



Dear IGH:

On Wednesday the 9th of September, 1998, strength journalist David Gentle and I set off to the London Borough of Walworth to meet one of the last true old-time strongmen: Joe Assirati. Joe is from the old school, in which strength and health were of equal importance. He was a trainee at Al Murray's famous gym, and later he was an instructor there. He was also a member of the Camberwell Weightlifting Club in the 1920s. There, he trained with some of the great all-round lifters of that period, men like Alan P. Mead, C. V. Wheeler, the great wizard of weightlifting W.A. Pullum, and even Herman Goerner.

At the age of 92, Joe is still healthy and active. He works out twice a week, performing mobility exercises and light stretching movements to keep himself fit. Joe comes from a large Italian family, all of whom were fit and strong. His cousin Bert Assirati was one of the most feared men to ever enter a wrestling ring as well as one of the strongest men in the world. Joe's father was also a very strong man. Joe told us on our visit of a time when he, his father, and Bert went to a vaudeville performance to see "The Amazing Samson," Alexander Zass. During the show, Zass passed around through the audience a short steel bar so that anyone could inspect it and try to bend it. Many tried in vain, but when Papa Assirati got his powerful hands on it he put a considerable bend in the bar before returning it to Zass, who was not at all pleased to have a big part of his show backfire on him.

Joe was also a fine all-round lifter, and held many records in the very popular 42 lifts in which the British Amateur Weightlifting Association kept records. Some of his records were made in such lifts as the rectangular fix and the pullover and press. Joe had the good fortune to know many of the top men in the game, men like George Hackenschmidt and Edward Aston, and he remembers seeing each of these men make a one arm snatch with 170 pounds without removing their coats or warming up. He saw these lifts at the famous Milo Brinn Gym in Tottenham Court Road in London.

After visiting with Joe at his home and looking at his strength memorabilia, we took him out to dinner, and as

we walked to a local pub it was a workout in itself just to keep up with him. He walked proudly, with big strides, what he calls "walking at my tallest and-broadest," and he would stop every now and then to do some deep knee bends and gentle stretching. He certainly is in marvelous shape for his years.

Joe also loves to read and write poetry as a way to keep his mind sharp and active. He is full of wisdom and knowledge about the iron game, of course, but also about life in general. He believes that if you have good food, a nice place to live, and people around you—especially family—who care for you, then you are rich indeed. He also believes that you should try your very best to help your fellow man. All in all it was a great day, and I feel much richer for having met this gentle, strong man.

**Lee Morrison
Southampton, England**

[Editors' Note: Joe Assirati is, indeed, one of the truly wise and good men in our game. We still cherish our visits with him at his home and here in Texas. There follows now a recent letter from Joe himself which reinforces our high opinion of him.]



Dear IGH,

I have been forced to change my address because Ede [Joe's wife] can no longer climb stairs. She fell twice, damaging her knee and forcing her to walk slowly with a walking stick. We waited for one and a half years for an operation, only to be told that owing to her angina an operation would be too dangerous. Then she fell again, shattering her left thigh and suffering terrible pain.

Our daughter Jean and her husband Michael retired and moved back here from California to help look after us. They have been so wonderful. I am still walking tall and broad, exercising, and eating moderately of English, Italian, and Chinese food. I pray for strength to look after my wife and family, now 21 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. I look on Ede as Queen of the *Famiglia Assirati* and everything I do for her is also for the

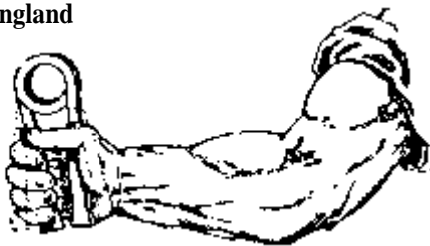
whole family. It is a great incentive to be happy in everything I do for her sake and for the sake of the family.

It was wonderful to receive the last *Iron Game History*, and I look forward to the next edition. Ede and I send our love to you and hope that you are both well and happy.

Sempre Avanti,

Joe Assirati

London, England



Dear IGH,

I read with great interest the article about Mark Henry's dilemma. I well remember visiting Leo Murdock at his Brooklyn home and him telling me with excitement in his voice, "Professor Todd is training a guy named Mark Henry who has a good chance of winning a place on the winners' platform at the Olympics. This guy is massive in size with plenty of power to spare. All he has to do is tune his lifting skills. Maybe he can rekindle interest in weightlifting again."

In the months that followed, Leo would give me updates on this mystery man's progress. Ever since Bob Hoffman deserted the weightlifting world for softball, lifting was a lost sport. Without Hoffman's influence, power, and pocketbook, weightlifting no longer got a line in a newspaper and very little if any space in the newstand barbell magazines.

This time I looked forward to the Olympics and hoped America again would be picking up a few medals! Work or no work I planned to stay up each night hoping to pick up a few minutes of weightlifting. Night after night I sat through hours of TV, but not a sign of iron being lifted. At last near the end of the week, weightlifting! But what is this, a German lifter makes his lift and is jumping around thinking he won the gold! But the Russian, Chemerkin, was to then outlift him and take the gold right out of his hands.

In less than five minutes the lifting was gone! The announcer had mentioned in hushed tones that the U.S. entrant had finished 16th or some such number. As I turned off the TV I was thinking to myself, he must have

hurt himself, maybe he started too high, or did he miss a lift or two because he was nervous? As I went off to bed it never dawned on me that Mark was lifting against steroid freaks!

Swimmers, like weightlifters, had to face the drug-muscle wonders and like Mark came out on the wrong side of the win ledger. A short time ago the TV program *20/20* interviewed American Olympic swimmers who wanted the Olympic bigwigs to award them the medals given to East German swimmers who had "won it all" in a past Games. The U.S. girls reasoned that the East German girls had used steroids to get an unfair advantage.

At the moment the program was aired, the German doctors who had given the swimmers the steroids were on trial for administering dangerous drugs. Just as in lifting, top sports officials when asked about this used the old political dodge, "we have to look into it, we have to check the facts and appoint a committee to investigate." You have to admire a guy like Mark Henry for they are few and far between to say no to drugs and give up an Olympic medal and the fame that goes with it along with potential monetary rewards.

As for his contract with the WWF, I hope he is as strong a businessman as he is a strongman. He has entered waters full of sharks and barracudas. Having been good friends with Walter Podolak, training at his gym, and going to the beach on weekends with him and our mutual friend, Leo Murdock, I heard many stories about Walter's adventures as "The Golden Superman." A year ago I came across an excellent book about pro wrestling called *Hooker*, an "authentic wrestler's adventure inside the bizarre world of pro wrestling," by Lou Thesz. Thesz, who was billed as the heavyweight champion during most of his long career, gives his life story. In the past year friends have asked me how to get a copy, but it never pushed me to get the answer. Reading about Mark Henry's WWF contract gave me the push to find the answer. I talked with Lou Thesz and he said, "Sure, the book is still in print. Anyone can get a copy by writing Lou Thesz Book, 7647 Gramby St. Suite 22, Norfolk, Virginia 23505. The cost is \$25.00 postpaid."

Lou went on to say, "I'm 82 years of age and in good health. Wrestling has been good to this fun-loving gypsy. I have clothed, fed, and supported three wives, three sons, made a lot of good friends and had a heck of a good time along the way. I have traveled the world and with all that who could ask for more? Like your Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen Association, I have been the president of the 'Cauliflower Alley Club' that brings together

boxers, wrestlers and movie industry people who get together annually for a banquet.”

In years past barbells and wrestling were tied together. Training with weights was the way to fame and fortune or so said some of the ads and articles in the barbell magazines. Maybe it was for men like Lou Thesz. May Mark Henry have the same good fortune.

Fred Howell
Mine Hill, NJ



Dear IGH,

I'd like to make two corrections to my article in the last issue of IGH. (Ed note: See "Some Lesser Known Strongmen of the Fifties and Sixties," IGH Vol. 5 No. 1.)

The first correction is to note that Oliver Sacks reportedly weighed 280 rather than 290 in his squatting contest with Lee Phillips. The second is to add some information about Houston Ridge which was inadvertently left out.

Ridge played pro football for the San Diego Chargers from 1966 through 1969, when an injury ended his career. I first heard about him from Maylen Wiltse, who was the strength coach of the Chargers. I was living in Santa Monica, but my family lived in the San Diego area and when I was down to visit my family I would go to see Maylen.

One day in the summer of 1969 Maylen took me out to their camp to watch a workout. He had told me that he had spotted Houston doing a 530 bench with a slight arch and that he had also seen him do a rock bottom, narrow-stance squat with 540. My interest was piqued. At the time they were doing two-a-day practices and then training with weights. We arrived as they were concluding their afternoon practice. As I didn't see them in pads I imagine it was not full contact, but I'm sure it was grueling nonetheless. After a brief rest they headed for the weight stations. Most were not putting out any great effort, which was understandable. Houston took some extra time until there was less traffic in the area and then went over to the squat rack and took 395 off and did four easy reps rock bottom in picture perfect form. I would have to think he could have done eight or ten had he wished. He was wearing nothing but football pants and a jersey, but it couldn't hide a physique that was both graceful and at the

same time massively muscled. He was 6'4" and according to Maylen had been weighed at 268. His bodyfat would have been under ten percent, possibly as low as eight percent. His was a combination athlete/bodybuilder physique. He then went up to the bench press and after two or three warm-up sets placed a folded towel on his chest and took 475 off without a spot for a double with a hip raise of less than three inches. I was impressed. He put it back and walked off without comment. Based on what I saw I have to believe he was good for a touch and go hips down 500 fresh. If his 540 squat was done as he squatted that day, no belt/wraps, he would have been in the 600 plus range with minimal gear and a modification of stance. He did perfect Olympic style squats.

What little background I have on him is courtesy of Maylen. Houston was raised in a small town in the San Joaquin valley area of central California and began weight training at age 12. He went to San Diego State on a track scholarship, throwing the shot and discus. He did not play football until he was in college. He set school records in the shot and discus. Soon after the day of my visit, in the third game of the regular season, he suffered an injury that was to end his career. They tried to bring him back too soon and his hip was permanently crippled. He filed a lawsuit against the Chargers and in 1973 won a settlement of more than a million dollars, the largest ever against any pro sports team at the time. Among the substances mentioned in the trial as rehab tools were steroids and painkillers. Houston Ridge walks with a cane today and the last I heard was a successful life insurance salesman in San Diego. Had he chosen a path other than pro football he might have been an Olympic athlete in the shot or discus or an elite performer in either bodybuilding or powerlifting or possibly Olympic lifting as he had athletic ability.

Steve Neece
Los Angeles, CA



Dear IGH,

Twenty years ago, a 14 year-old, fledgling weightlifter thumbed through the pages of Schwarzenegger's *Education of a Bodybuilder* trying to visualize the path his

newfound passion would lead him. Something was missing. A few days later, a friend lent him a copy of *Inside Powerlifting*. . . the boy was never the same.

Fifteen years down the path, in preparing for his first trip to Scotland, the lad came across Serafini's *The Muscle Book*, whose cover boasts a photo of you lifting the Inver Stone—paradigm shift number two.

Please find enclosed a long overdue subscription to *Iron Game History* and an equally belated, yet earnest "Thank you" for all the inspiration you've provided this fledgling weightlifter through the years.

Steven G. Jeck
Winston-Salem, NC

Such kind words from such a distinguished strength athlete and author mean a great deal. Jeck is one of the few men in the world to lift the Inver Stone, one of the great challenge rocks of Scotland IGH readers might enjoy his new book: Of Stones and Strength, co-authored by Peter Martin.



Dear IGH,

I am sorry to report that Harry L. Good died Wednesday, July 22, 1998. Harry was 95 years of age, had been married for 62 years, and had battled a heart problem for the past few years.

Harry, the oldest of the Good Brothers, started to train with weights in 1924. After training for two years, Harry gained so much strength and muscle his younger brothers Walter and Bill joined him in lifting the iron. With hard training in primitive conditions, it wasn't long before the Good Brothers, led by Harry, became household names in the barbell world. Between 1929 and World War II they were featured in all the barbell magazines of the day in both articles and photos. Photos of them were also used in Mark Berry's book, *Physical Training Simplified*.

In 1930, Harry was offered a job as a Coney Island strongman, which he turned down. In 1934 he began to be known as the world's strongest professional strongman. At the same time, his brother Bill became known as the amateur world's strongest man. When Warren L. Travis put some of his lifting equipment up for sale, the Good Brothers bought his 2,150 pound barbell. Adding human weight to the bell, Harry lifted 3000 pounds in the harness lift three times without stopping. He also lifted 2500

pounds 25 times in 15 seconds. During their long careers, Harry and his brothers held numerous weightlifting records.

Harry worked for Bob Hoffman for three and a half years and then went on his own and opened the Good Barbell Company. At a disadvantage without a house organ magazine of his own, Harry put his ads in the *Mechanix* magazines, *Physical Culture* and the old *Iron Man*. Always a rolling stone, Harry ran his barbell company from Reading; West Reading; Saginaw, Missouri; Siloam Springs, Arkansas; and Hendersonville, North Carolina. He ran the company for 37 years, retiring in 1974.

He is survived by his wife, a daughter, a sister and his two brothers. He belonged to the Seventh-day Adventist church

Fred Howell
Mine Hill, NJ



We were delighted to play host to Mabel Rader and her niece Ellen Shackelford several weeks ago here at the Collection. Mabel and Peary ran Iron Man magazine for more than fifty years and following Peary's death, Mabel bequeathed their papers to us for our collection. What's less well known about Mabel, however, is that she was a true pioneer in the field of women's lifting. Mabel was the first (and is probably still the only) woman to hold a referee's card in bodybuilding, weightlifting, and powerlifting. She was also the person who first pushed the US Weightlifting Federation to allow women to compete. And, when women were finally admitted, Mabel served as the first chairperson for women's lifting in the US. When we watch the 2000 Olympics and see the first female weightlifters to ever compete in the Olympics, we should all say a word of thanks to Mabel Rader for getting women's weightlifting off the ground. Watch IGH in future issues for the full story of the early days of women's weightlifting.



Copies of Jan Todd's new book, Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful: Purposive Exercise in the Lives of American Women 1800-1870 may be ordered from Mercer University Press, 6316 Peake Road Macon, Georgia, 31210. Email orders may be sent to: www.mupress.org. The price is \$39.95. ISBN: 0-86554-561-8.