

INTERVIEW

JOHN STAFFORD interviewed by Chris Ma- son of At Large Nutrition.



John Stafford, preparing to squat at the WPO Arnold Classic meet in 2006.

John Stafford is a top-tier competitive powerlifter with one of the highest totals ever in his weight class (275 lb class). John is a member of the Westside Barbell Club presided over by strength guru Louie Simmons.

This interview will provide you rare insight into the life and training of a strength titan. You will get to know a bit about him personally and he will provide valuable insight into the Westside method of training and how John overcomes some of the same training hurdles we all encounter.

ALN: Thanks for taking the time out of your busy schedule for this interview John.

JS: No problem, glad to do it.

ALN: Let's start with you telling us a bit about yourself on a personal level. Are you married? Do you have any children? Where were you born and where did you spend your formative years?

JS: I am an insurance agent in Columbus, OH. I have been married to my wife Mandy for about 2 years. She is very supportive of my powerlifting. No children yet. I was born in Los Angeles, but spent most of my life in Edina, MN.

ALN: Do you have an athletic background? What got you started in powerlifting?

JS: I started lifting weights to improve in hockey, but eventually ended up quitting hockey when I realized it was only getting in the way of my lifting. I have been competing in powerlifting for 8 years now.

ALN: I completely understand the "sports getting in the way of training" thing. I started training with weights to get bigger and stronger for football (like so many others) and quit football when I realized my affinity for the iron and how much I truly loved it.

Westside Barbell and its patriarch Louie

Simmons are two of the best known names in powerlifting and the iron game in general. You are strongly affiliated with Westside. Can you tell us how you came to be involved with Westside?

JS: I would read Louie's articles in *Powerlifting USA* every month and started calling him to ask questions... all the time. I told him I was coming to watch his Westside meet, and he said I could train at his gym when I was in town. I ended up training with Chuck V and Joe McCoy. I told Chuck I would love to move here and train and he said Louie would let me. I transferred to OSU the next quarter and have been here for 8 years since.

ALN: That must have been very cool to have someone you read about in the magazines take a personal interest in you (not to mention someone so well respected in the powerlifting community).

For anyone unfamiliar with Westside can you give us a brief overview of its most important points?

JS: As far as training goes, we devote equal time to the 3 methods of strength training: maximal effort, repeated effort, and dynamic effort. The squat and deadlift are trained on the same day because they use the same muscle groups... one day for speed training (dynamic) and one for max effort (1-3 max reps). Bench training also has a speed day and max effort day. Repetition work is usually performed on both days through assistance work, or in place of max effort for higher reps. We always rotate exercises, rarely doing any dynamic exercise more than 3 weeks in a row and max effort work is rotated every week. The actual powerlifts are rarely done, if ever, in full gear.

ALN: John, can you define the 3 methods of strength training for our readers?

JS: Maximal effort is simply lifting a maximal load. This is done to improve neuromuscular coordination and to reduce CNS (Central Nervous System) inhibition [Editor's note: The body has inhibitory safeguards in order to protect against injury. Decreasing these inhibitions theoretically allows one to lift heavier loads.]. After a warm-up to about 90% of our PR (personal best 1 repetition lift), we do a max set of usually one, but sometimes 2 or 3 reps. We may do another set if it is too easy and we think we can make another jump in weight, or if we just mis-groove the set and mess it up and want to try it again.

Repeated effort or repetition method is lifting a non-maximal load to failure (until you cannot complete another rep). This is used for hypertrophy and strength. Reps usually fall between 6 and 20. However, the sub-maximal effort version of this method is done more frequently for assistance exercises at Westside. This is lifting a non-maximal load a set amount of times not quite to failure for multiple sets. It is more practical than going to failure with the repetition method because it isn't as demanding on the CNS and thus recovery, but will still produce hypertrophy and some strength.

Dynamic effort is lifting a non-maximal load with the highest possible speed. This is done to improve explosive strength. We do this with different percentages, but always explosive. When training with the dynamic effort method we almost always include additional accommodating resistance with chains or bands added to the bar weight. Squats are done off a box with doubles for 5-

12 sets, benches are done with triples for 8-12 sets, and deadlifts are done for singles with 5-8 sets.

ALN: Let's delve a little bit into your own lifting abilities. What is your strongest lift and how do you train it?

JS: The deadlift is probably my best lift, my PR is 832. Normally, I only pull heavy once a month. For max effort work I either pull raw standing on a 2" box or off the floor against bands. I also do speed pulls twice a month, 5 explosive singles are done with bands usually added. Many other exercises also contribute such as reverse hypers, 45 degree hypers, glute-ham raises, heavy rows, heavy abs and obliques. I sometimes rotate in weighted box jumps as well.

ALN: What do you do when you hit a sticking point on one of the "Big 3"?

JS: I switch up my program, try and find a new way to get strong. It could be a small change like altering my stance or a radical change like switching up my entire program. Louie always has a lot of tricks that he has learned through the years. I talk to a lot of other lifters and find out what works for them. Sakari Selkainaho of Finland and Steve Goggins have been a great help as well.

ALN: You compete in the 275 lb. weight class which means you probably run close to 3 bills between contests. What advice can you give to the readers who are looking to gain weight?

JS: You have to be consistent with your diet, get on a plan and stick to it. Try to get in 6 meals a day, everyday. Protein shakes make this a lot easier. For example eat 3 whole food meals a day and 3 shakes each day and it becomes easy to stick with. Keep protein and carbs high, of course, but avoid high glycemic carbs altogether unless post workout. Get in plenty of healthy fats like nuts and oils (flax seed oil, extra virgin olive oil, fish oil, etc.). Anthony Ricciuto has been a great help with my diet, he has taught me many things that have made a huge difference.

ALN: You are sponsored by AtLarge Nutrition, LLC. Which of their products do you use?

JS: I use Nitrean, ETS, and Multi-plus. I use Nitrean for the majority of my daily protein intake; usually 3-4 shakes each day. If you check the ingredients you'll see it is a blend of several quality proteins. It has made it a lot easier to maintain my weight. I also gained about 3 pounds the first month I started taking ETS. Everything they sell is top quality.

ALN: If there was one thing you could change about powerlifting what would it be?

JS: I would like to see tighter judging at meets. Nobody seems to care what people are squatting anymore because of what they see being passed at meets. With all the gear we wear we should at least be expected to do legit lifts. The 2006 Arnold was pretty good though, I just hope it continues.

ALN: You have recorded a 2500+ lb total to date. What are your short and long-term plans in the sport of powerlifting or the iron game in general?

JS: My short term goal is to hit 2600 at the WPO semis in November. I think I have finally learned how to squat in gear so this is definitely possible. My long term goal is to just stay healthy and injury free for as long as I can, and, of course, to continually improve through the years.

ALN: Thank you John for this informative and insightful interview. We wish you the best of luck in all of your future endeavors.