



WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



Mike Westerdal Interviews AJ Roberts

MW: Hey everybody, this is Mike Westerdal here with CriticalBench.com. I've got AJ Roberts on the line. He's an elite level power lifter. Some of his best lifts include 1,008 pound squat, a 750 pound bench press and he's pulled 755. He trains at the famous Westside Barbell Club. He was a Strength and Conditioning Coach at the University of Idaho and now he helps manage one of the largest fitness consulting companies in the world.

We're doing this interview today, we're going to be talking about Westside Barbell Club and some of the Westside training methods and some of the fallacies and kind of just talking about the training there. So, welcome AJ, thanks a lot for being on the call. Is there anything I left out?

AR: Now, I think that's it. It's so hard when I hear those intros because everything changes so often for me. I just...I dead lifted 760 at my last meet here about a week ago.

MW: Congrats man.

AR: So, I bumped that up. I started out, like you said, as a Strength and Conditioning Coach at the University of Idaho and that was several years back now. From there I moved to Kentucky, ran a health club out there and finally, I ended up here in Columbus. So, it's kind of been the whirlwind over these last few years and so it's funny when I hear that to see where I've come from and where I'm at now. It's a pleasure to be here on the call, looking forward to answering some questions today.

MW: Yeah, for sure, and those five pounds on the dead lift to a power lifter, ever five pounds counts. So, we don't want to get that wrong. So, AJ, we mentioned you train at Westside Barbell club in Columbus, that's where you're living now. Just to kind of clear the air and just star things off, let's define Westside, because a lot of people have heard about it, they know it's a gym, they know it's a training style. Can you just give us like a background on the word or the gym or the training just to get things rolling?

AR: Yeah, you know, it's funny because before I moved here I always thought Westside was what you read about, was the articles that Louie wrote. What I've come to realize is that Louie writes about the training system, the Conjugate Method, or the Westside system. But, the Westside itself is kind of like its own little world. It's like an NFL team, you know, what goes on inside...unless you're there you really don't know. So, when people come and visit, they say the same thing. They're blown away, and really you can't experience Westside unless you go, you visit, you train, you really don't know what Westside is.

I've said before, I was probably one of their biggest fans. I had bought every DVD that Louie had put out, read every single one of his articles, printed them out, put them in a file folder to go back through. I'd spoken to Louie on the phone. When I met him in Las Vegas at nationals in '06, I sat and talked with him.

So, to me, I knew everything there was to know about the system, and I thought I knew what Westside was. And when I walked in the doors and began training here, I trained her for about two months before I moved here. I'd drive up and it was about a four and a half drive and I'd make that trip. That's how valuable training here is. I really was exposed to what Westside is, and can see why being here and training with Louie and why they continually produce the strongest lifters in the world, for I think it's been 25+ years now.

So, it's hard for people to see, but really Westside is the gym, Westside system, the Conjugate Method is the training style. To really know and understand both, you have to come to the gym.

MW: Okay, I'm sure we'll dig into that a little deeper. How did you first get hooked up training there? You said you started off commuting. How many days a week were you doing that and you've moved closer since then?

AR: Yeah, what happened, I was in Kentucky and I tried to put a team together there and not much luck. There were a few bodybuilder in town and I managed to get one training partner for bench press, but he wasn't a full meet lifter. So, I'd been traveling over to a guy's house in Indiana and doing squat. He had a monolift and stuff like that.

But, my work schedule, I was just frustrated. I turned my garage into a garage gym and bought everything you could need. I had squat rack w/ monolift hooks and all that. But, without a team I really was struggling.

I went to UPA Nationals, it was hosted in Columbus, actually. Kenny Patterson hosted it here in Columbus and I came and I sat with Louie again and he wondered what I was up to and Louie keeps a very close eye on the sport as a whole. That's what he does. It's his life.

So, he knew who I was and he said, "You know, if you ever want to train or something, you should come up." So, I just put in a weekend...

MW: Well, that's an honor right there, just getting invited.

AR: Yeah, you know, he opened the doors and said anytime you want to come, just let me know. So, I planned a four day weekend to come up and basically, I wasn't coming up here to continue to train, I was coming up to learn what I needed to learn, take it back with me and use it.

Over those four days of being up here, talking with Louie, talking with the other lifters I realized that it was my kind of place. Everything I wanted to achieve and all my goals and everything, I could see it happening with being there.

So, what I started to do was I'd drive up every Friday, I'd come up and train with David Hoff in the evening, and for anyone that doesn't know, David is probably the strongest...by now he's a junior lifter. He was the youngest person ever to squat 1,000 pounds. He just benched 825 a couple of weekends ago here.

MW: Wow, as a teenager he did this?

AR: He squatted 1,000 as a teenager. I think he's 20 or 21 now.

MW: Incredible.

AR: He just benched 825. I mean, this guys is on a warpath. But, I was training with him and coming up every Friday. I'd drive up, train, do that stuff and I'd drive back. It was a long time, but Louie saw that dedication, I think, and he saw how serious I was and he just flat out said, "You need to move here."

Long story short, I just pretty much quick...I had a decent job running a health club. I just pack-up, moved my wife and my dogs and we just moved to Columbus and made it work. And thankfully Louie helped out a lot to get my feet on the ground, but it's probably the best thing I ever did in my life.

MW: Man, that's awesome. What a brave move just quitting your job and making the move. But, you knew that that's what it was going to take.

AR: I was at a point where it was like, power lifting had become... I was struggling with the motivation. I was struggling with doing what I wanted to do based on my lifestyle. What it came down to is I looked at it like this, I'm either going to be the guy that does what I want to do and achieve the goals I've set out, or I'm going to be the guy that looks back and makes excuses because everything else got in the way.

It's a ballsy move, but I was unhappy in what I was doing and a large part of the unhappiness came from not doing what I wanted to do in power lifting. Because to me, that's just as much a part of me as anything else. It was painful to struggle through and try to make gains on my own and it just created this unease in my life. And when I made the decision to move, it was like everything just...weight off the shoulders and everything came together. So, to me, looking back, like I said, it was the best thing I ever did.

MW: Yeah, I mean you probably would wind up having regret to this day if you hadn't made the move. But, when you were training out of your garage, at that time, was that when you were kind of in between? Because you used to train with Brent Mikesell, one of the world's greatest squatters at one time, how was it different training with him as opposed to how it is a Westside now?

AR: Yeah, when I trained with Brent, that's when I first started in power lifting. I guess for me, I always thought a team was important from when I started in high school training with all the other football players. It was always a competition in the gym and we really pushed each other. I saw the importance of that.

So, I went to college and looked around and Brent lived about an hour away. So, I started commuting and training with him. When I trained with Brent I was new; I was fresh. I had no experience whatsoever in the sport. I'd done a couple of dead lift only

competitions in the WABDL, but I'd never done a full power lifting meet. And Brent pretty much trained me, showed me everything there was to know. But, Brent never had a big team.

There were three or four of us on a consistent basis, maybe five or six at one point, and the weights that got moved around were always heavy and I would always watch and try to spot and load. So, for me I was always seeing Brent work up to regularly 800 pounds in the gym and I'd seen him to 1,000 for a double and stuff like that. So, numbers like that were just numbers that got done.

So, I made lots of progress really fast and I think a lot of that was based on I had no conception of what heavy was. I didn't fear any weight because I saw these massive men moving this weight on a regular basis. So, to me that was where I wanted to get to. So, everything in between was a path, was a stepping stone. I would jump 50 pounds almost, it seemed like, every meet.

Brent is a very laidback, very calm, relaxed person and in essence he teaches through doing. He does and watch and you learn. It was great. I never really had to think. I just followed. I talk to Brent still and a large part of where I'm at is because of him.

But, Brent got to a point where he wasn't able to lift anymore. He had young children and those things became his priorities. So, the training structure broke down and the team kind of dissolved, which there's no foe to Brent. You can't go on forever at that level.

MW: It seems like it happens to a lot of team in a lot of gyms, actually.

AR: Yeah, and so we just didn't have the numbers to start with, and it pretty much was at one point just me and Brent and so when Brent left, you know, there was me and then a couple of younger guys going. But, it came to a point where I went from being the youngest, the most inexperienced to the most experienced with the biggest numbers. It took me a long time at that point to move forward. That's when I really started studying power lifting, because in college I was very much into the coaching and the sports.

MW: Did you play football in college?

AR: No, no, no. I helped as a strength and conditioning the whole time in college. So, I'd always looked into that. But, as far as studying power lifting, I just learned from what learned from Brent. And that's when I really kind of started learning about it all. After a while there on my own, that's when I took the job and that's kind of the in between.

Now, when I got to Westside, there's a lot of people and there's a lot of competition and it's very different.

MW: How many guys are there right now or when you first got there?

AR: Well, we got a lot of guys that come in a couple of days a week from a long distance away. And then we've got the regulars. I'd probably say overall we probably have 50 plus members that come to the gym on a regular basis, overall probably about 24 power lifters, give or take. So, there's a lot of guys and they're all highly competitive. That's kind of what the gym breeds on. So, it's best described like that high school atmosphere where everyone's gunning for each other.

MW: That's a big amount of people, a lot of competition. Do they split you guys up into groups and stuff? How does it work? Who does he work with or pay attention to? Is everybody treated evenly or does he focus more on top-level guys? How does that work?

AR: Well, we have different crews, different times to go. We have morning crew and afternoon crew. Louie lifts in the morning with the morning crew and we have two monolifts in the gym to get you going. He tries to help everyone, but you know, the top guys he actually seems to allow you to do more of your own. He's a little more hands-off because he assumes you're to the point where you kind of know what you need to do. A lot of us have conversations with Louie outside of the gym about what we need to do in the gym. So, he expects you to get it done. So, that's kind of how it works.

But, as far as the differences go, it's kind of going from me being a follower and just seeing what's happening to me like being a competitor and forcing myself to get better. It's kind of a do or die.

MW: Definitely more competitive.

AR: Yeah, that's the difference.

MW: It sounds like an awesome place to train. Tell us some more about Louie, what he's like. I'm sure everybody on this call knows who Louie Simmons is. He's a pioneer in strength training and an icon to the sport. What's it like seeing him or working with him?

AR: Yeah, you know, I give Louie a lot of flack, but he's an evil genius, so to speak. They guy...you get talking to him and a lot of people have pigeonholed him as like the power lifting guy or whatever. But, he continues learning. He's very open to new ideas. He just expects dedication and a lot of people who for what reason step away from the sport or stuff like that, you know, once you're done, you're done. And Louie moves on to the next project, so to speak.

As a person, he's great. He knows exactly what you need to do and he'll tell you what you need to do. Whether you listen is up to you. He doesn't force anyone to do anything. But, just from being here with him, like he just watches, observes, tells you what you need to do. And if you do it, it works. You can argue with him all you want, but until you prove him wrong, then he's going to continue to coach and tell you. The guys that listen seem to always be making progress. So, it doesn't really make sense to go again him.

MW: Would you say he's like a true coach/player relationship, like if you're on a team or something you kind of just listen to your coach. You're friendly with each other, but you probably don't hangout and stuff. Is he more someone you just listen to what he says and he's like the authority figure at the gym and once you're off the team or you graduated, you know, then there's new freshman coming in he's working with.

AR: Exactly. Louie does like to get his hands dirty. He's just like that. He's the coach and you're just kind of like... If it was an NFL team, once you're washed up and done, the coach...they don't have time for you. They have other things going on.

But, Louie likes to get his hands dirty and get in there. He still lifts. He's in his 60's now and he still lifts hard as much as he can. He's doing exercises and breaking records on certain things and I mean, the guys is just as competitive as the next one. He learns by doing and for anyone that comes to visit, he'll get in competitions with and stuff like that. He's a great coach and I'll be grateful for Louie, even in the short time I've been here. This is a time in my life that will never be forgotten and like I said, right now is everything I could want.

MW: For sure. Hey, do you guys ever have just riffraff try to walk in and not even realize what they're trying to get themselves into? I mean, it can't just be an open door to anybody who wants to come in. What are the requirements as far as visiting or becoming a member of the gym? How does all that work?

AR: Well, it was kind of funny.

MW: There's got to be some funny stories, just people walking in.

AR: Yeah, it's a private gym, but a lot of people have shown up at Louie's house because that's his business address is on there and they've showed up there and kind of randomly. So, they're constantly having people knock on their door there. But, no, I guess there was a time when some guy kind of walked in with his gym bag and just kind of looked around and started setting up on the bench press and, you know, kind of nonchalantly like you would if you snuck into a health club or something. But, he was politely asked to leave and was never seen again.

But, we get a lot of people who would really like to come and train and the problem is, with the level we're at, people can't just walk in. The weakest guy right now in the morning crew squats 730 pounds. That's our weakest guy. Louie is on him all the time. This guy is either going to quit or he's going to get stronger. He has two options. He's chose to get stronger continually. So, when our weakest guy has a 730 pound squat, we can't have someone coming in who can't keep up. That group, the lowest if 730, we don't have a lower group for him to work-in with.

MW: So, you basically have to at least get to that point before you could even try to get in the gym.

AR: Yeah, and people will come in and say they do this and say they do that, but you can't lie about numbers and it shows through very quickly. Several people Louie has spoken to and said that right now you're not strong enough to be here, come back when you're ready. He doesn't do it to be an ass; he does it because he's trying to create world champions. If he has to spend all his time teaching someone the very basics, it's so restrictive. You only have so much time. We're there and the majority of us have moved from out of state, different cities in Ohio, have moved there. So, he's very protective of that and it is an elite group.

As far as visiting goes, I've never seen Louie turn any visitor down. Just people come to see what we're doing, maybe get a workout in while they're there. I've never seen him say no to anyone. But, as far as training there, he does expect a certain level of strength. And that's only because if you're not at that level, you're on your own. If you're on your own, you're not going to get better. There are different thoughts on that, but it obviously works and it's been working. I don't think anyone can knock the results.

And of course, you get the people who come who seem like they're going to do awesome, but just can't handle the pressure. They don't train that hard, strength has kind of been easy for them.

MW: Maybe they were the big fish where they were. When they get competition they can't hack it.

AR: Yeah, exactly. So, you get all sorts that come through and as Louie said, only the strongest survive. Only those of us that are the most dedicated survive. So, it's interesting to see that.

MW: Has anyone ever gotten kicked out?

AR: Yep.

MW: What would you have to do to get banned, maybe just being late, not showing up or things like that?

AR: Yeah, the biggest thing is you've got to be there, it's a team. So, you've got to be there for each other. If you're not going to be there, you've got to let everyone know.

MW: Be a team player even if you're hurt or it's not your meet, you've still got to be helping out.

AR: Yeah, you know, if you played for a professional team and didn't show up to workouts, you wouldn't get to play. It's as simple as that. The other thing is, unfortunately...and I don't know why people choose to do this, but they start to doubt the methods or they want to do something different. They see what Big Iron is doing or what Metal Militia is doing or all these different gyms that are out there. Maybe their friends are people from there or they're just intrigued by those and they want to do their own thing. Like Louie said, this is Westside Barbell. We train this way and if you don't want to train with the system, don't come and train there. Like I said, if you played for a sports team and didn't want to run the plays, you're not going to play.

MW: Like your quarterback calling plays that aren't even in the playbook. You got to do what you're doing on that team.

AR: Exactly, and Louie, he is all for experimentation, but if you're flat-out just not going to train using the methods, then there's really no point in being there. That's cause some friction in the past and some people have been asked to leave, but most of them are ready to leave when they leave.

MW: Well, you mentioned some of the methods, let's go into some of those methods now. Could you talk about the Conjugate Method? What exactly is that, more than just rotating exercises. Could you explain the Conjugate Method a little more?

AR: Yeah. Most people know what periodization is. Periodization where you have blocks of training time where you'd work on speed for a couple of months and then you'd work on strength or endurance or general physical preparation, getting in shape, conditioning. Traditionally, these are all broken up into sections. What the Conjugate Method does it kind of a KZ method where everything is blended into the week. We have two days for speed training, one for upper, one for lower and then two days for maximal effort training and one for upper and one for lower.

So, it's a four day system broken into two dynamic training days and two max effort training days. That's pretty much what the Conjugate training is. The easiest way to explain it is it's like you do everything at once. You work on getting faster, more explosive. You work on getting stronger. If you need conditioning that would be in there, too. So, you're always prepared for battle, so to speak. You're never stuck in one phase.

The reason for this is really if you train specifically for a block, you train for that block and then you move onto the next, you're going to lose a little bit of what you gained. So, this way the gains continue to roll over.

MW: You kind of work on everything at once instead of blocking it off into different periods.

AR: Exactly.

MW: Now, you mentioned the dynamic effort days or the speed days, how are those set up as far as percentages or sets and reps? Let's take the bench press example.

AR: The speed days, Louie came up with a three week pendulum system, so to speak, and he kind of got it from a Soviet Union weight lifting champion. Basically, what the weight lifter stated and what Louie had found training for more elite level power lifters was, for speed after three weeks, you're not going to get much faster or stronger. So, you wave back down and start over again.

Traditionally, it kind of varies depending on who you are, but traditionally we're going the 1st week, like 45%, 50%, 55% for nine sets of three. And we do that based off of Prelipin's Chart which is a weight lifting chart that was created that basically says how many sets and reps to do based on percentage that you're using.

We don't stick...it's hard to explain. I always think that everyone stuck to percentages, but we don't stick to the percentages based on during different points your strength might be up, it might be down, it might vary. So, we really go on speed and the percentages are kind of benchmarks in my head. We know we should be around this weight. If you bench 500, 225, you're going to be around that weight for speed. But, if you're slow, we'll strip the weight off. If you're really fast, we'll go up in weight.

So, the percentages, a lot of people see the programs that Louie lays out and think that's exactly what you do, but really they're just more guidelines for us and we vary on that. So, we do three week waves and we just vary. We go up a little bit every week. We usually are using a accommodating resistance mini bands, chains...

MW: Speed work mostly?

AR: Yeah, mainly with the speed work. We'll do some max effort work with that stuff, but the speed work is basically three weeks of the same exercise. I used to think...I'm not sure why I thought this, I don't know if I just missed it in the videos or something. I always used to think speed work for the bench was always straight barbell with mini bands. But, after being here and talking to Louie, you can do speed bands with variations. You can do a board press for speed. So, it doesn't always have to be full range bench. And that's something that I did not realize until I came here.

But, basically, you do the three week wave and then you wave back down. And when you get stronger you might go up a little bit, only if the speed's there. But, the purpose of it really is to just learn how to be explosive and get your technique down. That, for me, has really, really helped, the repetition of that movement over and over again.

The three reps are based on the time under tension. Three reps explosively is the same as one max effort rep and recently Louie's had guys...we've been trying sets of five because time under tension seems to have increased, it takes a lot longer. So, we've been experimenting with that. Some guys have gotten great results, other's haven't. So, it just kind of depends on what style of bencher you are as far as what's going to work best. But, that's pretty much what speed benching is.

MW: About 30 seconds in between sets or how long do you take?

AR: We try to go... I've read 60 seconds and I read an article Dave Tate, back in the day where he would reduce his rest period each week. He's start with 60 then 45 then 30 the third week. But, we just pair up usually and we just go back-to-back.

MW: Right, you can't speed it up if you've got three, four guys in your group. When it's your turn you just keep going.

AR: Yeah, so we just go back-to-back and just try to go as fast as we can. We just try to keep it simple. When we start thinking too much, that's when things get too complicated and we make simple things that should be easy to do...you got stop watch out and we've just found that we go back and forth and not have to think about it. When it gets too complicated that's when you really lose sight of actually what you're there for, which is to get stronger, get faster.

MW: It seems like there's a lot of science behind all this. But at the same time, if you take it too literally and focus too much on it you lose the essence a little bit of what you're trying to do.

AR: Yeah, exactly.

MW: You mentioned accommodating resistance with the speed stuff. Just for anybody who doesn't know what that is, you mentioned the bands and the chains. Just talk about some of the benefits of that and do you use those on your max effort lifts as well?

AR: Yeah. We use accommodating resistance a lot, mainly on the speed work. But, we do use it max effort, too. If we're doing a full press we might throw some chains on there if it's a bench press max effort. If we're doing dead lift we might pull against bands or something like that.

The benefit of accommodating resistance and before, when I was training with Brent, we used bands and chains as well. So, I've always used accommodating resistance. Basically, according to biomechanics, you should be stronger when your angles are shorter. But, at lockout...everyone struggles at lockout, on the squat, on the dead lift, on the bench press. The last part of the motion is usually the hardest. That's due to the strength curve.

So, what Louie does is we use lighter weight as far as bar weight goes with accommodating resistance. So, let's say our bench press is 500 raw. We might use 400 pounds in bar weight with 100 pounds of accommodating resistance. So, as we lower the bar it gets lighter, which allows us to really blast off the chest and then go through that lockout point. Or, we might go over that 500. So, now we're using 525 pounds at the top, but only 425 at the bottom. So, you see how it allows you to kind of lift more weights at the top. What you essentially do is you train those weak points to be stronger and power lifting, thanks to the gear, it's really allowed you to overload that top end.

MW: Yeah, you're getting help off the bottom with the shirt and then you've been training your lockout.

AR: That's how it carries over, but it's beneficial for everyone and our football players use it that we have training here and our fighters use it, too. But, not to the extreme. Like for squatting, when we do our circuit max phase which is kind of our peaking phase, going into a meet, we use a lot of band tension, 500 pounds of band tension. So, we don't have our athletes use that much band tension, but you can see what I'm saying as far as it allows you to lose less weight on the bar and more weight at the top. So, in essence you're not killing the body trying to get that little bit stronger. You overload that top end and it really seems to teach the muscles how to squeeze through. And then when you go back to that straight weight, the full range of motion and stuff, it seems a lot easier.

I mean, I've always used it and it's always worked. I know there's people out there who aren't big fans of it. But, I mean, I've always used it, it's always worked. So, I haven't seen it not work for someone.

MW: I don't know if this is true, does it overload the CNS if you do it too many weeks in a row?

AR: We talked about this. Louie just had a seminar here recently and we got into talking about the CNS. Most people really don't kill their CNS. What most people do is they tap-out mentally before they tap-out physically. So, you can get overuse injuries. If you're going against heavy band tension all the time, your joints are freakin' going to hurt. This is what's going to happen. And at that point, are you smart enough to take a

de-load week to do what's right as far as icing the elbows and that stuff. Or, are you going to puss-out and blame the exercises?

The CNS fatigue thing, the burnout and all this, I think it's a lot harder to do than what most people think. I think what most people get is they're too tired.

MW: Yeah, or just the overuse injuries like you said, more so than the CNS.

AR: Yeah. It's just what I've seen and I've seen a lot of people say that, "Oh, my CNS is fried." But, if your CNS was fried on the bench press, your CNS would be fried on the squat. You'd be exhausted all the time, you wouldn't be able to do anything. You wouldn't be squatting heavy, but not be able to bench. So, it's kind of...I think a lot of it is a mental thing. People breakdown mentally, they're mentally weak and they can't handle that. Or, they're out of shape, they're not conditioned.

MW: Speaking of mentally, we talked about this. You got your interview coming out next month in Powerlifting USA. We talked about what it takes mentally to train at Westside. Why do you think most people just couldn't hack it there? Can you talk about that a little bit?

AR: Yeah. We were saying, when you come here, you come here to get stronger. Louie has gone through everything to get you stronger and he's kind of like the old school coach. He's not going to be your best friend and tap you on the shoulders. Some people do very well in that system and some people don't. He's going to throw everything at you and you're going to get stronger. If you can't get stronger, then there's a problem. The competition between lifters is at a high level. So, if you don't like competition that's not going to work.

So, it just depends on what kind of personality you have. It's not a place for everyone. Some people have a hard time dealing with that. They think that, I don't like being yelled at by my training partner because I don't want to do that exercise. Well, that's what happens here. So, if you don't like it, don't train here.

MW: It's not like you're forced to be there.

AR: Exactly.

MW: It's a privilege to be there.

AR: Yeah, and a lot of people like to be the strongest guy in their gym and then they come here and they're throw in with a group of people that are stronger than them. And the thing here, we do so many different exercises for our max effort stuff, with max effort you're rotating every week. So, we're always doing different exercises. So, you might kick ass one week, but then the next week the exercises hit your weakness and you

struggle. So, you need to be able to handle that and come back the next week with aggression.

MW: Check your ego at the door and get better at what you're weak at.

AR: Yeah. If you come in and you suck that week, you've got to be able to handle that, and a lot of people can't handle getting beat. They get beat and you see like their world get crushed and then they win and they're on a high again. You've got to be able to understand, hey, sometimes I get my ass kicked and sometimes I'll kick some ass. It's like if you're a fighter. At some point you're going to get knocked out, but you've got to keep fighting.

That's kind of the way it is. It's a very aggressive place. Lots of testosterone in there and it's pretty much fight or flight. Some people, I don't know why, but they don't see it like that. They think everyone should be best friends and all of this. I love the guys I train with. We hangout, we do stuff. But, I'm after all of them. I want to be the strongest in that gym. I want to have my name on that record wall and I'll do whatever it takes for me to get there.

Yeah, I'm friends with these guys, but I still want to kick their ass. When I beat them on something, I feel freakin' proud of myself. I know they feel the same. But, for some people they like to be everyone's friend. They don't like to do that. So, that mental side of it, some people are cut out for it, some people aren't. There are gyms all over the country. So, if you don't like it, just leave. If you don't want to do what we're doing, just leave. You don't need approval from us.

MW: Right. Are there any girls that train there?

AR: We got some girls that train there. They kind of have their own little crew. I don't think they would probably fit in too well with us. But, you know, it's interesting because the girls we do have train here, have the same attitude as us. They're chasing those world records. They want to be the best.

MW: You're not worried about offending them or anything.

AR: Yeah, and so, sometimes it's hard in a group because there's friction, because you might have two guys who are really close to each other and they're going back and forth and especially if they're in the same weight class. So, it comes easy for some people, it's harder for others. So, a lot of times there's friction and stuff.

But, it's funny because the girls we do have in there training, they have that. They have a little bit of that attitude. I think that's why they are training there, because a lot of them, they want to learn from Louie and they get that. But then, they do enjoy that competition and it's kind of what sets them apart from most of the other females that

you see out there training who are either training for weight loss or something like that. These are highly competitive girls. They usually come from a real sporting background and they're strong. We've got some real strong girls in here.

Molly Edwards, she trains here. I think she squatted 500 in her first meet, 450 or 500. So, we've got some really strong girls. And then, we've got Natalie Herrington. I think she did 450 her last meet. I might be off a little bit on those numbers, but I mean, Natalie was I think at 132 or something like that. So, 132 pounds squatting 450, she might even be lighter. I could be wrong. But, I mean, they're aggressive, they're strong and they're just kind of like...

MW: The guys thinking about visiting, don't even walk in the door unless you can at least beat the girls.

AR: Yeah, I mean, we've got girls here that would just embarrass people. Nora Phelps, she lives in Cincinnati now, but she comes over and trains. I think she holds the world record in the 181's a...

MW: Yeah, great lifter.

AR: I mean, we're talking about...these girls are serious. They're not your average girl and they have that attitude and they're there for the same reasons we're there.

MW: You mentioned earlier some athletes, like you mentioned fighters and stuff. Do you have non power lifters training there and how do they Westside methods help non power lifters in their sports?

AR: Yeah, we actually have...right now we have quite a few football player training there, being the summer. They use the same methods as us, but it's changed a little bit. They're do higher reps like 3's and 5's, more to mimic their time on the field and stuff. It's a little bit different as far as what we need and what they need. They still squat, bench and dead lift, but they'll do three reps instead of max, like I said. And they always use a box squat, but the box squat height, to try to hit the glutes and hamstrings from different angles so that they... They're in different positions on the field a lot of the times, and so we want to make sure that they can explode from every single position.

In power lifting, you go up and down and it's the same distance every single time. So, we don't train the high boxes. We train a certain height unless we have a weakness we need to hit. So, football players we vary their heights.

MW: They're not going to need the gear and stuff.

AR: Yeah, exactly. They don't use the gear. Louie will put some of them in loose briefs to protect their hips and stuff if we want to get them out wide squatting and stuff.

But, the majority, their feet are in a little bit closer because they're never in a sumo stance and things like that.

They do a lot of sets and a lot of that comes down to we want them to be explosive every single play and there's a lot of plays. So, we do a lot of sets for them. For benching, they'll do, again, higher reps and the exercise is very...pretty much the same as far as building them up, very explosive. We have the football bar the football players use if they have any shoulder problems whatsoever, which a lot of football players have shoulder problems and that comes from...

MW: Wide elbow bench, too. Everybody does before they learn the power lifting style.

AR: Yeah, so we fix that and they do a lot of box jumping, a lot of box jumping, different heights, weighted box jumps, stuff like that. And then they do a lot of physical preparedness work. They do a lot of sled pulls and Prowler pushes. They don't always do sprints and stuff. I mean, Louie has them do a lot of walking and things like that. It just depends on how they feel that day, because a lot of them are doing so much with the team that a lot of times we have to be careful what we do with them. They're with us to get better. We're not there to kill them. Their conditioning just depends on where they're at. That's kind of how we vary it for the football players.

For our fighters, they use methods, but they do a lot more time sets, like timed kettle bell swings, five minutes and stuff like that.

MW: It's more resistance cardio almost, kind of like Strongman stuff?

AR: Yeah, yeah. They'll do like a minute of squatting with the belt squat machine and stuff like that. So, they use the same methods as us, but in a different way. So, that's probably the best way to put it.

Louie looks at them the same, looks at their strengths and weaknesses and stuff like that and determines.

MW: You take a fighter and have him go jog five miles, that's not going to carry over into a fight when they're pushing and pulling on somebody the whole time. You might do better to use some kettle bells and do things like that.

AR: Exactly.

MW: I want to talk about Westside as far as where it originated from. Louie popularized it in the US, but it's based on some Russian methods. I don't know the whole history on that. Do you know some of where the Westside methods originated from?

AR: Yeah. What happened was Louie was using basic periodization and with that he would...going into a meet would get heavier and heavier every week. He would do numbers in the gym and then go to the meet and be 100 pounds off or 50 pounds off and he could never figure out what the heck was going on. He would talk to the other lifters and they had the same problem. He's like there's got to be a better way and I believe he got seriously hurt and so he said this has to stop. I have to find a better way to train.

He started getting a bunch of books from overseas and he got a bunch of stuff from the Soviet Union about the Dynamo Training Club. And basically, they use this system where they'd do lots of max effort exercises and I think they had like 15 exercises or something like that which they rotated through. Basically, Louie started experimenting with that and that's pretty much where he got most of the ideas from. He started with just himself in his basement and he was getting results. He started building a team up. He had like five guys or something training in his basement and everyone who did it, it worked for.

So, it just kind of spread from that and then I think he used it like five or ten years or something; it was a long time. He was using it before he ever wrote about it. They had national champions and stuff like that using the system before he every starting writing about it. So, it's been around for a long time and it's kind of like an evolutionary process. It's always changing based on the demands of our sport. The gear changes...

MW: Yeah, I was going to ask you the next question, how Westside has evolved since ten years ago until now.

AR: When Louie started using these, they lifted basically raw. And then the first Z-suits came along, these paper thin suits and it evolved into what it is today. So, the system has had to evolve around that. We still box squat and we still do stuff like that, but we get in our gear, I would say more frequently than they ever used to. I think Louie said for a while they didn't put their gear on at all, they just put it on at the meet.

MW: Right, and then I started being like just six weeks before the meet and now you're in it almost every week?

AR: Yeah, we don't go full gear every week. We still...there's still a huge focus on getting stronger, which is kind of different to most gyms out there in power lifting right now. We're not in our shirts every week. We're not in our full gear every week. But, we use briefs on the squat every week, and obviously now we're using our briefs...better than they were back then. We gear-up going into a meet. We do our circuit max phase with our suit bottoms on. We go in our shirt probably once every month at least, like we're getting in that shirt.

But, what's important for people listening on this that most of us who are doing this come from doing geared work all the time. And most of us are at the point where we know our gear inside and out. So, for a beginner, I would suggest they probably need to get in their gear a little bit more, because they need to learn the gear. Once you learn the gear, then you don't need to be in it all the time.

MW: Likewise, you want to have some kind of base before you even...

AR: Exactly, yeah, yeah. Most people who come and visit, our advise is get stronger before you try to get back in the gear. It's just depends on where you're at. But, if you go to Westside's website which is Westside-Barbell.com, there's an article section there and it's got everything on that Louie's wrote since the beginning. So, if you're like me and you like learning this stuff, you can go through and read them all. You can kind of track that process. If you just want to see what we're doing now, you can read the latest articles.

MW: Yeah, I think I could talk to you all day about this stuff, AJ. You're extremely knowledgeable on this and I appreciate everything you're doing. But, I don't want to keep you on the line all day. You just mentioned the Westside-Barbell.com website. You've also got a book, don't you? And you've got your bench press program coming out. Where can people learn more and get a hold of you if they've got any questions or anything?

AR: Yeah, Louie just wrote a book called Westside Methods. It goes over pretty much everything and that's available in hardcopy or ebook on the Westside website, Westside-Barbell.com. I have a bench press product coming out. It's really not aimed at power lifters. The way it evolved, I was talking with someone and they didn't have bands, they didn't have chains and they were like, what can I do? I said, well, there's this program I did when I wanted to get to 400 I used it and when I wanted to get to 500 I used it again. I've used it periodically over the years. I've really kind of kept it to myself and I didn't really think anyone else would benefit from it, for whatever reason. I don't know if it's because most of the people I talk with are power lifters. So, I really hadn't shared it.

But, I realized when I found it I was at a point where I had been trying to increase my bench for so long and I just hadn't gone anywhere. I kind of stumbled on this program. It was like this secret program and it was a program from overseas and all of this. It's just a six week program, but I used it and got great results. I used it with clients when I was doing personal training.

But, I kind of never really thought about doing anything with it. And then someone said, you know, there's a lot of people out there who don't have bands, chains, who don't train at a gym that has ball presses and foam and this fancy stuff.

There's a lot of people who don't like to do max effort exercises because they're training just one or two of them. They don't have the spotters to do that. Some had said there's a lot of people out here who could benefit from this.

So, I decided to try to put it together and it's actually more of like a video product, like I go through the setup and everything, how to setup properly and then it has the program there. I have some pretty cool bonuses I'll be throwing in. I'm putting that together right now, hopefully to be launched at the end of the month here.

But, for now, if you go to UpYourBench.com there's going to be a free report there. It should actually go up today. So, by the time you listen to this it will probably be up. I put together 36 of the biggest bench press problems and you can get that there and opt in for that. When the product goes live, you'll get a special heads-up when that goes live.

MW: Cool, you can keep an eye out on CriticalBench.com, too. That's an awesome video coaching, great product, going to be promoting that. And like AJ said, there's a ton of people out there that just don't have access to all the specialized power lifting equipment and barbell gloves. I mean, it's hard to find those gyms and those groups of guys. So, this is something you can do at any gym, get yourself up to that 400 pound raw, which is a great achievement. So, I'm definitely looking forward to finding out more about that program and sharing it with you guys.

So, thanks again, AJ. It was awesome talking to you. I really appreciate you taking the time today and I'm sure we'll talk to you real soon, looking forward to seeing your interview next month in Powerlifting USA.

AR: Thanks, Mike. I appreciate it.

MW: All right, talk to you later.

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