

Chinese Weightlifters: Why They Win Olympic Gold

How the strongest women in the world train

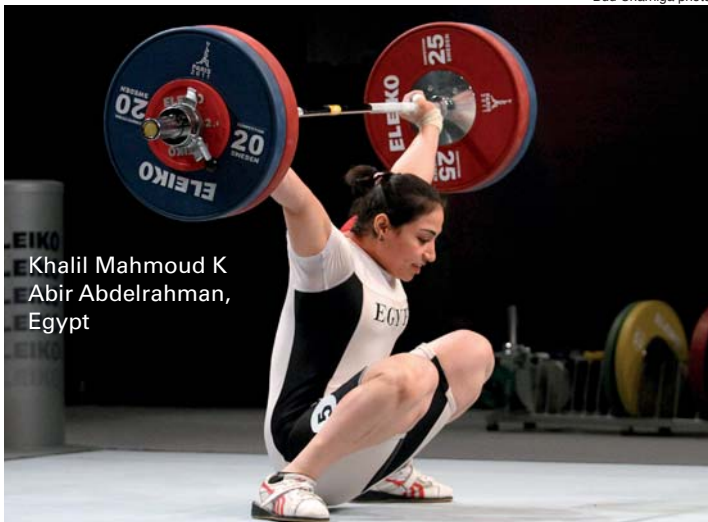
BY KIM GOSS, MS

Over the past decade the popularity of weight training among women has exploded, and this is especially true in the sport of Olympic-style weightlifting. In the '80s it was rare to see more than a handful of women in local competitions in the US, but now the number of women

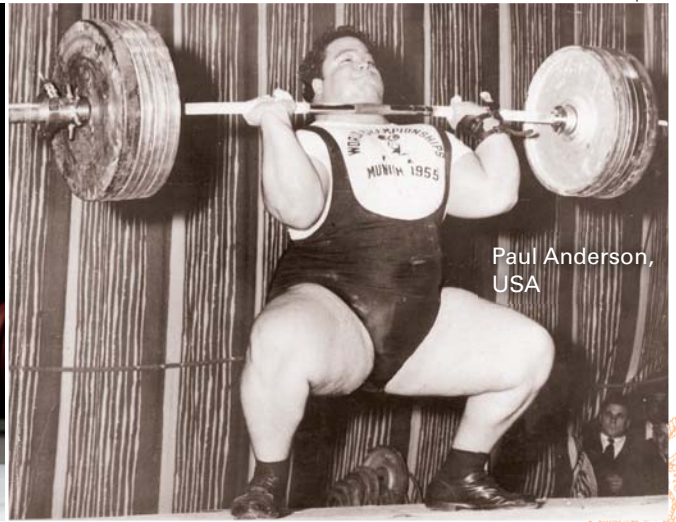
who participate in weightlifting meets is approaching that of men. With our desire to see just how strong a woman can become, we are learning more about how to design workouts that best suit a woman's unique anatomical and physiological characteristics.

Although the US is steadily

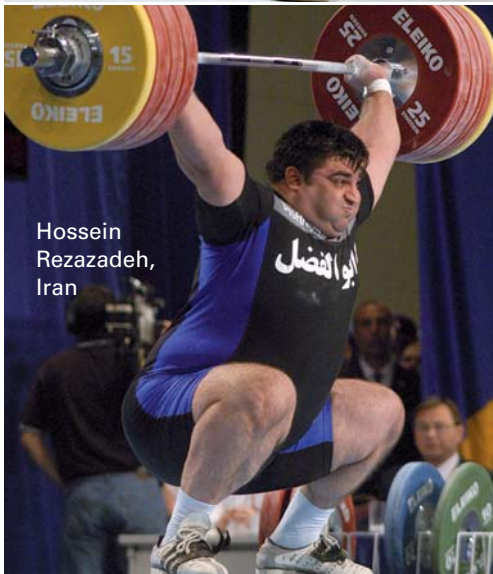
improving in the quality and quantity of lifts made by women, we continue to slip behind in comparison to the rest of the world. How far? At the 2012 Olympics the best US woman lifter finished 10th, and at the 2013 World Championships two US athletes placed 7th. Those results may not sound too



Khalil Mahmoud K
Abir Abdelrahman,
Egypt



Paul Anderson,
USA



Hossein
Rezazadeh,
Iran



Udomporn Polsak,
Thailand

Successful women weightlifters have learned to catch the bar lower to enable them to lift more weight. Compare their techniques with 1956 Olympic gold medal champion Paul Anderson and with Iran's Hossein Rezazadeh, who won gold in the 2000 and 2004 Olympics.

promising, but consider what we are up against.

Many of the women who won their bodyweight divisions at the 2013 World Championships would have placed in the equivalent bodyweight classes at the men's division at the 2013 US Senior National Championships. Women have snatched double body-

advances in women's lifting on the international platform.

The women who have been most dominant in women's weightlifting since 1983, when the IWF recognized it as sport, are the Chinese. Although a few women from other countries have broken world records and have won world and Olympic titles, in the team

weightlifting, and why the US has fallen so far behind the rest of the world, it's Bud Charniga.

A one-time elite US lifter who was only six pounds away from an American record in the snatch, Charniga has been to countless international competitions overseas. He has watched these athletes in their daily workouts and has spoken

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weight, and the absolute world records for women are a 332-pound snatch and a 418-pound clean and jerk. This is in no way a criticism of the US men, as there is considerably more depth in men's lifting than in the past, but rather an acknowledgment of the significant

competition the Chinese are always on top. Always.

A Culture of Power

If there is one individual who understands why the Chinese have been so successful in women's

to the best athletes and coaches in the sport about their training. Charniga's daughter Kelly was featured in *BFS* magazine five years ago when she decided to switch from gymnastics to weightlifting under the direct supervision of her father. Now that Kelly has

absorbed the knowledge her father gained from the best in the sport, she has become a top lifter in the US; in 2013 she represented the US in the Junior World Championships.

Charniga's studies and experience in this area are cumulated in his book about women's weightlifting, *A De-Masculinization of Strength* (www.sportivnypress.com, 2012). In this exclusive interview, Bud Charniga shares seven facts to consider when

training women weightlifters for physical superiority.

1. It takes more than numbers to win. Despite the increasing number of US women becoming involved in weightlifting, Charniga does not see the US catching up with the rest of the world because our athletes do not have the financial incentives of athletes from other countries. He provides the example of a competitor from Mexico, a 33-year-old woman who medaled

at the 2013 World Championships and whose performance resulted in enough money to buy a house. In comparison, Charniga points out, if a US athlete makes all six attempts in a national competition, all they receive is a blue wristband called the Rich Schutz 6-for-6 Award. Says Charniga, "A house or a rubber band – which would you rather have? It's not about numbers, but about the challenge of competing against highly motivated athletes who approach weightlifting as if it's their job."

2. Weightlifters need to focus on perfecting their technique. Charniga dismisses the notion that women from other countries are simply stronger. "It's not about strength – it never has been," he says. "There are specific ratios of how much an athlete should snatch in relation to their clean and jerk, and US women tend to have a bigger difference between the two lifts, indicating they are less efficient than some of their competitors." Using his daughter as an example, he says she recently snatched 198 pounds, whereas her best back squat is only 264 pounds. "The difference is that the best women lifters have learned to compensate for not being able to use their strength to pull a bar high by being able to catch the bar lower and by having less resistance to motion to move their bodies under the bar."

3. You can't apply lab results to a competitive environment. In his book Charniga examines many studies comparing the strength of men versus women. He cites a peer-reviewed study in which the female participants were 63.5 percent as strong as the men. Charniga says that one of the problems with relying on scientific strength measurements, such as in leg extensions and legs curls, is that they do not replicate the conditions found

Bud Charniga Photos

Bud Charniga Photo



Women can use their exceptional flexibility to help them lift heavier weights. At left, a Chinese champion uses her knee and hip mobility to create a zigzag pattern to enable her to recover from the squat. Also, even though some women possess joints that hyperextend, this does not necessarily make them more susceptible to injuries.

Bruce Klemens Photo



in sport. As proof, he points out that the current world records for women are about 80 percent of men's records; also, the women's records are rising, whereas the men's world records have stagnated for the past 30 years due to more sophisticated drug testing.

4. It's not all about testosterone.

It's faulty logic to attribute the greater lifts of some women to testosterone, says Charniga. If that were true, with men having 90 percent more testosterone than women, men should be lifting 90 percent more than women, which is not the case. Charniga also says that having high levels of testosterone can be a hindrance in the jerk, which is an especially technical part of lifting that requires extremely high levels of concentration. Charniga says that after cleaning a weight, it is difficult for a man – due to high testosterone – to settle down to focus on the jerk.

5. Women weightlifters do not need bodybuilding exercises. In the early days of weightlifting, coaches directed women weightlifters to perform a lot of bodybuilding exercises, believing that because women were more flexible, their joints were more likely to get injured. "What they were trying to do is stiffen up those women, which is not what you want. Over the

years I've seen about 40 elbow dislocations, and the overwhelming number of those dislocations occurred to men – and the few women who had elbow dislocations had normal elbows, not the kind that hyperextend." Likewise, he says that women lifters have used their knee and hip mobility to create a zigzag pattern to help them recover from the squat, a technique that most American coaches and physical therapists would consider an error.

6. Warm-ups are different.

Women have the ability to relax after maximal lifts, but for neurological reasons they also need more attempts to reach maximal performance, says Charniga. As such, they need to warm up differently from a male lifter. At the 2008 Olympics Charniga watched all four of the eventual Olympic champions from China complete three practice attempts of their opening lift in the warm-up room before they attempted that same weight on the competition platform. He adds that the Chinese women try to maintain body heat during competitions. To illustrate this point, in his book Charniga shows a photo of a Russian male weightlifter being fanned by a blanket to stay cool between warm-up attempts, and a Chinese woman weightlifter wrapping herself in a

blanket to stay warm!

7. Chemical enhancement is almost a non-issue. The question of drugs always comes up when looking at the amazing results of champion weightlifters. Charniga says the more sophisticated drug testing, and out-of-competition testing, make drugs a non-issue. "Designer drugs are also a non-issue because now the tests can determine if you've altered your hormone balance." He says the testing today is so good that with the exception of a world record made this year at the world championships in the 165-pound weight division, the men's world records established have frozen. "Another issue is that testosterone is only going to work if it's taken close to a competition, and you can't take it close to a competition with the testing we have now."

Asked if he has looked at the methods of US coaches to improve the quality of women's lifting, Charniga says, "When I go to international competitions, I see most US athletes lifting in the B and C sessions, and often showing up to these competitions injured. Why would I want to learn more about their training? The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the proof of superior training is in the winning." **EF**

Photo courtesy Bud Charniga

Bruce Klemens photo



(Left) Shown here with 2008 Olympic champion Chen Xiexia of China is Bud Charniga, author of *A De-Masculinization of Strength*, a book about women's weightlifting.

(Right) Kelly Charniga, Bud Charniga's daughter, shown here snatching, was a member of the 2013 Junior World Championship Team.