

Starting Strength

Bill March

The Chosen One, Part 4

by

Bill Starr

I concluded my last installment of Bill's story by stating that he had been selected to represent our country at the World Championships to be held in Tehran, Iran in October. But I was getting a bit ahead of the story. Before his place on the team was locked in, he had to show that he was in top form by competing at the Championships of North America, which were held in Montreal, Canada, on the 5th of September.

Bill was going to have to out-total Bob Bartholomew once again, as he had at the Senior Nationals, and he was also going to have to deal with Dr. John Gourgott. All three of the top contenders in the middle heavyweight division had totaled over 1,000. Should Bill have an off-day and both Bartholomew and Gourgott beat him, it was conceivable that he would be left off the team – although that was highly unlikely. March was, after all, the Chosen One and Hoffman was paying the expenses for the American team.

Nevertheless, an upset was entirely possible because both Bartholomew and Dr. Gourgott had been making excellent progress over the summer. Hoffman had paid for Gourgott's flight in from San Francisco and for his hotel room in Montreal. Dr. John was pleased about the first part, but not so happy about the hotel accommodations. Hoffman insisted that he share a room with him. For as long as I knew Gourgott, which was from 1967 to the time of his death in 2002, he swore that Hoffman had kept him awake most of the night talking, so that he would not be rested when he lifted against March and Bartholomew.

I told him over and over that this was not true, because the one time that I was unfortunate enough to spend a night in the same room as Hoffman, he also talked most of the night and I wasn't even lifting the next day. It was just that Daddy Hoffman loved to hear the sound of his own voice, and if his audience was only one person, that was fine with him.

The contest was held in the Maisonneuve Center, a magnificent venue where a variety of sporting events were held, from basketball to boxing and gymnastics. A large crowd showed up to support the Canadian lifters and the home country was well represented with 14 lifters, one more than the U.S. However, only seven could be counted for team points.

As at the Senior Nationals, it was discovered that the bar was weighing heavy. It was 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ lbs. over so the lifters had to make some adjustments in their lift selections throughout the meet. The

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contest for the 198-lb. division drew a huge crowd. This class always had the athletes with the best physiques. Both Bill and Dr. John had won countless bodybuilding contests and were two of the most impressive lifters in all of Olympic lifting.

Dr. John got off to a solid start by pressing 325. Bob Bartholomew opened with a strong 330, then March stunned everyone by missing that same poundage. He quickly regrouped, made the lift, and after Bob missed 340 twice, he stepped up and made that as well. None of the three were exceptional snatchers, but they all knew that they needed to make a solid number in order to have a chance of winning, or placing second. That second spot was very important because the selection committee, made up of Hoffman, John Terpak, Morris Weissbrot, and the National Chairman Rudy Sablo, had informed the lifters that they were going to be sending two middle heavyweights to the Worlds.

Bartholomew opened with 280, missing it twice before gutting it out on his third try. Even though he was still in the contest, he had dug a deep hole for himself and knew he would have to come up with a personal best in the clean and jerk. That is, unless his opponents did poorly in the snatch as well. Bill had planned on starting with 290, but Smitty convinced him to start a bit lighter. For two reasons: the bar was weighing heavy and all he had to do to ensure a spot on the team was maintain his lead over Bob.

So Bill took 285 and made it easily. Gourgott took the same weight, pulled it high enough, but lost it behind him. On his second attempt with that weight, he threw in over his head. It was almost a power snatch. Then he called for 295 for his final attempt and once again simply flipped the bar overhead. His pulling strength was amazing and it was obvious that once he honed his technique on the snatch, he was going to move some big numbers.

Bill took 300 for his second attempt and missed, then quickly turned around and made it smoothly. That provided him with a comfortable 20 lb. lead over Gourgott and 30 lbs. over Bartholomew. The clean and jerk was Gourgott's weakest lift – not because of a lack of pulling power, he had no trouble racking the weights. It was his legs that let him down. He opened with 360, cleaned it nicely, struggled to come out of the hole, then jerked it easily. But that's all he was able to do. He racked 370 twice after catching the weight at the parallel position, but could not recover.

Tommy Suggs was a good friend of Dr. John and was working with him in Montreal. He was also the managing editor of *Strength & Health*, and soon after this contest he wrote an article about working your weaker bodyparts. He used Gourgott as one of his examples of lifters who shied away from doing exercises they needed to do in order to improve their totals. In Gourgott's case, that was front and back squats. Gourgott loved pressing and pulling, but hated any form of leg work. And it showed. Tommy called him on his failure to do the hard work, and Dr. John was infuriated. Doctors do not take criticism well. Yet he knew that Tommy was telling the truth and he made some changes in his training, and in a short period of time his leg power increased considerably.

Bill opened safely with 370, and when Gourgott missed that same weight twice he sat back and waited to see what Bartholomew would do. Bob had started with 390 at a meet in the Baltimore prison in the summer, and again at the York Picnic, so he was determined to start with that same weight again in Montreal. Both Hoffman and Terpak urged him to take a lighter poundage. It was sound advice. He wasn't having a good day, the bar was weighing heavy, and all he needed to move ahead of Gourgott was 375. Second place was really worth the same as first as far as being on the World team.

But Bob was adamant. He had come here to win, not to come in second. So the bar was loaded to 390, actual weight 392 $\frac{3}{4}$, and Bob proceeded to miss the clean three times. I think every lifter has

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done this at one time or another in their careers and there's a certain psychology involved. Once a lifter has set a starting number in his head, it's difficult to alter that number for whatever reason. Also, when the people who are coaching you tell you that you need to take less weight than you planned on using, this plays with your mind. They must think I can't do that much, you reason, and your confidence drops a notch or two.

Whatever caused Bob to fail on his clean and jerk is unknown, but it ended up costing him a place on the team. Not so much because he didn't make any of his clean and jerks, but more so because he refused to take Hoffman and Terpak's advice. Daddy Hoffman, in particular, didn't like anyone to deny him his wishes. So Bartholomew was out and Dr. John was in.

Truth be known, Hoffman was more than happy to have Dr. Gourgott on the team – *his* team in reality. He dearly loved being associated with medical doctors. He had already invited Dr. Russell Wright to go along as team physician and Dr. Craig Whitehead to join the team so he could take part in the Mr. Universe contest, held in conjunction with the World Championships. To add yet another MD was icing on the cake.

Having medical doctors associated with the York Barbell Company translated to money. Hoffman often wrote articles under the pseudonym Doctor D. A. Dowling, who was in fact his dentist in York. And it was no accident that when the company started publishing a second magazine, it was named *Muscular Development*. The M and D were always in large type.

But Hoffman's plan of taking three doctors to Iran never panned out. Dr. Gourgott's commanding officer at The Presidio in San Francisco would not okay him leave time to travel to Tehran, even though Hoffman would take care of all the expenses. The Army didn't think lifting in a contest, even if it happened to be the World Championship, was nearly as important as the training program that Dr. John was going through.

By the time Gourgott informed Hoffman of his situation, it was too late to substitute Bartholomew on the team. So Bill was the only middle heavyweight to make the trip. Norbert Schemansky would have gone as the second heavyweight, along with Gary Gubner, but he severely injured his right elbow while attempting a 335 snatch. Tony Garcy was the third member of the team. This was the smallest number of lifters to represent the United States at the worlds since 1937, when John Terpak competed as a middleweight and John Terlazzo as a lightweight. They both won and both worked for the York Barbell Company, thus starting a dynasty that would continue for many decades.

Before moving on to the World Championships, I want to insert a story that is always brought up whenever anyone mentions the '65 North Americans. While it may not seem to have any connection to Bill March since he was not directly involved in the event, it does. If Smitty hadn't pulled off this Herculean feat, he would not have been present at the contest in Montreal, and that might have changed the outcome considerably. I've written countless times that having Smitty as your platform coach was worth ten pounds on each of the three lifts,

Terpak, Hoffman, March, Garcy, and Bartholomew flew out of Baltimore to Montreal the afternoon before the meet. Smitty was going to drive up into Canada so he could work with Bill. Dr. Gourgott had called Tommy Suggs and asked him to work with him at the contest. He agreed and decided to ride with Smitty instead of flying. It would give him the opportunity to see some new country.

Smitty enjoyed driving more than anything else, and the longer the drive, the better. And he was anxious to give his newly-acquired Peugeot a workout. Smitty and Tommy left York early on Friday. It was going to be a long haul, 565 miles to be exact. They had just passed through the village

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of Lake George in the Adirondacks after going through a heavy thunderstorm. They were on Route 9, a narrow two-lane highway bordered on both sides by dense forest. It was already dark and the roads were wet. Tommy was asleep in the passenger seat. Smitty lowered his speed because it was very cold and he wanted to be on the lookout for any black ice or animals crossing the road.

It was a very prudent move on his part, because as he came around a curve he saw that a large tree had fallen across the entire highway. He hit the brakes, but there was not enough room for him to come to a complete stop. A tree limb exploded through the windshield, glanced off the steering wheel, and jammed against the seat, at an equal distance between Smitty and Tommy. A few inches either way would have injured one of them badly. The impact stalled the car.

Stunned, they inquired if either one was hurt. They weren't, except for dozens of tiny lacerations on their faces and necks from the shards of broken glass that had erupted on them. After brushing themselves off they got out of the car and checked to see if it had been damaged. The front end was dinged, but everything was intact. A car pulled up behind them and the driver got out, asked if they were okay, then helped them dislodge the tree limb from the windshield. Smitty checked to see if the Peugeot would start. It did and he backed away from the fallen tree.

Then Smitty opened the trunk and got out some flares and the three of them set them across the road close to the curve of the highway. While they were doing that, Tommy and Smitty discussed their next move. They asked the man if there was a motel in Lake George, and he gave them directions how to find it. They had decided that they were too shook up to continue driving further that night.

They just had time to wash their faces and brush off more shards of glass when a New York highway patrolman knocked on the door to their room. After he took their statements, he told them in no uncertain terms that they were not to drive the car on the highway until they had replaced the windshield. Smitty assured him that he would take care of it before driving it any further than a repair shop.

He lied. Smitty and Tommy both knew that by the time they found a garage that could replace the windshield and get the job done, they would not be able to get to Montreal in time to work with Bill and John.

That meant they were going to have to drive into Canada without a windshield and they needed to travel under the cover of darkness so that it wouldn't be noticed as easily as it would in daylight. They discussed their plan of action. The first order of business was to clear off what remained of the shattered windshield and remove as much of the broken glass from the inside of the car as they could. While they did this, they talked. They would get something to eat and take out plenty of coffee. Then they would try to get some sleep and pull out at 3 am. They calculated that they still had 160 miles to go and should be able to get to Montreal in four hours. Smitty would have to drive much slower than normal because of the missing windshield.

Knowing that they were faced with an extremely cold ride, they put on all the clothes they had brought along and wrapped motel towels around their necks and head. They left earlier than they planned because they were too jacked up to sleep. But they were rested and alert. Even with the car heater on high, they still shivered the entire way and since they couldn't cover their faces, their cheeks were red as beets after only a few miles on the road.

But luck was on their side. The Peugeot ran like a clock and they never spotted any highway patrol on either side of the border. At the customs booth, Smitty stopped a bit past it, quickly got out and talked to the officer through the glass. The glass was frosted over so the officer could not see the front of the car. After answering a few questions, Smitty was back in the car and they were on their way once again.

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They made it into Montreal without a hitch and for the first time that night, they relaxed. Even if they got stopped now, they could catch a cab to the meet site. With Tommy navigating, they found the Maisonneuve Center and the hotel on the same street a block away where they had a room reserved. They took advantage of it, taking long hot showers, ordering breakfast through room service, and relaxing for a few hours, giddy from the frigid, nerve-racking adventure.

They walked down to the lifting venue and Smitty went looking for Lionel St. Jean, who was directing the contest and lived in the city. Lionel told Smitty where he could find an automotive repair shop and Smitty wrote the directions down. Then with Tommy guiding him, he found the shop and was delighted to find it open for business. That was the good news. The bad news was that the front end of the Peugeot was slightly out of line and that would have to be fixed before a new windshield could be installed. And that couldn't be done until Monday or perhaps even Tuesday, the owner informed a sad-faced Smitty. Then his expression turned to dismay when the owner quoted him how much it would cost to make the needed repairs. Smitty turned to Tommy and asked, "What do you think?"

Tommy didn't hesitate. He told the owner, "We'll let you know," and he and Smitty walked back to the car and got in. Having the car fixed in Canada was not a good idea. The price was way too high and they would end up missing one or two days of work, plus the added expense of a hotel and food. They were silent for a while, then Tommy blurted, "The hell with it. Let's drive back tonight, after the contest. If we could make it up here without a windshield, we can make it back home. We'll just have to stock up on towels before we take off."

So that's what they did. They must have set some sort of record by travelling a total of 725 miles without a windshield. And they did it for the most part in freezing temperatures. When Tommy and Smitty related this story to me on our return trip from Detroit in 1966, where Tommy had lifted in the YMCA Nationals, I asked the pair how cold they got.

Tommy said, "We froze our asses off, except when we made pit stops to get warm, gas up and stock up on food and coffee. We tried to pick up weather reports on the car radio, and the highest temperature we heard was in the low forties and the lowest was in the teens. But it was the biting wind that turned us into icicles." He paused, then added, "Starr, I've been really cold, sitting in duck or deer blinds when a blue norther came through, but I have never been as cold as I was on that long drive back to York."

I then asked if either one of them got sick from being exposed to the cold for so long, "No," Tommy answered. "Our faces were sore for a week and it took two weeks for all the little nicks on our faces and necks to heal, and another week for us to finally thaw out, but other than that, we were none the worse for wear."

Smitty said, "Even though I washed my hair every night, I was still finding tiny pieces of glass in my head for a week,"

That's legend-quality stuff.

When Bill arrived in Tehran, he was brimming with confidence. Since the North Americans, his training had been going exceptional well. Smitty and Bill believed that he was capable of doing 353, 308, and 413. That 1073 total could very well be enough to take the gold. And even if he just did his best total of 1040, he would have a good shot at silver or bronze. His expectations were high. In training, at a higher bodyweight, he had pressed 375, snatched 320, and clean and jerked 418. He had every reason to be optimistic.

But first things first. Bill served as coach for Tony Garcy during the middleweight competition. Hoffman should have brought Smitty to Iran to work with the lifters. He billed himself as the team

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coach but he never did any actual coaching. This left it up to the lifters to help one another. Like Bill, Tony had aspirations to take home a medal. His chances were greatly improved because Ohuchi of Japan, the world record holder in the total, and Zdravizka of Czechoslovakia, the gold medal winner at the '64 Olympics were not entered. And his well-planned training program was right on schedule, so Tony was primed and ready to take on the best in the world.

Tony pressed well, making 292 and 303 before a narrow miss with 308. He was third behind Dittrich, East Germany, and Kurinov, Russia, who did 308. In the snatches, Tony made 275 and 281 nicely, before a close miss with 286. Now he was tied with Kurentsov, another Russian, for third, but they were only five pounds behind the leaders, Dittrich and Kurinov. As usual, it was coming down to the clean and jerks.

Then something happened to Tony between the snatches and clean and jerks. He suddenly appeared very tired and about to fall asleep. Hoffman suspected that someone had slipped him a drug, but that was unlikely. What few people knew was that Tony was diabetic, so in all likelihood he was experiencing low blood sugar. Whatever the reason for his lethargic state, it couldn't have come at a worse time.

Bill did everything in his power to get Tony geared up and it helped to some degree. He opened with 352, a weight well within his range and missed. As he stood over the bar for his second attempt, he appeared even more sluggish and when he attempted to clean the weight, it looked like it weighed a ton. Now he had to follow himself. With Bill shouting encouragement and the crowd in full support of the American lifter, somehow Tony managed to clean and jerk the 352, but it was bone-on-bone.

The crowd roared its approval, but those two misses allowed his competitors to move past him and he ended up in fourth place. Had he not experienced this odd condition, he was capable of doing 380 which would have been enough to win. The lifting gods had not smiled on the athlete from El Paso, Texas.

Nor did they smile on Bill. He hadn't been feeling well when he worked with Tony, then he got very sick. Dr. Whitehead told me that it was a miracle that all the Americans didn't get sick. Side streets and alleys were littered with garbage, with rats having the run of the place. The preparation of food in the shops and restaurants was suspect, and Doc said he was glad he was cutting bodyweight because he could get by eating fruit.

Dr. Wright did what he could for Bill, but it didn't look as if he would be able to compete. Hoffman was all set to withdraw him, when Bill let him know that he had come to lift and he was going to lift, sick or not. But his illness had come at a bad time, just when he was putting his plan to shed the unwanted pounds into motion. When he wasn't able to do that properly, he failed to make weight for the middle heavyweights. However, he had often lifted as a heavyweight in local and regional meets so that he wouldn't have to make weight, and had posted a high enough total to qualify him to compete in the heavyweight class. That's what he decided to do.

Weighing 204, Bill was matched up against Zhabotinsky, Russia, at 342; Ecser, Hungary, at 301; his teammate Gubner, at 292; Oliver, New Zealand, at 287 ½; Abdulkhalik, Iraq, at 269; Reding of Belgium, 255; and Veselinov, Bulgaria, 251. It seemed to be a mismatch, yet if Bill had been healthy, he was capable of posting a high enough total in this class to be in contention of a medal. Those lifts he had done in training prior to the Worlds added up to over 1100 pounds.

But Bill never got the chance to show how hard he had trained for this contest. The head judge, Santana of Puerto Rico, made the lifters hold the bar on their shoulders a very long time before giving them the clap to start their presses. Bill opened with 341, a weight that he could handle despite his condition. He got a really slow signal, then simply pressed the weight overhead as he always did. Two

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red lights. He took that same weight two more times with the same results. He got screwed royally. Anyone who had ever seen Bill press knew that he did it with pure power. No fast starts, leaning back excessively, or any other gimmicks to help him get the bar overhead. Bill's presses looked like they were on an elevator, going from dead stop to finish in one continuous motion.

The third American lifter did well. With Yuri Vlasov retired, Gubner's main competition was Leonid Zhabotinsky, so unless he bombed, he would have the silver locked up. Gary moved ahead of Zhabo in the press, doing 418 to the Russian's 407, but everyone in the crowd knew he could not stay with the Olympic champion in the quick lifts. Zhabo out snatched Gary 369 to 341 and then set a World Record with a fourth attempt 381. Zhabo waited until the American finished with 440 in the clean and jerk, took 446 to seal the victory, then called for 480 to set another World Record. He came close both times but no cigar. The results show that Gary was only 17 pounds behind the giant Russian, but Zhabo had the meet under control the whole way.

Yet Gary had reason to be proud of his performance. His 1200 total set an American Record and he had given notice that he would be pushing Leonid in the years to come. One of the biggest surprises of the '65 Worlds was that the Polish team defeated Russia, 34 points to 32.

So all of Bill's hard work in the York Gym was for naught. However, Hoffman found a way to turn a lemon into lemonade. After the lifting competition, there was the Mr. Universe contest. This was the only official Mr. Universe at the time and was conducted by the Federation International Halterophile et Culturiste (FIHC). Past winners from the U.S. had been: John Grimek, Steve Stanko, Jim Park, Roy Hilligen, and Tommy Kono. After Bill March failed to total, Hoffman immediately entered him in the physique contest. Bill argued, "Bob, you know I hate this stuff," but to no avail. Hoffman believed he had a one-two punch with March and Dr. Whitehead. Daddy Hoffman really didn't care who took the top spot because both Americans would be representing York Barbell. I have no doubt that if Gourgott had been able to make the trip, Hoffman would have entered him as well.

The posing for this physique contest was a bit different from those at home. The contestants basically freelanced and hit poses and did movements that displayed their athleticism as well as their physiques. Most of the audience felt that Bill won the title because of the finish of his routine. He executed a picture-perfect back flip, which was easy for him since he did one at the end of every exhibition. The crowd went wild. They were amazed. They already knew that Bill was one of the strongest men in the world, but to see him perform that back flip stunned them.

What astounded the bodybuilding fans was the fact that Bill won, yet he didn't do any specific work for his various bodyparts. His interrogators were skeptical and asked him dozens of questions about his training. Such as "How did you develop your calves if you never did calf raises?" Bill replied, "I play basketball, plus I do standing broad jumps and standing high jumps. Otherwise, all I do are the Olympic lifts and isotonic-isometric movements in the rack." They didn't believe him, but he didn't care.

So Bill added the Mr. Universe trophy to his other physique trophies: Mr. Pennsylvania, Mr. Middle Atlantic, Mr. Eastern States, Mr. North America, and Mr. Pan American. And while he could care less about winning all those awards, taking that Mr. Universe title ended up bringing him more recognition over the years than all his accomplishments in Olympic lifting. Go figure.

One person who was not the least bit happy over Bill's victory was Dr. Craig Whitehead. He had made the trip to Iran expressly to win Mr. Universe. There was even an article about his preparation and his assured win in the next issue of *Se&H*. He contended for the rest of his life that he had been gyped out of the title. He simply couldn't let it go.

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Some thirty-five years later, Doc Whitehead and Tommy and Karen Suggs came to visit me, and we made the trip from Maryland to Pennsylvania to spend an afternoon with Bill and Sherry March. While we were getting ready to leave, Doc pulled Bill aside and asked him if he thought that he should have won the Mr. Universe title. It made no difference to Bill, so to make Doc happy he told him that he thought he had the better physique. Well, that was enough for Doc. When he got back to Tampa, he bought a huge trophy and had it engraved:

Dr. Craig Whitehead
Mr. Universe
1965

How's that for an inflated ego?

One final story, told to me by Doctor Whitehead. Bill would have never told it, because it would sound like he was bragging, and he never bragged. After the meet and physique contest, Gary, Bill, and Doc went out to a nightclub to unwind. Tony had already flown home. Everything was fine until a rowdy group came in and right away began hassling the Americans. The trio tried to ignore them so they could relax and enjoy themselves, but the Iranians got more and more hostile. While the athletes were much larger, they were also grossly outnumbered, and it was common knowledge that nearly every male in the city carried a knife. Just as the situation was about to get ugly, Bill grabbed two bottles of beer by their necks, smashed the bottles on the corner of the bar, then turned to face the mob holding two lethal weapons.

Bill was angry and dared them to come closer as he began to force them back while he waved the jagged glass at them. The mob, now wide-eyed, got quiet and moved further away from this madman. None of the locals were interested in dealing with this incensed Hulk. The Americans made their way to the entrance of the nightclub, with Bill holding the troublemakers at bay, then hurried down the street, and found a cab. Only then did Bill discard his weapons in an alley.

To be continued...

For those who haven't heard, Richard C. Smith died on the 27th of August, 2014, at the Hanover Hall Nursing Center in Pennsylvania. Smitty was 89. May he rest in peace. He was one of the good guys.

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