

The Roark Report

Measuring the Arm of Manfred Hoerberl

Joe Roark

Generation by generation, the iron game is degenerating. Our sport is being populated by some whose motives do not include health, or fitness, or any lifelong search for well-being. There is among us an element whose participation only lessens the goals of old—those people whose influence can be likened to singing along with the radio as they drive along. The passengers in the car can discern that the song is lessened, weakened by their accompaniment, not enhanced. We now have many out-of-tune wannabees flexing all over America.

But whereas when we sing along with the car radio we know in our reality that were the radio suddenly switched off the oddity of our voices would be immediately noticed, some wannabees are now driving, some riding as passengers, and the voice of the critic is nowhere in the car. The destination is uncertain even unnecessary, to these nomads for muscle, whose sole goal, not soul goal, is to become big, to reach the big-time, land a contract, pose hem and there and who somehow extrapolate that the subculture of muscle is noticed outside the bounds of spandex and baggy britches, when actually those uninvolved in our activities immediately file all our achievements in the file marked “Steroids.” It is only we who equate bulkier traps with deserving more trappings.

The nomads are now mad, very angry, claiming that the current champs on ‘roids would be the champs anyway—the level of genetics is simply amplified. There is no proof or precedent or probable trial for such a acclaim—but it soothes the heart of the pumper, who can now return to singing along with the radio on his merry way to Justbecauseville. Besides, the average non-ironhead doesn’t understand. Right? And all the passengers say yea.

At the least (a word repelling to pumpers) we can, and should, maintain some accurate measurements. Poundages lifted and girths measured should be strictly recorded; on the other hand, lifts not weighed—especially if near or beyond record lifts—should not only be ignored, they should not be reported in our mainstream publications. Who can ever hope to equal Sri Chinmoy’s claimed one-arm lift of seven thousand pounds? We should not even be aware that he claimed such a lift. And, in case you were not aware that such a lift was claimed, never mind—the passengers in that car were singing WAY off key.

Must we write that persons standing 5’4” who weigh less than two hundred pounds can claim a biceps measurement of twenty-two inches? Is anyone silly enough to believe this? When the bench press record stands at about 740 pounds, why do we give column space to those who, by means of something called a “forced rep,” claim a lift nearly twice as high? Does not Anthony Clark when he benches 740 use all the force at hand when attempting the record? why insult him by saying his “force” and his world record (done with no one else touching the barbell) are only fifty percent of someone else’s unproved, unjudged, unweighed attempt? Jan Dellinger calls this a tag-team bench press. Indeed such claims should be wrestled

away from our prim. In the early days of *Strength & Health* magazine, such drivel would appear in the *S&H* Liar’s Club column. Have our magazines become an extension on this old humor? No one is laughing.

This is not to say that there was no exaggeration in the old days. In fact, it went on around the globe. Globe barbells that is. Old-time strength performers would sometimes mislead the audience by asserting that the large spheres lifted were heavier than they, in fact, were.

Perhaps the bells to be lifted at the afternoon or evening performance would be on display in the lobby so that those who wished could have a hand at hefting them. Then, sometimes when those bells traveled from lobby to backstage, some lead shot or sand was drained, and when those in the audience who had failed in the lobby testing ground watched the performer hoist the weight easily, applause followed.

On other occasions, a performer would lift a weight which was not filled, and then place the bell near the stage curtain where it was being filled as audience members were summoned to try their luck at duplicating what they had just witnessed the performer achieve. Another trickery used was to literally attach the weight to a cart or a platform so that the neophyte would never know that budging the weight was impossible.

If the performer was able to lift the weights claimed, then, perhaps grace can be offered to the many performances daily in that era and the need to preserve some strength for each show.

Another deception that was present in the infant years of our spat was the exaggeration of muscular girths. The prime believe-it-or-not claim belongs to Charles A. Sampson, for whom, in 1896, a wrist to upper arm ratio of 4.2 was advertised. That is, his wrist was said to be 45 inches and his upper arm 19 inches, or 4.2 times the circumference of his wrist. If your wrist measures 7 inches, you’ll need an upper arm of 29.4 inches to match Sampson’s claim. Such claims are indeed enough to make serious students of strength history pull their hair out—no Delilah needed. [Sampson actually had a 17 inch upper arm and of course, a newborn baby’s wrist might measure close to 4.5 inches.

Why do those in the public eye in our sport feel the urge to exaggerate their lifts or girths? It is simple. If I wrote a training book entitled *How to build Seventeen Inch Arms*, no one who already has that dimension would feel the need for the product. If the book was entitled *How to Bench Press Three Hundred Pounds*, same situation. Indeed, even if your arm is only sixteen inches and your bench press 250, if on the market there are books for guidance to the land of twenty-three inch arms and thirteen hundred pound bench presses, the aspirant will buy those, reason& that all the sub-achievements leading to those dimensions will be by-products in the overall path. Of course, the book about a thirteen hundred pound bench will have several co-authors or assistants.

The following is my attempt to report accurately what happened when I measured Manfred Hoerberl's arm at the Arnold Classic earlier this year. I had warned Bob Wolff that I would walk off the stage if any misrepresentations were allowed during the measuring, that I would supply the tape measure, that I would want to take some measurements before the public measuring. The measurement I got was so large that I have now been relegated, by some whom I thought were friends, to the category of exaggerators. Not so. The following is fact and witnesses were present. . .

At the 1993 Mr. Olympia contest in Atlanta, Georgia, after Mike Matarazzo failed to make the cut, he came to sit beside Sandy Riddel in the audience, which also placed him beside me. I introduced myself, asked if I might measure his arm, and he emphatically, immediately replied, "NO!! NO MEASUREMENTS OUTSIDE THE GYM. NO MEASUREMENTS OUTSIDE THE GYM."

There's gold in them thar Gold's Gyms, I guess.

Jerry Brainum tells the interesting story of interviewing a world class bodybuilder who was speaking into Jerry's tape recorder, and when asked his arm measurement, the reply was "Twenty-three inches." Jerry calmly reached forward, clicked off the tape recorder and told the man, "Look, if you want me to write that you claim twenty-three inches I will. But the fans know generally how tall you are and what your weight is, so do you wish to change the figure?" The bodybuilder pondered for a moment and then offered, "Oh, okay, nineteen inches." Where did those four inches go in those twenty seconds? They traveled to the land of make believe. Where they belong.

There is a framework within which and without which certain girths cannot be obtained. Without a length of limb and a bodyweight approaching three hundred pounds you can discount any claims of twenty-two inch arms. It is humorous to think the humerus can accommodate such size on a small-boned individual. It truly becomes funny business.

It is, however, obvious to anyone with comparative vision that the arms of Manfred Hoerberl may not be the most vascular, may not be the most cut, or ripped or shredded. They are simply the most huge looking arms I have ever seen on a human. They look bigger than anyone else's—to my knowledge—have ever looked. Talking muscle here, not the girths of the obese.

But I really don't care how big they look. I care how big they are. So, hoping the world contained the technology to achieve that elusive fact, and hoping I did not have to travel to a gym somewhere to measure Manfred, the quest began.

It was 8:18 PM on 9 September 1994. The final competition for Mr. Olympia was to be posed down soon. But sitting at his vending table selling his book and displaying the largest muscular arms found at any latitude or longitude was Manfred Hoerberl. All 6'5" and three hundred plus pounds of him.

Though his book *10 Minutes to Massive Arms* was selling well, there was a lull in the leering line, so I stepped up, requested a book, and answered "Joe Roark," to Manfred's request for a name to which he could autograph. Bob Wolff of *Muscle & Fitness* was near-

by and he re-introduced himself to me, and we chatted. Bob is co-author of Hoerberl's book.

With this, I literally allowed a tape measure to unfurl from my shoulder height as I asked Manfred if I could measure his arm. His reply was a question. "Why, don't you trust me?" To which I undiplomatically responded, "I don't trust anyone," meaning in reference to arm size claims.

My distrust is very well-founded. Having read in this field for forty years, and having filed data extensively since 1970, I am aware of the size claims that have been attributed to many of the stalwarts in muscledom, and able to rate these claims in the overall scheme.

Some of the claims are preposterous; some are worse than that. Imagine an arm of twenty-two inches being claimed on someone who stands 5'4". Remember the upper arm girth 4.2 times larger than the wrist? These have actually been claimed! (For Manfred to equal the 4.2 ratio would require him to have an upper arm of 35.2 inches!)

Only twice that I am aware of have ironmen been willing to put their money where their measurements are: Sig Klein offered five dollars to Johnny Bracken if his upper arm measured less than fifteen inches and John McWilliams offered a thousand dollars for a measurement of his at less than 195. Neither Sig in 1939 nor John in 1950 transferred funds.

In any case, in the months between the 1994 Mr. Olympia and the 1995 Arnold Classic, Bob Wolff acted as intermediary between Manfred and me. It was agreed that I would measure Manfred's arm—publicly—at the Expo held in connection with Arnold's physique competition.

The original plan was for me to get some measurements and photos in Manfred's hotel room Friday night. But speaking to Bob that afternoon, it was revealed that those plans had been thwarted, and Manfred told me we would get the measurements at four o'clock the next day. Also present would be Marla Duncan, the beautiful fitness model who had agreed to have her waistline measured for comparison with Hoerberl's upper arm size. Accordingly, I arranged for Marla to meet us at three-thirty Saturday, backstage.

Saturday arrived, I packed my briefcase with two metal circles—one of twenty inches and the other twenty-five inches—two empty Pepsi Cola cans, a plastic tape measure, and a steel construction-type tape measure. By matching the steel tape to the plastic tape, I learned the plastic tape was accurate.

Trying to reach Marla at three-twenty proved hopeless—the crush of fans around her booth seeking photos and autographs prohibited me: I hoped she would remember to meet us backstage in ten minutes.

I circumvented the crowd, found Manfred backstage, unpumped. He and Bob—who had been in Manfred's presence since about two o'clock—assured me that Manfred was ready for a cold measurement. What happened next is even now difficult for me to realize: Manfred asked if I wanted to get some practice measurements before we went on stage. I did, and the results were:

Wrist: 8 3/8" or 8.37"

Forearm straight (fist clenched but not goose-necked): 16"

Forearm goose-necked at right angle to upper arm: 17.5"

upper arm: 25 3/4" or 25.75" COLD!!

We were called to the stage. Manfred then curled a 150 pound dumbbell for a few reps with his right arm, and Anja Schreiner asked me to hurry to measure his arm before the pump was lost. "What pump?" I asked myself. I had in mind alternate sets of curls and French presses, a minute wait, and then the measurement. But I was not in charge, so the hurried—one set only for biceps and nothing for triceps—produced a public, twenty-six inch measurement. First I had showed the twenty inch metal circle, explaining that this was probably the size of some of the heavier champion bodybuilder's upper arms—in spite of claims of larger girths. Then the twenty-five inch circle was placed around the twenty inch circle to show the overwhelming difference. Backstage I had placed the twenty-live inch circle around Manfred's upper arm, and he filled it—his arm being more oval than circular. It was now time for the Pepsi Challenge.

Through the years, various photos have appeared in bodybuilding magazines purporting to reveal accurate measurements. Scrutiny reveals that the portion of the tape on the lee side of the arm—out of sight—had to have been altered. Anyway, one cannot easily alter a soda can without it being obvious.

So, two Pepsi cans, one sitting atop the other stand 9.25 inches tall. Manfred's arm was taller! Backstage, using calipers, his arm height proved to be ten inches. When I placed the calipers at Marla's waistline, she was ten inches wide, and her waist circumference was twenty-six inches—at first a little over twenty-six inches—but a second measurement indicated twenty-six inches—so the audience was seeing a woman's waistline which was the same size as one of Manfred's arms!

Manfred thus became the first man in history to have an upper arm girth three times the size of his wrist circumference. Indeed, some measurements ratio charts published over the years indicate a ratio of 2.2 or 2.3 is a solid goal. By those standards, Manfred would need only 19.3 inches. I suspect many of the champion bodybuilders have a ratio of no more than 2.6 or 2.7. I still have my tape measures, and can come up with two cans of Pepsi anywhere in America with two minutes notice. All I lack is the cooperation of the top bodybuilders who henceforth have a standing invitation to contact me for verification of arm size.

Moments after I measured Manfred I had occasion to see two of the men who have claimed twenty-three inch arms or had the claim made for them. Their arms, though huge, are a world away from Manfred's plateau. so, thank you Manfred, for your cooperation.

or to hide. From anybody on the globe.

Ed Note: Manfred was involved in a serious auto accident this past Spring but is uow recovering at home. We wish Manfred all the best in his recovery.