

GET REAL!
(MY JOURNEY INTO FITNESS)

I'm not one who tries to attract a lot of attention. I typically try to write about those around me. But I started thinking how telling a little bit about my journey into fitness may answer some myths and questions that come up often. So, I'll give it a shot and hope you find relevance.

Why did I get into the field of physical fitness? Mostly for two reasons. One, I was a fat kid. Yup, that's right. Most people don't know that, because I'm not big on talking about myself, but I was. And two, my father passed away when I was 12 years old from a heart attack brought on by diabetes. Diabetes can be controlled by exercise and proper diet, so I wanted to make sure that I do the best I can (for my family) to not suffer the same fate. Here is a funny thing—I was fat by choice. That is, I never gave it any effort. I'd eat junk food, and tons of it, all day long. I really just made no effort to eat right. Now, I was very active. I rode my bike everywhere. I was an outstanding tennis player, and I played sports every day after school, from pick up baseball games (seems to be a thing of the past with kids) to sandlot football. So it wasn't about the "output"; it was about the "input". To this day, I really don't know why, but a few years after my Dad died, I decided that I simply was going to eat normally. (I always thought this epiphany was basically a miracle.) Now, normal to me was 3 meals a day, no junk food, no soda, no seconds—just simply 3 square meals. It was amazing. In just a few short months, I went from being a chunker to a 5'11" 135 pound beanpole. And I never looked back.

So I'd already learned a lifetime of health information by the age of 17. And I knew then how good my new body felt and how it changed me all the way around for the better. I knew that one day I would give back. I started pumping iron at that time. I thought I was looking a little too skinny. It wasn't long after I started working out that I found out what my genetics were, and that was for body building or strength and power sports. Shortly after working out (within a few years) I had 28" thighs, 28" waist, 50" chest, and 18" arms. I could bench press 360 pounds and squat over 500 pounds at the body weight of 175 pounds and 5% body fat. Yes, I'm proud of that, but I can only take credit for the work. It's in the genes. This is a very valuable lesson to learn. You have to find out where your genes are and not try to kill yourself going for a look or performance that is not in the cards for you.

I'll digress here from my story and tell you about my buddy, Kenny. Kenny wanted to look like me. So Kenny, my great buddy, came to the gym with me and worked as hard and as consistently as I did. He ate just as well as I did. Kenny was 6'3" and 160 pounds soaking wet. And he had legs the size of my arms and arms the size of, well---you get it. After two years, Kenny—well, looked the same. Now, Kenny got a little stronger. And Kenny felt much better, and was much more fit than when he started, but he was still a beanpole. Always will be! (Now you runners take note—this works the same for winning races. You have different genes as well).

After my success with working out, I realized that I did not want to be a Psychologist (I got my first degree in Psychology at UCF, and I did enjoy the field working as a counselor). I realized that most of my passion was about physical fitness. When I was working with chemically

dependent kids, I would found they'd ask more about how to increase their bench press than how to stay away from drugs! More importantly, my eyes lit up and I got all excited talking to them about fitness. I knew then it was time to explore my passion.

I wanted to do it right. I'm big on REAL education. I don't mean to offend anybody, but I just think it's a matter of commitment. I did not want to be one of those "personal trainers" I saw at the gym who were just all hunky and had very little behind their training philosophy. I had already heard that it was far too easy to get certified. I thought the profession deserves more than that. Mostly, I wanted to be confident that there wasn't anything that I didn't really understand. I didn't want to start getting paid by customers and be just repeating what I've heard. I really wanted to make sure that I understood all the science behind health and fitness. Sure, I knew a lot about what worked for me, but I was smart enough to know that that's not a great trainer's forte. The people who go by what worked for them and do not understand true fundamentals and principals are doing their clients a disservice. Note to trainers: Clients who hire you are not like you! Plus, it shows commitment. I wanted to be the best in my field. I wanted to be taken seriously. So I got my Master's Degree in Exercise Physiology. I was very passionate about it and hammered through it with a 4.0. Why? I breezed through it because I found it so fascinating. And yes, I learned a lot. I learned so much about why we get bigger, smaller, faster, fitter, toner. All the WHY'S behind it. I'm so glad I pursued this degree, because once I was done, I was so confident that I was ready to take on clients. I'm not saying I know it all. I don't. And I don't want to. I want to keep learning. I'm saying that, most importantly, I know what is NOT true. So many myths dominate the world of physical fitness and it's so frustrating because it keeps people immobilized.

So, I was on my way and working as a personal trainer. *Personally*, I was getting stale with the world of body building. I trained very hard for a show. I ended up getting 3rd in the state in my class and I really felt like I peaked out physically and emotionally. In truth, I think I took to the extreme of body building to balance out my years as a fat kid. I think it was the classic chip on my shoulder needing to be exercised (no pun intended!). And it was. Somehow, when I walked off that stage, I felt good. I'd proven enough. I wanted a new challenge. All of my professors and classmates were doing this weird sport of triathlon. It looked fun to me. They were a bunch of skinny worms, but it looked like fun to me. So I bought a bike, I started swimming laps at my Mom's pool up in Ormond, and I started running a little. I did my first 5K in 21:58, and the very next weekend I ran my 2nd 5K in 20:58 (I believe it was the first Arbor Day 5K ever). Wow! I got a minute faster in one week! Just kidding—I know it was simply due to learning how to race it better. And I did my first triathlon a month or so later. What's so funny about that first race is my swim in the quarter was about as good as it is now or ever was! I did my first sprint triathlon in under an hour. Bragging? Nope. Making a point. I was a good athlete. Still am. I have God given athletic genes, and I'm grateful. What's funny is I've spent years busting my butt and I haven't really gotten that much faster. Why? Well, I went into these races already lean, and I pushed myself hard on race day. I'm here to tell you that we don't change that much (race times)! I've run my best 5K in 19:37, so I've improved by a little more than 2 minutes in fifteen years! I'm very happy with that. And I get it. You need to too. We're not going to go from a 22:00 to a 16:00 5K if we're comparing apples to apples (same effort on race day).

I knew going into triathlon that I didn't have the genetics to be a GREAT triathlete. I had large muscle bellies, a pretty good VO2 max, and was more of a fast twitcher. So again, my genes are to be muscular and fast. Not endurance. But I didn't care. That's not why I wanted to do them, then or now. I wanted to have fun. I'd already spent years trying to be serious, and I was. I was over that. Now I wanted to have fun with my new sport and stay in shape. So I knew through my studies that "fast twitchers" can become pretty good endurance athletes, and that was fine with me. You see, I am competitive. I love to compete. So I maximized all that I could of myself in triathlon. So I can be under an hour in a sprint, but I'll never win one. I can break 5 ½ hours in a ½ Ironman, but I can never win one. I can break 20:00 in a 5K, but never 19:00. You see? And I'm fine with that. Triathletes who take themselves too seriously need to get that too.

I'm as likely to win the Clermont ½ Ironman as to take the actual winner and train him in the way I used to train as a body builder and see if he can bench press 360 pounds. What do you think? If you think there's a chance, then we need to talk. Most runners get it when I turn it around that way. Come on, folks... Think of the winners at the local 5Ks. Do you think we have any potential bench press competitors? Why? Effort? "Come on, Skinny---get that bar off your chest!!"

So, if you're paying attention, you'll see I am reaching my goal. I vowed to take on a healthy, fit lifestyle years ago. I wanted to do my part to maximize my weight and body composition. I wanted to do my best to ward off lifestyle related diseases such as the diabetes that killed my father. So, whether I pump iron, or run, or do triathlons, I'm doing it aren't I? I'm at least doing my best. My goal is stay fit. I owe that to myself and my family. I owe it to them to do MY part to stay healthy. And I know the more fun I have, the more likely I'll pursue it. Can some runners and triathletes take this too far? To a point at which it's not healthy? Of course-and that's my point. When you start thinking that what separates you from the Olympic caliber runner is how many hours you train, that's when you get into trouble. So—now you know what makes me tick. What makes YOU tick?