

Starting Strength

Joe Weider: Bodybuilding Patriarch

A complex man leaves a complex legacy

by

Marty Gallagher

Part I

Joe Weider was, as Kris Kristofferson related in the song Sunday Morning Coming Down, “a walking contradiction; partly fact and partly fiction.” For every Weider admirer there was a Weider detractor, for every fan there was a hater, for every accolade there was a lawsuit. He was the giant, the Mac Daddy, the King, of that ever-so-weird cult of big time professional bodybuilding. He was called “Jew bastard” by his crushed business opponents (his true genius was business – not bodybuilding) and he was loved by his inner circle. Joe was always making the right move at the right time, while simultaneously evaluating and seizing every business and commercial opportunity that came his way. He was a genius and an opportunist, he skirted the law and was deemed to have broken the law; he bamboozled the consumer with outlandish, unsubstantiated claims about his gaudy, overhyped products – seemingly without the slightest hint of remorse or regret. He was a flawed giant and he leaves behind a complex legacy.

Roots

Born in 1920, Joe Weider grew up in a tough neighborhood in Montreal, Canada during the hard times of the Great Depression. When young Joe left public school at age 12 to pull a small wagon 10 hours a day delivering fruit and groceries for a market, it was an act of survival for both him and his family.

– from the official Joe Weider website

Really, Joe? Pulling a small wagon ten hours a day at age 12? Yet another hyperbolic sentence that tells us a lot about Joe Weider, a man that actually had a real-life rags-to-riches story – yet the truth alone was never good enough for Joe, and he never failed to embellish anything and everything that he came into contact with. To get Arnold Schwarzenegger a movie role (*Hercules in New York*) he described to producers the incoherent, unintelligible 19-year-old Arnold as, “The greatest Shakespearean actor of his generation.” Rather than get into a morass of biographic detail for a man that lived one helluva life and died at age 93, let us summarize the first forty years quickly in order to get to the West Coast Go-Go years of the 1960s when Joe Weider came into his own.

Joe Weider

Born of immigrant Jewish parents in Montreal Canada in 1920, Weider did indeed grow up poor during the Depression. He was 19 when World War II broke out and it was unclear how he avoided service. He and his younger brother Ben were attracted to the world of “physical culture” and from their teen years onward the duo published bodybuilding and “health” magazines. Their flagship magazine was called *Your Physique*. Bodybuilding was, is, and always will be a visual art, and photographing and presenting the male physique in bodybuilding poses was considered – back in the forties and fifties – “lewd and lascivious,” seedy and secretly catering to the then-underground homosexual community, all under the guise of Health.

The Weider brothers didn't help their public image by periodically publishing men wearing nothing more than a banana hammock with bare asses shown in full gluteal glory – this screamed “PORN!” to the general public of the thirties, forties, and fifties. In the obituary on Joe, on the website IMDB.com, they identified Joe as “A physical culturist who published a number of magazines catering to the perfection of the male physique, such as *The Young Physique*, *Muscle Boy*, *Demi-Gods*, and *Muscle Teens*.” These publications were homoerotic to the max – to quote Jerry Seinfeld, “Not that there is anything wrong with that!” In the end, Joe's good points outweighed his bad and he helped a lot of folks. In the final analysis he was a force for good and we shall certainly not see his kind again anytime soon.

Weider had a genuine love for bodybuilding, and bodybuilding was gaining traction with the male general public in the late 1950s. *Strength & Health*, *Iron Man*, and *Muscle Builder* magazine, all were now available at newsstands. Each offered a radically different take on bodybuilding, weightlifting, powerlifting, strength training and muscle building. *Strength & Health* magazine staked out the “sensible right.” Perry and Mabel Rader, beatific owners of *Iron Man*, staked out the “middle ground.” Joe Weider staked out the “far left.” His timing was, typically, superb. He hitched a ride on the gathering tide of the hip youth movement that was just emerging. West Coast-style bodybuilding, beach-born and raised, meshed perfectly with the sex, drugs, and rock n' roll mentality of the turbulent times. Joe would align himself with the antiestablishment. Naturally, as soon as he vanquished his arch enemy Bob Hoffman, Joe became the establishment that he so recently and rabidly railed against. Once Joe and Ben seized control of elite bodybuilding, they ruled as the entrenched establishment with an iron grip: unassailable, unchallenged, a virtual bodybuilding dictatorship that lasted for the next 40 years.

Gaining Traction

Joe started the mail-order Weider Barbell Co. in 1942; his magazine now offered weight sets and other equipment as well as some rudimentary vitamin and mineral supplements. In 1946, Joe and his brother Ben rented Montreal's Monument National Theater to host the first Mr. Canada contest. The International Federation of Bodybuilders was born that night.

– from the official Joe Weider website

Joe and Ben got financial traction with *Your Physique*. The magazine generated enough throw-off capital for the brothers to enter into the then-nonexistent world of nutritional supplements. Joe sensed a change in mood and tone within the cloistered world of bodybuilding, and he changed the name and approach of the magazine: the slightly seedy *Your Physique* morphed into the hyperbolic *Muscle Builder*. He relocated from Montreal to New Jersey and began modifying the magazine to reflect the times. When Joe relocated to New Jersey he fortuitously employed a local, the man with the world's biggest and best

Joe Weider

biceps, Leroy Colbert. Leroy was a cool dude whose side chest/right bicep shot remains an all-time classic. Leroy brought some street cred to the rather effete (by comparison to the company Leroy kept) Weider.

Joe also hired another local boy, a big strapping kid, an 18-year-old novice bodybuilder named David Draper. Dave became the first in-house Weider bodybuilder project: Joe determined that the kid would be the face of Weider. Joe saw greatness in Dave before anyone else (including Dave) saw it. Draper had the Nordic-blond, beach bum, hoo-dad, sex-stud vibe that Joe was looking for. Never mind that the kid had never been west of the Mississippi – Joe would present David as the ultimate hip young “Blond Bomber” beach boy bodybuilder. Dave had the look, and now he needed to build some muscle and melt off some bodyfat.

Dave was big and smooth and shapeless. Dave was encouraged to train and once he got his bodyweight under control, he indeed became the face of Weider. Dave was to become the epitome of the beach bodybuilding lifestyle. Joe was creating myths; the target audience was males, aged 15 to 25. The lure was the eternal quest for muscles: boys want muscles and girls, and the advertisements Joe created were pure promotional genius. He would pair up Dave with his trophy wife, Betty. Betty Brosmer was then the highest paid pin-up girl in the U.S. In 1961 Joe and Betty married. She began working alongside him, now as fitness maven Betty Weider.

Dave and Betty were used in virtually all the Weider ads of the mid-sixties. Dave got better as he got older. Joe moved the whole organization to Southern California in yet another brilliant move. Now he was headquartered at the epicenter of all things bodybuilding-related. Joe now had access to the best and largest collection of bodybuilders in the world. He immediately caught and bottled the vibe and feel of the 1960s Southern California beach scene: the woodies with surfboards, the lingo, the surfer girls, the hot rods and malt shops, the bonfires on the beach, the beach music – and the bodybuilders. Ground zero was Muscle Beach.

On weekends the Muscle Beach bodybuilders, hand-balancers, gymnasts, and acrobats would gather and ply their trade for free for passers-by. It was an innocent golden era when hand-to-mouth athletes hung out with poets and surfers and beatniks and everyone could make enough to live on. They would rent the inexpensive, ramshackle housing that was cheap and available right along the beach. Joe availed himself of a goodly amount of (then) cheap Los Angeles real estate. Again, his business sense was nothing short of visionary. He settled in and really came into his own.

Joe had a true artist's eye when it came to photography and creating master photos of the elite bodybuilders of the day. Joe would supervise photo shoots and coach both bodybuilder and photographer until he got exactly the photo he had envisioned in his mind's eye. *Muscle Builder* blew every other muscle mag into the weeds when it came to photographing sensational, overly-muscular, freaky bodybuilders – which were *exactly* what the youth of America wanted!

Every story needs a villain

Joe developed an arch-enemy in Bob Hoffman and the York Barbell juggernaut. Hoffman once described Weider as “The worst thing that ever happened to a sport.” Hoffman was prone to hyperbolic grandiosity and had no compunction whatsoever about inflating his lifts and his accomplishments. Bob was, according to himself, also grand in other pursuits. In true Kim Jung Il style, Hoffman was the self-described “world polka dancing champion” and the man with the “greatest chest expansion on record.” He would routinely seize the microphone from MCs at national weightlifting championships and launch into Castro-like speeches about the greatness of Bob, the “Father of Modern Weightlifting.” Clinically, the man was ego-maniacal.

Joe Weider

At stake in the ever-escalating feud between these two men was the future of bodybuilding. Hoffman hated bodybuilding but was aware that its popularity dwarfed that of his beloved Olympic weightlifting. He understood that if weightlifting were to survive, he would need to hitch weightlifting to the bodybuilding cash-cow, in some manner or fashion. Thus began a titanic struggle for the hearts and minds of bodybuilders. This was an epic tussle: Hoffman's attitude was, "Let's co-opt bodybuilding, clean it up, make it respectable, create a male version of the ever-popular Miss America competition, complete with a talent portion (athletic points) and points for 'good grooming.'" The bodybuilding judges of the day would make sure that any Mr. America winner would be a wholesome representative of American manhood – as they perceived it. Hoffman was the head of an Iron Politburo that ruled through intimidation and fear. These men wore grey suits and black ties all the time.

The Mr. America winner would be a fantastic representative of all that is good and decent and right about America in the Cold War times. Thus Bob would mainstream bodybuilding – make it safe as warm milk for John Q. Public. Weider, naturally and rightly, viewed this approach as a bunch of sanctimonious bullshit created by a bunch of old white weightlifters that hated bodybuilding. Joe Weider loved bodybuilding and saw his opening. He would align with the "youth revolt" movement taking place in 60s; he would position the repressive Hoffman as "The Man" (he was), and position bodybuilding as a leader in the California hip antiestablishment (it was).

Joe's message to America's young men was, "Forget about being a fantastic representative of establishment values and morals – let's build some bad-ass freaky-ass muscles! Let's live on the beach and get a tan and score with the hottest beach babes, let's fuck the cheerleaders and beat up the guys that bullied you when you were a nobody nerd. Let's party all night long and sleep until two..."

Guess which message captured the hearts and minds of young male bodybuilders?

Weider used hip youth jargon to sell his worthless nutritional products in his magazine. Joe successfully fought off the IRS when they wanted to reclassify the "magazine" as a catalog, thereby changing Weider's tax status. Thanks to Joe, bodybuilding became as much a part of American culture as surfing, itsy-bitsy bikinis and the beach, and the surf music of Dick Dale and the Beach Boys.

Racial Politics

In the Amateur Athletic Union, it was an unspoken rule that a black bodybuilder would never be allowed to win Mr. America. There was a long history of incredible bodybuilders denied the Mr. A title for no conceivable reason other than race: as long as the AAU conducted interviews and awarded athletic points and awarded points for good grooming, these figleaves could be used to deflect accusations of racism. "Yes, the Negro possessed the best body – but his interview went poorly, he had no athletic points, and his grooming was off." The great George Paine should have been named Mr. America on numerous occasions. Sergio Oliva was denied the Mr. America title despite scoring off the charts on athletic points (he was a Cuban weightlifting national champion before defecting.) Sergio had twice the muscle of any other competitor.

The AAU's subjective garbage was marinated in overt racism and designed to create a system whereby lesser-built white men could be declared winners over superiorly-muscled African-Americans. A transitory event occurred at the 1963 Mr. America contest where a mightily muscled Harold Poole (from Indiana) was beaten handily by the smooth-as-a-baby's ass Vern Weaver. A smoldering Poole smashed his 3rd place trophy onstage and stomped out of the auditorium and straight into Joe Weider's waiting arms. Now Joe had another superstar on his expanding roster. Larry Scott was Joe's premier bodybuilder in 1965. With Poole onboard, and with Chuck Sipes in terrific shape, Joe now had enough bodybuilders of high-enough caliber to create the requisite tension and friction needed to

Joe Weider

generate fan interest. He needed a new venue to showcase the world's best bodybuilders, so Joe came up with his latest and greatest bodybuilding idea: the Mr. Olympia.

Supposedly Joe and some friends were having their post-workout replenishment shakes (12-ounce beers) after a savage workout. Joe presented his idea of a bodybuilding competition that would only be open to Mr. Universe winners. The men sat at the bar pondering names for the competition, "What's bigger than a Universe?" Joe asked? "A Galaxy! (Astronomers they were not.) We'll call the new contest the Mr. Galaxy!" The auto maker Ford called its top-of-the-line car the Galaxy – so to avoid being mistakenly linked to a car maker, Mr. Galaxy was abandoned in favor of Mr. Cosmos. Joe's eyes happened to focus on the beer can he was absent-mindedly holding. It was an Olympia beer. "We'll call this super contest Mr. Olympia," he said with finality.

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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