

THE “IDOL OF MY YOUNG MANHOOD”: NORBERT SCHEMANSKY

MAY 30, 1924 – SEPTEMBER 7, 2016

Joe Weider with Terry Todd

Editor’s Note: Before his death in 2013, Joe Weider had been working on a personal memoir with Terry Todd that discussed both the men and women who inspired him to become involved with lifting and bodybuilding and those whose physiques and physical accomplishments he found most admirable and inspirational. This memory piece about Norbert Schemansky was written for that book, and we believe it speaks to how far-ranging Schemansky’s impact has been on the Iron Game.



During the Olympic Games, held in Greece in 2004, I tried to watch as much weightlifting as I could on television, and one bit of lifting news that I caught made me smile and think back to the “good old days,” when American lifters dominated the platforms of the world. What made me smile was a remark made by the announcer as he noted that Nicolai Peshalov, a Bulgarian-born lifter who was lifting for another country—in this case, Qatar—managed to win a medal in his fourth Olympics, a feat previously performed by only one man. That man was Norbert Schemansky, one of the greatest and most physically impressive men to ever put on a lifting suit and make a world record.

In a very real way, what Schemansky had done several decades earlier was even more impressive than what Peshalov had done—for two reasons. For one thing, Schemansky’s medals came in 1948 (silver), 1952 (gold), 1960 (silver), and 1964 (bronze); whereas Peshalov’s medals were won in successive Games—1992 (silver), 1996 (bronze), 2000 (bronze), and 2004 (bronze). Not only were Schemansky’s medals of a significantly higher order, but they covered a 20-year period instead of a 16-year period as he had to skip the 1956 Games because of a serious injury. What’s more, Ski’s last medal was won when he was 40 years of age, making him the oldest medalist in modern weightlifting history. Even more

remarkable is that he earned that last medal and, two years earlier, set a new world record in his class in the snatch—after major back surgery that fused several vertebrae!

It’s hard to know where to begin in telling Ski’s story, but when I’ve finished I hope it won’t be hard to understand why he was such a hero to me when I was a



Norbert Schemansky stands next to weightlifting official Clarence Johnson holding the Best Lifter trophy for the meet in which he has just competed. “Ski” remains the only American lifter to win medals in four Olympic Games. Johnson was a wealthy businessman and a longtime high-ranking official at both the national and international level.



Schemansky, during a brief time after he unseated John Davis as weightlifting's reigning heavyweight, held the world record in the clean and jerk. He is shown here attempting, and failing, to jerk from the shoulders a weight reported to be 450 pounds. During this exhibition he was spotted by fellow legends Tommy Kono on the left and Clyde Emerich on the right. Emerich, after a distinguished weightlifting career, joined the Chicago Bears in 1972 as their first strength coach, and holds the record as the longest-serving Bears' employee.

young man just getting started in the publishing business. I was only 17 when I published my first issue of *Your Physique*, and I filled each issue with information about the great lifters of the past and present. I also continued to train very fiercely on the "Olympic Lifts" throughout the 1940s and beyond, and as *Your Physique* prospered I began another magazine—*Muscle Power*—that ran feature stories and news every month about weightlifting. In the early days I ran many, many stories about the lifting exploits of the man we all knew as "Ski." My readers liked the way he looked and lifted, and so did I.

The 1940s were the decade when Schemansky began to train heavy, following in the footsteps of his brother, Dennis, who won the U.S. Jr. National Championships in 1940. Young Ski was about 16 at that time, but he took to lifting quickly, and after World War II he eventually reached levels that were higher than Dennis had reached, finally achieving the highest levels in the world. Because Ski was so close to my own age; because he came from Detroit, which isn't all that far from my home in Montreal; because he had the most beautiful form I'd ever seen in the "quick lifts;" and because he had one of the most gracefully powerful bodies I'd ever observed he

quickly became one of my favorite lifters. He remained one of my favorites until he retired in the middle of the 1960s, by which time he was in his early 40s, losing his battle with age, but still strong as a bull.

Ski was one of those guys who came from a strong family. He was Polish, and he came from a neighborhood and culture where hard work and toughness were much appreciated. Still 16 and after only a few months of training he snatched 160 pounds, which was ten pounds more than he weighed at the time. He had the sort of physical make-up that most great lifters have, and while still in high school he reportedly ran the 100-yard dash in just over 10 seconds and threw a football 75 yards standing still. In 1948 George Yakos—who ran a gym where Ski trained in Detroit—wrote an article for *Your Physique*. According to Yakos, Norb always had naturally good form in the snatch and clean and jerk. His press was his "weak" lift in the beginning, but he worked hard and it began to catch up to his other lifts. And as he lifted,

his muscles continued to thicken. By the end of 1942 he was up to 191 pounds at a height of 5'11" and he made lifts of 215 in the press, 240 in the snatch, and 310 in the clean and jerk. Had the war not intervened, Ski would very probably have made the Olympic team in 1944 and medaled, but instead of working on his pressing and jerking he served for four years in Europe with an anti-aircraft unit. He did no training during his years in the service, but after he was discharged he rejoined Yakos' Gym in 1946. He soon found that his added maturity made him stronger than ever. He entered the Jr. National Championships just like his brother Dennis had done six years earlier and he took the heavyweight class with lifts of 240-260-330. He almost finished second later that summer in the Senior National Championships, but he had an uncharacteristic miss in the clean and jerk.

He did finish second in the Nationals the following year—to the already legendary John Davis, World Weightlifting Champion in the heavyweight class and widely recognized in those days as the strongest man in the world. This high finish qualified Ski to make the trip to the 1947 World Championships, where he played it safe and still made lifts of 259-286-364 to finish second

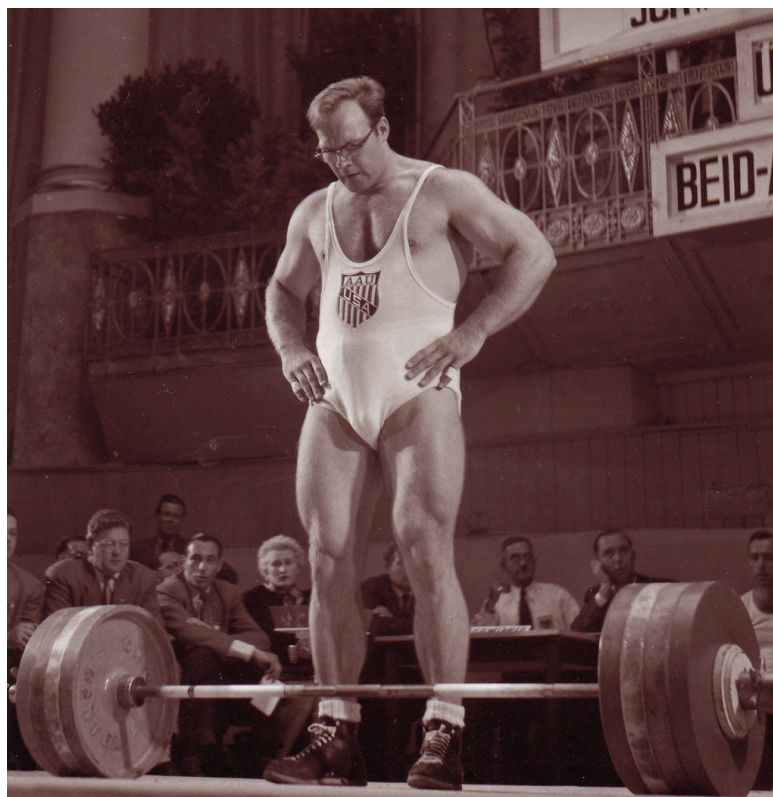
to Davis and score important points that helped the United States win the team trophy. By the 1948 Olympic Games, Ski was still moving up and playing a melodic second fiddle to the great Davis. In the Games, these two majestic men once again finished “gold-silver,” and Ski put up lifts of 270 in the press, 292 in the snatch, and 374 in the clean and jerk—all at a bodyweight of only 205. Ski always had a hard time gaining weight in his early years, but it seemed that every bit of weight he gained was muscle and sinew, because as he got heavier he appeared to become more muscular, too. And his quick lifts were so beautiful that they had to be seen to be believed.

One tends to think of beauty in sports coming in activities like gymnastics or diving, but when Norbert Schemansky took the platform all the old veterans stopped to watch him lift. The great Egyptian lifter and coach El Saied Nossier once said, “I would like for Schemansky to be on my team. I wish he were an Egyptian.” Coming from a former world champion who was a proud Egyptian and the coach of other world champions, this is high praise indeed, but those are the sorts of feelings Ski evoked when he lifted. One thing about his lifting style that was distinctive was that when he dropped into the deep fore-and-aft split style he used in both the snatch and the clean and jerk—in which one foot moves slightly forward and the other is thrust backward while the leg is kept fairly straight—his technique didn’t change, regardless of whether he was doing a light warm-up or making a world record. I remember watching him train one day and do ten single repetitions in the snatch to warm up, using only an empty broomstick each time. Each repetition looked exactly the same, and he had a serious look on his face as he made each “lift.” Then, with no intervening weight increases, he put two 45 pound plates and one 35 pound plate on each end of the Olympic bar and made a perfect snatch with 295 pounds that could not be distinguished from the previous ten snatches he’d made with the broomstick. It was quite a thing to see.

By 1951, the International Weightlifting Federation had added a new bodyweight division—the middleheavyweight class—which was for lifters who weighed between 181 and 198 pounds. This class was ideal for Schemansky as it got him out from under the formidable shadow of

the legendary John Davis, who by then had six world titles under his belt and showed no signs of weakening. The World Championships were held in Milan that year, and Ski reduced to 198 pounds and put up winning lifts of 275-292-374 for a total of 942. By the time the Games in Helsinki were held the following year he had improved to the point that he easily won his first Gold medal, with lifts of 280-308-391 as a middleheavyweight. Meanwhile, Davis won again in the Heavyweight division. But lifting aficionados took note that Ski’s clean and jerk of 391—not to mention his clean and near miss in the jerk with 402—was slightly heavier than Davis’ jerk during the Games, and only ten pounds lighter than Davis’ world record in the Heavyweight class.

Time passed and Schemansky just kept getting better, and sending every writer who covered weightlifting to the dictionary searching for superlatives to describe the power and the technical perfection of his performances. Everyone who wrote about competitive lifting for my magazines in those days—Charles A. Smith, Charles



In 1954, after standing for years in the shadows of the phenomenally strong John Davis, Schemansky moved to the top of the unlimited weight class and dominated the world championships with new world records in both the clean and jerk (424 pounds) and the total (1074 pounds).



By 1963, when Schemansky made this American and world record two-hand snatch of 362 pounds he was, to paraphrase the title of Tom Wolfe's famous novel, "a man in full" in the sport of weightlifting. He looked powerful; he was powerful; and with good reason he felt that he was the most powerful man on earth.

Coster, Oscar State, and others—simply raved about him. Charles Coster, for example, said of his lifting in the middleheavyweight class, "I think it is quite safe to say that never has there been a lifter in the heavier class-weight divisions who could compare with him for dazzling speed and perfection of weight-lifting style. It was a valuable education just to watch this astonishing lifter." And Charles A. Smith observed that Ski was, "...the perfect stylist...a big, powerful athlete, as fast on his feet as a fly-weight fighter...those clean and jerks of his...these were just some of the thoughts that went coursing through my mind as I sat watching Ski...and suddenly I realized how well could be applied to Ski's speed and technique the very same phrase that had been used to describe Johnny Weismuller's swimming...poetry in motion."

Oscar State, who served for years as the General Secretary of the International Weightlifting Federation and, later, for many more years as the General Secretary

of the International Federation of Body-builders was a somewhat taciturn man, but even he—as he was writing about the 1954 World Championships in which Ski broke free of the shadow of John Davis—was not immune to the impact of the American powerhouse. Here's Oscar, writing in *Muscle Power* about Ski's triumph, "Looking wonderfully impressive with his added muscular bulk, Ski delighted us with the best performance of his life...His first clean and jerk was the highest start ever made in such championships, with 396, and here his copybook technique returned to delight the connoisseurs, of whom there were a considerable number among this critical audience. On to 413 pounds, and the hush was more pregnant than usual because if he succeeded it would mean a total of 1074, the highest ever amassed in the history of weightlifting. It was a lift without fault or falter."

Following his great success in 1954, at the World Championships in Vienna, Ski stayed with the other lifters in Europe for a week and made a stop in France to have another go at the world records. While in France, the team trained in Lille, and an exhibition was arranged that has gone down in history and become even

more famous over the years. What happened is that the French lifting officials brought to Lille a historically important barbell—known as Apollon's Wheels, which were then, and remain until today, the most famous barbell in the world. The "Wheels" were introduced to the world by the French giant Louis Uni, who performed as a professional strongman under the name of Apollon in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. Sometime in the 1890s, Apollon found two railway wheels from a narrow gauge railway car, took out the thick shaft that joined them and replaced it with a shaft that was just barely under two inches" in diameter—which is quite close to the diameter of the end of a standard Olympic bar. When this thinner shaft was joined solidly to the two wheels the apparatus weighed 366 pounds, and for years it was thought to be unliftable. Although strength historians don't agree, some believe that even the colossal Apollon himself never cleaned it to

his shoulders and jerked it overhead, but we do know that the great French lifter Charles Rigoulot, the 1924 Olympic champion and world record holder, managed to clean and jerk the Wheels in front of a large crowd in 1930. Apparently, when Rigoulot first tried the Wheels he was unable to clean them, and it was only after several months of intense practice that he was able to lift them to his shoulders and then jerk them overhead.

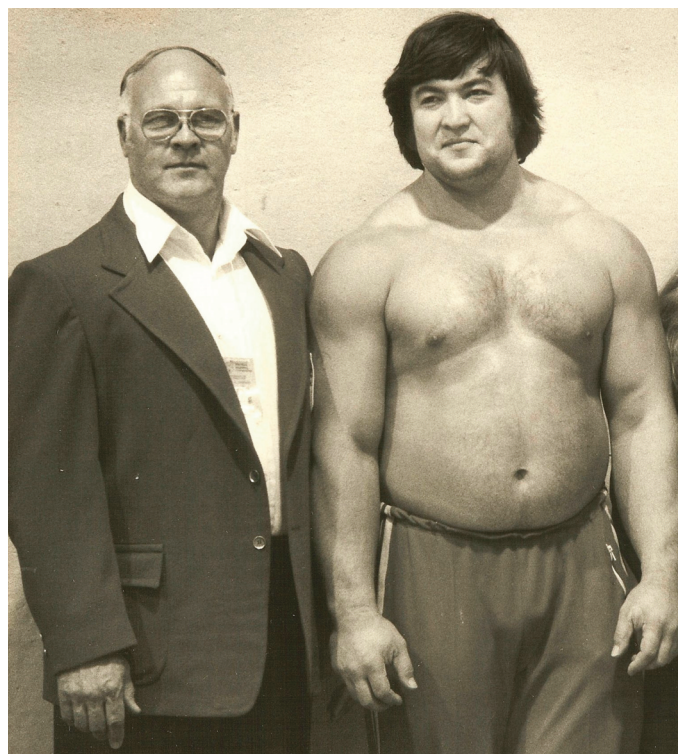
The Wheels remained, unlifted for 19 years, until several French lifting officials—in an apparent attempt to embarrass John Davis following his victory at the 1949 World Championships and his growing fame as the “Strongest Man in the World”—sprung them on Davis and the rest of the American team after the World Championships, asking them if they’d be willing to try to lift the famed wheels that had perhaps been lifted by 6’3” 270 pound Apollon and definitely lifted by the 5’9” Rigoulot, both of whom happened to be French. The officials neglected, by the way, to tell Davis that Rigoulot had had to train specifically on the Wheels for several months before *he was able to clean them.* [Editor’s Note: *The story of Davis’ attempt is told in detail in the article on Davis that begins on page 38.*]

When Davis dropped Apollon’s Wheels onto the wooden platform in 1949, the shaft was slightly bent, and this was another thing facing the brand new world champion and world record holder Norbert Schemansky in Lille. But Ski was not about to refuse to try the historic implement—a barbell only lifted by Rigoulot and Davis and maybe the gigantic Apollon, all of whom were known in their prime as the strongest man in the world. So after a bit of warm-up, and wearing a sweatsuit, Ski stepped up to the Wheels, surrounded by French fans and the entire U.S. team. Using a standard double-overhand style, he grabbed the thick bar with his big mitts and pulled the Wheels easily to his chest and then jerked them not once, not twice, but three times to the absolute delight of those who were watching. Even the French officials were overcome by emotion.

As for the quality of this performance, let me explain what happened to the Wheels 48 years later, in Columbus, Ohio. In 2001, Arnold Schwarzenegger and his friend, Jim Lorimer—who for 25 years had been promoting a huge “Fitness Weekend” featuring bodybuilding, lifting, arm wrestling, and a number of other sports—decided to conduct a competition that would be a true test of brute strength. They asked Terry Todd to design the event because he had done weightlifting as well as pow-

erlifting and had been one of the officials in several of the first World’s Strongest Man contests. As Todd began to think about a new contest, he sought the advice of Bill Kazmaier, the renowned strongman and powerlifter who had won television’s World’s Strongest Man title several times, and David P. Webster, the ageless Scotsman who has written more about the history of strength than any living man. Todd asked them what they thought about building a replica of Apollon’s Wheels and challenging the modern strongmen to lift it overhead as many times as they could—that is, if they could lift it once. Kaz and Webster liked the idea, and so the Ivanko Barbell Company built a replica of Apollon’s Wheels that weighed exactly the same and had the exact same thickness of handle. What’s more Tom Lincir of Ivanko set the shaft firmly into the wheels so that when the bar turned the wheels had to turn, too. The thought was that these characteristics, taken together, would make the Wheels a major problem even for the gigantic modern strongmen invited to take part in the first Arnold Strongman Classic.

Thus it was that everyone in the strength world was anxious to see what the men could do with the repli-



Soviet superheavyweight Sultan Rakhmanov stands next to 54-year-old Norbert Schemansky at the 1978 World Weightlifting Championships in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Rakhmanov set a world record in the snatch in Gettysburg, and won the gold medal at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. Ski holds his own.

ca, which had been kept in a box so no one could try it before the competition. Eight men came to Columbus to compete in the 2002 contest, and the first event featured Apollon's great Wheels. Each of the eight men was at least six feet tall and weighed at least 300 pounds, and one, Mark Henry, the 6'3" weightlifter/powerlifter, weighed just over 400. The men were given two minutes to lift the Wheels overhead as many times as possible, using any method except resting it on their belt and then "jumping" it to their shoulders from there. (They were also forbidden to stand the Wheels on end and then tip them over onto their shoulders.) The announcers explained to the many thousands people crowded around the huge stage that the Wheels had only been lifted three times in history, and that the last man to do so—and the only one of the three still living—was Norbert Schemansky, who was 5'11" tall and weighed only 224 pounds when he stepped into the spotlight back in 1954. The announcers also explained that Rigoulot and Davis were well under six feet and 230 pounds when they made their lifts, respectively, in 1930 and 1949.

When the dust had settled, only two men got the Wheels overhead and only the prodigious Mark Henry, had really conquered them. Mark Philippi managed to get them to his chest using a squat clean and a reverse grip that had to be adjusted very slowly once he stood up out of the squat, but the whole process was so tiring that he only managed one repetition. Mark Henry, on the other hand, had little trouble with the Wheels, power cleaning them three times and push-pressing them overhead each time. But we have to remember that Mark is even more of a natural giant than Apollon himself was, and that he had prepared for the contest by training on a heavy barbell that was just like Apollon's Wheels except for being a bit lighter. All of this, I hope, will help anyone who reads it to understand what truly wonderful, athletic lifters Rigoulot, Davis, and Schemansky were to have mastered the Wheels. And for Ski to have cleaned them the first time he saw them and then to have jerked them three times remains one of the Iron Game's greatest moments.

Later, however, Ski went on to further glory, but his future was in an odd way spoiled. After 1954 his back began to really bother him, and if that wasn't enough the 5'9", 370-pound Paul Anderson stepped onto the lifting stages of the world and sucked most of the oxygen out of the room. It wasn't that Paul—who, in 1955, broke Ski's world record clean and jerk and total—was so much stronger than Ski; it was that he was so preposterously

huge and personally colorful that he created a feeding frenzy among any media types that took a look at weightlifting in the mid-50s. By early 1956, Paul had taken all the superheavyweight records, won the 1955 World Championships, and gone on a history-making trip to the Soviet Union with the U.S. Weightlifting Team—the first U.S. sports team to go behind the Iron Curtain since World War II. So when the 1956 Olympic Games began Paul was already a popular culture figure known to every American who paid any attention to sports. And just before the 1956 Olympic Games in Sydney Paul was thought to be the surest gold medal winner of any athlete in the Games.

Paul turned pro after the '56 Games, but things would never be quite the same for Ski, who came through major back surgery, unretired after several years away, and became the top U.S. heavyweight again. He even set a world record in the snatch with 364—one of the last world records ever made by a U.S. lifter—and his best total (1224 pounds) far exceeded Anderson's best (1175). But by the 1960 Olympics in Rome, the Russians had begun to produce a whole succession of steroid-boosted supermen (Vlasov, Zhabotinsky, and Alexeyev) who proved to be a little too much for the valiant old warhorse, no matter that in the 1960s he weighed over 40 pounds more than he weighed when he set a world record in the clean and jerk of 424 in 1954. Never again would Ski be the greatest man in lifting—the champion of champions. But, this one man's opinion is that Norbert Schemansky was greater than them all. He had a longer career, he won medals in more Olympic Games, he was much more exciting to watch with his breathtaking technique, he had a far more impressive body, and—what's most important of all—he was a true amateur, a man who earned his modest living working at a series of blue collar jobs throughout his career instead of being supported fulltime and handsomely by the Soviet Union as a hero of the state. Ski was a workingman his whole life, and the Soviets were professional athletes and anyone who's tried it both ways can tell you what an enormous difference that can make. So, for what it's worth, I place Norbert Schemansky—the idol of my young manhood—above all superheavyweights who were to follow. Every top superheavy who came after Ski put up bigger numbers, but they were not as big a man.

