

Starting Strength

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

by
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I have written often about living and training in California in the late 1960s, especially about Zuver's Hall Of Fame Gym. In every case I enjoyed reminiscing and in the very truest sense, reliving what was a significant and pivotal period in my personal and physical development. Understanding the prevailing mindset of the "Iron Game" world of this era is important, because the late '60s to early 1970s saw the truest and perhaps final "break" in the various aspects of the lifting and training activities.

As I have extensively [written for TITAN SUPPORT SYSTEMS](#) and introduced in earlier startingstrength.com articles about my [initial visit to the York Barbell Club](#), those who trained most often incorporated movements from Olympic weightlifting, powerlifting, and bodybuilding into their year-long training programs. Olympic lifters spent some part of the year doing bench press, deadlifts, rows, and even biceps and triceps work. Powerlifters always included the overhead press movement in some form and usually power cleans as well as a year-long devotion to curls, triceps work, and lat exercises. Bodybuilders would "bulk up" with heavy squats, front squats, deadlifts, cleans, pressing and bench pressing before focusing more upon the standard single joint, isolation movements when preparing for physique competition.

As the 1960s passed into the '70s, the times indeed were a-changin' with the separation and specialization almost complete, into distinct activities with distinct approaches, each group of athletes pursuing a specific grouping of exercises. In California, I received a close-up look at how the top bodybuilders and best-known powerlifters went about their business. I also was plunked down onto Ground Zero of the nutritional supplement craze within the weight training culture, and perhaps that's the best place to begin.

If you trained with weights during this era, you also had an interest and a financial investment in any number of nutritional supplements. One of the oft-quoted summaries regarding this came from famed collegiate and NFL strength coach Dan Riley, who in one lecture remarked, "For those of you familiar with the statue on top of the York Barbell Company building, I want you to know that I paid for half of that with all of their supplements that I bought." I immediately piped up from the audience, "Dan, I believe you because I paid for the other half!"



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My own odyssey that wound through the nutritional supplement field was no doubt as typical for the era as it is possible to be. It began with the awareness that my training efforts needed a boost, some sort of push forward that training alone could not and would not provide. At least the muscle magazines told me this. Of course this wasn't true, as weight training was in the process of taking me from an undersized 120-pound youngster to a 232-pound collegiate athlete. The training was doing its job, but like so many, I read the ads that were aimed at fourteen and fifteen-year-old trainees and fell prey to the purveyors of protein powder, vitamins, minerals, wheat germ oil, and brewer's yeast. In the early 1960s these were the "standard fare" for anyone involved in weight training who deemed themselves to be "serious about things." No one was more serious about their training than I was, and I believed the advertising copy, much of which passed for legitimate articles in the various muscle magazines.

Please allow for another reminder, especially for those young readers of the Internet Age: the dissemination of information was extremely limited – often limited to what was printed in the magazines, if one could not actually get themselves to a storefront gym, garage, basement, or warehouse where serious lifters or bodybuilders trained. The "information" in the York publications clearly boosted "the fact" that the featured lifters and bodybuilders used York Hi-Proteen powders, tablets, Energol germ oil, and their other supplements. The Weider magazines, published under an almost dizzying array of titles, focused primarily on bodybuilders, but again the key feature was the intake of the Weider brand of nutritional supplements, many of which mimicked what York was selling.

The pathway through barbell training history is littered with personal claims of "being the first," or "inventing this or that," but relative to the far-reaching sale of protein related products, there is little debate that Bob Hoffman's York was the early leader after developing the idea to market his product through *Strength And Health* magazine. There is also little debate that Hoffman utilized the formula that was first developed by Irvin Johnson of Chicago. Johnson produced and sold a soy-based protein powder from his Chicago gym. The Johnson Health Studio was actually Irvin's health club facility and home. He had an interest in cooking and nutrition, and more or less ran experiments with some of his training clients. He attempted to "saturate" one of his trainees, Jim Park, with what for the time was a massive amount of protein, and the results were astounding. Park, in approximately four or five months, transformed his physique and became the 1952 AAU Mr. America winner.



Jim Park certainly knew how to squat!

Park, a machinist, subsequently moved to York, PA and became an employee of the York Barbell Company. He brought Johnson's Hi-Protein Food product to the attention of Mr. Hoffman who first advertised and sold it. Convinced of the soy-based product's potential based upon the mail order sales that were generated, he copied it and sold his own version of "Hi-Proteen" powders and tablets, expanding the inventory to include various flavors and varieties. He perhaps overreached with Proteen From The Sea, a concoction of powdered fish that somehow remained on the market for a number of years despite being barely edible. Needless to say, Hoffman's firm entrenchment as "The Father of American Weightlifting" and the widespread visibility afforded by his *Strength And Health* magazine gave him a far-flung network for distribution. Weider, too, added protein and vitamin-mineral supplements to his product line as he grew his new business in competition with Hoffman.

There was no doubt that lifting weights made one muscularly bigger and stronger. It worked for me, and despite being short and small, I earned a reputation in high school of "being all muscle"

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and the accompanying nicknames, “Muscle Beach” and “Mighty Mouse.” A true observation about training with a barbell, however, was made in 1970 by Arthur Jones in his Nautilus Training Bulletin. He noted that once a trainee purchases a barbell set, he is effectively removed from the marketplace as a consumer unless the barbell itself is defective. Any failure in performance of the barbell set becomes evident and a replacement will be sought. He clearly stated that it is much more difficult to judge the efficacy of a can of protein powder, and once established as a customer, the purveyor of nutritional supplements will have the user as a monthly customer, perhaps for a very lengthy period of time as he replenishes his depleted supplement supply.

This was also the realization of Hoffman, Weider, and a few smaller manufacturers or distributors who jumped onto the supplement bandwagon. Within a brief period of time, the sale of Hoffman’s Hi-Proteen and other nutritional supplements became the financial lifeline of the company. Tracing the development of the Weider magazines from their beginning, they grew from a few mimeographed sheets of exercise descriptions and routines, to monthly or bi-monthly catalogs of his products. By the early 1960s, the primary focus was firmly placed upon his nutritional products.

Living in the New York City area was advantageous to collecting information about strength training, bodybuilding, and the related ideas about nutrition. With gyms, barbell-containing YMCAs, and garages with a collection of interested trainees absent for many surrounding miles in most locales, the largest city in the nation had numerous small outposts of training activity and young, interested parties could insert themselves into the mix, and if nothing else, observe and learn.

Even in 1959 when I began to train, one would observe those lifters and bodybuilders who considered themselves to be “York men” or “York 100%-ers” as they were called, shoving Hi-Proteen tablets down their throats throughout the day, having bought into the notion that one needed “a steady influx of protein.” Those who favored Joe and Ben Weider – and to be absolutely clear, the lines of demarcation were well entrenched – did the same, but with Weider products only. Hoffman enhanced his protein products line with Energol, a foul tasting rice, corn, and wheat germ oil liquid that was in fact reminiscent of drinking motor oil. However, many of us bought into the idea that Energol and copious amounts of flatulence-producing brewer’s yeast would make for great energy and weight gains.

Until perhaps 1962, it seemed that whatever Hoffman did, Weider did, and then the latter began breaking new ground. I began as a “York guy” relative to my intake of nutritional supplements. I saw *Strength And Health* magazine on the newsstand before I saw one of the “Weider books” as we referred to them, though none of the muscle magazines would have passed for haute literature. In truth, everyone I knew that was involved in weight training looked upon all of the magazines as scientific journals, the equivalent of university generated information, and all of it designed to afford us truthful information that would unequivocally answer all of our training queries.

In the cult-like atmosphere that was weightlifting or bodybuilding – where the participants, even in the New York City Metropolitan area were more or less known to each other if they had achieved any kind significant development – few if any of us looked upon the magazines for what they truly were. The “science” was for the most part a dressed-up half truth or a complete fabrication; the training narratives of the champions and near-champions were fictitious, and often nothing less than fanciful ramblings from the typewriter of a paid, behind-the-scenes, full-time writer who had never lifted anything heavier than a ball point pen. If we were told that the target audience was fourteen to eighteen years of age, we would have argued long and loud that “kids wouldn’t understand the scientific method behind the training routines.”

That the formula worked for Hoffman and Weider and continues to work today is reflected in the continuous upward trend in the sales of vitamin and mineral supplements that topped \$32

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billion in 2012. Though there are variations on the oft-quoted statement about weight trainees and the supplements they ingest, this one will do: “If you told a group of lifters that eating Brillo pads would make them bigger and stronger, there wouldn’t be a clean pot or pan within five miles of any gym.” It’s a good summary, and in the early 1960s most of the fellows that I knew who trained, spent a disproportionate amount of their income on vitamins, minerals, protein powder or tablets, and the “other stuff.” In truth, by the mid-1960s, the “other stuff” was falling by the wayside.



As a “York 100%-er” I limited my supplement intake to the various York protein products and began with tablets. I did not have access to a blender, which made the choice of eating their tablets a rather obvious one. But the tablets presented the drawback of ingesting a lot of filler, the necessity of carrying around pockets-full of grainy pills, and feeling as if I was rattling and sloshing in the aftermath of sucking down fifty Hi-Proteen tablets and a quart of milk. I was fortunate in being acquainted with a number of the best bodybuilders in our area, if only because they were accessible as “neighborhood guys.” With such a limited choice of training facilities, I knew where to locate them and went out of my way to do so. AAU Mr. America Joe Abbenda, IFBB “Mr. Winners” Tony Pandolfo, Larry Cianchetta, better known to the readers of the Weider magazines as “Larry Powers,” John Maldonado, and others had a

few pieces of advice for me. The first was to ditch the tablets and use powder, as one could “absorb the protein better,” and in the long run it was less expensive.

More than that, the trend was moving towards the Weider products, at least among the local bodybuilders. I persisted with my York loyalty, but in time I stopped taking Energol and brewer’s yeast. My focus was vitamins, minerals, and protein powder and the new Hoffman gain-weight powder. However, the soy-based products were brutal, rough on the gastrointestinal system, and harsh tasting. I had used my mixing bowl to make Hoffman’s High Protein Fudge using honey, peanut butter, chocolate Hi-Proteen powder and his new gain-weight, a predominantly sugar-filled product, but to no avail. I was ready to make the switch to Weider – a rather significant step for many trainees when it was time to purchase supplements. The final Hoffman products I used regularly were the early versions of Hi-Proteen bars, none of which would have been mistaken for a Three Musketeers.

Again relating to our younger readers, in a time and place where no Hollywood actor, entertainer, media star, or even professional athlete would be seen with a modicum of muscular development it was ...unusual. And that may be the most accurate descriptive word possible – to be on the street and see a man with visible muscles. Anyone with noticeable muscular development no doubt became “that way” as a result of hard, constant manual labor. In my immigrant neighborhood, many of the men were in fact muscularly hard, if lean, with a few of outstanding size. Like my father, they were engaged in jobs that required the expenditure of physical force and energy.

In an immigrant neighborhood, where it was important to assimilate the core values of the American culture, being marked as “a laborer” was not positive. Every mother wanted her child to be seen as aspiring to higher levels of education, entering a “profession” rather than “a job” if possible, one that was at least a step above that which her father or grandfather toiled in. Thus, having any type of noticeable muscular development was a negative, a mark of being “low class,” the bottom-of-the-barrel blue collar mass of new-wave arrivals, lacking in education and social skills.

Weight training that developed obvious muscle just as obviously ranked towards the top of the list of activities to be avoided, at least in the eyes of the adults I came in contact with. There was a

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realization that being strong was positive; being able to fight and defend oneself or the neighborhood was positive, and being strong and resilient enough to get through a week of manual work was a necessity. Yet, only “natural strength” – the level of strength and muscular development that one was born with or gained through their day-to-day activity – counted as “good.” If one lifted weights to become muscular, larger, or stronger, it was seen as “artificial” or “for show,” even if one’s enhanced development allowed them to work harder and longer.

When an advanced weightlifter or bodybuilder was seen on the street, it was rather shocking and certainly noticeable to all. Most guys that I knew were modest, and careful to conceal their development. Think of the photos of an early Bill Pearl in a long sleeved flannel shirt or a young Dave Draper, usually attired in long sleeved shirts. The off-the-platform photos of the early York Barbell Club lifters and men like Steve Stanko usually displayed them in long sleeved shirts or York Barbell Club sweatshirts.

Against this backdrop, imagine my surprise while walking the streets in the Gowanus and Red Hook sections of Brooklyn, and spying Larry Powers striding purposefully and with obvious confidence. Red Hook was named as one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the United States in 1990, and “The Crack Capital Of the Nation.” As far back as the 60s, it was already an area to be avoided if at all possible. I was no doubt running a job-related errand for my father, using the subways and on foot, when I saw Powers, nee Cianchetta. He was one of the more popular local bodybuilders, a Staten Island resident whose training had been chronicled in more than one Weider magazine. He was wearing a tee shirt that was appropriate for the weather, and was on the other side of the street.



Of course, I felt compelled to follow him, and he walked into the Mr. V Sport Shop. I entered a minute or two after he did and met Jack Meinero, the proprietor. Trim but muscular, and dressed in a very tight, form-fitting tee shirt, Jack looked to be “Mr. V” incarnate, with a huge lat spread. What really caught my eye and ear however, were the clanging weights. The small, cramped store featured shelves of the various Weider supplements, a display of Weider barbell sets and dumbbells, and what appeared to be a real weightlifting gym. It was in fact a make-shift training facility, and Powers was already hard at work with two or three others, hefting dumbbells and tugging on pulley handles while I’m sure my jaw hung to the vicinity of my knees. Jack explained that he kept a gym in what I recall was an elevated loft in the rear of the store, so that he could train during the day, and many local lifters and bodybuilders would stop in to “take a few sets” while purchasing their supplements.

I had already been to Leroy Colbert’s World Health And Sports Center, which was a large health food store owned by Colbert and his wife Jackie, on Broadway at 84th Street in Manhattan. There, I also saw nothing but Weider products on display, and I met Dave Draper, which began a friendship that lasts to this day. Dave and I would sit in the rear of the store, eat foot-long, meat and cheese-stuffed hero sandwiches, drink quarts of milk, and listen to Leroy’s stories about working in the Weider warehouse with Harold Poole and others, the exploits of Joe Weider, and training odds and ends. Watching Powers and listening to both Meinero and Leroy convinced me to make the move to Weider products and completely abandon York.

The product that most interested me, circa 1962, was Weider’s “Crash Weight Gaining Formula Number 7,” and he hit it big with this one. Invoking an image of scientists in lab coats developing progressively more effective combinations of ingredients until coming up with “number seven” which obviously would be extremely effective, or at least more effective than “formula number 6,” I was all in

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for this one. I had been working more than one job from the age of twelve forward. Some income was contributed to the household budget, some was spent on food as the “house rule” limited me to one quart of milk per day with further consumption dependent upon my own means to secure it, and the rest was my “lifting, clothing, and lunch money.” Guess which one of those got the most emphasis? I saved, intending to time my Crash Weight Gaining Formula Number 7 intake with Christmas vacation. I would of course be working an eight to ten hour day as a fourteen year old ironworker, but knowing I did not have the regimentation of school for two weeks, I envisioned work, dinner, two hours of lifting, and a chance to chug down the magic elixir from the can-per-day box that required three buses and a lengthy subway ride before I could purchase it and bring it home.

Reminding our readers that we did not at that time own a blender, all of my various drink concoctions were mixed in a large bowl, using an egg beater and a lot of elbow grease to make it close to a drinkable consistency. Following Weider’s instructions, I placed milk, the powdered supplement, raw eggs, and peanut butter into the bowl and furiously churned away with the industrial-sized egg beater supplied by one of my uncles who worked as a chef. I filled two thermoses and sipped from these throughout the work day, saving enough for a post-workout feeding. I gorged on overstuffed sandwiches and without the need to study or run for football, rested and read muscle magazines.

I was shocked that upon the resumption of high school classes, I had gained a total of one pound. Where was the promised “14 pounds in 14 days” that were so prominent in all of the ad copy? Weider’s model Jerry Winick, who was another of the local bodybuilding legends, seemed to have as claimed, put on “a suit of muscles” in two weeks, yet I had gained but one pound.



From a small snapshot, a young Dave Draper on the left, and Jerry Winick who placed 2nd to Larry Scott in the IFBB Mr. Universe Contest, on the right.

One pound! I actually jogged to the high school and asked one of the custodians to provide access to the locked building so that I could use the “official football scale” to check my weight. The result was the same. Fourteen days of carefully planned, perfectly executed “scientific nourishment” down the drain, and of course no “suit of muscles” ala Winick, Draper, or any of the other Weider superstars who claimed that they blew up with well defined, striated muscle using very much the same supplemental product I had. No way. Something was terribly wrong, and I needed to find out what it was.

I sat down, pen in hand, paper in front of me, and wrote a long letter to Mr. Joe Weider himself, a letter I recall as both pleading and accusatory. He stole my money, and this stuff was a hyped-up gyp, but was it possible he could avail me of some of his medical and physiological expertise and perhaps diagnose a disease I might have that would have prevented meaningful gains? I did not get my suit of muscles, and despite spending my hard-earned money got very little from my carefully planned nutritional experiment. Although I waited patiently for weeks, I never did receive a reply from Joe. I’m sure my letter went onto the pile of hundreds of others that voiced the same complaint, before the entire pile went into the garbage.

Humorously, when I eventually met Joe Weider, perhaps two years later, as a still-naive trainee, I asked him if he remembered reading my letter. I am certain he had never even seen it among the thousands of other letters of complaint, but as he stammered and stuttered, searching for the correct

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response, I remained ever the polite young man, and motherfucked him while referring to him as “Sir”: “So yes, but Mr. Weider, sir, I worked so hard to be able to buy the Crash Gain Weight. I didn’t gain a fucking pound, motherfucker. What kind of bullshit is this, sir, can you explain this to me? What the fuck kind of shit are you selling if it doesn’t do what it says, only some kind of cocksucking motherfucker would do that, sir, don’t you think?” Or words to that effect.

Unfortunately, the real lesson was lost – that it was less necessary to use nutritional supplements than to train hard and consistently, and to demonstrate a bit of patience to allow the effect of the training to take its course. The move from Hoffman products to Weider products had been made because Energol and Hi-Proteen tablets and powders did not digest well, did not taste good, and had not delivered on their promise of noticeable gains in strength and muscle tissue. The Weider products did in fact taste better, but the promise of almost instantaneous results had not been realized, and certainly had been blown apart by my “Crash Weight Gaining Formula Number 7” experiment. Instead of thinking, “Maybe I just don’t need this stuff,” I came to believe that there was a secret I had yet to uncover, and perhaps it was out in California.

I continued to use Weider products when I could afford them, but often had to rely upon the generic brand of supermarket dried milk powder. Those who grew up as I did will recall that when one could not afford “real milk” they instead took a few spoonfuls of non-fat dried milk powder and mixed it in a glass of water. While this at times served as our source of “milk,” I found that the powder made an excellent protein powder substitute and one that was perhaps one-eighth the cost of any of the commercial protein powders.

My first insights to the “secrets” that were held by the California crowd came through *Iron Man* magazine. I cannot recall what would have prompted me to take the bus from Long Beach to Far Rockaway, the subway from Far Rockaway to Manhattan, and the PATH Train from Manhattan to Jersey City, New Jersey unless it involved the possibility of observing a well-known lifter or bodybuilder in training at their YMCA or VFW Hall. Not even the prospect of meeting a female willing to talk with me would have pushed me to make that sojourn. There would have had to have been very strong justification to make what no doubt was, at minimum, a three hour trip in each direction via public transportation. What I do recall was seeing a copy of the March 1965 issue of *Iron Man* Magazine, which featured the great heavyweight lifter Norbert Schemansky on the cover.



Wow. I knew who Norb was, having read about him and seeing photos of him in action doing his distinctive split style snatch or clean in *Strength And Health*. I was familiar with *Iron Man* only by its title and various covers. As a smaller-than-typical magazine at 9 x 6 inches, it was always displayed with the same sized blatantly homosexual magazines that were made available for public sale. It was never carried on newsstands in our neighborhood, but I saw it often, hanging from the “out of reach” section of the Times Square area news outlets in Manhattan. I had no idea that it was a legitimate muscle building-related publication as I lumped it with “those types of magazines.”

I was street-smart enough to know, especially by December of 1964 when the March '65 issue would have hit the newsstands, that quite a few of the top bodybuilders posed for gay-oriented magazines, but I harbored no negative feelings; it seemed like a quick and easy paycheck for them. However, by ignoring *Iron Man*, I had lost out on what would have been useful information in what was approximately my first five years of weight training. In addition to weightlifting features and the

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same type of contest results seen in *Strength And Health*, many lesser known “non-Weider” bodybuilders were featured in *Iron Man*, and of course, some were California guys.

More intriguing were the advertisements that included what was probably one of the last for Irvin Johnson’s Protein Powder. It was in early 1965 that Irvin Johnson changed his name to Rheo H. Blair, upon the advice of a numerologist, and applied that name to all of his nutritional supplements. I had seen the red and white distinctively-labeled cans of protein powder, as some of the lifters at our local storefront gym had purchased a number of cases, but I had not yet tried it due to its cost. However, seeing it advertised and having Larry Scott, Joe Weider’s primary poster boy, claiming that “This is what I actually use” to get bigger and stronger did it for me. This was one of the California secrets I felt I had just uncovered, and during my long ride home, I read the issue of *Iron Man* cover to cover, and I made up my mind to find out how all of these men were getting so big and strong.

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