NOT JUST PUMPING IRON

On the Psychology of Lifting Weights

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward W.L. Smith, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist in Atlanta, Georgia. His professional time is divided among the independent practice of psychotherapy, the training of psychotherapists, and writing. Dr. Smith holds an Adjunct Professorship at Georgia State University. Since 1971 he has traveled widely as a lecturer and seminar leader. Dr. Smith lives with his wife and his teenaged daughter and son. His hands have borne the callouses of the barbell for more than fifteen years.

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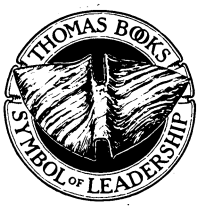
By

EDWARD W. L. SMITH, PH.D.



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To my father, Dr. Edward H. Smith:

I watched you train and I watched you compete.
Then, when I was ready, you placed a barbell
in my hands.

Lifting weights is the Hatha Yoga of the West.

—Edward W.L. Smith

INTRODUCTION

ONE DAY, during my internship, I was standing in the hall of the hospital talking with my supervisor. We were waiting for someone, and in our chatting we arrived at the topic of lifting weights. When I told my supervisor that I had lifted in high school and college, and from time to time since then, he said something which created a ripple which went to some deep place inside me. What he said was, "Think of all those hours you wasted lifting weights. Just think what you could have done if you had used that time to read and study or something." That was twenty years ago, or more, so the wording may not be accurate. But, that was the gist of what he said. I don't recall what I replied, but I remember that that ripple of soul searching spread within me. After long and deep consideration I have come to regard my many hours with the barbells as well spent. I have no regret for the time I have given to lifting weights. My supervisor's statement to me was a real gift, in the effect it had. It led me to question the wisdom of my choice, and to a conclusion which in a while led me back to serious lifting.

Lifting weights has had a central role in my life for about 20 years—competitive Olympic style lifting in high school and college, bodybuilding during periods in graduate school, and after several years lay off, bodybuilding again, powerlifting, and then curling competition. I have experienced competitive lifting as a teenager, as a young adult, and as an older adult, in that over-forty category given the euphemistic name "masters class." At times I have lifted for many months without having entered or even having intended on any competition. Having trained in all four of these lifting sports, and having competed in two of them, I have come to appreciate each as having something special to offer.

Those things which I have learned that lifting weights can offer, those things which are common to all forms of lifting as well as those special things that each particular form offers, has led me to the idea for the present book. I know that lifting weights can be so much more than just "pumping iron."

Lifting weights, in any of its forms, can become a vehicle for personal exploration and psychological or spiritual growth. The use of a sport for profound personal growth has been explored in writing by a number of people. The classic example is *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel (1953). Herrigel points out that although it may appear at first sight that it is degrading to associate Zen with archery, the martial arts are not just for utilitarian purposes or even esthetic purposes. His main thesis is that the martial arts are for making contact with the ultimate reality, that is, the training of the mind.

Further examples of the use of a sport for personal growth are offered by W. Timothy Gallwey (1974) in *The Inner Game of Tennis,* Timothy (sic) Gallwey and Bob Kriegel (1977) in *Inner Skiing,* Denise McCluggage (1977) in *The Centered Skier,* Michael Murphy (1972) in *Golf In the Kingdom,* Fred Rohé (1974) in his graphically beautiful and poetic *The Zen of Running,* Mike Spino (1976) in *Beyond Jogging,* and Koichi Tohei (1966) in *Aikido in Daily Life.* In addition to these books which focus on respective sports, two outstanding books have cut across specific sports lines. These are George Leonard's (1974, 1975) *The Ultimate Athlete* and Michael Murphy and Rhea White's (1978) *The Psychic Side of Sports.*

There is a relatively new area in the process of becoming defined which is known as "sports psychology." There are a few books devoted to this and a couple of journals, *Sport Psychology* and the *International Journal of Sport Psychology.* There are also two established organizations, the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity, and the International Society of Sport Psychology. And, recently in the American Psychological Association, a new division has been formed, the Division of Exercise and Sport Psychology. These developments attest to the current level of growing interest.

So far, sports psychology has had as its primary focus the use of psychological methods and techniques for the enhancement of sports performance. An example is using mental rehearsal to improve a golf stroke. In addition, sports psychologists have focused their research efforts on such topics as the personality of the athlete, particularly the personality factors which distinguish the athlete from the non-athlete, the social psychology of the sports team, organizational and management issues in sports, and motivation to sustain exercise programs. But, to reiterate, **sports psychology has been mostly concerned with the improvement of sports skills through the application of psychological techniques.**

It seems clear, then, that the orientation of sports psychology, as it is usually understood, has been the use of psychology in the service of

sports. The collection of books which I have listed above, however, suggests an additional orientation. This second orientation is that of sports in the service of psychological growth and personal enhancement, or to borrow a phrase from Michael Murphy (Spino, 1976), "sport as yoga." These two orientations are, in a sense, opposites. And, although often times compatible, the two orientations may in some instances conflict. That is to say, there are times when what would enhance a sports performance would be of detriment to personal growth. This will become clear in some of the material later in the book.

Recognizing this dual orientation of sports psychology, I address both in this book. Part I includes an exploration of lifting weights as a path for personal growth. In Part II I focus on the application of psychological techniques to lifting weights.

I want to share how I came to recognize this two aspect relationship between lifting weights and psychology, which parallels the dual orientation in sports psychology. In my first Olympic weightlifting contest, a state meet in 1959, I was impressed by a lifter in the weight class above me. He was a good lifter, far stronger than one would have guessed by looking at him. In fact, he seemed thin. He was oriental and a student at Iowa State University. Between his lifts he did something which was highly peculiar. Other lifters paced about or sat and talked with each other. But he went off by himself to an out of the way spot in the lifting hall and sat down with his legs crossed, and his eyes closed, and sat quietly. Remember, this was Iowa in 1959. In this context this was surely a peculiar behavior, and for an athlete in a macho sport at that. (We thought of weightlifting as macho, even though that word had not yet entered mid-Western vocabulary.) This was the first time I had witnessed Eastern meditation. Whether or not he entered an altered state of consciousness or lifted while in an altered state, I cannot say. What I do know is that I surmised that his remarkable lifting was somehow made possible by this exotic practice which he performed between lifts. This was the beginning of my education in psychological facilitation in lifting weights.

The other side of the relationship, lifting weights as a path for personal growth, took me some time to recognize. There was not a single and dramatic moment of insight as was the case in learning of psychological facilitation of lifting. Instead, I got glimpses of this over a period of years. For instance, I came to a familiarity with the "glow" following a workout. During my early years as a lifter I had bouts of depression, feeling sad, lonely, discouraged. Following a workout I most often felt a radiance

about my body. This was an organismic experience involving a feeling of warmth and tingling of aliveness in my body, and a sense of optimism and well-being. A word I can apply now is "centered." My depression was temporarily vanquished and I felt a joyous peace and harmony.

Something additional happened when I became involved in Olympic weightlifting. I set some early goals such as a bodyweight press, then a bodyweight snatch. In reaching those, and further goals, I found myself not only lifting poundages that I had been unable to lift before, but setting and attaining goals of poundages which but a few months before I would not have considered in the realm of my possibility. From time to time, I made one of these previously unbelieved of lifts which, in a current popular phrase, "boggled my mind." I experienced a mysterious, ineffable feeling when I went beyond my assumed physical limits. I gradually came to recognize that the limits beyond which I was going were also mental limits, and, in fact, I learned that the mental limit was the more important one. This recurrent exceeding of my limits gave me a deep and lasting sense of self-confidence. I came to know that what I am able to do, when I am properly prepared, is often far more than I am able to guess beforehand.

So, having personally learned this dual relationship between psychology and weightlifting, I want to share what I know is possible. I intend this book for the majority of lifters, not the "professionals." I believe that the **professionals are not good models for most lifters.** The professionals and the professional-hopefuls may benefit from modeling after successful professionals, but the non-professional lifter would do well to recognize the two class system. The successful professional has a genetic advantage and has made a commitment to excellence of performance which may involve practices which are not in keeping with overall personal development. For example, the amount of time a professional must spend training far exceeds that which would fit the balanced life of a non-professional. In a seminar which I attended a few years ago, the Mr. America who was lecturing claimed that all of the top contest winners in bodybuilding used anabolic steroids. He said they had to in order to do their best and win contests in that highly competitive business. This is another example of a professional practice which is incongruent with the use of weightlifting as a path for personal growth. Not only is the training different for the professional, but there is a whole lifestyle that goes with being a professional which is different from the lifestyle of the majority of lifters. And, it is this majority to which I belong, and to which I address this book.

Joe Weider has declared that bodybuilding is the sport of the '80s. Perhaps. At any rate, the listing of weight equipped gyms in any city and the rash of relevant magazines on any well stocked magazine stand attest to the burgeoning interest. Coverage of major bodybuilding, Olympic lifting, and powerlifting events on television is further evidence that pumping iron is no longer an esoteric activity and that the weight sports have reached a heretofore unknown popularity. It is timely that there be a book which invites and guides lifters in the use of the weight sports as paths for personal growth and enrichment.

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Also by Edward W. L. Smith:

The Growing Edge of Gestalt Therapy (Ed.)
The Body in Psychotherapy
Sexual Aliveness
Gestalt Voices (Ed.)

NOT JUST PUMPING IRON

On the Psychology of Lifting Weights

Part I

A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LIFTING WEIGHTS

Chapter 1

A TYPOLOGY OF LIFTERS

IN THE EARLY days of "strongmen," the late 1800s and the early 1900s, the focus was on an exciting, if not breath-taking performance. The successful strongman had to be versatile and a good showman in order to sell tickets. These early strongmen typically would capture their audience by performing a variety of stunts, lifting an assortment of spherical barbells, dumbbells, and kettlebells in various one or two hand lifts, as well as lifting various and sundry heavy objects such as large animals, automobiles, anvils, cannon, and platforms loaded with people. They also bent and broke metal objects such as spikes, horseshoes, and chains. These feats of strength were punctuated with poses and muscle flexing, leading up to a grand finale, often involving a dangerous stunt, or at least the stunt which appeared to be the most difficult of the show. Such was the image of the modern day strongman, a versatile man of muscle who looked the part and could demonstrate his strength. Undoubtedly, it was this nineteenth century strongman who was the inspiration and the model for the burgeoning interest in weightlifting.

With growing interest in the new "physical culture," and the new popularity of dumbbells, came the beginning of specialization. The all-round strongman image began to change with several historically important events. First, came the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896. That year there were two weightlifting events, a one-hand lift and a two-hand lift. Dropped from the list of events in the 1900 Olympic Games, weightlifting was reinstated in 1904, only to be dropped again in 1908, and again left out in 1912. Thanks to the Kaiser, the world was too busy for play in 1916, so no Olympic Games were held that year. Weightlifting was restored as an Olympic event in the 1920 games. That year three lifts were contested, the one hand snatch, one hand clean and

jerk, and two hands clean and jerk. In 1924, five lifts were contested, the two arm press and the two arm snatch being added to the three lifts used in 1920. As of 1928 the Olympic lifts became the two arm press, the two arm snatch, and the two arm clean and jerk, and remained so until 1972 when the press was discontinued (Gaudreau, 1975).

With the specific designation of Olympic lifts, other lifts which were contested from time to time came to be called "odd lifts." And then, in the early 1960s, three of the "odd lifts" emerged as a frequent threesome to be contested, the bench press, the squat, and the deadlift. With that, "powerlifting" was established in its own right. The first U.S. national championships were held in 1964 (Todd, 1978).

Thus, competitive lifting emerged and evolved. The other branch of the old strongman show, muscle flexing, was launched as an independent endeavor by Bernarr Macfadden in 1903 when he put on the first physique contest at the old Madison Square Garden as a promotional device for his magazine, *Physical Culture* (Gaines and Butter, 1974). In time, then, physique contests and Olympic lifting emerged as the two branches from the trunk which was the nineteenth century strongman show. Each of these branches has evolved considerably, and competitive lifting, in its evolution has branched again, with powerlifting.

Bodybuilding, Olympic lifting, and powerlifting are the contemporary forms which grew from the strongman shows of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Not only do they share a common historical root, but they share a common behavior, that of lifting weights. Some have suggested the terms weightlifting to designate competitive lifting and weight training to designate the lifting of weights for improvement of strength and physique (Rasch, 1966). This distinction calls attention to yet another use of the lifting of weights, one not involving either lifting competition or physique competition. That is lifting weights in order to gain strength to in turn improve one's performance in some other sport. This use of lifting weights is sometimes referred to by the scientifically descriptive phrase "progressive resistance exercise."

There is one more realm of lifting weights, which is physical therapy. Given that progressive resistance exercise is proven to be the most effective and most efficient way to develop muscular strength and muscular size, it has naturally found application in the rehabilitation of those needing such work. Whether through birth defect or muscular atrophy following injury or disease, progressive resistance exercise is the treatment of choice. The goal in this realm of lifting weights is to bring a person who is below normal in muscular strength or size to a normal level of

strength and size. So, the goal may be the practical one of getting a weakened muscle strong, or the cosmetic one of getting a withered muscle up to normal size. I mention the physical therapy realm for two reasons. First, it is in this context that many people have been exposed to lifting weights. And second, there are a number of people who, having started with lifting for the purpose of rehabilitation, have decided after attaining their original goals to continue lifting in the sports realms.

I want to draw a distinction, then, between "softcore" and "hardcore" lifting. **Softcore lifting includes physical therapy, physical fitness, and weight training to improve one's performance in a non-lifting sport.** For the softcore lifter, the weights are usually merely a means to an end. He or she has a goal and lifting weights is a way to facilitate getting to that goal. In the case of physical therapy the aim is to go from below average to average in muscular size and strength. For the person who lifts for physical fitness, the purpose is to go from average to above average in muscular fitness. And for the athlete who uses weights as an adjunct in her or his training, the goal is to jump higher, throw farther or faster, hit harder or farther, run or swim faster, and so on. With such pragmatic goals, the softcore lifters rarely find great enjoyment or devotion to the lifting endeavor, *per se.* Such lifters may recognize that they have to lift in order to get what they want, but they probably won't feel any love for lifting.

Hardcore lifting, on the other hand, includes the weight sports: bodybuilding, Olympic lifting, powerlifting, and odd lifting. In the weightlifting sports there is a real intimacy with the weights. There is a focus of personal encounter with the weights, as well as an identification on the lifter's part with weightlifting as her or his sport. And, in each of these the lifter is training for competition, or at least the possibility of competing at some time.

The several sports of hardcore lifting share a great deal, as suggested in the preceding paragraph. Still, each of them involves some unique quality. Let's examine what is unique to each type of hardcore lifting.

The most obvious distinction is between bodybuilding and weightlifting competition. In Olympic lifting, powerlifting, and odd lifting one trains to accomplish the heaviest lifts possible in the respective events. In contrast, the bodybuilder lifts in order to develop her or his muscles for an esthetic end. So, in one case it is how much you can lift that matters, while in the other case it is how you look as result of lifting that is important.

Even among the competitive lifting sports we can see some interesting differences. All of them place a premium on strength, to be sure, but