

MIGHTY MITTS

BY TERRY TODD

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Preface: In 1964 Terry moved to York, Pennsylvania, where he became managing editor of Strength & Health magazine and represented the York Barbell Company in lifting contests and public appearances. Terry met with his greatest lifting success while at York, weighing at that time well over 300 pounds. In talking about his York experiences, he always claimed that working for the York magazines taught him a lot about the process of writing, and more than once, he speculated on how his life might have turned out had he stayed there and not become a professor. Among the most memorable articles he wrote while at York in the 1960s was a two-part feature called "Mighty Mitts" that appeared in the March and April 1965 issues of Strength & Health. Like many of his articles, the first "Mighty Mitts" installment is filled with personal observations and autobiographical details. It also introduces a subject—grip strength—that fascinated Terry throughout his life. One reason this article made such a big impression was the photograph that ran with it showing Terry's hand next to the hand of his acromegalic friend, August Hartkopf. Because Terry was known for being unusually large, the contrast of his hand to that of August's was memorable.

~ Jan Todd



As long as man has kept account of his actions on this earth, a vice-like grip has been a source of envy and admiration. A strong man has always been known by the strength of his hands. Perhaps man's universal respect for a powerful grip can be traced back into the dawn of our history, when the difference between life and death was often the ability to scamper up a tree or to cling tightly to our mother as she darted to safety. A well-accepted phenomenon known to physiologists is the gripping or clutching reflex of monkeys and anthropoid apes. This instinctive need to grasp and hold is inborn in these animals, enabling them to survive in their arboreal world. When swinging along a hundred feet or so above the ground, a weak grip is not much in demand.

Whether this psychological explanation is valid or not, the fact remains that a powerful paw has always been a cherished attainment and a point of real



Although he weighed only 245 in this photo from 1972, Terry could still crush beer cans with ease.

pride. History tells us that Plato took time out from his strolls through the olive grove at Academus to acquire superior strength of grip. Richard the Lion-Hearted and Genghis Khan were noted for their physical vigor and the stories are many of the bludgeon-like swords they wielded that were so heavy that few men could handle them. George Washington was reputed to have the strongest hands in the land in his day and it is said he could crush the shell of a walnut between his thumb and forefinger. Abraham Lincoln is another of our presidents who was renowned for the might in his fingers and forearms. His feats with axe and sledge are both legend and legendary. The infamous King Henry VIII of England was respected throughout Britain and Europe for his awesome digital strength. We are told that he often amused himself after a two-hour-long session at the dinner table by rolling the handles of the spoons into the cup.

The annals of strength history are

filled with men who are famous for the power of their hands. The bending and breaking of horseshoes by John Gruhn Marx, the coin-breaking of Fritz "Cyclops" Bienkowski, the tennis ball-tearing of Charles Vansittart, the barrel-lifting of Louis Cyr, the shouldering of an automobile engine by Arthur Dandurand, the bottle-cap bending of Ian "Mac" Bachelor, the one-finger chinning by Eugene Sandow, the one hand, no-hook-grip deadlifting of 554 pounds by Herman Görner, the raising of over 10 pounds on the "Weaver Stick" by John Grimek, the license plate tearing by Bill Pearl, the bar bending by Louis "Apollon" Uni, and the pinch-grip chinning of heavyweight Al Berger are feats which stir the imagination and quicken the blood. They are feats at which the world of strength marvels and they are feats which will be remembered as long as the life of man.

The employment and demonstration of hand and wrist strength is an entirely different matter from the employment and demonstration of bodily strength. Almost anywhere you look you can find ways to utilize the power of the grip and forearm. Such commonplace things as a chair, a table, a bottle cap, a stick or a book can be used as a means of testing and developing the muscles of the lower arm and fingers. On the other hand, cumbersome apparatus and athletic attire are usually necessary for the demonstration of bodily strength, particularly for the execution of the Olympic and Power Lifts.

Perhaps this accounts to some extent for the enthusiasm generated in the average man upon seeing a feat of hand strength and the relatively blasé attitude taken by the same man upon seeing, for instance, an Olympic lift. Just as surely as Mr. Average American would not pay much attention to an athlete pressing 200 pounds, he would be impressed and attentive if the same athlete lifted a 200-pound man to arms' length. This is illustrative of the fact learned many years ago by the early professional strongmen—*lift weights that the public can appreciate*. People who wouldn't have given Arthur Saxon's monumental bent press of a 386-pound barbell a second look were awestruck as he raised in the same style a bar with his brother Kurt on one end and his brother Herman on the other. The Saxons and other strongmen realized that they had to relate to the people—they had to hit them where they lived.

The truth of this concept of the manner in which the general public views strength was strongly substanti-



"The hand on the right is the hand of the 6'2", 325-pound author of the article, Terry Todd. It is dwarfed in every respect by the massive hand of August Hartkopf of Austin, Texas. August is 6'5" tall and weighs around 285 pounds, and his hands must be seen to be fully appreciated. He owns his own garage and specializes in drag racing and has held the E Gas NHRA record (3 yrs.), the D Gas NHRA record (2 yrs.), the E Gas AHRA record (2 yrs.), as well as 30 or 40 track records. He can crumple a beer can almost as easily as a normal man can crumple a paper cup, but he adjusts a carburetor with the dexterity of an eye surgeon." (Original Caption)

ated the other evening when Tommy Suggs and I gave an exhibition and lecture on physical fitness to a local public school P.T.A. meeting. As I was to deliver the bulk of the lecture, Tommy was good enough to perform some Olympic lifts for the several hundred people present. He worked up to some very respectable poundages—ones that only a handful of men in the whole country could match. In return for this excellent lifting, he was given a warm and enthusiastic ovation. However, when I crunched up a few metal beverage cans that I had brought along to prove that not *all* of my flesh was excess baggage, you would have thought from the applause that I had taken Tommy's last Clean and Jerk weight, added Anderson on one end and Zhabotinsky on the other, and then knocked out a few reps with it.

The above incident should indicate the value to a man who trains with weights of a fairly strong pair of hands. For one thing, when someone who is unfamiliar with our sport innocently asks that maddening, but invariable, question, "How much can you lift?" you can save yourself a lot of breath by merely pinch-gripping his ears off. Seriously, strong fingers and wrists serve the weight trainer in other ways besides being a portable and relatively easy method of proving your strength. For one thing, strong hands help you to perform all exercises in a correct

manner. Your wrists won't give out on the last few reps of a set of curls, your hands won't slip when you power clean or deadlift for repetitions, and you won't experience pain as a result of front squats. For another thing, the possession of a good grip is almost always seen in conjunction with the possession of an impressive pair of lower arms.

John Grimek has a powerful grip and his forearms look like they got stuck in an angry beehive. Wilbur Miller is very strong-handed and to look at those meat hooks of his, you can't help but wonder if he bothers to use a lug-wrench to change a tire. Norbert Schemansky almost never uses a "hook" grip, either in training or in competition (says Ski, "I hook in desperation, not in preparation."), and his forearms have to be seen up close in person to be fully appreciated or, for that matter, even believed. Bill Pearl amuses audiences by ripping auto license plates asunder and twisting spikes, and his lower arms are also a bit on the bulgy side.

Forearm strength and development isn't reserved for the stars of the sport, however, for there is a young man in Austin, Texas, who is possessed of a pair of the mightiest mitts in captivity. This young man is Jack Fritsch or, as he is referred to by many of his friends, The Mighty Fritsch. I have known Jack for most of my life, as we grew up and attended the same public schools and university together. We have passed many afternoons in hard training and good conversation.

As long as Jack has been interested in the weights, he has had a special fondness and aptitude for feats of hand and wrist strength. Although I was able to out lift him on any regular exercise due to my greater size and more regular habits of training, I was almost never his equal in feats of gripping power. His fingers are the strongest I have ever seen and I have seen many of the best men in the world. To see him pinch-grip a pair of 45-pound York Olympic plates with the smooth sides out is a sight I will never forget and one that I don't expect to see duplicated. I may be wrong, but I seriously doubt that any man in the world at the present time can match this feat. Many genuinely strong men are unable to pinch grip even a pair of 35-pound plates which are much thinner, but Jack can clean them with either hand. I have seen him simultaneously clean and *press* a pair of solid 75-pound dumbbells using only the middle finger of each hand, and if you think that sounds easy, you either haven't tried it or you should be in a zoo. Several years ago, as Jack and I were hungrily por-



On a visit to California in the mid-1960s, Terry visited Bob Zuver's Gym in Costa Mesa, famed for its oversized equipment and exotic strength tests. Zuver called the gym The Hall of Fame and everything was big there. The water fountain was a fire hose, the door reportedly weighed 4000 pounds, and to ring the doorbell you had to squeeze one of the toughest grippers Terry ever tried. However, he closed it, and Zuver sent "Tremendous Terry" this picture to honor the achieve-

ing over the pages of *Strength and Health*, we read of John MacLoughlin's two-finger deadlift of 410 pounds. I talked Jack into trying himself out on this lift and he worked up to 340 with no trouble at all, but when he tried 360, the skin tore completely off the first digit on each of his two middle fingers. I'm not sure what he could have done had his skin not torn, but the 340 certainly caused him no strain.

The can-crunching that I mentioned earlier is a stunt that I learned from Jack. We have timed him, and he can flatten a beverage can to a height of an inch and a half in *less* than two seconds. He has crumpled as many as a hundred in a row in a matter of just a few minutes. Besides being able to mangle these beverage cans, he can also tear them in half after bending them only once. Another of his favorite feats is to take a regular can and bottle opener, wrap one hand around the bottom half and with the other hand, snap it as you would snap a popsicle stick. He does it with no padding and performs it so easily that it seems that anyone could do it. Jack is six feet tall and weighs about 225 pounds, and is quite strong in all exercises, but he has taken his naturally powerful hands and through hard work, turned them into veritable vices of might.