



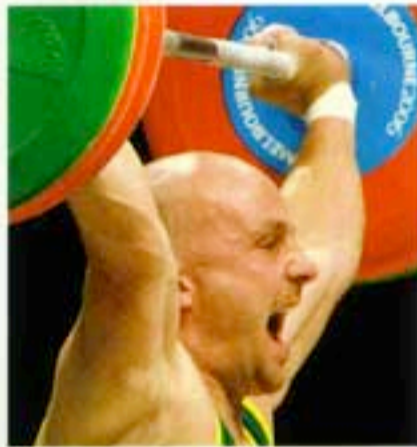
wrist and all, easily wins the 94kg division; he even manages to crack a few gags as the bar is on its way up. He gives his medal to an autistic kid – a friend of a relative.

"I'd rather have the \$5 it cost," he jokes, downplaying his generous gesture. "It's a bit sad that I can win with only four weeks' training. When they rang and asked me to compete, I said, 'What about Alex?' They said, 'Don't be silly.'"

An Australian championship, due to some sort of complex formula, means nothing as far as the world championships go. The worlds are to be held in late September, and only two lifters will go. Anyone else will have to self-fund. Heffernan has neither the money nor the inclination. Australia will not send anyone to the next Olympics.

Heffernan will proceed regardless, hoping that the current funding sanctions will break or the board will change, or have a change of heart. Like a man smitten with a capricious lover, he longs for a morsel of hope. After all, life has taken a small, ironic twist. He's been voted the athletes' representative to the AWF.

"I won't take a backwards step," he says. But, ultimately, he knows that the AWF has to be rebuilt from the bottom up: "I just implore ... people deep down know what needs to be done."



Commonwealth Games, Melbourne, March

2006: Pumped as he'd never been pumped before, Heffernan stalked the stage as though he was caged. He'd already transported Darrell Eastlake from ear-piercing ecstasy to apoplectic climax with three clean lifts in the snatch, followed, respectively, by a Lleyton Yahtzee roll, a Brett Lee chainsaw and a Townshend air-guitar flourish. The only one doing it easier was Karapetyan, who seemed relocated from a heavier division. He had, in fact, come down in weight, and had done so without losing any strength, so effortlessly was he handling the

multitude of coloured discs hanging like bulky petals from the ends of his bowed bar.

Still, Heffernan had straightforwardly spanghewed 182kg in the clean-and-jerk and had the silver in his keeping before his final lift, which he hauled to his chest, no worries ... well, some worries. The final well-timed split never came. Instead, balancing the bent, rigidly bouncing bar on his chest, he suddenly stood to attention and, with a regretful smile – because he always includes us in the theatre – dropped the weights as though they had suddenly turned white hot. His 332kg total, not even a personal best, was 18kg behind Karapetyan's. But it was pretty good, everything considered.

On the podium, Heffernan clapped hard clouds of resin for Karapetyan, the gold medallist, who'd draped himself in an Aussie flag. Only a small shake of his head betrayed anything.

Empty plastic seats – a memorial to Australian weightlifting. TOP MIDDLE The buck stops with Sam Coffa (CENTRE).



"I'd rather finish fifth and get beaten by every other country than finish second to a team-mate who lives in Russia." – Simon Heffernan