

Powerlifting: BALLANCE'S ACT

Chris Ballance has seen a Russian coach smack his athlete in the back of the head — repeatedly — as motivation.

He's seen a coach feed an 8-year-old girl creatine like it's candy.

He's seen a man with no legs and lobster claws for hands bench press 280 pounds, a 66-year-old athlete cuss like Andrew Dice Clay and a teenager project a stream of vomit — during competition — like a firehose projects water.

Ballance, a rising senior at Pasquotank County High School, is a powerlifter.

The sights he's seen paint an unusual picture. And rightfully so.

For powerlifting isn't your everyday sport.

"When you're in competition, you get an adrenaline rush. You just go out there and lift it one time. It's just something there. A lot of people, they love to lift."

Chris Ballance includes himself in that group.

Now a 5-foot-10, 153-pound 16-year-old, he fell in love with lifting when he was a "chubby" 13-year-old. He wanted to get in shape and talked to River Road Middle School athletic director Paul Bossi about lifting weights.

Bossi, now a teacher at Pasquotank, mentioned powerlifting meets, and Ballance entered his first one three weeks later.

He placed first in everything possible — squat, bench press, deadlift and combined total.

"When he got up there and got first, the bug bit," said Ballance's mother, Pam. "He would go to competitions and he'd set goals: 'Next time I'm gonna do 10 or 15 more than what I did this time.'"

For the first decade or so of Ballance's life, his goal was simply finding a sport in which he could participate.

Asthma limited his options.

He tried baseball, but mom made him give it up because of the whole bringing-him-the-inhaler-on-the-field thing. Ballance's lungs just couldn't keep up with the game.

Wrestling came next, and Ballance actually fared well.

"I was beating everybody," he said.

Then word got out that he had asthma, and elbows to the throat became as common as reality TV shows.

The illegal move made breathing difficult and made Ballance plain mad.

"The last competition I ever done, this dude kept hittin' me in the throat," Ballance said. "I was like, 'You do it again, I swear I'm gonna hurt you.' He hits me in the throat again: 'Whoomp!' Picked 'em up and {M4slammed the boy.

"They said, 'You're disqualified. Illegal slam.' I said, 'Fine. Forget wrestling.'"

But forget sports? Forget about it.

Ballance still wanted to get in shape, and after meeting with Bossi he told his parents he had found his niche.

After that first meet, which took place at River Road, Ballance began competing more often. The more he competed, the stronger he got, and records started falling.

Ballance now has personal bests of 345 pounds in the squat, 225 in the bench and 440 in the deadlift. He can't rattle off a list of records he's set, but he knows a few he still owns.

Like the AAU world record for bench press and combined total in the 165-pound weight class of the 12-13 age group.

And the state squat and total records he set June 7 at a national meet in Richmond, Va., for the 165, 16-17 division.

The trip to Virginia was a short one considering where Ballance has travelled: Tennessee, Florida, Maryland, Washington, D.C.

He'll go to Detroit late next month for the AAU Junior Olympics — one of the biggest meets a teenage lifter prepares for. The other is worlds.

And the bigger the meet, the better Ballance does.

"The whole time you're hearing people cheer you on, but when you get up there, it's weird," he said. "You don't really hear nobody or anything. You got commands, when they tell you to go down with the bar, but you don't really hear 'em. You just kinda sense 'em in a way.

"I'll lift maybe 10-15 pounds more if I go to a good competition where I'm feelin' it. I don't even see anybody. It's like it zones out."

{M4"I find it funny when somebody's sittin' there taking their creatine and abusing it a little bit and trying to get stronger and I still beat 'em in a competition — and I'm not takin' nothin'."

Raw.

Not like sushi. Like no assistance. No wraps, no bandages, no supplements.

Ballance prides himself on being a raw lifter.

The only time he's ever competed with assistance, a cast covered his broken ankle.

His doctor advised against lifting, but Ballance took a saw to the cast, making sure it didn't interfere with bending his legs during squats.

Ballance keeps it raw in part because of the pleasure he takes in beating guys who don't — guys who take creatine or steroids or any number of supplements. Some things, such as protein supplements, Ballance has no problem with.

His beef? Abusing them.

"The AAU, they allow creatine and stuff, because some people can't get the protein in their daily diet — which, creatine, all it is a protein supplement," Ballance said. "It's basically like you're eating steak, which is fine as long as you don't abuse it.

"You're not gonna sit there at a dinner table and eat 10-to-15 steaks. That's basically what they're doing."

Ballance may not intervene if one of his peers is abusing supplements, but when he sees little kids messing with creatine?

You might as well elbow him in the throat.

Ballance remembers one meet in particular, at which a coach barked out orders to 8-to-10-year-olds as though they were grown men. Ballance had already told one little girl not to listen to her coach's orders when he saw her walk outside with a glass of water and some creatine.

"She was like, 'Oh, my coach told me I needed it,'" Ballance said. "I'm like, 'How much is in there?' 'Cause I wasn't gonna say anything — maybe she's got a problem or something'. But there's too much in there for {M4me.

"I said, 'Give me that.' She handed it to me. I said 'Your coach is stupid. Don't even worry about him. If he says anything to you wrong, tell him to talk to me.'"

Ballance's concern stems from his knowledge.

Growing up an asthmatic, he forced himself to learn more about his body. Two months away from his 17th birthday, he's a walking encyclopedia in regard to personal health.

He can tell you about a proper training regimen: You don't want to work a protagonist muscle and then an antagonist muscle. You might tear something.

He can tell you about eating right: The three-meals-a-day thing? Malarkey. That method keeps your metabolism up and down and makes fat gaining an easier process. Smaller meals more times a day keeps metabolism steady.

And Ballance can definitely tell you about lung capacity: Forget the inhaler. Teach your lungs to grow. Blow up big water balloons. Practice holding your breath.

"Everybody gets short-winded when they're running'," he said. "But they'll start to get short-winded: 'Oh, I got to stop.' Then they're walking' around fine after maybe five seconds, not even huffing' any more.

"I'm like, 'You're never gonna grow out of it if you don't push yourself to.'"

{M4 "You try to help each other out. There will be a couple people that are cocky and pricks. But me, I know I'm strong and everything, and a lot of times I try to get kids into it."

Ballance always has been a helper. Sure, as his mom says, "he can get mouthy like any other teenager can get," but for the most part, he's a do-gooder.

That's why he stopped the 8-year-old girl from taking creatine and why he helps fellow athletes whenever possible.

At one powerlifting meet, officials asked Ballance to weigh in another lifter. The kid weighed half a pound over the limit and didn't like Ballance's first suggestion — taking off his boxers.

So Ballance had the kid take a deep breath, blow it out, hold it out and step on the scale.

The half a pound no longer existed, Ballance got his required three-second reading and the lifter was on his way.

Ballance plans on joining the Marine Corps after he graduates next year, something he's known he wanted to do since he was old enough to know what the Marine Corps was. He also plans on going to college and hopes to one day become a physical therapist.

Ultimately, he wants to open his own gym and help kids who want to get involved with powerlifting.

Along the way he's likely to continue helping anyone — and anything — he can. Ballance even plays part-time veterinarian.

He's nursed deer, squirrels and ducks to recovery, among other things. Once he brought home a goose, which his mom discovered when she woke up one morning and found it laying under the Christmas tree.

The family's two dogs lay on either side of the goose, resting their heads upon it as all three animals slept.

"I was like, 'Nobody would believe this in a million years,'" Pam Ballance said.

With what Chris Ballance has seen as a powerlifter, that scene isn't that strange at all.