

Why I Took My Ball And.....

It's been just over a year since I decided to sell my gym and move to America and one question that I'm still regularly asked is why did I turn my back on what was, according to some people "a life that a lot of people in the fitness industry dream of". Well firstly I don't honestly think that is actually the case, I'm sure that they don't really and if they do then they should have much bigger dreams than that. The short answer that I give is that I walked away because I just couldn't stand all of the bullshit any longer, if you find that statement interesting then the following should also be of interest to you.

The "dream life" consisted of having both an excellent domestic competition record and domestic coaching record, in fact I had more wins as a coach at all levels up to and including British champion than my ten top quality competition titles. It also consisted of me doing bodybuilding related work for TV on The Active Channel and The Community Channel and also appearing in the occasional TV commercial and movie. It involved me owning my own gym and even playing a big part in putting on a bodybuilding show, the first and very successful Coresport Classic. All of those achievements were definitely things that I will always be proud of. The online figures were incredible too, things that I appeared in on YouTube were popular, the manageress of a gym once said to me something like "nobody wants to see an old man with his clothes off" so I had this video filmed there and posted it online <https://youtu.be/DVo9ypWDztg> As you can see from the viewing figures which are approaching a quarter of a million and the many nice comments she was very wrong. There were thousands of similar nice comments and emails that I received about everything; along with blog and website views the numbers ran into millions, just a documentary that I made for the Community Channel was seen by an estimated 10 million viewers on TV over a period of several showings and YouTube combined. I will always be amazed that an unknown old man on such a simple journey attracted such interest and that the whole thing went so far but that is the world that we live in today. People crave their 15 minutes, well mine actually lasted a bit longer than that and it revealed a lot to me about some people.

The media exposure, which is of course the thing that most people are interested in, started at the end of 2010 when a friend of mine asked me if he could make a documentary about me which I was happy to do to help him with his film making career. In short, what happened next was that millions of people went on to watch it on TV and YouTube and it all went crazy from there, It was never anything that I courted and I didn't particularly enjoy it but was a useful springboard a few years later when I bought into a gym at the end of 2013.

With hindsight, buying a gym was a huge mistake and it was my own fault because I didn't realise how much the sport or indeed people had changed, that's what happens when you just get on with your life minding your own business I suppose, you don't see people becoming needy and greedy if you don't associate with enough of them. My vision was simple, a gym where serious people could come and train and get free advice and coaching from an owner with a good competition and coaching record, but it didn't work out that way, I hadn't allowed for all of the BS that plagues the business these days.

Unfortunately part of owning a gym these days involves a high social media presence. In fact social media was one of the things that helped me make my decision to walk away from everything, mainly because it enables people to do all of the stuff that I'm unhappy about with the fitness industry as it is today. While I didn't mind posting all of the motivational bumper stickers, pictures, videos and links to my very successful blog to help promote the gym, I did it hoping that it would attract the type of people to the gym that I wanted, people who loved the sport and wanted to help others reach the heights that they had without charging them a fortune to do so, but it didn't work out that way. I soon realised that validation on social media was, to some, the most important thing. Sometimes I would read what other people posted on there, and this was what made me unhappy to the point that I eventually posted less and less stuff and therefore read other people's posts less and less.

I must say right here and now that my gym did attract a great deal of excellent members and guests who were very serious about their training and had the results to prove it, a lot of those people are still my friends to this day and we still keep in touch, but there were a whole lot of people that came there who were nothing like that. I know that people go to gyms for different reasons and have different agendas but when those agendas basically consist of endless selfies and people that look like crap and / or have never won anything in their life telling me that they know better than me about something that I've been doing successfully for years, well, you can imagine how it made me feel. I'd invested more than what most people earn in a year into a gym that I wanted to make a "centre of excellence" and this was the result. In a few cases people that I was helping were acting on conflicting advice from their friends and partners and then when they didn't win their shows or hit their targets they wondered why. Disappointed doesn't begin to cover it.

So what is my problem is with what I was seeing and these days see more than ever almost every day on social media? In a nutshell I would just say that I find it all very fake and I feel that there are too many people that use it for validation and appreciation just because they have adopted a bodybuilding lifestyle. If you need validation, appreciation or adoration from what you do then bodybuilding really is not the sport for you. Only a select few get that and they are so successful at the sport that they really don't look for it and their success means that they don't need it. Ask the general public to name a famous bodybuilder other than Arnie and you will realise that bodybuilding is still a minority sport.

I wonder, was it that many years ago that we all just did this to be healthy and look good with the quiet ambition of becoming good enough to compete on stage against the very best in the country one day? Was it that long ago that diets were something that we worked out and wrote down on a piece of paper with the help of a successful coach? Is it that long since training journals were just that, a notepad chucked on the floor next to the bench where you were working out? And is it such a distant memory when we used to train hard and then just have a laugh with each other over a post workout protein shake? It seems to me that those days have gone, the days when we simply did it for ourselves.

Nowadays it is apparently essential to tell the world what you did in the gym every day and not in any kind of constructive or informative way either, instead you just write on Facebook "I did 300 reps, I am a Spartan!" No you're not, it just means that

you did 300 reps, they were probably all crap style and form too which is why you feel the need to justify your workout in this way because you probably look like crap too. Then it comes to the food. Pictures of food before it's prepped, while it's being prepped, after it's been prepped and writing about how much Broccoli you're eating, as if anyone could care. Then we get pictures of what the app on your phone says, what the macros should be and how many calories it comes out to, do these people not have a life? Do you know I have never been a slave to calories or any highly detailed macro chart, that goes not only for me but also for anyone that I have coached and we've all done very well using that method. Yet these days people that look like they don't even lift and have never ever won anything or in some cases never even competed will post advice on social media, either just to make themselves feel important or to sell whatever product they are earning a small commission from. Is anyone really stupid enough to take advice from idiots like that? Do the idiots really think that people listen to them or is it all about their precious validation?

Next come the selfies. Now let me say from the start that if you've won something or can post something to motivate and help others that fine, but when the picture is simply accompanied by some nonsense about how much better the person looks than ever before then it crosses the line between being motivational and being pure vanity. Surely it should be up to others to decide how you look in your pictures? It's certainly not up to the person that has posted a picture after agonisingly trying to make it look as good as possible first. And by the way, what is it with all the girls posting pictures of how fat their butt is? Am I missing something? If I want to see a fat ass I'll just follow a doughnut addict around Walmart. The selfies are only the start of the whole "please like and share" thing that people are begging for when they post this stuff. Next comes the bit where they tell you how good they are and how they can prove it.

Their "proof" comes in the form of who they are "sponsored" by or who they are an "ambassador" for. Let's get that into perspective then shall we? Just because a company gives you a free tub of protein to plaster their name over everything that you do really does not make you anything special. Take a look at just how many people that have never won anything can claim that they are an ambassador or a sponsored athlete. I had lots of different sponsors over the years, most of them were very good to me but the bigger they are, or should I say think they are, the more that they think that they own you. The one who gave me my own TV series was the worst, I was glad to away from them in the end, they hindered my bodybuilding career, they didn't help it because I was told that I could only use and endorse their products and as you can imagine I would not stand for that.

The last time that I checked I was still both an ambassador and a sponsored athlete although I retired from competition over a year ago. The reason that I still have associations with the two companies who still send me stuff is because we're friends, it's as simple as that. I still wear clothing from my last clothing sponsor and use supplements from a company that I am still an ambassador for because both companies make very good products and I'm grateful for the support that these people gave me when I was competing. It's like two friends sharing gifts and that's all it is. I'm two and half years away from my 60th birthday and I have no plans to compete again so neither of us gain anything out of it other than the continuation of our long friendships. Really? No profit or social media exposure? Yes really, as rare as rocking horse shit these days I know but we're very happy doing it.

Now lets go on to all of the "titles" that people have these days. It's a bit like a one man band calling himself "CEO" of the business. Everyone seems to be a champion of this or that or a pro of some kind. They seem to give out Pro Cards as if they were 'flu shots these days so here's a reality check for you boys and girls; you are not a pro at anything unless you get paid good money to do it. So unless these federations pay you good money every week to compete for them being a pro is as worthless as the piece of card that it's printed on. Don't believe me? Next time you go shopping hand them your pro card at the checkout and see if they will accept that as payment for your goods. If you're that desperate for a title go and work in McDonalds, you get a free name badge there and it has stars on it too.

At the present time the British bodybuilding scene has more federations, categories and classes than ever before which I personally think is great because it means that everyone can now compete, you don't have to be good enough to get on stage with one of the big federations where you will be outclassed, you can do a small federation instead, no problem. However, it does mean that the UK now has more champions, British champions and pro card holders than ever before by a mile and the new federations seem to keep on appearing with alarming regularity. This will happen for as long as people are happy to part with their hard earned cash for a crack at a meaningless title and a Mickey Mouse pro card. The whole business has become watered down to the point where it all means very little any more. I won't risk incurring the wrath of the people that compete for the smaller federations by categorising any of the multitude of bodies, just go to the shows or look at the show pictures which are posted every day and you'll soon work out which are the tough ones to do and which are the beauty pageants.

There is nothing wrong with doing an easy federation but please keep your feet on the ground. I was NAC British Open champion in the same year that I only placed 6th in the UKBFF Britain and only 4th in the NABBA England, that gave me complete perspective. And yes, I broke the rules and competed for whoever I wanted whenever I wanted, it probably cost me a few points, places and even the odd title but I was never in it to impress a handful of judges with their own agenda or to brag about it on social media, I just did it to be the best version of me that I could be, that is a far better reason. That's also why I always tried to compete at the highest level that I could, in fact there were times I competed in harder classes than I needed to just because I would rather place against the best than win against nobody.

Which brings me on to online coaching and show prep coaching. Again, some people just go way above their limits, they believe their own publicity and pretend to be something that they are not. Lets get this straight, a minor placing in a minor beauty pageant does not qualify you as a prep coach. What worked for you won't have the same effect on someone else, we are all very different. I don't see how you can even call yourself a coach just because you have a piece of paper that says you are, even though you look like crap and have no coaching record. You're definitely not a prep coach if you've never won anything against top quality opposition or at least placed highly in a top quality show against top quality athletes and gone on to a National Final with one of the big federations. I know that the wannabees are trying to make a living and I respect that but keep it real for goodness sake, don't pretend to be a World class coach if you've never coached anyone at World class level, it's that simple.

These days people do things because they have to, they invent this whole image and then put themselves under pressure to maintain it. These days the attention seeking blogs written by the nobodies make me laugh. I started writing a blog when I was a nobody back in 2009 and it ran for the length of my 6 year career. It was humorous, informative and sometimes probably too personal, but it was just for the people that were interested, you had to look for it rather than have it fed to you via social media, yet it has had almost one million views since it started. Peoples blogs these days all have an alternative agenda, some use bad language and they are filled with questionable pictures, many photo shopped of course. Apparently if you shout the loudest you will be heard above the din of all of the other blogs but that's ok because these people believe that their message is more important than anyone else's. I'm glad that I stopped writing a regular blog when I did and now I only use it for occasional pieces like this one as a lot of people have told me that they like reading the stuff that I write.

In the fitness industry if you choose to post about yourself on social media every day, pay silly money for vanity photo shoots so that you can convince everyone including yourself that you look great and generally talk the talk you have to then do well in competition or how stupid do you look? Why do you think that so many people complain about judging and politics these days? Because when they don't do well the whole image that they have created is shattered. I'm not saying that the judging is always spot on and we all know that politics often gets in the way of fair judging but surely the judges are far better equipped to judge the athletes live than the athletes' friends who are just looking at photos the next day. It makes me ask the question again, when did people stop doing this for themselves just to be happy and confident with how they look and feel?

We all have our own reasons for going to the gym and living the healthy lifestyle of course. Personally I've always had the same motivation to keep in shape, I took up boxing at the age of 15 and although I wasn't ever good enough to go anywhere with it I enjoyed it and it kept me fit and in good shape. When I stopped that at the age of 28 I took up weight training for the same reason that I had taken up boxing, in short I figured that if I kept in good shape I'd have more chance of dating the kind of girls that I like. My logic was that fit looking girls go for fit looking guys. I'm honest enough to admit it and the theory worked quite well. The fact that I have cabinets full of trophies and medals is just a bonus, I can assure you that every single girlfriend that I've ever had has felt better in my hands than any trophy, medal or any of the other accolades that people seem so desperate for these days.

I realise that what I have written will upset the people that I'm complaining about and that it may shake the fragile world that they live in, but like I've always said, I'd rather be honest than popular. Yes I am very happy to be a grumpy old man but that doesn't make my opinions any more or less valid and I can only hope that some of the people that read this will realise that they are part of the problem that plagues the British fitness industry today and make changes to start becoming part of the solution.