

Starting Strength

Lamar Gant and Joe Bradley: The Tiny Giants

by
Marty Gallagher

Lamar Gant is the only powerlifter in history that can be mentioned in the same breath as Ed Coan. Lamar captured sixteen IPF world championships, the most ever by any lifter. For those of you non-lifters reading this, the IPF, the International Powerlifting Federation, is the only powerlifting federation that matters or that has ever mattered – all the other various power federations are basically regional outfits that stage “national” and “world” championships. Nowadays anyone can become a world champion if you pick the right organization. Being a world champion powerlifter is about as prestigious as getting a “participation trophy” in elementary school. One ridiculous example comes to mind: a certain meet promoter, a 54-year-old man lifting in the 181-pound class with a 300-pound bench press wearing a bench shirt, had the nerve to have the meet announcer (his wife) at his “world championships” pompously announce every time he strode onto the platform that this fool was a “sixteen-time world champion.”

I confronted him on this sacrilege and he became mortally offended that I had taken exception to his blatant bullshit. His irate response was quite well thought out. “For the past four years at our World Championships (in this case, the world championships of Nevada) I have entered and won 1.) The three-lift over-50 division, 2.) The lifetime drug-free over-50 division, 3.) The over-50 shirt-wearing bench press division, 4.) the over-50 deadlift division. Thus, I simultaneously win four world championships in four categories at every world championship meet, and this is my fifth year.” He racked up three more “world championships” at this particular competition, and this serves as the perfect illustration of why powerlifting is so sick and is (deservedly) on life-support. When you dilute national and world titles in order to make money, you commit athletic suicide. These “national” and “world championship” competitions are held by every jive federation and are used to lure in competitors to generate MONEY. In this pathetic day and age, meet promoters make their money from entry fees: there are no paying customers buying admission, there are no sponsors and there is zero revenue to be made other than by milking the lifters.

Each lifter has to pay an entry fee, on average \$75 to \$100 dollars; you have to “join” the organization for another \$50 to \$75; the promoter then creates as many subdivisions as possible and allows lifters to enter these divisions simultaneously. A savvy meet promoter can easily generate \$300

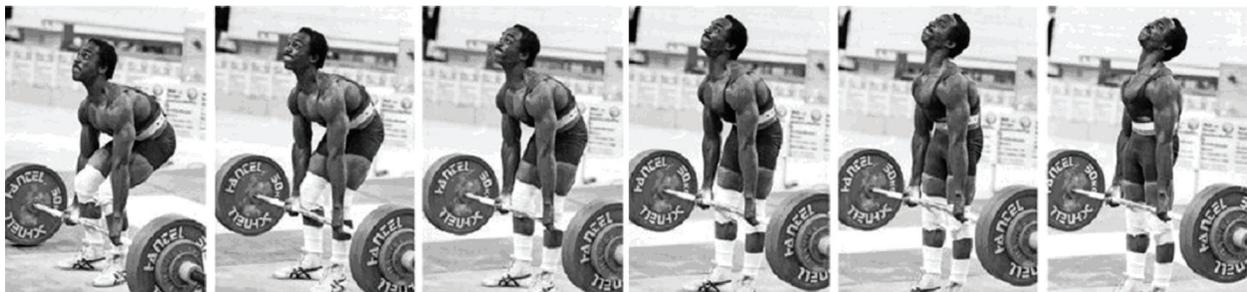
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per lifter. Now add the lure of becoming a national or world champion – with a \$25 trophy or medal to prove it – and you have a financial bonanza for those promoters that can draw enough lifters. Those of us in the know derisively call these puny power organizations that stage these faux national and world championships, “The World Championships of Pennsylvania,” or “The World Championships of Missouri,” or the World Championships of wherever they happen to be held. Some of the larger splinter organizations actually draw a few foreign lifters and perhaps some lifters from other parts of the United States; but the largest worldwide participation and the tightest, strictest judging in the world occurs in the IPF.

Back in the early decades of powerlifting, from the 1960s up until the mid-1980s, there was ONE national powerlifting organization: the United States Powerlifting Federation (USPF) and only ONE international powerlifting organization, the International Powerlifting Federation. Winning the IPF world title meant something. It still does. Lamar Gant lifted when there was only one national and international federation and won more IPF world titles than any man in history. That alone ensures his powerlifting immortality. But there is a lot more to the Lamar story: in addition to his longevity, Lamar set individual world records that have stood for decades and that may never be exceeded. His 688-pound world record deadlift made while lifting in the 132-pound class is arguably the greatest single powerlift ever made; the only rival to this lift would be Ed Coan’s 900 deadlift done while Ed weighed 219 pounds. No one-trick-pony, Lamar has held the world record in both the squat and the bench press: he officially bench pressed 336 without a shirt in a drug tested national championships weighing 129 pounds, and squatted 595 as a 132-pounder, this wearing a first generation Zangas SuperSuit (worthless), a belt, and old-time Marathon knee wraps.

Lamar was born in 1957 and was inducted into the International Powerlifting Federation Hall of Fame in 1980. He set his first world record in 1974 at age fifteen by deadlifting 525 pounds at a bodyweight of 123 pounds. In 1985 he became the first man to deadlift five times his own bodyweight when he pulled 661 pounds weighing 130 pounds. His 688 deadlift weighing 130 is 5.3 times bodyweight and is untouchable. This lift was done after he squatted 550 and benched 318.

Another perversion of our modern era is emergence of the bench press and deadlift specialist; these men are not powerlifters and their lifts should never be compared to powerlifting records set in full meets. The specialist does not pre-fatigue erectors, upper thighs and back muscles squatting before deadlifting; this allows the specialist to use all his available strength for a single lift. Deadlift specialists love to compare their lifts to the full-meet deadlifters of yesteryear. Single-lift records should never be compared to powerlifting records. Coan and Wohleber both squatted 960 before pulling 900; Kuc



The greatest deadlifter of all-time (excepting Ed Coan) shows how it’s done. Critics make much ado over Lamar’s scoliosis, (collapsible spine) long arms and long legs – a decided deadlift advantage – yet gloss over the fact that he set world records in both the squat and the bench press, lifts where his physical advantages become distinct disadvantages.

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squatted 832 before pulling 876. What do you suppose these men could have deadlifted in deadlift-only competitions? Another modern specialist trick: use an ultra-whippy bar that allows the lifter to pull four inches upward before all the plates leave the floor. This cheat trick radically increases starting leverage and makes breaking the bar off the floor way easier.

Lamar still holds the all-time world record in the deadlift at both 123 and 132, both lifts done 25+ years ago. At 123 pounds he benched 314 (shirtless,) pulled a 638 deadlift and made a 541 squat. At 132 he officially squatted 595. Lamar made an incredible 715-pound training deadlift and a flawless 352 training bench. He was untouchable and he knew it. He could beat the best in the world with a 70% effort and he would be the first to admit that mid-career he began to coast. Every great champion needs a great opponent as a great opponent ups the champion's game. In 1979 the federal penal system produced the man that would propel Lamar to stratospheric greatness: Lamar Gant, the powerlifting Ali, came face-to-face with his very own Joe Frazier: Joe Bradley.

At the 1980 World Series of Powerlifting Lamar Gant got the shock of his young life when he suffered his first defeat since winning his first world championship. "Mighty" Joe Bradley appeared out of nowhere and beat the unbeatable Lamar Gant. Bradley was a dead-end kid, dropping out of school in the 10th grade and soon afterward imprisoned for his part in an armed robbery. He was nineteen. While serving his five-year stretch, Joe started pumping iron. The 4-foot-11 Bradley morphed into one of the top powerlifters in the world nearly overnight. He had been scheduled for a September release from prison in 1979, but he was set free early, in June, to attend the Senior National Powerlifting Championships. At the World Championships in Arlington, Texas in 1980, Bradley broke the world record for squat and bench press in the 132-pound class: he squatted a mind-blowing 650 pounds, shattering the world record by 50 pounds; he then backed this up with an equally stratospheric 397-pound bench press. Joe beat a shell-shocked Lamar Gant. It was the power equivalent of Frazier pummeling Ali on March 8, 1971 in the "Fight of the Century" at Madison Square Garden. Joe Bradley eventually became the first man to bench press three times bodyweight when he pushed 402 pounds weighing 132. The bench shirt had not yet been invented.

Lamar was shocked stupid by this defeat, and it reinvigorated the man and his lifting; all of his best lifts at 132 occurred after his loss. Between the two men they set records that no one to this day has surpassed, if limited to the equipment used by these men and the strictness in judging they were subjected to. Lamar lifted for Black's Gym when I (along with Bob Fortenbaugh) coached Black's to five national team titles. While at the USPF National Championships, Lamar and I went to lunch. I asked Lamar why he used his patented "super-slow" lowering tactic before every deadlift. Before a deadlift he would position himself over the barbell and then begin a slow-motion descent wherein he would squeeze down to the barbell, grip and then pull. "I am building tension where there is none," he said by way of explanation. "Here, check this out." He stood up next to the table where we were eating and asked me to put one hand on his left trap and the other on his left erector: he stood and began to lower as if attempting to deadlift. His trap and erector muscles went



Mighty Joe Bradley squats 650 weighing 130: the Frazier to Lamar's Ali.

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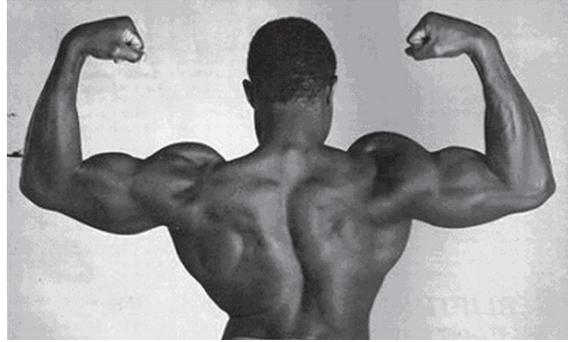
from soft as a baby's to the hardest, tightest, leanest, most fat free muscles I have ever felt.

Lamar Gant suffered from spinal scoliosis: when he deadlifted and arrived at full and complete lockout, his curved spine and long arms enabled him to stand erect with the barbell resting in final finished position just over his kneecaps. He and another deadlift star of yesteryear, Vince Anello, had the "lowest" fully locked final deadlift bar position of any international-level lifters in history. A low lockout is obviously a huge advantage in that the rep stroke (the distance a payload is moved from the start to the final position) is dramatically shortened. A shorter rep stroke is always a powerlifting advantage. In the bench press the barrel-chested short-armed bench presser has the advantage. Texas powerhouse Ronnie Ray was the first man to officially bench press over 500 weighing less than 200. His short arms, combined with his massive thick chest and his wide bench press grip, enabled Ronnie to push the barbell approximately one foot to achieve full and complete bench lockout.

On the other hand, when Ray deadlifted, the barbell at lockout literally hit his private parts; for this reason he was a mediocre (at best) deadlifter. The greatness of Lamar was that at various times he also held world records in the bench press. His bench press arch was amazing. From an anatomical and structural vantage point, Gant was long-legged with a short torso – hardly ideal for squatting where short legs, particularly short femurs, offer the best leverage. Yet Lamar also set world records in the squat. The power intelligentsia (a contradiction in terms if there ever was one) dismissively labeled Lamar a "genetic freak," and ergo, his Old School training methods therefore have zero relevance for normal individuals. This was and still is shortsighted and ridiculous – we have no lessons to learn from one of the greatest lifters in history? So we should take our training and strength cues from whom? Men that could not carry Lamar's proverbial gym bag? How Lamar trained was simple and direct: hit each lift once a week using straight-line periodization.

Mighty Mite Joe Bradley was shrouded in mystery. He burst onto the scene and faded away just as quickly. Initially he was mentored by two iron icons; both men at the time were operating out of the University of Wisconsin. Fred "Dr. Squat" Hatfield and Jeff Everson recognized Bradley's talent the instant they saw it. Joe benefited tremendously from their training strategies and competition coaching. Ultimately Joe Bradley's demons got the best of him and he literally disappeared. He was a man that spent most of his teen and adult life in prison. He became a raging alcoholic by age 20 and dabbled in hard drugs on and off (mostly "on") until age 50. Yet despite crippling habits, terrible nutrition, lack of sleep, stress and living a life of crime and physical danger (being a 4-foot-11, 130-pound black man living in crime infested ghettos) his genetics, training and fearlessness overcame all the massive negatives and allowed him to set world records in the squat and raw bench press records that have yet to be equaled.

The greatness of Lamar Gant cannot be overstated. From a longevity perspective, here is a man that set his first world record at age 15 and his last world record 18 years later. Here is a man that won 16 IPF world titles and whose best deadlifts were, are, and forever shall be, untouchable. The second best 132-pound deadlift of all time is over 75 pounds behind Lamar's 688 mark – the biggest



The man with the stainless-steel back muscles: His scoliosis is visible and apparent. Check out the depth and thickness of the spinal erectors. He displays lots of lats and delts.

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poundage differential for any record in any weight class. No one can touch his 595 squat using the gear of the day and only Mighty Joe Bradley's 650 squat trumps Lamar's. Joe B's 400 raw bench has never been exceeded, and these two tiny titans were, apparently, a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon that we shall likely never see again. Lamar retired at age 33 and could have won ten more IPF world championships had he wanted. He retired on top, and in our age of Lilliputians and dwarfs, this Tiny Giant grows larger and larger the further he fades in our rearview mirror.

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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