

My First Half-Century in the Iron Game

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Having attended some, not a lot but some, physique contests, and having observed the overall scene in weight-training circles for more than fifty years, it has been obvious to me that the declared winner of such contests is not always the right choice. All too frequently, the winner is determined for political reasons.

During the period from the 1940s until 1970 several Black men entered the Mr. America contest who should have won, but did not win because they were Black. Then, in 1970, the “powers that be” decided that it was time for a Black winner; so they looked around very carefully and selected one, Chris Dickerson, and he won the title that year. But he should not have won; Casey Viator created a sensation with the audience, and should have won, but instead took third place. Comparing Dickerson’s physique to that of Casey was a sick joke; but the decision was based on politics.

For twenty-five years we had discrimination, then it switched to reverse discrimination; having been impossible for a Black to win it then became “politically correct” for a Black to win.

For a period of many years, Bob Hoffman, owner of the York Barbell Company, controlled the Mr. America contest with an iron hand; he decided who should win, and it was a requirement that a potential winner spend several weeks training in York, Pennsylvania, immediately before the contest, so that the winner would appear to be a “York Trained” man.

Later, Joe Weider did much the same thing when he started promoting contests.

The result being, in both cases, that the right man did not always win. Which is why I have always had a rather low opinion of such contests. In a race, or in almost any athletic competition, the winner is usually obvious. An exception being fights that are won on the basis of a decision rather than a knockout.

Several years ago I watched one of Larry Holme’s fights on television, a fight that he won on a decision; but, in my opinion, I believe that other guy actually won the fight. Then, a few months later, Holmes came to visit me and tried to get me to give him a lot of money for the supposed “privilege” of training him for his next fight; this supposedly being an opportunity for me to get a lot of favorable publicity for my business. But I told him thanks, but no thanks. In the first place, I have never paid anybody for an endorsement; and in the second place, it was a “no win” situation for me, if he won following my having trained him I would get little or nothing in the way of credit, but if he lost it would be blamed on me. Apart from ethical considerations, turning him down was a wise move on my part because he lost his next fight.

In my opinion, paying celebrities for “endorsements” is outright fraud; the people who have chosen to endorse my products have done so because they liked them, not because they were paid.

And the people who have any of my equipment paid me for it, at full price; yet I still get about a dozen requests a month from people wanting to get some of my equipment free in return for their endorsement. Such people are wasting their time, it will never happen.

Bill Pearl has frequently stated that I gave him some early Nautilus machines, but that is untrue; I shipped him two machines that he was supposed to pay for, but he never did. So he got them free, but not as a gift.

Then he modified one of those machines in such a manner that its function was destroyed; when I heard about what he had done I called him and asked if what I had heard was true, and he denied it. But I continued to get reports that he had modified the machine, so I sent a friend around to Pearl’s gym in order to find out the truth, and the machine had been modified, literally ruined.

So I called Bill again; and faced with the evidence he finally admitted the truth of the matter; but he then tried to justify the modification on the grounds that doing so improved both the convenience and safety of the machine.

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So I told him ... "Why don't you modify your car in a similar manner? If you put oval-shaped wheels on it then it will be more convenient because it will be lower and you won't have to step up so far when you get in it; and it will be safer, too, because with oval-shaped wheels the ride will be so rough that it will throw you right through the roof if you drive it faster than about two miles an hour."

Bill didn't think that was very funny; but I have not found several of his statements and actions all that amusing either. He sent me a postcard on which he spelled the word "moded" as "motted," and when I mentioned this to him and pointed out the fact that the word did not have even one letter "t" and that he used the letter twice, he informed me that I was neither his father nor his uncle and that he needed no instructions from me. But he obviously needs help from somebody.

In a later book, supposedly written by him but almost certainly written by somebody else, he gave me the dubious "credit" for having invented isokinetic exercise; while, in fact, I have been violently opposed to any form of isokinetics since day one.

But his actions that I resent most was the outright screwing that he gave Sergio Oliva in the Mr. Universe contest in London in 1971. For several months immediately prior to that contest a series of articles called "The Bill Pearl Story" was published both in this country and in England; and if you were dumb enough to believe those articles you would believe that Bill Pearl, if not God himself, was certainly a God of some kind.

I trained Sergio Oliva for that contest and went to London with him, so I clearly saw just what happened. During the "prejudging" Pearl was asked to step up next to Sergio, but he looked down at the floor, waved his arm in a gesture of defeat and moved backwards away from Sergio; utterly refused to permit a side-by-side comparison.

Compared to Sergio he looked utterly ridiculous, and he knew it. Yet he "won" the contest; or, in fact, he "fixed" it.

For a period of several years prior to that contest, a very wealthy friend of mine who had a beautiful home just outside London had been paying all of the expenses involved in promoting and conducting the annual contest, while permitting the promoter to keep all of the income as clear profit; he did so because of his interest in weight training but did not want to connect his name with the contest. So the promoter had a very good thing going for himself.

I was staying in my friend's home and very shortly after we returned there following the contest the phone rang; it was the contest promoter calling to apologize for what had occurred. When my friend realized who was calling, he told him ... "Wait a minute, Oscar, I can't talk here, let me go to another phone." Then he motioned for me to pick up that phone while he went to an extension, so I heard what was said.

Oscar said ... "I'm sorry about what happened today, Jack, and I can assure you that it never happened before, and that it will never happen again."

So Jack told him ... "It shouldn't have happened today, Oscar." And then hung up. And after that Oscar had to pay his own expenses; end of the gravy train.

A month or two later Oscar published an article in several magazines in which he assured the readers that the contest had not been fixed; the tone of the article clearly indicating that he was rushing into print with a denial in anticipation of an accusing article from me.

And I wrote such an article, a satire which I called "The Pill Bearl Story," and in which I called the contest the "GRABBA" in "BLUNDON" and called Sergio "Hergio Saliva," it was, I thought, really quite funny. But Peary Rader's wife Mable refused to print it in Iron Man. So we then had a situation where Oscar was offering denials in an attempt to answer accusations that were never made. Me thinketh the lady doth protesteth too much.

During earlier years, thousands of pictures were taken at that contest every year, and hundreds of these pictures would be published in various magazines during the following year. But following that contest there were only a very few pictures published, and only one showing Sergio; because they could not find any other pictures that would fail to show just what occurred.

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And a number of totally untrue statements were published; they said that Sergio was “fat,” when in fact he was as lean as a well-conditioned race horse, and I have pictures taken immediately before that contest to prove it. They also said that you could see him “shrinking” during the contest, losing his “pump.” But in fact he was never pumped, posed cold. They provided Bill Pearl the equipment and space required to pump up prior the pre-judging and the contest, but refused to provide anything for Sergio.

These lies were repeated so often that even Sergio started to believe that he had been fat; realized the truth only when I later showed him the pictures we took immediately before the contest.

Nearly a year earlier, Arnold and his friend Franco Columbu visited me in Florida, and while they were there Arnold met a man that was called “Turkey,” a man who worked for the phone company. So the following year, while I was training Sergio in Florida, Arnold used this man as a “spy” in an attempt to learn just how well Sergio was doing. He planned to enter the London contest, but did not want to lose to Sergio. Being clearly aware of just what was going on, this being obvious from the questions that Turkey asked Sergio, we decide to try to blow Arnold’s mind. So we started feeding Arnold lies through his spy; at first, according to these lies, Sergio’s arms were 22 inches, then 23 inches, then 24 inches, and so on, while his bodyweight rapidly increased to nearly 300 pounds. We figured that Arnold would either get fat trying to get bigger than Sergio, or get too small in an attempt to be more muscular than Sergio, and than in either case he would lose. But we apparently overdid it, scared him off, because he did not show up for the contest.

Turkey continually asked Sergio how much I was paying him, and Sergio told me about these questions; so I told him ... “The next time he asks you, tell him \$20,000.00.” In fact, I paid him nothing apart from buying him a coach-class airline ticket to London.

So, a day or two later, sitting around Turkey’s house watching television at about midnight, Turkey asked him again about how much I was paying him, And he said ... “\$20,000.00.”

Whereupon, Turkey leaned forward and turned off the television, and said ... “I don’t believe it.”

And Sergio said ... “Believe what you like, he has already given me \$10,000.00,” and then reached forward and turned the television back on.

Having sat still in apparent shock for a minute or so, Turkey got up and left the room; was gone for quite a while, was in another room talking on the phone to Arnold.

How do I know?

Because, at eight o’clock the following morning, my phone rang; it was Arnold calling from California, where it was only five o’clock in the morning. “I’ve been thinking,” he said, “why don’t you give me a job? I’ll work for you for five years for \$100,000.00 (\$20,000.00 a year).”

So I told him ... “Gee, Arnold, I wish you had called earlier, even a few hours earlier, but right now I don’t need any more bodybuilders.”

He had, of course, been up all night, wanting to call but afraid of calling too early.

During his earlier visit to Florida, Arnold told me that Joe Weider was paying him \$125.00 a week, then about half an hour later he said it was \$175.00 a week. But what really bothered me was the fact that while working for Joe he went to great lengths in the direction of knocking both Joe and his wife; if Joe had heard Arnold’s stories about Joe’s wife he probably would have shot Arnold. I have never been an admirer of Joe myself, but I cannot respect a man who tells the kind of stories about his employer that Arnold did.

Fairly recently Arnold told Joe Cirulli that he had never met me. Sure. Well, as it happens I have hundreds of pictures of Arnold that we took in my house, in my gym, and elsewhere.

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I first saw Arnold in central Africa in 1968, when he put on a posing exhibit sponsored by Reg Park; he was, I believe, twenty years old at the time. I met him again in California in 1970, and then he visited me in Florida in November of that same year. And I saw him at a contest in Columbus, Ohio, and talked to him for several hours afterwards.

So he may not know me, but I certainly know him.

I would like to point out that I am not discussing Arnold's physique, but rather his character. In my opinion, Arnold, in his prime, had one of the two best physiques in history; it would be difficult for me to decide just which was best, Arnold's physique or that of Sergio. If both were at their peak, I would not object if either one was declared the winner; their physiques were different, but each was in a class far above any others.

My experience with top bodybuilders, with few exceptions, has not been good; a rather long list of them have worked for me at one time or another, and none of them ever quit, they were all fired. And I do not fire anybody without a very good reason for doing so.

When I sold Nautilus, one of the first things the new owners did was to rehire a long list of people that I had previously fired; and guess what? ... it did not take long for the new owners to fail, to take a very profitable business and run it into bankruptcy.

Then they went around telling people that Nautilus was already failing when they bought it. Well, if so, then why did they buy it? In fact, the company was making a clear profit of \$20,000.00 a day at the time they bought it, \$140,000.00 a week, nearly eight million dollars a year. And was making that profit in spite of the fact that I was spending enormous amounts of money on research and was also spending a lot of money conducting medical seminars on a daily basis for more than eight months, a total of more than 240 such seminars.

I sold that company in order to provide myself with both the time and the money required for additional research; and that research eventually produced the closest thing to a miracle that anybody will ever see, not the "best" but quite literally the "only" tools for meaningful testing of strength, range of motion and endurance. My present age being what it is, I will never see it, but eventually somebody is going to make a hell of a lot of money from our current equipment. It works, does exactly what we claim, and nothing else does; and it is desperately needed by millions of people with spinal pain.

My experience has taught me that very little works out as it was planned, and I have also noted that things which initially appear to be a disaster frequently turn out to be the best thing that could have happened.

Many people have given me the credit for causing the current boom in exercise, but I have never made such a claim; it was, I believe, a case of being in the right place at the right time, an accident. If I had not done the things that I have done, sooner or later somebody else would have.

So where do we go from here? Who knows? We are still working, still conducting research. When I sold Nautilus I took with me all of the people who are really worth having, and we have a very good team; just where their continued work will lead I do not know, but if their earlier performances are any indication I believe that additional discoveries of great value will eventually come to light.