Developing Size and Strength:

Bob Peoples: Super Deadlifter

By Terry Todd and Paul Anderson

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Preface: In May of 1971, Terry Todd and Paul Anderson published the first article in their popular "Developing Size and Strength" series in Muscular Development *magazine. The articles were always written by Terry, but Paul was a major source of information, and it was not uncommon for Terry to drive from Macon to Vidalia, Georgia, where Paul then lived, to get in a training session with Paul and to discuss ideas for future articles. Over the several years that they published together, they helped lifters understand the fine points of bench pressing, pondered the question of who deserved to be called the world's strongest man, discussed the merits of gaining body weight, talked about Bob Hoffman's maxim of "making lifting first in your life," explored the architecture of big arms, and profiled pioneers of strength like George Hackenschmidt and Bob Peoples.*

Terry made his first trip to Johnson City, Tennessee, when he and Paul decided to profile Peoples in their series. Peoples was, after all, a legitimate pioneer and physical marvel, who played important roles in the careers of both Terry and Paul. It was Bob Peoples, as most strength afficionados know, who helped Paul Anderson get started in the early days of his career. For Terry, it was his desire to break People's all-time deadlift record that kept him heading to the gym and then the fridge. To write the two-part article, Terry travelled to Johnson City in 1972 and left there having found a new friend. In later years, Terry and I often stopped to visit Bob and his wife, Juanita, whenever we were in the area. Those visits ultimately allowed us to save two significant pieces of equipment Bob invented—his power rack and his wooden barbell—both now at the Stark Center. ~ *Jan Todd*

Part One: This month the authors begin a two-part investigation into the lifting history and training secrets of Bob Peoples of Tennessee, a man who is considered by many to be the Iron Game's greatest deadlifter.

In the wonderful rolling hills of Eastern Tennessee, in a section near Johnson City called Sinking Creek, a boy child was born in the year 1910 into a sturdy Scotch Irish farm family. As the boy child grew into young manhood, he helped his father work the farm and as he worked and ate the rich and nourishing natural food—chicken, fresh river-caught fish, greens, cornbread, sweet milk, churned butter, field peas, orchard apples, etc.—that an active mountain boy in the South would eat, he began to grow strong. His hands began to thicken and his shoulders took on that slope of power you still sometimes see on men who work the land in the few rural sections of America where the farmhands haven't been mechanized into puny caricatures of what they used to be. His robust nature was challenged during his adolescence by a pair of solid, 50-pound dumbells his father owned and sometimes lifted. At first, of course, he was no match for these unwieldy bells, but the perseverance that was later to result in his worldwide fame was already a part of his nature and so he returned again and again to these weights until he mastered them.

During this period he loved to test his growing strength against that of his father in wrestling matches on the grassy hills of their farm and, although powerful and active for his age, he was no match for the mature strength of his dad. Faced once again with a challenge, the young man persevered until one lucky day while shopping in Johnson City, he came across a copy of the old *Physical Culture* magazine. He bought the magazine, took it home and read it again and again as he seemed to

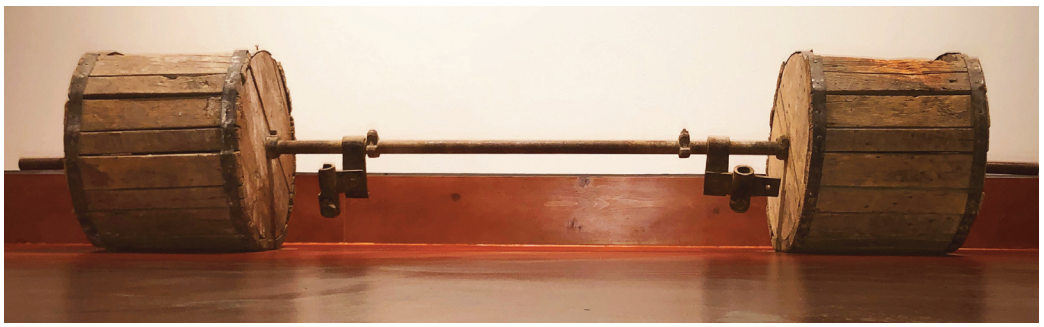
somehow intuitively know that the information it contained would make it possible not only for him to throw his father in wrestling, but to acquire the great strength which held for him such profound fascination.

The article which served as his greatest inspiration was written by David P. Willoughby, the lifting historian. It outlined a system of progressive resistance exercise with plate loading barbells and dumbells, neither of which our mountain boy could afford. Not being able to buy the equipment he so desperately wanted might have put the quietus on a lesser man but young Bob Peoples responded to the challenge by making a barbell out of a 1¼-inch bar and two wooden drums into which he would put weights of various sorts (rocks, pig iron, plowshares, etc.) in order to increase the resistance. This apparatus could be loaded to 1000 pounds and it was so well crafted that it remains usable to this day, over 45 years after it was built. With this crude but efficient barbell, young Bob was able to deadlift 350 pounds.

This was one of Terry's favorite photos and he sent it to *Muscular Development* to be used with the introductory article in the "Size and Strength" series in 1971. Terry also sent a copy of the photo to his parents and told them in his letter: "The reason I am laughing and so is Paul is because just before the picture was shot, he stepped up on a stool to make himself taller than me. Actually, he's only 5'9" or 5'10" but he must weigh about 370. So, we make up about 700 pounds of happiness in the picture, not to mention handsomeness, suaveness, dapperness, and just all around cuddly cuteness."

A year of sporadic training brought his deadlift up to 450 pounds and his overall strength up to the point where he was a fair match for his bull-strong father. At this time he was enrolled in Happy Valley High School, where he excelled in athletics and represented his state in the National Livestock Judging Show in Kansas City, Missouri. Upon graduation, Bob entered East Tennessee State College and played football for a year, but his love of the farm and the difficulty of doing justice to both the university and the land, not to mention his beloved barbells, made it seem reasonable to forego any further pursuit of formal education. College, even graduate work, though, would have presented no difficulty for Bob; his deep and brooding intelligence shines through his taciturn appearance.

As a result of the pressures of the farm, he trained intermittently for the next several years during which time he kept no records. His first official entry into his training logbook states that he was capable of a 500 pound deadlift, a 300 pound squat, and a 150 pound one hand clean and jerk. The date was November 1, 1935—Bob was 25 years old. For the next four years, Bob trained as he would for almost his entire lifting career—completely alone. No training partners. No spotters. No sideline encouragement. No coaching. No friendly workout competition. Alone. Never-



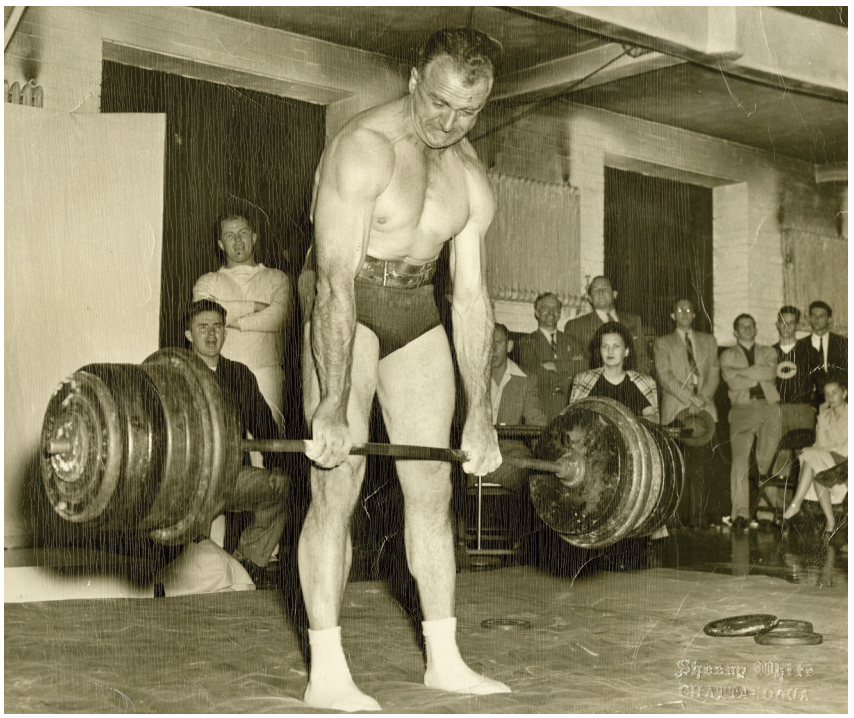
Bob Peoples' wooden barbell is on display at the Stark Center under a large photograph of Bob's world record 725 3/4 pound deadlift. The barbell is 96 1/4" long and weighs 112 pounds.

theless, his strength increased even with this handicap and the further one that he was never to escape-seasonal layoffs forced by the demands of the farm.

In 1939 he entered and won the Tennessee State Light-heavyweight Olympic Lifting Championship. Following his official performance, he treated the crowd to an exhibition of his growing prowess in the daddy of the brute strength movements—the deadlift. He easily registered 600 pounds and made a good try with 625. But then came 1940 and the war years.

Bob was sent to Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, for induction but during the examination it was discovered that he suffered from an obstructed kidney tube. This condition made him ineligible to serve and it became necessary for him to have major abdominal surgery. This he received at the eminent Oschner Clinic in New Orleans, in the form of an 18-inch incision and a post-operative warning by Dr. Oschner himself against further weightlifting of any kind. But we guess you know what happened—within six weeks old Bob was back at the barbells, although the pressure on all farmers during the war years was so great that he did only sporadic training until after 1945.

But by 1946, Bob was ready. He was now 36 years old and he was gunning for the world deadlift record. So when the Tennessee Championships rolled around, Bob defended his Olympic lifting crown and then, before a host of national officials, pulled up the world record weight of 651¾ pounds. He weighed 180.5 pounds. In 1947, one of the historic clashes in early powerlifting occurred when 180-pound Bob Peoples ran head-on into 275-pound Bill Boone of Shreveport, Louisiana, a rival for the title of world deadlift champion and a man of great bodily strength. But, as big and strong as Bill Boone was, he was no match for the man from the mountains. On his final attempt, Boone managed the record weight of 680 pounds and then settled back as old Bob stepped up to a bar that was loaded to the symbolic barrier of 700 pounds. He began his long pull and the bar bent and swayed under the great weight; but he would not be denied and the bar was locked into the final position amidst the roars of a partisan Chattanooga crowd. The bar was weighed and was found to be one disappointing pound shy of the magic 700. But did this fluster our man? Not a bit of it; in fact, a most amazing thing happened—a thing perhaps unprecedented in the annals of athletics. It seems that the newspaper photographer assigned to cover the contest had failed to get a picture and so what does Bob do? Yep!—he steps right up there to that 699 pounds of iron and hoists it a second time.



In a world without fellow powerlifters, Bob Peoples used homemade equipment fashioned from wood and pipe and trained without partners in his basement. Yet he built a level of strength in the 1940s that inspired Terry to try his own hand at powerlifting, and later, to see that Peoples was remembered and honored for his pioneering role in helping to establish the sport Terry grew to love. This framed photo hung in Terry's office for many, many years.

The 700 barrier wasn't left standing long, however, for in 1947 in Nashville, Bob hauled up 710 pounds at a bodyweight of about 185. Although he lifted over 700 pounds on many occasions, official and unofficial, the apex of his lifting career was reached in 1949, at a show in his own hometown. Lifting before his friends, neighbors and kinfolk, this gentle and widely respected man set a record in 1949 that has not been equaled to this day. Bob weighed only 181 pounds that night and he was facing the immense poundage of 725 ¾. As he approached the bar, one of the old mountaineers in the auditorium could bear the suspense no longer and yelled out in a clear voice, "Thar's our man—come on, Bob, I know you can lift that dang weight."

As the bar began to move, it looked as if Bob might at last have met his match but somehow he kept the weight going until it was locked out. As the referee signaled the completion of the lift the East Tennessee folks went wild in proud and joyous praise of their man—Bob Peoples—the greatest deadlifter in the world!

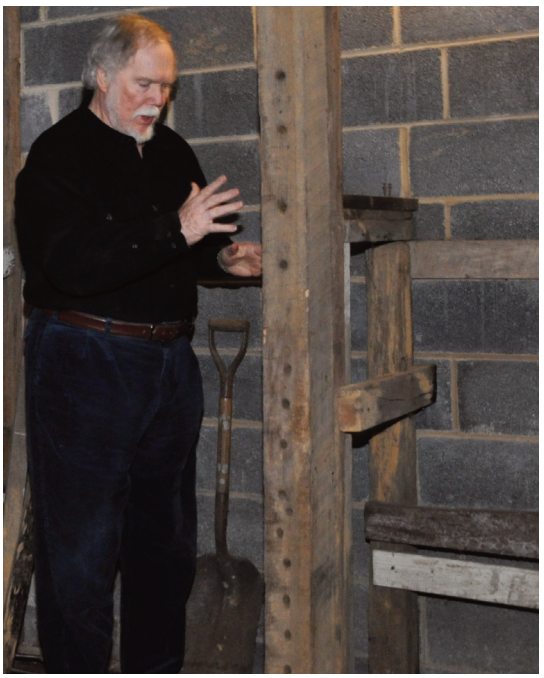
Part II: This month Paul Anderson and Terry Todd discuss the training genius of the man considered by many authorities to be the greatest deadlifter in the history of the Iron Game!

We mentioned last month that Bob Peoples grew up and still lives on a farm in what is called the Sinking Creek section of East Tennessee, just outside of Johnson City. The section derives its name from some unusual limestone deposits which have caused in the past, and still cause, creeks to go suddenly underground only to reappear some distance away. These deposits and the underground water supply also cause other "sinkholes" to appear which are unrelated to the creek-beds in the area. One of our favorite Peoples' stories involves one of these sinkholes—a sink hole which was down the hill a good piece from Bob's farmhouse. The story, which came to us from his wife, Juanita, involves the fact that old Bob, as much as he loved to lift, would from time to time get so exasperated and angry about his training that he'd load up his barbells and assorted weights and haul them down the hill and throw them all into the sink-hole. Then he was sort of sullen for a few days and just moped around the house with a hang-dog look on his face until finally Juanita would see him out the window trudging up the hill from the sinkhole, packing his weights to the house so he could get back to his training.

We hope Bob doesn't mind us telling that story on him. We tell it because we share with him the experience of frustration and lonely rage that all advanced lifters must face and transcend if they are ever to head the hounds. The important thing about the story is not that Bob carried the weights down the hill and threw them into the sinkhole but that he got them out, hauled them back up the hill and began again to train. What he did with the weights once he got back to the house is what this article is going to attempt to describe. What went on between Bob and those weights at the top of that hill is much, much more important than most of *MD*'s readers would ever suspect. Listen.

When you next use a power rack, think about Bob. When you next use straps to aid your grip in training, think about Bob. And when you next employ in a conscious way the rounded-back style in the deadlift, think about Bob. In all of these areas—each crucial in powerlifting—Bob Peoples broke new ground. He was a pioneer and his solitary trial and error efforts—his trips back and forth to the sinkhole—have made it easier for all of us who have followed.

Consider the power rack. In an article published over 20 years ago, Bob explained his invention and use of the power rack. He wrote, "I have also fixed two posts in my cellar when I train in winter. These posts have holes bored in them about every four inches. I insert pins in the holes to hold the weight at the desired height for various types of lifts. I also have holes on the sides of these posts into which I insert pins to hold one end of a pipe or bar with the other end resting on a horse at the proper height. I feel this apparatus is an absolute necessity for anyone training alone as I do. I insert the pins in the proper holes for a quarter deadlift, for instance, so that the bar will come just below the knee caps. You can set the supporting bars at any height and do almost all the power lifts known, such as half deadlifts, half squats, half bench presses and a lot of others too numerous to mention."



Bob's daughter, Alta Barwick, and Bob's neighbor and friend, Bill Anderson, worked with us to save Bob's power rack—the first one ever known to exist in the world—and move it to the Stark Center so it could be preserved. Terry is shown here in Bob's basement planning how to disassemble it for safe transport to Texas.

Consider the wrist straps. Discussing an incident that occurred a quarter of a century ago, he wrote, "In July 1947

For the second article, Terry grabbed Bob's cane, to illustrate deadlift technique. In the photo on the left, Terry is set in the traditional flat-backed position recommended by most experts. On the right, Terry demonstrates the rounded-back starting position used by Peoples for his record pull of 725 pounds at a bodyweight of 181 pounds. That record was not beaten by another man of similar size for 25 years.

I did a deadlift of 600 x 5. I was finding it difficult to hold the weight in my hands for high reps and often had sore hands, so I fashioned a device to tie my wrists to the bar for repetitions. This was composed of a couple of hooks and wrist straps. The practice of holding heavy weights in the hands in the finish (top) position is very important. The use of hooks strapped to wrists will help on repetitions because your grip usually gives out before anything else. However, always be sure your grip is strong enough to make your single attempts for records."

Consider the rounded-back deadlift, the style that has been seriously advocated in articles on power training only during the past year or so. Old Bob figured all this out several decades ago. He correctly reasoned that a rounded back helped the leverage in the deadlift by shortening the lever arm (the back) and therefore increasing the amount of weight that can be lifted. His thinking went far beyond even this, however. As an innovator, he was a true radical—he went to the roots of cherished assumptions and transformed them so that they bore better fruit. The established experts of Bob's day (and most "experts" today) all insisted that the correct deadlift position involved the following things: (l) A flat back throughout the lift (2) Hips low at the start of the lift (3) Head up throughout the lift (4) Chest full of air and (5) Either a reverse or a "hook" grip or both. Consider then, Bob's following statement, made over 20 years ago. "On October 4 I finally made a new world record deadlift of 700 pounds. At this time I was lifting on normally filled lungs. However, I then started lifting on empty lungs and with a round back—that is I would breathe out to normal, round my back, raise the hips, look down and then begin the lift. I feel this is much safer than following the customary advice of the experts. By breathing out you lessen the internal pressure and by lifting with a round back you lessen the leverage—all of which adds many pounds to your lift. I have used the reverse grip and also the overhand hook grip but I have now changed to the palms up or curl grip (with hook) and will experiment with it for a while to see if it helps."

Last month, we visited Bob in Johnson City (see accompanying photos) and he told us that although he made his record of 725, weighing 181, with an overhand hook grip, he found that the palms up or curl grip (also called supinated) allowed him to lift a little more weight than any other method of hand placement. He argues that

the curl grip provides a slight leverage advantage, and logic as well as physics seem to back him up on this. You might give it a try. If you do, let us know how it works out.

Another "modern" innovation involves the lowering of heavy weights—called "eccentric contraction." As you might suspect, Bob was into this before a lot of you reading this were born. This is how he did it. He had a Ford tractor and the tractor had a "lift" on it, and Bob rigged up a long stick with which he could activate the "lift" without leaving the rear of the tractor where the barbell was. He would take the weight at the top position and slowly lower it and then try to stand back up with it. He usually failed and then he'd activate the "lift" and raise the weight up again. He told us that he finally got to where he had to help the tractor up with the weight because he'd gotten stronger than the tractor. Another drawback he recalls is that this training procedure didn't work too well when the weather in the East Tennessee mountains turned cold in the wintertime.

Bob also favored heavy supporting work as a means of developing overall basic strength. One of his favorite stunts was to take a heavily loaded homemade barbell (described in last month's article) off the power rack, carry it down the hill in front of his house, walk across a small footbridge, climb the steps to the road and then turn around and retrace his steps. He also put in many training hours in supporting work in the deadlift. He would set the pins in his rack so that he would have to lift the bar only about an inch in order to reach the final or finished position in the deadlift. After lifting the bar, he would hold it for several seconds before replacing it on the supporting pins. His best in this training feat is 1200 pounds, which he did without straps, using only his bare hands.

Yet another "myth" Bob exploded involved the age at which a man could do his best lifting. He was in his prime between the ages of 35 and 42 and he set the still-standing record of 725 when he was in his 40th year. When he was 55, he was able to regularly lift 650 pounds at a bodyweight of approximately 190 pounds. (*MD Editor's Note: The present light-heavyweight deadlift record stands at 689 but was exceeded in the recent World Championships here in York with a record lift of 735 pounds, although it took more than 25 years to surpass it!)* [*IGH* Editor's Note: The 181-pound class record was broken by Vince Anello.]

Bob used a great many "routines" in his lifting career, but most of them revolved around the deadlift. Before his big contest against William Boone, Bob did the following workout every day for several weeks:

Deadlift—450 x 20, 500 x 15, 550 x 12, 600 x 10, 625 x 5, 650 x 2, 670-690 x 1.

Press—many sets of varying reps.

Squat—200 x 5, 250 x 5, 300 x 5, 325 x 5, 375 x 5, 400 x 5.

Another method he used successfully was to work entirely on deadlifts until he felt himself going "stale," at which time he'd switch to the squat until he felt stale again, then switch back to the deadlift and so on. In general, he favors daily training if you can stand it, low reps working up to heavy singles, Lots of partial lifting and supporting work, good nourishing country food, and an individualistic and creative approach to training. He suggests that beginners follow these rules as a way to begin but that they should feel free to experiment on their own with a variety of exercises and schedules. Bob's a strong advocate of a program of instinctive training built around a good solid core of the basic, heavy lifts.

We hope the readers of *MD* have enjoyed and will profit from this two part article on Bob Peoples. He was and is more than a great lifter—he's a good man and he's been a good man for a long time now. When we visited him and his wife the other day we stopped down on the main highway to get a drink of water and fill up with gas and the owner of the little country store asked us where we were from. We told him Georgia and that we'd come to see Bob Peoples. When he heard that, he began to tell us about Bob and about how the people of the area felt about him. He finished filling up our tank and as he screwed the cap back in place he turned toward us and said with a smile, "Around here, Bob's spoke of high."

We both believe that for many reasons Bob Peoples "ought to be spoke of high," he's earned it. He introduced one of us to the world of big time lifting, to the intricacies of the Olympic lifts and to the benefits of heavy partial movements. For the other one of us, he served with his world record deadlift of 725 as a standard toward which to strive, and even though the mark was reached and exceeded, we knew that on this lift, when bodyweight, competition, era, and training aids were considered, Bob was a better man. There may never be one so good again.