

THE BENCH SPECIALIST

WHO IS *DENNIS CIERI*

INTERVIEW BY JIM CURLEY

I remember seeing the Titan ad in PLUSA years ago with Dennis Cieri wearing a Katana single ply shirt and benching around 650 at 198. I was recently at an NAPF meet in February and saw him bench 514 raw, same bodyweight. I was amazed that a guy that light, with really long "deadlifter" arms could be so good at benching. He's a very successful and nice guy, and his bench success is something you'll want to read about.



Dennis, you've been undefeated for 28 years straight in raw benchpress in your weight class. How old are you, what's your height and weight, and what's your best recent bench in a meet?

I'm 46 years old, I weigh 205, I'm 5'9", and my best raw bench in a meet in the last year was 523.

You're not a full power guy, but a bench specialist. Do you ever train squat or deadlift?

I occasionally train them, but not to the extent I would if I was competing in them. When I was younger I was very busy, and I realized that I could barely generate enough time for the bench, much less all three lifts while balancing the rest of my life. I really enjoyed the bench, I was good at it, it kept me healthy, but it also didn't jeopardize my back or knees. Now at 46, when I do squat or deadlift it's like I'm a spring chicken!

Married? Kids?

I'm not married but I have two young sons.

What do you do for a living?

I do several things, but first and foremost I'm a real estate developer in northern New Jersey. I develop and own shopping centers and luxury apartment buildings. I also own four

gyms called Fitness Factory with almost 20,000 members. Three of the four have lots of powerlifting equipment. I'm also president and CEO of SSP Nutrition, but how I got into that is how I got into lifting.

I was heading that way. How did you start lifting and when?

I was 14 years old and idolized Arnold Schwarzenegger. I had all his books and read all the magazines at the time. I just had an insatiable appetite to learn everything I could about weightlifting and getting big and strong. The bodybuilding lifestyle appealed to me, but I didn't know that powerlifting even existed. I was eating correctly, getting plenty of rest, working out twice a day; I was doing everything I thought that could give me big muscle gains. I was focused on health and well being, so even though steroids were around at the time, I had no interest in them. My health was above all, even more than muscular gain. When I was almost 16 and weighing 155, a buddy of mine and I were training in his basement. He put 300 pounds on the bar as a challenge, and I got it! I was shocked! That's when I knew I had a talent, or gift, for the bench press.

What do you attribute to that?

I have long arms and a thinner body, not at all what the typical good bencher looks like, so I don't think it's genetics at all. I attribute it mostly to the fanatical drive and desire to get better. When I say my workouts were intense, I mean I went beyond failure, not just on the bench, but every exercise I did. It became part of my DNA if you will, to push harder than I thought was possible, every single workout. I know my body knows more about weights than it doesn't, because I started training so hard when I was so young. I've had life long growth in my ligaments and tendons that enables me to



still bench big today. I sort of laid a “super foundation” from an early age. In those days there were no real training templates or routines, so we would just keep going and going because we didn’t know any better. It was similar to the Rocky movies, just go beyond failure where you couldn’t even raise your hand after you were done. All of the Rocky movies were very inspirational.

the football team. I felt a sense of satisfaction in that, but I never went out for sports. I studied, trained and worked at whatever jobs I could get all through high school. When I was a freshman in college, age 18, I saw a poster for the ADFPA New Jersey Bench Press competition. I went up there with my dad, and not only won, but set a record at 181. I realized that there was an avenue that I had been looking for,

“ I TRY TO TRAIN SMART, ALWAYS SHOCKING THE BODY. SOMETIMES IT’S HIGH REPS TO FAILURE, SOMETIMES IT’S SINGLES ONCE A WEEK. ”

So you kept going through high school?

Yes, my strength gains gave me a lot of confidence, enough to stay away from drugs through school. I was the strongest kid by far out of a class of 440, not only in my class, but the whole school including

and the next 50 bench press meets I entered, I won! Some guy from New Hampshire finally beat me, so I trained even harder and the next meet we were in, I beat him. I had great times competing regionally and I finally got to a national meet in 1998. My nemesis was Joe

McAuliffe and he and I would go back and forth winning. These were shirted meets and initially, the shirt would just give you a boost, but they got better and better and it was no longer the strongest guy that won, but the one who could master the shirt the best. This frustrated me because the shirt and my body don’t go well together, unfortunately.

Why is that?

I think because of my longer arms and long stroke. The shirts are more designed for lifters who have a much shorter stroke. As soon as raw lifting emerged and records began being kept, I went back to that because I was always much better at raw lifting.

What year was that?

Probably about five years ago I hung the shirt up for good and just focused on raw lifting.

What was your best shirted bench in a meet?

It was 653 at 198. I started traveling to Nationals, not just local NJ meets, in 1998. I was really busy with law school (Seton Hall) but I enjoyed competing so much I made time for it.

Did you ever practice law, or do you now?

No, I went to law school at night while developing real estate during the day, and that was much more successful than I could have done as an attorney. The moment I graduated law school, I took the New Jersey and New York bar exams, passed them and immediately retired.

So when did SSP become an idea and why?

Going back about fifteen years, I had the world record and had accomplished what I could in the sport. I thought that my training couldn’t get better (I was wrong),

but I thought my nutrition could improve. I got with a nutritionist that worked in one of my clubs and he was wondering how I could be so strong eating like I did. He determined that I was undereating, not drinking enough water and other things, so he wrote me a diet program. I followed it to the letter and I started becoming stronger and looking better. That's when I knew that nutrition mattered, especially sports nutrition. I immersed myself in studying nutrition, read every book I could find and found out how important it was before a workout, but especially after a workout. Nutrient timing is the key. It was more than just eating. I read a book called Nutrient Timing by John Ivy that really inspired me. I had been making my own pre and post workout drinks to feed the muscles both during and after breaking them down in the gym to make sure that my body had the right nutrition during the workout. I needed to deliver the right nutrients to the muscles after I had created all the damage of muscle breakdown. You need to repair the muscle in that short period of time called "The Anabolic Window", about twenty minutes after you set the last bar down; otherwise the opportunity to rebuild is gone forever. The cells are not as receptive to nutrition uptake after that window. If you don't feed the muscle with the right stuff, you actually leave the gym in a worse state than when you walked in.

Because the muscle is torn down and is screaming for nutrition and repair, right?

Right! You have increased inflammation that's not being addressed, which increases your likelihood of injury. If you have an existing injury, you're exacerbating it because free radicals are flowing throughout your body with nothing to keep them in check. If the cells

aren't repaired, aging happens much faster. People think they're getting healthy going to the gym, but they're not. If you had a race car, you'd never enter a race without it being tuned up to the max. Similarly, after the race, you'd never just let it sit there. You'd fix everything that broke during the race and get it in perfect condition for it's next race. It's common sense, but why an athlete would take a pre-workout formula that isn't nutrition based is baffling. More importantly, why someone wouldn't take a post-workout nutrition based formula to repair the damage is foolish. Twenty years ago you could plead ignorance on this, as I did, but there are so many studies today that to ignore it is just crazy.

So going to the all-you-can-eat buffet near the gym after a workout maybe isn't the best idea?

You have twenty minutes to get that post-workout nutrition in you after you finish your last set, because the sooner you get it, the more receptive your cells are to receive it. The buffet idea I'll leave up to you to decide if that's the optimal route! Sure, nutrition is based on food, but when it comes to workout nutrition, you can't get the nutrients you need from food alone. Not only because food doesn't have enough of it but it can't deliver it fast enough to do any good. For example, our post-workout drink has chelated chromium which mimics an insulin spike without consuming a lot of sugar. The insulin spike opens up testosterone receptor cells which allows for maximum absorption of hydrolyzed whey protein, which is the fastest absorbing protein there is. It doesn't get any better than that. You can't prepare a plate of food that works as well.

That's all in the Post formula?

Yes, and that's just a fraction of what's in it. Similarly, in the Pre-workout we have 8 grams of branched chain amino acids (BCAA's) and 70% pure glycerol, which increases blood flow. You can walk up and down the aisles of Whole Foods but you'll never find the ingredients that we have in our drinks that will give you the equivalent amount of nutrition. We focus on nutrition, not stimulants. There's so much garbage out there. Any supplement outlet will recommend the pre-workout drink with the most stimulants to a teenage kid, or anyone for that matter. Yeah, they'll work a few times but is that really what they want? Stimulants just hitting the central nervous system, but next workout they'll need a higher dose to get the same effect. Your CNS starts to dull which cannot be good for the long term. I urge people to stay away from those types of products because they're stimulant based, not nutrition based. It goes back to the reason I started working out in the first place. I want to be healthier. If I'm doing something that's contradictory to my health, it goes against everything I believe in. If you're using a stimulant based

HIGHLIGHTS

Best shirted bench at 198 was 653#

Best raw bench at 198 was 535#

Came up with SSP products for personal use before making it a company



workout formula, you're burning muscle, not fat because you have no nutrition in your body. With ours, you feel good and you know you're burning fat, not muscle. That's in the best interest of powerlifters who are looking to make strength gains. Just because a pre-workout uses stimulants and you feel good doesn't mean it's healthy.

So the Pre formula has some caffeine, about the same as a cup of coffee, but other than that, it has no stimulants?

It has a little taurine, just enough to give you a "bump", but it's not based on stimulants. I know of people that have taken stim based pre-workouts and have had to go to the hospital, or not been able to get to sleep for days. It's an unregulated market and there's a lot of bad stuff out there. Some of these manufacturers are just out for the quick buck rather than their customer's long term health.

Your label says that there are no ingredients that are on the WADA banned list.

That's right. I made this product mostly for myself, because I compete in the USAPL and IPF and have been tested I can't count how many

times. It had to be free of any banned substances and not put me in jeopardy of failing a drug test. There's nothing more effective than great nutrition and so far WADA hasn't banned great nutrition, lol.

Is it available in retail outlets?

No. The distributors want a huge discount and that means I would have to make it cheap and use cheap ingredients. I will not sacrifice the integrity of the ingredients so I can sell it to a retailer who will mark it up 100%. It's not worth it. I put the money into the product, not the packaging or advertising. I can tell you for a fact that I spend at least three times more money on the product than most of my competitors. If someone has a \$10,000,000 advertising budget, you should realize that they're spending their money on advertising rather than product. It's common sense.

So it's likely the product will never be available in stores because you'd have to sacrifice quality?

I like to know who my customer is and the day I use a third party distributor, I lose that contact and feedback from the customer, so no, I'm not interested in growing like

that. This company is based on my passion and research, not me needing to make a living from it. I feel that if I make the best product out there and be true to my customers, it will grow on its own but it's not the focus of the company.

So back to your lifting. I saw you get a 514 in Aurora, CO back in February. Not bad for traveling in the winter and all that.

I'm proudest of my 535, done four years ago in a drug tested meet. It's still "Best of the Best", raw, 198 on www.powerliftingwatch.com. I've been drug tested probably 150 times, including polygraph, voice analysis, along with standard urine testing, in and out of meet. I stand ready to be tested anytime, anywhere.

What's your basic training routine?

I try to train smart, always shocking the body. Sometimes it's high reps to failure, sometimes it's singles once a week. The important thing is structure and goals so you can measure your progress, or lack thereof. You have to be able to improvise, adapting to how you feel. You have to push it hard most every workout and not leave much in the gym. I take deload weeks, but I don't plan them. I let my body tell me when I need it. I usually leave the gym with a great workout, but often not with the one I walked in with. That ties in with not worrying about it, which is how life is. You get from A to B, but usually not how you planned it to be.

Do you usually work to failure, regardless of the routine?

Usually I do. There are exceptions of course. Pretty much no matter how you're training, if you're working really hard but not overtraining, you'll make progress. I like the 12 week cycle, starting with 10-12 reps in the beginning, 6-8 reps in the middle and 2-4 reps toward the end. I just don't have a "secret sauce"

TRAIN SMART

template. It's not what you do, it's how you do it. It's the intensity that counts.

You're a "bench specialist". What are your three favorite assistance exercises?

Triceps, triceps, and triceps! Pushdowns, weighted dips, close grip bench, skullcrushers – they're all great, just mix it up and do a lot of it. My long arms have caused lockout misses, which is a triceps problem so I focus on triceps. I like heavy, deep DB presses. I've never had shoulder problems. If I'm getting inflamed, it's mostly due to nutrition or lack of rest. If they're starting to get sore, I'll back off or change my grip. I tuck the elbows in on the way down and flare them on the way up and touch low on the chest to alleviate and minimize shoulder tension. I also do lots of shoulders and back. Working hard is the most essential thing. I like bands, chains and anything that will change the lift somewhat. You get better at bench pressing by bench pressing though, and hard work.

Your best shirted bench was 653 at 198. Do you think you have a shot at a 600 raw bench in the next few years?

Whoa! Let's start with beating my 535!

You want to exceed your best at 50 years of age. Do you have any plans of "retiring" from the sport?

No, I'm healthy and I still love lifting and competing.

Can you think of anything else I forgot to ask?

I think a couple of questions could be asked. What are the ingredients

of my success in the sport? Why is it? It's not easy to define. A lot of people think there's some magical training program that will make them the best. There's a lot of ignorance in this sport regarding nutrition. I believe that nutrition is every bit as important as training. I think there are four elements to smart training. One is strategic training. Second would be eating the right foods at the right time; the "Anabolic Window" that we talked about earlier. Third would be rest. Know when to walk away and let the injuries heal. You don't grow in the gym; you grow when you rest. A good night's sleep is really important. The fourth element is a little more mysterious and harder to define, but



it's learning how to manage your stress level. I haven't completely mastered it, but if you worry about everything, whether big or small, it will affect your recovery and your performance on the platform. It will negatively impact every aspect of your life. I've found that not worrying about much, letting things resolve themselves, not making a mountain out of a molehill have gone a long way in my life. It's helped me to put things in perspective and being able to focus on what's important and not to focus on things that I can't change. If I worry about the weather, I'm a moron! It's not mentioned much

among athletes, but I truly believe that my ability to deal with failures, as well as victories has provided me with a platform to grow and prosper as an athlete.

When did you start implementing that strategy?

I was always one of those guys that took on a lot of things, even as a kid and teenager. In college, I'd be working two or three jobs, going to school full time, powerlifting, but I never really worried about much. If I worried about any one thing, I wouldn't be able to do all that I did. I've probably lived five lifetimes in the one I've

done so far! I worked full time in Manhattan and went to law school at night. I was in a relationship and trained powerlifting – it was overwhelming. For most people, just going to law school is a full time gig. So because I didn't sweat the small stuff, (which is a great little book, by the way), I was able to get everything done, become efficient, and understand how not to worry. You do what you can and let the chips fall where they may.

Who would you like to thank or mention?

My training partners, who give up a lot to help me, and Rich Kruszely in particular. My friends, my family – it's a long list. Fitness Factory, who paid my first entry fee in my first meet. I was so grateful that when the gym came up for sale, I bought it. I gave him more than it was worth! It had 140 members when I bought it, and today it has more than 3,000 members.

SSP products can be ordered at www.SSPnutrition.com, and Dennis can be reached at denniscieri@sspnutrition.com. **PLT**

