

January 7, 2012 Newsday.com

Bobby Buttafuoco, Dan Fortuna and Gene Camp talk Arm Wrestling on Long Island

By John Hanc Newsday

<http://www.newsday.com/business/retirement/bobby-buttafuoco-and-arm-wrestling-s-pull-1.3433246>

Bobby Buttafuoco and arm wrestling's pull

January 6, 2012 by JOHN HANC / Special to Newsday



Newsday Photo / J.Conrad Williams Jr.

Wherever he goes, no matter how hard he tries to avoid the situation, it seems that somebody is always ready to challenge Bobby Buttafuoco. "All the time," says the 57-year-old.

The challenge has less to do with his surname than his forearms. For the record, yes, he is related to that Buttafuoco; Joey -- of [Amy Fisher](#) infamy -- is his younger brother. But often the challengers don't even know Bobby's last name. They just know him as the old Arm Wrestler. And in the parlance of that once-

underground-now-almost-mainstream sport, they're ready to "pull." In other words, to face off, elbow to elbow, in the classic arm-wrestling stance, and mobilize all their strength until one guy's forearm is "pulled" away from his center of power, and collapsed on the table.

There was the time recently in Buttafuoco's auto body shop in [Baldwin](#) when the bottled water guy came in; a powerful young man casually lugging a full 5-gallon jug over his shoulder. He noticed the arm-wrestling table Buttafuoco has set up in the back corner of the shop and asked who the arm wrestler was. "I pointed to the secretary," Buttafuoco recalls with a chuckle. "They never think it's the gray-haired guy," he says, referring to himself.

Apparently, the water guy figured he could dispatch the older guy with ease. Wrong. Buttafuoco says he flattened the water guy in about two seconds.

Although he's well into his 50s, Buttafuoco is a five-time national arm-wrestling champion, one of the best in the country, and a reminder to all that strength is not something that has to be lost as you age.

If you work at it, you get to keep it.

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, older adults who consistently engage in resistance (weight) training tend to have a higher muscle mass, are generally leaner and are anywhere from 30 to 50 percent stronger than their sedentary peers. Even when compared to those who engage only in aerobic exercise -- jogging, walking, bicycling -- the seniors who include strength training in their regimen have more muscle mass, higher bone mineral densities and greater strength and power.

One of the key words in that previous paragraph, however, is "consistently." Muscular strength is a use-it-or-lose-it thing: You have to keep training, keep working at it -- at least twice a week, the American College recommends. Buttafuoco makes it look easy, but his strength was hard won and is maintained through regular weight training.

Buttafuoco says he developed his muscles as a teenager -- not in a gym, but in his dad's auto body shop (which Bobby later took over). "We didn't work out," he says. "We worked." In the 1960s and 1970s, young Bobby's job involved holding the heavy polishers used to Simonize and wax cars. "We would do 13 cars on a Saturday," he said, "and these were big, '62 [Cadillac](#)-size cars."

The powerful forearms and grip he developed handling those old Milwaukee Polisher machines hour after hour, week after week, were first used in competition in 1984, when he saw that a pro arm-wrestling tournament was to be held at the Sunrise Mall in his hometown of [Massapequa](#). "I said, 'I can do that,' " he remembers. "I got second place, and I was pissed. I knew I could do better. That's when I was hooked, and that's just about the time the sport was becoming real."

Over the next two decades, Buttafuoco became involved in the emerging sport of arm wrestling. Along with his national titles, he has won numerous local events.

Most recently, he took first place in the 50- to 59-year-old age group in the 2010 Unified National Armwrestling Championship in Billings, Mont. (Arm wrestlers compete in six weight classes, in both left- and righthanded divisions. Buttafuoco, who competes at 198 pounds, is a righty.)

"He's got a very strong will and he doesn't like to lose," says Gene Camp of [Bayside](#), Queens, president of the [New York](#) Arm Wrestling Association. And, "he has a real love for the sport."

That passion extends to other aspects of the sport. In addition to being an active competitor, Buttafuoco is a well-respected referee. He officiated at June's Coors Light [Long Island](#) Arm Wrestling Championships at Mulcahy's Pub in [Centereach](#). About 75 athletes from around the tri-state area competed at the event -- including five wrestlers older than 50 and six women. One of

those women, Joyce Boone of Brooklyn, went on to win the title of [New York](#) State Arm Wrestler of the Year.

In a sport where broken arms are always a risk, Camp says, "Bobby is very aware of people in injury-prone positions. If he thinks someone's going to get hurt, he'll stop the match right away."

While you can find boys in every high school cafeteria or guys in every pub ready to "pull," there are only about eight serious competitors on [Long Island](#) (and an estimated 2,000 nationally, according to Camp). These are the pros; the guys (and a few gals) who compete and win regularly. They know the proper way to grip an opponent's hand, "lock up" and apply the quick whoomp of arm power and leverage that usually results in speedy matches.

Buttafuoco is one of those guys; his friend and training partner, 46-year-old Dan Fortuna, is another. The two train together weekly in Fortuna's impressively equipped "man cave" in his [Wading River](#) home. There, Fortuna -- who views Buttafuoco as his mentor -- has assembled an array of weight-training equipment, some of it specific to arm wrestling. For an hour, the two work out together, curling 120-pound dumbbells with one arm, doing pull-ups with hands flat on pieces of wood (to better develop the forearms) and, of course, practicing their pulls on one of the six arm-wrestling tables Fortuna has collected. They have a goal -- the 2012 Unified National Championships, being held May 18-20 in Reno, Nev., where both men are hoping to win their respective age groups.

"Ridiculous!" is how Fortuna describes Buttafuoco's strength and ability as an arm wrestler. "When you grab him on a table, he's a beast."

But Fortuna also recognizes one of the keys to his friend's longevity in their sport. "He's a man of consistency, and that's what makes him a world champion."

Consistency in training and keeping himself in shape. "It took me all these years to get this strong," says Buttafuoco, who is married and has two grown children. "You don't want to let it go."

Muscling in on good health

We can get strong and stay strong, even as we age. But doing that requires work -- and, if you're not doing so already, there's your challenge for 2012. In its national physical activity guidelines, the U.S. [Department of Health](#) recommends that older adults should do muscle-strengthening activities involving all major muscle groups at least twice a week. To make sure you're getting the most benefits, put some resistance in your resistance training. "You don't want to use super, super light weights," says exercise physiologist Robert Mazzeo, a senior fitness expert at the University of [Colorado](#) in [Boulder](#). "That's not optimizing your time in the gym." Instead, use weight you can handle for 12 to 15 reps. Especially for older athletes, he says, each set should bring you pretty close to fatigue for that muscle group. "Then give yourself 2-3 minutes' rest in between each set."

For more information on strength training, see Exercise & Physical Activity: Your Everyday Guide from the National Institute on Aging, at www.nia.nih.gov/health.

For more information on competitive arm wrestling, visit newyorkarmwrestling.com.

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