

# Where Better Ideas Come From



By Tom Lincir,  
President and Founder,  
Ivanko Barbell Company

In previous articles and advertising, I have talked about “the evolution of better ideas”. In this article, I want to talk about where those better ideas come from. In our case, as I look over the course of our 35 year history, I realize that the best source of ideas for new products and product improvements has been our customers. Gym owners and weight room managers are in the trenches watching their members use our products on a daily basis. They observe what we’ve done right, and where we’ve gone wrong. They are our eyes and ears in the marketplace. We listen to them very intently.

To illustrate this philosophy in operation, this is the story of how our “Design No. 51” rubber dumbbell evolved from the original idea to its current state 51 revisions later. It might surprise you

In the early 1980’s, one of our distributors sold several sets of iron dumbbells to a health club that had just installed \$200,000 worth of strength equipment. Six months later I asked how the dumbbells were holding up, hoping to get some valuable input that I could use to further improve the product. “The dumbbells are fine, but the equipment is trashed”, he reported. “What do you mean,” I asked. He explained, “You know, when they drop the iron dumbbells, the upholstery gets cut and the powder coating gets chipped”.

That sparked the original idea - to enrobe an iron dumbbell with a material that would cushion the impact against a facility’s equipment, upholstery, and

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carpeting. Rubber was the logical choice because it is economical, durable, and “Nothing protects like rubber”. There were rubber bumper plates at that time, and there were a few adjustable rubber dumbbells showing up in various countries. But nobody had ever tried to make a fixed weight rubber dumbbell. Several months after the idea was triggered by this customer’s observation, we introduced the first fixed weight rubber dumbbell in 1983. In addition to protecting the good looks of equipment and furnishings, gym owners were also getting positive comments from members that they liked the quietness. In fact, it has since been shown that rubber dumbbells reduce gym noise by approximately 30%.

That was “Design No. 1”, but it wasn’t long before customer feedback



**Design No. 1 — Ivanko’s original fixed-weight rubber dumbbell introduced in 1983.**

was telling us to get to work on “Design No. 2.” We had the usual problems in the beginning — bad odor, insufficient tear strength, strange and unknown additives in the rubber. Over the years, we tried many different rubber compounds to arrive at the formula we use today. We prefer a slightly softer formula than some other companies — about 55-60 on a Type A Shore durometer. So there were a number of design refinements to address in these areas.

The first major revision was Design No. 9. A customer noticed that even though the plates were rubber, the steel washer on the end would still sometimes chip the painted equipment. Another customer complained that we did not have a way to identify the dumbbell poundage. In response, we changed to a rounded, rubber coated end plate with a recessed bolt head on which we placed the weight declaration. Design No. 9 accomplished the following in one revision:

1. Eliminated the steel washer
2. Provided a weight declaration and a recessed end bolt
3. Standardized the outside end plate dimensions for a more uniform look.



**Design No. 51, and counting.**

The new design also gave us a unique identity — one reminiscent of the global barbells used by the strongmen of old — a look that would inspire users and convey a feeling of strength. Eventually this look acquired what is termed “secondary meaning”, and on

September 26, 2000 was granted trademark status by the Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks, registration number 2,389,609.

As you may guess by now, customer inputs and ideas didn't stop there. I won't exhaustively detail all the 51 refinements and fine tuning that has taken place since 1983, but just touch on some the major ones.

We went from 5 pound increments to 2-1/2 pound increments when a customer showed us how he was fitting two 1-1/4 pound washers to our dumbbells to achieve 2-1/2 pound increments.

We changed to a 30 mm diameter handle to address conflicts in international dimensions. Originally, we established the U.S. standard for dumbbell handles at 1-1/16" (27 mm) diameter and 5-3/4" inside length. But Japan insisted on 28 mm; Germany 30 mm; Sweden 27 mm. We finally decided the Germans were right. The 30 mm diameter reduced handle bending, reduced harmonics when dropped, and generally felt better when gripped by most people. Also, strongmen have known for years that larger diameter handles help the user develop a stronger grip.

*"I'm glad we made all of those 51 design changes, and I feel good that customers cared enough to be our source of better ideas every step of the way"*

Next, several customers pointed out that the dumbbells were two to three pounds over declared weight because we did not count the weight of the handles. To address this, we recalibrated the weight plates to compensate for the weight of the bar, and we recalibrated



### **A customer idea led to offering 2-1/2 pound increments.**

the end plates to compensate for the the weight of the handle grip portion. This was design #43. Then, since recalibration made the iron core thinner, we switched to a stronger, more expensive core material — “ductile iron”, hence Designs No. 44, 45, and 46.

Finally, because we have a solid customer base in 57 foreign countries,



### **Ivanko is the only American manufacturer offering metric dumbbells for international customers.**

we duplicated the complete line in kilograms weights from 6 to 80 kilos in 2 kilo increments.

Our customers are very happy with our current “Design No. 51” rubber dumbbell because they told us what they needed, and we delivered. I'm sure there are manufacturers who would stop when they have “the best” and just milk it for the five or ten years. We might make more money that way, but it's just not in our blood. We're never satisfied, never finished.

We've already got Design Nos. 52, 53, 54, and 55 in the works. We are developing a stainless steel handle and bolting technology for better looks and durability. We are shortening the dumbbell length on the larger sizes. We are developing a permanent numbering system. We are developing urethane end caps that will accommodate club

logos. Who knows where we will

stop, or if we ever will. Perfection is an elusive goal.

Has it been worth it? Sometimes the value of your work is revealed in unexpected ways, as the following story illustrates. Recently, I was on a plane to San Francisco to attend IHRSA. The man next to me seemed like a tourist. He was studying a map, so I asked him if he needed help. He said he didn't. During the course of our conversation, he asked if I was a tourist. I said I wasn't, and told him I worked for Ivanko, and was going to a trade show. “Ivanko! Ivanko!” he exclaimed with much excitement, “That's my dumbbell!” “That's what I use in my gym in Mexico City”. “Great design”. “Great name Ivanko”.

As he talked, I felt myself growing bigger in my seat. I was getting nervous. I never had an ego problem before, and I didn't need one now. Then in the course of our conversation it came out that this man was Manolo Mastre, the famous Mexican architect who popularized the “Casa Pacifica” look. I felt myself shrinking down a little. I had been a Mastre fan for some time. I admired his work in Architectural Digest and I have his books Casa Pacifica and Casa Mexicana. Then he mentioned he was on his way to the Napa Valley to design a home for Francis Ford Copola. The shrinking process was now complete. My ego came back to Earth.

The point is, when a great artist with a recognized sense of design offers such a sincere and enthusiastic endorsement of our work, I'm glad we made all of those 51 design changes, and I feel good that customers cared enough to be our source of better ideas every step of the way.

*Ivanko Barbell Company was founded by Tom Lincir in 1967, and it is the leading provider of professional and commercial grade barbell and dumbbell products worldwide. Your comments or questions are welcome. Write Tom Lincir at Ivanko Barbell Company, P.O. Box 1470, San Pedro, CA U.S.A. 90733 or send email to tom@ivankobarbell.com.*