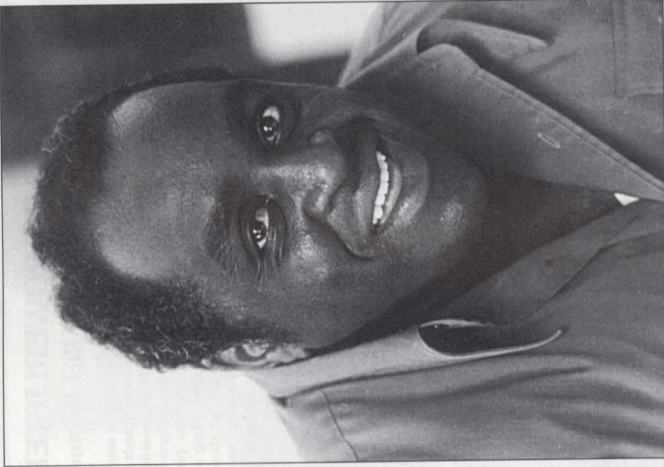


Interview

JIM WILLIAMS as told to Powerlifting USA by Herb Glossbrenner



The Lord of the Bench Press... that's what Herb Glossbrenner calls Jim

Growing up black in a white man's world was especially difficult back in the 1940's. Civil rights were nonexistent. The proponents of such were scorned.

The philosopher Frank Boas once said: "The existence of any pure race with special endowments is a myth, as is the belief that there are races all of whose members are fore-doomed to eternal inferiority. The Bible tells us that all men are created equal. This is to say that we are all equally born. There is no difference, but the world contains much indifference."

This is a story of one man's trials and tribulations. He was colossal in size and monstrous in strength. He is a great powerlifting legend that is all but forgotten. He is unknown to today's new generation, and that is a tragedy; he never gained the respect or notoriety he deserved. Great were his exploits in the Powerlifting arena. His forte was the bench press. His focus in this lift bordered the supernatural. So awesome was that ability that even today those who witnessed his lifts speak of it with reverence and awe. He was indeed a mighty locomotive, building steam as he thundered forward, gaining power and momentum. Somewhere along the way, he got switched on the wrong tracks. Several times he was derailed but kept coming back. His greatest feat may have been the light he saw at the end of the tunnel - emerging in total commitment to Christianity and finding at last the conviction of his faith, the brotherhood of mankind and most importantly in himself. Learn now about the man with the immense bench - his omnipotence - Jim Williams.

I got my first glimpse of Big Jim in the 1968 Junior Nationals in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I walked into the YMCA and found the competition area. There they stood real as life - plain as black-and-white - two humungous humans loitering by the bench press apparatus. Regarding the two monsters - the great buffalo proved to be Doug Ramsey (6'11"/315); the huge bear was Big Jim Williams (6'11"/320). To fully appreciate their gargantuan size you'd have had to see them in the flesh. A photo of the 5'5" 165-champ Ron Hale sandwiched between these two could have been captioned "David and the Goliaths."

Tracing Big Jim's roots we must return to Day One. Jimmy, the youngest of five brothers was delivered by Mama Williams on February 25, 1940. Scranton, a city in northern Pennsylvania, is most famous for its plentiful supply of anthracite - a mineral-hard coal containing few volatile hydrocarbons and burning almost without flame. Many will argue that Big Jim was the community's greatest natural resource. Jim

iron. Jim bent the bars and escaped. They thought he'd escaped. Later they found him grinding out benches in the work-out area. The guard who lifted weights himself was so impressed that he said nothing of the incident and even arranged for Jim to get more training time.

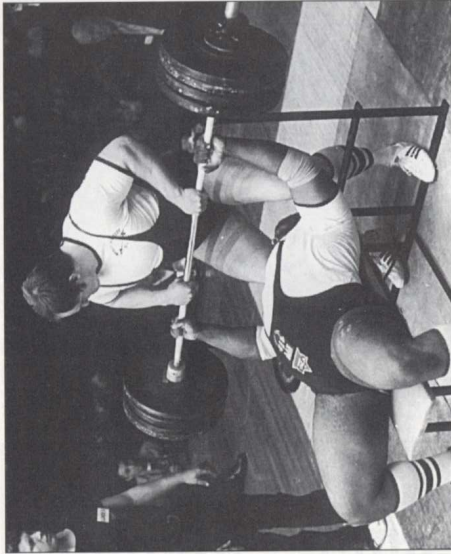
While incarcerated he got his squat and deadlift up to 600 and his bench up to 455. He returned to mainstream society in 1966. He met Joe Weinstein who was then the National 198 lb. champ. Weinstein's 465 bench made a big impression. Here was a man 100 lb. lighter who surpassed him. They bonded, and Joe invited him to join the famous Surfbreaker's WLCC of Barnegat, New Jersey. Jim gained much training wisdom from his newfound friends. He absorbed every tidbit of knowledge, practiced it, and made good progress. Jim had now merged from the onramp and high-railing down the powerlifting highway!

His first taste of the big time competition came on August 7, 1967 - the Junior Nationals at Patterson, New Jersey. He'd reached his full growth and was close to 300 lbs. He faced the 65" Olympic lifter who was an up and coming star from Sykesville, Maryland. Pickett was almost as heavy as Jim. Williams out-distanced the giant after the first two events. "Ernie" bridged the 90 lb. gap by pulling a 705 deadlift and won the title as lighter man. Jim was taken by surprise, but was a good sportsman, as he was through his career - win or lose! Jim didn't feel he was ready for the Senior Nationals so he bided his time and trained hard. He improved his deadlift to 640 in a local meet, but seldom practiced it. His next major outing was the 1968 Juniors in his hometown, as I mentioned earlier. Our Central Indiana Club Superheavy, Howard Durio, pulled a major upset pulling 710 deadlift to beat Jim (3rd place (1810 to 1805)). It was another case of the deadlift being Jim's undoing. He was disappointed in his performance before a home crowd, but had performed admirably in my tough company.

Jim couldn't afford the travel cost to the far away Seniors in Los Angeles so he prepared for the following year and planned to win! The year went fast and Jim grew in strength and girth. The 1969 AAU Seniors were in nearby York, Pennsylvania, the muscle capital of the world and headquarters of the famous York Barbell Club and its founder Bob Hoffman, dubbed the

"Father of Weightlifting". If you hadn't guessed by now the bench was Jim's pet lift. When two years earlier Pat Casey had surpassed the 600 lb. barrier, Big Jim was awed. During the past year his training buddies had urged him on. Williams could not even imagine himself doing such a lift. Up and up his bench crept, soon 535 and then 575 right before the big meet. As his self-confidence grew, he thought about it more often. Six-seventeen seemed such a long way off. The man from Bellowater - what power, he thought. Maybe it wasn't an impossible dream.

A quartet of prime beef engaged battle for the title. The two time defending champ was the red-goated Curdy; Minnesota's Paul Burman, a lumberjack with a wonder of a back. The new kid on the block was "thunder thigh" Russ Fletcher, the big Virginian, dubbed the new Werewolf. He fed upon the chants of 800 that rocked the auditorium. So, the magic number was loaded. Big Jim came in biggest of all at 339. Wow! The bench came first back then. Weaver punched up a short-lived meet record 526, but missed 555. Williams lumbered up gracefully to his favorite piece of equipment, laid down and zapped up a 575 opener. Then came the big one - he demolished his next lift and became the 2nd man in history to pop from his grass, splintering the biggest lift ever. His 620 - almost! Close only counts in horse-shoes and hand grenades. The hand-writing was as plain as graffiti on a Los Angeles overpass. For the Scranton giant the absolute record was only a matter of time. Williams squatted 730. Curdy stayed with



At the 1971 Worlds... Big Jim gets a handoff from John Kuc (courtesy F. Peffer)

them. Fletcher did 760, but was so far back in the bench he was no threat. Curdy, wild-eyed, watched like a hawk as Weaver missed 750 and a big jump to 805, both on depth. The announcer called the lift a "dipity-do". Weaver took his "do-or-die" lift over. It was another dip into shallow water and arose to the chrons of gleaming whites - a new American record. This brought a fervent protest from Curdy's Bedlam supporter Don Congratulate. Hoffman was the first to shake his hand. For that one instant in time, caught up in the frenzy of the moment, the rulebook had been thrown out the window. The audience, oblivious to the travesty which had just transpired, howled their approval.

Afterwards in the warmup area I held a sidebar with Jimmy, my appareled sidekick Merle's Kelly, Rudy Sebilo, and a prominent black official who is still active today. We all agreed that it was more than just a bad call. It has been 25 years and much water has spilled over the dam. I recently phoned Rudy to corroborate my reminiscence, but he has no memory of these events. Curdy was still alive, he'd concurred. Big Jim got screwed. To this day no one other than me has written about this or supported his cause. He took his medicine, bitter though it was, without verbal protest. I even remember him shaking Curdy's hand. That shows real class in my book.

Jim kept whatever resentment he harbored inside and channeled his frustration on the barbell. He trained with a vengeance. The day he'd long awaited came on February 14, 1970. At the Junior Middle

Again, he chalked and stalked, pacing the platform rear like a nervous tiger. He approached the bar and pulled...

Roder wrote in Iron Man: "He lifted it up, but seemed to get a quick down signal." Whitley transcribed in Muscular Development that it was a clean lift and he stood erect and straight with it, but after the signal he dropped the bar, a rule violation.

My reminiscence of the lift is most vivid. History tells us that Curdy won the Sr. National title four times consecutively (1967-68-69-70). He was a great champ and took on all comers and came out on top. No other super-heavy won as many titles. His victory here was a farce. The lift was passed and it weighed 801.5. The unanimous decision was unquestionably biased. I say this because I watched with a clear, unobstructed view standing on the floor directly in front of the elevated stage. Four flagrant rule violations could not be an oversight by three qualified officials. (1) It was pulled above the legs and supported on the thighs (2) The bar stopped (3) It was nudged, hitched and walked to the final position (4) The bar was dropped from arm's length following the quick down signal. Big Jim saw the decision and reacted with utter disbelief. Bedlam erupted - everyone mobbed the stage to offer Don Congratulate. Hoffman was the first to shake his hand. For that one instant in time, caught up in the frenzy of the moment, the rulebook had been thrown out the window. The audience, oblivious to the travesty which had just transpired, howled their approval.

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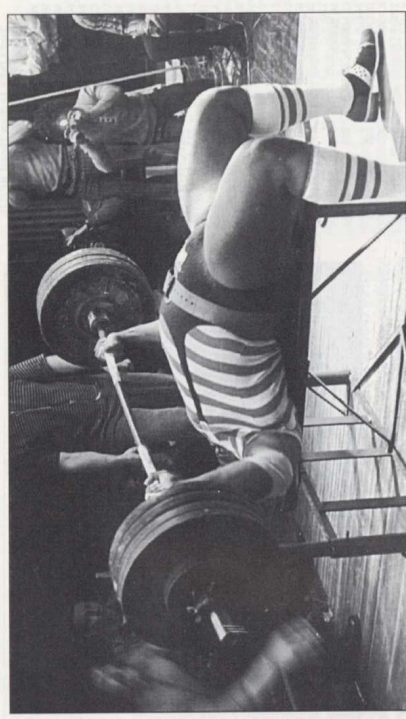


(article continued from page 20)

Iron Game History. If you train with the best it must certainly rub off. In a short span of time with Williams, Kuc's bench climbed from the mid four hundreds to 600 this day, even with Hoffman's long-clap. Reinhold, prompted by wife Cindy, muscled up 590 and was third overall with 2150. It was a moment of great things to come at a further date in time.

When it was announced that Williams would commence with 630 the crowd responded vociferously. Bob Hoffman awoke from his cat-nap to clap. It was way too long, but undaunted - Jim rammed up the monstrous barbell like a little boy and he would have crushed anyone else. He called for 675, and the crowd roared. The clock ticked down, Jim made the platform with only 15 seconds remaining. The time factor was pressing. With only one minute left to complete the lift he eased his massive body onto the bench and took the handoff. Gears reversed and the mother of all massive loads slowly descended to his massive chest. In that instant time froze. Seconds ticked away slowly. Asleep at the switch was Hoffman. Seconds lasted what seemed an eternity. The crowd was dead silent. The only sound was the hammering of adrenaline as it roared in my ears. I counted in my head: two thousand one ... one thousand two ... one thousand three ... one thousand ... The signal rang. The bar was launched skyward. Up and up. The massive lats contracted. The monstrous deltoids erupted with power. His mighty chest flexed, with those incredible pectorals boosting those stupendous arms as the bar inched upward, quivered, strained and finally locked out! It was a tough finish, but he'd made it. There was no time to savor the moment. Almost immediately he called for 700! It was though I was looking into a crystal ball, circumventing time for a glimpse of an event taking place far in the future. I snapped back to reality. Pat Casey had smashed the 600 barrier and was years ahead of his time. Yet, now in the span of less than one and a half years Williams had surpassed Casey's 617 ceiling six times: 628 - 635 - 650 - 655 - 660 - 675 and was now attempting to bust through the 700 barrier!

With one and a half minutes total time left Jim appeared from the wings. He was on the platform; the crowd yelled encouragement. Jim took to the bench; they grew quiet. With power no man on earth had yet witnessed, he took the weight to the chest. The signal finally came. He blasted history's biggest payload of iron up three-quarters of the way. The impetus slowed; he strained



Jimmy Jamming With 700 at the 1972 World Championships. It was close. (photo courtesy Frank Peifer)

and then gravity took over control as the bar drifted back to his chest. The crowd roared their approval long and loud. We'd witnessed one of the greatest feats of strength of all time. Everyone screamed until they were hoarse.

Jim had vertigo problems squating. Dizziness led him to dump 805 behind himself while in his bottom position. He cleared his head with a quick snort of smelling salts - and repeated. It was down and up - no sweat. He moved a foot and stepped back before the signal to rack - no lift. Jim needed a breather and gambled with a big jump. His last attempt at 825 was a clutch lift. No sweat. It looked great and earned much more. He led the contest on subtotal. The eventual outcome was a foregone conclusion considering Kuc's deadlift ability. To Jim that didn't matter, and he wanted to do it with the hips high and head down worked for Kuc, but was a detriment for Jim. He got 755 nearly to his knees. I recall thinking that he was capable then of 800 strength-wise and only his faulty technique kept him from doing it. His total was 2225 and at that point in time was ranked No. 3 on the All-Time list. This fact proves that he was much more than a one-jiff specialist.

Jim accepted his runner-up award graciously and being the gentleman he is, Jim congratulated Kuc - his protege - for a job well done.

This was the last time big Jim stepped into the competition arena. His lifting activities were circumvented by personal problems. Jim slipped back into his old habits. Had he stayed on the straight and narrow path he'd have emerged into a beautiful garden. These bearing luscious

fruits were his for the taking but instead he once again bit into the forbidden apple. Prior to his impending imprisonment he recorded some truly remarkable lifting far surpassing his best in competition. We will talk of his lifts later.

Jim later saw the light and does not lament his destiny, but rather that he was never credited with holding a world record even though his 660 in 1971 and 675 in 1972 were performed at the World Championships. Was this a case of personal discrimination against Jim? He certainly believed that, especially since he'd heard Kuc's squat and deadlift called world records.

Let us examine the facts. What happened, and was it justified? I got the exact details from Bob Pecker, a powerlifting historian and long-time member of the IPF executive committee:

The first two World meets were sanctioned by the AAU which was then the governing body of powerlifting in the USA. The vast majority of lifters in these first two organized World meets were comprised of USA lifters. Following the 1972 competition, the IPF (International Powerlifting Federation) was formed. The matter concerning the records was tabled until the following year, even though the majority had agreed that the highest lifts and winning totals in all categories from the 1971 and 1972 World Championships would be considered world records. The third World Meet was a three-part site-wise. It was again in Harrisburg. Now regulated under the auspices of the IPF, it was voted that the lifts made in the previous two championships would be tossed out and replaced by personal records. Jim slipped back into his old habits. Had he stayed on the straight and narrow path he'd have emerged into a beautiful garden. These bearing luscious

records. It affected all previously recognized records and athletes, not solely Jim. The reasons for this decision were given as the following: (1) Incongruity of the rules. Elbow wraps had been voted out and were not used in the 1973 meet. Kase wraps had been banned in the USA, but allowed elsewhere in the world including this competition. Great Britain allowed more wrapping than in USA. In the interests of international camaraderie the USA went over backwards to be good hosts in 1972 allowing them to use the wraps they were accustomed to using, it was a tradeoff, as they had heard Kuc's squat and deadlift agreed to follow the USA sequence of lifting with bench press first. The squat being the first lift followed by the bench press became the standard in 1973 and has been so ever since.

(2) Fairness to all. The foreign athletes, despite being a minority, got a vote. They thought with the new rulings implemented that everyone would henceforth have an equal opportunity. Autocratic? With total disregard to the athletes such as Jim who had established records? Yes, absolutely. Seldom does an athlete have a say-so in his or her destiny.

Just how great was Jim's 675 lift, that was credited as an American record but not a world record? The USPF became the US organization of powerlifting when powerlifting separated from its former guardian, the AAU. They wanted to have complete control of their own destiny. His great lift survived all comers in this the major organization until Anthony Clark finally surpassed it in 1994 with 683. How does that grab you? This clearly shows the significance of Jim's performance back in November of 1972.

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"Chimes?"

JW: I picked it up during my boyhood. It stuck. You might say I thought it was a "pencil".

HG: In your brushes with the law, I understand you once printed your own money. I heard the bills were very realistic. How'd you get caught?

JW: I might have printed a few ones with Booker T. Washington instead of George. No, seriously the ink color was not quite right. It didn't fool the experts. I got 11.5 months for that.

HG: I hear they served you with papers at the time of your arrest what kind?

JW: ABENCH warrant, what else?

HG: I've heard you were once the overseer of the world's oldest profession. True or false?

JW: Herb, I can unequivocally tell you I was never foreman of a carpenter's union.

HG: Jim, what made you finally realize that crime doesn't pay?

JW: Seven or eight years. I had a lot of time for thinking. I finally realized that one can only be a fool for so long. I blame nobody but myself. Now I follow the road to Calvary. I became a devout Christian. I am active in the A.M.E. Methodist Episcopal church. I am also the cook here. My wife does the cooking at home.

HG: Tell us about your wife and family.

JW: Patricia and I have been married since 1966. She's stuck with me through the good times and the bad. We have two sons and a daughter, all grown now. James, Jr., is 27 and married. I'm a grandpa now. Nathan is 24, and Georgianna, my daughter is 22, also married.

HG: Did any of your sons try powerlifting?

JW: Yes, Nathan lifted in 1987 in a NASA high school meet at Lake George near Canada. His lifts I believe were: 600 363 584. He was one of two (both black) that were drug tested among all the participants of the competition. They refused to give him his trophy until the results of the tests came back.

HG: How did you react to that.

JW: I was furious and made them give him the trophy. I made it plain that if the results were positive he'd go to jail.

HG: So what happened?

JW: Tests came up negative. I never heard any more concerning the matter. Nathan wasn't too motivated after that incident and did not continue to powerlift.

HG: What other activities are you involved with besides church?

JW: I do community service work. I'm involved with the Veterans Association. I drive them to the hospital for doctor check-ups and

to pick up their medications.

HG: What were your best ever lifts?

JW: Singles, reps, Olympic lifting, regular powerlifting, and assistant lifts.

JW: In Olympic lifting I did a 280 snatch, and a 375 clean & jerk. I pressed over 500 on a very steep incline. I push pressed 450 from the racks. Following the 1972 Worlds I benched 700 (paused at the York Barbell club before an audience. I benched 720 with a pause in Bob Gaylor's gym basement. My best ever for reps were 600x10, 630x4, 650x3, 700x2. I paused on everything. I never did touch and go's or bounces. I front squatted 700 and half squatted above parallel with 1200. My best powerlifts were in training. I dropped 900 squat and 805 deadlift after I finally learned to do them correctly. I also pulled 840 to the knees.

HG: Your best training lifts come to 2425 - wow! What a shame you didn't get a chance to try them in competition. What about your comeback announcement in 1980.

JW: I was 41 and training for the key for me. I did front lateral raises with 45 and 100 lb plates. Big lifts are essential. The bigger the lifts the bigger the bench, it's as simple as that. The lats and pecs get the weight 3/4 the way up. The triceps and delts finish it.

HG: Ebbate on your low-rep sets.

JW: Low reps and heavy singles allowed me to go heavy every day. I built up the tolerance to do this and quickly recuperated. You don't get strong unless you lift heavy weights.

HG: What do you think of Anthony Clark?

JW: Cimon Herb. You know everyone wants a record. Why does he turn his wrists backward? Is that bona fide? Is it to get through his sticking point easier or to make the officials? What can he do without the shirt?

HG: He claims without a shirt - 700; 662 with a shirt and 600 without a shirt using the conventional style. Who among the current crop of 700 benchers impress you the most?

JW: This Craig Tokarski is incredible! I know Confessore is a real powerlifter. I'd love to see what he could do without a bench shirt. This James Henderson has done 700 shirtless. Looks like he's my hero.

Guinness Book of Records documents the feat of a nine man team of holdogs, who in 1987 embarked on a 24 hour marathon bench barked. The final total accumulated was something over eight million lb. The weight used was insignificant that big Jim might have used it for a toothpick. This is a feat

have done with one?

HG: You would have done 770 for sure. Many, including Ricky Crain and myself, think you'd have done 800.

JW: How times have changed.

HG: You once did arm wrestling. Muscular Development made a big deal of you getting your arm pinned by Moé Baker. They even printed a picture of it.

JW: Herb, Moé was a world champ in arm wrestling. I was strong, sure, but there is technique involved. What they didn't bother to tell you is that I won one match; he took the other two.

HG: How is your health today? Do you still lift?

JW: I'm doing okay now. I'd developed blood pressure problems with severe repercussions. I dropped 60 pounds bodyweight and feel much better. No, I don't lift anymore. I have too much catching up to do with my life.

HG: Was your bench press "secret"?

JW: It's in my book. Lying about der shrugs with heavy dumbbells was the key for me. I did front lateral raises with 45 and 100 lb plates. Big lifts are essential. The bigger the lifts the bigger the bench, it's as simple as that. The lats and pecs get the weight 3/4 the way up. The triceps and delts finish it.

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of strength? What a joke. The McWhirter brothers had lied. Previously Anderson's 6270 lb. backlift was not acknowledged as a success-weight lifted by a human. Success-vinced this lift had not been documented by Mr. Terry Todd and his cohorts. So his monumental lifts were omitted altogether and replaced by this superfluous underlining of a national endurance. Myself, Jim, and countless others consider this transgression deplorable.

Lack of recognition cuts deeper than a sword and is the worst indignation. You won't find Williams in tops in my book. Jim takes nothing away from today's bench proponents. He congratulates the man who broke his record while I honor us look at some of the longest enduring records in all sports:

That of greatest longevity must be Pro-Basketball's Wilt Chamberlain. His 100 points scored in one game on March 2, 1962 has gone 33 years plus, and still counting. Jesse Owens long jumped 26'8" on May 25, 1935. His mark stood until the early sixties, Baseball's Babe Ruth career home run tally spanned 26 years. It was finally surpassed by Hank Aaron on April 8, 1974.

What are the oldest surviving records in the strength sports? weightlifting: Isaac Bengert set an American record at 132 lb. of 336 at the Tokyo Olympics. It lasted 27 years and was finally broken by Chris Leroux on December 6, 1991.

Let us now exalt the man whose record remained the longest on the powerlifting books: Williams' USPF American record 675 bench press stood like the rock of Gibraltar from November 9, 1972 until July 31, 1994 (21 years 8 months) I believe he is the greatest bench presser of all time. He raised his pet lift to an astronomical level back in the days when real strength ruled.

As I conclude the reminiscences of James Talbot Williams, this - my tribute - is a small token of appreciation to the man who has unequivocally Lord of the Bench, May his trials and tribulations be an inspiration for us all. **DIGNITY CONSISTS NOT IN POSSESSING HONORS BUT IN THE CONSCIOUSNESS THAT WE DESERVE THEM** - ARISTOTLE

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of strength? What a joke. The McWhirter brothers had lied. Previously Anderson's 6270 lb. backlift was not acknowledged as a success-weight lifted by a human. Success-vinced this lift had not been documented by Mr. Terry Todd and his cohorts. So his monumental lifts were omitted altogether and replaced by this superfluous underlining of a national endurance. Myself, Jim, and countless others consider this transgression deplorable.

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