

SOME LESSER KNOWN STRONGMEN OF THE FIFTIES AND SIXTIES

Steve Neece

[Editor's note: Steve Neece has lived and trained and followed the iron game in southern California for almost four decades, and through the years I have been impressed—sometimes even astounded—by his remarkable memory of what he has seen. And so I asked him to recount some of his experiences—to tell our readers about a few of the colorful and powerful men he has known and seen. Although we cannot vouch in every case for the accuracy of his recollections, it would be unwise to bet against him. I should add that Steve was, and is, a very huge and strong man himself, standing 6'3" and often weighing well over three hundred pounds. Steve is also a journalist, and his column appears monthly in *Muscle Mag International*.]

Because I was asked to write of my remembrances of some of the strong men I encountered in my long ago youth, I will endeavor to do so as best I can. The men I will be telling you about trained at Muscle Beach Santa Monica; Muscle Beach Venice, then known as "The Pit;" and the old Pasadena Gym. Except among their aging contemporaries these men are for the most part unknown to modern day enthusiasts of strength. There are several reasons for this. One is that these men for the most part did not compete and most were in their prime before powerlift-

ing became official, besides which most of them chose other exercises to demonstrate their strength. Because of this they have not received the recognition accorded those who did leave some records in the three powerlifts used today.

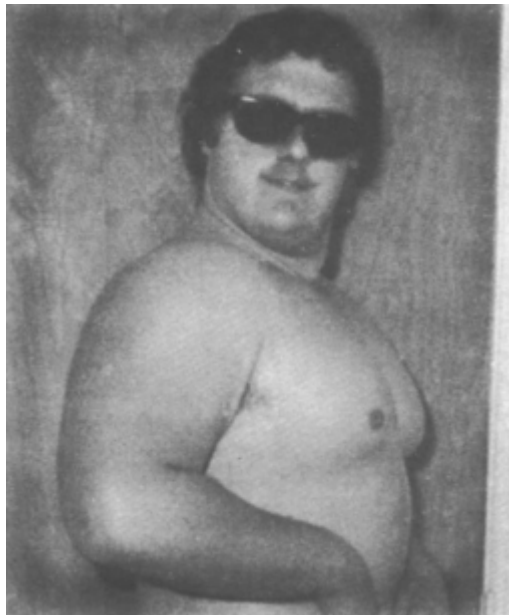
When you read of the men I will be telling you about please judge them on the lifts and exercises they

practiced, not on those they did not. Also try to take into consideration the era in which they lifted. This is often hard for younger readers but do try.

STEVE MERJANIAN

The first man I want to mention is a man I knew well—Steve Merjanian. The lifts I will relate are those I personally witnessed. I was around him a lot in the mid to late sixties and saw many amazing feats of strength. He may have exceeded some of the lifts I mentioned but I think this a fairly accurate record. To my knowledge Steve was the first man to really popularize the incline barbell press. There were those who used it before him and did big numbers but the real popularity of the exercise on the west coast dated from a 1963 photo in *Iron Man* of

him doing 440 on a bench with an angle of approximately forty degrees. All of the subsequent inclines I relate were done at this angle. When I moved to the Venice area a year later, his best had increased to 470 and I personally witnessed a 460. Late that year (1964), just a few weeks



AUTHOR STEVE NEECE IN A PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE 1960's. NOTE COOLSHADES.

before my twentieth birthday I managed a three hundred pound incline as he smiled in approval. It made my day. As great an incliner as Steve was, I think he was an even better over head presser. There was a padded chair at the pit in Venice that was free standing. It was approximately seventy-five degrees in angle which is about as strict as it is humanly possible to press at, especially with a barbell. It was so strict that you had to turn your head to the side when you pressed or the bar would hit your chin. While I am at it I want to say that it is impossible to press at a ninety degree angle. Those that say they do invariably stick their butts out six inches from the backrest. What they think they are proving I don't know. Anyway, I saw Steve numerous times max in the 365-375 range while seated in the chair, the weight having been handed to him at the SHOULDERS by a two man spot. This was 1964-65 and I think he later (1968?) may have reached four hundred at this approximate angle. The largest dumbbells at the pit weighted 144 pounds each and I saw him more than once do eight reps with them seated on the chair, lifting one into position himself and having the other handed to him at the shoulder. At this time overhead spots on any form of seated pressing, in front of or behind the neck, was considered cheating. A press was started at the shoulders. Presses behind the neck were usually done sitting on a flat bench press bench, ducking your head under the bar and lifting it clear of the rack on the back of your shoulders, pressing it overhead and then lowering it to your shoulders and returning it to the rack. A man who could do three hundred in this manner was considered to be strong. I reckon that a lot of the guys that do (or claim to do) four hundred or more in the current style (overhead liftoff, bringing the bar down to the top of the head & pressing it up) would be unable to do three hundred in this manner. Steve could also do cheating swinging lateral raises to the side with the 144's, swinging them to shoulder height for several reps.

Steve was strong at other exercises as well. Joe Gold built the first selectorized three hundred pound overhead pulldown machine at the original Gold's Gym on Pacific Avenue. It seemed to me that the rods the weight stack moved on were not very smooth and this, plus my weak grip (I didn't know about straps then) kept me away from it. There were a lot of strong men at Gold's but few used that piece of equipment and Steve was the only one who could use the full stack as an exercise poundage for eight to ten reps. No telling what he could have done on the smooth moving equipment we have today! Even with sticky rods the full stack was not a challenge to him.

Among other offhand feats of strength I saw him perform was a standing triceps press with 275 pounds. I never saw him do lying extensions or pressdowns though he may have at one time. Steve was also known for not liking the bench press and seldom practiced it. Once, how-

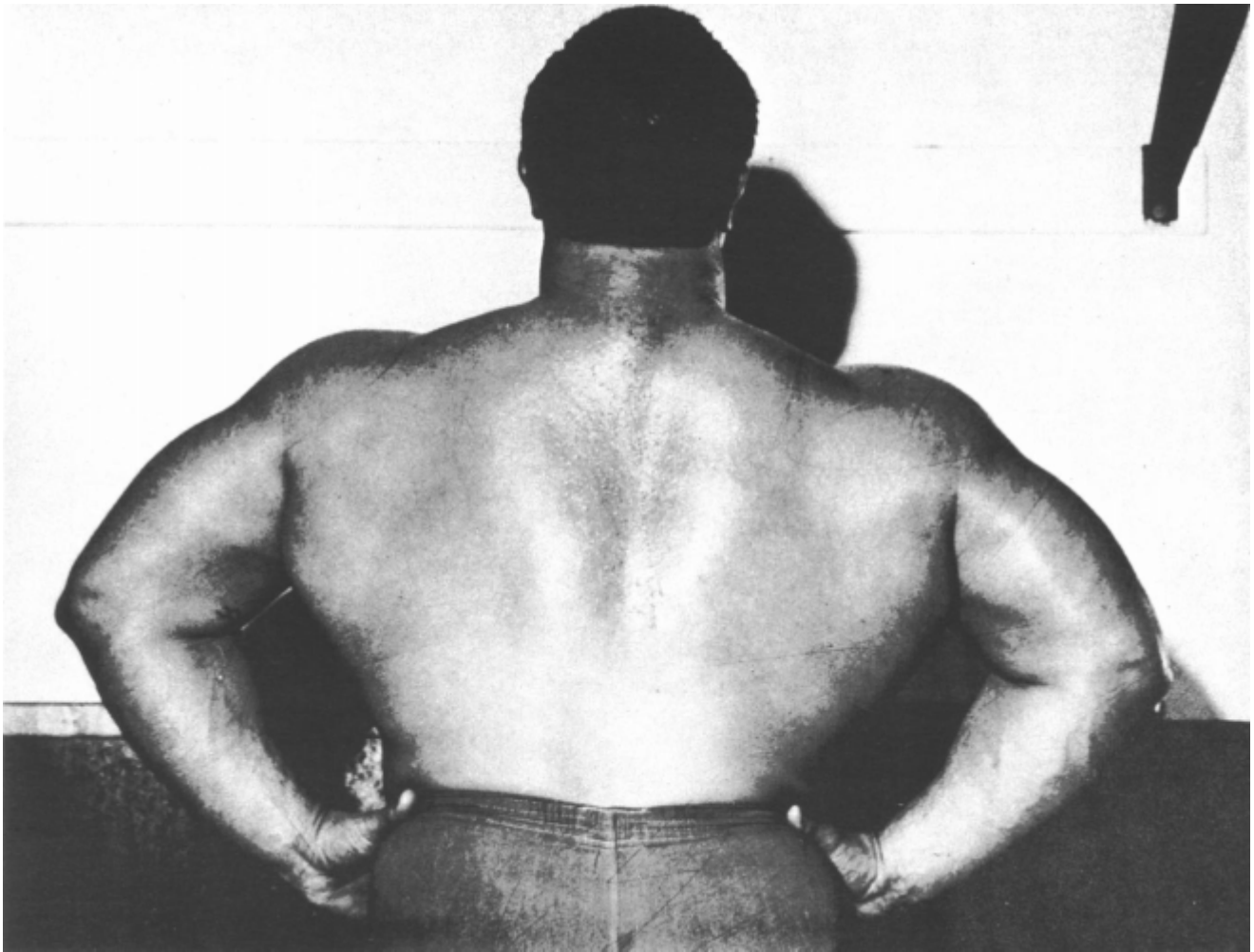
ever, in 1966, he was cajoled into entering a bench contest held at the Venice Beach pit. Despite being at a light (for him) bodyweight of 270 he did a 475 touch and go lift, winning that event. He may have subsequently done five hundred but I don't know for sure. Most of the time he could incline more than he could bench. Though I never saw him work his legs per se he did say that in his earlier years he did train them. They were certainly formidable looking with a calf of around twenty inches at a top bodyweight of just under three hundred pounds at 5'11". One day at Gold's some fellows were doing front squats with 315 so Steve walked over and probably out of curiosity did five easy reps. He had mentioned at one time taking 405 cold and doing it in a friendly contest with a pal who specialized in the move. It was the only time I personally saw him do any kind of squat and I have to wonder what he could have done had he applied himself. I saw him on at least one occasion leap onto a table tennis table from a standing position to the awe of a number of kids at the park where we worked. They couldn't believe a man that size could do such a jump and I was impressed to say the least. For a time, Steve and I, plus a number of other guys from Gold's, along with a couple of dozen mostly very large fellows, including a number of pro athletes, were working as liaisons for the department of Parks & Recreation. We were go-betweens between the park personnel and any problems that arose and we were called the Special Problems Unit. I can say that no matter how rowdy the park was before Steve arrived they behaved themselves when he was there! (If I may digress for a moment, I think it is interesting to note that this was a twenty hour a week part time job that paid very modestly yet during the year and a half (1966-67) that I worked it, there were such men involved in the program as baseball great Leon Wagner, several active pro football players, a former pro football player who was currently the vice-principal of a local high school and the former 1936 Olympic silver medalist Matthew (Mack) Robinson, the older brother of Jackie Robinson. With the possible exception of Mack, these men obviously did not need the money but I can only assume they felt an obligation to give back to the community and possibly enjoyed the camaraderie and occasional scrapes that went with it)

I believe Steve reached his greatest strength in 1968 At the time there were three men at Gold's who were over four hundred on the incline: Steve, myself, and a man named Joe Kanaster, about whom I will tell you later. There were several others in the 375-400 range, there were others who had gone over four hundred in the past but no longer trained there and a couple of others who would hit four hundred or more at a later date. Pat Casey had retired the year before but there were others coming up and it seemed Bill "Peanuts" West was determined to find somebody who would unseat Steve as the

strongest presser around. It is my opinion that Peanuts resented Steve' not competing in the three powerlifts and only occasionally training at his (Peanuts') garage. Peanuts thought of himself as one of the founders of the sport and he was very zealous in his efforts to get everybody involved in what he probably considered to be at least partly his creation. Steve, however, marched to his own drummer and had no interest in the three lifts. In addition, he liked to enjoy life and only trained when he felt like it. Many was the time we asked ourselves how strong he would have been had he followed a more disciplined routine and had the drive of a Pat Casey, Peanuts West, George Frenn etc. But such was not the case and we will never know. Pat Casey commented more than once on Steve's untapped potential and seemed to feel it was a terrible waste. I, perhaps grandiosely, thought I was Steve's heir apparent on the incline and seated pressing moves. I had inclined 425 the year before and a year later at age twenty-three I knew I was good for more though hard labor at the post office had sidetracked me. Then out of Oklahoma came Joe Kanaster. Joe was about 5'10", 255 pounds and a real wild man. He was a powerlifter and Peanuts got him doing inclines to help his bench press. His first max was around 370 and I was impressed but didn't feel threatened. However, he climbed steadily and was soon over four hundred with no end in sight. He eventually hit 445 with the help of elbow wraps. It was another form of assistance I wish I would have availed myself of at the time. Anyway, Joe's rapid rise served to light a fire under Steve and the results were awesome. One evening when most of us were present he put on a display of strength I will never forget. He started by doing presses behind neck. Joe Gold had built a piece of apparatus with a back rest and a rack for the barbell on top. The rack was not adjustable height-wise and was set too high for just about all of us, which made it almost impossible to get a proper start with it. Steve was too tight in the shoulders to reach back for it and it was at the wrong height for self-spotting. Therefore he asked for a two man overhead spot. He did a couple of warm-up sets, the last being six reps with 315 where every rep was brought below the bottom of the ear before being pressed to arms' length. He then asked for 390 and once again brought the bar below his ear before he pressed it overhead to the awe of all those present. After a break he worked his way up on the incline; his top set was two reps with 460. I think that had he come in fresh he had a good shot of making 500 that day. He never mentioned maxing more than 475 but it was obvious from what I just related that he was good for more.

I know that some of you reading this remember Pat Casey's incline feats, both with barbells and dumbbells. Pat used an incline that was, I think, the bench used for the famous photos of him pressing the two hundred pound dumbbells. Peanuts used to needle Pat about Steve's inclines and one day in 1967 just before he retired Pat decided to settle it once and for all. It was at Peanut's garage and George Frenn wrote about it in Weider's magazine. Someone also took a picture of Pat inclining 515. Peanuts and his bunch told Steve that he had been dethroned. However, looking at the photo I could tell they were using an angle of about thirty degrees, or eight to ten degrees less than the angle on the bench Steve and the Gold's/Venice/Muscle Beach crew used. Another tip-off was the poundages George reported others doing that night. In every case they were twenty-five to forty pounds more than I had seen them do on standard forty degree angle benches and I had seen all of them train. Who suggested that they use the lower angle? I wouldn't be surprised if it was Peanuts. I am sure Pat was not being deliberately deceptive. I have always respected his honesty. He and Steve were friends and I have to believe he knew what angle he used. Did he just go along with the others? It is a shame they didn't use the forty degree angle so the question could have been settled once and for all, because it is clear to anyone who knows anything at all about incline pressing that a difference of ten degrees makes a significant difference in what a person can lift **[Ed. note: Frenn's article claims the angle was forty-two degrees.]**

Others at the time pointed to the pressing feats of shot-putter Dallas Long as being equal, or nearly so, to Steve's. Not so! This is not to take anything away from Dallas Long, who was a tremendous presser. In fact, considering his long arms, he may have been among the best ever. However, tales grow. An article in *Strength & Health*, written in early 1964 detailed his training poundages and had numerous shots of him training. It was written several months before the Olympics and Long had not reached his peak strength. He was shown inclining on Bill Pearl's low incline bench and I think they mentioned sets of three with 370. Dallas was later credited with a max of 450, presumably done on this same bench. It is my opinion that for every degree a bench is lowered a percentage point should be added to the weight pressed and vice versa. Seeing that the angle was at least ten degrees lower I think that 450 at thirty degrees or less is equal to about 405 at forty degrees. It also showed Long doing seated dumbbell presses, I think with a pair of 130's. I noticed that he was resting the butt end of the dumbbell on the top of his shoulder. This meant that the



STEVE MARJANIAN'S BACK RANKS AMONG THE THICKEST IN LIFTING HISTORY.
THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN IN THE EARLY 1960s.

—TODD McLEAN COLLECTION

actual press was started several inches above the shoulders. Long was credited with doing three reps with a pair of 160's and a single with a pair of 190's. Presuming they were done in the same manner, and there were that many more plates on the dumbbells, the 190's would have rested so high that it would have amounted to about one half of a press—the top half. Long's barbell press was listed as 320 for two reps. He may have done more than this in the months leading up to the 1964 Olympics and I don't remember if it was done seated or standing. In any case, someone strong enough to correctly press a pair of 190's should be able to possibly 420 for two with a barbell, rather than 320.

As for some of Steve's bodily stats, he was 5'11" and at his largest was just under three hundred pounds. I never got to measure him so I am "guesstimating." His calves, as I said earlier, were a good twenty inches and his thighs were in the thirty inch range. His upper arm was

probably a little over twenty inches and was mostly triceps as he seldom did curls. His neck had to be at least twenty-one inches and his chest in the high fifties, possibly even sixty inches. However I think what most impressed me were his forearms. I have never seen a more impressive pair and I believe they would have measured at least 18 inches in a gooseneck position. His date of birth is 29 July 1935, so he was in his early thirties in the time frame I am describing. Steve inspired me and was always supportive of my progress. We had many laughs together and I remember those days fondly. He was truly a wonder of nature. He enjoyed training and being strong but he enjoyed life as much or more. I think he had the right idea. He still lives in the Venice area and I hear he still trains mornings at the World Gym. I ran into him a few months back and he made my day when he said he always read my columns in *Muscle Mag*. "I love reading 'em," he told me, "I laugh my ass off!"

CHUCK AHRENS

Charlie was another of my early inspirations. I will never forget those pics of him standing with Paul Anderson and Dave Ashman on the old Muscle Beach. How could anybody be that wide!!? Or thick!!? His feats of strength seemed unbelievable and I identified with his non-conformist ways.

I finally met him in 1964 when I moved to the Santa Monica/Venice area. He trained a few miles inland at Bruce Conner's gym in Westwood, and I joined just so I could watch him train. Steve Marjanian also trained there occasionally and they were great friends and had been since the early Fifties. They were quite the duo. I think they had sort of an unwritten/spoken agreement that they would not do each others' favorite exercises. Charlie had a pair of made-up dumbbells there that had a very long piece of pipe for a handle. It stuck out six to eight inches on each end and made it easier to spot him as a man could take each end while he hauled the other one up himself. According to an elderly gentleman name Francis, who knew him from childhood, the dumbbells were set at 156 pounds each, but any number of plates could be added to them as they were of the plate-loading, wrench-collar type. I never stopped to add up the plates but it seemed right. He pressed these leaning against a padded incline board with hooks at the top that were hooked to the rung of a ladder that was set against a wall. This was common then but probably unfamiliar to younger readers. The board was set at about seventy

degrees or slightly less. He did not press them in an orthodox manner but rather pressed them diagonally to the side and did not lock out. Indeed, it would have been impossible to do so because of the length of the handles. Once in late 1964 and again in late 1965 he told me he had pressed a pair of dumbbells loaded to 225 pounds in this manner. The reps were done in an explosive manner where it was hard to see exactly how close to lockout they were. I hesitate to write all of the feats printed up about him as I was not there. I did see one feat of strength that still

amazes me to this day. There was an Olympic bar with a thirty-five pound plate on each side, collarless, on the floor. He bent do and lifted it clear of the floor with one hand so it was hanging from his hand with his arm fully extended downward. He was bent over with his free hand braced on his knee. No part of the arm holding the weight touched any part of his body. He then curled the weight up to his chin without any body movement. Think first of all of the power it takes to do a strict curl



THIS IS THE ONLY KNOWN PHOTO OF CHUCK AHREN'S MASSIVE ARMS. FAMOUS FOR HIS ECCENTRICITIES AS WELL AS HIS STRENGTH, AHRENS ALWAYS WORE LONG SLEEVES AND LOOSE FITTING CLOTHING.

-TODD McLEAN COLLECTION

in that manner with even a 115 pound dumbbell. Now imagine the wrist and hand power it took to keep the barbell balanced during the lift. A tilting of even the least degree would have slid the plates off! It was the greatest feat of curling power I have ever witnessed. He may have been the strongest curler in the history of the sport.

Among the feats attributed to him was a 405 pound lying triceps extension. I find this believable as I myself did eight with 275 on several occasions and he was much

stronger than I was. He had no use for the bench press and to my knowledge never did any. Rumors surfaced from time to time that on one occasion just to show detractors what he could do he did anywhere from eighteen to twenty-eight reps with four hundred on the bench press and quit out of boredom, but I have known many people who were around him for many years and none of them personally witnessed it and Charlie never mentioned it to me. Therefore I classify that as one of the many myths that sprang up around him. He was also said to have side pressed more than three hundred pounds for several reps but again it is impossible for me to substantiate. Perhaps impossible is the wrong word. Let us say I am so far unable to substantiate it. I would love to hear from anybody who witnessed such a feat I imagine three hundred was well within his capabilities. He was said to brace his free hand on a pole or a wall when he side pressed. This would seem logical as he never trained his legs and they might not have been able to support a free standing effort with that much weight. Though it would be hard to prove, I feel he may have had more all around upper body strength than anybody of his time and would compare well even against modern day behemoths.

I have the feeling that Charlie may have been past his peak by the time I first met him in 1964. He had become increasingly reclusive by then and did not seem to have ongoing enthusiasm for training. In describing his appearance you must remember he wore baggy clothes and never took his shirt off. He was around 6'1" and I would estimate that he weighed around 320 when I knew him. The nearest comparison I can make as far as thickness and width is the late Jeep Swenson. Charlie's chest was said to be 62" and I can believe it. He allowed me to feel his arms and they were the hardest I have ever felt. Finally in 1966 he rolled up one sleeve for a famous arm shot. It looked to be in the 22-23 inch range. Ironically, considering the tales of his grip strength and his prowess at arm wrestling, he had small, almost delicate looking hands! I am not sure when he was born but I think it was somewhere between 1930 and 1932. Interestingly, in speaking with those who knew him from his youth and from several early accounts of his prowess, his growth to the behemoth category was a sudden one. He began training in his mid teens and according to Steve Merjanian weighed about 230 when they first met in 1952 or 1953. An early magazine account of his exploits in 1955 had him weighing 240. Yet by 1957 he was a full fledged monster weighing in the 280-300 range. A 1956 write-

up in *Strength & Health* had him weighing 250. So what happened? The only person who ever spoke of it to me was Paul Magistretti who said it was like watching someone grow before your very eyes. [Ed Note: **We must remember that although testosterone was being manufactured by 1935, it was almost never used by people in the iron game. Remember also that 1957 was several years before Bill March, Tony Garcy, and Lou Riecke—aided by John Ziegler—introduced anabolic steroids to the strength sports in this country. Dianabol was not manufactured until 1958.**] Maybe one day we'll know. Charlie is one of the great mysteries of the iron game and it may well be that was how he wanted/wants it.

RICHARD KEE

Richard Kee may be an even greater mystery than Chuck Ahrens. I have never seen a photo of him and like Charlie he never took his shirt off. However, I saw him several times a week the first nine months of my weight training career. He was the first really big guy I ever saw in the flesh and he awed me speechless, as he did my friends. I had seen huge pro wrestlers on TV but never in person I had thought Yukon Eric was awesome but this guy was a step beyond. Kee stood six feet tall and weighed 280. I could tell his legs were large, but most of his weight was in his mammoth upper body. He heightened his size by wearing long sleeve plaid shirts and often a tanker jacket. Sometimes he would vary this by wearing a floor length kimono over his plaid shirt instead of the jacket.

Let me tell you about the Pasadena Gym in 1959. It was the most hard-core gym this side of the old Muscle Beach. It was located in a rather rundown commercial area on Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena and it gave the block an extra flavor of its own. Its clientele included businessmen and professionals who lived and worked in nearby more affluent areas, but who liked the rough and tumble ambiance, much as jaded thrill seekers now do their gym slumming in places like Gold's Venice. It was definitely a blue collar kind of place among the hard-core trainees. The junior high, high school and collegiate wannabe's took some unmerciful hazing from these guys and it took a strong ego to survive. A few of them may have been big shots or bullies on their high school campus but they soon found they were at the bottom of the pecking order at Pasadena. Something told me this was my destiny so I stuck it out despite frequent overt and

covert humiliations. We were expected to run errands for the top dogs at any time they wished and I don't remember any of my peers refusing. Richard Kee had a hotplate in the office (he was the assistant manager) and whenever he was out of food he would send one of us to the market down the street. One time I tried to keep the change and told him the prices had risen. I had the money clenched in my fist and he grabbed my hand and started to squeeze. The pain was agonizing but I continued to protest my innocence. Finally he let up and dismissed me. The fifty cent piece in the palm of my hand was embedded so deeply the outline was visible for more than a day. That was the hardest money I ever earned.

Among the hardcore members were a young (nineteen to twenty year old) Pat Casey, Lee Phillips, manager Gene Mozee, C. V. Hanson, Bob Post, shot putter Clark Branson, well known bodybuilder Joe Barata and deadlift ace Jerry Barz. I am sure I have forgotten many others. Needless to say my embattled fourteen year old ego took many a jolt just watching these guys. Pat Casey may have been better known even then but Richard Kee was undisputedly the strongest man in the gym. He was the man they deferred to. I remember him doing a couple of straight armed front raises with a 135 pound barbell with what looked to be very little body motion. I didn't realize then that even a slight amount of motion can radically increase the amount of weight you can do; all I knew was I couldn't even clean it, much less raise it over my head straight armed. The only other time I saw him lift a weight was one day when he was pushing a large broom dusting the area near a squat stand that had a 255 pound barbell on it. Clad in his tanker jacket, he walked over and took the bar off the racks on his back. Was he going to squat? No. He proceeded to do eight reps in the press behind neck with every rep lowered down to the shoulders! He then racked the weight and resumed dusting. At the time he was said to be capable of a 540 bench and 440 incline and what I saw led me to believe it. Despite his size and strength he insisted he was a bodybuilder and was patterning himself after Reg Park. In fact, he regularly corresponded with Park, who had recently moved to south Africa.

As with Steve and Charley, Kee was the subject of many legends both of a physical nature and for his eccentricities. One day in the office I saw a number of books on guitar instruction and several magazines with articles on current rock-n-roll heroes. I may be wrong but I seem to remember soon afterward seeing an electric guitar discreetly shelved. Could it be? Yep, Richard Kee was considering rock stardom! It got out and even his size and strength didn't save him from being the butt of much

hilarity. He persisted for awhile but I guess he eventually gave up on the idea. I wonder if he ever serenaded the gym? If so did they dare to protest? In the summer of 1959 I moved to the San Diego area and did not have contact with the Pasadena Gym for several years. Through the grapevine I learned that Kee had trimmed to a leaner 240 and was to make his long awaited bodybuilding debut. It never happened. Rumor had it that Reg Park flew out from South Africa for the occasion and was understandably enraged when Kee backed out. I can't vouch for the truth of it but it makes a great story. Other stories have curious bodybuilders prowling Kee's back yard and trying to peek through his window to see if he finally undressed and showered in the privacy of his home. This I can believe knowing some of the crazies in the Pasadena crowd. Had any pics been taken they would be priceless today.

According to those who knew him Kee took up weight training at age eighteen in 1953. He was six feet tall and weighed 135 pounds and according to these same people had no shoulder width. How in the world he developed one of the widest sets of shoulders in iron game history is a mystery that may never be solved. Many a narrow skinny guy would pay a fortune to know. Here's another twist of fate; Kee and Steve Merjanian both went to Manual Arts High School at the same time! It's ironic that Steve, who was naturally strong and husky to begin with and started training possibly a little earlier than Kee, didn't attain elite strength levels until several years after Kee did. This is the result of Kee's incredible focus and single-minded drive as opposed to Steve's laid-back, happy go lucky approach.

C. V. HANSON

I first met C. V. at the Pasadena Gym in 1959. He was 6'2 1/2" and weighed around 250 at the time and was one of the big fellas. I did not see him again until 1963 when I was training at a gym in San Diego and he started back after a two year layoff. He weighed about 220 then but had gotten as high as 275 before he laid off. C. V. moved back to the Los Angeles area a few months later and continued to regain and exceed his former size and strength. By early 1965 he was near three hundred pounds. He would stay in the 280-305 range from 1965-1968. At this time he was reportedly capable of a three hundred pound seated press behind neck, a four hundred pound incline and a 505 bench. He was also a strong curler and did enough leg work to squat 550. Other than Merjanian he was the only man I ever saw use the full 300 pound stack on the overhead pulldown at the old Gold's on Pacific Avenue. I think he did sets of six.

According to mutual friend Maylen (formerly Maylen Wiltse) C. V. started weight training at age nineteen weighing 158 pounds at his full height and was unable to bench one hundred pounds. Under Maylen's expert tutelage he was weighing two hundred pounds in four months. C. V. was also a Harvard graduate—a highly intelligent man from a prominent and affluent family. He once returned a \$12,000 check to his parents and insisted on living life his own way. C. V. was born in 1936.

BOB POST

Another mystery man. Bob was one of the Pasadena crew and I remember him from 1959. He stood 6'4" and weighed around 250 then. I don't remember much of his training except seeing him do standing dumbbell curls with the 85's for several reps. In 1961 he weighed 315. To my knowledge there is only one published photo of him; it shows him in a back lat spread at 315. Don't recall any training poundages mentioned but I imagine he had a lot of curling and pulling power at that weight. Don't think he trained legs. Dropped out of the sport in the early Sixties.

JOE KANASTER

The Oklahoma Wild Man made his first appearance in the Venice area in early 1968. He was 5'10" and weighed around 255 with very wide shoulders and a thick chest. He had done a few powerlifting meets back home and I seem to remember he totaled around sixteen hundred pounds or maybe slightly over. He had come out to train with Bill West at the original Westside Barbell Club and he did supplementary training at the original Gold's. By chance I first met him at a smorgasbord restaurant that was very popular with the big guys. We got on very well as we were of the same generation and had a

number of interests outside the sport in common.

It soon became apparent that he was far stronger than his few official stats indicated and he was improving at breakneck speed. He also had a kamikaze attitude towards chemical assistance of any kind and was often jacked up to the brink of explosion. This probably contributed to his eventual burnout, but while the flame was lit he set off some spectacular fireworks.

Among the lifts I personally witnessed were the following: a 445 incline, a 325 seated press behind neck and a 675 squat. The PBN was done by moving a free standing flat bench up to the squat rack and moving the bar to a point to where it sat at a height that you could duck your head under the bar while seated straddling the bench. The squat rack was of the sloping variety with notches every few inches so you could adjust the bar to whatever height you needed. Joe ducked his head under the bar and sat back to clear the notches. Bracing his feet,

there was a sudden explosion as the weight shot upwards to arms' length. He pushed so hard with his feet that the bench actually moved backwards or may be he just moved backwards on the bench but something moved. He also slumped his torso slightly before beginning the lift to get the recoil effect when he straightened up as he pressed.

It was nonetheless an awesome feat. He never did front presses and I'm not sure if he ever did the seated dumbbell press. The 675 squat was done with just shorts and a lifting belt—without knee wraps and taken down to just below parallel. He mentioned a 505 touch-and-go bench and a 725 squat and I can easily believe both, especially the squat when he added knee wrapping. He and George Frenn and Tom Overholtzer were the first men I personally witnessed who used extensive elbow wraps that were



CHUCK AHRENS DOES TWO REPS IN THE TRICEPS PRESS AT MUSCLE BEACH WITH 345 POUNDS IN 1957, PRIOR TO THE STEROID ERA. THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN BY THE LATE BERT ELLIOTT.—TODD-McCLEAN COLLECTION

soon to become so popular. Joe's personal gym bests on the three powerlifts would have put him in the 1850-1900 range in the 1968-1969 time frame but the one meet I know of him entering during this time was a disaster as he only got one bench press in and missed all his squats. A few years later he came through the area again. This time he weighed 185 and had gone on to other pursuits. Despite his laughter he still had a glint in his eye. Whatever the pursuit, he never did anything half-way.

WAYNE COLEMAN

Younger readers and fans of pro wrestling may know him as Superstar Billy Graham. I first met him in 1969 at Gold's. He was three hundred pounds at 6'3". His arms were in the 22" range and they awed a young Arnold Schwarzenegger. It would take more space than I have to tell his story so I will limit myself to the time frame in which I knew him. His natural hair color was dark brown and when I first met him he had a mustache and looked like a western outlaw.

In fact, he had an outlaw presence even before he adopted the character of Superstar Billy Graham. He had a Steve McQueen/Robert Mitchum sort of presence. He drew people to him. His training temperament was more that of a body builder than a powerlifter. The only exercises I ever saw him go all out on were the bench and the squat. On the rest he just did enough to keep the blood flowing. He benched a touch-n-go 550 in 1969. He'd just finished a season of pro football in Canada but wanted to move on to other things. He was getting by working for a collection agency but he knew it was a dead-end job. Pro wrestling beckoned and the rest is history.

We got along well. When we first met I was the same height and weight he was but we were built differently. His arms were larger and better shaped than mine and I was wider in the shoulders and bigger in the chest. His legs were slightly larger than mine and he had a harder more rugged overall look that I envied. There was no ego clash as we specialized in different exercises. He was only two years older than I was but he seemed much older. He was instrumental in getting me into pro wrestling in 1971 and he helped save my life in 1969 when I had a seizure in Gold's and swallowed my tongue. I owe him much. He was a very good arm wrestler and often did it as part of his wrestling persona on TV. I once did a worked arm wrestling match with him for Los Angeles on TV. I pretended to be a big Swede that came out of the audience and challenged him. It went over great and the promoter wanted to make a series out of it but he wouldn't pay me so it fell through. In 1972 he was in Los Angeles for much of the year. He had leaned own to 275 and was acquiring the physique that would make him famous. I saw him at that time do a narrow stance squat well below

parallel with 650 and clean (once) and press a pair of 105 pound dumbbells two to three sets of ten reps. He had world class curling power but I never saw him go all out so I don't know exactly how strong he was. He was also said to be very strong in overhead pulldowns but I never saw him do that exercise and he never went very heavy (for him) in the seated pulley rows I saw him do. It was harder to maintain size and strength in pro wrestling in the Seventies than it is today, now that top wrestlers fly everywhere and don't work as often. The grueling travel schedules of that time put an end to increases in his size and strength. Had circumstances been otherwise, there is no telling how large and strong he would have become.

Many young wrestling fans today probably never heard of him which is tragic and ironic. If Hulk Hogan is the biggest draw in the history of pro wrestling, he owes it all to Superstar Billy Graham. Hogan's act is a direct steal from the "Star," right down to referring to his arms as his "pythons." When Hogan first came along he was considered to be a Billy Graham clone. In fact, a chance meeting in the Seventies in a Florida roadhouse between a young Terry Bollea and Wayne and Steve Cepello (Steve Strong) set the spark that started Bollea on the road to fame and fortune as Hulk Hogan.

OLIVER SACKS

The more literate among you probably know of Oliver Sacks as a best selling author (*Awakenings*, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, etc.), as the head of Neurology at the world famous Bellevue Hospital in New York City, as a professor of clinical neurology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and as a man considered by many to be the foremost authority on neurology in the world today. But how many of you know that before he scaled those illustrious heights he was one of the strongest squatters of his day? Very few men on the face of the earth could squat 650 pounds in 1963 and Oliver Sacks was one of them. He stood 6', possibly 6'1" and at his largest weighed three hundred pounds. In a squatting contest in late 1963 against Lee Phillips he did 620 weighing 290 and Phillips did seven hundred pounds at 315. They were the strongest squatters in California at that time. Unfortunately, shortly afterward Sacks was badly injured swimming in rough ocean water and it may have ended his strength career. Soon after his accident he went on a diet that brought his weight down to around 225. A couple of years after that he became the head of the Neurology Department at Bellevue and after that I would imagine he was too busy to consider resuming heavy training even if he had been able to do so and had the desire. Still, it is interesting to speculate how much stronger he could have become if he had not gone in the water that fateful day. In fact, I wonder how strong he

would have been if he had led an abstemious lifestyle then. He was a riotous liver who, so they said, indulged in booze, cigars and mind-altering chemicals and he was known to go on eating binges. He also had a fondness for motorcycles and I presume he rode them whether he was sober or intoxicated. I regret that I only spoke with him briefly once as he was training less by the time I arrived and probably at different places and times. Many were the tales told of his escapades. He was a Renaissance man in every sense of the word, including indulging in the table manners of that period in several local smorgasbords. He also was fond when in a festive mood of breaking into bawdy drinking songs from his native England.

I do not know much of his other training, but I remember him or somebody else mentioning a standing press in excess of three hundred pounds. Curiously, one of his best selling books is called *A Leg To Stand On*, in which he relates how an injury to his leg led to unforeseen psychological trauma and gave him the feeling that the injured leg was no longer a part of him. If he had not lived life on the edge he might not have gained the insights that have contributed so greatly to the field of neurology.

JIM HAMILTON

The late Jim Hamilton was known primarily as a benchner after his early twenties due to a leg injury in a motorcycle accident that curtailed any lower body training or standing overhead lifting. Before that he was an all around lifter though I don't remember any specific lifts credited to him during that time. I could be mistaken but I seem to recall reading of him doing a 385 pound press from the racks before the accident. I don't remember the exact year of the accident but I seem to remember him saying it was either in 1959 or 1960. Jim competed in numerous bench meets over the years and he is generally credited with having done five hundred in Bill West's garage in 1962 weighing about 285. He was slightly under six feet tall and generally wore loose rather raggedy clothes and presented a disheveled appearance that was heightened by frizzy hair, owlsh glasses and often an unkempt beard. In fact, he told more than one tale of being accosted by police as a suspected vagrant. Ironically he was a math and computer whiz who worked for the Rand Corporation. He was a pal of Oliver Sacks and may have been his superior in dissipation. While I never knew him to indulge in cigars or other tobacco products he was a heavy boozier and overeater and he took many dangerous drugs, one of which caused his demise in 1973 at the age of 37. Again I have to wonder how strong he would have been without the indulgences that eventually killed him. He was a brilliant man who earned a Ford Foundation Scholarship as a teenager because of his gifts in the math field. A terrible waste of talent both intellectual and physical

JOEL PREZANT

Joel was a free spirited non-conformist who happened to be very strong. He stood six feet and weighed around 250, all in the upper body. In 1964 I saw him do a 410 incline with a collar-to-collar grip. He also did a collar-to-collar bench with 475. On the seated press in the free standing chair at the Venice Beach pit, he did three hundred on several occasions and I remember seeing him do 315 on one occasion. He didn't work his legs when I knew him but he said he did some leg work earlier on. He had great natural strength and with very little training he deadlifted six hundred in nearly stiff legged style in 1970. He faded from the scene not long after though I occasionally saw him around town. He was born in 1939 and I last saw him a few years ago. Except for a little gray he hadn't aged in twenty-five years despite little or no training in more than twenty years. Some people have all the luck. An undisciplined trainer who trained what he wanted to, when he wanted to. No telling how strong he would have been with a more scientific approach.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

When I look back at the men I have just written of several things strike me. Perhaps most tellingly, they were all nonconformists, both in their personal lives and in their training. Secondly, I don't feel any of them reached their full potential of size and strength. Few of us do, even champions, but they all fell short of their full potential, many by wide margins. I shared fond times and friendships with many of them and cherish these recollections and I hope this article will give them some of the belated respect and recognition they deserve. Most probably realized that their nonconformity would keep them from getting the recognition they deserved, but they remained true to themselves and did their own thing and I admire them tremendously for it. You will note that I described many of them as highly intelligent. This seems to be less the case these days but back then the sport drew more strong-minded non-conformists because it was not accepted as it is today. Also, they did their thing at a time when performance enhancing drugs were in their infancy and you had to depend on deductive reasoning to overcome sticking points and improve your routines.

Most of these fellows would be strong even by today's standards. What size and strength could they have attained had they had access to today's training aids? The mind boggles! I am sure I have missed some worthy men from that period who I have either forgotten or never met because they lived in other parts of the country. My hope is that my account of those days—when the West Coast was the home of many of the strongest men in the world—has brought back some of your memories and given credit where credit was due.