

Arthur Dreschler's
The Weightlifting Encyclopedia:
A Guide to World Class Performance
 (Flushing, NY: 1998)



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To persons outside the iron game, it seems inconceivable that weightlifting competition consists of just two basic movements lasting several seconds each and that lifters should devote the best years of their lives performing endless repetitions of these motions. No less amazing would be Artie Dreschler's *Weightlifting Encyclopedia*, which encompasses virtually all aspects of this activity in nearly 550 folio-size pages. For iron game insiders, however, Dreschler's weighty tome is chock-full of meaningful information, based on decades of widespread experience, reading, and thinking about the sport of weightlifting. It is actually more of a primer (or "guide" as the author calls it), but this volume is truly encyclopedic in its coverage. The prevailing tone is upbeat—unabashedly conveying a sense of confidence that readers, especially budding lifters from the United States, can achieve world class performances.

That these noble aspirations can be fulfilled seems possible to the author from two events of the past—the success of Bob Hoffman and York Barbell in raising American lifting to unimagined heights from the 1930s to the 1960s and his own achievement, as a "Bob Hoffman boy grown up," in breaking a junior world record at the end of that golden age. Befitting the work of a crusader, each chapter is full of didacticisms and infused with the severe and relentless logic of a man with a mission. Sad to say, this enthusiasm may be futile. Olympic lifting in the U.S. is but a shadow of what it was during America's heyday, and it seems

unlikely that Dreschler's splendid effort will inspire a renaissance among the current generation of strength athletes. Today, these athletes seem far more inclined to take up bodybuilding, powerlifting, and other sports less hidebound by administrative and incentive structures from the past.

Interestingly, the introductory section, "What Weightlifting Is All About," concentrates more on dispelling commonplace fallacies about the sport than on describing what it is. Powerlifters, however, might question the assertion that "they are simply no match for the best weightlifters in the world in terms of pure strength or power" (p. 5), and many more eyebrows will be raised over the statements that "on a practical level, the advantages of taking anabolic steroids have been virtually eliminated" and that there are "50 to 100 times" as many weightlifters as powerlifters worldwide (p. 8). Notwithstanding these arguable points, it is true that weightlifting is greatly misunderstood and, unlike other sports, in constant need of explanation and justification to the non-lifting public.

This negative approach does not extend into the first two chapters on technique and teaching of technique. Here each step of the snatch and the clean and jerk is carefully explained, accompanied by sequence photographs and a clear idea of the consequences of improper form. No aspect of lifting technique—proper breathing, limited bar drop, the hook grip, etc.—is left uncovered. A really attractive feature of Dreschler's pedagogy is that he explains thoroughly the advantages

and disadvantages of each style, from the frog-leg pull popularized by the Japanese in the 1960s to the squat jerk employed by the Chinese in more recent years. His explanation of the advantages of the split (almost universally employed in the 1950s) over the squat style in the low position of the snatch and the clean, however, must be questioned. If the former does require less flexibility and leg strength and permits 30% to 50% faster execution, why does no one in the world use it? Otherwise, Dreschsler provides the wherewithal for lifters to experiment and make wise choices. The teaching chapter presents Soviet, USA, Romanian, and Bulgarian approaches to technique and even includes a section entitled "If It Doesn't Work, Try Something Different" (p. 102). His *laissez faire* approach reminds one of Steve Stanko's terse aphorism for lifting success: "If it works, do it."

Despite such extensive coverage of technique, it is heartening to know that the author believes that strength is still the most essential ingredient to weightlifting success. Indeed, "there has not ever been, nor will there ever be, a world weightlifting champion who is not incredibly strong, and the strongest man generally wins" (p. 112). Dreschsler explores strength in all its ramifications, its distinction from power and its relevance to flexibility, with much emphasis on the Russian and eastern European systems that have been so successful over the past four decades. He includes traditional and non-traditional methods for gaining strength, such as concentric and isometric contractions, isokinetic training, compensatory acceleration, plyometrics, and electro-stimulation, and incorporates the routines of noted strongmen from the past, such as John Davis, Doug Hepburn, Paul Anderson, and Ed Coan. Despite this profusion of scientific methods and models, Artie would no doubt appreciate the simplicity of an anecdote about Norbert Schemansky's take on lifting. A young lifter, having just missed an attempt, asked the great master to tell him the secret reason why. Norb just looked at him and said, "You weren't strong enough."

The chapter on equipment includes valuable information on such topics as lifting suits, straps, wraps, the bar, power racks, pulling blocks, and benches. What is unexpected, in what is otherwise a pretty matter-of-fact rendering, is a dramatic account of how the author, home alone, fought for his life to escape from a new and very stiff lifting belt that would not unbuckle after he had done a personal record press. Irony is evi-

dent too in his observation that the greatest weightlifting champions have often trained in grungy facilities. Compare, for instance, the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs with the Spartan facility of the Bulgarians or with the dingy Broad Street gym in York where America's greatest lifters once trained.

An entire chapter follows on assistance exercises. Generally these lifts, by stressing isolated movements and targeting special muscle groups, approximate the snatch and clean and jerk as closely as possible. Undoubtedly the most important assistance exercise for the Olympic lifter is the full squat, front and back. "The basis for life on earth as we know it" was the way junior world record holder Vic Schreiner referred to his fixation on the latter. "Squats are essential for weightlifters," concurs Dreschsler. "If the lifter is to succeed, they must practically become an obsession" (p. 226). Over and over, he stresses how much weightlifting is grounded in the big muscle groups of the legs, hips, and back. He also places the classic lifts in proper perspective, thereby ensuring that assistance exercises do not become an end in themselves.

The very long section on training plans, replete with discussions of periodization and cycles (micro, meso, and macro) will likely appeal only to the more advanced lifter. Here again Dreschsler offers a smorgasbord of choices and samples, consciously avoiding the "cookbook" or "one-size-fits-all" approach. He wisely believes that there is no ideal workout plan and that not all lifters are on the same level or capable of responding to the same kinds of routines. On one point, however, he is adamant. Contrary to most previous prescriptions, he does not advocate extensive stretching in the warm-up process, citing again the efficacy of Bulgarian methods. Flexibility work, he argues, is more appropriate in the cooling down process.

While most of Dreschsler's account deals with physical attributes and properties, full coverage is devoted to mental preparedness. Here single-mindedness, of the kind exemplified by Bob Hoffman, is a prerequisite. Weightlifting must come first in your life. Beyond that, such attributes as visualization, mental toughening, overcoming pain, and control of one's emotions and anxiety will fall into place. To illustrate how to harness one's mental powers to achieve optimal performance, the author relates his own experience in setting two junior world's records in 1970. The most important final ingredient to a record lift, however, is

motivation. “The motivated lifter will feel an energy that cries to be released and confidence that success will be achieved. I have almost never missed a lift that I was highly motivated about. I have rarely made a maximum lift that I lacked confidence about making or lacked the burning desire to complete” (p. 350). But willpower alone, driven by the prospect of Olympic glory or a world record, will no longer suffice as incentives in the new millenium. The more immediate gratification of fortune and fame, of the kind exemplified by other sports in tune with America’s capitalist tradition, will more likely motivate today’s young athletes.

Remaining chapters on the competition itself, non-traditional lifters, nutrition, and injuries serve almost as an anticlimax to these inspiring words. Unlike previous sections, a lingering resentment is detectable against overbearing and omniscient coaches. Presumably young lifters would be better advised to seek guidance from this manual than from some of the old guard of the iron game. As Dreschsler explicitly states, “the underlying theme throughout this book has been that athletes need to be treated as individuals” (p. 377). Likewise they should be treated with respect, and special allowance should be made for anatomical differences of women, maturational curves of children, and the effects of aging on the mature athlete. Surprisingly little attention is devoted to anabolic steroids, especially considering their impact on the sport over the past forty years. This is refreshing, but hardly realistic. A final irony concerns injuries. Weightlifting does subject the body to extreme stress, but contrary to the views of most outsiders, it is one of the safest of sports, even when extending oneself to the limit. The key is to exercise reason, meaning that “the weight attempted on any given day should be within or slightly beyond the lifter’s capabilities” (p. 419).

This kind of sound information extends another 76 pages into the appendices. Though they include a discussion of Newton’s three laws of motion and become somewhat technical in places, the appendices are hardly extraneous or irrelevant. They are followed by an annotated bibliography and a highly useful list of organizations and publications of special interest to the weightlifter. Making connections and networking are simply other ways of expanding upon the knowledge made available in this compendium.

This is not a book, however, that should be read straight through. It will be most useful as a reference work. Novices, veterans, and curiosity-seekers alike will find themselves thumbing through this clearly-written, well-organized, and amply-indexed text in search of answers to their lifting queries. It is not with-

out flaws, however. Some of the statements and advice are debatable, and a revised edition would benefit greatly from a copy editor and proofreader. Economy of expression is not one of the virtues of this volume, and there are numerous instances of missing or misappropriated words—especially articles, conjunctions, and prepositions. Spell-check does not catch such infelicities. But these are mere quibbles. There is far more to savor and appreciate than to criticize in this encyclopedia.

More than anything, it is an enterprise of creativity, much like the noble efforts of Peary and Mabel Rader in the 1930s and of Osmo Kiiha in recent years who were motivated mainly by a love of weightlifting and the pleasure of stimulating others who are devoted to it. What’s more, it is the only current “how to” book available on Olympic lifting, far superseding primers by Hoffman, George Kirkley, and others. In the absence of *Strength & Health* and *Iron Man* (the Rader version) and the lack of local lifting clubs or even meets, where else can a young lifter obtain instruction and inspiration? Though intended to encourage youth to world class performances, Artie’s encyclopedia may serve the unintended purpose of helping to prevent the extinction of an endangered species in this country—Olympic weightlifters.

This book, though very reasonably priced, will likely earn little profit, and what money it does make, the author assures us, will be used to promote the sport. It is such an important book that USA Weightlifting should adopt it forthwith and assist in its marketing. In the best of all worlds, sales should exceed those of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s *Encyclopedia of Modern Bodybuilding*, now in its second edition. But Dreschsler must realize, especially from his statement that “weightlifters and weightlifting coaches are both rare commodities,” that any such hopes are chimerical and that it will take much more than his crusader’s zeal to lift American weightlifting from the doldrums. Salvation, if it ever comes, will likely not require some foreign model, or the reappearance of another Bob Bednarski, Dave Sheppard, Tommy Kono, or even a Bob Hoffman to lead the way. It is only when the “powers-that-be” abandon the Procrustean bed of amateurism and atavistic thinking that has prevailed over the past thirty years that this admirable book will receive the attention it so richly deserves.

To order Dreschler’s book write: A is A Communications, P.O. Box 680, Whetstone, New York, 11357-0680. Telephone/Fax: 718-661-3195. Price is \$29.95. ISBN:0-9659179-2-4.