And then, even when you got back into pressing, it was sort of basic and more foundational. Talk a little bit about that.

MR: Yep. With Justin, the interesting thing was, when I got him his scap stability... So, when most guys bench press, they know intuitively, they want to pull their shoulder blades back and down. They want that nice, solid foundation. Well, Justin was so not only incredibly weak, but he had terrible endurance through those muscles. Kind of the rebuilding process started with his upper back. And whether it's progressing him to chin-ups or inverted rows, anything of that nature, one of the first things I wanted to do was to give him the stability so that when he would go back to pressing, he would be safer.

But, honestly, the guy didn't bench press for...I'm trying to think...at least probably a year and a half. I know that's hard for some of your listeners. They're probably crying, hearing that, thinking that that may be them. But, it really took him a long time to understand where he needed to be to press in an efficient manner.

So, once we did start reincorporating bench pressing progressions, it was very strict. He didn't start off just going right back to the barbell. We went back and we started with a neutral grip, dumbbell floor press. Because, a neutral grip gives your rotator cuff just a little bit more room to breathe, it's a little bit more shoulder friendly limits the range of motion.

So, we started off there, tried out some neutral grip bench presses from there. Then, we move him into barbell floor presses. So, there was a very specific progression that I built into his program, because if you go from no pressing right back into heavy bench pressing, again, you're setting yourself up for injury.

So, I tried to ease him back into it, slowly rebuild his body, rebuild his technique so that when he did get back to the actual bench press, he was able to do it in a safe and effective manner.

LA: In listening to...I think the interview you did with Eric Cressey for your podcast, the topic of a 2:1 pulling to pushing ratio came up, sort of in relation to this. Talk about the importance of that.

MR: I think just as a general rule of thumb, if you're not pulling about twice as much or two times as much with regards to volume as you're pressing, you're going to leave yourself exposed to injury. Here's why. Obviously we know every guy in America wants to bench press as often as possible, whether you like it or not, it's just the way it is.

So, if you know they're going to bench press, you have to do something to counteract the bench press. But, the 1:1 ratio really doesn't do it justice simply because number one, most guys are always going to press more than they pull, unless you're a power lifter or somebody that thinks in this fashion. But, number two, think about what you do every day. I can't tell you how many of the clients I work with sit at computers or they're driving in their cars all day long, constantly getting this pulled-forward, slouched-over posture. We need that pulling or we need that upper back strength to get us in appropriate alignment.

So, it's one of those little things that we can do in the gym, again, not only to improve our performance, but to keep us healthy. So, that's just a general rule of thumb for almost anybody I work with. They're going to do a lot more upper back work than they are pressing work.

Same thing goes in the lower body, as well. Most of the clients I work with are going to spend much more time focusing on the glutes and the hamstrings than they are on the quads.

LA: Now, that sort of 2:1 ratio, does that extend mostly to pulling or are you going to include band pull-aparts and trap work and things like that as well?

MR: Yeah, generally it's going to be more pulling. But, it won't always necessarily be extremely heavy, compound pulls. So, almost across the board, we're going to have some sort of heavy row or heavy chin-up variation in the workout. But, we'll also

incorporate more lower intensity stuff like face pulls or like you said, band pull-aparts, things of that nature, just so long as we're getting that consistent volume of work, generally people will be all right. But, it depends on how beat-up they are, too.

So, for a long time, most guys when they want to bench, they bench press first. So, again, with Justin, a lot of the times to kind of skew that a little bit, I would have him row first, and then he would do his bench press session. So, that way it kind of puts him in the right position from a scap and thoracic spine positioning perspective, get him lined up the way that I want, and then that makes it a lot easier for him to stabilize himself when he goes to bench press.

So, there's a lot of things that I kind of took into account when I was working with him. But, the more beat-up they are, the more focus you need to put on their upper back strength. So, that could be putting it first within a workout, putting it first within the training week, whatever you think is necessary to get them healthy.

LA: I really think that that's an important message to sort of get out to the listeners, just because the idea of bench pressing, bench pressing heavy, maybe using a shirt, things like that, it is dangerous if you're not doing the right things. And I think that's what you're trying to get across.

MR: Absolutely, and the more upper back strength you have, the converse or the opposite side of that, Eric and I talked about this as well, the stronger and more stable your upper back is, the more you're going to bench press long term. So, that's something I always try to convey to people. It's not just for health, but the more strength and the more stability you have through your upper back, generally, the more you're going to bench press.

LA: Well, I think that about takes us to the end of our allotted time. But, Mike, I wanted to thank you for being available today and the willingness to share such great information.

MR: Hey, it was my pleasure, Luke. Thank you.

LA: If people are interested in sort of catching you online, they know where to find you in Indianapolis, how do they get a hold of you?

MR: Absolutely. The easiest way to find me online is just my personal website. It is RobertsonTrainingSystems.com. I know, that's a long one. If you can't find me there, just Google Mike Robertson, I should be the first one that pops up.

LA: Thank you again and hopefully we'll be able to speak again before too long.

MR: Sounds great. Thanks, Luke.

About Mike Robertson

Mike Robertson is the President of Robertson Training Systems and the co-owner of Indianapolis Fitness and Sports Training (I-FAST) in Indianapolis, Indiana. Mike has made a name for himself as one of the premier performance coaches in the world, helping clients and athletes from all walks of life achieve their physique and sports performance goals



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