

Starting Strength

Observing Fifty Years of Gym Evolution (Part I) as experienced by Tommy Suggs

I was home for Christmas vacation from The University of Texas. It was 1956 and my weight training had moved from conditioning and body building to competitive Olympic lifting. My home was on the Texas Coast, Lake Jackson, and there was not an Olympic bar in the county. Houston, sixty miles away, offered my best hope for finding a place to train during my two weeks at home for the holidays. After examining the Houston yellow pages, I found one gym listed. A call to the gym revealed that they had no heavy weights and just stressed light barbell movement for toning up the muscles. In fact, it was necessary for me to explain what was meant by Olympic bar, lifting platform and squat rack. The Southwest YMCA ended up providing the equipment I needed to train. The weight room was a dungeon but it had all that was needed for me to get in a good workout.

And that was the way it was in the gym business in those days. Gyms could be classified as Key Clubs, where members chipped in to buy the equipment, shared the overhead expenses, and all carried a key, and Commercial Gyms where they were open to the public. It would be hard for younger readers who are acquainted with the mega-gyms with all the machines, free weights and cardio machines to visualize the gym of the fifties and sixties.

To help readers under fifty get a visual picture of a typical gym of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, I will describe their appearance, building- and equipment-wise, and how they were managed.

While I was a senior in high school, 1954, I heard about a gym in the nearby city of Baytown. I still remember standing outside and surveying with excitement my first gym. It was an old storefront building and it fit in the “not new or glamorous” category. Inside was small and drab. This was Otto Ziegler’s gym. Otto was a dedicated weightlifting enthusiast and his desire to have a place to train and spread the word about the many benefits of weight training was the motivation behind this establishment. His gym was Olympic and powerlifting-oriented. There was a platform, a couple of Olympic sets, squat racks, etc. The fact is that there was everything a person needed in the way of equipment to reach national levels of lifting proficiency. There is much talk about the renaissance of weightlifting during the late fifties and throughout the sixties. Those lifters and bodybuilders came out of gyms like Otto’s. Hard work and basic equipment is all it takes. Training in a gym that looks like the lobby of an expensive hotel doesn’t help one bit. Training partners with like interest and enthusiasm is almost as important as equipment.

Otto’s was a commercial gym and Otto took an active part in coaching and providing training programs. This brings up another important point about gyms of those bygone days: some gyms provided instruction and some provided only training facilities. As I describe the various gyms visited during these years, the fifties and sixties, mention will often be made regarding the instruction available and the quality of that instruction.

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In the spring of 1956 I visited Leo Murdock's gym in Austin, Texas. Leo was from New York City and had a background in wrestling and boxing in addition to his knowledge of weight training. He would provide instruction if you asked for assistance or a training routine. Of course my thought was that he couldn't possibly know as much as an advanced lifter like me. I finally broke down and asked him to write me out a press routine. This he did, and I followed it for several weeks. The routine was based upon what I now realize was a standard rep system that encompassed the idea of light, medium, and heavy training days. I made good progress but just couldn't cope with the light and medium days. Finally I got tired of hearing my training partners ask on my light day, "You mean you aren't going to do a couple more reps with that weight?" In those days if you didn't go to failure you weren't training hard enough. I returned to hard training and, as might be expected, my presses soon hit a wall.

Leo's first gym was a large old house converted into a gym. There were a few exercise weights, a squat rack and bench. Within a year or so he had built a well-equipped gym. "Well-equipped" in those days was a lifting platform, squat racks, a rack of dumbbells and barbells, incline and decline benches, lat pull, dip bars, a chinning bar, toe raise machine and leg extension-curl machine. Not much else is needed, but by today's standards it would get a failing score. Prospective trainees these days would be sure to ask, "Where are the machines." Then add, "No machines! How do you expect me to look like Mr. Universe is a month without machines?"

This is a good place to talk about the attitudes of the public toward weight training. Here, three different categories of attitudes emerge for consideration. One is the attitude toward training with weights in general. For instance, the trainer at my high school informed me that I should stop training with weights, as it would make my muscles "tight" and ill coordinated. I assured him that I would never touch another weight. That weekend I followed my usual workout in my garage gym. But there is justice in this world: years later the same trainer was hired by the Houston Oilers; at his suggestion I was hired to be their Strength Coach.

The second consideration is the public's desire to get in shape, but to not be "muscle-bound" like a Mr. America or huge like the heavyweight Olympic lifters, who are the only ones ever shown on TV. Leo sold his gym within a few years to Jack Woodson. When Leo owned it he catered to businessmen who wanted to get in shape and students who wanted to add a little muscle so they would look good at the local swimming hole, Barton Springs. In fact, he constructed a platform outside under an awning for the few lifters who wanted to do the Olympic lifts because of his concern that the heavy lifting might make a bad impression on his regular clientele. That all changed when Jack Woodson took over ownership. The Texas Athletic Club, as it was named, became known as the place to train if you wanted to get big and strong, and weak sisters really were discouraged from joining.

In those days you had to train in whatever gym was available. Very seldom did you have a choice. Remember, only one gym was listed in Houston, Texas during the fifties. I am sure there were more, but they were evidently limited in scope. They were usually owned by an overenthusiastic husband with visions of being a world beater, willing to lose money in the gym business because he wanted a place to train. In any event, the owner usually determined the type of training that would be encouraged in his gym.

The final attitude involves women. Co-ed training did not exist in any of the gyms of that era that I know of. Women were not allowed to train at the TAC. Other gyms had the same policy. One reason was that social mores didn't encourage male and female mixing in what was considered a male activity. There were a very few small exercise facilities available for women only. This usually consisted of an exercise class in a woman's home or a small building with very little equipment.

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The other disadvantage is that having the facility co-ed would mean the extra expense of having two dressing and shower areas. The gyms that did allow both men and women to train divided the training days so that women trained certain days and men trained the other. In the early seventies my gym allowed women to train Monday, Wednesday, Friday and men trained on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. I will discuss more about my gym later.

While attending the University of Texas, my training was divided between the Texas Athletic Club and the gym on campus. Finally, most of my time was spent training at the university gym where other lifters trained on the Olympic lifts and a lifting team slowly came into existence. My first training session in the UT gym was like heaven to me. It was a large room where weightlifting classes were held. Across the end of the room was a lifting platform. There were six or seven Olympic bars that were so old and used that the knurling was almost smooth. Most of them were bent. There was a wooden squat rack, a lat machine, and several chinning bars. This was a gym that would be considered sparse by today's standards, but appeared extravagant for someone who had been training on an exercise bar in a garage. A few years later a few new bars were added along with a platform that covered the whole floor, complete with a power rack made from four by fours. It was during my first visit to the UT gym in 1954 that I, in person, observed a lifter doing an Olympic lift; it was the beginning of a long journey that would take a book to describe.

When I moved to York in 1963 to train with Olympic coach Bob Hoffman at the famous York Barbell Gym, my training facilities changed little. It was a large room with two platforms complete with Olympic bars, lots of plates, a power rack, an iron staircase for squatting, a leg press, a lat machine, a rack full of dumbbells and several flat and incline benches. The York gym didn't need more equipment as it had the most important of all the ingredients necessary for becoming a champion – the X-factor. Again, the X-factor is a story itself and would take up considerable space to discuss. In brief, the X-factor is a combination of individual enthusiasm, an attitude of succeeding no matter what it takes, and a huge ego with all of the above bouncing off each other. It was individuals generating dynamic energy that spawned winners. There have been gyms since then, there are gyms now, and there will be gyms like this in the future. Serious lifters find them and their energy just adds to that which is already there. If you are a serious lifter, find one. Enough said.

It was my honor to lift on the York team and serve as managing editor of *Strength and Health* magazine. This gave me a chance to visit many gyms. Not much had changed when I spent a couple of weeks in Los Angeles training in some of the more famous gyms of that day. The only thing that changed was that some gyms were “going up town.” That is to say, the only difference between the plain vanilla and Spartan appearance of the usual gym and that of the new breed of gyms was the freshly painted walls, carpeted floor, and the same equipment, but chrome and in a spacious building. They cost more to join, but the average person felt much more comfortable in this pleasant environment. Many ordinary citizens started being concerned about their level of fitness for the first time. These new physical fitness enthusiasts were starting to make the gym business viable – almost. Making a living off a gym was, and still is, iffy.

I stayed with a lifting friend, Bobby Hise. He was a native of Los Angeles and knew all the “in places” to train. We visited and trained in many gyms but I will limit my discussion to just a few of the more famous.

The first is Joe Gold's gym. Joe Gold was the friendly and generous owner of a small gym near the beach. The gym was typical with a semi drab appearance and all the equipment available in those days. However, Joe's gym had the distinction of being *the* place to train if you were a serious

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bodybuilder. Some of the most famous West Coast physique contestants trained there on a regular basis. Dr. John Gourgott later described to me how the Mr. America and Mr. Universe contestants and winners were so regular at training that it was as if they were blue collar workers punching a time card. Vern Weaver accompanied Hise and me on our visit. Vern had won the Mr. America title a few years before and was training for the Mr. Universe contest in London. We met Joe's gym manager, Zabo, who invited us to visit him that night at home – a duplex owned by Joe Gold. We talked about training and trainees while we smoked a little grass. It was the sixties, you know. Joe came over and sat with us but did not participate in the smoking. He brought with him his very friendly white German Shepherd. Joe Gold was a typical gym owner. He made a living and not much more. He was nice and he was generous. Weaver and others told me how he let many members “slide” when they got behind on their membership dues because of unusual circumstances or just hard times. How on earth did Joe Gold turn a small California gym into a multi-million dollar business? I will use Joe's story as an example to explain how the gym business went from back street to Broadway.

When I first started reading the muscle magazines around 1951 the name “Muscle Beach” was always mentioned. It was a place where many of the greats visited to train and catch a few rays of sun. Muscle Beach was more of a place with a bodybuilding spirit than a gym. It consisted of a concrete slab located on the beach and close to the water. It had a low fence around it to separate it from the beach. It had what might be called “garages” where weights would be rolled into at night and stored. The equipment was bare minimum but the equipment is not what made Muscle Beach. Muscle Beach was a place where champions and aspiring champions could gather to enjoy the energy created when zealots of like mind gather together. It was a place where you could go to train with some of the West Coast's top physique and power trainers. It was a place to learn from watching, and usually, there was someone willing to provide a little inside information about how to train. You had the opportunity to show off your physique or strength to others, and you would always leave with visions of sugar coated barbells dancing in your head – a special place where special things happened. The X-factor. It was the same “special something” that was present in the York gym. A serious weight trainer will find these places and thrive.

Bill Pearl was one of the biggest names in bodybuilding during the sixties. He was also one of the nicest superstars that I have ever met: a real gentleman. Bill reminded me of John Grimek in this respect. While training at Bill's gym I asked if I might train with him. “Sure,” he says in a manner that put me at ease with this bodybuilding icon. A few mornings later I showed up at his gym long before sunup. Bill trained early every morning. The gym was spacious and well equipped, and it had a couple of extra amenities. There was a sauna, which most gyms sported, and a swimming pool that you could dive into when you finished sweating. There was a snack bar that served up great smoothies. As with Gold's gym and Muscle Beach, the energy was the intangible that made the gym popular. The floor was covered with large heavy duty rubber mats. While I tried to follow Bill through his work out, remember I was an Olympic lifter and not a bodybuilder, he would vacuum the rubber mats between sets with a few other trainees helping.

After the workout I asked him why he trained so early. He replied, “Now I have the entire day to myself and I don't have to worry about when I am going to get my training in. Also, my energy level is at its peak in the morning.” I never forgot these words and I always get my training in as early as possible. Bill seemed to be fairly prosperous. When I asked him about the viability of the gym business he confided that he wasn't too concerned about the income from the gym as he made a good living setting up and supervising exercise programs at one, or possibly more, large aerospace manufacturing concerns.

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Dennis Tinerino told me an amusing story about training at Pearl's gym. Another characteristic of "real" gyms in those days; they had gym rats. Gym rats were not of an animal nature, but rather trainees who were dedicated but economically challenged. They were willing to live in the gym so they could train with limited funds. They would train, shower, go out to eat, hang around the gym all day, and then sleep on an abdominal board at night. Dennis was a gym rat for a time at Pearl's gym. Dennis was dedicated but with limited funds. His dedication paid off as he eventually won the Mr. America title. Dennis said that he would sleep on the abdominal board that happened to be located under Bill's bathroom. Each morning Bill would get up and go to the bathroom and a short time later he would descend to the gym to train. When Dennis heard Bill in the bathroom, he would get up and prepare for his workout with Bill. All was fine until Bill happened to get up in the middle of the night and use the bathroom. Dennis jumped up and got dressed, ready to train. He waited. And waited. Finally he looked at the clock and found that it was several hours before the usual training time. Perhaps too much watermelon for Bill the night before. Being a gym rat wasn't an easy life.

In 1969 I entered my final National's competition that was held in Chicago that year. I had left York a few months earlier to return home to the Texas Gulf Coast for personal reasons, primarily family concerns. After lifting in the 242 pound class at the Nationals I stood on stage in the wings watching the heavyweights lift. I found myself standing next to Arnold Schwarzenegger. Arnold had been scheduled to be a guest poser. He was just making a big name for himself in America. The AAU had refused, at the last minute, to allow Arnold to pose. They said he was a professional and that his presence on the same stage with the Mr. America contestant would make them professionals. I introduced myself to Arnold and he recognized my name from *Strength and Health*. We had a short but pleasant conversation. I told him that I thought the AAU's ruling was ridiculous. Arnold said, "It's not fair. This is why the AAU will go under and Joe Weider's organization will thrive." He was right. Archaic attitudes then, archaic attitudes now.

When I returned home to Texas, I suddenly realized that there was a recession in full bloom and jobs were difficult, if not impossible, to find. I opened a gym to have an income – a meager income, I was to find out. Gyms in those days were tantamount to hard work for low wages. There may have been exceptions, but not many. I was proud of my gym, particularly how trainees were supervised and the results they experienced. The gym was spacious and had all the equipment of the day, which meant that the "machines" consisted of leg extension-curl, vertical leg press, toe raise, lat machine, pulleys and exercise bikes. Of course there was the usual assortment of dumbbells, barbells, incline/decline benches, sit-up boards, chinning and dip bars, a lifting platform with several Olympic bars, a squat rack, and power racks. We had a dry sauna and a large whirlpool. We also sold food supplements and sweat suits. Men trained Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturdays. Women trained Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. We had a babysitter for the children during the day. Without this our women's membership would have suffered immeasurably. We were open from 10:00 AM to 8:00 PM, and closed Sunday.

I was, and still am, proud of our training system. We only had a few hundred members, at most, but each progressed as if each had a personal trainer. Here is the story of how our training routine developed and a brief description of the program. Old members still stop me and say, "I have never experienced better results than when I trained at your gym." Personal trainers have taken the place of the employee that closely supervised members. Now managers spend all their time selling or hustling memberships on the phone.

This is how our personalized service evolved. I was in the process of building and equipping my gym when Bill Starr called and asked if I could come to see him in Maryland. Bill and I had the

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idea that we could make our fortune in the health food business. We had formulated a prospectus that contained details regarding estimated sales, expenses, financing needed, etc. Bill had found possible financial backing. Two recently graduated Harvard business majors were sure they could make it big in the venture capital business. We met with them and we ended up coming in second on a long list. Twenty-twenty hindsight suggests that second place was better than winning. While I was there we visited the local gym where Bill trained. I was interested in some details about how to run a gym. I knew how to get strong, but running a gym was a different animal. The manager was helpful and provided me with two items. She gave me an exercise card that I had duplicated. This saved me considerable time and energy as I had no idea about these details. The next item was the most important and one that I remember to this day when training people. She said, "You need to make sure that you supervise members, particularly beginners, closely so that they train correctly and get the results that will keep them coming back month after month."

Bill walked over to where he did power shrugs and informed me that this was where he first met Jim Moser. Jim was an Olympic lifter who did some creditable lifting on the National level. He currently manages a large gym on the island of Maui, Hawaii. He was the first to provide me with a foreshadowing of the current modus operandi of today's gyms. But first, an earlier visit to another gym made a difference.

While still the managing editor of *Strength and Health* magazine I made a trip to Florida to see Dr. Whitehead. Part of the trip involved going over to visit Al and Vera Christensen. At the time Al and Vera had been in the gym business for many years. They were able to live comfortably and raise a family from the gym business. Vera was a regular contributor to *Strength and Health* with her "To the Ladies" column. I already anticipated that someday I might open a gym, so I questioned these successful gym owners regarding many details. I was so impressed with the layout and appearance of their gym that I obtained a copy of their building plans and used them to build my gym. Vera brought my attention to the fact that women were starting to be the market of the future for gyms.

She was right. Women outnumbered men two to one for the six years my gym was in operation. Things were changing and the acceptance of weight training as a means of toning up and getting in shape was slowly becoming mainstream. Acceptance of weight training by the public was on its way to being a reality. Public acceptance needed a little more push and a couple of other changes to provide a sufficient marketing base for the gym business to evolve into big business.

First I would like to describe how I managed my gym for those who may be interested in a closer look at the operation of a gym of the seventies vintage. I have already described how the gym was equipped. Equipment is the easy part. Effectively training a large number of members is not so easy. Here is how we did it. New members were started at the first of the week only; Monday for ladies and Tuesday for men. On "beginner's day" three employees were present. One would sign up new members and the other two would supervise trainees. Proper execution of the exercise, common mistakes to avoid, the muscles exercised and how to read the card and record their reps and sets were emphasized during the first session. A review ended the first workout. The member was asked to point to where the exercise was performed when the instructor called out the name of the exercise. The exercise program was simple: sit-up, leg raise, squat, bench press, upright row, flyes and curl. New members were asked if they had a particular body area that they would like to concentrate on. An exercise for this area was included in the program and gave the beginner the feeling of an individualized routine.

The importance of how to record their reps, the weight used, the date they trained, and what they weighed before the exercise session was emphasized. If there were several new members then the

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second employee would take the new member through their paces. If it happened to be a busy day, the person signing up new members would start the last member to help keep the processes flowing. Starting new members only at the beginning of the week gave us a chance to get them familiar with the system and so that they would not need much supervision the following week when employees were busy with other beginners. The remainder of the week two employees would be on the floor during “busy time;” the time when most of the members trained. For women this was ten to twelve. For men this was four to six. Beginners were watched closely with help usually being required. This allowed one employee to watch the other trainees and offer instruction or answer questions when needed. Programs were changed every six to eight weeks and this was done on the last training day of the week. When the exercise floor began to get too crowded we would not sign up new members unless they could exercise at a time other than the busy time. This helped us provide better supervision and our regular members appreciated this policy. Taking care of our current members in this way seemed to make us special with them. Not bad for public relations.

My good friend Homer Brenham from Dallas gave me a very helpful hint before I ventured into the gym business. He had managed a successful gym in the Dallas area. He told me to have each member bring their exercise card to you, or another employee, before they started. This I did and it was invaluable for giving each member a feeling of personal service. I could look at the card and see how regular they had been training. “I see you missed last week. Everything OK? You might want to do just two sets today instead of three.” This is a sample of dialogue that took place. I could also look on the card and check their bodyweight. We had a sample diet based upon the low carbohydrate theory that had been prepared by Dr. Whitehead for the Christensen’s. Checking attendance, bodyweight and the details of their training program didn’t take but a minute or two, but provided an immeasurable degree of personal attention that members appreciated. When members came in to train they pulled their exercise cards, and when they finished they put them in another box for us to file. Filing these cards at night helped us to keep a feel for the members and their progress.

Before moving on to discuss the dynamics responsible for the catapulting of the gym business into the mainstream of contemporary life, I want to mention how much I learned from training individuals with diverse physical backgrounds. Businessmen who couldn’t do an unweighted squat, housewives that had to sit down because they were so tired from walking from the parking lot, teenage athletes and dyed in the wool power trainers all came expecting results. They got their money’s worth, but I was the winner with all that I learned – an education that only creative problem solving could provide.

Tommy Suggs Former National Champion Olympic weightlifter, national and world team coach, and editor of the legendary strength publication *Strength and Health*, Tommy’s experience at the top of the iron game spans six decades. His unique perspective on strength, power, training, and athletics is simply unavailable anywhere else. This is his first article in the fitness industry since 1969, and we are honored that he has chosen to place it with us.

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