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Horse-Meat-Powered Kazakh Defends Weightlifting Gold

By The Moscow Times

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Kazakhstan's Ilya Ilyin celebrating his new world record in the 94 kg class. **Dominic Ebenbichler**

LONDON — Kazakhstan's Ilya Ilyin nailed all six lifts, broke two world records and defended his weightlifting gold medal from four years ago.

Even more extraordinary, he made it look easy.

Most lifters in the 94 kg class paused for a few seconds as they gripped the bar, collecting themselves for the excruciating effort of lifting one-fourth of a ton over their head.

Ilyin, 24, marched up to the bar with quick steps and hoisted it in the air so fast that by the time a "good lift" was announced he was already celebrating.

Buoyed by an ecstatic crowd inside the ExCeL center's weightlifting arena, the spiky-haired Kazakh lifted 185 kilograms in the snatch and a world-record 233 kilograms in the clean and jerk for a total of 418 kilograms.

That total was also a world record, a whopping 6 kilograms better than the pre-competition mark, set in 1999.

"That's what I was aiming for, and it's going to stay for a long time," said Ilyin, never short on self-esteem.

Silver medalist Alexandr Ivanov of Russia matched Ilyin in the snatch but had no chance in the clean and jerk, despite registering a total of 409 kilograms, which exceeded Ilyin's Olympic record from 2008.

Anatoli Ciricu of Moldova took bronze, 2 kilograms behind Ivanov.

Ukraine's Artem Ivanov, second to Ilyin at last year's worlds, never showed up for the weigh in. He told Ukrainian newspaper Komsomolskaya Pravda he was injured three weeks before the Olympics.

After the medal ceremony, Ilyin said he has prepared for the Olympics with a special diet, including horse meat, a Kazakh delicacy.

"I try not to eat anything that is too fat, and I can't eat anything that is too sweet," Ilyin said. "I think chicken and horse meat are ideal food because they're very easy to digest."

A national hero in Kazakhstan, Ilyin remains undefeated in international competition. With three world championship titles and two Olympic gold medals, he's one of the true superstars in the sport.

Still, it wasn't a foregone conclusion that he would win in London. To stay No. 1 in this sport for four years is rare; no other weightlifting gold medalist from Beijing has repeated the feat in London.

China's 2008 winner, Lu Yong, came close in the 85 kg competition but bombed after missing all attempts in the clean and jerk.

Ilyin took a break from weightlifting after Beijing and enjoyed his celebrity status at home.

Returning in 2010, he won the Asian championship that year and captured his third world title a year later.

Ilyin's gold medal was Kazakhstan's fifth in the London Games and the fourth in weightlifting, an unprecedented haul for the central Asian nation.

Though he took his lifts in a hurry, he seemed to enjoy every second on the platform, soaking in the cheers from the crowd and gesturing for more.

"I love my life. I love my work. I love my training," Ilyin said through an interpreter at a news conference with the other medal winners. "It's all due to my love for life, my love for people. I'm very happy to be alive."

Ilyin also shared his future plans.

"Physically, I am now at my peak," he said. "Now I need to develop mentally to improve my

spirit. I also want to learn to speak English."

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