

Olympic Weightlifting and the Introduction of Steroids: A Statistical Analysis of World Championship Results, 1948-1972

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“Swifter, higher, stronger” are familiar watchwords inspired by the Olympic ideal – where games epitomize the pursuit for excellence and provide an ultimate test of the human spirit. In recent decades, however, the introduction of various artificial substances, principally steroids, have tarnished that ideal and raised serious ethical and philosophical questions concerning the conduct of sport. In no other sporting endeavor is the use of drugs thought to be so critical to actual performance as in weightlifting, where the correlation between strength and the outcome of competition is so direct. This study analyses the first three places in each weight division in world championship results from the London Olympics in 1948 to the Munich Olympiad in 1972 in order to determine when and to what

extent drugs were introduced into weightlifting. Empirical evidence, chiefly testimony from former U.S. team physician John Ziegler, suggests that it was the Russians who were using steroids as early as the Vienna world championships of 1954. These data tend to support this claim inasmuch as there was a sizeable increase in totals registered by Soviet lifters in the period between 1951 and 1956. These gains were made not so much in the press but in the snatch and clean & jerk lifts where increases were more attributable to steroids. They enabled the Soviet Union to surpass the Americans who had dominated the international lifting scene since World War II.

Statistics show a further dramatic increase in Olympic lifting totals between 1959 and 1964 when drugs were likely the most operative factor. But during that period, overall increases were due largely to the enhanced standing of other countries, namely Poland, Hungary, and Japan, suggesting a more widespread use of steroids. From 1965 to 1972 weightlifting totals were more effected by sizeable increases in the press, owing to changes in the technique and officiation of the press. But continued increases in the snatch and clean & jerk lifts, which were comparatively unaffected by any changes in technique, show that steroids were very much a factor in international competition. In 1972 the International Weightlifting Federation made the fateful decision to abolish the press. Appropriate action to disqualify lifters who used steroids was taken several years later. But it was the use of these ergogenic aids, complemented by the introduction of high protein dietary supplements and heavy power training, that was responsible for the great gains in strength during most of the period under investigation. By 1972, in light of enormous changes in totals and techniques, and through critical developments in sports medicine, the sport of Olympic weightlifting had become more a test of human ingenuity than a test of the human spirit.