



## MIND OVER MATTER

The powerlifting gym is dominated by sounds of clashing steel and loud music. The air is filled with a thin cloud of chalk and sweat. But despite its roots in male macho culture, powerlifting is a sport where brains win out over brawn, according to Irish lifter Jack Ryan.

"From the outside looking in it's purely physical but it's honestly more of a mental challenge," he says.

"Anybody can do the training so long as they're fit and healthy, anybody can go and lift weights four times a week but actually doing it is difficult, so your mentality is more important than your physicality."

Jack, like most lifters he knows, sets aside enough time to train four times a week to hone his skills in the three disciplines; squat, bench and deadlift. Each lift is attempted three times with the weight of the bar set to whatever measurement the lifter feels they can manage. The best attempt from each lift is taken into account by judges and then totalled to decide the lifter's overall score.

But before a bar is raised, before a muscle is even flexed, a lifter must decide how much weight they plan to lift. This, Jack says, is the most interesting aspect of the sport from a competitive standpoint.

"When you're taking three attempts at each lift you have to be smart about it and not throw away attempts because missed lifts don't count and if you don't make an attempt on one of the lifts you don't get a total so you have to make an attempt at all three lifts."

Being realistic about what one can lift must require strength of reason and clarity of thought, two things

all the best athletes possess. From speaking with Jack, it seems that with all the mental processes that precede a training session or a competitive lift, the actual lifting of the weight is just the bit you do at the end, the bit the audience sees, the way a well rehearsed play manages to erase all trace of its own preparation. It seems effortless but it is anything but.

In a world where footballers earn five times the average salary in one week, sports that are not backed in a significant way financially tend to struggle. Unless lifters are

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competing at the very highest level, their training costs, their equipment and their competition fees come out of their own pockets. Would a cash injection benefit powerlifting or would it only serve to corrupt the sport? Jack believes it would depend on how and by whom it was handled.

"More money would definitely benefit the sport, but it would corrupt it if it became divisive. If you look at Irish Olympic Weightlifting, the money is very divisive in that federation because it's small and the money is small and it all seems to go to one place, not where it is most needed," he says.

"But if it was incentivised in that way it could only make athletes better because it would encourage people to take it more seriously."

It was refreshing to hear Jack talk

about the sport he loves without financial motivation or sponsorship deals. Instead, he spoke of the nuances of the sport, the little things that keep people interested. He really got to the nub of why humans enjoy sport in the first place. Community, Jack says, is at the heart of it.

"There's a strong sense that everybody wants to do well and everybody wants everybody else to do well which is pretty unusual in any sport. It's probably because it's an amateur sport as there's no monetary reward at the end, there's no sense that this is our livelihood or anything like that," he says.

"In big competitions like the World Championships or the Arnold Classic in the States or the Oceania Championships in Australia you have some pretty competitive people who are breaking world records and they're not up for each other and they don't want the other guy to do well."

Women make up a large part of that tight-knit community, contrary to the stereotype associated with strength sports. Jack surmises that 50 per cent of lifters in Ireland are female.

Ryan believes that gender is irrelevant in powerlifting because a lift is only as impressive as how heavy it is in relation to the lifter's weight and height. The best bench presser in powerlifting, for example, is widely considered to be Jennifer Thompson, whose motto, "You don't have to look like a man to lift like one," serves to exemplify the equality that exists within this niche but burgeoning sport.

**Max Ryan**