



# IRON GAME HISTORY



THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

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## THE PASSING OF A TITAN

Early on the morning of 23 March 2013 Jan and I received a call from the family of Joe Weider that he had just died of natural causes in a local hospital near his home. To say that Joe was a giant in the world of strength and physical culture would be an understatement, and a case could be made that his reach and influence in North America during the twentieth century in that broad field exceeded that of any person living or dead. This reach and influence will be the subject of an upcoming special issue of *Iron Game History* and we invite anyone who might like to contribute for possible inclusion a short essay about Joe to do so. We've already received a number of emails and letters commenting on his life and, in particular, his impact on popular culture. Over the twenty-three years that we've published *IGH*, we've only devoted an entire issue to two men—John Grimek, the legendary bodybuilder, who was one of Joe's early inspirations, and Mr. America, Steve Reeves, of *Hercules* fame.

That Joe was considered a Big Man in this country and beyond was made clear shortly after his death when the *New York Times* published a long obituary devoted to his many accomplishments and contributions to the health and well-being of people everywhere. That he was well-loved by his family and close friends was apparent at a moving funeral service conducted by Rabbi Mordecai Finley in Los Angeles on 28

March 2013. Several people spoke there, including Joe's nephew, Eric Weider—who brought his "Uncle Joe" to life—and Joe's daughter, Lydia, who read a poem she'd written about Joe's love of the beautiful garden in the backyard of his and Betty's historic home. Most people who knew Joe well—especially during his California years—could relate to Lydia's poem as he seemed happiest sitting on the veranda at his glass-topped table and talking either business or philosophy with his many colleagues and friends.

Joe's impact on the field in which he made his living and his life was on full display for anyone to see at the lavish, invitation-only memorial service at the Fairmont Hotel in Santa Monica, attended by approximately four hundred people from various sub-cultures of the Iron Game—particularly the sub-culture of competitive bodybuilding. More like a family reunion on an important anniversary than anything else, the event was organized and underwritten by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the man whose profound gratitude for what Joe did for him could be felt by attendees like a bass note in their very bones. Many people spoke their hearts, and told Joe they loved him on that beautiful California day when we all came together to bid god-speed to a wise old man who changed his address from Montreal to New Jersey to Southern California and, in the



Joe and Betty Weider, photographed in the beautiful garden at their home in Los Angeles, circa 2000. Together, they redefined fitness through their personal example and the promotion of bodybuilding as a lifestyle in their numerous, culture-changing publications.



process, changed the world.

For much of his life Joe survived and prospered because he was a hard-charging visionary, and like many such men he was not universally loved. However, as he aged, everyone who knew him well said he became mellower and more open-hearted. Bert Sorin, who attended the opening of the Weider Museum in 2011 told me that he shook Joe's hand during the opening and thanked him for his generosity and for all the many things he had done. With his frail hand in Bert's, Joe looked up and said quietly, "Not enough."

As for Joe's influence on the Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, it's not an exaggeration to

say that had it not been for the generosity of Joe and Betty Weider there would be no Stark Center. No Joe and Betty Weider Museum filled with the paintings and sculptures they collected over the years and gave to us so we could share them with their extended "family." Besides the art collection, Joe pledged \$2,000,000 to allow us to expand the work we've done at the university, and their support of our dream gave us the courage to approach The University for the space in which to build a research center and to approach the Stark Foundation for the \$5,500,000 required to actually build it out.

Joe Weider was Jewish, but he was also our patron saint.  
—Terry Todd

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# Beyond the Hack Squat: George Hackenschmidt's Forgotten Legacy as a Strength Training Pioneer

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*The University of Texas at Austin*

But, as will be seen, it has not been my design to confine myself to laying down a series of rules for strong men and athletes only: my object in writing this book has been rather to lay before my readers such data as may enable them to secure health as well as strength. Health can never be divorced from strength. The second is an inevitable sequel to the first. A man can only fortify himself against disease by strengthening his body in such manner as will enable it to defy the attacks of any malady.<sup>1</sup>

—George Hackenschmidt in *The Way to Live*

Born in Dorpat, Estonia on 2 August 1878, George (originally Georg, sometimes spelled Georges) Karl Julius Hackenschmidt was one of the most admired and successful Greco-Roman and Catch-as-Catch-Can wrestlers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Gifted with extraordinary physical capabilities that seemed to far exceed those of the average man, he rose to stardom in the early 1900s through a captivating mixture of overwhelming ring presence, explosive power, sheer strength, and admirable humility. However, the “Russian Lion” was decidedly more than one of the greatest wrestlers who ever set foot on a mat. From his earliest days as a professional, Hackenschmidt displayed an indefatigable desire to inspire others to follow him on his quest to physical strength, health, and long life. Throughout his ring career and in the years that followed, he used his popularity and public celebrity to advocate strength training, exercise, and proper diet as means to attain health and well-being.

Like heavyweight boxing champion John L. Sullivan, professional strongman Eugen Sandow, wrestler William Muldoon, and dozens of other athletes at that time, Hackenschmidt capitalized on his celebrity status by appearing in vaudeville and variety theaters, challenging other performers, and publishing books during his years as an active athlete that reportedly detailed

his unique training philosophy and “system.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, Hackenschmidt became a revered authority in the field of physical culture and fitness, yet maintained a markedly different perspective from that of the two most famous fitness entrepreneurs of the early twentieth century—Eugen Sandow (1867-1925) and Bernarr Macfadden (1868-1955).<sup>3</sup> The fact that Hackenschmidt’s ideas on exercise were so different than those of Sandow and Macfadden—both of whom established magazines, opened physical culture institutes, and employed other marketing techniques to promote their training methods—may explain why, although the Estonian is well remembered for his wrestling accolades, little scholarly attention has been paid to his holistic approach to training, dieting, exercising, and the betterment of one’s body.<sup>4</sup>

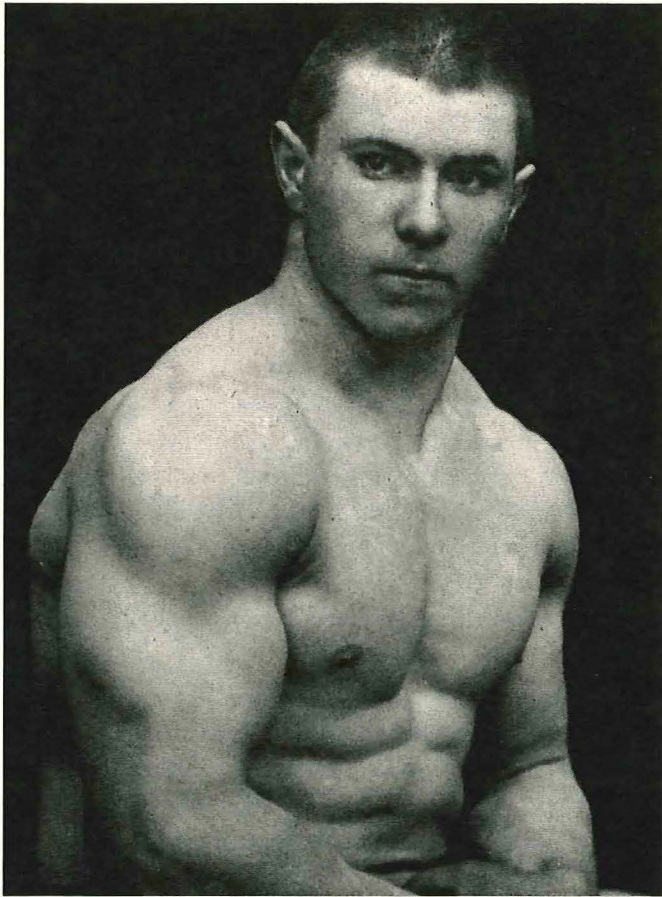
This article attempts to fill that void through an examination of George Hackenschmidt’s published works and personal papers on the subject of strength training.<sup>5</sup> The authors outline his contributions to early twentieth century fitness, describe the ways that his training philosophy evolved over the course of his life, and follow the path of a strength training pioneer whose perspective on the “way to live” stood in marked contrast to that of other physical culture pioneers of his era.

## The Early Years

As a young child, Hackenschmidt enjoyed playing sports and being physically active, displaying what

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At only 5'8 1/2" in height, Hackenschmidt would never have been considered a "large man" during his era, except for the unusual thickness of his muscles. Like Sandow, he had exceptionally well-defined abdominals, large deltoids, and impressive symmetry.

he later described as "an overmastering urge for quick and sustained movement."<sup>6</sup> Much of his childhood was spent in the open air, where he "never seemed to be able to get too much of the river and forests, where we fished, skated, rowed and swam or rambled and sledged."<sup>7</sup> In 1890, during one of the annual sport outings in his hometown of Dorpat, the twelve-year-old Hack delivered the best performance at his age across all the participating schools. He set records in disciplines like running and throwing, and the incident gave him an early taste of athletic success, which he would remember fondly: "I'm sure my chest measurement had expanded an inch or two as I walked back in formation with all the other boys, a galaxy of medals pinned on in front and a wreath over my head."<sup>8</sup>

That same year Hack discovered a love for wrestling when attending an exhibition match put on by a touring circus. He had begged his mother to let him go and, much to his surprise, she gave him the money for a

ticket, even though only the older boys in his school were supposed to be excused from classes to attend (and Hack was not one of them). Hack then borrowed a suit of clothes from a friend, snuck into the event and found a spot where he could hide from the teachers and older boys, and watched the local baker take on a traveling professional. Thoroughly fascinated by what he saw that day, Hackenschmidt recounted later:

When the wrestlers came on, my heart 'went plop with a wiggle between' and I could hardly breathe for fear I should miss any of the action. I was so entranced I couldn't even applaud. In fact I got so worked up over it that I determined I'd never rest until I had become every bit as strong as they appeared to be. This resolution was all-absorbing, so much so that for months afterwards, whenever I could manage to slip away from home, I'd run down to the baker's shop and feast my eyes on the rosy faced Mr. Miehle who, for want of experience, I thought must be one of the world's strongest men.<sup>9</sup>

Over the ensuing years the teenage Hackenschmidt continued to be active, growing increasingly stronger and more muscular. After moving to Reval in 1895 he joined the local athletic club and took up gymnastics and cycling.<sup>10</sup> However, he did not really pursue wrestling until Georg Lurich, whom Hackenschmidt later described as "probably one of the most remarkable personalities developed by weightlifting and wrestling," visited Reval along with fellow wrestlers Wladislaw Pytlasinsky and Fritz Konietzko.<sup>11</sup> Hackenschmidt, already somewhat known in Reval for his strength, was invited to take on Lurich in an exhibition bout, even though he had no previous wrestling experience. According to Hackenschmidt, although he knew "half of nothing" about wrestling, he was able to hold his own against Lurich for two matches, one of them lasting over an hour without either of the opponents being able to pin the other.<sup>12</sup> Despite losing the exhibition matches on points, as well as two other bouts against Pytlasinsky and Konietzko, Hackenschmidt felt that he was "altogether stronger than [his] rival and ought to have come out on top."<sup>13</sup>



The matches against Lurich, Pytlasinsky, and Konietzko reinforced Hack's belief in his own strength and in the ensuing years he continued to make progress "by what may well be described as leaps and bounds."<sup>14</sup> He further began to participate in occasional wrestling bouts and strongman exhibitions, earning local recognition across the Baltic region and setting a number of weightlifting records.<sup>15</sup>

In 1897, Hack traveled to Leningrad, bent on either making it as an athlete or working in an engineering office. In the Russian metropolis, Hackenschmidt sought out the advice of the city's leading athletic trainer and physician, Dr. Vladislav von Krajewski, founder of the St. Petersburg Athletic and Cycling club and physician to the Czar of Russia.<sup>16</sup> Krajewski had previously met Hackenschmidt when he visited Estonia and had invited Hackenschmidt to come to Moscow and train with him. Krajewski was so impressed with the young Estonian's strength and physical development that he invited Hack to stay in his home so that he could oversee his training. He promised to help turn Hack into the strongest man in the world, an offer Hack gladly accepted, later reminiscing that the physician's offer "was better than anything [he] had ever dared to dream."<sup>17</sup>

Dr. Krajewski viewed physical exercise as a means to preserve health, enhance overall fitness, and prevent and treat illnesses. His teachings influenced not only Hackenschmidt but many other athletes and strongmen as well. A true scholar of the history of *Tyazhelyaya Atletika*, or heavy athletics—Krajewski was also well-known for his expertise in medicine, psychology, and gymnastics. Many of his teachings regarding injury prevention, psychological management, and nutrition still hold true today, and much of his philosophy on physical training and exercise can be found in Hackenschmidt's later publications on strength and health.<sup>18</sup>

Although Hackenschmidt later claimed that Dr. Krajewski did not directly train him, he acknowledged that the Russian

physician profoundly influenced his ideas on nutrition, rest, and the right way to exercise. During his time with Krajewski, Hackenschmidt grew immensely strong and added to his knowledge of weightlifting, physical exercise, and the organization of training.<sup>19</sup> But Hack wanted more than simply becoming the strongest man in the world. He was determined to succeed in the sport that had so captivated him as a young boy and to become the world's greatest wrestler. And so, in St. Petersburg, as he continued to set records in weight-lifting, he began a new career. Hackenschmidt began training in earnest, taking every opportunity to get into the ring with the many wrestlers visiting Dr. Krajewski's home.<sup>20</sup> After winning a number of local amateur bouts and having success in several other European matches, Krajewski convinced Hackenschmidt to compete in the world championships held in Vienna in 1898. Hack, still relying more on his physical power than wrestling technique, beat all his opponents in overwhelming fashion and became amateur world champion at the age of twenty.<sup>21</sup>

After this victory, Hackenschmidt served for five months in the army before taking up the life of a travelling professional wrestler. In 1901 he returned to



Dr. Vladislav von Krajewski had a profound influence on Hackenschmidt's ideas about health and exercise. Hackenschmidt moved from Estonia to train under Krajewski's supervision and to avail himself of the doctor's many contacts in the vibrant sporting life of *fin de siècle* St. Petersburg.

Vienna and captured the professional world championship crown in a bout against Halil Adali.<sup>22</sup> As Hack traveled he came into contact with dozens of trainers, athletes, doctors, and other kinds of physical culture experts. These encounters and his own close attention to how his body responded to exercise and diet allowed Hackenschmidt to develop and promulgate a system of beliefs on the right way to eat, train, and live.<sup>23</sup> For Hack, it was not enough to simply have large muscles or lift weights solely for the sake of being big and strong. From the very onset, influenced by Dr. Krajewski's ideas on exercise and health, Hack was fascinated with functional strength—strength that allowed him to win at wrestling, to jump and run with ease, and to feel healthy and vigorous. Especially



during the early 1900s, his ideas on physical culture were marked by the goal to form a holistic symbiosis of body and mind, with a strong emphasis on balance and overall development.<sup>24</sup> Invoking Juvenal's maxim of the sound mind in the sound body Hackenschmidt believed that, "just as the man of sedentary habits and weak body possesses a correspondingly sluggish mind and lack of energy, so he who assiduously pursues physical development gains not only that desired government of his organs, but in marked degree obtains a thorough mastery of his will and, consequently, an easy and contented mind."<sup>25</sup>

Hackenschmidt's focus on overall development of body and mind, along with his imposing physique and wrestling accolades, struck a chord with large parts of the population in the early 1900s with Great Britain and the United States proving to be especially receptive to his ideas.

#### **Physical Activity and Exercise in Great Britain and the U.S. in the Late 1800s**

By the end of the nineteenth century, organized sport and physical culture had undergone a rapid and truly international revolution. In England, physical activity had changed from aristocratic outdoor leisure activities such as hunting, fishing, and horse-racing, to team sports and other games that formed the early foundation of modern sports.<sup>26</sup> In the United States, football, baseball, rowing, boxing, cycling, and a variety of other activities had become the new "safety valve" of American society, providing distraction, respite, and an outlet for societal pressures and boredom after the fall of the new frontier.<sup>27</sup> In addition, various systems of exercise—or physical culture—had also come into vogue.<sup>28</sup> Across the European continent, sport and physical training were included in school curricula and most members of society had some appreciation of the benefits to be had from both recreative and rational exercise. And so, by the time Hackenschmidt truly began to promote his own ideas on health and exercise, physical culture was an "international phenomenon."<sup>29</sup>

While gaining in acceptance, sport and exercise had become charged with moral implications, and heralded for their virtuous, character-building influence. In Great Britain, followers of utilitarianism and Evangelism were beginning to view physical culture and competitive play as "tools to help further their goals of establishing a rational, orderly, productive, and sinless socie-

ty." Sport had in fact become an "activity of duty."<sup>30</sup> The public schools, especially, helped evolve "an ethos that had replaced the old feudal ideals or suffused them with new concepts of civic virtue."<sup>31</sup> What had once been considered a sinful waste of energy and time became a tool to promote health, to strengthen the military, to "maintain purity and moral rectitude in adults," and to offset what was seen as the looming effeminizing of the country's future, masculine, elite.<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly, during this period systematic training, physical fitness, and muscular development also became a major component of military life in Great Britain.<sup>33</sup>

Across the Atlantic, sport also became "a moral force," especially when it supported virtues like self-discipline, physical development, progress, and control.<sup>34</sup> During the 1880s, taking care of one's physique through sport and physical activity became a prerequisite of living a life worth living, and the body—the resting place of the soul and the mind—was increasingly appreciated as a temple that the righteous were "obliged to maintain [...] as a worthy sanctuary."<sup>35</sup> Support for the new ideal of "Muscular Christianity" was ubiquitous, and outspoken supporters like President Theodore Roosevelt "hoped to energize the churches and to counteract the supposedly enervating effects of urban living."<sup>36</sup> Drawing on distinct images of masculinity, self-assertion, and control over one's environment, the contemporary proponents of Muscular Christianity openly promoted fitness and physical development. Just as in Great Britain, sport was promoted as a means to teach manly qualities that would enable men to weather the looming threat of commercialism, feminization, and domestication, and to face a world where as historian Elliott Gorn put it, "soft living threatened to overwhelm masculine virtues in a sea of goods."<sup>37</sup>

After the end of the Civil War people from all classes, encouraged by gymnastic societies and traveling strongmen, increasingly sought to model their bodies according to the Greek ideals of old, or, at the very least, become a little healthier.<sup>38</sup> Reemerging ideals of masculinity and the purported link between character and muscularity drove young American men to pay closer attention to their bodies, following the "gospel of health through rugged exercise [that] spread literally by leaps and bounds."<sup>39</sup>

Along with sport and physical culture, wrestling had grown to popularity both in Europe and the USA, albeit with distinct differences in history, style, and



social acceptance.<sup>40</sup> In Great Britain, a multitude of different wrestling styles had developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mainly due to limited travel opportunities and restricted interaction of the peasant communities, where wrestling was most popular.<sup>41</sup> During the early nineteenth century, wrestling was a regular feature of local fairs, and in cities like London bouts were organized on pub bowling greens and cricket grounds.<sup>42</sup> Like many other sports, wrestling in the 1870s gained in popularity in large part due to the increasingly influential leisure class whose members embraced growth in living standards and greater leisure time by engaging in various physical activities, both as participants and spectators.<sup>43</sup> By the turn of the century, wrestling in Great Britain had become a mass spectacle, popularized by extensive media coverage and driven by commercial interests and professionalization.<sup>44</sup> Bouts were a regular staple of music hall entertainment and traveling grapplers challenged local men to face them in the ring.<sup>45</sup>

In the United States, wrestling had experienced profound changes. Originally brought to the colonies by German, Irish, Scottish, and English immigrants, wrestling had been practiced in a variety of ways, from the “rough-and-tumble fighting of the southern back-country,” to the more gentlemanly pastime of collar-and-elbow wrestling.<sup>46</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, wrestling was a mainstay of carnivals, sideshows, and traveling circuses, bringing entertainment to all parts of the nation.<sup>47</sup> The ensuing Civil War, while effectively ending wrestling as carnival entertainment for a time, greatly enhanced the dispersion of sports throughout the U.S. and “spread knowledge of new styles of play to individuals from every corner of the country [as] soldiers organized their own games for entertainment and to alleviate boredom.”<sup>48</sup> Officers encouraged physical fitness and sports like wrestling and boxing as both a break from warfare as well as conditioning for the soldiers whose “excitement of the war’s early days quickly soured when the bloody realities of combat were realized.”<sup>49</sup>

When the soldiers returned home after the war, they brought with them their experiences, training, and concept of wrestling as a serious physical activity. Post-bellum society experienced a tremendous growth in leisure activities that “touched all social classes,” and spectator sports such as rowing, baseball, and boxing became increasingly popular, while athletic clubs proliferated.<sup>50</sup>

The stage was set for wrestling to move into the blossoming urban cities like New York or Boston, where the sport became an essential part of the local saloon and tavern culture, steadily growing in acceptance, media coverage, and commercial appeal.<sup>51</sup> By the turn of the century, newspaper coverage was extensive and wrestlers such as Frank Gotch profited from the writers’ romanticizing of the fighters as embodiments of the new American masculinity.<sup>52</sup> Wrestlers like Hackenschmidt received much attention in newspapers and magazines and the Russian Lion quickly rose to stardom and international fame, enabling him to reach vast audiences.

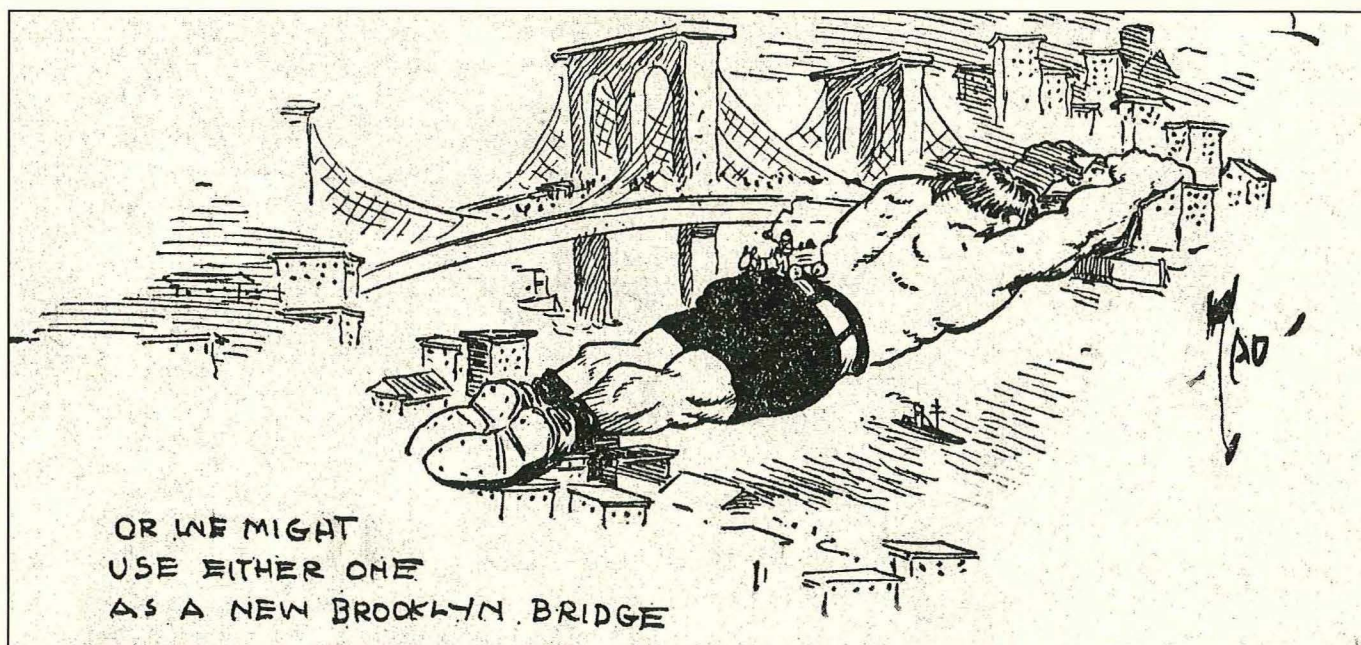
### **Hack, Public Admiration and the Media**

On the front cover his beautifully developed figure is shown up fully, whilst on the opposite page his massive chest is brought into full prominence. ‘The ‘Russian Lion’ he is called and it seems a most appropriate name. Swift in his movements, with tremendous staying power, a fatal hug, unlimited strength, a fearless heart—these seem to be the chief characteristics of the man, and truly no insult is offered to the king of the forest by comparison.<sup>53</sup>

Admired not only for his accomplishments in the sport of wrestling but also for his strength and physical development, Hackenschmidt became one of the world’s most revered athletes in the early twentieth century. Newspapers and magazines appreciated him for his good-natured temperament, publishing interviews and profiles of the great champion full of admiration, awe, and respect. One described Hack as “one of the most truly-balanced and beautifully-knit athletes the world has ever seen.”<sup>54</sup> Another writer saw him as “. . . the sort of typical figure that we imagine as having been brought from the barbarian north long ago to glad the eyes of spectators in the Roman Coliseum. A true gladiator, if there ever was one.”<sup>55</sup> Superlatives were, in fact, wide-ranging, and writers went to great lengths to describe Hack as favorably and formidably as possible.<sup>56</sup>

Although popular because of his sheer strength and physical dominance, Hackenschmidt was also revered for his humility, praised for his respectful demeanor, and appreciated for his intellect: “there is no trickery or chicanery about Hackenschmidt. He is a





Hackenschmidt's physique played a major role in the newspaper coverage of his career. Artists frequently exaggerated his strength and size while at the same time conveying a positive impression of the Russian Lion. This cartoon, drawn by "Tad" for the *New York Evening Journal* is a classic example. It appeared on 13 April 1905 as part of an article entitled, "Stars of Ring and Mat Take Town by Storm," on Hackenschmidt's appearances in New York with heavyweight boxing champion James J. Jeffries. Hack was in New York to prepare for his catch-as-catch-can world title match with wrestling champion Tom Jenkins on 4 May 1905. Hack easily won the bout.

fighter all the way but a gentleman at the same time. He is content to remain in the background until the time for action arrives, but when he strips for the fray he means very serious business."<sup>57</sup> While Hackenschmidt, like other famous strongmen in this era, also gave public exhibitions of his strength and muscular development in theaters, he drew the line at overly extravagant feats of physical prowess, usually sticking to posing and wrestling.<sup>58</sup> He didn't try to reproduce the standard fare of most professional strongmen with their colorful routines of chain-breaking, ripping decks of cards, balancing entire groups of people sitting or standing on wooden beams on their backs, or lifting—and in the case of Sandow even fighting—wild animals. Hackenschmidt's exhibitions were largely demonstrations of wrestling—in various styles—as he believed that muscles that didn't enable a man to do something were not really useful.<sup>59</sup> Unlike others in the Iron Game who frequently claimed more than they should in regard to the strength they possessed, Hackenschmidt believed that "the really strong man, the man who can do wonderful feats, never brags about it. He sits quietly in an assemblage of men and does not open his mouth about the things he can do. The man of less strength is always boasting."<sup>60</sup>

Inevitably, given their proximity in England and

the fact that the two showmen were competing at times for the same audience, the media frequently compared Hackenschmidt with strongman Eugen Sandow and often favored the Russian.<sup>61</sup> Hack, for example, was hailed as "the man who out-Sandowed Sandow at his own game."<sup>62</sup> Others described his physical development as "marvelous and greater than those of Sandow."<sup>63</sup> Other journalists picked up on the disconnect between showmanship and actual athletic ability, crediting Hack with muscular development that not only eclipsed that of Sandow but with possessing muscles that were actually "useful."<sup>64</sup> In an unpublished profile that he wrote about his meetings with Sandow, Hackenschmidt himself acknowledged Sandow's knack for posing and showmanship but said he found his movements to be "rather effeminate."<sup>65</sup> He also criticized the Prussian for advertising what he thought to be dangerous and harmful exercises, and further claimed that "where acrobatics, weightlifting, or wrestling is discussed seriously, Sandow is not prominently considered."<sup>66</sup>

While the public had grown accustomed to muscular showmen, a wrestler with the physical development of a bodybuilder and the strength of a weight-lifter, who so easily dispatched competitors well versed in the various grips, grapples, and throwing techniques akin to



the sport, was an entirely foreign concept to spectators and exercise enthusiasts alike. As Hackenschmidt's physical power was credited with much of that success, especially during the early stages of his wrestling career, many ring observers argued that he outmuscled rather than outwrestled his opponents. As one writer put it: "in one word, Hackenschmidt's strength and speed are so great that he can defy all the skill and strategy of the most eminent man in the wrestling game."<sup>67</sup> Others, with considerable justification, claimed that, "had it not been for weight-lifting, Hackenschmidt would never have attained to the position in the wrestling world he now enjoys."<sup>68</sup> Hack himself admitted later that he never truly learned how to wrestle before he started competing in bouts. Instead, he "left it entirely to [his] instinct" in determining what to do and how to react to his opponent's actions.<sup>69</sup>

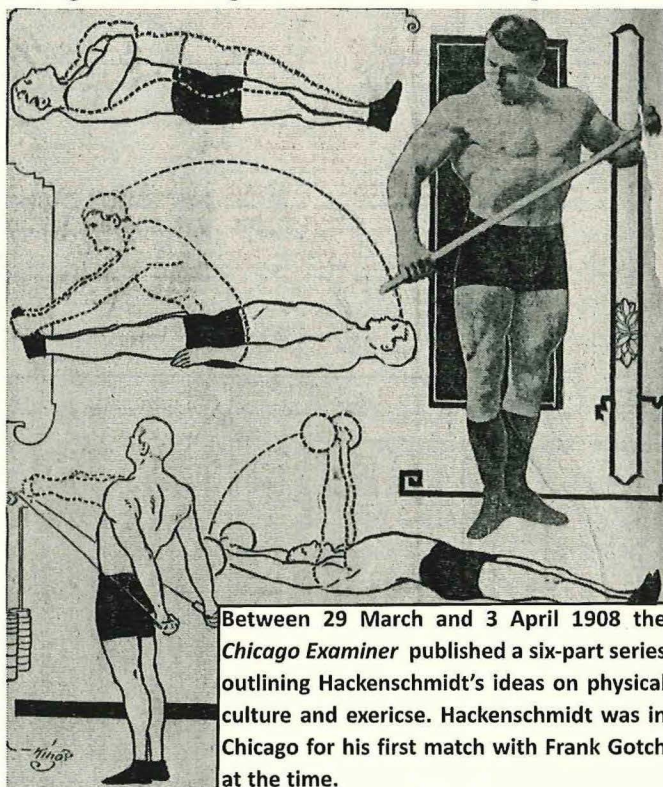
That Hack's remarkable physique and explosive strength played a major role in his wrestling career cannot be disputed. The Russian Lion also attributed much of his wrestling success to his rigorous strength-training regimen, never failing to stress to interviewers the importance of lifting weights. During a public training session for his match against Tom Jenkins, Hack reputedly asked for a pair of 150-pound dumbbells. When asked by the incredulous bystanders whether he always trained that heavy, he replied: "Always! How can a man get strong unless he does a strong man's work?"<sup>70</sup> Hack lived by the idea that a well-balanced exercise regimen would be most beneficial to any type of athlete and he himself engaged in a variety of physical activities besides wrestling and weight-lifting. He was an avid swimmer, acrobat, and gymnast, and was also a great high-jumper, a feat that astonished many because of his size.<sup>71</sup> His diverse regimen also helped him retain his agility and strength far beyond his wrestling years.<sup>72</sup>

### Hack on Physical Exercise

There is a universal urban immigration, a vast increase in the numbers of those who are engaged in indoor and sedentary occupation, and only here and there is the attempt made to combat the consequent unhealthy conditions of life with the only satisfactory weapon, Rational Physical Exercise. Unfortunately, the majority of people seem to associate the words Physical Culture

with huge muscular development. Men who do not entertain any ambition of figuring as professional athletes consequently omit to pay any attention to the care of their bodies.<sup>73</sup>

As Hackenschmidt promulgated the health benefits of weight training and consistent exercise, the print media proved to be a very useful and willing channel through which to spread his ideas on the importance of



Between 29 March and 3 April 1908 the *Chicago Examiner* published a six-part series outlining Hackenschmidt's ideas on physical culture and exercise. Hackenschmidt was in Chicago for his first match with Frank Gotch at the time.

the careful development of one's muscles and strength. Numerous magazines and newspapers eagerly conveyed the Russian Lion's thoughts on correct exercise routines and some even featured him in multi-issue spreads that outlined in great detail what it took to attain a great physique, to become strong, and ultimately to stay healthy.<sup>74</sup> In his approach to exercise and weight training, Hack relied on a simple, holistic system that favored the use of free weights, open-air activities, steady progression, and careful deliberation. Great physiques, superior conditioning and extraordinary strength, according to Hack were, after all, "not built up in a day, but [have] only been obtained by careful and systematic training."<sup>75</sup>

To the young and aspiring athlete, as well as to



the ordinary man who simply wished to attain better health, Hack offered the following principle: "assuming you are [free of heart or lung problems], you must first train for uniform development of all of your muscles. Go in to make one part of the body as strong as the next, and do this by taking all sorts of exercises in turn."<sup>76</sup> Hackenschmidt advocated that the young athlete and regular man try himself on all kinds of exercises throughout the day, without unduly focusing on one particular kind. He believed that "continual changes relieve the monotony which of course must be very great to an athlete who has to train year in and year out."<sup>77</sup> A balanced approach to physical exercise was the key to success and, just like a well-maintained machine, all parts of the body needed to be serviced properly in order to be able to perform to their maximum potential. Consequently, Hack favored compound exercises that required the greatest neuromuscular response, believing they were the best way to promote strength, general well-being, and overall health.<sup>78</sup> Hack argued that "all the parts of a machine must be kept in good order if high-class mechanical service is aimed at. So also with the human body. But the body, like the machine, will become impaired if it is abused. Balance is power. [...] Like the axle or bearings that give balance to a machine, the human machine has its bearings. These are in the body."<sup>79</sup>

Ultimately, aspiring athletes should "indulge in every good sport you can to bring out your strength" and aim for the conscious development of all body parts rather than favoring some areas over others.<sup>80</sup> While he often spoke of the benefits of weight training for young athletes, Hackenschmidt believed that physical exercise would not only benefit athletes but also "give the average business man, who may feel that he is physically weak, a reasonable assurance that he will be able to meet the demands made upon him daily by his long hours of work."<sup>81</sup>

Balanced training was but one pillar of Hack's system. He also contended that no form of physical activity was ever to be done in haste and without conscious deliberation. He believed that those who truly desired to gain in strength, improve their physiques and enhance their overall fitness would naturally gravitate towards those activities that would help them in their quest. Furthermore, he greatly emphasized the connection between the mind and the body, a concept that would become central to his later philosophical exploits. During his active days he offered the following advice:

"if you think of your muscles whenever you move them you do much more work and develop them much more. [...] If you are only half determined, there is no strength; but you must be very determined."<sup>82</sup>

Once settled on a routine, continuously increasing the weights, today known as progressive overload, was of utmost importance:

The best physical exercise is lifting weights, and in that one should follow the following rule: lift from the floor to a height at arms' length a weight you can lift easily. Do this for one week. Then add a pound – only a pound – to the weight. Lift this weight until it is as easy for you as the other. [...] Increase the weight you lift very gradually or else you will injure instead of benefit yourself.<sup>83</sup>

As evidenced in the above quote, Hack also preached slow progression, patience, and caution when engaging in weight training. Just as "Hercules himself never acquired his strength in a hurry," Hackenschmidt stressed that the true virtue of physical exercise lay in working the body without putting too much stress on the muscles and the nervous system.<sup>84</sup> In his eyes, it was more important to make good use of the time one spent exercising, doing "just enough to satisfy the muscle," rather than to work until exhaustion.<sup>85</sup>

On a similar note, Hackenschmidt argued that "it is quite a mistaken idea to suppose that it is necessary to devote hours of precious time to the task of keeping fit and well by taking beneficial exercises for, as a matter of fact, I am strongly of the opinion that any man or woman who will devote say, half an hour a day to really useful exercises, will certainly achieve the desired result."<sup>86</sup> In trying to dispel the myth that it took long, arduous hours at the gym to achieve even a baseline standard of fitness and health, Hack sought to encourage the general public to at least engage in some form of physical activity every day so they would improve their health. Doing more than just the right amount of weight lifting or other athletic activities, Hack further argued, would not only hamper the progress one intended to make regarding muscular development, symmetrical proportions of the body, or strength, but it would ultimately lead to the deterioration of one's health. He went as far as warning



his followers that “very often the life of a man is shortened ten or twenty years because of overexertion in the simplest athletic exercises.”<sup>87</sup>

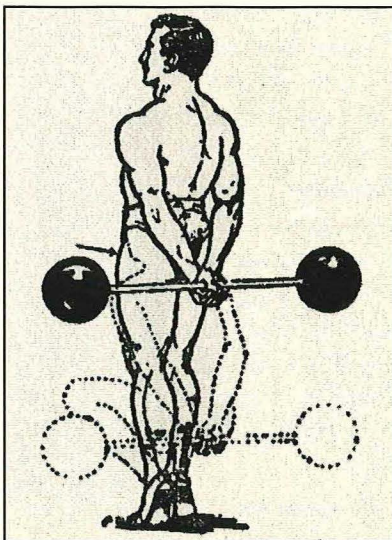
If done correctly, however, physical exercise and weight training would not only improve one’s physique but help “immensely increase the efficiency of the heart, stomach, lungs, intestines, liver and other organs upon whose activity not only the sustenance of the muscles but of the life processes themselves are dependent.”<sup>88</sup> Hackenschmidt argued that time spent on the necessary everyday physical exercises was time that could not be better spent. Being active was the key to a long and healthy life and, to Hack, anybody who chose not to engage in some form of regular exercise would not be able to prevent his/her muscular and nervous system from experiencing “the form of self-poisoning known as atrophy.”<sup>89</sup> Here again, we see the duality of muscular fitness and great overall health so avidly advocated by Hackenschmidt throughout his teachings, as well as his opposition to the widespread belief that rigorous exercising and weightlifting could in fact weaken the heart. He addressed those who doubted the benefits of lifting weights by proclaiming “progressive weight-lifting or dumb-bell exercise never weakened any man’s heart. If a man has a weak heart, he has to be careful, but I believe judicious dumb-bell exercise would rather strengthen a weak heart.”<sup>90</sup>

In order to maintain agility, strengthen the heart, and enhance the respiratory system’s capabilities, Hackenschmidt advised people to supplement weight training with bag punching and other activities. Running and jumping, he contended, would greatly benefit the overall development of the legs in a way that no other form of exercise could achieve.<sup>91</sup> Running, especially, was supposed to greatly support the development of all body parts while increasing stamina.<sup>92</sup> All exercises should further be boosted by frequently taking cold baths, “the colder it is the better.”<sup>93</sup>

The Estonian had very concrete ideas about how certain exercises could benefit the body and overall health. Addressing common ailments such as headaches,

dizziness, or dullness, he proposed, for example, that developing the abdominal muscles would provide relief since such exercises were known to “aid the circulation of the blood, revitalize and strengthen the digestive organs and tone up the whole system.”<sup>94</sup> Crunches, sit-ups, and leg raises were to be complemented by dumbbell exercises to strengthen the midriff as well as the back muscles to “be the better able to stand the wear and tear resulting from the hurry, worry and hustle of the modern business life.”<sup>95</sup>

Hackenschmidt further argued that “it is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance of the role played by the human hands and arms in transacting the business of the world.” One of Hack’s favorite exercises for arm development was the traditional push-up (he called it the “dip”), “an admirable exercise” to strengthen the upper body as well as to aid in the development of the lungs.<sup>96</sup>



In modern gyms, the exercise known as the Hack Squat is generally done on an exercise machine that works somewhat like an upside down leg press machine. However, Hackenschmidt did his with barbells held behind his back, as shown here in his book, *The Way to Live*.

Finally, Hack vehemently argued that physical exercise, preferably wrestling combined with the lifting of barbells or dumbbells, would not only strengthen the individual but would ultimately work towards the betterment of entire nations. In an interview with a British newspaper he reported: “I have great hopes for the future of the English race in consequence of the great interest they take in every branch of sport and in the general culture of the body.”<sup>97</sup>

Despite consistently preaching the benefits of weight training on overall health, Hackenschmidt held opinions which seem dated today. For example, he did not think that strenuous exercise was for everybody. Women, according to the Russian Lion, “should never strive for strength at the expense of womanliness or grace. They must be womanly above all things. ...They are not physically able to stand the strain and it destroys some of the womanliness they have.”<sup>98</sup>

### Hackenschmidt on Nutrition

Hackenschmidt was a firm believer in the importance of sound nutrition but he did not put too much faith in overly specific eating regimens or diet fads. He argued that



as long as people, and especially athletes, selected what he called “good foods” there was no need to adhere to any special nutritional habits:

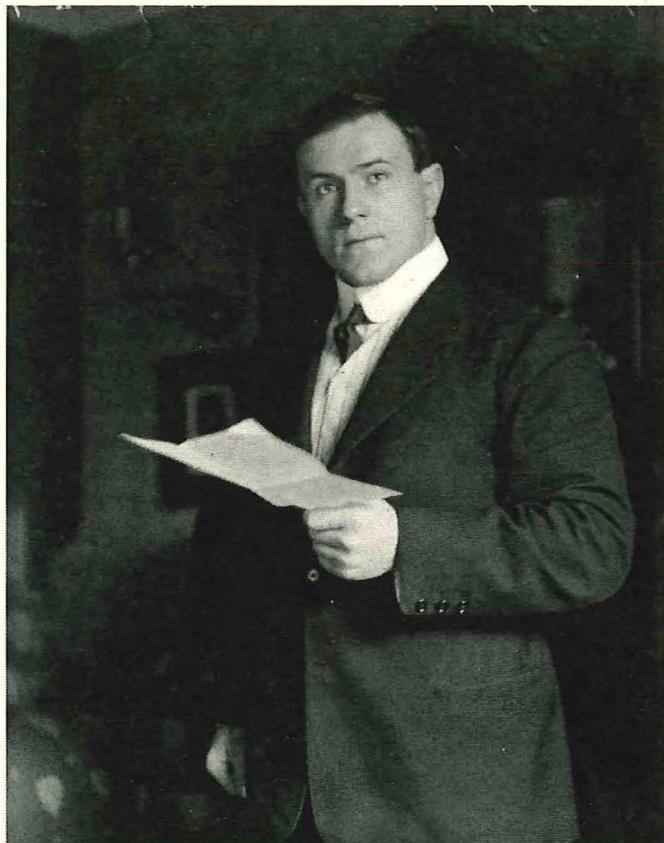
Athletes, and particularly those in constant training, require a considerable amount of food to maintain their strength, and that is why it should always be wholesome and agreeable to their constitutions. Of course I need hardly say that to eat too much food is worse than eating too little, so that an athlete’s meals, and anybody’s for the matter of that, should be generous and plentiful, but never excessive.<sup>99</sup>

In his endearing frankness, the Russian Lion thought it “foolish to lay out a strict diet.” However, overeating would make one “heavy and stupid and slow.”<sup>100</sup> His early ideas of eating the right foods extended far beyond what one might expect from a man of his physical development. He openly endorsed the consumption of varied sweet foods, believing that “good sweets are actually muscle builders, which [...] will really develop strength as well as beef or oatmeal.”<sup>101</sup> The Russian Lion in fact bragged about being able to eat copious amounts of sweets himself and encouraged others to do the same: “I can eat a pound of chocolate candy in half an hour and enjoy it. [...] Pie, cake and puddings will do you no harm.”<sup>102</sup> He still cautioned aspiring athletes, weightlifters and health enthusiasts to “always get the best you can. Cheap sweets are bad for the digestion.”<sup>103</sup>

To fully appreciate Hackenschmidt’s perspective on nutrition, consider the eating habits of Bernarr Macfadden, the self-proclaimed “father of physical culture” and health guru who, in his prime, commanded the attention of many thousands of devoted followers. Macfadden advocated fasting, condemned white bread, favored vegetarianism, and frequently introduced “faddish” diets and considered nutritional asceticism a virtue in the attainment of a better body.<sup>104</sup> Needless to say, such dietary limitations had no place in Hack’s philosophy on how to gain strength and become healthy. On the contrary, he believed that “it is well to eat what tempts the appetite, for a meal which is distasteful rarely has a beneficial effect.”<sup>105</sup>

Although Hackenschmidt himself preferred an unrestricted diet that allowed for moderate indulgence,

he did not necessarily condemn the elimination of meats from the menu of regular people. He even acknowledged that eating a plant-based diet might have benefits for the ordinary person. Ultimately, however, the Russian Lion argued that he had “never come across any very powerful athlete who adopted these [vegetarianism] rules; good athletes enough, but never heavy-weight champions.”<sup>106</sup>



Following his retirement from wrestling, Hackenschmidt began making plans to open a training facility in England. However, the more he thought about physical training the less comfortable he was with the idea of making the kind of claims other physical culture entrepreneurs made in this era. Instead, he turned to philosophy and devoted the rest of his life to refining his ideas about exercise, the body, and the nature of man.

Hack further advised those who sought to get strong and healthy to abstain from alcohol, proclaiming it was “the germ of death.”<sup>107</sup> Hack further cautioned aspiring athletes that “exercise will go for naught if the body is abused.”<sup>108</sup> One should note, though, that Hackenschmidt during his active days as a wrestler did not see any “crime in an occasional indulgence in a glass of wine or a cigar,” as long as one made sure to retain control over one’s mind and body.<sup>109</sup>



### India Rubber Exercisers, Grip Dumbbells, and Chest Expanders

Despite the increasing commercialization of sports and physical activity during the early twentieth century, Hackenschmidt forcefully rejected anything that made exercising too complicated. In a newspaper article published in 1906 the Russian Lion claimed that “if the present system of physical culture by the use of such things as India rubber exercises and grip dumbbells is persevered with it will end in the decadence of the athleticism it is supposed to cultivate.”<sup>110</sup> In the same article, Hackenschmidt relays how he tried an India rubber exerciser but abandoned it when he saw his muscles become “cramped and knotty.” Hack immediately returned to his patented regimen of free weights and open-air exercises and henceforth considered anything else “rubbish” as far as his idea of real physical culture was concerned.<sup>111</sup> In his opinion, most commercial exercise devices were “useless” for anybody to sought to acquire any serious level of functionality or conditioning.<sup>112</sup> While the Russian Lion admitted that machines and appliances may “make a fine-looking, muscular man,” he contended that the hard muscles acquired through chest expanders and other rubber exercisers would be of little actual use.<sup>113</sup>

Hackenschmidt was outspoken in his contempt for the commercialization of sport and weightlifting and the methods endorsed by the likes of Eugen Sandow. Showing little respect for showmen and bodybuilders, he argued that “these people who win prizes for best developments, with their hard, dry muscles” were “freaks.”<sup>114</sup> Stressing that physical improvement takes time and consistent effort, he advised the public to “take no notice of the advertisements of appliances for training. There is no short cut to condition.”<sup>115</sup> Despite his critical stance, clever businessmen tried to capitalize on Hack’s fame and reputation as a knowledgeable weight lifter and offered him money to promote various training appliances. However, he felt that endorsing rubber exercisers and the like would be nothing less than “defrauding the public.”<sup>116</sup> He ultimately offered “only one advice for any boy who is following that sort of training—Stop!”<sup>117</sup> Sandow, especially, became a target of Hack’s criticism and the showman eventually asked the Russian Lion to stop publicly attacking his training methods, for they “interfered with his business.”<sup>118</sup> Hack also did not see much good in breathing exercises for he believed that “the artificial expansion of the lungs, not under stress of exercise, is calculated to do more harm than good.”<sup>119</sup>

The wrestler’s adamant condemnation of potentially profitable exercise machines and training services revolving around rubber band exercisers and grip dumbbells likely constitute another reason why his ideas are only vaguely remembered today and why hardly anything has been written about his views on training. Entrepreneurs like Eugen Sandow and Bernarr Macfadden created vast empires of successful magazines and books, mail order training courses, several institutions for the betterment of the body, and commercial products such as dumbbells, exercise machines and even cocoa, leaving behind ample tangible evidence of their influence. Hack, on the other hand, never truly capitalized on his popularity in later years beyond publishing a small handful of books in the 1930s that were met with varying degrees of enthusiasm.<sup>120</sup>

### *The Way to Live and a Change of Heart*

In 1908, *Health & Strength*, Ltd. published Hackenschmidt’s *The Way to Live*. Though bearing his name and written from the wrestler’s perspective, it is not quite clear whether he in fact authored the work himself or if he simply provided his name as a form of creative patronage.<sup>121</sup> Regardless, *The Way to Live* constituted an inclusive manual on how to attain muscularity, improve stamina, and enhance overall quality of life. It outlined, in minute detail, how to train, what to eat, and how long to sleep, providing elaborate exercise sketches and timetables. With *The Way to Live* Hack offered the public an exercise manual that could be easily comprehended by everybody, “avoiding as far as possible all unnecessary technical details.”<sup>122</sup> In its comprehensiveness, *The Way to Live* distilled the wrestler’s training philosophies as promoted in countless interviews and magazine features into an accessible manual and further helped promote his beliefs.

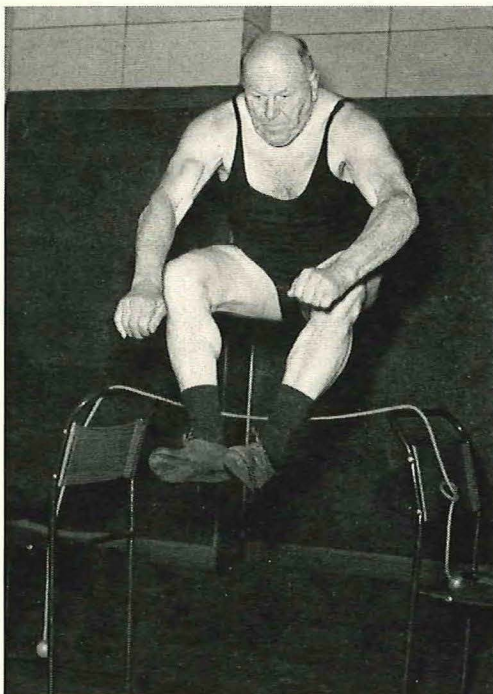
However, after retiring from wrestling, Hack’s ideas on physicality underwent a dramatic transformation. While *The Way to Live* constituted an informative set of guidelines on how to become strong and healthy, Hack’s later publications were anything but easily digestible. After the end of World War I he became increasingly interested in the broader relationships between the mind, the body, and the soul, dabbling in socio-political theory, economics, biology, physiology, and psychology. His ideas grew to be more and more abstract, which greatly limited his readership and decreased his accessibility, which had once been one of



his greatest assets.<sup>123</sup> Titles such as *Dethronement of the Brain* or *The Three Memories and Forgetfulness* strongly allude to the philosophical character of Hackenschmidt's treatises. In these later works he significantly reevaluated his stance on the importance of weight training and physical exercise and what had once been of pivotal importance to the attainment of health and a long life. In his personal papers, an unpublished note questions his earlier beliefs as detrimental and wasteful:

I had realized during my own exercising that I always trained against an opposition from my bodily system, that some power within me was constantly destroying all the benefits I obtained from that training. The effects were subject to physical forgetfulness, necessitating efforts to combat the loss of condition. Of what value, then, was the training that I proposed to offer to the public?<sup>124</sup>

In 1919 Hack abandoned his long-held plans to open an institute of physical development, although he "had repeatedly been urged to establish [such an institution]."<sup>125</sup> While he thought that people considered him to be "one of the highest authorities upon matters appertaining to physical development," he did not believe that providing regular training and exercise instruction would give the public anything of true value.<sup>126</sup> He was hesitant to subject "less fortunate human beings" to the same training he went through or even offer training suggestions at all.<sup>127</sup> After all, he considered himself to be a uniquely gifted individual, whose bodily attributes, "as natural and individual as the capacities of Raphael, Michelangelo, Beethoven, Chopin or Caruso," had enabled him to achieve feats decidedly out of reach for the ordinary man.<sup>128</sup> Many physical culture schools and



Hackenschmidt remained vigorous in his later years and followed his own principles to the end of his life in 1968 at age eighty-nine. He continued to practice jumping in the belief that it was one of the best of all leg exercises and is shown here at age seventy-five clearing a rope over the back of two chairs. Remarkable!

training institutions in Hack's mind promoted an artificial path to imagined fulfillment while in truth only reaffirming deception and false truths about one's appearance. He came to believe that no one would ever be able to do what he had done and that convincing people to even try would mean putting them in harm's way by "interfering with the natural unfoldment processes that are initiated from within the bodily systems."<sup>129</sup>

The concept of guided exercise, drill, and pre-determined movements, especially, did not have a place in Hackenschmidt's philosophies any more. He argued that "every movement of every human being should be unique to him," and that each person derived its own harmonious physical balance from idiosyncratic factors exclusive to that individual. Following another person's bodily patterns and commands would then surely

result in the suppression of one's uniqueness and ability to follow the inherent qualities Hack believed to exist in everybody.<sup>130</sup> An instructor in a class, for example, Hack argued, could only address the class as a whole, without ever being able to truly consider what each individual's body required or yearned for.<sup>131</sup> Exercise, after all, should be undertaken as a response to the body's needs and not in order to follow some form of outside instruction.<sup>132</sup> Ultimately, Hackenschmidt condemned all movements carried out under command as "wholly bad" and as "insults to whatever individuality and personality we retain."<sup>133</sup>

Hack also expanded on his idea of the balanced symbiosis of body and mind.<sup>134</sup> He emphasized the virtue of activities such as running, walking, or swimming, arguing that movements that freely follow the human being's natural impetus for activity always result in a greater, overall healthier, and more balanced development of the body than the utilization of "external factors such tools, weapons, machinery, gymnastic apparatus and so forth."<sup>135</sup> Conversely, the Russian Lion postu-



lated, those seeking to build “disproportionate muscle-bunches” were not attaining any real improvement but rather burdening their bodies with additional liabilities that exceed those imperfections they desired to alleviate through training in the first place.<sup>136</sup>

Hackenschmidt also reconsidered his earlier views on nutrition and he began to consider a person’s eating habits as “the most important issue that can affect human beings.”<sup>137</sup> He advocated the consumption of fruits, vegetables, grains, and nuts, while vehemently arguing against the “unsuitability of flesh diets.”<sup>138</sup> According to his theory, the right nutrition would help cleanse the body, reduce waste matter in the organism, and help restore and maintain cosmic balance of the individual.

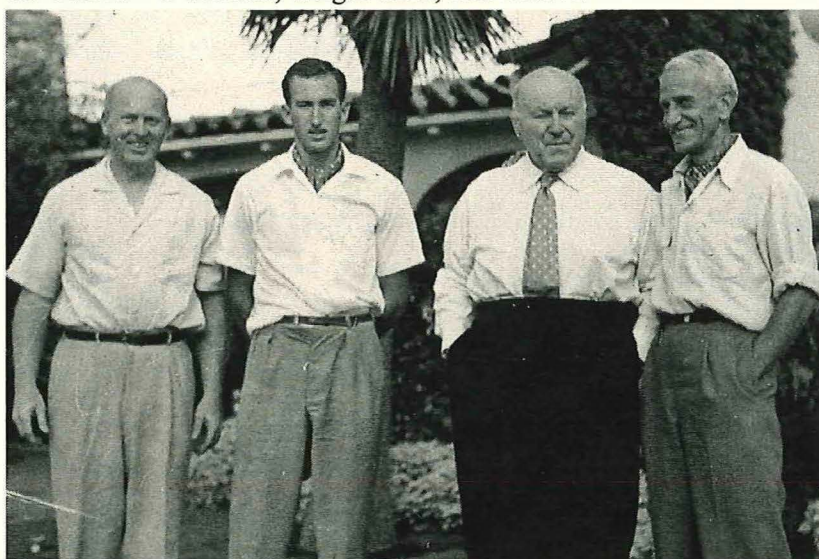
The examples given here can only serve to illustrate a part of Hackenschmidt’s later philosophical exploits. However, they allude to the transformation the wrestler underwent after the end of his competitive days. Though very outspoken as an athlete, Hackenschmidt became even more adamant as a social philosopher. Convinced of the truth of his own ideas, he doggedly pursued every opportunity to reach out to the public. He gave lectures at Trinity College in Cambridge and the German Sport University in Cologne, visited the Uxbridge Royal Air Force Depot, traveled to the United States, and penned several letters to politicians, offering his thoughts and advice on man’s health, vigor, social relations, and state of mind.<sup>139</sup>

### Forgotten Legacy

Despite significant media exposure, admiration from men and women alike, and ideas that strongly appealed to a public influenced by a newly emerging sport and physical culture ideology, Hackenschmidt unlike other strength, exercise, and health proponents of his time was not able to translate his beliefs into a lasting exercise legacy. Most of the Estonian wrestler’s contributions to strength training have been forgotten and what remains is the name of an exercise few bodybuilders or weightlifters even do: the Hack Squat.<sup>140</sup> It would be a mistake to attribute this process entirely to Hack’s own hesitance and changes in his ideology without considering the greater socio-politi-

cal events of the first half of the twentieth century, but it should still be noted that Hackenschmidt’s approach to strength training and health throughout remained markedly different from that of his contemporaries such as Sandow and Macfadden. In addition, his lack of a magazine of his own and his decision against opening an institute for physical culture quite possibly precluded him from building the audience he undoubtedly deserved.

While an argument can certainly be made that Hack was very gifted and possessed a unique gift of power and muscular development, the question remains as to why he underwent such a profound change of heart regarding exercise, training, and health. Hackenschmidt in his private notes provides little or no explanation as to why he suddenly abandoned many of the ideas he had tried to advance during his wrestling career, but it seems reasonable to propose that his experience in Europe during the two World Wars at least served as a catalyst to his philosophical development. Hackenschmidt’s dislike for anything that resembled drill, coercion, and external determination may very well stem from being caught in the turmoil of the two great wars, subsequently giving impetus to the creation of a theoretical framework that merged his philosophical interest with his experience as a wrestler, weight-lifter, and athlete.



One of Hackenschmidt’s most devoted disciples was Australian track coach Percy Cerutti, who trained gold medalist Herb Elliott for the 1960 Olympics. Cerutti was converted to weight training because of Hackenschmidt’s books and the Australian then used Hack’s ideas about strength training on Elliott and other runners in the 1950s and 1960s. On a trip to California during the height of Elliott’s career, Ray Van Cleef (left), Herb Elliot, George Hackenschmidt, and Percy Cerutti met and posed for the camera.



Regardless of his reasons, considering the respect he enjoyed in his prime Hack would surely have had tremendous commercial success had he not chosen another road. Moreover, many of his teachings still ring true today and future work will perhaps further untangle a life so fascinating and yet so little known to the community of strength athletes and physical exercise enthusiasts today.

## NOTES:

1. George Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live: Health & Physical Fitness* (London, England: Health & Strength Limited, 1908), 9.

2. For information on strongmen performers see Joshua M. Buck, "The Development of the Performances of Strongmen in American Vaudeville in between 1881 and 1932" (master's thesis, University of Maryland, 1999).

3. For more information on Sullivan, Sandow, Muldoon, and Macfadden see: Michael T. Isenberg, *John L. Sullivan and his America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); David L. Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of Bodybuilding* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Edward Van Every, *Muldoon: The Solid Man of Sport* (New York City: Frederick A. Stokes, 1929); Robert Ernst, *The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (London, England: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

4. The only published scholarly treatment of Hackenschmidt's ideas on exercise is in Terry Todd & Spencer Maxcy, "Muscles, Memory: and George Hackenschmidt," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 3 (1992): 10-15.

5. The Hackenschmidt Collection is housed at the H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports at The University of Texas at Austin and will be subsequently referenced simply as "Hackenschmidt Collection."

6. George Hackenschmidt, *The Russian Lion* (unpublished), 2, Hackenschmidt Collection.

7. *Ibid.*, 1.

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

10. *Ibid.*, 12-13.

11. George Hackenschmidt, "On George Lurich," *Iron Game History* 1, no. 6 (1991): 4.

12. Hackenschmidt, *The Russian Lion*, 16.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 17.

15. *Ibid.*, 17-20. In 1897, the nineteen-year old Hackenschmidt made the following lifts:

Jerk	216 pounds	12 times with both hands
Jerk	187 pounds	7 times with right hand
Bent Pressed	218 pounds	once with right arm
Snatched	152 pounds	once with right arm

At this time, the 5'8" Hackenschmidt weighed 176 pounds. His strongman feats included placing a 250-pound barbell on his back and then inviting three men to sit astride his neck and hang on to the globes on either side of the bar. With the combined weight of over 700 pounds he would walk around the stage, wowing those in attendance.

16. Polish born Krajewski (or Krayevsky) was a highly sought after physical trainer at that time and a true strength training pioneer. He founded the St. Petersburg Amateur Weightlifting Society in 1895,

presided over the World Weightlifting Championships in Vienna in 1898, and published one of the fundamental works on strength training, *The Development of Physical Strength with Kettlebells and Without Kettlebells*, in 1901.

17. Hackenschmidt, *The Russian Lion*, 23.

18. Hackenschmidt explicitly addresses the role Dr. Krajewski played in the development of his own training philosophy in Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 98-101. For additional information on the Russian physician's ideas on weight-lifting and exercise also see: Mel C. Siff, *Supertraining* (Denver: Supertraining Institute, 2003), 4-5.

19. Hackenschmidt, *The Russian Lion*, 25.

20. Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 109.

21. *Ibid.*, 114.

22. *Ibid.*, 128.

23. Hackenschmidt, *The Russian Lion*. This work also offers an incredibly detailed account of every fight until 1908.

24. Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 11.

25. *Ibid.*, 17. The Roman satirist Juvenal is credited with first using the phrase "*mens sana in corpore sano*," but it was essayist John Locke who reintroduced it as a rationale for physical training. Locke wrote, "A sound mind in a sound body is a short, but full description of a happy state in this world," and it can be found in: Richard Aldrich, "John Locke (1632-1704)," *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education* 24, (1994): 61-76.

26. J. A. Mangan, "Introduction: Complicated Matters," in *A Sport-Loving Society: Victorian and Edwardian Middle-Class England at Play*, ed. J. A. Mangan (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

27. Frederic L. Paxson, "The Rise of Sport," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 4, no. 2 (1917): 145, accessed December 2, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1886984>.

28. For an overview of physical culture in the nineteenth century see Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1988); and Bruce Hailey, *Healthy Body in Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: 1978).

29. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Managing the Body: Beauty, Health, and Fitness in Britain, 1880-1939* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 27.

30. Nancy Fix Anderson, *The Sporting Life: Victorian Sports and Games* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 67.

31. Derek Birley, *Land of Sport and Glory: Sport and British Society 1887-1910* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1995), 31.

32. Anderson, *The Sporting Life*, 73.

33. James D. Campbell, *The Army Isn't All Work: Physical Culture and the Evolution of the British Army, 1860-1920* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 47-64.

34. Elliot J. Gorn & Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1993), 84.

35. *Ibid.*, 85.

36. Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.

37. Elliot J. Gorn, "Sports through the Nineteenth Century," in *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. S.W. Pope (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 35.

38. Green, *Fit for America*, 98-99, 186-192.

39. John Higham, "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s," in John Weiss, ed., *The Origins of Modern Consciousness* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 28.



40. For a detailed history of wrestling in Great Britain and the U.S. see Lori M. Hildebrandt, "Mat Game: The Rise of American Wrestling" (master's thesis, The University of Maine, 2009).
41. *Ibid.*, 41.
42. Tony Collins, John Martin, and Wray Vamplew, "Wrestling," in *Encyclopedia of Traditional British Rural Sports* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 283.
43. Mangan, "Introduction: Complicated Matters," 2.
44. Collins, Martin, and Vamplew, "Wrestling," 284.
45. *Ibid.*, 223.
46. Hildebrandt, "Mat Game," 72.
47. *Ibid.*, 78.
48. Elliot J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 161.
49. Scott M. Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 11.
50. Gorn, *The Manly Art*, 161.
51. Hildebrandt, "Mat Game," 124.
52. *Ibid.*, 201.
53. "Georges Hackenschmidt," *Vitality and Health Culture: A Magazine Devoted to Mental and Physical Vigor*, March 1904, 72. *Vitality and Health Culture* was one of many physical culture magazines that routinely chronicled Hackenschmidt's exploits on the wrestling mat and which credited the Russian champion's wrestling success to his superior physical development.
54. "The Man of the Moment: Georges Hackenschmidt. Champion Wrestler of the World," *The W. G. Athletic Weekly*, July 9, 1904.
55. "When Greek Joined Russian: Tug of War at the Oxford," Collection of Hackenschmidt press clippings, page 10, Hackenschmidt Collection.
56. Other examples of superlatives used to describe Hackenschmidt: "A piano without keys," in "Lion's Roaring for the Fray," *New York World Globe*, May 3, 1905; "built like a 'battleship,' with muscles 'encompass[ing] his body as if he had been dipped in some case hardening sea'," in "'Hack' Downed Jenkins: 'Russian Lion' Made Quick Work of the American Wrestler Last Night," *Baltimore, MD Herald*, May 5, 1905.
57. Richard Morton, quoted in "Visit of Hackenschmidt – the Hero of Olympia – Champion of the World: Special and Exclusive Interview," *Blackburn Standard & Express* (Blackburn, England), May 14, 1904.
58. "Orpheum, Always a Good Show," undated newspaper advertisement from Hackenschmidt Scrapbook, page 61, reports that Hackenschmidt will give an exhibition of "posing and the scientific illustration of the different methods of wrestling." In "Hackenschmidt at the Palace Theater," also undated, (p. 75) in the scrapbook, Hackenschmidt reportedly gave exhibitions in Lancashire style wrestling on one evening and Greco-Roman wrestling in another. In another undated article, titled "Tit-Bits: 'Russian Lion' who Challenges British Wrestlers," (p. 60) Hackenschmidt stated, "I am one of those whose ambition is to restore wrestling to the high plane as a sport which it once occupied. It should be a gentleman's sport. It should become a sport which a lady may watch with delight—not with a look of horror as if she were watching a bullfight."
59. The Hackenschmidt scrapbook, which can be seen at [www.starkcenger.org](http://www.starkcenger.org), includes numerous first-hand accounts and programs of Hackenschmidt's routines.
60. George Hackenschmidt, quoted in "'Muscle Without Brains – Nothing!' Says Strongest Man in the World," *Chicago Evening American*, April 3, 1905.
61. For a painstakingly researched and well-written biographical account of Eugen Sandow's life see Chapman, *Sandow the Magnificent*.
62. George Hackenschmidt, quoted in "'Muscle Without Brains'."
63. "Hackenschmidt, Noted Strong Man, in Chicago," *The Chicago Sunday Tribune*, April 2, 1905.
64. "Hackenschmidt a Poser as Well as Fine Athlete: Unlike Sandow, the Russian Lion Can Put His Great Muscles to Practical Use," *The Morning Telegraph*, April 11, 1905.
65. George Hackenschmidt, "Sandow, Eugen," Hackenschmidt Collection, box 2, folder 15, 3.
66. *Ibid.*, 5.
67. "Sporting Comment," *The Montreal Daily Herald*, May 9, 1905.
68. Thomas Inch, "A Quick Route to Strength," Hackenschmidt scrapbook.
69. Hackenschmidt, *The Russian Lion*, 30.
70. George Hackenschmidt, quoted in Robert Edgren, "Hackenschmidt's Great Strength Due To Work," (untitled newspaper clipping), Hackenschmidt scrapbook, April 1905.
71. "Hackenschmidt, Noted Strong Man, in Chicago."
72. Even in his eighties Hackenschmidt still exercised regularly, running frequently and occasionally incorporating weight-lifting exercises into his training: Ray van Cleef, "A Champion Among Champions," *Strength and Health* (December 1958): 16.
73. Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 10.
74. The *Chicago Examiner* published a six-part mini-series of articles on strength and exercise as a promotional feature for the first bout between Hackenschmidt and Gotch on April 3, 1908, at Dexter Park Pavilion in Chicago. Every day of the week leading up to the fight Hackenschmidt told "the secret of his wonderful strength and also the way to become like him" ("Hackenschmidt Gives First Lesson in Strength Culture: Moderation and Regularity First Principles of Exercise," *Chicago Sunday Examiner*, March 29, 1908). The articles cover general training principles, present Hack's thoughts on nutrition, breathing and sleep, illustrate specific exercises for arms, legs, abdominal muscles, and outline the importance of simplicity and moderation in training.
75. "Georges Hackenschmidt," *Vitality and Health Culture*, 73.
76. George Hackenschmidt, "'Russian Lion's' Advice: Hackenschmidt, Matched to Wrestle Jenkins, Gives Good Counsel to Young Wrestlers and Those Who Seek Strength," *Pittsburgh Press*, May 3, 1905.
77. "The Man of the Moment."
78. "Hackenschmidt Tells how to Develop Muscles of the Legs," *Chicago Examiner*, March 31, 1908.
79. "Develop Propulsive Power of the body, Advises Hackenschmidt," *Chicago Examiner*, March 30, 1908.
80. Hackenschmidt, "'Russian Lion's' Advice."
81. "Hackenschmidt Tells How to Develop Muscles of the Legs."
82. George Hackenschmidt, "You'll be Strong if you want to, says big 'Hack,'" *The Evening World*, 1908.
83. George Hackenschmidt, quoted in "'Muscle Without Brains'."
84. George Hackenschmidt, "Wrestling for Health's Sake," *Daily Mail*, April 27, 1906.
85. "Hackenschmidt Gives Points on the Game," *Salt Lake City Telegraph*, May 1, 1905.
86. George Hackenschmidt, "How to Keep Strong and Healthy all the Year Around," *The Red Letter*, October 6, 1906, 7.
87. "Hackenschmidt Gives First Lesson in Strength Culture."
88. "Too Little Attention is Paid to Hands and Arms, Says Hacken-



schmidt," *Chicago Examiner*, April 2, 1908.

89. "Simple Life is the Best, Declares Hackenschmidt," *Chicago Sunday Examiner*, April 3, 1908.

90. "Georg Hackenschmidt on and off the Stage: Interview with the 'Russian Lion,'" *Evening Express*, April 16, 1907.

91. "Hackenschmidt Tells how to Develop Muscles of the Legs."

92. "Hustling Wrestler: Hackenschmidt in Training for his Match," *Manchester Dispatch*, January 29, 1908.

93. George Hackenschmidt, "Hack Believes in Sweets for Athletes," *The Boston Herald*, March 17, 1908.

94. "Development of Stomach Muscles Saves Much Suffering, Says Hack," *Chicago Examiner*, April 1, 1908.

95. *Ibid.*

96. "Too Little Attention is Paid to Hands and Arms."

97. George Hackenschmidt, quoted in "Visit of Hackenschmidt."

98. George Hackenschmidt, quoted in "'Muscle Without Brains'."

99. George Hackenschmidt, quoted in "Visit of Hackenschmidt," see also "'Muscle Without Brains'."

100. George Hackenschmidt, "Russian Explores Theories Attributed to his 'System,'" *The Washington Times*, March 21, 1908.

101. "Hack Builds up Muscles with Chocolate Creams," 1908.

102. Hackenschmidt, "'Russian Lion's' Advice."

103. Hackenschmidt, "Hack Believes in Sweets for Athletes."

104. Robert Ernst, *The Life of Bernarr Macfadden* (London, England: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 27-30, 38, 111-117.

105. Hackenschmidt, "Wrestling for Health's Sake."

106. George Hackenschmidt, "Hackenschmidt and Aspiring Athletes: Health and Strength for Everybody," *The People's Journal*, April 13, 1907.

107. Hackenschmidt, "Wrestling for Health's Sake."

108. Hackenschmidt, "'Russian Lion's' Advice."

109. Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 32.

110. George Hackenschmidt, "How to be Strong: A Plea for Simplicity of Exercise," *Daily Dispatch*, November 29, 1906. (Invented, produced and marketed by Eugen Sandow, grip dumbbells, or spring-grip dumbbells, were dumbbells composed of two halves between which steel springs were placed. The number of steel springs could be adjusted to either increase or decrease the force it took to close the bell. India rubber exercisers were exercise devices similar to modern spring or cable expanders.)

111. Hackenschmidt, "Hackenschmidt and Aspiring Athletes."

112. "Wrestler to Retire: Hackenschmidt Weary of 'Show' Life," *Daily Chronicle*, February 8, 1907.

113. "The 'Russian Lion' in Aberdeen: Interview with George Hackenschmidt," *The Evening Gazette*, April 16, 1907.

114. "Wrestling and Health. Hackenschmidt Interviews," *The Manchester Courier*, November 30, 1906.

115. "Muscle and Brawn: Hackenschmidt and his Company," *The New Zealand Times*, February 7, 1910.

116. "The 'Russian Lion' in Aberdeen."

117. "Muscle and Brawn."

118. George Hackenschmidt, "Sandow, Eugen," 4.

119. "Hack on Health: A Simple Gospel," *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg, Transvaal), October 10, 1909. Breathing exercises were highly touted by some physical culture experts, most notably Bernarr Macfadden, who published an entire book on the subject: Bernarr Macfadden, *Building of Vital Power: Deep Breathing and a Complete System for Strengthening the Heart, Lungs, Stomach and All the Great Vital Organs* (New York, NY: Physical Culture Publishing, 1904).

120. A list of Hackenschmidt's publications: *The Way to Live*;

*The Complete Science of Wrestling* (London, England: Health & Strength, Ltd., 1909); *Entthronung des Hirns: Grundlagen für die Wiederherstellung der Einigkeit und des Friedens im Menschen und in der Menschheit* (Leipzig, Germany: 1932); *It is From Within: The Way To Health, Peace, Beauty, and Vigor* (Peverleys Ltd., 1934); *Man and Cosmic Antagonism to Mind and Spirit* (London, England: Hazell, Watson & Viney, Ltd., 1935); *Attitudes and Their Relation to Human Manifestations: Instinctive; Intellectual; Dictated* (London, England: Billings and Sons Ltd., 1937); *Consciousness and Character: True Definitions of Entity, Individuality, Personality, Nonentity* (1937); *Self-Improvement* (1937); *The Three Memories and Forgetfulness: Acquisitions and Impositions from Without; Life's Opposition from Within* (London, England: Billing and Sons Ltd., 1937).

121. Health & Strength, Ltd. in fact offered a wide selection of books offering advice on health, physical culture, and sports, including *The Complete Science of Wrestling by George Hackenschmidt* (1909). The books would always bear the name of a well-known "authority" in the field, offering practical advice on topics such as tennis, cricket sailing, diving, camping, and exercise.

122. Hackenschmidt, *The Way to Live*, 11.

123. It should also be noted that, unlike *The Way to Live* and *The Complete Science of Wrestling*, Health & Strength, Ltd. did not publish any of his later works.

124. George Hackenschmidt, biographic fragment notes, Hackenschmidt Collection, box 1, 3.

125. *Ibid.*

126. Hackenschmidt, *It is From Within*, 6.

127. *Ibid.*

128. *Ibid.*, 2.

129. *Ibid.*, 4.

130. Hackenschmidt, *Consciousness and Character*, 170-171.

131. Hackenschmidt, *Self-Improvement*, 13.

132. *Ibid.*, 22.

133. *Ibid.*, 36.

134. An in-depth analysis of all his theoretical paradigms shall be reserved for a different time. For the purpose of this paper, the authors focused on Hack's ideas as they pertained to physical exercise and training. Note, however, that one of the main tenets of Hackenschmidt's theoretical framework is the interconnectedness of cosmic energy, mind power, strength, health, and social relatedness.

135. George Hackenschmidt, "The Fallacy of Training: Artificiality of Athletes," Hackenschmidt Collection, box 2, folder 16, 9.

136. Hackenschmidt, *Self-Improvement*, 50.

137. Hackenschmidt, "Nourishment," Hackenschmidt Collection, box 2, folder 13, 1.

138. *Ibid.*, 3.

139. *Ibid.*, 72-74. "Hackenschmidt's Visit to Uxbridge Royal Air Force Depot," Hackenschmidt Collection, box 2, folder 14. "Lecture Given At Cambridge in 1934," Hackenschmidt Collection, box 2, folder 12. "Lecture Given at German Sport University in Cologne," Hackenschmidt Collection, box 2, folder 11.

140. The Hack Squat, popularized by Hackenschmidt, is a version of the traditional barbell squat. Instead of placing the bar across the shoulder, the lifter places the barbell behind the legs and then squats down, grabs the bar with an overhead grip, and lifts the bar by extending hips and knees to full extension. For a detailed exercise description see: <http://www.exrx.net/WeightExercises/Quadriceps/BBHackSquat.html>.



# The USA vs. the World: A Statistical Analysis of American, World, and Olympic Weightlifting Results, 1970-1992

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What are we to do? We have worked hard and long. I go to at least an average of forty weightlifting contests a year. Constantly looking for and hoping for a lifter who gives promise of future greatness. We are not giving up. But unfortunately we are in the position of a man who is running a race with a man who is well ahead of him and running faster than he is. We will try harder.<sup>1</sup>

— Bob Hoffman

One of the curious features in the history of modern Olympic sports has been the almost continuous decline of American weightlifting since the 1950s. Under the paternal guidance of Bob Hoffman, president of the York Barbell Company, teams representing the United States rose to international prominence during the 1930s, and America remained a perennial power in world and Olympic competitions for several decades thereafter. With the rise of nationalized sports programs in the Soviet Union after World War II and in Eastern Europe by the 1960s, however, fewer American lifters were

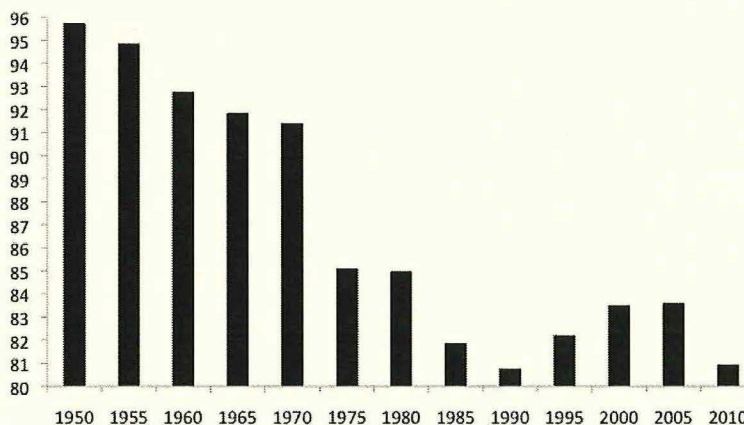
winning medals or setting records on the world stage. What followed in the 1970s and 1980s was a prolonged performance drought marked by a precipitous decline relative to foreign strength athletes. It was so debilitating that American weightlifting never recovered its elite status. How and why it happened, despite America's premier placement in other Olympic sports, has been the subject of much discussion but little serious study. A statistical analysis of the most critical period of America's relative decline will help fill that void by identifying the

chronology, numerical parameters, and severity of the growing differential between the USA and the world. As the first portion of a trilogy of articles examining this phenomenon, this article attempts simply to identify the problem, while later installments, incorporating documentary and oral evidence, will provide an interpretive framework.

Commentary and concerns about America's decline as an international weightlifting power have been ubiquitous for over a half century, appearing mainly in "muscle magazines" that often covered a variety of strength-related endeavors

from general fitness and physique contests to Highland events and Olympic games.<sup>2</sup> In the twenty-first century, pundits have also utilized the internet to post websites which, though sometimes shrill in tone and repetitive, provide valid insights and diagnoses of American weightlifting ills.<sup>3</sup> Rarely, however, have observers approximated the method employed in the current study by drawing on data to confirm these assumptions.

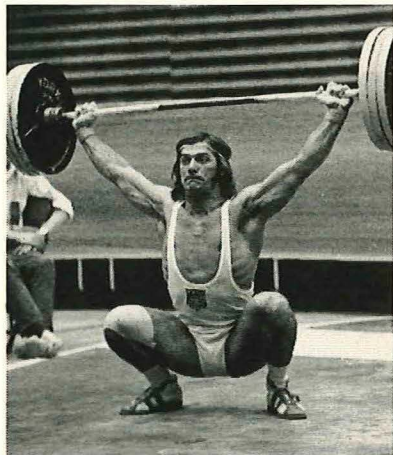
Bruce Klemens, in his 1979 statistical analysis of weightlifting results, compares American perform-



Graph 1: USA National Championship Totals as a Percentage of  
World Championship Totals: 1950-2010



ances with those of the world for the top three places in four weight classes from 1952 to 1979. He concludes that although American totals in the early fifties "were closest to the international results, our progress *even at*



At the 1972 National Championships Rick Holbrook snatched 155 kilos (341.7 pounds), a lift that came closer to the world standard than nearly any other lift by an American man since then.

*that time* was less than the rest of the world." By the late 1960s, however, "US progress was the *highest ever* and we actually were catching up," but after 1969, "we started to lose ground again." More sobering is the 1993 snapshot rendered by statistician Herb Glossbrenner showing that the top ten averages for American lifters in nine weight classes

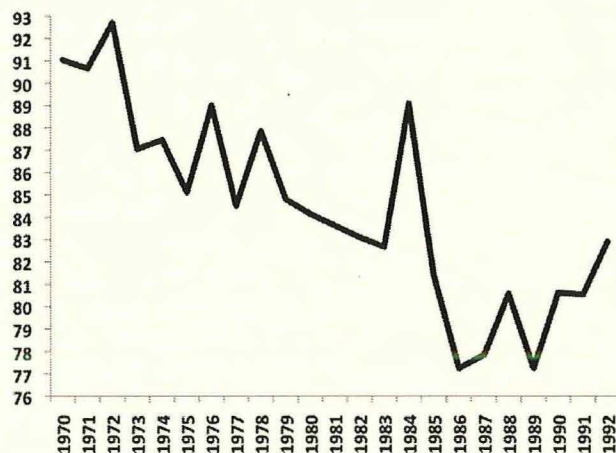
from 1974 to 1992 increased only 21.9 kilos or 2.43 kilos per class, while comparable figures for the rest of the world was 267.3 kilos or 29.7 kilos per class.<sup>4</sup> This study will refine and elaborate on those general observations and lay the groundwork for a working hypothesis.<sup>5</sup>

The most basic source for comparing American and world weightlifting is data derived from yearly reports in various iron game journals of American, world, and Olympic competitions from 1970 to 1992.<sup>6</sup> During this twenty-three year period 1,409 totals were registered in American senior national meets and 3,840 totals were registered in world and Olympic championships by lifters from 103 countries in nine weight classes—flyweight (52 kilos), bantamweight (56 kilos), featherweight (60 kilos), lightweight (67.5 kilos), middleweight (75 kilos), light-heavyweight (82.5 kilos), middle-heavyweight (90 kilos), heavyweight (110 kilos), and superheavyweight (110+ kilos). This categorization fits neatly into successive protocols established by the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF), including the introduction of flyweight and superheavyweight classes in 1969 and the reconfiguration of weight classes after the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. For the sake of simplicity and uniformity, this analysis is limited to the gold medalists in each weight class. To accommodate the elimination of the press as a competitive lift in 1972,

only snatch and clean and jerk lifts are included in the totals analyzed. No less important in the interests of uniformity, however, is the non-inclusion of the heavy-weight (100 kilos) division that was added to national and international meets in 1977. But the major rationale for choosing this period and categorization is that they correspond to the most significant widening performance gap between American and international lifters.

How critical these decades were to this differential becomes clear when data (discounting changes in kinds of lifts performed and weight classes) is drawn more broadly at five year intervals over a sixty year period. When the yearly totals of first place winners for all classes in the USA nationals are converted into percentages of totals achieved by world champions (see Graph 1) a pattern quickly becomes evident.

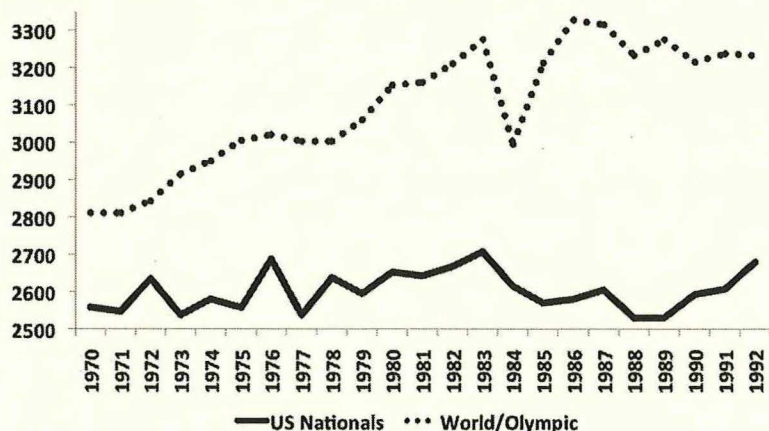
Not surprisingly, in 1950 when the United States was the premier weightlifting power, its champions at the 1950 National Championship in Philadelphia totaled 95.75% of what international winners (including Americans) totaled at the World Championships that year in Paris. This high point was followed by a slow decline over the next twenty years: 1955 (94.86%), 1960 (92.77%), 1965 (91.85%) to the 1970 Senior Nationals in Culver City, California, where American best totals were just 91.41% of the winning totals at the World Championships in Columbus, Ohio. Then there was a drop to 85.11% in 1975, followed by 1980 (84.99%), 1985 (81.87%), and then to the low point in American fortunes in 1990 of 80.77%. Since then percentages hovered in the lower eighties through 2010 (80.94%).<sup>7</sup> This overall picture agrees substantially with Klemens'



Graph 2: USA National Championship Totals as a Percentage of World Championship Totals: 1970 - 1992



analysis (so far as his graphics go), showing a dramatic drop in American performances after 1969, followed by a prolonged slump.<sup>8</sup>



Graph 3: American and World/Olympic Championships: 1970-1992  
Gold Medalists (Composite Total in Kilos)

A closer look at the period of greatest decline, 1970-1992, with uniform weight classes and just two competitive lifts, provides a yearly perspective and possibly suggests some factors that were operative in this change. Graph 2 reveals that the United States reached its post-1969 zenith at the 1972 National Championships in Detroit with a 92.70% of the World Championship total registered that year at the 20th Olympiad in Munich. It was highlighted by a magnificent 155 kilo (341.7 pound) snatch by mid-heavyweight Rick Holbrook and a 227.5 kilo clean and jerk by superheavyweight Ken Patera who became the first American to surpass the 500-pound mark. What followed was a 5.65% decline to 87.05% of international totals at the 1973 World Championships in Havana. After a brief recovery at the 1976 Montreal Olympics where mid-heavyweight Lee James won a silver medal, the downward slide continued through the 1980 Olympics, boycotted by the United States, to a spike in performance at the 1984 Olympics which was boycotted by the Soviet bloc.

Thereafter American weightlifting reached the nadir of its productivity, averaging just 79.80% of world totals for the next eight years. The most obvious feature of this decline is that American athletes, with the notable

exception of 1980, always did better relative to foreign competition in Olympic years.<sup>9</sup>

A more vivid perspective on the widening differential between America and the world can be gained by juxtaposing the former's lackluster performances with the steady progress of the latter. Graph 3 shows the contrasts between America's uneven record of peaks and valleys and the almost steady increase of winning world totals, with the notable exception of 1984 when most of the best lifters in the world did not show up in Los Angeles. The Communist bloc held its own alternative "Red Olympics" or Friendship Tournament in Varna, Bulgaria. The cumulative total of 3,322.5 kilos for winners at Varna exceeded the 2,995 kilos lifted by the Olympic gold medalists in Los Angeles by 317.5 kilos

with corresponding differentials of 35.3 kilos in each of the weight classes. At Varna there were 25 world records set, 15 by Soviet lifters and 10 by Bulgarians. At Los Angeles there were none.<sup>10</sup>

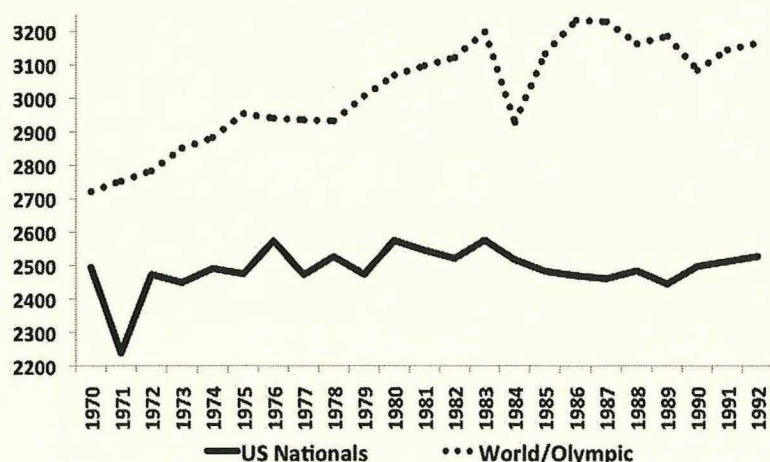
These increasing differentials are most noticeable from 1976 to 1984 and again from 1985 to 1991, not so much in the latter instance because the rest of the world was still advancing but because the United States was not getting any better. The following chart traces in kilos this differential, averaged in roughly four year cycles defined by the Olympics.

	USA	World/Olympic		Average
Years	Champs	Champs	Differential	Performance %
1970-72	2,580	2,821.5	241.5	91.44
1973-76	2,591	2,972.5	381.5	87.17
1977-80	2,606	3,054.25	448.25	85.32
1981-84	2,671	3,160	489	84.53
1985-88	2,592.5	3,271.75	679.25	79.24
1989-92	2,602.5	3,240	637.5	80.32

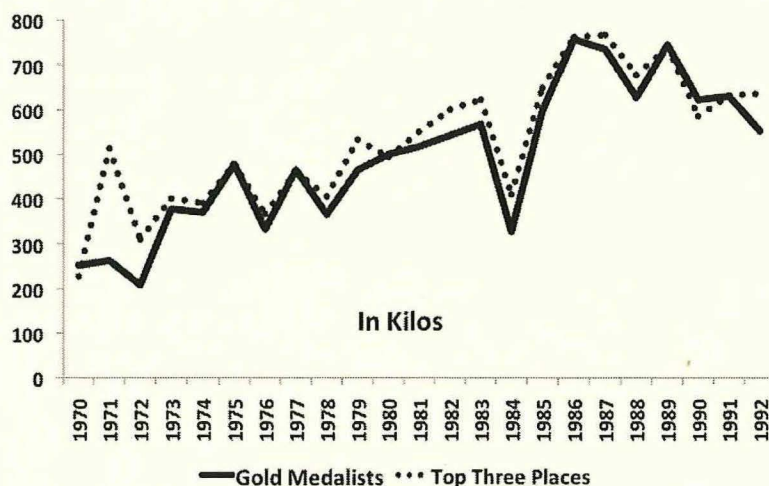
Table 1: American and World/Olympic Championships in Multi-Year Cycles:  
Differentials (in Kilos) and Average Performance Percentages

In summarial terms, as distinct from multiple year averages, American national champions lifted a total of 59,990.5 kilos, 84.19 % (or -11,267.5 kilos) of the 71,258 kilos lifted by international gold medalists during the 23 year period under study.<sup>11</sup> To address possible concerns that the employment of only winners might skew the results of this study, a follow-up analysis of the first three places in each class reveals (with the





Graph 4: American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992 Gold Medalists (Top 3 Places; Total Composites in Kilos)



Graph 5: American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992 Comparative Differentials

Years	USA Champs	World/Olympic Champs	Net Differential	Average Placements	# Lifters
1970-72	9,513.5	9,519.75	6.25	6.21	19
1973-76	6,574.75	6,537.5	-37.25	8.62	21
1977-80	5,605	5,517.5	-87.5	9.5	18
1981-84	7,492.5	7,427.5	-65	8.88	24
1985-88	5,025	5,040	15	12.3	20
1989-92	10,810	10,785	-25	12.41	37

Table 2: American Performance Differentials (In Kilos) and Average Placements: National and World/ Olympic Championships in Multi-Year Cycles

exception of the 1971 American Nationals when there were only two flyweights and one featherweight) much the same picture in Graphs 4 & 5. The vectors almost always move in the same direction as they did with the gold medalists. In fact it shows an even greater differential whereby the sum of the top three American averages for each year of 57,283.5 kilos, amounts to 82.43% (or -12,212 kilos) of the world/Olympic averages at 69,495.5 kilos, suggesting a lack of depth of the former.<sup>12</sup>

The underachievement of American athletes is evident not only in comparison to international winning totals but to their own performances (see Table 2) at world and Olympic championships which was a total of 193.5 net kilos less than they lifted in the national championships for corresponding years from 1970 to 1992.

The most serious erosion was a 240 net kilo loss from 1976 to 1982, followed by the Moscow World Championships in 1983 when no Americans registered a total. Not surprisingly in the course of two decades, the average placements of American lifters declined from sixth to twelfth in international competition. A corresponding breakdown of weight categories in kilos indicates that international athletes excelled in those classes neglected by the Americans. The former, again calculated as a percentage of world/Olympic totals, dominated the lighter classes whereas the latter performed better (though nowhere near parity) in



Class	# Lifters	USA	World/Olympic	Differential	Performance %
		Champs	Champs		
Fly	0	4,127.25	5,703	1,575.75	72.37
Bantam	1	4,808.75	6,245	1,436.25	77.00
Feather	8	5,487.5	6,777.5	1,290	80.97
Light	14	6,343	7,497.5	1,154.5	84.60
Middle	11	6,931.75	8,040	1,108.25	86.21
L-Heavy	21	7,428.75	8,535	1,106.25	87.04
M-Heavy	31	7,836	8,992.5	1,156.5	87.14
Heavy	24	8,371	9,430	1,058.75	88.77
S-Heavy	25	8,656.25	9,982.5	1,326.25	86.71

Table 3: American and World/Olympic Championships in Bodyweight Classes, 1970-1992: Differentials (in Kilos) and Average Performance Percentages

the heavier divisions. This pattern of United States participation in world/Olympic championships is closely correlated to performance percentages with only 34 lifters (or 25.19%) represented in the lighter five classes (under 75 kilos or 165 pounds) as opposed to 101 lifters (or 74.81%) in the heavier four classes. If the nascent (post-1976) 100 kilo class of 19 lifters is added to this mix it would cast even greater (22.08% to 77.92%) weight to the upper end.<sup>13</sup>

With an average bodyweight of 91.09 kilos (200.10 pounds), including no flyweights and 26 super-heavyweights, American teams seemed woefully top-heavy. Yet the progressively higher performance percentages of the heavier classes seem to justify this imbalance.

Such increases, however, can be deceptive, especially when American lifters in the lighter classes were scarcely represented in international competition. When a compilation of multi-year weight class averages in kilos of those who actually participated, as distinct from overall individual bodyweights, is employed a somewhat different picture emerges.<sup>14</sup> Coincident with Table 1, it was during the first two segments (1970-72 and 1973-76), at lower bodyweights, that Americans did better, and during the latter periods (1985-88 and 1989-92), at higher bodyweights, they lifted less, revealing an inverse correlation between bodyweight and performance on the platform.

Not shown, but relevant,

was the failure of America's three lifters to register a total at the 1983 World Championships in Moscow. Reporter Bruce Klemens called it "the best championships ever—with an incredible 23 world marks being estab-

lished." It was "the year of the 'little men' because more than half of the marks were accomplished in the first three classes—including the world's first triple bodyweight C&J!"<sup>15</sup> At one time the United States produced good little men—Robert Knodle in the 1920s, John Terry and Tony Terlazzo in the 1930s, Joe DePietro in the 1940s, and Chuck Vinci and Isaac Berger in the 1950s and 60s. While American officials of the 1970s and 1980s, who were focused on the best chance of winning medals, understandably favored the heavyweights, their short-sighted strategy abdicated all hope of winning anything on the lower end where American participation in most world meets was nearly nil.

It is not surprising that a similar differential between the American and the world/Olympic championships should also show up in an analysis of the competitive lifts. Cumulative snatch results for the former amounted to a total of 26,529.75 kilos or 84.19% of the 31,510 kilos lifted in international meets during the 23 year period under study. Respective figures in the clean and jerk are 33,460.75 kilos for the senior nationals, or

Years	Weight Class	Weight Class	Performance	Average
	Bodyweights	Avg. Weight	%	Placements
1970-72	2,173.96	94.52	91.44	7.16
1973-76	2,242.5	89.7	87.17	8.5
1977-80	1,909.5	95.48	85.32	8.98
1981-84	2,835.5	94.51	84.53	8.89
1985-88	2,064.51	98.31	79.24	12.15
1989-92	3,895	102.5	80.32	12.24

Table 4: American Bodyweight Differentials (in Kilos), Performance Percentages, and Average Placements in World/Olympic Championships in Multi-Year Cycles



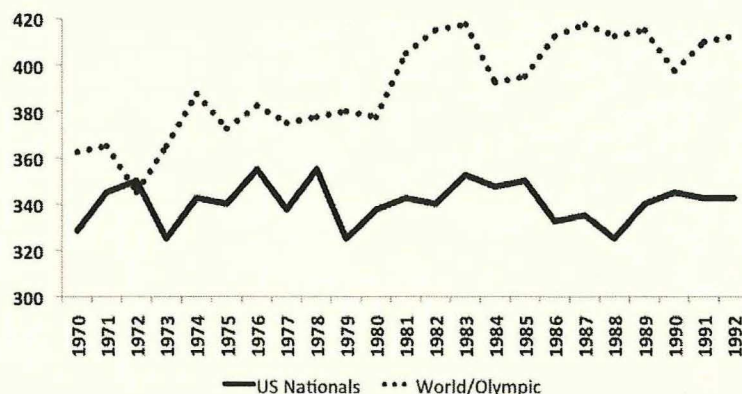
84.18% of the 39,748 kilos hoisted in world meets, a ratio of only .012% between snatch and clean and jerk performances. This remarkable overall consistency breaks down, however, when chronological comparisons are drawn between 1970 and 1992. They show American increases of 9.68% in the snatch but only 1.14% in

This result was contrary to what most pundits had predicted—that with more time and energy to devote to just two lifts, American quick lift totals would increase. Whether eliminating the press had this unexpected effect cannot be determined here, but it was the totals of international lifters that immediately took off. Notwithstanding the aberration of the Los Angeles debacle in 1984, they never looked back after 1972.<sup>18</sup>

Those of us who competed, officiated, or promoted during this era are hardly surprised by these results. The hard part comes from interpreting this mass of data. Numerous opinions have been put forth for the decline of American fortunes and the concomitant rise of the rest of the world, the most prominent of which are not enough money, lack of technical expertise, shortage of lifters and coaches, elimination of the press, lack of a publicity medium, competition from other sports, and drugs. All of these points of view will be examined in subsequent install-

ments of this study and will provide a “narrative” analysis based on published accounts and a “retrospective” analysis drawn largely from recollections of those who lived through this era of decline. A final statistical outcome that will necessarily set the tone for these further analyses is provided by a ranking of the top ten of the thirty-two countries that won medals (with gold in parentheses) at Olympic and world championships between 1970 and 1992.

It is hardly coincidental that nine of them were ruled by Communist regimes and that the only democratic country in this list is one of the most disciplined societies in the world. These countries accounted for 86.4% of all medals and 91.3% of gold medals won in

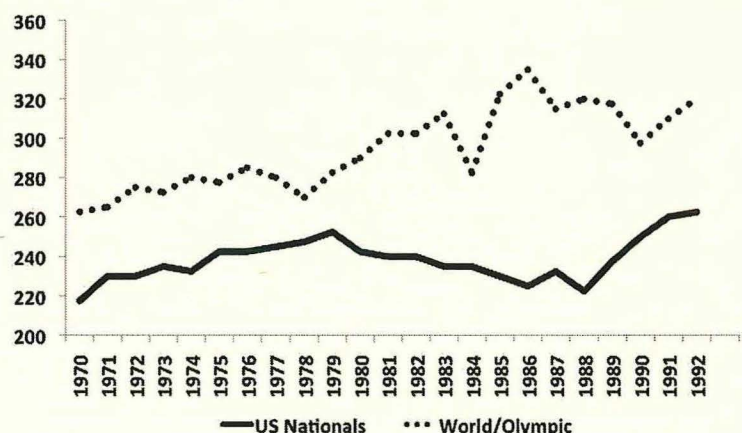


Graph 6: American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992  
Middle Heavyweight Class Individual Totals (in Kilos)

the clean and jerk, while international lifters posted respective increases of 19.5 % and 11.7%. Thus significant American gains in the snatch were more than offset by losses in the clean and jerk. Still, Rick Holbrook's American record of 155 kilos at the 1972 National Championships (combined with his 195 kilo clean and jerk) surpassed the two lift total of Bulgaria's Andon Nikolov at the Olympics, marking the only time an American exceeded an international athlete in the two lifts for the entire period under study.<sup>16</sup>

Otherwise the results for individual weight classes fairly consistently parallel the overall rising differential between American and world totals displayed in Graph 1 with the exception of the featherweight class, where the appearance of Bulgarian/Turkish superstar Naim Suleimanov (aka Suleymanoglu) fueled a growth gap in the late 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, an examination of lifting movements enables one to determine the possible impact of the abolition of the press in 1972. For the United States there was an immediate decline of 40 kilos overall in the snatch and 57.5 kilos in the clean and jerk. Furthermore, there would be five more occasions when the nine weight classes would dip below the pre-1973 mark of 1,145 kilos in the former and eighteen times when it would drop below the pre-1973 standard of 1,490 kilos in the latter.



Graph 7: American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992  
Middle Featherweight Class Individual Totals (in Kilos)



weightlifting during this era. The United States, with six medals, none of them gold, ranked fifteenth, tied with South Korea which had two gold medalists.

Country	# Medals	# Gold Medals
The Soviet Union	170	95
Bulgaria	135	59
Poland	56	9
East Germany	48	4
China	35	5
Hungary	30	4
Cuba	17	7
Romania	17	2
Japan	17	2
North Korea	12	2

Table 5: Top 10 Medal-Winning Countries in World/Olympic Championships: 1970-1992

Prior to proceeding with the interpretive portions of this study, two caveats should be kept in mind. First, these reflections on the past are not intended to offer any ready-made answers for resolving America's present or future weightlifting woes. The second is an aphorism made famous by legendary skeptic H. L. Mencken: "There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong."<sup>19</sup>

#### NOTES:

1. Bob Hoffman, "Olympic Report," *Strength & Health*, 40 (December 1972): 70.
2. See *Strength & Health*, *Iron Man*, *Denis Reno's Weightlifters Newsletter*, *Weightlifting USA*, *Muscle Builder*, and *Muscle Power*. See also a three-part series by Louie Simmons in *Milo, A Journal for Serious Strength Athletes*: "How to Regain Top Form," 2 (October 1994), 28-29; "How to Regain Top Form—Part II: Regaining Respect," 3 (April 1995): 26-28; and "What If?" 4 (April 1996): 25-29.
3. See especially Bud Charniga's six-part series, "There Is No System," at [www.sportivnypress.com](http://www.sportivnypress.com), and Lyle McDonald's twenty-part "Why the US Sucks at Olympic Lifting" at [www.bodyrecomposition.com](http://www.bodyrecomposition.com). For more temperate views on the state of American weightlifting see Harvey Newton's "Weightlifting eBulletin" at [harveynewton@newton-sports.com](mailto:harveynewton@newton-sports.com) or Bob Takano's "Takano Athletics" newsletter at [www.takanoathletics.com](http://www.takanoathletics.com).
4. Bruce Klemens, "Weightlifting Performances 1952-1979," *Denis Reno's Weightlifters Newsletter*, no. 71 (October 21, 1979): 12; Bob Hise, "Have We Progressed?" *International Olympic Lifter* 11 (May 1993): 3, 18.
5. For further contextual studies, see John D. Fair's articles: "Olympic Weightlifting and the Introduction of Steroids: A Statistical Analysis of the World Championship Results, 1948-1972," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 5 (May 1988): 96-114; "A

Century of American Weightlifting in the Olympics, 1896-1996," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 15 (December 1998): 18-35; and "The Tragic History of the Military Press in Olympic and World Championship Competition, 1928-1972," *The Journal of Sport History* 28 (Fall 2001): 345-74.

6. *Strength & Health*, *Iron Man*, *Denis Reno's Weightlifters Newsletter*, *Weightlifting USA*, and *World Weightlifting*.

7. See Appendix I for the composite totals of winners in all classes at American and World/Olympic Championships, 1950-2010.

8. It does not, however, coincide with Lyle McDonald's view that "we went from complete and utter dominance of the sport to nearly zero results and it seems to have just happened overnight (in 1956 we medalled in every category, in 1960, we medalled in 6 of 9 categories, in 1964 we won two total medals)." "Why the US Sucks," Part 5, [www.bodyrecomposition.com](http://www.bodyrecomposition.com).

9. See Appendix II for American percentages of world/Olympic Championship Totals for the winners of all classes, 1970-1992.

10. See *Denis Reno's Weightlifters Newsletter*, no. 15 (November 24 1984): 5.

11. See Appendix III for composite totals of winners in all classes at American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992.

12. See Appendix IV for composite average totals for the top three places in all classes at American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992.

13. With a national total of 5,265 kilos compared to the world/Olympic total of 6,145 kilos, American lifters in the 100 kilo class had an 880 kilo differential or 85.68% of the international standard from 1978 to 1992.

14. To compensate for an appropriate weight designation, an arbitrary 120 kilos is added for superheavyweight lifters.

15. Bruce Klemens, "1983 Worlds," *Strength & Health* 52, no. 2 (March, 1984): 12-21.

16. These impressive marks were offset, however, by the press in its last year of competition where Nikolov's 180 kilo lift exceeded Holbrook's 162.2 and ultimately relegated the latter to fifth place in the Olympics. See Appendix V for the totals of winners in the mid-heavyweight class at American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992.

17. See Appendix VI for the totals of winners in the featherweight class at American and World/Olympic Championships, 1970-1992.

18. Investigations of weightlifting world records by Gary Cleveland and John Drewes coincide roughly with the results of this study. They show that neither the snatch nor the clean and jerk was a better determinant of world record totals from 1917 to 2001 and that it was only after 1991 that snatch ratio to the clean and jerk improved. See *The Avian Movement Advocate*, no. 49 (October/November 2002): 3-5, and no. 50 (December, 2002): 5-6.

19. H. L. Mencken, "The Divine Afflatus," *New York Evening Mail*, November, 16, 1917, and H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Second Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), 158.

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and a copy will be sent by  
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## Reflections on Valentin Hristov's *Champion on a Cross*

MICHAEL CAYTON

*Michael Cayton was born in Texas, took his undergraduate degree at Stanford, and earned a PhD in Economics at the University of Texas. A competitive weightlifter in high school and college, Cayton has also competed in masters' weightlifting contests in both the United States and Bulgaria. He was a university professor until going to work for the federal government. Many of his assignments were overseas, and he is fluent in Spanish, Serbo-Croatian, French, Bulgarian, Portuguese, and of course English. He first went to Bulgaria in 2000 under the auspices of the US Treasury Department as a consultant in Macroeconomics at the Bulgarian Ministry of the Economy, and he has made his home there since that time. During his years there he has met many people who either are or were active in weightlifting, and he gradually developed an interest in the politics of the sport. A frequent visitor to the United States, Cayton was elected in 2008 as a member of the Board of Directors of USA Weightlifting, and he served until 2012.*

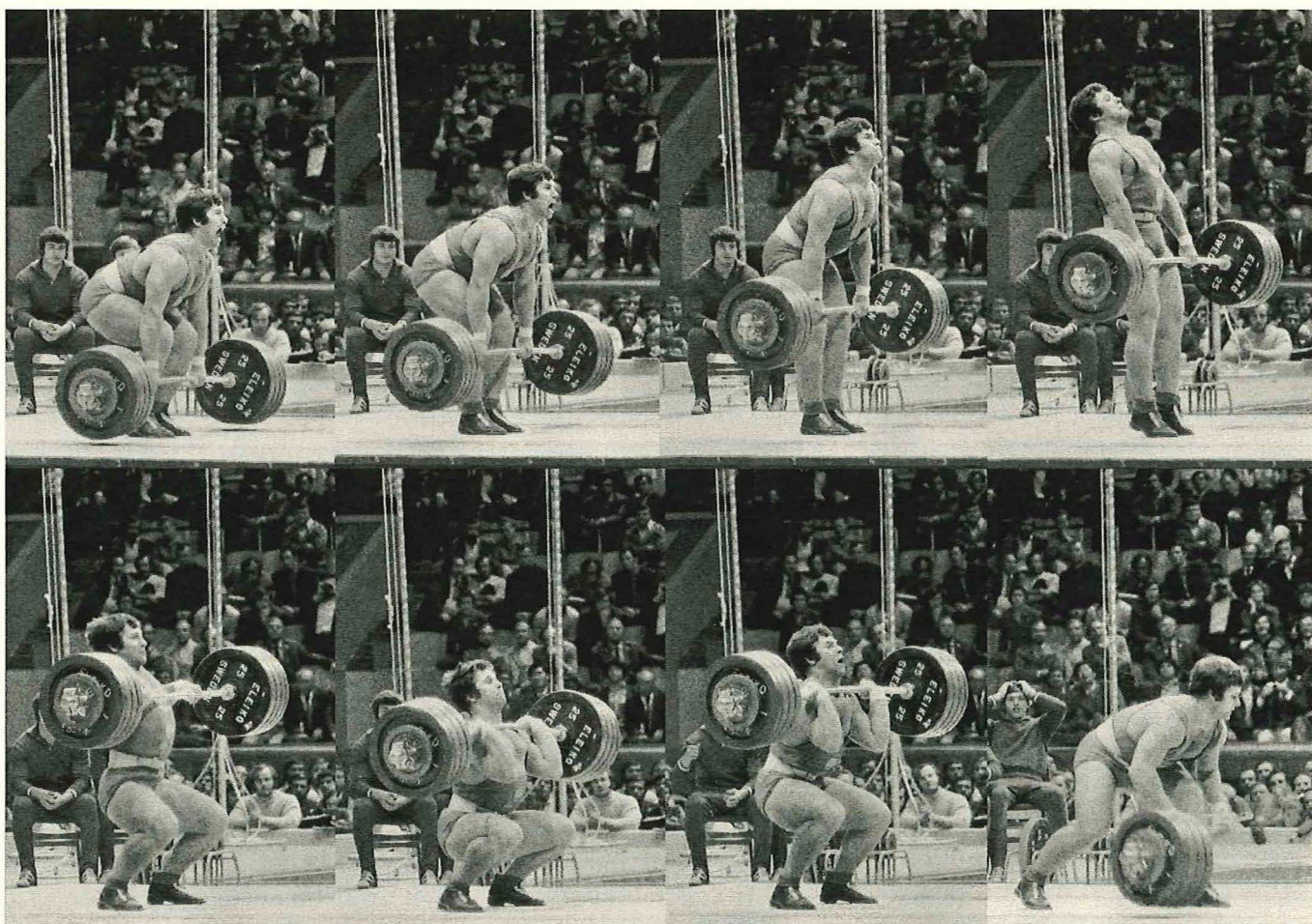
Valentin Hristov (sometimes spelled Kristov) was one of the top Bulgarian weightlifters during the big-time days of Bulgarian weightlifting in the 1970s and 1980s. His lifting achievements included nine world records and two gold medals in world championships. He won the first of these in Moscow in 1975 at the age of nineteen and, far more remarkable, the 110 kilo (242.5 pound) teenager came very close to besting the most coveted world record in the sport—the super-heavyweight record held by the already legendary, supposedly unbeatable “king of the clean and jerk,” the Soviet’s superstar Vasily Alexeyev. (*Editors’ note: The details of this historic attempt appear later in the review.*) The following year, at the Montreal Olympics, Hristov easily won the gold medal only to be stripped of it due to a doping charge. He again won the World Championships in 1977 at Stuttgart. He took silver at the World Championships in Athens in 1979 and won another silver at the Moscow Olympics of 1980. Moscow was Hristov’s last competition as he finished his career at the tender age of twenty-four.

Hristov’s autobiography, *Champion on a Cross*, is basically the story of his early life and lifting career, especially up through and just after Montreal in 1976. He wrote the book during the second half of the 1980s, after he had pretty well broken his ties to the sport and was supporting himself largely with manual labor in the underground economy and the help of friends and family. The book—written prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall

and the subsequent regime change in Bulgaria and other Eastern Bloc member nations—is in some ways an “exposé,” and exposés do not find favor among many, or even most, former sports figures. The book is, however, a true insider’s portrait of the remarkable success Bulgarian lifting enjoyed during its ascendancy under the controversial coach Ivan Abadjiev; the book would, obviously, never have been published during the communist period. Fortunately for Hristov’s book, however, if not for the Bulgarian weightlifting program, that regime fell in late 1989 and thereby removed the largest hurdle toward its publication. Even so, during the turbulent transition period of the 1990s, with the Bulgarian economy in constant turmoil, it was not easy for Hristov to find a publisher. Finally, however, the book was published in 1998, but it only remained on the market (even on the shelves, to be precise) for a very short period before disappearing. By 2010, when this reviewer learned of the book’s existence, there was not a single copy to be found—not in any of the many used book shops, not even in the National Library or the National Sports Academy. I eventually managed to locate Hristov himself in 2011 at his home in Pernik (an industrial town about thirty kilometers from Sofia) and was given a copy of the book.<sup>1</sup> During the following months, I spent many days discussing the book and interviewing Hristov.

It should be mentioned at the outset that Hristov did not write this book with the aim of producing a standard autobiography of a prominent sports figure.





*Iron Man* magazine describes 110 kilo class (220 pound) lifter Valentin Hristov's attempt at 245.5 kilos (541.2 pounds) in the clean and jerk at the World Weightlifting Championships in Moscow, in 1975, as the "The Greatest Lift Ever Attempted." Special thanks to Bruce Klemens, who wrote the article. Bruce also took these photos and was kind enough to send the original images so they could be reproduced here. Had Hristov made the lift it would have exceeded the world record in the superheavyweight class held by the already legendary Vasily Alexeyev and become the heaviest clean and jerk ever made.

Instead, he intended it to be a work of literature based on his personal experiences, rather than a straightforward historical account of his life. For this reason, the book consists of a series of vignettes, i.e., a series of anecdotes, narratives, and themes. As a result the book is often not in chronological order. Sometimes this works well, but sometimes it leads to confusion as to what happened, and when. In certain cases the book would definitely read better and be easier to follow if the order of the vignettes were changed. The lack of continuity also means that the narrative is often somewhat disjointed, which diminishes the book's artistic value as well as its coherence and clarity.

Another drawback, at least for readers primarily interested in sport history, is that the book's time span is very limited, especially the coverage of Hristov's career after he retired. There is a good deal of detail regarding

the author's background, and even his family's background and his early days as a teenager growing up in his hometown. However, the chronicle becomes more and more abbreviated and compressed as the years pass, so that there is much less coverage of the second half of Hristov's lifting career (after the Montreal Olympics) than of the first half. Even a casual reader will conclude that Hristov's enthusiasm for the book began to flag toward the end of this writing project, perhaps in this way matching the arc of his lifting career or simply reflecting his wish to be done with the project. In any case, the book basically ends with the Moscow Olympics in 1980, when he was still only twenty-four years old. Most readers would certainly have been interested in at least a brief discussion of Hristov's subsequent experiences as an assistant coach at the National Sports Academy, of the removal of Abadjiev as head



coach of weightlifting (although he was brought back later in the 1990s), of the government's dismantling of much of its sports industry, and of the general turmoil that crippled the previous decade's most successful sport's team. Also of interest would have been his observations and experiences regarding any long-lasting health effects he and/or his teammates experienced as a result of either the extensive doping program, the almost brutal intensity of the training protocol practiced by the lifters of those days, or both.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of those weaknesses, the book is highly interesting for its personal portrait of the Bulgarian weightlifting scene of the 1970s, and for Hristov's individual situation within that scene. There are many fascinating details, not only about Hristov and his feelings, but about his friends and teammates, as well as his famous—yet controversial coach—Ivan Abadjiev. Hristov's no-holds-barred description of the team's doping practices is very helpful for sport historians, and hair-raising for anyone who still might cling to the vision of an ideal of clean sport. The book is also useful for its details about Bulgaria's state sports policies—from the standpoint of the way they played out at the ground level, i.e., how they affected the athletes themselves. In the reviewer's opinion, the book succeeds in providing a very plausible portrait of Bulgaria's version of the weightlifting "sports machines" of the late communist era. Devoid of an ideological message, though obviously heavily influenced by a strictly personal perspective, the book is a particularly valuable contribution to sport history.

Hristov's earliest ambitions to become a sports star came partly from the tales he heard of the life-styles of some of those who had already made it to the top in Bulgaria. (By the 1950s, Bulgaria—like other communist states—was already pushing Olympic sports as part of its program of promoting national pride.) By the sixth grade young Valentin had heard the stories of two-time Olympic wrestling champion Boyan Radev, for example, who would motor around Bulgaria in his own Mercedes. (Obtaining *any* car at that time was very difficult for ordinary citizens and getting a Mercedes was reserved only for the most famous or well-connected.)<sup>3</sup> Inspired, Hristov started building his muscles with a pair of home-made dumbbells, but soon graduated to a set of home-made barbells which he and other kids stole from the yard of a collective farm.

Hristov's real introduction to competitive lifting, however, came more than a year later when at age fourteen he learned that a local lifting club was being organized by the state-sponsored Pernik sports association.<sup>4</sup> The new trainer/coach, Viktor Dimchev—who also played the trombone in the Pernik orchestra—was duly impressed by Hristov, who already showed considerable strength from his home training. Dimchev, who was apparently very effective in recruiting talented boys with dreams of sports fame, immediately encouraged the boy to begin training in the small weightlifting hall. Soon Dimchev was having them train after school for up to four hours a day (Dimchev himself had attended the National Sports Academy and knew that Abadjiev, by then national team coach, trained his own lifters much more strenuously than did any other coach of his era).<sup>5</sup> Later, Dimchev even had Hristov and the other team members come in for additional workouts in the mornings before school. And the team had practice competitions once a week as well.

The European Weightlifting Championships were held in Sofia the following spring, so young Hristov and his fellow team members were treated to many top-level performances, including that of the Soviet superheavyweight star, Vasily Alexeyev. This gave Dimchev further leverage with his ambitious team members, and during the summer vacation break he had them working even harder, and doing two four-hour sessions per day: Dimchev claimed that this was standard fare for the national team by this time, though according to Hristov it was actually more workout time than even the national team was spending. Indeed, Hristov speculates that Abadjiev was using Dimchev as well as other club coaches to "experiment" with varying training loads in an effort to learn if fifteen-year-olds could handle such extraordinary workouts.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the workload, Hristov and a few of his teammates continued through the summer. At one point Dimchev even wanted his team to sleep at the gym, but Hristov refused, which led to a blow-up with his coach and Hristov's walking out. Dimchev quickly gave in and implored his budding star to come back the following day. Hristov comments, "If he hadn't given in on my mulish disposition, Viktor Dimchev probably would have lost me as a weight-lifter."<sup>7</sup>

Even though some of his teammates began to slack off later under the heavy "vacation" workouts,



Hristov seemed to thrive. And later in the summer of 1971 at the national individual championships Hristov took fourth place in the total and won a silver medal in the clean and jerk with a lift of 115 kilos (253.5 pounds) in the 82.5 kilo (181.7 pound) class. Hristov and his father took great pride in this achievement, but it contributed to major problems immediately thereafter. Having finished the eighth grade the previous school year, Hristov had intended to enroll in a technical school.<sup>8</sup> But Dimchev apparently convinced him that he would have to spend too much time there on his technical drawings and that he should enroll at the closer-by gymnasium. However, at the gymnasium, the administrators would not excuse Hristov from the mandatory “brigade work.”<sup>9</sup> Hristov assumed that Dimchev would arrange something with the school director, but in the back of his mind the boy was already finding an excuse not to attend school that year and didn’t push Dimchev on the issue. When later Dimchev found out that Hristov was not going to school, he promised to see if he could get Hristov enrolled in the “Olympic Hopes” sports school.<sup>10</sup> But that didn’t happen either.

For some time Hristov’s parents were not aware of what was happening because he would take his school bag with him to the gym, as if he were attending classes. When finally they learned he wasn’t in school, there was, of course, a major ruckus. His parents initially cut him off from Dimchev and the weightlifting team, but amazingly, after much consultation the arrangement was allowed to continue and Hristov remained out of school. His father, against the wishes of his mother, agreed to allow Hristov to continue his lifting with the understanding that Dimchev would see to it that Hristov would make such great progress that he would become a member of the national team and definitely get into the “Olympic Hopes” sports school in the fall of the next school year—1972. The agreement also included the promise that the boy would go on to college so that he would not have to sweat and strain at the kind of work his father did as a smelter.

This plan really put the pressure on Hristov to train hard and on Dimchev to push for even heavier workouts. Under such emotional and physical pressure, Hristov found the gains slow in coming. A number of times he was at the point of giving up his training and trying to satisfy his mother by applying to enter the technical school at the middle of the school year. But each

time Dimchev coaxed him back into the gym. So, young Valentin continued to grind it out: “Looking back after all these years, when I thumb through my training diary of that time I want to cry. It seems clear to me that no other fifteen-year-old lifter in the world would bear up to the training I did then, not even for a week, much less a month. I know that many trainers would say, if they saw the diary, that it is not possible, that it’s just not true. But, I didn’t have anyone to lie to; I wrote those workouts for myself in the diary, and I went through them in the gym, and without Viktor Dimchev. With more than twelve hundred tons of lifting on the heaviest months . . . my muscles would begin to feel more or less normal only on those days when, totally exhausted, I would swear off the weights and wait for Dimchev to come to the house to take me back to the gym.”<sup>11</sup>

But Hristov bore up and then some. At the national championship for juniors in 1972 he won first place in the 90 kilo (198.2 pound) class. He indicates that he feels lucky that in the two weeks prior to the meet he trained less due to an ankle strain, which allowed him to be fresh at the competition and to set a national junior record of 133 kilos (293.2 pounds) in the press, snatch 130 kilos (286 pounds), and clean and jerk 160 kilos (352.5 pounds). That meet set him definitely on the road to becoming a world champion and as Dimchev had promised, the trainer at “Olympic Hopes” took Hristov in as an official pupil. Two weeks later, even though Valentin was only sixteen years old, the national coach, Abadjiev put him on the national team.

In spite of Hristov’s record of long workouts in Pernik, he still had trouble adapting to Abadjiev’s workout routines. The main difference it seems, was that Abadjiev had them lifting near their maximums for single repetitions, while in Pernik he had done more repetitions with longer rests in between sets. Thus, he became so worn out in those first few weeks he felt like quitting. And to make things worse, some of the other lifters, the “old guns,” were rough on the newcomer. But one day one of the more experienced lifters finally let him in on a secret—most of the lifters scrimped on the workouts prescribed to them by Abadjiev. They would lift up to what they felt they could handle, but rarely did they complete the entire prescribed workout. Abadjiev didn’t have the time or interest to check everyone’s sets, and he mainly wanted to see how the workouts were coming. The old guns would fill in their workout forms to match



the requirements, regardless of whether they had really completed all the sets. In spite of his initial fears of being caught in a lie, Hristov gradually also adopted this tactic. It worked; he started becoming more comfortable with his heavy singles, and Abadjiev was happy.

The following March of 1974, just after he had turned eighteen, Hristov lifted in a tournament in Armenia (then part of the Soviet Union) in which he snatched 162.5 kilos (358 pounds) and jerked 200 kilos (440.7 pounds) at a bodyweight of 100 kilos (220 pounds). This 200-kilo jerk compared with a lift of 70 kilos (154.2 pounds) at his first workout in the gym at Pernik three-and-a-half years earlier. Hristov maintains that up to that point he had trained completely clean, without any steroids or hormonal injections. He justifiably takes much pride in such an accomplishment, saying that it must be a world record for lifting progress made completely "clean."<sup>12</sup>

But then things changed. With Hristov's results from Armenia, Abadjiev began to think about the teenager's possibilities for the European Championships scheduled for two months later in Verona, Italy. After much deliberation, in early April Abadjiev proposed to Hristov that he put on an extra 10 kilos (22 pounds) of bodyweight to lift in the 110 kilo (242.5 pound) category in Verona—even though by then the contest was only two weeks away. Hristov, with considerable misgivings, went along. With his first use of steroids—and much stuffing at the training table—Hristov did in fact manage to quickly boost his weight, and weighed in at Verona at 108.2 kilos (238.5 pounds). It was Hristov's first big international meet, and he took away a silver medal by snatching 167.5 kilos (369.2 pounds), jerking 220 kilos (440.7 pounds), and setting junior world records in the snatch, the clean and jerk, and the total. He lost only to the Soviet champion Valery Ustyuzhin, whose final jerk of 227.5 kilos (501.5 pounds) was a new world record.<sup>13</sup>

But whether because of the doping, the weight gain, or something else altogether, Hristov started having physical problems soon after his successes in the European Championships. Within four days of the meet he unintentionally lost back down to his previous weight. He also noticed that he had stretch marks on his arms and waist—no doubt because of the rapid weight gain. But the more serious problem was that he started having lower back pains. Abadjiev, who was known for his dismissive attitude to all *kontuzii* (sprains and pulls), arranged for him to receive pain pills, but apparently they had lit-

tle effect. Soon after, Hristov began making the rounds of various doctors and "healers." One doctor gave him injections in the spine, which did no good. Then a team member took him to a "doctor" who specialized in manual therapy. This gentleman had Hristov lie down on his stomach, then sat on top of him and lifted Hristov's shoulders so as to arch Hristov backward. While Hristov claims he almost passed out from the pain, the doctor indicated that this was proof that he had freed the "blockages" in his back and that he could start working out lightly in a few days. When this failed to work, more treatments followed, but none seemed to definitively free the "blockages." Finally, after time away from training and some much more moderate physical therapy, his back started getting better. But by then it was too late for Hristov to compete in the Manila World Championships of 1974—where it had been thought (or hoped) that he might become a world champion.

By the spring of 1975, Hristov, still just nineteen years old, was back in top shape and had put the needed weight back on for the 110 kilo (220.2 pound) category. And, indeed, 1975 was to be Hristov's best year of competition. In the Danube Cup competition in Germany in April he not only won gold, but made a new world record in the total of 402.5 kilos (887.2 pounds). Next came the first-ever Junior World (and European) Championships, which took place July 5-12 in Marseilles, France. Initially, Abadjiev wanted Hristov to lift in the superheavyweight category (110+ kilos) in order to try to maximize team points and beat the Soviet team.<sup>14</sup> Naturally this did not go down well with Hristov, since it would mean giving up the possibility of setting another world record (and collecting the corresponding prize money he would win from the sports association). But, at the last minute, after Hristov had already arrived for the contest, this decision was reversed because it was calculated that the Bulgarian team was likely to win the team medal in any case, and so Hristov was allowed to go back down to the 110 kilo class. In the contest he not only won gold and the Junior World Championship, but also made new world junior *and senior* records in all three event categories—178 kilos (392.4 pounds) on an extra attempt in the snatch, 230 kilos (507 pounds) in the clean and jerk, and 405 kilos (892.7 pounds) in the total.<sup>15</sup>

He was even better two months later at the World Weightlifting Championships in Moscow, on September 15-23, which was certainly Hristov's most stun-



ning performance ever. He went three for three in the snatch with 170 kilos (374.7 pounds), 175 kilos (385.7 pounds), and 180 kilos (396.7 pounds) which was a new world record. What's more, with his first clean and jerk at 220 kilos (485 pounds) he knew he had won the overall title and the gold medal, as he was 10 kilos (22 pounds) ahead of the Soviet lifter, Vasily Mazheikov. He then made 230 kilos (507 pounds) easily for his second attempt. At that point he wanted to go for 245.5 kilos (541.2 pounds) on his third attempt, which would have exceeded the heaviest clean and jerk ever made—Vasily Alexeyev's existing world superheavyweight record of 245 kilos (540 pounds). According to Hristov, however, Abadjiev would not allow it, and insisted that he try the 245.5 only on an extra (fourth) attempt. So Hristov took "only" 237.5 kilos (523.5 pounds) on his third attempt, thus making a new world record in both the clean and jerk and the total and besting his Soviet opponent by 27.5 kilos (60.5 pounds) on the total. On his fourth attempt with the superheavyweight world record 245.5 kilos, Hristov racked the bar on his shoulders and got most of the way up, but the photos indicate that the bar was slightly forward and he was not able to adjust and bring the bar back in line, loaded as it was with this prodigious weight—more than 60 pounds over double his bodyweight.<sup>16</sup> In any case, he lost the weight forward and the bar fell to the platform. While very disappointed at the time, Hristov later came to believe that it was a blessing in disguise, suggesting that besting the record of the Soviet superheavy hero Alexeyev might not have been good for his health. Even so, the attempt electrified the sport of weightlifting and solidified Hristov's reputation as a genuine phenomenon.

In October of that same year, 1975, Valentin and the superheavy on the Bulgarian team, Hristov Plachkov, were invited to a special TV-sponsored meet in London, a "Superman Cup." This turned into more of a farce than a tournament. Valentin was not really in shape but went anyway. While there, he was given the opportunity to take some publicity photos for the *London Daily Mirror* and in one of the shots Hristov was pictured supposedly lifting with his back a board on which eight "cheesecake girls" were sitting, with a total weight said to be approximately equal to his record total of 417.5 kilos (920.2 pounds). The agent for the newspaper gave each of the girls twenty pounds sterling (then worth about one hundred dollars) for posing for the photos, and was about to offer Hristov the same when the political minder for the

team, Asen Stoev, jumped in front and exclaimed, "No professionalism! No professionalism!" Hristov, meanwhile, was saying, "Now wait, Comrade Stoev, now wait," but the agent shrugged and walked away.<sup>17</sup> However, as Hristov was not in very good shape and did not feel like competing, he did not turn up for the competition (ostensibly because he was sick). Alexeyev also came to the meet but did not lift, claiming that he was willing to go out on the stage and be seen by the audience for the £15 pocket money he was offered, but not to actually lift.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the Bulgarian superheavy Plachkov won the contest.

The Olympic Games in 1976 were scheduled to be held in Montreal. Obviously these were tremendously important not only for Abadjiev and the Bulgarian sports establishment, but for Hristov personally. In the run-up to the games, the Bulgarian team was invited to a friendly America vs. Europe meet in Montreal held on 6-7 December 1975. By this time the doping issue was becoming much more troublesome. The word was that at the summer Montreal Olympics all medalists would be tested, as well as a random sampling of other contestants. The question, however, was how long before the contest would the athletes need to quit using drugs in order to test clean. Because of this issue, Hristov decided to do some experimenting on himself, and he claims to have quit using all performance-enhancing drugs for seventy-seven days prior to the America-Europe meet in December. In any event, he seemed out of shape to reporters and managed to snatch only 160 kilos (352.5 pounds) while the American champion Mark Cameron succeeded with 165 kilos (363.7 pounds). Nevertheless, Hristov managed to pull out a first-place win with his final lift of 222.5 kilos (490.5 pounds) in the jerk, compared to Cameron's new record of 215 kilos (473.7 pounds).<sup>19</sup> At the "Record-breakers" meet held in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, less than two weeks later on 17 December, Hristov did not compete, reportedly because of a "painful back injury."<sup>20</sup>

Hristov then considered two different strategies. One was to train altogether clean, all the way to the Olympics. But this would mean lighter and less frequent workouts, which would mean that he would need to get the plan cleared with Abadjiev, who—Hristov believed—would almost certainly veto it. The other strategy would be to work out even more intensively (*à la* Abadjiev), to continue with the doping, and to work up to perhaps 195 and 255 kilos (429.7 and 562 pounds)



before the Olympics. Then, with this unheard-of level of lifting prowess he would (he hoped) be able to cut the drug use for ten days or more and still win with lifts of perhaps 185 kilos (407.7 pounds) and 235 kilos (518 pounds). In any case this was the strategy Abadjiev decided to follow, and it appears likely that Hristov never even discussed the "clean" alternative with the dominating national coach.

In May of 1975 the entire Bulgarian weightlifting team, as well as athletes from other sports, started training at the sports complex of Belmeken in the mountains south of Sofia. The idea among some sports theorists, apparently, was that this higher altitude training would help the lifters use oxygen better, and so improve the chances at Montreal, even though the latter is not much above sea level and even though altitude training is of relatively little use in a sport like weightlifting or putting the shot. Hristov claims that Abadjiev insisted on everyone training there for fear that he might be criticized later if he did not do so and then the team failed to perform up to par. In fact, according to Hristov, the team lost one top-notch lifter, Atanas Kirov, who developed kidney problems and wanted to train with his own coach back in Sofia.<sup>21</sup>

The pre-Olympic doping was very heavy, and Hristov claims that Abadjiev was giving each lifter 180 Dianabol tablets of five milligrams per week. Monday, Wednesday, and Friday were forty-pill days, and Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday were twenty-pill days. They were also being injected with the steroid Retabolil one day a week.<sup>22</sup> There were also heavy doses of vitamins—as well as other substances about which the lifters were told little or nothing. Hristov notes that his urine turned brown during that period.<sup>23</sup> He also indicates that after the third week of intensive training and massive drug use, he started seeing stars in front of his eyes, and even passed out one day in the gym. The team doctor decided he had gone into shock from the intensity of the workouts, but Hristov persisted, adjusted, and over the coming weeks worked up to a snatch of 192.5 kilos (424.2 pounds) and a jerk of 250 kilos (551 pounds). "Without the horse-sized doses of the white pills [steroids] and the injections of Retabolil, of course," Hristov maintains, "that [kind of workout intensity] would be impossible."<sup>24</sup> He says that without the support of the performance-enhancing drugs he would not have been able to walk out of the training hall, much less show up for the next workout. According to Hristov, all of the lifters and

many of the training staff were convinced that the extent of the doping and the intensity of the training were dangerous.<sup>25</sup> Even so, there was still the nagging question of the doping tests. *[Editors' note: The Montreal Games in 1976 was the first time in Olympic history that testing would be done to detect anabolic steroids, although at that time no test had been developed which could screen for exogenous testosterone, which is highly anabolic. What makes Hristov's account so fascinating is that it has been widely reported since 1976 that many athletes in weightlifting and other sports were aware of this loophole and therefore "beat" the drug test by stopping their use of traditional anabolic steroids and substituting them with synthetic testosterone. Apparently, although it would appear from the results of the lifting that some of the Eastern Bloc nations were aware of how to avoid positive tests through the use of this procedure, the Bulgarian team had not been informed.]* Not long before leaving Belmeken, Abadjiev supposedly learned from colleagues that quitting the steroids only ten days before the tests was not safe, and that at least fifteen days were needed for the metabolites of the steroid pills to leave the body and possibly twenty-one days for the injections to clear the body. There were rumors that one of the doctors would be able to obtain newer steroid variants from Germany which could not be detected by the labs. This was a false rumor and a decision was made for the lifters to discontinue the steroids seventeen days before the lifting was due to start in Montreal.

On his return to Sofia, and only a few days before he was scheduled to depart for Montreal (some of the lighter team members had already left), Hristov developed a very bad boil on the back of his leg behind the knee. The boil became so painful he could hardly put on his pants or walk. Seeing his chances of an Olympic gold medal possibly slipping away, Hristov became hysterical, could not rest, had panic attacks, and could hardly breathe. Some of the doctors and trainers thought that both the boil and the panic attacks were the result of the heavy doping. Finally, calmed by sedatives and the visit of a friend who told him he simply had to accept limits, and understand that he was a human being like other people Hristov recovered and was able to leave for Montreal on time.

The experience at Montreal Hristov describes in the aptly-named chapter "From the Bottom to the Very Deepest." Indeed the whole episode from the lead-up training to the lifting itself in Montreal sounds nightmar-



ish. Cutting off the steroids seemed to affect the heavier lifters, like Hristov, the most—perhaps because the ten bodyweight classes then being used competed one day at a time, which meant that a heavier man like Hristov would have been off drugs for a week or so longer than the lifters in the two lightest bodyweight classes. And, of course, Hristov had lost critical training time due to the boil and the panic attacks.

There were also problems at the team level. The Montreal training hall lifts were trending down. After one of the lighter Bulgarian lifters missed all of his lifts and “bombed out” early in the competition, Abadjiev feared more failures. In a dark, gloomy mood, he called a team meeting, and one of the team doctors (the one called the “Magician”) showed up with a catheter and syringe. Abadjiev went into a speech recounting how he had learned from the experiences of the Soviet lifters about the influence of the steroids—how, for example, the Soviet lifters trained less for the 1968 Olympics and had lifted more than the Bulgarians. He added that he had been forced to start using the steroids for the team to have any success, and that some teams had access to stimulants that the Bulgarians did not have. But he maintained that there was a solution to their problem, which was that those lifters who had not yet competed would go back on the steroids but, with the aid of the Magician and his catheter, would empty their bladders just before being tested and have it replaced with “clean” urine by the Magician before they had to submit a sample.<sup>26</sup> According to Hristov, one lifter, Atanas Shopov, finally spoke up, said it was better not to compete in the Games than do that, and walked out. The other lifters then followed him out. Thus, Hristov might well have joined them and gone on to compete for better or worse without any more drugs.

While he was still undecided as to what he should do, Hristov soon faced another serious problem. This problem was that the medical committee of the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) had decided that one athlete from each team would be selected at random for pre-testing. Unfortunately for Hristov, he was the one selected from the Bulgarian team, and he learned that he was to be tested two days before he was to lift, which would mean that his urine would be collected only thirteen days since he would have taken his last ten pills. This was thought by Abadjiev and the team doctors to be too risky. So Hristov faced a hard choice—he could gamble that he would not test positive or he could use the

catheter. The only other option, Hristov thought, was to pack up and return to Bulgaria without competing, which would probably mean the end of his lifting career. “Christ, was this what I banged away so hard for, for almost six years and for eight hours a day?” Hristov asked himself forlornly.<sup>27</sup> After more coaxing from Abadjiev, Hristov gave in and went for the catheter. Abadjiev then gave him two hundred tablets of five milligrams each for July 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, and another 150 pills for the 26<sup>th</sup>, the day of his competition.<sup>28</sup>

But the fact was that even with the new “horse-sized” doses of steroids Hristov’s lifting condition was far from his best. The episode with the boil in Sofia, the subsequent panic attacks, and the break in his steroid use had not only limited his training and weakened him but also undermined his confidence and concentration. What’s more, the further torment over the urine-switching scheme certainly did not help and Hristov was having major difficulties sleeping. He was given two types of sleeping pills; one of them provided little relief, and the stronger version left him groggy.

During the competition in between the snatch and the clean and jerk the team doctor (the “Magician”) flushed out Hristov’s bladder and—by means of a catheter—replaced Hristov’s urine with that from one of the trainers. However, apparently the procedure did not go completely smoothly and Hristov experienced considerable pain while trying to warm up for the clean and jerk. Even so, he finally came around and went on to win the gold medal with lifts of 175 kilos (385.7 pounds) in the snatch and 225 kilos (496 pounds) on his second attempt in the clean and jerk; he passed on his third attempt. Both lifts were well down from his best, of course, and worlds away from what he had done in training not long before.<sup>29</sup> Shortly afterwards he was summoned to the Doping Control to provide a urine sample. On the award podium, Hristov says, he wanted to break out in tears of joy for the Bulgarian journalists to report back to Bulgaria, but he couldn’t.

With his gold medal in hand, Hristov received on his return to Bulgaria a new Volga automobile. He had already been given an apartment not long before, and now he became engaged to get married. Three weeks after receiving his gold medal he learned that the Western press was reporting that traces of steroids were found in his urine. This was officially confirmed by the IOC Medical Commission shortly thereafter. Hristov, however, believes that his positive was bogus. In support of this



contention he includes in his book a statement by a Doctor Baldzhiev, who apparently represented Bulgaria to the IOC's Medical Commission, to the effect that the particular variety of anabolic steroid that was supposedly found in Hristov's urine was not even available in Europe at that time. Further, Baldzhiev claims that the lead seal on the vial which he was shown (the B sample) had been tampered with, which meant that the sample could have been switched.<sup>30</sup> There was also the fact that the urine which came from Hristov after the lifting was supposedly "clean," since it really had come from someone else. *[Editors' note: Because it isn't possible for a person to expel all of the urine from his or her bladder, and because it would have taken well over an hour after expelling his own urine and having "clean" urine transferred via a catheter into his bladder there could have been sufficient metabolites of banned anabolic steroids in his urine to trigger a positive result, particularly in light of the huge quantities of drugs he had just taken. As was revealed by testimony given to the Dubin Commission in 1989, members of the Canadian weightlifting team found this out the hard way when they used the same painful procedure and still tested positive.]* However that may be, Hristov thinks that he and another Bulgarian lifter, Blagoi Blagoev, were nailed for doping largely because some people in the IOC chain of command wanted to show that the IOC was tough on doping.<sup>31</sup> An additional factor, Hristov believes, was that two Soviet lifters, Yuri Zaitsev and Pyrotr Korol, moved up to claim gold after Hristov and the Polish lifter Kaczmarek were disqualified.<sup>32</sup>

At first it appeared that Hristov might not after all have to return his gold medal, due to the problem that those who initially placed fourth but now would become bronze medal winners had not been tested for doping. Hristov reports that this complication was glossed over and he was eventually told by the Bulgarian Olympic Committee that he must return the medal. If he refused, he was told, he would have to pay for the Volga automobile he had received upon his return from Montreal. Hristov did return the medal to the officials at the Bulgarian Olympic Committee, but not before having his name engraved on the back.<sup>33</sup>

Hristov seriously considered leaving weightlifting after Montreal. But of course he was only twenty years old, and really had no professional qualifications for anything *but* weightlifting. So he soldiered on. He had a knee operation two months after Montreal to

remove bone chips resulting from his last attempt clean and jerk in the Olympics. He continued afterwards to have knee pains from time to time but they did not keep him from getting back into shape for the next year's world championship in Stuttgart. The team itself did not do well, and by the time the lifting began for Hristov's 110 kilo category, three of his teammates had bombed and the team was well below the hoped-for points they expected to have at that point. But Hristov recounts that he was feeling strong and that he hardly cared about the team points.<sup>34</sup> While Abadjiev wanted Hristov to choose his weights conservatively Hristov insisted on a 7.5 kilo increase for his third attempt in the snatch. He made it with a lift of 180 kilos (396.7 pounds) "so that they would see that they had unfairly taken away my medal at Montreal."<sup>35</sup> That lift gave Hristov a 10 kilo (22 pounds) lead in the snatch over Zaitsev—who had taken gold in Montreal after Hristov was disqualified. However, Hristov's knee started hurting badly after his first attempt clean and jerk at 220 kilos (485 pounds) which was successful. He considered passing on his next two lifts, but thinking it might be his last lift in competition he went for 225 kilos (496 pounds) on his second attempt, which meant that Zaitsev would have needed 235 kilos (518 pounds) to take first place. Hristov made the 225, though he had to be helped off the platform afterwards. Zaitsev only could equal Hristov's 225, so Hristov again became world champion with a total of 405 kilos (892.7 pounds) vs. 395 kilos (870.7 pounds) for Zaitsev. Hristov felt vindicated and claims in the book that this was his most prized medal.<sup>36</sup> But, he says, "With my win in Stuttgart I still could not recoup the time which the IOC had cut from my life when it took away the medal I won in Montreal."<sup>37</sup>

Hristov, with his pride now restored to some extent, continued to have trouble with his left knee as well as with Abadjiev, with whom he was becoming more and more disillusioned. Burned out by the weightlifting scene, he essentially quit training and embarked upon efforts to find a new life. A sizeable chapter in the book is devoted to describing the twists and turns of his Kafkaesque campaign to wrangle a career outside of sport.<sup>38</sup> In fact, that chapter is an instructive example into how things were done (or attempted) during the communist period. Connections, even more than in the West, were absolutely vital. Because of his sports fame, Hristov of course had a good number of such connections. One aspiration he had was



to get into law school at the University of Sofia, but this would be difficult; with his paltry academic background he could not expect to do well on the entry exams. One angle he tried was to become a competitor for a different weightlifting club—he was officially still lifting for Pernik at that time—where one of the top officials promised to help Hristov get into a special school for State Security agents. This might have been a good launchpad for him to get into law school—or at least to have a steady job in a supposedly stable occupation—but this approach ran into difficulties when officials in Pernik got wind of Hristov's intention to switch clubs.

Many failed efforts later, Hristov gave up on that approach and instead decided to enter as a student at the National Sports Academy, to which Hristov automatically became entitled when he won the Olympics (regardless, apparently, of the doping problem). Then, Hristov's idea was, the rector there could transfer Hristov to the Law School at Sofia University. However, this plan also went awry when the rector at Sofia University refused to go along. As an alternative, one of Hristov's connections suggested that Hristov should just attend classes for a year at the National Sports Academy and then try again to get permission to enter Law School.

In the end, Hristov finally decided that perhaps the best way forward would be to go back to the weightlifting team and try to win a gold medal at the Moscow Olympics of 1980. After all, as some of his friends and contacts pointed out, he was still only twenty-two years old in 1978. With a medal in Moscow he could then proceed to the National Sports Academy, and perhaps try later to get into law school. So Hristov went back to Abadjiev and asked if he could rejoin the team. Abadjiev replied that the door was always open to him, and Hristov reluctantly resumed his lifting.<sup>39</sup>

But Hristov was still having knee problems and still worried about his general health. In September of 1978 he went to see a traditional "healer." Hristov claims that it was only with the herbs he received from that healer that he was able to continue training for Moscow.<sup>40</sup> But the problem with the left knee remained and in 1980 he started having problems with the right knee as well. The team doctor thought it was probably a torn meniscus and would require surgery to fix. However, one day Hristov's teammate Blagoev, who was also having knee problems, came to Hristov to report that he had found someone who had helped him. Blagoev then took Hristov to another famous "healer." This healer's

technique involved working a massive callous on the joint of his finger into the side of the knee, the apparent philosophy being that "one nail drives out another." The procedure hurt tremendously, according to Hristov, but he and Blagoev continued to see the healer from time to time during their training in 1979 and 1980.<sup>41</sup>

It seems evident in retrospect that Hristov's injury problems remained a serious hindrance. His next big meet was the European Weightlifting Championships in Belgrade in the spring of 1980. Here Hristov made only his opening snatch with 175 kilos (385.7 pounds). He claims that he was strong enough at the time to have made 182.5 kilos (402.2 kilos) but that the combination of the long stairs to the platform and the uneven platform itself rattled him. He made 227.5 kilos (501.5 pounds) in the clean and jerk, giving him a total of 402.5 kilos (887.2 pounds). But this was not up to the standard of the rising Soviet star Leonid Taranenko, who won gold with a new world record total of 420 kilos (925.7 pounds) with lifts of 190 kilos (418.7 pounds) and 230 kilos (507 pounds).

The Moscow Olympics came less than two months later—at the end of June 1980. It was obvious that Taranenko would be no pushover. But Hristov reports doing 187.5 (413.2 pounds) and 245 kilos (540 pounds) on his last workout before leaving for Moscow. These lifts would have given him a total of 432.5 kilos (953.2 pounds). Hristov's trainers reckoned that he would lose to Taranenko by five kilos in the snatch, but would have a good chance to win gold by beating Taranenko by five or seven-and-a-half kilos in the clean and jerk. Hristov's openers would be 177.5 kilos (391.2 pounds) and 230 kilos (507 pounds). When Taranenko's openers were announced as 182.5 kilos (402.2 pounds) and 220 kilos (485 pounds) and when the Soviet lifter weighed in slightly heavier than Hristov, the Bulgarian coaches breathed a little easier. But Hristov was having a bad case of nerves.

Things looked good for Hristov after the snatch. He made all three lifts at 177.5 (391.2), 182.5 (402.2), and 185 (407.7). Taranenko, however, after making his opener of 182.5 (402.2), jumped to 190 (418.7), and missed both attempts. This left Hristov 2.5 kilos ahead and lighter as well. Abadjiev's conservative strategy in the clean and jerk was for Hristov just to try to match whatever Taranenko did, since if successful this would leave Hristov safely ahead. Both lifters did 220 kilos (485 pounds) relatively easily. But Taranenko then



jumped to 235 kilos (496 pounds) on his second attempt—and succeeded. Hristov racked the 235 kilos on his second attempt, but just did not have the leg strength to stand with it. On his third attempt, Hristov managed to struggle up with the bar, but he writes that just as he was about to jerk it a spectator jumped up from his seat and stabbed the air with his fist. Somehow the bar got away from Hristov and he lost the lift. But even if he had made that lift it would not have been enough. Taranenko went on to make a 240 kilo (529 pound) clean and jerk, a new world record to go with his world record of 422.5 kilos (931.2 pounds) in the total.<sup>42</sup>

Hristov, of course, was initially distraught. He went back to his room, stayed there much of the rest of his time in Moscow, and didn't have the energy or the desire, he reports, to watch the rest of the Olympic competition or even to spend his allotment of rubles. On the one hand, he had not bombed (which he thinks he might have done had he opened with 230 kilos (507 pounds) in the clean and jerk as they had originally planned) and after all he won a silver medal—which would earn him a new Lada automobile on his return. On the other hand, he was aggravated by the thought that he could have trained only five times a week for three hours each day without any pills or injections and still won the silver medal with lifts of 175 kilos (385.7 pounds) and 220 kilos (485 pounds). But he was consoled by the thought that he had finished his lifting career honorably, and that now it was time for him to start his writing career.<sup>43</sup>

The book ends rather abruptly, with only a few short paragraphs for the period after the Moscow Olympics. In there he explains that he didn't actually begin writing his story until five years later. By then he had finally received a diploma from the National Sports Academy—his plans for going to law school had gone by the board. During those five years he had also been an assistant trainer at the "Olympic Hopes" Sports School, but he had grown weary of the long hours and the trip from Pernik to Sofia every day. He mentions also that he was frustrated with his coaching position, mainly because of Abadjiev's influence, who prevented him from coaching the kids at the school the way he wanted. So he made the decision to leave the sports school and big-time weightlifting. Initially, he wanted to find a job as a physical education teacher in Pernik, but it wasn't permitted. He was a former world champion and his duty—as the sports bureaucrats saw it—was to help in producing more weightlifting champions.

So Hristov basically spent almost the entire period from 1986 through 1989 without a regular job (though with periods of work in the informal or "gray economy.") With the help of his parents and friends, he persisted with his book. Ironically, by the time he finished it the communist system in Bulgaria (and the rest of Europe) was beginning to crumble and give way to the tumultuous "transition phase" and chaotic economic conditions. It took Hristov another eight years to find a publisher. Even then, as was mentioned earlier, the book virtually disappeared almost as soon as it appeared on the market. As a consequence, Hristov received almost no money or personal acclaim for the book on which he had worked so long.

Hristov continues to live in Pernik, and now supports himself partly on the pension he receives for his silver medal in the 1980 Olympics, but also by casting bronze to produce small bells and other decorative items for sale in gift and souvenir shops. He has never returned to coaching competitive weightlifting, and in fact has virtually no contact with Abadjiev or with any of his former team-mates. As he is in much of his book, Hristov has continued to be critical of the management of high-level weightlifting generally and of Abadjiev's role in it specifically.

It should not be concluded, however, that Hristov's disenchantment or disillusionment with the weightlifting scene is typical of most former Bulgarian weightlifters. Part of Hristov's problem almost certainly was the fact that he just did not take well to Abadjiev's coaching style. Abadjiev was, by all accounts, an extremely hard-nosed coach and trainer. He pushed and bullied his lifters relentlessly.<sup>44</sup> But most of those lifters adapted and gradually learned to let the hectoring roll off their backs. To them it was just part of the game. They knew they had to train very hard to stay on the team, and that was just a fact. But like legions of other athletes before and after who have had to contend with aggressive, driven coaches, they would attempt to get away with as much as they possibly could, both in their training routines and their lives outside the lifting hall. They just did not take Abadjiev's bullying and badgering personally.

In contrast, Hristov was certainly much more sensitive than most of Abadjiev's wards. The second chapter of Hristov's book is called "A Sadistic Lesson in Manliness," and it concerns an episode that occurred shortly before Hristov's first big international meet—the



European Championships in Verona, Italy—when he was only eighteen years old.<sup>45</sup> Hristov recalls that one evening, during his last heavy workout before the competition he was the only lifter in the hall as the other lifters had left earlier after only doing warm-ups (they would be lifting at Verona before Hristov.) Abadjiev had decided that Hristov should work up to a snatch of 170 kilos (374.7 pounds) and a clean and jerk of 215 kilos (473.7 pounds) during that final training session. As Hristov waited for Abadjiev he had a hard time concentrating and getting fired up for the heavy weights. And even after Abadjiev arrived to watch, Hristov found that the weights still felt heavy. Although he tried again and again he was unable to make a 160 kilo (352.5 pound) snatch. As he watched these successive failures Abadjiev became more and more agitated. Finally, after Hristov's ninth (!) unsuccessful try, Abadjiev's wife happened to come in. Abadjiev immediately jumped up and cried, "Do you think you can snatch it for my wife? Let's see it, snatch it for my wife!" But Hristov missed it again, and Abadjiev's interpretation was that the failure "proved that I didn't respect his wife enough."<sup>46</sup>

Things went downhill from there. Abadjiev decided to leave the snatches, to give Hristov a fifteen-minute break, and then have the young lifter work up in the clean and jerk. However, the clean and jerks went much the same way and Hristov couldn't manage even 200 kilos (440.7 pounds)—a relatively trivial weight for him. By this time Abadjiev was in a rage and shouted, "Don't you remember, Valentin? At the beginning of last month I promised you that I would let you compete in Verona. But now you can't lift 200! How can I send you? You will bomb out in Verona and wreck the team's chances!" After another failed try, Hristov began to cry and this enraged Abadjiev further—"You are going to convince me with tears? It's the end! No European Championships for you! I don't need your kind!"<sup>47</sup>

Hristov kept trying, unsuccessfully, to lift the 200 kilos over his head, and even developed a nose-bleed, but Abadjiev kept ranting. Finally, though, after it appeared that Hristov might injure himself, Abadjiev gave up and began to settle down. He later tried, half-apologetically, to explain that when Hristov had broken out in tears, "I did what the senior coach needs to do. Even though I didn't want to, even though it went against my feelings, I flared up. I flared up because you have to understand that you won't go far if you break out crying for this or that."<sup>48</sup>

Two days later when Abadjiev was about to catch a flight for Verona, he first came by and woke Hristov at six in the morning to have him do some back squats in the gym. That same morning, according to Hristov, Abadjiev told him, "There is no real problem . . . Your legs are strong." Continuing, Hristov added, "As I remember I squatted 255 kilos (562 pounds) or five kilos below my maximum at the time. And, as I said, I won the silver medal on the platform in Verona—and almost got gold. But the wound from the yelling and the insults did *not* help me to become more of a man."<sup>49</sup>

I believe this incident reveals a lot about Hristov's sensitivity and, of course, about Abadjiev's behavior as the coach of a gifted teenager. Over time both adapted, to some extent, to each other. Abadjiev, it is clear, learned that Hristov did not react well to tough-coach tactics, especially during competitions, and that such tactics were indeed counter-productive. And Hristov, to a degree, learned to take Abadjiev in stride. But it is also clear from Hristov's book (and from conversations with him) that there were many incidents between the two men that left scars and bitterness. Hristov basically was a very young, self-motivated athlete who was also easily offended—and likely to nurse a grudge. He was also always uncomfortable with the intensive doping regime. Abadjiev, however, had little time or inclination for such sensibilities.<sup>50</sup>

In retrospect, perhaps the most surprising thing about their relationship is that Hristov lasted as long as he did, especially after the debacle at the Montreal Olympics. To the reviewer the tragedy is that Hristov came along at the time when doping became so prevalent, and found himself under the complete authority of Ivan Abadjiev, one of its most ardent practitioners. Because of Hristov's astonishing natural abilities, and especially his individual drive and motivation, it seems very possible that in a drug-free world he would have been even more successful—relative to other world-class lifters—than he actually was. As it turned out, his lifting career played out in an environment of intensive training and doping of near mad-house proportions.

While Hristov's book certainly has its weaknesses, it is nevertheless extremely interesting and valuable for its insights into a particular epoch of weightlifting history and its portrait of an individual caught up in that epoch. Elite Soviet and Eastern Europe sports, exemplified also in East German swimming and track and field, were often ruthlessly and relentlessly pursued,



and Hristov's book is plausible in its portrayal of that pursuit in our oldest strength sport. But the book is also interesting on a personal level, for it is clear that some athletes, at least, just do not fit well in such a sports regime. To this reviewer, the book makes a significant and lasting contribution to sport history.

## NOTES:

1. Hristov believes that the book was withdrawn from the market after only a few weeks due to political pressures coming from the Bulgarian Olympic Committee, specifically Ivan Slavkov, then a member of the IOC. This seems very likely, especially given that the reviewer could not find a copy in any of Sofia's libraries or universities. As a result of the removal of the book it registered almost no sales and hence generated no income for Hristov, in spite of the enormous amount of time he spent on it. It also received no meaningful attention within Bulgaria. A surprising part of the story is that the publisher, who had left the business years earlier, contacted Hristov in 2011 and dropped off a number of remaining copies of the book.
2. In the reviewer's opinion the book could have really used a good editor. Whether or not Hristov would have accepted such editing is not so clear. Hristov definitely has a sensitive ego and is easily offended; not an unusual circumstance among big-time athletes and first-time authors.
3. Valentin Hristov, *Шампионът на Кръстът* (*Champion on a Cross*), (Sofia, Bulgaria: Guteranov & Son, 1997/1998), 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 33.
5. Abadjiev's introduction of much heavier and more concentrated workouts was certainly his main contribution to weightlifting training. In contrast to the generally accepted practices of the 1960s and earlier, Abadjiev believed that his athletes would soon adapt to twice-a-day workouts, for five and six days per week. This intensive training is now well-accepted in many parts of the world, at least for top-level lifters.
6. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 44.
7. *Ibid.*, 46.
8. The system in Bulgaria (following the pattern of East Germany) was that students who wanted to go on with more academic studies would go to a "gymnasium" after the eighth grade for preparation for university studies. Less academically inclined students would enroll in technical schools where they would receive mainly vocational training of various kinds. Some of the technical schools, it should be mentioned, were considered quite strong in their respective fields.
9. During the communist period, students would perform "brigade work," consisting of various kinds of manual labor, e.g., gathering crops on collective farms, typically before the beginning of the school year.
10. Bulgaria had by then instituted, along with their technical schools and gymnasiums, a network of sports schools. While the students there would attend classes much as in the gymnasiums, class work took a distant second place to sports training. The "Olympic Hopes" sports school had a large share of elite athletes and in weightlifting was closely linked with the national team. Here the school work was apparently reduced to a bare minimum, and was only a formality.
11. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 58.
12. *Ibid.*, 75.
13. Hristov mentions that other lifters claimed that Ustyuzhin's record lift of 227.5 kilos (501.5 pounds) was very questionable, and this was born out in the reporting by George Kirkley, "Great Lifting at European Championships," *Iron Man* 35, no. 4 (November 1974): 42.
14. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 97.
15. Oscar State, then General-Secretary of the IWF, reported on the event in "First Junior World and European Championship," *International Olympic Lifter* 2, no. 8 (July 1975): 9-22, where he stated that Hristov with his senior and junior world records was the outstanding lifter of the meet. He noted also that his total at the meet would "rank him among the best superheavyweights in the world." And indeed Hristov's total was the highest of any lifter in the meet by a considerable margin.
16. This is clear in the famous Bruce Klemens photos run—along with his article about the contest—in "The Greatest Lift Ever Attempted?" *Iron Man* 35, no. 3 (March 1976), 40. It's interesting that the wording in Hristov's book, p.128, is somewhat ambiguous, and makes it sound as if he actually completed the lift after the bar had slightly slipped downward or forward from his shoulders. Be that as it may, Hristov was so good in the jerk portion of the lift that he and many objective experts felt that he would have jerked the 245.5 kilos had he cleaned it.
17. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 145.
18. *Ibid.*, 147.
19. Terry Todd, "Continental Europe vs. the Americas: the Montreal Meet," *Strength & Health* 44, no. 3 (April/May 1976): 53-54.
20. Bob Hoffman, "The Lifting in Gettysburg," *Strength & Health* 44, no. 3 (April/May 1976): 67. Hristov does not mention this, and suggests on page 160 of his autobiography that he competed but bombed.
21. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 165. Also training at Belmeken were many East German athletes, including the weightlifting team, though in a separate facility from the Bulgarians.
22. Retabolil is sold in the USA as Deca-durabolin.
23. But it never turned red, which was a disappointment because Abadjiev believed that having blood in the urine, as supposedly happened with Alexandar Krajchev before Munich, would show how hard they were training. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 169.
24. *Ibid.*, 170.
25. *Ibid.*, 162.
26. *Ibid.*, 183. Hristov's passage is useful: "After a few moments he [Abadjiev] came to his conclusion: he was forced to start giving out anabolic steroids since the others were training less than we were and then lifting more than we did in the meets. The bottom line was that the position we were in was not his [Abadjiev's] fault. So, Abadjiev proposed that we save the team from failure: to go back on the whites [steroids] and to give the urine of others to the Commission for Doping Control at the San Michel Arena."
27. *Ibid.*, 185.
28. *Ibid.*, 188. Hristov asks himself: "Would a normal person die with a heart attack from such big doses of Dianabol — who can say?" [*Editors' note: As a way to comprehend this level of doping, consider that when Terry Todd used Dianabol in the mid-1960s, the most he ever used on a daily basis was two five milligram tablets (a hundred times less than Hristov), and Todd weighed almost a hundred pounds more.*]
29. *Ibid.*, 188. Hristov claims, with some plausibility, that he could



have matched these lifts, maybe even bettered them, if he had trained the entire year clean and worked out only four hours a day.

30. *Ibid.*, 200-203.

31. *Ibid.*, 204. "At the first session of the Medical Commission of the IOC the vote was taken that the positive results for the doping samples of Zbignev Kachmarek, Blagoi Blagoev, and myself were more important than the squashed lead seals on the urine containers. Or more exactly, that we needed to be punished for doping."

32. Blagoev, the other Bulgarian nailed for doping, had won silver, while another Bulgarian, Trendafil Stoichev (who did not test positive) had won bronze. So Stoichev moved up to take silver after the doping positives, and a Hungarian lifter then took bronze.

33. *Ibid.*, 205.

34. *Ibid.*, 220. In fact, Hristov says, if he had been feeling off that day he might have considered bombing intentionally to increase the pressure on the Ministry of Sport to dismiss Abadjiev.

35. *Ibid.*, 224.

36. *Ibid.*, 219.

37. *Ibid.*, 226. Hristov's attitude of having been unfairly nailed for doping is symptomatic of a very common attitude among Bulgarian elite lifters, and indeed among elite lifters world-wide. The attitude is that virtually all top lifters use doping, and that it is virtually impossible to win medals without it. So, as they see it, the real issue is not whether one has been doping, but whether one gets *caught* for doping. If some trick is introduced in the testing so that it is not conducted "fairly," then any individual disqualification is unfair, since *everyone* is doping.

38. *Ibid.*, 227-242.

39. *Ibid.*, 242.

40. *Ibid.*, 245.

41. *Ibid.*, 247. Supposedly the healer had been brought by the Track and Field Association to stay temporarily at the dorm/hotel where the team members lived, and to help with injured athletes prior to the Moscow Olympics.

42. *Ibid.*, 252-253.

43. *Ibid.*, 254-255.

44. Anyone who has any doubts about whether this characterization is accurate might want to take a look at the excellent documentary film produced by Adela Peeva, et.al., *In the Name of Sport* ("В Името на Спорт"), edited at the state film studio "Vreme." The film (available with English sub-titles) was originally produced in 1983 and was understandably very controversial at the time. It not only showed Abadjiev and other sports figures in an unfavorable (but apparently accurate) light but also examined some of the doping practices during that era. Although the coaches of many of the national teams in various sports as well as many faculty members at the National Sports Academy were given a viewing, the film did not see the light of day in a public venue or on TV until after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989.

45. Hristov, *Champion on a Cross*, 9-13.

46. *Ibid.*, 9.

47. *Ibid.*, 10.

48. *Ibid.*, 12.

49. *Ibid.*, 13.

50. Tough coaching techniques were not unique to Abadjiev or to weightlifting or to Bulgaria. One would suspect that Abadjiev would have fit in well as a coach with many American football teams. Abadjiev probably was not familiar with the aphorism often inaccurately attributed to famed football coach Vince Lombardi ("Winning isn't

everything. It's the *only* thing."), but he likely would have shared that outlook. And there was also the fact that he was always, *always* under great pressure from the political regime to produce *results*, which meant winning medals in international competition.

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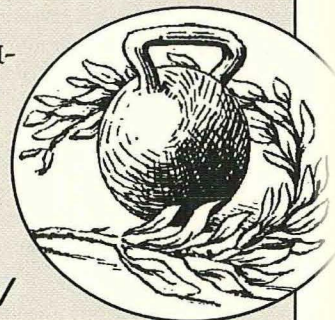
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