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Mac and Jan



n December and January of 1977, following her world record deadlift of 451 1/4 pounds, Jan Todd, my wife, received quite a bit of media coverage throughout Canada, where we then lived, and in the U.S., culminating in an invitation to appear on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*. So, although it wasn't easy to get away because we had a farm, Jan felt that the Carson invitation was an offer she couldn't refuse since the show was seen by an average audience of close to twenty million people. Twenty million people. Think about that.

And it wasn't just the numbers; it was also the fact that as far as we could determine, it had been at least ten years since a weightlifter, power or Olympic, had been on a show with such an enormous viewing audience. Coverage of that sort simply can't be bought; you just have to sort of stumble into it and then try to take the best advantage of it you can so that your sport is presented to the public in the best light possible.

Sports grow in strange, often dramatic ways, as the surge of bodybuilding's popularity over the past two decades demonstrates. And although the question is admittedly a complicated one, involving such varied factors as the state of the economy, increased leisure time, a widespread pursuit of youthfulness, greater general awareness of the effect of exercise on health, and the growing use of weights in schools and colleges, it seems clear that bodybuilding began to really grow soon after the terrific shot in the arm it received from the publication of Charles Gaines' book *Pumping Iron* and the release of George Butler's film of the same name. These two things, coupled with the wit and easy charm of the star of both the book and film—Arnold Schwarzenegger—did a very great deal to spread the gospel.

In short, knowing to some extent how all these things work, Jan felt definite obligations to lifting in general, to powerlifting in particular, and to the right of all women to develop and proudly use their strength, and so we found ourselves one morning leaving the snowy bluster of Halifax, Nova Scotia, headed toward the balmy smog of beautiful downtown Burbank.

Some weeks before we left, in a conversation with John Grimek, he told me that on his last trip to California he had visited one of our mutual friends, Mac Batchelor, and so one of the things I decided we'd have to fit into our tight schedule was a trip to see big Mac. I felt this way for many reasons. For one thing, Mac had been one of my heroes for over twenty years—from the very beginning of my interest in strength sports. For another, I knew that Mac was retired now and so didn't get to see as many fans as he did during the many years that he tended bar. And for yet another, I knew he was

interested in meeting Jan (as she was in meeting him), because he had been told that she was able to do some of the feats of hand strength for which he was so justly famous. And finally, I wanted to talk to Mac in connection with some research I was doing on arm and wrist wrestling.

The reason I wanted to talk to Mac about this, for those unfamiliar with his background, is that for a period of approximately twenty-five years (1931-1956), Mac met all comers in the hand game (arm wrestling, wrist wrestling, hand wrestling, call it what you will) and was never beaten. *Never beaten in twenty-five years*. Who else in any sport can claim to have been at the top of the heap for a quarter of a century? Champions come and champions go but when a man or a woman comes to a sport and stands astride it year after year after year, he or she becomes a legend. Babe Ruth. Pele. John Grimek. Al Oerter. Muhammed Ali. Babe Didrickson Zaharias. Wilt Chamberlain. Gordie Howe. Martina Navratilova. John Unitas. Bill Pearl. And Ian "Mac" Batchelor, who retired at the age of fifty after having taken on all comers night after night and decade after decade at his bar, playing right hand or left seated or standing, open hand or thumb-block, sick or well, tired or fresh, drunk or sober, and straightening the arm of every man he met.

Sometime, in a future issue of *IGH*, I'd like to tell the story about how Mac locked hands with challengers from all over the world and about how he trained to develop the ability to remain unbeaten for so long, but for now I want to take the space I have to describe one of Mac's feats of finger strength and to explain how that feat created a bond between him and Jan.

Let me describe the feat. To begin, you need only the top or cap from a beer or pop bottle, preferably a top which wasn't crimped in or bent very much as it was being removed from the bottle. Be sure to use a bottle cap which is one of the older types, made of heavier metal. Many of the newer caps (such as the twist-off variety) are made of a very lightweight aluminum and are really not much of a challenge, though they might do to train with if the heavier ones proved to be too tough. Ideally, though less romantically and practically, a good type of cap to use is the sort you can buy at wine and beer making shops—the sort which are used for capping beer. They're almost always of heavier gauge metal and, naturally, they're perfectly flat across the top,

Mac was able to hold one of these caps between his thumb and his extended (straightened) forefinger and then squeeze it until it was bent double or flattened completely together. He could do this, according to many people who saw him, almost effortlessly. Many of you have no doubt bent one between your thumb and your *bent* forefinger, bracing the bottlecap against the first joint of the forefin-

ger, but Mac could bend them the hard way, using an *extended* forefinger and holding the cap very near the ends of his finger and thumb. When Mac bent them the “easy” way, David Willoughby, the strength historian who knew Mac well, said that it looked like an ordinary man breaking the shell of a peanut. In fact, Willoughby reported that Mac once bent sixty-three beer caps the “easy” way and put them in a beer bottle in two minutes.

Often, to amuse his customers, he would gather a bunch of caps in a pile and then have someone time him as he bent them together. He kept records in this and from time to time would attempt to better them. One of my favorite stories about Mac centers around just such a scene. What happened was that a couple of his buddies, as a practical joke, took the flat piece of cork (which all beer bottles used to have) from inside a cap, glued a dime inside, then glued the cork over the dime. This done, they then encouraged Mac to try to break one of his speed records in cap bending. When he agreed to try to break one of his records using the thumb and extended forefinger, they waited for their chance and then secretly switched the “special” cap for one of the normal ones. And then they waited.

Finally, Mac began, picking up the caps and quickly snapping them shut, until he came to the dime-strengthened cap. As he picked it up his buddies leaned closer and watched as the big man squeezed once on the cap, then turned it slightly in his hand and squeezed again, much harder this time, but again the cap (and the dime) refused to bend. Then, obviously angry, Mac put the cap down against his bent forefinger and turned the full might of the great, iron-hard thumb against it, and he bent it, dime and all. But seeing what Mac could do when he was aroused had so shaken his buddies that they waited a few days before telling him what they had done.

In any case, I remember being awed by such stories as this in my early days of training and I remember how proud I was when I bent my first bottle cap the easy way and how despairing I was of ever being able to bend one with my forefinger extended. But I was young then and quite unaware of how one’s strength would increase as a result of hard training. It was at about this time that my interest in competitive lifting began to grow and my interest in feats of hand strength began to fade a bit, but even so as I gained in overall size and strength, my hands grew stronger too, especially since I often included a set or two of high rep wrist curls to finish off my workouts. And thus it was that one day at a tavern, fooling around with some bottle caps, I found that I was able, with effort, to bend a cap the hard way. It was a small thing now that I think back on it, but it made me proud. After that day, though I never trained on it or practiced it, I was always able to bend a cap the hard way whenever I tried it. And herein lies the second part of the story.

It happened that one night, many years later, Jan and I were sitting out on the deck of our home in Georgia, sipping on a couple of cold beers and relaxing after a workout, when I picked up one of the bottle caps I’d just removed and casually bent it, the easy way, at which point Jan who’d then been training for about a year or so, decided that she’d like to try it. So, humoring her, I handed her a cap

which she doubled up with really surprising ease and then turned to me and said with a smile, “What’s so hard about that?”

Well. What was I to do but go back inside, get a couple more bottles, bring them out, open them, take one of the caps, place it between my thumb and extended forefinger, bend it shut, then give the other cap to Jan and say, “Let’s see you do *that*.” Imagine my surprise—my *shock*—when she proceeded to do just exactly that. Unbelievable. Literally. Here she was, in heavy training for less than a year (though she’d broken the forty-eight year old women’s world’s record in the deadlift with 394 1/2 a few weeks earlier), and she was able to do something I’d been unable to do until I’d been training hard for at least *four* years. What was worse was that she bent it more quickly than I did. Not to mention the fact that she weighed 175 pounds whereas I was probably around three hundred when I first did it.

The long and short of the story is that it wasn’t a fluke because from then on whenever she tried it she could do it, unless the cap was badly crimped. So, though I couldn’t believe it then and can scarcely believe it now, I have to accept the fact that as the result of a strange anatomical gift, she could easily (and still can) bend caps that stop many big, strong men. (For example, in 1979, after the last day of competition of that year’s World’s Strongest Men contest in Los Angeles, we were with a group of the competitors in the bar talking shop when one of the people at the table said he had heard Jan could bend a cap the hard way and asked her to show how she did it. So after a batch of caps were procured from the bartender, she bent a couple of them. The man who had asked her to show him then tried to bend one but was unable to do so. One of the other people at the table was Jon Kolb, a starting offensive tackle for the Pittsburgh Steelers who had taken pan in the Worlds Strongest Men contest. As it happened, Kolb had won the only real test of hand strength in the event—a variation on the old wrist roller—and it was easy to see why as he had huge and muscular hands. Someone then suggested that Kolb try it, whereupon he confidently picked one up, placed it at the end of his extended forefinger and thumb as Jan had done and began to apply pressure. But nothing happened. Amazed, Kolb slightly changed his grip and cranked down on it again but again it wouldn’t budge. And then he tried once more with the same result. And remember, these were not the lightweight twist-off caps but heavy caps from imported beers. He then handed it to Jan, who bent it with no apparent effort, to the delight and amazement of the whole table. Later, we heard from Jon’s wife that he got a bunch of caps from the bar before he left that night and took them up to his room and continued to try to bend one. Overall, of course, Jon’s hands were stronger than Jan’s, but in this one narrow area, she could easily do a feat of strength that was beyond him.

Even before we visited California and Mac, I had told Jan a lot about him since I realized the extent of her natural hand strength, and so we were both excited when I called Mac from our hotel in Universal City and he said he’d love to see us. Accordingly, after Jan did five reps with 415 in the deadlift on the *Tonight Show*, we turned in early so we’d be fresh for our visit with Mac and our trip back east.

The next morning we found Mac living in the same neat, modest house in Gardenia in which he had lived for many years, and we were touched by the spread of fried chicken he provided and by the warm and witty way he made us feel at home. But we were saddened by Mac's physical condition. Some years before, he suffered a rather serious stroke which left him with a weakness in one of his legs and an arthritic condition in one of his hips, and these problems were compounded by an almost total loss of sight. But even with physical difficulties which would break the spirit of a lesser man, Mac was pushing on with his life, and he retained an active interest in the iron game. Even then, in his hands and forearms, you could see evidence of the matchless strength he once possessed.

As we talked, sitting close together so that he could touch us if he wanted to make a particular point, he took my right hand as he was explaining a certain technique of arm wrestling and, as he held me with that big hand I could feel the power that he *still* had in his grip. He was showing me how to "paralyze" an opponent's hand and, in showing me, he almost paralyzed mine.

After we discussed arm wrestling a bit more and talked over old times for awhile, he told us that he had heard about Jan's hand strength, and he wanted to hear and know more. He then took her hand in his two thick paws and felt the palm, the thumb and fingers, the wrist and the forearm, nodding to himself and smiling as he did so. Finally, he produced from his pocket a heavy bottlecap and asked her if she would mind bending it for him. Thinking back on it now, I suspect that although Mac had known me for years, he was skeptical about what he had heard from other sources concerning Jan's ability to bend caps. Who wouldn't have been? As a matter of fact, when he had asked me about it on the phone a year or so before our visit, I downplayed it as I didn't want him to think she was crowding in on his territory, even though he was long since retired. In any event, it was a fascinating scene as he cupped one of his hands around her



AT HIS BAR IN LOS ANGELES, MAC BATCHELOR PREPARES TO DEMONSTRATE HIS HAND STRENGTH BY TEARING A DECK OF CARDS.

—TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

hand and put the other one around her forearm and asked her to bend the cap. But she bent it so quickly that he asked her to do it again and to do it a bit more slowly if she could. So she bent the next cap slowly between her thumb and forefinger, and he smiled and said quietly, "Wonderful, wonderful. She's got it. Tendon strength and tenacity. That was what I had."

As we talked and ate Mac kept coming back to Jan's hand and to her extraordinary natural ability, which seemed to please him so greatly. It was clear that whatever jealousy he might have had as a younger man was gone with the winds of age and wisdom. In a lull in our conversation, he asked Jan how old she was, and she told him she was twenty-five.

He looked at her sharply then but asked softly, "When were you born?" to which she replied, "I was born on May 22nd 1952." He looked at her again his clouded eyes fixed on her face, and he said nothing for perhaps a minute. Then he began to cry, quietly at first and then in great, racking sobs and I found that Jan and I were crying with him, tears running down our cheeks as we sat there in the home of that fine old man, crying about time and age and youth and strength and all the things worth crying for.

Later, when Mac could talk again, and we could listen, he told us that the birthday of his only daughter was the same exact day as Jan's, and that he was the same age as Jan—twenty-five years—when he realized that he might be the best armwrestler in the world. He told us that he broke down when he learned that Jan could have been his daughter in the flesh as she obviously was in spirit. Mac's wife had been dead by then for some time, and he only had his daughter to care for him as his sight failed. But we learned with sadness that instead of helping him his only daughter had preyed on him for years, mistreating him and regularly taking money that he didn't have to spare. We thought the story couldn't get much more sorrowful, but then he looked at us again and asked, almost in a whisper, "Did you know my daughter's name is Jan?"