

Only the Strong Shall Survive

Bill Starr: 2006

The Strength Factor in Bodybuilding

Throughout the years I've had the opportunity to meet and train with some of the greatest bodybuilders in the history of the sport. Those I admired the most all had similar traits: They were symmetrical, took pride in their athleticism and were strong. They thought of themselves as strength athletes who chose to participate in physique competition rather than weightlifting. Quite a few were champions in both bodybuilding and Olympic lifting. Two such men were my first idols: Steve Stanko and John Grimek. After I saw their photos in *Strength & Health*, I was hooked.

Eventually, I got to know them quite well, and my regard for them went up another notch. Besides being legendary athletes, they were exemplary human beings. What I admired most about them was their strength. Grimek thought of himself as a strength athlete first and bodybuilder second. He always preached the doctrine of having sufficient strength to back up big muscles and was willing and able to support his beliefs. He was a member of the '36 Olympic weightlifting team before he turned his attention to the new sport of bodybuilding, but even after he switched goals, he continued to train hard and heavy, just as he had when he competed in Olympic lifting. He once told me of the time he cleaned 350, which he had never done before. He proceeded to press the weight, push-press it and then jerk it. When I asked him why he didn't do the three lifts separately, he replied that he wasn't sure he would ever clean that much weight again.

At an exhibition at the Los Angeles Athletic Club in 1940, Grimek cheat-curlled 320 and pressed it overhead. The photo of that amazing lift appeared in the March '71 edition of *Strength & Health*. He weighed 185 when he did extraordinary feats such as those and many more, including supporting a half ton overhead and deadlifting 600. And he was undefeated in physique competition, winning the Mr. America title in '40 and '41. He probably would have continued to take the crown except that a rule was enacted that forbade him—or anyone—from entering the contest after having won it. In '46 he captured the Most Muscular Man title, and he was Mr. USA in 1949. He retired undefeated—the only bodybuilder who ever earned that distinction—and is considered the greatest poser in the annals of bodybuilding. He really set the standard for others seeking the ideal physique to emulate.

Grimek's closest friend, Steve Stanko, was cut from the same cloth. Both grew up in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, became interested in Olympic weightlifting and moved to work and lift at the York Barbell Club in the '30s. Steve, like Grimek, was a weightlifter who later turned to bodybuilding—in his case, out of necessity. In 1941 Steve totalled 1,002 (press, snatch and clean and jerk), becoming the first lifter to break the 1,000-pound barrier. He was on course to become a multiple world champion when a severe case of phlebitis, an inflammation of the walls of the veins, curtailed his lifting career. He turned to physique competition and became Mr. America in 1943.

Stanko was still training, despite his painful affliction, when I joined Tommy Suggs on the staff of *Strength & Health* in the mid-'60s. Naturally, there were a lot of exercises that he was unable to do, but on those he could work, he was impressive. His favorite was the Weaver stick. A five- or 10-pound weight was attached to a broomstick and placed on the floor. With your arm completely extended, you

had to lever the weight to horizontal. No one in the York Gym could match Steve—not Bob Bednarski, Bill March, Joe Dube or Ernie Pickett—and he was in his 60s.

Vern Weaver was a protégé of Stanko's and Grimek's from the beginning of his bodybuilding career, and he adopted their emphasis on strength. Many who trained with him and saw him lift in Olympic contests will argue that he was the strongest Mr. America ever. I saw him do a rough version of a power clean with 370 and jerk it.

I heard a story about Vern and asked him if it were true. It was. Seems he was run off the road and ended up in a ditch with his car on its side. He was so incensed that he grabbed the underside of the car and flipped it upright. That wasn't a VW either but a full-sized American model.

His successor to the top title in the land, Val Vasilef, was, in my opinion, even stronger than Vern and much more athletic. The '64 Mr. America possessed a rare combination of natural strength and coordination not seen in the physique world since John Grimek. When he trained at the York Gym, he would outlift all the competitive weightlifters, including superheavyweight powerlifter Terry Todd.

No article dealing with strong bodybuilders would be complete without some comment on Marvin Eder. Although he never won any major titles, due to his being shafted by the AAU, he's regarded by most experts as the strongest physique contestant in modern history. I happen to agree with them. Eder did seven dips with 400 pounds around his waist and a single with 434. Throw in a 515 bench, a 355 military press and a 550 squat for 10 reps, all done at a bodyweight of 195 and long before steroids came along, and you can easily see why he belongs at the top of the strength ladder.

There were lots of others who were strength athletes as well as physique champions: Bill Pearl, Ken Waller, Chet Yorton, Mike Katz, Sergio Oliva, John DeCola, Ed Corney, Dave Draper, Bill St. John and, of course, Arnold and Franco. Franco Columbu, in particular, could have contended for national titles in powerlifting if he'd been so inclined. He wasn't—for good reason. Bodybuilding by then was a professional sport, whereas powerlifting was purely an amateur endeavor.

There were many more, but the list is enough to get my point across: All the top physique men in the country incorporated lots of strength work in their yearly routines.

And it just wasn't the bodybuilders who were winning major titles who were doing the heavy lifting. Those starting out and on their way up trained for strength as well. They were following the examples set by successful physique stars and understood the principle of building a solid base for future definition work.

I trained with Bob Gajda in Chicago four years before he won the Mr. American title. I'd been competing in Olympic lifting for five years and had an excellent background of hard training due to the influence of Sid Henry, who coached me in Dallas. Yet whenever I trained with Gajda, I would stay sore for several days. He carried a much larger workload than I did and worked at a faster pace. That foundation carried him to the pinnacle of American bodybuilding. Whenever I get on this subject, I think of Ronnie Ray of Dallas. After he won the Mr. Texas title, he began competing in powerlifting and won the Nationals within a year. The heavy lifting he'd been doing in his physique workouts carried over to the strength sport. In fact, he contended that training for powerlifting was a breeze after being a serious physique contestant. I hate to admit it, but I think he's right.

Then a number of events occurred that altered the way bodybuilders trained. One of the most important was that Joe Weider made bodybuilding a professional sport and got rid of the athletic points requirement. When the AAU ran physique competitions, points for athletic achievement were awarded at the national-level contests. Those very valuable five points often spelled the difference between taking the top honors and being an also-ran. They could be acquired in a variety of ways: earning a black belt in karate, being on a championship team in high school or winning a weightlifting meet. Since all the bodybuilders of that era included one or more of the Olympic lifts in their routines, the easiest way to gain athletic points was to lift in Olympic meets.

Another reason that the bodybuilders lifted in meets: The physique contests were always held after the weightlifting contests, and the men who served as judges for the lifting usually judged the physique events as well. So bodybuilders who competed in the lifting meet got to display their physiques in a dynamic fashion nine times prior to the bodybuilding contest, giving them a definite advantage over opponents who didn't lift in the meet.

Once the athletic points were dropped, however, there wasn't any reason for bodybuilders to bother with the Olympic lifts, and for the most part they were dropped from bodybuilding routines. Concurrently, Nautilus machines began pushing free weights to the sidelines in commercial gyms across the country. The concept of doing just one exercise on a machine was revolutionary, and Arthur Jones, the inventor of Nautilus, ingeniously married his impressive machines to a new method of training. It was quick and easy to learn, and gym owners loved it. Customers could be in and out in half an hour, and there were no loose plates or dumbbells to clutter up the place,

Due to the success of Nautilus, more and more machines came on the scene, each supposedly better engineered and therefore more functional than the last. As a result, free-weight training became passé—except for those interested in Olympic and powerlifting. Bodybuilders didn't see the need to train heavy any longer. That was strike two.

Strike three came during that same time frame and may have been the most damaging of all to strength training—the rampant use of steroids and other commercial anabolic products. Now anyone who wanted to get bigger and stronger had only to obtain the required pharmaceutical, and he was halfway home. It really didn't matter what routine he followed or how hard he trained. Gains came if he took enough of the magic pills or injections. When progress stalled, there was no thought of working harder in the gym. Rather, the course of action was to increase the dose or add yet another type of muscle enhancer into the mix.

Bodybuilders no longer studied programs or examined training methods in order to make improvements. Instead, they gleaned the pages of their new bible, *The Physicians Desk Reference*, hoping to find a tidbit of information in the hallowed PDR to aid their cause. I dare say that bodybuilders and competitive weightlifters knew as much as or more about the properties of any anabolic product as doctors and pharmacists.

Once a selection was made, procuring the drug was a simple matter. Nearly every gym that catered to bodybuilders had an in-house dealer, and every town had at least one drug doctor. When I lived in Venice, California, in the early '70s, the most popular drug dispenser operated in the center of town,

only a short walk from Gold's Gym. Talk about convenient. The patient handed the doctor a shopping list; the doctor wrote the prescriptions, collected his fee and sent the happy athlete downstairs to the pharmacy he owned to have them filled.

Within a decade the concept of doing some heavy training in order to establish—or reestablish—a solid foundation of strength was virtually lost. Sure, a few bodybuilders were quite strong, especially in comparison with their peers, but they weren't even close to being in the same class as those mentioned above. In most cases, when the bodybuilder went off the juice (which was never for very long), his strength dropped appreciably because it was based on chemicals rather than hard work. The notion of hammering away with heavy weights during those layoffs from taking the drugs never entered their heads. They just started the next cycle a bit earlier than planned

It got to the point where young bodybuilders really didn't have any models to follow, such as we had with Grimek, Stanko, et al. Even if someone could afford the costly pharmaceuticals, his lifestyle was a world apart from those of professional bodybuilders. The programs presented by the pros do not relate to 99 percent of those who read IRON MAN and other publications aimed at bodybuilders. Typical readers who are interested in improving their physiques have jobs or are full-time students. They also have family responsibilities and social obligations that leave them only a few hours per week for training. Their motives for lifting weights are different from those of the pros as well. Amateurs are mainly looking to add muscular size and shape to their physiques while improving their fitness and overall health. They understand that training benefits their mental as well as physical states and heightens their self-esteem. They like to look good in a bathing suit and take pride in the results of their work in the weight room. And, most important, they aren't willing to risk short- or long-term health problems by using anabolics in any form.

Those are the people I'm addressing here. They're the trainees who need to consider the value of including some strength training in their yearly routines.

After my Hopkins athletes had used up their eligibility, the majority switched from pure strength training to bodybuilding. While many organized their own programs, a lot of them came to me for advice. I told them that even though they were training on a bodybuilding routine, they should not completely eliminate strength exercises. If they wanted to become more muscular, they should set aside some time during the year for increasing overall strength.

Their comments usually went something like this: "I don't care how much I can lift anymore. I just want to get a six-pack and add a few inches to my arms and chest. Heavy lifting is history."

Yet another objection to my idea comes from the aspiring bodybuilders I encounter at fitness facilities and gyms: "I'm not interested in seeing how much I can squat or deadlift, although I would like to add 20 pounds to my bench. I'm not into powerlifting at all."

Being a patient man, I explain, "How much total work and intensity you put into your workouts is completely dependent on how strong you are. More strength also enables you to recover from a tough session faster. Strong muscles and attachments are less likely to get hurt, and when they do get injured, they heal more rapidly."

That gets their attention, so I go on: “Whenever you improve strength in a major muscle group such as the back, legs or shoulder girdle, you can use that newly gained strength to help you define parts of those larger groups, such as the middle portion of your back, and do more specialized work for the smaller muscles, like the biceps and calves.” By that time I’ve convinced them that they should do some strength work during the year and am helping them outline a program they can use right away.

High pulls are a great exercise to include in the strength cycle. Both wide- and clean-grip pulls are not that difficult to learn, and they work all of the muscles of the back in a dynamic fashion. It’s obvious that high pulls are beneficial for building back strength, but what most trainees don’t understand is that they’re also valuable to anyone who wants to get bigger arms—as are any other pulling movements done with heavy weights: power cleans, power snatches, bent-over rows, shrugs and deadlifts. All of those lifts involve the prime movers of the upper arm, the brachialis and brachioradialis. When those muscles are made considerably stronger, you will be able to handle more weight plus additional reps on a variety of specialized biceps exercises.

The same idea holds true for the triceps. Take a few months and improve your strength on weighted dips, flat- and incline-bench presses and overhead presses, and you’ll find that you can use higher poundages on your auxiliary exercises for your triceps.

For example, let’s say that Bob can incline-press 290 and flat-bench press 350. Because of his strength, he uses 180 for 15 reps on triceps pushdowns and does his straight-arm pullovers with 125 for 20. In comparison, Ralph can only incline-press 225 and bench 300. The most he can do is 15 reps on the pushdown with 90, and on the straight-arm pullovers he’s been stuck at 65 for 20 for several months. Which one of those bodybuilders is going to have the most impressive triceps?

Looking at it from another perspective, let’s say that you can back-squat 350x5. You take a couple of months and concentrate on bettering that lift to 405x5, and when you’re done, the amount of weight you can use on specialized leg movements like leg extensions, leg curls, the adductor machine and calf raises will go up in direct proportion to the gains you made on the squat. It’s simple logic that seems to have been lost along the way.

When you finally decide to include some strength training in your yearly bodybuilding schedule, there are two approaches to choose from. Your selection will be a matter of individual preference. What the majority of the bodybuilders in the ’50s and ’60s did was set aside six to eight weeks in which they did strength work exclusively. During the strength cycle they also added bodyweight, knowing that one of the best ways to get stronger was to get bigger. Since the most important contests corresponded with the national-level Olympic meets in late spring and early June, they did their longest strength cycles in the summer.

Primary, big-muscle exercises took priority. Some dropped all auxiliary work for the smaller groups, while others included a few exercises for parts that needed more attention. Programs were built around handling heavy poundages on squats, flat- and incline-bench presses, overhead presses, weighted dips, high-pulls, bent-over rows, shrugs and power cleans and power snatches, and a number also did full snatches and clean and jerks.

Reps were in the low range—sixes, fives and threes—with six to eight sets being the norm. They trained much like the Olympic lifters, doing one core exercise for each major muscle group per session. Their intent was to get as strong as possible and not worry about their overall appearance.

At the conclusion of the strength cycle they went back to their former routine and started dropping bodyweight. As I've already mentioned, the boost in overall strength helped them to charge through their lower-weight, higher-reps routines. They did two more, shorter cycles just before Christmas and again at the end of winter. Gains came continuously throughout the year and culminated onstage at the Mr. USA or Mr. America shows.

It should be noted that a number of bodybuilders lifted in Olympic meets to make improvements in one of the contested lifts, realizing that the competitive atmosphere would elevate them to higher levels.

The second method of including some strength work in a yearly routine appeals to lots of bodybuilders because it lets them keep a great many exercises in their programs and they enjoy the variety that affords. You work only one of the major muscle groups in a strength set-and-rep formula and continue to train the rest of your body as always.

For example, for two months you attack your back with those exercises I recommended, using lower reps, trying to move the top-end weights up as high as possible. It's a smart idea to set some realistic goals before embarking on any strength program. Then, when you reach those goals for the back exercises, give another major group the strength treatment. Make sure that you always put the strength exercise or exercises first in your workouts.

Changing the way you attack the various muscle groups throughout the year is very beneficial. It lets you steadily improve strength in the big muscles, which, in turn, carries over to the smaller groups. It's a win-win deal.

Keep in mind that strength is as important to bodybuilders as it is to any other athletes. A physique built on a solid foundation of strength is going to be not only imposing but also more enduring.