

Starting Strength

George Ernie Pickett

by

Bill Starr

When I moved to York, from Marion, Indiana, in February of 1966 to become the assistant editor of *Strength & Health* magazine, there were only a few lifters who lived in town and trained at the world-famous York Barbell Club on Ridge Avenue. There was Tommy Suggs, the managing editor of *S&H*, Bill March, Tony Garcy, Homer Brannum, and Bob Bednarski. The latter had arrived just three months prior to my relocation.

Homer often trained at night, as did Tony, and March, at the time was taking some time off after the '65s Worlds. So most sessions found just Barski, Tommy, and me in the gym. We set about changing this. When we went to contests, we made it a point to tell as many lifters as possible to come to York for a workout. Better yet, come and live in York so that they could train at the YBC on a regular basis. If nothing else, come to York on Saturdays and train with Tony, Bill, Homer, Barski, and Tommy.

As word spread, as it always does through the iron grapevine, more and more lifters began showing up for those high-energy Saturday workouts. The three Allentown lifters: Gene Stefko, Gerald Moyer, and Bob Bartholomew began making the hundred-mile trek more frequently. Three from Maryland also began showing up on Saturdays and sometimes even during the week. Barry Whitcomb was in graduate school at the University of Maryland and a rising star in the 181-lb. class. Bill Andrews and Ernie Pickett trained together at the Baltimore YMCA and often shared a car for the drive to York on Saturdays. Bill didn't come as often as Ernie, and during the summer he moved to Connecticut and we didn't see him after that.

So the YBC became a great deal more active and the energy the lifters generated served to help everyone train with a greater intensity. This was what Barski, Tommy, and I were wanting to happen, and the more the merrier was our motto.

However, not everyone in the York organization was happy about this new influx of lifters in the gym. John Terpak and Mike Dietz did not like the idea at all. The policy that Terpak invoked with a strong hand was that if a visitor was not a member of the York Team, he could not train in the YBC Gym. Dietz and Terpak didn't want more lifters. More lifters meant that Hoffman would be spending more money on them and they both firmly believed that they had as much right to determine how the funds of the York Barbell Company were spent as Hoffman did.

So visiting lifters, some who had driven a very long distance just to take a workout in the gym, were turned away. Usually by John Terlazzo at the direction of Terpak. Tommy, Barski, and I decided

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to change this policy. Much to Terpak's chagrin I might add. We knew that Hoffman was unaware that lifters were being told they couldn't take a workout in the gym and that he wouldn't agree with this idea at all. Hoffman was always on the lookout for some new talent to add to the team. If he could have every top lifter in the country on the York roster, he would be delighted. At one point, further down the road, he did have 36, all of national caliber.

What Tommy, Barski, and I did was tell every lifter to come find one of us when they came to the York Barbell and we would see to it that they got to take a workout. Invariably, Terpak would find out that there was a non-member getting set to train, he would send Terlazzo downstairs to tell him he couldn't workout because he was not a member of the club. One of us would be there and inform John that we had contacted Hoffman and he said it was okay for the visitor to train. End of discussion. We knew that neither Terpak nor Terlazzo would bother checking in with Hoffman since they both knew exactly what he would say. And that was, "Sure, let him lift."

It was into this foggy climate that Ernie Pickett entered when he first began driving to York, from his home in Sykesville, Maryland, in the spring of '66. Ernie was a massive specimen, standing 6' 4" and weighing 285. He had recently been making some impressive gains and was on the verge of breaking into the upper echelon of the heavyweight class. He worked a giant lathe at the Continental Can Company and often put in a half day's work on Saturday before driving to York to train. At that time he drove a Volkswagen Beetle. He resembled a comedy skit when he unwound his huge body out of that little car in the parking lot.

All the lifters at York liked Ernie. He was easy going, modest, and quiet, and had a dry sense of humor that caught everyone off guard since he usually tried to stay in the background. Over the years, I got to know Ernie very well as we trained together and traveled to many contests up and down the east coast. He was one of my favorite characters in all of Olympic lifting. His rise to the top and his role in perhaps the greatest controversy in American weightlifting is the subject of this piece. This is part one, and I will continue it right up to and during the '68 Olympics in Mexico City.

Anyone who knew Ernie seven years earlier would never have, in their wildest dreams, predicted that he would eventually become one of the strongest men in the history of Olympic weightlifting and also become one of the top powerlifters in the world.

Most lifters of that era who made it to the pinnacle of the sport started out in their teens, but Ernie never touched a barbell until he was twenty-two. A friend, George Immerwahn, who at the time was the Maryland state heavyweight champion, convinced Ernie to start training with him at the Downtown YMCA in Baltimore. Ernie readily agreed because he wanted to pack some muscle onto his slender 185-pound, 6' 4" frame. Plus, he was in sad physical shape. He hadn't done anything in the way of physical activity since he had captained the basketball team at Mt. Airy High School. For the next few months, he either trained at the Downtown Y or at Dick Crimm's home gym. There weren't many options back then since Olympic bars were as scarce as hen's teeth.

His routine was basic, typical of programs in the fifties. It was built around the three Olympic lifts: press, snatch, and clean and jerk. He also did back and front squats and clean and snatch high pulls. He certainly could not be considered a prodigy. At his first workout, he only managed to press 115. His relative weak state didn't discourage him however. On the contrary, it motivated him to work even harder, and that inner determination that would eventually take him to the top began to display itself from the very onset.

Knowing that he needed to add bodyweight, he started ordering bottles of Energol and canisters of protein powder from York. Soon he was drinking several protein milkshakes a day and gulping down the nasty tasting Energol as well. The intake of the supplements and the consistent hard

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training started paying off. His bodyweight climbed to 200 pounds and all of his lifts were improving.

After two years of training, he took the plunge and entered a contest at the Baltimore Y. It couldn't be counted as a successful outing; not by a long shot. Since he had been pressing 205 regularly in training, he opened with that poundage. The bar wandered too far out front and his toes came off the platform. Three red lights. He had pressed the weight easily, so was given some ill-advised encouragement to jump to 215. He failed on his next two attempts.

Just about anyone else would have been devastated by bombing out in their first contest. Not Ernie. His poor showing only prompted him to train even harder. He had a point to make and he set about proving that he could do well in this sport.

A year later, he was a 230-pound heavyweight and the work in the gym paid off handsomely. He won the Maryland State title and also won the Best Lifter Award with a 260 press, 240 snatch, and 330 clean and jerk. The press was his favorite lift, which was true for a great many lifters in the sixties. Sometimes he trained at one of the Holiday Health Spas where he would do presses off the racks. However, he was not allowed to do snatches or cleans. After all, this was a spa.

During his first few years of competition, he would switch to doing bodybuilding exercises in the summer months. He enjoyed the change in routine and was successful in that sport as well. He placed third in Mr. Maryland and fifth in Mr. Southern States. He often boasted of that fifth place finish because he had beaten the current Mr. Maryland in the process. I always got the feeling that Ernie would have been just as happy winning physique titles as we did winning lifting trophies. One of the reasons he trained with weights was to improve his physique. He did like the ladies and he knew a pleasing physique attracted some fine looking women.

Soon after winning the state title, he read in *SC&H* that the Russian Olympic lifters always participated in some other sport for part of the year to improve their overall conditioning. Ernie decided to try wrestling at the Baltimore Y. It turned out to be a bad decision. At his very first workout with the other wrestlers, he was paired up with a huge individual, which Ernie described as "a fat heap of flesh." From the bottom position, Ernie easily rolled the blob over to pin him, thinking this wasn't so tough. But during the roll, all the weight from both of them crashed down on Ernie's right ankle and it broke in two places.

That injury kept him from doing any serious training and he was unable to defend his state title. It also forced him to use the split style in the snatch for a couple of years, and hindered his flexibility in his lower right leg for the rest of his lifting career.

Once he was able to put pressure on his damaged ankle, he started making gains in the press once again. He did 290, breaking the Maryland State record. Then someone told him about another lifter who also trained at the Y, but at different times from Ernie, who could press 300 for a double and was only a light heavyweight. Quickly, Ernie sought out this lifter. It turned out to be Bill Andrews, a national-caliber Olympic lifter who also owned the state record in the press and was a top-ranked powerlifter as well.

Bill was a great help to Ernie. It was the first time that Ernie had received any coaching from someone that really knew what he was doing. Bill taught Ernie the newer, more explosive style of pressing. This was the style that Tony Garcy had invented and the European lifters had copied and perfected. Previously, Ernie had merely driven the bar off his chest, then leaned back to complete the lift. Bill taught him how to whip the bar upward by using a powerful hip thrust, and then laying back instantly to finish the press.

It helped. His press began to move up steadily. This was also the time when isometrics were all the craze across the country and, like nearly every other competitive weightlifter in the U.S., Ernie

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gave them a try. He also found that when he power cleaned the weights for the presses, instead of squat cleaning them, he had more energy left for the presses.

Not all the advice Ernie got on his lifting turned out to be positive. He went to see Bruce Randall put on a demonstration at a Montgomery Ward in Baltimore. Bruce was a well-known strongman who made his living giving these exhibitions all across the country. A lot of strength stunts: blowing up hot water bottles until they burst, breaking chains by expanding his chest, one-handed lifts, and so forth.

Ernie, naturally, stood out in the crowd. Bruce spotted him right away and sent word that he'd like Ernie to visit with him in his dressing room after the show. Of course, Ernie was elated to be singled out to meet this authority on strength training.

The first thing Bruce asked Ernie was how much he could press. It was a standard question in those days since the press was considered the gauge of strength by every strength athlete. Ernie replied that he had recently done 310 and Bruce instantly launched into how Ernie was much too tall to excel in Olympic lifting. "And," Bruce added knowingly, "your arms are too long to ever be a good presser."

I have to believe that a number of lifters just getting into O-lifting might have heeded Bruce's advice and switched to another sport. Bruce was a nationally-recognized authority on physical culture, but all his remarks did was to encourage Ernie to work even harder to improve in the sport he had learned to love. He reasoned, and rightly so, that he had already improved his press by almost two hundred pounds since he started, so why couldn't he continue to push it upward?

As his bodyweight increased, so did the numbers on his lifts, especially his press.

In the spring of '66, Ernie started coming to York on a regular basis. He seldom missed a Saturday session and frequently made the trip from Baltimore once or twice during the week. He liked the competitive atmosphere in the York Gym and for the first time, he was getting some useful advice on his technique and training. And he was learning a great deal watching the more experienced lifters go through their routines.

Garcy and March in particular, were excellent models to observe when they pressed, snatched, cleaned, and jerked. Tommy and Barski provided him with some high-octane enthusiasm that he had never had before. Those two pushed Ernie to handle heavier and heavier poundages, and taught him how to do many new auxiliary movements. He thrived on the energy that was generated when Homer, Tony, March, Barski, and Tommy went through a Saturday session, which was much like a contest every week.

In May, he drove his VW to San Jose, California, and won the Junior Nationals with impressive lifts: 370 press, 300 snatch, and a 400 clean and jerk. All of his lifts and total were Junior National meet records. He weighed 283 and had qualified for his first Senior Nationals.

With this victory, Hoffman would have gladly made him a member of the York Team. Hoffman loved heavyweights and it was obvious that Ernie was on his way to becoming one of the best in that division. Barski, Tommy, and I urged Ernie to join the team. "Then you won't have to buy those supplements you use," Barski told him. Ernie was spending a great deal of money on protein powder and Energol, but money wasn't the factor. He made good money at The Continental Can Company. The main reason he didn't want to join the YBC was because he felt a loyalty to the Baltimore Y. That's where he had started and still trained, although much less than he did before, and he wasn't yet ready to jump ship.

That's how Ernie was. You didn't just change allegiance to an individual or an organization when a better deal came along. However, everyone at the YBC considered him one of the team, and between Tommy, Barski, and me, we began supplying him with all the protein powder and Energol that he needed. And he did need it. The protein shakes were critical to him in his quest to gain more

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bodyweight. He ate like someone who weighed 150 pounds, and he was a finicky eater. Food had to be prepared exactly right and he never ate leftovers. When he told me this, I thought he was kidding. Then I visited him and his fiancé Cheryl for a picnic several years later. We had ham, deviled eggs, corn on the cob, and watermelon. After we finished eating, Cheryl started gathering what was left on the table to take back to their apartment. When she picked up the ham, which we had hardly made a dent in, and started walking toward the dumpster, I shouted to her, “What are you doing?” It was inconceivable to me that she was going to throw about fifteen dollars worth of food away. But that was exactly what she intended to do. She stopped, turned to me and said, “Ernie will never eat it. He doesn’t eat leftovers.”

Guess who left with enough food to last a week.

The long drive back and forth across the country took its toll on Ernie at the Seniors. His bodyweight had dropped to 279 and his lifts were far below what he did at the Juniors. He pressed 360, but only made a 270 snatch and 380 clean and jerk. Tommy, weighing 222, made up a 40-pound deficit in the press by out-snatching Ernie by 35 pounds and clean and jerking five pounds more to tie his much heavier opponent with a 1010 total and beat him on bodyweight.

Coming in dead last in the heavyweight division didn’t sit well with Ernie. He decided that it was time for a layoff. It wasn’t just that he felt he was chronically overtrained, he was having a problem with his bodyweight. He didn’t like being so heavy. As they say, he was perched on the horns of a dilemma. Although he did enjoy competing and being successful in the sport, he didn’t like weighing 280 pounds. He believed that being so heavy made him unattractive to the opposite sex and a leaner appearance would help him pick up more beautiful ladies.

We didn’t see Ernie for a very long time. He saw no reason to drive to York since he wasn’t competing and he could easily do his bodybuilding routine at the Baltimore Y and the Holiday Health Spa. He did include the Olympic lifts in his program occasionally, just to stay in touch with them. He didn’t enter another Olympic contest until the South Atlantic Championships in March of ’67. While he had dropped the unwanted eighty pounds, he had lost all of his hard-gained strength. He totaled 200 pounds less than he had done in San Jose.

It was serious decision time. He could stay light, compete on the local level, and be able to date hot chicks. Or, he could gain back the lost weight and find out if he could become a top-ranked heavyweight once again. He chose the latter course and his lifts started to climb right away.

He decided to skip the ’67 Seniors in Columbus. He knew full well that he wasn’t ready to go up against Gubner, Schemansky, Barski, and the fast-emerging star from Jacksonville Florida, the 300-lb Joe Dube, who had been throwing up huge numbers lately, especially in the press.

While he went about packing on bodyweight with protein milkshakes and Energol as he had done before, he put most of his training energy into the power movements, rather than the Olympic lifts. He did bench presses and deadlifts, two movements rarely found in Olympic lifters’ routines. He also did lots of high pulls, heavy inclines, and back squats. This was a rather unusual approach to training for the overhead lifts, but he believed if he got considerably stronger, he would be able to convert the new power to the Olympic Three.

He quickly found that his theory was right. He still had the motor patterns for the three lifts, and as his overall strength increased, so did the numbers on the press, snatch, and clean and jerk. He only did the competitive lifts about once a week, just to see how he was progressing.

That summer, he entered the Junior National Powerlifting Championships, which were held in Memorial School, West Paterson, New Jersey. I lifted in that meet as well and it was the first time I’d seen Ernie since the ’66 Seniors. He did a 440 bench, 560 squat, and came through with a clutch 705

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deadlift to tie Jim Williams of Scranton, PA, to take the title. If you're thinking I listed the lifts in the wrong order, I didn't. In the early days of powerlifting, we benched first.

Then, fate intervened and two events changed Ernie's future in Olympic lifting. The biggest was that Barski dislocated his left elbow while fighting to save a snatch at the Pan-Am Games in Winnipeg, Canada on the 31st of July. The second was when he was asked to be a part of the show at the York Picnic in September.

To be continued...

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