

# Starting Strength

## Pete George

### The Greatest American Olympic Weightlifting Prodigy of All Time

by Marty Gallagher

Imagine a 15 year-old, 145-pound boy clean and jerking 300 pounds – it would cause quite a sensation in 2012. Now imagine it happened in 1943 and the boy was the youngest person in the world to jerk 300 overhead regardless of bodyweight – keep in mind that at the time the world record in the heavyweight division in the clean and jerk was 401. That same boy won the Ohio state weightlifting title at age 14, the junior national weightlifting title (open to anyone that had not won the senior title) at age 15, the national senior men's title at age 16 and the world championship at age 17. Can you imagine the sensation that would cause where an American lad to accomplish this feat today? Of course to replicate this feat of winning the world title at such a young age, the 17 year-old American in 2012 would need to snatch 358 and clean and jerk 436 – drug free.

The boy's name was Pete George. Born in 1929, the son of immigrant Bulgarian parents fleeing Macedonia, his father spoke no English and moved to America after being told by relatives they could secure him a job on the railroad. The family lost their life's savings during the trip and ended up down and out in Akron, Ohio. No railroad job and no prospects. All this occurred during the depression and Peter (and his younger brother Jim) grew up dirt poor and stigmatized. Classmates considered tiny Peter weak, awkward and stupid. He was classified as a slow learner and seemed destined for failure. He struggled with English and he struggled with bullies, but as luck would have it, in his low rent Akron neighborhood an odd individual named Larry Barnholth had a gym – which consisted of nothing more than a few barbells and dumbbells. The gym was in a garage behind his home and the eccentric Barnholth ostentatiously named the simplistic facility “The American College of Modern Weightlifting.”

Barnholth might have been a weird eccentric but he knew his weightlifting backwards and forwards, inside and out. Barnholth and his brother Lewis were weightlifting rebels and taught the then-controversial “squat” style for both the snatch and the clean. Amongst the weightlifting intelligentsia this technique was considered heresy and discouraged at every turn. The split technique was high art; a vastly superior technique that trumped the squat style and at the time this was beyond dispute or discussion. After all, at the time 99% of all world records were held by splitters and the squat clean was ridiculed and looked upon as a clown technique. History has exonerated Lewis and Larry and today the split style in the snatch and the clean has been relegated to the dustbin of inferior and

## *Pete George*

forgotten techniques. The Barnholth brothers were on the forward edge of technical innovation and Pete was the squat-style bludgeon the brothers used to drive home the superiority of the squat snatch and the squat clean technique.

Pete George was the perfect empty vessel for the Barnholth Brothers and they mercilessly began subjecting the skinny, gawky 11 year-old boy to high-volume, high-intensity workouts that would shatter grown men. Pete was drilled on the three lifts with such intensity that by the time he entered puberty he was a lightning fast, utterly superb technician. Puberty is when testosterone levels begin to surge in the male body, and those young athletes lucky enough to be training with the requisite physical intensity when puberty hits experience lightning fast gains that rival a full-blown steroid cycle – gains that last a lifetime. Steroids are testosterone mimickers and when the technically proficient Pete George entered puberty, training like a maniac, all hell broke loose. Weighing 145 he pressed 240, snatched 240 and clean and jerked 300 a few months after his 15th birthday. He was a teen terror turned loose on the lifting establishment and nothing would be the same after his national debut.

During the summer months of his greatest competitive years Pete George worked construction as a hard laborer to pay his way through dental school. The slow learning, semi-retarded son of Bulgarian immigrant parents ultimately became a highly respected Orthodontist. Pete eventually ended up an assistant professor of stomatology at the School of Medicine, University of Hawaii. He competed in ten world and three Olympic championships, and by age 27 George had competed in more world championships and amassed more team points than any other weightlifter in history to that point. Pete went on to win one gold and two silver medals in the Olympic Games. At the 1948 London Olympic Games, his first, 19 year-old Pete George had the winning jerk fixed overhead when it crashed to the floor just as the referee was giving the down signal.

Pete George enlisted in the United States Army to serve his country and to continue his dental education. Lieutenant George began preparing for the 1956 Olympic Games. By this time he had competed in seven world championships and was the six-time world champion. He had competed in two Olympics and was the defending Olympic champion. Lieutenant George requested a slight reduction in his dental duties in the army so that he might have the requisite training time to defend his title and win gold for the USA. His commanding officer flatly refused – saying George had to decide if he wanted to be “a jock or a dentist.” The defending world and Olympic champion was refused time to train for the Olympic Games.

Training for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics went from bad to worse when during a lifting exhibition at a local high school (one month before the Olympics) Pete was repetition-squatting 400 + for an assembly of schoolboys when the decrepit stage gave way and George’s right foot went through the floor up to his knee. His knee was wracked and swollen to the point that he considered withdrawing from the games. He persevered despite the fact that the wrenched knee made it impossible to attain his patented full squat in the snatch and clean: he was forced to pull his cleans and snatches much higher than usual – he had to power snatch and power clean. Still, he took the silver medal at the Olympic Games and afterwards hung up his lifting belt once and for all. Despite the run of bad luck and the nonsensical military, Pete George posted his all-time best competitive total at the 1956 Olympics: a 270 military press, a 280 power snatch and a 358 pound power clean and jerk. Had he been allowed to train with the singular focus an Olympic champion is entitled to, had he not be the victim of the freak squat accident, he no doubt could have secured the gold medal.

Peter ultimately set four world records: three in the clean and jerk and one in the total. He won world championships in both the 148 and 165-pound class and for a decade he was the man to beat. He

## *Pete George*

never finished lower than second in ten world championship appearances and he retired at age 27. He likely had another five years of peak performance left in him, as most international level weightlifters peak in their late 20s thru their early 30s. George always worked a day job while competing and for five consecutive years he worked, went to college and still found time to train. One wonders how high he might have soared where he had been allowed to just eat, sleep and train. Imagine having to work ten hours a day hauling shingles up a ladder, mixing and pouring concrete and carrying 80-pound hods of brick all day – then going home, cleaning up and heading off to the gym to lift weights prior to a national or world championships.

Mention need be made of Pete's younger brother Jim George. Six years Pete's junior, Jim was an American weightlifting icon in his own right. Jim was a four-time AAU national champion in the light-heavyweight class and won the 1959 Pan American Games. Jim took two silver medals and two bronze medals at the World Championships and set a world record in the snatch at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. He lifted in the 181-pound class and was the first light-heavyweight in history to exceed the 300-pound snatch barrier. Later that same week, Jim set the 181-pound class world record in the clean and jerk with a 386-pound effort. All of which was rather astounding considering Jim, a lifetime drug-free lifter, stood 5 foot 10 inches and weighed 179 pounds. Jim George "looked like a basketball player" according to Tommy Kono and his strength was unbelievable in view of his rail-thin physique.

The George brother's exploits occurred in the golden, pre-steroid era when chemical enhancement didn't taint the competitive landscape. Had he come up today, Pete's accomplishments would be viewed with the same suspicion we view the mid-teen Chinese swimmer that set umpteen world records at the 2012 Olympics. No construction day jobs for the modern Olympians and certainly no asshole military officers telling them they have to choose between winning gold and making a living.

The primitive training tactics used by leading lifting exponents of the pre-steroid era have tremendous relevance for today's modern athlete seeking to maximize muscle, power and strength. The Old School "black iron" training of these ancient men has far more relevance for today's trainee than the bloated bodybuilders with their barely-can-move non-functional physiques. Look at the fat-free muscled-up physiques displayed in the photo of Pete George and Tommy Kono. These men represent realistic physical role models for today's trainees.

How did they construct these "honest" bodies? Essentially they all trained the same: lots of volume, i.e. lots of training sessions; lots of lifting done standing on their feet; the bench press had not yet ascended to prominence and the overhead press was the hallmark of manhood – nowadays the question is, "how much can you bench press?" back then it was "how much can you press overhead?" Exercise machines had yet to be invented and men of that era were not confused by the curse of too many choices. If you trained back then, you lifted barbells and dumbbells because that is all there was; modern trainees would be well advised to purposefully reduce their exercise menu and concentrate on doing fewer lifts better. Drop the triceps kickbacks in favor of some overhead pressing; eschew exercise machines in favor of power cleans and deep squats. Do we really need to perform lateral raises and endless sets on the pec-deck? Let's use that recovered training time for front squats and deadlifts.

A final thought: there was no mall GNC or Vitamin Shoppe back in the 40s and 50s. Nowadays an astute student of the iron game, someone that obtains their information from the monthly muscle magazines, would be led to believe that unless you take creatine monohydrate and meal replacement pacs, unless you spend \$300 per month on nutritional supplements (in order to 'recover and grow') you are doomed to failure. The muscle mags are nothing more than supplement catalogs aimed at generating sales for worthless, ineffectual products so that the supplement makers will generate enough

*Pete George*

product sales to take out ads in the muscle mags and keep them both (mags and supplement companies) financially afloat.

It is a giant con game wherein the “experts” inform you that you need the latest “revolutionary” supplement to make progress and fail to inform you (in the interest of full disclosure) that the maker of the supplement they recommend are paying tens of thousands of dollars per month to the magazine in the form of ad revenue. Back in those glorious ancient days of yore men trained like demons then ate the natural, organic, locally grown, seasonally appropriate, nutrient-dense foods in massive amounts. Nutritional supplements lay decades in the future – yet these men thrived and built fat-free physiques possessing ungodly amounts of power and strength. It is time for us to go “back to the future.”

---

**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](#).

---

[Starting Strength](#) : [Resources](#) : [Articles](#) : [Forums](#) : [Discuss This Article](#)

Copyright 2012 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.