

Chapter 12

A New Level

I've always had a ton of energy and enjoyed working a lot. Since we opened Systems Training Center in 2013, I had been working 7 days a week.

Once the accident happened, I couldn't teach as many hours as before for several months. I just couldn't give as much energy as I had before.

I loved our gyms so much and didn't mind putting in the long hours before, because I enjoyed seeing people's success and the community we were creating. I was doing what I loved and I was proud to be able to share my passion with others. I knew we were making a difference too, making people fitter, safer, and more confident.

We had created a positive place for the whole family and I wanted to share the concept with the rest of the world. My goal was to open 10 gyms in 10 years. We were on track with three gyms in three years. My drive was based on making this world a little better place and to be successful. Not financially per se, although I wanted to live a comfortable life obviously, but I had no materialistic desires. To me, business was like a sport. You play with the strategy and goal to win but you should also have fun along the way. You should play for the love of the sport.

However, my drive to make a difference with the nonprofit kicked in a new level of grit. I was a man on a mission. Now, I was fighting for my son's legacy. To make sure that he didn't die in vain and change came, because of him. I wanted people to remember Liam. My desire to build and succeed reached a level that I didn't even know existed. I didn't need sleep, I didn't need food, I didn't even need money; all I needed was for people to know who Liam was and what happened to him, so that other children could be saved and their parents not have to go through what we were going through.

Once I was able to put one foot in front of the other without breaking down, I went to work with a vengeance. Our first event we organized was a twenty-four-hour BJJ (Brazilian Jiu Jitsu) event at Systems Training Center in Hawthorne. We submitted it to the *Guinness Book of World Records* as an attempt at a world record: the longest BJJ class ever held. Leading up to it, we were inviting other gyms and BJJ practitioners and MMA fighters. However, just as with any other event, I was nervous about how many people would actually show up.

During an interview in a podcast, I was asked, "How do you prepare for twenty-four hours of BJJ?"

I answered, "You don't. You decide you're going to do it and then you do it."

The truth is, I did obviously train a little more BJJ leading up to it, but not that much more. My fitness baseline was obviously fairly high, but during the time, my elbow was really bad, with bone spurs floating around. I couldn't bend my arm beyond ninety degrees or straighten my arm out, which limited my training quite a bit.

I told myself I was going to do it and there was nothing that would stand in my way. Knowing that I did it in honor of my son made not finishing it, not an option. I have done many things in my life where, although I completed them, doubting thoughts started to creep into my mind, *Why are you doing this? This is madness; why don't you just stop?* This time around, the thought never even entered my consciousness. I wouldn't have stopped for anything, except maybe a serious injury or the building catching fire.

It was time to start the Facebook Live to record the entire twenty-four hours. I had a little adrenaline pumping, knowing that I was going to be there for twenty-four hours. However, I was more nervous that people weren't going to show up than anything else. We had food, drinks, live music and volunteers for the entire twenty-four hours. We started at 6:00 p.m. Friday night, and as we started, some people trickled in, but it was far from packed. As the night proceeded, more and more people started showing up. Soon, both rooms were packed with people from all walks of life. We had complete beginners to some of the best in the world all training at the same time.

We had people from a ton of different BJJ schools present, who usually competed against each other but now had come together for a cause. It was one of the most powerful things I had ever experienced. Throughout the twenty-four hours, there were over two hundred people on the mats, with names such as Fabricio Werdum, Mac Danzig, Renner and Ryron Gracie, and many more.

As the night went on, my body was starting to feel the effects of hours upon hours of doing BJJ. My knees started hurting from sitting on them, to the point where I couldn't sit on them at all anymore. The skin on top of my toes was gone, from the friction of the mats. One of the worst parts was the chafing, however. Marathon runners biggest enemy was chafing, from wet, sweaty skin rubbing against clothing. An average marathon takes about four to five hours, and the chafing happens only from their own clothes moving as they run.

Now imagine doing twenty-four hours of nonstop activity, and the chafing not just from the movement of your own body at a constant pace but rather from both your own and someone else's body and clothing rubbing against each other, as you battle for positions and submissions in a series of explosive movements.

My body was torn into pieces.

Toward the end, I had to start putting Vaseline on my neck, hands, and feet, but it didn't help much. I had also made the mistake of rolling with some really talented, young BJJ competitors at a high speed early on in the night. The competitor in me couldn't help but match the intensity they were going at. It was fun but cost me a lot of energy. They went home, but I was still there, having wasted a ton of energy very early on.

As Friday became Saturday and there were fewer and fewer people left on the mat, it started getting colder. I know what you're thinking: don't complain about "cold" when you live in Los Angeles. However, at 4:00 a.m. in December, it's not hot in Southern California.

In the middle of the night, a couple of homeless men came in to seek shelter. We let them eat some food and sit and watch, until one of them fell off a chair, either from drugs or alcohol or both, and we had to ask them to leave.

By Saturday afternoon, the mats were packed again, and as we started getting closer to the 6:00 p.m. mark, I was becoming emotional. I couldn't believe all the people that had showed up to pay their respects and show their support. Just seeing all of the support we had from the martial arts world, I really felt that we were going to make a difference. It was hard for me to hold back tears.

As the twenty-four hours were coming to an end, I could hardly walk anymore. At the end, six other people had stayed on the mat with me for the whole twenty-four hours. During that time, I had completed 105 five-minute rounds. For those not familiar with BJJ: a black-belt match is usually ten minutes long.

After the event, we still had to clean up, and I had to do a couple of interviews. By the time I went to bed that night around 10:00 p.m., I was completely exhausted. Even though I had been on the mat for twenty-four hours, I was awake for almost forty hours.

Unfortunately, I didn't get a chance to sleep in. I had to be up by 6:00 a.m. to go do a 5K run in Beverly Hills, in honor of Vahagn Setian. Vahagn's father, Karen, had become a good friend. He had reached out after Liam's passing, as he knew the pain of losing a son. Vahagn was killed by *Prison Break* actor Lane Garrison, in a drunk driving accident. Karen and his wife fought the same fight we were fighting, and I had promised him that we would be there for the annual 5K run. "Running" might be a strong word, but I hobbled along for the 5K, with Mishel and the mayor of Beverly Hills, talking Swedish politics, in Swedish.

After we were done, I went home and crashed. My body wasn't very happy with me, and I was at the verge of exhaustion. The combination of such an extended amount of physical activity, sleep deprivation, undernourishment, and the cocktail of germs from the sweat and proximity of so many people during the twenty-four hours, took its toll. I got really sick—the sickest I had been in many years—and I was bedridden for three days straight.

Liam's Life WOD

Anyone who does CrossFit knows what a WOD is. WOD stands for Workout of the Day, and in CrossFit boxes (gyms), workouts every single day, to have constantly varied training routines. Many of these WOD's—such as "Filthy Fifties," "Grace," and "Fight Gone Bad"—have become benchmark workouts, so that people can go back and redo them and measure themselves, to see how they have improved. Some of these WOD's are known as "Hero WOD's," such as "Murph" and "Arnie." They were created for fallen soldiers or peace officers who had given their lives in the line of duty. Simon Vickers, one of my best friends from England, contacted me and Tina Angelotti, another close friend and a CrossFit head coach and competitor, and suggested we create a workout in Liam's memory.

When Tina, Mishel, and I started to discuss what the workout was going to be, we wanted it to be something special, something that had meaning. We decided to create something around his birthday, May 25, 2015. We had some footage of Bebisen trying to mimic me and Mishel, lifting a PVS bar and throwing it back on the floor. On top

of that, we had Bebisen in a CrossFit promo video, where we had made it look like he was doing box jumps. We wanted to incorporate those movements into the WOD.

Finally, we decided to make it a partner WOD. By making it a partner WOD, people would have to work together with someone else and motivate and rely on that person. This was in an effort to also remind people, that we rely on each other always. We wanted to remind people not only to not drink and drive themselves but also stop their friends from drinking and driving. The workout ultimately became five rounds of exercises, alternating between twenty-five and fifteen reps, while the partner was holding a static position. It was a really fun but challenging workout.

I contacted CrossFit, whose community was usually really caring and attempted to make this world a little bit better of a place. I originally wanted to make Liam's WOD a hero workout, but since that was reserved for fallen officers and service members, that wasn't possible. However, CrossFit did promote the workout on their social media, and CrossFit boxes all around the world performed the workout on the twenty-fifth of May, 2016, the day Bebisen would have turned two.

People who had lost children had warned me that certain days would be difficult, such as Christmas, birthdays, and so on. Halloween had been hard, and Mother's Day had been really hard, but except from that, I didn't really feel that any day was much harder than any other. Perhaps that was because he was so young and we only got to spend one of each holiday with him. However, his birthday was unbearably difficult.

In general, CrossFit workouts were very challenging, and most people only did one workout a day. That day, I did the workout three times. It was my way of dealing with the pain, by pushing myself to physical exhaustion.

Looking back, many of the things I did, pushing my body to the limit, might not have been the healthiest, but I had to do it. It was my way of dealing with things. I would have laid down my own life over and over and over again for my son, but since I couldn't and I wasn't able to be there to save him, this was my way of honoring him. I had to push myself to exhaustion, for my son, in every way I could. I had to show the world and myself that I was willing to do anything for him but most of all, I had to show him.

Two weeks after Liam's passing, we shot a short movie with my good friend Bobby Razak. Bobby was a talented film producer, had produced a bunch of documentaries in the martial-arts world. Bobby was also familiar with the problems with drunk driving, after both being injured by a drunk driver himself, as well as losing his friend Mask, of TapouT, to a drunk driver. Months later, I got a call from a woman who was in charge of creating a PSA (Public Safety Announcement) commercial for the Department Transportation of Missouri, which was going to be a Super Bowl commercial for the state. She had seen the short by Bobby, and they used it to create a social experiment, where they put a green frog that resembled Bebisen's frog next to an iPad in bars and restaurants. People's reactions were then filmed as they watched the short movie. It was a very well done commercial, and it was seen by millions in Missouri.

With a lot of help from Anna Bielkheden, a become a big part of our nonprofit and fight, we created a children's book, which would become the first book in a series of books to teach children from a young age about drunk driving and organ donation.

I was the keynote speaker at Beverly Hills High School for some 1,600 students, as they did an event called "Every 15 Minutes," which was put on by Karen Setian, who had also lost his son to a drunk driver. "Every 15 Minutes" was an event that had started in Canada, where at one point, someone literally died every fifteen minutes due to drunk driving. It was a no-frills, hands-on event, where the school staged a car crash with some of the students from the school. Participants had a role. Some were "injured" in the crash, some were okay, and two of them played the role of being killed. The kids were taken to a real emergency room. The "dead body" were taken by the corner and the drunk driver was arrested and booked. It was very realistic. Beverly Hills police, court, and fire department were part of the event. It was an elaborate two-day event where the students got to see the potential deadly outcome of drunk driving.

Both Uber and Lyft created a campaign where new users received \$20 off their first ride if they entered the code "LiamsLife."

We gave out three full-ride scholarships to three students at Udacity University, who were studying a nanoprogram on autonomous cars, which is the ultimate solution for both drunk, drugged, and distracted driving. Out of some two thousand applicants, it was narrowed down to nine students, who wrote a short essay on why this program was so important to them. Mishel and I chose three out of those, who we felt were the most passionate about saving lives.

On June 25, 2017, we hosted what would become our first annual event. It was a block party in Downtown Los Angeles, sponsored by AEG and AXS, the owners of the Staple Center. It was dubbed "A Celebration of Life," promoting health and wellness. We had some very talented performers, including *American Idol* winner Lee DeWyze. It was a wonderful day in the sun and a huge success.

On July 16, we hosted another fundraiser in Sweden. Johan, one of my boys had I grown up with, owned a couple of nightclubs in Gothenburg and wanted to do something for Liam. Not only did he put together the event at his club, but he also got Mercedes to donate a car and wrapped it with *#rememberLiam* and *Don't Drink And Drive*. The car would drive people home for free if they had been drinking and didn't have money for a taxi.

It was a beautiful event, where we focused on organ donation, since drinking and driving wasn't as big of a problem in Sweden. Just because it's not as big of a problem doesn't mean it doesn't happen. However, as caring as the Swedish society usually was, the amount of organ donors was shockingly low. It was amazing to see so many old friends and acquaintances show up, many of who I hadn't seen in twenty years. We also had 2016's Swedish Idol winner perform; whose name also is Liam.

When I say “we,” I’m referring to all the creative and amazing people who were involved with Liam’s Life Foundation in one way or another—people who cared and wanted to make a difference; people who had joined Liam’s army to continue to save lives. To these people, I will be forever grateful.