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Unleash Your Power

Louie Simmons of Westside Barbell has been producing world-class lifters for decades. At CrossFit Powerlifting Certs, he shares his proven training methods and teaches CrossFitters about strength, speed and explosive power.

By Mike Warkentin Managing Editor

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

“Is that a puddle of blood down there?”

CrossFit co-director of training Dave Castro is standing under a monolift at Westside Barbell with a safety squat bar on his back. Between his feet is circle of blood about the size of a salad plate.

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Legendary powerlifter and strength coach Louie Simmons looks at the puddle and laughs like a pirate.

The One and Only Louie Simmons

As the late Hunter S. Thompson might have said, Louie Simmons is one of god's own prototypes. He's truly one of a kind.

At 62, Simmons is revered in the powerlifting community. He's produced world and national powerlifting champions, and he's worked with Olympic gold medalists and professional athletes. As of August 2007, Westside had 25 700-lb. bench pressers and 12 1,000-lb. squatters to its credit. Those numbers are undoubtedly higher now. Lifters from the rugged gym in Columbus, Ohio, are all over the [powerlifting record books](#), and several Westside lifters are current world-record holders. One of them, [Laura Phelps-Sweatt](#), is perhaps the best female powerlifter in the world.

Simmons himself is one of only a handful of lifters to ever total elite in five different weight classes. He squatted 920 lb. and totaled 2,100 lb. over the age of 50. He's overcome two broken backs and a multitude of torn tendons and muscles, and he's patented several powerlifting machines. Despite age and injuries, he's still competing in the sport

he loves. On Dec. 5, 2009, he competed at 220 lb. and achieved a 730 squat, 455 bench and 670 deadlift, which made him an elite again.

When the first CrossFitters arrive at the nondescript Westside Barbell in Columbus, Ohio, the bald, goateed Simmons is being shaken into a canvas squat suit by two lifters who are holding him off the ground by the straps. Simmons is shirtless, with giant axes tattooed on his chest and "Westside Rules" tattooed across his back and down his spine. He's instantly intimidating and instantly welcoming to the group of CrossFitters present for the first Powerlifting Cert. He's like your grandfather, if your grandfather had the energy of a 20-year-old and could total 1,850 lb. at a powerlifting meet.

"I've got 99 problems, but a bench ain't one."

— Louie Simmons



Louie Simmons has been pushing the limits of strength training for decades, and the leaderboard at Westside Barbell is a roll call of some of the top powerlifters in the world.

“When you squat, don’t push your feet into the floor—push them apart,” Simmons yells at the CrossFit crew over the gangster rap pumping through the stereo. “That’s very important—but we’ll get into that later.”

Then Louie heads over to the monolift for a series of speed box squats with a bar rigged with bands, chains and plates as opposed to simple stacks of 45s. Using bands and chains changes the movement and makes the bar heavier at the top, which is traditionally the easier part of the lift. Because the tension increases at the top of the movement, bands teach a lifter to generate a lot of force in the bottom to “outrun” the resistance. The bands also make the eccentric portion of the lift far more intense by pulling the bar toward the platform. Simmons swears by “accommodating resistance,” and he’s modified all his equipment to allow the use of chains and bands.

During the session, the athletes descend to a box and then drive up quickly, generating amazing amounts of power. Super heavyweight Matt Smith (1,160-lb. squat, 2,673-lb. total) is working the monolift as the athletes—including Louie—cycle through. It’s instantly apparent that powerlifting is not a misnomer at Westside.

These men and women are strong as hell, but they can move fast.

The Basics of the West Side Method

After the training session wraps, Simmons makes a desk of a bench-press station and spreads his notes out in front of him. Over the next two days, he’ll sit behind the bench and outline the basics of the Westside method, illustrating his points with anecdotes and an encyclopedic knowledge of powerlifting stats.

Simmons started powerlifting in 1966, and after researching Soviet methods in the early ‘80s, he decided strength training in North America was going down the wrong path. To correct the problem, Simmons used Soviet ideas to create a program Westside lifters have used for decades to move big iron. The program is relatively simple, but it’s based on a great deal of research by Lazar Baroga, N.P. Laputin, Dr. Mel Siff, Alexander Prilipen, Alexei Medvedyev and many others.

Simply put, the Westside method comprises a maximum-effort day and a dynamic-effort day: lifters are either working very light or very heavy. The Westside micro-cycle is seven days long, with the squat and deadlift trained heavy on Monday and light on Friday. The bench press is trained to max effort on Wednesday and for speed on Sunday.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Karianne Dickson of CrossFit Bernardsville works through a 20-minute met-con with ankle and wrist weights

“Big isn’t strong.
Strong is strong.”
— Louie Simmons



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Louie Simmons has created all sorts of equipment to produce big lifts, including the bamboo “bandbell bar.” If you don’t press in a smooth, vertical path, the kettlebells will quickly pull the bar out of the groove and create chaos.

On max-effort day, the lifter attempts to hit a PR in a particular lift related to the squat, bench press and deadlift. Westside lifters rarely perform the competition lifts in training because Simmons doesn’t believe you can optimize gains by repeatedly doing the same lift and using linear progression, equating that method with reading the same book over and over and never getting any smarter. Instead, Westside lifters will do any one of a number of movements closely related to the three competition lifts, always shooting for a new PR on max-effort day.

For example, squats can be done with all sorts of combinations of bars and resistances and to varying levels of boxes or foam blocks. Bar placement can be changed, as can the stance. A lifter will keep track of his or her PRs for every combination, and each will train to move those numbers higher. Certain variations will prove to have more direct benefits to the full movement and will be emphasized slightly. For instance, an athlete may find that a PR in a two-board bench press will almost certainly indicate an upcoming PR in a competition press.

The constant variation is what allows a lifter to max out all year without losing time to unloading, injury and overtraining, and it certainly has some links to CrossFit’s philosophy of constantly varied functional movements performed at high intensity. Not every powerlifting movement is “functional” according to CrossFit’s definitions, but powerlifters are specialists who still have much to offer the athlete concerned with broad work capacity and more general fitness.

**“The better shape you’re in,
the faster your new records
will come.”**

— Louie Simmons

Max-effort days should generally have only about 3 reps above 90 percent 1RM, with 2-5 minutes of rest between sets. For Simmons, it's critical to avoid overtraining. He references charts developed by Prilipen and maintains that too many reps above 90 percent will utterly fry the central nervous system and result in poor performance and overtraining.

Following the max-effort lift, athletes perform supplemental exercises such as glute-ham raises, reverse hypers, kettlebell presses, triceps extensions and so on. These exercises are designed to address specific weaknesses in key muscles and should help increase the PR on the squat, press or deadlift. They're generally done with lower reps or to one heavy set of five. Accessory exercises follow, targeting muscles that may not be quite as essential to the lifts but are still important. The reps are generally higher for these sets. The athlete finishes with any other exercises that he or she may require for additional work, and rehab/prehab movements fit nicely here.

“If you have a high work capacity, a high-volume, high-intensity workout is not as tiring for you. ... This enables you to train a little heavier and longer and a little faster than your enemies.”

— Louie Simmons

Speed day is all about explosive power, and athlete will train to increase his or her rate of force development with a relatively light weight, usually around 40-60 percent of 1RM. For example, a lifter with a 500-lb. squat will do 8-12 sets of 2 reps at 250 lb. (bars and plates only). Fewer sets are needed if bands and chains are used, and 5-6 sets of single deadlifts follow at 45-60 percent of the 1RM. For bench press, a lifter with a 400-lb. 1RM will lift 200 lb. in 8-9 sets of 3, using several different grip widths. Rest between sets is 30-90 seconds.

Bar speed is critical on speed day. The idea is to drive submaximal weights with all your power so that you can then transfer that speed-strength to a maximal weight, using power to move the bar rather than just slow, grinding strength. Trained lifters will be able to put a great percentage of their strength into a submaximal lift, resulting in greater speed and power. That power can then be transferred to competition lifts at maximal weights.

Following the speed work, athletes perform accessory exercises and any other additional movements, including ab and sled work.



Andy Hendel of CrossFit Charlotte drags a sled through the parking lot as part of Westside's GPP training.

Staff/CrossFit Journal

General Physical Preparedness

Most CrossFitters are not powerlifters, and vice versa, but Simmons is clear that the general physical preparedness CrossFitters chase is critical to success in just about any sport.

"GPP is very important if you want to reach the top," he wrote. "If you are unfit and can't do the proper exercises or do sled pulling, treadmill work or kettlebell work, you will undoubtedly fail."

Let's be clear: powerlifters will not post record Fran times, and they won't be doing Cindy anytime soon. But they do perform box jumps to develop explosive power, and they regularly drag sleds and work with kettlebells in ways designed to strengthen capacity and improve endurance.

Simmons sees GPP as an extension of absolute strength: you have to be able to do more work to be a better powerlifter. If you want to do more work, you have to have a level of fitness that allows you to train at a higher volume.

"GPP raises your ability to do more work by special means. GPP is very common in track and field overseas but is still very much overlooked in the United States," Simmons wrote.

If you focus only on being able to do a few heavy deadlifts, you will simply lack the capacity to do the supplemental and accessory work required to improve the lifts. Progress will stall and the athlete will inevitably be labeled a fat, out-of-shape specialist. Simmons is producing specialists to be sure, but he needs them to have a level of conditioning that allows them to reach their physical potential.

Under the Bar

During practical sessions, Simmons is like a big kid showing you his toys. He's energetic and enthusiastic and passionate, and his athletes/coaches are incredibly patient while teaching the crew how to perform technical powerlifting movements.

On Friday, Simmons goes through all kinds of variations of the squat and deadlift, adding in a bunch of GPP work at the end of the day. Athletes such as A.J. Roberts, Justin Tooley, Bianca Stone and Travis Bell offer coaching tips and teach CrossFitters the finer points of powerlifting. On Saturday it's all about the bench press, with a short nutrition lecture with Chris Mason of [At Large Nutrition](#). Then it's back to more play time with Louie's toys.

Throughout the cert, Simmons is constantly handing out activities for people to try.

2009 CrossFit Games champ Tanya Wagner is assigned 100 triceps extensions with a band, while 2008 Games champ Caity Matter is charged with 200 leg curls with ankle weights. Lauren Plumey has elastic bands around her ankles and is walking on a treadmill with no motor—a "tread sled." Spencer Hendel is using a plyometric machine called a "plyo swing."

Over by the monolift, Adrian Bozman is doing five minutes of 225-lb. safety-bar squats to a foam block, with reps coming every 15 seconds. Lance Mosely and Rob Orlando are working on 415 deadlifts with added band resistance. Jesse Ward is carrying a wheelbarrow around the building. Karianne Dickson is doing a 20-minute workout with wrist and ankle weights courtesy of [Shane Sweatt](#).



It's up to CrossFit's top trainers and athletes to figure out how to use Louie Simmons' techniques to produce fitter athletes.

Other CrossFitters are doing reverse hypers, sled drags, box jumps, kettlebell presses, ab work, glute-ham raises, close-grip benches, sumo deadlifts, rack pulls, Zercher squats with a special harness, floor presses and many more movements. Most importantly, they're thinking about ways to use Simmons' techniques to make better CrossFitters.

Some might ask what a man essentially focused on three lifts can teach a bunch of athletes searching for work capacity across broad time and modal domains. The answer is a lot, really.

Simmons is an expert in his field, and he's got an absolute wealth of information to share. He's passionate and experienced. His body bears the scars of experiments gone both right and wrong. He earned his knowledge and is happy to share it, and he had a group of elite CrossFitters buzzing with excitement and looking for ways to incorporate Westside methods into CrossFit training.

Admittedly, CrossFit will never produce a 1,000-lb. squat, and powerlifting will probably never produce a sub-three-minute Fran—but that's no reason to ignore a style of training that's generated a host of world-class competitors. Simmons is sharing a lifetime of knowledge, and it's up to CrossFit's best athletes and trainers to decide how to use that info to produce better athletes.

Perhaps Simmons himself summed it up best:

"It has been asked what training philosophy West Side adheres to. The answer is none We cannot be so arrogant as to form a personal philosophy."

Editors Note:

The Westside program is far more complex than this brief overview, but its essence can be captured in max-effort and dynamic-effort days.

*For a complete overview of Simmons' program visit the [Westside Barbell website](#), read *The Westside Barbell Book of Methods* by Louie Simmons or check the *CrossFit Journal* for upcoming videos from the first Powerlifting Cert.*



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About the Author

Mike Warkentin is the managing editor of the CrossFit Journal. Using Westside methods, Mike, Adrian Bozman and Dan Castillo of [Rainier CrossFit](#) will be working toward a 300-lb. bench press. Mike would also like to thank Kurtis Bowler and [Steve Slater](#) for going out of their way to help him locate a lost passport in Slater's warehouse full of atlas stones and strongman gear in Lancaster, Ohio.