

Starting Strength

The Bulgarian Method of Training Olympic Weightlifters

by

Jim Moser

A lot has been written about the Bulgarian weightlifting system. Those who have experienced this system for any length of time know that it can be brutal; time has proven its effectiveness. I have some experience with it, and this article will detail some conclusions I have arrived at and how I drew them.

For those of you who are not familiar with the Bulgarian system of training, it was developed by the famous Bulgarian weightlifting coach Ivan Abadjiev. It was based on the premise that if you subject the body to a constant load of heavy stress composed of steady repetitive explosive movements, it would adjust to this load and adapt to handle the increased stress. The biggest mistake people make when they begin the Bulgarian system of training is starting the program too heavy, so the body never has the chance to adapt. They are doomed from Day One. Later in the article I will explain the best way to ease into the program.

The Bulgarian system of training competitive weightlifters will not work unless you have a coach who has experience in this type of training and is not afraid of the dark side of the program. The first thing you must understand is that the program was designed for elite athletes – the cream of the crop. Athletes of average genetic potential will probably not be able to adapt to the demands of the program. Indicators for athletic ability are the obvious ones: vertical jump, standing broad jump, good overhead flexibility, agility in the shuttle run. Less obvious is the ability to recover from a high workload and the natural attitude required of a workhorse – the things tests don't show. Does this mean you have to be a world class athlete to use this program? No, but it helps. Does it mean you will become a world class athlete if you follow this program? No, not unless you are 15 to 18, have been training at an extremely high level for 5 to 8 years, are in the top three in the nation in our junior weightlifting program, and are completely committed to the goal despite the high personal costs such a program imposes.

To follow the program successfully the intensity in each session must be kept high and the reps must be kept to one or two. The other factor is that you need to take 30 minute rest periods between exercises. I do not recommend this, but a lot of the European weightlifters would take the old

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traditional cigarette break in between exercises. I recommend that you just remove yourself from the weight room and find a quiet place to relax. A sample program would look like this:

11:00am - 11:45	Front Squat
11:45am - 12:15	Break
12:15pm - 1:00	Snatch
1:00pm - 1:30	Break
1:30pm - 2:00	Clean & Jerk

Looks pretty simple, doesn't it? The simplicity of the program is what makes it attractive to some coaches and athletes. After you are done with the first three exercises take another short break and repeat them. Being a Bulgarian weightlifter is a full time job.

The coach is very important in this program. The coach has to be relentless in his drive for improvement and have a hard non-emotional mentality. Friends and drinking buddies do not make good Bulgarian weightlifting coaches. In fact, if being liked by your athletes and having them say nice things about you is important, then this program is not for you. When you hurt so badly you do not know if you can get out of bed, it is hard to appreciate the coach that is telling you it's time to squat. But for those few that are able to handle the constant stress and the enormous workload the rewards are great.

The Bulgarian program dates back to the 1960s, when Alex Krychev and a group of young gifted Bulgarians were selected to participate in a sports performance program designed to put the proud Bulgarian nation at the forefront of the sporting world. The weightlifting program was under the supervision of a young ambitious coach, Ivan Abadjiev. This initial group showed great success with Krychev winning a silver medal at the 1972 Olympic Games.

There are many rumors about how the maestro Abadjiev came up with the idea that weightlifters could train everyday all day long like other athletes. My favorite is that he got the initial idea from our own Harlem Globetrotters. He was simply amazed and fascinated at watching the Harlem Globetrotters practice. He was intrigued that they were in such phenomenal shape. He could not believe they could literally run up and down the court all day and night with the same drive and intensity in the evening as they had in the morning. Then they would show up early the next morning and do it all over again with the same intensity as the day before. If it made sense for other athletes, why not weightlifters?

For the next 25 years the Bulgarian weightlifters dominated the sport of Olympic Weightlifting. No World Record was safe from the Bulgarian onslaught. I remember seeing the Bulgarian weightlifters at the International Record Makers contest in Atlantic City. There was something very different about the weightlifters from Bulgaria. They were not your typical stoic European weightlifters; these guys seemed to attack the weights with a reckless abandon. It was almost as if they were saying, "We are going to lift your weights our way, we are going to out-lift you, and there is nothing you can do about it." When the Bulgarians lifted, they had an air of confidence about them that I had never seen before. I had seen the powerful Russians lift some phenomenal weights over the years but nothing compared to the explosive power and confidence of the Bulgarians.

For the critics who say their success was because of the use of performance enhancing drugs, I'll just remind them that the rest of the world – including the good old USA – was well aware of and using those same performance enhancing drugs. We all had the same steroids; I have yet to hear of any

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super-special Bulgarian performance enhancing drug that was used only by the Bulgarian weightlifters. To those that say the Bulgarian program cannot be done without performance enhancing drugs, I'd say that it's a good thing nobody ever told the Harlem Globe Trotters. Last I checked they were still going strong and their schedule is as busy as ever. The demise of the program was not the enforcement of random drug testing; it was the dismantlement of the old Bulgarian government. The money and funding dried up.

Abadjiev is now living in California with his ex-pupil and friend Alex Krychev. I got to know him when my son was training with him in California at American Weightlifting, a program set up to recruit and train American lifters in the Bulgarian method. According to Krychev they have set up a new training center in the bay area, the Eleiko Strength Academy, and are in the process of once again recruiting young athletes to be coached by Abadjiev. It will be interesting to see if the maestro has one final act – to produce an Olympic Medal for an American lifter. The United States has become one of the strictest nations on the planet for performance enhancing drug testing. Abadjiev's lifters would be under extreme scrutiny and would be tested at every turn by USADA (the United States drug testing agency). It would be a great final trophy for his legacy, and a vindication of his methods for all elite athletes.

This is Abadjiev's second stint on US soil. His first was under the watchful eye of David Spitz of American Weightlifting and California Strength. David actually trained and studied under Abadjiev. David took the knowledge he already had as a world class thrower and combined it with the knowledge of Abadjiev. He has used this knowledge to turn California Strength into one of the top training centers in the country for preparing elite college athletes for the rigors of professional sports. The recent success of his athletes at the NFL combine is a measure of his ability.

The Bulgarian system has had a significant influence on Olympic weightlifting all over the world. I recently received a training program from Dmitry Klokov, one of the world's best 105 kg lifters, and he suggesting squatting at the beginning and end of the workout. I have used that with some of the junior lifters over here on Maui and we have had pretty good success with the idea. The common denominator I am seeing is that not only do you need to squat heavy, you have to squat often.

Abadjiev has always claimed his program is a work in progress, he is constantly refining and coming up with ways to make his program more successful. Abadjiev refers to his program as an ongoing experiment. In our conversations he kept pointing out that he viewed the program as an experiment since the early days. I think that has a lot to do with why he keeps such detailed records – he has volumes and volumes of handwritten notebooks that I would love to be able to see and interpret. He didn't just wake up one day with this master plan; he admits to constantly changing things over the years, distilling the program into what it is today. I tried to get him to tell me at what point he came up with the program in its present form. He avoided the question by shrugging it off as unimportant.

There is a lot of intuitive room in the program; Abadjiev is not above throwing in a high-rep set of squats here and there, or adding jerks from the rack for athletes with special needs. The only things that are not subject to intuitive manipulation are doing the snatch, clean & jerk, power snatch, power clean & jerk, and squatting – heavy and frequently. One of the big problems with USA weightlifting is we put far too much emphasis on technique and not enough emphasis on hard work. Weightlifting is not an easy sport.

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If you want to experience the Bulgarian system of training I recommend you begin with the following progression.

1. Train heavy every workout, 3 times per week.
2. Add one training day at a time until you are training 6 days per week.
3. Add 2 morning sessions a week of just front squats.
4. Increase this one day at a time until you are comfortable training 2 sessions per day 5 days per week and one session on Saturday.
5. Once you reach this stage add a light warm-up day on Sunday.

This is pretty much the Bulgarian system. It is very simple: snatch, clean & jerk, and front squat every day. The Bulgarian program is not a get strong quick program – it takes a long time to adapt and to perfect, and implementing these five steps will take years. Many American coaches have tried the program, and the program itself is no big secret. The secret is the discipline, determination and patience it takes to reach the top spot on the podium.

American weightlifters and coaches have been spoiled for a long time now. I recently read a blog where the writer had tried the program for three weeks and his lifts all went down, so he is giving up on it. If you could achieve world-class success in three weeks of training, we would all be Olympic Champions. The simple fact is that it takes four to five months to adapt to this program and another eight to ten years minimum to reach some form of international success. In my opinion, for the right athlete in the hands of an experienced coach, the Bulgarian system is the best for Olympic weightlifters.

If you want be a successful lifter at the international level, the thing you must accept is that Olympic weightlifting is a long-term sport and at times can be very frustrating, especially during the adaptation phase. There will be times when you do not feel like getting out of bed, let alone squatting. These are the most important days and you must push through these if you are to achieve success in this program. Do not worry: the day will never come when you cannot lift the bar.

There are lots of little tricks and techniques you can use to make it through this period. The majority of the complaints I have dealt with are about the knee pain.

1. Wrap the knees at night with Tiger Balm and sleep with the wraps on.
2. Fill the tub with water and then add bags of ice and soak the legs for twenty minutes.
3. Do not take anti-inflammatories, Abadjev feels they delayed the adaptation period.
4. Warm up with light weights and do not go past 60 kg until the body is moving fast and you are hitting good positions. I have seen guys do as many as 10 sets at 60 kg before moving up.
5. No fooling around. The tendency is to do long slow workouts when you feel bad. You must do the opposite: train fast and take big jumps, and then allow your body more time to recover after the workout.

Although there is no doubt or question that Abadjev is the Master and Commander of this program, there was a very special side benefit that came out of the experimentation. The program has spun off some of the best coaches in the world, who are actively developing some of the world's best Olympic weightlifting programs. One of these coaches is Gancho Karoukov, who left Bulgaria to become the national coach for Colombia. At the Junior Pan Am Games in Colombia I hired an

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interpreter to translate between Gancho and myself, and he explained to me the intricacies of adapting the Bulgarian program to the needs of the Colombian athletes and their living conditions and culture. I was very fortunate to be able to shadow and film Gancho as he was handling the Colombian athletes in the warmup room and on the competition platform. He was the ultimate professional, handling his athletes the way a conductor leads his orchestra. It was enjoyable to watch a true professional at work after years of watching the American delegation trip over themselves and get out-coached at every turn.

After the meet I sat with Gancho and he proceeded to tell me more about weightlifting than I had learned in the previous 20 years of my involvement in the sport. To Americans weightlifting is a hobby, a way to get strong for football; to the rest of the world it is a very serious sport. He invited me to watch the national team train the next week. It was here that I observed the in-depth tracking of every rep, every set, and every weight lifted.

It was later that I found out Abadjiev had kept records of every athlete he has coached since the 1976 Olympics. I wonder how many American coaches can say the same thing. Anybody else still wondering why we finish 27th in the world? Too many of our lifters and coaches are writing too many blog posts, making excuses for why we cannot lift crap and giving the world advice on programs that are designed to limit their athletes' performance. Sad, but true. Seems like our coaches and athletes could better spend their time keeping track of performance, volume, blood pressure, body weight, sets, and reps, and learning from the data.

Our coaches have become lazy and the majority of our athletes believe they cannot compete internationally. Our guys are beat before the competition begins. One coach who is trying to reverse this trend is John Broz. John is getting little if any support from our country and is in a constant struggle with the weightlifting higher-ups. The majority of the people involved in the sport of weightlifting in this country are perfectly content with the state of affairs. John is one coach who is applying the Bulgarian method of coaching Olympic weightlifters to his Americans. It is working well. Perhaps it can work for you too, if you have what it takes to lift at the international level. And maybe you do.

Jim Moser is a former national-level weightlifter and powerlifter. He has coached weightlifting at all levels of the sport, and has been involved in the fitness industry since 1987. He has been a strength coach at the high school and college level, a resident athlete at the US Olympic Training Center, and has coached numerous athletes to national and international events. He is buddies with Bill Starr, Ken Patera, George Hechter, and Rip, and is unusually fortunate to be married to Lynn.

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