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## WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



### Luke Allison Interviews Shelby Starnes



LA: This is Luke Allison from [CriticalBench.com](http://www.criticalbench.com), here with the weekly Muscle Building Expert Interview Series. Today I'm here with Shelby Starnes. Shelby, how are you?

SS: Great. How you doing, Luke?

LA: Doing great. I certainly appreciate you joining us today. For people that maybe aren't as familiar as they should be either with your business or with your bodybuilding, give us some highlights, a little biography.

SS: I'm probably most well-known for being a nutritionist. I consult with tons of different athletes, bodybuilders, powerlifters, fitness and figure competitors, Strongmen, as well as regular folk that don't compete, but train and want to make the most of their time in the gym and realize that nutrition is a big part of that. So, they contact me.

People probably know me most from that, being a nutritionist. I'm on EliteFTS.com. I keep a training log there and answer questions, mostly related to nutrition and bodybuilding on there. I'm also on TNation.com, one of their featured guys. I do a lot of articles and training spiels and stuff like that.

I'm also a competitor in bodybuilding. I'm currently a light heavyweight. Light heavyweight is the third weight class that I've competed in since I started back in 2005. I've been as low as a welterweight before. I spent a lot of time as a middleweight and then I've been a light heavyweight for the past couple of years. In all of those weight classes, I've managed to make the top five at the national level.

So, I've been third place as a welterweight at the North Americans. Fifth place as a middleweight at Junior Nationals, and then last year I got a fifth place as a light heavyweight at Junior Nationals. And this year I'm going back to Junior Nationals and hopefully moving up a little bit closer to that top spot in the light heavyweight class.

And then, of course, my own website, [ShelbyStarnes.com](http://ShelbyStarnes.com) is where you can find out more about me. I've got a lot of pictures and contest history and a bio and training videos and things of that nature.

LA: Sounds good. Now, what's the sort of current focus of your training and where are you in terms of a contest phase?

SS: Right now I'm currently 10 weeks out of Junior Nationals. This year it's June 18<sup>th</sup> in Chicago. So, at 10 weeks out I currently weigh...this morning I was 210.4, I think. So, coming down. I've been as heavy as like 245 in the off season, which is a little bit too chunky. But, I don't have any problem getting into shape. So, I'm not... You know, some people if they have a problem getting into shape, they should keep a real close eye on things in the off season. But, that's not an issue for me.

But anyways, I started dieting slowly around Christmas, three months ago or whatever it was. And sitting at about 210 right now, with 10 weeks to go. The light heavyweight cutoff, upper limits, 198. And I'll probably be pretty close to that. So, I've

got about 10 pounds to lose or a little bit more over the next ten weeks, which is nice, because that's a nice, slow, steady rate.

Training wise, since Junior Nationals last year, I've actually been working with John Meadows, who might be someone that the listeners may be familiar with. He's also a T-Nation favorite right now, a guy that has a lot of history in the sport, has competed a lot at the national level. He's about my height, about 5'6", but competes as a heavyweight. So, he's a pretty thick guy. He used to compete around 215-220. So, real thick guy, real smart guy, good friend of mine.

I've been working with him since Junior Nationals last year. He's been doing my training. His website is [MountainDogDiet.com](http://MountainDogDiet.com). So, if anyone's interested in hiring him for training, that's where you'd contact him through.

But, he's introduced a lot more volume into my training over the last year than I was used to. It's not, I wouldn't say, at the super-high volume. But, it's definitely higher volume than I had been accustomed to for the past handful of years. Pretty high intensity, using a variety of unique exercises as well as basics. And it's just kind of taken me to the next level. It's really helped me transform my physique in a pretty cool way.

As for being 10 weeks out, I mean, we don't... Right now, we're going a little bit lower volume, going through a slightly lower volume phase and then over the coming weeks we'll be increasing volume a bit more. But, we don't have crazy, huge changes. There's nothing drastic. There's no drastic periodization between what we do for bodybuilding, just slight variations.



LA: One of the things I definitely wanted to pick up on was you'd posted some videos of your training online, I think on YouTube. And especially your leg training, it looks very different from what I consider normal for what most bodybuilders are doing. You're squatting wide, you're squatting heavy, you're doing additional range of motion on a lot of stuff. Where does that come from and is that your style or is that John Meadows?

SS: Well, I don't squat wide. I think...I'm not sure where you got that. My squat stance is pretty close.

LA: Okay.

SS: I go heavy as I can. John tells me what reps to use, reps and sets, and we pyramid up until we can't go any higher for a given rep range. He'll tell me what depth to hit, too. Like, some weeks we'll go below parallel. Some weeks we'll go just to parallel. And some weeks we'll go above parallel. There's merit to all depths of squatting, contrary to what a lot of macho gym-jocks say, that you only have to... You know, if it's not below parallel, it's not a real squat. Well, that's horse shit. All squats have merit. So, we use all depths.

We don't squat every week. Some weeks we might focus just on leg press and hack squat. Basically, I do what John tells me. He's the madman behind my training.

LA: It's very interesting. My comment about the wide squatting was I'm used to seeing people under the Smith Machine and their feet are maybe six-inches apart and things like that. That just wasn't the case with you.

SS: Yeah, I go about shoulder width or sometimes maybe slightly narrower. When the weight gets above maybe 400 or 450, I might widen my stance a little bit. But, it's really not going much wider than a shoulder width, mainly because that's where I'm strongest, with a closer stance. I don't have real strong hips. I feel more stable with a closer stance. I have strong quads, so a closer stance feels more like a leg press to me.

Actually, I went for the Arnold weekend, I drove down to Columbus where John lives and we trained legs together, him and I and another competitive bodybuilder named Brad Davis, who's a real good guy, real good light heavyweight, national level competitor. We squatted with chains that day and we worked up to, I think it was maybe 405, plus about 100-pounds in chains, or something like that. It was four or five chains a side. I think it was close to five at the top and then it deloads as you go down.

Anyways, I mean, everybody commented on...John and Brad were commenting on how close my stance was, because they squat a little bit wider. So, it's just where I feel more comfortable, more stable and where I feel strongest.



LA: That's a good take-home for people. It's where you're comfortable. It doesn't have to be...

SS: Right, but for a bodybuilder...right. I mean, real close stance like you're talking about, like on a Smith Machine or whatever. I mean, that's a nice accessory exercise or whatever. And we do stuff like that, too. We do a lot of hack squats with varying stances and sometimes they'll be real close. But, that's more of a finishing exercise, I would consider it. You need to keep your meat and potato stuff in there, keep it basic and as heavy as you can with the focus on progressive resistance without getting stupid. A lot of people, they try to train for progressive resistance, but every week they add a little bit of weight and get a little bit sloppier or a little bit less range of motion or something stupid. And then, before you know it, they're lifting way too much weight and incurring an injury or whatever. And that's obviously not the goal in bodybuilding.

LA: No, certainly not. One of the things I wanted to ask, we talked a little bit about sort of contests and off season. How does your training change, sort of the larger cycle, maybe year in and year out? Do you notice any changes?

SS: Nothing major. I really don't change too much. I always lift as heavy as I can, given a certain rep range, though. I don't train... I'm not a powerlifter. I don't do singles or doubles or... I mean, I might every so often do triples or sets of four or something like that. But, that would be one exercise.

Like yesterday, I did a back workout. We started with some...a variation of a t-bar row where you do one arm at a time. And I pyramided up on that. I did 12 reps and then a little bit more weight for nine and a little bit more weight for six, and then we went over to rack pulls. I did sets of four rack pulls from about mid shin or a little bit higher, about a few inches below my knee cap. And I just kept on going up, doing sets of four until I couldn't do four. And my last set was 545 for four.

And then, after that, we did some higher rep stuff, some lat pull-down work and some hyper extensions and whatnot. So, we're hitting those lower rep mass building type movements, but we're also hitting a lot of other stuff, too. But, we don't look at it as accessory work. Like, Westside might have their main movement first, which we rarely do. We always do something to sort of pre-exhaust a bit before we move into something really heavy, just for safety reasons. It will kind of limit how heavy you can go. It also helps a little bit with the min-muscle connection to hit lats before you do lat pulls.

Anyways. Like Westside, they'll hit their main movement DE-day or ME-day or whatever and then they'll finish-up the assistance. I think, at least when I see a lot of guys' logs or training, it almost looks as if the assistance is an afterthought. And it's just kind of like, yeah, let's get through this, three sets of 15 or whatever. And I know that's not how everybody does it. I'm sure some people do it pretty intensely and are trying to

make gains on it. But, I think a lot of people look at it as an afterthought, and if you're looking for hypertrophy, I think that's a mistake.

LA: It's certainly something to consider switching around and doing the pre-exhaust.

SS: Yeah, I mean, if you're looking for bodybuilding hypertrophy goals, then yeah. I mean, if you're training purely for strength and moving the weight from point A to point B, it's not necessarily about stimulating the muscle. That's a whole different story. But, powerlifting and bodybuilding have some things in common, but they also are very different in a lot of ways.

LA: And that's a perfect transition into my next question. What has it been like working with Matt as far as bodybuilding?

SS: You know, I've known Matt for quite a long time. I actually used to powerlift in the APF in Michigan back in like '03, '04 and I knew him from then. So, we've been friends for a while. And then, he decided to do his first bodybuilding show. So, I helped him get ready for that. And Matt's a great guy. He's very...obviously he has awesome willpower and discipline and intensity. So, it was fun putting him through the ropes and getting him ready for his first contest. Last year he did the Michigan, the state show, and ended up taking the heavyweight class and narrowly missed the overall.

So, now we're moving to the next level and then trying to go to the national level and I think Matt's realizing that bodybuilding is a lot different from powerlifting. Not just in the training portion, but in the lifestyle. I mean, it's a year-round affair. Your supplementation, your diet, your training, everything has to be 100% year-round if you're going to expect to go up against these national level guys and place decently. So, I think that's a big change for him.

This past off-season for him was decent, but it could have been a lot better. We were talking about doing Junior Nationals this year, but we decided to hold off because I'd like to see him make a good bit more improvements before he steps onto the national stage. So, we're going to wait until next year now. So, we're back to an off-season style approach rather than a pre-contest diet for Matt right now.

LA: I think that brings up a lot of interesting points in you'll have people that are interested in powerlifting and bodybuilding. But, the idea of sort of going back and forth is something that a lot of people are playing with. Do you think you can do that, or do you think you really need to specialize?

SS: I guess it depends on what level you're at. If you're an amateur that's just doing small, local bodybuilding shows and small, local powerlifting meets, you can do that,

especially for someone that's just getting into strength training. I think getting into powerlifting for a while is good to build a good strength base.

But, as you move up, I think it gets more difficult to... There's a saying that the dog that chases two rabbits catches none. So, I think as you get more advanced you need to choose what your goal is.

And there are people, Stan Efferding, strongest bodybuilder in the world or whatever. I mean, obviously he's been able to do both successfully, or fairly successfully. He's not a top tier bodybuilder, but he's got his pro card. Johnny Jackson has competed in both.



LA: Yeah, he seems fairly interested in being strong also.

SS: Yeah. But, they're not doing these...they're not usually doing these contests real close to each other. I mean, they might, at the most, maybe six months apart or whatever. I mean, I think it's possible to do both, but I think you're going to compromise... You can only give 100% to one thing.

In the beginning, I think it would be fine for someone to pursue both, if they're a beginning lifter, for their first, whatever, maybe three to five year, pursue both. But, if

you want to go past that and you want to be really bad-ass in one or the other, I think it's better to choose one and stick with it and just sort of tinker with the other.

Powerlifting, there's a decent potential for injuries in powerlifting, too. I mean, Matt's a perfect example. He's torn I think everything in his body.

LA: It's scary stuff.

SS: The potential for a bicep tear or a lat tear on a deadlift or a pec tear on the bench press or whatever, quad tear on a squat, whatever. Those are things that would really screw you up if you're a bodybuilder. Yeah, you can get them repaired, but they're not going to look the same. So, you have to factor that in as well, if it's worth the risk.

People always tell me I should do...my bench sucks, by my squat and deadlift are okay for my size. And people are always like, oh, you should do a powerlifting meet. And it's like, I'm really not interested in a one-rep max. Plus, the potential for... You know, when I deadlift, I deadlift double overhand with wrist straps, because I don't want to tear a bicep.

So, going up to a meet and doing a one-rep max with a...

LA: ...with a hook grip is just maybe not what you're into, exactly.

Shelby?

[call lost; Shelby rejoins call]

LA: Shelby, are you back?

SS: Yep. Back.

LA: All right. Sorry about that everybody. That was a bit of a technical difficulty beyond our control. We had just been talking about... Sorry, go ahead.

SS: Yeah, I was just going to say, I think where we left off we were talking about potentials for injuries in a powerlifting meet.

LA: Certainly.

SS: People ask me why don't you do it? And it's just not worth the risk for me. I get a lot more enjoyment out of bodybuilding. So, doing some local powerlifting meet to say I've got a 700-pound deadlift or whatever just isn't worth the risk for me.

LA: Well, and I think that's sort of the point of what we're trying to do, a little bit of something for everybody. You can take it as serious as you want, but maybe you don't want to get hurt. Maybe there are different things you're interested in focusing on.

SS: Right. I mean, there's definitely value in implementing some aspects of powerlifting training into a hypertrophy/bodybuilding type program. So, I'm definitely not saying otherwise to that.

LA: Certainly. You definitely mentioned yourself as sort of being known as a nutritionist. I know your approach is the carb cycling. Talk a little bit about that for people that might not be familiar.

SS: I'm probably most well known for carb cycling approach. But, that is certainly not the only diet style that I use. It really comes down to the individual and their situation, their metabolism, hormonal profile, how they respond to diet changes. But, carb cycling is basically...and probably a better term for it than carb cycling is macronutrient cycling. Because, carbohydrate is just one macronutrient, the other two are fat and protein. And with a carb cycling diet, you actually cycle all three on different days. But, carbohydrates are the focus.

You might have a high carb day, a medium carb day and a low carb day and you'd have a certain number of each per week, depending on your training and progress. But, the other macronutrients also get cycled. When carbs are high, protein and fat are a little bit lower. When carbs are low, protein and fat are a little bit higher. So, it's not just carbohydrate that's cycled. It's also protein and fat.

And basically, what that's trying to accomplish is on certain days, you're going to have more demand for carbohydrate. Like training days, you're going to have more demand for carbohydrate. So, you put more carbs on training day and less on off days. By staggering your carbohydrate intake, you also manipulate your metabolism a bit. The higher carb days are usually a little bit higher in calories. You get a little bit of a metabolic recharge on those days.

But, you can't have every day be a high carb day or you'll end up putting on too much fat. High carbs, you'll release too much insulin and in the end you'll just end up putting on too much fat. Unless you're one of these super-freaks that just has a super-crazy metabolism. And I've got clients like that that end up having almost every day be a high day. I've got other clients that have every day being a low day. It's very individualized.

People ask me questions about diet all the time, and it's like I can give you a roundabout idea, but if I'm not working directly with you and seeing how you respond to different changes in the diet, it's very hard to say. Because the human body has...we

all have similar processes, but there's so much individuality between people that it's impossible for me to say, oh, you're this weight and this body fat, this is what you need to do. So, it really depends on the individual.

With my clients, they send me updates at least once a week. We keep a very close eye on things and things usually change every week, depending on their response. So, none of my client every end up having the same diet, as we progress through the consultation.

LA: Right, and that's certainly something to keep in mind, because it's a certain amount of effort that I think has to go into it. You couldn't make it easy, basically. You have to put a certain amount of effort in.

SS: Right.

LA: You mentioned sort of not only doing the carb macronutrient cycling, who do you think that's appropriate for and who do you think that's not appropriate for, if you can sort of make generalizations?

SS: There's not really anybody I would say that it's definitely not applicable to. It's a very basic...for lack of a better work, wholesome diet. It contains all the macronutrients. It's comprised of basic dieting foods that are healthy. I mean, complex carbs, vegetables, lean proteins, healthy fats, yadda, yadday, yadda.

There's not really anybody that shouldn't at least... You know, when I start with a client, I almost always start them off with a carb cycling approach, and then based on their response, we might manipulate it. They might start off with maybe two high days per week and then they make a certain amount of progress with that for a few weeks, and then we need to lower it to... Maybe they plateau and we need to lower it to one high day per week. And then maybe they plateau another month later and we need to do something else. So, I usually start off with carb cycling and then just based on the response, manipulate things.

So, there isn't someone that would come to me and I would be like, you know what? A carb cycling diet is not the approach for you. It's something I would start most people off with. I have some other approaches that I use with people. If a guy came to me and was like 350-pounds and he said, "I've been trying a carb cycling approach, it's not working." Then I would say, "Hey, let's try a zero carb approach with moderate protein and moderate fat intake," and that's probably going to produce better results for him. He's a big guy that obviously doesn't have a great metabolism, so for guys like that, just completely eliminating carbs is usually the better option.

LA: Sort of talking a little bit about food and nutrition now, can you share some ideas about food preparation and I know you're sort of into beverages and beverage intake and things like that.

SS: In regards to what? I'm not sure what you mean.

LA: Well, just in terms of anything that you like to do or things that are sort of simple to do. I know you have like a coffee drink or like a mocha-caffeine type of thing that you use pre-training, anything like that that you could share.



SS: ...Coke Zero or flavored sparkling waters, but the coffee drink is something that uses chocamine, which is basically a cocoa extract that I add to a cup of coffee and add like a packet of Splenda or something like that.

So, these are just little things that don't have any calories, but help keep my energy up through the day and just the fact that you're putting fluid into your stomach and some carbonation helps keep you fuller between meals.

As for meal prep, I'm not real sure what you're asking there. Like for a Monday through Friday, nine to five, or something like that, do all your cooking one or two days per week. Maybe Sunday night you set aside a couple of hours to do all your cooking of chicken and whatever, and then also Wednesday night or something. And then freeze what you aren't going to be using over the next day or two in Tupperware containers, measured-out however many ounces you're supposed to get. And then as you need it, the night before, you're like, oh, I've already used all my chicken or whatever, just take it out of the freezer and put it into the fridge so it thaws out overnight.

That's usually the main food prep hint that I give people. I'm not sure if you're asking about something else or not.

LA: No. Sort of what you suggest. I just sort of wanted people to get a complete idea of what it sounds like coming from you. I didn't have anything.

SS: Yeah, I mean, another thing I do is I usually alternate whole food meals with protein shakes, which makes it a lot easier in terms of time. Some people, they try and do every meal as a whole food meal, which is just a bitch when you're eating six or seven meals a day, not only the food prep time, but the actual eating time and the clean-up time adds up. So, I usually make every other meal be a protein shake with whatever the protein, carb and fat amounts are.

And another trick I use, if you could call it a trick, is I make my protein shakes usually the night before, dry. I put the contents in a Tupperware container. So, if it's a certain amount of protein scoops plus a certain amount of oats plus creatine or whatever I've got for that day, I make it the night before dry. So then, the next day all I have to do is dump it into a blender with some water and ice and blend for a minute and I'm ready to go.

LA: I think that's good, even another level of preparation. I hadn't really heard that before with the protein shakes. I like that.

Talk a little bit about discipline and sort of maybe even a love for discipline. Would you be doing something similar to bodybuilding, you know, with a regimen, if you weren't bodybuilding?

SS: Yeah. I mean, me, personally, for me, bodybuilding scratches my sort of obsessive compulsive itch. It scratches that itch for me. It's something that I can be nuts about and basically be thinking about and doing something about pretty much all the time, if I want to. It's a lifestyle, like I mentioned before. I mean, you can look at it...it's not just training. It's also your diet, your supplementation, your recovery. It can be pretty all-encompassing. So, I like that, I like the discipline that it takes. I'm certainly no genetic freak when it comes to bodybuilding genetics, but I've obtained the little bit of

success that I have mainly through my willpower, my discipline and then also knowledge or whatever. I'm very interested in the art and the science of bodybuilding. So, I'm constantly studying it.

So, me, I'm not a genetic freak, but I've been able to use the fact that I have a good amount of discipline and willpower and that I have a love of the sport and studying it to turn that into something that's somewhat successful.

LA: I think that's certainly good, because it shows sort of what it's like if you're interested in bodybuilding. It might not be for everyone, but if that sounds like you, it might be something to look at to get into.

Shelby, I definitely appreciate the time. I think we're out of questions. Is there anything else you want to say, or let people know how to get in touch with you?

SS: Yeah, if anybody has any questions for me or wants to talk to me about a consultation or whatever, my website is [ShelbyStarnes.com](http://ShelbyStarnes.com) and there's a contact page at the back with my email. And then of course, I'm on EliteFTS.com. You can submit questions there via the Q&A function. I'm on TNation.com. So, please check out my articles there, my training live spiels and stuff, and let me know what you think.

LA: All right. I appreciate it again. Thank you.

SS: All right. Thanks Luke.

### **Shelby Starnes career BIO**

- 2011 NPC Jr Nationals Light Heavyweight - 1st place see below
- 5th place Light Heavyweight – NPC Junior Nationals, 2010
- 2009 NPC Central States Championships - 1st place Middleweight and Overall
- 2nd place 198-lb class – 2004 APF Michigan State Powerlifting Championships
- Overall Novice Champion – Motor City Bodybuilding Championships, 2005
- 2nd place open middleweight- Motor City Bodybuilding Championships, 2005 (nationally qualified)

- 5th place middleweight – NPC Junior Nationals, 2006
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