Philosophical and Practical Considerations for a "Strongest Man" Contest

By Terry Todd

Mark A. Holowchak and Terry Todd, editors; *Philosophical Reflections of Physical Strength: Does a Strong Mind Need a Strong Body?* (Lewiston, NY: Edward Mellen Press, 2010), 49-87.

Preface: Mark Holowchak, Ph.D. is a sport philosopher, former powerlifter, strongman fan, and the author of numerous books of sport philosophy. After attending the Arnold Strongman Classic several times during its first decade, Mark asked Terry if he would be willing to contribute an essay to a book he was planning on the philosophy of strength. Intrigued by this idea, Terry readily agreed to be part of the resulting book—Philosophical Reflections of Physical Strength—*and as the project evolved, he ended up co-editing the book with Mark. Terry dedicated his work on the book, ". . . to Marvin "Papa" Williams, whose legendary ability to lift and carry 600-pound cotton bales and to crack pecan shells with his thumb and forefinger inspired his grandson, Terry Todd, to spend a lifetime developing and thinking about strength."*

Terry's essay, reprinted here, explores the various decisions he made in starting and running what was called The Arnold Strength Summit in 2002 and is now known as The Arnold Strongman Classic. I've included his essay because most readers of this journal are probably unaware of the book's existence since it was published by an academic press. I've also included the essay because the creation of the Arnold Strongman Classic, and directing it for the next seventeen years, was one of Terry's proudest achievements. ~ *Jan Todd*

William Butler Yeats commented in a poem about "the fascination of what's difficult."[1] In my case, I've been fascinated by human strength for as long as I can remember. My first real encounter with strength of a genuinely high level came at the age of eight or nine when my grandfather Williams—a mallet-handed 5'10", 220 pound Texas rancher—picked up a single hard-shelled, native pecan from the ground where he and I were sitting and fishing down in a creek-bottom. After "Papa" picked up the pecan, he nudged me, smiled, placed it between the thumb and bent forefinger of one hand, and broke the shell of the pecan. At that point he turned to me and said, "Bud, very few men can do that . . . and no boys." And then he chuckled. Over the next couple of decades—as I began to train and gradually become, for a time, the strongest powerlifter in the world, Papa broke quite a few more such pecans for me, and each time he did it he chuckled, especially since it was a feat I was never able to match no matter how large I became or how hard I tried. How was it that a man in late middle age who had done no systematic training could be as strong in any part of his body as a much younger man who stood four inches taller and outweighed him by over a hundred pounds?

Finally, I came to understand that no man ever has been or ever will be stronger than every other man in all tests of physical strength. Even so, I was still interested to know which man, from various eras, had the most overall strength and how that strength had been acquired.

For over 50 years that question has been at the center of my life as an athlete, an academic, a coach, and a collector who has assembled an assortment of books, magazines, photos, videotapes, posters, art, equipment, and other artifacts which is believed to be the largest of its kind

in the world.

In March of 2001, my wife, Jan, and I went to Columbus, Ohio, to experience the annual iron-game extravaganza known as the Arnold Sports Festival. The 2001 event was the 26th year of a show conceived back in the middle '70s by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Lorimer. Arnold and Jim are men of large imagination, but even they could never have foreseen that what began as a bodybuilding show—albeit a major one—would morph by 2009 into a three day, ten-ring, physical culture circus featuring approximately 17,000 athletes in 39 sports, and a crowd of 170,000 people.

Jan and I had never attended any of the previous events, but in 2001 Jim and Arnold asked us to come and gave us a small booth at which we could display and sell copies of *Iron Game History*, a journal we began in 1990 at the University of Texas. One evening during our 2001 visit, in a casual conversation involving Jim and Arnold, the subject of "strongman" shows came up, and I offered my take on the ESPN event called the "World's Strongest Man" (WSM) show. I explained that even though I saluted Barry Frank, the Trans-World International executive who gave birth to the show back in 1977, for having the vision to create the event, the clout to convince CBS to air it, and the savvy to sustain it on ESPN up to the present, I nevertheless thought it could be improved. I pointed out that, because so many of the events rewarded athleticism and endurance more than raw strength, the winner was often not the man who was the strongest, but the man who had the best combination of strength and staying power. I mentioned several examples, including the infamous race in 1990 in which the rules were changed just before the event so that the 400-plus pound O.D. Wilson was forced to carry a very small load for a very long way in what amounted to a two-man race for the WSM title against Jón Páll Sigmarsson, the much smaller, more telegenic Icelander who was far behind going into that last event and needed a big win to retain his title.

Another problem with the WSM contests, as I saw it then and as I still see it now, was that they had so many events—an average of eight to ten—that more men were injured than was good for the sport, not to mention the men. In some past WSM shows three or four of the ten contestants were injured during the event so badly that they were unable to continue. I suggested that four or five carefully chosen events should be adequate to determine who had the greatest amount of raw, brute strength. I concluded my rant by saying that I thought it would be possible to

Jim Lorimer, founder and director of the Arnold Sports Festival, stands behind Terry and David Webster at the banquet following the 2003 contest. Over the years, Jim became one of Terry's closest friends and they spoke on the phone almost weekly. I was honored when he agreed to speak at Terry's memorial service here in Austin.

create a contest that would be safer than the WSM shows, more accurate in ranking the contestants in terms of overall strength, and maybe just as exciting to watch.

A couple of months later, I got a call from Jim Lorimer, who said he and Arnold had been talking about what I'd said that night in Columbus and that they wanted to have such a show as part of the 2002 Arnold Sports Festival, if I'd agree to design and run it. Taken completely by surprise, I told Jim that I was flattered and that I'd think about it and get back to him. Finally, after talking to Jan and several close iron-game friends, I decided that I couldn't very well say no after blathering on about how an ultimate—or at least a much more truly just—strength contest should be conducted. At that point, we began a quest to design four or five representative strength challenges and to attract the strongest men in the world to face them.

One of the first things that was clear to me at the outset was that we needed to make the contest appealing not just to WSM-type competitors, but to athletes in all three of the main disciplines of strength—weightlifting, powerlifting, and strongman events. Each of the three sports has had a long history of referring to the man who was the top dog of the moment in that particular field as the "Strongest Man in the World." This is understandable, and perhaps as it should be, for each discipline requires great overall body power. And the title itself—the Strongest Man in the World—is certainly one with bona fide value and great historical weight, not unlike "The World's Fastest Man" or

The "brain trust" for the Arnold Strongman Classic takes a well deserved rest after the second Arnold Strongman Classic in 2003. In putting together the contest Terry relied heavily on sport promoter and historian David Webster, who was involved with the formation of the original TWI World's Strongest Man Contest. Our good friend and two-time World's Strongest Man winner, Bill Kazmaier, also contributed advice on both possible competitors and events. At the contest, Webster was our head official; Kazmaier was the announcer.

"The Heavyweight Champion of the World." For at least the last century, hundreds of professional strongmen have claimed the mantle for themselves as a way to increase their prestige and, as a result, their income. But how could we attract the best weightlifters, powerlifters, and strongman competitors to take part in a contest that would take all of them out of their "comfort zone?"

I realized that what we really needed was a prize package that would be instantly appealing to most of the world's top men, and I suggested to Arnold that he might be able to convince the people who manufacture and sell Humvees to award one of those monstrous vehicles to the winner of the Arnold Strength Summit, as we called it that first year. He agreed, the Humvee people agreed, and armed with this great plum I appealed to the executives at MET-Rx, sponsors of the WSM show, for additional support. They agreed to a three-year package in which they would provide $50,000 each year as well as a year's supply of their food products to the winners of each of our four individual events. Jim and Arnold agreed to absorb the additional costs, including transportation, equipment, meals, and housing; and so we were able to approach the athletes with an offer of a contest with the largest prize list in the history of such events.

Perhaps the most crucial thing I did after agreeing to design the show was to contact two of the very best men I knew to work with us in designing the events and choosing the contestants. One of these men was David Webster, O.B.E., Scotland's ageless wonder of energy. David—who has written over 30 books, broken world strength records, and assembled the best private collection of physical culture books in the world—has been part of most of the WSM shows over the past 30 years and has promoted and/or judged at hundreds of Highland Games, weightlifting, and strongman events around the world. The other man we asked was Bill Kazmaier, a multi-year winner of both world powerlifting championships and WSM contests and a man who has added to his stature in the game over the years by creating unofficial world records in a variety of strength feats and by serving as the color commentator for almost all of the most recent WSM shows on ESPN. I've been friends with David for 45 years and I helped Bill get started as a powerlifter and strongman competitor over 30 years ago. It would be fair to say that both men were intrigued by the idea of a strength event structured to test the basic power of the best men in the world from the three disciplines of strength. Both men agreed to join us.

Choosing the Events

We began to talk about events we could use that would be reasonably safe, reward brute strength more than technique, and yet not be totally familiar to the weightlifters, powerlifters, or strongman competitors. We all wanted some sort of overhead lift, of course, but we knew that if we simply tested the men in the clean and jerk, using a standard Olympic bar, we might just as well give the top prize in that event to the best weightlifter in the show. One day early on in our conversations, I suggested to David and Bill that a fitting challenge might be to produce a sort of replica of the bell made famous by

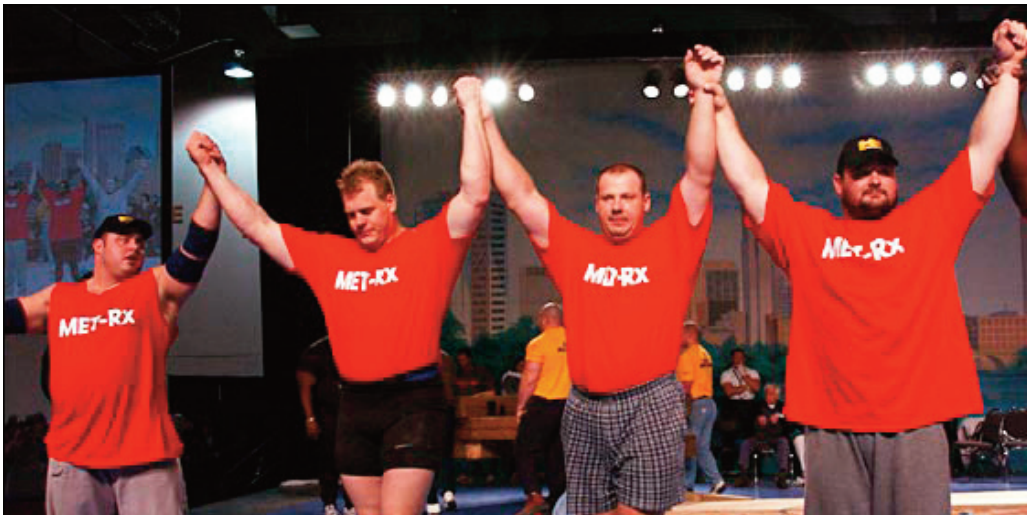
Louis Uni (Apollon), the legendary French strongman of the turn of the last century whose name had been given to a set of railway wheels which had only been lifted overhead by three men in the past 100 years—Charles Rigoulot, who cleaned and jerked Apollon's Wheels in 1930 after several months of practice; John Davis, who lifted them with no practice at all in 1949 using a reverse grip to clean them (being unable to clean them with a traditional overhand grip); and Norbert Schemansky, who cleaned the Wheels in 1954 and then jerked them three times.[2] There is considerable dispute as to whether Apollon himself ever raised his great Wheels overhead, but as to the merits of lifting the cumbersome barbell, Olympic Coach Bob Hoffman said that Schemansky's performance was, "the greatest feat of strength which has ever taken place in the world."

From the beginning, one of Terry's visions for the Arnold was to honor the strongmen of the past by replicating historic equipment to test our modern competitors. While Tom Lincir made the Apollon's Wheels, Richard Sorin made our Circus Dumbbells, and Steve Slater made the fabulous Austrian Oak, it was when Terry and Bill Henniger—the engineering genius who founded Rogue Fitness—became friends and joined forces that a quantum leap occurred in the number of historic replicas appearing at the Arnold and in a special series of Rogue Record Breaker events. Bill and his team at Rogue have now made accurate replicas of Louis Cyr's Dumbbell, Milo Steinborn's Rockover-Squat Barbell, Charles Rigoulot's Barbell, the Husafell Stone from Iceland, a new version of Apollon's Wheels with actual train wheels, and the jaw-dropping, massive replica of the Wheel of Pain from *Conan The Barbarian* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. Bill and Terry also reimagined Strongman deadlifting with the creation of the Rogue Elephant Bar, and specially machined plates used only at the Arnold. The photo is from 2016.

Apollon's Wheels weigh 366 pounds, and have a bar 1.93" in diameter, but the cleaning of them is made much more difficult because the thick shaft fits into the wheels so that when the shaft turns the wheels must turn, too. We all felt that the thickness of the bar (The bar's diameter makes a "hook, or thumb-lock, grip" impossible for all but a few giant-handed men.) and the fact that it didn't revolve would make this event a real challenge, even for the weightlifters. Once we all agreed on this as an event, in the early fall of 2001, I contacted Tom Lincir of the Ivanko Barbell Company and asked if he would accept the challenge of reproducing the essential aspects of Apollon's Railway Wheels precisely—bar diameter, total weight, and completely non-revolving bar. An avid collector of old barbells and dumbbells, Tom enthusiastically agreed to design and build the replica as a way of joining us as we tried to honor our past heroes by testing our present ones. One of our four events was set.

We also felt that we needed to create some sort of challenge that involved carrying something heavy—an event somewhat like a WSM-type "Farmer's Walk," but sufficiently different so that the contestants from the Strongman world would have their natural advantage significantly reduced. After much discussion we determined that there were several primary ways in which this could be done—by making the object or objects to be carried much heavier than what was normally carried in Strongman events, by using a time limit of thirty seconds instead of ninety seconds so that endurance would play only a small part in the event, by having the men carry one solid object rather than the two normally carried in Farmer's Walk events, and by requiring the men to go up a short ramp with a grade approximating that of a wheelchair ramp.[3]

Because of such experiences I and my committee had had, we tried to make our weight-carrying race as safe as possible. Having decided to have the men carry one solid frame and not two separate implements as in a traditional Farmer's Walk, our first plan involved building the apparatus out of logs. However, after I made dozens of calls to lumber-mills, it became clear that logs presented a series of technical difficulties. We also considered simply building a metal frame with



In the end, the 2002 Arnold Strength Summit featured men who truly deserved to be discussed as among the strongest in the world. On the left is Andy Bolton from England, who held the all-time deadlifting record at 925 pounds that year. Beside him is big Phil Pfister, the tallest man in the contest at 6'7" who would go on to win the World's Strongest Man Contest in 2006. Olympic lifter/strongman Raimonds Bergmanis, third from the left, has now become a politician and served in Latvia's Parliament and as its Minister of Defense. Brian Schoonveld, on the far right, was winner of America's Strongest Man in 2000 and 2001.

holders for Olympic plates in front and in back, and although this would have been far easier and less expensive it would have made the event less visually exciting because the iron weights would look much lighter than something less dense—like wood.[4] After I located a source for old timbers from demolished barns and wooden buildings, we decided to construct the apparatus out of 8" x 8" and 8" x 10" timbers. The timbers were held together by iron bolts drilled completely though, and the majority of the weight was placed in front and in back of the athletes, with two large timbers on each side plus the two bars/handles connecting the timbers in back to those in front. Once assembled—only a few days before it was placed on a trailer and driven from Texas to Ohio—the apparatus was so massive that I was worried no one would be able to lift it. After much thought and deliberation we had settled on a weight of just over eight hundred pounds, as this seemed heavy enough to be a major challenge but not so heavy as to be beyond the strength of at least some of our eight stout contestants. During our planning phase we consulted with many men experienced in the Farmer's Walk, and most thought the best handle size would be approximately 1¼" so that's what we used, setting the bars in the wood so they wouldn't rotate. It was also our consensus that the bars should be approximately 30" inches apart.

The ramp, constructed near Columbus, was four feet wide and 32 feet long, with a starting pad of 8' x 4' and a flat platform of approximately the same dimensions at the end. We would have made the ramp a bit longer, but the stage on which the event was scheduled to take place, the Columbus Auditorium, prevented this. The surface of the ramp was raw plywood, which provides good footing. The men had to lift the timber apparatus with their hands alone, as straps were not allowed, but they could put it down and re-grip if they lost their balance or if their hands gave way.

Another event that we all supported from the earliest discussions involved lifting a car or truck in a type of deadlift. Many experts through the years have considered the deadlift to be the most basic test of brute strength in the iron game.[5] It requires strength in the largest muscles of the body—those in the thighs, hips, and back—and it relies little on technique. But since we wanted to make it different from a regulation deadlift, we decided to have the men lift a metal frame on top of which rested a vehicle of some sort. This would mean that the path of the lift would be considerably different from the path of a normal free-weight deadlift with an Olympic bar—which would discomfit the powerlifters. Our first plan was to have the men lift the Hummer that would be the top prize but, as it was impossible to get one of the four-ton behemoths onto one of the stages, we chose instead to use a mid-size pickup truck. The frame we planned to use had been employed in several strongman events, but with the gripping handles set much higher from the ground than the height of a regulation deadlift. Another difference would be that in our event the grip used would not be the "wheelbarrow" style—palm facing palm. In our event we would use the normal, bar-in-front-of-the-shin overhand grip and we would allow "lifting straps," which take almost all of the pressure away from the grip. Unfortunately, the frame apparatus failed to work as planned.

The fourth and final event was one over which we agonized for months, as we went back and forth considering

three or four possibilities. Finally, we decided to require the men to push a Hummer, as we wanted to involve our major sponsor in some way. We knew, of course, that a Hummer, even as heavy as they are, would be no match for the titanic men we intended to bring—that is, unless we took almost all of the air out of the tires, and that is what we did.

Svend Karlsen's willingness to participate in the first iteration of what is now called the Arnold Strongman Classic helped legitimize our contest and gave it great stature. He's shown here, in 2004, with stage announcer Clint Huft.

Choosing the Competitors

Even before we had chosen our fourth and final event, we had been involved in heavy discussions about which athletes to invite and how to invite them. We had decided to limit our competitors to eight as a way to streamline the event, and it was critical that we devise a fair set of criteria on which to base our invitations. We started by agreeing to invite the two leading weightlifters, the two leading powerlifters, and the two leading Strongman competitors, and to fill out the contest with people who were outstanding in two or more of the disciplines.

In weightlifting, the top man in 2001 had been Saed Jaber, a Bulgarian national who had transferred his citizenship to the oil-rich, and athlete-poor, nation of Qatar. Our second choice was the venerable Russian Andrei Chemerkin, former Olympic gold-medal winner and multiple world champion. Accordingly, these men were contacted—at first informally and later formally—to invite them to take part. Both men responded well to the informal contact and, though Chemerkin never accepted the formal invitation, Jaber told us via officials in Bulgaria and through backchannels that he was definitely coming. Unfortunately, he declined the invitation at the last minute, telling one of our contacts that he feared he was not heavy enough to do as well as he wanted—a fear which was probably well-grounded. We also invited Germany's Ronnie Weller. Weller declined, but added that he would probably train for the event and come the following year.[6] We then decided to ask Raimonds Bergmanis from Latvia, as he was an elite weightlifter whose chances in the event would be, we thought, improved by his having also competed quite well in WSM events over the past several years. Bergmanis accepted enthusiastically.

In powerlifting, there are more federations than layers in a croissant, but we finally settled on the largest and oldest federation—the International Powerlifting Federation—and invited the man who had won the past two world championships in the superheavyweight class, Brad Gillingham of the United States. Once Brad fully understood the events, he told us he wanted to be part of the show. The other man we invited was Gary Frank, the World Powerlifting Organization (WPO) superheavy star who had put up such high totals over the past year or two. At 6'4" and almost four hundred pounds and with a background in field events and football we suspected Frank would acquit himself well. Kaz spoke to Gary at length, as did I, and after some original reluctance he agreed to come and began to do some event training. Just a short time before the meet, however, he told us he had suffered a torn biceps, while doing deadlifts in training, and would be unable to compete.[7] Because of Frank's absence, we desperately needed another top powerlifter. After David Webster, Kaz, and I conferred, we decided that David would call England's Andy Bolton, the World Powerlifting Congress (WPC) world superheavyweight champion and then the holder of the all-time highest deadlift with 925 pounds. Andy, a man unafraid of a challenge, excitedly agreed to take part.

In the Strongman world, we went first for Norway's Svend Karlsen, a consistent and colorful athlete and the current holder of the WSM title. We also invited the 2001 runner-up and former winner, Sweden's Magnus Samuelson. Both men indicated some original interest, but both were reluctant to commit absolutely.

As the show neared, Magnus became difficult to contact, although we heard conflicting stories from mutual friends as to whether or not he was coming. Finally, hearing nothing, we moved on to Phil Pfister of West Virginia, the top-rated American Strongman competitor over the last few years. Another man we had invited earlier, in antici-

pation that either Magnus or Svend or both would turn us down in the end was Canada's Hugo Girard, who had avidly courted an invitation by sending to us a great deal of information about his career in strongman events and his interest in setting records in certain strength feats. Surprisingly, Girard bailed out just a few weeks away from the event, citing injury, but we were told by a friend of his that he thought he lacked the necessary leg and back strength. Svend remained on the fence until the last minute, but as the day to decide drew near his Viking spirit prevailed and he told us he would definitely come and that he would do well. The last man chosen was Brian Schoonveld, a stouthearted American who had been climbing the strongman ladder for several years and a man who had the stones to agree to come with very little preparation.

Our fourth category of participants—for those who had distinguished themselves in two of the three strength disciplines—came in handy as we wanted to include Mark Philippi, who had been an outstanding lifter in the American Drug-free Powerlifting Federation before deciding to concentrate on Strongman events, in which his best showing was a win at the Strongest Man in the U.S. back in 1999. Another switch-hitter who got one of the original invitations was Shane Hannan, the young Oklahoman who was one of the greatest squatters in the world (with an official best of over 1000 pounds) before following Mark Henry from powerlifting into weightlifting and erasing all three of Henry's national records. Short, but massive and explosive, Shane appeared to us to be an ideal candidate.

Terry was delighted when IPF World Powerlifting Champion and one of history's greatest deadlifters, Brad Gillingham, agreed to participate in 2002. In his powerlifting career, Brad won six IPF Open World Championships and 14 USAPL National Championships. They're shown here talking about the contest at the hotel before the events began.

I had a long conversation on the phone with him about the contest and why I thought it would be fun for him and probably good for his career as well as his pocketbook; and at first he was very enthusiastic about taking part, saying that he could see the events were real strength events, sounded safe, and didn't require much endurance. Unfortunately, six weeks or so later Shane told me he had decided not to come to Columbus after speaking to his weightlifting coach, who was apparently very negative about the event and fearful of the harmful effect a poor showing would have on Shane's career,

Another man we wanted from the first—the Gargantuan bodybuilder Greg Kovacs—was a bit counterintuitive, as he had never to our knowledge taken part in any sort of high-level strength contest. Even so, he had been given so much publicity in the bodybuilding press because of his strength and size that many people in that field had come to believe that he was, indeed, the strongest man in the world. This is what the 6'4", 380 pound Kovacs has been called, in article after article, and claims came from his camp that he had done such things as incline presses with 650 pounds for six reps, seated presses with 500 pounds for 10 reps, and so on. Our reasoning was that since the Arnold Sports Festival started as—and still included—a bodybuilding show, we thought Kovacs' fans would love to see the big man in the contest. Also, all of us were more than a little skeptical about the claims made on his behalf and we were curious to see just how strong he really was. So Kaz and I began our campaign. We had numerous conversations with Greg and/or his wife. At first, Greg appeared to be genuinely interested, though a bit apprehensive too, but in the end he decided to pass, saying that he planned to enter a bodybuilding show in May and so would have begun to cut his weight by late February—the time of our strength contest.[8]

Another man who—after much discussion within our committee—earned his invitation because of his abilities in two of the three disciplines was Mark Henry, who had made his living since 1996 as a professional wrestler for the WWF (now the WWE). Before then, Mark won several national championships in the mid-90s in weightlifting and set all the national superheavyweight records, and he also won the National and World Drug Free Powerlifting Championships in 1995, setting many world records in the squat, deadlift, and total. In fact, his combined best official lifts in weightlifting and powerlifting—all made within approximately six months—added up to a total that was the highest ever made up to 2001 and remains the highest as

of this writing. Mark had been out of competition and heavy training for a very long time, however, and his weight had dropped about 70 pounds, from 410 to 340, through dieting and doing an hour of cardio every day at the request of the WWF. For those reasons, I never gave much thought originally to him taking part.

There was also the question about whether Mark could take part in the "Arnold Strength Summit" without embarrassing himself and losing some of his crowd appeal in the WWF, where he was announced as "The World's Strongest Man." At that time there were less than four months before the show, and for the previous five years all he had done in the weight room was light, mostly upper-body bodybuilding. He had done no pulls, deadlifts, cleans, snatches, or jerks, and very few squats since 1997 and it seemed that he had too far to go. Moreover, in the fall of 2001, Mark's mother became critically ill. He took a leave of absence from wrestling, went home to East Texas, and stayed with her for the final three weeks of her life, before returning to wrestling. With the stress of her illness and death, Mark gained about 40 pounds, most of it of an unflattering sort. In spite of those obstacles, he ultimately agreed to compete after getting time off from the WWF to train.

The Contest

Finally the week of the contest arrived and one by one our eight strength athletes began to arrive in Columbus. By Thursday night everyone was settled into their suites. Thursday evening the athletes and officials assembled in a conference room along with their coaches to meet Jim Lorimer, hear him explain the activities of the next three days, and then go by bus to look at the venues and the implements that would be lifted, pushed, and carried. Jim asked me to say a few words that evening and I used my time to pay my respects to him and to Arnold for supporting our efforts so generously and to thank David, Kaz, Jan, and our equipment manager Steve Slater for their hundreds of hours of work in planning and preparing for the show. I then thanked the eight champions who had accepted the challenge and risk of our competition. I told them that we had invited the top men in the world in all of the strength sports and that not everyone had been willing to accept an invitation and to meet the challenge. I told them also how brave I thought they were for being ready to step outside the comfortable bounds of their individual sports and take part in the contest. I explained that I had conceived the event for strong men everywhere, and that I was very happy we were able to offer the largest purse in the history of such contests. I closed by saying that Kaz, Jan, David, Steve, and I all wanted the strongest man in the room to win, and that we were extremely proud that so many outstanding, powerful, and valiant men were about to make history.

Event One: Apollon's Wheels

We decided to begin the competition with Apollon's Wheels, as we wanted the men to be as fresh as possible for their assault on this legendary implement. If any one of the four tasks could be seen as the signature event for the contest, this would have been it, because the Wheels carry such a unique pedigree. We knew that thick bars with two-inch handles had been manufactured and sold over the past several years, but we also knew that if the plates used on those bars allowed the bars to rotate inside them, cleaning as well as push-pressing or jerking the bar would be much easier with any given weight than the same weight would be on an implement that allowed the bar to turn only if the wheels turned at the same time and to the same degree. This point cannot be overemphasized.

Over the weeks prior to the meet Tom Lincir of Ivanko Barbell kept us on pins and needles as he perfected his design and built the Wheels. Originally, when Tom agreed in the late fall of 2001 to build the replica, he also agreed to build a lighter set of approximately 325 pounds with the same dimensions, so the men could have it as a warm-up and so we could use it in the contest for the athletes who were unable to raise overhead the 366-pounder. The construction of the big set proved to be so difficult and time-consuming that two weeks before the show we agreed that I would arrange to have a much cruder set of light wheels made in Texas. Fortunately, a talented, semi-retired machinist lives in my neighborhood, and he cut a two-inch steel, extra-thick pipe down to 1.93" and fitted it securely into two 150-plus-pound oilfield pulleys and we had our light set of wheels. True to his word, Tom Lincir finally finished the big Wheels and they were delivered via air-freight the day before the show. And a beautiful set of Wheels they were, gleaming and yet somehow ominous—up to Tom's usual high standards.

Because cleaning the Wheels is the most difficult part of the lift, we agreed from the beginning to require the men to do repetitions of the clean as well as the overhead portion of the lift. Actually, because we heard that some of the men were having trouble cleaning 365 pounds even with the easier-to-lift two-inch bar using regular plates, we finally and reluctantly decided to allow them to lift the

Although Terry had begun to worry that the non-revolving Apollon's Wheels might prove unliftable after watching the first competitors fail, Mark Henry proved that more strength was all that was needed. He made three solid repetitions and is shown here getting the "down" signal from head referee David Webster. It was a truly historic moment.

Wheels to their shoulders in any way they wanted, except by standing the barbell on end and rocking it over onto the chest or shoulders or by "continentaling" it—i.e., by placing the bar on top of their lifting belt and boosting it up to the shoulders from there. Similarly, we allowed the men to raise it overhead by pressing it, jerking it, push-pressing it, or push-jerking it, so long as they brought it under control at arms' length to the satisfaction of the judge. We knew these rules would set on edge the teeth of many purists, but we certainly didn't want to give the men a task that none of them could accomplish. We wanted to honor the men of the past, without embarrassing the men of the present. We also thought that it might be interesting to see the sorts of inventive ways the men might find in their effort to elevate the massive, awkward weight. Little did we know how resourceful they would be.

Because we thought that some of the men would be unable to get the big Wheels to their shoulders and then overhead, we decided to start with the heavy Wheels and then to allow those who failed to negotiate them to lift the smaller ones for as many reps as possible in order for us to rank the men for points. The winner of each event was to get eight points, with the next seven men getting from seven to one. In case of a tie the points would be split. We also required the men to lift the small Wheels backstage before the event in front of the judges in order to qualify to continue in this particular event. We did this as a way to save time since we had been allotted less than an hour on the Expo stage. As it happened, only England's Andy Bolton was unable to clean the smaller Wheels, so he finished last in that event. The night before at our meeting at the hotel, the men had drawn lots to determine the lifting order in which they would attempt Apollon's Wheels on stage. Svend Karlsen wound up having to go first and Phil Pfister had the advantage of going last. Following the first event the men went in reverse order of their current point score.

Finally the time came to roll Apollon's historic Wheels onto the stage in front of approximately seven thousand excited people and give the men a chance to conquer the Wheels and join the ranks of Rigoulot, Davis, and Schemansky. We had prepared some slides of these three immortals lifting the Wheels in France, and Kaz explained to the crowd that it had been almost fifty years since the original Wheels had been lifted. What Kaz didn't say—but I think it's fair to point out—was that although all of our eight competitors weighed over 300 pounds, most of them well over, Rigoulot, Davis, and Schemansky all weighed between 220 and 230 pounds when they hoisted the great weight. I spoke to "Ski" several times before the show, and invited him to be there, and he helped me appreciate the difficulty of the challenge. "Hell," Ski said in his typical crusty, blunt way, "if you wanted to make it really tough, you should bend the bar like the original one was bent after Davis dropped it all those times back in '49."[9]

The first man to try the Wheels was the 6'3", 320-pound Viking, Svend Karlsen—the most recent winner of the WSM contest. Like all the other contestants, Svend was given 30 seconds to begin his attempt after his name was called and, during the two minutes after he began his first pull, to do as many reps as he could. Svend decided to use a technique in which he pulled the bar a few inches above his belt, rested it there briefly while leaning back, then boosted it onto the top of his abdomen and from there boosted it again to his shoulders. This he did with a slight struggle, but when he tried to push-press the Wheels over his head they only went about 2/3 of the way. After a short rest he once again took the bar to his shoulders in three

stages, but once again he was unable to shove the bar to arms' length although he came much closer the second time, using a rough push-jerk technique. He appeared to have the same sort of problem several of the men had, which was controlling the non-revolving bar as they tried to adjust it on its way over their heads.[10]

Brian Schoonveld was the second man to try the Wheels, and he devised a previously unimagined way to raise them to his shoulders. First, he used a reverse grip and lifted them to the tops of his knees and rested them there while he assumed a parallel squat position. He then released his grip and hooked his elbows under the bar and stood up so that the bar was held in the crook of his arms—as in a Zercher Lift. Next, he bent at the hips and moved his upper body forward and then quickly backward, as in a power clean, and simultaneously raised his arms into the air so that the bar rolled along his upper arms and came to rest on top of his deltoids. At that point both his arms were pointing skyward—more or less at the angle of a Nazi salute—and Brian still had the task of getting his hands under the bar so he could try to raise it overhead. Slowly but surely he managed to get first one and then the other hand under the bar, but when he tried to elevate it, his hand-spacing was quite wide and he was so exhausted that on two attempts to push-press it he got it only a bit beyond halfway. Even though he failed, his brave attempt was an amazing feat of strength and ingenuity. After 10 or 15 seconds of rest, he tried again, but this time he couldn't get the bar back on top of his shoulders.

The next competitor was big Brad Gillingham, the world powerlifting champion. He came out with fire in his belly and used a conventional power clean technique. He pulled the bar very high, but on the first attempt he failed to catch it on his shoulders. But on his second attempt he made a majestic power clean and just barely failed to fix it overhead. His textbook clean made Brad only the third man to clean Apollon's Wheels using a traditional cleaning style, as John Davis used a reverse grip to pull the bar into the air before he let go and switched his "underhand" grip back to a traditional grip before catching the bar on his shoulders.[11]

To students of pure strength, Brad Gillingham's power clean of Apollon's Wheels was one of the highlights of the entire contest, as it represented the first time that anyone—including Rigoulot, Davis, or Schemansky—had used the power clean style to take the weight to their shoulders. A biomechanical analysis of the demands of bringing this particular implement to the shoulders reveals that it is easier to clean the Wheels using a split clean style than a power clean style—or, for that matter, a squat clean style. When a split clean is done, the lifter is able to lean the torso slightly backward and thus catch the thick bar on the top of the chest more comfortably. In a standard power clean or squat clean, the hips go a bit backward and the torso is inclined a bit forward as the bar is received at the chest—especially if the lifter lowers his torso more than an inch or so from a fully upright position—and this forward-leaning position makes it very difficult to fix and hold the thick bar in place. In short, it requires more strength—literally, more power—to do what Gillingham did than what Rigoulot, Davis, and Schemansky had done, because Brad had to pull the bar higher in the air than would have been the case had he used a split clean style. That wasn't lost on the thoughtful Gillingham, a man who is part of what surely must be the strongest trio of brothers in the world—brothers who share a father who was an All-Pro lineman for the Green Bay Packers. Brad told a few of us the following day that he was so excited at having cleaned the historic implement that he had been unable to get to sleep that night.

The fourth lifter to try the Wheels was Mark Henry—by far the heaviest of the contestants at a weight of approximately 400 pounds.[12] Most observers thought that because of Mark having made a clean and jerk of five hundred pounds in the past he would be one of the favorites in this event, and those observers were correct. Using the same power clean style Gillingham had used, Mark took a traditional, pronated grip on the bar and hauled it nose-high before catching it on top of his massive chest. He then drove it overhead effortlessly, using a push-press to get the bar up. He then dropped the bar and, after the spotters had replaced it in the center of the platform, made another powerful clean and another laughably easy push-press. Down crashed the Wheels again, which once again were centered on the platform. After Mark's second successful lift, the huge crowd of about 8,000 iron-game fans were standing and screaming, as they knew they were witnessing an unprecedented event. As they roared, Mark grabbed the Wheels again and yelled as he pulled them to his chest a third time and popped them easily overhead. "I hoped I could do it three times," he explained, "as a way to honor each of the three great lifters who lifted it before I did. I did one lift for each man, and I'm lucky there were only three!"

David Webster, in an account of the contest published in the magazine *Muscle Mob*, had this to say about Mark's

The only man other than Mark Henry to lift the Apollon's Wheels replica overhead in 2002 was University of Las Vegas strength coach Mark Philippi. Philippi, as Terry explains, used a reverse grip to do a squat clean and then using just one hand, held it against his throat as he stood up before jerking it overhead. He's shown here getting ready to drop into the squat position. Although his was an unconventional style, Philippi's athleticism was amazing to witness.

performance with the Wheels, "Sensational. There is no other word for it. He was like a raging bull. He stalked the stage, then tore the bar to the shoulders easier than either Davis or Schemansky did. He celebrated exultantly with the crowd and then did another clean and jerk. Storming around like a man possessed, he psyched himself up for a third and final lift within the two minutes allocated for the attempts. The huge crowd vocally supporting him in every lift, then showed their appreciation in no uncertain fashion. I have been organizing strongman competitions since the 1940s and can honestly say that the atmosphere created at Columbus Convention Centre has never been surpassed. This should give television producers food for thought."

As the crowd noise subsided, another Mark—Mark Philippi—was chalking his hands and making ready to have a go. Having seen Philippi do so well in training, I knew he stood a good chance of lifting the Wheels. He proved me right. Using a reverse grip squat clean and, as he descended, sliding his left hand (underhand) grip to the center of the bar, he pinned the bar against his throat and held it there as he recovered from his squatting position. Once he stood up, he gradually switched his left hand off the bar and then back under it so that it matched the position of his right hand. Finally he was ready to lift the Wheels overhead. Though the lift was hard for him, he used his athleticism and strength to balance it, once he drove it off his chest, pressed it out, and held it for the "down" signal. He approached the bar for a second attempt, but gave it up as he realized he wouldn't be able to make another clean. Even so, by elevating the weight, he became the fifth man in history to lift either Apollon's Wheels or a replica of the Wheels and the crowd gave him a well-deserved and rousing ovation.

Latvia's Raimonds Bergmanis was another competitor who some predicted would do well with the Wheels because of his extensive weightlifting experience. Raimonds has lifted more than 500 pounds in the clean and jerk and he has the large, thick hands of a natural strongman. But Apollon's Wheels proved too much for the genial Latvian, and even though he attacked the bar again and again he was never able to catch it and hold it at his chest as he dropped into a mid-range squat clean. He had it high enough to squat clean several times, but not high enough to power clean, and, as explained earlier, the thick, non-rotating bar and his forward-leaning style of cleaning prevented him from completing the lift.

The last competitor was the big fireman from West Virginia—6'7", 320-pound Phil Pfister—who had larger hands than anyone else in the contest. As he approached the bar Phil exhorted the crowd for some support and they were glad to give it. But as he pulled for the first time they were no doubt as surprised as I was when he only managed to lift the Wheels a few inches off the floor. But Phil wasn't finished. He psyched again and managed to raise the bar just above his belt and lodge it onto his stomach. From there he boosted it a few inches higher and caught it again before giving it another "jump" and taking it a bit higher still. Finally, he made one last boost and turned the Wheels

into position at the top of his chest. But although he gave it a manful try, his push-press effort only went part way up before stalling and crashing back down. After a brief rest he tried again but the weight was just too heavy for him. A professional strongman competitor, Phil does very little standard lifting with barbells or dumbbells, preferring to concentrate his efforts training on the events he must do in the strongman contests.

At that point in the contest the replica of Apollon's Wheels was rolled off the stage and replaced by a set of wheels that weighed 325 pounds. The lighter wheels had a bar with the exact same diameter as the big wheels and the bar was set firmly into the two large oilfield pulleys. The pulley-wheels were a bit smaller in diameter than the railway wheels used by Apollon, and so the bar was only approximately 11/2" inches higher off the floor than an Olympic bar is when it's loaded with forty-five pound plates. But we needed the smaller wheels, as they allowed the remaining four men—Schoonveld, Gillingham, Pfister, and Bergmanis—to fight for placings. Svend Karlsen, on the basis of his two "cleans" with the heavy wheels, was awarded third place and not required to try the smaller wheels. For the rest of the men—except for Andy Bolton, who came in last on the basis of his inability to get the small wheels to his shoulders during the warm-up/qualifier—the order of lifting was the same.

First up was Brian Schoonveld, who got the small wheels to his chest using his unique style and then push-pressed them three times before returning them to the platform. His strategy was to do the extra jerks and finish ahead of any man who did one successful "clean" and overhead lift but then failed to get it to his shoulders again. Not satisfied with the one clean and three jerks, Brian tried another clean and did get the bar to his shoulders again, but this time was unable to bring his hands from the "Nazi salute" position to a position under the bar.

The next man out was Brad Gillingham, who manhandled the lighter bar—power cleaning it three times and push pressing it solidly after each clean. Following Brad was Raimonds Bergmanis, who made a hard, awkward squat clean and an easy push press, but then failed to clean the wheels again—although he made eight more attempts in the 90 or so seconds he had left after making his first lift. Obviously frustrated at his inability to clean a weight that he had probably snatched at least a hundred times during his long career, Raimonds attacked the bar furiously and with admirable heart. But the characteristics of both the light and heavy wheels, as we predicted, made the implement so much more awkward to lift that it took away from the weightlifter the natural advantage conferred by years of training on a modern, revolving bar.

The last man to lift was Phil Pfister, who once again used his four-stage quasi-continental style to get the bar to his shoulders. This he was able to do three times, and to follow these "cleans" with three push presses, thus tying Gillingham for fourth place. So after the first event, the placings and points were as follows:

POINTS AFTER FIRST EVENT	TOTAL
1. MARK HENRY	8
2. MARK PHILIPPI	7
3. SVEND KARLSEN	6
4. BRAD GILLINGHAM	4.5
4. PHIL PFISTER	4.5
5. BRIAN SCHOONVELD	3
6. RAIMONDS BERGMANIS	2
7. ANDY BOLTON	1

The Apollon's Wheels have remained the iconic event of the Arnold Strongman Classic, and in almost every year new records have been broken. As of late 2009 it stands at 10 reps, and almost every man lifts it overhead at least twice. What's more, with only one exception the man who finished first in the Wheels event is our overall champion. We've used the same set of wheels every year out of respect to the past, but hereafter we will substantially increase the weight of the wheels. To do otherwise would be to risk having a weaker but more enduring man win the event. I and my committee know that the very best test of ultimate strength would be to go to a one rep max format on every event, but we also realize that nothing excites a large crowd quite as much as watching puissant young men fight for one extra rep. We also believe that if the winner of an event does no more than five or six reps he would almost certainly have won in a one rep max format.

Event Two: The Car Lift

The Apollon's Wheels event took place late on Friday morning and we decided to do Friday's second event—the car lift—almost immediately afterward, while the men were still warmed up. Problems abounded, but our primary problem had to do with the design of the frame on which the truck the men were to lift rested. Although we were assured by the people who designed the event that a small Chevrolet S-10 pickup had been lifted "comfortably" by at least two men on the same frame that was brought to us

One of the problems the men had to negotiate in the timber frame event was making sure that they had their grip exactly centered so the frame would stay level. You can see here, as Brian Schoonveld began his assault on the course, the front edge dipped very close to the rising ramp. A number of competitors lost time by hitting the ramp.

in Columbus, record-holding deadlifters such as Brad Gillingham, Andy Bolton, and Mark Henry found during warm-ups that they were unable to lift—without limit effort (and maybe not then)—a Ford Ranger pick-up resting on the frame. As the Chevrolet S-10 and the Ford Ranger are very equivalent in size and weight we were—and remain—puzzled as to how this could be so, and the experience taught us to never again use an apparatus unless it has been adequately tested in front of one or more members of our committee prior to the competition. In any case, once we realized that none of our men might be able to lift the truck when the official contest began we were forced to scramble around and find a test that would require the same sort of basic hip, back, thigh, and shoulder strength we planned to test with the lifting of the car.

After a quick conference involving David Webster, Bill Kazmaier, John Fair, Jan, and I we decided to borrow an Olympic bar and as many Olympic plates as possible and simply ask the men to use straps and do singles in the deadlift to determine who was the strongest. But even though we found an Olympic bar, there were no hundred-pound plates, and so we realized that it would be impossible to put enough weight on the bar for at least some of the men in the event. At that point we decided to use a pair of 150-pound plus oilfield pulley-wheels and put them on the inside with Olympic plates from there on out. Even so, the most we could squeeze onto the bar with a collar was 885 pounds, and we feared that even that might not be enough for some of our eight young rhinos. First, we were permitting the men to wear straps. This was done because we did not want gripping strength to be the determining factor in the event, especially since two of the other events—Apollon's Wheels and the Farmer's Walk—were good tests of hand strength. Second, the oilfield pulley-wheels were a bit larger in diameter than standard Olympic plates, which meant that the bar would be approximately two inches higher off the floor at the start of the lift than an Olympic bar loaded with 45-pound plates would be. We reasoned that these differences would translate into heavier deadlifts.

Thus, we told the competitors that they would each get three attempts, as in a standard lifting contest, and that if they decided to try 885 pounds on any of their attempts they should lift it for as many repetitions as they could as a way to separate themselves from one another. We used the "round system," in which the men with the lightest first attempts began and then, once everyone had an attempt, the bar was lowered so the lightest second attempts could be done, and so on.

Schoonveld was first up with 615, followed by Pfister (615), Karlsen (705), Bergmanis (705), Philippi (755), Gillingham (755), Bolton (805), and Henry (805). All of these attempts were successful, and so the second "round" began, starting with Brian Schoonveld (665), Phil Pfister (675), Raimonds Bergmanis (765), Svend Karlsen (775), Mark Philippi (805), Brad Gillingham (815), and Andy Bolton (865). Mark Henry decided to take 885 on his second attempt, and he pulled this massive weight easily to the finished position once, then lowered it and did it again with power to spare. Then, for some reason, he put the bar down and began to celebrate. For their third and last attempts, Schoonveld was again first, taking (and failing with) 705. Next up was Phil Pfister, historically a poor deadlifter, who managed a fine effort with 715. Svend Karlsen followed, taking 815 but only managing to get it a bit past his knees. Raimonds Bergmanis took the same weight and was delighted to make what was for him the heaviest deadlift of his life. Mark Philippi followed with 825 and made it solidly. Then Brad Gillingham, one of the greatest deadlifters in the world, brought up 865 with no trouble at all and looked capable of doing 900. Andy Bolton took 885 for his final attempt and made Mark Henry pay by hauling the big load once, twice, and then three times to take the lead. His last lift was a real limit—

slow and soft on the lockout and featuring one of the most spectacular nose-blood explosions I've seen in forty years of powerlifting. This blowout was all the more exciting as the spectators in the bleachers (including Arnold, Maria Shriver and their children) were no more than eight to ten feet away when the eruption occurred.

Even though the deadlift event was more or less designed on the spot, the poundages lifted by all of these men were exceptional, and some were phenomenal. To a real student of strength our impromptu test of back, leg, hip, and thigh power was a breathtaking thing to watch.

At the end of two events, the placings and points were as follows:

POINTS AFTER TWO EVENTS	TOTAL
1. MARK HENRY	15
2. MARK PHILIPPI	12
3. BRAD GILLINGHAM	10
4. ANDY BOLTON	9
5. SVEND KARLSEN	8.5
6. PHIL PFISTER	7.5
7. RAIMONDS BERGMANIS	6
8. BRIAN SCHOONVELD	4

In 2003, we began to use a custom-made deadlift bar that we hoped would be popular with the fans as well as the athletes. We also hoped it would be a true test of leg, back, and hip power without giving someone with a powerlifting background too much advantage. Proof that our hopes have been realized is that we have used our big bar every year since. As we did with Apollon's Wheels, we asked Tom Lincir of Ivanko Barbell Company to design and build a bar 14' long that could hold four Hummer tires on each end plus a couple hundred extra pounds in the form of thin plates. The bar, which is 1 3/8" thick—to allow it to bend but not bend too much—is a marvel of engineering, and when it's loaded with all eight tires it dwarfs even our Brobdignagian athletes. The first year it was used, Brad Gillingham set the record with 975 pounds, but in 2008 the young Icelander Benedikt Magnusson astonished everyone in the Expo Center by pulling an otherworldly 1102 pounds. Thus far, the Deadlift has been the one event in which we use single attempts.

Event Three: The Hummer Push

The next day, Saturday, the final two events were scheduled, and the first of those was the Hummer Push—a real challenge, with deflated tires. We did our best to make the event as fair as we could, and in this effort we bought shoes for the men so they would all have the same traction. We also placed a long runner of rubberized matting between the tires so that as the Hummer was pushed the tires would roll on concrete whereas the men would have the traction provided by the rubberized and slightly spongy runner. We realized, of course, that to push a "mere" Hummer would look somewhat unimpressive when compared with the things that have been pushed via a harness in television's WSM contests—tractor-trailer trucks, buses, airplanes, etc. But we were limited to an indoors format—we couldn't go out to a local airport or train terminal. But we thought that if we took the air pressure down to almost zero even the strongest men would find it difficult not only to start the vehicle rolling but to keep it rolling. Finally, the GMC people sent a Hummer to Columbus just a couple of days before the show and so we were able to work with our two official testers in an effort to find where we should set the tire pressure.

One of the bedrock principles undergirding the competition was that all of the events involving continuous effort could last for no more than thirty seconds. The reason for this decision on our part was that the "anaerobic threshold" is between twenty and thirty seconds, so if an event takes ninety seconds or two minutes to complete it's quite

The Hummer Push turned out to be more difficult than expected because of the inability of the spotters to get the wheels in the same position for all competitors. Svend Karlsen of Sweden finished second in the event, losing to Latvia's Raimonds Bergmanis by less than a second.

possible for a man who is strong but also very aerobically fit to defeat a man who is stronger but less durable. We aimed to have the stronger men place highest in all of our events.

As we put the testers through their paces, lowering the tire pressure again and again, we learned that when the pressure was reduced to about six pounds, the Hummer became very difficult to start and to push. I actually wanted to lower it a bit more as I reasoned that the men in the competition would be brimming with energy and adrenaline and that in any case they were also a bit stronger than our testers, but I was out-voted and we set the pressure at six pounds. In hindsight, it appears as if we probably should have reduced the pressure a bit more, as seven of the eight men completed the 40' course in considerably less than thirty seconds.

One problem, however, that might have been exacerbated by a further lowering of the pressure was that it would have been even more difficult to correctly align the deflated tires at the start of each man's attempt. As it was, several of the men experienced problems because, try as we might (and did), it was apparently impossible to align the tires for each man so that they were facing dead ahead. We learned that if the tires were even a fraction off dead straight it was far more difficult to get the Hummer rolling; the deflated tires seemed to sometimes squish to one side or the other and form what amounted to a rubber wedge that had to be overcome before the man behind the wheel could straighten the tires and keep them aligned down the course. This became apparent when Brad Gillingham had trouble moving off the line and even more apparent during Mark Henry's attempt. It almost seemed—as Mark began to apply his huge body to the rear of the Hummer—that the driver had his foot on the brake. Once Mark got the Hummer started, however, it appeared—and the videotapes show this—that he was moving the vehicle very fast. Brad Gillingham, in fact, said a week or so after the show that "it was clear that the tires were wedged in some way when Mark began to push, because once he got it started his world's strongest legs moved it faster than anyone else."

Another unexpected problem we faced—and a major one—was that since the event was held inside the Expo Center we were not permitted to start the engine and leave it on during the push, which would have triggered the power steering and made it much easier for the driver to keep the tires properly aligned. I, along with several of the men, had been able to find and push a Hummer in preparation for the event, but these sessions were all done outside with the engine running and the power steering mechanism working. Overall, it was a very disappointing event and we have never repeated it.

The surprise and very popular winner of this event was the man who came the farthest, Raimonds Bergmanis—who burned up the course by covering it in 17.07 seconds. Raimonds is an extremely explosive and determined athlete and his thick legs drove like pistons over the course of the race. The athletic Svend Karlsen came in second at 17.62 seconds, followed by Phil Pfister (18 seconds), Mark Philippi (18.53 seconds), Mark Henry (20.59 seconds), Andy Bolton (23.47 seconds), Brad Gillingham (25.60 seconds), and Brian Schoonveld, (who managed to make it 35'6" in the allotted 30 seconds).

At the end of three events the points were:

POINTS AFTER THREE EVENTS	TOTAL
1. MARK HENRY	19
2. MARK PHILIPPI	17
3. SVEND KARLSEN	15.5
4. RAIMONDS BERGMANIS	14
5. PHIL PFISTER	13.5
6. BRAD GILLINGHAM	12
6. ANDY BOLTON	12
8. BRIAN SCHOONVELD	5

In 2004 we introduced another classic test of strength—the Heavy Yoke, in which the men lift and then carry on their shoulders the colossal load of 1116 pounds, the heaviest Yoke ever carried in a contest. The Yoke was made for us by Richard Sorin of Sorinex, and it has worked very well for us in all the years since. To watch our athletes lift and carry almost three times as much as the early WSM competitors carried in the Refrigerator Race—and to do it in an anatomically more difficult manner—is to realize the advances in human strength that have been made in the years since 1977.

We also use our Yoke (unloaded) in another, more recent event—the Manhood Stones—which we do very differently than other contests, which usually use five increasingly heavy stones and require the men to put the stones, from lightest to heaviest, onto some sort of platform. In our version of the event, which we have done for three years now, we begin with a stone which is heavier than any man has ever lifted officially and we ask the men to lift it over the bar on our yoke, set at four feet, as many times as possible in 90 seconds. The record currently

stands at 530 pounds, which Zydrunas Savickas put over the bar three times.

Event Four: The Timber Carry

The final event—a variety of what has come to be called the Farmer's Walk—was one that required a lot of research, thought, and experimentation. Earlier, I explained that David Webster, Bill Kazmaier, and I had concluded that the Farmer's Walk event, as it's usually done, lasts too long and uses implements which are too light for it to be a true test of brute strength. In a race for time, the lighter the objects carried and the farther they are carried, the less chance there is for a really strong man to win. Imagine, if you will, two objects weighing one hundred pounds each and a race in which the contestants are to carry the two objects as far as possible in five minutes. Does anyone think that it would have been particularly difficult to find athletes (certain football players, for example, or wrestlers) who could have easily defeated Bill Kazmaier and Jón Páll Sigmarsson in their primes in such a race? What about a race lasting 10 minutes, in which the contestants carried fifty-pound implements? In that race it would be no great challenge to find very fit, enduring athletes such as decathletes who could defeat the men who defeated Kaz and Jón Páll in the previously imagined race. Thus, we wanted to keep the time of the race near the upper limit of the anaerobic threshold and we wanted to load the men as heavily as possible so that we were coming as close as we could to testing limit strength, not a combination of strength and endurance. However, even the latter part of the plan—to "load the men as heavily as possible"—proved problematic as we had no completely trustworthy method of knowing just how heavily we could load our eight strong men, especially since we were going to ask them to carry the implement up a ramp and not on a flat course—for reasons described earlier in the chapter.[13]

Originally, the plan had been to stage this event on Saturday night at the Columbus Auditorium during the crowning of the winner of the Arnold Classic bodybuilding contest. That stage would only allow us a total course length of approximately 32-feet and so that's how long we had the Ohio carpenters make the ramp. Early on, I had suggested to Jim Lorimer and Arnold that by allowing us to have the final event that night it would be a fitting way for the audience to watch as these giants of strength fought one another for the keys to a new Hummer. I explained that in most Strongman competitions, the Farmer's Walk is usually very popular among the spectators.

But as to how heavy we should make the implement the men would carry, we were entering uncharted waters. The heaviest Farmer's Walk any of us had heard about involved implements of approximately 350 pounds on a flat course, and most such "Walks" used far less than that in terms of weight. Plus, we had to consider that having to walk up a ramp with any given weight would be more difficult than walking along a flat course with the same weight. One unanswered question was that by using one solid implement (not unlike a giant "trap" bar) instead of two separate implements would we be making the event easier or more difficult. We thought we knew, but could we be certain? We were certain of one thing, which was that by using one solid implement instead of two unconnected implements we would be making the event different—and this would help to insure that the "strongman" contestants with years of experience in the Farmer's Walk would lose a bit of their "training" advantage.

With those considerations in mind, David, Kaz, and I spent dozens of hours agonizing over how heavy to make the implement, and each of us called other experts to get their opinions. Finally, as was stated earlier, we decided to build an implement of just over 800 pounds. Regarding the bar thickness of 1¼", the general consensus was that anything much smaller would cut into the hands of the contestants and anything much larger might be impossible to grip and hold in a carrying event with such a heavy load.

The only one of the athletes I saw train during the run-up to the event was, of course, Mark Henry, and I watched him each week as he would load a rectangular metal apparatus he'd had made at a machine shop. Each week he'd load it with more and more weight and carry it up a ramp at the Varsity Weight Room at the University of Texas in Austin. Although he had never done a Farmer's Walk event, and had only tried once to carry two objects—he carried two plate-loaded metal racks that day weighing 365 pounds each up a slight hill for a distance of approximately 50 feet and said he could have gone further—I suspected that because of his overall body power and freakish strength of grip he should be able to meet this challenge, if he had enough time to practice. Watching him get stronger gave me the confidence to suggest that a weight of 800 pounds was not unreasonable. I realized, of course, that an apparatus made out of thick timbers would be more cumbersome and difficult to balance than the small rectangular frame Mark was using in practice. Even so, I thought that when the Hummer was on the line most of the men would be able to carry 800 pounds at least part of the way

up the ramp. I was joined in this assessment by several of our contestants, including Svend Karlsen, who thought 800 pounds sounded about right. I discussed this with David and Kaz and they both agreed that we should try our very best to load the men so that most of them could finish the course.

Finally, a father-and-son team of carpenters in Texas began to build the apparatus about a month before the event, after I had at last located some old timbers, and they finished just a few days before the apparatus had to be loaded onto a flatbed trailer and hauled up to Columbus. But before we loaded it, I asked Mark to come to the small town where it was built and try to lift and carry it. Even though it could be argued that by doing this I was giving Mark an advantage over the other contestants I felt we had to be certain that the apparatus could be lifted, balanced, and carried up a slight grade. I discussed this with David, Jan, and Kaz and they concurred. We had to learn if the much more massive load of timbers would create problems for Mark and, by extension, the other competitors. And whom could I ask if not Mark? If there was a problem with the apparatus we needed to know it, so the problem could either be fixed before the actual contest or so we'd know we had to use a smaller, plate-loading metal frame instead of that colossal load of timbers. So, Mark drove down and it was good that he did, as he bent the braces the carpenters had used to hold the carrying bars in place. He predicted after looking the apparatus over that the braces would bend, but the carpenters said they wouldn't. The braces did bend when he lifted it, however, but new and larger braces were installed and the new braces held when Mark raised it off the shop floor for the second time. Encouraged, we loaded the bolted-together pile of timbers onto a trailer, drove it a couple of miles to the parking lot of a nearby grocery store, and unloaded it. Quickly, so as not to draw a crowd and perhaps be stopped by the store managers, Mark—already warm by having lifted the apparatus a few times while the bracings and balance were being checked out—stepped inside the timbers, chalked his hands, took his grip, lifted the timbers, and carried them up a grade fairly comfortably for about thirty-five feet. This was impressive to see, of course, but what really made Jan and I happy was that the apparatus appeared to balance well and, even more important, was definitely not so heavy as to be unserviceable for a lift-and-carry event.

The night before the contest began, the athletes saw for the first time the daunting pile of timbers for themselves. They were asked if they'd like to lift it, but understandably no one stepped forward. Even so, after being assured that the timbers weighed "only" about 815-825 pounds, and that Mark had had one successful "test-flight" with them, the men collectively decided it could be lifted. They did make a group request to have the apparatus placed on blocks for each man so it wouldn't be necessary to squat down so far to lift the apparatus before carrying it up the ramp. The officials accepted that request.

One final twist in this event was that on Friday afternoon, just after the first day of competition, Jim Lorimer approached me and said that he and Arnold had been looking at the pile of timbers and were concerned that if none of the men could carry it up the ramp it would put a damper on the final show on Saturday night. He said they both doubted if anyone could really carry it all the way to the top. I explained that Mark had done it, and that after seeing the pile of timbers for themselves the men agreed that it could be lifted and carried. I also told him that Kaz and I felt fairly certain that several of the men would be able to lift the timbers and carry them the full length of the ramp inside the 30-second time limit. I explained that even if some of the men failed to go all the way up we would mark the distance they achieved and that their failure would prove to the audience the difficulty of the task. Jim said he would talk it over with Arnold and get back to me. He did so the following morning, when he told me that he and Arnold were still worried and wanted us to move the event to Saturday afternoon on the stage at the Expo Center. Naturally, my committee, I and all of the competitors were disappointed by the decision, but we were still grateful to Arnold and Jim and wanted to make the best of things. We consoled ourselves with the knowledge that an even larger crowd would get to see the men lift and carry the timbers, because the Expo Center on Saturday would be even more crowded than it was on Friday.

Accordingly, the ramp was loaded onto a truck in pieces and assembled in the center of the Expo stage for the final, and deciding, event. The first man to challenge the timbers was Brian Schoonveld, and he drew roars of approval from the crowd by hauling the apparatus up the ramp in only 13.5 seconds and then holding it in the air for at least five seconds longer, smiling for all to see. He had been a bit overmatched in the overall contest, and it was good to see him finish on a high note. The only dark moment of the entire contest occurred on the next attempt, when Brad Gillingham injured his biceps just as he lifted the timbers off the frame. He immediately dropped the weight, and at first it was unclear if his injury was serious.

At the 2002 Arnold, Terry and I had the good fortune to meet strongman competitor—and all-around great guy—Steve Slater who agreed to begin helping us with future contests. Since 2003 Steve has been an integral team member both on the planning and the execution of the Arnold—running the stage crew, coordinating the equipment, building equipment, and suggesting events for the shows. Terry and I soon recognized Steve as the third director of the contest and with Terry's passing, I've been blessed to co-direct the 2019 and 2020 ASCs with Steve. We're working now on our plans for 2021.

But unfortunately he had partially torn his biceps, and a few days later he underwent surgery to repair the injury. My personal feeling is that had he not gotten a bad start with the Hummer and not torn his biceps with the timbers he would probably have finished in the top three in this contest. Brad is large, athletic, and powerful to a degree rarely seen and he has demonstrated this in the years since by winning many world powerlifting championships.

The next man up was Great Britain's Andy Bolton, who fought his way to the top of the ramp in a time of 19.2 seconds. Pfister then came out to wrap those monstrous mitts around the bars and show the crowd why he's been so successful on the Strongman circuit over the past few years. He did not disappoint, literally smoking the course in the amazing time of only 8.7 seconds. So much for the men not being able to carry the timbers up the ramp! As it happened, the only man who failed to take the timbers all the way to the top was the next competitor—Latvia's Raimonds Bergmanis—who was bothered by a slight hand injury he had sustained going for one of his many misses with Apollon's Wheels. The bum hand affected his grip, and without full command of your grip it's impossible to hold the bars tightly enough to make it all the way up the ramp.

Norway's Svend Karlsen was in third place going into this event, and he hoped to improve his position and, perhaps, to win it all if Mark Henry should happen to falter. So he summoned all of the Viking Power at his disposal and almost matched Pfister's time, hitting the finish line in only 9.5 seconds. Mark Philippi needed to finish no lower than one place behind Svend in order to remain in second place overall and bring home $15,000, but he had a bit of grip trouble and finished behind both Bolton and Schoonveld. This put Svend temporarily in first, Phil in second, and Mark Philippi in third.

Things now rested in the broad paws of Mark Henry, who had led the contest from the beginning and, as the leader, had retained the important advantage of going last in the final two events. This is especially critical in the last event as the leader knows in advance of his attempt what he needs to do to win not just that event but the much more important overall victory. As Mark prepared for his attempt with the timbers he knew that he didn't have to win this particular event in order to retain the lead. He knew that the only way he could lose would be if he really tried to hurry, stumbled, and was forced to re-grip. Armed with this knowledge, he lifted the timbers carefully, got his balance, and then marched majestically up the ramp toward victory, $10,000, a tropical vacation for two, the keys to a brand new silver Hummer with all the bells and whistles, and the screams and cheers of the thousands of fans. After roaring out his joy and acknowledging the crowd, Mark walked down the ramp and toward the back of the platform. Halfway there, he collapsed to one knee and began to sob. Someone went to him to ask if he was okay, and Mark finally managed to say, "I won the contest, but I lost my mother."

The final results and point totals were as follows:

FINAL RESULTS	TOTAL POINTS
1. MARK HENRY	25
2. SVEND KARLSEN	22.5
3. PHIL PFISTER	21.5
4. MARK PHILIPPI	20
5. ANDY BOLTON	16
5.RAIMONDS BERGMANIS	16
6. SVEND KARLSEN	8.5
7. BRAD GILLINGHAM	13
8. BRIAN SCHOONVELD	10

In the aftermath of the final event, everyone was proud that the men rose to the challenge so well and most of the competitors said they thought we should add weight for the show the following year. Both Arnold and Jim said af-

terward that they wished they had had the faith to put the Timber Carry in the Saturday night show, adding that next year they would definitely do so, which they did—to dramatic effect.

The Timber Carry is the one event in which the rate of improvement has been far slower than in other events. For example, after seven of our athletes carried it to the top in 2002 and we increased the weight to 875 pounds, only two men managed to finish the course—Svend Karlsen and Zydrunas Savickas, who dominated the overall contest for six years beginning in 2003. Interestingly, in 2004, although Zydrunas was so far ahead that he didn't need to do well in the Timber Carry to win the overall title, he failed to reach the finish line because he kept dropping the bar—and he has failed to finish the Carry in every subsequent contest even though we have never again increased the weight of the timbers. One of the reasons that some of our athletes—including Savickas—have had problems with this event is that they've gained a substantial amount of bodyweight, which thickens the hands so that it feels a bit like gripping a bar while wearing a pair of gloves. Zydrunas, for example, weighed no more than 340 pounds his first year but he was up to about 400 when he won in 2008.[14]

Another of our newer events is what we call the Circus Dumbbell, in which the men have to lift the bell from the floor to the shoulders with two hands and then to arm's length overhead with one hand. The dumbbell is a handcrafted masterpiece made by Richard Sorin to look like the globe-ended dumbbells famously used by travelling strongmen such as Louis Cyr during the golden age of the professional strongman. Our bell has a handle three inches in diameter and in 2009 it was loaded to approximately 203 pounds. In future contests, however, we'll be forced to increase the weight substantially since the overall contest winner in Savickas' absence, Connecticut's Derek Poundstone, toyed with the implement as he knocked out 15 repetitions in technically superb fashion.[15]

Aftermath

The word we got after the 2002 contest from Arnold and Jim—as well as from other veterans of the Arnold Sports Festival—was that the Arnold Strength Summit (known for the last six years as the Arnold Strongman Classic) was a great success, warts and all. Also, Arnold and Jim pledged to continue and even expand their support of the show, which they have done. Overall, David, Kaz, Jan, Steve Slater, and I were very proud to have played a role in the event and excited at the prospect of correcting our mistakes and hosting even better events in the coming years—which Jim Lorimer and Arnold tell us we have done. In fact, they've both said that of the dozens of sporting events which comprise the Arnold Sports Festival, the Strongman contest is the most popular.

It was a great honor to be asked by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Lorimer to take the lead role in designing and conducting this particular competition—this strength contest. Few things I have ever done have been as challenging or, at the end of the day, as rewarding. Had I not had the constant help and support of my committee—not to mention that of Arnold and Jim—it would have been impossible to do what we did.

At the 2002 contest, we brought together the greatest athletes in the world in powerlifting and the strongman competitions, and we had two elite weightlifters, too. And the top men who weren't in Columbus weren't absent because they hadn't been asked. We did our dead-level best to assemble the very strongest men in the world in order to determine who was the strongest man of all, and we have done the same every year since then. Ideally, we want to have the top powerlifters, weightlifters, and Strongman competitors in our contest, but as the years have passed only the Strongman competitors seem keen to take part. My committee and I believe this is due in large part to the fact that most powerlifters, with their increasing dependence on supportive gear, have marginalized themselves and lost popularity. In fact, we're convinced that the decision by most of the many powerlifting federations to allow the use of tight squat suits and bench shirts—*which can add an astonishing 50 per cent to a person's best lift*—has been a colossal mistake. For this reason, we have always refused to allow such suits and shirts in our contests. As for the weightlifters, whose power is limited to a very narrow range, the thoughtful lifters realize that they lack the total body strength the top strongmen have. Because of this, most weightlifters are reluctant to use what strength they have to face the challenge of a contest which tests their overall brute strength.

Who can say what events may be added or subtracted, and who can predict the strength limits of these Herculean men, who have created many new "world records" every year? Yet as strength athletes change so do we, and we continue to search for new, relatively safe methods to test for raw strength. By 2005 we had moved from four to six events and from eight to ten competitors because the tele-

vision people believed they needed more action to produce a one or two-hour show. Even so, we'll probably drop one event for the 2010 contest as we still hold the opinion that five, or even four, properly designed events are enough to determine who is the strongest man in a contest.

In any case, the ultimate challenge of the Arnold Strongman Classic will be there every year for anyone with a strong back, a stout heart, and a willingness to lay it on the line for everyone to see. The men that first year behaved like the warriors they were; they were brave, valiant, and anxious to confront the events and each other. Also, they were unfailingly open in their praise of one another and supportive of outstanding performances. They could not have conducted themselves more appropriately nor could we have been more proud of them. They were—all of them—physically strong men in the truest and best sense and the tradition they began has continued in the years since.

Notes:

1. William Butler Yeats, "The Fascination of What's Difficult," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (1989), online at: poetryfoundation.org.

2. At the time each man conquered the Wheels he was generally considered to be the strongest man in the world.

3. In 1977, as plans were being made for the first WSM contest, I was asked by the organizers of the contest to comment on the events that were under discussion. Although several of the possible events seemed poorly designed to me, one of them stood out as being potentially dangerous. That event—the Refrigerator Race—became infamous after the contest because one of the competitors, the bodybuilder Franco Columbu, suffered a catastrophic injury to his knee halfway through the race. My main concern was that since the weight of the refrigerator, less than 500 pounds, wasn't particularly heavy for such powerful men and since the race was to be run on a flat course, some of them would obviously begin to run as soon as they could to increase their speed. This meant, in turn, that their momentum, added to their bodyweight and the weight of the fridge, would mean that each time one of their feet hit the ground the knee on that leg would be exposed to a load which would increase as their speed increased. I explained my concerns to the organizers of the WSM, and suggested that the problem could be dramatically reduced by simply having the men carry the refrigerator up a slight grade. By having to go up some sort of grade the men would be prevented from ever moving fast enough to build up the momentum which might overload their knees. Unfortunately, that was not done and Columbu sustained an injury which was so extensive that his leg was never the same again in terms of strength and muscle size. Columbu filed a lawsuit, which he eventually won, against Trans-World International [TWI], the producers of the WSM contest.

Before the suit was settled, however, a related event occurred which might help in understanding how the leadership of TWI viewed the contest. That event took place in the months after the suit was filed but prior to the second annual WSM contest. By that time I had been hired by CBS Sports as a consultant/color commentator for their strength-related programming, and one of my first responsibilities was to serve as an advisor to and the chief official (unfortunately called the "Commissioner of Power") of the next WSM event. As soon as the president of CBS Sports, Eddie Einhorn, gave me this assignment, I got in touch with TWI and asked which events they planned to use. In that first conversation, I asked if they still planned to use the Refrigerator Race and was told that they were. I then said that I certainly hoped that for the 1978 version of the show the men would race up some sort of grade. After a moment's hesitation, the executive said that there would be no change because their lawyer had advised them that changing the event to make it arguably safer would be tantamount to admitting negligence, which is exactly what Columbu had charged in his lawsuit. I took issue with the decision, but the legal advice prevailed and the race was run on flat ground. Fortunately, no one was injured.

4. Although such decisions are trivial as far as determining who is the "Strongest Man," they cannot be ignored by those of us charged to create a strength contest for an audience, since one of our responsibilities is to excite, entertain, and even astound the audience.

5. I, my wife Jan, David Webster, and Bill Kazmaier agree.

6. He would do neither.

7. We invited him to next-year's show, but he declined.

8. Since Kovacs' unwillingness to take part in our contest there have been far fewer claims in the "muscle magazines" about his strength.

9. According to experts with whom I discussed this, a bent bar would likely be easier to clean, as any sort of significant bend would tend to keep the bar from wanting to roll and thus come out of the lifters' hands.

10. Prior to the event, I told the competitors that there were three things which would make Apollon's Wheels difficult to lift: its weight, its thick handle, and the fact that whenever the bar itself would turn the wheels would also turn, which meant that they would constantly be readjusting it as they pushed it overhead. Some men were surprised to find that push-press reps pumped their forearms as they had to fight against the tendency of the bar to roll.

11. Davis' dramatic lift, on his sixth or seventh attempt, was captured on film. Bud Greenspan of Olympic documentary film fame—making his first "major" documentary, called *The Strongest Man in the World*—followed Davis to France in 1949 to film him at the World Weightlifting Championships. While there, Greenspan immortalized Davis' heroic final effort with the Wheels, including the immediate aftermath of the lift, when an exhausted Davis fainted and slumped into the arms of a nearby official.

12. None of the lifters were weighed before the meet.

13. Also, we feared a load near the limit of the men's total body strength would be too heavy for their grip. We hoped to use a weight, a bar size, and a ramp angle that would mean their grip strength and their body strength would be tested to approximately the same degree. Our hopes were only partly realized.

14. He took a break in 2009 but vows to return in 2010.

15. Breaking the prior record by six reps.