

The President's Report

Growing Old Strong

Al Thomas, Kutztown University

This issue, Vic Boff, Founder and President of the Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen, has given his space to one of the most respected writers and thinkers in our field, Al Thomas, so that he could discuss the aim of the Association.

Research validates the contribution of aerobic activities to health and increased longevity. The popular press and professional medical literature abound with stories about older folks who have sustained their health and still others who have restored themselves to health by aerobic activities such as running, biking, swimming, and walking. It's clear that aerobic training has had a good press, even for senior citizens.

On the other hand, anaerobic activities, such as weight training, could hardly have had a worse press through the years, until very recently. Surely, folk wisdom has traditionally argued, tugging against resistance provided by barbells must ruin the hearts and backs and hasten the demise of even the healthiest of youths and must, therefore, be especially ill-advised for old-timers.

Folk "wisdom," however, isn't always so wise, as was demonstrated in a recent study at the University of Rochester Medical Center. Much to the clinicians' surprise, forty "moderately to severely" depressed folks were as "significantly improved" by weight training as by that media-blessed standby, jogging. This, of course, comes as no surprise to weight training senior citizens who know that nothing, not even aerobics, provides the "natural high" and mood elevation provided by plain old-fashioned pumping iron.

Objectively examined apart from the age-old prejudice against "weightlifting," weight trainers in their sixties, seventies, and eighties give clear evidence of profound physical benefit. Though old lifters are, admittedly, likely to supplement their lifting with some aerobics, lifting remains the exercise closest to their hearts. And lifting, rather than aerobics, seems to be the main contributor to their vigorous and healthy old age.

Current research suggests that senior citizens whose lean bodyweight exceeds the norm for their age and bodytype enjoy better health and less susceptibility to illness and unsteadiness than their contemporaries. The old truism trotted out to defend aerobics for oldsters—the idea that one can never be too lean—may prove, like so many other "truisims," to be simply untrue. The sort of body mass compatible with vigorous, graded weight training may be the very best insulation between the older athlete and atrophy and, more importantly, between him and decrepitude or serious illness. This suggests

an important research consideration for exercise-oriented gerontologists of the future, a consideration long-deferred because of the scientific community's unscientific endorsement of the folk prejudice concerning the "dangers of weight training."

The Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen comprises men who have trained with weights for more than half a century, some of whom have been among the world's exemplars in the sport, men who at ages near and beyond the promised "three score and ten" still lift weights, not just diligently, but mightily, sustaining high levels of good health in the process.

Because abundant health, no less than strength and muscle, has been and remains the motivation for our having been drawn into the iron game and having remained barbell enthusiasts, we feel strongly that the implicit endorsement of anabolic steroids by many athletes today is anathema to everything that made the game so appealing to us "way back when"—as well as to everything we envision as the fulfillment of its birthright, the beauty and dignity of which we defended back when it required courage to be weightmen, and which we continue to defend now and will defend until our last breath.

The training philosophy of our Association's "main man", its "Chief Executive Officer-Emeritus," John Grimek, who turned 80 this past June—expresses for us the best in natural bodybuilding and strength training, as well as the strength-generalist's cultivation of versatility, a quality that we miss in today's athletes. It's clear that the Grimek physique was architected the old-fashioned way: through hard work and imagination. It's the product of the old "thousand-and-one exercises," not to mention lots of weightlifting, strongmen feats, odd lifting, adagio, muscle control, handbalancing, leaping, weight throwing—you name it; Grimek's done it. It's the kind of physique that looks as though it can do anything because it has, indeed, done everything.

This focus upon Grimek is simply upon him as a sort of "Representative Man" of an era and mind-set that we admire and hope to see perpetuated in the generation now coming onto the platform and dais. In this Age of the Specialist, he remains unabashedly a remarkable anachronism: strengthdom's man for all seasons. He was and remains a powerful and full-functioning hand in an age when most men seem satisfied to be fingers or even, simply, a finger: this one a weightlifter, that one a bodybuilder, the other a powerlifter — or, not infrequently, "a great bencher."

Our Association's purpose, however, is not ideological, but rather to celebrate the joy of the body and strength, in

age no less than in youth, because the human body is meant not just to survive, but to prevail. In our view, the body is an artifact which in its own way is almost as responsive in age as it was in youth to massive renovation in both strength and mass.

our purpose is to demonstrate that, like youth, strength is often wasted on the young. In the hierarchy of things to be cherished, the forever-trained human body remains, even in its twilight, a revelation, not just of what's human but of what's divine.

Our purpose is to demonstrate that, although the body is poignantly vulnerable, its ever-training tenant confers a blessing upon everyone with his "fierce tears." Indeed, the old-timer takes just as fierce pleasure in his training as the youngster. If anything, the joy of his training is enhanced by his deeply felt sense of his humanness and his awareness that man's transcendence of mortality is, needless to say, limited, but that this very limitation makes his seized pleasure all the sweeter.

Our purpose is to remember, to pay our debts of gratitude to the iron we all love so deeply, to iron's bittersweet game, and to iron's evergreen heroes. Champions of strength who range, as heroes should, freely—beyond the withering grasp of Death—in the ever-young and deepest of the heart's several chambers.

No less than all this, our purpose is also as a reminder of the halcyon days of our youth, whose memories resonate in physical and psychic systems that were then, and remain still, our healthiest.

Our purpose, finally, is to demonstrate that one need not rust with age, that losses which are truly experienced can be made into acquisitions, and that although much is stolen by time, much remains: that remnant being the noblest of our human components. In the words given by Tennyson to Ulysses:

*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!
Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*