

New Classification Systems for Athletes and Coaches to Be Implemented in 2012
By Artie Drechsler 1/26/12

Your USAW Board of Directors has been deliberating for many months about ways to better measure and recognize outstanding athletic and coaching performances. As part of this process, we have created a new classification system for athletes, and outlined a new structure for the development and classification of coaches. These programs will be implemented during 2012. Here is some background on each program and an explanation of how each will work.

Athlete Classification

From the 1960's through the early 1990s, the Soviet Union (USSR) was the world's leading power in the sport of weightlifting in terms of the number of high level lifters it produced. As part of that development process, the Soviets created a very detailed athlete classification system that was meant to recognize and reward athletes for their performances at World's Championships and Olympic Games. In addition, the Soviet system was constructed to assure that if there were several athletes at any point in time who could win the World Championships (and there often were) all of those athletes would be recognized, not just those who actually made the World team and won medals. But perhaps the most important benefit of the system was to provide athletes, and coaches, with clear guidance with respect to their progress toward the highest international levels of performance. Many other countries, including the USA in the late 1960's, adopted similar systems. And the majority of US athletes and coaches seemed to like our system, but its standards were not updated regularly and eventually the system fell into disuse. Now we have come up with a new system that we hope will offer a better means to recognize and reward our top and rising athletes.

Our classification system, like our Olympic Team Ranking System, is based on the average of the bronze medal winning performances at the most recent five years of World Championships/Olympic Games. That is because we wanted the classifications we created to be tightly linked to medal winning performances at the highest levels of international competition. After studying performances at the world level since 1998, we realized that using only a year or two of results as the basis of a ranking system led to significant fluctuations from year to year. In contrast, using a very long period of results, such as 10 years, failed to take into account emerging trends in performance (e.g., that men's performances since 1998 have declined by approximately 1% while women's performance have increased by nearly 8%). As a result, we settled on five years as offering the best combination of smoothing and current relevance. This means the averages will self-adjust to performance changes over time, but the changes will never be precipitous from one year to the next.

Our analysis also revealed a relationship, in terms of medal winning totals, between the senior lifters and junior lifters, and senior lifters and youth age lifters. It turns out that, on average, the totals of Junior World Championships medalists are approximately 90% of those made at the Senior World level. Similarly, medal winning performances at the Youth World Championships level are approximately 75% of those of senior lifters.

On the basis of all of this information and analysis, we have created a classification system with the following characteristics. The highest level, which for senior lifters we are tentatively calling "Merited International Elite", is set at the bronze medal winning level at World Championships and Olympic Games (we are looking for input on these titles and "distinguished" has already been suggested as an alternative to "merited"). The next highest level, which is tentatively called "International Elite", is set at

95% of the Merited International Elite level. The next highest level after that, "International", is 90% of the highest level. Each level thereafter is 5% lower.

For Junior athletes, the highest level, which is tentatively called "Junior Merited International Elite," is set at 90% of the medal winning total for senior lifters (or at the same level as "International" for senior lifters). And each successive Junior level is 5% lower. Similarly, the highest level for Youth age athletes is tentatively called "Youth Merited International Elite" and it has been set at 75% of the senior medal winning level. So we have separate classification systems for senior, junior and youth age athletes, but they are all tied together by their relationship to the senior medal winning standard.

We expect to produce patches, certificates or some similar means of recognition for athlete classifications and to list athletes at the higher levels on our web-site. We also plan to experiment with tying athlete support to the new classification system. For example, if we send a full team to the Junior World Championship, we might fund the trips of those who are classified "Junior International Elite" and above at 100%, those who are one level down at 75%, and those who are yet another level down at 50%.

We hope that the prospect of all athletes being able to measure their performances against those of the best in the world will be an exciting prospect. And we think that recognizing coaches for their development of athletes at various classification levels presents some interesting possibilities as well, since such measures might be much more meaningful than simply looking at the number of athletes a coach has produced who have made a certain team.

A table that summarizes the new athlete classification system, using the most current available totals, appears below:

PROPOSED USAW ATHLETE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM											
WOMEN											
	100%	95%	90%	85%	80%	75%	70%	65%	60%	55%	50%
Senior	Merited	Int'l Elite	Int'l	Nat'l Elite	National	Candidate	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local
	Int'l Elite					National	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Junior			Jr. Merited	J Int'l Elite	Jr. Int'l	J Nat'l Elite	J National	J Candidate	Jr. Local	Jr. Local	Jr. Local
			Int'l Elite					National	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Youth						Y Merited	Y Int'l Elite	Y Int'l	Youth	Youth	Y C and
						Int'l Elite			Nat'l Elite	National	National
AVG											
196.6	197	187	177	167	157	147	138	128	118	108	98
210.6	211	200	190	179	168	158	147	137	126	116	105
225.6	226	214	204	192	180	169	158	147	135	124	113
240.2	240	228	216	204	192	180	168	156	144	132	120
249.2	249	237	224	212	199	187	174	162	150	137	125
271.4	271	258	244	231	217	204	190	176	163	149	136
288.0	288	274	259	245	230	216	202	187	173	158	144
MEN											
	100%	95%	90%	85%	80%	75%	70%	65%	60%	55%	50%
Senior	Merited	Int'l Elite	Int'l	Nat'l Elite	National	Candidate	Local	Local	Local	Local	Local
	Int'l Elite					National	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Junior			Jr. Merited	J Int'l Elite	Jr. Int'l	J Nat'l Elite	J National	J Candidate	Jr. Local	Jr. Local	Jr. Local
			Int'l Elite					National	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Youth						Y Merited	Y Int'l Elite	Y Int'l	Youth	Youth	Y C and
						Int'l Elite			Nat'l Elite	National	National
AVG											
279.2	279	265	251	237	223	209	195	181	168	154	140
307.4	307	292	277	261	246	231	215	200	184	169	154
332.2	332	316	299	282	266	249	233	216	199	183	166
360.4	360	342	324	306	288	270	252	234	216	198	180
375.8	376	357	338	319	301	282	263	244	225	207	188
395.4	395	376	356	336	316	297	277	257	237	217	198
410.2	410	390	369	349	328	308	287	267	246	226	205
436.6	437	415	393	371	349	327	306	284	262	240	218

Note: Averages (AVG) shown above are actual. All other numbers are a percentage of the AVG rounded to the nearest kilo

Coach Classification

Our first coaching classification system was developed in the late 1980's and it had numerical designations (1 being the entry level and 5 being the highest). There was no particularly good rationale for the five levels, versus say four or six, but it was a start. Eventually, names were substituted for numbers - Club, Senior, Regional, International and Senior International. Initially, rankings were made by committee, without very clear criteria. Later, as coaching courses were developed at various levels, educational requirements were tied to coach advancement, as was the level of athletes a coach had produced and any experience a coach had at international and similar events. The relative emphasis of the ranking system, in terms of education, versus experience, versus athlete development, shifted from time to time, and at times a coach's referee level was factored in. There seemed to be constant battles about what was most important factor and how coaches should be classified. Compounding this problem were changes in coaching education staff and committees. The end result was often extended periods during which the courses required to advance were not available, or other requirements could

not be met, even by the most willing coaches. These are among the many reasons that we thought a fresh look at our coaching classification system was in order.

As we reviewed the system, it became clear that names of and number of coach levels we have are both arbitrary and weakly integrated with how coaches and athletes are actually developed. To say someone is a “club coach” has limited meaning to the outside world, or even us. Some clubs are local and have limited aspirations, while others are very large and geographically dispersed. Some clubs cater mostly to masters, or to younger athletes, while others focus on the elite, and still others work with lifters of every stripe. Consequently, to say a coach is qualified to coach in a club has little meaning.

Similarly, the “Senior” coach may sound impressive to some, but it is somewhat vague – senior to what? Then there is the Regional level. Since there are no regions in our sport anymore (there were precisely defined and active regions decades ago), what exactly does a “Regional” coach denote?

In contrast, International and Sr. International coaching titles have clear referents in reality. Most coaches and outsiders would understand that such coaches handle international level athletes, with the Senior International coach being in some way more seasoned than the International.

Because our current coaching levels are uneven in usefulness and their linkage to athlete level (except at the international level), we decided to restructure the titles and categories of coaches to be more in keeping with how weightlifting competition actually works. That was accomplished by creating four levels, with titles that are clearly tied to event levels. For instance, we plan to call the entry level coach a “Local Event Coach”, implying that such coaches work with lifters performing at the local level and/or working with younger lifters, up through the Youth National level. The next level up is the “National Event Coach”, signaling someone who could coach athletes to the true national level (e.g., Jr. National, American Open and National). The next level is the International Event Coach (equal to today’s International Coach), signaling coaches who are capable of preparing athletes for performing in major international events. Finally, the Sr. International Event Coaches are those who are qualified to serve as head coaches at the major international event level, not solely by virtue of athlete production, but also by virtue of having demonstrated high performance in handling teams with at least some unfamiliar athletes at the international level.

These aren’t just meant to be pretty names (and suggestions for better names are welcome). But the modified names and four levels will have meaning in relation to the highest level of lifters these coaches work with. Note that we have an analog here to the way we have organized the development of those who are in a discipline in which we have been, and continue to be, very effective - the production of referees, many of whom rank among the best in the world. What are our referee levels? They are: Local, National, Category 2 (International) and Category 1 (Senior International). These levels are not arbitrary. They match the function and training of referees. Some only want to help locally and don’t want to deal with the complexity of the national or international levels. Others wish to participate at a higher level, where greater consistency, complexity and precision are required.

These referee levels have existed for decades and make perfect sense. But something more than the levels work. The process of developing these referees works. We train, test (on written and practical basis) local referees, then give such referees exposure at the local level. After they have served successfully for several years, we permit them to sit for a rigorous written exam and then test them on a practical basis at a national event, where the input of several testers is employed, and conditions can be highly controlled. And we are not afraid to fail those who do not reach the required standard, in part

because those issuing the grades at the higher levels are not individuals, but rather part of a group. Similar approaches are used for the higher level referees. While this format cannot and should not be exactly or blindly reproduced for coaches, modeling our coach progressions after our referee progressions in certain respects (such as testing, methodology and availability) has many advantages.

For local level coaches, we expect to continue to require the completion of a combined coaching and sports performance course (enriched over the one we have now). A home study version of that course will soon be available. Both those who take a live course, and those who study at home, will be required to pass rigorous proctored written and practical exams that demonstrate such a coach can go on to coach new and young athletes, with our confidence that they understand technique, safe coaching practices, and enough of the rules to handle lifters at local competitions, and can apply our lifts enhance sports performance.

To advance to the National Event coaching level, coaches would need to develop and demonstrate their knowledge by completing a rigorous advanced course (likely through some combination of home study and live classes) and pass a written exam. But they would also be required to develop athletes who compete on a national level and who display sound technique. In other words, they will have demonstrated their ability to develop at least two national level lifters with a good level of skill.

Once the coach has developed such lifters, he/she would request an examination at a national event. We would provide a written exam, in the same way as we do for referees (if such an exam had not already been completed successfully after a live course). The practical would consist of identifying the lifters the coach has developed and designated as examples of his/her coaching skill. The technique of those lifters would be evaluated on an objective basis, by a panel of at least three advanced level coaches (much as the Jury evaluates referees today). However, a technique checklist would be provided to the evaluators (and to coaches), so that the evaluations would be consistent and complete. By having structured criteria and a panel (versus one instructor) evaluating performance, we could expect to have reliable results and to cultivate coaches who focus on developing the technique of their athletes as much as their performance in terms of weight lifted. And we could eliminate the problem of access to advancement, as a guaranteed number of tests at national events would be available every year (as compared with having years go by in which no advanced courses or tests are given, as has happened many times in the past).

Current Senior and Regional level coaches would be permitted to retain their existing classifications, or they could move up to the National event coach level, if they had produced the requisite National level athletes and those athletes had been evaluated by a coaching panel (this could be done retroactively by video analysis). This is because each of these levels of current coaches have presumably taken advanced courses and passed the associated written exams. Current International and Senior International Coaches would be untouched by the new system (those wishing to advance from National to International in the future would need to produce international level athletes and demonstrate knowledge of international level competition). The end result of these transition rules would be that no one loses a current title and those who qualify will be given credit for results already achieved (e.g., in terms of athlete production).

We hope that our coaches will appreciate the advantages of the new system, and understand that it will take some time to fully implement. In the meantime, our Coaching Education Director, Andy Tysz, will soon be releasing a document that will permit coaches who feel they have been overlooked under the

current criteria to receive the appropriate ranking under these criteria, before the new system goes into effect.