

Refereeing

By Mike Leadbetter

Drugs destroy any semblance of FAIRNESS in Powerlifting (and all other sports). Behind drugs the quality and consistency of refereeing is the factor that next has an effect on FAIRNESS.

FAIRNESS within the rules, to me, should be always uppermost in a referee's mind. These are my ideas to help attain this. I don't presume to speak for everyone. These are just my ideas which I hope most would see as practical in the quest for FAIRNESS and consistency.

Refereeing is easy! as long as every lifter attempts only 50% of a maximum – everyone's performance would be impeccable be it lifter's or referee's. When percentage effort on the platform increases to 95% and above problems arise for both lifters and referees. The lifter's 'style' and body lines alter, particularly on the bench and deadlift, e.g. raising of buttocks from the bench and a possible rearward tilt and a conscious 'hitch' in the latter half of the deadlift. In the squat the style remains largely the same, but the weight persuades the lifter to economise on depth.

Degrees of change in style and limb alignment means refereeing then becomes much more difficult! Decisions have to be made as the lifter's style deteriorates in proportion to increases in weight attempted. This continues to where refereeing is easy again – because the weight is simply not lifted.

Make no mistake about it skilful refereeing is difficult and the ref. who says he/she has always got it right is either delusional or untruthful. Referees can only do their best in an effort to maintain fairness. Anything else? well yes, they can make sure they know the rules as regards the performance of each lift!

They should look over the rules before each competition to maintain sharpness otherwise a rule can become hazy and distorted. e.g. an involuntary 'shake' on the deadlift is not a cause for failure, but at times I have seen refs put up red lights. Other examples of failure that will never be found in the rules are failed due to opening/closing of the hand on the squat bar – when it was lateral movement they were really trying to bring to mind.

At the world power in Glasgow, November 2011, the Technical Officer was tackled by an International Ref. Insisting a squat should have been failed because the lifter's knees moved inwards and touched together on the ascent. "No Way!" The technical officer rightly retorted, "if it's deep enough and there are no other reasons for failure the lifter can squeeze his thighs together to his heart's content".

I could list other obscure fictional causes for failure, - but the point is made, look over the rules of performance regularly, it optimises fairness and makes you a better ref!

Lifters too should read the rules. A centre ref who tells the squatter to remove his fingers from the top of the inside collars, or to lock his knees before being given the squat signal is not being picky he's doing the lifter a favour. Side refs who tell a lifter to remove feet from the bench legs before they receive the bar are also being decent to the lifter who hasn't read the rules. It's easier to listen to the misinformed exhortations of training buddies, who also haven't read the rules. None of these referees wish to fail what could be otherwise a resoundingly good lift.

..... and why do we have 'picky little details' to contend with? Well, if small variations in the placing of hands, fingers, feet and placement of the bar etc are allowed outside the current rules

the lifts begin to take an unregulated 'circus' like appearance, and from small variations will arise greater deviations. e.g. squat bars way down the back, or hands and wrists hooked over the squat bar, or World's Strongest Man style deadlifts. (Yes, I can picture you all pointing at the telly and insisting on boring all other occupants of the room by telling them how it should be done, when all they really wanted to do was watch people stood in a neat line hoping not to be voted off the mind numbingly boring "votey of programmes"). Sorry! Anyway we need to maintain a standard of purity in the performance of lifts to avoid things getting silly, pointless and downright dangerous.

Of course adhering to high standards in rules of performance, dress and equipment codes and the prohibitions of all substances illegal, (which are all efforts to maintain a credible sport rooted in fairness), can limit the amount of weight lifted. Is this bad? Well, from what I've seen on You Tube of what some people class as powerlifting..... no! Personally, I'd rather spend the evening in a cold, dimly lit room, sat on an uncomfortable chair reading knitting patterns than watch people who might as well be wearing a suit of armour perform half squats!

COURAGE in referees is also required to ensure fairness, not in the amounts needed on the Somme obviously, but courage nevertheless. Why should hard earned records be snatched from lifters by 'ropey', 'iffy' lifts passed by referees who have been coerced by the indirect vocal intimidations of the 'boys', positioned to the rear of the side refs? well, because 'the boys' would be most upset if the white lights they were pushing for, for their pal, were given if it was their record that was being snatched by that 'ropey', 'iffy' lift.

They would immediately challenge that side referee for passing a very questionable , or obviously high squat, - (for it is usually the squat that attracts this type of behaviour).

So refs need to be well versed on the rules and in possession of a modicum of backbone to indicate 'red' if they believe it's 'red' no matter who is squatting, or who they have baying at their rear. Deviate from this and things become unfair.

Lastly, POSITIONING is all important. Referees make their best decisions when they are in the best possible position to see! On rare occasions I have seen centre refs slightly to one side of a squatter, not plumb in front. Now either they have trouble coping with the wide variety of ruddy faced gurnings or they reckon a slight variation in angle could afford a better view of the top of the thigh at the hip. At the bottom position that is where the centre referee is looking – to ascertain depth to the best of his ability. A slight shift to one side can help to eliminate thigh bulge that obscures a clear view of depth. It's not perfect, - but it's better.

Side referees play an even greater role in positioning and do need to be much more mobile. Spotter's legs are a nightmare on the Squat especially when there are five of them, (Spotters not legs!), but if the side referee is off the chair and on a level with the lifter's thigh, views are better and decisions are more accurate and fairer.

How does a side referee keep an eye on feet, buttocks, bar and head in Bench Press? You can't – head is discarded straight away! As regards feet, buttocks and bar you do the best you can by altering position. Side Refs (even Les Pilling), are too high on a chair to perceive daylight between buttocks and bench top. You have to get lower and try to pick a line from buttocks to bar to pick out infringements. Feet movement? when the 'press' command has been given you're relying on lateral vision to pick up movement of the feet and unless there is a pronounced 'slip', it can be missed You do the best you can!

On the Deadlift the tricky bits are deciding on slight dips and 'second' pulls, shoulder line and locking of the knees on completion. Side referees to the rear of the lifter or too far in front don't have the best views. Probably to the side and slightly in front - where you can best see knees and shoulders at completion and detect any dipping or conscious hitching.

It's a difficult job, and lifters will never appreciate how much concentration is required until they make the transition and do it. So spare a thought for the referee, he/she is trying to be fair, and may regularly have a headache as the day wears on – but they just don't like to mention it!