

## Mike Mentzer - Bodybuilder, Writer, and Philosopher

by Bob Burns



Mike Mentzer was born on November 15, 1951 in Germantown, PA and grew up in Ephrata, PA. Mike did well in grammar school as well as high school, "sometimes getting all A's, though mostly A's and B's." His father nurtured Mike's academic motivation and performance by providing him with various kinds of inducements, from a baseball glove to hard cash. Years later, Mike said that his father "unwittingly ... was inculcating in me an appreciation of capitalism." Mike's 12<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Elizabeth Schaub, apparently left her mark on Mike -- he credits her for his love "of language, thought, and writing." Ms. Schaub was one of those "'old-fashioned' no nonsense type" of teachers who expected her students to master whatever she taught in class.<sup>1</sup>

Mike started bodybuilding when he was 12 years of age at a bodyweight of 95 pounds after seeing the men on the covers of several muscle magazines. Mike's father had bought him set of weights and an instruction booklet. The booklet suggested that he train no more than 3 days a week so Mike did just that. This training regime worked for Mike quite well in fact. By age 15, his bodyweight had reached 165 pounds at which point Mike could bench press 370 pounds! Mike's goal at the time was to look like his hero, Bill Pearl, a famous bodybuilder of the 1950s and 1960s. In Mike's book, *Heavy Duty: A Logical Approach to Muscle Building*, published circa 1980, he wrote:

Now that my resolve to be a top bodybuilder had moved up a notch, it was time to start training like other top bodybuilders, I thought. Since every single title winner was training six days a week for at least two hours a day, who was I to question such practices? These guys were my heroes, so I followed suit. For a young man of 15 with no real responsibilities and a superabundance of energy, such training didn't seem all that demanding. I hadn't noticed that my gains slowed down considerably after beginning that type of marathon training; but then I was told that your gains are supposed to slow down as you progress.

After high school, Mike Mentzer spent four years in the United States Air Force. It was during this time that he started questioning his training practices, for he was now working out over three hours a day, six days a week. Was all the time and effort worth it, especially since his gains had slowed to such an almost imperceptible rate?

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<sup>1</sup> "The Steel Spiel! with Mike Mentzer", (accessed 10/28/01),  
<http://www.cyberpump.com/features/interviews/interview015.html>

In 1971 Mike entered and won the Mr. Lancaster contest. Mike also entered the 1971 AAU Mr. America contest where he placed a disappointing 10<sup>th</sup> place behind the winner, 19 year old Casey Viator. From *Heavy Duty: A Logical Approach to Muscle Building*, Mike observed that

What made Casey's win even more interesting was that he was engaged in what at that time seemed to be a very unusual type of training. Unlike every other top bodybuilder -- who was training for up to five hours every day -- Casey was only training one hour a day three days a week! If Casey could develop a physique of this caliber with only three hours of training a week, then there was still hope that I too might win the Mr. America title.

The man behind Casey Viator was Art Jones, the inventor of Nautilus exercise machines. Art had provided Casey with expert training instruction and coaching leading up to Casey's Mr. America win. Now, Art has had a life-long interest in discovering the best training method for increasing the strength and size of a muscle. His research led to the practice of training muscles very intensely but briefly, a practice diametrically opposed to what almost everyone, even the experts in the 'exercise science', believed was the proper way to build muscle. Mike recalled, in *Heavy Duty: A Logical Approach to Muscle Building*,

Back in 1971, Casey Viator informed Mr. Jones of my considerable muscular potential after seeing and competing against me at the '71 Mr. America; which was held in York, Pennsylvania, commonly referred to at that time as "Muscletown," USA. Jones was interested, and soon thereafter called me one night, at 2 a.m., to speak with me about HIT; something I learned later that this radically independent business man was wont to do. After a one hour plus, not conversation, but lecture, I knew he was right, that memorizing routines from the muscle rags doesn't make one an "expert." In fact, I left that call with the eye-opening realization that I knew literally nothing of value about bodybuilding exercise. Arthur had explained, in the most scrupulously objective language imaginable, the actual nature of anaerobic exercise, the cause-and-effect relationship between intense exercise and muscular growth; and, why, in light of the body's limited recovery ability, such exercise must be brief and infrequent. Subsequent to that early morning lecture from Jones, we developed a fairly close relationship, with my visiting the Nautilus compound in Lake Helen, Florida on numerous occasions over the years. We also had regular phone communications. I consider him the greatest exercise scientist of all time; and a man, who not only enlightened me on the subject of exercise, but, also, taught me much about people and life in general.

And,

For the first time in my life, I had listened to someone who took the values of knowledge, reason, logic and science very, very seriously.<sup>2</sup>

Because of a severe shoulder injury, Mike was forced to quit training from 1971 to 1974. In early 1975 however, he resumed training and entered that year's Mr. America contest where he placed third. Mike's new training regimen called for very intense but brief exercise, a training regimen based on principles he learned from Art Jones. Also at this time, Mike was attending the University of Maryland as a pre-med student where his hours away from the gym were spent in the study of "genetics, physical chemistry, and organic chemistry."<sup>3</sup> He left the University after 3 years.

My ultimate passion during that period was to become a psychiatrist. I earnestly read innumerable books on the subjects, including much of Freud, Jung and Reich. My special interest was the works authored by two of the most radical, revolutionary psychiatrists of our age, R.D. Laing and Thomas Szaz...

My diminished respect for psychiatry deepened upon making my acquaintance with many psychiatrists, and having worked in a mental institution. I observed that a remarkable number of the psychiatrists were suffering anxiety neuroses themselves, with some seemingly borderline psychotics.

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Mentzer, *Heavy Duty*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>"The Steel Spiel! with Mike Mentzer", (accessed 10/28/01),  
<http://www.cyberpump.com/features/interviews/interview015.html>

Most important, all of my educational experiences ... - starting with Mrs. Schaub - served to fuel the further development of my nascent passion for literature and writing after college. While my high school lit. (sic) teacher had instilled a certain liking for those intellectual disciplines in high school, I rebelled at having to read so many lengthy books and write the innumerable essays. (I was blindly, sophomorically rebellious at the time). Once I left high school and college, free to study on my own, I continued reading the classics along with books on psychology and philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

From 1976 to 1980, Mike's new training regimen paid off as his string of bodybuilding successes can certainly attest to. Some of the many titles he won were the 1976 Mr. America, 1978 Mr. Universe (where he received a first-ever perfect score), and 1<sup>st</sup> place in the Heavy Weight division at the 1979 Mr. Olympia contest. But after placing 5<sup>th</sup> in the most controversial 1980 Mr. Olympia contest held in Sydney, Australia, Mike retired from competition. He was convinced that this bodybuilding contest had been fixed.

The promoter of that contest was Paul Graham, a very, very close friend of Arnold's [Schwarzenegger's]. As it turned out, while the rules stated that individuals had to officially enter their application to compete one month before the contest, the IFBB bent the rule and let Arnold enter the day before! He waited that long because by that point he knew who the judges were. CBS, who was there to film the event for future televising, was convinced it was fixed and discovered that a majority of the judges had either close personal or financial ties with Arnold. Well, so convinced - and pissed off - was CBS Sports that, despite the time, money and effort required to send a film crew half way around the world to Australia to film a sporting event, they refused to air that contest. As further evidence, I suggest you view the video of the 1980 Mr. Olympia...<sup>5</sup>

During the 1980s, Mike provided training advice in many articles for *Muscle Builder* and other bodybuilding magazines. He also wrote several books including the aforementioned *Heavy Duty: A Logical Approach to Muscle Building* and also *Heavy Duty Journal*. For many readers of both these books, this was the first time the 'science of bodybuilding' was ever discussed at length. In *Heavy Duty Journal*, for example, Mike wrote

It has often been said that bodybuilding is a science, but as it has been practiced since its inception right up to the present by the vast majority, it has been anything but scientific. Dominated from the beginning by purely commercial interests, bodybuilding had little scientific interest brought to it. As a result, the sport has floundered for decades in a morass of commercialism; at times it's even laughed at by the medical-scientific community.

This is not to suggest, however, that bodybuilding is not a science. Bodybuilding can be and is a science, but a science in its infancy. While there is still room for much more research, there already exists a great fund of knowledge that is waiting, almost begging, to be applied to bodybuilding.

How did Ayn Rand influence Mike? When did Mike discover her and her philosophy of Objectivism? Well, I asked David M. Sears these two questions. David was a friend of Mike's and as well as the editor and publisher of Mike's *Muscles in Minutes* book. Here is David's response to my questions.

As you know, Mike was a voracious reader of philosophy in college - so that would put him at, say 18 years old, in 1970. He read the more traditional philosophers then, and "probably" didn't fully embrace Ayn Rand until the mid- or later- 1980's (since none of his writings mentioned her until at least the mid-80's if not later).

In my opinion, Mike's ideas on bodybuilding were "allowed" to emerge because of his Objectivism. His approach to critical thought, analytical thinking, and knowing there is one truth, all allowed him to buck conventional thought and push onward with his own mental effort.

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<sup>4</sup> ...

<sup>5</sup> John Stamatopoulos, "Mike Mentzer Speaks!", (accessed 10/28/01),  
<http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/mminter.htm>

Consider how influential Art Jones was to Mike's thinking regarding proper progressive weight training theory and practice. Yet, Mike was able to critically examine and evaluate Art's work on the subject in order to perfect Mike's own theories on the subject, dubbed "Heavy Duty." During the late 1980's and in the 1990's, Mike had a very successful personal training and consulting business. Listen to Mike's own words.

I firmly believe that, in terms of practical necessity, I've "perfected" high-intensity training theory and application. I started out training my clients using Arthur Jones' application of 12-20 sets per body part with my clients. No one made progress, and many regressed. I knew the problem wasn't under training; it had to be over training. So I cut the sets back to seven to nine sets three days a week and some made minimal progress for while, but hit a plateau soon thereafter. At this point, I was in a quandary. Again, I knew the problem wasn't under training, but how could it be that less training was required?

It actually scared me for a brief time. How could it be that I was discovering a radically different application of high-intensity than Jones and everyone else? At one time I actually thought Jones was infallible, that he was so incredibly smart, he had to be right. He was basically correct with the theory: To be productive, exercise must be intense, brief and infrequent. Where he was wrong was on the application of the theory. I kept reducing the volume and frequency of my clients training until, finally, they were performing only two to four sets per workout once every four to seven, and in some cases every 10 - 14 days. The volume and frequency requirements of any given individual depend on his innate recovery ability, with individual recovery ability, like all genetic traits, being expressed across a very broad range.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding what he learned from Ayn Rand, Mike said in an interview:

Learning logic and acquiring the ability to think critically is not easy, though not impossibly difficult. I learned how to do these things by reading and "digesting" the works of novelist/philosopher, Ayn Rand. To get started on the proper, methodical path read her books of explicit philosophic essays "Philosophy: Who Needs, It?" - especially the Introduction and the first two chapters - and "The Romantic Manifesto" - especially the second chapter, Philosophy and Sense of Life. After reading and re-reading the first couple of chapters from each of those books, put them aside for a while and read her two epochally great novels -- "The Fountainhead" and "Atlas Shrugged," in that respective order. Just as is true with any other context of knowledge, philosophy must be studied in a logically structured order...<sup>7</sup>

Let's examine the 'table of contents' of two of Mike's early books. The 'Table of Contents' of *Heavy Duty: A Logical Approach to Muscle Building* contains the following:

- Preface
- A New Perspective
- The Role of Realistic Goals
- Individual Potential
- Psychological Factors
- The Economics of Growth & Recovery
- The Evolution of Heavy Duty
- The Intensity Factor
- The Ideal Workout
- Anabolic Steroids
- Getting to Know Mike by Jack Neary

The 'Table of Contents' in *Heavy Duty Journal* includes the following:

- Introduction
- The Stress Concept
- Metabolic Momentum
- Salt, Water, and Blood Volume : The Body Dynamic

<sup>6</sup> ...

<sup>7</sup> "The Steel Spiel! with Mike Mentzer", (accessed 10/28/01),  
<http://www.cyberpump.com/features/interviews/interview015.html>

## Rest Pause Training The Value of a Training Journal

Now juxtapose these 'tables of contents' with the 'tables of contents' of *Heavy Duty* and *Heavy Duty II: Mind and Body*, which were both published over 10 years after *Heavy Duty: A Logical Approach to Muscle Building* and *Heavy Duty Journal*. See if you can find something faintly familiar about the following.

Here is the 'Table of Contents' in *Heavy Duty*:

- Forward
- Bodybuilders Are Confused!
- A Rational Approach
- The Science of Bodybuilding
- The Ideal (or Principled) Routine
- Individual Potential
- On Motivation

And here is the 'Table of Contents' in *Heavy Duty II: Mind and Body*:

- Introduction
- The Mind: Check Your Premises
- Nature, To Be Commanded, Must be Obeyed
- Another Kind of Definition
- Balancing the Theoretical Account
- Praxis
- Serving the Needs of the Growth Mechanism
- Either-Or

Consider that Mike opens Chapter 1, titled 'Bodybuilders are Confused!', in *Heavy Duty* with a quote from Ayn Rand:

Explaining the relationship between man's mind and art, Ayn Rand wrote, in an essay titled *The Psycho-Epistemology of Art*, "While, in other areas of knowledge, men have outgrown the practice of seeking the guidance of mystic oracles, in the field of aesthetics, this practice has remained in full force and is becoming more crudely obvious today."

To my knowledge, Miss Rand had no interest in bodybuilding, but if she had, she would have observed a similar phenomenon. The bodybuilders I communicate with on a daily basis are agonizingly confused. The sole source of information for many of them is muscle magazines, which they read with almost religious zeal, regarding the words contained therein as if they were the revealed truth of Sacred Scripture, or as oracular pronouncements, not to be questioned, but passively accepted, on blind faith.<sup>8</sup>

As you might have already surmised just from its 'table of contents', *Heavy Duty II: Mind and Body*, contains quite a bit of Objectivist philosophy. Steve Clarian pointed out that

... despite his success in competitive bodybuilding, Mentzer's greatest achievements were to be intellectual ones. In 1993, after many years of writing articles for the top muscle magazines, he codified his rational- and revolutionary- theory of high-intensity training in his seminal first book, *Heavy Duty* (in which he identifies exercise science as a subdivision of the broader field of medical science and which includes a chapter on the role of values in motivation).

Just three years later, after the careful analysis of more empirical evidence (gathered first-hand from his work with personal training clients) and a more meticulous application of the laws of logic, Mentzer released *Heavy Duty II: Mind and Body*.

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<sup>8</sup> Mike Mentzer, *Heavy Duty*, p. 11.

The subtitle is appropriate. This time, Mentzer was not content merely to present an exercise program, if even an improved one; instead he also went to considerable effort to place it in the context of that upon which its identification had depended: the epistemology of reason. In Mentzer's words: "There is nothing wrong with having a muscular physique, but it is by no means a viable substitute for a mature, rational mind." Mentzer dedicated the first chapter to the nature of philosophy and its role in human life and society, and the second specifically to epistemology, laying the groundwork for the theory to come. While for someone already familiar with Objectivism there is nothing much new in these chapters, Mentzer's targeted audience is not objectivists, but bodybuilders-- who are typically regarded as a not particularly intellectual segment of society. Mentzer has been an excellent spokesman for Objectivism, and has introduced it to an entirely new audience.

Further, Mentzer is one of the very few people of whom I am aware who have, beyond merely studying Objectivism, actually applied its principles to a particular field. Mentzer is not just a personal trainer who likes Atlas Shrugged-- but also one who has also dedicated serious effort to the study of logic and applied it to solving a specific problem in the realm of exercise science. The result was a revolutionary theory of exercise, which is of inestimable benefit to those interested in developing their bodies, in terms of the years of wasted effort it will spare them. To my knowledge, the only other established professional who has revolutionized his field through an application of objectivist thought to that specific field is the psychologist Nathaniel Branden. As philosophical principles must be consistently translated into specific 'plans of action' in regard to specific endeavors in order to directly benefit human life, applied Objectivism-- in every field-- is mankind's new frontier.<sup>9</sup>

*Integrated Man*, a short story which represented Mike's first foray into fiction writing, will appear in the appendix of his last book, *Mike Mentzer's Ultimate Guide to High-Intensity Training*, which will be released by McGraw Hill later this year. Let me share an excerpt from this short story with you:

I never suffered such a vice -- the dire need for approval. Rather than be like a creeping vine climbing up a tall tree where I could not stand alone, I preferred to be intellectually-emotionally and morally self-sufficient. No, I had always been a radical. This was expressed in my early years mainly through my "sense of life," which is the pre-conceptual, preverbal, emotional, subconsciously integrated view of man and of existence -- a child's emotional, subconscious equivalent to a conscious, mature philosophy of life. In part, owing to the lack of proper, rational guidance, I was blindly rebellious and desperately sought self-assertion. As I matured, however, the blind rebelliousness progressively decreased; and I was less under the control of my subconscious, emotional sense of life, and became increasingly directed by an explicitly verbalized, conscious, rational philosophy of life. The blind rebellion had been replaced by a passionate desire to discover the dispassionate, objective truth. At the time that my maturation was reaching a pinnacle, I became thoroughly fact-centered, truth-oriented; which placed me out of step with the rest. It's not that I was a lone wolf; it was that I learned to think for myself; which I came to understand required privacy.

As a young boy, I sought to achieve an objective view of others. This was accomplished by imagining myself lifted up into space, where I could peer down and obtain a clear, unobstructed view of them; and what I observed was abject conformity and the desperate desire for the safety of will-less passivity. Not passivity of the body, but passivity of the mind. And it wasn't passivity all the way through, but beyond a certain point. They were either unwilling or unable to think beyond the confines established by the pack.

The idea that achieving spiritual self-sufficiency was the goal of the process of maturation never occurred to them, something they never thought to question. They lead blighted lives, bereft of

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<sup>9</sup> Steve Clarian , "Mike Mentzer: Man of Thought, Man of Action", (accessed 10/28/01),  
<http://www.highintensity.net/Articles/>

any interest in science, philosophy, morality or art. Life as they lived it was the immediately given, the not to be questioned, the stubborn adherence to tradition and the opinion of others. To me, gaining the ability to think and to judge independently was the ultimate purpose in life. Those who didn't care held no interest for me, were of not the slightest concern, as I couldn't possibly respect them or their second-hand opinions. Nor did I refrain from letting others know this; but again it didn't matter, as they didn't matter. They were merely passing through existence, as cultural ballast, individuals that never looked up, held nothing sacred; while I and others seeking to achieve the ideal were righteously doing what truly, in logic and reality, was of fundamental importance. (The character trait I admired most in others was their holding of an exalted view of the sacredness of man's self-esteem and happiness on earth.)

David Sears, who, as I had mentioned earlier, was the editor and publisher of Mike's *Muscles in Minutes* book, had this to say about Mike:

After making wonderful progress following his advice in the book [*Heavy Duty II: Mind and Body*], I hired him as a phone consultant. During the phone calls that followed, I was transformed into an independent thinker and our friendship flourished. Mike implored me - as I imagine he did all his clients - to think for myself and not to take even his words as gospel. With renewed confidence, I experimented extensively with my training, always letting Mike know what was and was not working.

I am so very thankful for that gift of independent thought. I used to be quite normal in terms of training intellect - always following the latest book or article on exercise - and thinking that this new routine was the secret key to success. Mike freed me from those constraints. He helped me to fully realize that what I knew about the subject was just as important as what anyone else thought - perhaps more - since I had dared to try.

Mike had the uncommon gift of philosophical intelligence. He wasn't an engineer, looking for finely detailed solutions in computer chips or software code, his brilliance radiated a different light. He could see a clear path to reason and logic where others could see nothing. A conversation with him was always intellectually stimulating - often punctuated with "Now I've got it!" and "Yes, that makes complete sense now!" I, and everyone who knew him, will miss that dearly.

For me, Mike Mentzer was a promise. A promise of morally and ethically sound principles that could withstand scrutiny. A promise of belief in oneself and in the greater good of humanity. A promise of conquering greater things than previously thought possible. Mike kept his promises, and improved the world in the process.<sup>10</sup>

Mike Mentzer introduced many people to Ayn Rand and Objectivism via his many books and articles about 'Heavy Duty', his weight training methodology. And, in fact, I first heard about Ayn Rand in an article of Mike's in *Ironman Magazine* many years ago.

Mike Mentzer died on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

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<sup>10</sup> David Sears, "Remembrances of Mike and Ray Mentzer", (accessed 10/28/2001),  
<http://www.mikementzer.com/>

\*\*\*\*\*QUOTES\*\*\*\*\*

### The Absolutism of Reality

If you abdicate the responsibility of learning the nature of your consciousness, your means of survival, then you can never control it; thus, you unknowingly deliver yourself into the power of those who wish you the worst - whether he's trying to sell you a used wig, an erroneous training theory, or that evil theory of politics known as socialism. Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed. The absolutism of reality dictates how you must guide your training efforts to successfully develop larger muscles, and the absolutism of reason determines how you must direct your thinking so as to achieve intellectual success - truth and knowledge; and the greatest power possible to man - certainty!

Mike Mentzer

### A Fundamental Error

Most bodybuilders make a single mistake, a fundamental error, which is largely responsible for all their other mistakes: They fail to take cognizance of the fact that bodybuilding is a part of exercise science; which flows from medical science. And that science is an exact- and an exacting - discipline which absolutely requires that man use a specific, rigorous method of thought (logic) to gain precise knowledge of reality - (the one reality we all live in, the one where "what goes up, must come down" and  $2+2=4$ ) - so that he may successfully achieve his goals.

Mike Mentzer

### Effort and Pride

An individual's self-esteem stems from a sense of control over reality. Whenever we carry out a conscious effort, such as, completing a record Bench Press, an A+ in school or writing a book, we feel a specific power rising, a sense of will. The abundant self-esteem associated with successful people flows from their having achieved goals by exerting the proper effort - long range. People are not successful due to an accident of birth; they took the time and expended the necessary effort to develop their self-respect. They sufficiently value life and happiness to exert complete effort. As a result, they experience what Aristotle referred to as the "crown of all virtues": Pride.

Mike Mentzer

### Bodybuilding Titles:

- 1971 Mr. America - AAU, 10th
- 1971 Teen Mr. America - AAU, 2nd
- 1975 Mr. America - IFBB, Medium, 3rd
- 1975 Mr. USA - ABBA, Medium, 2nd
- 1976 Mr. America - IFBB, Overall Winner
- 1976 Mr. America - IFBB, Medium, 1st
- 1976 Universe - IFBB, Middle Weight, 2nd
- 1977 North American Championships - IFBB, Overall Winner
- 1977 North American Championships - IFBB, Middle Weight, 1st
- 1977 Universe - IFBB, Heavy Weight, 2nd
- 1978 USA vs. the World - IFBB, Heavy Weight, 1st
- 1978 World Amateur Championships - IFBB, Heavy Weight, 1st
- 1979 Canada Pro Cup - IFBB, 2nd
- 1979 Florida Pro Invitational - IFBB, 1st
- 1979 Night of Champions - IFBB, 3rd
- 1979 Olympia - IFBB, Heavy Weight, 1st
- 1979 Pittsburgh Pro Invitational - IFBB, 2nd
- 1979 Southern Pro Cup - IFBB, 1st
- 1980 Olympia - IFBB, 5th

**Some of Other Books (and Audio Tapes) from Mike include:**  
*The Mentzer Method to Fitness*, Mike Mentzer and Ardy Friedberg  
*Mike Mentzer's High Intensity Training Program*, Mike Mentzer

**Web Links:**

Mike's web site can be found at: <http://www.mikementzer.com/>

Additional Reading Sources on the web:

Actualize Your Muscular Potential in One Year!, Part 1: <http://www.ironmanmagazine.com/Mentz-Act-1.htm>

Actualize Your Muscular Potential in One Year!, Part 2: <http://www.ironmanmagazine.com/Mentz-Act-2.htm>

Actualize Your Muscular Potential in One Year!, Part 3: <http://www.ironmanmagazine.com/Mentz-Act-3.htm>

