

Ian King's Top 10 Lessons by Ian King

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A while back we asked some of the world's top strength coaches and nutrition gurus to share their most powerful tips, but when Ian King tackled this assignment, he decided to go about it in a different way.

Instead of simply listing his top ten tips, he talks about the lessons he's learned and the influences he's had in his years of service to the strength training community. We think it's pretty interesting to see how a strength coach forms the beliefs and training strategies that end up affecting all those who follow his programs.

King's Top 10 Lessons and Training Influences

The way you train yourself has a significant impact on the way you train others. The responsibility of training other people is a serious relationship. It goes so far as to be apparent in the visual and performance outcome: many of the people you train will ultimately gain your shape and abilities.

Therefore I don't see it possible, necessary or wise to separate the way we train from the way we train others. Sure, it's a generalization, but one that's worth evaluating. And the same applies to a person's influences—the influences on one's own training become the influences on the way one trains others.

It's with this in mind that I share some of the most significant influences that shaped my training philosophy. Yes, *philosophy*. It isn't a method or a system; it's a philosophy. I've also approached this article from a chronological perspective, which isn't inappropriate when you consider that influences earlier in life have so much more potential to shape us than the latter ones. In fact, that which is burnt deeply early in our lives has the greatest impact.

1. Early Childhood Environment: The Power of Play

I was born in Papua, New Guinea where there was little more to do than play. There was no TV. I didn't live in a house that had a TV in it until I was nearly 20 years old (and it wasn't much earlier than that I experienced fast food for the first time!)

This was such a benefit! Travel the streets of any South Pacific island and you'll see the locals playing everywhere—soccer, rugby, volleyball, any game. This is the ultimate environment for the development of athletic qualities.



I feel one of the limiting factors in athletic development in the developed world is TV, which can result in the child not gaining adequate movement experience in the critical early childhood years. A close second limiting factor on athletic performance, in the US in particular, is the over-reliance on strength and hypertrophy. This is no longer exclusive to the US, as the US cultural gap with many other countries is lessening rapidly.

My first exposure to strength training was around the age of seven years, early for any child, even in the US during the 1960's. I befriended an employee of the family named Iwela Jacobs. He was a local with a hearing and speech disability, but what he lacked there he had decided to make up physically. Although a small man, as a young boy I thought he was Superman.

He'd developed size and strength like I'd never seen before. He was the only strength-developed person I knew. He'd obviously been reading enough muscle mags to know what to do. He'd give me endless biceps flexes and I came to be in awe of the physique he was able to build. He'd perform walking handstands along the grandstand of the local public swimming pool and he enjoyed the reputation as the local strongman.

Iwela took me into the only gym in town, the local YMCA. I lasted only a few weeks once they worked out my age — too young to train there apparently (and I thought political correctness only came in the last decade or so!). We retreated to an alternate venue. He knew some young men who lived in a local hostel, and they had the bench press/leg extension, single station does-all machine.

I can't say I trained continuously from that age, but the seed was planted. I'd discovered strength, hypertrophy and weight training, but my focus was still on playing various sports. With no TV, I knew nothing about the Olympics; the greatest show on earth in my world being the South Pacific Games!

While it may be too late for you, you'd be a good parent to turn off the TV and let your children experience good old-fashioned *play*!

2. High School: Frustration Leads to the Desire for Knowledge

I attended a boarding school in Australia for high school, a relatively foreign experience for an island boy. The school was a popular place for my fellow countryman to attend, so much so they usually called the back line (a description of a group of positions in rugby union) the "black line." This allowed the skill-based play to continue. I haven't met many kids who came from the environment that I was fortunate to have been born in who weren't excellent in sport.

There were two aspects of this school environment that had incredible impact: the parallel bars behind the dormitory and the old gymnasium. I don't know how it got there or how it was able to stay in reasonably condition exposed to the elements, but there was a full-sized gymnastic parallel bar set behind the main dormitory. Students with focus on their strength and size lined up every afternoon to do a few sets of dips.

This was followed with the same religious zeal by a set of push-ups and sit-ups every night before going to sleep. I don't know why; it was just that way. Dips, push-ups and sit-ups: this continuity in training developed both a physical effect as well as a discipline to training.

Then there was the gymnasium, if you could call it that. The building had a number of rooms in it, one of which was dedicated to strength training. It would've been no more than 6 m x 6 m. I believe the building had been used in World War II to house troops and it was in poor repair. The holes in the floor were to be simply side-stepped. There was no floor covering, just dirty timber flooring. The barbells were made of cement poured into old tins connected by a bent bar.

I learned that the physical environment has no bearing on the outcome, and today I wouldn't hesitate to train any professional athlete in this environment. (But I can pass on the cement-tin barbells!)

After a while in this environment a startling truth hit me—no one knew what they were doing! We didn't even have muscle magazines to give us pearls of wisdom. Even my teachers had no idea. This became a great source of frustration. By the time I graduated from high school, I'd formed the burning desire to find answers to the questions of training. In hindsight, this experience was quite significant.

I enjoyed running up hills and around golf courses with a brick in each hand (over 20 kms, all before breakfast) during my teenage years, but I knew there was much missing as to how to optimize training.

3. University: Developing the Foundation without Spoon Feeding

I went to university with no other intention than to find the answers I was seeking—how to train. I enrolled in a course that appeared would answer my questions. I was in for a rude shock, as the content was more general science than specific, practical application.

But the two big upsides were this: firstly, I got a piece of paper that told everyone I knew what I was doing (and I still see this phenomenon continuing today), and secondly, I wasn't influenced in my training paradigms by the dominant dogma of my lecturers—they had none!

My interest in strength training must have been the first of its kind in the history of that establishment. I'm sure they thought I was a bit out there. (Funnily enough, I saw some of these post-grad students and lecturers who followed the popular research theme of endurance at that time suddenly jump on the bandwagon of strength research when it became "hip" in the 1990's!)

But one kind professor was moved to show me a journal he had just got in from America. It was the NSCA journal. I suspect I was in the first five people out of Australia to subscribe to that magazine. But fortunately, I'd been forced to create my early program design in the absence of this literature, again having no strong influences on my selection of training variables.

My specialty in the area of training generally and strength training specifically found me as the "go to" person at the university at that time, with no shortage of requests to provide guidance from other athletes, students and faculty. These were the seeds of my future business, what I believe was the first professional, commercial athlete training service in the history of Australia.

University has other benefits (and no, I don't have time to go into the endless booze and sex opportunities that we face during those years!). This included sporting clubs with some funding, and I was fortunate that at this particular university, competitive powerlifters and weightlifters trained in harmony, competing at the highest level.

But before I could truly avail myself of this, before I let go of the Universal multi-station and got real with free weights, I had to have a life changing experience.

4. Run or Lift? Living the Interference Principle

I played many different sports growing up, all as hard as I could. Many of these sports had significant energy costs and had a negative impact on my bodyweight and strength. I was naively clueless about this, but it did explain why I was barely 75ks! But was I fit! Body fat was in the single digits and on a sub-max VO2 bike test, I'd recorded a score of 74ml/kg!

One day while preparing for my black belt test in Tae Kwon Do, I felt a "niggle" in my lower back. I'd been showing off in the absence of a warm-up. I ignored it and kept on training. Slowly the pain got worse. I pushed through this over a period of more than a year. Finally, I consulted a doctor who took X-rays, shook his head and told me all the reasons why I should be in pain, and then sent me to a surgeon who—you guessed it—suggested surgery: spinal fusion.

Well, I didn't know much back then, but I knew enough to say no thanks to anything called *spinal fusion*! I embarked on a journey to find a way to resolve my back issue. Through the help of a chiropractor, discipline in self-devised rehab exercises, and the decision to stop playing all sports until it was resolved, I slowly made progress.

As my back pain reduced I found that the weight training I was able to do was more effective in terms of size and strength than when I was doing it whilst training three other sports in ten other sessions a week! So I decided to continue my journey in strength training and keep away from energy system training for a bit longer. I needed to do this anyway to ensure I didn't revisit the back condition, but the results were amazing.

I became my own best example of the reality of interference—that energy system training can seriously impair strength and size developments. This gave me a degree of entertainment as I watched the academics first debate this issue some ten years later (in the early 90's), then even more mirth as they argued over what you can and can't do, and what combinations work best (from a scientific perspective) to reduce the interference, now that they had finally agreed that there may be an issue!

I put on twenty kilos in my first year of this condition—sure, not all muscle, but I was drinking six liters of full cream milk a day (didn't I tell you about the nutritional advice I received from *Ironman* magazine?), so you couldn't expect to gain 100% lean muscle mass, even with the metabolism of a young man.

I learned two key things here—the power of interference, and the ability to rehabilitate lower back injuries. This was fortunate because it wasn't the last time I'd sit in front of the lower back surgeon and discuss fusion, and both lessons would benefit athletes over many decades, and perhaps even generations.

5. Injury Challenges

The university I attended had a well-established lifting club. I benefited from the advice and guidance of a former lifter, Andy Worrall, who was the first one to teach me about breathing squats supersetted with barbell pullovers. Remember, this was the early 1980's!

I credit much of my early leg size (and a lot of my during training/post-training vomiting) to this combination. It also taught me the mental and physical stress of facing this over a period of time. Anyone who trains this way long term, or with similar methods such as the timeworn 10 x 10 or 10 x 6 sets, is either not going to max, has a constitution of steel, or is just plain crazy.

Methods of supra-maximal effort need to be kept to limited exposure, a lesson Tudor Bompa taught so well in his classic text, *Theory and Methodology of Training*. They all work and are great methods—you just need to know when and how much and for how long.

Then I earned the respect of a world ranked lifter by the name of Glen Waszkiel, who took me under his tutelage. He wasn't the only world ranked lifter in the club, but he was the one who gave me the time of day. I learned many things from my years of training with him, including why I didn't want to be out-lifted by a guy 30 kgs lighter!

I also learned about the value of technique, discipline and some finer pointers on lifting. Waszkiel would come back from the world's every year with great updates on what was happening, but in hindsight I'm not sure if the Americans were telling him everything!

Whilst I feel that many overplay the role of powerlifting in strength training for athletes, I believe there's much value in being exposed to elite lifting—the athletes have benefited significantly from this. After all, when it comes to neural overload, the skills of powerlifting are critical. I'm glad I learned from a skill-based lifter to take the best of both worlds (technique and load) into my training with others.

We were also honored with the presence of world class Olympic lifters, who came along more so later in my lifting career. After the 1992 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, some of the UK lifters immigrated. I'd have liked to have done more Olympic lifting, but my intuition couldn't come to terms with the dominant dogma of the time: all rest periods were to be 30 seconds. Yes, *all* of them. It took some conditioning, and as a 110 kg powerlifter with limited conditioning to Olympic lifting with 30 second rest periods, this was hurtful!

One day in the lead up to my first state powerlifting championships, I was riding my motorbike to training. I stopped at a crossing for a pedestrian and was struck from behind by a motor car. I ruptured by ACL amongst other damage, but with the technology of the day it took nearly a year to accurately ascertain this. In the interim, I was repetitively told by therapists and doctors I just needed to go and strengthen my leg!

I watched that year's State titles in crutches, but went on to become one of the first persons in Australia to lift and have success at national level, post-ACL reconstruction. In fact, I might have been the first.

I learned a lot about rehabbing a knee, but I learned even more about what not to do. But the price I paid in my education has advantaged so many athletes. And I can even have scar competitions with the skiers!

6. Self Education

In the absence of any adequate formal education, I began my own pursuit in the area of training. Some of the earlier magazines and books I accessed were to form excellent basis for training philosophy. I developed the ability to respect my intuition, as it was invariably a case of the old mags and lifting books saying one thing and the scientists saying another.

Fortunately, the days when scientists' goals seemed to be to disprove everything (until they appeared to originate it) are gone. They seem to be a bit more proactive these days! Take post-training protein drinks for example. This theme was consistent in the old magazines and training books, yet the "scientists" and nutritionists in the 1980's were united in their condemnation: you don't need to do that! You only need 0.7 grams of protein per kilo of bodyweight!

And then there were vitamins. Bill Starr in *The Strongest Shall Survive* did more than set the standard for the core, basic lifts. He also provided a blueprint for nutrition and supplements (including vitamins and minerals), the likes I hadn't seen before. How ahead of his time was he! You could see this influence in Hatfield's books amongst others. Yet our dear friends, the academics, doctors and nutritionists, were staunch and united—you get all the vitamins you need from your food.



Then there were the drugs. The dominant debate between doctors and scientists in the 1980's was "Do they work?" Needless to say, those who knew better were telling it like it was, first with *The Science of Weight Training* by Mike Stone and later with Dan Duchaine's *Underground Steroid Handbook*.

The powerful lesson I learned here was that if I wanted to be ahead of the field, I'd need to pay attention to those on the cutting edge, not wait around for the science literature and textbooks to play catch up. It just took some intuition to spot the winning theory, and the patience and confidence to see it finally approved (be it two to three decades later) by science.

Take the squat for example. I estimate that it took around 30 years to recover from the damaging theories of Klien (dressed up as science) to the acceptance and support of the squat as a safe and effective lift by the academic community. And I value the contribution of Stone and his cohorts, who provide a steadying and guiding influence in the face of resistance to change and overreaction to science.

With timeframes like this, I feel no concern waiting for my approach to stretching to be recognized, not that I feel the need for this. Rather, I know that sometime in the future, perhaps the 2020's, the overreaction to the paradigms dressed up as science concerning the "damage" of stretching we saw in the late 1990's and early 2000's will be overcome.

I think Joseph Pilates would agree that to be ahead of your time you can expect to be mocked in your lifetime and treated like a heretic. Many decades later, society develops the ability to see what only the visionary could see at the time.

This has been a valuable lesson to me, and an even more valuable one to those who chose to study and seek to master my methods.

7. Science Still Needs an Intuitive Interpretation

Religion and science are often used to justify positions. Many times the bearer wishes us to believe the truth of what he says, to believe that he has the facts. But what if the facts in the world are truly limited to less than twenty?

We know there are many different religions, some of which have opposed teachings. Is one right and the other wrong? What about science? Is there only one conclusion, or is it possible that scientific conclusions are influenced by many factors including cultural bias and researcher predispositions? Surely not, you say. Then I ask, why do most researchers only recognize the research of their own countrymen?

You need to apply the same intuition I developed in my early, formative training years to science. Take the load vs. optimal speed debate for development of power. Which is the path to take, the Hakkinen and Komi influence of sub-maximal load with "optimal speed of movement," or the Schmidbleicher influence of maximum load with attempt for acceleration?

I've made many intuitive calls that have formed my training philosophy and I encourage everyone to do the same. What I discourage is to present your intuition or influenced beliefs as facts or science. That doesn't cut it with me. As soon as I see someone write "science has proven..." I question the integrity and understanding of the author. All you could really say in most cases is "...on this day, the test results of the 16 college students who ranged in age from 17-24 years showed that this group of people reacted in X way to Y stimulus..."

This doesn't mean you or anyone else will experience the same thing. It's a guide post, not a fact!

8. Pick Your Teachers Well

I'm often asked who was the most significant influence on my way of thinking. I find myself unable to answer this question in the singular, but I can share this: understand the difference between the quality of an article and the ability to train someone. And secondly, understand the difference between the desire to educate and the desire to impress.

There's a saying in coaching: "Those who are successful don't have time to write about it, and those who aren't do." I know, you may be wondering where that leaves me. Believe me, it wasn't until after achieving a measure of success, forming strong philosophies in training, and semi-retiring from coaching, did I have the time or inclination to write.

My writings aren't read by elite athletes to the extent they are by other coaches. I have no desire to impress other coaches. I write now simply to educate. This is critical. I've learned that there's a significant difference between writing a great article and knowing how to train someone. Some described it as the difference between knowing what to do and doing what you know, the gap between knowledge and practical competence.

It isn't for me to say who has this and who doesn't, but I can say that before you select your mentors, try to see them in the real world doing what it is you hope to learn. If they can't do it at the level you want to do it at, it doesn't matter how impressive their writings are.

Finally, marketing is based on writing to impress. In my T-Nation writings, I leave it to the magic keyboard of T-Nation editors to make my writing more attractive. I have no agenda to impress for the sake of feeding my ego or boosting the demand for my lecturing services or selling more training devices.

I can only show you what I can do, and that's intuition based, applied coaching of the physical qualities with methods developed on elite athletes.

9. Find Those Who Can Coach

Extending the point above, I can share with you some of the best coaches I've been fortunate to come upon.

In 1989, during my first tour of the US, I met with many coaches. Most took the usual US approach and grunted at me before telling me (if I was fortunate enough that they even spoke to me) how great their programs were. Two that were different were Mike Woicik (then with the Dallas Cowboys) and Al Vermiel (then with the Chicago Bulls). As strength and conditioning coaches, these were amongst the best I met.

I rank Charlie Francis as the smartest training mind I've ever seen. His perceptiveness and intelligence in training is generations ahead of his time. I can't speak highly enough of his training IQ.

I've met many others who, giving credit due where it is due, were fantastic marketers. They sold themselves really well, but their abilities were not theirs. They over-promised and under-delivered. Learn some marketing skills from these guys, but watch that you don't catch the rough edge of the ethics used.

Those I've mentioned aren't the limit on great coaches. I've met so many and learned so much. But rather than risk omitting names, I won't turn this section into the A-Z of who I've developed respect for. You could spend enough time studying Francis alone!

10. Play!

Finally, I've learned that play should always underscore our physical events. Ensure that there's an element of enjoyment. I'm intrigued by coaches who bash their athletes in joyless training and then at game time revert to "Now go out and have fun!" They haven't been trained to have fun!

With my play-based upbringing in sport and culture, I've been able to ensure athletes I train have a healthy amount of fun and hard work. The more money is involved in sport, the more this lesson seems lost. It can and should be fun!

And if you plan to train for a lifetime, learn to enjoy the journey! Remember, if you don't use it, you lose it. Age and gravity do their best to take our ability to do it—don't let lack of enjoyment further rob you. Develop the attitude of training for life through enjoying the experience of training!

Note: Ian King recently completed his new book, *Get Buffed III: Get Totally Buffed!* It's available only at www.getbuffed.net. It contains advanced programs, including five different four-stage workouts covering bodybuilding, strength training, explosive power training, powerlifting and Olympic lifting.