

Starting Strength

George Ernie Pickett (Pt. 4) The Great Controversy

by
Bill Starr

After Bednarski's brilliant, thrilling performance at the '68 Senior Nationals held in York, where he pressed 456½ and clean and jerked 486½ for two World records, the only question for every Olympic lifter and fan of the sport in the United States was, who was going to be the second heavyweight on the Olympic Team that would compete in Mexico City?

Most were of the opinion that Joe Dube was the man to grab that second spot. While he didn't have a very good showing at the Seniors, part of that was due to his injuring a knee just prior to the contest. But with two and a half months to recover, those that knew Joe felt sure he would be ready at the Olympic Trials.

What about Pickett? He, like Barski, was having a sensational year. Up until he tore his triceps while attempting to press 450 at the Regional II Championships at Gonzaga High School in Washington D.C. on May 4th. That injury kept him from lifting in the Seniors. Could he get himself ready in time to battle Dube? Not many thought so. I was the exception. Ernie had been getting treatments from Doc Ziegler on the Isotron, and Smitty used the ultrasound machine on his injured arm whenever he trained at the YBC. The injury healed quickly. So much so that Ernie was tempted to enter the Seniors. He was talked out of doing that by all of the York lifters and reinforced by Terpak, Stanko, and Grimek.

After a brief break following the Seniors, the York Gym got super busy. I thought the Saturday training sessions had been hectic prior to the Seniors in past years, but this was an Olympic year and a different kettle of fish. The ultimate goal for every weightlifter is to be a part of an Olympic team. Or, at the very least, be able to qualify to take part in the contest from which a team is selected.

That summer, Ernie and I spent a great deal of time together. We traveled to Western Maryland to put on an exhibition at Frostbury State College in early July, then a week later we competed in a power meet in Vineland, NJ. We had the same philosophy about taking part in power meets during the off-season of Olympic lifting. It allowed us to go heavy on lifts that we seldom ever did in the gym: bench press and deadlift.

While Ernie went heavy on his deadlifts every so often, I never did them in training. When Ernie asked me why, I explained that I thought if I worked my good mornings, high pulls, and shrugs really hard and heavy, I would make those muscles and attachments responsible for completing a

The Great Controversy

deadlift strong, and I really didn't have to do that lift in training. And I could do more total work by adding in sets of high pulls and be able to recover much easier than if I tried to go heavy on a full deadlift. I told him, "If I can add forty pounds to my clean high pull, I know I can deadlift more weight and those groups are worked more dynamically in the high pulls and I believe that carries over to the quick lifts better than a more static movement."

That was on the way to the power meet. The main reason we entered the contest was so we could party at Seaside Heights, New Jersey after we lifted. Tommy Suggs and I had stumbled across this neat nightclub right on the Atlantic a couple of years before and found out that all the bouncers were weightlifters. A few had been to York and knew of all the YBC lifters. So not only did they let us in free, all our drinks were comped as well. I'd told Ernie about the place and he was eager to join me.

But the decision to take part in the contest was a last minute one and I didn't get reservations for a motel. As a result, we ended up in a dump of a place and that's when I learned how fussy he was about where he eats and spends the night.

When he saw the shabby condition of the room we were to share for the night, he was upset. "Starr," he informed me in an angry tone, "when I stay in a place away from home, I want it to be better than what I have at home, otherwise, why stay there? And, secondly, when I eat out I want to eat at a place that has tablecloths."

I chuckled, apologized, and said, "There wasn't anything else available, Ernie. Guess you'll have to suck it up. Anyway, we're not going to be hanging out here. Soon as we shower and get dressed, we're off to the Jersey Shore."

Ernie got over his sour mood once we got inside the Pelican Cove. He was mobbed. It seemed that half the customers were fans of Olympic lifting and they peppered Ernie with questions the entire night. The ladies also took to Ernie. He was a massive specimen and polite as a country gentleman. So we had a delightful time and fell into our crummy beds not really caring if they contained bedbugs or not. Turns out they did.

On our drive home the next day, Ernie asked me more questions about my training. In a nutshell, I told him that I was constantly trying to increase my overall workload and intensity and always paying attention to my weaker areas and trying to improve them. And that I thought strength was more important than technique because whenever I was strong, my form was much better as well.

He nodded that he understood, then asked a question that was weighing heavy on his mind. "Do you think the Olympic Trials are going to be final? Or are they going to have another if the results don't come out the way a few people like. I'm talking about Hoffman. You know, like they did after the last Trials in '64."

I, like every other lifter and fan of the sport, knew exactly what he was talking about. Following the Olympic Trials held at the World's Fair in New York, the powers that be in the sport decided that there should be an additional tryout. Bill March had failed to total, primarily because of severe cramps brought on from making weight and the stifling heat and humidity in the open air pavilion where the contest was held. Hoffman wanted March on the team and many others wanted to see Tommy Kono go to Tokyo. Then there was the question as to who should be the second heavyweight to join Ski. Gubner had come in second, but many believed that Sid Henry or Lee Phillips would be the better choice.

The weightlifting committee was well within the rules for having an additional tryout and set a date, September 6th, just two weeks after the Olympic Trials. But as every competitive lifter understands all too well, it's not easy to gear up for such a test two weeks after he has put out 100%. And Louis Riecke had torn a muscle in his groin when he attempted a 330 snatch. He needed rest and

The Great Controversy

rehabilitation, not another high-stress contest in two weeks. As it turned out, his injury kept him from taking part in the second tryout, but, in effect, the damage had been done. He had still trained for it instead of spending that time allowing his groin to heal.

Riecke was selected to the team, along with March, but was unable to make any snatches at the Games. A shame since he was capable of winning the gold in that lift. Goloanov of Russian won the snatch competition with 313 and Riecke had made an American record 322½ at the Olympic Trials.

This was the question on every lifter's mind that had a chance of making the team. Even in my own case, I fully understood that the odds of me coming in second were more than slim, but at the same time it was possible. At the Seniors, I finished just five pounds behind Bob Bartholomew and only twenty pounds out of second place. If I could add ten pounds to each of my lifts before the Trials, I had a shot. Especially if some of the front-runners bombed, as they did at the Y Nationals, where I ended up with the silver medal. So the idea of additional trials was on my mind as well.

I said to Ernie, "After the Seniors, I cornered Rudy Sablo, Morris Weissbrot, Clarence Johnson, Bob Hise, Peary Rader, Dave Matlin, and Terpak and they all said the same thing, "The Trials would be the final contest to determine who makes the Olympic team."

"Yeah," Ernie replied, "but you know if Hoffman wants Bednarski on that team, that's what will happen. Just suppose, for the sake of argument that both Dube and I beat Bednarski. You really think the committee will leave him off the team?"

Quite honestly, I wasn't certain. "I think this is different from '64. Riecke wasn't a York lifter, so Hoffman really pushed to get March on the team. But all three of you guys represent York and I don't think it will be a big deal who goes to Mexico City."

Still, Ernie was quite skeptical and I confess that I had my doubts that the committee would stand up against Hoffman. I said to Ernie, "Well, I think you have to train your butt off anyway. Then, at least you can always say that you did your very best. If you get screwed, you get screwed."

He laughed as we pulled up in front of my house to let me out. As I was gathering my gym bag, he asked, "Starr, would you mind coaching me for the Trials? Bednarski has been helping me but now that we're both vying for a spot on the team, it doesn't feel right to ask him for advice."

I hesitated, not really feeling capable of coaching someone at his level.

"I just want you to help me in making my selection of exercises better. I don't want to do much different but I like your idea of building up the workload and intensity till right before the meet, and then pulling back. And I could use some help on my technique too. There's no one at the Baltimore Y that knows anything about form."

At that point, I had been mostly training with Barski. Tommy wouldn't be lifting in the Trials since there wouldn't be a 242-lb. class in the Olympics, and he had slacked off his training considerably, getting everything done at a noon session so he could spend more time on his working farm.

"Sure," I agreed. "We can start training together and see how it works out. I sure would like to see you beat Dube." This was what all the lifters who trained in York wanted as well. While Joe was a member of the York team, he wasn't part of our gang who trained there regularly.

The next day, at my office, I called Rudy Sablo and posed the question that Ernie had hit me with, what would the committee do if both Dube and Ernie beat Barski at the Trials? I believed that Terpak and some others would fold if Hoffman put pressure on them, but that Rudy would stand by his word, regardless. Rudy said, without hesitation, "Bednarski will stay home."

Here's the part of the story that only a handful of us knew about. I went straight to the warehouse and told Barski what Rudy had said. It didn't phase him at all. He simply couldn't believe that he wasn't a shoo-in after setting two World records at the Seniors.

The Great Controversy

Later on, at our morning coffee break at Sunshine Corner, a small cafe about a block away from the Barbell, both Tommy and I got on his case. Barski was training hard, but not with the zeal and intensity he had been training during his comeback from the dislocated elbow. He was going through the motions, but lacked the spark he had had all through the lifting season.

I said, "Ernie's training is going really well. He's making P.R.s on all his training lifts on a regular basis and packing on bodyweight. Smitty hears from Dube at least once a week and Joe is smashing training records as well. You have to take it up a notch, Barski."

Tommy stepped in, "You're slacking off Barski and you know it. You're convinced that even if you have an off day, or even bomb-out, the committee is still going to put you on the team. But you're wrong, Starr has talked to almost every member of that committee and they all say the same thing. The fiasco of extra tryouts that were held after the '64 Trials isn't going to happen again. You have to come in first or second to make the team."

Our words fell on deaf ears, mostly because Barski was being treated as if he were already on the team. He got numerous fan letters, which he delighted in reading to Tommy and me, where the writer wished him luck in Mexico City and some telling him to kick Zhabotinsky's ass. Visitors to the York Gym would shake his hand, congratulate him on his stellar performance at the Seniors and encourage him to break more records at the Olympics. It was a foregone conclusion in everyone's mind that Barski was a certainty to be on the team that competed in Mexico City.

So while Barski's mindset was one of complacency, Dube and Ernie were busting their humps at every workout. At this level, the slightest edge makes a difference and in this case it was the amount of work being put in by the three contestants.

I didn't really change anything in Ernie's routine, except to move some of the exercises around to give priority to the weaker lifts. In his case, the snatch. And as he slowly, but steadily increased his workload, I had him write down all the numbers of his workouts and figure exactly how much volume he did at each session. He worked a huge lathe at the Continental Can Company. When he told me this, I pictured him fashioning whatever was on the lathe with some sort of chisel. That wasn't the case. The lathe was huge and took almost an hour to shape the object on it and it was all done automatically. All Ernie had to do was be there to start the process and then take the object off when the lathe had finished its job. So he had lots of idle time to do the math, and this provided a vivid picture of what he was doing in the gym and allowed us to set up a program to hit those areas that were lagging behind volume-wise.

Ernie sometimes had doubts about my system of constantly pushing up the workload and intensity. I had told him that I often pushed too far and became overtrained, but when that happened, I quickly pulled back a bit until I was able to recover again. Just two weeks before the Trials, he was struggling to snatch 225 and got very upset with me. I assured him that he would be fine. All we had to do was lower the load and he would be fresh and strong at the contest. From his grim expression, I knew he wasn't persuaded that I knew what the hell I was doing.

I had been keeping him well supplied with protein powder and Energol and suggested he double up on his protein milkshake coming down the stretch and try to get more sleep than usual. I knew that Ernie depended on his bodyweight more than any other factor and I wanted him to weigh in heavier than he ever had in his life for the Trials. I thought he was ready. He had pressed 465 off the racks, inclined 365 and snatched 335.

Now it came down to who wanted it the most and who performed the best when the pressure was on. All three lifters had set World records in the press during the year and Barski had thrown in another World record with his 486½ clean and jerk. Whoever flinched first would lose.

The Great Controversy

The 1968 Olympic Trials were held on August 31st and September 1st at the Central High School auditorium in York. There were 20 lifters, with many top names conspicuous by their absence. Most notably, Ski, Gubner, Dr. John Gourgott, Tony Garcy, and Bill March. Eight failed to total. There were close, exciting matches and some clutch lifting, but since this story is about Ernie, I will restrict my report to the three top heavyweights.

They were the lifters that the majority of the spectators had come to see. They fully expected a classic battle and they were not disappointed. As soon as I finished competing in the 198-lb. class, I started helping Ernie with his warm-ups. Kenny Moore and Bill St. John were there as well, if I needed any assistance. Ernie was a handful since he never seemed to have the confidence in himself that he should have based on what he had accomplished previously. It took a lot of prodding and encouraging to get him geared up for every attempt.

The goal of the Pickett team was to beat Dube and this meant staying close to him in the press because we had no doubt that Joe was primed and ready for a big lift in that event. We also believed that Barski would press well since he had done 460 in training.

I started Ernie with 424, wanting to get in a solid lift to bolster his confidence. It went up smoothly and we were off and running. The first lift often sets the tone of the rest of the meet and I was happy to see that Ernie was very strong. Barski followed Ernie with the same poundage and, to everyone's surprise, struggled with it.

As expected, Joe started last, with 436, and it shot to arms' length. I called for 440 for Ernie's second attempt and, if anything, it was easier than his opener. Barski took 446 to move past his opponents and to the shock of the audience, missed it and then missed it again on his final attempt. However, he wasn't in trouble just yet. Dube and Pickett still had to do a lot more to move out of his reach since he was the superior snatcher and clean and jerker.

Joe called for 451, just a tad more than his World record of 449½ which he had made in March. No problem for the big man from Florida. I knew Ernie had a strong press in him from his recent training, so I called for 457, which would break Barski's mark and give him another World record.

I was as nervous as Ernie as I gave him the keys to remember and sent him out to the platform. One of the things I had been trying to get Ernie to change was power cleaning a heavy weight for the press, then going down into a full front squat. I told him he was wasting energy, yet I didn't add this to my instruction on this night because I didn't want him to think about anything but the press.

A hush fell over the crowd as Ernie stepped up to the bar. He got set and pulled the bar high, caught it firmly, and rode it down to the bottom. While I knew he had the leg strength to recover easily enough, I was still worried about how much energy he would have left to press the weight. He set himself to get the clap from the head judge, then staggered back three quick steps and my heart jumped into my throat. Quickly, he got himself under control and got the signal from the judge to press. The bar shot off his shoulders in a perfect strong line and he locked it out nicely.

The crowd rose as one and gave him a standing ovation. The bar was weighed and Ernie had himself another World Record – 457¼. He had bettered his best by 12¼ pounds when he needed it the most. I was elated for him, but knew Dube had an attempt left and was very capable of making it.

Dube called for 462, for the lead and yet another World record. Joe was built along the lines of Paul Anderson, his idol, but was much quicker and, according to people like Terpak, Ski, Stanko, and Grimek, was a much better competitor. He moved under the bar like a cat, struggled upright, then slammed the weight overhead. Once again, the crowd was on their feet giving him a standing ovation. The record weighed out at 462¾.

The Great Controversy

Ernie was in good position. Barski, on the other hand, had dug himself into a deep hole and everyone present that night wondered if he had enough in him to overcome the 37½ pound deficit behind Dube, or even the 33 lead that Ernie had over him. True, he was the better quick lifter, but that was a great deal of ground to make up. His only hope was that his two opponents would falter badly on the two remaining lifts.

Dube opened the snatches with an easy 319. This was Joe's weakest lift and he was playing it safe. The snatch was also Ernie's weakest lift, but he had been working it hard and heavy in the weeks leading up to the Trials, and his form had improved noticeably. He started with 325 and ripped the bar over his head with perfect technique. He was *on*. All I had to do was keep him focused.

Dube moved to 336 for another three white light success. Ernie's second attempt with 341 was done as smoothly as his opener. Barski took the same 341 and toyed with it. It was obvious that he had charged himself up after the presses and was coming on strong. The question was, would it be too little too late? Dube pulled 347 high enough, but jumped back and lost it. Ernie also pulled his third attempt with 352 more than high enough, but it was out front and came crashing down. Barski charged onto the platform for his second attempt with 358, a personal best, and made a beautiful snatch that got the audience very excited. He was making up ground. For his last attempt, Smitty told the scorekeeper to put 365 on the bar. Barski was following himself. If he would have had a little more time to recover from the 358, he might have made it. As it turned out, his pull wasn't strong enough on this night. Nevertheless, he had picked up 16½ pounds on Ernie and 22 on the leader, Dube.

Barski was stoked and everyone present knew all too well that he was capable of doing a tremendous clean and jerk. Ernie was going to have to clean and jerk more than he ever had in his life by a good margin to hold off the Ninth wonder of the world. Yet I had faith in my lifter. While mild mannered and quiet, he possessed the heart of a fighter. It would, I thought, come down to strategy and I was going up against the best in the business when it came to picking weights in critical situations – Smitty. No one else in the sport had his talent of being able to determine just how much a lifter was capable of at that moment and no one could get a lifter ready for a maximum effort better than Dick Smith.

I did my best to keep Ernie focused on the task at hand and not start worrying about “what if?” Bill St. John helped me keep Ernie calm and relaxed between the warm-ups and Kenny Moore was invaluable in checking with the scorekeeper as to what Barski and Joe were going to take for their attempts. What the three of us really wanted was for both Ernie and Barski to beat Dube. However, that task was going to be a formidable one because Joe was definitely well-prepared for this contest.

Ernie had been improving steadily on this lift so I felt he could start safely with 446. Nerves almost got the best of him. He reverted to his old form on the jerk and it looked more like a press with a step forward. And he did something that I had been trying to break him of that nearly cost him the lift – he jerked it way out front. I knew he wasn't going to get away with that with a heavier poundage.

When he came backstage after his first attempt, he flopped down on the floor and groaned, “I'm finished. I can't do any more.”

I was still wired from my lifting earlier and tense from all the stress of this contest between the three World record holders and wasn't in the mood to deal with this defeatist attitude. I nudged my toe against his ribs and barked, “Get up! You haven't worked all year to end up being a quitter. This is your chance of a lifetime. This is what you always worked for. Get up and get yourself ready to make one more attempt. Then you can call it a night.”

The crowd groaned and Kenny said, “Dube missed the 446.”

“That gives you more time to recover,” I said to Ernie after he got up and sat in a folding chair.

The Great Controversy

“Now listen to me. Concentrate on the clean, strong pull, bar tight to your body. When you stand up, take a second to think about driving the jerk back. That first attempt was too far out front. Got that?” He nodded and asked, “How much?” meaning what poundage was I going to have him take for his next attempt.

“A weight that you can make. If you drive the jerk back.”

Another nod and I saw the confidence come back into his body language and his facial expression.

Dube made the 446 on his second try, Barski opened with a shaky 451¾. The pressure was getting to him. Barski was a much better front-runner than he was trying to play catch-up, and he had a lot to make up. I told Kenny to tell the scorekeeper that Ernie would take 462½. If he was able to make that weight, and I believed he could, it would force both Dube and Barski to make the lifts of their lives to overtake him. I didn't think they had that much gas left in their tanks.

But first, Ernie had to come through in the clutch. The crowd knew the implications of him making the 462½, and most were aware that this was 12 pounds more than he had ever attempted.

The clean was hard and he had to call upon every muscle in his body to recover from the bottom. The crowd urging him on certainly helped. I have never liked it when coaches shout instructions to their lifters from the wings, but as he got set for the jerk, I called out, “Jerk it back!”

And that's exactly what he did, and then some. When I said “back”, I meant to just behind his head. What Ernie did was drive that massive amount of weight almost straight back so it ended up two feet behind his head. The crowd rose to their feet, screaming for him to hold it. Which seemed to be an impossible task. Anyone else would have dropped the bar. Not Ernie. Digging deep into his reserve of strength and determination, he slowly pulled the bar back into position over his head, stood up, and held the weight for the down signal.

It was, and still is, one of the most remarkable feats of raw strength that I ever witnessed. This time, when he flopped on the floor, I just patted him on his back and said, “Good job.”

I really thought that lift would be enough for Ernie to win, but Dube had other ideas. He called for 468¾ to take the lead. A strong clean followed by a difficult recovery, then a powerful jerk. Now Ernie was in second place. Barski needed 479 to overtake Ernie and knock him off the Olympic team. He had two shots at it and both showed that he was not up to the task on this night.

The contest was over. The athlete considered to be the greatest lifter in the country was not going to the Olympics. That is, if the selection committee stuck to their promise.

Results of the Heavyweight class at the 1968 Olympic Trials

	Press	Snatch	Clean & Jerk	Total
Joe Dube	462¾*	336	468¼	1267
Ernie Pickett	457¼*	341½	462¾	1261½
Bob Bednarski	424¼	358	451¾	1234
Joe Murray	380¼	286½	396¾	1063½

As soon as the meet was over, Smitty started trying to persuade the members of the selection committee to change their minds and consider having another tryout. I was right behind him,

The Great Controversy

reminding them that they had given their word that whoever came in first and second at this contest would be on the team and that there would not be any extra tryouts.

Ernie still didn't believe that they would select him over Barski and to be perfectly honest, I wasn't 100% sure myself. But, the next day, at the York Picnic, the names of the team were announced and Ernie was the second heavyweight. The committee had stood by their word.

Of course, Barski's fans thought he should have been put on the team instead of Ernie even though he had come in third place. After all, he had the highest total of any American heavyweight and had set two World records at the Seniors.

But the selection committee had served notice that past performances didn't count. It was who did the best at this one contest, the Olympic Trials. This had been made clear right after the Seniors. There would be no extra tryouts. Plain and simple.

Quite a large number of people chastised me for backing Ernie over Barski. I wanted Barski to make the team and I also wanted Ernie to represent the USA in Mexico City. I had done everything I could to try and persuade Barski to gear up his training prior to the Trials, but my words had gone in one ear and out the other.

The bottom line was, Dube and Pickett came to the Trials much better prepared than Barski. As a result, they performed better and were able to come through when the money was on the table. Barski made two critical mistakes. He failed to heed the advice given to him by myself and other members of the York team to get ready for the battle of his life. And secondly, he didn't pay attention to the basic tenet in every sport – never underestimate your opponent.

So Ernie was going to the Games and he was staying home. But first, Ernie and I were going to Disneyland.

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