



# IRON GAME HISTORY



THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

Volume 11 Number 2

June 2010

## A FINDING AID FOR THE PUDGY AND LES STOCKTON COLLECTION

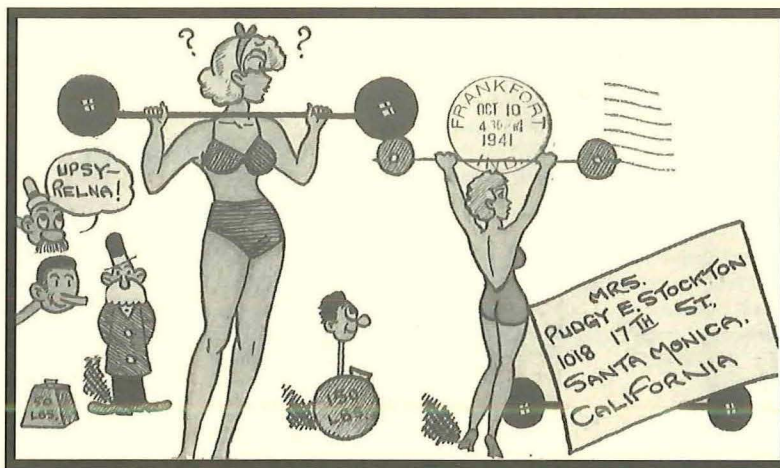
Geoff Schmalz  
The University of Texas

I'm the archivist at the H.J. Lutch Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at the University of Texas at Austin, and I'd like to explain a bit about what I do here and to provide some detail about my most recently completed project. For about four months, from September 2009 until January 2010, I worked on the Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton and Les Stockton Collection in order to create an "item level finding aid" for their papers. An item level finding aid allows iron gamers or, indeed, any researcher, to quickly know what is contained in someone's papers so that the maximum access can be obtained. Furthermore, archivy (the process of arranging and describing the items related to a specific creator, whether a person or a business) follows the essential principle of *respect des fonds* (respect for the materials). This means that archivists strive to put items

together so that, in combination, they can best bring out details about the creators—in this case, Pudgy and Les Stockton.

Archivists tend to think of items in terms of groups relating to aspects of the creator or creators: business, personal, etc. Archivists also diligently try to maintain original order. Since the creator or creators know best what purposes their items served, the archivist defers to their judgment in arranging the

resources whenever possible. The only exceptions to this are if either there is no real original order (everything is a jumble) or if it is obvious to the archivist that items are not arranged by the creator in a way that allows the maximum number of researchers to study the creator through the materials. However, the archivist first attempts to



Photographer Bernard Kobel, who took many photos of Pudgy Stockton in the early days of her career, was also one of her regular correspondents before World War II. He frequently decorated his envelopes with cartoons of Pudgy, Relna Brewer McRae, and other men and women from Muscle Beach.



divine the reason why items are where they are in order to gain insight into the mindset of the creator, only engendering his or her own order if that of the creator appears either totally random or unclear. In the case of the Stockton papers, they were wonderfully organized when they arrived here at Texas. Pudgy had created photo albums, had filed letters and correspondence, and had clearly given a great deal of thought to the preservation of her legacy.

Now, allow me to dive into some of the treasures contained within the Pudgy and Les Stockton Papers. Serious fans of physical culture will probably love the binder relating to the trip that Pudgy and Les took with George Eiferman and Steve Reeves to Hawaii

in 1949. The binder contains many photos of the trip, as well as Aloha placemats from a Hawaiian sushi restaurant and the packet given to the Stocktons on the Pan American Airways Clipper plane that brought them from Los Angeles to Honolulu. Furthermore, the wooden Aloha bowls given to Pudgy and Les Stockton (unfortunately, his arrived broken) by the Nuuanu YMCA Weightlifting club are also here at the Stark Center. The Papers also contain 11 publicity binders full of advertisements and articles featuring Les and, especially, Pudgy Stockton. In the late 1930s and early 1940s the Stocktons were featured in ads for everything from Univex cameras to Ritamine vitamins. In addition, the Papers subsume 14 binders full of photographs ranging

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*Iron Game History* is published by the McLean Sports History Fellowship at the University of Texas at Austin, under the auspices of THE H.J. LUTCHER STARK CENTER FOR PHYSICAL CULTURE & SPORTS. U.S. subscription rate: \$25.00 per four issues, \$40.00 per eight issues. McLean Fellowship subscriptions \$60.00 per eight issues; Patron subscriptions \$100.00 per eight issues. Canada & overseas subscriptions: \$30.00 per four issues and \$45.00 per eight issues. U.S. funds only. See page 36 for further details.

Address all correspondence and subscription requests to: *Iron Game History*, The H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture & Sports, NEZ 5.700, D3600, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas, 78712. For back issues or subscription queries, please contact Associate Editor Kim Beckwith at: kim@starkcenter.org. Phone: 512-471-4890

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*Iron Game History* is a non-profit enterprise.

Postmaster: Send address corrections to: *IGH*, NEZ 5.700, D3600, University of Texas, Austin, Texas 78712. (ISSN 1069-7276)

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from 1937-1999, including many of handbalancing and acrobatics on Santa Monica's Muscle Beach.

The Stockton Papers also contain a great deal of valuable correspondence, vitally important to a more complete understanding of how very popular Pudgy Stockton became. Many fans wrote to Pudgy and not only do we have their queries, we also have carbon copies of the responses Pudgy sent back. Pudgy received mail from many interesting characters and she put their correspondence into several specific files, including: "ego," "screwball," and "meatball." One person even asked Pudgy to send her the "Salon of Figure Development," apparently thinking that that was the name of the personalized course Pudgy sent out to women. (Actually, the Salon of Figure Development was a woman's gym owned by Pudgy and Les, leading Les to write on the letter, "Well, are you going to send it to her?" and Pudgy to write "meatball," and place it in the appropriate file.)

The Papers also include correspondence with "Barbelles" featured in Pudgy Stockton's column of the same name in *Strength and Health*, and by reading this correspondence, researchers can discover what an inspiration Pudgy was to women worldwide. It is also apparent from the correspondence that Pudgy was not always paid on time for her *Barbelles* submissions, and she often wrote *Strength and Health* editor Jim Murray to ensure she was remunerated for her efforts.

One of the most fascinating sets of correspondence in the Papers is in regards to the appearance of Pudgy and Les Stockton in Siegmund Klein's *Stars of Strength* show in New York City in November 1947. Originally, Klein wants her to come for \$150 plus the cost of plane tickets. Pudgy writes back saying \$500 is the lowest she'll accept if Klein wants her and Les in the show. Klein writes back saying \$500 is too high for him to go and Pudgy responds that she cannot participate for less. Two days later, Klein wires the Stocktons that he will pay the full \$500 if they agree to arrive by 11/12/1947. The interchange between these legends shows that both Pudgy and Les knew what their talents were worth and that they were not willing to settle for less than they felt they deserved, even from a man as well-known in the game as Siegmund Klein. The Papers further subsume correspondence about the acts Pudgy and Les would perform, what kind of music they would like, and details about the venues and stages. In addition, the Papers contain tickets and programs for the show, bringing it even more to life for either academics

or fans. Thanks to archival arrangement, compelling interchanges like that between Klein and the Stocktons can be relived and studied rapidly, yet with amazing detail.

This is but a small part of the precious information residing in the Abbye "Pudgy" Stockton and Les Stockton Papers at the Stark Center. In order to make things easier for anyone interested in the Stocktons and their era, I created an item level finding aid for the Papers online. (This aid refers researchers to the exact box and folder in which an item in the Papers is located.) To find the aid, simply go to [www.starkcenter.org](http://www.starkcenter.org) and click on the word "Research" at the far right in the top taskbar. Then click on the "view the aid" link under the picture of Pudgy Stockton and the words "Pudgy Stockton Finding Aid." When it opens you'll see an abstract briefly describing Pudgy and Les Stockton, followed by language about access and restrictions on use for the Papers, processing information, copyright and right to privacy language, and finally an index of key figures and terms. The index should be most helpful to those of you researching a specific person, like Steve Reeves, or magazine, such as *Strength and Health*. If you encounter any problems using this procedure, please email me at [geoff@starkcenter.org](mailto:geoff@starkcenter.org) or call me at 512-471-0991. If you live in or near Austin, of course, we hope you'll visit the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports. If you do, please stop by and say hello. If you live farther away, we still hope your travels will one day soon bring you to Austin so that you can stop by and meet the entire Stark Center team. Once again, my name is Geoff Schmalz and I'm proud to be doing my part in sharing the history of the iron game.

*Editors' Note: The Stockton finding aid is the first of what we hope will be a number of similar research tools that Geoff will be preparing for us in the future. However, we need to acknowledge that this work would not have been possible had Laura Stockton, Pudgy's daughter, not been willing to place her mother's wonderful collection with us at the Stark Center. We are deeply grateful to Laura for this kindness and there was no question in any of our minds when Geoff joined our team last fall whose collection he would start on first. It had to be Pudgy's. The finding aid Geoff prepared about her papers, by the way, is 200 pages long. Geoff is currently deeply immersed in George Jowett's papers and we expect to have the finding aid for that collection on-line later this summer.*



# Testing for the World's Strongest Man: Ensuring that the Man Called "The Strongest Man in the World" Is the Strongest Man in the World<sup>1</sup>

M. Andrew Holowchak  
Muhlenberg College, The Wescoe School

*"Our own worth is measured by that to which we devote our energy."  
— Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, VII.3.*

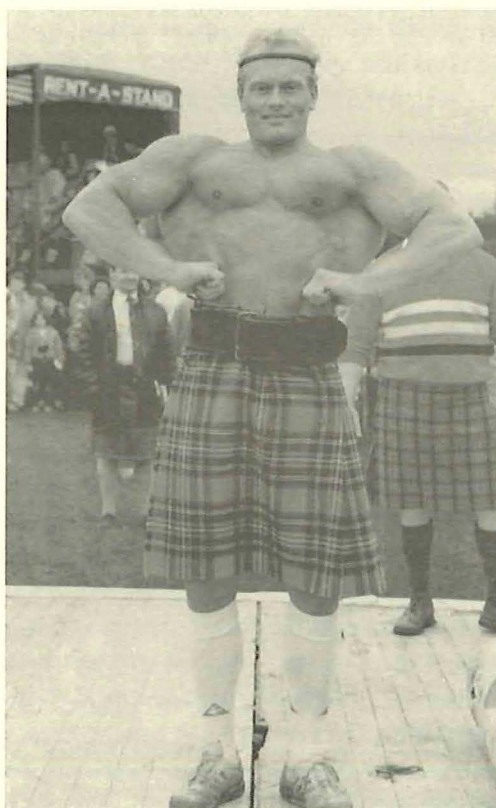
The final event of the 1990 World's Strongest Man contest—held in Joensuu, Finland—pitted Iceland's Jón Páll Sigmarsson against American O.D. Wilson. Sigmarsson, winner of three prior World's Strongest Man contests (hereafter, WSM), was behind by five and one-half points to Wilson (46 to 40.5), just after finishing second to Wilson in the Anvil Lift event. Still Sigmarsson confidently boasted that he would do well enough in the final event, the Brick Carrying Race, to beat Wilson in the contest. The generally soft-spoken Wilson, an incredibly massive man at 6'5" and roughly 400 pounds, was angered by Sigmarsson's boasting. "I hate for people to overlook me like I'm not there," said Wilson. "It makes me mad. And now I'm mad."<sup>2</sup> He vowed that he would prevail. So substantial was Wilson's lead that all he had to do in the final event was to come in fifth place or better, among a field of eight, to ensure victory.

Wilson and Sigmarsson squared off in the final heat of the four heats of the final event. Each was given a 100-kilogram (220-pound) block of bricks to be carried high on the back so that the strongmen could race around the 200-meter track in the quickest possible time. The well-conditioned Sigmarsson, who weighed more than 100 pounds less than Wilson, raced rapidly around the

track and completed his lap in 50.92 seconds—a time good enough to earn him first place and eight points. Wilson started quickly, but soon began to labor under the load and finished the course in 1:12.80 seconds—a time that earned him seventh place and only two points. Sigmarsson's eight points gave him a total of 58.5 points; Wilson's two points gave him a total of 58 points. Sigmarsson's half-point win was his fourth WSM title. The

massive and massively disappointed Wilson pledged to return to the competition next year and win. *[Editors' note: He did not.]*

To most observers, Sigmarsson's win in the Brick Carry event and narrow victory over Wilson in the contest showed his resiliency and his greatness as a strongman. Yet it must have been perplexing to some, as it was to me at the time, that a man as large and strong as Wilson could lose to the smaller Sigmarsson in a contest that aimed to determine the strongest man in the world. Would Sigmarsson have won if the load of bricks had weighed 300, not 100 kilograms, and the length had been 50, not 200 meters? I suspect not, but it is, at least, an open question. That notwithstanding, the Brick Carry ought not to have been what decided victory between Sigmarsson and Wilson. The event was structured so that a man of Wilson's mass could not do well. A truer test was needed.



**Four-time World's Strongest Man winner, Iceland's Jón Páll Sigmarsson stood 6'3" tall and usually weighed during his competitive years between 290 and 300 pounds.**

*Photo Courtesy David Webster*



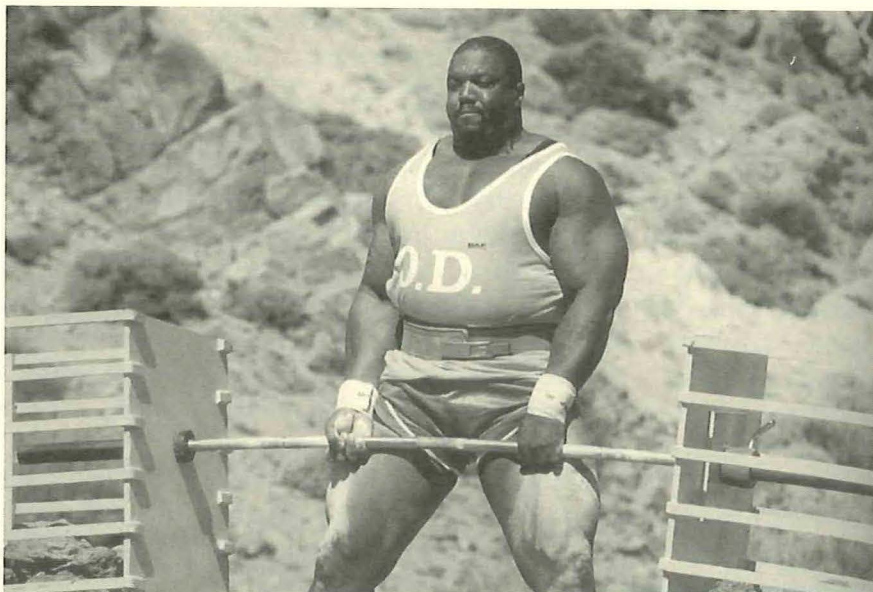
The sport of Strongman has come a long way, since 1990. As of this writing there are three major contests, including WSM, which aim to test for the strongest man in the world. The number and type of events at one competition differ, often substantially, from the number and type of events at the other two competitions and signify, as it were, key philosophical differences in their approaches to the sport of Strongman.

This paper is an effort to structure a contest that would viably test for the strongest man in the world by setting out the philosophical criteria undergirding such a contest: the completeness, heaviness, and simplicity criteria. Driven by those criteria, the structure of a strongest-man-in-the-world contest depends fundamentally on answers to four questions, which flesh out the theoretical ideal for such a contest. First, what sort of events ought to be included? Second, how many events ought to be included? Third, over how many days ought the contest be held? Finally, how much weight ought to be used in each event?

### *A Brief History of the Sport of Strongman*

Though strongman displays and exhibitions of strength have been a part of human history—as mythologies are full of accounts of human feats of strength that certainly have their origin in actual feats of strength—Strongman has only recently been made a sport with the inception of the World's Strongest Man contest in 1977. Since then, Strongman has gained in popularity to such an extent that many of the world's best weightlifters and powerlifters have left their sports to make full-time commitments to Strongman. There are now competitions of various sorts all over the globe.

The reason for the popularity of Strongman is easy to see. Athletes push up massive logs, pull trains or airplanes, deadlift bars fitted with large Hummer tires or containers overfilled with silver coins, and race with an automobile strapped to their shoulders. From the perspective of the athletes, Strongman enables the very best of them to gain notoriety that they could not have gained in weightlifting or powerlifting. It also enables the winner of one of the three major strongman contests—the



O.D. Wilson began his career in powerlifting and he totalled 2430 in a contest in 1989, one of the highest totals of all times. Although Wilson's weight varied considerably over the years, at 6'5" in height, he generally weighed between 400 and 420 pounds when competing as a strongman.

*Photo Courtesy David Webster*

World's Strongest Man (WSM), the Arnold Strongman Classic (ASC), and the Fortissimus Strength Challenge (FSC)—to stake a claim to being the strongest man in the world, which is a title as prestigious within the strength sports as is "heavyweight boxing champion of the world" in boxing, and instantly puts him in a select group of athletes. Furthermore, some of the larger competitions offer modest prizes, often of a monetary sort, that enable a handful of the very best athletes to make a livelihood of the sport.

The most noteworthy and established of these contests is the World's Strongest Man contest. WSM was established in 1977 by Trans-World International for CBS and was initially more of a friendly display of strength by invited athletes from several sports—e.g., powerlifting, weightlifting, bodybuilding, American football, wrestling, shot putting, and arm wrestling. Those invited had to lift logs overhead, race carrying refrigerators on their backs or pushing wheelbarrows with engines, toss beer kegs onto the back of a truck, wrestle each other Sumo-style, and bend iron bars of varied thicknesses.

The overall aim at first was light, almost frivolous entertainment, as athletes joked with each other throughout the contest and the events were unpredictable, sometimes outrageous. Some years later, Met-Rx bought out the sponsorship rights of WSM and, as athletes committed to training throughout the year for the title and pres-



tige that came with it, light entertainment turned into fierce competition. The first great modern strongman was the massive Bill Kazmaier, who stood 6'3" and weighed as much as 335 pounds. Kaz so dominated the events from 1980 to 1982 that he was not invited to return until 1988, when he was beyond his prime, though he still managed to place second to Iceland's Jón Páll Sigmarsson—the sport's second great strongman. Sigmarsson, a man with plenty of charisma, won four competitions between 1984 and 1990. The third great strongman, Magnús Ver Magnússon, also from Iceland, won four championships between 1991 and 1996. Finally there is the Polish powerhouse Mariusz Pudzianowski, who has won five championships between 2002 and 2008 and placed second in 2006 and 2009. Pudzianowski is arguably the most superbly conditioned strongman of all time and shows little sign of slowing with age, as he has yet to retire.

A second contest began in 2002, when Dr. Terry Todd responded to a request by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Lorimer, in response to comments by Todd, to set up a strongman contest that was a truer overall test of strength. Thus, the Arnold Strongman Classic—a competition imbruted, strangely enough, not through more and varied events, but through fewer events with much heavier weights—was established. Over the years, the number of events over two days has ranged from four to six and the weights used in those events were set up to challenge the limits of human strength. Events contested include a timber carry, without straps, of 865 pounds up a 30-foot inclined ramp within a 30-second time limit and a yoke walk, whereby athletes carry 1116 pounds on their shoulders for a prescribed distance over time. The contest was first won by American Mark Henry. Thereafter, Lithuania's Žydrūnas Savickas won it in each of the next six years. In 2009 and 2010, the winner was American Derek Poundstone.

A third strongman contest began in 2005 with the inception of an international strongman league called "International Federation of Strength Athletes" (IFSA). IFSA was formed not only to rival WSM, but also to allow strength athletes the opportunity to make a career of Strongman. Thus, IFSA recruited and signed 60 of the world's top strength athletes—including Savickas, Ukraine's Vasyl Virastyuk, Russia's Mikhail Koklyaev, Poundstone, and Pudzianowski—to contracts, though Pudzianowski quickly defected. Savickas won IFSA world championships in 2005 and 2006. Virastyuk won the title in 2007. IFSA folded in 2008.

Finally, in 2008, the first Fortissimus Contest (FSC) was held. With *L'homme le plus forte de la planète* pasted on its webpage in nine different languages, it no doubt considered itself to be the contest which best decides the strongest man in the world.<sup>3</sup> It had 10 grueling events in 2009, including the Pyramid of Strength—a timed race, in which athletes lift and load three weights with handles (weighing 450, 500, and 525 pounds) up five steps, and a hip-and-thigh backlift, in which athletes lift as much weight as they can and the weight begins at 2000 pounds. Said strongman Travis Ortmayer, prior to competing in the 2009 contest:

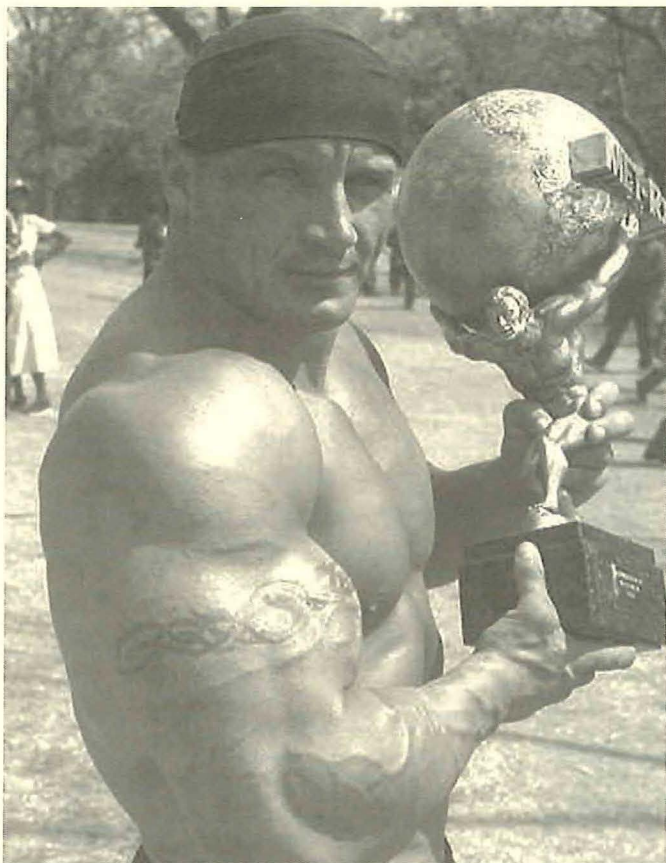
I think that FSC 2009 may just be the most brutal competition I have ever seen! For instance, the dumbbell-press medley was completed by three of us last year [Derek, Zydrunas, and myself], so what do they do this year? They certainly didn't do the obvious thing and take the last implement off and replace it with a heavier one. No, they just *add* another, even heavier one! The first day is going to pulverize the back and the second will take away what little will be left of the legs.<sup>4</sup>

The contest was grueling, as advertised. Over the two days, successful athletes had to negotiate over 16,400 pounds. Savickas won the contest in 2009; Poundstone, in 2008. [Editors' note: *The FSC folded in 2009.*]

#### Pudzianowski vs. Savickas

With the exposure he has been given globally through television by the yearly WSM contest, Pudzianowski has become the most recognizable strongman in the world today. At 6'1" and just over 300 pounds, he is superbly conditioned and is, from the perspective of lean muscle mass, perhaps the most physically impressive strongman of all time. His physical impressiveness is doubtless a result of his genetic gifts as well as his extraordinary drive, focus, and intelligence—reasons sufficient to cement a claim to being the strongest man who ever lived. His drive is manifest in his competitive spirit. In interviews, for example, he is not shy about being known to posterity as the greatest strongman of all time. His focus is manifest in his capacity to concentrate on each event in a manner that is free from all distraction. When competing, his attention is restricted exclusively to his own performance, while adversaries always seem to have one eye on Pudzianowski. His intelligence is manifest in the





Polish strongman Mariusz Pudzianowski has now won five World's Strongest Man Contests, in which his great muscular endurance and quickness have allowed him to frequently prevail even though he is never the largest man in the contest at 6'1" and just over 300 pounds. In the Arnold Strongman Classic, however, where the events more fully test physical strength, Mariusz has only entered three times, finishing fourth in 2003, fifth in 2004, and taking sixth in 2006. He has been invited every year.

extraordinary efficiency with which he tackles events. He not only makes the most efficient use of his body on each event, he also shows continual improvement on events for which he is physically less well-suited. His tenacity was no more evident than when he lost the 2006 WSM contest to American Phil Pfister by one second on the fifth and last Atlas stone of the last event and then came back the next year to crush Pfister and all other competitors.

In stark contrast to the superbly conditioned Pudzianowski, in the manner of the physical contrast between Sigmarsson and Wilson, is the massive Žydrūnas Savickas, who stands 6'3" and weighs roughly 400 pounds. Savickas is a physically impressive sight to those initiated in strength sports; to those uninitiated, he seems, as did Wilson, just another large, fat guy. Yet the large fat guy has won six straight ASC championships

from 2003 to 2008, the IFSA world championships in 2005 and 2006, the FSC challenge in 2009, and most recently the WSM contest in 2009—a contest generally ill-suited to men of his immensity.

Who, then, is the real strongest man in the world—Pudzianowski or Savickas? From 2005 to 2007, that was difficult to decide, since IFSA had barred its athletes contractually from competing in the WSM contest. Yet Savickas and Pudzianowski have competed against each other on several occasions in WSM. Prior to IFSA, Savickas had finished second to Pudzianowski in the 2002 and 2003 WSM competitions. Yet Pudzianowski came in third in the 2004 WSM competition, behind Virastyuk and Savickas, both recruited by IFSA the next year. In 2009, Savickas placed first and Pudzianowski, second.

More telling is their head-to-head performance in the yearly ASC. Between 2003 and 2006, Pudzianowski and Savickas competed against each other on three occasions. Savickas, who has competed in the ASC each year since 2003—except for 2009, when he decided he needed to take a break from year-round training—had never lost the strongman contest. Pudzianowski came in fourth in the ASC in 2003, fifth in 2004, and sixth in 2006. He did not compete in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2009, though he was invited those years. Pudzianowski was not only dominated by the more massive Savickas in the ASC competitions, he nowise distinguished himself from other competitors in the process.

Finally, what of the Fortissimus? Pudzianowski, though invited each year, has yet to compete. Savickas attended both competitions and won the competition in 2009.

Overall, Pudzianowski has reigned supreme in WSM competitions in the last decade, while Savickas has dominated the ASC and IFSA contests and made his presence felt at FSC with a win in 2009. Savickas did not compete in WSM contests from 2005 to 2008; Pudzianowski did not compete in the ASC since 2006 and did not compete in FSC in 2008 and 2009. Were the strongmen avoiding each other?

There is no reason to believe that either athlete has been totally avoiding the other in recent years. Savickas was contractually barred by IFSA from competing in WSM contests from 2005 to 2007. He declined to compete in 2008, but did compete in 2009, where he beat Pudzianowski, who finished second. In contrast, Pudzianowski was invited to each ASC since 2003 and to both the FSC challenges. In the years he has attended the ASC, he has been mediocre at best, and he has not





According to the author's CHS formula, Zydrunas Savickas of Lithuania deserves to be called the World's Strongest Man. In 2009, he won the Fortissimus contest in Quebec, Canada, and in 2008 he won the Arnold Strongman Classic for the sixth straight year. He also won the WSM contest in 2009. In this photo from the 2010 ASC, Zydrunas is doing two reps in the Apollon's Wheels with 459 pounds, a new record.

attended a contest since 2006. Moreover, Pudzianowski has verbally committed to both FSC challenges, but has yet to honor a commitment. What seems clear is that Pudzianowski is avoiding all contests other than the WSM contests. Why?

The answer, I maintain, is straightforward. He has nothing to gain and everything to lose by competing elsewhere. His successes at WSM contests since 2002 have given him the reputation of the world's strongest man to a large global audience. His dismal showings at the ASC competitions have shown that he cannot contend in competitions in which the weights are upped and events test for raw, not conditioned, strength. Whereas the ASC has structured its competitions so that the winner distin-

guishes himself in a handful of events by lifting very heavy weights in full-body tests of strength, WSM competitions have been as much tests of athletic endurance as they have been tests of strength. Deadlifting and pressing events, in the WSM, especially in the qualifying rounds just prior to the competition, allow for numerous repetitions that tire stronger, heavier competitors. Thus, a strongman with Pudzianowski's extraordinary conditioning has a decided advantage in WSM, year in and year out. In competitions where conditioning is attenuated, like FSC—or factored out—like ASC, Pudzianowski fails to distinguish himself other than by his impressive physique.

### Testing for Raw Strength

Why should conditioning be attenuated or factored out in a Strongman contest? It should not necessarily be attenuated or factored out in all Strongman contests, only those which aim to test for the strongest man in the world. Before elaborating on that point, let us attempt a definition of "strength."

Lexicons offer up a large number of definitions that relate not only to physical strength, but also to strength of mind and strength of character. For the purposes of Strongman competitions, I wish to focus on physical strength, though it is acknowledged that in Strongman competitions, like all other athletic competitions, character and mental strength play a large part also.

I begin with the following lexical definitions, all of which are relevant for understanding the phenomenon of human physical strength.

**Strength=df<sub>1</sub>** A numerical measure of force.

**Strength=df<sub>2</sub>** A capacity for exertion to overcome force.

**Strength=df<sub>3</sub>** A capacity for endurance to resist force.

The first definition is generic. It says that strength is merely quantifiable force. More precisely, as Newton stated in his second law of motion,  $F = ma$ , or force is equivalent to mass times acceleration. Simply put, for an



athlete, while supine, to press a 400-pound barbell from his chest, he must (roughly) exert continuously an upwards force in excess of 400 pounds or the barbell will remain on his chest.<sup>5</sup>

The second definition states that strength is a capacity to overcome some force, say an object of some specific weight, through human exertion. In the 2008 Arnold Classic, for example, Savickas pulled 1066 pounds in the Hummer-Tire Deadlift, for a new world record.

The third definition focuses on resisting a force, say a heavy dead weight, through endurance. At the 2006 IFSA World Championships in Finland, in the Toyota-Truck Deadlift-Hold event, Virastyuk held up the rear end of the heavy truck 87.8 seconds to best all competitors.

All three definitions seem to add something needed for a definition, suitable for Strongman contests. Thus, drawing something from each definition, let me offer up the following definition of “strength.”

**Strength=**df A quantifiable capacity either to overcome force through exertion or to resist force through endurance.

Although this definition ignores the inner dimension of strength—and as most great athletes admit, strongmen not being exceptions, that success in their sport is principally inner drive—it captures nicely the physical essence of strength competitions. At the end of a contest, the man who pushes or pulls the greatest amount of weight or a certain weight for the greatest number of reps in some events, or the man who endures a weight over time better than other men in other events is declared winner.

There is, however, a certain built-in ambiguity in the definition that reflects what I believe is a problem for any contest that essays to determine the strongest man in the world. The definition tells us only that strength is a capacity to overcome force through exertion or resist force through endurance. Neither does it say anything about how much force one must overcome or resist nor does it say anything about time. One can imagine a strength contest which includes events such as these: (1) athletes fill a shopping bag with groceries, carry it a distance of 100 meters, and then rush back, while they carry a 10-pound bag of flour, to where they began; (2) athletes toss up 10 bricks, one after another, and attempt to clear a 20-foot-high bar within 30 seconds; and (3) athletes try to prevent two hardy five-year-old boys from pedaling away in opposite directions on their tricycles

for as long as they can by holding fast to ropes that are affixed to the rear of the tricycles. Such events are, of course, contrived and silly, but the point I make through them is not: They are legitimate tests of strength, given our definition, so why is it that they seem to be events ill-suited for inclusion in a contest that decides the strongest man in the world? Conditioning, technique, and speed of performance would be deciding factors in the first two events. In the final event, one would expect that the two boys, however hardy, would become exhausted and frustrated, and then quit, well before either could break away from anyone, with a modicum of physical strength, holding them back. The point is that too many persons would succeed and succeed well in such events and such events would not distinguish them, whom we generally consider to be the strongest persons in the world, from them, who are merely good athletes. In short, being exceptionally strong would not gain an athlete an advantage in such “tests of strength.” Strength seems merely to be one of many things that are tested in such events.

Yet each of those contrived events has a parallel to WSM events, which are themselves flawed. The first is comparable to several carrying events at WSM throughout the years that test for balance and conditioning as well as strength. Technique is critical. Often the event is complicated, as athletes, barefoot, have to run through sand, while carrying a load, and the heavier, more massive athletes tend to falter. One year, competitors had to carry heavy sacks of sand onto a platform, situated in the sea! Few finished. The second is comparable to the keg-toss event, where athletes, standing in sand, have to toss 10 50-pound kegs over a 14’6” wall over time. The event favors taller, fitter, and well-coordinated athletes. Efficiency is the key. Extremely powerful athletes, who clear the wall easily on the first few kegs, often exhaust themselves before reaching the last few kegs and fail to finish in the allotted time. Heaviness of the kegs is not the issue here, as the kegs are not in the least heavy to such men; endurance of the athletes is the issue. The last is comparable to the Hercules-hold event, in which athletes, standing between two hinged pillars, grip handles affixed to the pillars in order to prevent the pillars from falling to each side. The pillars are held for the longest possible time. Grip strength is imperative. Moreover, short-armed athletes have a distinct advantage over long-armed athletes in that the weight of the pillar, sitting closer to the perpendicular position, rests more on the apparatus to which it is hinged. Consequently, short-armed athletes have less weight to resist. Furthermore,



the Hercules-hold event simply does not test for overall body strength.

### *Stumbling Blocks*

The flaws of carrying events, the keg toss, and the Hercules Hold illustrate, through their deficiencies, three criteria any contest that aims to decide the strongest man in the world ought to fulfill. I call these the completeness, the heaviness, and the simplicity criteria.

**Completeness Criterion:** Any contest, aiming to test for the strongest man in the world, ought only to include events that are complete, full-body, not frivolous, tests of strength.

**Heaviness Criterion:** Any contest, aiming to test for the strongest man in the world, ought to use weights that test the very limits of human strength.

**Simplicity Criterion:** Any contest, aiming to test for the strongest man in the world, ought to include events that are relatively uncomplicated.

Those criteria, taken together, which may be called the CHS criteria, have implications for the sort of contest that aims to test for the strongest man in the world. Immediately, however, we encounter two pressing practical concerns.

First, there is the problem of biased events. Any contest that tests for the strongest man in the world would have to attract the strongest men in the world, chiefly scattered in three strength sports: weightlifting, made up of the snatch and clean and jerk; powerlifting, made up of the squat, bench press, and deadlift; and Strongman competitions, made up, as we have seen, of a wide variety of strength tests. Consequently, the events contested in such a competition must not show a strong bias in any one direction toward any one strength sport to the exclusion of the others. Otherwise, it will likely fail to attract many or, at least, some of the strongest men in the world and, thus, it cannot claim to have achieved its aim.

The problem of biased events is a huge obstacle. As I have argued in a prior publication,<sup>6</sup> it may be that the best test of the strongest man in the world would be some slightly modified form of powerlifting contest, which tests for maximum weight in each of the three lifts. Testing for maximal weight satisfies the heaviness condition and the relative uncomplicated nature of the

squat, bench press, and deadlift satisfies the simplicity condition. Moreover, each of the three lifts is a relatively complete test of bodily strength. Thus, one could argue that the powerlifts satisfy the CHS criteria sufficiently well to prove a fitting test for the strongest man in the world. Yet staging a contest, aiming to decide the strongest man in the world, which features only the powerlifts, would likely not attract many of the strongest men in the world outside of powerlifting.<sup>7</sup>

Second, there is the problem of spectacle. A strongest-man-in-the-world contest, like all other competitive sporting events with large spectator appeal, is a competitive event with the express, though not exclusive, aim of entertaining. That means that certain concessions will always have to be made to spectacle—i.e., a particular strength event that is a poorer, often more complex test of raw strength but with strong spectator appeal (e.g., a back squat with a barbell affixed to an apparatus that carries women in bathing suits or a deadlift with bulky Hummer tires) will likely prevail over a strength event that is a better, simpler test of raw strength with little spectator appeal (e.g., a back squat or deadlift with a heavy barbell with standard plates). Spectator appeal sells a sport and spectator appeal requires some measure of complexity and, unfortunately for sports purists, some measure of compromise.

There are three other issues, related to spectacle, which need to be addressed: alteration of events, the historical grounding of events, and the safety of the events. First, it is a staple of Strongman contests to modify, rotate, or change at least some of the events each year. That is due, in part, to mistakes made by those holding the event, because of the relative newness of the sport. It may turn out that an event, like the steel bar bend, is too injurious to the competitors, so it is dropped and replaced by a safer event. It may be that an event proved too easy (or difficult) for competitors and so modification was warranted, such as more weight or inclusion of straps (For example, the 815-pound uphill timber carry, without straps, used in the 2002 ASC, was changed to a weight of approximately 875 pounds.) Such difficulties notwithstanding, Strongman, with its inception in 1977, has always at least rotated events to prevent athletes from preparing in advance for particular events and to force them to train for overall body strength throughout the year. The question that remains is this: Are modification, rotation, and change needed, if the events contested are simple, true, full-body tests of strength like the powerlifts? The answer, I maintain, is that they are not



needed, but that modification, rotation, and change of events in strongman are perhaps too entrenched and too much a part of the spectacle of Strongman to be discarded.

Second, strongman contests always seem to include events that have their roots in strongman exhibitions—from numerous decades ago (e.g., the Cyr dumbbell and Apollon's Wheel) to a few millennia ago (e.g., stone lifting). The preference for events with a history behind them, in effect, falls under the problem of spectacle. Does tying events to strongman feats of the past detract from the aim of testing for the strongest man in the world? Given the CHS criteria, one must acknowledge that it often does. Many of the strength feats of the past were remarkable only because they conceded so much to spectacle at the expense of simplicity (e.g., the bent press or side press) and sometimes to completeness (e.g., teeth lifts) and heaviness (e.g., bending coins with one's fingers or ripping apart phone books).

Finally, there is the safety of the events. Ought a contest to make concessions to spectacle that needlessly puts competitors at risk? Liberals in the philosophy-of-sport literature commonly argue that risk-taking is a personal, not a public, issue.<sup>8</sup> None have been pressed fully to demonstrate the practicability of that claim—especially as it concerns socially sanctioned sports. I have argued consistently that socially sanctioned sports must make key concessions to safety—lest we adopt an anything-goes approach to sport that privileges spectacle over concern for athletes.<sup>9</sup> The sport of Strongman, at least insofar as the ASC and the WSM have demonstrated over the years, seems to pay at least some consideration to the safety of its competitors. WSM, for instance, discontinued the steel-bar-bend event, after both Bill Kazmaier and Geoff Kapes sustained injuries in 1982, although they required the men to fight each other Sumo-style even though such matches are risky, especially to men untrained in Sumo techniques.<sup>10</sup>

### *Creating a World's-Strongest-Man Contest*

The problems of spectacle and biased events notwithstanding, I return to the four critical questions, as they pertain to structuring the sort of Strongman contest, aiming to determine the strongest man in the world.



At the 2010 Arnold Strongman Classic, defending champion Derek Poundstone carried the massive 1000-pound timber frame up the 40-foot incline in an amazing 9.28 seconds. Keeping the time is four-time World's Strongest Man winner, Magnus Ver Magnusson. Poundstone's phenomenal performance with the timbers allowed him to finish four points ahead of Zydrunas Savickas, who had injured his hamstring just before the contest. At this moment in history, Savickas has a slight edge over Poundstone in basic strength. They are ahead of all others.

1. What sorts of events should be included in the contest?
2. How many events should there be in the contest?
3. Over how many days should it be held?
4. How much weight should athletes have to lift in those events?

Answering these questions, my concern is not the practical problem of setting up just such a contest—for the problems of spectacle and biased events would certainly come into play—but the theoretical problem of deciding just what such a contest, given the CHS criteria, ought to look like.

### *The Type of Events*

Any contest that aims to determine the strongest man in the world ought to be aiming at testing for raw, brute strength. Given that, the sort of events that ought to be included are those that are relatively uncomplicated movements that fulfill the CHS criteria. For instance,



the overhead lift with a log, barbell, stone, or aluminum block is a great and relatively simple test of lower back, torso, quadriceps, shoulder, and triceps strength. The squat and deadlift are also exceptional and simple tests of overall bodily strength. In the main, there should be a preference for maximal single-repetition events over maximal multiple-repetition events.

Given the CHS criteria, the sorts of events that should *not* be included in Strongman contests that aim to determine the strongest man in the world are these:

1. Events too technically complex, where technical mastery prohibits exhibition of strength (e.g., the caber toss, the car walk, and the weight toss over a bar);
2. Events requiring extraordinary cardiovascular fitness, where strongmen often falter or fail because of lack of cardiovascular fitness, not strength (e.g., the light deadlift for reps or the carrying of several relatively light objects, in sequence, without rest);
3. Events focusing on strength of too particular a sort (e.g., the Pillars-of-Hercules hold and the front or lateral deltoid hold);
4. Events showing themselves too dangerous over time (e.g., the steel bar bend); and
5. Events where the apparatus itself is not consistent from competitor to competitor (e.g., the WSM squat or deadlift for repetitions, with a barrel dumped into the apparatus with each successful repetition, because the arbitrary placement of the barrels in the apparatus affords some athletes a leverage advantage over others).

### ***The Number of Events***

CHS criteria require that there should be great care to limit the total number of events in Strongman contests aiming to determine the strongest man in the world. Complete bodily tests with ponderous weights

exhaust fully all competitors. As a rule, strongmen need to be massive athletes, at least in part because body mass affords them leverage against the ponderous weights they encounter. Extra mass, of course, means that the toll on athletes over the course of a particular event or an entire contest will be greater and that by itself precludes having a large number of events. Overall, I think that four or five grueling events over two or three days are sufficient. Historically, the number of events contested as WSM contests have been too many. The 2009 FSC featured 10 events over two days. It may have proven itself to be, in the words of Travis Ortmeyer, the “most brutal competition,” but having so many events in so short a period of time factors in endurance too much.

### ***The Number of Days***

If events are fixed to a small, yet suitable number—say four or five events—it is feasible to conduct the contest over the course of a few days. Three would be ideal: two on day one, two on day two, and one on day three. In general, ASC has the right idea, as it generally contests four to six events over two days. WSM in 2009 only contested seven events over three days and the events (surprisingly) that year were fairly good events by measure of the CHS criteria. Yet the best athletes made the finals by surviving 10 qualifying events over four days just prior to the final events. That is too much testing. As a rule, more events require more days, but that, I have argued, detracts from the aim of testing for the strongest man in the world. [*Editors’ note: The 2010 ASC had five events.*]

### ***The Amount of Weight***

To focus on brute strength and not cardiovascular fitness, events in which the best athletes can pop out 15 to 20 repetitions, in a specified amount of time, use insufficient weight and favor well-conditioned strongmen. The car deadlift for repetitions in WSM contests is one such event. So too is the WSM light overhead press for repetitions. Conversely, the Manhood-Stones event of the 2008 ASC contest, where a spherical 484-pound or 525-pound stone had to be lifted off the ground and dropped over a barrier, approximately four feet off the ground, for repetitions, is the sort of correct test of brute strength that involves repetitions. Many repetitions are not possible, due to the heaviness of the stones. Again, maximal single repetitions in an event are always preferable to maximal multiple repetitions.

Overall, as strongmen become bigger and stronger,





An event such as this axe-hold at the 1994 World's Strongest Man contest is almost impossible to judge. Also the athlete, South African Wayne Price, is being tested more for endurance than for strength.

the weight lifted in events must increase correspondingly, so modification of that sort will be a necessary part of a properly organized contest over the years.

### Concluding Thoughts

The principal and perhaps unremarkable implication of this paper is that the structure of any Strongman contest itself determines the type of competitors that can reasonably contest in it. Contests with fewer events and heavier weights in those events will favor more muscularly massive, less conditioned, strength athletes. Contests with numerous events and lighter weights in those events will favor less muscularly massive, more conditioned, strength athletes.

Overall, I have argued for the CHS criteria to be employed in structuring a strongest-man-in-the-world contest: Events ought to be complete tests of strength, utilize weights that challenge the limits of human strength, and be relatively simple tests. Those criteria impose limits for the type of events that can be contested, the number of events contested, the number of days over which those events can be contested, and the weights that should be employed in those events.

The obstacles confronting anyone wishing to organize such a contest are those of biased events and spectacle and its related problems. The problem of biased events requires contest organizers to include events that will draw in athletes not only from Strongman, but also from weightlifting and powerlifting. The problem of spectacle makes it virtually impossible for the simplicity criterion to be met in the most right-intended strongest-man-in-the-world contest. Concessions will always need to be made to complexity to satisfy spectators.

Yet the problem of concessions to spectacle may not

be such a problem after all. The sport of Strongman has its roots squarely in strength exhibitions, which played to spectacle. To strive for utter simplicity in testing for strength—e.g., to use the three powerlifts as tests for the strongest man in the world—would be to ignore its roots and to pretend that Strongman is something it is not. What separates Strongman from other strength sports is its appeal to spectacle. For contest organizers, imagination and invention are key factors in designing yearly events. For strongmen, resourcefulness, in addition to brute strength, is needed to master those events. Along the way, organizers, competitors, and, most importantly, fans of Strongman have plenty of nerve-wracking fun. Having fun, as ASC has shown over the years, does not rule out a serious contest, in keeping with the CHS criteria, that in the process actually does determine the strongest man in the world.

### Notes:

1. I would like to thank Dr. Terry Todd for insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper and an anonymous reader for helpful comments on a later version.
2. <http://strongestman.billhenderson.org/bios/od.html>.
3. The French translates to: "The strongest man on the planet." The website is no longer on-line.
4. [http://www.FSC.ca/pages/index\\_e.aspx?DetailID=124](http://www.FSC.ca/pages/index_e.aspx?DetailID=124).
5. I say "roughly," because I could explode the weight from my chest with an initial upwards surge of, say, 475 pounds and use that initial thrust to complete the lift.
6. M. Andrew Holowchak, "What It Really Takes to be the World's Strongest Man," *Philosophical Reflections on Physical Strength: Does a Strong Mind Need a Strong Body?* eds. M. Andrew Holowchak and Terry Todd (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 11-33.
7. One could compromise by removing the bench press, which perhaps too narrowly focuses on pectoral, front deltoid, and triceps strength to satisfy the completeness criterion. In its place, there could be a standing overhead press, similar to the "jerk" part of the clean-and-jerk, where the weight is taken initially from a rack and then pressed overhead.
8. For example, W. Miller Brown, "Paternalism, Drugs, and the Nature of Sports," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 11(1985): 14-22, and Michael Burke and Terence J. Roberts, "Drugs in Sport: An Issue of Morality or Sentimentality?" *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 24 (1997): 99-113.
9. M. Andrew Holowchak, "Aggression, Gender, and Sport: Reflections on Sport as a Means to Moral Education," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 34 (October 2000): 387-99; "Ergogenic Aids and the Limits of Human Performance in Sport: Ethical Issues, Aesthetic Considerations," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 29(October, 2002): 35-51; and "'Aretism' and Pharmacological Ergogenic Aids in Sport: Taking a Shot at Steroids," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 27(October, 2001): 74-86.
10. That was not always the case—especially in the earliest years of WSM. Terry Todd relates an episode from the 1977 WSM contest in which he advised contest organizers against conducting the refrigerator race on a flat surface, due to the consequent impact on competitors' knees. His advice was not taken and Franco Columbo suffered a severe knee injury, from which he never recovered. See Terry Todd, "Philosophical and Practical Considerations for a World's Strongest Man Contest," *Philosophical Reflections on Physical Strength: Does a Strong Mind Need a Strong Body?* ed. M. Andrew Holowchak and Terry Todd (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 54-5.



# George Hackenschmidt vs. Frank Gotch

## Media Representations and the World Wrestling Title of 1908

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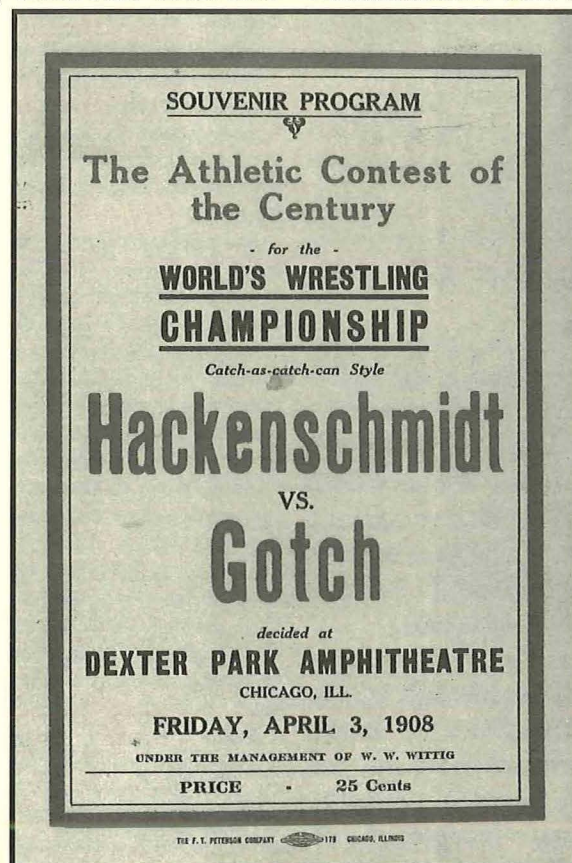
International wrestling star, George Hackenschmidt, widely known as “The Russian Lion,” met the American champion, Frank Gotch, at Chicago’s Dexter Park Amphitheater on April 3, 1908, in a wrestling title bout that was labeled “The Athletic Contest of the Century” on the cover of the match program.<sup>1</sup> After three preliminary bouts, the much anticipated World’s Heavyweight Wrestling Championships in the catch-as-catch-can style began at approximately 10:30 P.M. More than two hours later, reporters scrambled to file their stories in the early hours of the morning and share their ringside intelligence with an anxiously awaiting nation and world. The news they sent out from Chicago, however, was totally unexpected. The impossible had happened; the undefeated “Russian Lion” had been tried and found wanting. Gotch, the American, had won!

The journalist, like the historian, must make decisions about how he or she presents the facts. While modern journalists are taught to be objective and fair—to focus on the “Who, What, When, Where, Why and How” of the story—the reality is that most journalists (in 1908 as well as 2010) write from a particular set of socio-cultural biases. As Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson argue in *Reading the News*, reporting is actually “a double reality, both separate from the world it tells

stories about and a constituent of that world, an element of the story.” The reporter, they argue, “not only relates stories but makes them.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, pop culture analyst Carlin Romano contends that journalism is not a “mirror placed before reality,” but a “coherent narrative of the world that serves a particular purpose.”<sup>3</sup> Thinking about journalism in light of this definition makes it easier to understand how in the days following the historic Gotch-Hackenschmidt bout such different tales would be told

by various journalists even though all of them had watched the same sporting event. Like the characters in John Godfrey Saxe’s poem, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” almost all of the reporters who penned their reports from Chicago had a slightly different interpretation of what they experienced that evening.<sup>4</sup> An investigation of these newspaper accounts reveals that while some aspects of their descriptions of the match are similar, many reporters took issue with Gotch’s tactics that evening and felt that he had not lived up to the cultural expectations of what it meant to be a man and a good sport in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> However, it must be said, others also felt that Hackenschmidt had not acted totally with honor.<sup>6</sup>

After more than one hundred years, some wrestling fans still consider the 1908 Hackenschmidt-Gotch match

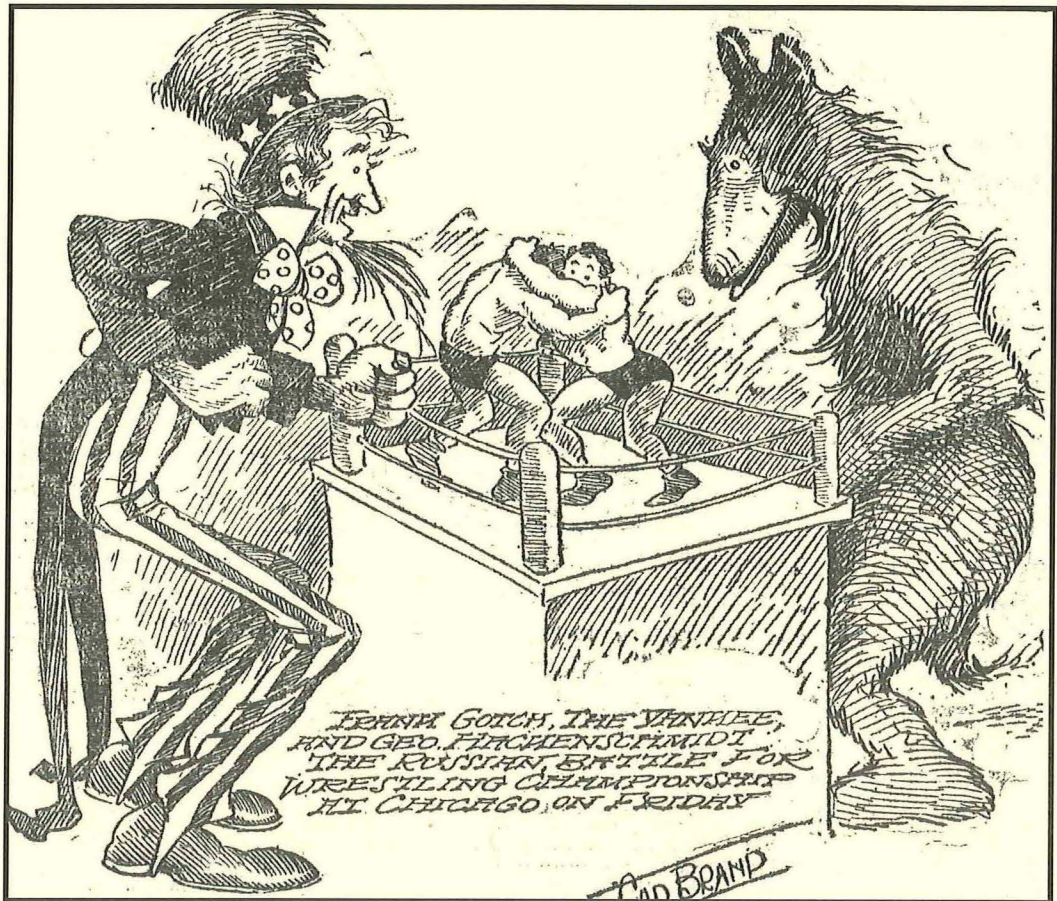


The cover of the program for the 1908 Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch match contained in Hackenschmidt's personal scrapbook is printed on light grey paper with red and black ink. It is 32 pages long.



to be one of the most significant ever. It was the match that catapulted Gotch from merely local hero status into an international super-star and in a way it was also a harbinger of professional wrestling's future. For, despite the fact that the match resulted in an undisputed world champion, the controversy over who did what remains the most important aspect of the match. In fact, much like the debate that rages in the modern era over whether we should regard as legitimate the records made in those sports where performance enhancing drug use is now ubiquitous, Gotch's name will always have an asterisk beside it on the list of title holders in the minds of many wrestling aficionados and scholars.

No such asterisk appears, however, on either the website [www.frankgotch.com](http://www.frankgotch.com) or in the 1990 biography *Frank Gotch: World's Greatest Wrestler*, both written by amateur historian Mike Chapman.<sup>8</sup> Chapman paints an almost saintly picture of Gotch, claiming that he was rough but that he always wrestled within the rules and that he justly earned the title.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, Chapman presents a negative image of Hackenschmidt, suggesting that the Russian wasn't on the same competitive level with Gotch because of his poor conditioning and ineffective match strategy.<sup>10</sup> Writes Chapman, "Gotch had simply outsmarted Hack in the ring in 1908. Knowing how strong Hack was, Gotch devised a strategy to move him around the ring, head snap him, under hook him, and tire him out."<sup>11</sup> An examination of the various reports immediately surrounding the match, however, suggests that Gotch's victory cannot wholly be attributed to the fact that he was simply "smarter." There is, in fact, strong evidence to suggest that Gotch used dubious tac-



In the leadup to the big match, dozens of cartoons like this appeared in American newspapers reminding readers of the international stakes in the contest. The caption reads, "Frank Gotch, The Yankee, And George Hackenschmidt, The Russian, Battle For Wrestling Championship At Chicago On Friday." Cartoon by Cad Brand from the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. The cartoon suggests that the referee showed favoritism to the American contender.

As Hackenschmidt and Gotch counted down the days to their title match, newspapers throughout the United States and Europe covered every possible angle of the story. In 1908, Hackenschmidt was truly an international celebrity, perhaps the most famous athlete in all of sports at the time. As often happens in title fights, nationalistic rhetoric became part of the event's coverage. So, while Hackenschmidt was the reigning champion, he was also in the eyes of many newspaper readers in America a "foreigner," and so patriotic sentiment suggested that the Iowa farm-boy—Frank Gotch—should be supported by the Chicago fans.<sup>12</sup> A scrappy wrestler born to poor German immigrant farmers in the small community of Humbolt, Iowa, Gotch was relatively new to the international arena in 1908. The title defense had been awarded to Gotch because he had won the American title from Tom Jenkins in two controversial and vicious matches in 1905 and 1906. However, unlike



Hackenschmidt and most other wrestlers who then set off on international tours to challenge “any and all comers,” Gotch stayed in America after his victory over Jenkins, and only occasionally took on those few foreigners that ventured to America’s heartland.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to the Hackenschmidt match, most journalists gave Gotch little chance to win however much they hoped to the contrary. The grapplers’ records against common adversaries seemed to indicate an overwhelming victory for Hackenschmidt. Hack had easily beaten Tom Jenkins and Joe Rogers, while Gotch was known to have lost to these opponents and if he did win he had had to struggle mightily.<sup>14</sup> New York journalist Horace Lerch wrote, “It has all along been conceded that Hackenschmidt as a strong man is superior to Gotch,” before continuing on to comment that all was not totally lost as Gotch’s quickness did offer him a “fine chance to win.”<sup>15</sup> Ironically, many wrestling experts from that period and in subsequent years have argued that the main reason for Hackenschmidt’s dominance in the ring was his *power*—a combination of his lightning speed and his strength. (Remarkably, at the age of 75, Hackenschmidt was able to do a standing jump over a

stretched rope at a height of approximately 36 inches.) Other wrestling “experts” explained that Gotch’s favorite catch-as-catch-can style of wrestling gave him the greatest chance at winning.<sup>16</sup>

In any case, the entire sporting world knew that “The Russian Lion”—the reigning world champion—had been undefeated for at least the previous six years and had defended his title dozens of times. Hackenschmidt’s strength was legendary; he began his career in weightlifting, where he surpassed the mighty Sandow’s records, but then realized that he had greater earning potential as a professional wrestler.<sup>17</sup> After he began his career—his first official match was in 1897 when he was only twenty—he had been virtually unbeatable.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Gotch, however, Hackenschmidt travelled the world and had significant matches during the early years of his career in cities such as London, Paris, Vienna, St. Petersburg, Melbourne, and New York City. It was in Madison Square Gardens in New York, in fact, that in 1905 Hackenschmidt defeated the American champion, Tom Jenkins, for the second time and solidified his claim that he was the undisputed world champion.

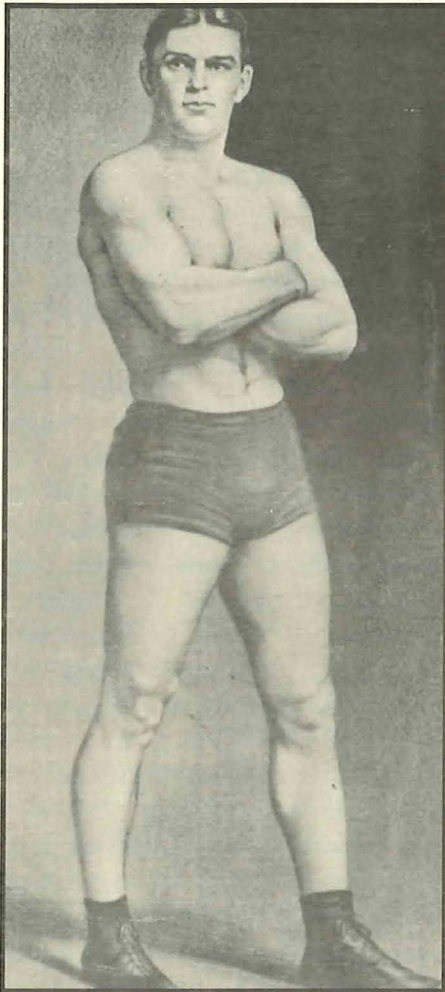
As a wrestler, Hackenschmidt favored Greco-

Roman matches, a form of wrestling that features upper body holds where his great power gave him the advantage. However, while the Chicago match with Gotch was by no means his first catch-as-catch-can bout—it was certainly not his favorite style. The newspapers hyped Hackenschmidt, who was born in 1877 to middle class parents in Dorpat, Estonia, as the perfect man and often compared him to Eugen Sandow.<sup>19</sup> He was, the papers claimed, physically magnificent, exceptionally strong, intelligent, and cultured.



This photograph from his personal scrapbook attests to Hackenschmidt’s celebrity status. It was taken in Blackpool, England in August of 1906 and shows the enormous billboard that advertised his week-long appearance at the Palace Theater. The Hackenschmidt Scrapbook has recently been fully digitized, allowing us to share some of its rare images in this article. As we’ve already done with the Attila scrapbook, we will soon put sections of the Hackenschmidt Scrapbook on our website: [www.starkcenter.org](http://www.starkcenter.org) for researchers to examine.





This illustration of Frank Gotch appeared in the official program for the 1908 contest. Gotch is listed as 5' 11.5" tall and weighing 210 pounds. He is described as the "Champion of America" and below his vital statistics is a very long list of various ring engagements and victories.

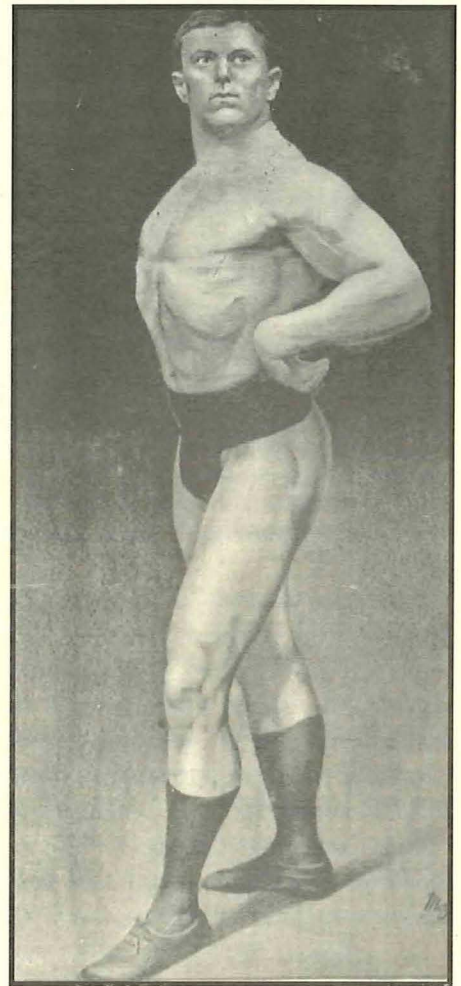
match opened, Hackenschmidt immediately went on the offensive and tried to lock his hands behind Gotch in a "bear-hug" grip. The bear-hug was one of Hack's favored methods of subduing an opponent as it allowed him to use his prodigious strength to hold the other man captive while he applied pressure to his opponent's chest, cutting off his wind. But on this fateful night, when Hackenschmidt tried to grab and pull Gotch in, the American slipped away. Hack lunged again, grabbed Gotch, but then felt him once again slip through his fingers. Surprised, Hack wrestled on, struggling to take any kind of effective hold against Gotch. However, as

Hackenschmidt was an exceptional man, fluent in at least five languages and comfortable in the presence of royalty and intellectuals as well as athletes. Honest as well as modest, he fit England's and Europe's idea of an ideal sportsman. Although he was not born an aristocrat, he embraced the manners and attitudes of the upper classes, including its strict moral code regarding ideas of sportsmanship.

On the evening of the big match at Dexter Park, approximately 10,000 people purchased tickets to watch the champions battle.<sup>20</sup> As the

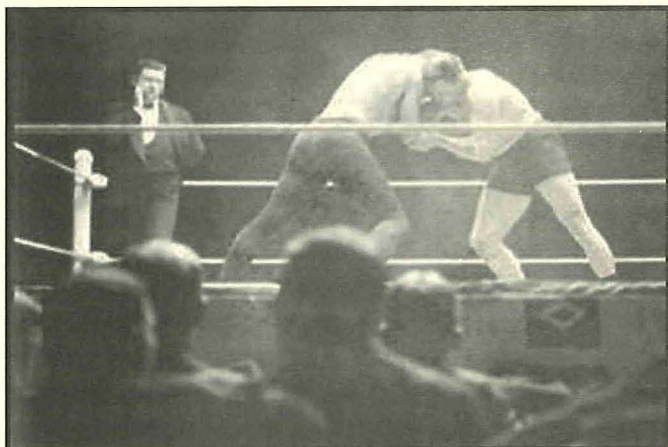
Gotch's body warmed from their exertions, Hackenschmidt began to understand why Gotch was so hard to capture; Gotch had rubbed oil into his skin. For the remainder of the match, although Hackenschmidt repeatedly tried to grab Gotch, he was unable to take a firm hold. Hackenschmidt suggested to Referee Edward Smith that both men be forced to go back to their locker rooms and take a shower to remove the oil.<sup>21</sup> While this request seems absolutely reasonable on the face of what many in the audience could see, it was denied by the referee. It is

interesting that in the reports written after the match, many American reporters saw nothing wrong with Gotch's use of oil. John Butnam's article in the *Minneapolis Tribune*, for example, reported that the referee regarded Hack's complaints as "childish," and laid the blame for the match's conclusion at Hackenschmidt's door, arguing that he should have noticed the oil prior to the match starting.<sup>22</sup> T.S. Andrews of *The Evening Wisconsin* took a similar view in an article published eight days after the match. Andrews claimed that the use of oil was "not a new trick" and that Gotch's coach, the famous wrestler Farmer Burns might have been behind



Hackenschmidt is listed as "Champion of the World" in the program, with a height of 5' 9.5" and weight of 215 pounds. Following a shorter but more impressive list of significant matches than Gotch's is a note that he had "defeated numerous other champions in all the countries of the world."





Because the fight was being filmed, an unusually large number of lights surrounded the ring making this action shot possible. Gotch is on the left, Hackenschmidt, in the trunks on the right. Smith, the referee, is dressed in the tuxedo.

the decision to use it. Andrews also claimed that he had had verification from someone in Gotch's camp that the American had used oil on his body. However, like Referee Smith, Andrews did not view Gotch's use of oil as an ethical problem. Andrews wrote that the match was "on the level," and defended his position by pointing out that Hackenschmidt had had the same opportunity to use oil that Gotch had had. He even went so far as to suggest that Hackenschmidt should have found better managers who would have helped him learn such tricks.<sup>23</sup>

Hack's frustration was heightened by the fact that Gotch failed to engage him. Rather than staying within arms' reach, Gotch danced around the mat like a boxer trying not to be hit. Wrestling historian Mike Chapman claims that Gotch's tactics were not dissimilar to those of Muhammad Ali in Zaire in 1974 when he employed the "rope-a-dope" defense against George Foreman.<sup>24</sup> However, Chapman's analogy is not accurate. Ali did not stay away from Foreman in that famous fight; he did just the opposite. He lay back on the ropes and invited Foreman to give him everything he had. Ali took brutal punishment that night and only when Foreman had punched himself into a state of near exhaustion did Ali come off the ropes in the closing seconds of the eighth round and knock Foreman out.<sup>25</sup> Further—while Ali's tactics in Zaire were far from his usual "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" approach to fighting—no one has ever argued that what went on in the ring was not a clean fight; it was just unconventional.<sup>26</sup> In the Gotch-Hackenschmidt match, however, in those rare moments when the two men were in a clench, Gotch reportedly used a number of other unsportsmanlike tactics, includ-

ing repeatedly trying to use his thumbs to gouge Hackenschmidt's eyes. George Siler's account, from *The Chicago Tribune's* media seat, saw "the American's rough work, principally thumbing of the eyes" and heard the audience "hissing" at Gotch for his actions.<sup>27</sup> Horace Lerch, sporting writer of *The Buffalo Express*, wrote, "Gotch is rough. Squirming, twisting and slipping, the challenger for the title never lost an opportunity to work his fingers and thumbs somewhere in the vicinity of Hack's optics."<sup>28</sup> Hackenschmidt complained to Referee Smith about Gotch's tactics. According to Lerch's account, Smith ignored the complaint and simply "kept walking."<sup>29</sup> Weightlifting historian David P. Willoughby, writing sixty years after the match, argued that "Gotch had resorted to every unfair tactic he could think of—oiling his body, rubbing the oil into Hackenschmidt's eyes, butting, gouging, scratching and even punching the Russian in the nose."<sup>30</sup> Willoughby's source for this information, Ivan Linow, while undoubtedly biased in Hackenschmidt's favor, was nonetheless not just in the audience, but actually at ringside that evening. In the 1927 interview with Linow, who served as a training partner for Hackenschmidt before both the 1908 and 1911 bouts that Hackenschmidt had with Gotch, Linow emphatically stated that Gotch was oiled, and had been "bulling" Hackenschmidt by head-butting him, trying to gouge his eyes, and that the American used other normally illegal tactics.<sup>31</sup> Despite the fact that even the audience was upset with Gotch's dishonest tactics and frequently "hissed" at him for fouling and cried "Cut it out!" at Gotch's brutality, Ed Smith, the referee, claimed in an article for the *New York Evening Journal* after the match that what he called the "Gotch transgressions" were not "worthy of more than a caution. I did not see that he did his broad opponent any hurt at all, and the 'bulling' was nothing more than is customary in any match seen in this country, especially where the affair is of any importance."<sup>32</sup>

Smith's notion that sportsmanship and rule adherence was different in America is a critical point to consider. Rather than feeling outrage or revulsion at what was apparently open cheating on Gotch's part, Smith and many in the Fifth Estate excused it as merely another example of American ingenuity and can-do attitude. Hackenschmidt, however, product of a more ethical sporting culture that equated manliness with honor and integrity, was apparently not able to countenance such questionable tactics. Nor, however, could he quit the bout, for he had given his word to compete and he



knew that even though the Americans chose to follow a different set of rules than he'd agreed to, there was still an audience watching the match who deserved his best efforts. What's more, he also knew that had he retired in protest, he might not have been paid.

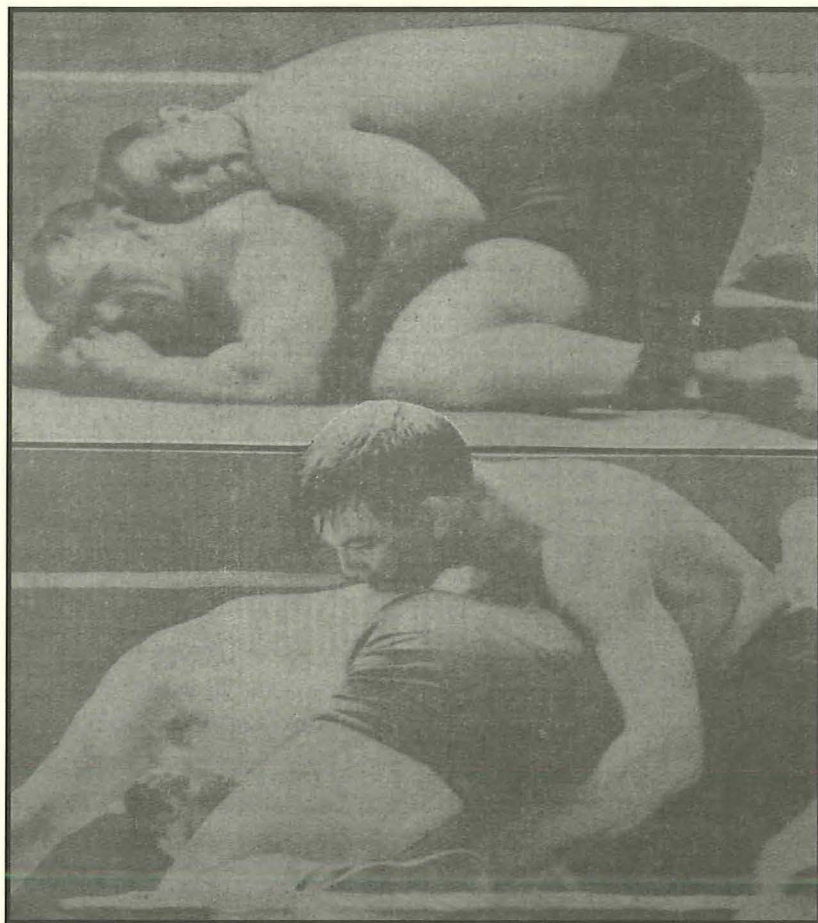
Catch-as-catch-can wrestling was widely practiced in late nineteenth century America and, as wrestlers could take holds below the belt as well as above, it differed from the Greco-Roman form of wrestling normally practiced by Hackenschmidt. By 1908 Greco-Roman wrestling was an official Olympic sport and so it not only had a formal set of rules to govern behavior during bouts, but it was also influenced by Olympic ideology and sports practices.<sup>33</sup> Catch-as-catch-can wrestling, on the other hand, still had no such structure; it thrived in America's rural areas and was ungoverned by any national agency. Catch-as-catch-can wrestlers tried to pull a man down on the mat and subdue him using intri-

cate holds and pressure points ("bone-bending" as historian, David Webster, calls it).<sup>34</sup> It was a much rougher and less refined method than Greco-Roman wrestling and it was favored by men who had learned their combat sports in rough and tumble America—men who weren't concerned with being regarded as "good sportsmen." Consequently, eye-gouging, head-butting, biting, and other nefarious tactics were commonly used in what were essentially "no holds barred" bouts.<sup>35</sup> Further, when carnivals and circuses began travelling the length and breadth of America in the second half of the nineteenth century they helped spread the sport as nearly every show had some wrestler or strongman attached to it who would take on all comers in matches that were, in many ways, very similar to our modern Mixed Martial Arts contests.<sup>36</sup> However, just as boxing had become civilized and gained in popularity by adopting the Marquis of Queensbury Rules, wrestling promoters at the

turn of the twentieth century also understood that when they set up a formal match—like the Gotch-Hackenschmidt bout—rules limiting these more barbaric tactics had to be in place if the general public was going to buy tickets. So, while it can be argued that many Americans may have found Gotch's head-butting and eye-gouging somewhat acceptable and even laudable, his actions were still clearly against both the letter and the spirit of the rules.<sup>37</sup>

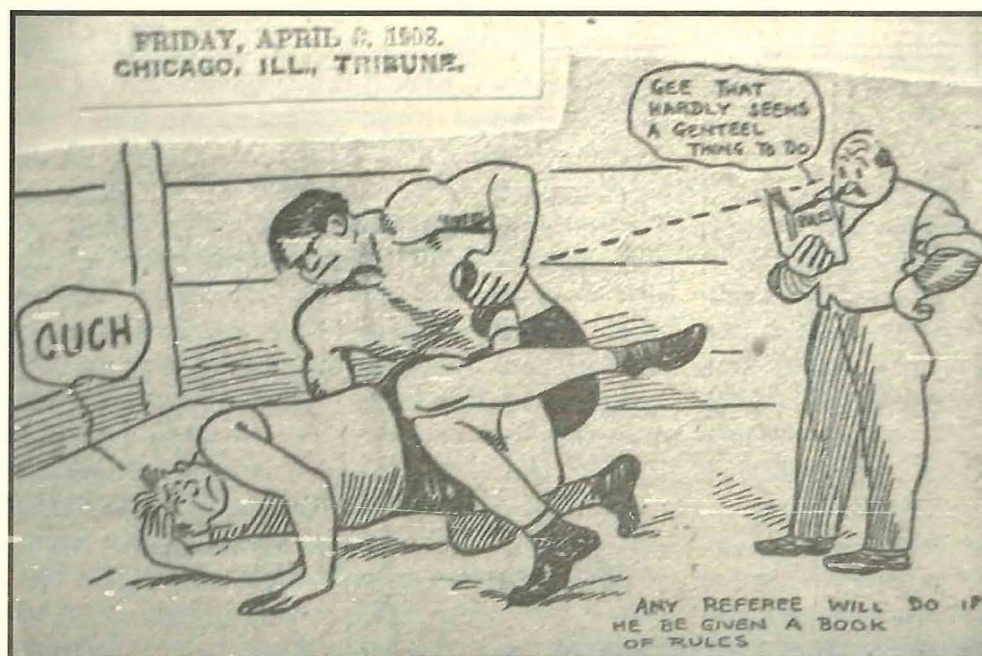
Historians Richard Holt and J.A. Mangan have suggested that sport heroes "reflect [their society's] values, aspirations and ambitions."<sup>38</sup> Historian Paul Gilchrist would have described both Gotch and Hackenschmidt as exemplifying "the purity of achievement in a distinctly cultural location" and being "a representative of what is publicly valued by [his] community."<sup>39</sup> In an era in which many Americans were worried by the influx of immigrants to their shores Hackenschmidt's heavy accent as well as his apparent wealth and aristocratic attitudes were less attractive to some Americans than the heroics of a Horatio Alger-like farm boy whose rise to the top in wrestling was symbolic of the struggles of America's lower classes.

In any case, throughout the match, under Smith's lenient eye Gotch continued



The Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch match was the lead sports story in nearly every major paper in America on the day after the bout. These photos were included in the April 4, 1908 report of the *Chicago Evening American* under a headline that read, "Gotch and Hack Struggling Fiercely on the Mat."





The *Chicago Tribune* used this cartoon to question the legitimacy of the refereeing in the match. As Gotch is getting ready to apply his famous "toe hold" the referee is musing, "Gee. That hardly seems like a genteel thing to do." Below, the cartoonist has written, "Any referee will do if he be given a book of rules." The typed notation in the upper left corner is part of the identification of the cartoon for Hackenschmidt's personal scrapbook.

to tear at Hackenschmidt's eyes, scratch at his head and ears, and even hit him directly in the face with his knuckles when the two men came close to each other. And for most of the match, Gotch stayed just enough out of Hackenschmidt's reach so that the larger and more powerful man was unable to truly get a grip on his slippery opponent. Most newspaper accounts, including that of Referee Smith, agreed that Hackenschmidt had definitely been the aggressor and in command of the match until the closing minutes.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, after more than an hour and a half had elapsed, during which Hackenschmidt constantly tried to get a good grip on an oiled opponent who danced away when possible and engaged in hitting, butting, and gouging when they closed, Hack suggested to the referee that the match be called a draw. Calling a match a draw was not unheard of. It was usually the result of a match in which neither wrestler seemed to be gaining an edge on his opponent, and it indicated an obvious stalemate. Since Hackenschmidt could not grip Gotch due to the oil and Gotch was unwilling to grapple, a draw would have seemed reasonable to the champion. However, nearly everyone else believed otherwise. As word spread through the crowd about what Hack had asked of the referee, the crowd began jeering and hooting at the Russian.

Gotch openly taunted him, while the referee denied Hackenschmidt's request, stating, "I am here to stay all night if necessary."<sup>41</sup>

In Mike Chapman's self-described "fictionalized biography," entitled *Gotch: An American Hero*, he claims that Gotch's victory came from his superior cardiovascular conditioning.<sup>42</sup> There is perhaps some truth to this as Hackenschmidt had not been involved in a match of such length for a number of years and he did not really interrupt his travel and exhibition schedule to any major degree to prepare for the fight. Newspaper interviews with Gotch prior to the match indicate that his plan was to wear down the foreigner since his

informants had told him that Hackenschmidt was not in the best of shape, but he also told reporters that he had plans afoot to upset the cool, calm, gentlemanly demeanor of Hackenschmidt.<sup>43</sup> And so throughout the match Gotch jeered at Hackenschmidt, taunting him and using language, Hackenschmidt claimed, that no gentleman would use in public. Ring-side attendants later reported they heard "a running fire of ridicule" that undoubtedly accounted for Hackenschmidt's complaints to Smith concerning comments and words he would not want his mother and sister to hear.<sup>44</sup> However, again, Referee Smith found no reason to censure Gotch. Gotch was heard to retort, "You are in America now."<sup>45</sup>

As the match wore on, closing in on two hours without a break, Hackenschmidt finally began to tire as Gotch kept slipping away and the American was able to take the offensive at last. According to Smith, Gotch got Hackenschmidt down on the mat, and was working toward getting the champion into his favored submission move—the toe hold—when Hackenschmidt could see that he was close to being pinned and asked for a forfeit.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps Hackenschmidt wanted to salvage his reputation by being able to later claim that at least Gotch hadn't pinned him, or perhaps he'd simply had enough of



the one-sided refereeing and of Gotch's willingness to flaunt all conventions of sportsmanship. In either case, just a few minutes past the two hour mark the match was finally over since Hack signaled to Smith that he quit and left the arena amid "catcalls and howls of derision."<sup>47</sup> Almost immediately American flags began flying in the arena and, while Hack walked backed to the locker room, many in the audience charged the ring—as Gotch's arm was raised by Smith—to celebrate what was viewed as a national victory.<sup>48</sup>

As the newspaper reporters scurried into the night to write their stories and telegraph them to their hometown papers, amazingly different versions of the events began to emerge, some of which have already been described. Articles appeared praising Gotch's undefeatable defensive system of wrestling, explaining how skill surpassed strength, and arguing that Gotch was too quick for the foreigner. At the same time, Hackenschmidt was described as "having his feelings hurt," "having a tissue paper heart," having no courage, "showing the white feather," and "showing his canary streak."<sup>49</sup>

Not surprisingly, the British press, who regarded Hackenschmidt as one of their own because he was then living in London, was consistently more skeptical of the events in Chicago and protested the treatment Hackenschmidt received while in America. One British paper opened its report with the lengthy headline: "Hackenschmidt Beaten: Loses Prize Fight to American Wrestler: Amazing Scenes: Struggle Like a Brutal Prize Fight."<sup>50</sup> A *Sportsman* writer asserted, "Hackenschmidt did not lose the championship, but simply withdrew from a most revolting and unsportsmanlike exhibition of butchery and not from a fair and square wrestling match. Hackenschmidt is thoroughly English in the sense that he is absolutely fair and square."<sup>51</sup> While voicing his opinion of America's bulliness in worldly matters, and recognizing the "great gulf dividing the American notion of 'playing the game' from the notions of other less acute and more primitive peoples," another British reporter satirically wrote:

Does not Hackenschmidt know that to have your eyes gouged out and your ear bitten off and your body torn and scratched by the purposely long talons of an opponent opportunely greased as were the Spartans at Ther-

mopylæ is part of the game or sport of wrestling? Gotch is 'an ideal American.' He is 'a past master of all the little trickery that verges on the illegal and unfair.' So says the referee, and he ought to know. ...As for Hackenschmidt – what would you? ...These Slavs are but savages. They do not comprehend that all is fair in war, and that in America an American must win, come who may.<sup>52</sup>

Besides these British criticisms, many American papers were also outraged at Gotch's tactics. William F. Kirk of *The New York Journal*, for example, "deplored that the 'Russian Lion' received a 'dirty' deal during his visit to this country."<sup>53</sup> A *New York Sun* reporter similarly wrote,

The easy-going referee did not seem to have made the least effort to prevent these foul tactics which were often repeated, even after spectators – by no means friendly towards the Russian – felt constrained to protest in a spirit of common justice. This is all extremely regrettable, and we must say that victory would have been more gratifying to our national vanity had the encounter been tolerably clean.<sup>54</sup>

And, in another article, the reporter described Gotch's tactics as unsportsmanlike and despicable. "Verbally he taunted the Russian in a disgraceful manner and his every movement was unfair to the impartial spectator, but apparently everything in his favour went with the referee."<sup>55</sup> Still others described Hackenschmidt's countenance the next day "as if he had been in a prizefight instead of a wrestling match today. The left side of his head was badly swollen and his left eye was inflamed. His eyelids were swollen and lacerated."<sup>56</sup> Another description that circulated in the media concerning the treatment of Hackenschmidt by both Gotch and Referee Smith includes the following:

Gotch used foul tactics of a sort that would have fully justified the referee in disqualifying him. He jammed his thumbs into Hackenschmidt's eyes. On one occasion, when



Hackenschmidt had twisted the American's thumb, Gotch retaliated by smashing him time and again in the face with his fists until the blood spurted out and ran over the Russian's face and body in streams. Time and again he butted viciously.

It was evident that Gotch was determined to win at any cost, and the referee did not interfere.

The end of the contest was dramatic. Hackenschmidt, with his eyes fearfully lacerated, his nostrils torn, his lips and face battered almost beyond recognition, smeared from head to foot with his own blood that streamed from a score of wounds on his head and arms and body, went to the mat at last, with Gotch on top. He was half-blinded, dazed and weary. Immediately Gotch leaped upon him like a savage, driving his knees into Hackenschmidt's body and "roughing" in the style used when football in America was legalised(sic) manslaughter. The Russian suddenly quitted the struggle, and appealed to the referee, as he had a score of times before during the bout. The audience hissed and hooted.<sup>57</sup>

Chapman claims the brawny Iowan was the "World's Greatest Wrestler." However, our analysis of the journalistic coverage surrounding the 1908 Gotch-Hackenschmidt wrestling match clearly demonstrates that Gotch was allowed to use and did use illegal and dishonorable tactics to achieve his victory. To employ a doping analogy again, it's like saying that confessed steroid user Mark McGwire was a better homerun hitter than Babe Ruth. Chapman bases part of his claim, of course, on the fact that when Hackenschmidt returned to America in 1911 for a rematch with Gotch in the then newly-finished Comiskey Park he was once more defeated by Gotch and then decided to permanently retire. As in the first bout, however, there were extenuating circumstances associated with this second loss to Gotch, including a major injury to the Russian's knee right before the bout.

As for which man really deserved the title of "World's Best Wrestler," no less an authority figure than wrestling promoter, Jack Curley, who managed both

Gotch and Hackenschmidt at some point in their careers, wrote in 1934, "In my opinion the greatest of all great wrestlers is or was George Hackenschmidt, the Russian Lion. George possessed brain, strength, speed, knowledge of holds, leverage, courage, and if there is any word left out that goes to make a great wrestler I am willing to go on record to add that he had that too."<sup>58</sup>

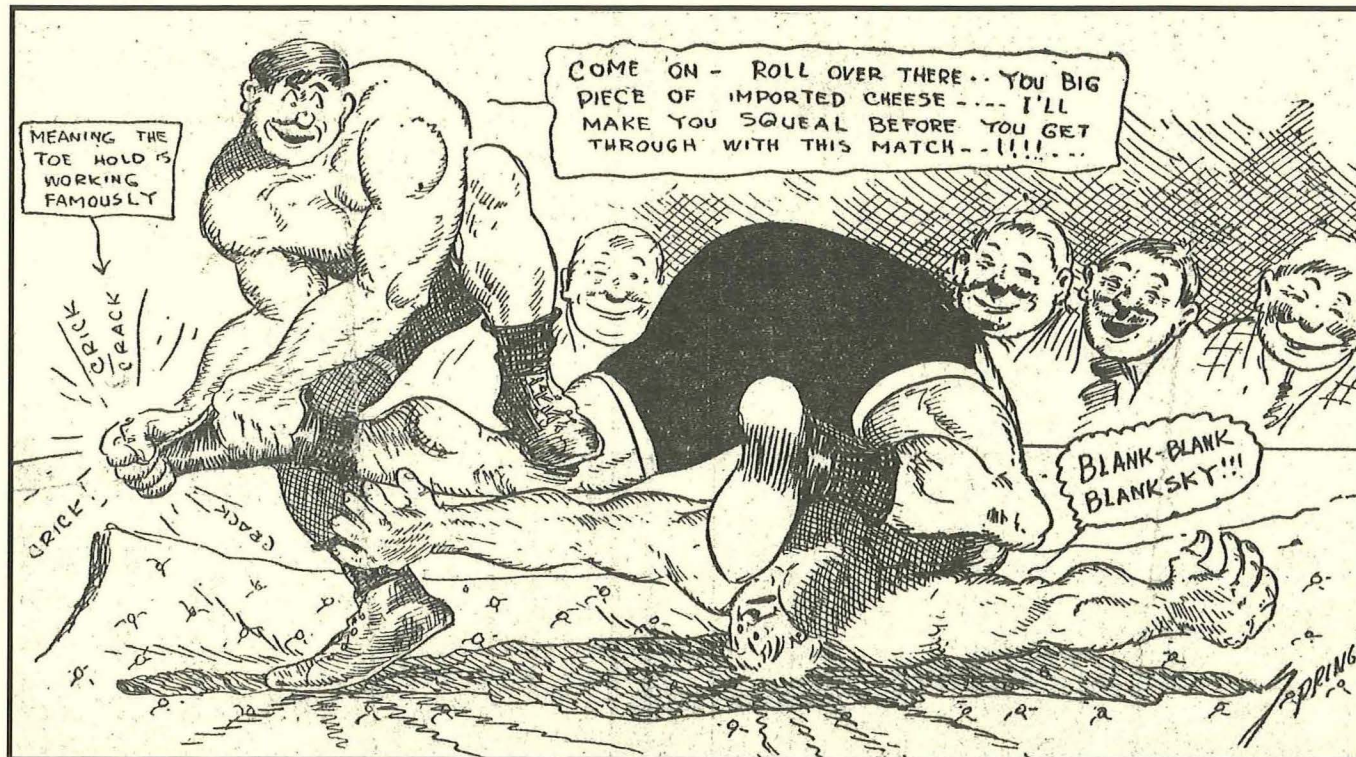
From the historian's vantage point, however, what is most significant and interesting about this match is that the controversy surrounding Gotch's victory still has "legs" more than one hundred years later and continues to be discussed on the internet and in nearly all works of wrestling history.<sup>59</sup> Like the Black Sox Scandal of 1919, the idea that a major sporting event was, in effect, rigged continues to tantalize us and those interested in the history of wrestling seem inevitably to champion one man over the other.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, the one primary source that could have shed considerable light on the bout is, apparently, lost to history. That source is a 15 minute synopsis of the legendary bout put on film by match promoter W.W. Wittig and released in April of 1908.<sup>61</sup> Wittig had the entire match filmed but then only released fifteen minutes of film to the public. However, even that short version has apparently not survived.<sup>62</sup>

As research into the journalistic coverage surrounding the championship match reveals, the nationalistic overtones of the bout suggest that the essentials of true sport—fair play, a level playing field, and impartial officiating—were so far removed from the squared circle in the Dexter Park Amphitheater in April of 1908 that it may not be an exaggeration to say the outcome of the bout was settled the minute Hackenschmidt signed his name on the contract. Although Hack failed to realize it at the time, he took a knife to a gunfight, and then they wouldn't let him use his knife.

It seems to be beyond argument that a genuinely confident Gotch, had he believed that he would be required to wrestle within the rules of the sport in such a widely watched title bout, would not have resorted to illegally oiling his body. Nor would he have hit his opponent with his closed fists, or head-butted him, or scratched him, or tried to gouge his eyes, especially since any of these rule violations, by themselves, should have caused his disqualification had they been repeated and intentional, as they apparently were.

A careful reading of the contemporary accounts of the match plus an understanding of the profound dif-





Before the match, the American papers were filled with speculation as to how effective Gotch's famous "toe hold" would be against the Russian Lion. Illustration from *The Post*, of Denver, Colorado, dated March 29, 1908.

ferences between a culture based on “Play up, play up, and play the game,” and one based on a belief to which Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis gave voice years later when he famously said, “Just win, baby,” provide an understanding of how such a controversy occurred. As was stated earlier, a comparison of the records of Gotch and Hackenschmit against the same opponents suggests that Hack would have prevailed over Gotch fairly quickly and easily. In fact, it’s probable—had referee Ed Smith disallowed only the body oil while allowing the gouging, hitting, and butting—that Hack would have still overwhelmed Gotch and pinned him because the American would have been too busy defending himself to use such tactics. Conversely, it’s also possible—had Smith overlooked the oil but stopped any punching, gouging, and butting—that Hack, without being bothered by such tactics, would have been able to close with the slippery Gotch and finally secure a winning hold.

What apparently happened, however, is that Referee Smith, out of either rank favoritism, a preference for a no-holds-barred style of wrestling, or both, somehow communicated his intentions to Gotch either before the match or during its first few minutes. Gotch, thus freed from standard officiating, had his way in

what, for the Russian Lion, was wrestling's version of a perfect storm.

**Notes:**

The term "Scrapbook" refers to the personal scrapbook of George Hackenschmidt located at the H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at The University of Texas at Austin.

1. Scrapbook, program for Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch wrestling match, April 3, 1908.
2. Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson, *Reading the News: a Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 439-42.
3. Carlin Romano, "The Grisly Truth about Bare Facts," in Manoff and Schudson's *Reading the News*, 39-44, discusses the mistaken assumption that news written by journalists is a "mirror placed before reality," when it may actually be better thought of as a "coherent narrative of the world that serves a particular purpose."
4. John Godfrey Saxe's poem, "The Blind Men and the Elephant," at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind\\_men\\_and\\_an\\_elephant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant). In that poem the "six blind men of Hindustan" came upon an elephant and fall into an argument about what the elephant actually was because they each felt only one part of it and could not grasp the whole. They described it either a wall (side), a snake (trunk), a spear (tusk), a tree (leg), a fan (ear), or a rope (tail).
5. Scrapbook, "Hack Hands Gotch Title without Fall," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 4, 1908; W. Horace Lerch, "Gotch Makes Russian Quit," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 4, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908; Horace Lerch, "To Wrestle for a Championship—Frank Gotch's chances against Russian Lion of a Very Fair sort—Not a Favorite, But..." *Buffalo (New York) Express*, March 30, 1908; Jeff Thompson, "Mat and Ring," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April



12, 1908.

6. "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," *New York Times*, April 4, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908; Scrapbook, no title, *Evening Wisconsin*, April 11, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Quits Mat; Match to Gotch," *Lima (Ohio) Daily News*, April 4, 1908; "Pictures of Big Match Show Russian Got a Square Deal," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 11, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Backing Up," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 17, 1908.

7. "Why He Lost: Hackenschmidt No Longer Champion: Two Hour Fight: Fingers and Thumbs Near the Russian's Eyes," *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, April 5, 1908; "Wrestling in America: Hackenschmidt Defeated," *Daily Telegraph*, April 5, 1908; "Hackenschmidt Beaten: Loses Prize Fight to American Wrestler: Amazing Scenes: Struggle Like a Brutal Prize Fight," *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, April 5, 1908.

8. Mike Chapman, *Frank Gotch – World's Greatest Wrestler* (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., 1990). See also Mike Chapman, *Gotch: An American Hero* (Newton, Iowa: Culture House Books, 1999) and Mike Chapman – *Life and Legacy of Frank Gotch: King of the Catch-as-Catch-Can Wrestlers* (Buffalo: William S. Hein & Co., 2008). Chapman also maintains a website on Gotch at: <http://www.frankgotch.com>.

9. See for example Chapman, *Frank Gotch*, Chapters 8 & 9, 91-115. See also, Chapman, *Life and Legacy*, 33-4 and 65-8, for Chapman's "Final Evaluation" of Gotch's career.

10. For an example of Chapman's description of Hackenschmidt's readiness for the match see, Chapman, *Frank Gotch*, 60-1.

11. <http://www.frankgotch.com/biography12.html>

12. Arch Ward, *The Greatest Sport Stories from the Chicago Tribune*, (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1953), 87.

13. A list of Gotch's matches leading up to his match with Hackenschmidt can be found on page 17 of the Hackenschmidt vs. Gotch program in the Hackenschmidt scrapbook.

14. Charles Carnie, "Giants of the Mat Clash Tonight for the Championship," *The Inter Ocean* April 3, 1908; Sol Plex, "Gotch and Hackenschmidt Await Gong to Battle for World's Championship," *Chicago Examiner*, April 3, 1908; Ray Van Cleef, "Did Gotch 'Beat' Hackenschmidt?" *Strength & Health* (June 1942) 13, 36.

15. Horace Lerch, "More on Championship Wrestling," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, March 9, 1908.

16. "Dan McLeod in Town," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, February 23, 1908; "Hackenschmidt-Gotch, Carkeek Believes the Westerner has a Splendid Chance of Success," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, March 29, 1908.

17. See "Sandow's Rival," *Taranaki (New Zealand) Herald*, June 9, 1902; Gord Venables, Siegmund Klein, and Milo Steinborn, "The Russian Lion," *Muscular Development* 3 (June 1968): 57; Jim Murray, "George Hackenschmidt: Iron Game Immortal," *Strength & Health* (February 1953); David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 72-4.

18. "George Hackenschmidt," *The Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum*, viewed at: <http://www.pwhf.org/halloffamers/bios/hackenschmidt.asp>. "Hackenschmidt turned professional in September 1896 at age twenty. Utilizing a classical Greco-Roman style of wrestling in the ring, Hackenschmidt was immediately a very tough competitor. He became the European Heavyweight Champion with a victory over Tom Cannon in September 1902 in Liverpool, England. With the title win, Hackenschmidt was given claim to being the World Heavyweight Champion. In May 1905, Hackenschmidt solidified this assertion by defeating American Heavyweight Champion Tom Jenkins in New York City to become the first undisputed World Heavyweight Champion."

19. There is some confusion as to the year in which George Hackenschmidt was born. Hackenschmidt himself writes that he was "born on July 20, 1878 (Old Style), or August 2 according to English methods" in *The Way to Live*. In his unpublished autobiography, "The Russian Lion," Hackenschmidt states that his birthday is August 2, 1877. The Church of Latter-Day Saints Family-Search™ Internet Genealogy Service website has two listings: George Hackenschmidt - birthday August 2, 1878 and George Karl Julius Hackenschmidt –

birthday July 20, 1877. A birthday poem celebrating his twenty-ninth birthday was written/published in *The Athlete*, August 1, 1906, giving credence to the 1877 birth year. The official program for the 1908 Hackenschmidt-Gotch wrestling match listed Hackenschmidt's birthday as July 20, 1877. For articles referring to Hackenschmidt's character and physical proportions as a perfect man, or at least believing him to be "out-Sandowing Sandow," see, Evelyn Campbell, "Muscle Without Brains—Nothing," *Chicago American*, April 3, 1905; "Trotting, Wrestling, Boxing," *Logansport (Indiana) Pharos*, June 22, 1904; "Hackenschmidt, Noted Strongman, in Chicago," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, April 2, 1905; "Hackenschmidt is a Great Athlete," *New York Times*, March 22, 1908.

20. Even the number of people attending the match is uncertain. Some sources quote 8,000: Horace Lerch, "Gotch Makes Russian Quit," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 4, 1908; and "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," *New York Times*, April 4, 1908. Other sources quote 10,000: Special to the Post Dispatch, "Hack Hands Gotch Title without Fall," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 4, 1908; and A. D. Phillips, "From Milo to Londres - Chapter 8," *The Ring* 12, no. 5 (1933): 16. Another quotes "seats had been provided for 10,000 spectators, and in addition there was general admission room for 2,000 more," "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," and "Hack' Quits in Bout—Gotch the Winner," *New York Tribune*, April 4, 1908, and yet another quotes 15,000: "Gotch Declared Winner," *Chicago Examiner*, April 4, 1908.

21. George Hackenschmidt, unpublished autobiography "The Russian Lion," 245, at The H.J. Litcher Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at The University of Texas at Austin. See also "Hack Hands Gotch Title Without Fall," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 4, 1908; and "Hack Wants No More of Gotch's Games," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 5, 1908, for mention of "massage treatment" and oil in pores.

22. John R. Butman, "Referee Denies Charges of Russian," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 9, 1908.

23. Scrapbook, T.S. Andrews, no title, *The Evening Wisconsin*, April 11, 1908. See also "Hack Wants No More of Gotch's Games," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 5, 1908, for more info on use of oil in wrestling.

24. [www.frankgotch.com/biography12.html](http://www.frankgotch.com/biography12.html). "Truth is, Gotch 'rope-a-doped' Hackenschmidt in much the same fashion Muhammad Ali outsmarted George Foreman in Zaire in their classic fight in 1974. Like Hackenschmidt, Foreman was considered unbeatable and far too strong for Ali. So Ali made it a match of styles, forcing Foreman to fight his style. Foreman couldn't adjust and was knocked out. Gotch forced Hackenschmidt to wrestle his style, and Hackenschmidt couldn't adjust, either."

25. From "The Rumble in the Jungle," viewed at: <http://www.baseball-statistics.com/Greats/Century/Games/Ali-Foreman.htm>. "Thirty seconds into the second round, Ali unleashed a daring and unheard-of 'rope-a-dope' strategy: for most of the next eight rounds, he let George Foreman try to kill him. Ali disdained his usual butterfly tactics, simply laying on the ropes instead and letting the unbeaten heavyweight champ flail away. He dodged, avoided or blocked most of the punches, and by the eighth round, the 25-year-old champion was running on empty. Ali took advantage to knock out his exhausted opponent with two seconds left in the round with a crisp left-right combination.

26. Zang, David W., "The Greatest, Muhammad Ali's Confounding Character" in *Sport and the Color Line*, eds. Patrick B. Miller and David K. Wiggins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 296; and Frank Lotierzo, "Thirty Years Ago: Ali And Foreman Rumbled In The Jungle," found at <http://www.eastsideboxing.com/news.php?p=2100&more=1>.

27. George Siler, "Gotch Defeats Hackenschmidt," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908.

28. "Russian Lion Cries Enough," *Racine (WI) Daily Journal*, April 4, 1908.

29. Horace Lerch, "Gotch, King of Them All," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 5, 1908.

30. Willoughby, *The Super-Athletes*, 373.

31. Ibid., 374. Willoughby also examined some newspaper accounts of the match although he does not identify them.

32. Ed. W. Smith, "Hackenschmidt Gives up after Two Hours Fierce Grappling



with Gotch," *New York Evening Journal*, April 4, 1908.

33. "Wrestling at the Summer Olympics," viewed at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrestling\\_at\\_the\\_Summer\\_Olympics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wrestling_at_the_Summer_Olympics).

34. Personal communication with David Webster, March 30, 2004.

35. Elliott Gorn, "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Back Country," *American Historical Review* 90 (February, 1985): 18-43; and Gorn, *The Manly Art – Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) for a description of masculinity in nineteenth century America.

36. Kelly Grigger, "Catch as Catch Can: Once a Carnival Attraction, Catch Wrestling Now Influences MMA," *FightMagazine.com*, pp. 94-100. At: <http://www.kellygrigger.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Catchwrestling.pdf>.

37. Ibid.

38. J.A. Mangan and Richard Holt, "Prologue: Heroes of a European Past," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 13, no. 1 (1996): 5.

39. Paul Gilchrist, "Local heroes and global stars," in *The Global Politics of Sport—The Role of Global Institutions in Sport*, ed. Lincoln Allison, (New York: Taylor & Francis Inc., 2005), 120.

40. Ed. W. Smith, "Hackenschmidt Gives up after Two Hours' Fierce Grappling with Gotch," *New York Evening Journal*, 4 April 1908.

41. Siler, "Gotch Defeats Hackenschmidt."

42. Mike Chapman, *Gotch - an American Hero*. This book, identified as an historical novel on its cover, is based on Gotch's life. It is liberally filled with examples of Gotch's training runs, see pages 3, 36, 69, 109, and 140-1 for example. Articles such as "Gotch and Hackenschmidt Discuss Their Match," *Health & Strength*, November 14, 1908, also mentions his endurance training regimen.

43. Horace Lerch, "After the Big Mat Struggle," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 6, 1908; Sol Plex, "Gotch and Hackenschmidt Await Gong to Battle for World's Championship," *Chicago Examiner*, April 3, 1908;

44. George Siler, "Wrestling: Gotch Defeats Hackenschmidt," in *The Greatest Sport Stories from the Chicago Tribune*, Arch Ward, ed. (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1953), 87-89; Scrapbook, "Hackenschmidt Surrenders Title After 2 Hours 1 Minute," unidentified newspaper, 4 April 1908.

45. "Russian Lion Cries Enough," *Racine (Wisconsin) Daily Journal*, April 4, 1908;

46. "Hack Will Not Tarry Here," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 6, 1908.

46. Smith, "Hackenschmidt Gives up after Two Hours' Fierce Grappling with Gotch."

47. Ibid. Some newspapers reported that the match ended in two hours and one minute and others in two hours and three minutes.

48. "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908.

49. The phrase "his feelings hurt" appears in "Champion Wrestler Quits, Exhausted," *New York Times*, April 4, 1908; and in "Hackenschmidt Seeing Defeat, Quits; Gotch Is World's Wrestling 'Champ,'" *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 4, 1908. The "white feather" image appeared in Scrapbook, no title, *The Evening Wisconsin*, April 11, 1908; and in "Hackenschmidt Quits Mat; Match to Gotch," *Lima (Ohio) Daily News*, April 4, 1908; The "canary streak or yellowness" references were from: – "Aftermath Statements by Gotch and Hackenschmidt," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, April 5, 1908.

50. "Hackenschmidt Beaten: Loses Prize Fight to American Wrestler: Amazing Scenes: Struggle Like a Brutal Prize Fight," *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, April 5, 1908.

51. "To the Editor of The Sportsman," *The Sportsman*, April 14, 1908.

52. Scrapbook, no author, no title, *The Evening Standard and St. James's Gazette*, April 18, 1908.

53. Scrapbook, no author, no title, *New York Evening Journal*, April 5, 1908. This quote is attributed to *New York Evening Journal* reporter William F. Kirk in "Wrestling—'Gotch is a Brute,'" *The Sporting Life*, April 18, 1908.

54. "Brutal Wrestling – Gotch Denounced by the America Press," (London) *Morning Leader*, April 8, 1908.

55. Scrapbook, "World's Championship," unidentified clipping, n.d.

56. "Gotch, King of Them All," *Buffalo (New York) Express*, April 5, 1908.

57. "Wrestling in America," *Daily Telegraph*, April 5, 1908. This account and similar accounts show up in various English newspapers, such as "Hackenschmidt Beaten," *Lloyd's Weekly Newspapers*, April 5, 1908; "Wrestling – How Hackenschmidt Lost to Gotch," *Sporting Life*, April 6, 1908; "That Big Wrestle," *The Star*, April 6, 1908. Only a few American newspaper articles pertaining to the results of the fight are identified as such in Hackenschmidt's scrapbook with a similar if not the same passage, but *New York Sun*, *New York World*, and several Chicago newspaper reporters are cited in many articles.

58. Jack Curley, "Curley Picks Hack," *The Ring* 13, no. 2 (1934): 24. Curley also favors Hackenschmidt in his article, "Native Born Wrestlers Excel Foreigners," *The Ring* 9, no. 11 (December 1930): 30; and is quoted in A.D. Phillips, "From Milo to Londos, Chapter 13," *The Ring* 12, no. 10 (November 1933): 21; See also Ted Carroll, "Jack Curley, Greatest Promoter of 'Em All," *Ring Wrestling* (2) 5 (May 1968): 29.

59. There is a Yahoo chatroom called "FrankGotch vs GeorgeHackenschmidt," that's been active since 2005 at: <http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/FrankGotchVsGeorgeHackenschmidt/>; and the Lou Thesz forum at [wrestlingclassics.com](http://wrestlingclassics.com) also contains threads of discussion concerning the match. There's also a video game on YouTube that lets you recreate the match at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7xZB43c8to>.

60. The best reference on the Black Sox scandal is: Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series* (New York Holt Paperbacks: 2000).

61. See: <http://www.silentera.com/PSFL/data/G/GotchHackenschmidtWres1908.html>. For an early discussion of the film see: "Pictures of Big Match Show Russian Got a Square Deal," *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 11, 1908. This article describes the film as showing "ten minutes of the first of the match...then the film skips the uninteresting parts and picks up where some real action occurs."

62. Ibid.



The cartoonist for the British newspaper *The Daily Dispatch* compared the match to a cat fight, titling this supposed painting "Scratch-As-Gotch-Can' An Impression By Geo. Hack." A label affixed to the "painting" also reads "Made In Chicago." It appeared on May 5, 1908.



# Mighty Mitts

## The Contest

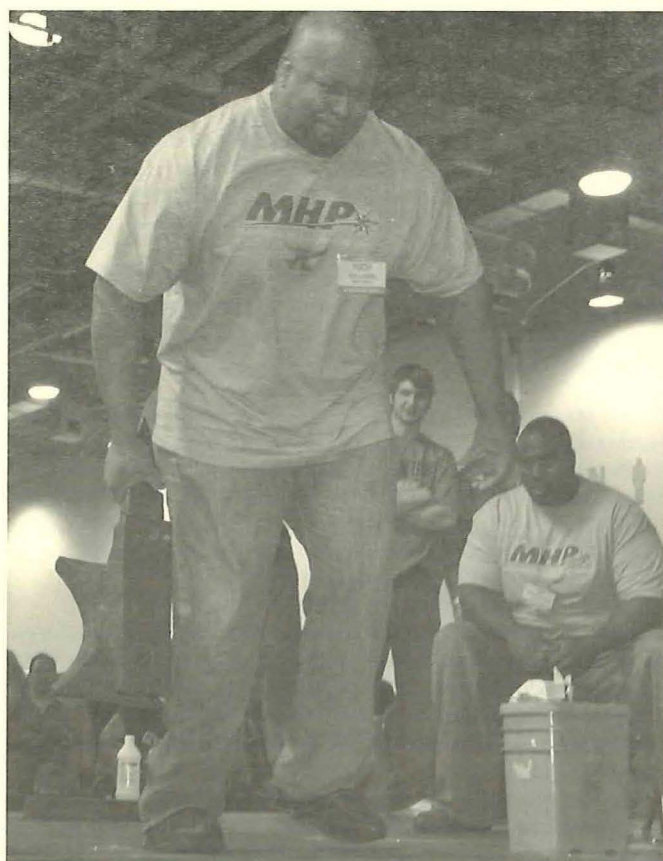
Terry Todd

The University of Texas

Over the weekend of March 5-7, 2010, in addition to the Arnold Strongman Classic's traditional tests of total body strength, we introduced a new feature for the crowds at the Expo Center—a sort of appetizer for the Strongman buffet. This new feature, "Mighty Mitts," was supported by MHP (our main sponsor) and also by Epicentr, a large building supply corporation located in the Ukraine. MM was a stand-alone contest and did not involve any of our Strongman competitors. Instead, it showcased ten men who are well-known or even famous for the strength of their hands. These men faced four challenges and could win up to \$1000 per event. The challenges took place atop the Expo Stage on Friday and Saturday, immediately before and after our Arnold Strongman Classic events.

Mighty Mitts was conceived as an extra attraction for fans of Strongman contests as well as for aficionados of "grip feats." Based on feedback following the contest it seemed clear that Mighty Mitts was popular and provided additional excitement for the tens of thousands of people who watched the Strongman contest this year. During the past couple of years, as I began more and more seriously to consider staging such a contest, I've done my best to think through which events should be conducted and who should be invited. As part of this effort I talked to a number of people—mainly to members of the Arnold Strongman Committee such as David Webster, Bill Kazmaier, Jan Todd, Steve Slater, and Odd Haugen—but for MM my primary co-conspirator has been Richard Sorin, to whom I and the entire grip community owe special thanks. Both Richard and I also listened to suggestions from iron gamers who've done a lot of grip work and thought a lot about hand strength.

One of our chief challenges this first year was to do all we possibly could to make Mighty Mitts an excit-



High school teacher Rich Williams of Charlottesville, Virginia, totally dominated the inaugural Mighty Mitts contest over the weekend of March 5-7, 2010. Williams, a protege of Richard Sorin, carried Jowett's 173-pound anvil all the way across the big expo stage and then rounded the corner and came partway back to the starting point for a total carry of almost 50 feet. Tex Henderson is seated in the background awaiting his turn.

ing contest to watch. If we could do this we believed MM would sell itself in the years to come and allow us to move forward in terms of covering expenses and increasing the prize package. Before we could even begin, of course, I had to sell the idea of MM to Jim Lorimer and, through him, to Arnold. As it turned out, they and the sponsors were very supportive and gave us the go-ahead to demonstrate that MM would be a good addition to the Arnold Sports Festival's many strength competitions, for which the weekend is justifiably famous.

Some readers might be interested to know the origin of the name of our contest. "Mitts," of course, is a colloquial term for "hands," seen in such phrases as, "Look at the mitts on that guy." In any case, after I had written a two-part article about hand and wrist strength in *Strength and Health* magazine in 1965, when I was a managing editor of that magazine, I decided to call the article, "Mighty Mitts." The article featured some fasci-



## THE 2010 MIGHTY MITTS COMPETITORS

**ANDREW DURNIAT**

Home: Wooster, Ohio, USA

Stats: 6' 4"; 225 lbs.

Age: 31

Job: Owner/operator of Durniat Strength

Athletics: Ice Hockey in High School; All-American defenseman in lacrosse while at Ohio Wesleyan University; specializes in grip and feats of all-around strength and fitness.

**MARK FELIX**

Home: Lancashire, Great Britain (born in Grenada)

Stats: 6' 4"; 310 lbs.

Age: 43

Job: Plasterer and Professional Strongman

Athletics: Finished fourth in 2006 World's Strongest Man Contest; held world record in "Rolling Thunder" deadlift event with 301 pounds; holds British Record in the deadlift with 881 in an IPF event; can take a "hook grip" on a bar with a diameter of two inches.

**STEVE GARDNER**

Home: Gloucester, England

Stats: 6' 3"; 280-300 lbs.

Age: 45

Job: Supplement company owner/landlord

Athletics: Four-time British Grip Champion; current European Grip Champion; holds 10 British Hand Strength records; first to one-hand lift the Millennium Dumbbell.

**WADE GILLINGHAM**

Home: Marshall, Minnesota, USA

Stats: 6' 2"; 300 lbs.

Age: 38

Job: Computer Programmer/Database Administrator

Athletics: Longtime leader and promoter of grip strength events; former powerlifter and professional strongman; runs the "The Grip Gauntlet" for GNC; brother of Brad Gillingham, winner of several world championships in the International Powerlifting Federation and Karl Gillingham, strongman competitor and former winner of America's Strongest Man contest.

**ODD HAUGEN**

Home: Newbury Park, California and Sunndalsora Norway

Stats: 6' 4"; 299 lbs.

Age: 60

Job: President of dotFIT worldwide

Athletics: Bodybuilding, weightlifting, powerlifting, football, strongman; competed in three World's Strongest Man contests; Norwegian national titles in bodybuilding, weightlifting, and powerlifting; promoter of strongman contests.

**SHEDRICK "TEX" HENDERSON**

Home: Grand Prairie, Texas, USA

Stats: 6' 8"; 367 lbs.

Age: 33

Job: Home theater installation and design

Athletics: Played football and threw the shot put in college; played Arena Football; competed in powerlifting and strongman; squatted 1025 pounds.

**JEDD JOHNSON**

Home: Towanda, Pennsylvania, USA

Stats: 6' 2"; 255 lbs.

Age: 31

Job: Human Resource Manager

Athletics: Played college baseball at Marshall University; competed in strongman from 2002 to 2006; founded the website DieselCrew.com in 2002.

**SERGEI ROMANCHUK**

Home: Kiev, Ukraine

Stats: 6' 2"; 304 lbs.

Age: 27

Job: Security director and strongman competitor

Athletics: Considered to have the strongest hands in the Ukraine; was added to the event with less than a month to train after strong-handed pro wrestler Mark Henry was unable to get time off from his weekend matches.

**RICHARD (RICH) WILLIAMS**

Home: Charlottesville, Virginia, USA

Stats: 6' 4"; 400 lbs.

Age: 38

Job: High school teacher

Athletics: Three time All-American as a college lineman; also threw the shot put in college; drafted in the second round in the NFL; plans to expand into Strongman events; learned about grip from Richard Sorin.

**CHET WOODALL**

Home: Athens, Georgia, USA

Stats: 6' 6"; 286 lbs.

Age: 36

Job: Fitness coordinator at a wellness center

Athletics: Played basketball for four years at Emmanuel College; won National Grip Strength Contest in 2006, 2007, and 2008; former Strongman competitor.



nating old photos, including one showing my hand next to the hand of August Hartkopf, an Austin mechanic who was acromegalic—a condition which is characterized by too much Human Growth Hormone and by the resulting physiological changes such as increased hand and foot thickness, facial disfigurement, and, in the case of people who haven't finished growing, increased height. In that particular photo, even though I weighed well over 300 pounds at that time, my hand next to that of Hartkopf looked like the hand of a child. For whatever reason, many old-time iron gamers seem to remember the article, and even the name. What's more, Richard Sorin claims that the article was one of the things which set him on his future path, which has been that of a pioneer in the field of grip strength. Thus it was that once I decided to stage the contest at the Arnold Sports Festival it seemed appropriate to call it Mighty Mitts.

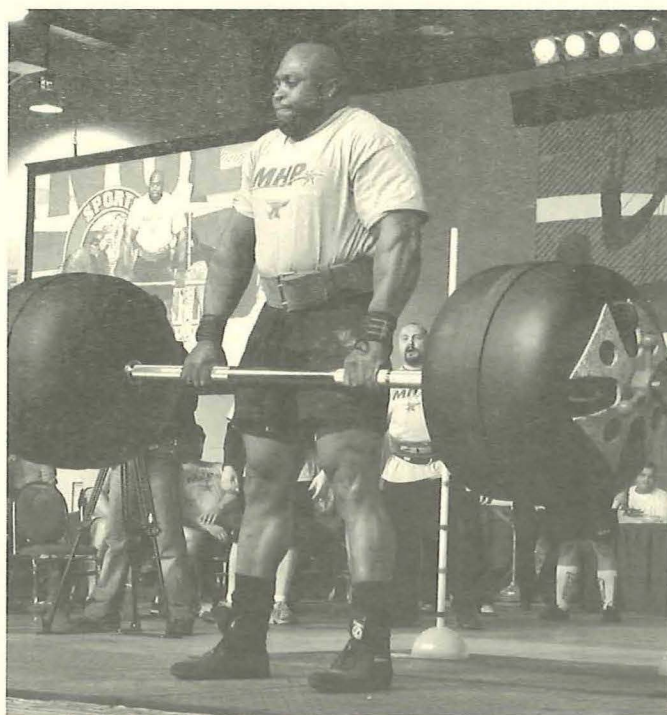
As soon as we began to go forward with the event we sent the word out through a number of channels and sat back to see if we'd have any takers. We hoped the event would bring out all—or at least most—of the men with big reputations in the small but passionate world of hand strength, and we were not disappointed; almost all of the men we most wanted to come contacted us to ask to be included.

The main reason we feared we might not get the turnout we wanted was that although we were able to offer \$1000 to the winner of each of our four events we lacked the sponsorship money to pay any of their transportation or other expenses, as we have always done for our traditional Strongmen. The difference, of course, is that the Strongman sport is much better known and, therefore, more appealing to potential sponsors. Even so, the top grip men in the world were willing to pay their own way in order to be part of what seemed to them and to us to be a historic event. Never before had there been a "Grip Contest," in front of thousands of cheering fans, with a thousand bucks on the line in each event. In short, the *Gripmeisters* all wanted in on it. Not to mention the fact that Grip Guys, in general, aren't inclined to shy away from a challenge.

## THE MIGHTY MITTS CHALLENGES FOR 2010

### The Jowett Anvil

In the early years of the 20th century, George F. Jowett was a very prominent figure in the physical culture world as a writer, lifter, and promoter. One of the



Mark Felix, England's veteran strongman, has made world "grip records" in feats of hand strength, and he was first alternate for the 2010 ASC. However, when Donnie Thompson dropped out of the Classic, Felix decided to take part in Mighty Mitts, not the Arnold Strongman Classic.

stunts for which he is most famous featured a large blacksmith's anvil, weighing 173 pounds, which he supposedly gripped by the horn with one hand, swung up toward his shoulder, flipped so that he caught it upside down in his hand, and then pressed over his head. Jowett claimed to be the only man who could perform this feat. However, leading strength historians are in agreement that Jowett—who was also famous for his exaggerations—never made such a lift. Even so, the feat is both famous and infamous. Jowett always fascinated me, and approximately 20 years ago Phyllis Jowett, George's daughter, gave his storied anvil to us for what's now known as the Joe and Betty Weider Museum of Physical Culture. Since we had Jowett's own anvil, that's the one we used as an MM challenge. Because strength historians realized that no human being has ever lived who could do what Jowett claimed to have done we chose a more modest—but still very difficult task.

After much deliberation the MM committee decided that the Jowett Anvil should be carried to the side of the body and not between the legs. This year the challenge was to lift the anvil by the horn from the floor and carry it on a rubberized mat along the front edge of



the Expo Stage from one end of the stage to the other, if possible. If an athlete carried the anvil the full length of the stage he was supposed to loop around an orange cone made of heavy rubber and then carry the anvil back toward an identical cone at the beginning point of the event...and so on until the anvil dropped. *Only chalk was allowed for this challenge and for all others, and the hands of all the men were subject to being checked by Bert Sorin or another judge at any time.*

All of the people associated with the contest were humming with excitement as Jowett's Anvil was brought onstage and the hard-handed heavies walked up the stage and into the pages of history. Those of us who really study the past are aware that no evidence exists that Jowett himself had been able to even deadlift the implement with one hand. Even so, his anvil feat has always fascinated people.

To underscore the impossibility of the feat Jowett described, consider that two of the topflight men in Mighty Mitts failed to deadlift the anvil and three others carried it less than six feet. Three men stood out, however—Sergei Romanchuk from the Ukraine, who covered 23'9"; Tex Henderson, who beat him by 10 feet; and the massive Rich Williams, who was credited with 38' 7.5" (because the distance was measured from cone to cone) but who carried the anvil all the way around the cone, at which point he began to actually run, making it part of the way back to the finish line for a total distance of close to 50'. It was a remarkable combination of body power, athleticism and, of course, hand strength. Speaking of hand strength, after the event was over I asked a group of the top finishers in the event what they thought about Jowett's claim of cleaning the anvil by the horn. They all looked at me and then each other and we all began to laugh.

### Sorin's Monster

One of the first events that came to mind as I thought about the best ways to test the mitts of the mighty men in our contest was a deadlift featuring a bar with a two-inch diameter. Another of my requirements was that the bar and the weights on each end must be solidly fixed to each other. In other words, we didn't want the bar to turn inside the weights—regardless of the material used to make the weights. A "solid" barbell—like a cast dumbbell—is more difficult to lift than is a barbell loaded with standard barbell plates, unless the plates are secured to the bar or handle in some way.

My original plan was to cut two "rounds" from

the trunk of a huge tree (three feet or more in diameter) so that the bar and the two rounds would have a combined weight of approximately 500 pounds. As Richard and I talked about this—and especially about how heavy we should make the challenge barbell—he said that as far as he knew the heaviest hookless and strapless deadlift ever made on a 2" bar and using a pronated grip was 438 pounds. For this reason, early in our deliberations Richard was reluctant for us to use as much as 500 pounds. However, as we swapped stories about things we had seen done by inhumanoids like Rich Williams and Mark Henry, Richard grew more comfortable with 500.

The advantage of a figure like 500 pounds to people in our situation, who are attempting to stage a strength contest, is that the figure itself is memorable. It's a barrier figure like a four-minute mile or a 400-pound clean and jerk. Most serious fans of track and field know that Roger Bannister was the first man to break the four minute barrier in the mile, just as most serious fans of the iron sports know that the first man to elevate 400 pounds in the clean and jerk was Charles Rigulot. However, only those fans with either a genuine obsession or a truly rare memory would know the name of the man who was the first to break the 3 minute, 51 second barrier or the man who first lifted 443 pounds to arms' length overhead.

Another aspect of "stagecraft" which can make a strength feat much more exciting to an audience—an aspect known to all performers during the glory days of the professional strongman a hundred years ago—is that it's very important for the thing being lifted to not only *be* heavy but to *look* heavy. It's a bit like the famous aphorism regarding judicial rulings, "Not only must justice be done, it must also be *seen* to be done." This consideration prompted me to make plans, described earlier, to use well-aged (and therefore lighter) wood when we built the deadlift challenge barbell for Mighty Mitts. However, because I was so busy with the operations at the Stark Center I didn't have a lot of spare time to scour the countryside in search of a relatively light tree-trunk (Cottonwood or Sycamore, for example, instead of Oak or Hickory) that had been dead for a long time and was therefore lighter. So, after three or four trips down to my ranch and to the larger ranches of several of my friends, I decided to give up my plans for the wooden implement I wanted to call the "Bobo Bell" (note obscure reference).

Salvation appeared in the person of Richard



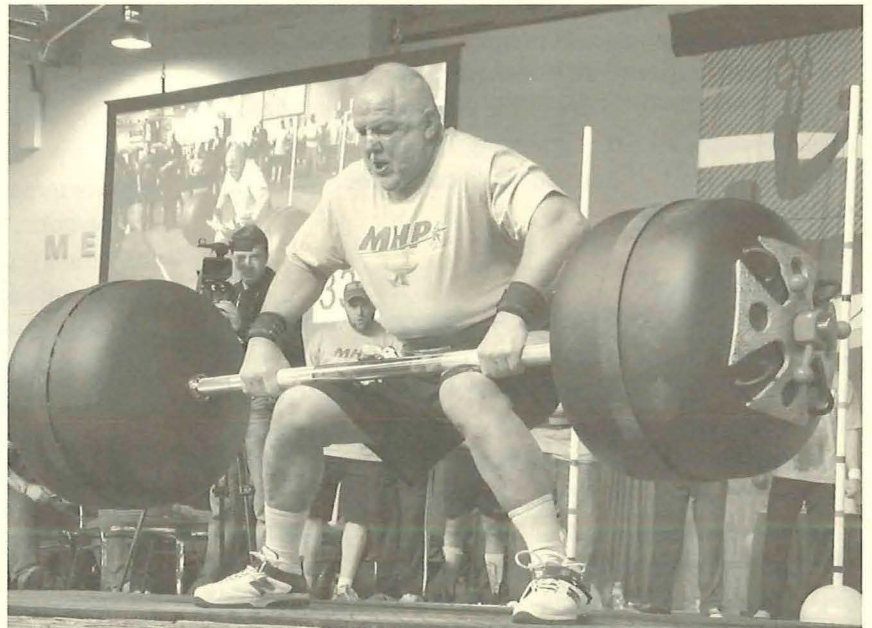
Sorin, founder and owner of the Sorinex Equipment Company and himself one of the legends of hand strength, who offered to design and have built a huge, circus-type barbell weighing exactly 500 pounds, featuring spheres which were to be 25" in diameter and a bar two inches in diameter. The bar he designed does not rotate within, or independent of, the spheres in any way. The challenge in the contest was to deadlift the bar for as many repetitions as possible within 30 seconds using a double-overhand (pronated) grip. Both Sumo and traditional deadlifting styles were permitted and the bell could be "hitched" on the way up as long as the lifter was standing straight at the end of the lift. The barbell had to touch the platform on every rep after the referee had given the "Down" signal, and a "hook grip" was not allowed. (Yes, as hard as it is to believe, some men have hands so large that they can take a "hook grip" on a 2" bar.) After the referee gave the down signal on each rep the lifter was allowed to either drop the bell, re-grip, and try to make another rep or he could lower it after getting the down signal, touch the floor, and pull it right back up again. The most reps, plus the height on the first failed attempt, won and determined placings.

The work of ironmonger's art which resulted not only weighed exactly 500 pounds or, as Richard said, "Five hundred, dead nuts," it was breathtaking—both beautiful and terrible—the largest-looking barbell I've ever seen that was neither a movie prop nor a bell designed for hip or harness lifting. Were it made of solid iron or steel it would weigh well over a thousand pounds. Even now, as it rests in a place of honor at the entrance to the Weider Museum here at the Stark Center, it never fails to catch the interest of the many thousands of people who have seen it since we installed it in April. In a later issue of *Iron Game History*, I plan to describe the hundreds of hours of design, fabrication, and tweaking it took for Richard and his crew to produce this spectacular implement—this monster. Sorin's Monster.

As to the ability of our MM competitors to deal with the ominous bell, four men failed to make a full deadlift, two managed one rep, and one man—the Old Viking, 60 year-old Odd Haugen—brought shouts of amazement and praise from the crowd by completing two suc-

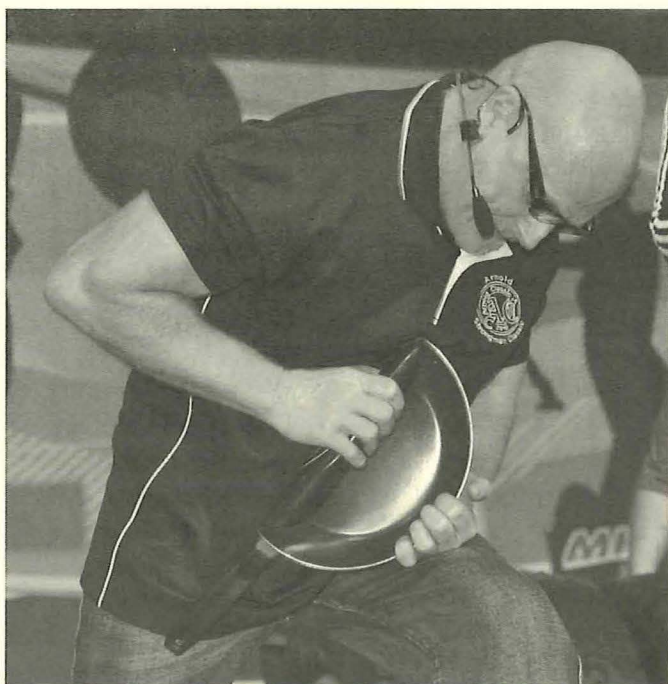
cessful deadlifts. As for the top men, Big Tex Henderson finished third with four full deadlifts and he lost several more as his grip failed before I was able to give the "Down" signal. Finishing second was the huge-handed Mark Felix from England, who was the main reason we specifically forbade the use of a "hook grip" in this lift. Felix is also phenomenal in the deadlift as it's done in the sport's largest and most prestigious organization—the International Powerlifting Federation—and he has an official best lift of 904 pounds. Because of Felix's hand-size, his grip, and his prodigious back strength (His top deadlift was the best of anyone in the Mighty Mitts event.) many people close to the contest thought he would do more reps than anyone else. As it turned out, he got credit for six completed lifts but he lost at least two more because his banana-like fingers failed him before I shouted "Down!" I should also explain that, having realized going in that it would be very difficult for the men to easily hold the Monster at the top of the deadlift, I decided to judge the event myself and to give very quick "down" signals to everyone.

The man who mastered the Monster was, once again, Rich Williams, who put on a show that drove the thousands of people watching wild with amazement as he hauled rep after rep after rep—as if he were lifting a bell made of plastic or balsa wood. Part of the reason for the crowd's excitement was that as Rich moved from rep to rep—some of which weren't official as he let them



The miraculous Odd Haugen, at age 60, held his own. Shown here doing his second rep with Sorin's Monster, which gave him fourth place. Hitching and stopping was allowed.





Perhaps the most widely travelled and publicized professional strongman in the U.S., the legendary Dennis Rogers helped to judge Mighty Mitts and also rocked the house with his phenomenal feats of hand strength, including the rolling up of a standard frying pan.

down so quickly that I was unable to give the “Down” signal in time—he became much more animated and forceful, and as he continued to lift he began to make a noise somewhere between a growl and a roar. To be honest, sitting as close as I was to this gargantuan man while he fought for the win, I actually wanted to move back a bit . . . as if I were standing too close to an open blast furnace. In short, his eight rep performance was absolutely unforgettable, and I join many others in the strength world—especially his competitors in the MM contest!—in the hope that he decides to train on our Strongman events, qualify in some way, and take his rightful place in the Arnold Strongman Classic in 2011.

### The Inch Dumbbells

As our plans for the first annual Mighty Mitts competition developed, we realized we could add a certain amount of historical gravity to the occasion by using implements which were connected in some way to famous iron gamers—in much the same way that we honor Louis “Apollon” Uni in the Arnold Strongman Classic by using a close approximation of the barbell he made famous over a hundred years ago and by referring to it not as “Apollon’s Axle” but as “Apollon’s Wheels,” the name used by knowledgeable people in all the years

since. For this reason we used George Jowett’s personal anvil, a barbell dreamed up and executed by Richard Sorin, and a pair of replicas of one of the most famous/infamous dumbbells of all—the Inch Dumbbell. (Actually, even the replicas we used in MM—thanks again to the kindness of Richard Sorin—had historical significance. One replica was used in an exhibition in 2002 at the conclusion of the first Arnold Strongman Classic when Jim Lorimer and Arnold wanted the winner, Mark Henry, and the other Strongmen to entertain the high-dollar crowd in the auditorium as the men picked up their prize-money and, in Mark’s case, the keys to a new Hummer. In the exhibition, the men were asked to pull an Inch replica as high as possible with one hand without touching the bell to the body, and Mark won a thousand dollars in that unofficial contest, too. The other replica in the MM event was the one Mark had used the night back in 2002 in New York City when he became the first man in history to clean an Inch Bell with one hand.)

Named in honor of the English strongman and weightlifter Thomas Inch, the original Inch Dumbbell weighs 172 pounds and has a handle almost 2.5” in diameter and 4” in length. The bell was made approximately 100 years ago, and for many years very few men were able to lift it off the floor. Once replicas of the original implement began to be manufactured, however, a number of men trained until they could deadlift one. A few men have been able to deadlift two Inch Bells and walk a short distance with them, and so the challenge at the Mighty Mitts event was to do exactly that—to deadlift two Inch Bells with the dumbbell handles remaining approximately parallel to the platform throughout the deadlift portion of the feat, and attempt to walk across the front of the 50’ Expo Stage, go around a large, solid marker, then go back the other way without dropping either one, and then repeat the process. The distance for each competitor was marked at the place where the first dumbbell hit the floor. Competitors were not allowed to hold the dumbbells tightly against their waists, thighs, or hips during the attempt.

In this case, since deadlifting one Inch Bell had become fairly commonplace, our committee quickly decided that to ask the men to deadlift a pair of “Inches” from the floor and then carry them as far as possible would be challenging as well as very watchable. (As anyone who gives it a moment’s thought will realize, in a vast hall like the main room in the Arnold Sports Festival—with as many as 10,000 people crowded around



the 50'x50' stage—anything like the closing of a gripper or the bending of a spike would be virtually invisible to most of the audience and, thus, profoundly unsatisfying to them.)

The double-deadlift and carry of two Inches gave the crowd a clear idea of the frightful gripping strength of these ten men, nine of whom deadlifted both replicas, one in each hand, and took at least a few steps. Inch, in comparison, used his 172-pound bell in probably hundreds of his shows during the first half of the 20th century and offered money to anyone who could clear it off the floor a fraction of an inch. He never had to pay. As it happened, our event was dominated by the same three men who had either done well in, or won, each of the first two events. Tex Henderson snatched the bells off the floor of the stage and motored down the rubber mat and around the rubber cone toward the original starting line until the fingers of one hand gave way and one of the bells hit the mat 66' 9.5" down the course. The very powerfully built Mark Felix edged Tex out by about a foot and a half, taking the bells 68' 4.5".

Once again, Rich Williams stepped to the line with fire in his eyes, lifted the bells from the floor as he might lift a pair of lunch pails, and took off toward the first cone. Almost running, he reached the cone, went around it quickly, and then headed back toward another cone, which had been placed on the finish line. Once again he reached the cone, circled it and began to actually run with the bells before they finally fell at 76' 4". It was spectacular to see, and Rich was travelling so fast when the dumbbells dropped from his grasp that he lost his balance to the right, fell forward to that side, did a quick shoulder-roll, and sprang back to his feet. No wonder he earned All-American honors in each of his final three years of college ball.

### The Mark Henry Bell

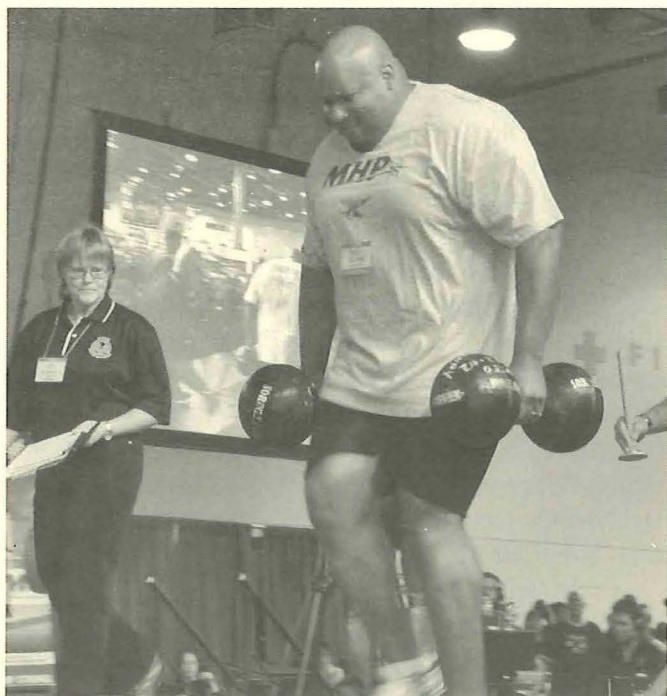
This was the one event we believed would have very little audience appeal because we thought no one would be able to lift it. Even so, we thought it was worth doing since—if it proved to be beyond the current ability of any of our athletes—it would remain a possibly achievable goal for future years. The staging of the event wasn't audience-friendly, however, and next year we'll do our best to find a way to keep the Henry Bell as an ongoing challenge while improving the view the audience has of what's happening—or of what's not happening.

As to the origin of this implement, about three or

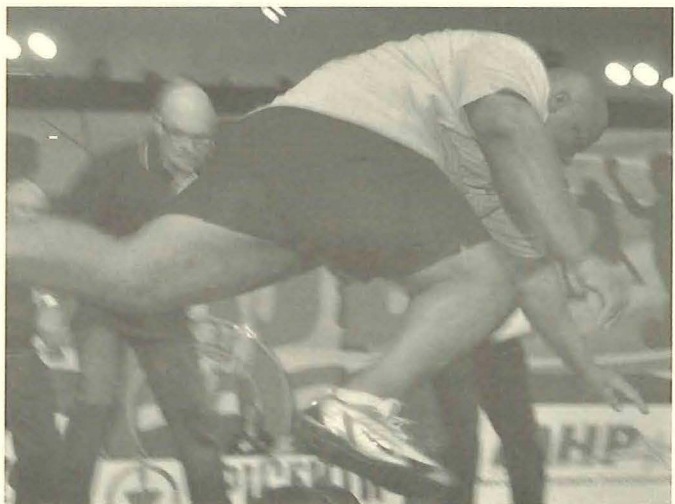
four years ago, Mark Henry decided to have a thick-handled dumbbell made weighing approximately 250 pounds. However, the machine shop that built Henry's bell made a major miscalculation when they cut the pieces of 9" bar-stock used for the "canister" weights at each end of the short handle. The result was a dumbbell, with a handle 2.5" thick and 6" long, which weighed not 250 pounds but 300 pounds. We called it the "Mistake Bell," and even though Henry himself was unable to lift it, he decided to leave it as it was so that it would remain as a challenge for him and for others. Shortly after the Henry Bell was made, a small but heavy box (50 pounds) was built for it so that it would be easier to carry, and the challenge at the Arnold was to lift the bell all the way out of its box with one hand without tipping the box over. At the end of a successful attempt the Bell would be resting on the platform and the box would be upright. During their attempt to lift the Bell out of the box, the men were not allowed to touch the box with either of their legs or feet in order to "brace" it. If more than one person succeeded, the prize-money would be split. We hoped that one of our Grip Gods would be able to raise the Henry Bell out of its box in 2010, but we doubted that it would happen. I should add that my committee and I were surprised that so many people who posted on the various internet grip sites seemed to think quite a few men would lift it from its box.

As a pure test of grip strength—without considering the spectators—I think it's fair to say that the attempts the competitors made to lift the primitive-looking bell out of its box indicated that although it was too much for them in the 2010 contest it will almost certainly be lifted within the next several years—at least as high as it needs to be lifted to come up and out of the box. I say this because several of the men—who put the heel of their hand against one end of the bell so that it tilted slightly and was therefore more "liftable" because of the increased traction and because the tilting suppresses the tendency of the handle to "roll"—were able to raise one end of the dumbbell an inch or so. What's more, according to Richard Sorin, who had the best view, one man—Andrew Durniat, the lightest man in the event—held it level and actually budged it briefly off the bottom of the box. This has convinced us that it won't be too long before one of these remarkable men—after lots of specific training on a solid bell with a bar diameter of 2.5"—builds the strength to bring the daunting dumbbell well off the ground and perhaps even to deadlift it. The Henry Bell is now a goal, and it reminds us of the





Unquestionably, 6'4", 400-pound Rich Williams had the mightiest mitts of all, winning all three events. The top photo shows him carrying a pair of Inch Dumbbell replicas; the second shows him in mid-air after losing his balance when he began to actually run with the 172-pound bells.



famous line from Robert Browning, "Ah, but a man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

Overall, those of us who planned and executed the Mighty Mitts contest were very pleased by how it went. We thought the performances were outstanding, and we were also able to arrange an extra added attraction for the crowd in the person of Dennis Rogers, one of the unquestionable Grandmasters of Grip. Not only did Dennis help us to officiate the four MM events—along with his good pal and grip legend Pat Povalitis—but in

between the last Strongman event and the first MM event he put on an amazing demonstration both Friday and Saturday of his ability to tear and bend objects like crescent wrenches and horseshoes. You have to see Rogers in action to believe what he can do, and we all thank him. His presence lent prestige and considerable gravity to the occasion.

But the greatest honor belongs to the pioneers who entered the first annual Mighty Mitts contest. They did themselves proud by answering the challenge and, in so doing, helping us to highlight this emerging sub-culture of the iron game—to bring it out of bars and garages and into the full light of public sports performance. Hand strength has always stoked the imagination of iron gamers and been emblematic of overall strength and vigor. To wit:

Under the spreading chestnut tree the village  
smithy stands,  
The smith, a mighty man is he, with large  
and sinewy hands.

This year, we used Mighty Mitts to "bookend" the events in the Arnold Strongman Classic, but next year we intend to stage MM as a stand-alone competition. We believe its time has come, as witnessed by the internet sites which reportedly have up to 50,000 members and, in the weeks just before and after the Mighty Mitts event, had up to 10,000 posts a week. Naturally, we're grateful to our primary sponsors, MHP and Epicentr, to Jim Lorimer and Governor Schwarzenegger for backing the idea, and to the wonderful crews led by Bert Sorin and Steve Slater, who made everything run so smoothly.

Jim Lorimer refers to the Arnold Sports Festival as "Strength Heaven," and the introduction of the unprecedented grip challenges unveiled in the first Mighty Mitts contest has added a new attraction to the colossal Arnold Sports Festival—an attraction which should stimulate strong men everywhere to push back the boundaries of hand strength.

*Editors' Note: All four of the implements used in the 2010 Mighty Mitts have been brought to the Joe and Betty Weider Museum in the H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at The University of Texas at Austin. By prior agreement with either Drs Terry or Jan Todd, attempts to break records under official circumstances may be made in Austin.*





*Six months or so ago I began writing an occasional blog for our website—[www.starkcenter.org](http://www.starkcenter.org). I call the blog “Don’t Weaken,” and I’ve used it primarily as a way to inform people about various activities here at the Stark Center. Since most readers of **Iron Game History** are probably unaware of this blog we decided to use an abbreviated version of something I wrote about the time David P. Webster, O.B.E., spent with us last spring.*

*—Terry Todd*

### Our Davie

Before my iron game-lifelong pal David Webster actually leaves Texas for his home in the bosky dells of seaside Scotland I wanted to share with readers how fortunate Jan and I feel to have had him with us at the Stark Center since the middle of January.

I first met David way back in 1964 in York, Pennsylvania, while I was living there and working as a managing editor of the York Barbell Company’s *Strength and Health* magazine, by then a leading iron game publication in the U.S. for over 30 years. As it happened, David was the organizer of a group of Highland Games athletes who were scheduled to be in Baltimore on a tour of North America, and so he had called the York Barbell Company to say he would like to bring a group of his “heavies” to York to see the famous lifters and bodybuilders who trained there. As David was already a major figure in the strength sports he was, of course, invited to come, with “heavies.” The next morning he and his kilted laddies arrived at the York Gym for what turned out to be a memorable visit.

Over 45 years have passed since that day, and the more I’ve learned about David Webster since that time the more admiration I have for the “wee mon.” For the last 60 years, few if any men have done more to advance the cause of physical culture around the world, and particularly in his beloved Scotland. It’s hard to know where to begin, really, but here are a few of his accomplishments. Born in 1928, David joined the Health and Strength League at age 14, took a college degree in physical education, became a fine all-rounder in hand-balancing and lifting, and was able to stretch a custom-

made set of cables no one else as of 2010 has been able to stretch. (The cable is now and will remain at the Stark Center and be available to any challengers.) In his professional life he worked his way up until he became the Director of Leisure, Recreation, and Tourism for a large section of Scotland, with over 2000 people working under his direction.

In multi-sport organizations David has been a Life Vice-President of the Commonwealth Games Council for Scotland since 1990, the Chief of Mission for the Scottish team in the 1998 Commonwealth Games, and the founder and (for over 30 years) still the promoter of the World Highland Games Heavy Events Championships. He is also the world’s leading authority on the Highland Games and has done the color commentary for many hundreds of Highland Games worldwide.

In weightlifting, David was part of almost every British team at the World Championships and Olympic Games as a coach, technical official, or referee through parts of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s; and he organized and directed the World Junior WL Championships in 1985. He has been the Chairman of Weightlifting Scotland for years, and in his last competition, in 1999, he won the 148-pound class in the Scottish National Master’s Championships. In bodybuilding, he competed as a very young man, went on to become a founding member of the National Amateur Bodybuilding Association (NABBA), and served as a judge at many Mr. Britain and Mr. Universe contests.

In the Strongman sport, he is one of its true founding fathers, having organized in 1955 the first televised Strongman competition, which featured the lifting and carrying of heavy stones. He also consulted with the developers of the first “World’s Strongest Man” contest in 1977 and went on to serve that show for over two decades in contests all over the world. What’s more, for the last ten years he has served as my chief of officials at the Arnold Strongman Classic in Ohio. In fact, when Jim Lorimer and Arnold Schwarzenegger asked me to create and conduct a heavy-duty Strongman contest at the Arnold Sports Festival, the first man I asked to help me was David Webster.

David has also done a great deal of television work related to physical culture activities, and most of his media work has been in either the Highland Games or strength sports such as weightlifting and Strongman competitions. He has also created and helped to produce several special TV programs, including two about the Highland Games and one, called “Glamazons,” that was



a contest for women strength athletes.

Although David has received many honors and been inducted into most of the halls of fame in the iron game, his most significant honor came in 1995 when he was “invested” by the Queen as an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. He was given this very singular and coveted O.B.E. because of his wide-ranging and effective work in support of physical culture and sports and because of how that work had introduced people all over the world to the ancient sport known as the Highland Games.

One little-known aspect of David’s remarkable career is that he was perhaps the first sporting official to convince a group of scientists to work with sports officials and create a method of drug testing which could be applied to the sports in which ergogenic drugs were already a problem. He began this effort in 1969. David was also a pioneer in the application of film analysis to the “Olympic Lifts,” and in this work he filmed many major championships and conducted clinics about his analysis and research in many parts of the world.

One of the reasons David, Jan, and I have become increasingly close as the years have passed relates to our shared interest in collecting materials about physical culture, and particularly the aspect of physical culture dealing with the history of the strength sports. David began collecting well over 60 years ago and, through his diligence and knowledge, has built perhaps the finest private collection in the world.

One of the things separating David from most serious collectors is that he has always made full use of his collection by writing about many aspects of the world of physical culture. The Stephen King of physical culture writers, David has written approximately 1000 articles in over 50 publications as well as more than 30 books, including such landmarks as *Modern Strand-pulling* (1953), *Scottish Highland Games* (1959), *The Iron Game* (1976), *Barbells and Beefcake* (1978), *Sons of Samson Vol. 1&2* (1993 and 1997), and *Donald Dinnie* (1999). As of this moment he has three titles awaiting publication –



**David Webster, in March of 2010, seated in front of his image on the Wall of Icons at the entrance to the Joe and Betty Weider Museum of Physical Culture.**

one a history of wrestling around the world that we hope to publish as part of the Todd Book Series at UT Press.

Before David came to Texas to help us with the museum named in honor of his old and dear friends Joe and Betty Weider I always wondered how he had accomplished so much in so many fields. However, I no longer wonder, because every morning when we arrive at the Stark Center David says hello to our other staff-members and then goes straight to his office, shuts his door, and immediately begins working at the task he had put down the previous evening when we left the university, usually around 8:00 pm. His “secret” is further revealed every night after the three of us get home, have dinner,

and he goes across the yard to our guest house. By the time Jan and I get upstairs to our two home offices and I look out of my window, David is already sitting in front of his computer and he generally stays there until around midnight. Most nights, if he’s still up then, I’ll usually go over with a bottle of single malt scotch in my hand, knock on his door, and ask if he’d care for a “wee dram” before turning in. He never says no.

Watching David work at the Stark Center these past ten weeks makes me think of elbow grease, grit, dedication, willpower—call it what you will—but a word that works for me is love...a deep, abiding love of the iron game. Having David here to help us shape our shared dream of building a facility in which people with a similar love can see, and read about, and study in detail the history of our game has been a blessing and a gift we can never repay. David has already given us many of the hard-won treasures he collected over the years, including our oldest book—Mercurialis’ sixteenth century *De Arte Gymnastica*—but the gift of his precious time here, in the late fall of his long, full life is the most precious gift of all. But when he leaves us physically in a few days his spirit—and his image—will remain. In fact, we’ll still see him every day at the entrance to the Weider Museum standing larger-than-life between Steve Reeves and Eugen Sandow on our Wall of Icons. He has earned his place.



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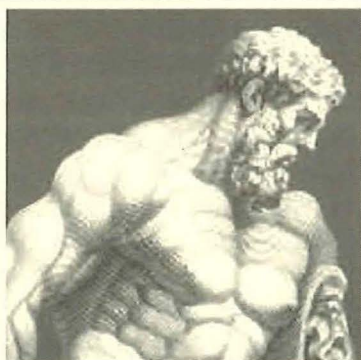
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