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Preparing for the First Olympic Meet

You only get six chances to make a lift at an Oly meet. Bob Takano details how coaches and athletes can prepare to get optimal results on the platform.

By Bob Takano

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An athlete's first weightlifting meet is often a hugely memorable event with emotions ranging from ecstatic euphoria all the way to sheer terror. In most cases this first meet will go a long ways toward establishing the nature of the athlete's competitive character, and so it would be of great benefit for both the athlete and the coach to take some time for advance preparation to make sure as many controllable factors go as smoothly as possible.

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The Performance

A weightlifting meet is psychologically unlike the vast majority of athletic events—even the other individual sports competitions. In track and field, there are numerous events occurring simultaneously. The same is true of gymnastics. Even in the combative sports there is another person, the opponent, sharing the officials' and audience's attention.

A weightlifter stands alone and is the sole focus of everyone's attention.

Fortunately, it is like all other performance experiences in that the chemical state of the performer is altered. Those with experience at handling this adrenalized state can transfer this expertise or aplomb to the competition platform. Others can learn to handle their adrenaline through other performance experiences. This is one of the reasons that I ask each new weightlifter I coach about their competitive sports history.

Coaching a new athlete with a successful competitive sports history just means that I won't have to explain or coach the adrenalized state. I just have to make sure the athlete is aware of the specifics of the weightlifting competition that are relevant to the performance.

Pre-Meet Preparation

Both the coach and the athlete should be aware of the procedures for conducting the competition. They should both know the rules for weight changes, the timing of attempts, the judging process and other details that are easily learned by reading the rule book. The coach should know them *much* better than the athlete, and the athlete should have complete faith in the expertise of the coach. Otherwise the athlete's mind may be preoccupied by this lack of faith, and this may interfere with concentration on the performance, which is the most important focus.

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for the official signal before
lowering the weight.**



***Weightlifters stand on the platform alone,
to succeed or fail by themselves.***

It would probably behoove some teams to stage mock meets in the gym so that each athlete and the coach or coaches understand how the meet is to be conducted. Lifters need to learn to wait for the official signal before lowering the weight, for example.

For new coach/athlete teams, a mock meet might also help to determine which weights are to be attempted in the competition. The first attempt should be a makeable lift with the coach fully aware that the adrenaline demon may take over and suddenly provide an over-pull or over-jerk that cannot be well controlled.

In any event, the athlete should not be surprised by the weights that are called in the competition. In a first meet it is most important to succeed with many attempts with properly selected weights. Lifting to compete may have to be left to subsequent competitions and not the first ones.

Make sure you have all your gear (including your lifting suit) packed in your bag, and that you carry your bag with you to the competition. If you are flying, make sure your bag is carry-on luggage. Pack your weightlifting registration card, photo ID and proof of mailing if there is a deadline for entries.

The Weigh-In

The coach should be entirely familiar with the rules of the weigh-in. When does it start? How long does an athlete have to make weight? How much clothing can be removed and/or must be removed? What are the rules on jewelry?

I would also strongly recommend that the coach not artificially induce a body-weight loss for a first competition as this will superficially introduce another distraction that can inhibit the athlete's psyche for competition.

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Because it would behoove an athlete to weigh lighter than heavier as potential tiebreakers include lighter body weight, the coach should have food ready for after the weigh-in. It should be easily digestible food with a high carbohydrate component.

For the first meet, the weigh-in should not become a distraction, nor should taking care of administrative paperwork. All of that should be taken care of well before the day of the meet. The coach should have the athlete's USAW card and ID.

The coach should be ready to provide opening attempts at the weigh-in.

The coach, in consultation with the athlete well beforehand, should determine the goal weight to be lifted in the competition. Then subtract approximately

5-6 percent to determine the opening weight. If that is successful, the second attempt of 2-3 percent less than the goal weight can be called for the second-attempt poundage. The goal weight is going to vary with the individual. Some competitive types are overly aggressive and will want to take much more weight than they've lifted in training. Others are more trepidatious. This is why the goal weight should be determined through a consultation with the coach. Percentages of maximum are not valid at this point because a true maximum can only be determined under competition conditions.



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Everything should be taken care of well before the competition so that the athlete has only to walk to the platform and lift.

The Warm-Up

The coach should be entirely confident of the warm-up procedure. This means establishing the athlete in a seat near a platform with a bar and enough weights to warm up properly. Water or a sports drink should be available, and chalk should be nearby (bringing your own chalk is often advisable). Except during the initial warm-up and during individual warm-up lifts, the athlete should be seated. Well-wishers, family members and other non-essential personnel should be kept away from the lifter in the warm-up room as they can provide unnecessary distractions.

The coach should know how to count attempts on the expediting cards or off the warm-up room attempt board. The plan should be three competitive lifts for each warm-up lift. Thus an athlete taking 5 warm-up attempts should take the first one with 15 attempts remaining before the opening attempt.

After the initial "warming up" of the body, the athlete should take four to five progressively heavier singles until the final one is within 5 kilograms or so of the first attempt on the platform. The athlete should have two to three minutes after the last warm-up and the first attempt on the competition platform.

The athlete should walk to the competition area before the weight is loaded.

During the Competition

In order to lessen the anxiety of working under the constraints of a time clock, the coach should have the lifter prepared to lift at the side of the stage (competition area) before the lifter's name is called (the calling of the name signals the start of the time clock). If the lifter is not out of breath, the one-minute clock provides plenty of time, and many first-time lifters end up performing the lift after less than 30 seconds have elapsed. Again, a mock meet in the gym will help the lifter lessen the level of anxiety and feel comfortable with the rules regarding the time clock.

After the completion of a successful attempt, the coach needs to inform the announcer of the weight of the next attempt (if there is one available). Otherwise the weight of the next attempt is the automatic one-kilo increase.

The first few meets should be a time to acquire expertise in successfully calling and succeeding with weights that are makeable for the athlete. In other words, there should be a plan to develop the competitive psyche of the athlete by calling and lifting challenging but not necessarily maximal lifts. Sticking to a plan will do much for the psychological development of the athlete in the long run. If a lifter has a sound record of completion percentage and regular establishment of personal records in competition after two or three meets, the coach can then begin to call weights strategically.

The attitude of the best lifters is that personal records lifted while placing fifth are more rewarding than mediocre winning performances against low-level competition. In short, the first few meets should be a time of learning to lift in a meet. When the weights lifted reach a certain level of competency, then is the time to think about competing against lifters of approximately equal caliber.

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Immediately after a lift, the lifter should not express any signs of doubt over the validity of the lift. The athlete should not turn to look at the official's lights to see if the lift is valid. Referees can change their minds, and the body language of the lifter can sway an official's decision.

If a first attempt is successful, the coach needs to determine how many attempts are remaining before the second attempt. If it is a large number, say five or greater, the coach needs to escort the athlete back to the warm-up area and perform a pull with a weight of at least 90 percent of the opening weight in order to encourage circulation and maintain warmth.

If the coach is working with several athletes in a given session, it may be necessary to have assistance available to help in the changing of the warm-up weights and in the counting of attempts for the timing of the warm-up.

The Final Bit of Advice

At some point any coach will need to learn the rules. They can be downloaded from the International Weightlifting Federation site [here](#). Read the rules and understand them. Furthermore, watch other veteran coaches and learn how they conduct the warm-up and performance.

So many of the factors in a competition are controllable if not foreseeable. An experienced coach can take the risk out of many of these factors and leave the athlete to do only what the athlete has trained to do—lift the weights!

Good luck with your first meet!



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About the Author

*Bob Takano has developed and coached some of the best weightlifters in the U.S. for the past 39 years. A 2007 inductee into the U.S.A. Weightlifting Hall of Fame, he has coached four national champions, seven national record holders and 28 top 10 nationally ranked lifters. Fifteen of the volleyball players he's coached have earned Division 1 volleyball scholarships. His articles have been published by the NSCA and the International Olympic Committee and helped to establish standards for the coaching of the Olympic lifts. He is a former member of the editorial board of the **NSCA Journal**, and an instructor for the UCLA Extension program. He is currently the chairperson of the NSCA Weightlifting Special Interest Group. For the past year he has been coaching in the Crossfit Oly Cert program. Website: www.takanoathletics.com*