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The Rise and Fall of the Press in Olympic and World Championship Competition, 1928-1972

For most of the twentieth century the press was the standard means by which the strength of an athlete, especially in weightlifting, was measured. “How much can you press?” was the standard question asked of any young man who started training with weights by his friends and fellow athletes. Therefore it is no surprise that when weightlifting competition and rules became standardized at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928, the press was adopted as one of the three so-called “Olympic lifts”, along with the snatch and the clean and jerk. While the latter two movements were regarded more as tests of an athlete’s speed and agility, the press was viewed as the truest measure of overall strength -an essential ingredient in determining the athleticism of a weightlifter. It also corresponded closely with the familiar watchwords of the Olympic ideal — “swifter, higher, stronger”.

Problems, however, plagued the administration of the press as a competitive lift from the very beginning. Although the original intention was that lifters should perform the movement in “military” styles, with the body ramrod straight, heels together, and head facing forward, this proved to be impractical, and various forms of pressing (sometimes called “cheating”) developed, whereby lifters utilized the larger muscle groups of the legs and lower torso in subtle ways rather than relying strictly on the muscles of the arms, shoulders, and chest. Individual differences in technique eventually led to national differences reflecting international political rivalries. There were, for instance, French and German styles of pressing, and disputes emerged in refereeing over what should constitute a true press.

With the advent of the Cold War these animosities increased, influencing meet results and national rankings as the lifting world separated into Eastern and Western blocs. In these more intense circumstances it was not only the rulings of referees but decisions made by juries of appeal over questionable lifts, that often determined the outcome of competitions. At least until the Tokyo Olympics in 1964, politics, rather than true displays of real strength, seemed to be the determining factor in judging the press. By the late 1960s however, violations of press rules had become so pronounced, driven largely by liberties allowed by judges from the Communist bloc, that virtually all officials and countries agreed that the press was no longer a test of strength. It had become one of the quick lifts, and poundages hoisted in the press even began to exceed those done in the

clean and jerk. This erosion of standards also coincided with the emergence of a more permissive society in the west where young lifters were increasingly allowed to flaunt the rules established by their elders.

Weightlifting authorities reacted, deciding at the meeting of the International Weightlifting Federation at Munich in 1972 to end the long controversy over the press by eliminating it from all future competitions. In justification of this drastic decision, it was argued that its abolition would lessen the number of injuries and cut down on the long length of weightlifting competitions. But the real reasons were embedded in the international political and social fabric of the 1960s. Unfortunately, the elimination of the press, though it decreased the level of controversy, led to a general decline of Olympic lifting. The de-emphasizing of upper body strength (and size) made the sport much less attractive to potential athletes and to the general public. The void was filled by the dramatic increase in powerlifting and bodybuilding, heretofore ancillary sports, during the 1970s. Henceforth, the standard question addressed to fledgling weight trainees is “How much can you bench press?”