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NEWS RELEASE
Salve Regina - The Newport College

Office of Public Relations
(401) 847-6650 ext. 223

Newport, Rhode Island 02840

CONTACT: Lyn Patterson
847-6650, ext. 208

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NEWPORTER, SALVE FRESHMAN, RANKED BEST JUNIOR LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT LIFTER
IN COUNTRY; SETS SIGHTS ON '84 OLYMPICS

There is a long pause as he studies his adversary. Taking a deep breath, he slowly bends down and positions his hands on the chalk-coated barbell. In tandem, his hands and feet nervously move scant inches back and forth along the bar and floor until the right combination is found. Another deep breath. Silence.

Suddenly, his muscles tense and he swiftly lifts the barbell, which sags under the 250 pounds of weight he has attached. Almost instantly, it is above his head. The veins stand out on his arms and face. Arm and leg muscles bulge beneath his sweatsuit. His teeth are grimly clenched as he struggles to stabilize the bar with arms extended high overhead.

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This weightlifting maneuver is known as the "snatch" -- lifting the weight from the floor to above the head in one single movement. It has been said it is the single fastest movement in sports, taking mere seconds from beginning to completion. For someone to do it well requires a combination of speed, strength, coordination and flexibility.

Gerald Willis, a freshman at Salve Regina - The Newport College, does it well. Well enough to be ranked the best light heavyweight lifter in the country under 20 years of age; among senior weightlifters (no age limit), Gerry is ranked seventh. Even more impressive is the fact that most weightlifters don't even reach their peak until around age 30. Gerry is just 19.

His credentials speak for themselves. At 5'7" and 181 pounds, Gerry, a life-long Newporter, has been named the outstanding weightlifter in New England for the past three years. He holds 12 state weightlifting records and nine New England records, including the new clean and jerk record of 358 pounds previously held by fellow Rhode Islander Mark Cameron. Cameron was a 1980 Olympic competitor who had been favored to win the gold in Moscow before announcement of the boycott was made.

But for Gerry, while the accolades are nice, and success is met frequently, all these records and championships are but stepping stones to the biggest prize of all. The Olympics.

"When I began weightlifting, I wanted to be the best in Newport, then Rhode Island, and then New England," Gerry said. "Now I want to be the best weightlifter in the country and make the Olympic team."

He says he'll try out for the 1984 Olympic team, but realistically believes his best chance for seeing the Olympics is in 1988, when he'll be 26 -- close to his peak as a weightlifter.

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Pipe dreams? Not at all according to Gerry's coach Joe Mills, a Central Falls resident who himself was a weightlifting champion and whose coaching abilities are known as far as the Soviet Union.

Mills says Gerry's chances for making the Olympic team are good, particularly in light of his steady progress. "He has better technique than most lifters," Mills says. "He's a good learner, and is easy to teach. He's beaten lifters who are physically stronger than he is, simply because his technique is better."

Mills however, neglected one word that Gerry uses often when asked why he is as good as he is. Desire.

"In training, as well as in competition," Gerry explains, "you have to want it. You have to have it in your heart. I've seen potential world champions who just don't want it badly enough. The one word in any sport is desire. And I have that."

In the sport of weightlifting, just two lifts are required in tournaments and Olympic competition -- the "snatch" and the "clean and jerk." Gerry's personal favorite, perhaps because he does it best, is the clean and jerk, a maneuver lifting the weight from the floor to the shoulders and then above the head. This lift is completed in two motions; the combined weight lifted in both events determines the winner.

And despite all the grunting, groaning and heavy breathing you hear while watching a weightlifting tournament, Gerry chooses a rather surprising adjective, given the subject, to define the sport overall. Graceful.

"Weightlifting is graceful," Gerry emphasizes. "There's an incredible amount of athletic ability required in weightlifting. You need flexibility and coordination in addition to speed and strength."

Gerry says lifting requires 70 percent strength and 30 percent technique, with the legs playing the most important role. Together they act as a lever to power the individual and weight upward.

And when you've successfully lifted the weight?

"You have the feeling that you've conquered it, you've beaten it," Gerry says. "You've achieved an end. It's like running a marathon -- you never know at the beginning if you're going to finish. It's a great feeling when you do."

Despite the lure of greener pastures in the form of an athletic scholarship, Gerry prefers to attend Salve. In fact, that's a primary reason why he chose Salve -- because it does not recruit athletes with promises of money, while perhaps denying entrance to another student without athletic skills.

Though Salve, like most schools, does not have a weightlifting team, it sponsors Gerry in intercollegiate and NCAA championship competition. When he's not at a meet, Gerry practices by himself at the local YMCA, utilizing the existing equipment. He doesn't own his own set of weights. The bar alone can run \$200 and with the weights, the cost is well over \$400. Even with the few items a weightlifter has to have, the cost is surprisingly expensive. For its part, Salve defrays the entry fees and travel costs and provides Gerry with the services of the College's trainer Jim Wilson.

Gerry plans on joining Salve Regina's fledgling track team this spring where he will throw the 35-pound weight (similar to the Olympic hammer throw), and assist other members of the team in developing a weightlifting program.

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Immediate goals for the Newporter include participation in the NCAA weightlifting championships in North Carolina February 18, the Junior American Championships in Cleveland in March, and the Junior New England Championships in New Bedford in April.

Future goals?

He says he would like to win the Senior National Championship which will be held in June, 1983 in Colorado Springs. The timing, of course, fits in with his goal of participating in the 1984 Olympics.

Goals. Gerry seems to thrive on them. In fact, his entire life sometimes seems to revolve around them. "Oh yeah," he adds with a laugh, "they also have a masters program for 45-year old weightlifters. After I accomplish that, my goal is to clean and jerk 200 pounds when I'm 80 years old."

Believe him. This young man does what he says he will do. Gracefully.