

AJ ROBERTS

BY MARK BELL

PHOTOS BY JAMES HAYDEN AND ROB HAMMER

In March 2011, AJ Roberts (from the world famous Westside Barbell) shocked the powerlifting world when he added more than 175 lbs. to his total and broke the 308-lb. all-time world record total. Roberts quickly proved it wasn't a fluke, breaking the record two more times before the year's end. Roberts has even out-lifted the unstoppable Dave Hoff twice, but Hoff won on bodyweight.

Roberts hails from Southampton, England. He has the fourth-highest total of all time (2,855 lbs.), second-highest squat (1,205 lbs.) at 308 lbs., eight-highest bench (910 lbs.) at 308 lbs., and a 815-lb. deadlift. Think about that: a 1,200-plus-lb. squat, 900-plus-lb. bench and 800-plus-lb. deadlift. Roberts, 27, is making huge changes in his life. He has dropped 50 lbs., retired from powerlifting and no longer lives in Columbus, Ohio. He has relocated to sunny San Diego, Calif., and is focusing on a new challenge: CrossFit. That's right, the once 330-lb. rotund and red AJ Roberts is on his way to being a 230-lb. "CrossFittian."

MB: Why did you leave Westside?

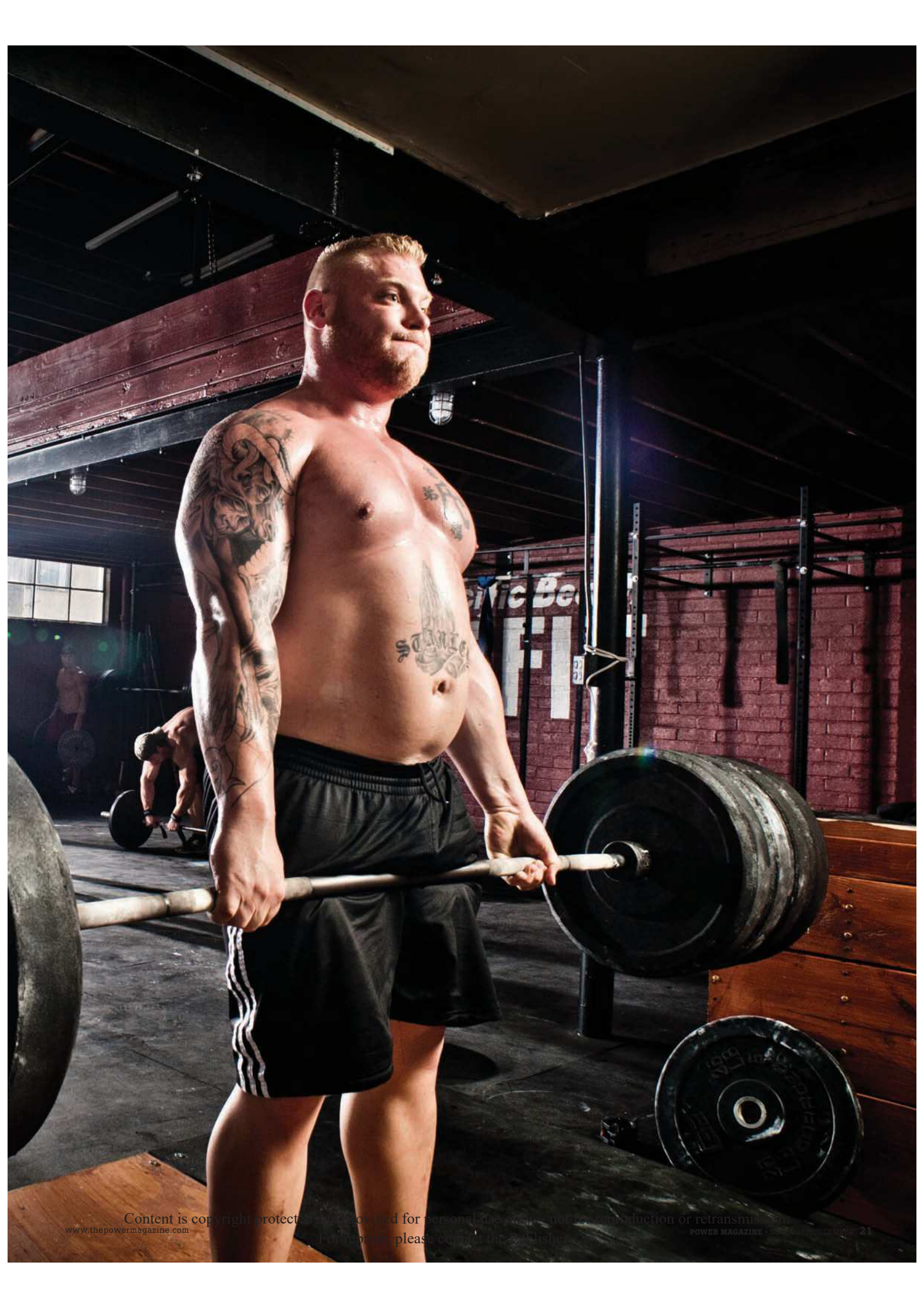
AJ: I was fat, sick and nearly dead. Seriously though, I gave everything I had to powerlifting over a 10-year span and, after reaching every goal I had set for myself, I knew it was time for me to walk away. Westside isn't the place for someone who isn't willing to push themselves to the extreme limit, so I knew I had to leave.

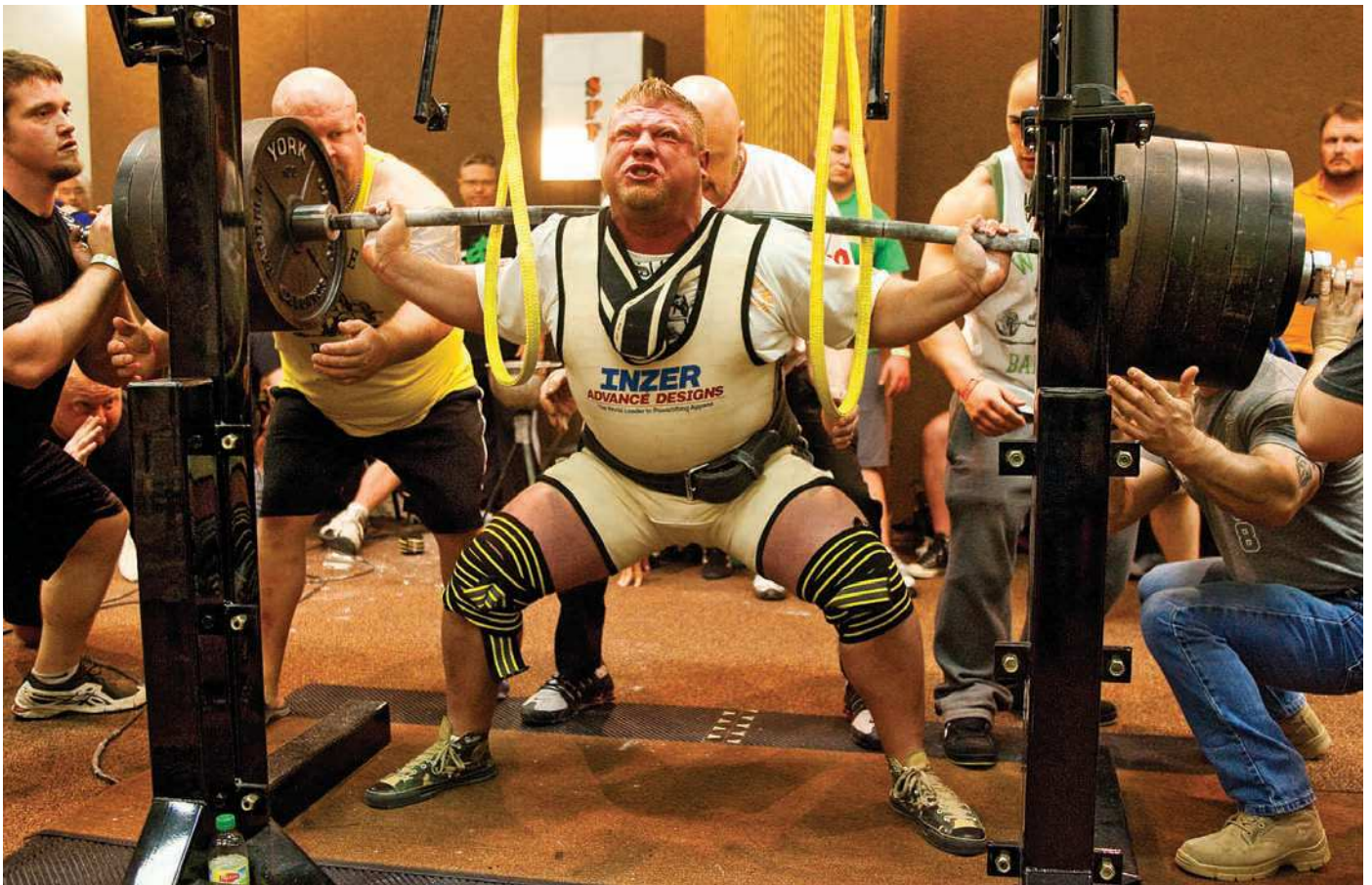
MB: Why do you feel other greats have left?

Chuck V, Panora, JL Holdsworth, Phil Harrington, Tim Harold, Jim Wendler, Matt Wenning – even the golden boy Dave Hoff left and came back.

AJ: People leave for their own individual reasons, so I really can't speak for anyone. The way I always saw it was that Louie is the owner and coach. It's his gym, his rules. If you don't want to play by those rules, then you know where the door is. If you can't perform or you're not willing to do what it takes to be the very best, then you shouldn't be there anyway.







MB: Why did you move to Columbus to train at Westside Barbell?

AJ: I was running a health club in Kentucky and was slowly beginning to hate life. I had built a garage gym with everything a powerlifter could want, but had zero training partners. I started driving up to Westside once a week to train with the night crew. I'd drive four hours one way, jump out my car, train, then turn around and drive four hours back home. After about two months of that, Louie finally convinced me to move. I knew if I wanted to be a world record holder, I had no other choice but to quit my job, find a place and move to Columbus.

MB: Explain how your bench press went up 40,000 lbs. once you got to Westside?

AJ: Extensions. I had never really done them before, but they became a staple exercise on max effort days. My favorite to rotate between JM presses, rolling dumbbell extensions and skull crushes with mini bands.

MB: Was Westside what you expected?

AJ: It was exactly what I expected. I had a long conversation with Dave Tate before I

moved there. He laid out the good, bad and the ugly, so I knew what I was getting into before I arrived.

MB: Do you force that British accent to appear more smartest, like Mark Bell?

AJ: It's totally fake, but the chicks dig it.

MB: From what I've heard, when you were training at Westside you never free-squatted, never wore the suit with straps up and never wore knee wraps. On the other hand, Dave Hoff (and probably oth-

ers) took the liberty to add some full-gear free squats into their training. How were you able to have the squatting success you did without ever doing a competition squat in the gym?

AJ: I never questioned Louie. I did exactly what he said and didn't vary from the plan. It worked for lifters before me and it's continued to work for the lifters who are still there. People have this misconception you need to be in your gear every time you



train. It's total bullshit. Get strong and smash weights.

MB: On the topic of squats, you currently have the biggest squat ever done at Westside barbell (1,205 lbs.). Talk to us about the progression from 1,000 to 1,205 while being at Westside.

AJ: I actually went backward before I moved forward. Coming into Westside, my best squat was 1,008 lbs. I had a lot of bad habits that had to be corrected, and although it sucked to swallow my pride and fix my technique, Louie assured me it would all come together. We widened my stance, increased my speed percentages and did a lot of three- to five-rep deadlift work, which carried over to both the squat and the pull. I also dragged the sled and hit the reverse hyper multiple times a week.

MB: I remember you going backward. I was like, "What the hell is going on with that guy?" Many of us get stuck and we need someone to tell us that things will work out if we stick with it. Can you elaborate more on those bad habits that didn't allow you to progress?

AJ: Oddly enough, it was only my squat that went backward. My deadlift and bench were both moving up, so we knew that I was getting stronger, but something wasn't clicking with the squat. My hips had gotten so stiff that I was leaning too far forward to compensate and wasn't pushing my knees out. I started doing a lot of different stretches and mobility work, added in adductor and abductor specific exercises, changed my stance and positioned the bar slightly higher on my back so I could keep my torso upright. At first it felt terrible, but it didn't take me long to get used to the changes. That's when things really started to take off.

MB: You mentioned widening your stance. Was this mainly for a training effect or did you use the same stance in meets, as well?

AJ: I found I wasn't as strong in a super wide stance (touching mono) at meets. I would use a slightly narrower stance and then vary it in training. I did the same thing with my deadlift.

MB: Lay out a sample one-month program that you followed leading to that massive 1,205-lb. squat.

AJ: I talked a lot with Donnie Thompson before laying out my program for the 1,205-

lb. squat. I took his suggestion of squatting twice a week and came up with a plan I thought would get me to my goal. Fridays I performed dynamic effort work keeping the weight moderate and sets high: eight to 10 x2 and then on max effort days I would free squat raw up to a max with various bars and resistance.

MB: So on dynamic effort day (your speed day) you wore squat briefs and on the max effort day you went raw? In this time period, what did you do for your deadlift?

AJ: Exactly. I'd work up to four or five plates (depending on the resistance) raw on speed day, then throw on the briefs for my sets. On max effort day I'd just use a belt and sometimes knee wraps, depending on how I felt. For deadlifts, I'd speed pull and do assistance exercises that targeted the hips, glutes and hamstrings. Other than that, I didn't put any specific focus on the deadlift. I wanted to focus as much as possible on the squat.

MB: Was conditioning ever part of your program while at Westside?

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AJ: I dragged the sled and pushed the pace on speed days. I found there was a fine line between being conditioned enough to finish a meet and conditioning that affected my recovery and strength gains.

MB: You mastered the use of the Super Duper Phenom bench shirt. What techni-

cal cues do you use when you bench?

AJ: Arch, belly up, spread the bar ... explode.

MB: Give us your top tips for building a big-shirted bench.

AJ: Only bench once a month in your shirt; build your raw strength off boards

(two- and three-boards especially; do heavy extensions.

MB: What about all these "bench-only" guys who say they have to be in their bench shirt every week to make progress?

AJ: Westside has two full-meet lifters who have both benched more than 900 lbs., and four or five full meet lifters who have benched 800-plus. I don't think there is any other gym or system in the world that comes close. If people chose to ignore the facts, then that is their choice.

MB: What do you do in the weeks between? Your best bench is 905 lbs., so how does a 545- to 565-lb. raw floor press help prepare you to handle 905?

AJ: You've got to think of the shirts in terms of percentages and not lbs. Instead of saying you get 400 lbs. out of a shirt, you need to think of it as the shirt is giving you a 30 to 40 percent increase in what you can lift. The stronger you are raw, the larger the carryover.

MB: You mentioned that you feel raw board work is important. How did you incorporate it? How many reps and sets?

AJ: I did board work once a month alter-



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nating boards. It was always on max effort day for a single.

MB: Now that you're in San Diego, how often do people accuse you of hiding a beach ball under your shirt?

AJ: Beach ball? Better than a giant exercise ball like back in Ohio.

MB: Is it true that you got into powerlifting because kids kept beating you up because your name is Ashley?

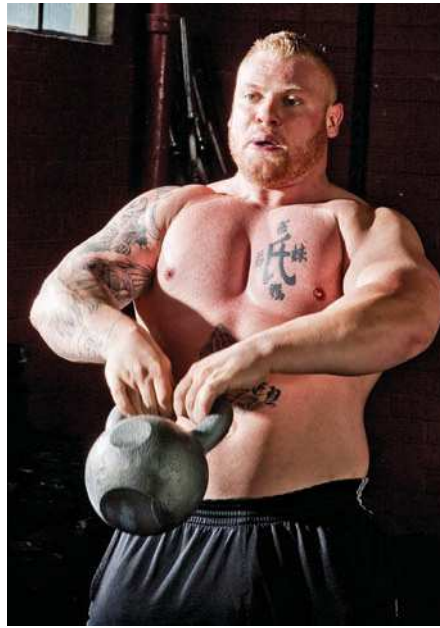
AJ: That'd make a good story, but unfortunately, no. I got into powerlifting after being banned from high school sanctioned sports due to a stupid recruitment rule.

MB: Why did you switch back to pulling conventional at your last meet?

AJ: I felt stronger. I was wrong.

MB: Speaking of deadlifting, explain to me how in the hell are you so explosive off the floor in the deadlift? Is it your mindset? Are you super-duper mad because someone ate the rest of your cheesecake or something? Also, tell us about what you did to clean up your weak point: the lockout.

AJ: You have to get jacked up for the



deadlift and attack the bar. Too many people pussy-foot around and are timid when they pull. It's the last lift of a meet and, to some degree, you have to trick your mind and forget about everything else you've done that day. You have to convince yourself that you feel stronger than ever.

Adrenaline is one hell of a drug, so learn how to tap into your body's resource.

MB: The mix of cross training and fitness scares the hell out of most strength athletes. But you, my chubby little friend, have not only embraced CrossFit, you're a 255-lb. CrossFitian! Tell us about some of your new goals.

AJ: Quite simply, my goal is to win the CrossFit games. People can doubt me, hate on me, call me crazy, etc. It's nothing I haven't heard before.

MB: Wow, that's a huge statement! Even though CrossFit is just entering the mainstream, the level of competition is through the roof. How do you plan accomplishing such a huge task?

AJ: The same way I broke the world record. Discipline, sacrifice, seeking out those who are smarter than me and, above all else, absolute belief in myself.

MB: Do you feel your strength will be an asset? I know how strong some of these guys are and I'd guess that by the time you get down to your 220- to 230-lb. "CrossFit fighting weight," your strength

and their strength will be similar.

AJ: It's certainly given me a head start on a lot of things. I believe strength is the foundation for any sport, so it's nice to already have plenty of that. I still follow the conjugate principles but obviously right now maximal strength is no longer the main focus.

MB: Many of our readers may not know that you have been involved in online marketing for years and have even helped me with some projects. Tell us a little about your work.

AJ: I mainly consult with information marketers who have digital products like e-books, audio courses, video training, software, seminars, coaching programs, etc. I help them develop and execute their online marketing strategies. Most recently I have been working with high-level entrepreneurs and small business owners.

MB: Let's talk about a few peeps and what they mean to you. You can thank them, hate them or whatever.

AJ: Iron Gladiators owner Brent Miksell is the guy who started it all. He was the first to believe in me and taught me the disciplines needed to make it in this sport. His early



guidance shaped me as a lifter and set me on the path that I have traveled. I consider him a close friend and I'm honored I was able to learn from such a legendary lifter.

Very few people know this, but Dave Hoff was my first training partner at Westside. He pushed me to be a better lifter, and I hope I

did the same for him. We spoke often, were fierce rivals and shared a mutual respect, when all was said and done.

Simply put, Westside Barbell is my home. I owe Louie and my training partners more than I could ever repay. Guys like Luke Edwards showed me what it means to truly push things further than anyone else. I was inspired every day I walked into that place, and although I'm no longer there, I'm excited to see what the future holds.

MB: Lastly, talk about how you developed the mental capacity to accomplish what some have thought you'd never accomplish. Tell Power readers how you staved off self-doubt to become a world record holder.

AJ: This could be an entire article by itself, but I'll try to summarize. You have to train your mind the same way that you train your body. You must protect it from the negative and feed it with the positive. Be mindful of what you watch, what you read and who you allow to influence you. Learn to control your thoughts, emotions and actions. Trust your gut, face your fears head on and never quit. **PM**

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