

## **Life of a Champion**

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*As read at GritLit 2018*

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"So what do you bench, son?" were the first words out of my new client's mouth. We were standing adjacent to the gym's reception desk in the white sunlight streaming through the big storefront windows and he was squeezing down with all his strength on the tendons of my thumb. The handshake was weak, but its duration was extraordinary.

"I don't remember," I said.

His eyes roamed over my chest and shoulders; the bastard was appraising me, and as I was wearing the gym's rather scant trainer's uniform and the gym's logo I could only stand still until he had finished. He was about my height and bore the usual marks of a prosperous middle age: a university T-shirt and clean pink flesh, and absolutely top-of-the-line running shoes, gleaming new.

"Come on, don't be shy," he said. "How about this, I'll tell you how much I weigh. I weigh two hundred pounds. What do you think of that?"

"Well, you're here to get fit," I said.

"I used to weigh one-seventy-five, not even my wife knows how much weight I've gained. I used to bench two ninety. Come on, what's the most you've ever bench-pressed?"

As a matter of fact, I can bench four hundred pounds. Can you? Of course you bloody can't. Why should you? Strength is my profession; it isn't yours. Today an investment banker client told me with real kindness shining in his squashy fat eyes, that I could buy a certain mining stock as a flow-through share, and blither blather blither about saving brokerage fees. It was actual gibberish, but did I feel insulted or threatened by Mr Bank Manager's obvious proficiency at stocks and bonds? I could give a toss. If I chose to be proficient at such things, I would doubtless be proficient. As it happens I have chosen my own proficiency, and there are few humans extant who can lift as much weight as I can.

"Four-oh-five," I said, and he whistled a little bit.

"This gym is full of big guys in tight shirts just like you," he said pleasantly. "They all say they can bench two thousand pounds. Then they do a one-rep max of a hundred and six and they need a nap."

I had agreed to give someone a free trial training session without letting Margo, the manager vet him first: that was my first error. I smiled and bid him to follow me to the nearest bench, where I loaded up the weights, and showed him.

When I was done, he whistled and said: "Enjoy it while you're young. I played lacrosse for a little while back at university and I used to be as big as you are. When I was your age I could deadlift three-fifty. But I have no regrets. I've done very well for myself."

That's what these middle-aged spread types tell themselves: it's not the training, it's not the work, it's the mere fact of youth. I work out for two hours a day; four hours a day when I'm training for a competition. It doesn't come easily or even naturally and I'm in near-constant pain, but I've gained fifteen kilos in two years, and let me promise you one thing: fat-face here has never deadlifted four hundred pounds in his life and moreover, lacrosse is not a sport. Athletes cling to certain traits, certain postures all their lives: there is a carriage, a straightness in their movements, and the puffer-fish before me possessed none of them. I smiled at him winningly, provoking him with thirty-two brilliant white teeth; he clearly enjoyed drinking beer, and it was probably special artisan beer and if you poked him with a fork, he would explode with fat like a pork sausage, whereas I could bench-press four hundred and ten pounds.

"You don't believe me?" he said.

"Sure," I said.

"Alright son," he said like a school principal. "I'm waiting. Let's see if you can turn this old man into a handsome prince like you."

I hadn't mollified him properly; I hadn't smoothed out his ego. Like all rich men, he believed there was a secret exercise, some exclusive and elusive workout that could restore him to his peak and could be unlocked only by money. Well, I'm not a bloody miracle-worker. Lend me your body twice a week for fifty minutes, and I'll give it a shock it won't forget, but don't kid yourself that you'll resemble me by the end of it. All you've done is stave off death. Nonetheless I led fat-face through a few

exercises. He was eager to show me that he could lift big weights; I slowed him down and corrected the form of his squats and lunges. He had an abnormally high range of motion in his rotator cuff, which was almost certainly the result of a Teres Major muscle that was failing to fire properly; otherwise he was of above-average strength and endurance. By the end of the session he had moderated his tone and showed me respect; it was good, but it was tiresome, I had to repeat the dance with nearly every client; I had to put my proficiency on display; I had to perform feats of strength and rattle off the Latin names of muscles and bones. I cut him off precisely at the thirty-minute mark.

"That's it?" he said. "I've hardly worked up a sweat."

"That's the end of the free thirty-minute trial. If you want to keep training with me, Margo can set you up with the paperwork."

"Margo? The gal at the desk? She's your keeper?"

"She's the manager," I told him, because the best way to fell a man with a chip on his shoulder is to ignore him.

"I tip very well," he said. "You'd be lucky to get a client like me."

"The gym doesn't allow tips."

"I tip anyway."

Sidelong, I could see Margo smiling in our direction, reminding me to push the sale. It was my job to move product, Margo had said, and you're the product. I smiled back and I hated it.

"We're having a sale right now on personal training. If you sign up today, you get a twenty-five per cent discount on your first ten sessions."

"Really?" he said. "And does Margo give you an allowance, or does she keep all the money for herself?"

"That's disrespectful, sir," I told him; to hell with him and with Margo's sales numbers; and I left him there sweaty and squeaking in his splendid shoes to finish my own workout. I was training for the provincial championships and it was strenuous and anger is one of the worst distractions there is. And spare me your dilettante's dicta, that I "use my anger" for my sport: does anger improve your proficiency as an

accountant? Do excellent surgeons make their incisions whilst fulminating with rage? Anger makes you spastic, and that's the end of it.

Fat-face was angry – at me for my youth and strength and at himself for his puce and marbled rich man's body. And I knew he was rich, my clients are always rich, or they couldn't afford the air I exhale, and they are proficient at being rich, and at complaining about the aftermath of richness. If fat-face chose to be strong and fit instead of merely irritable, he would be so: it's as simple as that. If he worked faster and strove harder, he would be built like I am; or at the very least he would be less marbled and less puce.

I told these things to Margo when she came to find me during my push-ups.

"You just lost me a sale," she said, but I could sense that she wanted to smile; she had once been a gymnastics champion, and when the younger trainers complained of their hours or their aches, she would launch herself up on a barre with and pointedly perform muscle-ups that instantly shut them up. "He was joking around. Get your numbers up, or I will keep all of the money for myself."

"I'm going to win the provincial championships next week. Isn't that worth something?"

"If you win, Amir. You're cruel to those poor knees, and when your knees go, you're finished as a weightlifter."

I absolutely was cruel to my knees, but all of us were injured and broken as our innards gradually burst from the strain; the real contest was with one's own cells - to beat them into submission without actually killing them. "Watch me win. Nobody can touch me."

"I'll put the trophy right here," she said, tapping the front desk. "We'll put a sign out on the billboard."

"Is Fat-face rich?"

"Let's call him Roman, Amir. It's called respect for the client."

"He's jealous of me. Olympic gold medalists can't afford the shoes he's got. Have you seen his asshole car?"

"Not everyone is jealous of you," said Margo, and she went back to work.

Margo was wrong: Roman Fat-face returned to the gym the next day with his purse of gold in hand, dead-set on purchasing personal training sessions with the “future weight-lifting champion of Ontario”, as if I were some sort of investment; but his chief executive charm evaporated when I told him that the earliest he could start was in two weeks.

“Is that so. Is someone else paying double for you?” he said, still smiling.

“Everyone pays the same rate. I’m booked solid for the next two weeks, that’s all.”

“You’re with clients every waking moment of the day?”

“As a matter of fact sir, I’m competing at the regional weight-lifting championships on Sunday, sir. So I’ll be working part-time hours. Sir.”

“Is that so. Well, I’ll have to give my business to someone else then.”

I did not reply, but he didn’t leave.

“What’s your best event?”

“The clean-and-jerk.” It was not, but I took great care and pleasure enunciating the word “jerk”.

I saw the old fart a few times after that. He was indistinguishable from the other old farts at the gym but for his athlete's shoes, the shoes of a pretender. He would perform a half-ass run on the treadmill, and when he was finished he would sloppily hoist the heaviest free-weight he could heave over his head with both hands, and then catch my eye and grimace, either because he was mimicking me or because he was a genuine idiot, and I did not care, because in the run-up to the competition I was training like a blind pig. My overhead lift was still weak and my right hamstring muscle throbbed with pain; it was firing incorrectly and to compensate I was badly taxing my knees. I wasn't lifting to capacity but I didn't care. When the hamstring gained strength, the heavy lifting would follow.

Exactly one week before the competition, I lifted my all-time personal best weight of one hundred sixty-five kilos. I knew I would win.

And I did. I won. I slaughtered sixty-seven competitors. I beat my own record in the clean-and-jerk by two kilos and bested my competition by a full 5 kilos and as soon as I knew it was true I sank to my knees with blood in my ears. I was the Ontario champion, and I would always be an Ontario champion; it was indelible. For the rest of my life I would know the unquenchable sweetness of a gold medal. At the celebration dinner we descended on the food like jackals and my head ached from the meat and the sweet heavy wine; I was twenty-two years old; I would be the greatest champion since Rezazadeh, king of the super heavyweights.

After the delirium, I made the slow float back to earth. A champion still had to feed himself; and a champion of my height and muscle density required a formidable thrice daily feed. I'd spent every penny of my prize money - most of it before the competition even began - on hotels and meals and transportation, and it was necessary to celebrate my win with the comrades I'd bested, or what was the purpose of victory? After a handsome feed at a steak restaurant and drinks at a nightclub, I had nothing in the bank by Monday morning, and neither did my mates. All weightlifters are paupers; what profit is there to anyone in our exertions? But art is always useless, and my art was no exception.

And so I returned to the gym, where I earned my bread, and meat, and occasional wine; and it did smell like socks and disinfectant but I instructed myself not to feel resentment, not even when I saw Mr Fat-face Roman watching television as he loped on the treadmill, and performed lunges badly, without any heed to my corrections to form. Margo was glad for me, and proud; she understood the compulsions of an athlete, however bankrupt, and gave me my pick of shifts for the month. She placed the trophy I'd received - engraved with the words "Amir Areghlian, Ontario Powerlifting Champion, Heavyweight Division" - on the reception desk, and all morning long the steroid boys gave me pats and slaps of approval and utterances of "Well done, dog" and "Congrats, Amir".

I trained three clients that afternoon, each a brasher, more moneyed sack of suet than the next; I was paid to teach them fitness, but also to cluck at their anecdotes, and to quack out a few of my own. I was stronger than all of them and more disciplined, but I needed their money to live, and at least at Margo's gym I could freely pursue my sport.

Listen, I told myself, did you not feel joy, abject joy, when you became a champion? And what the stuff of that joy? The joy I'd felt was the joy of pure sport. I enjoyed an NHL hockey game as much as anyone else, but the players weren't champions, they were monkeys who did laps around stinking arenas so that they could lap up the pocket change of wealthy men. When I hoist a one-hundred kilo weight clean over my head, I am moved by an invisible force that tells me it is right and correct to tax my body to its breaking point, and nothing else, and that is the beauty of amateur sport. If I felt compelled to lift large objects because some fat old fart paid me to I would feel soiled.

I was working the front cash register when Roman strolled by the water fountain and noticed the trophy. He peered down at the name engraved on it through his spectacles, then he turned to me and grinned.

"So you're a champion now," he said. "Congratulations, champ!"

"Thank you," I said.

"Was there any prize money?"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars."

"It's not worth it," he said decisively, and didn't wait for a reply. "I'm still jet-lagged from my three days to London," he continued to at Margo, who was working the reception desk. I could see him eyeing the chocolate energy bars.

"Travel will tire you out," said Margo. "I know it tires me out."

"It was go-go-go all day for three days. I barely had a chance to take in the night life. The doctor keeps telling me to take it easy, get more rest and exercise. I've got this membership and a home gym now." Of course he did: the rich lived within a system where the acquisition of things was uncomplicated; what they wanted, they bought. When they wanted health, they bought gym memberships, and to accelerate the process they spent harder, buying branded T-shirts they would not wear and

unlimited access to a dietician they would not call, and personal training sessions that they forgot to attend. The only thing they used consistently was the hot towel service; and Margo was happy to microwave slightly damp old gym towels to their hearts' delight.

"Well then, let me get you a hot towel," said Margo, and she laughed the laugh of a woman who wants to please a man.

Fat-face noticed me smiling at this and said, "Your boy is laughing at me. He thinks it's funny. You couldn't handle the strain, son."

"Take it easy," I said.

"Amir is the Ontario powerlifting champion, did you know that?" said Margo. "And he's my most popular trainer. He's phenomenal."

Roman buried his face in his hot towel and when he emerged he said: "Listen, I don't want to win medals any more, I have enough stress in my life. I need someone who can understand the stress I'm under." It's another of the afflictions of the rich: they genuinely expect one to go into deep mourning because of the extraordinary strain of their richness.

"How much for the Ontario powerlifting champion to give me a massage?" said Roman.

"That's not really what I do," I said. "I'm a professional powerlifter."

"Does it matter? I tip very well. I want the massage of champions."

We both looked at Margo, and her smile didn't waver, and I waited for her to tell him that the gym didn't allow tipping, that her star trainer was not some masseuse or prostitute, hired for an hour's pleasure, but one of a select breed of humans who could lift ungodly quantities of iron and for absolutely no reason.

"I'm sure you can work something out," said Margo.

"I'm sure we can," said Roman, winking at me. "Thank you, Margo, my love."

I could see him mount a treadmill and begin the workings of his ponderous legs.

The next morning my trophy was found smashed in two, glinting luminously in the morning sun. I knew exactly who had smashed it, and I knew why, and when he came creeping into the gym with his unattainable blue shoes he smiled.

"Hello, champ," he said.