



IRON GAME HISTORY



VOLUME 3 NUMBER 1

September 1993

GREGG ERNST: BRINGING BACK THE BACKLIFT

Late one afternoon this past summer, Jan and I left our cozy island home off the coast of Nova Scotia for the three mile trip to the mainland. There was rain falling and more rain forecast, and it was “thickafog,” too, as the islanders say—just the sort of night to stay indoors with a good book. But we had to make the trip. History beckoned, in the form of a long-haired, short-coupled dairy farmer from just across the bay in Lunenburg—Gregg Ernst by name—who planned to lift more weight at one time than any man had ever lifted in a fully documented manner.

More specifically, Gregg intended to crawl under a massive wooden platform with two small cars on top and lift the whole thing off the ground across his back. Thus the name—backlift.

Since the heyday of professional strongmen and strongwomen at the turn of the century, the backlit has been a popular stunt because it allows a performer to lift thousands of pounds at one time. A hundred years ago, William Kennedy backlifted three large horses, and in later years Josephine Blatt lifted twenty men, Jack Walsh elevated an elephant, and a Texan known as Stout Jackson shouldered several bales of cotton. Obviously, the lifting of such things is much more visually impressive to an average audience than the lifting of iron weights would be.

By specializing in the backlift, Gregg Ernst is continuing a tradition. Physically, Gregg fits the oldtime strongman image. At five eleven and three hundred fifteen pounds, he’s round and burly—like a small bear. With his proportions and flowing hair, he is an almost exact replica of another potent Canadian—the phenomenal Louis Cyr of Quebec. Even Gregg’s training harkens back to earlier times. In these days of stairmasters, spandex and selectorized weight machines, Gregg works out on his hilltop farm by hoisting boulders, driving fenceposts with an applewood maul, pushing his wagon up hills, lifting thick-handled dumbbells and practicing the

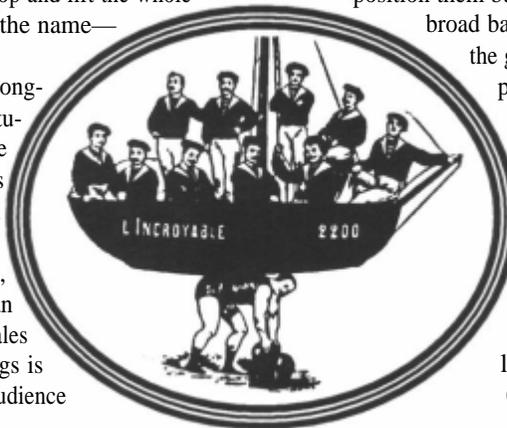
backlift.

Thirty-one years old, Gregg is a quiet, modest man, much admired in the community, all of which helps to account for the size and staying power of the crowd that came and sat through a wet, blowy night to watch him attempt his historic lift. The occasion was a big local fair—the Bridgewater Exhibition. The exhibition features a midway, of course, along with hundreds of agricultural exhibits, and such things as ox pulls and the tug of war, but the talk of the show this year was whether Gregg could lift the cars. It took a good deal of time to get the platform ready and to drive the cars onto the top and position them but finally the moment came and he bent his broad back under the platform and lifted it clear of the ground to the delight of the several thousand people who stayed through the rain to see a new world record.

Afterward, the entire load was carefully reweighed under the supervision of several officials and the grand total was five thousand, three hundred and forty pounds. In the big picture, of course, such an accomplishment has little consequence—just as all athletic accomplishments have little consequence. Even Gregg understands this. In fact, when he was reporter what his next goal was, he smiled

and said, “Puttin’ away the rest of my hay.” Even so, seen in the context of the history of human performance, what Gregg has done is to walk with the giants of the past and then, when he came to the place where the footsteps of others ended, to continue, alone, walking where no footsteps were.

We want to lend our support to Gregg and to other young people who attempt in one way or another to honor the past by attempting to recreate some of the strength feats which used to be a large part of the repertoire of any genuine strongman or strongwoman. What we like most to see is a modern lifter who honors the past—as Gregg



apparently does—by abstaining from the use of anabolic steroids, so that he approaches the old records with only his natural talent and training to sustain him.

Gregg has been fascinated by the backlift since his mid-teens, and has spent years refining the platform he uses and training to increase his strength in this demanding lift. It is, of course, impossible for any advanced strength performer to do a backlift (or any other lift, for that matter) with a weight which represents his true physiological potential in a feat with which he is totally unfamiliar. The truth of this can be seen in the experience of Anthony Clark of Houston. Anthony holds the current record in the bench press with 725 pounds and he has squatted in the neighborhood of 1000 pounds. But when this remarkable young man tried the backlift for the first time in a strongman contest recently, he was only able to hoist seventeen hundred pounds. Obviously, if Anthony spent even half as much time training the backlift as Gregg has done, he would do a great deal more than seventeen hundred pounds. Whether he would reach beyond Gregg's record is, of course, impossible to say. The point here is that one does not reach truly great weights in any lift

unless that lift is practiced regularly so that the strength and technique it requires can be brought to their maximum level.

We also want to applaud Gregg for doing everything he could to see that the lift was carefully documented. He contacted the Guinness people and he arranged for several high-ranking local elected officials to be present when the reweighing was done. He also saw to it that photographs and videotapes were made of his performance and he asked us to be there to make our own judgement as to the genuineness of his lift.

As students of the iron game know, several claims have been made which are in excess of Gregg's recent record. It has been reported in Ripley's "Believe It Or Not" column that Thomas "Stout" Jackson lifted 6,472 pounds and in the *Guinness Book of Records* that Paul Anderson raised 6,270 pounds. Possibly, one or both of these men performed a backlift with the claimed weights, but since adequate documentation is lacking in either case the "official" record must rest in the thick, calloused hands of the young farmer who trained so hard for so long to add his name to the list of history's giants.