ADAPT AND OVERCOME

Matthew Lynch's Story

STORY BY MICHAEL LEVY
PHOTOS BY JOSHUA BRIGHT

Matthew Lynch, a congenital below-the-elbow amputee, found weight-lifting and rock-climbing after years of emotional struggle. They changed everything for him.

The double front doors of the Cliffs at Long Island City swung open, issuing a trickle of uniformly masked climbers, all complying with Covid regulations. Matt Lynch too was masked, and wearing nondescript black shorts, a dark blue T-shirt, and a black baseball cap. Despite having never met him, I knew it was Lynch because of one particular feature: His left arm ends just below the elbow.

Lynch, 31, is a congenital amputee—he was born this way, and seven years ago, he would have been wearing a prosthetic arm, trying to blend in. He's come a long way since then: physically, transforming his body from a skinny rail into that of a muscled athlete; and psychologically; learning to take pride in his corporeal form. Climbing has been no small part of that journey.

After introductions and niceties, Lynch and I prepared to climb. He taped up his "little arm," as he calls it, the pink skin on the end exposed, in the way that crack climbers leave their fingers free to contact the rock when they tape. It is a method he has arrived at after much trial and error. In his first year of climbing he taped the whole nub, but eventually realized he couldn't feel the holds as well that way. After a couple of slabby warm up problems, we turned our attention to something with a little more *umph*. Lynch, from Kings Park, New York, where he lives with his family, is an experienced climber, after all. He has had a banner couple of years on the competitive climbing circuit, going to the 2018 U.S. Adaptive National Championships and then the 2019 Paraclimbing World Championships.

I hopped on a blue V4 in an obtuse corner: A few stemming moves led to a rising traverse rightward onto the face above. Lynch went next. The sequence I had used for the traverse moments earlier was out of the question for him; I couldn't see how he was going to do the moves. He scraped his "nubby"—another term of endearment for his left arm—against the lower of two volumes, fishing for purchase, before retreating to a stem rest. Next he came at the volume from above, allowing him to mantel on his little arm. He reached his right hand across to a higher volume, cut his feet, and swung his right toe out to a chip on the face, then sprang up to the finishing jug. He had found a graceful and powerful solution.

Whenever Lynch lays eyes on a problem or a route, he reads it in ways that someone with four full limbs would never even consider. To him heel hooks aren't a seldom-used technique but a critical tool in his quiver, employed on every route, sometimes virtually every move.

His nub is often the first thing someone notices about him—as I did—whether he is walking on the street or climbing in the gym. But while it is an integral part of his identity, it is far from what defines him: Lynch is a dedicated weightlifter, I would discover. His knowledge of political polling, I was to learn later as we discussed the potential outcomes of the 2020 presidential election, is superlative. Above all, he is a fighter: A youth plagued by adversity on various fronts—from his congenital amputation to being bullied to being outright abused—has imbued him with a bravery and resilience. Taken together, Lynch's amputation and the other hurdles he has overcome inform not just the novel ways he approaches a boulder problem, but how he approaches life writ large.

Sitting outside a coffee shop around the corner from the Cliffs climbing gym, Lynch began telling me his story in his thick Long Island accent, the G's long and hard.

A native New Yorker myself, I found that and his other Long Island tendencies—wide gesticulations with his arms; an ample number of you-knows peppered throughout in his speech; effortlessly raising his volume to drown out the sound of passing dump trucks—comfortingly familiar as he related his introduction to climbing. One night in 2017, he said, he was scrolling through his Instagram feed and came across an account called Adaptive Climbing Group (ACG).

Founded in 2012 by Kareemah Batts, ACG is the nation's foremost adaptive climbing organization, sponsoring climbers indoor and out, in bouldering, route climbing, and ice climbing. Batts, a below-the-knee amputee, had told me in a Zoom interview: "We're one of the few adaptive climbing organizations that is actually run by someone with a disability. Full-bodied people want to save us poor disabled

people. But we can do that ourselves."

Lynch went to an ACG climbing meet-up one night at Brooklyn Boulders in 2017 to see what this climbing thing was all about. "I was like, 'Oh my god, this is amazing,'" Lynch said, sloshing his ice coffee around in its compostable cup. He was soon a frequent participant at ACG events. "I'd met other amputees before in my life, but never on a regular basis. And here I was finally interacting with other amputees and other people with disabilities on a daily basis. It felt really good to connect and get to know them and become friends."

"I ALWAYS GOT WEIRD LOOKS BECAUSE OF MY PROSTHETIC," LYNCH SAID, "AND I JUST WANTED TO BE NORMAL. I WOULD WEAR SWEATSHIRTS UNTIL JUNE SO PEOPLE COULDN'T SEE THE PROSTHETIC."

That sense of belonging, of inclusion, was something that had eluded him in adolescence. He had lacked not just the opportunity to befriend other amputees, but even to embrace his own body.

Growing up, he went through prosthetic arms like other kids went through sneakers: As he got bigger, he'd either need a larger prosthetic, or something new and more ergonomic would become available. One model had a strap that went over his opposite shoulder, so he could move the prosthetic like a marionette with his good arm. Another prosthetic was purely for show, designed to look as lifelike as possible. The prosthetist took a mold of his right arm and hand and simply switched the thumb. The outfit even shaved Matt's right arm and glued the hair to the prosthetic.

The young Matt never liked any of the attachments. "My father was always really pushing me to wear it," he said. "He thought it would help me fit in."

The prosthetic he had in high school was the worst. It weighed nearly three pounds, ultimately affecting Lynch's balance and posture. "When I took it off, I'd be lopsided," Lynch said, demonstrating by slouching to the left in his chair across from me at the little folding table on the curb outside the coffee shop.

Beyond the physical discomfort, he was bullied and ostracized. A classmate in middle school circulated a petition among the student body to "ban" Matt's prosthetic because it "scared" him. "He was just being a dick," Lynch acknowledged with the wisdom of 15 more years. But it wasn't so easy to brush off back then.

By the time he was in college, thrown into new situations among new people, his anxiety over "fitting in" reached an apex: If he was at a party, holding a beer in one hand, and someone came up to introduce himself or herself, he'd have

to put his drink down to shake hands. "All those kinds of things really stressed me out," he said.

It wasn't until after college, in 2014, when he was working in retail, that something clicked in his brain. "I always got weird looks because of my prosthetic," Lynch said, "and I just wanted to be normal. I would wear sweatshirts until June so people couldn't see the prosthetic. But one day I woke up and was like, 'I'm tired of doing this for other people. I don't care what they think. I don't like this. I'm not worrying about it again.'

"And I just took my prosthetic off and put it in my closet. And that's where it has stayed ever since."

The day after Lynch and I climbed at the Cliffs in LIC, we drove out to the Shawangunks for some Trapp-rock climbing with his friend Eric Christian. As we wound up the road from the nearby town of New Paltz, the cliff band was shrouded in damp clouds—not the sunny 70s we'd hoped for.

After we warmed up on the ultra-classic *Three Pines* (5.3), named for the eponymous trees sticking out of the cliff along the route, Christian rigged a toprope on a right-slanting vertical crack called *Something Interesting* (5.8). Lynch cruised up the first 50 feet, but began struggling at a small roof. He fell and fell again. Hanging on the rope, he let fly a high-pitched "Damn it!" hung his head, and slapped his thighs in frustration. Next try, he jammed his nub into the crack, and held on long enough to reach his right hand above the roof and grab a good horizontal, his arm chicken-winging out from the effort.

When he came back down, he was drenched in sweat, but beaming.

LEFT: Lynch manteling off his "short arm," as he calls it, at Brooklyn Boulders Queensbridge. Whereas he wore a variety of prosthetics growing up to mask his congenital amputation, these days he goes without.
ABOVE: Getting into weight-lifting was a challenge, but he has fashioned apparatuses from exercise bands, leather straps, and other materials that allow him to do virtually any lift, from squatting to pull ups.

"Matt has really high expectations for himself," Christian reflected afterward as Lynch hucked another lap. "The climbs he can do—and do well—vary. So the Yosemite Decimal System is not always a clear guide for what he can climb. Even if he can toprope a hard 5.8 in the Gunks, sometimes a 5.6 will flummox him. And that can really frustrate him, and I've seen that over the years with him, both in the gym and outside."

Batts, having watched Lynch develop as a climber virtually from day one, has noticed this, too. "Matt gets hyper focused on a goal when he wants to do something," she said.

Kai Lightner, who often volunteers with ACG, remembered his first impressions upon seeing Lynch climb: "When I first met him we were at Brooklyn Boulders Queensbridge, and there was a boulder that he was having a really hard time doing. Kareemah suggested slowing down, that he read the route and rest. But Matt just kept throwing himself at it. It might not have been the smartest tactic, but it showed his grit and motivation."

Batts offered Lynch sponsorship on Adaptive Climbing Group's competition team when he applied in 2018. With backing from adidas, Batts sponsors somewhere between 20 and 25 adaptive climbers around the country each year. "Our pool is very eclectic and diverse," she said proudly. "They're all people of color, people from the LGBTQ community, people below the poverty line. It's a very unique team."

Lynch wasn't always so dedicated and focused, however. For as long as he can remember, he suffered from low self-esteem and a resulting lack of ambition and drive. He was insecure about his appearance and his prosthetic, but those were just some of the contributing factors.

"I hit a triple whammy of growing up tough," Lynch said in our initial interview over coffees. His congenital amputation was the first strike; his parents' messy divorce when he was just 3 years old (they continued fighting until he was 22, he said) was the second.

The third strike came later.

A childhood friend began systematically taking advantage of Matt when they were both 13, in seventh grade, Lynch said. He raped Matt, regularly, Lynch said. Equally damaging was "the mental abuse," as Lynch puts it. Lynch said his abuser (whom he did not name) preyed upon Matt from a position of power, manipulating him based on their earlier friendship.

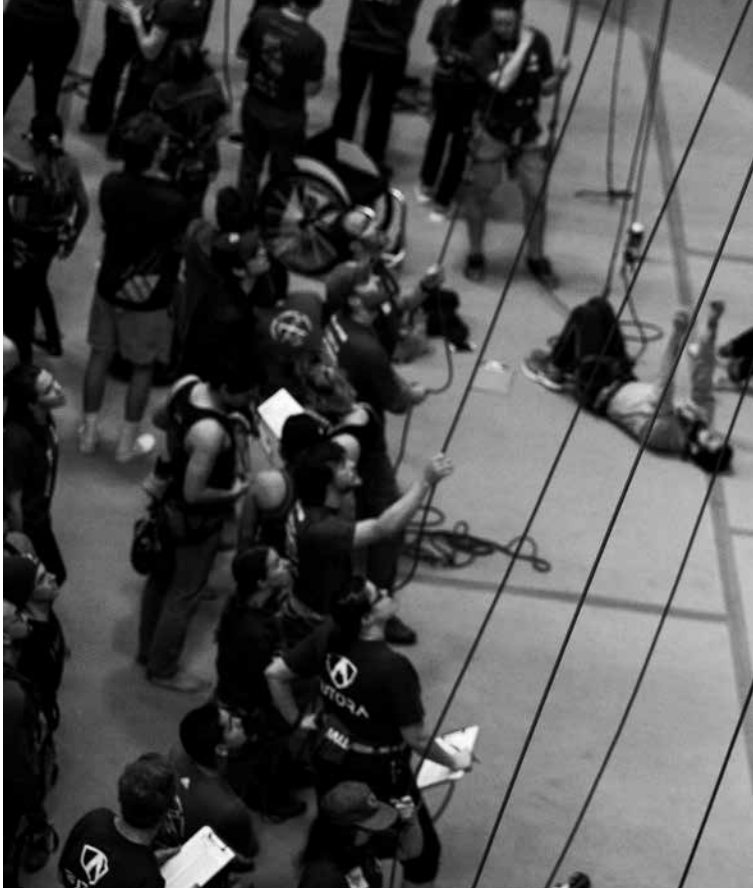
"Basically, without him, I had no other friends," Lynch said, "so I felt like I had to put up with everything."

The psychological trauma manifested itself in various ways. Matt would go through silent spells—hours at a time. At times he simply couldn't eat. When he was with his abuser, he became physically ill, sometimes throwing up.

"That was just my body's reaction," he said. Though six feet tall by the end of high school, he weighed just 109 pounds.

Around junior year, when kids began driving their own cars and had college in their sights—horizons widening, friend groups drifting apart—the alleged abuse fizzled out. But the effects on Matt's life didn't. "It really fucked me up. I was angry for years," Lynch said, as a driver in a car waiting at a red light in the street beside us looked us up and down, his eyes pausing on Matt's short arm.

Survivorhood is already complex, and Lynch's disability



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Lynch overcame many hurdles, and credits himself with being able to adapt. Lynch bears down at USA Nationals at Vertical Adventures, in Columbus, Ohio, in March 2019. While adaptive climbing comps use a toprope format, Lynch is also a capable lead climber and belayer. Despite all the hardship he has suffered, Lynch has a positive outlook on life and now hopes to use his experiences to help others.

compounded the challenges. Recognizing abuse for what it is, learning how to deal with it and what to do with his anger and pain, is a long process, and during college, he said, it felt like a heavy weight around his neck. Complicating his feelings even further, Lynch had spent years trying to understand his own sexuality, which he ultimately described as "in between bisexual and fully gay, somewhere there on the spectrum." In the wake of the alleged abuse, the thought of dating was overwhelming, and he walled off any romantic feelings he had toward others.

"On a scale of one to 10, I had like a negative five self confidence," he said.

To the casual observer, Lynch was doing well: In 2007, he matriculated at Dowling College on Long Island, and two years later he transferred to Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus. He pursued a degree in political science and criminal justice. But beneath a calm exterior, he was screaming.

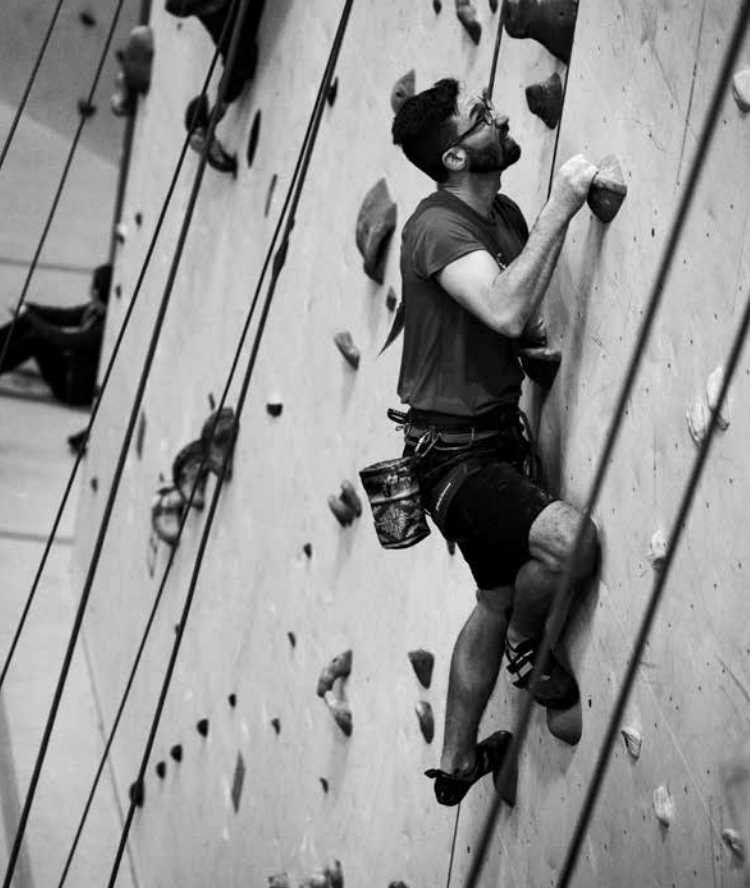
When Lynch was 20 years old, the "triple whammy" finally felt too much for him to take. He had some painkillers left over after getting his wisdom teeth removed, and he started popping one, here and there, to numb himself and quiet his mind. "And then one day I just swallowed the whole bottle," he said. It was a dreary winter day. But he didn't want to be alone—he called a friend to come pick him up, which she did. "I ended up throwing it all up on the side of the road. It was a cry for help."

Mercifully, he found some. Lynch enrolled in therapy, available through his college; first private counseling, and then later group therapy with other childhood-abuse victims.

If there is an inflection point in Lynch's life—a period where he could start to work on himself and move beyond his lot in life—it is the 2014 and 2015 timeframe. He continued in therapy in these years after he graduated college in 2013. He worked briefly as an office assistant at a law firm before transitioning into the retail job, which was the catalyst for his decision to ditch the prosthetic. The dominoes began to fall, and he realized it was important to focus on what made *him* happy—not what others thought would make him happy.

"I was tired of being thin. I was tired of being weak. I wanted to be stronger. I wanted to literally work out some of my issues," he said. So he turned to weight lifting. He fashioned attachments—made from strips and loops of leather, pieces of Velcro, metal hooks, segments of chainlinks—for his little arm that allowed him to do virtually any lift or exercise: pull ups, squats, deadlifts, you name it. He started gaining weight, nudging the needle on the scale up to 120, then 130, and finally, 140. "When I hit 140 the psychological impact on me was huge. I teared up," he remembered.

Weight lifting eventually led to climbing. And climbing? That led Matt to USA Climbing Nationals and the Paraclimbing World Championships.



Ahead of U.S. Nationals in 2018, Lynch was anxious. He hadn't even been climbing a year, but was already on one of the sport's biggest stages, joining 60 of the top adaptive climbers (in various categories) from around the country. Wracked by nerves, he traveled to Columbus, Ohio. Batts and Lightner went, too, as did a number of friends from the Adaptive Climbing Group team who were also competing. The morning of the competition he couldn't keep anything down.

Lynch didn't do as well as he hoped, finishing seventh out of eight.

But while he considered his Nationals performance a disappointment, Batts saw bright spots and potential. "He looked very calm and smooth," she said.

Lightner remembered seeing "fire" in Lynch's eyes. "It was clear he wanted to get back in the gym and get stronger going forward," he said.

Though Lynch did not finish in the top four at Nationals—the primary way to qualify for the Paraclimbing World Championships, in Briançon, France—he was named an alternate, and a spot opened up when someone dropped out. He started training. *Hard.*

"Before the World Championships, he was hitting the gym five days a week," Eric Christian said. "He would ask me to wake up at 6 a.m. and come belay him somewhere."

In July 2019, Lynch, along with Batts and much of the rest of the Adaptive Climbing Group Team, traveled to Briançon.

On the competition stage, Lynch felt the heat of the lights on his face, the eyes watching him—his nerves were piqued. But as soon as he touched the wall at the base of the first qualification route, the nerves melted away. "I just focused on the holds and started climbing. All this shit from childhood and adulthood leading up to this. This moment. Just climbing," he said. With his nubby taped just

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so, he began moving upward, concentrating on the moves, channeling the smoothness Batts had seen at Nationals. *Heel hook, heel hook, mantel on small arm, deadpoint to a jug. Rest. Repeat.* In just a few minutes, he was staring at the chains, having topped the first route.

He lowered in disbelief. "When I got back on the ground, I felt so much emotion, so much stress. I just bawled," he said. "So much shit had happened before that. I needed to cry. I was so happy and so overwhelmed."

Lynch finished the weekend in ninth place, tied with someone who had gotten three spots higher than he had at U.S. Adaptive Nationals. "I was just super proud of myself," he said.

In the two years since the World Championships, Lynch has continued to improve his climbing. He became lead-certified at the gym once he figured out an efficient and safe way to belay. In late June, he placed second at USA Nationals at Momentum Indoor Climbing Millcreek, Salt Lake.

His confidence is at an all-time high. "The short arm I have has made me unique. Not just physically, but mentally," he said. In the past, he might not have believed he could value that. "It's given me a different way of thinking, a way of adapting. It's an asset that benefits me every day. It has taught me to look at problems and create out-of-the-box solutions. I have to adapt to any problem life throws at me. I truly believe that this will benefit me in climbing and whatever career I go into."

A couple of summers ago, Lynch was working at a camp with LimbPossible, a non-profit that runs motivational programming primarily for middle- and high-school students. There was a small rock-climbing wall at the camp, and over wandered a 13-year-old named Jacob. Jacob had the same below-the-elbow amputation as Lynch, on the same side of his body. Lynch belayed Jacob and showed him how to use his little arm in new ways. Lynch told Jacob's mother that he should stick with climbing. She appreciated the kind words, but said it would be difficult, as the nearest climbing gym was 30 minutes away from their home in Long Island.

"So I was like, 'You're from Long Island?!'" Lynch said. "It turned out they lived 15 minutes from me. So I started mentoring him."

Lynch taught Jacob about weight-lifting—showing him all attachments he had created to make things feasible—and how to climb. He showed him how to tape up his arm, leaving the skin at the end free to contact the rock.

Lynch said: "Jacob was getting bullied, so I started talking to him about that. It's really good to have someone that looks like you and understands. I remember hearing someone say once, 'I want to be there for somebody because no one was there for me.' That got embedded in my brain.

"And that's what I'm doing now."