

It Always Matters

At a recent event I overheard a coach and athlete discussing their next attempt. The coach suggested a weight by saying “let’s just take this weight, it doesn’t matter anyway”. The weight was close to, but not exceeding a personal record for the athlete. I can remember thinking to myself that coach was wrong because it always matters! Here are some reasons why I think it always matters.

LEARNING CONSISTENCY

In the sport of weightlifting, an athlete only gets 3 attempts in the snatch and 3 attempts in the clean and jerk. I would consider a lifter to have an active lifting year if they compete in at least 6 events a year. That is 18 snatches and 18 clean and jerks in a year. An athlete has a very limited opportunity to perform the lift under a pressure situation such as a meet. If being consistent in training leads to being consistent in competition, why sabotage everything the athlete is working towards by not teaching consistency in competition?

OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN YOUR ATHLETE

Believe it or not, even though an athlete is progressing and getting stronger, an athlete will eventually get to a point where they are not ready to set PRs at every competition. And that is perfectly OK. It is an unreasonable expectation to achieve PRs at every competition. What is reasonable is ensuring the athlete is performing with maximum effort during each attempt. If the athlete’s focus is on making PRs, then they may not be entirely focused on the current attempt.

I believe turning the athlete’s focus away from trying to set PRs is important. So setting the expectation prior to each event that PRs may not be in the cards is an important conversation to have with your athlete. Once this expectation is removed, a coach has a little more flexibility in selecting attempts. The decision can now be based on important factors such as how the athlete is moving and how the competition is flowing. As the competition moves along, a coach can start getting a read on the body language and non-verbal communication of the athlete. Usually, if a coach suggests a number for a next attempt, and there is some hesitation and doesn’t say anything, the lifter is actually telling you something. You don’t get this when there is a plan to PR as most of the time the athlete is only worried about staying on track to hit a number. And you definitely will not get this if the lift doesn’t matter.

Why is this important? If a lifter competes enough, eventually they will find other people with similar skill sets...also known as competition.

LEARN HOW TO COMPETE

You can try as much as you want, but you can't replace experience gained at a competition. You can simulate a meet, host a mock meet, or anything else. Nothing replaces warming up in a different area, having your name called, a running clock, referees, and every other little thing that goes into a meet. Experiencing everything each meet has to offer will help your athlete learn how to compete properly. Eventually the athlete will understand that the only thing that matters is their effort on the current attempt. And then focusing on the current attempt becomes the norm. When this happens, more attempts are successful. In this sport, it usually comes down to those that make the most lifts. The ones that are making the most lifts are the same ones that consider each attempt important.

I have a lifter that is in her final year in the 'Youth' age group and has lifted in 6 youth national championships. Over those 6 events she made 16 of her 18 snatches, made 14 of 18 clean and jerks, setting a PR in both lifts and the total in each event except one. I remember each one of those misses.

In 2011, at age 10, we missed a 34kg clean and jerk on her final attempt. We were competing in the 13u 35kg category (at this time there wasn't a sub 11u category nor was there a 31kg category as we weighed 30.9kg) and by far the youngest and lightest. Prior to the competition, we were not concerned with placement as we just wanted to make lifts and make PRs. So our objective was to focus on every lift and making sure we make each attempt.

After the dust settled after the snatch we talked about how she did and how we were going to choose our next attempts. We discussed that a successful opening attempt would win bronze against the 13 year old lifters and if we stay on track, there could be an opportunity to go for silver. I remember the conversation we had between the 2nd and 3rd attempt like it was yesterday. We had previously talked about capping at 32kg or 33kg in the clean and jerk.

Me: "We are going to do 34."

Athlete: "34? Isn't that risky?" (Referencing our main plan was to go 6 for 6 not injury risk)

Me: "Yes, but sometimes in life you have to take risks. We can stay at 32, make it, and stay in 3rd. Or, we can take a risk to achieve something a little greater than what we have now."

Athlete: "Ok, let's do it."

She made the clean easily and barley missed the jerk, and the silver medal. She didn't make the lift or advance in placement. What she did gain has proven to be way more valuable. She learned how to compete. However, this valuable lesson may not have had the opportunity to be learned had we not performed so well in the snatch. After her 2nd snatch, we were pretty much guaranteed a 3rd place finish. The other 2 competitors still had 2+ lifts and we only had 1 lift left. Instead of telling her that the next lift really

doesn't matter, I told her that we need to focus in on this lift and finish out the snatch session on a good note. We added 2kg to our snatch on the last lift which put us right in range to compete in the clean and jerk. Who knows what happens if our mindset is just a bit different on that last lift. I'd like to think that she still makes it, but the odds go down. If she didn't add those 2kg, then her final lift in the previous scenario would have been 37kg. Well outside of any range I would have felt comfortable attempting. So now we are taking lifts just to make lifts (nothing wrong with that) and miss out on the valuable lesson learned about taking risks.

From the 2013 – 2016 youth national championships we made all lifts but a 3rd attempt snatch in 2015 (national record attempt) and a 3rd attempt CJ in 2014 (national record attempt). Last year (2017) was 1 of her 2 missed snatches, 2 of her 4 missed clean and jerks, and was the only time she didn't make a PR in the snatch, CJ, and total.

After that event, we had every intention of coming back this year (2018) to put the final exclamation point on her youth national championship career. However.....

YOU NEVER KNOW

Before I continue, in no way was I upset or disappointed in her effort or performance in the 2017 youth national championship. We were in a situation where we were going to be 3rd place in the total only regardless of our last attempt. We talked about it, learned from it, focused on the next opportunities, and then put it behind us. We then talked about closing out this event next year.

Earlier this year my lifter was named to Team USA and will compete in Colombia at the Youth Pan American Championships. This event happens to be the week prior to youth nationals this year. Combining an international event and all of the travel involved, we have decided against participating in this event.

There was no way for us to know that last summer was going to be her last youth nationals. At that event our final lift wasn't going to increase her placement; however, in hindsight it definitely mattered. The attempt was missed but the effort was there. Of course we would have liked to have made that lift, but we can rest easy that we were focused and gave our best effort.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Never take for granted any opportunity. Understand what the opportunity represents and ensure you put your best effort forward. You will never know if or when another opportunity will happen. You never know when you are a competition that "doesn't matter" but there might be someone in the audience where this is the one and only time they can watch you perform. The only thing you can truly know is that every opportunity is unique; meaning, you will never have the exact same opportunity twice.

“Do you know what my favorite part of the game is? The opportunity to play.”

– Mike Singletary

For those that do not know, Mr. Singletary was a very dominate linebacker in the NFL and won a Super Bowl with the Chicago Bears. He is talking about football, but the ‘game’ is easily interchangeable for anything in your life, including life in general. Opportunities come and go. We should all be looking for opportunities. And when you find one, a decision should not be made on whether or not it matters. Because the bottom line is that is always matters!