

Starting Strength

Doc Ziegler

by

Bill Starr

While Bob Hoffman had the greatest influence on Olympic weightlifting, bodybuilding, and other strength sports in the sixties, Doc Ziegler had the greatest impact. Doc was a pure scientist who became fascinated with strength development. His innovations did more to alter the course of this aspect of physical training than any other individual, before or since.

John Bosley Ziegler was a fourth generation doctor. His great-grand-father served in the Civil War as a physician for the Union Army. Doc was a Civil War buff with a large collection of medical paraphernalia from that era who often dressed up in garb to attend some Civil War convention or reenactment. His grandfather was a country doctor and his father a combination of practicing physician and research scientist.

Appropriately, he attended Gettysburg College as a pre-med student in 1938 and upon graduation joined the Marines. Fighting in the Pacific, he was badly wounded and was told by the attending doctors that he would never be able to walk without the use of crutches because he had lost his right collarbone and would never lift his right hand above his head again.

Doc had always been an active person, so he ignored what the military doctors had told him and began experimenting with a variety of exercises to help remedy his physical defects. After he was discharged from the Marine Corps Hospital, he enrolled in the University of Maryland Medical School. All through medical school, he continued to get corrective surgery at the Veteran's Hospital. After graduation and four years of internship and residency, he set up a private practice next to his home in Olney, Maryland.

He was using resistive training for his ongoing rehabilitation when he learned that the center of Olympic weightlifting was located just across the Mason-Dixon line in York, Pennsylvania. He made several visits to the York Barbell Company located on Broad Street. He was extremely impressed with what he found there: John Grimek, Steve Stanko, two of the greatest Olympic lifters and bodybuilders in the history of physical culture. He got to meet Tommy Kono, Dave Sheppard, Norb Schemansky, Issac Berger, and Jim Bradford as they came through for workouts prior to some major contest.

He also met Hoffman, who understood right away in the value of having a medical doctor associated with the York organization. Doc, in turn, liked the idea of having what he considered to be the strongest athletes in the country at his disposal. So a deal was made and when the US Olympic Weightlifting Team traveled to Vienna in 1954 for the World Championships, Doc Ziegler went along as the team physician. This trip set the stage for what would eventually become a revolution in not only Olympic weightlifting and bodybuilding, but in every sport that needed greater strength. Which basically means all of them.

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In Vienna, every night the coaches of the Russian team and those lifters who had already competed would party hard into the wee hours of the next morning. Americans didn't fraternize with the Russians. For a number of reasons. The Cold War being the main one, but they were also very loud, most didn't bother to bathe very often, and they reeked of garlic. Doc didn't care and soon they adopted him as one of their own because he was able to hang with them drink for drink.

Doc had purposely made friends with the Soviet team, but it had nothing to do with creating good will between the two countries. He wanted to find out as much as he could about how the Russians were training. Plus anything else that might have an influence on their programs. It didn't happen right away since the Russians had been well-trained to keep their mouths shut. But after a full week of everyone getting drunk together he discovered that they had been experimenting with testosterone.

He carried this information home and used the hormone on several lifters at York. Grimek was one of them. After a few weeks, Grimek told Doc that he never felt any effects one way or the other after taking the testosterone, so Doc gave up on that idea and set about designing the first anabolic steroid. He took the idea to CIBA Pharmaceutical Company and soon thereafter Dianabol was born.

The New Jersey-based company wanted the drug to be used for patients who were severely debilitated. In theory, it would help build muscle with only a minimum of activity. The tests showed remarkable results, even for burn patients and those who were so weak they were confined to wheelchairs. Doc understood immediately the implication for weightlifters and wanted to test it on one of the York lifters. However, he wasn't trying to build an army of super strongmen, he merely wanted to see what would happen when a healthy, well-conditioned athlete used Dianabol.

At this same time, he had read some German research where the athletes were using isometric contractions to gain more strength. The idea of pushing or pulling against a stationary object had its roots in Dynamic Tension, but what Doc came up with was something quite different. He expanded on the basic concept and came up with a complete training system and began using it himself on a power rack that he designed in his home gym. He started making gains on a regular basis and could even lift very heavy dumbbells overhead with his bad right arm. Something that the doctor at the Veteran's Hospital had told him would be impossible.

He needed a test subject for both Dianabol and his new form of training. This person had to meet some specific requirements. He had to live fairly close to Doc's place since that is where all the training would take place. He had no intention of driving back and forth to York five times a week. It was an 180-mile round trip. Doc was also looking for a young athlete who hadn't as yet made his mark in Olympic lifting. And most importantly of all, this individual must possess a high degree of dedication and be able to follow instructions to the letter. This was essential since the subject had to come to the training site, Doc's home gym, every scheduled training day and a skipped session would disrupt the entire experiment.

This would, in effect, be a full-time job. Ziegler approached Hoffman with his idea, but Bob wasn't all that excited about it. He felt it reeked too much of Dynamic Tension, a method of training that he had been blasting for years in his magazine, *Strength & Health*. But when someone sent him an article about the usefulness of isometric training, he agreed to foot the bill for Doc's experiment. Hoffman informed Doc that he thought Bill March would be the ideal subject.

Bill was an outstanding athlete and had recently won the Middle Atlantic Championship in the 181-pound class with a 745 total. Hoffman approached Bill about the idea and March quickly accepted. It was suggested that Bill stay with Doc. There was plenty of room in Doc's big house, but Bill rejected this notion right away. He wanted to sleep in his own bed with his new wife. He just wouldn't be comfortable living with Doc.

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It appeared that the plan had hit a major roadblock. There was really no other lifter living in the area who fit the bill. Then, Smitty came forth with a solution. He volunteered to drive Bill to and from Doc's house every training day. The 180-mile round trip on back country roads didn't phase Smitty in the least. There was nothing he loved more than driving and the longer the trip, the better. There was really no way to drive from York to Olney easily. The back roads in Pennsylvania were laid out following animal trails and the route to Olney consisted of lots of sharp curves, narrow roads, most without shoulders. Few realized how important Smitty was in this whole process. Ziegler had a very short interest span. If this experiment didn't happen right away, he would just turn his attention to something else.

But it did happen and the results changed the face of Olympic lifting and bodybuilding quickly and eventually spilled over into other sports that utilized some form of resistive training. Bill March made gains that seemed unbelievable, going from an average light heavy, to becoming a national champion in the 198-pound division in only a couple of years and capped it off with a world record press of 354 ½ .

Shortly after Bill began the drives to Olney to receive his daily allotment of Dianabol and go through the isometric workout under Doc's guidance, Louis Riecke, a 35-year-old from New Orleans who had been competing for twenty years and was no more than a second-tier lifter, became the second test subject. By this time, Doc had modified his rack routine so that the bar was moved a short distance before being locked into an isometric contraction. This proved to be much more effective than just doing pure isometrics.

Riecke, another exceptional athlete like March, took off like a comet. He broke the world record in the snatch, using the split style, with 325 pounds as a light heavy and in '64 became a member of the Olympic Team that competed in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, Hoffman was selling isometric courses and power racks like crazy. They couldn't turn power racks out fast enough at his foundry to satisfy the demand. Nearly every high school and college in the nation began doing isometrics. And all were achieving a certain amount of success for their efforts, yet nowhere near what March and Riecke had accomplished. That was because they didn't know about Dianabol. That was a closely held secret. Doc wanted it that way because he thought that if word got out, lifters would abuse the drug. Hoffman had another motive for keeping the drug usage under wraps. Dianabol gave the York lifters a tremendous edge over their opponents and there was nothing Hoffman liked more than having an advantage in business and athletics.

While Hoffman was cashing in on the isometrics, Doc didn't receive any extra money other than his agreed on salary for being the Director of the Hoffman Foundation.

Unfortunately, whenever Doc Ziegler's name comes up in a conversation or in print, it's always associated with bringing steroids into the athletic community. This is fact, yet what few know is how they were used in the early sixties under Doc's close supervision. The dosages were so low they would be considered ridiculous today. A lifter started out with five milligrams of Dianabol a day for two weeks. Then this was doubled to ten milligrams for two weeks, followed by twenty milligrams for another two weeks. At that point a liver function test was done and the athlete laid off the drug for the next six weeks, or even longer, before going on another cycle.

I didn't find out about steroids until I had been at York for six months and when I started taking Dianabol I was extremely wary of what it might be doing in my body. I followed the guidelines to a tee and so did all the other lifters who were there at the time. It was only after the word got out and the lifters began taking the drug on their own that they began to be abused. And once word did leak about the 'roids, isometric training disappeared almost overnight. Coaches and athletes figured that they'd been conned. It was the drugs and not the rack routine that had made March and Riecke so strong so fast.

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Which was only partly true. When the isotonic-isometric contractors were done just as Ziegler taught, lifters made a great deal of progress. But in a very short span of time, the only Olympic lifters in the country who were still including rack work in their programs were the York lifters who knew how to do the program correctly. It was truly a case of the baby being thrown out with the bath water.

When Doc learned that Dianabol was now being used in all parts of the country, he stopped writing scripts altogether. He had predicted what would occur and he was right on the money, but the genie had been released from the bottle and there was no turning back. Hoffman lined up a local doctor, Dr. Roseberry, on Market Street in York to take care of the scripts. And also made arrangements with Schultz's Drug Store, which was only a few blocks from the York Barbell, now on Ridge Avenue. The scripts were brought into the drug store and the bill sent to the York Barbell. This was totally irresponsible and it got worse. Soon, a lifter didn't even need a script. He just told the pharmacist what he wanted and signed the receipt. It was like giving a kid the key to a candy store.

Eventually, the drug list expanded to uppers and downers plus any new drug the lifters could find in the P.D.R. So it was Hoffman, not Ziegler, who totally disregarded the potential problems with this wholesale, reckless dispensing of drugs to any lifter who represented York. And over the next few years, this list grew exponentially to over thirty lifters and that's not even counting the many hundreds of athletes who got what they needed through the black market.

When Doc learned of this insane practice, he hit the roof. He fully understood that competitive athletes are compulsive by nature and lifters never be allowed to waltz into a pharmacy and leave with whatever their little hearts desired. To add to the problem, this was going on when the entire country was going through the drug culture. Doc tried to persuade Hoffman to stop the usage of Dianabol, but his words fell on deaf ears. Hoffman was adding more and more top-flight lifters to the York team and he liked being in that lofty position. There was no going back anyway. If he had cut off Schultz's the lifters would have merely found another source for the drugs they wanted.

Doc once told me that he wished he had never introduced Dianabol into the experiment with March and Riecke. All he was trying to do was conduct a controlled clinical experiment.

But by this time, Doc had moved on to something new, the Isotron. He had been given an exercise machine made at the turn of the century by his father. It ran on electricity. Like many of his inventions, he took an old idea and vastly improved it. What he came up with was very unique. No other machine that has come on the market that promotes muscle stimulation can come close to the Isotron. Several companies have attempted to duplicate its action, but they have all failed.

Basically, the Isotron could stimulate muscles and attachments to contract without the patient doing anything. Other than holding on for dear life in some cases. Pads were applied on either side of a muscle and a dial indicated how much juice was going into the muscle. He designed it with rehabilitation in mind, but tested it on the York lifters. Doc never recorded any of the results and kept no notes, so what he did in this regard is basically lost, except for what Smitty and Bill St. John know about what transpired. It was Smitty who gave the treatments and later on, Bill learned how to use the machine as well.

It worked, but since there was no statistical evidence from a large body of subjects and nothing was done in a controlled manner, few people actually believe it can produce any results in terms of strength gains.

There is, however, ample verification on the empirical level, March, Ernie Pickett, Tommy Suggs, Bob Bednarski, Tony Garcy, and Homer Brannum all utilized the machine and it helped each and every one of them. Both Pickett and Bednarski broke the world record in the press after using the machine in 1968. March sometimes used it exclusively and Suggs was a huge fan. I also used it and have to admit I

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didn't care for it at all. It was, to me, like being in a torture machine. When Smitty or Doc cranked up that dial, you were in extreme pain. I could get away with working my upper-body and back, but the instant the intensity was increased for my legs, the muscles would lock in a cramp. More like a spasm than a regular cramp and I was unable to handle it. I much preferred moving iron, so that's what I did and left the Isotron to my teammates.

The machine was especially useful for those who were nursing some sort of injury and couldn't go through a full workout. Homer Brannum used it when he had a sprained wrist. Tommy benefited from it when his knees hurt him so badly that he couldn't squat, and Bednarski made use of it while he was rehabbing his dislocated elbow.

As I said, the workouts on the machine were not fun. Forget water-boarding, when Doc or Smitty locked a muscle in full contraction, sweat poured out of you and you wished you had a stick to bite down on. Doc had a rather perverse sense of humor and would encourage the person receiving treatment to vent his pain by shouting out certain words. Doc knew that he had you by the short hairs and would make the athlete shout out cuss words or racial expletives. I had just turned into the driveway of the Foundation one afternoon and I could hear Homer screaming out the N-word over and over. I knew he was on the treatment table.

Bill St. John tells this story about Ernie Pickett and the machine. The two were visiting Doc at his office in Olney when a group of people showed up requesting to see the Isotron in action. Doc volunteered Ernie for the demonstration and as he was getting everything set up, he told Ernie, "If the contraction is too intense and you want me to back off a bit, you have to say 'Ne-Ne-Na-New.'" At the time, Ernie was weighing over 300 pounds and was one of the top heavyweights in the world. He felt that it would be too demeaning to say anything that silly in front of total strangers, so he held out and held out even when his muscles were crying for relief. Doc, of course, knew he had to break him and kept increasing the level of contraction. Finally, Ernie was crying out "Ne-Ne-Na-New" so loudly that half of Olney surely heard him.

You might be wondering, If the Isotron was so great, why didn't it ever emerge on the national scene? Basically because of two reasons. Doc had been burned so many times in the past by hustlers that he was no longer a trusting man. His recent association with Hoffman and the whole steroid deal only increased his lack of trust. There were a number of companies that did make him very generous offers for the machine, but Doc believed that once they had the Isotron, they would market it as they pleased and have no more use for him or his ideas. He was most likely correct in that assumption.

Also, Doc was not a businessman. Nor did he want to be one. That facet of life didn't interest him in the slightest. He never came up with a new idea for the sake of monetary gain. He was a pure scientist. Developing a concept and seeing it bear fruit was sufficient reward for him.

Readers might be surprised to know that the Isotron is still around. Bill St. John inherited it and he is the right person to have it. Bill probably received more treatments on the machine than any other athlete. He was a devoted disciple of Doc's and an observant student. He, along with Smitty, were the only people who knew how to operate the machine correctly. And he still uses it in much the same way as his mentor did – to help people overcome physical problems.

Doc was never at a loss for ideas. Long before anyone ever mentioned negatives, Doc taught Tommy and I how to do them. He came up with several nutritional supplements that were so far ahead of their time that he could have made a nice bundle if he would have marketed them. But he didn't because the idea was the thing. One called Fruc-tabs, combined a fast-acting sugar, fructose, with a slow-acting sugar, sorbitol. They were fantastic, providing a steady, long-lasting energy that made them ideal for tough workouts and contests.

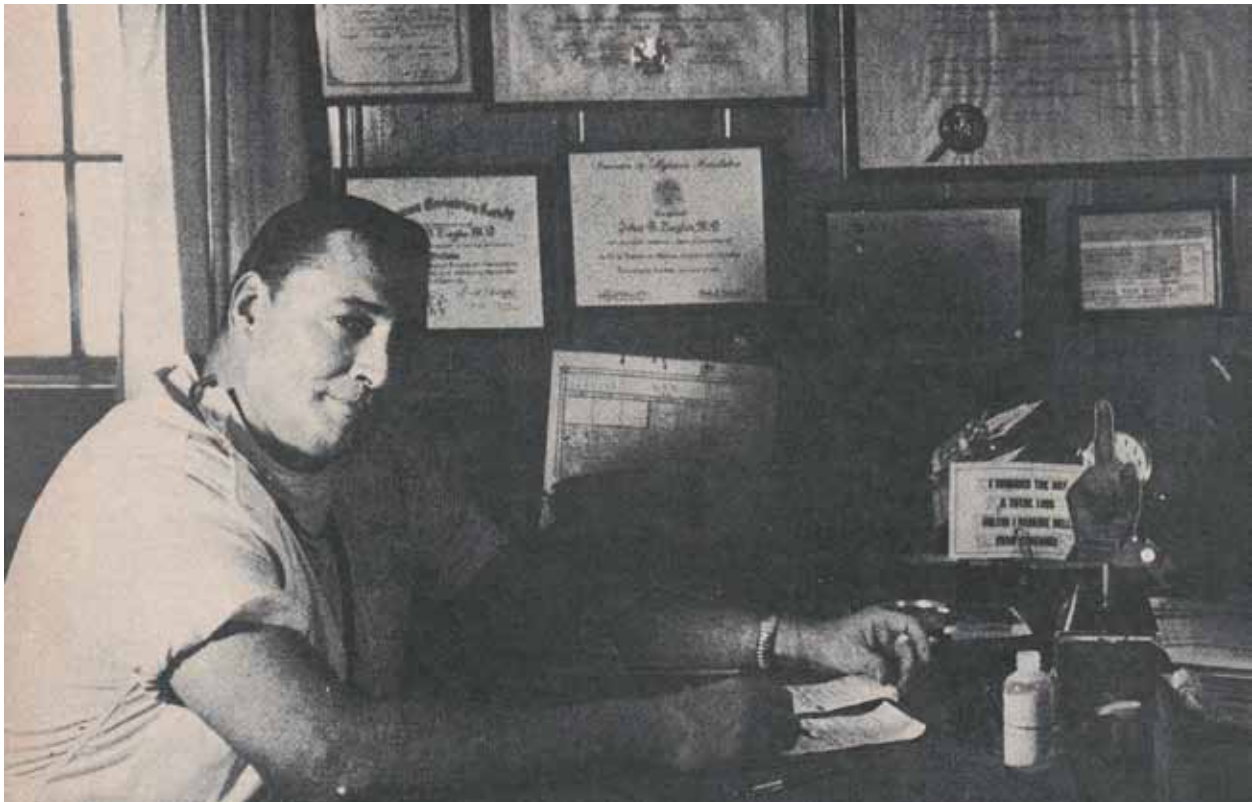
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He combined vitamins C, E, and B12 into a chewable tablet. He felt that these were the three most essential vitamins for athletes and they really boosted energy levels. He was the first person to note the importance of the amino acid L-lysine and believed that hard-training athletes needed to take a healthy supply of this nutrient daily. Which I have been doing ever since he started me on the supplement.

Besides dealing with the York athletes, Doc was a very busy man. At one point, in the early sixties, he was seeing as many as eighty patients a day in his little office near his house. He was also the Medical Director of the W. R. Grace Company and an Assistant Professor of Physical Medicine at Georgetown Medical School. Throw in Medical Officer for Committee on Civil War Re-enactments, Medical Examiner and member of the National Council of the Boy Scouts of America, being the Team Physician for the U.S. Olympic weightlifting teams and you understand that the man was always into something.

But with all that responsibility, Doc was notorious for his ability to party long and hard. No one could actually stay with him when he went on one of runs to blow off some steam. Tommy came the closest since he had a history of partying over the top himself. Doc would pick Tommy up and they would rendezvous with Kitty, Doc's squeeze, and a companion for Tommy and they would hit every watering hole between York and Gettysburg, sometimes partying for two days and nights. Tommy would be a wreck for a week. Fortunately for his health, Kay Suggs quickly put a stop to those shenanigans.

When Dr. Gourgott came to York for the '68 Nationals, he decided that he would take advantage of being in the east and go visit Ziegler. His purpose was to learn everything that Ziegler knew about all aspects of strength training including how to use the power rack and also gather some insight on what Doc knew about nutrition. Gourgott called Doc and asked if he could come down for a visit. "Sure, come on down," Doc responded.



Doc Ziegler in his Olney office.

Doc Ziegler

Gourgott took great pride in his intellect, as well he should. He went off the charts on the I.Q. exam. He believed that by the time he left Olney that night he would know all of Ziegler's most guarded secrets about strength training. Full of anticipation, he drove to Olney, going over and over the multitude of questions he planned to ask Ziegler.

When Gourgott got to the door of Ziegler's house, Doc stepped out and said, "Come with me. I'm going out for a drink." Gourgott readily agreed, thinking he would have Doc all to himself and that "a drink" meant just that. Or perhaps a couple. However, that was never the case with Doc when it came to drinking.

Ziegler drove them to a bar when he met some of his friends. So much for having him all to myself, thought Gourgott but decided to wait Doc out. It was a long wait. Gourgott became so frustrated and tired that he ended up sleeping in one of the wooden booths in the back. In the wee hours of the morning, Ziegler drove Gourgott back to his car. Gourgott never got to ask Ziegler a single question about training since he had to get back to York. He was competing the next day.

Doc was a most imposing individual, standing 6' 4" and weighing over 270 pounds. He added to his stature by wearing wide-brim cowboy hats and cowboy boots. He completely dominated any gathering, no matter how large. When he walked into an auditorium, everyone knew instantly that he had arrived. He was exuberant, loud, and sometimes downright rowdy. And he was always willing and ready to express his opinion on a subject, regardless of the other person's feeling on the subject. Doc Ziegler was the only person who could upstage Hoffman. A fact that Hoffman was well aware of and didn't care for at all.

He loved to startle and shock people. Better yet, a large group of people. He once built a gallows in his front yard for no other reason than to irritate his staid Olney neighbors. He wore outlandish outfits, usually some form of old military uniform from the Civil War or cowboy outfits, and threw out politically incorrect names for all races indiscriminately.

Smitty tells of an episode when he and Doc stopped in Westminster, Maryland, on the way back to Olney from York. They went in a bar and Doc ordered a double shot of whiskey. Nothing unusual about that, except he was dressed as an Amish preacher. When Doc ordered a second double, he asked the bartender whether it seemed strange for him to be drinking so much. "Yes, it does," the bartender replied refilling Doc's glass.

"Well," Doc told him. "I'm working on a sermon about good and ee-vile. I know a lot about good, but I need to find out more about ee-vile, so keep the drinks coming."

Those who knew him well fully understood that this was all for show. Deep down he was a very caring person. He never turned anyone away who was in need of medical attention, regardless of race or creed. He provided medical care to countless minorities in the Olney community who could not afford to pay him. The local Blacks regarded him highly for he was always there for them.

I got along very well with Doc. As part of his deal with Hoffman, he was supposed to write a monthly article for *Strength & Health* for the Hoffman Foundation. I quickly learned that he didn't care for this task at all. It was menial work, below his intellect. When his articles came in they were invariably late and required a great deal of rewriting to get ready for the magazine. So I suggested that he give me some ideas of subjects for his articles and I would write out a first draft. Then I would bring the draft to him to go over and make notes. I would type the final draft. This worked out in his favor and he was most grateful.

He provided me with a great deal of information to help me get healthier and therefore stronger. Ways to get in more work and still be able to recover from the heavier load. One time, he scared the hell out of me. He said, "Starr, you need to stop drinking milk and avoid all dairy products, Strontium-ninety

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is an extremely harmful radioactive isotope of strontium that is present in the fallout from nuclear power plants and contaminates the grass that cattle eat. It's passed on to humans in their milk and other dairy products made from milk."

So for two weeks, I did without milk and other dairy, including to my great regret, the daily milkshake at the dairy bar in the Barbell. I lost an appreciable amount of bodyweight since I depended on the shakes to maintain my weight. As a result, I began to lose strength. I finally decided to take my chances with the isotope and went back to eating dairy products and drinking protein milkshakes. I never knew for sure if he meant what he was telling me or just jerking me around. Which he was often prone to do for his own amusement.

After both of us had broken all ties with the York Barbell, I called him and told him I wanted to come down and talk about advertising his supplements in my magazine *Weightlifting Journal*. He was agreeable so I drove from Thomasville to Olney. A visit to Doc's place was always memorable and this was no exception. I found him in his office and we discussed what needed to be done for him to market his products. Everyone who had used them loved them, especially the Fruc-tabs. The first thing he needed to do, I said, was name your company. He told me to call it Clyde Labs. Clyde was his pet beagle who he regarded with more esteem than he did most humans. I would run ads for his products in my publication in exchange for product. That settled, he invited me to stay for dinner. I accepted since Doc was a great host with lots of tales to tell.

Doc lived in a rambling frame house with his wife Lillian, who he had met in med school and graduated with him. She was the Chief Pediatrician of the Outpatient Services at Walter Reed Hospital. They had three children: James, the oldest, Carol (Murph), and William (Kneedeep). Kneedeep because Doc said he was always in trouble. Doc sat at the head of the table and in a highchair next to him sat Clyde. Clyde wore a little bib and was the recipient of the first offering from each of the dishes. I sat next to Clyde and Murph while the two boys occupied the chairs across the table. Lillian didn't sit at the table. Rather she perched on a stool by the kitchen door where she responded to all of Doc's requests instantly.

I had a notion that all this was staged, but when I noticed that Clyde displayed perfect table manners and no one paid him any extra attention, I came to believe that this was done on a regular basis. I tried to relax and enjoy the moment, but I couldn't. I was told that the house boa constrictor had gotten free from his cage so I was constantly checking to see if the house pet had wandered into the dining room. This definitely wasn't the Brady Bunch.

Doc Ziegler was a pure scientist and humanitarian who had the misfortune to be associated with a greedy group of people who were only interested in money, He ended up bitter and disappointed. He died in 1987, He was 68.

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