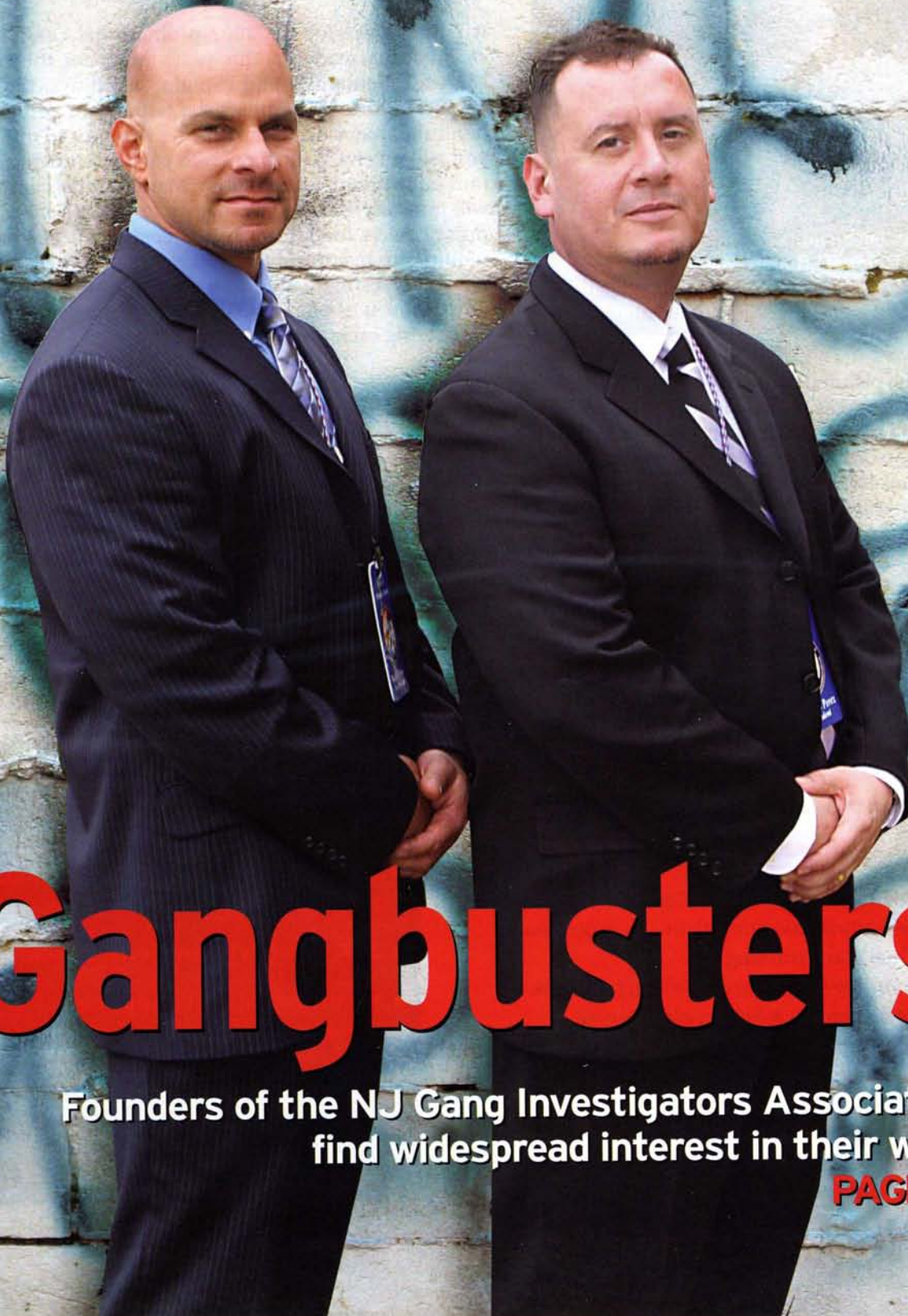


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Lessons learned: Turning 50

■ BY MATT BRZYCKI

It's estimated that every day, roughly 10,000 Americans turn 50. This month, I joined that population.



Matt
Brzycki

MY MISTAKES

Throughout life, everyone makes mistakes. I've certainly made my share. As I've gotten older, I've tried to learn lessons from those mistakes.

Here are some of the mistakes that I've made – and the lessons that I've learned – with respect to fitness:

Volume of Training

While in the Marine Corps (1975-79) and at Penn State (1979-83), I became increasingly interested in lifting weights. I came to believe that a greater volume of training was better and this was reflected in my workouts. In those days, I did three total-body workouts per week with each workout lasting four hours. (Exception: Because of severe time constraints, I was only able to lift weights a handful of times when I went through Drill Instructor School and then served a one-year tour as a Drill Instructor.)

During a workout in March 1985, I began to think about the amount of time that I'd spent lifting weights. I did some quick math: Four hours a day times three days a week is 12 hours a week, times 52 weeks in a year is 624 hours of lifting weights in a year. And multiplying that by the many years in which I'd been doing those marathon workouts was pretty sobering.

It was then that I decided to reduce my weekly volume of lifting weights from 12 hours to three and make my workouts more intense. In December 1998, I decreased my volume a little further and since then I've been lifting weights for about 2.5 hours per week (plus another 40 - 50 minutes of aerobic training per week).

Lesson learned: The quality of work done in the weight room is far more important than the quantity of work.

Low-Repetition Sets

From looking at me, hardly anyone would ever guess that I once was a competitive powerlifter. At a bodyweight of about 162 pounds, my best lifts in competition – not “in the gym” – were a 410 squat, 265 bench press and 440 deadlift. Not great but respectable considering my body type (which isn't suited for powerlifting).

My last powerlifting meet was in 1982. Since I no longer compete as a powerlifter, I've realized that I don't have to train like one by doing heavy “singles.” Actually, the same holds true for doing “doubles” and “triples.” There's simply too much potential for injury.

Lesson learned: Unless you're a competitive weightlifter, there's no need to do low-repetition sets.

Nutrition

For many years, I was able to eat pretty much anything that I wanted and showed few, if any, visible signs of poor performance.



In all seriousness, I had some of my best workouts after a burger, fries and a shake. Not any more. If you put sub-standard fuel in a vehicle, you get sub-standard performance. The same is true of your body.

For me to optimize health and maximize fitness at my age, I had to eat better. I cut back a lot on fried foods, candy, soda and evening snacks. I eat less red meat and more chicken, turkey and fish as well as more fruits and vegetables. And rather than have dessert twice a day, I reserve it for special occasions. Now at the age of 50, I'm within a few pounds of what I weighed when I was 19.

Lesson learned: Eat better to feel better and perform better.

Supplements

I first began taking supplements as a Marine in the mid-1970s while I was stationed at what was then Marine Corps Base Twentynine Palms in California. One supplement that I tried was liquid protein. I don't remember much about it other than the fact that it had the color and consistency of maple syrup. Hey, for all I know it was maple syrup.

As part of a nutrition course that I took at Penn State in 1983, I had to record my dietary intake for two days. On one of the days, my intake of the measured vitamins and minerals was at least 105 percent of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA); when factoring in the multi-vitamin/mineral supplement that I was taking, several of the values were astronomical – one was nearly 1,100 percent of the RDA. I haven't taken any supplements since.

Lesson learned: Most people who consume an adequate number of calories and nutrients don't need to take any supplements.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Sometimes, the only way to learn is by making mistakes. Hopefully, you can also learn from the mistakes that I made.

Matt Brzycki is the coordinator of Recreational Fitness and Wellness at Princeton University. A former Marine Drill Instructor, he has authored, co-authored or edited 16 books on strength and fitness, including SWAT Fitness (available at www.operational-tactics.org).