

*Article written by the late Barrie Nelson, IPF Referee and Coach*

What follows may all seem glaringly obvious to you. It certainly does to me. But, I've seen more people than I care to remember make an absolute ragshop of competing because they didn't seem to understand the very basics of competitive powerlifting.

Right off the bat: Not many people will remember what you missed, but you certainly will. (Particularly if it happens to be all three attempts on the same lift - you'll remember that all right! Or, you should!)

Listen, anyone can 'bomb'. It's happened to some real experts. Nobody's immune.

But, there are ways to make it a hell of a lot less likely. And, I'll tell you the old one about the three most likely reasons for bombing out – Too heavy, too heavy, and too heavy. It might be an old one, but it's still mostly true.

So, very obviously: always start with a weight you can do properly, anytime, anywhere, in any conditions, on any kind of equipment, and in front of any referees in the world. Having seen some of the decisions I have that can sometimes be a tall order, but you've got to try your damndest to see that that's the case.

It's no good giving it, "I did it for two/three/five in the gym last week". This is contest day! Never mind what you had written on the piece of paper when you walked in the place. Try and find out what you're going to be good for today, at this competition. Bear in mind what competition it is, where it is, when it is.

If it's a World Championships, for instance, and you've traveled half way round the world, you've had time changes of 7 or 8 or more hours, it's 30 degrees hotter or colder than it was at home, you're lifting in what's normally the middle of the night for you, you've probably been hanging around for a couple of days, trying to stay relaxed, the referees are going to be as strict or more strict than you've ever seen before. Believe me, you'd better be prepared and ready to make some adjustment to what you'd expect at your local contest where you set off from home an hour or two before weigh-in.

You often hear people, having seen the results from an International, saying that certain lifters were down on expectations. Whose expectations? The reader's? If you've been lifting abroad much you'll know there are a dozen or more reasons for the prospect of totals being lower than a lifters previous best. Not always, of course, but sometimes. Quite understandable, given the various changing circumstances that can, and do, arise.

Still, this is about maximizing your abilities on contest day – wherever and whenever it is. If you take a look at the results of almost any meaningful powerlifting contest, in the majority of cases the better-placed lifters will have more passed lifts than the lesser-placed lifters. There you go.

Competing at powerlifting is an art. I'm not talking about training for powerlifting, I'm talking about competing at powerlifting.

I've heard people say, "If I'm going to have a chance of winning I have to start with (whatever)." Sorry. No. To have any chance at all, you've got to be on the scoreboard on squat, bench, and deadlift. Too simple for words? You'd think so.

Here's one of mine, "You keep getting lifts on the board, let the others make mistakes."

I've actually heard lifters say, "Anyone who gets all nine lifts in can't have been trying hard enough." Words fail me!

As Andy Kerr says (and he's a real expert at getting nine lifts in, and has been for the best part of thirty years), "You get nine attempts so that you can maximize your abilities on the day. Trying to get all nine lifts passed in the only sensible course to take." (I'm probably paraphrasing, but it will do). As I say to people occasionally, you don't get three attempts at a lift so you can try the same weight three times!

And I've heard all the; "Your first attempt should be a lift you can do for two (or three, or five) in the gym. Your second should be within 5 (or 10, or 15) of your previous best. Your third should be a new best by 5 (or 10, or 20). Rubbish! Take account of where you are, and of the circumstances of THIS competition, and then be prepared to adjust your attempts accordingly. That means ALL the circumstances.

The first thing you have to do, of course, is develop lifting techniques that will satisfy the referees. It's no

good relying on your mates in the gym who are giving it lots of noise and “great lift” when you’ve just cut your squat by two/three/six inches. Get someone who knows what a good squat is and will tell you the honest truth. Anything else is doing you no favours whatsoever.

Then you have to be realistic about what you’re good for on the day. If the warm-ups are harder than expected, or not as technically sound as they need to be, then for God’s sake make adjustments to your opener. If the refereeing is tougher than you expected, make adjustments. If the contest is going faster than is good for you, make adjustments. And so on.. Whatever the circumstances, be ready to make adjustments if it’s advisable. I’ve seen loads of people who insisted on sticking rigidly to the plan that was made four weeks ago and come a real cropper. Don’t let it happen to you.

Here’s a couple more thoughts. I’ve often heard, on the squat, “It’s not heavy enough, I need more weight on the bar.” Oh dear! I don’t think so. Get down, you nutcase. And, if you can’t get down, then take some bloody weight off the bar and get down. On the other hand, with these crazy bench shirts these days, I have (often) seen people not be able to get the bar down. We’ve all seen it. (There are now more bombers on the bench than on the squat). Well, here are a couple of suggestions. Firstly, try using a less-tight shirt! Sorry, I know it’s not too good for your ego, but I’ll bet you it works. Secondly, either don’t put a belt on for your opener, or, don’t tighten it up as much, and/or, don’t pull the shirt down as much or at all. It might not be as good for your ego, but getting three white lights for your opener will more than make up for that, I guarantee you.

Here’s another thought. Three white lights for your opening squat will make you feel at least 100% better than you did three minutes ago. If you get three reds you’ll feel about 100% worse. If you then get three reds for your second you’ll be almost suicidal. Anyone who goes out and gets their third squat passed after having the first two turned down has my undying admiration; it takes a hell of a lot of guts and determination at a time when you’d rather be absolutely anywhere else in the world.

There’s nothing new in any of this. It’s all common sense. Unfortunately – and I’ve been around this sport since before it was a sport – I’ve seen too many people to remember make the most glaringly obvious, stupid mistakes at powerlifting competitions. And it keeps on happening. It happens at virtually every competition I go to.

And another thing; learn to count! Or, better still, have someone look after you on competition day who can count. The number of times I see people post stupid deadlift attempts because whoever’s doing the numbers can’t count, or doesn’t bother. Still amazes me. At every competition it amazes me.

And I don’t mean on the squats, or the benches. All you have to do there is keep getting lifts on the board and let others miss attempts. Don’t even count until you get to sub-totals, THEN you’d better have your act together. This is where the contest begins. There IS no contest until you get to deadlifting.

Keep it simple. Take attempts that you’re good for today. If it’s going badly, don’t try to play catch up. Realise you’re having a bad day – for whatever reasons – and pick your attempts accordingly. Similarly, if you’re having a spectacularly good day, likewise. Remember, at the end of the day (literally) it’s your powerlifting total that counts.

Now, having got your techniques fine-tuned, and your mind on the job of competing today, (Cos this is the day you have it to do; it’s no good wishing it was last week, or next week. It’s today, and you have your job to do today). I’ll give you the very best bit of advice I can. You lift the weights! That’s it. If you possibly can, get someone else – someone you trust to do it absolutely right – to do everything else. On contest day your job is lifting the weights to the satisfaction of the duly appointed referees. THAT IS ALL! If you’ve got this competing thing sorted, you shouldn’t have anything else to do.

I mean it; on contest day your only job should be lifting weights on the contest platform. Not looking at the scoreboard, not figuring out what you need, not concerning yourself with what anyone else is lifting, not worrying about when you’re on or who you follow. Get someone else – someone who knows exactly what they’re doing – to do all of that. As I’ve just said, your job – your only job – should be lifting the weights.

Try that. If you’ve got the right kind of back-up you’ll be astounded at what a difference it can make.

Competing at powerlifting is a whole different game to training for powerlifting. What you’re trying to achieve is success on the contest platform. Get better at competing. Don’t let your ego get the better of you. Lift smart. That’s where it’s at.