

Roy Hilligenn— The Smiling Superman

Jim Murray

One quiet day in the office of *Strength & Health* magazine in York, Pennsylvania, during 1951, the calm was shattered by a booming voice and the pounding of heavy footsteps climbing the stairs from the ground floor entrance.

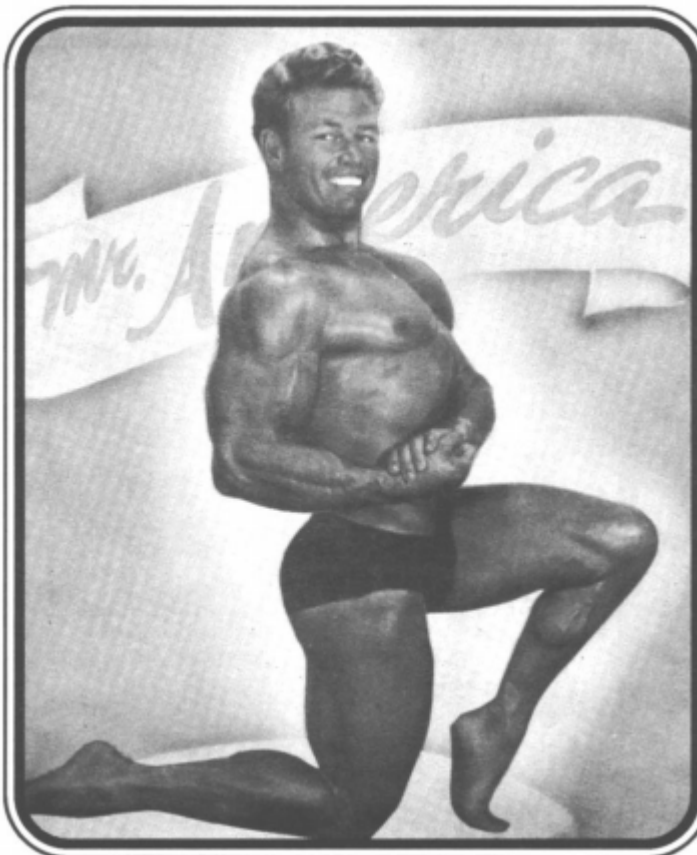
“The gr-reat Hilligenn is here! He can do anything you can do, and he can do it better!” Accompanying this modest proclamation, the heavy clomping on the stairs suggested that someone with the general configuration of the legendary Paul Bunyan was about to burst through the door, perhaps without bothering to turn the knob.

Instead, the first thing to arrive was a gleaming smile—sort of like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*. Surrounding the dazzling smile was a handsome, tanned face topped by wavy blond hair. The head was supported by a thick neck and a sturdy body a bit less than average height wearing a spectacularly colorful Hawaiian shirt. The brilliance of the smile and the shirt combined lit up the room!

This was my introduction to Roy Stanley Hilligenn, erstwhile Mr. South Africa and holder of the Mr. America title in 1951—one of the best all-around athletes to wear the Mr. America crown. (Incidentally, when I admired Roy’s Hawaiian shirt, he insisted on giving it to me, despite my protestations. I’m six feet tall and then weighed about 210 pounds, with a 48” chest. The shirt fit nicely, thank you: I wore it for years. It also fit Roy, at 5’6” and 180!)

Actually, I had seen Hilligenn once before, at a big show

John Fritsche staged in Philadelphia during the late 1940s. My wife and I attended and Jane was surprised to see that Mr. South Africa was a blond white man: she had assumed a representative from Africa would be black! During that visit to the US, Roy had developed a most unusual and very artistic posing display using two silver staffs as props.



Hilligenn had begun weight training in South Africa after incurring a serious injury in his work as an electrician. He fell four stories, with quite a bit of bouncing around, and suffered broken ribs, wrist, and fingers, all on the left side. After two years of convalescence, he began exercising at a bodyweight of 85 pounds. At Roy’s height of 5’6”, that was skinny!

Training primarily with calisthenics and wrestling, Hilligenn gained fifteen pounds by November 1941. His early weight training was done with a homemade barbell, a bar with two thirty-five pound trolley wheels at the ends. The total weight was less than 100 pounds, but Roy was so small himself that he had difficulty lifting it at first. He persisted, however, and when he gained access to adjustable weights his natural athleticism allowed him to progress rapidly. Three years after his serious injuries, he placed first in a novice weightlifting meet with 160 press, 160 snatch, and 240 clean and jerk in the 148-pound class. He also placed second in an accompanying

physique contest and a pattern of dual lifting/bodybuilding training and competition was established.

Continuing to train hard, Hilligenn later won the Mr. South

THIS PHOTO OF ROY HILLIGENN APPEARED ON THE COVER OF IRON MAN MAGAZINE FOR OCTOBER OF 1951.

PHOTO: THE TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

Africa title the same year, 1943. He won Mr. South Africa again in 1944 and 1946, the same year he became the first South African to clean and jerk double bodyweight. His lifts in 1946 were 245 press, 255 snatch, and 321 clean and jerk.

Traveling to the United States, Hilligenn placed third in the Mr. California contest in 1949 and later won the Mr. Northern California and Mr. Pacific Coast contests. A year later, he placed third in the 1950 Mr. America contest behind John Farbotnik and Melvin Wells. Hilligenn also won the Pacific Coast weightlifting championship at 198 with 235-235-335.

The next year, 1951, Roy trained with an outstanding group of weightlifters and bodybuilders at Yarick's Gym in Oakland. His best training lifts improved to 255 press, 250 snatch, and 350 clean and jerk, but then he had a fall and sprained both wrists, which handicapped his training before the National Championships. He had been training on lifting Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, and on bodybuilding Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. When he eased off on training because of the sprains, he lost weight. He had planned to compete in the Nationals at 198 so he filled up on bananas and milk before the weigh-in to get his weight just over the 181-pound class limit. As an over-stuffed lighthheavy, Hilligenn was still able to score 240-245-330, to place second to the world's best 198-pounder and future world heavyweight champion. Norbert Schemansky. And, on the same occasion, Hilligenn won the 1951 Mr. America contest.

Later that year, on November 17, at one of Bob Hoffman's big birthday shows in York, Hilligenn pressed 264, snatched 253, and cleaned and jerked 342. He also cleaned 363, but missed the jerk. On that occasion he entertained the crowd after he finished lifting by doing a series of back flips across the stage.

The next year, 1952, Hilligenn reduced his weight to well under the 181-pound class limit and won the Jr. National Championship as a lighthheavyweight (The Jr. Nationals at that time were open to anyone who was not a previous winner of that meet or the Sr. Nationals). His lifts were 240 press, 245 snatch, and 335 clean and jerk. On an extra attempt he cleaned and jerked 350 pounds, which was eight pounds more than double his bodyweight at the time.

In 1952 the York Barbell Club sponsored a dual contest: Mr. World and World's

Most Muscular Man, held in Philadelphia. Planning to enter, Hilligenn stepped up his bodybuilding training, only to suffer an attack of appendicitis. In a typical Hilligennism, he decided to have a spinal anesthetic so he could stay awake and watch the surgeon at work—which he did. He said it was very interesting!

A couple of days after he got out of the hospital, with stitches still in place, Roy dropped in at Yarick's Gym for a little light exercise—which included squats with 300 pounds! Returning to the doctor's office to have his stitches removed, Roy was asked how he'd been feeling. He responded that he felt fine. The doctor asked if he'd tried any activity and Roy said he had. He proceeded to describe his "light" workout at Yarick's. The doctor expressed astonished disbelief, so Roy—always a man of exuberant action—gathered himself, bent his knees, and took off in a perfect back flip, landing exactly where he had started in the limited space of the doctor's office. A friend of Hilligenn's, who had accompanied him that day, said the doctor nearly fainted!

While Roy was training at York, in the final pre-contest days, he was following his usual practice of mixing Olympic lift training and bodybuilding. One day, as he was standing on the seven-foot square training platform, preparing to lift an Olympic barbell, I asked him if he could still do a back flip. He was wearing a sweat-suit and a pair of heavy work shoes with built-up heels, which was the usual footwear for squat style lifting in those days.

The Olympic lift training platforms in the old York gym — there were three of them — were just seven feet square. With the barbell resting across the center, that left 3 1/2 feet for Roy. Nevertheless, in that small space and wearing heavy shoes, he promptly dipped, launched himself into the air and back flipped to a perfect landing on the platform.

The physique contest? Jim Park, who was in top shape after winning the 1952 Mr. America contest, shaded Hilligenn by a half point in the Mr. World event (Jack Delinger, the 1949 Mr. America, was a close third). Hilligenn, however, won the World's Most Muscular Man title in that portion of the competition.

When Hilligenn was winning best-built-man titles during the 1950s he had the following measurements at a height of 5'6" and



HILLIGENN POSSESSED PHENOMENAL STRENGTH FOR A RELATIVELY SMALL MAN. HERE, HE CLEANS A PAIR OF 142 POUND DUMBBELLS DURING A TRAINING SESSION.

PHOTO COURTESY JIM MURRAY

body weight of 175-185 pounds: 17-1/2" neck, 48-1/2" chest, 31" waist, 17-3/4" arm 7-1/2" wrist, 24-1/2" thigh, and 16-1/2" calf. Note the heavy upper body structure. A wrist of 7-1/2" is quite large for a man 5'6" tall.

Throughout his career, Roy continued to mix bodybuilding and weightlifting training, exercising with an intensity that few people would be able to match. For example, a leg training session included squats with 325 x 12, 350 x 12, 375 x 10, and 400 x 8: front squats with 320 to 40.5, three reps per set; partial squats with live hundred to seven hundred, four sets of fifteen reps: leg curls with 130, four sets of fifteen reps; and calf raises with 250, five sets of about thirty reps (Not really counting carefully, but going for a "burn"). He also did other leg exercises, such as extensions and leg presses (450, 525, and 575 for fifteen reps with each weight).

In his upper body training, Roy did a lot of presses, both with barbell and dumbbells. For example, he would press 150 pounds twelve reps behind neck, then move up to twelve with 160 and ten with 170. He would perform several sets of alternate presses with a pair of eighty and eighty-five pound dumbbells, twelve reps with each arm, then ten with nineties and sometimes six to eight reps with hundreds. For variation he would press the dumbbells together and at best could handle a pair of 135 pounders. (At Yarick's he cleaned a pair of 142-pound dumbbells, but did not press them). He followed presses with lateral raises in his workouts.

Other upper body exercises were pretty standard: pulls on the lat machine, one arm dumbbell rowing, and a variety of curls and triceps extensions. One difference between Hilligenn's training in the 1950s and today's bodybuilding was that he put little emphasis on the bench press. He bench pressed 250 for twelve, 265 for twelve, and 280 for ten. His incline pressing with dumbbells was more demanding: twelve with a pair of 90s twelve with 105s, and ten with 115s.

Olympic lift training, done on alternate days from the bodybuilding, would go like this: A series of presses with 135, 155, 175, 205, 215, and 225, three repetitions with each weight. He would finish by pressing 235 and 240 for singles. Next a series of snatches, using the same

weights and reps. In the clean he did triples with 225, 255, and 275; a double with 300; and singles with 310, 320, 325, and 330. Taking the weight from squat stands, he would jerk 225, 255, 275, and 300 three reps each: then 310, 320, and 330 for doubles; and singles with 340 and 350. After the actual Olympic lift training, he did a series of chest-high pulls, using a snatch grip, with from 300 to 400 pounds, and then—using a clean grip—more chest-high pulls with 350 to 500 pounds. Obviously, the heavier pulls didn't get as high as the lighter ones, but he was trying to accustom himself to pulling as high as possible with weights too heavy to snatch or clean.

Roy Hilligenn was truly one of the Iron Game's outstanding all-around athletes, able to give a good account of himself as a bodybuilder, weightlifter, or general strongman. His best training lifts were 280 press, 264 snatch, and 370 clean—these lifts by a man 5'6" weighing about 180 who was also putting himself through intense bodybuilding workouts that would send most people to a rest

home. He also could do an old-fashioned deep squat with 510 pounds, using a stance about shoulder width and with no help from knee wraps or a specially designed "super suit."

Hilligenn also was an entertainer—very charismatic. When he asserted that he could do "anything you can do" and better, his smile was so friendly you didn't mind the bombast. Besides, he probably could do it better!

[Editor's note: Roy Hilligenn, born November 15, 1922, is currently in a state prison in central Florida serving the third year of a seventeen year sentence for grand theft and attempted sexual battery. He served an earlier term in prison—from 1987 to 1989—on two counts of sexual battery and three counts of assault. Hilligenn was arrested in Corpus Christi, Texas earlier on a similar sexual battery charge but the case was dismissed. According to Jim Murray, who visited him in the middle eighties, Hilligenn was involved for a time in the alternative health business and was performing colonic irrigations. His recreational supervisor reports that he still trains regularly. His address is: Roy Hilligenn (#108027), Hillsboro Correctional Institute, 11150 672, Riverview, FL. 3569-8402]

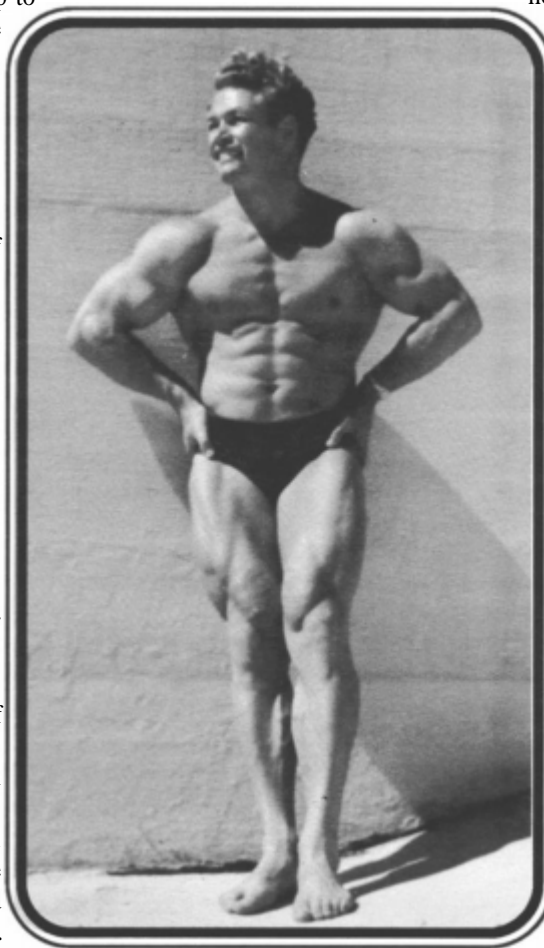


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