



Marshall celebrates after pulling an 810 deadlift for charity.



HEART ★ ★ ★ OF A ★ ★ ★ CHAMPION

BY JEFF "ROBOT" IRION

PHOTOS BY GILMOUR CREATIVE DESIGNS

At first glance, you might think that Marshall Johnson is just a powerlifter. But beneath the tattoos and piercings, Johnson is both a philosopher and a philanthropist. After reading about his charitable work with kids and all that he's sacrificed on his journey to be the best, I think you'll agree: It's hard not to root for him.

POWER: Who are you and what are your stats: height, weight, age and best competition lifts?

JOHNSON: I'm Marshall "Freakshow" Johnson. I train at Jeff Adkins' P-Town Barbell. I compete in the 275-lb. weight class. I'm 29 and about 5 feet, 11 inches. I used to be 6 feet, 2 inches before I started powerlifting. My best competition lifts are a 1,052-lb. squat, 705-lb. bench, 810-lb. deathlift and 2,568 total. I am sponsored with EliteFTS and Southside Bully.

POWER: Why do you call it a deathlift?

JOHNSON: I actually stole the term "deathlift" from Jeff at the gym. Deadlifts are just that, death! They are the hardest lift, a true test of strength.

POWER: You are covered in tattoos and piercings, yet everyone says that you're the nicest guy.

JOHNSON: I grew up very small and timid. I wanted to be huge and look mean just so people would leave me alone. Before I began any type of weight training, getting tattooed and pierced was a way to self-medicate. There's a lot of serenity in pain. I used to have a lot more piercings. At one time I had 17 in just my head alone. Although I have lost interest in the piercings, I've kept the ones I loved: my septum and stretched lobes. My tattoos are still an ongoing work in progress.

I think that difference in my exterior and who I actually am is very appealing to people. This is who I am, this is the way I think I should look, and I am not going to change for anyone. I don't expect people to accept it, just accept me. That's what I try to inspire others to do.

POWER: Your nickname is "Freakshow." What's the story behind that?

JOHNSON: I got the name Freakshow before I even competed. I used to be a bouncer—a great job for someone petrified of confrontation. At the time I had a lot of holes in my head. One night, while escorting some guy out of the bar, he called me a freak. From then on the other bouncers called me Freakshow. I get some flak from time to time because Shawn Frankl is called Freakshow. But he was given that name as a compliment, and mine was meant as an insult.

POWER: You used to be a bodybuilder. How long did you do that and what kind of success did you have in the sport? When and where did you start powerlifting?

JOHNSON: I trained like a bodybuilder from about 2004 until my first competition in 2008. Tom Kemper held the NPC Upper Midwest show every year in March, so one year I decided to try. I trained for three months and dropped from about 265 to 182 lbs. on stage. I placed in the top five for the light heavies in a group of about 12 lifters. I competed the following year at the same weight, about 183 lbs., and got a very close second place out of about 12 lifters again. I wanted to put on some size for the next year, so I started

training like a powerlifter. After about six months of eating, getting large and lifting heavy weights, I was a powerlifter!

Being big, eating big and lifting heavy-ass weights is more appealing to me. I competed raw for a year or so in the NASA federation with lots of success. After about a year of raw lifting, I slowly moved up the levels of ply. I started single-ply and worked up just one ply every time until eventually I was a full-on gear whore. I think it is very important to get as strong as possible with as little help from gear before you move up in plys.

I do miss bodybuilding and will one day sport my power panties on stage again. There is a distinct difference in the type of mental toughness the two sports take. I absolutely love the struggle, the torture, the hardship and the 24-7 dedication that bodybuilding demands. You need the mental toughness to continue on with the lack of calories, lack of carbs, and lack of motivation. You have to go to the gym one, two, three times a days and bust your ass when all you want to do is quit and die. Powerlifting requires a whole different type of mental toughness. On a weekly basis you have to handle and work with weights that can cause serious harm and injury. It's physically dangerous. To be on an elite level, both sports require a unique type of mental toughness that not many people can maintain. That is why I love them both so much.

POWER: When did you start training at P-Town Barbell and what sacrifices did you make to train there?

JOHNSON: My wife Kathy and I were living in Fargo, ND and training at Anthony Carlquist's and Jason Ehler's Dakota Barbell when I first met Jeff Adkins, the owner of P-Town Barbell. Kathy and I decided one weekend to make the 3 hour drive to P-Town to train with Jeff and his crew and my mind was made up that day that this is where we belonged. We began training there every weekend and staying at Kathy's parents' house and all of my lifts took off.

At the end of 2011 my wife was graduating college. I knew a big change had to be made to take my training to the next level and finally live my dreams. I had a great job in Fargo: great pay, great hours, great benefits, and most importantly a future. But I knew that if I wanted to make it in powerlifting then P-Town needed to be my permanent home. In January of this year I walked away from a secure future to move closer to P-Town. Nothing comes without sacrifice and nothing great comes without a price. Sometimes I regret moving, question myself about whether or not it was the right thing to do. Deep down, though, I believe that if you are doing what you love, and following your heart then you can't go wrong. All I know is that by the time powerlifting has run its course with me I will be or will have been the best 275-lb. powerlifter in the world.

POWER: That's a pretty lofty goal. How do you plan to take out Dave Hoff? Perhaps with the candlestick in the billiards room? Or maybe the revolver in the conservatory?

JOHNSON: When I say that I want to be the No. 1 275-lb. powerlifter in the world, there is some give to that statement. Whether

it's having the all-time total, or just being the best of my time period, I want to in some capacity be the best in my weight class. I won't even begin to compare myself to Hoff. He is definitely in a realm all his own and will never be equaled. His mentality, to me, is far more impressive that the numbers he puts up. I am absolutely terrified on

the platform. I would kill for just one meet to feel that total absence of fear! To be able to attach as much worry about a 930-lb. opening bench as putting on my shoes and walking down the street.

I know I will squat 1,200 someday. My bench is what is going to keep me away from an untouchable total, but if I can match his deadlift with my bench then there's hope. My equalizer is my deadlift. I am just beginning to scratch the surface of my potential on all three lifts. I have the tools and resources at my disposal now to take my training to a whole new level, and only time will tell where I end up. I will never be a Hoff, Coan or Vogelwohl, but I will be the best Marshall that time allows me to be.

POWER: Why is it that you're such a huge fan of bodybuilder Kai Greene?

Does he know that you're swinging wildly from his lock of hair?

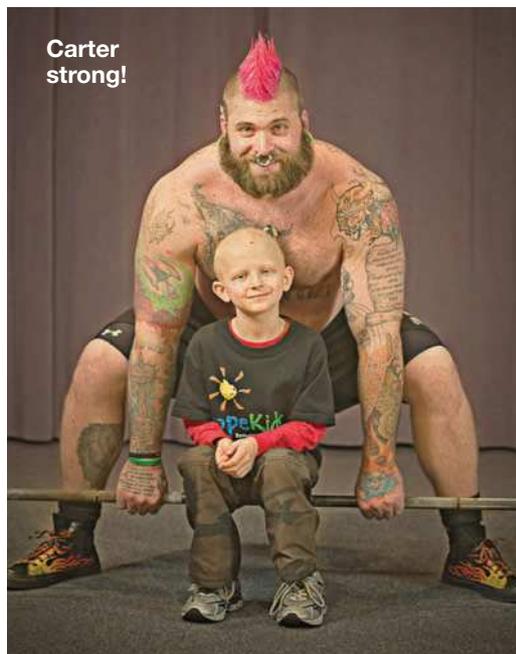
JOHNSON: I have been a fan of Kai Greene for years, but he became a role model of mine in November 2011. I was preparing for a big meet in Dubuque, Iowa. I was on EliteFTS' radar, so the pressure to perform was magnified tremendously. I trained myself into injury and exhaustion for that meet, and I ended up bombing out on deadlifts because my back was mush. I sat behind that stage and balled for 20 minutes. I'd let everyone I loved down, I'd blown things with EFS, all that hard work was for nothing.

Things were pretty dark for a month or so. I was looking for motivation in YouTube videos and I came across a video of Kai Greene after he'd had a disappointing finish at the Olympia after training a whole year for it. I instantly connected with him and the feelings he had. I learned that after 20 years of being moneyless, homeless, job-less and alone, he climbed out of the darkness and is now one of the best bodybuilders in the world. He has a philosophy of positive thinking, positive mental reinforcement and mental strength that appeals to me a great deal. My goal is to one day meet him face to face, shake his hand and thank him because he single-handedly changed my life and doesn't even know it.

POWER: Your first breakout meet was at Relentless 2011. Tell us about that meet.

JOHNSON: The Relentless meet was run by Scott Nutter as a fundraiser for Garth Heckman, a local powerlifter, gym owner and pastor. He had just beaten colon cancer when he was diagnosed with liver cancer. The doctors told him that he had a 50 percent chance of being alive in five years. Every penny from the meet went to the Heckman family. Almost \$20,000 was raised.

Relentless 2012 was the return of Garth Heckman, cancer-free and a competitor in the meet. That was also the birth of the relationship between the Relentless meet and HopeKids, HopeKids is a



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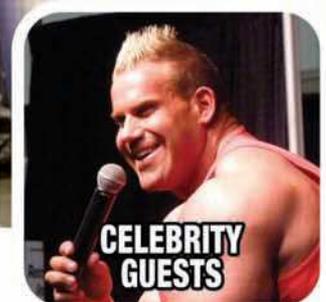
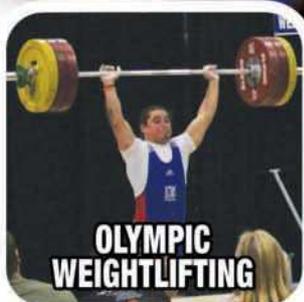
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foundation a lot like Make-A-Wish. One of the differences is that they try to get the whole family involved, because the family suffers as well when a member is fighting a terminal illness. HopeKids is now the official foundation for Scott Nutter's Relentless meet.

POWER: What does it mean to be "Carter strong?"

JOHNSON: There were many, many families and kids involved with Relentless, but there was one child who stuck out. Carter, 9, was fighting a brain tumor. His brain surgery and chemotherapy had severely affected his motor skills, vision and legs. He had special glasses because he had quad vision, he had to wear braces on his legs because walking was a huge challenge, and he had lost his hair. He was so physically affected by everything that just being awake for a few hours drained him to the point of exhaustion. But not once did I ever hear him complain, see him cry or look sad. This kid was so young and fighting so much, but he was so strong and he never once quit or complained. Since then I have aspired to be "Carter Strong." He has beaten cancer and is now on the road to recovery.

Scott Nutter's Relentless vision has led to two other Relentless charity meets held throughout the country. I will be heading to Michigan in November for Relentless Detroit. Hopefully there will be many Relentless meets held each year.

POWER: You had another breakout meet back in July at the 2012 UPA Iron Battle on the Mississippi. How did you manage to pull everything together and go nine-for-nine, despite some adversity in your training leading up to the meet, and even in the warm-up room?

JOHNSON: I was officially an EliteFTS sponsored athlete, so I had all the resources of EFS at my disposal: brand-new gear, access to knowledge from Dave Tate and the other sponsored athletes, and just the overall confidence that I did belong, that I was a pro-level competitor.

I also had a very brutal, but very beneficial raw training cycle getting ready for Dubuque. But in true Marshall fashion, I pushed too hard and too far. I ended up hurting my back to the point that I couldn't even hold up my own torso on certain days. So, I took two weeks off about a month and a half out from the meet, and when I came back I destroyed my numbers in training. I felt better, stronger and healthier than ever before. Of course, I pushed it to the max because I felt great, and ended up tweaking my back again. I took the last two weeks of my training cycle off and rest until the meet.

The thought of not training that close to a meet scared the shit out of me. I was the most scared and anxious I had ever been for a meet in my life. But when it was my turn, something happened. All doubt faded and I knew I could hit that weight no matter what. From this experience I learned that I can still train my way — balls to the wall, no mercy — but if I want to train that way then time off is a necessity.

POWER: So you've just hit a big PR total of 2,568.

Unfortunately, you're now dealing with a back injury that's hampering your squat and deadlift training. How do you plan to overcome this? And what is your next goal en route to becoming the top 275 in the world?

JOHNSON: I am searching for ways to still train hard and get

stronger without aggravating my back. I have been doing a lot of front squats and leg presses to help keep my legs in check. I actually think this extra effort with my quads will help me in the long run with both my squat and deadlift. I don't have access to a belt squat machine so I have been using a weighted dip belt and squatting with weight hanging off of that. I also discovered that doing deadlifts with the trap shrug bar doesn't aggravate my back. I stand on a platform, though, to make sure the lift starts at about the same height as a regular pull.

Another advantage to my disadvantage is that I have been able to put a lot more focus on my bench press. Being my lagging lift, this is a great opportunity to make up some ground. I have increased the workload and intensity and also added more shoulder-based movements to my training, like overhead press and DB raises.

My next goal is just to come into a meet healthy and hit PRs, whether they are 50 lbs. or 5 lbs. I received some great advice from Shawn Frankl. He said that once he stopped caring about pleasing everyone, winning every meet he entered and hitting monstrous PRs every meet, that's when he really started to dominate in this sport. Train to the best of your ability on any given day, and compete to the best of your ability on any given day. Quit worrying about the stuff that truly doesn't matter and just do what you love.

POWER: Is there anyone you'd like to thank?

JOHNSON: The best advice I was ever given was to give what you get. There have been a lot of people who have invested their resources, money, time and effort in me. Two people in particular are Tom Kemper and Ed May. They received help when they were younger to achieve their goals, so passing along the favor was just their way of giving back. Ed said, "I want nothing in return, but when the time comes and you can do this for someone else you help them." I want to thank Dave Tate, Matthew Goodwin, and Steve Colescott for believing enough in me to give the chance to live my dream of being sponsored by EliteFTS. Also I want to thank my wife Kathy, my team at P-Town, SouthSide Bully, Dakota Barbell, Stan Efferding, Shawn Frankl, Bob Bruner, Nick Boll, Gregg Damminga, Andrew at BPI, and especially all those people at my gym in Fargo who used to leave notes on our Monolift telling me I was a loser, a cheater and a failure waiting to happen. There are so many others I could thank, so to everyone that has ever helped me live my dreams, I thank you with all my heart and I won't let you down. **PM**

