

The Evolution of Power Branding



This is not an advertisement. It is a public interest article.

By Tom Lincir, President and Founder,
Ivanko Barbell Company

Every club would like to have a look and feel like no other place in town, a reputation as the best place to pursue health and fitness goals. An image like that takes a long time to build, and it can be set back overnight with just one bad experience. So when it comes to making a name for yourself, you must be careful where your brand appears. If it's on a product that's just good enough, your name will mean good enough but not great. If you want to be seen as the best club in town, you'll want to put your name on the best products on Earth. Product and image go hand in hand toward the elusive goal of perfection. That's what is meant by the evolution of power branding.

Whenever discussing the evolution of better ideas and technology, I like to include a history lesson for several reasons. 1) I know history. Some of history I have lived through. In other instances I have done extensive research even to the point of flying to countries to get a signed affidavit or declaration regarding historical authenticity. 2) To honor the legitimate inventors and real pioneers of our industry, and 3) To expose those pretenders who want to ignore, alter, or rewrite history to glorify their own image. In an earlier article I coined the term "strength archaeology" which is to painstakingly reconstruct the historical record to separate truth from fiction.

Urethane coated dumbbells are not a new concept. In the

1970's, James Sutherland, the owner of Hastings Barbell Company, developed the concept for an iron dumbbell encapsulated in urethane. In 1984, he presented the idea to Universal Gym Equipment, the largest manufacturer of gym equipment in the United States at that time, with \$80,000,000 yearly sales. Universal gave Jim the money and the engineering support to develop the concept.

The first samples were cast with a swaged 1045 cold rolled steel handle at the John Deere tractor engine factory in



The first urethane dumbbells by Universal in the 1980's developed cracking and peeling over time. Time will tell whether other brands will develop similar problems.

Waterloo, Iowa. These iron dumbbell cores were then sent to Trusty-Cook in Noblesville, Indiana to be encapsulated with urethane. Trusty-Cook was the company that developed the urethane-coated dead blow hammer that was eventually sold to Stanley Tools.

One of the first sets of Universal's urethane dumbbells was sold to the Dallas Cowboys. The even-size dumbbells were blue urethane and the odd-size dumbbells were silver urethane.

Initially there were a lot of problems with these dumbbells — urethane cracking, handles breaking or bending, etc. I believe in time these problems could have been solved. Unfortunately,

Universal was sold, and the new owners and CEO could only see the problems, not the potential. Several years later, Universal filed for bankruptcy.

Over the years we have collected these dumbbells both brand new and as we found them in the field (see photo). We also have an original blue print. By analyzing the dumbbells we



Our specially made Toledo scale indicated this dumbbell accurate to 5-1000th of a pound, the weight of a \$100 bill.

found in the field, we were able to design around the shortcomings of Universal's original design. Examination of Universal's urethane coating and the construction methods exhibits some similarities with some of the imported dumbbells that have been sold in the United States.

History can be a valuable teacher if you are willing to learn from it. Those who are unwilling to learn from history are often forced to relive it.

Toward The Best Products on Earth

When we create a new product, the first thing we do is look back and learn from history. Then, we set our initial parameters based on what worked historically, and what did not. To solve problems and overcome obstacles, we apply the latest science and engineering to take the product to the limits



Surprise! Surprise! You never know what you will find when you saw an imported dumbbell in half. Look closely at the mismatch of threads and the slipshod welding. Thousands of these dumbbells are in in U.S. clubs. Perhaps yours is one of them?

of what existing technology permits. In reality, when we think we've got the best product on Earth, we don't stop there. In the quest for perfection, we're never satisfied, never finished.

Urethane Chemistry

Not all urethane is created equal. A few years ago I bought a pallet jack that was "Made in U.S.A." When the urethane wheels began to crack and crumble, I found out that the wheels were "Made in China". It seems American manufacturers were lured to China based on cost savings. But once they incurred the cost of replacing all the wheels, they came back to American urethane, which is exactly what Ivanko uses. But durability is only one factor.

Urethane Bonding

Urethane separating from the core was a problem with the Universal dumbbells in the 1970's and remains a problem with some brands today. With one dumbbell advertised as permanently bonding the urethane to the core, I was able to rip it off with my bare hands. I must admit it's kind of nice to rip off some of my competitors for a change. A tire company whose name must remain anonymous introduced me to a technology called chem-fused bonding that joins the urethane



Sawed cross sections show the differences in thickness of urethane used by Ivanko and some other brands.

to the core in a union that is stronger than the urethane itself.

Urethane Thickness

We believe 1/2" thickness is the correct amount of urethane to surround the steel dumbbell heads (cores). This will give the dumbbell proper shock absorption and a cushioning effect that is facility friendly. There is always a temptation to use less urethane because it is much more expensive than iron or steel. We took the liberty of sawing in half the urethane dumbbells of several competing companies. These other dumbbells (designated Brand x, y, and z in the above photo) represent a different belief from ours in that they use less than 1/2 the urethane of the Ivanko dumbbell.

Weight Accuracy

We doubt any other company checks weight as often as Ivanko. Years ago, toledo built us custom scales with super sensitive load cells. The accuracy of these scales is +/- .002 KG

(2 grams, about the weight of a dollar bill), throughout the range of zero to 25 kilos (55.1 pounds). We have our scales certified by the state every 3 months, plus we use our own test blocks daily. All urethane products are weight tested throughout the manufacturing process i.e. the handles, dumbbell cores, finished dumbbell heads, and completed dumbbells. With this kind of control at every step of the process, we can guarantee extreme weight accuracy.

No Welding on This Dumbbell

Everyone will agree that welding is the cheapest way to attach dumbbell heads to the handle. But we have always been more interested in the best way, not the cheapest. Some manufacturers even claim their welded dumbbells are one-piece. To me, this is misleading advertising. If you weld dumbbell heads onto a dumbbell bar, it doesn't make it one-piece any more than if you glued, bolted, or used any other attachment method. Historically some welds have broken. There is no manufacturer who would dare claim under oath that none of their welded dumbbells have broken. If there is someone out there willing to make this statement under oath, we will publish it. Ivanko uses a proprietary mechanical fastening system. We believe that it may be the best concept invented to date. History will prove us right or wrong.

Dumbbell Head Core Material

Historically, cast iron has never been a good way to get exact weight. That's why we use steel cores that are CNC machined to exact weight. Making the cores this way is the primary

reason some dumbbells are weight accurate to three digits past the decimal point. We really don't need to make them this accurate, but this high accuracy is testimony that our methods are correct and sound.

100% Made in U.S.A.

If your goal is the best strength products on Earth, you're simply not going to get them offshore. America is one of a few countries where the culture reveres and rewards perfection. Americans derive personal fulfillment from achieving ultimate quality even in areas where the end user cannot always tell the difference.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is an art form that is not widely understood, as evidenced by how much copying of designs goes on in the industry. Getting the "right look" can make a powerful statement. Sometimes it is about proportions, or the correct ratios, or changing the texture to reflect the light in a way that pleases the eye. Ivanko's urethane dumbbell design has been well received by the market, and we already have our first copycat.

Customization

How else can you gain recognition one rep at a time? There is no one thing that I can think of that can have a more dynamic impact on the appearance of your club. The colored urethane we can inlay into your dumbbells will never fade or fall off.

Any color can be duplicated. Multiple colors can have an even bigger impact.

If you want to be seen as the best place in town, be seen on the best products on Earth.



The Essence of Power Branding

There can be only one "best place in town", only one brand that pursues and captures that elusive perception. If you focus on touting the image of a product that is just "good enough", your image will suffer. If you focus on offering the best product possible, your brand image will eventually gain the ultimate recognition.

Ivanko Barbell Company was founded by Tom Lincir in 1967, and it is the leading provider of professional and commercial grade barbell and dumbbell products worldwide. Your comments or questions are welcome. Write Tom Lincir at Ivanko Barbell Company, P.O. Box 1470, San Pedro, CA U.S.A. 90733. Or phone (310) 514-1155, fax (310) 514-1363, or email tom@ivankobarbell.com.