

Starting Strength

Wanna Bet?

by

Bill Starr

When I moved from Marion, Indiana, to York in late February of 1966, to take over the position of assistant editor of *Strength & Health* to work with the managing editor, Tommy Suggs, I was definitely the low man on the totem pole in the York Gym. While I had won some regional meets, such as the Ohio Valley Championship and the Southern and Southwestern Collegiates, my credentials didn't even come close to my new teammates. All of them had won national titles and Bill March and Tony Garcy had been in several international competitions, including the world championships and the Olympic Games.

This didn't come as a surprise. I knew all of their accomplishments and had trained with Homer Brannum at the Dallas Y and competed with and against Tommy when we lived in Texas. I had also visited the York Gym on summer vacations and had trained there previously. I knew exactly where I stood in the pecking order and it didn't bother me in the least. I had been in this position before – when I entered SMU and began training with Sid Henry and the rest of the Dallas Y team, I was still a novice and everyone else was ahead of me. Except maybe Mike Puddington, who was also just starting out in the sport. And when I went to the Irving Park Y in Chicago to train I was once again the least accomplished lifter in the weight room, since that was where Clyde Emrich, Fred Schultz, Chuck Nootens and many other seasoned veterans worked out.

In fact, I preferred training with lifters who were better than I was. During my three years as Youth Director at the Marion Y, I was the one with the most experience and served as coach for the other lifters in town. I made very little progress during that time, yet in the one year that I was in Chicago, competing and training against greater talent, I put fifty pounds on my total and improved all of my lifts in the process. Competitors, I believe, need to train in highly competitive atmospheres if they wanted to improve. While this isn't true for everyone, I felt it was for me.

So I welcomed the challenge and tried to soak up as much information as I possibly could in my early days at York. However, I was also engrossed in learning how to do my new job, and that took up a considerably amount of time and energy for the first couple of months. I did have some experience in journalism: sports editor of my high school newspaper, a column for the base newspaper when I was stationed in Iceland, and I also put out a newsletter on weightlifting along with Herbie Glossbrenner at the Marion Y. It was called *Lifter's Platform* and was all about Olympic lifting in the Hoosier State. Basically, I mimicked the format of *S&H*, the most popular muscle magazine in the country. While the newsletter would be read by a couple of dozen lifters, *S&H* would have thousands

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of readers, so the scale of perfection was raised to a much higher level. I had to learn how to rewrite an article, and some appeared to be submitted by elementary school children. I quickly discovered that editing was a whole different ballgame than proofing. However, this task was most enjoyable since I was enamored with Olympic weightlifting in particular and physical culture in general.

Early on, I watched and kept my mouth shut for the most part. There was so much to learn that I felt as if I had been thrust into a post-graduate course on the O-lifts. Contrary to what I believed about the York Barbell Club, there were no coaches, or even advisors for that matter. Homer, Tommy, March, Garcy, and new arrival Bob Bednarski trained themselves, and each had a unique routine totally unlike that of their teammates. Yet I had been in such a situation before. At the Irving Park Y, Emrich, Nootens, and Schultz did programs specifically designed for their own particular needs. What I did was try to find some common principles in the various programs being done in the York Gym, but mostly I studied form. That was what my lifting needed more than just pure strength at the time. I figured I could get stronger through more work, but to make changes in technique requires more than just effort.

For a competitive athlete to continuously improve in any sport, he must test himself against others on a regular basis. Not just at contests, but in training sessions as well. I knew that I thrived on competition, but there was no way I could challenge any of the York lifters since they were just too far ahead of me. I didn't make many contributions to the atmosphere of the York Gym early on, except for one: I brought betting to the workouts. Not that this was an original idea. I borrowed it from Sid Henry, who used it to elevate his own improvement with great success.

Sid was a strict Catholic and he never allowed any off-color jokes or profanity in the Dallas Y weight room. Betting, however, was a different story. It was a vital part of the training sessions. The small weight room had a record board where the top lifts in all the classes were recorded plus one column for the best overall lifter according to the Hoffman formula. The bets were for cartons of milk, which could be purchased from a vending machine in the lobby of the Y for a dime. No one actually bought the winner of a bet the carton of milk. They were merely used as collateral and recorded on a second blackboard on the wall behind the platform. I recall that at one point Sid owed several hundred cartons of milk to Gerald Travis, who had a knack of being able to goad Sid into lopsided bets. That's what Sid wanted, to be pushed beyond his normal limits. If he saw one of us struggling, he'd lay down a bet to get us out of our funky state, and if a teammate was having one of those great days, Sid would bet him so as to encourage him to go after a personal best.

The goal of all the Dallas lifters was to knock Sid out of the formula column on any of the listed lifts. No one, of course, could come close to beating him head to head, but the formula allowed us to have a shot at bettering him on one lift. When someone, usually Gerald, knocked him out of the number one spot, he would come back at the following workout to take it back. I never met a greater competitor than Sid Henry and his spirit rubbed off on the rest of us.

Only once did I have the opportunity to bump my mentor and friend off the formula column, and it damn near sent me and my spotter to the emergency room. Sid was an engineer and he designed a rack that could be used for a variety of exercises. It consisted of two four-by-fours set on a 45° angle. Holes were drilled at intervals on the front sides of the lumber. These were staggered so the wood wouldn't split. Metal pins were placed in these holes and they could be moved up and down the rack to allow the lifter to do front and back squats, presses, jerks, incline and flat benches.

At one session my jerks were really clicking, I equaled my best, 325, and was happy with that, Sid wasn't. He encouraged me to go after the Hoffman formula record, which meant I needed to do 340. I wasn't that eager to try that amount on this night. I had already done my cleans and presses

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and was at the end of an hour and a half session. When I said I was going to pass on that idea, Sid and Gerald began prodding me to go for it and began running up the odds on a bet. When they got to 10:1, I was tempted, but still refused to go after the 340. But when Mike Puddington, the only other lifter still training with us said, “Put me down for ten milks. Easy money,” my blood got hot. “Okay,” I told them, “ten milks at ten to one. Load the bar.”

Sid and Gerald chuckled at they loaded the bar and made sure the collars were extra tight in the event I missed. Now my adrenaline was soaring. If I won this bet, I would have enough betting fodder to last me at least a year.

I racked the weight across my shoulders and took one step back, just enough so that I wouldn't hit the rack when I dipped for my jerk. I got set and put as much charge into the jerk as I possibly could and the bar flew to arms length. But it was a bit forward and off to the right, which made me take a quick step to that side to save it. My outer right thigh hit the upright and I had nowhere to go. When the weight started descending I maintained my grip, hoping to slow it down some. That didn't work so well with that much weight.

Sid and Gerald were spotting me on either side, but the bar fell like a guillotine with the right side coming down faster than the left. It flashed through my mind what was going to happen next and I released my grip and jumped as high as I could. It was probably the highest I ever leaped in my life, and it was fortunate that I did.

When the bar struck the right upright, the wood acted like a giant bow, gave a fraction, then hurled the weighted bar out into the room like a missile – a very dangerous missile in such close quarters. The bar shot under my feet as the bar swung away from the rack and turned in an arc. Gerald and Sid did as I had done and jumped high in the air and the weights flew across the room toward the back of the area where we trained, rather than toward the platform, which was a lucky break for Mike. He had such poor eyesight that he would never have been able to react in time to save himself. The runaway bar crashed into a couple of benches and weight trees and rolled to the far wall.

After the initial fright passed from our close call, we started laughing and commending each other on our quick responses to the danger. Mike said he thought I should try it again, but I'd had enough for one night. My heart was still in my throat on my drive home.

Most bets, however, didn't deal with personal records on singles or when a lifter went after a spot on the record board. They occurred during the normal workouts and dealt with fives and triples, and sometimes even much higher reps. They were based on the “spot” system that allowed all the lifters to compete on an equal basis. If, for example, I wanted to bet Gerald on power cleans for five reps and his best was 285 while mine was 245, he had to spot me forty pounds.

In this way, an ordinary ho-hum session was quickly transformed into a highly-competitive event. Sid was a firm believer that the more a lifter was forced to compete, the better he would be when the chips were down at a contest. I agree completely, and knew without any doubt that these betting sessions enabled me not only to get stronger on the basic exercises and three competitive lifts, they also enhanced my competitive spirit and confidence.

So I brought the idea to the York Barbell Club. Certainly it was nothing new for lifters to bet; Ike Berger was so notorious a better that the other strength athletes dubbed him “Betcha Berger.” But that wasn't happening at the YBC at the time I arrived there and I got it going again – primarily, I fully admit, for my own benefit. I needed every bit of help I could get to elevate myself to a high level in the sport.

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Not everyone was hot for the idea; Garcy never bet, but part of the reason for that was he seldom trained with the rest of the team. Same for Homer. He worked swing shifts and we seldom saw him except for Saturday workouts. Tommy was a cunning better and would fix the spots in his favor if he possibly could. March was a great better. However, I never made one with him because I knew that he, like Sid, had the ability to dig deep into his reserves at will. Bednarski loved to bet and could be talked into almost any spot, because he liked to push himself to new limits at every session if possible.

Russ Knipp was another avid better, and when he was in York to prepare for some contest he and Barski would bet on just about every exercise they both did that day. At York, the bets were for protein milkshakes from the dairy bar. They cost a quarter but were worth their weight in gold in a contest. While this may sound silly, a lifter would damn near kill himself to win a bet. This was because the victor could claim his prize whenever he chose to do so. It didn't have to happen right after the workout. It could be obtained weeks later and it usually came about when there was a group of lifters present. Then the winner of the contest would tell the loser that he would like his milkshake now. That was like rubbing salt in a wound.

On occasion, the loser would refuse to go get a milkshake he owed, and for that he was ostracized from the betting game. Eventually, everyone did pay up because they all realized the value of being pushed harder and didn't want to lose that advantage, even though it was embarrassing to have to buy a milkshake and deliver it to someone who was not nearly as strong as you were. But that made the loser work twice as hard at his next bet. Which was the real purpose of the game in the first place.

Some of those who only came to York to train occasionally often got very offended by the way the regulars got so geared up for these bets, feeling as if we were trying to belittle them. This was not the case at all. What we were trying to do was use the enthusiasm of training in the York Gym to our advantage. And when they got into the spirit of the game, they had amazing workouts. It was nothing more than a motivational tool to get everyone stronger. All who trained at York, whether they were rank novices or seasoned veterans, were extremely competitive and none liked the idea of losing a bet. So a workout that started out rather mediocre in intensity could be instantly invigorated with a bet. The end result was a stimulating session where all parties benefited.

Bill March seldom got into the betting idea and when he did bet it wasn't for a milkshake. It had to be at least a dollar. And the only person who ever challenged him was Bednarski. Bill always accepted any bet from Bob. This was a natural rivalry. Before Bednarski moved to York, March was the king of the hill and was Hoffman's main man when it came to holding demonstrations. At one point, Bill was doing five a week. But when Bednarski came on the scene, he was Hoffman's choice for any exhibitions or demonstrations. In short, he had replaced March as Hoffman's golden boy and even though he never said a thing about it, it stung.

One afternoon, Bednarski, Tommy, Roman Mielec and I were sitting in the York Gym. We had walked over to Sunshine Corner for coffee, and in the case of Tommy and Bob, a cheeseburger to provide fuel for our noon workouts. The gym was dark and we were just killing time to avoid going back to work when March came out of the warehouse. He, along with Bednarski and Roman, had been mixing protein and he was covered with protein powder. He either didn't notice us or pretended that he didn't and walked over to the squat rack which had a loaded barbell on it that weighed 350. He stood studying it for a long moment while we all sat very quietly, curious as to what he had in mind. Bill stepped into the stair case rack, took the bar off the rack, stepped back, and tried to press it. It stuck just above his head and then came crashing down on the second level racks. Without a word or any gesture, he went out the side door.

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Bednarski was excited, “Did you see that? How in the world did he expect to press that much weight cold?” he asked no one in particular. Tommy replied, “Because he’s March.” Bednarski said nothing, but from his expression it was clear that he figured he had an edge over Bill for a bet at the afternoon workout.

Bednarski, Tommy, and I were doing presses off the rack when Bill came in carrying a box of food. It always amazed me that both he and Bednarski could devour huge quantities of greasy food, usually meatball subs, and gulp down Cokes during a training session. It made my stomach queasy just watching them eat. Tommy and I topped out at 300, then Bednarski loaded the bar to 350 and blew it up easily. March was busy eating, but said to Bob, “That looked heavy.” This was exactly what Bednarski was hoping for.

“Well, I’ll bet you can’t do it.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Bill said calmly. “What’s a you wanna bet? And don’t say a damn milkshake. I’m talking real money.”

Bednarski didn’t hesitate, “Anything you want,” he said in an exuberant tone.

March considered the matter for a long moment then announced, “Five bucks.”

This was an unheard of wager, but Bednarski agreed instantly, shaking March’s hand to seal the deal. Bill took another bite out of his sub, chased it with a swig of Coke, strapped on a lifting belt over his work clothes, took the bar off the rack and elevated the 350 smoothly overhead. Bednarski was dumbfounded – he knew he had been suckered into the bet. He ranted and raved and accused Bill of tricking him. All Bill said, “It was you that brought up the bet, not me. Now pay up.”

Bednarski did pay, because it was a cardinal sin to welsh on a bet. But he stayed wary about making any sort of bet with March from that day on. No one enjoyed betting more than Bednarski. He, even more so than the rest of us, used betting to gear up his workouts. We could often talk him into some outrageous bet where he had to do 20 or 30 more pounds than his previous best on some exercise, and he would usually win. Steve Stanko once bet him that he couldn’t do a one-hand snatch with a world record; he made it rather easily and made sure he got credit for the world record.

Stanko also liked to bet, but because of his phlebitis the only exercises he could do were those for the upper body. Ever so often he would bring out the Weaver Stick, and bet anyone in the gym that he could beat them. The stick was made of thick wood and was six feet in length. At the end of it a piece of clothesline was attached and at the other end of the clothesline a plate or couple of plates were tied to it. The lifter would extend the stick to arm’s length and try to lift the weight off the floor and bring it up to a parallel position. This required a great deal of wrist and forearm strength. I tried it once just to find out what I could do, knowing that it wouldn’t be much. My wrists are small and about as strong as a Girl Scout, so the most I could manage was ten pounds. Others did much better, but no one came close to Stanko. Since we all knew it was hopeless to think we could beat him, he would challenge us by saying it was just a “gentleman’s bet.” Although I can’t remember just how much he could handle, I do recall that it was damned impressive. Stanko told me he liked to pull out the Weaver Stick when one of the lifters in the York Gym got a bit too full of himself. This was usually Bednarski after he had an especially strong contest, and it worked. Bednarski was a bit more humble after Stanko blew him away on the Weaver Stick.

One of my favorite memories about betting was the day Donnie Reed and I got into a contest with jerk lockouts. Donnie may have been the least gifted athlete ever to lift weights, yet nobody I ever met had a greater intensity for the sport. He wanted to beat me so badly that I could talk him into a bet that was ridiculous. I once got him to bet that he couldn’t front squat fifty more pounds than his best. While it should have been impossible, he came within a few inches of completing the lift. I had

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won all the bets between us, and had made sure he brought the milkshake to me when there were lots of other lifters around. He was frantic to win one over me.

We did jerk lockouts inside the power rack. There were several ways to do them but on this day, we would start from the split position with our arms locked out and then move the bar up against a second set of pins. As we were warming up, we held the bar up against the top pins for a couple of seconds, but once the weights started getting really heavy, all that was required was the bar had to touch the top pins. Donnie had bargained for a spot on his weight, since I had done almost a hundred more pounds than he had ever attempted, but I refused. “Even Stephen,” I said, “or no bet.”

He *accepted*. That’s how desperate he was to beat me. I was confident that I had suckered him once again, and that was almost my downfall. He had worked himself into a frenzied state and was matching me lift by lift as we started getting into the demanding poundages, and he was doing his sets easier than I was. To say that he was highly motivated would be a gross understatement. We moved through 575, 605, and 630. I struggled on the last two attempts while Donnie seemed to be gaining strength. I figured that I only had a couple more attempts left in me and hoped that he was also running out of gas.

He wasn’t. Donnie was in one of those zones you read about in newspapers, where a sixty-year-old woman lifts the back of a car to save a child. It was also clear that he had a natural aptitude for this exercise. He just hadn’t pushed himself to this extent before.

We loaded the bar to 650 and it took me a couple of tries before I was able to tap the top pins. Donnie, on the other hand, drove the bar up against the pins almost effortlessly. There was no doubt that he was stronger than I was on this day, and I needed to do something drastic to throw him. As Uncle Lloyd Worrell would say, “I need to work on him ... psychologically.”

So I put a 2.5 lb. plate on one side of the bar and nothing on the other side. “Hey, you can’t do that!” he objected, but I said there wasn’t any rule about how much I had to jump. I moved the 652.5 and tapped the pins, but it was bone-on-bone and I knew I was finished.

Donnie was a madman. He jammed another 2.5 on the other side of the bar, raced over to the chalk box, chalked up while mumbling to himself, then dashed around the room toward the power rack. He was so intent on making that lift that he ran right over a folding chair and almost went tumbling to the floor. He kicked the chair out of his way and got under the bar. But *The Welder Man* had *slipped in the York weight room*. The bar would not budge off the lower pins. I can’t remember exactly how many times he attempted to move the bar, but it had to be ten or more. To no avail – he was spent and slumped to the floor, wearing a most dejected expression.

I won the bet, but in the bigger picture Donnie won as well. That amazing increase in his lockout not only made him stronger, it improved his confidence in his jerk ten-fold.

Betting can be beneficial even if you lose. Anything that helps you move more iron on any exercise than you have ever done previously is a plus. In fact, more often than not, the bet ended in a tie. But if the two, or three, or four lifters increased that lift by five or ten pounds, everyone moved forward.

I’m convinced that the more competitive you can make your workouts, the stronger you will become, and betting is one way to make you improve your lifts. It really had nothing to do with ego or one-upsmanship. It was simply a motivational device to help make you a better lifter, a way to spice up an otherwise routine session.

It doesn’t matter whether you wager cartons of milk, protein milkshakes, cash, or just bragging rights, betting will make you more competitive, and that’s the name of the game in any sport.

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But I have to confess that those milkshakes won on bets tasted sweeter than any of the rest.

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