

Starting Strength

Is Powerlifting Undergoing a Resurrection?

After years of disintegration, malfunction and fractionalization, gear-free, grass-roots powerlifting is suddenly wildly popular

by

Marty Gallagher

Modern powerlifting officially bottomed out in 2012 when Powerlifting USA, the longtime Bible of the sport, officially folded. Powerlifting had grown so feeble and anemic that it was unable to sustain its most venerated organ of communal communication. For decades PLUSA had been *the* central clearinghouse for information on upcoming competitions, training, gossip and all things power-related. Without any prior warning, PLUSA vanished from the face of the earth, gone without a trace after nearly four decades as the singular source of powerlifting information. To many it seemed yet another death-blow to a sport already in perilous decline.

It seemed inconceivable that the sport of powerlifting could realistically function or move forward without the magazine. One critical role PLUSA played was to act as a catalog of upcoming events; competitions were planned for based on information derived from PLUSA. The lifter could peruse the magazine and determine what competitions were coming to his area. Depending on which power tribe the lifter swore allegiance to, he was able to plot and plan the next competitive move as PLUSA cut across federation lines and a lifter could obtain a broad overview as to what competitions were scheduled where and when. The Coming Events page alone made PLUSA invaluable.

PLUSA was the brainchild of Mike Lambert, editor, publisher, sole owner, and heart and soul of the magazine for nearly 40 years. Initially Lambert became a magazine publisher to fill a void; there was a definable and growing powerlifting community without a publication devoted to it. Lifters wanted and needed a source of information; they wanted elite lifter profiles, training articles and coverage of the national and world championship events, they wanted a central clearinghouse where competition results would be published. In a stroke of pure genius, Mike Lambert went to the time and trouble to establish a Powerlifting USA Top 100 list each month.

This feat of compilation was akin to Hercules cleaning the Aegean Stables; this was an epic task done monthly. There are eleven competitive weight classes and every month Mike would post the annual top 100 list for one particular weight division – this was the cross-federation annual rankings list. Each month featured a particular weight class and in month 12 they ran top 100 Master and

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women lifters ranking. Now imagine what a royal pain in the ass it would be to read and log every powerlifting competition in the United States; input every competition, log every lifter's squat, bench, deadlift – we are talking hundreds of competitions and thousands of lifters. Then every month you tally up the rankings list for one weight class and post that annual top 100 lifter list for that division. Each month there would be a top 100 ranking in the squat, bench press, deadlift and a 4th top 100 category, all-important “three-lift total” category, the sum total of a man's best squat/bench/deadlift in competition.

Powerlifters would anticipate the top 100 list in their particular weight class as if they were being nominated for the Academy Awards. Making the top ten in any category was a monumental strength feat – or at least it used to be when we all squatted below parallel, wore the same gear, and used the same weigh-in times, before the advent of the insipid Monolift, the monster bench shirts that add 40% to a man's true bench press – and don't forget those extra-long knee wraps. There was a time when we could cross-compare lifts and the PLUSA Top 100 meant something. Add to this already toxic brew the curse of purposefully lax judging, and it is easy to see why we disintegrated. Corrupt judging is artfully called “interpretive differences” and the phrase has been used to justify sky-high squats passed with brazen impunity. We became the Tower of Babel when cross-comparison of lifts became impossible, as federations took it upon themselves to redefine what constituted a legal lift and what gear was allowable. The degeneration and erosion has been ongoing for over a decade.

Back in 1975 when Mike Lambert stepped up and created the epicenter for all things powerlifting-related, who could have imagined the trials and travails that would rip the sport apart decades in the future? Those first tentative issues of PLUSA, done in the 1970s, were photocopied homemade crudities, technologically challenged, yet vibrant and exciting and chock full of information and passion. As powerlifting grew, PLUSA grew and eventually Mike Lambert turned a burning passion into an excellent living. Mike deservedly reaped the financial rewards that go to a risk-taking entrepreneur that succeeds. Mike wrote and published the magazine by himself and was an excellent photographer. For decades Lambert was a regular fixture at major power competitions. He would appear in his fishing vest stuffed full of high speed film, two or more cameras arrayed around him as he sat on the floor in his favored viewing spot, ten feet to the front and to the right of the lifter. He seemed painfully shy and was one of the least talkative people I have ever met, at least towards me. I once sat next to him on a world championship team trip from NYC to Sweden and he didn't say five words to me, a guy who'd been writing for him for a decade. I tried to make conversation, but he was having none of it. He wasn't disrespectful – he was painfully shy.

At its peak, he likely had 30,000 subscribers and healthy ad revenues that would come close to offsetting the cost of production and/or mail-out. He did well and he did a fine job. Eventually he lost the passion and it showed. He started jobbing out the meet coverage of lesser championships to lesser writers, and eventually Mike stopped traveling to the IPF world championships. As the old BB King song goes, “The thrill is gone.” Mike folded the magazine so rapidly and so suddenly that it caught all of us off guard and completely unawares. There had not been the usual dire editorial warnings to the readership ahead of time and there was no “Adios! It's been great! Thanks to my loyal readership – but it's time to move on!” message in the last issue. It was a sad yet telling commentary on the sorry state of a once promising and vibrant sport. PLUSA came in with a bang and went out with a whimper – or perhaps it was just a tired sigh.

Powerlifting rose quickly and fell even quicker. There was a time in the 1970s when powerlifting had a TV contract with ABC and was in the regular rotation on ABC's number one ranked Saturday afternoon sport show, ABC's Wide World of Sports. For a glorious decade, before the implosion,

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scattering and fragmentation, powerlifting championships filled halls and venues to capacity. Powerlifting was on TV and promoters fought one another to put on championship events. Having a lone national federation and a lone international federation ensured control, ensured uniformity on the rules and ensured judging strictness at the regional and national level competitions. We had a lot of charismatic athletes back then, men such as Larry Pacifico, John Kuc, Kaz, and Doug Young. All were at their awesome respective peaks and all were featured in long, extended slots on TV.

Audiences liked powerlifting. Our apogee was a long WWS feature on world 242 pound champion Doug Young. At the 1978 world powerlifting championships Doug broke three ribs on a 722 squat. He pushed through and with great drama, finished the competition in excruciating pain – all documented in a 30 minute feature segment. With three broken ribs the Mighty Texan benched 544 and deadlifted 704. His Wide World of Sports segment was narrated by a young Bryan Gumball and indeed, powerlifting seemed destined to hold down a regular TV spot, much as Lumberjack competition, or arm wrestling, or strongman. Instead, powerlifting was kicked off TV after being branded as an unrepentant drug sport.

Even after we lost the TV contract, powerlifting still rolled on strong. With ever-increasing momentum the unified sport garnered and gathered more and more respect – true athletes recognized and understood that pure powerlifting was the truest test of pure strength: a prestigious place in the pantheon of strength modes: no single mode or method trumped powerlifting as the ultimate strength system – flawed as the sport might be. Mike Lambert was full of passion back in those golden days, and it came through in his informative retellings:

“The greatest demonstration of bench pressing in the history of the sport (written in 1986) occurred when Mike MacDonald sweated himself down to 181 pounds and opened with a 473-pound bench press – a world record on his 1st attempt. He then jumped to another world record on his 2nd attempt, a success with 488. He then became the first 181 pounder to break the 500 pound barrier with his successful 3rd attempt bench press of 501. Mike capped an already perfect bench press day with a successful 4th attempt with 512. Four attempts, four world records. How do you top that?”

Rick Weil nearly matched MacDonald’s feat (done a decade later) when in December of 1985 the 180 pound Weil bench pressed 512 on his opener. He set his first world record with a 540 pound 2nd attempt, Rick followed with a 545 3rd attempt for his second WR. He finally hit a 551 4th attempt success, three world records on four attempts. Ironically Weil’s lightest bench press, his opener of 512, equaled Mac’s once unassailable world record best. Weil commenced, literally, from where MacDonald left off.”

When there was a lone federation nationally and a lone federation internationally, powerlifting thrived. The judging was uniform and strict and everyone was getting better and prospering – and then we opened the Pandora’s Box of performance enhancing drugs. The once happy, prosperous, powerful and unified sport of powerlifting splintered, shattered, exploded into a thousand pieces as competing federations arose, each taking a differing stance on drugs, drug use and drug testing. At the one extreme were the anti-drug faction and at the other extreme were the steroid apologists. Each faction immediately set up organizations. The USPF attempted to stake out a middle ground by instituting competition drug testing. The testing was deemed insufficient for the anti-drug faction and way too much by the pro-steroid faction. Monies previously used to fund US teams traveling to world championships were now diverted to lawyers defending the organization from lawsuits arising out of drug testing. Rebel organizations sprang up from within other rebel organizations and with the each new federation powerlifting became weaker and more diluted.

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I wrote in an article decades ago, “Powerlifting as a craft will never die ... proper squats, bench pressing and deadlifting have incredible athletic applicability and for these reasons the lifts themselves will live on in perpetuity – the sport, with its innumerable splinter factions, ridiculous supportive gear (what % of a lift is attributable to the man and what % to the gear?) could well kill itself.” That prophecy came to pass: powerlifting self-immolated, set itself on fire, it became the sports embodiment of the biblical Tower of Babel. When the lone organization disintegrated, like ancient Rome, the Dark Ages descended on powerlifting.

In 2012 Mike Lambert threw in the towel. As it turns out, he may have just missed what appears to be a potential powerlifting rebirth, a resurrection that is occurring on a grass-roots level. For some strange and apparently inexplicable reason, powerlifting of a certain type, the so-called “raw” powerlifting – powerlifting that disallows supportive lifting gear (other than a weightlifting belt) – is experiencing an unexpected explosion in participatory popularity. Events that two years ago might have attracted 25 lifters are now attracting 150+ lifters; regional and national level events are cutting off raw entries at 350 to 400 lifters. This explosion appears to be nationwide and worldwide. USAPL competitions in every region are packed to capacity. Why this completely unexpected explosion in powerlifting popularity? The surge in lifters has nothing to do with any genius promotional ideas arising from within the powerlifting establishment; they are left scratching their heads, as clueless and surprised by this recent turn of events as the rest of us.

There is a veritable stampede of new lifters looking to compete in the classical three-lift power format. And they want to do it raw, i.e. without knee wraps, without a squat suit or a bench shirt – and no need for the expensive Monolift device that eliminates the walkout phase required of a classically-performed squat. It is as if some mysterious fitness oracle whispered into the ears of tens of thousands of trainees, “Hey! You people should train for and then enter a powerlifting competition!” And the mind-numbed robots then did exactly what they were told by the oracle. One illustrative example: at a recent power competition in my neighborhood, Columbia, Maryland, an upscale community and hardly a strength hotbed, the local promoter cut entries off at 100. He filled up his quota within 30 days. He then turned away another 100 lifters that had waited too long to sign up.

This particular competition catered to both raw (no gear) and geared divisions. Of the 100 entrants, 83 were raw and 17 were geared. This disproportional imbalance appears consistent on a nationwide basis. On the national level, big raw meets are routinely drawing upwards of 400 lifters. Because of this new influx of interest in raw lifting, organizations are rethinking their approach towards the sport. The rumor mill has it that the IPF, the International Powerlifting Federation, is seriously considering *dropping* geared lifting all together and jumping on the raw bandwagon. If the popularity trend continues it will spell the rebirth, the revitalization of a fabulous sport: fabulous when practiced in its purest, most pristine and precise way. Strict judging and no gear means we will once again be able to compare lifts, one to another, federation to federation. With an infusion of participants, powerlifting could become viable again: in our era of cable TV there is no reason why a well-run national or world championship of raw lifters could not draw excellent ratings. Seeing gigantic musclemen handling gigantic poundage in pristine fashion is always exciting. It is a fantastic turn of events when national organizations conducting national championships are cutting off entrants at 400.

If the powers-that-be are smart, they will take the time and trouble to trace this newfound popularity back to its source. Is there a lone endorser so powerful and influential that tens of thousands heed their advice? Perhaps power’s popularity is traceable to a combination of unrelated events. It would be wise to find out and if possible, bottle it.

Let us not fumble this opportunity.

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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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