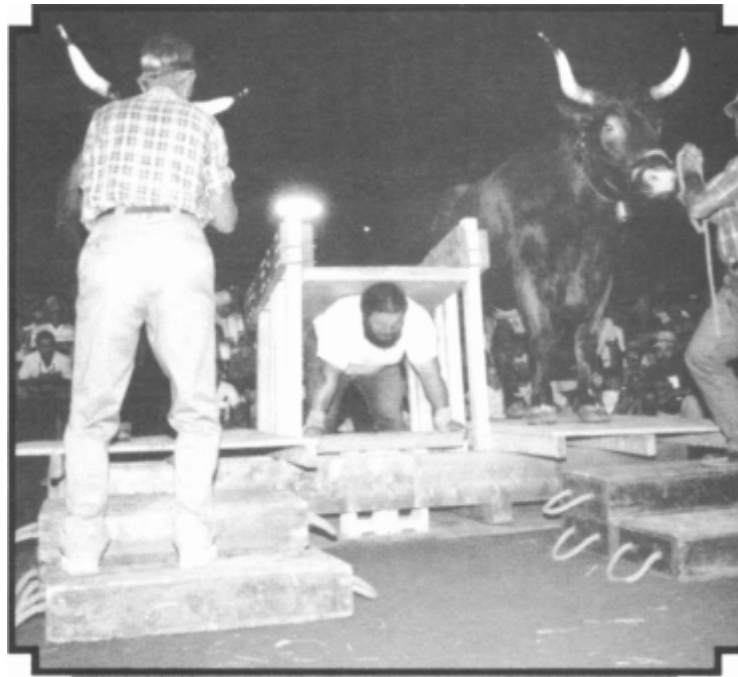


THE ROARK REPORT

BACKLIFTING



Greg Ernst backlifted a pair of oxen and a platform last summer in Nova Scotia. The total weight was 4420 pounds.

The back lift allows a person to lift more weight than can be raised in any other manner. Indeed, a current powerlifter could, with training, backlift more weight than he or she can total in the three standard power lifts. David P. Willoughby estimated that an athlete should be able to backlift approximately 13.1 times the amount of weight he or she could do in the Olympic-style press, basing his estimate on many athletes who practiced both lifts and whose abilities were well known. Nonetheless, through the years, some claims have been ridiculous, causing Willoughby to write in *Iron Man* magazine (December 1959, p. 29),

“How such ‘records’ ever got into publication can be explained only by assuming complete ignorance of weight lifting possibilities on the part of those who give credence to them.” He was referring to the claims of Peter James McCarthy, who in April 1898 during a lifting contest against Warren Lincoln Travis, at the Brooklyn Athletic Club was able to lift only 2400 pounds, but who is given credit five months later for a backlift of 6,373 pounds.

One suspects, after the dust of confusion blown about by ignorant writers has settled, that Travis may have been accurate—at least to the point in time when he said it—that the three greatest backlifters were Louis Cyr, Henry Holtgrewe, and himself.

New followers of iron history may need to be informed about the backlift. Usually, and in the more reliable instances, dead weight is lifted—that is, iron or stone, which has been weighed and placed on a platform, or very strong table. The lifter assumes a position under the platform, a position wherein knees and elbows are slightly bent so that when arms, hips, and legs lift in unison, the table or platform is elevated an inch or more and supported on the back of the lifter. Hence, backlift.

What follows is an alphabetized listing of the various claims in the backlift. I present these claims as I have located them through the years. Your knowledge of lifting will help determine which of these lifts have merit and which fit into the category disdained by Willoughby. “*S&H*” refers, of course, to

Strength & Health magazine. To my knowledge, no such list has ever been composed, but your additions or corrections are welcome. Please notice my new address: P. O. Box 320, St. Joseph, IL 61873.

Barre, Horace

(March, 1872-1918). 5’9”; 275-320 pounds bodyweight **3,500 pounds**—This was iron and was mentioned by Warren Lincoln Travis in *S&H* (Dec. 1927, p. 19). **3,890 pounds**—Willoughby credits Barre with this in *Your Physique* (May 1949, p. 40).

Cabana, Wilfred J.—This man from Montreal is credited with **3,300 pounds** by Warren Lincoln Travis (*S&H*, Dec. 1937, p. 38).

Kennedy, James W.—**4500 pounds**—At Madison Square Garden, on October 10, 1893. Kennedy lifted three horses with three cavalry men sitting on them plus a platform. “Each horse weighed around 1200 pounds, while the average weight of the cavalrymen was 130 pounds each, and the platform must have weighed nearly 500 pounds.” (*Police Gazette*, Oct. 28, 1893, p. 10).

Cyr, Louis—(1863-1912). The following is a list of all the various poundages I was able to locate for Cyr throughout his career. Please notice that the date given for the same lift can vary by the same writer (even Willoughby gives three dates for the same 4,300 pound backlift, and Venables misses the mark by a decade). 4,400 pounds-Boston. This is the lift which most writers refer to as 4,300 pounds. David Webster lists the lift at 4,400 pounds on May 27, 1896. (*The Iron Game*, p. 37). **4,330 pounds**—This is the same event as above, but is the poundage given by Leo Gaudreau. It was also listed by Gaudreau as 4,337 pounds done on May 27, 1895 (*Anvils, Horseshoes and Cannons*, p. 193). **4,330 pounds**—This is the same event, reported by Ben Weider, in his Cyr biography, in which he also uses 4,337 pounds and a date of May 27, 1895. (*The Strongest Man in the World*, p. 81). **4,300 pounds**—In the York Barbell Company publication, *Mighty Men of Old*, text provided by Gord Venables. The date is May 27, 1885. **4,300 pounds**—Oscar Matthes attributes this to Cyr in “1895” (*Anvils, Horseshoes and Cannons*, p.

197). **4,300 pounds**—Dean Camenares credits this in “1895”. (*Muscle & Bodybuilder*, July 1980, p. 11). **4,300 pounds**—W. L. Travis mentions this as having happened on May 27, 1896, and that he asked Cyr two months later, that is, in September of 1896, if the weight had been weighed. Cyr said no, and Cyr never claimed a lift of 4,300. It was claimed by others for him. (*S&H*, Dec. 1937, p. 19). **4,300 pounds**—Willoughby attributes this feat to three separate dates. He mentions May 17, 1895 in *Iron Man* (Dec. 1960, p. 27) and *The Super Athletes* (p. 570). But he gives May 26, 1896 in *The Super Athletes* (p. 154), and May 27, 1896 in *Your Physique* (May 1947, p. 19). **4,133 pounds**—Vic Boff refers to “Cyr’s 1896 record of 4133,” but says that “usually 4,300 is considered Cyr’s record.” (*Muscle-Up*, April 1981, p. 41). **3,900 pounds**—Travis’ opinion of Cyr’s best (*Your Physique*, May 1949, p. 40). **3,900—4,000 pounds**—Barre’s opinion of Cyr’s best (*Your Physique*, May 1949, p. 40). **3,641 pounds**—Willoughby says this was Cyr’s best official backlift. Iron was weighed. (*Your Physique*, May 1947, p. 19). **3,626 pounds**—Sixteen men plus platform, Royal Aquarium, London, January 19, 1892. (*S&H*, Nov. 1943, p. 34). **3,556 pounds**—Willoughby. (*Iron Man*, Jan. 1961, p. 30). **3,536 pounds**—This was apparently done while in training at Berthierville, Canada for the match with Sebastian Miller. (*S&H*, Sept. 1935, p. 68). **3,533 pounds**—Listed as Cyr’s “record” by Richard K. Fox in a challenge letter to Sandow and Romulus. (*Police Gazette*, July 28, 1894). **3,369 pounds**—October 19, 1892 at Joliette (*Your Physique* Nov. 1947, p. 44). **3,192 pounds**—July 2, 1891. Cyr stopped at this amount in his contest with Sebastian Miller since Miller had backlifted only 2,400 pounds (*S&H*, Sept. 1935, p. 89). **3,133 pounds**—Fourteen men, platform of 388 pounds, Royal Aquarium, London (*S&H*, Oct. 1943, p. 45). **3,300 pounds**—W.A. Pullum in *Health & Strength* (Aug. 4, 1955 p. 33) writes “...made the aggregate load sometimes a little under 3,000 lb, sometimes over. Two or three hundred pounds one way or the other didn’t trouble Cyr where this particular feat was concerned.” **2,920 pounds**—Also at Royal Aquarium during February 1892. (*Your Physique*, Nov. 1947, p. 29). **2,908 pounds**—At age of 20 lifted stone and iron, according to Charles Collins (*S&H*, Aug. 1935, p. 68). **2,879 pounds**—Done at age 44 on February 27, 1906 against Decarie.

Minerva (Josephine Blatt)—(1869-1923) 5”8” tall; 230 pounds bodyweight. **3000 pounds**—Minerva lifted 18 men and a platform at the Bijou Theater, Hoboken, New Jersey (*Police Gazette*, May 4, 1895, p. 10). **3564 pounds**—Reported by Rosetta Hoffman for the same date (*S&H*, July 1937, p. 38). Hoffman claims Minerva lifted 23 men and the platform. This latter weight appeared in *The Guinness Book of World Records* for many years as the greatest lift ever made by a woman. It is disputed by Willoughby (*The Super Athletes*, p. 577).

Ernst, Greg—5’10”; 315 pounds bodyweight. **4420 pounds**—Done last summer on July 24, 1991 in front of several thousand people at the Lunenburg County Fair in Bridgewater, Nova Scotia. The weight consisted of a platform and a pair of oxen. The oxen were weighed at the fair, as was the platform. Terry Todd served as one of the side judges and reports that the lift was done with strength to spare. Ernst is a dairyman and recently won the title of Strongest Man in Canada. His platform is slightly angled, giving him a better position for maximum leverage.

Franks, F.B.—5’8”; 175 pounds bodyweight. **3,788**

pounds—New Orleans, 1924.

Holtgrewe, Henry—(1872 -Jan. 1, 1917). 5’9”; 275 pounds bodyweight. **4,000 pounds**—Travis’ estimate (*S&H*, Oct. 1937, p. 32). **4,103 pounds**—Done in 1904 at Redland’s Field in Cincinnati. (*Your Physique*, May 1949, p. 41) but Willoughby estimates 3,704 is a more accurate poundage for this date.

Jackson, Thomas Jefferson “Stout”—(January 22, 1889-January 6, 1976). 5’9”; 185-205 Rounds bodyweight. **6,472 lbs**—Jackson was a professional strongman and made this lift on March 19, 1924, lifting, supposedly, 12 bales of cotton (cotton bales usually weigh around 500 pounds). *The Houston Chronicle* (April 1959) reported, ‘The peak of his career came in March 1924, at Bob Holmes Gin in Lubbock, [Texas], a 34 (sic) year old Stout Jackson crouched under a platform that stood on sawhorses and was stacked with twelve regular-sized bales of cotton.’ A photo of the lift makes it appear that the platform was several inches off the supports. At the time of the lift, Jackson weighed 188, so his claimed backlift was 34.4 times bodyweight. David Willoughby did not consider Jackson’s lift to have been legitimate, but *Ripley’s Believe It Or Not* received documents from several citizens of Lubbock who attested to the poundage claimed.

Levasseur—?? pounds—Twenty circus workmen on a platform circa 1935. **3,500 pounds**—An elephant on a platform while with Ringling’s circus in 1907. There is a drawing of this in *S&H* (June 1938, p. 18) and photos in *S&H* (Dec. 1934, p. 23 and Aug. 1962, p. 23). The photo appears to have been “fixed.” Notice his “straight” finger. **3,000 pounds**—He was said to be able to lift this much even after age 50 (*S&H*, Dec. 1934, p. 23).

Little, George—(Dan McLeod?)—**3,000 pounds**—This was witnessed by Travis, which puzzles me, as Little’s bodyweight was only 136 pounds. (*S&H*, Oct. 1937; *Your Physique*, Nov. 1947, p. 44).

Miller, Sebastian—**2,400 pounds**—Done on July 2, 1891, in a match with Cyr.

McCarthy, Patrick J—**6,373 pounds**—Done September 17, 1896 (*Muscle-Up*, April 1981, p. 41) and John Kern’s *Vigorous Manhood* (p. 52) and Willoughby (*Iron Man*, Dec. 1959, p. 29). Willoughby estimated McCarthy did a backlift in 1898 of approximately 2,400 pounds.

Steinborn, Milo—**800 pounds**—Milo, in a sport coat, lifted a young elephant; no platform was used. (*Iron Man*, Feb. 1952, p. 15).

Travis, Warren Lincoln—**4,140 pounds**—This was iron, lifted at the Brooklyn Athletic Club on Nov 1, 1907, bodyweight 185 pounds. **4,240 pounds**—Twenty-five men and platform. Willoughby mentions this was done “on another occasion.”

Walsh, Jack—?? pounds—A baby elephant of unknown weight (*S&H*, Dec. 1958, p. 26). ?? pounds—Two elephants (1,800 and 2100 pounds) plus a 450 pound platform. No lift, elephant panicked. (*S&H*, April 1952, p. 32). **4,235 pounds**—July 7, 1950, bodyweight 178 pounds. Walsh used 76, 50 pound plates plus a platform. Reported by Ray Van Cleef (*S&H*, Sept. 1950, p. 23). **4,638 pounds**—Made on November 13, 1950, bodyweight 178, using 84 plates (84X50) plus platform. **4,668 pounds**—This is Walsh’s highest claim. (*Iron Man*, Sept. 1951, p. 42).

The backlift claims of **Paul Anderson** are a story in themselves and will be examined in a later issue.

--Joe Roark