

# Starting Strength

## The Quest for the Realignment of the Sport of Powerlifting

by

**Michael Ferguson**

With the Commonwealth Games (CWG) in Glasgow, Scotland having come to a close not too long ago in early August 2014, there have been a number of things I have reflected steadily upon since. Firstly, what an exhilarating Games it was. The coverage was really memorable, and this combined with my home city as the hosts likely led me to spend more hours in front of the TV over this two-week period than in the first six months of 2014! When I did sporadically venture out of my house it was usually to go to one of the events or for a “swally” (as we Scots like to call it) in the animated West End, the real centre of the festivities. I do not doubt Glasgow City Council’s widely promoted “Legacy” goals either – who could not be inspired by such scenes over one two week period? Our Scottish athletes won more medals than they ever have, with a total of 53 and a 4th place finish in the final rankings. As a city we are doing all we can to make sure the Games have a resounding, long-lasting domino effect on development in Scotland. I sure hope so!

My joyous disposition was soon stifled, though, when I was brought from this sport-induced trance to quickly recall that Powerlifting is of course not part of these – to us Powerlifters – “lucky sports.” I have to be completely up front here: it does frustrate and aggravate me that Powerlifting has still not achieved recognition for inclusion in the CWG or the illusive Olympics. This is genuinely not my selfish or biased reasoning. It is instead because, quite simply, I know it could provide a different type of entertainment for viewers, one much different from Olympic Weightlifting and something our top athletes deserve. While I understand that Powerlifting’s omission is not without its reasons, in this article I will delve into this murky melting pot of exclusion.

Powerlifting itself, in comparison to many other sports, is relatively new, having only originated in the 1960s and formalized in the 1970s. The world’s main federation, the International Powerlifting Federation (IPF), was founded in 1971 and has grown through to its present day position as the premiere international Powerlifting organization (GBPF 2014a).

For the purpose of this article I will reference and discuss only the IPF. The reasons for this are straightforward enough; it is the largest Powerlifting federation in the world, with over one hundred and ten member countries (enough to make IOC recognition a viable option). It is also arguably the only international federation with a reputation in official world sporting circles and standing with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Moreover, since 2012, the IPF has been a member of “Sport

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Accord” (the former “General Assembly of International Sports Federations” – GAISF), is aligned with the “Anti-Doping Organization” (ADO) and recognised by the “World Anti-Doping Agency” (WADA) for its Anti-Doping programme. Crucially, the IPF has also been part of the “International World Games Association” (IWGA) since its formation in 1981 and competes in the World Games (WG) which “operates under patronage of the IOC” (Kantor 2011). Powerlifting is of course an International Paralympic Committee recognised sport as well.



*Figure 1.* Australian Jordan Dayes (52kg class) squatting at June’s IPF World Classic Championships 2014.

The above associations are significant because a number of other federations exist as purported representatives of the sport. These other federations, though, do not have any relationship with or membership in the above organisations, are fragmented, and arguably lack sporting or moral credibility in comparison due to these facts.

However, as promising as the above list of forged relationships, schmoozing, agency associations and memberships sound for the IPF and Powerlifting itself, a sport has to be part of 3 “games” before it can be even considered for IOC recognition – The “World Games,” the “University Games,” and the “Commonwealth Games.” We are currently one out of three. A significant number of people (including myself) believe that Powerlifting does, in fact, need to become a Commonwealth and Olympic sport before it ever attains true legitimacy and gets the recognition it deserves. And, to be honest, I’m sick to death of people asking me if powerlifting is “that thing where you put the weights overhead?” (with the arm motions), or the new one I got from work colleagues this summer after competing at June’s IPF World Classic 2014, “you’re not competing in the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow?!?” I digress, though. I guess it’s not their fault – it’s ours.

As far as Olympic Sports go, there are plenty of popular worldwide sports not included in the Olympics, whether by their choice or not. Greco-Roman and Freestyle wrestling were two of the founding sports of the Olympics, with more than ten times the participation rate of powerlifting. I’m sure many of you were shocked when they were to be cut from the 2020 Olympics, and thankful when brought back on appeal (Madvig 2013). Incidents like these mean that there has never been a more pertinent (or concerning) time for Powerlifting to grow and assert its dominance.

## **Progress and Growth with a Timeline**

Today, Powerlifting (especially “Classic” powerlifting) is rapidly flourishing through popular weight-training outlets such as CrossFit, which have acted as catalysts to its furthered growth. It is, arguably, seeing its most popular period ever since its inception in the seventies. In June 2014, the newfound health of Powerlifting was excellently represented at the IPF World Classic Championships in South Africa, which had five hundred competitors over the week (IPF 2014b). This number is not even taking into account all of the lifters who didn’t qualify from each participating nation.

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In Great Britain, The Scottish Powerlifting Federation (affiliate of the GBPF and IPF) has already been getting some recognition from Sports Scotland, with funding being given to some athletes for the first time. Additionally, at the close of 2013, the Great Britain Powerlifting Federation (GBPF) reached a record one thousand members (GBPF 2014b). The number of members needed for an NGB's recognition in Great Britain currently stands at one thousand, six hundred and fifty, and it appears that the only hindrance to this recognition is reaching this magic number along with some alterations to the GBPF's constitution (GBPF 2014b). I'm aware the USA and most other countries have seen huge increases in membership and competitors also.

This steady growth seems to be a worldwide trend and has meant that IOC recognition is now more viable than it ever was before. The IPF has been working towards recognition for around fifteen years now (Powerlifting Watch 2005). Through my research (outlined below), I have compiled a list of the most recent significant events in the IPF's quest to become an Olympic Sport (skip if you don't want to read the nitty gritty) in Table 1, below.

There is lots of good evidence of the "Quest" I have outlined in the table, but still no cigar. Since this last update in January 2014, the IPF stated that rejection was obviously very frustrating as they have always complied with the IOC's specific requests. However, they reinforced that they would "not give up and would continue to do their best to make sure that they improve and comply with the required criteria" (IPF 2014b).

| Date          | Details  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>Dec-08</b> | <b>IPF acknowledged by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA)</b> , the universal agency leading the war against drugs in sport.  |
| <b>Dec-09</b> | <b>The International Olympic Committee (IOC) declines recognition of the IPF</b><br>Summary: "Most of the IPF criteria were in line with IOC requirements. Moving in the right direction under current presidency - to develop a strategy plan, to engage a Sport Consulting Agency, to introduce a new homepage under consideration of a corporate design, to introduce and develop a corporate identity and all the other items. This is being achieved through the IPF's 'strategic plan' to help to transform the federation to new and higher heights. The main problem outlined is the high amount of doping positive athletes on international, regional and national level." |
| <b>Nov-10</b> | <b>Fewer weight classes introduced for men and women</b> to arguably please the IOC and <a href="#">promotional video</a> made, which was one step of their marketing strategy to sensitize and inspire the public into powerlifting.  |
| <b>Nov-12</b> | <b>IPF Meeting with representatives from IOC</b><br>Summary: "The IOC representatives were very impressed about the very complete and well done application. They pointed out the improvement since the last application 2006 and the great work in Anti-Doping and Media (live streaming, magazine) matters. Another very positive effect is the cooperation with the Special Olympics. The conclusion of the meeting was that the IPF has to finalize some additional paperwork but the IPF is on the right way and all participants of the meeting agreed that the IPF is ready for this big step - IOC recognition."   |
| <b>Dec-12</b> | <b>IPF Meeting with representatives from the IOC</b><br>Summary: "Progress has been made but we still have further tasks to complete to the satisfaction of the IOC. We are heading in the right direction but I appreciate we need to obtain support from a number of international authorities."   |

*Table 1.* Timeline (above and continued on next page) (IPF 2014b).

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### **The Issues**

The dominant issues surrounding Powerlifting look quite simple on paper, but are hugely complex in reality. They are fivefold and are as follows:

1. Lack of one cohesive governing body for the sport (as aforementioned, the IPF comes closest). Instead we have a laundry list of federations (with different visions and rules). If we cannot police ourselves where do we go from here?
2. The number of adverse drug test findings (and all the athletes who are taking Performance Enhancing Drugs (PEDs) and getting away with it). Do we really have higher levels of failures as a sport in comparison to all the IOC sports with failed drug tests?
3. The “Equipped” (bench shirts, squat and deadlift suits and knee wraps) versus “Classic” (belt, knee sleeves) issue. In essence, these are two different sports. Which one would be included if we ever did get into the Olympics?! Is equipped lifting just “sports technology” or are these materials deceiving artificial aids?

| <b>Date</b>   | <b>Details</b>   |
|---------------|--|
| <b>Jan-13</b> | <b>IPF Meeting with International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) President regarding IPF IOC recognition</b><br><br>Summary: “IWF president very impressed about the work of the IPF, especially in Anti Doping and also about how the IPF is working in the administration etc. He also gave also some advice to the IPF representatives - how to finalize the application and which are the most important items for the IOC in focus of a decision regarding granting the recognition. He pointed also out that the IPF is an old established Federation in the World of Sport and now definitely ready for the recognition.”   |
| <b>Jan-14</b> | <b>IOC administrators rejected the IPF’s application for recognition</b><br><br>Summary: They stated the following reasons:<br><br>1. “Equality of male and female members on the Executive Committee. They appreciate that we have improved in this area with the appointment of Eva as Athletes Speaker on the Board but as you know, equal means about 50% to 50%. I have explained the situation and said we consider this as an important issue and we will work to resolve this issue in the near future.”<br><br>2. “Participation on Multi Sport Games. They mentioned that the guideline from the IOC says that a recognized sport should be a part of a minimum of 3 multi sport games. The IPF is currently only participating in the World Games. The IOC propose that we should be working to get in the Commonwealth Games and the University Games. This is now the work in progress.”<br><br>3. “Sport for All Commission. The IOC claims that we still have no Sport For All Commission, which is a high priority for them. I explained that we have already founded the entourage committee and that we also now included the athlete’s speaker in the Executive Committee. Both things were also included in the constitution but this is an issue we have to resolve.” |

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4. “Minority Sport.” This is related closely to NGB recognition: if a sport is popular and shows real promise, national governments (and sponsors) will throw money at it and support it to give it the means it needs to thrive. Consequently, this will lead to each nation becoming capable of serious competition. This is a Catch-22 though, as governments need reasons to do so, such as the sport being part of the CWG or the Olympics. Powerlifting still has insufficient numbers in comparison to a lot of other sports, so it needs to keep growing in numbers and attention.
5. “Non-athletic.” The opposition and naysayers of Powerlifting often term the sport this. Could the same not be said for an Olympic Equestrian Event (of which the horse is the real athlete) or Lawn Bowls perhaps? (Elder 1989)

## **Reflectance & Conclusions**

The issues outlined above are significant and have been fought over by keyboard warriors on the web and by many Powerlifters in gyms worldwide for years now. You may be asking yourself, “So Michael, why does all this even matter?” It matters if you care about this sport, because these issues have put the brakes on any real progress for Powerlifting as a genuinely respected and legitimate sport. You may also be wondering who all this matters to – rapidly growing groups of Powerlifters the world-over. These pivotal matters can be ignored no longer.

It is beyond the scope of this article to bicker over these issues or who/what brought us to this point. But no Powerlifter can deny they are having a serious effect on Powerlifting and its ascendancy. It is actually refreshing, even for me, to see them written down so candidly rather than confusingly and endlessly trolled-out on social media avenues, accompanied with profanity. They are laid out here with sufficient clarity for them to be acknowledged and truly discussed.

So, the first step for the future of Powerlifting is honesty – acknowledgement and acceptance of the issues suffocating our sport. No longer can denial be an acceptable option. If you have read this, that’s a start (even more so for any non-Powerlifters who may have opened up this article and read it).

The second step is, of course, action. Fortunately here, I do believe the tide is turning, and the general consensus is now steadily emerging that this sport can become something more reputable than just a fitness industry-acknowledged sport or an underground dungeon sport fit for the Orks of Middle Earth. The stereotypes are already being confronted while we are slowly ridding ourselves of the naysayers, and a metamorphosis seems to be well underway. This is not just visible from within the sport but can also be seen by outsiders. It is evident in the increased coverage and attention Powerlifting gets on the web and in media from competitions, the sheer number of lifters now competing within the IPF and its affiliates, and the significantly higher number of women taking part, amongst other proof.



*Figure 2.* My good friend Josh Hancott (Canada) pulling 271kg for a new Junior World Record (74kg class) at June’s IPF World Classic Championships 2014.

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Therefore, to me, it seems like we are taking bold steps toward pulling away from the issues that have chained us, as if it's all been a simple natural movement. It is a great sport to be a part of right now. However, we have not reached our destination yet. It's not about conforming – it's about progression for our beloved sport. The CWG in my home city was my sobering reminder. What if this was it for Powerlifting? How would you remember your time as a part of it when you're old and “crippled from the squatting?” As something that could have been? Or something that was? The choice is ours.

In closing, I do believe the promise of the quest for IOC recognition is not a false one, but to date it is a failed one. I know that the IPF are continually doing all they can at a higher level to align their views with that of the Olympic Committee (see Table 1 above). So, we know they can do no more than that. You, however, can make a difference at the Local, National and even International level. The first and best thing you could do is not touch the PEDs, then join an IPF-affiliated federation, compete without the equipment, and finally, raise Powerlifting's profile as a legitimate sport.

Let's make it our turn soon, Powerlifting. We can begin again as an exciting redefined sport.

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