

# THE WEIGHT BEHIND BARS

Prison workouts channel anger and build trust. So why are jail gyms in the US at risk? *MH* finds out what it's like for weights to be your reason to live  
Words and photography Jonathan Green

**C**oiled razor wire surmounts the 16ft fences that hem the recreation yard of Montana's State Penitentiary. Armed prison officers perch behind bullet-proof glass atop 100ft guard towers. It's here that George Demers' redemption takes place at precisely 2pm every day.

When Demers walks through the yard towards the weight stacks and barbells, past the murderers and rapists, he does so with an ascetic economy of movement. Other cons slouching against the wall of the weights hut murmur to each other warily. The yard is where scores are settled, where you're most likely to earn a shiv in the back for a misdirected glance, a perceived slight or an unpaid debt.

Most avoid eye contact with Demers. With his brawny physique and ginger stubble, he is known for protecting new, young inmates from gang rape or coercion by prison gangs. Guards often place vulnerable newcomers straight from Fish Row (as convicts refer to the cellblock where new inmates are put before being transferred to the main population) into this unlikely saviour's cell so that he can watch over them. "I will not let a young man come into this environment and be preyed upon sexually," the 44 year old told me earlier, his eyes humble and downcast.

Today's workout begins as he slips 270kg on to the burnished length of the bar-bell – at 230kg an Olympic ▶

Weights give prisoners a real lift – but gyms inside are at risk

◀ bar-bell will start to bow. In prison issue denim, Demers breathes deeply before squatting, his thick, callused hands grasping the bar. He rocks three times then explodes, hoisting the bar-bell aloft as his face turns a violent crimson. He tremors for a few seconds before setting the weight down, the ground quaking as he does.

Since he first walked through the prison gates as a callow 24 year old, he has so far endured 18 years within these walls. But that is not even a quarter of the hundred he must serve for killing his girlfriend after she admitted infidelity and he flew into a murderous rage. Back then he was, he admits, a violent drug dealer and heroin addict. "I'm sorry about my crime," he tells me. "Every day I am sorry."

Once behind bars Demers underwent a remarkable volte-face, renouncing tobacco and alcohol. He rejected meat, turning full vegan. Then he became obsessed with weight training, laying his hands on as much reading material as he could, studying anatomy, physiology and muscle structure.

It wasn't easy at first. He was attacked a couple of times in the yard by violent inmates who knew his victim and sought revenge. At the time the gym had a reputation as a dangerous hang-out: "One guy tried to stab me while I was on the bench press," he says. But Demers fought back and over time he was left alone. Slowly he added over 40kg of muscle to his frame, morphing from 68kg junkie to 110kg hulk. He broke a prison record by deadlifting 318kg – a third of a ton – and winning a powerlifting competition. Terrified that he might have his weightlifting privileges taken away, his prison record is unblemished. Training is everything to him. "I've studied philosophy, looked into all the different religions, read the Bible, the Koran," he tells me between sets. "But I haven't got as much out of any of that as I have lifting. Weights to me are spiritual."

**Changes on the inside**

Yet prison weightlifting in America has never been more controversial. In the early '90s prison became viewed not as a rehabilitative tool but simply as punishment. Arizona was the first state to remove all weightlifting equipment

from their prisons. "The public saw inmates going in bad and coming out bigger and badder," said one Arizona corrections officer.

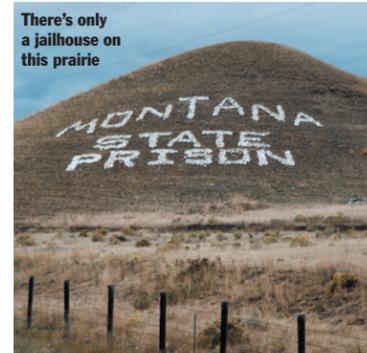
Other states followed: California, Oklahoma, Alaska, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Mississippi. Some outlawed upper body enhancement while others, like Louisiana, restricted the weight inmates could lift to 45kg. **Montana is one of the few places in which weightlifting is still sanctioned.**

Each year politicians attempt to ban weights in prisons. In 1999 Republican Randy "Duke" Cunningham tried to push through the "No Frills Prison Act", banning weightlifting on a federal level alongside tobacco consumption, while also lowering the quality of prison food. Ironically, he himself became a convict in March 2006. Found guilty of tax evasion and conspiring to pocket \$2.4 million in bribes, he was sentenced to eight years.

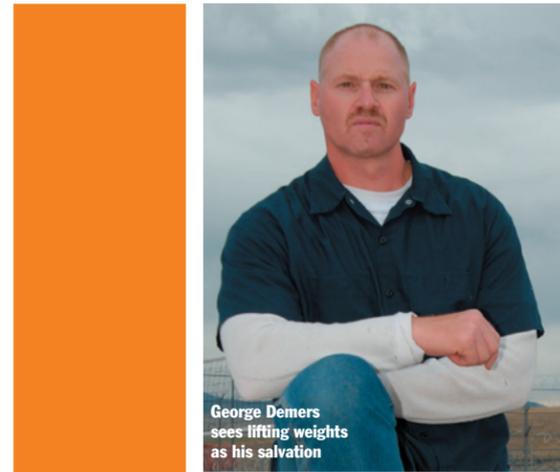
Plenty of persuasive arguments are employed by its detractors: convicts muscle up to overpower guards; when they leave prison they are brawnier and more dangerous; weight training makes convicts even more aggressive; weights can be used as weapons or escape tools. But weight training in prison has a rich legacy, too, stretching back to the '40s. In some penitentiaries there would be regular powerlifting meets where members of the public would come in to compete against the inmates. The pursuit was seen as a noble one, an exercise in discipline and self-respect.

So are the weights in American prisons making prisoners stronger and meaner? Or is there, as George Demers testifies, redemption and an easing of tensions at the end of a session?

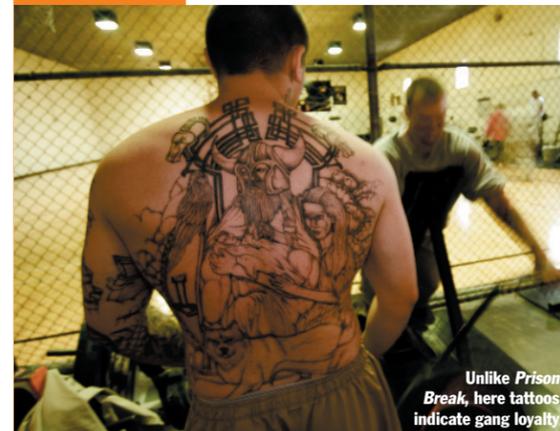
Once inside the double perimeter fence of Montana State Prison, visitors



There's only a jailhouse on this prairie



George Demers sees lifting weights as his salvation



Unlike Prison Break, here tattoos indicate gang loyalty

**"I'VE READ THE BIBLE AND THE KORAN BUT I HAVEN'T GOT AS MUCH OUT OF THAT AS I HAVE FROM LIFTING"**



In prison, keeping your chin up is vital



Outdoor workout privileges are hard-won and easily lost



Fenced off from society, but footsied on self-improvement

drive past the grey slab of the maximum-security block. To the side of the building is a cream-coloured trailer home, otherwise known as the death chamber. It was here in August that David Dawson was executed by lethal injection. He had murdered Monica and David Rodstein and their 11-year-old son Andrew at a motel in Billings, Montana, in 1986.

"All the inmates wanted to know when he was executed was whether this was going to cut into their weights time," says William Sanders, recreation

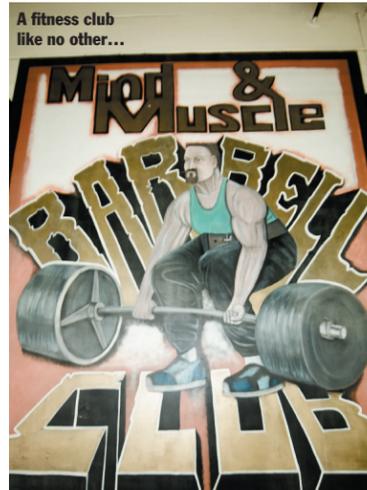
officer in charge of weightlifting. The 1300 capacity prison is unique in that it offers powerlifting competitions to inmates in July and December of every year. Those who take part join the Mind & Muscle Bar-Bell Club. "Weightlifting is the closest these guys ever get to being free," says Sanders.

**The rule of the bar**

The prison is divided into High Security and Low Security, each with its own gym, but the latter boasts an outdoor weights area too. In the "High Side" gym, a few inmates play basketball surrounded by bars, weights and machines. A group of Hispanic inmates see my camera, drop what they are doing and stride out of the gym, scowling. The smell is acrid and there's palpable tension in the air. **Two white inmates with tattoos of Norse gods done in blue ink – unmistakable jailhouse etchings with biro ink – pump away furiously.** Busy pushing iron on the preacher curl and dressed in prison issue beige scrubs is Larry Seybert, 47. He's an ox of a ▶



Putting in some serious legwork

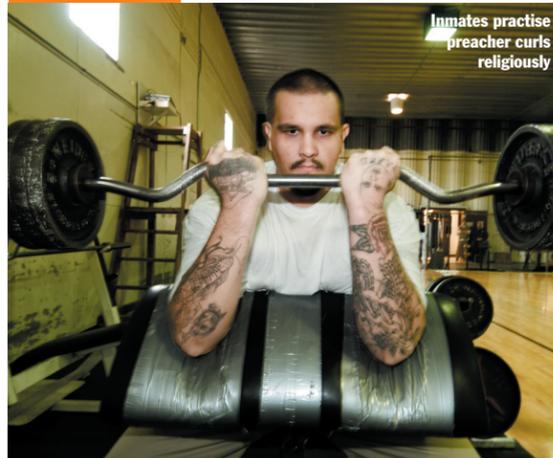


A fitness club like no other...

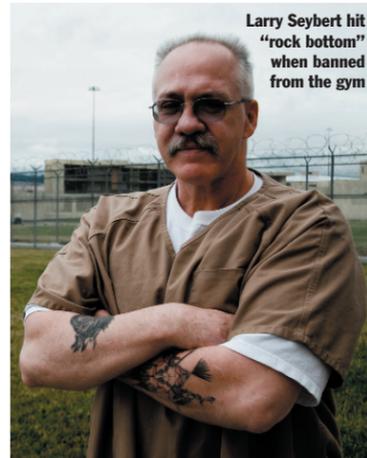
**"THE MOST DEADLY PEOPLE ARE THE AVERAGE SIZE GUYS. THEY'RE THE ONES WHO'LL STAB YOU AND FILL YOU FULL OF HOLES!"**



Not your average health club exterior



Inmates practise preacher curls religiously



Larry Seybert hit "rock bottom" when banned from the gym

◀ man serving 30 years for robbing a country club at gunpoint while on crystal meth – on top of that he recently received another ten for fighting with prison officers. Seybert has only just been released from the maximum-security unit where he has spent the past two and a half years. While there he was in lockdown for 23-and-a-half hours a day and, crucially, had no access to weights.

"I hit friggin' rock bottom, man," he says, his huge shoulders slumping. "It was like coming off drugs. I felt terrible. Now every day is like a holiday to me."

Perhaps the best indication of how prison weight training works in practice is the way inmates ensure they keep their weights privileges. "They would take this stuff away in a heartbeat if there were problems with it," says Seybert. "The cardinal rule is that we police ourselves here. If one fucks it up, they fuck it up for everyone." He narrows his eyes and gives a throaty laugh: "If someone messed it up for everyone else he would want a transfer to another prison quickly."

For most inmates training provides a much-needed release from the stress of prison. "You know when you release the pressure valve on a truck and release all that building steam?" explains Randolph William, a 31-year-old transferee from prison in California. "That's what weights are like for us."

Professor Steve Edwards at the Oklahoma State University, and a member of the US Olympic Committee Registry in Sport Psychology, agrees. "Weightlifting requires huge amounts of energy, which means prisoners relieve frustrations," he says. "There's nothing about it which

would lead to being more aggressive, other than perhaps its potential to reinforce ideas of masculinity and leadership. To say something is wrong with it is like blaming the pen when the words don't come out right."

### Strong arguments

But does it produce more dangerous offenders? George Demers is quick to refute such claims. "It does not promote criminality, absolutely not," he says. "The most dangerous people in this environment are the 70kg guys of average size. They're the ones who'll stab you and fill you full of holes. Most



Weightlifting builds trust as well as muscles

of your lifers have been engaged in the philosophy of weightlifting. They are the most well-behaved and docile in here. On the outside, it only takes a guy to be able to pull a trigger." There are others, admits George, who, "get half an inch on their arms and an attitude", but that's it. Many opponents to weightlifting cite the fact that it produces more testosterone in a place already dangerously brimful with the stuff. But this is contentious to say the least. While it has been demonstrated that a workout may produce small amounts of testosterone, this is minimal and quite normal. According to endocrinologist Richard Spark, Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard, "Weightlifting absolutely does not produce more testosterone."

Defenders of prison training say the discipline needed for a body-building or powerlifting regime is not something that sits well with impulsive criminals.

"Every time they show an Arnie movie the gym gets busy the next day," says Demers with a laugh. "They think, 'If I hit the iron I'll look like that.' But

then they find out it is hard, that it requires discipline, effort and, well, a lot of them don't like that part."

For those inmates who are serious about weight training, a regime can be hard to maintain. Prisoners have "rec time" for 50 minutes, twice a day, at 2pm and 6pm. But since most have prison jobs the first shift is usually missed, leaving just 50 minutes a day to squeeze in a session. Three years ago they were allowed creatine and other supplements but this was stopped due to pressure from politicians. As a vegan, Demers finds it especially hard to ingest the protein he needs. He also claims that the "terrible prison food" is designed to keep prisoners sluggish and lacks crucial protein. It only makes him more determined.

### The Montana Redemption

In America's gang-dominated, racially-segregated prison system, any relief from the threat of violence and frustration is welcomed. The US incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world. One out of every

150 adults is in custody at any one time. Between 1995 and 2005 the prison population grew by 3.4% every year; it is now well over 2 million.

As Jason Larcam, a member of a white prison gang, said to me: "If they took our weights away there would be fights daily. Maybe some guy doesn't like the way I looked at him. Instead of hitting the weight pile, he wants to hit me." He pulls up his sleeve to reveal two lightning bolts, earned, he says, for stabbing another inmate. Prison is already a violent place; remove the cathartic means with which prisoners quash their frustrations and it stands to reason that it will become more so.

"The gym is a good place to deal with stress. It's where the prisoners can think about repaying their debt to society," says warden Mike Mahoney.

He is strident in his defence of weightlifting. "In corrections, you have to look at the product you are putting back on the street," he says. "The weights help with their self-esteem; they give themselves a goal and they see the results in the mirror. It teaches them to manage their time. They can do this for the rest of their life – on the outside, too."

On paper, the positives clearly outweigh the negatives: weightlifting promotes discipline and self-esteem; it reduces tensions and healthcare costs, boosts morale and fosters camaraderie; most importantly, it makes prison safer. Yet still it's threatened. For now, though, Montana is secure.

George Demers was denied parole this year. Having failed at his hearing he was driven back to prison to serve out the other 80 or so years of his sentence. For many it would be too much to take, but through weight training he has found a sense of self-worth. At the end of 50 minutes, his face red and body fatigued, Demers makes the walk back to his cell in B Unit. Unlike other convicts' cells jammed with posters of bikini-clad women, hotrod cars and Polaroids of loved ones Demers' walls are completely bare. It feels more like a monk's retreat. "I chose not to decorate it," he says with an unwavering gaze, "because this is not my home. It's a temporary stop." **MB**