

John R.

Customer

John R., a 68-year-old Vietnam vet and retired clandestine agent with chronic back pain since 1975.



John takes iron for back pain.

SUCCESS STORY!

GET BUSY LIVING OR GET BUSY DYING:

Vietnam vet with chronic pain chooses barbells over suicide

The pain was so intense one day back in February 2015, John R., a 66-year-old Vietnam vet and retired clandestine agent gave himself three choices: pills, a gun or barbells.

It didn't start out so bad. After Vietnam, John got married to Val, became a warrant officer and later joined the federal government as a criminal investigator. But in 1975, he was on a protection detail that involved a pursuit and a jump. John landed on his gun, compressed a vertebra and has lived with back pain ever since.

"Shit happens, you learn to live with it and do the best you can."

-John

And this approach worked well enough during his career. You have to be tough to succeed in clandestine forces but also nice enough because 'as a special agent, you don't last long being a total jerk.'

Pain management program no longer managing pain

That unravelled once he retired in 2006 and Veterans Affairs labeled him 100% disabled due to the back pain, post-traumatic stress disorder, diabetes and Agent Orange exposure.

The pain got worse and John says he became impossible to live with. He was drinking too much, taking pain pills out the wazoo and by the time 2015 came around, he couldn't lift any of his pugs and he was using a cane to get around.

John had so much back pain, he had to fight to keep from killing himself every day. He kept stopping himself because of his faith and because he didn't want Val to go through the aftermath of suicide.

John's doctor did what he could with a pain-management program and getting John on the waiting list for physiotherapy at the VA hospital. But John's contrarian side bristled at the idea of 'some guy in earth shoes telling me to do yoga'.

And his gut told him he shouldn't be on that waiting list.

John R.

“Young men and women are missing limbs—these are the kids on the waiting list—and I’m taking up space when they need it more than I do.”

-John

As John's pain became unmanageable and solutions from the medical world didn't seem right, John started noticing something unusual in the family.

One transformation leads to another

John and Val live close to Val's sister Chris and her husband, Carson. A while back, John could see that Carson and Chris weren't as robust as they used to be. Chris had trouble getting out of the car by herself and Carson couldn't stand up without using his arms and lifting things was out of the question.

Unexpectedly, Chris and Carson—both in their sixties at the time—took up barbell training with Dr. Jonathon Sullivan—a.k.a. Sully—an ER physician and strength coach in Farmington. They both got spry and Carson kept telling John, “I've been going to this guy, you've got to come too.”

John *had* noticed the transformation.

And on the day when the pain got so bad that John gave himself three choices—two to end his life and one to begin again—he chose barbells because of Carson's transformation.

John and Val went to Greysteel Strength and Conditioning to watch Carson train and at the end, Sully asked them if they wanted to come back in three days. They said yes.

Day 1 at Greysteel starts with an assessment and evaluation of movement and ends with Sully, a former marine, telling you that if you want to train, come back with a medical release from your physician.

The VA says no but John says yes

“I walked into the den of a genius,” John says of his first time at the gym. But the VA didn't know that. They said no to the medical release and told John barbell training will hurt his back and exacerbate his problems.

Challenge

After retiring, John's back pain got worse and worse.

The VA labeled him 100% disabled, he got around with a cane, couldn't lift anything and had daily thoughts of suicide.



The middle of a deadlift ain't easy.



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John R.

Greysteel Solution

A two-day per week barbell program including squats, deadlifts, press, bench press, and pull-ups.



John at the top of a deadlift.

This bureaucratic hurdle didn't last long; Sully allowed John to sign a medical waiver instead and that's how John and Val started their lives as masters athletes.

Val, a 107-pound dynamo with energy to spare, took to barbells like a duck to water. John was so sore at the end of his first training session he had to cling to the railings on the way out of the building.

Stubbornness and pride keep John under the bar when the pain didn't budge

That soreness stuck around. For the first 3 – 4 months of barbell training, John retained the back pain and was sore on top of it. But he kept going.

"I'm extremely stubborn. I spent 30 years in law enforcement which is a competitive environment in terms of resolving issues so I don't like to quit."

-John

Pride also kept him going even as nothing seemed to change. Val loved training so John had to keep going. "This skinny little gal, lifting weights... What can I say? It's just not right if my wife can lift more weight than me," John says.

It wasn't just stubbornness that fuelled John. He was *doing* something. "All of a sudden, I'm doing squats," John recalls.

Under Sully's guidance and coaching—John describes Sully's coaching as phenomenal—John started with squats, deadlifts, overhead press, bench press and pull-ups and at the novice stage, the weight on the bar goes up a little every session. It's not easy, especially with chronic pain. But it was instructive for John and he noticed his perspective shifting, even when the pain wouldn't budge. "Barbell training builds an image of achievement, regardless of what else is going on. You do this and now you're a positive person doing positive things," John says.

Finally, the results are astounding: physically, emotionally, mentally and on the fairway

And after 3 or 4 months of training, the soreness *and* the pain abated. It's now more than 2 years since John started barbell training with Sully and it's been a transformative experience.



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Greysteel Strength and Conditioning is a Starting Strength Gym in Farmington, MI (Metro Detroit).

He doesn't need that cane anymore and the diabetes hasn't progressed. He takes a lot less pain medication but unlike before, John can now manage the pain. He's not suicidal anymore and John's life has a future because he feels better mentally, physically and emotionally.

It's still not easy though. "I dread training when I'm not feeling good. But I go. I squat the empty bar, then 95, then 165 and all of the sudden, I'm feeling pretty damn good. The day is brighter, my attitude is better," John says. His conclusion? "This shit really works."

The benefits of barbell training are more far-reaching than John imagined. Val and John spend all day together on Mondays and Fridays because of lifting and they're closer than they've ever been. With his golf buddies, he's gone from being the worst golfer to the second best, all because of strength and stamina – no golf lessons required. John's universe of people opened way up; at Greysteel, he's become friends with people he never would have met otherwise. There's even a medical miracle in the works: John's primary care doctor—who doesn't have any patients who go backwards in the chronic pain progression—is wondering if there's something to the barbell prescription after all.

And John's butt, which disappeared sometime in his fifties, returned, along with other muscles, even as he lost 18 pounds and dropped 3 inches around his waist.

Advice from someone who knows chronic pain: get in there and start

Even with all the pain since 1975, John's only regret in life is not starting barbell training when he was much younger. He can't do anything about that now but he's happy to be living, breathing proof that barbell training eases the darkness of chronic pain.

John knows there are lots of people who don't feel as good as they used to. His advice for them?

"Get in there and start. Quit worrying about what you cannot do. Use barbells and realize what you can do."

-John

John takes his own advice every Monday and Friday at 12:30 pm whether he feels like it or not. He's stubborn that way.

But what about Val? What happens when a 107-pound dynamo starts barbell training twice a week? *Get these answers and more by reading Val's success story.*

John R.

Results

Reduced back pain and fewer pain pills.

No longer suicidal.

Lost 18 pounds and 3 inches around the waist.

John no longer needs or uses his cane and can lift anything he wants now.

John feels better mentally, physically and emotionally and now makes his golf buddies jealous on the fairway.



John and Val at Greysteel.



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