# Starting Strength

## **Quotes from Iron Mike Webster**

by

### Colin Webster

As a follow-up to the previous article, <u>Reflections in Iron: Mike Webster's Training Methods</u>, these quotes from Colin Webster were included in the original manuscript. I pulled them out and have presented them here, to make the original article more coherent, and to keep his words together. There are some terribly important concepts in this material, stated more eloquently than I can write them.

- Rip

The following are a collection of memorable quotes from my youth, straight from the mouth of "Iron" Mike. I am forever grateful to a family friend, Sunny Jani, one of the only ones with him at the end, and who always stuck by him.

"If you want to play a sport professionally, play baseball. You'll get hurt a lot less, play longer, and make a lot more money."

"When you're faced with a tough opponent who plays dirty and takes cheap shots, buckle on an extra chinstrap and hit him in the snot locker every play until he quits."

"If you're losing a game, getting blown out, make it your mission to hurt the guy across from you. I'm not talking cutting at the knees or anything like that, just make sure when he walks off the field, the guy across from you knows your name."

"Pretend to let your eyes slip and cut them in the direction you are not going. Whether the guy across from you realizes it or not, he'll shift his feet and think he knows where you're going. Then the only trick is not to smile before you snap the ball and blast him off the line. Works every time."

"If you want a simple strength and conditioning program, stick to the basics. Run your 400s and 800s, and do lots of power cleans and presses and long heavy sets of squats."

"No one is a 'natural' anything. Everyone has to start the same place you do, at the beginning, and learn from there. Just always remember there's another guy working out there right now, to either beat you or take your place, and you'd better out-work him."

"Most people think you have an athletic prime, an age in which a man has reached the best he'll ever be, and from there it's all downhill. A man declines in athletics for three reasons: one, the wear and tear of the sport has made his injuries so great his body is no longer capable of the performance it once was; two, years and years of overeating or not exercising, particularly if drugs or alcohol are abused, then it'll simply be the fact that a man is suffering from not doing much of anything for decades and decades of his life, and has gradually atrophied to the point where reclamation becomes a very difficult process; and three, because he mentally accepts people telling him he can't be at his best anymore. Maybe some men have a little less energy than they used to, a little less stamina, but if you've been working out properly your whole life and eating well, it won't be much. You see this best in powerlifters and weightlifters, who often break their records in middle age. Some of the strongest record setters for powerlifting have been in their forties and fifties. Sure, if you've been running marathons for thirty years, then your body is eventually going to tell you very clearly it can't run marathons anymore. Regardless, I'd rather wear out than rust out any day. Problem is, I'm wore out."

"Don't be afraid to take a rest day. Sometimes the best thing you can do when your training progress stalls is to take three days off and hit it again. Often, you'll be stronger for it."

"Don't take it too hard at first when you don't feel like you are getting stronger and progressing at each workout. Sometimes you'll feel weaker, and you'll be tempted to change your program or dial back the weights. Wait to do that until you're sure you need to. Sometimes you go in the gym and can do less than the last time, and that'll happen for the next two workouts. Then one after those you'll be able to go up ten or more pounds. The body runs in cycles, and sometimes when you feel weaker it doesn't necessarily mean you are sliding backwards. Some days the greatest accomplishment is just to drag yourself to the weight room and get the workout in."

"If you want to get stronger, do sets of five. If you need strength endurance, do sets of six to eight, but above that you're leaning heavy on the conditioning side, and not gaining as much strength as you could be. Going higher on squats and leg exercises is fine and sometimes necessary, but get your strength from the weights and your conditioning from conditioning work. Start out well within your capabilities, and then you can add weight each workout. When you get to where you can't add weight for a while, dial it back and start all over again, and your body will still adapt as if it is responding to heavier and heavier loads." (Sound familiar?)

(On hearing of a Pittsburgh boxer's strength and conditioning program) "Where's the strength-part again?"

"If you fail, if you miss a block, if you screw up, the worst thing you can do is sit and dwell on it. You'll still feel like crap, but get your head back in the game, shrug it off, and keep playing. Dwelling on it never makes it better, and if you keep thinking about it, running it through your head, you're going to screw up again."

"You never know if the guy across from you is hurting. His face won't show it most of the time. He's doing the same thing you are, trying to hide the pain and the exhaustion, and pretend he's coming for you with everything he's got. Always remember that he's hurting worse than he's going to show you, and if you've prepared correctly and done your work, he's hurting worse than you are. So even when you don't want to drive forward on the next snap, do it anyway, and know that as bad as it hurts you, it hurts him more."

"No matter how many times you get knocked down, in a game or in life, get back up again, and you'll never have lost."

I don't know if I ever saw him more excited than when we moved to Kansas so he could work coaching the offensive line and helping out with the strength and conditioning program there. It was like he had all these theories and could put them to work. Unfortunately, it was pretty short lived. Perhaps a generational thing more than anything, I'm sure you guys will understand the following better than I ever could. He'd be working with players who just wanted to go light, because they were tired, guys who wouldn't do the exercises with the right form because they could go heavier that way, and Dad seemed to develop a particular hatred for what he began to call the 5 inch squat, or heavy good mornings.

"These guys will put their legs so wide you could crawl under them, and then just kind of dip down a little, and insist that's a squat. I'll tell you what kind of squat that is, son, it's a horseshit squat. There's powerlifters that squat wide, and they're working with a lot more weight, and not trying to be mobile and turn their feet over while pushing a 300 pound man in one direction or another. It's not the same thing."

He quit pretty fast, and Dad wasn't the type to quit anything. The breaking point was when a player started demanding Dad hand him the dumbbells on every set. Dad tried to explain to him he'd do better to lift them himself, and get an extra rep or two in, adding strength that way. "No Mike, that's your job, you hand me the dumbbells. I don't do things like that."

"F\*@# you," Dad said, and walked out. It was fine, the KC Chiefs Christmas parties sucked anyway.

We talked at length one time on why gains decreased the stronger you got. Here's what he had to say, pretty much verbatim as I recall it.

"There's going to come a point where you can't add weight every workout, then every week, then you'll be where some powerlifters are (Dad actually referenced them a lot, even though he felt he had to train a little differently) where you'll be happy to add five pounds to your bench in a month. Most guys think they've reached their potential when they get there, and just start trying to maintain, they might even drop down a little bit here and there as the years go on, and start just doing higher-rep stuff because it's easier. It's fine to drop weight and build back up, but you should never surrender ground gained for good.

"It's not so much that the muscles can't increase strength, but the fact that by that point you're squatting or deadlifting 700 pounds or more, and just think about the load that places on the human skeletal structure. You're up to the point where you're well beyond what you were designed to take on a regular basis, and that's the goal – to push the limits of human performance. The body can adapt to it, but the muscles and tendons tend to lag behind, and it takes time. Think about the time to heal a broken bone versus the time it takes for a pulled muscle to heal. We're talking weeks and months here, rather than 72 hours. It's a different kind of tissue. If you back off too much once you reach that sticking point, and I'm talking about the point where you're trying to bench 500 or 600 instead of 450, your body is smarter than we know, and it's going to limit you until it gets the joints, fascia and connective tissue to where you don't destroy yourself.

"That's often why you'll see someone hurt themselves doing a max lift, they're trying to go a little beyond what they've been able to do in workouts, they're motivated and trying to pump themselves up, and they end up arching a little more, or bending a little more at the waist, and bam, they are just a little beyond the point where their body was that stopped them from putting out more strength. They've forced the issue, and since they were already at their limit they've just added that last straw and injury occurs." (The whole time here he was doing this little chopping motion with his hand as he enumerated his points, it was a constant feature anytime he was explaining something)

"If a lifter stays right where they are, or close to it, the bones and joints still get the message to adapt, and over time – sometimes months, particularly if you've progressed quickly and the bones have to catch up – you need to just stick with it, and eventually you'll see a huge jump in strength. It's not so much that the muscles got stronger overnight, as the body has released its hold on them, and now they're free to progress. It might be all at once, it might be just that you start being able to add five pounds at a time again. The important thing is to stick with it. Even at five pounds a month, that's still 60 pounds in a year, so if you keep going and don't quit, in two years you have added more than a hundred pounds to your lifts, and that's how you get great as a powerlifter. Just take it slow, be patient and don't get hurt, and you'll get there.

"That's also why some of the great powerlifters are much older than other athletes. When you see them in their twenties and thirties, there are some guys who managed to put up big weights, close to a record real fast, but when they couldn't progress for a while, they changed their training to something else or just figured that was the best they were going to get and stopped trying to break a record. They might have had tons of potential, but figured they were past their prime and moved on. Some of the best guys weren't even very big or strong in their twenties and thirties, so they kept pushing at it and were just the sort who wouldn't quit, stubborn even if not gifted, and they broke a record while the guy who out-lifted them two decades ago is now cycling around or doing aerobics with Richard Simmons, just trying to avoid dying of a heart attack, and he's going to go when it's time for him to go anyway. If he kept lifting weights, at any level, he'd be at least fairly strong instead of atrophied and paunchy.

"But it's not too late. Even being older, the best thing you can do is get back to lifting again, and give your system a reason to stay as strong as it can as long as it can, so at least you're still moving and can shovel your own walk when you're seventy – which probably feels better then than benching 300 pounds. It's not so much that the guy is so old, as that he hasn't had anything more than his upper torso on his legs for forty, fifty, or sixty years, so there's never been a reason to pump out hormones, or keep his bones, muscles, and tendons strong."

We had that conversation sometime in the late 90s. I've always taken that one to heart.

"'All things being equal, the stronger athlete wins.' I hate that saying. All things being equal, the guy with any sort of edge wins. Hell, all things being equal, the more handsome athlete wins too. The point we miss is that being stronger makes you better at everything else. If you need endurance, get stronger. If you need to be able to run faster or longer, making your legs stronger has much the same effect as making yourself lighter, it takes less effort to push your bodyweight off that foot, if you can squat twice your weight it takes a lower percent of that muscle's effort to bound forwards, so you can keep it up longer, or have more *oompf* to put into that stroke, and so you go a few inches further per step, faster. That's why it's so hard to gain speed – your muscles don't have the capacity to learn to contract much faster. They have some, but not the same as they can gain the ability to contract more times harder, meaning stronger."

"If you have a terrible structure for running, like you and I do, you're not going to be quick, but your best bet to get faster is to make your legs stronger – or actually, your hips. Think about what muscles you use. It's your buttocks, lower back, and these ones right here, the hip flexors. If you make them contract more powerfully they can drive you further per step, and you'll get less tired doing so. Most things work the same way. You can train with a given weight to do more and more reps with *that* weight, or you can train to get stronger, and because that same weight now takes less effort to perform, you can automatically do more reps with it, even if your muscles are burning like crazy because they aren't used to it.

"So think of your bodyweight as a relatively fixed weight. Let's compare it to lifting 135. You can train day in and day out to do 135 twenty times rather than ten times, but if you train to lift 300, you can do 135 at least that many, and you can still lift 300. Sure, you might put on some weight in the process of gaining strength, but if you trained to lift 300 you'll still be able to do a ton of reps with 150, 175, or 200. If you do manage to build the endurance to stay near your max strength and do it for more reps, you still won't be lifting 300, and 150 or 200 will crush you. It doesn't mean you have to train for your one-rep max, but gaining more strength will improve almost every human activity across the board, even if you drop off some other training to accomplish it. Even a distance runner, if he gets stronger, he'll be able to maintain a faster pace longer, and his tendons and joints will take less of a beating. And at the end of the race he'll be able to hold onto a reserve better, so when he tries to kick it up a notch, he'll have those strong fast-twitch fibers that haven't been exhausted or used much yet, instead of relatively untrained ones, and he'll be able to run as fast as he possibly can for that period. So it's better to say that the training program for almost all sports, that includes the most strength training, wins. I'll never be a sprinter, but I can sprint better after years of squats and deadlifts than if I had just been trying to sprint fast."

"You've got to build strength before you build explosiveness. The goal is to get much stronger than the weight of the object you're trying to be explosive with, then you can train that muscle to respond faster and faster with that new strength, and it'll respond. You shouldn't do plyometrics until you've got developed a lot of strength first. Take a shot-putter: he throws 12-pound shot, and if he presses only 150 pounds, that shot is almost ten percent of his max strength. Granted, it's light, but think about how fast you can push your arm out unloaded, vs. loaded with a shot. They're both fast, relatively, but you can see the difference. Now think about increasing your strength to the point where you press 200, and now that shot weights a smaller percentage of the total, which is nothing new, but the point is that the stronger you are, the more your muscles can benefit from plyometric training. And if you're going to explode from a still position or from an eccentric contraction, you'd better make

sure your joints are as strong as can be, even if the load is just your own weight. Injuring yourself is not conducive to explosiveness."

"Nobody ever trains to failure, really. Unless you've gotten to the point where your muscle doesn't contract even when you just try to flex it - due to the chemicals and fuels in it being so depleted and the nerves so fried that you can't even contract it against no resistance, which is not a good thing - you haven't really reached muscular failure. What you can reach is failure with a certain weight, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything either. What do you think exhausts a muscle more? Putting 225 on a bench press and lifting it ten times until you can't raise it off your chest by itself? Or putting 135 on a bar and pumping and pumping 30 or even 40 times until you only have a few more reps left and setting it back on the rack? The weight might be lighter, and you've stopped long before you couldn't lift it, but the amount of fluids and fuels and the stress you've placed on the fibers is much higher, and will likely take a lot longer to recover from. At the same time, exhausting the muscle that much more, at least in the way I've described, is not going to add much strength the next workout. So take the failure thing with a grain of salt, because it doesn't necessarily mean anything other than you've run out of strength to lift the weight you are lifting, and if you had someone strip off a five-pounder on each side you could keep going. It's good to train intensely, but the exact level you have to reach to stimulate the maximum amount of nerves and muscle tissue with the least amount of recovery time has so many variables you can only get in the ballpark, based on how long you've been training, your recovery abilities, when you plan to train again, what you are planning to train for, and all the things that are going to happen in the next few days that might change your recovery for better or worse.

"So you have to tinker with it, lift enough to stimulate growth and strength gains, and do it in such a way that you can recover and adapt before your nerves forget all about the fact that they had to lift something heavy a few days ago. You can try and track every little thing, or you can just work hard, lift in an appropriate rep range with a weight appropriate to that rep range, and let your body figure it out, because it's smarter than you anyway, and we're still trying to figure out how it all works. You just need to put together a reasonable schedule, be consistent with it, and accept that some days you will feel like crap and feel weaker and still blow it out of the water, and some days you will feel great and miss lifts you got last time with ease. Don't stress over it, just stick with the weights, eat and sleep good, and you will get stronger. It's a process, and it takes weeks, months, and years rather than days and hours. So consistency, rather than training to the point where you have failed with a given weight, and rather than gotten one more rep with five pounds less, is what will make you grow. Go to failure or don't. Just make sure you leave the weight room knowing you've done something in there, and chances are you've done enough.

"I overtrained a lot in my early years, and I probably could have gotten stronger, with better recovery and more results, had I taken more rest and not tried to drive myself into the ground every workout. You can get addicted to the chemicals your body puts out when you work hard, and before you know it you are training like an addict, rather than to improve performance. You have the ability, especially when you've been training a while, to handle workloads that are far more than are healthy, and to feel like you are really getting results when you do them. The body ends up taking so long to recover that by the time it does, it doesn't even remember there's been a growth stimulus – it's just trying to survive what you've done to it. So going to failure or increasing your workload doesn't necessarily hurt or help you, unless you are really trying to overtrain. It's not how much you work the muscle, as in, how tired you end up being. It's about accomplishing a little more than last time, either adding weight or getting a few more reps. If you can't increase either, and the weight feels as heavy or

even heavier than last time, you're still getting the benefit because you are placing stress on the muscle, and it's probably still sorting itself out, on it's cyclic highs and lows, and because you've caught yourself at a low point, the same or even less weight has ended up providing an overload, because your body gets the message that it's not easily up to the task. There's a lot more to all of this, but the bottom line is you don't necessarily have to have someone haul a weight you can't lift off your chest or back for you because you can't possibly lift it again to stimulate the body."

"A lot of people look up to football players and other athletes as if we are heroes, son. We're not. What we do is tough, but it's artificial and doesn't change anything. It's entertainment. The real heroes are police and firefighters, military and teachers and the doctors curing cancer and saving lives. Those are the ones who make a difference. Those are the real heroes."

He lived by that last quote, and he was the most humble man I've ever to meet.

Colin Webster is a United States Marine with a vested interest in staying as strong and fit as possible, and helping others to do so. He first learned to squat over 500 pounds by one of the Steeler greats, Mike Webster, and learned to box under Craig Wolfley. He's tried almost every type of training and diet there is, with varying results. He's back on steaks and squats to stay, and the better for it.

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