

MY HERO, MY FRIEND: TOMMY KONO

Lou DeMarco

From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer, *Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono* (Mesa, AZ: 2017).

In 1952, similar to many impressionable boys, I began to read the lifting exploits in *Strength & Health* magazine of Tommy Kono who rapidly became my hero, my idol. Unlike many boys, I was most fortunate because in 1956 I saw Tommy lift at the Senior Nationals in Philadelphia; I even got close enough to him to hear him speak. This was an absolute thrill because I was only 17 years old and was seeing my hero in the flesh. The next year at the nationals in Daytona Beach I had a bigger thrill. I was backstage and when Tommy went to take his first snatch attempt, he took off his glasses and handed them to me as I was standing nearby. He made it strongly, then made his second attempt even better, again handing me his glasses before the attempt. That is when he said I was good luck to him and to stay near. Again, he handed me his glasses and went out and made a PR in the snatch. "Stick by me," he said; all I could think of was the Sistine Chapel and the beginning of man as God touched the finger of Adam.

The years went by and I saw Tommy at his best throughout the 1950s at various nationals. He would say hello to me and we would briefly exchange pleasantries. It was not until the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles that we became friends as we both served on the competition staff. After we returned to our homes, we corresponded frequently by letter and with occasional phone calls. With the advent of the internet, we began emailing one another frequently along with almost weekly phone conversations. We also saw one another a couple times a year at the nationals or at an Olympic festival. We often roomed together.

As time went by my respect for him only increased not because of his past lifting exploits or his knowledge of our beloved sport, but because of the man himself, i.e., a person of the strongest character who always was so humble, kind, and generous. I once told

him at nationals that he was too humble for his own good and our sport's good; he said that was his nature, his Japanese ancestry. I came to know Tommy's background and what challenges he had faced. I have often said that adversity builds character and nobody had more adversity than Tommy (beginning with his poor health and the years he spent at Lake Tule with his family). This is why he was such a person of character. He always stressed the importance of character. Despite what he and his family



Close friends Tommy Kono and Lou DeMarco are shown here during a 2009 interview that can be seen on Youtube at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=luqpWOxy8k. DeMarco and Kono shared much in common, including national coaching resumes. Both served in a variety of capacities within US Weightlifting, and became good friends when working together at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. DeMarco was inducted into the National Weightlifting Hall of Fame in 1999.

had to endure, nobody, and I mean nobody, was more patriotic than Tommy. On the platform, he always fought not for glory or financial gain (there was a strict amateur code), but for the love of his country. At the height of the Cold War, Tommy battled and defeated the Soviets constantly as they threw everything at him. One has only to recall his 1958 trip to the Prize of Moscow meet in Russia where he defeated them all with a world record total without assistance (no coach or handlers). That only established his strength of will and courage further.

I knew that I had become a close friend of Tom-



Tommy's parents, Kanichi Kono and Ichibi Kono, immigrated to the United States and then, like thousands of other Japanese residents, were forced during World War II to live in an internment camp because America was at war with Japan. His mother died when Tommy was only 20.

my at the 1991 Olympic Festival in Los Angeles. We were again rooming together on the UCLA campus (he told me he liked rooming with me as I was as neat as he was, i.e., making my bed and hanging up my clothes; I told him our mothers raised us well). It was here that he told me two personal stories which led me to the assumption that we were now close friends. In 1950 he had gone to York to have a tryout against Joe Pitman to see who would go to the world championships that year. He stayed at the York YMCA, and every day he would walk to the old York Barbell on Broad Street and pass an elementary school where children were in the playground during recess. When he walked past, the children would rush up to the fence and stare at him because he was Asian, which was very foreign to them. He said to me in his softest tones, "You know, Lou, that bothered me a lot."

He always spoke in glowing terms of John Grimek. Once he went to the York Barbell gym and was sitting there looking forlorn. Grimek came in and asked him what was wrong. He handed John a telegram; his mother had passed away. Immediately Grimek said you have to go home and forget the tryout, forget lifting as family is everything. John drove him to Washington, but it was fogged in with no flights going out. Grimek turned the car around and drove to Philadelphia. He put Tommy, who was only 20 years old, on a plane, all the time being

so caring and understanding of what Tommy was enduring. Then I realized how much Grimek meant to him. I also realized how blessed I was to have Tommy share these events with me.

I was asked recently by a reporter what I have learned from Tommy; that would take a book. Speaking of books, I had the pleasure of proofreading and editing his two books. Two years ago we discussed working together on a biography; I even emailed him an outline. He called me immediately and was very happy, along with his beloved Flo, with the idea. But, alas, we never got to it. Do I miss my friend? God yes. I miss his wisdom not only about lifting but about life itself. I miss calling him and Flo answering and calling to him, "Tommy, it's Lou DeMarco." I miss his humble, soft voice and his distinct laughter. As Tony Garcy once told me, "Tommy Kono is the great human being." My only regret is that not more of the world knew of him—as they did of other athletes in their prime—during Tommy's golden age and what he did for his country. ... May his memory and ideals continue to burnish brightly and live on forever.



This photo, taken on 29 August 1952 at an exhibition in front of 6000 people in Berlin, was one of Tommy's favorites. The Berg Hantel he was snatching was loaded to 100 kg (220 lbs.). With no warmups he made two reps and then cleaned 140 kg (308 lbs.) and jerked it three times. The dark glasses? The sun was in his eyes.