

Starting Strength

The York Barbell Series – Exhibitions II

by
Bill Starr

Hoffman was a staunch advocate of weightlifting exhibitions. He wanted the York athletes to be able to handle some impressive amounts of weight in a brief period of time and he also wanted them to have outstanding physiques. He understood fully that when he exposed the public to a relatively unknown sport of Olympic lifting, it would have a direct effect on the sales of his two magazines, *Strength & Health* and *Muscular Development*, as well as for his fitness equipment and nutritional supplements.

There was another, less mercenary reason why he put on as many exhibitions as possible. They provided him with a platform where he was the center of attention and could talk. He loved the sound of his own voice more so than anyone I ever met.

During the forties and fifties, Hoffman had a large stable of lifters working at the York Barbell that he could use for these exhibitions: Tony Terlazzo, John Terpak, Gord Venables, Dave Mayor, Dave Sheppard, John Grimek, Steve Stanko, John Terry, Dick Batchell, and Frank Spellman. He even used a couple of his girlfriends, Dorcus Lehman, and Alda Ketterman when he knew there would be lots of women in the audience.

But in the early sixties, there were only two active lifters living in York: Vern Weaver and Bill March. Vern didn't work at the Barbell, so he declined many offers to go with Hoffman to an exhibition. March, however, was employed there and he proved to be the perfect athlete to take to these exhibitions. He was extremely strong, could move heavy poundages without the benefit of any warm-ups, and was built like a Greek god. Bill did as many as two hundred exhibitions in a year and competed in a dozen meets. It seems impossible, yet it's true. He used the exhibitions as workouts, something no other lifter was quite able to do.

In 1965, Bill decided to take a break from not only competing, but also from the exhibitions. That's the main reason Bob Bednarski was brought to York in the later part of that year – to fill the void left by March. And Bednarski was up to the task, although not to the extent that Bill had done. Barski didn't really like his scheduled training to be interrupted two or three times a week, although he did end up doing about five exhibitions a month.

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When Tommy Suggs arrived in York in 1963, he joined March at a few exhibitions. Tony Garcy and Homer Brannum were living in York during this stretch of time but they were not working at the Barbell, so they didn't bother with the exhibitions. Tony, in particular, refused to have his training schedule interrupted and neither of them needed extra money since they both had well-paying jobs. Besides, Hoffman much preferred lifters that weighed over two-hundred pounds for the exhibitions and Homer was a 148-pounder and Tony a middleweight.

When I arrived in York in February of '66, I was only a second-tier 181-pounder, so I wasn't considered to be part of any exhibitions. However, once I grew to be a full-fledged 198er and had made a good showing at the '66 North Americans, Hoffman started taking me to some shows. Mostly when he couldn't get Barski or Suggs to go.

The reason March and Barski did so many of these was this is basically how they made their living. Bob would give them no less than \$25 for each show. The York Barbell was extremely frugal when it came to paying its employees. Barski and March, for example, got a paycheck for only a hundred bucks a week so picking up an additional 50-100 dollars was very tempting. And necessary. I know I was delighted when I got my first reward for being a part of an exhibition and my wife, Marlene, was even more ecstatic than I was since it was a bit more than our weekly food budget.

While the extra money was more than welcome, there were a few negatives. In many cases, Hoffman requested your presence with virtually no notice and quite often, Barski, Tommy, or I had already trained. Yet there was no refusing him. I knew that if I did, I wouldn't be asked to do another show and Marlene would be very upset. So when Hoffman said you were to leave at a certain time to drive to some site for an exhibition, you went, ready or not. It always had an adverse effect on my training because I followed a rather strict schedule, not nearly as involved as Garcy's, but it still messed me up to have to change it or to do two heavy sessions in one day.

And it didn't matter if one, or all, of us were preparing for some national level contest. The exhibitions were all about Bob, and he was the most egocentric person I've ever met. I have met a lot of lifters, bodybuilders, and people who have made a great deal of money in my life, but none came close to being as self-important as Bob Hoffman.

The other drawback, at least for me, was having to listen to Bob talk. He talked during the drive to the show, he never slowed down if we stopped to eat, and he continued to drone on and on all the way home. Of course, he talked continuously at the exhibitions, and when he got rolling on some subject that was currently stuck in his mind, the lifter, or lifters had to just stand there with their thumbs up their asses while he rambled on about his latest exploits. Such as how many miles he ran a week – a baldfaced lie. He got winded climbing the flight of stairs to the offices at the Barbell. Or how he had been fasting for the last three weeks, eating only his Hi-Proteen Energy Bars. Another lie. He had eaten two hot dogs and a hot fudge sundae on the way to the show.

Then things changed. It came about accidentally rather than being planned. A call came in from the principal of Camp Hill High School requesting an exhibition for the entire student body. The operator directed the call to Tommy, and he told the principal that Hoffman was in New Orleans at a Health Food Convention and wasn't available until next week. The principal said he knew it was short notice, but the person who was to give a talk at the assembly got sick and couldn't make it and could some York lifters put on an exhibition tomorrow? He would pay them one hundred dollars.

"We'll be there," Tommy said.

Since it was for both sexes, we took Kay Suggs along to demonstrate some exercises for the ladies. She instructed a course in weight training at the York YMCA and was in excellent shape. It was a huge success and a great deal of fun since we didn't have to deal with Hoffman. So Tommy and

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I started making some calls to schools in the York and Harrisburg area, asking if they would like a weightlifting demonstration for either the entire school or perhaps just for the football team.

We still went with Hoffman to exhibitions that he lined up but more and more we started going to high schools on our own. That's when we learned a valuable lesson that I had previously been taught when I worked for the YMCA. When we did an exhibition for free, the coaches would treat us like they were doing us a favor. Often, when we arrived at the school, there would be no one to greet us. We would have to carry in all the weights and sometimes a squat rack and bench, put on the show, then load up the van again, usually without so much as a gesture of appreciation for our efforts.

I told Tommy of my experience with the Y. If we provided any activity free to the public, we seldom got any response. However, if we charged, even as little as a dollar, we got more people than we could handle. So that's what we did with the exhibitions. If they wanted us, they paid. Our fee was moderate, fifty bucks, and we knew that a much higher fee was paid to those who put on assemblies around the country.

The attitude of the coaches or whoever was responsible for an assembly changed immediately. They would be out front to meet us, with someone to lug in the weights and equipment while we visited and had coffee with them. After the show, they had a group of young men reload the weights and equipment in the van, and frequently they took us out to eat as an added bonus. And as word spread around the area, we began getting more requests than we could handle.

The best thing about scheduling our own exhibitions or clinics was that we could arrange them to fit into our training schedules. Or maybe the best thing was that we didn't have to deal with Hoffman. It was such a great relief not to have to listen to him drone on about himself. And Barski, Tommy, and I always enjoyed being in each other's company so that the trips to and from the exhibitions were fun, rather than drudgery.

Setting up shows to blend with our training was a huge plus. And it needs to be remembered that Tommy and I had a monthly magazine to put out, meets to lift in, and we also wanted to spend time with our families.

Our presentations were much smoother without Hoffman. If possible, three of us went and this made it easier for all of us. One would talk while the other two demonstrated the Olympic lifts, and sometimes the front and back squat and bench press. We knew that most in attendance were not going to try the snatches and clean and jerks right away, but a lot of them would do presses, benches, and squats. Weight training for sports, especially for football, was on the rise and one of the reasons the coaches wanted these demonstrations was so that they could set up a program for their athletes at the school.

We made sure there was no dead time and if Barski was there, he was always the closer. If March joined us, which he seldom did, he made the final lift. March told me this story on himself. After he completed all his lifts at an exhibition, he would dunk a basketball if a goal was available and if it wasn't, he'd do a back flip. The idea was to show that a weightlifter could be very athletic. March put on a show on a stage that had a set of drums behind him in preparation for a dance that was to follow. When he did his back flip, he didn't quite get around far enough to land on his feet as he intended. Rather, he ended up sprawling into the set of drums and finished on his knees.

But this is what made March such a great showman. Instead of displaying any concern over his mistake, he merely bowed, stood up and left the stage, making the audience wonder if that had been part of the presentation.

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I never saw March, Barski, or Tommy ever miss an attempt at an exhibition, but I did see Barski come close to not only missing, he nearly pulled his shoulders out of their sockets. This is how it happened. It's really a two-part story. Barski, Tommy, and I were putting on a show for the entire high school in Harrisburg. As planned, Barski did his final clean and jerk, which showed as 405 but in actuality was only 365 since the 25s, 35s, and 45s, were all five pounds light. The kids went wild and began shouting and clapping for more. Barski was more than ready to oblige, but Tommy beat him to it. He cleaned the 365 and jerked it just as Barski had done.

I was announcing and telling the crowd that this was quite a feat of strength since Tommy weighed fifty pounds less than Bednarski. Then, without telling me beforehand what he planned to do, Tommy, with the bar locked out overhead, lowered it down behind his neck and commenced to do ten back squats with it. He brought the house down. Doing a clean and jerk with that amount of weight might have been some sort of trickery, but everyone in attendance fully understood that squatting the weight for ten reps was truly an amazing feat of strength.

Barski, of course, wanted to do another attempt, but we said that it was best to stop on such a high note. He grumbled all the way home about being upstaged by Tommy and all we could do was laugh. He vowed that it wouldn't happen again.

The very next week, we were giving another exhibition at a different high school in the Harrisburg area before a very enthusiastic audience, a general assembly of the entire student body. All the front rows appeared to be filled with young females – Barski's kind of crowd – and he was eager to impress them.

Tommy and I knew that Barski would insist on being the final lifter no matter what, so Tommy didn't even bother doing any squats after his final clean and jerk, again with 405 showing. Barski was all grins as he stepped up to the bar for his final lift with the same weight. But what he didn't realize was that Tommy had spent a good bit of time practicing this move in the York Gym when no one was around before he tried it in public. And he had told me that it was not easy to do. It was a great deal more complicated than it looked.

This was something that Barski figured out that day, and almost too late. He clean and jerked the weight with ease, then locked it out, set his feet, and lowered the bar to the back of his neck. But it didn't land where he wanted it to, and the bar started sliding down his back for about eight inches. If he lost it he was going to ding his shoulders for sure and maybe even dislocate them. Only through brute strength brought on by a jolt of fear was he able to keep the bar from falling to the floor. After some anxious moments he got the bar under control, flipped it to the front of his shoulders, then lowered it to the floor. The crowd, confused as to what they had just seen, gave him a smattering of applause and I quickly said in the portable microphone, "Thanks for inviting us to your school. I hope our demonstration will encourage all of you to try lifting weights. It's a great way to build strength and gain functional bodyweight." I had to dig my nails into my palms while I spoke. Otherwise, I would have broken out in laughter.

Tommy walked away because he, too, was doing everything in his power not to laugh. But once we got back in the van, we let loose. "It wasn't funny," grumbled Barski, "I could have hurt myself." Then he joined us, realizing how silly he looked and the three of us relived the expression on his face when the bar slipped down his back all the way back to the Barbell.

If you've read *Defying Gravity* you'll recognize this story, but I'm sure that some haven't and it's just too good to ignore, so I'll include it in this piece. After Ernie Pickett became a member of the York Barbell Team, Hoffman invited him to take part in exhibitions. Hoffman liked big men and Ernie was

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certainly that, standing 6'5" and weighing just over three hundred pounds. He was right at the top of the heavyweight division, battling it out with Barski and Joe Dube. At the YMCA Nationals in '68, he went nine for nine and set a world record in the press with a 445½ effort, erasing the mark held by the 351-pound Russian, Zhabotinsky.

Hoffman took Ernie, Roman Mielec, and me to an exhibition that was held in a park in York. We lifted on a level patch of grass which was fine – we'd lifted on worse. Hoffman wanted Roman along since he was a 132-pounder to demonstrate that both small and very big men could get strong lifting weights. I was there to keep the action moving. What Hoffman didn't know about Ernie was that he had a strange sense of humor which would surface unexpectedly, and for no obvious reason other than in his own mind.

We would do all three of the Olympic lifts. Roman would start, I would step in when he finished and Ernie would finish with 405 (365 actual weight). Normally, everyone would start with 225, but this was too much for Roman, so he did 135 for his first set, cleaning it and pressing it smoothly for five reps. All the while that Roman was lifting, Hoffman was going on and on about Ernie's world record press and how he was the first American to hold a world record in the press in the heavyweight class since the great Paul Anderson.

When Roman lowered the bar back to the ground, I started to step forward to help him load more weight. But before I moved, Ernie nudged me and stepped up to the bar. Hoffman was taken off-guard since this wasn't in the plans, then he went back to bragging about Ernie's exceptional pressing power.

Ernie is so large that when he bent down and gripped the bar, it looked like a Little Sampson Set. He flipped the bar to his shoulders like it was a broomstick and got set for the press. Having been around Ernie quite a bit, I knew of his sense of humor and wondered what in the world he was up to. I quickly found out. When he started to press this relatively small amount of weight, it suddenly looked as if he had 500-pounds on the bar. He twisted and squirmed, leaned way back as the bar wobbled from side to side and jerked around like it was electrified.

I couldn't help myself, I broke up and looked over at Hoffman to see how he was reacting. His mouth was hanging open and he had this stunned expression on his face. And perhaps for the first and only time in his entire life, he didn't have anything to say.

With great apparent difficulty, Ernie finally finished the lift, and placed the bar back on the ground. He even made lowering the bar look difficult. Then he stepped back as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Hoffman was staring at him, hoping that Ernie would provide him with an explanation as to why he had made 135 look more like a quarter of a ton, but Ernie's face was blank. Finally, Hoffman found his voice again and muttered, "Well, after all I can't understand what's wrong with Ernie today." Again, he looked over at Ernie for some help. He got nothing in return.

I quickly loaded more weight on the bar, Roman did another press, then I did 225, 275, and 300, actual final weight, 265. Ernie hadn't moved a muscle all this time and I could hear the crowd buzzing. They were confused and a bit dumbfounded. Here is this behemoth who is supposed to be the strongest presser in the world and he barely pressed a weight that the little guy had just done for five repetitions.

Roman and I loaded the bar to 315. Ernie cleaned and pressed it for five reps like the bar was empty, then proceeded to knock out three strong reps with 405, 365 actual weight, which baffled the crowd and Hoffman even more.

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Roman and I had a great time relating that story to everyone at the Barbell. It was the best stunt that anyone had played on Hoffman since Stanko rigged the chain that Hoffman used during exhibitions, back when he was still able to take part in the shows. Hoffman wasn't very strong. He never lifted 300 pounds over his head, even when he weighed as much as 275. So he did lots of stunts. Bent-pressing, tearing thick phone books in half and breaking a chain with a chest expansion. The phone books were baked until the pages were brittle and weren't that hard to rip apart. And the chain had a lead link, so after a bit of acting, Hoffman could snap it rather easily. He did have a large chest so no one thought that he was cheating.

Stanko replaced the lead link with a real one made of metal, Hoffman went through routine of struggling, then puffed his chest up to finish his task. Nothing; the chain remained intact, He stopped, tightened the chain and tried again. No soap. After a dozen more tries, he finally gave up and quickly explained to the audience that he wasn't at his best today because he had already run ten miles and trained heavy for two hours.

While the exhibition went on, Stanko removed the metal link and put the lead one back. Hoffman never had a clue what had transpired and Stanko kept the secret to himself for a long time before he told Grimek what he had done.

The strangest exhibition that I ever took part in was one Tom Hirtz and I held at the Bordentown Prison in New Jersey. One of the inmates had been writing me to put on an exhibition at the prison. He was doing the Olympic lifts and had been allowed to go to a few local meets. He said there was no money available, but he was sure the inmates would greatly appreciate seeing some top lifters in action.

I had done a few exhibitions at prisons in Indiana and the audience was always extremely receptive and most appreciative. Trouble was, I couldn't get anyone to go with me. Tom Hirtz was in town and when he heard me asking some of the York lifters if they would join me for a free show at a prison, Tommy stepped up and volunteered. He had just entered his Christian phase and putting on a show for criminals fit his philosophy nicely.

So we did the show. Right off, I knew that this was not like any other group of inmates that I had lifted in front of before. From the very beginning, as Tom and I pressed, they jeered and booed us, shouting for us to put some real weight on the bar. After we both pressed 300 on the exhibitions set, they still were hostile and their taunts continued on through the snatches and clean and jerks.

After we both snatched 255, actual weight, the booing got even louder. I threw in the towel, knowing that whatever we did, we weren't going to win this crowd over. I took 225 and 315 and quit. Tom, however, continued to bust his gut and ended up cleaning and jerking 350, actual weight, which was right at his best in competition and an exceptional lift for a 181er.

By this time, over half the crowd had left and those that remained got even louder, calling us a pair of girls and saying that anyone in the joint could outlift us. There were also a lot of nasty remarks about our sexual preferences and the occupations of our mothers.

The lifter who had contacted me came on stage to help us load the weights and bar on a dolly. He apologized profusely for his fellow inmates' poor behavior. "It wasn't your fault," I told him. "But what puzzles me is why so many of them left in the middle of the exhibition. You wrote me that the last time there had been any sort of weightlifting show was when Bruce Randall was here in 1958. I mean, it's not like they get to see something different every night." I was flustered and pissed off.

"Well," he said matter-of-factly, "I forgot that Gunsmoke's on tonight. I should have had you come on another night." That ripped it for us. We had made the rather long drive, missed our scheduled workouts, unloaded all the weights ourselves, extended more than usual, and they decided

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to go watch a rerun of a western on TV, rather than our presentation. And the worst part of the whole deal was that we had done it for free. It was a perfect example of “no good deed should go unpunished.” And the last exhibition I ever did in a prison.

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