

The lonely wolf of fitness

World-renowned coaching legend Steve Maxwell is the kind of man you can learn from just silently sitting at the same table. We were not silent, we asked questions, and listened. And learned something new – as will you, we are sure of it.

Steve Maxwell, famous coach and legend of jiu-jitsu, grappling, and fitness, visited Zagreb once again. I have to admit I did not know much about him, and before I was assigned to interview him, I had only basic information concerning him and his work – a superb sports coach and one of the most influential people in the world of grappling and jiu-jitsu. I also knew he was 63 and expected to see an average old man looking good for his age. How wrong was I! Exiting the car was a lean vital and a very attractive man, I must say, whose eyes exhibited a liveliness rare seen these days. Already then I realized he is the kind of person to win you over with his energy, intelligence, and unbelievable charisma. After just a few sentences, I was overwhelmed by the sense of honor and pride to be able to interview this great man. He is without exaggerating the first person ever to make such a deep impression on me from the very first moment.

Before the interview, we decided to take a few photos. Steve did not waste any time and took out his portable gym – a jump rope and a home-made TRX. He jumped over the rope with such ease that I decided to buy a jump rope on my way home. I was having the same sensation as after watching the Karate Kid movie, when I firmly believed I could perform all those movements on my own – that's how simple it looked.

After the warmup, he started with some more complex exercises and left us all breathless, taking out our cellphones to film his crazy energy. When the photoshoot was done, we sat for coffee so he could tell me his story.

He ordered coffee with Natreen – he's got a sweet tooth but does not consume any sugar. We all have our hidden weaknesses.

I read about your nutrition where you mentioned fasting with water. Can you tell me more about your daily rituals and how often do you fast?

I fast every day in form of a half-day fast. I wake up around 5.30 am and for the first six hours of the day I consume no foods, enabling my body to burn fat more easily and get rid of unwanted cells. As you get older, it gets harder to maintain ideal body weight so it's also a good way to stay fit. I used to eat breakfast but I started to have it later and later in the day and realized it feels great! I get up, have a cup of coffee or matcha tea, and train. Around 11 am I eat my breakfast – today I had fresh berries with yoghurt.

All my meals are carefully planned and I never combine many ingredients in a single meal, usually only two or three. For lunch I have some protein and vegetables – cooked or raw. Today I had a chicken casserole and mixed vegetables salad. In the evening I consume starch foods, so yesterday I

had only sweet potato for dinner. So, it's fruits and proteins combined with vegetables and at the end of the day some starch, it's the schedule I always follow.

My meals depend on the country I'm in at the time, and since I'm always on the road, I pack small portions, bowls of fresh salad or some other healthy foods, because I will under no circumstances eat the food they serve on airplanes.

Most nutritionists claim that breakfast is the most important meal of the day and you consciously avoid it. Why is that?

I disagree with them. As early as 400 years ago yogis had said that in the first part of the day the body gets rid of waste matter, and if you eat a big meal, that process gets interrupted. I live this way for 20 years already, and as I said, it's a great way to control the calorie input. Also, I follow Okinawa nutrition habits – they have a saying „Hara hachi bu“ which roughly means „Eat until you're about 80% full“. That's how I avoid overeating and unnecessary input of large amounts of food.

When I sense I might be getting a cold, I start fasting. It strengthens the immune system and helps it battle illness. I haven't seen a doctor in 35 years. When I fast, I consume only water and green tea. It's important to note that you shouldn't exercise during fasting, but rest. If I really need to work, then I'll eat some fruits. This type of fasting takes a day or two, and once a year I fast five to seven days, drinking water only.

Do you love food or do you think of it as fuel only?

I eat to live, not the other way around – and I eat very very slowly. I believe it is important to eat slowly and chew well, that makes the body satisfied and you won't eat too much. It helps to avoid bloating and digestion issues. But I can say I love certain foods. My favorite foods are berries and chicken. I don't see chicken as meat, but I like the taste. I like proteins, meat, cheese, and berries. Fruit smoothie is also something I like. When it's cold outside, I enjoy a hot soup in various ways. I reduced red meat intake so I don't consume meat every day. Three of my week days are vegetarian, but since I'm physically active, animal proteins give me strength.

You are probably one of the most known and influential homeless people in the world. How did that happen and why?

I don't own a house, an apartment, or a car, the only key that I have is a hotel room one. I have lived this way for the past 15 years and it all started with me working in various gyms in America, mostly Pennsylvania. In 1990 I opened my own gym called Maxercise, which I ran with my ex-wife. The gym specialized in kettlebell training and hosted the first Brazilian jiu-jitsu school on the East Coast. My wife and I owned it for 16 years and then we got divorced. It's hard to work with a spouse. After that I bought a camping vehicle and lived in it for 3 years. I had a girlfriend, but girls don't like living in trailers – she lived with me for a year and then we split. I was also tired of such a life and I started hosting seminars. I had no idea it would spark such an interest.

I have been coaching since 1972 and I have a vast knowledge bank about physical activity. I worked a lot and erred a lot, but the most important thing is I learned from my mistakes. In my seminars I try to help people not to make the same mistakes I did. It's very important to listen to someone with knowledge and experience. I learned from people in 70s and 80s. What people do in today's fitness is

not good because there's a big injury risk present. I think CrossFit is pure insanity, not good for the body. When people start competing amongst themselves, they forget about quality of performance. Besides, the guy who invented CrossFit is fat and thus a bad example.

How did your love of sport begin and when did you start exercising?

When I was 10, my dad bought me weights because I was bullied in school. I was tiny and weak so I had to get stronger in order to defend myself. My father was a fighter and a marine in WW2. He taught me and my younger brother how to box.

Quite soon I realized I got stronger from those simple exercises, but I stopped lifting weights and joined wrestling. By that time I was 12 and I really enjoyed it, and I was also quite talented – my very first year wrestling I won a competition. But it was the only sport I was good at. I never trained for looks, but to become a better athlete, a better wrestler. Quality comes first. There's a saying – You don't want to look like Tarzan and fight like Jane. I would rather look like Cheetah.

Do you travel for seminars only or do you ever travel for its own sake?

Sometimes I travel in order to learn. I was in Beijing to learn about qi gong and crawling. In Krasnodar, Russia, I learned about military style of fighting, where some martial arts originated from.

Other than seminars, you offer online training as well. How do you make it all work?

Seminars pay for my cost of living. I also have online training available, and nutrition programs based on every individual client. I ask my clients general questions about their nutrition, I ask for a complete body photo, and a photo of feet and knees in order to see the state of their spine. I make sure every ground is covered so they can get the best possible nutrition and exercise program for themselves. The exercises are simple.

It's easier to train men because women have many obligations and have to take care for the children, so it's harder for them to make big nutrition changes. Obese women are also problematic. Also, many women are very weak and cannot perform simple exercises, but I've had ups and downs. I've suggested to many of them to get a personal trainer. Men are also sometimes hard to work with, because they don't understand that no progress means they are not doing it well.

Rest is the most underrated part of training. People often contact me about jiu-jitsu as well because it's a very demanding sport with a big injury risk present.

What's your favorite type of training and can you give us an example?

I like interval trainings in 40:20 ratio. After warming up you run for 30 seconds with 30% of strength, then 20 seconds with 70%, then 20% with 100% - repeat 12 times. Rest walking for one minute, repeat the run 4 times, walk one minute, repeat. This can be done with cycling or jumping over the rope 10 to 12 times (high intensity). Kettlebell swings are a great example of cardio training with weights. Every minute do 20 swings and rest for the remaining time. Now I can lift with 16 kilo kettlebell, but I used to do it with 24 kilos. Due to my travelling schedule, I don't always have a kettlebell available, but I have an elastic band – you can insert one end between doors and imitate the swinging motion of the kettlebell. I like interval training, it's great for elderly people because it enhances metabolism.

You mentioned the importance of breathing techniques.

I hold workshops and seminars on this topic. While I was in college, no one taught us about breathing. I learned from yoga, the Russian system, and gracie jiu-jitsu – Relson Gracie was never out of breath, but he wouldn't tell me his secret.

It's important not to make faces while breathing. I also ask my clients to hold water in their mouths while they breathe through their nose. You should breathe from diaphragm, not from your lungs, because it encourages panic attacks. Breathing from the lungs leads to overproduction of adrenaline and the body thinks it's in danger. It also reduces the oxygen flow.

If you perform a difficult exercise, you can exhale through the mouth, but try to keep your mouth closed and not breathe in that way. Try exercising with water in your mouth. If you cannot do it, it means your lungs aren't strong enough.

I studied breathing techniques extensively, the Russian technique of buteyko, Chinese techniques, and yoga and pilates. It's always the same – don't breathe through your mouth. Before bed, many people put a band over their mouth in order not to snore and it really helps. Ayurvedan way to clear your air paths – the so-called netty – is a great way to ease breathing.

We all know that stress is the worst thing for the body and a cause to many illnesses. How do you deal with it?

You need to silence the noise in your head. I do that through affirmations, meditation, and prayer. I focus on my breathing and prefer meditation on the move, zen running – when you're completely focused on step, technique, and running. Theta waves with soft music and guided meditation are also a good way to battle stress. I try to meditate every day, but if I'm busy I sometimes don't have enough time. When I wake up, I meditate 10 to 30 minutes, or sometimes I do it instead of the afternoon nap.

What do you think about Croatian athletes, do you have a favorite one?

Croatians are great athletes and I see it every time I visit. I like Mirko Filipovic, he's one of the greatest, but my favorite is Marino Basic.