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## BOB PEOPLES: DEADLIFT CHAMPION, STRENGTH THEORIST, CIVIC LEADER



As kids, when we headed out to lift weights, that's what we did: lift weights. Nowadays a kid doesn't head out to some icebox garage or dirt-floored cellar; more likely he's off to a plush-carpeted spa with a blonde in spandex behind the instructor's clipboard. And except in name, it isn't "weightlifting" that he's headed for; it's bodybuilding or "pumping iron,"

the (gorge-raising coinage that wouldn't have meant beans to us when we were kids). So little real weightlifting, indeed, occurs in these plush emporia that it's a common sight to see an "iron pumper" return his E-Z curl bar to the middle pin on the power rack to save himself from bending the whole way down to the distant floor to take his next set. Before spandex and spas, weightlifting meant just that: lifting a barbell off the floor by either jamming or finessing it overhead or strong-backing it clear of the floor. We knew of course that weightlifting meant pressing, snatching, and clean and jerking, but the god-awful complexity of the snatch and clean and jerk often meant that the sport had only two components: a gut-busting Continental jerk-press and a hitched-up-the-legs lift we called the deadlift. To us, however, the greatest demonstration of might and main was the deadlift. And chief among the heroes of deadlifting might and main loomed the legendary Bob Peoples, from the land of Davy Crockett and Paul Anderson, Bob's friend and one-time pupil. As scholars of "the book," *Strength & Health*, we can be forgiven for thinking in those years that "Peoples" and "deadlifter" seemed to occupy the same breath, like "damn" and "Yanked" to a loyal Southerner.

The late John Robert "Bob" Peoples was born on August 21, 1910 in Northeast Tennessee, near Johnson City, of Scottish ancestry (originally Pebylls, later changed to Peebles, the most common spelling of the name). His clan migrated to our shores about 1650, at which time some of them changed the spelling to "Peoples." In about 1783, they moved to Northeast Tennessee, where they have

taken root, intermarrying with the local English and Germans. Bob lived in Central Community in Carter County. He was married for 53 years to the former Juanita Wills, who after 32 years of elementary and junior high teaching is now retired, the recipient of many awards for her long service in special education and for her civic and church work. They have a daughter, two granddaughters, and a great-granddaughter.

When asked about the origins of his interest in lifting, Bob responded, "No one in particular started me in weightlifting. I admired men of great strength and prowess, especially my father who had great strength. I started lifting his 50-pound dumbbell and anything else that provided me with some resistance. For example, I admired Jack Dempsey for his great strength as a fighter and his ability as a boxer. Over the years, I've trained outside and in various out-buildings on our farm anywhere, in fact, I could set-up a small lifting platform. In 1946, we moved to our present home, and I have a gym in the basement that Paul Anderson has always referred to as 'the dungeon.'" <sup>1</sup>

Rye Bell captures the feeling of Bob's ancestry and boyhood in his excellent 1948 *Strength & Health* sketch: "From his ancestors, all hardy mountaineers, he had inherited an admiration and desire for great strength. Bob's father was . . . a man noted locally for his strength. Most of his uncles, as well as his grandfathers, were hardy, robust men who could do a hard day's work and still have energy left for the rough and tumble sports that are native to East Tennessee. Sports such as Follow the Leader, Rap Jack and Running Through, as well as the more common ones such as boxing, wrestling, and football . . . His interest in strength had to contend with all the other myriad interests that engross the thoughts of the growing youth . . . He spent hours horseback riding up and down the steep mountain trails or along the broad valley at the base of the Great Smoky Mountain range. . . During those rides, Bob often had occasion to demonstrate his strength . . . but in this country where a Weak man is the exception, rather, than the rule, Bob as yet showed no promise of becoming the world's champion." <sup>2</sup>



*Juanita and Bob Peoples*

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When asked about the initial training system he followed, Bob observed that he used no special system at the start: "I was not aware of any systems of training. Later I read the Farmer Burns Wrestling Course and Jimmy DeForest's Boxing Course. I was also able to locate a copy of *Physical Culture* magazine and read through all the articles on weightlifting. Mark Berry's *Strength* magazines were also available; I later discovered *Strength & Health* and *Iron Man* magazines. Following some of the systems in these publications, I began to refine and develop my individual methods and equipment.<sup>3</sup> (It is not an overstatement to observe that these "methods and equipment" were to prove truly revolutionary and ingenious.) In thinking back to these years in his landmark training piece for *Iron Man* in April-May, 1952, Bob reminisced: "When I started training, I could deadlift 350 pounds and clean and jerk about 160 on the crude apparatus I had been able to make up. My first lifting instruction was obtained from an early article in *Physical Culture* by David Willoughby and from a copy of Calvert's *Super Strength*. My first weightlifting apparatus was made with a 1 1/4 inch bar and some wooden drums on the end, into which I put weights of various sorts through a hole in the top. I later applied pins to the ends from which I could hang iron plates. This could be loaded to 1,000 pounds or more. I later purchased a Milo Duplex set and then added a Jackson International Olympic set, plus a lot of plates of various sizes, totaling well over a ton. At one time I had two 50 gallon drums on legs with a bar through them to practice carrying heavy weights on shoulders. The drums or barrels were loaded with rocks."<sup>4</sup>

By the time he was twenty-five, in November of 1935, he had begun to keep records, and after irregular training on the five lifts and some strength stunts, he was able to deadlift 500. He "drifted along" until 1937 when he made 150, 160, 205 as a middleweight, and because he felt unhappy with these results, Bob began his revolutionary experiments with the prototype of what we have come to call the power rack "I set up two posts in the ground and bored holes through them. . . in such a way that I could load a bar up and finish at deadlift height. From this I would take the loaded bar and do dead hang lifts which I found to be of great value in developing the deadlift. I also built what I called a ring bar . . . a large ring of steel to which I fastened two short bars (one on each side) on which I could load plates. I would stand inside the ring on a box and do lifts from a very low position, going into a full squat and bent over position." Observing the results of this early power rack training, he set-up a similar apparatus in his cellar for winter training, with holes bored into the posts every 4 inches. Pins were inserted into the holes to hold the weights at the desired height for various types of lifts. He also bored holes into the posts' sides, into which he inserted pins to support pipes or bars with the other ends of these pipes or bars on a horse at the proper heights.<sup>5</sup> (see the illustration of this "original power rack by Bob Peoples.") In his introduction to Bob's book *Developing Physical Strength*, Paul Anderson observes, "I might add that many of the weight lifting machines we see on the market today are not new when it comes to Bob's gym in east Tennessee. He built prototypes of them years ago. Not that any of these ideas were stolen or even borrowed from Bob, but the point is that he was this far ahead of many in the strength world." Working with his prototype power rack and with many other ingeniously engineered creations, young Bob was developing into the foremost deadlifter of his era, regardless of bodyweight. (Recommended reading for those interested in his training devices and theories is his book, *Developing Physical Strength*, an IOL Publication, Elizabethton, Tennessee,

no date, with "Introduction" by Paul Anderson and "Preface" by Bob Hise; and also his six-page article, "The Training Methods of Bob Peoples," in the April-May, 1952, *Iron Man*.)

In his 1948 *Strength & Health* piece, Rye Bell exclaims, "Only four times during his twenty years of lifting has he had an opportunity to make an official attempt at breaking a record." His first attempt was in 1940 when he won the Tennessee State Lighthweight Olympic Lifting Championship. Following his Olympic lifting, he deadlifted 600 pounds for a Southern record and just missed 625; it was then, he admits, that he began to think of a "world record in either the lighthweight or the heavyweight class."<sup>6</sup> After undergoing a serious operation for an obstructed kidney tube, discovered during his physical examination at the time of induction into the Army, Bob was told that he would never be able to do any further weightlifting, but, of course, he was soon back into training. His training, however, as he worked his way back, was sporadic for the next five years because of the demands imposed on farmers by the war. By the time of the Tennessee State meet in September of 1946, he was at full strength and, after defending his Olympic title, he pulled a deadlift of 651 1/4 at 175 pounds bodyweight, a new world's record,<sup>7</sup> beating Jack Hope's former record of 624 1/4.<sup>8</sup> On October 4, 1947, he pulled the "mythical" 700-pound deadlift in the Bob Hise Show, an official contest in Chattanooga's YMCA.<sup>9</sup> (with judges: Karo Whitfield, Leon Greene, and Bill Curry), but when the bar was weighed it was 699; nonetheless, this world record in the 181 pound class outstripped the world record held by Carl Pepke, by 32 pounds.<sup>10</sup> A colorful sidebar to this contest is provided by Terry Todd and Paul Anderson in a fine biographical piece in *Muscular Development*. In this contest, Bob "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 first 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. When the bar was weighed, it was 699, but the unflappable Peoples was unflustered. . . in fact, it seems that the newspaper photographer . . . had failed to get a picture and so what does Bob do? Yep! —he steps right up there to the 699 pounds of iron and hoists it a second time."<sup>11</sup>

By this time, of course, Bob had learned as much about deadlifting as anybody ever had—and then some: "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, then do my deadlift. I feel this is safer than following the customary advice . . . to take a deep breath and then deadlift. By breathing out you lessen the internal pressure and by lifting with a round back, you lessen the leverage — all of which helps add many pounds to your lift."<sup>12</sup>

Later in the year, during the Southern tour of Pudgy and Les Stockton and John Farbotnik, he pulled 710 but wasn't credited with the lift because it hadn't been weighed.<sup>13</sup> The lift heard round the world, one of history's most memorable deadlifts, was made on March 5th, 1949 at Johnson City, TN. In his monumental volume, *The Super Athletes* (1970). David P. Willoughby places Bob's magnificent 725 1/2 deadlift, made that day, among the top four all-time performances in deadlifting history (as of 1970), with the top three

deadlifts being Goerner's 793.66 (at 220 1/2), Chuck Vinci's 600 (at 123), and John Terry's 600 (at 132). Willoughby calls attention to the fact that, like Goerner, Peoples "used an overhand hooked grip, which added to the merit of his lift," unlike most deadlifters who use the reversed grip.<sup>14</sup> Later, at the Junior Nationals in Chattanooga, Bob went on to sing his swan song, pulling an incredible 750, "but just couldn't quite straighten-out with it."

Though it's often disappointing to observe our strength and sports heroes away from the lifting platform or playing field, Bob stood as tall in life as he stood in the sport which he graced: "My goals were to develop strength, form, and skill: to become a champion weightlifter. I believe however, that other things are more important than lifting, such as time for family and the responsibilities of a job and one's community." A tall man in community affairs, Bob was a strongman for the ages, having deadlifted 500 for 20 reps, pulled a highside deadlift of 900 pounds, squatted 530, benched 300, done alternate presses with 130 pound dumbbells (one time), cleaned 110 pound dumbbells for 10 repetitions, in addition to his 725 1/2 pound deadlift which stood for more than two decades.<sup>15</sup>

No less impressive, however, were his political and civic distinctions: as a member of the Carter County Commission for 28 years and of the County Board of Education for four years, as a recipient of a life membership to the Tennessee State Board of Education for four years, as a recipient of life membership to the Tennessee State Parent/Teacher Association, as a Director of the County Farm Bureau, as a Chairman of the Soil Conservation Board (by which he was elected "Farmer of the Year"), as Chairman of the Central Community Club, and in his work for the Salvation Army and the Boys' Club.<sup>16</sup> Two richly deserved rewards were conferred near the end of his life: on February 9, 1990, he was inducted into the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame, and on May 7, 1990, into the Upper East Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame. In 1985, the U. S. Powerlifting Federation elected him to the National Powerlifting Hall of Fame. Of course, the mention of Bob Peoples' name evokes memories of one of America's strongest men, Paul Anderson. A keen analyst, as well as a good friend, Paul has rendered a signal compliment to his mentor and coach in his introduction to Bob's *Developing Physical Strength*: "I personally believe if Bob had deleted all his other activities and dedicated himself solely to training with weights, he would have recorded a deadlift of 1,000 pounds or more." A wonderful tribute from a man about whom Willoughby observes, "It would appear that Paul Anderson, if he wanted to, could surpass 850 pounds—and possibly even 900 pounds—in the dead lift, provided he could retain his grip. . ."<sup>17</sup>

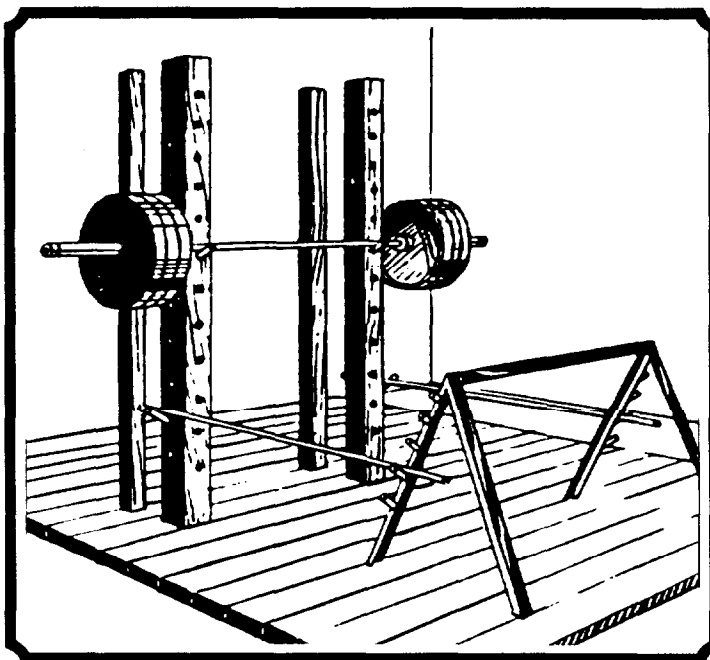
A life-long farmer, the indefatigable Peoples was also

employed in the textile industry. He attended East Tennessee State College for three years, with an eye to teaching agriculture in high school, a goal which was frustrated, however, by the local College's not having a grad program in that discipline. Speaking of himself in his eightieth year, Bob observed that, although he used to eat four meals a day when in heavy training, he then ate significantly smaller amounts, but still with an eye to a balanced diet, including milk and few other beverages. Recuperating from a serious auto accident, he still enjoyed light exercise, using his training apparatus, "the sweep," discussed in his book. He continued to be active in politics, holding office on the school board, and was still actively interested in civic and political matters at the community, county, and state levels until the time of his death this past summer. On the lighter side, he found time to write songs and doggerel verse. Quite a man.<sup>18</sup>

Probably more than any other member of our Game's strongman Pantheon, Bob was special to those, like me, who tie awake at night conjuring-up new exercises and new ways to do old ones, not to mention complex new apparatuses devoted to building this-or-that muscle system (The difference is that mine don't work and his did.) How I'd love to train in his "dungeon" with the wonderful contrivances discussed with such quiet fervor and erudition in his delicious book one of the intriguing legacies of this memorable athlete to the Game he loved.

Bob proved himself, throughout his eighty-two years, to be as important in his civic role as in his role in strengthdom, and this realization on the part of his admirers in the Game enlarges their regard for the whole man, but at the very same time, they

can be forgiven, I hope, for especially treasuring the memory of this man—his achievements both athletic and theoretical—in the chamber of the heart set aside exclusively for our evergreen heroes



*Drawing of Bob Peoples' Original Power Rack—The first power rack ever built in America.*

## Notes:

1. Letter from Robert Peoples to Al Thomas, 7 June 1990.
2. Rye Bell, "Bob Peoples — The Tennessee Hercules," *Strength & Health*, (April, 1948): 8.
3. Peoples to Thomas.
4. Bob Peoples, "The Training Methods of Bob Peoples," *Iron Man* (April-May, 1952): 15.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 16.
7. *Ibid.*, 17.
8. Bell, "Bob Peoples," 9.
9. Peoples, "Training," 52.
10. Bell, "Bob Peoples," 9.
11. Paul Anderson & Dr. Terry Todd, "Bob Peoples Super Deadlifter," *Muscular Development* (January, 1973): 49.
12. Peoples, "Training Methods," 52.
13. Bell, "Bob Peoples," 9.
14. David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (South Brunswick & New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 131, 135.
15. Peoples to Thomas.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Willoughby, *Super Athletes*, 136.
18. Peoples to Thomas.