

CHRIS DICKERSON: A REMEMBRANCE AND AN APPRECIATION

BY DAVID CHAPMAN

On 23 December 2021 Henri Christophe (Chris) Dickerson, one of bodybuilding's greatest pioneers, passed away in a hospital in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He was 82. Although he once possessed a strong, muscular body, recent troubles including a broken hip and COVID-19 had contributed to the heart failure that eventually took his life. This marked the end of a great athlete and an equally great career. Although he could not conquer death, throughout his career Chris Dickerson had triumphed over many other terrible forces like racism, sexism, and ageism. He was the first African American to win the Mr. America title in 1970; in 1982—at 41 years of age—he was the oldest man ever to be judged Mr. Olympia; and he was an openly gay contestant in a sport that has always been very touchy about acknowledging the racism and homophobia that have long been in its midst.¹

I first met Chris in 2007 when we made plans to collaborate on his biography, which I was going to write. I visited him a few times in Florida and he stayed with us in Seattle several times on his way to Alaska to visit his mother and brother. Unfortunately, the book never happened, but I was able to interview Chris both by correspondence and over the telephone, and I collected a good deal of information about his life that has never been disclosed before. This was not an easy process for Dickerson since he was a private individual and never really cottoned to the role of self-promoter that other successful athletes learned to assume. Gradually, I came to realize that writing his life story would be a difficult task because Chris seemed to be unclear about how much he wanted to reveal and how much he preferred to keep to himself. Still, this did not detract from my admiration for the man who quietly broke many barriers and became a role model for others.

Correspondence to: David Chapman, Seattle, WA. Email: davidlchap@aol.com.

Chris Dickerson's triumphs, as well as his reluctance to discuss his private life, were almost certainly a result of the era into which he was born. Gradually improving material prosperity and the civil rights movement made it possible for minorities to enter many social and sporting arenas that had been hitherto closed to them. Bodybuilding was one of these; since its beginning in 1939, no Black man had ever won the Mr. America contest, the most prestigious competition in the country. In a sport where appearance is the principal attribute that determines a winner or a loser, white judges found it hard to give the top prize to a Black man—until Dickerson came along, that is. The other reason for Chris's victories had more to do with his personality, his intelligence, and his public persona as a modest, reasonable and unthreatening figure; in short, he was much more palatable to the largely white power structure of the bodybuilding world. Dickerson did not have a Southern or stereotypically African American accent, and although he was always acutely aware of his status as a member of an often-oppressed minority, he seldom expressed those views in public.² He was an expert at playing the game and at acting the part that the athletic world wanted. That he was a superb athlete who possessed an extraordinary physique was a quality that allowed him to succeed despite all the impediments that were liberally strewn in his path. Those massive obstacles began early in his life.

GROWING UP IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH

It is difficult to overstate Chris Dickerson's importance as both a sports figure and a pioneer in the battle against ingrained prejudice against those who look or act differently. The earliest barrier holding him back was racial intolerance. As he said, "For a Black person, racism is never not there." To make matters worse, the issue of racial prejudice was much more of

a problem when he was born in Montgomery, Alabama, in August of 1939. Sometimes referred to as “The Heart of the Confederacy,” the state capital was small in feel and thoroughly Southern in temperament. It was a city where Blacks and whites had always lived separate lives—with separate neighborhoods, schools, churches, and attitudes. There was little mixing except in terms of commerce and transportation. As Chris explained, “If a Negro lady went shopping downtown and behaved in a seemingly manner, then she would be treated courteously by the white store clerks, but no one would ever dream of socializing with a friend of another race.”

Montgomery was also the home of a fairly large and stable Black middle class, and it was into this world that Chris Dickerson was born. His mother Mahala Ashley was the daughter of a prominent merchant, and she had been raised to expect respect from all those around her; she was also better educated than most girls in the Black section of town. This was largely thanks to Miss White, a genteel Caucasian Bostonian who

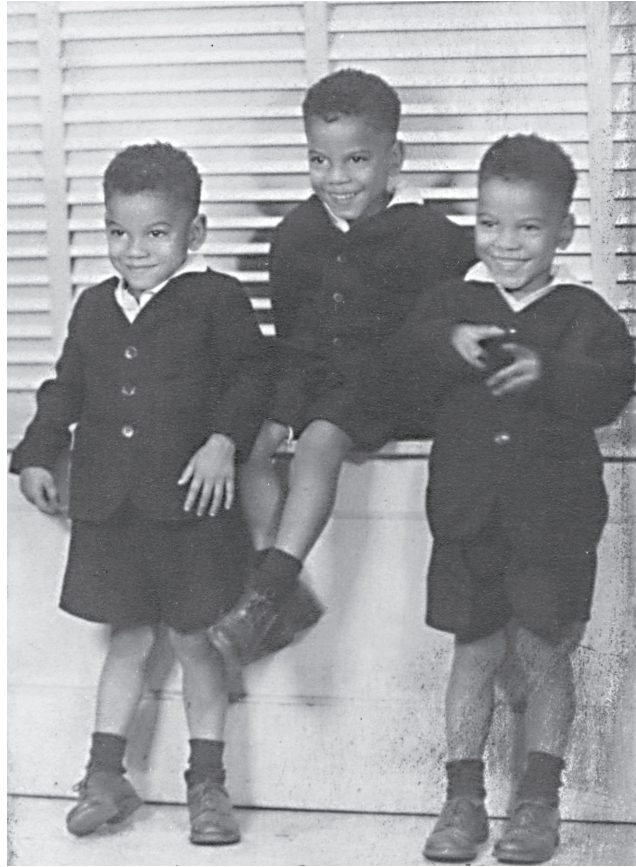
had come south and operated a school for Negro girls. Mahala enrolled in the school, earning good grades in academic and social subjects. One of her classmates at Miss White’s school would later attain fame of her own. Rosa Parks was a lifelong friend who kept in touch with Mahala throughout both their lives. Mahala later went to Fisk University, one of the South’s premier Black schools.

In addition to being well educated, Mahala had acquired an independent streak that caused her to do things that others in the family considered to be rash and ill-advised. One of these was her marriage to Henry Dickerson,

a handsome but not overly ambitious elevator operator at the posh Jefferson Davis Hotel in downtown Montgomery. Henry Dickerson clearly did not have the advantages that his young wife possessed, but he must have made up for his lack of a pedigree with other gifts. In her autobiography, Mahala writes that she

was strongly attracted to her husband. “I had never seen such strength and health exuberating from a human body.” Six weeks after meeting, the two were married in October 1938.³ No one seems to know if the couple was happy at first, but if anyone expected the two to settle down to a life of quiet domesticity, that image was soon shattered. They separated before their first anniversary, but by that time she had other distractions.

On 25 August 1939 Mahala became one of the most famous women—Black or white—in Montgomery when she gave birth to triplets. The event was so momentous that there was a great deal of press coverage. The Carnation Milk company agreed to give the children free milk until the age of twelve, and

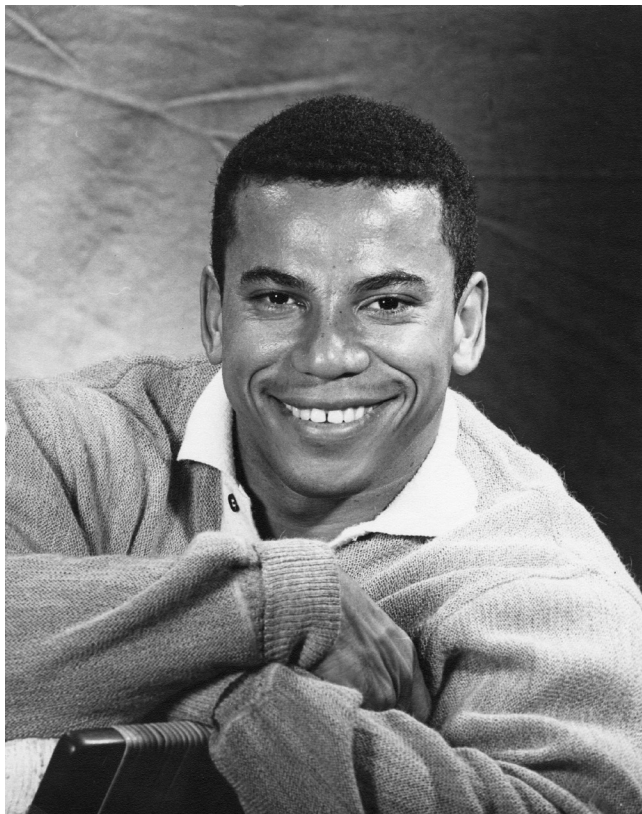


The Dickerson Triplets were famous in Montgomery, Alabama, following their birth in August of 1939. Identical triplets were so rare in this era that they were visited by Governor Jim Folsom and the Carnation Milk company donated free milk to the family until the boys turned twelve. At approximately three years of age, Chris stands on the left, John is seated in the middle, and Alfred stands on the right.

even the governor of Alabama, Jim Folsom, visited the triplets for a well publicized photo-op. The three boys, Alfred, John and Henri-Christophe were famous all over Montgomery, and like Alabamian versions of the famous Dionne quintuplets of Canada, the three boys were the darlings of the entire community. Mahala’s school friend, Rosa Parks, sometimes looked after the children when their mother was away from home.

Thanks to their celebrity, the boys were spared many of the institutional cruelties that segregation entailed, but as they grew older, they came to realize that their special status

had its limits in a Jim Crow society. Other problems were surfacing, too. Mahala divorced her husband shortly after the boys were born, and he all but disappeared from the children's lives. Their mother was also largely absent, and the children were raised by their mother's family. Chris's recollections of his childhood revolve mainly around his loving grandparents, not his mother who was often distracted by her own drama and struggles. Beyond their household, this was not an easy time for African Americans. On the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement that would soon plunge the nation into a maelstrom of violence, unrest, and soul searching, Mahala's father could see danger on the horizon. "The sooner you get those boys out of the South the better," he warned his daughter. So partly to protect her sons from a brewing storm, partly to distance herself from a failed marriage, and partly to launch a new life, Mahala left Montgomery for Indianapolis, Indiana, and a new husband in 1952. Three years later, Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott lit the fuse that sparked the Civil Rights Movement, and the children's grandfather's prophecy came true with depressing finality.



Although this picture is not dated, it appears to be what actors call a "head shot" and was probably taken shortly after Chris left Ohio in 1957 to attend acting school in New York City.

EDUCATION AT OLNEY

By 1955 Mahala was far from the social tempests of Alabama, but she was living a life that was far from peaceful. She had divorced her second husband and moved away from Indianapolis. She decided to attend Howard University in Washington, D.C., to earn her law degree. While doing so, she sent her children to The Olney Friends School, a boarding school near Barnesville, Ohio. The Olney School was a small but respected institution run by the Quakers, and thanks to the beliefs of the Society of Friends, the school almost certainly shielded Chris and his brothers from the worst aspects of racism that existed in the 1950s. Even so, it was a wrenching experience for the teen-aged triplets to be living in a dormitory, far away from home and their loved ones. Another problem was that thanks to the inferior education they had received in the segregated public schools of Alabama, the Dickerson boys found that they were far behind their classmates academically. It took some time to catch up, but this was only one of the problems that they faced. It was hard to get used to the regimentation of bells, classes, and schedules—so different from their lives in Montgomery. In addition, out of an entire student body of about seventy-five students, there was only one other Black student. The Dickerson triplets and a lone African American girl rounded out the entire Black population of Olney School. Small wonder that Chris gradually lost his Southern accent and began to feel more estranged than ever from his Alabama roots.

Despite the initial academic problems, the foreignness, and the isolation, Chris soon settled in and began to receive the excellent liberal education that would make him so different from most of his future athletic peers. Thanks to their democratic beliefs and relative freedom from prejudice, the Quakers were perfect people to guide the boys' education; they provided a good environment that insulated the Black children in their care from the racism of the outside world and showed them that they were the equals of any other students. Eventually, Chris's brothers moved away to different schools, but Chris remained until he had completed all four years of his high school education.

As comforting as life was at Olney, it was not entirely without troubles. One of the minor irritations that Chris remembered was trying to get a decent haircut. None of the local barbers were adept at cutting African American hair, so every time he needed a trim, Dickerson

had to ask his Aunt Erna (who lived nearby) to come and pick him up in the car and take him to Indianapolis where he could find a good barber. The principal had tried to cut Chris's hair, but the results were not satisfactory, so this remained a constant problem. It was on one of these trips to the barber that Chris recalled another example of the racism that raged outside the school. Aunt Erna was as determined as her sister Mahala to work her own will, and during the Montgomery bus boycott, she had chauffeured hundreds of Black workers to and from their jobs in her own car. She was a good driver, but on one particular trip, she was stopped by a policeman because he believed that she had committed some infraction. When Erna politely explained that the man must have been mistaken, he angrily retorted, "You're a liar, lady." Chris expected his aunt to rise to the occasion, but instead she meekly lowered her head in silence. Everyone knew that a Negro was not supposed to question a white man's word under any circumstances. Sitting in the back seat of the car, the Dickerson boys realized that they were expected to take this sort of abuse in silence, and although it was far less violent than many other confrontations, it still left a bitter memory and a psychological scar.

Another more menacing racial incident occurred when Chris was older and had begun to date a white classmate at Olney. It was easy to believe that racism did not really exist when he was within the confines of school, but once he left its walls, the world was a different place. Olney is located about ten miles from Barnesville, and Chris, his girlfriend, and a male friend all walked down the main street of the town; Chris walked hand-in-hand with the girl. Ahead they could see three young toughs from town and Chris knew that something ugly was in the works. When the two groups got closer,

one of the town boys spoke up. "What do you mean by holding a white girl's hand?" he asked. By this time, the frightened girl was backing up and the school friend was nowhere to be seen. "We're going to have to teach you a lesson," snarled another youth.

Dickerson realized that a fight was brewing, and that it meant a certain beating for him. Instead of confronting the young men physically, Chris tried another approach. "It's three against one," he said. "I don't have a chance. If you mean to beat me up, then there's nothing I can do about it." The fact that he did not back down must have made the attackers feel embarrassed, and this saved him. The boys looked at one another sheepishly. "We just don't want

to see you going out with a white girl," said one of the kids. "Now get out of here!" There was never a doubt in Chris's mind that the boys had in mind to beat him, but as he put it modestly, "I managed to talk my way out of it." His biggest disappointment was that his supposed friend failed to back him up in his moment of need.

Chris's libido was also starting to reveal itself to him and after a bit of heterosexual experimentation, he realized that he was gay. He also wanted to make his body more muscular. As early as 1953, Chris's first year at Olney, he had become interested in sports. He discovered that his

body responded quickly to exercise, and he became a star athlete, but physical culture was not widely taught in those days, and weight training was completely off the map in terms of a school activity. He also realized having a well-formed body made it much easier to find romantic partners.

LIFE WITH MAHALA

While Dickerson was at Olney, Mahala had earned a law degree and begun to practice



Chris's mother, Mahala, was an impressive woman. She was involved with the Civil Rights Movement, was the first Black woman admitted to the bar in Alabama, and she was the first Black woman attorney in Alaska. She is shown here with John (left) and Chris on the right. Missing is Alfred, her third son, who died at age 20 in Alaska.

in Alabama. She was, in fact, the first African American woman to do so in the state's history. Her clients, as well as the racist powers in Montgomery, soon came to recognize in her a zealous warrior for the underdog. She had also begun to toy with a momentous personal decision. The quickly growing territory of Alaska was in need of lawyers and Mahala's sense of adventure was tickling her. In 1958 she decided to make the move from the deep South to the far North, and she packed all her belongings and moved to Anchorage. From being the only female Black lawyer in Alabama, she found herself in much the same situation in Alaska. In 1960 Mahala's penchant for adventure caused her to file for a 160-acre homestead in Wasilla, just outside of Alaska's largest city. When the region achieved statehood in 1961, she was already established as a prominent legal figure in the new state, and a leader of the tiny African American community in the far North.⁴

Chris's relationship with his mother was always fraught, especially in his youth. As he later explained, "there was a deep appreciation and admiration for my mother, but not the

bonding between mother and sons (or daughters) that typically happens." Mahala's children were raised mostly by others, especially by her parents since she was almost always away either at school or pursuing her own life and pleasures. She even enjoyed her vacations away from her three sons. Chris speculated that there was bitterness on her part due to her growing hatred of his father and it was this wedge of loathing that had restricted the normal bond of love between the mother and her children. It was only in adulthood that the Dickersons were able to appreciate one another and to achieve a state of admiration, and later, according to what Chris said, the birth of real love. Much of Mahala's emotional distance might have sprung from her guilt at virtually abandoning her family, and the exaggerated hatred that she felt for her ex-husband must have been, at least in part, a reaction to her own regrets and mistakes.⁵ Certainly, Mahala needed to have a career that could support the children, and perhaps she convinced herself that she was doing the right thing, but one fact is certain: she would never win any awards for being a constant and loving



Chris Dickerson and Bill Pearl (right) met in the early 1960s. Chris moved to Los Angeles to be able to work with Pearl, and in doing so, he improved his physique significantly and began winning the bigger contests. Pearl became Chris's best friend and father figure during the years they worked together.



At 29 years of age, Chris placed second to 22-year-old Boyer Coe at the 1969 Jr. Mr. America contest held in Brentwood, New Jersey. Coe and Dickerson would receive the same placings at the Mr. America contest held later in the year. (L-R): James Morris, Terry Moore, Coe, Dickerson, Robert Moore.

parent. Perhaps to emphasize her growing estrangement to her children and her former life, she put as much geography between herself and her family when she moved to Alaska.⁶

A LIFE IN BODYBUILDING

Mahala made sure that her children had a good upbringing and they were all imbued with a love of learning and a desire to excel. After he had finished at Olney in 1957, Chris decided to explore a career in the arts, and to do that he needed to leave rural Ohio and move to a larger city. New York was just the place for this. While at school, he had acquired an interest in the performing arts, so it seemed only natural that he would continue that work after high school. In 1959 he began attending Mannes College of Music in New York City and also took classes at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts where he studied acting, ballet, and singing. He developed a rich baritone voice and was especially adept in operatic roles. One of his voice teachers suggested that he might improve his poise, deportment, and singing ability if he be-

gan to work out. Therefore, Dickerson took up weight-training for this purpose, but when he saw a photo of Bill Pearl (1930-2022) in a muscle magazine, a whole new world opened up for him. He gradually realized that bodybuilding was a good fit for his personality. He could turn inward and use his powers of concentration to improve his strength and appearance.

While he was in New York, Dickerson explored many aspects of life in the Big Apple. His agenda calendar from those years reveal that he frequently went to dramatic and musical events like plays and the opera.⁷ Chris also served as an usher at the NBC television studios while pursuing his theatrical studies. After he won the 1970 Mr. America title, Johnny Carson requested that Chris appear on *The Tonight Show*, and in order to make the human-interest angle more pronounced, the new Mr. America was briefly rehired as a page and given a page's uniform (black sport coat and red tie), so that when Carson interviewed him, he could rightly claim that Chris was still an NBC employee. In reality, Dickerson had gone on to other things. A

fellow page remembers Dickerson, who he said always looked muscular and healthy when they both served at Rockefeller Center in 1969.⁸ Soon after this, Chris left for California, where he could devote himself to daily workouts in preparation for the Mr. America contest.

The 1960s also marked the time that Dickerson had his first long-term relationship, but there were many other things taking up his time and energies as well.⁹ He began to work out under the direction of people who knew how to help him use his natural talents and athletic ability, and in a relatively short period of time, Dickerson acquired the basis of a good physique and began to attract the attention of prominent people within the sport of bodybuilding. The young man devoted more and more of his attention to exercising and working with weights and less to purely artistic endeavors. He regularly crisscrossed the country between New York, the center of his theatrical interests, and Los Angeles, where his sporting career was centered. However, building his physique became his principal obsession.

As he later explained, bodybuilding “was



In 1974, Chris won NABBA's Professional Mr. Universe title. His body continued to grow and get leaner under the tutelage of Bill Pearl.



On 13 May 1967, Chris was crowned Mr. California. This contest was one of his first major wins and fueled his desire to keep training and improving.

an individual effort, and it was up to me to do what was necessary. So it had that appeal and I changed my dream [from acting to bodybuilding].” At the age of 24, he made the decision to leave New York and move to Los Angeles, where he began training at Bill Pearl’s new gym in Inglewood. Pearl almost at once saw the possibilities of turning Chris into a major physique competitor. Many earlier Black competitors had well-developed upper bodies, but their lower extremities were often not as good as those of their white opponents. Pearl saw that his new protégé’s legs, and especially his calf muscles, were better than anyone’s he had ever seen, and this gave Dickerson an immediate advantage.

Dickerson’s physique grew quickly thanks to his energy, determination, and good genes; he also benefited from Pearl’s expert coaching and direction. In addition to helping the young man pack on muscle, Pearl taught Dickerson how to manipulate the rules and play the game so that he could achieve great things in the bodybuilding world. Bill Pearl was one of the first to believe in Chris. For a young man



Chris became a favorite model for Cliff Swan, a photographer known for his bodybuilder artistry. This image was taken on the Santa Monica Beach in California in the late 1960s.

who had never known the experiences of a loving family life and a strong father figure, Chris soon came to see his coach as something more than a knowledgeable and caring instructor. Dickerson later admitted that Pearl “has been everything to me: father, confidant, brother.”¹⁰

Under Pearl’s direction, Chris Dickerson’s first contest was a suitably modest one. In 1965 he entered the Mr. Long Beach competition where he placed third. Thanks to a great deal of hard work, he continued to improve and began to win bigger, more impressive contests. In 1967 he was victorious in the Mr. California competition and he was judged Mr. USA the follow-

ing year, but his greatest victory to date came in 1970 when he became the first Black man to win the Amateur Athletic Union’s Mr. America contest—then the most prestigious physique title in the country.

MR. AMERICA AND BEYOND

There had been other Black bodybuilding champions, but none had ever been awarded the Mr. America title or risen as high in the physique sports. For Black athletes at the time, there was a glass ceiling that was nearly impossible to shatter; they often won local contests or took lower places in the major competitions, but the bigger prizes lay just beyond their grasp. The Amateur Athletic Union had long been controlled by older white men who saw no reason to promote athletes of color, and they certainly saw much social and financial peril in doing so. Thus, no African American or Latino bodybuilder ever rose very high in the sport.¹¹ But by the late 1960s, attitudes were beginning to change, and it was possible to see some improvement on the horizon. By the time Chris Dickerson began competing in the early and mid-1960s, the Civil Rights Movement had begun to raise the consciousness of mainstream America and a growing militancy began to force open previously locked doors for African Americans across the social spectrum. One of those doors led to the top honors in the sport of bodybuilding.

From its start in 1939, the Mr. America contest represented the pinnacle of bodybuilding excellence, and while Black athletes had been participating in the Mr. America contest almost from the start, not one of them had succeeded in winning the contest in the 30-plus years of its existence; many had come tantalizingly close, but it seemed that the top prize remained just out of reach. As Dickerson stated, “An African-American athlete had to be twice as good to win the Mr. America contest.” Fortunately, there sometimes *is* an athlete who is twice as good, and Chris was the right person at the right time.

Many people began to see Dickerson

as the Jackie Robinson of bodybuilding, since he had broken through the color barrier just as decisively as the great baseball star. Many still wondered, however, why it had taken so long for this great achievement to happen. Part of the reason came from the entrenched racism that informed American society at this time, but perhaps even more important were the stated goals of the contest itself. Character, education, career aspirations, and athletic ability should all be considered when judging the man who would represent America. The winner would ideally be as articulate as Abraham Lincoln and as pure and chaste as a Boy Scout. Since many

African American athletes found it difficult to get a good middle-class education or the kind of coaching they needed, Blacks were consistently left out of the running. Added to this was the problem of traveling to contests (especially for men in the South) and the scarcity of African American judges.¹² When Chris Dickerson came along, it must have seemed as if the time for a change had finally arrived, for here was an educated, well-spoken, handsome man with an impressive physique, who could quiet the voices who claimed that bodybuilding (especially in the AAU) was racist. Chris was clearly ready to play according to the rules laid down by a group of white entrepreneurs and sportsmen. He did not want to burst down the doors of inequality, he was perfectly happy to turn the key quietly and open the portals of equality without making the power brokers think that they were in danger of losing control. Once the door was opened, however, others were ready to step over the threshold.¹³

After the Mr. America contest, the list of Dickerson's victories began to lengthen, and he soon took many other titles, including Mr. Universe in 1974. All the same, he started to get discouraged by many of the out-of-date and hidebound values of the AAU; therefore, he looked to change his affiliation to another bodybuilding organization that promised greater benefits to the winners of its competitions. In 1979 Chris switched to Joe and Ben Weider's International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) and began competing in their contests exclusively. In the IFBB, he won the Canada Cup and a series of other contests, beating the world's best bodybuilders in seven out of ten contests in 1980 and 1981. Chris had been competing as a professional since the 1974 Mr. Universe and short-



Like many other bodybuilders of his era, Dickerson frequently modelled in the nude as a way to supplement his income. This elegant image from early in his career, shows his physique beautifully and also reveals his athletic grace.



The use of a broken column in bodybuilding photography is a trope used to link the beauty of Greek sculpture to the bodies of modern athletes. Photographer Lon Hanagan uses it in this photo of Dickerson to help demonstrate the fullness of his calf and the thickness of his deltoids and triceps as he presses lightly against the column.

ly thereafter he decided to try for the highest award in pro bodybuilding, the Mr. Olympia title.¹⁴

Aside from racism, ageism (Chris was nearing 40), and homophobia, Dickerson faced another barrier in 1980; he had to get past the colossal persona of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Arnold had “retired” previously, but at the last minute, he entered the 1980 Mr. Olympia. Despite not being in top contest shape, Arnold relied on his reputation, charisma, and (as many have speculated) help from some overly indulgent allies among the judges, to win the contest. Whatever the reason, Chris came in sec-

ond behind Arnold at the 1980 Mr. Olympia in a decision that the bodybuilding community has generally agreed was rotten with corruption and cronyism.¹⁵ Publicly, Dickerson claimed that he was happy to have been judged number two, but in private he, like many others, thought that he had been robbed of the title because most of the judges had been prejudiced against him and in favor of Arnold. In addition, Dickerson admitted that Paul Graham, the promoter of the contest, “was a real low life—a bigot who had a real dislike for me—partly on racial grounds and partly for my sexual orientation.” Graham even told another official that “Chris couldn’t win because he was a fag.”¹⁶ With forces like these arrayed against him, Dickerson never had a chance.

Unfortunately, there were even greater disappointments in store for him at the Mr. Olympia in 1981, when Arnold’s best friend Franco Columbu won another extremely controversial decision.¹⁷ Coming just a year after his disputed loss to Arnold, Chris admitted to feeling angry because of his second-place showing. This time he felt real resentment and wondered if those in power consistently refused to accept a short, Black, gay man as victor. He later remarked, “I figured [the judges] were trying to tell me something, and I did not like it at all.” Like several other top bodybuilders who had decided to give up on the Mr. Olympia title, Chris was ready to walk away, but then he realized that if he were to surrender, he would just make it easier for the injustice to continue, so he returned the next year.¹⁸ That proved to be a good decision because he finally won first place. His perseverance had been rewarded at last.

Dickerson went on to compete in other contests, but after the Mr. Olympia victory, everything else must have seemed rather anticlimactic.¹⁹ Besides, by this time Chris was over the age of forty and most bodybuilders had retired from competition by that age. Chris had a good deal to be proud of, so he decided to take some of his winnings and buy a house in the Fort Lauderdale suburb of Wilton Manors. He occasionally received invitations to do muscle-building seminars, radio or web interviews, or to appear at testimonial dinners, but he never really felt that he was given his due. There were no lucrative movie contracts, cushy job offers, product endorsements, or other deals to make his post-competition life any easier. In addition, the many years of heavy exercise and steroid use had taken a toll on his body, and the bones,

joints, and tissues were starting to break down as he aged. Even so, he continued to battle his ailments, and he took the time to visit his mother in Alaska once or twice a year even though it meant traveling all the way across North America from Florida to the far North. Chris's brother John had moved to be with their mother, so the family was occasionally united in a way that was never possible before. The only one who was absent was the eldest of the triplets, Alfred, who had died in 1959 when he was 20 years old in a boating accident. Chris was very close with his brother John, who had performed as a professional dancer and was also gay.²⁰ These reunions ended in 2007 when Mahala Dickerson died. Her death was a heavy blow for Chris.

SKILLFUL USE OF VISUAL IMAGERY

Despite his mother's physical and emotional distance, she had a great effect on all of her sons. Her energy, drive, and self-assurance were all things that Chris admired. He had acquired on his own a fine aesthetic sense, and when he combined this with his athletic talents, it gave him a unique advantage. He certainly was not shy about displaying his body in artistically pleasing ways, and this was most obvious in the photographic record that he left behind. According to fellow physique star Shawn Ray, "Chris was adamant that the way to success as a pro in bodybuilding was to have everything photographed, master the art of posing and help others on their way up."²¹ Clearly, Dickerson knew the value of images, and he sought out the best lensmen who could give him both the publicity and the recognition that he needed, but also to demonstrate graphically his growing musculature. By the mid-1960s, as Chris was beginning to enter and win contests, there was increasing demand for photos that could be published in the various bodybuilding magazines. Over the years he was photographed by Cliff Swan, Russ Warner, Doug White, and Craig Dietz, and many others who specialized in bodybuilding photography.²² The task these image-makers had was to capture an athlete's musculature clearly and artistically. Sometimes this involved merely snapping photos at a contest, and other times it meant long hours in a studio where lighting, props, and poses could be carefully controlled and used to show (and perhaps flatter) the subject's body. There was never a sustained or overt effort to make the athlete's body sensual; although, any time the body of a human thoroughbred of either sex is recorded, there is likely to be some erotic ele-

ment that slips through the lens.

As historian John Fair has noted, there is "a fine line that has always existed between artistic and prurient exposure of the body."²³ For as long as the male body has been photographed, there have always been many genres, and some of these were considerably less chaste than regular bodybuilding photos. One of these was the physique photograph, which is much more overt in its exploitation of muscularity and sensuality; often the subjects are recorded nude but more often with genitalia coyly concealed. The principal consumers of these sexy images were gay men, and this type of photography flourished from roughly the 1930s to the 1970s. Fortunately, Chris arrived on the bodybuilding scene in the late 1960s-early 1970s, just in time for the final years of physique photography's golden age.²⁴

Although Dickerson was always quiet, gentlemanly, and reserved in his demeanor, he had a wilder and more Dionysian side to his personality, and this was sometimes revealed in the photography of LGBT camera artists. Chris was always a willing participant in these photo sessions in which he could display some of the exuberance that he kept concealed from the rest of the world. One of the first places where the budding young physique star was captured on film was in Los Angeles at The Athletic Model Guild (AMG) by the godfather of physique photography, Bob Mizer. Chris first delivered himself into Mizer's able hands in 1957, shortly after Dickerson had begun training seriously, but his photos did not appear in the AMG magazine, *Physique Pictorial*, until April of 1967.²⁵

Since he was flying back and forth between both coasts in the mid-1960s, Chris had the opportunity to be photographed in New York by another great physique photographer, Lon Hanagan. The noted camera man had recorded the physiques of such giants as John Grimek, George Paine, Mark Forest, and many others. Hanagan had also photographed many of his models in the nude, and this caused problems with the police, who deemed the images "pornographic." By 1965, when he photographed Chris, Hanagan had been through so much trouble that he was almost certainly reluctant to take photos of Dickerson in a similar state of undress. Thus, the images of Dickerson are all done in posing trunks and are surprisingly tame.²⁶ They were certainly sedate enough to be published in bodybuilding magazines of the time, so perhaps this was one of the motivations for both the subject and the photographer.²⁷

Hanagan and Mizer both represented the older generation of physique photographers, but in 1967 Dickerson began posing for a newer and bolder lensman, Jim French (1932-2017). By this time, it was possible for photographers to take frontal nudes of their subjects and to make them more overtly sexual. French was the founder of Colt Studios, which specialized in tasteful and beautifully composed nudes of muscular and thoroughly masculine models. These images were sold through the mail to a largely gay clientele, and starting around 1970, Chris became one of the most popular models, as well as one of the few bodybuilding superstars ever to pose for photos of this sort. In 1973 the Australian photographer Wayne Gallasch conducted a film shoot of Dickerson in the athlete's New York apartment as he posed in the nude.²⁸ Clearly, Chris had an exhibitionist side to his character, and this was made even more obvious by the many nude photos that he posed for and which were distributed to an eager (largely gay) public. He even participated in a gay porn film directed by Jim French sometime in the mid-to-late 1970s, which also featured John Tristram (1935-1985) and Ken Sprague (1945-).²⁹

Eventually, Dickerson's physique was recorded by just about every talented physique and bodybuilding photographer working at the time. In 1982 Chris even posed for photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989), although contrary to the controversial photographer's usually daring portraits, he shot Dickerson modestly attired in a tee-shirt. Even the famous gay artist Tom of Finland produced a striking nude portrait of Chris in 1972 that was based on earlier physique photos by Jim French, so Dickerson was acquiring an impressive portfolio of artists who had immortalized his form.³⁰

CHRIS DICKERSON'S LEGACY

Most of Dickerson's bodybuilding fans probably had no exact knowledge of or interest in his personal life or his extracurricular activities. All through his life Chris had learned to split his personality between two poles, one for public consumption and the other for the chosen few, and this is why Chris did not come out publicly as a gay man until later in life.³¹ Chris Dickerson was a complex man who embodied many contradictions; he presented himself to the world as a quiet, competent, intelligent, and supremely disciplined man (and he really was all of those things), but he remained a very private person. He had been accustomed to keeping things to

himself and never giving up too many of the secrets that would expose him to the contempt of mainstream American society. When the subject of his homosexuality arose in interviews, Chris never actually denied the claim, but he would often divert the conversation to other related subjects, like the many erroneous stereotypes that society has about bodybuilders in general: "Some people like flashy cars, some like flashy hairdos; we [bodybuilders] like healthy bodies. Everybody's got their own thing, and ours is no funnier than anybody else's."³² Like most gay men of his generation, Chris had learned to keep a well-established firewall between his inner and outer lives.

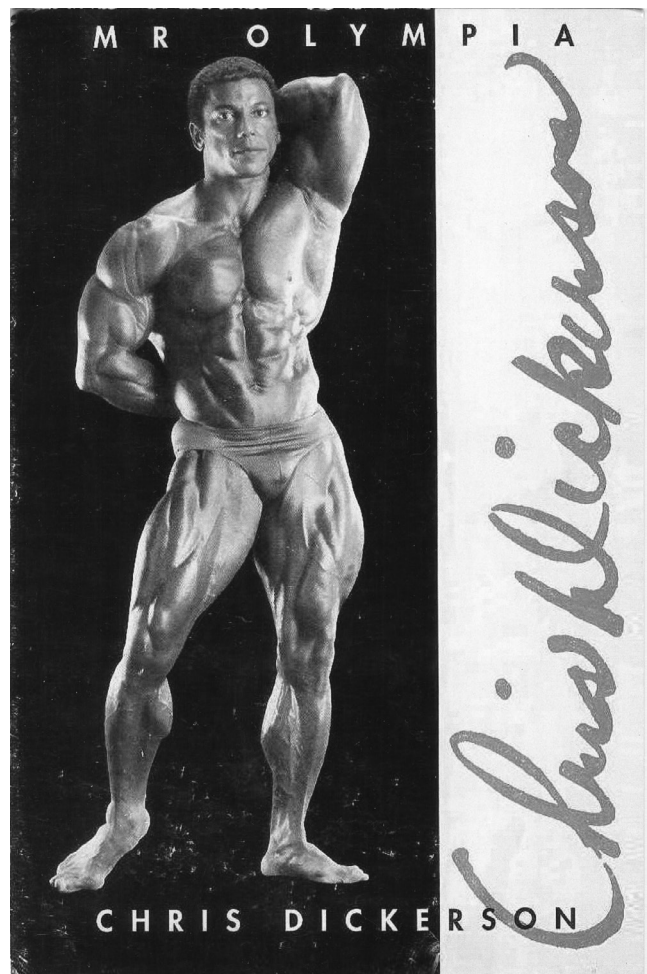
Throughout his 82 years, Dickerson taught himself to be self-reliant and to live his life with little assistance from others, and this can probably be traced back to having a mother who interacted with her children only when it fit into her busy schedule. Chris was often on his own—or at least he felt so. I always had the impression that he was basically a very lonely man who was surrounded by people but who found it difficult to make lasting and meaningful human connections. Bodybuilding is perhaps the most solitary of all sports, so it was a perfect fit for him. Conversely, his desire for attention also led him to enjoy showing off to others, and his artistic temperament meant that he saw the advantages that balletic grace and drama could mean to his posing routines. He learned the value of patience rather than confrontation as a tool to achieve his goals, and he internalized the lessons he felt as a double outsider. When disappointments arrived, he knew how to deflect the criticism (as he did when facing down racist bullies in Ohio) or to swallow his anger (as his aunt did when confronted by a policeman) in order to survive and fight another day. Dickerson was a man who always knew his own worth, and he refused to let others cheapen it. He was also a man who allowed few others to see very deeply into his soul.

Like all of us, Chris Dickerson was a cluster of contradictions—of confidence and insecurity, strength and weakness, modesty and brashness, temperance and indulgence. But he also had more bravery and determination than most of us, and the barriers that these noble qualities led him to break through permitted other outsiders to feel a little more comfortable even though they might not have had his strength, courage and perseverance. I feel very privileged to have known this pivotal figure in American sport.

CHRIS DICKERSON'S BODYBUILDING TITLES

1966 Mr North America - AAU, 2nd
 1966 Mr New York State - AAU, **Overall Winner**
 1966 Mr Eastern America - AAU, **Overall Winner**
 1966 Mr Atlantic Coast - AAU, **Overall Winner**
 1966 Junior Mr USA - AAU, Most Muscular, **1st**
 1966 Junior Mr USA - AAU, **Winner**
 1967 Mr California - AAU, **Winner**
 1967 Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, 4th
 1967 Mr America - AAU, 6th
 1967 Junior Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, 5th
 1967 Junior Mr America - AAU, 4th
 1968 Mr USA - AAU, Most Muscular, 2nd
 1968 Mr USA - AAU, **Winner**
 1968 Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, 3rd
 1968 Mr America - AAU, 3rd
 1968 Junior Mr America - AAU, 3rd
 1969 Mr America - AAU, 2nd
 1969 Junior Mr America - AAU, 2nd
 1970 Universe - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1970 Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, **1st**
 1970 Mr America - AAU, **Winner**
 1970 Junior Mr America - AAU, Most Muscular, **1st**
 1970 Junior Mr America - AAU, **Winner**
 1971 Universe - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1973 Universe - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1973 Universe - NABBA, **Overall Winner**
 1973 Pro Mr America - WBBG, **Winner**
 1974 Universe - Pro - NABBA, Short, **1st**
 1974 Universe - Pro - NABBA, **Overall Winner**
 1975 World Championships - WBBG, 2nd
 1975 Universe - Pro - PBBA, 2nd
 1976 Universe - Pro - NABBA, Short, 2nd
 1976 Universe - Pro - NABBA, 3rd
 1976 Olympus - WBBG, 4th
 1979 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, Lightweight, 4th
 1979 Grand Prix Vancouver - IFBB, 2nd
 1979 Canada Pro Cup - IFBB, **Winner**
 1979 Canada Diamond Pro Cup - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Pittsburgh Pro Invitational - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Night of Champions - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Grand Prix New York - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Grand Prix Miami - IFBB, **Winner**

1980 Grand Prix Louisiana - IFBB, 2nd
 1980 Grand Prix California - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Florida Pro Invitational - IFBB, **Winner**
 1980 Canada Pro Cup - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Professional World Cup - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Night of Champions - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix World Cup - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Grand Prix Washington - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix New York - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix New England - IFBB, 2nd
 1981 Grand Prix Louisiana - IFBB, **Winner**
 1981 Grand Prix California - IFBB, **Winner**
 1982 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, **Winner**
 1984 Mr. Olympia - IFBB, 11th
 1990 Arnold Classic - IFBB, 8th
 1994 Masters Olympia - IFBB, Overall, 4th



Chris had these promotional pamphlets made to hand out to his fans after winning the Mr. Olympia title.

NOTES

1. Much of the information in this account is based on interviews and conversations with Chris Dickerson that I held either in person or over the telephone between 2007 and 2010. If the quote or information is not credited, it means that it was obtained from these meetings.
2. After his reputation was made and he had mainly retired from the competitive world of bodybuilding, Dickerson became more outspoken. He spoke more openly of his feelings as a Black American and as a gay athlete operating in what was (and still is) a deeply homophobic sport.
3. M. Ashley Dickerson, *Delayed Justice for Sale: An Autobiography* (Anchorage: Al-Acres, 1998), 29.
4. *Ibid.*, 156-165.
5. Quotes and paraphrases from an email to the author from Chris Dickerson, 12 June 2007.
6. Dickerson, *Delayed Justice*, 156. Mahala did not totally abandon her family; she frequently arranged for her boys to visit her in Alaska.
7. I was able to examine Chris's annual agenda calendars when I visited him at his home in Wilton Manors, FL. There were dozens of these books that he had kept over the years. They were not included when Dickerson gave his trophies, photographs and other materials to the Stark Center at the University of Texas. Their present whereabouts are unknown. Also see <https://starkcenter.org/2022/01/remembering-chris-dickerson-and-his-gift-to-bodybuilding-history/>.
8. Also see on Facebook "Once an NBC Page, always an NBC Page," <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2209692484/>.
9. The great love of Dickerson's life was a man named Miguel. I have been unable to find his last name. I saw a few photos of him, and my impression is that the two were together while Chris was living in New York. It is known that Dickerson also had relationships with many other men, including bodybuilder John Tristram (1935-1985).
10. David Robson, "An Interview with 1982 Mr. Olympia, Chris Dickerson" 14 March 2019, www.bodybuilding.com/fun/drobson270.htm.
11. John D. Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 188-191.
12. See John Fair, "Mr. America: Idealism or Racism? Color Consciousness and the AAU Mr. America Contest, 1939-1982," *Iron Game History* 8, no. 1 (June/July 2003): 9-30.
13. As soon as 1973 another superbly muscled Black athlete, Jim Morris, was judged Mr. America. Unknown to many at the time, he was also a gay man.
14. A list of Dickerson's bodybuilding records and speculation on his steroid use at www.evolutionary.org/chris-dickerson-death-steroids.
15. There have been many explanations for Arnold's unaccountable victory in the 1980 Mr. Olympia, but most commentators agree that he was far from the right choice. See www.barbend.com/1980-mr-olympia-controversy/.
16. John Fair, "The Intangible Arnold: The Controversial Mr. Olympia Contest of 1980," *Iron Game History* 11, no. 1 (September 2009): 15.
17. www.ironmanmagazine.com/1981-mr-olympia-report-part-2/.
18. Robson, "An Interview."
19. A concise list of Dickerson's contest victories is found at www.musclememory.com/show.php?a=Dickerson,+Chris.
20. John A. Dickerson was as fascinating a character as his brother. He died in 2019, and his obituary reveals that he studied and danced briefly with the Joffrey Ballet, but he became interested in massage therapy and served in that capacity for many years on the ocean liner *Queen Elizabeth II*. He later married a French woman with whom he had a daughter. Chris told me that John was gay, so perhaps that explains his estrangement from his European family. I asked about his other brother Alfred, and he told me that he did not identify as gay. Alfred died on an early trip to Alaska in 1959. John and Mahala are both buried on Mahala's homestead in the "Alfred Dickerson Memorial Cemetery." None of this information is in Mahala's autobiography. www.frontiersman.com/obituaries/john-a-dickerson/article_a94eae76-153c-11ea-806c-07a807a1aa69.html.
21. <https://www.digitalmuscle.com/master-archive/remembering-mr-olympia-chris-dickerson-rip/>.
22. Chris always believed that Cliff Swan was one of the men who greatly influenced his career. Swan took excellent photos of Dickerson early in his career and helped advance it in the magazines. See Robson, "An Interview."
23. Fair, *Mr. America*, 203. I am not implying that nude images are "prurient," but that erotic elements of a photograph can often be subtly mixed with the athletic.
24. Chris first started posing for physique photographs in 1957, before the discreetly covered models were allowed to take off their posing pouches and reveal what was under them. This happened around 1967 when a Supreme Court ruling deemed nude photographs not obscene. It was only a matter of a year or two until the nudes transitioned to out-and-out porn. For a history of this progression, see David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
25. Although his first session with Bob Mizer was in 1957, Dickerson returned several times for other photo shoots, most of these happening in the mid-1960s. Chris made one physique film at AMG with Henry Bunkers around 1965. When I showed Chris a still from the movie, he admitted that he was rather nervous when the film and subsequent stills were being shot, and his discomfort is apparent in the nervous smiles and embarrassed acting that he displays. Mizer interviewed his models and then used a personality and sexuality code which he often appended to the photos. In Chris's first appearance in the magazine, Mizer indicates (by arcane symbols decipherable only to those in the know) that Dickerson was reluctant to give any personal information, and the most prominent symbols show that Mizer found him to be "aesthetic" in character and very "mother oriented." His next appearance included a new set of photos in *Physique Pictorial* (Aug. 1977) and Mizer indicated that Chris had lost his mother orientation and was a good deal more adventurous in his sexual preferences.
26. Hanagan's biographer, Reed Massengill, confirms that the photos of Dickerson are not very daring probably because in 1961 Hanagan was arrested for images that the authorities considered pornographic. For several years thereafter the photographer avoided all frontal nudes. Email to author 19 July 2022.
27. The photos by Lon began to appear in *Muscular Development* as early as September 1965.
28. Gallasch had also made several other more "legitimate" bodybuilding films of Dickerson, most importantly at the 1982 Mr. Universe competition in London.
29. French says that the film did not end up quite the way he had planned since he served the men pot-laced brownies, and then they all started giggling instead of attending to their business. Unfortunately, there was no happy ending for either the actors or the film. Robert Mainardi (ed), *Jim French Diaries: The Creator of Colt Studio* (Berlin: Bruno Gmünder, 2011), 184.
30. For Tom of Finland, see www.tomoffinland.org/chris-dickerson-1939-2021/.
31. Coming out is usually a gradual process, so determining a firm date is difficult and ultimately unrealistic. Some sources mention times from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Dickerson was a co-presenter in the physique contest at the Gay Games III in Vancouver, BC in 1990, so this is probably as good a date as any.
32. Quoted in the obituary in the *Washington Post*. www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2022/01/11/chris-dickerson-bodybuilder-dead/.