

Bob Hoffman, the York Barbell Company, and the Golden Age of American Weightlifting, 1945-1960*

John D. Fair
Professor of History
Auburn University at Montgomery

On July 18, 1985, Bob Hoffman, founder and president of the York Barbell Company, died. His contributions to the sport of Olympic weightlifting were considerable, so much so that all subsequent endeavors have been measured by his standard of success in the decade following the Second World War. From the Paris world championships in 1946 to the Melbourne games in 1956 the United States captured seven (out of eleven) world team titles and 38 (54%) of the individual titles; and though placing second to the Soviet Union from 1957 to 1960, America still showed potential for regaining its superiority.¹ "Hoffman's patronage and organizational genius were almost singly responsible for the rise of American international weightlifting fortunes" is the conclusion of the only study which approaches a scholarly treatment of this phenomenon.² Even his detractors admit that Hoffman was more responsible than any other person for what is called the "golden age" of American weightlifting. What he achieved stands in stark contrast to the bewildering decline of American lifting during the last three decades. In the 1984 Olympics, laments a former champion, "we could do no better than fifth in the team standings, even though the best lifters in the world didn't show up." In the 1985 Pan American Games the United States was beaten even by Brazil and Canada, and in the 1986 world championships in Bulgaria no American lifter placed higher than ninth. It is hardly surprising that sport analysts, seeking to resurrect America's sagging fortunes, have been captivated by the halcyon days of the fifties.⁴ To assess the reasons for

* I am grateful to Terry and Jan Todd for allowing me to use the Todd-McLean Collection at the University of Texas and for their assistance in the preparation of this article.

1 See David Webster. *The Iron Game* (Irvine, Scotland, 1976). pp. 74-104.

2. William Mason Reynolds. "A History of Men's Competitive Weightlifting in the United States from its Inception through 1972." (M.S. Thesis, University of Washington, 1973): 234.

3 Rival editor Peary Rader referred to Hoffman as "the principal promoter" who "had done more for the game than any other person in America and probably more than any other person in the world." *Lifing News* 4 (March 1958). 4. Charles A. Smith, former weightlifting editor for *Muscle Power*, another rival publication, admits that he personally disliked Hoffman, but "he contributed more than any other man to the success of American weightlifting." Interview with Charles A. Smith, Austin, Texas, October 25, 1985.

4. Bruce Wilhelm. "What's Wrong With American Weightlifting?" *Sports Fitness* 2 (January 1986): 51. See also Murray Levin. "Challenge Put to U.S. Lifters." *Weightlifting U.S.A.* 3 (1985): I; Fred Howell, "Wake Up

Hoffman's success, however, requires not only an investigation of individual enterprise but an appreciation of socio-psychological factors and the curious relationship he fostered between business and sport.

What Hoffman brought to weightlifting was a strong egocentric view of the world and a love of sport. As he repeatedly stated—"I am a weight-lifter. I like weight-lifting and weight-lifters." Furthermore his overwhelming dedication and zeal for the sport enabled him to look beyond racial or religious considerations to an appreciation of an athlete's actual performance on the lifting platform. Hence from his base in York ("Musclestown"), Pennsylvania, he was able to recruit a large number of weightlifters (The York Gang") from nearby ethnic minorities to whom the sport had a special appeal. Through the resources of the York Barbell Company he provided these lifters with financial security and an opportunity to compete on the national and international level. In the process they became increasingly acculturated to American values and exhibited striving qualities which not only brought them Olympic and world titles but a degree of acceptance by the mainstream of American society. The proportion of champions who emerged out of clearly identifiable ethnic communities from 1945 to 1960 is remarkable. A simple calculation of the 105 Senior National winners in this period shows that at least 73 (70%) fell into this category. Of the 28 world champions, 25 (89%) were ethnic-Americans, and 12 out of the 13 Olympic gold medalists (92%) were from recently arrived immigrant families or distinctive minorities. From the east coast came the Germans, Italians, and Slavs, and from Hawaii and California came the various Oriental peoples of the Pacific rim. Bob Hoffman became their great father figure, providing them with a sense of purpose, inspiration, and identity in an otherwise alien environment. Until the mid-fifties his teams subscribed to the American ideal of the melting pot. And his generous subsidies for lifting, circumventing the prevailing amateur code, seemed a triumph for the American free enterprise system. Such were his formulae for success. His efforts faltered only when the moral and material resources he had summoned forth were surpassed by those of state managed sports programs in the Soviet Union; and when drugs and the lure of physique and powerlifting contests began to compromise his endeavors. But Hoffman's socialization and subsidization of American athletes from the late forties into the early sixties reaped handsome dividends for the company and the sport.

As a youth in western Pennsylvania, Hoffman excelled in many sports, becoming an expert oarsman and canoeist. Dubbed the "iron man" of canoeing by the press, he won the national quarter-mile championship in 1915 and the world championship in 1925. Weight training served chiefly as a supplement to his other athletic endeavors. After serving in World War I he entered the oil burner business with a friend, Ed Kraber, in York and gained an acquaintance with machines, patterns, foundries, and marketing. He was the "world's great-

Weightlifters. "Iron Man 45 (March, 1986). 59: "What's Wrong With American Weightlifting?" Strength -Power Update 1 (Fall 1986): 2; and Herb Glosbrenner. "World Weightlifting. Why We're at the Bottom." *Iron Man* 46 (March, 1987). 14-16

est salesman and promoter” is the view of all who knew him as a businessman. But his successes in business and in other sports eventually became secondary to the passion he developed for weightlifting in its own right. About 1925 he organized what he alleged to be the first official weightlifting contest in America and in 1927 won the national heavyweight championship. Two years later Hoffman began making barbells and organizing a weightlifting team in the oil burner factory. That the lifting platform was originally located in the middle of the shop aptly characterizes the relationship of lifting in the York business. His first revolving barbell was constructed in the machine shop on North Broad Street by Ernie Zimmerman who had been a weightlifter in Germany in his youth. In 1932 Hoffman organized the York Barbell Company and began publishing *Strength and Health* magazine, which remains the chief historical record of his association with the business and the sport. What compelled him to become a weightlifting promoter was America’s lackluster performance in the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. The foreign competitors “looked upon the United States team as something of a joke,” recalled Hoffman. He resolved to make America the foremost weightlifting power during the next several decades. In the years prior to World War II he put together a formidable assemblage of talent. In the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Tony Terlazzo became America’s first gold medalist in weightlifting, at Paris in 1937 the United States won two world titles and at Vienna in 1938 won two gold, one silver, and a bronze, in close pursuit of the perennially favorite Germans. “The United States had really arrived as a world lifting power,” boasted Hoffman.⁵ These successes encouraged him to sell his interest in the oil burner business and devote his energies to manufacturing barbells. The profits generated from the business would be used to promote the sport and the publicity from the sport would, in turn, promote the business. Unfortunately, just as American lifters began posting totals that would win a team title at the projected 1940 Olympics, war in Europe intervened and American hopes were stifled for the next seven years.

Nevertheless Hoffman had already discovered the basic formula for his later successes. It began with recruitment. York was ideally situated in “Pennsylvania Dutch” country where remnants of Teutonic strength traditions persisted. It was largely local lifters of German heritage that he recruited initially. From Reamstown, for instance, a community of no more than a thousand, he found the Good brothers. “They had no opportunity to lift on a team of their own and they enjoyed any sort of lifting activity,” he explained. The fellowship, good times, opportunities for travel, and subsidies provided inducements for local young men to join the York team.⁶ By the early thirties the York Oil Burner Athletic Club was competing against the German-American Athletic Club in New York City, administered by Dietrich Wortmann, and also against teams of predominantly German origin from Baltimore and Hagerstown, Maryland. In 1934 team member Harry Good wrote that

5 Bob Hoffman. *Weightlifting* (York 1960): 19, 34-44. and “The Story of the York Barbell Club.” *Strength and Health* 14 (June. 1946). 21 (hereinafter cited as *SH*).

6. Hoffman. “Story. of the York Barbell Club.” *SH* 14 (August. 1946) 20.

The York Oil Burner A.C. who for the last few years have so completely dominated American weight lifting are about evenly divided among the Sicilians and the Pennsylvania Dutch. My brother Bill, America's strongest man and best weight lifter, my brother Walter and myself. Art Levan. Joe Miller. Dick Bachtell, George Brown. Lou Schell and many other lesser members are the Pennsylvania Dutch. Bob Hoffman is not far removed as his grandfather came from Switzerland 87 years ago: and a lifetime spent among the Dutch in Pennsylvania has made him one of us. Anthony Terlazzo, Joe Fiorito, Anthony Fiorito, Gus Modica, Angelo Taormine, Harry Thomasillo, and others are the Sicilian members. These Sicilians are small but mighty and have accounted for nine national championships in their meteoric careers.⁷

A sure-fire method of recruiting members for the York team, as the country was in the throes of the Depression, was the prospect of a \$10 per week job in the oil burner company. Hoffman recalled that Dick Bachtell, who captained the Hagerstown team, "had been writing to me telling me that he would walk from Hagerstown to York, a distance of 65 miles, on his hands and knees if he could get work in York and lift as a member of our team." Hoffman wanted to win a huge silver trophy from Wortmann's club in 1932. So he "borrowed" Bachtell and gave him a job in the factory.⁸ Bachtell remained York's top featherweight until 1947 and a loyal company employee until retirement in 1977.

By the mid-thirties the first Slavs joined the organization-Wally Zagurski (Polish) from Indiana, John Terpak (Ukrainian) from Mayfield, Pennsylvania, John Grimek (Czech) and Steve Stanko (Hungarian), both from Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Throughout the thirties Hoffman provided training facilities, accompanied his lifters to meets all over the country, and underwrote their expenses. In 1937 and 1938 he not only financed American teams to enter international competition abroad but paid for the German team to visit the United States. By his increasing patronage of American lifters he was on his way to becoming what he was later recognized to be—"The Father of American Weightlifting."

A critical sentiment fostered in these endeavors was that of socialization. In the recruitment process Hoffman set a high moral standard which encouraged the acceptance of wholesome American values. As he "hunted up weight lifters over most of the eastern United States," mainly at local meets, he idealized them as "a fine bunch of happy, enthusiastic, ambitious, clean-living fellows whom it was a pleasure to spend time with." America's first gold medalist, for instance, was portrayed by *Strength and Health* in 1940 as a "fine clean cut young fellow who did not smoke, swear, drink, gamble" or go out with "questionable women." He had strived hard and labored long to make his way up through the business and "mastered the English language to the point of speaking without the slightest trace of accent." Accompanying pictures reveal the twenty-nine year old immigrant as having achieved the American dream—an executive office, a late model car, a Florida vacation, and a lovely wife and son in a privately owned home in suburbia. Tony Terlazzo, in turn, attributed

7 Harry Good. "Anthony Terlarzo, One of America's Greatest," SH 2 (December. 1934): 24

8. Hoffman. "The Story of the York Barbell Club," SH 14 (October. 1946): 19.

American values to his brother John, also a lifter of note. "He is proud to be an American even though he had to prove it the hard way" by fighting his Italian countrymen in North Africa during the ensuing war.⁹

Indeed for Hoffman, America was a land not only for those with a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant heritage. He repeatedly expressed pride in the diverse nationalities that made up his lifting team. In response to a reader's letter in 1945 pointing out the predominance of Slavic names in the sport and their possible association with atheistic beliefs or "some weird form of religion," Hoffman rose vigorously to their defense. By revealing the ethnic origin and



Nowhere is the predominantly ethnic make-up of the iron game more evident than in this 1947 photograph featuring seven very foreign-looking members of the "Lon Bodybuilding Club" of New York City. Top, left to right: Jerry Rocco, Bob Scalone, Louis Franco and Frank Zirilli. Kneeling, left to right: Angelo Caminiti, Americo Rocco and Frank Giardine. (From *Strength and Health*. April 1947, reprinted with permission).

⁹ Hoffman. "The Story of the York Barbell Club." SH 14 (April, 1946): 22; "Wib" Scharzberger. "Glimpser of the Champions." SH 8 (March, 1940) 29; and Tony Terlazzo. "John Terlazzo. Lifting Champ-War Hero." SH 11 (December, 1943): 21

religious affiliation of each of his charges he not only dispelled the myth of atheism but flaunted the “league of nations” character of the American lifting community. “No country or color has a monopoly on strength,” he retorted, “there are good men in every nation.” From 1928 to 1938 Italians, French, Germans, and Egyptians had won world team titles “and the Americans with two colored men on the team and representatives of many other nationalities have been supreme for the last few years. Weightlifters are good average, wholesome fellows, good citizens, who try to do the best they can, and have succeeded.”¹⁰ Performance, not race or creed, was the means by which he measured the worth of his lifters, and he chided those promoters or regions of the country where xenophobia or discrimination existed. Pride in his team’s ethnic diversity and the fact that his lifters were becoming fine American citizens predominated his outlook. Bob Hoffman was a man of strong obsessions-his sport, country, city, and himself, but he was absolutely without prejudice in matters of ethnic origin. In this respect he was far ahead of his time, and it constituted an enormous asset in his development of American weightlifting.

The way in which Hoffman channeled this reservoir of talent into national and international competition was to appropriate profits from the York Barbell Company to subsidize lifters. Despite restrictions on materials, the company had continued to manufacture barbells (out of concrete), publish *Strength and Health*, and even turn a handsome profit during the war years. Wisely it diversified operations to include defense contracts, so that by the end of the war the company had produced commodities ranging from Liberty Ship winches to vegetable slicers. The company also made money as the chief supplier of barbells to the armed forces during the war, and afterward there was a great demand for equipment from discharged GIs who had become converts to weight training. Hoffman encouraged such endeavors by preaching the American way, that physical fitness was the key to his nation’s superiority, and that the war had been won largely by barbells. “Our country was saved . . . on the football fields, baseball fields, and in the gymnasiums, back-yards and homes of those who trained with weights,” he wrote. “Many of our heroes were barbell men.”¹¹ Thus the prosperity of the company was a reflection of the spirit of a muscular and confident America as it emerged victoriously from World War II. Awaiting those select veterans who had been promising lifters were jobs in the company, superior training facilities, and an assortment of other opportunities and benefits. It is hardly surprising in light of his generosity that Hoffman gained a special privilege in the ruling councils of the sport, especially in the

10. “Letters from Readers.” *SH* 13 (August, 1945): 47.

11. Mike Dietz. “Amateurs in War Production.” *SH* 12 (June, 1944): 21, 36-37, 40-42 and (July, 1944): 28-36-39; “We Are Grateful.” *SH* 13 (March, 1945): 26-27, 34-37; “Muscle town,” *Time* 43 (June 14, 1944): 55; and “Weightlifting.” *Life* 19 (October 29, 1945): 57. Hoffman. “Especially for S & H Boys.” *SH* 13 (October, 1945): 17.

selection of athletes and coaches for international teams, or that the York Barbell Club monopolized the national championships for several decades.

Of those six Americans who competed at the Paris world championships in 1946, four worked and trained at the York Barbell Company under the tutelage of Hoffman. Stanley Stanczyk, who became Olympic and world titlist for six successive years, typified the kind of champion who lifted for Hoffman. "Like many another young man," wrote Dick Bachtell, "his ambition was to train with the famous members of the York Barbell Club."¹² From a Polish neighborhood, via the Detroit Boys Club, Stanczyk became a key figure in the surprise victory by the United States over the Russians and Egyptians (11 to 9 to 6) at Paris. Even considering that most of the European powers were still recovering from the recent devastation of war, the fact that America's six heroes defeated a highly touted Russian team of eleven and an Egyptian squad led by the legendary



The 1946 World Champions. Left to right, back row: Stanley Stanczyk, 1st, Lightweight; Frank Spellman, 3rd, middleweight; John Terpak, 2nd, middleweight; front row; Emerick Ishikawa, 5th, featherweight; Bob Hoffman, coach, trainer, and sponsor; and Frank Kay, 2nd, light-heavyweight. John Davis, 1st, heavyweight, was not present when the photo was taken. (From *Strength and Health*, Dec. 1946, reprinted with permission).

12. Dick Bachtell. "Stanley Stanczyk—Superman," SH 14 (November, 1946): 16.

Khadr El Touni was a victory that Hoffman and his colleagues savored for many years. It provided just the inspiration needed to inaugurate a golden age of American weightlifting supremacy.

Technically the reason for America's triumph was the unexpected second place finish of Frank Kay of Chicago in the lighthweight class. But the broad basis for future success was sociological. Emerick Ishikawa, who placed fifth as a featherweight, was a Japanese-American from Hawaii, and both Kay and Stanczyk, the lightweight winner, were Polish. John Terpak, whose parents migrated to Pennsylvania from the Ukraine, was already a ten-time national champion and general manager of the company. He admits that as a youth he used his weightlifting talent to work his way out of the coal mines where so many of his ethnic kin had become entrapped. Frank Spellman no doubt had the most interesting background. His father, a Ukrainian Jew, was formerly a musician in the Russian army under Czar Nicholas II. He fled his homeland about 1900 to Canada and thence to Philadelphia where he met Frank's mother, an Austrian Jew. Orphaned at the age of seven, Spellman developed an avid interest in weightlifting by reading *Strength and Health*. His natural athletic ability and strength was noticed early by Hoffman, and after serving in the war he became a machinist in the barbell factory and joined the York stable of lifters. Finally John Davis, America's black heavyweight, universally regarded as the world's strongest man, was born on a southern plantation. In a strict sense Davis' parentage was more indubitably American than any of the rest, but it was hardly what could be called mainstream—indeed far less so than Hoffman's white or yellow immigrant recruits. York's achievement was to blend this polyglot assortment of individuals into a team. According to Hoffman, it was "team spirit" and a refusal to let their comrades down that caused these Americans to lift so well, better even than potentially stronger teams of the late thirties.¹³ America's superior political and economic position no doubt encouraged these efforts, but it was the striving for excellence and acceptance by the sons of immigrants and the organizing genius of the man who dedicated his life to weightlifting that was critical.

Success in 1946, however, brought mixed blessings. American lifting triumphs, Hoffman rightly complained, went virtually unnoticed, and what little coverage there was in the press was largely erroneous. When Stanczyk broke four world records in early 1947 there was nothing in the papers about it. This situation was rectified somewhat during the ensuing year by feature articles on weightlifting in several popular magazines. But the image they portrayed did not always please Hoffman. He objected to criticisms by foreign writers that American lifters were good only because he collected them, gave them jobs and did not care whether they worked—just so they lifted weights. Hoffman retorted, "The job comes first in our organization and only those men who do a good job are here." Grimek confirmed that many outsiders "who visit York for

13. Interview with John Terpak, York, Pennsylvania, May 3, 1986; Interview with Frank Spellman, Pensacola, Florida, February 24, 1986; Hoffman, "Details of the World's Championships," *SH* 14 (December, 1946): 45.

the first time seem very surprised to see all the York men working.”¹⁴ *Fortune* magazine referred to York as “a sort of mecca” for at least a half-million Americans and to Bob Hoffman as the “Unquestioned Czar of American lifting.” In 1946 his annual salary was \$50,000 and his lifter/employees received between \$35 and \$200 per week. He provided some with houses and

set up fifteen of his former champions in businesses that include a restaurant, a taproom, a roadhouse, a curiosity swap shop, and a food market. And he has not been less generous to his two girl friends in York, each of whom has a house and a business; one operates a little taproom and the other a dress shop. About his private life Bob Hoffman is earnest and frank. ‘I’m strong,’ he says, ‘I have to have two girls. I’ve been going with both of them for eight years and I can’t bring myself to break either’s heart by giving up one or the other.’ Enlarging on the disadvantages of indulgence, he observes, ‘A strong man can take more than anyone else, but there are limits. He can smoke or drink or make love to the ladies. I don’t smoke or drink.’ His two friends are both proficient weight lifters, and a pleasant evening spent in the company of either often consists of competition lifting in Hoffman’s parlor. ‘We could use the gym out in the garage,’ he explains, ‘but somehow we always seem to work out in here on that thousand-dollar rug.’¹⁵

Unfortunately, despite his business success, civic-mindedness, and philanthropic endeavors, Hoffman was regarded as a social pariah in his home town of 60,000 for many years. It was only too easy for the unenlightened to label his collection of young lifters as freaks, foreigners, and misfits; and for civic leaders and citizens alike to look askance at this relative newcomer who pursued improper relationships with local women and published a magazine featuring numerous pictures of nearly naked men.

The most serious challenge encountered by Hoffman was the rise of rival fitness promoters brought about in part by his own success in the field. Joe Weider, who established a firm in Montreal called “Your Physique Equipment Company,” began to market many of the same kinds of fitness items and courses, albeit with an emphasis on bodybuilding. Hoffman complained to his readers that organizations such as Weider’s were interested in “your dollars only

As you can see we have shown the way, others copy our equipment and copy our methods.” At the same time business had never been so good. In 1946 the York Barbell Company sold 50,000 weight sets and grossed a million dollars. *Strength and Health*, though it lost nearly \$3,000 per month, had a circulation of nearly 150,000 and was the principal medium which promoted the business, the sport, and Hoffman’s philosophy of life. “We are an organization,” boasted Hoffman, “which employs from 140 to 168 men and women, has a payroll of from six to seven thousand five hundred weekly, we are doing a sizeable legitimate business.”¹⁶ This success in business owed in no small part to

14. Hoffman, “We Must Educate the Newspapers.” *SH* 15 (April. 1947): 3; Hoffman, “Selecting and Training the American Team.” *ibid.* (October. 1947): 10; John Grimek, “Our First ‘Mr. Universe.’” *ibid.*, (December, 1947): 25.

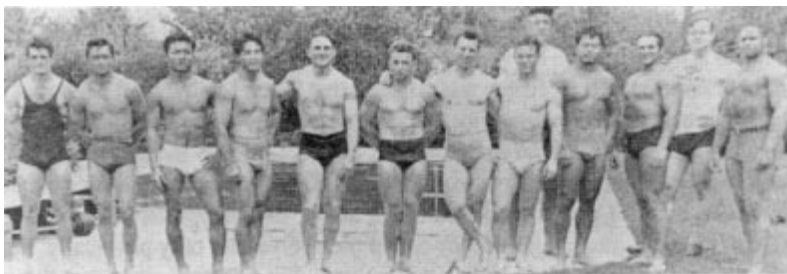
15. “Body Building.” *Fortune* 35 (February. 1947). 100. 161.

16. Hoffman, “Time Marches On.” *SH* 15 September, 1947): 5; “We Thank You.” *SH* 16 (March. 1948). 56. 33; and “Bodybuilding.” 100. In 1986 York Barbell grossed an estimated \$25 million in annual sales and employed 140 people. Thomas Goldwasser. “Pumping Iron. Not Concrete.” *New York Times* September 21. 1986.

the contributions of the lifters Hoffman had assembled in York. Not only did he get an honest day's work from them in the plant or the magazine, but he was able to use their fame to publicize his products. It did not even need to be explicitly stated, though it often was, that it was York equipment and methods that enabled American lifters to become the best in the world. Eager readers of *Strength and Health* sought to emulate the stars by following the York way.

Further attention was drawn to York by Hoffman's success in bringing the 1947 world championships to Philadelphia, only ninety miles east of York. There, with the Russians and Egyptians absent, American lifters scored a 27 to 3 victory over the rest of the world and equalled or exceeded twelve world records. It was Hoffman's show. Staged in the capacious and air-conditioned Municipal Auditorium (with a 15,000 seating capacity), Hoffman provided \$10,000 for the traveling expenses of foreign lifters and underwrote all other expenses to a sum of \$25,000. He even hired a publicity agent. Prior to the championships lifters from all over the country gathered in York. There they were quartered at Hoffman's expense and placed on a training table for three weeks at a restaurant run by Dorcas Lehman, one of his girl friends. Most of the training took place, according to Hoffman, at the York barbell gym, until the scores of visitors made it so crowded that the team had to use his home lifting facilities. "There they had the use of the club gymnasium, the swimming pool, the extensive grounds" and "they were having a lot of fun going around together, palling around." Even Peary Rader, editor of *Iron Man* magazine, commended Hoffman on the fine meet he conducted. "He spent a great deal of money and it is doubtful if enough tickets were sold to repay him. It was probably the smoothest run meet of international scope ever seen."¹⁷

In 1948 Hoffman raised American lifting to greater heights by achieving an Olympic victory. In London, where his lifters made an impressive showing



Aspirants for the 1948 U.S. Olympic Weightlifting team beside Bob Hoffman's swimming pool in York. Left to right: Muro of Cleveland, Tom of Hawaii, Tomita of Hawaii, Ishikawa of Hawaii, Terpak of York, Pitman of York, Spellman of York, Morris of Chicago, Sakata of Hawaii, Stanczyk of York, Schemansky of Detroit, and Bradford of Washington, D.C. Bob Hoffman standing in the rear. (From *Strength and Health*, reprinted with permission).

17. Jules Bacon. "The 1947 World's Weightlifting Championships," *SH IS* (May, 1947): 8, 9; Hoffman, "Selecting and Training the American Team," *SH 15* (October, 1947): 11, 12; Peary Rader. "World Weightlifting Championships 1947." *Iron Man 7* (1947): 2.

against the Egyptians, the system which had worked so well the previous year was perfected. By this time the cold war had become an international political reality and, for Hoffman, a factor in the weightlifting equation. "It is a race between our nation and Russia in weightlifting as well as in all around industrial and war strength," he contended. Once again the American team gathered in York several months before the games for final training. In Dorcas Lehman's newly remodeled King George Hotel, Hoffman provided accommodation even for those who were just trying out. With all the rooms occupied by weightlifters, and all eating, training, and playing together, a genuine team spirit developed. In expending \$20,000 for these games, Hoffman even offered, unsuccessfully, to provide York barbells for the competition. "An Olympic championship will well repay me for all my efforts," he said, "and that's exactly what the members of the team have promised me."¹⁸

In the Olympics, as in the 1946 and 1947 world championships, it was the upwardly mobile immigrants and their attachment to Hoffman that laid the basis for victory. Hoffman's ideas on the strength of ethnic diversity were fully borne out. It was part of the American dream—the land of opportunity. The league of nations aspect of the American team was illustrated, he said, by the presence of "17 different nationalities," including

men of Chinese, Japanese, Polynesian, Russian, British, Austrian, Macedonian, Italian, Polish, and African ancestry. We had men who were brown, white, yellow and black, we had men who represented many of the popular religions in the world today. Jewish, Catholic and all the branches of the protestant churches. All cemented together strongly, making one team, the representatives of a nation where every man has a square deal. Where all men are born equal, where every boy has the Possibility of becoming president, of being a champion athlete, a great business success, doing as he likes to find his road to strength, health, happiness and success.¹⁹

Hoffman was truly the patriarch for this aggregation—even to the extent that lifters would perform certain lifts for him. At the 1947 world championships John Davis made his 308 lb. world record snatch at his urging. Spellman claims that his "love for Bob Hoffman was so great that when I failed a lift I felt that I had let him down. He was my father image." Hoffman encouraged and projected the All-American image for his lifters. "It gives me pleasure when one of our team not only makes world weightlifting history but obtains a better education, a better position, a nice car, a home, or a happy family. . . . We strive to help our men make all they can of themselves not only physically, but mentally and socially." Illustrating this attitude was a feature article on Steve Stanko, "Mr. Universe," in the December 1947 issue of *Strength and Health*

18. Hoffman, "Training the Olympic Team," *SH* 16 (September, 1948): 10-11, 30-33. Also see Hoffman "America's Greatest Weightlifting Triumph," *ibid.*, (October, 1948): 21.

19. Hoffman. "Training the Olympic Team," *SH* 16 (October, 1948): 7. Hoffman's categorization of American lifters' ancestry was as follows: Joe DiPietro and the Terlazzo brothers (Tony & John)-Italian; Richard Tom-Chinese; Bobby Higgins-Irish; the George brothers (George, Pete, & Jim)-Bulgarian; Stanley Kratkowski. Stanley Stanczyk, and the Schemansky brothers (Dennis, Norbert, & Jerome)-Polish; Harold Sakata-Japanese; Frank Spellman-Ukrainian-Austrian-Jewish; John Terpak-Ukrainian; John Terry and John Davis-African; John Grimek-Czechoslovakian; Steve Stanko-Hungarian; Jules Bacon-Lithuanian; Joe Lauriano-Portuguese. Hoffman. "The Master Race?" *SH* 15 (November, 1947): 4, 5.

where the Hungarian descended lifter was pictured on one page in a loving home environment with wife and daughter and on the next page with a set of blue prints in hand outside their new home awaiting completion.²⁰

The Olympic achievements of York's immigrant lifters simply could not be sustained at the 1949 world championships at The Hague. Though taking a close second, Hoffman protested that the winning Egyptians were so heavily subsidized by their government as to be professionals and that the one lifter per class rule militated against the heavier American team. By the following year, however, he had recouped his forces and added several more names to America's pantheon of heroes. A significant proportion of them again were ethnic-Americans, including Tommy Kono, a Japanese-American from California; Norbert Schemansky, a Polish-American from Detroit; James Bradford, an Afro-American from Washington, D.C.; and "boy-wonder" Pete George, a Bulgarian-American from Akron. Kono especially fit the model of the striving ethnic-American. The youngest son of fruit cannery workers in Sacramento, he was introduced to weightlifting while his family endured the humiliation of internment in a "relocation camp" during the war. But he became America's brightest star in the fifties. There were also some more traditional American types emerging at this time-Richard Greenawalt, Joe Pitman, and Dave Sheppard (another "boy-wonder") but they never exhibited the same degree of excellence. It was the adaptability and acceptance of American values by immigrant youths, harnessed by a promoter with a crusader's zeal, that was the motivating force behind America's lifting fortunes.

At the 1950 world championships in Paris, national feeling was more of a factor than ever for two related reasons-the presence of the Soviet Union, and America's involvement in a war against the Communists in Korea. What gave the United States an 18-15-14 edge over the Egyptians and Russians was the unexpected win of Joe Pitman, the "dark horse" of the lightweights. Again Hoffman financed the team fully and the Americans functioned as a unit. They were almost always together, he noted, training, sightseeing, eating, and playing-with "an all for one, one for all attitude prevailing." Team physician Charles Moss called Hoffman "a second father to each of the team members. . . . I heard Joe Pitman say that he was going to win the championship for Bob." Lightweight winner Stanczyk said, "Don't worry, Bob, the Russian is not going to beat me. I'm going to come on top."²¹ America's victory in Paris dispelled any lingering doubts that America's weightlifters were the best in the world. To Hoffman it not only proved that America was the "strongest nation," but it was "won by Strength & Health boys, who now have grown to manhood."²²

20. Interview with Spellman; Hoffman, "The Inside Story of America's Great Lifting Team," *SH* 16 (January, 1948): 29; and Grimek, "Our first 'Mr. Universe,'" 24, 25.

21. Charles Moss, "Why the American Team Won!" *SH* 19 (January, 1951): 48-49. Hoffman later referred to Pitman as "one of America's weight lifting immortals" for his 1950 victory. He "deserves undying recognition for that feat even if he never lifts another weight." "1952 National Sr. Championships," *SH* 20 (October, 1952): 39.

22. Hoffman, "Building Young Supermen." *SH* 19 (February, 1951): 9. Clarence Johnson explained, for instance, that Olympic silver medalist Norbert Schemansky became inspired to lift by reading his brother Dennis'

The onset of the Korean conflict necessitated preparations by the York Barbell Company for possible shortages of materials for exercise equipment and plant conversions for war contracts. "We have built up our plant in York rather extensively," stated Hoffman in early 1951. "Some of our men are working 70 hours a week. All are working at least 50 and longer hours will prevail as time passes." Champions Spellman and Pitman were working ten hour days, five on Saturdays, with training being done after hours. By the following year the company was busy producing parts for airplane motors, guided missiles, bombs and instruments. Considerable sums were invested in new equipment, such as the 20 Swiss automatic machines that were accurate to 4/1,000,000 of an inch. Hoffman's claim that he put in a sixteen hour day on the business and magazine seems doubtful, but he did occasionally stay up with Spellman who, after working the night shift on the Swiss screw machines, would train alone between three and five A.M. Repeatedly he would fall asleep in the chair, but none could gainsay his devotion to the sport and his lifters. Such sacrifices give meaning to Hoffman's otherwise illogical statement that "we did not go in this business to make money"-for the business was always a means to a higher end.²³ By keeping his company prosperous he could provide the wherewithal to enhance the prestige of American weightlifting and his own place and power within that structure.

In the early fifties Hoffman struggled against two adversaries. Notwithstanding the fact that many of his lifters had also won top bodybuilding titles, Hoffman had stressed Olympic lifting to the relative neglect of physique competition. Into that void stepped the enterprising Joe Weider, who presented a flashier approach to fitness, physique, and power through his publications, *Your Physique and Muscle Power*. Hoffman accused his adversary of using the "big lie technique" and of promising anything to make a dollar. "Get big muscle quick is the usual line." Weider, of course, responded in kind to these charges and the muscle magazine feud became vicious and personal. "I have been insulted and my reputation has been unfairly and maliciously blackened," claimed Hoffman. "I want and demand satisfaction." He accepted Weider's personal challenge that the two moguls of the strength world should vie for supremacy by means of a lifting and physique contest. But to compensate for his being twenty years older than his challenger, Hoffman proposed that a boxing match in skin tight gloves also be included, and precede the other events.²⁴

Another challenge to Hoffman's paramouncy in the weightlifting world came from the Soviet Union in its general quest for international athletic supremacy. Though Russia had a larger population, higher birth rate, many more registered lifters, state support, and a society more appreciative of

issues of *Strength and Health*. From cover to cover each month young Norb would scan the pager to see what boys of his age and size were accomplishing." "Norbert Schemansky." *SH* 19 (March, 1951): 3, 5.

23. Hoffman. "History is Repeating Itself!" *SH* 19 (March, 1951), 3, 5, and "This Changing World." *SH* 20 (January, 1952): 5. Hoffman. "1952 National Sr Championships." *Ibid* (October, 1952): 12

24. Hoffman. "Starting our 19th Year." *SH* 18 (December, 1950) 11; and "I Accept the Challenge." *SH* 19 (July, 1951), 9, 46

strength, Hoffman believed that the American system, under his direction, should and must ultimately triumph. He simplistically equated international political struggles with sport. "A big part of this 'cold war,' although too few realize it, exists in the realm of athletics. Here the Russian leaders are doing everything possible to acquire a claim to supremacy. . . In Russia the stress is on records and titles in lifting and not on muscles for the sake of appearance." Such statements by Hoffman coincided with the chauvinistic climate of opinion that existed as a result of the Korean War and the McCarthy witchhunts. "The communists are utilizing this 'big lie' technique to a degree that completely eclipses its past applications by Nazi chieftains." Furthermore he easily equated Communist techniques with those of his commercial opposition. "Lies are told and misrepresentations are exploited. . . . Our efforts to combat these lies are just as necessary as the efforts to oppose communist aggression." Hoffman claimed to conduct his life and business according to truth, honor, and the "Golden Rule."²⁵

This commitment to Christian virtues and American values became part of the intellectual baggage his lifters carried with them into international competition. The United States victory at Milan in 1951 over the Egyptians was one of the most convincing of Hoffman's career. In a study of world championships since 1937 and Olympic games from 1920, British official Oscar State rated the United States the greatest weightlifting nation in the world by a wide margin. He concluded that "Bob Hoffman can be well satisfied with the results of his efforts when he pledged, after the miserable showing of the Americans in the 1932 Olympics in their own country, that he would devote himself to leading American lifters to the top of the list." To add even further to its standing the United States beat the Russians again at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics. This was the climactic point in United States weightlifting endeavors during the "golden age." No small reason for this success was the fact that at Milan and Helsinki all the gold medal winners—Kono, George, Stanczyk, Schemansky, and Davis—were hyphenated Americans unconsciously seeking an entree into the mainstream of society. That this was possible by great feats of strength on behalf of their adopted land was the inspirational message conveyed by Hoffman. "This nation is a real melting pot, a real democracy."²⁶

The strength and potential of the Russian team at Helsinki, however, indicated to Hoffman that American lifting supremacy was in jeopardy. By this point he had spent nearly \$300,000 of his company's profits to send lifters to championships and exhibitions, but it was becoming increasingly difficult for Hoffman's business-supported athletes to compete with Russians who were "wards of the state and paid by the government. It is this professionalism," he said, "which makes it increasingly difficult to outperform the Soviet athletes." He noted with dismay the endless preparations made for state-subsidized lifters

25. Hoffman, "War Between Russia and the United States of America," *SH* 19 (August 1951): 3,5; and "Truth and Honor," *ibid.* (October, 1951): 3, 5.

26. Oscar State, "The Champion Weightlifting Nation," *SH* 20 (June, 1952): 27, 48; Hoffman, "We Need More Weightlifting Contests," *SH* 21 (January, 1953): 15.



America's four first place weightlifting winners at the 1952 Helsinki games, all of whom established new Olympic records. Left to right are Pete George, middleweight champion; John Davis, heavyweight champion; Norb Schemansky, middleheavyweight champion; and Tommy Kono, lightweight champion. Kono set a new world's lightweight snatch record of 259. Schemansky set new world's 198-pound class records for the snatch, clean and jerk, and total with 308 $\frac{1}{2}$, 391 $\frac{1}{4}$, and 980 $\frac{1}{2}$ (From *Strength and Health*, Sept. 1948, reprinted with permission).

in the Soviet Union and recognized the need for a greater American commitment. "We have too few weight lifters, too few weight lifting leaders. We are fortunate that we have very good ones, enough to completely dominate some of the classes, to win championship after championship, but this championship was the closest yet. We will be on the wrong end of the scoring if we don't redouble our efforts." It was beyond Hoffman's capacity to understand why the sport of weightlifting, promoted so heavily in the Soviet Union, was virtually unrecognized by the United States government or why Ford, Rockefeller or some other foundation did not come to his aid. "Take notice, philanthropists, we could use a little help."²⁷

Realizing for the first time the limitations of his own resources and some of the constraints of America's free enterprise system, Hoffman could do no more than plead for "more weight lifters" and "more weightlifting contests."²⁸

27. Hoffman, "What Can We Do About the Russians?" *SH* 20 (November, 1952): 46, 48.

28. Hoffman, "America Needs More Weight Lifters," *SH* 20 (February, 1952): 28. Symbolic of the favorable official attitude towards sport in the Soviet Union was the appearance of 700 athletes from that country at the

Weider's publications played on these fears by publicizing Russian initiatives in the sport and denigrating Hoffman's efforts as commercially-motivated. "Donations don't mean a thing," contended Weider. "Support or sponsorship of any prominent lifter by placing him on the payroll or by financing 'teams,' or donating barbells is in the end, itself a means to further your OWN commercial interests." Hoffman struck back, accusing Weider not only of not supporting American weightlifters but of promoting Canadian heavyweight Doug Hepburn in an effort to beat Davis and causing the ineligibility of promising middleweight Marvin Eder by using his photographs in advertisements. It was a cruel coincidence that Hepburn's presence and Eder's absence at the 1953 world championships in Stockholm resulted in Russia's first ever defeat of the United States, 25 to 22. But there were other factors too. The army effectively deprived the American team of heavyweight Jim Bradford, who had been serving in Korea and had not trained regularly. Additionally, unlike previous years, the team had not gathered in York for special training, and it was divided into two Stockholm hotels. "It was the greatest disappointment of my life," pronounced Hoffman.²⁹

Upon further reflection Hoffman blamed the United States defeat on his countrymen being "less ambitious, less athletically inclined, willing to take things easy, listen to the radio, watch television, let the other fellow do it." America's prestige in weightlifting, he alleged, was built and maintained by a mere handful of men "and some of these are past their peak or not at their best." Among other reasons cited for America's lackluster performance included the increasing popularity of odd lift (power) meets and physique contests. Hoffman "shuddered" at the sight of men lined up for odd lift contests and believed, wrongly, that the best physiques were derived by performing the Olympic lifts. He was so biased in this way that on at least one occasion he persuaded fellow judges in a physique contest to award the title to a weightlifter, even though he possessed far from the best physique.³⁰ Hoffman was so attached, for business, personal, and patriotic reasons, to Olympic lifting that he simply could not imagine any upright American youth doing anything else. Victory in weightlifting was tantamount to victory over Communism and a verification of the American way of life. "Fight for sports leadership fight for world leadership; fight, if need be, for our lives and those of our loved ones" was the message he conveyed in *Strength and Health*.³¹

Ultimately Hoffman was consoled by a new product he called "Our Secret

Olympics, of whom 21 were lifters "Of all these athletes, Kutsenko, 13 tuner heavyweight champion of Russia, was chosen to carry the U.S.S.R. flag at the opening ceremony At the closing ceremony it was carried by Lomakin, newly-crowned Olympic 181-pound champion. This is a good illustration of how strength is admired in the land of our chief competitors for world supremacy." Hoffman. "We Need More Weightlifting Contests." *SH* 21 (January, 19.53): 42.

29 Joseph Welder, "Muscle Power 15 (June, 1953). 38: Hoffman. "What Our Worthy Opponents are Doing." *SH* 21 (September, 1953): 43: Hoffman, "The 1953 World Championships." *SH* 21 (December, 1953): 10-11. 42

30 Hoffman. "The Future of America." *SH* 22 (November, 1954): 3, 57, and "The Best Form of Bodybuilding." *ibid.*, (December, 1954): 24-25, 36-37: Interview with Bill Curry, Opelika, Alabama, April 18, 1986 Curry was a junior national lighthheavyweight champion prior to World War II and is presently National Merchandise Manager for Diversified Products.

31. Hoffman. "The Future of America." *SH* 22 (November, 1954): 58.

Weapon” which by this time was being marketed by his firm in sizeable quantities. It was Hoffman’s Hi-Proteen which appeared as a magic elixir, enabling his lifters to gain muscular bodyweight and thereby add substantially to their totals. What’s more, for the first time in his career, it enabled him to train, transport, and provision the American team without having to worry about where the money was coming from. So confident was Hoffman of its properties that he uncharacteristically predicted victory at the forthcoming world championships at Vienna in 1954. His only hope was that “the Russians don’t have Hi-Proteen. They begged for a bottle of our linament in 1950 when they saw the sensational success of our fellows. . . . Last year at Stockholm I gave Hi-Proteen tablets to some lifters from other countries and the average gain was 11 pounds per lift. The Russians don’t miss much.” Hoffman was a complete convert to Hi-Proteen as the “miracle food.” Even his team’s 29-23 loss to the Russians in Vienna did not cool his ardor. In an article entitled “Nutrition at the World Championships” he argued, speciously, that although the Russians, who outscored America in the lighter classes, possessed the world’s strongest small men, the United States had the strongest big men. “Without immodesty we can say Hoffman’s Hi-Proteen played an important part in this victory.” In place of the team spirit which had prevailed so strongly in York-sponsored efforts in the past, a fetish was made now of Hi-Proteen as the answer to America’s lifting ills. How misplaced such confidence was is indicated by an accompanying picture featuring the American “Hi-Proteen Kids,” mid-heavyweights Dave Sheppard and Clyde Emrich, standing on the number two and three blocks, overshadowed by the great Russian champion Arkady Vorobyev on the winner’s pedestal.³² Hoffman still could, and did, boast that America held more world records than the Russians, 13-10, and he would increasingly bestow upon himself titles by which others had so graciously recognized him over the years—“Father of Weight Lifting” or “Mr. Weight Lifter”—but something was missing in the process.³³

By the mid-fifties there were two further changes occurring that would alter permanently the course and character of American weightlifting. First, the preoccupation with Hi-Proteen was merely symptomatic of a deeper search for ways to alter the body’s chemistry to induce more efficient muscular growth. There was an increased emphasis on human physiology rather than the human spirit as a means to improved lifting performance. This was a subject that particularly interested Dr. John Ziegler, who was taken along as team physician to Vienna. American lifters were obviously bigger and stronger because of their ingestion of Hi-Proteen, but the Russians suspected that Ziegler was stimulating them “with some kind of drug

32. Hoffman, “Our Secret Weapons,” *SH* 22 (December, 1954) 60-61, 64; Hoffman, “Nutrition at the World Championships,” *SH* 23 (February, 1955): 60-61. Pitman agrees that York teams of the late fifties lacked the cohesiveness and commitment so characteristic of earlier teams. Interview with Joe Pitman. Vera Beach, Florida. May 3, 1986.

33. Hoffman, “United States Leads World in Weight Lifting Records,” *SH* 23 (March, 1955): 8-9. 34-35; Hoffman, “Barbells Build Better Athletes,” *SH* 23 (April, 1955): 4, 63.

to make them lift better.” The Russian team doctor kept asking him, “What are you giving your boys?” He was especially curious about the chewing gum Ziegler kept handing out to the lifters, so Ziegler “gave him a piece which he immediately wrapped in a note.” He “found out later that it reached an MVD agent with the Russian team and was probably sent away for analysis, as were samples of my linament and even aspirin.” Additional revelations of Ziegler’s activities in Vienna appeared three decades later in a *Sports Illustrated* article by Terry Todd. Here Ziegler stated that one night he and the Russian doctor went out on the town, and after a few drinks the latter revealed that some members of the Russian team were using testosterone, a growth inducing drug. Upon returning home Ziegler experimented some with the substance, but with undesirable side effects. Eventually, by the late 1950s, according to Ziegler, Dianabol was isolated and by the early 1960s was being used by certain lifters at York.³⁴ It will probably never be known to what extent the Russians were using steroids at this time. But if they were critical to improved Soviet performance at Vienna or their subsequent win in 1955 at Munich, then it was truly the Russians who had discovered a “secret weapon” for lifting success while Hoffman’s “secret weapon” merely brought him financial success.

The other notable development within the York organization during the mid-fifties was a decreasing emphasis on the kinds of human resources that were so evident in the previous decade. New recruits to represent the United States in international competition still came mainly from immigrant communities, including Charles Vinci (Italian), Isaac Berger (Israeli), Jim George (Bulgarian), and Yas Kuzuhara (Japanese). And Hoffman was still regarded as a father figure. Bantamweight Vinci said, “Don’t worry, Bob, I’ll beat him for you—I’ll make 800!” after his loss to the Russian Stogov in Munich. Eventually the little boot-black from Cleveland, through his association with Hoffman, would be greeted by the Shah of Iran and invited to the White House. Vinci and featherweight Berger mixed Hi-Proteen together in the York plant, competed with each other in the training room, and were a popular duo with the ladies of Muscletown.” But such camaraderie existed less than in earlier years when Hoffman himself was an active athlete. Furthermore there were no longer any references in *Strength and Health* to the “league of nations” aspect of America’s teams. There was also less emphasis on patriotic values than during the Korean War era. However slow and irregular the process may have been in the late fifties, the York Barbell Company was no longer serving so much as an agency for the socialization and acculturation of immigrant youth.

What Hoffman’s organization was finally gaining by this time was a modicum of official recognition. In 1955 the State Department partially subsidized a goodwill lifting mission to the Soviet Union, the first such American

34. Eugene C Shumate. “How Can We Beat the Russians” *SH* 23 (May, 1955): 44, 46; Terry Todd, “The Steroid Predicament.” *Sports Illustrated* 59 (August, 1983): 66

35. Hoffman. “World’s Strongest Little Man The Amazing Story of Charles Vinci.” *SH* 24 (May, 1956): 44. and Harry Paxhall, “The Brooklyn Bombshell Isaac Berger.” *SH* 24 (August, 1956). 47



Bob Hoffman, President of the York Barbell Company, in the 1970s. (Courtesy of John B. Terpak).

sports visit to that country. At Moscow and Leningrad the six Americans split wins with the Russians, but the great sensation of the trip was Georgia strongman Paul Anderson who hoisted an unbelievable 402 lb. press, 314 lb. snatch, and 424 lb. clean and jerk in Moscow. The capacity crowd of 15,000 referred to him as *Chudo Pirody* (A Wonder of Nature) and a flabbergasted Russian official exclaimed, "He's Mr. America." Anderson, whose size and strength represented a new standard, almost a quantum leap, in weightlifting, was one of the few American champions who was not of immediate foreign extraction and not deferential toward Hoffman.³⁶ Eventually the team gave

36. Harry Paschall. "Behind the Scenes." *SH* 23 (September, 1955): 26. Anderson, in fact, regarded himself as Hoffman's "equal and, on several occasions, did talk to him about his spiritual life." Anderson to the author.

exhibitions in Egypt and Iran where the Shah, a lifting enthusiast, told Hoffman that he had been reading his magazine since he was ten. Upon returning home the team was greeted by Vice President Richard Nixon, who praised the lifters as outstanding goodwill ambassadors and asked them to undertake an around-the-world journey. "All of this recognition came upon us with all the suddenness of an avalanche," remarked Hoffman. "I used to often remark to people in York that I was better known in Rangoon, in Manila, in Semerang, in Malaya than in my hometown . . . It will be nice to finally meet these converts to our way of life."³⁷ Their itinerary took them to Turkey, Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Burma, Indonesia, and home via Wake Island and Hawaii. Elaborate descriptions of their exploits appeared in subsequent issues of *Strength and Health*, along with pictures of Hoffman and team members in exotic places and attire. Despite government subventions, Hoffman estimated that his share of traveling expenses for 1955-56 was still \$36,000, which was paid for by Hi-Proteen.³⁸ Whatever state of decline American weightlifters might have been undergoing at the time of the Senior Weightlifting Championships in Philadelphia in 1956, all roads for future success still led to York, and it was an Olympic year.

Hoffman believed that the American and Russian teams were so evenly matched that the Melbourne games would be essentially a team match between them. Paul Anderson, he said, "is our only sure winner. In fact he is surer of winning an Olympic title than any man, from any country, in any sport." Yet the "team contest" came down to Anderson's last lift and he won only by virtue of lighter bodyweight than the Argentine Humberto Selvetti. It was America's last great victory. Anderson soon turned professional, Vinci got married and fathered a child, Pete George became involved in his medical career, and Pitman and Stanczyk had passed their prime. Hoffman's assessment in 1957 that "our chances . . . are not as bright as last year" was borne out by the Tehran world championships where the Russians won with 33 points and the United States tied Iran for second with nine points. Tommy Kono was the only American gold medalist. Similarly, when the Russian team visited the United States for competitions in Chicago, Detroit, and New York City in May of 1958, the outcome was a series of defeats for the Americans. Hoffman increasingly turned his criticisms on his lifters. He chided Dave Sheppard for drinking and smoking, Jim George for his attachment to cigars, Stanczyk for concentrating on physique competitions, and other lifters for bringing wives along to international meets for holidays. "If you want to beat the Russians," Hoffman contended, "YOU MUST TRAIN LIKE THE RUSSIANS, AND WEIGHTLIFTING MUST BE FIRST IN YOUR LIFE."³⁹

March 31, 1986.

37. Blanche Day, "Muscle Mission," *SH* 24 (March, 1956): 7; Hoffman, "Weightlifting Reaching the Heights," *SH* 24 (February, 1956): 40.

38. Hoffman, "Editorial," *SH* 23 (November, 1955): 42, and "why the Russians Did Not Come," *SH* 24 (July, 1956): 55.

39. Hoffman, "who Will Win the Olympics?" *SH* 25 (January, 1957): 10; Hoffman, "If You Want to Beat the Russians," *SH* 26 (July, 1958): 60.

In November of 1958 Hoffman passed his sixtieth year, still vowing to live in three centuries and proclaiming to be more enthusiastic about weightlifting than ever.⁴⁰ Unfortunately the man who had been such an innovator in the field of weight training and athletics was being passed by the times. His outlook was ossified by his intense preoccupation with Olympic lifting, which was declining in popularity, and his failure to accept willingly the growing enthusiasm for physique and powerlifting contests. He called physique contests "cruel" because they were "killing weightlifting all over the world, except in Russia, where they are getting a good laugh at all of us, as all of their men put their efforts back of lifting, an event which brings them worldwide acclaim and respect, an event which helps them score points at the Olympics." That Hoffman did not monopolize physique competition as much as he did Olympic lifting accounts in part for the relative success of Weider in that area. As for powerlifting, another of Hoffman's competitors, Peary Rader, assumed the initiative. Though professing to be "a real Olympic enthusiast, Rader recognized that "Olympic lifting in America today is a minor sport." Furthermore, for the general public, bodybuilding had far more attraction and benefit than the Olympic lifts and bodybuilding exercises usually included the power lifts.⁴¹ It is, of course, true that Hoffman hosted the first national powerlifting championships in York in 1964, but it was, in a sense, a formality for which he displayed no great passion. Even in Olympic lifting, Hoffman was out of touch with the trend towards squatting rather than splitting heavy snatches and cleans. Despite the fact that the entire American team employed the squat style in its winning effort at Melbourne, Hoffman remained partial to the split.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Hoffman was at last accruing the general respect in society that had been denied him in his leaner years, especially in his home town. In recognition of the business and publicity he had brought to York, the Chamber of Commerce in 1957 honored him and the Olympians at a testimonial dinner attended by many of the community's best citizens. Also a television film on the York Barbell Company story was broadcast locally in August of that year. In January of 1959 the company occupied a new showcase building on Ridge Avenue. For a cost of \$150,000, it included a sizeable gym, a Hall of Fame, snack bar, offices for *Strength and Health*, and space for clinics, movies, etc. And, for the first time since 1932, the Senior Nationals were held in York in 1959 at the fairgrounds. Most symbolic perhaps of the reconciliation of the company and the community was the participation of four of the "York gang"—Dave Ashman, John Grimek, Jake Hitchins, and Vern Weaver—in a production of *Li'l Abner* at the York American Legion Post.⁴²

40 Hoffman. "Enthusiast-The Secret of Success." *SH* 27 (May, 1959): 4.

41 Hoffman. "The Philadelphia Story." *SH* 24 (September, 1956): 49-50; Peary Rader, "Are You a Power Enthusiast?" *Lifting News*, 7 1 July, 1960): 3. In 1959 Rader had attempted to organize the first Senior Nationals for powerlifting in Colorado Springs but had to cancel it because of lack of interest. Only one lifter even requested an entry form. *Ibid.*: 5 (January, 1959) 2, 6 (July, 1959): 8.

42. "IronGrapevine." *SH* 25(July, 1957) : 49 ;Hoffman."Weightlifting in 1959." *SH* 27(Aprill, 1959): 44;and "The Iron Grapevine." *ibid* (July, 1959): 26

While the York Barbell Company was becoming increasingly respected and prosperous, the world championships results for Stockholm in 1958 and Warsaw in 1959 showed a continuing decline in American lifting fortunes. Hoffman rationalized that at Stockholm the United States was not expected to win—Russia’s victory was as much of a surprise as the Yankees winning the American League pennant. Furthermore three American runners-up—Vinci, Jim George, and Ashman—“had the winning lifts overhead; had they held their lifts, we would have won our greatest victory over the Russians.” After the Americans’ failure in Warsaw to take any more than one first, two seconds, and a third, Hoffman was forced to admit that “we failed miserably.” With other nations now, such as Poland, regularly joining the ranks of winners, he was forced to admit that in the future, “It will take a miracle for us to beat the world.”⁴³ Failing to find any new secrets to success, Hi-Protein being a short-lived panacea, Hoffman resorted to some of his old formulas. Pointing out that Communist nations had won 18 of the 21 medals at the 1960 European championships in Milan, he raised the spectre again of their possibly surpassing and taking over the West. The Communists “are out to prove that their system of living, their organization is superior to that of the free world. They feel that by winning in the events which require the greatest strength, they will show the world they are superior. . . . Only hard work will prevent us from being enslaved,” advised Hoffman. “Study, learn, do everything possible to make America strong.” Additionally there was still a substantial ethnic-American group of lifters who looked upon Hoffman as a father figure. At Warsaw, on the way to winning his eighth consecutive world championship, Tommy Kono before attempting a 286½ lb. snatch that would place him decisively ahead of his Russian adversary, said: “I will snatch it, I must snatch it, I will make this for you, Bob.” And he did. Furthermore, in an attempt to resurrect the team spirit which had existed in the early days, fourteen lifters spent twelve days at York in preparation for the 1960 Rome Olympics, and there was a gala strength fest at nearby Brookside Park just prior to their departure. The United States Olympic Committee, unlike any previous year, even provided a partial subsidy.⁴⁴ Nevertheless the Russians were again victorious, 40 to 34, and Charles Vinci was America’s only winner. It was the last Olympic gold medal the United States would ever win in weightlifting.

After losing to the Russians in six consecutive world championships and now, for the first time ever, in the Olympics, there was much consternation and soul-searching in American lifting circles. At the National AAU Convention in Las Vegas in 1960, there was much discussion about recent nutritional advances made by the Russians. Dr. Richard You, a nutrition specialist from Hawaii, had attended a meeting on athletic medicine in Vienna after the Olympics and was

43. Hoffman. “1960 is Olympic Year.” *SH* 28 (March, 1960). 4; and “We Need a Miracle.” *ibid.* (July, 1960): 4, 6.

44. Hoffman. “Two Different Worlds.” *SH* 28 (September, 1960): 3,4,43; Hoffman, “World Championships Report,” *ibid.* (March, 1960): 54; Hoffman, “Soviet Amateurs find Sports a Lucrative Pastime,” *SH* 29 (March, 1961): 4. Also see Staff pictorial “York’s Pre-Olympic Highlights,” *SH* 28 (December, 1960): 14-17.

amazed at the advances made by the Russians in the use of supplements. Peary Rader remarked that "the Russians had that extra spark of vitality and drive that enabled them to come through and win, whereas our men lacked just a little of making their final lifts. The Russians seemed to have much in reserve." And Hoffman noted that "Communist lifters, who last year had been mediocre were now sensational lifters, transformed in both physique and strength." That this sudden improvement by the Russians was due to steroids was simply beyond their comprehension. But it was only too clear that the 400 packages of Hi-Proteen the York Barbell Company had sent along with the lifters to Rome as well as all the other elaborate preparations for an American victory were to no avail. The Russians had obviously discovered food supplements of their own, or something even better.⁴⁵ "Personally I can not put forth greater effort," Hoffman lamented, "for I did all I could. We need more help."⁴⁶

Not long afterward, however, Hoffman discovered another scheme for success-functional isometric contraction-and a new line of marketable items to accompany it. He became fully converted to it and was soon sending Super Power Racks to leading lifters in various parts of the country, as he had earlier done with Olympic barbell sets and Hi-Proteen. This new method of training "is a time saver, a muscle saver," he exclaimed. "When I saw what this form of training had done, and could do, I was happier than I have ever been in my life."⁴⁷ Hoffman and other company officials have always vigorously repudiated charges that the isometric craze which swept strength-athletics during the mid-sixties was a hoax perpetrated on the American public for commercial gain. But the fact remains that leading York lifters who ascribed their gains to isometric contraction were taking steroids. The most likely explanation is that Hoffman, who was increasingly out of touch with his lifters by this time, was unaware of the full consequences of the experiments being carried out by Dr. Ziegler. The advertising technique he had perfected a generation earlier, invoking the fame of York champions to promote company products, backfired in this instance, revealing an appalling ignorance of critical changes taking place in the sport.⁴⁸

The York Barbell Company remained the most important force in American weightlifting throughout the sixties, but overwrought editorials stressing past accomplishments and vapid articles on nutrition designed chiefly to sell food

45 "Are You a Power Enthusiast?" *Lifting News* 7 (July, 1960): 1. According to Peary Rader, "the American team had only two official physicians with it while the Russians had as many doctors as they had athletes." *Ibid.*, (December, 1960): 2.

Unaware of the tremendous potential of steroids, Hoffman continued to believe that the great Russian strength gains were due to improved dietary supplements. "The Russians are pretty smart people. Dr Arkadi Vorobiov, who won his second Olympic title and sixth world championship in Rome, more than once in the past had learned about the contents of our Hi-Proteen and Energol. He realized that these products had something to do with the success of our great lifters and athletes. And so at Rome, for the first time that we could determine, the Russians had food supplements too. I hope they are not as good as ours, but something made these Russians perform sensationally I think the 20 pounds of solid mule gained by Juri Vlassow since I saw him in Milan last May was a marvel of the world, for with this 20 pounds he gained unusual strength too." Hoffman, "Hoffman Products at the Olympus," *SH* 29 (January, 1961): 19, 56.

46 Hoffman, "To Beat the Russians You Must Train Like the Russians." *SH* 29 (February, 1961): 43.

47 Hoffman, "The Future of American Weightlifting," *SH* 30 (February, 1962): 6.

48 General Manager John Terpak believes that Hoffman was "simply losing interest by this time. He had been to the top of the sport and there were no further challenges to be met." Interview with Terpak.

supplements indicated that much of the dedication and zeal which had driven Hoffman to extraordinary efforts on behalf of his chosen sport during the golden age was spent. It is hardly surprising that he turned much of his attention during the seventies to promoting softball. Drugs and the increased popularity of bodybuilding and powerlifting had permanently altered the character of weightlifting and the York Barbell Company had become a conservative counterweight to innovations in lifting and in American society. But for several decades, largely through the inspired leadership of Bob Hoffman, it was the dynamic force which made the United States the greatest weightlifting power in the world and eventually led to widespread public acceptance of resistance training. Commenting on the fitness craze of the 1980s, an executive of a leading health equipment manufacturer states: "If it hadn't been for what York did back then, none of us would be where we are today."⁴⁹

The spectacular success achieved by Hoffman for more than a decade after the Second World War was the result of a blend of his unique promotional skills in business and sport. But merely making money, even a lot of it as he did with food supplements, was never enough to satisfy his enormous ego. He wanted nothing less than international weightlifting supremacy and his utilization of human resources from America's immigrant communities was the means by which he achieved this goal. Through the resources of the York Barbell Company, Hoffman enabled them to transcend the cultural bounds which inhibited their less talented brethren and to translate their strivings for social and economic acceptance outside their ethnic groups into deeds of heroic proportions on the lifting platform.

This propensity for adaptation and acculturation became particularly strong in the wake of successive world wars where American values had emerged triumphant and where there was a stigma attached to being foreign. Frank Spellman reveals that his most lasting impression from childhood was that his Jewish parents, living in a small farm community outside Philadelphia, often attended Protestant churches as a way of becoming more socially acceptable. "I've always been a flag-waver!" Tommy Kono, America's greatest weightlifter of the golden age, recalled that his "greatest thrill" came just after the 1952 Olympics when the American team was competing against Belgian, British, and French teams in a little town in eastern France. "Suddenly a blond teammate stuck an American flag in my hand and said, 'Tommy, boy, you lead us!' A tinny brass band tried to play the Star-Spangled Banner as we marched in. It was just a small arena in a small town, but somehow I felt more honored than ever before or since!"⁵⁰ Confronted with the prospect of losing to two superior Russian heavyweights prior to the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Norbert Schemansky was undaunted. "Remember I am of Polish descent. I am an American and proud of it. Everybody knows that a man with Polish blood in his veins never gives up without a battle and an American accepts all challenges no

49. Interview with Curry.

50. Interview with Spellman: A Grove Day, "America's Mightiest *Little Man*." *Coroner* 48 (July, 1960): 110.

matter how big or small.⁵¹ What sustained these great figures in their quest for glory was the patriarchal figure of Bob Hoffman. Though often criticized for his egotism and eccentric enthusiasm for weightlifting, it was the self-confidence generated by Hoffman that provided hope for these individuals of gaining recognition and acceptance as an Olympic or world champion, and realizing the American dream.

That these high ideals eventually proved beyond fulfillment may be attributed to several interrelated factors. Relative decline actually set in sooner than is generally thought, perhaps as early as the 1952 Olympics. By that time the Soviet system of state support for athletics was in place and the York system of corporate patronage of lifters simply could not keep pace. It seems equally certain that Soviet gains were being made by the administration of drugs to lifters, possibly as early as 1954. "There were simply too many new Russian world champions appearing each year," observed Clyde Emrich who unsuccessfully kept trying to beat them by more orthodox methods. By the time trainer Dick Smith began driving York lifters in the company car for weekly treatments at Dr. Ziegler's Maryland office in 1961, the Russian drug program was already well established and achieving impressive results.⁵² The focal point for present discussions on steroid use then should not be on whether some York lifters eventually began using them, but that their use was not made earlier by the technologically-oriented Americans. Quite simply it would seem that Hoffman's previous mode of success disallowed any such possibility. He seemed unaware of the importance of Smith's trips, only that they appeared to be "good for the boys."⁵³ York's traditional emphasis on American values and high ideals, formerly its strongest appeal, would not allow anything so unethical as a drug program, at least not as a part of official company policy. But Hoffman's more legitimate promotion of Hi-Proteen and isometric contraction, despite whatever benefits might have been derived by lifters and the company, was simply inadequate to deal with the much more considerable Soviet assets. Consequently demoralization set in. American efforts became increasingly sublimated into powerlifting and physique competition where drugs were more fully accommodated, where there were no Russian adversaries, and where the York Barbell Company had no great stake. There is much to be learned about the present plight of American weightlifting by examining its golden age, but those who would attempt to duplicate Hoffman's achievements are doomed to failure as the unique sociopsychological circumstances of that era will likely never recur.

51. John Terpak. "Lifter's Corner," *SH* 32 (June, 1964): 28.

52. Telephone interview with Clyde Emrich. Lake Bluff, Illinois. April 15, 1986. interview with Dick Smith. York, Pennsylvania. May 4, 1986.

53. Interview with Terpak.