

# The Cultural Transmission of Weightlifting in Canada

By  
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We in weightlifting, almost as soon as we are initiated into the sport become aware that our sport is not a major one. Not only that, very few others in our society are interested in helping it get more high profile. The sports that survive and prosper are the ones that are supported by their host culture. Our sport is not supported by the host culture to any significant degree. Weight training now is after some decades of being spurned. But that is not the same thing as competitive weightlifting. It has not normally part of the physical education program provided by schools or other agencies of community athletics. True some teachers have tried but it was on their own personal initiative. When that teacher is transferred the weightlifting team usually dies of administrative apathy. Outside the schools in days gone by then, as now, there were few gyms devoted to competitive weightlifting. The YMCAs often passively provided gyms and even Olympic bars but usually had to rely on interested volunteers to supervise them.

That being our heritage, if a sport is not part of the culture how can it survive? How does it get implanted and how does it survive? The answer to this comes from the study of cultural anthropology. The answers usually revolve around three main methods which we will discuss below, namely:

- **cultural diffusion**
- **individual initiative**
- **family tradition**

## **Cultural Diffusion**

This term refers to the spreading of a cultural practice from one area where it is indigenous to another where it is not. This is done by means of immigration, travel and the media. All have had great effect on the spread of our sport in Canada however.

Immigration in particular has been very prominent. By this we mean specifically the migration of persons who are already weightlifting enculturated from areas closer to the sport's cultural core to those with no such culture (such as Canada in decades past) and the subsequent institution of the sport in the new locality. This happens in both international and intra-national basis. Canada is a nation of immigrants so it will not surprise one to find that European immigrants have had profound influence on Canadian weightlifting. This has been especially true of two time periods. The first was the post WWII era when many people in Europe decided that they did not want to deal with the fall of Hitler or the rise of Stalin. Later, after Stalin's successors finally landed on the scrapheap of history themselves there has been a second wave of immigration. Like most immigrants they ended up mostly in the provinces of Ontario, Alberta and BC plus the city of Montreal. This pattern is not so well established east of the Ottawa valley however. This is due to the long established ethnic groups indigenous to the area coupled with the fact of economic stagnation. Once arrived and settled in some of these people sought out a place to resume their lifting careers. Often they found slim pickings.

## **Individual Initiative**

Those persons native to Canada who had no contact with any helpful immigrants were in a difficult position in regard to being introduced to and learning about the sport in those early years. Yvon Chouinard in his history of Canadian weightlifting mentioned how a knowledge of English was key to learning the sport in the early 1950s. At that time bilingualism among the Quebecois was not as widespread as it is today. A problem occurred when there was only one magazine in Canada dealing with weightlifting, namely Strength & Health. Those who could speak English had a leg up in learning to lift. In order to get the sport rolling a number of enterprising persons simply took the bull by the horns and set out gathering as much knowledge as possible from any source possible. These men were often the leaders of the affinity groups that would form among the lifters at the local Y. These were the men you would go to when you wanted answers to questions. This would usually evolve into coaching and competition organization.

However, in the 1960s the YMCA started catering to families instead of young single males. This meant a wholesale change in the programs offered with the eventual result that a lot of weight rooms were converted to other uses. Not only that, some of the more highly individualistic gym rats (I'm sure you have met a few) were not always welcome when the families invaded. This meant that the erstwhile gym leaders were encouraged by market conditions to become sport entrepreneurs. This meant that spare space had to be found in basements, garages, old warehouses, schools, anywhere they could get a deal.

Over the years such weightlifting pioneers read all they could and then travelled to meets at some distance to learn from others more experienced. If they were lucky they might have a immigrant lifter join their clubs. This would hasten their acquisition of our sport's cultural traditions. By the start of the 1970s when weightlifting had finally established a precarious hold at the hand of these leaders and immigrants another factor would emerge in the natural course of life.

## **Family Tradition**

By this time a generation had passed and more sophisticated coaching knowledge had finally through the Iron Curtain and across the Atlantic. Our leaders are now talented amateurs if not professional coaches. Once such a man is significantly involved in the sport and has a family he can then transmit the love of the game inside his family. His first converts were often his brothers (sisters were not a factor in those days). These were usually younger ones who once scoffed at their elder's activity. They would often reconsider when they would see the dramatic physical transformation possible with the weights. Soon he was tagging along to the gym. A significant number of such

brothers the more successful ones were younger ones trying to improve his inter-familial status. Many lifters have had brothers who tried the sport for a while but then dropped out. Far fewer have brothers who have followed them to the elite levels of the sport.

As time moved on the lifter may eventually have a son who either wanted to follow in his father's footsteps (or sometimes, the father's footstep "encouraged" his son to lift). As we shall see with most such teams the son surpasses his father. This is due mainly to the increasing standards as the sport has developed but credit must also be given to the supportive environment in a WL household as well as the Oedipal factor.

Finally we are seeing another family development. Since the addition of the distaff side to our competitions we have been seeing the increased involvement of mothers, daughters and wives in the more active athlete, coaching, officiating and administrative positions where scorekeeping was once the norm.

At this time I would like to start naming names so that the reader can see how these three factors have figured in the development of Canadian Weightlifting in the post war period. I will start on the east coast and move westwards.

### **Newfoundland**

Speak of Newfie lifting and you must speak of to the **Squires brothers**. As a 5<sup>th</sup> place finisher in the 1984 Olympics Bert was the Rock's best ever lifter. He also brought lifting to the Northwest Territories when he was teaching in Inuvik at one time. His younger brother Jim was not quite of Olympic calibre but he was still their second best as a 67.5.

Another family were the **Gallants**. Although not up to Squire standards they seemed to have an unlimited number of members who have been involved in both Olympic and powerlifting. And don't forget **Les Butler** and son **Steve. Sheldon Pomeroy** was a promising junior who is now Hanna, Alberta's best ever (intra-nation immigration).

### **Nova Scotia**

The "herring-chokers" have two famous families. Most famous were the **Smiths**. Wayne won 110 kg silver at the 1978 Commonwealth Games while the younger Ricky was of national calibre as a junior 75.

On Cape Breton Island we have an unusual family situation with the **Corbetts**. The first two generations were of no great prominence. It was left to the third generation to make the family famous. **Jim Dan Corbett**, nephew of a lifter (his father did not lift) was briefly one of the top three athletes in Canada, lifting as a 91kg in the Pan Am Games in 1995.

### **Quebec**

**Lionel St. Jean** was one of the pioneers of our sport in Canada. He was originally a gymnast who subsequently discovered the weights. He achieved some modest success before realizing that he did not have what it would take to lift the really big ones. So he became a pioneer coach. In contrast to his cross-town neighbour Joe Weider he actually was a trainer of champions. The best was his son **Pierre**, arguably our best ever athlete. Pierre would lift is a number of major Games and Nationals. One of his father's other protégés was **Chun Hon Chan** who came to Canada from China in the 1950s. I do not believe that he was involved in weightlifting in China. He competed under the names Jol Sol Hum and Yok Sun Tam before settling on Chan. With that name he competed for a quarter century. I remember being at the 1975 Nationals in Quebec City where Madame Chan was showing off her new baby. Little **Derek Chan** would one day grow up to be a Canadian Champion as well.

Another Asian import was **Kaname Niimura**. Originally from Japan, he went first to Toronto before settling in Montreal. Again I am not sure if he lifted in Japan but he did go on to lift internationally.

From the other side of the world came the Marseilles trio of **Serge Moliere, Raphael Zuffalatto** and **Rene Decloitre** All settled on Quebec's south shore but I do not believe that they were involved in WL back in France. They were all involved in coaching and spreading the sport.

The monozygotic **Darsigny** twins have been factors in Quebec weightlifting since 1982. Yvan was the better lifter, having gone to the 1984 Olympics as a 17 year old 82.5. I remember Bob Hise congratulating us for having found such a great prospect. We all said that we have another one at home just like him. Not quite since Yves was a 90 kg athlete whose total was always a few kilos behind Yvan's.

We must also mention *la famille* **Marineau**. There seems to be a never ending supply of them, most of whom have lifted at national level.

Finally we have the **Turcotte** sisters. Although **Marise** is our best ever female lifter and has won two University Worlds plus medalled at too many other meets to mention her sister **Karine** has also won a U Worlds. I believe this makes them the first sisters to win world championships.

### **Ontario**

**Ken Carr-Braint** started lifting in England when his father was working there. I believe that they were Canadians but this is a good example of reverse immigration influence. He started the Apollo club over 50 years ago. Three of his best athletes were the **Walt** brothers. **Art, Gary and Bob** tore up the Ontario record books in the 1960s and 1970s. Bob was I believe the first 16 year old ever to C&J 300 lb as a 67.5. He later grew as large as a 110 and lifted accordingly. Art and Gary were usually a class or two heavier. Art has now taken over the Apollo. Their sons have also become lifters.

Out from under Stalin's boot-heel came **Alf Karklins** of Estonia. He was our top heavyweight in the early 1960s. From the Netherlands came his fellow brick-layer, **Harry Vinkenvluegel** and wife Maria but neither were not involved with the sport back home. Harry instead became the manager of the Ingersoll club. **Harold Norville** also came from

the UK and was the main force of Oshawa lifting for years and was also an expert soccer player of I recall. Eire gave us **Norm Bratty**. Norm in turn gave us **Gary Bratty** who was best lifter in the 1979 Nationals.

Former world supers champ **Antonio Krastev** of Bulgaria settled briefly in Ontario looking for a place to launch a comeback for Atlanta but did not stay long. **Steve Sandor** (HUN) is a later arrival in this country but has the distinction of being one of the highest qualified athletes to do so. Steve Sandor was a top athlete in his Native Hungary and has now raised expectations in his Mississauga gym. Son **Akos** is now our best 105 but still lags a few kg behind his father's best. Brother **Balasz** is not too far behind in the 94s.

Northern Ontario had two prominent French-Canadian families. The most storied has been the **Roys** from Sudbury. **Ralph** and **Aldo** were pioneers in Sudbury, sometimes travelling to York in order to learn more. Aldo was a favourite of Uncle Bob's wife, mainly because her name was Alda. Ralph lifted in several North Americans plus the 1967 Pan-Ams but it was younger and larger brother Aldo who had an even better career, going to two Olympics as an athlete, and many more as an announcer. They were greatly assisted by their good friend and 'virtual brother' **Bob Leclair** (and his real brother **Norm**) especially when they reached coaching days. They made the Sudbury teams famous in the 1960s to the 1980s. But they were not through. Ralph's son **Kevin** would grow up to outshine them all, making him and Aldo one of the first uncle-nephew teams in higher level lifting. Kevin always was amused how people would tell him that one day he would be as strong as his father. Ralph was a 67.5-75 in the mid 1960s while Kevin as a 100 in the early 1980s, with lifts more than in proportion. Ralph must have been one hell of an athlete.

The other Franco-Ontarian family came not from the north but from Sudbury. These were the **Turcottes** of Sarnia. The patriarch here was **Joe** who was a champion lifter himself then took to coaching his sons and nephew **Bob Santavy**. The latter has in turn also given us another generation in **Bobby Jo** and **Dallas John**. Bobby Jo was a pioneer in women's lifting. Dallas has more or less matched his father's lifts at least on a formula basis and has been on a similar number of teams and seems to have the same Santavy longevity as well. As if that is not enough, the Santavy's are fifth cousins to the Vinkenvlugels. And no, the Sarnia Turcottes are not related to the Quebec Turcotte sisters.

**Bob Prior** of Hamilton was a pretty fair intermediate level athlete in the 1950s and 1960s. But it was his son **Russell** who was to become Pierre St. Jean's main rival to "best ever Canadian" honours. Russ would eventually beat out St. Jean for the most number of 'best lifters' and the nationals after a long career that included three Commonwealth Games golds plus a Pan-Am gold.

## Manitoba

In Winnipeg in the 1970s a Peruvian immigrant named **Ydelso Diaz** was a coach who promised to add much to the Manitoba WL culture. But this opportunity was cut short when he suddenly left the sport, like too many of our leaders have done over the years.

In the 1990s **Miroslav Korkowski** was recruited from Poland to professionally coach the Manitoba lifters. His son **Rafal** has now grown into a star lifter himself. Both have added to the growing sophistication of Manitoba weightlifting that had a large gap with the sudden departure of Russ Prior who coached them twenty years ago.

On the distaff side Manitoba has a curious new kind of immigrant. They don't come from other countries. They now come from other sports, namely the field ones. Most prominent was **Theresa Brick**. She was a pioneer in two different family traditions. She became one of the first Canadian husband-wife weightlifting coaching teams when she married Denis VanLeaken. She then recruited her niece to challenge the Roys on being first on the female side of that relationship.

## Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan has had a few immigrant lifters but not as many as Alberta probably due to the nature of their economy. Few people cross the ocean to be wheat farmers nowadays. However Germany has contributed **Otto Neuman** and **Heinz Block** who have been involved for many years. Otto's son **Harry** was a top junior as well.

More recently **Jose Samaoya** was a top lifter in Guatemala before he came to Canada and remained so after arrival and is now a coach, often coaching his fellow ex-pats and son while doing some Masters lifting as well..

## Alberta

In Alberta we had a number of expatriates who played a major role in the development of our sport in the 1960s. One of the first was **Roy Hilligan** (RSA). He had won the 1952 Mr. America while living in the USA. Earlier that weekend he had also did an 800+ lb total at 82.5 to collect his athletic points. He soon moved to Canada and took turns living in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Winnipeg before returning to South Africa. He would return to Canada almost 30 years later when he returned to top bodybuilding form in his 50s.

**Fred Ketterer** (HUN) was our first star performer. He, along with guys like Foldi, Veres, Escer, Toth and Huszka were some of Sandor Gere's boys in the early days of Hungarian lifting. He won a position on the 1956 Olympic team but Khrushchev's broken promises forced him to relocate. At the World Masters Games he was finally able to renew acquaintances with Mihaly Huszka after 49 years.

At this point I must mention my own personal mentor, **Bert Mozley** (GBR). Bert was a top fullback for the Derby County Rams in the English Premier League. He came to Calgary in 1955 and was immediately the best in Alberta. He was also best in all three weight sports. From a point further north in England came **Dennis Hillman**. He was a member of Britain's 1960 Olympic team and was a valued intermediary with the British teams when we held the Commonwealth Games.

**Bruno Dobler** (SUI) was a journeyman athlete who made his major contribution as an official. He dropped out of the sport in the early 1980s.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s we had the **Gomes brothers** from Guyana. Malcolm the eldest did do some lifting in Guyana but Mark did all of his in Canada. They were national threats in the 67.5. Both ended up as teachers and coaches. Mal had the better build but Mark, built like a shorter basketball player had the greater desire.

**Bob Brintnell** was introduced to the weights by his father Leigh, one of the early northern bush pilots and aviation pioneers. He must have been a weight training pioneer as well since this activity would have been rare in 1930s Alberta. Bob then learned the finer points of Olympic lifting from Roy Hilligan.

### British Columbia

In BC the most numerous lifting immigrants are the Sikhs. They have made a significant contribution to our sport on the West Coast. WL is a favourite sport among them back in India and this has continued in their Frazer Valley diaspora. There are too many to name all of them here but **Parmajit Gill** and **Major Lidder** were the most famous.

**Chris Dariotis** was both a landed immigrant and a second generation lifter. His father ran a gym in Seattle I believe. He challenged St. Jean in the 1970s and continues as a master today.

Polish born, German speaking CWFHC Honorary Life Director **Dieter Stamm** has made great contributions in his adopted home of BC but did not get involved until he came to Canada and met other lifters at UBC. He got the honorific by way of coaching the Semi high school team for thirty some years. He has worked internationally where his language talents have proven useful. His sons **Eric** and **Eden** competed briefly but with some degree of success.

Even arch-bachelor **Doug Hepburn** had a relative in the sport. His nephew **Glen MacLennan** took second to Russ Prior in the 1971 Canada Games. He had great strength potential but an injury ended his career prematurely.

The most visible father-son team on the coast is the **Greavettes**. **Ron** was a journeyman lifter who soon went into coaching and still later into the CWFHC presidency. Son **Guy** was a lifter of international calibre who also went on to coach.

### Yukon

In the Klondike we have a reverse situation. First **Jeane Lassen** becomes a major star in women's lifting, eventually winning two U Worlds golds. This brought her mother **Moir** into the sport as a national and international administrator and referee. We have yet to see the first mother-daughter lifting team.....so far.

### International

While there are many families involved in our sport at the international level there have been oddly enough very few brother acts. The first to reach prominence were **Pete** and **Jim George** (USA) in the 1950s. They also claimed to be the first Bulgarian world record holders since their parents were from Macedonia. Next came the **Miyake** brothers (JPN) who both won 60 kg gold in the 1960s. At around the same time Finland had two families that won a number of medals and set some records. The **Kailajarvis** were first. Later the **Kangasneimis** ruled in the 90s and 110s. As mentioned Canada has two University World Champions in the Turcotte sisters.

In more recent years we must mention the **Alexeevs**. Although sons **Sergei** and **Dmitri** never lifted at a high international level that papa **Vasily** did they would have if they had lived almost anywhere else than in the Soviet Union. They both were 500 lb plus jerkers. Recently we have the **Klokovs**. Father **Viacheslav** was world champ a few years back and now his son is as well. At the World Masters Games I noticed one **Sergei Lopatin Jr.** lifting for Russia. He turned out to be the son of the 1961 67.5 champ who old timers will remember was the son of 1950s Soviet **Evgeni Lopatin**. Tommy Kono had noticed this, so now he has seen all three lift.

I hope that this look at how the culture of our sport is handed down to our new recruits in a country where there are few institutions that can effectively support it voluntarily. If all of our hockey coaches and leaders died overnight they would all be replaced by the next evening. But if the same happened to our weightlifting people we would have to start all over, waiting for some lifters to emigrate and for them to have families that will help eventually spread the word.

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