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Journalism

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### Christian Papic - Better Today than Yesterday

I cannot help but notice the number of short, buff men at Gold's Gym Express this afternoon. While this cliché of overcompensation is considered a ubiquitous fixture of the fitness world, this many of them being in one gym at the same time seems a bit preposterous. I wonder aloud if there's a Secret International Alliance of Short Muscular Fellows (the SIASMF), which holds meetings to determine the logistics which allow such a schedule overlap for these men. Understandably, my query is met by a "What the fuck?" from my workout buddy Christian Papic.

Christian is either the first or the last person you'd want to work out with - he has an intimate knowledge of anaerobic exercise, is accommodating of different strength levels, and will never drag you to a ridiculous session of CrossFit. That being said, he almost exclusively wears tank tops, speaks with a very bro-y inflection, and has an aesthetic not unlike Johnny Bravo.

In order to profile Christian as accurately as possible, I want to interact with him in his natural habitat. I've found this in the weight room, where he attains a state of zen I had not anticipated and is immediately able to shed the burdens of the outside world like a skin. This is where I will see him.

We begin with a bit of small talk, as we're yet to become fully comfortable with one another. He tells me that he loves to exercise, and, interestingly, used to be quite scrawny. I'm surprised to learn this, and ask how often he works out in order to maintain his muscular physique.

"Every day, bro. It took a long time to get where I am today."

Impressive. Christian is clearly a man of considerable discipline. We now shift to the present.

I am told today's workout will focus on the chest and arms, and we walk towards the back of the gym until we reach the incline bench press.

"Why incline?" I ask, "Isn't it basically a bench press that's more of a pain in the ass?"

"Yeah, it sucks, but it works the tops of your pecs. And they're hard to reach. It's what gives you that great cleavage definition," he replies while pointing at my chest.

Defined cleavage equates to better tips at my serving job, so I don't argue. In between reps on the bench, I ask Christian about how he ended up pursuing his undergraduate degree in Georgetown, Texas, seventeen hundred miles from his hometown of Darien, Connecticut. He laughs, and reminds me that he's twenty-three - unusually old for an undergrad. This tells me it's quite the story, which he begins in Darien.

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It is 2012, and Christian Paptic gleefully dumps an entire bag of pizza rolls into his microwave. He pitched a winning game today, in a decisive match that will allow his

high school baseball team to advance to conference. These pizza rolls were earned, he thought to himself.

After the microwave beeps, but not before they're cool, he begins to inhale his dinner. He doesn't have much time to eat before his father returns home to talk to him about choosing where he'll go to college. This conversation has been brewing in the background of his family life for quite some time now, ever since his parents announced their divorce. Even though they split when he was eighteen and not significantly distraught over it, he found it difficult to be his usual confrontational self with them; especially his father. His father had always dreamt of a life of baseball stardom for Christian, which he half-heartedly shared due to the convenience of his athleticism. Still, it was the second semester of his senior year and he had yet to find a university to attend (i.e. play ball at).

Christian had loved Darien and many of the other areas of the northeast centered around New York City (which he considers his spiritual place of origin) but now both of his parents planned to leave Connecticut, and simply existing in its space began to give him heartache. This growing need to distance himself from home botched his plans of attending Central Connecticut State University, and left his near future up in the air.

When his father returned home from work, he set his keys on the counter and gave Christian an obviously rehearsed look meant to prepare him for the conversation ahead. But having foreseen sitting through that emotional hell, Christian had made inquiries to several schools around the country a few days prior. Thus, the conversation was shortened to:

“Alright Christian, we’re going to have to talk about --”

“-- I’m going to South Carolina, dad. To Wofford College. It’s D1, and I’ll get to play baseball.”

As long as he was playing D1 baseball, he knew his father wouldn’t make an issue of him moving away.

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Back in the weight room, we move to the next lift. My chest is already on fire, and I’m mortified to see Christian set up a different bench for dumbbell incline press.

“Alright, I’ll ask the obvious question: why are we doing the same thing again?”

“It’s not the same thing. Now you’ve got two weights to control instead of just one, and each side of your body is worked harder trying to keep them balanced. If you want to get stronger, this is how you do it.”

Noted.

I surprise myself and make it through the first set pretty easily, and my new trainer instructs me on the proper way to spot a dumbbell lift - from the elbows, to keep the arms from splaying outward under too much stress. That outcome sounds incredibly unpleasant, and I take great care in making sure his elbows are where they should be. Once I match his rhythm, I zone out a bit and look around the room.

Gyms are excellent for people-watching. There are mirrors on practically every vertical surface, and everyone is fixated on themselves. I notice a very obese man on an elliptical across the room. Working out at that size must be so difficult. I’m a pretty skinny guy, and when I exercise I can tell absolutely no difference in my body from day

to day; for him it must feel like emptying an ocean with a bucket. But that's why most people don't work out every day: unlike Christian, we're hung up on instant gratification.

Christian finishes his set, and I take my turn on the bench while he takes his turn scoping out the room. After my eighth (and final) rep, he signals for me to look in the mirror towards the entrance. In walks a ten wearing a pink Lulu Lemon shirt, and surprisingly, not too many people have noticed yet (doesn't she know the SIASMF is meeting here?). Babe watch in the gym is mandatory for guys, and requires constant vigilance. It's the only appeasement we receive for the poetic cruelty that takes place here - that men encounter some of the most gorgeous women in the last place they want to be hit on.

The woman in pink rounds a corner to an area of the gym with tons of mats and yoga balls, and the obese man exits to the parking lot. With my two main distractors out of sight, I prod further into the story of Christian's pilgrimage.

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Two months into his freshman year, Christian was having a fantastic time at Wofford College. While his high school in Darien could be considered low-key and conservative, his college experience in South Carolina seemed like it was designed by MTV (think 90's spring break in Mexico, not whatever shit they're peddling these days). He was pitching excellently on the baseball team, and had already established himself as a starter. He was popular with teammates and girls alike, and partied more nights than he didn't. And though his GPA wasn't anything to write home about, it was high enough to keep him playing (on and off the field).

Unfortunately, this time in paradise was doomed to an early demise: it is three a.m. some night in mid-October, and Christian is dancing shirtless on a table in the baseball house, complete with a rubber horse mask. And though the beat is grooving, he manages to hold a beer in one hand with minimal spillage - quite the task for someone so magnificently intoxicated.

He hops down, sticks the landing, and heads upstairs to the bedrooms that double as boutique pharmacies on nights such as these. It's been a long, exhausting day of baseball games, homework, and celebration, and a man can't get through it unaided. In the last door on the left is a group of three or four people, some teammates, some not, huddled around a coffee table. He enters the room, and finds his presence is not welcome. I guess they're not on my level yet, he thinks. On to the next room, then. Across the hall, he finds a much warmer reception upon his entrance:

“EYYYY Papi, come do some lines with us!”

My, what a lovely thing to say.

Back in Darien, Christian was barely able to smoke an errant J, but now he practically had the entire world of illicit substances at his fingertips. Oh, what a wonderland. He graciously accepts, and adds to the veritable cocktail that is his bloodstream. He later recalls that Adderall got him to the party, while cocaine got him through it.

Fast forward to the next morning, and the hangover of all hangovers is intersected by a phone call from his coach: there's been a change in policy, and now players can randomly be subjected to drug-testing during the off-season as well as the

season. And as fate would have it, Christian Papic is one of only five baseball players who drew the short straws.

Christian's reaction to this news is somewhat hazy to him, but he tells me that he was too hungover to do anything rash. He freaked out of course, but mostly in his head. And without even leaving his bed, was able to reach a point of resignation with the matter.

He peed in a cup the following morning, and was promptly cut from the team and expelled from Wofford College in the middle of his first semester.

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We're now doing a type of tricep exercise called skull-crushers, but I am unable to focus. How could he let that happen? Wasn't there anything he could've done? Surely he could have acquired some clean pee within twenty-four hours?

I ask him all these things, and his answers surprise me.

"You know, dude, yeah. I probably could've squirmed my way out of it with some clean pee. But to be real, that party wasn't a rare thing. We did shit like that every weekend, and usually more. I was partying too hard, and I was enjoying it more than school and baseball put together. I knew it was all going to catch up to me, and I'm not Houdini or anything. I don't try to escape my mistakes. I did all that shit, so I owned up to it."

"But your dad... he must've been furious! I mean, D1 baseball was clearly out of the picture at that point. What did you tell him, and how did he react?" I ask.

“Oh, it was horrible, bro. I told him everything that happened, minus the horse mask and other stuff, and he could barely believe it. He was fucking pissed! It was only two months into the semester, I didn’t even get to play a real game! I think he was more pissed about the baseball than the school, though. He told me whatever I did from there, he wasn’t gonna pay for.”

“That does sound terrible, I hope he feels better about it now. Is that when he realized baseball was perhaps more his dream than yours?”

“Definitely a little bit, yeah. But I still wanted to play. That’s how I found Southwestern, actually. I called over a dozen schools around the country trying to find one with a team that would let me walk on in the middle of the semester. Southwestern was the only one that would - I had talked to the head coach, Thomas. He’s a fucking idiot by the way. My T-ball coach was better. Anyways, I called Thomas and used my D1 athletics pedigree to get my foot in the door. It worked, and I headed down to Georgetown without even visiting the campus first.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah, and paying my way was rough. I was lucky, though, because I have some cousins with a farm that live about half an hour away. They gave me work, and I busted my ass out there for the rest of the year. You should’ve seen my city-boy ass out there, it was hilarious. And eventually my dad saw that I was serious, and bankrolled me again. He definitely saved me from that damn farm, and I’ll never forget that.”



We go back to the workout, and don't speak for awhile. We've moved on to dips, another tricep exercise. After killing my arms on the incline press, I'm only able to do four.

I am quite impressed with Christian's character. Had I been in his shoes, especially at that age, I doubt I would've acted with such responsibility. Well, responsibility isn't quite right. *Accountability*. Christian holds himself accountable for his mistakes, and is humble of his successes.

He is now one semester away from graduating with a degree in communications, and lives in the Phi Delta Theta house on campus for the summer. He no longer plays baseball, and he has found the transition relieving. Apparently he had been playing so long that he had to quit in order to discover how much he didn't like it - a revelation that his father has since come to accept with grace. They have a strong relationship, and Christian visits him in New York (where he now resides) as often as he can.

Triceps seem to be a good stopping point, and we're both feeling the burn. We grab some towels and walk over to the bastion of American chitchat, the water fountain. I thank him for the workout, and tell him I only have one more question:

"That really is a great story, Christian, but I've got to know - what drives you to move so quickly forward from your trials and tribulations? I mean, think about your move to South Carolina caused by the rift in your home, and your mid-semester switch to paying your way at Southwestern. You hadn't even visited either school. Wasn't it all a bit rapid? How do you keep yourself oriented in navigating life? Okay, that's three questions, but I think you see what I'm getting at."

The wisdom of his answer impresses me.

“Honestly man, the reason I move forward from my mistakes is the same reason why I work out every day. You can’t change the past, but you can say ‘I’ll do better next time.’ I do a little better in the gym each time, and in life I just make sure there is a next time. I easily could’ve gone home after Wofford College and sat on my ass, but then I wouldn’t be this close to graduating. Getting a degree and getting fit doesn’t happen overnight, you know? I just try to put the work in every day, and be better today than I was yesterday.”

Author's note-

This is my favorite of the three articles I wrote in Journalism. It required me to do some actual reporting and story building, because it wasn't a personal narrative written from memory, nor was it a comprehensive narrative like the third assignment, for which my subject was much less reliable and relatable. I also learned that I can down some espresso and double my writing speed on the morning of a due date. Much was learned from this assignment, and I was a pleasure to write.