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89-year-old gym-meister is putting us all to shame

AN 89-YEAR-OLD MAN kicked my butt last month.

And the month before that, and the month before that and the month before that.

His name is John Dyer, and he weighs 139 pounds.

Don't laugh. He could kick your butt, too.

See, this is the time of year when New Year's resolutions dissolve. Oh yeah, yeah, that whole learn-a-new-language thing — well, I can do that

next year. Oh yeah, yeah, spend more time volunteering. Well, there's still 11 months left. Oh yeah, yeah, get into better shape at the gym.

That's why John Dyer kicks butt. Not literally, of course. He's a mild-mannered

former postal worker who constantly smiles and misses his friends at the gym when he's away from them for a couple of days.

In December he lifted more than 1.9 million pounds. That's almost twice the weight of the International Space Station.

How do I know how much he lifted? Because at the downtown Norfolk YMCA, they publish the names of the 15 males and females who have lifted the most weight during the past month. In December, John Dyer was No. 2 on the list.

This is the way it goes at the gym. You think you're pushing yourself pretty hard, but there's always a guy pushing himself harder.

Dyer works out on 14 weight machines each day. He spends 20 minutes on the bicycle and 20 minutes on the treadmill. All told, he's there five days a week for about two hours a day. After he's finished, he treats himself to Golden Corral three days a week.

There's self-doubt when you hear people say they're working on their trapezius muscle and then you question: Do I even have a trapezius?

Last summer Thad Doumar, who runs his family's famous Doumar's drive-in restaurant in Norfolk and is a regular gymgoer, studied the list of the top lifters. There was John Dyer.

Somebody had to beat him. It might as well be him.

He committed himself to lifting. He checked how Dyer was doing online. He went to the gym seven days a week.

"It became my sole purpose," Doumar said. "It became kind of an obsession."

Every time he looked, Dyer was leading, but the gap was closing. And Doumar had discovered Dyer's weakness: weekends. He kept lifting.

Finally, toward the end of the month, Doumar overtook the champ for the month. Doumar was exhausted. He was 42 years old and had lifted more weight than an 89-year-old man. He was proud.

"I consider it an accomplishment."

Two months later, Dyer regained his No. 1 ranking.

There is something a little bit insane about the strongest people at the gym — a bit of wondering about what they've given up to be at the gym so often. In fact, one weight-lifter I talked to used that word to describe his routine, "insane."

There's a bit of fascination at their self-discipline when all you want to do is go home and destroy a tub of five-layer dip. There's self-doubt when you hear people say they're working on their trapezius muscle and then you question: Do I even have a trapezius?

There is healthy, and then there is unhealthy worrying about being healthy. It's a fine line, like switching to Diet Coke, then draining a 12-pack each day.

For Dyer, it's just one way to stay busy and healthy.

"I don't think about it," he said of his heavy load. "It feels like what I'm doing is normal."

■ Reach Mike at (757) 446-2277 or mike.gross@pilotonline.com.



MIKE
GROSS