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WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



Luke Allison Interviews Olympic Lifter Zach Krych

LA: Hello! This is Luke Allison with CriticalBench.com and I'm here with Zach Krych. How are you?

ZK: I'm good, thanks Luke.

LA: I found a video of you online and I'm going to post it so that everybody can see this, but it's really inspirational and pretty incredible. But first, I kind of want to give people some background, give them some context and let them know you're an Olympic lifter. Sort of explain how that came about.

ZK: Okay. Well, I started to learn the Olympic lifts when I was a junior I high school. My high school had a weight training class that you could take and you could learn the traditional exercises that you do in a gym. But, they also had several Olympic lifting

platforms which had bars with rubber weight and people are doing the snatch and the clean and jerk, the two lifts that are competed in during the Olympics. And we had a team of about 100 people. You could take this weight training course as a class, and if you wanted to you could learn the Olympic lifts, too. If you were really interested you could join the team, which would train after school.

At the time I was playing soccer, I was doing that full-time. But, the moment I started lifting I quick my other sports and began doing this full-time, six days a week, two times a day, most days. I've never stopped since.

LA: And it just seemed to be your thing? You just picked it up naturally?

ZK: Yeah, yeah. I'm only 5'7" and so I wasn't going to be a professional anything. I mean football, basketball, baseball, nothing really I was that naturally talented at. But with lifting, I had pretty good natural positions. Things like the front squat came really easy to me and I had good leg strength naturally.

There was just a good amount of people doing it and some of my real good friends were doing it, so there was also just the team aspect to it that was attractive to me.

LA: You've been doing this for a while now. You've made a sort of career out of this. Where are you sort of in your career, sort of late January 2011?



ZK: Well, like I said, I was a junior in high school when I started. And that was in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I moved out to Colorado Springs...I actually got to come out for a couple-week camp when I was a senior in high school. That really lit a fire in me and made me realize if I wanted to get the best at the sport as I possibly could and hopefully make the Olympic team and everything, I'm going to need to move out to Colorado. Because just the quality of lifters and the quality of coaching out here at the US Olympic Training Center was the best I'd ever seen.

So, a year after I graduated from high school, I'd lifted well enough in a competition to move down to Colorado Springs, and I was supposed to come out for just four months, but that was January of 2003, and I'm still living out here now, January of 2011.

I came out to be a resident at the Olympic Training Center. We can talk about this later, but what when I got injured I ended up losing that residency. I just got that back again this month. Now that means I live off complex. I have a condo. I live with my wife. But, I can train at the Olympic Training Center and get a lot of the amenities like food and recovery massage, that type of thing. It is basically my full-time job, but I'm also working on masters degree right now and have some part-time jobs to help pay bills.

LA: So, it's coming together, basically.

ZK: Yeah.

LA: You have the support that you need and you're making the progress that people would want to see, that sort of thing.

ZK: Yeah, yeah. A lot of support out there with... Well, for one, my wife is working... Lifting doesn't really pay anything. I mean, even if you're... I mean, for instance, winning nationals, you don't get anything. You just get a medal, which is great. But, it would be nice to at least offset the cost for the plane trip or something like that.

So, there are ways you can make money, monthly stipends and that type of thing, which are wonderful. But, living off campus, my wife makes a good amount... Well, she works full-time and then I'm doing part-time things here to make money.

But, my lifting is going very well and the ability to, for instance, eat free at the training center helps out tremendously. They help pay for my school and that type of stuff, too. So, there are a lot of benefits.

LA: Just to give people an idea who maybe haven't visited the Olympic Training Center, what is that environment like and sort of explain what it's like to have everything sort of taken care of for you.

ZK: That's a real good question, because I've never experienced anything like this. The way it works is you can live in resident dorms. So, it's kind of like a dorm like a college where you would live with another athlete of the same sport, usually. And there's a cafeteria dining hall that has very good, very good food. It's much better than any other dining hall I've been to. The people there make wonderful food.

If you're living there you can basically live... You wake up, you go train, you eat, you take a nap, you go train. If all you want to do is train and eat and sleep and recover, then you have that available to you. You don't have to pay for any of it and you can get massages each...a couple of massages each week.

When you're done with your training you can go to the cold plunge or hot tub or steam room and stretch. There are sports nutritionist, there are sports psychologists. There are several sports out there right now, there's weight lifting, wrestling, gymnastics, a lot more.

There's another training center in California and another one in New York and I think maybe one in Salt Lake City, too. So, not every sport is at every training center. Specific ones are at individual centers.

LA: Okay. I guess there's a reason for that, but that could be beyond...

ZK: Colorado Springs is... The altitude in Colorado Springs is beneficial for like the tri-athletes that are out here. For weight lifters, I don't know why Colorado Springs is picked. It's a beautiful city, but the altitude is not going to help us a whole lot.

LA: Certainly, certainly. Do you have a typical day? You mentioned training six days a week, usually twice a day. Does the day follow a schedule or how does it usually work?

ZK: Well, my schedule is a little more hectic than most athletes' schedules because I'm married and I'm working on my masters degree and I have some part-time jobs. I've actually found doing other things other than only training is really helpful, because when you're in a situation where you're at the Olympic Training Center all the time and only thinking about training, it can be very stressful. You want to get your mind off of it. For me to be able to focus on energy on working on my bio chemistry degree or whatever and then going to weight lifting, it's a nice switch.

But, my schedule is usually Monday, go train Monday morning. I go eat at the cafeteria at the training center, train Monday morning, go to school where I now teach a lab on Monday. Then, I go back and train at 4 o'clock again and then eat dinner after training and stuff to recover.

Usually it's Monday, Wednesday, Friday we train in the morning and afternoon. Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday is just in the morning. That's actually been my routine for several years now. I have recently, though, switched to instead of working out twice a day Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I'm now kind of only working out once a day and making a longer workout. Because I've noticed that it's much easier on my body to only load up my wrists and my joints one time throughout the day and give them more time

to recover. Most athletes, though, train twice Monday, Wednesday, Friday and then once Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.

LA: Okay, and is that purely an individual thing or is that a post-injury thing?

ZK: Well, switching to one workout a day was my own...it was a thing that a coach and I tried because my problem in my career has always been nagging, tiny injuries where just something would get overtrained, my shoulders or something would get inflamed. The doctor would say, well, you have inflammation here, which is a very true, but annoying consequence. But yeah, that's the case, and all it can do is rest.

I've found that my body... I have the energy and the motivation to work out for three hours, but when I break it up into two one-and-a-half hour workouts, my joints just don't seem to like it nearly as much. So, this is a more personalized thing that I learned over time. It's just how my body adapts to training better.

LA: Okay. It might be useful for some other people, but I guess that's what happens when you spend time under the bar.



ZK: Yes.

LA: You figure out your own sort of path. I wanted to ask sort of where you're going, 2011 and then obviously 2012 is an Olympic year. What are your sort of immediate goals? What's on the horizon for you?

ZK: Well, my immediate goals are, I guess, qualifying for the world team, which is in...the World Championships will be in Paris, France in November, I think they are. And the last qualification for that will be the national championships which will be held in either June or July. My immediate goal is to qualify to be on that team. And I want to do that hitting some more personal records.

I have a competition in March that's going to be the Arnold Classic, which is a competition held in Columbus, Ohio and it's an expo. There's a whole lot of sports there. It's powerlifting, bodybuilding, a whole bunch of type of combat sports. I've never been there before. Hear it's just amazing, thousands and thousands of people show up. I'm really excited for that. That's going to be the first weekend in March and I'd like to hit some personal records there, but not huge because of nationals in June or July is where I'm planning on peaking and hitting some more PRs.

But, my immediate goal is to make the world team and I'd like to do well enough to place...well, as high as possible. But, I'd definitely like to place top-ten at the World Championships.

LA: This is sort of a weird question, because not too many Americans have been doing well recently. But, that would be significant to place at the World Championships, wouldn't it?

ZK: It would. We've had very few... Yeah, we haven't had many people placing that high. And not only do I want to place high for myself, but the way we qualify Olympic spots, so how many athletes can we sent to the Olympics, is how well does your country do at the World Championships. The way they figure it out is they see how well your country did at the two World Championships before the Olympics.

So, we've already has 2010 Worlds, and I was injured at the time, wasn't able to go. And the people who did go, one of our top guys, he got injured on the way there and wasn't able to compete. And basically, the way we placed, if the Olympics were held today, we would have no athletes.

For us to be able to send anybody by qualifying through the World Championships, we would have to...we would be able to qualify three guys. But, for us to do that, there are six guys that we're going to send to the World Championships, have the average about 13th place or higher, which we haven't done almost in recent history that I can think of, having a full team do that. So, if I was to place 10th or better, that would at least give some other people some breathing room and I feel like I can do that.

LA: Which really does create sort of a weird dynamic in terms of sport, because supposedly this is an individual sport and everything else and it's very personal and you have your own techniques. But yet, it's the entire sort of system of weight lifters and the entire community that's responsible, ultimately.

ZK: Yeah, that's true. If our country... If one guy lifts really well at the World Championships and he, let's say, scored the majority of the points, enough for us to get a spot or something like that, he doesn't necessarily get the spot. Someone else could

get the spot that that person earned by just...if that person beat him in a later-on competition.

So, it's done pretty fair in that there's no one making a decision saying, well, I like this athlete better, so we're going to send him. It's all numbers-based. So, a higher weight class guy can compete against a lower weight class guy using calculations and that type of thing. There are very little refs that get in the way because it's usually pretty black and white. Either they made the list or they didn't.

So, I've always like that aspect. At the same time, you have to rely on other people who it's not necessarily a team sport, but you have to rely on them for our team to do well internationally to score spots for the Olympics.

LA: That sort of reminds me of quote where it says, "the weight either comes or it doesn't." That's the beauty of weight lifting.

ZK: Yeah, he was amazing. Anything he says, it's true.

LA: You got to go with it. Got to go with that.

Like I mentioned, as we started, you put a video out on YouTube, which I really hope more people watch. But, I wanted to give you a chance to sort of set that up in whatever way you think is most appropriate.

ZK: Oh, yeah. I really appreciate the response I've had from this video, just a lot of people giving me positive feedback and everything. The video that was recorded that you initially see is the camera that we have at the Olympic Training Center. So, that's our gym that we're training at.

We have this wonderful system where we have cameras that we can turn on at any time, with flat-screen TVs on the wall that we can do a delay, like 30 seconds, 45 seconds, whatever we want. So, we can do a lift, sit down and then look at the camera and watch our lift played back to us, which is extremely helpful because there's so much technique involved in the snatch and the clean and jerk. It's really important to be able to watch your lifting.

So, that's the video you initially see. I'm doing an exercise which is cleans from below the knee. And to do that, you do a clean, which is lifting a weight from the ground to your chest and then I lower it down, but not to the ground. I just lower it to below my knee. And to be able to hang onto the weight without it falling out of my hands, I have to strap into the bar. I was doing the exercise at 160-kilos, which is 352 pounds. On my third rep, I caught it really far back on my heels. So, I was not able to stand up with it. I was about to fall backwards, tip over on my back. Normally, if I wasn't wearing straps, I

would be able to pop my hands out and kind of dump the bar. Because, I was wearing straps, I wasn't able to do that.

As I was falling backwards, I panicked and I remember distinctly having the feeling that the bar was going to hit me in the face and knock out all my teeth. It happened very quickly, but I remember everything. It seemed to be slow motion and I still remember it like it was yesterday, falling backwards and thinking, "Oh, no, this is going to hit me in the face." and trying to get the bar off of me. And by doing that I ended up...instead of keeping my elbow forward like on a front squat, I twisted them backwards. So, my elbows are the first thing that hit the ground. The weight stayed in both of my hands and it snapped both of my wrists back. When it did that, it broke and dislocated both of them. You can see the way the bar bending, bouncing kind of in my wrists. And when it's doing that, snapping backwards.

So, that's the initial injury that you see. There's no audio. I yelled, "Ouch!" when it happened. I remember. I don't know why. I'm thankful I only yelled, "Ouch!" and not something else.

LA: Right.

ZK: But, that happened. The bar rolled off of me and... I also remember distinctly right after that happened, I told someone to make sure to save the recording because I wanted to watch it later. I don't know. I remember, actually, I was... It happened and I was in a lot of pain, but I felt like I was very clearheaded and I knew... I wasn't like panicked or anything. It was amazing the amount of just how conscious I felt throughout the whole thing.

When they took me down to get x-rays done in the sports medicine area of the Training Center, I was cracking jokes and I was lighthearted and it was... My coach was super upset and every mad and I was trying to calm him down. It was kind of funny.

LA: I mean, it seemed like there was just more than you could possibly be sort of explained by the images. I think that was really one of the first things that got my attention.

ZK: Yeah, when I told people before that the injury was on tape, especially when they saw me in the casts, I was walking around... Everywhere I went after I had the surgery and I was in these two long-arm casts, people would come up to me all the time and ask me what happened. Usually I would say like I had a double high-five accident or try to make up something, because you tell the same story over and over again it gets boring.

I would tell them I have a video, you can watch it. Most people didn't want to. But, once you see it, it's not a gruesome injury. It's not gruesome injury-looking, at least, I think.

LA: Yeah, compared to maybe what people are used to watching on the NFL and things.

ZK: Yeah, absolutely.

LA: I mean, no doubt it hurt and extremely serious, but not in the way that things can be, obviously.

ZK: Yeah, and I remember the first time I watched it, I was really, do I want to watch this? I was like, yeah, let's just get it over with. And now I've watched it so many times it's not a problem for me. I'm glad it's not more gruesome, because it doesn't make me afraid to go back and lift anymore think it might happen again or something.

LA: So, that's actually the opening sequence and then the next sequence is you sort of smiling and gesturing with the sort of double casts and whatnot. And then, the next thing is you squatting with a safety squat bar with both casts. What was that like?

ZK: I was very thankful when I found out that the training center had a safety squat bar, because I was able to do that just two weeks after the injury. From the very beginning I was thinking, well, I'm going to do absolutely everything I can to come back from this. And I know in the past from talking to other people, one of the hardest things about coming back from injuries is when you lost things like leg strength. You spend years gaining it and then you can lose it and it can take a long time to get back.

The ability to build a squat with that bar... So, if somebody hasn't seen it, it's like of like a yoke over your head, and the weight just balances. The weight definitely felt weird squatting that way. It kind of feels half way in between a back and a front squat. But, I was able to go in there three times a week and do squats. I couldn't load any of the plates because someone had to load everything for me because I couldn't hold anything or grab anything for the first couple of months. But, I was really happy that they had that. I could do something instead of just sitting around waiting. That was nice.

LA: It sounds like a very sort of normalizing that that was there and you could go there. Obviously someone had to be there to put the plates on. So, you're not isolated because you're hurt and things like that.

ZK: That's true. Normalizing is a good way to put it. It made me feel like I could still do something in regards to weight lifting, which was really nice. Actually, at the time, the way...because my hands were both...I couldn't use either of my hands and my wife

worked full-time, normally she would... When she was having to feed me, bathe me, help me go to the bathroom, it was really a humbling experience. She had to do everything for me. I mean, use your imagination.

But, she had to be at work all day, what happened was a friend would actually come by and pick me up and drive me to the Training Center where they gave me a room. And I would stay there all day and I would go down to the cafeteria and someone would get food for me or they'd give me a smoothie with a straw because I couldn't even feed myself.

Everywhere I'd go, someone would have to kind of help me out and do things for me. And to go down to the gym and have someone load weights was just another one of the daily things of having someone do everything for you.

LA: And this is all a process that went on. How long was the entire recovery until full recovery?

ZK: Yeah, the injury was February 25th. I remember on my birthday getting my pins out of my hands, which is April 16th. And then, for a long time... I had my initial cast on. I go those removed, but then I still had to do these bandages on my hands. Eventually, I kind of used my fingertips and so I could kind of pinch a fork and do that type of stuff. That was a lot better when I could actually use my fingertips. I could even go to the bathroom by myself. That was a huge victory.

It was at least two or three months like that. I remember having it kind of documented. I tried writing down all the dates, and that's in the video. I tried to do everything correctly. Now, the very first video, the day of my injury, it has the wrong year, the 2008. It was supposed to be 2009 and then the next scene shows 2009. It was too late for me to change that. But, that was one screw-up I did.

LA: One of the things I think that really came across was you were very motivated from an early time, but there were clearly some other factors that must have been present to keep you motivated, to keep you sort of willing to put up with the daily grind of having to have help with absolutely everything. But then, really coming back from it at the end.

ZK: Yeah. I guess I know what those factors were. One of the benefits or one of the good things that came out of this whole thing was it really made weight lifting something that I had to...since I didn't know if I was going to come back. I had to be able to give that up to God and to say... Because, my faith is really important to me, I don't want anything to get in the way of my relationship with God and Jesus Christ. I don't want weight lifting to become an idol. I would love to use it as He would like me to, but not to put too much emphasis on it where I'm giving away something. And to be able to say

this is yours, you can have it if you want to use my hands. If you want to take my hands, they're yours to begin with.

And to be able to do that was very freeing to know that these aren't my hands anyways and God can do what he wants with them. If it's for His glory, then I'm glad He's using it for His will. And then to come back and be like, well, now I'm going to do everything I can do to make a comeback. I'm going to put everything I have into it. But, this is not what defines me. My lifting isn't who I am, where if can't ever lift weights again, I don't know who I am. Because that... If that was the case, then the whole trying to come back and everything would be very scary. It would have been a much harder ordeal to go through. Because, what if I fail? What if I can't do this? I don't know what I'm going to do with my life and I don't know who I am. I didn't have to deal with those questions because I know who I am in Christ and that was a lot of the joy I had throughout the whole thing.

And also, the ability... In the Christian faith, humility is a good thing and so, having to have someone wipe your butt is a good way to learn humility. And so, that was a side benefit, too.

That was a lot of what motivated me, I guess, to be able to have a really good outlook and right away thinking, I'm going to do the best I can at coming back and if I can, then I'll be thankful for that.

LA: That's really interesting. I guess anything that keeps a potential existential crisis sort of at arm's distance is probably important if you have to get your mind right first.

ZK: Yeah. I do remember I found this... You might find this interesting. I don't know. But, I do remember my initial injury happened, like I said, I was kind of cracking jokes and I didn't even... I wasn't even... I was upset, but I wasn't like super-grieving over it for a while. And I remember after about two weeks, after I had my surgery and everything was done with, I kind of realized through prayer that God was saying like, you need to grieve over it. Or like, you're free to grieve over this.

And I was able to take it to Him and ask Him why and really kind of like pour my heart out. "I thought you loved me. Why would you hurt me?" Blah, blah, blah, all the normal questions people have. But, that was, I thought, an important part for me, was to lay it out there in front of Him so He can handle it. He's big enough; He's God. I didn't want to have gone through the whole time and never actually grieving and mourning over the loss of maybe never being able to lift weights again, and that type of thing. I think that would have been a mistake to never have done that. I'm glad I did. I found that to be a freeing part in the whole thing, to not say, well, I'm just going to be positive. I mean, we need to come to deal with the pain and the struggles in our life.

Some people go through way more difficult things than just a physical injury. The death of a child or something like that would be much harder to deal with, or anything with a loved one and that type of stuff, to not grieve over that. This has kind of taught me in the future that I need to grieve over the losses I have in my life. It's an important process.

LA: And then to sort of reinforce the point about grieving, you put sort of a unique song on there. The title of it is "Rejoice and Lament". Is there anything larger that we should read into that?

ZK: Oh, for the song?

LA: Yeah.

ZK: Yeah. That song fit when I was trying to figure out what to put in the background. That song by Josh Garrels is the musician's name, and he's now become one of my favorite musicians. That song, "Rejoice and Lament", I mean, the whole lyrics, more than just the chorus, was really powerful to me. I guess if I was only trying to be...put a happy face on and trying to fake it, that wouldn't be... There's a time for lamenting. There's a time for grieving and I had to let myself know that. That's out of Ecclesiastics where in the Bible is saying there's a time for rejoicing, a time of lamenting. Kind of like that every season turn, turn song.

LA: Right.

ZK: There is definitely time to rejoice and lament. I'm very thankful that on this side of eternity I'm able to rejoice over my injury, because I've seen a lot of the good things that come from it. And I know not every pain and suffering... We're allowed to rejoice in this lifetime. But, I do believe we can...there is a time for that if our glory isn't for ourselves, but for God. That song really...I thought really encapsulated a lot of what I went through in that season.

LA: Yeah. There was definitely something about it that led to an aesthetic quality or quality of beauty where everyone could sort of see what you were trying to say. I think that's kind of the point of art, I guess. If you can express a single idea and have that come across.

ZK: Absolutely. Yeah, that's very true.

LA: I thought that was sort of well done and sort of worthy of praise, I thought.

ZK: Thanks. Thanks.

LA: Absolutely.

ZK: One of the hard things, also, I play guitar all the time. I couldn't do that for months either.

LA: Oh, wow.

ZK: That was just as hard as not being able to lift.

LA: Yeah. It's everything. It's not just what you want at the moment.

You mentioned sort of at the end of the video that you have a sort of unique approach to nutrition and there was something that you thought sort of contributed to that. Talk about that for a minute.

ZK: Yeah. One of the things that happened when I got hurt, I had been sitting in these casts and I'm thinking, well, I'm going to do everything I can to make a full comeback. I need to give my body the best nutrition I possibly can, because right now all I can do is sit here. I can't even start my rehab. But for cells and my joints and my ligaments and everything to heal as best they can, I'm not going to give them McDonalds. That's not going to be the best thing for them to be able to heal. Nothing against McDonalds specifically, but kind of.

LA: Understood.

ZK: Yeah. So, one of the things I did was I had always been actually taking supplements from a company called Shaklee there. I really trust them in their research and science behind everything they do, especially for purity, which is really important for being drug tested as frequently as I am. One of the things I added, I made sure I got my vitamins and minerals, fatty acids, all those things. I also began taking something called Vivix, which is a cellular repair thing. You may have heard of Resveratrol. It's been in the news a lot recently. That's one of the main ingredients in there. It's supposed to help with cells and anti-aging. It also works with increasing the number of mitochondria that you have in your cells, which is powerhouse energy producing of the cells. There are a lot of things to make the cells just more healthy.

So, I thought this would be a really important thing to add to give my body, to let it heal. And so, from the day after the injury, I never missed taking all the nutrition that I thought I could to help it, which beforehand, before I got hurt, I would take my vitamins off and on and I never did it a whole lot. I was just forgetful and now, since then, I think I've seen a lot of the benefit from it. And now I take them all the time and I really find a difference.

I believe that that played a key role in my body being able to come back. It's also helpful being 27-years-old or 26 at the time. But, my surgeons didn't seem to think that

that was going to be that much in my favor, that I was still not going to come back. So, I wanted to give my body everything that it possibly could use to heal itself.

LA: It sounded like a complete recovery. It sounded like you had it covered from just about every angle.

ZK: Yeah. My range of motion is limited, not as good as it used to be. Like, I can't quite do a handstand anymore. That's just kind of too much of a flexibility issue for me. But, that's not the worst thing to never be able to do again. It's not like I did them all the time anyways.

So, range of motion, they do start to ache. I have to...I was to say I feel like they're healed completely, but they're not 100% like it never happened. I have to be very careful in my lifting in that I have to warm-up very well. I can overtrain them to much if I load-up heavy weights all the time.

The most difficult lift is actually not doing a clean and jerk where I'm lifting the most weight, but is actually doing the snatch lift, which is I'm lifting less weight, but it's the wider grip. That wide grip puts a lot of pressure on my wrists. I had wrist problems before I ever hurt myself this way, with this injury. So, I think my wrists are great in that I can fully train and fully compete and everything, but I still have to be smart and patient with them.

LA: Certainly. Well, Zach, I definitely appreciate the time. I don't mean to tie you up any more. But, it's been a enjoyable and certainly enlightening.

ZK: Well, thank you very much. I would actually like to know a little bit more about your site and everything you guys do. I was looking at it earlier.

LA: Certainly. We can keep in touch and who knows, maybe follow you as you progress through the World Cup and Olympic qualifying.

ZK: Great. All right, well, thank you very much.

LA: All right. Thanks Zach. Take care.

ZK: Okay. Bye bye.

Zach Krych Injury & Comeback Video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bj-gyl-e4y0>

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