

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

BILL CURRY AND THE GOSPEL OF PHYSICAL FITNESS

AL THOMAS, PH. D. KUTZTOWN UNIVERSITY

“One of our sport’s grand old men,” announced another of the same sport’s “grand old men” when I told him that I was writing this “Where Are They Now?” column about W. A. “Bill” Curry. The phrase itself—the quickness with which it came to his lips—jolted me a bit: not the compliment implied in “grand,” of course, but that word “old.” Bill Curry, “old”? Momentarily he had been, at least to the “jolted” kid in me, the super-lifter and athlete who, between 1937 and 1951, held all the South’s weightlifting records in the light-heavyweight class: all of them for 14 years. “Old”? But as I came back to the realization that I myself had, long since, passed over into my own seventh decade, I had to admit that a man at 75 (half-way through his eighth decade) did, indeed, qualify for the attribution of that dismal adjective, even though I also had to admit that nobody carries off 75 with more athletic jauntiness and élan than this remarkable athlete of strength who dominated weightlifting in the South—as perhaps no other man had—from the Depression until a half-dozen years after World War II. From 1937 to 1951, he was the light-heavyweight champion of the Georgia State, Southeastern, Mid-South, and Southern A.A.U.’s, as well as the A.A.U. Junior National Champion in 1939, a fourth place finisher in the 1940 A.A.U. Senior Nationals, and runner-up as a heavyweight in the 1944 A.A.U. Senior Nationals. A signal athletic record.

Writing about Bill’s victory at the 1939 Junior Nationals, Bob Hoffman wrote with admiration of his “courage in coming from behind in the press” to beat Chicago’s formidable Frank Kay: 760 to 755: “Bill was forced to break his lifetime record in the two hands snatch with a fine 235, and then in the clean and jerk with 305, to win.” In the following year’s Senior Nationals, at Madison Square Garden, Bill’s performance, again, impressed Hoffman: “His normal weight had continued to increase, and reducing to the light-heavyweight class had handicapped him considerably. Nevertheless he finished fourth in a class which included some unusual men—John Davis, the world’s champ, Steve Gob, who made a higher lifting total than any other man in the world of his weight class except Davis, and Frank Kay, who has since made a total of 835.”¹

Bill remembers this meet: “In 1940, they had called off the Olympics [because of the war in Europe]. At that point, I hadn’t missed a workout in four years and had wanted to be on the Olympic team. My best practice lifts were higher than any other light-heavyweight’s in the United States, except for John Davis, and they planned to take two lifters in each class. At the Nationals, that year, I took fourth. With the news about the canceled Olympics, I had quit training and had only one week to get ready, but I over-trained badly and didn’t get close to my best.”²

Nineteen-forty was the year of the famous York Barbell Club’s tour of the South, including Hoffman, Johnny Terpak, John Grimek,

and Steve Stanko. With his heroes in the audience at Atlanta, Bill led his Southeastern team to a victory over the South Central team, lifting 250, 250, 320 for a new lifetime record total of 820. Remembering their own (cramped) grand tour, Hoffman writes sympathetically about the effect of such a “tour” on an athlete who has to be at his best: “Four days later, having driven to distant New Orleans in a crowded car with the remainder of his team, having had little sleep and only irregular living in the intervening days, Bill did even better. He is the nervous type of lifter, a man who can lift far beyond his apparent strength. I said frankly that I didn’t believe he could do as well again but I hoped that he could, and he showed me. Elwood Farmer was his competition on the South Central team. Elwood is big and strong, phlegmatic to a considerable degree, stronger than Bill I believe, but Elwood missed on his 330 jerk. Bill extended himself to break his lifetime record—by 10 pounds, to clean and jerk 330—and with this one lift he won again the title, ‘The South’s Best Weight Lifter,’ and won the match for his team. October 23rd in Atlanta, he had been selected over a great group of well-built men, the survivors of competitions in all principal southern cities, and was crowned, ‘The South’s Best-Built Man.’” In Hoffman’s view, Bill’s life story made it clear that “he was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was not a physical prodigy from early childhood; he had a long, hard road to follow, and he got there.”³ And in each step along the way of his “getting there,” Bill had vindicated the warm praise accorded to him by the “Father of American Weightlifting” and by everybody else who has shared in the enthusiasm, manliness, intelligence, and dignity that he has brought to our sport, not all of whose champions perform as admirably off the platform as on it.

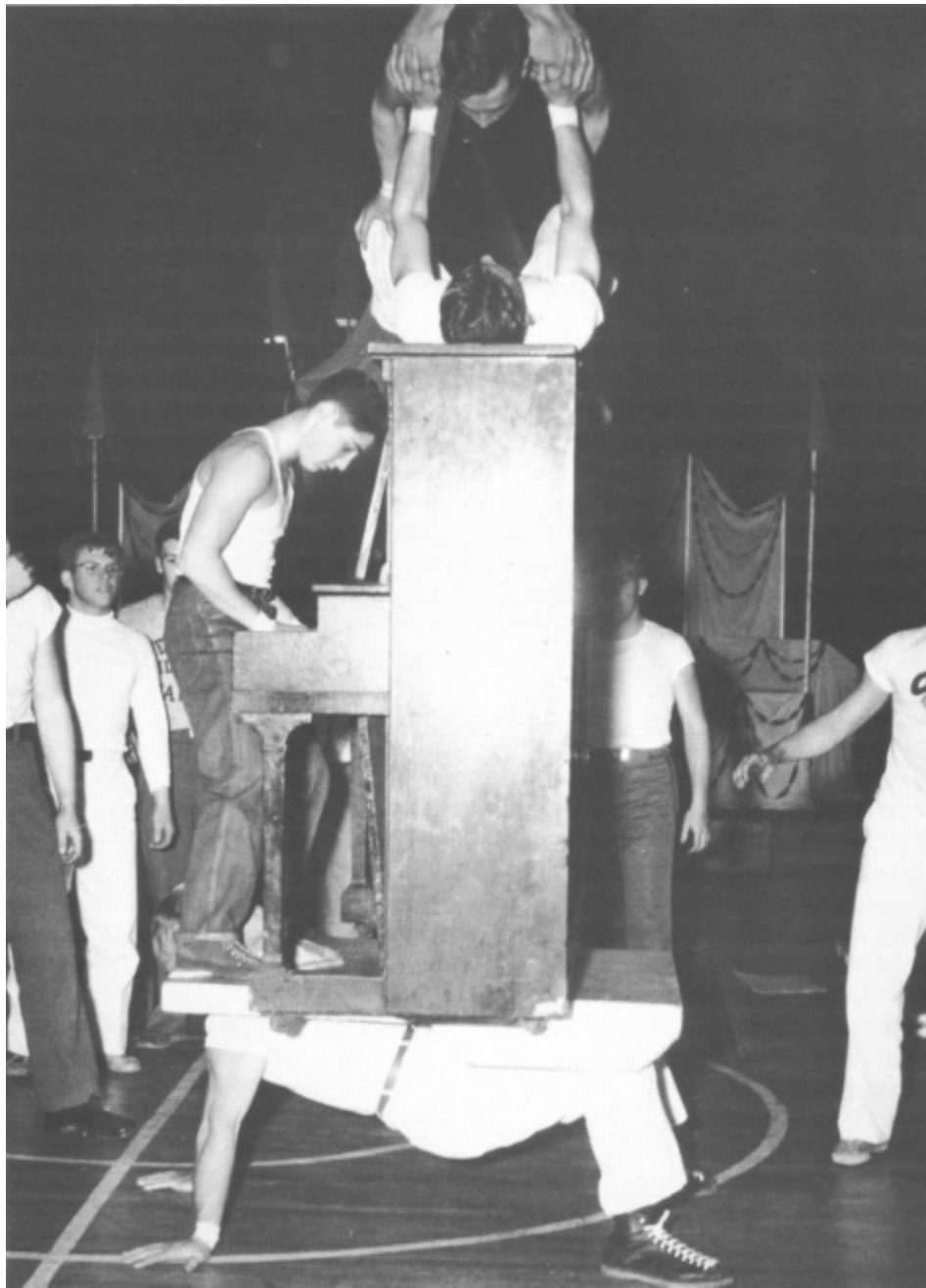
“Inauspicious” is a term that would not be misapplied in describing the introduction to the iron game of (now) retired U.S. Army Reserve Major Willie A. Curry. Genetically gifted—young Willie was not. Born December 3, 1917, in Athens, Georgia, he was a healthy boy until stricken at four with an eye disease which left him blind for two months. In time, he recovered but with much loss of strength and weight. From then on, until age 17, every physical examination disclosed Willie to be “greatly underweight.” A bookworm, during his grammar school years, he was unable, until he was 16, to climb the ten-foot rope that provided the entry to the tree houses that resulted from his ingenuity—and from his immersion in Tarzan books.

Offered a membership in the Y.M.C.A. at ten, the youngster was too tired and bashful to accept—and didn’t accept until he was 15. Soon after he joined the “Y”, a new physical director was hired, L. H. Cunningham, who as the 1925 Mr. America, had the cachet to convince the powers about the value of weight training. Young Willie blossomed under Cunningham’s tutelage, though at the start the boy’s interests were exclusively centered upon swimming, handball, and

calisthenics: “I thought that these sports would build for me a body similar to Tom Tyler and George O’Brien, who were at that time my ideals

. . . I believed that weights would make me muscle-bound, slow, and seriously injure my heart. It was three months before I began to realize that barbell training was working wonders with some of my friends. At the time I was fairly muscular but was too fine-drawn and weak. All I had was quite a bit of endurance, so I started training in January, 1934. My weight at that time was 140 pounds.” (In a letter dated 20 January 1993, Bill wrote me that this 140 pounds was at a height of about six feet.) “I worked hard on a standard bodybuilding course for a month and could press the tremendous amount of 80 pounds.” Soon afterwards, however, his interest lagged and he quit training.⁴

When Bill entered the University of Georgia in September, 1935, he weighed 152; by the end of the year, having made the University’s freshman boxing team, he was down to 149. In January of 1936, however, his interest in training revived when he began to read *Strength & Health*: “My interest picked up and I began to look around for some method whereby I could increase in size and strength. A friend of mine and several of the football players . . . worked out a system of dual resistance exercises which we worked on for about three months. During this time I gained considerably in strength but



During his years as a physical education instructor at Georgia Military Academy, Bill and his students produced a number of strength extravaganza to raise money for charity. Here, Bill supports three students and a piano.

Photo: Todd-McLean Collection

very little in size.⁵ In January, 1937, Bill became L. H. Cunningham’s “amateur assistant” for the bodybuilding club, and after a few months his weight had shot up to 160 from 150. It was at this time that a “great event took place” in Bill’s life: Peter Fox (a “member of the world-famous 300 Pound Club”) came to Athens and taught Bill the three lifts. In the boy’s first meet, the Athens Municipal Championships, he pressed 145, snatched 135, and clean and jerked 195. Later on, he placed second in the Mid-South Championships in Atlanta (177, 147, 222), and in June, he won the Southeastern Championships (AAU) with a total of 595 (190, 175, 230). (In the four years between 1936 and October of 1940, his press climbed from 145 to 250; his snatch from 135 to 245; his jerk from 195 to 330; and his total from 475 to 825. In a letter to

Hoffman, Bill said that he trained like the York champions, “doing heavy single attempts on the lifts three days a week and occasionally doing series of three to five repetitions. During the summer months I usually go in for bodybuilding entirely, for there are no meets in the South.”⁶ This, then, was the start—all the more instructive for its inauspiciousness—for one of the Southland’s premier lifters and strength athletes; the rest is history. As a light-heavyweight, Bill pressed 250, snatched 235, and clean and jerked 315. As a heavyweight, he pressed 285, snatched 250, and clean and jerked 330; he also jerked 360 from a free-standing squat rack.⁷

A 1939 graduate of the University of Georgia, with a degree in business—majoring in marketing—Bill participated in the University's ROTC program, and because of this background, entered the Army in 1941 as a second lieutenant, after a stint as a "physical development and recreational foreman" for the National Youth Administration ("a governmental agency that set up trade schools for disadvantaged youths throughout the country")—and, also, after a tenure as head physical education instructor at Georgia Military Academy (to which he would return after W. W. II).⁸

It would be impossible, I believe, to think of any exercise theoretician (from our own ranks or any other ranks) who responded with more imagination and just plain know-how than weightlifting's Lt. Bill Curry to the Army's special needs relative to training masses of men. In Dr. Terry Todd's words, "Curry's contributions preceded those of Army doctor Thomas DeLorme, the author of the book *Progressive Resistance Exercise* in 1945. Curry's knowledge, ingenuity, and enormous personal energy combined to make him a true pioneer of progressive resistance exercise in the military. The programs he instituted increased the muscle size and strength, the confidence and combat readiness of many thousands of soldiers as they trained during World War II."⁹

The brilliance of Bill's adaptations of what he had learned about weight training to that which the army needed in order to develop strong, enduring soldiers is captured most succinctly by Dr. Todd in his *Muscle & Fitness* tribute, in the June 1991 number.

In February 1942, Lt. Willie "Bill" Curry reported to Fort McClellan, Alabama for active duty in the US Army infantry. Because of his background in physical education, he was assigned to direct physical training for his company. He conducted calisthenics, running and the other basic Army training methods for several weeks. Then one day his former military science professor from the University of Georgia, Col. John Hutchinson, who also happened to be the regimental commander, asked him if it would be possible to improve the condition of the troops more quickly. Curry said yes, if he could get some weight training equipment.

Given an immediate go-ahead, Curry began overseeing the building of 50 barbells, constructed of 6-foot sections of pipe, 1-inch thick, on the ends of which were No. 10 cans filled with concrete. This setup permitted Curry to run one platoon of 50 men through a barbell routine while the other three platoons were engaged in running, calisthenics and other activities. Each platoon would work with the barbells for about 15-20 minutes and then rotate to other activities for the remaining period of physical training.

Curry would stand on an instructor's platform and lead the troops through sets of such basic barbell exercises as the squat, military press, bent-over row, upright row, heel raise, curl and power clean.

After several months the program had been so successful that Curry was assigned to conduct the training of 800 limited-service trainees, who were at the lowest end of the fitness spectrum. For that, Curry ordered built another 100 barbells, barbell racks, a row of 24 adjustable slant boards for abdominal work, 12 Roman chairs, 12 dipping stations, 12 chinning stations, and an elaborate arrangement of pulley weights made of concrete, cans, ropes and pulleys that allowed the men to do one- and two-hand movements. Also provided were vault-

ing horses of logs and wrist rollers in a rack that was long enough for a squad of 12 men. Curry's system could handle a 200-man company every hour, and he took four companies through every day. His program was a huge success, and his battalion of "limited-service" trainees ended up winning the overall post softball championship.

Curry was then promoted to captain and placed in charge of all physical training for all eight regiments on the installation. Although barbell training remained the heart of Curry's workouts, he also put a lot emphasis on lifting logs. Six men were assigned to each log; the men would shoulder the logs and then perform various exercises such as squats, presses, side straddle hops and bent-over rows. They also ran relays with the logs on their shoulders. The program was published in a manual and distributed to the entire Army.

Curry was later assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia. Even though he claims to have been unable to convince the West Pointers there of the value of his barbell routines, he was allowed to implement his log training program, with excellent results. Curry managed to get in enough barbell workouts himself that he was able to win second place at the National Weightlifting Championships in 1944.

Upon his release from the Army in January, 1946, Bill returned to Atlanta and to five years of coaching physical education at Georgia Military Academy. In 1951, he accepted a position as sports consultant and merchandise buyer for the Rich's Department Store chain in Atlanta; and after 23 years with Rich's, Bill embarked upon his "third career," working as national merchandise manager for Diversified Products, one of the world's biggest and most respected manufacturers of exercise equipment. In the words of Cal James, retired president and former C.E.O., "Bill Curry was a great inspiration and motivator at DP for 13 years. His efforts helped us become a major manufacturer of fitness equipment. He is a great friend and was an inspiration to my son, who he personally trained in physical fitness."¹⁰

Today, at 75, Bill is still the tireless physical educator and motivator, coaching 24 youths, aged 12-17, in his gym. His wife, whom he met on a blind date in 1940, Mary Eleanor Barnes Curry, is 70 but, like Bill, still works out in their gym "She always told me to go in the direction I wanted," says Bill, "and she would go with me."¹¹

Son, Bill, Jr., has had a legendary career in football. In high school, he lettered in football, baseball, and basketball, and was All-State in football. An All-American and All-S.E.C. center and linebacker at Georgia Tech, Bill played pro football for ten years, was All-Pro twice, and played in three Super Bowls (one with the Packers and two with the Baltimore Colts); he played with the Packers, the Colts, the Oilers, and the Rams. After his pro career, he was head football coach at Georgia Tech and, then, at the University of Alabama; he is now head football coach at the University of Kentucky. Needless to say, he works out with the weights three times a week and also gets-in his aerobics—the regimen still followed by his father. Daughter, Linda, 46, leads a group of men and women in weight training, aerobics, cross training, and distance running. She is a 10K racer and half-marathoner, and is involved in both weight training and bodybuilding. Daughter, Deborah, 38, trains three or four times a week, doing weight training and aerobics; she also runs 10K races. Among Eleanor and Bill's grandchildren—Kristin, 25 lifts, cycles,

and runs. Billy, 22, is a senior football player at the University of Virginia, where he also lifts and runs. A “walk-on” at UVA, Billy won a scholarship, earned three letters, and played in two bowl games. Nikki, 21, runs. Adam, 19, runs cross country and 10K races, plays basketball, does skateboarding, and some weight training. Emma, 8, is involved, already, in swimming, ballet, cycling, and skating.¹²

In 1983, Bill was among seven national recipients of the Honorary Presidential Sports Fitness Award at the country’s first President’s Council on Physical Fitness Sports Festival. He was selected for this honor “because he exemplifies what the President’s Council stands for,” according to the program’s Executive Director, Michael Goldberg. He was deservedly honored, in short, for his “lifetime contributions to sports and fitness.” He has preached, for years, the “Gospel of physical fitness and encouraged others to get involved with exercise and sports activities. His influence and dedication to the philosophy of health and wellness have earned him tremendous respect and admiration within the fitness community,” Goldberg continues, “[and] we felt he deserved recognition for his efforts.”

Bill’s training regimen includes 20 minutes, or more, or aerobic exercise three times a week, along with a weight training program that exercises all the muscle groups three times a week. He avoids red meat, but “eats plenty of chicken, fish, turkey, grains, skim milk, fruits, cereals, and raw veggies.” He takes vitamins and drinks a high-protein shake five times a week.¹³

When asked if he still follows the current weightlifting scene, he admitted to being very disappointed in American weightlifting, attributing its decline (among other reasons) to the “promotion of bodybuilding, at the expense of any mention of Olympic lifting,” as well as to the fact that so few people are interested in becoming lifters and that there are so few meets. “It’s terrible that the U.S.A. has no

world class lifters.”¹⁴

One of the respected elder statesmen of our Game, Bill feels that, “considering [his] poor genetics and background, [he has] done pretty well.” He attributes his “self-confidence, discipline, and self-esteem” to his participation in the Game: “I believe that I would never have ‘come out of my shell and been able to take my place in the work-a-day-world if it had not been for weightlifting.”¹⁵

His wish is to be remembered as a “caring, dedicated Christian father, husband, and friend.” To this “grand old man” of our grand old sport, the granting of this wish seems inevitable, a shoo-in, but no more so than the great respect and sense of fondness that he has generated in the hearts of all those who, like him, have labored long and hard to make this Game of ours all that it can, and should, be; an endeavor in which nobody has worked more mightily, in all the senses of that word, than Bill Curry.



At his home in Opeilka, Alabama, Bill has outfitted a complete weightroom where he, his wife Eleanor, and dozens of local teenagers train regularly. At 75 he still manages to get in three sessions with the iron every week.

Photo: Todd-McLean Collection

Notes:

¹Bob Hoffman and Bill Curry, “Bill Curry. The Man on the Cover,” *Strength & Health* (March 1941): 45, 52.

²Bill Curry to Al Thomas, 20 January 1993. Author’s Collection.

³Hoffman and Curry, “Man on the Cover,” 52.

⁴*Ibid.*, 52, 64.

⁵*Ibid.*, 64.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Bill and Curry to Thomas, 20 January 1993.

⁸Charles Evans and Edna Skip-

worth, “A Lifetime of Fitness,” *McClellan News*, April 17, 1992, 6-7.

⁹Terry Todd “Bill Curry, Pioneer Army Ironman,” *Muscle & Fitness* (June 1991): 125.

¹⁰Evans and Skipworth, “Lifetime of Fitness,” 7.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Curry to Thomas, 20 January 1993.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*