



IRON GAME HISTORY



VOLUME 1 NUMBER 2

APRIL 1990

Steroids: An Historical Perspective

Some years ago, during my annual visit to the home of David P. Willoughby, he and I were comparing the lifting and the physiques of the pre-steroid and post-steroid eras. In that discussion, one of several we had on the subject over the years, Dave told me that he found it increasingly hard to take real interest in the accomplishments of strength athletes since 1960. (Many people close to the game know that 1960 was the year in which Dr. John Ziegler convinced Tony Garcy and Bill March of the York Barbell Club and Lou Riecke of the New Orleans Athletic Club to begin using a form of training called isometric contraction and to begin taking a pill called Dianabol, and that the dramatic success of these three athletes ushered in the steroid era.)

Dave explained that he had spent a large part of his life trying to honestly assess the physical power and muscular development of strength athletes of both the past and the present and to produce a trustworthy formula which allowed him to compare men of different periods, bodyweights and lifting styles. But the steroids, he said, made it impossible for him to know how much of what the modern lifters and bodybuilders were producing, in terms of strength and muscle mass, had come from hard work and genetics and how much had come from the anabolic steroids. "I have no way to evaluate the modern competitors and I feel cheated," Dave said, "and I think that as the years pass and the champions of today get a little older and wiser, they'll feel cheated, too, because they don't know, themselves, how much the steroids boosted their size and strength. Steroids have ruined things for me, and in time they'll ruin things for others."

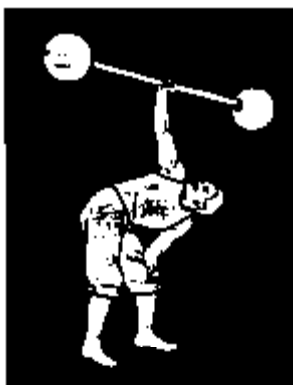
Dave's prophecy is an interesting one, particularly in light of the recent drug testing procedures used at the Arnold Classic on the weekend of March 3, 1990 and the way in which the results of those procedures have been covered in the body-

building magazines such as *Iron Man*. For those who might be unaware of the drug testing procedures, a bit of history might be in order.

Testing for anabolic steroids was first used in 1976, at the Montreal Olympics, and the weightlifting community has the unfortunate distinction of having produced more positive results than any other sport from those first drug tests. (Two of the most famous lifters who tested positive for steroids in 1976 were the Bulgarian, Blago Blagoev, and the American, Phil Grippaldi.) In the ensuing years, athletes from many other sports have tested positive and no longer does the average sports fan believe that the only athletes who use steroids are weightlifters and bodybuilders. But even though literally hundreds of cyclists, swimmers, soccer players and distance runners have tested positive for steroids, lifters and bodybuilders at the elite level are still believed by most experts to be the biggest abusers of these tissue-building drugs.

The reason strength athletes use steroids is a simple one, really. Steroids work. Steroids will make a man, and especially a woman, stronger and muscularly larger; and lifting and bodybuilding depend, respectively and obviously, on strength and muscle size. But even though anabolic steroids produce results, they do so at the cost, in the case of bodybuilding, of the very thing which has always been the bedrock of bodybuilding—a healthy lifestyle. How ironic it

is for a man to take steroids so that he can stand on a posing platform as a symbol of health. One of the things about bodybuilders in the pre-steroid era that stood out—leapt out, really—was their vibrant good health. Men like John Grimek, Bert Goodrich, Steve Klisanin, Armand Tanny, Ed Theriault, John Farbotnik, Bill Pearl and George Paine almost literally glowed with health and it was understood that their physical appearance was a manifestation of the care they took to exer-



cise regularly, eat carefully and take sufficient rest.

These days, by contrast, in order to reach the very top in bodybuilding and to produce the massive, vein-ridged bodies that are winning, it seems to be necessary to violate, not follow, many of the rules of good health. Judging by the many letters we have received about this subject and by the many conversations we've had with veterans in our field, almost all of our elder statesmen feel that things have gone seriously, dangerously awry. The fact that the most recent issue of ***Iron Man*** has on its cover Shawn Ray, the man who "won" the Arnold Classic until the results of the drug test revealed that he had used steroids, illustrates this point in two ways. First, because Ray is smiling, and second, because inside the magazine is a very friendly, almost fawning, interview with him in which Ray asserts that the testing was based on "politics" and that those who passed the test may still have been using drugs. The majority of the interview focuses on how wonderful he looks and what a star he is.

Those who followed the Ben Johnson episode may recall that when Johnson was pictured on the cover of ***Sports Illustrated*** after the news of his positive drug test at the Seoul Olympics the word "Busted" was spread across the page. Nor was the article inside the magazine at all friendly to the Canadian sprinter. In fact, the article—and others which followed—focused on the circumstances of the test and the shameful violation of the rules of sport implicit in such a situation. (It is ironic and sad that the Shawn Ray issue of ***Iron Man*** features a long, positive article about Ben Johnson ["The Fastest Man in the World"] and about the weight training program Charlie Francis [Johnson's coach, who also gave him steroids] designed for the sprinter. The article states that Johnson used "a program that was able to avoid overtraining, maintain, maximize and build strength and speed year after year. This insightful training produced the fastest man in the world." No mention is made of the role steroids and growth hormone played in helping Johnson to run his world record times.)

To be fair, the issue also contains coverage (brief though it is) of the fact that Ray failed to pass the test at the Arnold Classic. It also contains an article called "Coming Clean" and one I wrote about the problems a young, talented

powerlifter, Anthony Clark, is having with his steroid use. But the cover photo of Ray is very important. It is a symbol of the magazine, and for *Iron Man* to have used Shawn Ray, smiling, seems to us an error in judgement. It almost looks as if the editorial policy of the magazine is being bent in order not to alienate the top bodybuilders and perhaps lose the opportunity to take the photographs that keep the magazine afloat financially. One can only hope that the decision to use the covershot and the Ray interview, not to mention the Johnson article, were matters of editorial misjudgement and not matters of cynical calculation. I say all this, by the way, out of affection for the magazine Peary and Mabel Rader began back in 1936. I also say it out of affection and concern for John Balik, who bought the magazine from the Raders and who has been trying to find a pathway through the political and economic minefields so prevalent in the musclemag business. John is a good man and my conversations with him lead me to believe that he understands that steroids are a bane to the body of bodybuilding, but he should use his influential position to hammer away at the physical, psychological and political dangers of steroids, not to feature in a positive way people who have brought shame on themselves and the game they represent.

The purpose of this editorial is to suggest that all of us with a voice should use it to guide the young men and women who are flocking to the weight rooms of this country. We could, of course, approach the young steroid users by reproaching them, but they would probably just turn away. Perhaps a better way is to concentrate not on what they are doing wrong but on what people like Grimek, Paine and Tanny were doing right back before 1960.

What older lifters have is the advantage of perspective, and that perspective tells us Dave Willoughby was right. In the issues of *Iron Game History* which follow, we will try not to harp on the subject. We hope, instead, that our stories of pre-1960 athletes will serve as guideposts the young people in our sport can follow as they search for strength *and* health.

