

Starting Strength

Why Powerlifting Should Not Be in the Olympics

by

Myles Kantor

A periodic topic in powerlifting discussions is the addition of the sport to the Olympic Games. Through the International Powerlifting Federation (hereafter the IPF), powerlifting is part of the World Games, which operates “under the patronage of the International Olympic Committee.” For some powerlifters, Olympic inclusion is a long-sought dream that would mean great things. In this article, I will discuss why IOC recognition would likely have horrible consequences for powerlifting.

As a philosophical preface to my remarks, Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes of the State of Virginia*, “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others.” This is a vital principle of social relations. It is extremely—no, criminally—rude to use violence against other people because one dislikes how they choose to treat their own bodies. In this vein, in his multi-volume study *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means*, National Book Award winner William T. Vollmann describes what he calls The Zealot’s Golden Rule: “*Do unto others as you are doing for yourself*. Cortes [the Spanish conquistador] exemplifies this fallacy: I am a Christian, so I’ll force everyone else to be Christians.”

In the context of sports, these themes manifest preeminently with regard to drug use. The economist Ludwig von Mises—who left Austria in 1934 anticipating Nazi annexation and fled Switzerland in 1940 to avoid Nazi capture for the dual “offense” of being a Jew and opponent of National Socialism—observes in *Human Action* regarding drugs:

...once the principle is admitted that it is the duty of government to protect the individual against his own foolishness, no serious objections can be advanced against further encroachments. A good case could be made out in favor of the prohibition of alcohol and nicotine. And why limit the government’s benevolent providence to the protection of the individual’s body only? Is not the harm a man can inflict on his mind and soul even more disastrous than any bodily evils? Why not prevent him from reading bad books and seeing bad plays, from looking at bad paintings and statues and from hearing bad music?

Let us now turn to the Olympic movement.

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“IOC Pressure Great Britain to Change Doping Laws Ahead of London Olympics 2012,” read a November 8, 2008 headline from the British newspaper *The Telegraph*. The article stated in part:

The IOC are growing increasingly frustrated at Britain’s refusal to introduce legislation to outlaw the possession, supply and distribution of performance-enhancing drugs...Arne Ljungqvist, the chairman of the IOC’s medical commission, said he would be pressing for a change in the British law, which would be an important legacy of the 2012 Olympics.

To build its Olympic site for the 2008 games, China expelled thousands of people and perpetrated other violence to sanitize its image. Such massive (and foreseeable) brutality did not dissuade the IOC from maintaining the Olympics in Beijing. Considerable administrative energies must be directed against British freedom, however.

The Olympic Charter states that part of the IOC’s role is “to lead the fight against doping in sport.” The case of the United Kingdom indicates the IOC’s ultimate objective: the worldwide criminalization of steroids and with it the destruction of all athletic organizations that do not drug test. It is The Zealot’s Golden Rule as applied to sport: “*I don’t use steroids, so I’ll force everyone else not to use steroids.*” The IOC’s anti-drug fundamentalism attacks self-ownership and freedom of association while expanding monopoly privilege for its favored affiliate organizations. (I use monopoly as defined by the economist Murray Rothbard in *Man, Economy and State*: “Monopoly is a grant of special privilege by the State, reserving a certain area of production to one particular individual or group. Entry into the field is prohibited to others, and this prohibition is enforced by the gendarmes of the State.”) Between this aggressive obnoxiousness and the taxpayer plunder that enables Olympic events, the IOC is a global enemy of freedom. By contrast, the founder of the modern Olympic movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, noted that “The foundation of real human morality lies in mutual respect.” In 1892, he articulated a liberal vision for the Olympics in the classical sense:

Let us export oarsmen, runners, fencers; there is the free trade of the future—and on the day when it shall take place among the customs of Europe the cause of peace will have received a new and powerful support.

With regard to powerlifting, in America there is thankfully no equivalent (yet) to the ministries of sport that exist in other countries. Due to different preferences about drug testing, equipment, and organizational style, many powerlifting federations exist in America that accommodate these diverse preferences. This is how a marketplace works. Keep in mind that one person’s steroid is another person’s stimulant-filled pre-workout supplement or top-end single-ply bench shirt. While I find the latter form of performance enhancement offensive, a much worse offense would be to pursue state violence against people who compete this way. Lifters who wear costly immobilizing garments named after Japanese swords are not criminals; and lifters who wish to voluntarily gather and compete without drug testing are not criminals either. Neither population should be persecuted.

It should outrage powerlifters who care about freedom that there are at least two countries where illegal powerlifting can occur due to a monopoly held by IPF affiliates in these countries. In 2001 before WPC Worlds in Cape Town, the South African government threatened to surround the meet site with

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troops if government drug testers were not admitted. Soon after, the Ministry of Sport shut down the WPC affiliate by granting a monopoly to the IPF affiliate, whose constitution brazenly states under its intents and purposes:

To proclaim as unauthorised all Powerlifting Meetings and Competitions throughout South Africa, which are not held under the Rules and Regulations of the FEDERATION, whether such contemplated, controlled or held by any club or association.

In 2006, veteran powerlifting writer Paul Kelso wrote in relation to these events:

Many countries have government sports ministries or departments, and they usually recognize no sports bodies that are not IOC/GAISF [General Assembly of International Sports Federations], and give no financial support to the unconnected. I fear—or predict—that sometime in the future non-tested events in Europe or elsewhere will come to the attention of the local Ministries and run afoul of the local rules and be squelched. Maybe even start a ripple effect.

(For more information about what happened in South Africa, see my article [The IPF's Pursuit of Monopoly: Rule 14.9 and Beyond](#). Monopoly is an old vileness. In his two-volume *Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought*, Murray Rothbard discusses several examples of monopoly including the following imposed by 17th century French bureaucrat Jean-Baptiste Colbert: “In 1673, he forced two existing theatres to unite: when a third troupe was later forced to join them, the *Comédie française* was thereby formed in 1680. The *Comédie française* was given a monopoly of all dramatic performances in Paris, was subjected to tight state regulation and control, and aided by state funds.”

The IPF likewise pursues state subsidies in numerous countries.)

IPF operations in America have demonstrated a thuggish attitude similar to South Africa but with less coercive abilities. In the context of the American Powerlifting Federation's origins, legendary powerlifter Larry Pacifico referred in his 1986 book *Champion of Champions* to those who considered themselves “the lords of powerlifting.” Because the political apparatuses did not exist in America to impose a monopoly, the IPF used intimidation tactics in an attempt to destroy its non-tested competitor (the APF being the basis for the establishment of the World Powerlifting Congress in 1986). In 1984, IPF Secretary Arnold Bostrom wrote to *Powerlifting USA* editor-in-chief Mike Lambert, “Any I.P.F. or U.S.P.F. member, lifter, or official, found to be involved with this [APF] meet, will be suspended for two years.”

Still without coercive political power in America a generation later, the IPF's American affiliate, U.S.A. Powerlifting (hereafter USAPL), threatened to sanction lifters and officials who participated in the January 2011 Raw Unity Meet—an increasingly prestigious competition first held in 2008 that has attracted major media coverage and top lifters from several federations, drug-tested and non-tested alike. The basis for the USAPL/IPF threat was IPF Rule 14.9, which states:

Any lifter, coach, referee or official who competes or participates in an international Powerlifting or Bench Press competition not organised, sanctioned or approved by the IPF shall not be permitted to take part in any IPF international or regional competition for a period of 12 months from the date of that non-approved competition.

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The IPF did not apply 14.9 to the Raw Unity Meet in its previous three years despite the participation of foreign lifters. As of this writing, two participants in the 2011 Raw Unity Meet are known to have been sanctioned under 14.9. Neither individual received due process per USAPL/IPF by-laws prior to this action or even notification of their suspension/ineligibility. In one case, a lifter was removed from a meet advertised and previously held under a national (USAPL) sanction, which would not fall under the scope of 14.9. The meet sanction became international after Raw Unity, and the lifter found out about her removal in February when a friend asked why she no longer appeared on the online roster.

In the other case, an IPF referee with over 25 years of service who judged at Raw Unity asked the president of USAPL in April about judging at IPF Masters Worlds in September. He was then informed of his ineligibility. Both punitive actions appear to have been done by one USAPL official. In 2001, Ed Coan remarked on a similar arbitrariness concerning his appeal of an IPF drug test result in 1989: “I asked for my appeal, traveled to Holland for my appeal, but when I got there the powers that be said, ‘No, we’re not going to hear it’.” Due process is a cornerstone of a legitimate legal system, referenced in the Bill of Rights and other American founding documents going back to the Massachusetts Body of Liberties in 1641. The absence and perversion of due process characterize tyrannical regimes.

The IPF further prohibits (Rule 14.10.6) affiliated lifters from competing in meets with lifters who have been suspended for drug-related offenses, regardless of weight class or division. (Enforcement of these rules is inconsistent and in some cases egregiously inconsistent.) Also be careful about asserting oneself too much, because “bringing the sport into disrepute by means of...comments, published articles, TV or radio broadcasts” is also prohibited—an elite IPF bench presser encountering a related attitude from the IPF Secretary General in January (see [Powerlifting Watch’s report](#)). USAPL’s code of conduct likewise states that “petty criticism and complaints undermine the well-being of the organization.” In 2009, the APF attempted to add a rule similar to 14.9 with respect to judges. The APF membership swiftly asserted itself, and the leadership rescinded the proposal. This says something about the comparative vigilance of lifters in these federations.

For those interested in intellectual property matters, in January USAPL ordered a longtime member to shut down his 13-year-old Internet forum for having “advertised and legitimized a competing federation [Raw Unity] to USAPL.” (Such conduct is of a piece with a new lifter’s recent experience at a USAPL meet ([Meet Results? There weren’t any](#))). On April 19, the owner of the forum—originally named [usapowerliftingforum.com](#)—announced he was shutting down the renamed and revised forum, [thepowerliftingforum.com](#). The site now appears to be defunct. The owner commented on his decision:

What started pushing things to the end was really the change of [USAPL] leadership moods over the last year. The rankings fiasco for one. Then the legal threats I got from the leadership for using the logos (nevermind I have been doing that for over 10 years). Having my membership threatened when I confronted leadership about certain topics. Having my two motions (rankings and logos) I put forward circumvented by the EC [Executive Committee], despite getting approval from the NGB [National Governing Body]. (*The NGB meeting is held annually at USAPL Men’s Nationals and is the process by which policy changes occur in the federation. An ineffectual NGB indicates fundamental corruption.*)

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Despite the IPF referring to lifters as “customers” and claiming that it wants to “differentiate itself in the sporting marketplace” in its Strategic Plan for 2008-2011, the aforementioned events and other official documents make clear that the IPF and its American affiliate are contemptuous toward market values. As former IPF president Norbert Wallauch stated in 2005, “I do not share the opinion that Powerlifting is a worldwide market where the IPF has to compete and challenge the other organizations.” The minutes of the 2008 IPF General Assembly referred to Rule 14.9 in relation to “athletes participating in outlaw ‘federations’.” Taking the “outlaw” insult to its logical end, a senior IPF official recently referred to state restrictions against non-tested federations as “necessary weapons against that evil [drugs in sport].” He commented with ghoulish frustration vis-à-vis his own country, “We’ve been promised co-ordinated police activity here to break up the local WPC [affiliate] but nothing much happens, only sporadic arrests of their principals on a case-by-case basis.” In this one finds violent rejection of the market system Ludwig von Mises describes in *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*:

Where there are no privileges and where governments do not grant protection to vested interests threatened by the superior efficiency of newcomers, those who have acquired wealth in the past are forced to acquire it every day anew in competition with all other people.

Olympic recognition of powerlifting would mean further empowerment of the IPF to the jeopardy of lifter freedom, extending to America. In addition to policies like Rules 14.9 and 14.10.6, one could expect the IPF and USAPL to lobby state and federal governments to suppress their competitors. (Perhaps this has been attempted already?) Such suppression would be that much more probable in countries with direct governmental control over athletic activity. Think South Africa writ large.

Does this scenario sound extravagant? In the 1970s, many people might have found it absurd to suggest that steroids would one day be Schedule III federally prohibited drugs under the Controlled Substances Act, begetting Drug Enforcement Administration actions with names like Operation Gear Grinder. Generations before that, the notion of an American president initiating a “kinetic military action” (also known as war) would have been considered a flagrant usurpation of congressional authority and basic constitutional norms. (See, for example, Alexander Hamilton’s discussion in *The Federalist Papers*, #69.) Times change, not always for the better.

The Olympic movement is a war against freedom, and the IPF shares the IOC’s aggressive anti-drug fundamentalism. Whether a lifter uses steroids or not, he should not support a course of action that would trample upon another lifter’s freedom. Respect for individual rights and dignity means keeping powerlifting out of the Olympics. I will close with the words of the 16th century French jurist Étienne de La Boétie, from his treatise *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*:

...men will grow accustomed to the idea that they have always been in subjection, that their fathers lived in the same way; they will think they are obliged to suffer this evil, and will persuade themselves by example and imitation of others, finally investing those who order them around with proprietary rights, based on the idea that it has always been that way.

There are always a few, better endowed than others, who feel the weight of the yoke and cannot restrain themselves from attempting to shake it off: these are the men who never become tamed

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under subjection and who always...cannot prevent themselves from peering about for their natural privileges and from remembering their ancestors and their former ways....These are the ones who, having good minds of their own, have further trained them by study and learning. Even if liberty had entirely perished from the earth, such men would invent it. For them, slavery has no satisfactions, no matter how well disguised.

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