

TOMMY KONO: GREATEST WEIGHTLIFTER OF ALL TIME

Pete George

Written for Tommy Kono on 31 October 2015

From time to time the question comes up as to who was the greatest weightlifter of all times. I always unhesitatingly respond, “Tommy Kono.” On June 27 and 29, Tommy and I were 85 and 86, respectively, and I think this is a good time for me, as his contemporary, to record my thoughts on this subject for the benefit of future historians of our sport.

The most common response to my choice of greatest weightlifter is something like, “How can you say Tommy Kono was the greatest when all his records have been broken.” I can say he was the greatest weightlifter the same way I can say Roger Bannister was the greatest miler of all time. Bannister’s historic four minute mile has been beaten and continues to be scrambled repeatedly by boys not yet out of high school. It’s tough for most people to believe that athletic records are more mental than physical barriers. When Bannister ran the first sub four-minute mile he broke what he and most people in that sport thought was the actual limit of human capacity. But what he did break was not a physiological barrier, but a strongly reinforced psychological one. After that, the top milers were no longer trying to exceed the limit of human capacity. They were just trying to beat Roger Bannister and other mortals like themselves.

Weightlifters like all competitive athletes set their



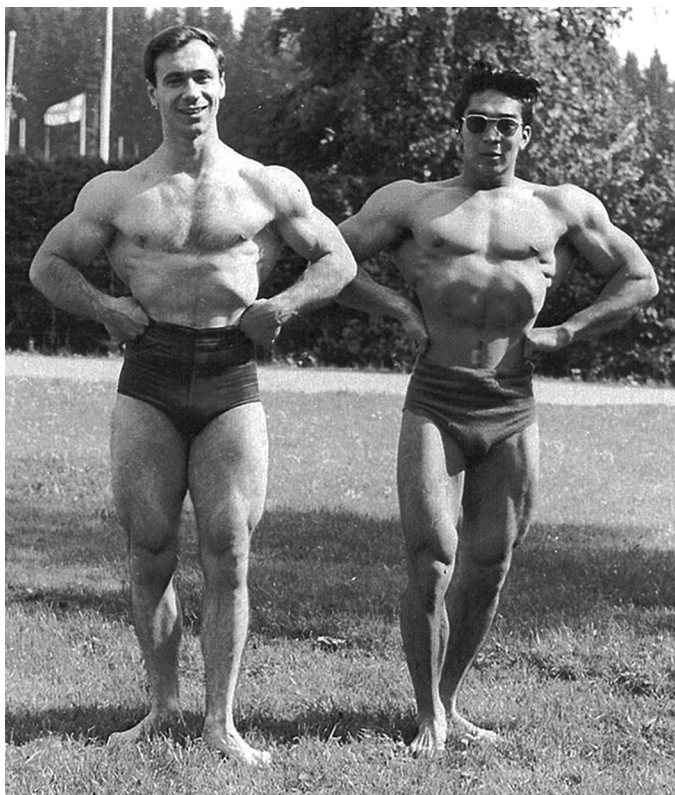
In a 2016 interview, Pete George told the *York Daily Record*, “I think he’s the greatest weightlifter of all time . . . He was the greatest competitor because he always went where the competition was the toughest. Most lifters go where the chance of winning is the greatest — at least that’s what I did. Tommy would select the weight class that was the toughest.”

sights on what they need to do to win. Tommy knew he was the greatest. Not that he was arrogant. Tommy was and still is the most humble great champion I know. He just set his sights a little above what the world’s top lifters were lifting. He was not intimidated by their reputations. Although he was a natural middleweight he competed in every class he could temporarily starve or stuff his body into—from lightweight to middle heavyweight. Along the way he broke every record and champion that stood in his path. I believe if the records at the time were 150% higher, Tommy’s results would have been the same.

When Tommy started training, weightlifting and body building were considered parts of the same sport; today they are two different sports. That’s because to reach the highest level in either, you must specialize. The training programs are very different and the results of one do not translate well into the other. Seldom has there been an athlete who excelled in both.

I don’t know of any physique star, other than John Grimek, who could out-lift a contemporary world class lightweight. And although Grimek was an Olympic class weightlifter, he never won a medal in international competition. Tommy won the world’s top physique title in four different years!

Kono performed at the highest level in every aspect of our sport. No one has ever had a broader resume in



In almost all photographs featuring Pete George and Tommy Kono in a way which allows their physiques to be compared, Kono's body looks better—with larger muscles, more taper, and more definition. However, in this photo—which Pete reports was taken prior to 1956 with Tommy's camera by one of Tommy's friends—the slightly older Pete comes out on top, mainly because of his outstanding deltoids and definition. According to Pete, the photo never appeared in a "muscle magazine."

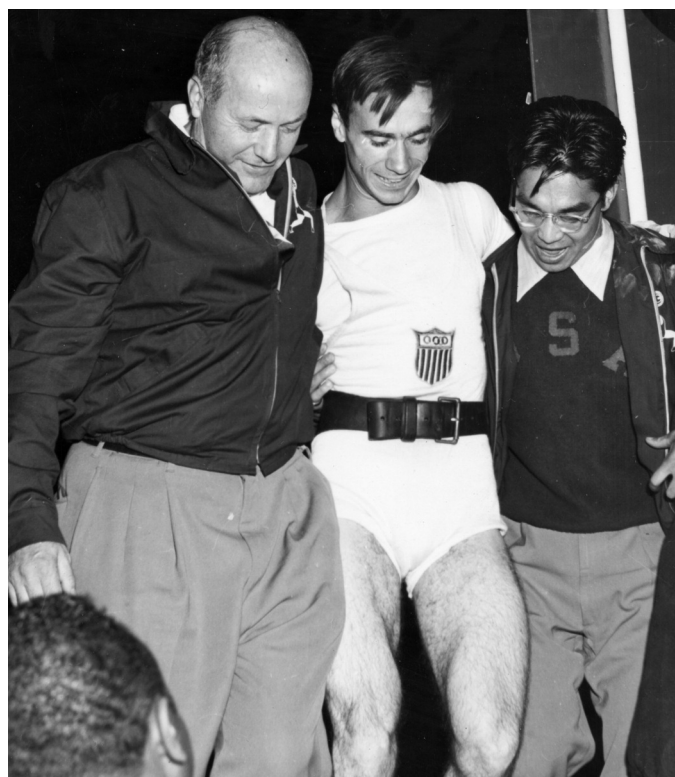
our sport than Tommy. After his competitive days, he was always willing to give back to the sport as a coach, official and author. I don't know of another man who served as head coach for three different countries in three different Olympics. He served as an official at world and Olympic competition eight different years. He was always willing to give a lecture or present a seminar to any level—from rank beginners to Olympic coaches.

Tommy's success as an athlete is all the more phenomenal when you consider that he was a self-made champion. He never had a coach. He started out in a World War II California relocation center as a sickly kid trying to build his muscles with an exercise set of weights. He never touched an official barbell until his first contest. However, he was a constant student and keen analyst of every aspect of our sport. He carefully analyzed photos of the top lifters that he found in *Strength & Health* magazine. At contests,

he would pick the brains of any available coach. I can remember him cornering my coach, Larry Barnholth.

Tommy always has been a quick learner and thankfully, he has documented much of his knowledge in his two books, *Weightlifting, Olympic Style* and *Championship Weightlifting, Beyond Muscle Power, The Mental Side of Lifting*. Every weightlifting coach should first thoroughly study their entire contents then make them required reading for all his or her charges.

Tommy tells me I was his early inspiration. I was a world champion before he entered his first contest. I kid him with, "I'm flattered when you say you wanted to be like me. But you just didn't know when the hell to stop. You broke all my records!" But they like his and all other athletic records were made for others to break and couldn't have been broken by a nicer guy. Tommy and I were competitors, but we have been the best of friends for 65 years—since we first met in Philadelphia in 1950. Now we both live under the Hawaiian sun where Tommy casts a large shadow; I am pleased to be so near to one with the greatest stature in our sport.



Bob Hoffman and Tommy Kono help Pete George offstage at the 1953 world championships after the clean & jerk that gave him a new world record in the total. Waiting to greet Pete with a congratulatory hug is his good friend John Davis, whose head (front and below) is the only thing showing.