

Starting Strength

George Ernie Pickett (Pt. 6) The Senior Nationals Powerlifting Contest

by
Bill Starr

Ernie's idea of a pre-meet meal was a quart of milk. I offered to give him a B₁₂ shot but he declined, saying that he had tried it before and couldn't notice any difference in his lifting. This was not unusual for someone his size. Most true heavyweights have to take a huge dosage of any drug or vitamin for it to have the desired effect. Ernie was also going to pass on taking any amphetamines for this meet. He said, "I don't need to get keyed up for this. It's nothing more than a heavy workout. Besides," he added, "those uppers make me cramp something awful."

While Ernie stretched out on his bed in the hotel room, I walked across the street to the Embassy Auditorium. This had also been the site of the 1965 Senior Nationals in Olympic lifting. I had several reasons for going over to the auditorium early. I wanted to talk to the meet director, Don Haley, from Manhattan Beach, California. I wanted him to give me a copy of the results to carry back to Grimek. He would use them in the next issue of *Muscular Development*. That magazine carried results of powerlifting while *Strength & Health* handled Olympic lifting.

Next I sought out Cliff Swan, who was the West Coast correspondent for *S&H* and *MD*. He said Grimek had already contacted him to take photos of the lifting and the physique contest. I told him if he wanted me to take the rolls of film and have them processed in York, I would be glad to do so. He replied that he would rather develop them himself and would ship them off to Grimek by express mail on Monday.

Then I spent time visiting with old friends. My first stop was Jim Witt. Jim had started Olympic lifting at the same time I had, in the fall of '59. I had just moved to Dallas to enroll at SMU. We began lifting with Sid Henry, Gerald Travis, Linwood Gillian, Homer Brannum, and the other members of the Downtown Dallas Y team. We were both rank beginners, but there was a big difference between us. I was 21 years old and Jim was 42.

Even though he did the hard work, it was clear that he simply did not have the necessary flexibility to do the quick lifts with good technique. But he got considerably stronger and began going to odd lift contests in various parts of Texas. I often joined him just to see how I would do. They really were odd lifts. While there were always three lifts contested, what lifts were selected depended entirely on the meet director and were usually lifts that the meet director was especially good at. I lifted in

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contests that consisted of curls, jerks off the rack, and back squats. And overhead presses with the heels together, front squats, and Zerchers. Even Hack lifts, pullovers while lying on a bench, and deadlifts.

Slowly but surely, the meets began to be more standardized with the bench press, back squat, and deadlift. Jim was the driving force behind getting powerlifting accepted as an official AAU sport. He succeeded in the mid-sixties and became the sport's first national chairman. Its popularity took off like a rocket. There were a lot of strength athletes out there who were in the same boat as Jim. They were extremely strong, but were unable to master the form on the snatch and clean and jerk because of a lack of flexibility in the shoulders, back, and hips. Or they just didn't possess the athletic qualities needed to excel in Olympic lifting. It didn't take that much coordination, timing, and foot speed to do the three power lifts.

Another plus for powerlifting was that the exercises could be done in a limited space with basic equipment and there was not any need for a coach. All that was needed to train were an Olympic bar, flat bench, and some sort of squat rack, and lots of hard work. Most of the powerlifters in the country trained at small gyms in garages and basements, and of course, YMCAs.

I also got to visit with Peary Rader, publisher and editor of *Iron Man* magazine and *Lifting News*. While Jim Witt spearheaded the movement to make powerlifting a legitimate sport, Peary had been his number one supporter, using the influence of his two publications to get the sport accepted. Peary was one of the great gentlemen of physical culture. He printed articles by authors in the same magazine that totally contradicted one another. He let anyone and everyone express their point of view on a wide range of subjects and presented training pieces of rather absurd routines. He was extremely liberal and fair, and his readers appreciated his attitude.

In the 1968 Senior Nation Powerlifting Championships there were 38 entries from all across the country. Carl Snitkin came all the way from New London, Connecticut, Allen Lord and John Dzurenko from New Jersey, Felix Gomes and Joe Weinstein from Staten Island, New York, and Ronny Ray and Jim Witt from Dallas.

Yet the high cost of travel kept many of the top powerlifters from attending. Those in the South and Midwest were conspicuous by their absence, but there were a half dozen more contestants than there had been at the Seniors Nationals Olympic Meet in '65.

With the sport in its infancy, it came as no surprise that some of the athletes would go to far extremes to gain an edge. I'd heard about lifters in Texas who wore several pairs of cut-off jeans under their lifting suits that enabled them to squat heavier poundages. But I was in for a shock when Tom Overholzer of the Zulver's Hall of Fame team, came out for his first attempt in the bench press. This was the lighthweight class. His arms from wrist to arm pit were wrapped in ace bandages. I don't know how many ace bandages were linked together, but my guess was about 15' worth. He couldn't bend his arms. When the spotter handed him the weight, he slowly lowered the bar to his chest, then once he got the signal to press, the bar shot up as if it were attached to a spring. Which it was. Those wraps acted just like a spring. There was really no pressing involved. The entire up and down motion consisted of controlling the weight so that it stayed in the proper groove.

Peary and Jim Witt were both judging the 181s, and they were all over Tom as soon as he got up from the bench. They told him he had to get rid of all those wraps. Tom stood his ground, arguing that there was nothing in the rules stating how long the wraps could be. He was right. Wraps were not allowed in Olympic lifting unless there was a serious injury to the athlete. But they were allowed in power meets. Of course, when those rules were drawn up, no one thought of some lifter coming up with such an outlandish notion of using them to such an extent.

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Tom had broken no rules and they had to pass his lifts. He ended up with 410 and took a healthy 45-lb. lead over favorite Jack Barnes of the Phoenix YMCA team into the squat (the bench was contested first at early power meets). If the judges had been flustered in the bench, they were furious in the squat because Tom had yet another trick up his sleeve. As expected, he had wrapped his knees in enough ace bandages to stretch to San Diego, and he had tucked tennis balls in behind his knees. The idea was for the tennis ball to help him kick out of the bottom. It was rather insane because it placed all the attachments of the knee under a tremendous amount of stress, especially the patellar tendon.

When Jim and Peary saw the tennis balls when the wraps came off – and they had to come off quickly to allow some blood to get into his lower legs – they hit the fan. When Tom contended that there were no rules against what he was doing, Jim told him they were not going to be allowed. As chairman of the sport, he was making the ruling. If he used them again, he would be disqualified from the contest. Peary and meet director Don Haley stood behind Jim's decision, and that was the end of the tennis balls. But those excessive wraps still gave him a big advantage in the squat. All Tom had to do was control his downward movement to the bottom, then he popped right up with little effort.

He made a meet record 655, actual weight 666, and picked up another ten pounds on Barnes. Even though Overholzer was a local product, the crowd really got behind Barnes. They felt that Tom had gained an unfair advantage over Jack by using the excessive wraps, and encouraged him loudly when he came on stage. Unfortunately for Overholzer, he hadn't come up with any gimmicks to boost his deadlift and Barnes came through with a strong 585 deadlift to beat Tom by five pounds, 1595 to 1590. He needed that extra five pounds because he was heavier than Overholzer. Jack got a standing ovation when he accepted the trophy for first place. To me, it was poetic justice and proof that cheaters never win.

Ernie and Bill St. John showed up in time to see the finish of the lighthweight division and I told them what had happened. They were as amazed as I had been. Ernie weighed in at 307 ½, the heaviest he had ever been and he was very pleased. There were only three heavyweights: Ernie, Tom Veller from San Francisco, and Dan Cundy, the favorite, from Minnesota. Dan weighed in at 280 ½. Veller promptly bombed out in the bench so it was just Ernie and Dan.

Ernie only did three warm-ups for each lift: 225, 315, and 405. He made every attempt on the platform and could have done reps on all of his final lifts. But as he had said before the contest, this was to be no more than a heavy session of training. A large part of the crowd had come to see him perform. Don Haley had used Ernie to publicize the contest. A lot of people came expressly to see a World Record holder and a heavyweight on the Olympic weightlifting team.

They weren't disappointed. While Ernie didn't have the showmanship and flare of Bednarski, he did have a style all his own. He exuded power and confidence. At 6'4" and 307 ½ pounds, he was the prototype of what a strongman should look like. He blew up a ridiculously easy 450 bench, squatted 600 as if it were 135 lbs, and made a smooth 750 deadlift on his second attempt and declined taking a third. It was an effortless 1800 total, and I believe that if he had seriously made a run at beating Cundy, he could have because he was extremely strong that night.

Cundy took the early lead with a 480 bench, then sealed the deal with a 700 squat. He made 755 on his second deadlift, then called for 800. Dan had been doing his very best to befriend Ernie all night. Ernie was an easy-going individual so he played along, while in fact he didn't like Cundy. Neither did St. John, Hirtz, or myself. Dan was loud and demonstrative when he was on stage, acting like a pro wrestler with a lot of screaming and yelling. Ernie hated show-offs.

So after Dan called for 800, he asked Ernie to take a weight less than that to give him more time to rest. He figured that Ernie would be more than happy to do that since they were now buds.

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“No,” Ernie told Cundy, “I’m through for the night” and started packing his gym bag.

“But,” Dan quickly said, “You don’t have to actually attempt the lift, just call for the weight so I can have more time to rest.”

“I don’t think so,” Ernie replied as he stuffed his belt in his bag. Then he stuck a knife in the wound by saying, “And Dan, I think you have lots of good years ahead of you in the sport, and after that you can start pursuing women.”

The look on Cundy’s face was priceless as the four of us walked from the warm-up room, grinning in delight. Cundy missed his final attempt, most likely because he was trying to determine what had just happened.

When we got into the auditorium, we were met by Mr. Hise and four of the LA Y lifters: Bobby Hise, Jack Hill, Walter Gioseffi, and Dan Cantore. All four had competed with Ernie and me in the Olympic Trials and all had done well. Dan had come in second in the 132-lb, class, Jack had won the 148-lb, division, Walter had taken fourth in the light heavies and had pressed 341 ½, and Bobby won the silver medal behind Puleo and was named an alternate on the Olympic Team.

Tom Hirtz had arrived just as Ernie was starting his warm-ups. He had gone to the Downtown L.A. Y to get in a workout. After the meet we gathered in the lobby until the awards were given out, then walked over to the hotel and huddled together in my room to talk weightlifting for the next few hours. Then our guests left and we walked down the street and ate at a cafe that stayed open all night. Hirtz stayed over and slept on a pallet he created from the comforter on my bed plus one of my pillows.

At eight o’clock, we were dressed and once again slipped through the hotel lobby unseen by Hoffman, and were on our way in the Chevy El Camino. This was to be a strictly sightseeing day with little walking since I was lifting in the afternoon and Bill was to take part in the physique competition that night. When Hirtz asked us, “Where to?” and no one answered, I suggested that he drive us by some of the famous sports venues. No one objected to that idea, so off we went.

First stop, The Forum, home of the Lakers, next the Coliseum, home field for the USC Trojans and L.A. Rams and the site of the 1932 Olympic Games. Next, Dodger Stadium then to Westwood for a look at the Pauley Pavilion on the campus of UCLA, followed by a long drive to Pasadena to look down on the Rose Bowl. We stopped and went in Bill Pearl’s Gym but he was out of town so we didn’t linger. The gym was in a house and reminded me of the one Schemansky had in Detroit, although Pearl’s facility was much better equipped and was cleaner.

Whenever we got hungry, we stopped and ate. Or more correctly, we stopped and ate whenever St. John got hungry, which was often. However, he only ate small portions and just protein foods. He shunned all carbs and drank liquids sparingly. I ate about a third of what he did and followed his example of eating just protein and taking in a minimum of fluids to make sure I stayed under the weight limit.

We were back at the hotel by 2 p.m. so that Bill and I could rest before our respective competitions. I laid down for a half an hour, then started getting my gym bag packed before going over to the weigh-in. Someone save the secret knock, I opened the door and Bobby Hise and Jack Hill stepped into my room. The night before, Bobby had asked me how I was feeling and I remarked that my left shoulder was dinged and I was having difficulty lifting it past horizontal. In fact, I couldn’t lift it any higher than that. I had hurt it at the Trials.

He told me to show him where the pain was and I pinpointed it on the crown of my left shoulder. He took out a small bottle, soaked the liquid in it onto a cotton ball and rubbed it all over my shoulder. Then he broke open a Darvon capsule and sprinkled the drug onto the spot that I had

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indicated was causing me pain. I knew what the Darvon was, but asked him what was in the small bottle.

“DMSO,” he replied. “Stands for dimethyl sulfoxide. Works just like an injection. Lift your arm.”

I thought he was kidding but when I lifted my left arm, it climbed right up over my head to a full vertical position. “Wow! That’s amazing! Where can I get some of that and what’s it called again?”

“DMSO. It’s used by vets on animals. It’ll carry whatever is on the skin right into the tissue and bone. You can have this,” he said, handing me the bottle. “It’s cheap and they sell it on roadside stands out here.”

I thanked him profusely, still a bit stunned, gave myself a B₁₂ shot (I like to wait until just before weigh-in to take the shot), finished packing my gym bag, and walked over to the meet site. Bobby and Jack said they would hang out in my room watching TV and would be over when I started lifting.

I made weight all right and was just starting the warm-ups on the bench when St. John and Tom showed up. They did all the loading and Bill kept track of the attempts at the scorekeepers table.

“Where’s Ernie?” I asked them.

Hirtz answered, “Out front. Signing autographs and allowing his adoring fans to kiss his ring.”

That broke us up and it took a few minutes for me to refocus on the task at hand. Like Ernie, I hadn’t done any benches or deadlifts since the power meet in mid-July, but unlike Ernie, I was going to have to exert myself if I wanted to make at least the qualifying total, which was 1525. If I were able to do that, it would justify my being a part of this championship.

Just before the bench press competition for the 198 division was about to begin, Hoffman walked over to me and said in a loud enough voice for all the other lifters to hear, “Bill, I’m the head judge in your class, I’ll do everything I can to help you.”

Great! I thought, just what I needed. Some of the contestants were already grumbling about Olympic lifters treading on their territory. Now Hoffman had announced that he was going to provide me with an advantage. I looked over at Bill and Tom and said, “That man is a piece of work.”

I figured that he was going to give me a quick clap and I was right. He clapped the very instant that the bar touched my chest. But I had planned what I was going to do, I had done it before. I ignored his signal and counted to myself, one-thousand one, one-thousand two, then drove the weight up. I didn’t mind a long pause because that was what occurred in the overhead press most of the time. Now no one could say that I took advantage of Hoffman’s attempt to assist me.

Hirtz had handed me the weight and when I got up he smiled and said, “Sweet move.”

I made what I had planned on making in the bench, but fell short in the squat. I had to gear up a notch for the deadlifts if I wanted to make that qualifying total. On my second attempt with 630, I had the total I was after and decided to pass my final attempt just as Ernie had done. Hirtz wouldn’t allow that. He jumped all over me to take that third attempt, “You just stood up with that last attempt. Go after the highest lift in the class. You’ve got a lot left in the tank. Do it for Olympic lifters.”

I knew he was right and decided, Why not? I’ve got nothing to lose.

I waited until Paul Wachholz made a solid 650 on his final attempt, then Bill went to the scorers table and put me down for 655. The bar had been weighing heavy all through the meet so I knew I would be trying to lift more than what was announced. It climbed up without a hitch and when it was weighed, I had a new National record of 666.

It always seemed ironic to me that I got more recognition for this lift than any other I had ever done, and I hadn’t trained for it. People like to point out two things about that lift. One, I lifted

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the Devil's number. Two, I was wearing penny-loafers. I can't explain the first one, but the reason I wore the loafers was because I had only brought two pairs of shoes, my lifting shoes and my good-luck penny loafers. The lifting shoes had built-up heels. For the deadlift, lower heels are much better and that's why I wore them.

I finished fourth behind some very strong athletes: Ronny Ray, Joe Weinstein, and Peanuts West. I was satisfied. I went back to the hotel, showered, changed into shorts and a York Barbell t-shirt, and got back to the contest to see the 242-ers compete.

The favorite, Mel Hennessy from Minneapolis WLC, jumped out to a 30-lb, lead in the bench, then bombed in the squats. That left two athletes from Phoenix, Arizona, to battle it out for the title: Jon Cole and John Kanter. It came down to the final lift. Cole came through with a 720 National record deadlift, actual weight 724, to tie Kanter and win on bodyweight.

During the break, while the staff was setting up for the physique portion of the show, Tom, Ernie, Bobby Hise, Jack Hill, and I sat in the back of the auditorium and talked about the upcoming Olympics. The conversations centered around the effect of altitude on the lifters and whether the team should go to Mexico City early or just before the opening ceremonies. Ernie said he would prefer to go in as late as possible. He didn't look forward to bunking with the team and eating strange food.

We kept on talking even after the physique competition got under way, except for when Bill came on stage. Then the five of us shouted, screamed, and applauded like teenagers at an Elvis concert. Despite not having time to really get ready for the show, Bill was in tremendous shape. At 5'10" and 210 lbs. he was all muscle. Bill lived in Glassboro, New Jersey, and worked at the Naval Shipyard in Philadelphia. He was a pipe fitter by trade and the job was often very physical. At 24 years of age, he had an abundance of energy that allowed him to handle heavy workloads in the gym every week. He was basically a strong athlete with a powerful physique.

Our small group thought he had the best build of any of the contestants, but the judges were looking for other aspects of a well-constructed body. Bill finished fifth, behind Chris Dickerson, Boyer Coe, Ralph Kroger, and Ken Waller, all elite athletes in the sport. Bill was definitely in the higher echelon of bodybuilding and he was pleased with his placing.

So was Hoffman. All of the athletes who represented the York Barbell Club had performed well. Roman Mielec had beaten Phil Trujillo, representing Colorado State College, by virtue of being the lighter man and had taken second in the bantamweight division. Ernie had also won the silver medal and Hoffman was delighted with my record and Bill's showing, so he was happy. Which meant that the four of us left the Embassy Auditorium with some spending money in our pockets that night.

I got the lifting results from Don Haley, said goodbyes to Peary Rader and Jim Witt, then joined Bill, Tom, and Ernie and walked back to our hotel. Bobby and Jack had left right after the winners of the physique contest were announced. They told Ernie that they would see him in Mexico City. They were painting houses to make enough money for the trip. After the two departed, Ernie said, "I sure hope those homeowners have plenty of insurance."

We all laughed because we knew exactly what he was talking about. That pair were known for pocketing anything that wasn't nailed down. I once wrote that Hise was the living embodiment of John Dawkins, the Artful Dodger, and Hill was the spirit of Fagan, from Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.

I related that when Jack and Bobby said they were going to stay in my room while I weighed in, I went and got my wallet and stuffed it in my gym bag and gave Bobby what was left of my B₁₂. "He would have taken it anyway," I said. "And if I didn't let them hang out in my room, they would have found a way to get in."

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All of us were tired, so we decided to hit the rack and get an early start the next day. It would be our last day in sunny Southern California and we wanted to make the most of it. Tom camped out on the floor of my room again, and by the time I got snuggled under my sheet, I could hear him snoring.

Everyone was up at 8 a.m. We were going to spend the day at the beach. We ate breakfast at the cafe in the hotel. We no longer had to play hide and seek with Hoffman. He and Roman had flown back east that morning.

After a brief tour of Santa Monica and Venice, Tom parked his El Camino in a lot right next to the beach where Santa Monica meets Venice. We left our shoes in the car and with hotel towels in hand and swim suits under our shorts, we strolled along the beaches, taking in the new sights.

What impressed me the most, other than the sheer beauty of the setting, was the fact that every person we saw, male or female, young or old, was physically fit. Nor did I see any ugly women. Which was in direct contrast to being in York. It was a pleasant change.

We found a spot on the Venice beach where we could watch several beach volleyball games at the same time. We sat on our towels, leaned back and took in the sights while soaking up the deliciously warm rays of the sun. We went swimming in the Pacific Ocean, mostly so we could say we had, then grabbed our towels off the sand and strolled along the triple-wide sidewalk that ran in front of the various stores and vendors selling souvenirs, t-shirts, surfboards, ice cream, pizza, etc. It was similar to the boardwalks on the Jersey Shore, but here, it was a year-round enterprise.

Extremely fit women of all ages walked past, most wearing teeny-weenie bikinis. Our necks grew tired as we tried to get a look at every one of them, but it was impossible because there were just too many of them.

Ernie declared, "There are no fat people in California."

"That's right," Hirtz said. "When someone gets overweight, they have to move to Oregon or Nevada."

I was thinking, wouldn't it be great to live in Venice and train at one of the many gyms close by? Little did I know that in just three years, I would be living just a block from the ocean in Venice. So it goes.

We walked along the pier that jutted out over the ocean in Santa Monica and when we came to the slide, Hirtz insisted that we take a ride on it. Bill and I were all for that idea, but Ernie balked. "Don't be such a girl!" Hirtz admonished him. "It's a kid's ride. It's not scary and it's safe." Naturally, Ernie couldn't refuse. After we purchased our tickets and started up the stairs to the top, Ernie turned to Tommy and said, "I don't want you behind me. Go over and stand behind Starr."

When we reached the top of the stairs we could see that there were a dozen slides and when they ended at the bottom, there was a long stretch of what appeared to be outdoor carpet extending to a chain-link fence. There were also a half dozen husky young men stationed close to the fence. Their job was to stop anyone that was moving too fast at the end of the ride from crashing into the fence.

Bill and I went first, at the same time, side by side. It was exhilarating, especially the first hump I shot over. Riders sat on thick mats, the size of large bath towels, and held onto the sides of the mats to maintain balance and to keep the mats from slipping out from under them.

Bill and I slid to a halt about ten feet across the carpeting, stood up and Bill shouted up to Ernie, "It's easy Ernie! Nothing to it! Come on down!"

Bill and I moved back to the fence and watched as Ernie settled himself down on his mat, then we saw him change his mind and start to get up. But before he stood all the way up, Hirtz leaped in behind him, pushed him back down to a sitting position, and shoved him as hard as he could. Ernie

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shot off the top of the forty-foot slide like a rocket, went airborne at the first hump, and appeared to be picking up speed as he came down the slide.

The husky person who was responsible for stopping those coming down the lane that Ernie was in called over to us, “How much does that guy weigh?” There was fear in his voice. Calmly, Bill informed him, “Three hundred five and a half pounds.”

When he looked back at Ernie, who seemed to be getting larger and larger and moving faster and faster as he neared the end of the ride, he muttered, “Holy shit!”

Ernie was gripping his mat for dear life and when he came to the end of the ride, it looked as if he was going too fast to be able to stop before he hit the fence. When he was within ten feet of the fence, the stopper decided that his life was worth more than his job and he dove out of the way. The carpeting slowed Ernie down enough so that all he had to do was lift his legs and plant his feet against the fence. Even so, the force of the impact caused the fence to bend backward. If it had given way, Ernie would have found himself in the Pacific Ocean. But it held and Ernie quickly got to his feet, angry as a wet hen. He screamed up at Hirtz, “I’m going to kill that little bastard!”

Hirtz just grinned down at him and waved. While we could have gone down the slide as many times as we liked, one ride was enough. Hirtz knew enough to keep away from Ernie for the next hour, but with the warm sun, carnival atmosphere, and steady parade of stunning, bikini-clad damsels, Ernie couldn’t stay mad for long.

Ernie, Bill, and I weren’t used to sun this potent, so we decided we had had enough of the beach. Bill wanted to see Gold’s Gym in Venice so we went there. It was nearly empty. Just two older men doing arm work. Nothing to write home about as far as I could see. The equipment was old and the place was not clean. Hirtz challenged me to an incline bench press contest and did an impressive 340, beating me by five pounds. He has never let me forget that.

Then we drove to a smorgasbord in Santa Monica. All-you-can-eat for five bucks. The place lost money on St. John, but came out ahead on Ernie. He really did eat like a bird. Tom told us that the Muscle Beach Gym was in the building right around the corner from the restaurant, but it would be closed on Sunday. He said it was a co-op. The members paid fifteen dollars every quarter and they all had a key. The money was used to pay a Mexican to clean the place and to buy more equipment.

After Bill had finally consumed enough food to feed the population of Cuba, we headed out. Unfortunately, our timing was bad. Everyone else had also decided to go home too. It was bumper to bumper out of Santa Monica. As he had been for the entire trip, Ernie was sprawled out on the mattress in the bed of the El Camino.

Hirtz was impatient to be on his way and since this was impossible, he decided to entertain himself while we were stalled in the heavy traffic. He started slowly backing up toward the car right behind us. The driver of the car began blowing his horn to get Tom’s attention. Hirtz ignored him and continued to back up, ever so slowly, forcing the car to back up as well. Now the driver was leaning on the horn and he and the passenger in the front seat were leaning out their windows screaming at Ernie, as if he were the one responsible for this irresponsible behavior. After taking some of the abuse Ernie started banging on the window of the cab and shouting, “Cut it out Hirtz! You’re really pissing them off!”

And all their anger was being directed toward Ernie. Which was exactly what Hirtz wanted. The traffic moved and so did we. But only for a short distance, then the El Camino came to another halt, and Hirtz pulled the same stunt again. The reaction of the two passengers in the Mercedes Benz behind us got more pronounced. They were cursing Ernie and threatening to do him bodily harm.

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Ernie, in turn, was getting more and more frantic, hammering on the window and trying to reach around the cab to get his hands on Tom.

When Hirtz saw what Ernie was doing, he hit the gas pedal and Ernie went flying back to the bed of the car. Then he would back up again, almost touching the Mercedes' bumper, but not quite. I'm sure if one of the men in the car had a gun, they would have shot Ernie and probably everyone one of us in the cab.

Meanwhile, Bill and I were laughing so hard tears were running down our cheeks. After the third, of maybe it was the fourth of fifth, time Hirtz did his backing-up ploy, I said to him with a hoarse voice, "Maybe you should let up, Ernie's already pissed off with you."

"I can handle that big sissy," Tom said in a serious tone.

The absurdity of that remark sent all of us into another giggling fit. Suddenly, the gridlock ended and Tom sent the El Camino up the ramp and onto the freeway. The Mercedes pulled up beside him and the passenger leaned out of the car window and began calling Hirtz ever vile name under the sun, throwing in nasty things about his mother and his propensity for having sex with farm animals.

Tom just grinned at the furious man, waved and said, "Have a nice day."

The angry individual shot Tom the finger and the Mercedes roared past us and was soon out of sight.

Our plan was to go back to the hotel, get cleaned up, and then take a long nap. We were going to hit the nightlife on Sunset Boulevard and wanted to be well rested since we intended to stay there until the wee hours.

When we parked, Ernie got out of the back of the car and walked towards the hotel, not saying one word about the backing-up deal. I imagine that he figured if he got started, he wouldn't be able to control himself, and he didn't want to be the one to spoil the good times we were having.

After Tom and I showered and laid down, it took us a good half an hour to stop laughing about Ernie's expression going down the slide and his frustration at bearing the brunt of the verbal abuse from the two men in the Mercedes. But we finally did fall asleep.

We got to Sunset Boulevard soon after the sun went down. After driving along the strip, Tom said, "It's too early. I'm going to take you up to the top of Hollywood Hills. It has an amazing view of the coast."

The drive up to the summit was a twisting road with sharp curves and Tom seldom let off the gas. Bill and I were hanging on for dear life and still were being tossed from side to side like rag dolls. We could hear Ernie screaming from the back for Hirtz to slow down as he was being knocked from side to side even more violently than we were.

When we reached our destination, we all got out and right away, Ernie told Tom to slow down on the way back. He said it was all he could do to hold on to the sides of the truck bed to keep from being thrown out. Tom just grinned.

The view was everything and more than Tom had advertised. He pointed out the lights of downtown LA, Santa Monica, Marina del Rey, Malibu, and on the far southwest horizon, the islands of Catalina. We all stood there for a full fifteen minutes, enjoying the experience which in all likelihood, none of us visitors would ever see again.

Before we started back down the steep, twisting drive, Ernie made it a point to remind Tom to take it easy. Of course, by now you can guess what he did. It was like being in a Le Mans road race. Bill and I braced one hand on the roof of the cab and the other on the dashboard but it still felt like we were in a blender. When we hit flat land, I looked back to see how Ernie was doing. He wasn't moving at all and I wondered if he knocked himself out bouncing from side to side.

George Ernie Pickett

Tom never said a word as he drove up and down Sunset Boulevard checking out all the strip joints and those advertising exotic dancers. We couldn't decide which place to go into because they all looked basically the same. Finally, Bill suggested that we go into the Kit-Kat Klub. "It's amateur night," he said, "and amateurs always put more energy into their acts than pros."

With that settled, Tom parked the car and we got out. Ernie still hadn't moved. One look at him and I knew he had a serious case of motion sickness. His skin was a shade of green seldom seen on living humans. "You okay?" I asked him. Stupid question.

"I think I'm going to die," he muttered. "Go on without me. If I move I'm going to throw up."

I expressed my concern about leaving Ernie alone with so many odd characters moving up and down the sidewalk right next to the car. Hirtz insisted that he would be fine. "Nobody will bother him. Look at him. He's a behemoth. Let's go check the place out."

The three of us paid the cover, went inside, and found a table close to the stage. Everything appeared to be fairly new and it was surprisingly clean. But none of us were really interested in the decor, we were here to ogle the dancers. As one after another took their turn on the stage, I turned to Bill and said, "They're all nines or tens. Even the waitresses are foxes. I've never seen so many beautiful women in one place before."

Bill nodded in agreement and said, "We would have to go to fifty joints back east to find this many hot chicks."

After about twenty minutes, I said, "This isn't right. The main reason we came to this place was so Ernie could enjoy it. This is his kind of place. C'mon, let's go get him, even if we have to drag him in here."

When we got to the El Camino, we found that Ernie was now sitting up and had regained his normal skin color. I said to him, "You're looking better." He just nodded, so I went on, "You have to come in and see these women, Ernie. They put the dancers on the Block in Baltimore to shame. They're absolutely gorgeous and they're dozens of them."

We watched as Ernie ran that vision through his brain and he went through an amazing transformation. He started climbing out of the bed of the car. We helped him get to the sidewalk and led him back into the Kit Kat Klub. After he ordered his drink (two-drink minimum) he settled back and took in the sights. Soon he was smiling like a Cheshire cat and the motion sickness was a distant memory. Ernie adored attractive women and he was surrounded by a host of them. He thought an extremely beautiful female to be a work of art, so he was thoroughly enjoying himself. And now Bill, Tom, and I were as well because we were all together again. It felt right.

When the announcer got on stage and said that the amateur show would be next, he also asked for volunteers to judge the competition. Without the least hesitation, Hirtz shot out of his chair, ran up the steps to the stage and shook the announcer's hand.

"Wonder what he's up to now?" Bill asked the question that was also what Ernie and I were thinking.

We soon found out. After the ten contestants lined up in front of the stage, we watched as Hirtz, wearing shorts and a tank top, began going through a series of poses much like the bodybuilders at the Mr. USA Contest had done. He was off to the side and behind the ladies, but we could see him clearly. He was playing the fool for our benefit and it got the response he was seeking. All three of us were howling and the longer he went through his silly routine, the louder and harder we laughed.

It was a fitting climax to the most enjoyable trip I have ever taken. St. John says the same thing and I'm certain that Hirtz had a great time. But I'm not sure that Ernie had quite as much fun as the three of us.

George Ernie Pickett

Next: The Olympic Games in Mexico City

Thanks again to Bill St. John for his help with the details

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