



# IRON GAME HISTORY



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## BEN WEIDER FEBRUARY 1, 1923 — OCTOBER 17, 2008

The last time I saw or spoke to Ben Weider was in early March of 2008 in the hallway on the tenth floor of the DoubleTree Suites hotel in Columbus, Ohio. Both of us were in Columbus to take part in the annual Arnold Sports Festival and, as it happened, we had adjacent rooms. Jan and I were there to oversee the Arnold Strongman Classic and Ben was there because he was being honored by Arnold Schwarzenegger for his lifetime of service to bodybuilding. Earlier that weekend, I had spoken to Ben in the dining room of the hotel, and each time we spoke he asked me about the progress of the H.J. Lucher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports here at the University of Texas, which will house the Joe and Betty Weider Museum of Physical Culture. His questions went well beyond simple courtesy, and it was clear that they represented Ben's understanding of the importance of preserving the historical record of the Iron Game and creating a research facility in which academics and fans alike could study the aspect or aspects of the game that

particularly fascinated them and be able to examine important artifacts related to the Game.



The late Ben Weider with his good friend, Oscar State. Oscar played a leading role in the early days of the IFBB.

Several years earlier, Ben had displayed his support of what we're trying to build at UT by sending to us a large number of historical documents connected to the establishment and growth of the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB), the organization Ben and his brother Joe created one day in 1946 after they were told by two officials of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU)—just as the curtain was about to go up at the Mr. Montreal competition—that any man who took part in the contest would immediately lose his AAU membership. Faced by this embarrassing threat and a packed house anxious to see a bodybuilding show, Ben and Joe had the chutzpa to decide, on the spot, to go ahead with the contest if the bodybuilders agreed to take part. The bodybuilders, all of whom were dressed and ready to compete, decided to follow the Weiders' lead and the IFBB was born. When future historians look back at the

sport of bodybuilding and try to understand when and how it really emerged as a distinct sport, they could do worse than to examine that day in 1946, in Montreal.

Besides the historical documents Ben sent to us, he also promised to provide additional artifacts that we could display when the Weider Museum of Physical Culture had its official opening in 2009. What many people in the world of physical culture don't know about Ben is that his interest in, and appreciation of, the field of history goes well beyond matters related to the Iron Game. From a very early age, Ben was fascinated by the life and legend of Napoleon Bonaparte, and he read everything he could about the French ruler's life. He

also began to collect material related to Bonaparte. In time, Ben founded the International Napoleonic Society and became its president. What's more, in 1982 he published a controversial but ground-breaking book, *The Murder of Napoleon*, which provided scientific evidence suggesting that Bonaparte's death had been caused by intentional poisoning.

As Ben's support of Napoleonic Studies continued and as the conclusions proposed in *The Murder of Napoleon* began to gain more traction in the academic community, he received in 2000 the prestigious Legion of Honor, which was established by Bonaparte himself and remains France's highest award. Over the decades,

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his collection of Napoleon-related artifacts continued to grow, and one of his last major decisions was to donate the collection—said to be worth millions of dollars—to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. In a sad irony, the opening of this collection—which took place in a new wing of the museum—was held on 23 October 2008, just six days after Ben’s sudden and unexpected death. In regard to his decision to donate the collection to the museum, he had said earlier, “If I keep this collection in my house, maybe 200 people a year will see it; now, thousands can [see it] every week.”

The same sort of single-mindedness which allowed Ben—who dropped out of school at a very early age to help his parents—to have such unexpected influence in the field of Napoleonic History also allowed him to remain focused on growing the IFBB from a handful of Quebec bodybuilders in 1946 into a world-spanning sports federation with approximately 180 member nations, making it one of the largest such federations in the world. By all accounts, he did this with a combination of diplomatic skill, incessant travel, adequate funding, and plain hard work. Perhaps his best move as an administrator was to befriend the late Oscar State and to collaborate with him on how best to make the IFBB a truly international, fully-functional sports federation. State, a tireless, well-connected Englishman, helped Ben to negotiate the difficult terrain of international sports politics, and even wrote the constitution of the IFBB. All of this was critical to Ben’s long-held dream of having the International Olympic Committee (IOC) accept bodybuilding as a provisional Olympic sport.

By the time State began to advise the IFBB, he had for many years been the General Secretary of the International Weightlifting Federation, but in the mid-1970s a group of jealous officials led by the Soviet Bloc organized a coup and unseated him. After he lost that position, State accepted Ben’s offer of a similar role with the IFBB, and he continued to function in that capacity



**At the 2008 Mr. Olympia, Joe Weider and his brother Ben were backstage together a final time. This photo, taken by Anna Cruz, is the last shot taken of them together.**

for the rest of his life.

The two men made a very effective team and—with Joe Weider’s constant support—transformed the IFBB and gradually outpaced various rival federations such as the AAU and NABBA. In the process, State became Ben’s best friend and it is a tribute to Ben’s judgment that he appreciated Oscar’s value as a man as well as an administrator. Ben also asked State to serve as the announcer at many of the major international IFBB competitions, realizing that the multi-lingual State, who could announce in 16 languages, added an element of class and sophistication to any competition. Truly, the International Weightlifting Federation’s loss was the International Federation of Bodybuilder’s gain.

Another critical element in Ben’s plans for the expansion of the IFBB was its affiliation in 1971 with the General Association of International Sports Federations (GAISF), a federation which was closely affiliated with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and made up primarily of international sports with aspirations of eventually gaining membership into the IOC. State helped Ben write the formal membership applica-



In the mid-1950s, Tony Lanza took this photo of Ben working on some of the first Weider food supplements.

tion to the GAISF executive committee and also used his contacts within the international sporting community to build the required support for the IFBB's application. Fortunately, State was selected as the General Secretary of GAISF the same year that the IFBB became a member of the organization. A critical element in this complicated story is that the GAISF only recognizes one federation from any sport, and Ben was quick to realize that this gave the IFBB enormous leverage over any other bodybuilding federation with international aspirations.

The next step in Ben's quest for official recognition by the IOC of the IFBB was to convince the leadership of the IOC to formally recognize the IFBB as a provisional member of the IOC. This step would not mean that the IFBB would become a "medal sport" competing in the Summer Olympic Games, but it was the step all sporting federations had to take if they had any chance of ever becoming a medal sport. To anyone unfamiliar with the complicated politics of the IOC it would seem that this intermediate step of becoming a provisional member would not be all that difficult. However, nothing could be further from the truth, and it took 26 years of dogged effort on Ben's part to finally build the support he needed to gain official recognition for the IFBB.

During this quarter century of effort, Ben faced two primary obstacles, the first of which was that many

IOC delegates held the opinion that bodybuilding was not a "true sport," such as track and field, wrestling, volleyball, and downhill skiing.

This debate preceded the birth of the IFBB, of course, and it continues still, so it took a lot of convincing and careful political maneuvering to finally achieve official recognition.

The other major obstacle to official recognition was the specter of drugs, which has permeated the "strength sports" of weightlifting, powerlifting, and bodybuilding for the past 50 years. No sport in the Olympic family has been unaffected by the use of ergogenic drugs, of course, but the strength sports and the throwing events in track and field have been particularly damaged by this relationship. Weightlifting has been a member of the IOC from the beginning of the modern Olympic Games in 1896, and even though it has had the worst record of any medal sport in the Olympics in terms of drug positives it has not been disowned by the IOC.

At least not yet. Even so, the close relationship in the minds of sports fans between weightlifting and bodybuilding—and the many public scandals those two sports have faced—has made the IFBB's efforts to achieve full IOC recognition much more difficult.

As for powerlifting, it is a relatively new sport, but its own drug problems—plus its tragic splintering into a babel of rival national and international federations—makes its eventual acceptance as a provisional sport in the IOC, much less a medal sport, a virtual impossibility. The IFBB, however, even faced with long odds, finally managed in 1998 to receive official recognition by the IOC as a sport. This came to pass because the IFBB, over time, had become the only truly international federation in the sport and because Ben had the political skill and the determination to keep trying.

This recognition brought immediate prestige to the IFBB, and to the sport it represented. For example, on Ben's next visit to Lausanne, Switzerland to meet with the IOC president, Juan Antonio Samaranch, he witnessed concrete proof of this change in status. As he walked into the IOC headquarters and then to Samaranch's office, the IOC president looked out his window and then told an aide to immediately raise the flag of the IFBB in front of the building in keeping with the IOC tradition of flying the flag of any IOC federation when a representative of that federation came to Lausanne for an

official meeting. The raising of that flag meant the world to Ben, as he makes clear in the pages of *Brothers of Iron*, the joint autobiography he co-wrote with his brother, Joe. Many people through the years told Ben that he was wasting his time trying to get official recognition for bodybuilding from the IOC, but he never gave up.

Much has been made of how far Joe Weider came from his hardscrabble beginnings in Montreal, but Ben made an equally improbable journey. In fact, a recent comment in the newsletter, *From the Desk of Clarence Bass*, noted,

Ben never entered a physique contest as far as I know, but he was devoted to weight training and worked out regularly . . . I was dazzled every time I met [him]. His look, demeanor, and manner of speaking were sophisticated and elegant . . . For a guy who didn't make it past seventh grade, it was almost breathtaking . . . My third encounter with Ben was in Atlantic City, New Jersey, at a dinner he hosted after an IFBB professional contest. Boyer Coe, the winner, and various other dignitaries were there. I distinctly remember two things about the event. Boyer had two desserts and Ben split an entrée with his personal assistant . . . What I remember most is that shared entrée . . . [Ben] was willing to go the extra mile to look the part.

In a way, most of Ben Weider's career involved going the extra mile. After emotionally buying into his brother's improbable dream of creating a business around muscle-building, Ben realized that he would have to become a sort of Johnny Appleseed and make national as well as international trips on behalf of weight training and the IFBB. He began making such trips in the 1940s, on a shoestring, and for the next sixty-plus years he never stopped. He always planned his trips carefully so that he could visit as many sports officials and iron game personalities as possible on his visits to such far-flung places as Russia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, China, Egypt, Korea, and the Philippines.

During Ben's long, purpose-driven life, he traveled countless miles in conveyances ranging from camels to the Concorde and visited well over

100 countries—often multiple times. As the years passed and Ben's wealth and stature grew, it was no longer necessary for him to maintain such a brutal schedule, but he never slowed down. Ben said in letter written just a few days before his death, "I am now 85 years of age and still training, eating intelligently and working a full day." He had places to go. He had people to see. He went the extra mile. He shared entrées.

Besides his brother, Joe, and his sister-in-law Betty Weider, Ben is survived by his wife Huguette and his three sons—Louis, Mark, and Eric. Eric is President and CEO of Weider Health and Fitness.

—Photographs Courtesy Weider Health and Fitness, Inc.



The IFBB flag flies in the background as Ben poses with Rafael Santonja, who replaced him as president of the IFBB, Juan Antonio Samaranch, the president of the IOC, and Pamela Kagan at the Olympic headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland.