

Last month I sat down with Rob Berry to have a conversation about being a cancer survivor and living his life to the fullest. He is an NPC Men's Physique Athlete, 6'2", 24 years old and in only his 3rd show, Rob won 1st place, in the Men's Physique Open division, Class F, at the NPC Klash Series All South Championships. He is naturally competitive and being an amputee does not define who he is or stop him from chasing his dreams.

## Rob Berry

### Living His Life With A Purpose

**S**o in 2011, I was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, which is bone cancer, and spent 10 months in the hospital. I spent Monday through Friday, in a hospital room getting served chemo, radiation, and whatever else they gave me. I would go home that Friday evening, and come back Monday morning. I did that for 10 months. The cancer had to be killed first and the chemo did that. Then they do a "Stay in the process", to take the cancer out. In my case, they did an endoprosthesis, which is basically a knee replacement. The chemo completely killed the cancer. During the healing process, I got a staph infection, which can be life threatening, so we had to act very quickly. My options were to go back in and clean it and completely replace the knee again or amputate my leg.

I asked which option would give me more flexibility, more activity, and they said, If you amputated your leg, you'd be able to do more, and you'd be able to withstand more. With the knee replacement, I would have to get a new one I think they said every six or seven years and personally I just didn't want to do that. So I was like, just go ahead and amputate and get rid of it. Then on October 7th, I got amputated.

### It's a pretty serious decision for a 12 year old.

My parents pretty much sat me down and asked, "Robert, what do you want to do?" My first answer was, I want to run. When I said that, they were like, okay, it was pretty clear that if I wanted to run and be more active then we're gonna have to amputate versus doing another endoprosthesis, and limiting what I am able to do. Right? And I absolutely don't want to be limited.

### So once they amputate, what is involved in getting a prosthesis?

Once they amputate, the process for getting the prosthesis takes a while and is very difficult. First, if it's covered by your insurance, it has to get approved. Then you have to get fitted for the prosthesis, get tested, then you can get it. It's a five step process, the first two steps taking the longest. Submitting the request to insurance and insurance approving it is the hardest part because insurance is going to look at something like a prosthetic and question if you technically need it. They consider other options like a wheelchair, or crutches and think he'll be completely fine to live his life with those less expensive options.



I've dealt with insurance for the last 12 years and getting those approvals is very difficult. On top of that, and on top of all of those five steps, you still have to pay for the prosthetic. After you receive the prosthetic, there's a certain amount of money that you have to pay every month to be able to meet your out of pocket expenses. At the time, it was \$4,500 out of our pockets. Of course, my parents took care of that. Now, if I get anything new, I have to think, "What is the monthly payment going to be on something new?"

**So I imagine at 12 years old, you're still growing. So changing that prosthetic out as you grow was a process. Tell me what it was like getting used to the prosthesis. What did you have to go through for rehab and then learning how to walk wearing a prosthesis?**

On average, amputees use twice the amount of energy than a normal person just to walk. The reason why we use twice the amount of energy is we have to subconsciously activate different muscle groups and add in different attributes to be able to continue to walk or stay walking for a long period of time. We also have to make sure we're not hurting, we're not doing too much, because if I do too much activity, I can't walk. There's just so much friction that goes on with wearing the prosthesis itself. The actual rehabilitation took about a year. It took about a year for me to be able to put pressure on my residual limb and to be able to be aggressive, the way I need to in order to wear a prosthesis. There are several options to attach the prosthesis to the residual limb using belts, wedges, pins, or suction. Mine is held on by suction. The rehabilitation work is activating your glutes, activating your, what's left of your hamstrings, what's left to your quad, for example, kicking your leg up for a leg raise, or like kicking your leg back for a glute extension, to be able to wake those muscles up to use them. It's just small steps, like every, like 30 or 45 minutes, I'd have to get up and try to use the prosthetic but I'd have to hold something. So I did all that for about a year. Yeah, it was a lot of work.

**At this point, you're 13 years old. Part of your decision to amputate included the desire to run. Were you able to run? Did you have different types of prosthetics for different activities?**

I went through three prosthetics before I could run, actually. I got what I needed to be able to run, my running leg or blade, but by the time I did run, and I was running, the mechanics to be able to run, props to any amputee that can just sprint and keep sprinting, because that crap is hard. I did get a fancier running leg than most. Running with a blade takes a lot out of your body because of the shock on your pelvic bone and your body takes a beating. I decided I didn't want to do this. So, I did have the running leg and I tried for about six or seven months to get acclimated to it, but I just couldn't. Instead I turned to different activities. I wrestled and then I did track, then rock climbing and finally then bodybuilding.

I asked what my high school could offer me as an amputee and found out track was an option. I began wheelchair track as a sophomore.

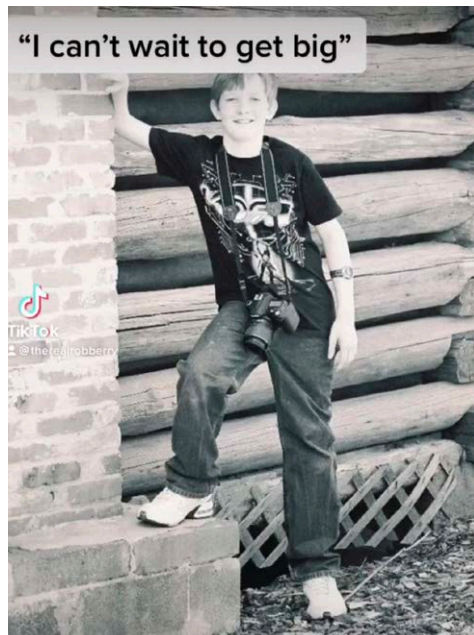
**What events were you doing?**

I was racing in the really long wheelchairs, you see in the Paralympics. That's actually how I think I got my shoulders to be 100% honest. I discovered I was pretty good at wheelchair track. There's only two events that high school allows for wheelchair athletes, the 200 and 800 meters events. So that's what I did. I think I got like 36 or 37 seconds in the 200 my first year and 2:15 in the 800. By the time I was done with high school, I was at a national level. My fastest 200 meter time was 30.2 and my fastest 800 time was 1:56 seconds.

**How does that compare to somebody with legs?**

I was one second slower than our best long distance runner at the high school level. Yeah, I was where he ran. He ran a 155 pretty consistently for the 800.

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**“ I don't classify myself as disabled, I am just me, regardless of whether I have only one leg or not, I can compete against the best in the world and I can win.. ”**  
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**That's Incredible, especially in such a short period of time. But you went from track to rock climbing or adaptive rock climbing. I don't think I've ever seen adaptive rock climbing. I understand the mechanics of regular rock climbing. So how is adaptive different?**

So adaptive climbing is different because people climb with prosthetics, or they climb without prosthetics, and that's what I did. I only climbed with my prosthetic off. I don't use my left leg.

I climbed both straight up and bouldering. I was really good, actually. I have fairly long limbs. The hardest level I've ever climbed is a 5.11. My first year, I competed at the national level placing fifth. You have to be relatively agile to do that sport, however, I was trying to get big. So that sport conflicted with my goals. Through all my sports I was working out to gain size. I was always working out. That's actually why I stopped track because my leg was getting too big. I couldn't fit in the wheelchair anymore. Literally. If my leg was tucked up under a certain way for an extended amount of time, I would lose 100% feeling in my foot and my calf and hamstring would cramp up. I couldn't sit in the chair anymore. I even tried angling, and it still didn't work. So I just decided to stop doing it. Then rock climbing presented itself to me and I saw that okay, I could do this. But the people in that sport told me, "Hey, you probably got to ease up on the weights a little bit if you're wanting to do this type of an endurance sport."

### **Climbers are lightweight.**

Very lightweight. Yeah, you don't see some huge dude climbing a wall. Again, I decided, I don't really want to do that. Bodybuilding kinda just took over. It's really God's way of showing me my body. I'm trying to do everything else and he's like, "Dude, you need to do bodybuilding." So, that's just him kind of pushing me towards the sport of bodybuilding.

I met a gentleman named Will at Platinum Muscle Nutrition in Buford. I was purchasing supplements so that's how I got to know Will. I was getting strong and he would tell me, "you should probably think about doing a bodybuilding show." I was like, No, I don't want to do that, because I didn't want to wear the men's tiny posing suit. He said, "Well, you don't have to. You're not that big. He told me about the men's physique



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category. So at this time, I was like, 15 years old. I kept going in for years. By the time I was 19 I was starting to gain a lot more size, weighing in around 160lbs. I walked in, and he was like, "you know, you're getting bigger, you're doing good. I'm gonna give you a contact. It was Nick Morell and we arranged to meet at a gym. We talked and he wanted to see what we could do. I did my first show when I was 20. My second was a year later and I just won my class in my third show this past year.



**Wow. That's pretty incredible. You know, you see a lot of people who are just starting out in the sport or just getting started out in the gym. What do you want to tell them? What is the message that you want to share?**

I want them to know that they just need to do it. If you don't allow room to grow, then you'll always remain comfortable. You have to be uncomfortable. You have to get comfortable being uncomfortable, or else you'll never grow. It's the same principle as if you're working in a specific field of a specific industry, and you want to grow in the industry, what do you have to do? You have to adapt, you have to change your mindset, you have to learn something new in order to grow and add something to your resume to your skill set. It's the exact same thing in life and in fitness, you have to be willing to change some things in order to make yourself better. If you're not willing to do that, then you'll never progress from where you're currently at. If you keep thinking, "I did this in the past, here I am now wanting to get back to the type of shape I was in the past. You have to realize, you can't really go back to where you were because your body is not where you were. It's completely new. So you have to relearn different things. You have to basically adapt to the new body that you're in, and figure out what your new body is telling you. Just as important, you need to learn how to listen to your body and understand that it's okay to go slow. It's okay to take it easy. It's okay to take baby steps. Look at the big picture, but focus on small milestones and accomplish one thing, then take the next step, and then go from there. Small steps to get to the big picture. Otherwise, you can overwhelm yourself and give up.



**Looking down the road five years from now, 10 years from now? Where do you want to be?**

Five years from now? Let's see. I'm 24. So I'll be at the Olympia in the next five years. I made a promise to myself by 2027. I'll at least be at the "O". My vision is to be the first amputee to step on that stage. We are all about getting to that point. The ultimate goal is to be Mr. Olympia in my sport, and really make a difference and an impact on a lot of people. The other day I was asked, "Rob, what keeps you motivated?" I'm like, Dude, I haven't been motivated since 2015. Motivation gets the ball rolling. Discipline keeps the ball rolling. I have an obligation and I have the opportunity to inspire the lives of people I haven't even met yet and who don't even know who I am. But I have an obligation to those people to change their life by stepping on that stage.

I want to step on the stage with all the other Olympians. The able bodied Olympians. It's the only division I can compete in. I'm not in a wheelchair. I don't classify myself as disabled, I am just me, regardless of whether I have only one leg or not, I can compete against the best in the world and I can win.

**If you are on the Olympia stage in five years, then what does the 10 year mark look like?**

The 10 year mark? I hope to have a successful brand, a successful supplement line and clothing line, Without Limits, to be able to show people that there's no limits to what you can accomplish. Losing my leg taught me humility, taught me the value of relationships, and showed me that I have a special role to play in this world, to be a light to others when all you've known is darkness. Inspiring people to live their lives to be purposeful and being able to have people be a part of something bigger than them.

**I have no doubt that you're committed to making it happen. And we look forward to watching you when it does.**



Rob with his mama