
THE CrossFit LIFE

A Day With Coach B.

You'll have to drive to Bonsall, Calif., if you want to train with Coach Mike Burgener. But you can't park in the garage. That's reserved for lifting.

By Hilary Achauer

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"Way to go! That really lights my ass on fire!"

Being coached by Mike Burgener is a singular experience. Not only is he one of the best Olympic-weightlifting coaches in the country—he coached the Junior World Women's Weightlifting Team and runs the CrossFit Olympic Lifting Trainer Course—but Burgener also has a way with words.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Athletes including two-time CrossFit Games champion Annie Thorisdottir regularly travel to Mike's Gym to train with Coach B.

Colorful language and incisive, targeted coaching cues flow effortlessly out of Burgener's mouth. He's tough but full of warmth and genuine enthusiasm, regardless of the weight on your bar.

Burgener is so good that CrossFit athletes from around the country drive for hours to remote Bonsall, Calif., just to hang out in his two-car garage and soak up his wisdom.

He doesn't charge for these sessions. All he needs is advance notice to make sure he's in town.

"I choose not to charge," Burgener said. "I'm blessed. It all comes back," he said.

Tough Love

Bonsall is a small town of about 4,000 people, full of rolling hills and wide-open vistas. I made the 45-minute drive from Pacific Beach with two friends to check out Mike's Gym and pick up some weightlifting wisdom.

When we first arrived at Mike's gym, he was finishing up what he calls the "Geezer Workout." The Geezers are a group made up of Burgener's friends in the neighborhood. The only rule is you have to be over 60 years old to join in.

"We do a workout, and we bullshit each other," Burgener said. "We get together every Monday, Wednesday and Friday I'm in town. We're done at 9:30, and they usually stay until 10 or 10:30." After the workout, they spend some time hanging out and drinking coffee.

While the Geezers were finishing up, Burgener told us to go on a short but steep warm-up run around his neighborhood.

"I call the route 'the Hillary Clinton,'" Burgener said, because he dislikes it so much. "Boss Hoss calls it 'the George Bush.'"

"Boss Hoss" is what Burgener calls his wife of 30 years. Her name is Leslie, but according to Burgener, "Shit, she's Boss Hoss."



Miss your footwork too often and Coach B. might have some motivational consequences for you. Yay, burpees!

Their marriage has lasted despite their differing political views. “We’re on either side of the boat,” Burgener said. “That’s how we’ve been married for so long.”

The run was steep but mercifully short, and once we got back, Burgener told us to do the **Junkyard Dog Warm-Up** and then work up to a heavy front squat before snatching.

In addition to our group of three, there were about seven other people lifting in Burgener’s garage that day. One of them, Anneke Marvin, owner of CrossFit Temecula South, has been coming to Burgener every week for years.

“When I qualified for (the CrossFit Games Southern California) Regionals in 2010, I couldn’t snatch 95 lb.,” Marvin said. “I hated Olympic lifting. Now I love it.”

Marvin can now snatch 135 lb.

“(Burgener) is just so good at what he does. I was in the Marine Corps, and I like his tough love,” she said. Burgener himself also served with the Marines.

Our group was by no means lifting heavy weights, and in fact we spent much of the time with the bar, as Burgener carefully corrected issues with our form. When we got it right, he exploded.

“Girl, you are a junkyard-freaking-dog!” he yelled when I correctly followed one of his cues.

Burgener manages to combine the right amount of tough love and encouragement with cues and corrections that get to the heart of your errors.

He spent almost two hours with us working first on snatching and then squat cleans. By the end, he said we might be able to lift some real weight.

“I’m not talking about little sissies in the pool. I’m talking about heavy weight,” Burgener said. “Excellent job!”

How It All Began

After everyone finished lifting, I asked Burgener how his two-car garage became such a mecca of Olympic weightlifting.

“That’s a good story!” Burgener said.

In the 1980s, Burgener was the strength-and-conditioning coach at Rancho Buena Vista High School in Vista, Calif. He had four young kids at home, but he was working until 6 or 7 at night and felt like he never got to see them. He loved his work and needed to keep his job, and he wasn’t sure what to do until one day he had an idea: if his athletes came to him, he could coach and see his kids at the same time.

“I built a gym in the garage, and the athletes came to my house at 4 p.m.,” Burgener said.

In addition to spending time with their dad, Burgener’s kids received an extraordinary education in Olympic weightlifting. One of Burgener’s sons, Casey, broke the national record for the snatch at the 2004 Olympic Trials and won gold in the 2008 Pan American Championships.

Burgener became a USAW Senior International Coach and coached the Junior World Team from 1996 to 2004. Then, in 2004, he got a call from another coach: Coach Greg Glassman. CrossFit’s founder wanted Burgener to certify CrossFit trainers through USAW—and Burgener’s work was cut out for him.

“When I started, nobody could overhead squat,” he said. Now the overhead squat is very familiar to almost every CrossFit athlete, and Burgener’s Olympic Lifting Trainer Course is sold out well into 2013.

As we talked, Burgener gave me a tour of his property. Next to the garage gym is a pool.

“We use this more in the wintertime,” he said.

When I asked why, he got a mischievous look in his eye and said, “Because then people have to jump in 45-degree water.”

Burgener’s house is on top of a hill with views of the surrounding farms, equestrian trails and avocado groves. He pointed out a red-tailed hawk flying by.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Anyone who's worked with Coach B. will tell you he has a knack for always finding the right cue to get the result he wants.

"We're birders," he said. They built an owl box, and for the past five years owls have returned to lay their eggs on the Burgeners' property.

Now that Burgener's kids are all grown and out of the house, he spends much of his time traveling around the world to lead the CrossFit Olympic Training Course. When he's in town, however, he doesn't stray far from his property. Just like when Burgener was a high-school strength-and-conditioning coach, the athletes come to him. After everyone leaves, Burgener works through the items on his to-do list from Boss Hoss.

Then, at night, Burgener and Boss Hoss sit together, "Paleo margaritas" in hand.

"Here's to having no adult children living with us," Burgener said they often toast, clinking glasses in the quiet night.

Of course, Burgener's daughter Sage delivered a baby in late November, and Coach Burgener's enthusiasm on Facebook was as infectious as it is in the gym: "OMG!!! ... I AM A PACHA!!!! YAHOO!!!!"

Loving Life

After I returned home, Burgener's weightlifting cues stayed with me, but what made an even stronger impression was the fact that Burgener is clearly having the time of his life.

Whether it's spending time with Boss Hoss—"My best friend," he said—or coaching Olympic weightlifting in his garage, Burgener loves every minute of it.

