

Starting Strength

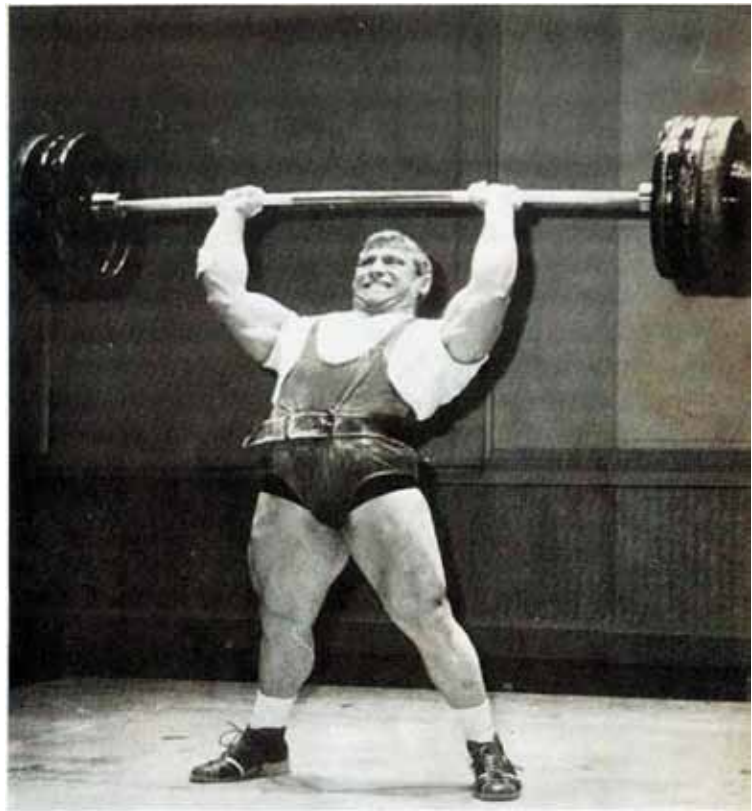
Iron Icons

Phil Grippaldi: Boy Wonder

by

Marty Gallagher

Phil Grippaldi mattered. In the weightlifting world he was one of America's brightest stars of the 1960s. Ultimately, for a variety of reasons, he never quite delivered on his awesome potential. His entry onto the American scene was meteoric. Imagine a short, 5 foot 5 inch, 195 pound nineteen year-old boy sporting ripped and shredded 20-inch arms. Further imagine he presses 345 pounds for a junior world record using pure power with none of the slick technical tricks employed by the Soviets. At the time the senior men's world press record was 358 pounds held by Soviet terminator Jan Talts. Phil was pressing within 4% of the senior men's world record as a teen. Additionally he was a good snatcher and an even better clean and jerker. The world lay at the feet of this incredible young athlete. Fast forward to July of 2008 and Phil Grippaldi, now age 61, has just been sentenced to ten years in state prison for selling crack cocaine. Wiretapped conversations conducted as part of a narcotics sting operation revealed that Grippaldi was dealing crack to a confidential informant. As he sits in his 5 x 10



Pure Power: weighing 195, Phil muscled up 360 with 20-inch guns ablaze.

Phil Grippaldi

foot jail cell he must wonder about how a life that had started off with such incredible promise had flown off the tracks so badly. He would have time to ponder: he would be behind bars until age 71.

Iron Roots

Phil Grippaldi was born in 1946 and raised in New Jersey. At a very early age he fell in with a very large and very weird neighborhood character named Mike Gubliano. The massive bodybuilder never competed in a single competition, yet Gubliano was hugely influential on young Phil. Gubliano's "thing" was arm training. He built arms reputed to be 22 inches and the few photos he allowed to be taken indicated that this was no exaggeration. Gubliano somehow ended up as a bodyguard for the world's top model, Twiggy, when she visited New York City in 1966. *Strength and Health* magazine ran photos of the stick-thin pop model clinging to Gubliano as he made like an arctic icebreaker plowing through the paparazzi. His incredible biceps strained against the material of his uber-expensive silk suit. It cemented his status as an underground bodybuilding myth. Gubliano deemed himself, "never quite ready" to appear in an actual bodybuilding competition and eventually faded completely from the scene. Young Phil Grippaldi fell under this arm guru's spell and engaged in marathon arm training enduros with these hardcore men right as he was entering puberty. Rumors of three-hour arm sessions abounded; young Phil blasted his arms with such ferocity that by the time he was 16 he sported outlandish, outsized 19-inch arms that would be his trademark throughout his competitive lifting career.

Thankfully young Phil was lured away from Gubliano's psycho-weirdness into Olympic weightlifting when Grippaldi met a truly fine lifting coach: Butch Toth of the Keasbey Eagles weightlifting club. Under Toth's excellent supervision, Phil learned the subtleties and nuances of the three Olympic lifts. It wasn't long before word began to spread about an astonishing young lifter that was closing in on the world record in the press. Phil debuted at the 1966 teenage weightlifting championships and smashed the junior world record by 35 pounds. The big-armed boy had "future world champion" written all over him. He also had an intangible characteristic: platform charisma.



World press record holder Russ Knipp's 15-inch popguns juxtaposed against Phil's howitzers.

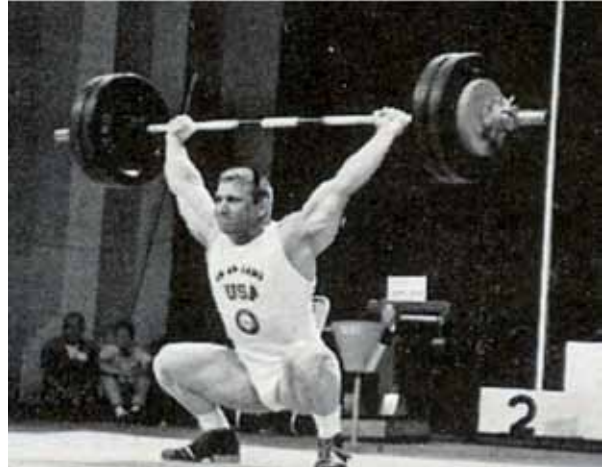
The Big Time

Phil entered the 1966 Senior Nationals and placed second to Bill March. He set another junior world record in the press with a 348-pound effort. At 1967 Empire State Games, Phil, now coached by Hungarian ex-Olympic team member Miska Huska, again broke the junior world record with a 352-pound effort. Grippaldi, exhorted on by Huska, ("Kill Talts! Kill!") actually cleaned and recovered with 410 pounds, just missing the jerk. At the time Talt's world record was 418, and this missed lift served notice that Grippaldi was no one-trick pony – his pulling power was now world level to match

Phil Grippaldi

his already world-level pressing. He exhibited surprisingly good shoulder flexibility for a man “saddled” with such massive arms. Already the naysayers were saying that were Phil to have “normal sized” arms and were that recovered arm mass distributed to his traps, erectors and thighs, he would be world champion. Phil’s attitude was, “Whatever.” His star rose ever higher with every successive competition, and among the young he was a God.

Grippaldi won his first national title in 1968 with a 1,055 pound three-lift total, beating the iconic Bill March in the process. The 1968 Nationals were the most famous in modern history as American “young guns” swept aside the Old Guard. Teenage and early twenties lifters abounded; Jack Hill at 148; Russ Knipp pressed a 345 world record weighing 165; Joe Puleo, Rick Holbrook, Jack Hise and Tom Hirtz at 181; Frank Capsouras and Grippaldi at 198; Ernie Pickett, Joe Dube and the King of the youth movement, Bob Bednarski at heavyweight...national records fell like fall leaves in a windstorm culminating in Bednarski’s twin world records: a 456 press and a 486 clean and jerk. It appeared that America



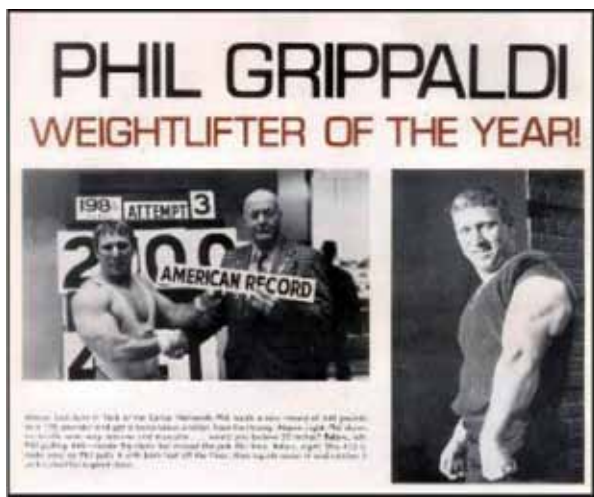
Despite 20 inch arms, Phil shows excellent shoulder flexibility with 292.

was ready to recapture its place as an Olympic lifting superpower; gone since the glory days of Kono, George, Schmansky, Vinci, Berger, and Anderson. Since the 1950s America’s position as an Olympic lifting power had gradually eroded. Now, in the late sixties, it appeared America was back. Phil seemed positioned to become the first 198 pound lifter in the world to break the 1,100 pound total barrier.

On a cultural level, in 1968 America as a country was being ripped apart by the Vietnam War. These young, brash lifters were definitely counterculture and definitely “against the establishment.” Young Bill Starr, a few years ahead of the Young Guns, was now in York, the epicenter of the lifting movement. An aura of excitement pervaded: the Duncan YMCA under Bob Gadja was challenging York for team title supremacy. This was a good thing – York had been the dominate power, and Bob Hoffman and the sinister John Terpak represented the establishment and “The Man” and the “repressive” Nixon administration. Starr and the Young Guns were the future, and the future was

now. It seemed like the world lay at the feet of these young men and nothing could deter the inevitable; youth would be served and a new dawn was breaking; these hip young athletes would have it all; they would compete and win at the highest levels of national and international competition, and they would do so on their own terms. The Man be damned!

Who would have guessed that the 1968 Nationals would turn out to be the high water mark and the wheels would come off the youth bus within a matter of a few short years. Eventually Starr left York dismayed. Bednarski failed to make the 1968 Olympic team; he became embroiled in



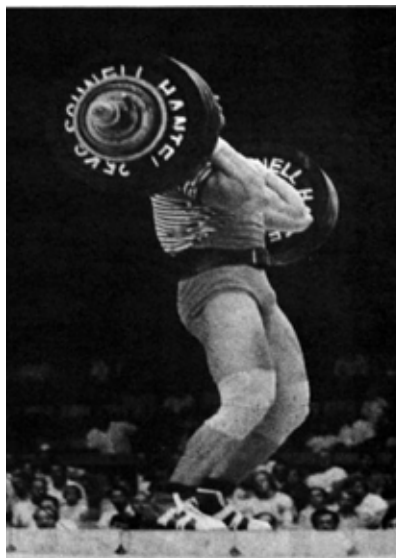
Phil Grippaldi

a sex scandal and was booted out of York in disgrace. None of the Young Guns would ever win internationally. Hoffman funded a Richard M. Nixon memorial park in York (a face-slap to the youth movement) and then abandoned Olympic lifting altogether. The Sugar Daddy that funded the international trips and provided jobs (pathetic as they might be) for promising athletes left in disgust, giving the Youth Movement the proverbial finger on his way out. Phil Grippaldi seemed tame by comparison: while Hill, Hise, Capsouras, Lowe and Holbrook grew their hair and aligned themselves with the extreme politics of the time, Phil maintained his straight arrow, military appearance and seemed removed from the radicalism associated with the youth movement. If anyone in 1968 were asked to predict which lifter would end up in state prison for selling recreational drugs, the last lifter picked would have been the straight arrow Grippaldi. As the old saying goes, appearances can be deceiving.

The press is banned: Grippaldi's career thought to be over

In 1970 Phil Grippaldi had his finest international showing. The then-24 year-old took second place to Russia's Vasily Kolotov at the world championships. Phil had a see-saw battle with Hungary's Geza Toth for second place and was behind going into the clean and jerk. Phil came through with a clutch 3rd attempt 418 pound lift to tie Toth and win the silver medal on bodyweight. In 1972 the press was eliminated from Olympic weightlifting and seasoned observers felt Phil Grippaldi's career was over. He proved them wrong: his quick lifts skyrocketed after the expulsion of the press and he eventually snatched 341 and jerked 451, light-years past his quick-lift bests during the press years. Phil competed in the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City and took 7th place. At the 1972 Munich games he took 4th place with an astounding 374 press and a near miss with 391, using the knee-kick press style. He eventually set a 386 pound all-time American press record shortly before the press was banned. At the 1976 Montreal Olympics he flunked the drug test after snatching 330 and clean and jerking an American record 451 pounds. Phil was the Senior National Champion in 1967, 1968, 1970, 1973 and 1975. He was the Pan American Games champion in 1971 and again in 1975. He retired in 1977.

Left, David Rigert is shown preparing to receive the referee's signal to press. This is his 436 pound all-time world record in the 198 pound class. This photo shows how judging had devolved to a point where "push jerks" were allowed. Loose judging was cited as the reason for banning the press: factually the powers-that-be wanted shorter competitions. *Right*, Russian heavyweight Valery Yakubovskiy with 455-pound world record press in 1971. Grippaldi adapted this style and eventually pressed 385. The venerable press was allowed to degenerate into a push-jerk followed by a standing bench press.



Phil Grippaldi

Life after lifting

Little is known of Phil Grippaldi's life after he retired in the late 1970s. Obviously things went sour at some point. It is not uncommon for champion athletes to self-destruct once their glory days are over. One startling statistic that has some relevance: 60% of NBA rookie players signing multi-million dollar contracts file for bankruptcy within five years of retirement. In the no-money sports, of which Olympic weightlifting surely ranks near the top, opportunities after retirement are nonexistent. There are no Olympic weightlifting coaching jobs in high schools or colleges; there are some strength coaching jobs, but frankly those go to those with advanced degrees and those with sport experience in the sport being coached. We can assume with relative certainty that after the conclusion of his lifting career, Phil Grippaldi could not generate enough money to support his lifestyle and turned to crime in order to pay the bills and keep a roof over his head. It was a sad endnote for one of America's premier Olympic weightlifters. Still, he inspired a generation of youngsters to take up the quick lifts and his physique inspired thousands. And for that we will be eternally grateful to him.

Thank you Phil.

Marty Gallagher has been a national and world champion masters powerlifter and is widely considered one of the best writers in the iron game. Since 1978 he has written over 1000 articles published in a dozen publications. He has authored more than 100 articles for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and produced 230 weekly [live online columns](#) for the *Washington Post*. Gallagher has coached some of the biggest names in powerlifting and witnessed some of the greatest strength feats of the last half century. If you like his style pick up a copy of his masterwork, [The Purposeful Primitive](#).

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