

Starting Strength

West Coast Impressions, A Random Journey: First, Nutrition of the Sixties, Part 4

by
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I wish I could state with confidence, at the time I was preparing to leave for California to discover the so-called secrets of the lifting and bodybuilding greats, or even now, that I was smart enough to give consideration to the factors that might have led to the unquestioned acceptance by the lifting public, that there was a need for nutritional supplementation. There is the obvious conclusion that the supplements were available due to the greed and business acumen of those selling them. Certainly there is justification in presuming that a “sell job” on a very grand scale was perpetrated upon the lifting public, but if this holds truth, why then were the lifting and bodybuilding communities so quick and eager to jump onto the supplement bandwagon?

For those not familiar with Jan Dellinger, he was a key figure in the York Barbell Company hierarchy, though his modesty would never allow him to describe himself as such. Holding a number of positions, primarily in the production of the York muscle magazine publications and in marketing strategies for various equipment products, he was at York for a solid twenty years. In that time, in addition to being privy to all that went on behind the scenes in the offices and in the gym, he served as a confidant and training partner to many of the big name lifters and bodybuilders that passed through the hallowed gates of the company.

Perhaps for us older Iron Game devotees, Jan’s greatest “claim to fame” is that he shared an office with the legendary John Grimek for many years, gathering pearls of wisdom that no one else did and many which one could not pay enough money for. Jan initiated discussion about the roots of training-related supplementation, more than making up for my lack of insight and deep thinking.

Some of the salient points made included those that fell against an historical backdrop. Jan pointed out that “...supplements were so quickly and almost completely adopted by the weight training world from the jump” and in the case of Hoffman’s, Weider’s, and Johnson’s protein products, this was absolutely true. From the moment they were placed on the market, they were presumed to be a necessity by lifters and bodybuilders and the momentum in their sales continued unabated into the 1980s. Protein pills and then powder were not only seen as a necessity, they in fact came to define lifting related nutrition. If you weren’t pounding down large amounts of protein in the form of food and supplements, you could not consider yourself serious about achieving your training goals.

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Without a doubt, the profitability of the products and what proved to be a willing and ready-made audience sped the growth of sales, as did what Jan referred to as “Mr. Big Body claiming he regularly downed a can of whatever.” The advertising of the leading lights in the field touted the miracle of the newly introduced protein-based products and it tied in well with what I have previously referred to as a willingness or propensity for lifters to try almost anything if it meant increasing their totals. The type of obsessive/compulsive nature of those drawn to the repetitive and controlled activity of training made them ripe for, as Jan put it, giving a different paraphrase to what I wrote in an earlier installment: the consumption of “horse flop if they believed it would put another inch on their arms or 20 pounds more on their bench press.”

What I was neither smart nor insightful enough to consider was the historical background of those who were attracted to lifting weights and their general state of nutrition when entering the activity. In my own case, I have alluded to the fact that we lived in what had been an uncle’s isolated summer home without heat or hot water for almost three years. The extremely small hot water heater provided for a few cups of coffee, and baths were taken only when two large pots of water were heated on the stove and then dumped over the head of a soaped-up member of the family. Any small amount of heat was provided by a series of judiciously spaced and dangerous portable electric heaters. Sleeping in the kitchen with the oven and stove on throughout the night kept my grandmother warm enough to last into her nineties. As this was not an unusual condition for quite a few of the friends I had in the neighborhood, it posed little problem for me, other than being the only one in physical education class to shower publicly rather than copying almost everyone else who covered their bodies with Right Guard deodorant.

I gave no thought to getting enough protein or a full complement of micronutrients, although I knew once I began to lift weights that I needed to be eating “big to be big” as the magazines usually advised. Whatever was available to fill the space was acceptable until I made the commitment to eschew soda, cookies, chips, and candy – staples for a twelve year old. A typical meal plan in our house when I was a pre-teen would be a breakfast of a very large cup of black coffee with a rock-hard piece of my grandmother’s home-baked bread dipped into it. Slathered with butter, dipping the bread into the coffee was the only way to make it chewable and this practice, over the course of years, eventually turned me off to drinking or eating all coffee-flavored products. After two dips of bread, an oil slick of butter would reflect light off of the surface of the coffee, a most unappetizing sight. Some of the sandwiches I brought for school lunch fare made me stand out in an unfortunate manner, although some of my classmates thought it was rather cool to trade their standard bologna or ham sandwiches for one of my spaghetti on white bread or onion and butter on rye concoctions.

The primary dinner meal, eaten a few times per week, consisted of boiled elbow macaroni that was then fried in butter and ketchup. Hamburger or hot dogs with beans rounded out most of the weekly dinner meals. I drank whole milk which provided the bulk of my protein, even when consumed in minimal amounts. Allow me to again stress that my eating habits were very similar to the fellows I knew and none of us had concerns about our nutritional profiles.

While slick advertising and the need for continuing gains by those involved with barbells and dumbbells drove the protein sales market, the great Grimek himself can serve as an example of one more important factor to consider. Jan, among few others, was the holder of many personal observations and bits of little known information that came directly from Mr. John Grimek. As a youngster, John was nourished on “copious quantities of baked bread smothered in lard and coffee.” That this was the foundation for one of the greatest physiques of the 1930s through the ’50s is incredible, especially

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when considering Grimek's lifting ability, and many feats of strength and endurance. Grimek told Jan he never ate a vegetable, unless one considers potatoes as a standard vegetable, until he was a teenager.

I have often stated to the young men and women I have trained through the years, that being poor "in the old days" which would include the 1960s, was a lot different than being poor today. While we were allocated one pair of shoes and one pair of "tennis shoes" as sneakers were referred to then, for an entire year or until a growth spurt had you literally bust out of them, it seems that even those on today's public assistance rolls have multiple pairs of the latest sneakers in a variety of colors.

We, as a collective "we," taped up our torn or splitting sneakers with electrical or athletic tape, repaired worn knees on jeans with iron-on patches, and wore a singular winter coat with the addition of flannel shirts and sweatshirts if it proved to be insufficient against severe winter weather. Again, it seems that even those on the lower economic end of the scale today dress as well as any middle class or upper-middle class teenager, carry a cell phone, and do their school work on a home computer. Thus it might be inconceivable to be fed home-baked bread smothered in lard and coffee as a full meal.

Grimek further revealed that he had probably been protein deficient during his growing years as "he saw very sparse amounts of meat during this time." Jan related that Grimek believed himself to be protein deprived until his late teens when he landed a job as a soda jerk. Again, for our Internet generation of trainees, carbonated drinks and "carbonated water," better known now as seltzer, was dispensed from a drugstore or luncheonette soda fountain via a spigot that was operated with a pull or push of a lever. Syrup, and/or milk, and/or ice cream would be put into a glass and the carbonated water was then added when the soda jerk literally "jerked" the lever back and forth. This service gave rise to the term "soda jerk."

Wherever Grimek was working as a soda jerk, he no doubt had access to food and absolutely had access to a lot more milk than he had previously. Jan further stated that, "He had started training some months before, but said the presence of milk accelerated his training quickly. In fact, he often remarked that any time he had a quart of milk before a workout, he broke some kind of personal record in at least one or two of his lifts."

In an article about Grimek from a 1956 magazine, John's wife Angela noted that her husband had "an enormous appetite," and yet was capable of going on "a restricted diet" when it was necessary to prepare for a physique contest or photography session. However, as she said then, "when he goes all out, he can never be filled...he just eats and eats." Again, I believe this reinforces the point that those that are deprived of food or limited in any way, never truly overcome the psychological scarring that reminds them that they often went to bed hungry. I know that until I stumbled upon my interest in lifting weights and eating so that I could progress as much and as quickly as possible, the goal of every one of our family members relative to food and nutrition, was to "just fill the empty hole."

During the Great Depression, even in rural areas where it was possible to maintain a vegetable garden or raise a few chickens for eggs or meat, many subsisted on soup made from coffee grounds and whatever could be scrounged and thrown into the mix. Of course many of our earlier era lifters and bodybuilders were no doubt undernourished and would in fact respond positively to increased amounts of protein in the diet. Most of the York Barbell Club representatives throughout its formative years were immigrants or first generation Americans who hailed from the lower socioeconomic classes.



John Grimek, great in his era,
great in any era

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Thus with the availability of greater amounts of protein-containing foods and the supplements of course, which coincided with the end of World War II, there was a ready, willing, and able market that would fill the coffers of Hoffman, Weider, and to a lesser extent, Johnson/Blair.

Having briefly worked for Blair and remaining in contact with him for a period of approximately a dozen years, I believe that in conjunction with any intent to make money, he had a genuine concern for the health of those he worked with and was very passionate about “everyone” using his products in order to become muscularly larger and stronger. He was, at least in my opinion, a true believer.

Perhaps the same could be said of Hoffman and the Weider Brothers, at least when they first introduced their products to the Iron Game market. Jan made the point that with relatively limited medical and physiological knowledge, they believed that they offered an alternative that would in fact produce superior physical specimens. The protein powder and other supplements could make what appeared to be supernatural alterations in the body of a serious and dedicated trainee. Of course, once the nutritional supplements became the financial lifeline of the companies, it was difficult to know their true motives.

In my own case, I trained hard and consistently, I ate in accordance with the dictums of the various magazines and those I met who were far more advanced than I was, and like “all the other guys,” I utilized supplements. As noted, I did very little deep thinking, it was enough that Larry Scott for example, used Blair’s Protein and that the guys in the gym said, “You need to do this.” Eventually, I believed there were even more little known or unknown to the public secrets that could push me to my absolute physical limit. As noted in [Part 3](#) when Jack and I decided to leave for California, we had no real plan, no real directions, and no money.

Both of us had seen the television program Route 66, a weekly series that chronicled the adventures of two very cool young guys who traveled around the nation, or at least the western USA where Route 66 is located, in a Corvette. The series, which was televised from 1960 into the early part of 1964, romanticized travel and how were we to know that Route 66, then a major east-west highway, only traversed eight states. That it also wound through what seemed to be every major and backwater town from Missouri to California made for difficult travel but our lack of preparation would be no obstacle to our obsessive goal. The trip itself, complete with interactions with law enforcement in Amarillo, Texas, a diet of milk and truck driver-inspired Chattanooga Bakery mini pecan pies, and the very briefest of stays at what must have been the movie setting for the Bates Motel, would make for a rather humorous series of articles in and of itself, but fifty-four hours after our departure from Long Island, we were entering Los Angeles.

I have always referred to Jack as “the brains of the operation” although that might be seen as less than an outstanding compliment relative to the company he kept. As I have frequently noted, if one wanted training information, an effort had to be made to obtain it. We were fortunate that Jack had developed a written correspondence with the great Bill Pearl. Jack had questions, he believed that Bill had the answers, he wrote, Bill responded. Jack had said that at some point in time, he wanted to come to California and see Bill’s gym and take a workout.

Bill, who has always been known as one of the true gentlemen of the game, of course left an open invitation, perhaps believing that this would be one more star-struck teenager who would never get closer than 1200 miles to his gym which was then located on Manchester Avenue in Los Angeles. Better known years later as South Central and bringing all of the violence that the name connotes, the gym was close to the Watts neighborhood that was the site of the horrible 1965 race riots. But to us, at least before we arrived, it would be located in the beautiful, palm-tree covered California that we only knew from movies. We had a rudimentary plan of “see Bill, train at his gym, find Rheo Blair and talk

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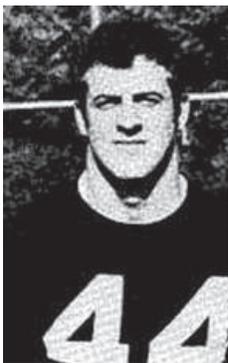
to him, get to Zuver's Hall Of Fame Gym, and visit the other good places" we had only read about in the various magazines.

I "covered us" with Blair with the same type of pleading letters that Jack had sent to Pearl. Along the lines of "Dear Mr. Blair, I use your protein powder and it is great. I am really making progress and would like to see you when I get to LA, if I ever get to LA, what do you think, huh?" Before there were mail order courses offered by any bodybuilder or big bench presser who had even a local following, before social media, and before long distance phone calls were affordable, this is how one gathered information that could be applied to one's lifting activities.

I had perhaps a solid year of Blair's use, augmented by a one-a-day type of multi-vitamin, and a lot of squats, deadlifts, and pressing. The regimen had brought my weight up to the 220-230 mark. I was much bigger, stronger, and faster than I had been at any other bodyweight, and I knew that California training and the inside knowledge from Blair would push me to the absolute limit. Of course at 5'5¾" I was not yet ready to accept that I had probably topped out regarding muscular bodyweight, and we were, after all, entering what we believed to be the ultimate Mecca of training.

My diet, though I was the furthest thing from a bodybuilder despite having rudimentary abs and "lines" that would jump into view when sprinting, could have passed for a typical bodybuilder's diet, at least one not yet peaking for contest condition. As an "expert" on Blair's entire nutritional program, despite being unable to afford much past the protein powder and the occasional bottle of B Complex or liver capsules, my daily intake was usually comprised of eggs, hamburger, one or two quarts of heavy cream, one or two quarts of whole milk, and as much protein powder as I could jam into the blender and still have the blades turn.

I justified using more than "the recommended amount" because unlike other lifters, I also had to run constantly to meet the demands of football preparation. I also have to admit to being hooked on the taste and in time found the "pudding mix" of powder beaten into a bowl of cream, with or without the addition of peaches or coconut, better than ice cream. While I overdid it, future Denver Broncos, Cleveland Browns, and Oakland Raiders defensive end Lyle Alzado, then playing for Yankton College, was using a full four pounds of powder each week. Many of us passed the hat to make sure he could afford it, but his reputation for hard work and fierce spirit marked him as one of the younger guys who could find success if we were all willing to lend a hand.



Rheo H Blair's Before and After Contrast. While leaving a legacy of one of the first professional players to admit to anabolic steroid use, those of us who lifted weights in our neighborhood remember Lyle Alzado as an incredibly driven and hard working athlete whose success came from those qualities, not out of a bottle. Being able to eat three meals a day made him one of the few college football players to actually gain 30 pounds in-season when he first went away to Yankton College in South Dakota. His judicious use of Blair's Protein powder packed on another 35 pounds in a brief period prior to the College All Star Game and the start of his rookie training camp with the Denver Broncos.

When Jack and I arrived in Los Angeles, we made a beeline to Bill Pearl's Gym on Manchester Avenue in Inglewood. We remained mindful of the destructive riots that had occurred there in the recent past, and understood immediately that we were not in the nicest neighborhood. As we prepared to begin our California adventure and what we believed would be a significant learning experience, we drove past Pearl's Gym and saw, standing in front, Bill himself. Huge, muscular to the point that

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even an overly large sweatshirt could not hide his development, Bill appeared other worldly, and a bit dangerous with his goatee and glower.

Wait. Bill did not have a goatee, and as one of the nicest men in the Iron Game, was never seen, at least not in public, with a stare that would have melted even the baddest of the bad guys on the street. Jack looked at me, I returned his startled look and we ducked my old Ford into a parking space. As we unfolded ourselves from the car, congratulating ourselves on arriving safely and in the warp-speed time of fifty-four hours despite the unscheduled delay with law enforcement in Amarillo, we cautiously approached the front of the gym. Wanting to just blurt out a greeting to Bill, we realized as we were almost upon this tremendously developed bodybuilder that it was in fact, not Bill Pearl. We said hello, Jack introduced himself, and we could then tell the world that we knew or at least had met, Bill's little known but bigger-than-Bill-brother, Harold Pearl. Our great adventure had officially begun.

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