

INTERVIEW

AJ ROBERTS interviewed by Mike Westerdal of Critical Bench



POWERHOUSE—AJ Roberts pushing his squatting power to the limits

Critical Bench: AJ, when did you move to the US and what brought you over from England?

AJ Roberts: I was always into basketball growing up and dreamed of coming to the US to play in college and then hopefully the NBA. I know most of you reading this are probably like WTF, but I ended up being a skinny little runt. I used to come over as a foreign exchange student and landed in a football town, though and found out I much rather preferred hitting people than running around bouncing a ball. This is when I began lifting weights seriously and competed in my first powerlifting meet my senior year.

CB: What weight class and feeds do you compete in?

AR: I think in my first competition I lifted in the 198 class, but that was many fat rolls ago. Right now I compete as a light 308 weighing in usually between 290 and 300. I know most people would probably cut to the 275 class, but I freaking hate cutting weight with a passion.

As for federations I have tried just about every fed there is, but now compete mainly in the IPA & SPF. I don't really have a preference though. As long as it is a well run meet that is for the lifters I am happy to step on the platform.

CB: Cutting does suck. What are your best competition lifts?

AR: Right now my best competition lifts are a 1008 squat, 750 bench and a 755 deadlift. I haven't been able to put all three together in the same meet so my best total is 2430. Obviously I'd like to change that and put all my best together, but if there is one thing I have learned with this sport it is to be patient.

CB: I'm sure we'll see the tri-fecta soon. When did your lifts really take off or when did you make the most improvement? Was there one thing that you can remember that really took you to the next level or was it little by little, pound by pound the entire way?

AR: I can't really say there was a time when my lifts really took off. I was very fortunate to train with Brent Mikese! pretty much from the get-go and was lucky enough to make huge improvements year after year. Once Brent stopped training, things became much harder for me to make improvements. I went from adding 50 lbs. to my squat every meet to almost 2 years without a PR. I think this was mainly a mental thing though, as my training lifts constantly im-

helps you with powerlifting today?

AR: During my 4 years at Idaho I was fortunate enough to work with nearly every sport. I saw a lot of people waste the talent they had by thinking that alone would get them to the next level, but then you'd have the one kid who was 100% committed to doing whatever it took.

They'd be the kid who stayed late after practice, came back for extra sessions in the weight room, didn't drink, didn't party, kept their grades up, etc. These were the people who were always on the winners' platform and made it to the next level.

Unfortunately, for the amount of athletes there were, these people were few and far between. What it did teach me was that if you want something bad enough, it is there for the taking—you just have to do what no one else is willing to do.

CB: That's a great statement, "What are you willing to do?" Moving along, why would most people never make it training at Westside?

AR: I don't think most people could handle it mentally. The pressure to be the best is at its highest. Everyone in there is gunning for the number one spot and if you're not willing to give it everything you've got, then you better stay the hell away. No one gives a crap about what you got going on in your personal life or if you don't feel good that day. You're there to do one thing and one thing only, and that is to get stronger.

CB: Awesome! Check your problems at the door and train! What are the top 3 missing components of a strength program?

AR: Technique—You can have the best, freaking program out there, but if you have no clue how to perform a lift correctly then you might as well not bother showing up. I have seen people instantly add a ridiculous amount of weight to their lift just by correcting the movement pattern.

Someone to call BS on those who are slacking—Look I couldn't care less if you had a hot date that kept you out all night—when you step in the gym, your better bring your A-game. Sitting there thinking about getting strong is not going to get you anywhere.

Mind Control—This is one of the most neglected areas of any program, be it strength or anything else. If you learn to control your mind, visualize your success,

(continued on page 92)



Vlad Alhazov - Team MHP Member
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(continued from page 8)

control your emotions and rid yourself of negative thoughts, then there really isn't anything else standing in your way.

CB: Great tips. What's your favorite lift and why?

AR: Despite having issues lately, I love to squat. If I never had to do another lift but the squat, I'd be fine with that. There is just nothing like putting 1000+ lbs. on your back and going down and up with it.

CB: I'll take your word on that (grrr)! Do you think powerlifting of any sort will ever be popular with the general public, like strongman is? Why or why not?

AR: If we can build a fan base then I don't see why it couldn't be popular, but we have to start going where the fans are. I've been lucky enough to lift at the Arnold Classic several times—once on the main stage and once at a booth. Both times the crowd was insane screaming for you to lift the weight. The people didn't care about gear, drugs, what federation you were lifting in—they just wanted to see you move some heavy weight.

CB: That's what powerlifting is really all about. Why do you personally think that even as a pro, a lifter can't earn a living as a powerlifter?

AR: With the way the sport is, sponsors just aren't willing to pay out a whole bunch of money when they don't get the return on their investment. That being said, in the last few years I've seen more money meets than ever before, which is a good sign. Hopefully lifters will support the companies who are giving and it will continue to grow.

CB: Hear that everybody? Support the companies that support you... hint, hint. Tell us about your new bench product you're coming out with.

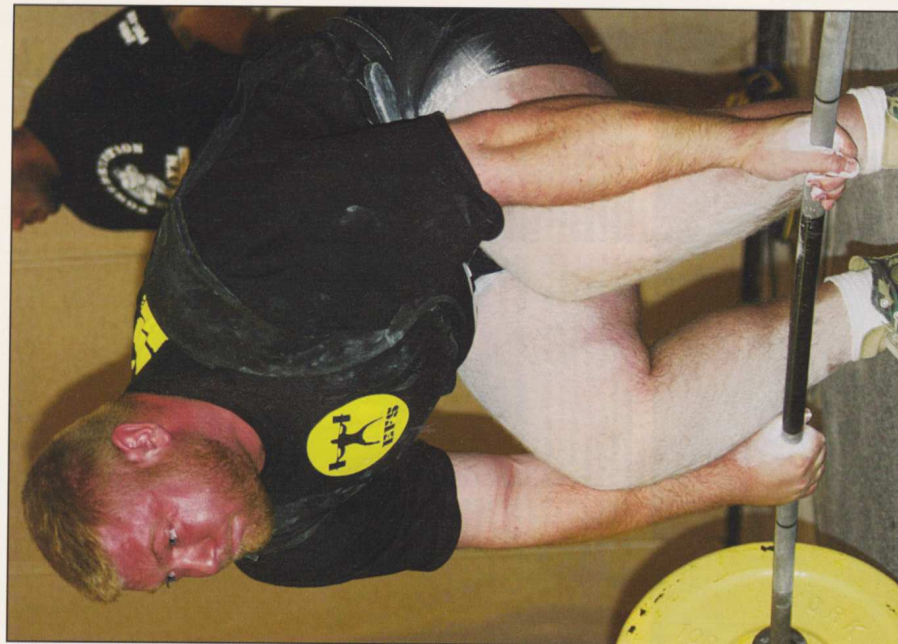
AR: It's something I've been thinking about releasing for a few years now. Back when I first started out I really struggled with my raw bench. I was stuck at 270 for the longest time and no matter what I tried, it just didn't seem to budge. Then I stumbled onto a 6 week program that finally took me over the 3 plate mark. Since then, I used the program whenever I'd get stuck and managed to get to 525 raw. I started sharing the program with some training partners and then clients who I was personal training with and they got some amazing results—adding between 20-50 lbs every time. I've just been sitting on it, but I realized that there are a lot of beginners out there, especially those who are not powerlifters who could benefit from it.

CB: Can't wait to check it out when it's ready. What are the top 3 mistakes most people make when benching?

AR: Man, people make so many mistakes it's hard to narrow it down, but I guess the 3 things that seem to crop up no matter if you're raw or equipped are the following:

Not pulling the bar apart — You really should focus on squeezing the bar as hard as possible and imagine you're pulling it apart. This will keep your elbows tucked as well as activate more muscles during the lift.

Not tucking the elbows — This is a lot easier



AJ Roberts' best deadlift is 755 pounds; his next goal is to deadlift up to 800 pounds!

to do raw, but I think it is the number one reason people fail to touch in their bench shirts.

Not staying tight — To really get good at the bench press you have to learn how to keep yourself in position throughout the whole lift.

CB: Do you think even someone who doesn't compete in powerlifting can benefit from a powerlifting routine?

AR: As long as your goal is to get stronger then I don't see why someone who doesn't compete on the platform wouldn't benefit. I've seen everyone from teenagers to little old ladies make improvements following powerlifting routines.

CB: This is off topic, but what about someone who has no intention of competing—would you ever recommend they use powerlifting gear?

AR: You know, the funny thing is most of the geared lifters continue to get stronger raw even though they train in their gear most of

the time. So maybe not to the extreme that we do, but I don't see why someone couldn't use a pair of knee wraps and a loose pair of briefs to protect the knees and hips while squatting, even though they don't compete.

CB: How do you feel about legal hormone replacement therapy?

AR: I don't really have any feelings towards it. I think what a person chooses to do to his or her body is up to them. It is not my place to judge or to say whether something is right or wrong.

CB: Have you ever heard someone say that a lifter is only strong because they are on steroids? What do you think of a statement like that?

AR: I think the person making the statement is probably highly uneducated on the topic and is using it as an excuse as to why they are not bettering themselves.

CB: Great answer. What do you like to do when

you're not training?

AR: My life is actually pretty simple. When I'm not training I am either hanging out with my wife and our two dogs or I'm in my home office working. I work full time online, which gives me a lot of freedom to do what I need to do when it comes to lifting.

CB: Tell us what's the deal with all the bloody noses when you squat, does that happen a lot?

AR: I've had some pretty brutal explosions up on the platform and a few head judges have ended up getting sprayed, but for me if I don't bleed it just means the weight wasn't heavy enough.

CB: What pisses you off the most about the internet as it's related to powerlifting?

AR: The fact that no matter what gets posted there it's always a bunch of negative anonymous people who have to bitch and moan about something. It's getting out of hand. If you went just by what you read on the internet, you'd think everyone in this sport hated each other.

CB: That's true. Luckily it's not like that at the meets. What are your goals this year?

AR: First and foremost my goal is to lift over 1000 lbs. in the squat again and to total 2500. After that I'm going to focus on pushing my bench and deadlift up to 800 lbs.

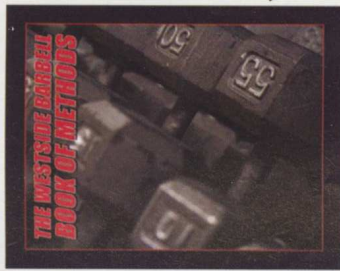
CB: How would you like to be remembered when you're done competing? **AR:** I don't plan to ever be done, so I guess as the guy who out-lasted everybody.

CB: Thanks for taking the time to chat with us today. AJ, it's been a pleasure picking your brain and finding out what makes you tick. Good luck hitting those numbers this year and keep us posted on your bench product.

In closing, is there anyone you'd like to thank? **AR:** Thanks, Mike. I want to say thank you to my beautiful wife for putting up with my obsession and supporting me for all these years. Thanks to Brent Mikesell for teaching me what it takes to be a champion, to Dane Tate and Elitefts.com for everything you have done over the past few years, and to Louie Simmons and everyone at Westside for pushing me to the limits day in and day out.

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