

Reflections on The Twelfth Annual Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen's Association Reunion

by Dr. Ken "Leo" Rosa

Those of us who were present at the 12th annual Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen's Association reunion in New York City's Downtown Athletic Club on October 8, 1994 were privileged to have Slim Farman with us and to witness this great strongman doing what he does better than anyone else in the world.

Slim Farman. He to be one of the most thrilling strongman performers of all time. Wherever he performs the audience watches his unmatched exhibition of intensely concentrated physical power with bated breath. No matter how many strongmen one has seen, none can surpass Slim The Hammerman for engendering sheer unadulterated excitement. Slim Farman's very unusual feats of strength are a most unforgettable experience. It's amazing to realize how quiet the room becomes as this giant of a man focuses his mental and physical force.

The annual Old Time Barbell and Strongmen's Association reunion is the premier of the gatherings to honor the greats and the not so great of the Iron Game. It is to be happily noted that other such reunions are taking place in California and England following the example set by the New York association. Infinite appreciation is owed to Vic Boff, the person behind the Oldtime Barbell and Strongman reunions. Three cheers for Vic Boff and Johnny Mandel.

Among the many distinguished Iron Game personalities seated at the dais was a fellow who I remember about four decades plus ago was a radiant youth with a deep tan who one gorgeous summer day was comparing muscular thighs with Al Berman on Orchard Beach in the Bronx. Honoree Dave Sheppard. Did I say deep tan? Okay. Deep tan. Huge muscles. Superlative physique. Great strength. That sounds like Bill Pearl four decades ago. It was and still is as he too sat at the dais to be honored. It was fitting that Bill was seated next to the inspiration of us all. There is only one and there never will be another, John C. Grimek.

When I was a kid I remember seeing a fine color photograph of Leo Stern on the cover of *Strength & Health* magazine back about 1946. And now there was Leo Stern being honored at the reunion.

It was good to see Mabel Rader. Immediately we thought of Mabel and Peary Rader's much missed *Iron Man* magazine which was universally respected by us all. The real *Iron Man*.

Jan and Terry Todd, Alex Godo, Laurie Fierstein, Marvin Eder, Al Thomas, Dave Webster, Dr. Zovluck, Izquierdo and Sansoli, Johnny Ogle, Joe Ponder and a cast of seemingly hundreds of Iron Game brethren and ladies were present at this eagerly awaited annual event. I even found myself in a discussion about Gracie jiu-jitsu, with which I fell in love once I became active in it three years ago.

Somehow I felt that I was not alone in reflecting back through the decades to a time which doesn't always seem to be so long ago until one stops to think about it and to calculate. As I circulated around the room greeting and being greeted by old friends and acquaintances, as I was greeting the people on the dais, the decades drifted away in reverie to the fanciful dreaming of youth.

Frankly, I don't feel a heck of a lot different now than when I was training with Al Berman in a basement gym in the Bronx back around 1951. There was no heat and we froze in the winter as we used a 110 pound barbell to do front deltoid raises with our overcoats on. Al Berman had a marvelous physique with a perpetual lat spread and first rate abdominals.

We remember when we were forever young, yesterday. John Grimek was the reigning monarch of muscledom, seemingly an ageless immortal who belonged in the same category as Superman, the man of steel. Pudgy Stockton was the breathtakingly beautiful musclegirl who was every muscleguy's fantasy. Joe Louis would rule the boxing world forever. Frank Sinatra would always be the romantic young crooner. Steve Reeves would forever be Mr. America age twenty-one. John Davis could not lose. And when he finally did it was to Doug Hepburn and Paul Anderson who would join the other ageless immortals and go on forever. Or so we thought.

Bill Pearl appeared on the cover of *Strength & Health* magazine in 1953 and after we recovered from being overwhelmed we immediately set about trying to match the astounding muscular girths of this incredible wonder. Gallons of milk and the then very new Hoffman's protein tablets or powder. That was the answer. Dave Sheppard was a young and handsome physique star photographed by Lon. We remember when Sheppard went to "Muscle town," as York, Pennsylvania, was then known, and became an American Olympic weightlifting legend. Terry Todd, with his huge stature, girth and immense strength out powerlifting into the vocabulary of players of the Iron Game. Leroy Colbert had attained twenty inch upper arms. Then called the largest muscular arms in the world. George Paine was an incredible muscular marvel the likes of which had not been seen before.

The halcyon days of youth would never end. Or so we thought. The three hundred pound bench presses would climb to four hundred and beyond. And continue that way. The coveted eighteen inch muscular upper arm, once attained, would always be that way. Or so we thought.

Suddenly I was back in 1994 at the Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen's reunion. Bill Pearl was looking as good as ever. I touched Ken Hall's legendary abs and they were like steel, as they were four decades ago. It's amazing how many people still appear to be in outstanding shape today. The reunions are a way of paying homage to the pioneers in the history of the Iron Game and it's gratifying to see how many young people are in attendance. Attendance is a way for younger people to actually reach out and touch the past and many are taking advantage of that opportunity.

The twelfth reunion left me in a more reflective mood than the previous gatherings. Attendance is definitely an extraordinary experience. The camaraderie is wonderful. All Iron Game people should attend because they'll be glad they did.

And for any really young iron pumpers who might be reading this and who, consumed by the "wisdom" and invincibility of youth, erroneously assume that the reunions are only for the doddering, a devastating lesson was to be taught about three weeks alter the reunion by a professor named Big George Foreman.

And some there are who still revere all the dreams of their youth.

—Attributed to George P. Bradford.