

# MASTERS WEIGHTLIFTING

While most people peak in terms of weightlifting potential in their twenties, there is a thriving competitive scene for those aged thirty-five and above – known as masters lifters.

Catering to masters weightlifters, whether they are novices or international competitors, can help you to grow your membership with a type of member who are especially valuable to a gym or club.

In this paper, we will look at why you should be looking to attract older weightlifters and how you will need to adjust coaching and programming to retain them.

After reading this paper, you should be ready to start building a masters section in your club.



# MASTERS WEIGHTLIFTING

# THE GROWTH OF MASTERS WEIGHTLIFTING

So called Masters weightlifting competitions, originally for those aged forty plus but now for thirty-five and over, have been held since the 1970s. The International Weightlifting Federation has recognised international masters competitions since 1992. However, recent years have seen a rapid increase in the number of masters participants at all levels in many countries. Many weightlifting clubs now have enough members aged thirty-five and above to form dedicated masters sections and masters competitions are regularly filled to capacity.

# WHY ARE MASTERS WEIGHTLIFTERS VALUABLE MEMBERS?

Many weightlifting clubs focus the majority of their attention on younger lifters – especially those with the potential to compete at senior national competitions at some point. Those who are past their physical prime may seem less attractive prospects. However, these members can be valuable in many ways.

Being open to all age groups widens the potential membership of a club or gym. Over a third of the world's population is aged thirty-five or above – if you ignore this group you are turning your back on a lot of potential members.

Middle-aged members will tend to have higher incomes than younger ones. This means they will often be more interested in paying for additional things such as one-on-one coaching or branded merchandise.Having some older members can also have a positive effect on younger members by creating a more mature training environment.

If you have long term plans to develop young athletes, masters weightlifters can provide them! A proportion of middleaged weightlifters will have children around the right age to be introduced to weightlifting. What better way for a youth weightlifter to develop than with a parent in the sport?

# HOW TO EXPAND YOUR MASTERS MEMBERSHIP

There are two main ways to increase the number of masters weightlifters in your club: attract existing weightlifters or convince novices to get started in the sport. Both of these are valuable approaches. Existing masters weightlifters will look for many of the same things in a club that all weightlifters want. Good coaching and a productive training environment are critical, along with a regular presence at competitions (both masters and younger age categories). Older weightlifters may also set more store by the social aspect of a club.

Getting non-weightlifters involved can be tricky. Weightlifting is a minority sport and many may not be aware of the benefits it could bring them. Some people will seek out a weightlifting club because they have seen weightlifting on TV, perhaps at the Olympics, and want to try it for themselves. However, the majority of potential weightlifters will not even know they will enjoy it until they try, so getting them through the door initially is the biggest challenge.

The main reasons why middle-aged people take up a new sport are to:

- Improve health
- Take on a new challenge
- Get new social opportunities

You can use all of these to attract and retain this kind of member. Happily, health advice to the public is now catching up with the science, so everyone is recommended to do some form of strength training regularly. If you offer an entrylevel strength training course, you will be able to encourage participants to try weightlifting movements as part of that. A proportion of people who start to learn the weightlifting movements will set themselves the challenge of becoming proficient in them. It is a small step from there to them becoming a competing masters weightlifter.

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Another opportunity for members is lapsed weightlifters. People leave the sport for many reasons, including work commitments and having children. Often these other commitments will reduce over time, enabling an athlete to return to the sport. A friendly invite to come and train might be all that is needed. Can you think of anyone like this?

### **RETAINING MASTERS MEMBERS**

Once you have attracted some older weightlifters to your club, you obviously want to encourage them to become loyal members. As with athletes of any age, progress is the critical thing for most masters weightlifters. If they feel like they are getting stronger and developing their technical skills, they are likely to stay motivated to continue. On the other hand, if progress stalls or if they don't think they will achieve their goals, you will risk losing them. Setting realistic expectations for progress and goals is therefore very important.

Competition is a great way to inspire masters weightlifters to commit to training regularly and to create long-term members. Dedicated masters competitions are very welcoming and provide an environment where older novices can start competing without feeling intimidated by younger athletes lifting huge weights.

Ultimately, the most important factor in whether masters weightlifters stay with you will be how well you have understood their personal goals and created an environment that supports them. Some may have aspirations to compete at a high level in masters weightlifting while other may be focused on keeping fit or even just enjoying practising the movements.

# **CHALLENGES OF MASTERS COMPETITORS**

We know that as we age, several changes occur in our body that will impact our ability to lift heavy weights. Production of the main hormone involved in developing muscle mass, testosterone, peaks for men in the late teens and sees a steady decline from then until around the age of forty (Kelsey etal, 2014). A similar pattern is seen in women. Levels of human growth hormone production also drop steadily throughout our lives (Bartke, 2008).

These changes lead to a decline in the ability to maintain muscle mass along with a reducing neural ability to use the muscle that we have efficiently. Changes in our connective tissue also make us more prone to injury (Boss and Seegmiller, 1981).

There is evidence that older athletes suffer from fatigue more during training, seeing a greater reduction in power than younger people in the minutes after completing a heavy exercise (Dalton et al, 2012). Studies have also shown that recovery between training sessions takes longer as we age, possibly because we don't process protein as efficiently (Doering et al, 2017). Neural changes in the aging brain and nervous system can make it harder for older people to take in new information or learn new skills (Murman, 2015).

Mobility can also be an issue for masters weightlifters, especially those who come into the sport late and without a background in another sport. Flexibility at the hip and knee, both critical to weightlifting, generally decline with age (Roach and Miles, 1991) and other areas such as thoracic or shoulder mobility can be challenged more with age, especially in those with desk jobs. The steady decline in weightlifting potential is demonstrated by the weightlifting world records across age groups (see Figure 1). This chart shows the final world records for the recently retired men's -85 kg category across age groups.



# Figure 1: The steady decline in weightlifting potential

Age Groupings

It should be noted that some of the drop between senior and the first masters-age category will be caused by lower participation and the fact that masters competitors do not have the level of support that many senior athletes get from their national governing bodies. However, the pattern is clear and is repeated across all weight categories for men and women.

The world records in a similar weight category in powerlifting also show a decline with age but do not show such a dramatic initial drop – perhaps indicating that a significant proportion of that drop is due to loss of mobility and speed as opposed to maximal strength (see Figure 2 below).



FIGURE 2: Decline in powerlifting potential

Note that in powerlifting, the first masters age category is from age 40 to 49 and the categories span ten years as opposed to five in weightlifting. The most significant drop in performance comes between the 50–59 and 60–69 categories, hinting that maximal strength may be impacted more over that age range. This is supported by some evidence that changes in our muscles as we age affect rate of force development ahead of maximal strength (Canepari et al, 2010).

# ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

It is important to consider the history of any weightlifter but this is especially true with masters athletes – they have lived longer so will likely have accumulated a wider variety of training experience (although this is not true for everyone – for some coming to weightlifting late in life, it is the first sport they have seriously pursued). They will also have had more time to accumulate injuries and other problems.

Make sure to ask about:

- Training experience
- Injuries
- Medical history
- Diet
- Family commitments
- Work

You should also carry out a full assessment of mobility and carry out functional movement screening to identify any potential problems. It is easy to make the mistake of treating older novices as more experienced than they actually are. Remember that biological age is important but training age is actually more significant when you are planning training sessions or longer term programmes. While late starters in weightlifting can make relatively fast progress in the same way as younger beginners, usually they and you will have to accept that they will progress more slowly. Most of the time this is not a problem – older trainees are often more patient and are prepared to plan over a longer term.

There is a huge range in mobility levels among masters lifters – an ex-gymnast who regularly does yoga will obviously be much better in this regard than someone who has led sedentary life. However, it is much more likely that masters athletes will encounter mobility challenges. If a masters weightlifter has significant mobility problems, you may need to consider using variations of the weightlifting movements, either as a bridge to performing the full movements later or even as their competition style.

It is worth remembering that the power variations of the snatch, clean and jerk are all completely legal to use in competition. Just because someone can't sit into a deep overhead squat or clean catch, there is no reason why they can't compete. Some masters athletes even use the split snatch and split clean styles in competition. While these lifts are seen as old fashioned now, they are still perfectly fine to use in terms of the rules. Some athletes find that they can achieve a lower catch with a split than they can with a squat and the greater forwards-backwards margin for error helps with consistency. Athletes who use the split for snatch, clean and jerk also have the advantage of three times as much practice on the split.



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As we saw earlier, the data on weightlifting and powerlifting records and some studies hint that maximal strength may not be the first factor that is affected by aging. It seems that rate of force development – and thus speed in the weightlifting movements – will be affected more and sooner. For this reason, it is important to put some emphasis on speed training for masters weightlifters. This might be in the form of plyometrics or lights pulls and squats. Since masters weightlifters are likely to take longer to recover from sets within a training session, it may be a good idea to reduce your expectations of how much work can be done in a certain time. The number of sessions per week is likely to be lower on average than it would be for younger athletes.

While all of these things are worth considering when you are coaching masters weightlifters, it is important to remember that everyone is different – you may come across a weightlifter in their forties who is better conditioned than the younger weightlifters you work with and can handle an even greater workload.

# **MASTERS COMPETITION**

Weightlifting competitions for those who are aged thirty-five and over work very much like any other weightlifting competition but with the significant difference that every competitor will have an age category as well as a weight category. The good news is that this dramatically increases the number of categories, creating more opportunities to win medals and set records!

The applicable age category is calculated using the year of birth of the athlete – in other words, your age for this year is the age you will be on the 31st December. So, any time in the year when someone will turn 35, they are eligible to compete as a masters athlete. Each category covers five years of age and has a letter to specify the sex of the athlete:

Age at 31st December	Men's Category	Women's Category
35-39	M35	W35
40-44	M40	W40
45-49	M45	W45
50-54	M50	W50
55-59	M55	W55
60-64	M60	W60
65-69	M65	W65
70-74	M70	W70
75-79	M75	W75
80+	M80	W80

Masters weightlifters will enter a competition in a specific weight and age category. So, if I was a -89 M40, I would be aged 40 to 44 and would need to weigh in under 89 kg.

As well as prizes in specific weight/age category combinations, best lifter prizes are also often presented for age groups or overall. For age group prizes, the well-known Sinclair calculation is usually used to create an even playing field between weight categories. For overall prizes, an extra adjustment, called the Malone-Meltzer coefficient, is applied to account for age. The overall score is then usually known as Sinclair Malone-Meltzer or SMM – you will often see a column for this on scoreboards at masters competitions.

Masters competitions, at least at the lower levels, often have a different, slightly less competitive atmosphere than senior competitions. There is usually a greater sense of community and of a shared resolve to achieve goals. But make no mistake, when national or international medals are at stake, masters weightlifters will compete just as hard as their younger counterparts!

Masters competitions tend to run in parallel to the system of senior competitions, with matching regional, national and international competitions to qualify for. At the international level, the competitions are recognised by the IWF and continental federations but are organised by separate organisations. Attending masters competitions can be an inspirational experience in itself. Seeing people aged eighty and beyond get up on stage and perform the competition weightlifting movements really shows that we do not need allow aging to limit what we can do.

# SUMMARY

In this paper, we have looked at why masters weightlifters are an attractive market for any weightlifting club or gym and how to create an environment that will attract them and convince them to become long-term, loyal members. We have also discussed some of the challenges that affect older athletes to a greater degree than with younger weightlifters, along with some strategies for coping with these problems.

The key things to keep in mind about masters weightlifters are:

- Longer histories may hold more things you need to know about, positive and negative
- Biological age is important but training age is even more so
- Progress will probably be slower
- Mobility is more likely to be a problem
- You can use power or even split variations
- Speed training is important
- Every athlete is different

You should now have a clear idea of why masters athletes are important and how to adapt your coaching to suit them.



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