



IRON GAME HISTORY



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Vic Boff: The Old Game's Best Friend: Face-to-Face—and by Proxy

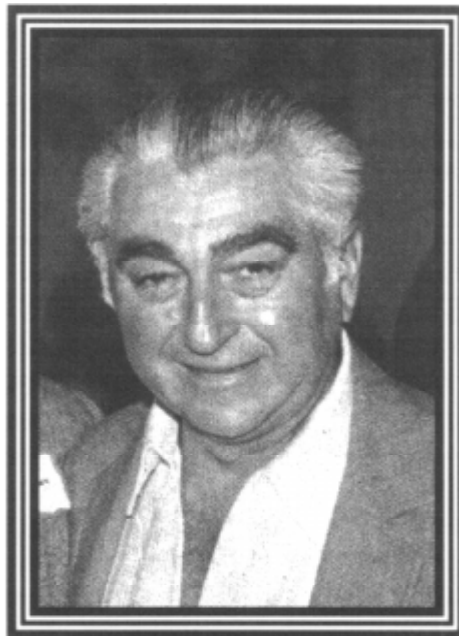
Al Thomas

My dear friend, Vic Boff, wasn't the sort of man we associate with rebuke of any sort, public or otherwise, yet despite the unlikelihood of the notion, my long friendship with this great and kindly legend of our Game had its origin in his heated rebuke of me—in public no less. It was meted out about fifty-six years ago at a York picnic and was the very first time we ever exchanged words, even though by that time I'd often eavesdropped on his conversations whenever our contest-going and picnic-going coincided.

Not an auspicious beginning for a friendship which, over the many decades, deepened and matured, enriching my life with Vic's hard-earned wisdom about the Game we both loved so much: its heroes and their own brand of hard-earned wisdom about the body and strength and health. (More about the much-deservedness of his rebuke, later.)

Vic was one of the consummate oral historians of the Game: the mystique and "charm" of its colorful

heroes. We've had phone conversations, over the years, about virtually every aspect of the strength sports, not to mention life generally and its vicissitudes. (How very special his wife of fifty-nine years, Ann, must be to have



remained his loving other-half after decades of phone bills that had to be utterly staggering.) We talked by the hour about the almost-fifty Manhattan, Bronx, and Brooklyn fight clubs: about "Sailor Tom" Sharkey and "Ruby Robert" Fitzsimmons—about the incomparable Dempsey and Canzoneri and Ross and Leonard—the "tremendous," if long forgotten, club fighters of his Brooklyn boyhood (each named and lovingly remembered)—and, of course, although his enthusiasm always trailed-off a bit, the "current crew," not even the best of whom would have "lasted fifteen with the 'Manassa Mauler' at his best."

In fact, I found him to be almost as full of stories about baseball and boxing, the sports of his young

manhood (especially baseball), as he was about the "Mighty Atom" or Macfadden or Jowett or Atlas or Hoffman or Grimek or Klein or Bothner or Travis. You name the strongman; he had an anecdote or two, usually many. And then, needless to say, there were the tales of the legendary characters from his beloved Iceberg Club, who plunged into the blizzard-driven surf of Coney Island, joining him in wintry denial of their human flesh and its weakness. All those Iceberg Club myrmidons whom we identify with their "King Achilles," our honored strongman-historian and friend, Vic. All the legions of strongmen of the Boff canon: All those legends about whom, ever the historian, he preached with such resist-

less enthusiasm, not just to contemporaries from the Oldtimers' Association, but with special enthusiasm, it seemed, to youthful Iron Game historians (-to-be). Carefully teased-out thoughts about baseball and boxing's future; grand visions of our Game's future glories—its "post-steroid glories" that is—always that *all-necessary* correction: "*post-steroid.*" These thoughts and visions informed both the enthusiasms and the worries of his conversations throughout the many decades.

The historian in Vic never allowed him to close off these gabfests without a sermon about the Oldtimers' obligation to call attention to, and to learn from, our sport's past. One thinks in this regard of York's

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Weightlifting Hall of Fame, so profound a legacy of Vic's historic sense and imagination. He spoke endlessly of the Oldtimers' special obligation to mentor newcomers to the Game: to instruct the young people whom he saw as bereft of even a rudimentary historical sense: utterly unconscious of the importance, to them, of such an historical sense. Hence, their profound vulnerability, their ignorance of the generosity-as-norm that was implicit in the Old Game: the generous manliness that informed the relations of star and fan in that Old Game. He despised the narcissism of the "I'm number one"-ness that, in his deploring estimate, had come to characterize the turn-of-millennium sport. Vic's worries about the 21st century Game could be summed-up briefly in its proudly flaunted contempt for, and ignorance of, its own history.

At the heart of his *apologia* for history's importance is the notion that a true immersion in history brings its student, not just a deeper historical understanding but a deeper love of the Game that it chronicles and provides texture for. If the youths of the current game had possessed a richer and more sacral knowledge of our humane and generous Game—spirit-enlarging as such knowledge always is—they would not have succumbed so resistlessly to the impersonality (to the preoccupation-with-profit) which comprises an almost insurmountable impediment to the modern game's being loved as unconditionally by its devotees as the more richly-felt Old Game was by its devotees.

My Last Words with Vic

Phone calls arrived from Vic until not-long-before his death. He talked often, long, and with great insight about a medical problem that I entertain. During these months—knowing full well and inarguably about his own impending death and speaking with characteristic care and good counsel about my issue—he never mentioned, never even hinted at, any near-death issues he might have entertained. But, then, what else was new? This was, after all, Vic Boff. Iceberg Club strong guys have learned, long since, never to yelp, like a sissy, when Coney Island's New Year's Day waves lap icily at their unoffending vitals.

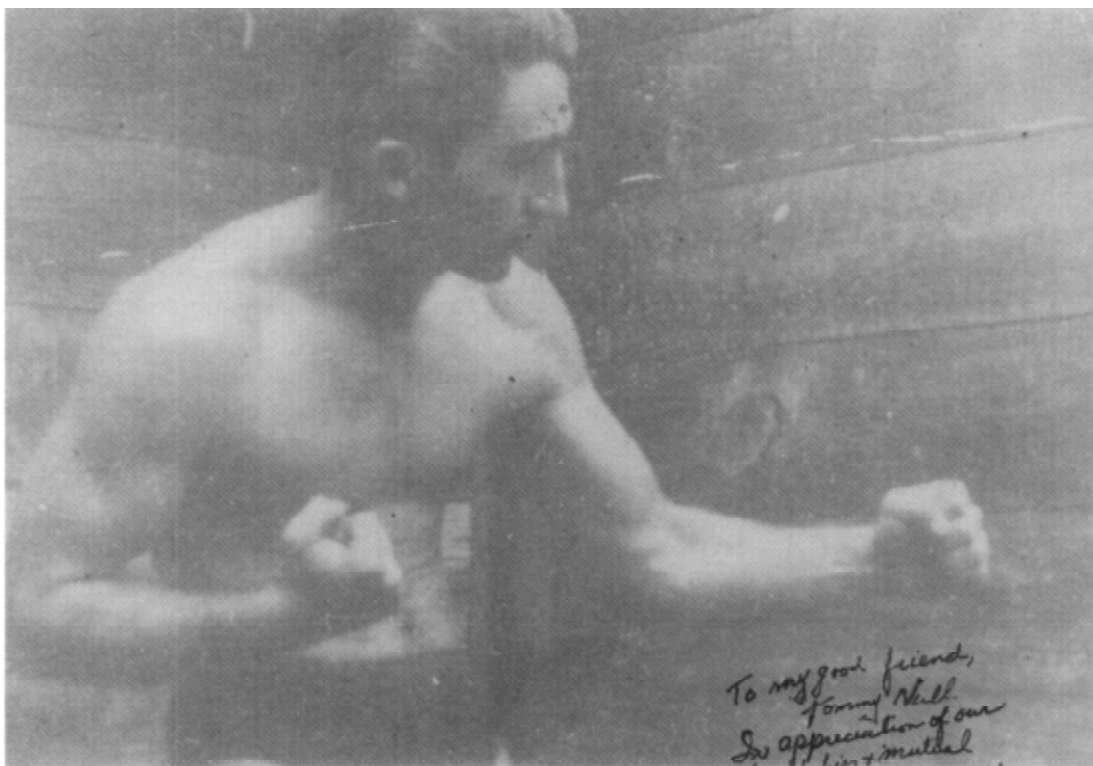
Dealing not for a minute with death, surely not his own, his last phone call did, in fact, deal with the following concerns, remembered here from a "list" (scribbled on the back of an envelope) that, for some reason, I made, ticking off the topics that characterized a Vic Boff

phone call: a list that I'd never seen fit to make in response to any of our earlier phone exchanges:

(1) Anecdotes about his good friend, Leo Murdock—our mutual friend—moving from a discussion about their "finding" Katie Sandwina's boxer son Ted—on to our pleasure in Leo's garrulously rambling tales: that Murdockian version of our Game which comprised oral history in its most human, its most touching and heart-tugging manifestation. (Anticipatory by very few weeks, as all this was, to Vic's joining our much-loved buddy.)

(2) As an habitue of Times Square, Vic corrected two memories about my twelve-year-old self's (long ago and only one-time) visit to Hubert's, on the occasion of the flea circus' presentation of ex-champ, Jack Johnson. The big guy sat upon a "throne" (a big chair) behind a curtain, the parting of which demanded yet-more pennies, above and beyond the admission to the "circus" (Hubert's). (Indelibly imprinted upon my mind because I had to scrounge the difference between the few pennies I found in my pocket and the number required to part the all-concealing curtain.) Vic's memories of his "audience" with the great one paralleled mine, but then how not?

The questions posed by the "faithful" must have been predictable and few: the same ones that cropped-up whenever "L'il Arthur" sat down to talk. (How numbing their sameness must have seemed to the quick-witted champ when he ascended his throne. Recounting *his* version of the meeting, Vic sounded almost commiserative.) At the time of both Vic's and my "audience," there was, of course, the inevitable recounting of that "bad day" in Havana with Jess Willard—and that "awful sun" that he protected his eyes against in his (supposed) knocked-out-ness. That unlikely KO, whose authenticity he stoutly claimed (in both Vic's and my remembrance), even though, all the while, every shining ounce of him winked conspiratorily at us, his clagues. Even the little boy knew that Jack knew that we knew. Vic corroborated my "take" of the performance, supplying details about both Havana and Hubert's that brought into focus (for the boy-grown-old) not only the words, but also the music, of that long-ago drama in Hubert's. The high-point of which, for the boy, was his timorous question as to whether (his boxing hero of heroes) little Sam Langford had actually beaten the big man. From the mountaintop of the Johnsonian hauteur that annoyed Vic (and the mutually-admired historian David Willoughby), he looked down upon me and, his big grin having fled,



Vic's first loves were baseball and boxing. Here, in this photo provided by Thomas Null, Vic's powerful hands and physique are shown to good advantage. The full inscription reads, "To my good friend Tommy Null. In appreciation of our friendship and mutual interest—Vic Boff." [See Null's letter on page 16.]

spoke softly and slowly: "Look it up in the record book, little man. I whupped Mr. Langford. I sent the Tar Baby back to Canada (Nova Scotia).

(3) After some insights about Langford, and about Hubert's, and about our hero, David Willoughby's great admiration for Jim Jeffries, (despite his decisive defeat at the quick hands of the man with whom we'd both sat in curtained-off wonderment)—Vic led me in memory to a revered Times Square monument to strength and muscle, not many steps from Hubert's: an institution that, in his *persona* as Broadway boulevardier, he'd come to know like the back of his hand: the legendary Bothner's gym. The mention of this cultural landmark (invariably coupled with Sieg Klein's historic gym at 717 7th Ave.) elicited brief Vic Boff-journeys through the careers of gym owner George Bothner, Zbyszko, Hackenschmidt, Carnera, Londres, Ed Lewis, Lou Thesz, and Bruno Sammartino (though I wasn't sure, at the time of the call, whether there was a Bothner's connection with his admiring comments about Thesz and Sammartino, who was recently honored by the Oldtimers).

(4) These thoughts, in turn, elicited others about Vic's dear friend, Sieg Klein, and his state-of-the-art gym ("around the corner from Hubert's"): the "heart" (in Vic's word) of the Metropolitan muscle world. From Sieg's unforgettable muscle control routine, he moved on to Prof. Attila. to Frank Leight's chest routine. and then to the pleasure he still experienced in recreating that fabled day (so redolent with meaning in the legends of our Game) when a muscular Czech kid from

Perth Amboy regaled the impresario with jumping squats and the presentation of a physique destined to remain for decades our planet's most splendid monument of "masculine perfection" (in the phrase of the famous photo album).

(5) The conversation moved, then, to what was ostensibly the reason for his call: Vic's concern for my medical condition, to which he bent his vast knowledge of alternative healing regimens, as well as the systems of herbal, homeopathic, and vitamin supplementation that he'd learned over the many years of his and Ann's ownership of some of the earliest health food stores in the Metropolitan area—calling also upon all that he'd learned from his long friendships with, and study of the healing protocols preached by, Dr. Jesse Mercer Gehman, Dr. Herbert Shelton, Dr. Benedict Lust, Bemarr Macfadden, and others.

(6) "Throwing around" some names of possible honorees for future Oldtimers' banquets provided the next resting place in our phone journey that afternoon, along with considerations of what the future of our Club would be if the sanctions remained in place against hon-

oring those, among us, who'd used, or experimented with, anabolics. Some of the possibilities discussed were Gary Gubner, Bill Good, David Chapman, Joe Weider, and (in light of Joe Dube's and Joe Puleo's recent honoring), the two's contemporaries: Bob Bednarski, George Pickett, Gary Cleveland, Tony Garcy, Russ Knipp, along with some of the pioneers of American powerlifting, such as Mel Hennessy, Pat Casey, Ronnie Ray, Don Reinhoudt, Don Cundy, and Dave Moyer, among many others. Given the virtual universality of steroid usage—and until our thinking has become clarified about the degree to which steroid-use impacts upon the Club's honoring of athletes in the two traditions—we might consider, I ventured, establishing a “separate category” for such “pioneers” in the two sports. All this might hold true. I continued *warily*, at least for that era when steroid usage hadn't yet become excessive. Since Vic hadn't bitten off my head after all these notions. above, I ventured, finally, that (to consider just one such example among many) it's difficult to account for Bob Bednarski's never having been honored. (At that point, considering myself lucky to have come-off unscolded, I desisted.)

Given my feelings in this matter, and Vic's even stronger and much more widely “published” views relative to the Club's positioning on the use of anabolics, I was happily surprised when, what might have become a painful divagation hadn't become one. Given the terrain and the loadedness of the subject, it could have been quite explosive. but each man knew that the other one was “for” him and, more importantly, “for” the Game. Each was “for” whatever was good, *for* the other and *for* the Game, which was so dear to both. We'd agreed, wordlessly, that afternoon to disagree. When the ostensibly rocky terrain had been traversed, neither of us had injured so much as a toe. The disagreement that we'd “agreed” to endure hadn't blown-up. Would we have voted “yea” on each of that journey's sometimes abrupt “turns”? Perhaps not. But the atmosphere hadn't been darkened. There'd be more of God's good time—or so we thought—for the planting and the sustaining, the nurturing, of these seeds (so precious to us both) sowed in that phone call on that happy afternoon. Ventured in love, love for the Game and for the other. there was no room for petty animosity, for self-vindication, for saving-of-face: There was “no room” for these and no need for them. Mentor and pupil were, after all, on the same page: love for this Game of ours. (And though only one

of the two knew it, they were at similar points in the paying-out of their respective skeins.)

As the conversation wound-down, Vic proffered a compliment. He observed that, when we talked, we covered ground that he didn't in other calls (“Stuff that nobody else is interested in”). He mentioned, especially, the remembering of his connections with Bothner's (where he used to box with Terry Robinson and hang-out with its humor-loving owner) and his connections, also, with Hubert's, not just the “flea circus's” (the “Museum's”) presentation of “the champeen” (He hadn't thought, or talked, about that afternoon with Jack Johnson for decades. “Nobody's interested.”)—but also the “circusy feeling” the “Museum” gave him. Running out of gas, we talked about Roger Kahn's recent book on Dempsey, and Vic said he was “going to run out and buy it.”

Vic's next-to-last words with me for that day—and as it turned out, for ever—dealt with a dietary protocol that he'd researched over his many years in health and fitness. Then, responding to another unspoken memory about Bothner's, he observed, “By the way, Al. you know, don't you, that your buddy, Terry Robinson. had his first chiropractic office in Bothner's. Talk about starting-out at the top, eh? We'll talk again soon, Al. Carry on.”

Ignorant that an important connection in my life had just been broken “forever,” I replied, “So long. old friend.”

The Only Article I Ever Wrote That My Friend, Vic, Liked

Because I knew that, here in 2003, the muscle world's venality, abusive power, and institutionalism inflamed Vic—

Because I knew that these characteristics were, to him. the poisoned “bait on purpose laid to make the taker mad”—

Because I knew that these were feelings we shared with one another-and knew, indeed, that my sensitivity to them was, in certain cases at least, a function of his angry sermons to me over the decades—

Because of these facts—and *despite* the unlikely fact that my dear friend had never expressed even a casual endorsement of, or compliment for, any of my articles over the many years of our long friendship-I wasn't really surprised or shocked when, one afternoon, he

phoned me and announced (in a long and complimentary call) that, in a (then-) current (mid-90s) essay, I'd written "lines" that sounded as though *he'd* written them: "Lines that could serve as [his] epitaph" if, that is, he had the small fortune it would require to "chisel them all into marble."

I became, needless to say, more than a little worried about the Boff phone bill when Vic began reading back to me many of the lines that he said would constitute a "perfect epitaph" for him. They were part of a long essay whose shortened title is "Some Observations on Iron Game History as Revolutionary Manifesto and Evangel." In that essay, I attempted to enunciate ideas and arguments that were, in truth, essential Vic Boff: Some of its ideas and even some of its language have their origin in the hot eloquence of Vic's many phone lectures to me.

The essay develops a consideration of history's power to shape the present; it also discusses the fact that the current game's *ability* to take-measure-of-itself is contingent upon the degree to which it comprehends history's lessons. That *ability* is contingent, also, upon the degree to which the Game can bring itself to participate in the renewing sense of lived-life that's implicit in the (otherwise merely abstract) lessons of history.

That long article's long sub-title is the "Venality,

Abusive Power, Failure of Nerve, and Institutionalism in the 90s' Muscle World." It's small wonder, in retrospect, why this piece was the one, the only one, of all my many articles, that caught Vic's eye, providing evidence aplenty (as he wryly remarked to me that afternoon) as to his influence upon me and my ideas.

The lines that Vic read-back to me that day had their origin in portions of three separate sections of the essay. If the words are mine, the arguments and sentiments—the passion from which these arguments derive—are essential Vic Boff. He saw himself in the mirror of these lines:

Section One

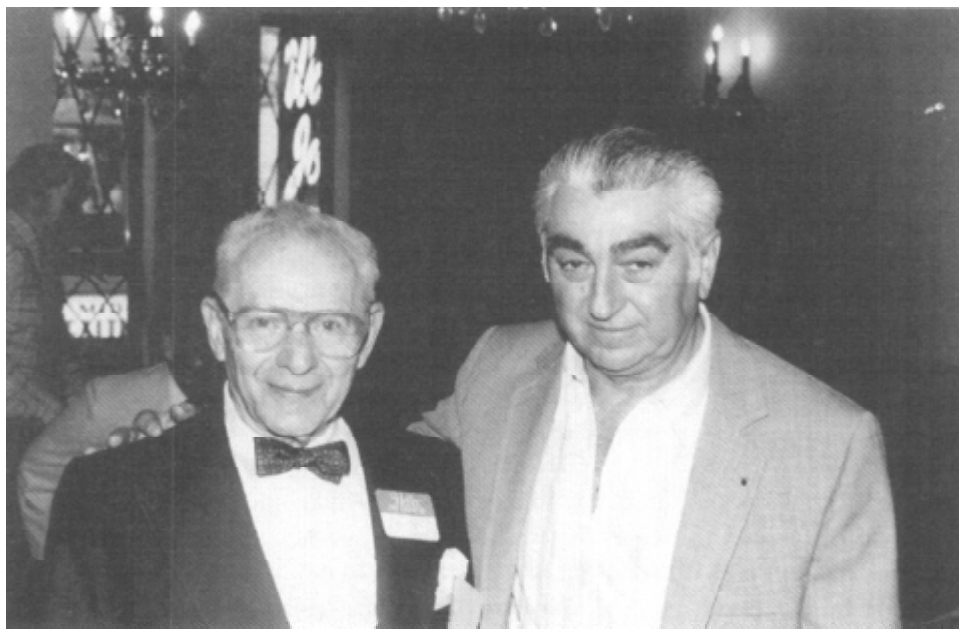
"Some Observations on Iron Game History. . ."

pp. 50-53

"Folks coming-in to the 30s and 40s Game were by no stretch of the imagination neophyte historians, historians-in-the-making. Not at all. They came-in for all the old reasons: to get big and strong and healthy. Once ensconced, they were "weightlifting bodybuilders." At least until—vibrating to *Strength & Health's* latest story about Davis or Terlazzo—they became born-again on the spot as "bodybuilding weightlifters" who sweated in frigid cellars, absorbing into unwilling nervous systems the mysteries of the press and snatch and clean and jerk.

"In short, they came to do it all. As easily and naturally as falling in love, they took to the book-learning about Sandow and Rolandow and also to the gym-learning about split-cleaning and deadlifting: like the lover who, having fallen in love, is without any stomach for his usual posturing when he's in the quiet presence of his beloved.

"They did everything and loved everything. And a decade or two later, when powerlifting poked its noisy head into weightlifting's *sanctum sanctorum*, a third canon in their sacred muscle-building regimen and text was revealed to them. They, then, did that: learned about it, read about it, fell in



The AOBS dinners began in 1982 as a birthday party for Sieg Klein, shown here with Vic. The first party was held at Lenny's Clam Bar in Queens, New York. The next year, the event moved to Wally and Joseph's Restaurant in Manhattan. The 2003 event will be held at the Saddlebrook Marriott in Saddlebrook, New Jersey, on June 28. For information or reservations contact Artie Dreschler at 1-718-661-3195.

love with it, and got big and strong from doing it. They bent it to what they wanted, just as their fathers had, earlier, bent Olympic lifting (as they called it) to what they wanted.

“At this point, the historian’s chore becomes difficult. If he were required to compose a thesis sentence that would sum-up his beliefs, he might conclude: ‘The pre-profit-centered weight game possessed a sense of community, of family. In this safer world, the athlete’s individuality was informed by an historical sense of what-had-gone-before, and also, of course, by a present-moment relational sense (a here-and-now sense).’

“In this latter sense, the athlete from the old game inevitably perceived himself and his accomplishment relative to his and to its ‘present-moment’ (the moment of the feat’s accomplishment): perceiving himself and the feat in terms of the psychological and moral stresses—and, also, in terms of the rewards and gratifications—that are characteristic of that ‘present moment.’ But more importantly, the athlete from the old game also perceived himself and his accomplishment (or feat) relative to his and his accomplishment’s relationship to a shared and much-esteemed past.

“How is this important? The past—and the strength athlete’s or physique athlete’s awareness of this past provided a context for his accomplishment. But this sense of a past, still alive into the present and shaping the future, provided more than merely a sense of context for the achievement (the feat). It provided a psychological and moral perspective, both for the feat and for its performer.

Unlike his analogue today (the 2003 man of muscle and strength), the athlete in the old game never perceived himself to be abandoned: he was not left to suffer alone, or to glory alone, in his feat and its sometimes ominous legacy.

“Not alone, he became part of a distinguished family, a family that often had members who had accomplished infinitely more than he, with infinitely fewer resources. To accept his place in such a family with anything less than a humbling sense of perspective, with anything less than a manly degree of humility, would expose him, of course, to the profound moral and psy-



Emcee Leo Murdock holds the microphone steady while Vic Boff smiles to see two of the greatest physiquemen of the twentieth century—Steve Reeves and John Grimek—shake hands the night Reeves was honored by the AOBS. Good men. Good times.

chological dislocation that is so much a part of life in today’s nuclearized muscle world.

“Psychological mechanisms of this sort don’t exist for today’s strength- and physique-athlete. He is deracinated, uprooted, cut-off from such a salutary relationship between himself (his achievement) and the whole force of an embraced and embracing past as an informing and empowering ‘Presence-in-the-Present’. In short, he is robbed of the Essentialist’s health-providing affirmations because of today’s contempt for history: the contempt of so many young athletes for traditions. for any sense of the past’s power to instruct and console them. To compound the problem, the 2003 athlete has, at the same time, been robbed of any sort of existential authenticity because the dynamics of his time have undermined his faith in himself: they have destroyed his ‘existential faith’ in his ‘spine-as-Pope.’

“Today’s athlete often seems adrift in an ever-vanishing present moment, uninformed by a sense of history and, at least seemingly, contemptuous of the need to connect himself with a viable sense of the past as a means of living with dignity and meaning in the present, and mastering the choices thrust upon him by an unfortunate future.

“In his more ‘satanic moods’ (exploiting an often-rehearsed avuncular *persona*), our historian often approaches the gym’s (any gym’s) best-built man (the physique bespeaking the most probing study of the muscle magazines) and asks who Eugen Sandow, or Sieg

Klein, or John Grimek was. So far, he's batting .000. He's gotten nothing in return, nothing but the blankest vacancy. If he asked about Mel Hennessy, Pat Casey, or Ronnie Ray in a powerlifting gym—or about Norbert Schemansky, Tommy Kono, or John Davis in a weightlifting gym (if he proved resourceful enough to discover such a thing)—he'd experience the same blankness. Pity is, it's never been necessary to dip as far back into history as these names to draw blanks from the queried. When our 'best-built man,' is asked about the current 'stars' in the muscle firmament, there is usually instant recognition, needless to say, but not the old sense of community (of family, of connectedness) between them and him."

Section Two

"Some Observations on Iron Game History . . ."
pp. 55-58

"How to develop loyalty to the 2003 sort of game? our historian wonders. How to communicate his sense of this present generation's obligation to repay the generation that nurtured it, by nurturing (in turn) the generation that's now beginning to make its way into the gyms'? For all their basic goodness of heart, these 2003 boys seem contemptuous of their game's history, disdainful of pursuing information about anything or anybody prior, and unrelated, to the here-and-now puffing-up of their very own muscles. More dispiriting, this generation seems to lack the sustaining sense of an obligation to the next one, the next crop of enthusiasts who will, inevitably, look to the 'heroes' of the current generation for mentoring. It seems, in fact, among the stars of the present game, that the ones accorded the most attention and rewards and nurturance are the very first to abandon their 'sport' and their obligation to it when their train of celebrity has run its course.

"In defense of these boys, however, the historian knows that they have never had connections with a game that is real. For them, there has never been anything that's rooted and human in the game, nothing that's based upon a person's willingness to do something for somebody else for reasons other than profit.

"To us,' the historian explains to an Oldtimer sidekick, 'it's a game, whatever that means. To them, it's a business. When we hitch-hiked down to the 40s' York picnics, did you ever pay for anything? I didn't. But that didn't stop us from stuffing ourselves all day long. Did you ever pay to have your picture taken with Stanko or

Hoffman or Bacon or Jowett or Sieg Klein or Grimek or Shandor or Charlie Smith or Ray Van Cleef? How many times did you talk the butt off these guys, for hours and hours, with all your damn questions? Did you pay a seminar fee? Don't you think all of them knew you were just making questions up so you could talk to them? Did they ever tell you to scram? When you asked Jowett how to do the bent press, he busted his suspenders showing you how. When you got sick, hitch-hiking home from a picnic, Hitchens picked us up and drove that big Cadillac of his fifty miles out of his way to get you to a doctor,

"And all the times that the gym was closed and Grimek let us train. Did you ever pay anything? Where was the business in all that? Today's kids *pay* to go to seminars and *pay* for "personal trainers" We had Grimek's, Hoffman's, Van Cleef's advice, free, anytime we went to York for the Birthday Shows, the A.A.U. meets, the picnic—whenever we took it into our heads to cut school and hitch-hike down there. On the streets of New York, we got a "lecture" from George Hackenschmidt, Stanislaus Zbyszko took us to lunch and preached about the horrors of white bread. We picked the brains of Sieg Klein, Terry Robinson, Otto Arco, Dan Lurie, and Abe Goldberg. Did they ever charge a "personal trainer's" fee?

"And you remember when Walter Good [Ed. note: One of the famous Good Brothers' strongman troupe] gave me over four hundred pounds of weights, just went out and piled it into my old Chevy. And then told me to pay for it "whenever [I] had the money," and he did the same thing for a couple dozen people you and I know. What equipment company would do that today—not for some special customer, but for guys who really didn't have two dimes?

"When these 2003 kids grow up, they'll have memories about a business, nothing more. Anybody who did something for them got paid for it. It makes a difference in the kind of people they become. They don't know the real thing, even when it comes to real words and making a real speech with real meaning. In the old days, pathetic punks like us meant something to people in the game, and the people in the game ARE the game. These kids today know they don't mean anything to the people in today's business; they know that only their money means anything.

"They like to call this endeavor of ours a sport, Can you conceive of the sport of football being created by the companies that manufacture footballs and helmets? Or the sport of boxing (as sleazy as some see it)

being created by the companies that manufacture boxing gloves or trunks? Or the sport of baseball being created by the companies that manufacture bats and gloves? But this is precisely what has happened, is happening, in our sport. Think of it. Can you conceive of *any other sport* in which the creator of the sport's equipment also creates the sport's rules, populates the sport's Federation, creates the sport's champions, and then announces to these self-created-champions which federations (if any-or ever) he (she) can flex for? Can such a sport possess honor? Can it possess even simple honesty?"

Section Three

"Some Observations on Iron Game History . . ."

pp. 20—22

"John Grimek once reminded us that, at one time, it was all fun. All of it. All this business of physique shows and the people in them. Unprofitable to be sure. but fun. But though 'unprofitable' nobody 'went without' at least not because they were 'professional' bodybuilders (whatever that concept might have meant back then) *on a losing streak*. They all had jobs. They all trained ponderously hard, when they chose to. They built, withal, wonderfully muscular and powerful bodies. And because their jobs and futures—and their very selves—were *not* threatened by a loss in the weekend get-together 'contest,' they hustled themselves onto the dais without the need for any magic muscle-building concoction, and always *with* the expectation of getting some good 'feedback' (a term they wouldn't have known) from cheering audiences of iron garners, who'd traveled across the country from the very same kinds of jobs that they, themselves, sweated-over back home. And fun it was, withal: not yet having fallen prey to the present-day contests' preoccupation with the three P's: placement, profit, and product.

"As a final thought in this vein, anabolic steroids represent for most people a source of ethical discomfort and serious compromise of the endocrine and immune systems, as well as chromosomal damage. Without them the ethicist and the medical establishment, indeed most people, would be considerably happier and healthier, certainly less torn than they are now. both ethically and morally.

"Before the advent of the big lure of big bucks and all the inflated blather that accompanies big bucks, there was far less sensed need ('need') in the world-of-muscle for steroids: the urgency accorded steroids

occurs mostly in a world that's dominated by a similar urgency accorded the two P's: contest Placement and Profit (growing out of the importance accorded contest Placement *by* Profit). This is a world dominated by the muscle industry moguls who exploit these two P's in selling the all important third P: Product, the engine that makes the whole thing go.

"The historian, in conclusion, bristles at the undermining, the unmaning, of the iron game by what amounts to a commercial Fifth Column, obsessed with the huge Profits that accrue to Product sale, generated by steroid-bloated 'first-placers' in 'contests' that are barely camouflaged extensions of the bosses Product sales and Publicity departments.

"Such an ignominious decline from the manly and generous world experienced by him and all the others who shared boyhoods in the almost-legendary iron game world that extended from the decades of the 20s and 30s into the 50s and 60s! Despite all that it shared of that era's sometimes lamentable political lapses and its need for social enlightenment, these were the decades of the iron game's Camelot. When it comes to open-hearted and generous egalitarianism. the latter-day Game has never caught-up to that earlier version of itself: that ever-green version of itself: the Camelot years. before Profit was King.

The Rebuke: An Inauspicious Beginning of a Grand Friendship

The Place: Brookside Park

The Time: About Fifty-six Years Ago

The Occasion: The York Barbell Club Picnic

I was responding to a red-faced Brooklyn boy who'd been hoarsely profaning the one-horse-ness of small-town Pennsylvania (especially the little York County town of Red Lion, where he'd been arrested for speeding). In reality, however, I was acting out the need for role-playing and sanctimonious attention-grabbing demanded by the self-theatre of mid-teenage, or the Thomas version thereof. At the instant of my comeup-pance, I'd risen to full preacher-heat on Red Lion's superiority to Brooklyn: the inarguable superiority of York County's innocent joys and Red Lion's Christian wholesomeness to any facsimiles, thereof, that Godless, violence-prone, gangster-ridden Brooklyn could ever possibly simulate.

At the commencement of all this showoffery, I'd noticed a dark-haired guy at the edge of the crowd. And somewhere in my mind it registered that he seemed strangely intent upon what was developing there between the Brooklyn youth and me, but with the rise of my preacherly heat, he vanished from my mind, along with any awareness of breathing (or even thinking). Gulping a breath of air in the midst of my sermon, I registered a vision of the scowling tough guy. In that instant it was clear even to my overheated brain that he'd already closed the distance between us by a few steps; his manner, if not quite threatening, was decidedly angry. Not really dumb, I realized that my position had suddenly become tenuous at best. He seemed about 10 or 15 years older than I, almost my height but considerably more muscular.

Not tall, but the sort of chap with whom one wasn't well-advised to seek confrontation. Having reflexively turned-away, I felt his hand on my shoulder, swinging me around to him, scared face to anger-scored face. In a low, angry, barely-controlled voice, he recounted a tale I've never forgotten: One that swung between sadness and unspeakable anger. With quiet fury, he spoke about the town that I'd been celebrating in know-nothing enthusiasm: scrubbed-face, Protestantly-proper Red Lion. (I'd later harken-back to him in this excruciating encounter as a latter-day Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose darkly-observing eye plumbed the depths of even the most church-going villagers: villagers whose sunniness-of-disposition and plumpness-of-flesh belied the awfulness that lurked in the innermost cham-

ber of their hearts. Without exaggeration—like one of Hawthorne's troubled protagonists—I've rarely, since that afternoon, been able to accept smilingly virtuous and rigorously-humble Christians according to their own (often inordinately unhumble) estimate of themselves.)

Vic's tale: Fleeing murderous anti-Semitic pogroms, Vic's family fled to America, settling in the safest place that this refuge for Europe's "huddled masses" offered: small town America—or, better, small-town Pennsylvania-America—or, better yet, small-town York-county-America: Red Lion, Pennsylvania. By the time that Vic was born, 1917, the Boffs, through hard work and much sacrifice, had achieved more than the usual immigrant success. There was, however, a cancer at the center of this sweet-smelling York County rosebud: the Ku Klux Klan. Intent as always upon its purposes, the expulsion of "affluent Jews," the Klan began to confront the frightened newcomers with burning-cross invitations for them to depart its sunny midst. They'd been warned: It'd be ill-advised, if not fatal, if they saw fit to remain among their warmly smiling, hymn-singing neighbors. Across the recently-traversed ocean, swinish. horseback-riding chaps, swinging sabers, descended upon poor Jews. Here in York County. big-gutted good old boys threw nailed-together lumber into the bed of pickup trucks: "crosses" they burned on Saturday nights and then bragged about (just another sort of contact sport) after Sunday morning services in one of those handsome small-town churches dedicated, irony of ironies, to yet-another Jew.

In any case. the Boffs pulled stakes for a "happy-ever-after—for an eminently safe and welcoming (if supposedly "Godless. violence-prone, and gangster-ridden") Brooklyn, New York. Where young Vic flourished. The young boy grew into admirable manhood in the midst of this "alien corn." Discovering in the process—a valuable lesson for a young historian—which of the two fields was (however unlikely the discovery) the source of the "alien corn"; and which, the source of the good corn. the healing corn. This is the lesson in irony that's so essential to every historian, and surely so to the one who pursues the truth about this infinitely complex and irony-filled game.

The final. excruciating irony is that—decades after the scene described above—my preacher father's final assignment, after a long and distinguished career in the Lord's service, was his



Author Al Thomas (second from right) stands with Peary Rader, Terry Todd and Mabel Rader just after the Raders were honored by the AOBs for their 50 years as publishers of *Iron Man*.

Conference's richest and most prestigious pastorate. The apple of every young preacher's eye. "Alfred," he phoned me one afternoon, "I've been assigned to Red Lion. What do you think, son?"

Some years ago, I wondered aloud, in the presence of an old friend, why Vic's later recounting, to others, of this painful story never elicited the sort of anger that characterized his spitting-out the tale to me, that blistering afternoon: the inauspicious beginning of our long friendship. "You were Red Lion, Al. Plumped-out in self-satisfied, hypocritical, sanctimonious little-boy flesh, you *were* the hated Red Lion, its embodiment. Don't You see that, even now? With all your pompous sermonizing and self-righteousness, you were lucky he didn't beat the crap out of you. He was a hell of a fighter, you know. You'd have been one sad duck, old buddy: one well-spanked preacher's son. Humility would've been a good lesson to learn, early on."

Perhaps less about humility than I should have, but I have learned many lessons from you, Vic. We all have. How very sad not to hear the phone ring and then to hear your voice across the many miles: our favorite historian, with his stories and wisdom from across the many years, the history of our dear Game.

Our friendship started in anger. In fear. But it blossomed. It endured. "Endurance," I read recently, is the "heroic mode of our time." Perhaps. Few aspects of our humanness are of more significance to the historian than endurance; it's the essence of history. I remember with fondness the phone call which announced that, deprived of your opportunity to endure the wintry shocks of the Atlantic Ocean, you were testing your "old body's" ability to endure the overwhelming summertime blasts of Florida's sub-tropic sun: "Overwhelming," that is, to mere (to un-enduring) mortals. Not to our Vic.

When I think of you, Vic, I think of the lines from *Cymbeline*: "Fear no more the heat of the sun/Nor the furious winter's rages." But, then, whenever did you need to be enjoined against such paltry "fears."



Unlike the Polar Bears, who often braved the frigid Atlantic only on New Year's Day, Vic and the fellow members of the Iceberg Club swam throughout the winter no matter what the conditions. Here, in a publicity shot, Vic stretches out on the new-fallen snow to read the paper, seemingly impervious to the cold.

To endure. To forbear. To "carry on" the Game, *our* Game: the construct that our bodies resonate to and that our minds know with the special knowing, not of book learning, but of visceral, gut "knowing."

Vic died on November 9th, 2002. On New Years Day, 2003, several of his Iceburg buddies braved, yet again, the numbing Coney Island surf, ritualists in that immemorial annual rite so dear to his heart. All this, as always.

Except that, in this celebration, Vic's dear friend, "Iron Mike" D'Angelo splashed into the icy waves bearing a cask that contained the final remains of his beloved Chief. Mike consigned his sad burden to the watery element that, for so many decades, had come to define the great heart reduced here to ashes. To define this great heart, that is, along with iron and blood and love for Our Game and its history—along with love for truth and love for honor and love for all those who strove to preserve the best traditions of the Olden Days in these days of quick-silver relativism.

Carry On, we shall, dear friend. And all the more enduringly because of your gift to each of us and to our Game. Adieu, Vic.