

The Iron Defines Me

A friend of mine once told me “that a person isn’t deemed successful based on their accomplishments, but on how far they had to come to reach those accomplishments”. I have seen a lot of success in my life with most everything I have touched. From athletics, academics, career, powerlifting, and even my hobbies I become passionate about being the best at everything I do. So much so that people often see one aspect of my life and see the success I have achieved and think that is the part of my life that defines me. The part of my life that for me best defines who I am, or at least how I became who I am is my journey with the iron. This might seem a bit odd if you look at my professional resume or the depth and involvement in some of my side projects. How did this come about?

As I child I was pretty inept socially leading to significant self-esteem and depression issues. I would say that these issues verged on the side of being dangerous at some points.

The life that I lived as a child was most definitely different than the upbringing most have been through. If you read the newspaper articles about my life you will see very little about my early years. There is a reason for this and as I come to terms with this period of my life I will begin releasing these stories. For the purpose of this discussion it is important and I would cover a brief synopsis of the important details and how they relate.

My mother is a very strong willed independent person however she had no interest in living by the traditional societal norms. My earliest memories are of moving and living in various locations around the northern California wilderness. Yes, wilderness. We would travel to remote towns and then from there head deep into the mountains and make camp. Our parents didn’t hold jobs by traditional standards but kept a meager income to keep food on the table. At times things were tight and we lived on bags of rice and beans. My stepfather would poach deer while my mom taught us how to forage for edible mushrooms.

It was honestly such a great experience growing up this way in this day and age. Being in touch with nature by living in and off of mother earth is such a rare experience today. Having free reign to run barefooted through the forest is not normal everyday living (or even allowed in today’s world of parenting). What this did do however is leave me with little social interaction with other children and no level of experiences to share with them when I started school. This is of course with the exception of my brother and 3 sisters as they were born. That first year I was driven off the mountain each morning so I could catch the bus. Being young kids are quite adaptable however. My second year of school my parents moved out of the woods for the winter and took up in an old mining camp out towards the Trinity Alps. Still no TV or other ‘normal’ items but my stepfather did build us a kitchen table with his chainsaw so we were definitely moving up.

I made a couple friends that year and wasn’t the silent kid sitting alone all the time. In fact I started staying over at my best friend’s house nearly every night. I loved what a real house was like! Towards the end of the year I remember my parents came to pick me up and I told them I was staying at my friend’s house again. At which point I was told no as I had stayed overnight every night for a week. I

remembered being quite mad at my parents. It was the next day at school we were notified that his house had burnt down and the entire family was killed. As a child this took quite a toll on me. I am told that I basically didn't talk the following year, although I honestly don't remember too much about that time.

To cut the remainder of this story short I'm going to abbreviate the rest of the timeline to get to the crux of the story. This tragedy was followed a year later by removal from my family. We were living in the woods once again and my stepfather was poaching deer for food and my parents were 'making a living' by methods not approved of by law enforcement. Our camp/home was raided and all of us kids were tossed in vehicles and then subsequently split into separate foster homes.

After a year in Foster care my parents won our custody back and we moved to Oregon and lived in my Step Grandmother's house that was in the hospital with cancer. I must say this period was quite normal with the exception of being punctuated by the only friend I had at the time dying. I don't remember him at all even though he apparently did all my writing for me when my arm was in a cast. Very similar to the first friend I lost. After my Step Grandmother passed away my parents were back to the old migrant lifestyle, albeit this time sticking to mining and logging. Legal activities but still allowed for being quite off the grid all over central and eastern Oregon Mountains and deserts. I was in and out of several schools.

By this period I had never made the turnaround in my dealings with other kids. And let me tell you it doesn't help being a teenager and being ridiculed for your clothing and even how you smelled. During the summer we used to fill up gallon jugs of water in the creek and let them sit in a rock on the sun to boil. But some of our winter time housing (see the 16ft trailer on the left in the 1995 article) didn't have these options. Boiling water on a wood stove was a slow process as well and usually only done weekly.

Depression and self-esteem issues had set in pretty solid. I had no friends and life in school was painful. My only escape was our summer retreats to the mountains. Looking back I know now that my issues were at a dangerous level. All I knew at the time however was that those issues needed to be hidden. What I did know from overhearing my mother and stepfather talk about my father told me this, as well as seeing how he was viewed in society. My father's family had a long history of depression and suicide (his mother and grandfather to name a few) and he himself had attempted suicide several times in his life. This was a lifelong struggle for him and I was well aware of the stigmas attached with it. I remember doing such things as running and hiking through the mountains as far as I could until exhaustion, the sun, or my orientation were reaching a point where I would question whether I could get back.

Junior high came along and things changed. Another kid walked up to me and said my names Gregg, come sit at my table were friends now. This sounded good to me so I did, and at the table were 2 other kids that Gregg had done the same thing with. Friends were good, and then came sports. Later that year Gregg came up to me and said "you're going out for track & field". Since his last plan of sitting at the same table was such a good idea I didn't argue much and the school let me in without paying. This became a turning point for me. I was decent, and started gaining confidence in myself. That summer I

bought some leg weights and started running, I did jump squats and pushups until I couldn't walk. I came back to school 'big' by 9th grade standards. No one made fun of me anymore. It just didn't happen, and I LIKED IT.

Going into High School my stepfather won a disability suit (story for another day) and he put the money as a down payment on what most would consider an unlivable mobile home. Doors & counters it didn't have but running water and electricity it did!

I was mowing lawns and chopping firewood so I could buy every concrete weight I could get my hands on. In my bedroom I barely had room for my bed with all the weight equipment. I kept getting better at sports and with every win in sports and pound of muscle I put on my confidence soared. In a couple year period my relationship with the iron literally transformed me.

It's more than just the increased confidence however. That feeling of disconnection with society and the world disappeared with the cold bite of steel in your hands. Everything disappears and there is nothing but the year and now, the pain and pushing or pulling that iron. The ability to push myself to the threshold of my capacity and leave me feeling physically drained but emotionally and mentally fulfilled was also much needed in getting me through the depression issues I was dealing with. That bite of the iron in my hands was powerful dose of reality and connection with the world while providing confidence and an outlet for me to drain my potentially self-destructive emotions.

As I got older I still felt (feel) a bit of surrealism about my connection to society and the life I live. I have continued to rely on that bite of steel in my hands or on my back to forcefully bring me to the present. Now using lifting as a coping mechanism with the other issues I have brought up as an adult will be the topic for another article. But for those that know my training it may help explain why I push myself so hard in the gym, well past what is healthy or productive as I have demonstrated many times.

Despite success in many ventures in life it is still my connection with the Iron that best defines why I am the person I am now.