

Starting Strength

The Tragic History of the Military Press in Olympic and World Championship Competition, 1928-1972

by

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For most of the twentieth century, the press was the standard means by which the strength of an athlete, especially in weightlifting, was measured. “How much can you press?” was the usual question directed by friends and fellow athletes to any young man who started training with weights. Therefore it was fitting that when weightlifting competition and rules became standardized at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928, the press was adopted as one of the so-called “Olympic lifts” for international competition, along with the snatch and the clean and jerk. While the latter two movements, often called the “quick lifts,” were regarded more as tests of an athlete’s speed and agility, the two-hand clean and press was viewed as a true measure of overall strength—an essential ingredient in determining a weightlifter’s worth. It also corresponded closely with the familiar watchwords of the Olympic ideal—“swifter, higher, stronger.” Problems, however, plagued the press from the outset. Although the original intention was for lifters to perform it in “military” style, with body ramrod straight, heels together, and head facing forward, this proved impractical, and various forms of “cheating” developed enabling lifters to use the larger muscle groups of the legs, hips, and lower torso in subtle ways instead of relying on just the arm and shoulder muscles. The urge to win by any means, combined with lax enforcement of rules, political pressures, and ultimately a tradition of drift transformed the press from a strength movement to another quick lift, leading the International Weightlifting Federation to eliminate it from all future competitions at the 1972 Olympics in Munich.

Only one account of the rise and fall of the press exists—Dave Webster’s brief chapter in his classic survey *The Iron Game*. Webster describes the pre-1939 press as “a movement for strong men” in which “the body had to be kept straight and as still as possible and the arms only moved,” and contrasts it with the “hip-swinging, knee kicking actions” so characteristic of later decades. He attributes this corruption of the military press ideal to postwar innovations by Russian lifters that were widely imitated and officially tolerated.¹ This interpretation coincides with views propagated by Bob Hoffman, American coach and publisher of *Strength & Health*, who did much to shape “iron game” opinion in the 1950s and 1960s. Hoffman associated increases in press poundages and press problems of this era to illegitimate methods employed by the Soviet Union and its satellites to secure victory in weightlifting and thus display the superiority of the Communism. The cumulative opinions of these

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authorities on the importance of the so-called “Russian press” has been considerable. A reexamination of Olympic and world championships on a yearly basis reveals quite a different story. While the Russians and their allies must share some responsibility for erosion of pressing standards, basic trends were already set before they entered the international arena in 1946. Others—including the Germans, the French, and the Americans—were at least equally culpable for corrupting this classic strength lift and setting in motion the events that would lead to its abolition.

One of the earliest statements on the importance of the press emanates from Alan Calvert, founder of Milo Barbell Company in 1903 and an early proponent of progressive weight training. The press is “always slow and steady,” insists Calvert in an early issue of *Strength* magazine.

You cannot find a better test of pure strength than a Two-Arm Press with a barbell. Whenever a man starts to talk to me about “knack” in lifting, I give him a fairly heavy bar-bell and ask him to make a Two-Arm Press.... If the legs are held straight, nothing will send that bell up except strength, and you need the strength in the triceps of the arm, the small of the back, and particularly in the deltoid muscles on the points of the shoulders. No skill is required to press a bell aloft after you once have it at the chest, and that is why I consider the Two-Arm Press as the best strength test.²

Accompanying these noble sentiments from one of weightlifting’s patriarchs, however, was an admission that pressing styles differed according to nationality. While the French required their lifters to stand “almost bolt upright,” the Germans and Austrians allowed considerable backbend, which in turn allowed them to lift greater weights.

But there were few opportunities for the intrusion of politics, as there were few international meets, no regulatory body, little standardization of lifts, and haphazard recordkeeping, at least until the 1920s. Although weightlifting was included in the first Olympiad in Athens in 1896 and at St. Louis in 1904, it was not contested at London in 1908 or at Stockholm in 1912, and the twelve world championships from 1898 to 1920 were unofficial and unrepresentative of nations outside central Europe. Likewise, there was no prewar governing structure for weightlifting. Although the foundation was laid for an international body at a meeting of German, Italian, and Dutch delegates at Duisberg in 1905, it was the French under Jules Rosset who revitalized the Federation Internationale Halterophile (FIH) at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp.³ These initiatives coincided with organizational developments in England, where the British Amateur Weight-Lifters Association (BAWLA) was founded in 1901.⁴ In the United States, Ottley Coulter wrote an article on “Honesty in Weight Lifting” in the January 1917 issue of *Strength* in which he argued for greater regulation. After the war Coulter renewed his appeal for accurate records and published a list of European and American records in 46 lifts.⁵ Coulter’s ideas were brought to fruition through the organizing talents of two British emigrés, Bernard Bernard and George Jowett, both with connections to BAWLA. As respective editors of *Health and Life* and *Strength*, they formed the American Continental Weight-Lifters Association in 1922 as a national regulatory body.⁶

Much confusion remained, however, over what should be included in the contested lifts. Calvert, based on his knowledge of what was practiced in Europe, recommended eight lifts: the right and left arm snatch, right and left arm swing, right and left arm jerk, and the two arm press, executed in both military (strict) and continental (loose) styles.⁷ But at the first national weightlifting championships, organized by David Willoughby in Los Angeles in 1924, there were five standard lifts—one hand snatch, one hand clean and jerk (with other arm), two hand snatch, two hand military press, and two hand clean and jerk. Lifts and rules alike were drawn (through French translation) from FIH regulations. Press rules were divided into first (clean) and second (press) motions. In executing the

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American strongman Siegmund Klein illustrating the correct form in the military press in a 1931 article in *Strength*. (Courtesy Todd McLean Collection, University of Texas, Austin)

latter, a lifter was required to pause two seconds, “then lift up the bar vertically until the arms are completely extended, without any jerk nor sudden start.” Throughout the press “the athlete’s body must constantly stand in a vertical position.” Any departure from it, “any foot work (heel lift, etc.) and any bending, however little, of the legs” were grounds for disqualification.⁸ These procedures were followed at the Paris Olympics in 1924, but nations were still far from unanimous on what lifts and styles should be allowed. The Americans substituted the one arm (for the two arm) military press and the two hand deadlift for the one arm snatch in 1925. The British rotated lifts yearly, including such variations as the one-hand swing, the two dumbbells anyhow, the one-hand clean and bent press, and the deadlift. The Germans sent no representatives to Paris in 1924, but employed the same five Olympic lifts at an international meet at Neuenkirchen.⁹

Germany’s absence was occasioned not by controversies over rules or protocol in weightlifting but by international political strife. Excluded from the Antwerp games in 1920, resentful over the Treaty of Versailles, beleaguered by reparations payments, and humiliated by French occupation of the Ruhr and the greatest inflation in history, it was hardly surprising that Germany opted out. It was therefore by default that the French (strict) style of pressing, use of globe barbells, and preference for one hand lifts prevailed in the early 1920s. This pro-French bias, underscored by the influence of FIH President Rosset, was challenged by two developments in 1925. First, the financial settlement of the Dawes Plan and the territorial agreements concluded by the Locarno treaties instituted Germany’s entry to the League of Nations and its reaffiliation with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Second, a 1925 meeting of the IOC in Prague, contrary to the wishes of Rosset, adopted a triathlon consisting of the press, snatch, and clean and jerk for the 1928 games in Amsterdam.¹⁰ Henceforth Americans, under the tutelage of Jowett and the ACWLA, were encouraged to practice and compete in the new Olympic lifts. “Most of the lifts will be strange, but the only way to learn them is to make them competitive lifts.” No one seemed sure at this point, however, what kind of press would be required at the Olympics—the (French) “military” style or the (German) “slow” or Olympic style. Jowett advised the former, arguing that “a man who can do a Two Hands Military Press can also do a Slow Press, but the reverse was not so.”¹¹

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What transpired at Amsterdam had momentous consequences for the sport. It was the German press that prevailed and German lifters who took highest honors. The major difference between French and German pressing techniques is that the former required the lifter to remain almost perfectly upright with eyes straight forward and heels together, whereas the latter permitted a backbend prior to extension. Afterward most national associations and the FIH, steeped in the French tradition, continued adherence to the one hand lifts and to the military press. All five “international” lifts, including the military press, were performed at American championships held in 1929 by both the Amateur Athletic Union under Dietrich Wortmann and the Association of Bar Bell Men under Mark Berry. So proud were Americans of their strict presses that they submitted a claim to a world record and the accolade of “world’s strongest man” on behalf of Siegmund Klein, a lightweight who pressed 221 at a strength show held at Herrmann’s Gym in Philadelphia in 1931. This poundage “Klein pressed in magnificent style, heels together and the bar pressed off the chest; not the slightest bend was noticed, the strictest sort of erect position being maintained throughout.” A further implication made by Berry was that the military press, executed in the strictest manner, provided the best measure of pure strength and ultimate criterion for determining the worlds strongest man.¹² Similarly Jowett, another advocate of a strict interpretation, recognized that “the Two-Hand Military Press has always been accepted as the true test of the strength of a man.”¹³

Understandably it required a considerable period of adjustment for Americans, who embraced idealistic notions, to comprehend fully the impact of the IOC policies set in motion at Amsterdam. The first reckoning involved the gradual acceptance of the three Olympic lifts over the multiplicity of lifting movements previously contested by clubs throughout the country. Strength prefaced its report of a show at Rochester, New York, in early 1932 by noting: “This being [an] ‘Olympic Year,’ Arthur F. Gay, conductor of many successful Strength Shows in the Western New York vicinity, decided to have the Iron boys try out their physical prowess on the Three Olympic Lifts.”¹⁴ An even greater enlightenment for the Americans was the loose interpretation of pressing rules at the Los Angeles games in 1932. Whether Berry, the American coach, knew of the liberties taken by the Germans at Amsterdam is uncertain, but he was aware of their slow press tradition and was not surprised by the “loose styles” they employed in training prior to competition. What he was not prepared for was the behavior of the French. Knowing that they dominated the ruling councils of the FIH and had drafted the rules, Berry naively assumed that Gallic traditions of strictness would be upheld. He admitted to a misunderstanding (either through erroneous translation or interpretation) of international regulations.

In performing the two hands military press no thought is given to maintaining the rigid strictness to which Americans have of recent years been accustomed; briefly, we might say that Internationally the press is executed as follows: After cleaning the bar bell to the chest the athlete assumes a position of a most decided arch of the back and he may or may not hold the bar on the chest depending upon whom might be judging; of course, according to the rules as written it is essential to do so; however, we witnessed various infractions of this rule.

Nor did foreign lifters abide by the rule requiring the head to be perfectly erect and eyes straight forward. Berry was confused that actual performance of lifts by foreigners did not correspond to the rules.¹⁵ Quite understandably the French could not allow their national rivals to gain an unfair competitive edge, but why they did not use their considerable authority in the FIH to bring about enforcement of the rules will forever remain an iron game mystery. Instead they adopted the more expedient technique of their German adversaries, thereby putting into place an interpretive dilemma that would plague the administration of the press for the next four decades.

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Even more surprising to Berry was the arrogance of the French, whom he had formerly regarded as the “most reliable” and “fair minded” of the Europeans. He had gone to Los Angeles “with full confidence in the French and was rudely surprised at the high handed manner in which they controlled things and favored their own men. After this, I shall have no faith in French records or performance.” Most galling was the loose style of French light-heavyweight Louis Hostin and attempts by French referee Eugene Gouleau to intimidate the side judges into passing his presses. America seemingly stood alone, not only in its stand for strict pressing, but in its distaste for the Olympic lifts. Afterwards, at a FIH executive committee meeting, the Americans recommended that the five international lifts be employed in 1936 but were told that this decision could only be made by the IOC.¹⁶

Upon returning home Berry did some serious soul searching. Attributing his team’s relatively poor showing in great part to the lax and partial officiating, he tried to understand how the decisions rendered could be so much at variance with the rules. However much it offended his moral sensitivities, it was obvious to Berry what American lifters would need to do in order to improve their standing by the next Olympics. Though harshly critical of European press techniques at first, he eventually came to admire their speed, especially the lightweights who “furnished the classiest lifting of the entire competition as both Hostin and [Svend] Olsen lifted in the easiest and fastest possible manner; the styles displayed by these men might well be copied by any ambitious lifter.” Indeed, future American success depended on adopting European methods. Berry reasoned that

when the rules are interpreted so flexibly as to permit of a shrug or heave of the shoulders as the press is started and the head may be to some extent tilted, then it not only is feasible but becomes essential that some special training for this additional play of the body be incorporated.

To execute this “freer and easier” press, he instructed American lifters to stand

erect with the barbell at the chest, the feet either together or no more than sixteen inches apart, flatten the chest and draw the arms back; then, in one movement you are to shoot the arms forward and thrust out the chest as you extend the arms overhead; as the bell ascends, arch the back and tilt the head back.

Thus Berry, following the French lead, caved in to the course of least resistance, one that would be in his nation’s (and his team’s) best interests. “If, as we are ambitious to do, we hope to beat the foreigners at their own game we must sooner or later adopt identical training methods and interpretations of the rules.”¹⁷ America’s future success as a lifting power depended on it.

During the next several years Berry promoted the Olympic lifts and the lessons he had learned at Los Angeles on how to perform them at national and regional contests. “You shall in time see,” he wrote in 1933, “that in keeping with our march towards perfection in regulation we shall have reached the standard of the European in lifting excellence.”¹⁸ Still, at the local level in the United States and England a tradition of strict officiating in the press had taken root, in keeping with AAU and BAWLA regulations against backbending, and there was considerable resistance to the new international interpretations. Just before the 1936 Olympics the British attempted to deal with these incongruities by changing their rules structure. BAWLA regulations, largely in response to Hostin’s egregious violation of the rules, now called for the bar, on completion of the clean, to “come to rest at the sternum bone where the collar bones meet.”¹⁹ This position at the top of the chest now enabled the lifter to assume a slight lay-back prior to pressing. These guidelines were eventually adopted by the FIH at the Berlin Olympics where lifting totals overall were significantly higher than in 1932. Thus most major lifting powers, first the Germans, then the French, followed by the United States and Britain, who were also the worlds foremost political powers, acted successively to relax the rules

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to further their own nationalistic agendas.²⁰ Yet a grudging respect remained for lifters who adhered to strict form, particularly for the Egyptians, who remained outside the political loop. W.J. Lowry, secretary of BAWLA, observed that middleweight Khadr El Touni's remarkable 259 pound press at Berlin was executed in strict style. It "proved conclusively how real champions can adhere rigidly to definitions and still beat those whose training is with a view to seizing every possible advantage which may be given by lenient judges."²¹ Such strict presses, though admirable as displays of pure strength, rarely won championships.

Further corruption of the pressing ideal was instituted by Bob Hoffman, who displaced Berry as the prime mover of American weightlifting after Berlin. Though he revered the press as a test of "sheer strength" and for determining the "strongest man," Hoffman was envious of the Europeans and always seeking an edge for his lifters. At the 1937 world championships in Paris he was impressed by Anton Gietl's 254-pound press as a light heavyweight. It combined a wide grip with "a great deal of back bend," which in Gietl's case was "not cause for disqualification as he stands in this position at the start of the lift."²² Americans Stanley Kratkowski and Steve Gob copied this style as did virtually the entire team that Hoffman led to the 1938 championships in Vienna. Eventually Hoffman added speed to this pre-press lean back technique, thereby doing away with the last vestiges of the old military press and turning the old "slow" press into a "fast" press. But he realized that such artistry was not without problems. "This form of press is a bit difficult for the judge and referee to correctly pass on. It's difficult to determine exactly whether some of these presses have been strictly presses. But many high poundages are correctly hoisted in this manner."²³ Indeed American advances in the late 1930s were fueled in part by this improved technique. "The Americans are adept at this style of pressing," observed George Walsh, a British official, "and, in spite of the criticisms you may have heard about them, the Americans are infinitely better and more scrupulous in their pressing than the majority of the Continental lifters."²⁴ In a distant foreshadowing of future developments the French, no doubt chagrined that other nations were seizing the edge they once held, proposed abolition of the press at the FIH meeting held at 1937 world championships.

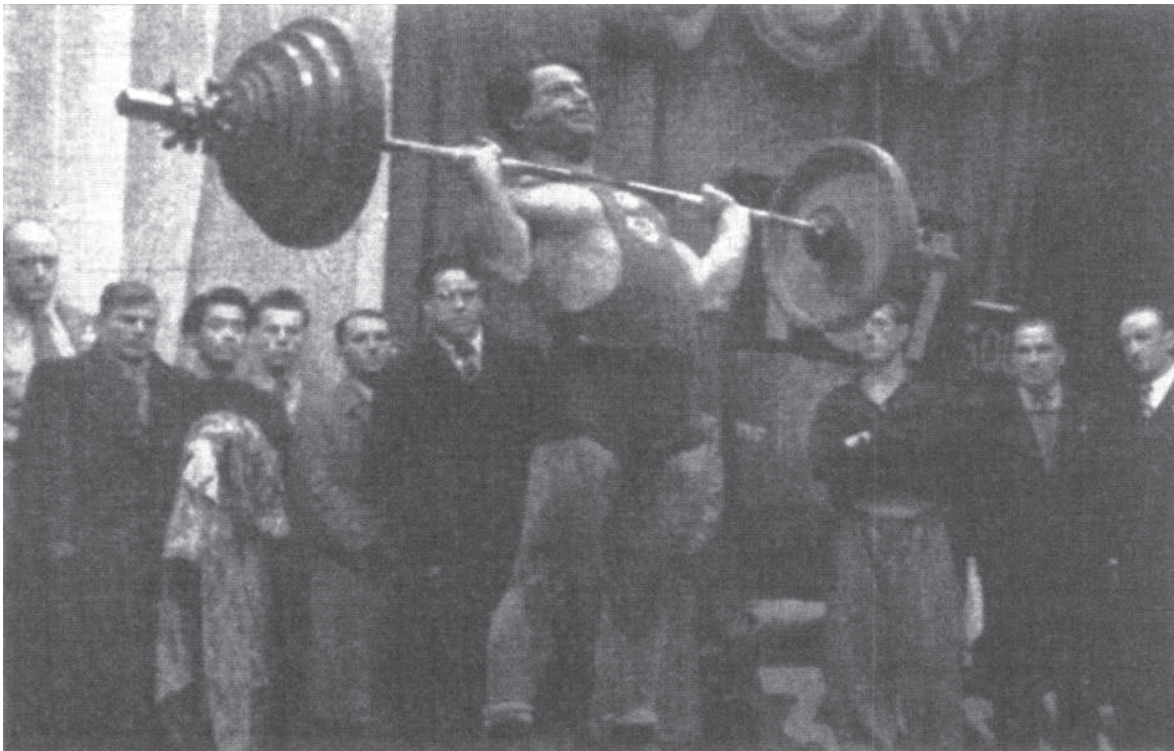
One of the foremost practitioners of the new fast press was Tony Terlazzo, whose dazzling success in winning an Olympic gold medal (1936), two world championships (1937 and 1938), and world records in the press heralded America's arrival as the world's leading weightlifting power. As Walsh explained just after Terlazzo's Olympic triumph, "he varies his styles occasionally in order to exploit every possible method of improvement."²⁵ But domestically it was John Grimek whose combination of raw strength and unmatched physique made the greatest impression. Bill Curry, one of the best lifters in the South, recalls attending the 1940 national championships in New York where he saw Grimek press 285 pounds with great speed and pronounced backbend while wearing a wide steel-reinforced belt for support. Upon returning to Atlanta, Curry crafted a similar belt and perfected the new pressing technique. From April to December his press advanced from 235 to 285 pounds. Rules specialist Rudy Sablo was also present and recalls that Grimek did press from a layback he assumed at the beginning of the lift and did not change during its performance. His was not an abnormal layback and was "within the rules."²⁶ Photographs in *Strength & Health* of pressing styles at the 1940 Middle Atlantic championships show Terlazzo and heavyweights Louis Abele and Steve Stanko with considerable back arch. An action shot of the great John Davis pressing 323 pounds at the 1941 national championships reveals a backbend as severe as those of lifters who stirred up so much controversy decades later. Hoffman rationalized that it was advisable for his lifters to test the limits of official tolerance. "While too much back bend means disqualification," he cautioned, "many pressers adopt a definite arch at the start of the press and maintain this arch throughout the press until the

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referee's signal." This was permissible as long as there was "no attempt to straighten the back."²⁷ With Americans performing better than ever, there seemed no cause for concern to Hoffman over erosion of officiating standards. From a broader perspective, however, it is obvious that many of the problems later to plague the press were well in place in the 1930s.

During the Second World War, national rivalries over weightlifting lay in abeyance, but in its aftermath the press reentered the vortex of controversy as a realignment of superpowers, featuring the United States and the Soviet Union, vied for international supremacy. For Hoffman, "America's victory in weightlifting more than any other one thing depicts America's strength" in the struggle against Communism. In material terms it "was worth more to the continued cause of world peace than the display of force by a fleet of battleships, by a thousand planes or by a dozen divisions of soldiers." The superiority of the American way of life was validated to a great extent by the surprise victory of six lifters from the United States over a highly touted Russian squad at the first post-war world championships in Paris in 1946. It was a victory Hoffman would forever savor and provided the impetus for a golden age of American weightlifting. The Soviets did not reappear until 1950 when again, at Paris, the United States trounced them by a score of 18-15. To Ray Van Cleef, this victory carried "the potency of an A-bomb in shattering some of the phoney propaganda of the U.S.S.R. as to their claimed supremacy over the 'decadent' democracies."²⁸ With further American triumphs at Milan in 1951 and Helsinki in 1952, Hoffman could view with satisfaction the performance of his lifters and the state of world weightlifting.

One must view changes in press technique within this context of need for Cold War superiority—on both sides. Although the Americans were victorious in 1946, it was Gregori Novak who set the



Gregori Novak at the start of his record setting press at the 1946 world championships in Paris. Note the wide grip and slight arch in upper back. (Courtesy *Strength & Health*)

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lifting world ablaze with a 309 press on his way to winning the lightheavy class. This awesome feat gave rise to the myth of the “Russian press” and the belief that it was the Soviets in general and Novak in particular who were responsible for the degeneration of modern pressing standards.²⁹ Hoffman called Novak’s lift “the greatest press ever made.” Health and Strength hailed him as “the greatest strongman the world has ever seen.”³⁰ But the so-called Russian press was no more than a variation of the layback position perfected by the Americans in the 1930s prior to Soviet membership in the FIH. It was characterized by a very wide hook-grip, with weight held high on the chest, lungs inflated fully, wrists straight, and lower torso tensed. Contrary to earlier versions, the Russian layback took the form of an arch in the upper back rather than a lower back bend, a position held through completion of the lift. Novak and his compatriots were thereby able to utilize some of the more powerful muscles of the chest while, with torso erect, pass the scrutiny of officials.³¹ Hoffman even contended that “pressing with such a wide grip almost eliminates backbend.”³² Not surprisingly, the “Russian press” was widely noticed.

What was nor so evident at the time was Novak’s overall ability. His magnificent press obscured a world record snatch of 287 pounds and a respectable clean and jerk of 342 pounds, which enabled him to outdistance his nearest competitor by 77 pounds in the total. Indeed the press differential for the remainder of the Russian team, relative to the snatch and clean and jerk, closely approximated that for lifters from the rest of the world in 1946; likewise for 1950 when the Russians reentered international competition.³³ The accompanying charts, which trace the relationship between the press and the quick lifts for medal winners in the middling classes-featherweight through lightheavyweight—from 1928 to 1972, provide another perspective. In composite totals, press gains (at 6.0%) were significantly higher at Paris in 1946 than they had been at Vienna in 1938, but respectable gains were also registered in the snatch (3.8%) and the clean and jerk (3.64%). From 1946 to 1950, even with the Russian secret out, press figures remained static, while there were gains of 2.05% in the snatch and 2.49% in the clean and jerk. And from 1950 to 1953, when the Russians won their first world championship, the gains were only 4.30%, 2.56%, and 2.29% respectively. Thus the arguments put forth for a Russian revolution in the press after 1945 seem unfounded.³⁴

Despite the fact that the press remained the most controversial of the competitive lifts, there was little debate surrounding it from 1946 to 1953, the period of American supremacy.³⁵ One can search the reports and commentaries of Olympics and world championships in vain for evidence of excessive rules infractions or lax officiating on the press. For lack of any better explanation, one must conclude that lifters, even the Russians, were exercising greater restraint and that officials were interpreting the rules more strictly than during the pre-war era. Indeed, Charles A. Smith, in a series of articles for *Muscle Power*, speaks admiringly of those who pressed in traditional military style, such as American heavyweight Jim Bradford and Korean featherweight Sung Yip Kim (who pressed 264 pounds on his way to winning a bronze medal at the 1947 world championships in Philadelphia). An eyewitness told Smith that he saw him “press 212 pounds fourteen consecutive repetitions in strict Military style and when I saw Kim at Philadelphia, I also saw what an immensely powerful man he was.”³⁶ Further evidence that the press was still viewed as a strength lift and that strict pressers were most admired comes from Harry Johnson, Mr. America for 1959. Prior to 1954 he entered many weightlifting competitions where “you couldn’t bend at all” in the press. Marvin Eder, one of the strongest lifters of the 1950s was widely esteemed for pressing in “strict style.”³⁷ With the lift now at the height of its popularity, Peary Rader observed in *Lifting News* that “to most people the two arm press IS WEIGHTLIFTING. They know little of any other type. . . . To most people pressing is strictly a power lift and even lifters themselves think of it in this manner.”³⁸

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Times were changing, however, and the press was being influenced by Cold War politics. The first sign of trouble appeared at the 1952 Olympics, where the Russians were the chief victims. Throughout the competition the jury of appeal overturned the decisions of officials. In the lightheavy class the Iranian Mohamad Rahnvardi, notorious for his exaggerated backbend, was credited with his 265-pound final press by the western-dominated jury after being turned down thrice by the officials. So infuriated was British referee George Kirkley with the jury that he “took off my official arm band, and flung it on the table in front of them.” It was obvious to Kirkley that “the Jury’s decision to reverse the judges’ verdict was clearly a political one—Rhanaverdi was a potential danger to the Russians [Arkadij] Vorobiev and [Trofim] Lomakin and might have kept one of them out of a place.” Later Vorobiev was denied any extra attempts on the clean and jerk on grounds of technicalities, though the jury accorded the same privileges to two Americans. Kirkley observed that the jury “overruled no less than EIGHT decisions” and that “the situation at times was so ludicrous that the referees and judges might just as well have been dispensed with and the lifting judged by the Jury.” He had expected a struggle “between America and Russia” and “some tense situations. . . . But never did I imagine that political bias could override sportsmanship and fair play to such an extent!” Hoffman, on the other hand, seemed pleased with the results and barely noted any irregularities in his Olympic report.³⁹

But it was evident to all iron gamers, including Hoffman, that Russia, a nation of 180 million with a nationalized sports program and over 100,000 weightlifters, would soon triumph. With the intensification of the Cold War in Korea, the potential for political conflicts of interest in sport seemed greater than ever. Not unexpectedly, the Russians eclipsed the United States 25-22 at the 1953 world championships in Stockholm. Kirkley thought the officiating showed some improvement, but he was more convinced than ever of “the necessity for obtaining some reasonable degree of uniformity on the Press.” Despite the fact that the FIHC (formerly FIH), prior to the 1954 world championships in Vienna, upheld a recommendation from the referees’ commission that “referees and judges should be more strict in their interpretation of the rule to permit only upright pressing,” the competition was marred by rules infractions and politics.⁴⁰ The worst violations occurred among the light heavyweights; Dimitri Ivanov won a gold medal and five valuable team points for Russia. Kirkley reports that in his first attempt with 243 pounds “he got two red lights (the lift was bad, with some lean back, and the bar stopped) but on an appeal from the Russian camp the Jury of Appeal allowed the lift—it beats me why?” Ivanov then failed twice with 253 pounds. “So it can be said that he won a title without doing one good Press.” It was obvious to Kirkley that

no lifter in future should press slowly. Do this and you’re asking for trouble. It doesn’t matter how you press ‘em but press ‘em fast.. and blind the judges with science! It seems that many international judges are influenced by the fact if a weight looks to be pressed easily he must pass it—even if there is knee snapping, bounce starts, or excessive lean backs! Many lifters at the Vienna meeting got away with murder.⁴¹

Equally concerned was Peary Rader, editor of *Iron Man*, who realized that almost any lifter utilizing the “fast start” would “still get a little body motion in and it is hard for a judge to know where to draw the line.”⁴² The rules had been clear about maintaining a vertical position and disallowing any bending of legs since the 1930s, but much depended on how these movements were interpreted and the political dispositions of the officials and juries.

Hoffman heightened an awareness of these factors in an article entitled “You Can’t Win” that he published just after losing the 1955 world championships at Munich to the Russians 29-25. After losing three world championships by narrow margins, he was frustrated and feeling the sting of

defeat. His explanation for American misfortunes was pro-Soviet political bias amidst the international community. At Stockholm he claimed that “everyone worked to dethrone us as champions.” At Vienna and Munich the crowd was friendlier, but anti-American feeling continued to permeate the officials. Just one red light from a French referee named Piou in the mid-heavyweight class, upheld by the jury, “had knocked America out of the chance to regain the team championship.” Hoffman contended that on the 303-pound press attempt by American Clyde Emerich, Russian side judge Shatov shouted “Jerk, don’t pass it” to Piou, and “obediently he flashed the red light.” Hoffman even implied that this arrangement was “fixed.” When the jury of appeal upheld the decision, Hoffman argued that its members too were under Soviet influence. The Russian Nazareth and Egyptian Raddi were supposedly “good friends,” and the latter had even made trips to Moscow.” FIHC President Bruno Nyberg of Finland, “our longtime friend, has never voted for us in the years of 1953, 1954 and 1955.” Hoffman reasoned that “Finland is practically a satellite of Russia, and it is quite natural for a man to favor his next-door neighbor.” FIHC Secretary Gouleau of France voted with the United States in 1953 but since then “went along with the Russians.” Only American Clarence Johnson voted “for us, the other four against in every decision.” What enraged Hoffman was their approval of the presses of Vorobiev, Emrich’s Russian adversary.

He presses with even more of the pressing exaggeration utilized by some of the Russians. As he is about to press, he curves like a spring, bends the shoulders back, lifts with loose knees, then the entire body unleashes itself like a spring when the pressing effort is made. Definitely there is a knee action, a knee kick, not too far removed from the push presses the Russians practice so much in training.⁴³

Vorobiev essayed a 31-pound world record press in this manner and took a 27-pound lead over Emrich. Whether the situation was as political as Hoffman insists or the Americans would have won with different officials is moot, but none of his complaints were even noted in Kirkley’s reports. Obviously the shoe was on a different foot than in 1952, and it was pinching.

What can be stated with certainty is that press figures in the mid-fifties were soaring—surpassing the snatch in 1956—and that these gains were not limited to Russians. In fact, relative percentage gains in the press for this period were less for the Russians than for the United States or the rest of the world. Russian world championship victories were fueled by relative gains in the snatch and clean and jerk where a far more profound innovation in sport was influencing the results, rather than improvements in technique. Statistical and empirical evidence suggest that steroids were assisting the Russians in the “quick lifts” in which, more so than in the press, greater strength was required in the large muscle groups of the legs and back to execute the great pulling and recovery movements.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Kirkley argues that the increased press poundages and world records of the Russians were “not due to any slackness of adjudication.... I know that the officiating standard is not all that it might be... but my experience of the pressing styles of the Russian champions is that, generally, they are quite reasonable.” The Russians were “certainly no worse than the lifters of other nations. Some of them are decidedly better.”⁴⁵ Indeed the strict style of Russian bantamweight Vladimir Stogov not only brought him gold medals and world records but attracted far more praise than the looser movements of such Americans as Chuck Vinci, Tommy Kono, and Jim George.⁴⁶

Still, Hoffman, unfamiliar with steroids and needing to rationalize for American shortcomings, clung to the myth of an international conspiracy that condoned Russian cheating in the press and thereby enabled them to win world titles. As the 1956 Olympics approached, he expressed hope that “we will have a jury of sportsmen this year, not politicians.”⁴⁷ To his surprise and delight, his team not only defeated the Russians (by a slim margin), but he witnessed two jury press decisions in America’s

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favor, an event he deemed “unique” in weightlifting annals. Still he complained that many of the Russians... definitely cheat and get away with murder.” This line was carried forward by Harry Paschall, Hoffman’s managing editor, who targeted Vorobiev for perfecting a push press that invoked a subtle bending of the knees. It was “as phony as a three-dollar bill.” Vorobiev’s world record 325-pound press was “a jerk instead of a press” and should therefore “be expunged from the books.” If officials would not enforce the rules, “let’s get a new batch of judges. It shouldn’t be hard to find them in any Institution for the blind, fully equipped with dark glasses, white canes and Seeing Eye dogs.” Paschall’s diatribe was further couched in political terms through his graphic depiction of Bosco, the “Hope of the Free World,” locked in a pressing duel where his Communist adversary gains an unfair edge by employing the Vorobiev style.⁴⁸ Yet there is no evidence that his form of pressing was widely employed by Russian lifters or others in the Eastern bloc.

A more significant development at Melbourne was a rules change whereby a certain degree of backbend was permissible—“providing it isn’t exaggerated.” Kirkley scoffed at this well-intentioned move, instigated by Jean Dame, to acknowledge the slight bending of the trunk that is necessary to press the bar in front of the head. “Just what is ‘exaggerated’ when applied to a backbend in the Press?” Kirkley queried. “Is it a lean back of 20 degrees, 30 degrees, 40 degrees, or even more? Your guess is as good as mine!”⁴⁹ Peary Rader shared these concerns, noting that determining excessive backbend would be “left entirely to the opinion of the judges and referee.” With the new standard in place, press figures soared at the 1957 world championships in Iran. Contrary to popular belief, it was not so much the Russians as lifters of other nationalities, such as midheavyweight Firus Pojhan of Iran and heavyweight Alberto Pigaiani of Italy, who most tested the tolerance of officials. Vorobiev, on the other hand, seemed sound. On his 320-pound press, Oscar State “could not detect any sign of the knee kick he has been accused of using. He had quite a little trouble with 325 but it was still worthy of three white lights.”⁵⁰ Indeed, Vorobiev’s victory over two Iranian runner-ups was due largely to superiority in the quick lifts.

So liberal were officiating standards at Teheran that the FIHC, at the 1958 world championships in Stockholm, decided to get strict. Its technical committee resolved that “presses had to be presses according to the rules.” Nevertheless Hoffman complained about backbending by Russian lifters and officiating calls that favored East over West. “It could well be that the officials from Iron Curtain countries are simply afraid to turn down any lift by a Russian.”⁵¹ On the other hand, press gains at Stockholm were much less than in Teheran. Charles Coster noted that 88 presses failed or were disqualified in the four lighter classes. Although officiating in the heavier classes was more lenient and the new measures caused some consternation, he was convinced they were “long overdue.” Kirkley too seemed satisfied that officiating “was stricter at this meeting, and I think the trend will continue.”⁵² Continue it did. At the 1959 championships in Warsaw, press figures actually dipped. In the bantamweight class, Hoffman pronounced the judging as “too strict.. If turning down every lift is good officiating, then we had good officiating.” And in the middleweights he even witnessed a Czech official turn down Russian Fedor Bogdanovsky’s second attempt press. He was “the first man from an iron curtain country... I ever saw turn down a Russian’s lift.”⁵³ This new strictness, however, hardly pleased Hoffman whose team won only one gold medal and finished third (behind Poland) in team scoring.

Therefore, contrary to his previous criticisms about Russian presses, he began to condone a relaxation of standards. In a *Strength & Health* article, he focused on Vorobiev as the greatest exponent of the push press at Melbourne.

His knees jerked in every press but he did it smoothly and got away with it. As he walked back and forth waiting for the record to be weighed.. he grinned like

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the cat who had eaten the canary to note that he got away with the push-press. American lifters will have to become better push-pressers to get their presses higher.

Although this advice was proffered as training information, accompanied by a description of how to perform the push-press, the implication was that American lifters should do whatever necessary to win. Indeed, at Warsaw in 1959 he offered the opinion that Jim Bradford “tries to press too perfectly.”⁵⁴ These views raised doubts about the recent trend towards strict pressing.

At the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Hoffman had no cause for complaint about high standards. Vinci, still backbending, had all of his presses passed on his way to a gold medal. In the middleweights, when Kono got two red lights on his 309-pound press “a near riot resulted among the audience.” Soon, according to Rader, “soldiers were brought in and stationed around the auditorium.” Meanwhile, Hoffman protested the decision, and the jury of appeal passed Kono’s lift.⁵⁵ In the midheavyweights, John Pulskamp, America’s worst backbender, was credited for all three presses, while British rival Louis Martin, with a much stricter style, could manage only two. After Pulskamp succeeded with his first attempt of 292 pounds, Oscar State concluded that the back-bend he was using would get bigger (and worse) with the heavier weights. It did, but the refereeing in this class was by no means as strict as it was in the previous classes and this leniency was Pulskamp’s good fortune.

Martin’s second try with 303 pounds went a lot slower but he managed to finish it in his usual immaculate style that was such a contrast to Pulskamp’s doubtful “lay-back” technique. Now Pulskamp essayed 303 and this attempt should not have passed but pass it did. Martin called for 308.5 but it was too much for him; it went up only a few inches. Pulskamp took the same weight and made it-thanks to lax judging.⁵⁶

Although State concedes that the victorious Russians in that class, Vorobiev and Lomakin, took their share of liberties, it would have been difficult for Hoffman to maintain that his lifters were treated less fairly than their Iron Curtain rivals or that the Russian victory was politically contrived.

By this time, however, what was becoming known as the Olympic press (though still called the Russian press) was being practiced by virtually all nations. This technique, along with the proliferation of steroids and nationalized sports programs, enabled Poland, Hungary, and Japan to join Russia and the United States as major weightlifting powers. Press figures soared in the early 1960s. Officials at world championships in Vienna in 1961 and Budapest in 1962 were inundated with controversial presses, some of the most extreme coming from Hungarians Imre Foldi and Gyoso Veres. But it was the pressing of Russian lightheavyweight Rudolf Plukfelder and lax officiating at Vienna that again nearly caused a riot. In his encounter with Kono, Plukfelder pressed 308 and 319 pounds with considerable knee-kick and backbend. When Kono, though hardly simon-pure, was turned down with 319 pounds, “the whole vast stadium erupted in a storm of booing, whistling, shouting, cat-calling and even fist waving. It was the loudest and longest demonstration of the kind” announcer State had ever heard, “but the noise became even louder and more menacing when the jury of appeal turned the American’s appeal against this decision down. The hubbub lasted for twenty minutes.” What so upset the spectators was not so much the rejection of Kono’s lift but the passing of Plukfelder’s far less strict presses which gave the Russian an unfair advantage. When Plukfelder made his third attempt with 330 pounds “amid a frightful din” and “with the most obvious knee kick of all,” the jury removed all three offending judges. Hoffman was furious with both officials and jury. “You can’t win,” he lamented.⁵⁷

At Budapest, Hoffman claimed that America was “robbed of two gold medals by careless and dishonest officials.” Repeatedly in the featherweight class, “the two judges turned down western lifters

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and passed lifts for eastern lifters.” Russian Eugenij Minaev’s pressing “was so bad the people howled and whistled every time he came out after that.”⁵⁸ But it was in the lightheavy and midheavy classes that Kono and Norbert Schemansky lost to Communist adversaries on questionable calls. As a result, despite his criticisms of Eastern bloc lifters and lax officiating, Hoffman became reconciled to the pressing style that had become so popular since the Rome Olympics which he (wrongly) attributed to the Russians. He now publicized this four step process of lean back, push forward, lean back, and press out, arguing that “a lifter who ‘presses without sin’ cannot hold a world record.” But he further moralized that, unlike his Communist adversaries who performed a “jerk press,” Americans, like upcoming lightweight Tony Garcy, were pressing within the rules. Indeed, “it is not the intention of officials in this country to pass jerk presses.” So the American version of the Olympic press became the “Garcy press” and more than ever Hoffman reiterated his refrain that “if you want to beat the Russians, you must train like the Russians.”⁵⁹

By this time other international coaches were better able to analyze the new press and rules infractions through the “Spector Analyzer,” a special camera that recorded five times as slow as slow motion. Prior to the Budapest championships Webster had shown motion pictures spotlighting doubtful pressing techniques, and officials publicly announced that they were going to interpret the rules strictly. “Sure enough,” observed British coach Al Murray, the rules for the press were interpreted strictly for the poor bantamweights and lifts were ruled out one after another.

But, as usual, by the time the heavier classes got into action the officials had begun once again to be impressed by how “easily” (meaning fast) the heavy iron was flying up and the officiating pressure was off. When the light-heavyweights were lifting, officiating was about back to normal and just about anything that went up was “good.”⁶⁰

FIHC President Clarence Johnson bemoaned this state of affairs and even held a session on press problems at an international coaching conference in Munich, but no one had any solutions.⁶¹

Hoffman, whose lifters were employing the Olympic press but still losing to the Communists, was convinced that international politics was the culprit. After the 1963 championships in Stockholm he complained that it was hard enough to get fair decisions from the officials, but “invariably the Jury reverses the decision when it suits their convenience, which is any time that a man from the iron curtain countries is involved.” Though chair of the jury, Johnson was always outvoted, four to one, by members from Russia, Poland, Finland, and Egypt “in favor of lifters from Socialist countries.”⁶² State, as a press purist, was appalled by jury reversals favoring light heavyweight Plukfelder (Russian) and midheavy Ireniusz Palinski (Polish).⁶³ But it was the Olympic press of Veres of Hungary that attracted the most criticism. According to pundit Jim Murray, Veres employed a “kick” to get the bar moving, “firing the weight upward with a bow-like or slingshot-like action,” then, after the barbell is about three-quarters up, “he bends back away from the weight again as he straightens his arms.” For those who would consider this a “horrible style,” Murray reminded readers that Veres “does not, after all, referee his own lifting.”⁶⁴ So incensed was Hoffman at this state of affairs that at a 1964 coaches conference in Paris he proposed that juries should replace referees but not reverse their decisions and that the press be eliminated.⁶⁵

At the ensuing FHI (formerly FIHC) meeting at the Tokyo Olympics, Hoffman’s proposition on juries passed. Significantly it was introduced by a Czechoslovakian delegate. Even more surprisingly, Hoffman voted with the Russian delegate to retain the press. He rationalized that there were not enough votes for abolition. “We will have to live with the Press for it has been a part of weightlifting too long to drop it. Officials will simply have to do a better job of ruling out infractions, notably

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exaggerated knee kicks.” Even more indicative of a thaw in East-West relations was the support of some Communist countries in Clarence Johnson’s reelection to the FHI presidency.⁶⁶ Although press violations abounded at Tokyo and press figures climbed higher than ever, a hint of change was evident at the 1965 European championships in Sofia. Officials, liberated from the meddlings of the jury, exhibited a born-again strictness, to the extent of applying a 27 degree backbend rule. This approach carried over to the 1965 world championships in Teheran. After Olympic bantamweight champion Alexei Vakonin failed all three press attempts, Webster pronounced the refereeing “the toughest I have ever seen.” Featherweight press failures were 60%.⁶⁷ Though knee kicks and standing bench presses were more evident in the heavier classes, this strictness continued at the 1966 world championships in East Berlin. In the middleweights, Hoffman noted, “the officials were very rough, passing only 13 of 33 lifts in the evening contingent,” thus effectively eliminating American press specialist Russ Knipp from medal contention. More significant, however, was a general breakup of Communist bloc solidarity. At Teheran, Shatov, now one of the greatest exponents of strictness, contributed his share of red lights to eliminating press world record holder Hiroshi Fukuda and Janos Benedek of Hungary and to lessening the fortunes of Rudolph Kozlowski, practitioner of a new and even slicker form of the Olympic press dubbed the Polish press. In the middleweights, State observed that the absence of “a politically biased jury” prevented the Russian Viktor Kurentsov benefitting from a “huge backlean” and the “blatant partiality” of a fellow Russian referee.⁶⁸ Lack of Communist unity was most evident in the lighthheavyweights at East Berlin where the Russian Vladimir Belyaev and Hungarian Veres were contending for the gold medal. Hoffman recorded that

Veres’ press of 358 was [as] good as any made in the championships and the Russian and the Polish officials gave him a red light. Vorobyev, the Russian coach, stood with folded arms glaring at the Polish judge as he was about to render his decision and no doubt this influenced him, for up came a red light and... Veres lost the championships.⁶⁹

Still, the problems with the press, especially the disparity in judging between lighter and heavier classes, were unresolved. A more extreme solution took the form of increased calls by iron game purists, with no political agendas or axes to grind, for abolition of the press. Foremost of these proponents was Peary Rader. He was incensed by slow motion films of Polish-style lifters Waldemar Baszanowski and Norbert Ozimek making world record presses with knee kicks and excessive backbends with “the approval and good wishes of the blind officials.” Rader insists that some lifters employ less knee bend in the jerk than was now permitted in the press. In some instances there was “no sign of pressing,” leading him to conjecture sarcastically that

soon we will be making a new rule against a “pressout” to finish a two arm press. Current presses were being done like a flash. We try to blame the officials, but actually the lifters have practiced and perfected this to such an extent that it is next to impossible for the official to see what is happening, especially the chief referee in front. He knows there is something wrong but he isn’t certain what it is. How then can we classify this press as anything but subterfuge, trickery or deliberate falsification of pressing style?

The whole pressing situation is in an almost impossible mess. When talk of making the press more strict is heard, then the lifters complain that if this is done they will never be able to make a new record, as they cannot possibly press such poundages in good, strict style. This is true. So what is to be done? Allow the press to deteriorate further! It seems the only solution now is to discard the press entirely from the Olympics and maintain the snatch and clean and jerk-two

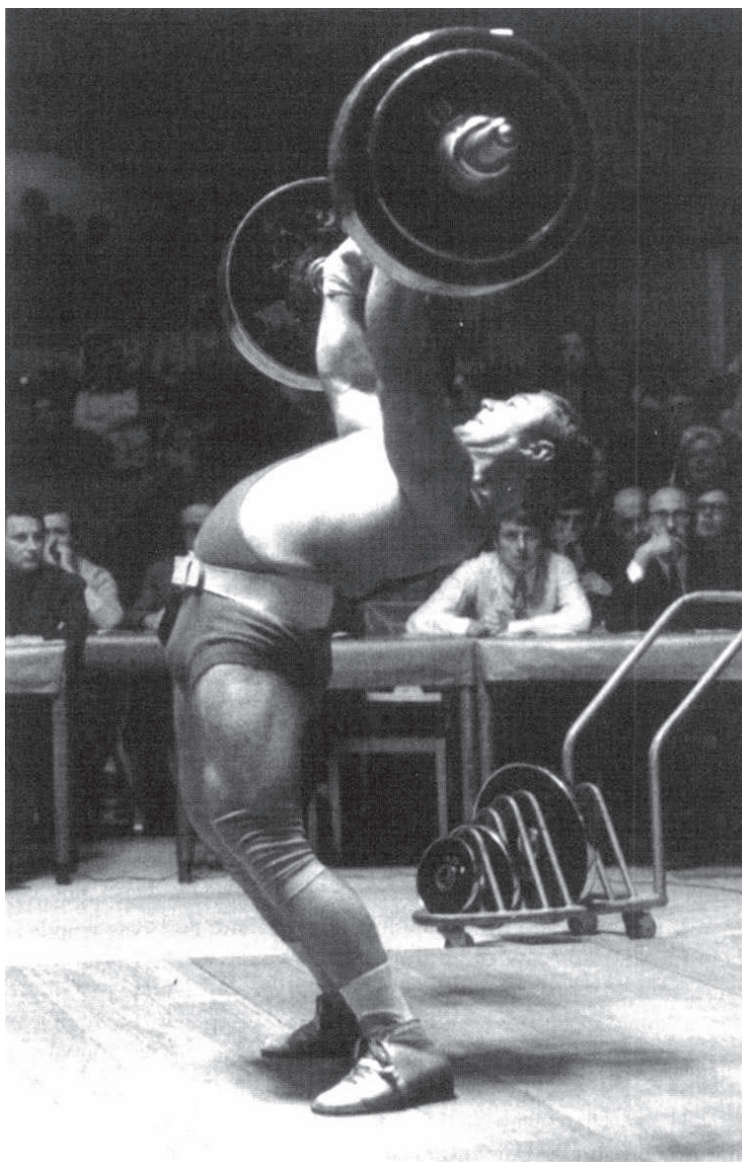
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athletic lifts that are not too difficult to officiate and will give a full measure of a man's overall strength and athletic ability.

Rader also makes the valid observation that the power lifts were increasingly gaining respect as truer indicators of strength than the press which was coming to be regarded as “a strong man stunt.” Virginia lifting chairman Bob Crist called it the “two hands clean and convulsion.”⁷⁰

Much of the excitement generated by the new Polish press stemmed from Poland's upset victory over the Russians at Teheran. Suddenly “how-to-do-it” articles appeared, ironically sometimes by the same authorities who were advocating stricter standards.⁷¹ Interestingly a return to the military press was also being advocated by some lifters—as a training exercise for the Olympic press! Former world record holder Bill March recommended that beginners “learn to press strict and also learn a good, loose style. Then, depending on who the officials are, you will be able to press as the judges dictate.”⁷² A more amoral view was expressed by bodybuilding promoter Joe Weider, still trying to keep a hand in weightlifting. He believed that “if you want to compete with the Big Boys you have to lift like them. Put so-called moral considerations aside. In sports there is no point handicapping yourself with worry over a rulebook.”⁷³ Weider's views closely coincided with those of the “anything goes” school which advocated abolishing the rules and permitting lifters any technique to press the weight overhead.

The medley of contradictory forces that had been mounting for a decade converged at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. After the lax officiating at the so-called “Little Olympics” in 1967, lifters were in no way prepared for the strictness of the following year. “Judging on the press was extremely strict,” observed Hoffman. “Knee kicking of any degree was taboo.” He attributed the poor showing of his team in “good part” to “almost impossible strictness in the press judging.”⁷⁴ Rader concurred, noting that lifters seemed shocked, disillusioned, disappointed, “and perhaps a little despondent at having to start so low in the press and still failing.” In many classes there were



Russian heavyweight Valerij Yakubovskiy, European champion and world record holder, attempting a 455-pound press at a 1971 international meet in Brussels, Belgium. Although it looks very close, he could not lock his arms in the severe layback position and stand erect. (Courtesy Tommy Kono)

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more presses lost than made, and even the heavyweights were strictly officiated.⁷⁵ But not all of it was strict. State pointed out that “the standard of refereeing sagged badly in the lightweight class where the chief referee in particular, Bob Hoffman of the USA, was far too lenient.” It was so inconsistent in the middleweight and midheavy classes that the jury recommended a change of officials. When FHI President Johnson refused to do so in the former (which included Hoffman’s lawyer and crony Dave Matlin), two jury members, Wally Holland of England and Jean Dame of France, resigned.⁷⁶ That the shortcomings of Hoffman and his allies were reported in a rival publication provides some grounds for suspicion as to their authenticity. Enough evidence exists, however, to suggest that the Americans were out of step with the high standards set at Mexico City. Most seriously, there was a long and heated debate by the FHI over a proposal by Dame to abolish the press, which he called a “festering sore’ in the body of weightlifting.” Delegates narrowly voted to retain it by 27 to 23, but Webster “heard many comments that this lift should be removed from the competitions.... How much longer can this continue? I say the situation is now beyond rectification.”⁷⁷

Over the next year it became obvious that too much momentum had built up for permissiveness for too many decades for the strict standards applied at Mexico City to hold. Webster pointed out “magazine articles since the early 1930s decrying the lower standards of pressing and each year it gets worse.” The problem had persisted for four decades and seemed farther than ever from a solution. Bill Starr observed that despite the harsh judgment exacted on American lifters in Mexico, officials in local and regional meets were “passing the same presses they let get by in 1968.”⁷⁸ A further premonition that stricter officiating was hardly here to stay was the “poor refereeing” at the 1969 European championships in Leningrad. Then at the world championships in Warsaw, State witnessed an “appalling decline in the standard of refereeing, the worst for years.” He attributed it to the spinelessness of the jury.

I watched aghast as knee kicks, jerk starts, lay backs were monotonously rewarded with white lights by the most permissive, ineffectual bunch of referees I have ever seen. Yet the jury sat there day after day and took no steps to stop the rot. They did once remonstrate with the two referees who passed [Viktor] Kurentsov’s shocking first Press, but took no action to change them. When they did change two referees in the super-heavyweight class, they removed two men who had honestly given red lights but had aroused the displeasure of the crowd who booed and whistled for six minutes non-stop. It was fear of the crowd that prompted the jury in this case.⁷⁹

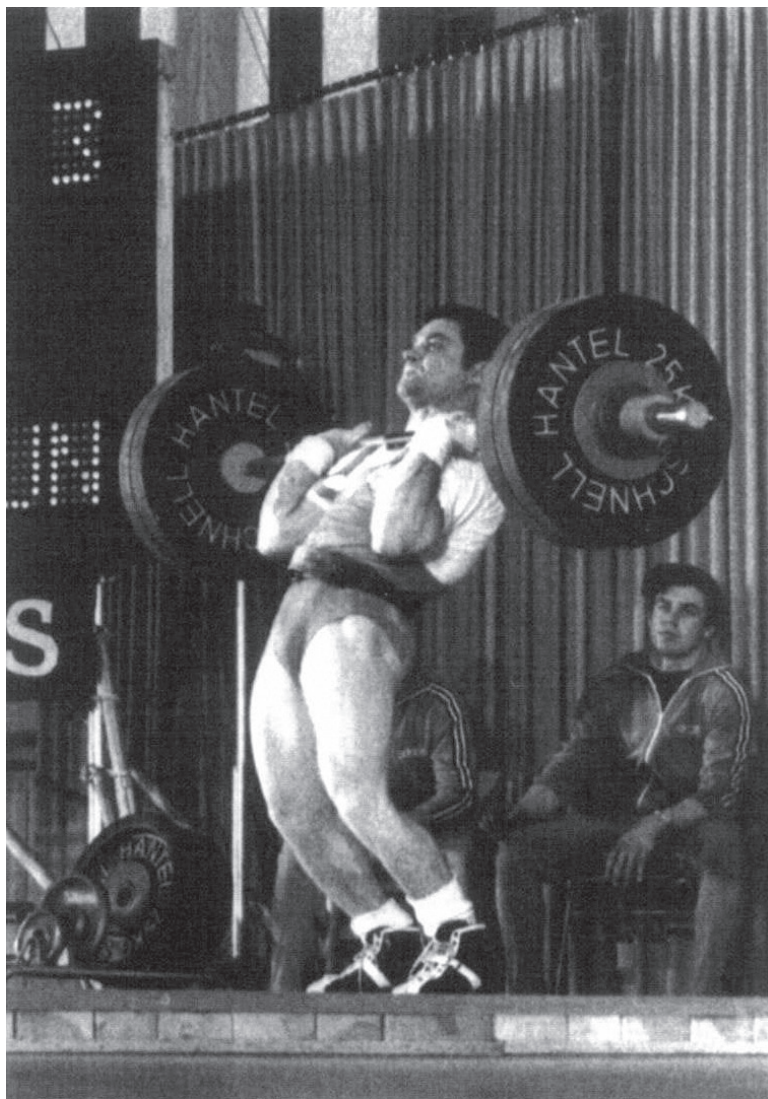
Not surprisingly, pressing figures in 1969 posted a significant increase over the previous several years and, more than ever, the lift appeared doomed.

Presses continued to escalate at the 1970 and 1971 world championships in Columbus, Ohio, and Lima, Peru, with ever more toleration of rules violations. “The Olympic press,” as Tommy Suggs rightly reckoned, “isn’t really a press any longer in the general sense of a press. It’s really a hard drive and a lockout.”⁸⁰ So much was it a quick lift that the presses of some of the heavyweights by this time were exceeding their clean and jerks. At Columbus, Russian superheavyweight Vasily Alexeev made weightlifting history by becoming the first man to clean and jerk over 500 pounds. At Lima he also pressed over 500 pounds. From a historical perspective, press gains over previous decades had been truly phenomenal. In 1936 German heavyweight Sepp Manger broke the 300-pound mark with a 303-pound press. It took nearly 20 years until Paul Anderson went over 400 pounds with a 402-pound press. This mark held until Yuri Vlasov made 408 pounds in 1962. It then took just nine years, as a result of improved pressing techniques, for Alexeev to clear 500 pounds.⁸¹ So out of control were the presses at Lima, observed Hoffman, that when the featherweights encountered a panel of strict

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officials, they “simply did not know how to press, they were so accustomed to using unlimited knee kicks.” Likewise officials in the middleweight class were so conditioned to approving quick jerk presses with lots of knee kick that they were no longer capable of judging it as a strength lift. “Slow, steady, correct presses were turned down throughout.”⁸² The press, once the epitome of the strong man ideal that lay at the basis of modern weightlifting competition, was now reduced to a tertium quid, and it was only a matter of time until it was no longer one of the Olympic lifts.

The French, led by Jean Dame, had sought such a resolution throughout the 1960s. When Dame died in 1970, Oscar State, the powerful executive secretary of the FHI, became the chief exponent of abolition. Bulgarian coach Angel Spassov viewed State as a “totalitarian. What the secretary wanted he got.”⁸³ But a ground swell of opinion had been mounting against the press. Just prior to the



Hungarian lightweight Imre Foldi attempting a world record 303-pound press at a pre-Olympic meet in Ulm, West Germany, in March of 1972. It features the classic big bow stance, with upper torso and hips back and knees (slightly bent) well forward. He is ready to whip the body to an erect position and thereby accelerate the weight upwards. (Courtesy Tommy Kono)

1972 Olympics, the United States weightlifting committee instructed its delegates, led by FHI President Johnson, to vote “for the elimination of the press” at the Congress. But the abolitionists were by no means confined to the West. Many socialist countries, influenced by doctors’ warnings about the dangers of Olympic pressing technique on the lower back, concurred. Such disparate delegations as those from Brazil, Bulgaria, East Germany, the Philippines, Rumania, Russia, and the United States favored elimination. Finally, acting on the recommendation of its technical committee at the Munich Olympics, the press was eliminated by a vote of 33-13.⁸⁴

The decision was generally applauded. Webster viewed it as “momentous and very necessary,” believing officials and competitors alike would “benefit in the long run.” Hoffman called it “a great idea,” and Kono believed “the sport will benefit.”⁸⁵ Even Alexeev was “100 per cent behind the Federation’s new ruling.”⁸⁶ *Strength & Health* featured articles by leading American pressers in a series entitled “Training Without the Press.” These athletes agreed that the absence of the press would allow more time to practice

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and perfect the other lifts.⁸⁷ Officials, coaches, and pundits, on the other hand, speculated more about its overall impact on weightlifting. State believed that lifters would become “more athletic, more supple, fast, which will give our sport a more appealing and exciting image.” Dropping the press would also enable promoters to make contests more appealing, in contrast to the “long, drawn-out affairs that used to bore even the most enthusiastic spectators.” Russian Coach Vorobiev understood the necessity of retaining the press as a training exercise. When executed without traumatizing the midsection, it provided much-needed strength in the arm and upper shoulder girdle to hold heavy jerks and snatches.⁸⁸ Most perceptive perhaps were the observations of writer D.L. Mott, who predicted a new more “functionally proportioned” physique, in contrast to the classic broad shouldered, powerfully muscled look traditionally associated with weightlifters. Without the press, lifters would develop greater mobility in the joints and soon resemble track and field athletes in fitness and appearance.⁸⁹

Most of these scenarios have been realized, but hardly to the long run benefit of weightlifting, especially in America. While there are fewer officiating controversies, and more streamlined competitions, athletes and spectators alike shifted their interest from Olympic lifting to powerlifting, bodybuilding, and strongman contests. What the delegates who abolished the press in 1972 failed to reckon was how much interest in weightlifting depended on traditional perceptions of strength and physique. “Elimination of the press changed the image and appeal of the sport,” observed Spassov. “Young men switched to powerlifting,” which was more a test of sheer strength. “Guys wanted to be big.”⁹⁰ Indeed, the demise of the press also coincided with the sudden surge of bodybuilding, popularized in the 1970s by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Weider Enterprises. These changes obviously had a much greater impact in the free-market West than in the state-controlled Eastern programs which were better able to sustain a dying sport. It was obvious at least to one correspondent to the *Weightlifter’s Newsletter* in 1987 that the military press was the best means to restore the strength component to weightlifting. “Most strong young men,” Joseph Livecchi insisted, were not interested in the technique needed to master the quick lifts. “The decline of this sport can be directly traced to 1972 and the elimination of the Press. . . . Strength will attract new lifters and not technique.”⁹¹ Most poignant in identifying the operative human ingredient in weightlifting’s decline were the remarks of Norwegian light heavyweight Leif Jensen, an outstanding presser who won a gold medal at Munich. He implored delegates, recalls Bob Crist, “to keep the press. It was a sign of manliness.”⁹²

This attribute was likely an important consideration in the adoption of the press in 1928 as an Olympic and world championship event. But even at Amsterdam, this lift which epitomized manly strength was becoming the center of political controversy when the Germans, drawing on their tradition of continental pressing, gained an advantage. The French successfully retaliated at Los Angeles in 1932 by forsaking their military presses and adopting the looser German style. This lapse of standards, featuring a pronounced backbend, encouraged the Americans and British to abandon their strict ways and introduce rules that were more consistent with practice. Thus the twin trends of loose pressing and lax officiating were well in place before the war and the entry of the Soviet Union into international competition. Even after World War II, contrary to popular belief, the “Russian press” (a variation of prewar pressing techniques) had virtually no impact on rising lifting totals for at least five years after its introduction by Gregory Novak in 1946. Thereafter Russian victories were achieved more from their expertise in the quick lifts than the press. The notorious Russian press was more likely a Cold War myth fostered by western rivals to moralize about ill-gotten Soviet gains and political foul play. Even Webster admits that the Russians never claimed credit for it, attributing popularity of the “back bending style” to “foreign lifters!”⁹³ What the Soviets did attempt was to use their influence over their Eastern European allies for ideological purposes to secure favorable decisions

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from officials and juries for at least a decade, but the Americans were not above employing politics to their advantage. Indeed all nations must bear responsibility for the introduction of the body heave and knee kick in the late 1950s, resulting in a precipitate decline of pressing standards. The appearance of Japan and the Soviet satellites as weightlifting powers in the early 1960s partially depoliticized the press, but it was no less vulnerable to permissive officiating. Despite valiant efforts to apply strictness, all nations engaged in a free-for-all to capture the winning edge. By 1972 the press was clearly out of control and abolition seemed the simplest solution. "It's almost like losing an old friend," eulogized Bill Starr. "The biggest difficulty I foresee in dropping the press is having to explain to everyone that asks the inevitable, 'How much can you press?'"⁹⁴ Such was the displacement of Olympic lifting by its powerlifting and bodybuilding brethren by the end of the century that the new query became "How much can you bench press?"

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Olympics and World Championships, 1928-1972

Composite Totals of 1st, 2nd, 3rd Places

Featherweight, Lightweight, Middleweight, and Lighthouseweight Classes

All weights are in pounds as converted from kilograms listed in Vladan Mihajlovic.
80 Years of Weightlifting in the World and Europe, 1896-1976 (Belgrade, 1977).

The Press

Competition	Total Lift	Change	
1928	2,442.0	—	—
1932	2,453.0	11.0	0.45%
1936	2,612.5	159.5	6.50%
1937	2,623.5	11.0	0.42%
1938	2,656.5	33.0	1.26%
1946	2,816.0	159.5	6.00%
1947	2,810.5	-5.5	-0.20%
1948	2,810.5	0.0	0.00%
1949	2,755.5	-55.0	-1.96%
1950	2,816.0	60.5	2.20%
1951	2,827.0	11.0	0.39%
1952	2,937.0	110.0	3.89%
1953	2,937.0	0.0	0.00%
1954	3,063.5	126.5	4.31%
1955	3,069.0	5.5	0.18%
1956	3,162.5	93.5	3.05%
1957	3,250.5	88.0	2.78%
1958	3,256.0	5.5	0.17%
1959	3,184.5	-71.5	-2.20%
1960	3,300.0	115.5	3.63%
1961	3,371.5	71.5	2.17%
1962	3,415.5	44.0	1.31%
1963	3,514.5	99.0	2.90%
1964	3,575.0	60.5	1.72%
1965	3,536.5	-38.5	-1.08%
1966	3,553.0	16.5	0.47%
1968	3,613.5	60.5	1.70%
1969	3,707.0	93.5	2.59%
1970	3,740.0	33.0	0.89%
1971	3,778.5	38.5	1.03%
1972	3,965.5	187.0	4.95%

The Military Press

The Snatch

Competition	Total Lift	Change	
1928	2,623.0	—	—
1932	2,640.0	17.0	0.65%
1936	2,783.0	143.0	5.42%
1937	2,755.5	-27.5	-0.99%
1938	2,838.0	82.5	2.99%
1946	2,948.0	110.0	3.88%
1947	2,854.5	-93.5	-3.17%
1948	2,986.5	132.0	4.62%
1949	2,904.0	-82.5	-2.76%
1950	3,008.5	104.5	3.60%
1951	2,926.0	-82.5	-2.74%
1952	3,025.0	99.0	3.38%
1953	3,085.0	60.0	1.98%
1954	3,074.5	-10.5	-0.34%
1955	3,085.5	11.0	0.36%
1956	3,107.5	22.0	0.71%
1957	3,113.0	5.5	0.18%
1958	3,151.5	38.5	1.24%
1959	3,179.0	27.5	0.87%
1960	3,228.5	49.5	1.56%
1961	3,201.0	-27.5	-0.85%
1962	3,217.5	16.5	0.52%
1963	3,305.5	88.0	2.74%
1964	3,399.0	93.5	2.83%
1965	3,333.0	-66.0	-1.94%
1966	3,388.0	55.0	1.65%
1968	3,487.0	99.0	2.92%
1969	3,443.0	-44.0	-1.26%
1970	3,492.5	49.5	1.44%
1971	3,459.5	-33.0	-0.94%
1972	3,520.0	60.5	1.75%

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The Clean and Jerk

Competition	Total Lift	Change	
1928	3,382.5	—	—
1932	3,404.5	22.0	0.65%
1936	3,668.5	264.0	7.75%
1937	3,553.0	-115.5	-3.15%
1938	3,624.5	71.5	2.01%
1946	3,756.5	132.0	3.64%
1947	3,624.5	-132.0	-3.51%
1948	3,767.5	143.0	3.95%
1949	3,685.0	-82.5	-2.19%
1950	3,850.0	165.0	4.48%
1951	3,685.0	-165.0	-4.29%
1952	3,866.5	181.5	4.93%
1953	3,938.0	71.5	1.85%
1954	3,916.0	-22.0	-0.56%
1955	3,921.5	5.5	0.14%
1956	3,982.0	60.5	1.54%
1957	3,982.0	0.0	0.00%
1958	4,026.0	44.0	1.10%
1959	4,059.0	33.0	0.82%
1960	4,114.0	55.0	1.36%
1961	4,086.5	-27.5	-0.67%
1962	4,174.5	88.0	2.15%
1963	4,262.5	88.0	2.11%
1964	4,400.0	137.5	3.23%
1965	4,284.5	-115.5	-2.63%
1966	4,427.5	143.0	3.34%
1968	4,466.0	38.5	0.87%
1969	4,405.5	-60.5	-1.35%
1970	4,433.0	27.5	0.62%
1971	4,460.5	27.5	0.62%
1972	4,543.0	82.5	1.85%

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19. See the report of the York Toronto Weight Lifting Contest in "Reports of Lifting Shows," *Strength & Health*, Oct. 1935, 30; W.J. Lowry, "Clarifying Olympic Definitions—The Olympic Trials," *Health and Strength* 54: 708 (15 Jun. 1936).
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21. Lowry, "Clarifying Olympic Definitions," 708.
22. Bob Hoffman, "Weightlifting Styles," *Strength & Health*, Dec. 1938, 30, 40.
23. Bob Hoffman, "Improve Your Pressing," *Strength & Health*, Apr. 1939, 30.
24. George Walsh, "Specialized Training—the Two Hands Press," *Health and Strength* 57: 947 (24 Jun. 1939).
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26. Interviews with William Curry, Sr., 26 Nov. 1999, Opelika, Alabama, and Rudy Sable, 21 Dec. 1999, New York City. Hoffman later called Grimek's 285-pound lift "the greatest press I ever saw performed." Bob Hoffman, "Better Military Pressing," *Strength & Health*, Jan. 1944, 41.
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29. See Charles A. Smith, "Russian Methods of Training for the Press," *Muscle Power*, May 1952, 2425, 42-43; Peary Rader, "Developing the Two Arm Press," *Lifting News*, Sep. 1954, 5; Sable interview.
30. Bob Hoffman, "Details of the World's Championships," *Strength & Health*, Jan, 1947, 10; "Gregori Novak—Greatest Lifter of All Time," *Health and Strength* 75: 466 (Nov. 1946).
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32. Bob Hoffman, "More Results of the Sr. Nationals," *Strength & Health*, Sep. 1947, 28.
33. For the weight classes charted in this study, the Russian differential in 1946 was 2.33% between the press and snatch and 27.33% between the press and clean and jerk, while the differential for the rest of the world was 6.4400 and 37.63% respectively. Without Novak, however, the Russian differentials were 6.89% and 35.34% respectively, more in line with other countries. If the heavyweights are added, the Russian figures are 1.80% and 28.38%, compared to 5.57% and 35.44% for the rest of the world. For 1950 Russian differentials were 9.70% and 36.36% for the four weight classes, while the rest of the world registered 7.580 and 38.14% respectively. When the heavyweights are included the differentials are 5.91% and 30.45% to 5.61% and 34.62% respectively. At best, these figures are inconclusive regarding any alleged Russian gains in the press over other nations.
34. In fact, overall gains in the press from 1946 to 1953 were only 4.30%, against 4.66% for the snatch and 4.83% for the clean and jerk. See the tables on pages 367-369 for a complete record of composite totals for each of the three lifts.
35. "There is as much controversy and difference of opinion about the lift today as at any time in the past." George Walsh, "The Perfect 'Press,'" *Health and Strength* 75: 146 (Apr. 1946).
36. Charles A. Smith, "How the Champions and Record Holders Train for the Press," *Muscle Power*, Jun. 1952, 36. See also Charles A. Smith, "The ABC's of Weightlifting," *Muscle Power*, May 1951, 24-25, 48, 50; Charles A. Smith, "Russian Methods of Training for the Press," *Muscle Power*, May 1952, 24-25, 42-43.
37. Interview with Harry Johnson, 4 Feb. 2000, Auburn, Georgia; Paul Waldman, "Marvin Eder Trains for the Press," *Strength & Health*, Jun. 1953. 30.
38. Peary Rader, "Developing the Two Arm Press," *Lifting News*, Jul. 1954, 8.
39. George Kirkley, "A Wonderful Olympic Games," *Health and Strength* 81: 38 (21 Aug. 1952); Bob Hoffman, "The Olympic Weightlifting Championships," *Strength & Health*, Nov. 1952, 10-11, 15, 39-43.
40. George Kirkley, "Best Ever World's Championships," *Health and Strength* 82: 43 (1 Oct. 1953); George Kirkley, "World Weightlifting," *Health and Strength* 83: 40 (11 Nov. 1954).
41. "Reflections on Vienna" *Health and Strength* 83: 40 (9 Dec. 1954).
42. Rader, "Developing the Two Arm Press," 5.
43. Bob Hoffman, "You Can't Win," *Strength & Health*, Jan. 1956, 49-51.
44. John D. Fair, "Olympic Weightlifting and the Introduction of Steroids: A Statistical Analysis of World Championship Results," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 5: 102 (May 1988).
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46. "Looser" must be interpreted in different ways. Film footage shows that Kono was the best of this group. He employed a traditional backbend and really pressed the weight. Vinci exhibited much greater backbend, and George not only had lots of backbend but utilized a layback and spring at the start-and body sway. By the 1960s Kono's "plain old backbend" was likened to "using a manual typewriter when everyone else had IBM Selectrics." My thanks to Douglas Stalker for pointing out these differences.
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48. Bob Hoffman, "First Hand Report" *Strength & Health*, Feb. 1957, 60; Bob Hoffman, "This Is a Press?" *Strength & Health*, Apr. 1957, 18; Harry B. Paschall, "Bosco," *Strength & Health*, Jul. 1957, 27.
49. George Kirkley, "Olympic Press Rule Amended," *Health and Strength* 86: 36 (3 Jan. 1957).
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53. Bob Hoffman, "World Championships Report," *Strength & Health*, Feb. 1960, 15; Bob Hoffman, "World Championships Report," *Strength & Health*, Mar. 1960, 53.
54. Bob Hoffman, "The Art of Weight Lifting," *Strength & Health*, Feb. 1958, 48; Bob Hoffman, "World Championships." *Strength & Health*, Apr. 1960, 59.
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