

# THE USA VS. THE WORLD:

## AN ANALYTICAL NARRATIVE OF AMERICAN, WORLD, AND OLYMPIC WEIGHTLIFTING RESULTS, 1970-1992

Part Three of a Three-Part Series

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In our country physical culture is sport for the people, in our country millions participate in the physical culture movement. And it is obvious that talented athletes will sooner be found among these millions than among thousands, and that it is easier to find talented athletes among thousands than among hundreds.

—Mikhail Kalinin\*

One of the hot questions of the day seems to be, 'Why isn't the United States the Olympic power it once was?' ... I think much of our slip in international sports stature has to do with the ineffectiveness of the very system our nation relies on to develop our young athletes.

—Dr. Robert Voy\*\*

*Editors' Note: Following the 2015 World Weightlifting Championships in Houston, Texas, the sport of weightlifting received yet another blow to its already scarred reputation when the IWF released the news that 17 athletes, 12 men and five women, tested positive, including Russian Aleksei Lovchev, who broke world records in the superheavyweight class. Already banned from the 2015 Worlds were 11 Bulgarian weightlifters who failed a pre-competition drug test conducted at their home camp. Although no Americans tested positive at the Worlds, it's disheartening that even with the disqualification of these 28 athletes, no American man qualified for the 2016 Olympics. In the team competition at the Worlds the American women finished 14th; the men placed 28th. This final article in John Fair's three-part series on American weightlifting could hardly be more timely, as the sport's most recent drug scandal may resurrect past debates in the IOC about whether weightlifting should be banned from the Olympic family.*

In the wake of America's lackluster performance in the 1972 Olympics, President Gerald R. Ford established the President's Commission on Olympic Sports to determine what factors were hampering the United States from entering its best amateur athletes in the Olympics and other international sporting events. To this end newly-elected national weightlifting chairman Murray Levin, along with previous chairman Bob Crist, AAU executive director Jim Stevens, and middleweight champion Russell Knipp, were subjected to a closed hearing in Washington, conducted by New York Congressman Jack Kemp to examine the shortcomings of their program. Levin recalls as he entered the room Kemp was

*... screaming and yelling and saying 'it looks like the whole sport is controlled by Bob Hoffman. Hoffman puts up all the money, Hoffman has the York team members that travel all over the world. They represent him. They win the medals, but it's all York, York, York, and maybe that's what's wrong with United States weightlifting; that one man is controlling everything financially.' And he said, 'I have it on good authority that he put up \$400,000 to send all those teams around the world.' Now I'm lis-*

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\*John N. Washburn, "Sport as a Soviet Tool," *Foreign Affairs* 34 no. 3 (April 1956): 494. Mikhail Kalinin had been a chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.

\*\*Robert Voy, *Drugs, Sport, and Politics* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1991), 131.

*tening to this. And after hearing this raving and ranting for about fifteen or twenty minutes, I blew my stack. I said, 'you're wrong, it wasn't \$400,000, it was \$600,000. I know the facts and the figures.' I said, 'where in the hell were you guys in Washington when the Russians were walking around the arena in 1968 holding the flag out in front of them. Our guys are training with tattered sweat suits in basements and garages. Where were you in the thirties, the forties, and the fifties, and the sixties when we needed you? ... One man did all this, and you did nothing.'*<sup>1</sup>

Levin and his colleagues could at least be consoled that weightlifting was not the only amateur sport under fire, but they resented Kemp's appalling ignorance of the past achievements of America's strongest Olympic athletes and ingratitude towards the promoter who almost single-handedly made them possible. With virtually no government assistance Bob Hoffman, often styled by himself and others as, the "Father of American Weightlifting," had enlisted the likes of John Davis, Tommy Kono, Pete George, Norbert Schemansky, and Chuck Vinci to make his teams the envy of the world. Prior to 1970 his lifters harvested a total of 117 medals in Olympic and world championships in 27 years of competition, averaging 4.33 medals per year.<sup>2</sup>

But during the next 23 years, on which this study focuses, American lifters garnered only five medals or .22 per year. Bantamweight Vinci was the last American male to win an Olympic gold medal in 1960, and Super-Heavyweight Joe Dube was the last American world champion in 1969. Furthermore, after dwindling steadily since the early 1960s, no American weightlifting medals were won at the Munich Olympics in 1972. While Dube rightly reckons in retrospect that America's decline can be primarily attributed to "the absence of Bob Hoffman," the germane question addressed by this three-part study is what was done to fill that void and why these efforts were inadequate.<sup>3</sup> The first installment, a statistical analysis, defined the nature of the problem, while the second, drawing on contemporary publications, established an interpretive framework that emphasized culture as a critical component to performance on the international level.<sup>4</sup>

### Voices of Experience

This final installment underscores that influence. Consisting largely of oral testimonies over 16 months, it draws on the collective memories and wisdom of 23 lifters, officials, and promoters who lived through at least three decades of American decline vis-à-vis the world. About 1,100 years would be a conservative estimate of the commitment of these individuals (some going back to the 1940s) to weightlifting. Most importantly their prolonged experience, drawn from all levels of participation, shades of opinion, and geographical diversity, enables them to view multiple dimensions of a problem that has defied any easy solution for a half century. What they suggest is that while the influence of leaders, lifters, and organizations cannot be discounted, America's lackluster performance was systemic. With money and talent migrating to more lucrative sectors of the nation's sports-crazed society, weightlifting remained true to its antiquated amateur origins and lapsed into a culture of underachievement.

Unlike most scholarly studies or the preceding articles in this series, every effort will be made in this article to allow each of the interviewees to speak in their own words as much as possible in the narrative. Hence citations of quotations from interviews will be embedded in the text itself, and footnotes will be reserved for additional information. Therefore it is important at the outset to introduce the 24 weightlifting insiders for whom I gratefully acknowledge assistance:

**Wesley Barnett** — United States Olympic Team Member in 1992 and 1996 in the 90 kilo class and former Executive Director of USA Weightlifting — 13 February 2013, Colorado Springs, CO (Personal Interview).<sup>5</sup>

**Dragomir Cioroslan** — Olympic bronze medalist for Romania in 1984, former United States National Weightlifting Coach, and current Director of International Strategies and Development for the USOC — 13 February 2013, Colorado Springs, CO (Personal Interview).

**Mike Conroy** — International Level Coach and Director of Coaching Education for USA Weightlifting — 13 February 2013, Colorado Springs, CO (Personal Interview).

**John Coffee** — Georgia gym owner and coach for nearly a half century whose women's teams have won 18 national titles — December 2012, Marietta, GA.

**Bob Crist** — Founder of the Lower Peninsula Weightlifting Club and Chairman of the National Weightlifting Committee from 1971 to 1976 — 21 June 2012, Hampton, VA (Telephone Interview).

**Louis DeMarco** — President of Team Pendragon, Coach of national and international teams, and former member of the USA Weightlifting Board of Directors — 8 and 26 September 2013, Cortland, OH (Telephone Interview).

**Arthur Drechsler** — Former Junior World Record Holder and current Chair of the USA Weightlifting Board of Directors — 7 November 2013, Flushing, NY (e-mail).

**Pete George** — National weightlifting champion in 1946, world champion in 1947, silver medalist at the 1948 and 1956 Olympics and gold medalist in 1952 — 11 July 2012, Honolulu, HI (e-mail).

**Ben Green** — Veteran national-level weightlifter and coach who has been a key figure in Southern weightlifting since the 1970s — 1 November 2012, Newnan, GA (Personal Interview).

**Gayle Hatch** — Founder of the Gayle Hatch Weightlifting Club which has won forty national titles and coach of the 2004 United States Olympic Weightlifting Team — 4 January 2013, Baton Rouge, LA (Personal Interview).

**Bruce Klemens** — Avid lifter and prolific writer and photographer who has covered virtually all major weightlifting meets since the 1970s — 31 January 2013, Oak Ridge, NJ (Telephone Interview).

**Tommy Kono** — Winner of Olympic gold medals in 1952 and 1956 and six world championships, often cited as the greatest weightlifter of all time — 12 July 2012, Alea, HI (e-mail).<sup>6</sup>

**Murray Levin** — Served as President of the United States Weightlifting Federation from 1976 to 1988 and organized the 1977 World Championships in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania — 30 March 2013, Boca Raton, FL (Telephone Interview).

**Laurie Lopez** — A mainstay for many years at USA Weightlifting, currently Director of Operations — 13 February 2013, Colorado Springs, FL (Personal Interview).

**Jim Lorimer** — Organized the 1967 national championships and 1970 world championships and administered the annual Arnold Sports Festival & Fitness Weekend in Columbus, Ohio, since 1989 — 25 June 2013, Columbus, OH (Telephone Interview).<sup>7</sup>

**Carl Miller** — A protégé of Frank Spellman, 1948 Olympic gold medalist, Miller served as first National Weightlifting Coordinator in the 1970s, authored *The Sport of Olympic-Style Weightlifting* (2011), and has operated Carl and Sandra's Physical Conditioning Center for three decades — 5 February 2012, Santa Fe, NM (Personal Interview).<sup>8</sup>

**Harvey Newton** — Served as first National Coach (1981-84) and Executive Director of USA Weightlifting (1982-88). Author of *Explosive Lifting for Sports* and editor of *Harvey Newton's Weightlifting eBulletin* — 16 October 2013, Ormond Beach, FL (Telephone Interview).

**Denis Reno** — National Weightlifting Coaching Coordinator in the mid-1970s and editor of *Denis Reno's Weightlifter's Newsletter* since 1969 — 12 August 2012, West Newton, MA (Personal Interview).

**Mark Rippetoe** — Former powerlifter and owner of the Wichita Falls Athletic Club who has authored *Starting Strength* and conducts strength seminars throughout the nation — 12 December 2012, Wichita Falls, TX (Telephone Interview).<sup>9</sup>

**Jim Schmitz** — Holds a degree in physical education from California State University at San Francisco and since 1972 has owned the Sports Palace where he has coached numerous elite lifters, including a total of ten athletes on seven consecutive Olympic teams — 9 April 2013, San Francisco, CA (Telephone Interview).<sup>10</sup>

**Les Simonton** — Serves as Coach of the East Alabama Weightlifting Club and as USAW Board of Directors Secretary — 6 October 2012, Auburn, AL (Personal Interview).

**Zygmunt Smalcerz** — 1972 Olympic Champion for Poland and Current USA National Weightlifting Coach — 13 February 2013, Colorado Springs, CO (Personal Interview).<sup>11</sup>

**Mike Stone** — Holds a Ph.D. from Florida State University, author of numerous articles on physiology and biomechanics, former head of Sports Physiology for the United States Olympic Committee and currently a professor of exercise science at East Tennessee State University — 25 October 2013, Johnson City, TN (Telephone Interview).

**Terry Todd** — Holds a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, junior national champion in weightlifting, national champion in powerlifting, former editor of *Strength & Health* magazine, founder and director of the Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at the Uni-

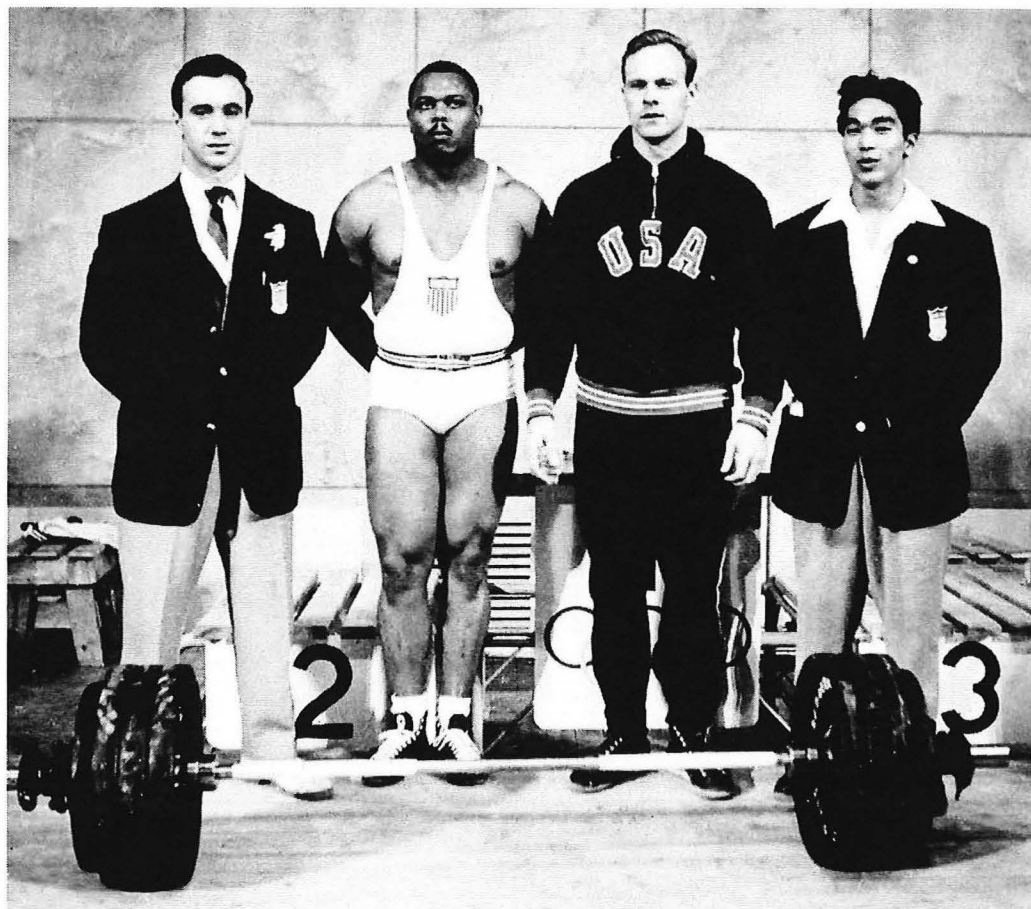


versity of Texas (Email Communication).

### The Numbers Game

Admittedly nearly all of these authorities use the present as their reference point, but in this case the past *is* the present. They virtually all concur that the need for greater numbers of weightlifters was as true in earlier decades as it is now. “You’ve got to get the numbers,” argues Carl Miller. Most would agree that the best sources of recruitment have traditionally been the schools, recreational centers, and YMCAs. “If you had Olympic weightlifting in all of the high schools, then that would increase your numbers,” observes Gayle Hatch. “That’s what the Russians have. They may start out with 100,000 lifters and then it comes down to the elite. We don’t have that.” Arguably the greatest handicap to recruitment and having weightlifting competitions in schools is the presence of football as the dominant sport. Until the early to mid-1960s, most football coaches vehemently opposed weight training, but during the fitness revolution of the 1970s weights ceased being taboo and quickly became a requirement for athletes in all sports. Thereafter coaches had to jealously guard their turf out of fear that players would like lifting more than football. “One of the things weightlifting has to do,” Les Simonton points out,

*is be careful not to tread on any big toes because football is an 800-pound gorilla, and particularly in high schools. I’ve heard time and again from weightlifting coaches that the football*



Pete George, John Davis, Norbert Schemansky, and Tommy Kono — four of the greatest weightlifters in history — represented the U.S. in many world championships during the same general era, winning a total of 20 world championships and 12 Olympic medals — six golds, four silvers, and two bronzes.

*coaches are very protective of their talent. They don’t want to lose anybody to weightlifting or to any other sport, but because they have to use weightlifting in their training they think there’s more of a danger there, and so weightlifting has to approach football more as a partner and not as an adversary.*

The best example of overcoming that obstacle was when Michael Cohen, a former national champion and physical education teacher at Jenkins High School in Savannah, Georgia, formed Team Savannah in 1988. As Wes Barnett explains, “they were in the schools, they had access to all these kids, so they had a lot of people to cull from, and then as the cream rose to the top, they were funded, they had facilities, they had their ways paid to competitions. They had a support system. They had medical around them, they had science around them.



They had very similar to what we had out in the [Colorado Springs] resident program.” So successful was Cohen’s team that it surpassed football in popularity and income, securing from local voters a one-percent sales tax to build a permanent lifting facility, the largest in the country, to support Team Savannah which claimed 47 national champions, 28 American record holders, and 152 American records by 1997.<sup>12</sup> Citing Cohen’s school-based initiative as a model, Ben Green maintains that “every little town in the United States has a potential world champion in it.” “In the schools,” Denis Reno reiterates, “That’s always the key. Get it into the schools.”<sup>13</sup>

Failing widespread weightlifting presence in the schools, however, recruitment efforts have been, as Jim Schmitz points out, haphazard and unsystematic. “You look at Tommy Kono and Chuck Vinci and all those guys. It was pure luck that they just happened to be near a facility where they could do weightlifting, Tommy from the YMCA and Chuck from John Schubert [in Cleveland] and so many others who just happened to be talented persons who were lucky enough to be around some weightlifting.” Even after the creation of the Colorado Springs training center, “you couldn’t just go out and tap a kid with talent ... and make an Olympic champion.” Recruitment, according to John Coffee, has consisted “mainly of people that come in off the streets. That’s the only way they come in.” Lou DeMarco insists “we really don’t have a recruiting system here at all. It’s by happenstance that we get the lifters we get.” Nor has the dramatic growth of health clubs and number of weight trainees since the 1970s improved the situation. “Many gyms that previously had barbells,” notes Artie Drechsler, “completely abandoned free weights in favor of Nautilus machines, and many new gyms were Nautilus only.” Ben Green recalls that “even back in the day when I came along you could go to almost any YMCA and find a platform, and they didn’t do powerlifting.” It became rare by the 1990s to see a platform or anyone doing overhead lifts with a barbell.

Pete George provides a unique perspective on America’s decline in weightlifting by placing the blame on how competitions are conducted and conveyed to the public. Pete believes,

*... the biggest reason there is so little participation in the sport is because it has practically zero spectator appeal. A*

*contest of human strength certainly should have a lot of appeal, but the way modern weightlifting presents it leaves most spectators bewildered. One of the reasons for this is that there are too many bodyweight classes. This has caused a multitude of problems. It’s almost impossible to stage a local contest in an interesting manner. Very few areas in the US have three good lifters in each class, and if they do, contests last too long. In an effort to speed them up, promoters group some or all of the competitors in a single session. The spectators then have no idea of who is lifting against whom, and what the significance of each lift is in the overall competition. I believe there should be no more than five classes, preferably four (light-140, middle-165, lightheavy-190, and heavy). I know that is radical thinking and has zero chance of being accepted by the controlling powers of international lifting, but I believe it’s the only way lifting in the US can survive.*

The beauty of George’s reform proposal is that it meshes so well with America’s consumer culture, which is driven by spectator appeal and ultimately the prospect of cash rewards. Unfortunately it flies in the face of the powers-that-be on the international level who are drawn largely from countries with government-supported programs. When Pete presented his plan to IWF President Tamas Ajan and others he was told that they are concerned about the athletes and not about spectators. “But the primary reason an athlete competes is for the recognition it brings him,” Pete reasoned, “otherwise he’ll just stay in the gym and work out. In other words, the fewer the spectators, the less the sport attracts athletes.” Les Simonton agrees that until weightlifting is conducted in a more professional manner “we’re doomed to poor exposure and doomed to mediocrity.”

This weightlifting version of supply-side economics differs from the traditional European model of success which American leaders have attempted to apply to their faltering programs since the 1970s. Zygmunt Smalcerz, the latest European to enlighten the West on

Eastern ways, explains that his native Poland, even after the breakup of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s, still follows a system that was put in place a half century ago.

*We still follow all the things like camps. Like first of all, why we are so good, because we start with what we call identification of talent and selection. We are not waiting if somebody will come for the weightlifting call. We are going forth to reach guys very talented in this school, and we would like to be the first to catch him, and we're providing the competition for him, not with very heavy weights, but we are judging the technique. And this process gives us to discover the most talented, and then we are giving them the fantastic big grant. ... We are thinking about Olympic cycles only, Olympics, worlds, Olympics.*

By way of contrast, in the United States there has never been any identification of talent process. "So many football players," says Smalcerz. "They look ready for fantastic weights, but they don't like to be weightlifters because money is everything." Nobody in this country has recognized weightlifting as a "good sport. So what we need to change here is first the identification of the talent."<sup>14</sup> Mike Conroy notes that USA Weightlifting has crossed the 10,000 mark for the first time in its history, "but we're still the smallest NGB in the USOC. ... Look at the power sports in the United States. It's all team sports. And people who do individual sports are looked on as kind of anti-social. The problem with weightlifting is that we use the lifts, but we only use the lifts as they relate back to the athletes of the team sports to get better." Lou DeMarco points out that a country like China, with over a million weightlifters, has no such problem, and even if team sports were more prevalent, the Communist government would insure that they would not draw talent from those sports that could bring Olympic glory and international prestige to the nation.

### Rival Alternatives

Carl Miller concurs that "some of our best people go down to other sports, whether it be football or track and field or gymnastics." Jim Schmitz points out that there are "no college scholarships whatsoever for

weightlifting. There are some colleges that have programs where you can go to college and do weightlifting, but it's nothing like for a gymnast or basketball or a swimmer or track and field." Mark Rippetoe asks, "How many schools in the United States offer a weightlifting scholarship? What would a guy with a 36-inch vertical jump do? Throw the shot at the University of Texas or lift weights? He's lifting weights anyway." That the lure to other sports goes beyond the scholastic level is evident to Denis Reno who observes that life is getting easier in America and "lifting is work. And nobody works for nothing any more. ... And of course pay has escalated like crazy in pro sports, so if you're going to pursue a sport, you might as well get paid a lot of money for it, and you know it's not going to be this." Were it not for the attraction of the Olympics, Ben Green believes the sport would cease to exist. "We're never going to be a football sport or anything that can draw, but we can do better. We get the leftovers to start with." Wes Barnett attributes America's lackluster performance in part to so many other distractions that do not exist in Europe.

*You win an Olympic medal in weightlifting in Bulgaria as an example, you got a car, you got an apartment, you're knighted or whatever the case may be. ... In this country, the big three, baseball, basketball, football, and still to this day to a large extent, those things dominate, and then you got all the BMX, the ultimate, the extreme sports and whatever. So you got all these competing entities where in Europe and other parts of the world, the Olympics were the end all and be all, and in some cases still is, and if you were an Olympic champion you were famous. And there are weightlifting Olympians throughout the world that have the same type of status as Michael Jordan does in this country.*

For Mark Rippetoe neuro-muscular efficiency is critical to becoming a good weightlifter, and athletes with "36 verticals" gravitate to college football, basketball, or track and field. He points out that, "there are avenues of athletic competition for people in all weight classes here that pay better and get more rewards than Olympic

weightlifters.” It is hardly coincidental that as weightlifting declined in the 1970s, most other sports, especially football, were escalating in popularity.

Even among the strength sports weightlifting was losing its attraction to a fast-growing rival sport that required less attention to technique. There were “thousands and thousands of powerlifters,” notes Murray Levin, while at the same time “if you go to a national weightlifting championship, you almost have to pay people to go in. The only people in the audience are the lifters or the coaches or the families.” Gyms and health clubs, another expansion sector in the 1970s, were providing fewer facilities for Olympic lifting. “Many of the owners/managers,” according to Art Drechsler, “made a conscious decision to focus on one or another of the sports when the governance split occurred, shedding facilities for Olympic-style lifting if they chose to focus on powerlifting or bodybuilding as many did.” The United States, he contends, “lost a disproportionate share of ground in this area, with a larger share of its talent pool gravitating to powerlifting than was the case for other nations.” It required a shorter learning curve, he argued, and its rise coincided with the “incorrect perception that powerlifting was a better test of strength.”<sup>15</sup> That powerlifters were stronger and could easily transfer it to Olympic lifting is vehemently denied by John Coffee. “They think that by having done powerlifting and being a world champion they could learn technique in the Olympic lifts and pretty soon be a world class Olympic weightlifter. Of course that’s bullshit.” Terry Todd — who coached Mark Henry during the middle of the 1990s, when Mark held all of the US records in weightlifting while setting national and world records in powerlifting — notes that “back in the ‘60s, when modern powerlifting was born, many people competed in both sports at the same time and did well, with some even winning national championships or setting records in both, like Dave Moyer and Ernie Pickett. As time passed, however, this became less and less common. Even so, a few competitive lifters, like Mark and Jim McCarty have the physical attributes to become very successful in both forms of lifting, but it becomes more and more difficult to excel in both because the standards in both continue to increase. Specialization rules.”

Todd adds that by the end of the 1970s Strongman contests were also beginning to present a further challenge to weightlifting, and to draw many large and powerful men way from the Olympic sport. Another

development that coincided with weightlifting’s decline, and closely correlated with powerlifting’s rise, was the elimination of the press as a competitive lift after 1972. Furthermore, as shown in the first article of this series, the most dramatic drop in American performance in weightlifting vis-à-vis that of other countries occurred during this period. Although Jim Schmitz observes that “Americans love the press” and that its elimination “took away the potential of a lot of our really strong lifters,” there is no consensus that it was detrimental to American lifting fortunes. After all, good pressers or love of the press was by no means unique to the United States. “Maybe slightly” is as far as Gayle Hatch will concede to the press. “I don’t think so,” says Ben Green. “I think it’s a much better sport without it. In fact, I think it helped us.” While Artie Drechsler’s contention that “Americans had more athletes capable of world records in that lift” in 1972 “than in the snatch and C&J” is contradicted by evidence presented in the second article in this series, his more general observation that “that link to the public was diminished” likely has merit.<sup>16</sup> One of the well-known questions asked of weightlifters prior to its elimination, “How much can you press?” was soon replaced by “How much can you bench press?” as powerlifting rose in popularity. That no such effect was prevalent in other countries further underscores the impact of powerlifting. Terry Todd holds that:

*One of the reasons many young men were drawn more to powerlifting than to weightlifting in the years following the elimination of the press was that [those] who wanted to be big and strong noticed that powerlifters tended to have larger and more powerful-looking upper bodies than weightlifters had. This was so for two main reasons: 1) the elimination of the press meant that the deltoids of weightlifters were not as thick as they were in the days of [Grigory] Novak, [Jim] Bradford, and [Chuck] Vinci and 2) as powerlifters bench pressed, their pectoral and front deltoid muscles increased in size, and as they began to realize that thicker biceps, triceps, and lats would significantly improve their leverage in the bench they began to do things like curls, triceps presses, and*



*bent forward rows, which built upper bodies that had the desired "look" — the look of Doug Young, Roger Estep, Bill Kazmaier.*

### Money

"Everything has to do with money," concludes Tommy Kono. "Weightlifting in the U.S. doesn't attract money like other sports. U.S. is a country for team sport." What American weightlifting is lacking, agrees Denis Reno, is "money and the press and peer pressure." Zygmunt Smalcerz cites how "big money" funneled by governments into the programs and lifters of predominantly socialist countries has produced spectacular results.

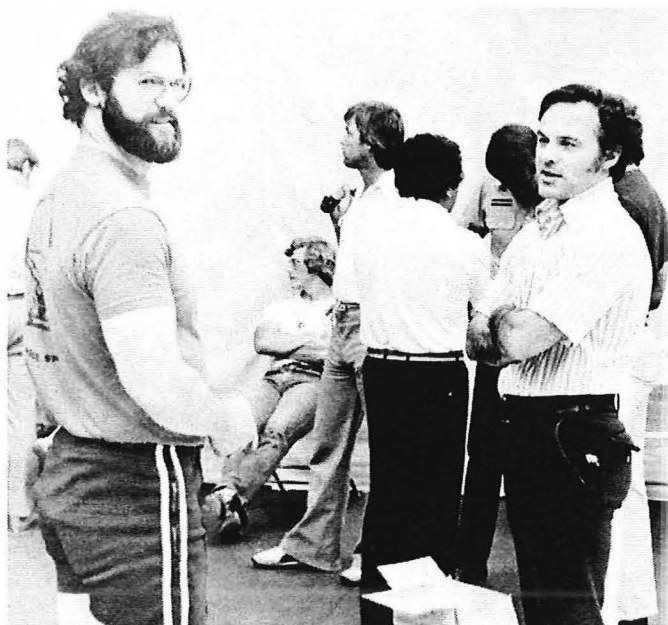
*Some of them, like for instance Alexeev, broke 69 world records. He was very wealthy guy, very wealthy. Each world record was total 500 rubles. One ruble was bigger than one dollar. He was in the media. Everybody watched what was going on. Big money. In Russia and Poland as well. When someone broke world record immediately money, money, money. Money, and weightlifters was free of work because the money was bigger, and each of them was able to lift without going three or four or six or eight hours of daily work. ... We need to choose somebody who will be able to put something with money in this federation. We need bigger money to support this to give stipends.*

Gayle Hatch, however, points out administrators have discussed ideas about paying good lifters as much as \$24,000 per year to facilitate their training, "but we have no lifters out there. That would be wasted money now. Kendrick Farris didn't improve one kilo on his total from the last Olympics." Les Simonton suggests a unique approach to kick-start the program. "I've often wondered if we could put up some money like in a trust. Here's a million dollars. You win a gold medal in the Olympics and you get that, 500 thousand for a silver."<sup>17</sup> Such capitalist ideas implemented in the 1970s might have forestalled American decline, but rules against professionalism were rigidly enforced, except in socialist

countries where it was practiced under the aegis of governmental regulation of sports. In essence, American amateur weightlifters were pitted against professionals from rival countries. By the time professionals were allowed in the Olympics in 1988, the quality of American athletes and their ability to attract corporate money into the sport had deteriorated to a point that recovery, even in the world's richest economy, seemed hopeless. As Jim Schmitz readily remarks, "it goes down to the fact that the rest of the world has really taken weightlifting seriously and professionally, and we're still fully amateur."

### A Marketing Issue

According to Mike Conroy, lack of change can be attributed to weightlifting being "a groundhog sport. We pop up every four years, put the superheavyweights on TV and then we disappear again. So there's a marketing issue. ... I've been involved at the national level for 22 years, and ... we're fighting the same fight we did the day I showed up." He recalls when Mary Lou Retton won the gold medal in 1984 there were over a million phone calls to US Gymnastics which "saved gymnastics." But when Tara Nott won a gold medal in weightlifting in 2000 "we couldn't capitalize it." Mur-



Jim Schmitz, left, produced many national champions during his long career as a gym owner and weightlifting coach, and Denis Reno, right, served U.S. Weightlifting during the mid-70s as the National Coaching Coordinator, and since 1969 has published as a labor of love the invaluable *Denis Reno's Weightlifting Newsletter* for an astonishing 47 years.

ray Levin attributes America's decline to the lack of a publicity medium. When *Strength & Health* "went out every month, there were a hundred thousand copies and everybody knew about weightlifting. Everybody knew who the heroes were. Everybody knew who Schemansky was, and Gubner was, and Knipp was, and Kono was. They knew everything about the sport." Levin remembers receiving a call one day in the mid-1980s from John Terpak, who was "almost like a father to me, saying 'Murray, I hate to tell you this, but we're gonna stop the magazine.' I said, 'Johnny, that's gonna cause the death of US weightlifting,' and that's exactly what happened. People didn't know anything about the sport anymore." From that point Joe Weider's bodybuilding magazines had a free reign over the iron game. "*Strength & Health* had an unbelievably universal effect," concurs Denis Reno. "You can't imagine how many people received that thing." Gayle Hatch "couldn't wait for *Strength & Health* to come each month."

Bruce Klemens believes the "one main reason" for "losing our critical mass" is the lack of any publicity medium for weightlifting.

*We are less and less of the iron game pie than ever before. And we don't have a newsstand publication because there's not enough people to read it. In the old days Weider and his bodybuilding magazines had a weightlifting article or two by Al Murray or somebody. Now if you look at any bodybuilding magazine there's nothing at all about Olympic lifting, and it's almost worse than [if they were] against Olympic lifting. They ignore it altogether. It's like we're irrelevant. And so if you pick up a newsstand publication, you don't even know we exist.*

*Here's another issue I have with even an internet publication or whatever USA Weightlifting puts out. They've lost all of the personalization of any sort of training routines. You know what I mean. In the fifties, sixties, and seventies, you'd read about how Tommy Kono trains or here's how Schemansky trains, and you could get a little hero worship.*

*You want to be like them, so you studied their training routines. Now any time I see the federation put anything out, it's just some generic percentage-based thing, and you have none of that personalization. I couldn't tell you specifically how the good lifters over the past two decades trained because they never published any articles. ... You don't see that personalization which to me is very important to motivate people.*

Personalization was also a key factor for John Coffee, who observes that "a lot of kids grow up wanting to be like Jim Brown or Wilt Chamberlain or something, and it's mainly from seeing those people...it's the media, either TV or newspapers, the magazines, or whatever it is, and they identify with the personalities they see of these people. But there's nobody like that in weightlifting." Coffee cites the example of when women's world champion Robin Byrd [Goad] was "doing very well, I don't think anybody out at the [Olympic] training center lifted a finger to try to get her any publicity."

#### **Administrative Shortcomings**

Clearly a consensus exists that much of the blame for America's weightlifting decline is due to administrative failings. As a general axiom, notes Carl Miller, as more emphasis is placed on bureaucracy, less attention is devoted to delivering a coaching and strength training system. "And that's where their emphasis is." Mike Stone holds the board of directors responsible for micromanaging and mismanaging the sport, especially in the critical area of sports science where its performance has been "abysmal."

*In USA Weightlifting it's been basically the same as it was when I started, the same people. They play different roles. A few people have died off. But basically you get many of the same people doing the weightlifting that you did forty years ago, and that can be a problem. Put it this way. If you do the same things you have always done, you'll get the same results. ... They need some new blood in there. They need to let the people they hire in the office have more*

*control. And over the years they've hired some people that were pretty good managers and entrepreneurs and had some really good ideas but were stifled in trying to bring those ideas to fruition. ... If the board would act like a more typical board and back off and let the people in the office have more control over what goes on, I think weightlifting would be in better shape.*

Denis Reno recalls a time in the late 1980s when USA Weightlifting was well administered by George Greenaway, an Air Force retiree who managed the office in Colorado Springs.<sup>18</sup> “He organized us. We told him what we sort of wanted and an idea of what had to be done, and he did it. ... He gave us structure. We have no structure whatsoever in our federation now.” Les Simonton reflects that “until 2008 the board of directors was something like 90% coaches, and most of those had special interests, their own kids to a large degree. Some of them were very well meaning, but there was nobody there who knew how to produce things, and certainly so far as running businesses, the organization just wasn't run very much like a business.” A “them and us” atmosphere seemed to prevail that extended to the resident athletes at Colorado Springs whom Ben Green calls “the fair-haired boys.” By the end of the eighties, Green said, “we all felt like outsiders. And when we'd go to the nationals, it was us against them. It always was. We hated them, and they hated us. They didn't like me, and they didn't like John Coffee.” Perhaps the harshest criticism leveled at USA Weightlifting officials, however, comes from Mark Rippetoe who regards them as fools. “They're fools in everything they do. They don't know how to run an organization. ... This is the smallest NGB in the USOC and the worst NGB as far as I'm concerned. USA Weightlifting is just a joke organization.”

Murray Levin attributes much of America's decline to the board's decision following his departure to mimic the Europeans. After the windfall of the 1984 Olympics, he explains, “we invested our money wisely. Still they wanted to bring in foreign coaches, and I always said, and Tommy [Kono] always said, that was the death of American weightlifting. When they started to bring in foreign influence, we sort of lost the spark, and that's when the sport started to go down.” Levin notes that only the women's and master's programs

flourished after he left in 1988. Whether foreign influences — namely the hiring of Australian Lyn Jones as National Coaching Director and Romanian Dragomir Cioroslan as Resident Coach — were significantly detrimental to a program that had already been faltering for two decades is debatable, but other administrative irregularities plagued the sport. According to Denis Reno, weightlifting chafes under the control of the USOC constitution and bylaws, and as he says, the

*USOC finances 70% or more of our programs. We're regimented in. We have all the little structures, but we don't know what in the hell we're doing. We have lousy managers. All of our people are free [volunteers] that run our things. We're not going to get the greatest managers. They're managing and making money for someone else. ... You get what you pay for. And we have no specific weightlifting people employed in Colorado Springs. They're all administrators. I mean our best thing is Laurie Lopez.*

Mike Conrad, National Coaching Coordinator at Colorado Springs, who does come from a weightlifting background, recognizes a lack of centralization and uniformity of coaching efforts with so many individual coaches throughout the country with their own egos and vested interests in the sport.<sup>19</sup> “The only thing we can do is try to create a dialogue. Bringing everyone together and changing the culture is a matter of survival.”<sup>20</sup> To Harvey Newton, who expresses the same frustration, “it seems to be impossible to get the parties of weightlifting on the same page. I don't know whether it's bitter jealousies. I don't know what it is.”

But administrative problems extend far beyond USA Weightlifting, as was obvious to Jim Lorimer who brought together a blue-ribbon panel of fifteen leading lights of the strength world in November 2012 to make reform proposals.<sup>21</sup> That weightlifting's new Executive Director (Michael Massik) was absent that day, that the Chief of Sport Operations and NGB Relations at the USOC (Rick Adams) attended only briefly, and that the Chair of USA Weightlifting's Board of Directors (Drechsler) was only available by telephone did not augur well. The result of the committee's all-day meeting was a



report submitted to Drechsler and Massik with recommendations for reform under four headings.<sup>22</sup> “There was a lot of optimism and a lot of thought about how we could get recruitment going and the like, but at the USOC level there’s just no support and no drive and no leadership,” lamented Lorimer. “I tried to give them a track to run on, and they didn’t run.”<sup>23</sup> Jim Schmitz discerns a major obstacle to American advancement on the international level. “The Communist Eastern Europeans have controlled weightlifting, and so they don’t want the US to have any power or influence because it would weaken them,” hence their aversion to television publicity. “You see Thomas Ajan didn’t care about the world championships or the Olympics making too big of a splash because if you got too big of a splash, people with money and influence would weaken his power. It would knock him out.” Whether there’s an Eastern European Weightlifting Mafia — or outright corruption of the sort that recently created a firestorm within international track and field, as some insiders suppose — has yet to be documented. But Mike Stone notes that “everyone tells me in talking particularly to Eastern Europeans, that they immediately recognized politics of the sport and made concerted efforts to take over those politics and to get themselves placed highly. And if you look at weightlifting, it’s been run by Thomas Ajan for years and years and years. I think they are quite right in recognizing a political structure here.” Stone’s point is that this structure enabled the Eastern bloc to get rules put in that would favor their side, especially in the critical area of drug testing. How well any “Eastern European Mafia” will ultimately withstand the challenge from Asia remains to be seen, but neither result will bode well for the United States, which has not had its way on the international political stage since the days when Bob Hoffman pulled Clarence Johnson’s strings and Oscar State was the General Secretary of the IWF.

### Democracy or Discipline?

Any correlation between the democratization and decline of American lifting during the 1970s and 1980s must also be examined. What Carl Miller “kept hearing from Colorado Springs was just the plain lack of discipline out there. And the board of directors would not back the national coach, like Harvey Newton or Dragomir. When Harvey was out there he didn’t get the backing he should because it takes a lot of hard discipline and training. So that’s a big thing, the lack of dis-

cipline. For a while Colorado Springs was a playland.” It was during the regime of Murray Levin in the 1970s and 1980s that the athletes, led by Artie Drechsler, gained a major voice in the administration of American weightlifting.

“They had double votes in the voting process,” Murray recalls, “and after a while it started to show because in the late eighties they were controlling the coaches, what trips they were going on. They

carried a lot of weight, and I saw that was becoming a problem internationally. ... I lift for me, not my country” became the prevailing attitude. That trend has continued, according to Wes Barnett. “Now we’re in a place where the athletes are calling the shots that they want for the majority of the national level competitions. They’re the ones saying, ‘I want this, I want this, I want this.’” The Eastern Europeans, on the other hand, are told what to lift. According to Barnett, “They’re doing it from a strategic point. They’re not thinking what do I need to do to win medals. The Eastern Europeans and everywhere else are told this is what you go out and lift.” Jim Schmitz agrees that the Eastern Europeans would never allow athletes to have so many “rights,” and maintains that American coaches, “give the athletes too much choice. ... [In] the countries that do the best, the athletes there are just athletes, and based on their performance, and they don’t have a vote on their starting attempts or what weight class they’re going to lift in. They are told what they are going to do. They’re even told to take their drugs.”



Jim Lorimer directed the 1970 World Weightlifting Championships in Columbus, Ohio, and then formed a partnership with Arnold Schwarzenegger that resulted in what is now known as the Arnold Sports Festival. Over the past half-century, Lorimer has remained a concerned fan of American weightlifting and, in 2012, he decided to sponsor a summit on weightlifting’s doldrums, bringing together fifteen strength-sport specialists to brainstorm solutions in Colorado Springs.

The efficacy of coach control over athletes even holds true in the United States, according to Mike Stone, citing track and field, swimming, and gymnastics as prime examples.

*The sports we do well at the world level come out of colleges. Now let's take a look at what they do in colleges. The athletes don't get to pick and choose their training program. They don't get to pick and choose sometimes their roommates. They have to go to bed. These are the rules. You can have various authoritarian coaches. You can have less authoritarian coaches. All of those coaches have done well at one time or another, but they all have rules. I don't know any coach anywhere that doesn't have rules, that just allows the athletes to do whatever they want nor do I know any country that allows athletes to do what they want to and it works. And it certainly doesn't work in college. That conclusion has been arrived at after years and years of observation. But there are actually studies showing that you don't do as well [if they let] you do whatever you want to do.*

Not all interviewees, however, were critical of Drechsler's athletes' rights agenda during the 1970s and 1980s. "I believe in the democratic way," states Lou DeMarco. "In my philosophy, I always put the kids first." Formerly, he recalls, "they were trying to be too controlling of the athletes as far as what they should lift and so on. And there were those in the administration who treated the athletes like second-class citizens which was very discouraging." Nevertheless DeMarco recognizes that the most successful programs in the world have been authoritarian and that "we're somewhat lacking in discipline. If you go into some places where there's a lot of lifters, top level lifters, they're on their cell phones, they're listening to music on the ipads, ipods, and all this stuff, screwing around, and that's not good. When you're at the gym you gotta take care of business."

The most subtle form of discipline was that which Zygmunt Smalcerz was exposed to in Poland where his coach established a training protocol that

enabled lifters to discipline themselves. "Each category had a minimum of two good lifters," he recalls. "In Poland we were so good in the 67 category that we had [Waldemar] Baszanowski, [Marian] Zielinski, and [Zbigniew] Kaczmarek on the same platform, very close to each other every day. Coach had nothing to do. He was watching. And sometimes he would come to Baszanowski, 'did you see him? Did you see him, Baszanowski, what he did?' Sometimes 'come on, give me this. Come on.' It was fantastic." Thus discipline was not imposed but came from the lifters themselves in the form of mini-competitions each training day.<sup>24</sup> Bob Hoffman was frequently criticized for exercising a heavy hand over picking coaches, lifters, and lifts. "But it worked" is the response of Gayle Hatch who recognizes that it was the "same thing" that was so successfully utilized by the authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe.<sup>25</sup>

### A Systematic Approach

What American weightlifters were not doing to keep up with the world, however, is only half the story. It was not so much the USA's decline as its stagnation or "relative decline" while the world was moving ahead. Mike Conroy feels the biggest difference between the United States and European and Asian countries is that the latter adopted a systematic approach to training.

*There's a system. You plug those people into it, and it tiers up. And they have that long-term athletic development. So if they take a kid at age twelve, they have a plan for them. Now the problem Americans have, and Vern Gambetta said this, 'when you really look at how it's done, you have to learn to train, you have to train to train, you have to train to compete, and then you can train to win.' We Americans have a hell of a time with that. We want to win right off the bat, regardless of the age group. You know this when you look at the attrition rates from youth sports to high school sports. The biggest problem for us is once you leave your club there's no place to go in college. We're lucky if we can get into the rec rooms, much less get into the athletic facility. We've had discussions and discussions with college*

*strength programs, and there's the liability issue if you allow a weightlifter to go into the weight room. Now you've opened up the athletic room to every club sport you have on campus. ... In other words, what we want to do is start developing an American system of weightlifting which means that patience is going to have to drive everything we do.*<sup>26</sup>

Even the Colombians and other Latin American countries have a system modeled after the success of Eastern Europeans, observes Harvey Newton. "They have a system that's equivalent to an old phys. ed. teacher who would know if he sees someone who has some talent for weightlifting. He would push them in a certain direction and get them to somebody who could help them. We obviously do not have anything similar to that. We're still in an all-comers type of approach to the sport." Denis Reno credits the dictatorial regimes in the Soviet Union and its satellites for creating a weightlifting infrastructure. First you "gotta have a coaching program" with coaches trained in "scientific methods that have proven to work. You gotta get the thoroughbreds in there. That's what we're not getting." In recent decades the Chinese have adopted the system. "They send somebody to schools in the country and identify people. You can easily identify people who are great potential athletes. ... I don't know how they do it, but you know the government has a system, and you listen to the government."

America's two European coaches explain how the Communist systems developed. Zygmunt Smalcerz points out that Polish weightlifting began in the early 1950s when Russian lifters visited Poland "to let us know what weightlifting is." Soon Fedor Bogdanovsky, middleweight gold medalist in 1956, was assigned as an adviser who became "like a Polish national coach" and traveled throughout the country and established a system of clubs modeled on those that existed in the Soviet Union. Smalcerz, who came from a poor family, joined one of these clubs in his teens as a gymnast before his potential in weightlifting was recognized. There he was exposed to the elaborate Russian system of scientific institutes, training camps, and sports medicine, all of which were replicated in Poland and other Communist countries.<sup>27</sup> Russian scientists at state-funded institutes

produced numerous books and articles on weightlifting. Smalcerz recalled that "They gave plenty of fantastic remarks on what to do, and immediately the coaches were able to implement all of this knowledge to our training. This was very important to putting results higher and higher." Another important component, he claims, was the

*big support from medicine, because all this team was surrounded with very important doctors, knowledgeable doctors, and many massage men. If the team was big, we had two massage men. Every day you were able to get thirty, forty-five minutes of massage. Massage, fantastic medicine and physiotherapies. Big support, big support. Doctor was watching only for what to give, what to do, what to give to recover. It was fantastic. The doctor was more important than the coach sometimes. Today they are using knowledge we get from your one drop of blood. They test it and see what you need.*

Periodic three-week camps organized by the clubs provided the opportunity for the most intensive utilization of these opportunities, according to Smalcerz.

*During the camps the nutrition and everything was much better because they were able to prepare very good food and good quality of this food. It was like a big supper. So I was dreaming to go to these camps because of the food. What did we need to do? I'll need to train, to eat, to rest, nothing [else]. Fantastic. Sometimes we get some free day to go to interesting places. I was able to travel to the old Poland without money. Everything was without money. Club would pay every kind of cost. It was like a privileged position all of the time. It was like a kind of freedom.*

In return for these privileges, Smalcerz continues, the lifters were expected to be "ready every day for very heavy training." He was lifting a total of 25 tons in the



morning and 35 tons in the afternoon for a total of 60 tons or 120,000 pounds per day. "It was like impossible to do it," he recalls, "but I was working like a machine. Every day it was fantastic. I was able to do, every day bigger, fantastic." The system was really working, he believes, and continues to work in Poland even after the collapse of Communism. His prescription is "First choose the very talented, then give them everything. Support every day. Support from medicine, from everything, proper eating, everything."

Dragomir Cioroslan attributes his rise from meager beginnings in Romania to elite status to the "systematic methodological smart training process" he endured. It was a more intense training regimen that he brought to the United States in 1990 as national coach. He increased the number of repetitions from five thousand to 18-20 thousand [per year], "because everything else

besides that is irrelevant in respect to contribution to the sport, other than health issues. The athletes were willing to commit to that, and they found that it resulted in the other major shift in their attitude, their behavior. That this volume of work, although overwhelming, made them all national record holders" marked a start to bringing up medals on the international level. Dragomir's holistic approach reflected his Eastern European origins.

*So my first challenge was a cultural shift in attitude with respect to what it takes. It takes a much more disciplined effort than I observed and found on the ground. It takes much more focus. It takes a much more determined and committed effort. It takes a much harder effort with respect to complexity, inten-*



In 1996 the United States fielded its last full ten-man team at an Olympic Games. Following the Atlanta Games, the IOC instituted a qualifying standard for Olympic eligibility as a way to limit the number of participants. In 2012 we sent our smallest group ever to an Olympic Games as only one man and two women met the required standard and competed in London. The 1996 team members were: Bottom row: Coach Dragomir Cioroslan, Bryan Jacob, Vernon Patao, Thanh Nguyen, and Coach Leo Totten. Second row: Trainer Charles Piba, Pete Kelley, Tim McCrae, Tom Gough, and Dennis Snethen. Third row: Tom Ingalsbe, Konstantine Starikovitch, Mark Henry, and Wes Barnett.

*sity, technicality, and of course additional resources from outside brought into the training process to ensure recovery, better health, avoiding injuries, and ensure progress towards targets that are methodologically set and accomplished in a logical manner with tools of the modern training process. That includes sports science, biomechanical analysis of the technique, transfer of that analysis and efficiency modeling into the individual technique of the athlete. Psychological aspects, motivation, focus, determination, blocking out distractions and all that in order to maximize the potential of the athlete on a daily basis — emotional, physical, psychological and intellectual. And then we had of course exercise physiology, the medical science. What they contribute in supporting and enhancing recovery of the athlete's body after the intense training.*

Many of the training aids Smalcerz and Cioroslan utilized as athletes were also implemented under the latter at Colorado Springs, according to his protégé, Wes Barnett — the science, the medicine, the physiology, the nutrition — but many lifters there were unable to withstand the intensity of the training program. Unlike Barnett, who had a solid foundation under his previous coach, Dennis Snethen, in St. Joseph, Missouri, others could not withstand the “punishment” Cioroslan was “dishing out in his programs.” Barnett recalled that many “could not handle it, and we were just going through a lot of athletes with injuries and non-improvement, and they would just kind of leave, and new guys would come in. So Dragomir eventually had to adjust his program.” Barnett concludes that, unlike the Americans, the Eastern Europeans were full-time professionals in their sport ... paid by their government to lift weights full-time.”

To Lou DeMarco, “we’re still training like in the stone age.” In great part Harvey Newton attributes that deficiency to “more advanced scientific knowledge coming from the Soviet bloc countries versus the relative absence of scientific work being done in this country.” Furthermore, [Newton] holds that American efforts

have resulted in the appearance of a system without the substance.

*They criticized Hoffman for running a monopoly. They criticized the AAU for running a monopoly. They said we need to have a training center which we got. And they said we had to have some coaches from which we have created a community of weightlifting coaches. That has not done us any good. ... Weightlifting's basically acknowledging now that they have more certified coaches than they have athletes. I knew this was coming. This is a huge cash cow for them to run these programs. ... I'm willing to bet 95% don't give a hoot about weightlifting. They just want to say they're a certified coach. They are not coaching athletes. Most of them have never seen a meet. Most of them don't intend to see a meet.*

The former Soviet bloc countries have systematically set the standard too high, maintains Bruce Klemens. “We have now gotten to that stage in Olympic lifting, unless you’re training six times a day, six times a week, two times a day or whatever, you can’t compete.” What enabled the Bulgarians to reach such a high standard, as Les Simonton recognizes, was early recruitment and training programs, “so by the time lifters were in their teens it was old hat. It was ingrained. Anything you teach someone who’s really young, the book type learning or something physical, they’ll retain it to a high degree.”<sup>28</sup> To some extent this more systematic approach has existed within the NCAA, Klemens points out. “You make it worth someone’s while to go out and look for talent and develop talent and make it interesting for the talent to migrate toward the sport or desire potential money.” But weightlifting long ago, at least by the 1970s, abandoned that option.

### **Strength vs. Technique**

At the center of the debate over what made Eastern European weightlifters so superior to the Americans are the types of training methods they employed. For Zygmunt Smalcerz, drawing on the experience of his athletic career, the acquisition of strength was a second-

ary consideration. “At first the basic is technique. We take care about the quality, not weights. Then bigger weights of course after time. First of all technique, secondary beautiful speed, flexibility, jumping, and explosiveness.” Mike Conroy, agreeing with the wisdom of Smalcerz, also believes “it is technique. Strength helps, but technique is skill. You can pull the bar at the speed of light, but if it’s going in the wrong direction, it’s not going to happen. It comes down to grip, stance, and position. If you do it right, you’ll get stronger in doing it right, but if you get strength in front of the technique, the strength will stall out because the bar is going the wrong way.” Gayle Hatch, who studied the technique employed by the Russians and other countries, concluded that it was far superior to that of the Americans. “Absolutely, no question about it. One time when we started out you just pulled the bar straight up instead of getting it into the power position and bringing the hips forward and up — the double knee bend.” According to Harvey Newton, American lifters and coaches had difficulty accepting this principle.

*I remember Morris Weissbrot and Rudy Sablo gave a clinic in 1974. I went and listened, and they said, bounce this off your thighs. Well that’s at a time when Carl Miller is saying ‘no.’ There’s all sorts of subtle things going on with centers of pressure on the foot, and the joints have to be re-bending and getting into a stronger position in order to create more vertical force. Here’s Carl Miller saying this in 73-74 and being shunned by many for what he’s saying, and there’s still a huge movement in this country and in the UK who hate the term double-knee bend. We had a huge disconnect during that period of time. When I was national coach I was on enough trips and talked with enough of our guys to know they didn’t understand how the bar really gets overhead in the most efficient manner.*

According to Carl Miller, “you’ve got to have leverage, and leverage is always more important than strength. So you’ve got to have technique to hit those leverage positions. But if you don’t have strength you’re not going to

go anywhere.” He believes the Eastern Europeans used a combination of technique and strength, first mastering the technique and then getting stronger.

Jim Lorimer, however, believes strength furnishes the basic raw material for performing the lifts. “We’ve got men in this country who are ferociously strong,” and following Bob Hoffman’s example, USA Weightlifting just needs to “identify and train them. I think strength is going to win. We can’t succeed because we haven’t made a commitment to get the strongest men anywhere near the sport. They just continue to do eight-hundred-pound bench presses and one-thousand-pound deadlifts. If you can deadlift one thousand, you ought to be able to clean and jerk five hundred.” From a scientific standpoint, Mike Stone believes “it’s definitely strength” that’s critical, citing studies showing no difference in technique between regional and elite lifters.

*You can’t find a hill of beans difference in technique. But you find a big difference in strength. ... There’s a paper out showing that if you watch the same level of lifter, they won’t do the same thing two times in a row, exactly the same or basically the same. But there’s a slight difference. And there’s a paper coming out showing world records, and the lifters all have slightly different techniques. So is technique important? Absolutely. But there’s a basic technique. Nobody can do perfect technique every time. They’re just not built that way. If they used the same technique every time, they ought to be able to lift the same weight every time, if that was the primary factor. How do you overcome that? Strength. What a lot of people don’t realize is that there are a lot of things that come with strength. As you get stronger, rate of force development goes up, output goes up, and on down the line. If you look at biomechanical studies there are very few differences between lifters in terms of their technique. The better lifters produce more force during the lift. The bar is moving faster, and they get under it faster. How can they do that? Not because of basic*





As the years have passed, sports scientists such as Dr. Mike Stone, an exercise physiologist, have played an increasing role in the production of elite weightlifters in many countries in the modern world. Men like Stone, who has practical experience as both a competitive lifter and a coach, are especially helpful.

*technique. It's because they're exerting more force. It goes back to Newton's second law, force equals mass times acceleration. So if you can accelerate things faster, you perform better.*

It was obvious to Mark Rippetoe that the program he was taught at the Olympic Training Center in 1989 did not have a direct strength component. "If you don't have the advantage of demographics to build your program out of, which we don't, then instead of relying on strength to wander in the door, you had better be prepared to build it, and we're not." Some people are naturally stronger than others, he points out, and US athletes who are "just freaky strong" end up somewhere else. "Weightlifting consists of the snatch, the clean, and the jerk," he reminds us.

*It's not judo. It's not downhill skiing. It's the snatch, the clean, and the jerk, done with the same barbell on the same platform under exactly the same conditions essentially, every time they're practiced, and every time you compete. The bar is laying on the floor, and you do three things with the God-damn thing. You snatch, you clean, and you jerk. First the coaching regime in the United States cannot even tell you what they consider to be good technique.*

*They haven't quantified it. And second, if there is such a thing as good technique, how long does it take an athlete to perfect technique on three movements that take half a second apiece with the same equipment, under the same circumstances every single time ... Good technique means you throw the bar up in as vertical a line as you can make and catch it overhead.*

Coaches, says Rippetoe, "want to pretend like weightlifting is gymnastics with a barbell, and if that were true then style points would be awarded." On the contrary, it's the guy who lifts the most weights who wins. He cites Leonid Tarenenko's 266 kilogram (585 pound) clean and jerk, the heaviest in history. "It was done because the man was really, really strong which made up for the technique mess that that lift was." Quite simply "everyone that beats us internationally is stronger than we are."

Bruce Klemens disagrees that American lifters put too much emphasis on technique and not getting stronger. "That's nonsense. Every reputable coach I know of trains strength as well as technique. ... I would say as far as emphasizing strength vs. technique, we're doing the same as the rest of the world does. We're all training the same." Ben Green, however, who had the opportunity to observe foreign lifters in the warm-up room at world championships, was "just amazed at what some of these guys can do. And not only are they strong, but they're fast. Bam, bam, bam, and they can take it. ... We don't train like those guys," he concluded.

Terry Todd believes that just as the bodies of individuals vary widely in terms of their suitability for elite weightlifting,

*Anyone who's paid close attention to high levels of weightlifting knows that the body types of lifters vary considerably — and not just in size. Even men who train using the same or a similar training program can become champi-*

*ons and still have very different body types. For example, during the mid-1900s Olympic champions Ibrahim Shams and Khadr El-Touni were both Egyptians and both world record holders although Shams was very thin and El-Touni was very heavily muscled. Both used the split style. In more modern times, of course, the squat style is king and the technique of lifting is much more consistent and better understood. Even so, it seems apparent that the experienced top lifters from the most successful countries feel the need to maintain their motor control by constant practice. I remember reading somewhere that the late violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz once said, 'If I don't practice for one day, I know it; if I don't practice for two days, the critics know it; if I don't practice for three days, the public knows it.'*

### Drugs

Whence comes such strength, speed, and intensity? Virtually all interviewees agree that beginning in the middle of the twentieth century drugs played a significant role in the growing differential between the United States and the world. Bob Crist, who was national chairman in the early 1970s when drug testing became an international issue, facetiously asks, "why can't we be like the Europeans and have coaches and labs to help beat the test?" Former IWF Vice President Wolfgang Peter once told him, "'if you have a race horse, you don't take him unless he's medically ready,' the implication being that European authorities would not use a lifter unless they knew he could pass the test, knowing full well he was vulnerable from using drugs. The US, on the other hand, clamped down." Zygmunt Smalcerz remembers when drugs became a significant factor at the 1972 Olympics, in which the Bulgarians beat the Soviet team for the first time. "It was a big surprise." Likewise at the 1973 world championships in Cuba he watched the Bulgarians squat very heavy weights in training. One of them in the 60 kilo class squatted an "impossible" 230 kilos at a time when Poland's best lifter, Waldemar Baszanowski, was only able to squat 210 kilos in the 67 kilo class. Smalcerz retired before testing was introduced in 1976, but he observed how Russia and Poland

set up laboratories, experimental procedures, and pre-testing protocols to determine optimal times and conditions for athletes to compete. "It was secret, top secret, only for the knowledge of leaders in the Ministry of Sport." Their object was to beat the tests. "It was like a system." At the so-called Alternative Olympics at Varna in 1984, however, where 25 world records were set, there was no need for a system, Smalcerz recalled, since the officials "threw all of the samples into the Black Sea." Fortuitously, Lee James, America's brightest star of the 1970s, also benefitted from a similar lapse in testing protocol at the 1976 Olympics, according to Ben Green. "He [James] said, 'as soon as I lifted Smitty [Dick Smith] grabbed me and said, 'Let's go.' And I left. So they didn't test me.'" Artie Drechsler recalls that the USA made "a conscious decision to get very serious about drug testing in the mid-1980s." It was a time when "many countries were complying with international requirements to the smallest extent possible. ... While this resulted in effectively cleaning up the sport in the US, it left US lifters at a relative disadvantage particularly when competition testing was not very sensitive, and athletes could take performance enhancing substances until just days before the event and still be 'clean' for the tests."

At the 1983 Pan American Games in Caracas Dr. Manfred Donike from Germany introduced a more advanced testing procedure that resulted in a walk-out of some members of the American track and field team; eleven weightlifters, including one American, were caught by the testing. And at the Seoul Games in 1988 the Bulgarian weightlifting team withdrew after two disqualifications in the lightest bodyweight classes, which are always the first to compete. Although Murray Levin agrees with John Terpak that "it takes more than little funny pills to lift heavy weights," by this time "the morale was gone. They just weren't training as hard as some of those guys over there." It was a cat and mouse game. "They got better steroids," according to Carl Miller. "To me steroids were originally an easy ball game. Take a carboxyl group off of a benzene ring and put it somewhere else and it's undetectable. Then testing got more sophisticated, but the Europeans kept on beating the ball game. And we more or less tried to do a non-drug program. And to me that was one of the biggest differences." Lou DeMarco and most others believe steroids produce a minimum of ten percent increase in performance, enough to win medals and set world

records. Although he concurs with Tommy Kono, who says “the fact that you don’t make progress has nothing to do with the fact that they’re taking drugs,” DeMarco believes “that has a lot to do with their winning.” Mike Conroy has had

*a lot of sports scientists tell me that anything that can be achieved with drugs, 90% of that can be achieved without drugs. But it takes longer because you’ve got to be more patient. You realize we go the Olympic Games, and the country that’s using drugs snatches 200 kilos, and we snatch 90% of that, 180, we’re in the B session. So you’re not on the podium and in the end being on the podium is still what drives what goes on. I would say that we’re about at that level.*

Conroy was told, without naming countries, that cheating was “all part of the program,” and when American weightlifters get caught it is “because they’re not getting assistance from the NGB to control what’s going on with the tests.” He was also told “if we wanted to, we could keep our athletes healthy, we could improve their performance, but we could only beat the test on a percentage ratio. So we would have failures every now and then.” The United States could not afford failures, however, because they would show up in the press.

Arguably the best example of the impact of drugs was the meteoric rise of Bulgaria in the 1970s under its famous coach Ivan Abadjiev, known for his brutal style of coaching — intensity, volume, anabolic drugs, and maximum weights virtually all the time. Jim Schmitz argues, however, that “Abadjiev’s training methods were probably no stricter than Bear Bryant’s, the famous football coach. You know what they do, their philosophy is train the dickens out of them, and if they don’t break we got a champion. If they break, too bad. They play the numbers game.” Terry Todd recalls “watching with absolute disbelief the Bulgarian team in 1983 under Abadjiev’s iron rule doing seven different training sessions — with a complete cool-down between each one on several consecutive days — during which a number of the men lifted weights on each day that were at or above the current world records. Over 30 years later I read world champion and world record holder

Valentin Kristov’s autobiography detailing the way in which Abadjiev manipulated the teenager with respect to both training volume and drug use. Wes Barnett recalls international meets,

*where I’ve had athletes bring garbage bags, literally garbage bags full of pill bottles with Dianabol, wanting to sell to us whatever they’ve been provided. Maybe they take some, maybe they save some, and over time they’ve got this giant supply that they’re trying to sell. ... I’ve also been told by some of my friends I’ve developed over the years in the international world that ‘look, if you want to be clean and never win a medal, that’s your problem.’ These are world and Olympic champions telling me this. I had another one tell me, ‘if you even want to dream of stepping up on the podium you have to take something. Otherwise you have no chance.’ And this is a guy who had won three Olympic gold medals. Again it’s the whole system. When you are taking drugs and you’re going six or seven days a week and two or three times a day in training sessions, obviously you’re going to see the effect you’re going to have. Really it’s recovery more than it is the strength because you’re able to do more because you can recover. So when you aren’t doing it under the guise of medical scientists and professionals in a systematic way, you’re just kind of on your own ... and you really don’t know what you’re doing or what dosage or any of this kind of stuff. You’re at a huge disadvantage.*

Mike Stone credits the Eastern Europeans and the old Soviet Union for having “really good sports science programs” in the 1970s. “They got a big head start on everybody. ... There’s no doubt that our lifters took drugs at that time, but ours was more of a hit and miss proposition compared to what was going on in some other countries.” It was not that these countries had a genetic advantage or some secret knowledge about training as it was a “program of concerted effort on ergogenic aids.



I believe that because I've talked to the people. I've seen the results. ... Our athletes were getting tested a lot. The athletes in other countries were not. When they started taking drugs they were able to do things they couldn't do before — not only lift more but train harder, I mean much harder and stand up to it.”

It seems obvious to Mark Rippetoe that a change in America's steroid policy would do much to level the playing field. “We all got the same drugs. Everybody has the same drugs and availability. What we have different is a national organization that is determined to be clean at the expense of winning. And nobody else is encumbered with that burden. They don't care if we place thirty-fifth as long as no one tests positive.” John Coffee observes that the Colorado Springs training center “may be the only place in the world where Olympic weightlifters train and are kept, but they're not taking drugs. Who would have a damn training facility and spend all that money to produce weightlifting champions without using drugs? The rest of the world has enough sense not to do that. Until there is a fool-proof way of testing to see if people are chemically enhanced, and as long as we're as stringent about it in this country, we won't win any more medals.” Another interviewee, who wished to remain anonymous, expressed the opinion that “I know these guys are better than us. No matter what we take and they wouldn't take, they'd still beat us.” Terry Todd agrees that the type of serious drug testing done in the US as well as other primarily western countries is only part of the reason we've done so poorly over the last few decades, saying,

*In the '60s through the '90s, before the fall of the Berlin wall and the regime change in so many eastern bloc countries, the selection process arguably played a larger role in their superiority on the platform than the drugs did. After that time the standard of lifting around the world began to fall back, and it's no accident that the all-time records in the superheavyweight snatch and clean and jerk were established in the '80s by Bulgaria's Antonio Krastev and Belarus's Leonid Taranenko, respectively. However, even though the political landscape changed in many parts of Europe, and the organized and*

*state-sponsored programs of early selection, training academies, and subsidized coaches were either de-funded or scaled back, those countries continued to outperform the US and most of the rest of the world, in large part, because the culture of weightlifting never died.*

### **The Deprivation Principle**

As Todd noted, any system that incorporates an early identification of weightlifting talent certainly yields a decided advantage. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, this approach and other aspects of the Soviet-inspired system had its roots in the post-World War II era and thrived in societies of greatest deprivation. Mike Stone recalls meeting various coaches and scientists during his IWF-sponsored visits to Eastern Europe.

*One of the things they consistently told me was as they were making their recovery, and of course many of them were under a Communist system, they looked at sport as a way of advertisement. There are some high profile sports that we have, like track and field, but there are also sports that other people are really looking at like weightlifting, and they actually made a concerted effort to get into those sports and put a lot of money into those sports to build them up. In fact, almost to a person, every single sports scientist told me that, including Lazlo Nadori, who was around at that time and almost single-handedly changed the sports face in Hungary during the 1950s. That's one of the stories that I got consistently, that they actually picked sports. Okay, what sports do we think we can make a splash in? And weightlifting was one of them. They're coming out of the war. They're putting their country back together.<sup>29</sup>*

Todd agrees, and points to “the incredible performances produced by China's decision to use tens of thousands of hungry women weightlifters as a means of dominating a

new sporting category and earning gold medals.” This deprivation model, as Zygmunt Smalcerz attests, was put into place in Poland during the early 1950s, despite shortages and rationing. “At home we were really very lucky to eat bread sometimes. It was everywhere a queue to buy bread and to buy sugar. It was a very difficult time.” Even with meager resources, however, the government started funneling money into clubs for weightlifting. Results were not immediate, but by the end of the ‘50s Polish lifters were showing up on the international scene winning medals. “We needed time.” It was not so much *despite* deprivation but *because* of it that Polish weightlifting gained strength.

This scenario continued to prevail in subsequent decades as a fundamental principle of developing powers. While social and economic deprivation helped athletes in other countries, it detracted from the performance of American athletes who could go into other fields and other sports to achieve a better life. Jim Schmitz, like Todd, cites the example of China:

*Their best athletes come from the poorest parts of that country. They come from the out-of-the-way, the outback and the wilderness where only the strong survive, and they're hungry to improve themselves and see the world and raise their status and make money. Even in Poland, though they're doing well financially and economically these days, their athletes and especially their good athletes come from the poorer parts, like the Dolega brothers; they come from a small town where there's only two sports and the people do either soccer or weightlifting because both are ways in which a person can get some fame and fortune and improve their standard of living. But definitely in China and in Thailand. I had talks with the coaches of these various countries, like the Indonesian coach, and he said the same thing. They get their kids from the poor parts of their country. And that's going on in Colombia and Venezuela these days. The same thing in Ecuador. North Korea had a phenomenal Olympics in London. South Korea's*

*probably doing better overall in other sports, but in South Korea what they do is approach their weightlifting programs like socialist countries do. They go to the schools and tap kids on the shoulder and test them and offer them a nice reward if they become a successful weightlifter. South Korea is the only country in the free world that's doing really well at the Olympic level in weightlifting now. Kazakhstan's a great example. They have this little Chinese girl, Chinese-Kazak [Zulfiya Chinshanlo], who lives somewhere on the border of China and Kazakhstan. She comes from a very poor tribe. She was 53 [kilo] Olympic and world champion.<sup>30</sup>*

In Cuba, Wes Barnett witnessed “a people who have nothing. So sport was a way out. ... So you look at what these individuals had on the line compared to being in the United States where you could be anything. ... Those opportunities didn't exist for other athletes throughout the world where sport was the end all and be all. That's where success comes from.” Dragomir Cioroslan agrees that in Eastern Europe sport provides an opportunity for those suffering from economic and social deprivation to have a car, an apartment, plenty to eat, and even the possibility of national and international fame. “It is known that many of the high performers in weightlifting are not coming from the valedictorians in the colleges and universities. They're coming from blue collar families and social environments where life is kind of difficult and work is hard, and promises little for future success.”<sup>31</sup> Harvey Newton recalls Thomas Ajan telling him shortly after the iron curtain came down that “weightlifting results in Hungary were really going backwards. I said, ‘I'm surprised to hear that,’ but he said ‘no, it's good for us,’ and I said ‘why is that?’ And he said, ‘it means that our life is getting better.’” Likewise, when someone asked Denis Reno “what does the US have to do to become good in weightlifting?” his joking but serious answer was “we have to become poor. Nice and poor. People have to have something to aspire to. But we're too rich. Even our poor people are rich.”

### The Fear Factor

Utilizing sport to overcome deprivation was a

common characteristic among Eastern European weightlifters in the 1970s and 1980s. Fear of losing newly won advantages served as an ongoing motivation. "There's great incentive there," explains Carl Miller, "because...you are in a country which has very little freedom, and you'll train like hell to get an apartment, a car, regular food, and all that kind of stuff." He spent five days in Bulgaria with Abadjiev, the head coach, and observed training sessions he deemed brutal — three times a day with maximum weights. Miller asked "how can these people take all this training? His [Abadjiev's] comment was, 'in any war there are casualties.' But you're also going to have people coming up. They will fight for the chance to get up there, and the discipline of those days before the Berlin wall went down still largely remains." They were part of a system, Wes Barnett explains, where weightlifting was an escape. "If I were put in a situation where it comes down to if I win I have a better life for my family, I would do anything that's available to me. I'm going to do it because it's more than just about winning and sport. It's about living. It's about life." Ben Green recalls training briefly with Tony Urrutia shortly after his defection from Cuba in 1980.

*He said, 'let me tell you a story, Ben. I was over-training. My coach had a stick. Tony, you got to do six snatches with 150 singles today. I missed my first. The guy hit me. You owe me six. I missed my second one. He hit me again. You owe me six. I just can't do it, coach. You will do it. Keep going.' Finally Tony said, 'Ben, I couldn't have snatched 100 kilos. Finally, and he hit me and he flipped out and says you blankety blankety blank.' Tony says, 'I quit.' He threw the shit down. He went home. He got a call from his mommy and daddy. 'Tony, what have you done? They've kicked us out of our apartment. They're going to pick up your Mercedes. You have no place to live, you have no place to make money. What are you going to do?' I was back in the gym the next day doing that 150. That's a little motivation.*

Although this encounter was no doubt an extreme case

and may even be an exaggeration, the scenario of possibly losing hard-fought gains furnished an incentive for even greater performances. "I think a certain fear that they came from nothing persisted," observes Bruce Klemens, "and Abadjiev will throw them out on their asses if they give any guff or don't do what he said. When someone asked Abadjiev why these guys are training so intensely; don't they get hurt? Yeah, I just get more lifters."

### Cultural Conditioning

Notwithstanding the decade of American dominance under Bob Hoffman, various interviewees cite the centuries of strength tradition in Eastern cultures. "You know it's cultural and it's historical," observes Jim Schmitz, "and so they take great pride that they are strong; historically Armenia and Azerbaijan and Turkey, that whole area. They all take great pride in their weightlifting and wrestling." While a young boy in the United States might aspire to be a basketball player or a golfer, a young boy in Georgia or Azerbaijan might want to be a weightlifter. "It's a cultural thing," concurs John Coffee. "I think weightlifting is associated with beer halls and Eastern Europe and the Chinese and with things that are not really American in most people's minds." This alien outlook is obvious in Leonid Matveyev's classic 1971 book on periodization, according to Mike Stone. Indeed "the whole first chapter deals with why the Communist system is better than other systems and then how sport fits into this system. And that sport is an export of their way of life, and the reason they're so good at it is because of the Communist system."<sup>32</sup> Zygmunt Smalcerz describes it as a closed system where information about the capitalists and America was "blocked. For me this system was fantastic because I got everything I needed." With nothing to contaminate the government's construct of the world, there was no reason to suspect that conditions were better anywhere else.

Dragomir Cioroslan describes how Eastern Europeans established a culture of success in weightlifting. "If you do it well you got support, and that was a great motivation factor. It's all about creating the environment, the high performance culture to succeed. Of course the wider the support base for recruitment, talent development, and further financial support, the greater the chance of success." Harvey Newton recalls watching a Tom Brokaw TV special on possible reasons for the remarkable success of African and African-American



athletes, a segment of which examined the superiority of Kenyan runners. In addition to

*elevation and a couple of other things, [Brokaw] said the bottom line is that the Kenyans have created a culture of success. They enter races expecting to win. ... In my [Harvey Newton's] backyard Spruce Creek High School is a consistent top performer in state championships in weightlifting. Anyone going to their high school regardless of their interest in weightlifting knows that their school has a record equaled by no other school in the state. Simply stated, there is a culture of success in weightlifting at Spruce Creek. The culture of expected success has a big impact on performances, common to those at the top of the podium. I think we can all agree that the United States does not currently have a culture that promotes excellence in international weightlifting.<sup>33</sup>*

Bruce Klemens observes that “in the fifties there was always some place you could do Olympic lifts, and probably by the end of the seventies we started to get things the way they are now, where if you tried to do a clean and jerk in a chrome gym, they’ll throw you out.” Ironically “the more popular weight training got, the less popular weightlifting got.” With weightlifting “becoming more and more a cult sport,” it became difficult to create a culture of success.

How different the cultural conditioning of American lifters has been to that of their adversaries is amply illustrated by two anecdotes related by Les Simonton. The first came from American weightlifting official and physician David Pursley, who,

*was telling me when he was at a junior world championship in Asia a few years ago a Chinese lifter girl dislocated her elbow pretty severely in competition. It turns out that Dr. Pursley was not the medical officer, but he ended up being the one going to the hospital with her because her coaches wouldn't. She wasn't worth anything to the coaches*

*any more. They had ten more waiting in the wings. It's a different mentality.*

The second involves Gabor Mate, a Hungarian athlete on the Auburn University track team who,

*asked me [Les Simonton] where I usually train, and I said I train in my garage with weights and a platform. He didn't scoff at it but said 'oh that's typical American.' That kind of hit me. I wonder what that means? I got to thinking about it, and after some trips overseas I realized they generally don't have something like that in a house. It's like a community. They might have a sports facility at which they have the weights or outdoor fields or basketball courts or things where you go there to do it. You don't do something in your basement there.*

The way most training is done in other countries is more communal or collectivist than individualistic. To Laurie Lopez, it's all about culture. “As I'm sure Zygmunt will attest, they take kids at a very young age, and raise them, and this is their life, and that's what they're commissioned to do basically. It isn't that way in this culture, and I don't think our athletes have the same constitution or drive, partly because they have other interests. I think it's a real cultural difference and that is why we haven't been as successful as other countries in the last forty years.”

### A Crossfit Solution?

Whether CrossFit, which incorporates both weightlifting movements in its training and competitions will help bring American weightlifting out of its half-century slump has been much debated. Many of the 7,000 CrossFit “boxes” (gyms) that have emerged since its official launch in 2000 offer specific times, places, and instruction for the Olympic lifts.<sup>34</sup> As a result, Art Drechsler believes “the ‘worm’ has turned. CrossFit's emphasis on Olympic style lifting and its use for improving athletic performance have dramatically increased interest in our sport. ... I see a very positive future for weightlifting in this country.” Jim Lorimer, who observes that these athletes are not only fit but phe-

nomenally explosive, sees CrossFit as a recruiting ground for Olympic lifters. Bruce Klemens agrees that CrossFit is “a good thing, and even if these people don’t go into competition, it exposes what a snatch is, and what a clean is to everybody else in the gym. Denis Reno also supports CrossFit and sees it as a way to bring more people and money into the sport through the training of level one club coaches.

*They may never coach a weightlifter, but they pay a fee to do it, and they pay a fee to renew every year, so that they could say they were certified as a club coach. So this is bringing money in. It’s one of the few money-making things that we have. ... I think the CrossFit people are being drawn into the Olympic lifts more than the football players because they specifically have to do snatches and I think they have cleans of some sort. ... So we’re hoping to pick up people from that. I think it is wonderful.*

Jim Schmitz also sees the financial benefits accruing to weightlifting from CrossFit. He sees it as “an amazing phenomenon that’s doing great things for weightlifting in this country. If for nothing else, it’s given people like myself an added income from training people who don’t care about being a weightlifter, but they want to know the snatches and clean and jerks, the exercises, because they want to be better at CrossFit.<sup>35</sup> And crossfitters don’t think about going to the Olympics,” he adds.

Mike Stone agrees that a lot of people are making money from CrossFit, including some weightlifting coaches, but “you would be hard-pressed to show that CrossFit, the way that it’s done, is a good thing to do. I never saw a cross-fitter that trains like a cross-fitter that is really a good weightlifter, I mean at the top, and I don’t think I ever will.” The problem, according to Harvey Newton, “is that nobody has found a link with them that has improved US weightlifting yet. We’re selling more shoes. We’re selling more uniforms. We’re selling more bumper plates, but we’re not getting any better lifters.” The most telling criticism of CrossFit comes from Mike Conroy who estimates half of the 6,000 level one coaches he oversees are crossfitters. “They come in and they want to learn the Olympic lifts but only as it relates back to CrossFit.” Mike Stone, he points out,

“figured out that if you really want to be a successful weightlifter you have to put sets in front of reps. In other words, you got to do it right, and then you got to rest, and then you got to do it right again.” Stone says,

*when you pull a barbell from the floor it does three things. You got peak force, peak power, and peak acceleration. ... Well if you don’t maintain the quality, the peak acceleration falls off, and so after about three reps at 80% it really falls apart. So that’s why in cycle one in a preparation phase weightlifters will do triples. Then in the power phase they’ll do doubles. Then in the neural phase prior to competition they’ll do heavy singles. Now you’re attacking the nervous system. Well if you’re going to hang around in the anaerobic threshold area, technique is going to suffer physiologically because the ATP [adenosine triphosphate] doesn’t store itself for that long. It falls apart. If you’re trying to pound out, and the famous CrossFit one is the snatch ladder where they skip rope for fifty skips, and then they snatch, and then they skip, and then they just go up in weight. But it doesn’t relate back to weightlifting as a sport. To me, when I tell them, snatching’s hard enough, why would I want to skip rope in between? That anaerobic threshold just causes the technique to fall apart, and then if you understand some of the ideas of motor learning, what happens at the end is the technique that’s remembered. So when the technique breaks down, that unfortunately starts to become the pattern.*

Lou DeMarco does not think highly of CrossFit. “Don’t get me wrong,” he cautions, “I think very highly of these people’s skill in what they do, and they are the fittest people on earth, and I admire them for that, but as far as developing our sport, no. It’s like comparing a marathoner to a sprinter. If you want to run the marathon or a mile, you’d better go out and do ten or twenty miles a day [Ed. note: This is an obvious exag-

generation.], whereas a sprinter, what does he do? That's what our sport is. Our sport is an explosive sport, not repetitions. And it's taking away some of our lifters." John Coffee believes "CrossFit is not interested in helping USA Weightlifting. They're making money hand over fist. CrossFit, the way it's run now is an abomination in my opinion." The best way to train for weightlifting, Coffee insists, is train as heavy, hard, and often as possible without getting hurt. Terry Todd suggests,

*We probably need to wait a while before deciding what the overall impact CrossFit will have on competitive weightlifting. Without question, tens of thousands more people are now doing snatching and cleaning and push-pressing or push-jerking in the U.S. than have ever done them before — women as well as men. Without question, those tens of thousands of men and women are becoming more fit and explosive as a partial result of their regular use of weightlifting movements. And without question these men and women have a far greater understanding and appreciation for the great feats of power our competitive lifters can perform. Also, CrossFit has brought a lot of previously unavailable money to various parts of our sport, so for all these reasons it seems likely that in the years to come at least some of the tens of thousands of crossfitters here and in other countries will decide to either leave CrossFit and focus on weightlifting or to compete in both sports.*

#### **An American Model?**

The dilemma that has confronted American weightlifting since the early 1970s can best be understood as a competition between socialist/totalitarian and capitalist/democratic cultures in the sports arena. That was how Bob Hoffman and his Soviet adversaries perceived it during the heart of the Cold War era, but while Bob was employing his company's profits to nurture teams he hoped would show the superiority of the "American Way," the Russians and Eastern Europeans, with government leverage, were creating a more power-

ful model of athletic development by tapping the resources of entire nations to serve opposite ideological ends. By such means they were able to create a large pool of weightlifters to recruit potential champions, identify local talent early, establish and subsidize clubs and camps, control what sports could be developed and promoted, provide maximum publicity and incentives, offer scientific and medical support for the use of performance-enhancing drugs, and cultivate a competitive environment within a national team. Most often this motivation resulted from conditions of deprivation whereby weightlifting was perceived as a means of social mobility.

These conditions could not readily be applied within the free enterprise and democratic structure of the United States, yet officials attempted during the 1970s and 1980s to resurrect American fortunes by replicating what seemed to work for the Europeans.<sup>36</sup> This process started with demands for a national coach and resulted in the hiring of Carl Miller, who was called a coordinator. Miller was followed by Denis Reno, Dick Smith, Harvey Newton, and finally Dragomir Cioroslan. Then the need for a national coaching center was realized with the Colorado Springs residential program, which enjoyed only partial success. Assuming Europeans were benefitting from advanced training procedures, officials next began translating and publishing their studies in *The Soviet Sports Review* and other sports performance digests.<sup>37</sup> Americans thus learned what Soviet bloc athletes were doing, but to no avail. Then a hue and cry emerged for more money. So Murray Levin, who was president from 1976 to 1988, managed to attract considerable funding from corporate sponsors, and the sport received a windfall of 1.2 million dollars from the 1984 Olympics, but American lifts and placements continued to show no improvement in international competition. None of the interviewees in this study seemed to know what happened to all that money in subsequent years, but it did virtually nothing to improve the state of American weightlifting. They are also all aware that even though wealth is being generated by the registration of thousands of crossfitters and lucrative coaches clinics, American weightlifting in 2014 seemed less poised to make its mark on the international stage than in 1972.

Obviously, attempts to mimic the Eastern European model of success — while still adhering to an amateur training protocol inherited from the sixties — were not working. It was an ill-considered attempt to apply a



model drawn from underprivileged societies that were prepared to use political means to achieve nationalistic and ideological ends. Perhaps it might be better to take advantage of America's greatest natural resource — individual free enterprise and its powerhouse economy — which Bob Hoffman did and countless other sports are doing, by professionalizing weightlifting and adopting some of the measures recommended by Pete George to endow it with popular appeal.<sup>38</sup> This might avoid the strictures not only of the USOC that Jim Lorimer encountered but the autocracy of the international overlords. By such means the face of international tennis was transformed several decades ago, enabling it to become an Olympic sport. [Ed. note: *This analogy fails to consider the worldwide popularity of tennis — a spectator sport of a type very different from weightlifting.*] In some way, as Bruce Klemens points out, “the desire has to come out of the lifter himself.” But instead of discipline being imposed by an elite governing body, it would come from lifters who would be motivated not by fear of lapsing into poverty but the prospect of enjoying fortune and fame the same result achieved by their ex-Communist counterparts through a system that supposedly rejects those values. In other words, the sport would be incentivized from outside rather than inside the system and from the bottom up rather than the top down. How popular weightlifting could be if properly showcased was obvious to me as I witnessed the Centennial Olympics in Atlanta. My description of it that subsequently appeared in *The International Journal of the History of Sport* is as true now as it was in 1996.<sup>39</sup>

*If America remains true to its capitalist tradition, the key component to success will likely be consumer demand. Whether the competition in Atlanta was ‘the greatest Weightlifting event in history’ may be debated, but it did have genuine audience appeal.<sup>40</sup> Probably not more than 10 per cent of the 5,000 spectators at each of the 20 sessions had ever seen a live contest, but virtually 100 per cent enjoyed the experience. The giant score board, the use of closed circuit television from five angles on two large screens, instant replay, biographical information on the lifters, and the employment of music between lifts*

*all contributed to this successful showcasing. ‘What we were seeing wasn’t just a world class weightlifting contest,’ concluded Jim Schmitz, ‘but living proof of just how popular the sport can be.’<sup>41</sup> Despite overpriced tickets (\$45 for group A and \$23 for group B) and overpriced food and services (\$4.00 for a large box of Cracker Jacks!) the crowd was enthralled by the spectacle of Olympic competition.<sup>42</sup>*

Much the same kind of crowd exposure is made available each year at the Arnold Sports Festival, albeit on a more limited scale and featuring only American lifters.<sup>43</sup> But the message is the same — if United States weightlifting is to escape from the doldrums and become competitive again it must create a new culture of success relevant to its capitalist and democratic society and not follow the old one that was uniquely fashioned for socialist and non-democratic regimes. To realize the American dream of medals in weightlifting, as in days of yore, the sport must escape the clutches of authoritarian governing bodies and become more spectator-friendly. Only by engaging the power of the sport-loving public with more exciting competitions will USA Weightlifting attract the kind of money and talent that will put American lifters back on the podium at Olympic and world championships.

## NOTES

1. Murray Levin interview with the author, 30 March 2013, Boca Raton, Florida.
2. Two weeks later Levin received a letter from Kemp “stating that he now realized I was right.” Levin to the author, 11 December 2013.
3. Dube never thought Bob over-commercialized lifting or took more than was his due. “I needed help financially and York gave it.” Joe Dube interview with the author, 8 November 1993, Jacksonville, Florida.
4. John Fair, “The USA vs. the World: A Statistical Analysis of American, World, and Olympic Weightlifting Results, 1970-1992,” *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 12, no. 3 (August 2013):19-25; John Fair, “An Analytical Narrative of American, World, and Olympic Weightlifting Results, 1970-1992,” *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 12, no. 4 (August 2014): 30-53.
5. See also Randall J. Strossen, “Wes Barnett, All-American Medal Detector,” *Milo* 4, no. 3 (October 1996): 12-14.
6. See also Tommy Kono, *Weightlifting Olympic Style* (Honolulu, HI: Hawaii Kono Company, 2001), and Tommy Kono, *Championship Weightlifting, Beyond Muscle Power, the Mental Side of Lifting*

(Honolulu: Hawaii Kono Company, 2010).

7. See also Jim Murray, "Jim Lorimer: The Iron Game's Greatest Promoter," *Iron Game History* 5, no.3 (December 1998): 4-7.

8. See Carl Miller, *The Sport of Olympic-Style Weightlifting, Training for the Connoisseur* (Santa Fe, NM: Sunstone Press, 2011).

9. See also "Mark Rippetoe," <http://startingstrength.com/index.php/site/about>.

10. See also Bruce Wilhelm, "Jim Schmitz: Coach and Trainer of Champions," *Milo* 15, no. 2 (September 2007): 42-49.

11. See also "An Interview with Zymunt Smalcerz," *The International Olympic Lifter* 3, no 1 (January 1976): 10-11.

12. See John D. Fair, "Georgia: Cradle of Southern Strongmen," *Atlanta History, A Journal of Georgia and the South* 45 (2002): 41. Perhaps the best example of a weightlifter being seduced from football is the legendary Paul Anderson. See Paul Anderson, *The World's Strongest Man* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1975), 36-38.

13. That this issue remains alive is evident in articles by Scott Safe, "Making the Case for a National High School Weightlifting Program" and by Artie Drechsler, "USAW's New Scholastic/Collegiate Development and LWC Initiatives" in *USA Weightlifting* (March 2012): 2-3, 5.

14. What Smalcerz meant by an identification of talent was spelled out in a presentation he made to the National Junior Championships at Foster City, California, in February 2013 where he outlined the steps whereby such a program could be implemented. See the synopsis of this presentation that appeared in *Denis Reno's Weightlifter's Newsletter*, no. 359 (1 April 2013): 10, 12.

15. See also Arthur Drechsler, *The Weightlifting Encyclopedia, A Guide to World Class Performance* (Whitestone, NY: S&S Communications, 1998), 5.

16. See Herb Glossbrenner, "The Strongest Pressers of All Time," *Strength & Health* 41 (February 1973): 50-55; "The Strongest Snatchers of All Time," *Strength & Health* 41 (March 1973): 40-45; and "The Strongest Jerkers of All Time," *Strength & Health* 41 (April 1973): 36-42.

17. Actually paying bonuses for Olympic medal-winning performances is not an uncommon practice. According to *Bloomberg Businessweek* for 3 February 2014, 17 countries will pay bonuses at the Sochi Winter Olympics, with Kazakhstan leading the parade at \$250,000 for a gold medal and \$50,000 for a silver. The United States rewards its athletes with \$25,000 for a gold, \$15,000 for a silver, and \$10,000 for a bronze. See [www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-02-03/winter-olympics-in-sochi-countries-that-pay-highest-medal-bonuses](http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2014-02-03/winter-olympics-in-sochi-countries-that-pay-highest-medal-bonuses).

18. See "USWF Gets New Executive Director," *Weightlifting USA* 6, no. 6 (November 1988): 11.

19. Part of the discrepancy with Reno's statement comes from the fact that Conroy as well as former women's champion Carissa Gump, were hired after the Reno interview. The new CEO and General Secretary, Mike Massik, however, recruited from fencing, does not have a weightlifting background.

20. Conroy cites Massik's inaugural article to this effect in the January 2013 issue of *USA Weightlifting*, 3.

21. Included on this Weightlifting Advisory Committee were Rick Adams (USOC), Mark Cannella (Columbus Weightlifting), Dave Castro (CrossFit), John Coffee (USA Women's World Team Coach), Boyd Epley (NSCA), Gayle Hatch (US Olympic Team Coach), Brent LaLonde (Arnold Sports Festival), Jim Lorimer (Arnold Sports

Festival), Harvey Newton (USA Weightlifting), Greg Page (USA Powerlifting), Angela Simons (USA Powerlifting), Dr. Chuck Stiggins (CSCCA), Bob Takano (California Weightlifting Coach), Dr. Terry Todd (University of Texas), and Dione Wessels (North American Strongman Association). Olympian Mark Henry also attended in an unofficial capacity.

22. The advisory committee's recommendations fell under the headings of identification and recruitment, coaching and training, promotion and publicity, and funding potential. Lorimer to the author, 29 November 2012.

23. In a letter to USOC CEO Scott Blackmun, Gayle Hatch protested the conduct of Rick Adams who showed up toward the end of the meeting and delivered "what could best be described as a 40 minute tirade against the USAW. We were all told how poor the USAW's performance was, along with that of a number of individual athletes. The USAW was compared to more successful NGBs in a very negative tone that went far beyond reporting on any perceived facts. The conclusion was that essentially the USAW was the worst NGB in the USOC family and was beyond help, so the USOC had given up on it." No less disheartening was his response to Lorimer's offer to send him a copy of the committee's recommendations. "Mr. Adams indicated that there was no point in providing him with a copy!" Hatch to Blackmun, 26 November 2012, copy of letter in the author's possession.

24. Much the same sort of principle transpired at York Barbell in the 1930s between Olympic champion Tony Terlazzo and John Terpak who were, as Bob Hoffman noted, "'the closest of rivals and best of friends,' and as they pounded typewriters outside his office, they challenged each other to private contests." See *Strength & Health* 5 (August 1937): 9; and John D. Fair, *MuscleTown USA, Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 62.

25. "Then officials were king" is Gary Gubner's recollection of the Hoffman era. "Lifters had no say. Lifters when travelling just followed along. You could get cut off from international competition if you didn't behave." Gary Gubner interview with the author, 15 June 1992, Weston, Connecticut.

26. Vern Gambetta is the founder and head of Gambetta Sports Training Systems in Sarasota, Florida, which espouses the concept of functional path training or building the complete athlete. [www.gambetta.com](http://www.gambetta.com)

27. The Soviet system of clubs which served as a model for Smalcerz's club was actually derived from Eastern European sokols. As early as the 1860s these physical culture clubs were formed by wealthy citizens in Moscow and St. Petersburg for a variety of sports. By 1905 there were about a hundred sport and gymnastic societies in Russia. Although the Communist regime viewed them as counter-revolutionary and put a damper on their activities, many of them survived in the 1920s as military clubs managed by the state where swimming, boxing, wrestling, and weightlifting were practiced. See Henry W. Morton, *Soviet Sport* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 156-60; and Deobold B. Van Dalen and Bruce L. Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education, Cultural, Philosophical, Comparative* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), 314.

28. This scenario also applied to the East Germans, as a 1976 article translated by Pete Talluto pointed out. "Training for weight lifting ought to begin in the 10-14 year age group," it advised. Then "at the age of 14 they are ready for a complete program using maximum

loads in snatch, clean and jerk, squats, and the assistance exercises." J. Kristensen, "Training in East Germany for 10-14 Year Olds," *The International Olympic Lifter* 3/5 (May 1976): 10.

29. Deobold Van Dalen and Bruce Bennett observed in 1971 that the Soviet Union since 1950 "has fully exploited the propaganda value from the success of their athletes in international competition. Their athletes abroad serve as cultural diplomats, and sports are truly an instrument of Russian foreign policy." Van Dalen and Bennett, *A World History*, 309.

30. See "Kazakh Chinshanlo's Baffling Records," *World Weightlifting, Official Magazine of the International Weightlifting Federation* 3 (2012): 10.

31. Matt Foreman recalls a reporter asking Romanian champion Nicu Vlad what he thought about training top young lifters. "In Romania," he responded, "I train on a bar that is bent. My gym has bad lighting and very little heat in the winter. Here in America, you have everything you need to train. It's not in the bar or the gym or the platform . . . it's in you." Matt Foreman, *Bones of Iron, Collected Articles on the Life of the Strength Athlete* (Sunnyvale, CA: Catalyst Athletics, 2011), 121.

32. "Without denying the significance of sport's role in the self-assertion of a personality, Marxist sociology shows that it can be regarded as a truly human activity only in its social aspects," according to Leonid Matveyev in *Fundamentals of Sports Training* (Moscow: Fizkultura Sport Publishers, 1977), 13-14.

33. See "Boys Weightlifting, 2011-12 Championship Records," [www.fhsaa.org/sites/default/files/orig\\_uploads/records/rec\\_wtb.pdf](http://www.fhsaa.org/sites/default/files/orig_uploads/records/rec_wtb.pdf).

34. CrossFit can be traced back to the 1970s when former gymnast Greg Glassman and his ex-wife Lauren Jenai initiated these exercises in a garage gym in Santa Cruz, California, but it was not until after the turn of the century that the concept mushroomed. From 2005 to 2013 the number of CrossFit gyms grew from 18 to over 6,000 worldwide. The top prize for individual champions in 2013 was \$275,000. Reebok, the corporate sponsor, has increased the total purse to \$1,000,000. History of CrossFit: [www.crossfitinfo.com/history-of-crossfit/](http://www.crossfitinfo.com/history-of-crossfit/); and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPAXQtDNLQ0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPAXQtDNLQ0); and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CrossFit>.

35. According to its "Profit & Loss" statement for January through June of 2012, USA Weightlifting had a total income of \$1,159,859 with \$919,860 in expenses for a net profit of \$239,999. Membership fees amounted to \$272,875 or 23.52% of total income, while coaching course income of \$653,835 was 56.37%. If the \$46,375 earned from coaching re-certifications is added to coaching course income (instead of membership fees), this figure would reach \$700,210 or 60.37%. Membership fees and coaching course income, both driven in the past decade by CrossFit recruits, are the largest items on the income side of the ledger, amounting to a composite of \$926,710 or 79.89% of USA Weightlifting's total income for the six month period. By 30 June 2012, its total assets were \$981,303. Copies of statements in author's possession.

36. Matt Foreman noted in 2011 that "China's gradual rise to the top of the world over the last fifteen years has likely been based on this classical Eastern European training methodology. But now that China's success is eclipsing these other traditional power countries, we must acknowledge that they have broken new ground in the training of weightlifters." Foreman, *Bones of Iron*, 18.

37. Michael Yessis' *Soviet Sports Review* was published from 1966 to 1994 in Laguna Beach, California. See also Michael Yessis, *Secrets of Soviet Sports Fitness and Training* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1987). "In almost all sports, athletes from the Soviet Union and other socialist-bloc nations have consistently outperformed Western competitors," maintains Yessis, a physical education professor at California State University, Fullerton. . . . Extolling the virtues of Soviet prowess, he advocates the separation of sports and politics, credits Soviet sports physicians with generosity and openness, and maintains that the 'secrets' of their superiority are accessible to Americans. Soviet success is due, he says, to a scientifically based system that includes sophisticated sports research, novel physical and psychological training regimens, innovative equipment and new competitive tactics." Cited in an extract from *Publishers Weekly* in [www.amazon.com/Secrets-Soviet-Sports-Fitness-Training/dp/0688082467](http://www.amazon.com/Secrets-Soviet-Sports-Fitness-Training/dp/0688082467).

38. For an interesting analysis of the current state of American weightlifting, largely from a west coast perspective see Greg Everett's *American Weightlifting, A Documentary* (Sunnyvale, CA: Catalyst Athletics, 2013). In the section entitled "Public Perspectives," Casey Burgener observes that "nobody really knows about Olympic-style weightlifting." Everett then points out that "the entertainment value of weightlifting is probably lower than a lot of other sports. Americans like to see guys dance. They like to see guys score touchdowns and dunk the football over the uprights. They like to see people slam dunk the ball and perform all kinds of theatrics. There's a huge entertainment value to it, and in weightlifting that just doesn't come across." Matt Foreman, however, insists "we don't have to change the sport to make it interesting enough for spectators. You have people watching golf and fishing and poker on TV in this country, and you can't tell me that those things are more exciting or interesting than weightlifting. The issue is that there are a lot more people that participate in those things and can understand them and appreciate the difficulty of them and are consequently interested in watching them." But Foreman's lack of any formula for eliciting greater participation in weightlifting brings the whole question back to numbers.

39. See John D. Fair, "The Iron Game and Capitalist Culture: A Century of American Weightlifting in the Olympics, 1896-1996," *The International Journal on the History of Sport* 15, no. 3 (December 1998), 32.

40. Mike Gattone to the author, 1 August 1996, letter in the author's possession.

41. Jim Schmitz, "The Best Ever, XXVI Olympic Games," *Milo* 4, no. 3 (October 1996): 5, 11.

42. Personal observations by the author, 20-30 July 1996, Atlanta, Georgia.

43. Although Wes Barnett recognized that "they organize a good meet," he was dismayed by the cap placed on the number of entrants and by the "circus-like atmosphere that's going on there. It's just with all that setting and the music and everything that's going on, is that the right setting for the athletes to be able to go produce their best performance?" (Barnett Interview.)

