

Starting Strength

SMITTY

by

Dr. Ken Leistner

Richard “Smitty” Smith died on August 27, 2014. I knew Smitty but I did not know him well. I spent time with Smitty but not a lot. I spoke with Smitty, not often but enough to pump useful and immediately applicable information out of him that assisted my lifting endeavors as it had with so many others. He visited my home and sat at my dinner table but I am perhaps not qualified to be the one to speak of his contributions and what he meant to the sport of Olympic weightlifting and the York Barbell Club for so many years. However I have concerns that he will not be remembered, not be appreciated, and will not be given his place in the sport’s history, a place that he deserves and has earned. The York Barbell Company Facebook page posted this on August 28, 2014:

“It is with very heavy hearts that we announce that legendary Coach Dick ‘Smitty’ Smith has passed away on Wednesday August 27th. I had the pleasure to meet him on 2 occasions and talk with him on life and lifting. His love for the sport and love for York Barbell will never be outshine [sic]. RIP Smitty”

This was followed by five comments. I do not own a cellular telephone and do not have the first clue how social media works. I don’t know how to get to a Facebook page or Twitter message but was guided to the comment or posting above by my wife. I read this and was literally sickened. A man who gave so much to the sport and who gave so much specifically to the York Barbell Club and Company over the course of decades was reduced to a remembrance of four sentences and a week following his death, there were but five comments. In a world that attracts millions of hits and just as much commentary for a posted video of a kitten chasing a ball of string, this is disheartening and insults the memory of a man who was the epitome of dedication. As I noted, I know that I am not the one to comment on the life of Dick Smith but he deserves a lot more than what he has been given by the company that he served for decades. “Served” is the operational term for this man, who also served his country in the United States Army during World War II, was dedicated to weight training, weightlifting, strength, and everything that the lifestyle stood for. He gravitated to weight training, the York Barbell Club, and as a friend of Bill March prior to associating with what was then the center of the United States weightlifting scene, he became embedded within it. He was Vern Weaver’s training partner and became a keen observer of the lifting done by all of the famed Olympic lifters who utilized York as their headquarters.

Smitty

I know that some observers at York may not have understood Smitty's role in the grand scheme of things but keep the word "service" in mind. His ability to observe, listen, and learn took him from the job he held to employment at York Barbell Company. Some on the outside believed him to be a "Go-Fer" and an insignificant part of the success of the team's many lifters. The public presentation was that all knowledge, coaching, and direction emanated from Bob Hoffman as the leader and fountain of knowledge of this successful band of athletes, but in truth, most of the fellows were left to figure things out for themselves and working with each other went a long way towards winning championships. The group atmosphere, the group-think approach, and the group coaching method was the key, and Smitty, with his sharp instinct for what would work in the gym and on the competition platform, was a catalyst for York's success. He did it all for many of the lifters - including "Go-Fer" work - and he never hesitated. He was there to push everyone forward, including local young guys like Donnie Warner who listened and learned, to the greats like Bob Bednarski, Lee James, and of course, Bill March. Smitty is known as "the guy who drove March on the 180-mile round trip four times a week" so that the latter could learn, receive instruction, and yes, be part of the first anabolic steroid and isometric training experiments of Dr. John Zeigler. However, visiting lifters, great lifters, and international lifters sought out Smitty because he was the guy "who knew" and was willing to share what he knew with everyone who could possibly benefit from his knowledge.



Dick Smith gave superb post-training critique and advice to a younger Ken Leistner, the same type of advice he freely gave to the greats of the York Barbell Club.

Among the old gang of York lifters, one would be hard pressed to find any who would utter a critical or negative word about Smitty. He was beloved by many and respected by all, a man who shared and held secrets in confidence, the one who boosted the confidence and lifting totals of so many, and one that certainly was the man behind the scenes of so many successful lifters. He served the sport and its participants unselfishly. He asked for little in return. He deserved better during life, and his memory deserves more than has been received. Dick "Smitty" Smith was one of the really good guys and great minds of the sport.

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