

Ivanko Quality Recognizes No Border

THE FOLLOWING IS NOT AN ADVERTISEMENT. IT IS A PUBLIC INTEREST ARTICLE.

Ivanko manufactures a line of freeweight equipment, including urethane plates, dumbbells, barbells, and stainless and high strength steel Olympic bars in the USA. This is nothing new. Ivanko has been making products in the US since our founding in 1967. Some of those US-made products, like our leather head harness, weightlifting belts, and neoprene waist trimmers were displaced by cheaper (and inferior) imports.

While we no longer make some of these early products, I have considered re-introducing at least one of these (the head harness) despite the high manufacturing costs. There's often a market for the best, despite production costs. For as I've demonstrated in these pages, our industry, at its best, values not the cheapest product, but the most durable. Usually, if you're going to make a durable product, it's going to cost more than a cheap product. At least in the short term. A lot of younger gym owners have told me they've learned this the hard way: they buy a cheap set of dumbbells. Two or three years later, they've begun to fall apart. Then they have to replace them. Do you double down and buy cheap again, or do you buy right the way you should've done the first time? Either way, you're spending as much (if not more) than you would

have in the first place if you bought quality. There's also something less tangible than product lost when you buy cheap: there's the loss of good-will from gym members: there's the safety risk (see our previous articles on Olympic bars): no one wants to work out with cheap and shoddy equipment.

But back to the idea of Made in the USA. Ivanko is an American company with an International presence and worldview. We sell our products all over the world. Many of our early dealers, who are my good friends, have been selling Ivanko since the beginning, in Japan, Germany, England, Australia, and South Africa.

I don't need to hawk some rigamorale about "Made in the USA" quality. All these countries have proud manufacturing traditions of their own. And each of these countries (not to mention many others where our dealers and friends reside) continue to make quality products.

I know what US manufacturing is capable of. I was a journeyman sheetmetal worker and machinist for the first half of my life. I don't need to waive the flag to try to prove my patriotism. It's cheap. And it represents a narrow, limiting worldview. Any thinking person with skilled manufacturing experience would see through this rhetorical smokescreen. I give my customers and readers more credit than that.

Often it makes sense to source a material or product from the US. We've been sourcing our steel from the best mills in the US since we began making Olympic bars. Following our example, many competitors have followed suit. Some even claim to source "the same steel as Ivanko." In almost every instance though, these claims are a case of "same butcher, different meat." The machinery we use to cut our steel is made in the US, Germany and Japan.

It just so happens when I bought a certain type of saw, the best available was German-made.

Other cutting applications demand several saws that we bought made in the US & Japan. Regardless of country-of-origin,

these tools are the best for the job. Period.

While our urethane dumbbells are made in the USA from US materials, I chose to make my urethane plates in the USA from both US and imported materials. The urethane is the best available made in the USA from US materials, while the cast-iron core is made in the jungles of South America. And this core costs more than the competitors' cores made in the US. Why? Why would I pay more for a key component of my product that's made overseas than in the USA? Because it happens to be a superior quality part. The casting material is superior, the workmanship is superior, the finished part is superior. Without this superior part, I wouldn't have a urethane plate that is as good as it is. Similarly, I source the bearings on my stainless needle bearing Olympic bar from Germany. In my experience, the best bearings for my particular application are made in Switzerland, Germany and Japan. When I make an Olympic bar, I'm not going to use inferior materials. I'm interested in the best part and the best quality. I tell my customers: "you should buy the best wherever it's made." Period.

Another example: before I got into the business, the majority of cast-iron plate offerings were crude castings. I set the standard higher. And then everyone had to improve their level. You see, there are several processes that you need to perform if you're going to make a good cast-iron plate (cf. "The Making of a Perfect Olympic Plate," 2001). Although country-of-origin can be an *indication* of quality, it isn't a *synonym* for it. Those of us who like to wrench on Detroit iron from the Golden Age remember there were times when this was so.

I start with the best idea or model for a product I have, and make creative cost-solutions that I can live with and refuse to perform those with which I can't. It's a lot like life. Take for



This dumbbell made in the USA

example, our rubber dumbbell. I source one model of the handle from Taiwan and another from the US. The rubber plates are a bit more tricky. While we originally offered Ivanko rubber products from Taiwan, we then went to the USA and then to China. We're now back in Taiwan (but considering a move to South America) for the rubber parts of the dumbbell, including the actual plates and my pioneering end plates. Why? Because I can get a quality part, without quality compromises, from Taiwan at a reasonable price. I use American-made Loctite despite the costs because it's the best fastening aid I've found. No amount of savings can persuade me differently. But I can't find the quality of a rubber plate made in the US for anything approaching a reasonable cost -- though we're still searching.

The irony of course, is that my hybrid US/ Taiwan rubber dumbbell is a

more durable, longer-lasting, higher quality product than most imported urethane products out there. Among the reasons for this is that many are skimping on the quality of their urethane product. From the ground up, the product isn't made right. And more and more stories keep rolling in about a gym here or there that's had their urethane

Before I got in the business, most were selling crude castings. I set the standard higher. Everyone had to improve their level" - Tom Ivanko

dumbbells degrade after 3 or 4 years. In some gyms, Ivanko rubber dumbbells keep going strong 28 years and counting.

Some manufacturers in our industry have recently hyped the “made under one roof” angle. Such an approach has its strengths and its limitations. Usually, people do it for better delivery. One could argue that this advantage is negated by prudent planning (think Apple). However, I find many of alleged merits of “one roof” claims improbable (e.g. I highly doubt one is meeting all of

ones chrome plating needs under one roof), or of dubious value (e.g. many other operations, some of which will be the subject of a future article).

Take, for example, one essential process of manufacturing an Olympic bar: that of bending your mill steel straight. As I explained in a previous article (“How to Bend an Olympic Bar,” 2003), steel does not come from the mill super-straight. You need to specify that straightness in a separate operation. I don’t know that any other barbell company is actually

straightening their bars, but if they are, it’s not an operation you want “vertically-integrated” because there’s not enough work to keep someone full time doing this procedure. This procedure, and others like it, require a lot of skill. You don’t want a guy doing a procedure part-time: you want an experienced, skilled operator who has been performing this specialized procedure for 30 years. If you’re doing the right things, you rarely want to limit yourself to one roof. Those who do live in a room without a view.

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Ivanko Barbell Company was founded by Tom Lincir in 1967 and is the most respected manufacturer of professional and commercial grade barbell and dumbbell products worldwide. Your comments or questions are welcome. Contact Tom at tom@ivankobarbell.com or write to:

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