

WHY I LOVED AL THOMAS

JAN TODD
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

In the front of nearly every doctoral dissertation there is a page or two on which the author acknowledges the support he or she received while in graduate school. It's normal to thank your faculty supervisor and the members of your dissertation committee, and most doctoral students then go on to thank spouses, partners, family members, academic colleagues, and other friends. I acknowledged the love and support of a number of friends and family members in my own dissertation when I finished it, but the longest "thank you" was for Al Thomas, who passed away on 17 April 2008 at age 77. Here's what I wrote back in 1995:

Finally, but certainly not least importantly, I would like to acknowledge an intellectual and emotional debt to retired English professor, Dr. Al Thomas of Kutztown University. From the early 1970s through the mid-1980s, Dr. Thomas wrote for *Iron Man*, the most respected weight training magazine of that era. In each of his approximately eighty *Iron Man* articles, Thomas dealt with some aspect of the conjunction of strength, femininity, and culturally approved womanhood. Some articles featured women athletes who chose to defy the social conventions of the seventies by pursuing muscularity and strength, while some articles were philosophical essays in which Thomas attempted to examine and eradicate our society's aversion to strong, muscular women.

I was a neophyte to lifting who was having a hard time reconciling an internal conflict about the issue of strength and womanhood, and Thomas' articles proved to be invaluable. They allowed me to see over the wall of a narrow, somewhat sheltered garden into a rich, limitless meadow of possibility. Thomas was uncompromising; he accepted no barriers to womanhood. As Dio Lewis had done in the 1860s, Thomas challenged modern women to become the physical and intellectual equals of men. Most American women in the 1970s came to feminism through reading Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, but I came to feminism through reading and talking to Al Thomas. By daring to practice what Thomas preached, I discovered untapped reservoirs of physical strength and a growing antipathy for those aspects of our culture which have, in countless ways, denied women access to this important part of themselves. His articles freed me to give full expression to my gift of physical power and helped me understand the political nature of that power. These insights enabled me to make history as an athlete and to want to write history as a professional.¹

In July of 1973, Al launched what I consider to be the most significant series of articles ever published

in a fitness magazine. That was also the summer during which I began dating a large, young professor at Mercer University—Terry Todd—and tagging along with him to the gym. We got married later that fall, and so my introduction to Al's articles about women and training occurred somewhere during the early months of our courtship and marriage. Terry was also an *Iron Man* contributor and subscriber, and after we married I began reading Al's articles and training more regularly, and more seriously, than I had while we were only dating. During the Christmas holidays in 1973, we traveled to Austin and took some workouts at a wonderful old gym called The Texas Athletic Club. In the gym one day I met a young woman who'd recently lifted as a 114-pounder in a men's powerlifting contest so that she and some of her male gym-mates could win the team trophy at the contest. Meeting her piqued my curiosity about the possible limits of my own strength, and so after talking it over with Terry I decided to start training for strength and not just general fitness and toning. Having a husband with his background was an advantage to me, of course. However, even with the strong technical and emotional support he provided, I was still not sure that I *should* lift heavy weights. Terry said it was completely up to me. I knew I *could* lift them, as I saw my strength growing in response to my training, but I remained conflicted about whether it was appropriate. After all, I was a woman, and until I met Terry no one had ever suggested to me that women had as much right to strength as men did.

In any event, the reason I believe Al's articles were so important was because they provided adventuresome women in the brave new world of the Post Title IX era with a new set of role models and a radically different paradigm for "appropriate" womanhood.³ Al's first article in the series, entitled "Weight Trained Women," was illustrated with a picture of the famous 1950s-era lifter Grena Trumbo. Standing in her striped swimsuit and high heels she looked very powerful, and I was fascinated to read in the caption that Trumbo had reportedly done a partial squat with 650 pounds, a full squat with 266 pounds, and had benched 160 pounds. Alongside the piece, Peary Rader announced that *Iron Man* would begin running regular articles on weight training for women, but noted that the women featured in the articles would have to be "genuine weight trainers and-or lifters or we are not interested." Continuing,

Rader wrote, "This is not a beauty department," but a series "for women who practice heavy athletics."⁴ Over the next several years Al Thomas (sometimes writing under his middle name, Karl) had an article in nearly every issue. He profiled a number of prominent women athletes but, more importantly, he also wrote a number of well-reasoned, truly philosophical essays in which he argued for a woman's right to strength and muscularity. These early essays—"Why Prejudice Against Strong Women?"; "The Weight Trained Woman: Some Thoughts on the Woman Mesomorph"; "In Defense of the Woman Mesomorph"; and "The Arm vs. The Vine"—not only provided me with answers to the niggling concerns I had from time to time about my own femininity and growing strength but actually inspired me, as an act of nascent liberation, to see just how far I could push the limits of my strength.⁵

Although Terry had known Al for a decade, I first met him in the summer of 1975 at the Men's Senior National Powerlifting Championships in York, Pennsylvania. However, I didn't really have a chance to sit down and talk to Al at length until the first official national women's powerlifting meet (called the All American Women's Open) was held in Nashua, New Hampshire in 1977. There, Terry, Al, and I talked a lot and found that we shared more than just our passion for lifting. All three of us had degrees in English and loved books, and that enriched our friendship and the enjoyment we found in each other's company through the years. From then on—either at lifting meets of one sort or another or at the annual meetings of the Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen—we saw Al regularly, and whenever we met we just picked up our conversation as if we'd been apart for a few hours rather than a few months or even a year. We also had many long conversations with Al on the phone, and through those talks Terry and I came to have even more admiration for this joyous, brilliant man who loved all aspects of the Iron Game.

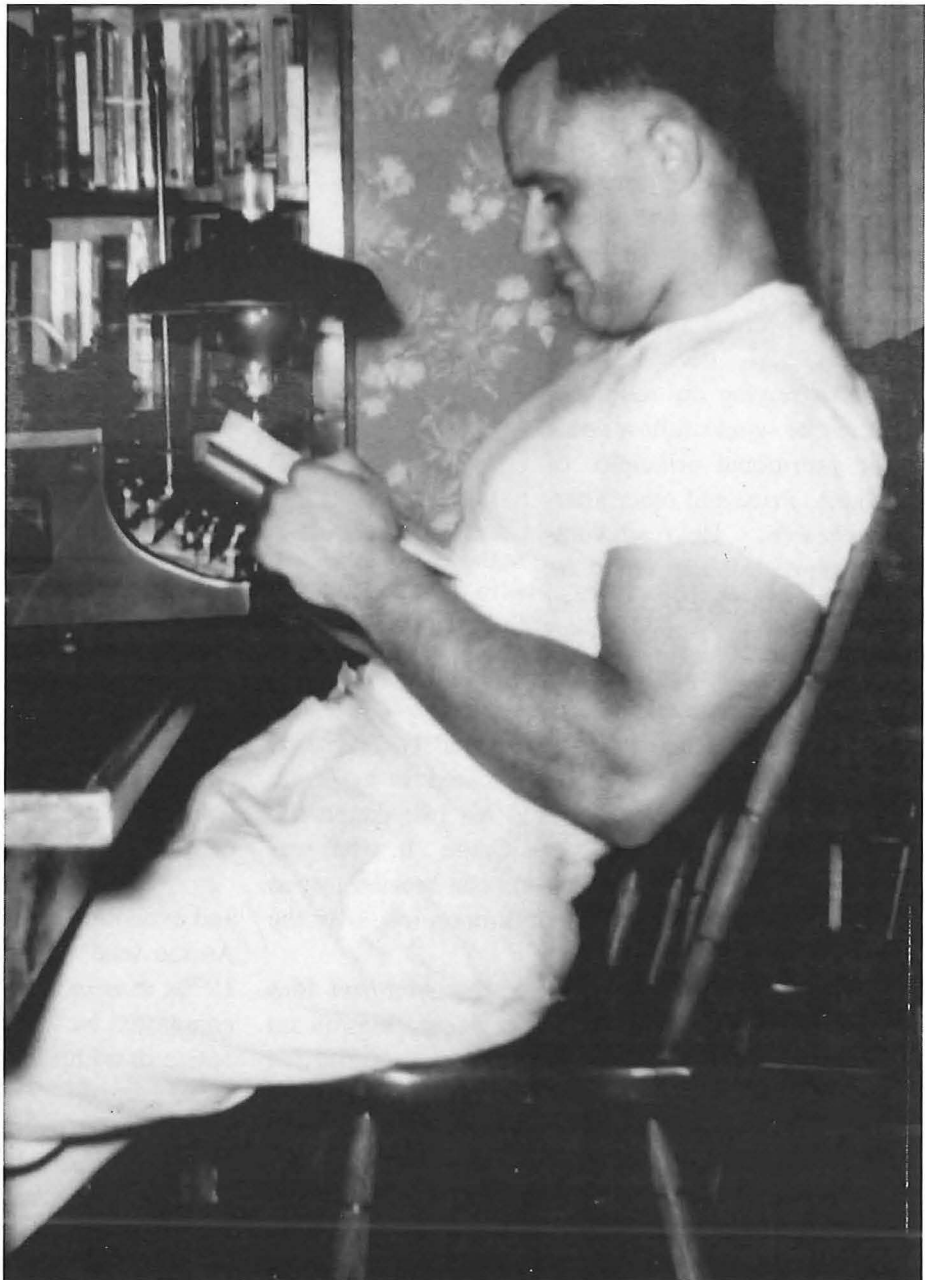
Al was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, on 7 November 1930 to the Reverend Alfred J. and Adella Krupp Thomas. As a child he lived in Baltimore until age 13 and then moved to Lockhaven, Pennsylvania, where he graduated from Lockhaven High School a year earlier than normal because he'd been able to skip a grade. Following high school Al joined the service, like most young men in that era, and enlisted in the Navy,

where his writing and editing skills landed him a posting as editor-in-chief of the Navy's newspaper. After finishing his stint in the service, Al entered Albright College in Reading, Pennsylvania, where he majored in English. He then went to Penn State, took a Ph.D. in English literature, and embarked on his career as a college instructor. He taught first at Lycoming College in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, then moved to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he met his wife, Zenta Laimdota, and married her in 1958 having, as he told us, "fallen in love with her calves and then with the rest of her." The next year he took a position in the English Department at the main campus of Penn State in State College where, according to Zenta, he designed and implemented the first weight training program for the Penn State football team. In 1960 they moved to Reading, where he joined the faculty in the English Department at Kutztown State College, which was later renamed Kutztown University. Al taught English at Kutztown for the next 31 years (during which time he never missed a single class), and also helped organize the Kutztown Collegiate Powerlifting Team.

In 1991, Al decided to retire from teaching and move to his beach house in Ocean City, New Jersey. Terry and I visited him there several times and it was abundantly clear that he loved living along the Atlantic Ocean. We walked the boardwalk with him, swam in the chilly Atlantic, and, of course, talked and talked about our many shared interests in books and the field of physical culture.

From the mid-80s on, when we would see Al at the AOBS banquets we'd always share stories about the game or books or

the great old-time boxers, but after he moved to Ocean City we found ourselves talking more and more about nutrition and alternative medical therapies. This was so because Al had just been diagnosed with prostate cancer and had decided to fight it with nutrition and non-traditional therapeutics. He knew that I had had a close call with cancer myself in the late 1980s, and he seemed to



According to his family, this photo shows the quintessential Al Thomas with his books, big biceps, and beloved Smith Corona typewriter. Unlike most modern writers, Big Al never made the leap to computers.

draw strength from my apparent recovery. Back then, to look at Al or hear him talk it was impossible to tell he was sick in any way. And for the next fifteen years or so after his diagnosis, neither Terry nor I could see any change in Al at all. He continued going to the gym and training hard; his physique remained thick, muscular, and strong; his ruddy complexion glowed; he was full of his usual energy and enthusiasm; and no one would have known that he was being gradually overtaken by cancer. When he received the original diagnosis, Al decided that instead of relying on traditional medicine he would follow some of the nutritional principles of Weston A. Price and other alternative healers. He read voraciously on the subject, and to the end of his life he believed that those principles were what allowed him to live so much longer—and so much more fully—than mainstream medicine had predicted. But after fighting his cancer for approximately seventeen years he died at home in Ocean City, cared for by Zenta, his beloved wife of 50 years, and his two daughters, Amanda Buxbaum and Zenta Lee Crane. In what was probably a coincidence, he took his last breaths just as the sun sank from sight and the full moon rose over the water just beyond his window.

Earlier in this piece I stated that Al's *Iron Man* articles on women constituted the most "significant series of articles ever published in a fitness magazine." I know that some will take issue with the claim, but I can't think of any other series of articles published in a "muscle magazine" that have had such a broad, cultural impact—in this country and abroad. Although I realize that Al was riding a pop culture wave, I do not believe that the growth which occurred in women's powerlifting, weightlifting, and bodybuilding during the 1970s and 1980s would have been as rapid had Al Thomas not been championing women's lifting and development in *Iron*



At the 1984 Collegiate Nationals, Al Thomas posed with Jan Todd, who was there coaching the University of Texas powerlifting team.

Man. He was our Sojourner Truth, our Mahatma Gandhi, our Booker T: Washington, our Nelson Mandela—an outspoken advocate of feminine equality who truly opened the doors of the weight room for my generation of women. Charles Gaines and George Butler would have had no plot line to explore in *Pumping Iron II—The Women* had Al not opened the debate about what it means for a woman to have noticeable muscle.

Near the end of his life, Al wrote a lengthy essay in which he talked about his advocacy of women's lifting and why he felt called to champion the muscular female. In the essay, Al argued that women have never had a heroic female ideal and that this lack has led to the definition of women as weaker, and therefore subordinate to men in terms of power and human

potential.⁶ As he explained it in another part of the essay: "I write what I write with an eye to creating the only consciousness-informing ideal that the female sex has not possessed since time out of mind . . . What might that ideal be? The ideal of an heroic female form. For better or worse, that's what my writing boils down to."⁷

The one area in which Al came to have second, and even third, thoughts was the area of anabolic drugs. As the seed of his grand idea blossomed in the early 1970s in *Iron Man* and continued to spread, he was so enraptured by what he had wrought that he was slow to notice or admit the worm within the apple of amplified female muscle. The warning signs were there but, as he said later, he overlooked them while he gloried at the sight of so many stronger and muscularly larger women. As the role of steroids and related substances began to be clear, however, he also came to wonder—as he watched the explosion and transformation of women's bodybuilding—if the appropriate response to the transformation was to simply say that because the playing field was so uneven women had more right than men to take male

hormones. But as time passed and the transformation continued—finally producing specimens with a combination of muscle mass and muscular definition beyond that displayed by male bodybuilders of the pre-steroid era—he realized that that was no answer.

Al Thomas was one of the brightest men I've ever been around, and in the end he fully understood that there was a dark side to his call for liberation—that part of his legacy was a classic case of what sociologists call the “law of unintended consequences.” However, because of the devastating effects his encroaching illness had on him physically and emotionally, he was never able to address the issue with his usual densely-worded essays. Even so, in one of his last efforts—written when his hands had become too stiff and curled to type—he briefly discussed it. In those comments he left no doubt that he still favored what he called the “grandly designed female form.” However, he argued forcefully that bodybuilding drugs led to the “glute-striation, quad cross-hatching, and dehydration with its effects both on skin and vascularity—not to mention the ‘skull face’ as a barometer of the competitor’s achieved-degree of ‘contest readiness’ and ‘conditioning’: the *more* prominent the competitor’s skull bones, the more deeply-shrunken her eyes, the . . . ‘better conditioned’ she is.” His final words on the subject were these, “Grandly designed circumferentiality . . . is available to virtually any gifted woman who loves training-as-training and is willing to train harder and over a greater number of years than her steroid-enhanced sister. The goal of [such] training regimens is the acquisition of a voluptuousness of womanly muscular development which will blossom and prosper as the decades progress, rather than decline into atrophy as the steroid-user’s declines when she sees fit to desist from further steroid enhancement.”⁸

In 1995, I was asked to introduce Al when he was honored by the Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen for his journalistic contributions to the field of weight training. I spoke that night about the role he’d played in my lifting career, as I’ve just done here, but then went on to say, “Unlike earlier magazine articles which generally just praised the benefits of weight training as a means to a slender figure, Thomas’ articles explored the boundaries—real and imagined—of femininity and strength.”⁹ Al helped me to understand what a life of strength could mean for a woman—and my entire life has been enhanced because I embraced that

ideal. Al also came to understand that there were, indeed, boundaries that should not be crossed. He understood that there was something deeply ironic and wrongheaded when a woman had to take a male hormone in order to become “more” of a woman. That’s why I loved Al Thomas.

Notes:

1. Jan Todd, “Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: An Examination of the Role of Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women, 1800-1870,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 1995), viii-ix. Dio Lewis was a mid-nineteenth century exercise expert and social reformer who championed women’s rights.
2. Title IX, the federal legislation mandating equal athletic opportunities for women in educational institutions receiving federal support, passed in 1972.
3. Dr. Al Thomas, “Weight Trained Women,” *Iron Man*, 32(5) (July 1973): 34, 89-90, 92.
4. Peary Rader, “Notice,” *Iron Man* 32(5) (July 1973): 34.
5. Karl Thomas, “Why Prejudice Against Strong Women,” *Iron Man*, 32(6) (September 1973): 44-45, 73-74; Karl Thomas, “The Weight-Trained Woman: Some Thoughts on the Female Mesomorph,” *Iron Man*, 33(3) (March 1974): 42, 58; Al Thomas, “In Defense of the Woman Mesomorph: Part One—The Leg vs. The ‘Gam,’” *Iron Man*, 35(4) (May 1976): 34-35, 60; Al Thomas, “The Arm vs. The Vine,” *Iron Man*, 36(3) (March 1977): 48-49, 69, 73.
6. Al Thomas, “Why I’ve Written: One: The Creation of an Heroic Female Form as Idea; Two: Its Culture Vehicle: The Physique Exhibition (A New, Humane, Artistically Pleasing Presentation Mode); An End Game Consideration of Thirty-five Years Behind a Smith Corona,” unpublished typescript, Al Thomas Files, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin, pp. 1-2.
7. *Ibid.*, 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 20-21.
9. Jan Todd, “Honoring Al Thomas,” *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 4(2) (October 1995): 1.

*Editors’ Note: On the boardwalk in Ocean City, New Jersey, near the Ferris wheel, a park bench now bears a plaque honoring Dr. Al Thomas’ memory. The Thomas family has also established a website in his honor at: www.dralthomas.com which contains a bibliography of his articles in *Iron Man*, *Iron Game History*, and other publications.*

