

Starting Strength

Bill March

The Chosen One, Part 5

by

Bill Starr

By winning the Mr. Universe title in Tehran, Bill had established himself as one of the greats in the field of physical culture. Having won five consecutive Senior Nationals and taking the most coveted prize in bodybuilding had put him in the same class as Steve Stanko and John Grimek. They too had won Mr. Universe and had many national crowns to their credit.

Yet change was in the air for Bill when he returned to York. The mysterious sickness that he had contracted in Iran lingered on. He couldn't seem to shake it. Doc Ziegler provided him some prescriptions for antibiotics and when these didn't help, he obtained some different ones from Dr. Roseberry, the physician in York who provided medical care to the York lifters, and the main provider of steroids, cortisone shots, and liver function tests. Nothing he tried worked.

Bill decided he needed to pull back some to allow his body to rest and heal. He continued to train, but his sessions were much shorter and he informed Hoffman that he wasn't going to take part in any exhibitions for a while.

As might be expected, Hoffman was upset. He depended on Bill to be available to demonstrate whenever he needed him. In fact, Bill was the only York lifter doing the exhibitions. Tommy had done a lot of them before his knees forced him to give up the Olympic lifts. Vern Weaver had moved to California to see if he could break into the movies. That left Tony Garcy and Homer Brannum. Tony refused to take part in any exhibition because he would not allow anything to disrupt his planned training schedule. Homer worked swing shifts so wasn't able to go with Hoffman, even if he wanted to. And he, like Tony, didn't like doing exhibitions since they interfered with his training. Since neither of them worked at the Barbell, Hoffman didn't have any leverage with them.

And Hoffman really wanted big men to demonstrate, not light or middleweights. It was a quandary, and Hoffman felt that Bill was letting him down, even though March had put on as many as 200 exhibitions in one twelve-month period.

There was, however, a very doable solution to his problem: Joe Mills, the exceptional coach from Rhode Island, had been pestering Hoffman to bring the young phenom Bob Bednarski to York to live and train. Barski had been making unbelievable gains since he moved up into the heavyweight division, and Joe was convinced that he would improve even faster if he could train regularly at the

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York Gym with Garcy, March, Brannum, and Suggs, and benefit from the nutritional supplements, especially the “Hi-Proteen” powder.

This should have been a slam-dunk. It wasn't, because Mike Dietz and John Terpak vehemently opposed the idea of bringing another lifter to York. They argued that Bednarski was never going to be able to pack on enough bodyweight to be a full-fledged heavyweight. Norbert Schemansky was already a member of the York team, and if Hoffman wanted to recruit anyone else, it should be Gary Gubner or Joe Dube. And these two heavyweights wouldn't have to move to York. That's the part Dietz and Terpak objected to the most – York would have to pay moving costs, provide a place for Bednarski and his family to live, and give him a job. That's money that could have been spent more wisely, in their opinion, and they firmly believed that they had as much say in how the York Barbell money was spent as Hoffman.

So Hoffman relented, even after Barski put on a brilliant show at the York Picnic. Hoffman wasn't all that keen on shelling out money himself, but when March announced that he wasn't going to do any shows until he regained full health, Hoffman brought Barski to York. Bob, Laura, and infant Bobby settled in a trailer at Brookside Park in Dover, only a few miles from Hoffman's residence and the Foundation. The Park was the site of the York Picnic every September.

Barski immediately took over the role that Bill had been playing for half a decade. Barski worked in the warehouse and put on as many exhibitions as Hoffman wanted to go to, which was often three a week.

Meanwhile, because of his illness, Bill stopped coming to the warehouse. He needed all of his energy to recuperate fully, and he assumed that he would still be on the payroll since he had gotten sick serving the YBC and his winning the Mr. Universe title had increased sales considerably. But Bill quickly learned how ungrateful and miserly Hoffman, Dietz, and Terpak were. Not only did they stop paying Bill, they took the keys to the VW from him. Bill was under the impression that the car belonged to him, a bonus for all the publicity he had provided for the Barbell over the years. He was wrong.

Bill was stunned. Suddenly, he was no longer the Chosen One. Barski was now the hope for the future. Naturally, this hurt his pride, yet he didn't spend any time dwelling on it. He moved on. He had no trouble getting work. York was the hub for several big trucking lines and they could always use someone in the warehouse. The loading of trucks there was much less demanding than at the Barbell because everything was done with a forklift and the pay was double what he was drawing from the Barbell.

In addition, Bill was approached by a couple of car dealerships to sell cars on their lots. Bill was a celebrity in York and winning the Mr. Universe had raised his status yet another notch. His friendly, easy-going personality made him the ideal salesman. While he was irritated at the way he was being treated by those running the Barbell, he was relieved not to be under their thumb any longer. Now he could choose what meets he went to and not be at Hoffman's beck and call. This new freedom allowed him to spend more time playing basketball with his friends at the York Y and to do more things with his wife, Nancy.

He still trained regularly, but at different times than when he was working at the Barbell. He would slip into the gym, go through a session and leave. He didn't mind training alone. He found that he got better workouts when he was able to move at his own pace and not have to wait until several other lifters had finished their sets before taking a turn on one of the platforms, the squat rack, or the power rack.

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The Philly Open kicked off the Olympic lifting season in the East, and for the first time Bill didn't travel with Hoffman. He and Smitty made the trip to Philadelphia. As usual, the Y Gym was packed to the rafters. Many of the spectators were there to see the rising star, Bednarski, but an equal number were on hand to see how Bill would rebound from the disaster in Tehran. Bill still wasn't completely over the illness that had caused him so much misery in Iran, but he knew he had to lift well because Bob Bartholomew was in great shape and would be challenging him from the get-go.

It was a great battle. Bartholomew out-pressed Bill 345 to 340, but Bill put together three beautiful successes in the snatch and finished with a solid 300, while Bob only managed to make 285. That proved to be the difference as they both came through with 395 in the clean and jerk. So Bill held off his rival 1035 to 1025, but he was going to have to continue to train diligently if he wanted to hold the top spot in the 198-lb. division in '66.

In November, I moved to York and became Tommy Suggs' assistant editor for *Strength & Health* magazine. I was there almost a month before I ever saw Bill. He would stop by to visit with Smitty, Grimek, and Stanko, or to get in a quick workout and leave. He didn't do any exhibitions that spring and said that he was glad that Bednarski had taken over that chore. It was like having a monkey off his back.

He didn't enter the prestigious Empire State Games, the YMCA Nationals, or the Wilmington Open, meets that he had always lifted in since he broke onto the national scene. This, of course, irked Hoffman because Bill always contributed to the team points for the YBC.

Then Bill started coming to the York Gym and training with Garcy, Homer, Tommy, Barski, and me during the week, and he also showed up for the Saturday sessions which drew lifters like flies to honey. Ernie Pickett drove up from Baltimore, Barry Whitcomb from College Park, Maryland and Bob Bartholomew, Jeff Moyer, and Eugene Stefko from Allentown, Pennsylvania. The atmosphere in the YBC on Saturday afternoons was highly-charged, more like a contest than a workout.

Bartholomew trained hard and heavy and pushed Bill to put more effort in all his lifts on those Saturday sessions. This, of course, is what Bill wanted. He thrived on competition, and he announced that he would be lifting in the Pennsylvania State Meet in May. He would use that contest to tune up for the Seniors in June. He didn't plan to make weight for the state meet, nor did he plan on going full out. He merely wanted to find out which lifts needed more work before the Nationals.

This was the first meet that I would lift in since relocating to York. Hoffman, Barski, and Homer rode with Hoffman. I joined Smitty and Bill in the little red VW that had been so rudely repossessed from Bill on his return from the World Championships.

Smitty, as usual, did all the driving. I sat in the back and enjoyed the ride as Bill and Smitty told stories of some of their past adventures. It was great fun because I had never been around Bill except during workouts and I got to see another side of his easy-going personality.

While March wasn't going to bother about making weight, I was, and I had a harder time doing so than usual. The main reason my bodyweight had gone up was due to the fact that I was drinking a couple of protein milkshakes a day; one after training and another at night. The free protein powder made me greedy. I had to drop almost seven pounds and started going without fluids on Thursday instead of my usual Friday. I didn't mind being hungry nearly as much as I did being thirsty. I couldn't wait until I made weight so I could gulp down water and whatever other fluids I could lay my hands on.

When we were about an hour out of Pittsburgh, Smitty got off of the Turnpike and drove to a diner that served extra-large hamburgers. Smitty knew I was making weight, since I had been complaining about it most of the week, so he didn't bother asking me if I wanted anything. Bill and

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Smitty went in the diner and soon returned loaded down with food and drink. Which I quickly discovered, was all for Bill, except for a small Coke.

Bill dug into the food before Smitty was back on the Turnpike, putting it away as if he hadn't eaten in a week. In no time at all, Bill devoured two huge cheeseburgers, a double order of French fries, and two large Cokes. I was amazed, I had never seen anyone inhale that much food so rapidly. And I had never seen any lifter *of any size* eat such a quantity of food just before he was to lift in a contest.

While Bill was thoroughly enjoying his meal, I was in agony. The succulent aromas were actually making me dizzy. My stomach growled in protest and my dry mouth pleaded for help. But there was absolutely nothing I could do to gain any relief. So I tried to ignore the smells of fried food and flavored liquid by studying the landscape more closely.

Thankfully, Bill finished eating rather quickly and when he packed all the trash in one brown bag and stuck it under the seat, the tantalizing smells weren't nearly as potent. Yet they were still there and continued to plague me.

Smitty and Bill went back to telling stories, which did help me take my mind off food and drink somewhat. Both of them had a storehouse of tales about Hoffman, and Smitty, in particular, told them in a way that had me in stitches. Smitty prompted Bill to tell about the time he was driving Hoffman home from a contest and Bob almost gave him a heart attack.

"I was driving," Bill said, "and Hoffman was asleep in the passenger seat. I pulled up behind one of those trucks that transport vehicles to dealerships. It was hauling pickup trucks and the one on the end of the carrier was facing backward. I wasn't able to pass because the traffic was fairly heavy and the road was curvy, so I just settled in behind the carrier only just about a car length away from it. Well, Hoffman wakes up, sees those headlights of the pickup at the end of the carrier and he let out a scream that almost made me drive over into a ditch. He thought he was about to be hit head-on by that big pickup."

I was laughing hysterically as I imagined the scene, and confessed that I probably would have reacted in the same way. Smitty, who had heard the story countless times had tears running down his cheeks.

Bill went on, "I was so shook up that I slowed down and let the carrier get a good distance from me. Hoffman didn't say anything for a couple of miles, then muttered 'After all, I thought I was going to die.' I guess that explained him screaming like a girl," Bill added and that sent Smitty and me into another bout of laughter.

As much as I was enjoying hearing the stories, I was so thankful when Smitty pulled up in front of the Pittsburgh Boys' Club, and I was able to get out of that VW that smelled like a kitchen. I also vowed that if I ever traveled to another meet with Bill, it would be one where I didn't have to make weight.

Bill did exactly what he had planned to do. He didn't really push himself and made solid lifts: 325, 280, and 370 for a 975 total. He obviously could have done more on all three lifts, but he decided to save it for the Seniors. Even if he had totaled 60 pounds more, he would have still come in second behind Barski, who didn't hold back at all. He pressed 375, snatched 320, and clean and jerked 430. Everyone who saw Barski lift that evening felt he had an excellent chance of beating Gary Gubner at the Seniors which were to be held in York in mid-June.

Now Bill was back training in earnest to get ready to defend his title. His sessions got longer and he began doing drills to improve his leaping ability. Garcy usually joined him, and they were fun to watch. They would place a stick on the top of two portable squat racks and jump over it. Then they

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would raise the stick a bit higher and continue in this manner until they failed. Both Garcy and Bill were able to clear a stick set four feet high, which impressed me greatly.

Another jumping feat that only Bill did was to leap from one platform to the other in the York Gym. They were twelve feet apart, but it wasn't so much the distance that kept others from trying this drill, it was that the platforms were over a foot off the floor. That meant that if the athlete didn't make it to the far platform cleanly, he would end up taking a nosedive into the platform. Bill was the only lifter to do these. No one else wanted to take the chance of getting hurt, including me. When no one was around I would do broad jumps next to the side of the platforms so that I was jumping from floor level to floor level. I was able to jump that distance but never had the guts to try going from platform to platform.

Tommy, Barski, and I wondered why Bill was doing these leaping drills and also including a great deal of flexibility exercises in his workouts when he had not been doing them previously. Then word leaked out: after the Seniors, he planned on trying out for the Baltimore Colts. Along with the flexibility work and leaping drills, he was also doing a good deal of running to improve his cardiorespiratory system.

Bill came to the Seniors in excellent shape, probably the best in a long time. But he hadn't bothered with making weight since the Philly Open in January and the weight that he had gained during that time was all muscle. It was never easy for him to shed unwanted weight and this time around it was extremely difficult. He made it, but it was draining. He weighed in at 198, dropping 20 pounds since the State Meet. He got off to a good start, pressing 335. That put him five pounds ahead of his rival, Bartholomew, but to everyone's surprise, Phil Grippaldi came through with a powerful 335 press as well. That set a Junior World Record and a Teenage American record. And since Phil weighed 196, technically he was in the lead.

Phil and Bob both ended up snatching 285. Bill was opening with 290. During the warm-ups, he started cramping, much like he had at the Seniors the year before. When Bill cramped, they were never small, bothersome contractions. Rather, they were of the kind that locked the muscles into a death grip. Smitty did all he could, but it was not enough. Bill missed the 290 three times. His string of Senior National wins ended at five.

Grippaldi ran into trouble on the clean and jerks. Actually, the cleans. He pulled the bar more than high enough, but on his second and third attempts, the bar simply bounced off his chest. His upper arms were so huge that they prevented him from racking the weight and he had to settle for his opener of 350. Bartholomew started with 370, then after Phil missed that weight twice, he took no more. His knees had been bothering him and he didn't want to push his luck. Winning the title was all that mattered.

Bill congratulated his friend and frequent training partner on his victory while both competitors were thinking that they were going to have to put their lifting into a higher gear because that teenager from New Jersey was coming on very strong.

A short sidebar about cramping: many lifters, including myself, cramped badly both during training and at contests. Yet none of the medical advisors who worked with weightlifters knew how to deal with them. Dr. Ziegler, Dr. Corbett, Dr. Wright, and the York doctor, Roseberry, never came up with a solution to the problem of extreme cramping. Dr. Gourgott did give me a number of drugs to take to ease my cramping, including quinine. These did help, to some degree, but they also made me feel dizzy and disoriented.

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I found the remedy for cramping when I researched a chapter on minerals for the *Strongest Shall Survive*. All an athlete had to do when he began cramping was to take a large dose of multiple mineral tablets and they would be gone. I was amazed that it was so simple and that none of the medical minds in the sport knew about the minerals. I went back and looked through the nutritional articles in *S&H*, *IronMan*, and *Lifting News*, but couldn't find one piece on the value of minerals. Hoffman never mentioned minerals in his articles, except to point out the value of iron or potassium. The only products he sold that contained any minerals were the vitamin-mineral supplement, liver-iron, and vitamin B-complex, but the amount of minerals in these was minuscule.

I learned that in order for the minerals to alleviate cramps, they had to be taken all together and in large dosages. Since the minerals are water-soluble, there is no risk of overdosing. Once I started taking multi-minerals, I never again had a problem with cramping.

After the Seniors, we didn't see Bill for a long time. Smitty stayed in touch with him and told us that he was preparing himself physically and mentally for his tryout with the Colts.

Every Olympic lifter in the country that knew about his attempt to make an NFL team was rooting for him. It had never been accomplished before. But there had never been an athlete of his caliber who had attempted to make a professional team. A goodly number did play on semi-pro teams, but none ever cracked the big leagues.

The odds against Bill making the squad in 1966 were staggering – maybe a thousand to one. For starters, he hadn't played football since he was in high school and he was now 28 years old. Bill was trying out as a running back and there were a dozen young football players, fresh out of college, vying for just two spots on the team. A couple of the rookies brought All-American credentials to the training camp.

Bill was not discouraged. This was not a stunt to gain attention. He thoroughly believed he could make the team. He knew he was stronger than any of those trying out. Add in his athleticism and the experience he had gained by elevating heavier and heavier weights over the last six years and his determination to succeed in any venture he undertook, and he was confident that he could pull it off.

The coaching staff thought otherwise. Most of them were still of the opinion that lifting weights made an athlete slower and impaired flexibility. And weightlifters were certainly not tough enough to endure the two-a-days in the heat and humidity of Maryland in July. The coaches figured he would be strong because they knew of his success in Olympic lifting. But they had no idea that he was so fast.

He survived the two-a-days. When I asked him how tough they were, he told me that every part of his body was sore after the first day and having to go out and hit and get hit twice a day was pure torture. "I felt like I had been in a car wreck" he said. "But I decided that if those other guys could handle it, then so could I." I remarked that this was the same attitude that recruits have if they want to survive boot camp in the military.

His mental toughness caught the coaches' attention, and their eyes popped open when Bill recorded the third fastest times on the 40-and 60-yard dashes. He was faster than all of the rookie running backs and he also bettered many of the veteran wide receivers and defensive backs.

Amazingly, he made it to the final cut. A few years later, when I was working for the Colts, I asked the team trainer how close Bill came to making the team. He said that the coaching staff really did want to keep him on the squad because he was such a fantastic athlete, but there were only two slots available and the experience factor won out "But," he added, "if there had been one more spot open, they would have kept him. He definitely made a big impression on the coaches."

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Just after I started writing this series on Bill, [this piece appeared](#) in the *Baltimore Sun* on 14 July, 2014, in a section “The Sun Remembers.”

“July 14, 1966: Mr. Universe is among the cuts at Colts training camp in Westminster. Bill March, an aspiring fullback who won that title in 1965, displayed many muscles but a lack of football knowledge.”

Rather fortuitous, don't you agree, that this comment about Bill would appear in the Sun at the exact time I was working on the series of articles about him, some 48 years later?

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