Dr. John Ziegler—
His Work with Isometrics and The Isotron

Understand straightaway that the mission of this article is to publicly rectify the grievous injustice to the lasting legacy and good name of Dr. John Ziegler by calling attention to the overwhelmingly positive contributions the man made to medicine and society at-large. In other words, these are facts about the doctor which have never seen the light of day “on the record” thanks to what appears to be a chronic conspiratorial effort to conceal this side of him on the part of mainstream media outlets, the “sporting” press in general, and all manner of shock-jock commentators, in and out of the ether, who chase after loud controversial headlines solely to garner ratings and “followers” in the truest sense of the word.

Sadly, 34 years after his passing, a Google search of this fine medical man produces two pieces of information: a very cursory recitation of his actual medical training, and the single overshadowing summation of his professional achievement—his connection to the steroid Dianabol and its introduction into athletics.

Of course, the picture portrayed is one of professional disgrace and disrespect. And to reiterate, perpetrated by “journalists” and “reporters” either too lazy or too invested in a one-dimensional agenda to even attempt to provide anything resembling balance and context to their crusade against John Ziegler.

And to put a fine point on the opinion expressed above, after much research on my part, I was only able to find TWO articles in any source that had a broadly positive and comprehensive take on Dr. Ziegler. The first was in the October, 1965 issue of Strength & Health magazine, and was authored by then-staff writer Terry Todd. Frankly, if one cares to peruse a more fully rounded view of all facets of Dr. Ziegler, this piece would be enlightening reading.

The other laudatory piece concerning Dr. Ziegler was authored by another York Barbell employee and competitive lifter, the late Bill Starr. I apologize for not being able to offer the precise issue of Ironmind’s Milo in which this piece appeared, but seemingly it was published just before or just after the turn of the century.

Clearly, Starr had immense respect for Dr. Ziegler, labeling him a “pure scientist” and “humanitarian” while touting his mind-boggling inventiveness, scientific curiosity, powers of observation and creativity as they were applied to a wide range of life, including strength training. Considering Starr’s esteemed reputation as a former lifter, writer and commentator, need I say that his feature on Ziegler should be required reading, if for no other reason than the sake of Iron Game history and to yield truthful balance?

Let’s be clear here, no one is denying Dr. Ziegler’s association with Dianabol, or his subsequent disavowal of it, but what we will demonstrate herein is that the man was about much more than performance enhancing pharmaceuticals. Specific concentration will be spent on Bill Starr’s Ziegler assessments of “pure scientist” and “humanitarian” and how he combined the two objectives.

Referring back to Starr’s Milo article on Ziegler in which he roundly praised the doctor’s boundless fertile mind as it pertained to medical science, considerable ink was devoted to his creation and progressive refinement of the Isotron, which by all standards, represented the capstone of his innovations.
What is the Isotron? For lack of a better general description, it is (yes, it is still around!) an electronic muscle stimulator (EMS). Of course, a TENS unit also meets that criteria, so recognize that caliber and grade matter in terms of performance. Suffice it to say that TENS units or the typical EMS units in current use are lesser-grade pea-shooters compared to the Isotron in terms of rehabilitative results.

Please do not fall prey to the smug notion that anything made today in the Age of Technology automatically is superior to a device which came to fruition in 1959, which the Isotron did!

How did the “Father” of the Isotron explain his creation to other professional entities? In correspondence dated January 19th, 1974, to the Casualty and Surety Division of the Aetna Life and Casualty Company, Dr. Ziegler offered the following:

“The primary function of the Isotron is to improve circulation and to increase muscle strength, size and tone. In short, what the deficiencies of the patient prevent him from doing to better his condition, the Isotron (selectively applied) does for him until he progresses to a point where his circulation and muscles become normal or so improved that he can respond to other and more common means of physical therapy.”

Ziegler’s three-and-half-page letter to Aetna contains some other enlightening snippets. The patient about whom they were conversing was a long-time sufferer of cerebral palsy, and had been under the doctor’s therapeutic supervision for more than a year as of that writing. Explaining his course of treatment, Ziegler noted having to correct abnormalities like faulty gait, faulty posture, sense of balance, a lack of overall body control, etc. A portion of his treatment focus was to enhance the neuromuscular connection of specific general areas of the body, as well as the body as a whole.

For instance, improving the neural connection and tone of the shoulders and neck fortified head carriage and overall sense of balance; arms and hands enabled the patient to break falls, which were inevitable with this impairment, by increasing his strength and dexterity to grasp objects as compensation or returning to an upright standing position when he did hit the ground. Also, electronic emphasis on his abdomen and lower back provided relief from back and pelvic pain stemming from long-weakened and atrophied muscles.

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Likewise, the patient originally exhibited serious skin discoloration in his lower extremities, which vanished over time with the enhanced circulation provided by Isotron treatments.

And then there was this clincher: Ziegler pointed out that this patient had been afflicted with cerebral palsy for several decades by that point, during the course of which he had spent vast amounts of time and money, “subjecting himself to every type of treatment, surgery, medication and therapy suggested by members of both the American and foreign medical communities” with no improvement.

“...The patient has stated that the course of action (author’s note--the Isotron) now being pursued has resulted in positive and visible improvement in his condition for the first time in several decades.”

The patient's testimonial also remarked experiencing steadily stronger impulses to his motor nerves, lessened involuntary muscle action and greater muscular control.

In retrospect, there were a couple of other Ziegler remarks in this letter, beyond the patient in question, which rate a mention. For instance, he pointed out to Aetna his level of experience administering Isotron treatments to others, citing his 15 prior years of favorable results using it solely in regard to sports-related therapy involving bodybuilders, weightlifters and injuries sustained by other participants in heavy and lighter kinds of athletics. Yes, this would include subjects from York Barbell and outside lifters—Pickett, March, Suggs, Starr, St. John, Knipp, Gourgott and many others.

However, it is my intent to confine this article to the Isotron's priority application in Ziegler's opinion: medical rehabilitation. Plans for a second Ziegler feature focusing on the athletic application of the Isotron are already floating around in “our” heads.

Perhaps it would be prudent to step back and establish Dr. Ziegler's path to this penetrating medical focus. Prior to opening his practice in Olney, MD, in 1954, part of his extensive medical training included a two-year residency in neurological medicine at Tulane University. This particular medical specialty centers on the diagnosis and treatment (surgical and nonsurgical) of over 600 diseases, conditions and disorders involving the central and peripheral nervous systems, including the coverings, blood vessels and “effector” tissues (muscles).

Neuromuscular medicine is a subset of neurology, which junctures at the crossroads of other specialties involving physical medicine and rehabilitation. Some of the more notorious and potentially catastrophic maladies in this category would be ALS, Multiple Sclerosis and Muscular Dystrophy or similar conditions that devastate the function of the brain and spinal cord. The aim of treatment for those afflicted with the aforementioned is to broadly reduce symptoms, provide as much improvement or relief as possible and optimize quality of life.

So the former Marine, who had some personal experience with a broken body, brought his considerable talents and tenacity to bear on these progressively debilitating scourges plaguing mankind.

Additionally, focusing on the rejuvenation of handicapped, seriously injured and structurally or biochemically impaired persons was also a good career move for Ziegler when he began practicing as outbreaks of poliomyelitis—also known as infantile paralysis—were happening worldwide. Typically, this infectious disease attacked the legs, head, neck and diaphragm muscles, frequently resulting in paralysis, which could be either temporary or permanent.

Even among those in whom the symptoms abated in their youth, there was also a substantial risk that symptoms would return with a vengeance between the ages of 35-60. This condition was referred to as post-polio syndrome. Characteristically, sufferers experienced extreme muscular weakness, pain and fatigue, which slowly and progressively worsened until “treatment” meant coping with the decline in the form of leg braces and power wheelchairs.

The medical community responded by researching a variety of avenues. Folks like Jonas Salk went...
the vaccine route, and thankfully were successful, while others like Ziegler took a different tact in dealing with these kinds of problems.

He took wing initially with a galvanic stimulator—muscle stimulation via electricity predates Dr. Ziegler—and a dry cell battery. Within five years of opening his practice, through trial and error, he developed a productive, operational and effective model of the Isotron. And, much like Salk, he was getting positive results in many cases, so much so that Dr. Ziegler and his device were drawing a great deal of positive word-of-mouth among his peers and beyond.

Before continuing with superlatives, understand that of the legions of patients with neuromuscular difficulties who were treated by Dr. Ziegler, miraculous results did not extend totally across the board, meaning there were some who received little or no benefit from treatments with the Isotron.

Seemingly, there is a point of no return where nerves and muscles have been atrophied and damaged for too long to have any hope of the slightest rehabilitation.

The good news was that of those legions of severe cases Ziegler treated, his “batting average” in terms of acquiring encouraging to near-miraculous results was so astounding that he and his Isotron got noticed in quarters large and small. Based on the “suitcase” full of laudatory correspondence to Ziegler that St. John made available for this article, the Isotron’s heyday was between roughly 1961 and the mid-1970s. Frankly, there are w-a-y too many glowing testimonials from patients, referring physicians and other sources to print in totality.

However, there are a few specific individuals and cases from back then I will take the trouble to spotlight. Supporting Bill Starr’s contention that Ziegler was a humanitarian as well as the epitome of a pure scientist, the good doctor’s talents and medical expertise were routinely made available to ordinary folks of extremely limited means when it came to paying for services rendered.

Then again, compensation can come in many forms. Dr. Ziegler’s long-time gardener/handy fix-it man did not start out as such. Actually, he had been suffering from such severe and chronic lower back pain that surgery had been performed with no reversal of his condition. In fact, it worsened to the point where the man was confined to a wheelchair. So, he came to Dr. Ziegler in search of any relief whatsoever.

Gradually and progressively, Dr. Ziegler gave this man continuing Isotron treatments, and slowly but surely restored his body in steps until he no longer needed the wheelchair, could stand and move about in a fully functioning manner. Overjoyed at his unbelievable rejuvenation, the man humbly admitted that he could not begin to remunerate Ziegler for his healing, a fact Doc already knew. Not wishing to deplete his esteem, Ziegler suggested that the man repay him by cutting his grass, painting and doing other odd jobs around the Ziegler residence. Per Starr, this was not uncommon for Ziegler.

Predictably, the news of Ziegler’s pioneering results-producing therapy reached the elites of the region. Unequivocally, Dr. Ziegler’s highest profile patient was President John F. Kennedy. Yes, you read that right! The back miseries of the 35th President of the United States were well documented. Ziegler and his Isotron were part of the medical team that sought to lessen President Kennedy’s pain on a regular basis.

This reveal begs a couple of ancillary but noteworthy points. First, Dr. Ziegler developed a suitcase model of the Isotron that went with him to the White House when he attended to President Kennedy.

Secondarily, but not insignificantly, from time to time, part of the media “character assassination” of Dr. Ziegler included the implied insinuation he was a kooky practitioner of bizarre science. EVERYBODY knows that visitors to the White House, and even more so those who have direct contact with a sitting president, are scrutinized stringently.
Hence, a copy of Ziegler’s White House security clearance on W.R. Grace letterhead is provided to put that scurrilous insinuation to rest.

Fortunately, the Isotron has been neither mothballed or sent to the scrap heap since Ziegler’s passing in 1983, as St. John has functioned as the gatekeeper of this ingenious device. Quietly, he has from time to time continued in Ziegler’s footsteps of providing relief from pain and restoration or maintenance of physical function gratis to a very small group of sufferers who have come his way. Characteristically, these folks are beset by lasting injuries or conditions so insidious that a standard prognosis would have had them in a wheelchair long ago.

We will look at two cases who vociferously declare that the only thing keeping them out of a wheelchair is continued access to the Isotron. One of them is a decorated Marine veteran (Navy Cross) of the Vietnam War named Rich Gresko. On March 11, 1970, Lance Corporal Gresko and his men became involved in a night ambush during which he literally threw his body on an exploding enemy grenade and lived...although horribly wounded as one would expect.

Incidentally, for readers who admire accounts of heroism while under fire in combat, check out Leathernecks.com to fathom the full measure of Rich’s bravery. Bottom line, despite taking the brunt of the grenade’s percussion and shrapnel throughout his body, Gresko had enough presence of mind to keep firing his M-14 rifle while resolutely crawling around and directing his men to the relative safety of the camp perimeter. Talk about a legitimately tough guy...then and now! Note, too, that this was the second time within the space of a month that Rich had been wounded in combat.

Of course, absorbing the full effects of a grenade detonation devastates the human body, as Rich sustained grievous injuries to his chest, abdomen, right shoulder, neck and legs. In point of fact, the razor sharp fragments of the grenade had so ripped his body from waist to ankles that his left leg was nearly severed by the blast.

At the first stop of what would prove to be an endless tour of medical facilities and veterans hos-
pitals, doctors, figuring it was beyond being useful, wanted to amputate it, but Rich talked them out of that procedure.

Needless to say, countless surgeries and medical procedures followed for years thereafter, and the unimaginable scarring of his legs and abdomen are only the visible signs of what Rich has had to endure. There is the considerable residual physical pain and mental anguish that are constant companions. This modest, genial former Marine even differentiates the pain into “good” and “bad” categories.

It is in this latter area where Rich feels the Isotron exerts its greatest influence in his particular case. Naturally, as one ages, the chronic nature of injuries like Rich’s only worsen. In fact, in 1990, he was forced to discontinue his occupation as a construction boilermaker due to the lasting complications.

However, thanks to fairly regular St. John-administered treatment with the Isotron, he is able to walk and do some of the odd jobs around his house, and engage in pool exercises as a supplement. More specifically, he feels the Isotron treatments stimulate the inner workings of multiple muscle groups and nerves that feed them simultaneously to accomplish the degree of rejuvenation he currently enjoys.

Per Rich, this improved degree of rejuvenation in terms of increased mobility and sense of strength—along with the critically relevant lessening of physical pain—lasts for eight to nine days after a single treatment! Understandably, Rich feels a tremendous debt of gratitude to Bill, as well as to the profound thinking of the former Marine, Dr. John Ziegler, who developed the therapeutic godsend.

Wives always have a good grasp of most situations, and Rich’s Katey is no exception as exemplified in a few off-the-cuff remarks she made about Isotron therapy, and especially as it applied to Rich’s situation.

In her view, there is nothing frightening or outlandish about electric muscle stimulation, or as she put it, “electricity is natural.” She went on to remark, and she should know more than anyone as she spends more time with him, Rich has experienced clear improvement in terms of mobility and nerve reaction.

Moving on to another individual who readily admits that semi-regular to intermittent treatments on the Isotron have allowed her to cope in a significant way with a multiple sclerosis diagnosis—meaning she is convinced they have kept her out of a wheelchair. Incidentally, this lady lives in very close proximity to Bill St. John. I’m referring specifically to his wife, Rita Doughty St. John!

Rita was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at the age of 41, when her neurologist began the standard course of action, gradually preparing her for the wheelchair at some point down the road. However, at age 43 she met Bill and the Isotron. For virtually the entire following year, twice weekly treatments on the machine allowed her to resume normal activities, including aerobics in the form of daily six or seven-mile walks.

After that year of twice weekly Isotron sessions, Rita returned to her neurologist who marveled at her mobility, asking, “Aren’t you on a cane? I thought you’d be in a wheelchair by now.”

Rita readily acknowledged that if it hadn’t been for the Isotron, by now, after 20 years of living with MS, her hands would be clawed and she’d be unable to stand or walk, much less pursue her current aerobic passion, spin bike classes.

Life-altering symptoms of this affliction also intrude in other less-obvious ways. Periodic “fog” sprees regarding the brain as well as one’s available energy level are also quite common among MS sufferers. In regard to fatigue, periods of extreme bone-tiredness are experienced, even though one had done nothing physical. Likewise, a state of unexplained disorientation or confusion can also occur. Rita has managed to generally sidestep these ravages as well, thanks to the Isotron.

Sure, there is a limited amount of pain that comes and goes, but if she thinks her symptoms are beginning to flare, a couple of Isotron treatments have so far kept them at bay.

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According to Rita, the secret is to head them off at their first appearance. In fact, in recent times, she has seldom required any treatments. Small wonder that Rita contends that Isotron treatments are, “The best thing I ever did. It is capable of helping so many people.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” is what I’d bet a lot of readers are thinking by now. I’m also sure this thought has likewise popped into the minds of most readers: Assuming I am not aggrandizing the capabilities of the Isotron, why has this marvelous, hope-inspiring device in the on-going medical struggle against crippling diseases and conditions remained in obscurity?

Per St. John, Dr. Ziegler was extremely (and justifiably) cautious when it came to sharing, much less turning over the rights to proprietary information about the Isotron with outside commercial interests.

There was no shortage of substantial interests and offers. However, the good doctor was insistent that his creation be used for its intended purpose—rehabilitation of the seriously injured and afflicted from all socioeconomic stratas. Despite being shown astronomical sums from a few high-visibility sources, none gained Ziegler’s trust sufficiently to abandon his high ethical standard.

Actually, a September, 1966, Idaho plane crash might have scuttled the most viable opportunity for the Isotron to have been embraced medically in conformance with Ziegler’s vision. Two of the men who were killed on this ill-fated flight that was returning from an elk hunting trip were Dean Markham and George Skakel, Jr., both of whom had close ties to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and possessed considerable interest in making the Isotron more commercially available.

Judging from the extensive paper trail Bill St. John has passed on to me, it’s clear that Ziegler and Markham shared a strong personal and professional relationship. The latter was a major A-list contact, being a bona fide “power player” in the Kennedy White House, thanks to his close personal friendship with the Attorney General—Harvard buddies, class of 1948, and godfather to Robert and Ethel’s eighth child, Christopher George, among other ties.

In 1961, Markham was brought into the upper echelons of the Kennedy White House, officially denoted as a “Special Projects Director.” Because he earned degrees in social psychology and possessed a bit of a background in police work, Markham directed, advised, consulted, organized and oversaw umpteen committees, councils, commissions, panels, and government out-reaches focusing on youth and narcotics (the popular word for illicit street drugs at the time), delinquency and related areas. Culturally, the “war on drugs” hit full stride in the Kennedy years.

Beyond this, Markham also worked with the Justice Department, Treasury, Health, Education & Welfare and the Budget Bureau. But there is no doubt, he was tightly connected with the inner White House circle, and, not coincidentally, all of his correspondence with Dr. Ziegler was on White House letterhead.

Similarly, there is no question that Markham was spreading a lot of positive word-of-mouth regarding the Isotron and its benefits and possibilities among other branches of our government, like the military. Hence, around 1963, Ziegler was receiving exploratory letters of interest from the Department of the Navy, who seemed interested from a therapy standpoint, and the Marines, who expressed interest from a physical readiness standpoint.

In time, the cautious and conservative Dr. Ziegler offered guarded responses, and multiple demonstrations were held with the aforementioned parties. Actually, a couple of the York lifters, and most often Bill St. John, served as the subject for these high-profile demonstrations.

Circa 1962-63, Markham was, in a friendly way, attempting to steer Ziegler in a commercial direction with the Isotron by connecting him with NYC lawyers Tom Hayes and George Skakel, Jr, the latter being Ethel Kennedy’s brother. However, in April of ’63, the former advised Hayes to shelve “incorporation proceedings for the Isotron Research Corpora-
sion of Dr. John Ziegler” as the latter had enlisted a local Olney, MD, attorney to spearhead a similar effort. Perhaps this explains the “ISOTRONICS, INC. of Olney, MD” reference in one of the military correspondences to Ziegler.

Of course, the very cordial Markham-Ziegler relationship and its insider influence dimension went away with that Idaho plane crash in 1966. However, by that point, Ziegler’s Isotron had a “life” of its own, albeit an underground one. This could explain why, according to Ziegler’s correspondence, government interest in it seemed to register a bit of a rekindling again in 1973-74, with overtures coming from the Veterans’ Administration.

Additionally, on the trademark registration front, it seemed Ziegler was also more proactive in that time frame, but only to a point. A February, 1974, letter to Ziegler from Virginia Beach physician Dr. Robert Brewer references the “Isotron Mark VIII.” Per Bill St. John, this designation is indicative of an advanced version from a prior generation of the unit. Over the years, Ziegler sought to reflect on his creation and make refinements when he felt upgrading was prudent.

What hybrid feature or technological uniqueness from the mind of Dr. Ziegler allowed the Isotron to gain what some would view as a near-panacea reputation? Only Ziegler knew for sure. However, the best guess of former Olympic lifter-bodybuilder, eye surgeon and accomplished critical thinker in his own right, the late Dr. John Gourgott, is that Ziegler had arrived at the perfect signal output and/or wave form.

What does that mean? Only Gourgott knew!

This exhaustive historical look at the Isotron only centers on one dimension of its past, the medical application. Recall that Dr. Ziegler stated in his aforementioned letter to Aetna Casualty that he also had quite a backlog of experience with its athletic applications as well. We’ll explore that in a future article, along with the doctor’s thoughts on pure strength training and advanced bodybuilding.

**Isometrics, the Isotron & Dr. John Ziegler**

*William “Bill” March*

Upon learning there was something of a concerted (and long over due) effort in the works to revisit and resurrect the public legacy of Dr. John Ziegler, which has been so callously and unjustly trashed over the past few decades, my participation was mandatory. The Dr. Ziegler I rubbed shoulders with during my competitive lifting heyday was 180 degrees opposite of the one so negatively portrayed by writers.

Moreover, due to my deep abiding respect for the doctor and his memory, which has only grown since his passing, and because my name has been historically linked to his, I feel compelled to recount on-the-record my cherished association with Dr. Ziegler.

Thanks to performing well enough to impress Bob Hoffman as a last-minute replacement for Dave Ashman at a public lifting demonstration, I was invited to train at the York Barbell gym on Ridge Avenue during the latter part of 1959. Roughly three months thereafter, when I went in for a Monday workout, I was instructed to go upstairs for a meeting with John Grimek, John Terpak and Bob Hoffman.

The trio informed me that York Barbell was working with a doctor located in Olney, MD, who was looking for subjects to test out a new form of strength acquisition, and they were wondering if I would be interested. To be perfectly honest, in those days I would have eaten horseflop had I been convinced it would have made me stronger. So, of course I told the threesome I would be interested.

Soon a meeting was set up between Dr. Ziegler and me at his home in Olney. During this initial visit, we mostly talked about weight training in general, but it was clear that one of Dr. Ziegler’s priorities was my ability to follow his instructions consistently and without deviation.

On this occasion, he also dictated the actual plan of action regarding the isometric regimen. In a nutshell, I was told to perform one press, one
squat and one pull position in a power rack every day from Mondays through Thursdays, rest Fridays, and total out at Saturday training sessions. Those rack positions varied from day to day—low, middle, high/lockout—per each individual movement, and the three Olympic lifts were practiced only on Saturdays.

Every weekday morning, Dick Smith, whom I had asked to function as my trainer, and I drove to Dr. Zielger’s in Olney, where I did a 12-second static hold in one press, one pull and one squat position on the power rack in Doc’s personal home gym.

Yes, that was it. Essentially, we drove the 110 miles to the Ziegler home and office every day so I could receive 36 total seconds of exercise! Luckily, the Saturday sessions could be carried out at the York gym.

While I gave my best available effort daily to these static holds, I, frankly, did not like them, being very skeptical of their effectiveness or carryover to the actual Olympic lifts.

After a few weeks of my skepticism, Dr. Ziegler came up with a version of isometric contraction that encompassed moving maximum poundages for very short distances off pins and held for time. Actually, I also referred to this revised form of isometrics as my “overload power system.”

Still, in the early stages of this isometric experiment, I never thought it was going to work. Never! Then, a fairly sudden 20-pound gain in my Olympic lift total prompted my attitude to turn a corner. In retrospect, other factors may have also contributed to some degree, and those “other factors” will be addressed in this article.

Getting back to my overload power system, my standard training pattern was to work in 6-8 week blocs (I think today, the commonly used term is “cycles”), which usually culminated in a lifting contest, although I would total out pretty close to my limit on those Saturday sessions between contests.

Actually, my workouts were planned a year in advance. For example, if a rack workout or a total session fell on Christmas day, I was doing that workout on Christmas day! Meticulous records of my workouts were logged daily. Unfortunately, those records fell by the wayside with the passage of time. Otherwise, I would be sharing them.

One more point I would like to make regarding the overload power system in the power rack: I never plateaued in terms of being able to get stronger from cycle to cycle. Put another way, I never hit poundages in any of the positions beyond which I could not progress.

My consistent approach was pretty simple: I would start a new 6-8 week training stretch conservatively with regard to rack poundages, ramping them up as best I could over the course of that time frame, at the end of which was typically a contest.

Upon resuming training after the contest, I would drop back the rack poundages in the various positions by 40-50% and start ramping them up again over the next 6-8 weeks of training, and then enter another contest. As I said, I NEVER failed to surpass the rack poundages I had topped out at in the cycle before.

For the sake of the curious, my best poundages (with a 6-second hold) were as follows: low pull/deadlift (from mid-shin to below the knees) 615; middle pull (above knees) 645; top pull (above waist, arms bent & on toes) 380; low press (shoulders to nose) 505; middle press (eye level to top of head) 470; lockout press (top of head to lockout) 750, and 1/4 squat, 1750.

Eventually, my low squat position was done outside of a power rack, taking 405 or so off of a squat rack, sitting in the bottom position for 5 or 6 seconds and then standing up.

Two other perhaps subtle points that also contributed to my overall success as a lifter were as follows.

Even on those Saturdays when I was just total-ling out in the York Gym, the motivation was always high due to the presence of so many other accomplished lifters, in addition to the big influx of specta-
tors who came to watch the Saturday workouts. You can't appreciate the quality of that York gym aura back then unless you were a part of it.

One final ancillary observation associated with my power rack training: As I noted, Dr. Ziegler had me start out at 12-second contractions per position. Over time, he began to suspect this duration was too long for maximum exertion, so progressively, contraction times were lowered to six seconds, and this did seem to foster better results.

Dr. Ziegler's seemingly boundless inquisitive-ness about muscular contraction and the operation of the human body also brought the Isotron electronic muscle stimulator into our relationship, and fairly early on. The version of the Isotron the doctor had when I first began going to him reminded me of a cross between one of those old, huge Philco radios with the big dials (you have to be of a certain age to know what I am talking about!), and some sort of sci-fi round thing. And, yes, there was regular mixing of isometric rack workouts and Isotron workouts. If an Isotron workout followed a rack session, it was most often on Mondays and Wednesdays.

However, this is not to imply that changing situations or circumstances could not have altered the timing or blending of the voluntary and involuntary contractions. If in Doc's discretion, I could benefit from an Isotron workout on a Thursday or my typical rest day, Friday, I took one. Likewise, there was the rare occasion when he advised me to cease the rack work for a brief period and rely only on Isotron treatments.

At one pint I had incurred a nagging injury to one of my thighs and was told to soft-pedal the rack work for the week. However, to hasten the healing, Doc administered repeated ultrasound treatments with some kind of liquid medication, in addition to treatments on the Isotron. The injury disappeared within a few days. In fact, he told me to do my normal Saturday workout at the end of that week. And I did... with positive results and no recurrence of the injury.

Keeping in mind that a considerable amount of the acquired trust accumulated in my relationship with Dr. Ziegler was based on my willingness to explicitly follow his recommendations. And because he liked to tinker with variables, very occasionally, his recommendations could be significant departures.

For example, there was one four or five-month period when he had me abstain from all isometric rack work entirely. During that period I received only Isotron treatments on the weekdays and would do my usual Saturday total session.

Without question, the usage and development of the Isotron for athletic purposes was an offshoot of his initial interest in isometric training for strength. And it's been pointed out as well that he also found eye-opening medical uses for it.

My personal experiences with it were quite positive. At the bottom line of getting stronger is coaxing the body's nerves and muscles to produce stronger and progressively more powerful contractions. Forcefully pursued, the type of short range and hold rack work I did encourages that scenario. Of course, the next upward step in that picture would be to eclipse the body's limitations by the use of involuntary muscle contractions, which is what the Isotron did.

But beyond that, the Isotron gave tremendous analytical feedback as to the on-going operational quality of the body's recovery mechanisms, both individual muscles and the system as a whole. The process of getting stronger goes nowhere with inefficient recovery.

In my opinion, Dr. Ziegler was the ultimate in an athletic trainer back then, and could still very probably more than hold his own against the elite athletic trainers of today...if not show them a couple of things!

Moving on to the topic most readers hoped I would address candidly, but assumed I would not... in that aforementioned meeting that took place in the offices at York Barbell, in addition to the mention of testing "a new form of exercise," there was also mention of “pills” being part of the picture as...
well. No specifics, just a reference to “pills.”

Yes, on those early trips to Dr. Ziegler’s I was given a Dianabol pill along with the 36 seconds of exercise. Candidly, I never took more than 10 milligrams a day...EVER...and there were periods during which I took nothing. Yet, I continued to follow my rack training, and/or augmentation with the Isotron, but still registered progress in terms of getting stronger.

Sure, some of my comparatively meteoric surge in the lifting world can rightly be attributed to Dianabol, but to totally disregard and deride the clear role that rack work and even the Isotron played in my ultimate success is categorically wrong and myopic. I can assert that with confidence because there were up-and-coming young lifters at the time who sought out and received my continuing guidance on rack training, who were not on any steroid, and who made progress strength-wise. Sam Bigler would be a case in point.

Looking back, it is ironic that my name has become attached to a lingering image problem involving athletics. From the moment I became involved with weightlifting, it was obvious to me that the sport needed all of the positive PR it could get. Hence, I made it my business to give free time and knowledge about lifting or general weight training to literally anyone who seemed interested in resistance exercise. Similarly, on Saturdays I would often attend lifting contests in which I was not competing in order to be fan-friendly and a good representative of the York Barbell Club.

My involvement in all of this lifting-related activity was that it was what it was, and I harbor no regrets. Further, I would like to point out, regarding the Dianabol issue, that its usage at the time was neither illegal or even frowned upon by authorities. And I was engaged in its usage under the auspices of a licensed practicing physician of considerable credentials, who took the necessary medical precautions to monitor my on-going health. To reiterate, it was what it was!

One aspect of Dr. Ziegler’s motivation for working with lifters like myself, Bob Bednarski, Bill St. John and others, that seems to have been lost in the shuffle was the accumulation of physical data that yielded insights he could employ to better understand and treat seriously impaired or injured medical patients. The refinement of the Isotron over time would be a fine example.

Early on, Ziegler searched for improved conducting solutions to lessen or prevent skin irritation or shock. He figured it out, but along the way determined that rain-induced mineral buildup in his well water was the cause, and that substituting distilled water in the conducting solution solved the problem and improved the quality of the contractions! There were many discoveries of that nature.

I also wish it to be known that my athletic activities back in the 1960s were not confined to just competitive weightlifting. In terms of a time commitment, I played considerably more basketball at the local YMCA than I spent working out. While it was not publicized in S&H, my usual post-workout tendency was to go to the Y for an hour or two of pick-up basketball.

In the same vein, for several years I also played on a local semi-pro football team in the fall. As much as I was into lifting, I did not turn my sporting life over completely to lifting. At my peak, this pursued combination of strength training and athletics allowed me the ability to perform a standing high jump of 5 feet, as well as be able to dunk a basketball at a bodyweight of 205.

A final word about my relationship with Dr. John Ziegler: My contemporary Bill Starr looked upon him as an exemplary scientific researcher and that was what the doctor was. Like Starr, I also viewed Dr. Ziegler as an exemplary human being, eccentricities and all.

The bottom line is that decades ago I put my lifting and athletic careers, not to mention my health and welfare, in Doc’s extraordinarily capable hands, and I was lastingly the better for it. I had supreme trust in any recommendation he forwarded, and

This is a compilation of articles written by Jan Dellinger, Bill March and Bill St. John. For more like this, please visit The Tight Tan Slacks of Dezso Ban blog at ditillo2.blogspot.com.
was very secure in the knowledge that he would never do anything to harm me.

And because of my good fortune to be a recipient of his superlative guidance and knowledge, it is a fact that I went places and met people I never would have otherwise.

**The Isotron as a Bodybuilding Tool**

*Bill St. John*

The 1965 *Strength & Health* Picnic was a seminal moment in my career as a competitive bodybuilder because on this occasion Val Vasilef pointed out Dr. John Ziegler to me. My curiosity regarding the doctor began when Val, who was also my training partner and good friend, had made previous mentions that Ziegler “had a machine which grew muscles!” On the basis of that “thought seed,” I attempted to read all I could about the doctor that was offered in the pages of *Strength & Health* magazine.

Actually, good fortune struck twice at the aforementioned picnic, as there was an after-party at Bob Hoffman’s house, and thanks to my close ties with Val, I also got invited to this shindig. There were a number of Iron Game notables present, including the Raders and Dr. Ziegler among them.

Holding “court” at one of the social circles was Dr. Ziegler, talking in his inimitably unapologetic and animated way about a variety of mind-bending topics, including time travel. While listening to him expound, my first impression was, “Wow! This guy is ‘out there’ eccentric.”

Funny thing, though: The longer I listened, the more I sensed his genuineness, so that by the end of his oratory, I was ready to sign up for extended time travel. Of course, the Ziegler creation I was more interested in was his Isotron, or as Val described it, the “machine which grew muscles.”

And fueling this personal curiosity all the more was a revealing conversation Bob Hoffman and I had on the way to my car when leaving for home.

Sensing my growing interest, Bob spoke effusively and very descriptively while praising Dr. Ziegel, and especially his Isotron. One statement the majordomo of Olympic weightlifting made to me then which I never forgot was, “Bill, Ziegler’s machine is just unbelievable!”

Think about the implications of that endorsement for a minute: Here was the number one advocate of barbell and dumbbell training talking up this
machine so glowingly to a dyed-in-the-wool weight guy! Quite progressive of Bob, all things considered!

Before continuing on, I want to put a finer point on the doctor’s personality, thought processes, and especially his genuineness, as mentioned a couple of paragraphs ago. As my association and rapport with Dr. Ziegler reached a level of extreme mutual trust over time, he would occasionally reveal pieces of himself and his innate complexity, such as his limitations with the ordinary, while juxtaposing his familiarity with the extraordinary. For instance, he once remarked, “I can’t make coffee or fix the toaster, but I am involved in electronic medicine.”

Perhaps it should also be mentioned that Dr. Ziegler’s unique look at the world was also shaped in part by weekly Thursday night “discussion groups” that assembled at his residence featuring exceptionally forward-thinking scientific minds and Mensa-level professionals from a wide variety of fields. Suffice it to say, these back-and-forths centered on topics far above standard newspaper editorials, radio call-in shows or even Sunday morning political talk shows.

Let’s get back to my gradual journey toward a relationship with Dr. Ziegler. In the spring and summer of 1966, I shared a car ride to a major lifting event in Newport News, VA, with Bill March and Sam Bigler. It goes without saying that since I knew of March’s working relationship with the doctor, I picked his brain for every shred and detail of information that encompassed that working relationship, but with special focus on the Isotron application.

Some months went by, and again thanks to being friendly with Val, whom Dr. Ziegler liked personally, I got invited along for the ride to his Olney, MD, residence in March of 1967. This was a Sunday, but it was not a quiet day at the Ziegler residence with W.R. Grace bigwigs visiting, Doc’s lysine dispensing machine spitting out tablets at a loud and frantic rate, neighbors also stopping by, etc.

When the uproar died down a bit and Val and I got a bit of face time with the doctor, as politely as I could, I asked Ziegler if I could experience the Isotron, whereupon, he asked his assistant, Andy Turnbull, if they had any conducting solution left. When the affirmative answer came back, he interrupted the show-and-tell of his gun and Civil War memorabilia collection long enough to pad and wire up my right femur. Then he turned up the current for a few seconds, cut if off and went back to expounding on his Civil War artifacts.

Was the experience all that I had hoped it would be? Even at that point in my life, I recognized that sometimes the reality of things did not live up to their hype. However, in this case, that few seconds of sensation got my attention. I thought my thigh bone was going to snap! Nevertheless, and perhaps in defiance of common sense, my fascination with the Isotron peaked even more.

Perhaps this would be the appropriate point to mention that intense electrical muscle stimulation (especially via the Isotron) is not for everyone. While Bill March, Russ Knipp, Ernie Pickett, and eventually I thrived on it, guys like Lou Riecke and Bill Starr did not like being involuntarily contracted. Pickett once offered a very plausible anecdotal defense to explain their dislike: “In war time, if the enemy had the Isotron, all a soldier taken prisoner would give them would be his name, rank, serial number...and the current position of the 7th Fleet!”

Before moving on, there is one point of history I would like to offer regarding my initial Isotron sampling: The model Dr. Ziegler used on me that day was the suitcase model he took with him to the White House when treating President Kennedy.

After that March, 1967, Sunday visit, I wrote Dr. Ziegler a personal letter, which resulted in an actual dinner invitation on April 2, 1967. Dick Smith was also a dinner companion that day.

Apparently, I was growing on the doctor, as around that time, I found out later, he asked Tom Suggs for his assessment of me. In late May of 1967, Dr. Ziegler began administering Isotron treatments on me.

Of course, I would do everything in my power to ingratiate myself with the Zieglers, including his...
wife Lillian, who was a very highly regarded physician in her own right. Hence, whenever I was invited to their home in Olney, I would stop at New Jersey fruit stands along the way and bring them tomatoes, berries or what have you.

By January of 1968, Ziegler’s personal interest in me was blossoming. In fact, he took my family up on an invitation to stay at our home, and simultaneously assess my bodybuilding progress at the Mr. East Coast Contest that was held at the Philadelphia YMCA. Ziegler and my parents really hit it off. My mother, in particular, really liked him.

Ironically, while I won the physique contest, Dr. Ziegler only saw a fraction of it as he and Joe Mills, the famed New England Olympic lifting coach, found a local watering hole to their liking.

Notwithstanding that incident, thanks to Ziegler’s guidance and Isotron treatments, things were really starting to come together for me as the 1968 Mr. America approached. Earlier in the year, Dr. Ziegler prompted me to clamp down on my diet, stressing that I consume more eggs, in particular.

Subsequently, I dropped from 208 to 188 over a couple of months. It was sheer agony to me, plus I thought I lost everything else with it. However, my own mother offered this approving comment, “Well, you finally lost those love handles.”

Aside from this being a necessary reverse step to build toward a better physique, in retrospect, this was also probably a partial Ziegler test to see if I would continue to do what he instructed.

Clearly, all of the Ziegler-inspired assistance was working, as even Val Vasilef began commenting on the physical transformation I was undergoing. My overall muscular hardness was off the charts. Even in casual clothes, my musculature looked like it was alive but solid as granite. I began getting admiring stares much in the way Val got them.

Perhaps the ultimate compliment I ever received was from the great Tommy Kono, who took me aside at a major national contest in 1972 to say, “Bill, you look like the strongest guy in the line-up.” Honestly, prior to the 1968 Mr. America Contest I had no business competing in a national level physique contest. Again, clearly, Ziegler’s expert guidance made all the difference as I took sixth place overall at that contest.

I have already mentioned the nutritional side of things, but my pre-contest training regimen consisted of two-a-day workouts daily (upper body session at one, lower body at the other), along with two full-body Isotron treatments daily. This was the regimen in the final 12-day run-up to the event. Of course, I had to build up to that volume of combined workouts and Isotron treatments over the course of a few weeks, nor could one keep that schedule up endlessly either. But unquestionably, the intense Isotron sessions imparted a degree of muscular separation and hardness that no combination of diet and voluminous exercise had given me before.

My physical improvement, as well as the Isotron’s reputation was pulsating through the lifting world by this time, even among non-York affiliated lifters. I think it was at the 1970 Nationals that the very fine West Coast lifter Dan Cantore came to my hotel room, noting my progress and asking questions about Ziegler’s machine.

Taking the merits of the Isotron in another direction, the conventional wisdom holds that it is nearly impossible to simultaneously promote strength and power gains and muscular endurance in the human body. My experience with the Isotron says otherwise, as the combination of fast-paced, high-volume bodybuilding workouts six days per week and fairly regular Isotron treatments imparted both in fine measure.

While working out once with the late Dr. John Gourgott, himself a fine bodybuilder and Olympic lifter, a curling challenge was issued: barbell curls for reps with 150 pounds, back against the wall. I cranked out 10 reps, at which point Gourgott remarked that my last rep was performed with as much control and rate of elevation as my first rep. Oh, and by the way, 400-pound full squats for 20 or so reps was also a routine thing for me.
Still, had it not been for Dr. Ziegler’s uncanny medical expertise, my personal moment of glory at the ’68 Mr. America would not have happened. If this story sounds familiar, Bill Starr referenced it in his classic training book *The Strongest Shall Survive*, but it bears repeating in any discussion of Dr. Ziegler’s medical rehab skills.

Six weeks out from the ’68 Mr. America, I badly injured my ankle on a Wednesday at my Philadelphia Naval Shipyards job. That same day, the Navy doctors determined via X-rays that I had chipped a bone in my instep and had ligament tearing. They put me on crutches, which I needed desperately, and told me to come back in 6 weeks.

Being desperate, I hobbled to the car, barely able to drive, got home and called Dr. Ziegler, advised him of the situation and was instructed to “get down here!” At that point, driving a car was no small feat, as the edema, discoloration from ankle to knee and overall pain had reached an excruciating apex, which was aggravated all the more when depressing the clutch to shift gears.

Immediately, Dr. Ziegler got diuretics and blood thinners in me and performed some ultrasound treatments, which then gave way to Isotron treatments. In a nutshell, he worked on my ankle intensely, primarily with the Isotron—10 individual treatments total—from that Thursday evening when I arrived through the following Monday when I went home...in no pain, with no swelling or discoloration, no need for crutches, and with full mobility restored.

In fact, I felt so back to normal that I naively visited the Navy doctors bright and early Tuesday morning to report my progress, as well as my desire to return to work, figuring they would be keenly interested as to how my speedy recovery came about.

As I said, I naively thought that. Their immediate reaction was to disavow any responsibility for me since I had received treatment from another physician. Not only did I go back to work, but that Tuesday night I full squatted 400 pounds for reps at the Philadelphia Athletic Club.

Most likely, a lot of lifters would have thanked Dr. Ziegler for the astounding ankle recovery, as well as the startling physical transformation and kept in touch. Learning more about the range of capabilities that the Isotron possessed became an unflagging quest for me.

Perhaps the “aha” moment was when Dr. Ziegler informed me that he was using the negative-pulse feature of the Isotron—which was a different modality than he employed for pure muscle stimulation—to heal my ankle. Suddenly, it dawned on me that the machine had a range of functions and uses, and my inquisitiveness was maximally stirred.

Massively helpful, too, was the fact that the doctor did not interact with me as though I were just a dumb bodybuilder, but more like something of an undercurrent in the Isotron curriculum. It goes without saying that the quality and quantity of information about not only the Isotron, but many other medical topics he imparted over time was head-spinning.

This close rapport also provided me the opportunity to serve as his primary test subject when he gave Isotron demonstrations to movers and shakers. Typically, it was educational to see the reactions of these power types when watching me take some serious stimulation. Very frequently, the doctors and administrators, such as those from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), just could not wrap their heads around the whole process.

Moreover, it could be equally educational to take in Dr. Ziegler’s reactions to these educated eggheads.

For example, when the folks from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) did not appear to be warming up to the Isotron demonstration as Doc thought they should, midway through he started berating them with this sarcastic bromide: “Aren’t you the same guys who spent $6,000 on a mattress last year?!”

These examples notwithstanding, the brilliance of the Isotron could not be kept “under a rock.” Due to the fact that Dr. Ziegler was located near the
country’s seat of federal power, and he had friends in high places, word of mouth about his creation reached the local professional sporting world rather quickly.

During one of my numerous visits to Doc’s, someone from the Washington Redskins brought over their quarterback, Sonny Jurgenson, who was suffered from elbow and shoulder miseries enough to adversely affect his on-field play.

Jurgenson, who because of his lengthy football career had been through the athletic training mill and was, hence, skeptical in general, took one look at the Isotron and sort of disparagingly remarked, “One of those muscle jumpers, huh?”

Nevertheless, he took a treatment on the machine. The following day his attitude had changed toward the unit as he called Dr. Ziegler to thank him and report that his shoulder and elbow were feeling much better.

Even big names from professional non-contact sports came to Ziegler because of the word of mouth about the Isotron. Golfer Deane Beman was not as physically powerful as his main rivals Jack Nicklaus and Lee Trevino. In brief, his “short game” was on par with theirs, but his driving was where he came up short. A period of time on the Isotron, and the sporting press was commenting on how he was suddenly breathing down the necks of Nicklaus and Trevino.

In fact, there was an article in our local Philadelphia Evening Bulletin showcasing Beman and his improvement. However, at the request of Dr. Ziegler there was no mention of him or the Isotron in the article.

Admittedly, in an effort to express the versatility and effectiveness of the Isotron, I have hop-schotched somewhat from the theme of this article: basically, the Isotron as a pure muscle building tool.

All I can tell you is that I was a veteran bodybuilder who would have NEVER risen above regional caliber had it not been for Dr. Ziegler’s remarkable counsel and assess to his Isotron.

Granted, I never won an overall Mr. America or Mr. USA title, but if you check the record, beginning in 1968, I never placed out of the top five or six at these events, and on a couple of occasions was second overall at the Mr. USA.

The bottom line is that my metamorphosis as a bodybuilder began at that 1965 Strength & Health Picnic, which I mentioned at the outset.

I really miss those S&H Picnics. And I’ll finish waxing nostalgic with another obvious admission: I also really miss my friend Dr. John Ziegler.