

# Raising the bar

Words Joel Snape Photography Tom Miles



Classic Olympic lifts may look tricky – and a bit scary – but they can improve your physique and performance in all sorts of ways. *MF* visits the home of British lifting to find out more

**W**hen Karl Grant squares up to the bar, everyone in Bethnal Green Weightlifting Club stops what they're doing. He's just piled

170kg on the bar – 17.5kg less than the weight he lifted to take a bronze medal in the clean and jerk at the 1998 Commonwealth Games, but still roughly the equivalent of a medium-sized adult gorilla. He pulls the weight up to his chest without a problem, then pauses to take a couple of deep breaths. 'Come on mate, get under it,' shouts one onlooker. Grant does a quarter-squat, then explodes under the bar, firing the weight upwards and locking out his arms. He screams, stands up for a second, then drops the weight to the mat, where it lands with a satisfying crash. Workout done.

If you train in a normal gym, the chances are that you've only ever seen Olympic lifts on the TV, with the lifters being thickset Chinese women or giant Russian men. Some things about it are off-putting: the lifts look difficult, the lifters never look all that chiselled, and occasionally someone pops their elbow out of its socket and rolls around screaming on the floor. Most gyms won't allow it because the floor isn't strong enough, the lifts take up too much space and the screams upset the people on the elliptical trainers.

Despite all of this, a huge range of top athletes – from sprinters to mixed martial artists – train by Olympic lifting. As Arthur Drechsler, author of *The Weightlifting Encyclopedia*, explains, 'The actual movements in an Olympic lift are among the most fundamental in sports. They teach an athlete how to explode.' Maybe it's time to buy some chalk.

Karl Grant of Bethnal Green Weightlifting Club goes for a 170kg clean and jerk

**OLD SCHOOL**  
STRENGTH

See all these lifts demonstrated at [mensfitnessmagazine.co.uk/bethnalgreen](http://mensfitnessmagazine.co.uk/bethnalgreen)  
CrossFit London is holding a three-hour Olympic weightlifting masterclass led by Giles Greenwood at the Newham Leisure Centre on 15th March. Contact Giles at [giles@bgwc.co.uk](mailto:giles@bgwc.co.uk)

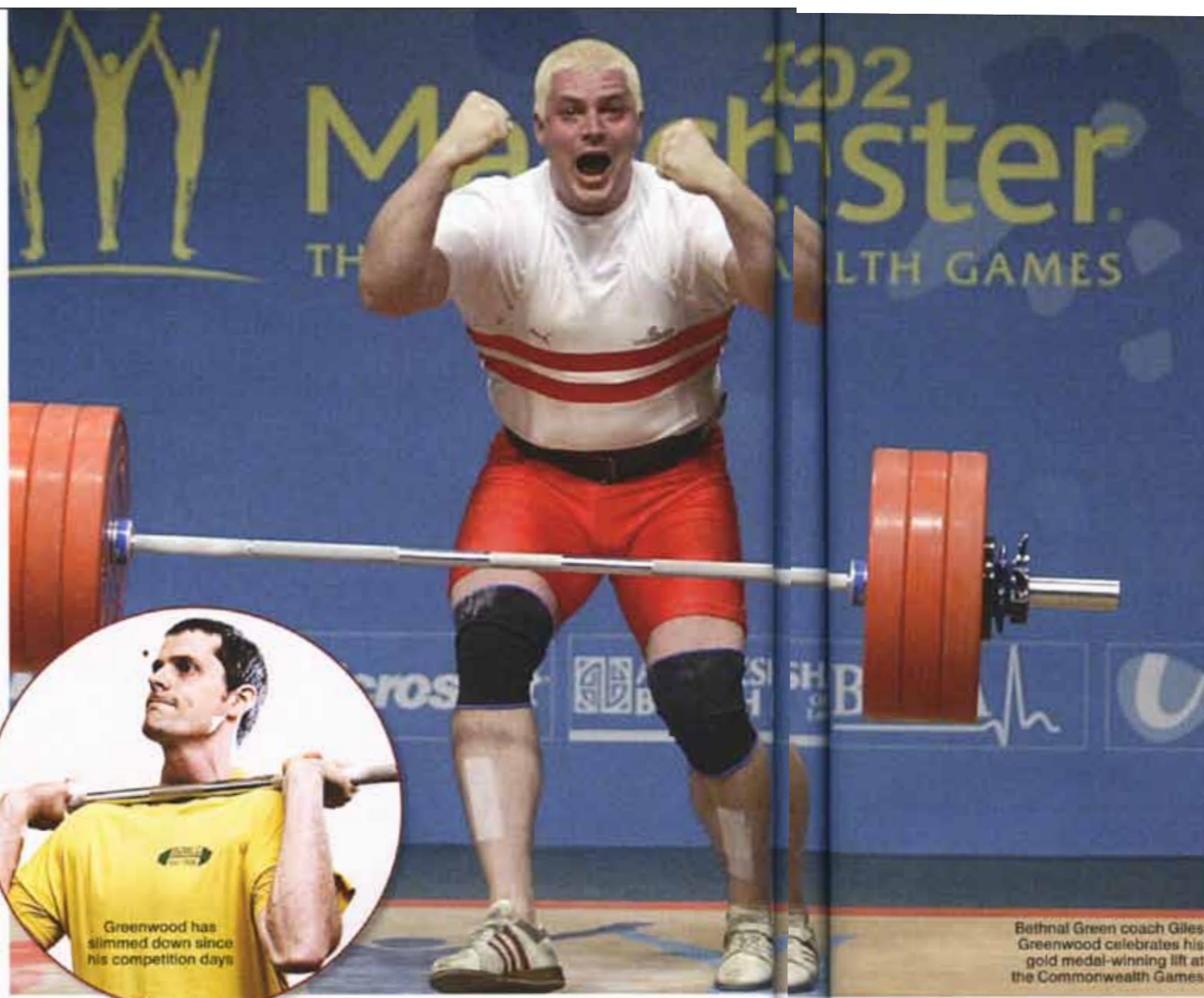
In modern weightlifting there are two lifts: the snatch (where the bar goes straight from the floor to overhead) and the clean and jerk (where the lifter catches the bar on his deltoids before shoving it upwards and doing a sort of lunging split underneath). The snatch is slightly less technical, but the clean and jerk lets you shift more weight – the Olympic records are 212.5kg and 263.5kg, respectively. Both demand shoulder flexibility, balance and speed, along with massive strength – which might be why most people would rather do biceps curls.

### Hard as nails

'I think the main reason people avoid weightlifting is that it's hard,' says Giles Greenwood, who won Commonwealth gold in the snatch in 2002 and holds the British records for both lifts – his combined total is an enormous 387.5kg. He's since retired from competition, but still teaches at Bethnal Green. 'Just sitting on a machine's a lot more comfortable than trying the snatch. You need a weightlifting coach, and it's difficult to find someone. It's been a minority sport for years.'

In fact, it's such a minority sport that even the Bethnal Green club – which has been open since 1928 and churned out hundreds of national-level lifters in the past 80 years – has resorted to government funding. Weightlifting is offered as a 'lifelong learning' course alongside flower arranging and flamenco, which take place next door. A ten-week course costs £40 – about the cost of an hour with a personal trainer – or £17 if you're a student. To put that another way, it's the

**'A ten-week lifting course costs £40 – the same as an hour with a personal trainer'**



Greenwood has slimmed down since his competition days.

Bethnal Green coach Giles Greenwood celebrates his gold medal-winning lift at the Commonwealth Games.

weightlifting equivalent of getting two months with Steve Redgrave as a rowing coach for the cost of an hour's personal training.

The benefits of heavy lifting are far broader than most people think, because of the way the weight accelerates. 'We have to generate a tremendous amount of force,' says Greenwood. 'I once did a power snatch on a force plate, and I had to generate 360kg into the floor to snatch 120kg. That's how much extra force I had to develop. To deadlift 120kg you probably have to generate around

125kg into the floor. That's why weightlifting's such a good force development exercise.'

### Forcing the Issue

Explosiveness is the key to victory in all sorts of sports. 'Sprinters are the best force developers because of their speed out of the blocks, but they usually lift to improve that force,' says Greenwood. '[Triple jump world record holder] Jonathan Edwards used to do the clean, and he's clearly a tremendous athlete.'

It doesn't stop with track and field, however. Foz Rahman, who also trains at Bethnal Green, is a purple belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ), but says he was 'a bit small' and decided to get into weightlifting. Since then, he's placed second in the Greater London Olympic Weightlifting Championships. He says he's much more athletic now, 'especially with fast movements, takedowns, throws and stuff'. Roger Gracie – a BJJ world champion who's also undefeated in MMA – does the snatch and clean

### LIFTING BIG

Your gym doesn't tolerate the dropping of 100kg bars? While you're looking for another place to work out, practise your technique with these floor-friendly exercises

#### SNATCH HIGH PULL

This is exactly the same as the start of the snatch,' says Greenwood. 'You want your elbows to make a 90° angle at the top, so start with a wide grip. Keep your bum down, chest up and look up, keeping your back straight all the way.

Once you get the bar past your knees, explode up like you're jumping in the air. Push hard with your legs and pull on the bar, elbows up as high as you can get them. Always keep your back flat. Most weightlifting injuries aren't that bad, but the one you must avoid is bending your back and slipping a disc.'



#### PUSH PRESS

Whether you're a martial artist or a shot putter, this one will develop leg power,' says Greenwood. 'Take the bar off stands if you're in the gym, so you don't have to learn the power clean. Keep your chest up and your back flat. Dip down and bend your knees into a quarter-squat.

Drive up hard with your legs, get all that power into the bar, then finish off with a pressing movement. Your body should stay upright – don't lean forward or back. The main thing is to drive with the power from your legs.'



#### POWER JERK

A progression from the push press. You're still using a strong drive with the legs and a hard drive with the arms, but this time you bend your legs to receive.

Keep your chest up and your back tight. Start like a push press, with a quarter-squat and a hard drive. Now quickly perform a second dip to receive the bar with your arms locked out, then straighten your legs to finish. Because you're catching with your legs slightly bent rather than finishing with your triceps, you should be able to use more weight. This is good for racket sports, or for anyone who uses arm and leg power together.'



#### OVERHEAD SQUAT

'This is very good for core stability. It's obviously a leg exercise but it's also good for keeping your stomach and back muscles strong, because you can't lean forward too much. It'll keep you from injuring yourself in the other lifts. Start by snatching the bar, or taking it off a rack, with a wide grip.

Squat as low as you can without relaxing – ideally your thighs should be just below parallel to the floor. If you've got a flexibility problem, just go a bit lower each time. If you arch your back you'll drop it, so this one keeps you honest.'

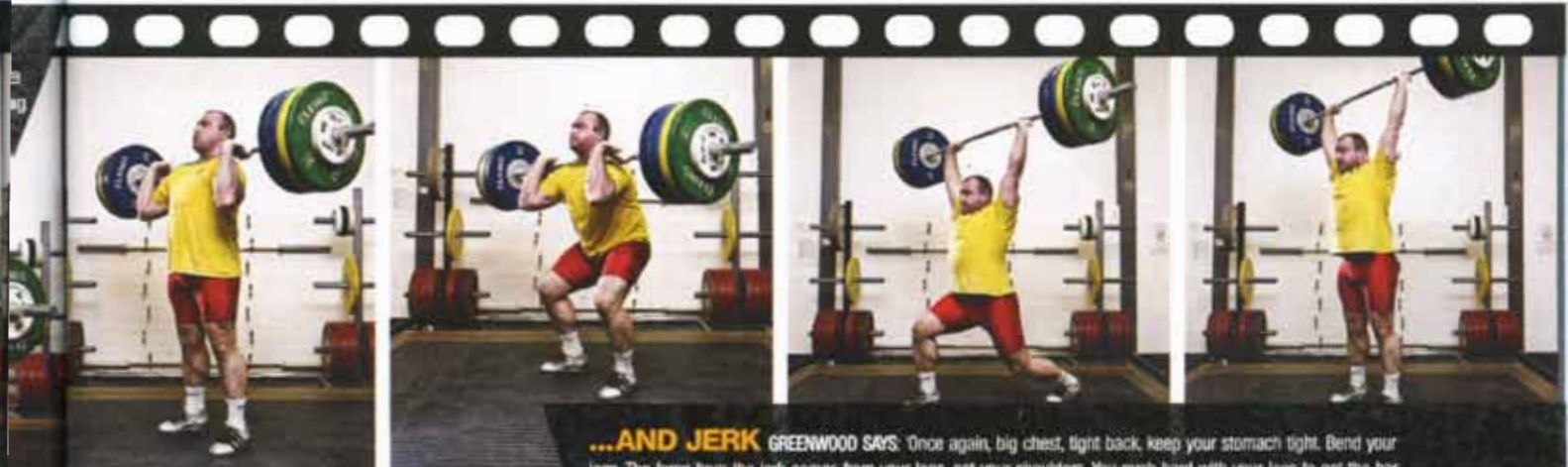


**THE CLEAN...** GREENWOOD SAYS: 'Start with a flat back. You won't lift as much as with a round back, but it'll stop injuries. Keep your bum down, look up and keep your chest up. That's your start position. Then you have to get the bar past the knees: you keep your shoulders over the bar all the way through the lift, so you don't sit back over your heels.'

'The next key position is fully extended at the top of the pull. You're moving as fast as you can, you've accelerated hard, your arms are still straight but your shoulders are up and you're up on your toes. That's the top, where you get the speed on the bar. Then comes the receiving position. This is like a front squat, so catch the bar on your shoulders, then stand up.'

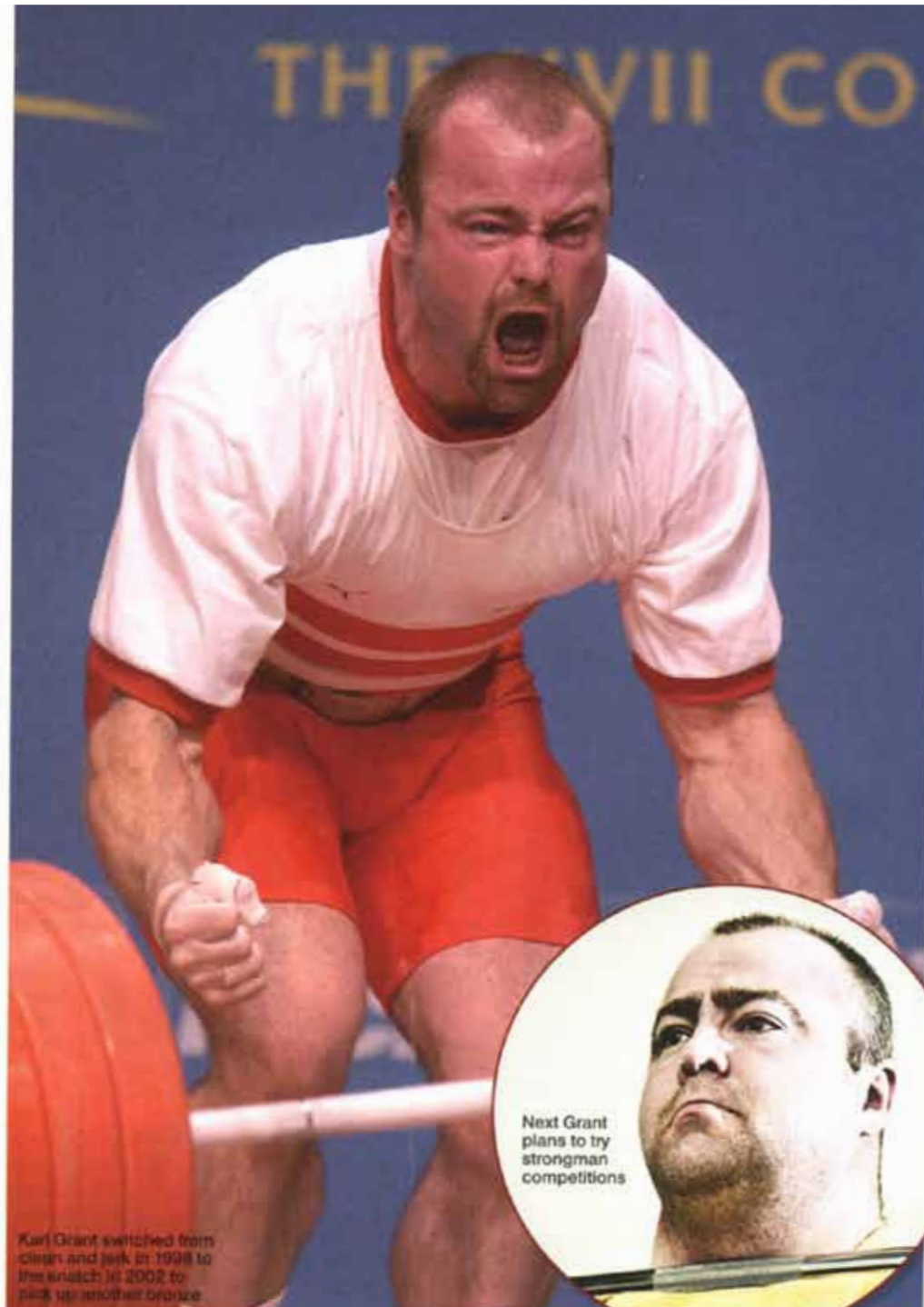


**...AND JERK** GREENWOOD SAYS: 'Once again, big chest, tight back, keep your stomach tight. Bend your legs. The force from the jerk comes from your legs, not your shoulders. You push hard with your legs to get the bar moving, and then push yourself under the bar and catch the weight. Split your legs fore and aft to catch the bar. Easy.'



**THE SNATCH**

**GREENWOOD SAYS:** 'Whereas in the clean you use a grip a little bit wider than your shoulders, in the snatch you take a nice wide grip because you have to catch it straight overhead. It's the same start position, though: bum low, back flat. Again, a flat back is key. Keep your shoulders over the bar. Pull as hard as you can until you're up on your toes. Then you just catch it in an overhead squat and stand up.'



Next Grant plans to try strongman competitions

Karl Grant switched from clean and jerk in 1998 to the snatch in 2002 to pick up another bronze

and jerk, and lots of boxers use power cleans because they develop explosiveness. Andrew Stemler, London's leading authority on intense fitness method CrossFit, teaches Olympic lifts on his own courses, but trains at Bethnal Green to work on his own technique. Student Ben Chahade makes a two-hour round trip to train at the club four times a week, because it's 'better than a normal gym'.

**Cleaning up**

If you're put off by the technical aspects of the moves, don't be. 'Some people say the lifts are about technique,' says Greenwood, 'But you can't separate technique from strength. A large part of technique is being strong enough to do it - for instance, you need to keep your back flat in all the lifts, and that means your back has to be strong, even under a lot of weight. It'll get you strong all over - it doesn't just focus on specific muscles.'

Greenwood says it shouldn't take too long to pick up. 'I usually teach the snatch first because there's less chance of injuring yourself. In cleans, a

lot of people bend their arms back and catch the bar on their wrists. To get the snatch really right, you can't learn it like a curl in five minutes. You should be pretty solid after two or three sessions in the gym, though. You need about two sessions a week to learn and improve, but you can practice front squats on your own to work on your mobility.'

So is weightlifting for everyone? 'Well, the hour you spend in the gym takes away from the hour you could be practising your sport,' says Greenwood. 'So if a darts player came in here I'll tell him to go practise his darts... but if you're doing practically anything that involves explosive force, whether it's boxing or running, weightlifting will help.'

MF is basically convinced. But what about those dislocated elbows? Nobody wants to end up in a gruesome YouTube clip, after all. 'There are risks, but it's not particularly dangerous,' says Greenwood. 'Football's dangerous but people don't worry about getting injured. You fall on your arse quite a lot doing weightlifting, but probably nothing more serious than that.' □