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Dieter's Room

In B.C., Canada, 71-year-old Dieter Stamm invests in the sport of weightlifting and the young athletes he coaches.

By Emily Beers

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All Photos: Kim Bellavance Photographie

It's a Saturday morning at Semiahmoo High School in White Rock, B.C.

It looks like an ordinary day at a weightlifting club. A dozen or so athletes, aged 9 to 25, are cleaning and snatching in a very unspectacular, almost beat-up weight room. The white walls are nearly barren, the weights look worn and abused, and the smell of chalky must fills the air. It looks like your typical underfunded sports club. And it is.

1 of 9

An older man, the head coach, is dressed in casual, almost sloppy attire. He circulates the room and gives cues to every lifter. He looks excited to coach each athlete he approaches.

"Finish the pull," Dieter Stamm yells to a young athlete in a genuine but firm voice, mimicking the shrugging motion to demonstrate what he means. The 9-year-old boy nods and tries the snatch again. Stamm smiles and tells him, "Good job. That was a good lift." The boy looks pleased.

Stamm moves on to the next athlete, and the next, treating each one with as much care as the previous. The energy and the rare sincerity in his voice give the impression that it's his first day on the job, that he has big plans to revive this beaten-down club.

The truth is it's not even a job at all. Stamm certainly isn't getting paid to be here.

The last time Stamm missed a day of training was in the spring of 2000—13 years ago.

The 71-year-old has been coaching at Semiahmoo High School for 43 years. The last time he missed a day of training was in the spring of 2000—13 years ago. And despite his humble working environment, the club—his club—doesn't need reviving.

Today, membership is made up of 30 devoted athletes. The club's largest enrollment was in 1994, when it had 125 lifters.

Stamm doesn't care that membership is down today. It's not about the numbers to him. And it's certainly not about the money. It's not really even about Olympic weightlifting. It's about watching young athletes become stronger and more successful human beings.

And when you take a moment to really look at Dieter's room, you'll see the success stories. Every athlete, every bar, every rusty plate has a story. And Stamm knows them all. When you spend a bit of time with Stamm in his

unspectacular room, you'll discover something spectacular is actually going on in there—and has been for 43 years.

A Quick History

On property looking out at the Pacific Ocean in White Rock, Dieter's front yard is littered with weightlifting equipment. From benches to rusty bars to something that looks like an old-school lat pull-down machine, the pile of beaten-up lifting paraphernalia looks like it's been there for years.

"A friend of mine had a home gym with all that equipment. When he died, I bought it all off him. But it's all custom designed, and I can't figure out how to put it all back together," Stamm says, laughing. "Maybe one day someone will have use for it."



For 43 years, Stamm has taught young athletes the value of lifting heavy things.



The shoes don't make the lift.

Stamm knows it's unlikely the pile of weightlifting gear in his yard will ever be put to use, but he doesn't like wasting things. That's also why he still uses 1990s-style printer paper with holes in the sides; he sees potential in everything and everyone.

Upstairs, Stamm takes a seat on a very worn couch and starts talking about his life and how he eventually got involved in the relatively obscure sport of weightlifting.

"I was born in Poland in 1942," he begins.

During World War 2, his family escaped to Austria, and after the war they settled in Germany. Stamm's father knew opportunities would be greater in North America, so he uprooted the family when Dieter was just 10 years old.

"When I left Germany, my uncle said to me, 'You're going to be a teacher one day.' I still remember that," Stamm says.

A high-school student living in Canada, Dieter decided he wanted to become strong.

"I was 6-foot-2 and 125 lb. When I turned sideways, I disappeared," he says. This led him into bodybuilding and eventually Olympic weightlifting.

Stamm started coaching Olympic weightlifting when he was a student at the University of British Columbia in the 1960s.

"I worked with track-and-field athletes. It was actually a study about the effects of weightlifting on track-and-field athletes," Stamm says.

The study involved two groups. The control group trained strictly on the track, while Stamm worked with the experimental group, which added weightlifting on top of sport-specific training.

"It still astonishes me. After a few months, the experimental group was leaps and bounds ahead of the control group," he says.

The results only made Stamm a bigger believer in the weight room.

After studying education at UBC, Dieter was hired by Semiahmoo High School in 1970, where he started teaching chemistry and opened the school's weightlifting program.

“I damn near remember everyone’s personal bests.”

—Dieter Stamm

“I knew within two months of being at Semiahmoo that it was exactly what I had been looking for,” Stamm says.



Forty-three years later, Stamm looks back with nothing but happiness: “When people ask me how many children I have, I say, “I have three biological ones, and 11,000 to 12,000 others. And I can tell a story about each of them.”

Many of these stories find their roots in his weight room.

“I damn near remember everyone’s personal bests. And if I don’t remember, then I can look it up. I have it written down somewhere,” Stamm says.

Stamm smiles and begins recounting one of the countless stories of personal triumph he has witnessed over the years:

“A 13-year-old girl named Shiloh came in once. She weighed 200 lb. She didn’t have the easiest upbringing. She didn’t even know her own dad. She walked in and said, ‘I’ve come to join the weight-losing club,’” Stamm laughs.



A little like a Canadian Mike Burgener, Stamm welcomes anyone who wants to lift.

"I said, 'Sweetheart, this isn't the weight-losing club. It's a competitive weightlifting club. But if you join and you train hard, you'll probably lose weight.'"

Dieter looks up and smiles: "And she did. She lost about 20 kg."

He adds: "She went from an insecure Grade 8 student to a confident young woman—physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. And she ended up winning the gold medal at the 2004 Canadian Junior Weightlifting Championships."

Stamm admits it's harder to get kids to sign up for weightlifting these days than it was 20 years ago.

"Young people then, they were much more eager to try new things. Kids today are more reluctant," he says.

**"You have a credit-card vertical.
You need to do some squats."**

—Dieter Stamm

"I try to recruit volleyball and basketball players sometimes. I tell them, 'You have a credit-card vertical. You need to do some squats,'" Stamm says.

But whether he has 125 kids to coach or just a group of six, Stamm doesn't care. He focuses on the people who are there, and he teaches them everything he knows. And the kids can feel the culture, the traditions and the years of stories when they step into Dieter's room.

Beyond the Call of Duty

It's one thing to show up and coach every day, especially if it's both your passion and your livelihood. It's quite another when you coach an underfunded sports team in Canada.

Dieter doesn't earn a cent from coaching; in fact, he's paying to keep the club afloat—out of his own pocket.

He leaned in and whispered: "I need to whisper because my wife is upstairs and she doesn't know this. From 1970 to 2006, I put in CA\$60,000 of my own money that I'll never get back."



***Great coaches have many different characteristics,
but they all share a passion for sport.***

He continued: "Since then, I've put in another \$30,000."

He explains that every lifter who joins the club has a cash account and is expected to put \$50 into his account each month. That money accumulates and is used directly to cover that athlete's costs—things like plane rides to competitions, entry fees, lifting shoes and uniforms.

If cash is tight, an athlete might skip a month or two of payments. And if cash is really tight, then Dieter steps in and helps fund that athlete's costs. This is something he is happy to do.

Contributing his own money "has been worth it because I've never left an athlete at home," Dieter says with a proud grin.

Jason Noel, a CrossFit athlete who trains with Stamm, explains that this is just who Dieter is.



Stamm's style is characterized by short, simple cues learned over four decades of coaching the Olympic lifts.

"He's so generous," Noel says. "He doesn't care who you are. He'll invest time coaching you if you express interest in his sport."

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Despite Stamm's willingness to coach anyone who walks through the door, Semiahmoo has seen the likes of many great Olympic weightlifters over the years. Canada's

Christine Girard—a bronze medalist at the 2012 Olympic Games—trained at Semiahmoo for a while leading up to the London Games.

But the big world-championship events aren't what Stamm's all about, explains Noel. Stamm's about the day-to-day happenings.

"Dieter will call you on your birthday, take you to the symphony, and if you've ever lifted for him, you're a member of Semi for life," Noel says.

This nurturing side of Stamm is also present when he coaches, which Noel loves.

"Too many coaches want to tell you everything they know about the history of Olympic lifting in a 30-minute speech, and then give you advice on every single lift, and honestly you just want to tell them to shut up," Noel says.

He continues: "Dieter keeps things very simple."

Stamm isn't convoluted and overly technical. Instead, he opts for simple cues like, "Finish the pull," "Hit hard" and "Lock tight."



The Semiahmoo uniform hasn't changed in decades because Stamm won't fix something that isn't broken.

"He lets you learn through the movements and your mistakes, which are vital in the sport," Noel adds.

Kane Morgan is another of Dieter's athletes.

He attended Semiahmoo High School as a teenager. A former university rower, Morgan began CrossFit last year, and he knew he needed extra Olympic-weightlifting coaching. He immediately remembered Stamm.

"He welcomed me with open arms and gave me a pair of Olympic-weightlifting shoes. They're blue suede lifting shoes imported from Poland," Morgan says. "They're awesome."

Morgan's not the only one who sports the blue suede; in Dieter's room, every single athlete wears the same shoes.

"People make fun of our shoes, but they also recognize that they're the best shoes out there," Dieter says. "They don't make them like that anymore."

Stamm's athletes' competition uniforms are also steeped in tradition. Employing the "if it's not broken, don't fix it" mentality, Stamm has been using the same seamstress since the 1970s. The small dance and gymnastics company in East Vancouver has hand-sewn more than 200 uniforms for Stamm's lifters in the last 43 years.

"Many of our younger athletes complain because they're not Adidas, they're not the top brands, but we're not going to change. Those suits are us," Stamm says.

Twenty-six-year-old Morgan loves his suit. To him, getting his competition uniform felt like a rite of passage. He didn't care that the bottom part of the uniform is white and pretty much transparent. Wearing it and representing Semiahmoo makes him feel part of something special.

"It's such an amazing environment at Semi," says Morgan, who travels two hours each way on the bus and train from Vancouver to White Rock just to train with Stamm twice a week.



There's no reason to retire when you love what you do.

"Dieter takes coaching to a holistic level. The movements themselves are just a medium to create something more long lasting," Morgan says.

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—Kane Morgan

Recently, this "holistic" coaching meant that the astute 71-year-old coach set Morgan up with his new girlfriend.

Stamm explained his clever matchmaking endeavor: "We were at a competition in Port Alberni. This girl was at the other end of the gym, and I could tell Kane noticed her. He was looking at her," Stamm explains. "So I grabbed him by the hand and took him over to her and said, 'Rachel, do you have a boyfriend?' She didn't. So I introduced them. And now they're dating. That's all it takes," he says with a satisfied grin.

Retirement Plan?

Stamm tried to retire one time back in 2006. But it didn't work out for him.

"I hired a coach from Ontario, but it was a nightmare. He lasted for about a month and then he got rid of himself," Stamm says.

"I realized that I can't give this club to anyone else," he says. "I can't quit."

**"If you know something, you
have to share it with others."**

—Dieter Stamm

The reason he can't quit is simple: "What kind of a man is a man that doesn't make the world a better place?" he asks. "If you know something, you have to share it with others."

And so Stamm will continue to share his knowledge as long as he's able, accepting no financial compensation in return.

And now with the growth of CrossFit, Stamm has another reason to stick around and continue to coach. In the last few years, Stamm has had a number of eager CrossFit athletes show up at his door looking for coaching. And he welcomes them all with open arms.

"The Olympic-weightlifting community is 100 years old. And CrossFit is a new community. And they enjoy learning from the Olympic-weightlifting community. They want to do it like us, but they don't know how, so I feel it's my obligation to help CrossFit athletes," he says.

Noel remembers the first time he stepped into Dieter's room.



Old-school apparel for old-school strength.

"I started at the bar. It took me five long and agonizing months to work up to a 60-kg snatch and a 100-kg clean and jerk," he says. Today, Noel can snatch 90 kg and clean and jerk 125 kg.

These small improvements are the reason Stamm shows up every single day.

"One small step in a positive direction, one more kilogram excites me," Stamm says.

"Everyone has the talent to improve. You can't tell people they don't have any talent. There's a saying that quitters never win and winners never quit, but if you never quit and you never win, then you're an idiot," he laughs. "If someone really never improves, I might tell them to join the table-tennis team, but in 43 years that hasn't happened yet."

That's why retirement isn't in his near future.

"I'm there every day. Training starts at 5 p.m., but I'm usually there early—by 4:30 p.m.—because I'm so excited," Stamm says.

What about the days he doesn't feel like coaching?

"I haven't had one yet," he smiles.



About the Author

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor who finished a master's degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional Media Director while recovering from surgery. Beers also competed in the CrossFit Games in 2011 on CrossFit Vancouver's team. She finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012.*