



John Y. Smith in the middle position of the bent press with 185

Profile:

John Y. Smith

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Tom Ryan competes in Masters' weightlifting and has written a book (unpublished) about strongmen.

For the inaugural issue of *Iron Game History*, it seemed appropriate to feature a strongman who exuded strength and vitality at an advanced age.

John Young Smith was born on April 22, 1866 to a Scottish father and German mother aboard an Austrian ship in Chinese waters (different, to say the least). Unfortunately for young John and the other two children, their father died in 1870 and their mother passed away a week later. Orphaned at such a tender age, John literally grew up working on sailing vessels.

He eventually retired from the sailing life, and a year later, at the age of 30, took up weightlifting. He stood 5' 6.5" and weighed between 160 and 170 pounds in his prime, which

was from 1903 to 1910. He is best remembered as having been a weightlifting champion at the age of 60—not just a champion for his age group, but a champion in open competition. Specifically, he won the “Strongest Man in New England” contest in 1926 against all comers.

John Bradford's detailed account of this contest can be found in *Strength* magazine (1926). A series of elimination contests were held that reduced the field from 34 contestants to six finalists. There were 5,000 spectators who viewed the elimination contests, and a picture shows that virtually all of them were standing. And a throng of 20,000 spectators viewed the finals, which were held at the playing field of the Boston Braves.

The lifts that were contested were the two hands continental jerk, two hands continental press, two hands deadlift, right hand deadlift and left hand deadlift. Smith won the contest by 15 pounds, and his best lift was probably the right hand deadlift of 415. (He had made 450 two weeks earlier for a world record.)

His performances in other lifts were truly phenomenal. David P. Willoughby, in *The Super Athletes*, rates Smith as the second greatest bent presser of all time when bodyweight is considered. Only Arthur Saxon is rated higher, and Smith's rating is based on a bent press of 275.5 pounds performed in 1903 at a bodyweight of 168. What makes this lift even more meritorious is that it was performed with a dumbbell, so it was probably equivalent to more than 300 pounds with a barbell (Willoughby says 313).

Smith also lifted a 1,640 pound block of iron in roughly a hand-and-thigh style (lifting the iron four inches), and pressed a pair of dumbbells weighing a total of 225.

As Smith aged he retained much of his tremendous strength. He made a bet with a friend that he would one arm press 200 pounds on his 50th birthday, and he did succeed, with 203.5 (which was presumably a bent press). Later, when he was 53, he did 207.5, and 185 when he was 59.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Oscar Mathes, another smallish strongman, for the accomplishments of Smith, as it was Mathes who convinced John that the only way he could regain his health (which had been damaged by many rough years as a sailor) would be to start a program of sensible physical training. That Smith was able to regain his health is indicated by his splendid strength accomplishments and by the fact that he lived another 60 years after commencing weight training, dying in 1956.

References:

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 Willoughby, David P., *The Super Athletes*. (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970) p.143.