



IRON GAME HISTORY



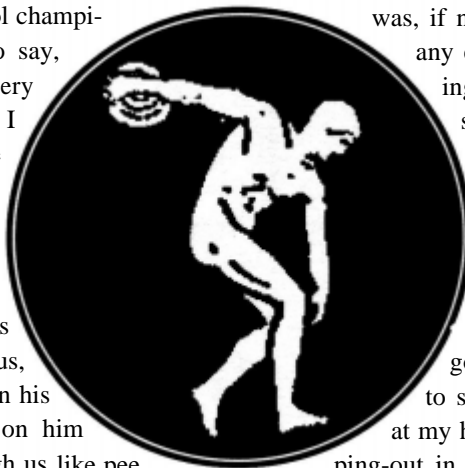
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Reflections on Musclebinding



he piece on Alvin Roy brought back many thoughts to me. Around 1943, my family moved from serving a mission church in northeast Baltimore to a big church in a small town in the mountains of central Pennsylvania, Lock Haven. I arrived there just at the time in my life that I was learning about the weights, so needless to say, I was passionate about them, but absolutely nobody else shared that passion. (Later I converted some of my friends, but theirs was not the real thing, just a passing flirtation.) In any case, Lock Haven had a passion for football. It was still reliving the glory of having had, about 20 years earlier, a true national high school championship team in football. So—needless to say, football meant a lot in this little town. Every other sport played third fiddle to it. When I arrived on the scene, the coach, one of the most impressive men I’ve ever met, had been drafted from Notre Dame, where he had started for two years as a 185-190 pound lineman (tackle)!!! He could run backwards faster than any of our backs could run straight ahead. He played with us, scrimmaged with us, sans uniform—just in his shorts. He’d have us line-up two men on him (three, even) and then “submarine” through us like pee through toilet paper. Perhaps the best natural physique I’ve ever seen. He was from Roy’s home state, Louisiana, back in the bayous, (Very dark. Deep-set eyes. Somewhat Negroid face. Magnificent physique: arms, legs, calves the works. Quite a man. Why all this? He was deadset against any sort of what he called, contemptuously, “fairy-ish” weightlifting,



despite his having matriculated at the same school that boasted Fr. Lange. “How can this be?” (I wondered.) But IT was. He hated lifting.

I played junior high football as a center, since I was so “big” in junior high (for those days); I had to skip my sophomore year because my father wanted me to work, rather than indulge in such “pointless and self-vaunting” activities as football. I wheedled my way back into the football mindset in my junior year and found it hard to make-up for that lost year—in the coach’s mind, I had proved myself morally derelict by dropping out (despite the cause). By that time, I was, if not exactly tiny, surely no longer “big,” by any estimate: around the high 130’s. I was lifting like a s.o.b. to get bigger—all on the sly, so that the coach did not hear about it. I was working extremely hard and, of course, the hardness of the training militated against the very thing that I had in mind: gaining muscle and strength. By my senior year, I had “bulked-up” to 147 and had won myself into (back into) the good graces of the coach, who permitted me to start several games, despite his black anger at my having disgraced his holy program by dropping-out in my sophomore year. This meant much to him and he said, openly, that I would be “punished” for this disloyalty. (By the end of the junior year, I was playing a lot, and started much (most) of the senior year. But not without two public chastisements—and being sent from the field in my senior year with a reminder of my “disloyalty” to the whole team. Very painful stuff.

But underlying all this was the coach's hatred of lifting. He had gotten the whiff of a rumor that I was lifting weights in my basement, so one day, in my senior year, early in the season, he walked down the street and confronted me, sitting on the front porch of the parsonage with my parson old man. Direct as the coach was, he threw out: "I hear you're lifting weights in your cellar. You know that you're off the team if that's true." I looked him straight in his eyes and said, straight-out, in my most ingenuous, preacher's son, butter wouldn't-melt-in-my-mouth, stalwart, Christian posture: "No sir, coach. I do not lift weights in my cellar. (Weakly) Who told you that? (Very Weakly) I don't even have any weights in my cellar (very, very weakly)." Having discharged his obligation to Heaven and the Holy Father, the coach stalked away into the lowering shades, leaving me to my less than holy (holy-) father. "Alfred, you lied to the coach. You lied to him straight in the face." I assumed the penitent look, forthwith,

and beat a hasty retreat from such public exposure of my dear(est) secret pleasure, assuring my holy-man father that, as he well knew, my weights were not in the cellar; they were in the garage. With that I took off, not for the cellar or the garage, but for the safety of the closest mountainside on my trusty bike, where I stayed until well past midnight. (school work, etc., wholly cast-aside for that unhappy day). My old man didn't like lying that paraded as Philadelphia lawyer-ing. But he didn't pursue the matter, as I thought he would.

That's the passion of the anger against weight training—that *was* the passion, and it was a passion. Hardly a day passed that the coach didn't inveigh against the use of weights, since I feel (and felt then, vaguely) that he sensed the coming of weight training, in the way that a spring breeze insinuates itself into the raw drafts of March. It was on its way, and he was against it: not just not for it—100 percent against it, as he was against the Masons, rubbers, abortion

(whether or not he may have caused one or two among over-excitabile Protestant cheerleaders), and boys who quit football. It is so very hard for folks, today, to believe this—or to remember it, even, having lived through it: it being one of those stupid things that one dismisses from his memory, lest he be sucked into some black hole of ignorance. But it was, sure as hell, there, deeply in the consciousness (almost-conscience) of all the coaching establishment. And the ironic thing is that this coach was (still is, even) one of the most impressive specimens of natural muscle (and great configuration of physique) that I've ever seen, all without ever having touched a weight.

After four years in the Navy and four years in college, I arrived at Penn State in 1956 to begin my Master's study and discovered there the same sort of absolute contempt for, and refusal to consider the values of, weight training. The assistant track coach was a chap named Norm Gordon, who also was an enthusiast, of sorts, of weight training, but he was up against a coaching establishment, in football and track, totally opposed to it, so we suffered together. ("What can be done to turn around this sort of hatred? How can we bring about a conversion experience, a 'redo' of the old Saul on the road to Tarsus, etc.?"") The force that directs the universe did it *all* for us. The head track coach, "Chick" Werner, went to the Olympics, that year, and saw Bill Nieder, the excellent shotputter who was also one of the early enthusiasts and boosters of (heavy) weight training: the old (or so they said) 135 pound Olympic barbell thrust-straight-out from the shoulders routine, etc., etc. Having talked with Nieder and caught his enthusiasm, "Chick" returned and began to put into gear the first and rudimentary weight training program for his track men. Norm Gordon came to my little room-apartment and, together, we mapped-out the first-ever weight training pro-

gram used at Penn State. At the very same time, the coach of the (of all things) freshman (!) football program came to me and asked me to set-up for his incoming boys a weight training program for football players. Indeed, this was, by a brief time (a matter of a few weeks), even earlier (in its set-up) than the preceding program, above, except that it was (merely) for the freshmen football players, as opposed to all the track men in the track program, under Werner and Gordon. Prior to this moment, even so prestigious an athletic program as the one at Penn State, both in football and in track (important programs at the school), was totally without any program in weight training. The conversion of "Chick" Werner was one of the most dramatic that I'd ever seen. Bill N. must have been a terrific salesman or at least a magnificent object lesson in the benefits of weight training because, upon Chick's having confronted this youth, he was never the same man when it came to the matter of training with weights: he became, overnight, a supporter, an enthusiast, and his enthusiasm spread to the football program, generally: a real time of ferment at Penn State, and it was fun to be in the midst of it. It's interesting that I was a teaching assistant in the English Department and that there was nobody in the Physical Education Department similarly motivated or set-up at that time. Every single grad assistant whom I met in Phys. Ed., at that time, was contemptuous of the very idea that weight training could possibly be an effective component of any sports training regimen, even one for football or track or wrestling. The same obtained when I taught at Lycoming College and, later on, even at the University of Wisconsin, and, of course, later yet at Kutztown. But Penn State, pre-'56, was as benighted as Lock Haven High School had been in my years there—when it came to the values of the "iron pills." Absolutely incredible.

Al Thomas

