

Starting Strength

The York Barbell Series – Exhibitions

by
Bill Starr

Bob Hoffman was, first and foremost, a salesman. He built the financial foundation for his weightlifting empire by going from house to house selling oil burners during the Depression. These were extremely difficult times and only because of his dogged determination and persistence was he able to sell his product. For the most part, he worked the rural market, driving to farms in outlying areas of Pennsylvania. This gave him a bit of an edge since few other salesmen bothered to venture very far from the more populated areas of the state. Plus, he had one other thing in his favor – everyone needed heat.

While we were driving to a health food convention, he told me that he figured all of his profits in terms of roast beef sandwiches. If he made enough money in a day to buy at least one sandwich, he knew he would survive. When he sold enough to purchase several sandwiches, he was ahead of the game. As it turned out, his remarkable ability to sell allowed him to buy lots and lots of roast beef sandwiches.

He fully understood the importance of meeting potential customers face to face. Whenever he traveled to some city for a weightlifting contest, such as New Orleans or St. Louis, he would always visit a health food store that carried his products. And, if possible, take a lifter or bodybuilder along with him. Quite often, the athlete would give a posing or lifting demonstration if the situation was right. The owners of those stores and the customers he talked to while he was there loved him. It had the same impact as if Henry Ford had showed up at a local Ford dealership. Sales soared after his visits.

He knew that holding demonstrations and exhibitions were a great way to introduce the public to the sports of bodybuilding and Olympic weightlifting, which in turn would enable him to gain more customers for his weight equipment and nutritional products. Nearly every employee at the York Barbell Company was a competitive Olympic lifter, so he had a full stable of athletes to utilize for his advertising. And he did put them to use: Tony Terlazzo, John Grimek, Steve Stanko, John Terpak, Gord Venables, Frank Spellman, Dick Bachtell, Jules Bacon, Mike Dietz, Wally Zagurski, and for a brief time, Dave Sheppard.

Bob would put on shows wherever and whenever he could, traveling deep into the South and hitting large and small towns throughout the East and Northeast. His most ambitious and most famous exhibition tour took place in 1940. Hoffman loaded John Grimek, Tony Terlazzo, and Gracie Bard, Hoffman's then-girlfriend and protege, in his new Oldsmobile and headed west. They carried their own weights, a 400 lb York Olympic set strapped to the front bumper. Their first show was in

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Columbus, Ohio, then they made a beeline to Denver. Both of these shows had been scheduled, but the rest were arranged on the go. They zigzagged northwest, stopping primarily at college towns along the way. Colleges were desirable since they always had some sort of gym or auditorium available for an exhibition and this was the age group that was most interested in strength and fitness. For the majority of the shows, there was no advance publicity. They would hit a town, spread the word of a lifting and posing exhibition by members of the '36 Olympic team and they always drew large crowds.

Grimek would lift and pose, Terlazzo would lift, Hoffman would talk and sometimes take part in the demonstration. I'm not sure what Gracie did, other than to keep Hoffman happy. Once they got to Seattle, they began working their way south. Portland was a hotbed for lifting at that time and they drew an overflow crowd there, as they did in San Francisco.

Grimek told me this story, and that the San Francisco show was, by far, the most demanding. The night before the exhibition he had partied with friends into the wee hours of the morning. He was still trying to sleep off the effects of the excess drinking when Hoffman and Terlazzo bodily carried him from his bed to drive him to the exhibition. He was wobbly and in no condition to handle any heavy weights on this night. But as fate would have it, Karl Norberg, the legendary strongman from The City, was there, and he planned to lift as well. Karl was obviously ready to challenge Grimek.

John never knew for certain whether he had been set up by Norberg, but one thing he did know was he was going to have to dig deep into his mental and physical reserves or he would be beaten in front of a lot of fans. This was something he wasn't accustomed to at all and he didn't care to come out on the short end of the stick.

Karl had this unusual style of cleaning a bar using a curl grip, then pressing it. He announced many times that he was the very best in the world at using this technique. However, Grimek had used this same style before and was most confident doing it. So whatever Karl put on the bar and lifted, John would add ten pounds and clean and press it with the reverse grip. Even though his head was throbbing and felt the size of the Golden Gate Bridge, he managed to outlift the great strongman on his pet lift, 280 to 270 for Norberg, and Karl outweighed Grimek by eighty pounds. It was an event that lifting fans talked about for many, many years in the Bay area. In fact, it was still a topic of conversation whenever a group of Olympic lifters got together out there when I was still competing in the '60s.

Word had spread about the shows and even larger crowds gathered for exhibitions in Los Angeles and San Diego. Hoffman then headed east with plans for putting on more shows on the way back to York. But when they arrived in Oklahoma City, Gracie was complaining so much about being on the road that Hoffman told Grimek to drive straight through to York.

By the time they got home, they had covered over 3000 miles and had put on thirty exhibitions. And they wore out a new set of tires. Little wonder, with such a load. Grimek said they carried so much weight that the big car set low like a sports car and was a lethal force with the 400 lbs suspended on the front bumper. That tour helped Hoffman to sell a shitload of weights.

By the time I arrived in York, Hoffman no longer had a large group of athletes to take with him to exhibitions. Basically, he had one – Bill March. Sometimes, he would round up another bodybuilder or lifter such as Vern Weaver, and Tommy Suggs when he moved to York and became the Managing Editor of *Strength & Health*, but in most cases it was just March. And Bill put on an enormous number of shows. In one year he did 200 and was lifting in eight or more contests as well.

March was the ideal person to put on strength shows. He lived in nearby Dover and so could be contacted for a show rather easily. He was handsome, looked like a bodybuilder/weightlifter, was

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extremely athletic, and he could handle some impressive poundages without the benefit of many warm-up sets. In fact, he seldom did any warm-ups. He started with 225, jumped to 315, and finished off with a press in the mid-three hundred range and a clean and jerk close to or over 400. He usually topped out his snatches with 275 or a bit more, depending on how he felt.

After each exhibition, Bill would finish by dunking a basketball, if a basketball was available. If not he would do a back flip. Like Grimek had done during his time, March proved that a muscular individual could also possess a high degree of athleticism. In addition to all that, Bill was extremely polite and would take time to talk to his fans. He felt that this was part of his obligation to those who came to see him perform, and he was always a gentleman.

With so many exhibitions, as many as five a week on occasion, when did he have time to train? He didn't train in the conventional sense. The exhibitions were his training sessions which he augmented with isotonic-isometric work in the power rack. This accounted for his ability to lift maximum poundages in contests with only a few warm-ups.

Bob Bednarski, the fast-rising young star in Olympic lifting, arrived in York just a few months ahead of me. The main reason that Hoffman had brought him to York from New England was that March had told Hoffman he needed to take a break from all the exhibitions. He was simply tired and wanted to rest and focus on his lifting because there were suddenly several competitors breathing down his neck, primarily Bob Bartholomew and teenage upstart Phil Grippaldi.

So Bednarski was to replace March for the many exhibitions Hoffman set up during the year. Bednarski was quite different from March in terms of personality. While March was soft spoken and rather introverted, Bob was extremely outgoing and exuberant. He was taller than March and was growing into the heavyweight division, but already possessed a strong, athletic physique. He quickly learned how to handle heavy poundages with very little in the way of warm-up. But most importantly, he loved performing in front of an appreciative crowd. It didn't matter to him whether there were a dozen people in attendance or a couple thousand, he still gave his full effort. He lived to be the center of attention, and the crowds could feel his excitement and always responded to it favorably.

And while March thought of it as part of his obligation to visit with the people after a show, Bednarski thrived on it. Bednarski never met a person who he didn't think liked him. He was this big strong kid let loose in a candy store when it came to exhibitions.

He began doing the exhibitions almost exclusively, although only about half as many as March did because Bednarski informed Hoffman that he had to get in his regular training sessions. He couldn't get by with just the work he did at the exhibitions and some rack work. Hoffman cut him some slack because he could see the potential in this ambitious young man. When he grew to be a true heavyweight, he would be a force to be reckoned with.

The main reason March and then Bednarski agreed to do so many exhibitions was basically because this was how they earned their living. The Barbell paid them \$100 a week, but this was for the work they did in the warehouse. Their chores included helping to mix protein powder, Energol, a mixture of three different kinds of oils, making the sun tan lotion out of aloe leaves, plus loading trucks with weight equipment and nutritional products. Hoffman would give a lifter who put on an exhibition \$25 in cash. While this may seem like a mere pittance now, in the mid-sixties it could provide groceries for a family of four for a week. I know this to be true because that was the food budget in my family. So it's easy to understand why March and Bednarski, and Suggs and I as well, jumped at the opportunity to go to one of these shows.

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The one thing that people watching an exhibition put on by the York lifters did not know was that the set used for these shows was considerably lighter than a regulation Olympic set. Hoffman had all the 45s, 55s, and 25s ground down so that they were five pounds light. That meant when 225 was showing on the bar, the actual weight was 205. Three fifteen was just 285, and so on. This, of course, was done so that the lifter would not miss an attempt. Hoffman had no qualms about cheating. He did it at every opportunity. When he claimed to have bent-pressed 250 pounds, Bob Hise wanted to see how much the weight really weighed. Hoffman's best press at the time was 225, and he said he clean and pressed that weight for 5 reps. Hise guessed it weighed closer to 195 or 200 than 250.

He also cheated when he broke a chain by expanding his chest after giving a talk at some sports or health food gathering. He had a link made of lead so that he could always be sure of breaking it. Steve Stanko told me that before one such exhibition, he exchanged the lead link with a real one made of iron and Hoffman huffed and puffed on stage for nearly ten minutes before finally giving up. Steve said he'd never laughed so hard in his life.

I didn't like the idea of having the audience believe I was handling more weight on one of the Olympic lifts than I could do on a legitimate, accurate set. Neither did the other lifters, so we made it a rule that we would never handle more on the exhibition set than our best in that particular lift. That meant if our best on the press was 300 pounds, we couldn't load "305" on the bar using the trimmed down plates. No one ever broke that rule since actual numbers are sacred to athletes in any sport. However, we did accept the fact that this was merely a performance and not a competition – a form of show business where props are permitted.

I had been there almost a year before Hoffman invited me to be part of a demonstration with Bednarski. I had moved up to the 198 lb class and had turned in some decent totals in my last couple of meets. Two lifters worked out better than one for obvious reasons; it gave each of them a chance to catch their breath between attempts. It took me a while to get used to the fast pace and lack of warm-ups. I always did about fifteen minutes of preparation before even touching a bar when I trained or competed, but this wasn't going to happen. There was no time for warm-ups. The audience didn't want to watch us going through some light lifts. They came to see lots of iron moved. Bednarski pressed, then we both snatched and clean and jerked. One reason Hoffman wanted me for the shows was because I used the split style in the snatch and he liked to point out the difference between the two forms of the lift. My primary purpose was to kill some time so that Bednarski would be more ready to close with a big clean and jerk, which he always did.

But one thing that Bednarski couldn't do that March did was to perform some sort of athletic trick at the conclusion of the exhibition. Bednarski possessed a high degree of athletic skill, otherwise he would never have been able to press, snatch, or clean and jerk the enormous weights he lifted. However, he had never played any sports growing up like nearly all the other Olympic lifters I knew. He didn't know how to throw a baseball or football. He didn't have a clue about how to dribble or shoot a basketball. All he ever did and all he ever cared about was lifting weights.

Even though the weights were lighter than they appeared, it still took a tremendous amount of concentration to get to the final weight for one of the lifts in three jumps without much rest in between. If I planned on clean and jerking 360, my best at the time, I would do 225 (actually 205), 315 (actually 285) then have to take a big jump to 360 (actual weight 330 since the tens, fives, and 2.5s were true). This was something I wasn't used to but I got used to it fast because it was a cardinal sin to miss an attempt at an exhibition. Miss a lift or use sloppy technique, and Hoffman would put you on his black list. This was fully understood. We were, in truth, lifting for cash and that proved to be a great motivator.

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At only one exhibition did a York lifter miss an attempt, and he missed three or four. He was attempting more than he should have, trying to impress Hoffman. It was a complete flop and Hoffman avoided even speaking to that lifter for a very long time.

Those exhibitions provided Hoffman the opportunity to talk about himself and sell his products. It was not a sporting event – it was pure business, and all of us fully understood that. In many ways, those exhibitions helped us a great deal during contests. We all knew that we could deal with short breaks between attempts, and should we get caught before we got in all our planned warm-ups we just shifted gears to when we did the same thing at an exhibition and we were okay.

When Hoffman wanted a second lifter to go with either Bednarski or March, he asked Tommy Suggs. Tommy had been in York longer than I had, was stronger, had won the Mr. Greater Pittsburgh contest, and had beaten Norb Schemansky out of the Best Built Lifter award at the '66 YMCA Nationals. Tommy had the perfect personality for shows. He, like Bednarski, was a showman, and was most gracious to those in attendance. Hoffman had a full stable of lifters he could use for exhibitions, and he made the most of it. In any given month, Tommy would go to two and I would do at least one, while Bednarski would hit eight or ten. March still didn't want to go to a lot of them, yet he did a couple a month as well. During the height of lifting season, from January to June, Hoffman didn't set up as many shows, but seldom did a week go by when one of us wasn't participating in an exhibition.

We lifted in every imaginable site: church basements, health fairs, Rotary Clubs, Lion's Clubs, Knights of Columbus, Kiwanis, Masonic Lodges, VFWs, lots of high schools, and every summer we lifted in front of a huge crowd at the York Fair. None of these places were equipped to handle weightlifting and most had slick floors of concrete or linoleum. Attempting a snatch with a goodly amount of weight on the bar on a newly-waxed linoleum floor took more balls than strength. Yet we always managed to do it. The absolutely toughest, however, was the show we put on at the Fair Grounds. Hoffman took two or three lifters for that one since it drew, by far, the largest crowd. We did the exhibition on the bed of a flatbed truck. The wood was not smooth and the surface was not only uneven, it swayed when we moved under a snatch and jerk. But since the platforms at the York Gym also swayed when a lifter moved from the sweet spot, we all succeeded in making all our lifts.

And that was the key: making every attempt. To drop a heavy weight on the floor of one of the service clubs, or at a frat house, or on a high school gym or auditorium floor just *could not happen*. Also, we had to lower the weights most carefully back to the floor after each attempt, which was in many ways the most difficult part of the lift since we were accustomed to dropping the bar after a heavy lift in the York Gym. But again, that had fringe benefits for us. At many meets, the judges were extremely strict about lowering the weights to the floor after each lift, so having to do this in our exhibitions gave us an edge over our competitors who never faced this problem.

Another thing that made some exhibitions troublesome was that Hoffman would come in the office and ask Tommy and me to go to some exhibition with him after we had already trained that day. Tommy would always beg off, saying he had to do some important task to get the next issue out. "Take Starr," he'd tell Hoffman. I would always go and somehow manage to get through without making a mistake. It was like doing two workouts in one day and it took me several days to recover, but again it taught me that my body and mind could handle more stress than I thought it could.

Only one exhibition that I ever took part in fell flat on its face, and that happened to be the one that Bednarski and I did before the Baltimore Orioles/New York Yankees baseball game at Memorial Stadium in Baltimore before 40,000 fans. Hoffman didn't set this one up; John Terpak did, and that was the reason for the disaster. Terpak thought he could handle the announcing much better than Bob.

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Turned out, he was wrong.

Bednarski would be lifting in the first base coaching box and I would be doing the same in the third base box. Fifteen minutes before the show began we went over what Bednarski and I were going to do, so that Terpak would be on the same page. We would both do presses, and while one of us lifted the other would reload his bar for the next set. I was going to do 225, 275, and 300 while Bob would hit 225, 315, and 405. Then I would split snatch while Bob clean and jerked. We only had fifteen minutes to complete all of our lifts, so we would have to lift and reload, lift and reload just as quickly as we could. No problem, we had done it before.

The stadium announcer introduced us and handed Terpak the mike. That's when the shit hit the fan. When the feedback from the microphone came tumbling down on the field, Terpak got totally confused. All he had to do was pause for a moment after each sentence, but he didn't. He started babbling like an incoherent fool. By comparison, Hoffman sounded like Socrates. Terpak got the amount of weight we were lifting wrong, what lifts we were performing incorrect, and he never quit talking. I guess that he thought if he talked fast enough he could override the feedback. Bednarski and I looked at one another across the diamond, shook our heads in disbelief, did our planned routine, then got the hell off the field as the ground crew removed the weights. Terpak was extremely embarrassed and apologetic on the ride back to York. He took great pride in always being in complete control of every situation, and he had made a complete fool of himself in front of a large gathering of sports fans. I doubt we sold any York products that night.

Eventually, Tommy and I started scheduling our own exhibitions. We knew that we could put on better shows without Hoffman. He spent more time talking about himself and hawking his products than educating the audience about the merits of Olympic weightlifting. And we weren't as interested in entertaining the members of service clubs as we were trying to get young athletes to lift weights.

Also, by setting up our own exhibitions we were able to schedule them on our non-training days. Once this got under way and word spread around the York and Harrisburg area, we had more invitations that we could handle. When Bob found out what we were doing, he was peeved. But Tommy explained to him, as only Tommy can, that this was a good thing for the York Barbell. More exhibitions meant more exposure and more sales for the company and besides, he added, "You don't have to pay the lifters Bob. The school will pay them."

This he liked – no money out of his pocket. So we continued doing what we started, and eventually expanded the idea by going to conventions for various sports. Since football was the sport that was starting to use some form of weight training more than any other, we focused on the annual coaches conventions held each winter in Atlantic City and the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, DC.

And it grew from there. Many of the best York stories happened at exhibitions, and I'll relate them in a future episode.

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