

Starting Strength

George Ernie Pickett (Pt. 12) The Final Chapter

by
Bill Starr

As might be expected, the controversy over whether Barski should have been selected as a member of the Olympic weightlifting team over Ernie got hot and heavy again. Ernie had failed to get his first two presses passed by the international judges. Which was solid proof to those who had backed Barski that Ernie was not the right athlete to be the number two American heavyweight. And when word got around that Barski had cleaned 500 lbs, in the York Gym while the American team was training in Mexico City it only added fuel to the fire.

But the group who had supported Barski had no way of proving that he would have performed better than Ernie on the stage at the Insurgentes Theatre. No one can. It's merely conjecture, which means the conclusion is based on incomplete information. To begin with, the rules going into the Olympic Trials had been very clear. Whoever posted the two highest totals in the heavyweight class would be selected to the team. Period. No exceptions. No extra tryouts such as those that had proven to be a travesty in 1964. Barski was well aware of this, yet failed to come to the Trials in his best condition. He fully believed that he would be selected regardless of the outcome of the meet. He wasn't ready, and he paid the price – something every athlete in every sport learns about the hard way.

While he did clean 500 according to Roman Mielec, whom I do believe, there's a world of difference between making a big lift in a gym and doing it under pressure during a competition. In my opinion, both Dube and Ernie were better competitors than Barski. Barski was a showman and did his best lifting when the pressure was off, such as his World Record 468 clean and jerk at the Nationals. He had a fat lead and could relax and focus fully on that lift. But could he have pulled it off if he absolutely needed to make it to win or place? Again, no one can say for sure. It also has to be pointed out that Ernie beat Barski head-to-head twice in '68, at the Y Nationals in Chicago and at the Trials.

Then there was the judging that has to be factored into the equation. Would Barski's style of pressing have gotten by the International judges? Maybe, maybe not. Keep in mind that Ernie pressed 419 twice and there was nothing wrong with either attempt. He used the same form he used to press 445 at the Y Nationals and 457 at the Trials, and the same form he used to place third at the Little Olympics in '67 on that very same stage in front of officials of the same level.

Ernie was ready, and he was stronger than he had been going into the Trials. His technique had greatly improved on his snatch and jerk. There's no doubt in my mind that the Soviets were not going to allow the two Americans to total. One was okay, and they selected Ernie to be the sacrificial

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lamb. Why not Dube instead of Ernie? Because the Russians had more to fear from Ernie than Joe. Joe had been sick with food poisoning, had lost weight, and wasn't having very outstanding sessions in the training hall. In contrast, Ernie was breaking PRs on many of his training lifts and was obviously peaking at the right time. Then there were the contrasting styles of pressing. Joe used the more modern European style where the bar would shoot off the shoulders to the locked out position. Ernie's style was more deliberate. He simply drove the bar off his shoulder and pressed it to arms' length, just like he had learned from Bill Andrews at the Baltimore YMCA when he first got interested in Olympic lifting. That slower motion gave the judges the chance to fail an attempt because the bar stopped. An idiotic rule, but it got the job done when the judges wanted to put an athlete out of contention.

Remember, the same thing happened to Joe Puleo. His presses were also clean, yet they eliminated him from the competition for much the same reason they did with Ernie. Joe was a threat to win a medal and had an excellent chance of winning. So politics burned Joe and Ernie, not their lack of preparation or faulty form. For the sake of argument, let's say that Barski had made the team instead of Ernie and he was primed and ready on the night of the heavyweight competition in Mexico City. Who's to know that the Russians would not have singled him out to fail just as they had with Ernie?

To answer the question I have had thrown at me a thousand times, do I think that Barski would have made a better showing at the Olympic Games than Ernie? I would like to think that he would have, but there's absolutely no way of knowing for sure. There're just too many variables to draw any conclusion.

Bob Bartholomew, Ernie, and I flew out of Mexico City the day after the heavyweight competition. Sitting together, Ernie quizzed Bob about his decision to retire from Olympic lifting. Bob explained that he was just worn out, always nursing some injury, and he was tired of taking all the drugs that had become a part of the sport – namely steroids and amphetamines. Bob told Ernie he wanted to spend more time with his family and that he had accomplished what he had set out to achieve in weightlifting. He also said that he knew, at his age, that he would never be able to progress to the point where he could challenge the likes of Toth, Talts, Golab, and Kangasniemi, or even hold off Grippaldi, Capsouras, Nootens, and the other younger lifters on the rise. He concluded by stating that he was proud of what he had achieved in the sport, but it was time to move on.

I think Bob's remarks had a profound influence on Ernie. When I asked him what his plans were for his future, he replied, "I'm going to take some time and think about that, I'm thirty-two years old and I don't recover from injuries like I did when I was younger. My day revolves around lifting, protein milkshakes, Energol several times a day, and, of course there's the steroids and trips to Doc Ziegler's place for treatments on the Isotron. I have no social life and I'd like to settle down with someone and raise a family." He paused and added, "I'm just going to have to think about it some."

"But you're not thinking about stopping lifting altogether are you?"

"Of course not. It's in my blood. I'll probably train the rest of my life, but not to see how much I can lift overhead. It'll be for my health and appearance."

Ernie showed up at the Yorktowne Hotel to celebrate Hoffman's 70th birthday on the 9th of November, and then we didn't see him again till after the holidays. When he pulled into the YBC parking lot driving a brand new Corvette and weighing thirty pounds less, I knew he had made his decision. His days of trying to be the strongest man in the world were over. He continued to come to York and train with us, although the weights he used were far from what he had handled the year before. He also continued to lift in Olympic meets, although only local ones in Baltimore. I went to watch him one time. He weighed 255 by then and was still able to power snatch 250.

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We drove to Long Island to see the Juniors and got a glimpse of the future of the heavyweight class in America. Ken Patera had all the equipment to go far in the sport, and both Ernie and I agreed that he was the most powerfully-built heavyweight we had seen in a long time. Ernie also traveled to Chicago to watch the '69 Senior Nationals at DePaul's Alumni Hall and to Columbus, Ohio, for the 1970 World Championships.

When I began working with the Baltimore Colts, Ernie came to the Security Health Club to watch us train one afternoon. Mike Curtis was one of my regulars and was very serious about his strength training. Ernie was surprised and flattered to learn that Mike knew all about his lifting history, his two World Records in the press and his setting an American record in the total. Mike raved about the strength it took to press such amazing poundages to the point where Ernie was a bit embarrassed. Here was one of the very best linebackers in all of football showering him with praise. It was something he didn't expect and certainly wasn't accustomed to. But from his demeanor and body language, I knew that this had to be one of the high points of his life.

It was during this time that Ernie found he enjoyed training people and was very good at it. He had learned just about every step of the process of getting stronger and had been around some of the sharpest minds in the field: Doc Ziegler, Bill March, Tony Garcy, Grimek, Stanko, Tornmy Suggs, and Barski. But best of all, he knew how to deal with individuals and he was patient. I knew he would be a great strength coach, and he was.

"On one occasion when he was in York, I asked him how he felt now about his disappointing showing at the Olympics. He surprised me by saying, "Starr, that was the best thing that could have happened to me. If I'd won a medal I most likely would have kept on training like I had been. Which meant I would also have to keep carrying all that extra bodyweight. I never liked being so heavy. It wasn't good for my health and I really didn't like the way I looked. Bombing out may have saved my life. I'm very happy. I feel one-hundred percent healthier and have much better self-esteem being lighter. And the ladies like the lighter version more than they did the fat one," he added with a chuckle.

He was right about the ladies. He was dating some foxes and loved being seen with them. For a time he was dating a former Miss Maryland, but it didn't last very long. Ernie was seeking a long-term deal and she was more interested in partying and sex. Most men would have been more than content with such a deal. Not Ernie. He was looking for a soul mate.

After a workout at the YBC, Ernie and I sat and talked after everyone else had left the gym. He caught me up on what he had been doing and I could tell that he had something he wanted to say to me. "What's up?" I asked him. "You look like you're about to burst."

He laughed, took a deep breath and said, "I've found what I've been looking for, that special lady." He was grinning like a mule eating briars.

His joy was contagious. I laughed and said, "That's what you say every time you meet a new female. How can you be sure this is the right one for you?"

"Because," he replied firmly, "this is the first lady I've ever met who loves me as much as I love myself."

This was one of the most insightful statements about relationships that I'd ever heard. That's when Cheryl came into Ernie's life. She fixed meals for Gail Tart and me a couple of times and we attended their wedding ceremony in September of 1971.

That was the last time I saw Ernie for a long, long time. I moved to California to become the Managing Editor for Joe Weider's magazines, then for the next two decades moved around the country, staying

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with friends in California, Hawaii, Texas, and North Carolina, with frequent visits to my mother in Forest Hill, Maryland.

It wasn't until I returned to Harford County for good in the fall of '89 that I made inquiries about Ernie. The word I got was that he was living in Germany, but no one had any details other than that. When one of my Olympic lifters from Johns Hopkins, David Stein, entered a meet at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland, I went to see him compete and spotted my old friend in the back row. He caught me up on what had transpired all those years that we hadn't seen one another, and said he was about to move to Hawaii within the next year. He and Cheryl worked for the government, which meant moving frequently. He was still weight training and had been doing a lot of martial arts. We talked about mutual friends and he informed me that he attended any Olympic meet that was close to home, in Lisbon, Maryland.

Later on that year, 1997, David told me about another meet that was being held at Mickey Pearson's Gym not far from Lisbon. I went since I was sure Ernie would be there. He was, and after we talked for a while, he invited me to go see the house he had built. I agreed and we drove over to his property. On the way, he detoured a short way so he could show me an empty house with a yard filled with weeds and trash. I asked him what was so special about a run-down house and he replied gleefully, "The owner was an old man who kept a half-dozen dogs, maybe more. When he died, no one knew about it for several weeks until the mailman noticed a bad odor and that his mail was piling up. When the police showed up, they discovered that the dogs had completely eaten the man."

"Except for hair and bone," he added with a grin.

Then he looked at me to see my reaction. I just shook my head. I had forgotten about his dry, dark humor. Some things never change, I thought. For the rest of the drive, he kept telling me not to expect much concerning the house. He didn't know anything about building a house, but had done the best he could. The way he was talking, I fully expected to find a dwelling that would resemble something out in the sticks. Maybe a rough-hewn cabin of logs or stone.

When he pulled off to the side of the road and stopped, he pointed up a sloping hillside and said, "My humble dwelling."

I was stunned. Perched atop the hill was a magnificent house that would fit in nicely on any southern plantation. Tara in Maryland. But I should not have been surprised that he could create such a thing of beauty. He was a superb craftsman. He gave me a tour of the house and showed me a miniature cannon he had made from bronze. It was a piece of art, about eight inches in length and maybe six inches high. Cheryl wasn't home, but his son Ryan was, and I got to meet him – a smaller version of Ernie, which wasn't surprising since Cheryl was petite.

On the way back to the meet, Ernie told me about their plans to move to Honolulu. They would rent the house. He knew I had lived in Hawaii and asked me many questions about Oahu. He was most concerned about drugs and crime on the island and I assured him that it was a lot less than in any mainland city. Mickey had prepared a picnic for after the meet and Smitty had showed up in our absence. Ernie, Smitty, and I spent the rest of the afternoon and evening sipping sweet iced tea and reminiscing about the glory days of the York Barbell and especially about that most eventful trip to the Olympics.

That was the last time I saw Ernie.

I want to relate a few stories that haven't been used in this series or in *Defying Gravity* about the big lug. These are the stories that are always told when one or more lifters get together and start relating tales of the sixties. They're classic Ernie.

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Ernie, Bill St, John, and I had just walked back to our hotel after watching Bill eat at a cafe just down the street. We were in Los Angeles to take part in the Senior National Powerlifting Meet. Ernie and I were going to lift while Bill would display his amazing physique (his choice of words) in the bodybuilding contest to be held after the weightlifting competition. The events were held in the Embassy Auditorium right across from our hotel. Jim Witt came out of the hotel, saw us, and immediately walked over to us. Jim and I go way back to when we both started Olympic lifting at the Dallas YMCA. I was 21, Jim was 42. We chatted about the upcoming competition, and then Jim asked Ernie if he had ever been in a scrap. Jim was a brawler and liked to tell stories of fights he was in and he also enjoyed hearing about other people's battles.

Sheepishly, Ernie confessed that he had never been in an honest to goodness fight. For good reason, I thought. Who in their right mind would tangle with the likes of this behemoth? "But," Ernie quickly added to save face, "I almost got into a fight with a guy on the highway," and proceeded to tell this confrontation.

Ernie was driving his girlfriend's Triumph sports car on one of the twisting back roads near where he was living in Sykesville, Maryland. He was minding his own business, enjoying the landscape when a car shot around him and darted right in front of him, causing Ernie to hit the brakes to keep from rear-ending the reckless fool. Ernie leaned on his horn to let the idiot know that he disapproved of his behavior, and to his dismay the errant driver stuck his hand out the car's window and gave Ernie the bird.

Well, that was too much even for the mild-mannered strongman. He hit the accelerator, zipped past the bothersome car, cut in front of it, and slowed down, preventing the car from getting past him. Then he came to a complete halt and prepared himself to go teach that jerk some manners. But when he reached down and pulled the hand brake, his abs cramped. When Ernie cramped, they were always strong enough to set off the Richter scale and this was a doozy. Of course, Ernie had lots of experience in dealing with cramps. Normally, he would have leaned back instantly, or better yet, stood up and leaned back to keep the cramp from escalating into a full-on spasm but in this case neither of these options was possible. There was no way for him to lean back in the tight-fitting car and certainly no way to get out of the car. He was wedged in with his forehead against the steering wheel, gasping for air and sweating bullets. All he could do was wait until the spasms ran their course.

Meanwhile, there was no movement from the car he was blocking for several minutes. He guessed that the driver was waiting to see him exit the Triumph before he got out of his car. He could always back up, turn around and flee the scene should whoever got out of the car happen to be an imposing creature. After a few minutes passed, the driver did get out and walked cautiously up to the driver's side of the sports car. When he saw the sad state that Ernie was in, he was suddenly filled with courage.

Ernie described him as a tall, skinny young man around twenty years old wearing a headband around his long, dirty hair. He had on bell-bottom jeans and a denim jacket with a peace sign on it over a tie-dyed shirt, and Ernie figured that he was high from the way he was driving.

The young hippie challenged Ernie to step out of the car and settle this affair man-to-man. The way Ernie was scrunched up there was no way for him to determine just how huge Ernie was. When Ernie didn't respond, the hippie started calling him every foul name he could think of, including a few ugly remarks about Ernie's heritage and the occupation of his mother. Finally, he ended his tirade with statements about Ernie being a coward and a sissy, gave him another finger, got back in his car, and took off like a jet.

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Almost twenty minutes passed before Ernie was able to sit up and drive and he was so depleted from the episode that he could barely walk up the steps to his apartment.

Then, after a long pause, Ernie added, “I guess I was lucky. Had my car window been down, he would have most likely pounded my face to pulp.”

I was in hysterics. Not only could I picture the encounter vividly, I was also wondering why in the world he would tell such an unflattering story on himself. Had it been anyone else, he would have either never revealed what transpired on the highway, or altered the events so that he wouldn't look like a fool.

Jim blinked a couple of times, then without saying a word, turned and walked away. When St. John stopped laughing, he asked Ernie, “Why did you tell such a self-disparaging story?”

“I didn't mean to,” Ernie explained. “It was the only story I could come up with about being in a fight.” Then he considered the matter for another minute before saying, “Probably better if I hadn't said anything.”

That sent St. John and me into another fit of laughter.

It didn't bother Ernie in the least what Jim thought of him. He believed it was a good story. When we got up to his room, he spread out on the bed and said, “I have another one about cramping that was the most embarrassing moment in my entire adult life. You guys want to hear it?”

Silly question. If Ernie wanted to relate demeaning stories about himself, we were more than eager to listen to them. It went like this.

Ernie and Cheryl were living in an apartment complex at the time. Ernie was just coming home from training at the Holiday Health Club in Baltimore where he was working part-time as an instructor. In the lobby, he encountered his downstairs neighbors. They weren't exactly friends, but were friendly with one another whenever they crossed paths. The neighbors had just bought a new dining room table and matching chairs and wanted to show it to Ernie. Since it was on the way to his apartment and he didn't want to offend them, he agreed to take a look at the set, Ernie was impressed. He understood fine craftsmanship and both the table and eight chairs were magnificently made. Ernie voiced his appreciation of the workmanship and design and his neighbors beamed in delight.

That would have been the end of the visit except that the wife began insisting that Ernie sit on one of the chairs to feel how comfortable they were. He objected. He was wearing his York sweats and was sweaty and grubby from his workout. But she wouldn't let him leave. She was adamant about him sitting on a chair even though Ernie protested, saying that they didn't look sturdy enough to hold his weight.

Finally, he gave in and cautiously eased down on the high-backed piece of art. And then his abs cramped. Without thinking, Ernie leaned back to stop the cramping, and the back of the chair snapped off like a twig. He was, to put it mildly, mortified. He apologized profusely, but the damage was done so he made a quick departure. He said that he thought about one of Smitty's favorite expressions, “I could have dangled my legs off of a dime” because it certainly fit the occasion.

By the time he finished, St. John and I were in stitches. When I finally got myself under some degree of control I said “I have a good story about Ernie cramping too, but he'll never tell it.”

“Then you tell it,” a still-chuckling St. John said to me.

“It was at the sixty-eight Y Nationals in Chicago. Ernie had the best contest in his career up to that point. He made nine attempts and set a World Record in the press. No one had expected such a performance from him and never thought he could outshine Barski. After the meet, he was the toast of the town. Fans, officials, and lifters crowded around him, wanting his autograph, asking him about his training and what he planned for the future.

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“This was new territory for Ernie and he ate it up. He got so caught up in all the praise and adulation that he forgot to do what he always did right after a contest – take some muscle relaxants to prevent cramps. Tommy Suggs and I had stayed with Ernie. We were going to share a cab to the Sheridan Hotel where we were staying. Bob Gajda had promoted the meet and arranged for a banquet for all the lifters and officials in a large hall at the hotel. The three of us were about to leave when Ernie started cramping. Not just his abs this time, but all over: hands, feet, calves, arms, back, quads and hamstrings. And the cramps hit him in a rush.

“Doctor Suggs grabbed a bottle of Soma out of his gym bag and handed Ernie a fistful of the muscle relaxants. Ernie gulped them down with some water, but it was too late, within a matter of minutes, he was immobilized. He couldn’t lift his arms or walk normally. Tommy said, ‘We need to get him to the hotel where he can lay down or soak in a hot tub of water.’ I agreed. I knew what Ernie was going through because it had also happened to me, so Tommy and I began helping Ernie walk to the door of the gym. When we got him there, we found that he was so rigid from the cramps that he couldn’t turn sideways enough to get through the door. His six-foot-five, three hundred pound body was a stiff and unyielding as a giant sequoia. It took the two of us to bend him enough to finally get him through the doorway and another fifteen minutes to get him down the stairs. And another ten minutes to move him out of the Y and into a cab.

“Getting him in the cab was another major problem, but by then the muscle relaxants had kicked in some so after some trial and error, we managed to push and pull him into the back seat of the cab. At the hotel, we were able to extract him from the cab a bit easier than getting him in it and began shuffling him across the lobby of the hotel, aiming for the elevators. We were halfway to our destination when Chuck Nootens stuck his head out of the doorway of the hall where the banquet was being held and shouted, ‘Hey. You guys! Get in here! The food isn’t going to last much longer!’

“With that, Tommy and I left Ernie standing in the middle of the lobby and scurried off to take part in the celebration. Ernie stood there, not believing that we had stranded him, and then he yelled, ‘You guys come back here! You can’t leave me like this!’ Tommy had given Ernie another large dose of Soma on the cab ride. He said over his shoulder, ‘You’ll be fine. The muscle relaxants are kicking in’ and kept walking.

“The last thing we heard from Ernie was ‘You bastards!’” I started laughing and St. John asked Ernie, “Were you alright?”

Ernie was chuckling himself, and he told St. John, “Yeah, the drugs worked and I was able to move again after a couple of minutes. But I’ll never forget how my good friends abandoned me in my time of crisis.”

That got us all laughing again and I said, “It was a rotten thing to do, but you have to remember that Tommy and I were still high from the speed and excitement of the contest. And,” I said to Ernie, “that story wins you the award for having the most severe cramping episode in the history of Olympic lifting.”

“I’d rather get a trophy,” Ernie declared in his deadpan manner.

I’ll conclude with a story that puts Ernie in a good light. There are several accounts of this event, but I’m going to use the version that Bill St. John tells whenever he gets the chance.

Right after the Olympic Trials in ‘68, the team and alternates stayed at the Yorktowne Hotel and trained at the YBC. Since Ernie only lived an hour away, he was allowed to remain in Baltimore and drive up to York for the workouts.

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Knowing that his teammate, Joe Dube, was into – how should I say this kindly – “kinky” sex of any sort (someone once commented that Joe would have sex with anything that wouldn’t pull a knife on him), Ernie invited him to go to Baltimore to experience The Block. The notorious district was perhaps the best known assembly of nudie bars, strip clubs, and other sexual delights on the East Coast. Whatever your pleasure, the Block could accommodate you.

They were in Ernie’s VW. How those two Hulks fit inside that little car is still a mystery to me, but they figured it out somehow. Ernie cruised up and down Pratt and Lombard Streets looking for a parking spot. Parking was always a major problem in that part of the city, because besides the attractions on The Block there was also Little Italy close by, and several popular restaurants. It was always busy, but since this was a Saturday night, every available parking space was filled.

Joe was getting anxious. He wanted to get inside the most famous establishment on The Block, Belle Starr’s place, and to visit the porn shops so he could add to his collection. Ernie too was eager to find a place to park and he didn’t care to have to walk a long distance. Heavyweights aren’t made for walking.

Ernie spotted a space, but it was way too small for even the VW to fit into. He stopped next to the empty space, looked it over, and said, “This’ll do. Get out Joe.”

Joe thought he was joking, “There’s no way you’re gonna fit in there.”

“Just get out,” Ernie told him again, so he did. Then Ernie turned off the engine, got out, walked around to the passenger side of the car, reached down, grabbed the front and back fenders and pulled the VW into the slot as if it was no more than a Tonka toy. “Damn!” Joe said in amazement, and Ernie just grinned in response.

That quickly solved their parking problem, but when they started in Belle Starr’s club, the two burly bouncers at the door stopped them and the larger of the two said, “We can’t let you guys go in.”

Ernie was shocked. “I’ve been in here before. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that you two are way too big for us to handle. If there’s any trouble we’d have to call the cops, and we don’t like doing that.”

The smaller bouncer added, “We saw what you did with that car. We don’t want any part of either of you two. You’re just too big.”

Now Ernie understood. Having two men as huge as he and Joe would prompt security to be wary, so he explained their situation, that they were members of the U.S. Olympic team and all they planned to do was have a couple of drinks and watch the shows. The last thing they wanted was any trouble. Any trouble with the law and they would be removed from the team.

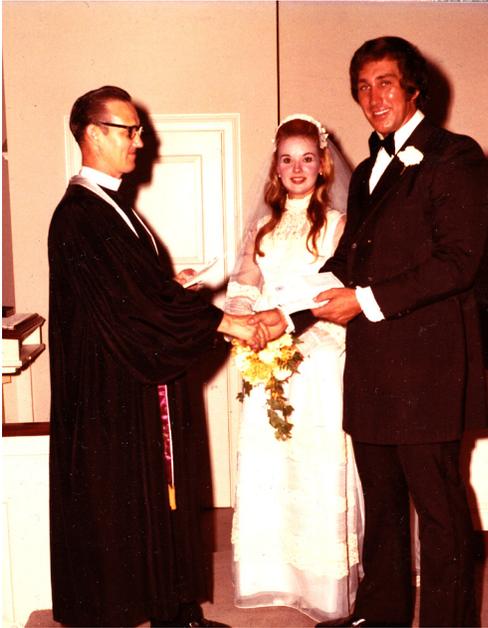
That changed things immediately. The bouncers became their buddies and invited them inside without paying the cover charge. But Ernie’s pulling the VW into that narrow space became part of a legend on The Block for many years. And over time more people knew about his feat of strength than of his two World Records in Olympic lifting. So it goes.

When I started getting close to finishing this series on Ernie, I realized that there were huge gaps in what I knew about his life from 1971 to the present. I contacted Cheryl, who was living in Ormond Beach, Florida. Months slipped by and there was no response from Cheryl. Then I got a fax from her. She had moved back to Maryland and by some miracle, my letter had been forwarded to her after three months.

I wrote her at her new address and explained just what I wanted – a time-line from when she and Ernie met to the present. I can’t tell you how many times over the years I have made this request to

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someone to help me fatten up a story, and what I usually receive back a few lines or maybe a paragraph of two with a bit of scanty information. Not this time. What she sent me was exactly what I wanted, a fitting ending to this story. She suggested that I edit and rewrite any parts that were not clear and I informed her that I didn't plan on changing a single word. It's beautifully written and full of personal feelings. Absolutely perfect.



I met Ernie in September 1969 at Holiday Health Club. He was working at Continental Can Company as a tool and die maker during the day and at Holiday Health Club as a weight lifting instructor in the evenings and on weekends. I remember the first time I saw him he was walking down the stairs of the lobby. I placed him in the typical “tall, dark, handsome” category. Of course I was attracted to that type, but also avoided that type. The second time I saw him, he was lying on a chaise lounge by the indoor pool with a beautiful brunette in a tiny gold bikini. I immediately thought my first instincts were correct, stay away! He must have noticed me by the pool as well, as he began to talk to me shortly after that. I, of course, was very cool towards him. When he asked me out, I asked about the brunette who he was with a few weeks ago. He answered, “I stopped seeing her. I told her I met a really nice girl, that I want to get to know and be with.” I

thought he was lying. But I later learned that Ernie didn't lie. He was the most honest, kind, humble man that I had ever met.

We were married on September fourth 1971 at Halethorpe Methodist Church in Halethorpe, Maryland.

For the next 8 years we worked hard, played hard, and traveled a lot. He was into Harleys then and during our early years he owned three. We would take long rides throughout Howard County, hiding from my mother, as he had told her that he wouldn't ride with me on the back. We were best friends and did everything together. It was like one long, fun date. We were both interested in remodeling, design and construction. We had purchased our first house, a 1920s colonial home, one month before we were married and lived in a construction site for at least three years. After five years of hammering and banging, we were done – everything the way we wanted. And Ernie got antsy, he decided he needed another project and more land. In 1976, we sold our beloved colonial and didn't look back.

We bought an acre lot in a new development in Ellicott City. With the profit from the sale of first home, and house plans we created with a custom home designer, we made an appointment with our local savings and loan. I remember on the drive home, after securing the loan approval which appointed Ernie the General Contractor/builder of our second home, Ernie looked at me and said, “I don't know how to build a house!” We laughed all the way home. Our second home was a special home for us, not only did we design and build it ourselves, we lived there three years before having our son, Ryan, on 13 June, 1979. Ernie was so happy and proud. The first thing he said to me was, “I didn't know if I could make one.” We lived in that house for seven more years. During that time, Ernie

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continued to train in the gym he designed himself. He was interested Model T Fords. He bought two and worked on them and searched car scraps for missing parts. He would take Ryan and neighborhood kids for rides on Route 99 to The Snowball Stand. He was also a Civil War enthusiast. We would walk the battlefields at Gettysburg, where he would photograph and take notes on the cannons he would see, then buy blocks of brass and wood and use his tool and die skills to replicate the cannons from scratch.

Ernie always needed a project and in 1985, he found a five acre lot in Lisbon, MD. His interest in the Civil War era made him always want a Southern antebellum home. After researching numerous magazines he found the house of his dreams, wrote the architect, purchased the house plans, and started on a new adventure. Only this time we had a child, which would limit our building endeavors. He hired a General Contractor, who put the house under roof, installed the electric and plumbing, and did the dry wall. Ernie and I would then finish the inside. I remember I took two weeks leave to sand and stain all the base boards and doors. I worked from 8am to 5pm, when Ernie would return home from work after picking up Ryan from day care.

We continued to take turns walking on the house while the other would play with Ryan. We always took weekends off so the three of us could be together. Friday night pizza and movie rental was Ernie's favorite family time. Family was very important to him.

During the next five years, we finished building and decorating our home. Ernie bought a tractor and enjoyed mowing the five acres. In addition he built and painted a white fence around the property, to include digging the post holes by hand. He also built Ryan a fort, which I believe Ernie spent more time in than Ryan did. He never stopped his projects.

By the late 1980s, Continental Can began to restructure the company. Although Ernie never complained, I could tell the job he once enjoyed was going to become drudgery. During that same period, I was offered a job in Germany and much to our surprise, the organization desperately needed a tool and die maker. It was so uncanny that I thought someone was playing a joke on us. But no joke, we were both going to work in Germany.

He retired from Continental Can Company in 1991, a very happy day for him. We were excited and scared of this new adventure. During his time in Germany, Ernie coached weightlifting to a lot of his friends and co-workers. He was also recognized for his part in renovating a weightlifting gym at a near by Air Force Base.

Ernie loved Volksmarching, but more than the 6.2 mile walk, he loved the little prize you received at the end of the walk, which was given out during a small ceremony. There was bratwurst, cake, cold drinks and a German band playing when you received your reward. He loved German music. He would diligently research where, when, what trinket and what refreshments were provided before we would set out to participate in the perfect walking experience. We went twice a week for four years.

Ernie was also the ultimate American tourist. We traveled to France, England, Italy, Switzerland, Poland, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and all over Germany. He was always first one on and off the bus, with cameras around his neck and bags full of gifts. He loved bus trips – no worries. Hotel, meals and a tour guide made him a happy traveler.

We were in Germany from 1991 through 1995. Although we were offered the chance to stay longer we returned to Maryland so Ryan could graduate from an American school. We lived in Lisbon three years when an opportunity for me to work in Hawaii arose. We lived there for a year. Ernie loved the warm weather, the ocean and all the tourist attractions Waikiki offered. He did not work while there and bought a brand new Harley Davidson to explore new and exciting places during the week

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and would show me his discoveries during bike rides on the weekends. We were there from 1998 through 1999. We returned to Maryland and I worked another year.

Ernie wanted us to spend more time together, so I retired in 2000. We lived in our house in Lisbon three more years. During that time the upkeep of the house and 5 acre property became somewhat overwhelming for Ernie, plus the cold weather was really bothering his breathing, as he suffered from asthma in his younger years. We had two major snow storms during that time, which made us both decide to head south.

We visited different areas for two years and decided to settle in Ormond Beach, Florida, right below St. Augustine. Ernie liked the area as it had a small town feel. The houses and lots were large and our house was 3 miles from beach. We were also close enough to Maryland that we could drive home in one day if needed. Ernie, always wanting a project, did small renovations to the house and landscaped the property.

Everything was great for a while. I started to notice that he wasn't remembering his new address or phone number the way I was. The fact that he didn't want to drive or venture out on his own should have been a red flag too, but it wasn't. He still enjoyed mowing the lawn, swimming in the pool and visiting the beach. His favorite past time was eating out in local restaurants. I'm still not sure if I should take that as a personal insult to my cooking or not. He no longer had crazy ideas for new projects or felt the need to explore new places. He was happy being at home with me and playing with our two dogs. He was always excited when our son would visit and wanted to show him a good time. He liked to reminisce and was happy when Ryan would help out. Neither Ryan nor I would admit that something was wrong. I regularly took Ernie to doctor appointments for eight years.

It wasn't until the last two years that the word "Alzheimer's" was mentioned. I wouldn't let my mind go there, as I really thought he would recover. But during his last year, he regularly got more symptoms; mood swings, wandering at night, fretting, agitation, and at times, not knowing me or Ryan. I was his care giver and wanted Ernie to remain at home forever if possible. Although he had lost weight, he was still a 6'5" man that was getting harder for me to maneuver when he didn't recognize me. I had a set routine for him to follow, as he was more comfortable with structure.

I was fixing his lunch one day. He was seated at the dining room table eating and I went to the kitchen to get him something to drink. While I had my back turned for no more than ten seconds, he fell and broke his hip. I still don't know how he got out of his chair that quickly or what he was trying to do. He was taken to the hospital emergency room by ambulance. While he was in the hospital bed waiting for his diagnosis, I was sitting in a chair beside him, he looked at me and said, "I'm sorry hon." I said, "Don't be sorry. You didn't do anything wrong, you just fell." He answered, "Oh okay, I'm glad."

That was the last time he spoke coherently to me. He was successfully operated on for his broken hip, but passed away three days later of heart failure. We were together for 40 years, not perfect, but close enough.

A Eulogy

On a Saturday afternoon, Ernie, Chuck Nootens, Sam Fielder, Kenny Moore, and I were lounging in the living room of my house on North George Street. We had all trained at the YBC earlier in the day and were discussing our various workouts and talking about ways to improve our lifts and technique. Then the subject of heredity entered the conversation, and each of us named the various ethnic groups that made up our bloodlines, or as much as we knew about our family histories. None had had their family trees charted.

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Ernie was stretched out on my extra-long couch. When it came his turn to contribute, he remained silent, so I prodded him, “What about you, Ernie?”

“Ah,” he grumbled. “I don’t pay any attention to that stuff . I’m just country.”

Ernie had summed up his genealogy in one word. He was country to the core. Ernie was an easy-going, unpretentious, very intelligent person, who was also a devoted husband and father, a skilled artesian, honest to a fault, kind, and generous. And he possessed a quirky sense of humor with the rare ability to not take himself too seriously, He was able to laugh at his own foibles and foul-ups along with everyone else. If you wanted his opinion or his thoughts on something, he gave it to you straight from the hip. There was never any hedging or sugar coating – with Ernie, what you saw was what you got.

It’s a given that Ernie was one of the strongest athletes to ever step on a weightlifting platform. But more importantly in the game of life, he was an exceptional human being. While I can’t speak for anyone else, I can state unequivocally that the time I got to spend with him greatly enriched my life. It was an honor to be his friend.

Rest in peace George Ernie Pickett. You did good.

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