

Starting Strength

“Starr Light, Starr Bright, Starr Gone”

Bill Starr announcing he was leaving Strength & Health Magazine

by

Marty Gallagher

Bill Starr is dead. He was an important figure in my life. As a young nobody from nowhere, I began reading *Strength & Health* magazine every month, cover-to-cover, starting in July of 1963 when, as 13-year old athlete, I worked up enough nerve to fork over 50-cents to the old guy that owned the newsstand. I was petrified he would think I was a weirdo pervert because there was a bodybuilder posing on the cover and I was NOT a bodybuilder and this was 1963, an unenlightened era when it came to bodybuilding acceptance. I was an athlete/lifter and I was ready to tell the old guy behind the counter exactly that if he smirked or challenged me. He could have cared less.

At the time I started reading *S&H*, the magazine was stale and stodgy and dated; run by old white men stuck in their glory days of the 30s and 40s and trying to hold back the hands of time in the tumultuous 60s. The Weider bodybuilding revolution was just starting to gain traction and the power players at York knew they needed to modernize if they were going to survive.

The egomaniacal Bob Hoffman made the mistake of handing the magazine steering wheel over to a succession of young upstarts. These men were super smart, forward thinking and athletically credentialed. Three men ignited a revolution: Terry Todd, Tommy Suggs and Bill Starr. These guys were young, hip, strong as shit, had college degrees, were great writers and enthusiastic as hell about the subjects they wrote on; they provided badly needed fresh perspective.

Todd was a Ph.D., a college-level tennis player, and a pioneer powerlifter. Todd won national titles and set national records; he was a terrific writer and hung out with the right people. Todd knew how to ask the right questions. His *S&H* training/bio articles on strength phenomenon Paul Anderson were seminal, instructive and wove tales of power with excellent instruction; mythical feats were interspersed with how Anderson trained to get so ungodly strong. For a sixteen year old intent on improving his own game, these tips and tactics were pure nectar of the Gods.

Tommy Suggs was critical: when Todd left, Suggs was given the reins. He too was an outstanding Olympic weightlifter and a national champion. Another Texan that could write, Suggs was all about the training, and his lifter profiles and training articles molded my young brain. Suggs brought Starr onboard, and Starr and Suggs together were magical.

The young guns “triangulated” brilliantly: in the mid-sixties, at one extreme stood the ultra-conservative York conglomerate, old people pushing weights and supplements, the magazine was stuck

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in the 40s and boring as hell. York hated bodybuilding and bodybuilders, but wanted their business and their disposable income. At the other extreme was the carnival circus approach of Weider. Joe Weider pushed bodybuilding and subscribed to the “Big Lie” theory in his Go-Go advertising touting Weider equipment, Weider supplements and the “Weider bodybuilding lifestyle.”

The reality was that the young guns at York worked for the ultra-conservatives and needed to make the best of it; they certainly had a low opinion of Weider and his deceptive advertising practices, so the logical solution was to create a magazine that was positioned (editorially) halfway between each extreme: the young guns killed with content. Open *S&H* magazine in the mid-to-late 60s and the flagship piece, the leadoff article, was an ongoing series called Keys to Progress, penned by the greatest writer in fitness history, John “Mac” McCallum.

Mac set the tone: rational, realistic, commonsense and funny as hell, he always wove a humorous or heroic tale into a progressive resistance solution. This formula, and Mac’s James Thurber writing style, created a cult following. The thing was, those that followed Mac’s advice got real results; tangible, measurable, mathematically verifiable results, more muscle, more strength, a renovated body. His methods worked: he was the first to champion the superiority of the 5-rep set, Mac got us eating big to support big lifting; he championed squats above all else and his strength and size strategies are still in use to this day. He was a visionary that wrote like an angel after three whiskeys.

The magazine would always contain one or two informative and instructive lifter profile articles, again mixing tales of athletic prowess with how-to-do instruction. Naturally there would be profile/training articles on various AAU bodybuilders. Hoffman would shamelessly tout York products and *S&H* featured a lot of terrific non-Weider affiliated bodybuilders: Bill Pearl, Reg Park, the AAU Mr. America winners and the NAABA Mr. Universe bodybuilders.

Todd changed the direction, and Suggs amped up the quality before Starr came aboard. Suggs successfully renovated the format. With terrific Olympic weightlifting photos from Everill Taggart and superb art work from Gilbert, the York magazines, *S&H* and a little later, *Muscular Development*, were, during the mid-to-late sixties, the finest source of progressive resistance information on the planet.

Bill Starr was talented, combative, funny, smart, well read, and ultimately iconic; he was a true radical. First and foremost, he was an athlete, a national level weightlifter, a man that cleaned 445-pounds weighing 219. He was no armchair quarterback; Starr saw everything through the eyes of an athlete. And that is why true athletes loved him: he always retained his purity; he was untainted, idealistic, never whoring out for financial gain. He was a romantic idealist that was bound to enter into conflict with the staid, grey, strange and insular world of York and Hoffman and Terpak and Dietz.

By the time Starr arrived at York, I was a committed Olympic weightlifter and rabid reader of the magazine. Bill Starr was the youngest, hippest, best writer with great athletic street cred. Starr was dropped right into the middle of the “York Gang” and with typewriter blazing began interfacing with Tommy Suggs, John Grimek, Bill March, Gary Gubner, Bob Bartholomew, Dr. John Gourgett, Tony Garcy, Olympic champion Norbert Schemansky and a little later Bob Bednarski.

These men were the cream of American Olympic weightlifting, and Starr was the chronicler. Because both he and Tommy Suggs were national level competitors, when they profiled lifters they asked penetrating, probing and substantive questions; the lifter routines were pure gold and what we in the boondocks based our own training on. The training information was priceless.

Bob Bednarski was a pivotal figure. Starr made his literary bones chronicling the exploits of “Barski,” the great American Olympic weightlifter whose dramatic, near miraculous ascension was followed by an equally precipitous crash and burn. Bednarski, with a little help from Dianabol, metamorphed himself from good-looking, whippet-lean, lightning-fast 180-pound teenage phenomenon

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into a charismatic 250-pound world weightlifting champion and world record holder. Starr's articles on Bednarski, the man, his training, his travels, triumphs and travails, made for fabulous fodder; Starr was James Boswell to Samuel Johnson: Starr was Bednarski's biographer, friend, cheerleader and co-conspirator.

I read every word that Starr wrote and followed 90% of his advice for years. I was a teenage American Olympic weightlifter and Bill Starr was my leader; he was the mentor, the elder statesman of the "youth revolution." We had a counterculture takeover of American Olympic weightlifting, commencing with Starr's tenure at *Strength & Health* magazine and peaking three years later in 1968. For a long period, it appeared that strictly through his efforts, American Olympic weightlifting and American Olympic weightlifters were ready, willing and able to challenge the rest of the world for international dominance.

It seemed that hip young American athletes, anti-establishment types, malcontents, radicals, exponents of the youth counter-culture would, in a miracle of wonderment, smite the totalitarian communist weightlifters while simultaneously sticking a thumb in the eye of, first, Lyndon Johnson, and then Richard Nixon. Make no mistake about it: Bill Starr was a counter-culture radical operating within an athletic context instead of a political context.

Starr's tenure at York was doomed from the beginning; he became more radicalized while Hoffman went so far the other direction that he purchased a park in York and named it "The Richard Milhous Nixon Memorial Park," his way of sticking his establishment thumb in the eye of the counter-culture. Starr related some salacious stuff: he wrote that powerlifting was actually accepted into the Olympic Games in 1968 and Hoffman went behind the scenes and killed the idea because he did not want to have to fund the travel for two United States teams. Is this true? No way of knowing. Starr was certainly in a position to be privy to this type of incendiary insider information.

Ultimately, optimally, at his best, Starr was an athlete in search of eternal progress; he was all about the pursuit of progress; Starr pondered progress. How best do we stimulate physical progress when none exists? How do we create momentum out of inertia? What can the experienced athlete do when stagnation sets in? He thought long and hard about how to get better, how to improve, as an Olympic weightlifter. His musings and his shifting training emphasis alerted us (living in the sticks) as to the latest cutting-edge thinking amongst the iron elite. He was an insider and knew everyone and we lived for the release date of the next monthly issue of whatever publication he was writing for at the time.

When Starr casually mentioned in an *S&H* gossip column in 1967 that all the York lifters had started doing heavy, weighed dips to increase their overhead pressing power, and that their triceps had gotten so huge that they all started cutting off their sleeves to show off their "guns," we immediately made heavy weighted dips our number 1 press assistance exercise.

I worked dips hard and when I was able to perform 10 strict dip reps with 100-pounds strapped to my 195-pound body, I finally overcame my press lockout problem and pressed 200 for 10 reps (clean & press) and in that same cycle set a Junior Olympic national press record of 260 as a 17-year old 198-pound class lifter. The point being, Starr's tips worked. We knew they worked and we couldn't wait for him to relate some new progress-stimulator that we could incorporate into our own training.

He would ruminate on enumerable training topics; he was nutritionally very sophisticated and ahead of his time; he explored outside avenues as potential progress inducers; he was big into "bio-rhythms" (plotting three separate factors) and vitamin supplementation; he was frank about drugs and was simultaneously open-minded yet skeptical. Again, as befits a man who had seen and done what he had. Starr was a thinker, he mused on politics and personalities and he did not suffer fools lightly. To

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say that he was highly opinionated would be a massive understatement – and why would a man with half-a-century of dedication towards a single endeavor *not* have, and be entitled to, strong opinions on his life's work and his life's focus?

We need to hear the opinions and musings of a man like Starr, someone that has pondered the Rubik's Cube of progress for five decades. He truly was a lifting monk, particularly late in life. Please read Jimmy Steel's beautiful piece on Starr's late in life groove. With his impeccable athletic credentials, his firebrand writing style, he developed a cult following. Starr, to me, was the wise, super-hip older brother I never had; he led by example. He reinforced our natural rebellious tendencies and kept telling us that it was all right to reject societal sameness; we did not have to "take it" from "The Man," and that resonated with my rebellious side.

By the time the 1968 National Championships rolled around, the youth movement had become a tidal wave and Starr was the orchestra maestro: Jack Hill, Peter Rawluck, Steve Zeigman, Fred Lowe, Jack Hise, Rick Holbrook, Tom Hirtz, Phil Grippaldi, Frank Capsouras, Gerry Ferrelli, Bednarski and Joe Dube to name just a few – all under 25 years of age and all capable of competing internationally. That event was the Woodstock of American Olympic weightlifting and a total athletic triumph. At the time it seemed predestined that American youth culture would take over the weightlifting world in a storybook ending where the righteous smite the Orks. Then the wheels fell off the bus.

In an instant, everything went sour. Suddenly Starr was exiled; cut loose and cast out, he became a vagabond Ronin Samurai warrior. The promise of the York dream had turned to ashes and vinegar in his mouth: it must have felt as if defeat had been snatched from the jaws of utter and complete victory. Had the youth movement not self-imploded, had they delivered on their promise, Bill Starr would have been the man that saved American Olympic weightlifting.

Instead of salvation, the bubble burst. Who knew that '68 was the high water mark of American Olympic lifting, and that from June 8th, 1968 forward, weightlifting in America would die a slow and protracted death. This dissolution of the sport he so dearly loved must have been heartbreaking. He was such an eloquent communicator of the benefits and advantages of Olympic lifting, done right, its demise and relegation into obscurity must have crushed him.

Starr and his personality fit the late 60s and early 70s like a glove. I idolized him from afar and crossed his path at Gonzaga High School in May of 1968, a month before the Nationals. Bob Bednarski and Bill March, the York terminator lifters, were using the regional championships as a tune-up for the Nationals in June. I trained at Gonzaga and had a backstage pass. I hung out in back as Starr coached the lifters. I sure as hell knew who Starr was; I had read him for years and idolized him.

I was so flustered I couldn't speak. To me, he was equal to John Lennon or Keith Richards. And now I was backstage with all the guys I'd read about. I mumbled to Starr that I was a local and would get them, the York guys, anything they needed. When he slapped my shoulder and smiled I thought I would faint away, like a fourteen-year-old girl at a Beatle concert.

I got them ice, coffee, and for Bill March, endless giant cokes. Bednarski set his first world record that night with a 451-pound overhead press. I was in Nirvana. That night I saw Bednarski and March have words, and I seriously thought March might go after "Barski." My money would have been on March, who later tried out for the Baltimore Colts as a running back, and almost made the team.

At the time, Bednarski was much taken with Ali, and was into trash-talk. Bill March was an old school dude who took it personally and was like, "Hey, I have an idea! Why don't you and me head

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out to the parking lot for a minute and we'll settle this shit." Starr interceded. I got the feeling this went on a lot.

I watched silently in amazement as real men, iron icons, set world records, I watched alpha males in action onstage and backstage; I saw them butt heads; it was a life lesson for me. A few years later our paths crossed again. Starr had left *Strength & Health* and then had short stints with Weider and then Perry Rader at *Lifting News*. He never got traction with either: we all had high hopes when he took over as editor at *Lifting News*, but the word was Perry Rader, whom we all loved, was unable to pay a livable wage.

The next we heard Bill was in Hawaii working as a strength coach. This seemed a damned good match: the crazy-ass counter-culture longhaired headband wearing Bill Starr, coaching aboriginal, strong as hell, crazy-ass Hawaiians that loved him and his wacky ways. It was a productive time for him as he came out with *The Strongest Shall Survive*, his iconic football book, a good read to this day.

He ended up back in Maryland in the 1980s. Bill Starr's brother Don was a damned good powerlifter and put on powerlifting competitions in rural Maryland. Mark Challiet, myself, and our contingent of 10 or so lifters from metro DC (and that number again of hangers-on) would routinely make trips to northern Maryland to compete at Don's competitions.

On one memorable occasion, one of Don's power competitions, Starr, powerlifting world champion Hugh Cassidy and myself retired to Hugh's truck in the parking lot between the squats and bench presses. A spiff was passed as I sat in the back seat, shut up and listened. Starr had shoulder length hair and was already grey-haired; he had pallid skin and sharp extended nails on his right hand (he was finger-picking guitar at the time and let them grow as picks) giving the appearance of a muscular vampire, in cut-offs and a wife-beater t-shirt.

He and Cassidy talked about an article in *Scientific American* on various colored lighting and its effect on human performance. Starr kept bringing up the *I Ching* while Hugh related that he seemed to get the best workouts when bathed in a blue light bulb. I was agog and speechless and had nothing to add.

I was later to see this for myself. One afternoon I traveled to Cassidy's Liar to meet the boys for a training session and there was Cassidy, dumbbell pressing in his Fred Muenster basement, with a pair of 80s in the seated overhead press, in his underwear, bathed in a blue light from a lone bare bulb – this while listening to mournful Hank Williams on the radio. As I stepped down into the basement and gazed at this, I was respectful; he was lost in rep reverie, repping with alternate arms, eyes closed, lost in the exertion and feeling the music. It was Whirling Dervish Sufism strategies applied to modern American progressive resistance training.

Starr was cut from the same divine cloth as Hugh: a freethinker that effortlessly thought outside the box because he lived his whole life outside the box. Starr was a Man's Man who had an inability to compromise. This left him pure, untainted and unpolluted by commercialism. And he was the poorer for it. He suffered for his art and never turned the financial corner; a crime against humanity, given how many fraudsters flourish in "fitness."

He maintained his enthusiasm for the barbell and progress and never tired of pondering the eternal dilemma of how best to spark physical transformation. He was a serious writer with a serious point of view and loads of empirical knowledge to back up his contentions: his people got results, his methods and methodology birthed many a national and world champion, both in Olympic weightlifting (his truest passion) and powerlifting. He was a realist, an athlete, a thinker and a visionary. He will be missed. Especially by me.

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Marty Gallagher has been a national and world champion masters powerlifter and is widely considered one of the best writers in the iron game. Since 1978 he has written over 1000 articles published in a dozen publications. He has authored more than 100 articles for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and produced 230 weekly [live online columns](#) for the Washington Post. Gallagher has coached some of the biggest names in powerlifting and witnessed some of the greatest strength feats of the last half century. If you like his style pick up a copy of his masterwork, *The Purposeful Primitive*.

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