

Starting Strength

Driving Daddy Hoffman

by

Bill Starr

Bob Hoffman was really the heart and soul of York Barbell Club. He, almost alone, supported the sport of Olympic weightlifting in the United States for nearly fifty years. True, he had a motive: money. Whenever a York lifter excelled, it benefited his pocketbook very directly. But the fact remains that without his backing there would never have been such an influx of champions such as Grimek, Stanko, Terpak, Spellman, Terlazzo, Bradford, Davis, Berger, Vinci, Schemansky, Grippaldi, Puleo, Bednarski, Garcy, Marcy, and so many more who wore the maroon and white of the YBC. And for hundreds of others who lived vicariously through the exploits of the champion lifters, he provided another sort of experience.

Hoffman was, by any standard of measure, odd and eccentric. Some believed this was because of all the money he had accumulated, but according to his own stories and from accounts of those who knew him before he became wealthy, he was always odd and eccentric.

Despite his affluence, he did little in the way of enjoyment. He never really went on a true vacation; his only trips were to weightlifting meets or conventions to sell more products. He wore the same clothes for months on end, often not bothering to have them cleaned. His one passion, other than counting money, was dancing the polka. Every weekend when he was not at some contest too far away to get home, he could be found at the Thomasville Inn, which was owned and operated by his common-law wife Alda, dancing until closing. It was the most important part of the week to him, and he would often fly back from some exotic foreign city such as Paris or Rome to be at the Thomasville Inn.

Hoffman made many claims about himself. He was, of course, the Father of American Weightlifting, hence the nickname “Daddy Hoffman.” He actually liked being called Daddy by the lifters, for this reinforced his right to the title. I didn’t know this until I accidentally slipped and called him Daddy to his face one day. He smiled and continued babbling, so I knew I was on safe ground. He was also the greatest Chinese food eater outside of China, the World’s Healthiest Man, and had once been crowned the World’s Strongest Man. There were more, but you get the point.

Few people bothered to challenge these claims, but I found out how he got the title of the world’s strongest man. Hoffman was never very strong. In fact, he never was able to put 300 pounds over his head, much to his chagrin since nearly every lifter at the York Barbell in the early forties could clean and jerk that much: Terlazzo, Grimek, Stanko, Terpak and even Bachtell who was a lightweight. So he decided he would become a professional weightlifter and not have to be bothered with those amateurs. He set up a contest to determine who was the strongest professional in the country. Only

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one other person challenged him, a lifter from Erie, Pennsylvania. On the day of the contest, held at the York Y, a blizzard blocked all the roads. Hoffman became the strongest man in the world, professional division, by default. As time went by, the professional part was dropped, and he sucked on this title till the end of his life.

Without a doubt, the absolutely strangest claim I ever heard come out of his mouth, or anyone's mouth for that matter, happened during a health food convention in Washington, D.C. Tommy Suggs and I were putting on a lifting demonstration in the York booth when Hoffman showed up and went into one of his endless diatribes about himself, his favorite subject by far. Tommy and I stopped our lifting, for the audience was made up of older men and women who were more interested in what Hoffman had to say than watching us do something they could never possibly do. They seemed transfixed by his droning. Perhaps it was because of his age, but they hung on every word and there were plenty to hang on, believe me. He went on and on about how healthy he was, how he ran a hundred miles a week and was in the midst of a two week fast. Tommy and I looked at one another and smiled, thinking we had heard it all I before. Then he came out with the kicker. He told the assembly he had the world's most perfectly developed penis. Now Tommy and I exchanged stunned expressions and I whispered, "Did I hear him right?" Tommy's hearing wasn't all that keen and he answered softly, "I'm not sure." It just didn't seem possible that he would say such a thing to a group of older people, but our doubts were quickly resolved when he repeated himself just in case he had not been heard clearly the first time. As amazed as I was at his ridiculous statement, the reaction of the crowd was even more astounding. Not a soul blinked, frowned, smiled, or showed the slightest reaction at hearing such an absurd remark. It was as if it were totally natural for this old man to say such a thing. After all, he was the world's healthiest man, so I guess it was logical for him to have the world's most perfectly developed penis. I half expected one of them to ask him to whip it out. I'm sure he would have been more than willing to comply.

The only tangible item that Hoffman spent his money on was a new car every year. Terpak and Mike Dietz also bought new cars every year, for this was a status game among the higher echelon of the company. Terpak and Dietz always went for the fancy Cadillacs, but Hoffman preferred Lincolns. He said they had larger interiors and since he was a big man, they fit him better. For once this was true; he was indeed a big man, standing 6'4" and weighing 270 pounds. His cars also served as his office. He did have an office in his home in Dover, but didn't have one at the York Barbell. His former office had been given over to the art department. Every night when he was in town, he would go to the YBC P.O. box to get the mail. Then he would strip all the cash from the incoming orders and throw the letters in his back seat. Which, naturally, resulted in more than a few orders being lost. Periodically, Terpak, Dietz or John Terlazzo would clean out his back seat and floorboard and attempt to fill the late orders.

Hoffman was always on the move, going to conventions, weightlifting meets, AAU meetings, exhibitions, and talks to various groups. He always wanted someone to go with him, primarily to have someone to talk to for he dearly loved the sound of his own voice. One of the first lessons at the York Barbell that any new person needed to learn was that when Hoffman asked him to go alone on some trip, he should always insist on driving. For there was yet another title he could rightfully lay claim to, although he never mentioned this one: he was the world's worst driver. I was unaware of this fact until I took a drive with him to Philadelphia and it cost me a few years off my life.

He asked me to accompany him to an AAU meeting so I could cast a vote for one of his five registered clubs. He kept five so he could stack the votes for whatever he wanted passed. The clubs were all registered under the names of his various companies: York Barbell, York Foundry, Hoffman Labs, Swiss Automatic and Dover Advertising. The last being a shell company supposedly run by Alda

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which allowed her to pocket a tidy sum each month for all the ads placed in *Muscular Development* and *Strength & Health*. Of course, she never did any such thing. It was just a way to keep more money in the family and pay a few less taxes.

I was rather flattered that he had asked me to go along, but when I mentioned this to Grimek, he laughed and said gruffly, “Hell Starr, he doesn’t need your vote. He already has the whole committee in his back pocket. He just wants some company.” Which I discovered was true. But I really didn’t mind for what benefited the YBC also benefited me and my fellow lifters, and I was also curious to see what went on at the meeting. The Middle Atlantic AAU was the most powerful, in terms of weightlifting, in the country.

What everyone failed to mention was the fact that I should drive. This was not an oversight on my fellow workers part. It was all part of the initiation process. He picked me up at the office at 3:45. I knew that the meeting did not start until 7, but figured we were going to stop on the way for a leisurely meal. That would be normal behavior, but I soon learned that Hoffman was not a normal human being.

We roared out of the YBC parking lot like the devil was after us. Up Market Street we flew. Red lights had no meaning for him whatsoever. After zipping through the third one in a row, I mentioned that he was running red lights, thinking that he forgot his glasses, was preoccupied and had missed them or was color blind. It was none of the above. “After all” he replied, “they looked yellow to me.” And stepped on the gas.

Yes, in a pig’s eye, I thought, tightening my seat belt and locking one hand on the dash. Sometimes he was forced to stop because of a line of traffic in front of him. This irritated him to no end. He would grumble under his breath, rock back and forth and gun his engine. If the car in front of him didn’t move the instant the light changed, he blared his horn. On one occasion, when the car in front didn’t move quickly enough, he passed him on the right shoulder. Now I knew I was in a car with a madman.

Once we cleared York, he really let the Lincoln air out. I only checked the speedometer once; it was tickling ninety. He passed on curves, hills, anywhere his heart desired. If he ran one car off the road, he ran off half a dozen. They would shout and blare their horns, but he didn’t seem to mind.

When we finally pulled to a stop in downtown Philadelphia, my knuckles were white and my sphincter had chewed off all the buttons on the passenger seat. I was in a daze. Hoffman checked his watch, smiled and said proudly, “Made good time.”

Now I understood his insanity. It was a game to see if he could better his driving time from his last trip. At that moment I vowed to either drive home or catch a bus. We were over two hours early for the meeting. We sat around a lobby, doing nothing. I was starved, but had no idea where I was so waited it out. Surely he would feed me sometime during the night. After a rather short, uneventful meeting in which I was not even called upon to vote on anything, we left. I quickly offered to drive. Well, actually it was more in the form of begging. I told him I had never driven such a fine car and would really appreciate it if he would allow me to do so. He agreed rather readily and I gathered that breaking the time record from Philly to York wasn’t that important.

It wasn’t, because we made a stop for food. He directed me to a small carry-out, reeking of grease in South Philly. He bought us two huge cheese steaks, which we ate on the road. This, I found out, was standard procedure for any trip to Philly. Cheese steaks were cheap and you got lots of food. Right up Hoffman’s alley.

On the ride to Philly, he hadn’t talked much for he was too intent on his version of driving, but on the ride home he never shut up. It was his habit to talk about what he was currently writing about

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at the time. Unfortunately for me, he happened to be writing about problems of the digestive tract, so he went on and on about impacted bowels and the amount of feces found in the human body; none of which was helping me digest the greasy food I had just eaten.

That's when I learned to get him to talk about his younger years. As long as the subject was Hoffman, he didn't mind switching topics. Some of it was quite interesting. I asked how he got into physical culture in the first place and he said he got bored while living in western Pennsylvania, where his father was employed building dams, so he started running. At four years of age he used to run around and around a tennis court near his home. He of course exaggerated how far he ran, but this I took with a grain of salt. It was common knowledge around the YBC that you always divided any number he told you in half when it came to his exploits and doubled any number which dealt with money. His stories were certainly less offensive than his talk of excrement.

When I reported his wild driving the next day, everyone got a big laugh out of it. "Welcome to the club," Suggs said. "You'll learn to always drive when you travel with him or suffer the consequences."

Which is exactly what I did from then on. Except for one trip. He had just bought a new Lincoln and was in a hurry, so he refused to get out of the driver's seat. Reluctantly, I got in, hoping the Philly trip had been an unusual experience since we were going to a health food convention in Allentown. Hopefully, there wasn't any driving record from York to Allentown to challenge. No such luck. Once again he broke the speed limit down Market Street, ignored all the red lights, then shot across the road in front of two oncoming cars into the parking lot of a Dairy Freeze. He asked me if I wanted anything, but I said no for it was only 4 o'clock. He went in, came out carrying a hot dog, dripping with relish, mustard and catsup along with a chocolate sundae. My job was to hold the sundae while he gulped down the hot dog. A good portion of the relish, mustard and catsup made its way to his shirt and suit coat, but he made short order of the hot dog, then disposed of the sundae just as quickly. It was as if he hadn't eaten in a month.

Once he finished the sundae, he went back to driving with vengeance, the purpose being to scare the daylight completely out of me. I have to say he succeeded nicely.

He never stayed within fifteen miles of the speed limit, and on one occasion passed a semi on a long, steep hill when a car was clearly coming from the other direction. If the truck hadn't had air brakes, he would have been toast. When we stopped in front of the high school, my legs were shaking and I wondered if I was going to be able to lift anything. That's why he'd brought me along; to give a lifting demonstration. Then he was to deliver a talk on nutrition.

I didn't lift much since the audience was all older folks and couldn't tell the difference between a 200-pound press and a 300-pound effort. Hoffman took the stage and damned if he didn't surprise me again. He actually stood in front of all those people in this high school auditorium and told them that he hadn't eaten anything but two of his high protein bars a day for the past two weeks. Oh yes, he also drank lots of water to clean out his system. And ran a few hundred miles a week. He was so sincere that if I hadn't seen him gulp down all that junk food only an hour earlier I think I would have believed him. Either he was the world's greatest liar or his brain was so far gone he actually believed what he was saying.

Once again, he allowed me to drive home; it seemed going home was never as urgent as getting to where he was going. This was a new Lincoln, equipped with extremely sensitive power brakes. I had never driven any car with brakes like this and every time I stopped, I damn near sent him flying through the windshield. He would pop his head against the dash over and over. "Sorry," I mumbled, "I'm not used to these power brakes."

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He didn't say anything until after the fourth time I sent him flying forward, then he grumbled, "Well after all, Bill, I'd think you'd have the hang of it by now." For the rest of the drive, he kept both hands planted firmly on the dashboard.

Eventually, I did learn to just barely touch the brake pedal, but he still kept himself braced, just in case. I was still a bit flabbergasted by his remarks about fasting and was dying to ask him why he told such a blatant lie. But I wasn't sure how he might take the question and certainly didn't want to offend the man who was responsible for feeding me and my family. When we got back to York, he had me pull into that same Dairy Freeze where he bought another hot dog and sundae. I knew then and there that any idea of broaching the subject was out of the question. He was totally mad.

I had one adventure while driving that helped to elevate my status with him tremendously. We were coming back from a convention in St. Louis. We had left his car at Baltimore Washington International airport and I was driving it back to York on I-83. We were almost to the Mason-Dixon line when smoke started rolling out of the hood. I pulled over, got the hood open and saw there was a fire on the engine. A fire of some size. Hoffman was beside me by this time. He just stood there looking at the flames. "Well after all, I wonder how that started?"

I could have cared less how it started. What concerned me was being stranded on the highway late at night. I snatched up some grass from beside the shoulder, thinking it was green, but it was dry. When I stuffed it on the flames, they erupted even higher. Hoffman still did nothing but talk. "Why Bill, that didn't seem like a good idea."

I ran down the embankment, dug out some dirt and packed this on the fire. That did the trick. In minutes, the fire was out. I wasn't sure if the car would run, but it did and got us home safely. For the rest of the drive, all he could do was talk about how I put that fire out. "That was really smart of you Bill. You saved my nice car."

For several months after the event, whenever he saw me he would tell whoever he was talking to about how my quick action saved his nice car. He never did mention the part about me putting dry grass on the flames; and for once I was happy that he had this way of eliminating any fact that might interfere with a good story. The bad part about the episode from my standpoint was that he would also talk about it every time I was about to try an attempt on the platform when he was announcing. It did little for my concentration.

There were a few times when he preferred to drive himself, usually when he had some meeting that he didn't want Dietz or Terpak to know about. He had to do many things behind their backs because they would often try to prevent him from doing anything that utilized the companies' money, even though it was his money. On this particular trip, he was negotiating to buy a candy company and had driven by himself to look over the plant. It was located in northwestern Maryland and he was coming home on the back roads. Pennsylvania back roads were built following cow paths, and are very hazardous with lots of sharp curves, blind hills and no shoulders. Even those who used them regularly knew to drive cautiously. Not Hoffman. He kept his foot to the gas pedal anyway. On this night, he met with an unexpected obstacle – a long bed truck was stalled alongside the road.

Hoffman sent his Lincoln full-tilt into the back of the trailer and he was taken by ambulance to York County Hospital. It's really a wonder the collision didn't kill him, but for all his shortcomings, he was a sturdy S.O.B. He had tubes dangling out of him and he was barely able to stand, but when Alda came to visit him, he persuaded her to take him out of the hospital and drive him back to the site of the crash. His purpose was to change the automatic speed gauge in his car to the legal limit before the authorities checked it. He had Alda change it from sixty to forty-five, then went back to his hospital bed for three days. The scam worked. When the State Police questioned him, he told them he was only

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going the limit and if they would check his car, they would find out this was the truth.

Anyone who traveled with Hoffman can tell a tale or two about his driving, but no other individual spent more time in a car with Hoffman than Bill March, and he can tell lots of stories. Besides traveling to all the meets with Hoffman, Bill also put on as many as five exhibitions a week during the course of the year. He learned early-on that it was important to get behind the wheel and not let Hoffman drive. But even with this precaution taken care of, there could still be problems.

This is my favorite. Hoffman and March were coming home after a contest one night, traveling on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Hoffman had fallen asleep in the passenger seat. Bill had moved up behind a truck transporting a load of new cars. The cars were positioned in the truck backwards with their headlights towards Bill. All of a sudden Hoffman woke up. He sees those headlights coming directly towards him and lets out a blood-curdling scream that almost caused Bill to run off the road; he thought the old man had seen something he didn't see. Needless to add, both their hearts got a nice jolt on that night .

Traveling with Daddy Hoffman was always an adventure.

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