



MH MEETS THE MEN FOR  
WHOM GETTING BIG IS  
ABOUT LOOKING OUT  
FOR THE LITTLE GUY





# Underground Resistance

On the fringes of hipster heartland Brooklyn, New York, a group of ordinary men are hitting the squat rack in an attempt to combat growing political violence. To find out if these liberal lifters have what it takes to trump right-wing agitators, MH took a trip to the Big Apple to train alongside the revolution

WORDS BY TOM WARD — PHOTOGRAPHY BY NILS ERICSON



# In October 2016, Poncho Martinez & his girlfriend were taking the NY subway

when they came across a stranger in need of help. Nineteen years old, slight of frame and terrified, he was the subject of a burly agitator shouting homophobic invective across the carriage. "Do not look at me," he yelled, "or I will fuck you up." Without consulting one another, Martinez and his girlfriend stepped in to help. She took a seat next to the stranger. Meanwhile, Martinez removed his glasses and glared at the attacker until he backed away. In that moment, the seeds of a revolutionary movement were planted.

Earlier in the same month, Donald Trump revealed that his preferred method of engagement with 50.8% of the US population was to grab them "by the pussy". Despite widespread condemnation, such superannuated beliefs did not prevent him from being elected the 45th President of the United States. This, says Martinez, has led to an underground movement of right-wing aggressors who, emboldened by Trump's rhetoric, have taken his installation as a license to exercise their own prejudices.

Since November 2016 – the month of Trump's victory – hate crimes in the US have risen by 20%, including a number of bomb threats to synagogues. Martinez's Jewish friends reported seeing swastikas spray-painted around their neighbourhoods. Anyone who raised objections was dubbed a "snowflake" and told to get over it. It was clear to Martinez that something had to be done. "I don't know how to do many things," he says. "But I know to help people get stronger."

Just 10 months later, Martinez has risen to prominence as the figurehead of a social movement dubbed the 'Swole Left'. The group's philosophy is simple: "If you are a leftist activist, and you are physically capable, you should lift weights." With a

pledge to defend themselves and others in an intolerant landscape, the Swole Left's liberal members refuse to be bullied. They're not hiding. They're in the gym, deadlifting twice their bodyweight, and they're on the streets, bringing the fight to their enemies. As one member posted on Twitter, "If you're a Nazi, you should be looking over your shoulder."

## Base Of Operations

It's 10am and we're in Richie's Gym, a bare-bones setup in the urban hinterland between Brooklyn and Queens. The temperature is a stifling 32°C. Outside, the L-Train rattles over the elevated tracks, forcing warm air in through the windows. Inside, loud hip-hop soundtracks the workouts of men who, for unspecified reasons, don't have anywhere else to be before lunchtime on a Friday. One of these people is Poncho Martinez, who is trying to fold my 6ft 3in frame into a proper squat.

At 6ft 1in and 99kg himself, Martinez, 27, is an imposing trainer. But with his red beard, plastic "sweat gutter" around his forehead, and a slogan tee covering his slight paunch, he is as far removed from the typical gym bro as it's possible to be. "I don't have a six-pack," he admits, a hint of his Texan roots in his accent. "I'm never going to be a cover model. But lifting weights makes me feel the best version of myself."

Many of those who end up at Richie's Gym have chanced upon Martinez offering to train people via Twitter and Facebook. Others have been introduced as a result of shared membership of socialist movements. I have come to New York at Martinez's behest. By inviting me into his circle, he hopes to spread the message of the Swole Left further. But first, we must correct my form.

"Your nipples should point toward the floor," he offers. Ignoring the rivulet of sweat running down my nose, I try again. "Better," he says, and for a moment I believe him. "Now let's put some real weight on the bar."

A dedication to squatting isn't enough to grant you access. In the Swole Left, political motivation is mandatory. "I ask everyone what they do politically and what their goals are physically," says Martinez. Not everybody wants to get hench. Some just want to lose weight. Some want to run faster in case they find themselves being chased by police at a protest. "I like to know how this is going to be applied, even if it's just building the endurance to march door to door with a petition. No matter how you approach activism, you need the body to do it."

Today we're joined by three members: Jacob Roa, 27, Ben Firke, also 27, and 28-year-old Mark, who wishes to keep his surname anonymous. Martinez moves among the group, offering pointers on form and cheering whenever there's a last rep to be pushed out. With the exception of Roa and Martinez, none of the men were acquainted before starting training. Now, along with other members of the movement, they meet as often as they can to plan political action and lift weights.

As well as giving direction, Martinez is the glue that holds them together.

"Poncho has helped my form, but the main thing is his encouragement," says Firke, a theatre producer. "He'll message me like 'Hey, when was the last time you were in the gym?'"

Roa, an actor, has been training with Martinez for a few years. He says he has felt reinvigorated by the group's political stance. "I'm a member of the Democratic Socialists of America

**"They meet as often as they can to plan political action and lift weights"**





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IN KEEPING WITH THEIR BELIEFS, THE GYM IS NOT COMPETITIVE BUT BASED ON A CULTURE OF SUPPORT



BUILDING POWER IN THE SQUAT RACK CAN HELP PROTESTERS GET OUT OF A TIGHT SITUATION





[DSA],” he tells me. “Having a strong body gives you an advantage in a crowd. I was at Occupy [Wall Street, 2011] the night the cops came in and tore up Zuccotti Park [Occupy’s unofficial headquarters]. That was a wild experience and opened my eyes to the fact that protest is inherently antagonistic. By participating you put yourself at risk.”

“Recent events just make you want to stay inside and drink, so it’s good to be moving,” says Mark, a brawny, 28-year old trombonist who sounds like he’s walked off the set of *A Bronx Tale*. He was in Richie’s Gym working on his deadlift when he first saw Martinez. “I introduced myself,” he says. “He told me he was a leftist lifter. I was like: I thought I was the only one!” Both are members of the DSA and train for strength. “I’m not gonna impeach Trump by deadlifting 400lb,” Mark laughs. “But it does carry benefits. I wake up in the morning and my body is ready to go. Plus, coming together to lift weights can get others interested in politics. It’s like meeting at a bookstore or coffee shop. The gym just has loud music.”

## Elective Strength

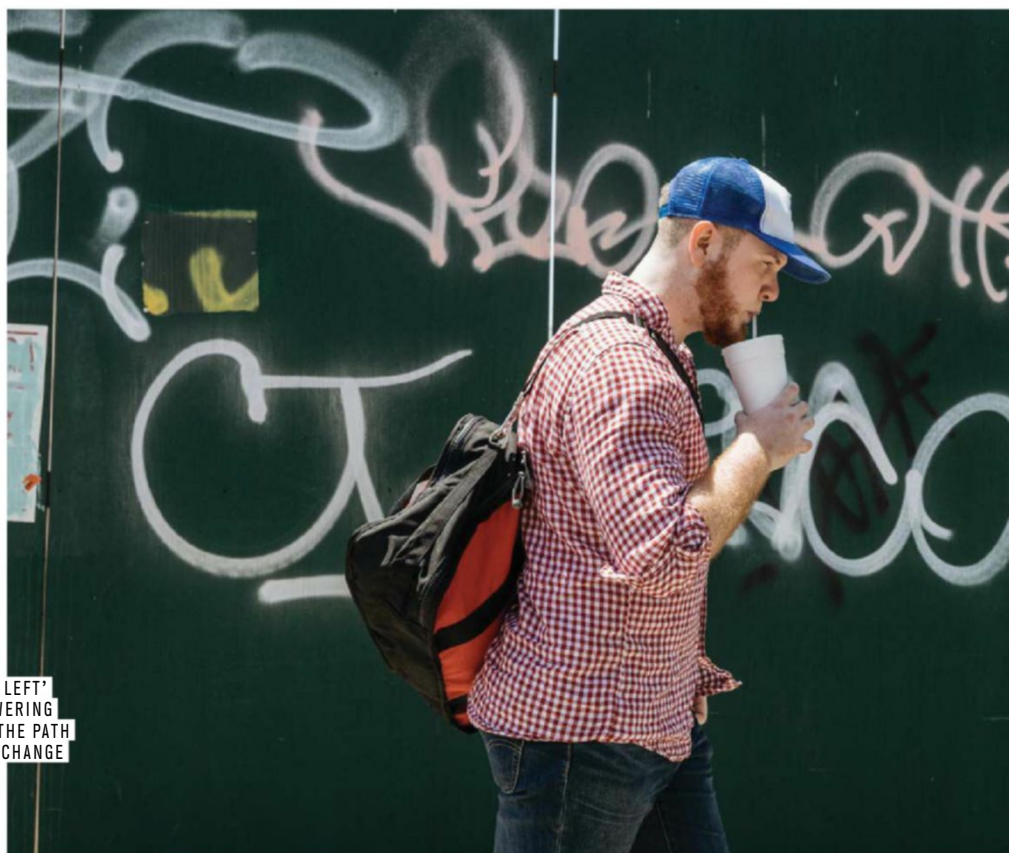
On 9 November 2016, Martinez woke to the news that Trump had been elected president. Watching TV in his Queens apartment, he says, it was clear the issues he saw on the street were not about to get better. They were about to get worse.

“I felt like I was in a dissociative state,” he tells me later over eggs in a café. “I was angry, but overriding that was a sense this wasn’t how reality is supposed to work. Everyone I knew was looking at each other like: ‘How did this happen?’”

Martinez had found weight training a year earlier as a way to manage a diagnosis of clinical depression, for which he takes medication. Hoisting heavy loads had revolutionised his wellbeing. But the election result came as a shock and he admits to, “falling flat on my face. I stopped training and drank for a month.”

Speaking to *The Atlantic* the day after the election, Dr Jack Saul, director of the International Trauma Studies Program, argued that, across the US, Trump’s election could be seen as a “collective trauma”, which he defined as “a shared experience of threat and anxiety... that lead[s] to some threat to a basic sense of belonging in society.” Speaking to *NYMag*, Dr Elan Golomb, a private psychologist, compared the effect of the election on some of his patients’ wellbeing to that of a sudden bereavement.

THE ‘SWOLE LEFT’ SEES EMPOWERING OTHERS AS THE PATH TO LASTING CHANGE



Martinez describes the month after the election as a period of “despair and hopelessness”. But he knew returning to the gym was the only way he could calm his raging mind. Realising just how much strength-training helped him mentally and physically, it was then he decided to offer his services to the wider world. “Full body compound movements have an unbeatable mental health benefit. I need something heavy and involved to put strain on my central nervous system – that’s what it takes to re-wire my head.”

His client list quickly grew, but Martinez hadn’t always been in a position to offer his services. Prior to 2015, he admits to being a 68kg “schlub” who could barely bench-press 40kg. Growing up in Texas, he says, strength was seen as mutually

dependent with American football. Not being a football player, Martinez reasoned, he had little reason to set foot inside a gym. Politically-speaking, he’d always felt an outsider. And while he’s keen to stress Texas in the 1990s “wasn’t a racist place”, as a man of Mexican-American heritage, he had grown up with a sense that something was amiss.

The melding of politics and fitness came when Martinez read *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain* by Harvard psychiatry professor John Ratey. Ratey argues maintaining a higher heart rate can be beneficial to neurogenesis and neuroplasticity – making the brain function better. It



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MARTINEZ TRAINS AS MUCH FOR HIS MENTAL WELLBEING AS FOR PHYSICAL STRENGTH



THE GYM ISN'T JUST A PLACE TO LIFT WEIGHTS BUT A SAFE SPACE TO REP OUT NEW IDEAS

was a revolutionary read for Martinez. A second book, *Starting Strength*, by fellow Texan Mark Rippetoe, piqued his interest further. Exploring the biomechanics involved in perfecting the four major lifts – squat, deadlift, bench press and overhead press – it became a vital handbook. When Rippetoe brought his training course to New York, Martinez was among the first to sign up.

The skills he learnt there are the ones he now brings to his own training sessions. While the course didn't provide any qualifications, Martinez doesn't claim to be a professional (sessions are free of charge). Nor is he interested in helping

clients look "greased up and hairless", like the manicured end of the gym spectrum.

"The goal isn't to get people on to a bodybuilding stage," he says. "The goal is to get them more functional on a day-to-day basis." To reinforce the point he tells me one of his star pupils

is a diminutive human rights lawyer. "There's no practical application for strength training in being an attorney," Martinez says. "But if by increasing her deadlift she boosts her confidence, that can't be a bad thing. Politics is about showing up and doing something day after day until you see results. Weight training is the same."

## Expansion Plans

Martinez is already seeing results. The Swole Left is growing and tentative plans to open branches in other states are being discussed. Come the near future, it's possible the revolution will be franchised. In conversation, Martinez speaks with care. There are no hedging phrases or circuitous explanations.

To spend five minutes in conversation with him is to witness a politician in the making. But for now, at least, his focus remains on affecting physical change.

A pet topic is the nationalisation of gyms. Martinez believes that "American infrastructure is designed to seal us off

from our bodies and atrophy us." He cites cities like his hometown of San Antonio where, he claims, it is

difficult to walk anywhere and "the only food that's available packs 2000 calories per serving." Nationalisation, he argues, would make gyms available to everyone. The rhetoric is amplified – some might say overblown and tenuous – but his palpable passion is what inspires so many.

Not that he resonates with everyone. Online resistance is ferocious. "I receive passive death threats," Martinez shrugs. "Not, 'I am going to shoot this guy', but 'Somebody should shoot this guy.' [A group of right wing aggressors] hate me because not only do I oppose them

vocally, but I'm trying to get more people to do the same – and make them stronger.

"Neo-fascists are obsessed with strength for strength's sake," he continues. "They always want to have a powerlifting competition, or kick my ass. That's not how politics works. It's not about fighting. I believe you shouldn't go out of your way to fight anyone."

It is because Martinez has made himself a magnet for abuse that few of his followers have been publicly open about training with him. To do so may put their lives at risk. Martinez respects this desire for anonymity and won't ask a client's surname unless they offer it. As he sees it, anyone who is politically active brings themselves into enough conflict. His role is to equip them to defend themselves.

Back in the gym, as we take our last break between sets, I ask Martinez if he's put his training to use since that first incident on the subway. It's tempting to picture him as a liberal vigilante, patrolling dark alleyways like a Guardian Angel. The reality is more pedestrian. "The problem with any superhero fantasy," he smiles, "is 90% of the time you won't be there when anything bad happens. The best way to ensure there will be someone there who can intervene is to give as many people as possible the

knowledge, strength and courage to do so."

Mark nods his agreement. "This 'Swole Left' thing has got me in great shape, but it isn't just about me," he says.

"We do this to benefit the world. It's part of the wider struggle for justice. It's about

pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone. That's where real change happens."

As the group cool down, the L-Train rumbles past again, sunlight glinting off its windows. One would hope that should another attack take place, somebody would try to stop it. But, as Martinez admits, the chance of this being a member of the Swole Left is statistically unlikely. How much influence the group will have on its country's political future is debateable. But one thing is for certain: by marrying their training to a shared ideology, Martinez and his followers have found new motivation to train – even if wider society never quite gets on board. They may not control the future, but their ability to effect lasting change in their own minds and bodies is something they can be certain of.

**"No matter how you approach activism, you need the body to do it"**