



IRON GAME HISTORY



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

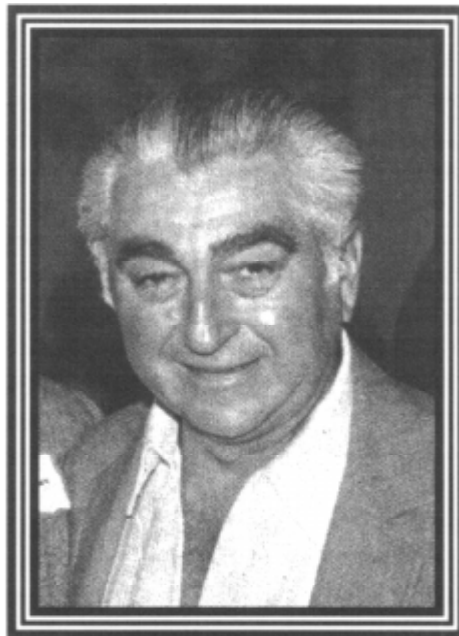
Al Thomas

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Vic Boff: The Old Game's Best Friend. Al Thomas
12. Farewell to Vic Boff Ken "Leo" Rosa
14. Grapevine: Our Readers Remember . . . Staff
26. Professor Pat O'Shea. Terry & Jan Todd
30. Sergei Eliseev Daniel Dubshin & David Chapman

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

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

My Last Words with Vic

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

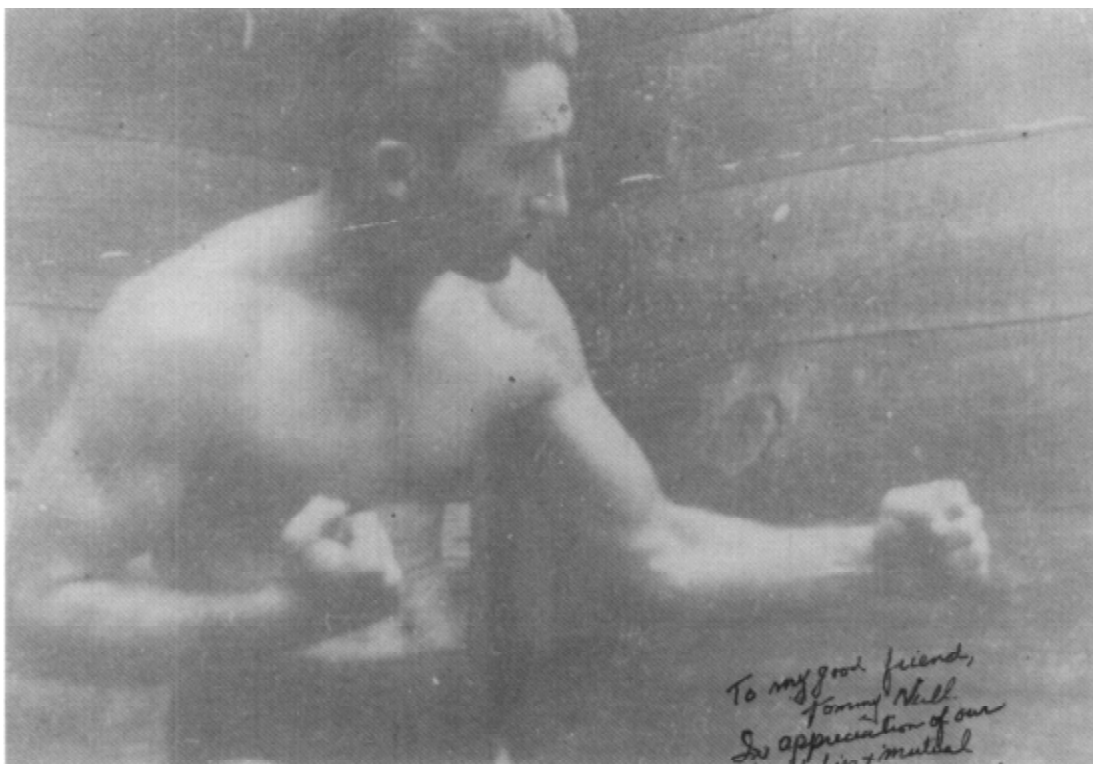
Dealing not for a minute with death, surely not his own, his last phone call did, in fact, deal with the following concerns, remembered here from a "list" (scribbled on the back of an envelope) that, for some reason, I made, ticking off the topics that characterized a Vic Boff

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Section One

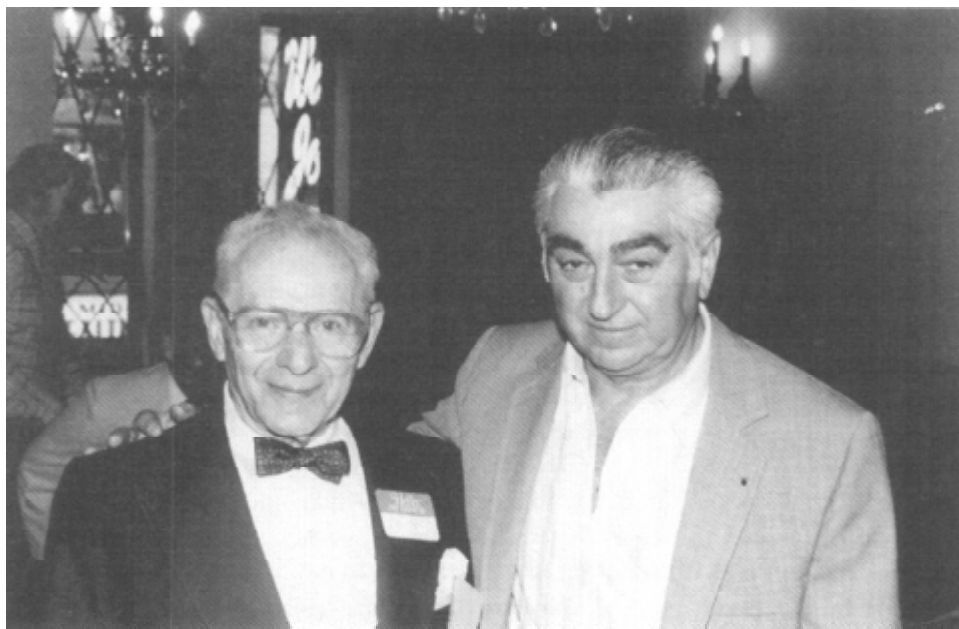
"Some Observations on Iron Game History. . ."

pp. 50-53

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Section Two

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Section Three

"Some Observations on Iron Game History . . ."

pp. 20—22

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Rebuke: An Inauspicious Beginning of a Grand Friendship

The Place: Brookside Park

The Time: About Fifty-six Years Ago

The Occasion: The York Barbell Club Picnic

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

FAREWELL TO VIC BOFF

Dr. Ken "Leo" Rosa

Ten A.M., January 1, 2003. New Year's morning. Cold, cloudy, gray, raining. I sat bundled up beside my longtime friend, Dr. Serafin Izquierdo, as he drove us from the Bronx towards Manhattan's West Side Highway. Destination: West 22nd Street on the beach at Brooklyn's Coney Island for a final farewell to Vic Boff. A group of Vic's friends were to meet there for a memorial ceremony at noon. On the way, we reminisced about the past twenty years of annual Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen reunions with the exception of the fateful 2001. We also talked about the disappeared Mollo's Health Food Store in the Fordham Road area of the Bronx, which was frequented in the past by both of us, who had been regular, satisfied customers. We found out only a few years ago that the wonderful Mollo's was owned by Vic Boff. Leroy Colbert told me that it was Vic Boff who gave him many valuable, helpful business pointers when Leroy opened his first World Health Center on Manhattan's Broadway and 84th Street.

Coney Island, 11:30 A.M. We drove under the elevated subway tracks until we reached West 22nd Street near the famous amusement area. We parked and walked onto the cold, rainy beach. There was nobody. Perplexed, we turned from the beach and faced the streets. To our consternation, there was a big man in bathing trunks walking towards us. He asked "are you here for Vic?" "Yes," we answered. "Come this way," he beckoned. Just then Arthur Dreschler and his wife Joanne arrived. We all followed the big man in bathing trunks a few yards to the street level metal door of a flat roofed cinder block garage-like building. A short passageway led into a room almost filled with people, many of whom we knew, some of whom we didn't. There was a well used exercise bench with a loaded barbell resting in its rack, some old lockers, a table on which were abundant morsels of chicken, rolls, juices and a fading picture of a young Vic Boff. At this table sat a fit-looking, white-haired man who I later learned was called "Ice Cube." To one side there was percolating hot coffee. The walls were covered with old photographs, and most of them depicted happy looking young athletes from another time. Prominent among those athletes was a smiling, dark haired, vigorous looking Vic Boff. We were in the

famous Coney Island Iceberg Athletic Club-home of the winter bathers and organized in 1918—of which Vic Boff was a long revered member. I felt at home. This was my kind of place.

Suddenly the giant figure of Slim "The Hammerman" Farman towered over me. He began softly sharing memories of his long relationship with The Mighty Atom and with Vic Boff. I listened intently. His face expressed profound grief. Then my breath stopped as I noticed what appeared to be a tear on his left cheek. I felt tears come to my own eyes. Slim and his wife had traveled four hours to say farewell to Vic.

Big Mike D' Angelo's booming voice was easily heard as he conversed with everyone and his two sons videotaped and photographed the goings on. Steve Sadicario greeted us with a gentle handshake from his powerful mitt. The great Joe Rollino, George Boff (son of Vic), Joe Guarino, Joe Lazaro, Randall Basset and Tom Townsend were among the growing group. Many great people were coming together to honor a great man.

We formed a line to sign the attendance book. People continued to file into the room. Then I was totally surprised by the arrival of Mark Henry. Mark lives in Texas, but he's quite busy with his WWE wrestling schedule. Once again a tear came to my eye and my breath momentarily stopped. Mark Henry came in order to pay his final respects, to demonstrate by his appearance this morning the great esteem in which he held Vic Boff. Wrestler, strongman, sensitive human being, Mark Henry has a new fan in yours truly.

One at a time individuals retreated to the locker area or the shower room and reappeared wearing bathing attire. I still had not figured out what this meant although I now realize that it must have been obvious to everyone else.

Amidst the friendly chatting there was a good natured call for us to direct our attention to the white haired man known as "Ice Cube" still sitting erect and regally at the table. The room became quiet so that "Ice Cube" could share with us his thoughts about his departed longtime friend. He said, "there was no one I knew that claimed to have an answer to life except . . . Vic. He believed there was one answer. So he told all the disbe-

lieving Icebergs when I was a rookie swimmer in 1953. 'be kind to your fellow man and he will reciprocate in kind, usually.' When I was young the world marveled at the exploits of Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the great physician who selflessly gave his resources materially and philosophically to help the poor people in Africa. As the years passed and some wisdom was attained it dawned on me that there was only one person remotely approaching the towering stature of the so-called "great white wizard" and that was Dr. Victor Boff. When Dr. Boff counseled you, the aura of his presence elevated you spiritually for a long time. Just as Dr. Schweitzer sometimes walked with kings so did Vic. Just as Schweitzer treated every man equally, so did Vic. He had an everlasting spirit that transcended the physical world and gave you hope and reason to carry on. A man such as this will live in **our** hearts forever. **CARRY ON!**"

Directed by Mike D'Angelo, in bathing trunks, people now began filing out of the room through its one door, onto the pavement, into the cold, onto the beach, towards the water. We followed those leading. Most of us were bundled up. Some were carrying umbrellas to shield against the freezing rain.

We gathered at the water's edge and listened as Mike D'Angelo, carrying the urn containing the ashes of Vic Boff, reminded us that we were on the spot where Vic regularly had bathed in winter. Mike pointed out the nearby rocks where Vic would place his towel and other gear before entering the water. With that, Mike walked to the rocks and began scattering some of Vic's ashes on them. He then strode into the frigid water and was joined by the other super-humans in bathing attire including Steve "Mighty Stefan" Sadicario, 97-year old Joe Rollino, Mark Henry, a young woman named Alexis Venezia and several others whose forgiveness I beg for my not having obtained their identities to include herein. When he was waist high in the Atlantic, Mike D'Angelo emptied the urn onto the waves as Alexis Venezia scat-



Mike D'Angelo speaks to part of the brave group who assembled at Coney Island to share in the scattering of Vic's ashes in the frigid Atlantic and on the beach he loved so well.

Photo Courtesy Leo Rosa

tered beautiful flowers which intermingled with Vic's ashes. Alexis Venezia was born 21 years ago with a hole in her heart which was surgically repaired during her first year. At age eight she had a pace maker installed. She is a competitive swimmer and was honored to be asked to participate. She needed little coaxing to go into the ocean with the other swimmers to honor Mr. Boff as she did it as a tribute to her 87-year old grandfather, Jimmy Venice, an old time strongman and a friend of Vic's.

After the memorable ceremony on the beach we all returned to the Iceberg Clubhouse, reminisced some more, then bade each other so long and went our separate ways. One impression that has remained indelibly with me is the image of Joe Rollino, casting one last sorrowful look at a photograph on the wall of his departed, beloved friend.

Mike D'Angelo has produced a video tribute to Vic Boff that includes the memorial service described in this article, newscasts showing Vic and the Iceberg Club in action, and other rare footage. Despite her protestations, all proceeds from the sale of this video will go to Ann Boff. To order, send \$25.00 to Mike D'Angelo, 18 Colon Street, Staten Island, NY, 10312. Please make checks payable to Ann Boff.

OUR READERS REMEMBER

“VIC” BOFF: 1917-2002



Dear *IGH*:

Throughout each age of history—almost as a special gift to us from God—are born men and women of great wisdom and insight—ambassadors of a higher dimension sent to teach us a greater truth and to open our eyes to things we might have failed to see on our own. Without their guidance and direction lighting the path of universal truth, we would stumble and bruise ourselves along another darkened road overgrown with lies, snares, and half-truths.

These special ambassadors are people of great courage, conviction and compassion who most of all are led by a burning need to share their deeper knowledge and understanding with others. Sadly, many times, the enlightenment they bring us comes with little or no financial reward to themselves yet in their selflessness they are rarely deterred from sharing and giving to those who seek.

In our never-ending need for labels, we have pegged such persons as giants, heroes, gurus, pioneers, and leaders-but unfortunately also radicals, eccentrics, kooks and rebels. Yet, it is by these very individuals that the world has been prompted to move forward throughout the ages. For whether in the light of adulation and praise or the shadow of scorn and derision, they still put forth their hand to us and say: “come—let me teach you!”

We now say goodbye to such a giant, a great man, a hero, a pioneer, a role model, a mentor, and most of all a friend. To those of us who had the good fortune to know Vic Boff personally and benefit from his great wisdom and insight, this is a very sad day. Our teacher has left us. And now in our sorrow and pain from such a great loss, we look desperately for another hand to guide us and lead us and encourage us to “carry on.”

And even now as we are forced to look for another to show us the way, we still savor and cling to the words, the wisdom, the guidance, the love, and especially the cherished memory of our beloved friend Vic.

For even in death, his powerful constitution and the unswerving strength of his convictions bid us all to “carry on” our own good fight no matter what the obstacles. And through his good example of a life well-lived, a life totally in service to others, a life of sharing and caring and giving, we will find deep within ourselves the ability to “carry on,” for Vic would have it no other way.

Yes, this is a very sad day indeed for all those in the world of health, and nutrition, and physical culture. A giant of a man has now left us to join that great Old Time Barbell & Strongmen Association in the sky—no doubt to be greeted warmly by those brothers in strength who went before him.

And as we now look up to the heavens to catch one last glimpse of the image of our good friend Vic slowly dissolving into the clouds, and if we listen really carefully through the silence of death, we assuredly can hear his words as he turns to us one last time and says: “Carry On!”

Goodbye Victor and may God bless you. You were a great friend.

Tom Ciola
Orlando, FL



Dear IGH:

I was quite shocked and saddened by your letter on the death of Vic Boff. While I never met Vic in person, we kept in touch quite often by phone and in letters. I am enclosing a short article on the personal impact Vic had on me over the years. I hope we can find a replacement to carry on, as he would have wanted.

The Passing of a Hero

Beside my easy chair in the living room lies the most valuable book in the world, at least to me. I have for 58 years been a fanatical physical culturist. I started in 1944 as a pupil of Charles Atlas, and his diploma still hangs in my home gym. Then in 1945, my older brother Tom bought me a York Barbell set that changed my life forever. I became a gym owner (Jakes Pennsylvania Health Gym in Altoona, PA.)—the first in central Pennsylvania. I put on a strongman act many times over the next 35 years, with a standing offer of \$1,000 for anyone who could duplicate all my feats on stage, which I never had to pay. I was also a dealer of rare and used books for over 50 years, and sold Bob Hoffman hundreds of health books.

I have grand admiration for that great strongman Joseph Greenstein, "The Mighty Atom," from whom I got the inspiration to have my own strongman routine. While not in his class of twisting horseshoes and biting through spikes, I was able to put on my routine that was last performed before thousands in Altoona, PA. On the same show were Dennis Tinerino, Mr. America and Mr. Universe; and the Pittsburgh Steelers' John Kolb with four Superbowl rings.

A small city gym owner, who dislikes travel, my only contact with the stars in our field was mostly at my contests, which I held several times a year, or at visits to my gym. A few greats visited, such as Bruce Randall, Mr. Universe; Ray Mentzer, Mr. America 1978; and super heavyweight Hugh Cassidy, national champ in Powerlifting. So when the President of the Oldetime Strongmen Association would telephone me, I would always feel honored. Vic was a kind and generous man and he always asked me about my training and laughed when I told him I still trained every day on an exercise bike or weights as I have for the last 58 years. He also would ask about a young man who I had trained in my gym—Gary Stitch, who had one of the strongest grips in the world and probably held a record in the grip machine I had made, with a very strict 325 lbs. with the right

hand. (A write-up by Joe Roark appeared about Gary in *Iron Game History* April 1990.) I was sorry to inform Vic that a stroke had stopped Gary from any lifting and grip feats.

From time to time, I would send Vic various books, photos, etc. that I knew would be of interest. When I recently ran across a large write-up on Vic's beloved Coney Island in New York City, I sent it to him.

Vic called me on September 11, 2002 and as usual we talked about many of the old-timers, many before my time but also about Hoffman, Grimek and my old friend Walter Good, who had built so many nice pieces of equipment for my gym. And, of course, the Mighty Atom, who Vic had known quite well and even worked with for awhile. Vic told me that he saw the Mighty Atom put down two men in a few seconds in a fight. I told him that I lent a friend my copy of the book on Joseph Greenstein and it was never returned and I was looking for another copy.

Then, October 7th, five days after my 73rd birthday, I received the most valuable book in the world: *The Spiritual Journey of Joseph Greenstein, The Mighty Atom World's Strongest Man*, inscribed by Vic, "To Jake. In appreciation of our friendship and mutual interest. Sincerely. Carry On." In the front of the book, Vic was thanked by Ed Spielman, the author.

I wrote Vic back telling him I would cherish it. Not only for my admiration for the Mighty Atom, but moreso for the kindness of Vic himself, the man who, above all others, carried the torch for all lovers of physical culture, as it was really meant to be. I hope I was able to get my message to him, as I read the letter from Terry and Jan telling of his passing.

Jake Webb
Huntingdon, PA



Dear IGH:

Thanks for your letter concerning Vic. Sure am sorry to hear about his death—just spoke to him a few weeks ago by phone. He seemed to be feeling fine at the

time.

You asked for memories, reminiscences, etc., so I wrote the enclosed poem to his memory. I'm also sending a copy to his wife, Ann.

Use the poem in any way you think is fitting or ditch if you find it bad verse. I'm going on eighty-seven now—still working out and walking my favorite hills here in Southern Illinois. Hope all goes well with the two of you.

TO VIC BOFF

To Vic, a man we all enjoyed
To Vic, a man whom fate employed
To keep our Iron Game alive
and help our legend to survive.
He was a pleasant, kindly man
who had a dream and drew a plan
to make our sport vital and strong
and prove our critics sorely wrong.
With sympathy we say to Ann,
Vic was a great and gracious man.

Gene Jantzen
Carlyle, IL



Dear IGH:

Thank you so very much for informing me of the passing of Vic Boff. It was certainly a sad feeling to experience the loss to the Iron Game of one so great. His knowledge of the muscle sports and the value of nutrition exceeded his years on this planet.

What I found the most interesting about him was the literal person of Vic Boff. I loved his accent, his direct no-nonsense explanations of this beloved occupation (my sentiments) as a divine purveyor of Strength and Health. Most importantly, I loved his compassion and his graciousness. We spoke over the telephone a few times. He gave me his time and sincerity. It was like talking with an uncle that the whole family loved. Although I never met him personally, I can imagine kids and adults wanting to be near him.

Vic Boff offered me an opportunity to perform

my act at one of the AOBS annual meetings. Unable to obtain the finances to make the trip, I truly missed a once in a lifetime chance. Vic still believed in me and had enough faith to publish an article on one of my shows in his newsletter. It was a tremendous honor to have him do that.

Ironically, I was sending out my Christmas cards when I received your letter. When I came to Vic's name it stopped me cold. The Lord has called one of his "Good Shepherds" home—he who tended the flock of the "Iron Brotherhood." God bless the Boff family.

John Patrick Sullivan
Greenwell Springs, LA



Dear IGH:

Please know that I was very shocked to get your letter, dated November 29, 2002, informing me that Vic Boff had passed away on November 9th.

Your write-up (obituary) covering Vic's lifespan 1917 - 2002 was excellent. It speaks volumes, loud and clear! Vic's main mission in life was dedication to clean living with emphasis on physical fitness, throughout one's entire lifetime.

Vic was an ideal role model. He practiced what he preached. He was a pioneer and motivator. A shaker and a mover. In appearances and action, Vic (to me) looked and acted about age fifty. Vic always had a most positive and upbeat philosophy of life. He had tons of energy, inner drive, and dedication (to his cause). He never became discouraged or complacent. He was a people person and a very, very dedicated professional.

Vic's tremendous dedication as founder and president of the Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen (for almost two decades) was a great contribution to our sport. We will all miss Vic, for what he did to help others. I always enjoyed talking with Vic and his devoted wife Ann.

Joe Pitman
Vero Beach, FL



One of the all-time great weightlifting group shots is this photograph taken at the 1960 York picnic at Brookside Park. From left to right, the men are: Bob Snyder, Dick Bachtell, Ottley Coulter, John Grimek, Sig Klein, George F. Jowett and Vic Boff.

Photo courtesy Gary Cleveland

Dear IGH:

I first met Vic and his wife Ann when I was sixteen years old, at his health food store in Brooklyn. As I walked in his store, above the counter were many framed photos of old-time strongmen, all autographed to Vic. Vic walked over to me and started talking to me about these great strongmen that he knew. All I can say is I was hooked on strongmanism after Vic's talk. Vic was always there to answer my and others' questions, whether it was on nutrition, exercise, or my favorite old-time strongmen.

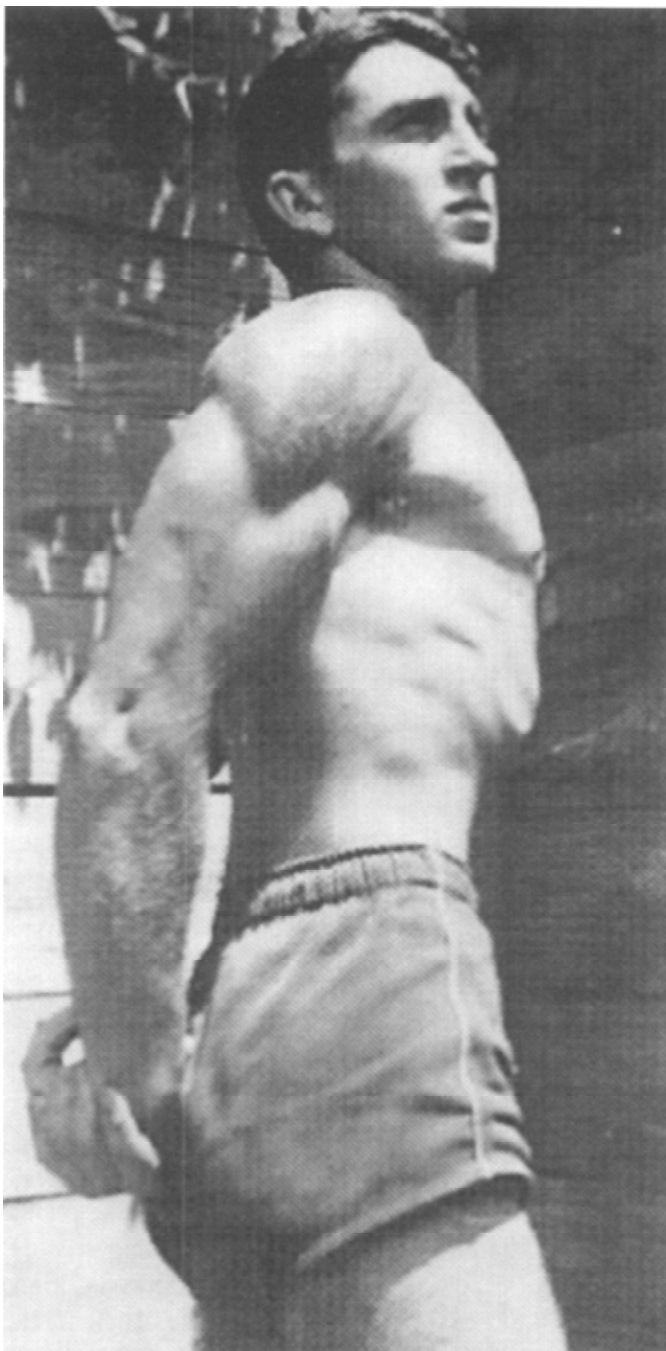
Sometimes, later in our friendship, Vic talked about the Iceberg Athletic Club. With a name like that I knew something was cold. Sure enough the Iceberg Club was a winter bathing club. The way I was involved was to talk to Vic and the members in the clubhouse and on the beach, taking pictures on Sundays. Not in the water! Vic was the president of the Icebergs, and was also the best at winter bathing. I remember one storm I met Vic

at the Iceberg Club, with blizzard-type weather, bad visibility, heavy snow and winds.

When Vic and I walked out of the clubhouse, I was in heavy clothes and boots. Vic was wearing a bathing suit and nothing on his feet. Before getting in the water, he would take a snow bath. After fighting our way to reach the water, Vic went swimming for about a half-hour. I could hardly see him; he went swimming way out there. When Vic came out of the water, the water drops on his chest turned to ice. Did you ever see people in the winter shiver and shake, their eyes tearing? Well, not Vic. He acted like it was a spring day. Truly an amazing man.

In closing, I am grateful for our friendship for thirty-one years. Vic will deeply be missed by me and many others, and especially his beautiful wife Ann and family. Carry on Vic, my friend.

**Thomas Null
Ronkonkoma, NY**



Vic's powerful deltoids and thick forearms are shown to good advantage in this photo taken when he was only 19 years of age.

Dear IGH:

I hope you are both keeping fit and well. What sad, sad news that Vic (Boff) has died and of course I wrote to Ann. Vic was a superlative physical culturist and he taught me much, I'm sure his devotion to the healthy life-style was contributory to his longevity. He

will be greatly missed and there's no doubt that he will leave an indelible and honorable place in the history of physical culture.

**Malcolm Whyatt
The Oscar Heidenstam Foundation
Hereford, England**



Dear IGH:

Thank you very much for the most thoughtful letter with the sad news that Vic Boff had passed away. I was shocked and had not heard the news. I spoke with Vic just prior to that date and had no idea he was in ill health.

Vic attended our grand opening of the Institute-Museum on Sept. 18, 1998, and had kept in regular contact with me ever since. He had a passion for his sport that matches what I have for wrestling, and I always enjoyed talking to him. He was such a gentleman and always made sure to tell me to say "hi" to my wife, as well. I will miss the friendly chats very much.

My last correspondence with him was in regards to Tom Tyler, the cowboy movie star of the 1920s who also played Captain Marvel and The Phantom. I have seen written articles that claim Tom was national heavy-weight weightlifting champion in 1928 under his real name, Vincent Markowski. [Ed note: *That's correct.*]

By the way, I know you are caretakers of the George Hackenschmidt legacy, and I would like you to know that he is being inducted into our George Tragos/Lou Thesz Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame on Aug. 1-2, 2003. We have a huge section on Frank Gotch, who is my all-time favorite athlete, and we have quite a bit of Hackenschmidt memorabilia as well. Even though I am partial to Gotch, I am a huge fan of Hackenschmidt, as well, and I am very pleased that he is going into the Hall of Fame.

**Mike Chapman
International Wrestling Institute and Museum
Newton, Iowa**

Dear IGH:

Vic Boff, my thoughts..

When I was an adolescent it seemed that all good things simply would last forever. My parents, my own youth, all of my heroes, my friends, the good times. They all would be eternal. But they were not.

It was my friend, Pete Marozas, who telephoned me with the news that Vic Boff had died. During the next few days my thoughts traveled back through thirty years and beyond. I first heard the name Vic Boff mentioned by my friend Leroy Colbert in the late 1960s when Leroy had his World Health Center on West 84th Street and Broadway in New York City. My bodybuilding competition days were behind me but I continued to train in my home basement gym. However, I grew to miss the camaraderie of other guys such as there had been in the Bronx Union YMCA and Abe Goldberg's Gym. After all, an important part of training always was the social component. It was 1981 or so when Anibal Lopez told me about a small gathering that had met to celebrate the birthday of Sig Klein and was organized by Vic Boff. I missed that first gathering because I learned of it too late, but made it my business to attend the next one as well as all those following annually right up to and including June 22, 2002. Frequently I was accompanied by my longtime friend Dr. Serafin Izquierdo. Of course, I met Vic Boff and realized just how dedicated he was to the cause of strength in particular and natural physical culture in general.

Through those years I watched the attendance grow at each reunion to where it was necessary to seek much larger meeting facilities. Thus, the prestigious New York City Downtown Athletic Club became home to the Association Of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen for many years, thanks to Vic Boff and Johnny Mandel.

Many were fortunate to have attended—while others only read about—the legendary York Barbell picnics years ago. The pioneers of our Iron Game were there. Vic Boff was among them. With the Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen reunions Vic Boff created a needed successor to the discontinued York picnics.

We in weightlifting, bodybuilding, physical culture and allied activities are a family. Members of our family come from near and far to attend reunions. The patriarchs and matriarchs of our family were people like John Grimek, Steve Stanko, Jules Bacon. John Davis,

the whole York group, Sig Klein, Clarence Ross, Steve Reeves, Pudgy Stockton. Each reunion attracted larger numbers of patriarchs and their disciples. With the 1990s the disciples of the disciples were now attending. Some of our Iron Game family from overseas were joining us. Our functions inspired similar gatherings internationally. The annual Oscar Heidenstam Memorial and Hall of Fame dinner in England, which started in 1992 with John Grimek as its first honoree, is the stellar example. Thus, our family has extended worldwide. It was Ed Spielman, creator of television's Kung Fu series, who said that he had not seen such camaraderie in any other group of people. Vic Boff is responsible for this.

In recent years Vic telephoned me fairly frequently. We would have hour long conversations touching on subjects from music, chiropractic and physical culture; pros and cons of orthodox medicine: health food stores; nutritional supplements; boxing and wrestling history, to values in life or the deterioration thereof. Vic related to me that one of his regrets was his never having had a photograph taken with Jack Dempsey when they met. Vic was steadfastly against anabolic steroids. He would not knowingly honor anyone who had used steroids and/or who did not publicly denounce that use and speak about the harmful effects of those chemicals on health. Vic maintained that the Iron Game should be about strength and health attained by natural means.

One of the high points of my life was when Vic said to me recently, "You're one of us" because of my *Iron Game History* writings. I will cherish that as long as I exist.

There were times when I had wished we could help Vic a little more with the Herculean task of the reunions, which involved having to remember an endless number of details. But Sinatra did it his way. So did Vic.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack forced Vic to cancel our reunion for the first time since its inception. The dastardly destruction of New York's Twin Towers was only a couple of blocks from our former home in the Downtown Athletic Club. The attack drastically affected the entire world. Everything else was rendered inconsequential. Our reunion, scheduled for the following week in New Jersey, obviously could not take place.

The future was unclear. There were many questions to be answered. On what date would it be appropriate to re-schedule our cancelled reunion? Could we get our scheduled honorees again? Would people attend

on a new date? Would people now want to travel?

Vic eventually re-scheduled our reunion for June 22, 2002. The fall is when we usually meet. This would be a new time of the year for us. Would it affect attendance? At first the reservations came in very slowly. Then the numbers began to accelerate until it became evident that there indeed would be a large turnout. Large turned out to be an understatement. Perhaps the postponement made our Iron Game family realize just how much we needed our annual get-together. Perhaps coming together would help to reduce the residual trauma of the September 11 attack. The 19th Association Of Old-time Barbell & Strongmen was attended by 250 people who packed the large Saddle Brook Marriott meeting room. Encouragingly, there were many young people present as well as families and many not quite so young anymore but young and vibrant in spirit.

The honorees were inspiring. The world class strength show was spectacular. It was absolutely the best reunion in the twenty-year existence of the Association Of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen. Vic and I discussed the marvelous event a week or so later. He was mostly happy with the way it turned out and was anticipating an even bigger 20th reunion.

I did not anticipate that Vic Boff would leave us quite so soon. We never get used to the fact that nothing is forever. We will miss our patriarch but we must do as he would wish. We must "Carry on."

Dr. Ken Leo Rosa
Bronx, NY



Dear IGH:

Vic Boff, President of the Association of Old-time Barbell and Strongmen is gone, but his great legacy will live forever. I was shocked when I received news of his death because I had talked with him by phone just a few weeks earlier. Though I never met him in person, he and I had many, many phone conversations over the

last few years. He always called me "Bill" and was always extremely courteous.

He loved physical culture and would always share stories with me about legends he personally knew. He was very knowledgeable about our sport and I would always tell him he should write about his career and the people he knew in a special book/autobiography.

He and I often traded memorabilia and newsletters. I looked forward to receiving his and he said the same about receiving mine. Many times he would call me and just want to talk. His stories and life were fascinating. He often spoke of Jack Dempsey and Joe Bonomo. His phone calls were always encouraging and he would tell me to keep up my work in helping keep our sport alive.

William E. Moore
Tuscaloosa, AL



Dear IGH:

It's been a rough fall in many ways. Losing Vic was a heartbreaker. Vic and I have been friends since 1939 when Ray Van Cleef introduced us. The early years were devoted mostly to swapping collection items. The last dozen we spent reliving the past and sharing experiences in weightlifting with a healthy dose of political opinions. We met at all the shows and meets and had wonderful visits together during the early years.

Vic called me regularly about once a month and always right after the banquets to get my slant on them. I was most pleased that he saw fit to print my article about John Hordines in his last issue. I had pressed Vic to honor John with an award at the banquet (for none is so deserving) but, while not directly rejecting the idea, Vic felt John hadn't been sufficiently in the forefront since his Mr. America contest. I guess I hadn't sufficiently presented my argument that John's training his

blind students with weights for 30 years was of such noble character that it surpassed the attributes of all those whose only claim to fame was their personal weightlifting prowess.

I called Vic Sunday the 3rd to thank him for printing my article and was immediately distressed by his obvious pain. He told me that he was having excruciating pain in his genitalia and back. That he was unaware of the seriousness of his problem was apparent from his statement that he was going to see a chiropractor the next day. Obviously he thought his problem was back-related, but I knew better. On our visit with Vic and Ann a year ago, Ann mentioned to Marge that Vic was having a prostate problem, but Vic had never mentioned this to me. As much as I wanted to warn him of the potential seriousness of this problem the fact he hadn't mentioned it to me made me hesitant to do so.

On ending the phone conversation, which was brief because of Vic's discomfort, I immediately said to Marge, "I am very upset, I am sure Vic has prostate cancer and it has spread." I called again on Tuesday to learn of his condition and Ann informed me Vic was sleeping. I called again on Thursday and received no answer. I called again on Saturday, the day he died, and received the recording on which I left a message requesting a call as to Vic's condition. When Mike Bondurant called me that evening, I knew. as soon as he introduced himself, that Vic was gone. I am so sad. The only comfort from such a tragedy is that he didn't linger in pain.

Alton Eliason
Northford, CT



Dear IGH:

We are losing too many good friends of late, and none will be missed more than Vic Boff. He has had a full life and made many contributions to our game, but he has been unique in founding and maintaining the

Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen. Vic has provided the opportunity for other old-timers—I'm one of them—to reminisce about the many good times that we have shared. I hope, along with Terry and Jan, we will all continue to "Carry on."

Jim Murray
Morrisville, PA

*Editor's Note: Jim Murray was honored by the AOBs for his contributions to the Iron Game as a writer. He was the editor of **Strength & Health** for seven years and also co-authored (with Dr. Peter Karpovich) the first major book advising athletes to train with weights, **Weight Training for Athletes**.*



Dear IGH:

Thank you very much for the updates regarding the passing of Vic Boff. My very fond memories of Vic Boff begin approximately twenty years ago at his health food store in Brooklyn, New York. As a teenage weight-training enthusiast at the time, it was my first experience in meeting one of the great pioneers of our field. Vic was his usual warm and friendly self, answering all of my questions and "introducing" me to all of the Iron Game champions pictured around his store. I can especially recall being extremely impressed by Vic, in that along with quoting the accomplishments of John Grimek he also referred to him as a "dear friend." Thus, I gained a wonderful sense of the camaraderie shared by individuals with a common interest, and realized for the first time that there was more to our beloved Iron Game than the actual lifting.

Through the years, the Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen Dinners have given me such a wonderful opportunity to meet so many of the "Iron Game Greats," as Vic would refer to them during our many phone conversations. Vic would share with me many of his stories and recollections of strength lore from bygone times. But what I am most thankful for is having had the oppor-

tunity to spend time with and get to know this multi-talented strongman, athlete, health practitioner, and physical culture scribe.

Vic Boff was a most giving man, who had a vision to create, in his words: "An association dedicated to the Oldetime drug-free ideals of strength and health." I can see Vic right now busy organizing a reunion banquet of barbell(e) brethren who have gone on before us. Thank you again Vic for all of your accomplishments, but most of all for being a "dear friend." My prayers go out to Vic, his wonderful wife Ann, and their family.

Lou Tortorelli
Howell, NJ



Dear IGH:

What a shock! I had spoken with Vic Boff four months ago and I think he mentioned something about some problems he was having with his doctors. I don't remember if it was prostate or what, but he wasn't happy with them. Little did I know! He was a real gentleman and I chatted with him on the phone regularly. He will be greatly missed.

Dr. Craig Whitehead
Tampa, FL



Dear IGH:

My dad, Walter Magnuson, Sr., is Norwegian. His family had a lot of men. His dad's name was Ole Edward Magnuson. Ole and his brothers all lived in the Bayridge. They were all large, strong, proud men. Some

worked tugboats, most were dockworkers. Most of the time they unloaded cement bags. They worked hard when work was available. They also worked out hard and played hard. During the Depression Ole and his brothers lost their jobs and set up a workout gym in an old two-car garage. It was quite Spartan! Most of the barbell plates were actually blocks of cement. As a child I remember seeing photos of my great uncles and my grandfather, muscles rippling, ripping decks of cards in half, blowing up hot water bottles till they burst and doing pushups with their feet on a window sill.

Ole lost his wife in the early 80's, developed some circulation problems, and entered a nursing home in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. He was about 80 years of age. Doctors gave him several months to live. He ended up outliving several of those doctors.

Somewhere along the way I came across a newsletter for the Oldetime Barbell and Strongmen Association. There was something in the newsletter about Kimon Voyages. It rang a bell. Dad worked out in the early 1950s in the gym owned by the Degni brothers in Queens Village. He met Kimon Voyages there. I was pumped up about this connection. I called Vic Boff to join the association. I did this primarily to read the newsletters to my grandfather while visiting Doylestown. He enjoyed the readings. Just prior to receiving my first newsletter Vic called on the phone to welcome me. We spoke for a long time. As a recreational and occasional lifter I knew I did not fit the mold of most of Vic's friends and most of the people featured in the articles. But Vic's tone and personality convinced me of the AOBS camaraderie. I finally attended an AOBS reunion several years ago, hoping Mr. Reeves would make an encore. Vic stopped at my table and spent some time with me so I did not feel out of place.

Ole passed away just shy of 100. I did not see him as much as I would have liked but I enjoyed reading him the newsletters. At 50, I am a bit younger than most of the membership but I remember being warmly accepted by Vic Boff at the reunion and enjoying myself. I will never forget Vic or my experiences with Association.

Walter Magnuson,
Franklin Square, NY

Dear IGH:

Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York, was known as America's Playground; it's where Warren Lincoln Travis and the Mighty Atom and others appeared. It's where the Atlantic Ocean swept up to the shore and found a beach, used by millions of people every summer. And in the very cold and snowy, windy days of winter, it was where the Iceberg Club frolicked as a group under the organizer of the club, Vic Boff.

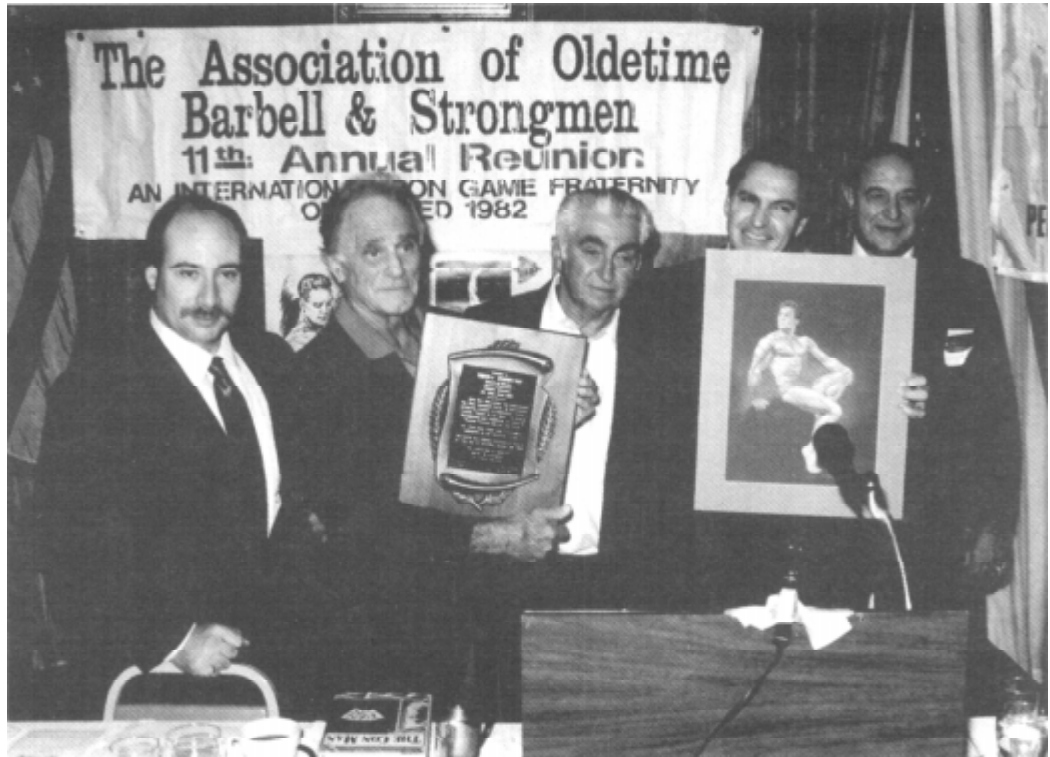
Vic, a well known strength athlete, a health food devotee, a good baseball player and boxer, kept his group exercising in the snow with the medicine ball and then running into the ocean for a swim in water around 45 or 50 degrees, often even lower.

People, like myself, would stand on the boardwalk in our warm clothes, our hats over our ears, our winter coats on as well as our gloves, scarves, and heavy boots, and we'd marvel at the antics of Vic and his inspired group.

Vic Boff was always a great ambassador of good health through exercise, proper eating and friendships. Vic was a doer not just a talker. He knew everyone in our field, from Jowett to the beginners of today. His book, *The Body Builder's Bible*, was a bestseller, and we all can still marvel at his words.

Vic, everyone of us that met you and talked to you was richer for the experience. Your friendship and your cheerful creed of "Carry on," will live in our hearts forever.

Terry Robinson
Los Angeles, CA



Fitness legend Terry Robinson was recognized by the AOBs for his contributions to physical culture. Shown in this photo are emcee Steve Sadicario, Robinson, Vic Boff, artist Jim Sanders and Johnny Mandel.

Photo courtesy Terry Robinson

Dear IGH:

I don't remember how we got together on the phone for that first chat some eight or nine years ago. I do remember that Vic Boff was a name that I recognized from his many photos in the old (*Strength & Health*) magazines over the years. I believe he was sincerely surprised that I knew who he was. Imagine that.

From that day on, we spoke at least once a week, sometimes two or even three times. I was in the gym business then and looked forward to his calls and his stories. For a few moments, he would take me away from the day-to-day activities of the business world into the "thrilling days of yesteryear," the golden days of early Iron Game history. Sometimes the phone will ring, and for a moment I will wish it could be Vic calling to tell me another great story about Jowett, Klein, or Macfadden. But I have them here in my mind, Vic, and I'll do my best to pass them on, old friend.

Mike BonDurant
Muscle Museum Forum
Clearwater, FL

Dear IGH:

We are all the better for having known Vic Boff. It is through his efforts that many of us got to know each other at the annual meetings of our association. Those of us who love Iron Game history are in his debt. Vic and Andy Jackson were my personal bridges to the Iron Game past. I will always be thankful for having known men such as these.

Carl Linich
Poughkeepsie, NY

**Dear IGH:**

I had the pleasure of meeting and working for Vic Boff at his health food store on 86th street in Brooklyn, NY around the mid-1970s for a few months. I worked for Vic and his wife, Ann, and they were two of the nicest people I've ever met. I recall Vic showing up at the store during the winter, his hair still damp from a morning dip in the icy Atlantic with his fellow members of the Iceberg Club. Vic loved to discuss all aspects of bodybuilding, strongman culture, and weightlifting. He beguiled me with countless stories about the strongmen of the past, most of whom he knew well. The only times I watched his usual ebullience fade was when the discussion turned to drugs. Vic felt that drugs were ruining his cherished weight-training culture, and was vehemently against the use of any type of pharmacological substance in the pursuit of strength and muscle. He viewed those who indulged in such use as cheaters. To Vic's way of thinking, the most vital aspect of weight-training involved the development and maintenance of optimal health and fitness, of which he himself was a paragon. I also fondly recall the close relationship that Vic had with his wonderful wife, Ann. They seemed like equal partners in every way, and you could see the love and respect they felt for each other every time they met. Although I haven't seen Vic in many years, I've always had the utmost respect and regard for him, and I'm sorry to hear of his passing. The world has lost another good person, but I know that Vic is now likely

training in that big gym in the sky with all of his old cronies, and if there is a way to jump in a freezing pool, you'll surely find Vic there, too.

Jerry Brainum
Via Email

**Dear IGH:**

I have heard that if you have had one very good friend in your life, you are very lucky. Personally, I have found that not to be true. When I lost my very best friend, Joseph Greenstein, years ago, I thought that I would not meet any more "diamonds" in my life. Since then, I have found several more bright jewels. They have since passed on, but still shine in my memory. Just to name a few, Bert Goodrich, Milo Steinborn, Sig Klein. Ed Jubinville, Joe Ponder, John Grimek, etc.

Until now Vic, whom I have found to be one of the most giving and helpful men since I lost Atom, helped fill the void. I could only go a few weeks before I had to call Cape Coral, Florida to have him pick up my morale. He surely was one of the brightest gems of them all, and I will always cherish his warm, helpful friendship.

Slim "The Hammerman" Farman
Pottstown, PA

**Dear IGH:**

I received your letter on the passing of Vic Boff. It was a great shock and loss to a great many of his friends and followers alike. I first met Vic through my dad, The Mighty Atom. It was when my dad was lecturing on health next to the Half Moon Hotel on the board-

walk. Vic would keep my mom company alongside of the platform. I also saw him swim with Saroki and the Iceberg Club on several occasions.

I remember him as more of a friend to our family—which consisted of ten of us—than a bodybuilder. He visited our home on many occasions, and I and my sister Esther visited him in his store in Bay Ridge. I spent some time last year in his home in Cape Coral, with his wife Ann. We will miss him and never forget him.

Mike Greenstein
Rockaway Park, NJ



Dear IGH:

Being around weight training since 1970, I've seen you both on TV in the past, so, I was curious why I would be getting a letter from you. After reading the first sentence I understood why. After reading about Vic Boff passing away I actually said aloud, "No, no, no!" although I knew what I had just read. I had not even had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Boff in person.

I had spoken with him different times on the phone, however. The conversations with Mr. Boff were usually about people he had known as well as speaking to him about himself. I had wanted to get a copy of Mr. Boff's book, *Physically Perfect, Powerfully Strong*, and during one call, I mentioned that I had been trying to get a copy. Mr. Boff said he would send me the book.

I received the book promptly in the mail. I sent Mr. Boff a money order and he sent me the money order back. "No charge for the book," he told me. Over the years I've talked to many people that were involved in the "Weight Game," in different capacities. All those people didn't know me, yet I was treated like I was a well respected family member. I definitely want to get the future edition of *IGH* that you dedicate to Mr. Boff.

Phil Maxwell
Eastpointe, MI

Dear IGH:

Vic Boff inspired those who value our history as much as our present through his *Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen*; through those wonderful annual dinners; through his writings; but most importantly, through his sincere interest in others.

He was a generous man—generous with his resources and generous with his time—and he loved to talk. Fortunate to have been one of the many on Vic's "call list," I often answered my phone with a grumpy, "Hello," expecting another telemarketer, to be greeted with a happy, "Hello Gary, this is Vic." With those words, my spirits lifted (and I'd start looking for a chair because I knew it was going to be a while). Then for the next half-hour or more he would take me on a tour that included the likes of Travis, Jowett and Bonomo, and I loved it. My phone will never again ring with such magic.

The last time I visited Vic and Ann's home I noticed, on the floor of the patio, along with the potted plants and the patio furniture, there was a turn-of-the-century set of dumbbell-shaped hand-balancing stands from Sig Klein's old gymnasium. Though nearly a hundred years old, they were completely appropriate there, a harmonious union of past with present, like Vic himself. Hope we can all "carry on" half as well as Vic.

Gary Cleveland
Minneapolis, MN



Editors' Note: Vic was, of course, also a close friend of ours, and a great supporter of our efforts here at the Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection. Several years back, the three of us drove from Houston to Memphis, Tennessee to pack the Hal Weiss Collection and move it to the University. During that trip, we taped Vic as he related his life story so that it could be saved as part of the archives. For a future issue of IGH we are editing the transcripts of those tapes and will publish his recollections of his life in the Iron Game.

*We miss him more than words can say.
—Terry and Jan Todd*

Professor Pat O'Shea— Strength Science Pioneer

Terry Todd and Jan Todd

“What was hard to do is sweet to remember.” Pat O'Shea chose these words from the first century AD Roman stoic Seneca to open his most recent book—*Quantum Strength Fitness II* (13). They are an apt choice, as they poetically capture the earned pleasure of hard training. They are also a good fit coming from a man of three score and ten whose fiercely diligent life in the weight room, in the lab, on his bicycle, at his typewriter/computer, or in full stride across the wild spaces of his beloved Oregon deserves sweet remembrance.

John Patrick O'Shea was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan and training as a competitive swimmer when serendipity touched his young life and changed it forever. To get to the pool in the YMCA where he swam, Pat had to pass through the weight room and usually he would hurry through, remembering the words of his high school baseball coach, who told him, “If I ever hear of you lifting weights, you'll be off the team.” One day, however, Pat was drawn to the obvious physical power and speed of a young man who was in the weight room, lifting a barbell over his head. Heedless of the words of that high school baseball coach, young Pat stopped to watch. Finally, he summoned the courage to introduce himself to the lifter, Al Kornke, an accomplished strength athlete who had won the United States Junior National Championships in weightlifting. Soon, Pat cut back on his poolwork and began to train under Kornke's guidance, learning the intricate simplicities of the press, the snatch, and the clean and jerk—the “Olympic lifts.”

As luck would have it, through Kornke Pat met U.S. Olympic team members Stan Stanczyk and Norbert Schemansky, both of whom lived and trained in Detroit. Both Stanczyk and Schemansky had by then established world records in their respective bodyweight classes and both were exceptionally quick in their split-style snatches and cleans and jerks. (Stanczyk, in fact, was tested at the 1948 Olympic Games along with hundreds of other athletes in a variety of sports and found to have the fastest reflexes of any athlete tested there.) Encouraged and inspired by such men, Pat was bitten by the barbell bug and the infection was to influence the rest of his life.

Pat had grown up working alongside his father

on the family dairy farm, milking twice a day, every day of the year, and developing a capacity for the sort of sustained effort and attention to detail that stood him in good stead in both weightlifting and strength research. Pat attended Michigan State University, but left in 1953 to join the Army. He was stationed for a time in Germany, where he continued his lifting. Following his discharge Pat returned to Michigan State, where he earned both his BS and MS in Physical Education. During those years he competed in local and national weightlifting events. His best lift was the snatch, in which he made 275 pounds when the world record was less than 300.

In 1962 Pat and his wife, Susie, both accepted teaching positions at Oregon State University in Corvallis. They taught “activities” classes in such areas as weight training, crew, track and field, and adult fitness. Pat also enrolled in several graduate classes and, after five years, he took a sabbatical leave and studied fulltime for a year at the University of Utah where he earned his doctorate, specializing in exercise physiology. They wanted him back at Oregon State, and he was glad they did as he and Susie had fallen in love with that beautiful area; they hoped to raise their three children there. As sometimes happens to good people, this is just how it worked out, and Pat rose quickly in rank to full professor. He was a fixture at Oregon State until 1991, when he finally retired. Retired from teaching, that is, not from research, publishing, lecturing, and continuing his arduous schedule of physical training in the weight room and on his bicycle. Nor from the work at his small vineyard and winery beside his home, which produces some of the finest pinot noir in Oregon, a state known for that particular wine.

Appropriately, Pat O'Shea's first publication appeared in a popular physical culture magazine, *Strength & Health*. He contributed a Barbells on Campus piece about Michigan State that appeared in January of 1962. That was 41 years ago. Since then O'Shea has published scores of articles in trade magazines as well as academic journals such as *Men's Fitness*, *The Physician and Sports Medicine*, *Nordic World*, *Research Quarterly*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *the National Strength and*

Conditioning Journal, *Sports Fitness*, *Orthopedics*, *Physical Power the Journal of Applied Sports Science Research*, *Journal of Swimming and Diving*, *Western Rescue Journal*, *Track and Field Quarterly Review*, *the Strength Athlete*, and *the Journal of the Canadian Athletic Therapists Association*. He has also published a number of books in the field of exercise science, and one of these, *Scientific Principles and Methods of Strength Fitness*, first appeared in 1969 (11). Published by Addison-Wesley, *Scientific Principles* was widely considered to be an important and influential textbook in the field of science-based strength training; it sold 75,000 copies.

O'Shea was one of the first sport scientists in the U.S. to conduct and publish human subject research on the effects of anabolic steroids on strength and athletic performance. The results of his first study were published in 1969 in the journal, *Science* (5). Over the next several years he published additional papers in *Nutrition Reports International* (15,16,17). In his original study, 12 matched pairs of subjects were trained with heavy weights and given a high protein diet for six weeks, the last three of which of which included ten milligrams per day of methandrostenolone (Dianabol) for the treated subjects. The subjects were all tested in such areas as strength, oxygen uptake, skinfold thickness, blood chemistry profiles, and anthropometric measurements, including bodyweight. The strength of the treated subjects increased significantly and their mean bodyweight gain was 2.48 kilograms with no attendant increase in skinfold thickness. These gains in lean mass were much greater than those made by the control group (which gained only 0.29 kilograms), and the strength gains of the control group were also less significant. The study concluded that "the combination of steroid treatment, high protein intake, and heavy muscular stress apparently accelerated protein synthesis in the muscle tissue, with this change being manifested by increased static and dynamic strength and body weight."

The article also included a statement which apparently had a surprisingly far-reaching effect. an effect O'Shea did not realize for more than 20 years. The statement was this: "It appears possible to train at or near maximum five or six times a week during the treatment." O'Shea only learned about the effect of this state-

ment in 1991, when Morris Silber's *Anabolic Androgenic Steroids in Soviet Sport, Vol 1* was published (14). In that book, Silber noted that in the sports system of the Soviet Union, their methandrostenolone program, "as it was expanded further during several closed doors and highly secret scientific sessions, was based on the original data derived from the studies of J.P. O'Shea, an American weightlifter and published in *Science*, 1969." Speaking of this recently, O'Shea said, "the news in Silber's book was a real shock to me. Now, of course, I'm familiar with the daily or even many times daily training sessions devised by some of the soviet bloc nations, but I'm ambivalent about my own role in all this and about some of the human subject testing we did back then. I often wondered in later years if the small amount of anabolic steroids that was administered in our study had had any sort of long-term negative effect on the subjects. I



In the late 1960s Pat O'Shea travelled the Oregon rodeo circuit giving lifting exhibitions. He would ride into the arena at a full gallop, dismount, and then clean and push-press 242 pounds for several reps. He'd then raise the bar to 400 lbs. and get several cowboys to help him lift it to his shoulders so he could do five reps in the squat. According to O'Shea, his performance was "always a big crowd pleaser."

Photo courtesy Pat O'Shea

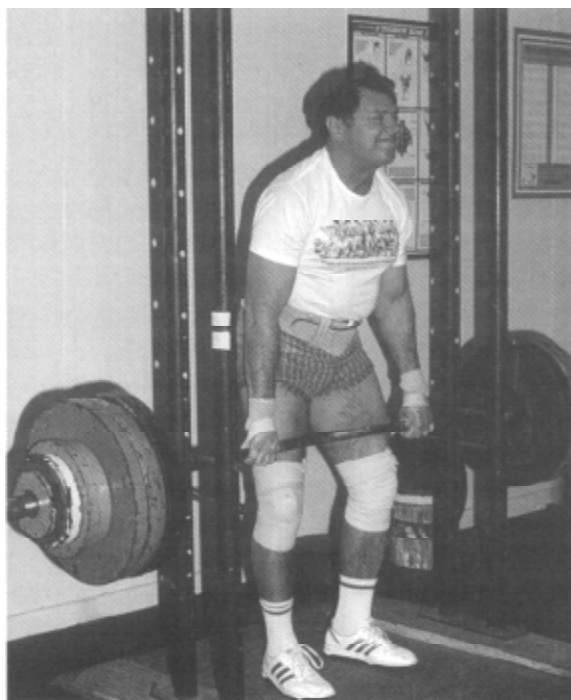
surely hope that it wasn't harmful"(3).

O'Shea worries about such things because he has seen, and is frightened by, the proliferation of steroid use in athletics. He is also concerned by the dramatic increase in the bodyweights of competitive lifters and football players. He is a sophisticated man in these areas and he knows that some of these gains in size are the result of the use of anabolic steroids. "I'm really worried about the early deaths I keep reading about in the ranks of lifters, bodybuilders, and football players. I know that what they're doing isn't healthy and I worry that enough isn't being done to educate these young athletes about the dangers of the high dosages and multiple drug use, or stacking, that many of them live by. I just don't want the athletes to die by them, too. I submitted an article about this to a leading powerlifting magazine recently and the editor wouldn't publish it"(3).

Another area in which O'Shea has made a signal contribution is in strength training for the female athlete. Beginning well before 1965, when he became the first "strength coach" at Oregon State, O'Shea had been especially interested in the great benefits athletes could derive from a program of progressive resistance training. He was able to implement his ideas as he began to work with some of the members of the OSU football team and a few of the throwers, too, but in those early years he worked only with male athletes. In those early, pre-Title IX years, of course, weight training was a new thing even for the male athletes, but as he put his big boys through their paces, using his own weights, he was amazed at how rapidly they gained. And as the years passed and he handed the strength coaching responsibilities over to a man who was hired to do the job full-time, O'Shea began to wonder if women could make similar gains. He conducted some informal studies and in 1981 he was the lead author of a major article on the subject in *The Physician and Sports Medicine* (10). In the article, he details the results of a study involving 13 men and 13

women, all of whom followed an intensive powerlifting program. Two conclusions were reached, the first of which was that the full squat should be considered as a "cornerstone" exercise because of its capacity to stimulate overall strength increases in both men and women. The second conclusion was that "women had the same physiological ability as men to tolerate and adapt to the demanding physical stress of powerlifting." To illustrate the power gap between female athletes from the U.S. and the Soviet Union, O'Shea noted that the differences in the shotput and discus records were 13 feet and 28 feet, respectively. "I wasn't totally naive," he explains. "I knew that some of the difference came from drugs, but I knew that a lot of it came from the fact that their women trained a lot harder than ours trained"(3).

Hard training never deterred O'Shea and it doesn't deter him now. Following his 13 year career as a weightlifter, in which he registered best lifts of 270 pounds in the press, 275 in the snatch, and 340 in the clean and jerk, all drugfree, he competed for seven years in powerlifting, with best lifts of 605 squat, 355 bench, and 630 deadlift. He then abruptly switched gears and for the next 12 years, under the influence of Dr. Kenneth Cooper, he concentrated on endurance training and did not touch a weight. During those years, he competed in



In his training, O'Shea has tried to maximize his strength by utilizing a variety of techniques. Here he practices isometric-isotonic deadlifts with more than 550 pounds.

Photo courtesy Pat O'Shea

triathlons, cycling, and Nordic skiing. Finally, at the age of 50 and at a considerably lighter bodyweight, he recalls that one day in the weight room he "had difficulty dead-lifting 330 pounds," a weight he was once able to lift over his head. Spurred by the loss of strength and muscle mass, he came back to home base. "I didn't care to go through the remainder of my life weak and puny-looking"(3). Since that time he has followed a typically rigorous program of periodized progressive resistance training interwoven with challenging sessions of cycling, hiking, plyometrics, and interval training on an exercise bicycle.

Today, at the age of

72, O'Shea does multiple sets of low repetitions with up to 220 pounds in the high pull and up to 310 in the parallel squat. His main biking pleasure these days comes from the touring he does each season with Susie, and from the cycling competition he still enjoys. "One of the abstract values of masters competition is that it has enabled me to experience the same emotional and physical highs I felt 40 years ago when I was executing a heavy snatch or clean and jerk in competition," he explains. "With each passing decade of life the desire to physically excel motivates me"(3).

This is a man who has squeezed life hard. And is squeezing still. On another front, he provides seminars for the Oregon Medical Association on the role of strength training in contemporary living and geriatrics, and he is a frequent contributor to several of the state's leading newspapers. He continues to lecture widely and has recently been to various U.S. universities as well as to Ireland, South Korea, and the Republic of China. He is also widely sought as a presenter at clinics about cycling, track and field, and skiing. He has also just published an updated book called *Quantum Strength Fitness II* (13). This exceptional, well-illustrated book is a compilation of his half-century of practical experience coupled with his extensive knowledge of the science of what he calls "athletic-type strength training." One reviewer said that, "He starts from the premise that there are many ways to train, but that utilizing multi-joint Olympic-type movements is superior to others...it is written in depth yet so clearly. The energy systems of the body, the workings of the neurological and cardiovascular systems are explained as you would expect an excellent university professor to do, making this a great reference book to have in your library"(4).

In 1990, the National Strength and Conditioning Association honored Pat O'Shea—one of the founders of the Association—for his long years of yeoman-like service in the field. He was then, and is now, remembered as a true pioneer in the science of strength training—a man who has spent a half century going back and forth between the rarified groves of academe and the primal challenges of the gymnasium, spreading the good word and fighting the good fight.

As Seneca had the first word, perhaps he should also have the last:

Think of all the blows which athletes receive...yet they put up with all this

pain...and they do it not because they are fighting but so that they will be able to fight; for their very training involves pain. So we too must rise above all pains...for the reward of them is not simply a crown or the trumpet of the herald calling for silence so that our name can be proclaimed, but [our reward is] virtue, a steadfast soul, and peace of mind for all time, once we have overcome the buffets of fate (2).

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SERGEI ELISEEV: THE TIMID REVOLUTIONARY

BY DANIEL DUBSHIN AND DAVID CHAPMAN

Revolutionary politics and weightlifting are rarely joined in the same individual, especially when the athlete is from a repressive regime, but sometimes men are forced to act by circumstances. Such was the case with Sergei Eliseev, an extraordinary athlete who opposed the cruel authority of the Russian Czar and paid dearly for his actions. In one of the ironies that history often displays, this gentle revolutionary was fated to survive the excesses of one tyrant only to fall victim to another.

We know little of Eliseev's life, but a few facts can be pieced together. For instance, we know that Sergei Ivanovich Eliseev was born in 1876 in Ufa, the capital of Bashkiria, a mountainous region in the remote southern Urals of European Russia. His father, Ivan Grigorevich, was a massive, tall man who served as a cook to a certain General Kazarinov.¹ Since the elder Eliseev wore a long, forked beard, he was almost certainly an "Old Believer" or *Starouobryadez* [or *Staroveri*], a Russian Orthodox religious sect that clung to old rituals and religious practices.² It was apparently thanks to his father that both Sergei and his elder brother Alexander began training with weights.³

Despite the dearth of biographical information, there is one telling incident from Eliseev's youth which indicates his growing prowess as a strongman and a wrestler. There was an annual Bashkiri festival called *Sabantuy*.⁴ This consisted of a number of cultural and sporting events, but the most important parts were the tournaments of Bashkiri national wrestling known as *Kurash*.⁵ A tall, strong and experienced Bashkiri wrestler named Habdrahman Salikhov was winning most of the matches that day, and he was heartily cheered on by the audience which consisted mostly of Tartars, Bashkirs and other Moslem nationalities. It was clear from the reaction of the crowd that Salikhov was the local favorite. At one point the mighty Bashkir issued a challenge to anyone in the crowd who might come up and try to defeat him. Much to everyone's sur-

prise, Sergei accepted the wrestler's offer; this was all the more remarkable to the audience because of the great discrepancy in the size of the two rivals. At a height of five feet six inches, Eliseev was much the smaller and younger of the two.⁶

What he lacked in size, Sergei made up for in strength and skill, and he surprised everyone by winning the first fight. The audience began to protest—after all their favorite had been beaten—and even the referee bowed to the will of the crowd since he failed to declare Sergei Ivanovich the winner. Finally, a compromise was reached: the two men would fight again after a half hour's rest.

At the start of the new match, Habdrahman Salikhov attempted to use some usually effective holds, but Eliseev was able to stay on his feet each time. In the end, the young Russian picked up his opponent and hurled him onto the grass. Once again he had won a clear victory; however, the match had an unexpected conclusion several hours later. That night when Eliseev and his family were asleep, they were roused by the clatter of horses' hooves resounding in their yard. The nocturnal visitors proved to be the defeated champion, Salikhov and a crowd of his supporters. Sergei's father went out and asked his unbidden visitors, "What do you want?" The Bashkiri wrestler answered that he could not submit to his two defeats and asked if he might have a third and deciding fight right then.

Sergei agreed, and after his brother poured a bucket of cold water over him to wake him up, the third round began. This time there were two referees so that no errors could be made. Thus when Eliseev won the midnight match, there was no mistake about his victory this time. His Bashkiri rival had to retire from the field in defeat, but on the following day three rams were brought to the Eliseev family as evidence of the young man's strength and as an apology for his uneasy night.⁷

Several years after this wrestling victory, the Eliseevs moved to Ufa itself, and there the brothers worked out and wrestled in their free time. Although

Sergei's fame was great throughout all of Bashkiria, the young man initially chose to remain in the provincial capital. That situation was destined to change, however. In 1897 Sergei's younger brother Alexander read an article in the magazine *Niva*⁸ about an athletic club which had been organized by Dr. Vladislav F. Krajewski in St. Petersburg.⁹ Alexander wrote to the magazine and described his athletic achievements. Doctor Krajewski read the letter and invited Alexander to the Russian capital where in mid-1897 the 19-year-old strongman appeared before the members of the country's most famous group of strength athletes. Alexander soon succeeded in astonishing the members by his strength and lifting ability. Although he only weighed 167.5 pounds, he managed to jerk 261.8 pounds and to press 167 pounds with one hand. Krajewski and the other athletes then asked him about his training methods. Alexander replied that he trained under his older brother's direction and that Sergei had achieved even greater results than he had. Since the next Russian weightlifting championships were approaching, the St. Petersburg athletes asked Alexander to arrange for Sergei's participation.

Sergei accepted the invitation, and he began to reconsider his training system. The competition was to take place in nine months, and Sergei tried not to overtrain before the contest. Despite this, he worked harder than he had ever done before: he ran long distances in boots with special lead soles and did hundreds of exercises with dumbbells and barbells. Sergei also devoted much attention to his diet, and he consumed large amounts of dairy products, particularly clabber—the thick, curdled milk that is popular in Russia.

Sergei arrived in St. Petersburg, the stately capital of the Russian Empire, in April of 1898 in order to participate in the second weightlifting championships of Russia. He made a great and immediate impression on the seasoned athletes, and a little of that astonishment is captured in the reaction of the famous weightlifting historian Ivan Lebedev.¹⁰ "He was the most marvelous athlete of any which I had ever seen," remarked the man who was better known to his friends and associates as "Uncle Vanya." Lebedev's enthusiasm was hard to conceal even many years after the event when he recalled his first impressions: "At first sight of Sergei Ivanovich, you would not possibly think that he was 'the very man who . . . ' etc. He is of medium height, lean, very muscular, with only 42-centimeter [16.5-inch] biceps. He is modest even to the point of diffidence."¹¹ Thanks to his unprepossessing appearance and modest demeanor, most

of sporting St. Petersburg did not expect that this 22-year-old athlete would be a serious contender in the upcoming contest. It was therefore something of a shock when the young strongman, fresh from the provincial backwaters of Ufa, placed second in the overall competition. First place that year was won by the famous "Russian Lion," George Hackenschmidt, who had much more experience in competitive weightlifting. Eliseev must have been proud to earn the second-place medal for his very successful debut.¹²

Despite Sergei Ivanovich's triumph, it should be mentioned that his success was not without its difficulties. According to Lebedev in his book *Heavy Athletics*, Eliseev lacked the technical prowess to become an immediate champion. "Unfortunately, it was not to be during this visit nor even in the next one that Eliseev was able to show his true prowess because he was unaccustomed to working with regular weights. For example in Ufa, Eliseev always trained with "bulldogs"—these were dumbbells which were designed for use in one hand [rather than using them as a pair] and which weighed over 35 pounds."¹³ In St. Petersburg, however, he was forced to work with barbells and other material. Since he was also a very nervous man, he could not lift his maximum weight with the entire audience staring at him. He always approached the weights slowly, softly and silently—white as a sheet with anxiety. He preferred to start with the maximum, record-breaking weights right away,"¹⁴

Thanks to his impressive performance, Eliseev was singled out for notice in the mainstream media. An article in *The St. Petersburg News* of April 21, 1898 reported, "S.I. Eliseev demonstrated the following remarkable feat with dumbbells: he took a spherical dumbbell weighing 152.5 [Russian] pounds [i.e. 127.5 English pounds] with his right hand and slowly raised it over his head and then lowered it. Then he kept his hand in the horizontal position for a few seconds. This is a world's record, for no one, even among professional athletes, could do the same with more than 120 pounds [108.2 English pounds]."¹⁵

On the day after this amazing performance, Eliseev participated in another competition which was organized by The Bicycle-Athletic Society in which he bested his own record and won a large silver medal for his efforts. His Old-Believer father would have been proud to see his son cross himself reverently two times, especially since the athlete was gripping two dumbbells weighing 70.5 and 74.9 pounds in each hand.¹⁶

Eliseev's third public performance came ten days later. At this competition the young athlete broke one more world's record and earned a large gold medal.¹⁷ Thus, only two months after his debut in the Russian sporting arena he had become the holder of several world records. Despite these successes, it was the great George Hackenschmidt who was sent to the World Weightlifting and Wrestling championships in Vienna. The Russian Lion placed third in the weightlifting contest, but he won top honors in the wrestling competition. It was partly as a result of that failure (if one can call a third place win a "failure"), that Sergei Eliseev was sent to the next championships. This contest was to be held in Vienna in the summer of 1898, and the world weightlifting championships were originally part of the festivities to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Emperor Franz Josef's reign. The reporter from the *Allgemeine Sport Zeitung* reports tersely that Eliseev was present but did not participate. Perhaps there was a problem, but the more likely explanation was that he chose simply to observe the level of competition so that he could launch his international career with greater understanding of his fellow lifters. That opportunity would come just a few months later in the championships which were to take place in Italy.¹⁸

Accordingly, Eliseev arrived in Milan in February 1899 in advance of the contests which were to take place on March 4-5. Many of the heavyweight foreign athletes must have supposed that this diminutive Russian lifter could not possibly pose much of a challenge to them, but after he began competing it only took a very short while for the audience to understand that Eliseev possessed both phenomenal power and brilliant technique.¹⁹ The little Russian athlete soon shot to the fore, leaving all his competitors behind in both his individual lifts and his overall total. Using only one

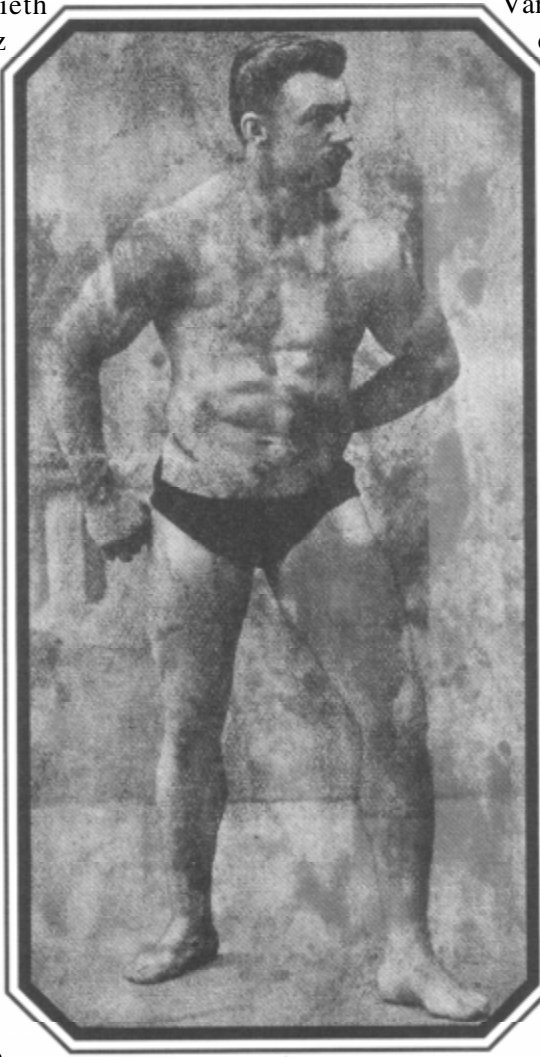
arm, he snatched 158.7 lbs., pressed 165.3 lbs. and a jerked 187.3 lbs.; with two arms he pressed 253.5 lbs. and jerked 308.6 lbs.²⁰ Thus, Sergei Ivanovich Eliseev, the 23-year-old worker from the wilds of Bashkiria became the first Russian to win a World Weightlifting Championships. He immediately acquired a high reputation among the lifting powers of Middle Europe, and several years later the Germans were calling him "The Athletic Superman" and marveling at his prowess.²¹ Naturally, when he returned to St. Petersburg, Eliseev was greeted warmly and with much enthusiasm; Russia had produced one of its first world-class weightlifters, and seemingly the entire country was proud of him.

Even after this great victory, Eliseev did not take a vacation; instead, he continued to train hard. Uncle

Vanya writes that the young man decided to give both French style wrestling and belt wrestling a try.²² Sergei never really took to the French style, but he was a skilled fighter in the so-called belt style. In addition to being a superb wrestler and weightlifter, Eliseev was also a popular man. It was said that he never boasted of his unique status as world champion in front of other less experienced opponents.²³

Eliseev had few rivals equal to his skills at the next Russian championships. In addition to the gold medal for Champion of Russia, he also won three other medals for breaking three new world records.²⁴ Thanks to these triumphs, Eliseev's renown spread all over Russia, and he received many proposals to move to St. Petersburg. Instead, he chose to return to Ufa where he continued his job as a metalworker at the main locomotive repair shop.

Sergei Ivanovich greeted the new century with new records. In official competition, he pressed a barbell weighing 319.58 lbs., but when he was



Although this rare photograph is stained with age, it gives solid evidence of the strength and power Eliseev's body possessed in his prime. Todd-McLean Collection

unconstrained by the strain of contests, he could do much better. It was reported that he pressed 336.7 lbs. and clean and jerked 384.59 lbs. Had these totals been done in an official tournament, he would have had a total of over 992 lbs., a phenomenal feat for 1902.²⁵

In 1903 Eliseev participated in the professional World Weightlifting Championships in Paris, and here he took second place. The overall winner was Pierre Bonnes, who had won the competition on three previous occasions. Part of the reason for the Russian's second-place showing was that he was not even familiar with eight out of the eleven lifts which were part of the tournament. He was forced to learn them during the competition, and of course he lost precious attempts while doing so. In classical lifts like the clean and jerk, however, Eliseev was victorious. Although he lifted a sum that merely tied with that which Bonnes had managed, Eliseev was judged the winner in the classical lifts because he weighed ten kilos less than the Frenchman.²⁶

Eliseev also was keenly alert to the records and the showy feats that were used by foreign athletes. For example, the famous German professional strongman Georg Rasso-Stangelmaier lifted a barrel filled with water (or some say beer) weighing 209 lbs., then turned it to the shoulders and pressed it overhead. When Eliseev learned of this, he ordered an exact replica of the barrel, and after training for a while, he also began to do the feat, but with one exception: his barrel weighed 273 lbs.²⁷

Despite being a successful and popular sportsman, there was another, covert side to Eliseev's life. Uncle Vanya, in his book *Heavy Athletics*, hints darkly and tersely at the political side of the strongman's character. "Life," he wrote, "which is fraught with perils, unsettled this wonderful athlete. Sergei Ivanovich Eliseev was involved in the unrest of 1905-06, and after being discharged, he disappeared from the sporting scene." Unfortunately, Lebedev could not give any more details about Eliseev's fate since his book was published in 1916 at a time when Czarist censorship was at its most virulent. Had he been permitted to tell the whole story, however, he would have shown that the man was as strong in conviction as he was in muscular power.

These were troubling times in Russia. On 9 January 1905, in St. Petersburg, there was a peaceful demonstration in the capital during which many workers were gunned down ruthlessly by government soldiers. Over 1,000 people were killed and over 5,000 were wounded. and this tragedy. together with the country's

shameful defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, brought about the first Russian Revolution of 1905.²⁸ As early as 1902 Eliseev had maintained close relationships with illegal revolutionary organizations. Ufa's locomotive repair depot was a center of revolutionary activity, and only ten days after the 1905 disturbance in St. Petersburg there was a mass meeting of workers in the train yards which drew upwards of two thousand people. By the spring and summer of 1905 the railroad workers had organized many strikes and other demonstrations: naturally, Sergei Eliseev was deeply embroiled in these and other actions. Eventually, he became the commander of a group of railroad workers who formed an armed skirmish force, and many of the guns, ammunition and propaganda leaflets were stored in Eliseev's own home.

It would have been impossible for these revolutionary activities to go unnoticed by the Czarist police, and among the local constabulary he was known by the code name "The Athlete." Somehow Eliseev always managed to stay just beyond the clutches of the gendarmerie, but in June of 1905 his luck ran out. He was transporting a load of revolutionary leaflets in a cab, and as it traversed the streets of Ufa, the vehicle was stopped by a large mob from the "Black Hundred" group, an ultra-rightist, monarchical organization. Sergei was quickly recognized and pulled out of the car. He received a serious head wound in the unequal battle that followed, but fortunately he was able to get rid of the incriminating leaflets before his attack. Because of the injuries that he had sustained, he was forced to recuperate in the hospital for over a month and a half. After he had recovered sufficiently, he was arrested by the police, but thanks to the lack of firm evidence, he was released after only a few days of incarceration.²⁹

The weightlifter's problems with the authorities were far from finished, however. After a police informant was killed at a meeting of railroad workers, suspicion fell on Sergei Eliseev, and he was arrested once more. Although many people testified in his favor during his court trial, he was nevertheless sent into exile to the remote Siberian region of Yakutsk. Thus it was that Eliseev's illustrious athletic career came to an abrupt and dramatic conclusion.

It is not known exactly when he was allowed to return; probably it was not long after the October Revolution of 1917. We know only that he was employed as a metalworker in the Siberian town of Tyumen in 1919. Presumably, he also married around this time, for there is a report that early in 1922 Eliseev and his wife and two

sons moved to Tomsk, another Siberian town located on the main line of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, where the man who had once amazed the world with his lifting prowess made a meager living as a freight loader.

Life after the revolution that he had worked so hard to bring about was very difficult for poor Eliseev. He and his family suffered much, and often they had neither a roof over their heads nor enough food on the table. Incredibly, Eliseev continued to train with weights, and in fact the former champion organized a weightlifting club and trained other young athletes. Somehow Sergei Ivanovich was able to return to exhibitions and competitions, and he often performed strength shows at local festivals and at the circus.

Things seemed to have improved for him, for between 1925 and 1931 he worked as an accountant at a tannery in Tomsk. At roughly this same time, he organized other weightlifting clubs. The Tomsk Regional Council of Physical Culture gave him two large rooms in a building which overlooked the Ushaika River. It was here that Eliseev personally trained over forty pupils; this was all the more remarkable because the great weightlifter donated not only his own barbells to the club but also his time and energy since he coached his students without any pay whatsoever.³⁰

Eventually, Eliseev's life in his Siberian hometown settled into a dull routine, but for a brief, shining moment the great weightlifter was destined to taste a little of the glory from his golden days. In 1925 Uncle Vanya arrived in Tomsk bursting with a "sensational idea" which had popped into the Russian Barnum's head. He would organize a wrestling match between two former world champions. His plan was to pair the unconquerable Ivan Poddoubny with the weightlifting hero Sergei Eliseev. Both parties were agreeable, and in due course the bout took place. It was reported by the magazine *Sport*, which described it this way:

For half an hour neither one of the rivals could get an effective grip, but clearly Poddoubny had the upper hand. The 309-pound strongman lifted Eliseev twice 'to the second floor' [i.e. overhead] and then threw him to the mat, but without the expected result. Each time Eliseev landed on his feet. Nobody knew how the fight would end, but at one point a strap which was wrapped around Eliseev's wrist was broken. Since no one had a new strap, the referee declared a draw.³¹

After the fight, Poddoubny approached Eliseev and said, "You really are a tough nut, Sergei Eliseev!" He presented the smaller man with a tie-pin in the form of a golden barbell set with a gemstone, and he remarked once more, "So, Russia has a worthy rival for old Ivan Poddoubny."³²

From 1932 until 1938 Eliseev was examined regularly by doctors (he would have been 56-62 years old), since they were apparently eager to see the effects of a lifetime of heavy exercise. These physicians could find absolutely no evidence of ill health. He was a completely healthy man, and he still trained with weights on a regular basis.

Sergei Ivanovich Eliseev died in 1939, and like many aspects of his life, we know little of the exact circumstances of his demise. The Olympic weightlifter and noted sports historian, Yuri Vlasov, writes in this excellent book, *The Justice of Strength*, that Eliseev was unfairly subjected to political persecution in the late 1930's. Vlasov does not give any references for this information, but all indications tend to verify the diagnosis.³³

Twentieth century Russia has always been very rich in talented people, and many of the finest sons of Mother Russia met a similarly tragic fate. Despite his untimely end, Eliseev was able to accomplish great things. Almost certainly, it was his unique personality that drew attention to him and made the Stalinist bosses nervous. If Vlasov is correct, Eliseev was purged by the very government that he had fought so long and heroically to establish. Sacrifices on the altar of megalomania are not unique, but to lose such a man is tragic, indeed. Athletes of Eliseev's stature are rare at any time in human history.

Notes:

Much of the material in this article came from Russian works that have not been translated into English. We include here a few of the more important sources in their translated titles.

1. Anonymous article. "110 Years of Russian Weightlifting," *Olympus Magazine*, January 1995, pp. 26-7.
2. Baranov, V. "Pages from a Wonderful Life: Recollections of S.I. Eliseev," in *Russia's Strongmen*, Moscow: Soviet Russia Publishing, 1983.
3. Bonini, Gherardo. *Il primo dizionario di sollevamento pesi in Italia*, (Florence: author, 1999).
4. Borisov, Isaac. "On the Strong and the Able," in *Physical Culture and Sport* (Moscow: 1956) Chapter on "Russian Strongmen."
5. Borisov, Isaac. "Pages of Sporting Glory," in *Physical Culture and Sport* (Moscow: 1960), chapter on "Russian Strongmen."
6. Dizenko, Joseph. *Under the Alias "The Athlete"*, Ufa: Bashkirian Publishing, 1982.
7. Ivanov, Dimitry. *Strength of the Very Strong*, Moscow: Soviet Russia Publishing, 1979.

8. Lebedev, Ivan. Heavy Athletics, Petrograd [i.e. St. Petersburg]: Gubinsky, 1916.
9. Svub, Josef. "Russian Men of Might: Sergey Eliseyev," in *Milo*, September 2001, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 87-89.
10. Vlasov, Yuri. *The Justice of Strength*, Moscow. NKI, 1995.

Endnotes

1. Although the exact identity of General Kazarin is uncertain, the surname is derived from an ancient Turkic tribe which often attacked their Slavic neighbors. The tribe disappeared in the 10th century, but the name remained in various forms. It indicates that the General's family was almost certainly a longtime resident of the region.
2. The Old Believers, also known as Old Ritualists, came into existence as the result of a schism within the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century. The Russian Church had adopted certain liturgical usages that differed from those of the Greeks. Patriarch Nikon (1605-1681) introduced changes intended to make Russian practices conform to Greek usage. This was offensive to some Russian Orthodox who believed that it was legitimate for the Russian Church to adopt its own traditions. Opposition coalesced around a priest named Avvakum, who was burnt at the stake in 1682. His followers became known as Old Believers—those who followed the old rituals.
3. Baranov, pp. 14 & 15.
4. *Sabanfuy* means "a celebration of the plough." It is an ancient festival held widely throughout Central Asia to commemorate the end of spring sowing when there is a little interval before haying and harvesting. The festival includes competitions, races, and *Kurash*, a form of wrestling.
5. *Kurash*: A style of wrestling popular all over Central Asia. Combatants are forbidden to lie on the ground. If fact, once even a wrestler's knee touches the floor the referee stops the action and wrestlers must begin wrestling again from the initial standing position. Wrestlers wear strong, wide belts, and opponents are required to lift one another by means of this belt. Such moves obviously require great strength.
6. "The measurements of Sergei Eliseyeff, the famous Russian athlete, were taken by Count Monticelli at the [weightlifting] competition in Milan (1897) [*sic.*] and were at that time the following: height 170 cm [5 feet 9 inches], chest (normal) 101 cm [39.7 inches], forearm 40½ cm [15.9 inches], thighs 60 cm [23.6 inches], calf 40 cm [15.9 inches], weight 84 kg. [185 lbs.]" From: *Illustrierte Athletik-Sportzeitung* (vol. 11, no. 17; April 26, 1902): 262.
7. Baranov, pp. 15-16. There is no date given for this incident.
8. *Niva* ["The Field"] was a popular magazine published by A.F. Marx in St. Petersburg between 1870-1918.
9. Although he was born in Poland, Dr. Vladislav Franzevich Krajewski (1841-1901) is considered by many to be the father of Russian weightlifting. He was a successful physician who had a large home in St. Petersburg where he trained many of the nation's finest athletes in his well equipped private gymnasium. Hackenschmidt, Lurich, Poddoubny and Aberg had all followed the doctor's system of weight training. The "The Circle of Athletic Enthusiasts" was begun by Krajewski in 1885, and this date marks the beginning of Russian weight training. (The doctor's name is often erroneously written as "von Krajewski.")
10. Ivan Vladimirovich Lebedev (May 25, 1879 - July 28, 1950) is renowned in Russia as an athlete, trainer, actor, and man of letters. When he was 17 years old, Lebedev joined Dr. Krajewski's Athletic Circle, and soon became one of the physician's favorite pupils. From 1912 to 1918 he published *Hercules*, the most popular weightlifting and wrestling magazine in Pre-Revolutionary Russia. Sometime after the October Revolution, Lebedev became a circus director; despite his duties, Lebedev managed to write many books and histories throughout his long and colorful career. His affectionate nickname, "Uncle Vanya" (Vanya is the diminutive of Ivan) seems to have been given to him around 1905 because of his age, his corpulence and his vast

- knowledge of athletics.
11. *Heavy Athletics*, 134.
12. The first All-Russian Athletics Championships began on April 16, 1898. In addition to losing narrowly to Hackenschmidt in the left-arm, right-arm, and two-arm jerk, Eliseev was victorious in the left-arm snatch. Although the report is discounted by some, Eliseev was said to have done a series of impressive free-style movements: he held a dumbbell weighing 137.6 lbs. on his outstretched arm, and then he did two-arm side raises with dumbbells weighing 65 and 74.4 lbs.
13. According to Svub, "Eliseyev loved to work out with traditional Russian equipment called *buliny* or *giri*, [kettlebells] and was exceptionally strong in leverage feats," p. 89.
14. *Heavy Athletics*, 135
15. These are Russian pounds which equal 409.5 grams or about 14 ounces.
16. Baranov, 17.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Allgemeine Sport Zeitung* 19 (August 6, 1898), 923-928. Quoted in Gherardo Bonini, *Il primo dizionario di sollevamento pesi in Italia* (Florence: author, 1999), 36.
19. Official IWF website [<http://www.iwf.net/results/statistics/msw.html>]. At the third Weightlifting Championships Eliseev measured 172 cm. (5 feet 6 inches) tall and 82.5 kg. [181.9 lbs.].
20. Bonini, 67.
21. "Sergei Eliseev, known as 'The Athletic Superman,' after encouraging assurances from the most famous Russian professionals Hackenschmidt and Lurich, does a two-handed lift of 340 German pounds and can press 300 pounds with effortless ease directly from his chest." *Illustrierte Athletik-Sportzeitung*, caption to cover illustration (vol. 11, no. 9; March 1, 1902).
22. "French" wrestling (i.e. Greco-Roman) limits the holds that can be used to those from the head to the waist. In "belt" wrestling, the participants wear a special, wide leather belt with protruding handles. Using these, the opponents try to pull one another to the ground. This style of fighting is particularly popular in Germany and eastern Europe.
23. Lebedev 136.
24. Baranov, 18.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Baranov, 19. Also see the letter written by the editor of the Russian journal *Sport* to the *Allgemeine Sport Zeitung* 11 (December 6, 1903) in which the obvious preference of French judges for their own countrymen is severely criticized (although the correspondent takes care not to diminish the performance of Bonnes). Eliseev's most remarkable record quoted in the letter is a two-arm clean and jerk of 353.66 lbs. Quoted in Gherardo Bonini, 48.
27. Baranov, 19. Rasso was the model for Max Klinger's statues *The Chained Samson* and *The Group with Centaurs*.
28. On Bloody Sunday in January 1905, unarmed workers demonstrating outside the Winter Palace were fired upon by czarist soldiers. There were then months of unrest throughout Russia, including Ufa, which had long been a hotbed of revolutionary sentiment.
29. Baranov, 19. The Black Hundred was a common name for a loose alliance of several pro-monarchical organizations. These organizations derived their name from Medieval Muscovy where the social classes who had to pay taxes were called "The Black Hundred."
30. Baranov, 20. The Ushaika is a smaller tributary of the River Tom that flows through Tomsk.
31. Dizenko [booklet is unpaginated].
32. Dizenko.
33. Vlasov, 305. It is impossible at the present time to get more information about Eliseev's death. Yuri Vlasov undoubtedly knows more than he said, but unfortunately he has turned his back on the sporting and journalistic communities and is rumored to live in his small village like a hermit.