

NICK LAVITOLA

POWER SPORT DOUBLE-THREAT



"I was always impressed by both musculature AND the idea of strength," Nick Lavitola said as he leaned across the table towards me. His passion for pushing the physique and the strength envelop was apparent by his wide smile and the excited tone in his voice as he recounted his past. His success at both was also evident, both by his thickly developed physique and slew of victories in bodybuilding and powerlifting.

Back when it was more common to be a two-sport strength athlete, Lavitola was one of the best. His physique victories include a slew of regional victories (class wins in the '83 NPC East Coast and the '87 NPC Eastern USA), top national level placings (tenth and ninth in the NPC Nationals '84-85, a third and fourth in the AAU Mr. America '89-90) and the short class in the '88 AAU Mr. World.

He is not a "in the past tense" lifter though — not by any means. Although exclusively competing in powerlifting these days, its obvious that he could hop up on the posing dais and smack around all but the best at the NPC Masters Nationals. In powerlifting, Lavitola is a contender at any three-lift meet he shows up at. His best squat is a bar-rattling 870-pounds. His current best bench tops out at 540. He pulls an earth-shaking 820-pound dead. His best one-day total is 2200 in the 242-pound class.

Once again, these weren't lifts done wearing a leopard-skin squat-suit while lifting Flintstones-like weights hewn from bedrock. In fact, I interviewed him at this past year's IPA Nationals in which he competed. As Nick said, "The goal today was to put all three lifts together for a 2300-pound total but that didn't work out." As it turned out, Nick did not have his best day, posting a squat below his best and not quite getting his groove on the pull. Regardless, he still dominated the class with his 2130 total. By timing his peak and fine-tuning his use of equipment, a 2300+ total would seem a reasonable goal for next year.

The Making of a Power Bodybuilder

At 40 years old, Lavitola has plenty of championship lifts in his future. He has being lifting however, for most of those four decades. Growing up in New Jersey (where he still resides), Lavitola was active in a variety of sports as a kid, particularly judo, which apparently helped lay the foundation for the heavy lifting to follow.

"In the sixth-grade," Lavitola says, "...a friend of mine, one of these freaks that had a full five o'clock shadow at eleven, had these ripped biceps and veins and was beating everyone at arm wrestling. I don't like to lose and he crushed me. So I started lifting with him down in his cellar." Even at this young age, Nick was impressed by both musculature AND the idea of strength. "I just automatically assumed that if you were big you were also strong, which we all know is not necessarily true. So since about the age of eleven I have been in love with lifting and haven't taken off more than three weeks since then."

From his friend's cellar, Lavitola progressed to Guys and Dolls Gym in Linden when he was sixteen. "I saw some guys that were powerlifting and was impressed by that," Lavitola says. "One of the powerlifters there was built really well and that got me psyched."

For Nick, progress came quickly. "I benched 220-pounds in the eighth-grade. I benched 280-pounds at the beginning of my freshman year. I benched 340-pounds sophomore year. I benched 380-pounds in my junior year. I benched 420-pounds as a senior and I was squatting and deadlifting over 600."

With that type of natural strength, one would expect early recruitment by an East Coast powerlifting team but Lavitola made his bodybuilding debut before ever chalking up in an official power meet. His first show was the Mr. Atlantis. At a mere fifteen years of age and weighing 165-pounds, he finished an impressive seventh out of fourteen competitors — not so bad considering all of the others were adults.

"It was an AAU physique contest and took place after the power meet. The powerlifters were lifting first and I was thinking 'this is cool too.' I had idols like Larry Pacifico, Doug Young, Don Rhenholdt and Vince Anello. To be honest with you, I was hooked on both sports. Back then guys like Doug Young had a really mean physique. Larry Pacifico was as built as shit so this just reinforced the fact that I was equating strength and size together. I went with bodybuilding because there weren't that many powerlifting gyms in New Jersey."

Nick continued his assault on the bodybuilding world. "At fifteen (about two months later) I went into the Mr. New Jersey Shore. I placed about ninth out of twenty guys. After that I entered the Mr. Colossus in Maryland and got fourth place." He followed this up with another fourth-place in the Teen New Jersey. This was during Nick's junior year of high school.

From here Lavitola won the middleweight class in the Teen East Coast which encouraged him to really concentrate on bodybuilding. He had entered and won one small gym power meet up to this point. "I lifted raw with just a weight belt," Nick recalls. Because of this early physique success, powerlifting would remain on the backburner.



Big Leagues

The sport of bodybuilding consisted of two major U.S. federations at this point, the AAU and the newer NPC, with top bodybuilders vying for National titles under both banners. "I trained at Diamond Gym and the owner, [NPC National judge] John Kemper always wanted me to go into the heavies because I was proportioned and could hold the bodyweight. But at the 1987 NPC USA, I found myself standing next to Jim Quinn. I was in shape at 204 and heavily-muscled but next to competitors around six-feet tall, it was a tough comparison. Even if you are big and built for your height, I was giving up a lot. To compete at my best weight, I would have been going up against guys like Jim Quinn, Mike Christian and John DeFendis. At 230-pounds ripped, John is a monster. He is extremely wide with a great physique. At 204 at just under 5'6," it was suicidal to stand next to him."

"That show turned me off to weight classes since I didn't want to lose much muscle to make to the light-heavies. I switched to AAU because height classes worked more in my favor," Nick admits. He was awarded with top four placings in four National and World level AAU shows between 1988-90.

During this period of time, Lavitola trained with Johnny Morant (1989 North American overall and USA class winner). "He had perfect genetics," Nick exclaims. "He could excel at ANY sport — football, wrestling, bodybuilding or powerlifting. He was the kind of guy that, if he was squatting 400-pounds, you

could throw another hundred on each side and he wouldn't even notice. He was so flexible that he could do Russian splits, which is amazing for a guy that huge. He was also fast as lightning. I think he had the potential to win the Olympia if he had really pushed for it."

Since 1990, Lavitola has concentrated on powerlifting. Nick dominates the masters' category. In the 242s, he owns the top squat (840), deadlift (750), and is tied for the third-highest bench (540). His masters total record of 2130 is a full 250-pounds over that of the second-ranking lifter (*PLUSA, March 2003*). He has won four IPA Nationals class wins, an APF North American win and is THE man to beat in any power meet he enters.

While training for powerlifting immortality, Nick makes his living as a personal trainer. His company, World



Much of Nick's admiration of strength came from the example of his father Carmine, show here supporting Nick at one of his early physique contests.



The benefits of power bodybuilding are evident in this classic pic from Nick's physique days.

Class Fitness Personal Training, is set up in a building behind his house with a complete gym. As Nick tells it, "It's like I'm under house arrest. I have twenty-six regular clients and I train them one after another. It is run like a doctor's office with a succession of clients in and out all day." He enjoys using his decades of experience to help both athletes and businesspeople reach their fitness and appearance goals.

Bodybuilding Movements for Powerlifters?

Lavitola incorporates a lot of bodybuilding mixed in with his powerlifting. "When I was competing as a bodybuilder, I always benched and squatted like a powerlifter, using a medium-wide stance. After I did my heavy squats with two to four reps, I did my higher reps on leg extensions, hack squats, leg presses and leg curls." This provided the best of both worlds.

"Even as a bodybuilder I trained fast, exploding the weight up. Everyone told me I was wrong but I was winning most of my bodybuilding contests so I never listened to them. They told me to squat close; not to use my wider stance but hell, I feel it and I was growing from it, so I must be doing something right."

In fact, Nick feels most powerlifters would benefit by including a greater variety of exercises into their program, including some that are almost NEVER incorporated. As he says, "In powerlifting, a lot of athletes neglect certain bodybuilding exercises like chin-ups that may not directly affect the three competition lifts. You see a lot of lifters that just concentrate on the three lifts and have big lower pecs, big triceps, big front delts, big hamstrings, big butts, no rear delts, no quads, no biceps, no calves. I think if every muscle in

the body is able to work at its strongest, that can only help you with your lifts."

But are there any drawbacks to mixing bodybuilding with powerlifting at an elite level? Nick reflects and says, "The only way that bodybuilding can hurt us as powerlifters is, if you have really big lats and mid-back, which I do from all the chins that I do. Nick continues, "Calves may seem unimportant but they help your deadlift. They also stabilize your stance in the squat. If you have strong forearms, they remove some of the tension off of your biceps in the deadlift." Building the big bodybuilding muscles may bump you up into a higher weight class but they also stop you from getting injuries from strength imbalances."

Supporting Support Gear

Nick lays down the final word on his feelings on support gear. "The gear is part of the sport and that's that. You can't just put a shirt on a guy and he's going to bench 700-pounds. It becomes a slightly different lift with a shirt on but you've still got to be strong. I don't give a shit what shirt I put on; I'm not going to bench 700-pounds. It ain't happening. You've got to have the elbows and triceps strength to do it." Nick feels the equipment is beneficial as it improves safety and the longevity of the lifter. Nick says, "I just think they need to keep better tabs on things so that it is standard for everyone competing in a particular meet." Greater enforcement would ensure that all lifters were on an even playing field.

Nick wishes to point out that the value of lifting gear varies with the size of the lifter. He feels that, "Squat suits and knee wraps help the little guys more than those in the heavier classes. For example, a 148-pounder can get at least twice the coverage from a standard length knee wrap than someone the size of Garry Frank as well as just being able to wear it tighter."



Nick's ability to focus during a workout is so intense that he is completely unaware as a group of street punks enter the gym and strip away his belt, the squat stands and most of the plates.

Due to his need for greater recuperative time as he gets older, Nick finds he needs to give himself more down time. For this reason, He recently began training three weeks on, followed by one week off. In this "off" week he may just do wrist curls, neck work, calves and miscellaneous detail work. He also has begun to train his deadlift less frequently, as noted below. All assistance movements (leg curls, extensions, calf, arm, delt and forearm work) are considered *optional* and are not done every workout.

SATURDAY. (Squat and Deadlift) **Squats.** 1) 155 (warm-up, raw with no wraps, just belt), 2) 255 (another warm-up, raw, slightly below parallel), 3) 355 (raw, about 2 inches above parallel), 4) 455 x 1 (raw, half-squats in rack with pins set to limit depth), 5) 555 x 1 (same), 6) 655 x 1 (half-squats), 750 x 1 (same), 7) 800 x 1 (quarter to half squat), 8) 820 x 1 (full equipment - briefs, suit, knee wraps). Nick will sink it for a full competition squat. "I like to do at least one set with my suit on just to keep in touch with how my gear feels." 9) 550-600 x 4 (for one or two sets, squatting down to a box).

Reverse Hyperextensions. "These hit my glutes, lower back and sacrum area unlike anything else." Nick does 3-4 sets of 10-20 reps with up to 270-pounds.

Leg Extensions. Leg Extension and Leg Curls are done very lightly, as a warm-down. They are cut out about ten weeks before a meet. Nick takes breaks from these if he feels any tendonitis in his knees. I only use 25-50 pounds for three sets of 8-15.

Leg Curls. Again, Nick only uses 25-50 pounds for 2 sets of 8-12. "Some of the women I train use more weight than me."

Standing Calf Raises. 800-1000 pounds for two sets of 6-12 reps.

Deadlifts. Instead of pulling every week,

Nick recently began pulling hard less frequently. He cycles his deadlifting poundages. Weeks one, two and three he deadlifts 50% (400-405) of his max. On week four, he takes off (only doing miscellaneous work for small bodyparts). Weeks 5 and 6, he squats and benches heavy, with no deadlifting. On week seven, he pulls up to 90% (720-pounds) of his max. He says, "I have made my best pulls when I'm not deadlifting, thanks to the heavy squats I do. Because my squatting and deadlifting styles are similar, involving the same muscles, I believe this keeps my pulling strength up - but hitting both movements hard at the same time compromises recuperation."

TUESDAY. (Bench and Delts)

Bench Press. (all done raw, with no bench shirt) 1)135 x 8, 2)225 x 8, 3)225 x 8, 4)315 X 6-8, 5)405 x 4, 6)455 x 1, 7)500 x 1. 8) If I feel good I'll go for 510 x 1. 9-10) Then I back down to 490 and do 1-2 singles. 11) I finish my bench with 440 x 4.

Alternate Dumbbell Presses with 50s for 8, 60s for 8, 70s for 8. "I only go light on these right now," Nick says. "I used to use the 160s. I find I get better results now just concentrating on going heavy in the bench. I found that when I was going heavy on all my other assistance movements, I was getting more twinges and nagging injuries."

Front Raises Nick uses 30s, 40s, and 60s for 3-4 sets of 5 reps.

Side Laterals 20s for two sets of 25, 30s for two sets of 8-10, 35s for two sets of 8, 40s for three sets of 8, one set with 25s for 20 reps to polish them off.

Tricep Pushdowns 55x 10, 75 x 8, 85 x 8, 95 x 8, 105 x 4-8, 65-75 for up to 20 reps.

THURSDAY (Back and biceps)

Wide Front Chin-ups. 1-5) Five sets of 5-8 reps (with bodyweight), 6) Bodyweight plus

25 for 4 reps, 7) BWT plus 50 for 4 reps, 8) BWT plus 75 for 4 reps, 9) BWT plus 100 for 4-5 reps. 10) If I'm feeling good, I do another set at that weight. 11) Then I drop the weight down to bodyweight plus 50 pounds for 8 reps, 12) Bodyweight plus 25 for 8 reps, 13-14) Just bodyweight for one or two sets. This explains why Nick has the best lats in powerlifting.

Seated Supported Row Machine. "Sometimes I go heavy as hell, sometimes I go relatively light," Nick says. "My normal weight is 150 on each side for three sets of 5. Sometimes I go crazy and put 200 pounds on each side." Obviously, Nick's lats are very strong. At one time he used to routinely do strict bent rows with 405-pounds.

Alternate DB Curls. Nick uses 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 90s x 4, 35s for two sets. Nick goes for feel on reps. "Sometimes I go up to the 100s but lately I have limited myself to just the 60s. I used to go heavy on them all the time but I now realize that its just not necessary due to the heavy chins I do."

Wrist Roller. Nick uses up to 100 pounds. He rolls it up with his forearms supported on the preacher bench, rests three to four minutes, and then flips the handle over to work the other side (rotating the roller in the opposite direction). He also will sometimes use a sliding gripper machine (in which the loaded weight carriage slides up towards the handles). "I've been know to get on a grip craze," he admits. "I was able to close 260 pounds with my right hand and 240 with my left. With both hands I can close 400 pounds. Grip isn't a weak link for me but I just like training it for fun." Nick feels that the roller works best for him in developing grip strength for holding on to a heavy deadlift. He also credits the fact that he never wears wrist straps for all his heavy lat work but warns, "It's easy to overtrain the grip when you're strong."

Nick has a deep respect for the accomplishments of the sport's pre-gear pioneers, feeling they deserve special consideration. "I do think they should separate all the records. I think the benches that were done raw should not be compared to the current lifts. George Frenn squatted 850 with, I think, NO knee wraps." Nick feels an apples-to-oranges comparison diminishes the significance of their trail-blazing lifts.

PL Nutrition

Being old school, Nick watches his fat intake in the off-season (increasing it slightly as a meet approaches). He keeps his protein intake high. "I eat a lot of eggs and remove the yolks. I drink a lot of protein drinks, particularly Isopure and Myoplex." With his hectic personal training schedule, Nick really can't sit down and eat during the day. "Before the Isopure and Myoplex, I used to live on tuna fish basically. I would eat three or four cans of tuna a day." On a non-training day, he consumes only about 100-grams of protein. On a heavy training day, he ups this to about 220-grams.

Nick feels strongly that the protein needs for powerlifters differ greatly from what he used to require as a bodybuilder. "When I was bodybuilding six days a week, I could eat five cans of tuna fish a day. You're not tearing yourself down as much in powerlifting. You are stressing your nervous system more as a powerlifter and not breaking down muscle protein so you don't need to consume as much."

Lavitola's Future

By training smart and listening to his body, Nick ensures that his lifting career will continue well into the future. Few lifters have the drive and genetic ability to excel at any one sport. Nick Lavitola not only has managed to climb to the top in both bodybuilding and powerlifting, but he has managed to keep his passion for lifting burning for three decades.

Long after most people have hung up their lifting belts and began swapping gym legends that begin with, "I useta do this...," Nick Lavitola will just be quietly plugging away in the corner, benching 500 and squatting and pulling in the 700-800 range. And loving every minute of it!