

John Carroll Grimek: The Nonpareil

Jim Murray

There was seldom a dull moment at the *Strength & Health* magazine office in York, Pennsylvania, during the early 1950s. York, at the time, was clearly the world center for weightlifting and allied activities. The United States had the world championship weightlifting team and the champions gathered at the York Barbell Club's battered old gym on North Broad Street to prepare for national and international competition. And bodybuilders from all over the U.S. and the world would spend time at York to get training tips from the dominant bodybuilder of the era, John Carroll Grimek (JCG).

John and I shared an office and, in lulls between preparing issues of *S&H*, JCG would regale me with accounts of his long experience in the Iron Game. He had been national heavyweight lifting champion and a member of the 1936 Olympic weightlifting team, and had placed third in the national championships as a heavyweight in 1940 while weighing only 183 pounds. That was the year he won his first Mr. America contest. JCG had tried to make weight to compete in the 181-pound class, but had too much muscle to lose and decided to compete as a heavyweight against Steve Stanko and Louis Abele, each of whom weighed about 225 (Anything over 181 was in the unlimited heavyweight class in those days). Despite the debilitating effect of taking off about 20 pounds, John still pressed 285 pounds, which was 102 pounds over his bodyweight.

Here's a tidbit that will surprise a lot of Iron Game fans: after a start in weight training during which he practiced all the standard barbell and dumbbell exercises of the time, John Grimek concentrated on competitive weightlifting, and from 1932 until after he won the 1940 Mr. America contest he did no bodybuilding! He

practiced snatches, cleans and jerks, squats for leg strength, and a lot of cleans and presses for general strength and to focus on shoulders and arms. He did repetitions of complete cleans and presses, lowering the weight and cleaning it before each press. With a clean before each press, JCG worked up to as much as 275 pounds for repetitions. With that kind of training, he developed the outstanding physique that won the 1940 Mr. America contest

Barbell men of the 1930s and '40s had minimal special equipment. Mostly they just lifted barbells and dumbbells in very basic exercises. There were no benches with uprights to support barbells preparatory to bench pressing, so there was little if any bench pressing done. There were squat stands, and Grimek did a lot of squats—with no knee wraps, special suits or other aids, and using a comfortable foot spacing about shoulder width.

Not only was JCG's training different—much more basic than that of today's bodybuilder—but so was his diet. As I see today's bodybuilders spending big bucks on special diets and exotic supplements, I recall John telling me about his diet during the Great Depression. "I often subsisted on bread and coffee," JCG laughed. "High Protein diets? We often couldn't afford any protein!"

Grimek, like most weightlifters/bodybuilders of his day, couldn't devote full time to what was—in those days—a hobby interest. His superior genetic endowment allowed him to pack on muscle from any strenuous activity. We would discuss some of the questions that were sent to his "Your Training Problems" section in *S&H*. In planning his answer he would refer to something he had done that worked well and I would kid him: "John, if you went over in a corner of the room and did push-ups you'd have had results most of us couldn't approach using every piece of equipment in the gym."

JCG was a man with incredible bone structure—eight-inch wrists on a frame just a little over average height, 5'9". He also had large ankles but surprisingly small knees, which added to the massive appearance of his muscular legs. Although he failed to make the 181-pound limit in 1940, John could usually control his weight in superb condition between 181 and the 221 he weighed when he



JOHN GRIMEK'S EXCEPTIONAL FLEXIBILITY HELPED TURN THE TIDE FOR THE ACCEPTANCE OF WEIGHT TRAINING BY ATHLETES.

PHOTO COURTESY: JIM MURRAY

won his second Mr. America contest in 1941.

I had seen JCG for the first time at the 1941 Mr. America contest. He had an indefinable quality that allowed him to stand out in a line-up of the nation's best built men, but what I remember most vividly was his grace and athleticism, despite his massive musculature. He was late in preparing for the contest, having stayed with his close friend, Steve Stanko, who was having difficulty making lifts that had been easy for him in training a few weeks earlier. John was doing his best to encourage Steve, who was experiencing mysterious leg pain. (Stanko had begun to suffer from phlebitis, a vascular disorder that was to end his weightlifting career just as he was beginning to reach his potential. Steve was never able to compete in Olympic lifting again after the 1941 national championships.)

The Mr. America contest was under way and JCG was just changing into his trunks when his name was called. He ran from the dressing room, leaped lithely up to the boxing ring where the lifting and posing were contested, and smoothly glided into his artistic muscular display. From that moment, the only question was—Who will win second place?

John was thirty-one when he won his second Mr. America title, resulting in a rule being passed that winners couldn't compete

again—since it seemed he would go on winning forever. When I joined him on the *S&H* staff in 1951, he was forty-one and I was astounded to see the superb condition he had retained at that “advanced age.” I was only twenty-five at the time and like most young people, thought anyone over forty was “old.”

That was nothing! In his eighties JCG retains beautiful proportions, with rounded, youthful-looking muscles. In the 1970s and '80s my work would often take me to Washington, D.C., and on the way home I would stop at York to see my old friends at the York Barbell Company. I remember walking in one day when John—then in his early 70s—was in the middle of a workout. He was performing repetition squats to bench level very easily with a weight of more than 300 pounds. In his mid-eighties John at last moderated his exercising a bit to pedaling a stationary exercise bike an hour a day and working out with a barbell loaded, he said, “to less weight than I used to warm up with.”

While I was at York, JCG was always experimenting with equipment, trying exercises other bodybuilders practiced. A Steve Reeves visit in the late 1940s resulted in a Rube Goldberg long pulley exerciser being rigged up as a rowing-type lat pull device. There was a pulley high on the wall at one end of the room and a long cable

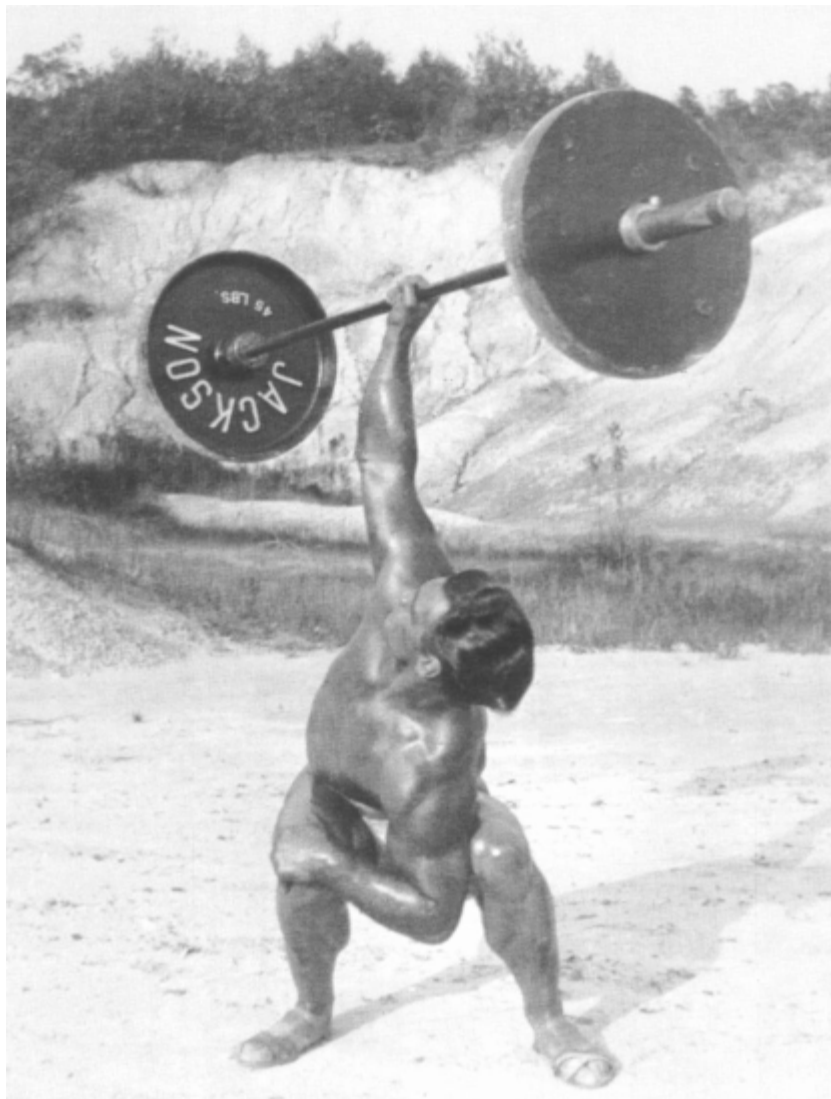
from a stack of barbell plates through the pulley to a double handle attached to the other end. It reached past the farthest of the three lifting platforms in the gym. John would brace his feet against the platform and perform countless reps, dragging the weights up the wall and producing what could have been a sideline business with toothpicks that were ground off the wooden wall.

Another memory of JCG's training during the early 1950s: our office was right next to the big open gym on the second floor of the old York Barbell Company building on North Broad street. Late in the afternoon I would hear what sounded like a blacksmith hammering a piece of metal on an anvil. I knew then that the work day was over and John was pumping out dumbbell presses on a very slightly inclined wooden bench in the gym. We used solid dumbbells and he would warm up with something light, a pair of fifties and sixties. He lowered the weights well to the side, touching the inner globes to his shoulders, stretching his deltoids and pectorals, then pushed them up and in, tapping them together at the top of the movement. It was the rhythmic tapping as the globes contacted that made the hammer-and-anvil clanging that summoned us to exercise.

Incidentally, at that stage of his career, JCG was doing many sets of high repetitions. I don't think he counted them, just going by the feel of the exercise, but he must have been doing from twelve to twenty reps per set as he worked up to a final set or two with a pair of overweight hundreds (about 104 pounds each) that had been rejected for sale at the York foundry because they were too much over

their stated poundage.

In addition to experimenting with strength and muscle building exercises, John would try stunts that tested his flexibility. For a massively muscled man, he was surprisingly flexible and could sink into a full split to demonstrate that his legs weren't "musclebound." The dangers of "muscle-binding" were of concern to many in the Thirties and Forties. In fact, it was Grimek's demonstration of flexibility that prompted Dr. Peter Karpovich, the Springfield College physiologist, to conduct studies proving that strong, weight trained muscles contracted faster than weaker muscles, even those of non-weight trained athletes.



IN THIS EARLY PHOTO TAKEN BEFORE GRIMEK JOINED THE YORK BARBELL TEAM, HE IS SHOWN WITH A JACKSON BARBELL SET. NOTE THE HEAVY TAN.

PHOTO: TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION.

When I began to exercise with weights in 1939, everyone warned about the dangers of muscle-binding. I could see that getting stronger was helping me in football and throwing the javelin, but I was still worried about restricted mobility. As a result I did all kinds of stretching exercises. One I did with weights was to hold a barbell overhead with a wide grip, lower it all the way down behind my back, and "curl" it back to my shoulders. It was sort of like a gymnastic dislocate motion with a curl behind the back. One day I was doing the exercise in the York gym and worked up to 95 pounds, using a collar-to-collar grip. John was intrigued. With no previous practice on the exercise, he easily worked up to 120 pounds, demonstrating that his heavily muscled shoulders were flexible as well as strong.

There was a lot of laughter during workouts in the York gym during the 1950s. Grimek,

Steve Stanko, and Jules Bacon—all former Mr. America winners—were constantly needing each other and anyone else in range, and there was an occasional practical joke. One of their favorites was to jolly an unsuspecting visitor into a lift with the “Deadlift Bar,” an innocent looking Olympic barbell on the end platform. The bar was standard—forty-five pounds—but two of what appeared to be forty-five pound plates had been poured heavy at the foundry and machined to seventy-five pounds each. There were a couple more overweight “forty-fives,” but the bar on the end platform started at 195 pounds, not 135. One day big Jake Hitchins was working out with us and the Mr. America trio went to work on him.

“Jake,” Bacon said, “you have big arms. What do they measure?” Jake proudly responded that they taped eighteen and a half inches. “But are they strong?” Stanko wanted to know. Grimek chimed in on Jake’s side. “Sure they are. Show ‘em, Jake. Show ‘em how easily you can do curls with 135,” pointing to the overweight barbell. Poor Jake! He couldn’t begin to curl the 195. Then the trio became solicitous. “Don’t you feel well, Jake? Maybe it was something you ate.” “Or something you didn’t eat; have you had your vitamins?”

The only time I remember the deadlift bar backfiring on them was when they challenged Ken MacDonald, the Australian heavyweight—an innocent visitor!—to try a 225 clean without a warmup. The deadlift bar was resting on the platform loaded with what appeared to be a pair of forty-fives on each end. The inside “forty-fives” weighed seventy-five each and the outside pair weighed fifty each. Actual weight 295. MacDonald crouched, secured his grip, and began to pull. When he felt the added poundage he smoothly turned up the power, pulling in the barbell as he dropped neatly into a squat and completed the clean. All the humorists concentrated on whatever exercises they were doing at the time. MacDonald never commented on the weight. He just sat it down nonchalantly



JOHN GRIMEK, SHOWN HERE WITH THE RECENTLY DECEASED ED JUBINVILLE, WAS HONORED IN 1986 BY THE OLDTIME BARBELL AND STRONGMAN ASSOCIATION FOR A LIFETIME OF ACHIEVEMENT IN THE IRON GAME. JOHN WAS A UNANIMOUS CHOICE OF THE SELECTION COMMITTEE WHO INDUCTED HIM DURING ASSOCIATION'S FIRST AWARDS DINNER. GRIMEK IS EIGHTY-ONE IN THIS PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY JAN TODD.

and quietly went on with his workout.

Before I joined the *S&H* staff John had been coaxed out of retirement a couple of times, once to defeat Steve Reeves in the 1948 Mr. Universe contest and again to beat back a challenge from Clarence Ross in the 1949 Mr. USA contest. You see, John was a private person, charming and friendly one-on-one or in a small group, but somewhat uncomfortable when he became the focus of attention from a lot of people he didn’t know. In recent years he has become much more extroverted, to the extent that he and Angela enjoyed ball-

room dancing weekly over a period of years. He could enjoy this, possibly because he wasn’t the center of attention as Mr. America/Mr. USA/Mr. Universe.

To see John Grimek as he is today, you would have had to attend his big fifty year wedding anniversary April 13, 1991. John and Angela had been married fifty years on October 20, 1940, but they hadn’t been able to find a suitable place for the big party until six months later. So there they were, John at eighty-one—the genial host welcoming old friends from far and near—and dancing up a storm with Angela as though they were a couple of teenagers!

It happened that April 13, 1991, the day the Grimeks had their belated anniversary, was my sixty-fifth birthday, and I can’t remember enjoying one more—even when Jane and my sons, and several friends, surprised me with a spectacular belly dancer on my 60th! This was a gathering of the Iron Game fraternity—a couple hundred people, young and old, who shared the same interests and many recalling the same memories of the Good Old Days. There was Bill Pearl from Oregon, Leo Stem from California, Vic Boff from Florida, Dave Mayor from Philadelphia, Ed Jubinville from New England, Jules Bacon and John Terlazzo from right there in York, and many, many others from all over the country.

And there were the Grimeks, the perfect hosts, making us all welcome as *we* enjoyed *their* anniversary!