

# MY REMEMBRANCE OF JEAN PAUL GETTY

by David P. Willoughby  
Edited by Jan Todd



*This memorial of David Willoughby's friendship with J. Paul Getty was found in his personal archives, but it does not appear to have ever run in a physical culture magazine. However because it contains some fascinating details about the life of Willoughby, Getty, and Milo Steinborn, we thought we would share it here.*

After perusing the autobiography of J. Paul Getty, which was published posthumously (Getty died on 6 June 1976, at the age of 83) under the title of *As I See It*, I was somewhat disappointed, although not surprised, to note that at a whole group of men he once had good times with was not even mentioned in the book.<sup>1</sup> After all, that is quite understandable of a man whose special interests in another field—the petroleum industry—involved so many personalities that it would have been impossible to refer to them all in any book short of an encyclopedia. In view of this, a few words here to fill in some of the omitted points of interest may not be out of place.

Although Getty, who was addressed by his friends as Paul, mentioned in his book that in his younger days he was interested in boxing, and that he had once sparred with his friend Jack Dempsey, he was also interested—either actively or potentially—in other forms of athletics as well. One of these came to be the sport of weightlifting. Paul and I first met on the beach at Malibu, California, when a group of athletes from the Los Angeles Athletic Club had been invited to the Beach Club there, of which Paul was a member. I, at the time, was amateur weightlifting champion of Southern California, and the year was 1923. Seeing me on the beach hoisting one of the other athletes overhead, Paul came over and introduced himself.

Although Paul had no aspirations of becoming a competitive amateur weightlifter—which would have taken up an excessive amount of his exceedingly valuable

time—he clearly was interested in simple tests of strength, especially feats requiring gripping strength. In such tests he became quite strong, at least strong enough to keep up with me until the final degree of power was required. Once he brought to the L.A.A.C. a 300-pound oilfield worker to see what the fellow could do with a barbell. But probably from lack of familiarity with such apparatus, the man didn't do very well, even though he was regarded as being the strongest man in his particular oilfield. On another occasion, Paul took me out to a different oilfield, to see how I might compare with the strongest man there. Being young, determined, and familiar with all types of lifting,

I had no trouble outlifting my opponent in every test. But I did not leave the field without finally straining my back trying to lift one end of a huge casting that my opponent had had enough sense not to even attempt. "Come on, Dave, it's moving," exhorted Paul, as I fruitlessly tried to raise one end of what was found later to be a 1600-pound casting. Even at that, my back would probably have remained unstrained had it not been that the casting was setting on some springy planks, which subjected my lower back to alternate stretchings as well as contractions, as my feet bent the planks under the pressure of my lifting on the casting.

In the latter part of 1923, Paul invited me to dinner at

his new home, on South Tremaine Avenue in the Wilshire district of Los Angeles. There he introduced me to his first wife, whom he had married only a year or so earlier. [Getty's first wife was Jeannette DeMont Getty.] After Paul and I had talked on various subjects for perhaps a couple of hours, I cautiously brought up a matter in which I hoped he would be cooperative. So, I asked him if he would be interested in sponsoring a magazine on physical culture which I was prepared to edit and do all the work on. To this day I can remember the exact words which he responded: "You get your magazine going, Dave, and I'll

be glad to subscribe to a couple of copies." Perhaps I had erred in tackling a hoped-for backer while he was still only a millionaire!

During January 1924, Getty built a gymnasium in the rear of his property on Tremaine Avenue. As I recall, he did this by using the building that had previously been his two-car garage. After the gym was completed, and was equipped with a good supply of weights, along with chinning and dipping bars, etc., Getty kindly offered the free use of the gym to me and to several of my associates who were also on the weightlifting team of the Los Angeles Athletic Club. At this time we were all training for the National Olympic weightlifting competitions, which were to be held on 19 April 1924 at the L.A.A.C. In this competition no heavy-weight contestants made an appearance. In the lightweight (181¾-lb.) division I won first place with the following lifts: Left hand Snatch, 145 pounds; Right hand Clean and Jerk, 185½ pounds; Two Hands Military (NOT Olympic) Press, 156 pounds; Two Hands Snatch, 172 pounds; Two Hands Clean and Jerk, 240 pounds; five-lift total, 898½ pounds. When I think of my having been awarded a gold medal for such a puny performance, I am obliged to smile; however, weightlifting in the United States in 1924 was a far cry from the well-organized and highly competitive event that it is today.

A red-letter day for weightlifters in Los Angeles occurred on 25 August 1925 when the celebrated German world record holder, Henry "Milo" Steinborn, arrived from the east coast, where he had been living for several years. I met him at my home the following day and in time became well acquainted with him and his capabilities. Steinborn's connection with the present narrative is that I introduced him to J. Paul Getty. And since Steinborn was out of work and in need of employment, Getty gave him a laboring job in one of his oilfields. Naturally after a day of such heavy work Steinborn was more in need of rest than of additional exercise, and he was understandably resentful when Getty insisted on him devoting his evenings to training him (Getty) in Getty's gym.

To add to Steinborn's woes, as he was giving a

Rome, Italy.

January 7, 1966.

Mr. David P. Willoughby,  
820 Wilson Street,  
LAGUNA BEACH, California 92651,  
U.S.A.

Dear Dave,

I have just finished reading your letter. You apparently know a great deal about ancient statuary since you recognized the Landsdowne Hercules. Incidentally, when you and I used to go around together you would have been a very good model yourself for a statue of Hercules. I hope you still have your figure, even though I know you don't get in as many hours in the gymnasium as you did when you and I used to work out together.

Your present job sounds very interesting. I hope that this year we can have a visit and talk over old times.

With all best wishes to you and your wife,

Sincerely,

*Paul*  
J. Paul Getty



Twenty-something Jean Paul Getty appeared to have an athletic build. An unknown photographer snapped this image at Santa Monica Beach circa 1916 to 1919. Courtesy of The Getty Research Institute, Institutional Archives.

Willoughby met Jean Paul Getty in 1923 while he and members of the Los Angeles Athletic Club performed lifting stunts on the beach in Malibu, California. This 1966 letter from Getty to Willoughby demonstrates that they remained friends despite the passage of time. The job that Getty refers to was Willoughby's career as an illustrator for Cal Tech University.

public exhibition of strength where he allowed a car to be driven over a trestle that he supported on his uplifted feet, something went wrong and one of his legs was broken. Actually, as a photograph taken at the time revealed, Henry did not have his legs straightened sufficiently to support the heavy bridge and car. Apparently this, along with the driver craning his head out of the car window instead of watching where he was going, caused too much weight to come over one of Henry's legs (whether the right or left, I do not recall), with the result that both the tibia and the fibula were fractured. Despite this setback, Steinborn soon resumed his work in Getty's oilfield. But the leg never regained the strength that it had possessed before the injury, and no longer could Henry squat with over 500 lbs.

Late in the year 1926 I turned professional by opening a bodybuilding gymnasium in downtown Los Angeles. As the gym was on the second floor of the building, with several small businesses on the ground floor below, it can be imagined how the people below felt every time a ponderous weight was dropped above! Steinborn was very

helpful to me by bringing numerous professional wrestlers to the gym with him to work out. In fact, Steinborn and I introduced a considerable number of these wrestlers to the benefits of training with weights. Pete Sauer, a light-heavy-weight wrestler who had gotten nowhere, after training for a few months with weights developed into a rugged heavyweight, took the name Ray Steele, and became one of the topnotch wrestlers of that era. Other outstanding wrestlers with whom I became acquainted in my gym were Jim Londos, Ed “Strangler” Lewis, George Kotsonaros, Jim Browning, Nick Lutze, Dick Daviscourt, and a number of others, including even Bull Montana! I also became acquainted (outside my gym) with Hans Steinke, a friend of Steinborn’s and one of the biggest and strongest of all the wrestlers of those days. Gradually, Steinborn was able to secure enough wrestling matches to discontinue his work for Paul Getty. But professional wrestling in Los Angeles was in a deplorable condition at that time, and only those in the topmost class could dictate their terms, while lesser wrestlers had to accept what they were offered, which in some cases did not

even cover the costs of medical attention. Steinborn, for one, did much better by returning to the east, where in time he became a successful promoter rather than a performer.

To get back to J. Paul Getty, in addition to interesting him in weightlifting, I got him to share to a certain extent also my interest in the comparative strength of “animals,” in particular, anthropoid apes. Thus it was that on a Thursday—4 December 1924—Paul Getty, his wife Jeannette Dumont, and I went to Selig’s Zoo in Los Angeles, which zoo was located in what was then known as Eastlake Park. There photos of a trained female chimpanzee named “Mary” were taken. We tried to get her to exhibit her muscular strength, but did not accomplish much. I did, however, manage to secure the ape’s bodily measurements (from the waist up), which were as follows: Height, about 3 feet 6 inches; weight 123 pounds; neck 17, chest 40, upper arm (flexed) 13½, forearm 11½, wrist 7¾. It may be noted that these upper-body girths are well within the range of proportions present in men of average size. However, though the neck is in human proportion to the wrist, it is overly large for the chest and arms. But the biceps and forearm are in good proportion to the chest. If a man standing, say 5 feet 8 inches had these chest and arm

girths he would weigh about 143 pounds. Thus he would weigh about 20 pounds more than the chimpanzee, and this would be because of his longer and thicker legs. A weight-trained human athlete would be approximately as strong muscularly as a chimpanzee of the same arm and chest girths, although the man would weigh more on account of his heavier legs. Thus it would be unreasonable to expect a man to be as strong in the arms and chest as a chimpanzee of the same *bodyweight*, since at a given weight the ape would have *larger* arm and chest muscles.

As is related in the conventional biographical accounts of J. Paul Getty, he ultimately had five marriages and five children, all sons, although his second wife was childless. Since 1956, when he was 64, Getty lived alone at Sutton Place, Guilford, England, some 30 miles west-southwest from London. He became a friend of W. A. Pullum, the famous 9-stone lifting champion, who in the Camberwell District of London ran a school or club for weightlifters. There, with Pullum officiating, Getty was present when Herman Goerner made a Righthand Dead Lift record of 602½ lbs., on August



The 1963 BBC documentary, *The Solitary Billionaire: J. Paul Getty*, showed a young Getty lifting weights at the beach, as well as Getty at 70 years of age performing overhead presses. Getty told interviewer Alan Whicker that he believed in exercising every day.

22, 1927. Although this lift was far below the 727½ pounds that Gorner had lifted in 1920 in Leipzig, Getty presented him with \$100 for having performed the feat (which was made on one of Pullum’s “cambered” bars, with which Goerner was unfamiliar). In more recent years Getty attended some of the annual “Mr. Universe” competitions held in London.

Getty also owned a villa near Rome, Italy, where he would go when the weather became too inclement in England. And he built a magnificent Art Museum in Malibu, California, which structure he never saw! I have at least one reminiscent personal letter that was received from Getty after he had moved to England. From there also I used to receive a Christmas card each year. However, since Getty’s secretary evidently intercepted or prevented any of my letters from reaching him personally, I finally was obliged to give up trying to correspond with him!

#### NOTES

1. Jean Paul Getty, *As I See It: The Autobiography of J. Paul Getty* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1976). This book was in press when Getty died.