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Prodigal Son Returns

Six years after CrossFit helped him lose 210 lb., Johnny Di Gregorio abandoned the training methodology to become a competitive weightlifter. After several injuries, he's back to CrossFit, saying it's the healthiest choice for him. Andréa Maria Cecil reports.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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All images: Courtesy of Johnny Di Gregorio

At 23, Johnny Di Gregorio was 425 lb. Three years later, he lost nearly half of that weight by following CrossFit.com programming. But that's not the most interesting part of Di Gregorio's story.

In January 2011, two years after he competed on Team CrossFit Academy's squad at the 2009 CrossFit Games and opened his affiliate, Di Gregorio decided to forgo the training methodology that changed his life for the better. Instead, he purposely regained 100 lb. to be more competitive in the sport of Olympic weightlifting.

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"I resolved to spend two years doing everything, no matter what, to see how far I could take weightlifting," he explained.

At his best, Di Gregorio snatched 286 lb. and clean and jerked 363 lb.

In 2011, he won the Cal State Games in his weight class. In 2012, he took home the silver medal at the Cal State Games in his weight class and qualified for the American Open.

But Di Gregorio became "riddled" with knee and shoulder injuries.

"I realized that weightlifting is not about health and longevity," he said. "It's about being strong enough to lift the weight."

Becoming a Lifter

Shortly after taking the CrossFit Level 1 Seminar in July 2008, Di Gregorio signed up for the CrossFit Olympic Weightlifting Trainer Course the same year.

"I felt like when I looked at weightlifting for the first time, I was like, 'Wow, these lifts look really difficult and technical! I didn't want to try them,'" he said. "I kind of don't like to do things blindly."

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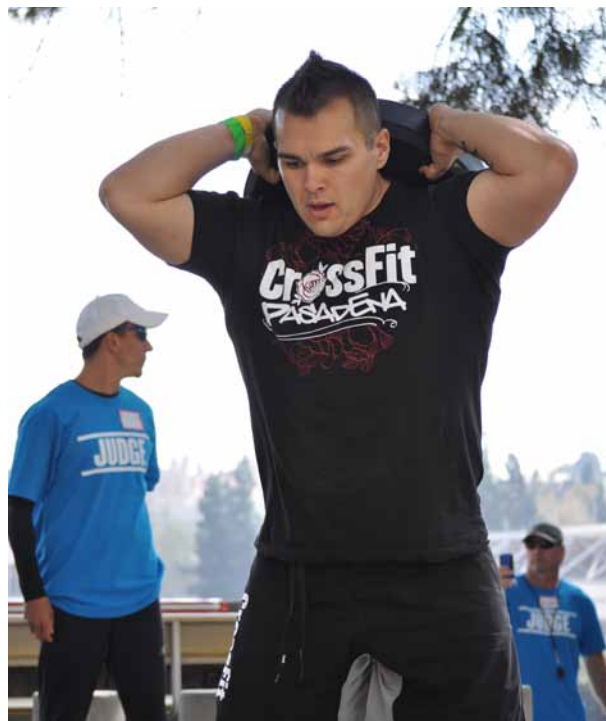
—Bob Takano

Di Gregorio neglected snatches and cleans until after he attended the Trainer Course with longtime Olympic-weightlifting coach Mike Burgener.

"After that, I started really enjoying it," he said.

As a 231-lb. lifter in his first meet, Di Gregorio snatched 154 lb. and clean and jerked 176 lb.

"It was really bad," he said with a laugh.



Di Gregorio admits he didn't start off with impressive Olympic-weightlifting numbers, but he was fast and explosive with a good work capacity.

USA Weightlifting Hall of Fame Coach Bob Takano was at the same meet.

"I just noticed that he was very heavy and not lifting a lot of weight, but he had a good movement pattern," the coach recalled. "He was fast and explosive."

Di Gregorio continued training on his own and occasionally working with Burgener as an athlete and a coach, assisting with CrossFit Olympic Weightlifting Trainer Courses.

"I got to a point where I could snatch 225 lb. and clean and jerk 265 lb., and I knew there was an issue with that because it wasn't a proper ratio," he said.

After Di Gregorio met Takano while they both were assisting Burgener during a Trainer Course, Di Gregorio began attending the lifting sessions Takano coached at CrossFit High Voltage in Burbank, Calif.

"He needed some technical work. He wasn't too bad," Takano said. "I noticed that he got strong very easily, that he still had good speed and he had a decent work capacity, and that's kind of rare in the bigger guys. They tend to take a little bit longer in the longer sets."



Ultimately, Di Gregorio discovered that CrossFit's constantly varied functional movements were going to be the key to long-term health.

And when Takano put Di Gregorio on a platform with a smaller guy who could move fast, he kept up.

"I was impressed by that," Takano said.

"I couldn't let go of the CrossFit aspect of things, where I should be able to do anything. I couldn't. That was depressing."

—Johnny Di Gregorio

At first, Di Gregorio's wife, Tiffany Wong, thought her husband's focus on weightlifting was another example of him "trying things out."

"He does like to experience other things before teaching it," she explained. "He loves the idea of being an expert in his field. (And he) wanted members to move better."

Likewise, Wong fully supported her husband.

"I was really gung-ho at first. I even started doing lifting with him and Bob," she said. "He was getting really strong really fast, and I was really excited about that. And then I got a little leery because he kept getting injured."

Plagued by Injury

At the 2011 Cal State Games, Di Gregorio dropped a 350-lb. barbell on his collarbone, which led to an injured shoulder. In September 2012, after qualifying for the American Open, he became injured again. Eventually, he discovered he had hamstring tendinitis and a torn medial meniscus. Both injuries stopped him from training.

"I started thinking, 'There's nothing healthy about being this injured.' I couldn't let go of the CrossFit aspect of things, where I should be able to do anything," Di Gregorio said. "I couldn't. That was depressing."

To be competitive at the international level, he would have had to invest another five or six years of training, he noted.

"It's just not gonna happen. I liked the ability to clean and jerk almost 400 lb., but at what cost? I couldn't do a strict pull-up anymore. It wasn't functional," said the 30-year-old. "If I want to have a family and play with my children, I couldn't be a weightlifter."

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say in his mid-teens, ...
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—Bob Takano

Wong said his injuries took a toll on their relationship.

"It was difficult on our marriage for a while because he wanted to have children, and we started to talk about it, but we weren't really (able) to plan that out with him always being hurt or not being able to move," she said.

Olympic weightlifting has its place, Wong emphasized. But for her husband, a 100 percent focus on it wasn't the healthiest choice.

"It wasn't a good balance," she said. "He was getting winded much easier."

At that point, Di Gregorio was roughly 330 lb. and able to regularly back squat 500 lb.

"It was getting easy to get that way," he said of his body weight. "I was like an athletic version of my former myself."

That's when Di Gregorio put an end to his competitive weightlifting career.

"I decided that I wanted to get healthy again," he said.

A Decision Already Made

That meant telling the coach with whom he had invested so much time that he would no longer pursue weightlifting as a sport.

"It was just as much of an investment of two years for him as it was for me," Di Gregorio said.

Takano seemed relatively unfazed, matter-of-factly stating that Di Gregorio's decision had been made for him.

"It's probably better for him in the long run," said Takano, who coaches at Di Gregorio's affiliate. "It's not like I had somebody who was going to be an Olympian or a national record holder."

He added: "I think he would have been qualifying for national-level competitions and maybe at that level placing in the middle of the pack. And part of that was just because he got a late start. I think if I could have gotten him, say, in his mid-teens, I think I would have gotten him further along, and I don't think he would have the same injury situation that he's got now."

Takano explained that the fact that Di Gregorio's muscles got very strong very easily was partly to blame for his injuries.

"If you get into the game late and you haven't had a chance to develop the circulation around the connective tissue, then the connective tissue doesn't develop at the same rate," he said.



Now it's back to the bar—the pull-up bar.

When Di Gregorio made his most-recent comeback to lifting, his muscles responded, but his connective tissues didn't.

"And he was putting more pressure on them," Takano noted.

"The other thing I think I should emphasize is if someone doesn't want to be a weightlifter, then they're probably not going to be very good at it. It's a sport that takes a lot of passion."

**"It's nice because now
I have my partner back
to do what I want to do."**

—Tiffany Wong

Back to the Burn

Still, Di Gregorio's return to CrossFit hasn't been easy.

After his first workout in late October, he got chills.

"I remembered how much it burned to do CrossFit," Di Gregorio said.

To keep him accountable, he has two training partners—a coach and a CrossFit Pasadena member—and frequently posts his workouts on his Facebook page.

His long-term goals: squat 500 lb. while weighing 250 lb., snatch more than 300 lb., clean and jerk more than 400 lb.—all while being able to do 40 consecutive kipping pull-ups and 100 unbroken double-unders.

"I'd like to be a CrossFitter where you can do all those things and obviously have my niche," Di Gregorio said. "I want to be the healthiest I can be, and I know that means not being anything near 300 lb."

He added: "I'll always clean and jerk and snatch for the benefits of them for strength and conditioning. As far as competing in the sport, it just takes too much demand."

Wong, for her part, is excited about her husband's return to CrossFit.

"To be honest, I was relieved," she said. "I love that he can come back home and he can tell me he broke some double-under record he had."

Di Gregorio, Wong said, has more energy and is less sluggish.

"It's nice because now I have my partner back to do what I want to do," she said.

Although he was taking an approach with Olympic weightlifting that most affiliates weren't, he wasn't a good example in the CrossFit community, Di Gregorio said.

"I'd call on somebody to do demos for pull-ups when I was teaching a class (because I couldn't)," Di Gregorio said. "If you're gonna be in the CrossFit world, you have to CrossFit in one way or another way."

The last thing he wanted was for members to question his authenticity and say, "This guy's not very fit. Why would I want to train with him?"

Being a better example is his motivation.

"I want my community to see I'm lying on the floor next to them after a workout," he said, adding, "I feel better about myself when I CrossFit. That's the stuff that really changed me and helped me reform my life. I really missed it. These two weeks (in November), I'm sorer than I've ever been. I'm really happy."



Courtesy of Andra Maria Cecil

About the Author

*Andra Maria Cecil works for CrossFit Media. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. She's a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**, where she coaches Olympic weightlifting. Additionally, Cecil dedicates four days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at **McKenna's Gym**.*