

## Where Are They Now?

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In August of 1944 when Gene Jantzen was featured for the third time on a *Strength & Health* cover, I was a sickly kid who'd been huffing and puffing for almost a year to look like the geezers I admired in "the book." By that time, Gene was already a near-legendary figure. I must confess, however, that until I began reading about Jantzen, the appeal of the Game to this 97-pound weakling was but one: the promise of muscles and strength. Only slowly, very slowly, did the idea dawn on me that muscles and strength were only part of the Game's promise. Indeed, many of the men most famous for muscle and strength were hardly less famous for their feats of endurance. In the forties, the strength world's champion of endurance was Bartelso, Illinois' Gene Jantzen, who taught us skinnies that the mastery of self achieved by endurance feats and training was as heroic and admirable as that achieved by the building of huge muscles and strength.

Today, the seventy-three-year-old Gene Jantzen lives in Carlyle, Illinois (Box 172, zip code 62231), and, in addition to his continuing athletic regimens, is a resort owner and manager (Jantzen's Resort), a corrective therapist, a sculptor, and a poet, with a 'book of verse published in 1985: a real "Renaissance Man."

Recently, for his work on behalf of health and fitness for senior citizens, Gene was one of five winners of the 1989 "Governor's Senior Leadership Award for Health and Physical Fitness" (Illinois), receiving his commemorative plaque from Gov. James Thompson at ceremonies during the Governor's Conference for the Aging Network held in Chicago. The Award was made in recognition of his life-long commitment to a lifestyle that has exemplified the best in health and physical fitness. Gene explains that the honor recognizes the "ultimate exercise," which he developed: "I have tried to sell it to people for years...but because it is so simple...no one believes it. It involves simply lying down [on the floor] and getting back up. This involves every muscle in the body." A great cardiovascular exercise, the "ultimate exercise" is especially adaptable to the elderly: "All they need is a place to lie down and get up."

Muscles built with the old "thousand and one exercises" endure. They don't completely deflate, like the steroid-built variety, when their owner cuts back on the "juice" and his training. About 20 pounds lighter than the 185 pounds of his *S & H* coverman days, Gene still possesses 16-inch arms and chest and waist measurements similar to the "V"-shape girths of those long-gone days: "I always tell people that I have no reason to believe exercise or fitness prolongs your life, but...while you're working out, it makes you feel like you're never going to die. That, to me, is the motivation."

Hard as it is to believe, by the time he was 12, Gene

# Gene Jantzen

had earned the nickname "satchel-ass," the result of his parents having fattened him up as part of a rehabilitation from pneumonia. It came as a surprise, then, when the little fatso, who was always the last one chosen for a team, was invited by the neighborhood gang to go ice skating. His disillusionment, however, came swiftly and almost fatally: "They knew if the pond would hold me, it would hold any of them." Unfortunately, "it didn't hold." Encased in ice, Gene ran home and, while warming-up, spied in the kitchen stove coal bucket a magazine advertising a mail-order exercise course. A year later, when one of the gang picked a fight, the now-muscular youngster made it clear that the fatso was history: "I won, and I never had another fight. They realized things had changed."

As a teenager, Gene would run nine miles daily from Bartelso to Carlyle and spend the afternoon swimming and socializing with friends, and then swim 14 miles downstream, before finishing off with another nine mile run. As a result, a "lot of people used to tell my dad, 'Louie, you better watch that kid. There's something wrong with him. He's out there running in the hot sun, and that's not good for the heart.'" The strength of the Jantzen heart, however, soon became legendary. He frequently swam from Alton to St. Louis, a feat which he now shrugs off because it was downstream. In the summer of '36, as a lifeguard at Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri, he swam from Osage Beach to Bagnell Dam, a distance of 20 miles, in a little over 11 hours. In 1938, Gene won foot races of 25 and 20 miles and a 5-mile swim, and in '41, he ran 100 miles, from Jean, Nevada, to McCarren Field, Las Vegas, in, as he recalls, 20 hours: "In those days, that was a world's record." As an Army Air Force fitness instructor in the summer of 1943, Gene set what he was told were world records in the sit-up (5,200 in 3 hours, 50 minutes; and 500 in 14 minutes); in the pull-up (1,000 in 1 hour, 42 minutes, resting after sets starting at 45 pull-ups); and in the Army style push-up, with no rest (1,500 in 1 hour, 35 minutes). At 50, in 1966, as a promotion for his resort, Gene offered a \$3,000 purse to anybody, regardless of age, who could stay with him for eight hours of running, swimming, and exercising. None of the challengers succeeded.

Known in strengthdom almost as much for his classic physique as for his endurance feats, Gene's "most memorable physique success" came in the fall of 1947 when he won the "Finest Physique in America Contest," sponsored by Bernarr Macfadden of *Physical Culture* magazine: "There were 330,000 entries from the U.S. and Canada, and I was featured in several articles in *Physical Culture* because of winning this title." It had all started almost ten years earlier, however, when Gene took fourth in the 1939 Mr. America Contest. In 1938, he had taken a second in the Mr. New York contest, and in 1939, he went on to win that prestigious title. He won the 1941

Mr. California title, and in Memphis, he took third in the 1944 Mr. America Contest. In '47, he was second in the Junior Mr. America and won the Mr. Illinois and Mr. Heart of America titles. In the same year, wife Pat, six-month-old son Kent, and Gene were highlighted in *Look* magazine: "Family Full of Health," a feature triggered by baby Kent's chinning himself at six months. (Future movie director Stanley Kubrick was the 18-year-old photographer for this piece.)

Success in the worlds of endurance and physique aside, Gene has distinguished himself in virtually every "physical culture" endeavor. He played high school football, was a member of the swim and gymnastics teams at the U. of Illinois, and later, as a student at the U. of Southern California ('37-'39), he was on the gymnastics team, posed for art classes, and worked out at Santa Monica's Muscle Beach. He graduated from U.S.C. in 1939 and went to New York City on a drama school scholarship, returning in the summer to work as a physical instructor in California boys' camps. In 1940, he received a contract with Columbia Pictures and managed a gym in Hollywood until he joined the Air Force in April, 1942, where he was a physical and swim instructor and a corrective therapist during his more than three years of service. In 1944, his feats of strength and endurance were brought to the world's attention in Ripley's "Believe It or Not" and in "Strange as It Seems," as well as in *Stars and Stripes and Yank*.

In response to a polio epidemic, Gene opened a corrective therapy clinic in 1950, and it flourished for 15 years. In 1953, he opened a resort, and in 1960 won the first of two awards for lifesaving. The second one, "The Award of Merit," conferred in 1969, is the Red Cross' highest award for bravery. Much press coverage came to Gene when he garnered more than a dozen medals in the Senior Citizens' Olympics of 1976 and 1977. With articles and features on him in all the contemporary American strength magazines, not to mention muscle and general publications around the world — from England and Australia to South America— few men of his day received the media attention accorded the "Bartelso Buzzsaw."

When asked how he had come to see himself after his decades in the Game, Gene replied, "I see myself as a dedicated physical fitness enthusiast, one who believes...that the development of the mind and soul are more important than 18-inch biceps." As a suggestion to the bodybuilders of the 1990s, he observes crisply that "too much is too much"; they should "work toward more naturalness."

Gene's dietary regimen consists of "lots of meat, all kinds of vegetables and fruit, and whole grain cereals." As a corrective therapist for 50 years, he has worked with "every kind of neuromuscular disorder using only resistive exercise and stretching as therapy." He and wife, Pat, have been

married for 45 years and have had ten children, several of whom have been involved in the arts and acting, and at least one, daughter Nina, has followed her father into bodybuilding and endurance running. Gene's current training program includes "running the hills, hard walking, and swimming in the summer months." He also "squats with bodyweight or more and does one vigorous extension and flexion barbell exercise for the arms and upper body in hour to hour-and-a half workouts."

Like the man he named as his "hero" in the Game, John Grimek, Gene Jantzen is, and has been, one of our sport's most distinguished generalists: "I'd like to be remembered," he once mused, "as an all-round endurance athlete, primarily into bodybuilding, marathon running, and swimming." And so —he surely will be.

Consumptive-looking long distance running specialists have come along who can manage to negotiate 100 miles in somewhat faster time than Gene did back in the 40s. Just as seal-shaped beings have swum times that are somewhat faster than his. The two best American marathoners of recent years, however, couldn't do five pull-ups between them: indeed, one laughed about not being able to do even one, though he assured inquiring reporters that his wife could (do one, that is).

A man may be forgiven, I hope, for wondering how many the "seal-shaped beings" could do. Gene, on the other hand, gutted-out his impressive times while sporting enough infinitely versatile wedge-shaped muscle mass to win national-level physique contests, and at the very same time that he was grinding-out endurance records in the pull-up, sit-up, and push-up. It's clear that this Gene Jantzen was an endurance champ for both the books and the ages — and that he is still one impressive hombre.

