

# MARK HENRY'S OLYMPIC DIARY

BY TERRY TODD

*Beaumont Enterprise*, July 6, 20 & 27, 1996

*Preface: In 1996 as Mark Henry was preparing for the Olympic Games, Terry suggested to him that he might want to do as many pro boxers do before a big match and isolate himself in a remote location so he could focus more on his lifting and less on the media blitz and hoopla surrounding the Atlanta Games. And so, in early June, Mark joined us on Ironbound Island to train with Terry as his sole coach as he prepared for his second Olympics. During the two months he stayed on the island with us, Mark and Terry agreed to limit media interviews and during that time they did only one magazine interview, for People magazine, and one TV interview, for HBO. However, Mark's hometown of Silsbee, Texas, had always supported him as an Olympian, and both Terry and Mark wanted them to know how he was doing. So, with assistance from the local paper, The Beaumont Enterprise, Terry agreed to send weekly reports from our remote "training camp." Here are three of the articles that appeared in that series.*

~ Jan Todd



6 July 1996

When I first saw Mark Henry, he was sitting among friends at a high school powerlifting meet in Dallas, looking for all the world like a young African king surrounded by his children. Never had I seen such muscle size and bone structure. I've been involved in competitive lifting for 40 years and was the national champion myself in both weightlifting and powerlifting, so I've known all the top men in both sports for almost half a century. When I met Mark, however, I thought to myself that here was a man with the potential to be the best of them all in either discipline, maybe even both disciplines, at the same time.

Powerlifting is a low gear sport—it both tests and develops basic strength. When I first saw Mark, it was apparent that he could have quickly become the best powerlifter in the U.S., but it seemed to me

that he would have a brighter future if he turned his attention for a time to weightlifting, which is the only form of competitive lifting done at the Olympic Games.



**Mark stands beside Powerlifting Collegiate Champion Eric Fomby, on his first trip to Austin in June of 1990. Mark was 19, stood 6'3" tall, and weighed about 380 pounds. Eric weighed around 170.**

Weightlifting is very different from powerlifting—it requires balance, coordination, timing, flexibility and explosiveness and as I watched Mark that day in Dallas move around and lift, it was easy to see he had unusual flexibility. He also got around like an athlete, and so I asked him if he had ever considered trying his hand at weightlifting. He told me that the first person who inspired him to become a lifter was the huge Russian Olympic gold medalist Vasily Alexeyev, but that there was nobody in Silsbee to show him how. "I don't care what kind of lifting I do," he told me with a smile, "I just want to get to be the strongest man in the world."

So, after checking with various people to verify Mark's claim of being drug-free, I decided to bring him and his mother, Barbara

Mass, up to Austin so that Angel Spassov and I could put him through some tests to determine if he had the physical qualities necessary for success in this demanding sport. Spassov, a strength coach at the University of Texas at Austin, was for many years a coach of the Bulgarian national weight-lifting team.

Thus it was that Mark came to Austin in June of 1990 and satisfied Angel and I that he had the physical wherewithal and the personal drive to succeed in a sport he'd only seen done on television. So after talking to Mark and his mother at length, my wife Jan and I decided to more or less “adopt” the huge, playful young man as a project—to bring him to Austin, set him up in an apartment with a good, all-you-can-eat meal plan, teach him the “Olympic lifts” and guide him toward what we hoped would be a successful career as a weightlifter.

When Mark arrived in August of that same year, he threw himself into his new sport with all of his large heart. Extremely coachable, he worked on a daily basis with Emilian Iankov, another Bulgarian living in Austin who had an extensive career as a lifter and coach. Almost immediately, Mark gave indications he was the real deal, breaking his personal records nearly every day in the gym. Within less than three months, he officially exceeded the national record for “Junior” (under the age of 23) lifters with a snatch of 325 pounds and a few weeks later broke that record three more times with 337, 341 and 343.

To place those records in context, consider this: Before the advent of anabolic steroids (approximately 1960), the best three men in history in the snatch lift—John Davis, Norbert Schemansky and Paul Anderson—had each made 330 pounds. Yet here was a young man—a boy, really—with less than three months of training under his thick leather belt who lifted more than any of these three great Olympic champions had been able to lift over their long careers.

When Mark broke those records, Jan and I felt vindicated, and we knew that unless Mark lost interest or sustained a career ending injury, he would become a legend in the iron game. In the following weeks I hope to share with the people of East Texas how Mark unwrapped—and is still unwrapping his prodigious gift of strength.



Mark moved to Austin in the summer of 1990 following his graduation from high school. He's shown here taking a heavy squat workout with Terry and a UT student as spotters. Note the lack of knee wraps and the narrow belt on this close to 700-pound squat. His best official squat, done raw, was 953.5 pounds (432.5 kg).

### 20 July 1996

**T**hursday was a busy day on Ironbound, an island well-named for the training camp of the strongest man in the world. Up at eight, Mark Henry began his day with a breakfast of pork sausage, hash-brown potatoes, eggs over easy, homemade English muffins, wild strawberry preserves, orange juice, and milk.

After a short rest he walked to the freshwater lake to watch some of the local birds—among them pheasants, stormy petrels, hawks, osprey, goldfinches, loons and even the odd puffin—and see if he could catch a glimpse of the island's two resident deer.

Earlier that morning I'd steamed ashore in our Cape Island-style boat to pick up six people from HBO who had come to our isolated home in Nova Scotia to do a major story on Mark's weightlifting career. As Mark was eating, resting, and walking, the HBO folks toured the island to choose the spots for the interviews scheduled for later in the day. I took them to the lighthouse, out past the freshwater lake, over to the Southwest Cove where we swim, down to the buildings where the fishermen store their gear, and over to the barn where I keep one of Mark's favorite things, a 12-foot rib from a 60-foot grey whale that washed up on island's beach in the 1950s.

By 11 AM, they had set up the spot for their interview with me, which lasted until half past noon. The interviewer was Sonja Steptoe, an editor for *Sports Illustrated*, who also works as a sports commentator for HBO.

After the interview, two cameramen and one sound man followed me up to our house to tape Mark eating lunch—a 20-ounce rib eye steak, home made French bread, a spinach salad, boiled blue potatoes, English peas, and carrots, all from our garden, washed down with two quarts of iced tea and followed by a huge piece of still-warm apple pie. Then, Mark took his daily hour nap, during which time the HBO crew scurried around the island shooting what they call B-roll—shots of the island which can be edited into the interview in a way that establishes where the subject of the interview lives and trains.

They got tape of the lighthouse, the beach, the fishing boats coming and going, the extensive birdlife, the wharf, our two big Mastiffs, and the building where Mark trains. After the nap, Mark had a cup of tea and we walked down to the building as the camera crew ran in front of us to capture the scene as we approached the heavy weights he planned to lift.

The training quarters are located on the second floor of a new building which houses farm equipment. The second floor is supported by steel rafters topped by



Mark and Terry stand in front of the Ironbound lighthouse in the summer of 1996. They're holding a spruce fence post that the lighthouse keeper had made. The ground on Ironbound was so soft and sandy that pointed fence posts like this were simply driven into the ground with a sledge. Mark was in the best physical condition of his lifting career that summer.



Terry explains the intricacies of hand-lining for codfish to Mark as they sit in the back of our boat on Ironbound. The big hook in Terry's right hand mimics the action of a small fish as the line is dropped overboard. No poles are used.

flooring made by inch-and-a-half tongue and groove spruce. On top of that we screwed down six sheets of 3/4-inch plywood in such a way that the lifting platform is 8' x 12'. The room, approximately 70' x 40' looks like the loft of a large barn, and it serves over the winter and spring as a place where extra hay is stored for the island's small herd of cattle. Now, however, it's clean, spacious, well-ventilated and a wonderful place to lift, smelling as it does of new wood and loose-baled hay.

The TV crew taped everything—the warmup routine, the stretching and, of course, the workout itself. Mark began with snatches—the lift in which the barbell is pulled overhead in one sudden movement as the lifter squats under the bar. He began with 132 pounds and worked up in small increments until he reached the target weight for the day—352 pounds—which he snatched in two repetitions with power to spare.

Next came full squats with the bar held on his chest. Beginning with 264 pounds Marked work up to two easy sets of two repetitions with 618. The last exercise was the wide-grip high pull in which he built up to two sets of two reps with 440 pounds, pulling the bar each

time to mid-chest before letting it crash to the floor.

Next came a walk to the beach and our daily swim in the 48-degree ocean, which we do in order to help the body recover from the heavy training. The TV crew stood by and shivered as Mark calmly walked out into the surf until he was submerged up to his neck, where he stayed for approximately 15 minutes.

Back to the house after the swim to get ready for the last chore of the day—the interview, which was done back in the building where we train. The interview was a long one—almost two hours—and was the most extensive Mark has ever done. Mark talked a great deal about how difficult it was to be drug free in a sport so riddled with steroid use, about his early life in Silsbee, and about the love he felt for the town which always supported him so wholeheartedly as he worked his way up in the world of sports. The TV crew had to leave at 10 on the last available boat or they'd probably still be asking Mark questions.

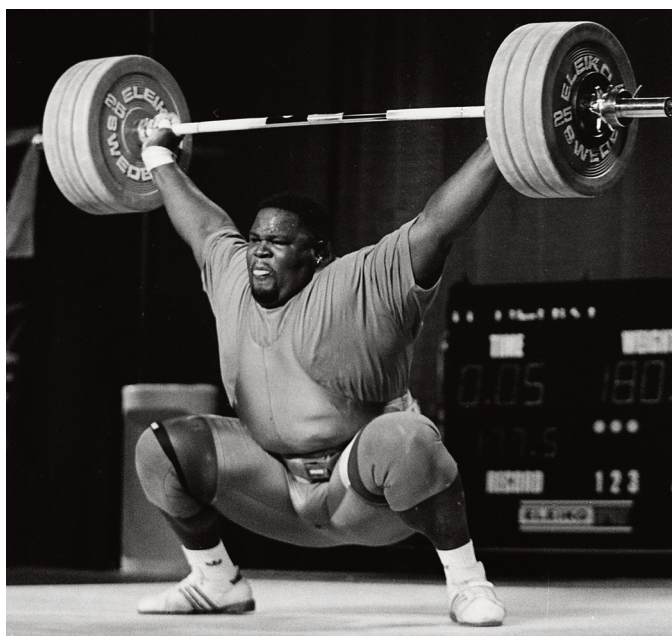
Once they were gone, we had a late supper of turkey sandwiches, potato salad and another piece of that homemade apple pie. . . . The HBO Olympic special will air on July 15, and Mark's part of it will last 12 minutes, which will make it by far the longest story he has ever had on national television. The importance of the show and the length of the piece convinced us to make an exception to our policy of limiting contact with the media until after July 30, the day on which Mark will battle for a medal at the Olympic Games.

### 27 July 1996

**O**ver the past year or so, Mark has been called by many people the strongest man in the world. In this series of articles for the *Enterprise*, I have often referred to him in the same way. Today, I want to explain how he earned the title and why, even if he fails to win the gold medal in Atlanta, he will still be the strongest man in the world.

When Mark deadlifted 903 pounds last summer in Pennsylvania, many older lifters approached me after the lift and told me that they had seen hundreds, even thousands of lifts, but that the 903-pound deadlift was the greatest lift they'd ever seen. It was, to be sure, a breathtaking performance—the most impressive lift in either weightlifting or powerlifting I've seen during my forty years in the strength game.

As is always the case, it's not only the weight on the bar that stamps a lift as either impressive or unimpressive.



**At the 1996 US Nationals, Mark made this picture perfect 180 kilo (396-pound) snatch for a new American record. He also held the national clean and jerk record at 220 kilos (484.5 pounds) heading to Atlanta.**

sive. How a lift is done is crucial. The form used. The ease of the lift. These things matter and they provide clues about the strength of the man or woman making the lift. The ease with which Mark makes his record lifts in both weightlifting and powerlifting adds considerably to his reputation as a strength legend.

There is, of course, considerable argument about how best to define and to test "strength." Traditionally, the weightlifters of the world have put forward men like Paul Anderson, Vasily Alexeyev, and Alexander Kurlovich as the world's strongest. At the same time, the powerlifting community argues that such behemoths as Bill Kazmaier and Anthony Clark are stronger. Others have backed huge athletes such as Magnus Ver Magnusson or the late Jon Pall Sigmarsson, both of whom have won titles in the grueling events known generically as "Strongest Man" contests, contests which feature such dangerous events as lifting boulders, turning over cars, carrying refrigerators, and so on.

Besides athletes from these groups, many others through the years have made claims of being the "World's Strongest"—arm-wrestlers, one-lift specialists, and out-and-out charlatans. The first problem encountered when trying to sort out such claims, of course, is that no one man can outperform all other men in every conceivable

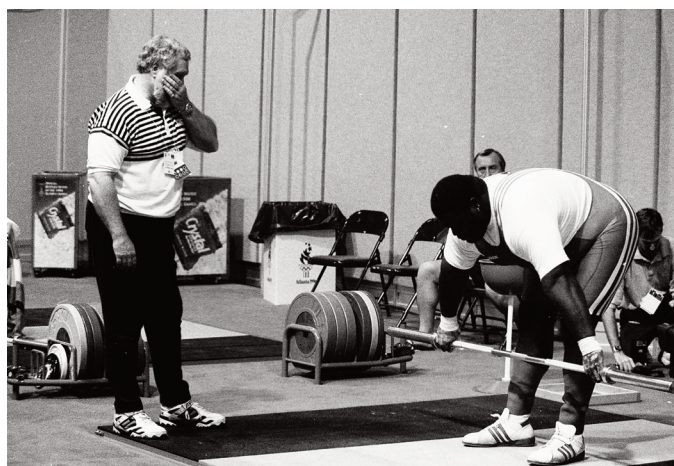
feat of physical strength. The second problem is verifiability—who judged the feat of strength? And how was the resistance weighed?

Faced with this tangled knot of conflicting assertions, how can anyone reasonably establish the identity of the man whose overall performance best qualifies him for the cherished title of World’s Strongest Man? It seems to me and to many others that the best way is to use the recent statistical format put forward by a writer for *Powerlifting USA*, a magazine which recently featured a list of the top 25 men they called “History’s Greatest Strength Athletes.” The technique used to rank these men is quite simple. There are three powerlifts (the bench press, the squat, and the deadlift) and two weightlifting movements (the snatch and the clean and jerk), and the magazine combined the best performances of each of the 25 men in each of the five competitive lifts and ranked them according to the total poundage of the five lifts.

Since these five lifts are done in more than a hundred countries around the world, and since the methods of performance are more or less standardized, using the five-lift total is the closest we can ever come to establishing the identity of the person who has the most right to be known as the world’s best lifter or the world’s strongest man. Using these criteria, Mark tops the list of history’s greatest lifters and can be said to have earned for himself the title as the strongest man in history.

Mark has been far too busy the past five years trying to learn the intricacies of the snatch and the clean and jerk to even consider trying his hand in one of the “Strongest Man” contests. This apprenticeship still continues, as Mark’s lifting style is very primitive, relying more on brute power than on perfect biomechanical technique. But even though his lifting *skill* leaves much to be desired, due primarily to his relatively late start in the game, his basic, overall strength is unmatched. In weightlifting alone, his accomplishments include a gold medal at the Pan American Games, three national championships, two victories in the Olympic Festival, a spot on the 1992 and 1996 Olympic teams, and dozens of American records.

As I explained in last Sunday’s article, Mark knows that because of the dramatic boost steroids give to competitive lifters, his opponents’ use places him at a significant disadvantage. Even so, he believes that despite his raw technique he could be winning the top medals in a truly clean sport, and this belief is frustrating. He knows he is physically stronger than the few men in the world



**At the 1996 Olympic Games, Terry served as Mark’s coach and is shown here backstage as he begins warming up. Although Mark had made 407 in the snatch and 507 in the clean and jerk in training, he injured his back during the snatches at the Olympics and finished a disappointing 14th. It was his last weightlifting contest. After the Games, he signed a contract with The World Wrestling Federation where he has had a long career. He was inducted into their Hall of Fame in 2018.**

still ahead of him in weightlifting, and he knows that when he loses to them it gives the false impression that he is weaker than they are.

“Even with all their steroids, they don’t have as much basic strength as I have,” Mark says, explaining that “most of the top guys have told me that I was stronger than they were, and that if I had their technique I’d be outlifting them.” The coach of the U.S. Olympic team, Dragomir Ciroasian, agrees, saying that “of the top ten supers in weightlifting, Mark is definitely the strongest.” Ciroasian is quite correct. If the top five superheavyweights in weightlifting tried to match Mark’s 903 deadlift, they would not only fail, they would be unable to raise the weight an inch from the floor. Similarly, were they to try to squat with the 1000 pounds Mark can lift they would be crushed by the weight.

It’s also worth noting that by making national and world records in powerlifting, this amazing, good-natured, young athlete became a fraternity of one; no other superheavyweight has ever held a national record in the open division in powerlifting and weightlifting at the same time. Indeed, Silsbee’s Mark Henry has proved on the battleground of actual competition that he has realized and gone beyond his boyhood dream; he is not only the strongest man in the world but also the strongest man of all time. And he did it the old-fashioned way—drug-free.