

Starting Strength

My First Search for the X-Factor: York Barbell

by

Jim Moser

I had been Olympic Weightlifting about three years when I got the idea to drive to York Barbell to see if I could find what Tommy Suggs so rightly refers to as the X-Factor. I had heard all the legendary stories about the York Gym from my coach, mentor, and friend Bill Starr. The one thing I did not take into consideration was that twelve years had passed since Bill had been moving iron in the York Gym. In my 20 year-old mind it seemed like only days had passed since the legends of the Iron Game had been training there. It never dawned on me that the legends had all moved on and the York Gym had literally become an empty museum. The only thing moving now in the gym were memories, and they were fading fast.

Bill Starr told me the man I needed to contact was Smitty, the caretaker of the gym since the early 60's. Smitty knew it all, had seen everything, and been everywhere. Bill let me know that Smitty and John Grimek were the two people I wanted to deal with at York.

The history of York Barbell is checkered, at best. John Fair touches briefly on it in his book on York Barbell, *Muscletown USA*. In my opinion, Fair's book is the G-rated version of the history of York Barbell. The book reminded me of an action film where all the action, violence, and sex are edited for television. Those in-the-know know exactly what I am talking about. Those not in-the-know are probably better off for not knowing. The real story is a classic tale of high values and integrity versus love for the almighty dollar. The outcome of the York Barbell/Olympic weightlifting falling-out in the late 60's is perhaps the single most important event responsible for the fall of USA weightlifting from international prominence. Its effects are still felt today. I feel very confident in saying that had Bill Starr remained at York Barbell our standing in the international weightlifting community would be very different today. What took place at York Barbell during the late 60's was magical. Having traveled and trained all across the country I have yet to come across a gym that has had the X-Factor the likes of the York Barbell Gym. Fifteen minutes in the York Gym and you knew something special had just happened or was about to happen there. This place had character, atmosphere, and a life of its own. With any talk or discussion of reviving weightlifting in the USA, one need look no further than the York Gym in the late 60s. This is the model I would use to start the restructuring of American weightlifting.

Bill Starr told me the night before my journey to York Barbell that due to my knowledge of the events at York in the late 60s I would have 0% chance to train there. This took the edge off of any confidence I had. My journey turned into a mission or, as some might say, a challenge.

I awoke the next morning at 6:00 am as I wanted to get an early start. My plan was to get up to the gym early and get my workout in before the York Barbell weightlifting team started to train. Visions of training where the greatest weightlifters of all time had worked out danced through my head on the long drive to York, PA. That morning I arrived at the gym, went up to the counter, and asked to

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see Smitty. The lady working behind the counter was reading a newspaper and did not bother to look up. She told me Smitty was in the back and pointed down the hallway. I followed the path through the warehouse portion of the building and worked my way through old prototype equipment, broken exercise machines and an early version of a isotonic machine. I was walking through a time-line of exercise equipment.

At the back of the building was a separate room with a light on. This was Smitty's office. He had two metal desks stacked with old weightlifting magazines and various souvenirs from his travels all over the world. Against the back wall was an assembly-line machine that was used to bottle York Barbell's patented Energol. This was where I first saw Smitty. He was a robust, loud man in his late fifties. Smitty had just finished packaging a case of Energol when I interrupted him and introduced myself. Smitty had me sit down at his desk, and he proceeded to tell me of his latest travels as coach of the United States Weightlifting Team at the World Championships. For the next several hours I listened to countless stories of Smitty's travels and his association with the greatest weightlifters of all time, from Tommy Kono to David Rigert and Vasily Alexeev.

He then got a big smile on his face and pulled out of his desk a black & white photo of Bob Bednarski in a split position with 525 pounds fixed solidly over his head. Smitty told me that of all the great weightlifters he had seen, none could match the charisma and strength of Bob Bednarski. I was very familiar with the amazing feats of Bob Bednarski, the man Bill Starr dubbed "The Ninth Wonder Of The Weightlifting World." After he showed me the photo, I followed Smitty out to the gym and he showed me the exact spot where Bednarski had hoisted the massive weight overhead. He told me Bednarski had done this a full year and half before Alexeev had clean and jerked the historic 500 pounds in Columbus, Ohio in 1970. I was a little puzzled, as the spot Smitty was pointing out to me was a painted concrete floor. I naively asked Smitty if a platform used to be on the spot where we were standing. Smitty chuckled and said no, just a pair of squat stands, you want to see them? I remembered Bill Starr teaching me how to jerk, and telling me Bednarski thought that if the jerk was stuck properly it could be done on a sheet of ice. Obviously, a man who thought he could jerk on a sheet of ice would see no challenge in jerking on a slick concrete floor.

As I was examining the gym, one particular item caught my eye. On the ground by the barbells was a very peculiar looking Olympic bar. Everything was normal except for the thickness of the bar; it had to be at least 2" in diameter. I later found out this was the bar the York Men of the past used to train with in preparation to lift the Apollon Wheels. It was the same diameter as the Apollon Wheels that John Davis had first lifted in 1949. It was very apparent that the gym was full of a lot of history.

I then asked Smitty what time the training was going to start, since it was getting close to early afternoon, and would it be okay to get a workout in. I explained that by the time I had driven back to Baltimore it would be too late to train there because the gym would be closed - I was searching for excuses. Smitty told me it would be okay; normally the gym was to be used by York Barbell team members only, but he would make an exception this time. I went outside to get my workout gear. When I returned to the gym I could barely believe my eyes.

Seated straight-legged on the floor with his feet pressed firmly against the side of the 8 inch-high platform was an elderly man doing inclined lat pull-downs. Clear across the other side of the gym was the plate-loaded lat machine stack. A cable was run up the wall to the pulleys mounted at about 20 feet high, and a 50-foot garden hose was attached to the cable and stretched all the way across the room to the seated gentleman, who apparently liked the "stretch" provided by the 50 feet of hose. I was immediately drawn to the size of this man's arms. He got up, gave me one of those what-are-you-looking-at looks, and then introduced himself to me. I had just met the legendary John Grimek, the man who was most responsible for the early success of York Barbell. I was now getting ready to train, but I never in my wildest dreams thought I would be training at the York Gym with the legendary John Grimek. I proceeded to put on my Bob Hoffman knee bands and lace up my weightlifting shoes.

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By the time I had finished stretching, he had finished his workout. As he was leaving he asked if I was coming back tomorrow. I stuck my chest out and said, "Sure, see you tomorrow, Mr Grimek."

It was years later that I learned from John Grimek one of the most valuable lessons I had ever learned about lifting heavy weights. I was attempting for the first time to snatch 140kg as 100kg lifter. I was on my 13th attempt at making the lift. Through all 12 attempts I had gotten all kinds of advice as I approached the bar. The other guys in the gym were all yelling various cues and encouragement. Pull higher, stay over the bar longer, hips higher, hips lower and on and on. I was approaching the bar for my lucky 13th attempt. Just before I gripped the bar John Grimek raised his voice from the corner of the gym. Whenever Grimek spoke, everyone listened. The gym immediately became silent. Grimek looked around the room and told everyone to shut up. He then said to me, "Will you cut out all of this crap and just pick the damn thing up?" John Grimek had just told me to make the weight. When John Grimek told you to do something, well, you just did it. For the first time in my lifting career I totally cleared my mind of everything except for one thing: "Make The Lift." Holding that thought in my mind I proceeded to nail one of the best snatches I had ever made. It was as if gravity had taken a vacation. For those of you who do not know much about John Grimek, google his name. His accomplishments are worthy of a whole article themselves. The man did as much for the Iron Game as anyone has in its entire history. Above all else, John Grimek was a man's man and a true gentlemen.

Back to the workout. It dawned on me that it was now 4:30, and that I had been at York Barbell all day and had not touched a weight. I figured I better get moving and started to do some power snatches on the main platform. After about three sets Smitty came into the gym. This time he had his coat and hat on, and he had his trusted German Shepard, Baron, at his side. Smitty watched me do a couple of sets and then told me he was going home to get some dinner, and he asked me to shut the door on my way out. As he was leaving I asked Smitty, "What time are the guys showing up to train?" Smitty then kind of shrugged and replied, "Well, Jim Moser, they must be running late. No sense waiting around." With that, Smitty left. I was alone.

It was just me, an empty gym, and my imagination. I went back to doing my power snatches. Before I knew it, it was dark outside. I kept on training, I was not used to training alone, and as anyone that has ever trained alone will tell you, the weights felt like a ton. I was resting between sets and must have dozed off.

When I awoke the gym was packed. On my platform was Bednarski, Patera, Schemansky, Dube and Pickett, a line-up of the greatest heavyweights American weightlifting has ever seen. On the platform in front of ours was a group of 198lb weightlifters standing in line, waiting their turn to clean & jerk. This was not your average group, but the best of the best: Demarco, Grippaldi, Holbrook, Hise, James, and March. Over in the corner doing timed squats were two of the brightest minds in American weightlifting, Bill Starr and Tommy Suggs. They were discussing who was going to be the lifter of the year on the next cover of *Strength and Health* magazine. Mark Cameron, the lightest American to ever clean & jerk 500lbs, was sitting in the bleachers being interviewed by *Wide World of Sports* for their upcoming show featuring America's top Olympic hopefuls. Bob Hoffman was seated behind the platform with Kono and Karchut at his side. Just minutes later, Hoffman walked by me and asked me if I had brought my muscles with me today. I answered, "Of course, Mr Hoffman. I would never leave home without them." Bob Hoffman was now explaining to Tommy Kono that he could not have invented rubber knee bands, since years after Kono had actually invented them they were called Bob Hoffman Knee Bands by Bob Hoffman. So after all, even though Kono invented them two years before Bob Hoffman started selling Bob Hoffman Knee Bands, it did not mean Bob Hoffman did not invent them after Kono invented them, thus making Bob Hoffman the actual inventor of the knee bands. This was the World According to Hoffman, right here in front of me.

While I was waiting for my assault on the barbell, it came to me: I had found Tommy Suggs X-Factor. The York Barbell team members were training at a furious pace. The enthusiasm was

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incredible; there was no jealousy, only the desire to lift heavy weights, and the camaraderie was a palpable substance. And they were not all using the same technique or following the same programs. They were following programs and sharing the advice from their hometown coaches that had led them to York Barbell, and learning from and coaching each other. All this is what made the X-factor work.

I heard Smitty calling my name, "Jim Moser, Jim Moser, let's go! Are you going to train?" I lifted my head up, squinted my eyes and looked around the gym. All the lifters were gone, the gym was empty again. The only person left was Smitty standing by the door, calling my name. The dream was over, I had just woken up. The X-Factor was gone. Smitty asked me, "Jim Moser, are you still here? Do you know what time it is?" I looked over at the clock - it was 10:30 pm. I told Smitty that I was working out and must have dozed off. Smitty then asked me if any of the guys had showed up to workout. I replied, "You missed it Smitty, they were all here. The place was packed." Smitty smiled. He knew exactly what I was talking about. Smitty came over and helped me unload the bar and pack my things up. We started across the gym and were headed towards the door. I stopped and turned around to get one final look at the gym before my long ride home. I noticed the lights were still on in the locker room, so I started towards the door to turn them off. Smitty asked me were I was going. I told him I was going to turn off the lights. He stopped me in mid-stride, smiled, winked, and said "Leave them on so the guys can see while they're taking a shower."

Jim Moser is a former national-level weightlifter and powerlifter. He has coached weightlifting at all levels of the sport, and has been involved in the fitness industry since 1987. He has been a strength coach at the high school and college level, a resident athlete at the US Olympic Training Center, and has coached numerous athletes to national and international events. He is buddies with Bill Starr, Ken Patera, George Hechter, and Rip, and is unusually fortunate to be married to Lynn.

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