

Starting Strength

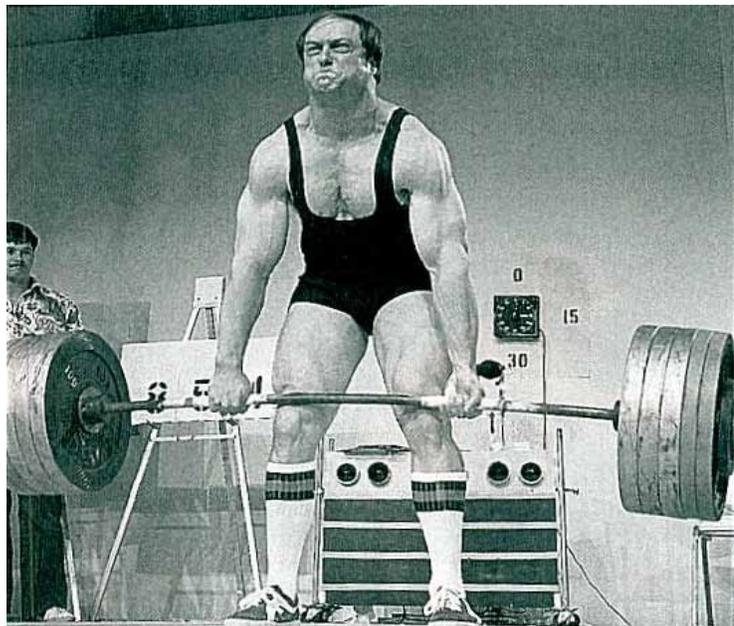
Iron Icons

Big Jim Williams and John Kuc

by
Marty Gallagher

John Kuc was an important figure in powerlifting. In the early 1970s Kuc trail-blazed all-time best poundages as a superheavyweight lifter: he was the first man to squat 900, the first man to total 2300, the first man to deadlift 850. Health issues related to his high bodyweight forced his retirement in 1973. Kuc reemerged a year later and shocked the strength world. He reduced his bodyweight by 100 pounds and began setting IPF world records. His 2,204 world record three-lift total, set in 1980 at the IPF World Championships at Arlington, Texas in front of the toughest judging in the world, withstood assault from the cream of 242 pound, hall-of-fame lifters: men like Dave Jacoby, Willie Bell, Thor Kritsky, Joe Ladiner, Doug Furnas, Dan Wolheber, Mark Chaillet and Kirk Karwoski – all took aim, some came close, yet all failed to break Kuc's historic total record.

The Great Kuc deadlifts 854: he stood 6'1" and weighed 239 in 1978. Built all wrong for moving big weights, Kuc was too tall and too skinny and compounded his obstacles by using terrible technique – note the wide stance, his grip is so wide his hands almost touch the 32 inch rings on the bar, dramatically lengthening the pull. In the above photo Kuc has, per his usual habit, prematurely straightened his legs. He will now utilize 100% spinal erector power to lockout this 854 pound barbell. A tremendous example of a great lifter using bad technique to set world records; many take away the wrong message, “Kuc used bad technique – so why can't I?” Kuc set world records “in spite of,” not “because of,” his technique. We strive to emulate the technical archetype, **not** the technical anomaly.



Williams and Kuc

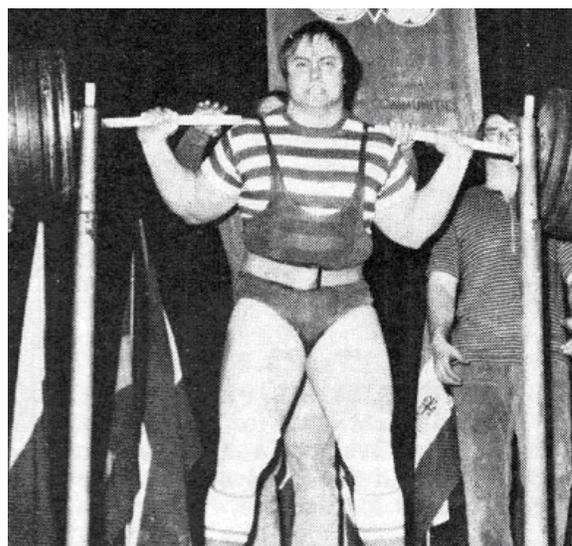
Ditto the deadlift: Kuc's 871 world record, set that same epochal day in 1980, is a mark that stood untouched for 15 years. It took Ed Coan to finally best Kuc's total and deadlift records. Like John, Ed did it in one fell swoop. Kuc was a man built all wrong for powerlifting. At 235-240 pounds, Kuc looked more like an outside linebacker than a world record holding lifter. Kuc was Clark Kent who never turned into Superman; Kuc looked like Clark, lifted like Superman; a crazed Superman. In competition Kuc was scary. He was able to work himself into a voodoo trance state before a world record deadlift that was incredible to see. As he was waiting to attempt a world record deadlift, his face would contort into that of a psycho-killer about to strike.

Kuc would begin to pace backstage, zombie-like, his eyes unfocused yet wide and wild and crazy-looking; his body would start to tremble ever so slightly as his name was called and he walked towards the barbell, oblivious to the crowd, the judges and his surroundings. He fixated on the barbell with crazy-eyed X-Ray vision. He set his feet wide as he prepared to grip and pull. Only Karwoski could come close to Kuc for dramatic, effective, pre-lift psych. But while Kirk's psych was external and demonstrative, Kuc's psych was internal and smoldering.

John Kuc's feat – massive bodyweight reduction while maintaining world level strength – was unprecedented. Before Kuc pulled off his physiological miracle, it had been deemed impossible to lose massive amounts of bodyweight, yet still retain world record level strength. While there are many accounts of superheavyweight lifters (sensibly) losing massive amounts of bodyweight after their competitive careers were over (my mentor Huge Cassidy dropped from 300 to a muscular 195 in a year), none came close to maintaining the strength levels they exhibited in their prime. Kuc actually increased his all-time best deadlift. He lost 100 pounds off his squat, his bench dropped from 600 to 500, but his pull went up a bit.

Kuc was built all wrong for lifting as a 242-pound lifter. He was way too tall, downright skinny. Most world-level 242-pound lifters are 5-5 to 5-9 in height. Muscle in relation to height in inches is a critical benchmark for powerlifting success. Top powerlifters are thick and squat. Kuc was 73 inches in height and at 238 pounds bodyweight generated a puny 3.26 pounds of muscle per inch of height. Kirk Karwoski is 67 inches in height and generated a far more impressive 3.7 pounds of muscle per inch of height. Even at the end of his spectacular career, Kuc was able to deadlift 850, drug-free, as a 275-pound lifter. That was a dramatic exclamation point on the end of one hell of a powerlifting career.

Kuc's approach to lifting was the very personification of unvarnished ultra-Old School, barebones strength training. His approach was as stark and hard and harsh as the environment that spawned this strength stalwart, the desolate Scranton/Wilkes-Barre region. Kuc burst onto the scene as the young training partner of another true power legend: the greatest bench presser in history, Big Jim Williams. Williams is an undisputed all-time Iron



Young Kuc weighing 340, a big, athletic boy; had he been able to push his bodyweight up to 370 or 380 he likely would have squatted 1000, benched 650 and deadlifted 950 RAW!

Williams and Kuc

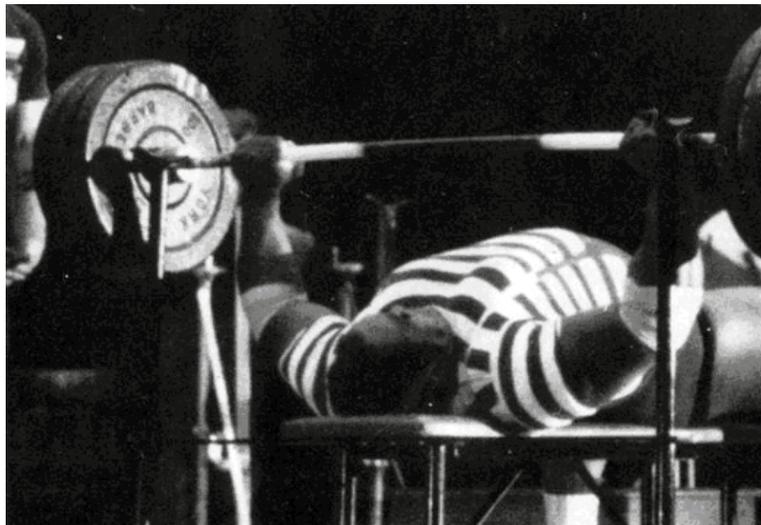
Icon, larger than life in every way. Nick Cohn once wrote about the primal 1950s rhythm and blues singer, Big Joe Turner...

*Big Joe can drink a gallon of bourbon and a bathtub full of beer,
Big Joe can tear down walls and knock out friends with either hand,
Big Joe can chew pig iron and spit out razor blades,
Big Joe can kill a man with a smile,
Big Joe can holler like a Mountain Jack and make love all night long,
Anything you can do - Big Joe can do better!*

I once saw Big Jim Williams at his physical peak swaggering down the middle of the depressing Wyoming Valley Mall outside of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He had a sexy blond babe in tow, bedazzled with jewelry. Big Jim was on his way to the movies. He strode through the retro-American mall clientele as if they were placid animals in a petting zoo. I knew *exactly* who he was, having seen him bench at the end of his career. The charisma dripped off him. He didn't walk – he lumbered – like some exotic beast. People wordlessly stepped aside then turned to stare at the man, quite literally larger than life.

Yet for all his presence and intelligence and strength, he embraced a life of serious crime. Williams' physique and persona and accomplishments were so large it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, reality from urban myth. Williams, like Wilt Chamberlain or Jim Brown, was at one time so far out in front of the rest of humanity – in one lift, the bench press – that the next best in the world was 100 pounds behind him. James “Hollywood” Henderson is the only man that can be mentioned in the same breath as “bench press” and “Jim Williams,” yet Hollywood is a bench press *specialist* while Big Jim was a three-lift *powerlifter*. Jim set the world record in the squat with a then-staggering 860 pounds in 1972. The lift was done wearing ace bandages as knee wraps and a flimsy lifting belt squat bought from Sears. The squat suit was yet to be invented. His best deadlift was 730 pounds. It all confirmed that Big Jim was no one-lift specialist.

In 1961 Big Jim Williams had been sent up the river, sentenced to ten years in prison for assault and battery and strong-arm robbery. He served his time in Rockview State Correctional Facility and got his lifting career started while in the joint. The prison groove was good for Big Jim's lifting consistency. He was released and was an immediate sensation in the powerlifting world, literally just showing up with training partner John Kuc in tow and taking over. It was that easy. Shortly after the 1972 World



The Best That Ever Was did it without the slightest bit of technique: he lay flat as a pancake, used an “elbows-out” style, benched with thighs relaxed and used zero arch. His bench press (and squat and deadlift, for that matter) were not finessed – they were manhandled. Both he and Kuc were technically deficient, yet overwhelmingly strong!

Williams and Kuc

Powerlifting Championships, the U.S. Secret Service arrested Williams and charged him with counterfeiting. He had printed money, passed the bills, and was busted by the feds.

Hugh Cassidy got along well with Jim Williams, and Hugh told me that the last time (at the time) Williams had been apprehended, Big Jim was actually printing counterfeit bills with *his own* face in a powdered wig on the bill. He served hard time in a variety of federal penitentiaries. In 1981, he was sentenced to five years in federal prison after conviction on Social Security fraud. He was (allegedly) involved in organized prostitution, and was referred to as “an organized crime boss” for Northeast Pennsylvania by co-conspirators and accomplices during the trial. Right before the social security fraud trial, he was rearrested on cocaine trafficking charges. Big Jim Williams spent the next eleven years behind bars.



Despite having horrible squat technique, Big Jim set world records in the squat. His best was a tremendous 860-pound effort. Here he is shown squatting 820. Note the pathetic ace-bandage knee wraps and flimsy lifting belt. Williams' huge size is shown when compared to the normal size of the tall spotter.

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

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