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Too Fat to Lift

Chris Moore reflects on a quest for strength that pushed his weight to 370 lb. Now he's on a path to strength *and* health.

By Chris Moore

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Courtesy of Chris Mason/AtLarge Nutrition

Powerlifter Ryan Celli recently posted a 625 squat, 530 bench and 685 deadlift for a raw record total of 1,840 at 198 lb.

I could not, for the life of me, take my eyes off the man.

The guy was like a train wreck, a cataclysm and a sunrise all rolled up into one big, disturbing—yet somehow beautiful—package.

1 of 6

Courtesy of Darren Mehling/CrossFit Manitoba/Freak Fitness



Darren Mehling deadlifted 805 lb. at 338 lb., then dropped almost 100 lb. to win several amateur bodybuilding shows in Manitoba, Canada. At a current weight of about 260, Darren recently set the CrossFit Football bench-press record (225 lb. x 34). He can deadlift 655, and he can squat 500 and press 255 for triples. His Fran time is under four minutes, and he has 32 kipping pull-ups.

In hindsight, I should've been paying more attention. This was a national-level powerlifting meet, after all, and I was supposed to be assisting my buddy Mike, who was competing. Everything was proceeding as planned. Mike's squat warm-ups went very well. He looked strong, especially for a CrossFit guy who doesn't necessarily specialize in the lifts. Right as we were approaching the platform for opening attempts, I saw the object of my fascination.

I could almost hear him
thinking to himself,
“Imagine all the food I had to eat
to get this magnificent gut.”

Picture in your mind, dear reader, a walking, talking kielbasa sausage. Four hundred pounds of man shoved into a 350-lb. bag. He could not have gone unnoticed: the guy was wearing the brightest yellow shirt you ever saw.

He wasn't there to compete, but you could tell he was a lifter. Heavily muscled upper back. A corkscrew splattering of busted blood vessels along his neckline—a sure sign of more than a few max-effort attempts. Enlarged, coarsely calloused hands. He carried himself with an expected strut, a look that screamed, “I am a fucking big, strong guy, and I know it.”

What struck me, though, were all the features that seemingly did not belong on a trained athlete. That strut of his, while confident, was barely a snail's pace, and it was performed atop two strained, purple ankles. He wasn't really doing much of anything behind the scenes but somehow still needed that handy gym towel to mop up the ever-growing stream of sweat, now furiously pouring from every inch of his body. The belly was something to be envied. I could almost hear him thinking to himself, “Imagine all the food I had to eat to get this magnificent gut. What have you ever accomplished with your life, asshole?”

Mike was actually having a tremendous day. He had nailed a PR squat, lifting 405 lb. in the 181 class. No belt, no wraps. He followed that up with a nice performance on the bench press. After a brief celebration, I couldn't help but notice it must have been lunchtime. This deduction was made after once more noticing The Man himself, plus three newly acquired double cheeseburgers.

What the hell had this guy done to himself? Was it intentional? All in the name of maximal strength? I wanted to grab one of the burgers and throw it down the hallway as far as possible. I could imagine him bursting into pursuit, quickly losing his grip on consciousness as that body rapidly drained its limited energy supply. Then it hit me. There was a reason I was so fascinated. Only three years prior, I had been in that guy's shoes.

Big Ain't Strong. Strong Is Strong.

OK, so maybe I wasn't quite that bad. But still ...

I came to the sport of lifting after my football career had ended. Really, it was a rebellion. I had spent years and years grinding my bones on barren practice fields. Endless hours had been spent under the boot of various egomaniacal, blowhard coaches. Eventually my body and mind just couldn't take any more. I developed a degenerative condition of the spine. Every blow, every fall resulted in splintering pain running all over my body. Physically, I was done. No more.

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My mind was equally spent. The endless practices. The constant yelling. Were these guys supposed to be coaches and teachers, or was it all just a glorified dick-measuring contest, day in and day out, 11 months of the year? My lifting career began as a means of repair. The only intention was to get my strength back, to shed those old habits and start something new. To my surprise, those goals quickly changed.

I got something from powerlifting that no other sport had ever offered. It was raw and brutally honest. There's



Courtesy of Chris Mason/AtlasGrowth Nutrition

Vincent Dizenzo has been a Top 10 bench for a decade. He is one of only a few lifters to press 800 lb. equipped and 600 lb. raw in meets. He is over 300 lb. in the before picture and close to 260 in the after shot.

a bar; lift it. Hours in the gym, mostly alone, taught me to finally appreciate the process of training. No one else could do it for you. You either put in the work, or you didn't. You laid it all out on the platform, or you failed. There was nowhere to hide. That early goal of being pain-free changed to maybe squatting 400 lb. again someday, then 500, 600, 700 ... 800 lb. I once took pride in the fact that I could bench press 405. Suddenly, nothing short of 700 would do. Soon, I was a legit national-level lifter in my class. But the only thing keeping pace with my rising total was my body weight.

At my strongest, I tipped the scales at a 370 lb. It's insidious. A subtle pound-by-pound escalation. After you're done with football, you figure the last thing you're ever going to fucking do again is run 110-yard sprints in the late-August heat. But you keep the same appetite. Pretty soon you cannot help but tie your increased strength to the scale. The two are inexorably linked. No way around it. The more you eat, the stronger you get. The stronger you get, the stronger you want to be. My goal was to squat 1,000 lb. That was going to take a lot of double cheeseburgers.

I am not particularly proud of this story, but it is 100 percent true. One night I headed out to my friendly neighborhood Chili's with some friends. I recall it being a relatively special occasion, so I made sure to wear my finest mostly clean Westside Barbell T-shirt, Size 48 camouflage cargo shorts and signature old-school Crocs (the only "shoe" capable of masking my crippling



Courtesy of Chris Mason/ATLarge Nutrition

Strongman Tom Mutaffis competes at between 220 and 235 lb. and has 19 podium finishes in four years of competition. He has a 700-lb. deadlift, 500-lb. front squat and 375-lb. press, and he has loaded a 375-lb. atlas stone.

case of plantar fasciitis). I started with the usual: those scrumptious southwestern egg rolls. A crispy outer exterior with creamy, zesty filling. What the hell else could you expect from an appetizer? I followed this up with the always satisfying Cobb salad. And hey, it was a salad! This was a pretty healthy choice, no? This brought me to the most important decision of the night—what to have for dessert. After careful consideration, I had narrowed my choices down to two options. Would it be the cheesecake or the molten-chocolate brownie? Tough one. The decision would have to come down to fate. I consulted the waiter.

“Hey, man. Which one of these desserts has the most calories?”

“Excuse me?”

“The desserts. Which has the most calories?”

“I don’t understand, sir.”

“Just give me both.”

“Both?”

“Yeah, I want one of each.”

For those counting calories, this meal contained somewhere around 3,500—just outside of being Zone. It was not an uncommon event.

One Goal

Everything was planned around the pursuit of strength. Social functions could not fall the night before a max-effort squat session. I always needed to park close—too much walking might “interfere with my recovery.” On and on and on. At that time, I knew reaching your potential took sacrifice. Health and maximum strength were never going to exist in parallel. Work capacity was not something you could fully pursue alongside record one-rep maxes. In hindsight, I have come to understand that this was a delusion.

I am not, by any stretch, a big poetry fan. But I appreciate it greatly. How can you sum up love, death, sorrow, fear, hate, jealousy or joy in a paragraph or less? That takes genius, and perhaps a bit too much personal pain. Sylvia Plath is one of the few poets I am familiar with. By any measure, she would be considered a master. Yet, she was incredibly troubled. In just 30 years of life, she generated enough work to fill some 20 collections of poetry and novels. In her unabridged journal, she wrote, “... life is



The author during his super-heavyweight days and following generous prowler use and cheeseburger cessation.

long. And it is the long-run that balances the short flare of interest and passion." That quote sums everything up perfectly.

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in the work—investing in my
long-term strength and health—
I simply ate my way to
improved leverages.**

When I look back on earlier times, I can see far too many instances where I lost sight of the long term. Missteps were fueled by the pursuit of temporary passions. As a young lifter, I confused my actions with some sort of nobility. I was part of an exclusive club—one made up of those willing to do whatever it takes to lift as much

as possible. That's bullshit. I took a big shortcut. I cut corners. Instead of putting in the work—investing in my long-term strength and health—I simply ate my way to improved leverages. I couldn't run the way I could when I played football. I couldn't bench press more reps with 300 lb. I couldn't even do a fucking pull-up! I was incredibly strong, but it was a magic trick, and one that anyone could learn.

On the last day of the meet, Dave Hoff of Westside Barbell locked out an 825-lb. deadlift to secure a 2,700-lb. total. He weighed in at only 262 lb. It is of course true that you do not have to be big to be strong. There were plenty of lifters in the audience dreaming of the day when they might lift that kind of weight. Most never will. They'll make every sacrifice, though. Food. Highly specialized technique. Reliance on supportive equipment. Drugs. All of the above. But life is long.

I was proud of Mike. He finished the meet with a 1,150-lb. raw total. Not bad for a CrossFitter. Later on, we talked about the sport and why we train and compete. For him, it was all about balance.

Courtesy of Chris Mason/AtLarge Nutrition



Lean bench-press legend George Halbert is a former world record holder in several weight classes and was once the greatest bencher ever by coefficient in the 220-lb. class.

"Because of CrossFit, I can train more," he said. "The more I can train for powerlifting, the stronger I will become."

As I took the time to answer this question for myself, I noticed just how far I have come. Although I am still a big guy—and damn proud of it—I have left my super-heavyweight days behind for good. It's still about being as strong as possible. Only now, I do it for myself. No one else. Each workout is a chance to enter the forge. To refine myself one rep at a time. I want to finish each month knowing that I am better than the one before.

When I compete, it's not for illusory glory. Being on the platform is a testimony. I might not be capable of lifting as much weight, but today, I am stronger.



About the author

Chris Moore is writer and powerlifting coach at [CrossFit Memphis](#). Prior to his lifting career, Chris played Division 1 football at the University of Memphis. During this time, he began his study of human performance, eventually obtaining a master's degree in exercise and sport science. In 2007, Chris joined Mike Bledsoe, Doug Larson and Rob Conner to found Memphis' first CrossFit gym. Today, CrossFit Memphis has grown to include powerlifters, weightlifters and mixed martial artists, all training and competing under the banner of Faction Strength & Conditioning. As a drug-free lifter, Chris' best competitive lifts include a 975-lb. squat, a 675-lb. bench press and 675-lb. deadlift. You can reach him at christo-phermoore57@gmail.com, or visit [FactionSC.com](#).



Courtesy of Chris Moore