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LIVE TO 100, DIE ON YOUR FEET

BY ANDRÉA MARIA CECIL

Septuagenarian CrossFit coach Mike Suhadolnik refuses to let his peers age gracefully.



A chemotherapy patient fighting prostate cancer, 77-year-old John Barber says his doctors are shocked at his physical capabilities compared with those of his peers.

It's a bright, sterile room—what you would expect at a hospital. Large windows line one wall.

“You've got a nice view out,” said 77-year-old John Barber.

As many as 40 people can sit in the room, each 10 feet away from a neighbor in a reclining chair framed by cabinets that hold TVs. Every few feet sits a nurse's station.

Many people sleep. Not Barber.

“I never sleep while I'm there. I read and I watch a little TV,” he said. “They got all these clear bags with liquid in it, and they're all lined up on a pole, and ... as they run out there's an alarm that goes off, and they show up and change the bag and start some other kind of fluid.”

Eight bags are typical.

“One bag to keep you from gettin' sick, another bag that's the actual treatment, and then there's another one to keep you from havin' the shits and, I don't know, there's some kind of thing ... after you've had all of 'em to kind of clear the system.”

In contrast to the other chemotherapy patients at Springfield Clinic in Illinois, Barber is a bit livelier. The retired real estate agent cracks jokes, drives and does CrossFit.

“The doctors at the hospital say they've never had anyone be able to do what I'm doin',” Barber said as he finished 5 miles on the Schwinn Airdyne one Monday afternoon in late April at CrossFit Instinct, also in Springfield. He's been doing CrossFit for three years.

On that particular day, his workout started with 12 miles on the same Airdyne, then went to 3,000 meters on the rower, followed by 5 sets of 5 deadlifts at increasing weight that topped out at 75 lb. While the rest of the class did Russian kettlebell swings and toes-to-kettlebells, the coach directed Barber back to the bike for more cycling.

“I still gotta get John where he gets uncomfortable,” Mike Suhadolnik said after the workout, sitting in the affiliate's small front office while Barber stood diagonally to his right at the corner of the desk.

“If he poops in his pants, he poops in his pants. It doesn't matter.”

The 72-year-old CrossFit Instinct coach is primarily focused on the gym's Longevity class—entirely comprising people over 55. The youngest is 57. Many have physical limitations, and several are

managing arthritis, diabetes and other chronic diseases or some form of metabolic derangement. A smaller number are there to simply lose weight and stay active.

“There's people who thought he'd be pushin' up daisies. ... He ain't pushin' up daisies. He's still drivin'.”

—Mike Suhadolnik

Suhadolnik has accompanied Barber to his cancer treatments and noted the difference between him and the other patients.

“Everybody's sittin' there like this,” Suhadolnik said, throwing his head down to portray a hunched-over posture. “And he's walkin' around gettin' smart with the nurses.”

CrossFit coupled with chemotherapy is a good thing, he added.

“This will make the medicine work better,” Suhadolnik said. “They can't believe he's not in pain. ... And he drives, he's alert. We talk at 4 o'clock in the morning.”

“I got a younger wife, too,” Barber proudly interjected.

“Younger,” said Suhadolnik, emphasizing the word's last two letters.

The couple is planning a summer trip north to picturesque Door County.

“He's still doin' all these things,” Suhadolnik said with his quintessential toothy grin. “There's people who thought he'd be pushin' up daisies. ... He ain't pushin' daises. He's still drivin'.”

The Vision

Suhadolnik, a former offensive tackle and middle guard at Illinois State University, spent most of his life powerlifting. At his best, he benched 350, squatted 450 and deadlifted 550 lb. His physique implied fitness. But when his daughter Molly and her now-fiancé Tim Hahn asked him to overhead squat more than seven years



Barber (right) is undergoing chemotherapy once every three weeks but still makes it to CrossFit Instinct at least four times a week.



No longer prediabetic, Dr. Craig Backs changed the way he practiced medicine after starting CrossFit in 2012.

ago, he couldn't get the bar over his head.

Then they asked him to do burpees.

"I played football in college. I said, 'No problem,'" Suhadolnik recounted. "I couldn't do a burpee."

Disturbed by this, the then-65-year-old visited his doctor in Springfield.

Of concern was Suhadolnik's rising level of prostate-specific antigen (PSA). PSA is a protein produced by prostate-gland cells. A growing level in a man's blood could indicate inflammation or enlargement of the prostate, even prostate cancer.

Other than that, "Your whole profile is good," the doctor told him. His rising PSA was not an emergency, the doctor said, but if it did become one any medication would negatively affect his otherwise-good health.

Upon his doctor's recommendation, Suhadolnik sought out a nontraditional doctor 200 miles northeast in Chicago. This one performed a dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry—known as a DXA scan—to measure his body fat and bone density.

"He said, 'I'm gonna just tell you something: Even though you almost look like Arnold (Schwarzenegger), 22 percent of that is fat.'"

For all his weightlifting, 6-foot-4, 250-lb. Suhadolnik was only in the "acceptable" category when it came to body fat. Had he been only a little higher—at 26 percent—he would have been considered obese.

"I told him I wanted to live until I was at least 110 years old but that I did not want somebody pushing me around in a wheelchair, walking with a walker or having someone wipe my butt," said Suhadolnik, today 223 lb.

"I told him I wanted to live until I was at least 110 years old but that I did not want somebody pushing me around in a wheelchair."

—Mike Suhadolnik

The doctor recommended changes to Suhadolnik's diet, including eliminating processed sugar, dairy and grains. Suhadolnik also became an athlete at CrossFit Instinct, Molly's affiliate.

Three months later, he arrived for his follow-up appointment with the Chicago doctor. Suhadolnik was at 9.5 percent body fat and had gained 12 lb. of muscle. His PSA had plummeted out of the danger zone. And he had done it without a lick of medication.

"Excuse my French, but I said, 'Holy shit.'"

Suhadolnik added: "My life changed forever."

In the year that followed, Suhadolnik paid closer attention to the world around him and the people in it.

"Every time I turned the television on, it seems like all they were showing (was) big butts and fat guts," he said.

He decided to do something.

It started with a program he dubbed Doctors Get Fit.

He began with Dr. Craig Backs, a former neighbor who was more of an acquaintance than a friend. Suhadolnik had seen Backs' picture in the Springfield Business Journal. He noticed the weight gain and picked up the phone.

"His picture was horrible. You couldn't even see his chin. Gee manilly."

The physician remembered the conversation vividly.

"So I get a call out of the blue from Mike Suhadolnik," Backs said while sitting inside his private practice in Springfield. "He said, 'I don't mean to be critical but,' he says, 'why is it you doctors don't take better care of yourselves?' And there was kind a long, pregnant pause. And I said, 'Are you trying to tell me that I'm too fat?'"

It was May 2012. Backs had recently opened his private practice. He also was struggling with his own health issues: atherosclerosis and prediabetes. At 6 feet tall, Backs weighed 235 lb.

All the while, he was advising his patients on the importance of lifestyle.

"I might as well have been sitting there with a cigarette and a glass of whiskey, tellin' 'em they need to quit smoking and drinking."

Suhadolnik had a plan.

“He already had a vision that involved improving the community’s health by getting the people that were supposed to be leaders in the community around health to set a better example,” Backs recounted.

The two men met for an hour and half the next day.

“He made me an offer ultimately I just really couldn’t refuse. He said, ‘Give me 90 days—I guarantee you’ll see your abs.’”

Suhadolnik emphasized diet, telling Backs to eat whole foods and avoid processed sugar.

“He worked me hard,” said 60-year-old Backs.

In 90 days, the doctor lost 40 lb.

“And I was pretty much hooked.”

He also got his atherosclerosis under control and is no longer prediabetic.

Then Backs changed the way he practiced medicine. Rather than immediately suggesting medication, he now starts with lifestyle changes.

“A big part of my medical practice now involves heart-attack and stroke prevention—arterial-disease prevention—and insulin resistance, or prediabetes, is a huge contributor to that that’s under-recognized. . . . I’ve gotten more conversant with that through CrossFit than I’ve ever gotten through any medical journals, which I think a lot of people find ironic. So if the CrossFit leadership is wondering whether (it influences) medical care, at least in my office, it certainly does.”

About a dozen athletes in CrossFit Instinct’s Longevity class are direct referrals from Backs. Some started in the Doctors Get Fit program, an on-ramp to the class for those with chronic problems and who haven’t exercised in years. Being a doctor is not required.

“I took seriously that my payback for that was to be a better example,” Backs said, “and to engage other physicians and other people in the community to be better examples.”

The Longevity program includes about 25 people split between the 7 a.m. and 4 p.m. classes that occur almost daily.

There’s 62-year-old Karen Paisley, who hadn’t exercised on a regular basis for nearly 30 years and recently showed off a photo of herself in a bikini. There’s 64-year-old Walter Lynn, whose legs are no longer black from knees to ankles because of poor circulation.

And 71-year-old Doug Nelson, whose back pain and minimal flexibility were keeping him from a motorcycle ride to Alaska; Nelson made the 3,600-mile trip shortly after completing Doctors Get Fit less than three years ago.

All of them have different stories. All of them have the same outcomes: improved body composition, performance and health. In other words: increased functional capacity.

Suhadolnik sees it like this: His father-in-law, a decorated World War II veteran whose B-29 was shot down over Russia, leading to his being a prisoner of war, lay in bed for six years before he died. He was on multiple prescription medications after surviving cancer and having his leg amputated. His mother-in-law developed Alzheimer’s and weighed 66 lb. when she died, unable to speak for the last three years of her life. His own father, however, died delivering turnips. His mother?

“She went from givin’ me a bunch of crap, still doin’ things, to dying within five or six days. That’s what we want to happen,” Suhadolnik explained. “Now did they live perfect lives? No. But they did what they wanted to do. And they were not a burden to anybody.”

Being a burden, he added, can easily be avoided.

“Hey, don’t wait until you have that heart attack and then start working out. Bullshit. Do it right now. Start right now.”

“Don’t wait until you have that heart attack and then start working out.

Bullshit. Do it right now.

Start right now.” —Mike Suhadolnik

“Gimme One”

With a clipboard in hand, Suhadolnik began leading the 7 a.m. Longevity class on this particular Monday. His haircut, voice and demeanor all point to retired Marine. Or drill sergeant. He is neither.

“All right. Everybody get a ball. We’re gonna stretch out.”

All 12 athletes scooped up medicine balls and followed instructions



CrossFit coach Mike Suhadolnik (foreground) pushes athletes to increase their functional capacity for a healthier, longer life.



After two weeks of CrossFit, Bill Fleer (on floor) had his blood-pressure medication cut in half by his doctor.

to place them below their lower backs, allowing their heads to relax and hang backward.

“Straighten your legs. Get rid of that weekend. Let’s go. Come on,” he barked.

Athletes moved their arms up and down with the med ball at increasingly higher positions on their backs.

“Just give me five snow angels. Go slow. Try to rotate.”

Next was kicking one leg straight back while touching the floor with the opposite hand.

“You look like a goomba, you look like a goomba. Don’t worry about it,” Suhadolnik declared.

The 4 p.m. class was similar.

“Give me snow angels, come on. Get those scapula moving.”

“Cobra. Dog. Come on, let’s go. Cobra. Dog. Please.”

The “please” typically comes after a couple of demands.

It was deadlift day. For most CrossFit Instinct athletes, the objective was to establish a 1-rep max with textbook form. For the Longevity class, it meant 5 sets of 5 reps.

“The movement we’re gonna do is stick you butt back and come back up,” Suhadolnik explained as he pushed his butt backward and snapped to standing again.

He watched each athlete, one by one, lift 55 lb. When he was satisfied with their movement, he gave further instructions.

“Everybody go get a pair of 10s.”

“I knew there was more,” Barber knowingly replied.

Suhadolnik laughed.

“K. We’re gonna do 5 sets of 5. And it’s gonna be academic that you keep your lumbar curve.”

Suhadolnik, who holds a master’s degree in mathematics, spent 17 years teaching the subject. He often uses the word “academic” when coaching.

A couple of the athletes were exceeding expectations.



A few athletes in CrossFit Instinct’s 55-plus Longevity class wear T-shirts made to support fellow athlete Barber through his chemotherapy.

“Rick and Walt, go get another pair of 10s. Please.”

When the additional weight was in place, Suhadolnik surveyed the room to see if the athletes were prepared to move on his call.

“You ready, Johnny?”

“Yeah,” Barber answered.

“All right. Walk up to the bar.”

Athletes positioned their feet below their barbells.

“Lumbar curve. Gimme one!” demanded Suhadolnik, his emphasis clearly on the second phrase.

He called out the same way—“Gimme one!”—for the remaining reps while his body twitched as if he willed the athletes to move.

The results of his no-excuses style are not only physically mani-

fested in his athletes but also mentally. Many in the Longevity class refer to themselves as “a tribe.”

“This is hugely, hugely important. Hugely,” said 58-year-old Susan Nightingale, another athlete in the Longevity class. “It’s been a revelation to me. It’s so much more than the physical.”

In more than a year of CrossFit, Nightingale has lost 40 lb. and lowered her blood pressure, and she hopes she’s gotten “ahead of the curve” on her asymptomatic arterial disease. On a Tuesday afternoon in April, Suhadolnik put her through a workout of 5 rounds of Turkish get-ups and jumping pull-ups. On the final round he bumped her up to a 20-lb. kettlebell, the heaviest she had ever used for the movement. It was a struggle, but she did it.

In that way, too, Suhadolnik is unrelenting.

To keep his athletes motivated, he texts them at 4 o’clock in the morning every day—sometimes earlier—with inspirational words, videos or a workout they can do at home or while traveling.

And several Longevity athletes arrived at CrossFit Instinct because Suhadolnik showed up unannounced at their offices or placed unsolicited calls.

“Because of my age, I can really be frank and get away with a lot of stuff that younger people can’t,” he explained. “I tell them in a nice way that they’re too fat and they’re not gettin’ their job done.”

“I get away with murder,” Suhadolnik added, grinning.

But Backs said it’s more than just age that accommodates Suhadolnik’s coaching style.

“People ultimately do figure out that he cares about them or they wouldn’t do it. ... On the surface it could be seen as ‘Yeah, he was just bein’ a bully.’ But if you get close enough to it and you start realizing that it’s for your own good, then it takes on a very different type of feel.”

Suhadolnik’s age, Backs noted, adds legitimacy to his demands.

“There’s something about maturity. You know that somebody has been through some of the same challenges you’ve been through. And I think we all gravitate toward people who are like us, have common interests, have been through many of the same things.”

Iron Mike

Three years ago, when Suhadolnik turned 70, CrossFit Instinct coaches and members threw him a surprise party that featured a presentation called “Stuff Coach Mike Says.”

“This is hugely, hugely important. Hugely. It’s been a revelation to me.”
—Susan Nightingale

“Most of them have to do with his apparent—but not real—lack of empathy. Things like, ‘You’ll be OK.’ And, ‘I know, I know,’” Backs explained. “People looking at it from the outside might think that he’s just hard-nosed and maybe even a little cruel. But those of us that are experiencing the benefit of what he’s doing know that it gets the kind of results (that) keep (us) coming back for more.”

Backs described Suhadolnik as “direct and largely unfiltered.”

In Springfield—Illinois’ capital of about 117,000 people—Suhadolnik has been a larger-than-life figure, making no apologies along the way.

“I don’t ask for permission,” he flatly said.

In a 1996 Illinois Times article, writer Jeff Ignatius penned a profile of Suhadolnik titled “Outta My Way.”

“If Suhadolnik dislikes somebody or feels wronged,” Ignatius wrote, “he will let the whole world know, one way or another. He is stubborn as an ass and quick with an acid tongue.”

For 30 years, Suhadolnik owned and ran Construx of Illinois, a general contracting company that challenged construction norms of the time and sought to build quality affordable housing for low- and middle-income families. Across three decades the company—and its multiple ancillary companies—created and performed \$75 million in business, Suhadolnik said. The Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce twice recognized him as Businessman of the Year.

“He tried to literally change Springfield ... in areas that needed to be renovated and renewed,” Molly said. “He believed in people. He hired people that other people probably wouldn’t.”

He’s a man who, when Molly was a teenager, refused to wear his prescription eyeglasses and instead trained his eyes to have 20/20 vision again. It’s an achievement he still holds today. He also has part of a gold tooth buried beneath the first finger of his right knuckle, evidence of a long-ago fight that most considered a tall tale until an MRI appointment proved otherwise.

Yet, despite her dad’s seemingly gruff demeanor, 29-year-old Molly described him as “a softie.”

“He was not the punisher of our family,” she said, smiling.

The day she was born, Suhadolnik was “so pumped” to have another child, Molly told, that he left the hospital at 3 a.m.—after she was born and while his wife, Maureen, slept—to do a set of 10 touch-and-go deadlifts at 475 lb., followed by 10 back squats at 425.

In Molly’s early years, Suhadolnik would take her and her two sisters to the local park every Sunday. There, he power walked 4 miles. To keep up, the little girls had to run. When they got home, he’d feed them a sandwich “with a huge bunch of meat,” vegetables, fruit and a tall glass of water, Molly said.

As a teenager, she added, her suitors were “always terrified of him.”



CrossFit Instinct’s Longevity class begins with about 20 minutes of mobility work.

These days, her father arrives at the gym before she does. And she teaches the 4:45 a.m. class. Suhadolnik typically rises anywhere from 1 to 2 a.m., does CrossFit Instinct’s daily programming at home and figures out the best way to modify it for Longevity athletes. At the box, he consults with Molly or Tim, who also help coach the Longevity classes.

“He’s preaching it and walking the walk,” Molly said.

Thus when Longevity athletes complain of aches or pains, he understands but offers little sympathy.

“When he sees people with their weaknesses, he doesn’t cut ’em any slack—and that’s out of respect,” Backs said. “I tend to agree with him that we often need to challenge people, that we need to expect more of ourselves and other people, that we shouldn’t assume that just because somebody has a limitation that they can’t do something that we think they should try. Many people will struggle with that, that the only way to show empathy to some-

body is to hug them and stroke them and coddle them and say ‘there, there.’ Mike has never said ‘there, there.’”

“It’ll Last You the Rest of Your Life”

It was a little after 5:30 a.m. on Thursday, April 28.

Bill Fleer came in for another one-on-one session with Suhadolnik. His first one had been nearly two weeks earlier.

Suhadolnik started him off with a warm-up of candlesticks to a seated V position. Fleer got winded.

Next was the cats-and-dogs stretch.

“Up, up, up,” Suhadolnik said in quick succession. “Now drop it way down.”

Fleer’s face grew red.

Suhadolnik brought him over to the pull-up rig for ring rows. His feet elevated on an 18-inch box, the 64-year-old retired railroad administrator couldn’t quite get his hips to the rings. Suhadolnik explained he needed to squeeze his butt first to force his hips to rise. Finally, Fleer understood.

He counted Fleer’s reps.

“One. Two. One more, please. Three.”

“He can’t chin yet,” Suhadolnik said of Fleer’s pull-up abilities.

He added, smiling: “When he loses 50 lb. of body weight, he’ll fly.”

Next he taught Fleer the shoulder press, push press and push jerk. Suhadolnik added weight to the barbell between sets, then had Fleer bust out more reps.

“We’re goin’ awful quick. We’re goin’ awful quick,” Suhadolnik repeated.

“For this old man ya are,” Fleer said between breaths.

“Big air. Go! Use your butt cheeks,” Suhadolnik instructed.

“One. Two. That’s it. Get your head through the window. Four. One more. Please. Five.”

Finally, it was time for the Airdyne: 20 seconds of work for 5 rounds.

Suhadolnik pushed Fleer to get the screen to read “30 calories.” The bike’s fan whirred and Fleer looked like he was in physical pain. He kept getting close but not quite reaching 30. On the last round, he did it.

“Thirty,” Fleer said, barely able to speak, as the bike became silent and he released the handles.

“Thirty,” Suhadolnik repeated with a broad smile.

“He’s strong. He just hasn’t had to work in a long time,” Suhadolnik said.

“My mind wants to do it. My body’s not there yet,” Fleer replied.

After his heart rate lowered, Fleer explained that his mental outlook has improved. He told of his father-in-law, who failed at his goal of living to be 100.

“I’m gonna be a centenarian. And be fit,” he said with a smile.

In his brief time at CrossFit Instinct, Fleer said his doctor has cut his blood-pressure medication in half.

“He might be miserable for 5 minutes, but that’s better than havin’ somebody wipe your butt,” Suhadolnik plainly stated.

Fleer nodded with a smile.

That’s the point for Suhadolnik, especially when he thinks of Barber, the chemotherapy patient battling prostate cancer.

“Now his quality of life when he beats this—and he’ll beat it; I really believe he’ll beat it—it’s gonna be good,” he said, smiling.

Suhadolnik hopes to inspire other older folks to get their CrossFit Level 1 certificates and start training their peers for longer, healthier lives.

“Functional movement, really, that’s what we do. Number 1, it’s safe. Number 2, it’s useful. I’m gonna teach you how to stand up off the chair, sit, stand up off the pot. And 3, it lasts a long time. It’ll last you the rest of your life. And that’s really what I try to do with these people.” ■

About the Author: Andréa Maria Cecil is assistant managing editor and head writer of the CrossFit Journal.