





# BRANDON LILLY

## THE MAN BEHIND THE CUBE

BY MARK BELL

**MARK BELL:** Okay, SlimThug. First off, can you please take your bench shirt off for this interview, sir?

**BRANDON LILLY:** Actually I can't. I have to wear a bench shirt to sleep, eat, drive, train and compete. I got really good at concealing my bench shirt during sex. Anyway, most people don't even notice that I'm wearing one unless they are on a powerlifting forum.

**BELL:** Why are you so big, fat, furry and Southern?

**LILLY:** I'm big, fat and furry most likely because of the lifestyle choices I have made, Southern by the Grace of God.

**BELL:** Let's talk about this Cube Method. What's the deal? Where did the idea stem from and what problem do you feel it solves?

**LILLY:** I have no problem freely admitting that every single person I have trained with and every single piece of training methodology I have read have influenced the "Cube" as a method. The idea stems from remembering being a kid in the gym and wanting to get stronger, but also wanting to "feel" something, like the "pump" or physical exertion when I trained. When I was training for just powerlifting, I lost that connection. I lost any passion for the gym whatsoever, and basically lost self-respect because my numbers in gear were climbing, but I looked and felt like shit, and without the gear I was a pussy. At 300-plus lbs., I could not even match weights I squatted at 220 lbs. from ages 19 to 22.

There was no one else to blame for me being in this shape or feeling this way but myself, but I am not the type of person to keep on the same path once I realize something isn't working. So I did a 180, lost the gear and just started training the way that I used to. Basically, I lift heavy on the main movement, and then bust ass like a bodybuilder after the main movement. I started looking at my body again, and started striving to look like what I feel a lifter should look like. I remember idolizing Kazmaier, Doug Young, Pacifico, Ronnie Coleman, Jay Cutler and many other lifters. (Keep in mind that I stopped giving a crap about definitions. I don't care if you are a weightlifter, powerlifter, strongman, bodybuilder, etc. We are all lifters.) I looked at the guy in the mirror, and I looked more like Bob the shoe salesman than a lifter. It was disgusting to see myself. So I had a deadlift routine that was given to me while I was training at Westside by Sakari Selkainaho. It was a

rotation of three-week waves:

**Week 1:** Barbell max lift

**Week 2:** Speed work

**Week 3:** Accessory work with no deadlift barbell movement

I had some success with it, but that was as far as the guidance went. I noticed that on my deadlift day for a max I was always super-aggressive and excited about the potential to lift heavy. So, I modeled a rotation that dropped the accessory day and implemented a rep day. It took off very well, and from there I had two guys at Lexen who were training with me, Jimmy Harris and Ryan Messmer. A few others would jump in time to time, but those two were my "training partners." We decided to implement the rotation in on the other lifts as well, and I laid them out in a way that allowed only one lift to be for a maximum each week, one for reps and one for speed. We looked at where we were weak, and there was a common theme for all of us. Training raw, we were all weak in the hole on our squats, so we decided to remove the box. To maximize the weight in the bottom, we removed the bands/chains to avoid the de-load in the hole. For geared lifters, the "hole" is where your gear is the strongest and offers the most reversal power, but for a raw lifter to always have the lightest weight in the hole just didn't transfer. We used straight weight and we did lots of reps. I dropped the dynamic bench day I was used to on the Westside Method because my bench was very fast anyway. So, I dedicated to overhead presses, bicep work and calf work on Sundays as well, along with three squat variations per week, two specifically for the quads. I wanted to cover every body part and be strong head to toe. Forget the idea that we don't need to train certain muscle groups. I agree that you can get by with some of that in gear, but why? Why not just be a strong, jacked, bad mother from head to toe?

People say it's ripping off the Westside Method. Well, why would I not begin with how I trained for 10 years? I feel like that is a testament to my respect for Lou, and his method. Understand that I trained the Westside method for a really long time, and I trained within the walls of Westside. I know the program works, the results are on "The Board" alongside numerous records and champions. Dave Hoff was my primary training partner at Westside, and I have to say he shaped my outlook on training more than any individual before or since. He laid the groundwork in my mind

to understand that I could modify things for me. That the only goal I should have is improvement, and finding what works for me. That is what helped me the most. My goal was to bring my raw base up and shift back to gear later on, so I wanted to blend philosophies that worked for me when I trained for raw competitions as a kid, and then also keep some of the ideas that would benefit my journey back into the gear. When I set out to organize my own training, I started with what I knew best. I liken it to a recipe. My grandmother makes amazing biscuits and gravy, so if I want to make my own, I'd start with her base – you know? There are Russian principles, 531 principles, bodybuilding principles. It's a combination of what I know. I would like to think the method has universal appeal, as I have had numerous people set PRs in and out of gear. I myself have seen my raw numbers climb more than 150 lbs. in the squat, 50 lbs. in the bench and 85 lbs. in the deadlift in since I took the gear off, and I hit an 82-lbs. PR in gear without training in it once in 10 months. The Cube allowed me to fix my weaknesses, build confidence and produce results every time I stepped on the platform.

The "Cube Method" you see today is not perfect, or bulletproof. I am constantly working new ideas into my rotation, but the basic outline is what I care about, and I will continue to try new things. The point is to keep evolving. One thing I do know for a fact: In every person I have worked with that competes in gear there are flaws that cannot be discovered or repaired until they take the gear off. So, let's say you want to do another method for your gear training. I say that's great, but you should look at your body as the vehicle that is lifting the weights, and do a cycle or two per year out of your gear completely. It can't hurt, right? The people I have worked with that have done just that, and they have seen tremendous improvements.

**BELL: I do like the idea of having some people use fewer boxes, bands and chains. However, those methods and techniques are amazing. In my opinion, bands and chains can give you a more optimal weight to produce more force on speed day. A big issue with the box seems to be proper execution. At ST we have had four guys squat more**



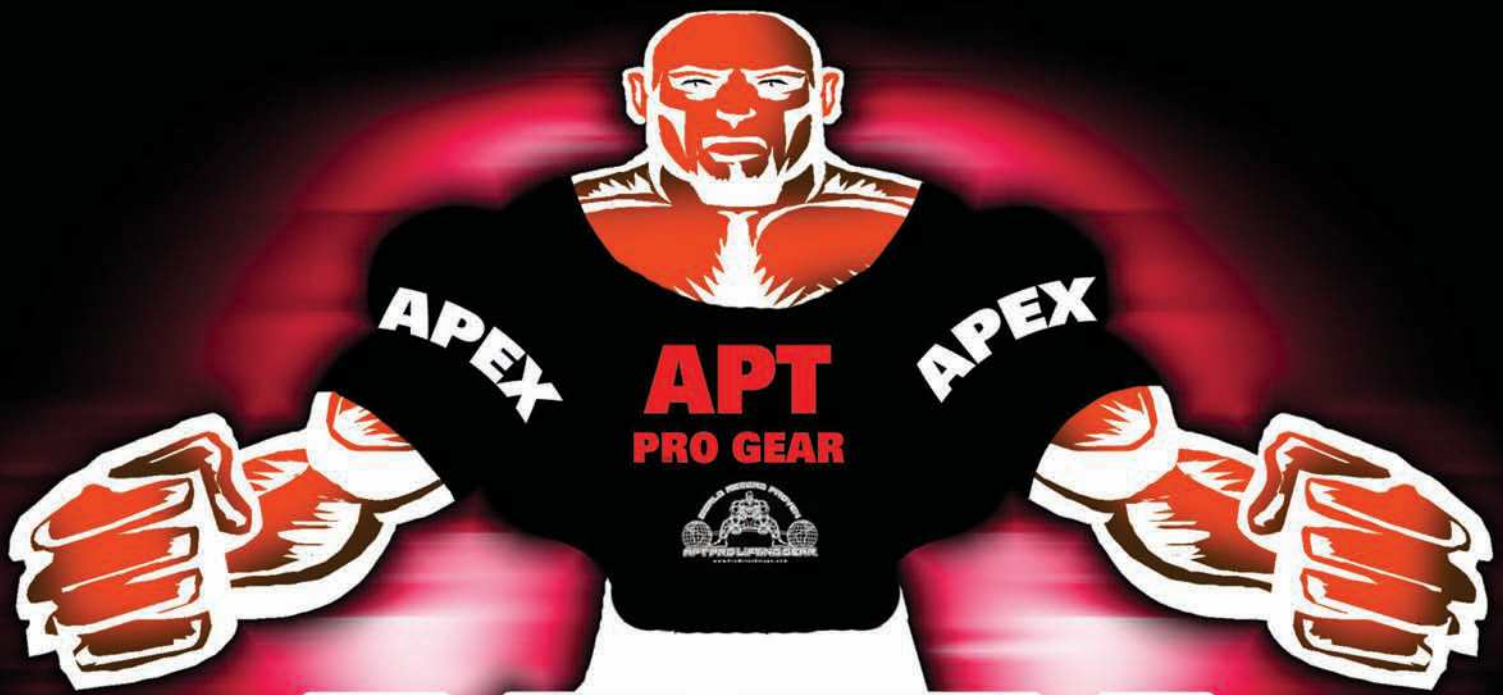
**than a grand, and we also slapped 100 lbs. on Rhino's squat with box squats. Are you kind of saying you feel the bands and chains are sometimes masking other issue or problems?**

**LILLY:** This is what I know: In a free squat, you can easily see where a person is weak. It is exposed instantly. I found ways to "cheat" the box and bands – so my box squat would indicate one thing and my free squat was something totally different. I was a horrible free squatter because I focused on being a good box squatter. We were coached on the box squat, so that is what I worked hardest to improve. However, as my box work improved, the further my form went from

being good for competition squats.

That is me; I'm not saying it's a fact for everyone. I needed more time squatting how I planned on doing so in a meet. As far as bands and chains go, I think they are amazing tools. I don't think lifters have any business using them until they have a complete understanding of barbell movements, and have shown an ability to progress and adapt with just a barbell. The gym can be intimidating enough for a beginning lifter. The worst thing people do is throw newbies into gear and start talking percentages, bands and chains. It's overwhelming and, I feel, unproductive. I look at the Russians. They





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are highly effective lifters with just barbell movements. I do feel that, for an advanced lifter, bands and chains could be a welcome change that puts them over the top, but overall I think their use has become too broad. Simplify and conquer. The box squat is not a mirror image of a free squat, especially for an unequipped lifter, so I feel like if you are going to use it you need good coaching on every rep.

**BELL:** Let's dig a little deeper into the Cube. I use the Cube. The first thing I noticed was that you need to be careful on your rep day. I see some lifters doing sets of five to eight where it looks like they are going to die on rep one. What would you like to explain to these people so they can get more out of their Cube rep day?

**LILLY:** Listen to your body and pay attention to the feedback it's giving you. If percentages don't allow you to get quality work in, then forget them. The percentages aren't written in concrete, they're a suggestion. The point of rep day is really to be an intermediate day that is supposed to build, but also help recover. There are days I'm supposed to do five sets of three, but I go in and do three sets of three. Why? Because my body says it was enough, and I got the most out of those three sets as possible. People need to listen to their bodies. I trained for six years before I knew what a "method" was. Looking back, if I had to call it something, I would call it the "train as hard as possible, go home and eat everything you can, sleep as much as possible and repeat method."

Too many people want a nice cute box to open up and be the magic potion or plan to make them successful. I've always held to the saying that "A bad plan you believe in is better than a perfect plan you don't." I get so sick of seeing guys try something for three weeks and say it is no good. I trained the Westside Method for seven years before I felt like I needed to change. People say I couldn't hang or wasn't strong enough. Well, some people die from eating peanuts. That doesn't make them a wimp, it just means they shouldn't eat peanuts. I totaled 2,000 lbs. at Westside and was damn proud to be a part of the gym while I was there, and to be a part of that history, coached by the best. About a year after my Westside days, I totaled



2,530 lbs. training the early Cube rotation at Lexen, and now 2,612 lbs. at Berea Barbell. I know where those totals stack up and they aren't near world-record level, but I've improved by having an open mind and trying new things. So, if you want to beat a dead horse in your training even though you've been stuck, that's your deal. I'm won't allow myself to do it. Take what information your body gives you, learn from it, process it, digest it. Just train. Don't get caught up in any method, just always strive to improve.

**BELL:** I'm happy to say my best total is better than yours, but we already know who is superior here. You have a team and many people around the country who you have helped, but I always say that if you can't help yourself, how are you going to help others? Give me an idea of some of your increases over the past 3 years.

**LILLY:** In the last three years I've seen my squat go from 900 lbs. legitimate, and deep at the 2009 SPF Pro Am, to a bullshit-high 1,005 lbs., then all the way back down to 800 lbs., crushing me when I moved to Lexen, then recently to a 1,008-lb. deep, legitimate squat at the XPC Arnold. My raw squat has gone from

650 lbs. to 826 lbs. in the past year.

In the bench I have progressed from 450 lbs. raw to 573 lbs., and in a bench shirt from 600 lbs. to 832 lbs. My deadlift increased from 670 to 810 lbs. For the longest time I was stuck in the mid 700s in gear, but only when I stripped the gear off and started depending on my muscles to do the lifting instead of the gear did my lifts take off. If you are stuck in your gear, just go a cycle without it and try to improve your raw lifts. Build up your weaknesses. To be exact, on April 14, 2012, I barely pulled 725 lbs. raw, and on Nov. 3, 2012, I pulled 804 lbs. That was all done on the Cube rotation.

**BELL:** How do you feel the Cube has helped your progression and the progression of others?

**LILLY:** It kept me in powerlifting. It allowed me to remove any expectations because everyone expected me to fail. I set small goals, surrounded myself with only positives and had a gym owner, Danny Dague, who said, "Do what makes you happy." That was all I needed to hear. For too long I had trained for other people. Finally I took ownership of my training. I get that kind of feedback from so many others, as well: They wanted to do something different but



were afraid to, or didn't know what to do. The Cube has opened some doors for a lot of people. As far as lifts go, I've got a few big lifters who will be competing soon. Britain just squatted 771 for an easy double and pulled 804 lbs. for an easy double. I've got beginners, women and every type of lifter you can imagine making gains. That has been the best part, hearing the stories of success in others. I have a "Cube Method Group" on Facebook, and it is just amazing. So many people there answer questions, share feedback and grow the method with their stories. I have even changed some of my training based on information shared there. The best part is that I have seen no negativity. Lots of people post videos and people give honest, constructive criticism. That may be what I am most proud of, the community it has brought together. As of right now there are more than 1,700 in that group.

**BELL: I am a fan of many different types of strength. Something you don't hear much about is training time. I like geared lifts and I like smashing big weights in gear, but good lord does it take a long ass time to train in gear properly. Give me some of your thoughts on training economy.**

**LILLY:** I think gear slows things down a lot, but I agree with Lou wholeheartedly that around the 45 minute mark your free testosterone starts to plummet, so you better have the bulk of your training done by then. At Berea Barbell we strive to be done in less than an hour. With abs and chit chat we are in and out in an hour and 15 minutes. Not to go on a rampage about different types of strength, but powerlifters have been extremely mislead about how strong we are. If you want to talk about real strength and where some lessons could be taken from, look at the world of Strongman. Those guys are animals on every kind of lift you could imagine, and they train their asses off. There is no universally accepted method for them, they just train. Look at my favorite lifter, Mikhail Koklyaev. He's world-class at weightlifting, powerlifting and Strongman. Maybe if we stopped with all the definitions, we would actually start getting strong in all areas. Another is Krzysztof Radzikowski. Learn that name. Why? Because if he ever chose to stop making money and being

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a dominant Strongman, he would kill the powerlifting records for 308 and probably 275. He competes from 290 to 305 lbs. and boasts best squats of 826 for a triple with no wraps, 600 bench for an easy double (also claims 640 as a 1RM), a 930 deadlift with straps and an 887 pull. Not to mention he looks like, with a contest diet, he could be on any bodybuilding stage in 12 weeks. Michael Sydorichev, Jon Anderson, Mariusz Pudzianowski and many more just like them. They could literally walk into a powerlifting meet and destroy some egos.

**BELL: Would you say most people would be worse off going too heavy, as in missing some lifts, than they would be just sticking to lighter weights that they can actually lift correctly?**

**LILLY:** In America we get too focused on the PR. For some reason, we only see a PR as progress. But what if it is performed with crappy form? Then where does your form go in pursuit of the next PR? It's not going to magically correct itself overnight. I adhere to this quote, which I read in a Sheiko article: "In Russia we search for perfection in form, because perfect form is the only way to new levels of strength." They work their technique to be the most efficient so the weights become easier, rather than worrying about PRs all the time. I'd tell someone to shut a workout down early in the name of good technique rather than hitting a PR with bad form any

day. Some say speed kills, but technique keeps you healthy, strong and gaining.

**BELL: I hear a bigger shift toward technique especially because it appears that, over the last few years, thousands of newbies have started to embark on some type of strength training protocol. Why should I care so much about form?**

**LILLY:** To put it mildly, technique is everything. Think about a golf swing. If you mess up even a little bit, the ball goes everywhere but the way you want it to. The results/feedback isn't so immediate in powerlifting. You can get away with bad technique for a long time before injuries occur or progression stops. Take the time to learn to do things the right way, and practice it every time you train. Too many guys would give up form for five more pounds. But as I stated before, where do you go once your form breaks down? How do you expect to hit new PRs with worsened technique? It's not only wrong to think you can, its madness. I am working with a client who had developed some of the worst habits I have ever seen in a lifter. She was a raw lifter training with a group of geared lifters. Instead of realizing the difference they had her training raw, like a geared lifter (sitting more back than down in the squat, raising her head and tucking severely on the bench, etc.). So we began by working only with weights she could perform exactly as I wanted to see them. And in 20 weeks, she not only surpassed her previous PRs, but she was smashing them. So again, technique can be everything.

**BELL: Okay, you convinced not lift like a slob. What are some ways I can work on getting "tighter" and improve positioning so my form can be better?**

**LILLY:** Time under the bar with weights you can actually learn and grow from. Stop testing and start training. If you continuously put maximum loads on a lifter, over time they will break down because they cannot recover fast enough. The pressure to PR over and over becomes too much, and injury or technical breakdown occurs. You and I have spoken about the recovery aspect of the Cube Method, and how you always feel "fresh" and ready to go. That is because you are building new muscle, giving your CNS time to restore itself and come back better. Your body has to accommodate to the ever-increasing load. So keep



your goals realistic and in sight. Have people you trust coach every rep you do if at all possible, and videotape yourself. Compare what you see to top lifters and find “cues” that help you to remember to lift better. My guys yell, “head up, chest high,” in the squat, and it helps me emphasize those areas that are commonly fail points in my lift. No one will be perfect from day one, but with a dedication to all the little things — and patience — you can surpass a lot of people who fizzle out by making mistakes over and over.

**BELL: Give me a few cues and a few exercises to improve my form on the Big Three.**

**LILLY:** Here are the cues that help my team the best:

SQUAT	BENCH	DEADLIFT
Head up	Pull the bar apart	Squeeze the bar
Chest down	Head down	Get your air right
Sit down (raw)	Raise (belly to the bar)	Keep your head neutral
Sit back (gear)	Squeeze (quads into the bench)	Glutes! Glutes! (fire glutes at lockout and don't hitch)
Knees out		

**BELL: I'm going to shout out some common default positioning and weaknesses, and I want you to tell us how to fix it with as few words as possible.**

**Problem solving the deadlift:** Lock-out: Moderate rep, moderate weight block pulls, band pull-throughs, and front squats.

**Strength off the floor in the deadlift:** Get your legs more into the lift. Imagine you are squatting the weight. I do all my training pulls standing on a 1- to 2-inch block. I only pull from the floor at a meet.

**Grip:** Nothing will build your grip like rep work on a knurled up deadlift bar. Never let go.

**My butt shoots up first before the weights leave the floor:** Refer back to what I was saying about “squatting the weight up”. A quick fix is to put a Safety Squat Bar on their shoulders and have them deadlift. After eating the floor a time or two, they will start to make changes.

**Problem-solving the bench:** Lock-out: Close grip board work for reps. It doesn't have to be maximum weight, just good heavy high rep work.

**Power off chest:** Spoto told me to start pausing an inch off the chest, and this made a huge difference. If you can,

a bow bar is great for this as well.

**Shoulder pain:** Lots of range-of-motion work with light bands. Warm them up slowly and realize that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

**Elbow flaring out too much:** I have people do palms facing dumbbell presses to strengthen the muscles that are lacking.

**Problem-solving the squat:** Speed out of the hole. I think people need to lose the box and start building up their bodies to drive out of the bottom. How can you expect to be the most powerful in the hole if that is where the weight is the lightest? Keep your weight constant and actually break parallel. Squat deeper than you have to. You will thank me when your squat PR happens.

**Rounding over:** Arch-back Good-mornings. I think people are afraid of GMs because they were told the only way to do them was with a million lbs. for maximum effort. Think about what you are doing. You are trying to fix a problem, so lower the weight way down and do rep ranges that will build muscles that will allow you to stay upright. Again, build, don't test.

**How to force your knees out:** I think the Hip Circle you have invented is a great tool to teach this when warming up, or just put a band around your knees and squat your body will reflex against them and learn to push out.

**How can I stop having my butt shoot up:** Lower the weight for a little while and fix hip and lower back strength. This usually occurs when people chase weight, not form. Just back it down for a few weeks, perform perfect reps with a weight you can manage, then start working back up. It's all about dedicating to the things you don't want to do, but they are most often the very thing you have been missing all along.

**BELL: When you competed at ST and won the Back Yard Meet of The Century, you were large and in charge (aka bloated.) You and I talked, along**

**with Jesse “Mega Mind” Burdick, and you decided to get some diet help. How did that work out for you? How do you feel now?**

**LILLY:** When I started this sport, I had two goals: look like I lifted weights and be strong. On that day last November I was very strong and extremely proud of the weight I lifted, but I looked at a picture of me with Jesse Rodgers after the meet, and I was embarrassed. I realize I had some meet bloat going on, but I was ashamed of how I looked. I did not set out to look like that. I had to take a Lasix the night before the meet just to breathe and sleep properly. I was so bloated I could hear the gargle in my breath (pulmonary edema) and I couldn't walk 100 feet without my back cramping and my feet swelling beyond control. I got really down on myself, then I got mad — and that's when you guys stepped in. You probably saved my life, at least in the short term, because I was just going to keep on gaining. We set out with a plan of doing CarbNite with some modifications, and set a goal of being 300 lbs. (down from 332 in November) by Jan. 1.

To say I was shocked by the results would be an understatement. Not only did I hit my goal of 300 lbs., but I slept better. I could run, walk, dunk a basketball, hike the Pinnacles in Berea, Ky., (one of my favorite pastimes growing up) and I had abs. I looked like a lifter and was still strong. So I stayed around 300 until February. I had the Animal Cage coming up, the XPC the next day and the ST March Madness Meet two weeks after that, so I needed to get game ready. I modified my diet to where I still ate very clean, but if I had a craving I would only indulge it after my clean food was eaten. This resulted in 320 lbs. of lifter that looked great, had abs, could still run and do “normal” things. I damn near had a PR day across the board. I just missed my PR squat and injured my shoulder on my PR bench attempt, but I felt stronger than ever. I carried little to no bloat on meet day, and I did it with food. No supplements. My meet cycles were identical, so the only variant was clean food vs. crap food. I am a huge believer in dropping down 5 to 10 percent after a meet, then rebounding up. I'm currently on my way to 295 lbs. Now I'm losing weight the right way, and slowly will have no impact on my strength like



crash dieting. To me this is what allows me to do so many lifting events close together and I feel 100 percent recovered. Food is king, if you ask me.

**BELL: Do you have any new Cube stuff that has been effective?**

Have there been chunks of feedback that have been implemented to make the Cube even more efficient?

**LILLY:** You would not believe the feedback I get. So many people on the Cube group on Facebook page give great advice. For example, one of the changes on the bench program is that guys are doing lower reps with higher weight and finding tons of gains. On the bodybuilding day, guys are leading with military one week, followed by close grip bench as a second movement, and then the next week they lead with the close grips and follow with the military. Not everyone in the group posts, but imagine having a third or more of that number posting frequently about things they have tested, and seen succeed or fail. It's amazing.

The main thing that doesn't change is the rotation of the heavy, rep and explosive days. Within that rule, anything goes. I am working on a second book

that shares specific outlines tested by individuals. I trust these people to give honest feedback, and when they post something people will try it out and give their feedback. It's a blessing for me to not be the only guinea pig.

**BELL: You have convinced thousands to try the Cube (including Ed Coan). Give us a "William Wallace speech" to inspire us all to hop on the Cube train.**

**LILLY:** The Cube kept me in powerlifting. It gave me hope, and self-belief when I had lost all confidence. I gave up everything to succeed in this sport, and I damn sure wasn't going to give up without listening to what my heart said. I believe in the Cube Method, and I believe in the people who have taken the time to message me and tell me that they are seeing gains again. I started this process to help myself. People paint themselves inside of a box, or an idea and they don't want to admit failure. Sometimes admitting failure is the only way to reverse the downward spiral. I gave 10 years of my life to training the Westside Method, and if Louie were standing before me today, just as any time I see him, I would

thank him for taking a chance on me. I just hate that I didn't hold up my end of the bargain. I totaled 2,430, 2,465 and 2,500 while at Westside. I won the Sweatt Shop Bench Contest in 2010 and got to train with some of the greatest lifters this sport has ever known. But for me, I had to close that chapter to really allow myself to move forward. I had to find a way to pick myself back up, and that was in raw powerlifting. I was a pretty good raw lifter back in my younger days, and that is what I remember being fun and carefree. So, I went back to that. I knew one day I'd come back to the platform of multi-ply, but for a while I just needed to do what felt right. So if you are out there, and what you are doing leaves unfulfilled, angry with your spouse, alienated from your friends and family, let me tell you there is a balance. It can be found. You just have to make the adjustments to make you happy and successful. I don't care what method you use, just strive to be the best you can and enjoy this awesome sport. For 10 years I thought I had to be someone I wasn't, and now that I do things my way, I realize that I was a pretty damn good lifter all along. I just forgot how to have fun.

**BELL: Give a parting shot that gives all the basic tools to be strong, jacked and healthier.**

**LILLY:** Do what makes you happy. Take the focus off always getting stronger. Take some time each year to focus on leaning up and eating healthier. Remember no matter what you do, whether it is perfect diet, drugs, training, etc., the number one hurdle to greatness is time. Don't always rush the process, take the time to digest what you are doing and enjoy the journey, because it can be over in an instant. At the end of your life, who is going to really care what you totaled? Do this sport for yourself, set small achievable goals, set mid-range goals and set goals you think are absurd, then get to work at chipping away at them. Consistency and time will be your biggest ally. Lastly, never believe anyone who says you can't. I started at 6 feet, 170 lbs., and now I have done things people used to laugh at me for saying out loud. Never feel for yourself, and never give up. You do that, and you have laid the cornerstone for being a champion. **PM**