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Strongest of the Strong: Savickas Earns Fifth Straight Title at 2007 Arnold Strongman Classic

Jan Todd

As Zydrunas Savickas, the five time winner of the Arnold Strongman Classic, sat backstage on a precariously lightweight chair on Saturday afternoon during the Arnold Sports Festival, a smile flitted briefly across his handsome face as he watched a group of large, portly men strip down to their *mawashis* in preparation for a demonstration of sumo on the Expo stage. The irony of this chubby group coming on stage immediately after ten of the strongest men on the planet had just finished two grueling events was clearly not lost on Savickas. Before arriving in Columbus, Ohio, these sumo wrestlers may have believed they were *rikishi*—the Japanese word for strongman—but after watching American Steve MacDonald lift a world record 522-pound stone over a 47” bar in just 15.7 seconds, and then seeing Savickas motor across the Expo stage in 10.10 seconds with an 1116-pound yoke on his shoulders, they admitted to everyone within earshot that the real *rikishis* in Ohio that first weekend in March were the ten stupendous athletes (average height 6 feet 3¼ inches, average weight 346 pounds) who competed for the \$140,000 in cash and prizes put up by contest sponsor and food supplement company Maximum Human Performance (MHP).

In 2001, when Jim Lorimer, Arnold’s

partner and the organizing force behind all the activities at the colossal Arnold Sports Festival, first approached Terry Todd about developing a strongman contest, Terry agreed, if Jim and Arnold would help him provide prize money beyond anything ever awarded in a Strongman contest. Terry also told Jim that he wanted to consult with David Webster and Bill Kazmaier and then to invite the strongest men in the world from the various strength sports to compete in a set of newly-created events that would primarily test what exercise physiologists define as “strength”—maximum muscular force—rather than events that relied heavily on muscular endurance and quickness as was then (and is still) common in contests like ESPN’s “World’s Strongest Man” show. Jim and Arnold agreed, and six years after that first 2002 show the Arnold Strongman Classic is regarded by most experts as the premier brute strength contest in the world—with the biggest prize money, the best strength athletes, and the heaviest set of events of any Strongman contest held anywhere.

The fact that Zydrunas Savickas has now won the contest for five straight years—and has improved in nearly every event each year—is so remarkable that the buzz behind-the-scenes among the contest’s top officials was that it was



Zydrunas Savickas rests between events at the 2007 Arnold Strongman Classic.

time to give the large Lithuanian his due and acknowledge that Zydrunas Savickas is not just the world's strongest man over the past five years, but that he has a very solid claim to an even grander title—*The Strongest Man in History*. I mean no disrespect to Magnus Ver Magnusson of Iceland, a four-time winner of the ESPN World's Strongest Man Contest and a man who honors the Arnold Strongman Classic by coming each year to help with judging; and I certainly don't want to cast any aspersions on the late Jon Pall Sigmarsson, who matched Magnus' four wins in the ESPN contest. Nor do I want in any way to make light of the fabulous career and phenomenal strength of legendary three-time WSM winner (and my good friend) Bill Kazmaier, who has worked

with Terry and David Webster over the past six years to choose the events. And I especially don't want to slight my adopted "son," Mark Henry, who I suspect may have become even stronger than Zydrunas had he not decided 12 years ago to assure his financial future by becoming a professional wrestler. Similarly, I have great respect for Andy Bolton, the first and only man to deadlift 1000 pounds, and for weightlifters such as Iran's Hossein Reza zadeh, the current world and Olympic champion, and Russia's Leonid Taranenko, who holds the all-time bests for both the clean and jerk and the total. All of these men either were, or are, prodigiously strong. However, as Terry, David Webster, and others sat around talking after the show, everyone involved—including Mark



Left—Zydrunas Savickas (6'3", 400 pounds) once again dominated the field as he pressed (not jerked) the 366-pound replica of Apollon's Wheels for eight repetitions after bringing the bar from the floor to his chest on each repetition.

Center—Vasyl Virastyuk finished second to Savickas in the overall standings once again, but he won the Circus Dumbbell event with six repetitions.

Below Right—Estonian Andrus Murumets was a last-minute addition, but he lifted as if he'd been training for the "Arnold" for years, finishing third and setting a new record in the Timber Carry.

All photos by Jan Todd

to lift overhead, however, is that the bar is 1.92 inches in diameter and is fixed to the wheels on each end so that if the bar rotates, so do the wheels. When you clean Apollon's Wheels you create terrific centrifugal force

and all 366 pounds come crashing down on your chest. In 2002, the first year we held the show, the Olympian, World Powerlifting Champion, and WWE wrestler, Mark Henry power cleaned the Ivanko replica of the Wheels three times and push-pressed it overhead three times. Everyone else failed. In 2007, Savickas pulled the bar to the top of his chest using two or three motions on each repetition and then pressed—not jerked—the weight overhead for eight reps using either no leg drive or very little. The audience could hardly

Henry, who won the Arnold Strongman Classic the first year; Odd Haugen, the 57-year-old phenomenon who is one of our judges; Magnus Ver Magnusson; and even Bill Kazmaier agreed that in the low-gear, heavy-duty realm of total-body pure strength, the 400-pound Zydrunas has probably reached a level never before seen. What's more, he has also dominated the International Federation of Strength Athletes over the past several years. What had so impressed everyone at the "Arnold" wasn't just that Zydrunas took first place in three of the six events and placed second in two of the others on his way to the \$30,000 first prize check, the \$25,000 Audemars Piguet watch and the \$10,000 Louis Cyr trophy courtesy of Joe Weider—it was how he performed in certain key events that literally took our breath away.

For example, the signature event of the Arnold Strongman Classic is the lifting of the "Apollon's Wheels" barbell made by Ivanko and used only in this contest. Modeled after the famous stage weight owned by the French strongman Apollon (Louis Uni), the barbell weighs "only" 366 pounds. What makes it difficult





believe it. It was, indeed, one of the most impressive exhibitions of arm and shoulder strength I've ever seen. Several other men also turned in great performances with the Wheels this year. For example, the world's strongest powerlifter, Brian Siders, put them overhead seven times; and both Vasyl Virastyuk of the Ukraine and Estonia's Andrus Murumets managed five cleans and overhead jerks. (Invited as a replacement for Mariusz Pudzianowski, Murumets was very impressive, astonishing the crowd by cleaning the wheels on each repetition



Above Left—West Virginia's Pfil Pfister had the highest finish among the US Strongmen, and although he lifted Apollon's Wheels "only" five times, at 6'7" he lifted it higher than anyone. **Center**—Unfortunately, the immensely talented weightlifter/strongman Mikhail Koklyaev injured his leg in the first event and thus was unable to push Savickas as he was expected to do. **Right**—Although this was his first time to compete in this contest, the 410 pound Ukrainian, Oleksandr Pekanov, set a new (albeit briefly held) world record in the Tire Deadlift and tied Koklyaev for fifth place overall.



with a double-overhand grip and creating a new record in the Farmer's Walk by carrying the 865 pound Timbers up the 36-foot ramp in 6.87 seconds.) It should probably be added that Zydrunas has won the Wheels event each year—and has created a new "world record" every year except one, when he "only" tied it.

This Baltic Superman isn't just strong in his arms and shoulders, however, as he demonstrated in the Tire Deadlift, when he pulled a record 1016 pounds on his third attempt wearing no supportive gear except his belt. The deadlifting contest proved to be one of the highlights of this year's Classic as four men succeeded with second attempts at 950 or more, and three men attempted more than 1000 pounds in an effort to break Savickas' 994-pound record, set in 2006. New-comer Oleksandr Pekanov of the Ukraine was the first to cross the half-ton barrier with a 1005 pound belt-buster that brought roars from the six-to-eight thousand fans flocked around the stage and watching the Jumbotrons. The 410-pound Pekanov's record didn't last long, though, as Savickas then strode onto the stage and easily pulled the 1016 to reclaim his spot in the record book. Brian Siders, however, who'd made 961 on his second,

then asked that all four Hummer tires be loaded onto each side of the springy 14 foot bar, bringing the total weight to an astonishing 1062 pounds. The crowd roared when it was loaded and went truly crazy when Brian got it well above his knees. But then the bar began flexing and whipping so much with the great weight that Brian finally had to let it go. Almost certainly he could have lifted a few pounds more than Savickas' 1016, but by bravely trying all eight tires he became a hero to everyone.

Although every man who accepts a coveted invitation to the Arnold Strongman Classic is a hero of some sort, I can't close this brief report without mentioning how proud I was to see West Virginia's Phil Pfister, winner of ESPN's 2006 World's Strongest Man Contest, come to Columbus and lay his title on the line. (For additional information about this redoubtable athlete, read the "Iron Grapevine" section of *IGH*.) This marked Phil's fourth appearance in the Arnold Strongman Classic and he knew, coming in, that with men like Savickas, Vasy Virastyuk, Mikhail Koklyaev of Russia (who finished third last year), and Estonian Andrus Murumets



(one of the best Strongmen in Europe) it was unlikely that he would finish first in this series of extreme events. At 6'7" it's taken Phil a long time to grow into his enormous frame, but at approximately 350 pounds he is truly high and mighty now, and he proved it when he dethroned the supposedly unbeatable Mariusz Pudzianowski this year in the challenging—if lighter—events used in the WSM show. This year Phil ended up



Left—Steve MacDonald qualified for the Arnold Strongman Classic by winning the American Strongman Championship and he really shone with the Manhood Stones, creating a new, all-time world record by putting this 522 pound stone over the 47" bar as Chief Referee, David Webster of Scotland, looks on approvingly. Center—Veteran strongman Karl Gillingham was nursing an injury, but somehow managed to tough it out and trudge through the full distance with the Heavy Yoke, which weighed 1116 pounds. Top Right—Texan Travis Ortmeyer had the bad luck to sustain an injury coming into the competition, and was not at his best. Even so, he finished the contest and finished third in the Timber Carry. Note Mark Henry in the background.



One of the high points in the entire Arnold Strongman Classic came when the former World Powerlifting Champion, Brian Siders, called for all eight tires (1062 pounds) on his final attempt and barely missed locking it out.

fourth overall at the “Arnold.” Even so, he had a terrific contest and tied Zydrunas in the Circus Dumbbell lift, putting up the massive, three-inch-thick-handled 202-pounder five times with his right hand to the delight of his many fans at Saturday night’s finale at Veterans Memorial Auditorium. Vasyl Virastyuk—who finished second again—actually won the Circus Dumbbell lift this year with six repetitions but, as in the Apollon’s Wheels,

Savickas’ five strict, *easy* presses with the dumbbell—when he knew he had the contest already won—left the most indelible memory.

It’s a memory that will always be with me. Who knows what rough beast will come round next year to challenge the Lithuanian Hercules? Maybe someone will finally unseat him, but maybe he’ll simply extend his streak. He just turned 31—

not old for the Strongman sport by any means. If you have never seen Zydrunas Savickas in person, you should make every effort to come to Ohio next March and see this majestic wonder of nature for yourself. After all, it’s not every day you get a chance to see a man who may soon be widely regarded as The Strongest Man in History.

Ed Note: Some of the material in this article will be published in Jeff Everson’s Planet Muscle magazine later this summer.

MHP Setting New Standards in Sports Nutrition		2007 Arnold Strongman Classic Final Results March 2-3, 2007 in Columbus, Ohio; Sponsored by MHP																	
Competitors	Timber Carry	Place	Points	Apollon's Wheels Cleans- Continental- Jerks	Place	Points	Deadlift	Place	Points	The Manhood Stones Stone 1 = 522 lbs Stone 2 = 484 lbs	Place	Points	Heavy Yoke 1116 pounds	Place	Points	Circus DB R=right hand L=left hand	Place	Points	Final Points
1. Zydrunas Savickas	25'2"	6	5	0-8-8	1	10	1016 WR	1	10	#1 x 1 rep in 17.44 sec.	2	9	10.10 sec.	1	10	5-R	2	8	52
2. Vasyl Virastyuk	7.75 sec. WR	2	9	6-0-5	3	8	856.5	6	5	#2 x 2 reps in 33.24 sec.	4	7	10.56 sec.	2	9	3-R 3-L	1	10	48
3. Andrus Murumets	6.87 sec. WR	1	10	5-0-5	4	7	873	5	6	#2 x 1 reps in 16.61 sec.	7	4	14.02 sec.	5	6	4-R	5	5.5	38.5
4. Phil Pfister	24.82 sec.	4	7	0-5-4	5	6	845.5	7	4	#2 x 1 rep in 19.5 sec.	8	3	11.79 sec.	3	8	5-R	2	8	36
5. Mikhail Koklyaev	13' 4"	9	2	3-0-3	6	5	950	5	7	#2 x 1 rep in 7.25 sec.	5	6	20.59 sec.	6	5	5-R	2	8	33
5. Oleksandr Pekanov	16'1"	8	3	0-3-2	7	3.5	1005 WR	2	9	#2 x 3 reps in 51.12 sec.	3	8	24.06 sec.	7	4	4-R	5	5.5	33
7. Brian Siders	3'3"	10	1	0-8-7	2	9	961	3	8	Unable to lift #2	9	1.5	12.00 sec.	4	7	1-R	9	2	28.5
8. Steve MacDonald	19'	7	4	0-3-2	7	3.5	840	8	2.5	#1 x 1 rep in 15.70 sec.	1	10	8'9" 3 touches	9	2	0	10	1	23
9. Karl Gillingham	27'9"	5	6	0-3-0	10	1	Pass	0	0	#2 x 1 rep in 8.16 sec.	6	5	25.17 sec.	8	3	3-R	7	4	19
10. Travis Ortmyer	19.94 sec.	3	8	0-2-1	9	2	840	8	2.5	Unable to lift #1	9	1.5	Pass	0	0	2-L	8	3	17