

NORBERT SCHEMANSKY

AMERICAN LIFTING'S LAST SUPERSTAR: ON HERO AS THE FOCUS OF A GREAT GAME'S "MEANING"

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Editor's Note: About a decade before he died in 2008, retired English professor and physical culture author Al Thomas—now most often remembered for his groundbreaking articles in Iron Man about strong, weight-trained women during the 1960s through the early 1980s—also wrote a number of much longer and more theoretical essays that dealt in various ways with strength, manhood, womanhood, muscle, and beauty. As the years passed and Jan began her own career as a strength seeker, we all became closer friends and corresponded with Al, and he began sending copies of unpublished articles and original manuscripts to us so that they could be added to our archives and available to researchers in the future. Accompanying almost all of such contributions from Al would be a long (always long), hand-typed letter, sharing his memories and insights into the world of men's and women's strength building, competitive lifting, and bodybuilding. Unlike most modern



For several years early in his lifting career, Norbert Schemansky—to help the US team win points as well as to avoid having to compete against the American heavyweight John Davis—kept his weight down and entered either the 181-pound class or, after it was created, the 90-kilo (198-pound) class, where he sometimes out-lifted the 220- to 225-pound John Davis in the snatch and in the clean and jerk. In 1951, for example, when Schemansky became the first world champion in the 90-kilo (middle-heavyweight) class, his snatch was 2.5 kilos (5.5 pounds) better than Davis', and his clean and jerk was 10 kilos (22 pounds) ahead of the heavier man's. Davis was far better in the press, however, making 142.5 kilos (314 pounds) to Schemansky's 125 kilos (275 pounds).

typewriter, he continued his writing, and his thinking. One day, to our great surprise, we received one of his poorly-typed letters saying that he'd been working "on a piece (in the days after learning of his death) on Norbert S." Why had we not heard the news, we wondered, until we checked and were relieved to learn that the legendary gold medalist was still very much alive.

Be that as it may, even after we told Al that Sche-

Americans, Al never embraced computers, but did his best to keep abreast of his world through phone calls and, especially, letters. In the best and truest sense of the word, Al was a "man of letters." As the years rolled on and his extraordinary vigor was undone by his illness, he more and more often used his letters to provide the latest news of his remarkable family and his inexorable decline as he was overtaken by prostate cancer.

Even so, and even though his poor circulation had left most of his fingers unable to bang out letters on his manual

mansky was not only alive, but feeling well, Al decided to continue to write his essay on Schemansky, explaining in all capital letters that he wanted to finish it, "JUST FOR THE FUN OF GETTING THE WORDS AND IDEAS STRAIGHT AND TRUE, FOR MYSELF." Al explained that he'd been inspired by Joyce Carol Oates' new novel, Blonde, based on Marilyn Monroe's life, and he acknowledged the irony of using Monroe to explain the often taciturn weightlifter by writing, "Norbert and Marilyn, a match made in heaven if there ever was one."

Armed with this new inspiration, Al explained that although he was embarrassed to have been writing an obituary for a living man he wanted to complete the essay and send it to us. "I'd love to have a reason to finish this effort," he wrote, "and to have another set of eyes glance over it." Al's letter continued, "I first met N.S. about 55 years ago, and shadowed him and eavesdropped on him and talked to him and tried to get to the bottom of him . . . HIM, I do find interesting—a paradox difficult to plumb the depths of, even if they should prove to be not very deep depths. There are other causes for, causes of, depth than mere ("official" and usually defined) deepness. A damn tiger is quite deep, withal."¹

Some months later the essay arrived, and we both read it immediately and found that like many of Al's efforts it was ambitious, heartfelt, at times brilliant, and yet somewhat dialectically confusing. Accordingly, because Al maintained that he had written it as a "thought exercise" and not as an article to necessarily be published, we filed it away with his other papers and for the most part forgot about it.

Time passed...and almost ten years after Al lost his struggle against the "dying of the light," the legendary four-time Olympic medal winner Norbert Schemansky finally passed on September 7, 2016 at the age of 94. Jan and I were both saddened, of course, and I was actually surprised by the news because as long as I'd done "Olympic lifting" and read about it, Schemansky had always been an inspiration to me due to his unique combination of power, appearance, size, and ruggedness. He seemed almost immortal.

It was not until the early fall of 1964 that I actually met Schemansky and saw him up close in all his puissant majesty. I'd taken a job only a few weeks before as a managing editor of Strength and Health magazine in York, Pennsylvania, and Ski was in York along with most of the 1964 US Weightlifting Team for some final tryouts just prior to the Games in Tokyo. To be able to mingle and even

train with such record holders as Ike Berger, Bill March, Tommy Kono, and the massive but graceful Schemansky was tall cotton indeed to a growing boy like me. Nor were the gym sessions the best time to talk shop with the legends; the best time was in the evenings at the bar in the Yorktowne Hotel, where most of the team gathered to drink beer, talk lifting, and drink more beer. Ski was renowned for his consumption, and as a fellow heavyweight I gravitated to his end of the table and did my best to keep up with him as he continued signaling for more. As an Olympic team member, Ski and all the other lifters were eating and drinking on the USOC tab, which delighted Ski on a number of levels. I remember one night when he made us all laugh and laugh by showing us a note he'd gotten just that day from a USOC official complaining that Ski's bar tab the previous week had been larger than his meal tab. Considerably larger.

As we began thinking about the passing of this particular giant, and what to say and do about it in Iron Game History, Jan remembered Al Thomas' premature eulogy. And when we went back into the archives hoping it wouldn't take us all afternoon to find Al's reflections about Schemansky among our extensive holdings of Al's work, either pure serendipity or the mighty hand of the "Lord of Iron" placed that particular essay on the very top of the first Al Thomas folder we opened. Finding the essay again, so easily, gave us pause, and rereading it made us grateful to the essayist as well as his subject. We offer it here in honor of Norbert Schemansky and Al Thomas—two unique men whose long careers changed the Game both men worshipped in the best sense of that word.

—Terry Todd



In the world of sports journalism with its venal "legends" and conjured "heroics"—in a sports establishment whose PR departments labor full time converting sinners into saints and vacuous games into morality plays—our truly great Game "piously," almost self-hatingly, denies all but the most mechanical explanations of its and its heroes' Meaning.

The cash cow American games have no qualms about showering monetary contributions upon their myth-making PR staffs and their multimillion-dollar Halls of Fame. All this in return for the most embarrassingly excessive attributions to them of every high-level virtue implicit to our human condition. But when it comes to this Game of ours, the greatest of Games, the worried advice

is: “Stow all that high-falutin’ stuff, Al. Just the damn facts. How big is so-and-so’s arm? Baseball’s different. Baseball’s about America and mom’s apple pie. The American Way. Bodybuilding’s about big arms. The numbers, man. The numbers.”

At some point in our love affair with strength and muscle, like it or not, we have to come to grips with the fact that the (self-diminishing) devotee of the muscle-and-strength Game has been conditioned (sufficiently brow-beaten) to exempt his very own Game from the celebration and philosophical analysis that cause him to grow weepy-eyed when they’re applied to a “real sport” like baseball (with its Coopers-town and movie images of pink-cheeked bumpkins running around in dreamy meadows).

The citizens of our great Game are not patriots. Unlike their counterparts in baseball, they are almost congenitally unable to contemplate their grand endeavor in anything other than a materialistic frame of reference, premised upon numbers, pounds, inches, and dates—surely never in a more philosophical framework.

No other sport or game has been as reticent as our own to avail itself of the spiritual enlargement and emotional enrichment that accompany honest, self-probing philosophical analysis, embarked upon without fear of the insights (transcendent or even “religious”) that might be uncovered beneath all that sweaty muscle and its doings.

In short and ironically, the ultimate strength and muscle Game, Ours, contemptuously pooh-poohs even its own devout “fans” observation, grandly or simply stated, that the flesh of its mighty champions bespeaks more about spirit, more about what makes a human being human, than all the games and game players known to history—despite



Norbert Schemansky, early in his weightlifting career, posed for a number of nude photographs taken by Douglas of Detroit, as did his older brother—a practice not unusual for weight trainers during those years. Many such photos were retouched so that they could illustrate the physique of the athlete, just as this photo from pre-steroid 1947 illustrates the heavy development of Ski’s legs and lower body.

their multimillion-dollar Halls of Fame and PR departments. Our Game’s river of blood sweeps its celebrants back, not to the Civil War and its general staff, but back to the very beginning of body, back to the original Garden before anybody had dreamed up an outfield or a Trinity of bases.

Enter: Norbert Schemansky

Forty-two years ago, my wife and I attended one of the pre-Olympic training sessions at the York Barbell Club’s Ridge Avenue gym. Seated next to us that afternoon was a noisy group of local high school girls who’d seized this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to catch a glimpse of the handsome young lifters and, of course, their bodybuilding buddies, gathered there to root them on, among them a future Mr. America and Universe.

The afternoon progressed with wonderful lifting, accompanied by the ceaseless chatter from the bleacher bench of girls as they elbowed one another in admiration of this and, then, that “cute boy.” On and on. Until, about an hour into the session, the pack’s lead girl caught a glimpse of Schemansky in a cut-off sweatshirt and shorts. She blanched and, as a reflex, her elbow banged into the

ribs of her neighbor, who, following her leader’s gaze, fell silent, as her elbow sought the ribs of her neighbor. Onward: elbow banging ribs, down the long line of suddenly deflated girls.

This was an event easily missed in the china plate clatter of dropping barbells, but one that spoke volumes about the ineffable effect of grandly designed muscle upon even the flightiest, the silliest and most callow, of girls. But, then, this wasn’t just grandly designed muscle. Of that, there was much, everywhere one turned his eyes. This was, however, the supreme gathering-up-into-one-body of

grand muscle. It was Schemansky. Far from the handsomest man in the gym. By most high school girls' standards, the least (Hollywood) handsome man out there on the platforms. But he was Schemansky.

If the shining-muscled "cute" boys were the fuel for showoffy young-girl chatter and posturing, this grizzled middle-aged man—not just his Herculean muscle, but the grizzled maleness of this furious middle-aged male—stopped these girls, each of them, dead, in mid-sentence, in slackjawed double- (and triple-) takes.

In a loose-fitting business suit, he wouldn't have seized the attention of even one pair of eyes. But here in his bareleggedness and bare-armedness, he set off the hormone cascades of a benchful of high school sillies, who'd announced a hundred times over during their lives, to one and all, that they "just hated big muscles."

Having caught her breath, the pack's lead girl croaked, "Oh, my God. Look at that one. He's somebody big. He's gotta be somebody big, very big. Oh, my God. Look at him." Since Skee wasn't, in actual fact, the session's biggest man, in circumference or height, it was clear that this young girl meant "big" in import: in his impact, even there in the midst of those big guys. She meant "big" as in "important, formidable, imposing, meaningful." "Big" as in Schemansky.

With Skee, what you saw was what you got. As with all great sculptural art, his body (his "what-you-saw-ness") was an artifact of long- and painfully-crafted masculine beauty. It provided text. It was text. Like all such bodies, his was a book, one that was full of meaning and available to being "read," without any biographical knowledge of the "book's" author, the man himself. A "book" in, and of, flesh.

There was also meaning of the old-fashioned sort (the usual sort) in Skee. The sort of meaning purveyed by biographers and historians and schoolteachers. There was meaning of the sort that you'd expect from a strongman who—unlike his smiling shadow, the "Dixie Derrick," Paul Anderson—chose never to accommodate society's needs by conforming to some MGM cliché of the Herculean innocent: tousled and artless, yet somehow filled to the brim with enough farmboy charm and shtick to grease the skids for his scary muscle and brute strength.

(Standing there on a lifting platform in the fullness



Schemansky, as he continued to train hard into his thirties, gradually built muscle mass until he weighed between 260 and 270 pounds, with far less fat and far more shape than almost all other superheavyweights from his era through this one. In this photo, by Cecil Charles, he is seen with magazine publisher Peary Rader on the left and Bob Hise in the center.

of his powers—Schemansky is Schemansky: those magnificent Polish guns, hanging there at his sides or akimbo. Dour. Four-square. Expressionless. Looking the wide world straight in its eye through those artless, but somehow, invulnerable, spectacles of his. No Oscar candidate, this one. No cliché from Central casting, this unsmiling and wordless one. The look on his face of a man who'd opt, almost, for crucifixion, rather than play some sort of role or even just play along for the sake of good-guyness. Play-acting was definitely NOT part of the splendid Game that he'd signed onto, an angry lifetime earlier.)

What you see is truly what you get in Skee, but this is, of course, not the only thing you get. As in any complex human being, you also "get" far other than "what you

see.” In this ever-more vulgar era of transparency—in this increasingly vulgar era of transparent icons of sport—in this era in which nothing is sacred (nothing closed off to the journalist’s and the camera’s eye)—Skee could very well be, or have been, the last of our truly opaque heroes of sport. The last “sports hero of real opacity.” The last of the real thing, that is.

Though a sports icon like few others, Skee was more than just an icon. He was, for better and sometimes worse, a human being, a man who lifted weights with a sublime poignancy. In the heart of those who love the skillful lifting of iron—who love it with a deep, often unsettling passion—the possession of such a gift as Schemansky’s is “sacred.” It’s a “sacredness” to which the brave aficionado of our dear game openly adverts, even though he knows full well the sort of contempt he’ll be subjected to for the use of such a word. All this, painfully enough, often comes from townspeople of his very own town: practitioners of his favorite Game, though one that they “see” as simply a “game,” like baseball: the source of fun and even “peak experiences.” But, they ask, “Is it really ‘sacred’? Get a life. It’s a damn game. And the best way to build muscles. Period.”

Even baseball’s “devoutest devotees” don’t think of their game as an endeavor whose understanding and appreciation is enhanced by the application to them of the term “sacred.” This is a game. It has its origin in empty-hearted man-made rules, which, in their often macho traditions and strategies, have come to foster, not unity but isolation and discord, sometimes even violence: the very emotional forces which Martin Buber reminds us stiffen the “resistance-to the entrance of the [sacred] into lived life.”

In its highest expression, as dramatized in the taciturn Pole, our Game is not a (small “g”) game. Baseball is a game. He who embarks upon baseball learns to do something. He who embarks upon our Game becomes something. In short, the body created in, and by, our Game is, of course, a vehicle of skillful, infinitely powerful doing-as-doing. But, far more importantly and definingly, our Game is the engine and the product of its devotee’s having undergone a process of psychic and moral rebirth. It’s the engine and the product, in finality, of his having taken up a new life as a reborn man, as a physical culturist, in a seemingly brand-new, but in reality an ancient, body, one which is, in every sense, a Temple of God, whatever the derision engendered in the “tough-minded” by such a metaphor.

As never true of the game player, even the seeming lowliest creature when he’s reborn in the Game becomes a physical culturist, on the one hand, and a metaphor-in-muscle, on the other. Given the depthlessness and contrivance of rules-laden games, not even the best-put-together game-player (game-doer) is reborn in such a dramatically palpable sense. Small-“g” games demand none of the self-mining demanded by our Game, which is, of course, not truly a game, but a way of being: a series of becomings.

An article such as this, with its gloss of ideas and notions not usually addressed in the muscle magazines, is (however effective or ineffective its rendering) essential to an understanding of (a) Schemansky and his athletic (and artistic) brilliance. Such an article is essential to an understanding of Skee’s sport: essential to reminding us that (because it’s his, artistically) it becomes ours as a function of our participation in it as a sport, but also as an “art-form” to which it’s been elevated by him. It’s essential, in short, to an understanding of his sport, not just as a congeries of strength-related skills to be mastered (as in baseball), but also as a way of triumphal living: as a way of secular “salvation”: as a way, almost, of “religious salvation.”

Broken bodies or spirits aren’t usually brought to baseball or to any other game for healing, except in the sense that any sort of activity is minimally healing. Thousands, however, have brought (in their forgivably overwrought words) “broken bodies and broken spirits” to this Game of ours. I did. Many of us have. I found renovation and rebirth in the inspiration to health and strength provided by John Grimek and, later, in the big Pole honored here, in his heart-stoppingly graceful performances on countless spotlighted platforms: so deeply planted under so crushing burdens of iron. In those soul-wrenching epiphanies, in those conspiracies of weightlifting beauty, my “conversion” to the (almost-) “religion” of Skee’s Grand Endeavor was immediate and final.

So what? How does all this perhaps tedious “philosophizing” relate to my thesis that the deepest insight into the transcendent meaning of this marvelous Game is enfolded in its grandest heroes, in this case the grand Schemansky? Is it far-fetched to think of the beauty of Skee’s sport, in its most poetic resonance at least, as a “blood”-relative (a distant cousin, perhaps) to the beauty of art-as-art, the beauty of high art?

If it isn’t always far-fetched to envisage weightlifting in so high-flown a character (just for the discussion of a moment, for the sake of argument at least)—if it isn’t al-

ways far-fetched to envisage the most poetically-resonant achievements of strength and muscle in this way—then aficionados of the Game are justified in thinking about it and its high-born “distant cousin” (high art) as part of the same force field, one whose magnetic truths are mediated (as art’s—and religion’s—are always mediated) in our “heart,” our “soul,” our Kingdom-Within, our ancient Sacrum (the sacred place in our middle: the site of both art and God’s mediation).

This is the sort of truth which blossoms in an aficionado’s sense of oneness with something central to his being: something coterminous with his “soul,” his spirit: a force, the force that even some of the sanest (and least “sentimental”) would call an aspect of God and of the sacredness which is resonant with the (God-) Idea (the Word) from which the Universe-as-body derives. Understood in its most Catholic sense, sacredness resonates much more with spirit (even when incarnated in strongman flesh) than with religion or religious denomination. This is true, contrary to all our conditioning in this matter, because religion has established an almost exclusive corner on the term and its “correct” usage. This institutionalizing of the term (both its referent and meaning) is so resistless that the very notion of applying the word to the human body, even to the ultimately-artificed human body (as a testament of spirit) is invariably laughed off the boards as high-falutin’ and excessive: no better, according to its critics, than the strenuousness that’s cynically invested in elevating the significance of painfully contrived games and their players.

The majesty of Schemansky’s platform ballet is almost as much yoga as it is athleticism and art, if in yoga one finds—as Lionel Corbett finds in such practice—a “numinous emotional quality...a kind of beckoning by the Divine—mysterious, powerful, awe inspiring”: the sort of practice that qualifies, surely; as “sacred.”

With this platform beauty as an intercessory dynamic, the strong man and strong woman—no less than the strongman and strongwoman—live at their silent deep-Self center in a present-moment Presence, virtually unknown to any but the most spiritually “sentient” mediators or practitioners of yoga. Not to live in such a “peak experience” present-moment is to “miss [one’s] appointment with life: the sense that [one] doesn’t have to run anymore. Breathing in [the practitioner of Skee’s “yogic practice” says] ‘I have arrived.’ Breathing out [he says], ‘I am home.’” This, Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, is a “very strong practice, a very deep practice.” And, indeed, yoga

is a very “strong” and “deep practice,” and hardly less so, deep-centered weight training—if rarely the sort of training required by games, given the ultimately outer-direction of the game (its source in a committee): its purpose, the fulfillment of social norms and requirements).

On the other hand, and unlike Our Game, nothing connects games with Nature, or art, or God—neither games nor their players. Nothing about games suggests their connection with anything as archetypal as the human body in its aesthetic-religious function at the spiritual ground-zero of our Game—especially, for our purposes here, the sort of human body that is as grandly and artfully architected as Schemansky’s.

Although it’s a powerful vehicle of doing things, of playing games, the human body, honored here, is most important in its larger meaning: the one mediated by physical culture generally and by our dear Game specifically. The ultimate body, in this larger meaning, is the incarnation of its Idea, co-creative as that Idea is of a particular body, but (more subsumingly) of all body: of the “Universe” itself as body. The ultimacy of the ultimate body—in these notes, the Schemanskyan body—and its



This rare photo of Schemansky, taken by *Strength and Health’s* former managing editor, Jim Murray, captures Schemansky in a very low position in the snatch, the lift for which he was most famous, for his perfect form and great strength.

incarnation of Logos: its enfleshing of “Divine Idea” in a Temple of God: AS a shadowcasting, toe-stubbing Temple of God.

“In the arena of human life the honours and rewards fall to those who show their good qualities in action.” (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, III)

Is there a word more precisely nuanced than drama for the sort of “teaching” that’s implicit in Schemansky’s acting-out-of Aristotle’s “good-qualities in acting,” up there, under the lights, on a lifting platform? His is not the instruction of teacherly discourse, but of action as teaching: of teaching in action. The big Pole speaks, also, in Emerson’s line from “Self-Reliance”: “My life is not an apology, but a life.”

To comprehend the meaning implicit in the infinitude of contingencies emblemized in Skee and in his body-as-vehicle, one has to contemplate him and it in the thousand-thousand moments of his and its, “good qualities in action,” upon more than three decades of lifting platforms, everywhere in the world where aficionados assembled to wonder at impeccably expressed human mightiness.

Beauty, in Emerson’s words, is “God’s handwriting.” Despite Skee’s sometimes truculence—in the beauty of his “handwriting” on a lifting platform, something transcendent, something (almost) divine, was revealed to us (to the world), not through words, but as an exercise of the heart, of feeling, of something almost “mystical.” For an instant, on a platform, this phlegmatic man became eloquent, as few others: he became beautiful, a thing of perfection(s). For an instant, his sometimes truculence aside, an epiphanous beauty came to blossom where, only an instant earlier, an angry man had crouched.

To the wordless and taciturn Schemansky we turned for the sort of counsel that transcends words: that teaches by gracious and heroic action: by doing. We turned to him and to the serene and angry beauty of his platform performances. We turned to this man as an incarnation of a time and of a people: people who still held a secular “faith” in opacity: the kind of people, that is, who manage to know that part of the “light of the world” would be extinguished when society came to be emblemized, not by Skee’s heavily-partitioned inner house, but by an un-partitioned, an un-curtained, a plateglass house and its icons of transparency. (Welcome to the sports “icons” of the 21st century.)

At a painful time in my long-ago self, Skee, in the drama of “good qualities in action” on a platform, thundered the sermon (in Kenneth Lind’s words): “There is indeed no place where God is not. Running through the differences that make us all unique, and even those that may tend to divide and injure us, is a cord of unity that ultimately connects us to one another.”

To the boy-me, that “cord of unity” (between “high” and “low”) was provided by several men—some of them from the Game—but surely one of them was this untalking, this wordless, preacher: this man whose “good qualities in action” spoke more deeply to me of heaven and of health than all the preachers and priests I’d ever known, shouting their holiest of clichés from their church steeples. As Aristotle observed, “In the arena of human life, the honours and rewards fall to those who show their good qualities in action.” The great Greek spoke volumes about the great, if confounding, Pole, who is “honoured and rewarded,” if still far too meagerly, in these random musings.

The most tedious of sports clichés is not a cliché here: There’ll never be another like Skee because there’ll never be another willing to give over what he willingly gave over in response to what he seemed to construe as a vocation. Even to the best of those who’ve followed in his train, weightlifting has been merely a sport, a source, to be sure, of ego satisfaction and happiness, but not a “vocation” (of all things), with all that term’s religious connotations.

Many decades ago, a wordless man heaved into our consciousness. A man who was all the more stoical for the doomedness of his grounings. Divested of the sort of ego that separates so profoundly the artist from his audience, this man worked his “divine magic” on lifting platforms around the world. In response to his heart-stopping grace under crushing loads of iron, many a desperate little boy was awakened to Meister Eckhart’s reminder that “Every creature is a book about God”: each “creature,” a “word of God.” And the text of this “book about God” is no less testamentary for being subordinated in action, rather than in mere words: for being subordinated, that is, in the “good qualities in action” of an “honoured” hero: in these lines, our “devoutly honoured,” if insufficiently” rewarded,” hero: Norbert Schemansky.

NOTES:

1. Al Thomas to Terry and Jan Todd, undated letter, collection of Jan and Terry Todd; Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing 2000).

