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## The Arms Race and Olympic Lifting

Bill Starr explains that training your biceps has limited carryover to lifting, but targeting your triceps can result in PR snatches and jerks.

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All images: Dave Re/CrossFit Journal

Everyone who ever set out to improve his physique and get stronger started out by working his arms.

Not his back or legs. Arms.

Why?

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Upper arms are a symbol of manhood, especially for youngsters, and bulging biceps show that a lot of hard work has been done to achieve such results. Sometimes those impressive upper arms came about from doing hard labor, but in most cases they were products of long hours in the gym doing countless curls in a wide variety of ways: one-arm concentration curls with dumbbells, two-arm dumbbell curls, curls on a preacher bench, hammer curls, and curls with a barbell—plus some additional work on an EZ curl bar and a curling machine, if one was available.

“Curls for the girls” was a phrase all lifters understood and fully believed.

While the other part of the upper arm, the triceps, did not occupy the same high rank of distraction as the lofty biceps, the three-headed muscle had to be worked diligently as well if the athlete wanted to build large upper arms. That’s because the triceps make up two-thirds of the upper arm, so only hammering away at the biceps without spending ample time doing something specific for the triceps just doesn’t get the job done.



*Curls for the girls?*

Yet when anyone is asked to show his arm size, he will, 98 times out of a hundred, hit a double biceps pose.

### **Selling Tickets to the Gun Show**

Obtaining big arms was one of my primary goals when I started lifting weights. Visiting the York Barbell Club Gym and seeing John Grimek, Steve Stanko and Vern Weaver up close heightened my desire for big arms even more. But at the same time, I also wanted to add muscle to all parts of my body and get considerably stronger in order to perform better in sports such as basketball and softball. I, like most beginners, wanted both. I wanted strangers to give me a second look when they saw my upper arms, so in the early stages of my weight training, I spent plenty of time doing exercises for my biceps and triceps.

Then I discovered Olympic lifting, and my priorities changed drastically. From the photos in “Strength and Health” magazines, brought to me by fellow airmen when I was stationed in Iceland, I learned how to press, snatch, and clean and jerk. Not well, of course, but well enough to make me hungry to improve those three competitive



*Heavy pulling movements can have dramatic effects on the biceps and explain the physiques of some lifters who never do curls.*

lifts. My focus shifted from doing bodybuilding exercises to those needed to elevate weight overhead. My workout consisted of lots of squatting, pulling, jerking and overhead pressing. But even then, I kept a dumbbell in my room and did curls religiously three times a week on my non-training days. I thought I needed to do them if I wanted to maintain the size I'd obtained.

When I left Iceland, I was assigned to Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas. There, I discovered a YMCA with a fully equipped weight room, and I began competing in Olympic meets. My workouts revolved around the three competitive lifts, with lots of pulling movements and overhead presses, jerks, and, of course, both front and back squats.

At that point, I rarely did any curls, and to my surprise I found my arms still gained in size. I did, however, continue doing specific work for my triceps, and I thought that accounted for the increase in my upper arms. But this wasn't the case at all.

I found out what was really happening with my arms after I enrolled at Southern Methodist University and began training under the guidance of Sid Henry at the

Downtown Y in Dallas. He explained to me the reason my arms had grown was not because of the extra triceps work I was doing but because of all the heavy pulling. He said the power snatches, power cleans, clean- and snatch-grip high pulls, full cleans, full snatches, and heavy shrugs were directly affecting my arm size and making my upper arms a great deal stronger.

Those heavy pulling movements were strengthening the prime movers of my upper arms—the brachioradialis and brachialis—and had a much greater influence on arm strength and size than any form of curling. Sid didn't allow any curling. He said it wasted energy that could be spent on larger groups that helped to lift more weight overhead. In addition, he told me, doing lots of curls can have a negative effect on racking the clean.

I knew this was true because I watched several lifters with unusually big upper arms struggle to rack their cleans in contests. But the best example of this type of problem was Phil Grippaldi, whom I lifted against after I moved to York and became a member of the York Barbell Olympic team. This was in the mid-'60s, and Phil was a rapidly rising star of the sport. He easily won two straight teenage national



***Big arms can create problems in the rack position for the clean, and those with exceptionally large arms often need to add flexibility training to their regimens.***

titles and began breaking teenage world records at every meet he competed in.

He was a great presser and solid snatcher but wasn't that good in the clean and jerks because he had difficulty racking his cleans. The strength was there, without any doubt, but regardless of how high he pulled his cleans, he couldn't rack them. The bar would simply bounce off his big chest because of his humongous upper arms. There was just too much mass in them for him to be able to fix the bar across his shoulders.

His upper arms had to be seen in person to fully appreciate how enormous they were. Fans at local, national and international meets would swarm all over him, wanting to touch those big guns and pestering him to tell them what program he used to obtain arms that size. Few believed him when he said he never did any curls—ever. He just did the Olympic lifts and a great deal of heavy pulling exercises.

While Phil certainly did enjoy the attention he got from possessing those arms, he needed to do something so he could rack his cleans.

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**If you're interested in excelling in the Olympic lifts yet still want to have head-turning upper arms, forget the curls and just work the pulling movements harder.**

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Phil was coached by Butch Toth of the Keasby Eagles weightlifting team in New Jersey and Dr. Fran Corbett, who helped with the nutritional end of training. Together, Butch and Dr. Corbett devised a series of stretching exercises for Phil to do that would allow him to rack his cleans. It didn't happen overnight, but eventually he did gain the flexibility in his upper arms he needed and went on to become one of the greatest lifters in U.S. Olympic-lifting history.

There were many other Olympic lifters in the '50s and '60s who developed amazing upper arms without doing



*Overhead work is responsible for the triceps of many lifters.*

a single curl. Two who always come to mind are Tommy Kono, arguably the greatest American lifter ever, and Bill March, one of the most honored lifters in the early '60s. They built their prize-winning bodies, including their arms, training for the Olympic lifts. Curls were never a part of their programs.

So the bottom line is if you're interested in excelling in the Olympic lifts yet still want to have head-turning upper arms, forget the curls and just work the pulling movements harder. By greatly strengthening those prime movers of the upper arms, you help secure the elbows joints, thus keeping them from getting injured. It's your brachialis and brachioradialis that help you pull the snatches and cleans higher and with much more intensity. The biceps themselves do very little in this regard.

After your career as an Olympic lifter is over and you begin doing a less severe training program, you can insert curling back into your routine if you so choose. In any conditioning program, it is important to do some specific exercise, or exercises, for all the body parts, including the smaller ones, so doing some form of curling is a good idea. But leave them alone when your goal is to become a more proficient Olympic lifter.

### Tri Harder

The triceps are an entirely different story. They can and should be worked directly while training for the Olympic lifts. Large triceps are never a hindrance, always an asset. When the overhead press was dropped from official competition in '72, Olympic lifters, for the most part, stopped doing them. Prior to that, many competitors spent as much as half of their training time pressing, push pressing and working various positions in the power rack doing isotonic-isometric contractions to improve their overhead strength. But with the press gone, the only overhead work being done was jerks.

As a result, triceps strength began to lag behind what it was when the press was a primary exercise. And it still does in most cases. About the only Olympic lifters who still include overhead presses in their routines are those athletes being coached by lifters who competed in the '60s and very early '70s.

What the new wave of lifters and coaches didn't seem to understand was that presses did more than build arm and shoulder strength; they also greatly enhanced strength in the back, hips and legs. In other words, they enhanced supportive strength, which is needed to fix a jerk in place

overhead and hold it there during the recovery until the signal is given to lower the bar. That got lost when the press got thrown out of training.

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**Those massive horseshoe-shaped triceps the top lifters carried around didn't come from any specialized training movements but from doing countless overhead presses.**

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Those massive horseshoe-shaped triceps the top lifters carried around didn't come from any specialized training movements but from doing countless overhead presses. Grippaldi, March, Kono, Ken Patera, Joe Dube, George Ernie Pickett and Bob Bednarski all possessed amazing triceps development, and they were all exceptional pressers.



***Presses and push presses build "supportive strength" that can be used to stabilize and support huge loads in the jerk.***

I have all my Olympic lifters do presses, and I want them to run the numbers up as high as they can. I make it a primary exercise, not an auxiliary movement. I challenge them to press body weight, and this is not nearly as easy as it sounds. It takes a great deal of work to achieve that goal, and when an athlete does, I push him to press 20 lb. more than his body weight. And so on and so forth. The top competitors were able to elevate 1.5 times their body weight, and there were a few exceptional athletes, such as Russ Knipp, who could press double body weight.

That sort of shoulder strength doesn't exist anymore, at least for American lifters. Yet even if you only reach the goal of pressing body weight, the benefits in your supportive strength are going to be evident when you do jerks.

Another overlooked benefit of doing overhead presses is that the strength gained throughout the back, hips and legs carries over nicely to locking out and standing up with a snatch.

Another exercise I have my Olympic lifters do is weighted dips. These work the triceps in an entirely different manner than overhead presses, and that's a good thing. The



***Weighted dips are a great movement to use to increase triceps strength.***

triceps are much more complicated than the biceps, and by working various angles, all three heads can be made stronger. Dips bring quick results, mostly because the groups responsible for doing the movement haven't been involved to any great extent during your training sessions.

You may not be able to use weight right away. Start out doing them unloaded, and when you can do 3 sets of 20, add weight. You can use a dip belt or tuck a dumbbell between your legs. You're going to need a dip belt eventually, so start checking the equipment catalogs as soon as you decide to add weighted dips to your program.

Dips, like overhead presses, are done as a primary exercise. That means using a good amount of weight. Set a goal of 100 lb. plus your body weight, and when you reach that, keep adding more plates. Do dips once a week, and vary your sets and reps at each session: 4 sets of 8, 5 sets of 5, 2 sets of 5 followed by 3 sets of 3. Once a month, go after a personal-record single. Finish each dip workout with a back-off set of as many as you can do with 50 lb. less than you handled that day.

There is one other triceps exercise I like for all strength athletes and particularly for Olympic lifters: straight-arm pullovers. They are done as an ancillary exercise. The reason I include them in my athletes' programs is that they hit the long head of the triceps better than any other exercise. The day after you do the pullovers, you can trace that long head from origin to insertion.

Pullovers can be done with a dumbbell or barbell. A dumbbell is fine in the beginning, but once you start using more than 100 lb., it's best to do them with a bar. Lie on a bench with your head hanging over the end, and have a training mate hand you the barbell. Flex your shoulders within comfortable range of motion. Some will be able to get the hands even with the bench or below it, while others will not. Extend the arms to the starting position. Start light if you are unfamiliar with the exercise. Do your reps, then have your training partner take the weight from you. That's the ideal. In the event you're training alone, simply take the bar off the uprights on a bench, lie back, get into position, knock out your reps and drop the bar to the floor. Or sit up if you're able to do so.

Do 2 sets of 20, and use more weight on the second set than you do for the first. Everyone discovers, to his or her surprise, that the second set is easier than the first. Once a week is enough if you really lean into pullovers. I had a number of athletes who could use 135 lb. for 20, so set your



*The straight-arm pullover is a seldom-seen exercise Bill Starr recommends for Olympic lifters and all strength athletes.*

goal high. Try to keep your arms as straight as possible, but it is OK to bend them ever so slightly at the very end range when the bar is below your head. Do these in a controlled, smooth fashion. No jerking the bar around, as that will irritate your shoulders and elbows.

### **Carryover to the Platform**

The combination of overhead presses, weighted dips and straight-arm pullovers will greatly improve strength in your triceps. Most importantly, that strength can help you jerk more weight and control snatches. If you also want to add size to your upper arms and do not have a problem with being heavier, these exercises will do the trick. Yet even if you need to control your body weight, presses, dips and pullovers will make your upper arms a great deal stronger.

So my message is this: Don't bother with any specific exercises for your biceps. They are getting all the work they need from the heavy pulling exercises. But do add these three triceps exercises to your program because if you make your triceps considerably stronger, you're going to make your snatches and clean and jerks much heavier.



### **About the Author**

*Bill Starr coached at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the 1970 Olympic Weightlifting World Championship in Columbus, Ohio, and the 1975 World Powerlifting Championships in Birmingham, England. He was selected as head coach of the 1969 team that competed in the Tournament of Americas in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where the United States won the team title, making him the first active lifter to be head coach of an international Olympic weightlifting team. Starr is the author of the books "The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football" and "Defying Gravity", which can be found at [The Aasgaard Company Bookstore](#).*