

UNSTOPPABLE!

Among even the hardest living of comrades, Sr. RKC Mark Reifkind has been there, done that, and got the scars to prove it!

Rif is at it again. For those of you who've never attended an RKC event where Rif's been on the teaching staff, you're really missing out. This man is the consummate athlete and a thinking man's coach. And just when you thought that competing on an elite level in gymnastics, bodybuilding, and powerlifting (as well as dabbling in ultra marathons and triathlons) was more than enough, Mark Reifkind has done it all with injuries that would've reduced most other world-class athletes to playing nothing more than their Xboxes. Now an elite level kettlebell instructor with the Senior RKC ranking, he shares the first part of his story—his background as an Olympic hopeful and his head-on collision with terrifying injuries.



Hard Style: Rif, thank you for taking the time to share your story with *Hard Style*. I first had the chance to meet you in April 2006, and since then, I've had the opportunity to train under you at three different RKC events. Each time, I hear and witness nothing but amazing things from you.

Not knowing you from Adam the first time, the thing that most impressed me after that RKC was how powerfully you spoke on the RKC system. More recently, at the last RKC II, you shared a ton of rehabilitative techniques with the RKCers for use with their clients.

The first question that comes to mind is "How did you amass all of this knowledge?"



In this first of a two-part interview, Rif shares the first part of his background in elite athletics and the numerous career-ending injuries that forced him to reinvent himself.

Interview by Dr. Mark Cheng, RKC II
First of a 2-part series

Mark Reifkind: Thank you for all of the compliments. I'm just a guy who's had a lifelong love of sports and competition, as well as a voracious appetite for knowledge. If it has to do with making the human body perform better, move faster, or live more pain-free, I'm all over it!

HS: That's putting it quite simplistically, Rif. When did you start participating in sports on a competitive level?

Rif: I started competition training at age 14 in gymnastics. Although, growing up in Miami Beach, I'd been swimming since I was three and surfing from almost as young. I grew up in the ocean and developed a decent upper body strength base from paddling out against the windchop while teaching myself how to surf for many years. Without instruction, I was already able to do handstands and cartwheels, so when I saw the Japanese gymnasts competing in the 1972 Olympic Games on TV, I was hooked! Instantly and instinctively, I knew that gymnastics was the sport for me.

Luckily, I had access to a high school with a gymnastics team and a coach with real competitive experience. One of our first workouts was held at the Miami Dade Community College with their team, one of the best in the country at that time. From the moment I stepped into the gym, I felt like I'd found my home and devoted myself to training as intensely as possible. The college gymnasts that I was watching looked like Superman to me, and I wanted to be able to do what they were doing and have that same build.

HS: Inspiration leads to perspiration, huh?

Rif: Yup! I spent the next four years training 4-5 hours a day, 5 days per week, and when I wasn't in the gym, I was still doing more handstands, handstand pushups, and stretching like crazy to get and maintain my splits, as well as working to mold my body into the gymnast's model.

When I wasn't training, I was fantasizing about my ideal gymnastics routines, spending hours visualizing the movements in my head and playing them back in slow-mo in my mind.

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analyzing them over and over. I also did a lot of self-hypnosis to perfect my movements mentally and rid myself of any fear or anxiety.

HS: That sounds very cutting edge, Rif, even for today's athletes.

Rif: Today's athletes are blessed, man. Technology has made training so much more productive. Camcorders are so cheap these days, and they make it so easy for an athlete to analyze his or her movement down to the umpteenth detail. And more elite training centers have motion capture technology that allow you to see even more detail and give you the chance to take it to a whole new level.

HS: That kind of technology might have saved you from a lot of the injuries that you suffered. Your first relatively major injury was in gymnastics, right?

Rif: Absolutely. During my junior year of high school, I landed a full twisting back somersault with straight knees, trying to "stick it", and compressed the cartilage in my left knee. That put me in a straight leg cast for a month.

That, by itself, isn't too major, but right out of the cast, I went straight back into training. No rehab. No strength training. Nada.

Keep in mind that that was the paradigm of sports medicine at the time (1974), but it set the stage for the rest of my injuries throughout my career. One month later, attempting the same trick, I over-rotated the skill on a wrestling mat and my coach missed the spot. My foot got stuck in the mat, but the rest of my body continued rotating... resulting in a vicious full dislocation of my left knee. Somehow, my coach managed to reduce the dislocation, and I went off to see the doctor immediately. While testing for stability, the doctor managed to dislocate it again. Two full dislocations in an hour. Not bad, eh?

HS: Holy... Wow, Rif. I'm an orthopedics guy, and that's still making my skin crawl hearing that. I'm amazed that you're walking, let alone doing half the things you're doing with kettlebells these days!

Rif: Wait a sec, Doc. The story's not over there!

They put it in a straight leg cast—no ice or anti-inflammatories—and scheduled me for surgery in three days. When my foot went completely numb that night, I went to the ER and got rescheduled for the next day.

My doctor, who was the team physician for the Miami Dolphins at the time, said it was the worst knee injury he'd ever seen, explaining that I'd missed tearing the femoral nerve by mere millimeters.

Again, another cast and not an ounce of rehab, and 8 weeks later, I'm back to the gym with nothing more than an ACE bandage! I was scared like hell, and the road back was very tough, but I was completely

determined to get back to competitive shape.

My nemesis, Kurt Thomas, was graduating that year, so the Florida state title and the All-Around record was mine for the taking if I could get my act together in time. My injury was in March and I had to be back in competition shape in November.

HS: Did you say Kurt Thomas? As in, the Kurt Thomas, former Olympian and the first American male to win gold in the floor exercise competition?

Rif: That's the one. He and I had a serious rivalry going on. That year, I won 5 out of 6 events in the state championship and broke Thomas' All-Around record. Mine still stands to this day. From that, I got a full ride to the University of Iowa, which had been the national champs a few years earlier.

Again, zero strength or rehab training, and I was off to Iowa. Just my ACE bandages and back to training elite level gymnastics 5 hours a day for 5-6 days a week. Mind-blowing, huh?

In spite of all that, I did well at Iowa, becoming Team Captain my sophomore year, and make it to the Big Ten Finals on the parallel bars my junior year.

That same year, I was picked for the US Team for the Maccabiah Games, the Jewish/Israeli Olympics.

But I started to develop a shoulder problem, which, in usual fashion, the coaches and trainers left untreated and ignored. All I got was a bag of ice after practice. Tendinitis progressed to chronic bursitis, and then after one bad day in March, I suffered a full dislocation of my right shoulder while swinging giants on the rings.

HS: Please tell me that it wasn't another case of "put it in a cast and back to training?"

Rif: Nope. I wasn't so lucky that time.

I'd promised myself after the physical and psychological torture of coming back from my knee injuries that if I ever needed surgery again on any body part I'd quit gymnastics. The doctors wanted to cut my shoulder since the damage was so severe. I had a knee jerk reaction and just quit right then and there. Without the ability to compete as a potential Olympic gymnast, my motivation for being in college melted. I walked away from a full scholarship and left school.

I had a bit of a breakdown because of that. During my most formative years, my whole being had revolved around the pursuit of Olympic competition.

Every shred of my being had been utterly and completely focused on that single goal. Every thought, every emotion, every drop of sweat, every ache, and every tear had centered around representing my country on the world stage.

With that hope taken from me, I had no idea what to

do with myself, and I felt my world spinning around me like a ship lost at sea.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE...
THE REINVENTION OF A SUPERMAN...
MARK REIFKIND'S RISE TO PROMINENCE
IN THE WORLD OF STRENGTH TRAINING
AND REHABILITATION!



NEW FROM DRAGON DOOR & MARK REIFKIND

See Pages 10 and 11 of this issue for full details of Mark Reifkind's new 2-DVD set, *Restoring Lost Physical Function*

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