

Starting Strength

George Ernie Pickett (Pt. 10)

The Competition

by

Bill Starr

Once Smitty and I started going to the competitions, our days grew considerably longer. We would get up, shower, have a huge breakfast prepared by Victoria, pack a change of clothes, and head out to the bus stop, a twenty-minute walk from the Dolleros house where we were staying.

The bus schedule was a joke and we often waited forty-five minutes before catching one to the Villa Olímpico. Once there, we would visit with the team in their dorm room, grab a bite of lunch at the dining hall, and then go wait for the shuttle to take us to the training center, which was located on the campus of the University of Mexico City. The American team trained from 2-4 pm. We tried to get to the training center a bit early so the athletes could get all their warm-ups out of the way before hitting the weights. Although there were twenty-two platforms, there were four other countries besides us getting in their final sessions.

As soon as everyone finished their workouts, it was back to the Olympic Village to shower, change clothes, eat a quick meal at the dining hall, then off to another bus stop that would take us to the site of the competitions, the Insurentes Theatre. While I didn't get to see all of the sports venues, I have to believe that the Insurentes Theatre was the most magnificent of all. The front of the building was one huge multicolored mosaic, exquisitely done. The interior was also beautiful. It brought to mind the lavish opera houses I had seen in movies. It was, indeed, the perfect lifting set-up. The warm-up room had four platforms, a scoreboard, and a television showing the ongoing lifting on stage. Just off the warm-up room was a wide hallway filled with over a dozen cots. In addition, separate rooms were provided for the teams so that a lifter could seclude himself as he prepared for the competition if he chose to do so. Refreshments were circulated constantly. A masseur and chiropractor were on hand in the event that any lifter wanted their services.

The only drawback to the place was it was far too small to accommodate the number of people who wanted tickets, but the plus side of that was, every seat in the house afforded a splendid view of the action.

There were two sessions for each weight class. The A-session weighed in at 9 am and began lifting at 10. The B-session, weighed in at 3 pm and lifted an hour later. None of the lifters on the American team bothered going to the bantamweight competitions. Same for Smitty and me. We were

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just getting into the rhythm of catching buses and hadn't got our schedule down pat as yet. No one on the American team would be at center stage until Wednesday when Russ Knipp and Freddie Lowe lifted.

But Smitty and I went to watch the lifting on Monday because we wanted to see the Miyake brothers perform. When we arrived at the Theatre, it was like homecoming. Joe Mills and Al Stack had driven all the way from Rhode Island. Ralph Countryman was there to shoot photos, many of which would eventually be in *S&H*. Rudy Sablo, Adam Swirz, John Scott, and Bob Hise Sr. also showed up, as did Bobby Hise and Jack Hill. The pair had told Ernie and me that they planned on painting houses to earn enough for plane fares plus enough to live on for the week in Mexico.

They both had passes, although I never found out how they obtained them. It was better, I decided, that I didn't know. That's how weak the security was at the Olympic Village. They would come and go as they pleased, eat in the dining hall and ride with us to and from the training center. They always kept a lookout for Terpak, knowing he would find some reason to bust them, but they didn't have to worry about being spotted by Terpak. After Smitty and I arrived, we only saw him one time at the training center. Then, all he did was walk around and talk with the foreign lifters and coaches.

Hector Solorzano from Venezuela was competing. He had spent several months in York and was very helpful to Smitty and me in getting over some of the language hurdles once we became involved with the various officials during the competitions. Charlie Herring of Fort Smith, Arkansas was also in attendance. Now, there were a lot of odd characters in the sport of weightlifting, but few could match the heavyweight. He parked himself in the second row of the Press Section every day. Officials would ask him for his pass (which he never had) and Charles would commence answering them in some incomprehensible babble. The officials would then bring over various interpreters: Russian, French, German, Polish, all with the same results – no dice. The officials would throw up their hands in frustration as Charlie provided them with a shit-eating Arkie grin, and keep shooting photos.

The spectators were still buzzing about the amazing finish in the bantamweight class the day before. Foldi, the Hungarian, had built up a considerable 22-lb. lead over his main rival, Nassir of Iran, going into the clean and jerks. And he had a strong clean and jerk, so it appeared he would waltz in for the gold. He made 297, then 308. Nassiri opened at 314 and to everyone's surprise, Foldi missed his third attempt with that poundage. This opened the door for the Iranian. He called for 330, 11 pounds over his own World Record. If he made it, he would knock Foldi from the top spot since he was the lighter man.

Mr. Hise told me that he made an easy clean and an even easier jerk and was the Olympic champion. Mr. Hise said the place went absolutely wild. Pandemonium broke out as the large crowd realized that they had witnessed one of the greatest clutch lifts of all time. The champion did a back flip to top off his stupendous feat of strength. Iranian flags were suddenly everywhere in the audience and the applause went on for a solid ten minutes. He deserved it. The confident Nassiri had equaled the highest lift made at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1932, made by the 276-lb. heavyweight Strassberger from Germany.

Smitty and I arrived in time to watch the best lifter in Mexico, Manuel Mateos, compete. The place was packed with Mexicans standing and screaming their support to the young lifter who had won the Teenage Nationals in 1966 West Paterson, NJ with a 685 total. He did well in the press, setting a new Teenage World Record with 264 and it brought the house down. But he couldn't keep pace in the quick lifts and finished last in the afternoon session. While Tommy Kono was the coach for the Mexican team and did have some input concerning Mateos's training, he was mostly coached by his

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father and Rene de la Cerdá, the prominent Mexican coach and official. He was only eighteen, so he had a very bright future ahead.

The Miyake brothers were odds-on favorites to take gold and silver. Yoshinobu, the oldest, and Yoshiyuki, started out strong in the presses and moved further ahead in the snatches. They both employed a unique version of the squat snatch. It was called “frog style” because they started the lift with their heels together. They were fast as lightning and solid as rocks once the bar was fixed overhead. The older Miyake made only his opener with 259, then failed twice with 270, which would have equaled his own Olympic record. Younger brother Yoshiyuki made his first of two mental mistakes that ended up costing him dearly. After getting three white lights for his second attempt with 253, he dropped the bar and officials disqualified that lift. So he had to take it again and suddenly found himself in a tie for second with Shanidze of Russia. Yet he was only 5½ lbs. behind his brother.

In the clean and jerks, Yoshiyuki looked like he was back in control, but after jerking 325, he once again lost his concentration and dropped the bar. Another disqualification and he had to take the 325 again to make sure he won a medal. Shanidze took full advantage of his opponent’s mistake and made a solid 330 to snatch the silver medal from the Japanese lifter. Then the Russian featherweight took a shot at 336 to tie Ike Berger’s record but it was too much for him on this day. The older Miyake took the gold with his 336 success, then tried 341 to set a new Olympic mark. He failed.

But the meet was not over. The two Polish lifters also went after Ike’s record. Wojnowski made 308 and 330, then called for 341. Again, too much. The final lifter in this competition was Nowak. The powerful Pole went full out. After making an easy opener with 325, he called for an incredible 352. If he made it he would win and establish a new Olympic and World Record. He gave it a good shot twice, but it was a tad more than he could handle.

So Japan picked up eleven team points and Russia gained a valuable five that they really hadn’t expected. Team scoring was 7-5-4-3-2-1. And Berger’s record survived and the featherweights would have to wait another four years to take another crack at it.

Ike was in attendance. But unlike the rest of the spectators at the Insurentes Theatre, he was there to turn a quick buck. “Betcha Berger” was always looking for some way to make money. His scheme in Mexico City was to buy up as many tickets for the last two classes as he possibly could. He was especially interested in getting as many tickets for the heavyweight class as he could get his hands on, because of the limited capacity of the lifting site and knowing that the majority of the people who were not diehard fans always wanted to see the biggest and strongest lifters compete.

He was able to corner the market on tickets for the final night because he knew that when sports enthusiasts bought tickets for their favorite event, or events, they also were required to buy additional tickets for the less popular sports. In other words, those that wanted to see the premier events – track and field, swimming, and gymnastics – also ended up with tickets to less popular events, such as shooting, equestrian, fencing, and weightlifting.

So Ike spent his days and nights asking everyone he encountered if they had tickets for the final two days of lifting and if they planned to use them. Nearly all of the fans of other sports were not that interested in seeing any weightlifting, so he got the unwanted tickets at bargain basement prices. On Friday night, when the 198ers took center stage, he tripled his investment, and when the heavyweights competed on Saturday night he increased his investment ten-fold.

I had seen Ike lift and was very impressed with his form and strength. I knew a good bit about his lifting background – he had won Olympic gold in the 132-lb. class in Melbourne in 1956 when

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he was only eighteen – but I never fully appreciated what a gifted strongman he really was until I saw him do something extraordinary in the training hall one afternoon.

Our lifters had finished their workouts and went seeking some liquid refreshments. Smitty and I were standing next to one of the platforms talking about what we were going to do next. Ike walked in, came over to Smitty and they chatted for a while. Then Ike wandered around the huge training hall, checking out the loaded barbells on the multiple platforms. He stopped at one, studied the bar and plates, then stepped up to the bar, reached down and cleaned it in one smooth motion. He was in his street clothes and wearing loafers. He set the weight down on the platform, turned and left the training hall.

My mouth dropped open in amazement because he had just cleaned 308 cold and wearing a dress shirt and pants. The only other feat that I had ever seen that could compare with that lift was watching Bill March press 350 off the rack in his working clothes without any warm-ups.

Smitty and I didn't wait around for the awards ceremonies. We grabbed the first shuttle back to the Olympic Village, then waited to catch the last bus of the night back to our temporary residence. The last bus ran at 10 pm. Once at the Dolleros's, we put all our sweaty clothes in a basket by the door of our room, showered, and hit the racks. The next morning our clean, folded clothes would be in the basket outside our room. We would enjoy a large breakfast, pack our gym bags, and head out once again.

Only four lifters were going to train on Tuesday: Grippaldi, Bartholomew, Dube, and Ernie. And since they were all tapering down their workloads and intensity, the workouts were relatively short. Everyone but Phil. He went heavy on all three lifts. Few could get away with that just before a contest, but Phil was no ordinary lifter.

I noticed that quite a few of the foreign lifters were also handling some really heavy poundages. What it all boiled down to, I decided, was that if a lifter had established a solid enough foundation and could recover from an ultra-high workload, he could train much harder than someone with a much lighter volume and get away with it.

On the way back to the Olympic Village, Smitty was studying the program for the contest. He said to me, "Did you notice that the Japanese team has six of its seven lifters from the sixty-four Olympic team? Same for the Poles. Only Palinski is missing. Wojnowski took his spot. Our team does not have a single lifter who competed in Tokyo."

I said that I hadn't noticed that, but fully understood what he was implying. Experience is a huge factor in international competition and our team was sorely lacking in that category.

We got to the Insurentes Theatre in plenty of time to visit with some of our fellow Americans and watch the competition in the 148-class from start to finish. The lifter I wanted to see was Baszanowski. He was unique in that he squat snatched, but split cleaned. I wondered why he didn't use the split style when he snatched, because he went very low on the clean. His rear knee was almost touching the floor. Ernie joined Smitty and me because he too was a fan of the Polish lifter. The rest of the team, except for Dube, arrived just as the pressing got under way and we all sat in a group near the back of the theatre. Dube had come down with a case of Montezuma's Revenge, and he stayed in the dorm so that a bathroom would be close. I had told him to go to the clinic at the Village and ask the doctor for some Lomotil. He did, and the pills were working nicely, yet he didn't want to take any chances.

Baszanowski had just turned forty, but he controlled the lightweight class. There were many strong pressers in this class. Zielinski of Poland matched his teammate with a 297 press. Hatta of Japan also pressed that poundage. Bagocs, of Czechoslovakia, finished with 292, as did Tilev of Bulgaria.

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Then Baszanowski pulled away from the pack, finishing with a 297 snatch. Jalayer, representing Iran, pulled himself into contention with a solid 292 effort and Hatti held onto second place by making 281. Zielinski dropped to third after making 275, with Won of Korea in fourth but within shot of a medal.

Then Baszanowki sealed the deal with a 368 clean and jerk. The battle for second and third was fierce with Won, Hatta, Jalayer, and Zielinski in the hunt. Hatta could only manage 341, then Zielinski made a bone-on-bone 352 to push him over the Japanese lifter and also over Won who had done a fine job with 358. Jalayer opened with 363, going for the silver. He missed it, but got himself together and made it with power to spare. Then he went after 374 to set a World Record, but failed. After Baszanowki had secured the gold he asked for 380. Not on this night. His 964 total bettered the Olympic Total Record, which he held, and was just short of the World Record 969½. It was an impressive performance.

That night, after Smitty and I settled in our beds, Smitty said, "Starr, if those judges are as strict as they have been on the presses, our fellows may be in trouble. Everyone of them depends on a big number in the press. Freddie not as much as the others, but he still needs a strong press to be in contention for a medal."

"I agree, but there's nothing we can do about it. They can't alter their form now. Let's just hope we get friendly judges."

No one was training on Wednesday from the American team, Dube had planned on getting in a light session, but decided to save all his energy for the meet. His bout of diarrhea had tapped into his strength habit.

So Smitty and I just hung out with the team in the dorm. Then we ate a large meal at noon because we weren't going to be around the Village later on. This was the first day any members of our team were going to compete, in the 165s, and we wanted to get to the Insurentes Theatre early so Russ and Freddie could weigh in as soon as possible and get on with their warm-ups.

Both lifters appeared confident and ready to go against the best in the world. The favorite was Kurentsov of Russia. He had turned in a 1019 total at the European Championships. Ohuchi was the only other lifter in the field who had totaled over a thousand, so he was the best bet for the silver. But the bronze was up for grabs. If either Freddie or Russ could match or better the 969¾ they had done at the Olympic Trials, they might be able to grab that medal.

I was working with Freddie and Smitty handled Russ. After he had warmed up for the press, I said to Freddy, "Just think. It was almost exactly four years ago that I was helping you at the Marion Y, when you competed in your first meet." He nodded and I added, "You've sure come a long way in a short time, Freddie Lowe."

As Smitty had feared, the judging was very strict. The judges were turning down presses that appeared rock-solid to me. The coaches saw what was going on and started lowering opening attempts. But this, in itself, can have a negative effect on the athletes. It's as if the coach is saying, "I don't think your form is good enough to get past these judges."

I didn't lower Freddie's opener. It was the same weight that he started with at the Trials, 292. He made it, but it was shaky. Since this was his first international competition, it was understandable that he was very nervous. What he needed was to stick a strong press and get out of the blocks on a positive note. On his second attempt with 308, a poundage he had made at the Trials, he shot the bar too far out front and was unable to finish it. While he waited for his turn on platform, I reminded him to keep the bar closer to his head on the initial drive. He overcompensated, as is often the case. The bar did stay in close, too much so and he lost it behind his head.

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Freddie was not alone in failing to make a respectable lift in the press. None of the athletes did as well as they had in the past. Bakos of Hungary only made 303, Dittrich of Germany, Ohuchi of Japan, Lee of Korea, finished with 308, far below their best.

The battle for the top spot in the press came down to Kurentsov and Russ. Kurentsov started very conservatively at 319 and made it easily. Russ started at 325, same as he did at the Trials. Russ was usually solid as a rock in this lift, but the bar slowed down at the finish, which gave the judges a reason to turn it down. He had to take it again and this time it shot overhead. Kurentsov took 336, but it was turned down. He did get one white light, from the head judge, Artemyev of Russia. He made it cleanly on his third attempt. Russ called for 341, ten pounds less than his best. He gave it his best shot, but couldn't lock it out.

After the presses, Kurentsov was leading with 336, Knipp in second with 325, followed by Kittrich and Ohuchi with 308, Bakos with 303 and Freddie in seventh place with 292. The American lifters had dug a deep hole for themselves and would have to come up with some personal bests in the quick lifts in order to get on the podium.

Russ had very little time to get ready for the snatch since he had been the last to press and was starting with one of the lightest poundages, 270. He only had time for two warm-ups, 132 and 198, before running on the stage. He made it nicely then failed twice with 281. Freddie opened with 281 and failed. He came back and made it but was shaky on his attempt with 292 and he missed it as well. He needed that last lift badly.

Lee made 292, as did Bakos, and Dittrich finished with 286. That left Kurentsov and Ohuchi; the two favorites to battle it out. First up, the Russian with 297. I was watching his every move from the wings and was shocked to see him miss his opener. But not as shocked as the Russian coaches. They pulled their lifter backstage and read him the riot act. While I don't know any Russian, I could tell they were cursing him, and I did recognize the word "Siberia." He was following himself and damn if he didn't miss that weight again.

Now all hell broke loose. The Russian delegation was in a frenzy. Vorobiev grabbed Kurentsov by the arm, pulled him backstage to the warm-up area and had him snatch 286. I had been right behind the Russians, anxious to see how they handled this crisis. I had never imagined that having him snatch a weight nearly as heavy as the one he had missed twice would be the solution. Wearing a grim expression, Kurentsov hurried back to the platform, took a moment to catch his breath and chalk up, then he proceeded to power snatch that 297.

I chuckled under my breath, thinking that there's nothing like fear as a motivator. Had he missed that final attempt, there was a good chance that Kurentsov would never be on another international team. The Russians were deep enough in talent to be able to do just that. And perhaps "Siberia" was not just an idle threat. There was no way under the sun to threaten an American lifter with any proposal strong enough to make him afraid for his future.

The crowd gave Kurentsov a standing ovation for his comeback, although none in the audience knew of what went on backstage. I believe the long wait hurt Ohuchi. His best snatch was 330. He missed his first attempt at 308, then made it. He failed with 319, and so missed a golden opportunity to gain ground on the Russian.

Going into the clean and jerks, Kurentsov led with 633, Ohuchi 617½, Lee 600¾, Knipp 595, Dittrich 595, Bakos, 595, and Lowe at 573.

Freddie and Russ were not happy with their performances so far, but Smitty and I told Russ that he still had a chance to gain a medal and Freddy could still pick up some team points for the US

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if they came through with big numbers in the clean and jerk. This was not a strong lift for Russ, but it was for Freddy. He had done 395 while training in Denver.

Of the leaders, Russ started first in the clean and jerks, making 358. Bakos, Lee, and Dittrich all succeeded with 363. Knipp took 369 to move ahead of Bakos and Dittrich. He struggled with the jerk, as he always did, but held it for the count. There were then eight failures at 374 after Ohuchi made it on his first attempt. Fred opened with that poundage and missed the clean. On his second try, he missed the jerk. He was definitely not having one of his better days. He had some time to rest and gather himself before his final attempt with this pesky weight.

I urged him to simply concentrate on his form and not be concerned with how much was on the bar. He was obviously plenty strong. It was his ragged technique that was causing him difficulty. "Make this, so you can say you finished the meet," I told him. And that's what he did. I was extremely proud of him for not giving up.

Russ also failed at this weight. So did Bakos, but he had one attempt left. If he made this weight, he would take third. A miss would give Russ the bronze medal. But the Hungarian was not to be denied, and he had himself an Olympic medal.

Although Kurentsov had a commanding lead, his failures in the snatch gave Ohuchi hope that he could overtake the Russian in the clean and jerk. Kurentsov opened with a solid 385. Ohuchi took it for his second attempt and was successful. Then he waited, hoping that Kurentsov would not make more. It was a false hope because Kurentsov was on fire. He rammed up 402 to break Zdrazila's Olympic Record of 391, and he was not done yet. He called for 413½. He made a beautiful success with this stupendous poundage and set a new Olympic total along with his gold medal. It boggles the mind to think what he would have totaled if he hadn't sputtered on the snatches and presses.

As I thought about what had just happened, it occurred to me that all the top lifters in this class had sub-par performances. Ohuchi was far below his best, making only one press, one snatch, and two clean and jerks. Dittrich made one press, two snatches, and one clean and jerk. Even the winner did poorly in the press and snatch before he put it in high gear on the clean and jerks. Unfortunately for the American team, Freddy barely got by by making three lifts total and Russ only made four. If Russ had made just one more lift, he would have medaled.

I was bummed out. I had really wanted both of the Americans to be at their very best. That had not happened, and I wondered what Smitty and I could have done better to improve their performances. The answer came – nothing. Their training had been better than good, their confidences were high, and they came to the contest full of vigor and expectation. I really thought the extra tight judging on the press set the mood for the entire meet, but the judges never showed any favoritism that I could see. Hell, maybe everyone's biorhythm was down or crossing. I wasn't going to come up with an answer to my question so I let it drop. Smitty and I had five more lifters to deal with and they needed to be our priority.

Freddie and Russ showed a lot of class in their defeats. After they had packed their gym bags, they congratulated the winners and shook hands with all the other contestants and coaches. It was a gesture rarely seen on the international stage. The other members of the team came backstage and did their best to console their teammates. Then Ernie walked over to me and said, "Whadda you think?"

I replied, "They just had an off night. We've all had them. It's just too bad they were both off tonight." Wanting to change the subject, I suggested, "Let's go out front. I'm starved." I didn't want to go through the crowd, so we went out a side door, and walked around to the front of the Theatre where there was a row of food carts. All were doing a brisk business. I bought four tacos and wolfed them down along with a large smoothie made with ice cream and orange juice. Ernie thought I was nuts for

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eating food off the street, as he called it, but I had been doing it since I arrived and had experienced no problems with my digestive system. The Lomotil which I took daily was doing its job.

Ernie asked "You think we should make some changes in my attempts? I mean, if the judging is as strict for the heavyweights as it was today, it might be a good idea, especially in the press."

"It's up to you. If you'd feel better starting with less than what we've been planning on, four twenty-four, that's what we'll do. Get a solid lift in, then we can go after the bigger numbers. But I don't want you to get in negative headset. There's not a thing you can do about the judging. What you have to focus on is your lifts and particularly your form. You've been getting stronger this entire week and you've improved your snatch and jerks considerably. You're as ready as you're going to get. You still want to do that short session tomorrow?"

"Sure, I think that helped me a lot at the Trials."

We walked around to the back where the shuttles to the Village were parked, got in one with the rest of the team and rode silently in the night. When Smitty and I got out, we said our goodbyes and hurried to the bus stop. It was a night of bad luck. For the first time since we had been catching the bus to take us up Insurentes Avenue, it had been on time and we had missed it. Since there was no bus service after 10 pm we considered our options.

"The Canadians offered to let us sleep in their dorm. They have extra beds." There were only three Canadian lifters: Pierre St. Jean, Paul Bjarnason, and Aldo Roy.

"I'd rather try and catch a cab," Smitty replied. "If we stay here tonight, we'll have to go back to the Dolleros's tomorrow morning to get a change of clothes, then come right back to the Village."

I agreed. We started walking up Insurentes Avenue searching for a cab. We had gone three blocks when a car pulled over to the curb and a lady said in broken English, "You need a lift?"

"We do indeed," Smitty said and explained our quandary to the two women in the front seat. When he finished, the driver said, "Get in, we're headed that way."

Smitty lost no time in opening the back door. We climbed in, breathing long sighs of relief. Smitty, being extremely gregarious, immediately engaged in conversations with the two ladies. I guessed that they were in their mid-twenties and on their way to a party. They were decked out in fine dresses with large earrings and plenty of makeup. The driver's name was Maria and her companion was Andrea. I was almost right – they were on their way to a nightclub, which, as it turned out, was in the same area of the city as the Dolleros's house. They both worked as secretaries at the University.

When Smitty informed them that we were coaches for the American weightlifting team, they were very impressed and invited us to join them for a night of dancing. Smitty thanked them for the invite but told them we were completely worn out, dirty, and had a hard day ahead of us.

Maria delivered us to our destination. When Smitty got out, he walked to the driver's open window and handed Maria a ten-dollar greenback. She refused the money, saying it had been a pleasure helping members of the American Olympic team. So Smitty leaned in the window and kissed her on the cheek. She drove away and we could hear the two giggling.

I laughed as well and realized that I had been in a really sour mood. After we took long, hot showers and settled in our beds, I said to Smitty, "This coaching is a hell of a lot harder than I expected it to be. We suffer through every attempt of our lifters. When they miss, I feel terrible. It's a lot harder, in my opinion, than lifting in a meet. Then, at least I have some control of the outcome."

"I could have told you that. And when you're working with a team, like we are, you go through the agony and letdowns several days in a row. We've got another tough one tomorrow. Puleo is our best bet for a gold."

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We were both too keyed up to sleep and spent the next hour going over what had happened that day at the lifting venue. We replayed every lift Freddie and Russ had attempted and marveled at the way the Russians had set a fire under Kurentsov. Finally, we drifted off, but my dreams that night consisted of only one subject – the competition of the middleweight class at the Insurentes Theatre.

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