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Mark Henry's Dilemma— Reflections on Drugs at the Olympics

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In the most recent Olympic Games, Mark Henry represented the United States in weightlifting. He earned the right to compete by winning the U.S. National Championships in the Spring of 1996 with a total of 400 kilos (882 pounds) made up of a 396 pound snatch and a 485 pound clean and jerk. This 400 kilo total, in the opinion of many experts in track field of international lifting—including Dragomir Ciroslan, a former Olympic medalist and the current coach of the U.S. team—was the highest ever made by an athlete who had never used anabolic steroids. Who was lifetime drugfree. Unfortunately for Mark and for the entire concept of “clean” competition, his historically significant 400 kilo total failed to place him among the top ten qualifiers in Atlanta. Even so, knowing that the deck was stacked against him, he trained for the games with all of his large heart, going to a remote island off the coast of Nova Scotia (where Jan and I have a summer home) for his final eight weeks of preparation. This dedication paid off and he made lifts in practice of 407 in the snatch and 507 in the clean and jerk. Because Mark is usually able to lift substantially more in meets than in training, these two personal records indicated to us that he should make approximately 424 in the snatch and 529 in the clean and jerk. But as Scotland's Robert Burns teaches us, “The best-laid schemes of mice and men” go easily astray. As luck would have it, Mark missed his second attempt in the snatch and sustained an injury to his back on his third attempt, effectively removing him from the competition. Yet even if he had made the 424 snatch and the 529 clean and jerk, he would have finished out of the medals.

What this means is that Mark Henry, generally acknowledged—even by many of the Eastern Bloc ath-

letes who outrank him in weightlifting—to be the strongest man in the world, doesn't have a chance on his best day of beating a group of men who have enhanced their natural gifts by taking anabolic steroids. For months before the Olympics, Mark spoke out about this to the media, saying the sport was so dirty that he planned to leave it after the Games were over. That he had taken all the unfairness he could stand. Well, the Games are over now and Mark has retired from weightlifting, vowing never to return unless the sport is cleaned up. During the Games, he signed a ten year, multi-million dollar contract with the World Wrestling Federation, joining such iron game notables as George Hackenschmidt, George Lurich, Milo Steinborn, Paul Anderson, Bruno Sammartino, and Ken Patera in entering the squared circle as a way to earn a living. He broke his leg in the Fall of 1996, but by the summer of the following year he had rehabbed it enough to be able to win his second national powerlifting championship. He plans to continue heavy training in powerlifting, although his travel schedule makes sustained training difficult. Mark won the World Championships in power lifting in 1995 even though he trained on the lifts sparingly, so he is excited by the prospect of increasing his world records in the squat (954), deadlift (903) and total (2339). Although the travelling he must do makes sustained training difficult, Mark is working out as hard as he can, and within the past two weeks he has done five reps in the bench with 495, three reps in the squat with 855 (with no suit and no knee wraps), and three reps in the standing press with 405. He currently weighs 380, and I recently measured his right upper arm at 24”.

Mark's WWF contract is unique in many ways, one of which is that it encourages him to make public

appearances in front of young people on behalf of drug free sports. Another unusual aspect of the contract is that it gives Mark at least three months off each year from wrestling so he can train for the national and world championships in weight lifting or powerlifting. Barring injury, Mark hopes to return to the platform in late 1998, to lift for many more years, and to eventually squat at least 1100 pounds without a "squat suit" and to deadlift 1000. And he plans to do it drug free.



Now for a bit of background. When my wife, Jan, and I decided in 1990 to help Mark realize his dream of becoming the strongest man in the world we did our best to make sure that he was not using and had not used anabolic steroids. (For anyone who might not know, anabolic steroids are artificial forms of the male hormone, testosterone, and they help build strength and muscle mass) By 1990, Jan and I had already spent many years speaking out and writing articles in opposition to the use of these drugs, and had we learned that Mark was "on the juice," as body-builders and competitive lifters say, we would not have volunteered to help him.

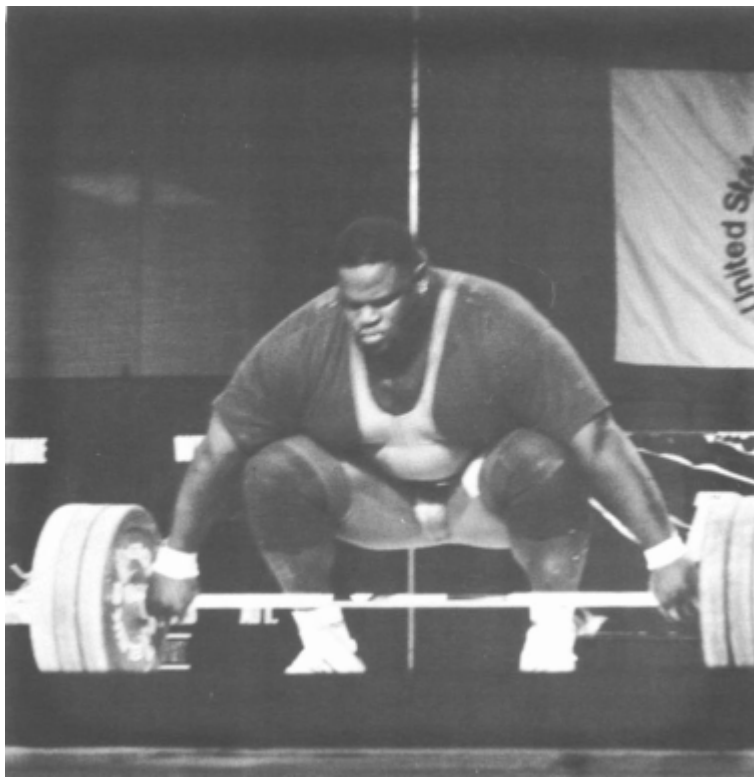
We suspected when we first saw Mark that he was a steroid user, basing our suspicions on his prodigious size and strength, but the more we looked into the matter the more we realized that he was exactly what he claimed to be—drugfree. A story which helped to convince us came from one of Mark's coaches, who told us that at the state powerlifting meet in Mark's junior year a drug-using young man walked up after Mark had won the state title for the second year in a row and asked quietly, "Mark, what kind of juice are you on?" To which Mark answered in all honesty, "Well, I had some orange juice for breakfast." Even as a junior in high school, Mark was so out

of the steroid loop that he was unaware that "juice" was gym speak for "steroids."

Jan and I realized from hearing stories like this that Mark had been shielded from the ugly underbelly of the iron sports by having grown up in a small town like Silsbee, Texas—population eight thousand—and by having trained at his high school gym, with high school athletes. Had he come from a city and trained with older lifters who were, themselves, steroid users he would almost certainly have been told by those older lifters, "Hey, Mark,

if you want to really get big and strong you've got to get on the 'roids. All the top guys are on the stuff and it's the only way you'll ever get to the top. As big and strong as you are for your age, man, if you go on the juice you could be a champion." In just this way, hundreds of thousands of teenage boys begin using steroids, and it's certainly possible that Mark would have gone down that same road had his background been different. As it was, by the time he really knew what steroids were, he was already stronger than almost anyone who might have recommended their use and so he had the psychological strength to just say no.

One of the things which makes Jan and I proudest about our involvement with Mark is how fervently and effectively he speaks out against the use of these powerful, potentially dangerous drugs. He never gives an interview or a talk to young people without saying that he's never used steroids and that anyone who says you can't get strong without drugs is a liar. Many times I've heard him say that if he had to cheat and take drugs to be a champion he'd rather not be a champion. To back up his claim Mark can point out that he has probably been drug tested more often than any other athlete over the past several years—approximately fifty times. The U.S. Weightlifting Federation tested him often, many times without any advance warning,



MARK HENRY IS SHOWN HERE AS HE PREPARES TO PULL 396 POUNDS FROM THE FLOOR AT THE 1996 U.S. NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS. THIS SNATCH REMAINS THE AMERICAN RECORD.

and he has also been tested by six other federations—the American Drugfree Powerlifting Association, the U.S. Olympic Committee, the International Weightlifting Federation, the World Drugfree Powerlifting Federation, the World Wrestling Federation, and the International Olympic Committee. Some of these groups test only at competitions but some also test with no prior notice, a procedure which makes it much more difficult for a drug-using athlete to escape detection.

In comparison to the sort of drug testing Mark has faced over the past several years, most of the top Olympic lifters in the world are tested very little and most, if not all, of Mark's top competitors either were using or had used anabolic steroids. Jim Schmitz, the past president of the U.S. Weightlifting Federation, recently stated that he was certain every medalist in Atlanta in weight lifting had used anabolic steroids. Schmitz went on to say that even if their steroid use had occurred months ago the athletes who used these drugs would have an advantage over lifetime clean lifters. In other words, the drugs these men took provided a substantial and unfair advantage over Mark and anyone else who had never taken them.

There are arguments as to how much the steroids help a lifter, but most experts believe that they provide a ten to twenty percent edge. Using this standard, instead of the 529 pounds Mark's practice lifts had led us to expect in the clean and jerk, for instance, he would have been capable of lifting 582 or 635—enough to have easily won the gold medal.

As to the drug use of his opponents, consider this. One of his main competitors, Alexander Kurlovich, was caught in 1985 coming into Canada with a suitcase containing approximately forty thousand dollars worth of steroids. Kurlovich had been invited to a contest in Montreal, and he apparently planned to sell the drugs to Canadian and American lifters, a common practice in those days among Eastern Bloc athletes. In any case, Kurlovich lost the drugs to the customs people, but because he was a foreign athlete they let him go. Even so, the incident was widely publicized, and his country—then the Soviet Union—was sufficiently embarrassed that they banned him for life. Then, however, after a Bulgarian, Antonio Krastev, began to outlift all the other Soviets, the “lifetime” ban was reduced by the Soviet federation in time for Kurlovich to compete in the 1988 Olympics, which he won. He won again in 1992, but in early 1995—after a meet in Germany—he tested positive for an anabolic steroid. This time Kurlovich was banned for two years, which meant he would have been ineligible for the Atlanta Games, but he and his country—Belarus—appealed the ban and, amazingly, the International Weightlifting Fed-

eration reduced the suspension to one year

As for the man who eventually won the gold medal in Atlanta—Andri Chemerkin—an anabolic cloud also hung over his head before the Olympic Games. What happened is that several months after Chemerkin won the world championships last fall in China, an article appeared in an Australian newspaper stating that he had failed the drug test given at the meet. As expected, accounts of this article and Chemerkin's expected lifetime ban spread through the lifting community like a prairie fire, but then, after no action was taken by the International Weightlifting Federation, a darker rumor began to circulate. This rumor, which came to me from several sources—at least one of which was very highly placed—alleged that there were three reasons Chemerkin wasn't banned: 1) because of his status as the reigning world superheavy weight champion, 2) because the IWF was already reeling from the approximately eighty “positives” they'd reported over the previous year, and 3) because the closeness of the Olympic Games would insure unusual media scrutiny. For these reasons, the IWF had allegedly decided not to report Chemerkin's positive. Not to penalize a guilty man. To sweep it all under the rug. The head of the IWF, Tamas Ajan of Hungary, denied the rumor, but it persisted nonetheless.

Another chapter to this story took place following the lifting of the superheavyweights, during the press conference involving Chemerkin and the other two medalists—Ronnie Weller of Germany, the silver medalist and Stefan Botev of Australia (He's from Bulgaria, actually, but has lived off and on for the past several years in Australia and represents that country in international competition). During the press conference, a reporter asked Ronnie Weller, “How do you respond to Mark Henry's allegations that as a lifetime clean lifter he is unable to compete with the top men in the sport since all of the top men use anabolic steroids?” To which Weller said, after a pause, “All of the people who are really inside the sport know the truth about this. Beyond that I would not like to comment.” In other words, he seemed to be saying that Mark was correct. This remarkable admission from the man who won the gold medal in Seoul and had just won the silver medal in Atlanta took a great deal of courage. One thing is certain. There is no question that when a lifetime clean lifter like Mark Henry lifts against men using steroids it's like taking a knife to a gunfight. And lest anyone think bronze medalist Stefan Botev is being ignored, I've been told by Professor Angel Spassov and Emilian Iankov, both of whom worked with Botev when he was representing Bulgaria, that Botev, along with all the other marvelous Bulgarian lifters on the national team, was a

regular user of anabolic drugs.

This is the sort of thing Mark and other clean lifters face, as the Weightlifting Federation, which is run by a former Eastern Bloc official, has an embarrassingly bad record in the area of fighting drug use. What's more, Kurlovich was apparently only caught in 1995 because a new test was developed which reached back a bit farther in time, thus foiling his calculations as to when he needed to stop taking the drugs in order to pass the test. Now, of course, the word is out among the former Eastern Bloc lifters as to how to beat the new tests. The proof of this is apparent in the explosion of world records in weightlifting during the Games. No sport in Atlanta created as many world records. Of the ten bodyweight divisions, only one failed to produce new world records. Even in that class, the winner had a world record over his head in the clean and jerk but was unable to hold it because of a slight injury to his hand. What this record-breaking means is that the new and supposedly much-improved drug screen developed in Germany by the late Professor Manfred Donike failed to live up to the claims of certain members of the IOC and the IWF, who had been pointing to the new screening procedures as proof that the guilty would be caught and punished and that the Games would be "clean." Unfortunately, once the lifters and other drug-using athletes understood the new clearance times, the test presented little problem for them.

Even more unfortunately, the lack of an effective drug-screening process was only part of the difficulties facing clean lifters in Atlanta. Consider the extraordinary tale of Russia's Alex Petrov, who won the world championship in China in the fall of 1995 only to learn later that he had tested positive for anabolic steroids and would therefore be banned for life. When news of the test result and the lifetime ban reached the American team, there was a sense of satisfaction, a sense that at least one of the top cheaters had been caught and punished. Imagine the shock and dismay among the Americans just before Atlanta when it was learned that Petrov would lift for Russia at the Games. Apparently, and astonishingly, what happened is that the International Weightlifting Federation accepted a statement from a woman who represented herself as Petrov's former girlfriend claiming that without Petrov's knowledge she had "put steroids in his protein drink." So Petrov lifted and, as expected, he won. This logic-defying action by the IWF cost them any credibility they had among the American lifters. In fact, in an interview after the lifting, Tom Gough, the U.S. athlete who lifted in Petrov's class, scoffed at the decision, saying that "Maybe they can sell that story in Russia but not here," and adding that "money talks and bullshit walks."

To add insult to injury, consider this. Mark and I arrived in Atlanta approximately two weeks before he lifted, and on the evening before, an HBO Olympic Special had aired which featured Mark's career. During this fourteen minute segment, Mark spoke out strongly against the current situation saying that any organization like the International Weightlifting Federation which let a man like Alexander Kurlovich—a "drug-selling, drug-using embarrassment to the sport"—continue to lift was a dirty organization. That first evening in Atlanta, we were told by several officials from the U.S. Weightlifting Federation that the top brass from the IWF had complained bitterly to them about Mark's comment and had asked that he be silenced. What gall! No wonder there is a movement among the International Olympic Committee to throw weightlifting out of the Games.

So, for these and other related reasons, Mark Henry has left a sport he loves, a sport in which had things been done to level the playing field he would very likely have won a gold medal for the U.S. and become the best in the world in weightlifting as well as powerlifting. Mark's official best lifts in the powerlifts, added to his best lifts in weightlifting produce the highest five-lift total ever made and stamp him, according to lifting statistician Herb Glossbrenner, as history's greatest lifter.

In my opinion and in the opinion of many other authorities, Marks official performances have earned for him the title as the "Strongest Man in the World." As for the World's Strongest Man television show, Mark has told the producers that he will not take part until all of the events test strength and not endurance. But he is not afraid of competition. In powerlifting, for example, his \$10,000 open challenge to Anthony Clark and anyone else has not been accepted. He would also like to continue in weightlifting, but not as things stand now. He has often asked me why the International Weightlifting Federation has not done more to lessen the effect of drugs in the sport. My answer is that many of the top officials come from the era when such drugs were either legal or were accepted as just another aspect of the game, and that they are more concerned about public relations than they are about the plight of clean lifters. I have also told him that I wish the IWF had the same philosophy as the World Swimming Federation, which has worked very hard to root illegal drugs from that sport. So Mark knows that more, much more, could be done. Thus it is that as he concentrates on powerlifting and on his new career as a professional wrestler with the WWF, it is with a heavy heart and a sense that he and other lifetime clean lifters are being made fools of by the very organization which should protect and cherish them.