



A History of the Mr. Universe and Mr. World Competitions Before 1950

Part One: Mr. Universe 1947

In 1947, John Grimek, who had been a member of the International Weightlifting Congress for one year, sided with Dietrich Wortmann in the decision “to have physique contests staged with each world’s weightlifting championships.” Their idea was met with roaring approval, and the first such contest, titled “Mr. Universe, was held that year at the 15,000 seat Convention Hall in Philadelphia, in connection with the world weightlifting championships, which was staged for the first time in the United States.

The two day affair, September 26 and 27, did not require such a large venue: empty seats of 12,000 the first day and 10,000 the next seemed as cold a welcome as the unmoving barbells. Nonetheless, ironfolk have never depended on the non-exercising to become exercised about love for lifting, and the greater attendance for the second day may be attributed to the heavier classes thrusting their stuff and the bodymen showing their stuff.

The judging system which was established—but ultimately not employed due to the midnight imposition of a Pennsylvania blue law which forbade activities to continue into Sunday morning—was:

- Six points for muscular development
- Six points for body proportions
- One point for posing
- One point for general appearance, posture and “etc.,” what ever those may have been
- One point for teeth, skin, and facial appearance
- A total of fifteen points possible.

But with the strike of twelve looming, the fate of the seventeen contestants was decided by each of the nine judges writing his choice for the victor on a slip of paper. The voting was, therefore, anonymous.

Much was made of the fact that Bob Hoffman of the York Barbell Club did not allow himself to be a judge—indeed while he and Jack Liberatore had emceed the lifting portion of the weekend, Jack was the only emcee for the physique section.

The nine judges were: 1) Larry Barnholth of the USA, founder of the American College of Modern Weightlifting and coach for Pete George; 2) John Bans of England, editor of *Vigour* magazine, who noted, upon eating a large steak while here in America, that the portion was more than that allotted per *month* in England at the time; 3) Robert Cayeaux of France; 4) Julio De Cespedes, coach of the Cuban weightlifting team; 5) Emmett Faris of the USA, a judge at the 1946 Mr. America contest; 6) Art Gay of the USA, who also judged the 1946 Mr. America contest; 7) Bernard Mendonca of British Guiana; 8) Bruno Nyberg, coach of the Finnish weightlifting

team; 9) Karo Whitfield of the USA, an Atlanta gym owner who was a judge when Steve Stanko won the Mr. America contest in 1944.

In alphabetical order, the seventeen competitors were:

Jules Bacon: Mr. America 1943, whom many in the audience had seen grace the covers of *Strength & Health* magazine (April 1941, October 1941, September 1943 and March 1944). Indeed, even Weider’s *Your Physique* had brought home the Bacon with a cover in March 1943, and the *Chicago Bodybuilder* magazine led with Jules in February 1947.

John Bavington: Canadian

Keeval Daly: from British Guiana, who had been living in America and was a Mr. New York winner.

George Eiferman: who, hard to believe from today’s vantage point, had appeared on no physique magazine covers prior to the time of this contest but who would win the Mr. America the following year. He was the current Mr. Philadelphia.

John Farbotnik: still three years away from becoming Mr. America but a physique familiar to fans via his covers of September 1946 and January 1947 on the *Chicago Bodybuilder* and *Your Physique* (June 1947) and *Muscle Power* (July 1947).

Orlando Garrido: 165 pound class lifter from Cuba.

Josef Hantych: Czechoslovakia

Joe Lauriano: who as of this writing is still walking an hour every day and lifting weights for forty-five minutes every day as he nears age seventy-seven. His cover appearances were on *Strength & Health* for March 1946 and December 1946.

Rene Leger: The current Mr. Canada seen on the front/back covers of *Muscle Power* for September 1946.

Henri Moulins: 123 pound lifter from France.

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Eric Pedersen: edged out by Steve Reeves at the Mr. America earlier that year he appeared on the cover of *Strength & Health* (April 1947). *Muscle Power* (August 1947) and *Your Physique* (August 1947).

Steve Stanko: Mr. America 1944. *Strength & Health* covers on January 1939, October 1940, October 1943, September 1944 and March 1947.

Joe Thaler: USA.

Juhani Vellamo: Finland

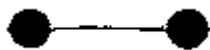
F. Vieira: British Guiana.

Kimon Voyages: of the USA who appeared on the cover of *Your Physique* (August 1942) and *Strength & Health* (June 1945).

Three months earlier, on 29 June 1947 in Chicago, Illinois, at Lane Tech high school at the corner of Western Avenue and Addi-

son Street, (2400 west -3600 north), the AAU Mr. America contest was held. Steve Reeves won. Interestingly, five of the top six men in the Mr. America were also competitors in Philadelphia at this premier Mr. Universe contest. Reeves, however, who was present and talked into coming on stage, removing his shirt, and hitting some poses, was not in the contest. It was said that he was under contract to make a film and, therefore, could not compete. Go figure.

Anyway, the other placers at the Mr. America event who were not under contract were: Eric Pedersen (second), Joe Lauriano (third), John Farbotnik (fourth), George Eiferman (fifth), Kimon Voyages (sixth), and Joe Thaler (tenth). Please take a moment to notice how Eiferman placed, and who was judged better than he at the Mr. America.



Steve Stanko was still a teenager when he watched the 1936 Senior National Weightlifting Championships in Philadelphia at this same Convention Hall and saw John Grimek win a berth on the 1936 Olympic team.

Steve's dad passed away 27 November 1942, knowing of his son's wonderful lifting successes: national heavyweight champion for 1938, 1939 and 1940; and world champion—1940. As of 1941, Steve could sprint 100 yards in street clothes in 10.8 seconds. The days would come, however, when that distance required almost ten minutes to traverse because of phlebitis, a painful leg condition which would shadow him for the rest of his life.

Within a year and a half of his father's death, Steve won the Jr. Mr. America and the Senior Mr. America title for 1944, and in the latter was designated as possessing the best arms, back and chest.

Strength & Health magazine noted in December 1945 that due to a leg injury Steve would never lift again, but three months later, on March 16, 1946, he posed at a strength show in Philadelphia at the Kensington Labor Lyceum at Second and Cambria Streets.

By the time of the first Mr. Universe contest Steve was still on the record books for the USA with a 381 pound clean and jerk. *Strength & Health* (November 1947, page 50) shows Stanko with two women, one of them Gene Jantzen's wife, Jantzen would write the coverage of the Mr. Universe for Weider's *Your Physique*.

As midnight and the blue law time limit approached, the judges cast their single votes, resulting in:

Steve Stanko	3
John Farbotnik	2
Eric Pedersen	2
George Eiferman	1
Rene Leger	1

Another vote was then taken to break the tie between Pedersen and Farbotnik for second place. This vote went in Farbotnik's favor. Two versions about the popularity of this decision appeared in print following the contest:

Strength & Health for February 1948 (p. 11) contained a letter from Larry Barnholth, one of the judges, to Bob Hoffman, the editor/publisher. "Say, Bob," Barnholth wrote, "what is all the mysterious whispering for in regard to the 'Mr. Universe' contest? The Canadian magazine is to expose the 'Mr. Universe' scandal. The 'Iron Man' says of the contest, 'The least said the better.' The 'Body-

builder' avoids the contest, merely saying the greatest thrill they got in the show was the fact that John Farbotnik almost won."

Hoffman replied: "This is the first news we had that there was anything mysterious about the selection of Steve Stanko as Mr. Universe." Those present just before midnight on 27 September 1947, however, were well aware of the controversy.

As soon as George Eiferman was allocated fourth place, as Gene Jantzen explained in his coverage for *Your Physique* (April 1948), the audience response was antagonistic.

"Of all the contestants to appear on the stage, George Eiferman was the most popular with the audience. . . When George Eiferman was the first of this group of four [Farbotnik, Stanko and Pedersen] to be asked to leave the stage, the large audience nearly went wild with booing and shouting. Even after he left, and throughout the time that the judges were selecting the first three places out of the three men left the audience still continued to shout for Eiferman."

Whereas Hoffman's response to Barnholth indicated that he thought the great majority of the audience favored Stanko, who worked for Hoffman, Jantzen wrote: "To most of the people the whole show looked like some sort of farce with our good friend Steve being made the goat."

Steve's leg condition was painful and it was impossible for him to adequately train his legs at all, to say nothing of the intensity required for the Mr. Universe event. There were no best body-part subdivisions at this contest; had there been it may be safe to suggest that Stanko's legs would have been in seventeenth place.

The International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB) was created in 1946, but had not yet sanctioned a contest. The newness of the organization is evident when copy editors at *Your Physique* allowed Jantzen's reference to the cub organization as the "IFOBB" just before he informed us: "It will take time before the International Federation of Bodybuilders is big enough to tackle this job [Mr. Universe] but it is growing rapidly and the time will surely come. Certainly you will agree that it would be better to wait ten years and do a decent job of it than to rush in with some half-baked ideas and run a Mr. Universe contest which has become the laughingstock of bodybuilders the world over." (Indeed the first IFBB Mr. Universe was not held until 1959. It was won by Eddie Sylvestre.)

Stanko was not without redeeming muscle. Jantzen notes: "Anyway, Steve Stanko won the Mr. Universe title, and believe me, he looked more surprised than anyone else." Jantzen explains that had there been a best arms subdivision, Stanko would have won it, and that Steve's arms, shoulders and upper back were amazing, but that he lacked pecs, lats and abs (in addition to legs).

Jantzen summed up the feelings of many who witnessed the first Mr. Universe contest when he wrote, "The contest was run in an orderly fashion and with a definite sense of timing but it could not hold a candle against many city or district physique contests I have had the pleasure of watching."

At that point in history, September 1947, the IFBB was one year old, NABBA had not yet been formed, and a small Austrian youngster named Arnold had just turned two months old.