



POWERLIFTING 101

A competition guide for the novice powerlifter

Written by Mike Jones & Sean Clarke
Ruthless Barbell Club 2024

INDEX:

Page 1: How a powerlifting competition works.

1. Flights & sessions.
2. Rounds & attempts.

Page 2: The general rules of powerlifting.

Page 3: Things to know Before the day.

1. Time, Date Location.
2. Ruleset.
3. Weigh in time and location.
4. Understand competition timetable/structure. Sessions and flights.
5. Comp day nutrition.

Page 4 & 5: On the day (after weigh-in).

1. Eat and hydrate.
2. Find warmup area.
3. Check flights and lifting order.
4. Planning warmups.

Page 6: How to warmup.

1. Etiquette in the warmup room.
2. How to adjust on the day.

Page 7: Attempt Selection.

1. Attempt submission rules.
2. Attempt selection guidelines.

Page 8: Keys to success.

1. Expectations for the day.
2. Executing with patience and precision – trust your process.
3. Be adaptable – have a plan, so you can deviate if needed without getting lost (for warmups and attempts) listen to your body.
4. Talk and meet new people.
5. Have fun.
6. Notes from the coaches.

How a powerlifting competition works:

In a powerlifting competition, lifters complete three rounds/attempts for each discipline: Squat, Bench Press, then Deadlift.

Each session follows the same structure:

Squat (3 rounds/attempts) → Bench Press (3 rounds/attempts) → Deadlift (3 rounds/attempts).

Flights & Sessions:

Flights: Lifters are arranged into groups of 6-15 lifters called flights. Flights are alphabetically named; A, B, C, D etc.

Sessions: Flights are then arranged into sessions. A session is a cluster of 1-3 flights. All flights within a session will complete their entire competition, before the next session begins. Sessions are numerically named; 1, 2, 3 etc.

Each Flight within a session will complete all three attempts before the next flight begins. E.g Lifters in Flight A will complete all three squat attempts before Flight B begins.

Rounds/Attempts:

Each flight goes through three rounds for each lift. Each round is arranged via lightest to heaviest weight on the bar:

Round 1: All lifters in the flight attempt their first squat.

Round 2: All lifters in the flight attempt their second squat.

Round 3: All lifters in the flight attempt their third squat.

After all flights within a session have completed a discipline, there is a scheduled break before the next discipline begins. Scheduled break time should be communicated prior to the day, then displayed as a countdown on a monitor during the break itself – if it is not, ask!

The sum of a lifters best Squat, Bench Press & Deadlift determines the lifter's Total.

THE GOAL AT THE START OF YOUR POWERLIFTING CAREER IS TO BUILD THE BEST TOTAL YOU HAVE AVAILABLE ON THE DAY.

The General Rules of Powerlifting:

Each of your lifts will be judged by three referees to ensure the standard is satisfactory. Each referee will either award a white or red light. You need at least 2 of 3 red lights for a lift to be successful.

Note: You can ask any referee that gives you a red light what it was for; ensure to do this in a respectful manner as any inappropriate behaviour can see you ejected from the competition.

Squats:

The Ref's Calls:

1. "Platform Is Ready/Bar Is Loaded" – You Approach the Platform, Unrack & Walkout.
2. "Squat" – You Perform A Squat.
3. "Rack" – You Re-Rack the Bar.

Causes For a Failed Lift:

1. Missing the lift.
2. Missing any of the calls.
3. Moving of foot position anytime after the "Squat" command.
4. Missing Depth – Hip Joint below Top Of Knee.
5. Downward movement of the bar on the way back up.
6. Not locking knees at the top.

Bench Press:

The Ref's Calls:

1. "Platform Is Ready/Bar Is Loaded" – You Approach the Platform, Lay Down & Unrack.
2. "Start" – You bring the bar to your chest and hold it motionless.
3. "Press" – You press the bar back up.
4. "Rack" – You Re-Rack the Bar.

Causes For a Failed Lift:

1. Missing the lift.
2. Missing any of the calls.
3. Change of Position after the 'Start' Command.
4. Sinking/Downward movement after the 'Press' Command.
5. Not locking elbows at the top.

Deadlift:

The Ref's Calls:

1. "Platform Is Ready/Bar Is Loaded" – You Approach the Platform & Lift The Bar.
2. "Down" – You lower the bar to the ground.

Causes For a Failed Lift:

1. Missing the lift.
2. Missing any of the calls.
3. Any downward movement of the bar on the way up.
4. Using the thighs to support/assist the bar.
5. Not locking knees, hips & shoulders at the top.
6. Dropping the bar at any time – including on the way down after the 'Down' command.

Things to Know Before the Day:

1. Time, Date, Location:

Make sure you know the exact time and location of your competition. Arrive early to avoid any unnecessary stress.

2. Ruleset:

Every powerlifting federation has its own set of rules – all are similar apart from a few small nuances and technicalities. It's essential to understand the rules specific to your competition, such as equipment standards, commands, and allowable gear (belt, wraps, shoes, etc.).

3. Weight Class, Weigh-In Time and Location:

Powerlifting is a 'weigh-classed' sport. Meaning there is certain weight divisions athletes must fit into. Know what weight classes your competition caters for and enter in the division you comfortably sit within. Do not bother with 'making weight, losing weight, cutting weight' early in your powerlifting career.

Be aware of your weigh-in time and where it will take place. Have your opening attempts ready (openers are your first attempt weights of each lift – if you are a Ruthless Athlete these will be on your competition plan from your coach). Valid ID may be needed at weigh-in.

4. Understand Competition Timetable/Structure:

Competitions are typically divided into sessions and flights. A session will typically be made up of 1-3 flights. A flight is a smaller group of lifters typically made up of 6 – 15 lifters. Know which session and you are in to ensure you go to the appropriate weigh-in time. Know which flight you are in to plan your warm-up properly.

5. Competition Day Nutrition:

Bring easy-to-digest, carbohydrate-based foods to keep you fuelled throughout the competition. Hydration is equally important—bring water and electrolytes to stay hydrated. Ensure that you eat in between each discipline.

On the Day – After Weigh-In:

1. Eat and Hydrate – Even if You Are Nervous

Once you've weighed in, it's important to eat and drink. Nerves can make you lose your appetite, but you need to fuel your body for the competition. Focus on foods you normally eat that are easy to digest—carbs, some protein is fine, and fluids with electrolytes to stay hydrated. Avoid trying anything new on competition day.

2. Find the Warmup Area

Locate the designated warmup area as soon as possible. This is where you'll prepare for your lifts. Knowing where it is helps you avoid scrambling at the last minute.

Note: some federations use 'Attempt Cards' which is a physical card you hand to the table to submit your attempt, these need to have your name and signature on them – do this now but DO NOT put your attempts on yet. Make sure you have some pens.

3. Check Flights and Lifting Order

After Weigh-Ins. The data will be entered into the computer by the table staff and each flights lifting order will be generated. Keep an eye on this and find out where you are in the lifting order for each lift and make a note of this on your competition plan.

Squat:								
Time:						5th		
	Warmup	Warmup	Warmup	Warmup	Final Warmup	1st Attempt	2nd Attempt	3rd Attempt
Weight:	20 / 60	75	85	90	95	100	105	107.5
Cues:								

This example suggests the athlete will be the 5th lifter to lift.

Continued next page

4. Plan Warmup Timings

Once you know where you are in the lifting order – work backwards from there to plan your final warmup – give yourself roughly 10minutes between your last warmup and your opening attempt.

Give yourself 5-10 minutes between all other warmups. As a rule of thumb, estimate that each attempt takes one minute. The most important warmup by far is the final warmup, so don't worry too much if you find yourself guessing the earlier warmup times – make your way to taking the final warmup on time.

If you are in the first flight of a session, due to the scheduled break you will be timing your final warm up based upon 'minutes out' from the start of your flight:

Squat:								
Time:	35min out	25min out	20min out	15min out	5min out	5th		
	Warmup	Warmup	Warmup	Warmup	Final Warmup	1st Attempt	2nd Attempt	3rd Attempt
Weight:	20 / 60	75	85	90	95	100	105	107.5
Cues:								

This example shows working backwards from their opening attempt in 'minutes out' of the start of the flight – for bench press & deadlifts, remember to account for the scheduled break between disciplines.

If you are NOT in the first flight of a session, you must base your last warmup on the pace of the flight before you, with reference to 'attempts out':

Squat:								
Time:	Through Openers	Early 2nds	Late 2nds	5 out	5th			
	Warmup	Warmup	Warmup	Warmup	Final Warmup	1st Attempt	2nd Attempt	3rd Attempt
Weight:	20 / 60	75	85	90	95	100	105	107.5
Cues:								

This example shows working backwards from their opening attempt paced by what attempts the previous flight is up to. You will see the first three warmups in this case are all done through the openers of the previous flight.

How to Warm-Up:

Warmup Room Etiquette:

1. There will be lots of people in a cramped space. Bring only what you need and keep your things tidy.
2. Don't bring in excess people with you. You only need yourself and/or a single handler/coach.
3. Find a rack you want to work on – everyone has the same entitlement to warm up.
4. Talk with the other groups on your rack – ask what their warmups are. Help load & unload the bar for each other.
5. Unload the bar and leave the space tidy for the next group once you are done.

Getting ready to warm up:

- If you are in flight A of a session and lifting begins at 9am, be ready (fully dressed etc.) and ready to get under an empty bar at 8am.
- If you are in a later flight of a session, be ready to get under an empty bar AS SOON as the flight before you begin lifting.

Warming Up:

This is where you can follow your warmup plan that you planned out after weigh-in.

Some helpful notes for warming up:

- Don't worry about what others are doing, many people are just winging it.
- Be flexible, in our framework we take the 'long' approach to warming up (Starting early and having longer breaks between). This gives us the opportunity to stay on schedule even if we have to move a warmup forward or backward a couple of minutes to fit in with others.
- Keep an eye on the countdown timer OR how the flight before you is tracking, they can go deceptively slow or fast sometimes.
- Be realistic with how things are feeling on the day and take your last warmup with enough time to change your opener if necessary. Most competitions this is either 3 minutes before lifting starts OR 3 lifters out from your flight starting. A good rule of thumb is aim for 5 minutes / 5 lifters out. To change your opener, you will submit it to the 'table'. The table is where the scorekeepers/computer staff will be sitting; this is usually just off to the side of the platform.

Attempt Selection:

Attempt submission rules:

- After each attempt, you have 1 minute to submit your next attempt to the table. If you fail to submit an attempt after a successful lift within 1 minute, an automatic increase of 2.5kg will be input. If you fail to submit an attempt after an unsuccessful lift within 1 minute, and automatic repeat will be input.
- You can only go up in 2.5kg increments (unless it is for a record, in which case you can go up in 0.5kg increments).
- You cannot go down in weight – the only opportunity to do this is to change your opener (see the previous page).

Some Notes on Attempt Selection:

- The goal of powerlifting is to build the biggest total possible on the day.
- The best way to build a good total is to make as many attempts as possible.
- It should be of particularly high importance to make 3 successful squats and 3 successful bench presses.
- Don't rely on hope. Make smart choices. Take what's available. Build the total.

Attempt selection guidelines:

- If you are a Ruthless Athlete, planned attempts will be in your comp plan. But the below guidelines still apply.
- If you miss a lift, retake it. Do not go up in weight.
- From opener to second attempt: 4% - 6% increase.
- From second to third attempt: 2% - 4% increase.

	5% Increase	3% Increase
Opener:	Second:	Third:
40	42.5	45
80	85	87.5
120	125	130
160	167.5	172.5
200	210	215
240	252.5	260
280	295	305

What this may practically look like.

Keys to Success:

1. Manage your expectations.

If you have never done a powerlifting competition before, you have no frame of reference. Aim to enjoy the day, meet new people and build a total. Don't be greedy in your attempt selection, take high probability attempts and bank the kilos toward your total.

2. Trust your processes.

There is nothing unique about the job YOU have to do when you step out onto the platform. So don't do anything different. By the time the day comes, you should have been training to competition standard for months, and practicing the competition calls with your training partners. Follow your process, trust yourself, be patient and enjoy the moment.

3. Be adaptable.

You are in control of your actions and decisions. When things aren't perfect or aren't going your way, be adaptable.

You may have to warm up on a rack that isn't very good. You may not be feeling as strong as you had hoped on the day. You may disagree with the referee's decisions of a lift. Deal with it, be adaptable and move forward in a constructive manner.

The reason we have such a robust plan, is so that we still have solid direction when we need to deviate / pivot from that plan.

4. Make friends.

At the entry level of powerlifting (and often at the top end), everyone is as nervous as each other. Talk, make friends, have a laugh and relax a little bit. It's just lifting weights.

5. Have fun.

The day of competition is the reward for all the hard work you have been doing. It's meant to be fun, enjoy it.

Lessons From Sean Clarke:

“Weight classes do not matter: Weigh in on the day at your usual weight, do not use any weight manipulation strategies (this is for advanced athletes, ie more than 5 comps in). Weighing in at your usual weight allows you to compete where you are comfortable and where you are the strongest”

“Keep the variables the same: If you do not use pre-workout, the competition isn't the time to try it. If you have never used smelling salts / ammonia, the competition is not the time to see what it's like. Keep everything how you would normally train. We need predictability”

Lessons From Mike Jones:

“No one cares about how much you lift, or how strong you are. What people remember is if you were a nice person or not; take the time to relax, enjoy the day and be friendly to those around you”

“Everyone gets nervous (especially for the first squat of the day). Don't hide from the nerves, accept that they are there and trust your process. A helpful tip can be to actively 'slow things down', with the added adrenaline and nervous energy, you may find you execute things faster. By actively slowing down you will likely find yourself executing at your normal speed, increasing predictability”