



LiveFit America™

Training With a Spouse

Ten tips to coaching and training alongside your spouse.

By Christian (Mac) Ward

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"My skin hurts, my head hurts, and I don't feel like working out," Gillian said to me.

I briefly pondered my response, everything from, "Suck it up, woman!" to "No way you're working out, your body is telling you not to work out, to rest, and to recover. Working out will only delay recovery from this *minor* illness, so just relax and let's re-evaluate tomorrow. The last thing you want is a set-back due to a *minor* illness becoming a *major* illness." I wisely chose the latter response which was immediately met with protest.

"But I will miss a day of training, and I don't want to!" as if to say that I did not know exercising and training is one of the most important things in Gillian's life. Further, this would require my bride of not quite a year to *watch me* train while she sat *idly* watching.

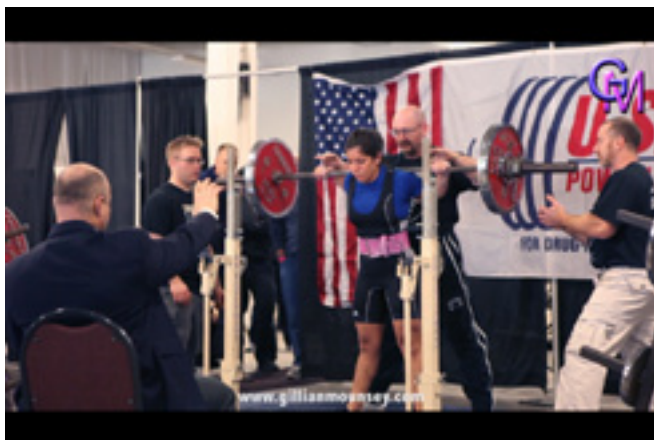
In the past I have skipped workouts when Gillian was injured or under the weather.

It is difficult for Gillian if I train when she is resting due to circumstances beyond her control, and to be supportive I have taken an extra day of rest in the past, but not this day. I might add that Gillian's personality is not particularly reciprocating. On days where life prevented me from training, Gillian hammered it out, alone, leaving me to "coach and watch."

Throughout the entire evolution, one thing remained constant - *respect*.

Three years ago I met my wife, Gillian Mounsey, while taking the Level 2 certification for CrossFit. After that weekend, we found ourselves working on weekends together and consequently, working out together. In her I found someone as dedicated as I, someone that shared similar values with similar hopes

and dreams, and a little over two years later, we married. That was a little over a year ago. Throughout those three years we trained together, motivated one another, and helped each other through injuries, illness, and periods of stupidity. I have watched our relationship move from one of curiosity, to friendship, to love - and now one of espousal support. Throughout the entire evolution, one thing remained constant – *respect*. All the while, our relationship in the gym changed, largely due to our personal relationship evolving and growing stronger. But sometimes a stronger personal relationship does not equate to a stronger “training partner” relationship.



Gillian before her third squat attempt at the 2011 USAPL Northeast Regional Championships.

Gillian is a personal trainer with an Exercise Science degree. As a result she has studied and read gobs of literature. She has studied human movement at the collegiate level as well as through a host of commercial

certifications that include the likes of Romanov and others. She has studied movement in clients of all ages and demographics for more than fifteen years. She has been involved in fitness since she was a toddler doing a wide variety of sports: gymnastics, school athletics, track and field, body building, CrossFit competitor, Olympic Weightlifter, and recently Powerlifting. Somewhere along the way she won the USMC National Fitness Championship, posted a record for push ups in the Guinness Book of World Records, earned her Pro card in body building, won 3rd place in the CrossFit games, and won her weight class in both a USAW sanctioned Weightlifting meet and a USAPL sanctioned Powerlifting meet.

I followed the USMC physical fitness plan.

I am a United States Marine. As a kid I played intramural sports, I was involved in scouting – running, biking, hiking, canoeing, swimming, rowing, camping, shooting, you name it. I joined the Corps in 1990 and became an avid runner, posting a 3-mile time of 15:43 at my peak. I ran a marathon once (to my chagrin), and followed the USMC physical fitness plan. Sure, I goofed off in the gym like everyone else but nothing serious. I found CrossFit, took every certification I could, studied, read outside of CrossFit, and did my best to learn. I’ve since avidly studied and read

"Starting Strength" editions 1, 2, & 3 (Rippetoe), "Practical Programming" editions 1 & 2 (Rippetoe), "Olympic Weightlifting" (Everett), "Ultimate Back Fitness and Performance" (McGill), "Westside Barbell Book of Methods" (Simmons), "Strength Training Anatomy", (Delavier), and "The Human Body Book" (Parker).

What's the point? The point is that we both come from extremely different educational and training backgrounds and experiences from a physical fitness point of view. And in fact, our genetic potential is equally different. I'm an average guy in his forties, I can't dance, but I have a lot of heart. Gillian is gifted with freakish strength and a kinesthetic awareness that seems to know no bounds. Why is this relevant? Gillian is my coach, and in theory, I am hers. And that is what I want to share with you: how two friends with different potentials and backgrounds, now married, train together without killing one another.



Mac spotting and coaching Gillian as she prepares for her first Powerlifting Competition

"...you can't coach someone you're sleeping with. It doesn't work!"
- Mark Rippetoe

Wichita Falls Athletic Club hosted the Northeast Texas Weightlifting meet on July 9, 2011. Mark Rippetoe (Rip) was coaching Gillian. This was Gillian's first (and to date) only meet. Stef Bradford was also competing, however she was not going to be coached by Rip, and in fact, spoke very little to Rip during the meet until after her final lift. I asked Rip about this later. Rip's response will not be forgotten, "No #&!ing way can I coach her, you can't coach someone you're sleeping with. It doesn't work!" I should have listened. That little piece of advice should be included in the next edition of Practical Programming and should be the subtitle to Starting Strength for Barbell Training ed. 4. I digress.

Our gym is in our garage, attached to the house, and part of our lives. Five to six days a week we train together for an hour or two. The division of "life outside the gym" is often blurred with "life in the gym." I am certain the reader can attest to having a bad day at work, or at home, or wherever and then going to the gym only to experience what I think of as "bleed over" and experience a suffering in performance. This becomes infinitely more complicated when your training partner/coach

is also your spouse, and at times the source of the "bad day". To that end, we have discovered several rules that we live by, rules that allow us to train together, live together, sleep together, and remain best friends. You believe that right? Read on.

We go to the gym and work hard, because we want to attain our goals.

Before I go any further, I must clarify something. My wife and I *train*. Gillian is the competitor; she is a member of the United States of America Weightlifting (USAW) and the United States of America Powerlifting (USAPL) associations. She has competed in sanctioned events under the rules of both. She has won her weight class in both and intends to compete again. She has goals that are both lofty and attainable. Gillian has asked me to compete, and in 2012 I will, because she has inspired me to do so. The point is this: we *train*. We no longer exercise and we no longer go to the gym to perform pointless movement without a particular goal. Gillian has clear goals for each lift, as do I. This mentality is fierce, and provides the framework under which we operate - most of the time alone together - in our little gym. It means we go to the gym and work *hard*, because we want to attain our *goals*.

1. Set a time to train in the gym.

This is hard, and requires a lot of discipline. For us, having a set time to train, determined the day before, relieves some stress that might otherwise be an issue. We both have jobs, and because bosses tend to appreciate employees that come to work and do their job, there is little room to play when it comes to schedule. In the summer, when afternoon temperatures reach well into the 90's with humidity upwards of 70-80% and beyond, we are forced to train in the morning. By morning, I mean 5:30 AM. During the rest of the year, we attempt to train in the afternoon.

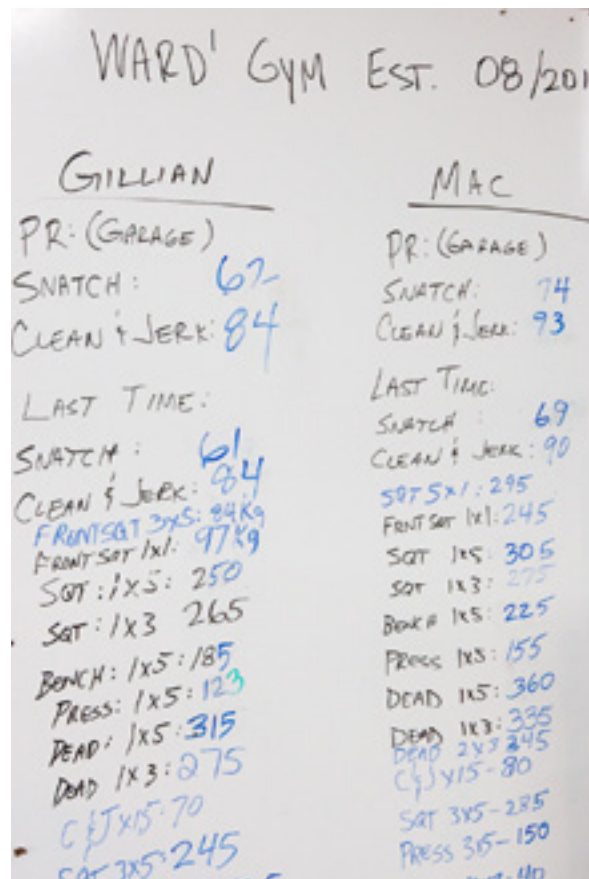
We both equally respect the desires and the needs of the other to train.

Gillian has clients and sometimes these clients interfere with "my perfect schedule", and require some give and take. Regardless, the gym experience is in isolation of all other events in our lives to the maximum extent possible, and that starts with a schedule. Having a predetermined time to train helps prepare us both mentally and emotionally for the training we are about to undertake. Training is hard, and the bar weighs enough without putting extra emotional weight on the bar. This helps in another subtle way. Because the time is known, all other events of the day are

worked around this time. The time to train becomes the point around which other things are scheduled. This is because it is a priority to both, and we both equally respect the desires and needs of the other to train.

2. Celebrate victory, no matter how small.

In my brief forty-three years, I have learned that human nature is such that we tend to treat the ones we love the most - the worst. It is with embarrassment that I recall things I have said to close family members that I would never say to someone far less close to me. I have watched others do the same. Why? Because we take them for granted, and we know that they care for us and trust they are not going to leave. We do not speak to those that are not close to us the same way because they would immediately leave. Why then should the ones we love the most suffer our acts of rudeness? Many will probably recall an incident they witnessed in the gym or elsewhere when a couple turned on one another and made bystanders uncomfortable. When training in the gym we do our best to think of one another as friends and clients, vice siblings. By taking that one step further, the victories experienced in the gym should be celebrated with the same enthusiasm you express when rooting for your favorite team. Personal Records (PR's) are met with hugs, high fives, and sometimes a small kiss. When weight is reset (we use the linear



A whiteboard in the gym shows Personal Records (PR's). The whiteboard is immediately updated any time a new PR is set.

progression on all our lifts) and a new series of gains is made, the celebrations begin immediately. Her victories are my victories and vice versa.

3. Discussions of events outside the gym are kept to a minimum.

At times this is more difficult than others. I don't mean to imply that we never talk about ANYTHING other than what we're doing,

but we leave big topics outside the gym. For example, we tend to discuss the day's events between sets, but we do not discuss the specifics of purchasing a new home for example. Focus is critical when climbing under the bar for a heavy set of five, and by keeping the discussions to technique, gym related topics, and subjects that are relatively light, we respect the needs of each other – the need to focus on the task at hand.



Gillian spotting Mac on the bench.

This proves to be quite beneficial on two fronts. First, it brings us closer together through small talk, sharing, and time spent. Second, it allows us keep our focus on the task at hand. There is a second related piece to this as well. Because we are more than “just training partners”, failure by one is often felt and expressed by the other. It is tough to have a solid day and get really excited about a PR if your spouse is in the process of self-destructing. Normally I am the one that struggles or is found “self-destructing” and

knowing that a failure on my end is often expressed in Gillian, I work harder to ensure that I succeed. I do not want to disappoint my wife (silly I know), and I do not want to be the reason she feels anything other than positive energy. Negative energy, whether from outside the gym or inside the gym is destructive to a heavy set of 5!

4. Music is the filler of the void.

Gillian and I both like music and fortunately we have similar tastes. I have a pretty decent (and ever growing) library of music. One of the first orders of business when we move out to the garage to work out is hook up the iPod and hit the “Shuffle” button. Many a workout has been made far more entertaining when Gillian “busts a move” and danced across the garage either before or after a set. (I do not do this, see my comment from earlier, and we do try to keep some level of decorum while training.) Music helps to keep it light, fill the moments of silence when focusing on the task at hand and making the mental shift from light conversation to TRAINING under the bar. We have recently moved to a Blues/Jazz type mix, however variety is best. As our tastes change, I am quick to remove songs from the playlist and add others as I hear them. Music soothes the soul, and in our case, helps fill the void and prep the mind when getting ready for a heavy set of 5. Volume is low, not so low that it cannot be heard but low enough that it is not distracting. In

truth, neither one of us hear the music when doing our sets. Gillian has told me that she has no idea what is playing most of the time.

5. Not all criticism is constructive and not all criticism is necessary at that moment.

We are married. There is a certain level of emotional involvement and baggage that comes with that no matter how hard we try to avoid it or deny it. Things that are said to one another might not be received with the same intent in which they were delivered. Further, things may not be delivered in a constructive manner. Not every criticism needs to be delivered, and not every criticism needs to be delivered *now*.

Because we care, we want to help, but sometimes that help is not wanted or needed.

Criticism is just that, critical, and when delivered from a loved one, it can be hard to take, and taken personally. Gillian and I are good about receiving criticism due to our shared desire for excellence as we work toward the unattainable goal of perfection. (Gillian will point out that Nadia Comaneci was indeed perfect once, and as an idol of hers, Nadia provides the justification for any argument that perfection is attainable – again I digress.) Criticism is therefor taken as “professional”

and not “personal”. Because we are personally involved, that can be hard to distinguish when having a particularly hard day. The opposite can be equally true. “How was that?” answered with a nonchalant “Fine” can be received entirely differently than intended. At times, baggage outside the gym may require a “Good set!” when nothing else constructive needs to be given. (See point 2 above.) Because we care, we want to help, but sometimes that help isn’t wanted or needed. Rip once said to me, “You *can* over coach this stuff you know.” Another gem of wisdom that should find itself in most coaching literature. Learning to allow one another to struggle without the need to *fix* something is necessary and difficult. Gillian is the most supportive training partner I have ever had. Gillian is slower to critique than I am. I believe this is a result of two major factors. The first is that Gillian has been training people for 15 years and has a better sense of when to let someone work though an issue vice providing mindless critique. Second, as a man I think I have more of a tendency to want to *fix* what is broken – whether it be broken or not. Gillian is patient and together we are better – both as athletes and as coaches.

6. Thick skin is necessary and is required.

While constructive criticism is not always necessary, calling a missed rep, jacked form, dangerous movement, etc., is not only

necessary, it is required. And this happens *immediately*. We should have a sign in our garage that states, "Those without form need not apply." We will help those without proper movement get good at a particular movement, but there are no quarter squats, rounded back deadlifts, or partial rep bench press reps tolerated in our garage. Under no circumstances is range of motion or other silliness tolerated. A squat is a squat, the standards are clear and anything other than a squat that meets the standards is not a squat.

By working to clearly understood, clearly defined standards, there is never a doubt.

Prior to visiting Rip at WFAC my squat depth was an issue. Frequently Gillian would announce mid set that depth was missed. When fighting for a set of five it is difficult to hear after a second rep that depth was missed...four to go, not three. Getting angry at Gillian as a result of my own failing does nothing for the positive energy described in Rule #2 and #3 above, and does nothing to validate an otherwise invalid movement. We both pride ourselves in movement. We do not attempt to make the movements any harder by changing the requirements of a given movement – rather we honor the movement and perform to the standards. Having thick skin, believing each other when judgement is

made is necessary. At times, the opposite is true. I have felt I missed depth, asked the question and told that my movement was in fact within standards. Thick skin is necessary, sometimes we are not kinesthetically aware, and having the respect, belief, and confidence in your partner is a tremendous asset. Lastly, by working to clearly understood, clearly defined standards, there is never a doubt. Success is success and failure is failure. Thick skin is necessary.

7. Your spouse really has your best interests at heart.

Because we live together, train together, sleep together, and go on vacations together it is tough to hide bad days. I am not talking about bad days in the gym - I am talking about bad days in life. Illness, work, travel, mental stresses all effect training. When we go to the garage, it is for the sole purpose of training and setting a PR.



Gillian often helps Mac with his post workout stretch.

There is no day that we hope to “maintain” or fail. Having the ability to have someone outside of us give an honest assessment of mental and physical state helps garner over enthusiastic predictions and daily goals. “Seriously, you are *sick*. Knock it off and get better, or you will make *me* sick” are powerful words when delivered by someone you trust. “My back is hurt, but I think I can do it anyway,” is met with, “What would you tell your client to do? Let’s do the rehabilitation protocol you would prescribe to a client.”

Training is a lifelong journey, and like life, it has its ups and downs.

These little rudder steers along the way prevent stupidity, arrogance, and most importantly, long term injury. Outside assessment of our own abilities is equally useful. As we continue to train, micro loading has become more useful. When predicting a capability to make a five-pound jump, the other has weighed in to recommend a two and half pound jump. Sometimes we listen, in which case Rule #2 is in effect, sometimes we do not listen, and that will often bring a reminder of Rule #5 and #6 together from above. Training is a lifelong journey, and like life, it has its ups and downs.

8. When your spouse/trainer makes a bad call, you still grow and learn together.

Together you are better. Listening and failing together is better than I’m right, your wrong. And sometimes, *sometimes*, the spouse was right in the long run, and the benefits of the decision are not immediately apparent. Having thick skin (rule #6) is quite useful – because sometimes it is *you* that is wrong. Gillian recently competed in a Powerlifting meet. Prior to the meet, Rip, Gillian, and I hammered out opening attempts, probable jumps, and hopeful finishing weights for each of the three lifts. We did so with the understanding that a fourth attempt could be made to break an American record. When Gillian and I found out during the pre-meet briefing that this was no longer the case, together we elected to change the plan for one of the lifts. In retrospect, we made too big of a change. Nothing was lost (other than a few pounds on what was already an amazing total), but the experience gained both as an athlete and a coach was immeasurable. The point is simple, bad calls and good calls contain a learning point, and sometimes those bad calls have a bigger dose of medicine than the good ones.

9. Outside influence is not only nice, it’s necessary.

Gillian and I often travel. In fact, I don’t personally know of another couple that travels as much as we do. We routinely make the trip to New York to visit Gillian’s family, I travel fairly often with the Marine Corps, and

we like to take vacations together. End result – we travel – *a lot*. This is both a blessing and a curse. It is disruptive to the training schedule, however it gives us opportunities to meet and train with people we would not otherwise have met. Alone in the garage with an occasional friend is an excellent way to train. Training with other like-minded people and working/listening to other coaches is valuable. In our travels we have met with the likes of Rip, John Broz, Jim Steel, Paul Steinman, and Mike Burgener. Along the way we have watched and trained with Olympic athletes and laypersons. Each coach has offered advice and each athlete we have trained with has brought an experience that has been beneficial in some way. Not *all* bad advice is necessarily bad, in fact – it often explains some of what we have seen. But the point remains the same; outside influence is good, even if that outside influence only reinforces what you already know. I have seen the positive influence that Gillian brings when she trains with others. In our travels I hope that we have positively influenced others as they have us.

10. Have fun - if it's not fun, it's time to evaluate, and make it fun.

This last rule is not last because it is least important. It is last because it is the last thing I want to share with the reader. Fun is relative. *Training* is not fun, it is *rewarding*. Training is hard. Gains can be obnoxiously elusive, however with the support of a loved

one, training can be *fun* overall. The ups and downs that come with a lifelong journey are better suffered and celebrated together. Working in the garage is somewhat isolated, however doing it with your best friend/spouse makes it far more enriching.



When not training her husband or clients, Gillian enjoys playing with "Millie".

For me, training with my wife has been a rewarding, wonderful experience. Gillian loves to train as much as I do, and even though she is nearly 10 years younger, she has been training much longer. There is an eleventh rule that overarches all other rules. *Training is an individual quest, the experience of training is what is shared.* Because we are different in age/weight/sex we do not directly compete with one another – we celebrate one another (Rule #2). Because we are completely different creatures, we do not compare rate of gain, quantity of gain, nor place relevance on the comparison of our individual numbers or abilities. At times we may compare quality of movement – but this is a comparison I frequently lose. I should probably mention that

this last "Rule #11" is followed more by me, I still catch Gillian eyeing my PR's and I know that she is (not so) secretly trying to take me down. I have not told her I know this, but it helps me work harder knowing that she is on my heels. I have one thing going for me – a "Y" chromosome. Without that...the competition would be over! And if I let up for a minute, she will destroy me.

These "rules" are more like guidelines. We do not have them written down, nor have we specifically discussed any of them in detail. These are guidelines that we have stumbled across by doing it, guidelines that I have observed. In some cases a rule became a rule because the rule was inadvertently broken. (Rule #1, 3, 5, 6, & 7 are perfect examples.) For the reader considering training with their significant other, I hope this will provide a little assistance to anyone attempting to embark together down the path of training.



About the Author

Mac and Gillian currently live in Quantico, Virginia and are currently preparing for a move to North Carolina. Mac is a pilot in the Marine Corps and Gillian trains clients in their garage and at a local commercial gym. Together they endure the challenges and joys of training, raising a 20 year old daughter, and taming a feisty bulldog.