

Starting Strength

The York Barbell Series – Exhibitions III

by

Bill Starr

In the late sixties, exhibitions were as much a part of the weekly routines for some of the York lifters as training and lifting in contests. At first, it was only March who went with Hoffman to put on shows at every venue imaginable: fairs, VFWs, Lion's Clubs, Kiwanis, American Legion Halls, health conventions, and high schools. After Tommy Suggs moved to York and took over the job of Managing Editor of *Strength & Health*, he too began traveling to exhibitions with Hoffman. Bob Bednarski was brought to town to fill in for March in December of '65, when Bill decided he needed a break from putting on shows for awhile.

I came to York early in '66 to be Tommy's assistant, but I wasn't asked to participate in any exhibitions until that fall, after I had moved up into the 198-lb. class and made a decent showing at the North Americans. Then Tommy and I began setting up exhibitions on our own at high schools in the area, and these went much smoother without Hoffman jabbering while a lifter was trying to press, snatch, or clean and jerk. Bednarski often joined us, mostly because he dearly loved to perform before a large, appreciative audience.

The best thing about arranging our own exhibitions was that we could fit them into our training schedules. On more than one occasion, Hoffman would enlist one or more of us to accompany him to an exhibition on a training day, and even on days where we had already trained. We had no choice but to go, and it was nice to get twenty-five bucks for about forty-five minutes of effort, yet it screwed up our planned training schedule for that week.

In an earlier piece on this subject, I wrote about how John Grimek got blindsided by Karl Norberg in San Francisco during a cross country trip that included Hoffman, Tony Terlazzo, and Gracie Bard, Hoffman's current squeeze. Tony, John, and Bob had been putting on lifting exhibitions across the country, starting in Columbus, Ohio, on through the Midwest and far west and then down the Pacific Coast. The demonstration in San Francisco was to be just another show, so Grimek partied hard with his friends the night before and had to be carried from his bed and dumped in the car to go to the exhibition by Tony and Bob. That's when they found out that the legendary Karl Norberg was also planning to lift, a direct challenge to Grimek. John told me he really had to dig deep that evening because he didn't want to be humiliated in front of so many fans. And that's exactly what he did, bettering Karl in his favorite lift, cleaning and pressing a barbell using an underhand, or curl, grip.

Many years later, Tommy and I found ourselves in a similar situation, Bob Crist was the regional vice-chairmen for the most active areas in the country: New Jersey, Middle Atlantic, which included

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York, South Atlantic, primarily Maryland, District of Columbia, Allegheny Mountain, Virginia, and West Virginia. Bob lived in Hampton, Virginia and was tight with Hoffman, Terpak, Rudy Sablo, and Morris Weissbrot, the primary decision-making group in U.S. Olympic lifting.

So when Bob called Terpak and asked if it would be possible for Tommy and I to stop by an army base in Virginia on our way back to York after competing in the Carolina Open to hold a clinic, it was a done deal. We didn't mind. We enjoyed holding teaching clinics for lifters, and this would be for the Lower Peninsula Weightlifting Club. We would have done this for Bob for free, but the Ft. Eustis Army Base had a fund for such things and would be providing us with a room for the night plus \$100. We planned on using the clinic for our Monday workout. We wouldn't bother going heavy since our purpose was to demonstrate proper form on the Olympic lifts to those in attendance.

The Carolina Open was held in Winston-Salem, N.C. and was directed by Jack King. Tommy and I won our respective classes and stayed up late holding an impromptu clinic in our motel room. Jack was there as was Kenny Moore, who had spent part of the previous summer living and training in York. Frank Saunders, Larry Ford, Art Cole, John Fair, and an impressive 181er, Jim Bishop, showed up as well. When Jack wasn't entertaining us with jokes and impressions, we answered questions on technique and how to program in order to improve the various lifts needed to excel in the sport. It was well after midnight before our guests departed and we finally fell into our beds.

The following day was a Sunday and we followed Kenny Moore to his home near Lenoir, in the mountains. Tommy and I wanted to check out the many furniture manufacturers in and around Hickory. The prices were about half of what they were in York and Tommy and I were thinking about renting a truck, driving down to Hickory and buying a quantity of the well-made furniture for our homes.

After examining a few – which was enough – we spent the remainder of the day and into the night talking weightlifting again. Earlier, we had checked the road atlas and calculated that it would be an eight or nine-hour drive from Kenny's home to Ft. Eustis, so we needed to be on the road by 9:30 just to be on the safe side. We needed to allow for car trouble, detours and getting lost.

Neither Tommy nor I slept very well in strange, not-so comfortable beds and we passed on the offer of breakfast from Kenny, saying we'd grab something on the road. Once we got out of the mountains and hit I-40, we made good time. We only stopped twice for gas and food, ready-made ham and tuna sandwiches, milk, and coffee to refill our thermos. We took turns driving, switching every couple of hours. When we were driving to Winston-Salem, we switched every hour because we were going to be lifting in a meet. Since we were only going to be "demonstrating" the lifts later on that day, it didn't matter if we were well rested or not.

At South Hill, Virginia, we left I-85 and headed east to Franklin and then crossed the James River into Newport News. It was a short drive up Rt. 60 to the base. Crist's instructions had been perfect. Tommy was driving when we pulled up to the Main Gate of Ft. Eustis. He told the M.P. on duty our reason for being here. He checked a clipboard and asked us to park the car where he pointed and come in the Guard Shack to sign in.

We were so stiff from sitting for so long we walked like seventy-year-old men. After we signed in, the M.P. handed Tommy a cardboard plaque that said "Visitor" and told him to place this on his dashboard. When I asked him if he could give us directions to the B.O.Q. and base gym, he replied in a sullen tone, "That's a map of the base on that bulletin board just past where you parked."

As we were walking back to the Volkswagen, the guard stuck his head out of the Guard shack and shouted "Suggs! Tuck your shirrtail in!"

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Tommy reacted like he'd been struck by a cattle prod, tucking his shirt down into his pants, then going over everything again to make sure it was right. After I studied the map and memorized where the B.O.Q, and base gym were, I got in the car and started laughing. Tommy glared at me and barked, "What's so damn funny?"

"Supe," I said after I got myself under control, "you're not in the Army. You don't have to do anything he tells you to do." Then I broke up again and continued to chuckle while I navigated him to the B.O.Q. The more Tommy thought about what had happened, the more angry he got. Which just made me laugh even more.

We checked into our assigned room and decided to take a short nap since we were ahead of schedule. We both needed to stretch out for a half hour and relax. But first, we needed to take showers, to get rid of the dust and grime of traveling all day. We had just gotten cleaned up and were about to lie down when Bob Crist knocked on our door. He wanted to make sure we got to the base gym on time and would escort us over there. So much for some down time.

We dressed in our lifting gear, still sweaty from the meet, and followed Bob to the base gym. There was a good-sized crowd waiting for us, standing around and sitting in the bleachers overlooking the lifting platform. Four members of the Lower Peninsula Weightlifting Club: David Harris, John Callis, Larry Cardon, and Roy Ridgley were there. Also present were several officials – Crist, of course, Reg Roberts, Ray Warnon, and Colon McMath. The audience was made up almost entirely of Army personnel, who came out of curiosity. Crist told us that there was a great deal of interest in Olympic lifting among those who used the base gym and that's why the base provided the money for the clinic.

After greeting everyone, Tommy and I started slapping on the muscle rub and tried to stretch out our creaking bodies. In a low voice, Tommy said, "Starr, I have a feeling that we're gonna earn our money tonight."

I nodded, not realizing just how prophetic that remark would turn out to be. We both took a couple of aspirin then did some shadow lifts with a stick. One of the things that Crist wanted us to do was to show the lifters how to do the more dynamic style of pressing. It was generally known as the European style, even though our teammate at York, Tony Garcy, had been the first international lifter to use it.

Tommy would talk while I demonstrated the proper technique, then we would trade places. After about fifteen minutes of instruction, we started loading more weights on the bar and proceeded to press 225, 250, and finished off with 275. That was plenty – it felt like a ton. Harris and Cardon were lighter lifters and dropped out after 225, but Callis and Ridgley, both heavyweights, stayed right with us and when we started to strip the weights to move on to snatching, they stopped us and proceeded to press 290 and then 300.

The crowd was delighted to see their two local lifters making Tommy and I look bad. We looked at one another with angry expressions. Tommy was already in a sour mood because of the incident at the Guard Shack and being deprived of a short rest. Now he was royally pissed. He motioned me to follow him and we went around to the back of the bleachers.

"They set us up!" he snapped. "We can't let them get away with this shit!" He reached in his gym bag, brought out a small bottle, opened it and handed me a Ritalin, saying, "Take this and chug down lots of coffee. We need to gear up. If they want to make this a contest, we'll give them one."

I popped the pill and drank a couple cups of bean while I changed my mind-set from passive to aggressive. We took our time explaining how to do the two forms of snatch – split and squat – giving the Ritalin and caffeine time to take effect, then we began pushing the pace and taking big jumps, something we didn't think the two heavyweights were used to. They weren't. They were able to handle

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250 and after I did 265, they both failed several times at this weight before Tommy finished off with a picture-perfect 275, just five pounds less than he did in Winston-Salem. The 265 I did matched what I had done at the meet.

We were stoked. I knew I was going to be a very sore dog the next day, but the competitive juices were rushing through my system and the present was all I cared about. Tommy was in the same zone.

We followed the same hurry-up procedure in the clean and jerk and the big jumps stopped our challengers in their tracks. We were able to do this because of all the exhibitions we had taken part in where it was necessary to move fast and hit the top-end poundage in just three jumps. Roy and John finished at 315 and didn't bother to attempt anything heavier. Tommy and I ended the exhibition with 350, 15 pounds less than what we had done at the contest.

Now the crowd had changed its allegiance and we got a standing ovation after our final clean and jerks. We thanked them, shook hands with all the lifters and officials, gathered our stuff, collected the payment, and drove back to our room. Crist invited us to join him and some of the lifters for a meal and drinks at a local restaurant, but we declined. Tommy explained that we were beat from the driving and lifting just two days after a contest. This was the truth, yet the main reason we rejected his offer was that we weren't feeling very friendly towards the members of the Lower Peninsula Weightlifting Club at that moment.

We didn't even bother to take off our sweats when we got to the room. We just collapsed on our beds and slept like dead men. Someone pounding on our door jarred us awake, I checked the radio clock and it read 11:30. "We don't have to be out till twelve," I said in a hoarse voice. "It says that right on the sign on the door."

"I'll get it," Tommy grumbled as he climbed out of bed, still grumpy about the events of the day before. When he opened the door, I could see a major and lieutenant standing in the hallway with their luggage at their feet. The major snapped at Tommy, "You need to vacate the room. Right now!"

I could see Tommy's posture alter instantly and I knew he was about to get some revenge for the "tuck in your shirt" order. He tapped the sign on the door and said in an angry, loud voice, "The sign says we have to be out by noon, not before. So cool your heels, cowboy. We're staying till then." He slammed the door in the major's stunned face and walked back to his bed, smiling like the Cheshire Cat.

At the stroke of twelve and not a second before, we opened the door, brushed past an extremely red-faced major and sad looking lieutenant. Tommy couldn't resist one last jab: "Have a nice day," he told the major, who was almost shaking from rage.

When we got in the car, Tommy turned to me and said, "Damn, that felt good."

Our training for the rest of the week was crap, but it was worth the trip to Ft. Eustis because we reaped some great stories, and who can ask for more than that?

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