

Starting Strength

Bill March

The Chosen One, Part 2

by

Bill Starr

When Bill March accepted the offer made by Bob Hoffman and Doctor John Ziegler to be the guinea pig for a new form of strength training, he was entering uncharted territory. Bill had been told that Doc had conceived a revolutionary method of gaining strength and wanted to test it on a young, healthy athlete who could be counted on meeting a rather trying schedule without fail. The conditions that Doc set were that Bill would have to drive down from York to do the prescribed workouts six days a week. This meant that Bill would have to travel to Olney, where Doc lived and had his medical office and small weight room, do the workout, then drive home, a total of 180 miles. To make matters worse, there is no really easy way to get to Olney from York. Those back roads in southern Pennsylvania were laid out following animal trails and the route to Olney was a mare's nest of sharp curves, more ups and downs than a roller coaster, and without the benefit of any shoulders. The trip would take an hour and a half each way.

As might be expected, Bill wasn't too keen on making that long drive six days a week. That's when Smitty stepped forward and volunteered to chauffeur the Chosen One, a commitment that proved to be critical for the success of the experiment. Had Smitty not offered to do the driving, most likely Doc would have simply set the idea aside and moved on to some other project. Doc had a rather short attention span. Then the world of athletics would never have learned about isometrics or Dianabol. Smitty's role in this drama would never be fully appreciated.

Doc's specialty was rehabilitation. In large part, because of personal reasons. He had joined the Marines in WWII and while fighting in the Pacific, he was badly wounded. The attending doctors informed him that he would never be able to walk without crutches. Since he had lost his right collarbone, he would never be able to lift his right hand above his head again.

Doc thought otherwise. After several corrective surgeries and long stays in Veterans Administrations hospitals, he earned his medical degree and set up shop at his residence in Olney, Maryland. There he began using resistive exercises to rehab his injuries and found that Dynamic Tension worked best. All the while he was digging through medical journals seeking any and all information on ways to gain strength. He came across some research out of Germany that had its roots in Dynamic Tension, but was a bit more advanced. The Germans called it isometrics.

Using this research as a foundation, Doc expanded on the idea. He built a power rack in his weight room and began trying out various formulas of sets and reps and how long to hold each in

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isometric contraction. The rack had holes drilled in the uprights four inches apart so that a great many variations of exercises could be done in it. That was the primary reason why Bill had to come to Doc's weight room to train. This was the only rack of its type in the country.

After a lot of trial and error, Doc found the formula he was looking for and started making gains consistently. So much so that he could walk without crutches, or even a cane, and not only could he elevate his right hand above his head, he could do presses with 20 lb dumbbells. He knew he was onto something special and wanted to see if it would work for someone who was already quite strong.

Bill was a 23-year-old in the prime of health, and eager to become a national level Olympic lifter. In the short period of time that he had been training on the three lifts, he had made remarkable progress. In his first contest he totaled 745 as a light heavyweight and quickly improved that total to 800. There were only about a dozen 181ers in the country who could boast of that total.

So the experiment that would eventually change the face of every sport in the realm began. Bill and Smitty would leave York at 7a.m., drive an hour and a half, then Doc would put Bill through a workout on the rack. Three positions for overhead strength, the press, three for pulling strength, and three for hip and leg strength. Each position was locked into an isometric contraction for twelve seconds. The entire session only took about a half an hour, then Smitty and Bill headed home.

This was their schedule for the first three weeks while Bill gradually grasped what Doc was teaching him in regards to the position of his body during each set and how to slowly but steadily increase the pressure on the bar during the isometric contraction phase. As I can testify, this takes some time to learn, but with Doc's coaching, Bill mastered the technique rather quickly. He was a gifted athlete and the traits that allowed him to excel in basketball, football, baseball, and track served him well. He was the ideal student, never questioning Doc about any facet of the system.

And he began to gain strength once he had the form down pat. You might notice that I haven't mentioned anything about Dianabol. That's because it hadn't entered the picture yet. It was nearly a month before Doc gave Bill a little pink pill and told him this would help him gain strength faster. Bill never hesitated in taking the anabolic steroid. He told me that he would have eaten horse shit if it would have helped him get stronger. He was, in a word, determined to get to the top in Olympic lifting.

It should be noted that Doc didn't provide Bill with a prescription for the drug just yet. Rather, he handed out the dosage each time Bill came to Olney and trained. Doc wasn't sure that the highly-motivated athlete wouldn't start taking more than he recommended. Which was just 5 mgs a day. After a month, he increased the dosage to two Dianabol a day, but he never gave Bill more than that.

I also want to point out the fact that Bill was already packing on muscular bodyweight and increasing the numbers on all of the Olympic lifts, plus back squats, even before he took any Dianabol. It was the rack work that was making him stronger, and it continued to do so.

Doc was always adjusting and modifying his ideas and he did this with his isometric program after a period of time. He put Bill through a workout that combined an isotonic movement before locking the bar against the pins for an isometric hold. After the first session with the revised version Bill reported that he got more sore from it than from the pure isometric workouts.

So that's what he did from then on, and when the isometric workout was printed, that was how athletes were instructed to do the routine.

Once weightlifting season began, Smitty and Bill only went to Olney on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Not only was Bill competing in meets almost every week, he was also doing several exhibitions with Hoffman. And by this time, he fully understood just what Doc Ziegler wanted him to do. Truth be known, he now knew more about using the isotonic-isometric system than the founder

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did. Doc now trusted Bill enough to provide him with a script for D-bol. Which he filled at Schultz's drug store on Market Street in York, a couple of blocks from the York Barbell.

Meanwhile, Hoffman began turning out power racks at his foundry. The first two were put in the new York facility on Ridge Avenue and in the weight room of the apartment/garage next to Hoffman's mansion on Lightner's Hill on North George Street. Bill had access to both of these racks and that's where he continued to train using Doc's program.

His progress shocked the Olympic lifting community. No one had ever heard of a lifter making gains like Bill was making. Hoffman took full advantage of his fast-rising star and filled the pages of *Strength & Health* with photos of Bill training on the York power racks. The articles in the magazine provided just enough information to make the readers anxious to learn more. To do so, they had to purchase a copy of the instructional manual for isometric training. Needless to say, these couldn't be printed fast enough to meet the demand.

In 1961, Bill began his run to the top of the 198 lb division. Once again, he was in the right place at the right time. Clyde Emrich, Jim George, and John Pulskamp were past their primes and their lifts had basically stagnated. After a mediocre 880 total at the Philly Open, Bill kicked it into another gear: 915 at Schenectady, 930 in Brooklyn, then 950 at the National YMCA Championships in Toledo, Ohio.

Bill won both the Junior Nationals and Senior Nationals that year, posting another balanced 950 at the latter contest. He was selected to be a member of the US Team for the Tour of Russia. The American would compete against different Russian teams at four venues. Four contests in five days. Bill had been accustomed to lifting in front of a few hundred fans and suddenly he was on stage in front of thousands. He was no match for the seasoned Vorobyev, but he held his own against the other Soviet middle heavyweights. It wasn't a problem for him to compete in meets held close together because of his experience doing so many exhibitions. He returned to the States with a new, higher level of confidence.

Sid Henry and Dick Zirk were also on this team, and Sid told me this story. They were staying at a very old hotel in Minsk. Bill, Sid, and Dick wanted to do some isometrics. After looking around in the apartment, they found some exposed water pipes in the bathroom. They were at the right height to do some iso pulls. Bill did a set, then Sid stepped in and put all his strength into an isometric contraction – and ripped the pipes right out of the wall. They did their best to patch up the mess they made and hustled out of the hotel very early the next morning before the damage was discovered.

March rolled over his competition in 1962, winning the Y Nationals and repeating as Senior National Champion, increasing his total to 975. He placed third at the World Championships in Budapest with lifts of 324 ½, 297, and 390 ½ for a 920 total. In '63, it was more of the same. A victory at the Seniors with a 1000 lb total and another trip to the World Championships, held this time in Stockholm. He tied the Russian, Brovko, for the bronze with a 940 total, but the Soviet lifter took home the medal since he was the lighter man.

But the highlight of that year was not winning the Seniors or lifting in the World Championships. It was setting a World Record in the press. The press had always been Bill's favorite lift and he excelled in it from the very beginning. Word had spread that he was going to attempt to break the record at the Philly Open and the Downtown YMCA was packed. Bill came through, pressing 354. He, like many other Olympic lifters, believed that setting a World Record was a greater accomplishment than winning a World Championship. To be the best in the world was indeed a worthy feat, but to lift more than anyone had ever done was a greater one.

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In 1963 he also won the Pan American Championships, held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and as a bonus, took home the Mr. Pan-Am trophy as well. As Hoffman often said, “The world was his oyster.” But the truth of the matter was that it was Hoffman and the York Barbell company that was prospering from Bill’s success. Bill’s meteoric rise in Olympic lifting was being attributed to the isometric training system. There was never the slightest mention of Dianabol in the pages of *Strength & Health* and Hoffman fully intended to keep the drug a secret.

So the sales of power racks and isometric training courses brought in a staggering amount of new revenue. In addition, sales for weight equipment and nutritional products greatly increased because Bill March was using those as well.

Bill certainly wasn’t getting his fair share of the pie. He drew a meager salary and basically made his living by putting on exhibitions. Once he stopped going to Olney, he was expected to work in the warehouse, where he was expected to help mix protein powder, make suntan lotion, energy bars, and as far-fetched as it may sound, load cases of nutritional products and weights onto trucks. He also did a great deal of modeling for articles and products in *S&H*, yet never received any extra money for doing that.

Hoffman was a great promoter and he believed exhibitions were the best way to expose people to weight training. To encourage them to start lifting weights so that they would purchase some of his products. Bill was perfect for the shows. He was very personable and courteous. He also had an award-winning physique and could lift heavy weights without the benefit of any warm-ups, and always finished an exhibition by either dunking a basketball, if a hoop was available, or doing a back flip. He did more than anyone, other than John Grimek, to dispel the notion that weightlifters were muscle-bound.

The number of exhibitions he did was staggering. He gave them at high schools, colleges, county fairs, churches, civic clubs, health food conventions, ball parks, and at halftimes of football games. Anywhere people gathered, Hoffman would schedule an exhibition. Since these were done for free, the shows were warmly accepted. Besides competing in a dozen or more meets per year, he also put on over two hundred exhibitions.

I once asked him when he had time to train and he said that he learned how to make the exhibitions his training sessions. Then he would do a few isotonic-isometric contractions and he was good to go. What I also found once I started training with him was that he could gain strength with a minimum of effort. He seemed to be able to will the increases on the various lifts. I always believed that he had been born with an exceptional physiology, akin to Marvin Eder and Ken Patera, and would have been a champion in Olympic lifting even if he had never taken any steroids.

While Bill rather easily won three straight Seniors, 1964 was going to be different. This was an Olympic year and athletes in all sports always trained a great deal harder. Although there were no young lifters stepping up to challenge Bill, there were a couple of seasoned veterans that were making it clear that they could defeat him. Clyde Emrich, who had won multiple national titles, and had won bronze at the ‘54 Worlds in Vienna, silver in Munich in ‘55, was making one last effort to make an Olympic team. The Seniors were being held in Chicago, his hometown, and he fully intended to give Bill a fight for the title.

Although Clyde was certainly capable of pulling off the upset, Bill’s greatest threat came from a 38-year-old from Harahan, Louisiana, who had been competing in Olympic lifting since 1940 – Louis Riecke. In the first installment of “The Chosen One” I recounted how Louis had impressed Doc Ziegler so much when they met at the Yorktown Hotel in York, that Doc had invited Louis to come

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and stay at his place in Olney so that he could teach him how to do the isotonic-isometric contractions correctly. This was way out of character for Ziegler, yet what he did in addition to teaching him this new form of strength training was unprecedented for the very tight-lipped physician. He gave Louis a prescription for Dianabol. There were only two lifters who ever received a script for D-bol from Doc: Bill March and Louis Riecke.

And now they were about to clash at the Senior Nationals. There was no doubt that the lifter representing New Orleans Athletic Club had a genuine chance to defeat the defending champion. In less than a year after learning about isometrics and Dianabol, he moved his total from 880 to 960 as a light heavy. Earlier that year he had set a World Record in the snatch of 325, using the split style. Then he moved up to the 198 lb class and began posting numbers that matched those Bill was making.

Even so, Bill was still making gains and was the man to beat in Chicago. He had also been the beneficiary of another one of Doc Ziegler's inventions, the Isotron. It was a machine that stimulated muscles. As I've mentioned previously, Doc Ziegler was primarily interested in all facets of rehabilitation and this machine could be used to help bedridden and severely injured patients regain their strength.

After he had successfully treated many patients at his office in Olney, Doc brought the machine to the York Foundation and used it on the lifters. March took advantage of the Isotron more than anyone because it fit his hectic schedule nicely.

So he was primed and ready for the Chicago showdown with Emrich and Riecke. But he ran into difficulty even before he took his first attempt. I never met anyone who could gain weight as rapidly as March. If he ingested 50 grams of protein, he gained 50 grams of solid muscle. And he had a bad habit of waiting until the last minute to shed any unwanted weight. Before the Seniors, he dropped an astounding fourteen pounds in less than forty-eight hours. Although the rapid weight loss didn't sap his strength, it did result in severe cramping, and Bill was a legendary crammer.

With Smitty's help, he made it through the presses okay, then the cramps got worse. After his first warm-up set with 135 in preparation for the snatches, he was unable to release his fingers from the bar. Smitty had to pry them loose. Bill turned to Smitty and asked, "What can I do?" Muscle relaxants were the only thing that relieved the cramping when it got this bad, but they were out of the question because he still had to do the snatch and the clean & jerk.

Smitty told him, "Forget the warm-ups." And that is what Bill did. He went on stage for his snatches and clean and jerks without the benefit of any warm-ups. There wasn't a lifter at any level who could have done this, but Bill was so used to handling heavy weights at the exhibitions without any warm-ups that he was able to pull it off. Despite this handicap, he ended up with a 1010 total, ten pounds more than he had done at last year's Seniors.

Riecke had almost injured himself when he attempted to clean 380. It had fallen back on him and pinned him to the platform. It was a miracle that he didn't break a bone or tear a muscle, but was able to walk off the stage. That near-accident put him out of the running.

Clyde Emrich, on the other hand, was very much in contention. He needed 410 to tie March and win on bodyweight. When I was in graduate school in Chicago, I trained with Clyde, Fred Schultz, and Chuck Nootens at the Irving Park Y every chance I got. Clyde was the smoothest cleaner I ever saw. Even better than the great British champion from Jamaica, Louis Martin, who I got to see in the '68 Olympics. He was fantastic, yet I still rank Clyde higher.

At several contests in the Windy City, I watched Clyde clean 420 two or three times, often taking a fourth attempt because he was attempting a World Record. He cleaned the weight with ease every time and missed the jerk every time.

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So the vocal, partisan crowd was on their feet when Clyde came on the stage for his final lift. Everyone in attendance knew that he could clean this amount of weight. The bigger question was, could he jerk it?

A flawless clean followed by another missed jerk gave March his fourth consecutive Senior National Title. A loud, extended groan washed over the crowd, and my utter disappointment was expressed as well. I had been cheering for Clyde because I knew him and had worked out with him. I hadn't met March yet. I was also angry at Clyde. Why in the hell didn't he work on his jerk? It was obviously his weak point and he had the title in his grasp. But as for cleaning a weight, he was without peer. I truly believe that he was capable of cleaning 450 pounds. At that time the record in the heavyweight class was 444, held by Paul Ashman.

Bill had little time to celebrate his victory because the Olympic Trials were only two months away and that was the contest that counted. Winning the Seniors was good, but it didn't punch his ticket to Tokyo. And he knew full well that he had dodged a bullet in Chicago, so he would have to show up at the Olympic Trials in the best shape of his life.

It has always seemed ironic to me that the top two contenders who would be battling it out to make the Olympic team as middle heavyweights were the only two lifters who received personal instruction from Doc Ziegler on how to do his isometric system and the only two to learn about Dianabol from him. Strange, but true.

Next time: One of the greatest meets in the history of American weightlifting, and the ensuing fiasco.

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