

Memories

GROWING UP ON STATEN ISLAND A PERIODIC SERIES

Staten Island Body Building Club



LEFT: Mario Strong stands outside Staten Island's first bodybuilding club. The gym was located in New Dorp. Photo circa 1976. RIGHT: Strong in the gym's fully equipped Nautilus training room. Photo circa 1980. Photos courtesy of Mario Strong

Mario Strong Community Contributor

Mario Strong has called Staten Island home since the mid-1950s. He was the owner of Staten Island Bodybuilding Club, the first gym of its kind on Staten Island, until its closure in 1986.

In 1976, bodybuilding was still somewhat of a sub-culture. It was the running era, and weight training for sports was forbidden at many high schools, universities and professional sports teams; it was wrongly believed that weight training would make one musclebound. Arnold Schwarzenegger was very popular in the bodybuilding world, but virtually unknown in Main Street, USA.

The physique publications of the day were rarely found on newsstands, and the public at large laughingly frowned upon women training with weights.

At the time, Staten Island had a few local garage-type gyms and a small YMCA. There was a serious void on Staten Island for bodybuilders and athletes wanting more, and I eagerly stepped in to fulfill their needs.

Before opening the gym, I trained at home with my brothers John and Domenic. We had quite a bit of exercise equipment, and after a while, friends and neighbors migrated over to train with us.

I was a bodybuilder who believed not only in the muscle/power building benefits of weight training, but more importantly, the health and longevity benefits.

Over the years, I had become well-read and I wanted to share my knowledge with others, so in September 1976, after several months of searching for a location to build a gym, and after acquiring tons of exercise equipment from various sources, I opened Staten Island's first bodybuilding club on New Dorp Lane.

The gym was appropriately named the Staten Island Bodybuilding Club, and was equipped with a huge variety of weight-training equipment and Nautilus Time machines.

The Staten Island Bodybuilding Club had two brightly-lit floors to workout on, and was designed for maximum results. Its high-mirrored walls continuously echoed songs from the gym's stereo system, which only played tunes from the Rocky Balboa films. This helped to create a unique atmosphere that energized the members to train as if there were no tomorrow.

The membership primarily consisted of high school and college students. Mixed in with them were doctors, lawyers, judges, civil servants and even some recovering from a serious illness or injury. There was one factor that brought them all together: they were all there to improve their health and fitness.

The club was also known as the mecca for the Island's top muscle builders, and was featured often in the national physique mags as well as the Staten Island Advance.

On a personal note, I loved operating the gym. Its purpose was something that I believed in, and I looked



TOP: American bodybuilding champion Ron Teufel lifts in front of a crowd. Photo circa 1979. LEFT: Gym members creating an ad to help promote the gym. Photo circa 1977.

forward to each and every day when I would open its doors for the members that waited to get inside.

It was a time that can't be replicated.

The sport of bodybuilding was coming into its own throughout our country, and here in Richmond County, the Staten Island Bodybuilding Club was beginning to turn out natural physique champions and become a recognized name in the world of muscle.