

Starting Strength

George Ernie Pickett (Pt. 11)

Crunch Time

by

Bill Starr

On Thursday morning, Smitty and I got to the Olympic Village a bit earlier than usual. We were going to visit the San Juan Basket Market, or Thieves Market, as it was called locally, and wanted to take some lifters with us. For a couple of reasons. It was the place to shop for souvenirs and we wanted to get the athletes out of the Village for a short while. Everyone was getting bored with the routine and a change would take their minds off of lifting. I especially wanted Ernie to go because he was getting very tired of spending time in the dorm. And I also wanted to take Russ and Freddie. Their sub-par performances the night before were weighing heavily on them and I thought a short excursion into the city would be a distraction from pondering over what they might have done at the competition, at least for a short time.

Not that either of them was bummed-out. Not at all. They fully understood that every athlete is going to have an off-night sooner or later. It was a shame it had to happen at the biggest event of their lives, at least so far, but both were mature enough to know that regardless of all the work and preparation, shit happens. They saw it as a learning experience, something they could use to help them in their coming years of competition.

Russ passed on our invitation, saying that he had already bought presents for his family. Grippaldi wasn't interested, nor was Dube, and Puleo declined since he was competing that night. I had mentioned the idea to Ernie the night before and he had agreed to go. Freddie and Bartholomew were also eager to see the place so they could make some purchases for family and friends.

We caught a cab to the Market and spent the next two hours wandering through the maze of stalls that spanned two football fields and buying items at one-fourth the price of what they would cost in the States. We found out that haggling was an essential part of every purchase. The noise, color, and level of excitement that permeated the teeming crowd was, indeed, extremely distracting. None of us had any thoughts about weightlifting the entire time.

Our cab was stuffed to overflowing on the return trip to the Village. After stashing our goodies in the dorm rooms, Ernie and I went to the dining hall for an early lunch. We were the only members of the US team going to the training hall that day. Smitty would be going with Puleo directly to the Insurentes Theatre, the site of the lifting.

Knowing that I wouldn't be eating a decent meal again that day, I stuffed myself with hot roast beef, gravy, mashed potatoes, and a bowl of ice cream. Ernie, as usual, ate very little: a piece of beef and a small mound of mashed potatoes with gravy. I had given up my efforts to get him to eat more and it

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was a little late for it to make any difference anyway. Plus, eating a light meal was a good idea before training, even though it was going to be a short session.

The scheduled training time for the American team was from 2-4 but since there were only a half dozen lifters using the facilities at this phase of the competition, we got there an hour early. No one cared. The short workout I put him through was the same one we both used prior to the Olympic Trials. I had found that I lifted better in a meet when I did some training two days before. Most American lifters laid off after Tuesday for a Saturday contest, but when I tried this, I had trouble getting loose and the weights felt heavy. Ernie had tried it and also liked the idea.

The workout consisted of a quick circuit: power cleans, presses off the rack, and back squats. Three sets of five for each lift, with very little rest between sets. He ended up power cleaning 315, pressing the same weight, and squatting 405. It took a total of fifteen minutes, not counting warming up and stretching afterwards, and he worked up a good sweat. With so few athletes using the training hall, we were able to grab a shuttle when we walked into the parking lot.

When we got out at the entrance to the Olympic Village, I suggested to Ernie that he get some rest and eat again before coming to the meet site. I had told him that I was going early so that I could watch part of the A-session. Two of the Canadian lifters, Aldo Roy and Pierre St. Jean, would be lifting. The Canadian team had bonded with the Americans early on. Their training time was right after ours and they always arrived when the US team was still working out. After the sessions, Ernie and I and a few others on the team would stick around to watch them work out. I was particularly interested in observing St. Jean when he snatched. He was absolutely the smoothest snatcher that I had ever seen. Fluid, precise, poetry in motion, were my thoughts as I watched him handle impressive weights in that athletic lift.

Pierre had really been on a roll in '66, but a series of injuries had forced him to lay off for the better part of a year and he was just getting back in stride once again. Aldo Roy was a very likeable individual. I thought of him as a combination of Suggs, Barski, and Ray Rigby. He was always upbeat, full of mischief, and loved the women. At one of our workouts, the Canadian team, led by Aldo, brought the Olympic skiing champion, Nancy Greene, to the training hall to meet Ernie. She was a cute, sweet, soft-spoken girl, exactly the kind Ernie liked. Aldo really laid it on about what a great lifter Ernie was and Nancy was indeed impressed with the big guy. Ernie, as Aldo and the other Canadians had hoped, was tongue-tied and blushing at all the praise.

But that meeting with her might have been one of his highlights at the Games. He was in a pleasant mood for the rest of that day, joking and telling some of his cramping stories at the dining hall.

Paul Bjarnason was the only other Canadian lifter to make the trip. Bob Santavy, the 20-year-old middleheavy sensation who had become the first 198er to total 1000 two months earlier, sustained an injury that prevented him from competing in Mexico City.

Paul, like Pierre, was introverted and left all the mischief making up to the very outgoing Aldo. The Vancouver native was currently the hottest topic in Canadian lifting, with his rapid climb to the top. A great deal was expected of him and Pierre.

Wes Woo was the coach and manager. Wes's cartoons "Cus the Coach" were regular features in *S&H* and he also provided me with lots of results and information about what was going on in Canadian Olympic lifting.

They were a laid-back group who had come to Mexico to enjoy themselves. They, of course, wanted to do their very best, but fun took precedence over performance. They all knew that none of them stood a chance of winning any medals, so they were relaxed and relished the experience. And

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they partied. A lot. Their rooms were three flights up from the American team, and the difference in atmosphere between the two residences was extreme. For the most part, the American lifters were somber, focused 100% on the task at hand. In contrast, the Canadian's quarters resembled a college frat dormitory.

As soon as you walked in, you were offered a cold beer or a joint. The Mexican beer was in a tub of ice and the joints were in a silver case on a table, next to a lighter and ash tray. And it was primo weed, Acapulco Gold. It was difficult to find on the East Coast and even more rare in Canada, but readily available in our host country. And cheap. Aldo had bought an ounce for ten bucks right in the Olympic Village. Chalk up another one for tight security.

I passed on both offers on my first visit, then realized there wasn't any reason for me to stay straight after the training and competitions were over. I didn't like the taste of the Mexican beer, but did enjoy a couple of tokes of the flavorful marijuana. Two hits was plenty. There was also music, a pile of food that they had collected at the dining hall, and a few female athletes from north of the border. This was all very hush-hush for obvious reasons. Smitty was aware of what was going on in the Canadians' living quarters and never went there. But he thoroughly enjoyed the members of the team and spent a great deal of time visiting with them at the training hall and dining hall.

Aldo turned in a solid 925 total: 292, 275, and 358. Not his best. He had pressed 297 and cleaned 375 at the Canadian Olympic Trials. Pierre did a bit better: 297, 292, and 369 for a 958 total, which placed him higher in the standings than some of the lifters in the B-session. If he had made his final attempt with 380, he would have leap-frogged up three more places.

Smitty, Ernie, and the rest of the American team had arrived to see the two Canadians take their clean and jerks and we all went backstage to congratulate them. They were pleased with their performances and happy to have had the opportunity to take part in such an exhilarating event.

Now the Americans nervously awaited the competition in the B-session. Joe Puleo, along with our two heavyweights, stood the best chance of taking home a medal. He had done 1046 at the Trials and his best lifts added up to 1069. His training had been going exceptionally well and he was known as a solid performer when the heat was on. Three of Joe's top competitors had recently lifted in the European Championships and his total was more than any of them had done at that contest. Selisky of Russia had won with 1041, Ozimek of Poland placed second with 1036, and Arnold of East Germany, was third with 1025. Belyaev of Russia had not lifted in the meet but was considered one of the favorites.

Then there was Veres, the veteran from Hungary, Zdravila of Czechoslovakia, and Jaako, the younger Kailajaryi from Finland. It was certainly going to be a battle for Joe to come away with a medal, but everyone on the American team believed he was capable of not only winning a medal, but had a shot at the gold.

But we had not figured on politics. Prior to the competition, the judges of the lighthheavy class had been warned that they had to be strict with the rules or they would be removed. This, of course, would be devastating to their future at international meets. It had a huge impact on the outcome of the contest.

After learning about this warning, Terpak did his utmost in trying to get Joe to lower his starting weight of 325. I had to say that in this particular situation I for once agreed with him, yet at the same time I fully understood that it can be very detrimental to lower a starting poundage at the beginning of a meet for fear of having it turned down by strict judges. Lifters plan what they're going to start with days and sometimes weeks in advance and they go over those numbers countless times to fix them firmly in their minds. To change at the last minute destroys all that mental preparation.

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But the manner in which Terpak was trying to persuade Joe to lower his opener was all wrong. It needs to be done with finesse so that the athlete is taking part in the decision. Terpak was using his position as the coach of the team to push him to make the change and he was doing what no coach should ever do in this situation – he was using negative language in his argument. He must have said “bomb out” and “fail to total” a dozen times. The negative words get fixed in the lifter’s mind and suddenly, there is a sense of doubt. “If the coach doesn’t believe I can make the lift, maybe he knows something I don’t,” runs through the lifter’s mind and he goes out on the platform with less confidence than he had before.

Joe held his ground and promptly fell victim to the strict judging. His opener with 325 was not smooth, but his form was perfect. No hitching or slowing down of the bar whatsoever. Two red lights. Belyaev had started with this same weight and made it, so this meant Joe had to take it again with a short amount of rest. He got two reds on his second attempt and only gave a halfhearted effort on his third attempt. Just like that, Joe’s dream of gaining a medal and the American team’s hope of taking the team title vanished.

I felt as if I had been punched in the gut and I was not alone. All the other lifters and fans were silent, not knowing just how to handle this totally unfair event. Then many got pissed off and began booing the judges. Naturally, that had no effect on them. They were just doing what they had been told to do and they were consistent. They burned several other competitors for allowing the bar to slow down, which I have to say was perhaps the most stupid rule in all of Olympic lifting. Having a bar stall on the way up does not benefit the lifter. Not by a long shot. It makes the press harder. I think the idiotic rule came from the time when the press had to go up in the same motion as the head judge’s hand. Knee kicking and excessive lay back are definitely advantages when pressing, but the bar stopping only makes it more difficult.

The Americans all stuck around to watch the rest of the competition, but we were a sour group. I took a lot of photos and studied the form of the top men and how they prepared themselves for critical lifts. It was an extremely tight battle from start to finish. After the press, Arnold was leading with 341, followed by Belyaev with 336, Ozimek, Veres, and Selitsky at 330, and Koilajarvi at 308,

In the snatch, the two Russians pulled away from the pack. Belyaev set an Olympic record with 325 and Selitsky made that weight as well. Belyaev took a shot at 330, but failed. After the snatches, Belyaev led with 660, then Selitsky at 654, Arnold with 644, Ozimek still alive with 639. Zdravila and Kailajaryi had fallen too far off the pace to be in contention for a medal.

So it came down to who had the best clean and jerk, as it always does. Arnold and Veres were successful with their openers at 385, then Arnold fell by the wayside when he missed 396 twice. Ozimek failed with that same weight, made it, then waited to see what Veres would do. The Hungarian made 402 strongly so Ozimek took the same weight to tie Veres and move ahead of him since he was lighter. He had injured his thigh just two months before the Games and this would be a tremendous test for him. He came through and gained the bronze medal.

That left the two Russians to battle it out for the gold. Both started with 396 and made it easily. Selitsky missed 407, but instead of repeating with that poundage, he jumped to 413 and made it. Now he was in the lead. All Belyaev needed was to match his opponent’s 413, but for some reason no one could understand, the Russian coach, Vorobiev, called for 418 for Belyaev’s final attempt. It didn’t make any sense. There was obviously something going on that was only known by the Russians. Belyaev did clean the weight, but had difficulty with his recovery and missed the jerk. He was visibly pissed off at his coach, shaking his fist at the Russian bear and refused to take part in the press conference. When

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a Russian official was asked why Selitsky was selected to win over his teammate, he replied, “Political reasons.”

“At least we don’t have to put up with that crap,” I thought as I joined the American team to catch a shuttle back to the Village. On the ride, Ernie asked me if I thought Joe should have lowered his starting poundage.

I replied, “I don’t think it would have made any difference. They were burning all the lifters who did a power press and letting those get by that shot the weight up. But Terpak should have gone over all that long before the contest, and not waited until Joe was finished with his warm-ups to try and get him to take a lighter weight. He did that same thing with Ski at the last Olympics and Ski said it threw his concentration completely off. It’s a damn shame Joe got screwed. If he had matched his total he made at the Trials, he would have got third and had he equaled his best lifts, he would have won. All that work down the toilet just because those judges were afraid of getting removed and not getting to go on any more all-expense paid trips again. It really pisses me off.”

Our bus was running late, so Smitty and I were able to catch it. After showering and putting on shorts and a clean t-shirt, I found that I was far too restless and angry to go to bed. And I knew that Smitty and I would start discussing the lifting that went on that day again, just like we always did. “Smitty, I’m going to that nightclub that those ladies told us about the other night. You want to come?”

He said he was too tired and that wasn’t his cup of tea, so I put on the best clothes I had brought and went searching for the night club. It wasn’t that hard to find. All I had to do was follow the sound of loud music. I paid the cashier, pushed open the door and was overwhelmed. This was not like any night club I had ever been in. It was absolutely huge, with dance floors and bars on two levels and the place was packed to the rafters. There was no place to sit at the bar, so I squeezed in next to the wall and ordered a Cuba libre. Then I turned and took in the dazzling scene in front of me. Spotlights whirled, bathing the dancers in colored beams of red, yellow, green, and blue; music pulsated, sending a wave of sound through the floor and into my body.

I had no idea what type of dance I was watching, but whatever it was they all certainly knew what they were doing. But what struck me the most was the women. They were decked out in their finest and every single one of them was drop-dead beautiful. Dark, smooth skin, fantastic bodies, and faces any model would covet. Within a few short minutes, I had all but forgotten about weightlifting and allowed myself to relax and enjoy this experience. After two more Cuba libres, I was no longer angry and was extremely relaxed. That night, my dreams were filled with those dazzling dancers. I woke up refreshed and ready for another day of competition.

Friday, Ernie and I arrived at the meet site for the battle of the middle heavyweights. Smitty would be working with Phil and I would handle Bartholomew. I had trained and lifted in enough meets with Bob that I knew his temperament quite well. All he needed from me was how many attempts there were before his warm-ups and to point out form keys for the three lifts

We had discussed his starting lifts earlier in the week. Because of the tight judging on the press, he decided to lower his intended first attempt from 336, which he had opened with at the Trials, to 325. He knew full well that he didn’t have any chance of placing and wanted to make certain he finished the contest. I knew that whatever he told Terpak that he was planning to start with, John would try to get him to lower it. So I told Bob to inform Terpak that he wanted to start with 336 and then let John persuade him to take a much lighter weight. That’s what he did and Terpak was delighted since Bob gave him no argument.

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But before the B-session started, I got to watch Paul Bjarnason compete in the A-Group. He did 275, 281 and 341 for a 898 total. Far below his best, but he was little more than a puffed-up light heavy. He had lifted as a 181er at the Canadian Trials to push St. Jean and Roy and hadn't been able to pack the weight back on. He was pleased. His goal was to finish and he had accomplished that. I really admired the attitude of those Canucks.

Bob was very relaxed, more so than any other American lifter so far, and for a rare change he wasn't favoring any injury. His opener with 325 was done with ease. However, on his second attempt with 341 he staggered forward to catch the clean and that messed up his press start. He shot it too far out front. I told him just to concentrate on his clean on his third attempt and that's what he did. The weight went up smoothly. He was capable of doing more than the 352 he did at the Trials.

I hadn't been worried about the judging for Bob's presses. His drive pushed the bar from his shoulders to lockout in one fast move. I was concerned about Grippaldi's presses, however. He had been getting away with obvious knee kicks for years. He was the golden boy and the judges were more than lenient with him; they totally ignored the infraction. A number of us in his weight class complained because whenever he got that big lead after the presses, it was impossible to make up any ground. I told the judges that they were setting him up for a fall because when he knee kicked at the international events, he would be ruled out.

Phil opened with a conservative 341, the same as he did at the Trials. Terpak's effort to get him to lower his opener didn't work – Phil simply refused to take a lesser weight. He believed he had a chance to place and would not be deterred. Sure enough, he got three red lights on his first attempt. Phil was extremely nervous and it got worse after the miss. Smitty did a marvelous job getting him settled down and focused and Phil got his second attempt passed: two whites and one red. He took 352 on his final try and received three reds for knee kick once again. He had made 378 at the Trials where friendly judges had overlooked the blatant infraction. Without a big press, Phil was out of the running for a medal because the Europeans were all accomplished snatchers and clean & jerkers. When Toth, a former world champion, failed to press 341 three times, it helped Phil's chances of at least picking up team points, but not much because this class was loaded with experienced talent. Not only were they fantastically strong, most of them looked more like top-class bodybuilders than they did weightlifters. This was especially true for the Swede, Johansson, and the Finn, Kangasniemi. Both had worked as models in their home countries and it was easy to see why. They were extremely handsome and had physiques that Greek gods would have envied.

The Russian, Talts, was the favorite by virtue of his winning the Europeans with an 1127 total. Johansson had come in second with 1091, and Kangasniemi was third with 1080. Golab, another Russian, was expected to give them a run for the money even though he hadn't lifted in the Europeans. Louis Martin, the World Champion in '66 from Jamaica and representing Great Britain, was a dark horse who had been moving some big numbers going into the Games.

Louis finished with a personal record 352. Talts opened with this same weight, missed it, made it, then failed with 369, digging an early hole for himself. Golab, another Russian and the one lifter who did not possess an outstanding physique, made 352, then 363, before meeting his match with 374. Johansson started with 363, knee kicked it for three reds, took it again and got two white lights. He, too, missed with 374. Kangasniemi showed that he was in terrific shape. He did: 363, 374, then moved away from the pack with an amazing 380. It was a new Olympic record.

I was really enjoying myself watching these talented athletes from the wings. And while I had seen this much weight clean and pressed before, I had never seen any lifter in any weight class power clean the weights like Johansson and Kangasniemi. They power cleaned 374 as if they were using 132

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pounds and the 380 was handled by the Finn in that same manner. The bar was on the platform then magically fixed on their frontal deltoids in the perfect starting position for the press. And they had the form down on the European/Garcy style press to a tee.

After the press the standings were: Kangasniemi 380, Johansson 363, Golab 363, Talts 352, Martin 352, Grippaldi and Bartholomew at 341, and the other Hungarian, Nemessanyi 330, and the older Kailajaryi 308.

The snatch was Bartholomew's weakest lift and he started off conservatively with 275, six pounds less than he opened with at the Trials. His pull was plenty strong and he slipped under it using the split style nicely. But he tore his right thumb on the pull and dropped the weight. Smitty and I frantically tried to wrap the injured thumb in the little time we had before Bob had to take his second attempt. He missed that badly. He could have just bowed out, but he was determined to make a total. On his third try, he simply forgot about the damaged thumb and made a nice lift.

Grippaldi started with 292, five pounds less than he opened with at the Trials. It fell in the slot nicely. He made 303 with lots of extra pull at the top. He called for 314, but cut his pull and missed. That miss would cost him. Martin made 308 and 319 before failing with 325.

Of the contenders, Golab opened with a success at 308, moved to 319 and made that, then missed 325. Nemessanyi did 308 and 319 with power to spare, but 330 was too much. Talts made 314, missed 330, and then came back to make it. Johansson missed his opener at 319, made it, and missed 330. Jouni Kailajaryi made his presence felt in the snatch. After only pressing 379, he opened with the same weight as the leader, 330. The fans were in an uproar as he missed his first two attempts, before making it perfectly. He got a standing ovation. Kangasniemi opened with 330 and manhandled it, then called for 341. He pulled it so high he caught it at parallel. The Finn then asked for 347, which would be a new Olympic and World record. He approached the bar quickly and pulled with a smooth, powerful move, then exploded under the weight. The Finnish delegation in the upper deck went crazy as he completed his record-breaking lift.

After the snatch Kangasniemi had all but moved out of reach with a 727 sub-total. He was followed by Johansson with 683, Golab 683, Talts 683, Martin 672, Kailajaryi 650, Nemessanyi 650, Grippaldi 644, and Bartholomew 616.

The Americans left nothing in their tanks in the clean and jerks. Both wanted to make sure they finished the meet, so started lower than they did at the Trials. Bartholomew opened with 374, made a solid clean with a shaky jerk but got three white lights. Grippaldi started with an easy 391 and Bartholomew followed him with another nice clean but a much worse jerk. It went too far out front for him to control and he had to take it again. This time the clean was rough and the jerk shot forward. Bob was not to be denied and fought the bar until he finally had it under control. It was a terrific effort and the capacity crowd roared their approval. Phil called for 407 but lost concentration and didn't finish his pull. On his final attempt he made the clean without any difficulty and ended up with a 1052 total, 33 pounds less than he made at the Trials. But nearly all of that difference was in the press and he had made a higher clean and jerk than he did at the York show. He wasn't happy with his performance, but he was satisfied that he could compete on the world stage with the best.

Golab started with a smooth 396 clean but shaky jerk. Then he missed 407 and came back to make it. Johansson had a good shot at overtaking the Russian for the bronze. He came in at 402, a strong clean and rough jerk for three white lights. He jumped to 413 to overtake Golab. He cleaned it with ease then missed the jerk. On his final try, the bar knocked him back on his butt and he had to settle for fourth place.

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Nemessanyi also opened with 402. He seemed to cut his pull and was the only lifter in the contest who did a push jerk. On the shuttle going to the training hall, I asked him a question through an interpreter, “Why do you use a push jerk rather than the split?” His reply, “I can lift more.” It made sense and reminded me how Ski answered any question about lifting: short and precise. He cleaned 413 like a toy, then shot the jerk back over his head. On his final try he made another easy clean but didn’t put enough juice in the jerk and failed. Now he had to wait to see what Kailajaryi would do. Kailajaryi started with a strong 407, then went after 418 to overtake Nemessanyi. He made a solid clean and a perfect jerk. That put him in 5th place. Talts opened with 407, made it, moved to 418 and made that, ensuring him second place. He salvaged some pride by clean and jerking 435 for a new World Record on his last attempt. Then Kailajaryi, who everyone thought had finished, called for 440. He pulled it in, but dropped to one knee and ended up dumping it.

The leader Kangasniemi opened with an easy 402 and followed with an even easier 413. His attempt with 418 was only a halfhearted effort. He knew he had enough to win. The Finnish delegation went wild, waving flags, cheering, and singing their national anthem. He had pulled the upset. As great as his lifting was that day, it was less than what he had been doing in training.

I haven’t forgotten Louis Martin – I left him for last on purpose. The most vivid memory of all of the lifting I watched through the week was of Louis doing clean and jerks. When he didn’t come on stage until nearly everyone had finished, most thought that he was injured. I knew better because I had been watching him warm-up. He was waiting to see what he needed to lift in order to medal. He called for 424, which was the highest lift of the day at that point in the competition.

I worked my way through the crowd and found a spot close to the center of the stage so that I was looking almost straight at Louis as he prepared for his lifts. He did the exact same thing on all three attempts

He would psych himself up at the far back end of the platform, crush a full block of chalk with both hands, let out a yell, then rush through the cloud of chalk, grip the bar and pull. Very dramatic. The astonished crowd watched in amazement as he cleaned the bar three times and three times drove the jerk to lockout, held it for a brief second, and let it crash to the platform. The sight of this extremely muscular black man charging through the white chalk and almost jerking the weight off the floor was something to behold. Although he failed in his quest, the crowd stood and cheered for a full five minutes. In many ways, it was the highlight of the night.

As soon as the lifting was over, Ernie and I caught a bus heading to the Olympic Village. Ernie was going to spend the night with me at the Dollero’s house. Smitty would sleep in his room at the Village. Only the three of us knew about this arrangement. We believed that if Terpak got wind of it, he would try to put a stop to it. Walking from the entrance of the Village to the dorm, Aldo Roy caught up to us and invited us to come up to their quarters. “We’re celebrating. Come join us.”

I looked at Ernie and he nodded, saying, “Sure, why the hell not.”

The Canadians were in very high spirits and it was contagious. I took a few hits from the joint being passed around and drank a bottle of beer. Ernie passed on the weed but did indulge in a beer. There were also plates of food so I grabbed a ham sandwich and wolfed it down. Ernie and I relaxed and watched the Canadians indulge in what they considered to be a hilarious prank. They would fill balloons with water and throw them out the window towards any group who might be walking along the sidewalks and grounds below them. When the water balloons exploded close to any innocent victims, they would be drenched. That resulted in loud screams and curses, which delighted our hosts tremendously. After about fifteen minutes of this, they upped the ante. They filled the balloons with chocolate milk. This made the explosions on the ground a lot more devastating.

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Ernie and I moved to a second window to watch and started laughing at the sight of the soaked athletes trying to figure out just what had happened. They tried to get a fix on the culprits but there were so many windows in that large building and so many floors, it was impossible to pinpoint just where the missiles were coming from.

Ernie hadn't yet got over being pickpocketed at the bullfight and decided this was the perfect way to get some revenge. Even though there were very few Mexicans walking the grounds of the Village, Ernie pretended that anyone with dark skin was fair game. He had a strong, accurate arm and his chocolate milk bombs were hitting within feet of his targets, spraying the innocent victims and sending them scurrying for cover. It was the most fun he had since coming south of the border. Finally, he got the pent up anger out of his system and let the Canadians go back to their innovative sport. I suggested that we take off, just in case someone did figure out where the balloons were coming from. Being hauled in by security the night before he was to lift wouldn't sit too well with Hoffman and Terpak.

So after Ernie grabbed some clothes and his dopp kit from his room, we caught the bus going up Insurentes Avenue. When we arrived at the Dollero's house and he saw where Smitty and I had been staying, he exclaimed "You guys have been living like kings! I would have loved to stay here."

I laughed. "I know you would have been better off, but Terpak would never have allowed it. It's been a long day, let's hit the rack."

Naturally, once we got in our beds, we started going over all the things that had transpired that day. Then we talked about his starting attempts for the three lifts and our schedule for tomorrow. Finally I said that we needed to stop talking or we'd be up half the night. So that's what we did and we fell asleep soon afterwards. It had been a long day.

We slept much later than usual, but by the time we got cleaned up and dressed, Victoria had our breakfast on the big table in the dining room. When Ernie saw the spread: fried eggs, hot rolls, two huge steaks, pancakes, sliced papaya, freshly-squeezed, orange juice, and best of all, in Ernie's opinion, whole milk. He was flabbergasted when I told James that Ernie would be spending the night, he went way out of his way to buy two quarts of milk for their guest.

"You eat like this every day?" he asked me in wonderment.

"Yeah, except for the milk. Eat up. She'll fix more if we want it."

While I ate more than Ernie, this was the most food he had consumed at one meal since coming to Mexico and he thoroughly enjoyed all of it, especially the milk. As we were finishing, James came in and I introduced him to Ernie. He sat down at the table and Victoria quickly brought him a cup of coffee. The reward Smitty and I had planned for James was to smuggle him in to see the heavyweight competition. So we went over the specifics. He was to wear the York Barbell t-shirt and USA cap that we gave him, and warm-ups and running shoes. He was going to be our assistant trainer and I told him where to meet us at the lifting site at exactly four o'clock, at the back entrance where the officials and athletes went in the Insurentes Theatre. James was very familiar with the building and knew exactly where I was talking about. We were all set.

Then he offered to drive us to the Olympic Village. I accepted right away. I was going to have Victoria call us a cab because I didn't want Ernie to have to walk twenty minutes to the bus stop and then have to wait anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour for the bus to arrive.

With that settled, Ernie asked James to inform Victoria that this was the best meal he had had since coming to their country. And to tell her that he would like her to come to the United States and be his cook.

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Smitty had been making that same offer every morning since we had been there but she didn't understand much English, so she didn't respond. When James informed her what Ernie had said in Spanish, she began giggling and ran into the kitchen.

We all laughed, but I do believe Ernie was dead serious.

When James dropped us off at the Olympic Village, we went straight to the dining hall. Not because we were hungry; we were stuffed, but because we wanted to make an appearance at the Village so Terpak would assume Ernie had spent the night there. Not that it mattered all that much at this point, but I was trying to avoid having him read us the riot act for not getting his permission and usurping his authority. He was just petty enough to make a big scene about it.

At our usual table sat Russ, Freddie, Bob, Puleo, and Smitty. The first thing Russ said to us was, "Hear about Grippaldi?"

"No," I replied. "Did something happen to him?"

"Yeah," Russ said. "He got laid!" and everyone began laughing.

"How in the world did that happen?" I asked. "He turns red if a female even talks to him. Where did he find a woman?"

"He didn't," Smitty chimed in. "The Canadians, or more specifically, Aldo Roy found her for him."

"A hooker?" Ernie asked.

"I like the term 'soiled dove' better than hooker," Smitty said, "but it comes to the same end, a roll in the hay." Everyone broke up again and I insisted, "Tell us what happened."

The floor now belonged to Smitty, "Well, when Aldo learned that Phil was still a virgin, he decided to do something about it. So he found a willing lady of the evening and put her in Phil's room. When he got back from lifting and found a young dark-skinned girl on his bed, he tried to get out of there. But the Canadian lifters held the door shut and Aldo told him they weren't going to let him leave until he had sex with the girl."

Smitty paused for effect and I urged him to continue, "The union was consummated," Smitty provided with a wide grin. "Our tender lad is no longer a virgin." That caused another round of giggles and laughter.

"So how did Phil take it?" Ernie inquired.

"That's the best part," interjected Russ. "When he staggered out of his room, the first thing he said was, 'Do you think this will hurt my chances in Munich?'" That was the site of next year's World Championships.

We all roared. That was vintage Grippaldi. His life revolved around Olympic lifting more so than anyone I ever met.

"Dube was really upset with the Canadians for not bringing him a hooker too," said Russ.

That caused us all to chuckle once again. After we settled down a bit, the discussion turned to the lifting of the night before. While we all agreed that Kangasniemi was absolutely fantastic and many others in the 198-lb class displayed amazing strength and technique on the presses and snatches, we were somewhat dismayed that most of them were so weak in the jerk.

I said, "Other than Talts' 435, the rest were no more than mediocre, relatively speaking. This is, after all the Olympics. Kangasniemi power cleaned three eighty like it was a toy. Golab and Johansson did the same with three seventy-four. With pulling strength like that, I would have guessed those three to clean and jerk 440 or even more."

"They're not working their jerks hard enough, or just ran out of gas," Russ concluded and we all agreed with his conclusion.

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We talked a bit longer then headed back to the dorm to get ready to head out to the lifting site. Ernie and I waited and caught the last bus to leave. There was no sense in getting there too early and just hanging around. We would arrive in time to weigh-in and to smuggle James into the Insurentes Theatre.

There were only a few other athletes in the bus. Ernie and I sat in the back. For the most part, we were silent, then he turned to me and said, "Hoffman said he'd give me two thousand dollars if I won. I want to give you half."

I shook my head, "No Ernie. I don't want any of the money. If you win, you deserve it. I've just enjoyed being along for the ride."

When we arrived at the theatre, Smitty and James were waiting for us just outside the door. Smitty had loaned James his warm-up jacket and wrapped a towel around his neck so that it covered part of his face. James was also carrying the trainer's valise. Smitty said to Ernie, "You lead. James, stay close to us and don't stop no matter what anyone says."

James nodded that he understood and we charged through the door. The security guard shouted, "Hey you!" to James, but we kept right on moving and he didn't bother to chase us since he was the only guard at the door. Another high mark for security. We could have been carrying a bomb or a dozen weapons in that trainer's valise. James quickly made himself scarce.

Ernie was one of the last contestants to weigh in. Serge Reding, the powerfully built Belgian, came in at a light 274. Zhabotinski, a hefty 358, Dube, only 315. He had lost considerable weight because of a bout of "Montezuma's Revenge." When Ernie stepped on the scale and saw that he only weighed 295, his mouth dropped open and his entire body slumped. He had lost a total of twenty pounds since leaving Baltimore to go to Denver and most of that loss came in Mexico.

I knew he was going to be lighter since he hadn't been eating much, but not to this extent. Time for damage control. While he got dressed, I said, "Ernie, it's no big deal. That's about what you weighed when you pressed the World Record in Chicago at the Y Nationals. You match that 445 tonight and you're in fine shape. And being a tad lighter is going to help you in the quick lifts. Your training on the snatch and clean and jerks has been going great. You got your snatch form and the jerk down pat now. Even if you give away a few pounds in the press, you're going to be able to make it up in the final two lifts. You're ready Ernie. Don't let your bodyweight put any negative thoughts in your head. Are you with me?"

Ernie knew I never bullshitted him and he realized what I had said was gospel. His attitude shifted from being discouraged to being primed and ready for what lay ahead. His warm-ups went well. Knowing full well that Terpak was going to insist that he start light, I informed the Head Coach that he was going to open with the same weight he did at the Trials, 424. Terpak said absolutely not, lower it to 418. That was the starting weight Ernie and I had decided on earlier in the week.

While it may seem a bit farfetched that the two Americans could come in one/two, it was indeed very realistic based on what they had done in comparison with the Giant Russian recently. At the European Championships Zhabo had done 1256. At the Olympic Trials, Ernie did 1261 and Joe 1267. It was not a pipe dream.

Before I get to the top four competitors, I want to relate what the 17-year-old West German, Rudolph Mang did. It was, in my opinion, the finest lifting in the class. At a bodyweight of 255, he pressed 391, snatched 336 for a Teenage World Record, clean and jerked 429 for another Teenage World Record, and set yet another with an 1157 total. He only missed one attempt, a 391 press, then came back, to make it.

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Word was out that the judging was going to be extra tight, so every coach started their lifters out conservatively. Tabo and Reding came in at 413 and just muscled the weights up. Dube started with 419 for a success. Ernie cleaned his opener with 419 strongly and pressed it without any hitches whatsoever. *Three reds.*

My heart sank. Our worst fears were coming true. But I tried my best not to convey my thoughts to Ernie. I told him to take his time, make a solid clean and try to drive the press to the top a bit faster. The lifters they had burned so far were all power pressers. Those that shot the bar from their shoulders to the finish were getting white lights.

Another strong clean and an even smoother press. No way to rule that out, I thought, but I was wrong. Two reds. Now Ernie had to follow himself again and he might have been able to do it if he really believed it would matter. We both knew his third attempt would be turned down regardless of how it was done. It was hopeless and there was no use in pretending. I said nothing to him. He could end it anyway he wanted to. He cleaned the weight, got the clap, then eased the bar down to the platform, waved at the crowd and walked off.

The packed house could also see what had happened and gave him a long standing ovation. Ernie decided not to give the judges the opportunity to turn him down again. He chose to eliminate himself from the competition.

I was seething with anger, "There was nothing wrong with your first two presses," I told him. "You used the same form as when you pressed 445 for a World Record at the Y Nationals, and did 457 at the Trials. You got royally screwed!"

I believe Ernie was more concerned about my reaction to the judging than he was. He had fully accepted that he had been given a raw deal. "Don't worry about it Starr. I'm fine. Go help Joe."

That's what I did, although I was of little assistance – Smitty had things well under control. After Ernie bombed, Reding took 429, missed it, then came back to make it. Zhabo made that same weight for his second attempt. Joe jumped to 435, missed the clean, then called for 440. He made that with power to spare. Zhabo finished with 440 as well. So Joe was in good position. However, the Russian was the superior snatcher. Joe dug a hole for himself by missing his opener at 319, but came back to make it before missing 330. Reding did 314 and 325 before failing with 336, but he had made up some valuable ground on Dube. Zhabo toyed with 352, then set an Olympic record with a smooth 374. He took 391 for his final attempt but didn't really give the bar much of a ride. He knew he had the gold in his pocket now.

So the battle was for the silver and Joe still held a slim five-pound lead over the Belgian. Joe opened with a safe 429, then made 446. Serge made the same weight then waited to see what the American would take for his final attempt. I was urging Terpak to have Joe take 468 to keep the pressure on Reding. Joe already was assured of third place, why not go for the silver? No way, Terpak's philosophy was when in doubt, play it safe. Joe did an easy clean and an even easier jerk with 463. Reding wasted no time in making 468 to tie Dube and take the silver on bodyweight.

Joe took the bronze, the only medal won by an American.

Thus ended a chapter in Ernie's life. A major chapter, to be sure, yet every human being has many chapters in their lives. When Ernie left the theatre that night, he was not angry, distressed, or the least bit sad. He was, in fact, relieved.

Ernie was about to enter another chapter in his life after being at the pinnacle of Olympic lifting. The next, and final, installment of the Ernie Pickett Story will allow you to learn what transpired in his journey through life. And most it will come from his widow, Cheryl. She provided me with a

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beautifully written account of their years together. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and I'm betting you will as well.

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