

My First Half-Century in the Iron Game

While I have no reliable source of information in this regard, I would be surprised to learn that there were many, if any, more than about 2,000 people lifting weights in this country prior to the Second World War. Even several years after the war, as late as 1950, there were probably less than a hundred weightlifting gyms in the entire country; most of the few that did exist being located in YMCAs, and their facilities varied from pitiful to God awful. Having trained briefly in several such places in the late 1940s, in Tulsa, Oklahoma City, New York City, and elsewhere, I was provided with a rather clear picture of the situation that existed then throughout the country. Even the in-house gym then maintained by the York Barbell Company in York, Pennsylvania, left a great deal to be desired.

Very few, if literally any, of these early-day weightlifting gyms were profitable; given their very poor facilities and almost nothing in the way of training equipment apart from a few barbells and dumbbells, they could not attract enough paying customers to earn a profit. Which situation, in one sense, was a self-fulfilling prophesy: because these early gyms were not capable of handling enough customers to earn a profit, even if such numbers of customers were available, which they were not.

Totally apart from the still ongoing controversy on the subject of the virtues of exercise machines versus barbells, there can be no doubt that exercise machines are required for the operation of a profitable gym. If you are stupid enough to believe otherwise, then try opening a “barbells only” gym and see just how long it takes for you to go broke. Not long.

A gym, or any business that you can think of, unavoidably involves a certain level of fixed expenses, costs that must be paid regardless of the amount of income. Things like rent, insurance, taxes, utilities, and a long list of other expenses, collectively add up to a very meaningful level of costs that must be paid even if the business is producing no income at all. Until income reaches a level where all of the fixed expenses are covered, it remains impossible to produce a profit. Many people, probably most people, assume that all income represents profit; which is to say: they believe that if you “take in” \$1,000.00 a month, then you have “earned” that much. Unfortunately, in the real world, things don’t work out that way; if a major corporation such as General Motors earns a “net profit” (money left after all expenses are paid) of even two percent (2%), then they are in great shape. Smaller retail businesses, on the average, earn a profit of less than one percent (1%). Which is why only a very small percentage of new businesses survive their first year. Gyms are certainly no exception.

For a period of several years, all over the country, it was a rather common practice for somebody to open a new gym, advertise heavily, and sign as many people as possible to so-called “lifetime contracts,” agreements supposedly guaranteeing the customers that they could thereafter use the gym for the rest of their lives with no additional payment. Sure. Thirty-odd years ago, in New Orleans while I was living in the nearby town of Slidell, Louisiana, a man named Alvin Roy, who later was responsible for literally enormous, and still ongoing, damage to the field of exercise, pulled such a stunt twice within a period of only two or three years.

Having opened a gym, and then having sold as many memberships as possible, supposedly “lifetime: memberships, he closed the place over a weekend, moved all of the equipment out and left town. Members who tried to use the gym on the following Monday found it closed and empty.

Apparently not being satisfied with having worked such a scam once, he did the same damned thing again about two years later, even used the same location twice.

So many people pulled similar stunts that stringent laws were passed in several states, laws intended to prevent, or at least punish, such actions in the future. In some states, the previous situation of “anything goes” in the gym business was brought to a halt, or, at least, slowed down. Passing a law is one thing, enforcing it is another; most of the laws now on the books are seldom enforced, and some are never enforced. And if you believe otherwise, then consider the well-known, but generally ignored, fact that large segments of American society make a lifelong habit of simply ignoring all of the tax laws; Gypsies, most carnival and circus people, professional criminals, gamblers, prostitutes, and quite a few

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other people, never pay taxes. If all of these people were convicted of tax evasion we would not have enough prisons to hold all of them. Which, I suppose, is just as well, since if they did pay taxes it would simply give the politicians more money to steal and waste.

The con-man associated with the two gym scams in New Orleans, Alvin Roy, later became one of the first strength coaches ever hired by an NFL team; while working for the Chargers, he almost went to jail for dispensing steroids to the players, and later was almost solely responsible for one of the worst outrages ever associated with the field of exercise: he went to great lengths to convince both coaches and players of the supposed benefits of so-called “explosive” exercise, insanities such as jump squats, power cleans, so-called “plyometrics,” and other dangerous and worthless practices that offer nothing apart from the great risk of serious injury. Sudden movement against resistance during exercise is nothing short of insanity, but Alvin Roy managed to convince thousands of people that it was both safe and valuable.

Nearly thirty years later, the intensity of explosive training not only remains on the scene but appears to be spreading; and, like most such dangerous and worthless myths and superstitions, it will probably still be widespread a century from now. Bullshit is rather easy to establish but, once accepted, it is almost impossible to eradicate.

People have been asking me for more than fifty years just what they should do in attempts to improve their results from exercise, but I have never been able to answer their questions; what I can tell them, instead, is a few things that they should not do, things to avoid, things that will not help them and may hurt them. It took me a very long time to learn just what worked best for me, and even longer to learn that the same things were not always best for other people.

Having previously heard of him, but not then knowing him personally, back during the period when he was pulling the two health-club scams in New Orleans, I first met Alvin Roy sometime in the early 1970s, when he visited me in Lake Helen, Florida, at Nautilus headquarters. Then, having learned that he was promoting so-called “explosive” exercise, I initially assumed that he was simply stupid, that he really believed what he was telling people. But, having later visited him during the spring training of one of the NFL teams, I discovered that he was not practicing what he was preaching. Far from using explosive exercises, he was leaning over backwards in the opposite direction; the exercises that he did have the players perform were in no sense dangerous, nor were they capable of increasing strength or producing any other benefits. His only concern, in practice, was to be damned certain that he did not hurt anybody.

Later, having gotten to know him a lot better, he finally admitted to me that he was well aware of the dangers from explosive exercises, but still promoted them as gospel because “that was what coaches wanted to hear.”

Unfortunately, twenty-odd years later, the situation remains much the same, most people still seek out what they want to hear, while avoiding anything that puts the lie to their superstitions. And, while a few people, damned few as it happens, appear to succeed in spite of such an attitude, it is also true that at least fifty people fail for each one that succeeds.

Proper exercise could be, and should be, an important part of the lives of literally everybody, but it never will be until and unless the situation undergoes some earthshaking changes.