



Dr. Ken “Leo” Rosa Remembers “Pudgy” Stockton

In 1947 I was a wide-eyed, curious boy eager to experience everything the world had to offer. A few years earlier the world of music, specifically the piano, had attracted my attention and now clutched me tightly. At the end of World War II my parents had moved the family from Bernardsville, New Jersey (where one of our neighbors was famous band leader Tommy Dorsey) to New York City’s borough of The Bronx with a rich and diverse cultural ambience totally unknown to me before. After school and on weekends I would walk tirelessly through miles of city blocks exploring the seemingly interminable concrete domain. There were people everywhere. One day, while walking on Westchester Avenue near 149th Street and Third Avenue, I discovered Gleason’s boxing gym. (Yes, that was the original location of the now famous Gleason’s.) With great eagerness mixed with apprehension and wonderment, I climbed the single flight of stairs and found myself standing where Jake LaMotta, the raging Bronx Bull and number one ranked middleweight contender, trained regularly. I went home and asked my mother for the monthly \$4.00 boy’s division fee to join and take boxing lessons. Really, it was so I could watch Jake LaMotta train, which I did many times. To that boy, Jake LaMotta was the iron man I wanted to grow up to be.

Then one day—while I was examining the wares of a local Prospect Avenue Bronx newsstand—I discovered a magazine called *Strength & Health*, which would prove to be another seminal event in my life. After reading that issue of *S&H*, my physical training tilted slightly from boxing to bodybuilding because I wanted muscles like the people I saw in *Strength & Health*. When I saw a movie called *Tarzan and the Green Goddess* starring 1928 Olympic shot putter Herman Brix, it helped to further propel me in that direction. My initial efforts at bodybuilding commenced with a set of metal cables in the cellar of our private house on Tinton Avenue as well as with a cement barbell my father fashioned. I put together a training program based on articles and photo-


graphs I had seen in *Strength & Health*. Evaluating it now, that training program was very crude. I trained seven days a week, using the same exercises! I didn’t know any better. That’s *not* what they taught in *Strength & Health*. It was simply the eagerness of a boy to become big and strong immediately. In spite of all that seven day a week weight training, I did, indeed, develop. At that young age you can recuperate from *anything*. A good night’s sleep and you’re ready to go again.

In 1947, Steve Reeves was the new Mr. America. Two time Mr. America John Grimek was one year away from winning the Mr. Universe title in London, two years away from winning Mr. U.S.A. and retiring undefeated. Sig Klein was forty-seven years old, had an outstanding physique, was an artistic poser, was very strong, and had a famous gym on Manhattan’s Seventh Avenue. John Farbotnik possessed a spectacular physique and was three years away from becoming Mr. America. Pudgy Stockton was also well known to readers of *Strength & Health*. She was beautiful, athletic, strong. She possessed the most phenomenal female physique most Iron Gamers had ever seen. Her unforgettable color photos in a white two-piece gym outfit were breathtaking. And, in Austria, a baby named Arnold was born.

At that time, John Grimek was known as “The Glow.” Some of that nickname came from his deep, reddish-brown tan, but some of it referred to his appearance of vibrant, radiating health. Although Pudgy was not nearly so tan, she also glowed with physical well-being. In that era bodybuilding was about health and strength, and the insanity of anabolic steroids was more than a decade away. As for the ageless Sig Klein, he taught us to “train for shape and strength will follow.” To me, the world of 1947 was a mysterious, and wonderful place.

That same year I learned of a sensational event which was to take place in New York City in November—The Siegmund Klein “Stars of Strength” Show. Steve Reeves, John Farbotnik, Sig Klein, Pudgy Stockton, and perhaps even John Grimek would all be there. I was thrilled! It would be a chance for me to actually see in person the almost mythological figures I had only read about. There was, however, one perplexing dilemma. The Sig Klein show would take place the same evening that my other hero, Jake LaMotta, the indestructible Bronx Bull, was to fight a Philadelphia light-heavyweight named Billy Fox in Madison Square Garden. Wow! But I couldn’t be in two different locations at the same time. In my heart I knew that Jake would win this fight, and that I would have other opportunities to see

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"STARS OF STRENGTH"
featuring
Mr. America of 1947
and
The Queen of Bar-Belles
And other Outstanding Acts of
 STRENGTH • SKILL • BEAUTY
including Frank Leight
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Steve Reeves

Pudgy Stockton

Reserved Seats \$2 \$3 \$4
 General Admission \$1 \$1.50 (tax included)
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 SIEGMUND KLEIN'S GYM
 717 Seventh Ave. (at 48th St.)
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ST. NICHOLAS ARENA
69 WEST 66th ST., NEW YORK
Friday, November 14, 8:30 P.M.

This original poster from Sig Klein's "Stars of Strength" show in 1947 gives Pudgy Stockton and Steve Reeves top billing. John Grimek was there to watch, but at the end of the show, the crowd prevailed on him to pose on-stage.

him fight. So I went to the Sig Klein show.

What do I remember most about that evening? *Everything!* I saw a middle-aged Sig Klein do his remarkable posing routine. I saw a youthful John Grimek come up from the audience, and watched his creative, ahead-of-its-time posing. *Unforgettable.* I saw Farbotnik do an amazing side chest pose. I saw a twenty-one year old Steve Reeves up close wearing his trench coat with shoulders that seemed to be yards wide. I saw the never-to-be-forgotten Pudgy Stockton on stage doing her unique routine.

The boy that was me left the show with visions, not of sugar plums but of muscles. Decades later, while our Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen was still meeting in New York City's Downtown Athletic Club, Vic Boff invited Pudgy Stockton to be one of our annual honorees. I'm grateful and appreciative that I had my photograph taken next to the still beautiful, sweet-

natured Pudgy Stockton. We lost her on June 26 at age eighty-eight.

To the best of my knowledge the only people remaining from that watershed evening in 1947 are myself, Jake LaMotta—a man now in his late eighties who I see and converse with from time to time (and who admitted after his career was over that he had thrown the Cox fight in order to get a shot at the Middleweight title, which he won)—and a certain Austrian baby, now sixty.

Ken "Leo" Rosa
The Bronx, New York



Dear IGH:

By chance, I saw part of a wonderful television program on the history of weight training, in which you were the featured commentator. Below, I have written about a few of my own recollections from training [at Ed Yarick's gym] back in the 1950s. Maybe you will find the following of some interest:

I lived in what was then rural Danville, California, over the hills east of Oakland. At sixteen, I got a driver's license and once a month would drive to Oakland to DeLauer's newsstand for the latest issues of *Strength & Health* and Peary Rader's *Iron Man*. I owned a York barbell set.

In those days most people thought lifting weights was pretty strange behavior. Coaches warned athletes that weights would make them "musclebound." Today's athletes would laugh, of course, but that's the way it was. Steroids had yet to offer up their ugliness and muddy clear waters.

So I was going against conventional wisdom. The muscle magazines promised that weight training would make me big and strong and I believed them. They also introduced me to bodybuilding's superstars, and I began to wonder if there was somewhere nearby where they trained. I found out that a place called Yarick's Gym in Oakland was a gathering spot on the West Coast. Several Mr. Americas and Olympic weightlifting team members had worked out there. It was the legendary Steve Reeves' first gym and Ed Yarick had been his trainer. I scraped together \$10 for a month's worth of workouts and drove to Oakland.

Now to imagine Yarick's you have to block out any image you might have based on today's modern health clubs. For better or worse, times have changed.

As well known as it was in the subculture of bodybuilding and weightlifting, Yarick's was a tiny space, the blinds pulled down over the windows, sandwiched between other small storefronts on a busy block of Oakland's Foothill Blvd.

Inside and immediately to your right was a small wooden desk that was Ed Yarick's office. That's where you paid your \$10 and he marked you down as a member. When the financial transaction was out of the way, he would measure and record the size of your arms, chest, waist and legs, and then walk you through the beginner's routine. If you read the muscle magazines you reasoned that you were being given the very same treatment he gave to Steve Reeves only a few years earlier. Man, you were ready to fly.

Like other gyms of the day, Yarick's had few exercise "machines." There was a lat pull-down, a cable row, a leg extension device, a vertical leg press, and a couple of basic wall pulley arrangements. That was it. Along one wall the fixed-weight barbells were racked vertically. Against the other wall was a long rack of dumbbells that went from fives to well over one hundred. Above the weights were mirrors and framed photographs of famous bodybuilders and weightlifters. There were a couple of flat benches and inclines. Basic stuff.

More or less in the center of the room was a slightly elevated wooden platform. On it were two Olympic sets, lots of plates, a squat rack, and a heavy-duty flat bench. There was a rubberized kind of mat to protect the platform when weights were dropped during unsuccessful overhead lifts. There was a small box on the floor with chalk in it. The lifters would reach in and chalk their hands before gripping the Olympic bar. Beyond the platform and farther back in the room was a slant board for sit-ups and the leg extension apparatus.

The room was a narrow rectangle and couldn't have been more than forty or fifty feet deep. At the far end you entered the dressing room. Inside, there were two small, metal stall showers with plastic curtains, a tiny bathroom, and several old lockers. There was a bench to sit on. If you didn't have a locker, you hung your clothes on a hook. A door next to the stall showers opened to a small back yard. Outside, there were a few more dumbbells, barbells and benches.

The attraction of Yarick's was not its ambiance. It was the man himself, Ed Yarick. He knew his stuff and people liked him. He treated everybody the same, Mr. America winners and nobody teenagers like I was. I remember that he liked soy nuts and always offered them to the kids. "Have you tried these?" he would ask.

"They're good and good for you." He was a big guy, at least 6'4" and probably 250 lbs. If he wanted to be intimidating he could have been; but instead he was kind, good-natured, and friendly. He liked jokes. For a while he not only trained Steve Reeves but was also his training partner.

By the time I arrived, Reeves had won Mr. America (1947), Mr. World (1948) and Mr. Universe (1950) and had moved on to Los Angeles for opportunities in television and movies. Another Mr. America (1949), Jack Dellinger, was still a regular. Dellinger was only 5'6" but weighed 195 and was powerful. He was also a super intense trainer and the word around Yarick's was that he didn't go for any horseplay. One afternoon some young guys got too noisy and Dellinger shouted out just two words: "Shut up!" And the gym went silent. It was the only time I ever heard him speak.

John Davis and Tommy Kono were members of the U.S. Olympic team and stopped to train while traveling through. I watched them one night practicing the clean and jerk with huge weights, weights approaching world records, while I, not ten feet away, curled a ponderous forty-pound barbell. A Little Leaguer tossing a ball around while a few feet away Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio took batting practice.

The evening that topped them all involved the great Canadian heavyweight, Doug Hepburn. Hepburn was born with a frozen ankle that left him with one slightly shorter and less-developed lower leg. It seemed a minor flaw but I guess he was self-conscious about it because he always pulled one sock halfway up the calf. People said he was the strongest man in the world.

While visiting, he and a few local strongmen got into a friendly competition of oddball feats of strength. One of the events was trying to explode a hot water bottle by blowing into it. Hepburn did it and no one else could.

Another event required balancing between lower lip and chin a tall ladder while walking around Yarick's backyard. Hepburn handled it with ease and grace but one of the others was also successful. The tie had to be broken. So someone got a 12-inch ruler from Ed Yarick's desk. Hepburn won the contest by successfully balancing the ruler above his chin while walking around the gym as everyone cheered.

So it went in the first gym I ever belonged to. And I was hooked.

Logan Franklin
Via email