Where Are They Now?

Bob Samuels

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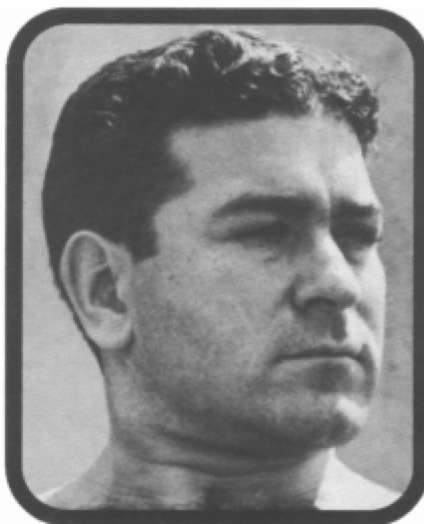
Ed Note: Al Thomas, our regular "Where Are They Now?" contributor, will return to these pages next issue.

With the recent passing of so many iron game veterans, the few surviving old-time strongmen are all the more worthy of recognition. Such a man is Robert "Bob" Samuels. Samuel's career is particularly noteworthy because he spans the gap between the old stage strongman with his theatrical exhibitions of raw strength and the modern age of Olympic-style and powerlifting competition, in which he pioneered and held records, as well as coached, promoted and officiated.



Robert Samuels was born to immigrant parents in New York, and brought up in an orthodox Jewish home. His interest in lifting came early. One of his first recollections was of lifting heavy objects around his father workshop. His first break in the Iron Game came when he attended a Police Field Day involving the stage strongman Siegmund Breitbart, best known for driving a spike into thick planks of lumber with his bare hand. Breitbart was impressed by the enthusiasm of the stocky, muscular fourteen year old who came up to him after the show, and gave Samuels his first advice on lifting.

Early on, Samuels performed feats of strength in exhibitions, which included bending spikes in his bare hands and pulling a fire engine with a mouthpiece and chain held in his teeth. He also supported enormous weights in the bridge position and lifted people, which he—like Louis Cyr—favored for exhibitions because their weight could not be faked. He also entered early weightlifting contests and continued this avocation when he traveled to Hollywood to work in the motion picture industry and, when he moved to Louisiana and began to work in the shipbuilding trade. In 1935, Samuels established one of the earliest YMCA competitive weightlifting programs in the country at the venerable Lee Circle YMCA in New Orleans; he became its first champion.

Lifting in Samuels' early days consisted of the odd-lifts—those specialized exercises which predated modern powerlifting. In the side, press Bob managed 220 pounds in his right hand and 205 in his left for an unofficial record. He could do alternate or "seesaw" presses with a 110-pound dumbell in each hand. Perhaps his most impressive odd-lift feat was a shoulder-bridge press with a "world record" 420-pounds. His abdominal strength was commensurate with that of his other muscles, as he could do sit-ups with 145 pounds behind his shoulders.

Samuels developed into a world-class Olympic-style overhead presser in later years. Though experts such as Peary Rader wrote that they hoped to see Davis and Samuels meet in competition, this was not to be, for Bob lost his standing as an amateur. After a torn leg ligament killed his chance to gain a berth on the Olympic wrestling team, Bob decided to move on to the colorful world of pro wrestling. "I got into wrestling because my arms were too short for boxing—I was getting killed!" Bob conceded. A true renaissance man, Bob continued to hold a full-time job—wrestling in the evenings and weekends—and also introduced scores of people to the benefits of physical culture. He also raised a family, pursued intellectual interests, made a movie, and in later years became a successful real estate developer.

As he did in the world of strength, Samuels served as a "missing link" in the transition of wrestling from the Golden Age of orthodox professional wrestling with such great champions as Frank Gotch, George Hackenschmidt, Stanislaus Zybysko, Strangler Lewis, and Jim Londos to modern, theatrical pro wrestling. Samuels' career began in 1935 and ended five years later. He did most of his wrestling in the Southwest, where he became friends with fellow wrestlers Milo Steinborn, Dory Punk, Buddy Rodgers, Lou Thesz, Man Mountain Dean and a very young Antonio Rocca. One memorable incident transpired when a young grappler named George Wagner asked Bob for some advice on advancing his career. Samuels replied that while he was a fine technical wrestler with a thorough mastery of holds and escapes, he needed a "gimmick." Several months later the young man re-emerged, transformed. "He had platinum blond hair fashioned into a flowing bouffant style, a valet who sprayed the ring with Chanel No. 5, a chiffon dressing gown and a new name: Gorgeous George. He had become the immortal 'Human Orchid,' and pro wrestling was never the same again," Bob laughed. Bob favored more manly gimmicks for himself. At intermissions between the matches, he sometimes put on strength exhibitions: his favorite stunt involved a tug-of-war between himself and several men. What made the stunt difficult was that Samuels held his end of the rope or chain in his teeth.

Professional wrestling has traditionally been a last athletic stop for discarded heavyweights of all sorts. Ex pro boxers and football lineman as well as outstanding lifters such as Doug Hepburn, Ken Patera and the mighty Bruno Sammartino ended their athletic careers as pro wrestlers. Because Bob never wrestled full-time—in all he had only 150 pro matches—he was able to gain reinstatement as an amateur athlete. and compete again in weightlifting. The terms

of his reinstatement specified, however, that he could not lift in the Olympics or the national championships.

The overhead press was Bob Samuels' best Olympic-style lift, and in strict form he did 305 for a state record and later made 325. He also did three rapid power cleans and presses with 300 pounds, and five presses off the rack with the same weight. He was also a pioneering powerlifter. At a bodyweight of about 220 pounds, he was one of the first men to bench press over 425 pounds. This was done when a bench in a gym was generally used for sitting down and resting between sets of military presses. Indeed, earlier he did a version of this lifting lying flat on the floor, pulling the weight over himself before pressing it. His personal best in the bench press was to be 440 pounds, and in the era prior to the Hepburnesque mastodons, he informally held the record in this lift. In the deadlift his all-time best was 640 pounds. Samuels considered Milo Steinborn the strongest wrestler-weightlifter of his day, especially considering his big squats. Steinborn was so avid about squats building overall strength that he encouraged his own sons to do them religiously. "When Dickie and Henry were little more than toddlers they already had muscular thighs and calves," Samuels recalled. Samuels also included squats in his routine, though he never matched Milo's poundages.

Turn-of-the-century strength performers were much like gunslingers of the old west. They had a reputation to uphold for the sake of their livelihoods, and were compelled by honor to meet the dare of any legitimate challenger. It was not uncommon in the early days for an audience member to "jump the stage" and ask to try a man's barbells while a show was underway. Before standardized contests began to be held in the early 1960s, powerlifting was not far removed from this state of affairs. Incredible claims circulated throughout the Iron Game, claims which achieved the status of truth based on the integrity of the performer of the alleged lift the consistency of the various reports which described the lift in question and the veracity and number of witnesses present.

Laughing about this early state of affairs one day recently, Samuels recounted a perfect example of the lifting rumor mill at work. "A story circulated years ago," he explained, "about a man fitting my description who had been seen lifting a set of wheels and axle from a railroad car over his head." Such an assembly, he explained, normally weighed around 1,200 pounds. What "eyewitnesses" actually saw, he reported, "was me doing overhead presses with a wheel-axle assembly salvaged from a small tram used for moving luggage in a railroad station. It weighed only 180."

Samuel's integrity about lifting matters carried over into his work as a referee in weightlifting. Once, he gave thumbs down to the great Norbert Schemansky for a technicality, on one of the heaviest lifts of Schemansky's career. Schemansky was livid, Samuels reported, at being denied his new record, and many in the audience booed the judges. Samuels, however, stood his ground "I judge by what I see," he told them, "not by what I think I see."

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of Bob Samuels' lifting career is that much of his best lifting came about after he was 50 years of age. In 1965, Bob organized a team of American weightlifters to participate in the Maccabiah Games in Israel. Before leaving the country, Gary Gubner, his heavyweight, took ill and could not make the trip. Samuels—suffering dysentery himself, not having practiced the Olympic-style overhead lifts in some time and approaching senior citizen status—filled in for Gubner, and won second place. This achievement, at an international event the calibre of the Maccabiah Games, brought Samuels more publicity than any other achievement of his career. At that contest, Samuels did a press with 285 pounds and achieved a highly respectable total.

Bob's strength diminished little with the passing of the decades. When he was a mere lad of seventy-three, he could still bench press, in strict style, 375 pounds. He is, in fact, still a very strong man able to bench press 225 pounds at the age of eighty-two.

Samuels' greatest contribution to the Iron Game has been as a weightlifting and powerlifting coach. As a mentor of young lifters, he firmly believed that the weight room should not belong solely to genetically gifted potential champions. He welcomed anyone with ambition and an interest in self-improvement. For Samuels, this included the "last chosen," those traditionally excluded from the athletic mainstream. To the chagrin of so-called experts, some of these less genetically gifted athletes became top lifters; those who did not make it to the top of the lifting heap still reaped the secondary benefits of self-discipline, fortitude and confidence, attributes which carried over to enhance other areas of their lives. Samuels belief that lifting was for everyone even extended to an innovative remedial program for the handicapped, who trained and competed not just with each other but right along with unimpaired lifters. His first candidate was C. J. Bennett, a young man severely afflicted with cerebral palsy, who could barely walk when he began weight training. Bennett changed his life dramatically by training. He went on to compete in open weightlifting contests, build a successful career, get married and even drive a car.

The highlight of Bob Samuels' coaching career came in 1969, when his Lee Circle YMCA team garnered the National YMCA Weightlifting Championships. Bob equated that victory, however, with the time his team finished second in the Senior Nationals to the dynastic York Barbell Club. Bob Hoffman York's legendary coach, paid Samuels a supreme compliment when he admitted that he had picked his team from established winners, while Samuels had developed his from "diamonds in the rough."

IN 1946, RIPLEY'S "BELIEVE IT OR NOT" FEATURED THE LIFT OF BOB SAMUELS', A 420 POUND FLOOR PRESS.

PHOTO: COURTESY BOB SAMUELS

Ever true to his holistic athletic philosophy, one of the first things that Bob Samuels told beginning trainees was that weightlifting should not be the most important thing in their lives. Young lifters were always reminded to not neglect their schooling. Samuels would tell his teenage lifters that a competitive lifting career rarely lasted more than ten years or so (rare exceptions being lifters like Kono, Schemansky and himself) and that having a good career and higher aspirations were more important. Samuels firmly believed in the classical Greek credo: the good life must embrace a balance between physical intellectual, social and spiritual-moral components. No one aspect of a man's life should dominate, he argued, all must reinforce and enhance the other aspects of manhood. True to this philosophy, when Bob talks about his former team members, these days, he boasts not about their past lifting, but about what fine men they have grown to be. This is true when he talks about any of his lifters. More than his strength feats, coaching or international officiating, it was probably this coaching and moral influence which moved Peary Rader in 1970 to successfully nominate Samuels for the prestigious Helms Sports Hall of Fame in California.

Bob Samuels' involvement with competitive lifting came to a halt in 1972. A prime reason was his heartbreak over the loss of his protégé and close friend David Berger, who was one of the athletes murdered by terrorists while competing in the Munich Olympics. Too, like other aging athletes, Bob had the sinking feeling that he was one of the last leaves on a tree in fall. Many of his lifting contemporaries were gone, as was his friend from his high school days at James Monroe High School in New York, Baseball Hall of Famer Hank Greenberg. Samuels grew disgusted with coaches and lifters who abided drugs and less than sensible training methods, people he believed were so obsessed with winning and records that they ignored the much larger world beyond the walls of the gym. Even so, Samuels continued to work out in his home and occasionally read strength publications, but he was not seen anymore in gyms. When word got around that he had donated his collection of strongman literature and memorabilia to the Todd-McLean Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, it appeared that an extraordinary career in the iron game, a career that began back at Breitbart's show, had finally come to an end.

But one day, while reading his evening paper several years ago, Bob Samuels came upon sports writer Peter Finney's column about a brave powerlifter named Bob Hafner who had survived a deadly bout with leukemia and planned to lift again as a symbol of hope to others fighting to live. Later, Bob learned how Hafner had planned to re-establish a special program for handicapped youngsters. Like Bob's own program from years past, Hafner's charges would train and compete with unimpaired lifters. This story inspired Bob and prompted him to make one more visit to the Lee Circle YMCA to watch a meet.

At the contest, he was immediately spotted by former national weightlifting champion Jimmy Craig and ten-year Louisiana powerlifting champion Glen LaBorde, who served as MC that day. When Samuels was introduced to the crowd, he received a long and enthusiastic ovation. At first, Bob could not believe that there were so many of his ex-lifters in attendance. In reality, there weren't: he had simply become a legend. Most of those in the crowd who cheered him that day were men like powerlifting champion Jesse Kellum, lifters whose relatives or older friends had told them about the man from whom they had gotten their start in the Iron Game. They knew of Bob Samuels as a man who was always ready to help with a personal problem, who was known to pay for equipment or traveling expenses out of his own pocket. He was "Uncle Bob" to the many kids he helped in the weight room, and his acts of kindness had not been forgotten.

At that recent powerlifting meet, Samuels felt like a visitor from another time. He was surprised by all of the accessory gear lifters of today wear, but very pleased to see how well the Special Olympians fit in and fared alongside the regular lifters. He had never before seen women lifters at a meet, but looked on approvingly as several competed, including Louisiana's greatest all-around female athlete, Lurline Hamilton Struppeck, a mother of three grown children, who made an impressive deadlift that day.

Bob Samuels always shunned the spotlight of publicity and avoided interviews. But he was always a "lifter's lifter," respected by the great twentieth-century giants of the strength world. He did a great deal for his beloved sport and helped many along the way. He deserves a hallowed place in the Eternal Pantheon of Ironmen.