



Powerlifting Phenom Josh Bryant

by Kim Goss

In a sport dominated by veterans, one rookie is holding his own

You have to pay your dues to be a champion in powerlifting. Although powerlifters can enjoy strength increases from day one, it takes many years—even decades—to plateau. This fact is evident by looking at the high numbers of 30- and even 40-year-old powerlifters who occupy the winner's spotlight in amateur and professional competitions. Josh Bryant, however, is a young powerlifter who didn't want to wait to be the best in his sport.

Bryant lives in Santa Barbara, California, and competes in the 308-pound weight class. At 6 feet and 305 pounds, his best official lifts are 903 in the squat, 622 in the bench and 749 in the deadlift. His bench, squat and 2,276 are WPC Junior World Records. At the USPF Texas Cup last November he bench pressed 601 without any supportive equipment, the youngest ever to do so. What's just as amazing is that this February Bryant celebrated his 23rd birthday, making him one of the youngest athletes ever to squat 900 and bench press 600.

When he was 15 years old Bryant entered his first lifting competition, the AAU North American

Bench Press Championships. Weighing 196 pounds, Bryant bench pressed 308.5 pounds; two year later he improved to 413 while weighing 230. Prior to his 20th birthday, he officially bench pressed 523 and squatted 727 while competing in the 275-pound bodyweight class.

Bryant attended Santa Barbara High School and earned All-League and All-County honors in football and track. He played football at Moorpark College in Moorpark, California, but after his first year decided to leave the gridiron to concentrate on powerlifting. Bryant eventually transferred to Cal State University-Northridge, and last December received his BA degree in history.

In addition to training to be the strongest powerlifter in the world, Bryant works part-time as a strength coach at Carpenteria High School in Carpenteria, California. He hopes to eventually work full-time in this field. Bryant took a few minutes out of his busy schedule to tell us how he became so strong and to share his insight into the people, and even some of the politics, of powerlifting.

BFS: *Have you always been strong?*

Bryant: My bench has always been high—I benched 200 when I was in 7th grade—it’s my squat and deadlift that I’ve really had to work hard to get up there.

BFS: *What sports have you been involved with other than powerlifting?*

Bryant: Before and during high school I did boxing, football and track. I played fullback throughout high school, and nose guard until my senior year, when I was switched to linebacker.

BFS: *What was your highest playing weight in high school?*

Bryant: I played at about 230, but my bodyweight was kept down because I ran so much—I’d run 40 forties in one workout—and because I didn’t know much about nutrition.

BFS: *Were you offered a football or track scholarship?*

Bryant: No, I was recruited mostly by smaller schools. I went to junior college and played a year there, but when I was switched from fullback to guard I decided to concentrate on powerlifting.

BFS: *Are any members of your family involved in athletics?*

Bryant: My dad was All-American in track and field in college, in the hammer throw, and my brother Noah is a true sophomore at USC on a track scholarship. He recently took the silver medal in the Junior Pan Am Games in the shot put.

BFS: *When you set goals for yourself, do you look at goals for individual lifts, or are you more focused on the total?*

Bryant: The total. A lot of powerlifters specialize in one lift, but I think it’s better to be a complete strength athlete.

BFS: *What are your immediate goals in powerlifting?*

Bryant: I’d like to total 2,400 in June at the ESPN Mountaineer Cup in West Virginia—all my training is focused on that meet.

BFS: *What type of advice would you give to a beginner powerlifter, such as a 14-year-old boy who just walked into a gym and wants to lift like you?*

Bryant: Work on technique first. Find a coach, or some kind of mentor, who knows the technique. I’ve seen a lot of powerlifters get hurt just because they don’t have the technique right.

BFS: *Do you believe beginners should compete as often as possible, or do they need to train for perhaps as long as a year before they consider competing?*

Bryant: I think they should compete after just a few months of training, even if their total is not great, just to get the platform experience. In almost every meet I go to, it seems that 70 percent of the competitors are upset because they didn’t lift anywhere near what they thought they could.

BFS: *Do you lift more in training or competition?*

Bryant: I get pretty pumped up at competitions, so I don’t think it’s possible for me to lift more in training.



Josh’s dad, Dan, was an All-American in track and field in college, in the hammer throw, and his brother Noah is a true sophomore at USC on a track scholarship.

BFS: *Have you made any impressive lifts other than the three powerlifts?*

Bryant: I’ve done a close-grip bench with 570. I’ve also done walkouts with 1,100.

BFS: *Is it difficult to lift in different organizations because of rule differences?*

Bryant: You just have to be honest with yourself and know the rules. If you’re competing in a meet run by an organization that allows you to squat higher, then you squat a little bit higher. But you also have to practice the right technique, because there’s a big difference between bouncing a bench in training and pausing a bench in competition and not being able to lift your butt up. It’s just a whole different animal.

BFS: *Do you have any experience coaching powerlifters?*

Bryant: I helped Gary Frank [powerlifter with world’s highest total] coach powerlifting when I was in Louisiana. We placed second in the state for high schools. We were coaching a small private school and we lost to a huge public school, so I think our coaching was comparable.

BFS: *Have you worked as a personal trainer?*

Bryant: I’ve done that before, and I’ve had really good results, such as increasing a person’s bench press

more than 100 pounds in the first year. I'm just not into patting people on the back and saying things like, "Oh, you've only had one Daiquiri this week and one bag of Cheetos—you're doing so well." I just don't want to be around people like that.

BFS: *In American powerlifting there are so many organizations, each with different rules, that it's difficult to compare performances and determine who is best. What's your take on this subject?*

Bryant: The problem is there are too many chiefs and not enough Indians!

BFS: *Has the fact that there are so many powerlifting organizations negatively affected public reaction to the sport?*

Bryant: Definitely, especially with efforts to promote the sport and get it accepted into the Olympics.

BFS: *The Russians compete primarily in the IPF. Do you think that's the organization that will have the most impact in getting the sport into the Olympics?*

Bryant: Probably, but from a professional standpoint, it's the USPF that will probably take powerlifting the farthest, because of TV exposure and the money that the USPF puts in.

BFS: *Which organizations are you affiliated with?*

Bryant: Quite a few, and I've competed in just about every one. My favorite is the USPF, but there are others with strong points. I just think the USPF has the best balance of everything.

BFS: *What's your advice regarding supportive gear?*

Bryant: Don't wear too much supportive equipment except at meets. Build real strength and then add it on for a little boost.

BFS: *Where do you train?*

Bryant: I train in my garage. I've got everything in there I need, such a bench press, glute-ham raise, squat racks, 100-pound plates and dumbbells.

BFS: *Do you perform box squats?*

Bryant: Yes, I do very low box squats, using a 9-inch box and pausing at the bottom. A 13-inch box is right below parallel for me, so it's way down—some of the people who come over here to train can't even touch it.

BFS: *How much weight do you use in the low box squat?*

Bryant: I've done 700 on it with no supportive equipment and held it there for a couple seconds. I have a video of it on my website, joshstrength.com.



At 6 feet and 305 pounds, Josh's best lifts are 903 in the squat, 622 in the bench and 749 in the deadlift.

BFS: *What about high boxes? Don't they offer any value to you?*

Bryant: They could, but using them would be difficult since I train by myself or with a couple of other people. I would also need to get some more 100-pound plates because I can't fit any more weight on the bar.

BFS: *You used the BFS program when you attended Santa Barbara High School. How did it help prepare you for powerlifting?*

Bryant: BFS got me into doing box squats. I was doing

high box squats with 700 when I couldn't squat 600, and when you're handling that much weight it's really going to get your nervous system ready to handle some heavy weight. We also did a lot of box jumps on the BFS program. I've noticed that athletes who don't start plyometrics when they're young generally are not going to be good at it when they get older.

BFS: *I haven't heard much about powerlifters doing box jumps. How do you feel it has helped you?*

Bryant: Look at the bottom of a depth jump, and you'll see it looks exactly like a deadlift. Look at the video on my web site of me squatting 903. You'll see



Josh believes that plyometrics have made him more explosive coming out of the bottom of a squat and at the start of a deadlift. Here he performs box jumps on a BFS 32" plyo box with booster.

I come up really fast, and I attribute this partially to plyometrics. There are a few of us powerlifters doing plyometrics, and everyone I know who has started doing them has become super strong.

BFS: *I see where many powerlifters do a lot of speed workouts with lighter weights. Do you believe you are accomplishing the same thing with plyometrics?*

Bryant: Absolutely. I've done a lot of experimenting with upper-body plyometrics and it didn't do much for me, but plyos does work for my squat and deadlift.

BFS: *Is it true or a misconception that the current trend in powerlifting is to get very explosive?*

Bryant: Slowly but surely, there are more and more people doing it. I get a lot of e-mail from people who say that they started doing plyometrics and feel they are a lot more explosive when coming out of the hole in the squat or are more explosive at the start of a deadlift.

BFS: *What are the advantages of using chains?*

Bryant: They really work your lockout.

BFS: *What training advice would you give to other athletes, such as football players?*

Bryant: For lifting they need to get their technique down pat. And they need to be doing a lot of plyometrics. I know some people don't think you should start plyometrics until you're 16, but you should have seen the results we got with the freshman kids this year doing plyometrics. They made such great improvements.

BFS: *How many calories do you take in during the day?*

Bryant: Usually about 5,500, which helps me maintain my weight, but I go up to about 7,000 when I need to gain.

BFS: *When kids ask you about supplements, what do you tell them?*

Bryant: I tell them to get their diet straightened out first. Supplements are not bad, but I believe they should be added only after you've learned to eat right.

BFS: *What types of supplements do you take?*

Bryant: My supplements include fish oils, multivitamins, antioxidants, vitamin C, flaxseed oil and whey protein.

BFS: *So would you say the supplements you're taking are generally directed towards improving your overall health?*

Bryant: Yes, exactly, because I think you have to be healthy to perform well.

BFS: *What do you prefer about whey protein over other forms?*

Bryant: I like it because it gets into your system quickly.

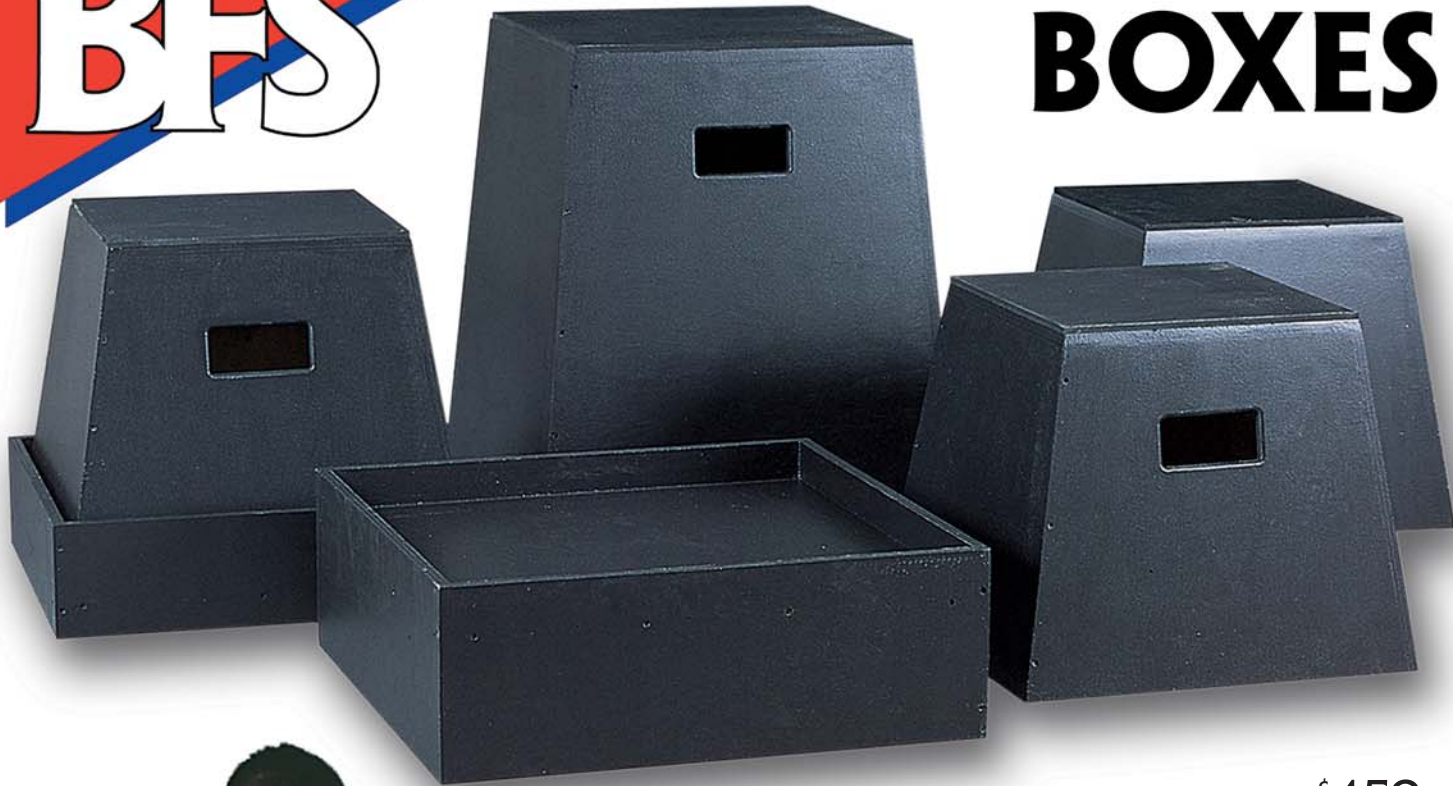
BFS: *Is there anyone you'd like to acknowledge for helping you achieve your goals?*

Bryant: I want to thank Steve Holl for getting me started, and I want to thank Gary Frank and Ed Coan. And I most of all I want to thank God for giving me this talent. **BFS**

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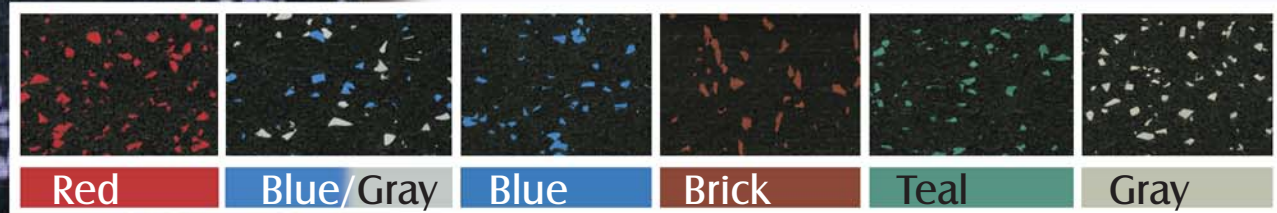
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