

Hard 'Core' Training has New Meaning to Me

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When I was 13-years old, a friend of the family gave me a box of bodybuilding magazines. I never imagined that the man who so inspired me, Arnold Schwarzenegger, would one day become California's governor.

I participated in my first bodybuilding-competition in 1984, at the age of 16. Since then, I've competed in about 40 shows and won titles like Mr. Philadelphia, Mr. Pennsylvania, Mr. Physique USA, and in 1993, Mr. North America.

I was at the top of my game, preparing to get my pro-card, when my body starting giving me problems. In 1994-95, I was having trouble with my balance and bladder. I was working out with my friend one day and I told him I had looked on the Internet and thought I might have the disease, Multiple Sclerosis.

He just laughed and said, "Paul, you don't have MS, you just squatted 550 pounds!" So I laughed it off as well; there was no way I had MS. In the back of my mind, however, I realized I was squatting on a Smith machine; that didn't require me to balance myself.

As my health continued to decline, I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 1997. I was still going to compete, a year later, but lost my vision. This caused me to fall into a deep depression, and with MS, this also brought on a lot of stress. Because I was feeling so lousy, I asked the doctor to put me on anti-depressants, sleeping pills, and medicines for my muscle spasms. The drugs just made me more tired and dejected, and my MS progressed to where I had to be in a wheelchair.

I sat in my wheelchair for a long time, feeling sorry for myself. I then met my future wife, Judy, and she told me I had to accept my MS. I told her I didn't want to and that I hated it, but she explained that I had to do something besides feeling down. I wasn't sure if I could, because the doctors told me I had primary progressive MS. That is the worst kind; you don't get better.

I decided not to believe the doctors, and went back to the gym to begin exercising. I found out which muscles are primarily affected by MS - the core muscles (abs, hip, and back muscles). When these get weak, it's like a flower with a frail stem that falls over when the wind blows. That was me, and that's why people with MS are always looking for something to help them balance. I also learned about core muscles by watching my son, Tyler. When he was only 7-months old he had the leg-strength to push himself up to a standing position, but I had to hold him so he could balance. When he was 11-months old, he would always use the couch to support himself while he walked - much like I had to do. Then, I realized that for an infant, the core muscles are the last to develop, and in a person with MS, or other neurological conditions, they are the first to go. Before he could walk, Tyler would balance on his knees. I thought, "What a great way to exercise; do it from your knees and challenge the balance. You don't have to worry about falling!" I also found that by waking up new muscle, I could stabilize and walk better.

The average person activates about 60-70% of their muscles in their entire lifetime, a bodybuilder about 75% (they're just much bigger), but a dancer or gymnast awakens about 90% or more. I said to myself, "Wow! If I could tap into those muscles, it would be like having a spare tire for you car." So the way I did this was by challenging balance using a Swiss-ball, or standing on air cushions. Both strengthen the core.

In 2001, I moved to California. When I went back to the gyms, I realized how inaccessible they are for a person in a wheelchair. Sure, maybe the bathrooms and parking are accessible, but rarely is the equipment. I applied to work at Club-One, even though they didn't have wheelchair accessible equipment. When I told the manager about my mission to help the disabled community, he was very receptive. That is why I decided I wanted to work there.

During my interview, the fitness manager asked if I knew what core-training was. At the time I was not as familiar with



it so I tried to make a joke, "Sure, hardcore training. I've been doing it for 20 years." She didn't laugh, but I got the job anyway.

I began training people with disabilities, but I realized a lot of physically challenged people were not coming to the gym because the equipment wasn't accessible. I decided to do something about this, and in 2002, my wife and I opened Accessible Fitness, a completely wheelchair-accessible gym located in Santa Clara, California. We specialize in working with people with all types of disabilities, and not only is every strength station wheelchair-accessible, but the cardio equipment is as well.

My life is different now because I feel through exercise, I have regained control of my life and no longer have to give in to this thing they call MS. I am inspired by the people in my gym everyday and I am competing again for everybody who has some type of physical challenge.

I am no longer in a wheelchair and will be competing this year in the Mr. America competition. Even if I have to use my cane, I am there, win or lose, to represent people that are physically challenged like me.

For a long time I asked myself, "Why me?" But then I realized this is my calling, my passion in life.

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