



IRON GAME HISTORY



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Another Big Man Gone

Two weeks ago, we got the news of the death of Matt Dimel, a superheavyweight powerlifter. Matt was only thirty-three, and his passing at such a young age brought to mind how many of our supers have left us too early. Too early. Within the last decade or so, we have lost, among others, Iceland's thirty-two-year old Jon Pall Sigmarsson, who won many world championships in "strongman" competitions; Gary Aprahamian, the four hundred pounder from New York who wanted so desperately to be massive and strong yet who died in his twenties; Chuck Braxton, the popular Master's lifter who suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of fifty-three in the warm-up room just before a meet; and O. D. Wilson, the enormous powerlifter/strongman who was near the top of both of his favorite sports when he suddenly expired.

None of these giants died accidentally, in the manner of Dave Pasanella, who was killed in a car crash. All died of what are sometimes called "natural causes," yet it seems all too clear that most, if not all, of these men died earlier than they otherwise might have died had they not had such a passionate love for size and the strength size confers. Deaths of this sort are not unprecedented in the Iron Game, of course. Louis Cyr, the 5'9", 320 pound marvel of strength from Quebec was only forty-nine when he died which was three years older than the age at death of his former stage partner and companion-at-table, Horace Barre. Their lesser known contemporary, the splendid backlifter Henry Holtgrewe, was just a few years older, fifty-four, when he was laid to rest. Another leviathan who failed to even approach the biblical promise of three score years and ten was the renowned Austrian Karl Swoboda, who died at the age of fifty. Nor should we forget that had it

not been for kidney dialysis and the miracles of modern surgery, a similar fate would have befallen the legendary Paul Anderson in his late forties.

What are we to make of this seemingly contrary situation, in which so many of our largest and strongest men die so young? Would not their phenomenal strength provide protection against the ills which beset normal men? In the world of fantasy, perhaps it would. In the real world, however, the apparent answer is no. Apparently, the very obsession which drove these men to exceed the size they were genetically programmed to be—added to the fact that they were all programmed to be far more massive than an average man—made them vulnerable to the sorts of physical problems which brought them down—strokes, heart attacks, kidney disease and so on.

In the old days, of course, the overeating which helped to produce the abnormal size of giants like Cyr and Barre was sufficient by itself to create premature problems. Now, however, those obsessed with ultimate size and strength have another, equally deadly tool at their disposal—anabolic/androgenic steroids. And the combination of habitual overeating and anabolic/androgenic steroids is particularly deadly. It would, in fact, be fair to say that a very real occupational hazard for a steroid-using superheavyweight is an early death. All of which makes the term "natural death" ring with such grim irony when it is (mis) applied to some of our late brothers.

It has been argued that those who took such risks did so knowingly, and that they died doing what they loved. That—to paraphrase the song Billy Joel wrote for Frank Sinatra—"they did



it their way.” Therefore—those who make this argument say—we should not pity these men.

However, even though I understand these arguments and even though I heard and succumbed for a time to the same siren song which proved to be the undoing of these big men, I still pity them. I pity them because of the things they missed, many of which perhaps, they hadn’t lived quite long enough to fully appreciate. Simple things like the fellowship of friends and family; or good music; or the majesty of a storm; or physical passion; or the thrill of sports; or even a favorite food. Not that the men didn’t experience these things, only that their experience was so much more limited than it might have been. Had they lived longer, nature would probably have blessed them with more wisdom, wisdom which would have helped them to place a truer value on things, to realize that there is a time for maximum strength and size and a time to move on.

I’m also saddened by the deaths, because I knew most of these men and now they are lost to me, lost to the Game. I went once to the home of Wayne Bouvier, who had died some months earlier,

to speak to his family. I had travelled to Germany with Wayne in 1982—the year he won the national powerlifting championship as a superheavyweight—to attend the World Championships, and he told me how upset his father was because he had admitted to his father that he used steroids. “I hated to tell him, but he and my mother were really worried about my weird behavior and aggressiveness. They thought I was going crazy.” On my trip to Michigan to see the Bouviers, Wayne’s father told me that on the night he died, Wayne had come home late from the gym with a bag of cheeseburgers, sat down on the living room floor, complained of a splitting headache and then gradually began losing the power of movement, and of speech. “He went so quickly,” his father said. “I held him til the ambulance arrived, but I think he was dead before he reached the hospital.” Wayne was only twenty-nine when he died in his father’s arms.

Mr. Bouvier gave me Wayne’s lifting belt, and it has a prominent place in our collection. I see it every day and every day it reminds me that obsession has a price.

—Terry Todd