



## The Education of a Strength Coach

# Charles Poliquin

A frank discussion with one of the world's most accomplished strength coaches

BY KIM GOSS, MS

**A**n *outlier* is someone who not only masters a certain skill or field of study but also makes us think in a different way about what they do. Examples of outliers in business are Bill Gates and Donald Trump; in sports, Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan; and in music, the Beatles and Eminem (that is, if you call what Mr. Marshall Mathers III does “music”). In the field of strength and conditioning, one individual immediately comes to mind as an outlier – at least, for those who know anything about the profession: Charles Poliquin.

I’ve known Charles Poliquin for nearly two decades, and in that time I’ve seen him become one of the most accomplished strength coaches in the world. He has designed workouts for over 500 Olympians and hundreds of professional athletes, and he is also a leader in the field of functional medicine. He has written more than 600 articles and 10 books, many of which are now available in several languages. Now his focus is on teaching, and as with all other challenges he has faced, he has become amazingly successful.

Last year Poliquin and his staff taught 205 days of seminars, in eight different countries, with a very high

percentage of them sold out months ahead. This upcoming year, his company has been booked for 250 days of teaching, and the demand for his knowledge continues to grow. He also has a thriving functional-medicine business with a line of over 150 nutrient products that can treat everything from acid reflux to hypertension to – for lack of a better Z word – zits.

In January of 2009 Poliquin opened the Poliquin Strength Institute in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. The institute contains a 4,600-square-foot teaching gym with the best equipment in the world – he has barbells that cost up to \$1,400 each! – and a 2,000-square-foot multimedia classroom. His staff of instructors includes many former Olympians, and he frequently brings in guest speakers who have every letter of the alphabet after their names and who also fit the definition of outliers.

### Strong Beginnings

Coach Poliquin’s first love in sports was karate, and at age 14 he became the second-youngest athlete in Canada to earn a black belt. It was through the martial arts that he became involved in strength training, although it was mostly

Photo: Milos Sarcev



by accident. One day during a severe snowstorm the buses were not running, so Poliquin had to walk several miles to the dojo where he trained. When he arrived, he found that the class had been cancelled because no one had showed up. His sensei, Web Corcoran, told Charles that since he had braved the elements to make it to class, he could lift weights with him. That experience left him bitten, as they say in the iron game, by the weightlifting bug.

In college Poliquin majored in



The Poliquin Strength Institute features a 4,600-square-foot teaching gym and a 2,000-square-foot classroom.

exercise physiology, moved on to graduate studies where his master's thesis examined the optimal loading intensity curves for building strength for four major muscle groups. Poliquin saw the value in learning the basics of science-based subjects such as anatomy and biomechanics, but he was disappointed to find that the research focus in exercise science in North American journals was in aerobics. The best research, he learned, was coming out of European journals, particularly those from Germany. Because only the abstracts of these research studies were published in English, and because he had such a strong passion to learn from the best, Poliquin learned how to read German.

Poliquin's first elite athlete was a volleyball player on the Canadian National

Team. The player saw Poliquin lifting at the university and, seeing how strong he was, asked him to write him a program. The player quickly became the most powerful athlete on the team, and as a result other players on the team asked for Poliquin's help. This led to Poliquin being hired as the official strength coach for the national team to help them prepare for the 1984 Olympics. In the 10 years following, Poliquin designed workouts for 78 of the 118 Canadian athletes who competed in the 1992 Olympics and won 5 medals, and saw seven of his athletes win medals in the 1994 Olympics.

As Poliquin's reputation and bank account grew, the Canadian government decided that Poliquin was earning too much money and put pressure on him

to take a full-time job as a civil servant. As a result, he left Canada in the late '90s to become a resident in Colorado Springs, but it proved difficult for his clients to come there. After several years he moved his headquarters to Arizona, and this year he moved once again to his current headquarters in Rhode Island. At present, he has certified coaches in his training system from 56 countries.

## Powerful Words of Wisdom

One of the most valuable aspects of attending a Charles Poliquin seminar is being able to ask questions, because you know that the answers you receive will be based upon his three decades of practical experience working with the best athletes in the world. For this reason, we asked Coach Poliquin to participate in

a word association exercise in which we would give him a key word or phrase, and he would talk about the first thing that came into his mind. The result was enlightening...as you will see.

**Education.** “Learning shouldn’t stop when you get a degree. I still spend about 16 to 18 hours a week reading, and I’ve found that my colleagues in strength coaching and functional medicine do the same.”

**Peer Review Research.** “There is a staggering amount of research available on just about any subject, but much of it is garbage. Dr. Jeffrey Bland, who was Linus Pauling’s assistant, said that of the 50,000 published papers about vitamin C, only 352 could be considered valid science. You really have to do your homework to learn what is accurate and useful in your profession. Right now, as far as the best researchers in strength training in the U.S. are concerned, I would say that Bill Kraemer from University of Connecticut is at the top of the pyramid.”

**Core Training.** “It’s a wimpy trend in my profession, and I’ve found that the biggest advocates of core training seldom make anyone strong. What these coaches don’t seem to understand is that the core muscles are force *transducers*, not force producers – and as such these muscles are not capable of much in the way of power production.”

**Coaching Mistakes.** “Following

dogma. So many strength coaches just can’t think for themselves. The same problem exists in medicine – many physicians are finally figuring out that much of what they learned in medical school is wrong or, at best, ineffective.”

**Childhood Obesity.** “Literally, a growing trend. One of the problems is video games. In Canada, I read recently, the average teenager spends up to 36 hours each week online, and with that much time devoted to entertainment there is not much time left for exercise. One of my students from Holland told me that their government was alarmed because one in 10 kids in their country was fat – in the US, we have some states where seven out of 10 kids are fat.”

**Ethics.** “Take the number of strength coaches in this country who claimed they have trained 60 guys in the NHL and add them together, and you’ll find that there are more professional hockey players than spectators. It’s sad.”

**Discipline and Attitude.** “My friend and respected Canadian weightlifting coach Pierre Roy told me that there are three keys to success in weightlifting: hard work, hard work, and hard work. No amount of squatting on one leg or balancing on a BOSU ball is going to replace squatting with a heavy load on your back for a full range.”

**Safety and Liability.** “Many coaches shy away from promoting heavy lifts because they are afraid of injuring

their clients, but ignorance is not an excuse for not providing the best service for your clients. None of my colleagues have ever been sued for promoting heavy lifting for one simple reason – they know what they are doing.”

**Personal Training Industry.** “A popular profession – after all, where else can you make a six-figure income and be illiterate? In many countries you have to have a state license before you can practice personal training; here you can get certified online over a weekend. I was in a club in Toronto and overheard a personal trainer giving a nutritional consultation in which she told a client that she should add an extra gram of protein to each meal – that’s a sixth of an egg!”

**Aerobics.** “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, which is why I believe it is insane for people to do all this long, slow, distance aerobic training and get fatter every year. The literature on this subject is quite clear that over the long term aerobic training can make you fatter, but for some reason this information is not passed on to the general public. Plus the greater the volume of aerobic work you have in your life, the greater the likelihood of suffering from Alzheimer’s.”

**Functional Medicine.** “The doctors who are getting into this field seem to be mostly in their 40s – it took them 20 years to figure out that what

Photo: Reg Bradford



At left, Poliquin checking an athlete’s bodyfat; at right, working with Ethan Brooks, a former lineman for the NFL who was featured in our Spring 2003 issue.

they were doing wasn't working all that well. Functional medicine has become popular because people are getting fed up with drugs and their side effects. And think about the logic behind conventional medicine. If you have a problem with depression, it's not because you are Prozac deficient; and if you have a problem with high cholesterol, it's not because your body is lacking in Lipitor. Often many of the most common medical problems our country is facing can be resolved by simply addressing nutrient deficiencies in our diet."

**Best-Educated Coaches.** "For overall knowledge of their sport and how to strength train for it, worldwide I would say gymnastics."

**Best NFL Strength Coach.** "Ian Danney of Scottsdale, Arizona, whom I coached when he made the Olympic bobsleigh team at the Nagano Olympics. His success stories include 60 guys who are playing in the NFL. Ian has a degree in biochemistry from the University of Alberta and has achieved the highest ranking in my certification, which is Level 5. Although he was not genetically gifted, he did a front squat of 451 pounds at a body-weight of just 180 pounds. Of all the people I have seen, he has extracted the most from his genetics. If you were to see him today, you would never guess that. He is truly a product of will and smarts."



Poliquin has worked with Team BFS weightlifters such as 2009 Junior National Champion Maegan Snodgrass. Here he is shown with Maegan and BFS Editor in Chief Kim Goss.

**Coaching Women.** "The only difference between males and females is the plumbing. Seriously. Women can handle a lot more work than coaches give them, and I believe that I've actually had more success coaching women than men because I don't hold them back in their training."

**Powerlifting vs. Olympic Lifting.** "In martial arts, the more techniques you know, the more fights you will win. You need to bench, you need to squat, and you need to power clean. But one thing I don't like about powerlifting is the emphasis on using special equipment, such as bench shirts, to help you lift more. You need to lift raw."

**Bigger Faster Stronger.** "It's a

good system to build a foundation because it focuses on the basics of getting strong with heavy weights. The kids I've seen who come out of the Bigger Faster Stronger program know how to clean, they know how to squat, they know how to spot, and they understand important training concepts such as progression. I've also noticed that the kids who have used this program in high school are far easier to teach."

That's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the knowledge Coach Poliquin has at his command. He has much, much more practical advice to offer and has agreed to share some of it in future issues of *BFS* magazine. It's the outlier way. **BFS**



At left, Poliquin teaching power balance drills during a seminar; at right, administering a soft-tissue treatment.