

**WEIDER PRINCIPLE**

# One Man's Journey with the Godfather of Bodybuilding

By Charles Peebles

Joe Weider, also known as “The Master Blaster,” Godfather of Bodybuilding, Trainer of Champions, the guy who imported Arnold — and by extension everything that ensued — to our shores and the world, died the weekend before Easter at ninety-three. That may mean nothing, or a great deal, to you, and of course there are detractors, kinda like those troll types who invariably pop up on any discussion board. The current tendency is to “one-percent” extremely successful moguls like Joe (or the late Bob Kennedy, who followed in his footsteps and died almost exactly a year earlier) simply because of their wealth and power (especially in an era when anyone can become a multimillionaire overnight with the right Powerball ticket, lawsuit, or narcotics racket) without bothering to learn how they struggled to achieve it. Or without acknowledging how much we’ve all benefitted from their work.

Certainly the statue has tarnish spots; by most accounts, Joe was a supreme hustler. He claimed credit for everything and gave none, stamping “Weider Principle” on every technique ever used in the gym. He pretended to lament the drugs largely responsible for the mind-blowing bodies in his ads. He so wildly embellished the benefits of his powders, vitamin packs and exercise gizmos that the records will show he had to pay enormous fines for his tall tales. He coldly abandoned his first wife and married a trophy-bride model to grace his magazine ads. His autobiography *Brothers of Iron*, published only a few years ago, was a self-serving whitewash that overlooked his sins and gave only a sentence or two to the existence of his only child, a daughter. He brutally suppressed dissent among his beefcake disciples by warping the career trajectories of those who dared question him. His muscle magazines had all the substance of fast-food, and his supplements were worthless. The door

of the legendary “Weider Research Clinic” apparently opened a broom closet. No wonder he and the Governor, who was by all accounts, similarly Machiavellian in controlling the world around him, got along so famously. And along with the usual trolls, there are those who feel they *personally* got a raw deal from him.



But you’ll find far more who admire him and what he represents. You couldn’t paint a better Horatio Alger epic than that of a poor, scrawny Jewish kid who deals with constant bullying and beatings in a tough neighborhood not by crying “bully” but by building himself up in Charles Atlas style, vanquishing adversaries, inspiring others, ignoring the naysayers, building an empire, and quite literally, changing the world. Yes, I am unabashedly a fan of Joe Weider.

If you ever read Stephen King’s *11/22/63* and/or Ray Bradbury’s classic tale *The Sound of Thunder*, you know about the “Butterfly Effect”. Step on a butterfly, and perhaps you deprive its predator of a meal, and perhaps ditto for all successive predators, effecting changes



over epochs, which is why time-travel stories are so sticky. But consider: no Joe>no Arnold>no *Pumping Iron*>no bodybuilding explosion> no brawny action-stars>no “six-packs”>no fitness movement/industry>no *PhillyFIT!*

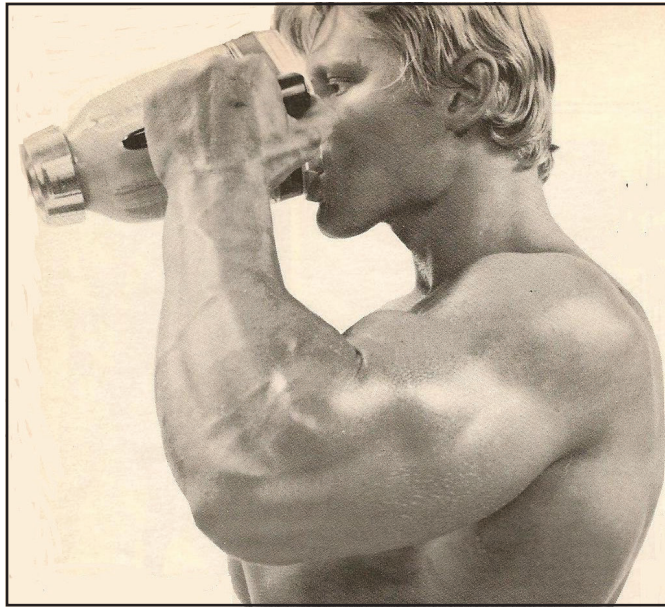
*Doubt* all that? If you can find any other muscle magazines from the time Joe was beginning his ascent, and well into the sixties, they’d most likely be those of Bob Hoffman, of York Barbell fame. Hoffman, who also sold weights and (equally-hyped) nutritional supplements, was all about weightlifting, but almost strictly for feats of strength and Olympic lift competition. Physical appearance was given just a nod. If you didn’t aspire to hoist enormous poundages, preferably at an Olympic lifting contest, you didn’t matter (like today’s functionalists who sneer, “So you’re built-betcha can’t do *this!*”). Even power lifting (bench-press, squat and dead-

lift) wasn’t yet legitimate. Hoffman ridiculed the followers of “Jew Weider” as slackers: a *real* strongman didn’t need to lie on a bench to lift a weight! And what’s all this pumping and posing stuff? In the Hoffman world, if there *had* to be bodybuilding, it would be stuck at the end of a lifting meet, in a dingy, barely-lit high school gymnasium, maybe even as the audience was filing out the door. And if you look at those Hoffman magazines (I’ve even got some from the late 1970s that are this way) you’ll find plenty of dry text and black and white photos of lifting, and equally bland ads for weights and protein powders. But you won’t see any excitement, no colorful awe-inspiring studs cavorting on the beach with the ladies, having fun, *enjoying* all that develop-

ment they've worked so hard for. No inspiration or possibility for *you* unless you're already a ranked strength athlete focused on improving your totals in the snatch and jerk - certainly no transformative magic.

As a tall but gangly (6'3," 170 pound) non-athlete starting college I would fall prey to the Weider spell. I saw some of my nineteen year-old fraternity brothers growing bellies, while the football players bopped around so nonchalantly with huge arms and their pick of the coeds. The unfamiliar super-abundance of dining hall food (poor as it was) had packed on around thirty pounds. The choice was obvious, but in 1975, with *Pumping Iron* still two years away from release, no experience with "working out," only a couple of Universal machines available to "lizards" (as the jocks called us), dips between the dressers and some dumbbells under the bed, there wasn't a whole lot of motivation. Normal guys just did sports. When I stumbled upon some Weider magazines, after laughing at the ads ("*Blitz and blast... a new generation of Weider wildcats... muscle up and make out*") I began to *will* myself into that world, to be Dave Draper chugging that "Weidershake" (a term I'd coin and trumpet relentlessly for decades to the mirth of all who knew me) straight from the blender glass: "*Tastes like a shake, feeds like a steak!*" With my genetics it was about like attempting to bolt a Hemi V8 to a Volkswagen frame, but it did wonders for my self-esteem. It would serve as anchor of sorts during my army years in Germany, as I eagerly sought the latest scoop on all those names I'd come to know in the latest issue of Joe's magazine from the Stars and Stripes store. It would lead to some semi-careers, and keep me looking (if not *feeling*, with my wrecked joints) far younger than my contemporaries. It would lead me along paths where I'd actually get to *know* some of these heroes (and even more, the *heroines*) in Joe's pantheon. And even Joe himself.

I'd come up with the idea of a barbell with rotating handles in 1982, and while trying to patent it, sent a photo of a dummy model I'd made to Joe. He wrote back (I still have his letter somewhere) asking to see a sample. The working model, unwieldy, vastly over-engineered and hewn out of steel in a machine shop, had precision ball bearings, weighed around eighty pounds and cost me nearly seven hundred dollars — this during a recession. Joe'd had it for the better part of a year when I got a call, to hear his famously nasally voice telling me that it wasn't economically feasible — he wanted something he could sell for \$29.95 — and he'd be sending it back to me. Years later, someone else would introduce a simpler

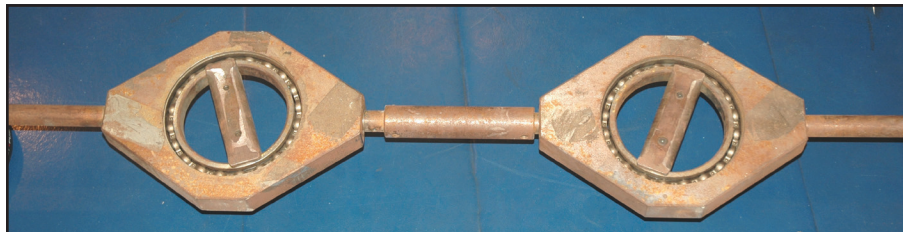


version, although the "Roto-curl" bar/handle never really took off. But I never begrudged Joe his decision; he was a businessman and I wasn't.

What he'd given me over all these years couldn't be priced. And whether or not the rest of the fit-body-conscious world realizes it, or will admit it, what we owe Joe is beyond calculation. I do wish though, that I'd told him about my adding "weidershake" to the vocabulary. I think he'd have liked that.



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