

(The following appeared in *Strength and Conditioning Journal*, Volume 21, Number 3, pages 15-16 and appears with permission of NSCA)

Weightlifting? Weight Lifting? Olympic Lifting? Olympic Weightlifting?

Back in my competitive days (1963-1980), I, like all my peers, referred to the sport of weightlifting as “Olympic weightlifting” or as “Olympic lifting.” It is common in many English-speaking nations to refer to this sport this way even today.

As I moved up the sport’s administrative ladder, both nationally and internationally, I recognized several reasons to refer to the sport by its correct name, weightlifting. Most profound was the impact of the Amateur Sports Act (The Act) of 1978, in which the franchise for each sport was assigned to a single U.S. governing body. In this case, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) had to divest its administrative control of the AAU Sub-Committee on Weightlifting and permit the formation of U.S. Weightlifting Federation, Inc. At this point, the sport was correctly referred to as “weightlifting,” remaining consistent with what the sport was called at the highest levels (the Olympic Games, World Weightlifting Championships, and International Weightlifting Federation, to name a few.)

Background

Also as a result of “The Act,” the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) took an increased protective posture regarding the use of the word “Olympic.” According to U.S. Law, the USOC is charged with protecting “Olympic” in this country, and they are quite diligent in doing so. The rationale is that a protected term increases the dollar value of its use by sponsors. If the term were allowed to be used without controls, its importance would be reduced.

Yet “Olympic” is used in many different venues. Under “The Act,” entities that used the term “Olympic” in business prior to 1950 are entitled to continue to do so on the basis of a grandfather clause. As an example, the York Barbell Company, York, PA is the only weight equipment manufacturer in the United States that may legally use the term “Olympic,” on the basis of their old design of the York Olympic Standard Barbell, which was used years before the USOC gained protective custody of the term in America. Another entity entitled to legally use the term is the Olympic Club in San Francisco.

Does this mean that every company with a catalog listing “Olympic” benches, power racks, or “e-z” curl bars is in violation of the law? Most likely, especially since these devices have nothing to do with the Olympic Games. Many companies receive cease-and-desist letters from the USOC when such terminology is discovered. Others get away with this simply because they have not been brought to the USOC’s attention.

The USOC has granted permission for the use of the term “Olympic” to Special Olympics, Inc. and to the AAU’s Junior Olympics. However, the so-called “Gay Olympics” some years ago was hit with legal action by the USOC which went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the USOC prevailed. This event is now referred to as the Gay Games.

“The Act” was recently updated to include protection of the terms “Pan American Games” and the Para-Games terminology and now may be cited as the “Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act.”

Consistency Sought

While serving as the executive director of the U.S. Weightlifting Federation (now USA Weightlifting), I was fairly successful at moving the organization away from the term “Olympic lifting.” When Ken Kontor, CSCS, former executive director of the National Strength and Conditioning Association, visited me at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs in 1983, we had a lengthy discussion on the topic. Soon thereafter, most NSCA references correctly referred to the sport as weightlifting.

There remain subtle attempts to sneak the word “Olympic” into the phraseology from time to time. Copying the trend then in vogue for the sport of boxing, weightlifting has sometimes been referred to as “Olympic-style weightlifting.” Amateur boxing had an interest in distancing themselves from professional boxing and chose this manner in order to appear somewhat more legitimate in the eyes of the novice viewer.

When I served as the editor-in-chief of *Strength & Conditioning* (1994-1998), I insisted that the publisher, Human Kinetics, make the necessary adjustments to the many manuscripts submitted by authors. On occasion, in order to provide some variety, “Olympic-style” was properly used. I have always viewed this challenge as sort of a 1-man campaign to educate those in the Iron Game. In reality, there are many fans of the sport in this country who correctly label the sport and take the time to educate the uninformed that weightlifting means the snatch and the clean & jerk lifts. Mike Stone, PhD, CSCS, used perhaps the most classic line in a recent presentation: “These data deal with Olympic lifters. The weightlifters represented here were actually measured while competing in the Olympic Games.”

The Future

But if the proper term is “weightlifting,” why do we continue to see the erroneous terms? Some of this is simply a result of old habits dying a hard death. However, many newcomers to the sport also use improper forms of identification. I have always felt that these individuals either don’t know the history of the terminology or want to elevate the status of the sport by making a reference to the Olympic

Games. This is not unlike those manufacturers who want to suggest pieces of equipment are somehow linked to the Olympic Games when they are not.

In my opinion, this is related to the relatively ignored status of the sport of weightlifting in the U.S. A. and in other Western countries. Supporters of this sport are quite evangelical in their approach to convincing others that the sport of weightlifting is the greatest thing since electricity. While I recognize the strong points linked to the sport of weightlifting, I have always felt that a consistent message in educating others as to proper terminology and the reasons behind this leaves a more lasting impression.

Much like the correct terminology for exercise execution (is it a heel raise, a calf raise, or a toe raise?), correctly identifying the sport of weightlifting helps the strength and conditioning professional educate those who know less about our activities. Perhaps it takes a few more words to explain, but take this opportunity as an expert in the field to enhance your status by educating others.

Harvey Newton competed in weightlifting from 1963-1980. As a USA Weightlifting Senior International Coach, Newton has coached numerous international teams, including [some participating in] (sic) the 1984 Olympic Games. He currently serves as the Executive Director of the National Strength and Conditioning Association.