

Mike Bridges

The Peoria Powerhouse

as told to POWERLIFTING USA by Herb Glossbrenner



Great Form from the beginning... Mike Bridges at the Central AAU Sr. Championships, April 1978, with a world record 585 squat. He broke the world total record 3 times at this meet. Lemenager photo

At the 1976 Badger State Open Powerlifting competition in Wisconsin, an suspicious young man told head referee Lyle Schwartz he was going to break the lightweight world record in the bench press that day. "How long have you been lifting?" Lyle inquired. "Not long. This is my first competition," the young upstart replied. Schwartz skeptically raised an eyebrow and nodded. "Ah, a world record you say? Good luck." He thought it was a bold forecast, but admired the lad's enthusiasm. After the stalwart young athlete topped the IPF world record with cardholders present, Schwartz and a whole host of others became believers.

Astronomers search the heavens for that one in a hundred billion chance to witness the birth of a star, as its brilliance flares forth with blinding incandescence. The opportunity may never occur in a lifetime, but it did this day - a 367 pound bench press by a 148 pound virtual unknown in his first meet.

Nobody realized that this youth, whose career was launched that day, was beginning a long journey. His route would take him into the outermost regions of our powerlifting galaxy. On the way he blazed a trail - like a comet - across the heavens, crossing barriers and surpassing limits we never visualized in our wildest imaginations. He was then what Ed Coan is to powerlifting today - indomitable and supreme - he is Mike Bridges.

Michael was born February 1, 1957, the next to the eldest of five brothers. He came in at 8 lbs. 3 oz. in his first weigh-in. His father was 5'5" and mother 5'3". Neither parent had an athletic background, nor did his brothers have interests in such. Brother Bob later did high school wrestling, following in Mike's footsteps. Mike grew up in Peoria, IL, and developed a fondness for grappling. He competed as a freshman and sophomore and as a junior he was runner-up in the state championships.

Bob Ross, Jr., a lifetime friend, met Mike while promoting a forthcoming PL meet. Mike was invited to the gym for a workout. He developed a propensity for the power movements - especially in the bench press. His wrestling coach felt, so many during this era believed, that weight training would cause slowness and inflexibility. So, the coach prohibited it. Word got out of Mike's workouts. A decree was delivered: "No weights, Mike. You can win States this year. Don't throw it away. Give it up or you're off the team," Mike balked. "I quit." The Coach begged him to reconsider, but he'd made his decision.

From that day forward he trained

The big one finally arrived August 27, 1978. At the Senior Nationals Bridges recorded the best performance ever in powerlifting history. Tony Fitton, powerlifting's beloved guru, described Mike as exuding confidence, a portrait of athleticism. "He's an All-American - a perfect lifter," Tony raved. Mike Lambert, who had used up all the superlatives in Webster's Dictionary to describe him called this outing: "one heckuva Superman type lifts."

Mike overall, but Californian Armington Ralael stole some of his thunder with a world record 396 lb bench. An old lifting buddy (and I do mean old) and rival of mine Bob Cortes topped Armington with a lifetime best 1366 for second place. Bridges was 336 pounds better than through his lifts - 606, 386, 611. His first two deadlifts smashed the world record total. The sixteen hundreded banner was now history (1603). Next came a world record deadlift, try - 633 - almost.

Now the stage was set to see if he was really the best. The World Championships is the real testing grounds. And prove himself he did. A long ways from home in Turkey, Finland, he popped two mind boggling world record squats: 611 and 622. He sat too low with a fourth try at 628, and stayed down. Mike blasted 352, 391 and then 402 and the lightweight 400 lb. bench press banner was finally beaten. He'd lost seven pounds making weight in a Finnish steam room. Fluid deprivation caused cramping. He took two medlocre (for him) deadlifts - 562 then 584 - and called it a day. Even so his 1609 conglomerate broke his own world mark.

Mike didn't bother to drop weight for the last meet of the year. In his very first outing as a very light middleweight he leasuredly made 644, 402, 584, 1631.

Bridges kicked off 1979 dramatically. He went up to 165 for good. At a meet in April his 1719 total obliterated yet another barrier - seven hundred. His 672 squat broke Crain's 666 mark (Rickey retailed soon afterward with 683). His 418 bench press and 628 deadlift completed another great day. Amazing as this lifting seemed, it did not give any indication of the surprise he was saving for the forthcoming Senior Nationals.

Damp, sweating Mississippi summertime - Lambert called the Bay St. Louis gathering "the Mississippi Meltdown". Heat and humidity plagued the competitors. Bridges perspired as did everyone else, however, the competition (superstars in their own right - Crain and Gaugler), provided "no sweat" for the Illinois

Superboy. Crain was in rare peak form. With hisradical theatrics he psychod himself into a frenzy, and strained bench press specialist Backlund (SWE) was third.

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At the Auburn, AL, get-together Mike had no peers. Crain came in at 148 and Gaugler was back home gearing up for the Seniors. Dropping bodyweight once again was a problem for Mike. He lost ten pounds to make 165. In pre-meet preparation he had been hoisting some enormous weights. The steam room ordeal took a big edge off his presentation. He was nauseous and cramping from dehydration. Regardless Bridges still broke three world records. His record 722 squat opened needed repeating. He passed a third and saved himself for a subsequent record 463 bench. He breezed through 600 and 650 deadlifts. The final augmented a total record of 1835. Bridges wanted Gaugler's elusive 694 record as well. His terrific effort at 699 came up a few inches shy. Even under these adverse conditions - almost 1884!

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one won the meet, and the last two increased his total mark at 1813 to 1829. Canadian Di Pasquale was 176 pounds back in second and bench press specialist Backlund (SWE) was third.

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Showing His Stuff in the Bench Press at the 1979 Senior Nationals.

sprawling atop him. The doctor declared upon examining Mike that there was no tear (did anyone attend to Larry?). Everyone thought Bridges was done after that melee. Yet - surprise! Out he came for a big 722. He hauled it up and bumped his total record one notch higher to 1962.

The Ohio Association Championship, October 4, was a prelude to the Worlds. Pacific, in top form, had plans for redemption after his Seniors bomb. Mike was there to invade 198. He aspired to hold records in four weight categories simultaneously (he weighed 183). I never forget. It was a bitter-sweet mixture of triumph and trauma. Mike triumphed as he broke the 1951 world record total for 198's by 116 plus pounds. He squatted lower to silence his critics. His second attempt 804 crashed the 800 barrier for the first time in that division (beat Jerry Jones' 793). Next he mastered 826.7 which weighed out a "light" 822. An enormous 848 was down and up, but ruled high. He joined the 500 club with a 501 bench and followed that with a 738 pull. His 2066 total was mind boggling. Next came the tragic mishap with Pacific's finger. Mike recalls thinking that PL would never be the same without Larry. Larry did not mind. He was proclaimed powerlifting's Champion of Champions.

The 1980 Worlds were held (but almost weren't) November 7-9 in Arlington, TX. The on-going power struggle escalated and reached a crescendo. USA factions bickered among themselves. A disgruntled Pacifico formed a new group called the NPA. They had their own elite team and insisted they be allowed to participate. Lawsuits threatened to shut down the competition. Foreign participants were upset. Finally, at the last hour, an agreement was reached. The NPA could lift, but as "guest lifters" only. They were allowed to set world records, but not win world titles. It was agreed there would be no re-nominations against NPA or their lifters if they would permanently disband following the competition. So, on with the show.

Just where did Bridges fit in this paradoxical dilemma? I asked Mike about this:

HG: Mike, you threw away a world title that was ripe for your picking by lifting for NPA. Why?
MB: I was promised the IPF would accept the NPA team, and we could lift. I was talked into staying by Larry and others. I was told it was for the future betterment of powerlifting.

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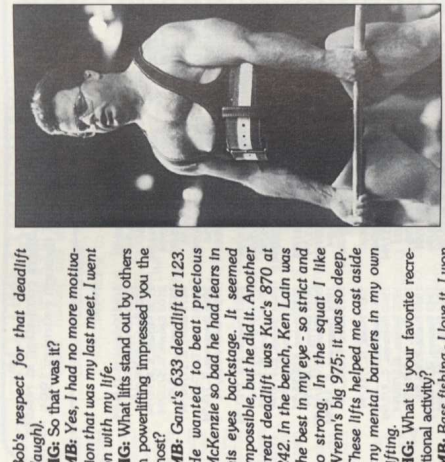
MB: No, I would have moved up to 198.
HG: On your body frame (5'3"), could you have become full-fledged middleweight?
MB: I weighed 185-188 normally while competing at 181. I could have got up to 203-204 with force/feeding.
HG: You did more in training than your best in competition. What were your best lifts?
MB: I squatted 881 (800 kg) many times at about 187 bodyweight, hitting at least parallel. I did 900 in exhibition at one of the World Strongest Man contests.
HG: How low was it?
MB: I was anywhere from one half inch to three inches high, depending on who you talked to.
HG: Is that your best ever?
MB: No, I did a three-quarter squat (two inches above parallel) with 923 at 188 bodyweight.
HG: What about your other lifts?
MB: I did 535x3 bench and a 560 touch and go.
HG: With a bench shirt?
MB: I never liked a bench shirt. I found them too restrictive, so I never used one.
HG: Realistically, what could you have done as a 198?
MB: Being conservative, I am certain of 926, 573, 804.
HG: That's 2303! A hundred pounds more than Ed Coan's total record and 55 pounds more than the squat record.
MB: I would have done these lifts barring injury. No doubt about it.
HG: Did you ever have any injuries during your career?
MB: Never.
HG: That is remarkable and most unusual. How did you prevent this?
MB: Smart training and lots of stretching. I believe this kept me from injury. I stretched from my high school wrestling days and never abandoned it.
HG: Did you do your personal involvement with Ruthie Shaler?
Some suggested a romantic interest.
MB: We became very good friends. She was an incredible lady/lifter and I respected her as a person. There was nothing more than that.
HG: Did you keep track of your biometrics?
MB: I believe in their scientific authenticity. I felt it best for me not to chart or know my own. I felt it could be psychologically detrimental to my performance. I saw that a major meet fell in a low cycle.
HG: Who was your coach?
MB: I never had a real coach. Basically, I trained myself. In the



Rewards Along the Way... included a diamond ring Best Lifter award, presented by designer Fredrick Prete at the '82 Seniors. (J. Strauss)

I moved to Dayton to get close to Larry and learn more about powerlifting and trained near the big breakthrough came under the tutelage of Pacifico?
MB: Yes, that is an accurate assessment. We both learned from each other. My strength increased so fast I had trouble gauging it.
HG: How did you meet Larry?
MB: We met at the 1977 Junior Nationals. We hit it off real good. I'd read and heard about him beforehand. When I saw him lift, I liked his style. He had good well on and off the platform. His lifting caught my eye. He wanted each lift to look easy with style, control, and correct form. It made a lasting impression on me. You must control the lift and not let it control you. Later I attended a Pacifico Seminar in Chicago. I set four 148 records that day. He was cool. I liked that.
HG: How do you feel about Larry today?
MB: I am proud to consider him a close, personal friend, always. HG: I first met you at the new Life Spa in 1979 in my hometown in New Castle, Indiana.
MB: Yes, I remember you. Larry was involved in the spa chain at the time. There were maybe a dozen or so in Ohio and Indiana.

legs spread wide on his pommel horse routine. I'd watched ski jumpers with their vertical leaps in the tuck position with calves straight. I figured, leverage-wise, if I could squat sitting back on my heels with my wide stance and toes pointed out would give me a big advantage. I explained this to Larry. It helped me, and my squat improved significantly. Larry came up with the name "Bridges Flair".
HG: There were others who used a modification of your style. Why could you do so much more than everyone else?
MB: I used my body levers to the best advantage. I put all the stress on my biggest muscle groups - the hips and glutes.
HG: You have stated you rely on your delts and shoulders mostly?
MB: No, the pectorals.
HG: What was your favorite meet?
MB: My first Worlds in Finland was my first international meet. I got to go to a foreign country. I liked everyone, and we stayed together at one hotel. There was always someone to talk to. Terry Todd was a most interesting fellow. We all lifted in a packed house with an enthusiastic crowd. Larry's 1979 Worlds was also significant to me.
HG: You never participated in the Big Hawaii Record Breakers Meet. Were you ever invited?
MB: Yes, once, but I declined as I was training for the Seniors.
HG: Would you have liked to have participated there?
MB: In the beginning, yes. Later on, after seeing some of the bad lifts turned off on TV coverage, I got turned off.
HG: What about Bell beating your 837 world record squat there?
MB: I would have liked to see him weigh in. After I saw Clark's 1025 half squat I didn't give the meet any credibility.
HG: What is your prime objective in competition?
MB: Winning first, records second.
HG: Did you rely on chiropractic?
MB: No, I never need it. I got adjusted a few times, but never relied on it.
HG: What was your favorite lift?
MB: When I started out, the bench. I set a world record in my first meet. When my squat was my best lift it became my favorite.
HG: What of the deadlift?
MB: It was my least favorite. I always had negative thoughts concerning it. It is logical to leave your strong points alone. They will stay. One should work their weaknesses. I did not practice



Mike took an ADFPA National 181 title back in St. Louis in 1988.

Bob's respect for that deadlift (laugh).
HG: So that was it?
MB: Yes, I had no more motivation that was my last meet. I went about 1977. I experimented until I perfected my own technique. I complemented a good squatter, almost like a squat in reverse. The legs and hips work in unison.
HG: Who has been your biggest supporter over the years?
MB: My brother Bob, without a doubt.
HG: How ironic - that his best lift is your worst. Do you think he did that on purpose?
MB: (Laugh) It balances out the Bridges Brothers, don't you think? Remember, I did later concentrate on it and proved I could do it as well (738 @ 171 bodyweight, at 1988 WDFPF Worlds).
HG: Mike, let's talk about your comeback in 1988. What motivated you to enter the American Drug Free Powerlifting Association Nationals?
MB: My brother Bob was training for it, and asked me to train with him and give it a go. I thought it would be a fun thing to do. It was in August in St. Louis. Bob won the 165 pound class with 1620.1 won the 181s.
HG: What did you do?
MB: 1995 - I was pushed in the squat by Bob Wagner. I set a record 738. Then he did 749, so I upped it to 750 on a fourth. I enjoyed the competition. It was new experience for me. I can't recall any time I was ever challenged in the squat. I also made a 451 bench and 705 deadlift.
HG: What did you like about AD-FFA?
MB: I liked the polygraph test. I prevent people from taking drugs to train and then going off in time to clear urinalysis. They employ random, unannounced testing at any time up to the world championships.
HG: You lifted an won the WDFPF Worlds in June 1989 in Chicago.
MB: Yes, it was the second world meet in WDFPF history. Six foreign countries entered, and Bob won his first ever world title in an organization doing 1576 at 165. I won by a margin of 336 pounds in the 181 category.
HG: Your squat and bench were awfully low, but your deadlift was unbelievable. Tell us about it.
MB: I had done an 804 squat several times training for this meet. I decided not to go all out in the first two lifts and save something for the deadlift. I wanted to prove that I could do something good in that as well as if I concentrated on it. I weighed 171 and pulled 738. I think I got

what I'm preaching.
HG: Did you always use the sumo style?
MB: No, I started with the conventional style. I switched to sumo about 1977. I experimented until I perfected my own technique. I complemented a good squatter, almost like a squat in reverse. The legs and hips work in unison.
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HG: Like what?
MB: Polygraph, urinalysis, blood test, anything but a brain scan (laugh).
HG: Was residual traces of the red cryptonite might show up, implanted during your boyhood encounter with the UFO and those aliens.
HG: Red cryptonite, unlike the green cryptonite which is bad for the red the good stuff that gives you...?
MB: ...power and abilities far beyond that of mortal men? Yes.
HG: And after you back up your words?
MB: I'll even grow my hair as long as John Traver and submit to a haircut after the meet.
HG: Maybe if you break John's world record deadlift he might submit to a haircut, too.
MB: Yes, of course, that would be a good stipulation.
HG: Who would the barber be?
MB: Marv Phillips, who else?
HG: Are you serious about this? How long would you take to get in world record shape after four and a half years with no weights?
MB: I can do it in one year. Have someone come up with the procedure I mentioned, and I'll prove it.
HG: Mike, thanks for this interview. In closing, what would be your advice to any aspirants out there who would like to be "Just Like Mike"?
MB: Train smart. Perfect your style. Make your own body levers work to your advantage. If that is one secret I have, it is that I used biomechanics to the utmost in my own personal achievements. I have no mental barriers. Work your weaknesses and soon you will have none. Don't cheat. There are no short cuts to true strength.
HG: What one thing influenced and inspired you the most in your career?
MB: Unquestionably it is Mike Lambert's Powerlifting USA Magazine. It was reported unbiased, it was informative and a real inspiration to see the great coverage or if you're lucky maybe even on the cover. It united everyone and made the sport grow and prosper. Powerlifting owes a great deal to Mike Lambert.

A powerman in the mold of Mike Bridges and his successor Ed Coan may come along just once in a lifetime. It takes the perfect combination of genetic ability and mind over matter. Preserve the legends of strength and cherish the memories. The exploits of Mike Bridges should motivate, inspire, and live... forever.
HG: A corporate sponsor with big bucks to back you up?
MB: It would take that. If so, I can guarantee I'd do it.
HG: What stipulations?
MB: I'd do it at the USPF Nationals with the strictest of officiating. I would submit to any type of drug testing.
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