

Finding Balance

The life journey of Steve Pilot



Photo by Robert Collins

Written by Carole Audet

Steve Pilot is a fitness coach based in Bangkok Thailand. Originally from Germany, he began lifting weights at 13 when his mother was trying to help him find something to be passionate about. The martial arts classes she signed him up for weren't his thing, but he took to weightlifting.

After two years as a paratrooper in the German Special Forces, followed by a career in engineering and five years spent travelling the world during which time he became vegan, he returned to this passion for weightlifting and fitness.

The highly organized world of the military suited Steve Pilot. However, when he was single-mindedly focused on his career as an engineer, less than stellar habits crept into his daily routine, including a diet of way too much junk food. The stress of his work and lifestyle led to burn out and ill health. A visit to his doctor was a bit of a wake-up call: to continue on the same path was putting him at risk of developing cancer.

"I'd been a rat in the rat race, running around making money, spending money. But I hadn't even thought

much about the food I was eating and what I was putting into my system," he reflects.

Pilot's journey of educating himself began with watching *Earthlings*, and this was when he stopped eating meat. He continued his research with *The China Study*, Dr. Neal Barnard's TED talk, and reading as much as he could. The evidence was clear.

At around this time, Pilot quit his job, sold his house and nearly everything else he owned to travel the world,

fulfilling a long-held dream to experience other cultures and satisfying his fascination with a minimalist lifestyle. His first stop was Thailand, followed by a nine month stay in Nepal where attendance at the Gadhimai festival convinced him to give up all animal products and become vegan. Pilot then spent seven months in India, after which he accepted a friend's invitation to Dubai where he ended up staying for two months. From there Pilot travelled to Africa, starting his exploration of this continent in South Africa where he stayed for several months before spending time in Namibia. South America was next on the itinerary, then Central America, Mexico, and finally arriving in New York City.

In total, Pilot travelled to nearly 80 countries during this five-year adventure. Once back in Munich, he decided he did not want to resume his previous way of life.

"I thought, I'm not going back to work. With all the knowledge I gained becoming vegan, there's something more out there than just going to a regular job again."

A week later, Pilot found himself in mainland China. He made his way to a small mountain town and began to practice yoga and qigong. He made good friends, helped local monks, and when he felt it was time to move on, he continued to travel.

"I went on to Macau, from Macau to Japan, from Japan to the Philippines where I spent a long time."

He eventually made his way back to Bangkok with the thought of staying for a few weeks, but this city of nearly eleven million people felt like home.

"If you fall in love with Bangkok, it's hard to leave. Thailand is my home, it's the place where I want to be. There's no other place I would love to live for now."

Still overcoming the split from the woman he had spent five years travelling with and who ended things when they got back to Munich, Pilot found a sanctuary of sorts at a local Bangkok gym.

"My church was my gym, the place I felt confident. It's where I spent my childhood, so I was coming back to my roots: weightlifting."

This was far from being an idle sanctuary. Inspired by Frank Medrano, a vegan bodyweight trainer, Pilot would spend hours at the gym, seven days a week.

Working out started as a way to help him get over his breakup, but he was soon seeing dramatic changes to his body, and the amount of weight he could lift continued to increase. An idea came to him to document his progress in photos. He enlisted the help of a friend with

photography equipment, and that photo shoot at his local gym resulted in his first magazine cover.

This early success motivated him to develop his Steve Pilot brand, with his beard a part of that brand; it even got him hired for a Cartier commercial—his first move into acting. From there, many other opportunities came his way.

"I've been hired for movies, for TV series, for magazine articles; I have hundreds of pictures on stock photography. I'm the first vegan weightlifter in Asia, definitely the first in Thailand, and Muscle and Fitness shoots me for this reason," says Pilot.

But there was a curve up ahead. Pilot had been into CrossFit at that time, and with his experience in Olympic lifting, Reebok came knocking and offered to sponsor him at Unit 27 in Phuket. He went all in, signing a contract and making the move. At the time, Unit 27 was the place to be for CrossFit in Thailand, attracting big names preparing for the CrossFit Games.

But this opportunity was short-lived when he was injured due to rigorous CrossFit training. "That's when I completely quit this career and went into handstands."

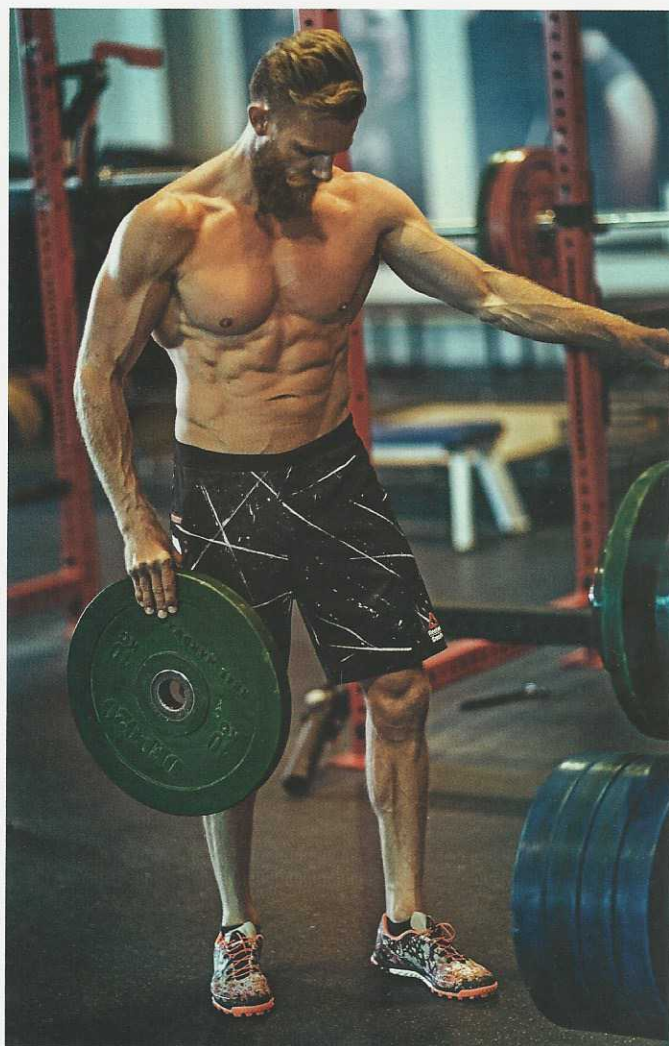


Photo by Per Magnus Persson

Throughout his journey, Pilot has dealt with depression, particularly when it came to dealing with the end of his seven-year relationship with the woman who was by his side as he travelled around the world.

"I wasn't used to going to bed alone, sleeping alone, waking up alone. All of a sudden there was no one to listen to my thoughts or to my fears. I missed desperately someone I felt connected to," he recalls.

"I overcame my loneliness by facing it, analyzing it, talking to and being honest with myself. I asked myself what I actually want [in a relationship] and what I can offer to the other person if I meet someone."

He credits his plant-based diet with helping him overcome his depression sooner, noting that hormones from the fear animals experience on the way to and in slaughterhouses are inherent in meat and, when consumed, play a role in one's physical and mental health.

Lack of meat has never affected his consumption of protein. While many are curious about where vegan weightlifters get their protein, it's common sense for Pilot. "Every plant has protein, so eating plants is cutting out the middleman—cows, pigs, chickens—and directly eating the protein. And, we don't need as much protein as people think," he explains.

Pilot is a big fan of intermittent fasting. His first meal is lunch which he consumes between noon and 1:00 p.m. "For lunch you will find on my plate brown rice, broccoli, beans, tofu. And, no, tofu does not cause male boobs," he jokes.

He'll have a snack of fresh fruit or a smoothie around 4:00 p.m., and then his last meal of the day is typically around 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. Dinners often consist of oats. "I love food that doesn't spoil because I'm a single man. I found oats many years ago; it's easy and I spice it up in many ways: cinnamon, cocoa powder, acai berries, goji berries, different nuts. If I have frozen berries, I add them on top."

For him, bananas are essential. They are the first thing he reaches for to boost his energy between meals.

In training, Pilot stresses the importance of stretching. "I got introduced to stretching way too late. Never thought stretching could be so important, but only with the right amount of stretching was I capable of breaking into the mysterious world of handstands."

His first experience of a handstand—with the blood rushing to his head—felt incredible to him. He even credits handstands for helping him with his depression

and over-thinking. "Whenever I put my legs up, there are no thoughts."

Pilot adds that there are a lot of health benefits from doing handstands: anti-aging effects from blood circulation, core strength, mobility, balance, and coordination. One typically starts with a press to handstand, which is the beginner level. The intermediate level is a kick to handstand, and a pike press is advanced.

If you're interested in this form of training, Pilot warns not to expect to see progress in short order, but achieving your first press to handstand is something to celebrate. Handstands are a disciplined and committed form of training.

"Every day is different. That's the challenge. There is a day where you balance like a hero and then the following morning you can't hold yourself. Handstands symbolize your inner clock. If I have something on my mind, I lose my balance. If I'm in a bad mood, I lose my balance."

Pilot's daily routine starts with about an hour of warming up, stretching and a variety of handstands. He then heads to the gym to coach, teach, and lift weights. His evening training at the gym consists of up to five hours of handstands—a minimum of three hours, which he feels is crucial because, as mentioned, progress with this form of training is incredibly slow.

Pilot has created two eBooks, *Get Fit Program*, and *Vegan for Beginners Guide*. The former provides the basics of why we should train, and gives advice on the right approach, water consumption and nutrition. It's a program that fits both women and men, and proper form is depicted using graphics.

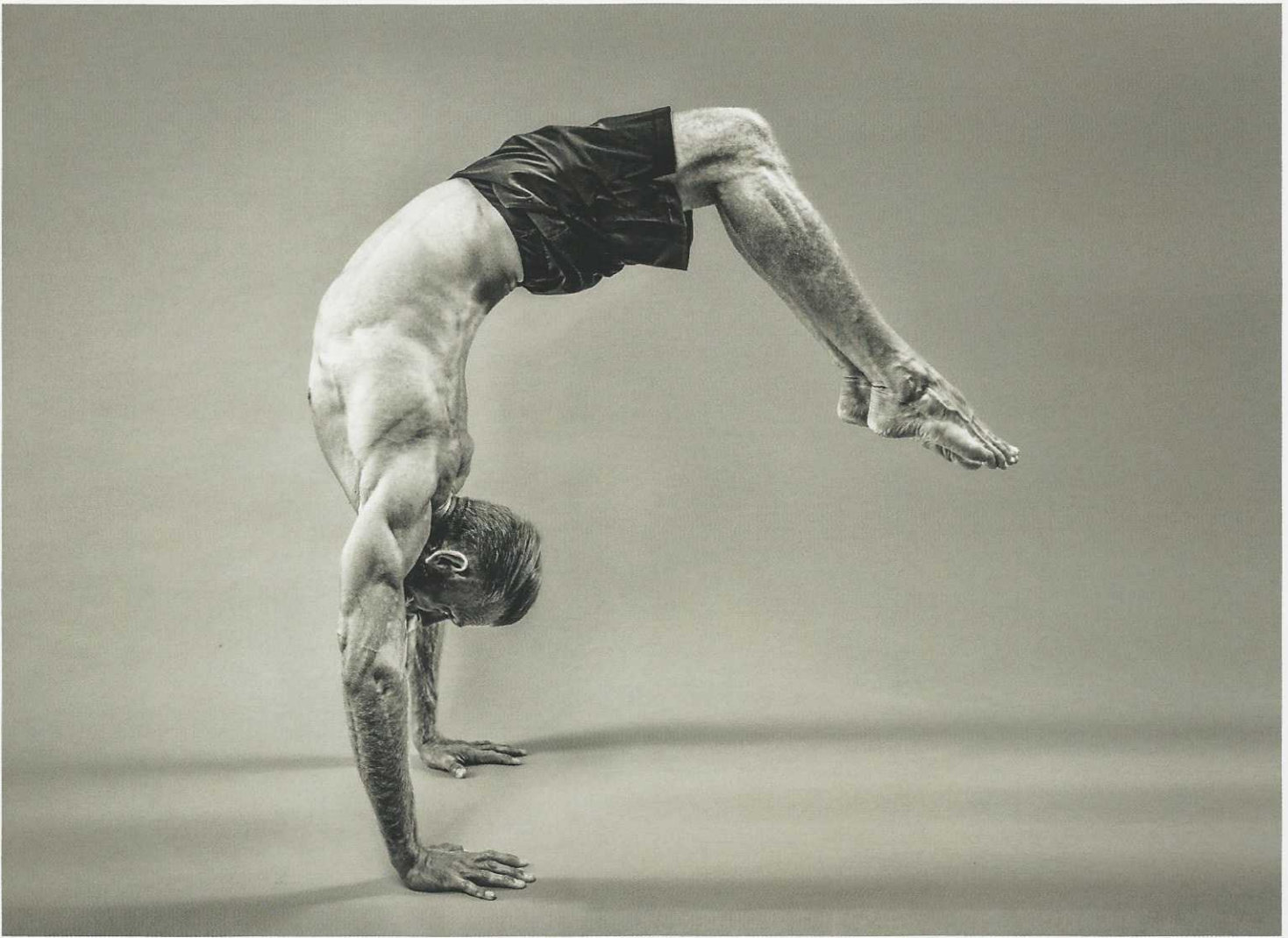
The latter is his passion project. It's a cross between a recipe book, and a motivational book. Mixed with the recipes, Pilot and his beard appear in caricature with tips, guidance and inspiration. "It's for those who still struggle to give up dairy products. The recipes are designed for singles. I'm a single guy and I have no time to cook, but I want to stay healthy," he explains.

"I desperately love what I'm doing right now—teaching and having an impact in other people's lives, helping them change their health and their mindset. Ninety percent of the people I work with feel a little bit overwhelmed or might even be lost in their current circumstances. After 15 or 20 minutes of talking with them, we can easily shift things, help them manage their time for what they want to do during the day. It's just a set of priorities." And he advises focusing on one

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-Steve Pilot





short-term goal at a time.



When asked why we should go vegan, his answer is simple. "Because it's the right thing to do. It's simply wrong that some creature has to suffer for our pleasure." As a representative in the vegan space, he doesn't take this leadership role lightly. "The only mission we have in 2021 is education. It's our duty as vegans to provide the information when someone is ready. I'm more than happy to sit down with them and share all my knowledge, which I gained over the last decade."

He appreciates those who are doing their part to reduce the plastic pollution that is choking our planet, but, as he points out, our personal responsibility doesn't end there. "If you continue to eat meat, you haven't understood the real mission to save the planet. If you want to save the planet, you should start with your own plate and your own eating culture," concludes Pilot. ●

Photos on this page by Robert Collins



Learn more about Steve Pilot and his story online.

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