

The York Barbell Company and the Golden Age of American Weightlifting, 1945-1960

JOHN D. FAIR

Auburn University at Montgomery

From the Paris world championships in 1946 to the Melbourne Olympic 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, Americans still showed potential for regaining their superiority. The individual most responsible for this achievement was Bob Hoffman, founder and president of the York Barbell Company. 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 York Barbell Company he was able to provide 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.

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 power-lifting 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.