

# CHRISTOPHER REED

*'the athlete's choice'*

B.A. Geography (with 3 years of study in Kinesiology)

Personal Training Specialist – Canadian Fitness Professionals

Certified Kettlebell Trainer – International Kettlebell and Fitness Federation

Certified Underground Strength Coach – The Underground Strength Gym

Level 3 Football Coach – Coaching Association of Canada

Kettlebell Training Specialist Level II – Athletics & Wellness Incorporated

Pressure Point Control Tactics Instructor – The Control Institute

Open Water Diver – Professional Association of Dive Instructors

2004 Canadian Football League Supplemental Draft Participant – Universite Laval

Cygen Laboratories Sport Strength and Conditioning Expert

Two decades of theoretical, technical and practical experience in fitness and sport; 18 years of martial arts training in varied disciplines; Part-time Faculty member at Humber College; Fitness Innovator – creator of the *Kettleboxing™ Program* and respective *Certified Kettleboxing Coach™* designation and more recently; author and featured guest blog contributor to various fitness related websites.

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# PASSIONATE, FUNNY, DEDICATED

## QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

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Is being on a vegan diet necessarily detrimental in any way for a younger athlete (16 – 20yrs)?

**\*\*DISCLAIMER FOR MOM & DAD:** I am not a Registered Dietician nor am I a Certified Nutritional Specialist. I would strongly recommend seeking out the services of a Registered Dietician to better qualify the *opinion* that I am about to express.

It is *my opinion*, based solely on my experiences both as an athlete and working with athletes who have varied nutritional preferences such as that of a Vegan Diet, that a Vegan diet is in no way detrimental for a young athlete between the ages of 16 - 20 years. In fact, I would argue that a Vegan Diet is better for a developing athlete than a conventional non-vegan diet due in large part to the methods employed to “produce” food in quantity rather than in quality.

I would ensure that nutrients normally received through the ingestion of meat were somehow substituted into your diet through alternative sources. The argument of a conventional diet versus a vegan diet I feel is a debate that is more so fueled by ideological and philosophical dogma (perpetuated by popular social media) versus physical culture and the physiological needs of a given individual - as if, all of a sudden, it's trendy and cool to be a vegan.

I look to colleagues within the fitness community that I admire like Jon Hinds Owner of Monkey Bar Gym in Ohio and Mike Mahler of Mahler's Aggressive Strength who themselves, have been vegan athletes for several years now. Both espouse how they have managed to maintain size and in certain instances improve athletic performance – so this debunks the idea that vegan athletes are “*scrawny*”. You need only look at the physique of either Mike or Jon to see what I mean or you could look to a more publicly recognized figure like Mac Danzig, UFC Fighter and Mixed Martial Artist.

There are however, a few considerations I would like to mention when examining dietary options (Vegan or otherwise):

1) **RESPECT THE INDIVIDUAL** - neither through diet nor training protocol should a “*band-aid*” solution be utilized. What works for one is **NOT** to be considered scripture for the masses. This should hold true regardless of the age of the population in question - athlete or otherwise. Everyone varies in their individual capabilities both developed and developing, as well as in their individual dietary needs.

Developmental Psychology teaches us that physiological ability is based upon the cohesive transition between successive stages of development which we all experience at individual and varied rates. These developmental stages, in no particular order are: Chronological (Age),

Physiological (physical maturation), Psychological (Mental Age) and Emotional (social expressiveness of feelings – *per se*).

**What would you recommend to a weight trainer transitioning to a heavily laden cardio routine (say jogging), who is concerned with losing muscle mass?**

To the weight trainer transitioning to a heavily laden cardio routine concerned with losing muscle mass – I have one question: *What is the purpose behind your transition to a heavily laden cardio routine?* Before I can completely answer your query it is important that I ascertain a complete understanding of the direction that you, the weight lifter are intent on heading. Is this transition based solely on aesthetic goals or are there performance related goals that provide reason and more importantly motivation to head in this general direction with your training protocol?

Once I understand completely what your intentions are I would be better able to provide commentary on whether or not this course of action coincides best with the results you desire to achieve – be they aesthetic or performance based.

**Do you prefer working with men or women – why is that?**

Neither. I prefer working with a specific mentality not a specific gender. Regardless of whether you are male or female if you do not possess the right mental attitude it will not matter what we do during training sessions. The results we achieve will be short lived in the absence of the mindset and attitude required to sustain those changes – and guess what, I am not responsible for your mental attitude; you are. What I can do is cultivate and encourage the growth of traits that already exist within you and may require positive reinforcement and nurturing.

This is one of the reasons why I enjoy working with young athletes so much. There are no physical limitations because there are no mental limitations. Kids want to play and do; they are not as concerned as adults with rules of convention. Kids are great because they have not lost the innocence associated with dreaming big! This is something I feel we have lost as adults. Whether male or female I like people that dare to dream and have a desire to inspire through achievement – but remain humble in their achievement. I can not help but think of the scene in *"Pursuit of Happiness"* when Will Smith's character is talking to his son about his son's dream of playing professional basketball and he states:

*"Don't ever let somebody tell you that you can't do something; not even me. Alright? ... Alright. You got a dream; you gotta protect it. People can't do something themselves, they wanna tell you that you can't do it. You want somethin'? Go get it - period."*

This mentality of *"Go get it – period"* is what I look for in a client, not their gender; and this is why there is an application process to train at my gym and it is a private facility versus public.

Attitude reflects altitude and I genuinely want all who come to train at this gym to succeed and strive to be their individual best.

### **Do you believe in supplements or physical enhancers and do you believe in giving advice where these are concerned?**

I believe in supplementation not ergogenic aids like anabolic steroids. I feel it is important to separate the two as they are quite often lumped into the same category, and wrongfully so, by uneducated consumers and ignorance perpetuated by popular social media. Supplementation provides a convenient way to provide your body with the quality nutrients it needs in order to function – whether this function is in the arena of day to day life, the sports arena or the gym.

The commercial agricultural practices now associated with the mass production of the food we ingest has deprived our whole foods of some of the nutrients we gain from the soil in which they are cultivated – whether these nutrients are lost through the application of topical pesticides or during the actual processing of the food itself. If you are a race car driver your engine is the most important part of what drives that car; to this end, fuel is engineered and specific blends of fuel are used to improve the performance of the car. Supplementation is the same. If science can find a way to provide us with the nutrients we need; and provide those nutrients to our body in an optimal way that will maximize absorption and use within the body, than why not use this better source of fuel so that we can perform at *our* absolute best?

Would I give advice concerning supplementation – *absolutely!* The most important piece of advice I can give concerning supplementation is this; *caveat emptor* – buyer beware! All things are not created equal. Think of buying a pair of underwear. You buy a cheap pair thinking there is no difference between your \$2 *under-roos* and the \$25 hot looking designer undies you see in a boutique. Then you wear those \$2 briefs only to discover that the fit and more importantly the feel of those briefs suck. What causes the \$2 briefs to suck? Poor quality during the manufacturing process – and for those of you wondering I do not have shares in Calvin Klein, although I am a big fan.

The same is true of supplement companies. Not all supplement companies are equal in the quality of their manufacturing process. A lot of supplement companies outsource their manufacturing and their products are prepared in developing countries because of cheaper labor costs which ultimately increase profit margins for the company. Be careful when you are going after that bargain priced supplement -quite often cheaper prices correlate to a poorer quality product.

This is why I affiliate myself and my gym with a company like Cygen Laboratories. They are a quality Canadian company that produces their supplements right here in Cambridge, Ontario – and like the CBC I am all for Canadian content. Ultimately it is up to you, the consumer, to do your research and be responsible for the choices you make regarding your supplementation and nutritional practices regardless of what advice you receive and from whom.

## What would you change about the fitness industry?

This is a question that is dear to my heart as it resonates closely with what I believe is my purpose to fulfill in this lifetime both on a professional and personal level. Within my lifetime I would like to be a major contributor to a movement that decentralizes fitness in Canada; taking it back from commercial fitness centers and "*certifying bodies*" and returns fitness to its place on playgrounds, fields and smaller gyms where fitness is the true priority not covering expenses.

I would like to see a whole-hearted evolution transpire in all aspects of fitness; from the funding of our Canadian Olympic athletes, to funding for sport at the grassroots level, to a more inclusive holistic approach adapted by all health care practitioners – clinicians and non-clinicians alike.

I do feel however, that it is rather bold of me to think that I alone can be the catalyst for the whole-hearted change the fitness industry in Canada needs and deserves. I have faith and believe that if I concentrate on; and continue to invest in, the clients I serve at *Empire Fitness* the fitness culture in Canada will undoubtedly change through their individual achievements and positivity that they pay forward into the lives of those with whom they come into contact.

I would like to be naïve enough to believe that the positivity that I can affect in someone's life through one hour of training will spread and touch the lives of all with whom they come into contact. As this positivity continues to grow and spread change will inevitably happen as a result – by simply taking care of those people in front of me, genuinely caring and doing all I can to service them to the very best of my abilities the culture of fitness will inevitably change; but the key is not me, it is in those I am fortunate enough to serve.

## What is the biggest challenge facing you as a trainer?

The biggest challenge I face as a trainer is the same challenge that faces everyone – ourselves. Sometimes my own inner demons of doubt and insecurity get the best of me; but on those days I need only look to my clientele and a smile a mile wide will spread across my face. I am really, really fortunate to be capable of doing the job that I do. I am even more fortunate to have the people in my life that I do.

Regardless of the challenges these demons present I have come to realize just how important people are; people truly are the most precious resource you will come in contact with in this life and hopefully learn to appreciate. There is a lot in this life that is ugly, but if we continue to focus on the negative we forget how to appreciate all the beauty that surrounds us. The mind loves a good puzzle and I try to remind myself when those voices of doubt and insecurity creep into my head that the hardship is only temporary and that the people in my life depend not only on my strength, leadership and example but they also rely on my humanity and willingness to trust in them to show that I too am flawed and imperfect and that that is okay.

## What is the most important advice you would give another trainer?

Presumptuous again to believe that I am in the position to be giving advice as even after 20 years in the strength game I still consider myself a student and believe I have as much if not more to learn from other trainers, coaches and health care practitioners as they do from me. However because this forum has been afforded to me I will share my experiences:

**1) Make your clients "Rock Stars".** Always remember that you are in the service industry. You are "selling" (ick – I dislike that word) two things – your skill set and hope. The more important of the two is hope. People come to you with the hope that you can change their life for the better. Remember that always. Recognize your limitations, respect them and direct the people with whom you come into contact to a professional that can help them achieve what they hope to if you recognize that you can not for what ever the reason may be. Put your clients in the best position to shine and recognize their accomplishment. Be quick to correct but be even faster to compliment and praise.

**2) Be yourself.** Inevitably you are your client's favorite restaurant. Your clients will continue to come back to you for your great service and the experience you create for them while they are in your care. To this end it is hard to create a great experience for someone when you are not being yourself and putting on a front. *Nosce Te Ipsum* – Know thyself. Kurt Cobain said it best...  
*"I would rather people hate me for who I am then love me for who I am not"*

It's tough to be comfortable and confident in your own skin but if you learn how to do this you will find that the people you have in your life will remain there as long as they possibly can and that the relationship you foster will be more authentic – like attracts like. In effect, the strength of this relationship will raise the level of service you provide to your client as it is genuine and not contrived nor based solely on financial gain.

**3) Be professional.** Recognize that you represent your family, yourself, the company you work for, your brothers and sisters in the fitness industry and ultimately the profession itself as a whole. To this end hold yourself to a high standard; seek out current information, consistently update your knowledge and seek out opportunities that facilitate both professional and personal growth. In your endeavors to be the best version of yourself that you can be both professionally and personally you will serve your clients in the best way that you possibly can.

**4) Believe in your value and do not be afraid to demand it.** Value is based on perception. In this instance there are 2 perceptions that create value – the perception you have of yourself and the perception your client has of you. The confidence that you have in your skills should be tempered with a certain amount of humility. However, your humility should not impede your ability to look your client in the eye and say clearly and confidently what your services and ultimately you are worth.

Your clients will perceive value if you concentrate on creating an experience that consistently exceeds their expectations. The only way that you can appreciate the expectations that your client has of you is if you ask. Part of any successful level of communication is clarity. Once you

clearly understand what your client expects of you – you are now in a better position to assess whether you can provide the level of service your client expects of you or if their expectations are unrealistic and will end up depriving you of your most precious resource as an entrepreneur - time.

**Do you work in conjunction with any other professionals for the benefit of your client, is it done enough, do you think more trainers need to do the same?**

I do work closely with other clinical and non-clinical health care professionals in order to maximize the health benefits to my clientele – *absolutely*. Whether or not this is a consistency among my peers and is done enough on the whole; I cannot provide commentary on that. I can only control my actions and help the people that enter into my care to the best of my ability, in doing this perhaps it will encourage other trainers to do the same or encourage clientele to seek out more conscientious trainers – I do not know?

**Would you say that there is a difference between training men and woman?**

No. I believe that “differences” are less based on gender and more so based on the individual themselves. A person is a composite of the integration of 3 parts: At the highest level – the spiritual self, secondly – the emotional self and on a tertiary level – the physical self. Different people, both male and female alike, vary in their awareness of these planes of existence and as a result will be highly sensitive on certain levels and less on others – but again, these differences are individual differences and not characterized by gender. In training an individual a competent coach must not only be cognizant of the interaction between these varying levels but also be aware of which level dominates the individual they are coaching.

**Do you believe it possible for an individual to achieve ‘strength’ without actually lifting weights?**

There again, because any given individual is a composite of the integration of these three levels of consciousness, strength is something that can be developed on anyone of these 3 planes – so, *yes* I believe that strength can be developed without lifting weights. This, I feel, is what makes training such an amazing experience – and one that everyone should be able to enjoy. It is my belief that, beyond a certain point, training (whether with weights or not) is transcendental and has the amazing power to move beyond simply strengthening someone’s physical self and can actually strengthen someone’s spiritual self as well.

Physically demanding training is cathartic and the physical purge one feels through training provides an emotional release and ultimately lends itself toward spiritual peace allowing us to feel whole and in tune with all levels of our ‘self’ – spiritual, emotional and physical. Here again,

a good coach is aware of the interplay between these elements of the self and can encourage, nurture and facilitate their development.

**Do you believe in weight training for children, if so how do you proceed? If not, what do you recommend?**

I do believe in weight training for children – strongly and without question. The progression for a child that is approaching weight training should be no different than that of an adult. The basics must be mastered through body weight exercise first. In this instance the basics to which I refer are: pull-ups, push-ups, dips, squats and, when the time is appropriate, deadlifts - this core group of exercises are what I refer to as the “*Fundamental Five*”. It is important that these exercises can be performed with bodyweight alone, through a full range of motion and without the risk of incurring injury prior to adding resistance through the additional stress of weight.

Movement in daily life requires that we have the strength to push, pull, bend, twist, squat, and lunge in conjunction with a certain degree of stability around the muscles that comprise our core. A program should address strengthening the muscles that affect these movements through a logical, systemic and progressive overload. For young kids ages 4 – 7 I would have them involved in the following sports: gymnastics, swimming, martial arts, some form of dance and music – regardless of gender.

Involvement in these sports will develop co-ordination, balance, strength and speed on a physical level but, more importantly; discipline, confidence, character, improved cognitive function and problem solving skills on a psychological level – thus building a solid foundation for not only a better athlete later in life but a better person too.

From age 7 – 12 I would suggest participation in some form of team sport. Here they will learn how to function as a member of team and can foster social skills that will be an asset as they grow-up and become members of society.

At age 12 I would start adding stress through a weight lifting regimen depending on the child's individual level of physiological development; some kids at this age can handle resistance training, others can not; and yet others still, can even handle this physiological stress at an earlier age. However, I would caution parents regardless of the rate of physiological development of your child always keep in mind that they are still just kids and that their emotional and cognitive development may be behind their physiological growth.

From the stand point of sport at this age I would encourage and support independence by allowing the child to choose which sport or sports they were involved in – however, I would ensure that they realize the commitment involved and hold them accountable to their commitment. Too often I see parents allowing their kids to quit a sport mid-season because their child does not „like“ the sport any more – what kind of lesson does this teach the child by allowing them to quit? When things get tough later on in life this ethos will haunt them and manifest.

The biggest thing for kids and training is to let them be kids. If you want to keep a child physically active for their life make it fun for them. Oddly enough this same principle holds true for adults as well – go figure.

### What is the most important lesson you've learned during your training career?

The most important lesson that I have learned during my training career is that no one is special, no one is more deserving than the next person; we all bleed red, we all sweat, we all dream, we all need. No; we are not special but what we are is unique. There are only a unique few that will sweat, fewer who will continue to dream after many have insisted that they be practical or realistic and even fewer still who will possess the courage to go out and get from life what they need - period.

The people I am privileged to serve continue to inspire me to believe that I too can sweat, I too can dream and that with their help and yours I too can get what I need from this life – to change the world by changing the lives of the people I serve so passionately.

Looking at an athlete strictly from a physiological stand point of maturation, it can be surmised that an athlete progressing through his/her individual stages of physiological growth will have different nutritional needs to fuel their body at optimal levels of performance when progressing through these different stages of growth. For example, something as “simple” as a growth spurt versus something as complex as meal timing during competitive versus off-seasons will place varied nutritional demands on the dietary needs of the individual in question as the stress the body is under is different in each one of these particular circumstances. It should be noted that these varied fluctuations in nutritional demands are not necessarily correlated solely to chronological development (age).

I think of how many times I have come across lactose intolerance among the adult population when as kids they could not get enough milk and dairy in their diet or the perennial "late bloomers" out there who go through a growth spurt “late” while in college when they were “supposed” to have finished growing. In each of these circumstances as an individual’s physiology changes so too must their nutrition change; “*What does this mean?*” you may ask; well, this is a good segue to my next consideration...

**2) PERFORMANCE IS NOT THE *SOLE* MARKER of dietary “*success*”** - the cool thing about working with an athlete in regards to nutritional needs is that you can see whether or not the fuel s/he is providing their body is being absorbed or rejected faster than you would with a client from the general population. This is due in part to the accelerated rate at which their metabolism is working (which is influenced by training frequency and intensity). I would offer up this caveat however when using performance as a benchmark: **DO NOT** forget the aforementioned developmental stages that we all transition through and how unique the progressions are through these stages based on the individual in question.

More often than not, marks of performance and an inability to meet or beat these marks are closely tied to the psychological and emotional development of an athlete rather than their

dietary choices. As an example, I am sure we can all recall an experience we had with a "*bad* coach". Ask yourself now, would it have mattered if I was eating a Conventional diet or if I was a following Vegan diet? I am pretty confident that I can answer for all when I say - NO. I am also confident that the mere thought of the memory of that "*bad* coach" causes a swell of emotion to surface; and there in lies the crux - the simple truth of the matter is: **THERE IS NO SIMPLE ANSWER.**

(I digress) It has become my belief through experience; that to deny a person of their individuality is to deny them the right to express fully the unique beauty of who they are on a spiritual, emotional and physical level. This is probably more than you expected as an answer to this question but that is the point - there is so much more going on than what is often observed on the superficial physical level of existence. "*Luminous beings are we; not this crude matter*" and, I tend to agree with Master Yoda on this one.

It the professional duty of all Strength Coaches and Personal Trainers to become detectives of sorts and dig deeper in search of the individual answers to the enigma that is the client that stands before them. Physical success is fleeting and transient whereas the ideal of "*health*" has an inherent element of longevity; the tone one sets during "training" sessions will go a long way to changing someone's life – never mind their eating habits and dietary regimen. It is in the search for these answers, in service to our clients, that we celebrate what it is to be human '*beings*' and earn the mark of being a true „*professional*".

## WORDS TO LIVE BY...

*C.A.R.P.E D.I.E.M.*