

Starting Strength

George Ernie Pickett (Pt. 3) The Year of the Heavyweights

by
Bill Starr

In the last installment of the Ernie Pickett story, Ernie had upset Gary Gubner and Ski to win a place on the team that was to travel to Mexico City to lift in the “Little Olympics.” This contest would be, in essence, the ‘67 World Championships, and Hoffman sent a full team. In addition, the United States was represented by Terpak, Dave Mayor, and Jack Lipsky, who served as referees, and Tommy Suggs.

Tommy had wormed his way into the trip by telling Terpak that he would pay his own expenses if he could carry credentials as the team’s official photographer, and Terpak agreed with the idea. But when they arrived in Mexico City, they found that there was no category for a photographer, so Tommy was put down as an assistant coach. And since the York Barbell had paid for Dave Mayor’s expenses, it was decided that it was only fair that Tommy had his expenses covered as well.

One of the reasons why Tommy was so eager to be on hand for the contest was he wanted to be able to help Ernie do his best. Ernie had been anxious about the contest ever since he was named to the team and Tommy, along with Barski, had been doing his best to bolster his confidence at every workout in the YBC since that tryout. Tommy did take a lot of photos to use in *Strength & Health*, but when the heavyweights took front stage, he set aside his camera and went backstage to coach Ernie.

The World Champion, Zhabotinsky of Russia, was a no-show, so the heavyweight class was up for grabs. Rigby of Australia was only seventeen and weighed in at 267 ½, so he wasn’t a threat to place. Olexa of Czechoslovakia was even lighter than Rigby, but had a great deal more experience than the Aussie. Reding of Belgium was a true heavyweight and had done a 1200-lb. total in training, and so was one of the favorites to win the gold. Then there was Dube and the seasoned Russian, Batishev. Ernie would have to be in top form to earn a medal of any color.

Tommy told me that Ernie was extremely nervous. So much so that he failed to clean his opener for the press of 402. He had been doing much more than this in training, but the pressure was weighing heavily on him. He came back and made it for a shaky success. Then he collected himself and finished with a P.R. 413 press. Dube pressed 430 to take the lead and Ernie was in second, ahead of Batishev, 407, and Reding, 374.

In the snatch, Ernie lost ground. He failed miserably with his opener of 308, then made it on his second attempt with what Tommy said was nothing more than a power snatch. He called for

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330 for his final attempt but it wasn't close. Batishev roared past Ernie with a 342 snatch, which was matched by Dube, so now Ernie had to get in gear to hold onto third place. Reding had snatched 314, so he was only thirty-three pounds behind Ernie and was known for his prowess in the clean and jerk.

Reding opened cautiously, making 396 easily, using the split style. Ernie, too, started out conservatively, making 408. Reding jumped to 419 and did it with power to spare. Ernie called for 424 and it was obvious that he needed to make this because Reding had a lot left in the clean and jerk. Ernie racked it, but didn't hold a tight bottom position, folded over, and lost it. Once again, he gathered himself and came through with the 424 in the clutch, finishing with a 1145 total. It was a good thing he did make that lift because Reding made 440 on his final attempt, giving him a 1128 total. Had Ernie failed with 424, Reding would have tied him and won the bronze medal.

Even though he totaled twenty pounds less than he did at the tryouts, everyone was pleased with Ernie's performance. After all, lifting in front of a packed house in a foreign country, at altitude, was a far cry from driving an hour and competing in the friendly confines of the YBC. But the fact was that he was still way behind Dube. Joe finished with a strong 440 clean and jerk for a new American record of 1212 and barely missed cleaning 451. However, despite that great showing, he came in second as Batishev made 463 and beat Joe on bodyweight.

While Ernie was tickled pink over winning the bronze, there wasn't a whole lot of time to celebrate. He had six weeks to get ready for the Empire State Invitational Meet, to be held on the 9th of December at the Kutsher's Country Club in Monticello, New York. This was a very prestigious show. Ernie would be going up against Ski, Gubner, and Dube once again, and his good friend and coach Bob Bednarski. This would be the first contest for Barski after he had dislocated his left elbow at the Pan-American Games in August.

Ernie had been experimenting with a different type of routine since the Little Olympics, concentrating on technique more so than pure power, and it cost him. He came in dead last in the heavyweight class with an 1120 total. Even Barski beat him despite the fact that he only took a token 300-lb. snatch so as not to reinjure his elbow. Then Barski stunned the crowd with an American record clean and jerk of 450. Ski, too, showed that he had a lot more competition left in him by snatching 345, the highest snatch of the contest. Gubner didn't have his best day, but he did add 55 pounds to what he did at the tryout and looked strong enough to do a lot more. Dube showed that he was still the man to beat in the heavyweight division by posting a solid 1205 total and pushing the American record in the press up to 435 pounds.

At the Philly Open on January 13th, 1968, Ernie only had to contend with Gubner. Barski was taking advantage of the newly-created 242-lb. class and wanted to set records on all three lifts and the total before he had to start packing on weight to get ready for the Seniors and Olympic Trials. The 242-lb. class would not be in play at the Olympics this time around. Barski obtained his goal: pressing 415, snatching 321, clean and jerking 455, and totaling 1190, records that would be around for a long time.

Gubner started off strong, setting a new American record in the press at 436, then snatching 340. Meanwhile, Ernie pressed 410 and snatched 300, and so was trailing Gary by an insurmountable 75 pounds. Then Gubner inexplicably failed three times to clean 420 for the clean and jerks, so Ernie ended up the winner. He finished off with a 420 success which gave him a 1130 total. After the first two contests of the season, Ernie had posted the lowest totals of the five ranking heavyweights. Again, he had some catching up to do.

Ernie was, by nature, quiescent, and many observers believed that his easygoing manner reflected a lack of genuine desire and determination to make it to the top. They were wrong. He decided that he was following the wrong course of action by giving priority to technique over pure

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strength. He went back to the type of training that had gotten him this far and started concentrating on strength movements more than he had in the last two months. Also, his sub-par performances at the Empire State contest and the Philly Open didn't depress him. They served to motivate him to train with an even greater intensity and his sessions at the York Barbell reflected his desire to prove he was a contender in the heavyweight class.

His next test was going to be an enormous one – the YMCA Nationals at the Duncan Y in Chicago to be held on the 24th and 25th of February. The Y Nationals in the past had been considered no more than a regional championship and very few of the top lifters in the country bothered to enter. In '66, only 15 lifters showed up in Detroit and in '67 in Kansas City, there were 25. But Bob Gajda had assembled a team at the Duncan Y for the express purpose of defeating the York Barbell at the Seniors in June. In '66, York had three lifters represented at the Y Nationals, Tommy plus two from Detroit where the meet was held, Ski and Puleo. At Kansas City in '67, Hoffman flew Barry Whitcomb and me out there to represent the York Y. But in '68, there were nine York lifters to go up against the seven representing the Duncan Y, although only seven would count in team scoring.

It was an exciting contest, full of energy and surprises. The atmosphere was much like the Philly Open and it was set up much better, with an elevated stage and a scoreboard behind the platform so the audience could see how every lifter was doing as the meet progressed. The gym was packed for the two days of competition, but when the heavyweights took stage, there was standing room only. They were there to see the miracle man, Barski. Exactly one hundred days after he suffered what most believed to be a career-ending injury at the Pan-Ams, he came back and set an American record in the clean and jerk. He was, indeed, the Ninth Wonder of the World, and lifting fans wanted to see him in action.

Hoffman had brought Ernie along to pick up team points for second place. He had vocally stated that he was disappointed with Ernie's lifting since the Little Olympics and didn't expect much out of him at this competition. But he was in for a surprise, as was everyone else who attended because Ernie had one of magical days that every lifter dreams about. He made nine attempts, including a World record in the press with a 445 ½ effort. He took the record from the giant Russian, Zhabotinsky, who had weighed 351 when he did the 444. Ernie weighed in one pound shy of 300. It was a monumental event in American weightlifting history. The United States had not held the world heavyweight press record since Paul Anderson did 408 in Munich in 1955.

That was just for openers. Ernie proceeded to snatch a personal record 345 and clean and jerked 450, another PR. He erased the American record total by an astounding 28 pounds. He did 1240. Barski weighed in at 243, his heaviest ever, and he, too, put on a show. His 420 press was a PR, then he snatched 335, and clean and jerked an American record, 465. His 1220 total exceeded the American record as well, before Ernie upped it to twenty pounds more. Then Barski had a close miss with 485.

It was one hell of a battle and a harbinger of what was to come in the heavyweight division. Never had there been five lifters capable of being at the top of the class. Now there was Barski, Gubner, Dube, Pickett, and Ski. No one could count out the veteran Schemansky. If he could pack on more bodyweight as all of his competitors were doing and jack his press up 20 or 30 pounds and, most importantly, stay healthy, he would be in the thick of the dogfight.

While Ernie was delighted over his performance in Chicago, he knew that he could not let up even a fraction because his fantastic lifting would only spur on his competitors.

A sidenote about the Y Nationals. Duncan did beat the York team, 42 to 37. The main reason they won was Joe Puleo represented the Duncan Y because he had been training there on a regular basis. This, as could be expected, didn't sit well with Hoffman, but since Joe assured him that he would

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still be representing the YBC at the Seniors, Hoffman didn't make a big issue out of it, mostly for fear that Joe would get pissed off and switch allegiance to the Duncan Y team.

Now the contenders in the heavyweight division moved everything up another notch. At the Middle Atlantics, held at the York Y on March 23rd, Barski and Dube locked horns in a classic confrontation that had the packed gym frantic. The Jacksonville heavyweight showed that he was in top form right out of the box. He pressed a World record 449 ½. Barski countered with a personal best of 430 and quickly made up most of the deficit by out-snatching Joe 350 to 335. Joe took 430 for his first attempt in the clean and jerk, made it, but in the process hurt his knee and was unable to handle 450. His 1210 total was most impressive, considering that he only made his opener in the clean and jerk but it wasn't enough on that night. Barski did 440 with ease, then called for 467. If he made it, he would break the American clean and jerk record and also the total, which Ernie had set a month before. The crowd was really behind him and Barski was bubbling with confidence – maybe too much, because he missed the clean. One thing I always admired about Barski: he never let a failure bother him in the least. Many times, after a miss in training, he would add more weight to the bar and end up making the attempt with room to spare.

After getting his head right, he clean and jerked the 467 ½ and was perched at the top of the heavyweight division once again. And slowly but surely Barski, Dube, and Ernie were pulling away from Ski and Gubner. Barski's total of 1245 was now the mark to shoot for in the heavyweight class.

Since Ernie had competed in five contests in five months, he didn't enter another one until May 4th, the Region II Championships held at Gonzaga H.S. in Washington, D.C. He had been training like a maniac and told me he felt ready to press another World record. I asked how his injured triceps was doing and he said fine. He was getting treatments on the Isotron from Doc Ziegler, and Smitty was using ultrasound on his arm whenever he trained at the YBC. He said he almost decided not to lift but he felt strong and didn't want to appear to be dodging Barski.

Ernie opened with 400 and made it ridiculously easy. Barski took the same poundage and struggled to make it. He, like Ernie, had upped his workload considerably in recent weeks and he appeared to be slightly overtrained. Barski had told me that he might just take a token press and snatch because he wanted to try to up his clean and jerk to make another American record.

But when Ernie shot up 430, Barski's competitive juices took over and he made the same weight and much easier than he had done his opener. Pickett called for 450. In the past, Ernie often had trouble with his cleans, especially for the press, but on this night, he cleaned the weight like it was a Sampson set. He drove the weight over his head, then his injured triceps gave way. This wasn't good. The Seniors were only six weeks away.

Barski took over the meet. He somehow rammed the 450 home. It was a beautiful, smooth lift and he had himself a World record, his favorite. It was the first time in history that a lifter had pressed 200 lbs. over bodyweight. It was also the third time in three months that an American had broken the World press record. He went on to do a nominal 300 snatch then set himself for the clean and jerk. He pushed aside his fatigue long enough to achieve his goal, a new American clean and jerk mark of 471. Most remarkably, he had broken the American clean and jerk standard in every meet he lifted in since injuring his elbow.

Barski was now the odds-on favorite to win the Seniors. Dube's knee kept him from training as hard as he wanted to, Pickett's triceps would not be ready for that high level of competition. Plus, the other two contenders were also nursing injuries. Gubner had a badly injured wrist, incurred while attempting a heavy clean, and Ski had injured his knee while cleaning 425. When Ernie found out that Gubner and Ski weren't going to enter, he was tempted since third place was assured even if he had an off day.

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But all the York lifters along with Grimek, Stanko, and Terpak advised him not to lift. Terpak told him that the only meet that was going to count in 1968 was the Olympic Trials. The team would be selected from that contest and everything else that had happened that year was a wash.

So Ernie didn't compete, yet he was backstage lending support to Barski throughout the contest. It was payback for the way Barski had helped him at the Tryouts. They were certainly rivals, but extremely friendly and supportive rivals.

The 1968 Senior Nationals were held on June 8th and 9th at the William Penn H.S. auditorium in York and will go down as one of the most exciting weightlifting contests ever held in this country. It rivaled the 1964 Olympic Trials which had been held at the World's Fair in New York. The crowd there had been large and extremely vocal, yet I believe the audience that attended the '68 Seniors was even more enthusiastic.

Seventy lifters showed up to test their strength, compared to 58 the year before. Unfortunately, 19 lifters bombed, which may be some sort of record although I'm not sure about that. Part of the increase in lifters was due to the new 242-lb. division which had 13 athletes. There were tight contests in nearly every class, but the one that everyone came to see was the match between Dube and Barski.

That entire day had been hot and humid and when the heavyweights took stage, the auditorium was stifling due to all of the body heat. There were fans in the warm-up area, but they didn't help much. Leonard Rendino of Torrington, Connecticut, lifted alone because of the high attempts taken by the other two in the class. He did well under the circumstances 350, 280, and 360 and took home the bronze medal.

Barski, weighing 247, opened with 420 in the press and made it with ease. Joe took 425 and it was a success as well. Barski jumped to 440. It was out of the groove but he fought it and got three while lights. Joe knew he had to stay ahead of Barski in the press if he wanted to win. He called for 445, but missed the clean. Then he passed on taking it again. He wanted to see what Barski would do on his final attempt. Barski asked for 455. It was weighed before his attempt and found to be 456 1/2, which would be a new World record.

The crowd was on their feet as he approached the bar, shouting and screaming encouragement. Barski made a strong clean and jammed the weight overhead. He received a five minute standing ovation, then the audience settled down because Joe had asked for 460. When Joe stepped up to the bar, the crowd was deadly silent. Would they see two World records back-to-back? Not on this occasion. Joe cleaned the massive poundage and drove it almost to arms' length. He struggled for several long seconds, but couldn't lock it out. Nevertheless, the 2000 spectators stood and roared their approval.

Both lifters started with 325 in the snatch, but that's all Joe got. He tried 345 twice but failed both times. Barski took 340 and made it effortlessly. With a fat 40-lb. lead, he declined a third attempt. He wanted to save all his energy for the clean and jerk.

This was Barski's night to shine. With every successful lift, his confidence shot up another notch. After they both took 425 to open the clean and jerk competition, Joe opted not to take any more attempts. He knew he wasn't going to win this encounter and didn't want to take the risk of reinjuring his knee. He would save it for the Trials in August.

Barski was now in his element. It was no longer a contest, but an exhibition, a performance, and he made the most of it. The bar was loaded to 485, actual weight 486 1/2. If he made it, he would break the record held by the 350-lb. Russian, Zhabotinsky.

Final team standing for the Senior Nationals in 1968:

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| York Barbell Club | 36 |
| Duncan YMCA | 22 |
| L.A. YMCA | 14 |
| U.S. Air Force | 13 |

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After I finished working with Tommy when the 242ers competed, I moved to the edge of the stage out front to watch the heavyweights. A storm was right on top of us when Barski stepped up to the bar and raised his arms to the heavens, his signature pose. Right at that very moment, a burst of thunder and lightning exploded directly overhead and the lights flickered. It was as if the lifting gods were telling him he had their full support. I think that every person inside that auditorium believed one-hundred percent that he would make that lift. And he did: magnificently. Once he set the bar back down on the platform he was mobbed by lifters and fans that swarmed onto the stage. The rest of the crowd applauded on and on, almost in disbelief at what he had just accomplished. Two World records! Plus a new American total record of 1280.

He had a lock on an Olympic Team berth. The only question in everyone's minds was: who will be the second heavyweight on the team? Dube or Pickett, or perhaps even Gubner? Hoffman even wrote in *S&H* that it should be a great battle between Dube and Pickett to see who made the team. But the fact of the matter is that there are no sure things in competitive sports. Remember Super Bowl III? There was no way in hell the Jets could beat the Colts. How many boxing fans put any money on Leon Spinks to defeat Muhammad Ali? Maybe a couple of members of his family, but that's about it.

My point being, strange things happen in every sport. What it finally comes down to is: which team or individual comes to the contest more fully prepared? That's how the final act in this drama plays out and the results were stunning to every lifter and fan of Olympic lifting in the country. And perhaps even the entire world.

To be continued...

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