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Apollon's Wheels

In the early 1890s the French professional Apollon found a set of railway wheels in a junkyard and bought them to use in his act. Born Louis Uni in January of 1862, Apollon was a majestically built strongman standing 6'3" and weighing in his prime 265 pounds. He was also, with the possible exception of the French-Canadian Louis Cyr, the strongest man in the world at that time. The wheels he bought weighed 366 pounds and had a thick handle, making them difficult to grip and lift. The wheels were also solid, of course, so the handle did not revolve, as a modern bar will, which added to the unwieldy nature of this particular implement. During the hundred years since Apollon bought them, the wheels have become increasingly famous, and they now hold pride of place as the most well known artifact in the world of weightlifting.

There is considerable dispute among followers of the iron game as to whether Apollon himself ever lifted his railway wheels to arms' length overhead, and this paper examines the controversy. That three equally famous lifters—all of whom were considered the world's strongest man when they made their attempt—managed to conquer the wheels is not in dispute.

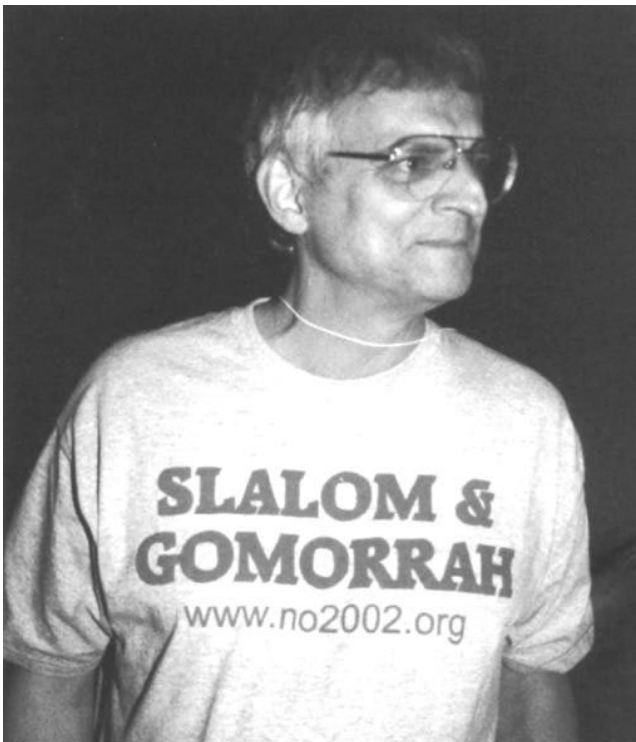
The first to subdue the wheels was Charles Rigoulot, a gold medallist in weightlifting in the 1924 Olympic Games. By 1929, Rigoulot had become a professional strongman, and had been the first man to lift 400 pounds overhead in the lift known as the clean and jerk. When Rigoulot first tried his hand with Apollon's Wheels, however, he was unable to "clean" the weight to his shoulders; but after practicing with the massive bar for several months, he finally mastered it. At that point he gave a demonstration in Paris, on March 3, 1930, and before a large and enthusiastic crowd, raised the bar over his head.

Nearly twenty years passed before the wheels were taken off display and attempted, again in Paris. The challenger this time was John Davis, winner of eight world weightlifting championships. Davis had very small, short hands, and he found that he was unable to grip the thick bar tightly enough so that he could pull it all the way up to his chest. But perhaps because Bud Greenspan, the documentary film-maker who would go on to fame as the foremost chronicler of the Olympic Games, was present shooting a film about Davis, the great champion was unwilling to give up easily. Seeing that the traditional grip would not work, he reversed his grip with one hand, taking what is called in lifting a "supinated" or "reverse grip." This allowed him to pull the bar strongly upward, but in order to take the bar to his shoulders it was necessary for him to release the grip and then

quickly reverse it while the bar was suspended in mid-air. No one there expected him to make the lift, and indeed he failed several times, dropping the bar heavily to the platform. Finally, he managed to catch the weight on his chest, stagger up, and jerk the bar to arms' length; but he was so overcome by the effort that he passed out after returning the wheels to the floor.

The last person to challenge Apollon's legendary weight was Norbert Schemansky, the 1952 Olympic and 1954 World Champion. Fresh from winning the 1954 event in Vienna, Schemansky gave an exhibition in Lille in which he first made a clean and jerk with 425 pounds and then tackled the wheels. Possessed of much larger hands than Davis, Schemansky lifted the wheels to his chest on the first attempt and then jerked them three times.

Since Schemansky's feat, Apollon's Wheels have resided in France, unlifted. But they have remained in the hearts of lifters throughout the world. Perhaps one day another drug-free lifter will take up the challenge and join the four immortals whose names will forever be linked with this daunting implement.



Larry Gerlach's "take" on Salt Lake City's Winter Olympics affair.