



IRON GAME HISTORY



VOLUME 4 NUMBER 1

July 1995

Siegmund Rejoins the Professor

In the years before Sig Klein's death, he and I spoke several times on the phone concerning a painting of his late father-in-law, Professor Attila. The painting was one of the few iron game artifacts Sig had saved from his marvelous collection, and it still hung in the front room of the Manhattan brownstone he shared with his wife, Grace. Although he had never visited our collection, Sig often encouraged us in our efforts to capture as much as we could of the history of the game. Thus it was that as he was dying of cancer, Sig decided that it would be fitting for the painting of the Professor to come to Austin and be in the company of so many of the luminaries in the field to which both he and Professor Attila had given their lives.

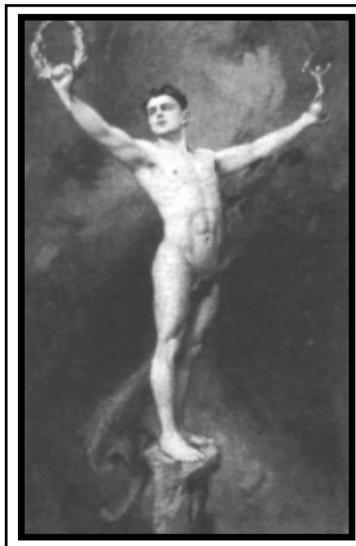
Both Sig and Grace told us that the oil painting of Professor Attila had been done in 1887 in London by a "court painter" who had done several portraits for the royal family. The story they got from the Professor was that in the late 1880s he had been engaged by members of the royal family to serve as what would today be known as a "personal trainer." According to the Professor, the royal family was so pleased by his work that they commissioned the "court painter" to do a portrait of him dressed as a strongman and then presented the portrait to him as a gift. In fact, he even told them that the leopard skin costume he wore had been made from the skin of a leopard shot by one of the royals he had been training. In any case, when the Professor came to this country in the early 1890s and opened his famous gymnasium in New York, he brought the large, virtually lifesize portrait with him, ornate frame and all.

Sig told us that the wonderful painting, which depicts the Professor standing with his right hand placed lightly on the small end of a large club, was displayed for years at Attila's gymnasium, which closed at his death in 1924, and for many more years in the Professor's gym once Sig reopened it, and for even more years in Sig's own even more famous, gym. So much did Sig love the painting that he

refused many offers for it, and he told me that it pleased him to see it every day and to reflect on the glory days of the game. So when he told us that he thought the painting should come to Texas and join his and the Professor's friends, we were inexpressibly grateful.

Once the decision was made, we agreed that we would come to New York and take possession of it in the fall of 1987 on the occasion of our annual trip to The City to take part in the Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen Association dinner. We knew Sig was weakening, of course, but we were still surprised and shocked when, just days before we were to leave, Vic Boff called with the sad news that Sig had died. But still we came, of course, and after the dinner we went with Vic to pay our respects to Grace Klein and to collect the painting of the Professor, along with his scrapbook.

To ensure the painting's safety, we drove it to Texas and today it hangs in and dominates my office, where it has been seen in the years since by thousands of people. Since that time, as I would look up from my work and see the good Professor, I would often wish that we had a panning of Sig to keep the Professor company, and then one day we learned that Sig's daughter had sent a small oil painting of Sig to be sold at the renowned New York auction house, Sotheby's. Dismayed that we hadn't known that Sig's daughter had owned such a painting and that we weren't in the financial league to bid for an oil painting at Sotheby's, we decided to call someone who had both the informed interest to want the painting and the money to buy it. We called Joe Weider. I told him



what was afoot and passed along what we knew, hoping that he could acquire the painting and keep it from going to someone with no idea that the model for the depiction of Mercury was a famous lifter and bodybuilder. Joe was excited by the news and thanked us for the information, and within the month he called me to say he had managed to buy the painting. Jan and I were pleased by the news, as we

knew that Joe would enjoy it and that it would rest among his many other artistic treasures.

The painting of Sig as Mercury was done by C. Bosseron Chambers, a well known New York artist who specialized in religious and heroic figures. Born in 1883 in St Louis, Chambers studied at the Berlin Academy and at the Royal Academy of Vienna, and from 1935 through 1941 was listed in *Who's Who in America*. For years, Chambers maintained a studio in Carnegie Hall, and it was there that he painted a young Sig Klein in 1926.

Recently, on a trip to the West Coast, I took a few hours and drove out to Woodland Hills to visit with the Weider editorial staffs and to spend a little time with Joe himself. As it happened, Joe and I went out for lunch, then came back and said goodbye in the lobby, but before I left I stopped to see Dr. James Wright. About fifteen minutes later, I was back in the lobby again when Joe walked by and said to me in passing, "Thanks again for that tip about the Klein

painting." I told him he was welcome, and then he asked if I had ever seen it, to which I answered, "No, but I'd very much like to." So into his huge office we walked, and over to the painting. He then picked it up and handled it to me and asked me what I thought. After a moment of admiration, I told Joe that it was truly beautiful, and then he looked at me and said with a smile, "You like it? Well, then take it. Add it to the collection." To say I was surprised hardly captures my feelings. In all my years of collecting, I doubt that anything has come to me so unexpectedly. Clearly, the gift was a spur of the moment heartfelt thing on Joe's part, as he thought I'd already left, but for a man who loves both art and the iron game to give away so precious an artifact says a great deal about the wisdom and perspective of age.

Today, Professor Attila still has the place of honor over my big leather couch. Looking at him now is his son-in-law who, although they never met in life, honored the Professor by following the old man's footsteps into the heart of the *kraftsport* they both revered.