

Starting Strength

They Don't Award Form Points in Olympic Weightlifting

by
Bill Starr

Everyone who participates in the sport of Olympic weightlifting knows that the judges do not award form points in the snatch and clean and jerk, yet that's how the majority of the lifters in this country train for those two lifts. I've watched athletes with excellent technique spend over half of their time in the weight room doing set after set of form work with light to moderate weights. Then I've watched those same athletes at contests. They'd use picture-perfect form to clean a weight, but would have to struggle so much to recover from that deep position that they'd be unable to jerk the weights. Some were able to pull in a beautifully-done snatch, yet lacked the leg strength to stand up with the bar.

And the amount of weight they're handling in the two lifts isn't all that much, simply because they just aren't that strong. It's as if they're training for gymnastics, diving, or figure skating where points are deducted for form faults. In reality, the form on the snatch and clean and jerk just has to be good enough so that it does not break any rules. Such as not completely locking out the bar during the snatch, or allowing an elbow to touch the knee while cleaning a weight. That's it. No bonus points for doing a lift perfectly. It's how much that's elevated overhead within the confines of the rules.

Somewhere along the road, the emphasis in the sport has shifted from strength to technique, and that is the primary reason why America is no longer producing any competitors on the international stage.

Val Valisef and I were standing in the doorway of the auditorium at the York Barbell just off I-83, watching an Olympic meet. He and Bill St. John had driven from their homes in New Jersey to York primarily to visit with John and Angela Grimek. But they had come out to the Hall of Fame building to see Smitty and me.

Val was the 1964 Mr. America and arguably one of the strongest bodybuilders ever. He was in that elite class with Grimek, Steve Stanko, Vern Weaver, Bill Pearl, Roy Hilligenn, and Marvin Eder. He also has the distinction of becoming the most wealthy of any Mr. America in history. He is a self-made millionaire, creating Vitol Products, an innovative company that produces nutritional products. His autobiography, *Russian Bear: Journey to Mr. America* is a most delightful read and is available through Amazon.

Val hadn't been to a weightlifting meet in decades. He had retired long before kilos came on

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the scene, so he asked me how much was on the bar.

"That's two-twenty," I told him.

He studied the lifter and asked, "Is that guy a heavyweight?"

"He is," I replied, knowing where this was heading since I was thinking the same thing.

"Is that all he can snatch?" he asked in an incredulous tone.

"Well, that's his first attempt, but he won't do much more than that."

"That's ridiculous!" he blurted, "I snatched that much with one hand."

He wasn't bragging, only stating a fact. Val was known for his feats of strength, including benching 440 while weighing a bit over 200 lbs. But perhaps what he was remembered for the most, especially by those connected with the York Barbell in the sixties, was when he beat Terry Todd in a dumbbell curling contest at the York Gym. Todd weighed in the mid-three hundreds while Val was 210. They curled a dumbbell on a slant board that was used for doing incline presses. They started with a 100-lb. dumbbell. Todd topped out at 130, Val did 150.

"I'll tell you what's even more ridiculous," I said, "he'll most likely win a trophy."

Val's mouth gaped open in disbelief and he muttered, "What the hell happened?"

"American lifters have stopped training for pure strength. It's as if they expect to be awarded style points. That's why Third World countries are kicking our asses. No one wants to do the hard work anymore."

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I fully comprehend the necessity of learning proper form and spending time honing that form on the Olympic lifts. All the exercises in a program should be done with good form for that matter. Whenever an exercise or competitive lift is done correctly, the athlete will derive greater benefits than when it's done in sloppy fashion. Also better form will for the most part allow the lifter to use more weight. But, and this is the important but, only if you're strong enough to finish the lift.

While it's true that the two Olympic lifts require a high degree of athletic ability, they are not as complicated as many coaches like the athletes to believe. The current crop of coaches want us to believe that they possess some secret knowledge that only they can impart to the lifters. Whereas in reality, unless an athlete is hampered by poor shoulder flexibility or can't do an overhead squat, or a front squat, I can teach him how to squat or split snatch and clean and jerk in a single session. So can any other coach worth his salt. It isn't complicated. Learn how to do the lifts then get really, really strong.

This is what brought success to those who took part in Olympic lifting in the fifties, sixties, and seventies. More strength was their primary motivation, not technique. Their form only had to be good enough to allow them to get the lifts passed.

If two lifters are equal in strength, the one with the better technique has the advantage. This is a statement that all coaches agree with, so they set up programs to further enhance their charges' form. Yet there is another side to the coin. If the lifter with poor form is considerably stronger than the athlete with exemplary form, then the advantage shifts to him. To take this a step further, when two lifters both possess excellent technique, which one is going to come out on top? The strongest. This is so basic, so elementary, yet it seems to be ignored or even forgotten in the way Olympic lifters are currently training in this country.

It should be noted that the reason the lifters in my era emphasized strength over form was because they, with few exceptions, trained themselves. There were perhaps a handful of coaches in the entire country, and in order to be able to take advantage of them the athlete had to live close to them. I learned how to do the three Olympic lifts by looking at photos in magazines and then going

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to contests and closely observing what the other lifters did on platform. It was the same for all of my contemporaries. We used trial and error to determine the best way to clean, press, snatch, and jerk. Then we did everything in our power to get stronger because we all learned early-on that, regardless of how rough our form was on a lift, it always improved as our overall strength improved. No one had to teach us this. It was simply common sense.

All things being equal or close to equal, the strongest was going to emerge on top. Early in my lifting career, I saw a vivid example of this and it has stuck with me all my life. I had only been lifting for the Dallas Y team for a few months and the only meets I had gone to so far were all in Dallas, plus one in Waco, so I'd seen the same lifters at every contest. Then Sid Henry took me, Homer Brannum, and Mike Puddington to a meet in Oklahoma City where all the competitors were new faces to me.

A 198er was the one I recall. He was a pre-med student and I heard him tell Sid that he was doing his residency and only got about four hours of sleep a night and seldom got to train. He liked competing, so there he was. He had virtually no form at all. Everything was done with power. He did a rough version of a power clean for his presses and jerks and jumped his legs wide apart when he powered the weight overhead for his snatches. There were several lifters in his class that had very good technique, but in the end the medical student beat them all by a large margin.

Later on in my career, I encountered other lifters doing the same thing, especially when I competed in the South. Some ol' boy who trained by himself would come out of Georgia and give me fits because he was so damn country strong. And whenever this topic comes up with a lifter or group of lifters, all I have to do is remind them of David Rigert. His form was terrible. He would make a half-dozen mistakes on a snatch or clean and jerk, but he was so unbelievably strong the form errors didn't matter. He would simply over-power the bar. Lots of other great American lifters made form mistakes. Take Norb Schemansky for example. He bent his arms way too soon on his cleans and snatches. This form error would have meant a failed attempt if anyone else had done it, but not for Ski.

The first time I saw Mario Martinez clean, I did a double-take. It looked like he was doing an entirely different version of the lift, a combination of a bent-over row and hang clean. I couldn't understand how in the world he could possibly recover from his excessive forward lean and still be able to rack the clean. But he could, with a ton of weight. Or at least a quarter of a ton plus change.

When staying with friends in San Francisco I trained at the Sports Palace and got to watch him workout and saw how he was able to make his cleans. Once the bar passed his knees, his arms straightened and his torso came erect, placing him in a perfect position to provide a powerful finish. No coach in his right mind would teach anyone such an unorthodox move, yet it worked perfectly for him.

The lifter with the worst form I have ever seen and who was still able to achieve a great deal of success had to be Gary Gubner. It's didn't appear that he spent any time working on technique. Everything he did was clumsy: his pull, lockouts on the snatch and jerk, and even his presses were awkward. Despite his ugly form, he became a national champion and placed second at the World Championships in 1965.

Even Bob Bednarski would revert to sloppy form on occasion. At the World Championships in East Berlin in 1966, he cleaned 402 perfectly, then failed to press the weight. So on his final attempt, he did a sort of a power clean, jumping his legs out to the side. This forced him to take some valuable time in getting set for his press. Usually, when this happens the lifter fails because he's unable to set himself properly for the press. Plus, he's used up a great amount of energy by moving around so much. Barski made the lift as determination and strength won out over technique.

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I could list a number of lifters who excelled in the sport because they concentrated on strength more so than technique, but two will get my point across.

Soon after I took the job of Strength Coach at the University of Hawaii, I went to the Nuuanu YMCA in Honolulu to watch an Olympic meet. I mainly went to visit with Tommy Kono, Pete George, and Harold Sakata, who served as officials. There was only one Haole in the contest, a 23-year-old transplant from Western Pennsylvania, Steve Dussia. He was in the 181-lb. class. Using the split style, he snatched 220 and clean and jerked 270.

After the contest, he approached me and asked if he could train with me at the UH weight room. He knew I used the split style in snatching and wanted to get some coaching on his technique. No one at the Nuuanu Y where he trained used that style. I told him he was more than welcome. Olympic lifters always had access to the weight rooms where I was the strength coach. They helped my other athletes see how the quick lifts were done and that encouraged many of them to try doing snatches and clean and jerks.

His form was good. Not perfect, but good enough. The only thing I did in that regard was have him switch to the squat clean style instead of the split, but I left his snatch alone. All through the summer I loaded him up with pure strength work: heavy pulls, shrugs, good mornings, and every so often a session on deadlifts. He also worked his back and front squats hard and heavy along with lots of overhead work and weighted dips.

The meet where we met was in June. In October, he lifted in another meet at the Nuuanu Y and snatched 260 and clean and jerked 340 as a light heavy. Kono and the others present were sure that I had started him on steroids. It wasn't true. They were not available on the island. If they were, neither Steve nor I had any knowledge of how to obtain them. And he wouldn't have taken them if I had offered them to him. His progress was made the old fashioned way – hard work.

It paid off nicely for him. All the other lifters who competed at the second meet basically made the same numbers as they did at the first one I attended. Most trained at the Nuuanu Y, Steve was the only lifter who had made any progress, and it was considerable. A gain of 110 pounds in four months. Switching to the squat clean style helped a great deal since he didn't have to pull the bar nearly as high as he did when he used the split style. His snatch improved simply because he had made his pulling muscles so much stronger with all the base work.

What's often overlooked is the simple fact that the best way to improve a quick lift is to make the muscle groups involved in that movement a great deal stronger. Keep the form the same, get stronger, and more weight is lifted overhead. That's what Steve did. Nothing magical about it. Just plenty of sweat and concentrated effort.

The second example of how important strength is for the Olympic lifts was one of my football players at Johns Hopkins, Dan Dziadosz. He was a defensive back who earned the nickname "Monkey Boy" because of his antics in the weight room. He was also one of my most diligent trainees. When he returned to school after the long Christmas break, he told me that he had been training on the Big Three ever since the football season ended, and that he was doing just about as much as he had done at the end of last year's off-season program. He wanted to learn the Olympic lifts. He already knew how to front squat and do an overhead squat and power snatch.

I agreed to teach him how to squat snatch and squat clean and jerk on one condition – he had to lift in a meet in York on February 20th. That only gave him 3½ weeks to prepare. He said he would do it since a couple of his teammates were going to compete as well. He was an excellent athlete and followed my instructions to the letter. He was also a pre-med student. It helps to have a lifter who is smart. They learn faster.

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To his surprise and delight, he won the 77 kg. class, beating his nearest rival by, coincidentally, 77 pounds and out-totalling seven competitors who trained on the Olympic lifts year round. While some of his opponents did display much better technique, he beat them all because he was stronger.

I've seen it happen as long as I've been associated with the sport. A lifter doesn't have to have perfect form in order to excel in Olympic lifting. But he does have to be strong enough to compensate for any technical flaws.

I don't think lifters use a pure strength cycle any longer. A time when they avoid the two quick lifts entirely and just work on getting much stronger. During the off-season at York, the summer, many would do pure strength work and attack the power rack with isotonic-isometric sessions. Ernie Pickett and I would go to two, three, or more power meets where we would do heavy benches and deadlifts. We didn't bother doing them in the York Gym since we were doing a shit-load of upper body and back work. The power meets were a nice way to get in a heavy session and were in fact, less demanding than our regular Saturday workouts at the YBC. And the heavy benches, done for singles and the maxing out on the deadlift always boosted our overhead presses and pulling power.

The current crop of Olympic lifters shun any of the power lifts. I think that's a mistake. The halting deadlift is, in my book, one of the very best exercises for an Olympic lifter to strengthen his starting positions in both the snatch and clean and jerk. I insert them in all of my Olympic lifters' programs.

Also, the bench press can be used to strengthen overhead strength when it's used correctly. Every year, about six weeks before the first contest of the season in mid-January, I would do bench presses. Once a week and all for singles to max. When I started this routine, always done on Mondays, at the end of '67, Barski said he wanted to join me. He had never bothered with flat benches since he first started weight training. His best when we started was 360 and we both increased our last set by five pounds every week, so he ended up doing 390. Doesn't sound like much of a bench, does it? Yet that increase in upper body strength was the key to him pressing 451 for a World Record at the Region II Championships at Gonzaga High School in Washington, D.C. in the spring.

It should be noted that we always used the same grip on the bench as we did for our overhead presses and we always paused a full second with the bar on our chests. We weren't so much interested in seeing how much we could lift in the exercise as we were in making our frontal deltoids and triceps stronger.

Tommy Suggs and I often discuss the topic of a lifter who is doing quite well on his strength routine and suddenly decides to concentrate more on his technique. He invariably plateaus or regresses. We've both seen it countless times, but whenever we're talking about this, the contrast between Russ Knipp and Tony Garcy in the summer of '66 always comes up.

In 1965, Tony placed fourth at the World Championships in Tehran and only missed being on the podium by 25½ pounds and was in the thick of the battle until the clean and jerks. Tony was a master of form on all three lifts, and what many people aren't aware of is that it was Tony who first used the technique that transformed the press from a strength move to an explosive quick lift. The new form of pressing was called the European style, yet it was Tony who created it.

He owned the 165-pound class in American by a wide margin. In 1966, Russ Knipp moved up from the lightweight division and began making noteworthy progress. At the Philly Open in January, he broke Tony's American press record with a powerful 315. However, he still lagged way behind Tony on the quick lifts.

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After he was discharged from the Army in May, Russ came to York to prepare for the upcoming Seniors to be held in town. He had improved since the Philly Open and pushed Tony at the Nationals, pressing 331¼ for a new World Record. However, Tony's superior technique provided him with a big edge and he totaled 940 to Russ's 920, finishing with a national meet record 355 clean and jerk.

Russ liked the atmosphere in the York Gym and got a job working in the warehouse with Bednarski. This is where the story begins. While Tony's technique on all three lifts was absolutely flawless, Russ had trouble with the snatch and jerk. His pull was good and very strong, it was the locking out of the bar on both lifts that was giving him trouble. Both were done in very rough fashion.

So here was one lifter with exemplary form, a role model for every aspiring lifter in the country and another who had to fight the lock-outs on the snatches and jerks. Tony's lifts were all done silky-smooth, his technique was his greatest asset. In contrast, Russ relied on his strength. Much like Rigert, he overpowered the weights.

I'm not suggesting that Tony wasn't strong; he was very strong. A person doesn't lift the amount of weight he did without being powerful. What Tony had achieved was an almost perfect balance of form and strength. He didn't need to do much work at all on his technique, just keep it where it was and get stronger. This was obvious to everyone. Except Tony.

It was at this point that he decided he needed to refine his technique. Why? I'm not sure, but it may have been a result of seeing how precise those European lifters performed at the World Championships. Whatever the reason, that summer he scrapped his program that had brought him to such a lofty level in the sport and switched to one that emphasized form. Not just some minor changes but an entirely different approach.

He spent hours perfecting the smallest segment of a lift. He constructed a stick figure of the human body to help him determine specific angles for the three lifts. It wasn't that he wasn't carrying a heavy workload. He set the standard in that regard. At one session, he did 35,000 lbs. Yet most of the work was done with light to moderate weights so he could concentrate on improving his form even more.

Meanwhile, Russ was training with Barski (Tony preferred to train alone) and they were both moving weights like men possessed. Which, in a way, they were. When Tony turned in his 35,000 lb. workout, Russ upped the ante and did 36,000 lbs. As Russ's strength increased, so did the form on his snatches and jerks. At the special meet held at the Teen-Age Training Camp in July, Russ pressed 336½ for a new World Record, then added a 260 snatch and 355 clean and jerk for a new American Total Record.

He had moved past Tony. A number of people including Tommy Suggs and Barski tried to talk Tony into giving up his form program and going back to the one that had put him into the top of his class. Their words fell on deaf ears. Tony believed in his plan and stuck with it.

The North Americans were held at the York Y and served as the tryout for the World Team that would compete in East Berlin, Germany. Russ came in primed and ready. Tony didn't bother peaking for the contest. He had carefully laid out his plan for training leading up to the Worlds and was only scheduled to do 880 at the North Americans. And that's exactly what he did.

Russ, on the other hand, wanted to win and win convincingly. And that's what he did. He out-pressed, out-snatched, and out clean and jerked Tony and in the process set a new American Total Record of 955. He had gone nine for nine and was now the best middleweight in the country.

Both Tony and Russ were selected for the World Team, but just a week before they were leave for Germany, Tony injured his thigh so severely he was forced to withdraw. Russ won the gold medal in the press and came in fourth with another American total record of 958 ¾.

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That's basically the end of the story. Russ stayed in control of the 165-lb. class for many years. Tommy and I often wonder what would have happened had Tony continued to train more for strength than divert his training to one based on technique. We both believe he would have been on the Olympic Team in '68 and been in contention for a medal. Maybe even the gold.

Getting stronger is beneficial to every sport that I can think of, so why shouldn't it be the one number consideration in the sport of strength – Olympic lifting? Learn proper form, improve strength by 40% or more and you will become a better lifter. Simple logic that far too many seem to overlook or ignore.

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