

Starting Strength

Joe Weider : Part II California, the Go-Go 60s, Arnold, Franco and the “Fitness Revolution”

by
Marty Gallagher

Joe Weider relocated himself, his trophy wife Betty, Dave “The Blond Bomber” Draper and his entire business organization to Los Angeles just in time for the tumult and turmoil that accompanied the countercultural revolution of the 1960s. The mid-to-late sixties was a golden time for the Weider Empire. Joe gained traction. He had always been an outsider and he naturally developed a kinship with the youthful counterculture and its antiestablishment stance. Joe had always been shunned by the same WASP establishment these kids were railing against: the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Joe’s youthful mindset and preferences put him in far greater touch with the demographic he was seeking to sell product to. He spoke the language of the young. His arch-rival Bob Hoffman had zero interest in speaking the language of the young. Further, in magazine editorials, Joe’s nemesis warned against communism and Weider in the same breath. He told the young to “grow up” and “start acting right.” The entire nation was splitting apart over values, old and new, and while Hoffman and his York/AAU axis-of-evil effortlessly aligned itself with the Nixon establishment and “traditional American values” (as defined by old white men), Weider, always an outsider, effortlessly aligned himself and his fledgling empire with the antiestablishment counterculture.

Bob Hoffman had made millions in business, and despite his innumerable quirks and flaws, he was no dummy. Bob was not someone to be trifled with and was a serious enemy to have. Both men were intent on winning the hearts and minds of America’s young men. Hoffman would appeal to the young by telling them to respect their elders and practice Olympic weightlifting. Hoffman’s Aryan ideal was patriotic, disciplined, clean-cut, honest and forthright. His American Man went to church and practiced Olympic weightlifting, a true man’s sport. Joe Weider simply staked out the exact opposite position on anything and everything that Hoffman said or did. Joe appealed to the hearts and minds of American youth with a message of sex, surf, rock n’ roll, and bodybuilding. In the end, it was a rout; but for many years Hoffman and his allies battled Weider and his allies tooth and nail. At stake was the lion’s share of a single key demographic group: males between the ages of 12 and 29.

Both camps believed that there was a finite universe of potential customers. The commercial “pie” included magazine sales, supplement sales, fitness gear sales, barbell and dumbbell sales and

Joe Weider

bodybuilding show revenue. Joe and Bob would contest one another in each of these arenas. Joe was now located at the epicenter of the bodybuilding universe and this enabled him instant access to the world's best bodybuilders. Weider thrived and grew and gained traction in a wide variety of bodybuilding-related pursuits. The Weider brothers seemed schooled in the PT Barnum carnival barker school of business, the one that proclaimed, "There's a sucker born every minute." Yet Weider was no bumpkin; he was a well-read sophisticate – a highly-informed individual capable of conducting complex simultaneous undertakings in a wide variety of ongoing business ventures.

Yet despite his sophistication, his marketing approach was unethical and flabbergasting: lie your ass off about results, and promise the buyers impossible results easily obtainable just by using Joe's latest magical product. Joe created and micro-managed every aspect of his empire; his various magazines pushed product and generated newsstand sales and ad revenue; he created a nutritional and supplement division and began making equipment and fitness gear. Joe invested heavily and wisely in California real estate when it was cheap. His antique collection was deemed priceless and heralded internationally. His overflow of priceless antiques was stored in a massive warehouse. Joe was into art and had an artist's eye. He used that artist eye as he personally supervised the never-ending photo shoots for his ever-growing fleet of magazines.

Joe established a stable of "contract" bodybuilders. He purchased their exclusivity, and this ensured steady access to the world's best bodies for his magazines and ads. Joe was smart enough and insightful enough to take a chance on an unintelligible, slightly brutish 19-year-old Austrian man/boy named Arnold Schwarzenegger. Arnold had won his division at the NABBA Mr. Universe and Joe fronted the dough Arnold needed to relocate to LA. Once there, Joe hired Arnold and in short order Arnold had convinced Joe to fund the relocation of another non-English speaking European bodybuilder: the short and stocky Sardinian, Franco Columbo.

Between Draper, Arnold, Franco, Betty and a revolving cast of local bodybuilders and buxom beach bunnies, Joe had access to an inexhaustible talent pool. The world's best bodies were available locally and he used them like the conductor of an orchestra. His over-the-top ads had flair and zest, and he created a myth, a vision: the reader could transform himself physically using Joe's products and Joe's methods. The "Weider Principles" were proclaimed in articles with titles such as, "Bomb and blitz your biceps into total submission using Weider drop-set cheating Principle #53!!" Joe made bodybuilding synonymous with the southern California beach culture and surfer scene.

Needless to say there was considerable resistance from many sides towards what appeared to be a Weider takeover of organized bodybuilding. The entrenched establishment was run by unsmiling, humorless older white men – men that wore suits and ties every day of the week. The Amateur Athletic Union, the AAU, had a virtual stranglehold on bodybuilding competitions run in America until Weider appeared. Not that any other organization wanted or was fighting for bodybuilding anyway. The AAU was comprised of all the governing bodies of all the Olympic sports. Bodybuilding was the red-headed stepchild of weightlifting and only tolerated because it generated cash money. For that reason bodybuilding was joined at the hip to its uglier, older stepsister, Olympic weightlifting.

There was an odd love/hate relationship between the weightlifting and bodybuilding communities. The weightlifting power brokers hated bodybuilding and bodybuilders, but they needed the cash they were able to generate by making bodybuilding an integral part of all weightlifting competitions. The bodybuilding show would be conducted whenever the final lift had been pulled, and in my regional hotbed of lifting back in the 60s, often the last clean and jerk wouldn't hit the platform until 11 pm. It was nothing for bodybuilding shows scheduled to start at 9 pm to start at midnight.

Joe Weider

Weider's message was seductive: Bodybuilders of the World, Unite! Stop groveling! Stop belonging to organizations that offer you, The Bodybuilder, second class citizenship and sneer at you behind your back. Who needs the weightlifter's snide remarks? Who needs the AAU and their uptight old-man set of values?! Join the Weider Bodybuilding Organization dedicated to bodybuilding, bodybuilders and nothing else! Joe put on contests that blew away anything the AAU could come up with. There was a very real economic war, a hot war of nasty words; charges and countercharges flew back and forth between Hoffman and Weider and their surrogates and allies. At stake was control of the magazine/supplement/equipment market: both sought the same demographic and they fought each other ruthlessly on all fronts.

Weider sold exotic pieces of exercise equipment: Joe was ahead of the curve with his isolative Arm-Blaster, so ably and effectively demonstrated in the ad by Arnold. Joe marketed clever and quite effective Peak Contraction devices. He was an early proponent of the E-Z curl bar. Joe was far more in touch with the training tactics of the LA bodybuilders than Hoffman was with the training (or even the names) of his stable of lifters. The two men waged war over supplement and exercise equipment market share. Bob was a behind the scenes puppet master and had the authoritarian AAU famously ban any bodybuilder that dared compete in Weider's fledgling International Federation of Bodybuilders – the IFBB – an organization that at the time barely had 100 members.

Eventually Joe wore Hoffman down and Hoffman slunk away into retirement in the early 70s, and that was that. The AAU Mr. America went from meaningful to meaningless and the IFBB routinely began attracting the finest physiques in the world. Game, set, and match to Weider.

By the early 70s Joe Weider had become Joe Almighty. Every rival was vanquished and all knees bent and all heads bowed to Joe in the Kingdom of Bodybuilding. Weider was an opinion shaper. He did much to glamorize and make legitimate bodybuilding and bodybuilders. To the youth of the day, Arnold and Franco were cool and enviable; they trained and ate and napped on the beach in the afternoon getting sun tans while being massaged by playboy bunnies in bikinis. Later, they would have sex. This was the mythos Joe created. He made money hand-over-fist and plowed it back into each of his ever-expanding and ever-improving ventures. Not that there weren't potholes and difficulties: I was told by a Weider insider that Joe was on the precipice of bankruptcy on three different occasions. Yet he weathered it all and stood poised to reap an unprecedented financial bonanza that occurred with the arrival of the great American fitness revolution.

Joe Surfs the Fitness Revolution Wave

An amazing occurrence took place in the early 1980s. There was a sudden and widespread increase in interest and participation in all things fitness-related – by women. For a variety of reasons, there was a huge influx, a tidal wave of female fitness participants. Suddenly, 50% of the population unexpectedly decided in unison that working out was cool, beneficial, and could be feminine and distinct from the classical grunting, swearing, off-putting male brand of fitness. Now women could segregate themselves in dance classes and step aerobics class, and don't forget pump-and-sculpt classes and yoga. Posh, upscale fitness clubs sprang up in every affluent neighborhood to cater to the mobs that accompanied the Fitness Revolution. Suddenly fitness was hip for all segments of the population.

Joe Weider was well attuned to what was going on, and was an early and vocal proponent of women in fitness. He began catering to women's fitness needs very early on. He sanctioned women's competitive bodybuilding and was a pioneer in creating a magazine strictly for women's fitness. Joe powered through the 1980s and into the 1990s. In his final genius move he sold his magazine empire

Joe Weider

for a reported \$250 million dollars. At their peak, many of his magazines were amongst the best selling of their type and genre worldwide. There was a long stretch where *Muscle & Fitness* magazine had a 500,000 monthly subscriber base and triple that in newsstand sales. *M&F* was the King of bodybuilding magazines. *Flex* was *M&F*'s wilder younger brother; more hardcore, less mainstream – and extremely popular. He had a fleet of magazines that covered everything from muscles to golf.

At the Weider peak, Joe had no less than fifty athletes under annual contract. These contracts were highly sought after and fought over amongst competitive bodybuilders. Having a Weider contract meant the bodybuilder wouldn't have to work a day job; they could devote 100% of their time and effort to actualizing their genetic potential. On the downside, these contracts would be ruthlessly terminated if the athlete placed poorly at national or international events. Contracts could run as low as 20K per year and well into six figures for the Olympia winner. At one point in time, powerlifter Ed Coan had a Weider contract, one of the few non-bodybuilders to ever so be honored. Of the fifty athletes, 35 would be men with 15 contracts reserved for women bodybuilders.

Drug testing was and is scrupulously avoided by the IFBB. It is the freakish physiques that fill the auditoriums to overflow capacity, not cleanliness. There was a short time when the IFBB became righteous and actually instituted drug testing. This lasted for a year. This was back in the 1980s and when the physiques deflated almost as fast as the box office receipts, quietly, and without any fanfare, drug testing was dropped. Arnold Schwarzenegger has been particularly hypocritical on the issue: as the Governor he was the chief law enforcement officer of the State of California, yet the contest with his name on it awards its highest honors to the most drugged men on the face of the planet. The female bodybuilders look like cyborgs and it is obvious that all Arnold competitors were, are, and forever shall be gassed to their blood-shot eyeballs.

Joe and his brother Ben Weider tried for years to get the International Olympic Committee to include bodybuilding in the Olympic Games. This would be the brothers' crowning glory and final bequeathal to bodybuilding: they would legitimize bodybuilding – get it adjudged a *sport* by the most prestigious sports body in the world. In the Weider Brothers dream scenario, Olympic gold medals would be awarded to the world's most perfectly built man and woman. This was their dream and they found some receptiveness within the IOC. The Olympia was held for several years in Atlanta as a favor to IOC officials. It was farcical from the beginning. The IOC would never add bodybuilding to the roster of sports. If anything, the IOC was *dropping* "at risk" sports, not adding them. In the end, the brother's dreams were never realized. It was one of the few times they failed to succeed.

When it came to business, Joe had an uncanny knack for timing. He was in LA real estate when it was cheap and (reportedly) got out at its peak. Joe sold his magazine empire right before the widespread introduction of the internet. This bit of timing was critical: within an 18 month period magazine sales plummeted by 40% across the board. Joe got out right before this occurred. Magazine ad revenues plummeted just after Joe bailed. He later (reportedly) sold his equipment division and supplement division for between 200 and 400 million dollars. Those he leaves behind are well taken care of. By all accounts Joe stayed sharp and alert into his 80s. Regardless whether you think of him in a negative or positive light, he was a towering presence in bodybuilding and fitness. He made bodybuilding a permanent part of popular culture. He successfully mainstreamed bodybuilding, and for that alone he stands alone.

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

Joe Weider

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](#).

[Starting Strength](#) : [Resources](#) : [Articles](#) : [Forums](#) : [Discuss This Article](#)

Copyright 2013 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.