



# Weightlifting's Champion Carl Miller

by Kim Goss

*Down-to-earth wisdom from one of America's most respected proponents of weightlifting for life*

**J**ust as every sport has its heroes, every form of physical conditioning has its champions. Sure, there's an endless parade of fitness celebrities who want you to stretch rubber bands, march on plastic boxes, electrocute your abdominals and even stand on giant rubber balls. The most vocal fitness groups of all may be those who promote aerobics as the ultimate form of exercise. One aerobic guru even wrote a bestselling book, *Smart Exercise*, that implies weight training is, if not stupid, certainly inferior to aerobic training. Putting that idea to rest once and for all is lifetime weightlifter and active gym owner Carl Miller. A personable guy and senior citizen who can outlift most college football players, Miller is proving that weightlifting is the best way to increase athletic performance and improve the quality of life.

"I once heard a speaker from Cooper's Aerobics Center say weight training wasn't aerobic," writes Miller in his upcoming book, *The Miller Physical Training Plan*. "I cornered him and taught him to do one of the Olympic lifts on a 45 pound bar. I asked him to do ten repetitions. He was amazed at the effect the exercise had on his body and admitted he had not realized how aerobic that lifting could be. I told him to go back and spread the word about the cardiovascular merits of lifting—we would be glad to share our data." Unfortunately for the public at

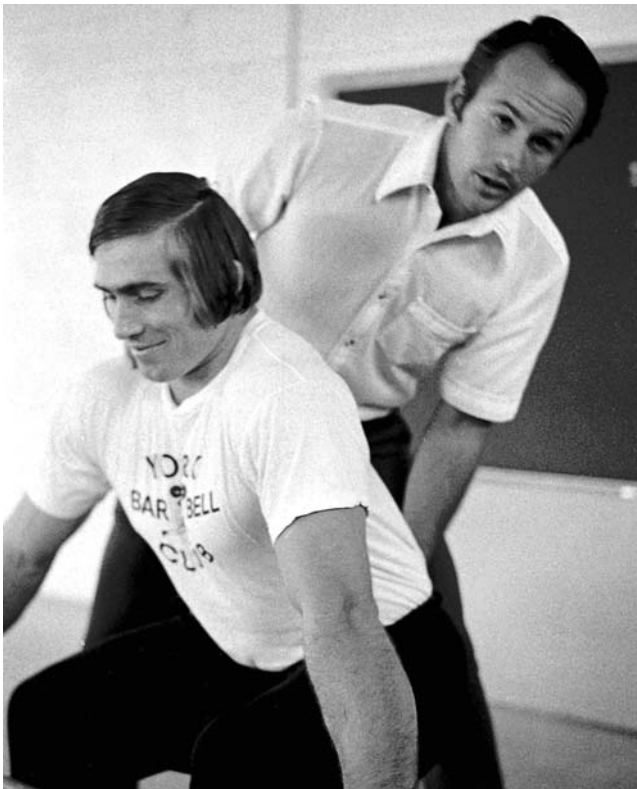
large, the man apparently kept his experience to himself.

"If you are not a biker, swimmer, runner or the like you don't get through to anybody responsible at that center," says Miller. But that wasn't stopping Miller, and he continued teaching the gospel of athletic weight training to those with open minds. It's Miller's passion for lifting, especially explosive lifting, that prompted me to learn more about his training philosophy and to visit him this summer at the 12,000 square-foot gym that he and his wife, Sandra Thomas, own and operate in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



## The Back to the Future Gym

Located in the center of the city, Carl and Sandra's Physical Conditioning Center has been in business for over 20 years and is proof that Miller's program works. Unlike any other gym in the country, this facility displays pride in its clients with 275-plus banners hanging across the gym recognizing those who have personally trained under Miller's guidance for at least five years. Not just individuals who have paid a membership and have



**When he was the coaching coordinator for the US Weightlifting Federation in the 70s, Miller gave many hands-on seminars to promising athletes.**

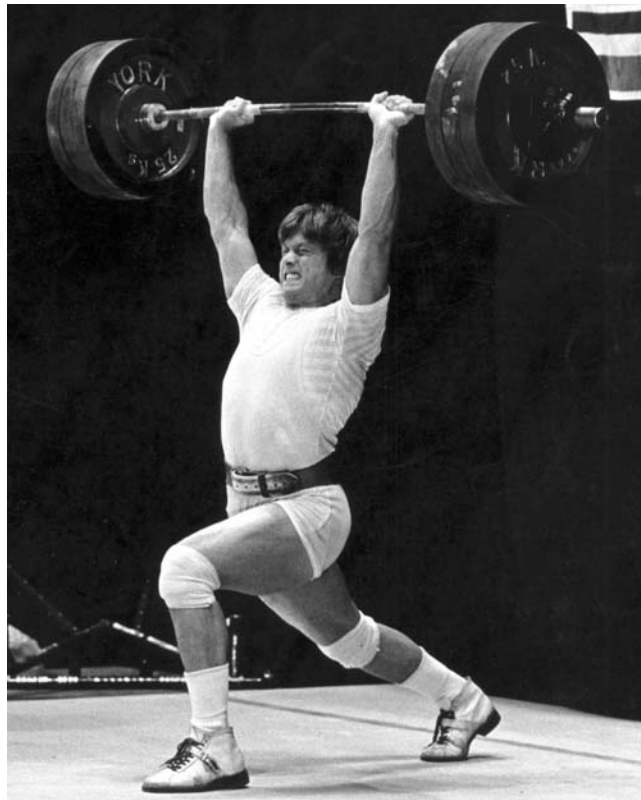
showed up occasionally, a practice that Miller doesn't tolerate, but those who have completed approximately 46 six-week training programs that Miller personally designed for them. Some have been working under Miller's guidance for as many as 20 years—now that's dedication!

While high-tech treadmills, weight training machines, stair climbers, elliptical cycles and stationary bikes now form the core of most of America's gyms, Miller's gym features new and classic equipment that emphasizes function over flash.

## **BFS Meets Carl Miller**

When Miller was age 12 he wanted more than anything to become a quarterback. Upon the suggestion of his stepfather, he started lifting weights to become strong for football. That first year they trained at former Mr. America Bert Goodrich's gym in Hollywood, California.

After a year Miller and his stepfather switched to a gym in the San Fernando Valley. After another year of training with primarily bodybuilding exercises, Miller was introduced to Frank Spellman, 1948 Olympic gold medalist in weightlifting (165-pound bodyweight division). Spellman introduced



**Luke Klaja was coached by Miller and made the 1980 Olympic Team in the 198-pound bodyweight class. He could clean and jerk 429 pounds.**

Miller to the Olympic lifts, the snatch and the clean and jerk, and continued to coach the young man until he was 21. "I was so captivated by the sport that it influenced me as both an advocacy and a vocation," recalls Miller.

Soon after enrolling at UCLA in a pre-dental program, Miller found that time constraints forced him to choose between football and weightlifting. He chose weightlifting. And then, realizing that his passion was not in dentistry but in coaching, Miller went on to earn a master's degree in exercise science at the University of Arizona.

After graduation Miller coached weightlifting in South America for two years and in Japan for three years. Miller provides insight into why he loves the sport: "Doing something athletically using speed, timing, agility and flexibility in the coordinated power chain of the hips and legs, back, and then arms against an immovable object! Now this is real power! The most powerful sport of all!"

I first met Miller in 1977 when I attended his Olympic-style weightlifting camp in Santa Fe. Miller's program was a week long crash course of classroom and gym instruction, teaching all aspects of competitive Olympic lifting. Serving as the national coaching coordinator for the US Weightlifting Federation, Miller told us how he had

Photo: Bruce Clements

had visited Bulgaria and other Eastern Bloc countries to learn their secrets of success so he could share them with American lifters through his writing, lectures, training camps and personal coaching. The following year Miller was named head coach of the US Weightlifting Team at the World Championships.

The athletes Miller has coached have performed well in junior, open, and masters' competitions. His most accomplished athlete is Luke Klaja, now a successful physical therapist with a private practice in Klamath Falls, Oregon. Klaja was a member of the 1980 Olympic Team, competing in the 198-pound bodyweight class. Known for his speed and excellent technique, Klaja at his strongest was able to clean and jerk 429 pounds. At the Olympic Trials when Klaja was about to attempt a weight that would earn him a spot on the team, Miller recalls that his athlete turned to him for encouragement to make the lift. Bemused that his athlete needed any more incentive than making the Olympic team, Miller quipped, "Miss it and you owe me \$100!" To this day, Klaja remains in excellent shape, and in 1998 he broke the national masters' clean and jerk record in the 45-49 age group, lifting 319 pounds in the 187-pound class.

As a lifter in his own right, Miller had a competitive lifting career that spanned four decades. At age 19 he broke the national teenage record in the snatch; at age 41 there were no more than a handful of US lifters stronger than Miller as he snatched 281 and clean and jerked 352 while weighing 181, despite having several surgeries that included two spinal fusions. Two years ago at age 61 he cleaned 319. Not only can Miller hold his own in the weight room against many college football players, at 61 he ran the 40 in 4.91!

In the 70s when he was working tirelessly as our coaching coordinator, Miller traveled extensively in foreign countries to study the training of the world's best weightlifters. At one time he was able to get a private audience with Bulgarian Head Coach Ivan Abadjiev, the man who single-handedly transformed Bulgaria into a world weightlifting power capable of challenging, and often defeating, the mighty Russians.

Miller wrote and lectured extensively about the keys to Bulgaria's success, one of which was to keep the multiple daily workouts short, often no more than 45 minutes, to prevent overtraining and to enable the athletes to work out harder. He also wrote extensively on the Bulgarian lifting style, which was difficult to master but enabled the lifter to move the barbell faster, and on how the Bulgarian coaches limited their exercise selection to primarily just the classical lifts, the snatch and clean and jerk, and squats. Such training is now considered the standard model for almost all elite international lifters.

## The Miller Physical Training Plan

Those who recognize the value of the snatch and clean and jerk, and exercises derived from these lifts, consider them unmatched for developing total body strength and power. According to Miller, the characteristic shared by these exercises is that they start with the most powerful muscles of the body, the legs and hips, and then transfer over to the less

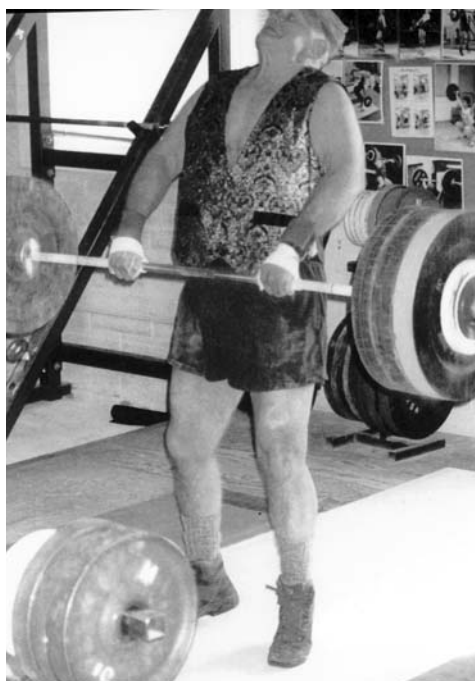
powerful upper body muscles. "It is similar to throwing a small rock into a pond and seeing the concentric circles radiating out," says Miller.

In addition to developing the muscles in a coordinated manner to produce a greater workload in a shorter amount of time, these "athletic weight training" exercises have many other benefits. The first is an aerobic training effect – yes, aerobic – to develop cardiovascular fitness. Miller says that the aerobic content of an activity is related to how many calories are burned per unit of time. And per unit of time, weightlifting is a high calorie burner.

In a personal experiment with Colombian Olympic-style weightlifting champion Hiram Aguirre, Miller found that during training Aguirre's calorie expenditure was between 500 and 800 calories per hour. He later found that studies by the Japanese and Chinese using large groups

(in one study there were 218 subjects!) came to the same conclusion that Olympic lifting training could burn 600 to 800 calories per hour.

With the aerobic question answered, Miller addressed the subject that weightlifting does not burn fat. "Doesn't it stand to reason that once existing fuel is used, the body draws upon fat for its



**At age 61 Miller cleaned 319 pounds. At age 41 while weighing only 181 pounds, he snatched 281 and clean and jerked 352.**



**Carl and Sandra's gym is 12,000 square feet and contains four Olympic lifting platforms with quality Olympic bars and bumper plates.**

fuel?" asks Miller. Further, he says, you only need to look at the lean bodies of gymnasts, athletes whose exercise is anaerobic as defined by physiologists, to see that anaerobic exercise burns fat.

Additional benefits of weight training are increases in bone density and stress reduction. Miller says because he uses a large variety of exercises, including over 500 progressive variations of the two Olympic lifts, his workouts are more enjoyable than typical weight training programs. He also says that aerobic exercise on equipment such as treadmills and stair climbers can be boring and as such might lead some people to quit their exercise program. "We do have bikes, rowing machines, steppers and Nordic Tracks at the gym, but we use them for warm-ups and as adjuncts to our programs, not as the program itself," says Miller.

Although athletes from numerous sports train at the Millers' gym, there are no competitive bodybuilders or powerlifters. You train under Carl Miller's guidance, or you don't train at all. For those primarily interested in optimal fitness, Miller's standard program consists of new workouts every six weeks, and a trained staff ensures that you perform each exercise with perfect technique. Most workouts take about 45 minutes. Although Miller has found that his clients can make progress training just twice a week, and maintain with one workout every five days, he believes best results are achieved with three training sessions per week. Miller is adamant about regular workouts. One member I talked to said she had not worked out the previous week but had not told Miller, and when she returned home she found a message that he had called to find out why she had missed her workout!



**The free-weight gym has been in business for over 20 years, and 275 members have been training with Miller for at least five years.**

Nutrition is key to Miller's program, and members can receive a personal nutritional evaluation by expert nutritionist Sandra Thomas. Commenting on popular diet programs, Miller believes that care must be taken with those individuals who insist on being vegetarian. Miller says being a vegetarian is not easy; it takes considerable thought and planning to ensure all the nutrients are included in the proper amounts and meals are varied and satisfying. "Unless the vegetarian likes large amount of beans and rice at every meal, every day, the meals can get boring," says Miller. Miller also says that protein should be taken at every meal, and that if the body goes six to seven waking hours without enough of a usable complete protein, 10-14 grams for most adults, it will burn muscle and retain fat.

During my visit I saw not only nationally ranked weightlifter Jody Stanbo preparing for a competition, but also a middle-aged woman performing split cleans under Miller's supervision. Lifts can be modified for anyone at any age, emphasizes Miller, having taught for ten years in elementary schools in Santa Fe and now coaching clients from ages 8 to 91 at his center.

One thing that impressed me was how friendly everyone was at the gym, not just Miller's staff but also the members. Carl Miller has created an attractive facility that is both professional and personal, and he really cares about his clients. "We are very proud of the membership here," says Miller. "We have a hugely diverse and fascinating group of people using the facility. While we seek to provide an environment conducive to the pursuit of serious fitness, we very much enjoy the fun, humor and sometimes serious discussion that our members bring in with them. This all contributes to the promotion of health." Spoken like a true champion!

