



IRONCLAD

Paul Anderson's June 12, 1957 Backlift

by Joe Roark

Why would any man crawl under a platform loaded with weights weighing almost three tons more than himself, then try to backlift it? Paul Anderson says he was motivated to try it to prove he was the strongest man in the world after someone had shown him a copy of the 1956 *Guinness Book of Superlatives* which listed Louis Cyr as the strongest man in the world: "The greatest weight ever raised by a human being is 4,133 lbs (1.84 tons) by the 350 lb. French-Canadian, Louis Cyr (1863-1912) in Chicago in 1896 in a back-lift (weight raised off trestles)." Paul wrote in his autobiography, *A Greater Strength*: "I decided to break Cyr's record in my hometown, partly because of the prohibitive cost involved in moving all that weight to another area."

Here is what was happening in Paul's life in the weeks leading to the famous backlift of 12 June, 1957. On 4 April 1957 Paul began a two week engagement of strength demonstrations at the Mapes Hotel in Reno, Nevada. Advertising heralding this nightclub act included a mention that Paul ". . . has lifted better than 5000 pounds." *Reno Evening Gazette*, 2 April 1957.

When the Mapes Hotel was built in 1947 it was, at twelve stories, the tallest building in Nevada. Charles W. Mapes had first encountered Paul weeks earlier while Anderson was performing in California by hip-lifting his 2300 pound safe out of a hole. During Paul's engagement at the Skyroom at the Mapes Hotel two challenges were issued. To a regular patron (non-lifter) all that was required to keep the \$15,000 (in silver dollars) packed into the special see-through barbell was to lift the barbell off of a squat rack and stand there supporting it. The barbell has been reported as weighing between 900 and about 1200 pounds. No actual squat (either full or half) was required of a challenger who was a non-lifter.

For a *lifter* to earn the \$15,000, a deep squat

needed to be performed, or at least a squat of the sort Paul demonstrated twice each evening and during three performances on Saturday. No one ever won the cash, and after the final performance each evening four stagehands and Paul would carry the barbell to the storage area. Mr. Mapes said that the barbell was weighed publicly and that it weighed 1,000 pounds. He also said that Paul played to a packed house (350 patrons) each performance during the two week engagement. During Paul's stay about ten people tried for the money.

In June of 1957 Paul was at Muscle Beach and did some heavy lifting; this was the month that he and Gail Taylor were to have been married, but were not.

Then came the fateful day. On 12 June 1957, according to Paul's later claims, he performed a feat that has received more publicity, particularly among the non-lifting public, than any other lift in history—his backlift of 6,270 pounds. [*Editors' note: The only lifting feat that is perhaps better known than Anderson's would be the reported lifting and carrying of a heifer calf, as it grew to maturity, by the Greek wrestler, Milo of Croton in the fifth century B.C.*]

On Wednesday 12 June 1957, Paul Anderson was just 24 years of age, and the temperature in Toccoa rose from Tuesday's high of 82 with .02 inches of rain to 95 degrees with no rain. Paul, in the afternoon (according to his brother-in-law, Julius Johnson, who was not present), supposedly attempted to backlift more weight than anyone else had ever hoisted, surpassing Cyr's sixty-one year old record by more than a ton. (Actually, several references indicate that Paul had already bypassed Louis by more than 800 pounds.) It was established in an earlier issue of *Iron Game History* that the safe Paul used for this backlift weighed approximately 2300 pounds instead of approximately 3500 pounds, so

let's now study the components of the backlift: the platform and the other items added to the platform for additional weight. In a telephone interview on 1 December 1999 with Julius Johnson, Anderson's brother-in-law, Johnson said ". . . the backlift platform that was in Paul's back yard was about six feet long and three or four feet wide..." In other words, the platform had the overall approximate dimensions of a household door. He also said that the platform had saw-horse type legs. Keep in mind that *Guinness* describes this lift as having been done "off trestles," so no "sawhorse legs" or any other sorts of legs would leave the ground. If for some reason the legs were attached to the platform, it would require eight legs to be lifted clear of the ground, not four as is always described by various writers with more enthusiasm than knowledge.

The *Toccoa Record* newspaper on 6 October 1994 (page 2-c), carried an article by Julius Johnson regarding the backlift on 12 June 1957, maintaining that: "That afternoon he decided to fill it [platform] up with weights to see if he could lift over 4,000 pounds." In reference to the 6'x3'-4' platform (which Paul has said weighed 1800 pounds), Johnson describes what happened to it during the backlift: "It bent slightly, so he held it until it was steady and everyone could clearly see that all four legs were off the ground." Legs? To repeat, *Guinness* says this was a lift off trestles, in which only the door-like platform and the weights on top of the platform would have been lifted.

Now let's compare the various descriptions of these events. Paul indicates in his 1975 autobiography, *Paul Anderson: The World's Strongest Man*, on page 88, that the weighing of what was lifted was prior to the lift attempt. Julius Johnson, however, says that the weighing followed the lift, and that Paul was trying to ". . . see if he could lift over 4,000 pounds." Why? According to the *Reno Gazette* he had already lifted 5,000 pounds. What's more, when Earl Liederman interviewed Paul for a *Muscle Power* article that appeared in February 1957 (page 58) Paul himself claimed a backlift of 5,000 pounds. If the platform weighed 1,800 pounds, as claimed, and

the safe 3,500, as claimed, why would anyone have to weigh either to determine that 4,000 pounds had been surpassed, especially when Johnson had described the addition of ". . . other weights until the platform was covered in a fairly balanced manner."

Also, why would an 1800 pound table that was only 6' long bend at the ends? The great majority of the weight was dead center over Paul's wide back. Obviously, the saw-horses would have been placed at the longer ends of the platform, not under the narrower 3' to 4' wide span. If the platform was only three feet wide, and the safe (we know) is two feet wide, then there was only six inches of space on either side of the platform for extra weight, and only two feet of extra space on each end. This would not have left much room for additional weights to be added. Another matter is this. Of what material would you construct a lifting platform six feet long and three or four feet wide that would end up weighing nine-tenths of a ton? How thick would it have to be? For example, it would require a stack of forty-four (3/4" thick) plywood sheets to weigh approximately 1800 pounds, but, at 4'x8', such a plywood table would have been 2' longer than the one Johnson described, and perhaps wider.



One of the lifts in which Paul Anderson was unusually strong was the one-hand side press.

Platform Descriptions

Let's examine in detail what has been written about the backlift platform that Paul used in his quest for the record. Herb Glossbrenner in *Iron Man* magazine July 1987 (page 23) says that Paul and his dad "...built a big platform and loaded it with metal weights." In describing the 6,270 pound backlift, Glossbrenner says that, "At last all four corners cleared the uprights. He had done it—the greatest weight ever lifted by a human—6,270 pounds!" So Glossbrenner says the platform was what was lifted, just as *Guinness* had described it—a lift off trestles and not a lift in which the "legs" also cleared the ground. This 6' x 3'-4' platform weighed 1,800 pounds?

As for Paul's own

account, he wrote in his autobiography, *A Greater Strength*, "I worked with my father to build the platform and lifting table." So Paul lists two items. Obviously, he's describing a platform which rested upon a lifting table. He also said, "The table itself weighed about 1,800 pounds." Why weigh the table if it was not to be a part of the lift? And, what did the platform weigh? But Paul continues that each weight was added to the table. Did he mean the platform resting upon the table, or did he mean the reverse? Paul's widow Glenda acknowledged to me that she had never seen the lifting table/platform Paul used for his June 1957 attempt. She said that it was gone from the backyard in Toccoa by the time she and Paul were dating and she had occasion to visit that location. But she and Paul were married September 1, 1959, and Paul wrote to me that, "That old manganese safe finally fell through the platform as it deteriorated over the years and its laying in the same spot today up in Toccoa, Georgia where my daughter now lives in the home where I was born." But how could this be? If the platform was there in 1957 for the attempt and rotted through by the time Glenda was in the area two years later, of what was this massive 1,800 pound table composed? Certainly not railroad ties, that have a life expectancy of several decades, not several months. And what 1,800 pounds of wood would rot through in two years in the north Georgia climate?

In *Musclemag International*, July 1992, Julius Johnson's letter to the editor indicates that the backlift components were weighed after the backlift, instead of before it, as Paul had claimed. Johnson wrote: "They piled all the junk they could get on a platform. When they could pile on no more, he lifted it. Then they totaled the weight of all the parts, including the platform. A newspaper man (Maurice Payne) and the owner of a gym in Atlanta (Karo Whitfield) were there. They suggested, not Paul, that the feat should be submitted to the Guinness(sic) Book of Records." But Paul himself says in *A Greater Strength* that he had summoned the proper authorities to witness the lift. And if a representative from *Guinness* was indeed present, why would anyone have to urge that representative to include the lift as a replacement listing for Cyr's record? Why else would *Guinness* have sent anyone to cover the event? In that same letter, Johnson adds, "None of the [Toccoa] townspeople were aware that an exceptional event would take place in Paul's backyard that day." So when did Mr. Johnson learn of the backlift? What he told me over the

phone was, "I will tell you that I was not aware of it until I saw it published." In *Guinness*? Read on...

In any case, Paul realized that in order to be known as the world's strongest man he had to break Cyr's backlift record of 4,133 pounds. Surprisingly, Paul understates his case in a manuscript which he provided to author John Little, who wrote a long article in *Muscle & Fitness* magazine in May 1993. In the manuscript, Paul writes that, "The backlift I did of over 6,000 pounds wasn't important at all. A bigger to-do is made about it today than it was then. I only did it to have my name associated with the greatest lift ever made. There was no fan-fare or anything . . . It wasn't as big a deal then as it's being discussed today. People are, you know, disputing it and all that but, you know, it doesn't bother me."

Why are people disputing it? Was it not well witnessed and soon put into the *Guinness Book of World Records*? The answers are no and no. Regarding witnesses, Paul has said that Karo Whitfield was there along with a newsman named Maurice Payne. Paul also said that his brother-in-law, Julius Johnson, was there with his camera to get some photos. As stated earlier, however, Johnson disputes this and says he was not present, did not take photos, and did not even learn about the backlift attempt until much later, long after the incident. If Maurice Payne ever photographed or wrote of the backlift of June 12, 1957, I, along with others who have researched this incident, have been unable to find any such photos or text. And if Karo Whitfield ever wrote of it, I can find no trace after years of searching. So the witnesses to this historic lift bore no witness?

As to when the backlift claim of 6,270 pounds was entered as a record into the *Guinness Book of World Records*, was it an entry in the next available issue: 1957? Or perhaps in 1958? No to both. *People* magazine, 29 August 1994, in its obituary on Paul asserts that, "In 1957 he [Paul] made the *Guinness Book of World Records* after lifting 6,270 pounds." Not really...

The first edition of the *Guinness* book to mention his record was the 1962 edition, five years after the fact, which lists the lift as 6,000 pounds. Why would it take so long? And why just 6000 pounds? It gets even more confusing. The 1962 listing remains the same until 1968, which repeats the 6,000 figure and adds that Anderson ". . . is reputed to have done" 6,200 pounds. Note that the new figure is 6200 and *not* 6,270. Even so, for some reason the date given for the 6,000 remained

the same as always—June 12, 1957. This 1968 citation is the first mention (11 years after 1957!) that Paul backlifted more than one amount on that date. Indeed, it has long been implied by Paul that *Guinness* had a representative at the backlift attempt that day. Yet if Paul loaded the table to 6,270 pounds (the final, famous figure) and then lifted it, and the representative saw it, or Payne and Whitfield saw it, why would not that figure, instead of the 6,000, or 6200, be printed in the record book? And why would Paul have been later “reputed” to have done 6,200? Did the Guinness representative leave before the lifting was over? Or did Paul first backlift 6,000, then 6200, and then finally 6,270? Indeed Paul later stated that when the amount on the table reached 6,270 pounds, the attempt was made; he does not mention a lighter attempt. David Willoughby in his 1970 book, *The Super Athletes*, writes that Paul backlifted 6,000 pounds and had “unofficially” lifted 6,270.

In a letter to Tom Ryan on 1 April 1988 regarding the 12 June 1957 date, Paul wrote, “I had officials there and what you would call a small audience. At the time, documented letters were written to the officials of the Guinness Book of World Records by the certified judges and newspapermen who were present.” Newspapermen, plural? Judges certified as to what? Weightlifting? Who were they, other than Whitfield, and why have they never written about this? Paul continues: “The McWhirter brothers, who founded and edited the Guinness Book . . . have always been very particular about what they used in print. They did a full investigation in our case.”

Well, maybe not so full. In a letter on *Guinness* letterhead, Stewart Newport, Deputy Editor, wrote to Dr. Terry Todd, 4 October 1989, regarding Paul’s backlift, as follows: “However, after due consideration, the lack of extensive evidence for these claims led me to discuss the matter with our Sports Editor. He himself was unhappy with the entries and consequently we have taken the decision to delete the entries as highlighted on the



The finale in most of the hundreds of exhibitions Paul gave as he crisscrossed the country raising money for the Paul Anderson Youth Home was the lifting of a table loaded with people. Paul always sent detailed instructions to the people sponsoring his exhibitions so that a table built to his specifications would be available. Such a table allowed him to do the lift so it was safe for him as well as for those he lifted.

enclosed copy.” Thus was Paul’s unsubstantiated backlift deleted from the “record” book, after almost 30 years of free publicity. *[Editors’ note: We had become interested in the backlift records after meeting the father of Stout Jackson, a Texas strongman (profiled in the January 1994 issue of IGH) who had been listed as early as 1949 in Ripley’s Believe It Or Not publications for a backlift of 6470 pounds. So we contacted the U.S. representatives of the Guinness organization as well as those at the Ripley organization to get whatever documentation existed about these decades-old claims. We received no documentation about Anderson’s lift, except for the letter quoted above, but we received a substantial amount of documentation about the Jackson claim, though not enough to convince us of its authenticity given his overall career.]*

So whatever Whitfield and Payne or others wrote to Guinness, if anything, was judged upon reflection to have been inadequate proof Paul had argued in

a 24 January 1990 letter to me that, “We had officials present. One was a man by the name of Foster, who lived in Oregon and represented the *Guinness Book of Records* at one time, or at least was a contributor, another was Karo Whitfield and several of his friends from Atlanta, but I do not remember their names. Most of them were business and professional men and not lifters . . . A newspaper man was there, who came through our request, and as I have already said, my brother-in-law was also there.” Whitfield was an AAU official, and would have been the only weightlifting official unless one or more of his friends were also weightlifting officials. As was stated earlier, Johnson claims not to have been there or even to have known of the lift until much later.

Almost 6,500 lbs?

In the same 24 January 1990 letter, Paul wrote, “Let’s now go to the 6,270 pounds. This was rounded off, because it actually was a couple hundred pounds more.” *Read that again.* Does this mean that he actually lifted 6,470 or maybe 6,500 pounds? So now we learn that the initial reports of *Guinness* at 6,000 pounds (which were listed for six years) were off by nearly 500 pounds? And what about the documenting letters, if any, written by the witnesses? They missed the 6,270 and the weighing which had actually totaled about 6,500? Or did everyone agree it would somehow be better if the 6500 were rounded *down* to 6,270 or maybe 6,000?

In any case, by the 1970 edition the 6,270 pounds is presented as the record. Thirteen years after the date of the event! Whitfield was still living at the time of this change.

Chance at Headline Publicity

Four days after Wednesday 12 June 1957, Paul appeared on the Ed Sullivan TV show. This was a golden opportunity to proclaim his achievement of four days earlier—that of having eclipsed Cyr’s venerable record by one ton, and to add that *Guinness* would soon be updating its record book. But neither Anderson nor Sullivan (if he knew of it) saw fit to break this news on national TV. As for *Guinness*, they waited a dozen or baker’s dozen years before committing the figure to print. Why?

And how about the bodybuilding magazines which had spotlighted every incremental increase in poundage as Paul upped the squat record beyond the

reach of mere mortals? Did they headline the backlift accomplishment? There is no mention at all of the 12 June 1957 lift for many months in the bodybuilding literature. *Iron Man* magazine in January 1959 (page 36) states that, “We hear that he has made a 6200 lb. Back lift for a new world record.” Surprisingly, the August 1963 issue of the same magazine offers one sentence on page 58: “It is rumored that Paul Anderson has recently succeeded with a back lift of 6,000 lbs.” Apparently, editor Peary Rader forgot about the mention he had made of a 6200 pound lift four and a half years earlier. What’s more, why would it be presented as a “rumor” by Rader?

Also, it would seem unlikely (because of the way the wire services operate) that a publishing deadline had caused Bob Thomas in his August 1957 Associated Press piece on Anderson, titled, “Bring Back Strong Man to Show Business” to mention only a backlift of 5,000 when Paul had lifted almost 1300 pounds more, “officially,” just two months earlier? Why did Anderson not tell Thomas of the brand new record of 6270?

And although there may be ways to explain certain other omissions, one wonders why in September when Paul returned to Ed Sullivan’s TV show did the announcement in *TV Guide* herald his carousel lift “laden with top Hollywood celebrities” and not mention his record backlift of June, a lift that has been the literal benchmark for nearly every biographical piece written about Paul for almost 45 years? And why in the *Hagerstown Daily Mail* 16 May 1958 does the AP story “Strong Man Would Fight For Title” fail to mention that Paul was entering the world of boxing as the greatest backlifter in history? Or the following day in Madison Square Garden when during his lifting exhibition he cleaned then pressed 424.25 pounds for two and [almost] three reps was the backlift not remarked on? And when Paul lifted at Karo Whitfield’s show in Atlanta in March 1963, why did Karo not tell the audience that he had witnessed the incredible backlift that had been done just six years earlier?

Later assessments of Paul’s lift can perhaps add insight to the situation. For instance, Jon Cole in *PLUSA* magazine, Dec 1994 (page 10) describes his thought of breaking Paul Anderson’s backlift record in a response to the writer Herb Glossbrenner, who had asked Cole, “Did you pursue [Anderson’s backlift record]?” Jon answered, “I found out that sort of stunt was out of my league or anyone else as far as that goes;

it was a farce.” Whether Cole meant that it was a farce for him or anyone else to be able to match Paul’s lift, or that Paul’s lift was a farce, is unclear from the language, although the latter interpretation is more likely given his (Cole’s) May 1972 challenge to Paul (in *Muscular Development* magazine) to meet him in a lifting competition. Bruce Wilhelm, writing in *MILO* April 1993 (page 14) adds to the Cole comparison in the article, “Paul Anderson: Force of Nature.” Wilhelm wrote, of Cole, “He had a steel company in West Phoenix construct a back lift platform. Without any weight it was 2,500-plus pounds. Jon said he got under it, and darned near killed himself trying to move it. He decided then and there to pass on the attempt at a record in the back lift.” That was in 1971/1972. So are we to believe that Jon Cole, ranked among the strongest men in history nearly killed himself trying to backlift 40% of what Paul had done? Was Paul more than twice as strong as Jon? Certainly not in any of the other, standard lifts. In fact, Paul’s best publicly done competition lifts in the three “Olympic lifts” (Press, Snatch, and Clean & Jerk) added to his best in the three Powerlifts (Squat, Bench Press, and Deadlift) fall short in cumulative poundage to what was done officially by Cole.

Regarding the argument used by some of Paul’s supporters that if a man like Jack Walsh, who usually weighed less than 200 pounds, could backlift x-amount, then it is easy to believe that Paul could lift x-plus, it cannot be taken seriously. It is a flawed argument. We cannot take, as a base point, a non-substantiated lift (like that of Jack Walsh), and then use that amount and Paul’s great overall strength as a beginning point. What’s more, all lifts require practice, and Jack Walsh was a real specialist in the backlift. In contrast, and by Paul’s own account, he claims that, essentially, he had done no training in the backlift when he and his father built the platform and added the safe and other weights until the poundage was approximately a ton more than was done by Louis Cyr.

An additional bit of circumstantial evidence was provided at Norway’s Strongest Viking contest held in June 2000, in which the Norwegian backlift record of 940kg was surpassed:

Roy Holte won with	1400 kg or 3,080 lbs
Olav Dahl was 2nd	1359 kg or 2,970 lbs
Sveinung Tangstad 3rd	1300 kg or 2,860 lbs

So, could Paul Anderson have added together the first and second place finisher’s weights (which total

6,050 pounds) and still had strength to spare? I think reasonable people would find this difficult to believe.

In summary, this three part series on Paul Anderson’s claimed backlift has attempted to raise significant questions regarding the components used for the lift, the weights of those components, and the lack of consistency regarding how many witnesses, if any, were present. It has been determined that the weight of the safe was (and is) approximately 1,200 pounds less than the figure Paul used to calculate and finally reach a cumulative total of 6,270 pounds. Serious reservations remain regarding a wooden table which measures only about 3’ to 4’ by 6’ yet supposedly weighs 1800 pounds -nearly a ton. Even allowing an inflated (in my opinion) figure of 800 pounds for the weight of the table requires reducing the overall backlift aggregate to approximately 4,070 pounds (6270 minus 1000 from the table minus another 1200 from the safe equals 4070 pounds).

These facts, in addition to the total lack of written accounts by witnesses, and the disparities of accounts in various muscle magazines compared among themselves as well as compared to the several *Guinness Book of World Records* poundages, all create serious questions regarding what, if anything, really happened on June 12, 1957.

I began my study of this lift fully, perhaps naively, believing that an untapped well of proof was awaiting my discovery. Perhaps that well is out there. Somewhere. To those who see this three part series as a personal attack on Paul, or as somehow vengeful, please be aware that for a long time I did not publish my findings. But the personal attacks against me, instead of against my conclusions—attacks based on my simple asking of questions—prompted me to offer what I have discovered and to open myself to any rebuttal arguments available. Responsible replies are welcomed. One other thought. When I began I intended, and hoped, to align proof showing how Paul had indeed performed this monumental feat. Reality, as I have come to understand it regarding this situation, led me to another conclusion. I am saddened by this whole discovery. But facts cannot be good or bad; they can only form truth. And truth will set us free.

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