

Heavy Metal Days

Jay McKeen

The barbell Grippaldi held across his shoulders was bent like a longbow by the five 20-kilogram metal plates loaded on each end. As he pumped out five quick back-squats to rock bottom depth—ass-to-heels, and back up—the bar bounced straight and the plates clanged at the top of each repetition. Fifteen or so of us watched in silent awe. The set completed, the movement as precise as a combustion engine piston, Grippaldi stood still a few seconds and breathed easy, eyes fixed on the gray block wall, expressionless, as if he'd forgotten about that quarter-ton of weight on his back and was considering whether he'd need to pick up milk and bread on the way home. Then, with a slight shrug up and back, he dumped the stack of iron behind him, crashing to the floor. The giant fan that distributed our stale basement air blew the dust raised by Grippaldi's thrown barbell down the long line of weightlifting platforms, and the collision of metal and wood signaled us to resume training with our own less heavily-loaded bars.

Grippaldi dropped to the bench against the wall, straightened his legs wide, and started unwinding the ace-bandage wraps on his knees. Without looking up, he called to fellow U.S. Olympian Bob Giordano, who was buckling on leather wrist-wraps to begin snatching.

"Ready to lift yet, Giordano?"

"You're gonna pull now?," said Giordano. "That's a relief. I thought maybe you'd given up lifting and turned bodybuilder. I expected to see some curls next."

"Maybe we should both switch," said Grippaldi, now eyeing Giordano. "I'd have something new to beat you at."

Three platforms down, I had loaded a modest 270 pounds on the bar for some power cleans, and I smirked at their Olympic banter, as if I were part of it. But I wasn't really, and neither were my two training partners who shared the weekly trip with me to lift in the same grimy room with these giants. Standing on our platform down the line from the elite lifters, we eyed Mount Olympus from distant foothills. We wanted to climb it, though, and knew how to get there.

Pull more. Snatch, clean, deadlift with a snatch grip, deadlift with a clean grip, pull to the knees, pull from the knees, pull the bar from a dead hang, pull off of blocks, rip the barbell to chest-height, then pull some

more to waist-height, pull with the legs, pull with straight legs. Pull tons each training day, aggregate more and more tonnage. And sleep and eat well. For weeks, for months, for years. Keep on pulling. Then maybe, someday, we would wear the white singlet with the small A.A.U. shield at center chest: the uniform of the U.S. Team.

In the summer of 1978 I left at sunrise each Saturday with Al Collins and Chuck Burnley to drive two and a half hours so we could make the morning workout of the Belleville Barbell Club. The early hour and serious business ahead made for a solemn ride. When warmed up to talking, the talk was sets and reps, pull technique, soft-tissue injury treatment, optimum daily protein gram intake. Riveting and rapt was my crew.

For American Olympic-style weightlifters of the '70's, New Jersey was the holy land, and the basement weight room under the Belleville High School stadium on Belleville's Passaic Avenue was its temple. Though the Soviets had eclipsed us, the best American lifters were from Jersey, and the best of those trained at Belleville. The twin mountain Superheavyweights Jerry Hannon and Terry Manton trained there. So did '80 Olympians Bob Giordano and Brian Derwin, and Lou Mucardo, '84 Olympic Team. So did the legend: seven-time National Champion, three-time Olympian, silver medal at the '70 Worlds, and silver medalist in the clean-and-jerk at the 1972 Olympics: Phil Grippaldi. Just 5 foot six, this 198-pound class lifter clean-and-jerked 451 pounds at the '72 Games, and sported a pair of triceps that jutted so far back behind him that both muscles could be charged with stalking. "The Gripper's" grim glare was often featured on the cover of *Strength and Health Magazine*, our bible. He was mythical to us: both a David and a Goliath.

The Belleville weightroom was a long and narrow gray catacomb, burrowed into the concrete basement of the football stadium, poorly lit and ventilated only by a giant caged fan with cloth wire insulation, an original, possibly, from Thomas Edison's lab in nearby Menlo Park. It squealed at the only doorway. Extending from that entrance, like a row of giant scrabble tiles placed flat atop the concrete floor, were six twelve-foot-square lifting platforms, each equipped with one seven-foot Olympic bar, a stack of old York iron plates, and a chalkbox made from a battered stainless steel mixing bowl nailed through the bottom into a waist-high stand fashioned from scrap boards. A single iron power rack was bolted to the wall. A pair of upright barbell stands—custom made from thick pipe jammed vertically into old auto tire rims by somebody's welder friend—from which to squat deep or jerk the bar overhead, were tucked against the opposite wall. That was all. No benches, no cable machines. No cardio room, dumbbells or Pilates mats, no mirrors or TVs, no juice bar. A small tape player shrieked from the corner, Zeppelin and ZZ Top permitted (the perfect lifting sound, Metallica, not yet invented). But that was it. Just six chalk-dusted and barbell-gouged piles of plywood

on plank, upon which to crouch and grip the bar, sink hips, arch spine, and overcome the inertia of the loaded bar by trying to drive our legs into the earth below. We were athlete-physicists, intending to maximize in a straight line the forces of contracting legs, hips, calves and traps, and achieve the escape velocity needed to defeat gravity. On every platform, for two or three or more hours, lifters jammed the barbell overhead, held it a second, then stepped back and unhinged locked joints, permitting the stack of iron to crash back to the floor. Wandering from platform to platform was volunteer coach Bucky Cairo, who offered the elite lifters and the novices the same time and boundless devotion to the sport.

“Tighten that low back! Good, good. You just might make it to Moscow,” cheered Bucky.

The platforms had admission requirements. The farthest from the doorway – worst lit and least breathable air – was for juniors and novices who cleaned less than 200 pounds, the next one for the 250 club, and so on. The near platform (best lit with freshest air) was usually occupied by the elites: Olympians, World, Pan-Am, and National Team members, those getting very close to joining that club, and Grippaldi himself. It had the only genuine Eleiko rubber bumper plate set in the place, and some of the lifters strong enough to share that platform sported Russian weightlifting shoes that Grippaldi had given them, gotten in trade with Soviet lifters—for jeans and other items he stuffed in his bag for international meets. In the year I trained there, I worked my way up toward the middle platforms. I got pretty good. But not good enough to share a bar with Phil.

A lifter’s move up to the next platform was a graduation day, and sometimes got you cheers and taunts from the rest of the room: “Watch out, Phil. Burnley’s after your Pan-Am Games slot!”

“I thought I heard footsteps,” said Phil. No smile. Long stare, and slow chew on lower lip.

Wood benches lined the wall opposite the platforms. Lifters sprawled out on them wrapping knees, taping over—or shaving smooth with the razor blade we kept in our bags—the jagged calluses on thumbs and palms. Ripping a callus deep into the flesh during a pull would dampen a day; smooth calluses didn’t catch on the bar’s knurling. We learned to pause mid-sentence for the crashing of plates to the floor. And we rested between sets on the benches, massaging thighs and low back, attending to current injury and trying to prevent the next one. You’d get your sinuses cleared now and then, while you bent over strapping a lifting shoe distracted, when the lifter next to you pried open his tub of Tiger Balm or Icy Hot to jam it near your nose. Or, if you were too close to a lifter who cracked open his small vial of smelling salts for a jolt before stalking up for a max attempt, you became the collateral damage as second-hand ammonia shot to the back of your brain like grenade shrapnel. We had adapted to a minefield of pranks, and to the atmosphere: the smell of

cold cinder block and dust, gymnast's chalk, and sweat-soaked knee and wrist wraps fermented for weeks deep in Adidas gym bags.

We were *Olympic-style weight lifters*. Athletes, strength sport purists, with a tradition and a history. We had a century of recorded National, World and Olympic records to aim for, and a competition that demanded gaining more strength, but not just strength. We trained raw speed, explosiveness with the bar, and joint flexibility. We perfected our timing under the bar, and scientifically planned the composition of our training load. Always trying for more. We were muscleheads, sure, but not of the lesser phyla of muscleheads: bodybuilders, powerlifters, or spandexed *exercise enthusiasts*. For us, any movement that did not improve the ability to pull a bar from the floor, and put it overhead, was not weightlifting at all. Powerlifting, a younger sport derived from weightlifting and dating to the 1950's, with its slow-motion squats, bench presses, and deadlifts, was a consolation sport for those without enough fast-twitch muscle fibers in their bodies to hang with us. We called those powerlifting movements "partials," relegated to the class of "assistance exercises." We were impartial, of course. The answer an Olympic weightlifter gives to the question, "How much do you bench?" is a cold staccato, "I. Don't."

And bodybuilders? Those even further removed from the one true faith, concerned with size and shape rather than functional strength, who preen in mirrors doing high repetition curls to develop the most unimportant muscle in the body, who dine on boiled chicken and egg whites—supplemented with protein powder, Bob Hoffman's Energol, and with the anabolic steroids decadurabolin, injectable testosterone, and human growth hormone—and who shave and oil surfaces for "shows" rather than ready entire organisms for "contests?" They deserve the respect due to all God's children, but not that due his elect.

We thought like that—sort of—and I still talk a high horse now, but I should fess up. Weightlifters, too, started as kids wanting to be bigger, to avoid the beach sand kicked by bullies in the Charles Atlas magazine ads, and to get the girls. We'd flash the bodybuilder's double-bicep or "most muscular" crab pose after a successful lift: a silverback celebrating his domination. And, though "curls are for girls," we did them. The grimly serious Grippaldi's arms were so hypertrophied from bodybuilding done in his teens that the Russian weightlifting experts at the Soviet Academy of Sport—in an article translated for American magazines—diagnosed those prodigious arms as the cause of a technique problem that inhibited his ultimate success. Phil may have been okay with that. He didn't get Olympic gold, but a silver medal and a band of worshippers is not too bad.

We were never the first there on Saturday, after that first week, when we left so early that we sat in the car outside waiting for full daylight and for someone to arrive. But whatever time you entered the stadium

basement got you robust hellos from lifters lacing shoes or stretching hamstrings, doing shoulder dislocations, box jumps, and shadow snatches with broomsticks, and some quick nodded acknowledgements from lifters already pulling on the platforms. There were nicknames: "Squatty Body, you freak! The Neck said he thought you'd quit lifting and joined the circus." Ball busting. "Chuck, can't help but admire you. I've never seen anyone snatch that same 100 kilos so many times without losing interest. Ever thought of maybe trying 101?" And there was the guy stuff. "You've got a nice snatch, Al."

The rhythmic crash of bars loaded with six to eight 45-pound plates dropped to platforms, punctuated these happy insults. A few seconds of hale and hearty was all you were permitted, anyway. If you didn't get down to business quick, you were in the wrong place, bud.

Personal lives came up, but only before or after the serious training—we could multi-task a bit while we wrapped our wrists and knees—or at greater length at Bob Giordano's Pizzeria after the lifting session. Many of the lifters worked part time jobs, so it wouldn't interfere with training or competition travel. Some were bouncers at Jersey shore nightclubs, midnight security guards who slept at their desks at night to be fresh for the morning workout, on-call substitute teachers who picked and chose days to work, so as not to interfere with a heavy squat day. The talk was often about getting out of the sport. "I'm going back to the shotput. At least I had time for other things besides training." Or, "I've got to make some money. I'm giving this one more Olympic cycle, then getting a real job." Or, "I'm done, guys. Pro-wrestling camp starts next week. I've gotta get paid for all this." Talk also included, "She doesn't understand, "all we do is fight," "She moved out," or "I thought the lawyers were talking about someone else in that courtroom...I can't believe I'm divorced." These guys, the best in the country at shoving weights above, may have been the worst in the country at love. The problem was that the Olympic weightlifting training regimen sucked the time out of life, and other than the few seconds of video where a champion held a world record weight overhead, the sport was of inherent interest only to the weightlifters themselves—there's only so much talk of metric training tons a girl can take. Weightlifting didn't leave room for anything—or anyone—else, and the women put up with it only so long. This was a few years before women's weightlifting became part of the program, adding to the dating mix a small population of females who found as deeply fascinating as the men did the acquisition of pulling strength, and the nuances of snatch-grip width. That dream match didn't exist then.

During the week that led up to these Saturday sessions, I trained with Al and Chuck in an unheated, un-air-conditioned garage in Mays Landing, about twenty miles west of Atlantic City. Al was our leader, our coach. Until we joined him, Al Collins was the only Olympic lifter in Mays Landing. He taught us with a broomstick, then a bar, how to

snatch, clean, and jerk with proper technique. *Technique* was Al's first principle, and we were not permitted to add another kilo to the bar until we mastered our form with a weight. "Pull with your legs! Elbows out! Wrists forward! No, no no! Don't rip the bar from the floor! Shoulders in front of the bar! Push your legs through, accelerate smoothly!" We drilled and drilled positions, until he was just barely satisfied, and willing to let us add a little weight to the bar.

"That felt good, Al," I would declare after standing with a clean. "I'm on today!"

"Yeah, you're on," said Al. "On drugs."

"How about I add five kilos?" I'd plead.

"How about you don't," said Al. "You're not ready: butt's coming up too fast. You're late getting under the bar." Al had no patience with a lifter who depended on sheer, awkward strength. Do it right, or don't do it at all.

We had a platform, weights, and squat rack back home, and, in winter, a blasting old kerosene heater shaped like a cannon, that filled the garage with burnt hydrocarbons that we tasted in the back of our throats. We didn't need anything else; we didn't have to drive two hours north to work out, but the weekend trip to Belleville was what we waited for. There was inspiration gained, training with better, stronger, athletes. Often as not we rose to the occasion those days, setting personal records, training longer, always with more intensity.

Often we paid for that intensity. More than once I did so many sets of squats and pulls at Belleville that my hamstrings later jackknifed in spasms without warning, once during the ride home on the busy Garden State Parkway. I screamed to Al and Chuck to pull the car over, and crawled out on the highway's shoulder to my back, and jammed my legs out straight to stretch the hams. But that contracted my quadriceps and made them spasm. I alternated locking knees and unbending them, and alternated wails of pain as hamstrings and quads took their turns torturing me. As cars flew past us south, Al and Chuck looked down at me, lying on the highway doing my weightlifter's Curly Shuffle, and laughed their asses off. Eventually I crawled into the backseat, where I continued my suffering. An hour or so later, they dumped me off in front of my house, where I crab-walked on all fours backward, arms waddling and legs doing their best to follow, to meet my wife at the door.

"He's better than he looks!" Chuck yelled as they drove off.

There was a specialness of being so few. By the 70's, weightlifting in the U.S. had devolved to a cult sport, most athletes attracted to football and basketball and at least the chance of money someday. In 1978, there were about 1,100 competing weightlifters in the entire United States, still trying to regain a foothold internationally in a sport we had once dominated. The United States hadn't won a world championship gold

medal since 1969, an Olympic gold medal since 1960, or had a contending superheavyweight (the only weight class that made it to TV's Wide World of Sports) since Ken Patera followed Russia's Vassily Alexeev through the door of the 500-pound clean-and-jerk, raising America's hopes, only to be soundly defeated by the big-bellied Soviet's superior technique at the Montreal Games in 1972. After that Olympics, the clean cut Ken Patera grew out his hair, permed it, and dyed it bright blonde for his long career as a World Wrestling Federation star.

The glory days of American weightlifting—the 40's and 50's, when we dominated the Soviets—had ended by 1960 with the last U.S. gold by 123-pounder Chuck Vinci, and the retirement of the great heavyweight Paul Anderson, the 311-pound Dixie Derrick, who had built his gold-medal-winning body squatting a farm tractor axle and wheels at his country home in Georgia, accessing the giant wheels and axle from a hole he had dug in the ground under it. The magazines said he had also built that strength drinking the liquid extruded from centrifuged raw fish. ("Damn! Where can I get a centrifuge?" I was probably not alone, wondering.)

After the '56 Games, rather than continue to rack up medals and set world records as an Olympic amateur, Anderson turned professional strongman and Christian evangelist, lifting into the air a ladder full of Vegas showgirls one day, a congregation's spirits the next. And by then the Soviets, then the Bulgarians, took their turns dominating the sport of weightlifting. The athletes of Eastern Europe were state-supported, but in the 1970's, the American Olympic sports' governing body—the A.A.U.—still clung to the arguably archaic amateur athletic ideal that stripped Jim Thorpe of his Olympic track and field medals in 1912 for making a few dollars playing semi-pro baseball.

We were envious of the Eastern European weightlifters whose job was to train full time. Weightlifters in the U.S. had developed a siege mentality. We knew that the few of us who still stuck with the sport were competing against the odds, but we were stubbornly unwilling to leave the field. We all had to get jobs to eat. Bob Giordano owned a pizzeria and worked his training around 12 hour days behind 400 degree ovens, Hannon was a deli clerk trying to work enough hours to earn the 300 grams of protein he ate each day, my partners were a teacher and warehouse manager at the local vocational high school, and I got a job there, too. Even the legendary Grippaldi taught school by day, to feed his weightlifting habit. These lifters had been fighting those odds for four, or eight, or twelve years of training in the Belleville basement weightroom to make the 1980 Olympian Team. No one knew that summer that the team would not leave home; two years later the United States would boycott the 1980 Games, to protest the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

There was something wrong with us. We chose a sport with no pot of gold and no rainbow. Weightlifters didn't get appearance fees or product

endorsement deals, do commercials or interviews, and most spent their entire income on their training and travel to competitions. Some lifters got fed up, and turned pro wrestler, or switched to the new sport of professional strongman competition; the strong legs and backs of Olympic lifters made it a natural transition.

In Europe, champion weightlifters were recognized on the street. (In Europe—though not in the United States—Phil Grippaldi was recognized on the street!) In the U.S., we recognized each other, and our moms knew us. The training was brutal, buried from sunlight, and a fulltime job itself. Twelve to twenty joint-jarring training hours a week, 30 grams of Bob Hoffman's Protein Powder every three hours, vitamins, amino acids, more chicken and eggs than the human digestive system should have to work to convert to muscle and energy, washed down with a gallon of milk. Whatever the food supplement fad of the week was—whatever the latest muscle magazine advertised, animal, mineral, or vegetable—we were on it. Vanadium, chromium, the amino acids arginine and ornithine, DHEA, ephedrine; blenders made with milk, brewer's yeast, raw eggs, and dessicated raw liver tablets—if you've smelled dogfood, you know how that concoction tastes. Whatever the latest nutrition supplement advertised, we bought it. Dianabol, the original steroid? It was around, and the injectables, too. If you told a weightlifter in the '70s or '80's that more iron in his diet made him stronger, you wouldn't be able to buy a 12-penny nail at a hardware store for a 100-mile radius. We kept detailed training logs, drew progress charts on x-y coordinates, planned diets, varied our training loads by amount of metric tons.

And we usually passed on fun. Fun was tied to spontaneity outside of the weightroom. Skiing for the weekend? Might get injured. Trip to the Outer Banks? Where would I train? "You are going to the gym on Christmas Day?" my wife demanded, incredulous.

"It's Wednesday. Wednesday is jerk day. I'll just be a couple of hours," I said.

"It is jerk day, isn't it?" She turned away. Why the turn wasn't permanent, I'm not sure.

All that for the possible reward of respect by the other thousand or so Olympic lifters in this country, of being a Grippaldi. We few, we slap-happy few.

Life was simple and clear then, and I miss that time. We shared a singular adventure, with epic toil and victories and defeats, all our efforts aimed at a single goal. Ours was an odyssey, Al our Ulysses, and we his loyal crew. Phil Grippaldi was at least half-god, therefore Hercules. I've thought about those days more since my orthopedic doc scoped my knees last year for a stress fracture, cleaned up a torn meniscus, and saw the arthritis that made repairing the fracture impossible. The fracture will have to heal naturally, slowly. I can delay double knee replacement

for five or ten years if I'm careful, he pronounced. "No squats," he said. "Yes, of course, and no oxygen," I thought.

For months after that surgery, I considered supplanting my lifelong passion for the weightroom, lifting, and shotput and discus competition—these things I've done for almost forty years now—with something less stressful to the joints. Perhaps bicycling or rowing or swimming, maybe tournament chess, or—if I would just throw the towel in—golf. But by January I could walk a little better with less pain, by February the bad knee days were less frequent than bad hair days. I packed my lifting bag one cold Saturday morning, and drove the mile to the dusty basement weightroom where I'd trained alone for the last fifteen years.

I bought a brand new steno notebook and placed my stack of old training logbooks out for trash pickup. My new logbook begins by recording that first post-op workout when I loaded my shoulders with just the empty bar, and squatted, speaking aloud for my knees as I descended, "Ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch, ouch." My goals are less grand than Olympic gold: I will lift more than I could that first day back, and more than last week. Like Tennyson's aged Ulysses, I am *not now that strength which in old days seemed to move earth and heaven*. But that's all right. *Though much is taken, much abides*. My goal: be stronger at fifty-five than I am at fifty-four; I'll settle for that.

But back in our heavy metal days? We didn't settle. There were no limits: improve your front squat, clean one more kilo. Increase your vertical jump, snatch another kilo. Sharpen your speed getting under the bar? Another kilo. Keep training, eat right, train right, sleep right, stay focused? Add up enough kilos and you've got an Olympic medal. If some is good, more is better. So we abandoned our wives and families and overtrained, multiplying sessions, accumulating months and years of training tonnage, increasing the weight on the bar so relentlessly that we wore our bodies down and got sick. We rested when temporary disability required it, more often working around tendonitis, sore backs, torn and pulled muscles, still doing sets of twenty-rep squats till our legs screamed and brains exploded from spiked blood pressure.

I'd get home each Saturday that summer, with spasms in both hamstrings and barely able to walk, but charged with renewed faith.

"Good time?" my wife asked.

"Great time! PR'd with 440 for five in the back squat, racked 407 in the clean, couldn't stand up with it, but will soon. Phil Grippaldi said my second pull's getting sharper."

"Who wouldn't want a sharp second pull? Very nice. And who's this Phil?"

Who's this Phil? Phil Grippaldi?

In fairness, there was no reason she should have known, though her disinterest belies a great generosity that proved lucky for this selfish

man. Hardly anyone would know who Phil—who we—were; hardly anyone does now. The stadium still stands in Belleville, the room must still exist—perhaps it's used for storage—but the Belleville Barbell Club is long gone. Bob Giordano stayed in the area, and traded making pizzas for making case law as an attorney. Brian Derwin is out west, a successful business manager, and former president of the U.S. Weightlifting Federation. Terry Manton left lifting and wrestled professionally as The Executioner, before dying young of a heart attack. Jerry Hannan switched to World's Strongest Man competition in 1980, losing to ex-powerlifter Bill Kazmaier in the beginning of that man's WSM dynasty. And my hero, Phil Grippaldi? An elbow injury in competition a year after that Belleville summer ended Phil's weightlifting career, despite a yearlong comeback fight that he—unable to use his arms— spent doing thousands of 1,000 pound-plus leg presses. After that, some poor decisions landed him in State prison. I kept at it till 1984. After a bronze medal in the American Championships in 1983, and falling five kilos short of the Olympic Trials qualifying total at a qualifying meet the following January, near thirty years old with a wife and two babies living in a small trailer on the money I made as a night security guard, I thought about professional wrestling for all of about two minutes before taking the municipal police officer test and clinching medical benefits and a twenty-five year career from which I will soon retire.

I occasionally run in to my old training partners, Al and Chuck—all of us now pushing sixty. Chuck, retired now, has healed from hip surgery, and bought an Olympic bar and rubber bumper plates to begin training again in his garage. Al has added strongman stone lifting to his regime, and trains now with Russian kettlebells, doing exercises like “two-arm swings,” “one-arm snatches,” and the exotic “Turkish get-up,” which I was relieved to discover was not something one had to wear. Al spent a few Sunday mornings two summers ago teaching me kettlebell technique, forbidding me—of course—from going too heavy. “Shoot the hips! Flat back! Stop! Technique first. Rest a minute,” Al commanded, just as he did thirty years ago. Comforting, the eternal.

When I see my friends, the talk turns inevitably to sets and reps, and pull technique. One would think we must have exhausted the subject by now. But for those of us who trained in that airless basement those thirty summers ago, and who sweated, planned, tried, succeeded, and failed there; for those of us who mostly dreamed there with other dreamers, most never achieving those dreams, we were part of a time of magnificent ambition worth remembering, part of a small concrete-walled perimeter that had no boundaries.