



# IRON GAME HISTORY



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## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE BODY: “HOW IT MEANS” AND WHAT IT MEANS

Our friend, Al Thomas, sent the following thoughts to us some months back. He didn't intend for us to publish them; he only wanted to share with us what was on his mind. Even so, we have decided to share his thoughts with you. As some of you know, Al has made seminal contributions to our game—particularly in a series of articles in *Iron Man* concerning women, strength and physical development. He made these contributions simply by focusing his long experience and his agile intelligence on the issue. What follows is a fascinating display of unexpurgated Thomas confronting certain ultimate questions. What follows is not for the timid. What follows is a love song.

(This has its origin in three questions posed at the recent Old-timers' banquet. Since they echoed a similar one that I was asking myself, I wondered how many other banqueters would find their own feelings mirrored in these questions: “The only thing that hasn't changed in my life is the fun of working-out. My wife says it's a sign I'm lapsing into my second childhood. What do you think?” Another celebrant admitted that, after a long hiatus, he had returned to the gym and that this had brought him more happiness than he'd known since he was a kid in the gym: “What can you say about a guy, past seventy, who gets more fun from a workout than he did when he was a kid and feels more guilty about missing a workout than about missing mass?”

At some point in life, even the least introspective people feel the need to confront the pattern of preferences and habits that comprise their value systems. Such a confrontation was thrust upon me when, along with film-maker Curt Crane, I embarked upon the creation of a film documentary on some great old strength athletes: “Growing Old Strong, A Celebration of Strength in Old Age,” a tribute to men, aged seventy and above, who embody the

values that weight training confers.

The film, it seems, had created the need for explanation to so many people that it became a sort of emotional watershed for me. Or, more accurately, it was the film, plus the fact that, having passed through my fifties and the first year of my sixties, I was faced with retirement from my profession as a college teacher. With the ticking-down of the machine that is symbolized by such life-changes, I began to wonder what truly had become my “value system”: Was the new one that seemed to be a response to my film really as unworthy of a balding college professor with a Ph.D. as it seemed?

As recently as a year ago, I would have claimed my family and my profession (along with one or two other traditionally acceptable entities, perhaps) as my emotional and philosophical bases. Having undergone, however, the emotional wrenching occasioned by many months of contemplating the film's philosophical intention, not to mention the lives of its subjects, honesty demanded my admitting

to a realization about myself much like the one undergone (suffered, really) by a faculty colleague who experienced a deep religious conversion and had to “go public” to his secular colleagues about this religious side to himself that, in self protection, he had never admitted. Smelling blood, his faculty mates, needless to say, lost no time in pouncing upon him.

I felt similarly exposed. The realization to which I had come, however, was more compromising, intellectually, than (mere) religious conversion

which, given the 90s' conservatism, is easily fobbed-off by the convert with some fast talking about metaphors and symbols. I didn't have such an expedient to fall back upon.

Once admitted, my realization would inevitably (and rightfully, I thought) earn the contempt of thirty-seven years' worth of academ-



ic colleagues. After all, what can be said in defense of the intellectual seriousness of an academic who, as the result of making a film, had come to see physical culture and the body (the life and cultivation of the body) as one of the main sources—next to family—of his value system (and his pleasure). How suspect, how shattering to an academic's image, such an admission had to be.

It is especially shattering, however, when what is referred to is not physical culture in the ancient Greek sense, which might carry with it the cachet of magnificent sculpture and temples, but in the narrower sense associated with our Iron Game, our body-and-strength-thing, an historically maligned subdivision of classically conceived physical culture. Indeed, decked-out in its Sunday clothes, is even dignified old physical culture, itself, sufficiently distinguished and credentialed to be accorded a placement in an academic's value system, above many of the hoary abstractions usually honored?

To me, it is. And all the more so as my (our) conception of the film on the strength greats evolved from just another Guinness Records

Show to a probing consideration of the real nature of strength and of the body-as-document and artifact.

It isn't overly self-conscious to observe that there is a spiritual danger built-in to the pursuit of physical culture (the cultivation of the body: its strength, health, and beauty), a danger that is not built-in, let's say, to baseball or tennis, which are, at best, merely distant cousins of classical physical culture. When one learns tennis or baseball, he learns how to *do* something. When he embarks upon the cultivation of the body's strength, health, and beauty, he doesn't learn how to do something; he *becomes* something. It is his fate, henceforth, never again to be that which he had been. He may *play* tennis or baseball, but he *is* a physical culturist.

The cultivation of the body is different, not in degree but in kind, from the cultivation of one's stroke. The body is not a sport. Except among tediously pompous "baseball religionists" (tennis-lovers are far too sophisticated to mythologize their sport), serious folks never misperceive baseball or tennis (or the players themselves) as temples

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of God or the spirit. They're wonderful games (and players).

The body is created in the image of its Maker (not by its own claim, but by the Good Book's claim): it is the focus of the Divine in this earthly realm of shadows. The body, in short, is many things, but not a game (at least not merely a game, however much fun it provides the vehicle for, on occasion).

Even if the notion of the body's holiness or "temple-ness" is not one that proceeds easily from the self-contemplation of our own broken-down bodies, the notion is, and always has been, an inevitable one, to wise man and fool alike, whenever the body is contemplated more profoundly than as just another problem in biceps or latissimus building.

In this matter of values-placement, the criterion of "holiness," above, come-s down to blood. As the vehicle for passing generations down the stream-of-blood, from our first parents to our biological ones, the family is inarguably "holy." Can the same value judgment be accorded that "infinitely hurttable column of blood" known as body (the body)?

It is neither tedious nor pompous to suggest, at least, that, if any earthly "artifact" is "holy," it is the human body. Family, then, and the human body. Body lies at the center of the mystery of Christian incarnation (from the Latin root meaning flesh or meat): the giving of flesh to the spirit of love so that it possesses substance and can, as a consequence of its substance, live in our midst as a force that is immediately available to us.

Family and body. One as the vehicle and the other as the fleshing-forth of the Divine or Eternal in us. We are left, then, with the felt-sense of the primacy of body (no longer a matter for embarrassment to right-thinking people). The sovereignty of body (concretion, thing-ness, shadow-castingness: designate it whatever one might) is inarguable. Just as inarguable, by extension, is the sovereignty of THE body, the human body. In the real sense of the word, it is palpable, "touchable."

Despite all this, we in the Game (the quintessential body-conscious Aristotelians, if anyone ever should be) have capitulated to the abstraction& in our midst: white bread apostles of a watered-down Plato, who inveigh against what seems the voluptuous animal pleasure that we take in body. They see such pleasure as occupying a lower moral and aesthetic order than the (ostensibly) higher pleasure to be taken, let's say, not in the "mere" bodies of the athletes, but in the geometries of the athletes' bodies' movements: the geometries of the "doing" required by sports. All of this applies, of course, only when these abstractionists permit themselves to pay attention of any sort to such low-level matters as sports, preferring as they do to occupy themselves with the more rarefied delights afforded by philosophy and mathematics, to name two of the many "higher-level" exchanges between the abstractionist and his abstract fare.

We in the Game are the keepers of the body. We are its Levites, its priests. How ironic it is that the Force Behind the Universe has consigned a heightened sense of the body's special reverence to us, as unsophisticated, unlettered, and uncouth as we are so often perceived (not to mention innocent, child-like, and holy) devoted to laboring under crushing work-loads in dirty gyms for many decades, all in the quest of strength and hypertrophied flesh (the acquisition of which, in His very own image) the Lord occasionally and whim-

sically permits His favored few).

Try as they do, even the best (read: "most venal") market manipulators can't really reduce the body-as-body into many of those ultimate abstractionist tokens: dollar bills. That the body doesn't lend itself to this sort of big-time promotionalism is a blessing. Thank God. And as for those abstractionists in our very own camp, the so-called professional bodybuilders, a master plumber in a big city makes more in a year than all but a half-dozen of these professionals, and he makes it for a lifetime, not for a bodybuilder's brief life in the limelight.

The understanding of the body is not achieved by the mediation of the conceptual faculties. The body is best understood by those who can apprehend, even if not always truly comprehend, it as the working-out in man of the phyletic (the notion that, in this term's usage, conception has more to do with phylum and with matters of race than with the mere sexual congress of a father and mother). One's understanding of the body, then, is rooted at levels of our unconscious as deep as the terrain mediated by archetype. It is rooted in that part of our human continent which is the domain of sexual process and procreation, that part which resonates, not to idea, but to the particular and the concrete: the Sacrum (so appropriately named by the ancients who knew that the sexual process is precisely that, Sacred). The mediation process that occurs in the Sacrum, the realm of sexuality with its resonance to body, is still suspect to the abstractionist, still not acceptable in polite society. (Does this sound familiar to those who have sought to make our (oh, so) visceral, concrete, and body-centered sport acceptable to the polite world?)

The other mediation process—the one occurring in the mind, with its resonance to fleshless abstraction—is (Oh, so) very "salable," as currency, backed by infinitely malleable idea, the vacant wind. The currency of the body, of our body-sport and all such matters-of-body, on the other hand, is backed by flesh, bone, and muscle: the ingredients of the good Mulligan stew which is our Iron Game: topics and a comestible not "at home" in the paneled dining rooms of Society.

Is it difficult then to understand the deep feeling and even the self-doubt and worry that are implicit in the comments of the three men quoted at the beginning? If their element of worry is cultural and not worthy of truly adult men, their deep feeling (for this visceral game of ours) is rooted in our evolution from the pre-man state and still resonates to the pre-man residing in us today. The call *of* body, the call *to* body, is the Deep's, the unconscious', call to us. Rather than such a call's being something to worry or be embarrassed about (the sign of a "lapse into second childhood"), the real worry should be reserved for those systems so layered-over by convention and culture as to have muffled body's call beyond hearing.

If one of our Game's seniors is embarrassed by the depth of his enthusiasm for an activity more often associated in the public's mind with youngsters than with seventy-year-olds, he shouldn't be. For the senior involved in the heavy training associated with the iron game, as well as for the old man who returns to it after an absence, there is the always-healthy connection with the evergreen psychic and emotional systems of his youth, a stirring connection, unlike that which attends a return to the sports or athletics of one's youth.

A return to such sports and to an approximation of the skills we

had attained in our youthful involvement in these activities is, at best, fun: quickening our hearts making us feel good, and helping us lose an inch or two off our bellies. But the Old-timer's involvement in, or return to, heavy body-work bespeaks the existence in him of a life that can't be mistaken for any other: He walks like a strength athlete. He looks different from the old tennis player, marathoner, or swimmer. Seen on the street, at whatever age, he is clearly what he is. Unlike the old tennis player who can be mistaken for a haberdasher, he carries his ironman lifestyle with him. He embodies it. He is it. He is never mistaken for a haberdasher. He is never mistaken for anything but that which he is.

All this comes to more than the mere surprise that we feel at seeing a wrinkled old codger hit a golf ball for a country mile. The old iron-gamer, however wrinkled, is not an old codger in anything like the same sense. He may have wrinkles aplenty, and with age *they* may sag, but *he* does not. Propped-up with a profound muscle system (which comprises an essential difference between him as an old strength athlete who *IS* something and an old game-player who *DOES* something), he does not sag. More importantly, plugged-in to the psychic and emotional systems of youth — he glows.

Like a painting or a sculpture, the human body provides a perceptive (an onlooker) with an insight into the very private and personal mythology of its possessor/creator. That mythology is embodied (Listen to that word: “embodied”—incarnated, given meat) *IN* and *BY* the human body. This truth operates at levels deeper than mere understanding, (I think) in most true initiates into the mystery (the “almost-religion”) of our Game. This probably sounds unconscionably precious and high-faluting, but so be it. A cliché is no less true for being a cliché, or for being tedious or precious or high-faluting. Again, so be it.)

A baseball player “acts out,” and is absolutely a creature of, the highly abstract rules of an infinitely formalized and ritualized game, to the achievement of whose abstract purposes he is at best a mere counter (or token) in a commercialized, hence abstract, business venture, masquerading as something hovering uncertainly between entertainment and sport. The argument would be as tortuous as it was tedious which sought to “validate” modern baseball (or any game) — or a baseball player (or any game player) — as providing an insight into a private, personal mythology (lest it be the “mythology” of the entrepreneurial capitalist). Baseball is, needless to say, a game which has wonderful evocations associated with it. Despite these and the near-mythic import they have assumed for many, it is only a game, if the most deeply felt of American games (and hence not needful of validation as anything but a grand game). Baseball's evocations, however, touch only a few keys in the pipe organ diapason of mythic evocations called-forth by the body, which has been an artifact in the process of consciousness from as far back as the first man, an artifact that is destined to be the sounding board for the “deep” in us until the last gong of life tolls across our dead planet.

More than any bodily endeavor, the cultivation of profound degrees of strength and muscle is an interior process. If the baseball player is capitulative to the abstract rules of baseball, the iron man (locked-in to the corpuscular inner kingdom of his caveman self) is pure artist: The inspiration and also the stuff of his creation is the stuff of all art: body (*the* body). In what sense, “body”? Body as the opposite

of “mere” idea and spirit, but (ironically if not perversely) body, also, as the only means of the release in an audience of the deep feeling that is triggered by the insinuation of an incarnation into an audience's “force field of consciousness.”

In the sense of the religionist who seeks ascension, not into spirit, but into body (as the City of God): the iron man, as seen above, is the ultimate Aristotelian (albeit, of course, unknowingly). If he wills to be “known” at all, he must be (and will be) “known” only by the efflorescence, the flowering-forth, of his Deep, the Eternal in him as embodied in his testifying-flesh. This flesh and muscle are the creation of the artist in him: this flesh and muscle are the only He that can truly be shared and known in the deep way peculiar to the art construct. This poetic (this “made,” crafted, created) flesh, in its very fleshness—if truly “read”—provides the final bodying-forth-of and, hence, insight-into the mystery not just of his human nature, but of all human nature.

As it is of so many other metaphors, life is the endless fleshing-out of the metaphoric conflict that was so important to the Medieval Scholastics: the conflict between body and soul: in their “infallible” resolution of which these Godly teachers came down on the side of teacher's pet: soul and spirit. Poor body. Downplayed. Bad-mouthed. Perennial second banana, even in life comedies orchestrated and produced by folks who should “know” better. I love him. “Him”? Yes, “him” (for our purposes here). To refer to body as “it” is playing into the hands of body's enemies, those who despise “him” and everything that “he” takes pleasure in, and, lest we forget, the Game he takes chief pleasure in is the same one that we do. ‘His’ despisers hate everything about body except, of course, that which “he” can be enlisted to do, and to suffer, on behalf of “his” betters,” the goodie-goodie soul-boys, top-buttoned to pop-eyed-ness in their sanctioned (sanctified) torment of body and contempt for “his” iron toys (so dear to all of).

Except for the sickly excessive concern for what body can be trained to earn and do (as in kicking and hitting balls and bashing chins), has any real insight into body-as-body or into Body's (and our) favorite game been achieved as we progress into our century's last decade? Very little if we persist in seeing body and body-work as the province of boys, rather than as the focus in muscle (and the working-of-muscle) of an argument that confounds the wisest philosophers.

The preceding lines aside, need there be the determination of a less important and a more important when it comes to body vs. soul (or spirit)? There is enough of the Sunday School (and Sabbath-Day School) boy in each of us to assure our “knowing” something of the (self-styled) primacy of soul (and spirit). We need not labor this point. It has been done to death for all of us. We all admit the fact that there are beautiful expanses of body (of human body especially) which remain unleavened by soul, the “heavenly commodity” which effects the body's leavening, its “rising” (with all the beauty to which body's stuff-ness is heir). The “beauty” of soul-less stuff sickens us like poisoned bait “laid to make the taker mad.” The empty “beauty,” in short, of soul-less body needs no further impeachment: a cliché that has provided many a mindless cleric with a spur-of-the-moment sermon. Enough already. The danger lies elsewhere, in the opposite camp.

If without the leavening of spirit or soul, the body is poisonous to

itself and others-without body, the “spirit” and “soul” are equally empty terms, without apprehensible referents and, indeed, without any real meanings either. . (I beg the indulgence of those with other religions—or no religion; I use the following example to make a point about the function of body, not as an argument in favor of a particular religion. A glance at the underlying Christian metaphor is instructive, however, in getting at “how body means.”)

The Christian apologist would claim that, without Jesus, a phrase such as “God is love” means nothing. (We “love” our mothers, our country, and chocolate ice cream. What does “love” mean?) The meaning of Christian love is contingent upon the existence of, and implicit in, Jesus, in His body which he willingly sacrificed for others. It is clear from the function of body, as metaphor here, that the word “love” to a Christian implies the concept: willing sacrifice, or gift, of self to others. But this meaning does not have to be announced or ‘taught.’ It is implicit in (tucked-away-in) the incarnation of (Christian) love: the man Jesus with His encompassing flesh-body, which he offers as a willing gift to others, just as the Christian’s gift of love must be willingly proffered, at whatever cost or pain. Unless the spirit or idea is beautiful in flesh, it cannot walk among us and, without the encompassing flesh, cannot be apprehended or fulfill its role in the economy of life’s grand plan. What is true of body in this religious-metaphoric context is no less true of it in any interactional context — including its role in bodying-forth the meaning of *the* body and of the Iron Game. The last thing to be ashamed about, the body provides the answer to the question “How?” when applied to any deep transfer and release of feeling-meaning at the very deepest of levels, as opposed to the shallower, merely conceptual, meanings communicated as ideas at the level of concept. Yet most of us, perversely, are more proud of success in the latter communication (of ideas, as such) than of success in the former “deep-level” transfer or release of feeling-meaning. (Strange: This triumph of abstraction over heart-touching body, over concretion generally.)

From whatever direction (aesthetic, philosophical, religious) that we come to it, there is a primacy to body-as-body that throws into bold relief the fool’s embarrassment at his self-confessed “obsessive” attention to body and its cultivation.

As suggested earlier, there is a spiritual danger built-in to body and one’s reverence for it: a danger not built-in to baseball and tennis. As he lies dying, at the very instant that the “King” (the Lord) is about appear to him the speaker in one of Emily Dickinson’s poems turns his failing attention away from the solacing arrival of his spirit’s King to the “blue uncertain stumbling buzz” of a fly. With all the urgency of the beauty inherent even in earthly corruption, the fly “interposes” itself between the dying man and the “light” (the coming of the Lord) — yet another display of body, of earth’s seductiveness. Even in the “Eternal Moment’s contention between body and soul, again the primacy of body.

During a beach walk decades ago, before my daughter could talk, she dashed back to me from a foray into the dunes: a stone held aloft in her little frog-of-a-hand. Exulting in the feel of the satiny stone against her skin, her round face fell when I applied to her gift the term for it in the geological world. Seeing the sudden fall in the precious face, I bit my tongue, knowing that I’d started my little animal upon a gray journey into abstraction (the de-bodying of bod-

ies into their names). This gray journey away from an open avowal of body’s primacy (because it wasn’t academically acceptable) was one that her old man had not yet abandoned at the moment he set-out on his film.

Now, however, like the skinny street fighter who bloodily pummels guys twice his size because (with no teeth and his nose a “busted shambles”) he has “nothing to lose,” I don’t give a damn anymore. How about you? The secret’s out. Is yours? I’ve joined the “broken faces” and admit to sharing more with Emily’s speaker than with those who harrumph at my (so-called) “preoccupation” with our (“silly”) Game and with body, itself, none of which I’ve employed my few powers to defend. Have you?

Some folks’ pleasure is in the arts. Others’, in social activities. More to the point here, for many the pleasure (even chief pleasure) is a sport or game. For us, it’s not really a game, but the body itself—not Irrespective (mind you) of what it can do, because the cultivated body outstrips the imagination—it’s just that our interest goes beyond the body’s (mere) *application* to what it *is* (beyond the “practical body,” that is, to the “pure body”), as well as to the only Game that both creates and tests its pure-body-ness.

In old age, a wonderful old baseball or tennis star moves from point A to point B, and we call it movement, sometimes even graceful movement (They’re athletes, after all, even if old ones). Old game players, graceful or otherwise, do not *mean* something; they are not statements: they merely *do* something.

In old age, a wonderful old Iron Gamer moves from point A to point B, and we call it a statement. (It’s a “statement,” indeed, even if there’s nobody there to “call” it anything.) It’s conceivable (if unlikely) to imagine such-a-one as ungraceful, but it’s no matter. With such folks, the issue is not their *doing* something, gracefully or otherwise. The issue is that they *are* something. (Again, the earlier distinction between people who DO wonderful things and people who ARE wonderful things by reason of body (its mystery) and body’s chief sport, our sport, our game, the Iron Game.)

The playing of a sport does not create an artifact that evokes mystery, that confounds the imagination; it creates a machine that can do something (something outside itself) superbly well. It creates a machine that we applaud for the geometries of movement that it describes against the backdrops of beautiful afternoons or brightly lit parks and arenas.

Do you notice? The irony here is that, despite the “second banana-ness” of all this, there is no known case of a baseball player (old or young) — or fan, however unathletic—who has ever betrayed so much as a scintilla of embarrassment about his *affaire d’amour* with baseball.

The mystery of body is insoluble, ineffable, a sword beneath our hearts, a test of our spirit and moral nerve: a continuing delight. Yet one confesses pleasure in body’s cultivation at considerable risk to his reputation and, because of this, often with considerable embarrassment.

To comprehend fully what we are heirs to when we UNembarrassedly acknowledge our veneration for body and its cultivation comprises an epiphany — an epiphany, however, in which the embarrassed and the embarrassable can never take pleasure.

—Al Thomas

# THE HISTORY OF STRENGTH TRAINING FOR ATHLETES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

*TERRY TODD, PH.D.*

R

alph Hammond worked out all summer and he worked out hard. The college football season would begin before long and he wanted to be ready, so most mornings he'd be on the running track by daybreak for a few easy miles and some speed work, maybe even some stadium stairs. But his main workout came later, in the early after-

noon, when he'd begin each session with stretching exercises on a wrestling mat in a wooden annex of the main gym at the University of Texas in Austin.

He'd bend and twist and coax his body into increasingly extreme positions for 15 to 20 minutes, proceed to a few basic calisthenics moves to warm up even more and then he'd wrestle whoever happened on any given day to be both available and willing. The annex wasn't air-conditioned, but even in that withering Texas heat he'd stay on the mat as long as he could find someone to work with. And then came the weights—snatches and cleans and presses and curls, set after set. Thus it was that when the fall came he was ready.

One might ask, "So what else is new?" The young man runs, he stretches, he gets in a little combat on the wrestling mat and he lifts weights—more or less how any serious athlete with a yen to play college ball would spend his summer. Except for one telling difference. Hammond's sweat fell not this year, nor the year before that but in the summer of 1927, a year distinguished by 60 home runs off the bat of Babe Ruth, the Dempsey-Sharkey fight, Lindbergh's conquest of the Atlantic and the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.

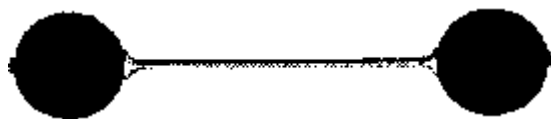
The football coach at U.T. at that time was Clyde Littlefield, who is best remembered for his long and successful tenure as track coach there from 1921 to 1961, but those were the days of the allrounders—athletes as well as coaches were often two or three sport men. And when Hammond, who had never played a single down, decided to try out for football, Littlefield had just been proffered the head job. The new coach knew football well enough to be skeptical that anyone with no experience at all would be able to make the varsity squad at a school the size of Texas. Littlefield knew, of course, of Hammond's former NCAA championship in wrestling and he knew about Hammond's ability as a pole-vaulter but this was *football*. Littlefield had to be shown. Hammond and Littlefield are both dead now, as is another important man in this

story, Roy J. "Mac" McLean. McLean was then U.T.'s coach of wrestling, at that time a varsity sport at the school, and it was at his urging that Littlefield promised to give Hammond a fair chance to make the football team.

"I knew what a good athlete Ralph was and I knew how rugged he was and I felt sure he'd do well," the 86 year old McLean recalled several years ago. "I'd worked with him all that summer and I'd gotten him to where he was really pushing hard with the weights, He wasn't an overly big man—about 5' 10" and 180 pounds—but he was strong as a thousand dollar mule and he could go all day. I still remember how bad he tore those boys up when football practice began, especially late in the afternoon when they began to play out. Back then the boys all just showed up in the fall and played their way into shape. They didn't have any kind of a summer program—nobody did—and so once they got a little tired Ralph almost killed them. Nobody even wanted to scrimmage with him."<sup>1</sup>

Off to such a bodacious start, Hammond went on that year to secure a place on the first team and, of course, a varsity letter before going back to his truest love—wrestling—in which sport he placed fourth in the 174 pound class in the 1928 Olympic Games, losing the bronze medal on a technicality.<sup>2</sup>

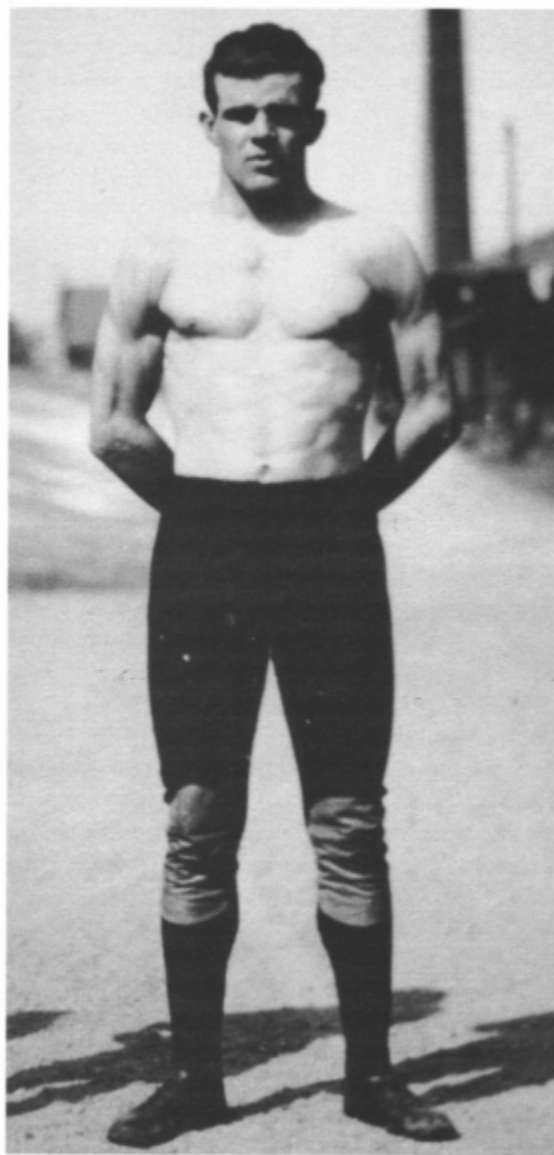
It's impossible, of course, to know how much of Hammond's success in football resulted from his superb conditioning and how much resulted from his no doubt considerable genetic gifts, but it seems safe to say that the extra strength, stamina, and suppleness he built that summer lifting weights and wrestling made him more of a man in those essential characteristics of an athlete than he otherwise would have been. "All that weight work damn sure didn't *hurt* him." McLean was quick to assert. Even after all those years McLean was still bemused by how long it had taken for the rest of the coaching and physical education fraternities to catch up to what he and a few others were doing with their athletes more than 60 years ago.<sup>3</sup> But the rest of the coaches have caught up now with a vengeance; almost every feature article about a modern athlete will make mention of that athlete's conditioning program. Even more revealing is the recent explosive growth of the coaching subspecies known variously as the strength coach or weight coach. Twenty years ago strength coaches were as rare and exotic as whooping cranes but now their habitat has expanded far beyond the occasional pro or major college football program to other major sports, to minor sports, to small colleges,



to high schools and, of late, to women's athletics. They have even formed an Association.

The National Strength Coaches Association—now called, in an understandable but semantically shaky attempt to lay claim to all aspects of physical fitness, The National Strength and Conditioning Association—was founded by Nebraska strength coach Boyd Eppley and a handful of fellow weight men in 1978, but it now has 11,000 members in 50 countries. The NSCA sponsors regional and national clinics and they publish four informative journals filled with a combination of articles representing various conditioning philosophies, research studies and advertisements for training equipment and so-called nutritional aids.<sup>4</sup> This growth has, of course, paralleled that of the mushrooming fitness field and is both a recipient of and a donor to that growth. Where it will stop is difficult to predict. Even now many conditioning coaches speak a language that is becoming increasingly inaccessible to the average person, as the language of priesthoods usually tends to do. Terms such as proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation, valsava maneuver, general adaptation syndrome, eccentric contraction, gigabites, depotestosterone, and sensory deprivation tank now float through the liniment-scented locker rooms of America. In any case, it might be instructive to examine what has happened through the years at the University of Texas in both men's and women's athletics as a way to understand how we got from Ralph Hammond to where we are today.

To understand Ralph Hammond, though, we have to under-



Wrestler Ralph Hammond as he looked after he had begun to train with weights. Photo: Todd-McLean Collection, The University of Texas.

stand Mac McLean and to understand Coach McLean we have to go back to two other fascinating men—L. Theo Bellmont and H. J. Lutch Stark. Stark was the heir to an East Texas empire built around timber and oil, and he enrolled at U.T. in 1905, bringing to campus two years later the first student-owned private automobile. He was an energetic young man, and he served his beloved school as the business manager for the football team in 1910—negotiating with other universities and scheduling games.<sup>5</sup>

After Stark finished his year as the business manager of the football team, he drove up the bad roads from his home in Orange almost every week to see his friends and stay in touch with things athletic. He also loved to eat, and by 1913 he weighed over 200 pounds, far too much for his 5'7" height and bone structure, so he decided to go to Philadelphia for a course of physical training under the personal supervision of Alan Culvert, owner of the Milo Barbell Company and publisher of *Strength* magazine. Stark spent two months there and then returned home 40 pounds lighter, twice as strong and an ardent champion of the merits of progressive resistance exercise.<sup>6</sup>

In 1914, however, weightlifters were about as scarce in Texas as *entrechats*, and Stark didn't have a fellow enthusiast to talk to until he met Theo Bellmont in 1914. Stark

convinced Bellmont to give up the directorship of the Houston YMCA and to join U.T. as the school's first athletic director. Bellmont had been an outstanding collegiate athlete at the University of Tennessee, and after taking the YMCA job in Houston he came under the influence of a gifted acrobat and lifter, who initiated him into the





European tradition of the weightlifter/athlete. So, when Bellmont came to Austin he brought several sets of dumbbells with him, along with a belief in the efficacy of this form of physical training. As for Stark, he never failed to haul a Milo barbell or two to Austin in the trunk of his Rolls Royce on his weekly trips to the campus, and a pattern soon developed that saw the two men engaged in regular sessions of weight training.

That first year—1914—Bellmont introduced Stark to a slender young man and Stark and Belmont both introduced the young man, freshman Mac McLean, to the weights. McLean asserted that the example of those two men and the lifting lore they taught him changed his life. Stark by then had left one of his Milo sets in Austin, and McLean soon ordered another and over the next five years Mac ran, wrestled, and lifted, adding 35 pounds of useful weight to his lanky frame and becoming a much better athlete in the process. And as he lifted and played sports he began to read Calvert's magazine and anything else he could get his hands on about this fascinating "new" form of exercise.

By 1919 McLean had graduated and been hired by Bellmont as an Instructor in Physical Training at the university. That same year Mac asked for and received Bellmont's approval to teach a weight training course, perhaps the first such course of its kind in the U.S. at a major university. In that class and the hundreds which followed it during McLean's almost 50 years of teaching at U.T., he tested and measured his students both before and after their semester of training. This testing and measurement proved to them as well as to himself that, contrary to current belief, significant all around physical improvement could be produced rapidly by hard work with the weights. He also put this new knowledge to work as a coach.

In 1920, McLean's duties were expanded to include coaching the newly formed cross country team, and for 13 seasons—until he stepped down—his men won the Southwest Conference championship every year. Throughout those years Mac encouraged many of his harriers to train with weights, unheard of though this practice surely was. But it was with his wrestlers that he was most insistent about the capacity the weights had to produce a winning edge. McLean was named to coach the Longhorn wrestling team when the sport resumed its varsity status in 1923, following a hiatus occasioned by WWI, and for four years, until wrestling was dropped by the Southwest Conference and by Texas as a major sport, McLean's wrestlers proved again and again that lifting neither slowed them nor bound their muscles.

But even with such examples as Hammond, plus occasional hints from Bellmont and McLean, the other coaches at U.T. were reluctant to employ weight training as a conditioning aid. So thoroughly convinced were they and their coaching brethren throughout the U.S. that lifting would make a man tight and clumsy that any

successes enjoyed by weight trained athletes were summarily dismissed as exceptions which proved the rule. The reasons for this wrongheaded attitude are too complicated to explain in this article, but it was certainly true that throughout the first half of the 20th century, weight training was disapproved of by almost all coaches and physical educators.

Narcissism was in both principle and practice far less acceptable in those naturalistic days than it is now. In football, for instance, it was thought almost unmanly to do too much preparation for fall practice. "Hell, fall practice was preparation," was the way Bully Gilstrap, a former Texas player and coach, put it. Gilstrap is dead now, but he was a football man nearly all his life. He came to U.T. as a freshman in 1920 and he was an outstanding athlete during his college career, lettering in basketball and track as well as in football. He returned to U.T. to coach in 1937 and remained on the staff for 20 years.<sup>7</sup>

Gilstrap remembered his playing days. "Most of the old boys on the team came off the farm like I did and we were in pretty good shape from hauling hay, chopping cotton, cutting wood, and milking, but the only running I did back then was to race somebody or to try and catch one of them old jackrabbits. You got to remember how different things were then. Hell, I won the state track meet running *bare-foot*."

By the time Gilstrap came back to U.T. in 1937, everybody did have shoes, but preseason conditioning for any varsity sport was still almost non-existent. "Things were about the same in '37," he said, "'cept we had a training table so they wouldn't none of 'em have to go through school on chili like I did. But all we did to warm up and all was a few jumping jacks. Then we'd run plays or scrimmage. It was pretty much the same in basketball and track, too. The boys scrimmaged in basketball and they practiced their events in track. That was it. I don't know what they done in baseball."<sup>8</sup> As far as baseball is concerned, the words of the late Bibb Falk are instructive. Falk played at Texas for three years, beginning in 1917, then went straight to the big leagues where he played for 12 seasons. He returned to Austin in 1932, served as assistant coach until 1940, then coached the Texas team until 1968.

"We did a little of what we called P.T. in the early days, but only when it rained. Other than that the boys ran and threw and played. We wanted long, loose muscles and the word back then was that lifting would tie you up. To be honest I never even heard of a ballplayer using weights. Not in college and not in the bigs. Now Hack Wilson and Babe and some of the others did a lot of lifting all right but it was done a glass of beer at a time. The key to baseball is power and power comes from speed and we were leery of anything that might slow us up. When I played and for most of my coaching career we always believed that if a man ran enough and threw enough he'd be strong enough."<sup>9</sup>

This play-yourself-into-shape attitude prevailed in pre-World War II U.T. tennis and golf as well, but “Tex” Robertson, who coached swimming from 1935 until 1950, used a variety of conditioning techniques for his athletes. He recalls, “We used the ‘torture belt,’ before anyone did. It was a sort of harness tied to surgical tubing attached to the side of the pool. I’d have my guys swim against the pull of the tubing and I also had them do wall pulley exercises simulating the various strokes. We did a lot of different things. I remember we always did 15 leg lifts and 32 sit-ups before we swam because some U.T. phys. ed. instructor believed in it, but we did no stretching and no weightlifting.” Robertson shared the fears of his coaching contemporaries about heavy weight work. “We wanted the long, loose muscles you need in swimming and we’d all heard stories about guys who’d messed themselves up by doing too much, so we stayed away from lifting.”<sup>10</sup> Before and during the second World War, the individual coaches designed and implemented whatever conditioning routines their players followed, but in 1945 a man came to Austin who was instrumental over the next three decades in designing the workout program for many U.T. athletes. Only 4’ 10” tall, Frank Medina had a larger than life impact on the minds and bodies of the Longhorns for 32 years, until he retired in 1977 at the age of 70.

“We never used weights in my early days here because the coaches just didn’t want to. And neither did any other coaches in the country,” he explained. “The coaches

here all wanted their players to be quick. And I didn’t believe in it either. I still don’t believe in all that heavy stuff. I always said that if God wanted a boy to be bulgy, He’d have made him bulgy. Some of the football players these days look like *weightlifters*. That’s not good.”<sup>11</sup>

Medina’s views on lifting were formed in the early 1950s, when he saw a film about the conditioning program at Northwestern made during that university’s glory days. The film recommended, among other things, light dumbbell lifting, and Medina took the recommendation to heart, never deviating from it during his many remaining years at Texas. “A pair of 20 or 25 pound dumbbells is enough for anybody, no matter how big and strong he is,” Medina maintained. “You need to see how many times a man can lift a light weight, not how much a man can lift once or twice. After we watched the Northwestern film, one of the things we did before spring training was to have the men wear ankle weights and waist weights and weight vests and lift the dumbbells over their heads while they were jogging around in a heated locker room. I worked them hard.”<sup>12</sup>

One thing is certain; those who went through the legendary “Medina Sessions” will never forget them, be they former players who look back with the fondness of survivors, as most do, or former players who look back with the bitterness and resentment of Gary Shaw, who wrote in *Meat on the Hoof*, his diatribe against Texas football:



Roy J. “Mac” McLean (right) with Terry Todd in the Physical Culture Collection, just before McLean’s death.

McLean taught what may have been the first weightlifting class for credit at a major university in the United States. McLean was an early practitioner of weight training for athletics and his varsity athletes in both cross country and wrestling did resistance training in the 1920s. McLean was also instrumental in establishing the Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection at the University of Texas at Austin.

*Photo by Jan Todd.*



"After dressing the first day, Medina called us through the closed doors. The steam heaters in these two rooms pushed the temperature to 120 degrees... We ran in circles, crowded into one room, with the dumbbells moving in an up-down motion. As soon as we stopped running, we were to stand perfectly straight with the dumbbells held at arms' length from our chest...

"Each exercise would continue until someone faltered; for example, couldn't hold the weights up any more; whoever failed was made the center of a big production.

"Medina would...announce that they were responsible for our doing it all over again...

"Our last exercise using the dumbbells was sit-ups. Usually we did a hundred at this point (anyone screwed up, we started over). But this day Medina didn't stop at a hundred...or two hundred or three hundred...nor four hundred or five hundred...

'Men, push yourselves, now's the time to find out...what you've got inside.'

"The concrete floor had rubbed us raw and most of our butts were bleeding. I was cut enough that I had trouble sitting for two weeks."<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting that even those who feel nostalgic about such experiences recall many of the same details. Don Talbert, for instance, who was an All-American for Texas as a defensive tackle in 1961, remembers that heated locker room. "Man we used to fear those Medina sessions in that steamy locker room. We had to jog around with those damn little dumbbells in each hand, around and around, with no water breaks allowed. And sometimes we'd do 400 or 500 sit-ups and get these big hiccups on our tails. It was an awful gut check but I reckon we lived through it."<sup>14</sup>

But often, it seemed, just barely. Bud McFadden, who was an All-American at Texas in 1950 before going on to a fine career in the pros, laughs ruefully when he thinks back to those long gone days, "Frank Medina. That little bugger made us work all right. He thinned those walk-ons out with all that calisthenics work but the rest of us had to go through it too. Sometimes he'd keep at us and keep at us 'til I wanted to reach up and snatch him down off that bench. But I reckon he got us in shape, at least for those days. We did run too much, though. I know that. We ran so much our legs stayed dead. They didn't have time to recover from one day to the next."<sup>15</sup>

One of the most difficult questions any conditioning coach must face is how to strike the correct balance between too much work and too little. Medina, although an extremist, was hardly alone in the way he drove his players. "Running is all the leg work any player needs," Medina staunchly maintained, "and lately they don't run 'em enough." Even today, the zeal of many coaches to leave no conditioning stone unturned often causes them to overwork their athletes, who thus become physically depleted, emotionally exhausted

and more liable to either infection or injury, even death. Over the years, however, as coaches have learned through trial and error as well as through the growing application of science to sport, the tendency to overwork or incorrectly work athletes has decreased. Seen from a distance, this decrease appears gradual; seen up close and individually, it has often been surprisingly sudden.

A case in point was the effect on Darrel Royal, U.T.'s outstanding football coach from 1956 to 1976, of the physical mauling his team suffered in 1959 at the hands of the LSU Tigers. Led by All-American Billy Cannon, the entire LSU team had been involved for two years in a vigorous weight training program designed and administered by Al Roy, a gym owner in Baton Rouge and former trainer of the U.S. Weightlifting team in the Olympics in 1948. In any event, the effect of Roy's weight program on the line of scrimmage in the LSU game was clearly not lost on the discerning eyes of Royal.

"We were beat up pretty bad that game and even though they had good personnel everyone was talking about their lifting program, so I figured it was time to move before we were left behind," he said recently. "I'd never lifted as a player and I'd always been warned away from it but you couldn't watch a man like Cannon run and still believe weights would slow you down. So I asked my people to begin looking into it and after a few years we worked into a program where all our players trained, even though it was mostly work on machines and lighter weights. We began to rely on it more and more, but it wasn't 'til we hired a full-time strength coach in 1977, my first year as Athletic Director, that it began to pay the kind of dividends we're enjoying today. These days, you've just got to have it. The players are much bigger now than they were when I played and started coaching and the main reason is all the weight work they do. If your team doesn't train and has to face an equally talented team that does, there's just no way you can win."<sup>16</sup>

The greater size of modern football players is often remarked on these days, but a statistic that brings it into precise focus was offered up by the aforementioned Bully Gilstrap. "One thing I'll never forget," Bully recalled, his ruddy face squinting out over the vast farmland surrounding his home, "and that's the fact that when I started to play back in '20 there wasn't but two players—two!—in the whole damn Southwest Conference who weighed over 200 pounds. Think about it."<sup>17</sup>

Sixty some odd, some very odd, years later, football is indeed a different game, and what with pharmacological incursions and more sophisticated methods of training, who can say the next 60 won't produce increases in size and strength equal to or even greater than what has gone before.

Basketball, for instance, has undergone a sea change in opinion on the subject of conditioning over the past years. The late Jack Gray, who coached Texas from 1935 to 1941 and then from 1945 to 1951,

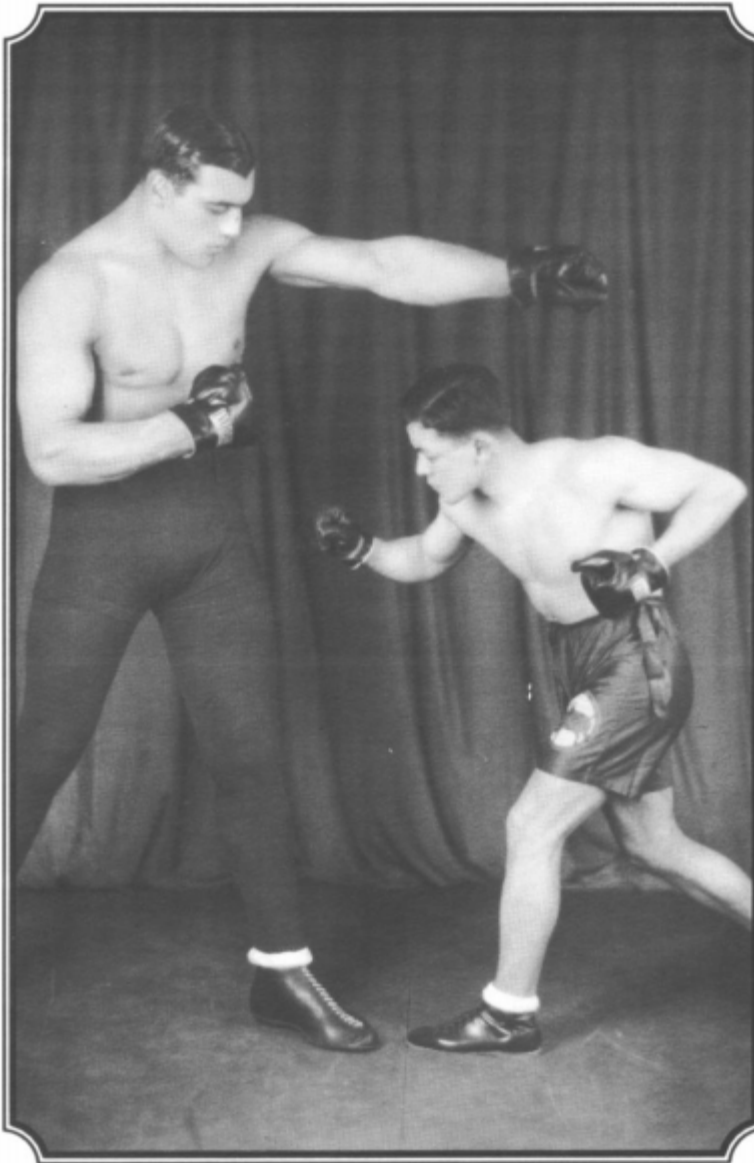


remembered king fearful of the weights because of their supposed fell power to bind the muscles. 'We just played, that's all. We scrimmaged and worked on plays and did a little extra running. We wanted our boys to be lean as greyhounds.'<sup>18</sup>

Things continued in much this way in U.T. basketball until Harold Bradley put his team on a program of light circuit training in the early 1960s using a multi-station weight machine. It produced noticeable results for Bradley's men, most of whom were accustomed to lifting nothing heavier than their textbooks.

After Bradley moved on in 1964, Leon Black, who now serves Texas as Assistant Athletic Director, took over and continued in a modified way what had already been begun. "The wind was blowing toward strength and bulk when I came," Black recalled, "but lots of us coaches were resistant. It's hard to change old habits, especially if you've had some success with them. We feared our players would lose finesse, so I for one stayed away from any upper body work. Frank Medina was in charge of the early going when I came and he was opposed, too, so we just did a little leg work but I wish now we'd had them on the heavy stuff."<sup>19</sup>

Of course, not everyone agrees with Black's assessment. Some coaches still privately admit to lingering skepticism about weight



This wonderful photo of the young Primo Camera gives some sense of his phenomenal natural size. Camera lifted weights a bit as a young man and several sportswriters blamed his relative ineptitude in the boxing ring on his lifting, ignoring the fact that he had very little serious training in boxing before his promoters thrust him into bouts with much more experienced men.

Even so, he won most of his matches and, for a brief time, was world heavyweight champion.

*Photo: Todd-McLean Collection  
The University of Texas at Austin.*

training king able to produce body weight and vertical leaping ability without some loss of agility or touch, and a few coaches have enough of the maverick in them that they don't mind swimming against the rising current.

One such coach was Black's replacement at Texas, Abe Lemons, who coached from 1976 until leaving under duress to return to his previous post at Oklahoma City College in 1982. Lemons is a witty, outspoken man and he happily voiced his reservations about the weights. "I'm not so sure the weights build muscles you really need. I do know you can't go to a coaching clinic these days without hearing a talk about one lifting program or another. Everybody's quick to jump on a successful bandwagon, even if they don't understand it. To me it's sorta much ado about nothing. I'm not so sure a lot of this stretching and lifting and all out gutcheck running isn't more for the coaches' benefit than the players. Our players used to scrimmage, shoot free throws, do floor drills and that's it. I know this may

make me sound frivolous but I don't *feel* frivolous. The funny thing, though, is that my kids heard so much about the weights and saw all the lifters on TV that almost all of them lifted on *their own*. Maybe it's better that way. At least *they* believed in it. I know Dana was mad at me because I didn't send my players to him but I just couldn't see it."<sup>20</sup>



The Dana in question is a young man with the surname of LaDuc who, since 1977, has served U.T. Athletics as the strength coach. LaDuc was an outstanding shot-putter at U.T., winning the NCAA National Championship as a senior in 1976 and establishing, with a put of 67' 1/4", the longest heave on record for a left-hander. LaDuc believes with all his heart that the weights gave him the power to throw as far as he did and this belief shines forth in everything he does. He admits to having been displeased that Lemons was unable to make that vertical leap of faith in the weights.

"It did tick me off a little that I could never convince Coach Lemons to let me work with his athletes. I'd worked with other basketball players and I knew for certain I could make them jump higher but he just never could see it. It's funny because after he left and a new coach came in and gave me the go-ahead, we increased the vertical jump of Lemon's own players by an average of a little over three inches in just a few months."<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, two central truths now seems to be almost universally accepted: all things being equal, a stronger, more powerful athlete will be a better athlete in any sport, and resistance training is the most effective means of producing physical power. As these truths have enjoyed increasingly wide acceptance, the budgets of athletic departments around the country have found room for the personnel and equipment to put the truth into practice. Essentially the same pattern has been followed around the country as the role and responsibilities of the strength coach grew and as more and more men with a history as either a lifter, a thrower or a coach with a personal interest in the weights were hired on a year round basis by the various colleges in an effort to keep up with the LSU's of the athletic world. And as the strength coaches to handle this aspect of the program were added, so were the physical facilities to accommodate the hundreds of athletes who would use them.

During the early Medina session days at Texas, for example, there was no separate weight room for the athletes, and the trainers had to make do with the locker room and the great outdoors; but in 1965 a vault-like storage room on the second level of massive old Memorial Stadium was converted into a weight and rehab room for the varsity athletes. The late Cleburne Price, U.T.'s assistant track coach from 1964 to 1971 and head coach from 1971 to 1985, remembered with a laugh king put on the project. "We were short-handed and didn't have too much money and I became known as the 'paint coach.' It's been fun to watch it grow here and I've seen it up close. When I came our throwers were already using weights—they were the only U.T. athletes who were using them then—but now all our guys do, and our women too. Even the cross country team. And now, thank God, when something needs to be painted, they don't call me anymore."<sup>22</sup> But U.T.'s weight room, large as it was, became inadequate to handle the

growing numbers of athletes who trained there. So, with the full support of both Delos Dodds, Director of Athletics for Men and Donna Lopiano, the A.D. for women, plans were developed to build a facility which would include a state of the art 10,000 square foot weight room.

Part of the reason for the expansion was the fervor and frequency with which the current weight room was used by U.T.'s women. Back when they had only "club sports," a few of the women used the facility but, since 1976, when women's sports began to be propelled by the dual carburation of varsity status and dramatically increased funding, the women have become as avid as the men for their turn at the squat rack. Jody Conratt, who is both the successful head basketball coach for women (won 598, lost 144 as of the beginning of the 1992 season) and the Acting Athletic Director, has seen and been a part of these changes.

"When I came in 1976," she explains, "I had no experience with weight training at all but Dana convinced me it would help my players and he was absolutely right. At first some of the girls were reluctant to really try hard but after they saw how much better it made them look and play we didn't have to do any more selling. Our vertical jump went way up and so did our self confidence."<sup>23</sup>

Another coach of U.T. women athletes in the 1980's was Richard Quick, whose swim team won five NCAA championships. One of the varsity coaches who prefers to design and supervise his own weight program, Quick explained his position by saying, "I respect Dana's knowledge but since we have our own weight room here at the Swim Center and since weight training for swimmers has been a special interest of mine for quite a few years, I prefer to work with my women myself. I have them keep charts on themselves so they know exactly where they've been and I talk to them a lot individually so they know where I'm trying to take them and how we can get there quickest. And we really stress heavy weights."<sup>24</sup>

Another coach who shares this attitude is Eddie Reese, who heads the men's swim team, a team which always finishes at or near the top in the NCAA meet. Reese not only believes in heavy work with the weights for his men, he believes in it for himself. "Our guys train with Dana because I know he pushes them. There's more weight over here. I work on the program design with Dana and we try to put in as much variety as we can. We do lots of stretching and we run the stadium steps and ramps and we do lots of rope climbing. We really train a lot like competitive powerlifters. We do heavy squats, benches and deadlifts and I mean heavy. We want to build overall body strength—core strength—and we think we *are* building it."<sup>25</sup>

At Texas and, it seems, at every other college with a strength coach, opinions such as those given by Conratt, Quick, and Reese are the order of the day, regardless of the sport. Cliff Gustafson, for instance, coach of U.T.'s consistently outstanding baseball team—winners of



six National Championships—is an unreserved supporter of resistance training.

“I inherited an off-season program from Coach Falk when I came here in 1968 built around light free weights and Universal machines and I kept it ‘til Nautilus came along and we switched to that. Dana oversees it for us and we’re mighty pleased with it. There’s no question in my mind that the players can hit the ball farther after they’ve trained for awhile. The ball jumps off the bat quicker because of the extra power they develop. In season, we use some free weights we’ve got over at our field. They’re just as quick as they ever were, maybe quicker, and they have just as much finesse as they ever had, maybe more. They’re just stronger.”<sup>26</sup>

At Texas, it seems Abe Lemons was alone in his views. Besides the enthusiastic coaches already mentioned, all of the other varsity coaches avail themselves to some extent of the help offered by LaDuc and by the women’s strength coach, Angel Spassov. As for the system of training Texas uses, it would be fair to say that LaDuc and Spassov use an eclectic, non-doctrinaire approach to conditioning, and they use many different tools in their sweaty trade. LaDuc: “We use free weights, we use various machines—including Nautilus—and we use other methods of strength conditioning as well, such as ramp running: the Russian Leaper which involves trying to jump while you’re being resisted by surgical tubing; rope climbing; and plyometrics, which involves jumping down from a box to the floor and then back up to a higher box. We use it all and we try to use it when it’ll do the most good. And we work a lot on flexibility. Spanky Stephens, the head trainer here, and I talk over the entire program and he designs the running workouts. We have to coordinate the running and lifting or we’d be undoing each other’s efforts.”<sup>27</sup>

But the doxology of LaDuc’s and Spassov’s training programs is one of praise to the same heavy lifts with barbells which built their own strength. Like most with their background, they are true believers, especially LaDuc, who is at his happiest when he is among his colossal boy-men, passing along to them by word and deed the articles of faith as they were earlier passed to him.

Late one spring several years ago LaDuc conducted a lifting competition between the football team’s 50 best players—25 each from offense and defense. He invited the public to the contest and in front of assorted girl friends, local lifting fans, several coaches and members of the local sporting media, his players put on quite a show. The contest involved the squat, the bench press and the power clean—the three lifts which are the blood and bone of LaDuc’s program for football. The men had chalk, they had belts, they had proper technique and they were geared for personal records. They’d been training with increasingly heavy weights for weeks with this contest in mind and they approached the bar with absolute seriousness.

When the chalk dust had finally settled the improvements over the previous years were substantial. Almost all of the men made at

least one personal record.

Watching Dana become increasingly excited and proud as the competition progressed and record after record fell to the onslaught of his puissant young bulls, it would have been natural to assume he was the happiest in a roomful of happy men. And no doubt he was, except perhaps for an old man who sat quietly during the long afternoon of lifting, smiling to himself from time to time and shaking his head in pleasure and disbelief as the big weights went up again and again. The old man was Mac McLean.

None of the young men had any idea who Mac was, of course, or what role he had played in the sequence of events which led them all to be there that day. But that didn’t matter to Mac, since he had reached an age at which most good men look less for glory than for symmetry, for things turning out as they should. He was content deep down, in the way only the old can be contented, to be watching a performance whose whole meaning was that he and Theo Bellmont and Lutch Stark and Ralph Hammond had been right, by God, all along.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Roy J. McLean, interview with the author, 23 September 1983, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>2</sup> David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Olympics* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 505.
- <sup>3</sup> McLean interview.
- <sup>4</sup> The NSCA publishes: *The National Strength and Conditioning Association Journal, The Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research, The Journal of Personal Training and Conditioning for Cycling*. Membership data supplied by the NSCA office, January 15, 1993.
- <sup>5</sup> Roy J. McLean, “A History of U.T. Athletics,” unpublished manuscript, McLean files, Todd-McLean Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> Bully Gilstrap, interview with the author, 15 August 1983, Rosebud, Texas.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> Bibb Falk, telephone interview, 12 August 1984.
- <sup>10</sup> Tex Robertson, telephone interview, 13 May 1984, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>11</sup> Frank Medina interview with the author, 27 April 1984, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Gary Shaw, *Meat on the Hoof* (New York: Dell, 1972), 110-6.
- <sup>14</sup> Don Talbert, telephone interview, 25 January 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>15</sup> Bud McFadden, telephone interview 2 February 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>16</sup> Darrel Royal, interview with the author, 7 March 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>17</sup> Gilstrap interview.
- <sup>18</sup> Jack Gray, telephone interview, 18 March 1985.
- <sup>19</sup> Leon Black, interview with the author, 2 April 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>20</sup> Abe Lemons, telephone interview, 8 April 1985.
- <sup>21</sup> Dana LaDuc, interview with the author, 15 April, 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>22</sup> Cleburne Price, interview with the author, 21 February 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>23</sup> Jody Conradt, interview with the author, 17 January 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>24</sup> Richard Quick, interview with the author, 5 December 1984, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>25</sup> Eddie Reese, interview with the author, 9 December 1984, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>26</sup> Cliff Gustafson, interview with the author, 10 February 1985, Austin, Texas.
- <sup>27</sup> LaDuc interview.

## THE EUROPEAN CORNER

# LAUNCESTON ELLIOT

DAVE WEBSTER

Launceston Elliot (1874-1930) came from a well known and noble Scottish family and his name is to be found in *Debrett's Illustrated Peerage*, showing his direct relationship to the Earl of Minto. His daughter, Nancy Maud, told me he also had some Australian blood and his granddaughter, Ann, who was my house-guest earlier this year, related some fascinating tales of his adventures 'down under'.

Elliot was conceived in Launceston, Tasmania, hence his rather unusual name, and he was born on the ninth of June, 1874, in India, where his father was a magistrate. Father Elliot was married twice, his first wife having fallen or thrown herself off a balcony while in Australia. Mr. Elliot went back to marry the receptionist of the hotel where they were staying and Launceston was a product of this second marriage. By the time his family returned to the U.K. to farm in Essex, Launceston was already a very hefty and strong thirteen year old, a pupil of Eugen Sandow.

The world's first proper national weightlifting championship was held in January 1891, in the International Hall of the Cafe Monica, Piccadilly, London, and amongst the twenty entrants and twelve starters was Launceston Elliot, now aged 16. He performed with

credit and three years later he won a similar National Championships at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster. This event was more on the lines of weightlifting today, decided on aggregate poundage—although there were eight lifts instead of the two we have now.

On this occasion the twenty year old was well ahead of his rivals, being the best in the vast majority of lifts.<sup>1</sup> He grew rapidly in stature and in reputation, culminating in his Olympic victory, when he won for Britain the first Olympic gold medal for weightlifting. The scene was Athens, Greece in April 1896 when Baron Pierre de Coubertin revived the Olympic Games. Weightlifting was supervised by Crown Prince George of Greece and Elliot did a one hand lift of 71 kilos (156 1/2 pounds) to win that event. An official report proclaimed "This young gentleman attracted universal attention by his uncommon type of beauty. He was of imposing stature, tall, well proportioned, his hair and complexion of surprising fairness." Elsewhere he was proclaimed as "the finest man of English birth," completely ignoring his true heritage. The popular press of the day revealed that his handsome figure had procured for him an offer of marriage from a highly placed lady admirer.

Young Elliot had wide-ranging athletic tastes: discus throwing



Launceston Elliot shortly before his death in 1930 at age 56. This reception, organized by the Australian Weightlifting Association, proved to be Elliot's last public appearance. He is shown shaking hands with Clarence Weber. Photo donated by Vic Boff.

at track and field meets, participating in Greco-Roman and other types of wrestling matches, bodybuilding competitions, etc.; and correspondence with his family tells of him practicing the traditional Scottish Highland Games activities, including tossing the caber with his friends Roland and Algernon Spencer.

In 1898 Elliot won what was the first major physique contest, run in conjunction with the national weightlifting championships of that year. In his prime Launceston Elliot stood six feet two inches and weighed 224 pounds. He had a 50-54 inch chest and 18 1/2 inch arms, good even by today's standards. His forearms were 15 1/2 inches, thighs 28 inches and waist 36 inches.

Launceston also performed as a professional strongman in later years. His presentation started with a popular posing routine, interpreting well known classical statues. Having demonstrated his muscles he then went on to show his strength. His wife, Rose Amelia, went everywhere with him and often they were accompanied by their three daughters, including Nancy Maud, who became my pen-friend from the 1960s until the 1980s. In one of her many letters (26th January, 1981) she told me that "Uncle Roland Spencer... tied to persuade the family to put me into training." The feat best remembered by her was the Spinning Cyclists. She wrote to me about this, even doing a little drawing to clarify the description. The strong man supported a yoke across his shoulders and from this wires were attached to two cyclists who would ride in a circle around him as he revolved at a similar pace. As they accelerated Elliot would spin rapidly until with a short squat he would heave them off the ground as they still, for effect, continued to pedal furiously. The faster he spun the wider they swung until they were almost horizontal. "I would cover my eyes for fear that there would be an accident," said Nancy Maud, who herself became quite an actress. The orchestra pit would seem perilously close on such occasions, "the bikes literally went over the orchestra who were pounding away on drums!" As centrifugal force did its work and the cyclists rose level with his shoulders the strong man would use another heave of his legs to drive them aloft. It was a splendid finale which invariably got a great reception from audiences. He did quite a lot human lifting in the act rather than using iron weights.

Launceston Elliot was greatly encouraged by his father, a small, pale but highly intelligent and energetic man. He was intensely interested in weightlifting and strength, greatly assisting his son throughout Launceston's amateur and professional career. When Launceston was younger and lifting in competition his father always attended and would frequently rebuke anybody making a sound while his son was concentrating prior to lifting.

The Olympic medalist matured into a merry character but had a quick and fiery temper, although he was careful not to use his fists. He was extremely light of foot, as could be seen in Cumberland and Westmoreland wrestling, Greco Roman and Catch-as-Catch-Can. He practiced all these styles but hated professional all-in wrestling.

This great strongman toured Britain and the continent for more than a decade, being a particular hit in Paris and at Berlin's Winter Garden in 1912, at this time employing twelve pretty girls as assis-

tants. Nancy Maud wrote that he retired from the stage after this but his grand-daughter Ann Elliot-Smith told me he did shows afterwards, even in the early 1920s, and also appeared in South America.

Women as well as men flocked to see him and the ladies were forever inviting him for cocktails, etc. He broke many British weightlifting records but he was not a specialist. He loved all kinds of strength athletics so people were not surprised when in 1901 he decided to become a professional strongman—but there was more to it than that. Nancy Maud told me the real reason her father took up his professional status. When Elliot married he got a stud farm, "Teddingtonbury" in Herts, as a wedding present from his father. Old man Elliot, however, never passed on the deeds to his son and three or four years later he told them that the farm would have to be sold as since retiring he had been gambling on the Stock Exchange and lost heavily. He told Launceston that he could bring his family to Highfield, Nottingham, Kent, and all live together there. Launceston told him what he could do with that idea and instead took his wife to her own father, a vicar in Lee, Kent, and called in old Bill Klein, who had coached him to victory in Athens, to help devise an act.

In this first presentation he lifted his wife as the Statue of Liberty, and was partnered by his old pal Montague Spencer, one of four weightlifting brothers. Soon Mrs. Elliot became pregnant and Nancy Maud said, "As soon as I began to show my mark my mother had to retire." To contrast with his own very fair complexion Elliot used three or four superbly built black men as well as three or four white men. The whites dressed in white Roman togas and the black men wore leopard skins. This mixed troupe was a permanent part of the act and traveled with him, but he also hired eight other people at each town. The local eight were dressed in sailor outfits and as one of the main stunts Launceston Elliot would, with the refined aplomb of a born aristocrat in all his movements, lift and support all 16 men at the same time.

As soon as the act became a success, old man Elliot came back on the scene and persuaded Launceston to move to Highfield in Nottingham and leave the children there during the strongman's overseas tours. Launceston was always top of the bill and sometimes the youngsters would be taken by their grandmother to Germany, Holland, etc., visiting their parents during extended seasons.

When Elliot's professional career was over, he became a gentleman farmer and in 1923 he moved to Melbourne, Australia. Launceston Elliot's weight increased to 22 stone (308 pounds) and he died in Sydney on August 8, 1930 as a result of a cancerous growth in the spine. He is interred in New South Wales. Elliot's daughter told me that his best medals and much of their memorabilia were taken by Malcolm Halsey, who married into the family and later left. The Melbourne police were actually put to work on this but without result. I believe Halsey was Nancy Maud's brother-in-law, married to her sister Kathleen.

Looking very much like Sandow, although much larger, Launceston Elliot was one of the most respected figures in the world of strength at the turn of the century when this form of entertainment was at its height.

<sup>1</sup> David Webster, *The Iron Game* (Irvine: by the author, 1976), 24-5.



## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

## Joe Assirati: Reminiscences of Britain's Renaissance of Strength

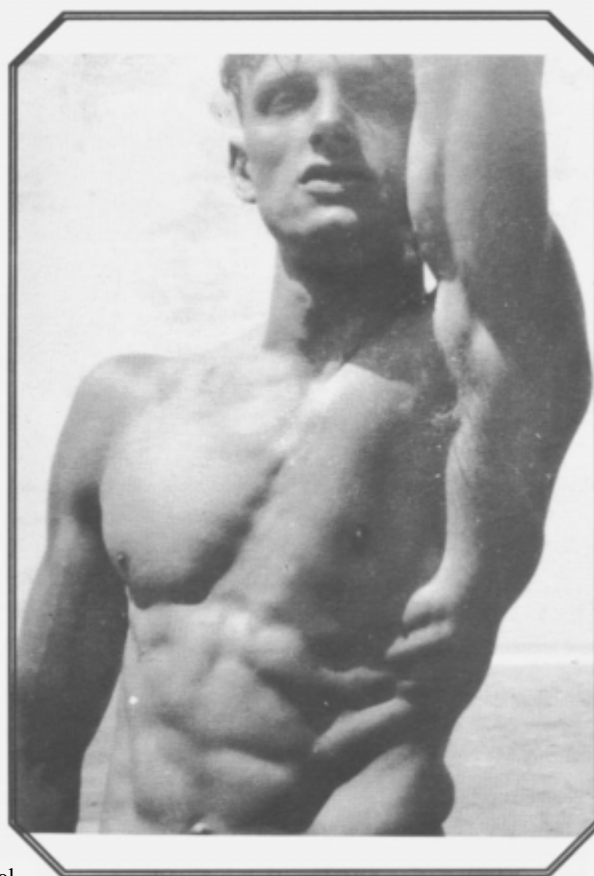
Al Thomas, Ph.D.

Like all history, iron game history is stories. The history here comes to us from strongman storyteller, Joe Assirati, one of the few extant eye witnesses to the most colorful epoch in the annals of British strengthdom. The closer to the fact-ness of the past event, the better and more authoritative the history. But truly objective history doesn't exist. However stoutly pursued, there is, in history, always the alloy of the teller's perception, prejudice, and predisposition: in short, his personality. And without this aura of personality, there would be no joy in stories and their telling, and (to come full circle) without stories and their telling, there would be precious little history. In short, the best of iron game history is stories.

Like yours, my pleasure in history took root in stories, in my case those of my grandfather, who as a breaker-boy in Pennsylvania's hard coal region trudged-off, a boy of six, for his first day in the man's world of the breaker, which was destined to be (as whaling was for Herman Melville) his "Harvard college and his Yale." My love for boxing and even more, later on, for strength took root in his "traveling man tales" when, on a "sabbatical from the pits," he "took up with that hoyden, travel," returning to the patch, one day, with marvelous stories of Choynski and Corbett, "Ruby Robert" Fitzsimmons and Sailor Tom Sharkey. And it was such stories, along with the charm of his tale telling, that cast the die which was to stamp in iron the imprint of all that his grandson would become. Change the details: Is it not true for you, too, when you seek the roots of your interest in the "way things were" in our sport, its history? The story—and the charm of its telling.

Not just "official histories," but all levels of our game's "hot stove league" are fueled by the story, the yarn. Today, of course, the simple joy that we took in such yarns as children is not enough, so we rationalize our delight in them by calling them oral history, and historians from the local University dash around with their recorders to capture them for posterity.

As readers interested in the history of strength, we too can rationalize all this as oral history, but in our hearts, we know that the charm of a strongman story lies in the tale spinner's love for the game and



Joe Assirati in 1931.

its heroes. It's instructive, of course, to attend to the tale-as-tale and to find in it yet another piece with which to complete, and give meaning to, the iron game puzzle that each of us carries around, unfinished, in his mind. But even more, it's sweet to feel, in the storyteller's telling, his love for our wonderful game and its history.

When Terry and Jan Todd returned from a recent trip to England, they spoke glowingly about meeting and working out with Joe Assirati (of the famous Assirati clan, cousin of Bert), a marvelous specimen of weight-trained manhood, 87-years-old, an inveterate storyteller. Encouraged by the Todds, I wrote to Joe and discovered, in the process, a charming man, full of the wisdom that accrues to deep reading, thoughtfully conceived progressive weight training, an acute social consciousness, and a commitment to his faith.

Unlike his massive cousin, Bert, who weighed 240 pounds at 5'6", Joe—who weighed only 92 pounds, clothed, with a 26-inch chest, at 16—was

threatened with the loss of his job if he didn't "put on some weight." Inspired by his father's

stories of Sandow and Hackenschmidt, he began to study the writings of Alan Calvert in *Strength* and various other systems of exercise: W.A. Pullum and Thomas Inch on weightlifting, Danks on strand-pulling, Mueller on free exercise, and Sandow's courses in light dumbbell training. In six months, he had gained nine pounds (and kept his job). In five years, he weighed 161 pounds, clothed, an increase of 69 pounds. ("As with Siegmund Klein, my bodyweight has remained the same. At 59, I broke a civil service weightlifting record, weighing 153 3/4 pounds. At 70, I was still 154, stripped and now, at 87, I am 150.")

Having suffered with bowel and digestive problems throughout his teen years, Joe credits Calvert's teaching (that "weight training is powerfully effective in strengthening one's digestive organs") with the final cure of this acute disorder. "Judicious weight training," he continues, "also strengthens the heart and lungs. So much has been written about the necessity to run because (the claim is) weight training does not strengthen the heart. Paul Von Boeckmann disagreed with this view in a *Strength* article, around 1925. Many well-known



lifting authorities agreed with Von Boeckman; such as Charles A. Smith; my brother-in-law, Bill Coggins (Britain's 'Most Perfect Man' in 1930 and '32); and Ronald Walker (considered by many to be England's finest weightlifter)."

Admitting the complexity of the issue, Joe concedes that he has done a "lot of running." He continues, "I think the type of exercise Von Boeckmann was referring to was similar to that given by George Hackenschmidt in his book, *The Way to Live*. Von Boeckman advocated doing curls, presses, knee bends, etc., exercising at a steady pace and walking to and fro, briskly, between exercises. During such a workout, the heartbeat is increased enough to strengthen it and to improve circulation of the blood. As mentioned earlier, Charles Smith, Bill Coggins, and Ron Walker had an inherent dislike of running, but the two former men loved swimming. Charles represented Great Britain as a youth and Bill, at one period, was an all-year, open-air swimmer. Ron Walker lived with W. A. Pullum for awhile, being trained for some special events. Bill Pullum was a great believer in 'roadwork' and made it part of Ron's training. I was told, however, that Ron, when unaccompanied, would call on a friend, rest with him for awhile, and then run back to Church St., Camberwell [Pullum's Gym]."

At the age of 87, with two children, seven grandchildren, and eight great grandchildren, Joe still weight trains on Monday and Friday: "My training is limited mainly to the deadlift (owing to arthritis in both wrists), along with loading and unloading for my pupils. In the early morning, around seven, I do my outdoor exercises." Recently Joe was one of four generations of Assiratis who ran in the *Sunday Times* "Fun Run" in Hyde Park. As to his ideas about food, Joe commends his wife, Edith's, cooking and a varied diet. His own consists mainly of English and Italian dishes, along with Chinese dishes, which he praises as healthful. Since he turned 75, he has avoided eating after 6:00 P.M., except in social situations which demand otherwise.

"As to the role that exercise has played in my life, I have learned to discipline myself and to follow healthful living habits. Most men who continue to train with weights are cheerful, helpful, optimistic, and lasting friends. They enjoy their lives, and because of this, they are not envious of other people."

Like many in the older brigade of lifters, Joe leans to traditional training: "Weight training is the cheapest of hobbies. Along with a cambered bar that I bought from W.A. Pullum seventy years ago, I still have discs that were in use before 1914, given to me by George Merriman, one of my life's heroes, a man who lived to 91 and remained true to his name, a 'merry man.' A physical culture club that he started before the 1914-18 War is still active in the main center of London. Modern weight training, however, has become expensive because of all the Nautilus-type machines, but these are not necessary. I have no need for them, but I do realize that Arthur

Jones revolutionized muscle building, and when used correctly, his machines can be of great use in many ways.

"I joined Pullum's famous Camberwell Weightlifting Club in 1927 and am a lifetime member of the British Amateur Weightlifting Association (B.A.W.L.A.), having been a member for sixty-five years. In 1927, Herman Goerner was training there. In those days, the quick lifts were the basis of a workout: one- and two-hand swings, one- and two-hand snatches and jerks, one- and two-hand deadlifts, and bent presses: there were 42 official lifts under B.A.W.L.A. rules. To show how things have changed, I was invited recently to visit a physical culture club that I started in 1935, at Mount Pleasant Office, London. It now has 600 members. The club secretary has told me that 'It's all changed now,' and it certainly has. Thousands of pounds had been spent on huge machines, but gone were the wrestling and tumbling mats, the parallel bars, and punching bags. Gone were the quick lifts. Gone, also, were the smiling faces I used to see there. My old weightlifting equipment was still there—the Olympic bars and the lifting platform—but it was hardly used anymore. I asked myself what had happened to physical culture as I knew it."

Just as interesting as these insights, above, into Joe's views of the "good life and lifestyle," are his historical insights into, and his stories about, British strengthdom in the decades just after the turn of the century, the renaissance in that nation's history of physical culture. Lest I should intrude another set of lips between the tale-spinner's and the printed page, here, I have permitted Joe to tell his own story in his own words, not mine, centering to a degree (for this issue) upon his hero, Alan P. Mead. In the process, Joe touches upon other strength luminaries, as well as upon some brief insights into what it was like to grow up as a Socialist Church-of-Englander in London's "Quartiere Italiano," as a member of a family whose very name was synonymous with strength and the finest in the strong-man lifestyle. This whole column is taken from a series of letters that Joe wrote to me in response to questions that I had posed to him about his life in the Game.

"My father was a Socialist. The extreme poverty in London, contrasted with the examples of extreme wealth, caused nearly all thoughtful working men to become Socialists. Born in 1883, my father came to share the values of Socialism with me and taught me at an early age about the 'Brotherhood of Man,' lessons that I have never forgotten. He was a boxing instructor and, like my cousin Bert, a powerful, deep-chested man, who was not afraid of anybody. Prior to the 1914-1918 War, my Dad was a member of the 'Judeans Club' in the East End of London when Ted "Kid" Lewis was training there. Through a close friend of Jack Johnson, named Moriarity, my Dad became a friend of Johnson, and in the 30's, Dad managed professional boxers. It's clear that I was brought up with a great interest in boxers.

"Except of course for my father, my greatest inspiration was Alan P. Mead. In 1924, I witnessed a display of muscle control by him which remains vivid to this very day. The symmetry, proportion, and elasticity of his skin, and the tone of his muscles—his ability to control them—outshone anything I had seen before or have seen since. His upper arms measured 16 1/2", and all the other muscles were in perfect proportion. By 1924, I had put on 70 pounds of good muscle and was thin-skinned and very supple; I was also almost hypnotized by Alan's muscle control. Soon after this, at a Christmas concert at work, I gave my first muscle control show and continued to repeat these in concerts, private exhibitions, and physical culture shows. After the muscle control portion of these shows, I presented talks on my 'way of life.' Still at 87, I do many of these movements in my daily morning workouts.

"The last time I met Alan was 1946, while I was still a member of the Army Physical Training Corps. To those who knew Alan's deep devotion to his country and its royalty, it was no surprise that his daughters were named Mary and Elizabeth, just another example of that devotion, as was his military service in the 1914-18 War, in which he lost a leg from the knee down. He came from a distinguished family of judges, etc., in the 'Temple,' London, for hundreds of years. As David Webster discusses in *Barbells and Beefcake*, the Mead family was rather rich, and Alan, himself, became the head of a well-known firm of solicitors and a most successful attorney-at-law.

"Whenever I think of Alan, I remember many examples of his warm generosity. For instance, I met my future brother-in-law, William T. 'Bill' Coggins, who as I said earlier was Britain's 'Most Perfect Man' in '30 and '32, at the Mount Pleasant Post Office in London where we both worked. Bill mentioned that Alan had presented the Clarence Physical Culture Club in Islington (London) with an Olympic barbell set that he had purchased from W. A. Pullum. In fact, Alan was so impressed by Bill's physique that he paid for a series of photos (and directed the photo sessions) with Bill posed as "Apollo," the "Discobolus" of Myron, Rodin's "Thinker," and others." Bill later married Joe's sister, Anne: another alliance through marriage of the Assirati family with the nobility in British muscle and strength, not to mention the 'almost family' connection between the Assirati family and Charles Smith, who at 20 came to live with Joe's family. Unlike some modern physical culturists, Bill was a good all-round athlete, which was common in those days. He was a member of the famous Ashdown Wrestling Club (in Islington) and also the Highgate Diving Club, both of which produced many British champions.

"My cousin, Bert, the European wrestling champion, also lived in Islington and often trained at the 'Clarence': lifting weights, wrestling, practicing acrobatics, pulling strands, etc. You may have read that Ben did ten full deep knee bends with 500 pounds at the age of seventeen, accomplished in the presence of Bill Coggins and Jack Lewis, the famous strand-puller mentioned by David Webster in *Strength Lore and Strands*.

"Speaking of Alan's generosity, I remember another example, this

one involving his response to one of Bert's early demonstrations of power, when he was less than fifteen (fourteen years and nine months, to be exact). Bert and my father visited Pullum's gym in Camberwell on the occasion of a strength exhibition by Alexander Zass, 'The Amazing Samson,' whose main forte was bending iron bars. (I had to work that night and was not in attendance.) After displaying his amazing physique, Zass invited anyone in the audience to punch him in the abdomen, requesting that the punch be directed to the upper-part of his abdominal wall. Harold Wood, a good fighter who weighed at that time about 16 stones, took up Zass' challenge. (Wood is mentioned by Leo Gaudreau in *Anvils, Horseshoes, and Cannons* and also by David Webster in *Barbells and Beefcake*.) Harold hit Zass with a mighty blow. Unfortunately, he did not hit him 'fair and square.' His fist caught part of Zass' ribs, causing him to stagger sideways. My father said that he thought Harold 'had taken a liberty.' I had been under the impression, until I read Webster's book later on, that Zass had invited another punch, a legitimate one this time, and that Harold had thrown one, but Webster claims that Wood had broken two of Zass' ribs, which was quite possibly true.

"Before Zass ever started to bend bars, in his exhibitions, he would hand around an iron bar so that any doubters could 'test' it. My 14-year-old cousin, Bert, happened to be the last 'tester,' having been immediately preceded by my father. When Bert returned the bar, it was noticeably bent. This, of course, created quite a stir, and many questions were directed at the young boy, who when requested, stripped off his shirt and showed his very muscular physique, especially his pectorals and triceps.<sup>1</sup> (It must be remembered that large pectorals were rare in those days because most lifting was done in a standing position.) In any case, Alan Mead was so impressed by the strength of this youngster that he told Bill Pullum to give Bert a 225 lb. set of weights and also that he would pay Pullum to instruct him. Bert accepted the weights, but because he lived in Islington, which was a center of physical culture clubs and good instructors, he never went to Pullum for instruction. Also, since our families saw one another almost every week, I helped to teach Bert various systems of training, including the 42 official lifts. As a sequel to this story, when my father described the evening's events to me, he whispered, 'Don't say anything to anyone, but I bent the bar before handing it to Bert.' You can believe this, when I tell you—many years afterwards, when Bert had traveled the world and seen all its strongest men—he confided to me, 'Pop [meaning my father] had the most highly developed forearms I ever saw.'<sup>2</sup>

Yet another side of the complex Mead is dramatized by an event that occurred at the Drill Hall in Southwest London back in 1928. "On that occasion, Thomas Inch (who was 47) beat Eugen Sandow's 282-pound. two-hands anyhow with dumbbells and the boxer Harold Wood, whom I mentioned earlier, beat Arthur Saxon's 386 lb. two-hands pullover and push on back with bridge. The lifting was officiated by BAWLA referees and judges, and took place on a platform that had been rigged on a boxing ring. Tom Inch bent-pressed a dumbbell weighing 220 to arm's length overhead, and then whilst supporting the dumbbell, bent over, reached down, and took another dumb-

ell to his shoulder, straightened up, and pressed the lighter dumbbell overhead. This must have weighed over 62 lbs.; I cannot recall exactly how much. Throughout the lift, he had a smile on his face, which may have seemed like professional showmanship, but that was just the kind of person he really was. He always had a genial smile for everyone.

"Both Inch and Wood had lived for many years in the 'Southwest area' and the Hall was packed with their supporters. The excitement increased when Harold Wood appeared. He was carrying a quart bottle of beer, which he placed by his side after he seated himself on a stool in a corner of the ring. Wood, at that point in his forties, was weighing over 224 lbs. In light of the fact that he had won the British 12-stone championship (168 lbs.) prior to the 1914-18 War, you know he was carrying a lot of excess flesh. Between warm-up lifts, he took swigs from his bottle, until it was time for his attempt at beating the famous Arthur Saxon. The bell was loaded to 387 3/4 lbs., and Harold rolled the barbell across his face and chest onto his abdomen. He then did a shoulder bridge and gave a mighty heave. The bell briefly sank several inches into his flesh (fat), but then shot-up so fast that there seemed to be hardly any 'press out.' This was greeted with tremendous applause because, as Bill Pullum had said, 'Harold was loved by the weightlifting fraternity.' In the midst of all this applause, I happened to look over at Alan Mead. He was expressionless and 'applauded' by gently patting the back of his one hand (palm downward on his knee) with his other hand: 'applauding,' if that was the word, with the least motion and emotion possible. I said to myself, 'Alan does not approve of what he has just witnessed.' I may have been wrong, of course; perhaps it was just his judicial training, which prevented him from showing his emotion.<sup>3</sup>

"Another interesting phase of Alan's life revolved around his first wife, a very good looking and intelligent woman, who, like many intellectuals, was of the left-wing persuasion, quite the contrary as I've said to the right-wing Alan. I recall on one occasion, as a group of unemployed laborers marched past the gym, Alan said, jokingly, 'We could drop a few of those solid dumbbells on them.' I froze inside at the comment. Remember, at this time Fascism and Nazism were raising their heads, and there was much political tension in the air. On at least one occasion, however, Alan's left-wing wife influenced him in the strength side of his life. At that time, Alan requested my help at a sport meeting that he had planned; I was to take charge of the spirometer, with a prize to be given the man with the largest vital capacity of the lungs. The surprise to me was that the funds were being raised for a left-wing movement—not a Communist organization—but one supported very strongly by many Christians, particularly the Methodists, and to a great extent by the founders of the Labor Party in Great Britain during the early 1930s. Imagine my surprise that Alan, of all people, was running such an affair. I came to realize, of course, that the event and his involvement in it had to be the product of his wife's influence upon even as strong a conservative as Alan. The centerpiece of Alan's event that day, however, was a tug-of-war. We weightlifters got a team together on the spur of the moment, including Charles Smith, my training part-

ner. We looked quite a muscular bunch when we lined up. Alas, there was a team in the competition which had not been thrown together at the last moment, as we had been. It had trained together consistently and had a coach who had studied and timed our pattern of straining at the rope, so that when it came time for our contest, they knew the rhythm of our pull-and-release and beat us twice.

"Along with the tug-of-war that day, Charlie Smith had a wrestling match with a fellow Bermomosey (South London) man, named Barham. A good wrestler, Charlie was expected to win, but was, instead, beaten in two falls. How so? It developed, as I learned later, that Barham was a member of the famed Ashdown Wrestling Club, whose coach was George Mackenzie, Great Britain's representative in four Olympic Games. From having wrestled with Charlie, on the occasion of the latter's visit to the Ashdown Club, Mackenzie knew all of Smith's favorite throws, as well as his ways of 'coming at' his opponent. So from his coach's experience with Charlie, Barham went into the match knowing what to expect and how to counter Charlie's throws. It was not until Charles was in the U.S.A., years later, that I told him how he had come to lose.

"Like C. A. Ramsey, Alan was a very private man, and I feel somewhat guilty in telling you some of these things, especially about the strong influence upon him of his first wife."

Like all great men, Alan P. Mead has been especially honored, here, by the fineness of this fine man who was his stoutest admirer.

Like all history, iron game history is stories. More charming iron game stories than Joe's don't exist, nor more charming a storyteller than Joe Assirati, scion of strengthdom's noble Assirati clan.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Joe Assirati in a letter to the author: "Things are not always what they seem. When Bert stripped amazing everyone with his pectoral development, it was assumed that his chest was the result of his lifting, gymnastics, and wrestling, all of which, of course, did contribute to it. Another contributor, however, was the fact that I had showed Bert the great Maxick's *Muscle Control* and had read parts of the book to him, especially how Maxick advocated concentrating on one's muscles during exercise and other life activities. At that time, Bert was working for a family named Ronga (the family of Guido Ronga, the wrestling champion), and had to do a lot of metal filing at a bench. Encouraged by Maxick's development, Bert practiced his theory of concentration on the muscle group involved in one's activities (in this case, metal filing), and it was this single-minded concentration which contributed to his excellent chest. Huge pectorals were comparatively rare, compared with today. Note for example, Sandow."

<sup>2</sup>The British Empire and European Wrestling Champion and a man of Herculean proportions and strength, Bert Assirati was one of the great strongman-wrestlers of all time. He reportedly dead-lifted 800 pounds back in 1938, and did a one-legged squat with 200 pounds. He did a pullover at arms' length with 200 pounds, and three one-arm chins while weighing 240 pounds. He also was able to hold a one-hand stand and do a crucifix on the rings at a bodyweight of 266. At the same weight, to quote David P. Willoughby, he could do a series of back somersaults "with the lightness and grace of a ballerina." In addition, he was a good long-distance cyclist and a champion stand-puller. See: David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (South Brunswick A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 131, 134-5, 254, 256, 266, 274, 381, 382, 546. See also Charles A. Smith, "Tribute to a Strength Athlete." *Iron Game History* 1(March 1991): 14.

<sup>3</sup>Harold died in 1954 at the age of 65. He had retired and left London to live in a cottage in the country, continuing part-time work as a rat catcher. One snowy evening he visited the village public house to enjoy some local company and the beer for which he still retained a 'liking.' By closing time, the snow was deep, so Harold decided on a 'short cut' across some fields, upon which, unfortunately for him, a farmer had recently laid some barbed wire, which entangled itself in his trousers. Failing to free himself quickly, he fell asleep, only to be found next day, frozen to death."



Dear *Iron Game History*:

I should hate to miss a copy of the magazine which I consider excellent. I've enjoyed all the information imparted so far. However with regard to the Roark Report and the listing of significant dates in issue 4 & 5, he gives three alternative years for the birth of Steve Reeves, i.e. 1926 or 27 or 28. It has been well documented that Reeves was the youngest Mr. A winner in 1947 at 21 years of age. Presto, he must have been born in 1926. Also, the Roark Report dates in issue No 6 for 1932 had Lud Shusterich being born. I am sure I have seen a picture of the 1940 Mr. America contest with Lud as a contestant. I believe he was 17 years old at the time, making his year of birth 1923. It could be a simple transposition of the numbers 3 and 2. Anyway, all great stuff to all of us iron game fans of the years before the steroid era started to bite. Good luck in all your endeavors.

Doug Ewington  
Staffordshire, England

**You're right. The year of Shusterich's birth was 1923, and the error was that the last two numbers were transposed. As for Reeves, Roark was simply relating the various dates given over the years for Reeves' birth as a way to illustrate the often inaccurate information published in our field.**



Dear *Iron Game History* :

*Iron Game History* is an excellent journal! I look forward to reading *IGH* more than any other bodybuilding publication. I read with special interest the article on "Reflections on Muscledbinding" in a recent issue of *IGH* (April 1992), because of experiences during my high school days (1947-51) similar to those of the author. Our coach told the players, "I'll drop anyone from the team that I find drinking booze, smoking cigarettes, or lifting weights!" After being converted to weight training by a cover photo of and comments on Steve Reeves in *Muscle Power* (October 1947), I had to train in secret in order to continue playing high school sports. Today, however, high school, college, and professional athletes all participate in weight training programs.

I do have a bone to pick with Dr. Al Thomas, however, regarding some comments in his otherwise fine article. I believe it was inappropriate for him to state that "cheerleaders" or one religious

denomination are more sexually promiscuous than members of other religious denominations. A search of the relevant literature reveals no credible research finding to support his "cheerleaders" hypothesis. In the future, therefore, I suggest that Dr. Thomas and other authors stick to reporting facts that can be documented.

Keep up the great work on the history of the iron game!

Grover L. Porter, Ph.D.  
University of Alabama, Huntsville

**A careful reading of Al Thomas' editorial about "muscledbinding" reveals that his mention of "protestant cheerleaders" was not intended to single them out in any way other than to note the particular role one or two of them played in that particular school at that particular time.**



Dear *Iron Game History*:

I recently read with great interest your article in *Muscle & Fitness* entitled "Hermann Goerner." I have tried to locate Edgar Mueller's book *Goerner the Mighty* (1951), but with no success. A top local bookstore ran various computer searches and told me it is out of print. The local university library does not have a copy. Do you have any suggestions on how I might obtain a copy? Your help would greatly appreciated. Thank you.

Ray Moeller  
Prospect, Kentucky

**Perhaps a reader might have an extra copy for sale. Good luck. It's a wonderful book.**

Dear *Iron Game History*:



Just a note to commend you on your interesting article on "The Origins of Weight Training for Female Athletes in North America" in the current *Iron Game History*. It has much to say to female athletes, and to all ladies interested in staying healthy.

John C. Long, M.D.  
Longview, Texas

Dear *Iron Game History*:

Joe Assirati got in touch with me about George Hackenschmidt and asked me to get in touch with you. Excuse the delay, but as I am in my 86th year I can be excused.

The reason I took up wrestling when I was around nine years old was because George was a great hero in my eyes. He was a moving

force in wrestling. Many competitors over the years have told me how impressed they were by him.

I started my career about 1914 or 1915 when I joined the boy scouts. My tutor was S. V. Bacon, one of the first Olympic Champions. He had two brothers. He started me on Cumberland and Westmoreland wrestling which I was not much taken with as it was a restricted style of wrestling and meant taking a back hold. I soon progressed to Freestyle and over the years have won seven national wrestling titles and many international titles. I represented Great Britain at the 1948 Olympic Games. I was also the coach and team manager at other Olympic Games and Commonwealth Games. During my life I was a 2nd Dan Judo and was captain of a winning team against Germany. I was also second in the Montreal Provincial Judo Championships. During the last war I was the close combat instructor at the CBTC, Inverness shire, Scotland.

Briefly the above gives you a little of my background. I was, of course, in the A.P.T.C. with Joe.

Now for George! I first met him around 1947 when he came to my practice nights at Peel House. This was where I worked and at this time he used to work out and do his double jumps over a rope string across the backs of two chairs. He could do this at the age of 70 years. I then lost sight of him for a few years. Then he turned up at Elliott House where the police trained two nights a week. This was off the Edgware Road. He carried on coming along about once a week. I last heard of him around 1954 and visited him and Rachel at his home in South Norwood in 1955. I retired from the Met Police and went to Canada. In Montreal I was a Director of P.T. at the YWHA in Montreal. I stayed for four years and then returned to England. It was in Montreal that I saw George and Rachel and we had lunch with them. Both were in good health but as to understanding George's philosophy of life, I am afraid it was too deep for me!

I next saw him and Rachel at their home in South Norwood. I last visited him (I believe) in East Dulwich Infirmary where he subsequently died. Rachel gave me a large photo of George when he was 19 years old. This I finally gave to Bert Jacob for a museum of the English Olympic Wrestling Association in St. Manchester.

I kept occasionally visiting Rachel and finally lost touch about ten years ago. Her memory was vague.

I am afraid I have not told you much. As one gets older everything gets very much more clouded. I hope you can get something out of this.

Stan Bissell  
Codford St. Mary, England



Dear *Iron Game History*,

I thought that the enclosed copy of a review I wrote for *Powerlifting USA* might interest you. I say this because some of what I say was inspired by what I read in some of your reports on old time strongwomen in *Iron Game History*. It seems to me that the great strongwomen in the past were exhibited like oddities in circuses,

vaudeville and side shows. I can recall in my own childhood seeing one of the last of the classic strong women of the stage, Joan Rhodes, perform at a state fair. She bent iron bars, tore telephone books in half and—most impressive of all—she lifted the heaviest men in the audience. She was not accepted as an authentic athlete, but like Sandwina, Vulcana, Ivy Russell, Josephine Blatt, etc., was viewed as a curiosity, an oddity to draw in money. When I see women of today accepted and respected in lifting meets, I am reminded of how much they owe these early female strength performers, who paid the price of being “exhibited.” I think, too, of the early women athletes who first used heavy weight training for betterment in their chosen athletic endeavors, women like diver Pat McCormick (who trained with the musclemen at Muscle Beach in California), tennis player Christine Truman, Cindy Wyatt of track and field, etc. I especially think of my dear friend, Lurline Hamilton Struppeck. While at LSU, strength coach Alvin Roy refused to even see or speak to her; she was often shunned in the weight room, and not being able to come to New Orleans on a regular basis as a struggling student to work with the fair-minded Bob Samuels, read everything about and by Paul Anderson as her inspiration! Lurline was recently inducted into the L.S.U. Athletic Hall of Fame (the first woman so honored), and I was doubly proud of her knowing what she went through to get there!

Unfortunately I missed your article on Josephine Blatt. I find her fascinating because her harness and back lifts were near the top, even as compared with men lifters. She must have been extraordinary. I hope you get to Ivy Russell one of these issues. Joan Rhodes must be around somewhere still lifting hefty men and seeking out telephone directories to destroy (oddly enough, Joan is best remembered for failing at a feat of strength on worldwide television: dropping Bob Hope on the back of his head while trying to put him over her head, leaving him with a headache for a week!). Paula Mollerup of the WPC club and her dream of an island for modern amazon women must be around somewhere amongst the living.

Allen Smith  
New Orleans, La.

The article on Josephine Blatt, who appeared as the strong-woman “Minerva,” appeared in Vol. 1, NO. 2 (April 1990) of *Iron Game History*. Back issues are \$4.00.



The iron game community suffered five losses recently and we wanted to pay our respects. In the future, we will provide additional details about the contributions of Bob Mitchell, Weldon Bullock, Mohammed Benaziza, Jon Pall Sigmarsson and Grace Klein. Some lived a long, full life and some were taken much too soon. We extend our sympathy to their families and friends.

# The Roark Report

## SOME MEMORABLE IRON GAME

### EVENTS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

The late 1930s and early 1940s were an especially interesting era in the history of the Iron Game. Bob Hoffman had been putting out **Strength & Health** for only a few years, Peary and Mabel Rader had just begun *Iron Man*, and young Joe Weider was just beginning the magazine empire that would one day be his. York, Pennsylvania became a center for weightlifting activities in those years; "Muscle Beach" got started in California; the first Mr. America contest was held. As war brewed in Europe, as the Depression wound down in America, through it all, the history of lifting continued. Below are *some* of the significant events of that era. For those who would like to read more about them, I've included an abbreviated bibliographic guide to sources in the major magazines or books in our field. Please send additions, corrections and other tailoring to Joe Roark, Box 320 St. Joseph, IL 6187 as soon as possible so that in each issue we can present corrections on previous offerings. Please document any such corrections as completely as possible. Thanks.

The references for the following information are:

**S&H** is *Strength & Health*

**HS** is *Health and Strength*

**Vol. 1 or Vol. 2** refers to Leo Gaudreau's two volume work, *Anvils and Horseshoes*

**Mr. A** is *Mr. America* by Weider

**IM** is *Iron Man*

**SA** is David Willoughby's *Super Athletes*

**MD** is *Muscular Development*

**V** is *VIM* magazine by Eells

**M** is *Muscleman*

**IG** is *The Iron Game* by David Webster.

#### 1938

- Jan. 8 In Vienna, a special weightlifting contest was held to honor Joseph Grafl, who won the world's heavyweight weightlifting title in 1908 and 1909 in Vienna, in 1910 at Dusseldorf, and in 1911 he won one of the four world's championships held that year. In 1913 he won the title in Breslau, Poland. That makes five world titles. SA, 86-87.
- Jan. 27 Roger Eells bent presses 200 lbs with his left hand, 185 lbs with his right hand. S&H, May 1938.
- Jan. 30 LeeRoy Saba born: IM, 20:2, 10.
- Feb. 16 George Petroski world record middle-weight crucifix at the St. Petersburg, Florida strength show at the YMCA: S&H, May 1938, 4.
- Feb. 19 Roger Eells bent pressed 235 pounds with his left hand, feet not together.

- Mar. 7 Joe Zimmerman, 145 lbs bodyweight, withstood his 150lb brother's jump from a six foot step ladder onto Joe's abs. Dick, the brother was holding a 50 pound dumbbell in each hand. SA 205; S&H May 1938, 18.
- Mar. 19 Black Jack Wodson born, birthweight 17 pounds, 9 ounces.
- Mar. 25 Roger Eells fourteen futile attempts to bent press the Cyr dumbbell. S&H, June 1938, 33.
- May 16 Chick Fisdell bent pressed the 175 pound Rolandow barbell.
- June 14 The German weightlifting team visits USA.
- June 25 Josef Manger, in New York City, jerked 402 1/2 pounds (he did not clean the weight) but at the time no one in America had jerked that amount. S&H, August 1938, 18.
- July 30 The French finals, at La Baule, for the World Physique Championships held, winner was Pitet.
- July 31 Overall winner of above title during the World's finals was Emile Bonnet.
- Sept. 5 At North American Championships in Toronto both John Grimek and John Davis earned berths on the USA team headed for Vienna, with totals, respectively, of 830 and 815 pounds. Vol. 1, 101.
- Nov. 26 Ron Walker's first pro record: 286 1/2 pound snatch. M, May 1953, 15.
- Nov. 26 Bob Hoffman claimed a bent press of 263 1/2 pounds. S&H, March 1939.
- Dec. 1 Johnny Hordines' bodybuilding contest at Gardner's Reducing Salon and Gymnasium in Schenectady, N.Y. No overall winner, but the three height class winners, in height order were: Jack Channing, Bill Hillgardner, and John Bousa. Title was "Finest Physique" contest.
- Dec. 2 Aurele Veilleau at Klein's gym *almost* bent pressed the Rolandow dumbbell 14 times.
- Dec. 4 S&H showed a poster for contest this date between Milo Steinborn and Charles Rigoulot.

#### 1939:

- Jan. 1 Bob Hoffman bent pressed the Rolandow dumbbell (which weighed 209 lbs).
- Feb. 25 Copy of Cease & Desist Order against Charles Atlas. S&H, June 1939, 12.
- Feb. 26 List of lifts done by W.L. Travis on this date. S&H, April 1940, 33.
- Feb. 27 W.L. Travis signed an affidavit attesting to previous day's lifting. S&H, April 1940, 33.
- Apr. 4 Emile Deriaz died, or, he was cremated. V, December 1940, 12.



- Apr. 23 Best Built Man Contest was held at the Bronx YMHA. Height class winners in order: Murray Markoff, Bill Hillgardner, and Bert Goodrich. S&H July 1930, 25.
- May 9 Shams cleaned and jerked 338 1/4 pounds at 142 pounds bodyweight. S&H April 1967, 26.
- June 24 Marriage of Jim Halliday of Great Britain.
- June 7 Batta died: born August 17, 1866. IM 17:4, 29, also V 2, 126.
- June 10 "America's Finest Physique" contest at Amsterdam, N.Y. Height winners: Elmer Farnham, Jack Hempe, Bert Goodrich.
- June 20 Tony Garcy born.
- July 4 Joe Abbenda born.
- July 4 Roland Essmaker won Mr. America title.
- July 25 Joe Greenstein's chair/auto accident was featured in *PIC* magazine
- Nov. 17 George Paulik pinched two 45 pound Olympic plates, by the hub, then with one in each hand, curled & pressed them. MD September 1974, 6.
- Dec. 17 W.A. Pullum displayed his six weightlifting medals at the Camberwell Club.
- 1940:**
- Feb. 3 Floyd Odom born. MD January 1977, 22.
- Feb. 17 John Grimek continentaled and pressed 320 pounds in York. S&H April 1940, 17.
- Mar 14 George Hobby bent pressed the Rolandow dumbbell (209lbs).
- Apr. 5 John Davis bent pressed the Rolandow dumbbell.
- Apr. 28 The Jr. Nationals in weightlifting were held in Detroit S&H June 1940, 40.
- Apr. 30 Letter from Emile Valtier to Leo Gaudreau. concerning the Apollon rail car wheels. Vol. 1,153.
- May 5 Nature Boy Buddy Rogers first wrestling bout. MD November 1966, 55
- May 25 Weightlifting Sr. Nationals. S&H July 1940, 30.
- May 25 John Grimek won Mr. America. S&H July 1940, 30.
- Sept. 13 Bob Gajda born.
- Oct. 19 Tony Terlazzo, at 148 lbs, pressed 250 pounds, snatched 245 pounds and cleaned and jerked 330 pounds. Vol. 1, 31.
- Oct. 20 John Grimek wed Angela, thus making Angela the first woman to ever marry an AAU Mr. America title holder.
- Dec. 1 Grimek, Bob Hoffman, and Tony Terlazzo headed west on a tour. S&H January 1941, 5.
- Dec. 6 Rolandow died, born May 6, 1874. IM 19:5, 26.
- 1941:**
- Jan. 9 Ron Walker's son born. HS May 24, 1941,483.
- Jan. 30 Joe Bednarski (Ivan Putski) born in Poland.
- Feb. 21 W.L. Travis celebrated his 65th birthday by lifting 1000 pounds s one thousand times in 39 minutes S&H October 1956, 50.
- Apr. 13 Steve Reno born. IM 28:1, 14.
- Apr. 27 Weightlifting Jr. Nationals in Akron, Ohio. S&H June 1940, 34.
- May 10 Bent press championships held.
- May 23-4 Weightlifting Sr. Nationals in York, Pa. S&H July 1941, 32.
- May 24 Grimek wins Mr. America for second year.
- June 8 Randy Watson born. IM 22:6, 12.
- July 4 Sergio Oliva born.
- July 13 At 12:30 A.M. W.L. Travis died; born Feb. 21, 1876. SA, 82
- July 14 Les Stockton took as his bride Abbye Eville, better known now as Pudgy Stockton.
- Aug. 7 *New York Times* published part of Travis' will.
- Dec. 23 Serge Reding born; died June 27, 1975.
- 1942:**
- Jan. 7 Vasily Alexeev born.
- Jan. 26 Tom Helms born.
- Feb. 13 John Farbotnik began exercising with weights at Fritshe's Gym; age 16. IM 8:1, 9.
- Feb. 15 Jim Halliday became a prisoner of war. Imprisoned 3 1/2 years.
- Mar 20 Ken Waller born.
- April 1 In a circus caravan, Joe Roark was conceived.
- Apr. 9 Weightlifting Jr. Nationals in Bristol, CT. S&H June 1942, 30.
- Apr. 20 Andy Jackson's wedding day (according to Andy; a magazine misreported this date)
- May 24 Sr. Nationals in Cincinatti. S&H July 1942, 22.
- May 24 Frank Leight wins Mr. America.
- June 6 Chuck Amato born. IM 37:6, 28
- June 28 Frank Zane born.
- July 10 Andy Jackson drafted. IM 34:2 p31
- Sept. 30 John Lopez pressed 150 pounds 37 times. SA, 197.

