

TO HELL AND BACK

BY JEFF "ROBOT" IRION

Photos by Renee Needham

Who are you and why should we care? My name is Luke Edwards. I'm 30 years old and I train at Westside Barbell. I weigh 258 lbs. and am 5 feet, 9 inches. I have an elite total at 220 and pro totals at 242, 275 and 308. My best lifts are as follows:

BWT	Squat	Bench	Deadlift	Total
220	750	575	700	2,025
242	1,025	685	810	2,405
275	1,000	700	840	2,455
308	1,020	690	775	2,465



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What do you do for work? I work with juvenile delinquents. I wasn't a good kid growing up, but I changed my ways and now I try to help troubled youths do the same.

Out of all the guys currently at Westside, it seems like you're one of the veterans. When did you start training there? I started training at Westside Barbell in December 2007. I remember talking to Louie Simmons in August 2007 about moving to Columbus and training at Westside. I was very nervous about this. It was a dream of mine, and I could not believe that Lou felt I was good enough to train there. I was living in Fort Wayne, Ind., at the time and training at Big Ugly Barbell in Auburn, Ind. It was owned by longtime powerlifter and strongman Gabe Daniels. While there, I trained with a great group of guys. However, I felt that it was time for me to move on because I was just starting my powerlifting career and Gabe was ready to end his. I take great pride coming from that gym, as Gabe helped build my foundation for powerlifting and never charged me a dime to train there. Before powerlifting, I competed in bodybuilding, so I was always strong in lifts for reps. Gabe really helped build my absolute strength and got me ready for Westside.

My best total before coming to Westside was 2,226 at 242, which is good enough for a pro total. My wife and I saved up some money and we moved to Columbus to pursue a dream. I'll never forget when I first came to Westside because I would get so nervous before every workout. I was getting to train with legends!

You had some medical problems a few years ago and nearly died. Tell us about that. I was born with focal segmental glomerulosclerosis (FSGS) kidney disease. There is no known cause and there is no cure without a transplant. Even with a transplant, it can recur. It basically entails the buildup of scar tissue in the kidneys - like cancer of the kidneys - eating them until they're gone. When I was 17, I started puking every morning. Everyone thought I had a weak digestive system, as my blood work showed no signs of kidney problems. I guess I just got used to puking every morning - it became the norm for me.

At 25 I was diagnosed with the disease. I was cutting for a meet to make the 242s and I could not get my weight under 256, no mat-

ter what I did. I knew something was wrong. At the last minute I decided not to cut, and I weighed in at 273. The day of the meet I was 287. After the competition, I saw a doctor and he put me on lasix [treats fluid retention]. I lost more than 40 lbs. of water. I also had a kidney biopsy, and it was discovered that I had PSGS and was in Stage 2 kidney failure. However, you have to be in Stage 5 failure

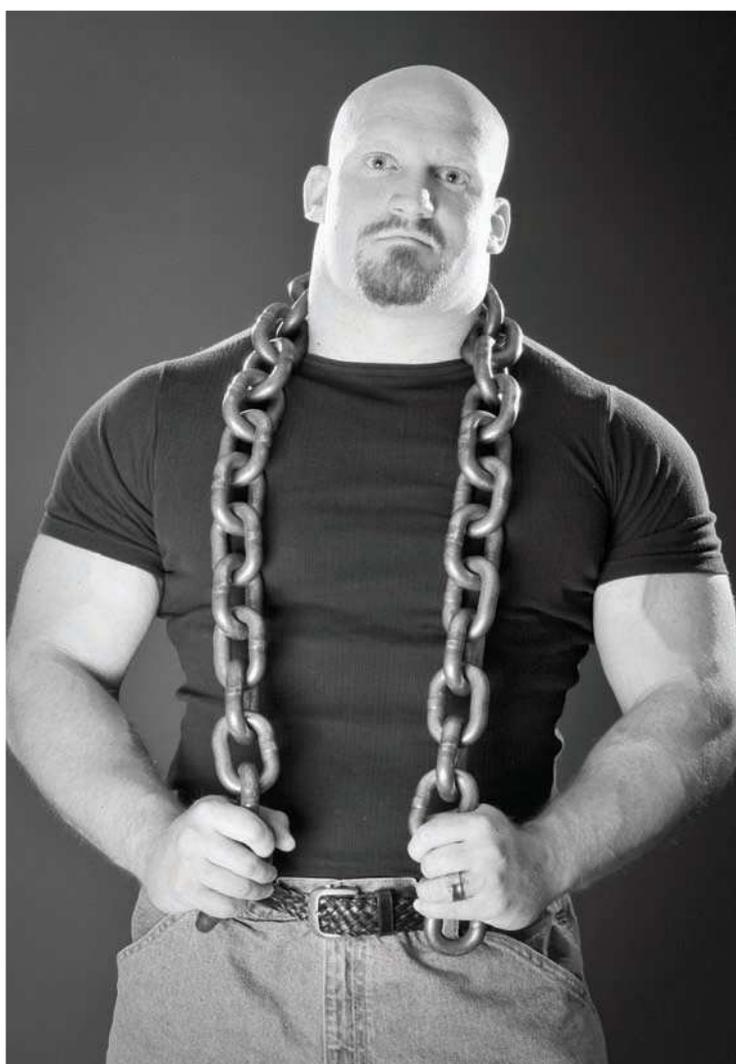
to get a transplant. A month later, I got my first pro total of 2,226 at 242. This was in January 2007.

In July 2010, I had hit a bench PR [Personal Record] in the gym one. Two days later, I had a little mark on my pelvis, but I thought nothing of it. However, by the end of that workout, that little red mark had turned into a huge red mark that spread from my stomach to my knees. I was still planning on going to work that day. I took a nap, and when I woke up, I was running a fever of 104°. I ended up puking everywhere, and we decided to go to the hospital. Blood work revealed that my creatinine level was 9.6 (normal is about 0.7-1.5). They sent me to a room and this lady comes in and was basically preparing me to die, asking questions like, "Do you have a living will?" and "Do you want a chaplin?" I was scheduled for dialysis, but I refused to get a port in my arm. I instead chose to continue training and praying for

a miracle. I competed three times that year, and I even took a Best Lifter award while being in Stage 5 kidney failure. I take great pride in that.

I needed a transplant, but that is a difficult process. I would've had to wait three to five years for a dead donor. Finding a living donor is hard because they have to be healthy enough to donate and have the same blood type as you. I was very lucky to have five people willing to get tested to donate, and my mother was the best candidate. For about a year, I lived through the hell that is Stage 5 kidney failure, but I still went to work every day and never missed a workout. Finally, on May 27, 2011, I was transplanted and given a second chance at life.

Tell us about your comeback after the surgery. When were you able to start training again? How much weight and strength had you lost? The day after my transplant, I opted to walk over to the next room, rather than be wheeled over. It was only about 50 to 100 feet, but it seemed like 5 miles! The next day, and every day





after, I walked three times a day for 20 to 30 minutes. It started to feel better every day. I know this helped me come back faster than most people.

At four weeks post-op, the doctor said I could lift a gallon of milk, or about 10 lbs. He didn't say how many times! I would go to the local YMCA every day and do every exercise I could think of with 10 lbs. for sets of 50 reps, plus cardio. People would look at me like I was so weak, but I didn't care because I had a goal in mind of coming back.

From the surgery, cardio and low-protein diet, my body weight had gone from 265 pre-op to 216 at eight weeks post-op. The loss of strength is a tricky question. I had lost so much strength while being in Stage 5 renal failure, but I just kept my head down and trained every other day, knowing deep in my heart that a comeback was coming. At eight weeks post-op, I was able to start lifting heavy again. I squatted 405 plus a green band for a few sets, I benched close to 300 and I deadlifted around 400.

At six months post-op, I competed at 220. My goal had been to compete one year post-op, so I far exceeded that. I totaled 2,025 and was one squat or one bench away from a pro total in my fourth weight class. This was huge for me considering that a lot of nurses said I would never lift heavy again. I recently competed at 14 months post-op. I weighed in at 258 and hit a 980 squat, 630 bench and 740 deadlift for a 2,350 total. I plan to compete again in March 2013 and total 2,500. It isn't a massive total, but considering what I've been through, I think it is very respectable.

You are jacked, but your wife is jacked and tan. How jealous does that make you

feel? This has got to be a California question! When I was a boy, I was shaved and tan, but now I am a man and I no longer need to do either! Actually, with my anti-rejection medications, I am unable to tan because my meds give me an increased risk of skin cancer. My wife is hot and naturally tan, just the way I like it, and I am completely fine with being pale and bald.

Why are your legs so big? My legs used to be even bigger! I did a ton of ass-to-grass front squats and heavy hack squats back in my bodybuilding days. My best front squat was around 550 for five reps. Also, when I first got into powerlifting, I was a narrow stance quad-squatter. My legs are still pretty big, I think 30 inches, give or take an inch. But I focus more on hamstring work and I squat wider, so they aren't as large.

Your stance seems extra wide, especially considering that you're not a tall guy. What are your reasons for using such a wide stance? When I first came to Westside, I was a narrow stance squatter. Chuck always told me to "get my legs out, get my legs out". It was very odd and uncomfortable for me. But what was I going to say to Chuck — no? So I slowly kept working them out and it just clicked one day. Now I only take a super wide stance in the gym and I do that when I feel my hips need more work. In a meet, I bring them in some.

What powerlifting accomplishments are you most proud of? 1.) Pulling 810 at 242 to take Chuck's 805 deadlift off the record board, which had stood for about 12 years. Afterwards Chuck came up to me and shook my hand and said I'd earned it. Chuck doesn't respect lifts — he respects

work ethic. To have earned Chuck's respect is an accomplishment of its own. 2.) Again, taking Chuck's 835 deadlift at 275 off the record board with an 840 pull. 3.) Six months post-transplant, I pulled 700 at 220. At a time when most patients can't even pick up general items, I picked up 700 lbs.

I knew there'd be some deadlifts on that list! You're known for being a good puller, so give us your top tips for pulling big. 1.) Train your lower back with heavy weight for a lot of sets and reps. Do reverse hypers, pin pulls against bands, and 45-degree hypers.

2.) Strengthen the tendons of your hamstrings. Once you get strong in the deadlift, it seems easier to tear hamstrings without that tendon strength. I use 10- to 20-lb. ankle weights and complete 100 to 400 reps total.

3.) For sumo, a lot of people start with their shins close to the bar. When they pull, it will start to windmill half way up. Try placing your feet an inch or two back from the bar. This will help the bar travel straight up.

4.) It's hard to pull big after a heavy squat and bench. You need to be in shape to have a good pull at the end of a meet. Like they say, the meet doesn't start until the bar hits the floor.

It appears that you don't have any grip problems with the deadlift. How do you train your grip? I really don't train my grip. I used to do a lot of Strongman training in Indiana, so I would say that's how I built my grip. Jake Anderson used to do Strongman, as well. Josh Conley, one of my current training partners, built his grip from doing years of construction work. I would say one of the main things for grip is to never wear straps. The only time I have ever worn them is if I've messed up any of my fingers while restraining at work. Other than that, I never use them.

You used to pull conventional, but now you're a sumo puller. Why did you make the switch? Do you still pull conventional in training? I made the switch because I figured I had better leverages for pulling sumo. It took me about a year of training sumo to feel confident in it. My first meet pulling sumo, I pulled 810, whereas the contest before I had pulled 744 conventional. That said, almost all of my training is



done conventional. I feel that the stronger my conventional is, the stronger my sumo will be. If I do too much sumo, it seems to go backward. In the gym, I have pulled 800 conventional from the floor using just a belt.

You changed things up again with your deadlift when you switched from pulling in a poly suit to a canvas. Once again, why did you make the switch?

What do you find are the pros and cons of each? The switch to canvas was not by choice. I had always pulled in poly. Leading up to this recent pro-am, I used poly briefs in the gym and that's all I planned on using. But at the pro-am, my legs swelled up and I was unable to get my briefs on. We tried and tried and could not get them up. After about 10 minutes, I got my squat suit and pulled in that. I had never pulled in canvas before. However, after using it, I do feel that I can hit a deadlift PR in it soon. I really don't have pros or cons to suits, but I would say that for any deadlift suit, you want it tight in the hips but not too tight, otherwise you can't get down to the bar and get set right.

Speed bench is a highly controversial subject on the Internet. Some try to go as heavy as they can while still moving relatively fast, while others say that you need to use light weight in order to benefit from it. Help set the record straight by telling us what kind of weight you use for speed bench. And for reference, can you tell us what your raw and shirted maxes are? I currently use 185 to 205 plus minis or two chains, but I used to use a lot more. I would use the same weight as Dave Hoff

until one day it clicked for me that I was not an 850-plus bencher, so I lightened it up. Lighter weight and focusing on speed works for me right now, but like everything else, nothing is set in stone and it could change any time. As far as my strength right now, I would say I'm around 490 raw and I just benched 650 shirted, and I've hit 750 and 775 off a two- and three-board, respectively.

Who would you like to thank? I would like to thank God for giving me the ability to work through any obstacle thrown my way and for blessing me with all that I have. I want to thank my mother for giving me a second chance at life and for being such a brave lady, raising me as a 16-year-old single mother. I want to thank my beautiful wife Molly for all she does, and especially for being by my side while I was sick and I told her to leave. Thanks to my grandma and grandpa for teaching me that if I have a dream to go after it. I want to thank Louie Simmons for everything he has done for me, and for visiting me in the hospital and telling me what I needed to hear. Thanks to all of Westside Barbell; they're like my brothers and sisters and they help push me every day. Thanks to Jake Anderson for visiting me every day in the hospital and being such a good friend and training partner; to Mike McClain, Mike Frank, AJ Roberts, Sarah and Ryan Block, Dave Hoff, and Jason Coker for always being there any time; to Gabe Daniels for giving me a chance to train at his place and being a good friend. I'd also like to thank Mark Bell and everyone at Power for this interview. **PM**

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