

# Raising the bar

We spoke to two autistic adults who feel passionately that Olympic weightlifting is a sport that's well-suited to people on the autism spectrum, whether done competitively or not. They told us how they got into it and why they think it's so brilliant.

**WEIGHTLIFTER MARTYN RILEY was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome at the age of 30 in 2014. All three of his sons are also on the autism spectrum, and one of them, 13-year-old Kobain, is learning to weightlift too.**

I've been involved in Olympic weightlifting for nearly twenty years, have won multiple titles and medals in my region and nationally, and I'm a

national referee and a qualified coach.

My 13-year-old son, Kobain, got a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder in 2011. I've been coaching him in weightlifting for the past three years. Despite being more affected in his development and learning than me, Kobain is an undefeated three-time British development champion and has been able to integrate well into the team of young lifters he trains with.

Because he's doing so well, the first time Kobain loses will be hard. I'm trying to prepare him by reminding him to try his hardest and do his best – because you can't do better than your best. But it's inevitable – everyone loses one day. The first time I lost I felt like quitting. But I didn't.

I got into the sport when I was 14. I was at the local pool and I heard



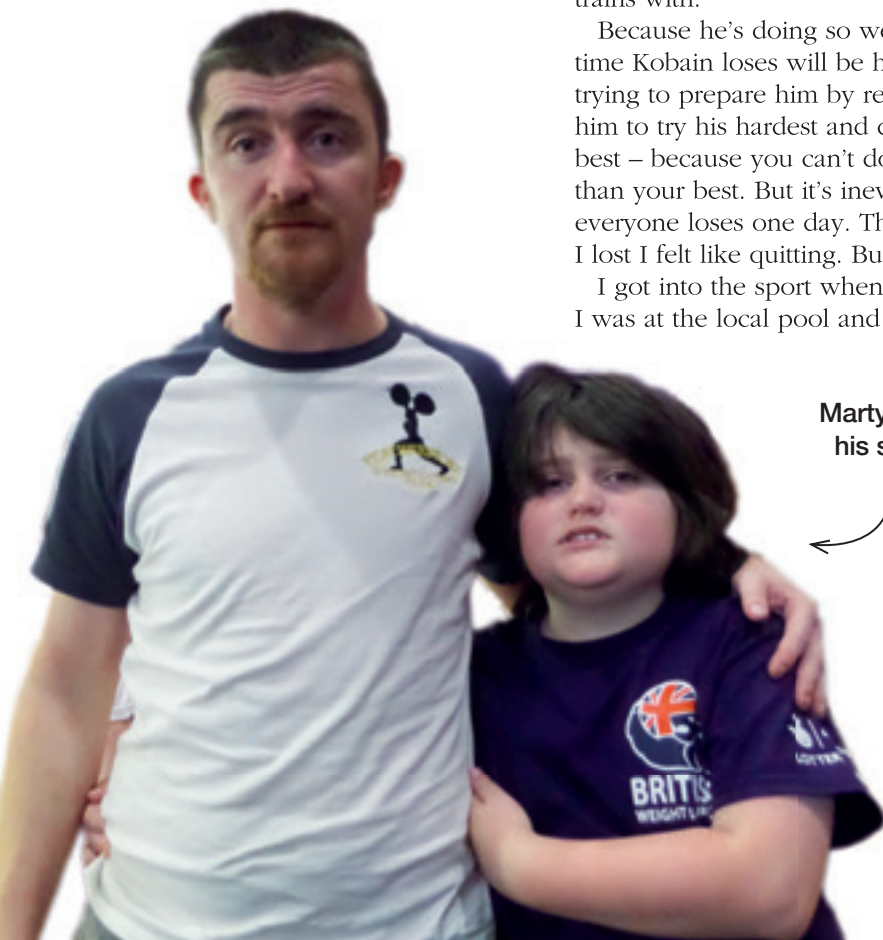
some banging around – so went downstairs to see what it was. I found one of my friends doing some weightlifting and I had a go there and then.

After that, I got fixated and I started training three times a week. I'm quite a competitive person. What I like about the sport is that you are aiming to compete against yourself. You are your own opponent. Your targets are your own targets. It's so structured, disciplined and it allows you to take out aggression.

When I find things hard, rather than kicking off I channel my aggression into the bar. It helps me let off steam. Even though it's an individual sport, you have a team supporting you. You have your coach and your team mates. But it's ultimately you against the bar. I liked winning trophies too!

I have competed a lot over the years but I now run a kids' club in Featherstone, the village where we live. I love seeing kids achieve and giving back – I get such a buzz out of seeing their smiles when they achieve something.

I train Kobain and other club kids. It's nice watching them support each other and warm up together at competitions. I'm lucky that Kobain and I have the same interests. →



Martyn coaches his son Kobain



→ I'm really proud of him.

When you're autistic, sometimes learning can be hard as you develop rigid ways of doing things. Once I learn how to do it one way, it's hard to learn a new way. For example, I know that you shouldn't bend your arms too soon but sometimes you go to autopilot and bad habits start coming back in. I still have some bad habits. Having a diagnosis means I can accept that.

Ever since I got my diagnosis, it gave me closure. With social skills, I didn't understand why I couldn't get my head around stuff. I didn't get that things weren't always black and white. Even if people spent ages explaining.

I try to keep reminding myself it's not all about me. But part of me thinks it is! My brain wants me to be selfish, but I don't want to be selfish. I have a lot of internal battles. For many years, people thought I just had anxiety before I got diagnosed. Sometimes I think that's why it's

a bit harder if you are 'more able' because you can see that there's something different which is making your life harder. But that doesn't mean you know how to sort it out.

I've got by in life because I've been clever. I'd always known I was a bit different. It's like everyone else is in a blue shirt, and I'm in a red shirt. But being diagnosed has helped me understand myself. I used to feel like a failure. But I look at the stuff I've achieved and I don't feel like a failure any more. I also have quite a good radar for noticing other people who are like me.

My advice for parents is to encourage your child in what they like to do! They can only deal with what they've got. But if you aim for the top and you only hit the middle, that's still a great achievement. One man's hill is another man's mountain.

I think our story is one of sporting success, despite the obstacles we've faced as a result of being autistic.

**ALIS ROWE** has Asperger syndrome. She has been doing Olympic weightlifting for four years and wants to promote it as a sport for women.

I hated PE when I was at school but I knew exercise was important for health. After leaving school, I took responsibility for my own health and started to exercise regularly. I was very fortunate that my parents had a rowing machine, an elliptical machine and a set of dumbbells at home and so I was able to use those. I was (still am) far too shy and too socially anxious to go to a public gym and I don't like travelling either (even going to places that are close to home). All those factors put me off exercise!

But – lucky for me – I had a workaround, because the equipment we had at home was perfect. I read a lot of fitness magazines (mainly *Men's Health* and *Men's Fitness*) and used to cut out pages of workout programmes and stick them on the wall, which is how I learned how to use dumbbells. I also joined a couple of fitness/weight training websites and spent all my free time reading about how to weight train. Fitness quickly became my special interest and before long I had turned my garage into a gym that was equipped to meet my complete exercise requirements! As soon as I got a barbell and a power rack, my weight training really took off.

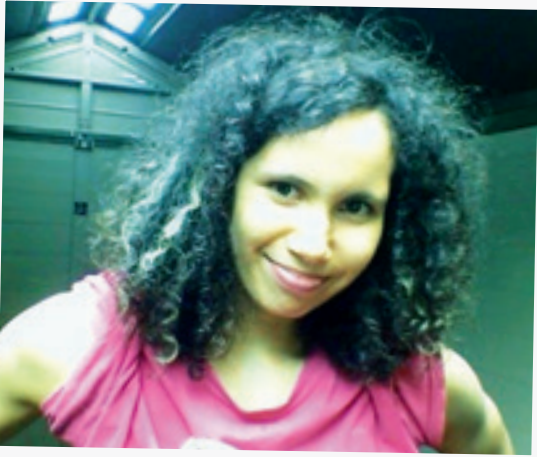
Over time, I'd had a few personal trainers. However one was particularly interested in Olympic weightlifting. At the time, I didn't even know what Olympic weightlifting was. He told me that I had good flexibility, mobility and strength, and that I might really enjoy



Development-level weightlifting focuses on technique, not weight

“What I like about the sport is that you are aiming to compete against yourself. You are your own opponent. Your targets are your own targets.”  
— *Martyn Riley*

Alis thinks  
weightlifting is a great  
sport for women



“I like the fact that my weightlifting is solitary. The most enjoyment comes from being able to do it alone, in my own time, in my own way.”  
— *Alis Rowe*

it, so why not give it a try and see?

After my first few sessions of coaching and learning more about Olympic lifting on the internet, I was hooked. It started from lots of hours and days just learning the basic movement of the snatch using a broomstick! It was a few weeks till I got to use a barbell. I wasn't put off though and I'm really glad I stuck at it.

As well as my power rack, dumbbells and standard men's bar, I also have my own weightlifting platform, jerk blocks, a women's specific Olympic barbell, and a set of Eleiko bumper plates all at home – so I have everything I need. My coaches come to my home, which works well for me.

Olympic lifting is not the sort of sport you can teach yourself and I would recommend anyone who wants to try it to get themselves a good coach. It is a very technical sport and there is no substitute for someone watching you and cuing you in real time.

After five years, I am now pretty good at it and, most importantly, I enjoy it so much it changed my life. I qualified as a personal trainer, although I have not pursued this as

a career, due to my autism. I'm good enough at weightlifting to qualify at the national level but I have no interest in competing, even though my coach has tried to persuade me.

The primary reason is that I do not like to be the centre of attention – ever. I do not even like talking to people because when I am talking I feel like the spotlight is on me. If I competed, I would feel very shy, embarrassed and anxious.

Also, I'm not a competitive person. I like to compete against myself because I like to develop and progress who I am as a person, but I don't like comparing myself to others. In fact, comparison with others has been very damaging to my self-esteem. Growing up undiagnosed with autism meant I was never “as good” as my peers at certain things, and I have often felt inferior and upset.

I like the fact that my weightlifting is solitary. The enjoyment I get comes from being able to do it alone, in my own time, in my own way. I am also sometimes reluctant to train in the way my coach wants me to (if, for example, they want me to stop a certain exercise and focus on another one instead, or if they want me to change my diet –

that's not going to happen!). If I was going to compete, I would have to obey their instructions entirely, which, again, would take away some of the pleasure of lifting for me.

I think it's a great sport for people with ASD, especially females. Not only do they have the autism traits (such as hyper focus, dedication, commitment, the desire to master, and the love of repetition and sameness), but also, physically, females are thought to be better ‘designed’ for lifting than males. We are generally more mobile and more flexible, have strong legs, a lower centre of balance, and may be more patient and willing to listen and take advice!

If you're interested in trying it, my advice is to get a coach who works for you (make sure they understand your autism and explain what you need from them and what your limitations are). Read about it and watch lots of videos! Practice and have patience. Weightlifting is a frustrating and very difficult sport. There will be lots of ‘bad days’, but with consistency and commitment, all the work pays off and you can be amazing at it. It's a very impressive and addictive thing to get into! ●

## → Find out more

- Find out more about Olympic weightlifting in the UK at [britishweightlifting.org](http://britishweightlifting.org).
- We offer autism training for sports coaches and physical activity leaders. Find out more at [www.autism.org.uk/active](http://www.autism.org.uk/active).
- Find autism-friendly sports clubs near you at [www.theautismdirectory.com](http://www.theautismdirectory.com) and at [www.autism.org.uk/directory](http://www.autism.org.uk/directory).

