

PETE GEORGE: A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

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When I started weight training in the early 1960s, the name of Pete George, along with other weightlifting greats of the Golden Age of the previous decade, including Tommy Kono, Norbert Schemansky, Isaac Berger, and Chuck Vinci, still resonated. Since then I have had the pleasure of interviewing all of them for my various publications, except for Pete. But it is with him that I developed the closest and most meaningful personal relationship.

Although I had corresponded with Pete and written about him after beginning physical culture research in the mid-1980s, it was not until the Centennial Olympics in Atlanta where I served as a volunteer in the weightlifting venue and Pete was honored as one of the hundred greatest Olympians that we actually met. While working one afternoon at the competition site, I happened to see Pete and his wife Lazarina in the audience. A brief conversation ensued which led to a fruitful correspondence over the next decade. It culminated in a 2010 article in *Ohio History* entitled "The Ethnic Origins of Ohio's Strength Culture" in which Pete and his brothers Jim and George figured prominently. At that time Pete pointed out to me that he was the first person of Bulgarian ancestry to win an Olympic gold medal (in 1952) and that if he and Jim were a separate nation between 1947 and 1960, "we would have scored more points in world and Olympic competition than

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all but 4 nations." It was a remarkable story of immigrant family achievement, the full extent of which remains to be told.

That Pete held a special place in the pantheon of weightlifting heroes was evident in an all-time ranking of Olympic and world title-holders in weightlifting compiled in 1982 by Hungarian educator Ferenc Fejer. Pete, with six gold medals, placed third, just behind Tommy Kono with eight. A significant feature of Pete's greatness is that he was always willing to contribute his expertise and share his knowledge to benefit weightlifting on a local and national scale and to recognize others' accomplishments. He was especially apt to extol the achievements of Tommy Kono, thereby contributing to the latter's reputation as the greatest weightlifter of all times.

My most significant remembrance in this regard was the critical role Pete played in securing the transfer in 2016 of the Kono collection from Tommy's home in Aiea to the University of Texas. Tommy had not been close to Terry Todd and had expressed his resolve to have nothing to do with *Iron Game History* or any of the worthy enterprises at the Stark Center that Terry had a hand in creating. As Tommy's close friend, Pete shared these sentiments, as did some members of the Kono family. I first encountered this when I asked him to write a remembrance of Tommy for the article I was preparing for a special issue on Kono for *Iron Game History*. During a subsequent conversation, I asked Pete whether Tommy kept a lot of his correspondence and other



As John Fair wandered through the weightlifting venue at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, he happened to look into the audience to find Pete and Lazarina George watching the action. This photograph was the result of their first face-to-face encounter.

memorabilia from his long career. After Pete assured me that it was an extensive collection, I managed to convince him that the Stark Center was the best place to protect and preserve Tommy's memorabilia. Pete then persuaded Tommy's daughter joAnn that it would be in the best interests of the collection and Tommy's reputation to make it a gift to the Stark Center. When I broached this idea to Terry, he said, "wait a minute, I need to sit down." He was flabbergasted, but also excited to be able to preserve Tommy's legacy. With Pete's encouragement, the Kono family (joAnn, Mark, and Flo) consented to donate Tommy's collection to the Stark. To facilitate that transfer, Jan and Terry Todd authorized and provided the wherewithal for me and my wife Sarah to retrieve all relevant materials from Hawaii in early November 2016.

Upon arriving at the Kono home several critical things happened the first day. During the first hour Pete and I had a serious discussion in the family living room where I explained to him the background behind Tommy's opinion of Terry, and he explained to me that the rationale behind the Konos' preference to donate the collection to The University of Texas so that no portion of it (especially the gold medals) could ever be sold. No less important to the suc-

cess of our mission was the relationship Sarah cultivated with the Kono family who were still distraught over Tommy's death and quite capable of nixing the agreement at any time. To ensure acceptance, Sarah accompanied joAnn into Flo's bedroom to witness her signing the contract for the donation. Her success also led to Flo recruiting some of Tommy's associates at work and the Honolulu Marathon for interviews.

Over the next eight days, Sarah, Pete, and I worked feverishly to sort, pack, and ship Tommy's vast collection by UPS air freight to Austin. During that time we had many meaningful conversations with the Konos (including joAnn's husband Gary Sumida) and Pete. On one memorable occasion we went to an ethnic restaurant for lunch where Pete (usually quite reserved) jumped for joy when he saw tripe listed on the menu. While he consumed a large dish of it with relish, reminding him of his Macedonian roots, I also had to sample this exotic peasant fare to satisfy my curiosity, but I was less than satisfied by the taste, texture, and thought of what I was eating—the digestive innards of a ruminant animal! On another occasion Pete and I came across a copy of the March 1956 issue of *Strength & Health* that featured Pete on the cover performing a jerk. A curiosity frequently

discussed by weightlifting aficionados is how Pete could be so strong without big and bulging muscles. Looking at the picture, I pointed out what must have been obvious to Pete that it was all in the legs and that his relatively thin arms served merely to hold the weight. Perhaps the most memorable event of our Hawaiian sojourn was a luau held on the lanai [veranda] of the house we were renting to commemorate and celebrate Tommy Kono's life. It was orchestrated by Pete and Russ Ogata, one of Tommy's most dedicated proteges, and attended by several dozen former lifters, friends, and the



Two months prior to winning a silver medal at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia, Pete George jerks 350 pounds while weighing around 165 pounds at an unknown Hawaiian weightlifting competition on 15 September 1956. Note the traditional Hawaiian leis, dresses, and shirts in the audience.

Kono family. The event featured various local delicacies and was highlighted by personal remembrances of Tommy, led by Pete. Finally, on our last day in Honolulu, Pete treated us to a farewell luncheon at the Outrigger Club on Waikiki Beach, along with Lazarina and members of the Kono family. There were lots of hugs, tears, and well wishes, and Flo showed her appreciation for our efforts by placing a lei around each of our necks.

No less relevant to our Hawaiian experience was the emotional support Pete rendered to the Konos and Sarah, which helped insure the success of our venture. Sarah was initially under the impression that she would spend half of the trip on a much-needed carefree vacation in the beautiful islands. Although we did spend several days touring Oahu and visiting the tourist sites at Pearl Harbor, she quickly realized how much time and effort would be required to pack boxes and arrange for shipping as well as restoring Tommy's office for Pete's prospective interview with a local television station. Indeed, she virtually took over the enterprise and was constantly barking orders to Pete and me whom she regarded as lax and spending too much time talking about weightlifting. Sarah gives Pete a lot of credit for providing much needed comfort at this time of emotional stress and will always remember his acts of benevolence. Another example of Pete's generosity was the tour he provided us of Honolulu and the visit to Tommy Kono's internment site at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific. Again, despite his own remarkable athletic achievements, Pete seemed intent upon extolling the achievements of his greatest rival.

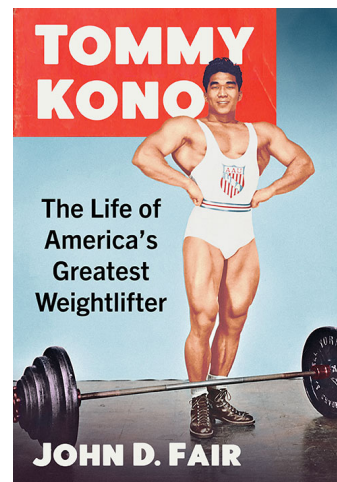
My second visit to Hawaii in January of 2019 was designed to research local archives and conduct interviews with Kono's close associates. Again, Pete provided valuable leads on the life of Dr. Richard You and You's misguided efforts to energize downtown Honolulu with the York International Building. During a tour of this site and other locations, we visited the Nuuanu YMCA where Tommy coached and inspired many Hawaiian lifters for many decades prior to his death. It was a memorable experience. Pete and I were greeted by two very upbeat young trainers (male and female) of the new Nuuanu YMCA who no doubt assumed we



In the spring of 2021 Pete's sons Tryan and Barton and Barton's family visited Pete and Lazarina in Hawaii. Back row (l-r): Barton, Logan, Dane, Tryan; front row: Nicole, Peter, Lazarina.

were likely prospects for membership. They escorted us downstairs to the weight room where I explained that we were interested in the illustrious history of the Nuuanu YMCA where Tommy and many of Hawaii's regional and national champions had trained. After this duo professed no knowledge of that, I explained that my elderly colleague had been a gold medal winner at the 1952 Olympics. At first there was stunned silence. Then one of them asked, "What did you bench?" Pete was no doubt embarrassed, but I thought the question was hilarious, revealing how much the current generation is out of touch with the great figures of their sport from a bygone era. To me, it was one of Pete's finest hours!

It is altogether fitting that my forthcoming biography on Tommy Kono will be dedicated to Pete as "Tommy's Kindred Spirit."



[Ed Note: *Tommy Kono: The Life of America's Greatest Weightlifter*, is scheduled for release in December 2022. It can be pre-ordered at: <https://mcfarland-books.com/product/tommy-kono/>.]