

DOCTOR DEADLIFT SPEAKS

Dr Benjamin Soh performing his best lift, the deadlift!



Interview conducted by Dr Jipson Quah, Editorial Board Member
Photos by Norman Jaillet Photography

Dr Benjamin Soh, popularly known as Doctor Deadlift, has been making tsunami-sized waves in the Singapore weightlifting scene. Having only started competing in 2012, he achieved second place in the prestigious HomeTeamNS Strongman Challenge last year and most recently, emerged champion in the Singapore Strongman Classic last month. For starters, strongmen have to deadlift 270 kilogrammes, press 120 kilogrammes and carry a stone weighing 150 kilogrammes. Other conventional strongman events require the competitors to flip a 350-kilogramme tractor tyre and pull a 6,000-kilogramme vehicle. Mind you, the ladies participating are capable of flipping a 150-kilogramme tyre and carrying a 50-kilogramme log in each hand. To put things into perspective, regular gym-goers usually work out with weights approximately 1 to 1.5 times their body weight (already considered pretty darn good!). Wanting to give my own exercise routine a boost, I sought to learn Doctor Deadlift's secrets.

Doctor Deadlift, you have accomplished some really incredible feats of strength! How did you get started in weight training and strongman competitions?

I started weight training in my second year of junior college. Back then, I was just training for the Individual Physical Proficiency Test, so as to achieve a silver that would translate to a shorter period of National Service (two months' reduction). At the start of the year, I could only do five pull-ups on a good day, so I started doing daily push-ups and pull-ups to build up my fitness. As my pull-ups improved, I noticed enhancements in my physique too, so I started training with weights in the gym. Soon I was known as the "buffest" guy in my year (though I was still small then) and I was hooked! Thereafter I always trained to be the biggest and strongest version of myself that I could be.

I started doing strongman in Year 4 of medical school. Back then, I was training at a gym in Bukit Timah and met one of the old-timers of the strongman scene, a man known as "The Enforcer", who still trains many young strongman hopefuls today! He introduced me to strongman training and I discovered, again, that I had a natural aptitude for it. Hence I trained hard for it and took part in my first contest in March 2012, where I placed sixth in Singapore! Since then I have continued training to better myself and my competitive record.

For a medical officer, your competitive record is outstanding! Many of us struggle to get in some regular exercise, not to mention compete. Where do you train and how often?

I think credit must go to all the gyms that tolerate my nonsense on a semi-regular basis! I train mostly at Fortitude Gym now, which is walking distance from Singapore General Hospital (where I work), but also frequent The Gym Nation which has outlets in Bukit Panjang and Bedok. In the past, I trained at SG Titans in Woodlands (which is the group that forms the majority of most strongman competitors in Singapore), Singapore Weightlifting Federation in Kallang, and Solitude of Strength in Aljunied. I train about three to four times a week.

Supplementation and nutrition are highly important for competitive athletes like yourself. What are your staple foods and daily diet like?

I don't watch my diet in particular, but I do make it a point to keep my total protein up with protein shakes and meat, and total calories in the 3,500 to 4,000 range. (A Big Mac, large fries and a sugary drink add up to approximately 1,000 calories.) If I am trying to gain weight for a contest, it may go up to 5,000 calories a day. If you think this is a lot, I have many friends who regularly consume over 6,000 calories as their maintenance intake! But of course, they have more physical jobs, so their energy expenditures are much higher than mine. Otherwise, I have loved eating meat since I was young, so I have never had too much difficulty gaining weight... Haha!

Any positives from the Medicine-muscle connection?

There are really too many positives to count! Off the top of my head, I would say the most important things are:

1. Knowledge of injury. Generally, knowing the pattern of real orthopaedic pathology, I can usually reassure myself that that twinge in my shoulder or that ache in my back isn't a fracture waiting to happen or a serious lesion that would require surgery.
2. Knowledge of balance. Competitive sport is a very passionate affair, even when performed at an amateur level; too many times I have seen my friends and fellow colleagues go crazy in the pursuit of their goals. Knowing that life is brief and that long term health is paramount does keep me grounded in my pursuit of strength goals.
3. Knowledge of Medicine. I am able to give back and advise my friends from the unique perspective of a competitive lifter who also possesses medical knowledge.

On the flip side, life as a junior doctor can often be tough – lifting helps me find an outlet for my occasional frustrations at work!



Check out those cannons! Dr Soh (front row, first from left) with the runners-up from this year's Singapore Strongman Classic

What are your future career plans in Medicine?

After my Family Medicine residency is over, I do plan on eventually going into the subspecialty of Sports Medicine, so I can fulfill my dream of merging my life outside Medicine with my life inside it! I feel that Sports Medicine has a lot to offer the community in terms of rehab and managing musculoskeletal issues, so that everyone can continue with their sport of choice and stay fit. I also feel that Sports Medicine's main emphasis is on endurance sport, as that has a larger following in Singapore. However, I feel that strength sport and weight training can complement the public's fitness regime in a big way, and I hope to share my unique perspectives with my patients eventually.

Who are your role models in Medicine and weightlifting?

In Medicine, I admire those who have gone off the straight and narrow path and succeeded, while maintaining a good balance with their career. First, Dr Ben Tan from Changi Sports Medicine Centre, who has helped to grow Sports Medicine in Singapore while furthering the nation's efforts in competitive sailing, while maintaining a ridiculous marathon timing! Others would of course include Dr Mok Ying Ren, whose sporting accomplishments need no introduction, and Dr Kumaran Rasappan, who managed to scale Everest while raising a great deal of money for charity!

In weightlifting, I have many role models, but one that immediately comes to mind is Hafthor Bjornsson (better

known as "the Mountain" on HBO TV series *Game of Thrones*). He is not only a massive man at 2.1 metres and 190 kilogrammes, but is also consistently one of the top three strongest men in the world at the tender age of 25! Not only that, he is very good in deadlifting (my favourite type of lift), and lifts in an aggressive, larger-than-life manner that makes for great viewing!

What are some of your personal lifting records? Do you have any advice for our colleagues who are looking to improve their strength and physique in the gym?

Squat: 225 kilogrammes x 1 rep, bench press: 160 kilogrammes x 1 rep, deadlift: 275 kilogrammes x 1 rep, and overhead press: 120 kilogrammes x 4 reps.

For the average gym-goer, I would say: always perform your exercises with the correct form, focusing on exercises that work many muscle groups at the same time. Work hard, and remember that the gym is only the stimulus – muscle growth and strength gains happen when one is recovering. Get enough sleep and nutrition (I cannot emphasise this enough), and you will improve. And remember it is a slow process, so perseverance is key.

To the gym-goer looking to turn competitive, I would say that you need to love it with all your heart. Just like Medicine is a calling, so is competitive sport – be it endurance sport, strongman or bodybuilding! ■