

Strength Archaeology



By Tom Lincir, President and Founder, Ivanko Barbell Company

archaeology, n. (archzo-, and Gr. logia and legein. to speak) The scientific study of the life and cultures of ancient peoples, as by excavation of ancient cities, relics, artifacts, etc.: also spelled archeology. (Webster's Dictionary)

The sands of time often cover over the origins of what we see today, and it is left to the archaeologist to retrace cold trails, dust off artifacts, and reconstruct the historical record.

Spring is my favorite time of the year. This is when I get to visit my fellow strength historians in Europe, primarily in Germany, France, and England.

In 2002 I spent 3 days studying the largest German "Kraft Sport" collection of books and other strength paraphernalia. I am not fluent in German, but many of the words in the strength field are second nature to me, primarily from reading books in my collection and studying old German patents.

This year was especially rewarding. Wally Pullum or "Famous Wally," as we like to call him, found the pattern for the "Strength Athlete" version of his two slot grip plates that he has produced since 1978. Also, Wally found a pair of rare "Luton W/T TNG centre" version Pullum grip plates that were produced after he sold the Strength Athlete Company. These plates were prominently displayed in an article in the London Times, August 25, 1989, distributed worldwide. The Ivanko Historical Society has acquired both the pattern and the pair of plates.



A rare Luton W/T TNG version Pullum grip plate displayed in the London Times, August 25, 1989, and now in the Ivanko Historical Society collection.

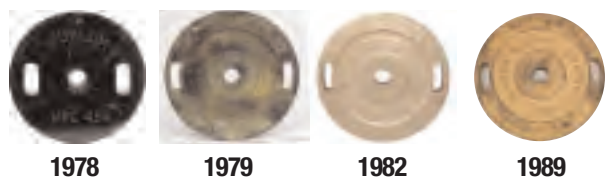


Wally Pullum (l.) with employee Chris Gladding (r.) holding the pattern used to produce the Strength Athlete plate, the third version of the Pullum design.

Even though Wally is considered by many to be the legitimate inventor of the two-slot grip plate, there were several others that preceded Wally. One predecessor is Chuck Coker, the much admired and highly respected founder of Universal Gym Equipment, the world's largest manufacturer and distributor of selectorized gym equipment for over 40 years. In 1952 Chuck designed a grip plate with a pair of oblong openings that were diametrically opposed, parallel to each other, and placed near the perimeter of the disc for easy gripping. These plates were made by the Modesto Foundry, and they were in use for years at Modesto Junior College, Modesto, California.

The plates measured 18" in diameter with a 2" hole in the center. The slots were 6-1/2" long and 1-1/2" wide. The plates weighed 90 pounds. Chuck said he got the idea from a gym he trained at in Hong Kong in 1950 that had twelve-sided barbell

plates with two oblong grip slots. (HmMMM...I know I've seen that design somewhere).



The evolution of the Pullum Grip Plate design.

Another predecessor is Foundrie A Roux in France. In the late 1920's the company's catalogue displayed a barbell disc with two oblong slots that to me look somewhat similar to the Anastasi patent #5,137,502 issued August 11, 1992. The catalog also displayed other discs with a recess to allow fingers to slip under for ease of lifting off the floor, in my opinion similar to the Standish patent #5,853,355 issued December 29, 1998. Even though this catalogue was undated, its art deco cover design was the graphic style of choice in the 1920's. Further evidence identifying the catalog date is French patent #629,735 for a bumper plate design issued to Antoine Roux on November 16, 1927.



Roux 20 Kg Olympic plate with recesses on edges for fingers to slip under when lifting off floor.

For years I have been searching for a Roux barbell set, to no avail. I even hired a private investigator and agents to assist my search. Finally, I received a lead that there were some old barbells in a barn on a farm in a remote part of France. Could these be from the elusive Foundrie A Roux?

I took the Euro-Star train from London to Paris where I met my driver, Francois. We drove for four hours. Between my broken French and his broken English, it was a hell of a ride.

When you have a collector's passion for old barbells and strength history, there are emotional swings that are hard to explain to a person that does not have the passion. When we finally arrived at the storage shed on the farm, I tried not to get excited. Was this another false lead? The barbells were old and covered with dust. I brushed off the dust to see the name R...O...U...X, Roux! I found a Roux!

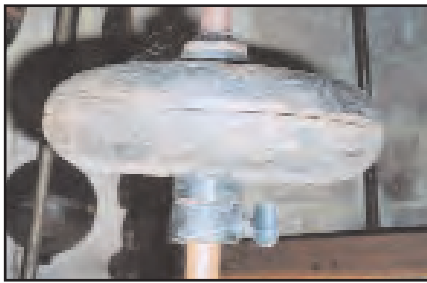
I could hardly wait to tell my collector friends that I found a Roux barbell! A closer observation of two of the Roux plates revealed they had rubber around the perimeter, exactly as described in the 1927 French patent I referred to earlier. To my knowledge these are the first bumper plates ever produced. Previously, most strength historians thought the first bumper plate was manufactured by a German company by the name of Berg Hantel, circa 1939.



Foundrie A Roux bumper plate, French patent No. 629,735, Nov. 16, 1927.

This is the kind of event historical collectors live for. To find a complete Roux barbell and a pair of Roux bumper plates in one day is a high that's hard to explain. The best way I can explain it is that this must be the way Dr. Louis Leakey felt when he discovered the jawbone of *Australopithecus boisei* in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania in 1959.

As good as this find was, the best was yet to come. One other barbell that caught my eye was an old barbell that was half global and half disc loading. This is what we call a transition barbell, and this type was from the turn of the century, late 1800's, and early 1900's. A transition barbell has two half spheres with discs in the center between the half spheres. To change the weight, you remove the outer half sphere then add or subtract the discs using the three equally spaced slots that were cut into the discs. Then replace the outer half sphere again.



Outer and inner half spheres of the Cordier Central transition barbell.

It must have been difficult for the French (or anyone else at that time) to change from the beauty and aesthetics of the global barbell design to the practicality of the disc loading design. I guess the transition design was a compromise of sorts, an attempt at the best of both worlds.

The discs were stamped C C, which stood for Cordier Central, the largest supplier of gymnastic equipment of that era. They weighed 4 kg or 8.81 lbs each. In my opinion these plates were very similar to the Rojas design patent # D409, 695, issued May 11, 1999. Cordier Central Transition Barbells are extremely rare. I've seen pictures and advertisements but this was the first time I got to examine one close up. If the Roux made me feel like Dr. Leakey finding the jawbone, the Cordier Central find made me feel like Indiana Jones finding the Holy Grail.

Reconstructing the historical record can be a humbling experience, because it makes you realize that most of the ideas you come up with were actually conceived and sometimes patented decades ago, long before companies like Life Fitness, Cybex, TechnoGym, or Ivanko existed. It can also be an ennobling experience, because it makes you realize that each generation of inventors passes the torch to the next generation to take existing ideas and hopefully improve on them, as the evolution of better ideas marches on.

Strength Archaeologists Wanted

The Ivanko Historical Society is a non-profit foundation dedicated to the preservation of historical records, products, and paraphernalia relating to the strength industry. We are looking for a few passionate truth seekers to join the cause. Still a lot of digging to do, a lot of interesting barbell designs and records to uncover.

See contact information below.

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, e-mail tom@ivankobarbell.com, or call 310.514.1155, ext. 205.

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