

Bill Grant 60 Years Young

By Charles Peeples

You saw him flashing a bicep with his grandson on the last issue's cover, and you might even have met him at the January PhillyFit Bash. However, many of us have seen Bill Grant over thirty years earlier, in the pages of George Butler's 1974 book *Pumping Iron*, a pivotal work largely responsible for today's profusion of gyms and also for introducing to the world the man who would be "Governator." It's a nonchalant, yet proud pose in that "Bill Grant checking his stomach" photo; a young man with an Afro and huge arms pulls up his tight black tee as he studies his abs and chest in a mirror. In its bare glimpse of a handful of men engaged in a lonely esoteric pursuit, it captures perfectly the Zeitgeist of Gold's Gym back when there was only one, known only to its denizens, and it was indeed "The Mecca." To have been part of that, to have been Mr. America (1972) and Mr. World (1974) right in the midst of bodybuilding's heyday...wow!

That Bill continues to look so robust and healthy today says much about the virtues of the bodybuilding lifestyle. Without the absurdly inflated dimensions that characterize today's top pros, Bill retains what counts: an abundance of lean hard muscle, low body-fat, excellent health and a satisfying career in the fitness industry. It's about longevity, folks, and Bill's got a lot to share.

What was the gym-scene like when you first got started in bodybuilding?

When I first started bodybuilding there were no real gyms to speak of, and I couldn't have afforded them anyway. I used to train in backyards, people's attics, basements and in the bedroom of my house or my friend's house. At fifteen I joined the YMCA of Orange -not the greatest place to train but it was affordable. It had a wooden plank floor with you could see through. We had plumber's pipes for squat racks, chinning bars and dipping bars. The leg press was made of wood and the weights were big truck gears. There was no



Photo by George Butler

Bill Grant and Franco Columbu help Arnold build calves.

air conditioning back in those days so we had a small window on one side of the wall and an exhaust fan on the other side. We were right next to the stuffy locker room and the swimming pool, so the exhaust fan just sucked the steamy air from the locker room and pool area into the gym. When the temperature was eighty or ninety outside, it was as hot inside, but more humid. About a year later I was able to go to the one of the top gyms at the time, Mid-City Health Club, where all the famous bodybuilders and top wrestlers trained. It was a four-floor walk-up located right in the heart of Times Square. And we all know what Times Square was like back then, so you can imagine what it must have been like for a kid of fifteen. It was one block from the Port Authority where I would catch the bus. I must have been asked five or six times if I wanted a date before I even got to

the Port Authority. Arnold used to train at this gym when he was in town in the late sixties, which shows you how little there was to choose from!

You experienced the "Golden Era" of bodybuilding -Venice Beach with Dave Draper, Arnold, et al. Tell us about that.

It was one of the greatest memories of my life, a dream come true. When I was in New Jersey that was all I could think about was going to California -the beach, bikinis, sunshine, and of course working out at the famous Gold's Gym. Before Gold's, everyone used to go to Vince's Gym in North Hollywood on Ventura Boulevard. The late Vince Gironda was called the "Guru of Bodybuilding." Not only did he train bodybuilders in his gym but a lot of famous movie stars would train there as well. Vince was a strange guy, hard to get to know, but he would let you know where you stood with him; he was not one to hold in his emotions. If you didn't like what he had to say to you, he would quickly tell you to get out and go train somewhere else. He also didn't believe in doing squats for the legs. When he took the squat racks out of the gym, everyone started to migrate to the new gym in town: Gold's Gym, located in Venice, one or two blocks off the beach. Now this was a real bodybuilding gym, and most bodybuilders would give anything to come and train here with guys like Arnold, Dave Draper (of *Don't Make Waves* fame -and also another New Jersey boy), Franco Columbo, Ken Waller, Frank Zane and some of the greats who didn't live in Venice on a regular basis, like Sergio Oliva, Serge Nubret and Lou "The Incredible Hulk" Ferrigno. It was the place you had to be if you wanted to be a famous bodybuilder, just like Hollywood if you wanted to be an actor or actress. Those were the days where we all really did everything together. We trained together, we ate together and we partied together, true camaraderie. You have to remember bodybuilding wasn't a mainstream sport back in the seventies until the film *Pumping Iron* was released. Then all of a sudden bodybuilding gyms were cropping up everywhere. People were now interested in bodybuilding shows, TV was starting to give us some play and the bodybuilding magazines were growing in popularity. We were now called upon to be on television shows and commercials. I did two Toyota commercials, a Bally's, and a McDonald's. I also appeared on billboards in Europe from a sock ad I did for a French Company. I was appearing on shows such as The Cher Show, The Smokey Robinson Revue, The Muppets Go Hollywood. I even worked on a TV pilot, The Famous George Burns and Pat Boone. I was once a bodyguard for Paul McCartney's kids when the Wings opened up their US tour in LA. A lot of us used to work for a security company that did all of the major Hollywood events such as the Peoples' Choice Awards. As I said in *Pumping Iron Returns*, there was enough energy in Gold's Gym from 10:00 am in the morning to about 12:00 noon to light up the city of Los Angeles. For me it was the greatest place to be for bodybuilding. It was seventy five to eighty degrees year round. My apartment was right off the beach and I could wake up every morning and see the ocean. I was really living the dream, and only paid \$180.00 a month for rent. After we worked out, we'd go to the restaurant down the street which we called "The Germans" and eat our usual meat and eggs, then go to "The Pit," where everyone would train outdoors, hang out and get the sun. Can you imagine eight or ten huge guys lying out there tanning and the reactions we got? I was married at the time, and one day I had brought my three kids to the gym. At the last minute I remembered that I had to get to a meeting at work, but had no time to take my kids back home. So I asked Arnold if he could watch my kids for a couple of hours until I came back. He agreed, but you can imagine what



Photo by George Butler

Pumping iron

was going through my mind, "I just left my three kids with Arnold and I'm hoping everything is going to be okay when I get back. If my wife knew that I'd left my kids with Arnold she'd hit the roof." But when I got back, the kids said Arnold was very good with them. He took them to McDonald's for hamburgers and ice cream, and then played with them at the beach. My kids, now with kids of their own, still treasure that day.

Gold's Gym moved to 2nd Street Santa Monica shortly after the film *Pumping Iron* was released. I had a hard time adjusting to the new location, but over time it picked up some of the same energy that was created at the original location. Gold's started to flourish under the new ownership of Ken Sprague; there were huge sales of Gold's Gym tee shirts, hats, sweats, etc. When Ken Sprague held the '77 Mr. America at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium it was a complete sellout, but what I enjoyed most was the job they gave me there. The legendary Mae West used to have a show that traveled all around the country featuring some of the most famous bodybuilders of that era. My job was to watch her while she was in her dressing room and then lead her to the stage to present the award to the winner. The winner, by the way, was the late Dave Johns, another Jersey boy who came from Newark. The show was absolutely fabulous, with TV and national newspaper coverage, but what happened the day before will go down in the record books as one of the most successful parades ever featuring bodybuilders. There were elephants, floats, marching bands and of course there was a huge crowd, estimated at well over 300,000. I was riding on the big AAU Float, and it got me a cover-shot on *Muscle Training Illustrated*.

Like many who got into training in the late seventies I first saw you in the book, "Pumping Iron." Of course the film wouldn't be released for another three years, but how did the book impact your life?

I think the book, *Pumping Iron*, associated me more to the bodybuilding scene than the film did at the time. Now thirty-one years later, I'm more remembered by bodybuilding fans than ever before because of the film. I feel that I was a part of something that made a difference in the sport I've been involved in for the last forty-six years. That film forever changed the way people thought about bodybuilding and exercise.

Most of the bodybuilders from that era feel it's gone downhill - money, drugs, lack of camaraderie... can you detail the bad and the good?



Sixty's just a number

What we have here is a sport that never really got any real recognition, no money and very little respect from the public. But with the release of *Pumping Iron*, all of that changed. When money gets involved, people change. The camaraderie was leaving, the drug use increasing, and like a ship going down, it became every man for himself. We've gotten off the path of what bodybuilding really is. The majority of fans out there who love

bodybuilding, and your average person who just works out to stay in shape -wanting maybe to build a little more muscle- have commented to me that they think the physiques have gotten less esthetic than in the past. They could relate to the physiques of yesterday because, unlike today's, they seemed attainable. For bodybuilding to regain the status of the *Pumping Iron* days when all the media loved us and it seemed like bodybuilding was finally becoming a recognized sport, we're going to have to make some positive changes in the way we're viewed by the public. This will take a team effort, because no one individual (short of another Arnold!) can make it right.

How has your own training & nutrition changed over the years?

I've just learned to train smarter now that I've gotten older. My body doesn't recover as fast as it did when I was in my twenties and thirties, so I have to take longer rest periods in between workouts. My joints and attachments are more fragile now, so I use much less weight in some exercises than I do in others. I still train with high volume -a lot of reps and low sets, with less rest in between exercises. I'm coming out with my own training videos so I can show people how to train safely and effectively to make progress in the shortest time. I've also come out with my own product for workout and recovery called Creatine Cocktail (you can get more information about the product by going to www.billgrant.net). As far as my diet is concerned I've been very fortunate to have a very fast metabolism, a regular calorie-furnace. I try to get a balance of carbs, protein and fats in my daily diet because recovery is really the key to making progress. If you're not recovering from your workouts, you won't make progress and you risk injury.

A confusing array of supplements exists out there; in brief, and without naming brands, what works and what's BS?

The supplement business is now under government scrutiny and I can see why. Some companies out there tout products that will help you gain twenty to thirty pounds of muscle in one month. That's bull! There's a lack of responsibility in the industry in making such claims, especially when "science" (pseudo-science, actually) is evoked to back up these claims. I'd advise everyone to stick to the basic supplements: protein powders (such as whey, milk and egg proteins made from calcium caseinate), liver tablets, a strong Multi-vitamin, amino acids, and of course a good creatine product. These will help build more strength, energy, lean muscle mass and recovery.

Another liver tablets user... cool! I take those horse-chokers by the handful, and brewer's yeast. I guess that makes me "old-school" too, huh?

I was brought up with those when I first starting training. Liver tablets are probably the most effective supplement on the market,

providing you with all of your B-vitamins especially B12 which does a whole host of things. It's a quality protein as well and has a lot of the enzymes the body needs for optimum health. Liver also enhances one's endurance tremendously.

How about glutamine? DHEA? Secretagogues and those transdermal HgH stimulants?

I am glad you mentioned glutamine because it is what they call a "non-essential" amino acid when in reality it is probably one of the most important ones. People might not know that glutamine is administered to burn patients because it helps spare the loss of muscle tissue, which happens rapidly with burn victims. So this is great for bodybuilders, helping the body from going into a catabolic state from over training. It also helps strengthen your immune system and eliminates lactic acid that forms in your body during a hard workout. Our ALL IN ONE drink includes glutamine along with whey protein. DHEA is very helpful for older guys because it helps keep our natural testosterone levels up to normal, this is one of the major chemical in our bodies that keep us looking young, our skin pliable, helps in preventing the atrophy of muscle tissue. It also helps keep connective tissue strong. Secretagogues and transdermal HgH stimulants basically do the same thing as DHEA.

What recommendations do you have for us older trainees (like me, with my arthritic elbows)?

Cut back on your sets and poundage, but increase the repetitions in your sets. We call this training smarter because after all, bodybuilding is all about longevity. Glucosamine/chondroitin/MSM help strengthen the ligaments and tendons, which start to deteriorate as we age, but I have learned of a better joint care supplement called hyaluronic acid. It's an ingredient that helps make the synovial fluid we need to keep the joints healthy.

What are some highlights of your career, inside and outside of bodybuilding? Tell us about your current projects (including www.billgrant.net)

The highlight of my career just came on July 4th when I received the Muscle Beach Hall of Fame Award from *Iron Man Magazine*. I believe it's important to give back to the community, so I've been involved in a program for the past seven years at the YMCA called the "Sports Legends." I got involved in this because I started my bodybuilding career at the YMCA (the Mr. High School New Jersey). We go around to the schools in the Newark and surrounding communities to speak with kids about how important it is to stay in school and help motivate them to make the right decisions. I'm currently working on my new training DVDs and a book. I also MC bodybuilding shows from New York to Virginia and just held my first Bill Grant Bodybuilding & Figures Classic in Allentown. This show is run in conjunction with many other sports such as basketball, martial arts, volleyball, power lifting, arm-wrestling, amateur boxing, etc. It's a three-day event called the SportsFest. Most people may not know I turned sixty years young September 27th. By the way I have eight grandchildren and I feel like I'm in my early thirties!



Charles Peeples, NSCA-CPT, NCTMB, whose articles have appeared in numerous fitness and bodybuilding magazines, is a well-known proponent for girls' and women's physical advancement (www.teamvalkyries.org). In addition to being a Nationally-Certified Personal Trainer, he is a Nationally-Certified Massage Therapist (www.yourlocalpersonaltrainer.com).