

Paleo Solution 306

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Robb Wolf: Hey folks, Robb Wolf here with another edition of the Paleo Solution Podcast, very, very excited for today's guest. Even though I told him that this is a podcast where careers go to die, he still agreed to come on the show. This is Alex Viada. He is a power lifter and ultra-marathoner. He has posted over a 700-pound raw squat while also maintaining a sub 4-minute and 30-second mile. I could lift 700 pounds with a crane and drive 4-minutes and 30-second mile, but I definitely couldn't do either of those physically. Alex, how are you doing man?

Alex Viada: Doing very well, doing very well. Thank you so much for having me on the show, really appreciate it.

Robb Wolf: Huge honor. I have to throw some props out to David Dellanave who is the person who really put your work on my radar. I met him at a hunting gig a couple of years ago and have just been following his strong man and power lifting exploits. I was like man, you're really making some great progress, and he was like yeah, I'm going to send you something and what he sent me wasn't just a PDF lifted of your material. He actually went on the juggernaut training and did this wacky thing of paying for it and then signing me up for this thing. So big props to David.

Just to do a little bit of a shameless knob polishing here at the beginning, I am a complete crack whore for your Facebook feed. Like I've got to say your commentary on everything ranging from training to basically like stoic philosophy in politics, I just absolutely love. So I've been selling my body in the mission district to pay for maintaining my internet feed just to watch your Facebook feed.

Alex Viada: [Laughs] I really appreciate that. It's funny because I used to think back to a lot of social media and I realized that just generally, I think over the years, I found that just kind of being real and just saying what comes to mind and your observations. When I stopped worrying about kind of crafting an image and just said you know, I'm just going to say whatever crack comes to mind., that's I think when it kind of open the flood gates. I said, I think that especially in fitness and especially in everything else is so much is about brand image of this than the other and I think people really appreciate the fact that I try to be as real as possible with whatever is on my mind and just the less I worry about how it's received, the better it seems to be received.

Robb Wolf: You're killing that and I've tried to employ the same technique, but the difference here is that you're actually intelligent and I'm kind of an idiot. So my attempt to that just looks pathetic and yours actually looks like a warrior poet of some note so yeah.

Alex Viada: I mean, it's smoking mirrors but I really appreciate you say that.

Robb Wolf: So you're actually like 4 foot 2 and 105 pounds.

Alex Viada: Oh absolutely, absolutely. In various places on the internet, you can find the excellent claims on my Photoshop skills.

Robb Wolf: You and John Welbourn would be in good company with that. He has a very, very crafty photoshop skills as well. We'll have to have a big dude photoshop tool at some point.

Alex Viada: It's all about the filters. It's all about the filters.

Robb Wolf: He is well known for putting penises on faces, so that's really his claim to fame, but we're getting completely off topic here. Alex, give some folks your background. You have a really fascinating background, elite level powerlifter, have been in and around the Westside barbell training scene for long time and then you developed this program you wrote in an outstanding book, the Hybrid Athlete. Can you walk people through that whole kind of evolution?

Alex Viada: Sure, yeah, no I actually, I was never directly involved with Westside. I think the reason I want to clarify on those because especially Westside is something that's -- I think it influenced a lot of my running, a lot of my powerlifting that's early on. I think unfortunately and almost unfairly the Westside, I think a lot of people sort of generalized it and misinterpreted a lot of with they're about. And the thing that people -- because I've spoken and worked with many people who've actually trained there and then they say Westside is as much a place and a philosophy and a mentality as it is, just a program.

So I just want to throw that caveat out there, but yeah, so my background in strength sports have actually -- I was a high school athlete, lifelong athlete. My mother threw me in the pool when I was 4 years old. They got me swimming lessons about a year later when I actually survived and the kind of thing remind that was always doing a million different sports, always had a lot of exposure to a lot of different things. I was doing track. I was doing football. I was doing martial arts and

obviously, then I went to college and I discovered beer pong and late night Chinese food ordering, which by the way I was a pro at.

Once I get out of college, I got interested in lifting again, got interested in training. I became quite good at powerlifting, but realized that there was a gaping hole in my fitness and that was really anything lasting longer than about 2 reps.

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Robb Wolf:

Do you need more than that though? I mean, if you're squatting nearly a thousand pounds, what more do you need?

Alex Viada:

Right. You put on some multiplug here and just say look, maybe I can't do this for 30 reps, but I can do all that weight just once.

Robb Wolf:

Right, right.

Alex Viada:

It was funny because then the girl I was dating at that time who I later married, I guess she tolerated me. One day, she said, hey, I'd love to go to the gym with you and I went to the gym with her and she was sore for about 2 and a half weeks and then she said, okay, that was fun. I'm going to take you for a run and I said, come on, this will be easy. I sprint occasionally. I'm in good shape and I have to say that I felt great. We went out. We started off at about 6 minutes, 630 pace and we're tracking a long and after about 100 meters or so, I kind of felt like you start to see the tunnel vision and the walls closing in, so I realized, hey, I really suck at this.

So that's kind of what got me started on the whole running concept and I think the conventional wisdom around then was that you had to do one or the other. I think looking at humanity in general, we've had some very big, very strong people over the years who are not one dimensional. You think the rugby players or football players. You think of old school, blacksmiths and I mean, maybe the Vikings weren't the massive people that we always tend to think about in TV and movies, but humans are meant to do more than one thing. Coming out from that kind of perspective and saying yes, we can be incredibly strong, but that doesn't have to mean we can't go up a flight of stairs, like that just doesn't seem like fitness to me and this was a couple of years ago.

I mean, this was 2007 I think when I started running again and at this point, things like CrossFit were just starting to really kind of expand and people were thinking about it. So it was kind of the thing where I said, you know what, there is enough of a background to this, then I'm going

to try this and it's kind of grown from there. There have been ups and downs.

At this point, I have worked with so many different athletes, so many different walks of life and have the chance to really work with some very, very cool people. The idea though, the way I do the programming, the way I incorporate everything else has kind of grown and morphed and changed over the years, but I mean, we've got -- my company has had over 800 athletes we were worked with by now.

Robb Wolf: That's super impressive. I don't know if you know this, but I actually sent the first affiliate inquiry email ever to become a CrossFit affiliate. Like I co-founded the first and fourth CrossFit gyms, which some people love me for that. A lot of people hate the fact that I help bring this spawn into existence, but it really...

Alex Viada: You're OG, that's as OG as you can get.

Robb Wolf: [laughs] Absolutely. I've had philosophical differences with how CrossFit gets tackled, like I think that they really put forward this idea that you can be strong and have some significant cardio and do some complex movements and whatnot. How people tackle that training, I've had some misgivings with as I've moved along like I really feel like we need some block periodization. You need to look at strengths and weaknesses and kind of shore those things up. You do a fantastic job in your book of breaking down just the basic metabolic pathways, the components of strength how long it takes to develop strength, connective tissue versus neurological innovation and whatnot. I don't know if -- yeah I'll just jump right into this.

Where are you folks in this mixed modal sport of CrossFit scene? I believe that the people at the top levels are doing something that looks a whole lot like the hybrid training system, which is breaking apart strength and what we could call cardio or aerobic base building and then re-incorporating these things for kind of a peaking-type phase near the end. Now, this is very controversial within -- as you get closer and closer to the kernel of what runs CrossFit, but I think out on the periphery, this is the way folks are training. I know you have a lot of success with CrossFit athletes, like how are you cracking that nut?

Alex Viada: It's interesting because you mentioned that a lot of top level athletes were doing this. Are you familiar with Chris Henshaw?

Robb Wolf: Yes, yeah.

Alex Viada:

I mean, you've got individuals like that that really -- they can come in and they can analyze a multimodal multisport athlete and say, okay, the end game, the end objective is to create this individual who has no weaknesses, who has explosive power, has short duration anaerobic work capacity, has a good aerobic engine to let them last through those chippers and recover between sets. It just goes down the list like this and I think a lot of what we do is precisely look at the athlete like that, because I talked to a lot of people who say, we bought the hybrid athlete, were interested in this template and that template and that template.

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Templates are excellent, but I think so much of what we do is we break down athlete's individual strengths and weaknesses and especially for CrossFit where you can have people who come from two dramatically different backgrounds. You can have a lifelong cross country runner and you can have weightlifter on the other end and they'll both be competing in the same sport and to expect them to kind of meet in the middle... One of the things I talked about a lot is what is your training age in this sport? You have these two athletes I just talked about, both with the exact same workout that consists of a run, a row, a lift and some sort of explosive muscle abs or something like that.

With regards to that, those two athletes approaching the exact same workout, each one of them is going to have an extremely advanced training age in one component and was going to be novice than the other. So what's the relative level of exertion going to be for that cross country runner who does a running or aerobic heavy met con versus the weightlifter and vice versa.

Looking at program, looking and looking at off season programming and realizing that, okay, the runner individual like the amount of endurance work that individual can tolerate is huge. The amount of endurance work they're going to have to do to continue to improve is likewise huge.

So what's the best use of their time? When we look at their off season, when we look at their strengths and weaknesses, obviously, we'll never turn their weaknesses into strengths. I hate that term, but we will turn their weaknesses into areas of competence, which means that we've got to maintain their strengths and looking at offseason programming like that and saying, okay, what is the minimum we can do. They are already well ahead of the curve in this area. Now, is it going to be worth pushing them to be better in this area? Probably not. Is it going to be worth maintaining that area and instead building up this other ones? Now, do we want to drop their proficiency in running? Absolutely not.

So much of what we've done and so much the reason why we have a lot of success in training a lot of these individuals is precisely that we can analyze each one of those different sports. On my coaching team, I work with -- I've got coaches who are dedicated ultrarunners. They are dedicated powerlifters. They are dedicated weightlifters and they can all take a look at every individual's proficiency in each area and say, okay, this is where they are in the learning curve. This is how much work they're going to need. This is how many weeks or months we need to devote to this particular skill and then we can kind of build together their entire offseason programming like that and so it's like these little modular components, you pull together and create the offseason into competition progression and try to slightly mold the athlete every year closer and closer to the prototypical athlete that they need to be.

Robb Wolf: Alex, remind folks, I think because so many people make really great progress on even just a completely randomized CrossFit template initially, but talk a little bit about just the phases of training adaptation and how it's just easy almost like slip stream in the beginning and what's occurring with that plateau and why we need to break this into multiple components and then put it back together later?

Alex Viada: Yeah, absolutely. Obviously, people talk about newbie games early on and you'll experience that in this sport. Once you, I mean, you look at my run training when I got back to it, I'm in as much progress percentage wise in terms of minutes off my time in the first year of training as I did over the next five years of concentrated training. It's the same thing with lifting. You have an individual who can go into the gym and after a year, they're deadlifting 400 and then 3 years later, they're deadlifting 500 and 8 years later, they finally get another 100 pounds on.

So for a lot of individuals who come to CrossFit, since it is so diverse, since there are so many moving pieces, it's very easy when you have sports that's made up of so many different components to suddenly you build up a level of competence in 8 or 9 different components and you already excel at one. You'll see just gobs and gobs of time getting knocked off. Every baseline you do, you're going to say, oh my god, I'm making tremendous progress and then it's easy to forget how much further ahead those podium athletes are.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: And just the diminishing returns and it's not just diminishing returns in one area, it's diminishing returns in 10 areas and you say well, the

difference between a good CrossFitter and a games athlete, I mean, that is a chasm. It's a canyon and it's like the difference between a good high school runner and a good Olympic runner. I mean, it's just huge amounts of difference. So you say when he can't just keep pushing and pushing and pushing because you look at running and you look and even things like the Tabata protocol where you say okay, you can just do high intensity stuff and you can progress and you realized that a lot of people like especially the Tabata protocol, you will top out in terms of adaptation after 6 to 8 weeks. You get people who they can push themselves harder and harder and harder. It's not even necessarily because they're building fitness. If you talk about like the central governor theory, that there is this neurological limitation on our output, you can say well, they're just getting better at suffering.

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Robb Wolf:

Right.

Alex Viada:

They're not building their capacity. They're not becoming better athletes. They're just bumping up their pain tolerance. I think if your goal is just to be casually good at it, say hey, this is fun. I love the variety and everything else and that's fine, but if you say, I really want to make that next week. I don't just want to go in there every week and just try to push balls on the wall and see how well I can do because then things start to break down. I mean, the first time you have a setback or don't beat your time. You think, it's just a fluke, then it happens again, and you start to get the trend and then you just start ramming your head against the wall and you'll get worse every single week.

Robb Wolf:

And I've noticed with a lot of people that's when they're like I need to go to double days.

Alex Viada:

Yes, exactly.

Robb Wolf:

Six days a week didn't cut it so now I'm going to do double days four of those 6 days.

Alex Viada:

Yeah. It's nothing better like when you're falling apart and you just kind of double down or whatever you have to be doing.

Robb Wolf:

That's kind of how I look it like our presidential candidate and our soon to be imploding economy and like, ah, let's just burn it all down. We'll get all these guys and there just accelerate the whole thing.

Alex Viada:

If Trump isn't be going to be allowed in UK, I say, let's vote him and just see what happens.

Robb Wolf: Totally, totally. I mean, it will be amazing for diplomacy, so yeah. So this is maybe a wackily philosophical question, but do you think that these folks that are really doing exceptionally well at CrossFit, these Podium finishers, like do you think that we're getting kind of a cross section of some people that have some specific like fiber types and enzymes versus somebody who is a very good 100-meter sprinter, somebody who really is just an outstanding ultra-marathoner? Like what are some of the physical and physiological characteristics that are going into folks being very, very good at CrossFit?

Alex Viada: That's an interesting question because I think CrossFit is still at a point and it's slowly changing, but if you look at the Podium finishers over the years, they've become less and less diverse in terms of body composition, size and everything else. I mean, we're really approaching an ideal and I think with CrossFit, it is especially interesting because there is certainly creativity to the games program in every year and with any sport eventually, you start to see this prototypical athlete, and occasionally, somebody comes along who just doesn't fit the mold like I mean you look at Usain Bolt and he's entirely too tall likely is going to be a sprinter, but there he is.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: With CrossFit, you think, well God, there is enough variety every single year and what it takes and you look at performance across all the different workouts and the games leading up to the games and even the best in the world will still sometimes get crushed. But you really are starting to see a bit more of focus and you say, well, these are not pure aerobic athletes. I mean, you look at a guy like Froning. He's obviously got an outstanding VO2 max and everything else but he's not a terribly fast runner. So you say, what is it, what's that cross section of skills?

It's funny, I'm noticing that a lot of people who were fairly decent team athletes have actually become outstanding CrossFitters. It's almost as much a -- their propensity is towards variety and skill acquisition over any sort of -- I mean, obviously there is raw athletic ability, but it's not obscene raw athletic ability in any one domain.

I think a lot of the athletes that the CrossFit athletes that are going to succeed and I really do believe this, are ones that comes from actually a more varied athletic background. Because they have experience with lifelong skill acquisition and they have experience with especially mindset and the concept of pacing and the concept of being able to dial up and

dial down intensity depending on what's needed and does it go down to fiber types and muscle attachments and everything else. I just think there are way too many stimuli to have anything like that ever really reach a conclusion.

Robb Wolf: Defining deal, okay.

Alex Viada: Exactly, exactly because I think it's almost as much obviously, you have to be a great athlete. You have to be a gifted athlete, but you have to have that background of adaptation. You have to have that background of general physical preparedness and developing skills and hand-eye coordination and agility and all those things. They all seem to come together and I really think that if you made a funnel for the ideal CrossFitter, you probably had somebody who did everything from cross country to baseball to football going through high school and gymnastics, because why not.

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Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: And you probably have some of the best CrossFitters of the world.

Robb Wolf: And it wouldn't be surprising somebody with a background like that, you would say, they're probably going to be a decent athlete no matter what they do.

Alex Viada: Yeah, yeah, obviously. I mean, they've obviously got to be borderline freaks of nature at that point.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: It's remarkable to see just on paper how few of these athletes would actually stand out in any given raw -- again look at decathletes. They're not the fastest. They're not the biggest jumpers and everything else, but the fact that you can have a guy like again some of the best decathletes like they only will train hurdles a handful of times a month if that because they still don't have the bandwidth to do it, but they're so adaptable. They're so skilled. They're so good at retaining movement patterns, that they can still be competitive and competent in a discipline like that despite minimal training and I think that's really I think what we're seeing here.

Robb Wolf: Very cool. I like it and I've noodled on this stuff a long time and again more philosophical than anything that would drive like a coaching paradigm or whatnot, but I think it's super interesting. Why is it

important for folks to not just launch into high intensity interval training? What's the disservice that they're doing with that because we get Men's Health articles, like the Tabata protocol or fart like type stuff or whatever and really good return on investment, but what are folks short circuiting themselves on by just focusing on intervals or intensity?

Alex Viada: Actually the funny thing is I've actually got an article coming up on Men's Health about the advantages of low intensity cardio, just kind of timely. So I'm just going to go ahead and pin that right now.

Robb Wolf: Nice, nice.

Alex Viada: Yeah. There you go. Stay tune. So I think for me, the biggest thing there is building a base versus realizing potential and the way I see interval training and the way I see a lot of this peaking type of stuff is a lot of that is the bigger your bases and you'll think about chiseling a block of wood, the bigger the block of wood has, the more intricate, the more elaborate, the bigger sculpture you will have when you start whittling away at it.

A lot of high intensity work, yes, it certainly builds adaptation. There are certainly even cardiovascular adaptations that have build very well, mitochondrial density and lactate clearance and a lot of those other things. But the fundamental underpinnings of work capacity in cardiovascular capacity, you do actually need lower intensity work to build that and that's one of the things that I've talked about just regarding heart adaptations and looking to preload and everything else.

Basically, saying that you need a sustained low intensity stimulus to really maximize some of the heart adaptations. High intensity just doesn't do it. Because of the nature of the intensity, there are certain processes that don't take place. What I tell people is you can realize a lot of progress, but it's a little bit like saying, okay, I got a new athlete, he wants to squat 600 pounds. He can currently squat 400 pounds. Well, okay so I'm going to take him without putting on any muscle or anything else. We're going to put him through a straight, straight phase and sure enough, he can be up to 500 pounds and all we've got him doing are heavy singles and heavy accessory work in form work and a lot of high intensity stuff. You say well is that going to get him to 600. You say, when you get to a point where it's just he may not have enough muscle to get him to 600.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: It's kind of the same thing with a lot of work capacity and you say, well, you can raise that VO2 max. You can push that central governor to a little. You can realize that adaptation, but you're always going to be limited by what your base is. I mean, that's as far as you're going to get and you could push it and push it and push it, but you're going to get to a point where you're going to have to be pushing it harder every single day just to keep making improvements and eventually, you're going to crack. The athlete's going to crack and they're going to go backwards and they don't have that aerobic base. They don't have the overall stroke volume, that heart capacity. The heart itself isn't vascular enough to really pump any harder and they're going to hit a wall and that's frustrating as hell because you've got a lot of individuals who they do have potential and they push themselves so hard and they make so much progress and they never realized that 100% of that is because they don't spend any time going back and working on those fundamentals.

Robb Wolf: Alex, what type of training volume do you need to see in maybe a beats per minute intensity for folks and this maybe too open ended question to answer and if so then be like you're an idiot, next question. But what type of training volume do we need on maybe a weekly basis? Let's say, somebody hasn't developed that aerobic capacity to a significant degree, maybe they kind of a power oriented athlete, saying the older like man, I can do 100-meter repeats with a smoke and a cup of coffee in between all day long, but then they go to do that 7-minute mile pace and they blow up after 400 meters. Like what type of volume and intensity and how many weeks and months do they need to invest into that to see like that left ventricle growth that we want and the vascularization of the cardiac muscle?

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Alex Viada: It's funny because obviously like anything else, like every great answer that everyone like they hear the question, they lean in, they say what's going to be and they answer is always that depends and that's the fact and you go.

Robb Wolf: Damn it. [laughs]

Alex Viada: God damn it. It's one of those. So my answer to that is it depends. [laughs]

Robb Wolf: I love it. That's been my answer. Ten years ago, I thought I had everything figured out. Now, I feel dumber and dumber everyday, so yeah I like it.

Alex Viada: The only thing that get smarter as I get older, my dad get smarter and I'll tell him that every time. All the crap he told me when I was growing up that I was like dad, what are you talking about. Now, I'm like, that man knew what he was saying.

Robb Wolf: The old man was onto something, yeah.

Alex Viada: Yeah. He would agree with that in a heartbeat. But actually, I mean, there is a little bit of response to that because I went back and I talked about training age a little bit. I would say my company probably works with more like 350 plus pound runners than I think any company on earth ever has. One of them hell, he just do this first 10k a little while ago, which I thought was pretty damn cool, but a lot of it comes down to like I said a little bit of training age and little bit of what you would consider vascular load.

I did a seminar up at Eric Cressey's place and I had a real cross section of individuals come and just do a basic heart rate test. Like what is your low intensity heart rate and what is the work needed to get you to keep you in that low intensity zone? The reason I emphasize low intensity zone too much is I think we're fair at about 65 to about 80 to 85% of your max heart rate is still technically low enough or in that range where you can say, okay, this is -- you're going to get the full heart pre-load. You're going to be able to sustain this for time. You're going to be able to get all those adaptations that high intensity stuff wouldn't necessarily give you, but the bigger question there is what's going to be the impact on the athlete. What's going to be the impact on them physically? What's going to be the impact on their strength and that's where you start to have to get a bit more careful.

What I typically tell people is it's all about, and this is something that Mike Israetel of Renaissance Periodization talks about, what is your maximum recoverable volume. How much work can you do? How much work can you add on before you start to suffer elsewhere true low intensity zone to work?

I mean, when I was training for an ultra about 2 years ago, I could put in 12 to 15 hours of running a week and I wouldn't actually feel that bad, but that's because so much of it was so low intensity. I wasn't appreciably taxing my muscles or taxing my joints. Whereas conversely years before when I was working with a track coach, I would put in fewer miles and eventually those crept up and they would just be devastated. What I tell people is honestly, do as much as you can without having to

compromise anything anywhere else. I mean for general health, 3 sessions of 30 minutes, 3 sessions of 40 minutes is going to be enough.

If you want to talk performance, what I typically tell people is look at what's your longest single event is going to be, whether it's series of events or anything else. I will tell people if you can't do an hour and a half to 2 hours of low intensity cardio without feeling like you're going to die, either a) your intensity is too high or b) your work capacity really needs help. So the longest I'll have a lot of people especially CrossFitters, the longest I'll will have them go for is I say, look if you can get to the point in your off season where you can go out for 90-minute run or 2-hour easy bike ride and not even feel it, you know you're right about where you need to be.

Robb Wolf: Got yeah, okay. So maybe steering things towards my own need, I'm doing old guy Brazilian jujitsu. I have no designs on doing tournaments or anything, but typically, we drill rounds anywhere from 3 to 10 minutes in length. After grabbing your program and I've tweaked and modified a few things, but the main thing that I've really stuck very closely to is that aerobic base activity and trying to do it in as many different modalities as I can.

Alex Viada: Yes.

Robb Wolf: Some running, some swimming, some rowing, some airdyne, some VersaClimber because none of it is particularly close to jujitsu, but so trying to mix it up and whatnot. What type of time indexing would you recommend for someone like me? I definitely don't have a big training age on aerobic base, so I think that there is a lot of gold to be found in that pan.

Alex Viada: Yeah, yeah, and actually, I worked with a couple of fighters as well and for them, even the ones who have been doing this the longest, again they bump up on that hour and a half or so, but really at that point, it's diminishing returns. What I try to tell them is 25% of your total weekly training volume should be your low intensity work. That's your low intensity base work and that's all your work included because generally, I've just found that when you do jujitsu obviously, you're doing a lot of -- with any sport, you're doing a lot of support training, right. Support training should always come first. That's what your recovery should be towards. That's what your main focus should be everything else.

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Then specific modality accessory work should come next. So whether-- you know for jujitsu for anything else like that you say specific modality

or specific modality and duration, what's that? Well you say you know the average round--You want to be good in that 4 to 5 minute time period, right?

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: So you want a combination of anaerobic endurance and aerobic endurance in that time period so that's where the specific weight training comes in. You do certain time limited metcons and you do certain interval work over that period. You can do 8 x 500 meter row with power cleans in between and a more or less simulates that general time and muscle groups that you are using.

Third should come the specific explosive distance strength training because that has a direct relation to how much--how explosive you're going to be and how good you are at the sport itself. And then once that's taken care of then that last 25% should really be that low intensity work. You know where you say like you said the mixed modality is absolutely perfect because especially with jujitsu you don't want to develop any kind of overuse. You want to make sure every muscle group is getting a little bit of work going through a full range of motion. You know all the work capacity in your legs isn't going to help you if you find that your upper body is getting tanked out and there are definitely local adaptations to low intensity work and that's one thing I try to remind people of as well.

Robb Wolf: Yeah. You know what? I've been looking around in eBay trying to find upper body ergometer kind of deal and I can't find one. So the Airdyne and the VersaClimber have been decent proxies for that. Like the Airdyne you can pull your feet off the pedals and just do that upper body component.

Alex Viada: Yeah. And swimming is great too and, **you I know tell people this all of the time**, you know even if you're terrible at it. You know even breaststroke for couple of hours is--I mean an hour a week. I mean that's a heck of a workout. It gets your shoulders involved. One of the things I love about swimming by the way is it teaches you breath control which I think is so absolutely critical.

Robb Wolf: So I was going to mention like I'm a decent swimmer not spectacular. My wife is actually a collegiate swimmer so she's worked with me and I'm decent but--

Alex Viada: It's standard not to live up to?

Robb Wolf: Right. But what I've doing is actually is doing goggles and snorkels so I don't have to worry about the technical part of my swimming.

Alex Viada: Right.

Robb Wolf: I just keep my head in the water and then just motor. I do some stuff where I will do--you know I'll push off under water and go a length of the pool, pop up and I've got kind of anaerobic piece of that and then recover and do some other pieces. So I don't exclusively with the snorkel but would you ditch the snorkel and really try to entrain that breath control? What are your thoughts on that?

Alex Viada: I'd say a lot of the snorkel work is great certainly because that lets you keep the intensity level up of course. The breath control is also useful because--especially for a lot of different sports. The tendency is you ramp up the intensity, the breathing gets raggedy and everything else and especially with running that can be a problem. I like introducing a certain amount of--you know the breath control makes itself pacing. You can't go 100% if your form isn't quite down. You need to stay just on threshold to keep breathing well especially over long--like you look at a swimmer even a casual swimmer, a triathlete because they're casual swimmers.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: Well you ask a real swimmer and they'll go heh triathletes, hah. Yeah, I do triathlon, I do.

Robb Wolf: [Laughs].

Alex Viada: The swimmers next to me, they're like doing butterfly back and forth and I'm there. I'm like in--

Robb Wolf: One lap.

Alex Viada: One lap.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: Like swim one lap at the time they do three. But you look at the fact that if you focus on that breathing not only is there a certain benefit to it. You do have to rotate your body. You do have to think about--you have to be aware of your elbow lift, your shoulder mobility and everything else and it really forces focus on the form. But it also forces you to keep that pacing down and take deep filling breaths and to not panic and not panic

breathe when you start to get fatigued and everything else. And I think those are all--On the laundry list of tools that can be good for an athlete. I think those are--they're not on top of the list but they're definitely on there.

Robb Wolf:
[0:35:05]

The athletes to develop.

Alex Viada:

Yeah. You know one on the things over the years I really changed my approach on when things are useful and I'm finding so much more that there's a lot of value to be found in sports and activities that you wouldn't necessarily expect.

Robb Wolf:

Interesting. Interesting. So Alex, I seriously could pick your brain on that side of the equation for ages but I want to talk about nutrition because you are totally crackerjack on that. I know that you're not a fan of the basic paleo template for athletes. I'm really not a fan of lower carb approaches. Like there are some folk out there putting out some really compelling work, Phinney and Volek, these faster studies where folks are eating ketogenic diet and they're metabolizing three times more fat per unit of time than what historically has been noted.

But I've got to be honest like I'm a fan of that stuff for like the metabolically broken and different things but I've been hard pressed to see folks actually posting markedly better performance with the fat adapted program. Can you comment on all that stuff? You have a great series of videos via your YouTube channel where you're talking about nutrition. You're talking about some of your not even huge athletes like 200 pound guys and they're getting 800 to 1000 grams of carbs a day. What's the deal on all that?

Alex Viada:

Actually, it's really funny because that's one of the things that people want me to include in this book I'm writing so much is the idea of fat adaptation. I think even though there's an attempt to nail on the coffin on that years ago and people said well you know look these ultrarunners at 70% of their VO2 max, they actually lasted longer with less performance decreased. Yeah they weren't so great in the sprints but who cares? And you say well 70% of VO2 max is otherwise known as like going out and riding with grandma.

Robb Wolf:

Walking.

Alex Viada:

Yeah. Exactly. So you say okay well let's see how these apply to elite athletes and you're starting to see now that some--you're starting to get a couple higher level of athletes who are talking about this and talking

about the benefits. You know the one thing I always go back to is first of all what are winners doing and you know you don't even have to look any further than the winners. You look at guys like Scott Jurek who basically wins every ultramarathon he is a part of. You will think oh well that's the part of the archetype. I do believe that his diet is--and it's actually from what I understand it's actually a fairly amount of whole foods focused diet. But these are not low carb and Kenyans have diets that are 70% carbohydrates and you say well if there was a benefit to this, you look at--I don't know if you're familiar with cycling. But are you familiar with cycling's Team Sky?

Robb Wolf: I've heard of it but I really do not follow it at all.

Alex Viada: So Team Sky is a British team and Chris Froome who's won Tour de France a couple of years, he's kind of one of their main riders. They are one of the most science data driven teams I've ever seen. I mean they are a machine. If anything even remotely sounds like a good idea, they will test the crap out of it and see what happens because they're looking for every single edge they can possible get.

So you say well if there's anything that's of benefit, you would see these Sky cyclists riding in elevation masks if they thought it did a 0.1% benefit to performance but it doesn't. They played around with the idea of some of the low carb and they weren't seeing a return because the other thing that they were seeing is even in the cases where some degree of adaptation worked for short durations on game day, they were seeing poor athlete compliance in relatively--in terms of recovery they were saying well some of that seems compromised and the sprint speed is so compromised at the top end. This is something that I'm definitely going to have to dig down into a lot more because you know like everything else every time I think I'm like and 100% right on something, I find out that there's something I haven't taken into consideration. But really it still very seems to me like the advantages in terms of fat burning and everything else, it's not an advantage it's a non-inferiority for a certain group of athletes but it's not a superiority when it comes to performance in any specific athlete that I've seen yet.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: To me well it seems like it's an awful lot of work for something that's simply not inferior.

Robb Wolf: For dubious return.

Alex Viada: Exactly. As I said if there was an advantage to it, if there was any advantage to it overall, you would see some of these elite teams doing it in a heartbeat. Because they've got every financial incentive to squeeze every extra watt out of their athletes and they're not doing it so you say okay, I'm fully in favor of appealing to authority on certain things.

Robb Wolf: Right. You know at some point, it's kind of like most the physics is reasonably well figured out. Like in the very, very small and the very, very big, there's some confusion but like if you launch a rock and you its weight and its trajectory and everything, you know where it's going to land and there's not a lot of discussion on that.

[0:40:19]

Alex Viada: Yeah. Exactly. And my whole thing was I think part of the reason like anything else my views on these have changed over the years. Part of the reason I used to be very much down on the quintessential paleo for athletes is they wouldn't take into account the fact that you do have to focus on those carbohydrate sources for performance. It's funny because I also--my goal is not just performance obviously. I work with a lot of individuals who just want to get in better shape and I see a lot of appeal to basic guidelines that can be good reasonably applied. It's funny because--are you familiar with Food Babe?

Robb Wolf: Totally, totally.

Alex Viada: Oh, god. I mean you know I don't even think we need to get into that here but she says something like don't eat anything that you can't pronounce and I'm like well nobody can pronounce quinoa and people still eat it.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: But coming from her you're like oh my god, that sounds asinine. But then it's funny Eric Cressey who I respect the hell out of said something very similar and people came down on him for it. And I said you know what that's actually not a bad way of looking at things. Generally saying you know what I'm going to make a change in my life, I'm going to focus on whole foods. That's not a bad change.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: For 99% of people that would be a great move. It would be a great thing for them to do and really it just comes down to are we so caught up in performance for the top 1 or 2% that we're forgetting the fact that 99%

of people just need better than they're currently doing. So definitely change in that regard.

But for elite athletes, it really just means that you can do that for 90% of your diet but you got to make an effort to branch out a little bit and taking those performance foods and you're not going to lose the benefit of it. I know CrossFit is 100% against Gatorade and sugar and soft drinks right now. But there's no reason not to take in sugar if you're absolutely tanking out your glycogen storage during the workout. I mean it's not going to give you diabetes.

Robb Wolf: Right. I guess the wacky thing with that is that we do so what's good for the elite athlete? Like you go down and you see youth sports and these kids show up with a big Gulp and then they do 30 minutes of soccer which is mainly a bunch of grab ass and then they do a bunch of Gatorade afterwards and it's like well little Johnny's got the diabetes. I think that that's one of these tough things is that particularly kind of the mass culture mind like athletes are seen to be healthy and what they're doing is healthy but maybe extrapolating all of that to our general sedentary, overfed, under moved population is a problem.

But you know these heuristics, these simple explanations to try to get things across to people, folks will take it and put into stone tablets and then there's like no latitude to it. You've got low carb jihadist. Like I had a lot of I guess selection bias early in my career where I was very, very successful working with people with autoimmune condition and type 2 diabetes and insulin resistance and all these stuff. So the whole became insulin resistance and autoimmunity for me, you know?

Alex Viada: Yes.

Robb Wolf: And then I started branching out and worked with some MMA athletes and I was like wow the stuff I'm doing for my 62-year-old grandmother with rheumatoid arthritis really isn't working well for this MMA guy. I had to really go back and say well he needs a lot more carbs and oh my god, we're going to do some Vitargo and Waxy Maize Starch intra-workout and everything and suddenly his peak performance got better and--

Alex Viada: I don't even know who I am anymore.

Robb Wolf: Exactly. But you know the funny thing is then when I started talking about this stuff, the low carb jihadist were like you've been bought by big sweet potato and I'm like are you fucking kidding me? Really? Like that's why I

drive a Subaru Forester because big sweet potato is like funding my G550 jet, you know? It's crazy.

Alex Viada: And you know it's funny. I think like I said I've changed a lot on that too just had a lot of time to think over the years and I think hitting 35 was really probably the most painful thing there. But you do start to reflect back on a lot of the black or white stuff you always held fast to and I think--my company, the kind of training we do--I mean we've got as far as athletes we've trained, we've got a 16-year-old power lifter and we had a 72-year-old guy doing the Grand to Grand Ultra marathon. So the variety of individuals and backgrounds and everything else and you realize how different all their needs are and suddenly the idea of being dogmatic about anything just sounds ridiculous.

Robb Wolf: Right. But then you have to think.

Alex Viada: Yeah I know I think that--

Robb Wolf: Then you have to think. It sucks.

Alex Viada: It sucks. It's like I had all my shit figured out like 10 years ago when I didn't know a goddamn thing.

[0:45:20]

Robb Wolf: Right. Alex, how are you setting up caloric levels for folks? I know that this is again going to dramatically depend like is the person getting 5 sessions a week or 2? Are they a 70-year-old grandparent? Are they CrossFit games competitor or MMA athlete? But what are some general guidelines for how you're figuring out both caloric levels and macro levels for folks?

Alex Viada: So one of my main things is I'm 100% and people will argue this ad nauseum, since some people pay us to do nutrition, we can take a bit more time to do this. I'm always 100% in favor of tracking current diet for at least 2 weeks when I start with anybody. One of the hardest things for people to understand is if you're a data driven person, I totally understand wanting to say okay I need X amount of protein calories and everything. You look at how a lot of these calorie calculators are, this cracks me up. So they're like alright so you're going to need to take your percent lean body mass and multiply it by this and add all this many calories if you're doing this many minutes of running at this speed and blah, blah, blah and then you need to multiply it by anywhere to 1.1 to 1.8 depending on your activity level. You take this entirely highly precise calculation to determine exactly what you want and you blow it out of the water.

Robb Wolf: At the end.

Alex Viada: At the end by just taking a wild guess. If you look at people, one of the hardest things to figure out is how much are they actually burning because everything makes a difference. You know people who now have all these FitBits and everything else you realize how much they're actually walking. And you look at things like non-exercise associated thermogenesis, NEAT, and you see some people who fidget you like crazy and they're always active and they're always getting up and down from their chair and everything else. And we hate those people because they're really irritating when you work at an office with them.

And then you've got people who sit there and just look like they're constantly shelled and don't move. You think okay even these people have the same "activity level," their needs are totally different. So one of the first things I do is calculate over and over a period of a week and a half, 2 weeks. When someone comes to us, the first thing we do is we say we're going to start the programming but we're going to leave your diet as it is because we want to see what impact the programming is going to have on your weight loss. We're going to look at how much--we just added this amount of work, what's that going to do to your maintenance and then we track their calories and then we track everything else.

We say okay so now we got a baseline and from there we start construct it and my way of constructing diet is a little bit different than most. I will program in kind of 75 to 89% of their calories to be critical ones. I'll say okay you need X amount of grams of fat. You need an X amount of grams of quality protein and you need X amount of grams of carbohydrates and that's not going to be everything but that's going to be that 80% that you need. That last 20% is kind of do what you want with it.

And compliance goes way up because people don't feel like their having to stick to some crazy diet plan. Very often I find that people tend to gravitate towards things that they may be missing in their diet anyway and even if they want to take in more junk food or anything else like that it certainly works. But I don't usually over emphasize protein certainly not in athletes who were taking in so many calories that you know they're--if you are in a 5000 calorie a day diet, chances are you're getting enough accidental protein just from all the food you're eating, sheer volume. The place I really emphasize that is when athletes are trying to lose weight or try to affect some sort of body composition change. But you know generally speaking most of my athletes anywhere from 60 to 70% carbohydrates in fact, and going down from there about 10 to 15%

protein and fat. Obviously if they're trying to lose weight the more sedentary, it's more like 60-20-20 sort of thing but that's generally how I structure it.

Robb Wolf: Gotcha, gotcha. Do you have any folk like I kind of gravitated towards a little bit of a lower carbs side of things like 150 to maybe 200 to 150 grams a day even though I'm doing jujitsu. I really feel like I have some blood sugar control issues when I start ratcheting up beyond that. Do you have some folks that have that problem? What do you do with that?

Alex Viada: And that's actually a very good point. So one thing that happens especially that you're not used to it you're so insulin sensitive is that you will feel that taking a bunch of carbs and suddenly you'll get an energy spike and then a crash. You know for a lot of individuals they do actually maintain more steady energy levels on a higher fat and lower carb and that's again that's something where I come from where I believe that most athletes can benefit from more carbs but like any other rule you got to be completely willing to completely ignore it. I mean if you introduce carbohydrates and obviously there's going to be a lag period where you say okay this isn't actually improving performance because you're making a change. If definitively the athlete doesn't do well on it then what's the point?

Robb Wolf: Right.

[0:50:28]

Alex Viada: If lower carb is working for you then don't change it. I think I've gotten to the point where I'm not so dogmatic about anything that I'm not willing to change it for an athlete who just does better a certain way.

Robb Wolf: Right.

Alex Viada: I mean I had an athlete run a cyclical ketogenic diet which is I don't think people done since 2005 and it works pretty well.

Robb Wolf: Right. I know John Welbourn uses cyclic ketogenic diets for football players, track and field athletes pretty frequently and he really likes it and the folks seemed to like it like the compliance is good with it and what not. But if he's got somebody more of a CrossFit gamer, MMA athlete, we've tinkered with that. It's just you can never get the timing of the carbs right. The failure to thrive seems to be ubiquitous. So it's just-- there's some really hard drawn lines typically depending on what type of energy demands the person has.

Alex Viada: And like anything else perfect is the enemy of good. The amount of people who especially oh god with this whole like evidence based movement. I mean don't get me started on that. I don't know what your thoughts on that.

Robb Wolf: Oh, I can't stand it. If I drop a hammer on my foot but that there's not a randomized control trial to it, it indicates the dropping of hammer on my foot causes this. Like these people typically interestingly are like atheist and kind of market centric and stuff like that but yet they absolutely polish the knob of evidence based medicine thing. There is way more that we don't know than what we do know and really at the end of the day if you have good clinical medicine which I considered the gym to be primary care medicine and what you're doing and what I do is essentially is primary care medicine. That's where you're able to say okay here's some big macro ideas that we have but what is this person responding to? How do they look? How do they feel? How do they perform? What's their biometrics looking like?

And then we can tweak and fiddle that and when they do big drug trials if you are the poor schlep that is three standard deviations outside the norm because of like genetics or gut biome or something, you might be the one person that dies out of a million, and it really sucks for you. Within a nice statistical parameters, It's okay. So I hate the evidence based medicine.

Alex Viada: And the funny thing is even if you look at medicine. Good clinical practice, best practices those actually involve a certain degree of what is not coming out of the studies and what has been adopted. I think with health and fitness and everything else, I think there's obviously been a backlash to a lot of the woo and a lot of the garbage out there. You know people are saying well no one ever going to take this business seriously and everything needs to be--you know we need to get away from the broscience of this, that and the other.

So it's almost become the kind of thing where there are two camps and each side is kind of trying to throw the baby out with the bathwater. You say look there is great science out there and there is great evidence. We're learning new ways of doing things and the science teaches us what questions to ask. But it can't give us all the answers just yet. You need to take it into context and say well okay the conclusion to these studies are telling us this but we're repeatedly seeing this other result, does that mean we're not seeing what we think we're seeing or maybe we ask the wrong question in the study?

Robb Wolf: Or we haven't asked enough question. We didn't have a big enough sample size. Yeah.

Alex Viada: Exactly. So I mean that's been a huge pain point especially lately. I hate to say it but I think in a lot of cases it's because the more evidence based you are, the less actual experience you need.

Robb Wolf: Shocker.

Alex Viada: I'm gonna get some hate, but I don't care.

Robb Wolf: Shocker.

Alex Viada: You say okay well if you haven't done anything--if you haven't done something for 10 years, just do it for 1 year, read a bunch of studies and say well I'm evidence based. What the hell, it sounds good. But there's really got to be a middle ground there. I think that being able to look at the science and look what's out there but also try to do your best to reconcile that with what you're actually observing in your own clinical study even if it's just a bunch of case studies, I think that's so important.

Robb Wolf: I could not agree more again not to completely put you up on a pedestal but this is why I really enjoy your writing so much you've had a few fascinating pieces that you've done on your Facebook feed and elsewhere talking about the evidence based medicine scene and the juxtaposition with the broscience. There's a good elements to both and again when we put things into stone tablets then all kinds of hell breaks loose you know? Look at the Middle East.

Alex Viada: Exactly. You went there.

Robb Wolf: I did. Hey we have 6 listeners so long as I keep those, were pretty good to go.

Alex Viada: A little more radical jihadist, we should be okay. And the funny thing is I come from a clinical trial background like that--I work at clinical trials for close to 8 years. So it's kind of like okay I should have every reason to be like sucking at the pharmaceutical teeth there. But you know I realized the limitations of it.

[0:55:34]

Robb Wolf: Right. It's awesome. I really appreciate your work. Where can folks track you down on the interwebs? You know what before we get to that, tell folks about your upcoming nutrition book.

Alex Viada:

Oh, yes. it's something I'm working on right now and when I wrote *The Hybrid Athlete* my whole idea with anything I write is to say okay it's great to write something that's interesting but it's even more good to write something where people go that's interesting I can use this. I think on nutrition there's kind of a similar gap between here's a diet plan and here's a textbook or a book just on theory.

So my whole idea behind this nutrition book to kind of try to combine the two and it's say okay here's how digestion actually works and it's not going to be 50 pages of the textbook on how amylases release from both the pancreases and the mouth and here's the particular bonds that it break. But it's basically going to say okay here's how long things in your stomach, here's what absorption takes there. So as an athlete what do need to think about when you're eating? What do you need to think about when you're eating on game day? How does insulin actually work? What does spiking your insulin mean? What's actually going to happen?

So a lot of this nutrition book is going to be looking some of that theory giving a--I try to make the tone to be where a--someone with no background can understand it and somebody with a formal education in it won't be insulted. That's kind of my view point on it. And basically say okay if you're an athlete I want you to be able to read this book and say okay here's not only the guidelines I should follow when I eat but here is why this is doing this. Here is why I always feel like vomiting the morning of a race if I've done this kind of carb load, here's how I should be safe during the weight cut, here's how I should eat during a race and here's how much protein I should take in and whether or not protein quality matters and how much does it matter.

So all those little questions that I think kind of fill in the gaps where people sort of know what to do and they sort of know the theory but they want a little bit more on each. That's going to be kind of what I'm going for right there. Because my whole thing is if I can kind of empower every athlete I work with or everyone who reads the book to kind of be able to look at diet and look at everything with a critical eye of their own. To me, that's the biggest reward is to somebody pick this up and say you know what I don't need someone to tell me whether or not this other diet is good, I can kind of think about that for myself.

Robb Wolf:

Right. That's fantastic. Awesome. Well I'm super excited to see that. I've just gotten amazing utility out of your *Hybrid Athlete* book. I mean that book alone has a phenomenal nutrition section. Like it's better than 99% of the nutrition writing that I've seen anywhere so I'm really excited to see what you have with this specifically nutrition-oriented book. Remind

folks where they can track you down in the interwebs and any other like consulting anything else that you have goon on.

Alex Viada: We've actually got a website up CompleteHumanPerformance.com. It's got a lot of articles I've written over the years. We're actually going to expanding it because our team is growing like crazy. But again a lot of good articles. We got Apparel which is fancy. I'm wearing one of the t-shirts right now. But yeah we've got link to a lot of our writings there. It should have a link to *The Hybrid Athlete* book as well. You can follow me on Facebook that's where I do most of my musings. If you like puppy pictures and peanut butter and failed attempts of being inflammatory, they never seem to pan out, that's probably where to find me.

Robb Wolf: Awesome. Well Alex, a huge honor having you on the show again and just to circle back thanks to David Dellanave for putting you and your writings on my radar. It's just been a real game changer for me. I've been flailing around in this arena for years. Your book is one of the most concise, practical, actionable things that I've read in ages. It's just head and shoulders above everything else out there.

Alex Viada: That means the world. Thank you very much. That's wonderful to hear. I've poured a lot of my writings into that and you spend a lot of time like anything else you write something and you go oh my god does this suck?

Robb Wolf: Any book that finishes that finishes off with a beer pairing section is-- you're doing god's work then. That's totally amazing.

Alex Viada: That's actually my favorite section to write there. I'm like okay, crack the knuckles; I'm like alright now this is what this was all about.

Robb Wolf: You can tell because there's some giddy enthusiasm that comes through in the beer paring so absolutely comes through.

Alex Viada: Awesome.

Robb Wolf: Awesome, Alex. Are you game coming back on the show when the nutrition book is ready?

Alex Viada: Absolutely. Absolutely. I'd love to.

Robb Wolf: Okay and maybe next time we'll get some specific questions from the listeners and we'll talk more about the nutrition and just whatever else floats our boat at that time.

Alex Viada: Let's do it. It sounds great to me.

Robb Wolf: Awesome, man. Thank you again for being on the show and I'll talk to you soon.

Alex Viada: Robb, it sounds good.

Robb Wolf: Okay. Bye-bye.

Alex Viada: Bye-bye.

[1:00:48] End of Audio