

COMING ON STRONG

HE'S AUSTRALIA'S STRONGEST MAN, BUT FOR DEREK BOYER JUST GETTING RECOGNITION IS PROVING HIS TOUGHEST CHALLENGE

BY JESSE FINK IMAGES BY VINCENT LONG

A man who wants to conquer the world does not live in Albury. Nice town, nice people, but if you want to make big things happen for your career, don't live in Albury. Derek Boyer knew that. He had to leave. His life was in Albury, his family was in Albury, his childhood, his formative experiences, but out there, beyond Albury, was where it was all going to come together, the dream he'd nurtured for so long: a life of possibilities. He was sick of the nightclub work. Sick of the gimmicky jobs, such as getting painted green as "The Incredibly Friendly Hulk". He wanted more. He was blessed with a gift. The

world would not know what hit it when he finally made the move. So he booked a ticket... to the Gold Coast. This was the place to start his dream.

Australia's answer to Miami, the Gold Coast has always lived by the credo of new starts, new beginnings. You can see it everywhere you look. The landfill. The canal estates. The theme parks. The Christian life centres. The off-the-plan units. This is where people come to forget the past and make a fist of the future. This is where Boyer, 35, Australia's strongest man and World's Strongest Man and strongman grand prix competitor, came to knock down the door to his tomorrow.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Boyer shoulders the weight of expectation; Q: How many Weet-Bix does he eat? For the answer, see pg 114; the ties that bind; leaving a mess on Bianca's belly; approx 30m in good old feet and inches.

Much has changed here in recent times. Hot asphalt has been ripped up for terrazzo tiles. Beachside 1960s-era units have been torn down, replaced by towers of white marble and green frosted glass. Takeaway shops have made way for mini-malls and shopping boutiques. Even the coffee is pretty good here. The prejudicial judgments that used to be made about "The GC" just don't wash any more. The place is on the up.

You can see it in the people walking the streets: young, tanned, buff. Boyer fits right in, except he doesn't. He's bigger. He walks taller. You could get blasé about people-watching in this town, everyone looks so good, but Boyer makes heads turn. He enjoys the attention and admits to being an extrovert. He figures it's his privilege for having worked so hard to become what he is today. And what he is today is unstoppable.

He's also complex. *Inside Sport* meets Boyer in a cafe in up-market Broadbeach, and within minutes he's talking about Nietzsche's theory of the Superman, metaphysics, and the Greek legend of the calf-carrying Milo of Croton – a story that spawned the "progressive overload" technique that Boyer credits for turning him into a 192cm, 130kg Fijian-Australian mesa of pure muscle. This is not your average sportsman.

Even more confounding is his diet. Coffees arrive and Boyer has ordered a small raspberry chocolate slice, a reasonably sized portion for anyone else, but about as big as the tip of Boyer's thumb. Can he eat whatever he likes and still look like... *that*? He can sense this writer is confused.

"I had to buy this. I'm a diabetic. I can feel my blood sugar level is dipping a little bit," he explains, stirring his long white in a glass.

"You're a diabetic?" I stammer, feeling even more inadequate.

"There's a bit of a story in it. Ten years ago I was an amateur powerlifter and I was representing Australia. I became very, very ill. I actually thought I was going to die. In the space of two weeks, I lost about 20kg and I was going blind. I was diagnosed as being a type-1 diabetic. I went to a specialist; he then referred me to counsellors, to remap a new life for me... I was devastated.

"The first question I asked my counsellor was: 'Are there any elite athletes in physical sports that are diabetic?' She had no idea. But she researched high and low, and the only thing she could find was a one-page article on Steve Renouf. And I tell you what, that article meant so much to me. I held on to that article. It was the only thing I had to try and resurrect some semblance of what I had been. I started working really hard in the gym. A year later, I started my professional strongman career."

Ex-Broncos and Test winger Renouf would probably be very flattered, I tell him. Boyer says he's been trying to look Renouf up, to explain how the league great's diabetes confession changed his life. I can't help thinking that Boyer would be a perfect spokesperson for diabetes charities, if only they knew he existed. But even Boyer knows that what he does – flipping cars, lifting rocks, pulling planes, gnashing his teeth for the cameras – makes him a fringe performer.

In Europe, strongman is a big sport. The Finns, Icelanders and Swedes are mad for it. But here, it's a sport consigned to the margins, followed by a minority, watched by even fewer. That's why Boyer has to work on a construction site to pay the bills. That's also

why he's taking acting lessons (his only acting role to date has been a non-speaking part as a bouncer in the Paul Hogan movie *Strange Bedfellows* – not exactly a stretch). He wants more than what Australia can offer him. The man is *big*, but in the Australian sporting firmament he is inconsequential.

However, meeting Boyer in person, seeing him up close, it just doesn't make any sense. The man has marketable qualities in excelsis: he's tall, handsome, speaks in a baritone voice, is built like a bull, has a wry sense of a humour, is contemplative, a thinker. He should be a somebody, but this land of 20 million people has scuppered many plans. Boyer knows he has what it takes to "make it"; the trajectory of his life points only to one destination, and he is determined to get there, no matter how long it takes.

"Unlike many sports where at 35 you're pretty much over the hill, with strength sports you can keep your strength with you, well into your 40s and 50s," he says. "You can be phenomenally strong well into middle age. That's a very attractive thing for me."

As is the barista at the cafe, 23-year-old Bianca. Boyer has noticed her. He notices all the good-looking girls. They notice him. It's all part of being Australia's strongest man.

When I go up to the counter to order another round, I tell her the man seated at the table is Australia's strongest man. Bianca excitedly steps forward to get a closer view.

"Really, *that* guy?"

"Yeah, truly."

"I must get him to sign my abs."

When the coffees come to the table, Bianca's as good as her word. She hands Boyer a marker pen. She pulls up her shirt revealing a Gold Coast-standard tanned, washboard stomach and Boyer methodically writes, "TO BIANCA, STRENGTH & POWER FOREVER".

Each languid stroke of his pen is so sensual, and she's enjoying it so much, it's uncomfortable to watch. Bianca mentions she's off to a singles night that evening. Boyer, a "very single guy" by his own admission, sees a chance. I feel I should leave. I nervously joke that he should also write his number. Boyer doesn't blink. "CALL ME" he continues, scrawling his mobile phone number and his website address.

Then something unusual happens. Boyer doesn't stop. He begins drawing an Australian landscape – a kangaroo, Uluru, rolling hills, bush flowers, a burning desert sun and, to top it all off, a likeness of Boyer himself holding a 160kg "Atlas stone": his strongman speciality. Boyer, adding further weight to his credentials as a Nietzschean superman, confesses to having toyed with being a professional artist. He got a degree in visual arts at Charles Sturt University. He's had his mixed-media artworks exhibited.

The drawing goes right around Bianca's waist. Boyer is pleased. "I love drawing on women," he says, tongue in cheek. It sounds sleazy, but coming out of his mouth, it's very funny. When a man the size of Boyer cracks a joke, you laugh.



BOYER KNOWS THAT WHAT HE DOES – FLIPPING CARS, LIFTING ROCKS, PULLING PLANES, GNASHING HIS TEETH FOR THE CAMERAS – MAKES HIM A FRINGE PERFORMER

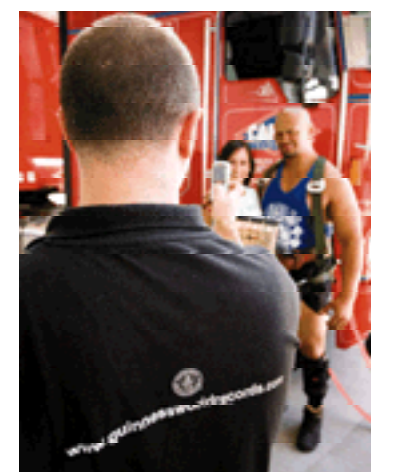


Boyer came to Australia from Fiji when he was eight, the son of Alfred, a 160cm-tall English-Tongan electrician, and Tina, a Rotuman restaurateur and manager of disabled nursing homes.

Rotuma, a volcanic atoll 465km north of the main Fijian islands, has been a part of Fiji since the late 1800s, but the Rotuman people are ethnologically more Polynesian, and identify with that culture's warrior ideology. It's a feature Boyer, descended himself from a chief of the island, played on early in his strongman career as the "Island Warrior", when he sported a mullet fiercer than Tawera Nikau's and wore hammy black make-up.

In his first forays on the international circuit in the late 1990s, Boyer represented "Oceania" rather than Australia. He was bigger then, a good 20kg heavier, and looked meaner, but he grew tired of having to take care of the mullet and cut the lot off. Even today, though, he still gets asked to bung on the whole Islander schtick when TV producers are on the lookout for a big Polynesian thug. One such occasion was last year, when Boyer appeared on the MTV series *Road Rules*, a corny pastiche of *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*, featuring six twentysomethings who are asked to take part in various challenges in exotic locales. Boyer had to dress as the Island Warrior, in full war paint, and jump out of a bush and holler a Fijian war cry at the contestants. One of them, Abram, a blond upstart from Montana, gave Boyer the war cry back, mimicking every call and action he made. The stand-off went on for a minute. Watching the tape again with *Inside Sport*, Boyer can't hide his annoyance with the whole scenario. "I just wanted to smash him," he says. "But I had to go along with it."

Going along with it is a pattern that was set early for Boyer. As a child, he was inspired by American powerlifter Paul Anderson, who pioneered strength sports from the 1950s through to the '70s, and he admits he always "wanted to be the strongest man in the world". Still, he started playing a bit of rugby league, just because everybody else did in Albury, and



only got into serious powerlifting when a visiting trainer, Robert Adams, of the Australian Drug Free Powerlifting Association, plucked him out of the locker room and threw him into the gym.

From that point on, Boyer knew what he was capable of doing with his body. But even though he had found some stability and purpose in his professional life, Boyer says he hasn't always achieved the same perfection in his personal life. He has two daughters by two mothers: Michaela, 16, who is in Melbourne on a high school scholarship, and Paris, 9, who still lives in Albury with her mum. Boyer admits he's "not proud of" the situation, but says that's "just the way the cards were dealt".

Since moving to Queensland, he has consciously made an effort to be a better parent, and a better provider, to both his kids. Having a stable relationship, Boyer says, was difficult because of "travelling commitments and my work in the nightclub industry... under those conditions, it makes it intensely difficult to hold [down] a relationship". In fact, Boyer's only long-term companion is a 45-year-old walrus-moustached ex-nightclub bouncer from Albury, Tony Miller. He moved up north before Boyer and lured his friend to join him where the living was better and the prospects unlimited. Tony is Boyer's right-hand man – trainer, spotter, minder and drinking partner.



WHEN THE TRUCK IS OFFICIALLY WEIGHED, THE FIGURE IS MORE THAN BOYER HAD BARGAINED FOR: OVER 50 TONNES. BUT THE ISLAND WARRIOR DOESN'T FLINCH. HE'S GONNA GO FOR IT

Part of putting the dream in place was getting a manager, which Boyer has done in Gary Hopes, who runs a promotions agency that specialises in models, actors and children. Hopes has only been representing Boyer for a few months, but says he has big plans for his giant client. Part of that is organising a world-record truck-pulling attempt during *Inside Sport's* visit. The venue is the Cahill Transport truck yard in Lytton, an industrial suburb outside Brisbane, and Hopes has been busy clearing permission, finding the right pulling surface, organising weigh-ins for the truck

itself, and trying to drum up interest from other media to attend the event. But he hasn't remembered everything. In an ironic moment, Boyer takes *Inside Sport* to the hardware store while he buys masking tape for the rope he'll use to pull the truck. Then we follow him to the chemist so that he can buy his insulin. Even the toughest guys in the world still have to do their own shopping.

Lytton is so far in Brisbane's boondocks that even *Inside Sport's* taxidriver doesn't quite know where to go. But after a 20min drive through a landscape of tall grass and Jeffrey Smart-like industrial detritus, we find the address – a wide expanse of concrete dotted with huge Hamburg Süd and PIL shipping containers. Boyer has been here since 8am, and admits to having had a couple of beers in Fortitude Valley the previous afternoon to "take the edge off and calm the nerves". Still, he got to bed by 9pm and started this day with ten Weet-Bix, so he's feeling relaxed, refreshed and strong. Dressed in a muscle singlet, camouflage long shorts and hiking boots, he reassures me he has a special outfit for the occasion. Everything is in place, crucially so the container that will be fixed to the rope that Boyer will use to pull himself forward.

For the next couple of hours, Boyer mills about, sharing jokes with employees of the

trucking company and spouting strongman epithets for anyone who cares to listen. Indeed, he seems remarkably casual for a man who is about to try to break the record for pulling a truck along a 30m course, and who failed to pull 45 tonnes in his last official attempt. The record is 46.69 tonnes and Boyer tells me he's aiming for 47. However, he is concerned about a small crack in the concrete in the last section.

"It doesn't take much for a record attempt like this to go badly," he says. "I'll check for stones on the wheels. The course will be swept. You have to be very precise and calculating about putting a [record] attempt together... at the end of the course there's a crack in the cement that we can't get around. There's only a small incline, but it makes a big difference. I see that as the major obstacle. It would be heartbreaking to make it down 29m and not be able to get past that last hurdle."

A TV crew arrives with the official Guinness adjudicator, Sydney journo Chris Sheedy, who's seen Boyer try – and fail – attempts like this before. When the truck is officially weighed, the figure is more than Boyer had bargained for: over 50 tonnes. But the Island

Warrior doesn't flinch. He's gonna go for it. "I'm ready now," he says, pushing out his chest and grimacing. He takes one last swig of his water bottle and lets out a guttural cry. Then he undresses and changes into his pulling gear: tighter shorts, calf pads, harnesses and an assortment of belts. Inside Cahill's office, a gaggle of bored-looking promotional models, herded in for the attempt, are interrupted from reading the Sunday papers to be informed that Boyer is ready to go and instructed to come out to the tarmac and cheer him on. When they emerge, the girls are wearing baseball caps promoting various Gold Coast businesses and look like they have no idea what they're supposed to be doing. Neither does anyone else.

Tony, Boyer's right-hand man, attaches him to the truck. The engine of the truck roars like a jet (turning the engine on keeps the air flowing through the brakes, preventing them from jamming), the gears shift into neutral, and Boyer crouches like an All Black prop packing down into a scrum. He grabs the rope

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Boyer measures up; on the pull with his moustachioed drinking buddy; the blur of a record-breaking event; it must be official cos there's a man with a clipboard; making a fan's day without a pen; limbering up moments before the record attempt.

and yells, his muscles straining to their limit. "LET'S ROCK! C'MON!" Tony screams. "OOAAWW!" Boyer replies, shifting the weight off the tyres and getting the truck rolling, one hand passing over the other as he pulls himself along the rope. "C'MON!" "GRRRAHHH!" "C'MON!" "GRRRAHHH!" "GO DEREK!" The girls are excited now. Boyer's moved ten metres in next to no time. "C'MON! THAT'S IT! GO!" "OOAAWW!" Lactic acid is coursing through every vein. His eyes are popping.

BOYER: HOW TO WIN WITHOUT THE GEAR

"I'm 100 per cent drug free," says Boyer, categorically denying any link to drugs. "I don't touch the stuff. I don't deal with it. [But] it's everywhere. There's this idea now that anybody going into a gym, or even on the street, doesn't believe that they can be big and strong without being on drugs. I think that's a load of crap. I'm an educated man. From my readings, drugs have been around for the last 50 years in mainstream gyms and society. Before then there were men who walked this earth that [in terms of strength] were amazing, and still to this day haven't been equalled. It's from those guys and from those stories that I get my inspiration.

"I do research what guys take... it's important to know what you're actually competing against. I don't have a problem [with drug users]. I actually think there's more than one way to skin a cat. There are actual advantages to being drug free at the highest level. For example, through the course of a year, you'll find that these [drug users] are stuck in these cycles; their graph will fluctuate a lot. Whereas being drug free, your graph is a lot more consistent in strength. I'm never that far away from my full capacity to be at my best. If I capture these guys when they're in a trough, I'll beat them.

"A lot of the stuff we do in World's Strongest Man involves a lot of strong

connective tissue. I've seen a lot of guys turn up... the first car event, the flipping section, they blow biceps straight off the bone. Like a 400kg tyre, then bang! When this happens, and it happens a lot, these guys disappear completely. You never hear from them again. In this sport, there's a definite learning curve – a five-year curve. You need to be around for five years at the top level to be at your best. Consistency is a definite plus in this sport. Being drug free, your injury rate is a lot less, so you can serve the term."

However, ask Boyer how many of his rivals on the international stage are juiced up, and he clams up. "I don't want to speculate on that... I can only speak for myself," he prevaricates. However, he insists there is drug testing, and claims the peak body for strongman, the International Federation of Strength Athletes, launched a new initiative in 2004, the World Anti-Doping Agency-backed IFSA Health Policy, after pressure from sponsors to clean up the sport. Boyer says there has always been a drug policy in place, but it was more to do with making sure athletes didn't kill themselves by taking stimulants, rather than testing for substances. "The profile of the sport may change [because of the new drug policy], that's all I can say. In the end, I don't care what guys take. My idea is, I'm gonna kick their arses anyway."

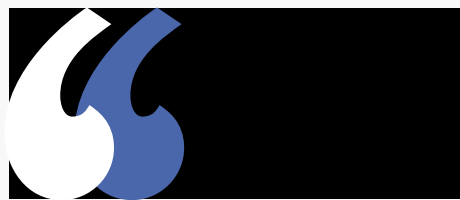


JOHNNIE WALKER

The End



TOP TO BOTTOM At the end of his rope – the apogee of Derek Boyer. TOP RIGHT Despite setting a new Guinness world record, Boyer is disappointed to learn there isn't a free slab of beer in it for him.



IT'S LIKE THE CLIMACTIC SCENE FROM A HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTER. THE TRIUMPH IS WRITTEN IN HIS EYES. HE LETS OUT A SCHWARZENEGGER-LIKE "RAARRGGHH!" THE CROWD ERUPTS

"YOU'VE GOT IT, DEREK! GO!"
"GRRRAHH!" Twenty metres.
"KEEP IT COMING! YOU'VE GOT IT! YOU'VE GOT IT!" Girls screaming.
"GRRRAHH!"
"KEEP IT COMING! KEEP GOING! KEEP GOING!" Twenty-nine metres... 30.

The truck's horn blares and Boyer collapses over the line to applause and cheers. It's taken less than a minute, just 48secs – but then Boyer doesn't move for three. He's prostrate, hyperventilating, physically spent, and an eerie silence falls upon the scene, the crowd not sure what to say or do.

"Onya, Derek," someone shouts from the crowd to nervous applause.

More silence. The only sound is the cadence of Boyer's breath: one (*breath*), two (*breath*), three (*breath*). Eventually, Boyer moves one of his legs, bringing a knee closer to his chest. Then the other leg. He's getting up. He lifts himself up from his elbows and straightens. It's like the climactic scene from a Hollywood blockbuster. The triumph is written in his eyes. He throws his fists into the air and lets out a Schwarzenegger-like "RAARRGGHH!" The crowd erupts. Boyer roars again.

Sheedy steps forward to do the official duties, telling Boyer he's pulled 51.84 tonnes,



smashing the previous record. Boyer, stunned, does his bit for his backup team, calling the day a team effort, thanking Cahill and the surveyors of the site, and not forgetting to mention the promo girls. "I feel alive," he tells *Inside Sport*. "I feel alive. What can I say? I feel alive. I feel really and truly alive. For me and my life, this is what it's all about. Just testing myself and making it happen... you've gotta believe in magic."

The crowd departs and Boyer, swigging mouthfuls of water, collapses in a director's chair, looking every bit the action movie star that, by rights, he should be. One of the promo girls, the best looking of a modest bunch, plucks up the courage to ask him for a photograph on her camera phone. "That was inspirational, really inspirational," she says, gushing. Boyer thanks her, but his mind is somewhere else. The girl, embarrassed, with nothing else left to say, simply repeats what she said the first time: "That was inspirational, really inspirational." Boyer returns his attention to her, smiles and poses for a few photographs by the side of the truck. The impromptu photo session over, the model slinks away and retreats to the shadows. What soon becomes obvious, though, from her fidgeting and nervous glances in Boyer's direction, is that she's waiting for him to *really* notice her.

Chances are Boyer did. But what's on his mind is when will the rest of the world *really* notice him? **■**

AND THE WORLD'S STRONGEST MAN IS...

So who is the world's strongest man? It's not an easy question, with the sport full of squabbling. However, in 2005, rival promoters World Class Events and Trans World International joined to create a unified competition, World's Strongest Man Super Series, made up of individual grand prix events and starting in California in April, in which IFSA-aligned and non-IFSA-aligned strongmen can compete. The WSM Super Series will award a championship title and will form the sole qualification path to the big one, the



World's Strongest Man competition, to be held later this year. The promoters of WSM Super Series have the discretion to invite competitors; IFSA is shut out of the process. When the old Super Series was disbanded in 2004, Zydrunas Savickas of Lithuania was top of the rankings but, based on the placings in the grand prix final for '03/'04, Pole Mariusz Pudzianowski (LEFT) was IFSA world champ. Hence, current rankings count for zip. In the IFSA-backed 2005 Arnold Strongman comp in the US, in March, Savickas won, taking home \$20,500 and a Hummer. Pudzianowski didn't compete.

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