



IRON GAME HISTORY



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Honoring Al Thomas

Through the years, the Oldtime Barbell and Strongman Association has honored a number of amazing athletes, successful promoters, and dedicated officials of the Iron Game. At this year's Hall of Fame dinner, held 7 October 1995 at the Downtown Athletic Club in New York, Joe Abbenda — Mr. America 1962 and Mr. Universe in 1962 and 1963; Dr. Hy Schaffer, who, in the 1930s, snatched two hundred pounds at a bodyweight of 132 pounds; and Al Berger, gym owner and strongman, were recognized for their many contributions to the Game. A special presentation was also made to Dr. Charles Moss, of Los Angeles, for his unflagging support of the Association and its ideals.

However, in discussions over the past year, the Association had decided that there was another aspect of the Iron Game that deserved recognition and respect. That aspect is the power that the written word has had in our lives. And so, to honor the story-tellers of our game — the writers and journalists who string together the sentences that lift our hearts and fire our enthusiasm for the weights — the Association decided to honor one person each year who has made a significant contribution as a writer. We are honored to tell the readers of *Iron Game History* that the first recipient of the OBSA's Writing Award is Dr. Al Thomas, who (according to the speech commemorating his achievements at the OBSA dinner), "more than any other person, is responsible for providing the philosophical framework that caused the explosion of interest in women's bodybuilding and powerlifting that began in the 1970s and continues to this day."

Allow me to explain. In July of 1973, Dr. Al Thomas, then an English professor at Kutztown State College in Pennsylvania, began writing a series of articles for *Iron Man* magazine that explored the world of women and weight training. Unlike earlier

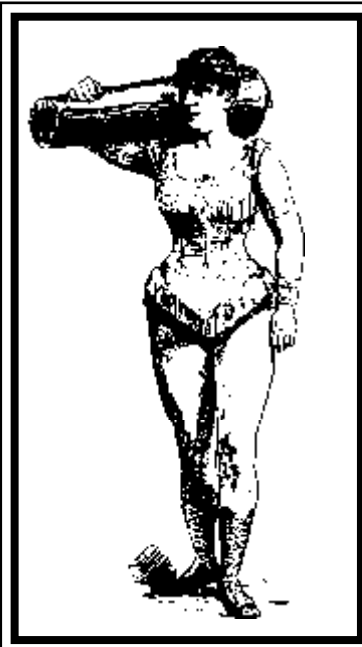
magazine articles which generally just praised the benefits of weight training as a means to a slender figure, Thomas' articles explored the boundaries — real and imagined — of femininity and strength. He argued that women should be strong, that women should (if they wished) be muscular, and furthermore, that, like men, women should find joy and pride — not shame — in their strength and physicality. Thomas wrote approximately sixty such articles for *Iron Man*. Some

articles featured athletes who had chosen to defy convention and pursue strength some articles were philosophical essays in which Thomas took aim at our society's aversion to muscular women. But for the women who read them — including me — the articles were a revelation. They gave me — and the other women who crowded into America's gyms in the 1970s — visible, contemporary role models as well as a philosophical center that allowed us to follow Thomas' call to muscular arms and tight our way onto the lifting platforms and posing daises of America.

Few men (or women) have ever had such an impact on a sport. When Charles Gaines wanted to write a book and then create a film documentary on women's bodybuilding, he turned to Al Thomas for assistance. Again Thomas helped Gaines see through to the center of the problem of women's bodybuilding — that women had as much right to strength and muscularity as men did and that women could possess these attributes without somehow "becoming men." It was — and is

— a significant point, and one which, without Thomas' insight, Gaines would not have made the central theme of his documentary film.

Although Thomas ended his *Iron Man* series in 1985, he continued to write and contribute articles to a variety of magazines — *Body and Power*, *Strength & Health*, *The Pallas Journal*, and



of course, most recently, *Iron Game History*. With Steve Wennerstrom, in 1983, Thomas also co-authored an encyclopedic history of women's bodybuilding entitled *The Female Physique Athlete*.

At the beginning of the past semester, in my course on sports and ethics, I explained to my class that what we call "philosophy" is actually made up of several sub-disciplines: Metaphysics asks questions about the nature of things: Aesthetics asks questions about beauty and proportion; Epistemology asks questions about how we learn things: Axiology asks questions about valuing things: and finally, Ethics ask questions about the morality of things. In thinking about Al Thomas' body of work, I am struck by how he has devoted his energies and intellect to tackling *all* these big questions. What is the nature of bodybuilding? Is it immoral to deny women their right to muscle? How should an ideal physique look? And so on. In this issue of *IGH*, for instance, Thomas once again tries to get at the philosophical heart of the Iron Game. In "Some Thoughts on Spirit," he explores ideas which are, admittedly, complicated. They

are, however, also extremely important. Thomas asks us to think about how we value and understand what we do, and how, unlike other sports, the Iron Game is, in large part, a matter of the spirit.

Years from now, when historians chronicle the growth of weight training, Edmond Desbonnet and David Willoughby will be remembered for their efforts to preserve our early history. Alan Calvert, Bemarr Macfadden, Bob Hoffman, Joe Weider, and the Raders will be remembered for giving the Game its great magazines. And, if history is accurate, Al Thomas will be remembered for his attempts to give the Game a philosophical heart.

The speech honoring Thomas at the OBSA Dinner concluded, "Every woman bodybuilder, powerlifter, and weightlifter in the English-speaking world owes Al Thomas a debt of gratitude. We have done what we've done because of him; we have become who we are because of him. He opened the doors."

Congratulations, Al. And thanks, from all of us.

—Jan Todd