

# Interview

*With Steve Denison By Jim Curley*

## Steve Denison about his successful ownership of USPA

I was introduced to the sport of Powerlifting in 1983 and competed in my first Powerlifting contest in June 1984 in Roy, Utah in the 220 class squatting 535, benching 375 and deadlifting 545. I became a State Referee in 1994, National Referee in 1997, and International Referee in 2007. I have trained and competed for 30 years. I have competed in five National Powerlifting Championships from 1993-1995, 2008, and 2012. I took second place honors at the 1995 Senior Nationals in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in the 275 Open. I also took 2nd place in the Open division and 1st place in the 275 Master 45-49 age group in the 2008 Nationals in Providence, Rhode Island. I competed in my first World Powerlifting Championship in November 2008 in Vienna, Austria in the 275 Master 45-49 age group taking 1st in my weight class and age group.

I've been a contest meet director since 1987 and have directed over 150 powerlifting meets. This includes 7 National Championships (2001, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013), over 20 state championships (87, 93, 94, 97, 99-present) and over 125 other local meets.

My best lifts in competition are a 749 squat, 611 bench, and 694 deadlift using single ply gear. I competed at my first Raw Nationals in 2012 and took 1st in the Open 275 Class and 1st in the 275 Master 50-54 age group squatting 584, benching 440, deadlifting 622 with a 1647 total.

**What did you do before becoming a full time meet director?**

I was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army. I had weekends off, so I would run meets or go home and see my wife, which was about two weekends a month. I left active duty Army-National Guard in March 2011, went inactive and retired in November 2012. I'm the President of USPA (United States Powerlifting Association) and this is now my full time occupation.

**Why did you start USPA?**

I was with another federation for 25 years and just felt like it had no vision, no future, like it wasn't going anywhere. There was too much turmoil in the leadership, so I had to start something new. I announced it in October 2010 and it has just taken off. I chose non-tested because I didn't want to be just like the USAPL, otherwise I'd have just joined them. I've always been a traditional powerlifter – deep squats, walked

out squats and full extension on the bench press. We started out with raw, single ply and multi ply. We wanted to cater to all aspects of powerlifting, and about a year later we added raw with wraps because of demand. It's just kind of the way that powerlifting has evolved. It gives people options and all the categories are filling up.

**What are your most popular categories?**

By far, it's classic raw (wraps allowed) and raw (knee sleeves only).

**Anecdotally, just giving rough percentages nationwide, what would you say the breakdown is for raw, raw with wraps, single ply, and multi ply?**

Raw is probably 60%, classic raw (with wraps) is 25%, single ply is about 10%, and multi ply is 5% or less. Classic raw is getting more interest. All the different categories compete on the same platform, so a raw lifter sees someone in single ply and thinks, "I might want to try that someday". Raw lifters inquire about getting into the Olympia. That's a single ply event with a qualifying total so they start thinking about getting into gear. Powerlifting is a multi-dimensional sport and they can have fun trying the different

aspects of it. Take a guy like Al Caslow. He lifts raw, classic raw, single ply and multi ply and he's good at all of them! It's nice to see lifters experiment with all the categories and have fun with them. Each category of lifter can come to respect the other categories because



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bottom line, you have to work hard to be a good lifter no matter if you're geared or raw.

**With all the controversy about squat depth, is USPA's squat judging different for multi ply than raw?**

No! Every rule book is the same, you must break parallel. Many multi ply federations say the top of the hip must go below the top of the knee but they don't actually judge that way. Our multi ply rules director says that if you have too many "plies" and can't break parallel, then you need to take off some gear, maybe the briefs, so that you can break parallel. We're not asking you to sit on the ground, but you have to break parallel with the hip joint. Break parallel by an inch and leave it to the judges. Correct squat depth is the same for all categories.

**You mentioned earlier that you're going to start offering voluntary drug testing at meets. How did that come about?**

Someone approached me about getting the records for powerlifting watch.com which has tested categories. The lifter pays the \$65 fee for Redwood Laboratories and they do the testing. Someone might want to enter one of our meets and tell his buddies he was tested and so that's an option for those lifters.

**Do you think that might lead to an actual tested division within USPA?**

No, the record keeping would be a nightmare. I would say that the vast majority of lifters who compete in USPA meets are drug free. There are some elite and top level lifters who I'm sure use, but that's their choice and I'm not there to police them. Powerlifting is an amateur sport and if that's how they want to do it, that's up to them. Other top lifters will understand that they may be going up against users, but for a lot of guys they just want to see who's the best, period. If a guy demands a tested level playing field, there's USAPL. They provide the most rigid drug testing. We get a fair number of USAPL lifters in our local meets. Just because we're a non-tested fed doesn't mean that everyone is using, but we do offer high quality meets and a high level of competition and they appreciate that.

**One reason your fed grows is consistent judging. I hope that doesn't change.**

No, it won't. It has to be consistent. Be fair and strict, don't give gifts but give the benefit to the lifter. We're not a charity here but this is an amateur sport after all.

**Who actually "owns" USPA?**



# Interview (Cont.)

I do but we're in the process of converting to a non-profit. I use USPA money to send refs all over the country to help with state meets. Airfare, hotels, meals, USPA judge shirts annually – it adds up. Profit comes from me putting on my own meets.

## What do you see for the future of powerlifting?

It's growing like our numbers show, mostly in raw and raw with wraps but single ply is solid, and I'd like to see more people get in gear. Most new lifters are coming over from CrossFit and I actually have to cap the entries on the California state meets. USPA has qualifying totals. The old Elite, Class 1 etc. were all based on single ply, so with the help of Kevin Meskeu we created our own for raw, raw with wraps – all our categories have Class qualifying totals. CrossFitters are pretty competitive, so they see the qualifying totals they need to go to nationals or the Olympia and they get motivated to hit that qualifying total. They're excited about it! We're at more fitness expos than any other federation and you have to qualify and be invited and they accept the challenge.

## I've never been to a fit expo. What is that? Do you organize and run the expos?

No, we're an event within an event. A Fit Expo is where you have all kinds of other events going on like strongman, bodybuilding, MMA, women's figure contests – powerlifting is one of those events. There are lots of vendors and you get thousands of people coming through. They get exposed to all these different events and a lot of them say, "Hey, that powerlifting looks interesting. I want to try that". It's great exposure of powerlifting to non-powerlifters. That's how a lot of women find powerlifting. Women's powerlifting in CA is just exploding because of these expos.

## Are most women lifters in the raw divisions?

They're mostly raw, but as they enter meets they look at single ply lifters and think about moving up to that. It's mostly curiosity about how much more they could lift in gear. They ask me how they get to the Olympia and when I explain that it's single ply with high qualifying totals and that they need to learn gear to get there, they're excited about it and start training in gear.

## Maybe we're entering a golden age of powerlifting, kind of like when I started in 1980.

Powerlifting was on TV in the late 70's and it should be again. I think raw has a lot to do with it, but powerlifting is just getting a whole new rhythm to it. I can't keep up so I'm looking for an assistant! I just never thought powerlifting would take off like it has.

## Do you still train and compete?

My training has been kind of put on the back burner but I've almost finished a nice powerlifting gym in my garage. Most of my exercise has been loading and unloading my trailer to set up meets and that's more of a heavy workout than powerlifting! I want to compete, USPA of course, but not in my own meet so I'll have to fly out of state, lift and have fun.

I'd do the Hawaii Meet in October, but it's my anniversary!

## That wouldn't go over too well! Does your wife help with the business?

My wife has a business that she runs ([www.ironrebel.com](http://www.ironrebel.com)), so she and my stepson are pretty involved in that and he helps out with social media. If it wasn't for my wife, I probably wouldn't be doing this and USPA might not exist. She has a vision too and has helped me business-wise. She has just been a great help.

## Who else would you like to thank?

Dennis Reneau designs all our T-shirts, logos and artwork besides being an awesome lifter. He's put a great face on USPA. Mike Tronske is our business development guy and Alan Aerts handles all the referee testing nationwide. Jose Hernandez handles all the records, both American and International, besides being a referee himself. Lisa Wheeler handles all the multi ply records ( she's also an ex-wife of mine but we get along great!). Each state chair manages state records and sends out a records certificate by email (Dennis Reneau designed it). Gordon Santee is our technical rules guy and loves the sport so much he'll help judge other federations meets. I encourage it because powerlifting is a brotherhood, a fellowship. Let the market dictate where a person will lift and all I can do is compete and offer a great lifting experience. I want to thank all of our over 200 referees, the Executive Committee and all the lifters who choose our federation. **PLT**



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