

# Mr. America: Idealism or Racism:

## COLOR CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE AAU MR. AMERICA CONTEST, 1939-1982

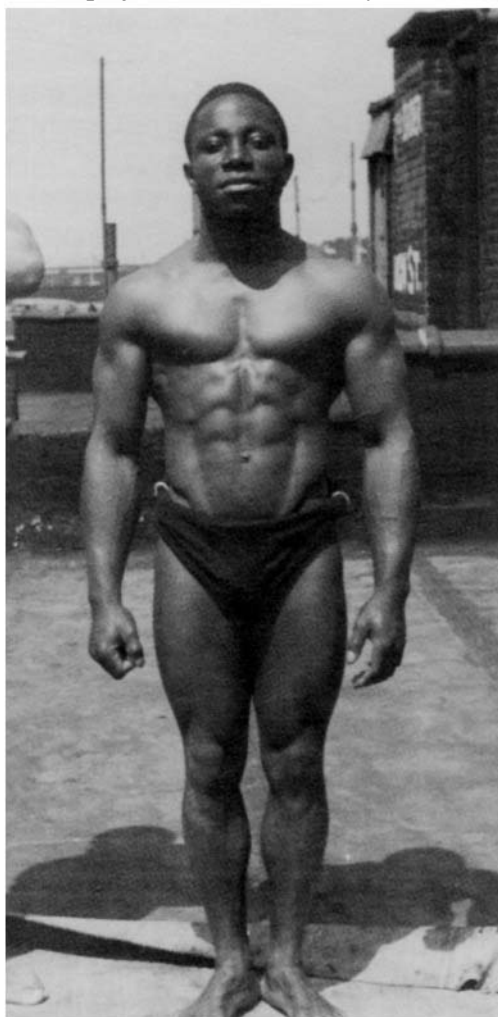
*John Fair*

In his 1985 account, *Muscle Wars*, black bodybuilder/journalist Rick Wayne heaps contumely on the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and Bob Hoffman, its foremost supporter, for exhibiting racial prejudice in conducting the Mr. America physique contest. "The big winners . . . were always white, and they were always associated with the York Barbell Club and Bob Hoffman," according to Wayne. "Year after year extraordinary bodies won no recognition at all while run-of-the-mill entries were lifted to stardom."<sup>1</sup> Wayne and other black activists observed that minorities were usually relegated to second places or consoled with "most muscular man" awards. In any case, no African-American won this most prestigious of physique titles until 1970. For the sport's predominantly white officialdom, however, such criteria as symmetry, general appearance, and athletic ability were as important as muscularity in choosing a Mr. America. No insider ever admitted that race was a factor in the decision-making process. Obviously the civil rights movement, changing societal norms, and a new set of rules stressing physical appearance had much to do with the fact that four more Blacks would win the title by 1982. But the nagging question remains about how much color consciousness weighed

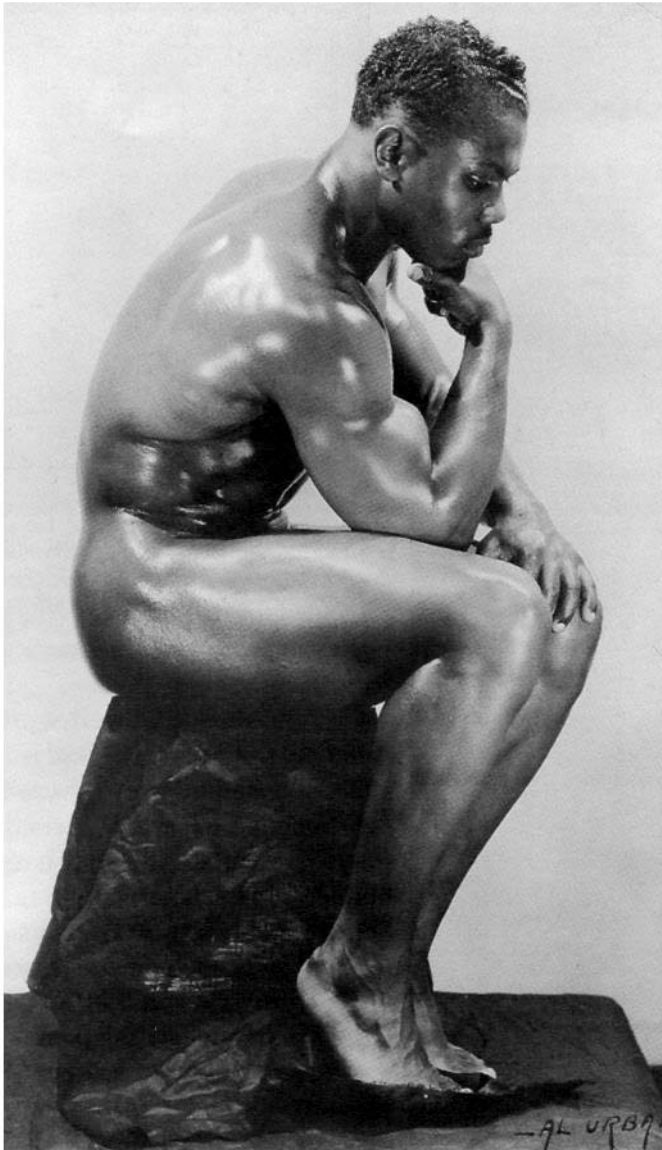
on the decisions of AAU authorities and whether the ideals of American manhood were sacrificed in the process. To address these sensitive cultural issues, it is necessary to investigate the history of the Mr. America

concept since its inception and determine the extent to which it coincided or clashed with more fundamental changes in American society.

Although the first Mr. America contest was not held until 1939, the tradition goes back to the strongman era at the turn of the century when the famous bodybuilder and showman, Eugen Sandow, held the world's first significant physique contest at London's Albert Hall in 1901.<sup>2</sup> The next major bodybuilding competition was staged two years later by physical culturist Bernarr Macfadden in New York's Madison Square Garden. As a sort of precursor to both the Mr. And Miss America contests, it was designed to identify the "Best and Most Perfectly Developed Man and Woman." In the men's division a select group of finalists were chosen from hundreds of photographic entries to appear in New York. Contest guidelines stated that the object was "not to decide who is the most wonderfully developed man" but "the most perfect specimen of physical manhood."



**Featherweight John Terry developed remarkable muscle density and strength back in the drug-free 1930s, registering a 600 deadlift.**



**John Davis, perhaps the greatest weightlifter in U.S. history, had a fine physique early in his career, but said in an interview that he would "never enter a Mr. America Contest because I believe a negro cannot win."**

Although muscular development was important, the sculptors, physicians, and physical culturists who served as judges looked for classical features—that competitors should exhibit "uniform, healthy and wholesome development of each and every limb and muscle, and the relative proportions that they bear to each other." The winner was Albert Toof Jennings (Treloar), a native of Michigan and graduate of Harvard University who would later serve as physical education director of the Los Angeles Athletic Club for forty-two years. Despite

Macfadden's showmanship, his competition was no mere display of muscles but stressed all-round development. It was, according to iron game historian David Webster, "virtually the first Mr. America contest."<sup>3</sup>

After a nearly two decade hiatus, Macfadden staged a contest for the "World's Most Handsome Man" in 1921 and one for "America's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in 1922. Both were won by Angelo Siciliano (Charles Atlas), an Italian immigrant from Brooklyn. Again it was health and overall development, not muscularity, that was critical. Atlas recalled in a 1972 interview that a panel of sculptors, illustrators, and doctors examined each of the contestants "extremely carefully" for five nights. "Eyes, ears, nose, throat, heart, lungs, and blood were all checked. Measurements and weights were carefully recorded." Atlas also pointed out that some of the 75 contestants had bigger arms or legs than he did, but none had his overall symmetry.<sup>4</sup> Another period of inactivity ensued through the 1930s, but weight training and bodybuilding did receive a boost in this era through the prevalence of mail order musclemen (including Atlas) and the formal organization of American weightlifting competition under the auspices of the AAU in 1929. Sometimes there would be informal physique exhibitions after the Olympic lifting, but there were no contests as such. Indeed it is difficult to imagine such a world where few trainees performed bench presses or squats and there was no obsession with developing one's lats, traps, pecs, or biceps. One of the few sources of inspiration was a strapping youth from Perth Amboy, New Jersey, named John Grimek, who possessed incredible raw strength and was good enough to make the 1936 Olympic team that went to Berlin. What impressed most observers, however, was Grimek's physique. At the 1934 national championships in Brooklyn he impressed Hoffman "with the huskiest physique we had seen. Broad, brown, shapely, terrific is the best way to describe it."<sup>5</sup> Even with no special training on body parts and no physique contests, Grimek had a build that far exceeded that of any other strength athlete of his era. But bodybuilding could not be pursued as a sport for its own sake since there was virtually no frame of reference for it within the AAU structure that governed competitive weightlifting.

It would be tempting to think that the same exclusionary standard would be applied to participation of Blacks in the weight sports since the racial barrier

permeated so many other sectors of American life in the 1930s. But the iron game, still in its formative years, was far more accepting of minorities. This anomaly may be attributed to the progressive attitudes of Bob Hoffman, founder of the York (Pennsylvania) Barbell Company and club. Often dubbed the "Father of American Weightlifting," he was in the process of gaining control over the ruling councils of the sport at this time. In his zeal to recruit the best weightlifters, color meant nothing to Hoffman. The ability to outlift the world's best athletes and thereby bring glory to America and himself meant everything. It is not surprising that the same (1936) Olympic team that featured Grimek also included a black featherweight named John Terry, who was trained by Charles Ramsey of New York City and promoted to national stardom by Hoffman. Set up by the latter with his own business in York, Terry eventually won national championships from 1938 to 1941 and set an unofficial world record in the deadlift in 1939 of 600 pounds. He was portrayed in Hoffman's magazine, *Strength & Health*, as a success story, with frequent photographs of his fine physique and references to his strength and wholesome character. "He is an idol of the colored boys," exclaimed Hoffman, "a real big shot."<sup>6</sup> Likewise John Davis was brought to York from Brooklyn and with Hoffman's support quickly ascended the heights of weightlifting, winning the world's lightweight title at age seventeen in 1937 at Vienna, and setting two world records in the process. After the war he became the world's premier heavyweight, setting many more records and winning seven Olympic and world titles. Repeatedly Hoffman, often to the detriment of his own social standing, defended Davis and other Blacks in his organization. He even went so far in response to a reader's challenge, to feature Davis on the front cover of *Strength & Health*, a first ever for a major muscle magazine.

Hoffman's pride in the accomplishments and potential of black athletes was exceptional. In the first year of his magazine he published an article on "The Advent of the Colored Strength Athlete," dwelling on the achievements of Wesley Williams, who won distinction not only for his lifting ability and physique but for becoming, despite his race, an officer (eventually battalion chief) in the New York City Fire Department.<sup>7</sup> Special attention in the 1930s was lavished on lifters from the Republic of Panama, all of whom exhibited mixed

racial heritage, but there were also pictures of men of color from the Barbados, Granada, Jamaica, and Burma as well as the United States. Hoffman was pleased. "Yes, it seems that John Terry has started something and we get more and more photos of colored athletes. Come on, fellows, send them in and we will do our best to publish them."<sup>8</sup> So impressed was Hoffman with these success stories that he attributed superior athletic abilities to black athletes, especially in sprinting and jumping events. "Many of the colored boys have bought York bar bells. And in a surprisingly short period of time muscles appear all over them. Especially in the Canal Zone and British West Indies are there some extraordinary physical specimens." Hoffman attributed this physical superiority to their African ancestry and to their limited experience of the "devitalizing effects of the white man's civilization." It was the law of the jungle or survival of the fittest that prevailed. "American colored athletes of today are outstanding because they are only a few generations removed from their savage ancestors."<sup>9</sup> After the 1936 Olympics, where African-Americans won every race up to 1500 meters, Hoffman elaborated on this theme. Although willing to admit that Blacks "have a slight edge over their white brothers in a physical way," he strongly subscribed to the maxim of Abraham Lincoln that "All men are created equal." Thus it was possible for men of all races to excel. The real reason for the success of black athletes, he insisted, was "emulation," brought on in part by the legacy of slavery. "There has been an inferiority in the social status of the negro that no democratic laws could eradicate. He has not been able to secure an equal footing with white men in the business and social world." Hence the feats of such athletes as Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, and John Terry provided assurance to other African-Americans that they too could succeed in sport where they would be judged on their ability and not skin color. For Hoffman it was not genetics but willpower that explained

*why colored athletes are successful. Because they love and admire physical supremacy, they have the emulation of other great athletes of their color and they are out to do as well or better. Whether or not negroes are superior physically, it has been proven that the chief reason for their success is their mind.*<sup>10</sup>

Hoffman was color conscious, but he was very supportive of black athletes and willing to give them a fair break, a rarity in the 1930s.

It is against this background of relative racial tolerance and lack of bodybuilding competition that the inauguration of the Mr. America contest must be set. Actually, after a gap of seventeen years, there were no less than six such events within a year. The first, in December 1938, was organized by physical culturist Johnny Hordines at Pink Gardner's Reducing Salon and Gymnasium in Schenectady, New York. An art director, a sports editor, and a former wrestling champion served as judges for the 39 contestants. There was no overall winner, only best body parts awards.<sup>11</sup> Gym-owner and physical culturist Alton Eliason staged the second contest, which was held in New Haven, Connecticut, in early 1939; and a third "Best Built Man Contest," staged at the Bronx YMHA, attracted 55 entrants. Again there was no overall winner, but Californian Bert Goodrich "was as outstanding as a sore thumb," according to Hoffman.

The most interesting feature of his report, however, is his detailed description of the athletic achievements of the winners. Hoffman believed that muscles should be useful, and he was intent on "showing the physiques the best athletes earn for themselves."<sup>12</sup> The next outing, dubbed "America's Best Physique Contest," conducted by Hordines on June 10 in Amsterdam, New York, is often recognized as the first Mr. America Contest. A panel consisting of a physical educator, a sculptor, a gym operator, an acrobat, and a Hollywood stunt man employed criteria of muscular development, proportions, and skin, hair, teeth, posing ability etc. in choosing Goodrich the overall winner. Joe Peters, one of the finalists, recalls that a diminutive African-American, Kenneth Pendleton of New York City, was among the entrants in the initial photograph screening but never showed up for the actual contest. A former cripple, Pendleton was featured



**In 1941 Kenneth Pendleton (above) was considered by many to be the "most muscular man on earth."**

numerous times in *Strength & Health* and was included in a list of the "20 Most Perfect Men of All Time" compiled by Peary Rader, editor of *Iron Man* magazine. That list, headed by Grimek and the great Eugen Sandow, also named three men of color and featured a full page photograph of Pendleton. He was "considered by many to be the most muscular man on earth."<sup>13</sup> Rader, no less than Hoffman, seemed determined to give black athletes full visibility and fair play.

But it was Hoffman who probably first appropriated the term Mr. America in describing the "many supreme masculine beings" he had seen in Amsterdam. "This contest was more truly representative than any similar event ever held in America." In hopes of establishing a new tradition in the sport, he looked forward to two future physique contests, one to be held for the weightlifters participating in the AAU national championships at Chicago in July and a final outing to be held in conjunction with Hoffman's annual birthday show at York in November. "We hope that this will be the biggest of the year

in point of entrants and in spectators' interest. The other contests will be over . . . and a winner here will be a real Mr. America." But the Chicago event, won by Roland Essmaker, was limited to selecting America's best built weightlifter and was marred by controversy over the inclusion of four women artists and art teachers as judges. And Hoffman's "York Perfect Man Contest," though won by Grimek and heavily promoted, did not attract a truly national body of contestants.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, sufficient momentum had been created from the 1939 competitions to bring about the concept of a Mr. America. Hence the 1940 Mr. America contest, held in Madison Square Garden, was a composite of all previous best built man contests. It was sanctioned by the AAU and the overall winner was John Grimek. More emphasis was placed on muscular development, as signified in points and in the separate recognition of a most muscu-

lar man, but symmetry, posing, and general appearance were nearly as important as they were in Macfadden's early shows.<sup>15</sup> And the fact that the Mr. America contest would be held yearly as an appendage of the national weightlifting championships strongly suggested that the winners would also be athletes who displayed useful muscles. This concept, rooted in the notion that muscularity was a pleasing derivative of more basic human attributes of health, strength, fitness, character, and athletic ability, became a settled feature of the contest as its importance grew in the 1940s. Furthermore it coincided with Hoffman's principles of all-round physical development and was complemented by the increasingly popular Miss America pageant, which adopted similar standards in selecting, each year at Atlantic City, the perfect specimen of womanhood.<sup>16</sup>

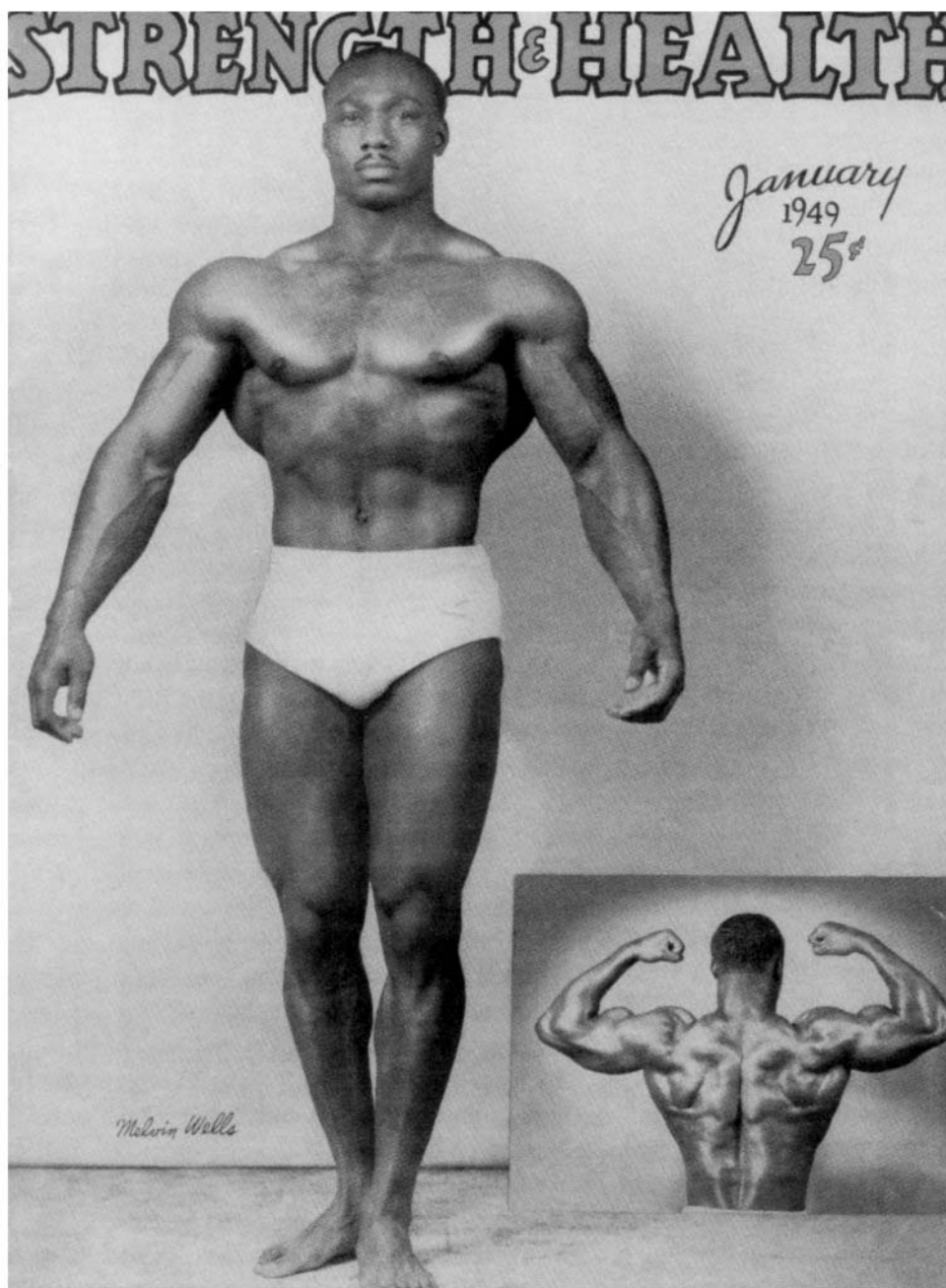
However color conscious AAU officials may have been in this period, race was never an issue because there were never any minority competitors for the Mr. America title. There was one slight exception. In the 1941 contest in Philadelphia, John Davis entered and won the best back subdivision. But in 1942 at Cincinnati he placed only third. No one suggested that the judges were prejudiced, but Hoffman was obviously disappointed that he was the only one of the eight who chose Davis, whose back was "more than extraordinary" from years of Olympic lifting. Davis "much prefers to have a good physique to being world's weightlifting champion . . . In my opinion he had as good a physique as any of the men who were present at Cincinnati and were it not for the handicap of color, he might have been Mr. America." That Davis shared this opinion is evident in a statement he made a decade later in *Ebony* magazine that he would "never enter the A.A.U. Mr. America Contest because I believe a negro cannot win."<sup>17</sup> Yet the racial tolerance of the system that Hoffman and his associates had put into place was not tested again until the late 1940s when two black stars burst upon the scene. The first was Keevil Daly of New York City, who exhibited great promise as a lifter and bodybuilder, winning the AAU titles of Mr. Metropolitan and Mr. New York State in 1947. Part of his prize for the latter was an all expenses paid trip to Chicago to enter the Mr. America contest. But Daly finished a disappointing ninth at the 1947 event that was won by the legendary Steve Reeves.<sup>18</sup> More consequential was Melvin Wells of Buffalo who wowed spectators at Hoffman's birthday show in 1948. Englishman

Charles Smith, normally a bit of a cynic, spares no superlatives in describing Wells.

*Melvin walked on the stage, the curtains parted, he took his jacket off—there was dead silence for thirty seconds, and then pandemonium broke loose. Never have I heard a roar like it before. It was a sheer cry of amazement, of almost disbelief . . . It seemed hardly possible that a man could be so big and yet so purely muscular. . . . His arms tape 18 1/4 inches cold. Pumped up they measure a full 19. Yet you can see every fiber. It almost seems he has no skin. His anterior deltoids run across his upper chest and meet there. The trapezius stand up from his back a full inch. The back development defies description.*<sup>19</sup>

But no mention was made of his relative lack of lower body development or about symmetry. Thus at the 1949 Mr. America contest in Cleveland he won best arms and back subdivisions and even copped the Most Muscular Man award, but the overall title went to the golden-haired boy from Oakland, Jack Delinger. Wells' shortcomings were obvious only to trained observers. While recognizing that his arms, shoulders, and upper back were "unbelievable," Rader tactfully pointed out that "his lower back is not quite as good." In fact it was only "above his waist that he is so outstanding. . . . He has a pleasing and agreeable personality, and is a credit to his race." To Ray Van Cleef, Wells was hampered by his unimaginative posing routine, but "his greatest liability is his comparatively poor calf development."<sup>20</sup> Still he had risen far higher than any man of his race in a competition that was heretofore dominated by Caucasians.

More controversial was Wells' loss in 1950 to Philadelphian John Farbotnik, particularly since Wells' awesome upper body was such a crowd pleaser. Although reporter Eric Askew noted that Wells' legs showed "marked improvement," he argued that he could not match the posing mastery or symmetry of Farbotnik, who also had an outstanding back. Again Wells was relegated to second place and the most muscular man title. From the audience Joe Peters thought it was a fair decision and in "no way was it racist. Wells had tremendous arms and deltoids but not a balanced physique and not



**Melvin Wells was considered by many observers to have the finest physique of his day—other than that of John Grimek. He won the Most Muscular Man title in both the 1949 and 1950 Mr. America contests, but failed to win the Mr. America title.**

comparable to Farbotnik's."<sup>21</sup> Even the rival Weider organization recognized Wells' less than perfect chest, abdominals, and legs and expressed no criticisms over the AAU selection process.<sup>22</sup> It was only a half century later that questions reached print over whether racial prejudice had been at work. "Many clearly thought so," according to David Chapman. "Wells felt very bitter

about the situation. He believed that he'd never been awarded the top prizes simply because he was black. There are many who agree that he should have been the first black Mr. America, but it was not to be, despite his virtual domination in the contests he entered." These revelations came largely from an interview with Wells' widow Julia shortly after his death. "She reiterated several times" to Chapman "that Melvin felt very bitter about his treatment."<sup>23</sup> But these sentiments make no reference to the criteria for judging, the fine physiques of Delinger and Farbotnik, or to the fact that all contemporary pundits, though expressing admiration for Wells, seemed satisfied with the outcomes.<sup>24</sup>

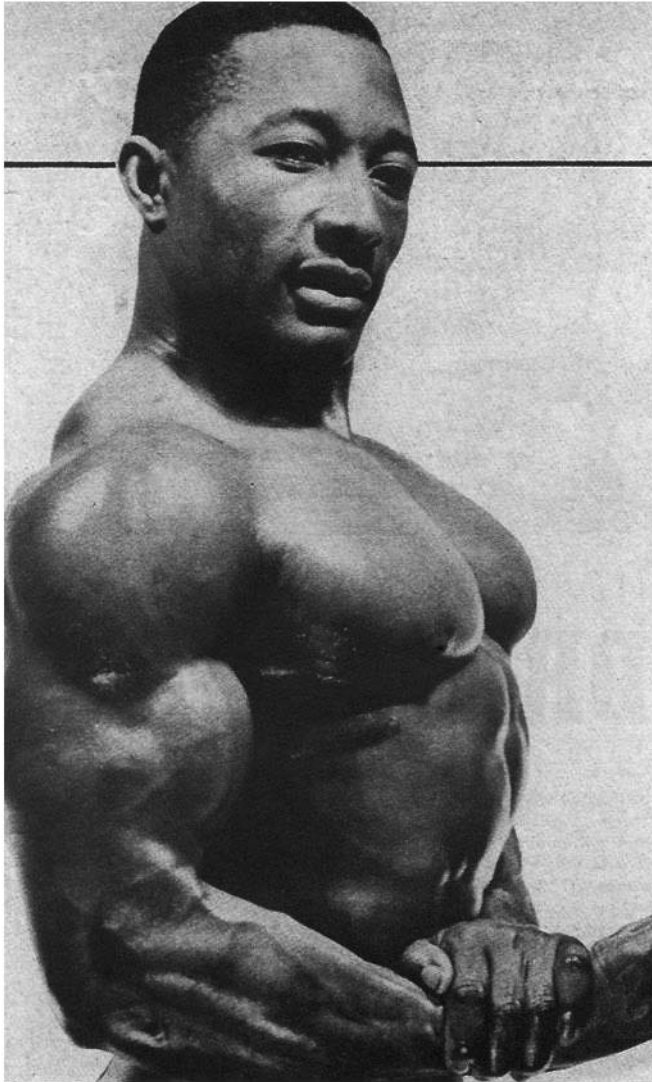
The next test for the system came from the extraordinary physique of George Paine, a West Indian from the Metropolitan (New York) AAU district. Unlike Wells, he had outstanding lower and upper body development and an unprecedented degree of muscular definition. At the 1951 Mr. America contest he displayed to *Muscle Power* editor Earle Liederman "the greatest back development I have seen in many, many years. Not one inch without knots or lumps from his deltoids to his spine and from his neck to his waist-line. To term it *Great* is a weak word. *Incredible* perhaps describes it better. And what a marvelous all round physique too!" Peary Rader was also impressed, calling Paine "the sensation of the show with his great development and unequaled definition," but his superlatives quickly lapsed into a racial argument, perhaps to justify why Paine placed no higher than third overall.



Steve Klisanin, who won the Mr. America title in 1955, had to follow the rules and submit to an interview by the panel of judges who would determine his ultimate placing. This interview was supposedly used to determine how well the contestant expressed himself, his facial handsomeness, and his skin tone. The panelists whose faces can be fully seen are, from left to right, Bob Hoffman, Al Roy, Peary Rader, Karo Whitfield, Harry "Bosco" Paschall, and John Terpak.

"Like most all of his race his calves are his weak spot. Although they are well developed, the bulk is high on the leg."<sup>25</sup> This color consciousness was even more evident in a subsequent *Iron Man* article by Frank Oshima, Japanese-American proprietor of a Los Angeles gym where men of all races trained. At this "All Nations Gym" he observed that African-Americans progressed faster than the others. He attributed this superiority to their being "hard workers" and "fast gainers," but mostly it was a matter of "heredity" where traits dating back to the days of slavery were acquired. Slave traders, he argued, selected only the healthiest physical specimens, the best of whom survived the trip from Africa. Then they were subjected to the hardest possible work and were fed plain but wholesome food. "Thus we can see that only the best and strongest of them survived. . . Our present day colored athletes are descendants of these hardy, vigorous people. This, I believe, explains why they are super athletes."<sup>26</sup> This idealization closely coincides with Hoffman's Social Darwinist views of the 1930s. What it does not address is the inferior calf development issue raised by Van Cleef and Rader.

The 1952 Mr. America Contest featured four African-Americans—Paine, Pendelton, Wells, and newcomer LeRoy Colbert of New York City. Paine, according to *Iron Man* reporter Jerry Ross, was "much improved with more bulk and shape and about the most definition you could expect to find. We used to think Melvin Wells the most terrific colored man we had seen but Paine has features to place him at the top. He is simply unbelievable." Still, Paine only placed third and Wells, though he "still looked terrific," was not among the leaders and did not even win best arms. Unlike all previous outings, controversy erupted over the choice of Jim Park as winner. The issue was not race but the preference of the crowd for Malcolm Brenner, another white man. The show concluded in "a bedlam of booing and catcalling and insulting remarks." Ross reported that "a certain uncouth element . . . mobbed the stage and created the most disgusting scene I've ever witnessed at a sporting event."<sup>27</sup> A quite different view of the proceedings was provided by Barton Horvath in *Muscle Power*. This magazine was published by Montreal promoter Joe Weider, who was feuding with Hoffman, on commercial



**George Paine won a handful of Most Muscular Man trophies at various Mr. America contests in the early-to-mid 1950s, but he never won the big prize. Even so, he was so outstanding and popular among the fans that many people considered him to be "the uncrowned Mr. America."**

and personal grounds, and becoming increasingly alienated from the AAU. Horvath called Park's selection a "fiasco." Although he did not question the honesty of the judges, he harshly condemned their failure to choose Brenner.<sup>28</sup> No mention was made of race, but the next month's *Muscle Power* featured a fictional dialogue between bodybuilding buffs, which raised this issue. "I saw the whole thing with me eyes," stated the protagonist.

*There wuz a lotta them boys who had lumps bigger than the winner but they*

*were colored fellers and didn't have a ghost of a chance there. There wuz a guy named Melvin Wells who has the greatest arms in the land—did he get a tumble? . . . Naw, he got disgusted, that's all he got and I don't blame him for walking out of the show as he did. Then how about this other colored feller, George Paine, who is all muscle from his dome to his dogs. If any guy deserved to become the most muscular man, it was this guy Paine. And y' can scratch him off too. Why? Betcha can't answer that one.*<sup>29</sup>

To what extent this oblique but highly potent attack was motivated by iron game politics cannot be determined, but race was no longer a topic that could be ignored by AAU authorities.

They responded to the Weider offensive in the only way possible, by reference to the qualifications of judges and to the approved criteria, which included much more than muscular development. *Strength & Health* editor Jim Murray made the telling argument that Brenner had recently won the Jr. Mr. America contest in Oakland with exactly the same number of points (70) with "a different set of qualified A.A.U. judges."<sup>30</sup> The criteria of six points each for muscularity and symmetry and one point each for general appearance, face and skin, and posing, first employed in the 1947 contest, continued to prevail in the mid-1950s, and there were no incidents or severe disagreements that Bill Pearl (1953), Dick Dubois (1954), and Steve Klisanin (1955) were deserving recipients of the Mr. America crown. Obviously the system was not broken or corrupt and there was an increase in the number of magazine articles to educate bodybuilding fans. But there were continuous calls from iron game leaders for reform and refinements. Interestingly, none aimed to satisfy audience demands for increased muscularity, and all addressed the need for a greater fulfillment of the highest ideals of American manhood, stressing such qualities as character, education, personality, health, and "muscular efficiency," a euphemism for athletic ability. Rader was the most uncompromising on these points and assumed a strong moralistic stance. "WE ARE ALL AGREED THAT WE MUST EITHER HAVE A MR. AMERICA WHO WILL BE AN IDEAL AMERICAN IN EVERY WAY or change the name to something like 'Best Built Man' or

some other less inclusive title." Hoffman, a long-time supporter of all round development and useful muscles, strongly supported Rader's reform proposals. Sensing how closely they coincided with the criteria of the Miss America contest, stressing personality, intellect, and talent as well as physical endowments, Bob Hise of Los Angeles even suggested that, "the Mr. America should be held with the Miss America contest."<sup>31</sup> This idea received little favor, but support for Rader's proposals was considerable among AAU bigwigs. Pending full implementation, the national committee, just prior to the 1955 contest in Cleveland, decided to "gradually adopt" such criteria as character, education, career aspirations, and athletic ability in a "rather informal way" through an interview process. And to preserve the independence of judges from crowd influences they would be insulated through a prejudging procedure, another Rader idea.<sup>32</sup>

None of these high-minded innovations or their manner of adoption carried the slightest racial overtones, yet on a more practical level it was obvious that Blacks were not attaining these ideals and were failing to win the top prize. Paine, though winning the most muscular man awards in 1953 and 1954, could place no higher than fifth and fourth overall respectively. "How good do you have to be to win a Mr. America title?" queried Rader. Liederman, following the Weider line, was less enamored with AAU standards of all round development, noting that Paine "seems to be the uncrowned Mr. America in nearly every contest he enters." After the 1954 contest, "Paine vowed that he would never again enter a physique contest," according to Liederman. But no mention was made of race, and Liederman was quick to point out that there were many "thoroughly discouraged and disgruntled" contestants, including such perennial white standouts as Brenner and Ludwig Shusterich.<sup>33</sup>

The latest black bodybuilding star was Arthur Harris, another product of the fertile New York Metropolitan organization. At the 1955 Mr. America contest Rader rated him as "possibly the best built colored man we have ever seen." His arms were "very outstanding, with most amazing definition. It almost seems this man may have more definition than George Paine." Harris won the best arms trophy, but "many expressed surprise that he was not placed higher" than seventh overall.<sup>34</sup> He would go on to capture the most muscular man award twice and rise as high as fourth, but many bodybuilding aficionados, though well acquainted with the judging criteria, had difficulty

understanding how a man with such a superb physique could not become Mr. America. Further blows to AAU credibility came from the international achievements of Enrico Tomas and Mickey Hargitay, who won Mr. Universe titles at London in 1954 and 1955 respectively. The former, another New Yorker from the Caribbean rim (Venezuela), had never competed in the Mr. America contest, while Hungarian-born Hargitay placed just fifth only several months before he became Mr. Universe.

Yet no one openly discussed the possibility of racial discrimination. Despite the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 and other civil rights incidents in its wake, the country was not yet sensitized to the need of remedying racial injustice. And Joe Weider, though always at odds with Hoffman and the AAU, held back from playing the race card. Perhaps he feared retribution from his overwhelmingly white readership or did not wish to discredit the Mr. America contest, whose winners he promoted to sell his magazines and products. But an early 1956 issue of *Muscle Power* at least raised the question in an article entitled "Will a Colored Boy Ever Win the Mr. America Title?" Surprisingly, the author, Earle Liederman, finds no fault with AAU standards and practices. "As long as the AAU is never prejudiced it is, therefore, obvious that a colored fellow has just as good a chance of winning any contest as does a white boy." The only reason why Blacks failed to win the Mr. America title was "their characteristic handicap of possessing long ankles with their gastrocnemius muscles or calves being set a trifle too high to constitute an ideal lower leg." Liederman also subscribed to recent AAU rulings concerning "character, personality, appearance and posture" criteria. It was obvious that the solution to the racial dilemma was that "colored bodybuilders will have to keep on plugging along . . . until they become so good in development that, when they pose in a big contest, the judges will not be able to make an award to someone else."<sup>35</sup> Before long, however, Weider himself became less accommodating. In fact, he soon turned speculations about why there were no Black Mr. Americas into accusations of racial discrimination, perhaps in response to a series of vicious and sometimes anti-Semitic attacks on his organization in 1957 by Hoffman's managing editor Harry Paschall.<sup>36</sup> In *Muscle Builder* Weider stated outright that "partiality and even worse, open discrimination" had tarnished the Mr. America contest. He gave credence to persistent rumors that "a negro will never wear the Mr. America crown!" and cited the unsuccessful

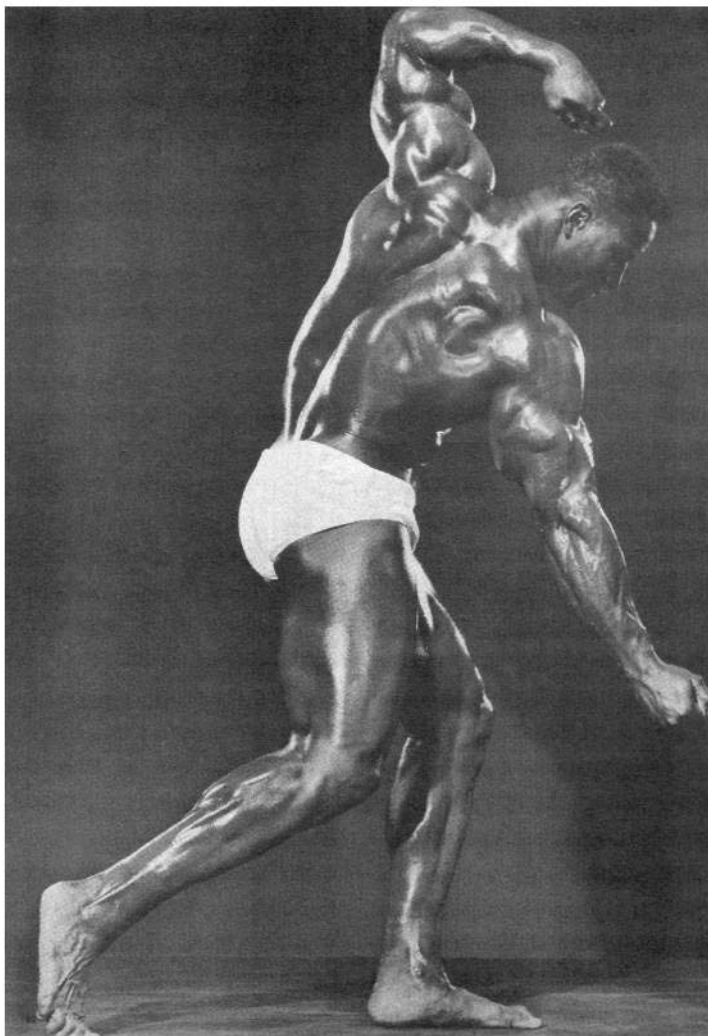
ful efforts of Wells, Paine, and Colbert as evidence. "In God's name, gentlemen, can you *honestly* say it is *right* to hold a man down because he is not white?"<sup>37</sup> Admittedly Weider's evidence was circumstantial, but few would gainsay that a pattern was unfolding. This was especially evident with Art Harris, whose extraordinary physique in 1959 fetched the most muscular man award but only eighth place. Not only did *Strength & Health* editor Bob Hasse regard him as "one of the most outstanding muscular marvels of the era" but the winner, Harry Johnson, who trained with Harris in Atlanta, recalls, "Art had a better physique than mine and should have won the contest."<sup>38</sup>

That Blacks were not winning the Mr. America title, however, had less to do with racial discrimination than with the idealistic standards Rader had been promoting for years. His crusade for integrity and all-American values resulted in sweeping rules changes at the 1956 AAU meeting in Los Angeles whereby "athletic ability" accounted for 25% and a further 50% was divided between symmetry and general appearance. Furthermore education, personality, and character considerations were usually subsumed within the latter category. Only 25% of a judge's score remained for muscular development. Little wonder then that the man with the best physique was often not the overall winner and that bodybuilding fans often disagreed with the choices of the judges. Yet it was Hoffman who was hanged in effigy on Muscle Beach and had to endure protests of body-

builders that athletic ability and other non-physique attributes should not be important in choosing a Mr. America.<sup>39</sup> Neither Hoffman nor Rader showed any doubts about the just nature of their cause, or that it was rooted in anything less than the best traditions of the iron game. "For a Mr. America there are certain qualities," stated the latter, "that should be very prominent above and beyond his physique, for the title denotes the ideal of 'American Manhood' rather than just a physique champion." Rader even carried his moral crusade a step further in an *Iron Man* editorial harshly condemning the association of "sex deviates" with the sport. "Their desires are abnormal," and he regretted that the number of magazines catering to "perverts" was greater than

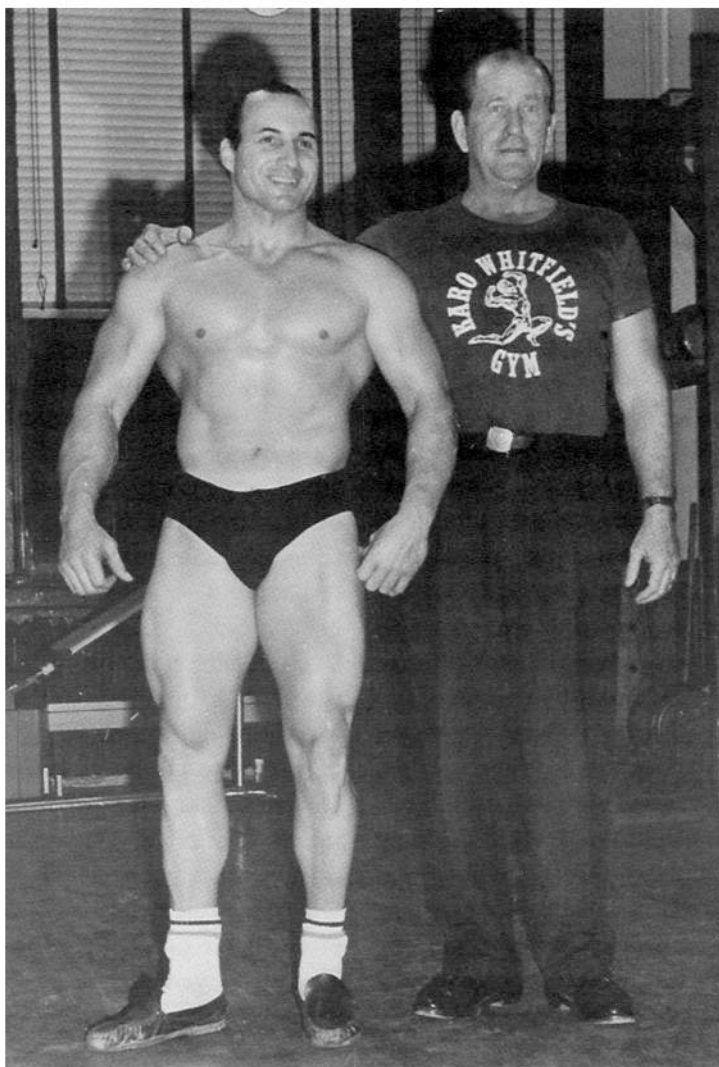
legitimate physical culture magazines.<sup>40</sup> Indeed to Rader and other AAU leaders homosexuality seemed a far greater threat to bodybuilding than racism during this golden era of the Mr. America contest.

Prior to 1963, despite continuous misunderstandings over scoring procedures and grumblings when local favorites did not win, there were no major outbursts against the all round ideal of manhood the AAU had put into place. In fact, a poll taken by Van Cleef of *Strength & Health* readers in 1959 indicated that 75% approved of the current system. One respondent even wanted the addition of an endurance test, and Van Cleef advocated the inclusion of a talent category which might entertain audiences with strength feats, hand balancing and tumbling



**A photograph of Arthur Harris compared to one of Harry Johnson makes it easy to see why many people in the bodybuilding community failed to comprehend how Harris placed no higher than eighth in the 1959 Mr. America contest.**

performances. "That this talent factor could be a practical asset has been proved by the national prestige significance the Miss America pageant has gained since making it an important factor in the selection of the winners."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, there appeared to be a black contestant on the horizon who seemed capable of going all the way. Harold Poole first entered the Mr. America contest in 1960 at age 16 and placed 18<sup>th</sup> but rose quickly to 4<sup>th</sup> the following year. Rader observed that he had "the most outstanding physique there from the standpoint of shape, development, definition, and general overall proportions." Also, "here is a colored boy who has good calves. . . . You will hear a great deal of this boy in the future for he has the foundation for becoming the greatest physique his race has ever produced." With offers of three college scholarships and plans to enter Purdue University, Poole seemed to have it all, and no one was surprised when he was runner-up to Joe Abbenda and won the most muscular man title in 1962.<sup>42</sup> Nothing seemed to stand in his way from becoming the first Black Mr. America. Even Weider publications, often prone to question AAU efforts, expressed satisfaction with the outcome. "Joe Abbenda is a swell guy. He speaks effectively and has a million dollar smile. I doubt they could have picked a better man to wear the mythical Mr. America crown for the year 1962."<sup>43</sup> It was obvious too, from the smiles all round on the winners dais, that Poole was ideally positioned and fully expected to win the top spot next year.



**Harry Johnson, on the left, was the 1959 Mr. America, but he said in an interview, "Arthur Harris should have won the contest." Atlanta's Karo Whitfield, a prominent judge, is at right.**

Unfortunately these expectations were never realized. At the 1963 contest in Harrisburg, Poole again became most muscular man but was outscored by York native Vern Weaver whom he had easily bested in earlier outings. Hasse reported that Poole's muscular development had improved even further and that he

*accepted the huge Most Muscular trophy with obvious satisfaction, but his reaction to the announcement that he was placed second in Mr. America scoring gave proof positive that he is not yet ready for that honor. Confused and perhaps abetted by hooting and booing from a loud-mouthed minority in the audience, the Indiana teenager foundered on stage, seemingly unable to make up his mind whether he should accept the runner-up trophy or not; when he did, amidst the uproar he continued to move about the stage. Not knowing what to expect next, the emcee . . . had the curtain drawn shut. Some minutes later the curtains parted again, and Weaver was announced as the winner. With apparent reluctance, Poole shook the victor's hand. A short time later the five top men were asked to pose as a group on the elevated posing platform. Poole, in tears, hesitated momentarily behind the*

*other four, then walked off stage.*<sup>44</sup>

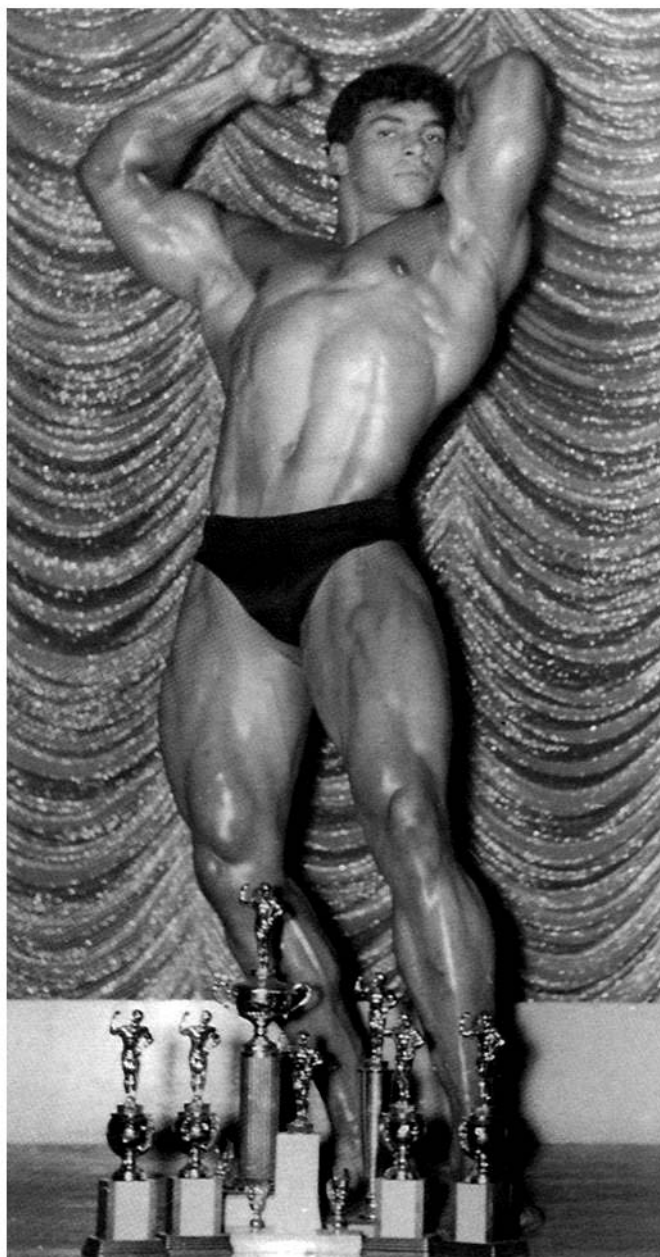
Two weeks later, at the Teen-Age Mr. America contest, when Poole was again relegated to second by surprise winner Jerry Daniels of Georgia, he repeated his disappearing act, then smashed his trophy to bits off stage. A flurry of letters to editors ensued from stunned bodybuilding enthusiasts, some expressing outrage at Poole's unsportsmanlike conduct and others expressing displeasure with the AAU scoring system that allegedly caused it. Only one, a Californian named William Glenon, raised the subject of race, insisting that Poole had actually "won the title two years in a row, but because he is a Negro, he is relegated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> spot. . . . He is so superior to the rest that in the eyes of any unbigoted judge there would be no contest."<sup>45</sup> But this was an isolated instance, and it was only in retrospect that Rick Wayne could say that Poole was "to black bodybuilding—what Joe Louis and Muhammed Ali had each in turn been to race and boxing."<sup>46</sup> Certainly no one at the time realized that they were witnessing the dawn of the civil rights movement in bodybuilding.

Oblivious to these developments was the AAU officialdom, which continued to respond to criticisms in a responsible way by citing the facts of the selection process. Hoffman explained that six of the seven judges rated Weaver ahead of Poole, mainly from his superiority in symmetry and general appearance. Poole had the edge in muscularity, for which he was recognized as most muscular man. Both contestants received the maximum of five athletic points from all judges. To refute the charge of racism, Hoffman noted that the only black judge, Rudy Sablo of New York City, rated Weaver a half point higher than Poole in total scoring. Sablo's placement, as much as those of the white judges, reflected the idealism of the times. He recalls that "the Mr. America was to be a complete physique, and Poole didn't have that."<sup>47</sup> Poole's most serious handicap, according to another AAU official, Ralph Countryman, was a severe speech defect that supposedly cost him victory in the 1962 contest. In an attempt to remedy the problem, he enrolled in an institute for stammerers in Indianapolis, but it persisted and was perhaps the decisive factor in his 1963 losses.<sup>48</sup> Bob Crist, future national chairman, recalls that Poole "looked good" at Harrisburg, but "people talked about his having a speech impediment." Bob Bendel, veteran judge of about 25 national physique

panels, thought Poole nevertheless "should have won," but he was disappointed in his behavior. Contestant Val Vasilieff, who placed ninth, believes that "Weaver should have won over Poole in 1963 . . . Weaver had a fantastic back. . . . When he did a back shot the place went wild."<sup>49</sup> However justified Weaver's selection might have been, nothing could console Poole, and it was no surprise that he soon found employment with Weider Enterprises in Union City and won the Mr. Universe contest staged by Weider's International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFBB).

Peary Rader seemed stunned by the fallout from the 1963 contests and called for "some outside group" to take them over in order to prevent further deterioration of the Mr. America image.<sup>50</sup> Weaver found such discussions stemming from his hard-won victory highly disturbing and accused Rader of stirring up the controversy against him. "I, as 'Mr. America' 1963 would prefer to live out this year with the least amount of contempt as possible. I find it very difficult to elevate the meaning of the 'Mr. America' title as long as contemptuous premises continue to be injected into the contest itself."<sup>51</sup> Decades later Weaver remained bitter about his treatment. He felt that Poole had a good physique but his own symmetry was better. "Poole had teeth missing. He was the typical muscle-head with few social graces." How much these lingering resentments contributed to Weaver's eventual suicide cannot be ascertained, but he always felt that the controversy engendered by Poole "threw a cloud" over his tenure as Mr. America.<sup>52</sup>

In the wake of the controversial 1963 event, attention was focused on the need for further revision of the rules and on the irrelevance of athletic ability points. Again Rader took the lead, arguing that at one time weightlifting and bodybuilding were "almost synonymous and . . . it seemed only natural that lifting and physique contests should be held together. Today there is very little in common between bodybuilders and weightlifters. . . . I know of few, if any, bodybuilders who approve the athletic points used in selecting a Mr. America by the A.A.U." Though less willing to back-track on education and character considerations, Rader could see that his moral crusade for a Mr. America that was "truly representative of ideal American manhood in every respect" was increasingly being questioned. "I still feel this way," he insisted, "but apparently Mr. Public does not agree with me, for he voices vociferous

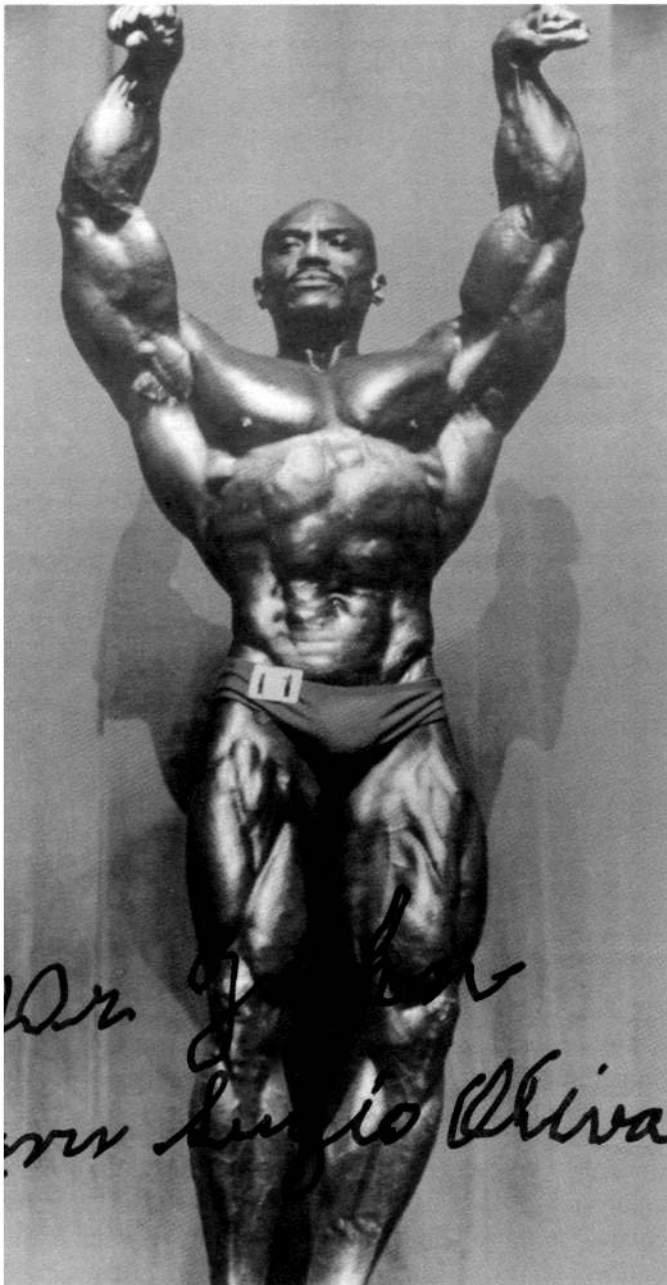


**Vern Weaver, on the left, won the 1963 Mr. America contest over Harold Poole, on the right, who was chosen "Most Muscular." Weaver's win was very controversial, and roundly booed by the audience. Bob Bendel, a prominent AAU judge, thought that Poole should have won, but some judges apparently used Poole's speech impediment against him.**

objection to the selection of anything but a physical specimen (irrespective of other qualities or weaknesses the man may have)."<sup>53</sup> Gradually, in the hearts and minds of AAU officials, Poole's lack of sportsmanship was interpreted as a display of righteous indignation. But against what? Racism was rarely mentioned in the discourse of the times, and then only fleetingly. Even Weider publications avoided below-the-belt attacks, stress-

ing instead how the IFBB "has never shown prejudice towards its members. Musclemen of every nationality, color and religion have won IFBB titles-from the most coveted to the smallest."<sup>54</sup> That pictures of black bodybuilders who had defected from the AAU often accompanied such boasts of virtue only compounded their impact. But it was not so much the employment of race-based tactics as it was a series of IFBB physique reforms

more in tune with the times that gave Weider an edge. Abolition of the point system, enabling judges to "select the winners-based on experience, observation, discussion and final agreement" was the most important innovation, but sole stress on muscular development, the lack of any amateur/professional distinctions, the creation of the Mr. Olympia title, and the award of cash prizes were popular with bodybuilders and fans alike. "Muscle up"



The legendary Sergio Oliva placed second to Bob Gajda in the 1965 Mr. America contest. Oliva later said, "The AAU guys...don't know the Civil War is over." He soon defected to Weider and helped popularize the IFBB.

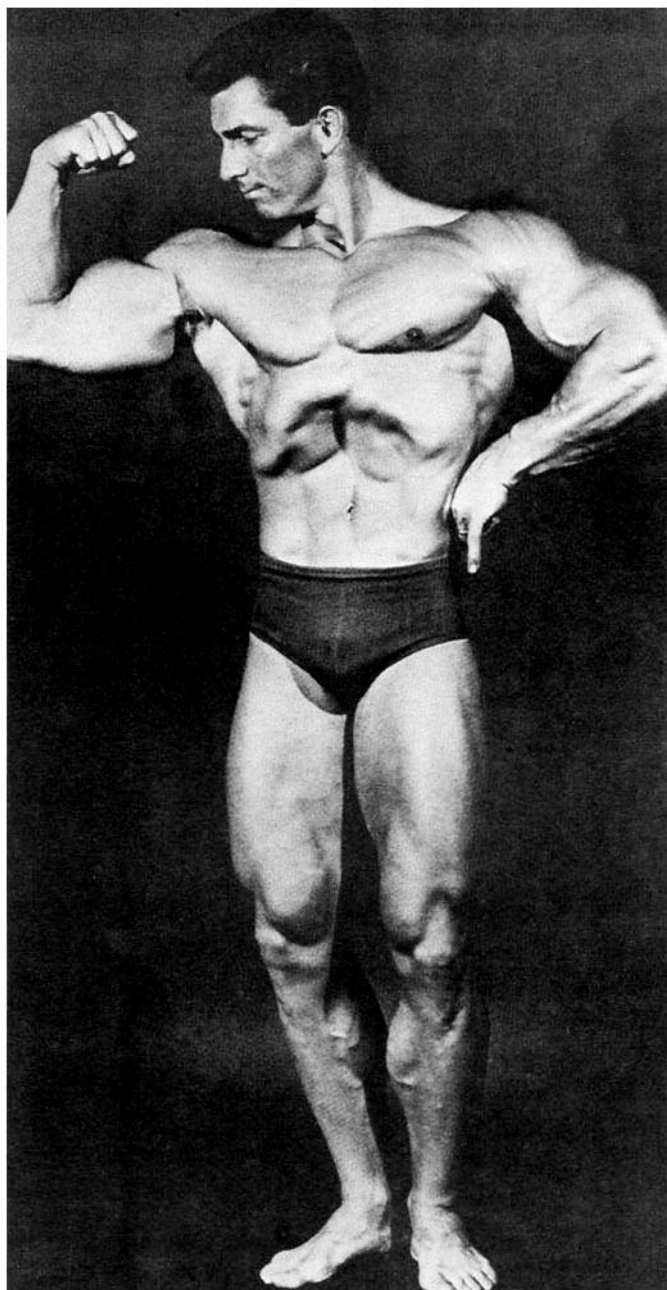
was the Weider line, "you're in the Weider generation of champs!"<sup>55</sup>

The AAU was also moving in this direction but very slowly, finally lessening the value of athletic ability points in 1966. And the Mr. America contest, dealt a major blow to its credibility in 1963, received a second one in 1966. Sergio Oliva, the latest black phenomenon, had defected from the Cuban weightlifting team at the Central American Games in Jamaica in 1962. After moving to Chicago, he placed seventh in his first Mr. America contest in 1964, then rose to second in 1965 when he was also named most muscular man. Oliva had, observed Rader, "the outstanding physique of the meet" and "had he been a citizen, and able to speak English fluently, he probably could have won the Mr. America title." What's more, "his calves are very good-a generally weak area for colored men, but Oliva has a different ancestry than the colored people of the USA, with a mixture of European blood, and this gives him certain physical advantages of each race."<sup>56</sup> In the following year, after winning the Jr. Mr. America title over training partner Bob Gajda, expectations were high that Oliva would become the first black Mr. America. But again, in accordance with a tradition established by Wells, Paine, Harris, and Poole, he was denied the grand prize and had to settle for most muscular man. Oliva accepted his second place finish to Gajda, with a sense of humor and a racial barb. "The AAU guys who don't know the Civil War is over say Gajda is the winner when everyone in the house knew it was me." From that point it was "goodbye AAU for me and hello IFBB and super-bodybuilding status."<sup>57</sup> In short order, Oliva defected to Weider, "for reasons best left unsaid," and won the title of Mr. World. A year later he beat such greats as Poole, Dave Draper, and Chuck Sipes to become Mr. Olympia. "Sock it to me, baby!" he screamed as he rammed a fist full of hundred dollar bills and an engraved silver platter overhead. Oliva likened his defection from the AAU ("Antique Archaic Underdogs") to his 1962 escape from "Castroland." Years later Rick Wayne provides a racial spin to this momentous event. "He had the best possible revenge for the AAU's injustices to his race; he'd landed bodybuilding with a new king-who was black!"<sup>58</sup> Sergio's triumph, followed by two more and a string of victories by Arnold Schwarzenegger, catapulted the Mr. Olympia title and the Weider organization into the forefront of the bodybuilding world.

Much of this rise in prestige came at the expense

of the Mr. America contest where AAU officials again merely adhered to the best traditions and highest standards of their sport. In an effort to ensure honesty and integrity, the scores of individual judges were published. None seemed out of line. Furthermore, the highest and lowest scores for each contestant were eliminated. Bob Crist, one of the judges, scored Oliva a full point higher than Gajda, but he recalls that the former's physique was not perfect. "Sergio was massive but didn't have the proportion and symmetry. His skin had a blotchiness to it when viewed close up that was not so evident to a larger audience."<sup>59</sup> Sablo, then national weightlifting chairman, agreed that Oliva, like Poole, did not have "the complete physique necessary for a Mr. America," but "Sergio came closest." He also "failed to do some of the things he was told to do before the contest." His refusal to remove facial hair, for instance, cost him points.<sup>60</sup> In the final analysis all agreed that Sergio's greatest handicap, as with Poole, was his speech and perceived inability to communicate fluently with the American public.

Such idealism, however antiquated it may appear in retrospect, coincided with the all-American image of the 1960s which was being so successfully marketed by the organizers of the Miss America contest. Indeed, iron game enthusiasts occasionally expressed the desire to see the Mr. America contest televised, just like the annual Atlantic City pageant. Bob Crist, who was leading reform initiatives in the late sixties, wanted to "upgrade the show along the lines of the Miss America pageant" by devoting an entire day to it separate from the lifting, having representatives from the different states, and by interviewing the ten finalists on stage before the public.<sup>61</sup> Crist gave every indication that whatever changes were in the offing (athletic points were abolished in 1969) the AAU would maintain its elevated tone and never allow the Mr. America contest to become just a muscle show. Or as John Grimek stated in 1968, "No 'hippy' [sic] will ever win." Furthermore, high standards seemed more possible than ever with the likes of Chris Dickerson on the horizon. Like Poole, Oliva, and other black stars, this Alabama native steadily rose through the Mr. America ranks from sixth (1967) to third (1968) to second (1969). Unlike his predecessors, he exhibited exceptional balance, not only in his physique but also in his personal attributes. Dickerson was educated, articulate, clean-cut, personable, and studying voice with hopes of embarking on a singing career. In January 1969 he gave bodybuilding some very positive national exposure



**Bob Gajda was picked by the judges over Sergio Oliva to be Mr. America in 1965, a decision ridiculed by most bodybuilding fans.**

when he appeared on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show."<sup>62</sup> "His physique is classical, and his knowledge of art and sculpture enabled him to display it perfectly," commented *Strength & Health* editor Don Reed after Dickerson's loss to Boyer Coe by ½ point at the 1969 contest.<sup>63</sup> If he was strong in any one area, it was his calves, which were as good as judges had ever seen in either race! It was obvious from the large number of



**Chris Dickerson, 1970 Mr. America, with Miss America Pamela Elred. Viewed especially within the context of this heterosexual pose and the homophobic comments of Peary Rader and others in years past, Dickerson's victory was truly ironic as well as historic. Dickerson was not only black, but also gay.**

complimentary articles that appeared on him that expectations were high and that he would be hard to beat.

The most presumptuous of these forecasts was rendered by Californian Bob Hise III in a pre-contest issue of *Strength & Health* featuring Dickerson and an attractive black female on the cover. "There have been black contenders for the Mr. America contest crown before," noted Hise, but "no black athlete has matched Dickerson's qualifications: personable, intelligent, well-

spoken and friendly, Chris is a champ in every department. . . . And with California's known racial fairness, the issue of the 1970 Mr. America Contest will be decided on individual merit." The judges at the Culver City contest agreed with this assessment, placing Dickerson far above runner-up Ken Waller. In any case, he was gracious in his acceptance remarks, noting how his victory was proof that anyone, "regardless of race, color, creed or background, could rise to the top." It vindicated his faith in America and "the opportunities for everyone who will try and keep trying."<sup>64</sup> This same kind of color consciousness permeated Dickerson's later reflections in the Mr. America series he was asked to write for *Strength & Health*. "Oh sure, I had been told by others in confidence that I should not dream of winning the big title. That, after all, it had never been done before. . . . Suppose Jackie Robinson had quit along the way before reaching the major leagues and chose to discourage black youngsters from ever dreaming of playing big league baseball." But Dickerson was also realistic enough to understand that times were changing and that the AAU was "anxious to have a black Mr. America" because of growing appearances of racial prejudice. "I

felt that they were in my corner," he said, "and I really felt that my race, if anything would be in my favor because of the times being what they are. . . . I feel good about myself, about my race and the AAU."<sup>65</sup> It seems obvious from these remarks that whatever societal factors lessened the possibility of a black man becoming Mr. America in the past were now, under roughly the same judging criteria, weighing in his favor.

Dickerson's victory sparked a greater awareness

of color in bodybuilding, leading a *Strength & Health* reader from Indiana to call for segregation in the sport. "Chris Dickerson should have been named Mr. Black America," he wrote. "The fact that he carries the regular Mr. America title sickens me. There ought to be a Mr. Black and Mr. White in EVERYTHING." Such expressions of intolerance, however, were not representative of iron game opinion, which seemed accepting and even relieved that a black bodybuilder had at last met the exacting AAU standards for American manhood. But it was accompanied by a heightened consciousness, radiating from changes in American society, about racial and genetic distinctiveness. Dickerson himself believed that "the Negro is generally more muscular, lean, and has little body hair," thus providing him a "muscular advantage" in bodybuilding over Caucasian competitors. Conversely, however, their long limbs and large feet, which accounted for their "remarkable performance in football, basketball, and track," were less ideal for bodybuilding where traditional considerations of "body structure and proportions" favored Caucasians.<sup>66</sup> Herein lay some of the reasons why black bodybuilders of the past with such obvious muscular superiority could still lose the Mr. America contest, even by substantial margins. What enabled Dickerson, perhaps because of his mixed racial heritage, to meet the all-round expectations of the AAU was his combination of superior muscularity and symmetry. What's more, he also epitomized those intangibles (character, education, poise, etc.) that made the Mr. America competition more than a muscle show. In short, Dickerson, unlike his black predecessors, evinced a willingness to play the game by the white man's rules, the format for which was put into place long before there were any black competitors. Hence he was critical of those who refused to wear a suit, speak politely, remove facial hair, show up to meets on time, or engage in other subtle forms of dissent. "There is politics in everything and no one is above it. ... Therefore be persuasive," he advised. "There must be a rapport, an identification on both sides of the judging table. In order to build that communication, you must dress and conduct yourself accordingly."<sup>67</sup> What set Dickerson apart from previous black physique stars was an ability to compromise—and those extraordinary calves.

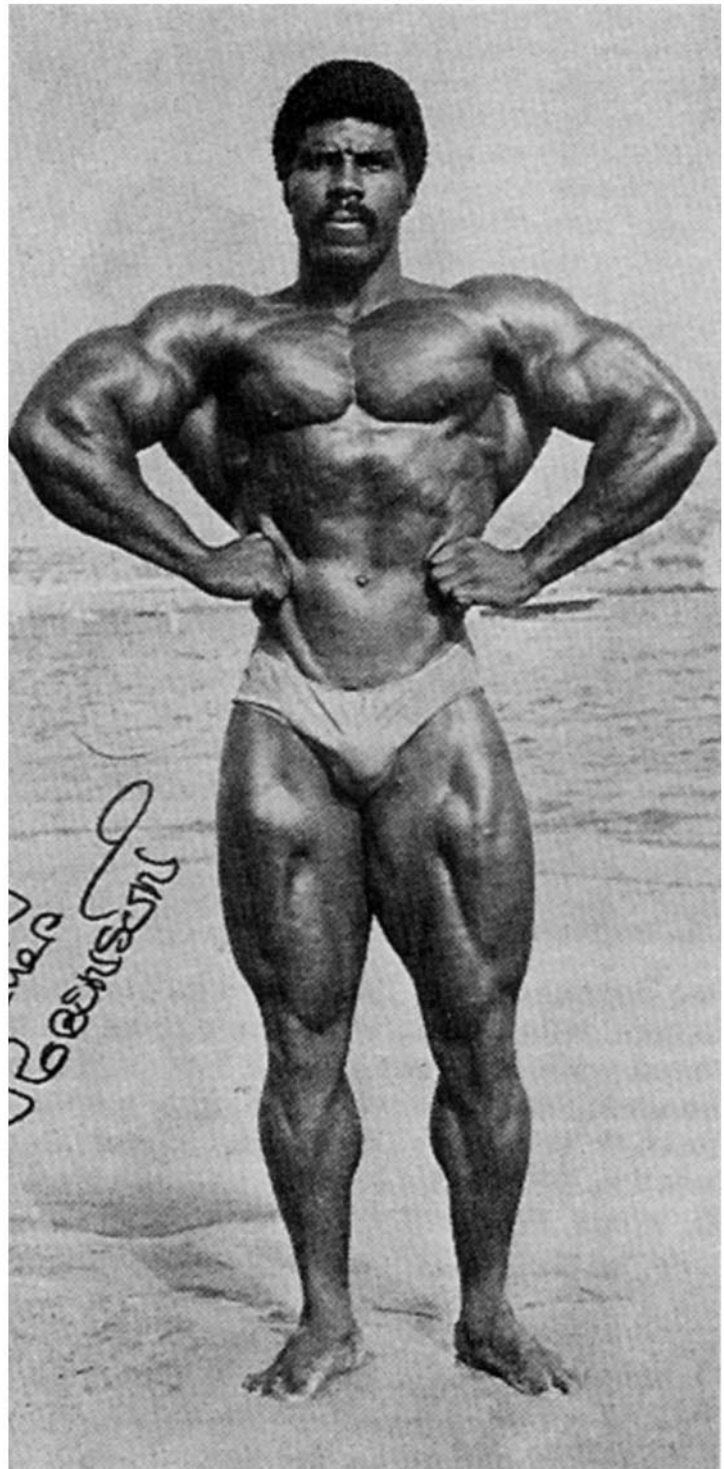
Always the gentleman, Dickerson completed his eventful year with nothing but gratitude and goodwill for his AAU mentors. That more black Mr. Americas might be forthcoming was presaged by further rules changes to

keep abreast of changing times. General appearance was softened to presentation with more stress on grooming, posture, carriage, and posing and somewhat less on character and education. Simultaneously there appeared on the horizon a black bodybuilder who seemed to be a much darker version of the relatively light-skinned Dickerson. James Morris, originally from New York City, had been training for 18 years and had won many major physique contests. After placing only seventh in the 1969 Mr. America contest, he retired but was coaxed back to train for the 1972 event by former Mr. America/Mr. Universe Bill Pearl, who had also coached Dickerson at his Pasadena gym. Morris improved greatly under Pearl's tutelage to win the 1972 Mr. USA contest and to place third in the 1972 Mr. America competition. Rader noted that he had a "fabulous physique and it would not have surprised many of us had he come out in first place."<sup>68</sup> The only obstacle to fulfilling this ambition in 1973 was massive Pete Grymkowski of Rochester, who had been runner-up for the previous two years. But with continued improvement and exposure in the leading muscle magazines, it was no surprise that Morris copped the 1973 crown with Grymkowski again in second place. What shocked everyone was the 30 point spread between first and second, while less than 20 points separated the next six contestants. "How was this possible?" asked John Grimek, reasoning that "it's virtually impossible for any man to be that far ahead of others in today's competition. . . . Yet it happened." Consequently the announcement of the scores was greeted by prolonged booing from the assembled throng in the huge auditorium at Williamsburg.<sup>69</sup> A flurry of letters to editors ensued, none attacking the concept of a black Mr. America or denying that Morris had an outstanding physique and would represent the title well, but virtually everyone wondered how Morris deserved 30 points more than the man many thought should have won.

Only *Iron Man* carried an analysis of results, observing that Morris, with the possible exception of his calves, had excellent "balance and proportions" along with "amazing cuts and definition, probably the best of anyone in the contest." Furthermore, he had "a personality that matches his spectacular physique; he is a man that we and all Americans can be proud of."<sup>70</sup> As one of the seven judges, I recall that our selection of Morris was unanimous and strong, based largely on his combination of muscularity and symmetry. But he was also well-educated, mannerly, articulate, and poised in the interview

process. His muscles were not larger than those of other contestants, but they were nicely defined, shaped and integrated. I was especially impressed with the definition of Morris' thigh biceps (hamstring) muscles, the best I had ever seen and a real rarity in those days. We might have been distracted from any relative deficiencies in his calf development by those of another leading black contestant, Willie Johnson of Akron, Ohio, whose slender calves stood in stark contrast to his absolutely awesome back. Grymkowski's size (especially deltoids) was impressive, but his physique needed more definition and his posing was not nearly as effective as that of Morris and some others. In the interview process, Grymkowski came off as almost too eager (even as obsequious) to please the judges—a sign of insincerity. These impressions were confirmed years later when he revealed that he was "a little sick of the old style of judging where every guy had to be Mr. Prim 'n' Proper. And you all had to talk nice to the judges. At the time I thought that half of the judges were homosexuals anyway." Morris, on the other hand, was natural all the way. However unobvious it may have been to onlookers, it was clear to me and to other judges that Morris was the winner, even by a substantial margin. How much considerations of race came to play in our decisions is less certain. I don't think any of us had a racial agenda, even though the contest was held in the South, and three of us represented Southern states. But I recall that all of us were pleased that a second Black had so admirably fulfilled the AAU's stringent requirements for ideal American manhood.<sup>71</sup>

Despite high hopes that more would be forthcoming, there remained what Rader called "That Mr. America Problem" stemming from our point spread and considerable public disaffection with contest criteria in the wake of our decision.<sup>72</sup> Responding to the overwhelming weight of bodybuilding opinion and following the precedent set by the Weider organization years earlier, the AAU national committee quickly and quietly abolished the point system and introduced the place system the following year. Although traditional judging criteria and the ideal of picking the best overall specimen of American manhood theoretically still applied, the absence of points in particular categories rendered these time-honored standards meaningless. The Mr. America contest was

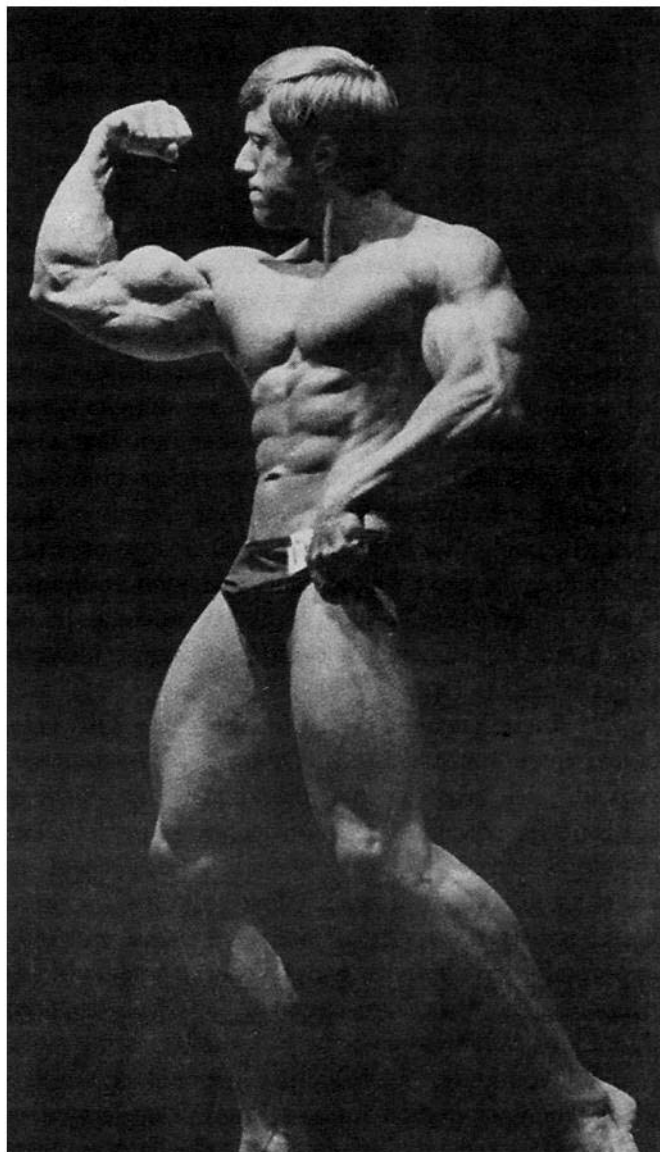


Robbie Robinson made an attempt to win the Mr. America title in 1975, but was beaten by Dale Adrian and three other white bodybuilders. As had happened to so many black men before him, Robinson won the Most Muscular Man title, but was relegated to fifth place. Robinson was somewhat outspoken, and some writers have argued that his personal style was not to the liking of the judges, who scored him low.

no longer unique. Contest descriptions now seemed to dwell solely on muscularity-size and shape of muscle. Ironically this did not attract the highest caliber of entrants. The next three Mr. Americas—Ron Thompson, Dale Adrian, and Kalman Szkalak—were comparative unknowns, while real comers, such as Ken Waller, Mike Mentzer, and Robbie Robinson were lured out of the amateur ranks into the Weiders' fold by the prospect of money and prestige. Superstars Arnold Schwarzenegger, Franco Columbu, and Frank Zane bypassed the AAU Mr. America contest completely.

Robinson, a black bodybuilder from Florida, had the same potential for superstardom as Wells, Paine, Harris, Poole, and Oliva. Remarkably, he experienced the same fate as the others at the 1975 Mr. America contest by winning most muscular man but only fifth place overall. Less than ninety days later Robinson won an even more prestigious IFBB title. He "needed only four blockbuster poses to win . . . the 1975 IFBB Mr. World title" read the caption for a picture of Robinson holding an armload of trophies that later appeared in Weider's *Muscle Builder & Power*.<sup>73</sup> Was the AAU still susceptible then to charges of racism, even after two recent black Mr. Americas and a deregulation of the rules? Clearly this was Robinson's perception. "The powers couldn't see me as Mr. America. Hell, that's the way they do their thing out there. But they couldn't beat my spirit." Rick Wayne was even more explicit in his display of black anger and indignation, contrasting Robinson to what "Floyd Patterson in his heyday was to boxing. The sort of man establishment white folk might describe as *respectable . . . nice . . . quiet . . . a credit to his race!* Ergo, a white man's Black man." No mention was made of Dickerson or Morris, but clearly Robinson was a different kind of black man, who could never be seen "as anyone's Uncle Tom."<sup>74</sup> Many of Wayne's black power ravings sound outrageous, even after twenty-five years, but some of the implications flowing from them might hold a key to any possible AAU racism. Admittedly Blacks had always been allowed to compete, but embedded within the Mr. America tradition, no less than in the hearts and minds of the judges, was the notion that the winner must be a safe Black, one who is non-threatening to the predominant white culture—a white man's black man!

Perhaps, but 1977 Mr. America, Dave Johns, was black and hardly fit the image of an Uncle Tom. The only trait he shared with Dickerson and Morris was that



**Dale Adrian, Mr. America in 1975, should not have beaten Robbie Robinson that year according to Len Bosland, the announcer for many years at the Mr. America contest. Bosland said there was "racial prejudice" on the panel.**

he trained at Pearl's gym, and his foremost reason for wanting to win the Mr. America title was to "provide an alternate image to all of the counter-culture 'heroes' presented to the youth of today."<sup>75</sup> The 1978 winner, Tony Pearson, was also black and even admired Robinson, but, like Johns, he looked upon himself chiefly as a role model for American youth. In the latter instance, a controversy, with possible racial overtones, was engendered by supporters of the second and third place winners—Ron Teufel and Manuel Perry. They protested that Pearson did not deserve to win because his "incomplete calf

development impaired his symmetry."<sup>76</sup> To such an extent were Blacks winning the AAU Mr. America, four out of the past nine, that judges were now susceptible to charges of reverse racism!

Ironically the Weider organization, long regarded as a haven from racial strife, was now receiving the same kinds of accusations of racism that the AAU experienced in the 1960s. Resentments flared when, with the advent of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the early 1970s, Oliva was no longer the apple of Weider's eye. "Oliva suspected that a black Mr. Olympia wasn't nearly as useful to Joe Weider as a white one," according to Wayne. It was no secret around Weider headquarters that whenever the publisher featured a black champion on the cover of *Muscle Builder*, sales plummeted. Surely a champion who couldn't sell magazines was close to useless as an endorser of food supplements and gym equipment. Wasn't it likely that Weider, crafty businessman that he was, would do whatever he could to guarantee himself a commercial Mr. Olympia?<sup>77</sup>

Racial paranoia or just fear of losing, Oliva boycotted three successive Mr. Olympia encounters with Arnold. But when he had the audacity to attack the IFBB on Tom Snyder's "Tomorrow Show" in 1974, Weider struck back, referring to Oliva as greedy, venal, and a "'chicken' without a head." Owing to his "sickening narcissism and weak ego," Sergio had lost a "golden opportunity" to publicize bodybuilding on national television. "The man loves himself too much to admit Arnold is better" and used the occasion "to bring racism into bodybuilding."<sup>78</sup> A similar incident occurred in 1977 when white bodybuilder Frank Zane edged out Robinson for the Mr. Olympia title. The latter protested that he "simply could not beat the power structure." Zane won because "they wanted a white Mr. Olympia for commercial reasons." Other black bodybuilders complained that white judges are always more prone to pick Blacks "with the most white characteristics" and that lighting at contests was never arranged with Blacks in mind. Wayne, however, perhaps wanting to avoid biting the hand that was feeding black bodybuilders, rallied to Weider's defense, cautioning brothers that, "we have to be careful when shouting about Black rights, that our color does not become a crutch." Despite the intense rhetoric that swirled about the Weider camp by the end of the 1970s, Wayne eventually concluded that Weider had "done more for race relations and brotherhood of man than all the politicians, writers, preachers, and

activists put together and was . . . Captain Marvel and Saint Peter rolled into one."<sup>79</sup>

Part of the reason why racial controversies converged so sharply on the Weider organization by the early 1980s is that there was so much more at stake in the IFBB than the AAU. The tenacity of the Weiders and the popularity of Arnold Schwarzenegger transformed bodybuilding into a more respectable and lucrative endeavor. "Promoting an amateur contest after the Arnold era was a problem," noted Bob Crist. "Guys were increasingly in the sport for the money."<sup>80</sup> That race became a factor in the quest for the Mr. Olympia title was not surprising. Here, unlike the AAU debate in former decades, there was no idealism to muddle the discourse. To Weider's credit, it was all conducted openly in the pages of his magazines, and the cauldron that was so vigorously stirred by the likes of Wayne and Robinson eventually cooled down.<sup>81</sup> By this time controversies over race in the Mr. America contest had already subsided, owing partly to a restructuring of the AAU. The National Sports Act of 1976 separated physique from weightlifting and relegated the AAU to the status of a service unit. This soon led to a breakup of the old guard and an affiliation and takeover by the IFBB. A pictorial report of the 1979 Mr. America in *Muscle Builder/Power* shows winner Ray Mentzer receiving his six-foot trophy from Joe Weider.<sup>82</sup> Eventually AAU loyalists, through litigation, wrested control away from the Weiders, and the 1982 contest at Worcester, Massachusetts, resembled a homecoming, featuring the likes of Grimek, Abbenda, Rader and others from its golden era. The winner was Rufus Howard, a black bodybuilder from Mobile, Alabama. Deeply affected by the honor, he wept on stage, but he was hard pressed in interviews to explain just what the Mr. America title represented.<sup>83</sup>

By the time the last Mr. America contest was held in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1999, there would be four more black winners, including the final two. No longer was the AAU susceptible to charges of racial discrimination, but the Mr. America contest ceased to carry the prestige that it held in former decades. That change might be attributed to a redirection of priorities in American society—from homogeneity to heterogeneity—sometime in the 1960s. The civil rights movement merely accentuated this trend. What may appear to have been (and what actually may have been) racial discrimination, owing to the failure of Blacks to get beyond second place or most muscular man prior to 1970 can just as

easily be interpreted as an adherence to traditional values set in an era when America had a more definite idea of what constituted perfect manhood. Bob Bendel thinks that prejudice existed, but that it was clearly in the minority. He would be hard-pressed to name five prejudiced Mr. America judges, but even one or two whose choices were influenced by racial prejudice could influence the outcome of a competition. Bendel does believe that "with the judges of today, Melvin Wells would have won." Len Bosland, the "Voice of Mr America," who emceed the contest for many years, agrees that "there was racial prejudice on the Mr. America judges' panel but I can't prove it." Especially suspect in his opinion was Dale Adrian's victory over Robbie Robinson in 1975.<sup>84</sup> Possibly judges after 1970, in tune with the times, were more predisposed to choose black winners, but there is no evidence that the abandonment of the point system and traditional criteria in 1974 was done to accommodate Blacks. According to Bob Crist, there was "a lot of pressure to keep up with Weider," which brought about the elimination of traditional judging procedures.<sup>85</sup>

Ironically these changes occurred at the height of national crises over Vietnam and Watergate and at the very time when Blacks were showing every sign of meeting the high traditional standards of manhood set by the AAU. Henceforth the Mr. America contest was just another muscle show and clearly not on the new fast track to fame and fortune emblazoned by Arnold Schwarzenegger. In an interesting postscript to this state of affairs Robbie Robinson, in a 2003 *Iron Man* interview, expresses regret over the direction that bodybuilding has taken over the last several decades. "Aesthetics were always an important consideration in the past, not just the acquisition of mere size," he muses.

*With the present standard of judging established by the IFBB, the biggest guy wins. . . . One step in the right direction would be a shift in the judging to take into account factors other than size, such as symmetry, definition and a good aesthetic look, minus things like bloated guts. While the mass behemoths do appeal to some hardcore fans, most people are completely turned off by too much muscle mass at the expense of aesthetics. We've lost our core audience.*<sup>86</sup>

Whether Robinson would also want to restore other factors such as athletic points and the interview process is unlikely, but clearly his nostalgic reverie reveals a sense of loss of those qualities that once made Mr. America the most respected and sought after bodybuilding title in the world. By the 1980s this American institution—which no doubt was effected to some degree in its first several decades by the more open prejudices of those earlier times—could no longer be stigmatized as racist. Even so, in the course of responding to various pressures the contest abandoned rules that provided the sense of balance and wholeness that was once the driving force of physical culture—balance and wholeness which was intended to insure that the man who was crowned "Mr. America" represented more than brute muscle.

#### Notes

1. Rick Wayne, *Muscle Wars, The Behind-the-Scenes Story of Competitive Bodybuilding* (New York, 1985), p. 4.
2. See David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent, Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana and Chicago, 1994), pp. 130-131.
3. David Webster, *Barbells & Beefcake, An Illustrated History of Bodybuilding* (Irvine, Scotland, 1979), p. 42. For biographies of Macfadden see William R. Hunt, *Body Love, The Amazing Career of Bernarr Macfadden* (Bowling Green, 1989) and Robert Ernst, *Weakness is a Crime, The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (Syracuse, 1991).
4. Paul Niemi, "Charles Atlas at 79," *Iron Man*, 31 (September, 1972), 22-23.
5. Bob Hoffman, "National Weight Lifting Championships," *Strength & Health*, 2 (July, 1934), 27.
6. "Wib" Scharzberger (Bob Hoffman), "Glimpses of the Champions," *ibid.*, 8 (April, 1940), 64. For details on Ramsey's training of African-American weightlifters, see Benton Pride, "The Life and Death of C. A. Ramsey," *Iron Man*, 14 (September, 1954), 34.
7. "The Advent of the Colored Strength Athlete," *Strength & Health*, 1 (September, 1933), 20.
8. Bob Hoffman, "Your Training Problems," *ibid.*, 4 (April, 1936), 24.
9. Harry Good, "The Unusual Physical Ability of Negro Athletes," *ibid.*, 3 (August, 1935), 86-87.
10. Bob Hoffman, "Are Colored Men Superior Physically?" *ibid.*, 5 (June, 1937), 29 and 44. Alda Ketterman, Hoffman's common law widow, recalls that Bob was regarded as a pariah figure in York, where the Ku Kux Klan was active in the early 1930s, for befriending Blacks. Interview with Alda Ketterman, Dover, Pennsylvania, August 25, 1987. Joe Peters, an early Mr. America contestant, confirms that "Bob did not have any qualms about Blacks." Interview with Joe Peters, Schenectady, New York, June 26, 2001.
11. *Musclesearch, The Roark Report*, 18 (May, 1988), 3-4.
12. Bob Hoffman, "Best Built Man Contest," *Strength & Health*, 7 (July, 1939), 39-40.
13. "Biographies of 20 Most Perfect Men of All Time," *Iron Man*, 4 (July, 1941), 27.
14. Bob Hoffman, "The Amsterdam 'America's Best Physique Contest,'" *Strength & Health*, 7 (August, 1939), 28, and "Wib" Scharzberger, "York Perfect Man Contest," *ibid.*, 8 (January, 1940), 30.
15. *Musclesearch*, 6-7.
16. No doubt coinciding with postwar changes in views towards women, Miss America contestants would be judged on intellect and personality (1947), along with swimsuit, evening gown, and talent, and the winner would be dressed in an evening gown rather than a swimsuit at her coronation (1948). A. R. Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant Before, After and in Spite of Television* (Bowl-

- ing Green, 1992), p. 40. For an early comparison between the two contests see Ray Van Cleef, "The Modern Apollo-Alan Stephan," *Strength & Health*, 14 (August, 1946), 12.
17. Bob Hoffman, "Frank Leight-Mr. America!" *ibid.*, 10 (July, 1942), 48, and "John Henry Davis, Jr.," *The Iron Master*, 11 (April, 1993), 33.
18. "The New York State Weight Lifting Championships and 'Mr. New York State' Contest of 1947," *Your Physique*, 7 (August, 1947), 16-17.
19. Charles A. Smith, "Bob Hoffman's 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Show," *Strength & Health*, 17 (December, 1948), 47.
20. Peary Rader, "National Championships and Mr. America Contest," *Iron Man*, 9 (August, 1949), 38, and Ray Van Cleef, "Jack Delinger Wins 'Mr. America,'" *Strength & Health*, 17 (July, 1949), 47.
21. Eric Askew, "'Mr. America' Contest," *ibid.*, 18 (July, 1950), 14 and 16; and Interview with Peters.
22. Barton R. Horvath, "Taking a Look at Melvin Wells," *Your Physique*, 9 (March, 1949), 38; Charles A. Smith, "1950 Mr. America Contest," *ibid.*, 10 (August, 1950), 8; and *ibid.*, *Muscle Power*, 11 (October, 1950), 42-43.
23. David Chapman, "In Black and White," *Iron Man*, 60 (July, 2001), 210.
24. David Chapman to the author, June 6, 2001, letter in author's possession. Interestingly Hoffman published a 1951 letter from Wells in which he denied any resentment towards decisions made at the 1950 Mr. America contest. "I truly appreciate everything that has been done for me. . . . Never did I dream that I would be elevated so high in the physique world. It came about due to the fact that we still have people who have the backbone to stand up and face an issue regardless of race, creed or color." Bob Hoffman, "Spotlight on Slander," *Strength & Health*, 19 (April, 1951), 9.
25. Earle Liederman, "Let's Gossip," *Muscle Power*, 12 (November, 1951), 49, and Peary Rader, "Sr. National Championships and Mr. America," *Iron Man*, 11 (October, 1951), 17.
26. Frank Oshima, "Introducing Robert Shealy," *ibid.* (December, 1951), 9 and 63.
27. Jerry Ross, "Mr. America for 1952!" *ibid.*, 12 (September, 1952), 13 and 44.
28. Barton Horvath, "The 1952 Mr. America Contest," *Muscle Power*, 14 (November, 1952), 56.
29. Earle Liederman, "Echoes from the Mr. America Contest," *ibid.*, 15 (December, 1952), 56.
30. Jim Murray, "Mr. America 'Rhubarb'-and Reply," *Strength & Health*, 21 (January, 1953), 60.
31. Peary Rader, "Editorial," *Iron Man*, 14 (September, 1954), 42.
32. *Ibid.*, "Let's Go to the Mr. America Contest," 15 (September, 1955), 11.
33. "Of George Paine," *ibid.*, 13 (April/May, 1954), 32, and Earle Liederman, "Richard DuBois Crowned 'Mr. America' 1954!" *Muscle Power*, 17 (September, 1954), 12 and 62.
34. Rader, "Let's Go," *Iron Man*, 12-13.
35. Liederman also subscribed to the essentialist notion that Blacks had more muscular definition than men of other races. "I have found colored boys eventually develop musculature that is all muscle and bone and trims right down into each and every indentation between every muscle." Earle Liederman, "Will a Colored Boy Ever Win the Mr. America Title?" *Muscle Power*, 18 (February, 1956), 38.
36. See "The Iron Grapevine," *Strength & Health*, 25 (May, 1957), 54-56; (September, 1957), 44 and 59; and Harry Paschall, "Let Me Tell You a Fairy Tale," *ibid.* (June, 1957), 17.
37. "Muscle Builder Salutes Bob Walker," *Muscle Builder*, 9 (October, 1957), 38.
38. Bob Hasse, "Mr. America Report," *Strength & Health*, 27 (November, 1959), 14, and Interview with Harry Johnson, Auburn, Georgia, July 24, 2001.
39. "The Iron Grapevine," *Strength & Health*, 25 (June, 1957), 56, and Hoffman to Ed Jubinville, March 20, 1958, Hoffman Papers, in author's possession.
40. Peary Rader, "Can We Improve Physique Contests?" *Iron Man*, 18 (November, 1958), 42, and *ibid.*, "We Hang Our Heads in Shame," 18 (February/March, 1959), 47-48.
41. Ray Van Cleef, "Physique Contests, Pros & Cons," *Strength & Health*, 27 (July, 1959), 47-48.
42. Peary Rader, "Routledge-Mr. America, Labra Is Most Muscular," *Iron Man*, 21 (September, 1961), 12.
43. Gord Venables, "1962 AAU Mr. America Contest," *Mr. America*, 5 (November, 1962), 83.
44. Bob Hasse, "Mr. America 1963," *Strength & Health*, 31 (October, 1963), 63.
45. "Teenage Nationals," *ibid.* (November, 1963), 11, and "To the Editor," *ibid.*, 32 (December, 1963), 11.
46. Wayne, *Muscle Wars*, p. 40.
47. "To the Editor," *Strength & Health*, 32 (December, 1963), 10-11, and Interview with Rudy Sablo, July 7, 2001, New York City.
48. Ralph Countryman, "Harold Poole-Mr. North America," *Iron Man*, 22 (April, 1963), 11, and "Daniels Wins Teenage Mr. America," *ibid.*, 23 (October, 1963), 60.
49. Interviews with Bob Crist, Hampton, Virginia, July 9, 2001; Bob Bendel, Moorestown, New Jersey, July 10, 2001, and Val Vasilieff, Sewell, New Jersey, June 16, 1992.
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51. Weaver to Rader, January 1, 1964, Rader Papers, Todd-McLean Collection, University of Texas, Austin.
52. Interview with Vern Weaver, York, Pennsylvania, July 3, 1992.
53. Peary Rader, "Is the Mr. America Contest an Athletic Event?" *Iron Man*, 23 (September, 1964), 7 and 59.
54. "Sound-Off Here," *Muscle Builder*, 14 (January, 1965), 11.
55. Joe Weider, "Muscle Talk," *ibid.*, 14 (April, 1964), 55 and *Ibid.*, "How the IFBB is Saving Bodybuilding," *Mr. America*, 8 (February, 1966), 123.
56. Peary Rader, "Jerry Daniels Wins Both Jr. & Sr. Mr. America Titles," *Iron Man*, 24 (September, 1965), 13-14.
57. Sergio Oliva, "This Routine Made Me Mr. Olympia," *Muscle Builder/Power*, 9 (April, 1968), 19, and Wayne, *Muscle Wars*, p. 98.
58. Oliva, "This Routine," 23, and "Mr. World," *Muscle Builder/Power*, 8 (December, 1966), 17.
59. Interview with Crist and Bill Starr, "Highlights of the 1966 Mr. America Show," *Strength & Health*, 34 (October, 1966),
60. Interview with Sablo.
61. Bob Crist, "Courtesy at the Mr. America Contest," *Strength & Health*, 36 (November, 1968), 56 and 63.
62. "Mail from Muscledom" *Muscular Development*, 6 (January, 1969), 7, and Gord Venables, "Ramblin' Thru Muscledom," *ibid.*, 6 (May, 1969), 31.
63. Don Reed, "Highlights of the 1969 Mr. America Contest," *Strength & Health*, 37 (September, 1969), 19.
64. Bob Hise III, "A Day with Chris Dickerson," *ibid.*, 38 (July, 1970), 80-81, and Peary Rader, "Dickerson Wins Mr. America," 29 (September, 1970), 15.
65. Chris Dickerson, "The Impossible Dream," *Strength & Health*, 38 (October, 1970), 87, and *Ibid.*, "Mr. A Series" (December, 1970), 31.
66. "Letters to the Editor," *ibid.*, 39 (January, 1971), 8.
67. Chris Dickerson, "Our Physical Differences," *ibid.*, 83-84, and *Ibid.*, "The Politics of Winning" (July, 1971), 42 and 75.
68. A.A.U. *Official Rules, Weight Lifting* (Indianapolis, 1971), and Peary Rader, "Michalik Wins Mr. America," *Iron Man*, 31 (September, 1972), 14.
69. John C. Grimek, "Mr. America Contest-73," *Muscular Development*, 10 (September, 1973), 12 and 63.
70. M. Kirchner, "Morris Wins Mr. America Title," *Iron Man*, 32 (September, 1973), 12 and 84.
71. Recollections of the author, and "Grymkowski on Drugs," *Muscle Builder and Power*, 19 (August, 1978), 82.
72. Peary Rader, "That Mr. America Problem," *Iron Man*, 33 (November, 1973), 9.
73. George Kaye, "New Super-Stars Dominate 1975 New York Muscle Show!" *Muscle Builder & Power*, 17 (April, 1976), 55.
74. Rick Wayne, *The Bodymen* (St. Lucia, West Indies, 1978), 16-17.
75. Jim Morris, "Dave Johns-Jr. Mr. America's Training Program," *Muscular Development*, 13 (October, 1976/1976), 22-23.
76. Bill Dobbins, "Tony Pearson-78 Mr. America," *ibid.*, 16 (February, 1979), 66, and Jan Dellinger, "1978 Mr. America Contest," *ibid.*, 15 (December, 1978), 34.
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78. Joe Weider, "Sergio Oliva, A 'Chicken' Without a Head," *Muscle Builder/Power*, 15 (October, 1974), 13-14.
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80. Interview with Crist.
81. For an interesting sketch of the former see Kevin Carasco, "Rick Wayne, Bodybuilding's Literary Politician," *MuscleMag International*, 83 (March, 1983), 23.
82. "Finding America's Best-Built Man," *Muscle Builder/Power*, 41 (March, 1980), 32.
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85. Interviews with Bendel and Crist.
86. Jerry Brainum, "The Artist Formerly Known as the Black Prince," *Iron Man*, 62 (June 2003), 218-219.