

THE ROARK REPORT

THE ROLANDOW DUMBBELL

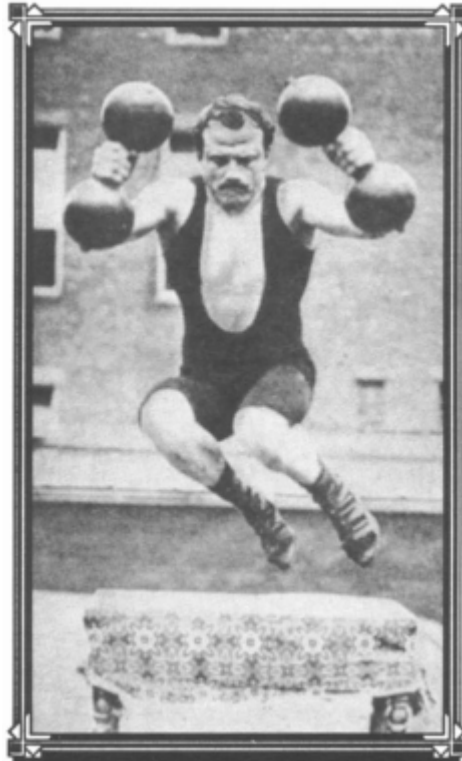
Eighteen ninety-six was a year of interest for iron game followers. Mark Berry was born that year, as was Joseph Moquin, who would later own, then trade, the Cyr dumbbell to the York Barbell Company in exchange for one of their revolving barbell sets. April Fool's Day was the setting for the strength match-up between Louis Cyr and August Johnson. Nearly two months later Cyr would perform a backlift with 4300 pounds, and, a couple days following that, Hans Beck would continental, then jerk 347 1/2. In the autumn, Max Dauthage squatted 220 1/2 for 50 consecutive reps.

Eighteen ninety-six was important for another reason: in that year the Rolandow dumbbell was born. Birthweight was anticipated to be 200 pounds when its father, Warren Lincoln Travis, gave the specifications to the McLaughlin Iron Foundry in Brooklyn New York; but the bell cast was a solid sphere dumbbell weighing in at 209. Birth length was 23" and the 5" long handle was just over one and a quarter inches in diameter.

Travis used the bell, which never bore his name, in his strongman demonstrations. At the turn of the century he sold the bell to Gottfried Wuthrich, better known by his professional name, G.W. Rolandow, and the tale of that sale, though difficult to accept if considered thoughtfully, is that Travis carried the weight "several blocks to the nearest street car line," then made two transfers involving, of course, stepping down and then up onto street cars. After one hour and thirty-three minutes he arrived at the 79th Street trolley stop. Supposedly, Travis toted the bell two more blocks, climbed two flights of stairs to Rolandow's office, and plopped the hunk of iron onto G.W.'s carpet and nonpolitely asked to be paid.

Rolandow indicated that unless he could hoist the dumbbell there would be no sale. One imagines what went through Warren's mind at that moment, and what non tea-room words came to his lips at that news. Anyway, Rolandow, who probably never weighed more than 180 pounds, grasped the weight, cleaned it, then bent pressed it for seven reps. Then, Rolandow handed Travis two dollars, according to David Webster, or twenty dollars, according to *Strength & Health* magazine.

The Rolandow dumbbell was never known as the Travis



Rolando performing a "standing" jump over a table 36" high and 25" wide with 75 pounds in each hand.

dumbbell because it was merely one of a stable of weights Travis used in his demonstrations, and he was not known for overhead lifting so much as for ponderously heavy hip and supporting lifts.

The whereabouts of the Rolandow dumbbell can be ascertained until 1956. Sieg Klein met Rolandow in 1924 at the latter's Health Studio at the corner of Broadway and 81st Street in New York City. (This is the address usually found in magazine accounts, but the *New York Times* obituary on Rolandow listed Broadway and 82nd Street). Rolandow transferred the bell to Klein as part of a package of weights Rolandow was relinquishing upon closing his gym. Sieg sold the weight to Rocco Signorille on August 8, 1956. Rocco weighed only 135 pounds but could deadlift the dumbbell with one hand—essentially 150% of his bodyweight.

Unfortunately, the Rolandow dumbbell is missing. Has it been melted down in a foundry, or stored these long years in a basement? The oldtimers in our sport-

veterans who keep watch on the artifacts of our history—are unaware of the bell's fate or location. Now, keep in mind that the Rolandow *barbell* has been displayed at the York Barbell Hall of Fame Museum since it was given to York by Robert I. Howard. (The barbell's handle is 2.1" in diameter and 6 5/8" circumference and not—as Gord Venables indicated in *S&H*, December, 1974—2. diameter, which would mean a circumference of 7.85". Jan Dellinger, who is employed at York Barbell, measured the handle for me and discovered that where the handle swells on either side of the center gripping space, the circumference is 8 7/8".)

Back to the dumbbell. Remember that Travis had another dumbbell manufactured for Rolandow, the weight of which has been reported as 135 pounds (by Travis and David Willoughby), 137 pounds by Ray Van Cleef, and 138 by Earle Liederman. All these men tell the story of Rolandow being able to bent press this dumbbell for 18 consecutive reps (He probably lowered the weight after each rep using both hands.)

Rolandow was very proficient in the bent press, and perhaps he really could perform 18 reps with 135; but in his contest with August Johnson at the Grand Palace in New York City, which

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Rolandow lost on poundage but won on number of events, he bent pressed “only” 150 pounds for eleven reps.

The larger Rolandow dumbbell was not easy to handle. John Grimek recalls that the 209 pound bell with its relatively thin handle felt as though “a line was being cut through the lifting hand” during the bent press. John says the Cyr dumbbell was easier to lift because the thicker handle fit the palm better. Indeed, when Klein acquired the Rolandow bell he tried “...for several years” to lift it overhead with one hand. “I couldn’t do it,” he wrote in *S&H*, November, 1956, wherein he traces the history of the bell and lists the names of those on the Rolandow Dumbbell Honor Roll. A rare photo of the weight is shown.

Here is the list Sieg presented, along with my additions of birth and death dates: (the date following the name is the year the bell was first lifted)

1. G.W. Rolandow--1900	born 5- 6-1874	died 12- 6-1940
2. John Grimek--1934	born 6- - 1910	
3. Bob Hoffman--1936	born 11- 9-1898	died 7-18-1985
4. Wally Zagurski--1936	born 1- 12-1911	died 1959
5. John Davis--1936	born 1-12-1921	died 7-13-1984
6. Jack Kent--1936	born 1912	died 1- 27-1965
7. Frank Bates--1936	born 1911	died 10-24-1988
8. Bob Harley--1937	born 1913	?
9. Sieg Klein--1937	born 4-10-1902	died 5- 24-1987
10. Aurele Velleux--1939	?	?
11. George Hobby--1940	?	?
12. Elwood Holbrook--1941	born 1912	?

It should be noted that the inclusion of John Davis on this list, at least for 1936, cannot be correct. He was born in January of 1921, and he had been training only about a year by 1936. By 1939, John placed 3rd in the 181 pound class at the National AAU Bent Press Championships with a lift of 200 pounds. So, when Davis *did* bent press the Rolandow dumbbell, it was not as early as age 15.

Holbrook’s lifting of the bell is described by Klein in *S&H*, in March of 1956. Holbrook was about age 28 when, after a trip from the Pacific coast, he bounded up the stairs leading to Klein’s gym, hastily greeted Sieg, asked where the bell was, spotted it before his question could be answered, rolled it to the lifting area, “...grasped it firmly, heaved it to the shoulder, and began to push it aloft”, via bent press. Klein adds, “He was the first man I had ever seen lift this rather awkward dumbbell at the first attempt, and without a warm-up”.

Sieg remembers that seven years later, on November 8, 1948,

“A few moments before I closed the gym for the evening, I noticed a group of men standing outside the door.” These were the Baillargeon brothers, and if all of them were present the list would include: Jean, Paul, Adrien, Lionel, Charles, and Antonio. Their six sisters were not among the group. A photo of the six brothers appears in *Muscle Power*, January, 1951 issue, on page 14, and on page 22 of the December 1948 *S&H*.

In any case, soon the brothers came in and introduced themselves; and “several” of them performed a one hand deadlift with the heavy bell. Paul then bent pressed the Rolandow dumbbell on his first attempt, thus becoming the second man in Klein’s memory who required only one try.

After 1956 the bell is not mentioned, to my knowledge, in the muscle literature. It is my guess that Rocco would not have allowed the bell to pass to someone who was unappreciative of its history. Perhaps the bell now resides in a private home. If any reader has any leads on the famed weight please contact me at P.O. Box J, St. Joseph, IL 61783.

Suggested reading:
Strength & Health

- Nov. 1934, p 15 paragraph by Ray Van Cleef
- Aug. 1937, p 39 paragraph by W. L. Travis
- Aug. 1941, p 23 Rolandow by Ray Van Cleef
- Jan. 1949, p 8 & 45 Klein’s story of Baillargeon brothers with the Rolandow bells.
- Feb. 1949, p 19 paragraph by Van Cleef about Rolandow bent pressing 209 for seven reps
- Mar. 1956, p 58 six paragraphs by Klein
- June 1956, p 13 G. W. Rolandow by Klein
- Oct. 1961, p 58 tale of Howard giving barbell to York
- June 1976, p 43 photo of Klein with Rolandow barbell

Muscular Development

- Oct. 1967, p 19 Rolandow by Earle Liederman
- Mar. 1972, p 23 paragraph by Klein about the 135(137) pound nickel plated dumbbell
- Mar. 1972, p 49 when Rolandow retired, sold some weights to Klein

Iron Man

- Oct. 1959, p 26 G.W. Rolandow by David Willoughby
- Jan. 1975, p 63 Andy Jackson was a witness when Klein bent pressed the Rolandow dumbbell.

Your Physique

- June 1949, p 24 several paragraphs by Willoughby

New York Times

- Dec. 7, 1940 p. 17 obituary for Rolandow

Bodybuilding: An Illustrated History - book by David P. Webster see pages 22, 52, and 67.