

TOMMY KONO: WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THIS?

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My home in Scotland is far from Hawaii but Tamio (Tommy) Kono was a very well-known and much admired weightlifter in this part of the globe. Although I had often met him at various important competitions I did not get to know him properly until a rather strange experience. One evening in Scotland I was sitting by the fire planning training schedules when the phone interrupted my studies. Grumbling to myself I was surprised by a female voice saying she was calling from America, mentioning a well-known hotel. Guessing that some of my weightlifting pals had enlisted one of the many American stewardesses from the nearby airport to play a prank on me I decided to play along and asked to be put through to the caller. This time a male voice said that his name was Bell and he wanted the best possible weightlifting coach to come to Chicago and coach a team for the forthcoming Olympics in Munich! "Mr. Bell, your bell does not ring true," I replied and added one or two other wisecracks when Mr. Bell irately interrupted, "Have you been drinking? I am willing to pay you well. I want to have the best possible American team. What would it cost me for you to come and coach them."

"OK!" I replied. "You book me a suite in that hotel. Send me a plane ticket to Chicago, and I will come right away! Who put you up to this, Mr. Bell?" "Tommy Kono said you were the man for the job and I take his word," Bell replied. "Tommy Kono," I gasped, "Tommy is my hero and Tommy was my hero even though we are on rival teams."

My admiration for Tommy soared more than ever. It turned out that he had read my articles based on the films I made officially for the International Weightlifting Federation and thought I could do a good job. Tommy had put aside all international barriers and I will never forget his quiet kindness and support. When this happened Tommy and I were not personal friends. Even so, he apparently saw in my film analysis and related studies that I was a very serious student of the game. After that we remained friends for life.

At one point Tommy came to Scotland and coached our best men. He was enormously popular and

his incredible knowledge was widely circulated. My family on the other hand was most impressed by the fact that such a famous strength athlete was so quiet and modest. We worked together to produce a weightlifting log book which, if kept up to date, was a very valuable tool for us to study. It allowed us to follow the results of training for the three competition lifts used in those days.

Some years later, when a team of Highland Games champion "heavies" were returning from Japan they were, not surprisingly, very keen to meet Tommy, a request which was accommodated by this incredible weightlifter. At the last minute an urgent private matter kept Tommy from meeting us that night at the airport, but instead he had several of his club members meet us to help with the baggage and take us to our hotel! Our men were astounded by such kind, thoughtful treatment from such a busy sports superstar. The following day, on meeting Tommy, they left him in no doubt about their appreciation of his kindness and that of his club members. Naturally, Tommy's kind response, when it was fully conveyed to our Scottish weightlifters, made them like him even more.

Tommy and I met again in 1972 in Munich, where I was filming again for the IWF. I went to see him one afternoon while he was directing a final training session for the Germans. I had used up all my own film, and wanted a photograph. Without any request from me, Tommy asked the lifter David Berger to take a photograph for me. (Berger, an all-American boy who did not quite reach the standard necessary to be on the American team, had gone to Israel and qualified for their team.)

That very night, 5 September 1972 was the darkest day in the history of weightlifting and should never be forgotten. That night eleven Israeli lifters and coaches, including poor David Berger, were martyred by terrorists! The horror of the situation completely changed the atmosphere at the Olympic village, but some weeks later I was astonished to receive the photo Berger took that last day. The great Tommy Kono, without any request, had gone to the bother of acquiring David's camera, had the film developed, and sent it to me from America! "Treasure it," he wrote, "It was David's last photograph." Rest in Peace.