

GETTING STARTED IN THE GYM WITH BEGINNERS

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With the goal in mind of teaching 11-13 year-olds the Olympic disciplines, the clean & jerk and snatch, the big question is: How do I begin this project? I know there are different ways to do this, and I don't claim what I'm about to describe is best, but it has worked well for me for many years. What I present here is not a short-cut method hopefully leading to quick success, but rather a step-by-step approach requiring competency (but maybe not mastery) at each step before moving on to the next. Learning to correctly perform the Olympic lifts is not a simple task, and in my opinion, it is nearly impossible if one does not possess the proper foundation. Part of this foundation would be a natural endowment of good joint mobility in the ankles, knees, hips, shoulders, and elbows, as well as the ability to move quickly. A background of vigorous physical activity and a lean body composition are also real assets. Obesity at this age is a deficit, as it makes balance and speedy movements difficult, and it can negatively affect joint mobility making certain key body positions difficult. Some exhibit most of the positive aspects right from the start. For others it will be a project requiring patience and determination—a rare commodity now-a-days, but not impossible to find. Not everyone is well suited to this sport.

Strength building will come with time, but we must first develop the proper motor skills (learn the movements), and then get stronger in that pattern of movement. There is little point in getting stronger in a movement that is unrelated or counter-productive to the sport of weightlifting if one's goal is high achievement in this sport. Much of the initial progress in "strength," which always occurs in the first few months of training, is due to increased motor unit recruitment rather than more muscle tissue. From a neuro-muscular standpoint, they are learning to better use what they already have.

I have five basic exercises in which the kids need to show proficiency before moving on to actually practice the clean & jerk progressions or the snatch progressions. Three are prerequisites for the clean & jerk, and I teach those first. Two are pre-requisites for snatch, and those are introduced at a later time, when I feel it is appropriate to move on. It is only after showing some proficiency in the actual clean & jerk discipline that I introduce the two snatch related exercises. Some are able to move on much more quickly than others. There are also those who, unfortunately, will probably never be able to do these snatch related, pre-requisite exercises properly, and will never be able to do anything other than a crude power snatch. The truth is, they might be better off finding another sport. Even so, I don't discourage or "cut" anyone, but most end up finding another activity before long more suited to their abilities and liking.

I have these young lifters train twice per week. Each training session is approximately 60-70 minutes in length. After a year or two it will be time to increase to three times per week if the youngster shows real interest and if weightlifting becomes an activity of high priority. At that time I generally have a pretty good idea of who might become a good weightlifter, but there are always surprises as time goes by. Some who show promise early on eventually lose interest despite having had some success. Others who initially don't seem to be great prospects end up becoming good weightlifters. You never know!

Here's what a typical training session would consist of for a young, inexperienced newcomer: After a general warm-up of movement, stretching, bending, twisting, etc., I have the youngster begin the first of the three basic exercises used prior to teaching the clean & jerk. This first exercise is really a combination of two movements. It consists of six repetitions in an overhead press from the shoulders while standing bolt upright. Each press is locked out in the final position. At this point I'm not fussy about back position or technique during the "power clean" phase to prepare for the press. I will soon address that in the next exercise. The weights here are not at all heavy. After the final press the bar is returned to the shoulders and three front squats follow. The bar is then returned to the floor. In our gym this exercise simply goes by the name "six and three." Everyone soon knows what that means.

This exercise addresses three important necessities for the sport of weightlifting: 1. The ability to support the bar overhead with arms fully straightened (elbow lock-out) and humerus bones extended vertically (shoulder joint extension) for a solid, comfortable overhead support position. I will occasionally have them pause at the extended position (lock-out) so I can check for correct alignment. Comfortably supporting weights overhead is a very important aspect of our sport, and I like to work on this early on in the development of the lifter. 2. Racking the bar correctly on the shoulders with the elbows in the proper position is essential for the jerk. With the bar on the shoulders in this position, there is a solid launching pad for the jerk. Younger kids usually find this position comfortable right from the start. If there is difficulty with this position, it can usually be addressed with supplementary flexibility work. 3. Performing the front squat correctly while maintaining the proper elbow position insures that the elbows do not touch the legs in the bottom position of the squat. The torso will lean just a bit forward in the bottom position, but the spine must be kept straight. There should be no slouching during the squat, and the chest should be kept high. This should be a full squat, and the hips should not project too far to the rear. When this is done correctly, the stage is set to rise correctly from the bottom position of a clean. If the heels come off the floor during the squat, this indicates a lack of ankle joint mobility. Proper footwear (weightlifting shoes) will allow this exercise, as well as most other movements in this sport, to be more comfortable.

The second exercise is the clean start. The flat, or slightly concave, back position while grasping the bar is very important here. I do not teach the hook grip at this time. That will be introduced when I begin teaching the clean & jerk progression exercises at a later time. The same hand spacing is used here that was used in the "six and three" exercise just described. The shins should almost touch the bar. From this position the lifter pushes with the legs, maintains the same flat back position, and keeps the bar lightly touching the shins and thighs as he stands erect. This back position is of great importance. I pay a lot of attention to this position and make a big deal of it in training sessions. Placing one's hands on the slightly bent knees and keeping the arms straight while pushing the chest out can help a student get the feel of this position. This is NOT a deadlift! I call it the "clean start." The feet should be approximately shoulder width apart. Reps are from 3-5, never increasing to a weight where there is a break in form. They might do 4-6 set of this exercise, all with different weights. At this point in the process, I will see a much improved power clean for the "six and three" exercise in the near future as a result of this exercise.

The third exercise is the back squat for six reps. This exercise will, of course, continue to be a big part of training throughout the athlete's career. The back squat is usually easy to learn. Since the bar is on the shoulders behind the neck, not in front, the torso will be somewhat more inclined forward in the bottom position than one sees in the front squat. I have them usually do 5-6 sets of back squats in a training

session. The bar is held high on the shoulders and the back is kept straight at all times. The lifter lowers himself in a controlled manner to a full squat position and then returns to the erect starting position. Any break in form is probably a sign of too much weight on the bar. It is important that youngsters learn to do this exercise correctly. Bad habits learned early on are hard to break. One should be patient and very careful not to "load up" the young lifter with too much weight at this stage of development.

The training session at this point consists of the three exercises just described with emphasis on the "six and three" exercise which would be done six to eight times. The last part of the session consists of some additional exercises which vary from day to day. Some of those I might choose are dumbbell presses for ten reps, medicine ball lifts or throws, jumping exercises, abdominal crunches, upright row with elbows held high for ten reps, etc. Sometimes extra sets of the basic three exercises are done with light weights to insure that the movement is being practiced correctly.

The fourth basic exercise, which is the first of two pre-requisites for learning to snatch, is the overhead squat. I introduce this movement only after the young lifter shows some proficiency in the clean and jerk. The timing of this introduction varies greatly from person to person. First off, I quickly determine the proper wide hand spacing for this lift. This is the same hand spacing that will be used when the lifter begins to learn to snatch. I can usually come real close to what is correct by observing the lifter as he or she holds the light bar or stick overhead. I may change the spacing a bit depending on what is most comfortable for the lifter. This is done subjectively, and can always be changed as time goes by.

The overhead squat begins with the bar overhead with the proper hand spacing which has just been determined. With arms fully straightened, wrists extended back, feet approximately shoulder width apart and flat on the floor, and toes pointed somewhat outward, the lifter squats to a low position, pauses briefly, and stands back up. The torso may lean a bit forward in the bottom position, but the lifter should try to keep the head and chest as high a possible as this is done. I have them do three repetitions in this exercise, and they will do 5 or 6 sets of this with various light weights all the while concentrating on correct positioning. There are some who will have no difficulty with this exercise and will do it quite well the first time they try it. Others learn after practicing and working to improve the flexibility required to perform this correctly. I do not have anyone try this movement who is not wearing weightlifting shoes. Proper footwear for this exercise is of great benefit, yet some will still be uncomfortable in this movement. Two of the three young lifters shown in the photo section of this article were able to do this exercise well the first time they tried it! I do not attempt to teach anyone to snatch who cannot comfortably do this movement. There will be some tipping over and dropping of the bar for most youngsters during the learning process, but the weights are not heavy at the beginning, and they soon learn how to dump the weight and get out of the way comfortably. Before long this exercise simply becomes another way to do squats, and they are able to handle heavier weights with ease. Most bring the bar to the starting position by doing a sort of wide-grip press because they have not yet learned the snatch. At this point I'm not fussy about how they get the bar into position. Since most kids have at least some difficulty with this movement, it gives me a chance to see which ones have the determination to succeed at something that is at first difficult. This attribute will be required more and more as time goes by in this sport.

The fifth exercise goes by several names. It is often called "snatch balance" nowadays. Back when I started lifting it was called "drop snatch." At our club we just call it "jump under." What you call it is not important, but how you perform this movement is. I introduce this exercise after the young lifter

is proficient at the overhead squat. The lifter begins this exercise in the same manner that the previous overhead squat was done. After the bar is overhead in the locked out position, the lifter lowers the bar to a position on the shoulders behind the head. This will look like the position at the beginning of a back squat with a somewhat wider hand spacing. Now the lifter carefully centers himself on his feet, bends the knees ever so slightly, drives the bar upwards a tiny bit, and then very quickly pushes himself under the bar (jump under?) to a quick lock-out of arms and shoulders in a full squat position. This bending of the knees prior to the "jump under" is nowhere near the amount of knee bending utilized prior to the drive for the jerk, but rather it's more like a little twitch—just enough drive to allow time to quickly get under the bar. The lifter then stands back up smoothly, returns the bar to the position on the shoulders behind the neck, and repeats for three reps. The bottom position here should be exactly like the bottom position for the overhead squat, it's just a different way of getting there. I usually have them do 5 or 6 sets of this exercise in a training session. At first they are rather slow at the movement and may not get all the way to the bottom position. After some practice they will improve on this. I stress speed on this movement, and the students usually learn to do the movement much faster as time goes by and also, of course, handle heavier weights. Some can do it in the blink of an eye, and I really like to see that. There are some who have learned to do the overhead squat and the "jump under" in the same training session, and two of the youngsters shown in photos at the end of this article are examples of those who did this. All three of those shown have learned to snatch quite well at an early age.

When they have learned to do the overhead squat and the "jump under" exercises well, I will begin teaching the snatch progression exercises leading up to, in time, the complete snatch lift as it would be done in weightlifting competition. At this point each of the two training sessions they have per week will be different. One session (session A) will be devoted to the clean & jerk. It begins with some warm-up exercises followed by a few sets of "six and three." This is followed by a few sets of clean starts. Then comes the clean and jerk progression exercises followed by some competition style clean & jerk lifts. Back squats are the last of the exercises done with the Olympic bar in this session – the number of sets here may vary. I have them finish with a few miscellaneous exercises such as dumbbell presses, medicine ball work, abdominal crunches, jumping, upright row, etc., all ten reps or more in a set. The time for this work-out is 60-70 minutes.

Session B consists of warm-up exercises followed by several sets of overhead squats and "jump unders." Next comes the snatch progression exercises leading up to some actual competition style lifts. During the last part of the session they will do front squats for three reps for 5 or 6 sets. This work-out concludes with some of the same miscellaneous exercises just described and perhaps a one set of ten reps power clean where I pay close attention to correct technique and proper rack on the shoulders. Total time here is around 70 minutes.

The Red Wing Weightlifting Club gym is a small, well-equipped facility. It measures 28 feet by 12 feet with a 10 foot ceiling. We have certified Eleiko and Werksan competition bars and weights, as well as the large, hollow Eleiko 5 Kg. and 2.5 Kg. training weights along with 5 Kg. and 10 Kg. youth training bars. One end of the room is a permanent floor and wall mounted squat rack. Because of the small size of this room, the maximum number who train at one time is four, and that only occurs occasionally. Most often two or three train at one time. Small groups are an advantage for me as a coach, as I am able to carefully see every exercise or lift being done. This is especially important for these 11-13 year-olds. I work with them generally two at a time and carefully watch every exercise or lift they do.

The following three pages consist of photos which demonstrate important positions in the various exercises which have just been described. The three young fellows shown in the photos perform these exercises competently. They are also on their way to learning good technique on the competitive lifts, the snatch and the clean & jerk. They are all 11-12 years of age and have bodyweights from 41-44 Kg.

ABOUT THE PHOTOS

The next three pages of photos follow the text in order from beginning to end. They are meant help show some of the things I look for when I coach the young lifters. Still photos, of course, do not convey the idea of movement, which is an essential component of learning to do these exercises correctly.

#1- This is the proper position for the finish of the press exercise which is part of the "six and three." It is also the proper position for the finish of a clean & jerk done in competition as one waits for the "down" signal from the referee. This boy supports the weight overhead with good body alignment, and it is easy to see he is very comfortable doing this.

#2- The bar is racked on the shoulders properly for the front squat or the jerk.

#3 and #4- Good position at the bottom of the front squat.

#5- Coach helps athlete learn proper back "set" for clean.

#6 and #7- Proper position for the clean start.

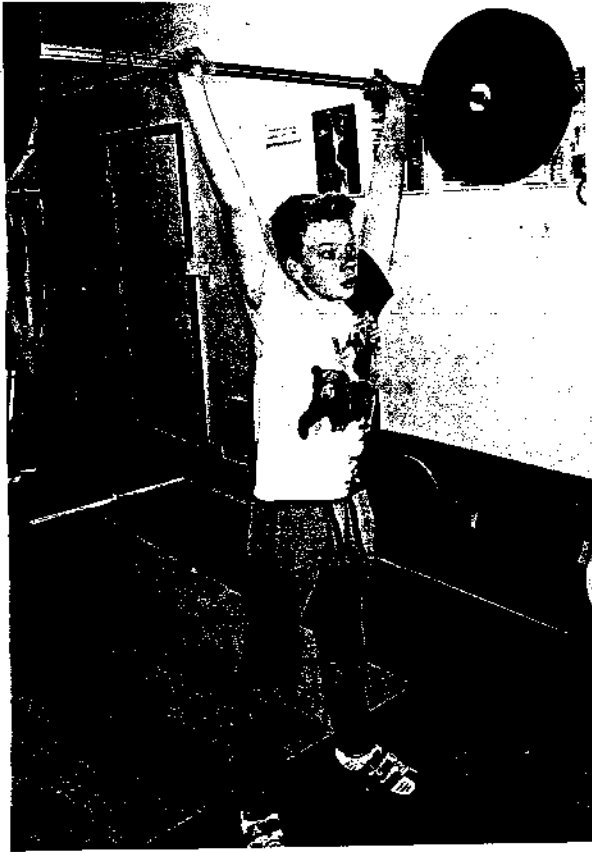
#8- Incorrect back position for the clean start often seen in an un-coached individual who might try to do this lift. Weights should never be lifted off the floor with the body in this position.

#9- Bottom position in a back squat.

#10- Start position for the overhead squat.

#11- Start position for the "jump under."

#12 and #13- Good bottom position for the overhead squat, "jump under," or eventually the snatch.

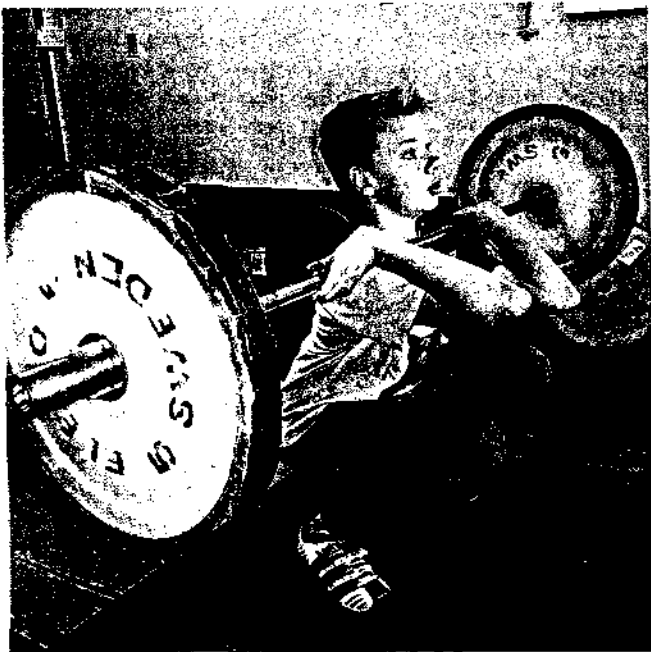


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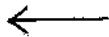
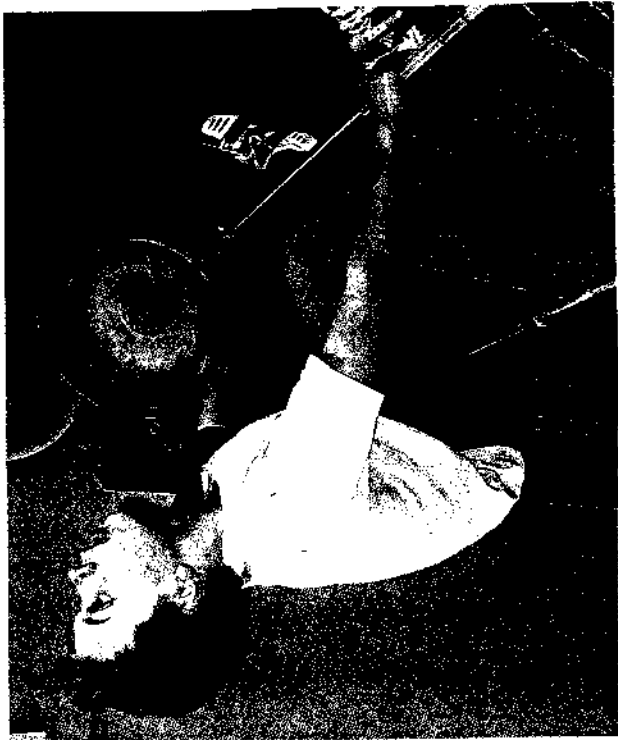
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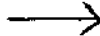


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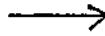
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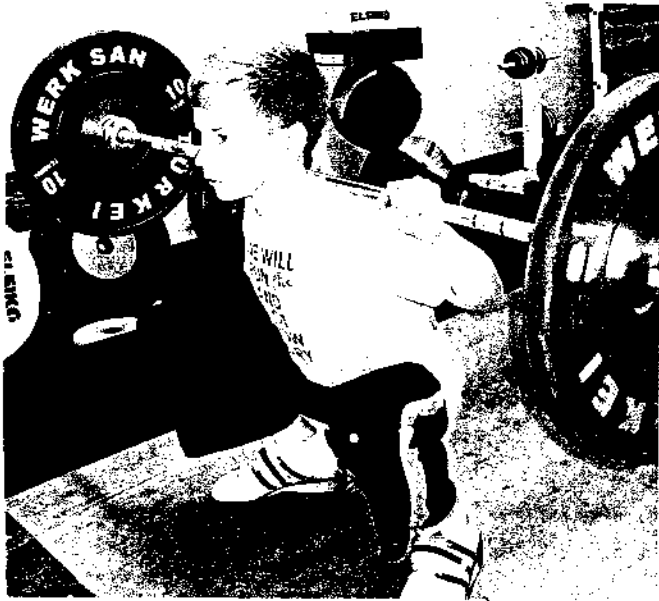


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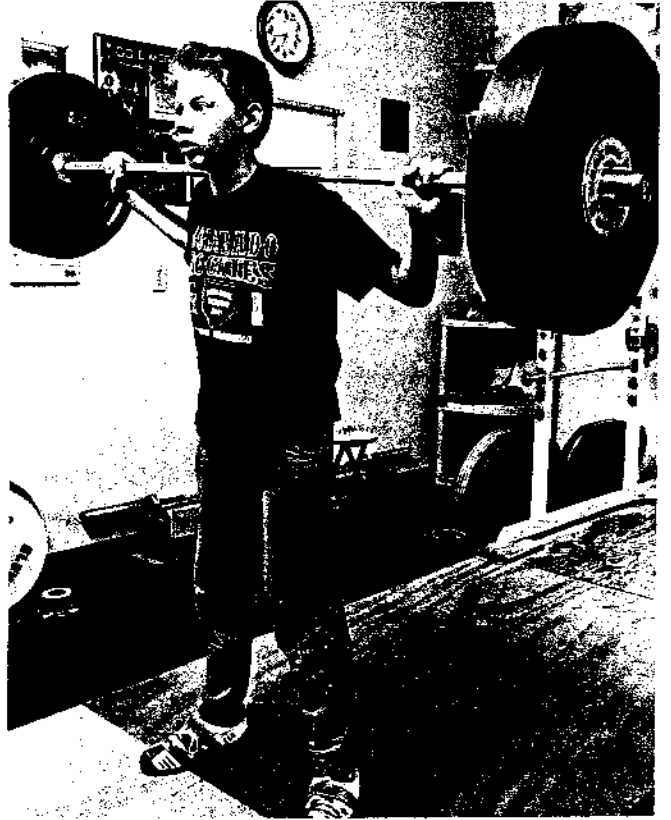


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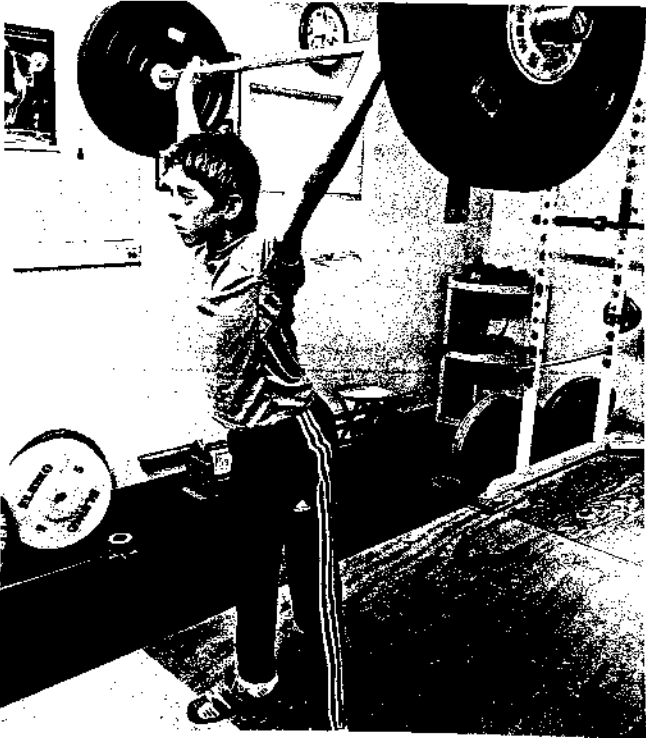




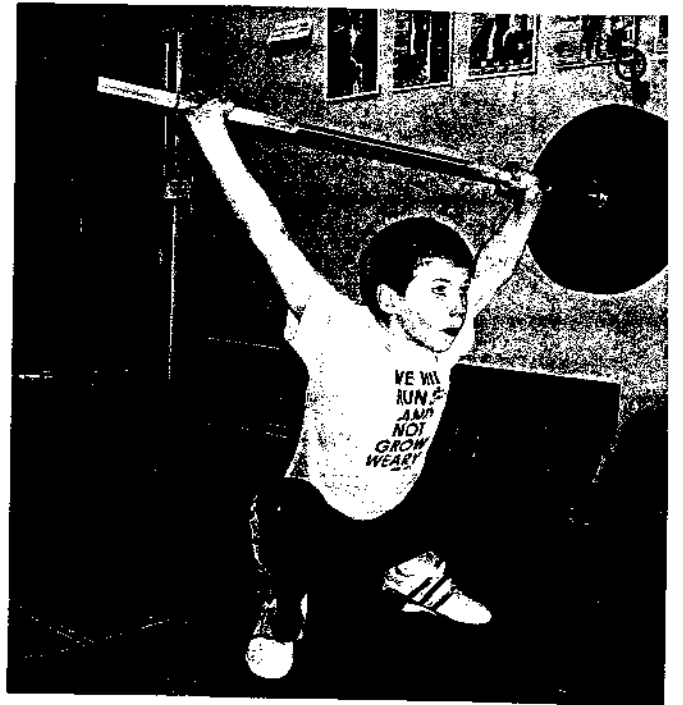
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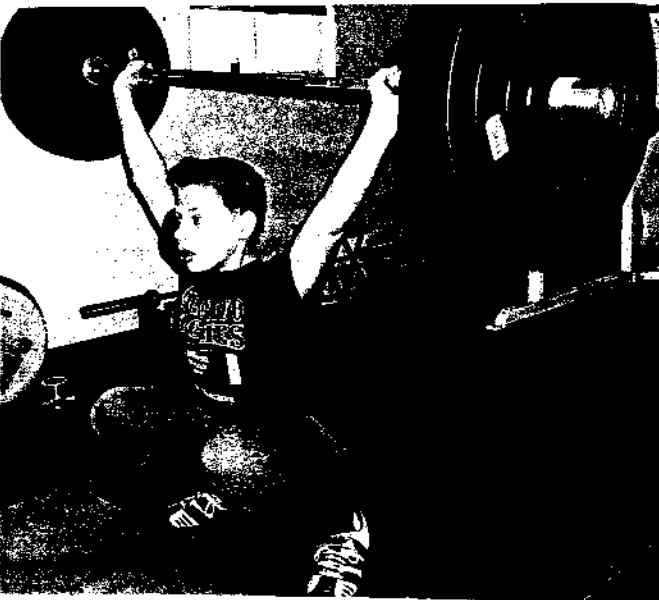
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