

Starting Strength

West Coast Impressions, A Random Journey: First, Nutrition of the Sixties, Part 6

by
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I've told our "grand hotel" story previously, but it's worth repeating, in part for the humor and in part to emphasize how different the times were for serious lifting guys comparing "then" to the present. As noted in [Part 5 of this series](#) we gave absolutely no consideration to the rather important questions of "Where will we live, where will we stay, and what can we afford once we arrive in California?" This would never occur today because one's computer, iPhone, iPad, or other device would be able to locate a suitable and affordable living space, be it for a week or a month. We lacked those options, we lacked finances, and we did everything out of our passion for training and becoming better, stronger athletes. Our usual mode of operation was, "We'll work it out when we have to, as long as we can train." And as also noted, it seemed as if we avoided many pitfalls in our day-to-day existence in California through Divine Intervention.

We had our "audience" with Rheo H. Blair, and decided to return the next day to pick up our protein powder and the supplements we could afford. We then began our return trip to Pearl's Gym for our first California workout. Of course we were exhausted from our non-stop cross country drive, our lack of food, relative dehydration, and running-around-like-madmen activities on our first day in Los Angeles. No matter – we were there to train. Even Bill suggested that we slow it down and acclimate for a day but we figured that every day, if not every minute, counted, so we trained, albeit lighter and easier than usual.



A famous photo of Millard Williamson, founder of MLO Protein noted in Part 5 of this series. Millard was (obviously) known for his rib cage expansion and the ability to balance a glass of water on his chest. MLO has sold a line of nutrition products since the 1960s and helped to develop a soy based protein bar for prostate cancer research.

One of our first "lessons" came as we completed our workout. Sensing that we were poor and had little to wear, or perhaps that we were so hip that we were capable of pulling off the ultimate in Los Angeles area lifting fashion, Bill showed us to a small room near the locker room area. The Lost

West Coast Impressions

And Found baskets were there, filled with sweatshirts, shorts, and yes, old and previously worn jock straps that had been pulled out of the lockers of former members or those tossed from the gym for non-payment or more serious transgressions.

Bill explained that “the guys” – meaning all of the big lifters, football players, and track and field athletes in his gym – wore oversized sweatshirts that were then cut down at the sleeves and at the bottom hemline, to allow for unrestricted upper extremity movement while training. These oversized garments also made for a larger-than-expected appearance. He sensed that we either couldn’t afford the trip to the local Army-Navy store where his gym members and friends purchased these double or triple extra-large sweatshirts, or he just felt that giving these items to us from the discarded bin was the fastest and easiest way to get us into the Southern California training ensemble.

We weren’t offended, but rather flattered that Bill Pearl himself would think highly enough of us to help dress us correctly for “proper” training. We knew enough to ask directions to the nearest Laundromat before actually putting anything on but taking a few huge sweatshirts, washing them, and then cutting off the bottoms and sleeves up to elbow level more than doubled our available wardrobes.

As our first evening in Los Angeles grew into night, we had not yet agreed to sleep on the floor of Bill’s gym, but instead had the brainstorm to “go see Rheo” *and sleep on his front lawn*. From our perspective, the neighborhood he was in – big-time Hollywood to us – seemed safe, and why wouldn’t one be allowed to sleep on someone’s lawn if you either knew them or like us, “sort of” knew them? It seemed perfectly reasonable, so we returned to Rose Avenue, laid our sleeping bags on Rheo’s front lawn, and rolled up for the night. At approximately 11 PM, Rheo returned from a night out of the house and could not believe that his two “new buddies” were actually sleeping, or trying to sleep, on his front lawn. Explaining that “this just isn’t done,” he directed us to a hotel not far from the house.

Obviously, Rheo had not been a patron of this hotel in recent years, and perhaps suggested it based upon past reputation. Upon our entrance to the hotel, it seemed worn but “okay” for one night, as we decided to take up temporary residence at Pearl’s for the few nights to follow.

Oh boy. Once we paid our very few dollars (which should have been the first hint of trouble), and walked up two flights of stairs to “the sleeping area,” we realized that we were in a real, live, just-like-on-television flop house! Everyone was given “a roll” or rolled up blanket with flattened pillow within it and assigned to a wooden pallet to sleep on for the night. The room was crowded with the homeless, just out of prison, unwashed, and the to-be-avoided group that every mom had always warned their children about. Yikes! I told Jack to sleep, or to make the attempt, and I would remain awake and “sit watch” all night.

The stench of urine was enough to keep one awake and after a few hours of Jack’s sleeplessness and my death-stare warnings to those walking by trying to steal our shoes, we decided to get back onto the street. Immediately roused from Griffith Park with the police admonition that “no one sleeps in



The great Bill Pearl and the author, both attired in their oversized and cut off sweatshirts, in front of Pearl’s Manchester Avenue Gym. Both men weigh close to 230 pounds with Pearl holding an obvious advantage in muscular bodyweight.

West Coast Impressions

the park,” we drove around and tried to become more familiar with the LA area until the sun came up and our return to Pearl’s for a juice bar visit, breakfast, and another workout.

Our primary focus for the day would be having another Blair’s protein drink and picking up our box of supplements. Of course, a place to actually live so that we could prepare meals and utilize the blender we had transported cross-country should have been first on our list, but of course it wasn’t.

In our first two weeks in California we met many lifters and bodybuilders who actually utilized The Blair Diet in some form, with or without a lot of the supplements he offered. However, his specific diet, built around protein powder, milk, cream, and/or half-and-half, was not typical for all of the lifters and bodybuilders. Most importantly a similar template of striving to ingest a lot of protein, moderate fat, and limited carbohydrates was in fact used by almost everyone we met or spoke to. As recently as this week, as I write this installment of the series, Dave Draper’s weekly e-mail newsletter says it all, exactly what the belief was in the 1960s and early ’70s about lifting and bodybuilding nutrition (emphasis mine):

Q) What was your knowledge of nutrition back then? How was your diet comprised? Did you use Rheo Blair products? Were they as amazing as many claimed?

*(Dave’s response): Though I wrestled with the iron for years growing up in Jersey, I didn’t really learn anything till I moved to Muscle Beach. It was there in all its **unconstrained simplicity** that lifting weights and building muscle was clearly understood. The basics in nutrition and exercise were discovered, established and practiced. Why fix what works and ain’t broke, it was agreed; train hard, eat right, and grow.*

*The diet information I acquired in the early ’60s, the basic bodybuilder’s diet being restored today for all of mankind, came from the struggling Muscle Beach/Screen Actor’s Guild members who didn’t work much beyond studio calls, and made every penny count: **high protein, low carbs and medium fat – meat, milk, eggs, fruit and salad, and don’t forget your vitamin and mineral supplements and your protein powder. They knew this menu built muscle and provided energy and kept the bodyfat low.** Why? ’Cuz, that’s why. Ask anyone. Try it.*

Today, more than 50 years later, there are stacks of books that have made the subject of nutrition no clearer or more appealing; just lots of research, study, facts, data, and confusion. What are we, nuts?

Simply put, “everyone’s diet” consisted of beef, some chicken or fish, cottage cheese, yogurt, whole fat milk, eggs, protein powder, and an occasional salad. The “you have to have carbs” craze did not hit until the late 1970s, and “low fat” was not in vogue until the ’80s. Chicken was so far down the list of protein sources used by lifters and bodybuilders until the late 1970s that it was literally dirt cheap and something to either deep fry or make soup with.

In truth, the impact of low fat/high carb diets on the muscle building community was negative. The statistics will bear out that it has also been deleterious for the general population if the degree of childhood and adult obesity and number of diabetics is noted. Before there was such concern about high cholesterol counts, dietary cholesterol, and broccoli ingestion – and allow me to interject that just this week, the so-called medical experts reversed field on fifty years of the-sky-is-falling warnings about eggs killing breakfast lovers everywhere – serious lifters all ate in a very much standardized manner.

For us, we were always a bit constrained by finances, but on the Blair Diet, breakfast would be a start-the-day mix of Blair’s milk and egg (not whey) protein powder in half-and-half, followed by a “real meal” of scrambled or fried eggs (with no concern about bacterial poisoning) on top of a half-pound burger. Protein shake consumption was done by sipping the pitcher or thermos-full mixture

West Coast Impressions

throughout the day, while lunch might be two cans of tuna (straight from the can with water or oil drained off) and/or a few hard boiled eggs. Dinner was another round of a half-pound or full pound of hamburger with a side of eggs or cottage cheese, washed down with a protein drink or glass of whole milk. Life was simple, eating was simple, the “science” of nutrition for us, was simple.

One should also recall the rationale for utilizing half and half or heavy cream in Blair’s protein drinks. By the time a dairy or egg source was processed and packaged as protein powder, it had been “de-fatted” and mixing Blair’s powder with at least the fat content of half and half, restored a more normal fat content – “more normal” referring to “what whole milk has in it.” One wasn’t souping up the fat content but rather, returning the entire protein powder mixture back to normal whole milk standards. The higher fat content relative to drinks made with whole milk (or God forbid, low fat or what we called “skim milk”) also allowed for slower digestion and enhanced assimilation of the drink.

The supplements, with Blair’s germ oil mixture and liver powder capsules qualifying as a bit exotic, were less than complex with a standard mixture of B vitamins, C, E, and A leading the way, backed up by calcium tablets in some form, and if “cutting up” or keeping body fat levels steady, choline and inositol. The very much in-the-know bodybuilders or lifters attempting to make a bodyweight class beneath their existing scale weight, would add a period of kelp ingestion or liquid iodine drops.

Perhaps manufacturing techniques became more efficient or profit-enhancing, but what Brewer’s yeast and blackstrap molasses intake did for lifters and bodybuilders of the 1940s to the late 1950s was now supplanted by the capsules or tablets of B-complex vitamins. The physical culture approach to vitamin and mineral intake quickly became a thing of the past, and for all practical purposes those items were all but eliminated from the usual diet of weight trainees. Vitamin E got a tremendous push from the research done in Canada by the Shute brothers, dating back to the publication of their early work in 1945. Wheat germ oil, long a staple of the lifting and bodybuilding diet, gave way to the more convenient and less noxious-tasting Vitamin E capsules. An almost dizzying array of tocopherols were offered in alpha, beta, delta, epsilon, and mixed forms by the various retailers of nutritional supplements.

Very rapidly, the “physical culture” lifestyle that included bodybuilding and/or one of the strength enhancing lifting activities combined with exposure to sunshine and outdoor exercise and an eating plan as “natural” as possible, fell by the wayside. Tablets, capsules, and powders were hailed as improved forms of “assimilable nutrients,” making many of the “whole foods” that were previously called forth to provide the same nutrients unnecessary.

This more or less standard template of protein, vitamin, and mineral supplementation was how it was done from 1960 through the mid-1970s, when commercial interests much more sophisticated than the early marketing of Blair, Hoffman, and Weider decided that they could more effectively



Beef and a lot of it, was the lifter’s and bodybuilder’s standard; it still should be!

An advertisement for Blair's Protein supplements. The top section is titled "THE FAIREST AND THE FINEST" and "A Complete Line of Superior Blair Food Supplements". It features a woman holding a product and a bottle of Blair's Protein. The text describes the benefits of the supplements, including their ease of use and effectiveness. The bottom section shows several bottles of different Blair's Protein products, including Blair's Protein, Blair's Protein with Vitamin E, Blair's Protein with Vitamin C, and Blair's Protein with Vitamin B12.

Advertising for Blair’s products targeted “everyone,” not only the lifting and bodybuilding faction of the public. Blair was, in the author’s opinion, a “true believer” who wanted everyone to benefit from his approach to nutrition.

West Coast Impressions

scam the lifting public with the razzle-dazzle of science. Protein powder was infused with some sort of “metabolic enhancers,” “GH releasers,” and tree bark. Animal glands and herbs that no one had previously heard of were pushed as magical elixirs that would alter bodies overnight. That the lifting and bodybuilding public thought the high carb/low fat/weird supplement combination was viable speaks volumes about both their prevailing mentality and the marketing ability of the new breed of nutritional supplement purveyors.

As I have also written and lectured upon frequently, the fact that whatever was being touted as a miracle supplement would drop off the sales shelf within one to three years sort of said all that needed to be said about that specific product. That the very same supplements would be recycled into the lifting and bodybuilding psyche and again be made available to the buying public twenty or more years after its initial demise, sort of says all that needs to be said about the mentality of the training public!

For those who collect old Powerlifting USA and/or bodybuilding magazines, read through the advertising of the late 1960s through mid-1980s. Note which products, from glandular supplements to Yohimbe bark splashed through the advertisements, the approximate time period they disappeared from the pages of the magazines, and when they made a return with similar commercial sales points and promises that were no more legitimate than they had been the first time around. Needless to add, the effectiveness of many, if not most, of these supplements should not have been expected to exceed that which they displayed their first time around.

I am all for science. I’m a health care provider with advanced degrees who looks to legitimate research for answers. However, when “something works for almost everyone for a very long time,” there has to be some common-sense utilized that asks, “Why do all of these guys do this and seem to have it work for them?” Science can be brought into the conversation, with an explanation that a high protein, moderately-high fat, and low carbohydrate diet will both dictate and necessitate the need to utilize fat as a primary energy source in the absence of carbs, and consistent, highly intense, hard-ass training creates a need for protein-based repair and growth of one’s muscle tissue. However, why get complicated? Why get whiney? Why must every smallest aspect of one’s training have to go under the microscope? Why not eat relatively simply and train one’s balls off on the big, basic, multi-joint exercises that have worked for “almost everyone” who gave them a legitimate, hard training shot since the 1950s?

What we learned in California is that for the most part we were in fact doing things “the correct way,” and not only for those times but in a manner that would bring results today. The modern, internet influenced trainee has a need to consult You Tube, every forum and “expert’s” site to justify what they are doing in the gym and at the dinner table.

There is a very different “type” of learning that one receives relative to reading about it or watching an online video, when instead you walk into a warehouse or garage where five or six long-time training partners are lifting very heavy weights and doing it with a focused seriousness and enjoyment. When you witness a group of men and women lifting very heavy weights with proper form and in a manner that would allow them to compete if they were so inclined, it is exhilarating.



One very important fact that was reinforced while we were training and eating in California in the late 1960s was that one needed to keep it simple and lift heavy weights and eat protein based foods. Various scraps of I-beam converted to lifting implements in the author’s driveway qualify as “heavy weights.”

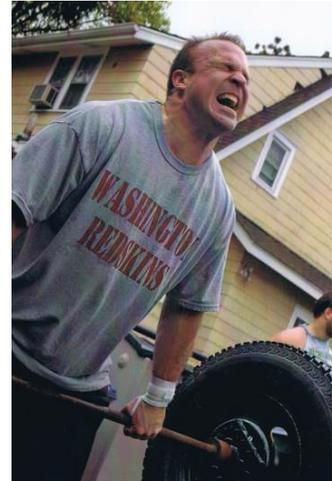
West Coast Impressions

The concept is simple, the actual work is not.

While visiting all of the “known” Southern California gyms of the day, hallowed names that included the original Gold’s, Vince’s, Pearl’s, Zuver’s, Bill West’s garage – the original Westside Barbell Club, and Bruce Conner’s Gym among others, the emphasis would vary. Some like Vince Gironda’s stressed bodybuilding while the Westside garage in Culver City was all powerlifting. However, the constant that we witnessed was hard work. The trainees that pounded consistently and pushed to remain progressive grew bigger and stronger. The advanced bodybuilders who claimed that they “didn’t do squats,” for example, may have reached a point in development where they could benefit from performing numerous different lower extremity movements. But they were quick to add that in their formative years they did in fact squat frequently and consistently, and that exercises like the squat and deadlift were responsible for their advanced muscle size and strength.

For contest preparation, some of these advanced men may have eschewed the squat and deadlift in favor of leg press, leg curl, hack squat, and the myriad other lower-body movements that bodybuilders seem to come up with, but in literally every case the initial foundation was formed by the basic, multi-joint exercises that work “a lot of muscle tissue.” Hard work, consistent work on these “big movements” in combination with a diet primarily based on simple, protein based foods was the standard, and we actually “got it!”

Train hard, eat simply of protein laden foods, keep fat and carbohydrate intake moderate, put a lid on junk and processed food intake, and little instruction past that is needed! We didn’t have to travel to California to figure that out, but our time there certainly reinforced what became lifetime habits of exercise and nutrition.



Former St. John’s University, World League of American Football, and CFL player Ken Cobb proves the adage that progressively lifting heavier weights in multi-joint exercises allows one to become muscularly larger and stronger.

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