



Marilia Coutinho

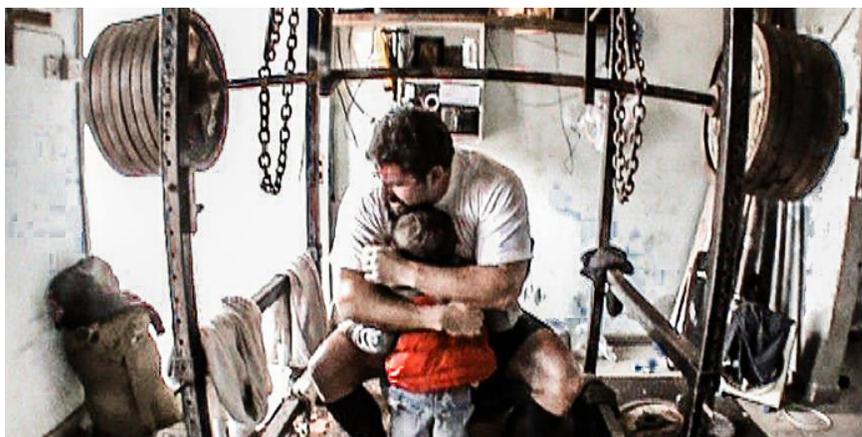
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POWERLIFTING

Home and the Home Gym — The Heart Follows the Iron

TAGS: Gorilla Bench Training Center, Hugo Quinteiro, Travis Willingham, Ben Moore, Valhalla Barbell Club, home and the home gym, John Hollier, Richard Ficca, Marilia Coutinho, Kabuki Strength, Harry Selkow, gym owner, Chris Duffin



We now reach the fourth and final part of our “home and the home gym” series. In part one, some of the concepts involved in understanding why we need a “home-like” place to lift (“meaningful activity”, “personal space”, “territory”, etc.) were introduced. A few cases of “home-like gyms” were analyzed. In part two, you were introduced to home gym owners and their gyms. Part three was about barbell clubs and how they differ from other formats. In this article, we reach the end of our journey. You will read about how original home gym owners made different choices and changed their lives as they followed the iron.

HOME AND THE HOME GYM

“Home and the home gym” series is about the relationships people have with their training environments when training is a *meaningful activity*.

What should you expect to “take home” from this series:

1. An understanding about your relationship with the gym space/environment. This is useful for:
 - Decision-making (will you stay at that gym or move to another one? Will you build a home gym?)
 - Mood control (understand why you become uncomfortable or comfortable in gym situations and learn how to manage that in order to protect the quality of your training)
 - When is the moment to build a home gym
2. How to build a home gym, how much it costs and what you need
 - What to expect from your home gym in respect to your training, your relationship with other people and the sports
3. What are your options after you have a home gym

The Homeless and Nomad Home Gyms

Some of our interviewees have had home gyms at the same location for over a decade. Others moved to a new house and the home gym was relocated somewhere in the new place. Sometimes a basement gym became a garage gym, for example. In a few cases, though, the home gym couldn't fit in the original domestic setting anymore.

This was the case with Team Impact Elite, from Kansas City. Ben Moore shared with us the incredible adventures of this group of friends who started their journey out of love for all things strong:

“I started lifting like others in high school, for football. There was a coach who took us to our first meet, where I bombed out on the squat. But at that point, I knew I loved the process.”

As Ben got married and started having kids, he realized that bringing home his training was a necessity. That is how 107 Barbell started: with a few friends that grew into a close-knit brotherhood along the years.

The same reason that encouraged Ben to bring his training home made him move it: it was, after all, a domestic space. The small group of friends moved their equipment several times. First, it was the industrial basement:

“It was a basement of an industrial building that had been converted to a haunted house. It was dark, wet, and perfect. (...) Training times, due to our schedules, were at 5 AM. This area was not the best and arriving at the gym in the dark was always an adventure. Some guys were approached by a prostitute who had one arm. Drug deals were the norm. There were always noises and people wandering around. Some guys carried weapons when they came down, for protection. I was chased by three guys that approached me when I got out of my car. I don't think they wanted directions. There was always a new story every week.”

It didn't stop there, though. The basement collected water during rainy seasons to a point that they had to move again.



“Our next space was a 10 x 30 storage unit. No climate control. No bathroom. Just your standard storage unit. We'd use headlights at night to train. It was cramped. It was dirty. But it was so much fun. We got an old generator at one point, added lights, and made it our own.”



People have constraints in their personal lives that often make this type of non-profit voluntary association short-lasting. Family dynamics, work demands, and other issues end up dissolving the group, and this is what happened to theirs. The storage unit didn't last long. Meanwhile, Ben met the owners of a new local gym in Kansas City, Impact Elite Gym. They were holding a small meet and shared with Ben the desire to bring in a powerlifting team like “the old-style barbell clubs.”

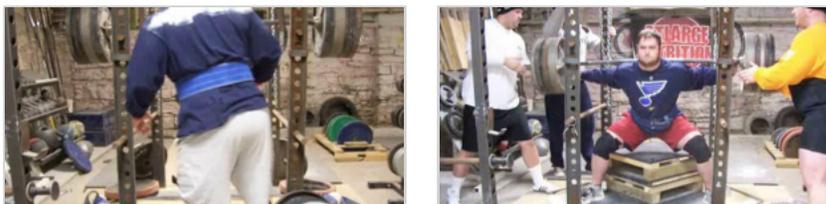
That is when Ben met J.P. Price, known for his amazing 1,003-pound squat in wraps, 624-pound raw bench, and a raw total of over 2,300 pounds. Ben and J.P. attracted 10-15 people fast, brought their equipment, and the gym purchased a monolift, a few benches, and built an entire room for the team.

Being inside a commercial gym solved problems and created new challenges. Their specialty bars and specific performance equipment had to be locked and they needed to acquire more equipment as the team grew.

“We started running meets and reinvesting the money we made into the equipment we needed. We've purchased two combo racks, more bars, and a competition set of discs from these meets. We also developed dues for the members of the team to go into our general fund to offset the cost of equipment, as well as chalk and ammonia.”

Today, team Impact Elite Gym has 35 members, with half a dozen ranked top five in their weight classes. Their choice was neither a *sensu stricto* barbell club or a commercial gym, but rather a hybrid solution.

“In the end, communication with an open-minded owner and a vision of something great brought us here. And we will only continue to grow.”



Similar stories can be found where training as a “significant activity” (see part one) is practiced.



The story of my own home gym, inherited by my partner and friend Hugo Quinteiro, is not much different. Since he is the one who backpacked with over 1,000 pounds of iron around the city, I asked him to give me his perspective.

We called it “the Powerhouse” and it was a type of shed built on my backyard. It was very simple, with one power rack, two bars, about 400 kilograms of calibrated Olympic plates, two kettlebells, bands, chains, and material we used for our strength training continued education courses. I still lived in Brazil when I built it, in 2011, and because many TV news stories were filmed with me there, there was a mythical aura around it (especially because nobody except a few friends were allowed in). Hugo came later— in 2013, after he competed for the first time—and showed that he wasn’t, after all, the poor, too tall, too skinny nerd with no chance of a decent lift I judged him for when we met.

Just like the knurling of the Olympic bar was new and fascinating to him, so were the sweat stains on the dirty pink rubber floor of the Powerhouse.

“The Powerhouse was a sort of temple for me. I watched videos where Marilia trained with other athletes there and dreamed of the day I could also be one of them.”

A video posted by Hugo Quinteiro (@quinteirohugo) on Aug 11, 2015 at 8:40pm PDT

Hugo squatting with me spotting him – the Powerhouse, 2013 or 2014

That is the precise situation when one would say, “Be careful with what you wish for.” Yes, he became one of us, he won several world championships and broke a world record, but I left the country and the Powerhouse in his hands. Driving over 40 miles every day in heavy traffic just to train there alone started to weigh on his budget and make some workouts impossible. Hugo found a CrossFit box near his house that accepted his equipment. He paid a monthly fee that was still under the cost of commuting to the other side of town. That didn’t last long: right after he won his second world championship, he was informed they needed the space and he had 30 days to take away his equipment.

For a few days, Hugo had a homeless gym instead of a home gym. It was then that he decided to resurrect an old project we all had: a warehouse gym. That would solve Hugo’s training problem. It would also solve a problem we struggled with for three years: renting a well-equipped location to teach our continued education program in strength and conditioning, MAD Powerlifting’s coach education courses. Finally, it would solve the problem of space to organize the small sanctioned meets that otherwise are so hard to offer in Brazil.

Former MAD Powerlifting students started to call and ask to train there. Hugo realized MAD Barbell would be self-sustainable.

MAD Barbell Club – January 2017

“My plans for the Barbell Club include bringing the atmosphere of the martial arts to strength training: respect, hierarchy, and order, but also mutual support, friendship, and brotherhood among the members. It is not an open space and will never be. I hope that in time each member sees himself as part of something greater that provides us all with a sense of belonging, pride, and identity. We will never grow into a large commercial gym – this is not and will never be our purpose. The whole project was based on two things: the American barbell clubs’ experience, which Marilia shared with me, and my own background in the martial arts. I will actually be responsible for the strength and conditioning preparation of the sub-18 and sub-20 judo teams of my former Dojo, which is an honor for me”

The adventures of nomad iron people can fill a whole book of tales. One arm hookers, flooded basements, backpacking 1,000 pounds of iron across Sao Paulo are just parts of a larger saga that speak about how those for whom strength has a deeper meaning will follow their dream wherever it takes them. Dreams made of iron and strength.

Skipping the Garage Format

Sometimes the original home gym project evolves so fast into something else that this stage is actually skipped or lasts for a very short time.

That is the case of Richard Ficca’s Gorilla Bench Training Center, in Tampa, Florida:

“I was training at Powerhouse in downtown Tampa three days a week, at Roman & Roman Strongman two days a week, and at Irish Iron on Sundays. Roman and Irish were both losing their homes and I was desperate to find something closer to my house since my wife and I were pregnant and I knew an hour of travel time, three hours training, and hour home was not going to cut it once Jack arrived. I started putting equipment into my garage and realized very quickly that 15 people were showing up to train. It became obvious we needed to have a home, so I opened Gorilla Bench Training Center.”

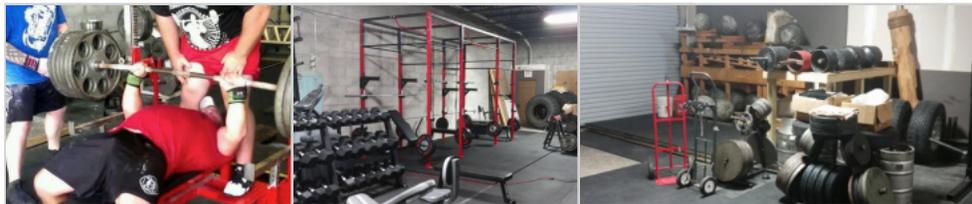


The Gorilla Bench Training Center (GBTC) demographic is not that different from that of the gyms we have been talking about in this series. The reason is simple: they are all environments that, with different formats, provide a personal and defensible space for the practice of training as a meaningful activity. It is not for anyone or everyone, even when it becomes profit-oriented.

The atmosphere at GBTC is, at the same time, seriously performance-oriented and family-like, with strong supportive bonds between members.

Richard never quit his day job, though. He owns two companies: Florida Coastal Insurance Agency and Advanced Risk Consultants. When asked if he ever considered quitting these jobs, he answered:

“I love it but the pay isn’t there. The gym has grown to break even, but I would have to expand to lifters outside of our culture to bring enough of them to generate the revenue needed to be successful.”



It’s a tough choice — one that we saw being handled in different ways by different lifters and coaches. When the home gym evolves into a company, there will always be a fine balance between keeping it (and the owner) financially viable and losing its “spirit.” And even if the owner never quits their “day job,” managing the gym will consume from 10-20 hours/week, according to Richard.

The Business: Making the Living Iron Economically Viable

But a few home gym owners did make the complete transition, quit their former job, and became full-time entrepreneurs.

Among our interviewees, the ones that did it were Chris Duffin, Harry Selkow, and John Hollier. These three people once owned home gyms and two also had occupations unrelated to coaching or the fitness industry.

Chris Duffin was a corporate executive in the manufacturing world. He spent 18 years in the industry with the last 10 years at the executive level as either general manager or director of operations. He specialized in company turnarounds, process improvement, and cultural change. At a certain point, with kids growing, the compromise between a demanding career and a demanding athletic and coaching life became impossible. Chris had the gym and the equipment, competed at the high level and coached. That’s when he left his previous career and became full-time manager of his present strength training company. Kabuki Strength grew into a multiple service and products enterprise, providing not only coaching (on ground and online), but also education and equipment.

Chris’ home gym expanded into one of the fastest growing and innovative companies in strength and conditioning, without diluting the original commitment to training as a meaningful activity. Is this easy? No, very few manage to do it. But it is feasible, as Chris has demonstrated for almost a decade now. It does require growing beyond the small, family-like relationship between members. Instead of pasteurizing down to a wider general fitness consumer market, it upgraded to the high-level consumer market of knowledge and cutting-edge technology.

It worked: “I only work a few hours a day now. The rest of time I train, think and read. My schedule is entirely flexible. I have more time for my kids. I am also in a position to leave a mark and change the world. My goal was to do just that. Change the world and create

more time.”



Harry Selkow's home gym started around the same time as Chris'. Of our interviewees, he and John Hollier are the ones who came from a professional strength and conditioning coach career track before having his own business. Harry coached football and hockey teams and for a while, instead of a home gym, he had a gym-home:

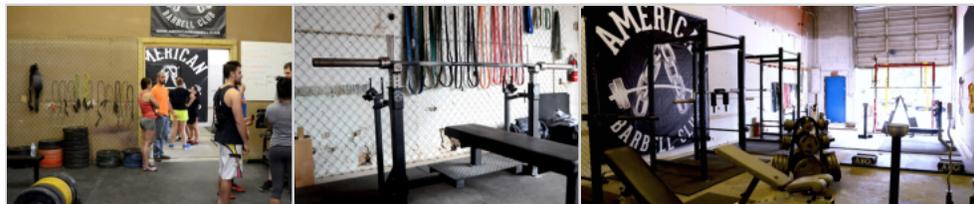
“While training out of the house (literally), as the home was so large and we had no other furnishing other than the gym, we put the equipment IN the house. Nothing says 'I love you' like enjoying Thanksgiving dinner over a GHR machine. A year's rental went by and we downsized the home to a purchased one and home ownership once again. We now 'partnered' with a local gym that is one of the most respected MMA/CrossFit/Powerlifting gyms in Northern California. I shared my equipment for space and the right to train or refuse training. Here I have a large following of athletes, private clientele, and teams that now use the facility and my equipment.”

Harry, too, was successful in this move to entrepreneurship:

“I do NO advertising. I'm tucked away and I'm actually hard to find. I carry no phone, so a person wanting to reach me must make the physical effort to do so. (...) [The business] matured and now I have a waiting list.”

John Hollier is our newest company in the home gym owners interviewees list. He transitioned from active duty with the USA Army directly into company owner, with one year of home gym experience before opening the facility. American Barbell Club, a name he adopted while he was stationed at Fort Campbell (2013) and trained people there, was founded in February 2015. John coached mainly in powerlifting and tactical athlete training.

Like Harry, John never had a marketing strategy. He attributes the company's growth to word-of-mouth advertisement and social media. The fact that they are the only gym in Gainesville, Florida with proper strength training equipment, a competitive team, and an educated staff, are factors listed by John as the basis for his gym and brand success.



Bottom Line

From part one of this series to now, there is a thread marked by struggle — a struggle characterized by the tension between a defense of the personal space and identity (“culture”), and the centrifugal forces that pulls people away from the “home-like gym” into the institutional demands of society at large.

The home-like gyms are places where people engage with (and are highly committed to) meaningful activities. They still have owners, but many of them are closer to being managers of a co-op, since “breaking even” isn't really an alternative that allows for them to give up on a day job that pays their bills. The barbell club *sensu stricto*, as illustrated by Valhalla Barbell Club, is the hardest of all solutions, and the one that requires the

highest level of collective commitment. Keeping a home gym with transient “buddies” is much more prevalent because it is, economically, the easiest alternative. As Jack Kottwitz pointed out, he could have as many as 16 people training together to as little as himself and the dogs – it didn’t make any difference for him economically.

The infrastructure varies along a gradient of expenses. The home gym can be anything from about \$2,000 to \$10,00. A Barbell Club raises the financial and management burden up a notch: the maintenance of a rental property as well as purchase and maintenance of collective equipment. The small “home-like” gyms must break even and attract more customers: rental and utilities will be much higher, much more equipment must be purchased, and management also becomes more complex. Therefore, although these alternatives are not organized along a gradient of complexity or commitment, costs are linearly increased.

They all, however, have one thing in common: the heart follows the iron.

Acknowledgements

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