

UNEQUALED YET NEVER EQUAL: THE PORTRAYAL OF JOHN DAVIS IN *STRENGTH & HEALTH* MAGAZINE, 1938-1957

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Following the 1949 world weightlifting championships in the Netherlands, French weightlifting officials invited American heavyweight and world champion John Davis to perform a strength exhibition at the Elysee Montmartre, a famous Parisian concert hall.¹ The French delegation challenged Davis to perform a clean and jerk with the ponderous Apollon Railway Wheels. Performance of the lift, one of the three competitive lifts at the time, required a lifter to pull the barbell from the floor with sufficient force to raise it to nearly shoulder level. The lifter then dropped under the bar, using either a “fore and aft” leg split or a bilateral squat, to “catch” it across the shoulders. After steadying the weight, the lifter then shoved the bar upward, dipped his legs, and did a fore and aft leg split before catching it at arms’ length. Once the lifter showed control of the weight, the lift was considered successful. The “Wheels” Davis had been invited to lift were, quite literally, train wheels, taken from a narrow gauge French rail car. Their namesake, Apollon (Louis Uni), was a famous French strongman who had used them as part of his act in the 1890s.² While some historians say that Apollon could hoist them overhead in the same manner Davis was challenged to do, many experts remain unconvinced that he ever put his own wheels overhead.³ To lift such an implement is particularly impressive not only because the wheels weigh 366 pounds, but because the axle connecting the wheels is almost 2” thick and rigidly attached to the wheels. As a result, in order to rotate the axle as one must do to “catch” the bar, one has

to supply sufficient force to rotate both the wheels and the axle. Rotation of the fixed axle requires much more force than is required if one were to use the much thinner “Olympic” barbell, the bar of which can turn independently of the barbell plates (or “wheels”).⁴ Successfully lifting these thick, rigid wheels, then, requires phenomenal grip strength. Apollon was a large man at 6’ 3” and 270 pounds at his peak. His size and unusually large hands allowed him to grip the bar with relative ease, which is why some historians believe it is likely he was able to “clean” the wheels and put them overhead even though he apparently never made it a part of his act. Lifting the wheels would have been challenging even to Apollon, who was notoriously lazy. Davis, on the other hand, stood 5’ 9”, weighed only 225 pounds, and had hands that were small even for his size.⁵ This is evidenced by the fact that Davis, who lifted in the weight division with the largest men, was unable to employ what is known as a “hook grip,” in which the lifter prevents the bar from rolling out of his grip by wrapping his thumbs around the bar and then placing his first and middle fingers on top of his thumbs.⁶

Though many other men had been challenged to lift the wheels only one man, Charles Rigoulot, the French Olympic champion weightlifter, had successfully done so.⁷ Before he was able to accomplish the feat Rigoulot, who had relatively large hands for a man who stood 5’ 8”, practiced with the wheels for months in order to be able to clean them to his shoulders.⁸ Davis, on the other hand, got only a few days’ notice. French officials, upset at the fact that Davis had broken Rigoulot’s weightlifting records, challenged Davis during the World Championships to lift the axle during the American

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Davis' reputation as one of the greatest strength athletes in history results as much from his incredible lifting of the famous barbell known as Apollon's Wheels as it does from his two Olympic, six world, and twelve national titles. This historic lift was captured by Bud Greenspan, who included it in his 1952 documentary of Davis' life, called *The Strongest Man in the World*.

team's brief stop in Paris on their way home. When Davis accepted the challenge, French officials advertised the hastily-organized exhibition heavily on radio and in newspapers, resulting in a sizeable crowd.⁹ At the time, Davis held the world record in the clean and jerk at 391.5 pounds, so anyone in the crowd unfamiliar with the technique of weightlifting might have assumed that doing a clean and jerk with the 366-pound implement was not likely to be problematic.¹⁰ Davis was also widely recognized as the strongest man in the world at the time and had not been beaten in competition for more than a decade. Nonetheless, the combination of a large diameter axle, wheels that did not rotate independently of the axle,

the sheer weight of the implement, and Davis' small hands and lack of practice with it, made for a challenge the French officials believed would be beyond him.

Spectators and the press, with cameras ready, watched in rapt silence as Davis strode to the bar chewing gum, as usual. Davis then reached down, gripped the immense handle, lowered his hips, and attempted to rip the wheels from the ground. Just as quickly, his grip failed and he dropped it. Undeterred, Davis tried again. As with the first attempt, Davis' small hands kept him from getting a good grip on the bar and made it impossible for him to generate sufficient power to get the bar high enough to split his legs fore and aft and catch it on his shoulders as he normally did. The officials smiled as the crowd began to mutter. Perhaps this American phenomenon was not as great as they had thought; surely not as great as their own Olympic champion, Rigoulot.¹¹

Davis remained unfazed. He approached the bar a third time. This time, however, he altered his grip. He grabbed the bar with his right palm facing toward him and his left palm facing away, as is commonly used in the deadlift to prevent the bar from rolling out of the fingers. This time, when Davis pulled the bar from the ground, he was able lift it much higher and faster because of his "reverse grip" and he realized that he had a chance to get it to his shoulders and put it overhead. The reverse grip presented a new problem, however, as catching the bar during a clean required both forearms to be pronated. In order to "catch" the bar successfully, Davis had to pull the bar high enough and then—very quickly, as the bar surged upward toward his chest—release the bar with his left hand, and pronate that forearm so that he could catch the bar with both hands now facing the same way. Another major problem was that the uneven grip caused the right side of the bar to rise much higher than the left, which in turn caused Davis to lose his balance as he "caught" the tilted bar and it fell, crashing to the stage. Nonetheless, because of Davis' grit he kept trying, and because of his phenomenal athleticism—after at least four failed attempts—he managed to pull the bar high enough, switch his left hand quickly enough, and catch the bar on his chest.

Even so, although he had successfully cleaned the Wheels, he had nearly exhausted himself and he still had to lift the thick and unwieldy bar over his head. It must be remembered that the wheels were only twenty-five pounds lighter than his own world record that was made using a thinner, springy bar, which is much easier to jerk.

As he drove the wheels overhead and split his legs to provide a stable base, he had the weight too far forward and almost dropped it. But after several short, rapid steps to catch his balance, Davis finally held the bar still and the judge signaled that the lift was good. As the audience roared in appreciation of this amazing feat, Davis turned toward the back of the stage and literally collapsed into the arms of the officials. Fortunately for sport historians, Davis' struggles to perform this genuinely phenomenal feat were dramatically captured on film by a young Bud Greenspan, who was directing the very first documentary of what would become a body of work that made him known around the world.¹² Bob Hoffman, the United States coach and publisher of *Strength & Health* magazine, the leading magazine in that field, called Davis' lift the greatest feat of strength in history. Although some of the embarrassed French officials announced that the lift would not be accepted because of Davis' use of a "reverse grip," members of the French press lauded him, dubbing him "*l'Hercule Noir*." The newly christened "Black Hercules" was supposedly offered citizenship, a home, and a business if he wished to stay in France following this performance.¹³ Subsequent events suggest that he might have done well to accept these offers.

Beginnings

John Davis was born on 12 January 1921 on Long Island and grew up in the tenements of Brooklyn.¹⁴ Raised by his mother, Margaret Campbell, Davis never met his father. John played football and ran track in high school. At the time, strength training for sport was rather uncommon, due to the pernicious belief that lifting weights would hamper athletic performance.¹⁵ Instead, Davis was introduced to strength training around the age of sixteen by an amateur lifter in his neighborhood named Steve Wolsky.¹⁶ Wolsky had happened upon Davis and his friends horsing around one day in Brooklyn. One of Davis' friends dared him to lift a 125-pound concrete block overhead, which, to Wolsky's amazement, he did with ease. Wolsky recognized the youth's talent and convinced him to train for competitive lifting at a gym he had assembled in his home. Within a year, Davis had begun capturing medals at weightlifting meets and come to the attention of Bob Hoffman, owner of the York Barbell Company.

In addition to manufacturing barbells, Hoffman sponsored a competitive weightlifting club at his York, Pennsylvania factory. Hoffman regularly brought prom-

ising lifters to York and either directly provided them with jobs at the factory or helped them gain work in town by other means. He supervised their training and served as a benefactor for the lifters in exchange for their representation on his team. Hoffman's ultimate goal was to have the strongest club team in the country, so that "his" lifters would comprise a majority of the American national and Olympic teams.¹⁷

Once aware of Davis' promise, Hoffman arranged for him to attend school in nearby Philadelphia on scholarship so that he could supervise the teenager's lifting program.¹⁸ In June of 1938, Davis competed in his first national championships with a shot at making the national team on the line. The seventeen-year-old Davis was defeated in the heavyweight class (181 pounds and above) by Stanley Kratkowski, but was awarded a spot on the national team as an alternate.¹⁹ When the team mem-



Bob Hoffman stands at the announcer's podium as Davis makes a heavy press during an exhibition. The lack of collars and unorthodox loading of the plates suggests Davis was not worried about missing this lift.

ber in the weight class below Davis' was unable to lift at the world championship meet in Vienna, Davis was able to drop a few pounds and compete in the light-heavy-weight (under 181 pounds) weight class. In spite of the last minute weight loss, Davis seized the opportunity and defeated the reigning Olympic and world champion, Louis Hostin, while posting world records in the press and total weight lifted.²⁰

Hoffman, characteristically, took quite a bit of the credit for the 17-year-old's success. In his magazine, *Strength & Health*, Hoffman's retelling of Davis' lifting heroics emphasizes his own influence. "I [Hoffman] asked him to make 850 months ago. I told him he could do it. He voiced his disbelief. But I asked him to carry 850 around with his mind, to think about it, dream about it, and with hard and scientific training he would win."²¹ As a benefactor for most of the American lifters Hoffman viewed himself as a father figure to them, but as a manufacturer of barbells and magazine publisher, he realized the commercial advantages of being closely linked to the best lifters in the world. He regularly referred to all of the lifters as his "boys."²² *Strength & Health* was an integral part of Hoffman's business. Through the magazine he gave detailed recaps of weightlifting meets, created his own personal myth, and, to an extent, mythologized the lifters. As noted by historian John Fair, Hoffman had a fairly progressive attitude about race, owing largely to his desire to build a successful weightlifting team and to associate with talented lifters.²³ This paper will examine coverage of John Davis in *Strength & Health*, the most widely circulated physical culture magazine during the middle decades of the twentieth century, and discuss his racialized portrayal throughout his career.

Becoming Bob Hoffman

Hoffman began publishing the magazine in December of 1932 in response, he claimed, to what he witnessed at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. In spite of the fact that the United States dominated the total medal count, in the first issue of the magazine Hoffman expressed concern that "other countries are outstripping us physically."²⁴ The magazine, then, would offer advice on physical training so that America's greatness could ostensibly be achieved, and physical degeneration defeated. In reality, the magazine was established to promote strength training so that Hoffman could sell the barbells he produced, a model established by an earlier barbell entrepreneur, Alan Calvert.

Calvert, owner of the Milo Bar-Bell Company, published *Strength* magazine to promote physical culture, show people how to train, and to sell barbells, books, and training courses.²⁵ Bob Hoffman was among his many readers and purchased a Milo set in 1924.²⁶ A traveling salesman at the time, Hoffman dutifully trained with his Milo barbell and began to participate in weightlifting competitions. In addition, he was active in a variety of other sporting events and claimed to have won contests in handball, canoe racing, boxing, and wrestling during the mid-1920s.²⁷ Hoffman proudly recalled that he had been a national champion in weightlifting, though he neglected to mention that he won by default, as he was the only lifter in his weight class.²⁸

Nonetheless, Hoffman viewed himself as a Horatio Alger-like character and, occasionally, even referenced Alger when he recounted his early weightlifting results.²⁹ He truly believed himself to be a self-made man and, for the most part, he was. He was a decorated veteran of World War I and became a successful oil-burner salesman upon his return home. He was such a successful salesman that he bought out the primary owner of the company and became the sole proprietor of York Oil Burner Company in 1927. By 1929, he was also producing barbells in the oil burner factory. In 1931 Hoffman began recruiting lifters to join his "York Oil Burner Athletic Club (YOBAC)" weightlifting team and providing them with jobs at the factory. His recruiting efforts were so successful that the following year, YOBAC captured the national team title in weightlifting, beating out much larger clubs from New York City and Baltimore.³⁰ As his barbell business began to take off following the success of YOBAC and the publicity generated by *Strength & Health*, his new magazine, Hoffman sold his oil burner business and began to concentrate on manufacturing and promoting barbells.³¹

In his articles and editorials, Hoffman created an "origin story" for himself, likely based loosely on fact, that included incredible feats of strength, endurance, and heroism. He claimed to have gotten started in fitness very early in life, following a battle with typhoid fever, during which the doctor declared him dead but, "when [the doctor] found there was still a spark of life in me, he said that I would never amount to anything even if I lived, for my heart and other organs were too badly damaged."³² Hoffman claimed that, rather than accept the diagnosis, he immediately started extreme physical training. For instance, one of his early athletic feats was running "100

times around a double tennis court” when he was about four years old.³³ Hoffman was fond of this story, though the number of laps he ran varied between 100 and 200 in various retellings.³⁴ A much less credible claim was that at the age of nine he had been asked by two older boys to hold their clothes while they ran a ten mile race. Hoffman’s story was that, knowing they would need their clothes at the finish, he ran alongside the two boys for the entire race. “At the end of the ten miles I was running beside the winner carrying the clothes and shoes, fresh as I could be and it would have been easy to win, had I been properly entered.”³⁵ Hoffman



Flyweight John Terry stands next to Davis in an unidentified park in approximately 1940. Terry was the first African-American lifter to be part of the York Barbell Club, although Hoffman did not let him work at York Barbell as he did other team members. After posing with Terry, Davis removed his shirt and displayed the small waist, broad shoulders, and exceptional lats that suggest he could have had a successful career in bodybuilding if race relations had been more advanced in his era.

Hoffman credited his physical fitness with everything, from his success in business to his escaping World War I alive.³⁶ Similarly, in the magazine, he tried to cast the York lifters as extraordinarily successful in all aspects of life. He would also go out of his way to help them become their own self-made men. However, the narrative that physical fitness and a robust work ethic could lead to success in all areas of life became more difficult for Hoffman to maintain after African-American lifters joined the team.

Race Relations and the York Team

The first African-American member of the York and American national teams was a featherweight (under 132 pounds) lifter from New York City named John Terry. Terry had won the junior national championship in 1934, been a member of the Olympic team in 1936, and was

profiled in a 1940 *Strength & Health* article.³⁷ Hoffman got to know Terry well on the trip to Berlin and invited him to train in York after the Games. Upon Terry’s arrival, Hoffman attempted to help him secure employment but quickly found that “the opportunities for a colored lad are not so many.”³⁸ Instead, Hoffman purchased a bar in the “colored section” of town from a former Negro-league baseball player who intended to leave to manage a semi-pro team. Hoffman then turned the bar over to Terry to run as the sole proprietor. The bar quickly became a success and Terry still managed to train some in spite of often working eighteen hour days. The article in *Strength & Health* profiling him lauded his work ethic, and its author, Wib Scharzberger, expressed progressive

views on race:

*We subscribe to the principle in this country, as Abraham Lincoln said: 'All men are created equal.' Color, race, or creed should not affect the opinion of any man in a democracy such as ours. Men should be accepted on their own merits... There are good and bad in every race... A colored boy is born with two strikes on him. He has a much harder time than a white boy to make any sort of success in life.*³⁹

Moreover, according to Scharzberger, Hoffman purchased the bar for Terry because “he thinks that a man who has sufficient ambition, willingness to strive to be a weight lifting champion, deserves every help he can give him towards attaining greater financial success and happiness.”⁴⁰ For his part, Hoffman echoed the quote Scharzberger attributed to Lincoln.⁴¹ This is not particularly surprising, as the article attributed to Scharzberger was probably written by Hoffman.⁴² Left unsaid, however, was how this notion of equality squared with a segregated York—which John Davis himself had described as “a Jim Crow town.”

While segregation was mentioned in passing, it does appear that Hoffman genuinely sought to help the York lifters make their own success stories. He truly believed that strong men were intelligent and hard workers like himself, and would invariably succeed in their endeavors. It should also be noted that Hoffman helped lifters of all races at least in part because he saw himself as the patriarch of American weightlifting. In order to maintain this position, he felt that he needed to be the head of the strongest collection of men in the country and, later, the world. By helping them to be successful through pluck and luck, Hoffman reified his own sense of patriarchal authority. Additionally, he felt strong and fit by association with these superior athletes in spite of the fact that his rigorous travel schedule led him to have a less healthful life than he claimed.⁴³

The laudatory article on Terry was, almost certainly, an attempt to placate readers who had begun to agitate for more stories about the two great African-American national team members. In the “Letters from the Readers” section of the January 1939 issue, George Weaver from Brooklyn, New York, expressed interest in

hearing more about Davis’ training routine.⁴⁴ Later in the same year a New York City physician, Dr. C.C. Pettit, inquired about the “possible omission” of black lifters from the cover of the magazine. Pettit suggested, “I can think of no one who is a more worthy candidate or who has a more beautiful physique than John Davis.”⁴⁵ A reader from Los Angeles, James Burch, agreed with Pettit saying that he, “desire[d] to see more of Davis and, if possible, on the cover.”⁴⁶ Rather than putting either Davis or Terry on the cover initially, Hoffman and the other writers elected to include the feature story on Terry. While both men were regularly included in the reporting of meet results and pictured in those stories, the article on Terry was the first article detailing the personal interests and life away from the lifting platform of an African-American athlete.

In January of 1941, Davis finally appeared on the cover of *Strength & Health*. The photo was a nude physique shot from the rear emphasizing the development of Davis’ upper back, buttocks and legs. Davis shared the cover with a little-known white lifter, Joe Mandallo, and was set against a white background, while Mandallo, in posing trunks, was set against a black background. The next month’s issue featured letters both elated and outraged at the January cover, as well as a cartoon of Davis that both lauded and degraded him. J.W.B of Harlem, New York declared, “At last, *Strength & Health* is seeing the light of day. Needless to say we were overwhelmed with a lively emotion of happiness when our beloved strength friend and buddy John Davis appeared on the cover.”⁴⁷ Conversely, C.V.C of Mobile, Alabama claimed that he “nearly went stark raving mad with insult and horror” when he saw the cover with Davis’ photo.⁴⁸ The reader demanded to know why Davis was on the cover, to which Hoffman responded, “because John Davis is the world’s best weightlifter and this is still a democracy.”⁴⁹

The characterization of Davis in the accompanying cartoon utilized stereotypical black facial features and speech patterns. The drawing showed a big-lipped Davis, with exaggerated facial features, staring blankly into space at its right edge. Another frame lauds him as “the world’s best weightlifter” and shows him walking off with a crown while exclaiming that the prize is, “Elegint!”⁵⁰ Considering that Davis aspired to be an opera singer and was multilingual, the speech pattern depicted was clearly offensive and stereotypical, rather than based in truth.⁵¹ The cartoon, attributed to a William Anselow, encapsulates the ambivalence of Hoffman and the other



Davis finally appeared on the cover of *Strength & Health* in January of 1941. The fact that he appeared nude, and with his face away from the camera, however, can be “read” as a lack of equal treatment by the magazine and its editorial team.

writers at *Strength & Health* regarding race. Davis is at once admired and degraded.⁵² Similarly, his cover photo had Davis facing away from the camera. The shot showed the lifter’s impressive back and hip musculature while failing to show his face. The photo was unlike typical *Strength & Health* covers which rarely omitted the face of the model. In the three years prior to Davis’ cover, most models were photographed in a similar fashion to Mandallo: they usually wore minimal (rather than no) clothing, and included full-face, profile, or three-quarter shots.⁵³ A notable exception is the August 1939 issue which also included two cover models, one of whom was completely nude and shot from the rear. The model, Gene

Jantzen, appeared again in the November issue, still fully nude, but this time from a three-quarter view.⁵⁴ It is important to point out that there were no subsequent letters expressing “insult and horror” over this fully nude white model.⁵⁵

While Davis’ nudity and pose were not unique, they were unusual. In their descriptive analysis of *National Geographic* magazine from the 1950s through the 1980s, professors Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins described how the magazine both shaped, and was shaped by, notions of race. Specifically, they noted that the magazine tended to depict those who were “culturally defined as weak” as facing toward the camera, while those who were more powerful tended to face away from the camera. The direction of the subject’s gaze is also important because if they are facing away, the viewer can observe without the subject’s seeming acknowledgement of them. The interaction is more voyeuristic and less threatening to the viewer. Diminishment of a perceived threat is of particular importance when viewing a black male body, where physical strength tends to have “threatening connotations” for a white audience.⁵⁶ Given that Lutz and Collins’ analysis of *National Geographic* began with issues published less than a decade after Davis’ cover, it seems reasonable to conclude that some of the same subconscious biases may have come into play. Moreover, this notion is borne out by the fact that this was not the first time Davis had been featured on the cover of a muscle magazine. The prior year Davis appeared on the front of *Iron Man* magazine and, as in the *Strength & Health* issue, was shown fully nude and from the rear.⁵⁷ It is also noteworthy that Davis split the *Strength & Health* cover with a white model. As previously mentioned, it was not the first time that more than one model appeared on the cover, but the majority of covers included only one model. Thus the ambivalence of Hoffman and the *Strength & Health* editorial staff is evident; Davis was on the cover, but he was nude, facing away, and sharing the cover with a partially-clothed white model.

In spite of others’ trepidation about him, Davis continued to dominate weightlifting competitions. While international meets had largely been on hold following Germany’s invasion of Poland, the United States and

Canada held their own “International Championship” meet in September of 1940. The American team included: Gord Venables, Steve Stanko, John Grimek, Tony Terlazzo, John Terpak, and John Terry. John Davis did not lift.⁵⁸ The October edition of the magazine featured a picture of the “York Barbell Club International Championship Team,” which included all of the lifters except John Terry. The shameful decision to not include Terry on the cover in a team shot, in lifting apparel, would certainly have been less controversial than the cover photo of Davis which ran the following January. It is important to also note that not only was Terry a member of the team, he won his weight class by 200 pounds—a monumental victory in such a light weight class.⁵⁹

The explosive power of John Davis was not only instrumental to Bob Hoffman in terms of personal and international prestige, it also proved useful in promoting barbell training. As previously mentioned, until the 1950s, most athletes did not train with weights as a means to improve their performance. Weight training was believed to limit a joint’s range of motion and slow contraction time of the muscles and both of these outcomes would clearly hamper athletic performance.⁶⁰ Hoffman, however, believed that weight training could only benefit athletic performance and credited his experience with weights with helping him to victory in the many athletic championships he claimed to have accrued.⁶¹ He forcefully and frequently championed weight training as a means to improve athletic performance from the very first issue of the magazine.⁶² Nonetheless, most coaches and athletes believed that strength training was deleterious to their performance. It should be noted that although Hoffman truly believed that weight training was important for athletes, he also knew that getting athletes to lift his barbells would be huge for his business. As a result, he relished any opportunity to disprove the myth of muscle-binding because he was driven by zeal as well as a sound business plan. A perfect opportunity appeared in April of 1940, when Hoffman was invited to speak to the student body at Springfield (MA) College, the premier institution in the field of physical educa-

tion at the time. The invitation was extended by an undergraduate student and avid *Strength & Health* reader, Frayser Ferguson, who had tired of the anti-weight training attitude which prevailed on the campus. Foremost in Springfield’s anti-weight camp was Dr. Peter Karpovich, a physician and faculty member in exercise physiology. Karpovich had told a reporter earlier in the year that “one of the greatest tasks that faces Springfield College is to fight these muscle builders.”⁶³ He went on to refer to proponents of barbell training as “faddists” and “quacks.” To disprove Karpovich’s belief that strength training led to muscle-binding, Hoffman brought several barbell men to campus, including John Davis and John Grimek, the leading bodybuilder in the world. After Hoffman gave a brief

BARBELL PICK-UPS

By WM. V ANSELOW



William Vaneslow’s caricature of Davis—while purportedly praising Davis for his great lifting accomplishments—is drawn in such a racialized and demeaning manner that Davis’ achievement is negated by the attribution of bad grammar and a graphically distorted image of his face that looks nothing like the real Davis.

talk on the benefits of barbell training, he took questions. The first came from Karpovich, who asked the heavily-muscled Grimek to touch between his shoulder blades. Grimek easily complied and then drove home the point that weight training did not reduce range of motion by doing leg splits and showing off his ability to nearly touch his elbows to the floor with his knees locked. Then, to leave no doubt about their point, Davis performed one of his favorite feats—a full back flip while holding a fifty pound dumbbell in each hand. Upon seeing the sheer explosive power and flexibility of Davis and Grimek, it would be difficult for anyone to believe that strength training slowed or stiffened a man. The exceptional physical abilities of Davis and Grimek were instrumental in disproving the myth of muscle-binding for Karpovich and the many future physical educators in the audience.⁶⁴ Karpovich, thunderstruck by what he saw, apologized to the visitors, and then went on to perform some of the earliest

and most important research demonstrating that the effects of strength training on components of athletic performance were overwhelmingly positive.⁶⁵

In June of 1941, Davis captured another national championship victory with a total of 1010 pounds lifted in the three events. In three years Davis had added an impressive 157 pounds to his total and bested his closest competition by thirty pounds. In his summary of the meet, Hoffman noted that, while Davis easily won and set a new record in the snatch, he “wasn’t pushed.” Otherwise, Hoffman said, Davis would have lifted more.⁶⁶ Not only had Davis set a new record with his 317.5-pound lift in the snatch, he absolutely obliterated the old world record of 296.5 pounds. Davis was only given credit for an American and not a world record, however, as only two of the three judges passed the lift. The assertion that Davis *could have lifted more* if he were pushed by competition was a common theme in the reporting of his lift-



Davis won his first Olympic gold medal at the 1948 London Olympics. Shown here with coach Bob Hoffman, Davis had just set a world record in the snatch with 142.5 kilos (314.2 pounds). Note Davis’ short fingers.

ing. Hoffman had previously made the assertion following Davis’ second American championship in 1939.⁶⁷ Here, one can again see ambivalence in the coverage of Davis. Hoffman feels the need to make all of the lifters fit within his narrative—they are extraordinarily successful as lifters because they are extraordinarily hard workers. In an article discussing the work required to become a champion, Hoffman mentioned, “John Davis and John Terry put in hours and hours and then more hours of hard training. To get to the top, a man must almost eat, breathe, and sleep weights. More work and more weight, that’s the slogan to keep in one’s mind.”⁶⁸ More commonly, however, in mentioning Davis’ amazing strength, Hoffman and other *Strength & Health* writers would consistently slip in the comment that Davis could have lifted more if “pushed.”⁶⁹ In one of his more derisive reports, Hoffman said that, “rest is one of the things our heavyweight champion does best...Davis has always been a good competitor, willing to win by a small margin, unwilling to lift more than needed to win.” Hoffman went on to say, “It seemed there was no limit to his ability when he needed the poundage to win.”⁷⁰ Part of Hoffman’s frustration with Davis was due to the philosophy he consistently espoused, “Making the most of yourself.” Hoffman advised the readers of the magazine that “we must all strive to make the most of ourselves, to do the best job we can in the position we occupy.”⁷¹ He apparently felt that Davis was taking his talent for granted. His estimation of that talent, however, was probably tinged with the then current ideology of the natural physical superiority of black athletes as well as the supposed natural laziness of African Americans.⁷²

A 1935 *Strength & Health* article authored by Harry Good offered an explanation on the success of black athletes claiming that “negroes for a much shorter period of time have experienced the usually devitalizing

effects of the white man's civilization."⁷³ Good went on to espouse the Darwinian notion that only the fittest survive in Africa, while in America we save the weak with modern medicine. African-American athletes, then, were more physical because they were not as far removed from their "savage ancestors." In a later physique article on development of the pectoral muscles, another *Strength & Health* writer claimed that for "many thousands of years the men of many ancient races have had exceptional pectoral development so that it has become an inherited characteristic...All natives, whether black, brown, yellow, or red, have fine pectoral development."⁷⁴ The misunderstanding of inheritance is interesting, as is the idea that a writer from a magazine devoted to physical development could misunderstand the physical implications of manual labor. This writer clearly believed that African Americans were naturally stronger because they were closer to their "native" state than were white lifters. An obvious inversion of this notion of inherent physicality is that it must be developed in white lifters, who had to achieve success through hard work, discipline, and sacrifice.⁷⁵ While Hoffman himself never explicitly articulated such racial views of strength in his articles, it is not a stretch to assert that his view of Davis as a lifter was due, at least in part, to Hoffman's belief in the combination of inherent physical superiority and what he perceived to be Davis' reluctance to give 100% effort all the time.

The charge that Davis "dogged it" when not pushed by competitors followed him throughout his career, in no small part because *Strength & Health* was then the primary source of information about competitive weightlifting. Davis began writing for the magazine in 1947 and defended himself in one of his columns saying:

Because of my unorthodox or inconsistent performances lifting, I have been called everything from 'lazy' to 'fat and out of condition.' To explain as briefly as possible about my output of energy; I would not consider paying \$5000 for a new car if I knew I could purchase it for \$2500. Likewise, in a contest I would not total 1000 pounds if I knew or realized I could win with 800. Of course, the importance of the contest has considerable influence on my efforts. There seems to be an insatiable, uncontrolled desire among lifting fans to see records

surpassed at every contest. . . . But most of these enthusiastic followers of the 'iron game' seem to be of the opinion that I can break [records] at will. This is not always the case. My apparent disinclination to break records is due to the following reasons. During the 10 years that I have been lifting I have broken and re-broken records, national and world's records alike. At one time or another I have held all of the records in the light-heavyweight and heavyweight divisions—without recognition. It seems that I can gain possession of records only during international competition, and even then I can't be sure of acceptance. I have only the personal satisfaction of having accomplished difficult feats. In my humble opinion, these are sufficient reasons for lifting only enough to win in a contest. It has been said that I lift better when faced with stiff competition. This is not necessarily true. The situation, as I see it, influences my lifts and my final total. My attitude may not coincide with the general attitude prevalent among athletes and their followers who continually call for 'blood.' But it is my attitude and as yet I have not felt inclined to change it.⁷⁶

A picture accompanying the article showed Davis with a stoic expression, surrounded by white officials and judges eager to "share the spotlight" with him on the lifting platform following one of his many exceptional performances.

Davis not being awarded the world record in the snatch in 1941 was not an isolated incident. Though he rarely mentioned it, or did so only in passing, Davis felt that weightlifting judges sometimes discriminated against him. In a competing physical culture magazine, *Your Physique*, Davis was asked what he remembered most about a trip to Berlin to lift in international competition. He responded, "The undemocratic way the Germans judged the lifting," without elaborating further.⁷⁷

Following his national championship in 1941, Davis enlisted in the Army and was sent to the Pacific theater. He was able to return stateside for the 1942 and

1943 national championship contests, winning both in spite of little opportunity to train.⁷⁸ Davis was forced to forgo the 1944 and 1945 national championship contests due to his obligations to the Army. While he was overseas, however, the contests carried on as usual. In his absence, the 1944 contest was won by a white athlete from Rolla, Missouri, Frank Schofro. Schofro's winning total at the meet was 850 pounds—a total Davis had exceeded as a 17-year-old weighing 180 pounds. Almost certainly, Davis would have beaten Schofro by more than 100 pounds had he competed.⁷⁹ The next month's issue of *Strength & Health* included a feature article on Schofro, which he authored with the tag line "National Champion," titled, "How I got that way."⁸⁰ The article was actually a two-part feature and included a second piece the next month.⁸¹ At the time, in spite of his feats, Davis had never been the subject of such a laudatory piece, much less a two-part feature, and had not written for the magazine. In putting up a total Davis had bested six years earlier at a lighter weight, Schofro, the white athlete, was extolled as a paragon of strength.

When Davis returned from the war in 1945 he was "ready to give up weight lifting." Forty-five pounds lighter following a bout of "jaundice," Davis was tired and didn't feel that he could compete.⁸² With a bit of cajoling, however, Hoffman was able to talk Davis into defending his title at the 1946 world championships in Paris, the first international meet to be held since 1938. With little training, Davis was able to total 917 pounds at the 1946 national championship meet, easily outpacing George Shandor, who took second with an 831 total.⁸³ In Paris, Davis again won easily, this time over Russian champion Jakov Kutsenko, by a total of 959 to 915 pounds.⁸⁴ To Hoffman and American Olympic officials, Davis' performance was important because, with increasingly frigid relations, the Americans and Soviets began to view athletic competition as a means to prove the superiority of their respective economic systems. The two powers had been tied going into the heavyweight competition, in Paris, but by virtue of Davis' victory the Americans won the world championship because they had two gold medals to Russia's one. In Hoffman's mind, the victory of the smaller and diverse American team validated his vision of the self-made man.⁸⁵ Moreover, America was now home to the undisputed strongest man in the world. In spite of this, Davis received surprisingly little coverage in *Strength & Health*, and certainly not the two-part feature Schofro had gotten two years before.

Following their defeat in Paris, the Russians withdrew from international competition until 1950. At the 1948 Olympic Games in London, Davis easily captured the gold medal with second place going to another American, Norbert Schemansky.⁸⁶ One of the more noteworthy aspects of the *Strength & Health* coverage was the depiction of Davis in a drawing titled, "Highlights of the Olympics."⁸⁷ In contrast to the depiction of Davis following the 1941 cover photo, this drawing was a realistic portrait of the lifter, without the racialized facial features. This was presumably due largely to Davis' importance and utility as evidence of America's purported physical and social superiority.

When the Russian team surfaced again to challenge the Americans at the world championships in 1950, it was as a last minute addition to the meet. Rumors were spread that Kutsenko, whom Davis had beaten handily in 1946, had improved dramatically, totaling 1019 in training. If true, the total was 10 pounds more than Davis' best. When the lifting commenced, Kutsenko and the Russian officials did their best to disrupt Davis' performance. In the first event, the press, Kutsenko finished with a 308 press and then he and the Russian coaches argued with the officials that, due to a technicality, Davis could not try the same weight. While they squabbled, Davis easily lifted the 308 and then put up 319 on his next attempt. In the following event, the snatch, Kutsenko managed 297 while Davis called for 325 on his second attempt. The weight went up easily and he was awarded the lift. However, Davis had felt his knee hit the floor, a violation which would have negated the lift had the judges seen it. In a remarkable example of sporting integrity, Davis reported the violation to the officials, in his words because, "[he] didn't want to go around with that on [his] mind."⁸⁸ On his third attempt, he lifted it just as easily, but without the knee contact. In the final event, Davis called for 375 for his first attempt in the clean and jerk. He succeeded and passed on his final two attempts, stopping at the total of 1019 – the exact weight Kutsenko had claimed he would lift. In reality, Kutsenko only managed 931 and the Russians again retired from the international scene until the 1952 Olympic Games.⁸⁹

In the months leading up to the 1951 world championships, Davis had been bothered by a nagging, though unspecified, leg injury. It wasn't the first time an injury had hobbled the great champion, nor the first time he fought through one to compete.⁹⁰ At the 1951 championships, however, the injury was so painful that on his

second snatch attempt he came up hopping on his good leg, attempting to avoid putting any pressure on the injured limb. In spite of the severity of the injury, Davis stayed in the meet and managed a 352 clean and jerk. His primary competitor was Jim Bradford, also African American, who had lifted 347 easily. Even so, after Davis' injury,

Bradford refused to make another attempt to beat Davis even though it seemed clear that he could have made what he needed to win. Bradford's incredible display of sportsmanship and Davis' unrelenting competitiveness thus combined to make Davis world champion again in 1951. Following the meet, Davis was featured in a celebratory article written by Hoffman. In the article, Hoffman claimed, "No athlete in any sport has dominated in his field more completely than Davis does."

Hoffman concluded the article by saying, "we are especially proud that this great champion is an American and a member of the York Barbell Club."⁹¹ The statement is further evidence that the barbell magnate viewed Davis as one of history's greatest weightlifters, as well as a means of projecting the success of the American economic system and as a means to sell more weights.

At the 1952 Games in Helsinki, the Russians returned, but elected not to enter a lifter in the heavy-weight class. Knowing they had no one who could com-



Davis' graceful, yet powerful, physique is displayed to perfection in this artistic pose captured by photographer Al Urban.

pete with Davis, they instead entered two lifters in the light-heavyweight class. As in 1946, they lost to the Americans by virtue of less gold medals, one of which was won by Davis. In the months leading up to the Games, Davis had been featured in the popular "general interest" magazine, *Reader's Digest*. According to one of the article's authors, Bud Greenspan, then a fledgling filmmaker, the editors at the magazine had "cut much of what had been written about [Davis'] singing [aspirations]."⁹² This response led Greenspan to make a fifteen-minute film about Davis, *The Strongest Man in the World*, which featured Davis' exploits at the 1952 Olympics as well as his now-legendary lifting of Apollon's Wheels. When Greenspan tried to sell the film, however, "[he] soon learned that theatrical distributors were not eagerly

awaiting a film about a black weightlifter. But the US Information Agency saw John's story as a way to counteract Soviet propaganda depicting blacks in America as second-class citizens. They purchased the film, as did the Army and Air Force Motion Picture Service, and showed it to military personnel throughout the world."⁹³ As was the case with *Strength & Health*, John Davis' amazing strength was largely ignored, except as a vehicle to promote the American system. Davis did finally receive more mainstream national attention in 1953, but only

because his reign as champion finally came to an end at the hands of Norbert Schemansky.⁹⁴ Beset by injuries, illness in his family, and with only limited ability to train, Davis finally lost for the first time since 1937.⁹⁵ The loss effectively ended his career, though he did attempt to make a comeback for the 1956 Olympic Games. At the Olympic tryouts leading up to the Games, however, Davis tore a tendon in his knee, crushing any hope of a comeback.⁹⁶

Near the peak of his career in 1948, Davis made the observation that “outside of weightlifting, I don’t think fifteen people ever heard of me.”⁹⁷ While his estimate was certainly a bit low, Davis’ celebrity was highly specific. In a 1952 poll, “seven out of ten sports experts...failed to identify him.”⁹⁸ When his career ended, Davis quickly faded into obscurity. He had always worked low-level jobs, likely limited in part due to his race, “that wouldn’t interfere” with his lifting, including stints as a mechanic, subway guard, and can-stacker in a paint factory.⁹⁹ As an athlete who excelled in an “amateur” sport, he had received no compensation for his lifting prowess. With little to fall back on, Davis worked as a prison guard at Riker’s Island and soon gave up his pursuit of a singing career. He developed a drinking problem, divorced, and succumbed to metastatic lung cancer in 1984 at the age of sixty-three.¹⁰⁰

In a 1968 *Sports Illustrated* article, Jack Olsen observed that African Americans failed to understand “that the white American was able to compartmentalize his attitude toward the Negro, to admire his exploits on the field but put him on the back of the bus on the way home.”¹⁰¹ In many ways, the career of John Davis bore out this observation. In his earliest years at York, in spite of the fact that he was a world champion, Davis roomed in the “colored section” of town with John Terry. Davis, unlike many white lifters, such as John Grimek, Steve Stanko, Dick Bachtell, or John Terpak, was never offered employment by Hoffman nor was he given a business like the one John Terry received. What is more, even though he competed for the York team, Davis rarely trained at the facility.¹⁰² Discussions of his achievements throughout his career were discordant, as exemplified by the 1941 cartoon both celebrating his success and implying that his physicality was due to his race, possibly because he was less removed from his savage ancestors. Similarly, and likely with racial undertones, Davis’ work ethic and desire were consistently questioned, though only if Hoffman wasn’t shoehorning him into his mold of social Darwin-



Davis did not stay closely involved with the weightlifting community in the later years of his life but he did travel to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to witness the 1978 World Championships. Although this photo by Peary Rader has faded over the years, it still captures the happiness Davis felt at being with his teammate and old friend, Pete George, who is standing behind him.

ism. Near the end of Davis’ career, his coverage shifted and included less criticism, although this is likely due more to his importance as a symbol of American physical superiority over the Russians and shifting attitudes toward race following the Second World War. Throughout Davis’ long career, Bob Hoffman played an important role in his success as well as in utilizing him to win titles and reinforce racial narratives. In the end, Davis’ fame was limited because Olympic weightlifting was not a mainstream sport in the United States. Nonetheless, Davis made several crucial impacts on American culture and its international image. Through his matchless power, he was able to wound the myth of muscle-binding and thus play a role in making strength training more mainstream, including for other young African-American men.¹⁰³ Despite the fact that it was not necessarily his

desire, Davis was utilized both by Hoffman and government agencies to promote the American Dream—the idea that anyone can make it in America, regardless of race, if they're simply willing to work hard enough. John Davis did indeed “make it,” but the “two strikes” of race mentioned by Scharzberger (or Hoffman) proved to be too many as he quickly faded from the spotlight and had few career prospects once his lifting career ended. Given Davis' poignant life story, it is difficult not to speculate on what might have happened had he remained in France.

NOTES

1. K.D. Arax, “Davis' Colossal Lifting in Paris!” *Strength & Health*, November 1949, 13, 38.
2. Edmund Desbonnet, “Apollon – The Emperor of Athletes,” *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 4, no. 5 (August 1997): 23-47.
3. Osmo Kiiha, “Apollon Railroad – Car Wheels,” *The Iron Master: The History of the Iron Game*, April 1993, 35.
4. The thinner “Olympic” barbell that allowed the plates to rotate independently of the bar had become standard during the 1930s.
5. Ted Shane and Bud Greenspan, “Strongest Man in the World,” *Readers' Digest*, April 1952, 85-86; Bob Hoffman, “1949 World's Championships,” *Strength & Health*, November 1949, 44; Bob Hoffman, “U.S. Makes Clean Sweep – Wins Every Class!” *Strength & Health*, November 1947, 20-33.
6. David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (South Brunswick, NJ: AS Barnes and Co., 1970), 159. Davis' hand, according to Willoughby, measured 7.1 inches in length by 3.1 inches in width.
7. Rigolout's successful lift took place on 3 March 1930 at Wagram auditorium in Paris. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13; Terry Todd, “The Arnold Strength Summit,” *Iron Game History* 7, nos. 2 & 3 (July 2002): 4; Kiiha, “Apollon Railroad – Car Wheels,” 34.
8. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes*, 158; Bob Hoffman, “Charles Rigolout – A Few Chapters from the Life of the Greatest Weightlifter that Ever Lived,” *Strength & Health*, March 1939, 34, 41-43.
9. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13, 38.
10. Hoffman, “1949 World's Championships,” 44.
11. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13, 38.
12. “John Davis: World's Strongest Man,” the film by Bud Greenspan of Davis lifting the Apollon Wheels can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3KkZfRCuPs>.
13. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13, 38; John Davis, “Davis Answers the Critics,” *Strength & Health*, May 1950, 14, 29, 31-32; Shane and Greenspan, “Strongest Man in the World,” 85.
14. John Fair, *MuscleTown USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 77-78; Osmo, Kiiha, “A Tribute to John Davis, Super Athlete,” *The Iron Master*, April 1993, 12.
15. Jason Shurley and Jan Todd, “If Anyone Gets Slower You're Fired: Boyd Epley and the Formation of the Strength Coaching Profession,” *Iron Game History* 11, no. 3 (June 2011): 4.
16. Shane and Greenspan, “Strongest Man in the World,” 86.
17. Fair, *MuscleTown*, 35-46.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*; Bob Hoffman, “1938 National Championships – Can We Beat the Germans?” *Strength & Health*, July 1938, 28-29.
20. Bob Hoffman, “1938 World's Weightlifting Championships at Vienna,” *Strength & Health*, November 1938, 4, 30-31.
21. *Ibid.*
22. See, for example, the cartoon on page 20 of the June 1934 edition of *Strength & Health*. Part of the cartoon depicts Hoffman sitting in a chair with two miniature muscle men sitting on his lap. He is rubbing the head of one of the men and saying, “Now this little piggy...” The caption says, “[Hoffman] looks after 'his boys' in a paternal manner.”
23. John Fair, “Mr. America: Idealism or Racism: Color Consciousness and the AAU Mr. America Contest, 1939-1982,” *Iron Game History* 8, no. 1 (June 2003): 9-30.
24. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial,” *Strength & Health*, December 1932, 1.
25. Kimberly Beckwith, “Building Strength: Alan Calvert, the Milo Barbell Company, and the Modernization of American Weight Training,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2006).
26. Bob Hoffman, “How I Learned the Quickest and Easiest Way to Strength and Health,” *Strength & Health*, January 1933, 3-5.
27. *Ibid.*
28. John Fair, *MuscleTown*, 33.
29. See, for example, Hoffman, “1938 National Championships,” 28. In the article Hoffman characterizes the meet as, “Quite the finest weight lifting contest ever held in America [that] went out with a thrill-filled finish that rivaled the stories of Dick Merriwell or those written by Horatio Alger.” Also in a 1953 editorial, Hoffman claimed, “The success of every champion would be a good story in itself – a success story of the Horatio Alger type. Yes, gentlemen, the overwhelming weight of evidence proves that, regardless of the present state of your health or strength, if you have enough ‘want to’ you can succeed.” Bob Hoffman, “Editorial – It Can Be Done,” *Strength & Health*, May 1953, 3. For Hoffman, the notion that desire invariably led to success could be much more generally applied than just to acquisition of physical fitness.
30. Fair, *MuscleTown*, 20-38.
31. Hoffman sold the oil burner business in 1938. Fair, *MuscleTown*, 69.
32. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial,” *Strength and Health*, October 1933, 8.
33. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial,” *World Health Ecology News* 6, no. 4 (April 1975): 5.
34. Bob Hoffman, *Bob Hoffman's Simplified System of Barbell Training* (York, PA: York Barbell Company Press, 1941), 1.
35. Fair, *MuscleTown*, 14.
36. Hoffman claimed that the “strength and health” barbell training conferred was necessary for “success in life.” Bob Hoffman, “Why You Should Be Strong,” *Strength & Health*, June 1933, 5-6; He also credited his physical fitness with saving his life during WWI in two ways: he tells the story of performing a tumbling feat over barbed-wire to return to the American lines and escape pursuing Germans and that the immunity conferred by his fitness helped stave off disease which was causing other men to “drop like flies.” Bob Hoffman, “Especially for Strength and Health's Boys,” *Strength & Health*, December 1934, 20.
37. Wib Scharzberger, “Glimpses of the Champions,” *Strength & Health*, April 1940, 29-30, 64.
38. *Ibid.*, 64.
39. *Ibid.*, 29-30.
40. *Ibid.*, 64.
41. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial – The Master Race?” *Strength & Health*,

November 1947, 4-5.

42. Hoffman was known to write articles under pseudonyms, including Wib Scharzberger who was, in reality, the Chief of the York Police Department. Hoffman also appropriated his dentist's name for various articles. John Fair, email message to author, 4 August 2016.

43. Fair, *MuscleTown*, 227-229, 249-253.

44. George Russell Weaver, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, January 1939, 9.

45. In addition to his tremendous strength, John Davis was also noted for the quality of his physique. Following the 1942 Mr. America contest, Bob Hoffman commented that Davis' physique was as good as any of the winners and that "were it not for the handicap of color, he might have been 'Mr. America.'" C.C. Pettit, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, November 1939, 9; Fair, *MuscleTown*, 79; Fair, "Mr. America," 13.

46. James Burch, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, January 1940, 9.

47. J.W.B., "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9; Fair, *MuscleTown*, 77-79.

48. C.V.C., "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9.

49. Bob Hoffman, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9; Fair, *MuscleTown*, 78.

50. William Anselow, "Letters from Our Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9.

51. One of Davis' teammates from 1947-53, Pete George, described learning of Davis' interest in opera and singing during the 1948 Olympic Games, saying that "John's knowledge of music was far superior to mine, and I learned a lot from [Davis]." For all team trips after that the two roomed together. During a stay in Stockholm for the 1953 World Championships, the two were overheard singing by a reporter who connected them with a prominent voice coach, and arranged for the two to sing at the China International Variety Theater in Stockholm for a one week engagement. Bud Greenspan, "Flowers for an Olympian," *Sports Illustrated*, 13 April 1987, 84; Bob Hoffman, "1938 World's Weightlifting Championships at Vienna," 4; Osmo Kiiha, "Comments by John Davis' Admirers and Friends: Peter T. George," *The Iron Master*, April 1993, 8.

52. As discussed by John Fair, one of the most famous members of the "Old York Gang," John Grimek, hated John Davis. Grimek went so far as to criticize Ray Van Cleef for writing an article about the "God-damned nigger" and to enter a meet specifically in an attempt to break Davis' 280-pound press record. John Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 76.

53. The February 1938 cover depicts a completely nude model, though it includes a three-quarter view of his face. *Strength & Health*, February 1938.

54. "Strength & Health League," *Strength & Health*, November 1939, 8.

55. There were no letters of protest in the "Letters from Readers" sections in the two issues following Jantzen's cover. "Letters from Readers," *Strength & Health*, September 1939, 9; "Letters from Readers," *Strength & Health*, October 1939, 9.

56. Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 199, 197, 163.

57. Cover, *Iron Man* 3, no. 2, 1940.

58. Osmo Kiiha noted that Davis claimed to have sprained his ankle prior to the *Strength & Health* picnic in late September of 1940. The

injury may have kept Davis from lifting at the meet, though Kiiha believes Davis "was holding back for a match with [Steve] Stanko in October [at the Western Union Invitation Meet in New York City]." At the October meet, Davis set new American records in each of the three lifts and the total and had lifts that exceeded the world record in the snatch and clean and jerk, as well as a total higher than the then world record. Osmo Kiiha, "John Davis' Lifting History 1937 Through 1956," *The Iron Master*, April 1993, 21; Charles Coster, "We All Love Johnny," *Muscle Power*, May 1954, 42.

59. Cover, *Strength & Health*, October 1940.

60. Terry Todd, "Al Roy: Mythbreaker," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 1 (January 1992): 12-16; Al Thomas, "Reflections on Musclebinding," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 2 (April 1992): 1-3; Terry Todd, "The Myth of the Muscle-Bound Lifter," *National Strength & Conditioning Association Journal* 7, no. 3 (August 1985): 37-41.

61. Bob Hoffman, "How I Learned the Quickest," 3-5.

62. Bob Hoffman, "How to Improve at Your Chosen Sport," *Strength & Health*, December 1932, 6-8.

63. Jan Todd and Terry Todd, "Peter V. Karpovich: Transforming the Strength Paradigm," *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research* 17, no. 2 (2003): 213.

64. *Ibid.*, 213-220; Jim Murray, "Weightlifting's Non-Lifting Patron Saint," *Iron Game History* 4, no. 5 (August 1997): 3-5.

65. William Zorbas and Peter Karpovich, "The Effect of Weight Lifting Upon the Speed of Muscular Contractions," *Research Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1951): 145-148.

66. Bob Hoffman, "Results of the 1941 Senior National Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1941, 22-23.

67. Bob Hoffman, "National AAU Senior Weightlifting Championships," *Strength & Health*, September 1939, 7.

68. Bob Hoffman, "More Work and More Weight is What You Need," *Strength & Health*, April 1942, 22-23.

69. Vic Tanny, "1943 Senior National Championships," *Strength & Health*, August 1943, 32; Bob Hoffman, "1946 Senior National AAU Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1946, 23.

70. Bob Hoffman, "World's Heavyweight Championships," *Strength & Health*, February 1947, 41, 49.

71. Bob Hoffman, "Editorial - Making the Most of Yourself," *Strength & Health*, March 1944, 3.

72. As noted by Lutz and Collins, this was a common narrative of the relationship between blacks and labor. They describe a "double mentality" in which people of African heritage were thought to have "a tremendous capacity for work, coupled with an unwillingness to actually work." Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 162. See also John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 172-3, 104.

73. Harry Good, "The Unusual Physical Ability of Negro Athletes," *Strength & Health*, August 1935, 65.

74. Dick Zimmerman, "Building Shapely Pectorals," *Strength & Health*, May 1942, 22-23.

75. For a thorough discussion of the attempts to quantify natural black athleticism, see David Wiggins, "Great Speed but Little Stamina: The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority," *Journal of Sport History* 16, no. 2 (Summer, 1989): 158-185.

76. John Davis, "My Views," *Strength & Health*, December 1947, 29-30.

77. Joseph Weider, "Popping the Questions at John Davis," *Your Physique*, April 1947, 10.

78. Bob Hoffman, "1942 Sr. National Championships," 10-12; Vic Tanny, "1943 Senior National Championships," 10-11, 32.

79. Bob Hoffman, "The Senior National Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1944, 6-7, 10, 24-25, 48.

80. Frank Schofro, "How I Got That Way," *Strength & Health*, August 1944, 20-21.

81. Frank Schofro, "How I Got That Way – Part II," *Strength & Health*, September 1944, 7, 9, 29.

82. Shane and Greenspan, "Strongest Man in the World," 87.

83. Bob Hoffman, "1946 Senior National AAU Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1946, 20-23.

84. Bob Hoffman, "American Wins World's Championships!" *Strength & Health*, December 1946, 8-13, 40.

85. Fair, *Muscle town*, 64, 119-123.

86. Davis won with a 997.5 total to Schemansky's 937. Bob Hoffman, "Olympic Weightlifting – Part II," *Strength & Health*, November 1948, 21-28, 32-46.

87. *Ibid.*, 21.

88. Shane and Greenspan, "Strongest Man in the World," 87-88.

89. *Ibid.*; Bob Hoffman, "USA Victorious!" *Strength & Health*, December 1950, 9-11.

90. Davis was also injured in previous meets due to dropping the weight across his leg—a hazard of Olympic lifting, muscle strains, and an unspecified knee problem. Bob Hoffman, "More Results from Senior Nationals," *Strength & Health*, September 1947, 28-31; Bob Hoffman, "US Makes Clean Sweep — Wins Every Class!" *Strength & Health*, November 1947, 20-33.

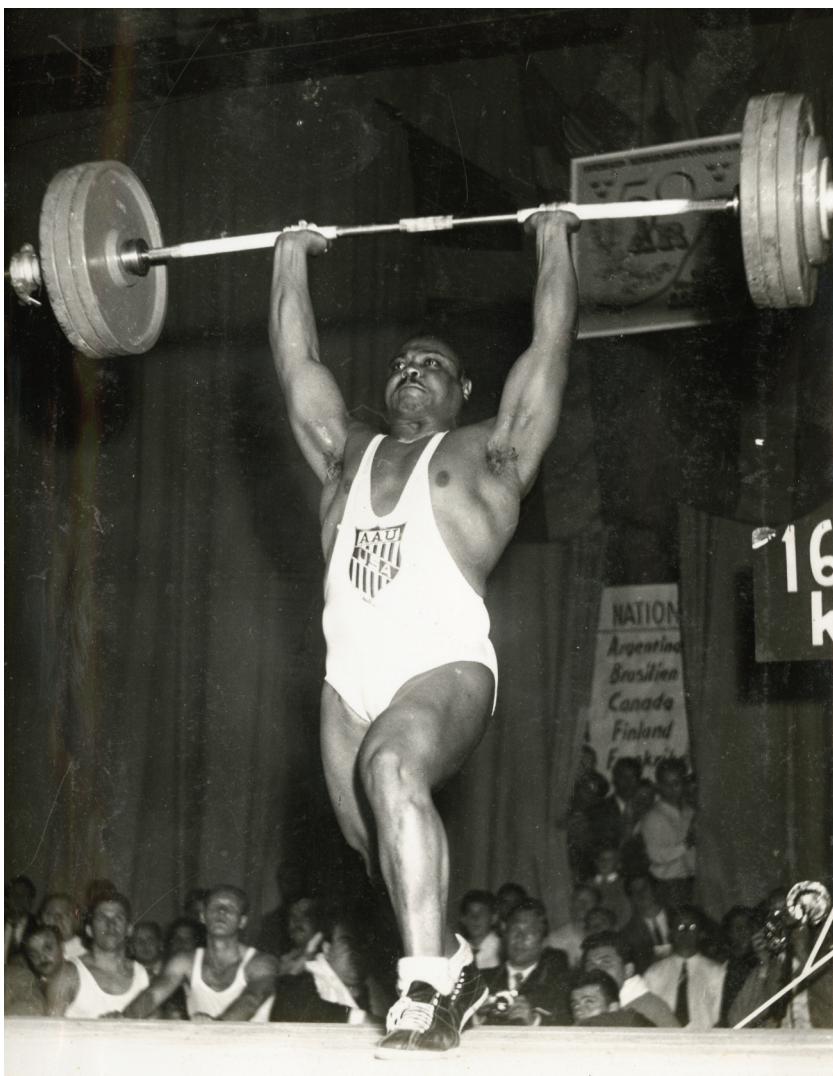
91. Bob Hoffman, "John Davis—World's Greatest Weightlifter—World's Strongest Man," *Strength & Health*, October 1951, 8-9, 45-46.

92. Greenspan, "Flowers for an Olympian," 84.

93. *Ibid.*

94. *Ibid.*

95. Bob Hoffman, "American Weightlifting Progress," *Strength & Health*, July 1953, 9-10; Bob Hoffman, "The 1954 World Weightlifting



British weightlifting coach George Kirkley made a small album in which he kept his "favorite weightlifting photos." This undated photo of Davis is from that book. Kirkley later gave the album to David P. Webster, who donated it to the Stark Center.

Championships," *Strength & Health*, February 1955, 34; Bob Hoffman, "1954 AAU National Weightlifting Championships," *Strength & Health*, October 1954, 11.

96. Davis was thirty-five at the time of the injury. Ray Van Cleef, "Strongmen the World Over," *Strength & Health*, February 1957, 22; Greenspan, "Flowers for an Olympian," 84.

97. *Ibid.*, 76.

98. Shane and Greenspan, "The Strongest Man in the World," 85.

99. *Ibid.*, 87.

100. Davis married Louise Morton in 1946. The two separated and eventually divorced in 1961. Davis claimed in 1984 that Louise accused him of cheating and invoked a picture from the May 1952 cover of *Ebony* magazine in which Davis, in his Olympic lifting uniform, held a young woman overhead at arms' length. Osmo Kiiha, "A Tribute to John Davis, Super Athlete," *The Iron Master: The History of the Iron Game*, April 1993, 18; "Former Olympic Hero, 'World's Strongest Man,' Losing Battle to Cancer," *Jet*, 7 May 1984, 52.

101. Jack Olsen, "The Cruel Deception," *Sports Illustrated*, 1 July 1968, 17; Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes*, 30-1.

102. Historian Terry Todd pointed out that none of the dozens of white lifters Hoffman employed was an eight-time World Champion as Davis was. Osmo Kiiha, "John Henry Davis, Jr.," *The Iron Master*, 7, 11. Terry Todd, personal correspondence, November 2011.

103. In a letter to *Iron Man* magazine, later published in *Iron Game History*, African-American Richard Hubert discusses being inspired to take up weight training after seeing Davis in *Strength & Health*. Richard Hubert, "Strong Wind Versus Weak Tree — My True Story," *Iron Game History* 10, no. 1 (November 2007): 23-31.

