

SOME THOUGHTS ON SPIRIT:

Its Source and "Uses" in the Best of Games

Al Thomas

The questions raised here and the guesses ventured in response to them are connected to issues specifically rooted in Maurice Catarcio's record-breaking feats and more generally, in the wonderment engendered by the Iron Game body and accomplishments. Maurice's feat is the particular to which many of these generalizations point, but at the same time and by implication, these guesses are ventured about all of the truly authentic achievements in our old and noble tradition of strength: about all the great ones with a true "vocation" or calling from On High. (But, lest we read too much into all this, these guesses are ventured about these memorable strength heroes within, and only within the time frames in which they administer the [almost priestly] "offices" of their strongman "vocations." In the paleness of the real world we must remind ourselves that even those whose "call" is the "highest" often prove themselves — so disappointingly to us, their admirers — no more mighty, no more called from On High than we.)



Unaccountably moved, I recently watched a video of sixty-six year old Maurice Catarcio's unprecedented tearing of 102 decks of plastic-covered playing cards in fourteen minutes, three seconds (blasting into smithereens Herman Bush's 1948 record: forty decks of paper cards in twenty minutes). Because I had witnessed the real event not long before and was the one who slapped each of the 102 decks into the bloodied paws of the "Magnificent Maurice," I couldn't account for the fact that the video's virtual reality was resonating with stronger feelings in me than the real thing, there in Jim Larusso's Muscle World Gym, before the recording eyes of network TV cameras.

Mystified, I replayed the tape again and again. Slowed down in effect, Maurice's "secular epiphany" (as one reporter called it) slowly revealed itself, filling me with the pleasure that always attends demonstrations of great might. Filling others too, we learned later, with a similar pleasure, but also with the shock of recognition that accompanies the experience of epiphany, mentioned above: "the sudden unveiling of hidden meaning, consequent to confrontation with an unexpected event." The reporter's so-called "secular epiphany" revealed itself as any proper one should, experientially, in the resonance-chamber equipped for the recording of prodigious feats, the belly.

Please bear with the next paragraph, which develops, at least as a metaphor, a body-mind or body-Spirit connection that will be returned to, and developed, in the following argument.

As a student of aesthetics (art as feeling) might explain this

process: In a mechanism similar to the communication of ideas as a function of the brain — deep feelings (like the almost reverential ones disclosed by some in the audience) are revealed, or more correctly "released," *in* and *by* the nervous system. These feelings, then, are registered or encoded as experience, which is characterized, at the deepest levels, by its resonance to a continuum of feeling-impulses (ultimately aesthetic impulses), ranging from religious-Spiritual responses on the one hand, to their womb-mates, on the other, art and sexuality.

It is an understatement of course to say that a discussion of this sort is rare in the strength journals. But the observations, ventured above, and their subsequent development are part of a larger consideration and argument that are, I think, important, even if for no other reason than that they might elicit the kind of debate without which it is impossible for our game to achieve its fully human potential. Some thoughts, or guesses, at least are ventured below about the Spirit-body connection; about the body as metaphor: about the deep schism between our Iron Game and games/sports (generally considered); and ultimately, about the uniqueness of our Iron Game by reason of its Spirit dimension.

When it comes to discussing an issue like the feeling-cascade touched upon above and the role played by such issues in our deeper understanding of the body and body game, it's beyond debate that only we ourselves (we who love the "weights" and the body) — not others — are guilty of having created the mind-set which exempts us from truly serious, mature, and probing discussions of the Game, its unique body, and the body-Spirit (Iron Game-Spirit) connection. It is nobody other than we who have exempted ourselves from this morally important, growth-enhancing self-analysis.

We have exempted ourselves, in the final analysis, from the self-knowledge that accompanies such discussion for no other reason than that the metaphors, linguistic constructs, and "poetic" imageries that occasionally (but necessarily) crop-up in such discussions are too high-falutin' and pompous, too self-conscious, too precious for folks who just want to look at pictures of big, strong muscles and read biographies (very short ones) about the possessors of big, strong muscles and the heavy weights they can lift: "Enough already. Save all that 'philosophical' crap for the eggheads at the *Readers Digest*."

If we can accept the intent of the foregoing discussion and then move on, we come to some observations that advance our argument by specifying it. As a start, the spiritual dimensions of "soul"-stirring achievements in strength and body are registered, as we've

seen, in our ‘middle.’ A more colorful metaphor than our earlier use of “belly” and “nervous system” comes to us in the designations employed by anthropologists and students of religion in referring to this body-site of feeling: i.e. the “sacred (or holy) middle” and, more commonly, “the sacrum.” Whatever the seeming inappropriateness of such terms in the squeamish Nineties, this mid-realm has been “holy” for thousands of years before there were any Romans who subsequently named this anciently-sacred venue of Spirit (and emotion — and sexuality) the sacrum.

Perhaps more germane to some of us, the Christians’ Savior assured his followers that Spirit was similarly located. The venue of its kingdom, He taught, is “within us,” “in the middle of us,” “in the midst of us.” In this placement, of course, Jesus sounded very much (But why not?) like thousands of so-called pagans in His location of this ultimately-important “faculty” and seemingly-ever-applicable metaphor.

However “quaint” the “*physiology” in all this, the fact behind the metaphor is inarguable. We all know the Holy-Middle source of the profound emotion that we experience in the presence of great art, or the supernal, or the person for whom we would die. Knowing the deep source of this feeling, we know also that our most spiritually enriching experiences have their roots in it. This was true for the ancients to whom it was the realm of the god-within, the Spirit. It is hardly less so, if with different designations, for US moderns.

“But when you say, ‘for US moderns,’ does the “US” refer to the brilliant priest (-technocrats) of our theological-industrial complex?”

No. Bless your heart. No.

“But—but does it refer to the philosophers-of-spirit of our academic-industrial complex?”

No, not at all. But we must go slowly here. Try this thought on carefully; it may not fit at first. It’s the irony of ironies in this age of the specialist. Try to understand this:

To nothing—to no group or class or profession—to nothing does that pronoun “US” refer more inarguably than to Our Game, to even the lowliest of the real-ones in Our Game. Nobody—not academician, not cleric, not scientist —nobody is more the student, the chief advocate, the “philosopher” of body —nobody is more the Levite (the priest of body’s ah-empowering “sacred middle”) than we in the Game are (even the “least” among US): we who love this Body (-Spirit)-Game of ours.

This “holiness” —this, at least metaphoric, holiness; this wholiness —of our (quite noble) game deserves celebration. The connection between these awarenesses about ourselves and the Game’s role in embodying them for us — our growing experience of the deep, moral distinctions that separate Our Game from small “g” games — all this cries out for celebration.

I love baseball. I love its history. I love the “mud lusciousness” of the game, the land whose “mud lusciousness” shapes the game. But rhapsodize about it as much as I and other silly people may, our nation’s favorite pastime is just a game, though a magnificent one. To put the very best face on our favorite pastime it is just a game: an invented game. When it and Our Game meet, a blush suffuses the cheeks of its fans as their game’s mongrel pedigree is rolled-out in the presence of the human body’s family tree: with its

human roots in mankind’s primal parents there in the Garden (long before it had an outfield) — and its transcendent roots in the Power, the Presence: in the Spirit: the source of Maurice’s resurrection and of all human renewal and heroic revitalization.

But our Iron Game, thank God, will never be America’s favorite pastime. Such conferrals of dime store cachet are best left to *Field of Dreams* cultists.

If (other than as part of its name) our Iron Game was truly a game, it would be the capital “G” Game of a divinely-appointed human body — and at its center: The Kingdom. (Now listen well: In their reading of this preceding sentence, there will be Good People who feel constrained, by their deepest and most honest instincts, to enclose “divinely” in quotation marks. That is fine. But even they, *especially* they [in their honesty], can’t escape the sense of a deep and powerful force at work in this “Game” of theirs.) Ours, to repeat, is the game of a divinely-appointed human body, with *the* (or *a*) Kingdom at its center. And this is true. True and psychologically important no less so as (mere?) metaphor than as substance. It is true, no less (or more), for the true-hearted atheist than for the believer in Jesus or Judaism or the Vedas — or in wondrous groves of oak.

Harkening for a moment back to the earlier discussion of the sacrum in our continuing pursuit of Iron Game meanings: As is obviously NOT true for any of the small “g” games —despite their fancy country clubs and Halls of Fame —the connections in our Iron “Game” are deep, not just back to the Civil War Days, not just back to the beginnings of our own personal history, but way back to the beginnings of our race’s memory. That’s what the body in our body-sport connects with, and that’s what it connects us (its incarnations) with.

The deep memory is what informs us when, alone (always alone, adrift-on-our-own, as in no other game), we dive into the deep sea (of our Being); and rising to the surface, we embark, alone (without coach or sensei), upon our ponderous swim. Alone.

This “aloneness” (not loneliness, as we will see) is a critical issue in the distinctions drawn here between our Iron Game and games-as-such. Games-as-such cannot exist without coaches, managers, instructors, senseis. Until too old to matter, game players are plagued with a hierarchy of instructors, whose official role is the instruction of novitiate and bald-dome alike into the mystery of games. Their real purpose, however, (though unofficial, of course) is nourishing a childish dependency in their charges and retarding in them the sort of morally-informed maturation that Our Game effects by connecting us with the deep memory touched-upon above.

For all the aloneness of this deep journey, it is not lonely. There are of course, all the therapeutic silliness and happiness that accompany shared travail with training partners, “with whom (in Harry Paschall’s words, describing a similar phenomenon) we have ridden the river.” But at the same time there is the feeling of family, far deeper than the transient connectedness provided by teams and team sports. For many. Our Game is a psychic parent: much more their true source than their gene-source had ever been. Connected to the world-within, the iron man experiences *IN* his deep self, *FROM* his deep self, that which he could never *learn*, surely never *experience*, from teammates or even the wisest coach or sensei, out-there in the world beyond his skin.

Hunkered down in his holy middle, he discovers, not as a

theory but as nonverbal, immediate, sensory, transforming experience: a “unified field.” There in his sacrum (where thought has become living cells), he experiences an inner reality as complex and diverse as its twin, the “reality” of the outer world: “These moments [are] of pure, positive happiness, when all doubts, all fears, all inhibitions, all tensions, all weaknesses [are] left behind. Now self-consciousness [is] lost. All separateness and distance from the world [disappear].” In this peak experience, as described by the psychologist Abraham Maslow, we see and feel something of Jesus’ “Kingdom of Heaven” (within), of Swedenborg’s “interior awareness,” of Buddha’s “Nirvana.” We see and feel something, a bit at least, of what the audience sensed in Magnificent Maurice — the apartness, the abstractedness —of his doings that remarkable afternoon.

Those of us who have journeyed beyond our little boy enthusiasms for the “weights” —those of us who have experienced at least some modest degree of access to this sort of deep world via the spirit-stretching intensity of the Spirit-Body connection that we have experienced UNDER ponderous weight loads —we have some resonance to, we have internalized to a degree at least, these states of “peak experience,” of “interior awareness.”

In recounting these sorts of connections, Maslow’s patients told him that, for the first time they felt “like a member of the family, not like an orphan.” Indeed, Maslow came to feel — as the mature Iron Gamer has sometimes sensed, but usually lacked the bold courage to say—that such experiences were the real “reality,” the truly normal “normal life,” not some mystical experience available only to chaps in Himalayan retreats.

Hitting a homerun is a “peak experience,” but you do not *labor-under-it*. You don’t *labor under* the “peak experience” that comes in the split-second of catching a game-winning Hail Mary Pass. You most assuredly *DO live-inside*, you most assuredly do *labor-under*, any one of a hundred (intense-beyond-imagining) experiences that are provided, not just to great athletes (but to the least of athletes, if willing to pay the price), by our Alma Mater (who was kind enough to provide Maurice a “peak experience” to “live-inside” for fourteen minutes and three seconds).

These sorts of folks, as Maslow assures us (but need not have), are not hysterics, but the healthiest of people. Where the great man is wrong — as any mature Iron Gamer knows — is in his notion that such experiences are “accidents or moments of grace,” available to one percent of the population. “Accidents” they surely are *not* to those who achieve them as part of Our Game. “Moments of grace,” perhaps, but moments that Our Game makes available with a lavish hand to those willing to make the deep journey into the truest of ‘family’ connectednesses.

Products of a social contract, games are constructed in a practiced realm of abstract geometries beyond the surface of the player’s skin, as we’ve seen. If larger significances are sought in that realm — larger moral, political, aesthetic, or sociological significances — they are necessarily qualified by the essential game-ness of games —by the predictability of the game-purpose — by the inescapable abstractness of any activity whose “essence,” like the game’s, is expressed in number formulations. In the world of the game as such, significances are smaller rather than larger, because a game’s paradigm “legislates” its conversion into a world but invari-

ably a world bereft of meaning or spirit.

On the other hand and in an opposite direction, one experiences in our Game’s paradigm a force that “legislates” a conversion that is charged with meaning: in which the Real World “out-there” (and the Real World “in-here,” in our “holy-middle,” that is) undergoes a sea change-conversion into a Game (for our purposes, here, our Iron Game): a conversion replete with significances: with the stuff of literature and art, but more importantly here, with the stuff of “affirmative prayer,” which (in a few pages, relative to Maurice) will be defined as “spirit-filled, life communicative living.”

Unlike the outward-direction and social dynamics of games (in which meaning is undermined by the inescapable sense, however, endearing, of contrivance), Our Game’s direction is inward: its dynamics, those of the Spirit-body connection, with their source, as we’ve seen, in the sacrum. In these sorts of distinctions, lie the deep moral divergence between these two formulations (Our Game and games) and their respective “realities.” It’s to such distinctions as these that the disputant turns when correcting any attempt to confer cachet upon Our Game by the attribution to it of the (ostensible) honorific term “sport” (or the lesser one, “game”). The true beauty of Our Thing is not contingent upon such patronizing, but ultimately demeaning, conferrals.

A counter-argument to the premise ventured above is that bodybuilding and its contests represent a game and, if less accountably, a sport. As suggested earlier, the conferral of the honorific term “sport” upon activities such as bodybuilding and its contests is meant to provide these endeavors with some cachet. It is clear, however, that no definition (developed pursuant to logic’s demand for internal coherence) supports the notion that bodybuilding is either a game or a sport. And any definition that is sufficiently manipulated to permit bodybuilding contests being included under the heading of “sport” would be shamelessly contrived and “stipulative” (one reached, that is, by agreement: in this particular case, an agreement between “interested parties,” who profit by the attribution of this term, “sport,” to their showcasing of bodies).

If there is an argument that validates my notion that the body’s “role” in our Iron Game is different in kind from its “role” in a game or sport — “different in kind” and more “holy” (for lack of a more precise term) — we find such a validation in the perversion that is visited upon the body when it is subjected to contests, to competition.

For instance, despite the fact that boxing is a product of “business contrivances” far more sleazy than those that produce bodybuilding contests, a boxing aficionado (even the most humane of the species) is less disjunct from himself (and from his humanity) at the final bell of a fairly-matched boxing contest than an aficionado-of-body is at the end of a well-judged bodybuilding contest (a greater and greater rarity, it seems, with the passing years).

For the aficionado who is sensitive to such distinctions, they result from the fact that, in boxing, a body is a vehicle for doing. It is seen and responded-to for what it does, not for what it IS or MEANS (in some metaphysical sense). It is precisely in this latter sense that, in humanely conceived physique display (such as the “exhibition,” *never* the contest), the body is not responded to for what it does because it doesn’t DO anything, except to pose.” It is responded-to

for what it IS and for what it MEANS. And the body's "is-ness" and its meaning have far more to do with transcendental truth(s) and "holiness" (the body-as-temple, etc.) than they have to do with what the body DOES or CAN DO — in this case, posing, which up-there on the posing dais is far closer to ballet than to a game or a sport, even in the most florid aficionado's "definitions" of these words.

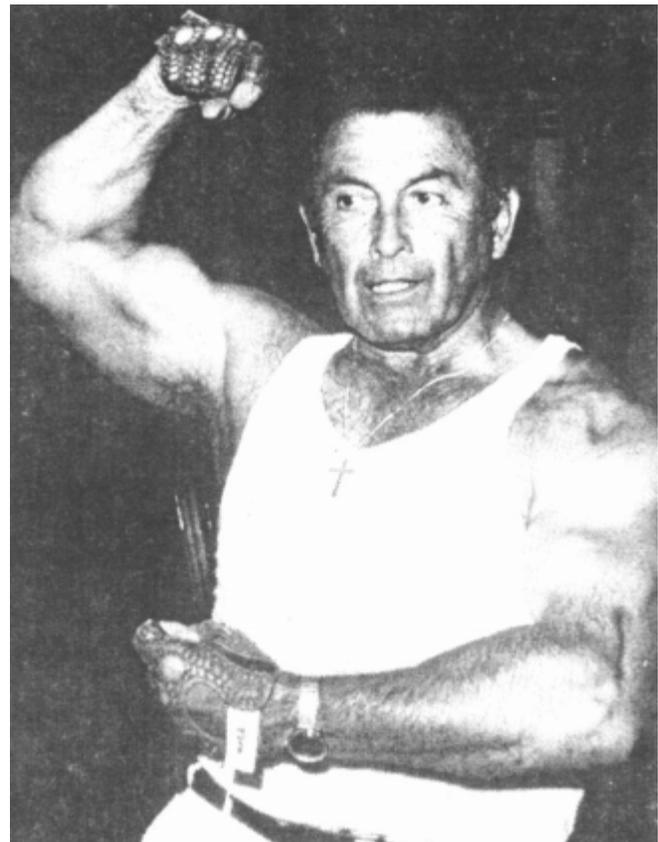
And if we are called to account for the impossible tackiness and bush league-ness of bodybuilding's professionalization (contrasted with the professionalization of REAL sports) —we need merely remember and consider these distinctions above. However tacky and bush league (ignoring far weightier moral considerations) it is to professionalize thwacking jaws and noses (which is merely the perverting of what the body-as-machine DOES) —the professionalizing of what the body IS (in ail its beauty and metaphysical-religious significance) is far more disruptive than boxing to the deep resonances of our Holy Middle, and especially so because such disruptions are deeper than words and betray themselves (if at all) merely as dissatisfaction with (such silly and inconsequential matters as) bad contest placements.

It is, finally, against a backdrop of this sort of inquiry into what the Iron Game was coming to mean to me —what it had always meant in an inchoate way, but was coming to mean in a more clearly comprehensible sense —that Maurice's feat began focusing itself in me, and especially so when a New Age lady who saw the video remarked that Maurice appeared, at times, as though he were meditating or praying, which was a "surprise" to her since she hadn't thought of the "somewhat macho Maurice as the meditative or prayerful sort."

Whatever else the video shared with art, it was becoming clear that, like art, it had isolated its suffering and ever-more bloody subject from the Honorable Maurice Catarcio, the imposing Chairman of the Bridge Commission of Cape May County (NJ.), but even more interestingly, it also separated him from the Maurice who "works out with the weights" at Muscle World Gym.

In the words of another viewer, "I remember Maurice when he was the best built guy around, but then his businesses took over, he got fat, and then went down with diabetes and cancer. But that afternoon, I got the feeling he'd been thinking for so long that he could do all this strongman stuff that he'd 'hard-wired' a circuit in his brain or his Spirit, somewhere, and, before anybody noticed, he'd thought up a new body for himself. [One is reminded here of the insightful line from 'Romans': 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may know what the will of God is.'] As the stack of cards grew, right there in front of our eyes, he actually grew younger looking and more peaceful. He seemed deep into himself. Really deep. Abstracted also —as though he was meditating about other things while his hands were doing their own thing, separate from him. Since he went-down with cancer, he's rebuilt lots of muscle, but this feat seemed to me more an example of mind over matter than muscle over matter."

On a less poetic note, it has become a cliché of sports journalism to attribute the success of a game-player to spirit. The term is never defined, however. In sports, "spirit" has become a synonym for *spunkiness* or *morale* or *vigor* or *esprit de corps*, etc. Its intent is vague approval, with no hint, of course, at its original sacral deno-



ON 19 AUGUST 1995 SIXTY-SIX YEAR OLD MAURICE CATARCIO OF CAPE MAY, NEW JERSEY, TORE 102 DECKS OF PLAYING CARDS IN HALF IN FOURTEEN MINUTES AND THREE SECONDS.

— PHOTO COURTESY MAURICE CATARCIO

tation. There was something, however, of the original intention of the term in one reporter's observation to me that he "felt" a "force, a Spirit" in Maurice while he was in the midst of his card-tearing, "despite my first-impression sense of him as a dominating sort of guy, not your usual Spiritual sort."

Apart from the obvious muscular force, there was inarguably a "force" at work in Maurice that afternoon: one that I've often found in the authentic ones and that, more and more with the passing years, I'm coming to appreciate as being coterminous with the force implicit in the ancient referent of the term "Spirit."

This notion was seconded by the New Age lady mentioned above. What an earlier commentator saw as "abstraction" and "apartness" struck her as more like "prayer." But, lest she offend the unprayerful, she quickly defined her terms: "I don't know whether this ripping and tearing is a sport or athletics or what. But I never saw the kind of transformation that I saw this man experience in any other sport. I got the feeling from all this of some kind of Yoga, which teaches that Spirit creates body, and also that the strict attention necessary for this creating is provided by Yoga as a sort of focusing technique. I hope I'm not offending you muscle-people, but to me all this looked more like a new kind of Yoga than a game or a sport.

"When I said I'd gotten the feeling of 'prayer,' I meant the real thing, not the begging that passes for prayer. For instance, if

you could translate this man and his miracle-healing into words, they'd comprise a prayer. What are the processes that have contributed to this not-young man's youthful strength and to his ability to heal himself? They are nothing more than the substance of the kind of prayer that I'm talking about, 'affirmative prayer': the kind that focuses, not just on life, but on discovering and celebrating the *processes* of life that taken together, add up to life. This 'affirmative prayer' exists in any process of living that's in touch with Spirit, and with life-communicating living. Is there a better way than this to describe the quietness that everybody remarked about, welling up in him from the deep place where Spirit resides?

"My guess is that this man is special because he 'knew' even without 'knowing' that the Spirit in him had not been violated by his diabetes or cancer or anything else. He would never put all this in these words, of course, because he's a devout Catholic, but as I said earlier, everything he did to heal himself and restore himself to even more strength than he ever had before was, and is, prayer. He'd explain it in one way; I, in another way — but whatever. This feat has been very moving, even to me, and I never lifted a weight in my life, but what you can learn from this kind of thing is that whether the technique is called Yoga or prayer or meditation, its purpose is the same: to act as a focusing technique so that the Power in Spirit deep in our 'Holy Middle,' can be brought to the surface, where it can be used, as this man did like any other 'principle' in nature or science."

As I said earlier, this is strange, even "inappropriate." language in a discussion of strength and the body. But I hope that one may be forgiven for wondering why language that has reverential meaning in a discussion of the source and resources of Spirit suddenly sounds "inappropriate" simply because, now, the discussion of these Spiritual sources has been shifted to a strength journal. At the same time that I *do* wonder why discussion of Spirit is disallowed in Iron Game publications by the very folks for whom such discussion *is* appropriate in another publication, I do *not* wonder (I *DO* understand) why such discussion is "disallowed" by those folks to whom life is (merely) matter: nothing but the meaningless collocation of molecules and atoms. On the other hand, however, I may wonder, of course, how such folks can be quite so convinced-beyond-questioning about the finality of their pronouncements (about the finality of matter) in this post-Einsteinian, increasingly Platonic, field theory, quantum physics world of ours.

"Strange subject matter," indeed. The strength athlete is, after all, the only athlete (considered in his role as an athlete, that is) about whom the argument for a Spirit-center can be seriously mounted, without fear of bathos, a descent into sentimental claptrap and hot stove "philosophizing" about the religion of games and teams.

What's the reason that, despite almost reverential feelings about strength and strongmen, we rarely permit ourselves to think — and more rarely yet to write — in terms that are commensurate with these reverential feelings? One reason. I think, is that we have been conditioned to contemplate our Iron Game and its champions in formulations that have their origin in games. And since it is virtually impossible to talk at any depth about a mere game without descending to bathos and Grantland Rice-rhetoric, we find ourselves with

millions of Iron Game words but none of them addressed to the problem of comprehending the Spiritual problem, the mystery of Spirit and deep feeling, presented to our conceptual and experiential faculties by the doings of a Maurice or any other distinguished strongman.

It's important, then — and it's about damn time — that we disabuse ourselves of the notion that ours is just-another game, a sport like the others. It's important — and it's about damn time — for us to think and write about this generous-hearted endeavor of ours from some other orientation than one concerned only with numbers, records and anecdotes. In short, it's important — and about damn time — to proceed in all this without any apologies for expressing our appreciation, our love, for this Game of ours. Ours is too important an avocation—for some almost a vocation in the churchly sense — for it to remain unexamined as to its true "nature," and as to the spirit which is the ground of its, and our, nature.

It's important — and about damn time — that Our Game comes to terms with, and speaks aloud, its instincts about body: what it is and means to us. Body: the noblest work in nature's gallery. In games as such, bodies do exciting things, even artistically pleasing things. but always things that provide the only reason for games. In Our Game, the aficionado resonates to epiphany: to the pleasure that body provides his aesthetic sense, almost his religious sense. He resonates to achievements in strength, to the grace and balleticism of body's most ponderously massive doing.

More beautiful than a double play, the immemorally-crafted human body—balanced like the earth itself on the butterfly wing of Spirit — rewards its devotees' contemplation with a sense of the human body's majesty, to which games, by their nature, are inattentive: too busy to attend to. The noble body: in every age the temple of God, or gods. Above all, the ultimately-crafted human body rewards its devotees' contemplation with a sense of the mystery and beauty of humanness itself; the tragedy of our being brought to life, the sublimity of our being brought to life-in-the-Spirit. No game, this Iron Game carcass.

Ultimately, it is body that sets even the least distinguished of Iron World citizens apart from the most distinguished citizens of gamedom. Try as he might—and many do—even the most obtuse iron worlder cannot forever escape a confrontation of some sort (or a collision at least) with the mystery of the body, not just that it often breaks down sliding home, but the confounding mystery of what body is and poetically at least, how and what it means. Not even the wisest citizen of Iron World can answer such questions, of course, but the very process of living in proximity with questions like these and with the body that is their source is humanizing and ennobling, in the very same way that proximity even to undistinguished art is more humanizing and ennobling than proximity to the most distinguished machine.

When answers to questions like these are broached, a yet-deeper one emerges: How is Spirit incarnated — and to what purpose in so "low" a vehicle as (even the grandest) human flesh? With such deep issues, even the most distinguished citizen of game-dom has no truck, certainly not by design or "collision."

No game, it's clear, could put one as immediately, as pal-

pably in touch with Spirit as the epiphany that was figured-forth, swelteringly, in the quietude and transfiguration of the peacefully-suffering Maurice (slumped deeply into his chair, his hands slippery with blood). Tearing now: the hundredth deck. And now: the hundred-first. And now, finally, hunching himself up with a grunt: the bloody hundred-second, in an excruciating fourteen minutes and three seconds. No game this. No game player, he. The epiphany? What other than Spirit, immanent in all life-communicative living and doing. But not as theological cliché.

What we experienced that day in Jim Larusso's Gym was different in kind from the "spirit" bandied about on the sports page. In the presence of the emotion-tugging feat experienced that afternoon, the devotee put away for the moment all truck with concepts and abstractions: His heart having been touched in the presence of such agonizing capacity to DO, to ENDURE, and to SUFFER, all so manifestly superior to his own.

My "authority" for the ideas (the guesses) ventured here about Spirit resides in its (in Spirit's) works: my "authority," that is, rests in the effects (the works, the products) of what one might call the "applied principles of Spirit." Just as the "authority" of scientific principle resides in its effects (its works): in the fact, that is, that scientists can use it. The rootage of the strength athlete, deep in our race memory — in Spirit — is deeper and more existential in its effect upon him and upon his achievement of Self than the tentative rootage that connects the game player with the ultimately essentialist contrivances of his rules-oriented game.

As the years pay out I have come to feel that nobody can be known in any sustaining way apart from a consideration of his connection to body, and ultimately, and even more importantly, to Spirit: his connection to immanence, to his "holy middle." All of which seems particularly true of the central player in our drama of Spirit — and of all authentic players in the body-drama of Spirit.

"Nothing ever disturbs us without our permission," a wise preacher assures us. A photo resonates in my mind, taken at the time that Maurice's cancer was discovered. Big-gutted, the 247-pound version of the once flat-bellied strongman is sprawled in an easy chair with a big grin on his unshaved mug, a glass in one hand, and the other signaling the "V" sign. It was the sort of grin, I have a hunch, that perched on the cocky mug of old Jacob when he announced to the Angel, after a long night of wrestling, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." And truly "blessed" is what old Maurice has become — has worked so hard to become — by his attention to the "workings-in-him" of capital "S" Spirit: his long and painful grappling with a Jacob-ian blessing-in-disguise.

In Jacob's fashion (and in the words of gerontologist Ronald Miller), Maurice has seen fit to "grapple with the approaching end of physical life in an attempt to call forth the hidden blessings within human finitude." His subsequent "grappling" gives evidence of his rootage in Spirit and of his desire to share this realization of Spirit's power.

The much-remarked serenity that characterized Maurice's performance seems to have had its source in his deep awareness that the decades-long battle he had waged against himself was, finally, finished. Another way to express this (though at odds with his old

street lighter *persona*) is that Maurice's serenity was the afterglow of his (and of all the good ones') realization that the "therapeutic wherewithal," necessary for his healing, had always been right there in the "middle of him," "within him": Precisely the site where the Prophet reminded us that we would find the "Kingdom": the sacrum: the realm of Spirit—to which the wise man's surrender is his victory.

Looking at this photo of Maurice — somehow triumphant in his strickenness — and then fast-forwarding our film to watch old Maurice in the process of constructing a (strongman-)life, one gets the sense that, in his eyes, there must, in reality, never have been a truly "final diagnosis" of cancer for him, because a strongman lives (strong people live) in a universe of infinite possibility, in which a new life is there-for-the-making.

In everything that has come to pass since that photo, there is a child-like magic thinking, according to which the thought is the master of the deed. First, one announces the reality of facing-down death — believes with a child-like power in this reality (this new Spirit-consciousness) — hunkers himself down in his "sacred middle," restoring his broken old-self with Spirit — and then, proceeds to the next day's doings in "delicious anticipation," in "confidently-knowing anticipation" of unprecedented Powers.

Like the sun on a cloudy day, the Powers had, of course, always been there, but were obscured — in effect: "not there" — for him until thrown over by disease, he surrendered himself to embarkation on the ancient journey within and, surrendering himself (like a droplet returning to the ocean-of-Spirit), he discovered within his interior Kingdom the Spirit-Power to prevail not just over cancer and death and tons of iron, but more importantly, over the forces in himself which had sought his destruction. In order to master Nature, he had to obey it and master himself.

Perhaps not yet completely transformed. Who is? But the message that breaks through, slowly, to the observer from this unlikely Phoenix-resurrection is just that:

If we can bring ourselves to live with a similar sort of child-like mastery, in which the thought truly is master of both the deed and matter itself —

If ever we can come, properly child-like, to a deep comprehension of this Power-conferring Game of ours, like none other —

If ever we can come, properly child-like, to a deep, even humble comprehension of the special, the absolutely unique, entree Our Game provides to Spirit as the real source of renewal —

Then, like Maurice and the others, we can say to the mountain, "Remove hence to yonder place, and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible."

