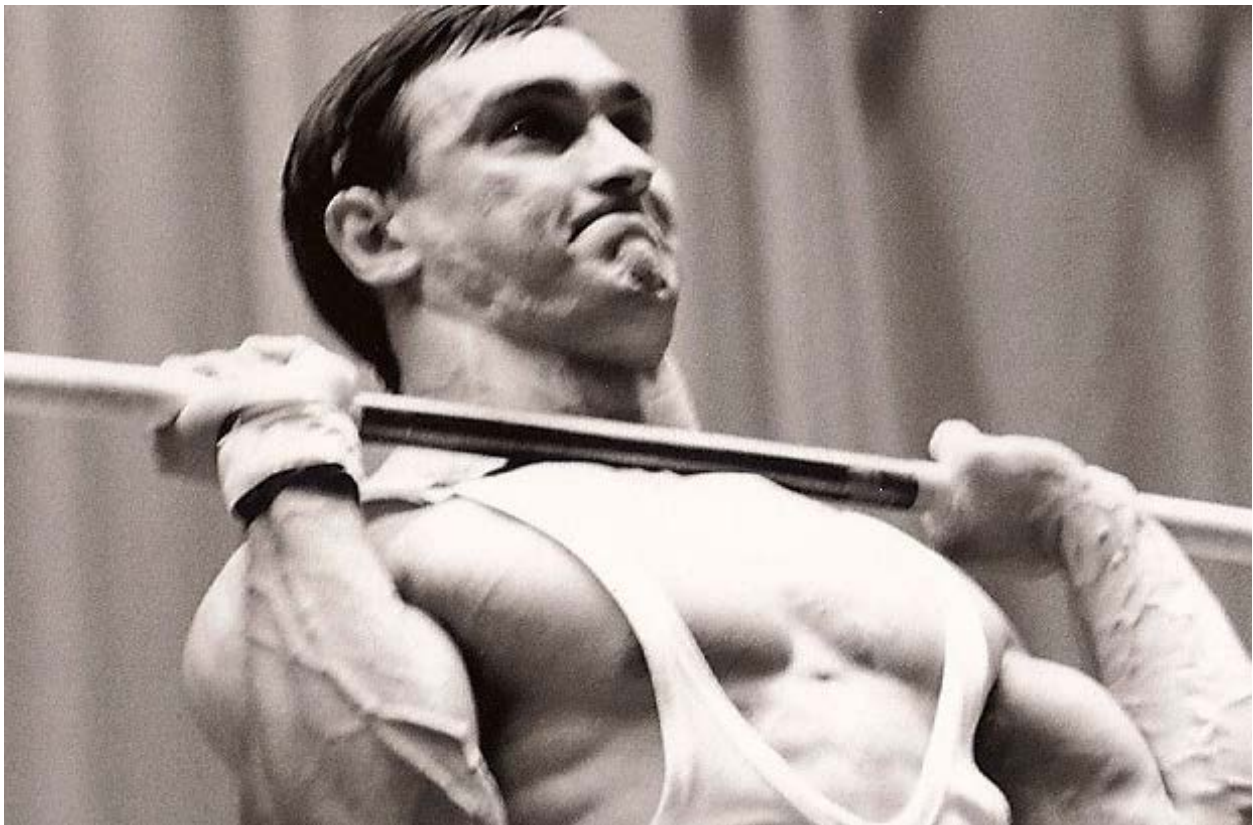

THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Bill Starr, 1938-2015

Longtime CrossFit Journal contributor and strength legend Bill Starr passes on at 77.

By Mike Warkentin

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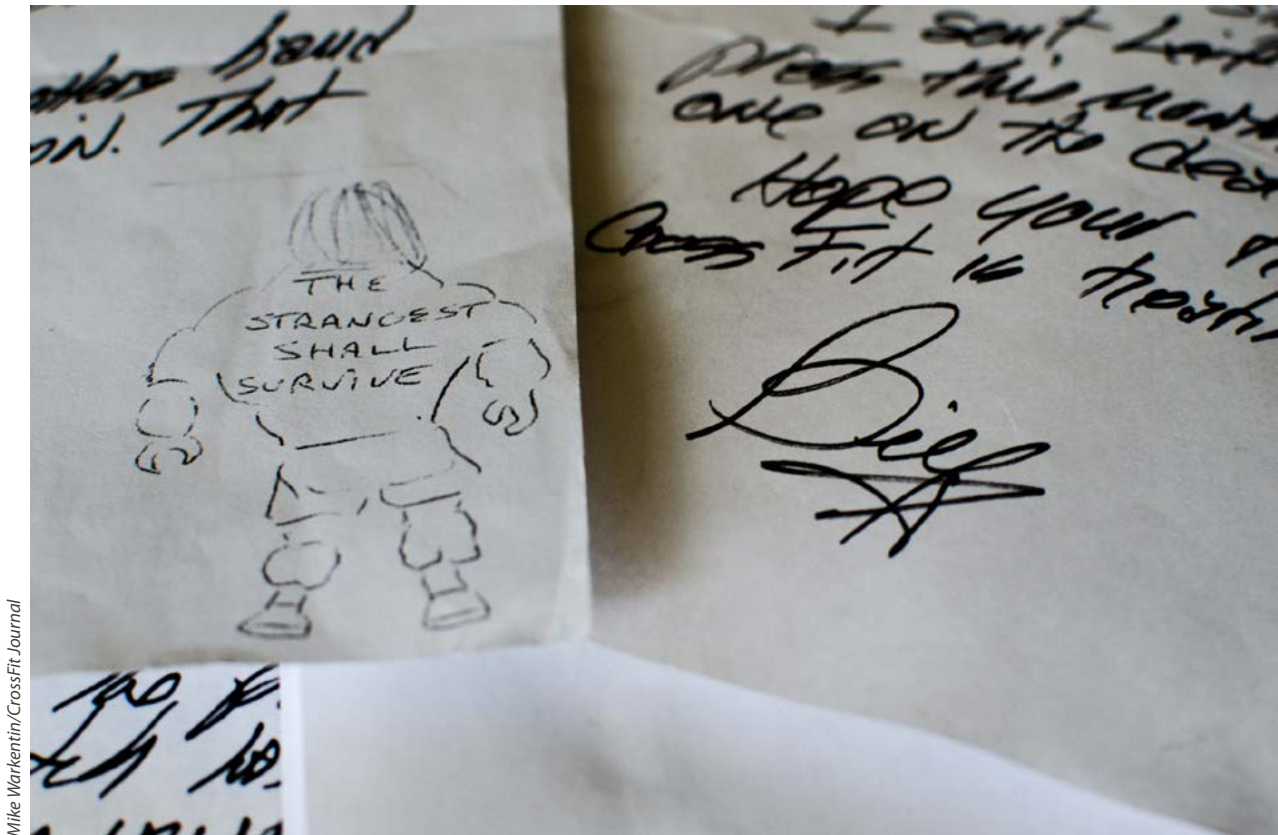


Jody Forster

To call him the last of a breed would be accurate.

Bill Starr was indeed that, and CrossFit Inc. was saddened to learn of his death on April 7 in Maryland. He was 77.

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Farewell, Bill. The strongest, and the strangest, survive in memory.

Starr first contributed to the CrossFit Journal with “Overhead Is Rising” in November 2008. It was introduced as follows:

“This article is both an instructional piece on overhead lifting, as well as a history of the unfortunate demise of overhead lifting in most strength and conditioning programs.”

I was lucky enough to edit Starr from April 2009 to the present, and those lines define his body of work to me. Starr was a technical resource to be sure, but he was more than that: He was a part of the history of fitness in North America.

I never met Starr, and I succeeded in speaking to him on the phone but once in six years. I had been told Starr was a private man who corresponded almost exclusively by fax or mail, but I had also been told I might catch him on the phone if I was lucky enough to call at exactly the right time, when he had switched off his fax machine for the night.

I tried several times and got lucky once in 2009 or 2010. Starr actually laughed at me when he answered the phone. He said something like, “Figured out the system, did you?” before we talked for a bit about upcoming articles.

I never spoke to him again after that call, and while he had my number, he never rang it. Our correspondence was archaic and sporadic, but always appreciated on my end. I’d fax him letters on a machine that wouldn’t receive, and he’d receive on a machine he said wouldn’t send. So he’d write—letters, not email. All along, CrossFit Journal readers would devour his articles and ask questions of an author who wasn’t online to reply.

Starr’s letters were always a welcome sight in the mailbox. These were actual letters—handwritten or typed, with the envelopes taped shut. Sometimes he’d include a Far Side cartoon. The stationery was either just an unlined piece of paper or a sheet with muscled cartoon characters in the upper-left and bottom-right corners. One wore a shirt that read “Defying Gravy,” and the other read “The Strangest Shall

Survive”—a play on the titles of his books, “Defying Gravity” and “The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football.” He signed each letter with “Bill” and a simple star.

By mail and fax, we talked over the years, throwing article ideas back and forth. I was as eager a reader as CrossFit Journal subscribers and always asked Starr technique and training questions that inevitably led to Journal articles. Starr, whose sense of humor was never lacking, always filled the letters with anecdotes and tales from decades spent in the iron game. It seemed he knew just about everyone who had ever snatched more than 250 lb., and he had many, many great stories, some fit for print and some—the funniest, of course—best left in handwritten letters filed away in a cabinet.

We’d correspond, and Starr would type and then mail his manuscripts to the CrossFit Media office in Scotts Valley, California, where they were typed up for editing. The process was slow, but it was always worth it to me, and they were welcome emails that announced a new article had arrived in an envelope from Maryland.

We talked a lot about photos to accompany the text, and I was always pleased when Starr received printed copies of the articles and approved of the images. The form mattered to Starr, and he’d always review our images and edits. In one case, I mentioned the challenges of making heavy lifts look good, and Starr shared a bit of advice I won’t ever forget: “You should have just had spotters hand you the 485 at the finish position. (That’s) what most publications do.”

After several years of working with Starr, I had the idea to write about him myself. He was a true character and a fountain of knowledge, so I asked him if I might visit and interview him. His response was simple:

“I’m not interested in doing an interview. They take up time & really serve no function, except to boost egos & the Tao says to avoid bragging.”

And so I scratched that idea and instead tried to get as much history as I could from Starr. Sure, I wanted technical info, but more than that I wanted to know about the history of strength training. What was it like when bodybuilders and Olympic lifters were the same people? How did people train before bumper plates were common? What happened when steroids appeared and then later became illegal? How did the black-iron crew feel when the barbells and platforms were banished and shiny machines put in their place?

That last question was answered in the recent article “[Rise of the Machines](#).” It’s one of my favorites, and it documents that dark era between the early period of North American Olympic lifting and powerlifting and the “new Renaissance” brought on by CrossFit.

After growing up in machine-filled gyms in which the only barbell was always at the bench-press station, I had a lot of respect for a guy who very clearly did his own thing regardless of how the magazines defined strength training. Starr knew how to make people strong, and he did. His way. For many, many years. Internet be damned, machines be damned, complicated systems be damned.

His character and the elegance of his prescriptions and training advice made Starr a natural fit for the CrossFit Journal. We’re proud that his voice was a big part of the publication over the last years, and we’ll soon publish the final articles he wrote. And then we’ll do some heavy squats in his honor.

In closing, I’ll share one of my favorite lines from Starr, written after I told him a few of his training recommendations had me walking funny for days.

“Glad you got sore. Feels great doesn’t it?”

Indeed it does. Every time.



About the Author

Mike Warkentin is the Managing Editor of the CrossFit Journal and the founder of [CrossFit 204](#).