

Starting Strength

Lee Moran

“OG” Powerlifting Powerhouse
“Better to burn out than fade away”

by
Marty Gallagher

1999 Washington Post interview with Ralph “Sonny” Barger, lifetime president and founder of the Hell’s Angels...

Somewhere, USA: Sonny, you can sure bench-press a lot. Why do you mention that in your autobiography? What is it about weightlifting that appeals to you?



Sonny Barger: *The reason I mention it is that it's an autobiography. This is a book about my life. One of the photos we chose to use is of me in prison doing weights. The amount of weight mentioned is a small amount of weight. At my best, I can press 305, but not now. My weightlifting days have sort of waned. I'm not a powerlifter. I lift weights to build my body. We had a guy in the club named Lee Moran who was a powerlifter. In 1984 he set a world record of 1,003 pounds in the squat, which has never been beaten to this day. He was about 5'8" and weighed about 350 pounds. He died the other day.*

Imagine a man standing 5 feet 8 inches, weighing 330+ pounds, tattooed, massively muscled, and a full-patch Oakland Hell’s Angel. That was Lee Moran, the first man in history to officially squat 1,000 pounds. He won the national and world championships in 1984 at age 29. He died of a massive heart attack in 1999 at age 44. Lee lived one hell of a life, running fast and hard on the edges of society. He was a proud Hell’s Angel and belonged to the most sacred of all Angel clubs: the original club, the Oakland Chapter of the Hell’s Angels. Oakland was ground zero for all things related to the biggest, baddest outlaw motorcycle club in the world.

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Nowadays the Angels are a worldwide franchise, but back in Lee's heyday the Hell's Angels were essentially a California phenomenon and Lee was a member in good standing in the epicenter of the outlaw world. Let's make no mistake about it, the Hell's Angels are not the girl scouts or civic minded members of the Rotary Club – this rough, tough outfit is made up of rough tough alpha males and Lee's membership spoke volumes about his attitude and approach towards life itself. Some have tried to gloss over Lee's association with the Angels since his premature death in 1999, and Lee, an Angel to his core, is no doubt spinning in his grave – to demonstrate his allegiance to the outlaw lifestyle one need only to check out these two photos...



Evergreen Cemetery, Oakland, California – This is the Oakland Hell's Angel's sacred section and Lee Moran's final resting place: beside Lee lie Doug "The Thug" Orr and "Mouldy Marvin" Gilbert, both featured players in Hunter Thompson's famed book, [The Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga](#). *Right*, Note that Lee's memorial photo is one of him squatting.

Being an Angel was integral to Lee's life and Lee's lifting. He lived on the edge and died early. His body weight, his habits and his take-no-prisoners attitude towards life and living no doubt contributed to his early demise. There are countless numbers of athletes, rock stars, twisted artists, writers and motorcycle outlaws that prefer to live life with gusto and verve, rather than to live, as Thomas Hobbs once described normalcy, "lives of quite desperation." Meanwhile the pirates and social misfits, the bikers and the artists, live hard and die early, c'est la vie – such is life! Better to burn out than fade away, as Neil Young romanticized in Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black), his song tribute to all his prematurely dead rocker friends. The rappers would call Lee an OG – an "Original Gangster," on account of his early tenure in the most famed of all Angel Clubs, populated with the most famed of all Hell's Angels. So let's not retroactively sanitize Lee in order to make him fit into some athletic ideal we hold sacred, and one he likely never considered or heard of, much less adhered to or cared about.

Lee Moran was a strength natural and shot to the top of the powerlifting heap like a 1000 horsepower dragster: he had the bone structure and the body (thick, squat and dense), and an ability to pack on bodyweight. His density per inch of height was incredible – he was able to weigh 300+ pounds, mostly muscle, and his squat and bench press leverages were second to none. He was a fierce competitor with an unbelievable pain tolerance and an ability to effortlessly push his body past its capacity. His powerlifting career was short, memorable, and meteoric. Lee Moran burst onto the scene as a 275-pound lifter and almost immediately began posting world record-level performances in the squat and bench press.

Back in the late 70s and early 1980s, powerlifting was pure, unspoiled and unified. Imagine a time when all lifters in this country lifted in a single federation and all powerlifters internationally also lifted in one federation. The supportive gear that so taints the current (pathetic) power scene was minimalistic in Lee's day: no bench shirts that add 50% to a person's bench ability; no 20 foot knee wraps; gear was primitive and all from one source. Gear was pitiful compared to the high-tech aides

made today. Squat suits were used, but they were basic and everyone used the same wraps and the same suit. More importantly, the judging had not yet become corrupted: squats had to be below parallel – judging squats back in the day were simple: either a squat was “unquestionably” below parallel or it was failed. If a squat was in the “grey zone,” flunk it! So simple, so effective, and so profound.

Nowadays you would think squat judging is akin to nuclear physics, as judges twist language and logic in order to justify passing the sky-high “world record all-time best” squats, routinely and with brazen impunity. My favorite justification proffered up by a “respected” modern judge was that squats of yesteryear were “insanely low”, “dangerous” and “impossible to judge.” Insane refers to legal, dangerous would infer that we were beset with some epidemic of squat injuries – which we were not – and “impossible to judge” really means clearly and obviously legal. Bench presses in Lee’s day were done shirtless, and they had to be paused and elbows had to be locked fully and completely. He lifted in puritanical times.

Lee had terrific strength genetics, and even as a skinny 165-pound high school boy, he bench pressed 345 in a preview of things to come. Lee set his first world record in 1982 when he squatted 909 to break Ernie Hackett’s 275-pound class record. He also bench pressed 600 pounds (raw, always raw) and deadlifted 700. In 1983 Lee lifted at a local meet in California and weighing 2 pounds over the 275-pound class limit, posted a 937 squat, a 600-pound bench press and a 705 deadlift; had he lost the two pounds of bodyweight this would have been a world record total in the 275 pound class. Lee competed at the Nationals for the last time as a 275-pound lifter in 1982; he dropped 20 pounds of bodyweight in seven days and took a disappointing fifth place. He resurfaced as a superheavyweight in 1983 at the California Iron Man meet and posted an huge 954-pound squat, backed up with a 628 bench press and added a 705 deadlift for a 2287 total: this was the best superheavyweight three-lift total in the world that year. At the 1984 National Championships in Dayton, Ohio, Lee was ready to win the national title and become the first man in history to officially squat 1,000 pounds.

I was at this competition coaching Mark Chaillet in the 275-pound class. Mark ended up taking second place to John Gamble, and Mark and Lee lifted in the same flight: the 275s and superheavyweights lifted together in front of 4,000 people in the packed Dayton Convention Center. I had a ringside seat to the dramatic happenings of this epic competition. Lee opened with 953 in the squat. He took the ponderous poundage down deep and three-quarters of the way erect he ran out of air and blacked out. He fell forward and the weight rolled over his head. He snapped his skull upward and cracked the back of his head on the bar. It knocked him unconscious and he fell backward. Lee had to be revived with smelling salts. He had bitten his tongue badly (nearly severing it) and his mouth filled with blood repeatedly. Asked if he wanted to quit, he said “No Fucking Way!” He repeated the 953 weight and absolutely smoked it. Way below parallel, he fired it to lockout like it weighed 135 pounds.

Lee was having trouble breathing and needed oxygen after this attempt. He suddenly began to bleed profusely from the nose: his cut tongue and nosebleed were so intense that he had to periodically take off the oxygen mask and turn it downward to drain the blood. He was a mess. His nose and mouth made it hard for him to get air and the two attempts had taxed his limited cardio system to the max. But he was determined to give 1,000 pounds a ride on his third and final attempt. I was backstage and watching this unfold, and had I been his coach I would have told him to pass on the 1000-pound squat attempt – way too many things were going wrong and his main competitor, Dave Waddington, had just “bombed out” – Dave had missed all three of his squats and was out of the competition. In order to become the national champion and secure a spot on the world championship team in November, all Lee needed to do was take a token bench press and deadlift. The only way he could screw this thing

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up was to take a crazy squat attempt on a bad day (like today) and incur some catastrophic injury and ruin everything. Taking a 1,000-pound squat at this juncture was crazy and reckless. So, naturally, Lee took it for a ride.

The 1,000 pounds was loaded as I made my way from backstage to the front of the auditorium to watch the attempt. I squatted down five feet behind the left referee and watched as the stout, gnomish-looking powerhouse chalked up and approached the barbell. He stepped under, stood erect, and stepped back to squat. The collar on the right-hand side came loose as Moran stepped back and took his left-right-left squat stance adjustment steps. The right hand collar fell to the floor followed immediately by a 25, a 45 and then in rapid-fire succession, three 100 pound plates. The fully loaded and secured 450 pounds on the left side of the barbell now fell towards the floor as the bar used Lee's 23 inch neck as a fulcrum. Moran, with cat-like reflexes, had the presence of mind to leap rearward just as the 450-pound payload hit the floor. It would have crushed his left foot. The fulcrum catapult shot a gold 100-pound plate 20 feet into the air, like an iron Frisbee, towards the left side judge. Luckily everyone scrambled out of the way: the 45-pound bar whipped with such speed that had a spotter been hit with it, death would have been instantaneous – the flying 100-pound plate was a second death disc. It was incredible that no one was killed or seriously injured and that Moran didn't have his left foot crushed. Meet announcer Tony Carpino intoned over the public address system, "WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED?!!!"

It took a full ten minutes for the bedlam to die down. It was determined that Moran could have another shot at the attempt – if he was crazy enough to want one – which he was. Lee, being a Hell's Angel with an unbelievable pain tolerance, shrugged it off. Despite being knocked unconscious and having nearly bit his tongue off on his 1st attempt, despite having a nose-bleed that would not stop and was making him dizzy and oxygen deprived, despite having crushed a 953 squat on his second attempt, despite having to chug oxygen in order to breathe, and despite having just survived a murderous wipeout with 1,000 pounds, Lee Moran roared out for a 4th attempt squat with 1,003.

He made a legal, legitimate, deep 1,003 pound squat.

He barely made it. I thought he was going to collapse again three-fourths of the way erect as he struggled to lock out the poundage. It was the triumph of will and tenacity over adversity, and the 4,000 people in the audience stood as one and gave him the ovation he deserved; it went on for a full five minutes and a Hollywood script writer could not have written a better "Rocky-like" saga – and had he written it, we would have dismissed it as too unbelievable to be taken seriously. In my mind, I knew Lee would have crushed 1000 on his second attempt had he not been knocked senseless on his opener – personally I feel he could have squatted 1,040 on this particular day, had he have had a curse-free day. Instead, Lee Moran had the most nightmarish competition imaginable and still squatted 1,000 pounds. Incredible. He went on to win the National Championships and the World Championships that November. He and Mark Chaillet roomed together – but that is a tale for another article.

I think back fondly of Lee Moran to this day: to my way of thinking Lee Moran was the epitome of the athletic rebel, the epitome of the rock-and-roll lifestyle; he was a pirate, an outlaw, and above all else a proud Hell's Angel. He was one of the greatest squat/bench performers in history.

Hey Hey, My My
Rock and roll will never die...
Better to burn out than fade away...
Hey Hey, My My!

Marty Gallagher has been a national and world champion masters powerlifter and is widely considered one of the best writers in the iron game. Since 1978 he has written over 1000 articles published in a dozen publications. He has authored more than 100 articles for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and produced 230 weekly [live online columns](#) for the Washington Post. Gallagher has coached some of the biggest names in powerlifting and witnessed some of the greatest strength feats of the last half century. If you like his style pick up a copy of his masterwork, [*The Purposeful Primitive*](#).

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