

PUMPING IRON III: AN EXAMINATION OF COMPULSIVE LIFTING

D. R. Lehmann

This paper examines weightlifting as an example of fanatic behavior. As defined here, fanatic behavior is repeated behavior that conflicts with the observer's utility function and any utility function the observer accepts as valid or reasonable. For many, this makes serious lifting a paragon of fanaticism.

Some serious lifters obviously go to great extremes. Consumption of steroids, hours in the gym bulking up, radical dieting, and conflicts with work and personal lives with no real prospect of monetary gain are, in an economic sense, irrational. During 1986, a weightlifting camp at Rider College in New Jersey drew participation from around the world who forfeited salaries and paid \$500 per week for the privilege of working out and listening to serious weightlifters like Tom Platz (a former Mr. Universe), Bill Grant (a former Mr. World), and "Dr. Squat" (Fred Hatfield, who demonstrated his specialty using a mere 800 pounds). Such behavior would even be classified as fanatic by the participants themselves. Here we will concentrate on a slightly less fanatic level, the serious lifter or fanatic fringe.

I don't consider myself a complete fanatic, although I did pass up a free dinner with friends at a French restaurant in Montreal Wednesday night in order to fly back to New York so I could lift Thursday morning before I flew to Toronto. I have also lifted when injured, exhausted (e.g., after other forms of physical exertion such as 6-8 hours of sports), and busy (e.g., at 9 p.m. with 6 hours of grading to do before the next morning) because it was time to lift. Yet by serious lifters' standards (e.g., bodybuilders and powerlifters), my lifting would be considered casual. Still, if not a fanatic, I am probably, at least according to most people's utility functions, a bit aberrant. Consequently the following is at least a partial justification for my behavior. This paper is also very different from those I normally write. There is no mathematical model, mass of data, or complicated statistics involved. Rather the paper relies on introspection and intuition. Hence it may be marginally interesting or provocative, but is in no way argued to be "scientific," at least not in the tradition of logical positivism.

Defining and Identifying Fanatic Consumption

Exactly where rational consumption ends and fanatic consumption begins defies easy definition. In fact, most people assume anyone whose utility function values more of an activity than theirs is a fanatic. Consequently we treat fanaticism as a continuous construct related to strength of and reason for commitment. The reason for commitment is important in defining fanaticism. For example, while one might argue that someone who spends 2 hours a week exercising a single muscle group is fanatic, if the reason is to prevent injury (say, to a neck for a football player) to rehabilitate an injury (e.g., a knee), or to aid in their work, the exercise is clearly a means to an end and not the end in itself. Put differently, a fanatic devotee of anything continues the activity at least partly because the activity is an end to itself. With this in mind, we can uncover fanaticism based on two dimensions: opportunity cost involved in participating and reason for participation.

The opportunity cost is relatively easy to assess and is measurable by the time involved, possibly multiplied by a marginal wage rate appropriate for those hours, plus the out-of-pocket cost. The more inflexible/rigid the time commitment, the more fanatic the participant. For a serious weightlifter, the 300 or more hours spent lifting per year are clearly more expensive than the \$200 annual fee most pay to join a club, plus whatever laundry bills, etc. are involved. The hidden costs involved such as vitamin

supplements and chiropractic sessions often exceed the cost of club membership.

Assessing the reasons for participation is a bit more difficult. For our purposes we suggest a five-category typology (Figure 1). The first category is specific-benefit based, similar to multiattribute (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) and micro-economic (e.g., Lancaster 1971; Ratchford 1975) models. In the case of weightlifting, these include benefits such as rehabilitating an injury, getting exercise, or improving strength in order to participate in other sports more effectively. While one can argue about when diminishing returns are reached, it is clear that these are "rational" explanations and indicate the person is lifting as a means to an end.

The second level of reasons has to do with image. Some lift weights because they feel that bigger biceps or tighter abs will impress members of the opposite (or same) sex. Others, the author included, somewhat enjoy the semi-wild, macho image of weightlifters, a healthy substitute for riding a Harley-Davidson. While it is possible to become obsessed with how you look (as the myriad mirrors in gyms encourage), gaining a particular image in return for a few hours a week is not necessarily a mark of fanaticism. Elements of narcissism, a search for eternal youth, and the Puritan ethic of hard work all contribute to the image of a lifter.

The third level of reasons for lifting fall into the category of global liking. This category includes explanations such as "it gives me something to do" and "I just like it." The liking reason in particular is hard for nonparticipants to believe when they observe the pain of exertion during the activity (and largely unintelligible to people who think sweat is to be avoided at all costs). Still, weightlifters get a feeling similar to the so-called runner's high, which is quite enjoyable as an experience (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

The fourth level of reasons relate to the activity being the goal itself. This category includes competitive powerlifters whose basic goal in lifting is to lift more. While lifting heavy weights is not high on most people's lists of goals, it is at least an understandable goal and hence what appears fanatic to most may be "rational" to a few.

FIGURE 1

Reasons for Pursuing an Activity

1. Specific Benefits
(e.g., weight reduction, improving strength, rehabilitating an injury)
2. Image Enhancement
(e.g., impress others)
3. Global Liking
(e.g., acquired taste, something to do)
4. Goal In Itself
(e.g., competition)
5. Addicted
(e.g., "because I do")

The final category of reasons relate to addiction. Here participants basically lift because lifting is what they do. Their behavior is literally a routinized response behavior (Howard, 1977). Many don't stop lifting out of fear that they would deteriorate rapidly. To maintain a level of lifting strength tends to require continuously increased effort. Hence lifters are on a treadmill, running faster to make minor gains or even to stay at their current plateau. Even if they cognitively admit that rest would help, they continue to lift. Lifting has become a ritual (Rock 1985), one in which participants in designer outfits are not welcome.

No one starts out to be a fanatic. Rather, fanaticism develops gradually as one moves from the first category of reasons towards the fifth. Extreme brand loyalty can easily be considered fanatic. The old "I'd walk a mile for a Camel", "I'd rather fight than switch", and "If you're out of Schlitz, you're out of beer" slogans actively encouraged such fanatical commitment among customers. In fact, serious lifting is basically a manifestation of strong brand loyalty where the brand is a way of spending time.

Bodybuilding Culture: The Religious Aspect

The word fanatic is often used in combination with another word, as in "religious fanatic". Actually there is a great deal of similarity between proponents of religion and proponents of bodybuilding. First there is the tendency to look down on those who are not members, with a combination of benign condescension ("I feel sorry for those people who are out of shape"), scorn ("look at that pencil-necked geek"), and intolerance ("there is no excuse for being weak and out of shape").

Then there is the adherence to a set of principles. Religion has Korans, Torahs, and Commandments. Bodybuilding has similar tenets. For example, readers of Muscles and Fitness magazine are constantly exhorted to improve. Consider the following phrases of Joe Weider, the publisher and editor and a leading guru of weightlifting in the October 1986 issue:

Strive for excellence, exceed yourself, love your friend, speak the truth, practice fidelity, and honor your father and mother.

We celebrate our sports stars because they embody all the qualities that make survival possible: speed, strength, courage, quick-wittedness, and superb fitness. These superathletes are symbols of an ancient performance, and through them we live our lives according to an ancient, powerful design.

By taking control of your body through fitness you gain a self-assurance that drives you to make all-round changes in your life. You control forces outside yourself in a way that's near mystical. You are able to vaporize mediocrity or any sense of helplessness.

There is an obvious element of proselytizing here, a call to a type of conversion experience. Once converted, one's lifting can be guided by a set of principles more complex than the oft quoted "no pain -- no gain" slogan, for example the "Weider Cycle Training Principle", the "Weider Instinctive Training Principle", and the Weider Muscle Confusion Training Principle". Basically, however, weightlifters value muscle size, the ability to move heavy objects, intensity in workouts, and muscle definition, not necessarily in that order. While strict form in exercises is promoted, there is a strong end-justifies-the-means attitude among serious lifters, as the use of the terms "cheats" and "cheating" suggests.

Like any congregation, health club members have different segments which vary basically in the intensity of commitment as Figure 2 indicates. Perhaps the similarity of religion and bodybuilding can best be highlighted by the fact that the manager of the club where the author lifts, a one-time serious competitive bodybuilder, has been studying to become a minister. As Williams (1962) said,

"The person whose religious awareness is strong has in his life a sense of direction and purpose."

For some, lifting provides a direction and purpose.

A Pilot Survey

Trying to capture fanaticism on 5-point scales is probably a hopeless task both because fanatics are generally uninterested in participating in surveys and because much of fanaticism is non-cognitive and hence capturable by whole images rather than a collection of aspects. Nonetheless, partly because the author feels uncomfortable without data and numbers, an attempt was made to pilot test a 5-page survey to assess attitudes toward weightlifting. A sample of 12 members of a club best described as in between a status club (replete with juice bar and tanned, smiling instructors and gleaming machines) and a hard core gym (replete with the smell of liniment and sweat and a preponderance of free weights) was obtained. Three more questionnaires were handed out but never returned: two recipients left to join a more serious gym and the third, probable the most fanatic lifter (I've had to help him get in position to lift when his back was too sore for him to do it himself), never got around to finishing it. The remaining 12 seemed remarkably happy to fill out the survey, suggesting perhaps that they are generally members of the serious but not fanatical category. Or more likely, they didn't want me to drop the weight the next time I "spotted" for them during an exercise.

FIGURE 2

Characteristics of Members of Congregations and Health Clubs

Segments	Characteristics
Social Belongers	Occasional Attenders Observers of Surroundings Concerned about Attire
Serious Proponents	Regular Attenders Functional Dressers Like to Concentrate, but Willing to Talk
Fanatics	Completely "into it" Assume the Church or Club is Theirs Reaction to Non-Serious: 1) Ignore or 2) Belittle Use Special Clothing

The twelve male respondents can best be described as serious if not fanatic lifters. They lift between 3 and 6 times per week for between 4 and 13 hours, but only 2 are involved in power lifting. Nine do forced reps or negatives at least half the time, but nine have also never lifted seriously before. Only one also runs over ten miles per week (guess who), and none participates seriously in aerobics. Eight participate in team sports versus only three in racquet sports. Demographically, all but one have had some college education and are generally in their 20's. Ten of the twelve rate themselves as competitive and as successes in their jobs.

In terms of the reason for beginning and continuing to exercise, average importances on a five-point scale are given in Table 1. Physical appearance is the main reason for both beginning and continuing to lift, and the exercise involved and general feeling are also important. Specific benefits such as sports performance and injury rehabilitation are less important, and the respondents do not believe lifting will lengthen their lives. The addictive nature of the activity is demonstrated by the importance of habit in the decision to continue lifting and the fact that three respondents (25%) gave the importance of "afraid to stop" a 5 on a 5-point scale. Five respondents indicated that they "can't stand to miss a workout", four were willing to risk injury to improve their bench press and squat by 100 pounds, eight agree that a good workout has to lead to pain and fatigue, four work out even if they have an injury, and six admit that others think they are fanatics about lifting.

TABLE 1

Reason	Importance	
	For Beginning To Lift	For Continuing To Lift
Getting Exercise	3.58	4.17
Improving Performance in Sports	3.67	3.33
Improving the Way You Look	3.92	4.33
Being with Friends	2.50	2.75
Making New Friends	2.17	2.50
Rehabilitating an Injury	2.50	3.08
Relieving Stress	2.83	3.25
Feels Good		4.00
Habit		3.67
Afraid to Stop		2.83

What do these results prove about lifters? Nothing. However, combined with intuition they lead to some interesting propositions:

1. Lifting usually starts with a specific purpose in mind, but the reasons for continuing to lift are often quite different. At some point the activity becomes addictive and only a serious shock (e.g., loss of employment, getting a new job, moving, or a serious injury) will lead to reevaluation of the benefits of lifting.
2. Fanaticism benefits from support groups. While the rest of society may not understand, the enlightened (crazed?) few one lifts with (or the video or TV show watched) tend to insulate one from the carpings of others.
3. Serious lifters believe they are superior to non-lifters. The feeling of superiority, rooted in a survival of the fittest past, is a powerful motivation to continue lifting.
4. As in religion, recent converts are likely to be more fanatic than those who have been involved for other reasons (e.g., because a coach required them to). This is because often they have been searching for something to commit to for a long time.

Personal Reflection

Serious lifting, at least for me, does not stand up all that well to careful cognitive evaluation. It seems counter to the long-standing tradition of man to use beasts or technology to reduce physical strain. While it helps my tennis, skiing, etc., the improvement is only marginal, and the attained level far from exceptional. Consequently I tend to suspend cognitive arguments and rely on self-image, the approval of support groups (fellow

lifters) and the feeling of a good workout to justify lifting. To quote Joe Weider,

"Getting in shape is a rebellion against being mediocre. By nature we all have the desire to be number one. Perhaps we will never be. The point is, we can make the effort, and no effort in life is ever lost. We have it within us to be the best we can be. We hark back to the driving forces of ancient survival. That fulfills our obligation to excellence. We owe it to our past, our country, and ourselves."

Summary

In discussing fanaticism, it is possible to rely on the words of others. Rather than say that a fanatic is a person whose continued participation is based on almost blind faith we could say,

"A fanatic is a man that does what he thins th' Lord would do if he new th' facts in th' case." -- (Dunne, 1900)

One could define a fanatic as one who, once "hooked", repeats a behavior even when evidence suggests it is "no longer optimal". Alternatively, one could say,

"But Faith, fanatic Faith, once wedded fast, To some dear falsehood, hugs it to the last." -- (Moore, 1817)

The essence of fanaticism, however, is not that others think it odd, but that even the participant himself cannot recall exactly why he is participating. Put differently,

"Fanaticism consists of redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim." -- (Santayana, 1905)

If you'll excuse me, I have to go work on my pecs.

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