

Starting Strength

Iron Icons

Kuc & Williams, II

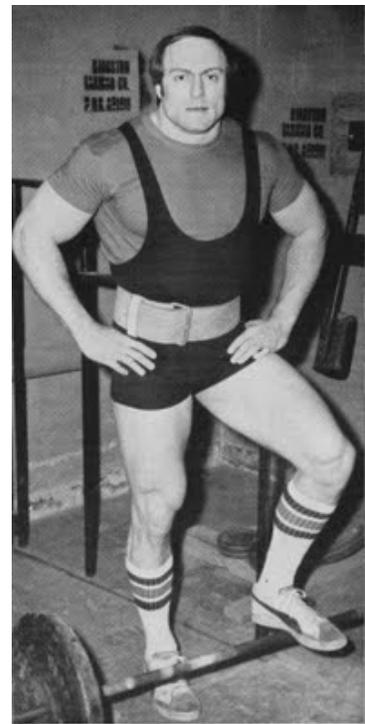
by

Marty Gallagher

You cannot relate anything about John Kuc without referencing Jim Williams. These two stalwarts started training together in the dreary, dank Scranton YMCA at a time when that city was disintegrating. Both men were from the once coal-rich region of northeast Pennsylvania. This once-thriving area produced the wrong type of coal, anthracite, and went from thriving and growing to complete economic collapse. The mines played out as anthracite fell out of commercial favor. The good jobs left.

Kuc and Williams were hard men that came from this hard place: they both became the best in the world at two different lifts. Williams was the undisputed bench press King – his 675 pound raw bench done with a *two-second* pause on the chest was not exceeded for decades. Kuc set one of the greatest powerlifting records of all time with his historic deadlift of 871 pounds in the 242 pound class done in 1980. Kuc squatted 832 before he pulled his 871. Be aware that we live in the era of the deadlift specialist. Those that compete in the deadlift-only competitions and avoid having to have 800 or 900 on their backs for multiple squat warm-ups and attempts *before* deadlifting need asterisks next to their records. Wolheber, Coan and Kuc set their deadlift records *after* heavy squatting – Dan and Ed are the only men to set world record squats *then* pull 900.

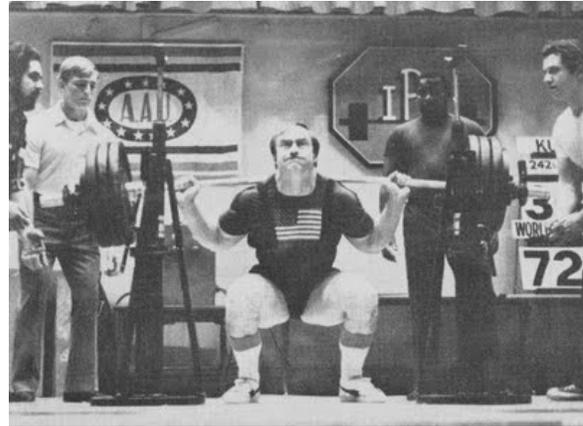
In the sixties Williams and Kuc met and trained together and pushed each other to stratospheric heights. Kuc pushed his bodyweight upward until, in 1972, he weighed 340 pounds. Weight-related health issues forced him to reduce his bodyweight. He whittled down to 240 and did the impossible: he shattered world records and won world titles. In 1980, when he set his 2204 total record, he squatted an astounding 832 pounds, below parallel in front of the world's toughest judging, using pathetic ace bandages as knee wraps and a flimsy Olympic weightlifting belt. He then pause bench



Kuc looked more like a linebacker than a world record holding powerlifter.

pressed 500 pounds raw and finished his perfect day with his historic 871 deadlift. Another Kuc anomaly: his techniques were *not* good. His squat style had a great deal of forward lean and spinal flexion to take advantage of the strongest erectors and hip-hinge in the game; his bench style was flat as a pancake, exhibiting no stylishness whatsoever.

His deadlift was wide-stance and all back. He'd straighten his legs out first then derrick the barbell. Using his massive erectors, traps, lats and rhomboids he'd ratchet the bar ever upward to eventual lockout. His stance width was way too wide – a carryover from his 340 pound days. Kuc's stance was not too wide for a 340 pound man with a 45 inch gut; for a 239 pounder with a 34 waist his stance was halfway to sumo. It made no sense. His hands needed to be splayed wide, almost to the 32 inch rings, thereby increasing the length of the rep stroke. His wide stance and fast leg straightening made breaking the bar from the floor relatively easy but the finish of a Kuc deadlift was horrific, traumatic and dramatic. His mighty back locked out world records one vertebra at a time. It was excruciating to watch and exciting as hell.

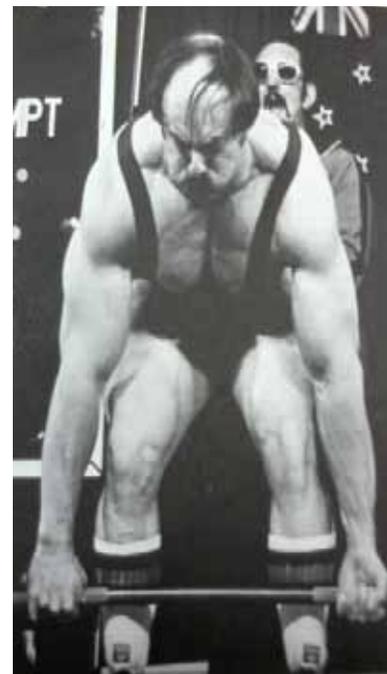


Kuc squatted narrow stance and high bar; he hit 900+ as a super; 832 at 242.

Kuc Deadlifts

Bob Gaynor knows of what he speaks: “For over 15 years I trained with the great John Kuc. John's deadlift routine was simple: three heavy sets of 3 or 4 reps in the deadlift each and every week. Throw in some upper back work and that was it. John deadlifted 52 weeks a year.” So, does this disappoint you, dear reader? Were you hoping Kuc would suggest something radical, something exotic, something outside the box and exciting? Were you hoping for some revolutionary new approach that forsakes actual deadlifting in favor of using balls and chains and springs and bands that will magically push the deadlift upward without ever actually having to do any deadlifts? And whenever you got around to doing deadlifts you would set new personal bests – is that what you were hoping for?

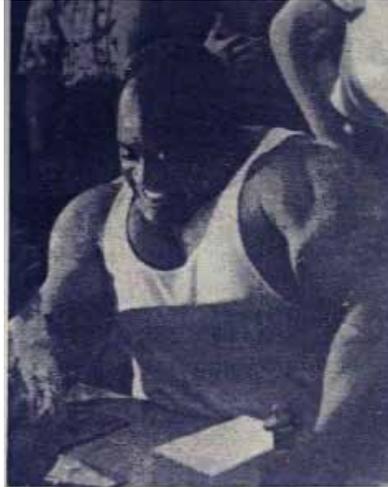
Instead, you are given the unenviable task of performing three heavy sets of never more than 4 reps and some lat and trap work, and that is it. Ad infinitum, ad nauseum. Kuc did his barebones back routine once a week, every week, world without end, amen. He had the mental perseverance to come back and slog it out, over and over and over. Kuc's name is synonymous with fierce determination and doggedness in the weight room and a crazed berserker psyche on the platform. His weird techniques and scary demeanor made him charismatic. We won't see his like again anytime soon.



Kuc's high-hipped start made breaking the bar from the floor easy and the finish gruesome.

Kuc & Williams, II

Big Jim Williams was, as Winston Churchill once described the Soviet Union, “A riddle wrapped in an enigma tucked inside a paradox.” Any Williams’ retrospective is rightfully full of “what ifs?” What if Williams had avoided a life of crime? One the other hand, it was in prison where he was introduced to lifting. It was in prison, with nothing else to do, that he lifted methodically and with purpose – quite unlike his time spent on the outside. Big Jim might have set records that no one today could touch if he’d stayed on the straight and narrow path. On the other hand, if he’d never gone to prison would he have ever become a lifter? What we do know is Williams took the bench press to heights that at the time no other human on the face of the earth could come near. His strange life was hardly dull and he left a mark that will not likely be forgotten.



This old photo taken at an arm wrestling tournament gives you an idea of the shapely mass, the awesome thickness of Big Jim Williams’ immense upper body. It was most noticeable when he sat down; Williams was tall, so it was hard for normal people to get a sense of his gargantuan size when he stood. I remember seeing him at a chain restaurant in Scranton sitting at a table. It was impossible not to stare. He was used to it.

The greatest powerlifting feud in history ends anticlimactically

Big Jim Williams was not a man to back down from any other man, ever...not as a Crime Boss (allegedly), not as the world’s greatest bench presser, and not as a 350 pound muscle man and prison gang leader. Big Jim didn’t back down. Never did, never would. Jon Cole was a man’s man: an international level discus thrower. Cole had flung the discus over 200 feet. He was also an Olympic weightlifter that totaled 1200 via a 430 press, a 340 split snatch and 430 pound clean and jerk. Photographic evidence indicated Cole’s Olympic lifting technique was horrendous, making the pure strength aspect of this truly monumental achievement all the more amazing and impressive.

Cole looked like a Greek god; with smoldering dark looks and a beard, he looked like Steve Reeves’ older, larger, more muscular bad-ass brother. Cole was (reportedly) married to Wonder Woman Linda Carter’s *better-looking* sister. Cole was the strength coach at Arizona State and was entrenched and ensconced within the system. Williams was on the outside of that same system and it seemed inevitable they would clash. Photos of Cole’s world record lifts, set in the southwest, filtered back to Pennsylvania. When Cole began usurping world records and getting



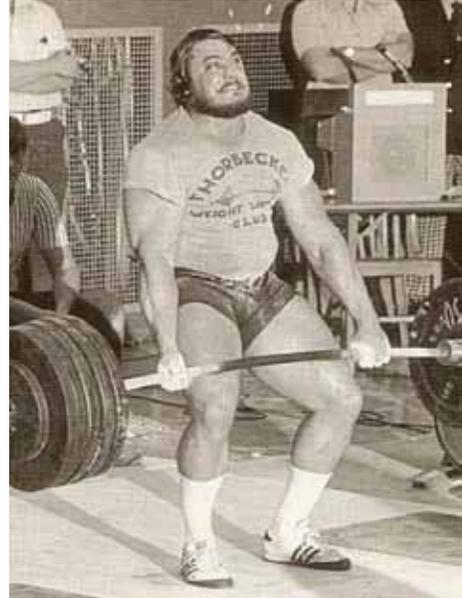
Williams and Kuc flank my mentor, Hugh “Huge” Cassidy at the 1971 inaugural world championships; the egomaniacal Bob Hoffman shuffles out to leech off the winner’s glory.

lots of press, Williams and Kuc said the photographic evidence showed the lifts were illegal.

Big Jim issued Cole a challenge: “Show up at the world championships and face me! Make your lifts in front of judges and not friends. Show up or be branded a pussy!”

Jon Cole was not about to take a bunch of smack talk lying down. He fired back his own reply, basically stating that, indeed, he would be at York to fight it out at the 1st World Powerlifting Championships. The gauntlet was thrown, the challenge heartily accepted, and the powerlifting battle of the century was on: the excitement was palpable and it was only upon arriving at the site of the world championships that attendees were told that Jon Cole had tripped over a vacuum cleaner cord in a department store and injured himself to the point where he was physically unable to lift, and would therefore not attend.

Hardly had the shock of “Cole is out!” worn off when the second shockwave hit powerlifting: Hugh “Huge” Cassidy came out of nowhere to pull off a “huge” upset and beat both Kuc and Williams. In an amazingly display of balanced lifting: Huge squatted 800 with no wraps or lifting belt. He bench pressed 570 with a 2-second pause and deadlifted 790 pounds to pull off a power upset. Cassidy then retired, Big Jim was arrested, Kuc dropped out to later return triumphant. Jon Cole is rightfully worshipped to this day as a strength God and athlete’s athlete.



Cole deadlifts 885 using “highly suspect” technique. He lifts bar to his knees then leans back (as shown) and drags the bar up his thighs to lockout. Would it have passed at the world championships? We’ll never know. Big Jim labeled Cole’s lifting “Circus tricks!” A Gonzo department store cord-tripping accident derailed the “feud of the century” showdown. Huge Cassidy upset the apple cart and Big Jim was sent to the Big House.

Marty Gallagher has been a national and world champion masters powerlifter and is widely considered one of the best writers in the iron game. Since 1978 he has written over 1000 articles published in a dozen publications. He has authored more than 100 articles for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and produced 230 weekly [live online columns](#) for the *Washington Post*. Gallagher has coached some of the biggest names in powerlifting and witnessed some of the greatest strength feats of the last half century. If you like his style pick up a copy of his masterwork, [The Purposeful Primitive](#)

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