

The Odd Lifts

By [Brian Hamill](#)

'Odd lifts' may seem a pejorative term but it sums up the variety of dumbbell and barbell feats that have waxed and waned in popularity amongst devotees of the Iron Game for more than a century. Rooted in the activities of music hall strongmen, some of whom were prepared to falsify the weights they purported to lift, many feats became codified and a part of weightlifting in Britain and worldwide.

Much of the historical legitimacy of weightlifting and feats of strength has been lost, now relegated to the circus or TV formats favouring giant men with dubious attitudes to pharmacological assistance. But with the growth of functional fitness, especially via organizations such as Crossfit which have embraced the olympic lifts, the time is ripe for odd lifting to be rediscovered.

Today's repertoire develops grip strength, trunk rotational force, core stability, speed-strength and strength-speed. In this way such lifts are superior in a wide definition of functionality to the two traditional Weightlifting feats and the three Powerlifts.

What are the Odd Lifts?

They are a variety of strength feats with barbells and dumbbells, occasionally simultaneously, 32 according to BWLA, if left and right hand versions are counted separately, though in its 1937 rule book were listed 42, with seven being contested internationally. Some still current are simple enough, like the Hold Out in Front raised or lowered, but others are technically tricky, like the One Hand and Two Hand Dumbbell Swings, or the Two hands Anyhow. There may no longer be strong men able to swing their own bodyweight with either hand. I remember diminutive Frank de Conick was the second man in the world to achieve this, in 1920, with 102 lbs right handed and again left handed. Andrew Cominos and a few others, all long since retired from the scene, achieved bodyweight swings decades ago.

Nowadays many more feats are codified by a variety of organisations. The British Strength Athlete's Guild Rules Manual lists 140, including truly odd lifts performed kneeling down,

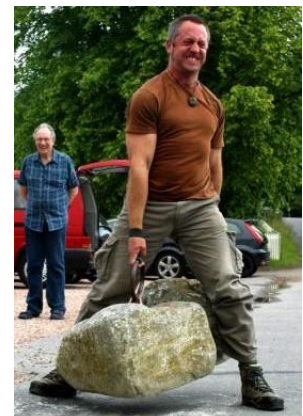


presumably with the aim of receiving divine intervention. I imagine the most appealing inventory would include single arm dumbbell presses, front squat, pull over and press on back and one hand dead lift. More challenging would be the one hand barbell Clean & Jerk, and Snatch (one hand snatch pictured, left). It is almost certain that the last worldwide known weightlifter to attempt some of these was Olympic champion Vassily Alexyev, whose world record one arm Snatch and Clean & Jerk will still be recorded in the archives of the International

Weightlifting Association (IWF) in Budapest. Some lifts have disappeared, like the Abdominal Raise, a sit up with a barbell held behind the neck: murder! Another ferociously difficult lift is the Bent Press with barbell. It requires strength, strength endurance and fantastic suppleness: maybe the greatest developer of core strength imaginable!

History of the odd lifts

Even in ancient history, around 1100 years BC in China and later in Greece and India there is evidence of stone lifting and ring weights ('kettlebells' in modern parlance). Stone lifting survives amongst the Basques in Spain and in the international arena of TV strong man shows, where the Atlas Stones is one of the most popular events. Other stone lifting feats still attract challengers, notably the Dinnie Stones in Scotland, two awkwardly shaped stones weighing 187 kgs and 146kg that were originally carried across the Bridge of Potach by Donald Dinnie in 1860 (see picture, right, of Roger Davis carrying the Dinnie Stones from gordondinnie.com).



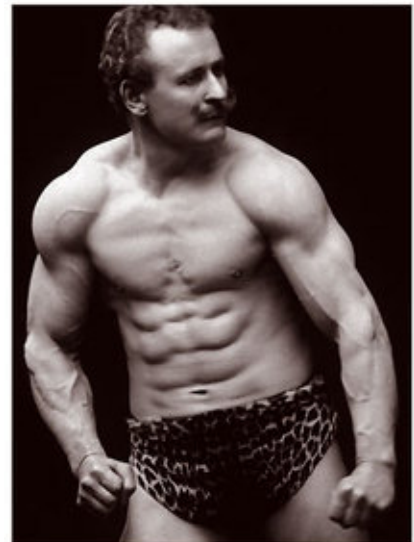
Why people are called to cross the world to tackle them is a mystery. I suppose the double challenge of lifting them and then walking with them enhances the

spectacle, which is clearly the basis of the Farmers' Walk tests we see on TV. Moreover Scotland, with its Highland Games, has a lively tradition of strength feats.

More than a century ago Britain held a World Championships. It involved dumbbells of various weights that had to be lifted overhead in repetitions, some with one and others with two hands. The final feat was with two 56 lb bells (around 25.5kg each) held out in front with straight arms, a feat still in the BWLA list today but with a barbell, either lowered from overhead or raised from a straight arm hang below.

Physical Culture

Over the years Weightlifting, especially in Western developed nations, has lost popularity and been confused with bodybuilding in the public mind. It was highly respected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the remarkable Eugen Sandow's successful music hall career, his marvellous physique and serious intellect. Sandow (pictured, right) pioneered good exercise and health habits, even calling for school doctors and dentists and the creation of food hygiene inspectors. The King appointed him Professor of Scientific Physical Culture! As late as the 1960s there were still Physical Culture clubs, notably at Twickenham, home of many champions. Some of its members, strangely enough, went on to enjoy successful circus careers.



Olympic weightlifting

In the UK Weightlifting became a unified and codified sport a hundred years ago. The British Weightlifters' Association (BWLA) celebrates its centenary in 2010.

The first modern Olympic Games of 1896 featured lifting with both one and two hands. Britain's Launceston Elliot won the one hand event with 71 kgs. Not until Louis Martin MBE in 1960 was Britain to have another Olympic Weightlifting medal. Those were the days when the Games included the barbell Press, which favoured very strong, not necessarily fast men.

Arnold Schwarzenegger competed in Olympic lifting for his Austrian club, doing fairly well, based on his pressing ability.

Some informed British strength athletes who respected Olympic lifters but chose to pursue strength sport independently of UK Weightlifting's governing body (BWLA) considered the removal of the Press from Olympic lifting a key to the sport's decline. In this BWLA had inevitably followed the lead of Weightlifting's world body, the IOC-recognised IWF. Here and in the United States a further factor in this apparent decline was the formalisation of Powerlifting (squat, bench press and deadlift) as a separate discipline which in most countries has separated itself from Olympic lifting's administrative bodies. In Britain the BWLA retains paralympic Powerlifting (the Bench Press) and lists the three Powerlifting disciplines as available for those who seek to use them as part of its various incentive schemes.

All this has left BWLA as a small, specialised governing body focused strongly on two lifts, the Snatch and the Clean & Jerk. However its mission remains, in essence "to widen the use of weight training for all purposes". To this end it offers a wide variety of educational courses. Its future seems secure today as more and more people realize that machine lifting is of little value in a sport context, and the Olympic Weightlifting disciplines are being promoted by a new generation of highly qualified sport scientists and strength and conditioning coaches in many sporting arenas.

The future of Weightlifting and the Odd Lifts

Reviewing this brief history it is clear that the sport could grow were all the disparate groups to work together. One interesting development, driven dynamically by its US leader is Crossfit, whose devotees use many strength and strength endurance feats in circuits and repetitions. They include the current Olympic lifts, believing, as do some other organisations, that these have a greater functional value - that is, applicability to every day and sporting functional efficiency - than simple, often single joint strength movements, as seen in much bodybuilding practice and encouraged by the widespread replacement of barbell and dumbbells by machines. However it is hard to see how such commercially driven operations

can revive and reinvigorate 'Odd Lifts'. They are after all businesses, rightly driven by the profit motive. The International All Round Weightlifting Association (IAWA) might succeed in that, as might the British Strength Athletes' Guild with its hilarious and scatological magazine the "Back Hang Gazette".

FK.UK is attempting to bridge the gap between all these bodies and BWLA by becoming a [virtual BWLA club](#), which gives the FK.UK community a special membership deal and allows participation in BWLA incentive schemes and the Lift of the Quarter. The latter, a new feat every three months until 31 lifts have been completed (excluding the Powerlifting and Olympic lifts), is the relic of Britain's Best All Rounder scheme in which every lift had to be tested during one year. The last winner was Mike Archer, in his time a good Olympic lifter. His mentor was the late Bob Smith whose know-how was immense. A few of us were lucky to have had his coaching, adding to whatever we picked up from the famous book "Weightlifting Made Easy and Interesting" by W A Pullum, which covered 50 disciplines! (Try second hand bookshops or ebay.)

In pursuit of BWLA's mission the Lift of the Quarter is now open to all. The *de facto* Best All Rounder today is Chris Chea of the Woking club, giving the lie to the myth that Olympic lifters are only about speed and technique. Chris is also Britain's Olympic lifting champion at 69 kgs, and Dave Morgan, five times Commonwealth Games Weightlifting champion, has, at the time of writing, clocked the fastest time in Crossfit's notorious strength endurance workout 'King Kong'. Further evidence of the ability of 'classic' Weightlifters' fundamental strength was evident in FK.UK's recent strongman event at Reading in which the winner and runner up were both Olympic lifters.

BWLA is seen as, and is, specialised in Olympic lifting. As an affiliate of the International Weightlifting Federation it must be. But as we see from the example of Chris Chea, and recently of FK.UK's own Chet Morjaria, there is a welcome awaiting All Rounders in BWLA clubs. There are so few places in Britain where functional weight training and lifting is possible and encouraged that the link between these two bodies is of obvious benefit and is a new launch pad on which to build a bigger future for both Odd Lifts and Weightlifting.

Details of the Lift of the Quarter and of existing Odd Lift records are available from Jim Smith, Longwood House, Shifford Lane, Standlake, Witney, Oxon. Details of BWLA clubs from the [BWLA website](#).

Brian Hamill, now 72, continued his not very distinguished Olympic lifting career into his 50s via the British and world masters events. Brian became a BWLA coach and promoted its Lift of the Quarter scheme when there was a danger that all the Odd lifts were to be jettisoned. Now a BWLA board member and coach at his own Woking club, Brian is anxious to find ways to popularise BWLA programmes, promote its courses, and persuade resistance trainers of all types of two things: one, that for useful outcomes free weights are superior to machines, and two, that the Olympic lifts are really not at all difficult to learn. [Click here](#) for his full bio.