

SOME THOUGHTS ON COACHING YOUNGSTERS AND SELECTING ATTEMPTS
IN WEIGHTLIFTING EVENTS

By John Drewes, USAW National Coach, Red Wing Weightlifting Club Coach

Over the years I've introduced many 11-12 year-olds to the sport of weightlifting, and after a time, worked with them as first-timers at youth weightlifting events here in Minnesota. Some of these have remained in the sport and gone on to National Youth or National Junior Championships and won medals. A few have continued beyond the age of 20 and competed in other national events. This, I have been doing since around 1973. I have thought about and tried to evaluate my own skills and strong points as a coach, and I believe my niche is working with beginner and intermediate lifters in the gym and in competition. With this background, I have some thoughts to share from experience and observation regarding training and determining sensible attempt weights and increases in youth weightlifting events.

I want the youngster's first sanctioned event or "competition" to be successful and enjoyable. The warm-up area, the interaction with others, lifting on the platform scrutinized by the officials and audience, and seeing the white lights after a lift all make for a new, exciting experience. There's no talk of "winning" here on my part, only making nice, successful lifts. The last thing I want to see in this situation is the lifter missing several lifts, struggling mightily with little success, or exhibiting a lack of motor skill development. I want that first (and, yes, subsequent) event(s) to be very successful and fun. The idea here is to cultivate the notion in the athlete's mind that: "I can't wait to hear my name called and step on the lifting platform, because when that happens, I make successful lifts, and I really like doing that." When the lifter steps on the platform, he or she should be comfortable and confident in what he or she is about to do. As a coach, I can help set this all up. I enjoy hearing a young athlete say to me after a successful third attempt "I could have lifted more, it was easy!" My reply usually goes something like this: "Yeah, it's too bad you don't get a fourth attempt with a little more, but you'll get your chance to do more than that next time you go to one of these events." Rest assured, I do all the selection of weights for each attempt when working with the kids of this age. For first-timers, I always have them do as their last warm-up lift, the exact same weight as their official starting attempt. This may continue for a few more of these events if I feel it is appropriate.

The one Kilo increment in weight selection was a good rule change for our sport, and one that is especially beneficial for youngsters. I use a one Kilo (or sometimes two Kilo) increase all the time with the younger athletes. I do this with the following rationale: Let's use as an example a high level, advanced athlete who will make a first attempt snatch with 150 Kg. It would be quite ordinary for that lifter to increase 5 Kg. after a successful attempt. This amounts to a bit over a 3 % increase in weight. Now consider a youngster with an opening attempt of 30 Kg. We see many lifts in this range in our youth program here in Minnesota. That same 3 % increase for a 30 Kg. attempt would be a one Kg. increase. I've seen youngsters take increases of 4-5 Kg.! A 5 Kg. increase from 30 Kg. is the same percent increase as it would be for the aforementioned expert lifter who started with 150 Kg. to jump to 175 Kg. for his second attempt! I can't remember ever seeing that happen. The one Kilo increment provides more options than the old 2.5 Kilo increment, and it should be utilized often with youngsters.

My goal in coaching is to have all three attempts in each discipline look the same-- consistent patterns of movement demonstrating the learning of motor skills. I do not like to see an opening attempt as some sort of power snatch, a second attempt a clumsy, staggering squat style snatch, followed by a miserable miss. There's no evidence of motor skill development in that sort of performance. Yes, there are youngsters who will falter or fail attempts sometimes despite our best efforts, but with careful thought and patience, we as coaches can orchestrate positive and successful outcomes on the competition platform for those who are new to the sport. Hopefully, we can blaze the trail for their future success in the Olympic sport of weightlifting.