

Fitness Forum: Weightlifter's strongest muscle is his will

by Jack Williams

They teased and tormented him, stole his schoolbooks and bullied him into bloody submission. At 4 feet 6 inches and 85 pounds in the 11th grade, Enrique Hernandez could pass for a punching bag.

"I got beat up all the time," Hernandez said.

Somehow, he was determined to stand up for himself even if he was head and armpits below his peers. His strategy was to substitute strength for stature.

"You are going to be short no matter what," he told himself. "And you are going to be stronger no matter what."

STRIVING FORCE - Enrique Hernandez, 61, a former world champion power lifter, demonstrates his strength to customers at his Chula Vista, Calif., fitness equipment store. CNS Photo by John Gibbins. During one summer in his native Puerto Rico, he took up weightlifting as if his life depended on it and began to pack on solid muscle.

"At 114 pounds, I felt like a giant," he said.

Putting his newfound strength to the test, Hernandez won a Puerto Rican championship in Olympic weightlifting in his teens.

The next year, with dreams of becoming a world champion, he moved to New York and joined a YMCA lifting team. By age 21, he had shot up to 5 feet 6 inches with the body fat of a mosquito.

In 1967, when Hernandez was training for the Pan American Games in which he was a gold medal favorite, an auto accident left him with broken kneecaps and three compound fractures in his right leg.

Rejecting suggestions that he would develop gangrene unless the leg were amputated, Hernandez found a surgeon at the University of California Los Angeles Medical Center.

"He said he could save my leg, but that I wouldn't lift competitively for the rest of my life," Hernandez said. "I told him, 'You don't know me. Just fix my leg, and I'll take care of everything else.'"

The next year, competing in a cast at 123 pounds, Hernandez set the first of a series of world records in his weight class.

"I bench-pressed 325 pounds," he said.

Minus knee cartilage, he managed to squat-lift 650 pounds and leg-press 1,000 pounds. In 1971, he won world championships in Olympic and powerlifting at 132 pounds.

Thirty-five years later and more than two decades removed from competitive lifting, Hernandez is in constant pain. Years of pushing a tortured body to the max and causing three herniated discs, sometimes make it difficult to walk.

Yet, at 61, he's feisty and indomitable to the core.

"My whole life, I've heard, 'You can't do it,'" he said. "I heard it so often I almost changed my last name to 'Can't Do.' I got so mad."

While much of the disrespect was rooted in his height, Hernandez, a native Spanish speaker, had to overcome doubts about his grasp of English as he furthered his education.

Studying exercise physiology and nutrition, Hernandez earned a bachelor's at the University of Southern California and a master's at San Diego State University.

He applies his knowledge in his own workouts and in training others while operating Fitness Warehouse in Chula Vista, Calif.

"I only lift a third of what I once did," he said. "I used to work so hard it made me dizzy."

Today it's all about discipline and consistency - and trying to trim about 15 pounds from his still firm 165-pound frame.

Iron-willed, Hernandez trains six days a week with free weights, cables and machines. In about two hours, he'll do 15 to 20 sets of each exercise, adding weight as he reduces repetitions. Mondays and Fridays, he addresses shoulders, chest (with 250 pounds on the bench press) and triceps. Tuesdays and Thursdays are devoted to back, forearms and biceps. Legs take center stage on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Work of heart: On the recumbent bike and elliptical trainer, Hernandez turns up the resistance for a

25-minute workout nearly every morning. Several hours later, he'll hit the weights. He'll also do several sets of sit-ups.

Protein power: High in protein and complex carbohydrates, Hernandez's diet is supplemented by "every vitamin known to man." He takes about 100 capsules a day, along with aloe vera juice four times a day.

Once a month, he allows himself ice cream or cheesecake.

"I can eat a half gallon of ice cream in 10 minutes," he said. "Any flavor they put in front of me."

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