

# Starting Strength

## An Initial Visit to the York Barbell Club: Pt2

by

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As the day wore on, Jack and I were less aware of the time than we were of the weights being loaded and lifted by the York Barbell Club weightlifters. I had always relied on what New York University researchers had told me was my eidetic memory to recall specifics about individuals and events but even this unique capacity was severely overloaded by the quantity of information presented by our mere observation of the guys in action. Conversation with Bill March during his training session added to the certainty that neither of us would recall everything we wished to, but we knew we were being exposed to a lot of information and that we would benefit from it.

Because March considered this particular training session no more than a “light break-in workout” following his Atlantic Coast Football League season, he was relaxed throughout its duration despite using weights we considered to be in the stratosphere. Of course, I had literally hundreds of questions; “How can you press so much?” and the response was “I do partials in the rack and I do a lot of pressing.” “Uh, how do you keep going in the squat with all of that weight?” “I do partial squats in the rack and a lot of squats.” The point was made: Bill March had been the primary force behind the sale of the Hoffman racks, and as noted in [Part One](#), I was but one of many who believed that there was some special and secretive construction or configuration of this specific rack that allowed for such massive development and unbelievable strength.

However, Bill was clear that he was an advocate of doing very heavy partial pulls, presses, and squats in the rack and with but one “real weightlifting workout” per week, he was able to reach the levels he was famous for and was also confident that he would regain after his football-enforced layoff. For our younger readers, please recall that powerlifting was still a fledgling sport in the mid-1960s and if one participated in athletics, especially collegiate athletics, bodybuilding was certainly actively discouraged and almost tantamount to admitting one’s narcissism. Olympic weightlifting was the king of the lifting activities, and one’s strength was judged only when answering the inquiry, “How much can you press?” For athletes, bodybuilders, and anyone who lifted weights for any purpose, the three Olympic lifts and their typically utilized assistance movements were always included in the overall training program. In our eyes, this made Bill March “The Man” because he covered all of the bases as a super strong guy, top rated Olympic weightlifter, an award winning physique man who looked as if he could walk through walls, and as someone who actually went to training camp with the Baltimore Colts.

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This did not cause us to ignore everything else going on around us. At the time of our visit Bednarski and Starr for example, were part of the “new” York Gang, with Stanko, Grimek, and their contemporaries representing the older crew. Tommy Suggs was certainly among the younger lifters in age, but had arrived prior to many of the newer men, and in fact had more or less assembled the cast of characters, receiving a tremendous boost in doing this once Starr was on the scene.

“Scene” was as good a word as any to describe what had begun at York, with serious lifters coming together for king-hell training sessions on Saturday, where it became not only commonplace but expected that national or world records would be challenged and often eclipsed. The enthusiasm and energy were palpable and contagious. We knew we would be positively affected once we could translate the sights and sounds of the day into new exercises, new programs, and new rep and set protocols.

First however, we had to get home, and looking at the accumulated snow that had risen to the mid-door level of my Ford, the power rack lying across the hood, and the pile of weights we had tossed into the trunk that had sunk the back end deep into a snow drift had momentarily dampened any spike of enthusiasm we might have felt. Without the benefit of a furniture blanket or similar protection, and noting the less-than-pristine condition of the automobile’s paint, it made sense to simply tie the power rack to the roof. This necessitated having our front seat windows open for the trip home, but we already had the Olympic bar sticking out of the open back seat window on the passenger side, so a bit more snow and another drop in temperature of five or ten degrees inside the car as we drove home with what we knew would be freezing appendages seemed like a reasonable course of action.

I had the foresight to at least start the engine and allow the vehicle to warm up. We knew the interior wouldn’t be affected since there was no heater or defroster but at least we would be ready to roll once we were fully packed up. As the lifters prepared to stow their straps, extra tee shirts, belts, and other lifting gear into their gym bags, we said our good-byes and were surprised that we were treated very much like one of their own. We were told to visit again, and we would; we were told we were “okay,” and were glad they thought we fit in; we were told that we were welcomed at any time, and we would take advantage of that. We were then pointedly told that we would not be able to exit the parking lot, and looking at the level of snow the blizzard had dumped on the York area, we had to agree. The car was wheels-deep at this point, overloaded, and more or less frozen! A few of the fellows quite jubilantly agreed to push us onto North Ridge Avenue, although the street was no better plowed or cleared than the York Barbell Company parking lot. They did in fact push, I steered, we careened onto the avenue and waved farewell.

We were on our way home and immediately began to dissect the day and all of the information and events we had been exposed to. The entire day had been an event worthy of celebration and while we excitedly watched our breath fill the car due to the extreme cold, we could only hope we were at least headed in the right direction. The streets were predictably empty at 5 PM and only lunatics or dyed-in-the-wool barbell men would be out in the brutal weather conditions, trying to make their way home 205 miles away. Needless to say, the absence of prior directions, a road atlas, or enough common sense to have recalled our initial route to “The Barbell” left us on US Route 30 instead of Interstate 83, which would have taken us to either the Pennsylvania Turnpike or Interstate 81, either of which would have at least been plowed, relatively safe compared to smaller roads, and may have had a passing car or two.

Instead, we slogged our way through what to us were rural outposts like Columbia, Landisville, the infamously named Amish towns of Bird-In-Hand and Paradise (and spotted the sign for Intercourse!), and Guthriesville before coasting into Philadelphia. From there we at least figured out

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what had to be done before the journey became a week long sojourn that took us east to Atlantic City, New Jersey, but as it was, the lack of directions and weather conditions extended what would normally be a three-and-one-half to four-hour trip into a grueling eight-hour disaster.

We rolled into my driveway after 1 AM, with Jack opting to sleep on the couch. I of course removed the power rack from the roof of the car, despite the still falling snow. I had quite literally risked life and limb to secure this special piece of equipment and intended to use it as soon as I could erect it. A day and night of exhausting travel, a lack of food and drink, traveling sideways on the snow-packed highway as often as I could maintain its path in a semblance of a straight line would be no hindrance to my next workout, one that would come as soon as I retrieved my first Olympic barbell and plates from the car. As Jack fell into a somnambulistic state, I was mentally constructing a power rack routine as I assembled the power rack and proudly placed my Olympic barbell across the support pins.

This was it! Forget food, forget drink, forget sleep, and forget the cold in the unheated and poorly-lit, one-bulb garage. I was going to rush upstairs, hopefully avoid waking anyone, and find my York Barbell Club tee shirt. I knew that having actually paid a visit to the York Barbell Club, donning the official club tee shirt under my two heavy sweatshirts would add pounds to each exercise and insure that my enthusiasm was at an all-time high. I had performed isometric and power rack training just as the routine was described in the Hoffman course, the articles pertaining to Alvin Roy and the San Diego Chargers, and the “tell all” from March himself in *Muscular Development*. However, getting some off-the-cuff instruction, commentary, and encouragement from Bill March had me with visions of outsized traps tearing the seams of my collection of flannel shirts and football jerseys.

Despite the flood of shot-in-the-ass enthusiasm, I was bone weary and close to a state of semi-starvation. While Jack slept, I ate. A typical lifter’s protein-based meal of burgers, cottage cheese, and a quart of milk seemed like just the thing to start things off at 3 AM on a Sunday morning! Usually I was much more attentive to my nutritional needs. At 5'5-3/4" in height and 232 pounds, it took a lot of nourishment to maintain that body weight, and a lot of work to maintain a low enough bodyfat level to show at least the outline of my abdominal muscles.

My teammates often joked that a missed meal meant a loss of six or seven pounds, and of course often made fun of my penchant for eating at the training table, and then strolling over to the “civilian” cafeteria to see what I could scrounge in the way of leftovers. I would fill my pockets with half-pint containers of milk and chocolate milk and walk them to the dorm, putting them in the toilet tanks of the communal bathrooms unless the outside temperature allowed for safe storage on the window sills. I periodically took two or three buses to downtown Cincinnati or made the three-mile walk to the only health food store in town in order to buy protein powder. I placed the powder in a large glass jug with my procured milk, and would go from room to room to ask different teammates to “shake it up” for me. As I did not own a blender at home, I was used to the chalky, chunky slurry of partially mixed powder and milk which I would gulp down as a late evening snack.

Now standing in the garage, door opened to the elements, and fueled by protein and the adrenaline that had spurred us through the blizzard conditions that more or less shut down the entire East Coast, I felt ready to train. Others may have considered a nap, a night’s sleep, or a total collapse but I was focused, I was obsessed, and as I was often reminded, I was probably a bit nuts!

I had, in my usual compulsive manner, planned ahead. I knew I would have a lot of questions for anyone and everyone I met at York, even those who wouldn’t talk with me, but we had targeted Bill March, drove for the purpose of returning with a York rack, and obviously intended to utilize some version of the power rack program. In keeping with all I had read and the pearls of wisdom that March had dropped on us, I decided to approach a new six week program in the following manner:

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### MONDAY

Low Position Deadlift  
Mid-Knee Position Deadlift  
Low Position Press  
Mid Position Press  
Low Position Squat  
Mid Position Squat  
Side Bends

### WEDNESDAY

Top Position Deadlift  
Top Position Press  
Top Position Squat  
Abdominal Work/Sit-ups

### FRIDAY

Barbell Squat  
Bench Press  
One or two other exercises of choice

This of course was not the “Gospel Truth York Barbell Company Bill March Power Rack Program” but I had to adapt it to our work and school schedule. In an era where universities had no weight training program, no weight rooms, no strength coaches, and little interest in their athletes actually lifting weights, anyone with an inclination to train was on their own. With the huge advantage of having watched some of the York greats at work in the gym, and having had face-to-face conversations with Bill March during our visit, I believed that my variation on the usual or published power rack program would best suit our needs and school, football, and work schedules.

Relative to any power rack program, allow me to add what will no doubt seem like a less than sensible statement. Dr. Fred Hatfield once described the introduction he gave an untrained, scrawny teenager who was hanging around the gym he used to have in Louisiana with his partner Randy Wilson. The youngster was anxious to train and Fred directed him to be at the gym during the times that the competitive lifters trained, and as his introduction to the world of barbells, Fred had him pick up plates and dumbbells and replace them on the rack. I don't now recall all of the details of the story, but the young man began a rudimentary, beginner's type of program and responded well, very much as expected when one is young, healthy, and untrained and then first exposed to any type of resistance exercise. Fred made the point, at least as I remember it, that even before the young man's actual lifting cycle began, he demonstrated some increases in muscular growth just from picking the plates and dumbbells up and carrying them to their racks. Even that “little bit” of physical work was more than what he had been used to and served as an overload and thus as a stimulus for growth.

In my home gym, my brand new York Olympic barbell set was a cherished addition, but I had already become relatively strong compared to my starting point, using a truck axle in place of a barbell, flywheels, gears, and sewer covers for plates, and pails of sand and concrete as one would dumbbells or

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kettlebells. I also had a number of 100 pound standard plates. I had used a two-inch drill bit on these to make them useable on the thick axle that served as my primary barbell and of course, for use on what I knew would eventually be my own Olympic bar.

Using a power rack program entails the use of very heavy weights and thus, the use of large plates. My first barbell set was the York Hercules 555 set that consisted of a standard (“small holed”) chrome vanadium bar, and one pair each of 100, 75, 50, 25, and 12.5 pound plates. I was used to humping around large, heavy plates and in any power rack program, one will or at least should, be using 100 pound plates or an awful lot of 20 kilo or 45-pounders. As an advocate of exercises – not sporting events but “exercises” utilized to build muscle tissue, like Farmers Walk, stone lifting, and beam carrying – I truly believe that one of the “secret benefits” of a power rack program is having to load, unload, and move the large plates the program will call for. Of course, moving large plates and a lot of weight was the indelible image left from watching Bill March and the other York Barbell Club lifters train on my initial visit to what was in decades past, the shrine of weightlifting.

One of the truths I would learn as I made additional trips to York Barbell and then to California, was that there is little if any truth in what was published in the various muscle magazines. In this age of immediate access to almost limitless information, it is hard to relate to an absence of information and gaps of time lasting months between exposures to useful training information. As I have often stressed, if one wanted to learn about strength training or the specifics of Olympic weightlifting or powerlifting, transportation had to be secured, often an invitation had to be obtained, and one then had to travel to the gym, garage, basement, or YMCA facility that housed the individual that held the sought after information. The magazines were thought to be a reflection of the true training that was transpiring, a peek into the window of greatness that produced the champions. Once I sat in the York Barbell Club facility, Zuver’s Hall Of Fame Gym, Bill Pearl’s Gym, the original Gold’s Gym, and all of the hole-in-the-wall gathering spots for serious lifters, it was at the same time disheartening yet exhilarating to learn that one did not have to be tied to a dogma, to a defined program that could not be varied, and that success would be dependent upon one’s willingness to work hard on a consistent basis.

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