

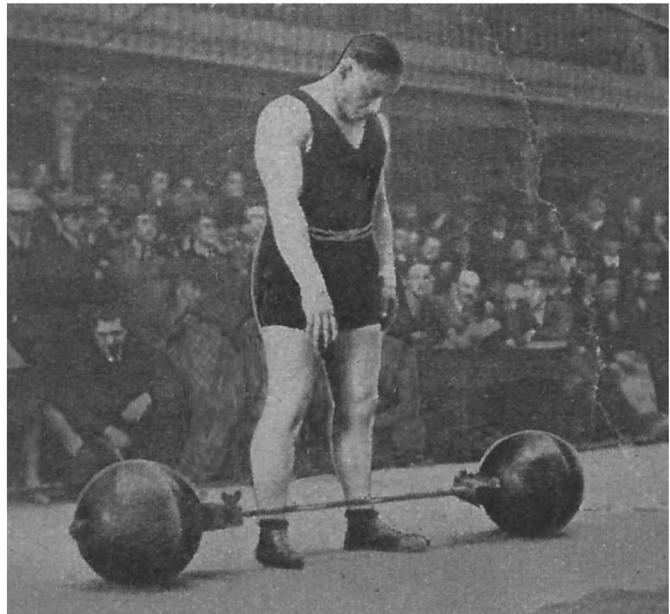
A SNATCH FOR THE AGES

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Three years or so ago, on the cover of Denis Reno's indispensable *Weightlifter's Newsletter*, I saw a photo of Russia's Tatiana Kashirina.¹ Inside the newsletter I saw, and was amazed by, a set of sequence photos of her making a new world record in the snatch with 145 kilos (319.7 pounds). Kashirina weighed, as I recall, 212 pounds, and I was struck by the solidity and power the photos revealed. Films or a sequence of stills of a world record in the snatch or the clean and jerk sometimes give the impression that the lift resulted more from the flexibility, speed, and technical skill of the lifter than from the explosive power required to elevate a bar to the height required by the rules governing the sport. Kashirina's 319 pound snatch, on the other hand, absolutely shouted power—extraordinary power.

One of the reasons the lift made such a profound impression on me is that I began my limited weightlifting career back in the late fifties, when the world record in the snatch was approximately 150 kilos (330.7 pounds). *For men*. But when I saw the photos of Kashirina making her 319 snatch I thought to myself—perhaps, in part, in defense of my gender—that it was unlikely she'd be able to add another 11 pounds to her astounding new record. My reasoning was triggered by something written 50 years or so ago by one of my greatest heroes, David P. Willoughby, something I've never forgotten. What Willoughby wrote, in his masterpiece, *The Super Athletes*, was that although the remarkable Frenchman Charles Rigoulot's best official snatch was 315 pounds (143 kilos), he was good for more. To be precise, Willoughby wrote that by 1930 Rigoulot "was evidently capable of at least 150 kilos (330.69 pounds)" in that lift. Willoughby always had evidence framing the support of his reasoned claims, and his evidence in this case was based on the fact that although Rigoulot's best official clean and jerk was 402 pounds (182.3 kilos), he



Although Rigoulot was extremely quick going under the bar in the two-hand snatch, his technique in the one-hand snatch—in which he dropped into a full squat—was considerably more proficient. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h5YHYIZkh0Q>.

had also: 1) cleaned 409 pounds (185.5 kilos) and jerked it twice, and 2) cleaned 422 pounds (191.4 kilos). Because these lifts, both of which depend heavily on pulling strength, clearly indicate that 402 pounds was not his limit in the clean and jerk, Willoughby reasoned that a man who had the "pull" to clean 20 pounds more than his best clean and jerk would also have had the pull to snatch 15 pounds more than 315, his best public performance.² It's also possible that Willoughby, with his extensive contacts in Europe, had been told by one or more reputable sources that Rigoulot had snatched 330.7 in training on at least one occasion. (It should be noted that Rigoulot, by then a professional, used his own custom-made lifting bar, which was over eight feet long, springy, and apparently thinner than a standard "Olympic" bar.)³

In any case, for the sake of an argument I'd like to make in this essay, I ask that you go along with Willoughby's assertion that, in 1930, Charles Rigoulot was capable of approximately 330.7 pounds in the snatch. So, that being our agreed-upon starting point, I'd now ask you to consider the fact that over the next three decades—30 years—no other weightlifter managed to snatch anything much heavier than 330.7.

As I considered this fact for myself, I decided that for Kashirina to add 11 pounds to her record during her career was unlikely. However, Kashirina was anything but done with us menfolk, or with breaking

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records, and in no less a theater than the 2012 Olympic Games in London this phenomenon snatched, in full view of the sporting public around the world, no less than 334 pounds (151.5 kilos), a weight which 30 years ago, or even 15, would have been almost unthinkable.

To drill a little deeper, let's consider more carefully the history of men's performances in this singular, thrilling lift. To do this we should perhaps start with the now-controversial Hermann Goerner, the legendary German who, as an amateur, snatched 120 kilos (264.6 pounds), which was not nearly as much as the 135 kilos (297.6 pounds) claimed for him only by his longtime friend and publicist Edgar Mueller, who had no documentation other than his memory.⁴ From there we take a large leap to the smaller, but more brilliant Frenchman, Charles Rigoulot, who won a gold medal in the Olympic Games in 1924 in what was then called the Lightweight Class (82.5 kilos/181.75 pounds) and then became able, by 1930—if you accept Willoughby's hypothesis—to snatch 330.7.⁵

To be sure, this was far more than anyone up to that time had ever snatched, and only the long lens of history allows us to fully appreciate the fact that Rigoulot exemplified the qualities that Malcolm Gladwell referred to in the definition of an "Outlier" in his popular book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, which provided examples from many fields of people whose abilities lay so far outside the norm that they accomplished things well beyond the reach of their contemporaries.⁶ Had Rigoulot publicly snatched 330.7 pounds in 1930—which we've agreed he could do, it would have arguably been—up to 2014—the *greatest heavyweight snatch made by a man in the annals of the iron game relative to the date of the lift*. How can this be the greatest, one might ask, since as of 2014 the heaviest snatch ever made is Antonio Krastev's 476-pound (215.9 kilo) lift done way back in 1987?⁷ (Many experts in weightlifting believe that neither Krastev's record snatch nor Leonid Taranenko's all-time best of 586 pounds (265.8 kilos) in the clean and jerk have been exceeded in over a quarter century because of the collapse of almost all state-supported sports programs and somewhat stricter drug control.)⁸ In support of the argument that a 330 snatch in 1930 would take pride of place over all others, including Krastev's 476, consider the following lifts,

when those lifts were made, and who made them.⁹

John Davis, USA	149.5 kilos/329.6 pounds	Buenos Aires, 1951
Norbert Schemansky, USA	150 kilos/330.7 pounds	Vienna, 1954
Paul Anderson, USA (<i>did not qualify as a world record</i>)	152.5 kilos/336.2 pounds	Philadelphia, 1956
Dave Ashman, USA	150.5 kilos/331.8 pounds	Stockholm, 1958
Alexander Medveyev, USSR	151 kilos/332.9 pounds	Moscow, 1959
Yuri Vlasov, USSR	153 kilos/337.3 pounds	Warsaw, 1959

As can be seen, what happened in the snatch between 1930 and 1959—almost 30 years—is that no one, not even the almost certainly drug-strengthened Yuri Vlasov—was able to surpass 330.7 in the snatch by more than seven pounds. It should be added that Alexander Medveyev, the other Russian on the list, was probably also using testosterone injections when he made his listed lift. (The use of testosterone by some Russian weightlifters began at least as early as the 1950s, according to several reliable sources.¹⁰ As for the other lifters on the list—Davis, Schemansky, Anderson, and Ashman—the likelihood is that most of them did not use any type of anabolic/androgenic steroid before 1960, although it is also likely that some of them did use such substances after 1960, once these hormones were introduced to the sport more broadly outside the Soviet bloc. As these potent substances wormed their way into the marrow of weightlifting, however, it was open season and the world record increased approximately 140 pounds (!) over the next 27 years instead of six pounds—thanks to dozens of records—ending with Krastev's prodigious effort. If one needs more proof—this late in the drug wars of modern sport—that anabolic/androgenic hormones increase strength and muscle mass, a comparison of the gains in the heavyweight snatch record between 1960 and 1987 to the gains made between 1930 and 1960 in the same lift should be proof positive.

What makes this astonishing difference doubly remarkable, of course, is that Kahshirina—a woman weighing, at 225 pounds, very little if any more than the first three of the four men who could snatch approximately as much as she did—made her 334 without the unquestionable advantages of the heavier bone-structure and hormonal advantages nature confers on the "stronger sex." That Kashirina's drug screen in London tested negative for an anabolic/androgenic agent does not, of course, mean that she had not used or even *was* not using



Tatiana Kashirina's raw power is readily apparent in these photographs of her 334-pound world record snatch, taken by Denis Reno, at the 2012 Olympic Games. To subscribe to Reno's excellent *Weightlifter's Newsletter*, go to: <http://newenglandlwc.com/renos-newsletter/>.

these banned substances. This was made famously clear by the career of Austin's own Lance Armstrong, as well as by the tasty fact that during the heyday of the East German sports machine only three athletes from that country officially tested positive for banned drugs in the Olympics. Only three, even though the "secret documents" discovered by Dr. Werner Franke and his wife Birgitte Berendonk after the falling of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the state support of elite sport in that country revealed in hair-raising detail that the use of anabolic agents by East German athletes—women as well as men, girls as well as boys—was for all practical purposes essentially universal for the people who had been selected by the state to serve their country's political philosophy.¹¹

I will never forget an interview I did for the CBS Olympic coverage team, in 1991, with the director of the infamous lab in Kreisha, where the urine of the East German athletes was commonly screened before they were cleared to travel out of the country to compete in tested events. The interview took place shortly after "Regime Change" had swept through most of the Eastern Bloc countries, and the large, state-of-the-art Kreisha lab was eerily quiet and dimly-lit—like an abandoned, haunted house. Even so, the director, holder of a Ph.D. in Endocrinology, nervously told me with as straight a face as he could muster that he and his fellow scientists believed their job was to provide the substances to East German athletes which would improve their performances without causing them to test positive. When he was asked about the ancient Healers' Pledge—*primum non nocere* (first do no harm)—he looked down and

said, "that was not our job."

But even if Kashirina—as a result of the ministrations of clever lab workers—had more circulating testosterone in her body than Rigoulot, Davis, and Schemansky put together had in theirs—her performance on the platform was nonetheless an outlier—a

breath-taking, paradigm-shifting moment in the strength sports. What's more, it suggests in yet another way that the task facing a drug-free strength athlete is like the Labors of Hercules . . . on steroids.

As to whether we should view Kashirina's mega-human accomplishment as a step forward for women or a step back, each man—and certainly each woman—should decide that for themselves.

NOTES:

1. *Weightlifter's Newsletter*, No. 339 (30 November 2010): 1.
2. David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1970), 98, 107.
3. *Ibid.*, 107.
4. Gherardo Bonini, Mark Kodya and Joe Roark, "Was Hermann Goerner Truly Mighty?" *Iron Game History* 9, No. 4 (May 2007): 21-32. See also: Edgar Mueller, *Goerner the Mighty* (Leeds, England: Vulcan Publishing, 1951), 53.
5. Willoughby, *Super Athletes*, 97.
6. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 2008).
7. "World Records Since 1919; Lift Up: History of Olympic Weightlifting" viewed at: http://www.chidlovski.net/liftup/l_recResult_athletes.asp?a_id=458.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Records included in the table are derived from: "Lift Up: History of Olympic Weightlifting," viewed at: <http://www.chidlovski.net/liftup/default.asp>.
10. Terry Todd, "Anabolic Steroids: The Gremlins of Sport," *Journal of Sport History* 14, No. 1 (Spring, 1987): 93-94.
11. For information on the East German doping program see: Brigitte Berendonk, *Doping Dokumente: Von der Forschung zum Betrug* (Berlin: Springer, 1991); and, Michael Janofsky, "Image-Conscious East Germany Ran Drug Tests Before Trips," *New York Times*, 15 December, 1989.

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