

Iron John—Three Mentors
Lessons That Last a Lifetime
by Dan John

I discuss training a lot here at T-Nation, and the same basic questions keep surfacing. The thing is, my answers don't seem to change much.

"What works?" I'm asked.

"Everything," I answer, "Well, everything for about two to six weeks."

This leads to the follow-up question, "What do you do when things start going wrong?" That's the real question.

I've slammed my head against the wall enough times over the last four decades of strength training to learn that, well, slamming my head against a wall hurts. Therefore, I recommend everyone stop doing that. I also wouldn't recommend the way I learned my greatest lessons in sport: allowing surgery to tell me that I need to slow down.

As I review my journals I've kept since 1971, what I discover is that the best lessons of my career come from odd little meetings with mentors (my own little cadre of Obi-Wan Kenobis) that have simply taken me aside for a few minutes and summed up their athletic experience for me to try on for size.

Let me share with you an amazing one month experience when I literally bumped into three of the greatest names in sports...and built a career on a paragraph worth of information.

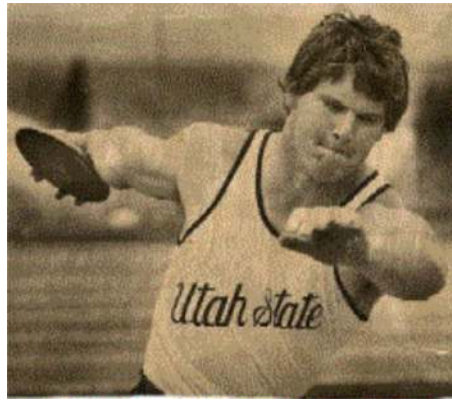
Best Month Ever

In 1976 I had one of those amazing months that still impacts me three decades later. I met three people — three very famous people — and came away from these conversations with insights about training and life that still shape me today.

In a three-week period, I had conversations with arguably the world's most famous basketball player, a world record holder and Olympic medalist in the discus, and one of the greatest bodybuilders the world has ever seen. For my part, I simply bumped into each of them. Fortunately, I was too dumb to ask any questions, so all three gave me answers to questions I didn't even know to ask.

"You gotta do it in competition."

In late May, just as the college track season starts to wind down, I was invited to throw in the Mount SAC Relays. At the time, it was the hottest track meet in America, maybe the world. I was the lone freshman in my division and, to paraphrase my dad, I looked like I was "standing in a hole" when they introduced me. I took my first warm up throw and it skidded far into the field.



The author as college student, circa 1876.

Now, as I walked out into the field, I noticed something very odd: the man bringing me my discus seemed to be getting larger and larger. And larger. It occurred to me as we got closer that it wasn't an optical illusion; this guy was *enormous*. He was as big as Wilt Chamberlain... probably because he *was* Wilt Chamberlain! Turns out the NBA legend was a fan of track and field.

Wilt literally reached down to hand me the discus and said, "Nice throw, looked good." I realized at that moment that the role of genetics is key in athletic success. Wilt was immense. Huge. He blocked out the sun.

As I turned to walk back to take my second warm up, I heard a voice say, "Go get 'em, bum." I looked over and saw my dad, just outside the ropes. I found out later that Wilt asked my dad to come out with him in the field. Both he and Wilt stood out in the sector for the next few hours watching the discus and talking about track and field. (For the record, my dad never mentioned basketball, a good lesson really. At parties, a doctor doesn't want to hear your symptoms, an accountant doesn't want to hear about taxes, and Wilt doesn't want to talk about center play at a track meet.)

I placed. All in all, a pretty good effort when you consider that during the warm ups I was the worst thrower by quite a bit. My dad offered me his hand in congratulations. Wilt smiled at me as he put his hand on my shoulder. "Yep," he said, "Practice is practice. Warm ups is warm ups. You gotta do it in competition." He had noticed that I lost the warm ups and did well in the meet.



Wilt doing his thing.

Wilt's advice is worth considering for every effort in your life. All of us have a friend or two that mastered all the intricacies of high school or college life but failed miserably in the "real world." At the local gym, we all know somebody, call him "spandex guy," who has the I-tunes cranking, the doo-rag going, the wrist straps,

the big belt and knee wraps, then sits down on the leg adductor machine.

These people are mastering the warm-ups and losing the competition. Think about it.

"When things go bad, simplify."

One week later, I was back down in Southern California for the State Meet. I fared well for a freshman...the only freshman. At the end of the competition, I came up to sit with my mom and dad in the stands. My dad leaned over to me and said, "Hey, this guy knows something about the discus." I turned back to meet Fortune Gordien, former world record holder in the discus and multiple Olympic medal winner. Yeah, Dad, I think he might know something.



Fortune Gordien

Fortune gave me a piece of advice: "When things go bad, and they will, either simplify your footwork doing 'iddy biddy feet' or stop reversing when you throw. The key, though, is when things go bad, simplify."

Now, I don't want to worry anyone about the technical aspects of the discus. The gem here is this: When things go wrong, *simplify*.

Most of us, of course, do the opposite. When we get in trouble with a little fat gain, we go over the top with excessive cardio, insane dieting, and massive increases in workload in the weightroom. A few weeks later, depressed and hungry and walking around with less lean muscle mass, we wonder what went wrong. Well, we didn't "simplify."

I always like to remind people when they ask about cardio — or jogging, as we used to call it — that John McCallum (author of the *Complete Keys to Progress*) encouraged people to jog. It's true. McCallum told his readers to try to run a quarter of a mile and, if possible, build up to a whole mile over the next few months.

One mile...built up over a few months. That's not much, folks. *Simplify*.

"Toss out the extras."

With the season over, I jumped right back into training, but it was obvious that I needed a break. I needed some sun. I needed the beach.

My friend Howard had to go to Santa Monica for business, so I hopped in the car with him and went to Muscle Beach. It was all there: the original Gold's Gym, the original World's Gym, Franco, Lou and all the rest, topless girls on the beach, and all the crazies lined up outside the doors. I paid my ten bucks (in 1976!) for my day membership and went into Gold's to train.

In the back, they had a nice little platform with a great barbell, so I started off my workout with power cleans. It was one of the best decisions of my life. Robby Robinson, "The Black Prince," came over to compliment

my form. He said, "It's nice to see a young guy who knows how to work out." Robby, like all the greats, knew the Olympic lifts and the powerlifts.



Robby Robinson

Now, at ten bucks a day, I decided to train several times that day. As I walked down the beach after my first workout, a rather big human in sweats ran past me from the opposite direction. Then, I heard, "Hey, hey." I turned around and it was Robinson.

"You're the guy who was doing cleans," he said.

"Yeah," I said. I mean, what else do you say to one of the greatest bodybuilders in history?

We walked for about a mile together talking about training. Not "gear," not theory, but good old fashioned "this works, this doesn't." I'm amazed at how much I still use. Robby believed that his best workouts came when he "tossed out all the extras." Basically, his best workout came down to two cycles or supersets:

1. Bench Press
2. Pull-ups

He'd do "set after set after set" of these and he told me he could "feel his whole upper body grow."

For his lower body:

1. Front Squats
2. Straight-legged deadlifts

Again, "set after set after set" until his legs blew up.

For fat loss, he only recommended one thing. There was a flight of steps down on the beach, maybe 200 steps. He told me to sprint up to the top of them.

"Try it. Then, after a couple of weeks, try to do it a couple of times."

Ever since that day, the first thing I look for is a hill or flight of stairs to train. I walked with Robby back to where I started and went back into Gold's Gym. For the record, I started doing front squats. He headed north on the beach and I never saw him again.

A Handful of Advice

So there you go, a handful of advice that continues to shape my training each and every day:

- First and foremost, it's what you do in competition that you measure. Warm-ups are fine, but they mean very little. Base your practice sessions around your successes in competition. By the way, that's an easy thing to say, but very difficult to chart.
- When trouble arises, *simplify*. Cut back, toss something out, eliminate the extras. Simplify.
- Just because it's simple doesn't mean it isn't hard. Learn the difference.

I'm lucky I didn't have any questions when I met these three guys or I wouldn't have gotten the right answers.

About the Author

Dan John is the Diocesan Director of Religious Education for the Diocese of Salt Lake City and a full-time "on-line" religious studies instructor for Columbia College of Missouri. Originally from South San Francisco, Dan came to Utah to throw the discus for Utah State University and never left. He has Masters degrees in history and in religious education, as well as having done intensive work at the American University in Cairo, University of Haifa, and Cornell.

Dan is former number one in the world in the Highland Games, ages 45-49, broke the American record in the Weight Pentathlon, holds numerous National Championships in weightlifting and throwing and maintains a full-time free internet coaching site at <http://danjohn.org/coach>.

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