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The little gym that could: Terry Grisham's Team Chalk takes regular folks and helps them become champion powerlifters

BY [NICK PATTERSON](#) SEPTEMBER 22, 2021 4:17 PM

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Photos courtesy of Terry Grisham.

Tyler McGill, of Vestavia, participates in the deadlift competition with Chalk Gym at the United States Powerlifting Association Club One Classic held in Oxford in July.

For his first ever weightlifting competition, Tyler McGill of Vestavia Hills, just wanted basically one thing:

“I wanted to successfully complete the lifts,” he said.

Not only did he successfully complete the lifts, McGill, 44, who works in marketing sales for Altec, earned a state record. Which he finds amusing.

“There was no record holder in my age and weight division,” he said. “I’m the only one who’s ever participated in that age division, that weight division, so I had a chance to be a record holder.”

Not only did McGill emerge a champ, so did the rest of his team, all of whom came together at a small workout space off U.S. 280 called Chalk Gym, owned by trainer, coach, and mentor Terry Grisham.

All nine lifters from Team Chalk participated July 10 in the USPA [United States Powerlifting Association] Club One Classic in Oxford, and earned gold medals — and several state records in their weight and age classes. Besides McGill, Team Chalk was represented by Ali Priest, Tamdoan Huynh, a Spain Park High School senior from Greystone; Betty Petro, a grandmother from Mt. Laurel; Roy Jackson; Noah Kim; Carolyn Moore, a Trussville grandmother who broke her back a few years ago, and her husband Sandy Moore, a Vietnam veteran and former Homewood firefighter, who still carries shrapnel from the war.

Grisham, a longtime weightlifter with his own name in the books, setting a master’s world record in the squat in a Las Vegas meet in 2019, uses what he’s learned in training and coaching college and professional athletes to

encourage and develop a diverse group of ordinary people like McGill into powerlifting champions.



Team Chalk with Chalk Gym in Birmingham competed at the United States Powerlifting Association Club One Classic. McGill, third from the right, set a state record in his age and weight division.

“None of these people are professional athletes but they’re in here getting better, overcoming obstacles and doing things way into their older years which is something that everybody doesn’t think they could do. But they really could if they believed they could,” Grisham said.

Chalk Gym — so named because of the chalk weightlifters often put on their hands to enhance their grip — opened in 2016, after Grisham had already spent a career in coaching.

“I was a strength and conditioning coach at the University of Oklahoma. I started in 1984,” Grisham said. After that he became a strength coach at LSU.

“In 1991 I worked with the baseball team when they won their first national championship and then that got the attention of the Chicago White Sox and I got a job there,” he said. During the Major League Baseball Strike in 1995, he wound up remaining in Birmingham, working at an orthopedic group office.

Grisham decided to put his expertise to use in his own business. "Everybody said, 'You have a master's degree in exercise physiology. You worked with professional athletes [including Michael Jordan] ... You'd be crazy not to open your own gym,'" he said.

He found that the same kind of motivation that benefited pro athletes also worked for people with more basic needs for weight training. "When people come in here to work out, it's my job to help them perform better in any regard that they want." Grisham said. "So some people do want to compete. Some people just want to do rehab, some people want to lose weight, some people just want to get stronger," he said.

McGill had been lifting weights for a while before he connected with Grisham.

"I've worked out on and off at various gyms going back a long time, years and years. Around the end of 2020, was just looking to try something different. ... Just doing squats and deadlifts — just felt like my technique wasn't great. And I'd never really had a coach work with me on how to do it. And so it really just sort of started as, 'I wonder if I went and sought out somebody who really knew what they were doing, what I could learn from them?'"

He found Chalk Gym while searching on the internet. He went to visit and "I talked to Terry for probably no more than just a few minutes and saw this guy knows a ton about this, probably exactly who I should be working with," he said. "And figured I would just try it."

That was December of 2020. But although he knew Grisham was helping him become a better weightlifter, he had no thought of competing outside the walls of the gym.

"Terry's excitement about that event was a little bit contagious I would say," McGill said. "And when I heard a few folks at the gym were going to participate, had signed up, it seemed fun just watching them start to get in the mindset to have something to prepare for. And so I thought, 'Yeah. What the hey? I'll try it, see how it goes.'"

Two months later, he got his name in the record books.

Grisham said he saw the potential in McGill and the others in the group.

"Everybody follows a certain program and so as everybody started to improve, I said, 'You guys are doing really, really well. Why don't I look up the state records for Alabama and see what they are compared to what you guys are lifting,'" Grisham recalled.

"So, come to find out, probably four or five spots that these lifters filled had no state records. They were just blank. Mainly that's because when people

turn 40 or so, they don't do anything like they do when they're 20. So, there were no records for young 17

year-old-girls. There were no records for female 60-year-olds, no records for female 70-year-olds and there were no records for any guys over 75.

"So I said, 'Alright guys. We're going to go set records and you guys are going to show people that you can do it.'"

McGill said the atmosphere at the competition was "a blast."

"I thought it was awesome. I had no idea what to expect. I've never — not only never participated — I'd never been to anything like this before. ... The environment itself — very supportive," McGill said. "It's not competitive in the sense that people are trying to outperform somebody. It felt more like everybody's just trying to do their best and kind of encouraging and supporting one another."

And that reflects the atmosphere at Chalk, he said. Besides the team of lifters from Chalk Gym who went to the meet, others who work out at the gym came to cheer them on, and support their mutual coach.

Chalk Gym builds more than muscle — it builds strong connections, McGill said.

"I've been in a bunch of gyms over the years. Never really seen one quite like this," McGill said. "Terry is very hands-on. Does all the programming. So everytime you come in there, you give him your notebook. He writes all the work out — everything — the exercises, the weights, the sequence, the number of reps, he puts the whole thing together. And when you're in there, if you're doing something that's on the lighter end, he's still watching. He doesn't miss a lot — he's a high attention to detail kind of guy. But when it gets heavy, people will yell 'minute out' and you know they've got a heavy lift coming up.

"The whole culture of the gym is everybody just stops what they're doing. They don't want to distract, they're sorta focused on whoever the lifter is... everybody's dialed in, Terry's over there encouraging them, everybody is supporting them. They'll get out video and video if someone is going for a PR. It's incredibly collaborative, supportive, encouraging environment and I've never seen anything like that."

While the lifters on Team Chalk came to the gym for different reasons, they all had to be motivated to compete. Grisham's method involves getting them into the mindset to do their best, but letting them know he's there for support.

“I always tell my lifters, I’m never going to put anything on the bar you can’t lift,” he said. “Number two, I’m always going to be behind you. If you ever have a problem I’ll be there. They have the confidence knowing I’m behind them that I’ve got my hands on the bar in case anything happens.

Grisham said as a coach you come up with whatever button for each individual that you need to push, and when you push it the right way, everybody gets inspired and they get motivated and they’ll do things that they never thought they could.”

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