

# Starting Strength

**Dave Jacoby**

**A Coach's Retrospective, Perspective, and Appreciation**

by

**Marty Gallagher**

In 1991 I was selected as a coach for the United States powerlifting team at the IPF world championships to be held in Orebro, Sweden. I had coached (along with Bob Fortenbaugh) Black's Gym to five national team titles in three different federations all within a two-year period. As a result of our national dominance, I was offered one of three world team coaching slots. This was the most prestigious coaching job in all powerlifting. Despite other federations' eternal protestations, the only true world championships are the IPF world championships. Nowadays, splinter federations spring up like forest mushrooms after a rainstorm, and the various "world championships" are factually the world championships of Pennsylvania or the world championships of Ohio. Sure, you might get a smattering of foreign lifters to appear sporadically, meanwhile the IPF consistently and continually draws huge foreign lifter participation – when was the last time an American-based international powerlifting competition was put on in which foreign lifters outnumbered the American lifters? Never. At an IPF world championship, American participation represents one team out of dozens of teams.

I had actually been asked to become a world championship team coach the year before, after Black's crushed all comers at the USPF Nationals. I couldn't go on account of unavoidable work commitments. The boy I coached back home, young Kirk Karwoski, made his first IPF world team in 1990. I had desperately wanted to go and to coach Kirk in his first world championships. I wasn't able to and Kirk lost the world championship by two kilograms, not quite five pounds; he lost to the multi-time defending world champion Kristo Vilmi. I kicked myself in the ass after Kirk's razor-thin loss – I knew that my presence would have most assuredly been worth five pounds. The following year, when offered the slot, I accepted and made the trip; I would be there as an active participant at my boy's coronation. Kirk's first trip to the 1990 world championships had taken some strange twists. It started at the 1990 USPF national championships. John Black had assembled a mighty cast of lifters: Phil Hile, the dwarf terminator, at 123; Lamar Gant, arguably the greatest powerlifter of all time, at 132; at 165 IPF champion Dan Austin; in the heavier classes we'd have Ed Coan, Joe Ladnier, Willie Bell, Eric Arnold, Mark Chaillet, Mike Hall, Thor Kritsky and finally, Kirk.

Only the mighty Armed Forces powerlifting squad (top lifters taken from three service branches) could rival Black's. Multi-time world champion Gene "The Machine" Bell anchored the

Armed Forces Team. Gene was the only man alive that deserved to be mentioned in the same breath as Coan and Lamar. Kirk showed up for the 1990 national powerlifting championships prepared for a death-duel battle in the 275-pound class with national champion Calvin Smith. At this stage in both men's careers, Calvin was more than capable of handling Kirk. Karwoski was still maturing and would not achieve true greatness for another three years. When I began working with Kirk, he was a doughy, misshapen, bottom-heavy youngster. He had a great squat despite sloppy, horrible technique, a so-so bench press and mediocre deadlift.

Kirk pushed his bodyweight up to 270 pounds and his lifts skyrocketed. Karwoski's national-level squat was suddenly world-record level; his formerly sub-par bench press (420 at 242) shot up to 500-520. I had taken him to visit bench press maestro Ken Fantano and Kenny had tossed Kirk's current technique right out the window. "Inefficient, son," was how the stoic Kenny phrased it. Ken gave Kirk the "underground" Fantano bench press technique. Ken had done a dead-stop double with 633 pounds without a shirt, and had created two other 600-pound raw benchers in his 100-member gym. Kenny knew his shit, and his technique fit Kirk like a glove. His legs grew monstrous as his squat pushed his deadlift way up: when he got 700 we knew we were contenders for USPF 275-pound class national title.

We arrived at the 1990 national powerlifting championships and I met with John Black to talk team strategy. John related that current superheavyweight national champion Mike Hall had injured himself in training and had pulled out of the competition. John was pulling his hair out trying to come up with a replacement superheavyweight lifter for Black's team – my mind was racing a million miles an hour. I had a good working knowledge of all the class contenders and their capacities in any given weight class. In mental computer mode, I quickly ran through the 275/super possibilities and said to John, "Put Kirk down as our superheavyweight entry. He might beat Calvin Smith and he might not – he damn well can beat any of the other superheavyweights." John scrunched up his face and looked at me quizzically. He then relaxed, shrugged his shoulders and said, "That's a hell of an idea!"

Kirk won his first (of seven straight) national championships as a superheavyweight lifter. Again, this was a kid that a year before was a good, not great, 242-pound lifter – now 12 months later he was on the world team as a superheavyweight. The final weird twist came when during the space between the national championships and the world championships, Calvin Smith, a monster dude, was having trouble getting his weight down to 275. He suggested to Kirk that they switch weight classes, so Kirk lifted in the 275 weight class at the world's and lost to Vilmi by two kilograms. Calvin lifted as a superheavyweight and didn't do so well. In the year between his loss to Vilmi and the next world championships, Karwoski found his stride. An American sprinter was once asked after breaking the world record in the 100-meter dash, what had accounted for his recent and sudden and dramatic improvement? "My performance finally caught up with my ego." And so it was with Kirk. Suddenly he was on fire and 50 pounds better than the rest of the world. Vilmi coincidentally decided to retire, pissing Karwoski off to no end; he had used retribution on Vilmi as training incitement all year long; now Vilmi "wussed out" depriving Kirk of the joy of "crushing and humiliating" the fearsome Finn.

Team USA met in NYC and took planes, boats, buses and taxis until we eventually arrived in dour and sour Sweden. At the time, it was not a friendly place towards American athletes. The Swedes are reserved and it seems laughing out loud in public places was frowned upon. Now here come a pack of swaggering American athletes, loud, boisterous and irreverent; we were treated with smirking disdain or with smug condescension. That was all right; we were so damned good that we wrapped

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up the world team title with our dominating combined performance in the 123, 132, 148, 165 and 181-pound classes on Day One. Day two was all gravy, and we crushed on day two as well.

The highlights of day one, for me, was my coaching Dan Austin as he won the 165-pound class and also won the champion-of-champions award, given to the best overall lifter at the world championships. Dan was a freaking steamroller. Yes, coaching Kirk to his first world championship on day two was important, but so many lifters had fled Kirk's class that he really won before the competition began; the actual meet for Kirk was a cakewalk. He didn't set any world records and was never in the slightest danger. So in that sense it was anticlimactic. This was his first world title. He'd win five more, all in a row. Then he got bored and quit. He could have won a dozen world titles, he was that good.

For me the high point of the competition was getting to coach a powerlifting hall-of-fame immortal, the perennial national and world champion, Dave "Super Man" Jacoby. I had watched Dave lift up close and personal for a half-dozen years. Everyone had taken their best shot at Jacoby during his reign as the King of the 242-pound class and no one could defeat him. An incredible array of topflight lifters had tried and failed to beat Dave, including Willie Bell, Joe Ladnier, Thor Kritsky, Kirk Karwoski and Carlton Snitken. Every one of the men listed set national and or world records in the 242-pound class, but to my knowledge Dave never set a single national or world record – Dave just won.

Dave Jacoby was a physical freak, in the best sense of the word. He was 5'7" to 5'9" (Dave wore poofy hair, so his exact height was hard to tell) with yard-wide shoulders, a tiny waist, huge arms, and great legs. He was the total package. Dave was actually a little tall for the class as Ladnier and Kirk were ushering in the era of the shorter, thicker 242-pound lifter. Dave was relatively tall with small joints; he was more bodybuilder-like. Still, one look at him even in street clothes and it was like, "Oh yeah, no confusion or question about how or why he hoists the weights that he does." Dave looked like Tarzan and lifted like Tarzan. Dave's specialty was the three-lift total, the combination of the best efforts in each of three powerlifts, the squat, bench press and deadlift. The winner was determined by the best aggregate total. When it came time to total up the three lifts, Dave Jacoby always ended up standing on the 1st place pedestal at the national or world championships.

While Dave never equaled or exceeded John Kuc's monumental 2,204 total record (done in 1980 and consisting of an 832 squat, 501 bench press and 876 deadlift), Dave came within a whisker (2,175) and he could post 2,100 + any damned day of the week. Many a man had Jacoby down at sub-total, the aggregate of the squat and bench, only to have Dave pull close to 800 with his wide-stance, all leg, sumo deadlift.

Probably the greatest powerlifting battle I ever witnessed was Dave Jacoby versus Joe Ladnier for the national title in the 242-pound class at one of Larry Pacifico's Dayton Convention Center mega-meets. I had full backstage access and watched Dave, the defending national and world champion at 242, battle his toughest ever opponent, The Mighty Lad at his mighty awesome peak. Ladnier was perhaps the most genetically gifted lifter I ever saw. At the time of the Jacoby battle, Joe was all of 21 years of age.

Joe had battled ferociously for two competitive seasons in the 220-pound weight class against the likes of his mentor, Larry Pacifico, and Larry's arch enemy Jim Cash – now add Fred "Dr. Squat" Hatfield to the 220 mix. The Lad lost to Cash at the nationals and lost to Fred at the world championships. Joe was done with the 220 class and decided to add even more muscle to his already incredible body. Joe Ladnier was an extremely thick, squat, well-proportioned muscular dude; he was short in height with low bodyfat. At 198 he was thick and veiny, like a pro bodybuilder; at 220

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he morphed into gigantic. When he showed up at the nationals weighing 235, people were shocked stupid: all the other competitors in the 242-pound class took one look at Lad and conceded. He was thick yet ripped, scary, bordering on sci-fi.

Dave was not intimidated. Or if he was, he didn't show it, and the backstage insiders were looking for any hints. Both Ladnier and Dave squatted using an incredibly wide-stance with bolt upright torsos. I called this style the "sumo-squat" technique. Both men would step back from the squat rack with 850 + on their back and then with the left leg take a big-ass step to the left, then with the right leg take a big-ass step to the right – then they would take another small step to the left and yet another small step to the right. Now set up and ready to squat, these men would then dip below parallel using this seam-splitting stance. Dunk and arise, using thigh power and thigh power alone – hence, each man had humongous thighs. In those days a squat better be unquestionably below parallel or it was flunked.

Anyway, it seemed the lead changed hands on every lift as Dave would make a lift and then the Lad would top it. Finally it came down to the deadlifts and the lead changed hands on every deadlift. The packed house was going crazy – this was an informed crowd and Dave was from Ohio. Joe was Larry's boy and Larry was Ohio personified, ergo the audience had split allegiance. Jacoby had stage presence: you could tell he was a quiet, centered guy by the conservative way he dressed, the quiet way he talked and the fact that he never partied with the boys. He seemed real straight, but in a good way. Now on the platform Dave, with his Clark Kent glasses, would morph into Powerlifting Superman. First, you got to see him stripped down for battle; gone were the oversized, modest madras shirts and jeans; in his lifting gear Jacoby was a freaky weird monster, his glasses making him look like a muscled-up nerd. The announcer would call his name and everything would stop: here was The Man, the multi-time defending world champion, and he was up to bat.

Everyone sat up when he would bound out from backstage wearing an electrified expression; the difference between normal Dave and powerlifting Dave was mind-blowing; he'd bounce from foot to foot to foot as he chalked up; when he'd applied just the right amount of chalk, he'd turn to the left where his old friend and longtime coach Pep Wahl stood. Pep would be whispering last minute lifting instructions to Dave when suddenly he would stop bouncing and look Pep straight in the eye. Pep would then slap the shit out of Dave's face. His slap was so hard the "crack!" could be heard for twenty rows. Pep's slap left a handprint on Jacoby's face. Dave Jacoby would get slapped in order to become enraged, enraged by the pain and effrontery. Dave would growl, crouch, spin and attack the barbell, be it in the squat rack, on the bench supports or sitting on the ground waiting to be deadlifted.

Keep in mind that in those days in the heavier weight classes it was easier to win the world title at the world championships than it was to win the US nationals. Jacoby pulled a clutch, third attempt 780 deadlift, and in doing so retook the lead from the Lad. Joe had one final attempt left: he needed 804 to retake the lead and win the nationals. Joe came out to cheers and exhortations, people were on their feet. This lift was for all the marbles. Joe then made one of the gutsiest deadlifts in the history of the sport, pulling 804 to lockout with excruciating slowness.... his death-grip talons dug fingerprints into the chromium steel...he locked the weight out to thunderous applause – a broad smile crossed his face – he replaced the bar to the platform and the crowd gasped just as Joe was about to erupt in celebration. *The lift had been turned down 2 to 1 by the three referees.* Bad call, boys.

I stood 20 feet from Joe as he made the lift with an unobstructed view. To me the lift was fine and I would have passed it. Joe's face contorted in pain when he saw the two red lights. I would not have blamed him had he gone berserk and murdered the nearest red-light referee. Had he, he would

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be getting out of jail about now, in 2013. Joe grimaced, shook his head and strode offstage. Jacoby had dodged a bullet. This Cat had nine lives.

At the 1991 world championships in Orebro, Sweden, Dave and I did battle together.

Next, Part II: Jacoby engages in power brinksmanship at world championships with me as his coach...

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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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