

THE WHEEL OF PAIN KEEPS ON TURNING: ON HUMAN POTENTIAL AT THE ARNOLD SPORTS FESTIVAL

BY TOLGA OZYURTCU

What is possible for us humans? This was the driving question for adherents of the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s. Emerging at the intersection of the counterculture and humanistic psychology (think Maslow's theory of self-actualization), the underlying premise of Human Potential was that the great lot of us were underdeveloped, operating at a sliver of our full capacity. But, if our full potential was developed, a life of true happiness and fulfillment was to be had, driving positive societal changes as the human flywheel turned. In and of itself, this view always struck me as a fair one, especially if interpreted optimistically.

Most Human Potential progenitors focused their attention on the emotional and intellectual dimensions of our existence, but credit is due to George Leonard, who compellingly argued for the role of the physical in realizing our potential. In 1975's *The Ultimate Athlete*, Leonard challenged readers to reconsider the potential of the active body: "The athlete that dwells in each of us is more than an abstract ideal. It is a living presence that can change the way we feel and live. Searching for our inner athlete may lead us into sports and regular exercise and thus to the health promised by physical-fitness organizations—and that might be justification enough. But what I have in mind goes beyond fitness: it involves entering

the realms of music and poetry, of the turning of the planets, of the understanding of death."

Recently, on the occasion of my first visit to the Arnold Sports Festival in Columbus, Ohio, I found myself thinking a lot about human potential and returning to Leonard's words in particular. Human potential—especially that of the physical variety—is front and center at the Arnold, almost to an overwhelming degree. While the event program is a bit pared down from its peak a few years back, it is still staggering in its scope. Over 10,000 athletes compete in every variety of strength sport and physique competition, alongside majorettes, martial artists, medieval fighters, and more. (And yes, medieval fighting is more or less what you imagine.) It is hard to imagine another place and time where such a range of human physical potential is so richly concentrated: both the potential of what a body can be (or appear to be) and what a body can



Spectators of the professional Arnold Strongman and Strongwoman Classic passed by this huge display on the way to their seats. Mark Henry on the right was the first Classic winner in 2002 and Hafthor Bjornsson was a three-time winner, 2018-2020.

do. Of course, the *potential* of human potential is also very much on sale at the Festival; the vast exhibit hall floor was dominated by booths hawking training implements and apparel, protein powders, and energy drinks. So many energy drinks. The commerce of the physical and physical culture intertwine almost seamlessly at the Arnold. On just one walk in pursuit of a free, nuclear-candy-flavored energy drink, I passed

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by young martial artists straining for leverage, a display of technicolor posing trunks, Highland Gamers adjusting their kilts and opening up their hips, a pitchman for home water purification, bikini competitors getting their spray-tans touched up, and the aforementioned medieval fighters setting their helmets aside to scarf down some Subway—turkey breast a begrudgingly accepted substitute for a turkey leg.

I spent most of my time at the Arnold alongside the men and women competing at the Arnold Strongman and Strongwoman Classic, tagging along with my colleagues from the *Iron Game History* masthead. I'll reiterate here that this was the Arnold Strongman and Strongwoman Classic, the first time that women have been featured at one of the sport's premiere events. Our *IGH* executive editor Jan Todd directs the event as she has since the inaugural in 2002 when she and the late Terry Todd began the Arnold Strongman Classic. Their co-organizer Steve Slater joined the effort in 2003. Of course, Terry Todd's legacy still looms as large on the Arnold Strongman stage as it does in the pages of this journal. My fellow editors-in-chief, Kim Beckwith and Jason Shurley, lead a judging and scoring team of dedicated Iron Game lifers. I'm grateful to them for letting me tag along in a semi-official capacity (emphasis on the semi). I was occasionally called on to help with a sundry task, but for the most part, I had the luxury of taking in what might be the finest display of human potential in the world.

Like many folks my age, I first encountered Strongman competitions in the early 1990s, during the halcyon days of cable television. The then recently launched ESPN2 filled its airtime with whatever it could acquire for a fair price and that included both current and vintage showings of the World's Strongest Man. I imagine I wasn't the only teenager up past his bedtime marveling at some fellow named

Magnus ver Magnusson dominating the competition. The sport was far out and the men who competed in it were somehow more far out.

Today, Strongman is still pretty far out, but is decidedly less on the fringe of the mainstream than it was when I first encountered it. (And yes, Magnus is still around, a robustly fit elder statesman who helps with the judging at the Arnold and many other major contests.) As with much of the world of physical culture, the Internet has helped, allowing previously isolated folks to share training knowledge and providing a lucrative platform for the more popular athletes in the sport. There are competitions at the amateur and professional ranks all over

the world. There are fans, actual fans who follow the sport, and don't just stumble on to some late-night programming novelty. The bleachers were packed all weekend long in Columbus.

I'll spare you my commentary on much of the competition itself. If you missed it as it happened, you can head to event sponsor Rogue Fitness' YouTube page for their excellent coverage of the event. By the time you read this, the CBS Sports special on the contest should also be available to watch as well. Spoiler alert:

you'll see Canadian Mitchell Hooper win, by putting in a solid all-around performance, winning only the Wheel of Pain, but finishing no worse than third place in the remaining four events. On the women's side, American Victoria Long took first place. Following a disappointing seventh place finish in the Wheel of Pain, Long won three out of the four final events and set a world record 259 kilograms (571 pounds) in the Elephant Bar Deadlift.

As entertaining as the men's competition was, I found myself really engaged on the women's side of things. There was certainly something special about this being the inaugural competition, a legitimizing moment for the women in the sport. And while the crowds were slightly bigger for the men's events, they were



Medieval Fighting enjoyed its second year at the 2023 Arnold Sports Festival. They had events for men and women in several different styles of weaponry and attack formations. This unknown group of participants was preparing for upcoming bouts.



Both the men's and women's contests were conducted in front of packed seating with many more in "standing room only" areas. Stage announcer Mark Henry was heard to say that there were seats for 3000 spectators.

just as loud while the women were competing. If we're measuring by decibels, American Hannah Linzay was the fan-favorite of the weekend, blowing the roof off the convention center as she blew out every capillary in her nose on her final deadlift. Credit to Kim Beckwith, who was judging the event, for not flinching when the blood-soaked athlete offered her a fist bump.

Throughout the contest, for the men and women alike, event after event, that idea of human potential would sneak into my head. Where else could one encounter such a group: objectively, quantifiably pushing and exceeding the limits of what we think is possible for humans? And it's not just the strongmen and strongwomen, it's everyone pushing the limits at the Arnold—or even in their home gym—engaged in the perpetual act of overcoming that links the diverse disciplines of physical culture. Overcoming gravity, the competition, ourselves, what is thought to be humanly possible.

Or perhaps it need not be so complicated, a simpler philosophy is often best. Before the deadlift event, I found myself sitting next to WWE superstar and the first Arnold Strongman Classic winner Mark Henry, now serving as the stage announcer for the event. He said that the deadlift was the only event that made him want to step back on the stage. I asked if he thought it was more legitimate than the newer, more novel events. He didn't really give me a direct answer, but stared off across the stage at the loaded bar and said, "Pick it up off the ground . . . as pure as the driven snow."



As with every issue of *IGH*, the exploration of human potential through physical

culture can be found throughout the current volume. In "Giving Attitudes," K. Mitchell Snow offers a fascinating look at so-called "living statues" in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, situating their evolution within the arts as an antecedent to modern displays of physique. We are excited to share Ottley Coulter's "Reminiscences and Impressions Over the Years." Dating from 1944, "Reminiscences" is an archival treasure from the Iron Game pioneer. As John Fair notes in his introduction to the piece, much of Coulter's archive lives at the Stark Center, but Fair uncovered this gem in Bob Hoffman's manuscripts. While sadly the result of an unrealized full-length biography, David Chapman's "Chris Dickerson: A Remembrance and an Appreciation," offers a look at the life and legacy of the late bodybuilding legend, ably capturing the spirit of both Dickerson the athlete and Dickerson the man. Fair and Chapman appear once more in Fair's review of the McFarland reprinting of Edmond Desbonnet's *The Kings of Strength*, edited and translated by Chapman. Fair finds the edition a welcome volume, noting that calling the book an "iron game *tour de force* would be an understatement." In "Mary Macfadden and the Media Narrative of the Physical Culture Family," Lucy Boucher and Jan Todd offer a new perspective on the life and times of Bernarr Macfadden, exploring how the beleaguered publisher deployed his marriage and family in service of his image and public reputation. As Boucher and Todd demonstrate, the gap between reality and public perception is often wide and invariably complex. After attending The Arnold, I realized a similar gap separates the common, blurry-eyed viewership of strongman events on late night television and the genuine awe I experienced upon walking among the modern goliaths of this year's Strongman Classic.