

Armand Tanny Remembers Steve Reeves

Terry Todd conducted this interview in June of 1999 near Armand Tanny's home in Woodland Hills, California. Tanny has lived in southern California for over 60 years and has made significant contributions to the iron game as a competitive weightlifter, a bodybuilder, and a prolific writer for many physical culture magazines, including *Muscle & Fitness*.

TT: Am I wrong? It seems like I remember somewhere that there was a time when you and George Eiferman and Steve Reeves were all living pretty close to one another near Muscle Beach.

AT: Oh yeah, that's right.

TT: That was kind of amazing that three guys who'd have such big reputations would be so close. I'd guess those were kind of your salad days.

AT: Really. We all lived there at the same place for awhile. We paid a total of \$60 a month or something like that, you know? We were right on the water. I could jump off the balcony onto the sand of Muscle Beach. It was the life. I got there in '39 and was in the Beach area down to 1958, so it was about 20 years that I was there most of the time when I wasn't rambling around.

TT: When were you and Reeves and Eiferman all there together at the same time?

AT: It was in the late 40s cause we were all competing, you know, and all three of us competed in the 1949 Mr. USA show. That one show had Grimek, Clancy Ross, Reeves, Eiferman, me, and others, too. So those of us who lived out here had a lot of opportunity to watch one another and train together.

TT: Where did you do most of your training? On the beach or in the gym?

AT: In the gym. The Tanny Gym. Fourth and Broadway.

TT: So if you'd do something at the beach with the weights it would be just light stuff, or maybe a little arm work?

AT: Yeah, right. But I might do some odd lifts, too. I used to have a little trick I'd do. I'd pull maybe 300 pounds or so to my shoulders in a power clean and jerk it overhead and then walk down through the sand holding it over my head.

TT: I don't imagine you had too many people trying to match that.

AT: No.

TT: Old George was a great presser, though, wasn't he?

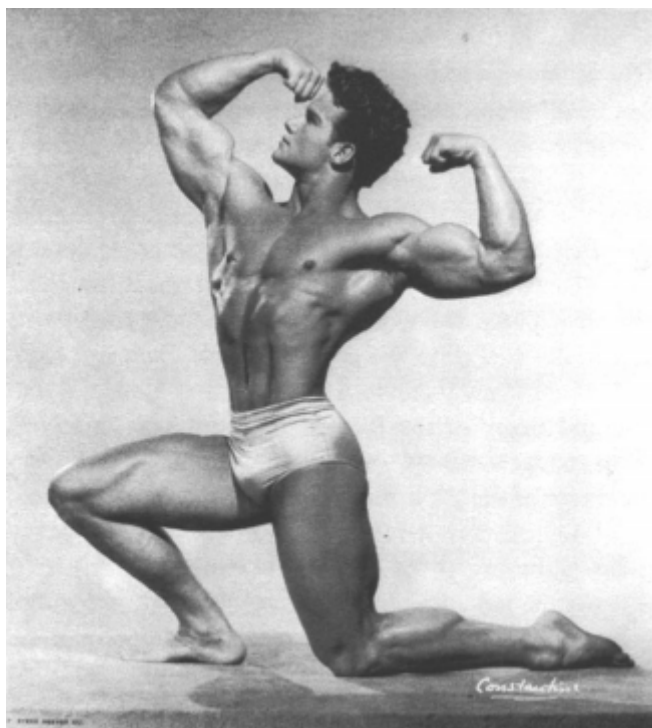
AT: He had tremendous pressing power. He wasn't a talented weightlifter, but he was really strong, particularly in the pressing movements.

TT: I know he's told me he wasn't very good in cleaning or things like that.

AT: No, he didn't have that speed, you know, that quickness that a top lifter needs.

TT: I remember seeing photographs of him playing a trumpet and at the same time pressing a person or a 14.5 pound barbell over his head with one hand.

AT: Yeah, that was one of his stage tricks. After he was out here in the late 40s there was a time when he travelled around the country speaking to school systems, you know. He gave lectures and told jokes and did strength stunts. He'd always take one of the students and press him or her over his head while he was blowing on his



Steve Reeves more or less as he looked the first time he came to Muscle Beach and was seen by Armand Tanny.

trumpet.

TT: I guess Reeves must've been amazing, too, in his own way. He always looked to me like what an artist might have created if someone told the artist, "Okay, let's see you make a physically perfect man." I've always thought that most artists with imagination and real skill would have come up with something a lot like Steve.

AT: Oh, he was so pretty.

TT: [Laughing.] Yeah, that's right. He had real beauty. In all seriousness "beauty" may be the best word for someone made like he was. Everything about him seemed to fit the other parts, with perhaps the most defining parts being his face and those big calves.

AT: Yeah, everything was to perfection. It was just amazing. Yeah, Steve. He used to poke a little fun at himself, you know. He loved to joke. He'd hold out his foot and he'd say, "Isn't that foot perfect?" And it was perfect. Or he'd open his mouth and say, "Not a cavity." And it was true, there wasn't a cavity in his mouth and all we could say was, "Reeves, you dirty dog." You know? But he knew he was special and he was easy with it. He always seemed to be in good spirits and had a lot of fun. He really enjoyed being around everybody at the Beach, you know?

TT: He and his ladyfriend Deborah came out and visited us at the library a few years ago. He wanted to look at our collection of books and magazines and photos and things. But he had another reason, too, which is that he was thinking about getting a ranch out in central Texas where we live. He said he was serious about moving because everything was getting too crowded where he was.

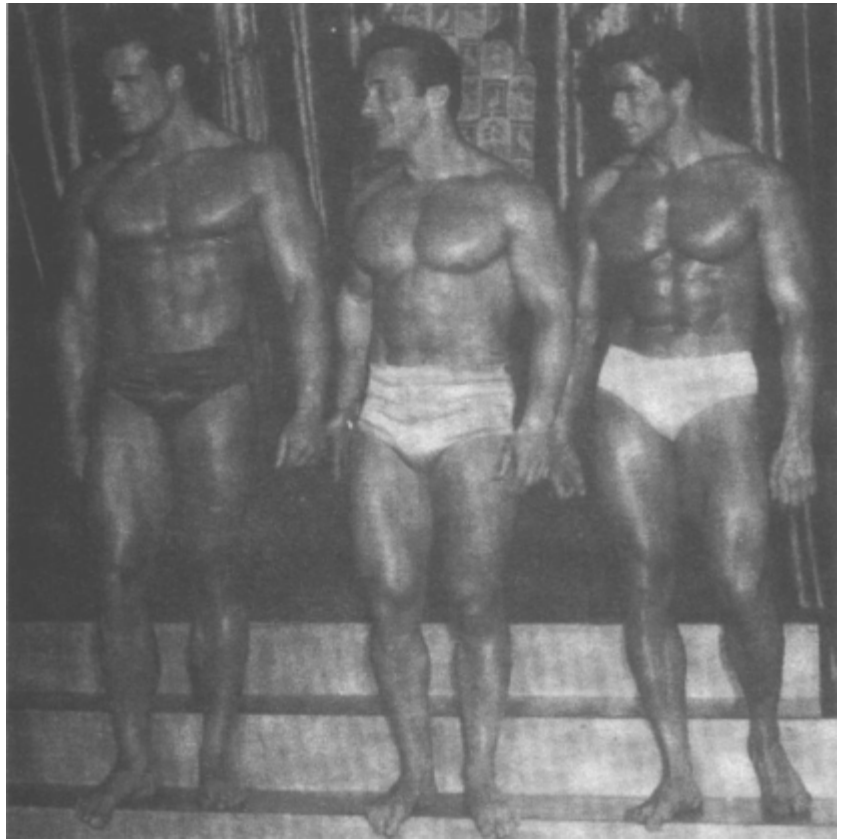
AT: I could believe that.

TT: And so they came out and stayed a few days with us. That was the first time I'd been around him for any length of time and I found him to have a truly pleasant nature. In a way, he seemed almost shy at first, or at least reserved.

AT: He was a bit shy. But he had a good sense of humor. Loved jokes and fun, you know? A pleasant kid.

TT: But did he have an impact on the beach? With the general public?

AT: Oh, man, let me tell you. I think it was about 1945 when I first learned about him. The war was still on and



Muscle Beach buddies—Steve Reeves, George Eiferman, and Armand Tanny on stage in the 1949 Mr. USA, which was won by John Grimek.

I went up to San Francisco to see Jack LaLanne's gym there, you know, and he said, "Armand, look at this picture." So here was this kid, you know, and he's only about 16 years old in the shot. Here's this 16 year-old kid with this perfect structure. So, Jack says, "Anyway, he's down in the Philippines in the service but he'll be back soon." I thought, Jesus, man. Wow. Great body, and he already looked like a man. Anyway, about two or three years later, you know, I'm sitting there at Muscle Beach one day and this fellow comes walking down the beach. He's got a tailored shirt, and when he gets on the sand and starts to strip down, you know, and he's standing out there and we're all watching him I say, "Holy Christ! Look at that body. That's Steve Reeves."

TT: I guess when the big crowds were there, he must have had a big impact. I mean, people must have. . .

AT: They followed him around like dogs. Like, for instance, groups of women, middle-aged or older women, would walk by him. He'd be walking down the boardwalk in his trunks and they'd see him coming and then they'd make a U-turn and just follow him. He had a lot of fun with that body, but he never took himself too seriously. He was a hell of a guy.