



# Behind the Platform

The real sport of weightlifting as told by Commonwealth Silver Medallist, **Simon Heffernan.**

I've been weightlifting for nearly 20 years. Not bodybuilding (no vain bicep curls for me) or powerlifting (ditto the bench press), but the Olympic sport made famous in Australia by Dean Lukin in 1984, and well and truly taken the mickey out of by Roy and HG in Sydney 2000.

#### What Exactly is Weightlifting?

The sport of weightlifting is as simple as any. It features two compulsory lifts:

- the snatch (the bar yanked from the floor to above your head in one movement)
- the clean and jerk (the bar lifted first to your shoulders, then jerked above your head)

In a competition, you're allowed three attempts at each lift, and your weights are added up to arrive at a total. Tactics play a part, since you nominate your own weight increases.

Weightlifters are often asked - in a manner ranging from polite to genuinely bemused - a host of questions that are basically all variations of the same question:

#### "Why do you do that sport?"

My high school, De La Salle in Melbourne, has a rich tradition in the sport, and it was something I was encouraged to do by a 'supportive' teacher: "Mate, basketball ain't going to happen for you," I recall him saying.

I thought AFL was great to watch, but the skills of that game also eluded me. By no account was I overly strong for my age, but I was reasonably quick, and fast twitch muscle fibres are a weightlifter's friend. I was also quite flexible and not too tall, which added to my physical suitability. Another positive was that I was only 50kg when I started, which helped avoid mismatches in bodyweight. I still remember boys a lot bigger than me, and full of much more bravado, failing at weights lighter than mine as they tried to 'muscle' the weights up, rather than using their bodies efficiently.

I love the sport's simplicity. There is nothing arbitrary about it. It's just the competitor and the weight and the weight - no team-mates to blame or take the kudos, no judges' favour to curry. Weightlifting lends itself to those who are disciplined as it's not the sort of sport you can do on and

off. As anyone who does resistance work can testify, muscles can take months to gain, yet days to lose.

Most lifters are thickset, although not in a bodybuilding way. Our muscles are more functional, rather than aesthetic. People often remark to me that, "You look like you do weights, but you're not that big." I choose to take that as a compliment.

I also love how the sport encapsulates the 'fortius' aspect of the Olympic motto. Strength is somehow primordial. Just watch little kids (and sillier big ones!) flex and boast about their strength. In the world of gyms, strength and improvement is highly valued. Its rich history - one of the three original Olympic sports - makes it worthy of respect. It is a sport for traditionalists and the conservative. Melbourne 2006 certainly achieved what is required to entertain a rapturous crowd, aided by replays, music and good commentary. It was an honour to be a part of a sport that was described as the "hidden jewel" of those Commonwealth Games.

I started training purposefully when I was 16. At that time, nearly everyone at the gym did the same exercises, with only the weights varied. Fridays were 'heavy days', which involved hopefully succeeding with maximum lifts in both disciplines, followed by heavy squats. It was an interesting and esoteric environment, what with chalk clouding the air, dozens of torn-tracksuited bodies hurling themselves under monstrous weights, grunts and cries piercing the air, and no small talk except for cries of encouragement. This certainly took its toll on our bodies, and the only respite from stiff quads and aching backs came in December and January, when 'beach exercises' of bench presses and curls could be performed.

Nowadays, the sport is a little more methodical, with clever coaches tailoring programs, tapering and easing off prior to maximal efforts, for example. Leading up to an important event, I would try to achieve a personal best in just one exercise per session, not necessarily the competition lifts, given how taxing that can be. Psychologically, it's great to feel good after a session, to have completed the exercises well. This means it's OK to have a light session now and again, allowing joints to feel nice and supple, with a hunger for a harder session later.

In the week leading up to an event, tapering is commonplace, with only single repetitions performed and an emphasis on speed. Strength exercises, such as clean pulls and heavy squats, are also reduced before a competition as there is no chance of getting stronger just a few days before a competition! When I was stronger, I often used to panic and try to cram too much in before an event, and ended up feeling tired and flat at the critical time.

Another way that training has changed is with the introduction of mirrors! That might seem silly, but lifters used to scorn gyms that were covered with mirrors, just as much as they scorned the pretty boys who would preen in front of them. Today, we go much further than just mirrors to examine our lifting technique. Phoenix Weightlifting members in Oakleigh, Victoria often use digital video to gain a slow motion look at their technique. Looking at the position of knees while squatting, or watching the angle of the spine in slow motion video, for example, can be very beneficial in identifying areas for improvement. Sometimes even the trusty mobile phone of my coach, 84 Olympic Silver Medallist Robert Kabbas, is pulled out to record something of interest. The more intrepid members even post exercises on the ubiquitous YouTube!

#### Training Program

A 'standard' program incorporates most of the following, with percentages revolving around the personal best lifts: