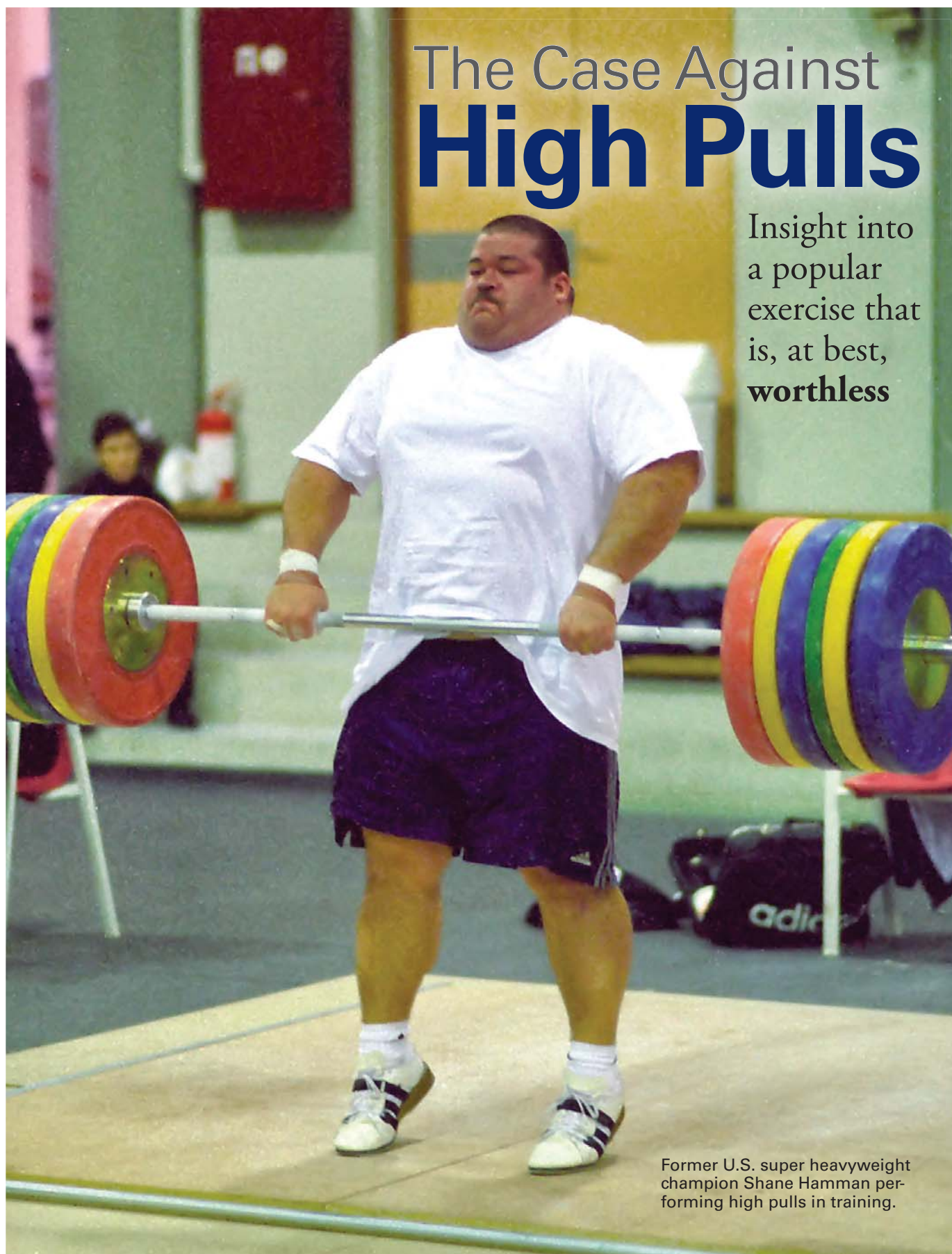


The Case Against High Pulls

Insight into
a popular
exercise that
is, at best,
worthless



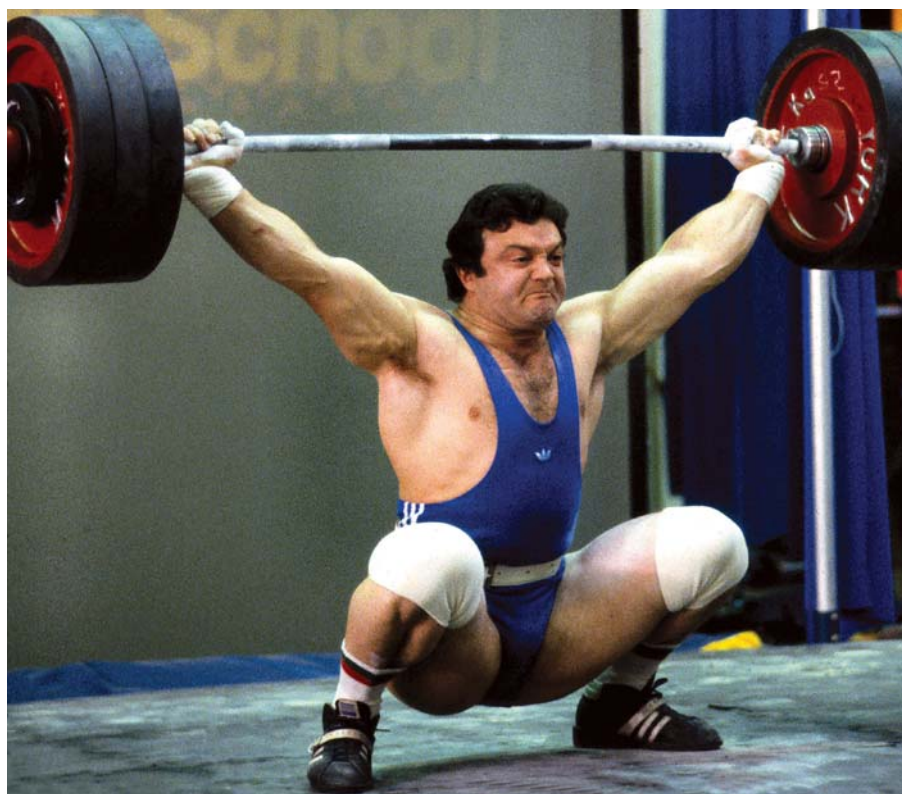
Former U.S. super heavyweight champion Shane Hamman performing high pulls in training.

Bruce Klemens photo

BY **KIM GOSS**

One of the most common story lines in fitness magazines is to warn readers about dangerous, or at least inferior, exercises. There is the yoga plow, in which you lie on your back and lift your legs behind you, which has the potential to injure the neck and possibly cause a stroke. There is the hurdler stretch, in which one leg is bent behind you, causing excessive strain on knee ligaments. And standing backbends have been attributed to chronic back pain, which is one reason for the elimination of the press in Olympic lifting. But there is one type of exercise that is not so much dangerous as it is useless – especially if you’re interested in improving your performance in explosive exercises such as cleans and snatches. These exercises are called *high pulls*.

The portion of the snatch or clean from the ground to following through with the shoulders and arms is called the high pull – and that’s where the exercise stops. You don’t turn over the wrists and drop down so you can catch the weight,



Bruce Klemens photo

Much of the sudden success of Bulgarian weightlifters such as Blagoy Blagoev has been attributed to their elimination of auxiliary exercises such as pulls. In 1983, at a bodyweight of 198 pounds, Blagoev snatched 430 pounds and clean and jerked 501 pounds!

Pulls have lost favor among European lifters because of the success of the Bulgarian lifters, and more recently the Greek and Turkish lifters. For

’80s I interviewed Naim Süleymanoğlu (formerly of Bulgaria but of Turkish descent), who is considered pound-for-pound the greatest weightlifter of all

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—Bud Charniga

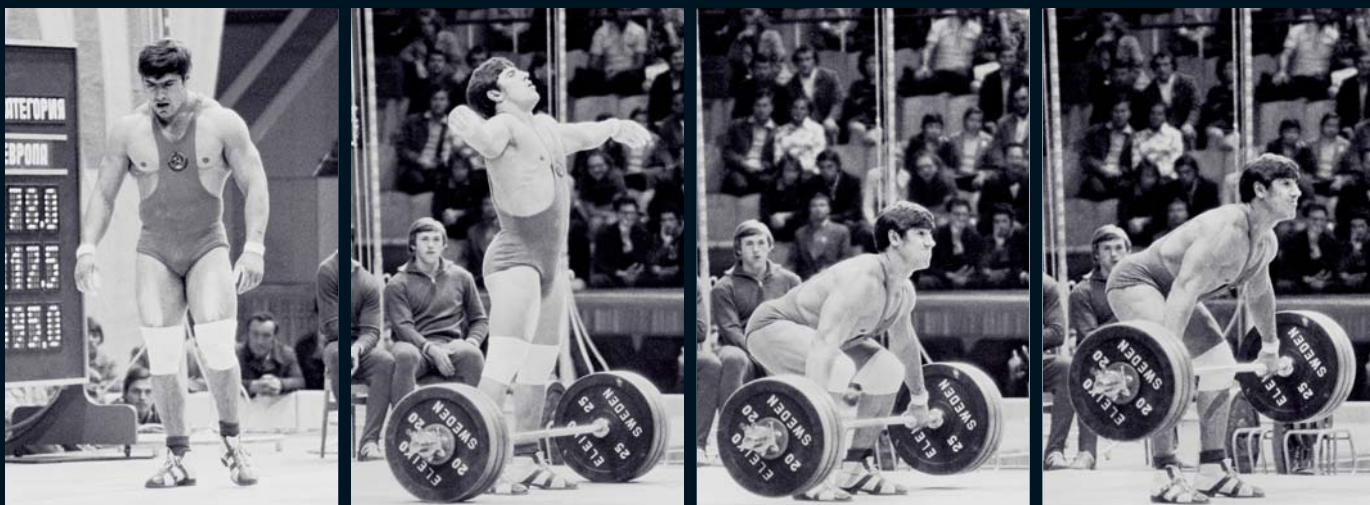
whether the motions occur in a power- or squat clean, or power- or squat snatch. Whereas squats have been crowned the king of exercises, for many US lifters and strength coaches pulls might play a lesser role of a powerful knight or bishop. But the reality is that there are many elite European lifters who simply do not perform pulls at all, focusing more attention on just the classical lifts and squats.

most of the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s, despite Bulgaria being a small country with limited resources and a small number of lifters, Bulgarian competitors were able to successfully challenge the powerful Russians in world records and world championship medals. For them, their exercise choices were often limited to snatches, clean and jerks, and back and front squats – that’s it! In fact, in the

time. Süleymanoğlu told me that he believed that back squats were also on the way out for competitive weightlifters because they “are not specific” to the classical lifts.

Expert Advice

Providing more insight into this seemingly radical trend in exercise selection is Bud Charniga, a US weightlifter



To be competition sharp, weightlifters must focus on lifting maximal weights often in the snatch and clean and jerk. One Russian weightlifter known for his ability to defy gravity with his mind was 1976 Olympic champion David Rigert.

who snatched 352 pounds at a body-weight of 242 pounds – an accomplishment that is especially impressive as he did it more than 30 years ago! Charniga is a student of the sport, having translated many weightlifting textbooks from Russian and having visited the training centers of the best European weightlifting teams. Charniga explained to me why, if you're a serious weightlifter or strength athlete, you should avoid pulls.

First, it should be mentioned that there are some top international lifters who still do pulls, most notably the Chinese. But, said Charniga, "You have to consider that a country such as China has so many athletes lifting that you always have to wonder if they

are a success *because* of pulls or *in spite* of them." As for the US lifters who do pulls, Charniga says they should not be considered in this discussion because the US is so far behind the rest of the world in this sport. For example, in 2007 our US men's team placed 30th at the World Championships, and it appears that because of this poor result we may not have a single US lifter competing in the 2008 Olympic Games!

Asked what the major problem is with pulls from a motor-learning perspective, Charniga replied, "With pulls you're teaching the athlete to focus on just lifting the barbell up, but the sport is more complex than that. Performing a snatch or a clean consists of two move-

ments: the first part, where you pull the bar up; and the second, where you catch the barbell – and the catching is the most difficult part. Lifting should not be thought of as a pull and a drop; it's about switching positions from the start to the end point: pulls do not prepare you for the catching portion of the lift."

Charniga says after the barbell passes the knees and the hips come forward, the bar decelerates so quickly that if you pull on it too long it becomes more difficult to move under it. "It's a completely false assumption that when you do a high pull that if you straighten your body and rise on your toes, you've lifted the barbell high enough to lift it," says Charniga. "When you time a lift correctly, as you switch directions to go under the bar, you are applying upward force on it. Europeans move so fast under the bar because they are trying to switch directions sooner than most people would guess. Waiting until you are fully extended is too late and often causes the barbell to crash on the lifter."

On this same subject, Charniga says it's a mistake for coaches to say "Pull high!" or "Shrug!" when a weightlifter is about to lift. "Weightlifting is not like putting the shot; because when you



There are many variations of pulls, as shown here, such as pulls where the arms don't bend at the top (left) and pulls performed off a bench (right).



Bruce Klemens photos

Thirty years ago Rigert snatched 397 and clean and jerked 488 weighing 198 pounds; then he moved up to the 220-pound class and did 407 in the snatch and 507 in the C&J.

release the shot, you can pretty much fall over, as there is nothing more the athlete can do to make the implement go farther. When you tell an athlete to focus on extending their body by telling them to pull or shrug, they are not prepared for the hardest part of the lift. The lifter needs to concentrate on switching directions, moving their feet quickly to change the base of support, and securing the barbell overhead or on the chest.” So, what would Charniga tell a lifter before lifting? “I would tell them nothing – they need to just relax their muscles and go as fast as they can to the end point of the lift.”

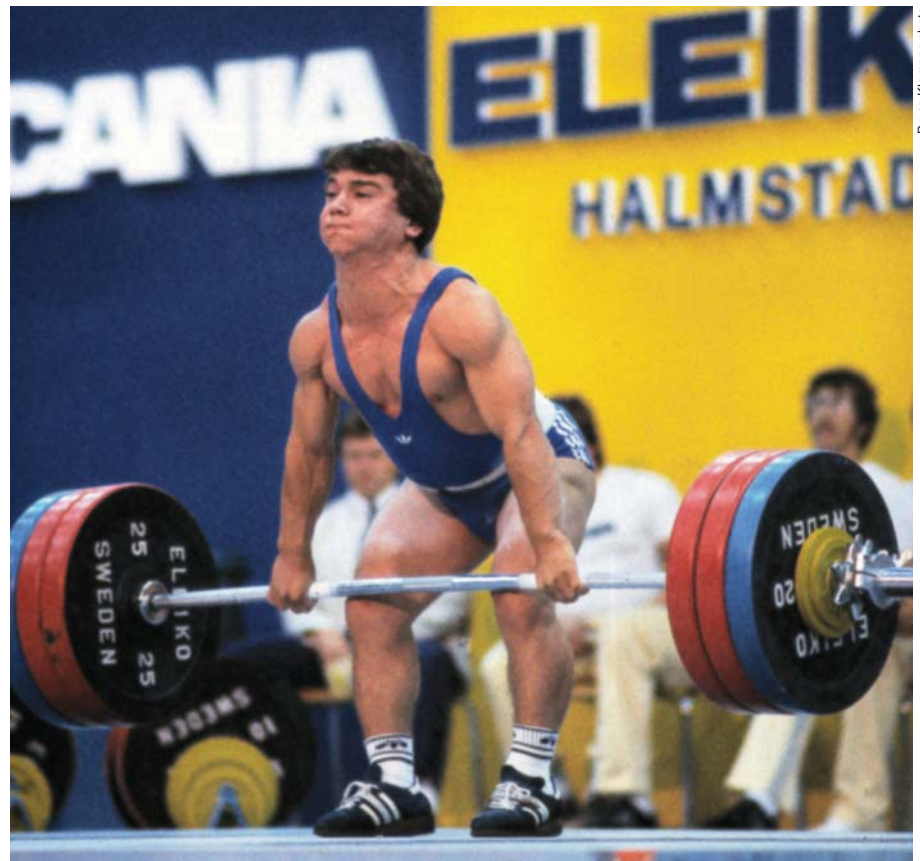
Additionally, Charniga believes pulling too long on the barbell can increase the risk of knee injuries. “When you extend too long in the snatch or a clean, the quadriceps relax at the top of the movement. When you drop into the bottom position, there is not enough time for these muscles to significantly contract again to protect your knees. In my experience, this is one reason you see a lot more US lifters wearing knee wraps, at least compared to the Europeans.”

A Bad Habit

Are pulls a good exercise for beginners to help “break the lifts down” and

master technique? “To a point,” says Charniga. “Pulls may not be such a bad exercise for a beginner to help them get the feel of keeping the back straight, but

a lifter will quickly reach a point where they are learning bad habits. I believe, ultimately, that if you look at the highest results in a sport such as weightlifting,



Bruce Klemens photo

Considered pound-for-pound the best weightlifter in history, Naim Süleymanoğlu of Bulgaria primarily limited his training to snatches, clean and jerks, and squats. In 1988, at a bodyweight of only 132 pounds, the man known as the “Pocket Hercules” snatched 336 pounds and clean and jerked 418 pounds!

coordination becomes the key. And when you learn a bad habit, it takes far more time to unlearn it – if you can – than it does to learn it right the first time.”

Charniga believes a more useful approach for athletes, especially weightlifters, is lifting heavy weights in the snatch and clean and jerk (or for non-weightlifters, at least the power snatch and power clean) as often as possible. “At the European Weightlifting Championships last year in the 85-kilo (187-pound) class, the top three guys made 17 attempts – the only miss was a guy who tried a world record after he

won the contest. But two of these guys snatched 169, 171 and 172 kilos (379 pounds) – that’s very near maximal weights lifted three times, a very-high-level skill replicated under a lot of tension. And it’s necessary to do this because the other lifters are doing the same weights you are. This high level of skill is not going to be reached by doing a bunch of strength lifts such as high pulls for a long period of time when you’re not in competition – you will not be prepared.”

As for applying the training methods of powerlifters who often break down the lifts into assistance exercises

and then performing the full lifts just before the competition, Charniga says you can’t make comparisons between the two sports. “A weightlifter can train for three months on the squat and pulls, and their squat will go up and their upper body muscles will get stronger; but if you go into a competition and your technique is off, you can get nothing. In powerlifting, I could train for three months on just the squat and ignore the deadlift; but I’m still going to be able to perform a heavy deadlift, because if I make a tiny mistake I’m not going to miss a deadlift.”

There is also the question of the so-called “East German pulls,” in which a lifter pulls the weight and then partially dips down to help the lifter focus on switching directions. Here is

Charniga’s take on this exercise: “Back into the late ’60s, the Russians noticed they were behind in terms of world records in the snatch and the clean and jerk. They had world championship teams, they had world record holders in the press, but their team was older than the others’ teams and they held fewer snatch world records and fewer clean and jerk world records. So they looked at their assistance exercises, and in looking at the snatch pull, they thought that instead of just standing there with your toes raised and your shoulders shrugged, you switch directions and try to lower your chest a little bit. It is probably better than a regular high pull, but you have to be really good to do it correctly to get any kind of transfer. I saw several of the Chinese lifters doing it, and some of them looked really pathetic – it was such poor technique, and I doubt the exercise had much merit to it.”

Possible exceptions to this discussion on pulls are those athletes with injuries who cannot perform the classical lifts, or even variations such as power snatches and power cleans. Says Charniga, “In the professional ranks of many sports there are many athletes with chronic injuries to their wrists and elbows, and for them high pulls would be a sensible alternative.”

Although high pulls will not make one of those “Top Ten” lists of most dangerous exercises in fitness magazines, it’s not the type of exercise that will help an athlete achieve the highest levels of physical superiority. There are much better exercises for serious athletes to spend their time on. **BFS**



Many thanks to Bruce Klemens for his amazing weightlifting photographs.



Bruce Klemens photo

German lifters experimented with the so-called “East German pulls,” in which a lifter pulls the weight and then partially dips down to help the lifter focus on switching directions. One of the most successful German lifters was Marc Huster, shown here demonstrating his vertical jumping ability after a successful lift.