

# Starting Strength

## *Iron Icons*

# Ken Patera: Power Personified

by

Marty Gallagher

When Mark Rippetoe is asked to pinpoint the single biggest reason for the sorry state of American Olympic weightlifting, he responds unhesitatingly and without equivocation, “American lifters are *weak!*” You can’t get more succinct, pithy or pointed than that four word summation. American Olympic weightlifting coaches are in danger of going to the 2012 London Olympic Games by themselves. The USA is in the embarrassing position of not yet qualifying a single men’s lifter for the upcoming Games. Anyone want to bet that our USA Weightlifting coaches (who should be hiding in shame) go to the London Games anyway? Watch as the coaches and managers (without any athletes to coach and manage) march proudly in the opening ceremonies and wine and dine on the taxpayer dime. Is this not ridiculous? That coaches without athletes might participate without a trace of irony or embarrassment would happen because no one calls them to account. Amongst the entrenched athletic aristocracy the standard smug retort is: “Any foreign lifter that places above an American is obviously on drugs (beating the most sophisticated testing known to man), and were it not for these drugged athletes we would rule the world. Plus, as a consolation



Ken Patera military presses a 1st attempt press with 456. At the time, the world record press was 483 held by Vasily Alexeev. Ken went on to press 472 on this day. Note complete lack of layback used to push through the sticking point. Imagine the triceps and shoulder strength needed to push 470 pounds overhead in this super-strict fashion.

## *Ken Patera*

prize, while we Americans might not field the strongest team (or the *thirtieth* strongest team) we are certainly the *cleanest* team.”

Well, isn't that comforting! There was a time when American Olympic lifters were super strong – strong to the point that if a wayward snatch, clean, or jerk or an overhead press got slightly out of the groove, these powerhouse athletes had such a super abundance of super-strength they would simply power the errant barbell back into the prescribed motor pathway. A technique lifter is capable of lifting more, as a percentage, of his available strength, than the stronger lifter with poor technique. However, while this strategy is seductive (lift more thru continual honing of technique) it is ultimately flawed: being able to harness 97% of very little available strength is admirable; however the precision technician loses to the uber-strong goon that only harnesses 72% of his strength using horrific technique. The former might be super efficient snatching 300 pounds while the later ridiculously inefficient snatching 400. Unfortunately for American lifters, style points are not awarded in Olympic weightlifting.

One of the finest examples of “strength overcompensation” occurred in Canberra, Australia on November 26, 1988 when Leonid Taranenko set the all-time clean and jerk world record of 266.0 kilos, 586 pounds, in the clean and jerk. That record has not been exceeded to this day, a quarter of a century later, and remains the most weight ever lifted overhead by a human. The story behind the lift is that Taranenko had not intended on extending himself at this competition. However when the meet promoter approached him and told him he would pay \$5,000 dollars for a world record clean and jerk, Leonid got real motivated real quick. He was not in top shape but highly motivated: he wanted the cash and as a result extended himself way past his capacity on that particular day. How hard he fought to save this world record (when he normally would have let it go) is a story worth retelling in detail later. The point is this: the technique Taranenko exhibited on this lift, the most weight ever lifted overhead by any man, was terrible! He used his excess strength to overcome a badly out-of-position barbell thru every phase of the historic lift. He had to bounce his way out of the squat clean after he was pinned by the massive poundage. On his second bottom bounce, he barely caught traction and recovered. On the jerk, things got even worse; he had to step awkwardly to his left to dramatically save the lift. Without an excess of power this lift was lost. Readers can look at the lift on YouTube.



Video frame shows just how out of position Taranenko was with the 586 jerk. Excess strength (and a \$5,000 payday) saved this lift. Excess strength can overcome a host of technical miscues.

## *Ken Patera*



Another “strength over-compensator” was the late, great Sultan Rakhmanov. He stood 6'1", weighed 330, and simply manhandled world record poundage. Three time world champion, Olympic champion, Sultan was a genetic wonder found in Uzbekistan and brought to fruition by the mighty Big Red Soviet sports machine. Sultan was a powerhouse and relied on overwhelming strength to overcome technical shortcomings. He was world record level in all three lifts. Adequate technique combined with overwhelming power.

## **Patera Power**

Here is a sampling of the lifts Ken Patera was capable of at his awesome peak....

Incline Press	485 x 2
Rack Press	552
Power Clean	505
Hang clean	486 x 3
High Pulls	770
Squat	820 x 2 (no wraps or suit, super deep)
Front Squat	650 x 3
Bench Press	560 (“I never did them.”)
Snatch	387 official, 402 in training
Overhead Squat with Snatch Grip	480
Clean and Jerk	506 official, 518 in training

Ken Patera was genetically predisposed towards Olympic lifting: he was strong and super athletic. His brother Jack Patera played football for the Baltimore Colts and was the head coach for the Seattle Seahawks from 1976 until 1982. Always athletic, Ken was one of the nation’s premier track and field weight throwers. Ken attended Brigham Young University on a scholarship and won a gold medal in the shot-put at the Pan American Games in 1967. After his disappointing 6<sup>th</sup> place finish in the shot-put at the 1968 Olympic trials, he turned his full and complete attention towards Olympic weightlifting. In December of 1969 he cleaned and stood erect with 501 pounds at a local competition in Portland, Oregon. He just missed the jerk, coming tantalizingly close to being the first man in history to lift 500 pounds overhead. Alexeev beat him to the 500 jerk in 1970. Ken finished in second place at the 1971 World Weightlifting Championships and was the first American to clean and jerk 500 (503½) pounds. This lift was done at the 1972 Senior National weightlifting championships in Detroit. He is the only American to ever clean and press 500 lb (507) and was the last American to excel at weightlifting on an international level. He was a serious challenger to the Soviet legend Vasily

## *Ken Patera*

Alexeev. At the 1972 Summer Olympics he failed to total when he missed all three snatches. That same year the overhead press, Patera's best lift, was dropped from Olympic lifting and Ken moved onto a long career as a topflight professional wrestler.

Patera played football at Cleveland High School in Portland, Oregon and wrestled weighing 193 pounds. He ran the high hurdles and high jumped. Ken could dunk a basketball at age 14, standing 5'9". As a college shot-putter he had numerous 69 foot + throws. His athletic ability and inherent explosiveness made him a prime candidate for Olympic lifting and his quick rise to the top was due to his incredible quickness and overwhelming power. At his physical peak, Patera stood 6'2" and weighed a rock solid 340 pounds. Ken eventually totaled 1,397, the highest three-lift total ever made by an American. His technique was adequate.

Patera was a powerhouse – as were Vasily Alexeev, Serge Redding, Rudolph Mang and all the other superheavyweights that strode the earth at the end of the overhead press era. The press was allowed to devolve into a technique lift at the end of its existence by officials seeking an excuse to ban it. The same men that used eagle eyes to routinely turn down a snatch or a jerk for press-out were mysteriously paralyzed and impotent when it came to judging presses. Those skilled enough to detect an elbow touch on a squat clean were strangely unable to see a presser standing with bent knees awaiting the "Press!" command. Why would a head referee give a press command to a lifter, bent-legged and ready to push jerk, unless it had been authorized or insisted on by his superiors?

Once the press was banned, American Olympic weightlifting devolved back to a "the only thing needed to improve the Olympic lifts is to do the Olympic lifts" mentality; this dead end had been blown out of the water three decades prior by Paul Anderson. As philosopher Yogi Berra once observed, "It was déjà Vu all over again."

Good group: Patera, the mysterious Serge Redding, and the most dominant heavyweight of all time – Vasily Alexeev, who, by-the-way, had a 1,000 pound back squat. Power and strength were the coin of the realm when the press was still an Olympic lift. One good Patera tale: two young men came into the Portland gym where Patera trained and were told Ken was in the bathroom; the squat bar was loaded to 385 and the boys were thrilled, "This is great! We get to see Kenny squat!" Patera returned from the locker room, unceremoniously ducked under the bar, stepped back and set up to squat. At which point he proceeded to knock out a triple in the press-behind-the-neck.



## *Ken Patera*



The King of overwhelming power displays grotesque technique: the detractors called him “the uncouth hillbilly oaf.” His Olympic gold medal and utter and complete world domination reaffirmed the old Shakespearean adage, “He who laughs last laughs best.” Raw strength can overcome a host of technical shortcomings. Paul Anderson grew up in rural isolation. He lived in an era before TV, the internet, and strength magazines. He applied his idiot-savant-like “Rain Man” brain towards the acquisition of power and strength and came up with innovations we still use to this day. Anderson knew he would never be a great stylist and recognizing that fact, he reasoned that the way to overcome irresolvable technical deficiencies was to overcompensate by acquiring shock-and-awe strength. Subtlety be damned! Anderson didn’t finesse poundage, he overwhelmed poundage.

In 2012 American Olympic lifting is in the toilet and defenders of the entrenched status quo defend failed methodologies with all the vigor of dark-ages witch burners. Anyone who dares question the methods that fail to qualify a single lifter for the Olympics is branded a heretic; “How DARE YOU question the validity of our approach! This is *settled science* and any moron that suggests an alternative should be burned at the stake! Or at least declared persona non grata! Dissenting opinions are not welcome here!” And then the rational loops back around to the “foreign lifters are beating the drug test and were that not so, our methods would rule the world – plus we are squeaky clean, and this moral high ground trumps your piss-ant complaints.” We need look to the past, to men like Anderson, Patera, Alexeev and Taranenko to discover the way out of this maze we find ourselves lost in. Unfortunately, those entrenched seem to have tenure.

---

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

---

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

Copyright 2012 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

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