

Critical Bench: Mike, tell us about yourself!

Mike Strom: I'm 29 years old, and started competing in bench only competitions when I was 18. I've been married for just over 5 years to my wife Alicia, and we live in Kenosha, WI, which we love—at least from March through September each year when snow isn't an issue.

I work as a carpenter building custom homes; which I enjoy, but it can also interfere with training at times because of the physical demands of the job.

CB: What is your biggest BP today?
MS: My best competition bench is 606 @ 198, 562 @ 181 (both top 50 all-time). My best bench raw in the gym is 415.

CB: Tell us about the first time you benched 225, 300, 400, 500, and 600 lb.? Tell us a little about how you trained to get to each and how you overcame each of those bench press barriers one by one.

MS: I recall making my first 200+ bench shortly before high school (I started lifting in my parent's basement at 8 years old). I remember because I had the old concrete weights we used to have to hang bags off the ends of the bar with dumbbells in them to add extra weight.

Throughout high school I was pretty much stuck in the mid 200's until I finally found out about powerlifting. Once I started to train more like a powerlifter and less like a bodybuilder as well as gaining a few pounds—I finished high school weighing about 155 and moved up to about 175 by

INTERVIEW

MIKE STROM

interviewed for PL USA by Ben Tatar of Critical Bench

the time I benched 300—I passed 300 fairly quickly by 1999, after powerlifting about one year.

Four-hundred seemed to just come along pretty easily as I built a strong base and moved into a denim shirt after using the old EHPHD shirts to start with. I got my first 400 bench in 2002.

Five-hundred was a bit more of a struggle. It took some evolution in my training as far as learning more about my individual weaknesses and what exercises paid off for me. I needed to focus on building lock-out strength and as that came along I pushed past 500 in '05.

I hit 600 for the first time in late 2006, so that came pretty quickly once I passed 500. I switched shirts again (went from the denim to a 2-ply Rage-X) which I think helped, and my improved training knowledge help me progress more quickly; and again I moved up in bodyweight to the 198 class.

Since first benching 600, things have slowed down again as I've been focusing on competing in full meets, but my total has been moving up well.

CB: Do you ever scare yourself by knowing that you're benching well

over triple body weight?

MS: I never really think in terms of bodyweight, I just want to continually lift more.

CB: Answer the following: what would you like to say to those who a) Look up to you—

MS: Always push yourself to achieve your best, constantly re-evaluate your training, and learn to feed off others lack of belief in you.

CB: b) Are afraid of you—

MS: Meet me and you won't be, I'm very laid back and friendly.

CB: c) People who you fire up—

MS: Always focus on hitting PR's and improving, but also do your best to beat everyone else in the gym—you owe that to your training partners to push them in that way.

CB: What's your training routine?

MS: My general template is based on Westside Barbell, although I continually try new things and constantly adjust and evaluate my training.

CB: What bench shirt do you use?

MS: I currently use a 2-ply open back Rage-X with a reinforced neckline (but not the "super-neck"). My shirt is actually from before they made a thicker Rage-X material, so I can't even get an-

other like it to replace it. I wish I could because this one is over 4 years old and pretty worn out, but I still love it. So currently I'm looking into a new shirt and have a few in mind I'd like to try.

CB: How do people respond when they hear how much you bench?

MS: I really don't talk much about my lifting to "non-lifters," so they understand the shirts and the training, etc. Generally they say "wow, that's a great bench for your size." I hate the "for your size" part.

CB: What are your future goals?

MS: My short term goals are to total over 2000 @ 198, compete at the AAPF Nationals and AWPC Worlds, squat over 800, bench over 650, and pull over 600. Long term goals I like to keep to myself for internal motivation.

CB: So far in your powerlifting journey what has been your favorite, craziest, most hardcore and most memorable moment?

MS: My most memorable and favorite moment was actually taking 3rd behind Brad Heck and Jay Fry at a UPA Bench Bash for Cash pro meet. It was an honor to share the platform with 2 guys at the top of the game like they are. I guess I don't really see what I do as "crazy" or "hardcore," it's just what I do and who I am; I hate to back down, so training can get pretty wild.

CB: Where do you train? Who do you train with and what is it like?

MS: Over the years I've had a great experience with great train-

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Mike Strom (middle) has joined the ranks of great bench pressers like Brad Heck (left) and Jason Fry (right) (photo courtesy Critical Bench)

ing partners, so I'd like to give them all some credit.

I started in bench only with Iron House Gym in Burlington, WI. I learned a lot about training from Dave Walker; Sean Corbett instilled a drive and competitiveness in me; and Mark Hinkston reinforced the importance of assistance work to me. These guys really mean a lot to me, and I appreciate all their help.

When I moved to Kenosha, I started training at Atlas Gym, which isn't so much a "powerlifting" gym, but a hardcore place for sure with lots of great guys willing to help you out and spot for you. The gym is filled with strong guys, from gym rats, to powerlifters, and the owner is a highland games competitor.

Currently I train at Monster Garage Gym (www.monstergaragegym.com). It's a great atmosphere with a good group of guys and we've been growing lately. We have a mix of raw lifters, single ply lifters, multiply lifters, and guys just starting out that haven't competed yet. We also have Philip Daniels, one of the owners, who plays for the Redskins. It's a great group and we have all the equipment you need in a power-

lifting gym.

CB: Has the bench press shirt changed your perspective on lifting? If so, how?

MS: Nope, I just lift as much as I can—pretty simple.

CB: What do you like doing away from competing in the bench press?

MS: Spend time with my wife, family, watch movies, drink beer, watch football—pretty typical stuff. But mostly away from bench I like to squat and deadlift.

CB: What motivates you to step under heavier and heavier weights?

MS: Whenever people ask "how much do you want to be able to lift," all I can say is "more." I don't know why I do it, I just know I can't not do it.

CB: What is the best and worst advice you were ever told?

MS: Best advice—technique is everything. Worst advice—arching your back is bad for you.

CB: Out of looks, health, toughness, and strength, what is the most important to you in order and why?

MS: 1. Toughness—everything in life and lifting depends on your ability to withstand pain and discomfort.

2. Strength—it's always been an obsession for me.

3. Health—it's necessary to continue lifting/competing.

4. Looks—doesn't matter much.

CB: How do you want to be remembered?

MS: As a strong, dedicated lifter who loves his sport, but is still fun, easy going and enjoys helping fellow lifters.

CB: What does the bench press mean to you?

MS: It demonstrates complete dominance of a weight. You can't bench it if you can't control it.

CB: What makes you happy?

MS: Consistency in my training; I really hate to miss the gym. Also, nothing feels better than a PR.

CB: Tell us your top 10 tips to a bigger bench press?

MS: 1. Learn proper form and use it on every rep.

2. Lift with other serious powerlifters.

3. Build a strong upper back.

4. Build strong triceps.

5. Focus on training your nervous system.

6. Be open to new ideas.

7. Take care of your joints/rotator cuffs.

8. Learn to identify your weaknesses.

9. Spend time training raw.

10. Be tough and expect success.

CB: Give us your training routine and diet.

MS: You can check out my training on youtube (mikesbench600). Saturdays: max effort squat/dead-

lift. Mondays: max effort bench. Wednesdays: DE/RE squat/deadlift. Thursdays: DE/RE bench.

My diet really isn't anything special. I try to make sure I get adequate protein and not eat too much junk.

CB: What are the 5 biggest mistakes other benchers make?

MS: 1. Letting their wrists bend back.

2. Poor setup with no leg drive.

3. Unable to maintain tightness throughout the lift.

4. Don't retract the shoulder blades well enough.

5. Fear of the weight.

CB: Any words of inspiration for all the other benchers out there or any message you would like to leave the bench pressing world?

MS: Cherish this sport—it's one of very few things in life where hard work is guaranteed to pay off.

CB: In closing, is there anyone who you would like to thank?

MS: I'd like to thank my wife Alicia for being so supportive of my lifting. I'd like to thank all the other lifters and coaches who give so much back to powerlifting through articles, interviews, videos, etc. I'd also like to thank the meet directors and judges who are often taken for granted and don't get the respect and appreciation they deserve.