

The Jim Bradford Story

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Editors' Note: In 1999, Artie Drechsler was asked by President Vic Boff of the Oldetime Barbell and Strongman Association to introduce honoree Jim Bradford at the annual dinner. Everyone to whom we spoke agreed that Drechsler's speech was on of the best in the history of the Association. It captured a simpler, drug-free time when the iron game seemed somehow more pure, and also captured the character of a man who symbolized the essence of amateurism— big Jim Bradford

I want to begin by thanking Vic Boff and his entire organization for bringing us together once again. The significance of these gatherings is truly special for the honorees, but it is perhaps equally so for those of us who have what is often a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet our heroes and to show them our appreciation for their achievements.

Tonight I feel very fortunate that I have been asked to speak to all of you about a man who I believe was one of the greatest natural strongmen of our times, or any times, James Bradford.

Jim got into the Iron Game in a serious way at the age of 14, after purchasing a *Strength & Health* magazine with none other than the legendary John C. Grimek on its cover. His early training was done at a YMCA in the Washington DC area. He had been relocated to the Y after a dumbbell he was lifting in the second floor bedroom of his family's home fell from his bed onto he floor and sent plaster from the ceiling crashing down around his family.

This youngster managed to elevate 115 pounds in the press shortly after he began his training. After four more years of training and competing on a local level, he entered his first National event, the 1946 Jr. Nationals.

It was at this competition that he began to learn a little more about the lifting techniques weightlifters used in competitions (training himself, he had thus far relied on only the very crudest of techniques and pure strength to make his lifts). At that same event he also moved onto the "radar screens" of Bob Hoffman and John Terpak. They saw the potential of this young giant (Jim weighed 247 at the age of 14), a

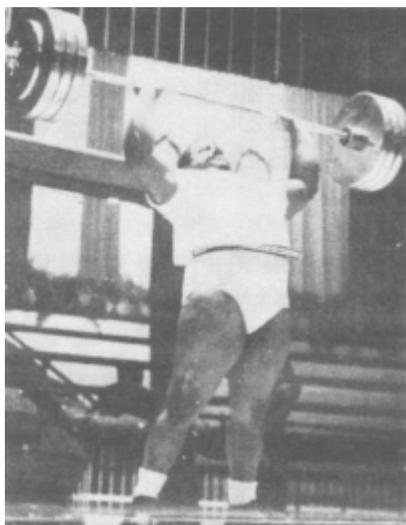
man who would provide such a great contributions to the victories of the US Weightlifting teams during the 1950's.

But success didn't come overnight to Jim. It wasn't until 1950, four years after his arrival on the National scene, that Jim finally won the Jr. Nationals. However, this event marked the beginning of a steady ascent to national and international success.

Jim placed third that same year at the Sr. National Championships, and, by 1951, he had not only moved up to second place at the Nationals, but he had earned himself a spot on the 1951 World Championship team.

During a career that spanned three decades, Jim won two US National Championships, earned a silver medal at four world championships and was a silver medalist at two Olympic Games (in 1952 and 1960). This is a fantastic medal winning spree by any standards, but by listing Jim's many official accomplishments we can only begin to appreciate the magnitude of his achievements. Why?

For one thing, much of Jim's great lifting was done with little or no training. For instance, he served his country in the Korean war from 1952 to 1954, coming out of the Army just before the 1954 World Championships. He had not been able to train during his tour of duty, yet when Bob Hoffman called upon him to replace the injured John Davis on the 1954 World Championship team, he jumped on a plane without hesitation and placed second, winning valuable points for the U.S. Similarly, during much of the next four years, Jim was able to lift only sporadically complet-



At the 1960 Olympics in Rome, Jim Bradford pressed 396 pounds with strict form.

ing his studies at legendary, rigorous Howard University. Yet he continued to win medals for the United States.

Consider another example of Jim's special accomplishments. Many lifters of Jim's day were employing the precursors of the very refined techniques that the Olympic lifters of today use. In contrast, Jim classifies himself as a throwback to the era of the old time strongmen and weightlifters, to a time when pure strength and power prevailed. This is because all of Jim's lifts were performed in a very high split style, in which he barely split his legs to catch the bar overhead in the snatch lift, or on the shoulders in the clean. And in the press, when other lifters were jerking their bodies, leaning way back and even bending their knees slightly to elevate great weights overhead. Jim executed his presses by merely setting his back in a slight incline and pushing the weight directly overhead. As Bob Hoffman often said, Jim Bradford came by his incredibly wide and muscular deltoids honestly.

So prodigious was Bradford's pressing power that many feel the 396 pound press he performed at the Rome Olympic Games in 1960 was the greatest demonstration of pressing strength in the history of the Olympics. Jim was surely the only lifter of his day who could challenge the immortal Paul Anderson in terms of pressing strength. [Ed note: And Doug Hepburn.]

In fact, the entire story of Jim's performance at the 1960 Olympics represents a dramatic depiction of the issues of strength versus technique and sportsmanship versus the effort to win at any cost.

By 1960, Jim had finished his formal education and was settled into a regular job that permitted him to train seriously for the Olympic Games. He was in the best shape of his life in Rome, ready to truly compete with Yuri Vlasov of the Soviet Union, a man who had just broken a number of Paul Anderson's world records.

Jim gained the lead on Vlasov during the press (or so everyone thought), and was ready to match the powerful Russian in the snatch. Then it would come down to whether Jim could hold the great Russian off in the clean and jerk (a lift in which Vlasov was clearly superior – in part due to his fine technique). But then something odd happened. The Russian delegation protested the disqualification of Vlasov's last press, which by most available accounts was improperly performed. The appeal was successful, and suddenly Jim's lead had evaporated.

Ultimately, Vlasov went on to win comfortably

what might have been one of the toughest competitions of his career. As Jim has said about this unfortunate event, the record books show the gold medal going to Vlasov, the silver going to Jim Bradford and the bronze medal going to Norbert Schemansky, but Yuri Vlasov knows what really happened that night, and so does Jim Bradford.

Somewhat embittered by his experience in Rome, but also ready to move on with his life, Jim won another Nationals in 1961 and then retired from the national and international scene. His education at Howard had prepared him well for his career, and he has devoted his life since retiring from lifting competition to research and learning, working for 52 years at the world famous U.S. Library of Congress, where he still serves as a librarian today. During those 52 years, Jim has earned the respect of so many of his fellow librarians that he was recently elected president of the local librarian's union.

Now that, in a very small nutshell, gives you some sense of the accomplishments of Jim Bradford's very rich career. But now I'd like to tell you the rest of the story....

In 1951, John Henry Davis stood at the lofty summit of the highest peak in the world of athletics. He reigned supreme, indeed uncontested, as the World's Strongest Man. He was undefeated in international competition since 1938 and there seemed to be no one who could challenge his dominance. But that same year, unbeknownst to many, John Davis had a major problem. He had been hampered in his training for the World Championships in Milan by a leg injury. So he began the competition in less than his normal superb condition. Yet so great was his margin of performance advantage over the rest of the world that no one on the American team was terribly troubled by the situation. John would win, as he had always done, since 1938.

But by the conclusion of the snatch lift everything had changed. Suddenly, John Davis was facing two of the most serious threats to his undefeated reign that he had ever confronted. One threat was in the form of an agonizing pain in his leg, which he had seriously reinjured during the snatch competition. The other threat came in the form of another competitor, who was performing better than had been expected, a competitor who was troubled by no physical pain of any kind, only the hunger that the young challenger feels when victory is imminent, when the momentum of youth is about to

overtake the status quo.

Davis lay in pain in the locker room while the American team physician and trainer worked feverishly over him to see if the leg could be revived. They were able to mitigate the pain somewhat, but they could not mitigate the truth—that John Davis was injured and, while he might be able to continue, it was a virtual impossibility that he could perform at the level needed to retain his world championship crown. Even the lion-hearted John Davis knew his undefeated string was very likely over. The king was dead. Or was he?

Standing in the same locker room was another American lifter, a man much lesser known than the great John Davis. It was in fact a man who had never set foot on a World Championship platform before this very evening. Yet, amazingly, despite his youth and relative inexperience, this man found himself with weightlifting history about to fall into his powerful hands. That youth was James Bradford.

Jim stood in second place after the snatch competition in Milan. He was right behind Davis and no one else was in sight. Had John been at his best, Jim would not have been ready for him on that day. But John was not at his best and Jim was at his, so the reality was that Jim appeared to be more than equal to the task of removing the king from his throne. It would be an incredible upset!

As the clean and jerk competition began, the arena was charged with the electricity that is generated only when an audience senses that it is about to witness history. Bradford made his first clean and jerk, and Davis did the same, but Davis was in terrible pain by the time he had finished his lift. Bradford answered with an easy second attempt clean and jerk that tied Davis, who as lighter man would have continued to lead. But Davis would not win in this way, so he took just enough weight on his second attempt to go into the lead over Bradford. Only John Davis knew what it cost him to make that lift.

As John struggled from the stage after his courageous lift, valiantly suppressing his pain, Jim still had one more clean and jerk and he was looking strong. As Bradford readied himself for this challenge, his mind was consumed by the kinds of thoughts and feelings that one would expect a young man in such a position to have.

A gold medal and the glory of winning a World Championship were within his grasp. He felt the once in a lifetime energy and excitement that one feels only when standing on the threshold of achieving a lifelong

goal. But then Jim looked at his friend and team mate John Davis. As Bradford studied this great champion, he realized that if he made his last lift, Davis would take still another clean and jerk attempt. Given the serious nature of Davis' injury, such an attempt, successful or not, might well have been enough to end John's career.

It was at that moment, in the fury, the drama and the finality of international competition, that the young Jim Bradford made up his mind about what he would do. He was the only man who could defeat John Davis, and, at the same time, he was the only man who could save Davis from a possible catastrophe. And Jim Bradford decided to do the latter. Shocking the world, in what has been heralded as one of the greatest acts of sportsmanship in the history of athletics, he declined his last lift. He gave up his chance to beat the great John Davis.

Yes, Jim wanted to beat John Davis. Yes, he wanted to be recognized as the Worlds Strongest Man. Yes, he wanted it more than anything he had ever wanted in his young life. But he would not do it this way. If he was to beat John Davis, Jim had decided, he would do it when John was at his best. So a great drama had ended with an even more dramatic gesture of respect for a great champion and for Jim's ideals of athletic competition.

History tells us that John Davis went on to win still another World title that day and to continue his unbeaten string. Perhaps as importantly, he recovered from his injury. In fact, he trained himself into the best shape of his career by the 1952 Olympics, where he won his second successive gold medal and his 8th consecutive world championship, establishing a victory string that has never been broken by any athlete in the history of weightlifting, and one that stands in little jeopardy from anyone competing in the sport even today.

Indeed today, weightlifting fans the world over know the story of John Davis' victory string, much as baseball fans know of Joe DiMaggio's 56 game hitting streak, as well they should. But now all of *you* know...the rest of story.

And while the world will long remember John Davis' achievement, relatively few know of, or remember, Jim Bradford's profound contribution to that achievement, a contribution that was quietly and respectfully made so many years ago, on a beautiful fall evening in city of Milan. But I thought that tonight would be a very fitting time to remember Jim's contribution. And, most importantly, to remember that the great strength of Jim Bradford's body is surpassed only by the great strength of his character.