

WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



Tom Phillips Interviewed by Luke Alisson For CriticalBench.com

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

TP: I'm doing great, Luke, how you doing?

LA: Doing good, thanks. Give the listeners just a little bit of insight into your background, tell them a little bit about yourself.

TP: Sure. I own a training studio in Marlboro, New Jersey. I've owned it for about six years now. I'm a competitive power lifter, active bodybuilder and I train about 53-55 appointments a week. I run some classes on muscle full time, special education teacher, I have two kids. So, I keep my plate pretty full.

LA: The reason I found you was your email was listed on the website for the Tactical Strength Challenge. Talk a little bit about that and sort of your role with the Challenge.

TP: Sure. Actually, the first Tactical Strength Challenge took place back in 2002 and there were a few challenges that were after that. And then, it got restructured in 2005,

in September of 2005. And since then, we've run two or three a year, every year. And each time we've held it, it's grown quite a bit.

This last Tactical Strength Challenge, we had almost 200 competitors from literally around the world, which from a grassroots starting, and without any advertising, it's pretty good. We really just rely on word of mouth and it's a great competition and it challenges different forms of strength and different energy systems. It's only three lifts, but the three lifts were selected very carefully as far as what they're designed to measure and what they're designed to do.

LA: Now, you mentioned that this is coming from a grassroots level, talk a little bit about your interest or motivation in sort of doing something like this.

TP: Well, it actually wasn't started by me. I was one of three people total that really were critical in starting the newer version of the Tactical Strength Challenge. I'm the only guy left of those three guys that still actively participates and actually does stuff with the site. There are a couple of other guys that are involved in helping to maintain the site and they're actually very active in maintaining the site and helping to host TSC and things like that.

But, the way that it got started back in 2002 was really just the concept of Tactical Strength Challenge, what are we trying to measure? What's important for tactical strength? They did it a little different 2002, but when 2005, the three lifts that we decided on was the dead lift, the raw dead lift, that's designed, obviously, to measure absolute strength. Then there's body weight pull-ups, which is designed to measure your relative strength. And then there's the kettlebell snatch, which is designed to measure strength endurance. It's a five minute test, doing as many snatches as you can. Don't get me wrong, there's a lot of rules to how we judge the three events, but it's pretty straight forward as far as what we're looking for.

LA: Now, do you have any sort of long-term goals in terms of what you would like to see eventually happen with the Challenge? Would you like to make it bigger, maintain quality? Where do you see things going in the future?

TP: Well, to be honest with you, I'm a very competitive person and I encourage people to compete in something. Tactical Strength Challenge is just something for somebody to train toward, and I think it's a worthy competition to train towards, because, again, it measures three different types of strength.

I'll be very honest with you, I compete in it to support it. I never train for it, though. A lot of the things that I do help me for the Tactical Strength Challenge, but as an example, I never practice kettlebell snatches. The only time that I do them is for the competition. Now, I'm a certified kettlebell instructor, I'm an RKC, RKC2, CKFMS, RKC

Team Leader. I've been asked to Minnesota a bunch of times. I'm pretty well known in the kettlebell community. So, I have the technique of the snatch down very well. So when I have to do the five minute kettlebell snatch, I can perform pretty well.

Now, I practice dead lifts all the time and I do a lot of pull-ups as part of my training. But, in no way do I say that I'm trying to do X, Y or Z for the Tactical Strength Challenge at any given time during the year. In fact, I don't even taper for the challenge. I sort of jump in and I do it as part of a workout.

There are people who take it very, very seriously, who do it...they train for it. They train very specifically for it. They taper for it and they use it as a measure of improvement over time, which is a great thing to do. So, since we hold it every six months, people can see where they were six months ago or six months before that, or six months before that, and they can improve over time.

LA: Do you think that has sort of a unique aspect whereas people can sort of prepare for it, design your cycles to sort of achieve your personal best or to just use it as sort of an onsite assessment, say if they found it several days prior or something like that?

TP: I'm sorry, Luke, repeat that question again.

LA: It seems as if the Challenge has a unique aspect of being able to be used both as preparing for a competition, but also as sort of an onsite assessment, so you can use it both ways.

TP: Yeah. We've had some of the same people compete over and over again, over the years. If you look on the results page of the TSC website, if you look for a certain names, you'll see that these people improve over the years in their dead lift numbers and their pull-up numbers and their snatch numbers, and that's what we want to see. That's why I encourage people to compete, because lifting weights and getting stronger and just health and fitness in general should be about improving yourself. So, this is just a way of measuring your improvements.

So, I told you I'm a competitive power lifter, I'm a competitive bodybuilder, and I have very specific goals in each of those fields. So, the Tactical Strength Challenge is a way for people to measure their improvements over time. That's why I'm involved in it, because I think it's a great way for people to measure improvement over time and to be competitive and to really be involved in a high energy atmosphere where people are rooting for each other and want to see others do their best.

LA: It seems like a very sort of useful concept that people can take and sort of do it on their own. It's not really sort of intensive in terms of logistics or facilities or anything like that.

TP: No, what we do is we have a lot of hosting sites throughout the United States and actually there are places around the world that hold it. What we ask is that there is a certified RKC there to oversee the competition. It's not really something that just anybody can do, because we need a person there that we sort of know in the community of RKC's, that the snatches are being judged correctly, that the pull-ups are being done the way that we want them done, that people aren't hitching on their dead lift. So, like I said, there are rules that absolutely need to be followed. And whenever you run a multi faceted site... Like, if they're doing a competition in 15, 30, 50 different sites, we want to make sure the judging is consistent.

So, we don't let just anybody run a TSC. We ask that you contact us and say, "Hey, listen. I'm interested in running a TSC." We try to get an RKC to you to help judge that event and then you're good to go. If there's a real issue and somebody wants to compete, we try to work it out, but we make sure that they're very, very clear on the rules.

LA: Sure, and I think that's probably definitely for everyone's benefit.

TP: Right, because like I said, some people... For some people, this is their major meet. This is their power lifting meet or this is their bodybuilding event, or this is their Strongman event, this is their thing that they have worked for. So, I respect that and I want to make sure that the judging is consistent no matter where you go, because people deserve to finish where they deserve to finish.

LA: Now, previously you talked a little bit about your training and how it doesn't exactly sort of fit to peak for the Challenge. Is that sort of consistent with what you understand about the way other people prepare? Or, is it sort of a mix and people kind of do what they think is necessary?

TP: Actually, when we first created the Challenge, we created the Challenge so that people didn't have to train specifically for it. We sort of said to ourselves, "What are the three components of fitness that people should have that aren't specialized in certain fields?" Like, for example, if you're a power lifter, this wouldn't necessarily apply to you, although of course, you would do very, very well in the dead lift. But, just talking about people in general who are interested in fitness, the three components strength-wise to fitness, like I said before, would be your absolute strength, your relative strength and strength endurance.

So, we tried to find three events and only three, that would measure these three things pretty accurately. Are there flaws, are there restrictions? Of course, it's only three events. No challenge or test is perfect. But, again, it does measure three very different types of strength.

And of course, here's the thing about it, and here's what I really like about the Tactical Strength Challenge, is that in order to do very, very well in it, you have to be pretty fit. I mean, you can't be excessively overweight. Because if you are, you won't do very well in the pull-ups. If your wind isn't good, you won't do very well in the snatches. If you're not strong overall, you're not going to do very well in the dead lift.

So, you really have to put it all together in order to finish well in the Tactical Strength Challenge. And if you look at the people who finish in the top five, whether it's the open division or the elite division, you'll see that the people, height wise and weight wise, are very, very fit in terms of where their weight is relative to their height.

LA: Maybe for people listening that don't come from a power lifting background, talk a little bit about the dead lift training associated with getting ready to pull a one-rep max.

TP: I think I had mentioned to you that I actually do have a DVD just on training for the Tactical Strength Challenge. When I say training for the Tactical Strength Challenge, what I mean is, I cover the three lifts in detail from technique to options for training and the DVD is actually 90 minutes long. So, if you consider three lifts, me taking...I actually take about 40 minutes on the dead lift alone. But, it's a lot of information.

Just to keep it very simple, there's a lot of great programs and protocols out there for dead lifts as far as pulling a one-rep max. Some programs that I really like for people to read are things like Westside Barbell. You can read any of Louie Simmon's stuff. You could read Pavel Tsatsouline's, Power to the People, which talks a lot about technique and different types of programs to help you pull not just a one-rep max, but again, talking very specifically about how to leverage your body against the bar. Online there's certainly plenty of other reputable people that can talk about how to train for a one-rep max.

But, in general, the most important thing about a dead lift is that you get the technique right. Whether that involves you looking at videos or going to somebody that's experienced in dead lifting, the most important thing is that you prepare your body to hold a maximal load. Because, if you don't train your body and get it used to those heavy weights, over time you're going to get hurt. You're going to hurt your back.

So, unfortunately, people who have never dead lifted before will say something like, "Well, let me see how much I can dead lift now," and then they get hurt. That's not what it's about. It's about progressing over time and getting the technique right. Once you have the technique right and once you have the breathing right, then you can go ahead and load that over the course of several weeks and months to prepare for a one-rep max.

LA: One of the concerns I had had just sort of with the idea that this would go out to the general public would be, I've heard that the dead lift compared to the golf swing and knowing that it comes from power lifting, which is sort of its own sport in itself, to sort of make sure that people understood the complexity and the seriousness of pulling one and a half or two times bodyweight, just as a start. I did want to get a warning about that out there.

TP: Yeah, absolutely. This Challenge is for people who are experienced with the dead lift, who are experienced with the kettlebell snatch. We've had people show up who are tremendous dead lifters, do lots of pull-ups, but have never snatched a kettlebell. And we try to teach them the technique of snatching the kettlebell while they're there. They're really hell-bent on performing and competing, and I respect that. But, at the same time, if we feel that it's not safe to let this person do a five minute snatch with a kettlebell, we'll tell them, "Listen, we don't want you to do that."

And that's another reason why we introduced the novice division, which is a much lighter kettlebell for people who just simply haven't trained with a kettlebell and want to just sort of get some work in and compete with others who aren't as experienced with a kettlebell.

LA: As you just mentioned, the kettlebell is probably the one sort of major variable. If people don't have access to a kettlebell, would you support the substitution of a similarly sized dumbbell perhaps for the snatches?

TP: There are a couple of things about the kettlebell snatch, and I talk about this a little bit in my video. But, I'll say right now...like I told you that I don't even practice the kettlebell snatch at all. You can learn how to snatch a kettlebell from an instructor, depending on who you are, in anywhere from 10 to 15 minutes, and it could take you an hour, depending on how athletic you are and how well you pick-up some of the nuances of snatching a kettlebell. Now, the thing about that five minute snatch, it's not just the technique. It's when you get very, very tired, the ability to mentally push yourself past those barriers.

So, that's the other thing about the Tactical Strength Challenge that I didn't really speak about, but it's important to mention, is that it also measures mental toughness. I mean, if you watch somebody do a five minute kettlebell snatch, when they're done, they are literally passed-out, on the floor, can't move for 10, 15, 20 minutes. They're done. Some of them are throwing-up, some of them are... You know. You don't see that a lot with...and don't get me wrong. That's not how I encourage people to train, at all. But, my point is that people are trying to do their very, very, very, very best at a competition that they've trained very hard for.

So, that mental component, when you're very tired your ability to control your body when you're breathing is all jacked-up and you're mentally kind of weary, your ability to still control your body and not get hurt while snatching a kettlebell, that's when technique really, really matters.

So, somebody might be able to snatch a kettlebell 10 or 20 times with good technique, but can they do it 130 times in five minutes without getting jacked-up? That's what we care about and that's the value of really understanding the technique of the kettlebell snatch.

So, to answer your question, can you just use a dumbbell? Well, you could use a dumbbell, but it's a very, very different groove. So, if you think that it's going to transition over, you'll be very surprised at the difference when you go ahead and use a kettlebell.

On the other hand, since a lot of it has to do with your wind, you will get a lot of benefit out of snatching the dumbbell, simply because you're training your wind, you're training that energy system. Same thing like with dragging sleds and pushing the Prowler and doing all that stuff, really like a lot of fit cardio, that high intensity interval training. All those things help your wind, which obviously when you start to get tired when you're snatching that kettlebell, that's going to help in your conditioning.

So, yes, things like that help and you do your best with what you have. But, to be very honest with you, the kettlebell snatch is a very specific groove and a very specific technique that you really need to practice a few times before you can say, "Well, I've practiced with a dumbbell, I just get it." Because, you definitely don't.

LA: To pick-up on one thing that you said, I think the sort of mental aspect of the density work, the five minute snatches is important because there's sort of nowhere for peoples' minds to go. You're not done, you're not taking a break, and that's just not consistent with a lot of other training. So, it sounds like maybe if people even don't want to compete or maybe they think they want to compete, sort of incorporating something like that into their regular training would be good just because it's not being done right now.

TP: Yeah, and listen, I'm not... I don't like to criticize any type of training or any type of competition or anything like that. To each their own. But, there are certain training systems out there that encourage people to go to muscle failure and to throw-up and to do all this stuff. I, for one, do not train myself that way or my clients that way, nor will I encourage anybody to train that way.

Now, there are ways to push people past mental barriers that do not require people going to complete muscle failure and throwing-up in the bushes and things like that. I believe that that is not the best way to train in general.

However, I do think that it is a good idea for you to put yourself in the position every now and again, such as a competition, where you might throw-up at the end, where you might go...well, maybe you should in that respect, go to complete muscle failure and push your body to limits that it has never approached before. But, there's a time and a place for that.

When people try to do that every day or every other day, I believe in the end, you're going to get hurt and the gains that you will see will diminish over time. So, like I said, I'm not one to criticize type of training or types of competition, but my opinion is that the mental component to it can be trained, but you have to be very smart about how you do that. But, I'm not encouraging people, at all, to be, like I said, throwing-up in the toilet or anything like that while they're training their kettlebell snatches.

Hopefully that makes sense to you, because like I said, a lot of this has to do with really good technique and improving that over time.

LA: Absolutely. I think there's definitely the time and the place for that. If people like what they hear so far and they think they have a baseline of fitness, what are the first couple of steps in terms of competing if they want to do that?

TP: It's very simple. I mean, we make it really easy for people to compete. First of all, there's no charge to compete. So, you can go into a facility that's holding a Tactical Strength Challenge and you can just lift. We want people to compete. We encourage the comradery and the competition.

All they have to do is look on the website, the Tactical Strength Challenge website, which is just TacticalStrengthChallenge.com. They can go into locations where the next locations are going to be. In this case it will be in September. They click on locations, they'll see a list of different states and different facilities that they can literally walk into that day and just compete. Or, they could send an email to the person who's going to be hosting it and say, "Hey, listen, I want to compete." But, that's not even necessary. As far as we're concerned, you can just walk in on that day and say, "Hey, I'm here to lift," and you're more than welcome to lift.

LA: If people read the website, if they see the name Tactical Strength Challenge, if they see sort of the origin and they think, "Wow, this is sort of really law enforcement or military oriented," and they're kind of nervous or put-off by that, what would you tell someone like that?

TP: Yeah, we've had a lot of...anytime you put something out to the public, people are of course going to voice their opinions about a great many things. They'll say things like, "Well, it's not real. What does this have to do with tactical strength," and, "What does this have to do with..." whatever. So, again, the whole way that the Tactical Strength Challenge came about was to measure...

If you think about it like this, and I made this point in the video. Here's why it does relate to tactical strength, because if you think about somebody in the military or somebody in law enforcement, a firefighter, whatever, what are the types of things that you want to see on that individual or about that individual?

Well, you're going to want to see...number one, you're going to want to know that they're strong. Right? Number two, you're going to want to know that they can handle their own bodyweight very, very well. So, relative strength is strong. Number three, you're going to want to know that their strength endurance is up there, because in the military, for example, hey listen, if you have to take an 80 pound rucksack and run it uphill while you're holding an M16 and maybe a device across your back, well, that's a lot of weight. You need to be able to carry all that stuff for a long period of time.

And the final thing is, and I mentioned this before, is that the people who do very well in this, they have relatively low body fat percentages. So, they're fit. So, in that respect, we feel that it does correlate to tactical strength in terms of the types of things that are desirable in a physique for people in tactical strength.

Now, some people will say, well, it should incorporate a long distance run or it should incorporate this or that. Listen, we make it very specific about what we're trying to measure without making people do ten different events. And I think that these three events do a very good job in measuring those three things.

LA: Just in my own experience, I've sort of asked people about this topic of tactical fitness and what sort of operators or people like that would need to do. And pretty much unanimously the activities or the attributes that come across are things like climbing, pulling and moving obstacles. And that seems to be entirely consistent with the way that the Challenge is put together.

TP: Absolutely. Don't get me wrong, there are components that are missing such as thing like agility. Like you said, like an obstacle course or something like that. Absolutely, I'm not disagreeing with all of those things as far as those being accurate and very good measures for tactical strength. But, this is like a little bit of a different test.

Like I said, if I'm only taking three lifts as opposed to an entire obstacle course, which could be as many as 20 things. For three lifts, I think we did a pretty good job in

measuring three different components of fitness that does a damn good job of showing how well somebody could perform in probably any obstacle course or any other type of activity that you would have a law enforcement officer or military personnel do.

I could tell you this, I've done very well in the Tactical Strength Challenge every time I compete. I was in the military and I do have an Honor Certificate of Achievement in physical fitness. I always maxed out my PT tests. And I say that not to impress anyone, but to really impress on other people that if I can do well in what the military considers important in fitness and I do well in the Tactical Strength Challenge, well, then you know there's some carryover there, right?

So, no matter what test you choose, I think you'll find that people who do well in the Tactical Strength Challenge will do well in any other event that you want them to do to measure tactical strength.

LA: And that is important, because people are concerned with training economy and things like that. There's always going to be people who want to make it overly complicated and whatever. But, I think you made your case that the Challenge is not only applicable, but appropriate for these types of endeavors.

TP: Absolutely. And over time, as people have had questions about the Tactical Strength Challenge and why we chose these lifts and all these things, over time people eventually begin to really agree with us that it really is a great test, it's a worthy challenge for people to step up to the plate and give it a try.

Like I said, if you're very specialize in what you do, if you're only in power lifting or only in Strongman, or whatever, God bless you. I respect anybody that competes in anything. But, if somebody's looking for something to compete in and they're not really sure what to do, I would encourage them to give this a try, because it's a very worthy challenge.

LA: You had mentioned that you have a video product coming out. Tell people a little bit more about that and how they get a hold of it if they're so inclined.

TP: Yeah. I do have a video out, it's called, "The Tactical Strength Challenge." I go over, in the very beginning...I do about 40 minutes worth of talking about the dead lift technique, talk about how to train the dead lift, different options that people can use, different templates that people can use, safety precautions. I talk about coaching cues, all kinds of good stuff that even an experienced dead lifter will benefit from.

I've had a lot of great feedback from it. I do that with each of the three lifts, from the pull-ups. Believe it or not, as simple as a pull-up is, concept-wise, there's a lot going on there. And there's a reason why people do pull-ups effortlessly, and there's a reason

why some people, no matter what they weigh, struggle with pull-ups. It's because they're not activating the muscles that they should be activating appropriately. So, I talk about how to do that, what you should be thinking about when you're doing your pull-ups. I talk about the rules of the Tactical Strength Challenge and what we're looking for in the pull-up, namely that you have to lock your elbows at the bottom and you must touch your throat at the top in order to stay consistent.

I talk about the kettlebell snatch and how to do it, the nuances of the snatch and what's going on there and how to train for the kettlebell snatch test so that you don't kill yourself every single time you do it. Some of the things that I did with myself and I've experimented with my clients in order for them to do well in the kettlebell snatch.

Like I said, I've never really trained the snatch. What I do is actually lots of GPP type stuff outside with sleds and Prowler and do all kinds of stuff like that, high intensity interval work in order to keep my wind up. When it comes time to do the snatch, my wind is there, I know the technique of the snatch, and I always do very well with the snatch. I know I would do better if I actually trained it, but for me, with the goals that I have in power lifting, snatching kettlebells for lots and lots of reps isn't the optimal exercise for me.

Like I said, the product covers all those things and it has other stuff in it, too, like really good stretches and mobility drills for people to do for dead lifting, for pull-ups or for snatches, because one of the things that people get turned-off by is that snatching a kettlebell for lots of reps can start to hurt your shoulder if you don't have healthy shoulders. So, I talk about that a little bit as well.

LA: Well, I think we're about out of time, but I'd definitely like to thank you, Tom, for stopping by and freely sharing such good information about the Tactical Strength Challenge. <http://www.tacticalstrengthchallenge.com/>

TP: My pleasure, Luke, any time.

LA: All right, take care.

TP: All right, bye bye now.

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