

# SUPERMAN

## The Reinvention and Rise of Mark Reifkind in the Hardcore World of Competitive Weightlifting and Strength Training

In the last installment of this series, you read about how after a terrifying series of injuries, Mark Reifkind found himself walking away from the one thing that had defined his very existence – gymnastics. Now he shares his story of triumph over tragedy and how Russian kettlebells played a crucial role in his rehabilitation and rise.

Interview by Dr. Mark Cheng, RKC Team Leader  
Second of a 2-part series



# H

**Hard Style:** Rif, after coming to the realization that you'd no longer be competing in elite gymnastics competition, what did you do to occupy yourself and stay out of trouble?

**Mark Reifkind:** Since my upper body was trashed, I took up running. My knee could tolerate it, and it allowed me to distract myself and Zen out from the heartache of leaving gymnastics. I sort of taught myself how to run, working my way up to longer and longer distances as an escape. Next thing I knew, I was filling the void from the almost daily 5 hours of gymnastics training with greater and greater distances. Six months later, I did my first marathon.

But since my marathon times weren't exactly stellar, I kept looking for a sport where I could really shine again, and I eventually found ultra-endurance training. To me, the only limiting factor in that sport was one's psychological ability to suffer for long periods, and *that* I was damn good at.

For 3 years, I went through a stage of running, then cycling, then running, cycling, and swimming. That was in 1979 and around the time when the first Ironman Triathlons were started, and that looked like the perfect competition format for me. I jumped into training full-bore, and surprisingly, it didn't create any new injuries for me!

The downer was that there were virtually *no* triathletes at that time, and therefore no real community centered around the sport. Also, I wasn't exactly thrilled with what that sort of training did for my physique. I felt great, but at 5'6" and 125 pounds, I wasn't exactly fighting off potential dates.

**HS:** Which explains the shift to bodybuilding!

**Rif:** Exactly. During the late 70's, Arnold was king, so I started hitting the weight pile. I did bodybuilding for 8 years, but at the beginning, I was still doing high endurance training, so within one year I went from 125 pounds to 175, back down to 125, and then back up to 175. You could say I was a little conflicted, but bodybuilding won out in the end.

**HS:** So then your entire focus shifted to weight training?

**Rif:** Not exactly. At that time, I was making my living in Eugene, Oregon, as a coach at the famous Oregon Academy of Artistic Gymnastics. I got a really good look into the viciousness in the world of competitive women's gymnastics and also found that my injury experiences were in no way uncommon—the higher up the food chain, the more messed up the athletes' bodies were. In spite of all that, it was my way of keeping in touch with the sport I still loved so much and gave me the chance to work with elite women gymnasts and Olympians. Those years also helped me develop my eye for detail and my

teaching abilities—two attributes that are crucial for any higher level coach or instructor.

The world of competitive athletics was uncovering secrets 5 – 10 years ahead of the labs and academicians, and after much deliberation, I made the decision to not pursue an advanced degree. Rather, I wanted to see, hear, and experience the truth about optimal human performance myself, firsthand, and from within.

**HS:** Did you compete as a bodybuilder?

**Rif:** Yes. I did bodybuilding for 8 years, during which time I landed a job at Gold's Gym in San Jose, California, working with pro bodybuilder Scott Wilson, who's a real legend in the sport. I was lucky enough to become his training partner and eventually his coach.

Scott taught me a ton about how to do real-world bodybuilding, and he was one of the most disciplined athletes I've ever known. True to the methods of the day, we trained in total high-intensity fashion—never missing a workout, never cheating on the diets, and training until we dropped dead at the end of each workout. Those

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days were an unbelievable lesson in pain tolerance, muscle control, and absolute mental focus.

I also had the chance to coach Sue Ann McKean, one of the first really muscular women in female bodybuilding. She competed in the Ms. Olympia contests many times with a best placing of seventh.

However, I came to the realization that bodybuilding was essentially a male beauty pageant and I ain't that pretty. What I was really missing was real athletic competition, and shortly after Scott Wilson and I bought the Ironworks Gym in Campbell, California, I took up powerlifting.

**HS:** Did you find the switch from bodybuilding to powerlifting difficult?

**Rif:** Not really. In fact, it felt like I went from trying on a suit that was a little too large to one that seemed to fit much better. Powerlifting is about results in a "right here, right now" kind of way, not about cosmetics or academic theories, so in that way, it really appealed to me.

The new location was perfect for that sort of training, too. The Ironworks Gym was a hotbed of strength and power athletes like Brian Oldfield, Mac Wilkins, and Olympian Bruce Jenner throughout the 80's. Wilson and I turned it into a World Gym, and I dove right into the deep end of powerlifting, both as a coach and a competitor.

As a coach, I got to work with some of the finest athletes, including one newcomer named Catherine Keli. Catherine became one of the USA's best all time women powerlifters. As a drug-free athlete at 123 pounds, she squatted and deadlifted 400 pounds and benched 250 pounds. She competed and placed in the top three in numerous IPF World Championships, as well as winning the Pan Ams and "Best Lifter" recognition at the Pan Ams. Jeff Stanley, who put up an 865 pound squat at his first USPF Nationals in 1991, was an athlete I had the pleasure of coaching from his start in powerlifting. I also had the honor of serving as assistant coach for the USA Team in Sweden in 1993, head coach of the Women's USA Team in Chiba, Japan, in 1995, and head coach for the first ever Pan Am Championship in 2000.

We all know that to be a better coach, you need to humble yourself and learn from a great coach, so from 1993 to 2000, I had the extreme honor and pleasure of studying with one of the world's finest powerlifting coaches, Louie Simmons. We were the first to host Louie for a two-day seminar in 1995, giving us the rare opportunity to learn directly from the master himself. During those years, I spoke to him almost every week, picking his brain constantly on every possible nuance of training—physiology, mechanics, routines, everything. You name it, I asked him about it, and he had an answer for it, never holding back any of his information or wisdom.

Because of Louie's coaching, I came within a hairbreadth of achieving my goal, an elite rating total

(1500 pounds) at 181 pounds with a 1485 pound effort. But my injuries were catching up to me.

**HS:** Are these new injuries we're talking about? By this time, you'd already blown out a knee and wrecked a shoulder, right?

**Rif:** Yup. A lot of it came from constantly going balls out with technique that we now know were dangerous for my knee and back—for example, squatting too widely and doing too many rounded back max effort lifts.

This resulted in a pretty serious L4-L5 disc herniation in 2000 while I was preparing for the APF Masters Nationals. Since I couldn't tolerate my normal volume-based training regime, I had to seriously improvise for the meet, just putting in 4-5 single reps per workout with heavier weight. Now while I did manage to pull off a PR total and my PR bench, that injury definitely signaled the end of my powerlifting career.

While I'd recognized the serious length/tension relationship imbalances I'd developed throughout my entire body and set about correcting them just prior to then, it was too late. My body had turned into a total mess, and I couldn't train for beans. I was in pain all the time. I don't think that people really comprehend that injuries can cause you a lifetime of pain. Even the little traumas that you think might have worked themselves out sometimes accumulate and show up much later on down the road. They don't always manifest immediately as disability or excruciating pain.

There are a lot, a lot, a lot of pro athletes out there who would benefit so much from training in a manner that both rehabs and prehabs them. This is where I think kettlebells are tremendous tools.

**HS:** Ahhh, the good part of the story! So you discovered kettlebells after those last two injuries?

**Rif:** Enter the kettlebell, baby! Actually, I'd already been using kettlebells in my training as a powerlifting adjunct. I opened my studio, Gyras, and was using the kettlebell more and more as an exclusive training tool for my clients. I read Pavel's article "Vodka, Picklejuice, and Kettlebells" in *Milo*, and I was attracted to the primitiveness of the training. I bought some kettlebells for my clients, as well as Pavel's *Russian Kettlebell Challenge* book. While learning the exercises was relatively simple for me, doing the work, however, was definitely *not!*

Basic exercises like swings and snatches put my heart rate through the roof, even with light weights, and that blew my mind. When I'd started with KB training, I thought that they might irritate my back injury, but the opposite occurred. Not only did my back start feeling better, but my squat performance improved along with my cardio.

My long-time friend and protégé RKC Team Leader Michael Castrogiovanni came up to visit and brought

For more information on Sr. RKC Mark Reifkind, please visit his website [www.giryastrength.com](http://www.giryastrength.com). To register for the RKC or RKC II workshops, please visit [www.dragondoor.com](http://www.dragondoor.com) and click on Author Workshops.

his friend Master RKC Brett Jones to my house. Despite seeing what a wreck I was physically, they both urged me to sign up and train for the next Russian Kettlebell Challenge certification course.

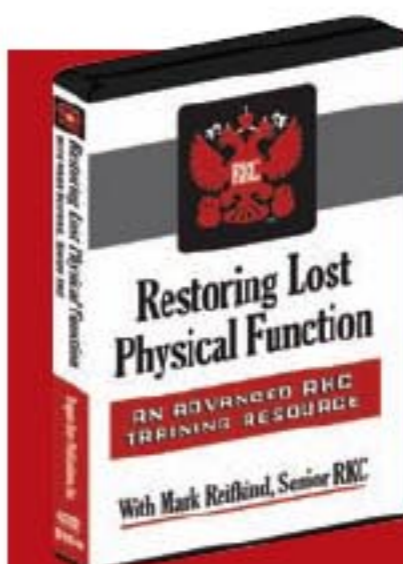
Knowing I was out of choices as far as physical training was concerned and knowing how well my back had rehabbed since I'd begun including the kettlebell swings and snatches in my own routines, I said "What the heck?" and went for it.

**I dropped all barbell work, took up the Warrior Diet, and let Michael kick my ass three times a week with so many swings that I felt like my glutes were utterly pulverized. But five months later, I was 25 pounds lighter and feeling better than I had in years! It was mindblowing, man. I started moving like an animal again, instead of an 85 year-old arthritic!**

**HS:** And after you'd achieved your RKC, you also got introduced to clients who needed your training expertise in an extreme sport that you hadn't competed in, didn't you?

**Rif:** Ah, yes. Frank Shamrock! Frank retained us for his strength and conditioning training before his comeback fight with Cesar Gracie. Mixed martial arts was something I really didn't know a whole lot about, so I got the chance to see inside what makes those guys tick and what kinds of stress they have to endure in their arena of competition.

Frank loved the kettlebell training because it made him stronger in the core, as well as his back and hips. He'd hurt his back in the past and couldn't squat heavily or deadlift anymore. Kettlebells let him work those areas wickedly hard without the monster loads and compressive spinal forces. Kettlebells are the perfect functional strength training tools for martial artists and fighters for a zillion reasons. They keep you loose while making you ridiculously strong and agile, and they teach your body to move synergistically, just as you'd need to move in a fight. I understand that they also make taking impact much easier as well.



See page 15 of this issue for full details of Mark Reifkind's new 2-DVD set, *Restoring Lost Physical Function*

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