

Starting Strength

Norbert Schemansky

World & Olympic Champion, Transitional Strength Figure

by

Marty Gallagher

The year is 1964 and the young trainee approached world and Olympic champion Norbert Schemansky with great trepidation. The Polish-American lifter from Detroit did not suffer fools lightly, particularly if he was interrupted when training. The setting was the venerable and ancient York gym on a typical Saturday. Most every Saturday a mini-Olympic weightlifting competition was conducted in the York gym. The public was welcome and you could see a veritable cavalcade of weightlifting national and world champion lifters. Lifting acolytes from around the country made their way to this American lifting equivalent of the Haj in Mecca, and the vast majority of the onlookers consisted of other lifters seeking tips and tactics that would improve their own lifting.

On this particular day Norb was midway through the overhead press portion of his extended workout. An 18-year-old regional weightlifting champion had driven to York with two training partners; the young men were positively enthralled and absorbing new data about lifting that they would use. They could barely wait to return home and put into practice all the new training protocols and lift techniques. Our protagonist knew that he and his pals would have to be leaving in the next hour in order to get home in time to conform to their parental curfews. The youngster was bursting at the seams to ask Schemansky some pointed questions about tactics and training. The problem was that Ski had been training for a long time and looked as if he might continue for quite a while longer. Under normal circumstances the clean-cut young man would never bother Ski, or any other elite lifter while they trained. A training session was sacred, and amongst the Iron Elite interrupting the sacrosanct training atmosphere with mindless blather was considered sacrilege.

The youngster was impaled on the horns of an irresolvable dilemma: interrupt the fearsome Schemansky's workout and risk incurring his legendary wrath – he'd been known to get physical with those that irritated him; conversely, if our young man missed this opportunity to ask questions of Ski and if his burning questions were left unanswered, it would haunt him forever. Summoning up his courage, the young lifter took in a sharp breath and strode to where the champ sat between sets on a steel-folding chair.

Ski caught the youngster approaching him out of the corner of his eye and thought, "Oh Hell!" he mumbled this under his breath; he knew what was about to happen. Schemansky was a month out

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from competing at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic games, where he would ultimately take the 3rd place bronze medal behind the legendary Soviet world and Olympic champions Yuri Vlasov and Leonid Zhabotinsky. An uncontrollable scowl spread across his already dour face as the well-built boy pulled up to a halt four feet in front of Ski and stood at attention. After a long silent pause the youngster said in a single breath...

“Mr. Schemansky SIR! I am sorry to interrupt you – my press has been stuck at 205 for the past six months – could you be so kind as to give me some advice about how I might increase my press?”

Ski exhaled a cooling breath and talked himself out of the trees; he was NOT going to go off on this earnest young man. Ski was trying to turn over a new leaf and he would not resort to cussing this kid out, as he would have in the not-too-distant-past. Truth be known, as Ski looked the kid up and down, he got a good vibe off the boy.

Emotional outbursts on his part during a training session, while satisfying in the immediacy of the moment, would derail and destroy the workout. He had eleven training sessions before leaving for Tokyo and every single session needed to count; each week he had to show tangible improvement. He decided to tolerate the polite boy – no yelling, no profanity and no rebuffs – he would avoid “leaking” any of his precious emotional psych. Plus, there was something oddly endearing about the bearing, manner, and presence of the youngster that stood in front of him. The boy was deferential and reverential, akin to a young soldier addressing a General. Ski always and forever had a place in his heart for the military man, so he grunted a reply: “Son, if you want to improve your press – PRESS!”

Ski deliberately broke eye contact with the youngster and started rooting around in his gym bag. A look of confusion and consternation spread across the boy’s face. Puzzled, but elated by the fact that he had not been told to “Beat it!”, the youngster decided to press his luck and he posed a second question.

“Mr. Schemansky SIR! Any suggestions as to how to improve my snatch would be greatly appreciated. I have been stalled...”

Ski decided to reinforce the point. “If you want to improve your snatch, THEN SNATCH!”

This time the rugged, stern champion leaned back in his chair and drilled his eyes into the youngster until the boy winced and wilted, yet rather than skitter away, the youngster gathered himself admirably, he knew this question was rhetorical but asked it anyway. “How about my clean and jerk, sir?”



Norb in top shape: This photo was shot in the mid-1960s at the York gym at a Saturday session. Note the folding chairs along the wall for lifters and the curious public. Ski stood 5-11 and in this photo weighs a rock hard 260 pounds. At the time, he was capable of a 420 press, a 370 snatch and a 460-pound clean and jerk. He could squat 650 for reps. Norb was the prototypical modern power athlete, both physiologically and psychologically.

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“Clean and Jerk, son!”

“Squat?”

This actually made Norbert laugh. The boy had big balls. He looked at the boy, and with a quick jerk of the head wordlessly indicated that the audience was over. The boy, being smart and perceptive, understood that he was being dismissed. He wanted to express his gratitude for the great man's time.

“Thank you sir.” He extended a limp, damp hand that hung there suspended in space for the longest time before Ski sighed and engulfed the boy's hand with his own callused hand and gave the youngster a real man's handshake, a small jolt, just a taste of his raw power, transmitted through a crushing handshake.

The boy winced in pain. He would remember those 15 minutes for the rest of his life. Fifty years later the strength elite would still talk about and marvel at the Zen wisdom and sparse economy of Norb's precise answers. There was, and remains, so much truth in his advice.

Ski strode to the lifting platform to perform a double in the clean and overhead press with 385 pounds. Nearby, a young Bill Starr had overheard the conversation and repeated it for his readership in his monthly gossip column, “The Iron Grapevine.” The Iron Grapevine ran in *Strength and Health* magazine for years, and Starr (a visionary) immediately sensed the wisdom of Schemansky's terse answers. There is a famous Zen Koan: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The answer is a hard slap across the face. The student poses the question and the Roshi slaps the taste out of the acolyte's mouth. Often that unexpected slap would jolt the Zen student out of his conscious mind allowing him attain the level of consciousness that cannot be reasoned out. Ski's irreducible answers were akin to the Zen face slap.

Truly, as Starr succinctly noted, if a man is serious about improving his press, snatch, clean and jerk, squat, deadlift or any other major resistance training exercise – the best possible way in which to improve is to do that specific lift – repeatedly. Remember Aristotle's truism: “We are what we do repeatedly.” Sport specificity applies to strength training movements. As my old lifting coach Hugh Cassidy would say, “The best way to improve in any lift is to do that lift and do it a whole lot.” Further, the best assistance exercise for any specific lift is to use assistance exercises that most closely resemble the core lift. Hence, the best assistance exercise for bench press is the bench press with a wide or narrow grip. In keeping with Cassidy's timeless axiom, variations on flat benching are superior assistance exercise to incline or decline bench presses.

There is tremendous wisdom hidden deep within Schemansky and Cassidy's pithy pronouncements. Schemansky's classic power strategy for improving strength could be described as “doing fewer things better.” This old school philosophy could be summarized as “Perform the major lifts and do them often – and do very little else.” Old pros knew that there exists a universe of variety and variation in volume, intensity, and timing within the core four lifts and their assistance-lift brethren.

In this day and age it is very chic and fashionable to *avoid* doing the lifts. The prevailing wisdom in our information age is that you can improve the squat, bench or deadlift without doing the actual lifts. You can get just as strong, stronger in fact, by using bands, chains, board presses, box squats – anything to avoid the harsh starkness of the ancient strategy of “just the lifts.” Think about this ludicrous situation: whereas Ski and Cassidy and Kuc and Hennessey, and all the other all-time greats of the 1960s and 1970s would *only* do the main lifts – it would never occur to them *not* to – the modern approach is to avoid the main lifts until the meet, using assistance exercises instead.

How did we arrive at this upside-down bizarro world? I think it is no coincidence that the physiques of Doug Young, Kaz, Gamble, Cash, Estep, and all the other muscled-to-the-max men of

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yesteryear blow away the physiques of today's "smarter" athletes. The ancients *bore the weight* and embraced the lifts, over and over and over and over, ad infinitum, ad nauseam, because this is how you get better at the lifts – doing them repeatedly, world without end, amen. The tried and proven plain-vanilla way to get better at doing a lift is to do the lift, do it a lot. Period.

When someone comes along and says, "Hey – guess what?? I got a way to improve the performance of the lifts – but you won't have to do the lift!!" It creates a stampede to use this "no lift" philosophy. Lifting *performance*, the classical report card, was inflated through the use of supportive gear, the "monolift," and corrupted judging. It appeared as though lifts were skyrocketing, all as a result of this get-better-at-the-lift-without-doing-the-lift philosophy.

Factually, if you strip the modern lifter of his lifting apparel, make him do below-parallel squats and bench without a bench shirt – guess what? The modern "athlete" is *weaker* than the ancients – an inconvenient truth.

Ski and Cassidy, John Gamble and Jim Cash, Mel Hennessey and Roger Estep, these men knew that in order to get really good at a thing, you needed to do that thing, endlessly. By doing the lifts to near exclusion, they built physiques, and levels of raw power and strength, unrivaled and unmatched to this day. The smart trainee need look *backwards* for breakthrough strength strategies; look to the plain vanilla simple strategies used by greats of the past. Those who tell you that modern strength and power strategies trump what came before are false prophets speaking with forked tongues. It is time we destroyed the Golden Calf of delusion and get back on the Old School good foot: to get super-strong become super-uncomplicated.

Norb Schemansky was born in 1924. The Detroit native learned his fundamentals early on and in the post-war period he came into his own. Norbert stayed at the top of the strength world from the 1940s all the way into the late 1960s. He cut his teeth on simple pre-war training templates, and over time modified them; he grew larger and stronger as he grew older. Norb set the world record in the snatch, 363, at age 38, some twenty years into his competitive career. Norb adapted and adopted ever-more-sophisticated training strategies as he matured, but he never lost his pre-war work ethic.

Norb became the first weightlifter in history to earn four Olympic medals, this despite missing the 1956 Olympic Games due to back problems. Norbert won an Olympic gold medal; a silver medal and two bronze medals spread over four games. He won the world championship three times and the Pan American Games. He was the Olympic champion in 1952. He set an all-time world record in the snatch in 1962 when he split-snatched a seemingly miraculous 363-pounds. Norb set 75 national, world, and Olympic records.

According to his biographer Richard Back, Schemansky related that the most impressive feat of strength he ever witnessed took place at the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games during a rare joint training session when both the American and the Russian lifters were in the same training hall at the same time. The secretive Soviet cold-war sport machine watched the athletes like hawks. Trench-coated KGB secret police lined the walls of the training hall wall just in case a desperate communist athlete dared try and dash for sanctuary and freedom. This stuff was real and Ski saw the Big Red sport machine up close and personal for decades.

Ski's number one competitor in 1952 was the 180-pound Soviet champion Gregory Novak. Novak held the press record at 309-pounds and during the joint training session the stumpy, thick Russian effortlessly pressed 281 pounds, and then, no doubt for Norbert's benefit (Novak was well aware that Schemansky was watching) pulled a psych maneuver that blew Ski's mind.

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“First he presses 281, and I am impressed with the strictness and lack of backbend. I mean back then (1952) a press was a press.” Norb related, “Then, just for the hell of it, Novak lowers the 281-pound weight down behind his neck and presses it three times! I’m thinking, I better have a damn good snatch and jerk because I surer than hell was not going to beat this beast in a pressing contest.”

Schemansky struggled with life outside of weightlifting. He stayed in Detroit and was reduced to working minimum wage jobs to make ends meet between national and world championships. While Big Daddy Hoffman would cover the expense of sending Norb to the national and world championships, between those trips and excursions Ski had to pump gas and scrub toilets. It became so bad that *Sports Illustrated* magazine ran a feature article called, “Looking for a Lift,” an expose’ on the hard times that had befallen one of America’s premier Olympic athletes.

This wasn’t some retrospective on how some former great was now laid low – Norbert was on the national, world and Olympic teams *at the time*, winning and placing at the highest levels of the sport. In the *SI* magazine photo, Norb stood desolate, wire scrub brush in hand in front of a commode he was about to scrub. This was a *man*, a man with a wife and kids who in his spare time was kicking ass internationally for his country. At home he was a pathetic nobody, always two paychecks away from disaster, destitution, and homelessness. Despite the feature article in *SI* describing his plight, no sugar daddy, organization, or corporation stepped forward to offer Ski any relief. In nearly every retrospective ever written on him, the word “bitter” is used somewhere in the article to describe how he viewed the unfolding of events in his life. Ski was once asked what he was bitterest about, and he wryly commented that he was “bitterest about always being portrayed as bitter.” It was yet another of his barbed comments about an athletic career that was nothing less than astounding contrasted with recompense that was nothing short of pathetic.

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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