John Grimek
Master of the Dance

Al Thomas, Ph.D.

Al Thomas completed this long essay in less than 24 hours after hearing of John Grimek's death. In our opinion, Thomas' writing—decades of writing—about the muscular body is very profound. He brings to bear on the subject a combination of absolute love for the game, analytical precision, and a unique writing style. Because Al looks deeply into his subject, his work is often complex and not easily accessible. So be it. We think his essay about the passing of our great good friend John Grimek is well worth the work.

The death of no other athlete-hero from my youth has touched me as deeply as the death of John Grimek.

Sitting here at my Smith Corona a few hours after the word of John's death echoed-back to me across the intervening miles, I can't help thinking that the echo is really across years, rather than miles, and that the sadness I feel is almost as much for myself as it is for John: sadness for my lost youth and the evergreenness of a little boy's infinite capacity for hope, for all that the magnificent Grimek embodied of even that puniest of boy's capacity for wonder. Needless to say, this isn't an unusual or original feeling. I've heard it confessed as often as I've talked to survivors who're attempting to comprehend the seemingly disproportionate impact upon the young boy still alive in them (the young boy grown old and bald) on the occasion of a hero's death.

This, I think, has something to do with John's being a bodybuilding hero, rather than a baseball or football or boxing hero. Those heroes, I had in plenitude. I remember how I grieved as a boy when this or that one died—and ringside bells clanged, and prayers echoed across infields and gridirons, and multitudes rose and pressed their eyes shut and locked their hands behind their backs.

But when such a hero dies, he's remembered in the heart-racing context of wonderful catches or hits or touchdowns. He's remembered for events that occurred in time and space: events that touched you as a boy, that made you happy, that made you cry, events that you penciled-in to your copybook and yet-more deeply into the copybook of your memory—but penciled, there, as numbers, not as, or in, corpuscles. These had been men who did things, who played games: these, after all, had been game players, and game players are remembered for what they do. Above all else, doing-ness defined them as men worthy of having their numbers penciled-in to your copybook of memory.

(Though it may be heresy to some, lifters of the various sorts fall into a similar category. They too are game-players who're remembered for the unforgettable magnificence of what they do and have done. They may come closer, of course, than those other game-players to being penciled-into our corpuscles, rather than merely into our copybooks; but, then, it's quite possible that we're a bit prejudiced in this concession, coming into the Body Game, as we ourselves have, by way of [honest to god] weightlifting. Close as

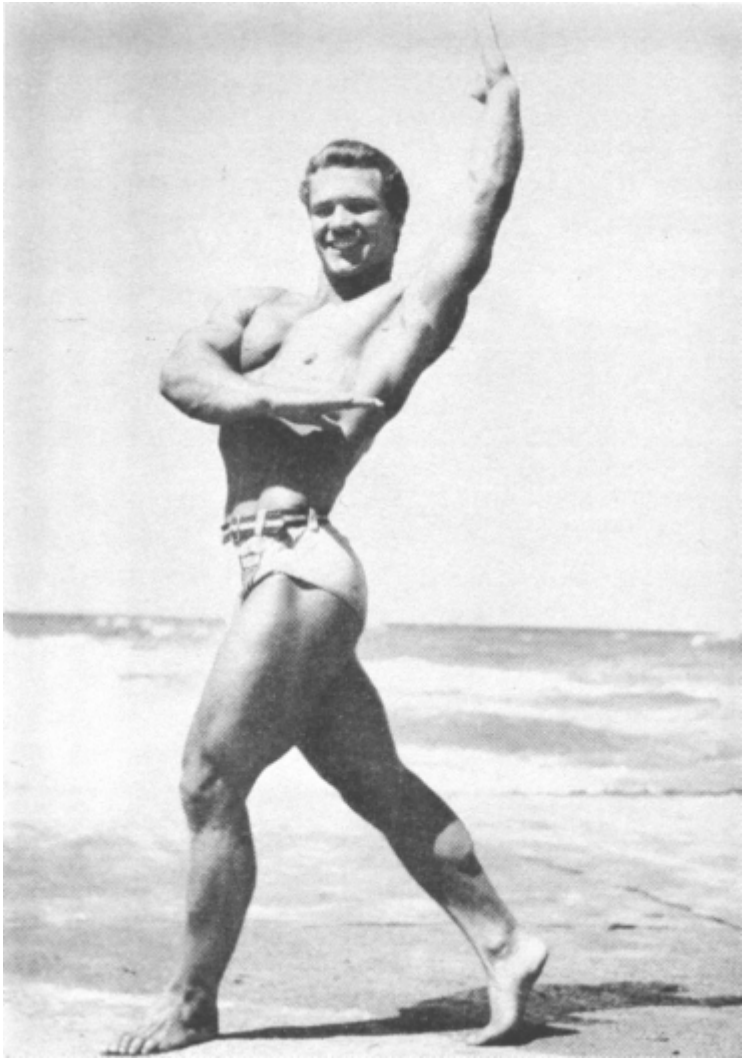
they are to the corpuscular domain, however, lifters are still game-players—remembered and even revered for the heroism of their doing-as-doing by their fellow-warriors: game-players.)

To the aficionado, the hero of bodybuilding—as a function of the symbolism of what he IS, rather than simply a computation of what he DOES—is someone other, someone apart from other sorts of athlete-heroes in their placement on Olympus.

(This, needless to say, applies only to the real ones, not to the ever-growing legions of narcissists with their "I'm Number One" forefingers stabbing the unoffending lavender ambience.)

John's death stabs us to the heart on this day of mourning, this day of phone calls from the four corners of the Game, from old boys needful of sharing their sadness and retelling remembered anecdotes of the gruff one's legendary kindnesses: that reflexive Grimekian generosity which is the charm, the very essence, of that almost-boyish innocence which is always noted as the defining core of the epic hero's character, whether in the sweat of battle or of princely derring-do. Behind such-a-one's gameday face, there was always the at-once manly and boyish innocence and generosity which proved so often to be his undoing as no merely mortal opponent on a battlefield or a greensward could ever have proved himself to be. (This, of course, would prove to be an innocence for which our hero, John, would pay, and pay dearly, before he took his final blow.)

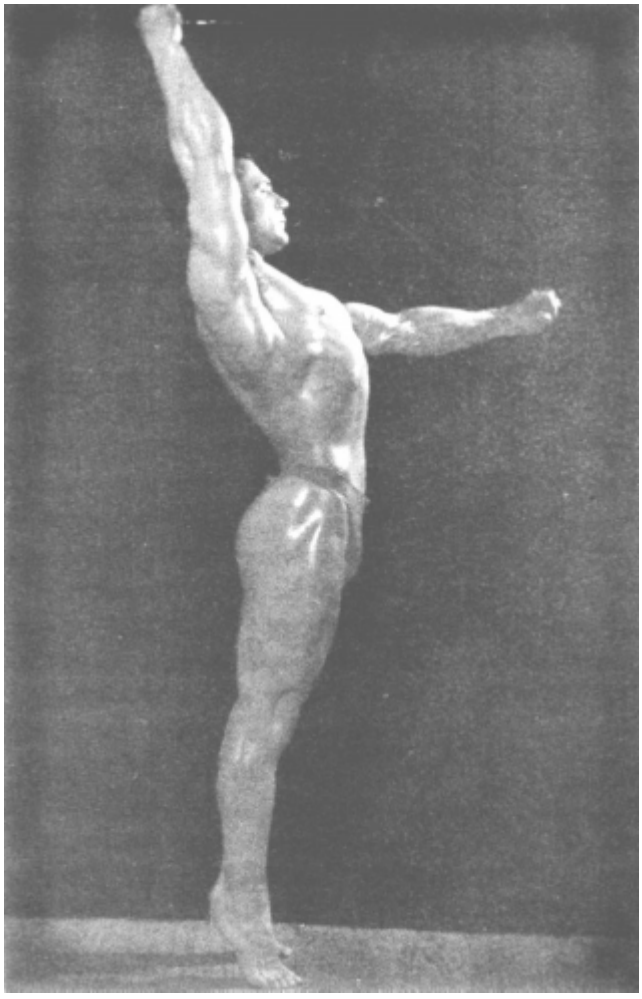
As boys we wanted to be able to slug the bad guys who picked on us the way Joe Louis slugged Max Schmeling. We wanted to be able to hit a baseball the way Joe DiMaggio did. We wanted to be able to lift a barbell with the quick grace—the unhurriedly shallow clean and the quick, round-armed jerk—of John Davis. But we wanted to be John Grimek: to carry Grimekness about on our bones. In the final analysis, Louis and DiMaggio and Davis were men who could do things and do them supremely well. Grimek was a man who had become something. He carried-about on his bones that which he'd crafted as his own living flesh, that which he'd become: he hadn't merely achieved mastery in a sport or a game with its origin in a human brain, even though he was a supreme athlete. That which John achieved—single-handedly, with nothing to draw-upon but his boyhood dreamings in Perth



BOB HOFFMAN CHOSE THIS PHOTO OF JOHN FOR INCLUSION IN HIS CLASSIC, *HOW TO BE STRONG, HEALTHY AND HAPPY.* GRIMEK CALLED THE POSE "RADIANT HEALTH."

Amboy, New Jersey—was, in effect, the culmination of a process that had its origin, not in a human brain as a game of some sort, but somewhere at the origin of our species, as far back as Adam and Eve, long before their famous Garden had been revamped to include an outfield.

This difference between *doing* and being is a real one. The Grimek-connection was a visceral one, premised on flesh and bone and muscle: a corpuscular nexus that was more and deeper—far other—than the inevitably abstract connection between a boy and a hero, when that connection is premised merely on a hero's ability to bash somebody's jaw or to hit a baseball or (however tough this call is for a Body Game audience) to clean and jerk a ponderous set of railway wheels.



ALTHOUGH OF AVERAGE HEIGHT, JOHN COULD STRIKE POSES, SUCH AS THIS, WHICH MADE HIM APPEAR TALLER. THE IMAGE IS THE EPITOME OF BALANCE.

Plunk Babe Ruth and John down into a province somewhere in China's hinterlands. Grimek would be Grimek. The one, the only. The Babe would be an ungainly fat man with skinny legs. John wouldn't have to explain to some China-man what he did to hard balls with a big ash stick in a town called New York. The China-man would know that he was in the presence of such-a-one as meant something in the very fleshness of his such-a-one-ness: in his very flesh as flesh. The China-man would know that he was in the presence of a such-a-one (whoever this particular such-a-one might be, elsewhere) who was the embodiment of something wonderful, something from legend (perhaps), something (in any case) infinitely-other and yet, at the same moment and in the same breath, the embodiment of something true and good and (in this case, at least) powerful: something to which the China-man would be tugged: something in the presence of which he'd feel unaccountably at-ease as a function of this something's localizing of some larger presence or force: a localizing-effect provided (in this particular scenario) by that monumental edifice of heroic man-flesh called John Grimek.

But the name wouldn't be important to the China-man or anybody else: The presence, the force, localized in that heroic flesh would be the same presence or force, whatever its designation (its name) in another land across some great sea; or in another epoch, across some great expanse of centuries. Unlike the "such"-ness of a hitter-of-baseballs, the "such"-ness of such a body (and that body's tenant) is eternal, beyond mere space and time. Such is the glory of our Game, of Grimekian flesh-as-flesh, and the HOW-ness of such flesh's eloquent meanings, its "symbolings."

Legends from across time, and from every nation or tribe on earth, are replete with man-gods who come (at least) sufficiently close to pass as Grimekian. These are legends and nations and tribes, of course, to whom baseball (not even to mention its chief icon) is totally unheard of: totally other (as a concept, even), absolutely at odds, aesthetically, with anything that the communal mind of such nations or tribes could, or would, ever have conjured-up a need for.

Our China-man would have felt himself to be, even without the words (which are always extraneous

to such epiphanies), in the presence of some unknown, but somehow anticipated, word (or concept or myth) made flesh, despite the un-Chinese-ness of the flesh in which that word (or concept or myth) was embodied, given-meat.

I've read that everybody remembers what he was doing when he learned of J.F.K.'s assassination. I don't. I remember precisely, however, the instant of my first seeing JCG: where he was standing in the shadows of that warehouse-gym at the bottom of Broad Street, what he was doing, what he was wearing, and what he was talking about. Above all, I remember my thought. It was that my skinny, literally heart-sick, pathetically weak body could, and would, one day look like the body possessed by the man who glowed, there, in that late-afternoon's gloom. At that instant, I knew that my days of being beaten-up were numbered, as were my endlessly debilitating illnesses and my self-defeat and my cowardice. I'd been reborn. Of that, I had no doubt.

The difference between myself and such heroes as Joe DiMaggio and Joe Louis was a difference in degree. Correcting it required that I learn how to bat a baseball. I learned that, but was still the same sickly boy, with an improved swing. It required that I learn to throw a punch; I learned how to, and found myself on a boxing team, no less, but was still the same sickly boy, with a better jab.

The difference that I came to grips with on that epiphanic afternoon in the holy city of York was a difference in kind. It required, not just honing the particular skills of this or that kind of do-ing; it required being reborn. It required, not a mindset, but a "spirit'-set that was, in essence, almost as much a matter of religion as it was a matter of physical culture.

It required my confronting (at that tender age) a truth, the full import of which would remain beyond my powers of comprehension for many years to come: the utterly amazing truth that a despised sub-culture, such as bodybuilding, could and would yield deeper insights into the almost-sacred mystery of muscle and body than the academy or the church or psychology or sociology—and that the chief priest in this "religion" was the man whom I'd confronted in that gloomy room on Broad Street.

If he was, indeed, the chief priest, I wondered,

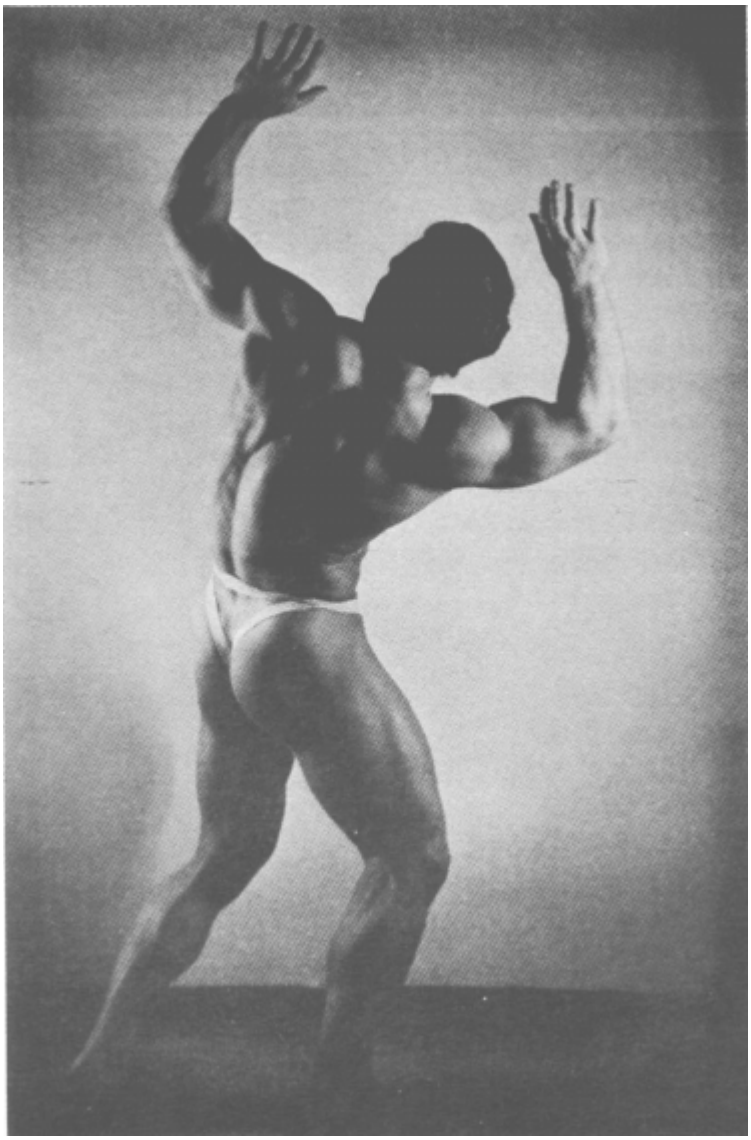
IMPRESSIVE FROM MANY ANGLES, GRIMEK COULD MOVE FROM A STRAIGHTFORWARD POSE TO ONE INVOLVING COMPLICATED ACTION.

then, whether we (I was presumptuous enough to include myself among the "congregants") were to be numbered among the minor clergy. How ironic it was that Heaven had consigned this "divinely heightened" sense of the body's special reverence to us, as "vulgarly unsophisticated" as we (NOT John, of course) were perceived to be by the World out-there (not to mention, of course: innocent and child-like and "holy"): devoted to the task of laboring-under crushing workloads in dark gyms, in the (seemingly) "silly" quest of marvelous strength and even more "silly," if (even) more marvelous, muscle.

Marvelous muscle, indeed. Long before Freud, we had always known that everything is symbolic, a homerun no less than a Grimekian body. But the

moral—the aesthetic and spiritual—divide between a homerun (and all that goes into it) and a Grimekian body (and all that goes into it) is too profoundly wide, and too obvious, to brook debate.

Granting all the human limitations (the moral, aesthetic, and spiritual limitations) of the homerun hitter and of the great body's tenant, it's clear that any consideration or judgment of the artifacts themselves (the homerun or the ultimate body) must come-down far more profoundly on the side of the ultimately-deep body than on the homerun, even at its game-winningest.



UNLIKE MANY MODERN BODYBUILDERS WHO SEEM TO FEEL AS IF EVERY MUSCLE MUST BE FLEXED AND RIGID WHEN THEY POSE, GRIMEK COULD TELL STORIES WITH HIS BODY. IN THIS PHOTO, IN WHICH MOST OF HIS MUSCLES ARE NOT COMPLETELY FLEXED, THE IMAGE SUGGESTS "PROTECTION" OR "DEFENSE." EVEN SO, IT IS AT ONCE DRAMATIC AND POWERFUL.

Contemplating the body of this man who invented the body as it's known today among those to whom the body (as physique) is important, both as the body-beautiful and the body-as-temple—we are reminded, as by none other among Nature's artifacts, that unless the Spirit (or idea) is "beautiful in flesh," it can't "walk among us" and (without encompassing flesh) can't be apprehended, in the acting-out or fulfillment of its role in some grand plan.

Despite the thoroughness of our having been conditioned to be embarrassed by and about the body, the body (and most profoundly the heroic, Grimekian body) often provides the only answer to the question "How?" when that question is applied to our Deep Self's release of feeling (its release of the deep meaning called feeling), as opposed to the shallower, more conceptual meanings (or answers) communicated conceptually, at the level of mind (from mind to mind).

The body, and especially the body in its ultimate (Grimekian) manifestation, is far too complex as a natural symbol (a symbol in nature, that is) to permit being shrugged-off as a or the "mere body." The only access into many of life's truths is the access provided by the body as a vehicle, often, of spirit's (the universe's, God's, Nature's) descent as a powerfully resonant force into our personal force fields. One thinks in this context of the body-as-temple and of the Grimekian body as the profoundest incarnation of that metaphor: the most compelling (the most overwhelming) of its modern incarnations in physical culture: the incarnation that is still most redolent with complexity— the incarnation that, as an art construct, is still most demanding to the percipient (the observer) in his

confrontation with such a body as a creation of art, as an artist's creation.

Understanding the complexity of Grimek and his impact is not easy in this age of the specialist. A woodsman judges a man, according to Robert Frost, by the way he handles an ax. A possessor of real Body Game aficion measures another, in this matter of aficion, by how he responds to the test that Grimek provides: the test, indeed, that is Grimek.

When young John embarked upon the cultivation of his physical genius, he learned—needless to say—how to do many things very skillfully. All athletes learn how to do things very skillfully. It comes with the athletic territory. But, whereas other athletes go on to engage in competition that's a concoction of the codified abstractions which are the basis of all games or sports, young John, as a function of cultivating and fulfilling his physical genius, didn't "go on to play a game." Even though he was, of course, a splendid athlete and game-player, John is that which he is in our hearts and minds because he went on to BE something, to become something. And what he became (what he did in the process of becoming something and, ultimately, being something) had absolutely nothing to do with "codified abstractions" of any sort as its "basis."

How, in the presence of such ineluctable truths, can anybody—God forbid some in our very own Game, no less—talk behind-their-hand about Our Game, deferring in the process to the "proper" games, the small "g" games, replete as they are with million-dollar rosters (not just among their athletes, but among their supporters, their "fans"), not to mention county-sized country clubs?

The cultivation of the body is the sine qua non of things-corporeal. Between the body and the realm of games is a culture-wide divide. The body is not a sport or a game. Bright folks never misperceive the bodies of baseball players as temples of God. The metaphor simply doesn't work.

Grimek, in his complexity-of-effect, reminded us that—putting aside arguments about the world of facts and the world of metaphor-truths-the body (especially as symbolized in its ultimate enfleshing) is created in the image of its Maker. It's the focus of that which many call the "Divine" in this earthly realm of shadows. It's many things, but it's not a game—or at least not only a game, despite the joy it provides the vehicle for, on occasion.

Grimek, in his complexity-of-effect, reminded us that the notion of the body's "holiness" or "templeness" has been an inevitable one to wise people whenever the body is contemplated more complexly or feelingly than as a machine for stroking a tennis ball or bashing a jaw.

Grimek, in his complexity of effect, reminded us that— in this matter of values-placement, above—the criterion of "holiness" is coeval with body (body and blood). Body—as a symbol here: the ultimate Grimekian body—is the vehicle for passing generations down the stream-of-blood, from our first parents to our biological ones. That "infintely-hurtable-column-of-blood" called body is as "holy" as any artifact of Nature can be. And body is the very reason-for-being of our Game: The Grimekian body as physique: The ultimate enfleshing, the ultimate incarnation, in its inevitably spirit-tugging and monumental complexities as a symbol: The ultimate body's monument-ness.

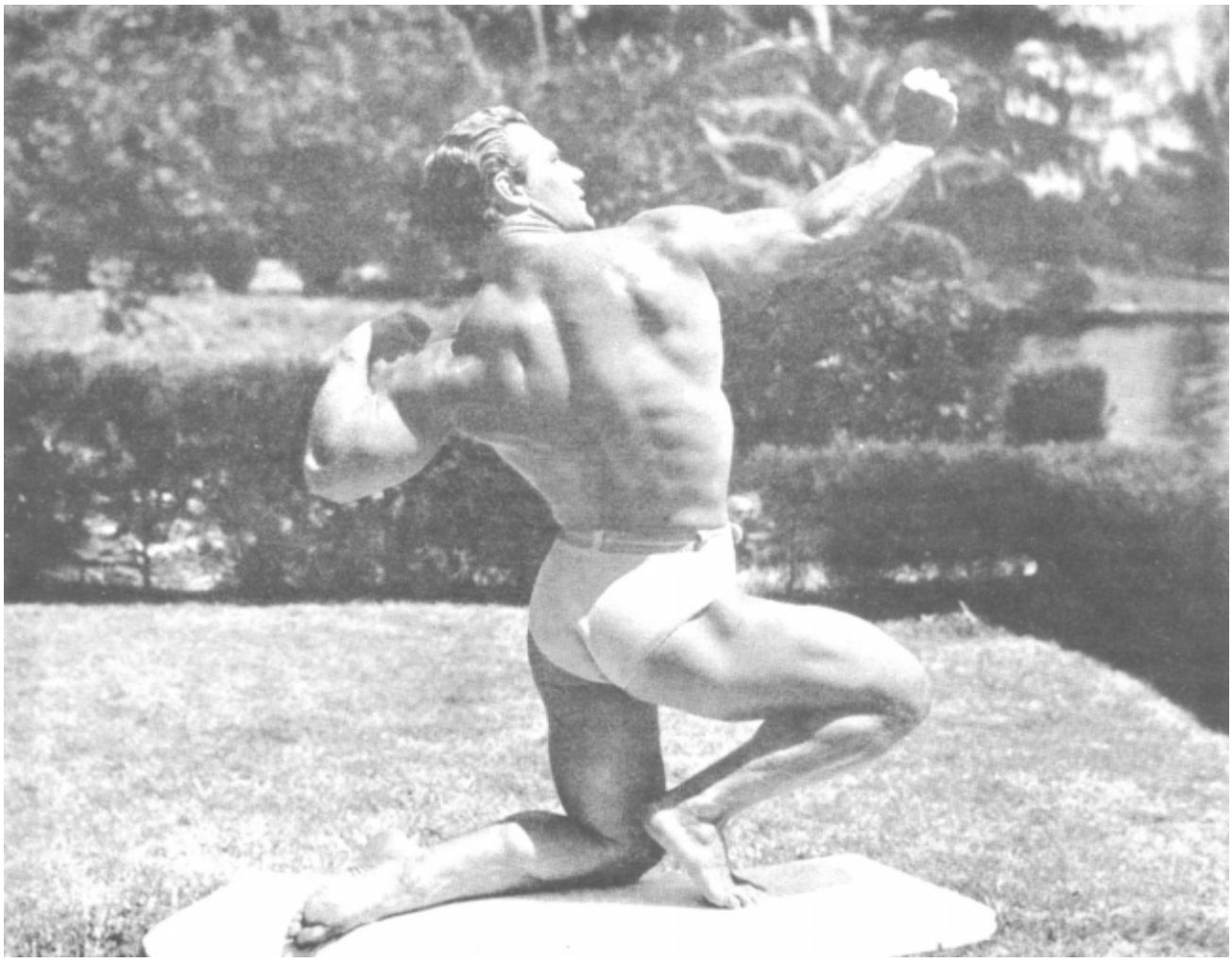
Ultimately, then, it's to the Body Game as "forum" and to Grimek as its expositor and incarnation that the student turns in his pursuit of insight into matters-muscular and into the Aristotalian notion that essence is revealed through and as matter: as thing, as body, as concrete-particular (and concrete-universal): for our purposes here, as Grimek, accoutered in the most meaning-redolent (and most complex) of masterly-crafted flesh: as that Grimekian flesh which is a reminder, as such crafted flesh always is, of human complexity.

Is it any wonder, then, that it's to Grimek and the Grimekian in our Game that we turn—not to the academic repositories of wisdom—when we wish to unearth that which inspires awe and terror in ultimately-developed body and muscle. Is it any wonder that we don't turn to games or to their millionaire players: diversions (they and their games) from everything that's emotionally regenerating about flesh

and the body. In them, there is no answer to what muscle "means" in its most massive enfleshing: no answer to how it "means" in the most massive of its enfleshing.

In these pursuits of meaning, it's the sensitivity of Body Gamers to the meaning of the body (the "purity" of its classic embodiment in Grimek) that sets even the least-distinguished of them apart from, and above, the most-distinguished citizens of the academy and of gamedom.

The Grimekian paradigm reminds us: Try as one might (and many try), even the most obtuse Body Gamer can't escape a confrontation (even if only in the form of a collision) with the mystery of body: the confounding problem posed by what the body is and, poetically at least, how and what it "means." Not even the wisest Body Gamer can answer these questions, of course, except by that most pointed of answerings: pointing. The wise man proves his wisdom by pointing to the answer, to the man, to the eloquently-muscled "text" that's right-there, evident to all: the resplendent flesh whose tenant is the Maestro of all



THROUGH HIS "POSING PLATFORM" COLUMN IN *MUSCULAR DEVELOPMENT*, JOHN TAUGHT A GENERATION OF BODYBUILDERS THE AESTHETICS OF POSING. HE BELIEVED THAT THE SETTING WAS ONE OF THE MOST OVERLOOKED ELEMENTS OF PHYSIQUE PHOTOGRAPHY. HERE, HIS USE OF THE BENCH AND MANICURED GARDEN ALLOWED HIM TO CREATE THE IMPRESSION OF A PIECE OF CLASSICAL STATUARY.

such Aristotelian embodiment (text-incarnate, teaching-incarnate): Grimek the Grand.

All of this comes, needless to say, with the reminding proviso that (whatever the vagary being suffered in a given moment by the tenant of this text-in-flesh: whatever that "tenant's" manifestation of an all-too-human-ness) the text itself (the body, that is: that "text" which is body itself) is never subject to vagaries, including those of its "tenant's" "all-too-human-ness." It is always perfect, or as "perfect" as it is (in its shadowcastingness). Whatever the lapse of its human possessor (its tenant), the text-in-flesh, the symbol-body itself as body, is never anything but "perfect" in all its symmetries (however "unique" they may be): its moral symmetries, its aesthetic symmetries, its spiritual symmetries. These are symmetries, in each case, that beggar (as moral lesson or as aesthetic lecture or as spiritual homily) any and every moral or aesthetic or spiritual argument that is communicated (from conceptualizing mind to mind) in words (words-as-text): mere words as the vehicles of mere concepts. All of this comes, then, as part of a Grimekian paradigm which reminds us more "purely" than any other text-as-flesh (any other body, as text) that the immemorially-crafted human body is silent Nature's (sometimes-silent Nature's) most eloquent homily.

I sit here on this sad day, thinking about John and the journey that so many of us took in his comradely and generous company, a journey into understanding the beauty and power of the human body, as metaphor and reality. Certain bodies—and I think John's more than any other—reward their admirers' contemplation with a sense of the perfect balance struck between the earth and the butterfly wing of spirit. They reward us with a sense of the mystery and beauty of humanness itself the tragedy of our being brought to life in the most sublime of human flesh; the sublimity of our being brought to life-in-spirit—that very spirit, no less, whose most confounding reminder to us is that self-same sublime, if tragically doomed, flesh (that flesh which is all the more eloquent in the doom of its magnificence, in the magnificence of its doom).

I'm reminded, we're reminded, by Grimek the Grand—by our friend, John—that in its utter magnificence, this carcass of ours, each and all of ours, is no game.

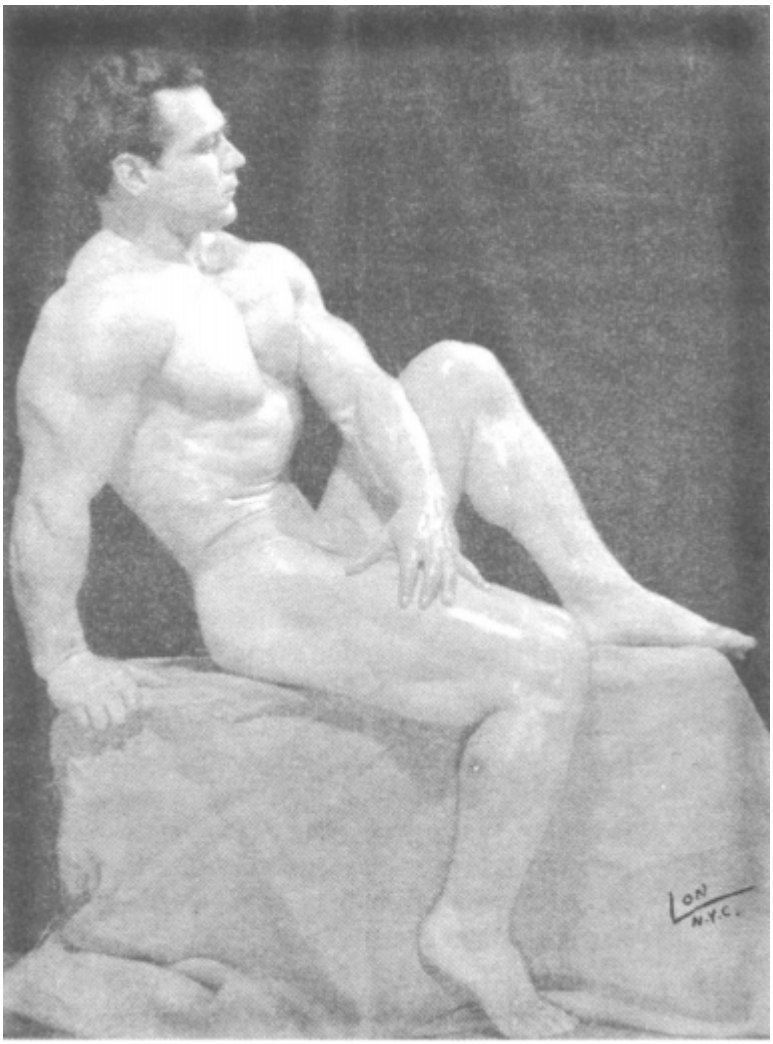
Or, if a Game, the most marvelous one.

It's hard to gainsay the term "religious" when confronted with the need to describe or define the experience provided by a man such as John, presuming that there are, or ever again will be, men who are—as profoundly as he was—a whole and fully-functioning hand in a latter-day realm and epoch of fingers or, in this age of specialization: parts of fingers.

John's was the most catholic of effects, requiring more fingers to number them than even his "fully-functioning hands" possessed: Not just the inventor of posing (modern physique display)—he was, and remains, its noblest practitioner. A stage strongman. (To an audience who missed the opportunity to see Grimek in this role, the film shorts "Whatta Build" and "Muscletown, U.S.A.," among others, are recommended.) An odd-lift lifter. A weightlifter (Olympic lifter). A handbalancer. An adagio performer. A muscle-control artist. A performer renowned for his flexibility (virtually a contortionist in some of his feats). A field events performer (by nature, rather than extensive training), proficient in the throwing and jumping-leaping events.

A man, indeed, of many strength-athlete parts. But of course the most stirring of them all was that part (or those parts) represented, and fleshed-out, by muscle: Grimek-muscle in its unprecedented, its matchless, it almost preternaturally-graceful and classically dignified movement across a stage or dais: the art and the artfulness possessed by the genius-tenant of that unprecedented, that matchless flesh.

John was the genius-balleticist who brought to a still-dim region in the dancerly arts—a region beyond even the imagination of Balanchine—movement that was so poetic in the majesty of its massiveness that it still awaits a choreographer who is truly equal, not in device, but in imagination, to its spiritual-emotional limnings—to the heroism and innocence of its (already-almost-century-old) Grimekian genius, here at the turn of the Millennium.



THIS PHOTO BY LON HANAGAN DISPLAYS THE INCREDIBLE THICKNESS OF GRIMEK'S BONESRUCTURE AND MUSCULATURE. FIFTY YEARS AGO, SUCH DEVELOPMENT WAS UNPRECEDENTED.

John was that grand artist, from Perth Amboy, with nothing to steady and sustain his youthful genius: with absolutely no tradition to draw upon, except that magical tradition—that real, poetic, true, authentic tradition—rooted deeply in his ever-private mythologies and, yet more deeply, in his Holy-Kingdom-Within.

During the years of his youth, a few miles across the water in the Big City, a whole generation of painter-artists had Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" to take inspiration from. But, alone, John had only Perth Amboy. Alone. Alone, that is, except for his interior Kingdom: Interior to him, it must have seemed—but to nobody else.

Without disciples in this marvelous genre, John had to be his own Duchamp, but up-there on his dais, he moved with an un-Duchamp-ian dignity, with a classicism as pure and uncluttered as a Roman column. The pleasure to be experienced in John's movement across a stage was the pleasure of art, of high art: now joyful, now excruciating; now delicate, now heroically bold. It was the high art of an important and moving dancerly innovation—if not invention—that hasn't moved one inch since those grand days of John's clear and massive-limbed and experimental rejoicings in this—his—stirring new genre.

I think, finally, that John was better than the Game deserved—or deserves. He was, he will remain the personification of more than the (increasingly-commercialized) Game possesses as the wherewithal (the moral and aesthetic "stuff') to be personified. Grimek-body (and hardly less the spirit to which Grimek-body gave substancing form) was, and will remain, an artifact for the aristocrats of our Game.

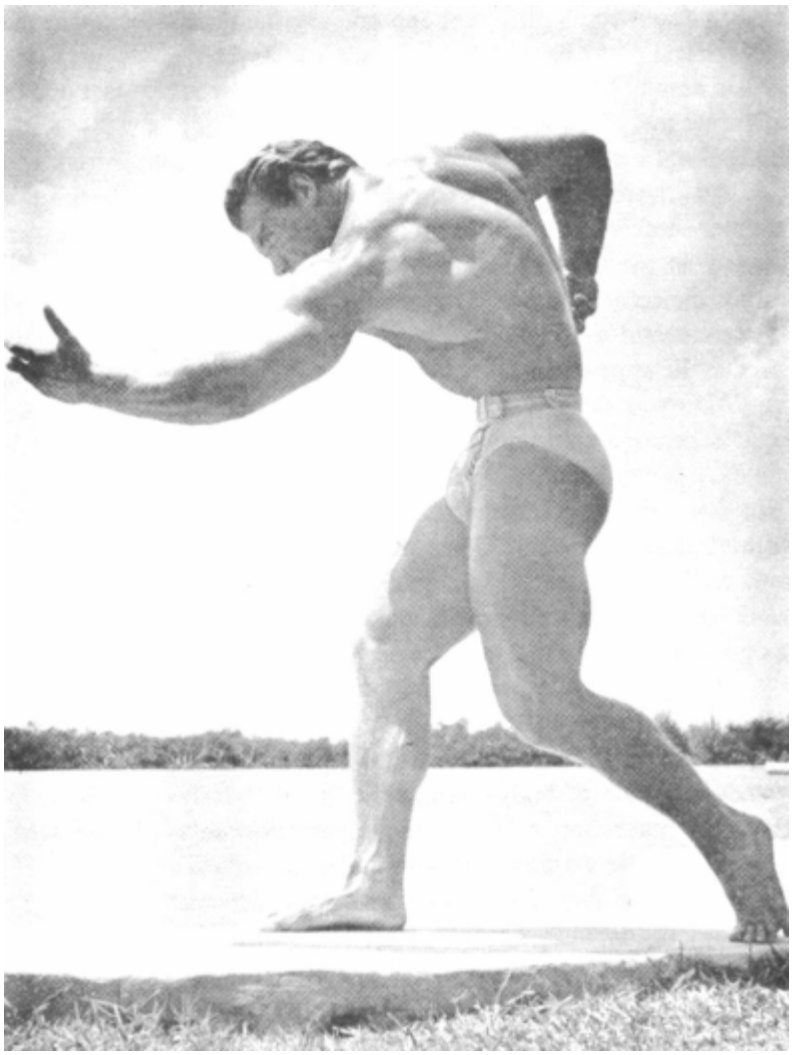
Grimek-body will remain the cherished artifact of those who (despite the delight that's to be seized in the celebration of a particularly beautiful or accomplished finger-joint) still prefer—"stubbornly," perhaps, prefer—the (Grimekian-) fully-functioning hand, however far short one of its finger-joints may fall, compared with one of those late-90s specialized finger-joints: one that's being celebrated as that moment's sine qua non: a celebrated speck of muscular-dust, at whose front-door the aesthetic universe stops (but for an instant)—"hushed and admiring"—and then off, headlong, in pursuit of another, and yet-another, glittering finger-joint. (One hears considerable praise, these days, for the top-half of a highly-regarded little-finger's first-

joint.)

Many hours after learning of John's death— more than twenty hours after I sat myself down to capture and give form to my whirlingly-sad feelings and thoughts—I've come to the reckoning, both painful and mysterious, that a man, not my kin (a man who'd often of late been piqued and sometimes even angered by me) could, by his death, confound me so mightily: could touch me, and all the thousands of us, so profoundly, with so much real and wonder-stricken sadness, even pain.

In Shelley's words, we gather "to weep, to weep for Adonais, [who] is dead," cognizant as we all are that the hero-force in John, like that in Shelley's Adonais, cannot but arise, emblossomed in a flesh of so beautiful a leafage that we will always be reminded, even in its ceaseless unleaving, that "there is no death, though eyes grow dim." His grandest of flesh will return to that grand earth, from which it sprang: his substance and form, that earth's chief ornament.

What but power and magnificence and transcendence were emblemed in that powerful and magnificent and transcendent Slovak flesh: the truth and even beauty of which—despite (or because of) its massive grandeur—bespoke more loudly than any other notion: deathlessness. (As, of course, Adonais flesh—or even just-plain adonis flesh—bespeaks, more than any other, lessons, not of spirit's ascension, but of its resurrection-and-descent into the most magnificent of human clay.)



THE "DANCERLY" ASPECTS OF JOHN'S POSING ARE REVEALED IN THE GRACE AND DYNAMISM OF THIS PHOTOGRAPH.

John, needless to say, always yelled, literally yelled, when he didn't actually "cuss me out," for such seemingly "high faluting crap." "Crap" was one of the nicer words, never far from the tip of his tongue, when he took me aside for yet-another of his growingly-more-heated than just-plain-fatherly remonstrances about such stuff and (much more often) about my "far-too-damn-often-use" of him as a comparison, of some sort, worked-in to one or another of my articles: "Are you going crazy, goddamn it, Thomas?"

(As an unoffending little boy, I was always "Al." As I grew into those hoary-headed, and ultimately bald-headed, decades, when, in his view, I "should have known better than to have written [such-and-such]," I became, on those occasions, just-plain "Thomas" or "Thomas-goddamn-it" as in "Are you going crazy, Thomas-goddamn-it? Every time I read one of your damn articles, it's about some girl. But, no. It's about me. No, wait a minute; it's not about

me. It's about some girl? On and on. By the time I get to the end of the damn article, I don't know who the hell it's about, her or me! What's wrong with you? But forget me. How about the poor girl's feelings in all this about me?'

(In those decades when women hated big "musclebound muscles," it was John's charm and even gallantry in the presence of the "ladies," even more than his dancerly grace on a posing dais (surely never his monumental muscles), that turned women's heads whenever he appeared.)

"Do you think that any girl wants to look like me or to be compared with me? 'This one's a female Grimek.' What the hell is a 'female Grimek' anyhow? 'That one moves with the grace of a John Grimek.' We both deserve better. Come on, Al. I know you mean well. Come on." (As quickly as it rose, his thunderhead of wrath dissipated and—in a blinking—was gone: vintage Grimek-anger.)

At such times, granting John's need to vent his understandable steam (in this case at my argumentative procedure), I'd say, in defense of myself and that procedure, that a body—whether an ultimately-developed masculine body or the commensurately-developed female version of it— provides an audience with an insight into the private and most-personal mythology of that body's tenant, male or female. That so-called "mythology" is incarnated in and by the very body-ness of the human body, in and by either the male or the female body, and no more powerfully in and by the male body than in and by the female one—when, that is, the female body is as grandly-symbolic, according to its own heroic patterning and agenda, as the heroic male body is.

When discussing an ultimately-developed female body—a manifestation far less familiar to any audience, even a bodybuilding audience—I would often fall-back upon his own ultimately-developed body (the sense of beauty and power that it released in an audience's nervous system) because his body was a manifestation (a fleshing-forth) of this concept that was profoundly familiar to any bodybuilding audience: familiar to it and much-admired by it.

My last totally amicable exchange with John on this topic occurred about four or five years ago when we were both seated together on the speakers' platform at one of the Oldtimers' Banquets.

John, himself, not I, maneuvered us onto the topics of dance and dance's function in physique posing, and, inevitably of course, he began to meander into some muted observations about his long-time, and often deep-rooted, annoyance at my seemingly incorrigible preoccupation with using him as a point-of-reference whenever I saw tit to mount a discussion of the (sometimes) dancerliness of posing and of the art that he had brought to it, as contrasted with that generally vulgarized and vulgarizing "up-date" of it, developed by one or another of its current practitioners, both male and female.

There, at that noisy and whirling table, I wanted only peace with this truly grand old man: my hero of muscle and of strength for over half a century: I smiled, at once sheepishly and boyishly, hoping against all hope that we'd—that John would—soon tire of this topic, so dangerous to our long-comradeship, however reconcilingly-muted he'd seen fit, so far, to portray his long-time discomfort with me, my writings, and my thought.

There, at that noisy and whirling table, however, I was fated to experience the sweetest of my latter-day exchanges with my youth's hero of heroes: the most reconciling, the most vindicating, the most gently orchestrated, and the most profoundly surprising exchange of all. The most out-of-character.

There at that table, with hands from all sides being thrust at him, clutching napkins and old magazines and programs to be autographed . . . .

.... there, with faces being thrust-up against his own face for photographs to be snapped of them with the great John . . . .

.... there, with all the crazy hubbub that only John, among all the Misters (Olympia or Universe or America), could generate . . . .

.... there, in all that whirl, the grand old man of Our Old Game: that "fully-functional hand' who, for the last time in our history, still brought-together (in one fully-functional hand) all the fingers which (by that night) had been so irrevocably and so-finally

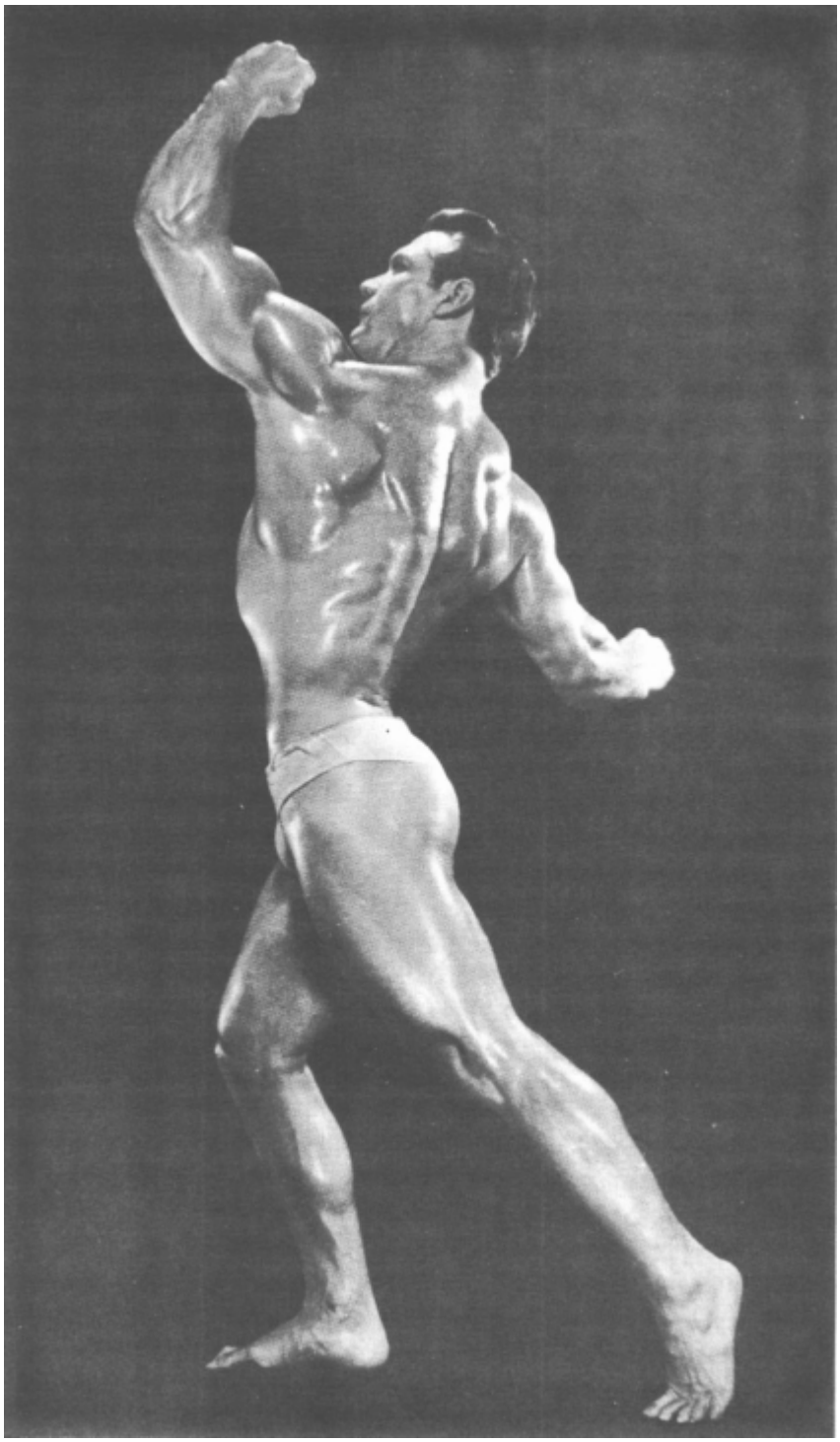
separated—in response to a totally new Game's demand (its appetite) for specialization at the expense of the old and humanizing and all-comprehending Grimekian generalist: that concrete universe (and—universal) whose body and the sense of its church-ness united and unified all the multitudes of races and nations (those hours each week) when they joined in spirit (and as questing spirits) in holy pursuit of muscle and strength and the doings-of-muscle-and-strength . . . .

.... there, in all that pandemonium, being just-what-he-was: Our Old Game's last and greatest hero (being mobbed, as usual) . . . .

.... there at that table, John Grimek (I suppose the most correct term would be) "confessed' to me (and not even very quietly) that I "HAD NOT BEEN THAT WRONG" in all my articles and "pronouncements," over all those many years, in which I'd celebrated the (albeit masculine) dancerliness of the poser-Grimek . . . .

.... there, at that table, John had (what else to call it?) "confessed" that I "HAD NOT BEEN THAT WRONG," when I'd "gone on and on, long-windedly, of damn course," about those dancer-skills of his which had to have grown-out of a deep urge, a deep-Self urge (from those long-ago days of the sensitive, if powerfully-accoutered, boy who was still alive in him): the deep-Self urge to dance, to be (among all his other Herculean destinies) a dancer.

"Except that it was sissy, Al. It seemed sissy to me. Back in those days, where I came from, it seemed



"POSING IS AN ART," WROTE GRIMEK IN AN ARTICLE IN THE FEBRUARY 1964 ***MUSCULAR DEVELOPMENT*** ," THE ART OF BODY DISPLAY." MOST PHYSIQUE CONTESTANTS ARE INTERESTED IN IT, HE ARGUED, "BUT ONLY A FEW QUALIFY TO EARN THE DISTINCTION OF MASTERING THIS ART."

too sissy to me."

And, in that instant, not John, but I, was embarrassed. However so, or why, and strangely-enough—John didn't seem to be the least bit embarrassed at all this, having merely stated the quiet fact of the feeling about dance and dancers, back where he came from. I didn't draw him out. There may have been much to draw-out, but I had my own abysses, opening-up right-there between my own two feet, and knew that I wasn't the one to embark upon the drawing-out of the great Grimek on that strange and wonderful Oldtimers night.

In that fondly remembered confidence, I learned that I hadn't "been that wrong." And that was enough.

In our latter years, when I ventured a comment that John thought inappropriate, or worse, he'd bespeak his thunderheads of anger unmistakably and, then, as quickly as they'd come, they'd go. I've often wondered, in these years at the closing of our lives, whether these tempests had simply passed as tempests do—or whether John had shooshed-them away for old-time's sake, for all those past times which are so sweet in my memory: Such as that late-afternoon, long ago, when Bob Hoffman had directed John to "scoot that skinny pest outta here," and John had said, in that way of his, "Come on, Bob. He's okay. He just likes to hang around. He'll be a mouse and won't get in anybody's way." (And, mouselike, I scurried, forthwith, into a dark comer and stopped breathing.)

I conjured-up my first question to elicit John's wisdom—but more than his wisdom, a bit of his life and its breath, in short, to capture the great one's attention—when I was fourteen. He learned my name, totally uncredentialed as I was and would remain (as nobody else at York ever bothered himself to do for another fifteen years), and, having learned it, never forgot it over the next fifty-five years.

He even remembered the name of my buddy (Andy Rumberger, of all the unlikely names to remember), the next (and only) time they ever crossed paths again, a year and a half later. (An amazing feat of —what else but?—real interest in the (sometimes) tedious and pathetic sillies who repaired to York in their need, and in their need for repair.) The gruff-one was an excellent repairman.

The irony in all this was that the only man in the holy city of York whose remembering meant a tinker's dam to any of the pilgrims who journeyed there was Grimek (and his "remembering"). It was to be remembered by John that pilgrims made their long hejira to that Mecca. And they were never disappointed. Rather than permitting himself the remoteness that seems to be considered the primary reward (other than salary) of superstardom, the superstar of the York Barbell "industry" was the most available, by far, of all that industry's employees. "The Glow" would smile, and say your name, and touch your shoulder, and even remember something you'd said (whatever it might have been that you'd conjured-up to get his attention) on your last visit. And this made the ten-hour hitch-hike worth it. It would have made crawling there on your hands and knees worth it.

(As an aside, relative to this matter, above, of the money-incentive to stardom: One wonders how many times Grimek's York Barbell salary would have to be multiplied to equal that of even a second-level bodybuilding "luminary"—one of those specialized-specialists, mentioned earlier—here at the end of the millennium.)

Young boys go to bodybuilding seminars and have to shell-out many dollars to hear the mumblings of the current-month's May-fly muscle-luminary. In an earlier day, we would "go to Grimek," not to a bodybuilding seminar. We would go to Grimek (at the Broad Street Gym, or at the picnic, or even at his often-besieged home) for advice and counsel which was destined to become the holy text of muscle in the first two-thirds of our century. Needless to say, his advice and counsel were (What else "for God's sake"?) free in those uncommercialized days.

When it comes to photos of the currently "hot" muscleman-champs, those "glamour" shots that cost young fans a sawbuck or two—we think back to John at Brookside Park or on Broad Street or Ridge Avenue, wherever: this man undoubtedly posed for more shutterbugs than any other Body Gamer in history, dozens of thousands, without ever extorting (or even entertaining the thought of extorting) a recompensing dime, much less a sawbuck or two, for the "effort" of putting his arm around the shoulder of some kid from Pittsburgh or a "humble pilgrim" from St. Louis.

Such doings went with the territory, the territory that was John Grimek. Such doings became the constituents of the exactly-right hero (the exactly-right

doer-of-things) who, in the very process of doing all these things, was transformed into a sort of archetype (a primordial image) of heroism, "laid down" at the core of his time's collective psyche. At the same moment, of course, these doings were the very ones that were expected (that became the price expected) of the hero whose image had, at last, earned itself ensconcement within the primordial depths of his admirers (congregants in what amounts, almost, to a sort of secular "church"), rather than merely "fans."

These are but a few of the many good memories from those "good old times": memories that, I hoped, played a part, somehow, in John's permitting his storm clouds to be shooshed-away, after he'd delivered himself of his very-real annoyance about the notions in my writing that embarrassed and angered him.

But sometimes I wished that such relentings were less a function of his sympathy for that kid, back in the old days, and much more a function of being moved or even touched—if only slightly and against his better judgment—by one of my "long-winded goddamn explanations and goings-on" about his absolutely seminal role in the thought of any writer who is truly interested in the human body as metaphor and as machine. (Grimek, after all, in his own powerful writing and in the object lesson provided by his own body, made as powerful a statement about the beauty and function of the body as anybody who was writing in those years, the Grimek years.)

After John's "confession" at the Oldtimers' Banquet, I sensed that his relentings had their origin, to one degree or another, in a creative, necessarily inaccessible region that had to exist in him, a region that exists in all artist-incommunicados: An inevitably hidden garden in a far-corner of his deep-Self to which this supreme artist-of-the-body must have retired and where (after York and all its churches had fallen asleep) he would dream the dreams of power and mass and grace: the dreams of a ballet-of-power never before dreamed (much less seen)—drawing (in his hidden place) upon the artistic, almost spiritual, powers that come to massive life in the tectonic massiveness of John's art.

Drawing, there, upon the oldest and most deeply-rooted archetypes of god-like power and grace and masculine beauty, John dreamed (would have dreamed, must have dreamed) himself into existence as Grimek: into an un-Perth Amboyian—wholly Grimekian—apotheosis, which in the back-perspective of the future, will come to be celebrated as the first (and being first: greatest and most seminal) of an, at-once, new and ancient avatar: an incarnation, here at the millennium's end, of the almost-archetypal complexity of grandly-muscled human body as text. (A grand-enough word made ultimately-grand flesh.) And a reminder, to boot, of the grandness of such magnificent flesh when it is its own excuse for being.

As the sad news of John's death fills us, pathetic little boys grown old and bald, our shakenness is a function of the irrevocable goneness—for the unconsidered instant—of this man: The momentary gone ness of the very source of those pathetic little boys' dreams of power, and the power of dreams (the almost holy wonder of dreams as dreams), incarnated, with such good fortune for us, little boys grown old, in the majestic clay of John Grimek.

For now, John, adieu. And Amen.