

Second Home

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In December 2018, I transferred from Tapout Fitness gym to Blink Fitness. I most definitely do not regret making this decision. Blink Fitness offered a better gym membership price, better equipment, and better customer service. If I had never met Anthony at Tapout, I would've never made this change.

It started with Anthony saying, "Why you lifting that baby ass weight? You can go heavier than that." We were at Tapout doing deadlifts when he approached me saying this.

"I'm weak," I replied. "I don't think I can go heavier. Plus I'm afraid of adding more weight on to the bar."

If it wasn't for Anthony, I honestly would not be where I'm at now with my fitness lifestyle. He was the one who encouraged me to try out bodybuilding. Bodybuilding is a sport involving strenuous physical exercises in order to strengthen and enlarge the muscles of the body.

Blink Fitness is located in Harlem at 116th Street, between Lenox Avenue and Fifth Avenue. You can't miss the gym with those big bright white letters glowing from down the street. Once you enter the gym, the first thing you see is the front counter where you scan your card. The second thing you see is the staff behind the counter: very welcoming, funny, and kind. On top of that, they have great music playing in the background. I'm talking about Travis Scott, Lil Uzi, Sheck Wes, J.Cole, Bad Bunny. Once you pass the front counter, on the right hand side is the stretching area. A couple feet ahead of this area are rows of treadmills, stair masters, and ab coasters. Directly in front of this, you have squat racks, and at the far end away from them are bench presses. To finish it off, you have a whole row of dumbbells facing away from the bench press and machines.

When I enter the gym, the first thing I notice is whether it's packed or not with people. Most of the time, it's busy even at 7 a.m., and for that reason, I have to wait an extra 10 to 15 minutes for a specific machine or squat rack just to start of my exercise. While waiting those couple of minutes, Anthony and I usually go to the stretching area and start stretching and warming up. Anthony isn't just my coach or trainer; he's one of my close friends. In fact, he's like an older brother to me. Our bond is stronger than the love that Romeo and Juliet had for each other. If I ever need help with anything, he is always one of the very first people I get my help from.

When I met Anthony in March of 2018, I was amazed by his physical strength and appearance. Anthony is insanely big. He has biceps that are 17 inches big, legs that are 26 inches big, and forearms that are 13 inches big! I wish for the day when I would see myself as that big and strong. Anthony took me under his wing and started training me. He taught me how to perform using proper form during my lifts-which are squats, bench, and rack pulls.

The more I trained with Anthony, the more I saw my progress. Soon I could lift more and more weight and see my body taking shape. I remember one day we were at Blink hitting some chest using the bench press. I said to Anthony, "Yo bro, I want to compete in a men's physique competition and I want to take bodybuilding more seriously. Would you be down to help me on this journey?"

In this moment, everything changed. Anthony replied, "Bodybuilding isn't something you can just do because you think it's going to be easy. If you want to step on stage for the first time, you have to change your meal plans, consistently do

cardio, sacrifice the parties. Most of all, your state of mind is key, because that's where your desires come from and what pushes you to surpass your own damn limits. At the end of the day, it is going to be a battle with yourself; you are the only person who stands in your own way. You got that clear?"

Once I was given that motivational speech, a spark lit inside of me. I immediately started to take action. First, I tracked my macros. For instance, I needed 120-150 grams of protein, 200-220 grams of carbs, and 50 grams of fats per day. Then I started to focus each day's training on just one body part. Now, how I train depends on what exercises I do on any given day of the week. Most of the time, my training sessions start off with heavy lifting on the particular body part I'm working on that day. When it comes to leg day, I start off with squats. I make sure I tighten my back and poke my chest out while carrying the bar on my back, and also make sure I move ass-to-ground. I work up to a single of 315 pounds for 3 repetitions. Then I go back down to 275 pounds, and start doing two sets for 5 repetitions. After the heavy lifting is finished, I target all the muscles surrounding that one specific body part either by using the machines or dumbbells.

As I enter the work zone, I feel as if I'm entering a second home. There's no judgment in the gym. Everyone in the gym hypes each other. You hear staff and gym members yelling out: "That weight is your warmup; stop playing, kid."

"Push that fucking weight."

"You're making it look way too easy."

The gym makes me feel stress free. I am not worrying or thinking about anything at the moment. My attention is all on my workout. I love pumping that iron and seeing myself in the mirror as my veins are about to explode from my neck straight down to my fingertips. I love the way the metal feels on my bare hands and on my back. Lifting that heavy weight makes me feel invincible as if I'm one of the strongest human beings alive.

I got into bodybuilding because I used to get bullied growing up. I was an 11 year old kid weighing at 185 pounds. You would hear classmates yelling from down the hallway, "Here comes big boy so make room for the pig." I remember one day I was riding my scooter around the playground and one of my classmates stopped me, "Juan, is it true you weigh 185 pounds? You are so fat and ugly that no girl would ever want you." All I did was put my head down and tighten my fist so hard so I wouldn't punch that kid in the face. Hearing these words made me feel heartbroken. Over time I would degrade myself, and deep down I would feel as if my soul was crying its heart out. I would tell myself I would always be the ugliest fat kid in the room for the rest of my life.

Until one day.

I was home laying on my bed crying on top of my iPod. I decided to search up workout plans on YouTube. The very first thing I remember typing was how to get a six pack. I came across a bunch of videos with guys showing off their six packs with enormous legs, back, biceps, and chest. After listening to their workout plans, I asked myself, "What do I have to do in order to become like them and not be afraid of judgement?"

I started working out at home, slowly at first, just twice a week doing calisthenics. As time passed, I increased it to three times a week and started

increasing the intensity in my workouts. My goal was to lose two pounds per week. Slowly I started seeing my belly get smaller and my man boobs stop hanging. Once I started seeing my progress, I never missed a workout. I finally reached my end goal, which was weighing in at 135 pounds.

But I still wasn't satisfied. I decided to take my fitness lifestyle to the next level. At age 18, I signed up for the gym. Ever since I entered that kind of environment, not once did it occur for me to give up or to walk right back out those doors. The gym became part of me and made me who I am as a person.

That's what I thought, until I made a terrible mistake at Tapout.

One bad experience I had in the gym was spraining my back. This happened last year in the summer of 2018. I was going for an attempt of 295 pounds on squat. In the process of lifting the bar and weight off the rack, I forgot to tighten my back and poke my chest out. By doing so, I lifted the bar with a hunched back. This caused my back injury. I knew it was bad because I remember bending down to pick up my phone and then completely dropping dead to the floor.

Anthony ran to my side yelling, "Bro are you okay? Should I take you to the hospital?"

"Nah I'm good bro. Just help me get up and find a place to sit down," I replied.

In the days that followed, I was able to bend down but still felt pain. It was like a knife stabbing me continuously in the back. I would stretch every day for half an hour using a foam roller. For two months, I could not do squats, rack pulls, bench press, or any sort of exercise. I gained a couple of pounds and lost muscle mass. Most of all, I lost most of my strength.

The hardest part of my recovery wasn't gaining my strength back or getting my body in shape once again. The hardest part was starting to eat properly again. I had to stop eating junk food every day. My water intake was very low, so I had to force myself to drink a gallon per day. Sadly I had to stop eating out so much because the amount of fried food I had per week was extremely terrible.

Even though I had this bad experience, I learned something from it. The gym is where all the magic happens. It's where I feel the most comfortable and powerful. I love how it makes me feel when I get up every morning: waking up sore, not being able to move a single muscle, but knowing that I am able to go to the gym and get a solid workout makes my day a hundred times better.

Bodybuilding taught me to love myself, even if I think I'm the "ugliest" or "fattest" person in the room. It taught me that nobody can dictate the direction of my life just because of my actions or appearance. Most of all, it taught me to never give up on anything I'm devoting myself to. No matter how big the obstacle is, there's always a way through it if you put your mind and heart into it. Nobody outworks you but yourself.