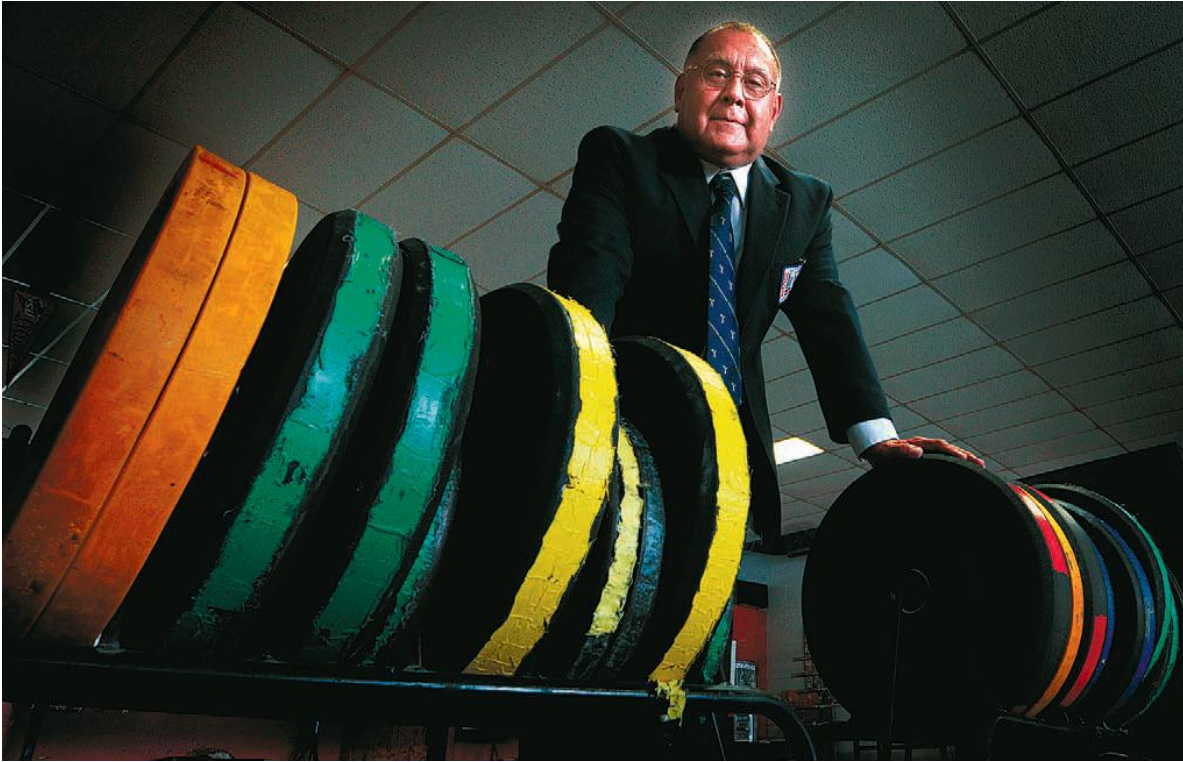


Dennis Espinosa satisfies his passion for weightlifting as a coach and referee

By JON GARTEN *Salina Journal* – June 1, 2008



TOM DORSEY / *Salina Journal*

Salinan Dennis Espinosa was selected as a referee for the United States Olympic weightlifting trials held May 16-17 in Atlanta. Espinosa helped judge the competition that determined the U.S. lifters for Beijing.

Dennis Espinosa said his interest in weightlifting began while watching the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany, on television.

Espinosa was captivated by the feats of strength of Soviet Union super heavyweight Vasily Alekseyev. Alekseyev, who set 80 world records during the 1970s, and won the gold medal during the '72 games.

Since then, Espinosa has been hooked.

"I don't think a lot of people understand Olympic weightlifting in its purity," he said. "It takes a lot of strength and tremendous courage."

Espinosa began working out at the old YMCA on Iron Avenue. He competed in a few power lifting events but he said his real passion has always been coaching.

In 2000, he passed the test to coach Olympic weightlifting at the club level.

Espinosa's Team Salina became a member of USA Weightlifting in 2000 as well. One of the athletes Espinosa has trained, Hilary Katzenmeier, won the 2007 National Junior Championship in the women's 58-kilogram category.

Katzenmeier, an Abilene native, now works out at the United States Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs. Espinosa expects her to compete in the 2012 Olympics as long as she stays on track. "We're wanting to develop athletes to represent our country as well as our community," he said.

“What makes me the proudest is the fact that this is my hometown, and we have kids here who are very capable and stepping up.”

In 2002, Espinosa took a test to become a local weightlifting referee. He said he wanted to learn the rules of his sport so he could become a better coach.

“If you’re going to coach, you better know the rules of your sport,” Espinosa said. “I really stand by that. If I learn the right way, then my kids can learn the right way.”

Espinosa passed the national referee test in 2005. With his new title, Espinosa was able to referee the United States Olympic Trials May 16 and 17 at Atlanta. He helped judge the nine athletes who made the 2008 Olympic weightlifting team.

“It was awesome,” he said. “It was like getting a promotion.

“I love refereeing because it gives me first-hand, practical experience in our sport. I love being able to work with elite athletes. It allows me to come back and help my athletes at my gym.”

Reps and Sets, an old brick building on the corner of Bishop and 12th streets, has been Espinosa’s gym since 1988. Inside, mats, autographed posters of world-famous weightlifters and steel and rubber weights line the mirrored walls back to the area where Espinosa trains his athletes.

“We like it,” he said. “It looks like a weight room.

It’s here that Espinosa works with his newest top prospects, sisters Macy and McKenzie Pilgrim. Nine-year-old Macy took third place at the 2007 National School Age Championships in the 35-kilogram, 13-and-under division. Her 12-year-old sister McKenzie placed fourth in the 44-kilogram division.

Espinosa said the Pilgrim sisters, who are from Salina, will compete in the 2008 National School Age Championships in June at Orlando, Fla. Espinosa said he will also bring two boys to lift at Orlando.

While training some of the nation’s top youth weightlifters can be rewarding, Espinosa said the sport is expensive. Team Salina has about \$16,000 invested in weightlifting bars and official Olympic bumper weights, which are designed to absorb the impact from being dropped.

Team Salina became a nonprofit organization in 2000 so it could receive grants to help pay for equipment. The gym also operates as a business with about 50 members.

“The Olympic sport is not cheap,” Espinosa said. “But we’ve found ways to help out with the cost.”

Outside of weightlifting, Espinosa also trains several other local athletes. He said he has worked with former Salina Central standout running back Andrew Braxton and has shared training tips with Central coach Mike Hall.

Espinosa said the Olympic lifts — the snatch and the clean and jerk — are better for football, basketball and baseball players because they are performed in the standing position.

“You don’t see a bench press out on the football field,” he said. “You don’t see a squat rack out on a basketball court. What’s happening now is all the area coaches are recognizing the benefits of dynamic lifting.