

THE VOYAGE OF A LIFETIME

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Editors' note: As most readers know, Ben Weider is the longtime President of the International Federation of Bodybuilders, the largest bodybuilding federation in the world. Several years after the end of the Second World War, Weider visited Cairo, in Egypt. In the following article, he recounts that trip for *IGH* readers. As the article reveals, the trip had a profound impact on Ben. It also gave him an early taste of the very extensive travel he would undertake throughout the remaining fifty-three years of the twentieth century, as he crisscrossed the globe in an effort to make bodybuilders and the IFBB major players in the field of international sport.

I remember it like it was yesterday. The voyage to the land of enchantment. Cairo, Egypt. The year was 1947. The Second World War was over and I had just been honorably discharged from the Canadian Army. I had finished serving my country and life was full of only promise and possibilities.

One of those possibilities was the founding of something my brother Joe and I would call the International Federation of Bodybuilders. Yes, that was almost 54 years ago and how quickly time has passed.

During those formative years, the only countries that the IFBB could say were members were the United States and Canada. Like any new venture, it was a humble beginning, yet from day one, we believed in the message of bodybuilding and its power to change lives. Even from the start, something inside tugged at us to take the message to more countries and more people. We decided that the plan would be for me to travel to England, France, and South Africa to make them the

next members of the IFBB.

About this time, circa 1946, I became friends and pen pals with the Egyptian World heavyweight Champion, El Saied Nossier. Nossier, who lived in Cairo at the time, was hailed throughout Egypt as a hero. Ultimately, Nossier became Egypt's Minister of Sport and a trusted advisor to Egypt's King Farouk.

In one of my letters to El Saied Nossier, I told him that I was planning a brief visit to Cairo during a stopover on the way to Capetown, South Africa. He rushed his reply to me with the insistence that I spend several days in Cairo as his guest. How could a 23-year old young man refuse such an offer? "Of course, I'll accept!" was the message I sent back to him.

As a young boy, I was always amazed at the land of Egypt, its history and the pyramids, one of the sever wonders of the world. My dream was to someday go there and see with my own eyes the magnificence of this great land and its people. That day was about to come.

On the day of my arrival, the plane finally landed and what waited before me was my first taste of what it meant to be treated like a "VII?" More importantly, I was about to find out what the meaning of friendship truly was.

As the TWA Constellation taxied to a stop, even before the steps could be secured against the door of the aircraft, there, waiting on the tarmac, was none other than El Saied Nossier and a group of officials to greet me. As I stepped out of the plane, the hand of a muscular 6', 240 pound giant reached out to clasp mine. This massive man with such a huge frame was adorned by the traditional Turkish red "tarbush" worn by millions of Egyptians. Yes, I do remember that powerful grip, but

remember even more the soft, gentle smile that said, "Welcome, my friend."

As we walked off the tarmac, we entered the immigration section in the airport, which was filled with what must have been over two hundred people ahead of us, waiting to be cleared. I looked at Nossier and whispered, "It looks like we're going to be here for hours." Nossier looked at me and with his characteristic smile said, "Just follow me." I did. As we walked past the crowd of hundreds of people, we went through a special area and as we did, guards and immigration officials saluted us and would only stop us for 10 seconds before they whisked us by everyone who was still waiting. You can only imagine the looks and stares we got. The plan was that we could be taken by limousine to the Sheppard's Hotel in downtown Cairo--one of the most famous hotels in all the Middle East.

Upon arrival, Nossier told me to rest up because I would be needing it for the party he had planned later that same evening. Upon entering my beautiful suite, I had to pause for a moment and let it all soak in. Here I was, fresh out of the Army, just arrived in Egypt to a place I had always dreamed of going and I was being treated like royalty. For this 23-year old, life didn't get much better.

In 1947, Cairo was a very cosmopolitan city that included over 300,000 Greeks, 200,000 Jews, and 100,000 French and Italians. Even to this day, as I close my eyes, I so vividly remember the sights, the sounds, and the incredible aromas that filled the air.

That night, El Saied Nossier threw one fantastic party. Among the many guests were Egypt's most famous strongmen. Powerful weightlifters and world record holders like El Fayad, Khadr El Touni, and so many others whose faces I recall so clearly. It was a marvelous evening of "brotherhood," friendship, Egyptian music, and dance.

The next day, Nossier made certain that we ate at Cairo's most popular restaurant, Groppi's. Now, Groppi's was only a ten minute walk from the hotel, but it took an hour for us to get there. Seems that Nossier could only take a few steps before another group of people would want to talk to him. After watching this encounter, I became convinced that next to King Farouk, El Saied Nossier was Egypt's most popular person.

During our lunch and subsequent conversations,

I recall having numerous discussions about a wide variety of topics. During one of our talks, Nossier asked me a rather pointed question, "How do you feel about Bob Hoffman." At that time, Hoffman was President of the York Barbell Company and a very powerful figure in the International Weightlifting Federation. Hoffman had a reputation for developing magnificent weightlifters in the USA and was highly respected.

In any case, I told Nossier the truth, I told him that although I admired Hoffman for the work he was doing to promote weightlifting in America and for developing champion weightlifters, I could not condone nor appreciate how I felt he was exploiting bodybuilders just so he could attract more people to his weightlifting competitions.

The fact was, in those days weightlifting competitions attracted less people than bodybuilding competitions. However, in order to keep people at the weightlifting shows, Hoffman would purposely schedule the bodybuilding contests *after* the weightlifting. Many times, the bodybuilding competitions wouldn't start until after midnight and would go until two, three, or four o'clock in the morning! This wasn't right and I told Nossier just how I felt.

I was amazed at his reaction. Up to that point, Nossier had been extremely kind, forgiving, understanding, and compassionate to not only myself, but to anyone he met. But when the Hoffman subject was brought up, he turned to me and said, "I believe that he is the one who caused problems for the International Weightlifting Federation and I have cut all of my contacts with him."

I was quite surprised. Not so much at another negative story about Bob Hoffman, for it was no secret that we were having our own problems with him, but I didn't want to speak negatively about this since these were our own, private matters. Apparently, Nossier had had his own fair share of "experiences" with Hoffman.

Of course, taking in all the sights of Egypt was high on my wish list, but so was the iron game. While in Egypt, I wanted to know more about how the great champions trained and I asked Nossier about the techniques he used to produce so many world champions. He gave me two.

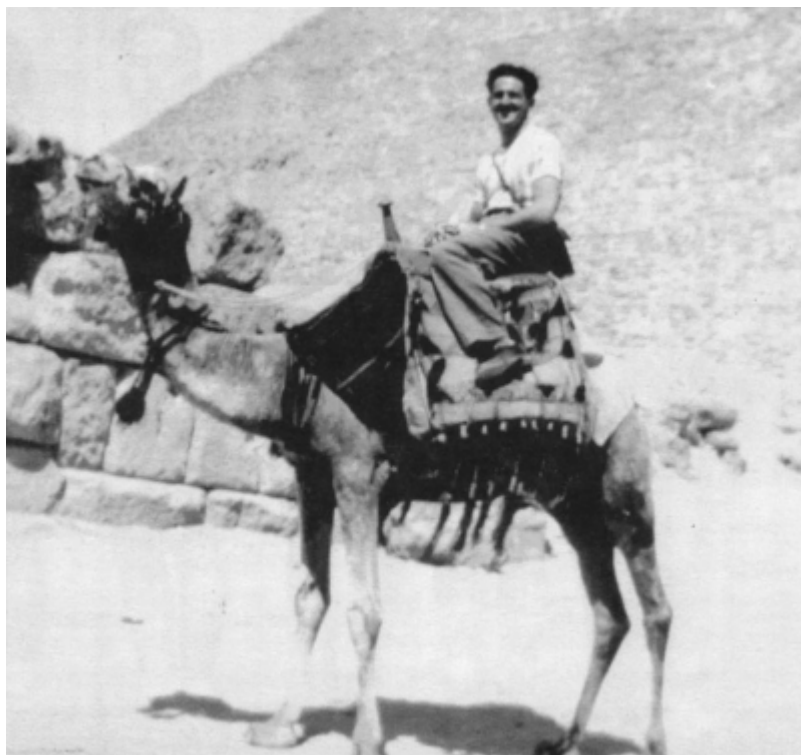
1) The first one taught each athlete bodybuilding principles, some of which had come from the pages of my brother Joe's *Your Physique*. Nossier felt that after each

athlete built his muscle size and strength through bodybuilding, he could then specialize on all the various techniques of weightlifting.

2) Nossier also described to me a new method of weightlifting he developed which he called the “Camel Method.” He explained that a camel, when seated, is usually on its knees. In this position, the heaviest loads could be placed on him and once loaded, the camel would stand by using a certain body position. First, the camel’s back legs would straighten up and when its back was completely up, it would then straighten out its front legs, thereby allowing a heavy load to be lifted and carried. By observing the camel, El Saied Nossier got the idea that to “snatch” or “clean” a weight to the shoulder, the best way to do it was to bend down completely to the lowest level, like the camel, then as he lifts the weight upward, he lunges forward with one foot and thereby continues the movement of lifting the weight up and overhead in one complete uninterrupted motion. He would then stand up, again, like the camel, and control the weight in place over his head. Nossier found so much success using this system that he also applied it to cleaning the weight to the shoulders for the military press with equally good results.

After hearing about his discovery, I asked Nossier to write a series of training articles fully detailing his “camel training” methods. The articles were well-received, and used by many coaches and lifters throughout the world.

My time in Egypt was passing quickly and with only a few days left, Nossier planned a trip to the pyramids and the Sphinx. The pyramids were unlike anything I had ever imagined. My immediate reaction upon arriving was to touch them and, of all things, climb them! I chose a pyramid called “Cheops” and decided that I’d make it to the very top. The pyramids were made up of huge blocks, approximately three feet high by three feet wide and weighing many thousands of pounds. The Cheops pyramid reached 450 feet into the air; and at the top was a large area where you could sit,



Twenty-three year old Ben Weider gets a lift at the pyramids in 1947.

Photo courtesy Ben Weider

relax, and soak in the sights and sounds of the city of Cairo and the surrounding desert below.

If you have never climbed a pyramid, there are two things to keep in mind: climb carefully and make sure you have enough energy and power to do it. Even for a healthy 23-year old, it wasn’t as easy as it first looked. Once I reached the top, I found an area where the tradition was to carve your name or initials, so I wrote in small letters, “Ben Weider, March 15, 1947.” When I next return to Egypt, I may have to climb Cheops once more to see if what I inscribed in stone is still there. I believe I can still do it.

One of the things that greatly impressed me, then and now, was the positive attitude and energy of the Egyptian weightlifters. Even though they had the most primitive of equipment—even by the standards of the late Forties—they trained and worked hard to produce outstanding results.

Among the other points of interest during my visit was a championship fencing match between Italy and Egypt, which was held at the Palace of King Farouk



El Saied Nossier (left) stands alongside some of Egypt's greatest weightlifters: Khadr El Touni, the 1936 Olympic champion, Ibrahim Shams, world record holder as a lightweight, El Fayad, Egyptian featherweight champion, and El Mahgoub.

and his wife, Fawzia. To say I had a magnificent evening would be an understatement, as I had the opportunity to speak with the King.

I also visited Misir Film Studios, where I was introduced to many famous Egyptian movie stars and singers as well. Just like Hollywood, these stars created huge crowds wherever they went, and the people loved them.

My last night in Cairo was a night dreams are made of. El Saied Nossier surprised me by holding a party under a large tent at the base of the pyramids. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, I told him that as much as I'd love to attend this gala, I didn't think it would be possible since my flight to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was leaving sharply at 10:00 PM. Nossier just looked at me with that characteristic smile and said, "Don't worry my friend. I have everything worked out."

So I went. Festivities got underway about 7:00 PM and after a delicious feast and enjoyable show, the time quickly became 9:00 PM and with that, I told Nossier that I had to leave or else I wouldn't catch my flight. Again, his words were, "Don't worry, take it

easy, relax and enjoy yourself and I'll get you to the airport on time." In what seemed like only ten minutes, I looked at my watch and it was 10:30 PM. Too late. I had missed my flight. Nossier saw my frustration, but made no mention of it as he chuckled and kept reassuring me that I would still catch my flight . . . even as we left for the airport at 11:15 PM!

Little did I know that I was in for still more surprises. As we arrived at the airport, we bypassed not only customs, but immigration. But that was only the beginning. El Saied Nossier drove onto the airport runway and stopped the car to let me out at the steps of the plane! He said that he found out earlier that the plane had an engine problem and that's why it hadn't yet departed.

As I walked into the plane and looked ahead of me, I saw that everyone was looking at me. As I took my seat, I heard two people behind me say, "Who is this man that they held this plane up for almost two hours?" It was then that I realized that El Saied Nossier had instructed the pilot and crew that the plane could not leave unless I was on board. Talk about having friends in high places.

As the plane took off into the night sky, I sat back and just tried to let it all soak in with all the wonderful experiences I had. One night wasn't enough. For it's taken my whole life to reflect back and think about just how meaningful my first trip to Egypt was, and the wonderful friends I made and all the people I met. Even today, Egypt remains one of my favorite destinations.

Egypt has come a long way since my first visit in 1947. Today, thanks to the hard work and commitment of Egyptian Bodybuilding Federation President, Dr. Eng. Adel Fahim Sayed, Egyptian bodybuilders are winning more medals than Egyptian athletes from years past. In the fine tradition set forth by El Saied Nossier, Dr. Sayed and Egyptian athletes continue, like their country, to be one of the great wonders of the world.