DANNY LENNON: Yeah, first where to start, I would like to ask about current projects you've got going on in AUT. I know before probably quite a while back the last time we talked about some of your research. So just for maybe people who are interested in keeping up to date without what you are currently working with over AUT?

ERIC HELMS: Yes it's pretty cool because last time we talked, my research was my Ph.D. research and so I finished that and it's just pretty exciting to have research that is as a research fellow, as staff at AUT and working and collaborating with others. So I've got a number of projects on, and I can only claim some of it as a mine cause a lot of it is driven by my students. And that's a really cool part of AUT is that a lot of the research we do at sprints is driven by student projects. So I am fortunate enough right now. I've got a stable of Ph.D students and the Master's student as well and collectively between them we are looking at a lot of cool stuff and it's all at the very early stages. So Kendrick Quan, he's out from Malaysia, he's a coach for TSG and he's going to be looking at using autoregulation to preserve and improve performance during weight cutting and power lifters.

So that's a really cool topic to see if, you know, you might expect when you're cutting weight to have more

variable performance. So can we attenuate those negative downsides of it and hopefully react to some of the aspects of it using things like a volume and load regulation. I also have Alyssa. Alyssa spend -- she's out here from Canada and she's going to be looking at the effects of stretching and powerlifters. So there's a robust amount of data that shows that acute hardcore stretching before, you know, anaerobic performance or resistance training can be a detriment, but there's actually some indications that long term chronic stretching, if you know, not immediately before you're trying to lift weights, might actually have some benefits to the muscle tendon unit and making it better at stretch shortening cycle.

So there's a reasonable rationale that for a squat or a bench press, you could see a benefit to stretching. So she's going to be looking at that for her Ph.D. And then recently arrived is Colby Susa who did his Master's at FAU with Dr.[00:07:43] and he's going to be investigating the use of power days. So kind of the year like 3 by 180% as a recovery modality compared to both active and passive recovery to see if that can be used as a way to not only facilitate recovery from a higher volume or high intensity day, but also to potentially potentiate performance on the next day. So that's who I've got out at the moment and I've got a few other Ph.D. D students are having literally just a week from now, we're going to be looking at a couple of interesting projects. So there's Ivan Djukich. He's coming from Croatia with his partner Catarina and they're both looking at some things that I'm really interested in velocity based training and the impact of different methods of volume autoregulation with velocity based training. That's Ivan's project. And then Catarina is going to be looking at kind of the intersection between flexible dieting, intuitive eating, tracking and weighing and where these different tools can be either facilitative or debilitative to mental health in weight class restricted strength athletes like powerlifters, and also physique athletes; people are getting on stage and then general fitness folks and to see if that the population is different. If the goals can modify it and she'll be doing some mixed methods. So we'll have some qualitative and quantitative data.

So that's a lot, but it's cool. And then the one project I can say is mine is we're very grateful that Legion athletics supplement company, Mike Matthews they're just funding some research that's unrelated to their supplements just because they want to support it and they're, they have gotten myself, James Krieger and Brad Ditter along with some of my Ph.D. D students who are running it.

We're looking at a weight gain protocol. So we've got three groups. One that's trying to eat roughly in maintenance to see if recomp can occur. And then two at different levels of the surplus around 5% surplus and 15% surplus. And it's an eight week muscle gaining protocol that we're essentially just running the resistance training side of it here at AUT and a Brad Ditter and also just recently my RD Steve Taylor are working together to handle the nutrition side of it. So that will take a while to complete with three groups, but sometime probably next year we'll be fully finished with that. So -

DANNY LENNON: Have you started data collection now or is it kind of in recruitment process or where are you at?

ERIC HELMS: We have. We've actually gotten just to participants through all the way and we have about another three lined up and we'll probably need to recruit around 40 in total to get, you know, including dropouts, you know, at least around 10 in each group, which based on our basic power calculation where we think we need to be to get to get some decent data there. And plus, you know, as you know, in sports science, if you don't have 10, then reviewers think it's not enough regardless of your power calculations. Yeah. So the – we've just done some things that we can hopefully recruit a little more efficiently and more quickly. We've got a more robust staff on the nutrition side now that Steve's on board to help Brad out. And I think that'll allow us to kind of really start pushing recruitment a little harder. Some of the administrative side of getting started pushed us towards December, January, and you really can't do much in that time period here in the world because it's not only summer, but it's also the Christmas holiday.

So there's like, you know, Auckland is basically a ghost town from December to January because everyone's

out in the batch and on the beach and they don't want to be counting macros and lifting weights in the lab. So now that we're just coming into a mid to late February, we can actually really do a good recruitment recruitment push there.

DANNY LENNON: Are you happy to talk about some of the details of that study now?

ERIC HELMS: Absolutely. Yeah..

DANNY LENNON: So just a few things just as you're talking through from the nutritions or even just the practical side of trying to get people in a 5% or 10% surplus. The first thing that strikes me is that it's probably very difficult thing to do of just because you don't have that much wiggle room with something like a 5% surplus. So, and then even when you think of typically errors that certain collection that may have. So how are you going about monitoring their nutrition, collecting that data, and then trying to get as close as possible to that consistent 5% surplus?

ERIC HELMS: That's a great question. And there are some logistical hurdles there and it's essentially, it's created a study where we have multiple opportunities for people to drop out, which is less than ideal, you know. So the requirement for being in this study is that you are weight stable. So that means that we have someone, we give them macronutrients. They start tracking it and using a tracking database. We give them feedback. I'm not the one running this side of the study, but of course I know how the design works. I'm blinded to it. So you know, Brad and Steve, they're working with one of our subjects and they're making sure that they're within plus or minus 1% of their body weight. And once we see that for a couple of weeks and they've been consistently hitting the target and macros that are roughly producing that within a certain amount of error range, then they're ready to start the study.

The minimum required time period for that is two weeks. But in practice, unless someone has some experience tracking macros and tracking and nutrition and fitting foods to numbers, that actually takes more like four, sometimes five weeks.

DANNY LENNON: Right.

ERIC HELMS: So right there at that's a barrier to as people kind of, it's a useful barrier though because they know what they're getting into and that's, we don't want someone's compliance with the protocol to be poor during the first four to five weeks of the study. We'd much rather teach people those skills and weed out those people who aren't going to get those skills in the timeframe we need for the study or just don't want to deal with that once they fully understand what they're involved with experientially because we do try to explain them as best we can to not be part of it, you know, and that that's okay. And that means we lose some real world validity. We're losing some granularity to where saying, hey, you know, sure this is true when we look at our outcomes, but you may or may not be able to manipulate your nutrition to this degree. And then for the actual intervention, the way we are determining a 5% or 15% surplus is essentially back calculated. So we know how much rate of weight gain should occur if someone is in a given surplus based on a rough 3,500 calorie "rule" and that's a little different for weight gain. But we've back calculated what level of rate gains should rate of weight gain should occur at these different surpluses. And then each week we're looking at an average and every two weeks we're looking at the change in that average. And then we're making adjustments to their nutrition with certain if then statements based on whether or not they reached that a weight gain change.

DANNY LENNON: That adjusted based on the change in body weight as opposed to the recorded calorie intake.

ERIC HELMS: Exactly. Exactly.

DANNY LENNON: So that's really interesting because that kind of almost answers one other question I was going to ask about, because one of the big things I have talked a lot about and a lot of the seminars and have thought about a bit kind of deeply as when we just talk about what a certain calorie deficit is say I put someone on 300 calorie deficit for example, or I put someone on a 500 calorie deficit. What someone is actually saying there is I reduced someone's food intake by 500 calories, but that is probably different to what their net calorie deficit is. So I like the fact that rather than saying this is a 5% calorie surplus, that's not just a 5% increase in

food, because my next question was going to be, well how would you account for that person's increased energy expenditure?

ERIC HELMS: Absolutely.

DANNY LENNON: Is that kind of thinking behind using body weight rather than caloric intake.

ERIC HELMS: Absolutely. Yeah. Because as you know, there's some data out there where people can, you put - you increase their calories by a thousand and they only end up in a net surplus of 400 due to them being a high responder in terms of neat. So to account for that, we were looking at the output, which is really what matters, right? And this, so this study aims to answer the question of how quickly should you gain weight and we've got some data but very little in total. Like the only study that's directly applicable that's directly assessing this not us pulling data from some of their study is [00:16:15] 2013 where they looked at, you know, a group that was intentionally fed by an RDA surplus and they maintained a certain amount of weight gain. And in a group that did an [00:16:26] muscle mass gaining phase where they ended up having like a roughly 600 calorie discrepancy between the two. And there's a little other data on over feeding that as informing it. But this is a relatively sparse area of research, hence why we're doing it. And what is probably going to end up happening is that while we're going to have these distinct groups based on their allocation that we're randomizing them to the adherence to the specific amount of weight gain we want and being accurate with the calories, it's going to be as good as we can get it. But what's going to probably happen is that we might be doing some kind of assessment of looking - grouping them post hoc by how much weight they gained versus yes, you were assigned to the 5% group but you didn't gain any weight. So you're essentially in the maintenance group.

So we'll probably calculate it both ways, both the, the way we said we would at the start, which is the, you know, that's just ethical, you know, with your research and the way you've got to do it. And we'll say, hey, the groups weren't that different. I'm, I'm guessing here they may end up being great, you know. We're doing

our best to control it. But if we look at it from who gained the most and breaking it into say, quadrilles or [00:17:34] and then start looking at relationships between body composition change that might tell us something as well. So there's a number of ways we can start to analyze this data once we get it. And of course you always try to just analyze it the way you set out for at the start. But, you know, I think I said this to you earlier, no plan survives contact with the enemy and research. No matter how good your intentions are, it doesn't always quite go according to plan and you've got to make some adjustments. And so long as you're honest about it, it's written in the methods and you can say, hey, the groups weren't different and inherence and compliance wasn't at the level that we hoped. So we did this assessment, here's why, and here's this alternative analysis as well. And we found that the people who gained the most weight also gained the most body fat or what have you, whatever is going to happen happens, then we should be able to get good data out of this no matter how well the actual groups themselves are able to follow the protocol. So I'm hopeful that this will be useful data regardless of some of those realistic and logistical kind of practical concerns.

DANNY LENNON: Yeah, 100%. It definitely fills a well needed gap, at least another piece to it. When you were coming up with that research question either just from your own perspective or as a group, what is the hypothesis you had for what you'd expect based on, again, anecdotal evidence you have, etc. that you'd expect to come from something this?

ERIC HELMS: Yeah. So it was pretty cool and that when we came up with the research question, we got to have the input of a lot of the other advisers for Legion athletics which you may be familiar with who they are. So we got some good brains in there to make sure it made sense. And I would say that collectively based on what we'd seen as coaches and like I said, the limited data in this area, I think we expect that with trained lifters, which that's what the participants are. They're not incredibly well trained, but they've got at least be able to bench their body weight, squat their body weight and a half and we're trying to recruit a relatively trained population. So that's kind of the minimum requirement. We're

expecting people that at this level, there's only so much muscle mass you can gain in a given time period, and if you try to force feed that like we saw on Garth, we're probably not going to get an increase at least in body composition efficiency, right?

It'll be much less efficient from, I'm guessing from a fat to muscle mass gain in the 15% group versus the 5% group. And then it'll be a question of, all right, well, is that worth it and what would that mean for someone long term? So, I mean an athlete would probably have to go through more frequent dieting phases if they're in the 15% surplus group, would that be worth it? And that's going to be context dependent. But I'm also really interested just to see what happens in the maintenance group. You know, there's, there's some people who are vocal proponents that really it's about protein balance, not energy balance for, you know, putting on muscle mass. And I think that's probably true when you're pretty novice and you have a very low “threshold” to respond to training adaptations. But when you start to look at some of the mechanisms where if you're in a acute energy deficit there is a lowering of muscle protein synthesis.

So certainly muscle protein synthesis is the driver and what drives muscle protein synthesis is protein. But there's a lot of other mechanisms like related to amp kinase [00:21:21] and being in a deficit that ended up short circuiting the effect of protein. I think this is some recent research that came out of Philips lab, if I recall correctly, that looked at that. And they said, hey, you know, we've talked about being in a “catabolic” state when you diet. But what's really happening, at least in people who are decently high in body fat, is you are less anabolic, right? So there seems to be this, this cap on how high you can push up muscle protein synthesis. However, there's also other data showing that when you're lean, there's a disparity between lean and obese people or overweight people that when you're actually very lean and in the diet, not only is there a cap on muscle protein synthesis, but there's also an increased rate of muscle protein breakdown, which kind of parallels what we see in natural bodybuilders, right? You see, yeah, you're probably not gaining much muscle. Your progress slows. And then man, you start to get really lean and that's where you risk seeing a

pretty drastic negative change in your physique if you don't pace yourself and be smart about it. And that's, you know, that's what I see like guys and gals sometimes and like the last six weeks before a show, you're like, oh, you dieted off some muscle groups there, you know. So I think that kind of makes sense and that's why I do think that there's going to be an impact over feeding. You also see impacts overfeeding on things like IGF 1 and [00:22:46] and there are other effects like, you know, when you're really full of glycogen, there's some downstream signaling like I could see a rationale for why being in an overfed state would help you improve your ability to gain muscle. And that it's probably too reductionist just to look at the protein balance side of it.

DANNY LENNON: Yeah, for sure. Especially when, like you said, there's so much more like that dictates muscle hypertrophy as opposed to just muscle protein balance. But even beyond that, to kind of stick with that same theme it's easy to see why some people may have the rationale that it, again, [00:23:22] may not matter as much, right? Because you can see clear data in a ton of studies where people have been in a calorie deficit, lost body fat, but have gained muscle mass. Right? So then you can take that and say, well look, here's some sort of proof or at least rationale that this makes sense. But from, I suppose the question then switched to, well, which is more optimal for gaining at the right rate. Beyond that, then I'm interested for your thoughts on of, I suppose a well thought through idea that a lot of people will promote now is that the surplus doesn't need to be that large. It can be relatively small because there's a certain limit to how much muscle you can build. And so to build muscle without putting on much extra body fat, have a slight surplus that gives you enough extra energy to put towards the energy expensive process of building new muscle tissue. And any more of that is wasted. However, there's probably another hypothesis that you could say, well, even if there you add even more energy on top, even if it's not going to allow for more muscle to be directly driven from the energy that say just that higher calorie environment and the actual gain of more body fat could put someone in a long period of time in a better position. And there's some different reasons that people promote. If you've kind of been looking through

those kind of different arguments on both sides, where do you typically come down on?

ERIC HELMS: I think it all depends on the goals of the person. So it does seem that when you gain weight to some degree, and this is anecdotal because this isn't actually supported by the research. You know, if you look at that study by Garth the only performance differences that were statistically different between groups is the groups that gain more weight ran slower and didn't jump as high because they got fat, right? So, but if you look at, say powerlifters should move up a weight class, they don't just gain muscle mass. Right? Especially if we're talking like IPF powerlifters I have seen numerous times someone moves up a weight class and they can improve not only their absolute strength but also their relative strength and they're gaining maybe 60% body fat, you know. So there does seem to be an advantage of just being heavier.

I don't know if it makes them more resilient to handling training volume, being in that calorie environment. I don't know if sleeps better. I don't know if, you know, if people always say “leverages are better.” I don't think they really know what they're saying when they say that. But here's a great example. I noticed consistently with nearly a thousand people I've worked with over the years so that when you diet your bench press seems to go down disproportionately and you'll even notice the thing is like flat dumbbells inclined, they don't go down the same way as bench. And I think what's happening is you're losing glued fat. So you're now actually not in as much of a decline. Right? So and you're losing peck fat as well. So the range of motion is increasing at two sites and you're changing from being in this arched declined press to a flatter and flatter press.

So it's, you're losing some of the motor pattern and you're just getting less of a mechanical advantage. So I think there's subtle stuff like that that happens. Like anyone who's lost a significant amount of weight and is squatting in the whole, sometimes the whole just feels like space. Like you've got to turn everything around and then you used to feel like you're kind of rebounding off some of your body fat or just like you had more tightness in your belt, you know, as you get into deep

flection. But yeah, like the whole of a squat when you're like, right now I'm six weeks out, it's not a fun place to be, man. Like, it's just all right, you got to stand back up now. And it's like, oh, but I used to have some bounce, like, where's my stretch shortening cycle, you know? So I think there's some non muscular benefits to being heavier. And I also think that being heavier does just somehow drive more lean body mass. Like the data on sumo wrestlers is really compelling. You know, like they carry more fat free mass then per height than any other athlete on the planet. So yeah, I think there's a reason why super heavies are stronger than 120 pluses, even though they're not taller than them, you know?

DANNY LENNON: Yeah. That's what I was kind of getting the idea of just having been able to have that extra energy that you're putting on more body fat, but just even being that heavier weight is, seems to be at least in some of these cases leading to more muscle mass gain whereas kind of theoretically it probably shouldn't. Right? If we can judge that surplus just enough to provide you with what [00:28:03] need to recover them training, to add the extra muscle mass, there shouldn't be any inherent advantage. But there's these kind of other issues that we don't know why. But again, it's trying to tease that apart of why that's happening, I guess. Right? Like, if you get a huge surplus and you would like ton more energy and maybe your training is slightly bit better that we can ever quantify, it's difficult to tease apart. Right?

ERIC HELMS: You know how obese people always have great calves. Like you've got to move carrying all that weight. And I think I was just thinking about it like Kelly Branton and Ray Williams, these guys yeah, they're really not taller than the folks in the 120 class, but they have to live in a 180 kilo body. Like, and that's a non negligible amount of weight. Like if you could imagine I'm six foot right and I'm 84 kilos right now. Like if I had an 80 kilo backpack on all the time, you know, I'd be getting some hypertrophy just in the muscles of daily life, you know.

So I think we probably keep our microscope too focused on when we're in the gym and then like, how did that affect training? And I think there's man, like if you put someone in space that's the easiest way to lose

a ton of muscle tissue. And this is kind of the opposite. We've just increased your body mass way more than it needs to be [00:29:25] from fat but something has to carry that fat, you know? So yeah, I think there's some probably some effects of living in that body that probably impact your ability to handle load.

DANNY LENNON: To go back to the original question of like what's the best rate of of weight gain to come in with this is something that I'm sure you're acutely aware because a lot of people in the internet like to have this polarization between you and Mr. Mike as you tell on a number of certain topics and that particular idea of how they will see the general broad brush stroke recommendation that you may give for most say intermediate above lifters to gain weight add will be slightly different to what Mike would have and yours might seem to be more conservative, is a bit more aggressive and people are going to ask him, well, which one is better or why is one person saying this versus the other? And it kind of strikes me to the way a lot of these questions, it's probably just a function of the long term approach and then neither one is necessarily worse depending on what your long term approach is. Right. So you can correct me if I'm wrong, but at least to me it seems that if you have this more conservative surplus, slower rate of weight gain, but you would tend to have an athlete at least if they're relatively lean, still stick with that surplus for much longer extended period of time whereas Mike may include more regular aggressive mini cuts throughout a period of time, but is going faster with weight gain as well. So the net difference maybe isn't as much as people think, they're not dramatically different strategies. It's just the way you do one thing as a function of the long term goal.

ERIC HELMS: I think that's a really good characterization of it. And while this is based on limited data, like I could cite Garth like all the time when I talk about this cause I don't have many other options. It's pretty much a tortoise versus the hare scenario. And I think it's also important to realize and I probably don't do a good enough job reminding people of this. Like I'm not a general health or nutrition or even resistance training researcher. I'm a power lifting and bodybuilding researcher, you know. So that intersects a lot of nutrition and resistance training. But I'm a specialist.

So when I think about someone gaining weight really quick, I think, man, you're next contest prep, you're just going to have to lose all that body fat and then you either have to diet longer or you have to diet harder. And we know both of those are probably going to produce more muscle loss. So to me it very much the analogy seems logical that it becomes this tortoise versus hare scenario where if you, yeah, it's all got to come off. Like, man, you just forget how lean you have to get. You know, you get to the point where everyone on Instagram and everyone in the gym and says, you are ready and you are in your head if you what you're talking about, if you're a seasoned competitor and you're competing in the bodybuilding division, you smile and you nod and you thank them and you go, no, I'm ready when you guys start thinking, I have a terminal illness and when I wear a sweatshirt it looks like I don't lift, I actually have another 10 pounds to lose. And yeah, it's just a different level of leanness and it requires doing things that are super suboptimal and if you can make that process a little easier by not to die it off another 10 pounds of fat, that goes a long way. So yeah I think it's context dependent. I think if you have, you know, a power lifter who is okay with their body fat percentage going up is moving up a weight class then sure. I think it's a very reasonable approach because it doesn't all have to come off. You know, you might be able to get the 2% over the top of your weight class and then just, you know, skip breakfast and drink water after you go in and you coast in, it used to be an 83 now you're at 93 and you're stronger. Awesome. But if you're a competitive physique athlete, man, you've got to think long term and I think the amount of the rate of weight gain and the amount you can gain should be very much game planned out based on when's your next competition.

So I'll give you an example. I got up to 100 kilos in a 2017 but I knew I wasn't going to get on stage again until 2019. So that gives me plenty of time to run a few mini cuts, do some recon phases, and bring myself down to it in a more appropriate starting position. But if I was going to compete in a year earlier than that, man, I wouldn't want to get over like say 95 because my stage weights like 81, 82, you know. So I think it really depends on what the demands of that your endeavors are. And, you know, for example, if you're never going

to get on stage and you're just someone who wants to look big and a shirt and not be disgusted with yourself with your shirt off, then shit, you know, with a lot of muscle and putting on muscle in the right spots, you could be as a male, 18%, 19%, 20% body fat, that's certainly healthy. There's no data show that's unhealthy. Not only does it bother you mentally. And if you feel strong and you're filling out shirts and you know, your bros give you the brofist and women still don't care, then that's awesome. Yeah. And same thing for a gal. It's like, you know, you can get up close to 30% body fat and you're able to handle heavier loads, you know, be able to fill out the muscle groups that you want to fill out and be stronger. So I think it really depends on the individual and the goal there. There may be a time where you're happy to gain weight quickly and then you just work on making that body weight better over time and maintenance. I think that's a really reasonable thing to do if you're in it for the long haul, but you're not going to compete in anything. Or if you're a power lifter who's going to move up a weight class and stay there.

DANNY LENNON: Yeah. Yeah. 100%. You mentioned your contest prep and so it's probably remissive if we don't get into a bit of that. So just from an overview level for maybe people who haven't been following along or being aware of your plans to compete, given idea of what you've got for this competition season coming up and where you're at right now.

ERIC HELMS: Yeah. So I've had a semi long career as a science communicator or bodybuilding information source that extends all the way back to 09 although most people don't know it because I didn't get on Instagram until 2016 and I basically was just on Facebook and the forums and stuff back then. But yeah, 3DMJs is actually almost 10 years old, which is exciting. But the last time I competed was 2011. So a lot of people just see, you know, crappy old photos. But that was actually my third season. I competed in 07. I competed in 09. I competed in 2011 and then decided I'm not going to do this again. I'm done with grad school. So now two Master's degrees and a Ph.D. later I'm still crazy and I still want to do the damn thing. So yeah, I am six weeks out. Well, a little under that for my first show, which will be the IMVF WVF Polynesian muscle mayhem in

Hawaii. And then I've got shows planned for July and August. Then we'll see after that.

So this has been really cool for me because I'm finally back in control of my life in a way that doesn't have the huge monkey gorilla probably more appropriately if we're talking about a Ph.D. and monkeys, more like Master's. Yeah. So I got, I had a girl on my back, got it off and now I felt like I really had the brain space to do a contest prep in a way that was not going to sacrifice anything that I wasn't willing to let slide a little bit.

DANNY LENNON: Sure. So let's get into this because your approach to this particular prep has been not only different to your previous competitions seasons, but maybe it's actually probably quite counter to most of the people that are probably prepping right now. And probably to be honest, probably still different to the way, like you said, you would work with 99% of your clients they would structure. So I think it's important we mentioned that caveat it just as a kind of personal thing that you're doing is quite interesting of how you've structured your diet over this period of time. Can you fill us in on that?

ERIC HELMS: Absolutely. So if anyone's been following my work for the last say year I've been trying to not be alarmist, but I am trying to inform people that there are potential psychological downsides and social downsides. We can even say psycho-social if you will from tracking your nutrition, tracking your body weight and relying largely on external cues to drive your nutritional decisions, especially if it comes at the expense of paying attention to internal cues, which is our natural way of eating based on a satiety and hunger. And this intersects with a lot of different research. There's the whole intuitive eating line of research, which I think a lot of people in the fitness industry don't actually understand. A lot of people who talk about intuitive eating, and I've been guilty of this before, you know, the obesity epidemic, that's a intuitive eating. You know. You eat when you're hungry and you stop when you're full. But we got to be static environment and it's terrible and it's worst advice ever. This defeatist. You know, people should be just sucking it up and trying harder. The reality though is that on the – people with obesity, they're not using internal cues anymore. You know, they're eating based on cravings. They're eating until the food in front of

them is a gone. They're not being mindful while they're eating. The experience is something that's rushed. There are emotional driving factors and it's very different from what an animal would do. And of course humans are animals, but we're, you know, messed up cause we have thinking power who eats when they're hungry and stops when they're not and typically is not overweight or over fat. But in our always food being available, low levels of physical activity which we have good data to suggest, makes it harder to regulate satiety. It's very easy for someone to start eating based on external cues that are based on cravings and thoughts and emotions that maybe those aren't external cues. And probably better to put that as something besides satiety and hunger.

DANNY LENNON: Right? These homeostatic Hormonal controls.

ERIC HELMS: Exactly. So they're exactly, they're non homeostatic drivers for hunger and an ending. And that's the same thing a bodybuilder are doing what for a different purpose, right? We're trying to lose weight. We're trying to diet and get past the point of health to get lean or in the off season sometimes we're eating past the point of fullness to hopefully drive more muscle gain. So it's the same problem either way. You know, We're both a issuing our internal cues for hunger to potential different detriments. You know. People who are struggling with obesity often have disordered eating. People who are competing in bodybuilding or often skirting disordered eating if they didn't already have it at one point or are currently dealing with it.

And so intuitive eating is actually a clinical tool that is weight neutral. It has nothing to do with gaining weight or losing weight. It has to do with focusing on having self worth regardless of where you're at. And then learning to eat again as a human right? Paying attention to satiety. Paying attention to hunger. Eating without restriction but also eating for health and nurturing your body and nourishment rather than for emotional reasons. And it often comes with counseling and nutritional education. And you know, if you look at the data on it, people either maintain weight or occasionally will even lose weight, which makes sense if you think about it. And almost always you see an improvement in health off almost always psychological

and sometimes physical as well because I think the diet quality improves even if it's not enough to drive, you know, fat loss.

So that's an important whole tangent I went on about intuitive eating because I just don't want people to get the wrong impression. What I'm doing is absolutely not intuitive eating. I am using internally – I'm using internal cues to help me make decisions and to use internal cues when you go through the process of contest prep, you have to have experience because it's not I eat when I'm hungry, it's what's an appropriate level of hunger for me at six weeks out. And I only know that because I've been there before. What's an important – what's an appropriate level of lethargy? How low should my libido be? How flat should I look? How crappy should I feel during training? And what rate of weight loss should I be seeing?

So essentially this prep has been guided by reliance on more "biofeedback" or internal awareness of my system while previously the method I would use would, did say, hey, this is going to suck. This is going to hurt. I need to ignore all my body signals and just push through it. And I'm going to focus on my macros, focusing my rate of weight loss. I'm going to focus on me sending pictures to my coach because I can't trust myself. I don't know my body. I'm crazy. And those statements aren't untrue. But they also aren't unmalleable. And as you go through the process of competing year after year, if you don't pay attention, if you just assume it's going to suck and it's just going to be a willpower battle, you're actually losing a lot of the granularity that you can have as a competitor and that's essentially what a coach does. The coach says, hey, I'm an objective party here. You're going to tell me how you feel. You're going to tell me what your numbers are. I'm going to look at objective and subjective data if you're a good coach. If you're a shitty coach, you just look at macros and weight loss and and everything else be damned, but a good coach is getting video reports. They're skyping with their athletes. They're looking at changes in body weight and they're also looking at what they say. They're asking them things about their libido. They're looking at, you know, changes in fullness there. They are thinking about, you know, how strong is the desire to eat? What's the binge risk here? How long and

how hard should I push someone before I do a repeat or a diet break? A good coach is considering all of these subjective and objective factors to make a decision for a bodybuilder, for them or ideally with them, with their input. And that is there's no reason why that isn't something that you cannot consider on your own. And that can happen with or without a coach. You know, the, the level of involvement of a coach should change over an athlete's career, if you will. And it becomes much more leading from the front versus leading from the back over time.

So, you know, when you're working with a junior athlete or a first time competitor, you're holding their hand and you're saying, here's the path in front of us. I'm going to take you through it. We're going to talk about the experience. How do you feel? Are you good? What decision do you want to make? All right, cool. We'll take a left here. But you're taking much more of a leadership role because they don't know what to expect. They don't know what's normal. Should this hurt this bad? Should I be this hungry? How hard should this be? What foods can I eat? All of these questions and this experience is what a first time competitor has. When you're in your fourth season like me for example, and I've had a Alberto Nunez in my corner is kind of my primary coach, if you will, since 09 and a little bit towards the tail end of 07 he was just more of a friend who is also competing. Now he has his hand on my shoulder. He's behind me, you know, and he's like, let me help you see some things you might not have seen. So as an example, I think I shared with you just earlier today that I tracked my first few days on fit genie. Not because I wasn't accurate, but just because I was a little nervous. Like I hit a little bit of a stall. I didn't see my skin folds go down for my last check in. My body weight was a little stalled, but I was looking better. So I had some confusing metrics of data. And so we've decided now, okay, I'm going to hit lower, lower macros on my low days or lower rough target calories. Not that I'm necessarily hitting really specific targets, but I'm pushing hard. And then once I see progress, then we're going to refit. So to ensure that I am actually pushing hard, I'm, you know, tracking here and there especially when I have something that's a little less calculable, you know. So it's more of really peace of mind. It's a safety blanket. But for the first, from

December 18th until literally last week, I hadn't touched fit genie. I had a zero day streak, you know?

DANNY LENNON: Which is kind of almost unheard of for some people, like nine weeks through a contest prep and like, yeah, no tracking per se.

ERIC HELMS: Yeah.

DANNY LENNON: In that sense.

ERIC HELMS: Exactly. It was unheard of from me from 2007 all the way through to the 2012. And that's another really important piece here is that to some degree, I can't not know what my calorie intake is, my rough macro breakdown and my protein intake. So even when I'm not tracking, I know that I've been within, I've been with between 170 and 210 grams of protein this whole time, you know, which is roughly about a gram per pound for me on average. And I know that my calories on low days started around 1800 and 1900. Now there are a couple hundred calories lower than that and then my high days or close to 2,400-2,500. And I know, you know, how much cardio I'm doing. All of these things like I can't not know these metrics, but I also understand that hitting them super, super precisely at this point is actually less optimal than me thinking about how I feel and response to them. And that I, since we can't measure my exact caloric expenditure, measuring the output of how I feel, measuring the output of what happens on this scale and looking at the change in skin folds and the change visually and my performance in the gym, those are actually more useful metrics if you can have the emotional regulation to assess them objectively, which I'm pretty good at doing, but I've also got a coach to even help me further with that.

DANNY LENNON: Yeah. I want to ask you about, you mentioned a few times when we were talking about how this has been pretty enjoyable experience or as much as a contest prep can be and that you've really enjoyed going through this. And there's some kind of obvious reasons based on that strategy of why people might think of maybe there's less anxiety around having to track. It's less of a nuisance. It's nice that you can kind of be a bit more fluid at some of your meal choice. But I'm also wondering how much of that enjoyment for you is

down to the novelty of this process of seeing this as like, this is some sort of experiment for myself to see what will happen and because it's new, it's not maybe as monotonous as a lot of what a contest prep could be after those first few weeks where, okay, I got to put in my number, hit those and same in day in, day out.

ERIC HELMS: That's a really insightful Danny. I think you said a lot of things that are true for me and I haven't been on stage for eight years and I have developed a lot of really good habits over these eight years. I'd become much more of someone who is in it for the long haul, a lifestyle bodybuilder, a lifestyle powerlifter if you will. You know, I can effortlessly maintain myself right at the top of the 93 kg weight class. I can fluidly go in and, and out of of bulking or cutting by making small adjustments to my lifestyle. You know, you just watched me and my wife make dinner. We probably seem like a finely oiled machine except for me, you know, forgetting where I put the knife and shit like that. That's low carbs for you. But the point being is that I see this as a really enjoyable experiment and a learning experience. Like my comfort zone for contest prep is my fitness pal every day hit everything within five grams, knock out cardio, until they burned x number of calories shown on machine or estimated using tables or I wear a heart rate monitor, burning those calories, count those steps, hit those macros, check to see what my percentage of my body weight losses every week and make algorithm like based decisions based on what happens. And then occasionally give my subjective feelings to a coach and you tell me, am I being too crazy and we can change things. You're the boss, but I'm the machine who will do this. And that's I've done that for three seasons. It's worked well. But there are some inherent limitations there. I mean, the human body's senses. I mean like man, like if you've ever watched like how we try to make machines that can visually recognize things and move and we get these little clips from Darpa where it's like the machine that really jumped well and it's freaky because it moves like a human. But then you watch all the blooper reels, like the thousands of trials where the thing can't even like touch the door handle and you're like, wow, what we do effortlessly without even thinking when we're not paying attention of just reaching over to open up a door and getting the

distance right and the amount of rent on a force and pressure. Like we're incredibly sensitive machines and we can eat based on satiety and hunger. We can make decisions. We can make observations and it's always going to be more accurate than using all these external metrics. If you have that awareness, if you pushed yourself out of that comfort zone and if you start to draw associations between how you feel and what you see using some biofeedback, actually getting some objective data, but then correlating that objective data to your subjective experience. And I think that's just been really cool because I'm learning I'm – I wasn't even paying attention to certain things before like, who cares how hungry I am? I'm going to do whatever is necessary.

And now I'm like, well man, when I'm really that hungry I also look really shitty and I'm also performing poorly and maybe I'm pushing the deficit too hard like, oh yeah, I walked a lot today. Like, you know, like just thinking about things like, you know, it is true that what isn't measured isn't managed. But now that I'm thinking more qualitatively and big picture and subjective, I'm realizing there's a lot of things that you can't measure

So now that I'm thinking more about the output, it's actually opened me up to a lot of other options. It's not something I could have done in 2011 not something I could have done in 2009. It's not something I recommend to anyone until they get to a point where they're not scared of coming out of their comfort zone. You know. And I think the final piece to it is that my motivation for why I compete is more intrinsic now. It was pretty intrinsic before, but it's much more intrinsic. So I'm not feeling pressure of, oh shit, I'm a 3DMJ coach. If I don't get shredded, people won't respect us or they'll think my nutrition degree was a waste or under some nerd or I've got to get a pro card. That's all that matters to me or man, I got to do this for the Instagram follows. Like I genuinely enjoy, as crazy as that sounds, the process seeing my body change, manipulating my nutrition and actually pushing myself to a discomfort level and trying to manage my life like it's a fun challenge.

DANNY LENNON: Yeah.

ERIC HELMS: So, yeah.

DANNY LENNON: That reminds me, I was going to ask, and as someone who's obviously a non bodybuilder, I'm only trying to look from the outside of what I've seen in you and some other people who talk about this. particularly people who do this for literally the love of the sport and very much one of the huge things about bodybuilding that is maybe not present and a lot of other sports is that inherent art form aspect of it. If you just look at the competition itself, it's like you're a presenting this certain physique in a certain way with subjective measurement as well from judges. But it's kind of that the showed itself is this artistic kind of form to, and I think maybe again, correct me if I'm wrong, but with the vast increase in knowledge that's more widespread over the last number of years, I think it's undoubted that the average conditioning level for a natural bodybuilder has gone up. That mean average is way higher than it was. And the ability to track so many things is almost, yeah, if you give yourself a long enough time and track these things, it can be a bit more predictable than before. And now with this, it's almost like there's some sort of art to what you're doing, right? You're not, you might have called yourself a machine, but you're almost going the other way. Right. It's not just this input/output machine. Here is my macros, these, exactly. And this gives me a predictable change in my body composition and I just have to do that for long enough. Now it's like I'm using all this, these human things and using my own pattern recognition to make my own choices and try and end up with this final products that I am going to present.

ERIC HELMS: Exactly. I'm learning to play the instrument that is Eric comes in prep, you know, and it's a lot of fun and there is definitely an artistic element like things I didn't think of as much previously like I'm growing out my beard and people like, why are you doing that? You know, I used to do that just because I was too tired to shave, you know, cause I was managing so many variables and then I just shaved late, you know, and it, so I'd have some man fuzz. But now I'm actually growing it out because I'm trying to replicate some photos of Frank Zane when he had this kind of Jack Jesus-ish look, it's kind of homage to someone who I see is also an artist with his own body. So I'm going to take some shots on

the beach in Hawaii when I go compete there. Try to replicate those pictures, you know, horribly fail because this is one of the guys who scored perfectly Olympia three times. Mr Olympia, you know, beat Arnold at the Mr. America and is generally considered the standard for aesthetic. However, I'm going to take the pictures regardless, and just post them up side by side because it's something that is enjoyable for me and it's kind of I'm walking the path of people who I respect in a sport that I love and there's a certain element of self expression and it's more fun to and more enjoyable and I feel more connected to the sport if I'm trying to do this artistic self expression and I'm doing it through the unique process of observing how I respond on beyond just a numbers based approach. And that's not to say that I'm not still hitting at least 200 grams of protein today and then I kept myself at 1700 calories and that I am going to do cardio on Sunday. Like there's, I don't want people to get it twisted, like there is –

DANNY LENNON: I am going to go out and eat whatever today I'm kind of like, I can kind of feel myself getting leaner.

ERIC HELMS: My soul says I can have a cheeseburger and I'm like, no, like –

DANNY LENNON: Identify as being leaner.

ERIC HELMS: Yeah, exactly. Yeah like I'm going to get on stage and to be like I have straight glue. It's like, no you don't. I'm like, well I feel like I do. I think, yeah, that's what I want don't want people to get twisted. I think if you're super analytical, you're an immediate kind of knee jerk response to this is going to be, oh this is suboptimal. But I can legitimately say that my [00:56:12] the way I look, my training, one funny thing that Alberto and I've been laughing about as, and my quads had been coming in really well and I'm notoriously someone who the quads come in last and they're very variable like of quads in morning and smooth at night. And I think that really had to do with just stress levels and cortisol and then water retention and the place that I tend to spill over when I do, like if I did a carb refeed is my quads faded first.

So it's like I almost, we used to laugh about it like in 2009 I had a really, really rough year in addition to

contest prep. And my quads were kind of this metric for how stressed am I like did did you lose like you [00:56:49] this morning and now it looks like your 10 weeks out, you've had a rough day and now I'm just noticing my quads came in early. They stay tight, I look good. So it's, I'm seeing all of these kinds of side effects of being able to better manage my stress that I think is having positive physiological outcomes. So yeah.

DANNY LENNON: I'd love if we get a time machine and send you back to like 2011 Eric in Alberta who are chatting, you rush in the door and say, guys, I got the answer to the quad problem. Stop tracking. And they just look at you like, what the fuck is this guy saying? It would be pretty awesome.

ERIC HELMS: A, travel going backwards is real. That's crazy. Stephen Hawkings was wrong? And then B, you're crazy and to go back to the future where you're doing it suboptimally dumb ass. Yeah.

DANNY LENNON: If we're good for one more question, I'd love to ask –

ERIC HELMS: Sure.

DANNY LENNON: You can keep this as short as you want. Last week when we're having dinner, you mentioned something to me and I thought it was like pretty profound but didn't get a chance to go into a bit deeper. You talked about some of the things you're trying to do with 3DMJ as a coaching team and we were kind of talking about lessons people learn through a contest prep and a competition season and that you can learn a ton of things about your body, how you're responding, prep, just about your maybe discipline, all these different things you can learn. But you said that like one of the core focus is now is to look at have sit down and talk to the athletes afterwards and say, okay, not only what have you learned about this prep that relates to you being a bodybuilder, but in what ways can you apply these other areas of your life? Can you maybe give some examples of where that might apply in and what that kind of conversation typically looks like?

ERIC HELMS: Absolutely. Yeah. I think anyone who knows enough bodybuilders know that they're in credibly detail oriented people who can at least flip that switch and they're able to achieve things that are impressive. Like

we just stare at bodybuilders because it, even when you don't like the look, you can look at that and go, man, there's a lot that went into that. And that is something that many times also comes with a need to stay within certain confines and create constraints and control your environment. Control is something that every bodybuilder can relate to. It gives you a sense of empowerment. It gives you a sense of ability and competence. And if you're honest, when you don't feel in control as a bodybuilder, you often feel less than or emotionally distraught. And this is why that post contest period where that the goal disappears and if you didn't plan for it, all of a sudden you're gaining weight and you feel like you lost your, you like you had this card that said you're a bodybuilder, you're part of the club, and all of a sudden you can't control yourself eating cheeseburgers. How you've taken it away? I have no self identity. The post contest blues that struggle period isn't just, I don't like looking fat. A lot of it comes from this loss of sense of identity because now you're no longer seem to have that discipline and control.

Now that relates to what I'm talking about because when bodybuilders stay in their shell, stay in their constraints and they develop all these skills, but they only apply at the body building that can end up becoming a negative thing because all of the resources, all of their emotion, all of their energy is going into this process and this sport but man, those are some valuable skills, right? To be able to control that level of detail, manage variables, control your stress, control your environment sometimes to the detriment of your social life. The fact that you can do that is something that is really rare, really unique. And Man, there's a whole other positive side to that sword. And we just want to get our athletes realizing that, that if you apply that same work ethic and ability to discern variables, pay attention, that can really benefit not only you but the world, you know.

So without sounding melodramatic bodybuilding I think is what really unlocked my potential to be more effective at what I do. My Ph.D. is in no small part a result of the discipline I learned and the self confidence I built from being able to take myself through a prep. You know, dealing with the loss of my father something even that difficult prep became kind of a cathartic

experience as it happened at the same time in 09. So dealing with grief, dealing with loss you know, connecting with people. That's another interesting thing about bodybuilding is that I never would have met Alberto like outside of bodybuilding, I never would've met Jeff for Brad or Andrea. It brings people from disparate backgrounds together and you bond over this shared elective trauma essentially. But yeah, man, the skills that we like pushing through a high volume leg day when you are on low volume carbs and you have no body fat left and it's just because it's what you have to do like man you can apply that to your business. You can apply that to tough times in your relationships. It can be applied to so much. And I think the process of bodybuilding, and this is true of most sports, it teaches you new depths of effort and willpower that you have and ability and competence and resilience. And I think if you can apply that outside of that little comfort zone, nice little shell of the sport to your life, your family, your business, helping other people, paying it forward, I think you can accomplish a lot. And I don't think I'm a shining example of accomplishing a lot, but I've certainly accomplished a lot more than I ever would have if I had kind of stayed in my shell or kind of rested on my laurels and only applied it in the small little area. So I think the success of 3DMJ is a great example of the five of us trying to do that. And that's just something where we want to pay it forward and we try to have more intentional conversations with our athletes. You know, John Wooden is a great coach. He's one of the most legendary ones and he always talks about it in many different ways, multiple different quotes that I build a good people and then I do that through the sport. You know, I build good humans first and then, and then they become good athletes.

And, you know, the order's a little different for us because we don't get them in their freshman year when they're playing at UCLA. Sometimes we get them when they're 45 and they've already done 10 seasons. But that's something that is always at the front of our mind. We try to build the career of an athlete and we asked them questions that they might not want to ask themselves about what comes after the sport or why are you doing the sport, what comes after the season? And just trying to make them really bring the skills and the

mindset and the mentality out of contest prep into the world. And that's why we're called, you know, 3D muscle journey instead of team shredded to the bone, you know, and we have dedication, desire and discipline built in and the word journeys in there not end point or outcome. So yeah, that's kind of our whole ethos and it's become more and more intentional over time. And I think I would like to think to the benefit of the folks who work with us.

DANNY LENNON: That's awesome man. And probably a great way to finish up. So before we do let people know where they can find you on the Internet and anything else that you want to point them towards.

ERIC HELMS: Yeah, check us out at teamgetsshredded.com. Check us out at a team3dmusclejourney.com. That's the number 3, the letter d, then musclejourney.com and that's kind of a one stop shop to find everything else I do. You can find a link to monthly applications and strength sport, which I know Danny talks about a lot. You can find links to my books, The Muscle and Strength Pyramid. This is a training one, nutrition one both about how to program your diet and also you're training for strength or physique. And then there's also a links to our blog, our podcast and you can also follow me at Helms3DMJ and then most recently at iron culture podcast where myself and Omar delve into the why behind why we lift and we're just getting off the ground there. We're probably going to have Danny on there soon.

DANNY LENNON: Sweet. Tank your numbers.

ERIC HELMS: That's right. We don't want to get too big too soon. So we're going to bring you in to bring [01:05:20]

DANNY LENNON: Get rid of this podcast competition. Just make it a disaster. Yeah Awesome. For everyone listening, I will link up to everything Eric just said in the show notes. So go and check that all out if you haven't done so already. Hit him up on social media, slide into those DMs and yeah, thank you for listening. Eric thank you for the conversation.

ERIC HELMS: My pleasure. Thanks for having me on.