



# IRON GAME HISTORY



THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

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## THE KONO LEGACY

During this past holiday season a large shipment of large boxes was delivered to the Stark Center at the University of Texas in Austin. Some of the boxes weighed over a hundred pounds and they contained material assembled over the long life of Tommy Kono—one of the Iron Game's most legendary athletes. Almost immediately we began to unpack the boxes and sort the contents into appropriate categories in preparation for the long and time-consuming task of having the contents systematically archived so they can be used in the future by fans as well as academic researchers. During this process, Jan Todd, who directs the Ph.D. Program in Physical Culture and Sport Studies here at UT, said she believed the Kono Collection contained enough



**Weightlifting legends as well as fast friends and fellow Hawaiians for more than 60 years, Tommy Kono (left) and Pete George (right) share a 375-pound barbell as well as a laugh, as they perform a rare two-man clean and jerk.**

material for a number of doctoral dissertations during the coming years.

Shortly after the Kono Collection arrived on campus, we decided to share the wonderful news with the readers of Joe Roark's *Iron History* internet forum. Accordingly, I sent the following announcement to Roark and told him to feel free to share the news with his readers.

*The Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports*

*just received a unique and wonderful addition—the Tommy Kono Collection, which came in over 40 boxes and weighed well over a ton. As some of you may have known, Tommy assembled over*

*his long life a large and eclectic collection of materials relating primarily to weightlifting. Besides being an incomparable lifter, Tommy was a saver, and his collection contains books, magazines, photographs, films, videotapes, awards and medals, including the dozens he won from the early years, small ones up to and including his Olympic trove and his Mr. Universe trophies. Tommy also collected artifacts of all sorts, perhaps the most valuable of which, from a research*

*perspective, is his remarkable, detailed series of training logs covering most of his dominant years. These book-like logs list every rep, set, and workout he did, along with such information as what he ate, how he felt, who he saw, and much more; they even contain comments which make Tommy and his time come to life again. These logs are in a way like books of the sort Ernest Hemingway referred to when he wrote, "All the good books are alike in that they are truer than*

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*if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that it all had happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.*

The primary architect of this matchless gift is another lifting legend, Dr. Pete George, who has been a subscriber to *Iron Game History* since our first issue was published in 1990, when he became a Patron. It should be added that Pete's own accomplishments on the platform are very little, if at all, below those of Kono, his fellow Hawaiian and long-time friend.

Following the end of his competitive lifting career, Tommy did not fade away from the Iron Game. He served as coach of the Mexican national weightlifting team for four years before the 1968 Games in Mexico City and then worked with the West German team for another four years before the Munich Games in 1972. He was then named head coach of the 1976 US Olympic Weightlifting Team that competed in Montreal. After 1976, he supported himself by giving clinics and taking a job with the Honolulu Parks and Recreation Department, where he quickly rose in rank. He also continued to attend major lifting meets, to serve as an official, to offer advice to young lifters, and to stay in touch with other celebrities in the worlds of sports and popular culture. There was even a documentary film made about him called *Arnold Knows Me*. The title of the film referred to a question the director of the film asked Tommy after having seen a signed photograph of Arnold on the wall in the Kono home. "Do you know Arnold?" he asked Kono, to which Tommy answered with a smile, saying, "Arnold Knows Me"—a reference to his long friendship with Schwarzenegger, who often spoke about how, when he was only a 13-year-old boy in Austria, he saw Tommy Kono lift in the World Championships in Vienna and decided that he wanted to be a weightlifter just like Tommy Kono.

Although Pete was managing his thriving dental practice in Honolulu and Tommy was increasingly busy at his job for the city's Parks and Recreation Department, the two men and their families remained very close and saw each other often. After Tommy became ill, Pete visited frequently and the Kono family sought Pete's counsel about what should be done with his collection of papers

and memorabilia. The Konos wanted to make sure that Tommy's legacy would be protected and his materials would be cared for and made available to weightlifting fans and scholars alike. And so, with encouragement from Pete, the decision was made to donate the collection to the Stark Center so it could be preserved for posterity.

Following his death last April, we have had numerous conversations with Pete George and members of the Kono family about the transfer of the collection to The University of Texas at Austin. As we thought more about Tommy's multi-faceted life and many contributions to the Iron Game we decided, even before we knew the collection was coming to the Stark Center, to produce a special issue of *IGH* focused primarily on Kono—as we did in 2000 when we honored the late John Grimek.

Accordingly, we asked John Fair—who has spent the spring semester with at the center for the last six years and also taught a physical culture class for the past three years—to help us with the creation of such a special issue. John agreed to write the lead article about Kono and to solicit other articles about him. John also agreed to go to Honolulu and oversee the sorting of the collection and—with days of help from his wife, Sarah; as well as assistance from Pete and members of the Kono family—the packing of the collection.

Our belief is that the more a person knows about the sport of weightlifting, the more he/she will understand how unendingly grateful we are to the Kono family for entrusting us with Tommy's collection, and how fully committed we are to preserving his memory and sharing with the wider world his singular contributions to the strength sports. We've already made a decision to add him to our Wall of Icons, which includes such legends as Eugen Sandow, John Grimek, John Davis, and Kati Sandwina. And, once we fully unpack and archive Tommy's priceless collection, we're going to mount a display devoted to him and his lifting cohorts—men like Schemansky, John Davis, and Pete George—who ruled the world during the Golden Age of American Weightlifting.

Over our 34 years at the University of Texas Jan and I have been fortunate to have been trusted with many significant collections from giants of The Game. Beyond question, the Tommy Kono Collection ranks among the most exceptional, and we are deeply grateful to the wonderful Kono family and to Pete George for helping it make its way to the Stark Center, where it will always be among friends.

—Terry Todd

# NORBERT SCHEMANSKY

## AMERICAN LIFTING'S LAST SUPERSTAR:

ON HERO AS THE FOCUS OF A GREAT GAME'S "MEANING"

Al Thomas

*Kutztown State University*

*Editor's Note: About a decade before he died in 2008, retired English professor and physical culture author Al Thomas—now most often remembered for his groundbreaking articles in Iron Man about strong, weight-trained women during the 1960s through the early 1980s—also wrote a number of much longer and more theoretical essays that dealt in various ways with strength, manhood, womanhood, muscle, and beauty. As the years passed and Jan began her own career as a strength seeker, we all became closer friends*

*and corresponded with Al, and he began sending copies of unpublished articles and original manuscripts to us so that they could be added to our archives and available to researchers in the future. Accompanying almost all of such contributions from Al would be a long (always long), hand-typed letter, sharing his memories and insights into the world of men's and women's strength building, competitive lifting, and bodybuilding. Unlike most modern*



For several years early in his lifting career, Norbert Schemansky—to help the US team win points as well as to avoid having to compete against the American heavyweight John Davis—kept his weight down and entered either the 181-pound class or, after it was created, the 90-kilo (198-pound) class, where he sometimes out-lifted the 220- to 225-pound John Davis in the snatch and in the clean and jerk. In 1951, for example, when Schemansky became the first world champion in the 90-kilo (middle-heavyweight) class, his snatch was 2.5 kilos (5.5 pounds) better than Davis', and his clean and jerk was 10 kilos (22 pounds) ahead of the heavier man's. Davis was far better in the press, however, making 142.5 kilos (314 pounds) to Schemansky's 125 kilos (275 pounds).

*typewriter, he continued his writing, and his thinking. One day, to our great surprise, we received one of his poorly-typed letters saying that he'd been working "on a piece (in the days after learning of his death) on Norbert S." Why had we not heard the news, we wondered, until we checked and were relieved to learn that the legendary gold medalist was still very much alive.*

*Be that as it may, even after we told Al that Sche-*

*Americans, Al never embraced computers, but did his best to keep abreast of his world through phone calls and, especially, letters. In the best and truest sense of the word, Al was a "man of letters." As the years rolled on and his extraordinary vigor was undone by his illness, he more and more often used his letters to provide the latest news of his remarkable family and his inexorable decline as he was overtaken by prostate cancer.*

*Even so, and even though his poor circulation had left most of his fingers unable to bang out letters on his manual*

*mansky was not only alive, but feeling well, Al decided to continue to write his essay on Schemansky, explaining in all capital letters that he wanted to finish it, "JUST FOR THE FUN OF GETTING THE WORDS AND IDEAS STRAIGHT AND TRUE, FOR MYSELF." Al explained that he'd been inspired by Joyce Carol Oates' new novel, Blonde, based on Marilyn Monroe's life, and he acknowledged the irony of using Monroe to explain the often taciturn weightlifter by writing, "Norbert and Marilyn, a match made in heaven if there ever was one."*

*Armed with this new inspiration, Al explained that although he was embarrassed to have been writing an obituary for a living man he wanted to complete the essay and send it to us. "I'd love to have a reason to finish this effort," he wrote, "and to have another set of eyes glance over it." Al's letter continued, "I first met N.S. about 55 years ago, and shadowed him and eavesdropped on him and talked to him and tried to get to the bottom of him . . . HIM, I do find interesting—a paradox difficult to plumb the depths of, even if they should prove to be not very deep depths. There are other causes for, causes of, depth than mere ("official" and usually defined) deepness. A damn tiger is quite deep, withal."*<sup>1</sup>

*Some months later the essay arrived, and we both read it immediately and found that like many of Al's efforts it was ambitious, heartfelt, at times brilliant, and yet somewhat dialectically confusing. Accordingly, because Al maintained that he had written it as a "thought exercise" and not as an article to necessarily be published, we filed it away with his other papers and for the most part forgot about it.*

*Time passed...and almost ten years after Al lost his struggle against the "dying of the light," the legendary four-time Olympic medal winner Norbert Schemansky finally passed on September 7, 2016 at the age of 94. Jan and I were both saddened, of course, and I was actually surprised by the news because as long as I'd done "Olympic lifting" and read about it, Schemansky had always been an inspiration to me due to his unique combination of power, appearance, size, and ruggedness. He seemed almost immortal.*

*It was not until the early fall of 1964 that I actually met Schemansky and saw him up close in all his puissant majesty. I'd taken a job only a few weeks before as a managing editor of Strength and Health magazine in York, Pennsylvania, and Ski was in York along with most of the 1964 US Weightlifting Team for some final tryouts just prior to the Games in Tokyo. To be able to mingle and even*

*train with such record holders as Ike Berger, Bill March, Tommy Kono, and the massive but graceful Schemansky was tall cotton indeed to a growing boy like me. Nor were the gym sessions the best time to talk shop with the legends; the best time was in the evenings at the bar in the Yorktowne Hotel, where most of the team gathered to drink beer, talk lifting, and drink more beer. Ski was renowned for his consumption, and as a fellow heavyweight I gravitated to his end of the table and did my best to keep up with him as he continued signaling for more. As an Olympic team member, Ski and all the other lifters were eating and drinking on the USOC tab, which delighted Ski on a number of levels. I remember one night when he made us all laugh and laugh by showing us a note he'd gotten just that day from a USOC official complaining that Ski's bar tab the previous week had been larger than his meal tab. Considerably larger.*

*As we began thinking about the passing of this particular giant, and what to say and do about it in Iron Game History, Jan remembered Al Thomas' premature eulogy. And when we went back into the archives hoping it wouldn't take us all afternoon to find Al's reflections about Schemansky among our extensive holdings of Al's work, either pure serendipity or the mighty hand of the "Lord of Iron" placed that particular essay on the very top of the first Al Thomas folder we opened. Finding the essay again, so easily, gave us pause, and rereading it made us grateful to the essayist as well as his subject. We offer it here in honor of Norbert Schemansky and Al Thomas—two unique men whose long careers changed the Game both men worshipped in the best sense of that word.*

**—Terry Todd**



In the world of sports journalism with its venal "legends" and conjured "heroics"—in a sports establishment whose PR departments labor full time converting sinners into saints and vacuous games into morality plays—our truly great Game "piously," almost self-hatingly, denies all but the most mechanical explanations of its and its heroes' Meaning.

The cash cow American games have no qualms about showering monetary contributions upon their myth-making PR staffs and their multimillion-dollar Halls of Fame. All this in return for the most embarrassingly excessive attributions to them of every high-level virtue implicit to our human condition. But when it comes to this Game of ours, the greatest of Games, the worried advice



is: “Stow all that high-falutin’ stuff, Al. Just the damn facts. How big is so-and-so’s arm? Baseball’s different. Baseball’s about America and mom’s apple pie. The American Way. Bodybuilding’s about big arms. The numbers, man. The numbers.”

At some point in our love affair with strength and muscle, like it or not, we have to come to grips with the fact that the (self-diminishing) devotee of the muscle-and-strength Game has been conditioned (sufficiently brow-beaten) to exempt his very own Game from the celebration and philosophical analysis that cause him to grow weepy-eyed when they’re applied to a “real sport” like baseball (with its Coopers-town and movie images of pink-cheeked bumpkins running around in dreamy meadows).

The citizens of our great Game are not patriots. Unlike their counterparts in baseball, they are almost congenitally unable to contemplate their grand endeavor in anything other than a materialistic frame of reference, premised upon numbers, pounds, inches, and dates—surely never in a more philosophical framework.

No other sport or game has been as reticent as our own to avail itself of the spiritual enlargement and emotional enrichment that accompany honest, self-probing philosophical analysis, embarked upon without fear of the insights (transcendent or even “religious”) that might be uncovered beneath all that sweaty muscle and its doings.

In short and ironically, the ultimate strength and muscle Game, Ours, contemptuously pooh-poohs even its own devout “fans” observation, grandly or simply stated, that the flesh of its mighty champions bespeaks more about spirit, more about what makes a human being human, than all the games and game players known to history—despite



**Norbert Schemansky, early in his weightlifting career, posed for a number of nude photographs taken by Douglas of Detroit, as did his older brother—a practice not unusual for weight trainers during those years. Many such photos were retouched so that they could illustrate the physique of the athlete, just as this photo from pre-steroid 1947 illustrates the heavy development of Ski’s legs and lower body.**

their multimillion-dollar Halls of Fame and PR departments. Our Game’s river of blood sweeps its celebrants back, not to the Civil War and its general staff, but back to the very beginning of body, back to the original Garden before anybody had dreamed up an outfield or a Trinity of bases.

### **Enter: Norbert Schemansky**

Forty-two years ago, my wife and I attended one of the pre-Olympic training sessions at the York Barbell Club’s Ridge Avenue gym. Seated next to us that afternoon was a noisy group of local high school girls who’d seized this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to catch a glimpse of the handsome young lifters and, of course, their bodybuilding buddies, gathered there to root them on, among them a future Mr. America and Universe.

The afternoon progressed with wonderful lifting, accompanied by the ceaseless chatter from the bleacher bench of girls as they elbowed one another in admiration of this and, then, that “cute boy.” On and on. Until, about an hour into the session, the pack’s lead girl caught a glimpse of Schemansky in a cut-off sweatshirt and shorts. She blanched and, as a reflex, her elbow banged into the ribs of her neighbor, who, following her leader’s gaze, fell silent, as her elbow sought the ribs of her neighbor. Onward: elbow banging ribs, down the long line of suddenly deflated girls.

This was an event easily missed in the china plate clatter of dropping barbells, but one that spoke volumes about the ineffable effect of grandly designed muscle upon even the flightiest, the silliest and most callow, of girls. But, then, this wasn’t just grandly designed muscle. Of that, there was much, everywhere one turned his eyes. This was, however, the supreme gathering-up-into-one-body of

grand muscle. It was Schemansky. Far from the handsomest man in the gym. By most high school girls' standards, the least (Hollywood) handsome man out there on the platforms. But he was Schemansky.

If the shining-muscled "cute" boys were the fuel for showoffy young-girl chatter and posturing, this grizzled middle-aged man—not just his Herculean muscle, but the grizzled maleness of this furious middle-aged male—stopped these girls, each of them, dead, in mid-sentence, in slackjawed double- (and triple-) takes.

In a loose-fitting business suit, he wouldn't have seized the attention of even one pair of eyes. But here in his bareleggedness and bare-armedness, he set off the hormone cascades of a benchful of high school sillies, who'd announced a hundred times over during their lives, to one and all, that they "just hated big muscles."

Having caught her breath, the pack's lead girl croaked, "Oh, my God. Look at that one. He's somebody big. He's gotta be somebody big, very big. Oh, my God. Look at him." Since Skee wasn't, in actual fact, the session's biggest man, in circumference or height, it was clear that this young girl meant "big" in import: in his impact, even there in the midst of those big guys. She meant "big" as in "important, formidable, imposing, meaningful." "Big" as in Schemansky.

With Skee, what you saw was what you got. As with all great sculptural art, his body (his "what-you-saw-ness") was an artifact of long- and painfully-crafted masculine beauty. It provided text. It was text. Like all such bodies, his was a book, one that was full of meaning and available to being "read," without any biographical knowledge of the "book's" author, the man himself. A "book" in, and of, flesh.

There was also meaning of the old-fashioned sort (the usual sort) in Skee. The sort of meaning purveyed by biographers and historians and schoolteachers. There was meaning of the sort that you'd expect from a strongman who—unlike his smiling shadow, the "Dixie Derrick," Paul Anderson—chose never to accommodate society's needs by conforming to some MGM cliché of the Herculean innocent: tousled and artless, yet somehow filled to the brim with enough farmboy charm and shtick to grease the skids for his scary muscle and brute strength.

(Standing there on a lifting platform in the fullness



**Schemansky, as he continued to train hard into his thirties, gradually built muscle mass until he weighed between 260 and 270 pounds, with far less fat and far more shape than almost all other superheavyweights from his era through this one. In this photo, by Cecil Charles, he is seen with magazine publisher Peary Rader on the left and Bob Hise in the center.**

of his powers—Schemansky is Schemansky: those magnificent Polish guns, hanging there at his sides or akimbo. Dour. Four-square. Expressionless. Looking the wide world straight in its eye through those artless, but somehow, invulnerable, spectacles of his. No Oscar candidate, this one. No cliché from Central casting, this unsmiling and wordless one. The look on his face of a man who'd opt, almost, for crucifixion, rather than play some sort of role or even just play along for the sake of good-guyness. Play-acting was definitely NOT part of the splendid Game that he'd signed onto, an angry lifetime earlier.)

What you see is truly what you get in Skee, but this is, of course, not the only thing you get. As in any complex human being, you also "get" far other than "what you



see.” In this ever-more vulgar era of transparency—in this increasingly vulgar era of transparent icons of sport—in this era in which nothing is sacred (nothing closed off to the journalist’s and the camera’s eye)—Skee could very well be, or have been, the last of our truly opaque heroes of sport. The last “sports hero of real opacity.” The last of the real thing, that is.

Though a sports icon like few others, Skee was more than just an icon. He was, for better and sometimes worse, a human being, a man who lifted weights with a sublime poignancy. In the heart of those who love the skillful lifting of iron—who love it with a deep, often unsettling passion—the possession of such a gift as Schemansky’s is “sacred.” It’s a “sacredness” to which the brave aficionado of our dear game openly adverts, even though he knows full well the sort of contempt he’ll be subjected to for the use of such a word. All this, painfully enough, often comes from townspeople of his very own town: practitioners of his favorite Game, though one that they “see” as simply a “game,” like baseball: the source of fun and even “peak experiences.” But, they ask, “Is it really ‘sacred’? Get a life. It’s a damn game. And the best way to build muscles. Period.”

Even baseball’s “devoutest devotees” don’t think of their game as an endeavor whose understanding and appreciation is enhanced by the application to them of the term “sacred.” This is a game. It has its origin in empty-hearted man-made rules, which, in their often macho traditions and strategies, have come to foster, not unity but isolation and discord, sometimes even violence: the very emotional forces which Martin Buber reminds us stiffen the “resistance-to the entrance of the [sacred] into lived life.”

In its highest expression, as dramatized in the taciturn Pole, our Game is not a (small “g”) game. Baseball is a game. He who embarks upon baseball learns to do something. He who embarks upon our Game becomes something. In short, the body created in, and by, our Game is, of course, a vehicle of skillful, infinitely powerful doing-as-doing. But, far more importantly and definingly, our Game is the engine and the product of its devotee’s having undergone a process of psychic and moral rebirth. It’s the engine and the product, in finality, of his having taken up a new life as a reborn man, as a physical culturist, in a seemingly brand-new, but in reality an ancient, body, one which is, in every sense, a Temple of God, whatever the derision engendered in the “tough-minded” by such a metaphor.

As never true of the game player, even the seeming lowliest creature when he’s reborn in the Game becomes a physical culturist, on the one hand, and a metaphor-in-muscle, on the other. Given the depthlessness and contrivance of rules-laden games, not even the best-put-together game-player (game-doer) is reborn in such a dramatically palpable sense. Small-“g” games demand none of the self-mining demanded by our Game, which is, of course, not truly a game, but a way of being: a series of becomings.

An article such as this, with its gloss of ideas and notions not usually addressed in the muscle magazines, is (however effective or ineffective its rendering) essential to an understanding of (a) Schemansky and his athletic (and artistic) brilliance. Such an article is essential to an understanding of Skee’s sport: essential to reminding us that (because it’s his, artistically) it becomes ours as a function of our participation in it as a sport, but also as an “art-form” to which it’s been elevated by him. It’s essential, in short, to an understanding of his sport, not just as a congeries of strength-related skills to be mastered (as in baseball), but also as a way of triumphal living: as a way of secular “salvation”: as a way, almost, of “religious salvation.”

Broken bodies or spirits aren’t usually brought to baseball or to any other game for healing, except in the sense that any sort of activity is minimally healing. Thousands, however, have brought (in their forgivably overwrought words) “broken bodies and broken spirits” to this Game of ours. I did. Many of us have. I found renovation and rebirth in the inspiration to health and strength provided by John Grimek and, later, in the big Pole honored here, in his heart-stoppingly graceful performances on countless spotlighted platforms: so deeply planted under so crushing burdens of iron. In those soul-wrenching epiphanies, in those conspiracies of weightlifting beauty, my “conversion” to the (almost-) “religion” of Skee’s Grand Endeavor was immediate and final.

So what? How does all this perhaps tedious “philosophizing” relate to my thesis that the deepest insight into the transcendent meaning of this marvelous Game is enfolded in its grandest heroes, in this case the grand Schemansky? Is it far-fetched to think of the beauty of Skee’s sport, in its most poetic resonance at least, as a “blood”-relative (a distant cousin, perhaps) to the beauty of art-as-art, the beauty of high art?

If it isn’t always far-fetched to envisage weightlifting in so high-flown a character (just for the discussion of a moment, for the sake of argument at least)—if it isn’t al-



ways far-fetched to envisage the most poetically-resonant achievements of strength and muscle in this way—then aficionados of the Game are justified in thinking about it and its high-born “distant cousin” (high art) as part of the same force field, one whose magnetic truths are mediated (as art’s—and religion’s—are always mediated) in our “heart,” our “soul,” our Kingdom-Within, our ancient Sacrum (the sacred place in our middle: the site of both art and God’s mediation).

This is the sort of truth which blossoms in an aficionado’s sense of oneness with something central to his being: something coterminous with his “soul,” his spirit: a force, the force that even some of the sanest (and least “sentimental”) would call an aspect of God and of the sacredness which is resonant with the (God-) Idea (the Word) from which the Universe-as-body derives. Understood in its most Catholic sense, sacredness resonates much more with spirit (even when incarnated in strongman flesh) than with religion or religious denomination. This is true, contrary to all our conditioning in this matter, because religion has established an almost exclusive corner on the term and its “correct” usage. This institutionalizing of the term (both its referent and meaning) is so resistless that the very notion of applying the word to the human body, even to the ultimately-artificed human body (as a testament of spirit) is invariably laughed off the boards as high-falutin’ and excessive: no better, according to its critics, than the strenuousness that’s cynically invested in elevating the significance of painfully contrived games and their players.

The majesty of Schemansky’s platform ballet is almost as much yoga as it is athleticism and art, if in yoga one finds—as Lionel Corbett finds in such practice—a “numinous emotional quality...a kind of beckoning by the Divine—mysterious, powerful, awe inspiring”: the sort of practice that qualifies, surely; as “sacred.”

With this platform beauty as an intercessory dynamic, the strong man and strong woman—no less than the strongman and strongwoman—live at their silent deep-Self center in a present-moment Presence, virtually unknown to any but the most spiritually “sentient” mediators or practitioners of yoga. Not to live in such a “peak experience” present-moment is to “miss [one’s] appointment with life: the sense that [one] doesn’t have to run anymore. Breathing in [the practitioner of Skee’s “yogic practice” says] ‘I have arrived.’ Breathing out [he says], ‘I am home.’” This, Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, is a “very strong practice, a very deep practice.” And, indeed, yoga

is a very “strong” and “deep practice,” and hardly less so, deep-centered weight training—if rarely the sort of training required by games, given the ultimately outer-direction of the game (its source in a committee): its purpose, the fulfillment of social norms and requirements).

On the other hand, and unlike Our Game, nothing connects games with Nature, or art, or God—neither games nor their players. Nothing about games suggests their connection with anything as archetypal as the human body in its aesthetic-religious function at the spiritual ground-zero of our Game—especially, for our purposes here, the sort of human body that is as grandly and artfully architected as Schemansky’s.

Although it’s a powerful vehicle of doing things, of playing games, the human body, honored here, is most important in its larger meaning: the one mediated by physical culture generally and by our dear Game specifically. The ultimate body, in this larger meaning, is the incarnation of its Idea, co-creative as that Idea is of a particular body, but (more subsumingly) of all body: of the “Universe” itself as body. The ultimacy of the ultimate body—in these notes, the Schemanskyan body—and its



This rare photo of Schemansky, taken by *Strength and Health*’s former managing editor, Jim Murray, captures Schemansky in a very low position in the snatch, the lift for which he was most famous, for his perfect form and great strength.

incarnation of Logos: its enfleshing of “Divine Idea” in a Temple of God: AS a shadowcasting, toe-stubbing Temple of God.

*“In the arena of human life the honours and rewards fall to those who show their good qualities in action.” (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, III)*

Is there a word more precisely nuanced than drama for the sort of “teaching” that’s implicit in Schemansky’s acting-out-of Aristotle’s “good-qualities in acting,” up there, under the lights, on a lifting platform? His is not the instruction of teacherly discourse, but of action as teaching: of teaching in action. The big Pole speaks, also, in Emerson’s line from “Self-Reliance”: “My life is not an apology, but a life.”

To comprehend the meaning implicit in the infinitude of contingencies emblemed in Skee and in his body-as-vehicle, one has to contemplate him and it in the thousand-thousand moments of his and its, “good qualities in action,” upon more than three decades of lifting platforms, everywhere in the world where aficionados assembled to wonder at impeccably expressed human mightiness.

Beauty, in Emerson’s words, is “God’s handwriting.” Despite Skee’s sometimes truculence—in the beauty of his “handwriting” on a lifting platform, something transcendent, something (almost) divine, was revealed to us (to the world), not through words, but as an exercise of the heart, of feeling, of something almost “mystical.” For an instant, on a platform, this phlegmatic man became eloquent, as few others: he became beautiful, a thing of perfection(s). For an instant, his sometimes truculence aside, an epiphanous beauty came to blossom where, only an instant earlier, an angry man had crouched.

To the wordless and taciturn Schemansky we turned for the sort of counsel that transcends words: that teaches by gracious and heroic action: by doing. We turned to him and to the serene and angry beauty of his platform performances. We turned to this man as an incarnation of a time and of a people: people who still held a secular “faith” in opacity: the kind of people, that is, who manage to know that part of the “light of the world” would be extinguished when society came to be emblemed, not by Skee’s heavily-partitioned inner house, but by an unpartitioned, an un-curtained, a plateglass house and its icons of transparency. (Welcome to the sports “icons” of the 21st century.)

At a painful time in my long-ago self, Skee, in the drama of “good qualities in action” on a platform, thundered the sermon (in Kenneth Lind’s words): “There is indeed no place where God is not. Running through the differences that make us all unique, and even those that may tend to divide and injure us, is a cord of unity that ultimately connects us to one another.”

To the boy-me, that “cord of unity” (between “high” and “low”) was provided by several men—some of them from the Game—but surely one of them was this untalking, this wordless, preacher: this man whose “good qualities in action” spoke more deeply to me of heaven and of health than all the preachers and priests I’d ever known, shouting their holiest of clichés from their church steeples. As Aristotle observed, “In the arena of human life, the honours and rewards fall to those who show their good qualities in action.” The great Greek spoke volumes about the great, if confounding, Pole, who is “honoured and rewarded,” if still far too meagerly, in these random musings.

The most tedious of sports clichés is not a cliché here: There’ll never be another like Skee because there’ll never be another willing to give over what he willingly gave over in response to what he seemed to construe as a vocation. Even to the best of those who’ve followed in his train, weightlifting has been merely a sport, a source, to be sure, of ego satisfaction and happiness, but not a “vocation” (of all things), with all that term’s religious connotations.

Many decades ago, a wordless man heaved into our consciousness. A man who was all the more stoical for the doomedness of his grousings. Divested of the sort of ego that separates so profoundly the artist from his audience, this man worked his “divine magic” on lifting platforms around the world. In response to his heart-stopping grace under crushing loads of iron, many a desperate little boy was awakened to Meister Eckhart’s reminder that “Every creature is a book about God”: each “creature,” a “word of God.” And the text of this “book about God” is no less testamentary for being substantiated in action, rather than in mere words: for being substantiated, that is, in the “good qualities in action” of an “honoured” hero: in these lines, our “devoutly honoured,” if insufficiently “rewarded,” hero: Norbert Schemansky.

#### NOTES:

1. Al Thomas to Terry and Jan Todd, undated letter, collection of Jan and Terry Todd; Joyce Carol Oates, *Blonde* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing 2000).





# THE “IDOL OF MY YOUNG MANHOOD”: NORBERT SCHEMANSKY

MAY 30, 1924 – SEPTEMBER 7, 2016

## Joe Weider with Terry Todd

*Editor's Note: Before his death in 2013, Joe Weider had been working on a personal memoir with Terry Todd that discussed both the men and women who inspired him to become involved with lifting and bodybuilding and those whose physiques and physical accomplishments he found most admirable and inspirational. This memory piece about Norbert Schemansky was written for that book, and we believe it speaks to how far-ranging Schemansky's impact has been on the Iron Game.*



During the Olympic Games, held in Greece in 2004, I tried to watch as much weightlifting as I could on television, and one bit of lifting news that I caught made me smile and think back to the “good old days,” when American lifters dominated the platforms of the world. What made me smile was a remark made by the announcer as he noted that Nicolai Peshalov, a Bulgarian-born lifter who was lifting for another country—in this case, Qatar—managed to win a medal in his fourth Olympics, a feat previously performed by only one man. That man was Norbert Schemansky, one of the greatest and most physically impressive men to ever put on a lifting suit and make a world record.

In a very real way, what Schemansky had done several decades earlier was even more impressive than what Peshalov had done—for two reasons. For one thing, Schemansky's medals came in 1948 (silver), 1952 (gold), 1960 (silver), and 1964 (bronze); whereas Peshalov's medals were won in successive Games—1992 (silver), 1996 (bronze), 2000 (bronze), and 2004 (bronze). Not only were Schemansky's medals of a significantly higher order, but they covered a 20-year period instead of a 16-year period as he had to skip the 1956 Games because of a serious injury. What's more, Ski's last medal was won when he was 40 years of age, making him the oldest medalist in modern weightlifting history. Even more

remarkable is that he earned that last medal and, two years earlier, set a new world record in his class in the snatch—after major back surgery that fused several vertebrae!

It's hard to know where to begin in telling Ski's story, but when I've finished I hope it won't be hard to understand why he was such a hero to me when I was a



Norbert Schemansky stands next to weightlifting official Clarence Johnson holding the Best Lifter trophy for the meet in which he has just competed. “Ski” remains the only American lifter to win medals in four Olympic Games. Johnson was a wealthy businessman and a longtime high-ranking official at both the national and international level.





Schemansky, during a brief time after he unseated John Davis as weightlifting's reigning heavyweight, held the world record in the clean and jerk. He is shown here attempting, and failing, to jerk from the shoulders a weight reported to be 450 pounds. During this exhibition he was spotted by fellow legends Tommy Kono on the left and Clyde Emerich on the right. Emerich, after a distinguished weightlifting career, joined the Chicago Bears in 1972 as their first strength coach, and holds the record as the longest-serving Bears' employee.

young man just getting started in the publishing business. I was only 17 when I published my first issue of *Your Physique*, and I filled each issue with information about the great lifters of the past and present. I also continued to train very fiercely on the "Olympic Lifts" throughout the 1940s and beyond, and as *Your Physique* prospered I began another magazine—*Muscle Power*—that ran feature stories and news every month about weightlifting. In the early days I ran many, many stories about the lifting exploits of the man we all knew as "Ski." My readers liked the way he looked and lifted, and so did I.

The 1940s were the decade when Schemansky began to train heavy, following in the footsteps of his brother, Dennis, who won the U.S. Jr. National Championships in 1940. Young Ski was about 16 at that time, but he took to lifting quickly, and after World War II he eventually reached levels that were higher than Dennis had reached, finally achieving the highest levels in the world. Because Ski was so close to my own age; because he came from Detroit, which isn't all that far from my home in Montreal; because he had the most beautiful form I'd ever seen in the "quick lifts;" and because he had one of the most gracefully powerful bodies I'd ever observed he

quickly became one of my favorite lifters. He remained one of my favorites until he retired in the middle of the 1960s, by which time he was in his early 40s, losing his battle with age, but still strong as a bull.

Ski was one of those guys who came from a strong family. He was Polish, and he came from a neighborhood and culture where hard work and toughness were much appreciated. Still 16 and after only a few months of training he snatched 160 pounds, which was ten pounds more than he weighed at the time. He had the sort of physical make-up that most great lifters have, and while still in high school he reportedly ran the 100-yard dash in just over 10 seconds and threw a football 75 yards standing still. In 1948 George Yakos—who ran a gym where Ski trained in Detroit—wrote an article for *Your Physique*. According to Yakos, Norb always had naturally good form in the snatch and clean and jerk. His press was his "weak" lift in the beginning, but he worked hard and it began to catch up to his other lifts. And as he lifted,

his muscles continued to thicken. By the end of 1942 he was up to 191 pounds at a height of 5'11" and he made lifts of 215 in the press, 240 in the snatch, and 310 in the clean and jerk. Had the war not intervened, Ski would very probably have made the Olympic team in 1944 and medaled, but instead of working on his pressing and jerking he served for four years in Europe with an anti-aircraft unit. He did no training during his years in the service, but after he was discharged he rejoined Yakos' Gym in 1946. He soon found that his added maturity made him stronger than ever. He entered the Jr. National Championships just like his brother Dennis had done six years earlier and he took the heavyweight class with lifts of 240-260-330. He almost finished second later that summer in the Senior National Championships, but he had an uncharacteristic miss in the clean and jerk.

He did finish second in the Nationals the following year—to the already legendary John Davis, World Weightlifting Champion in the heavyweight class and widely recognized in those days as the strongest man in the world. This high finish qualified Ski to make the trip to the 1947 World Championships, where he played it safe and still made lifts of 259-286-364 to finish second

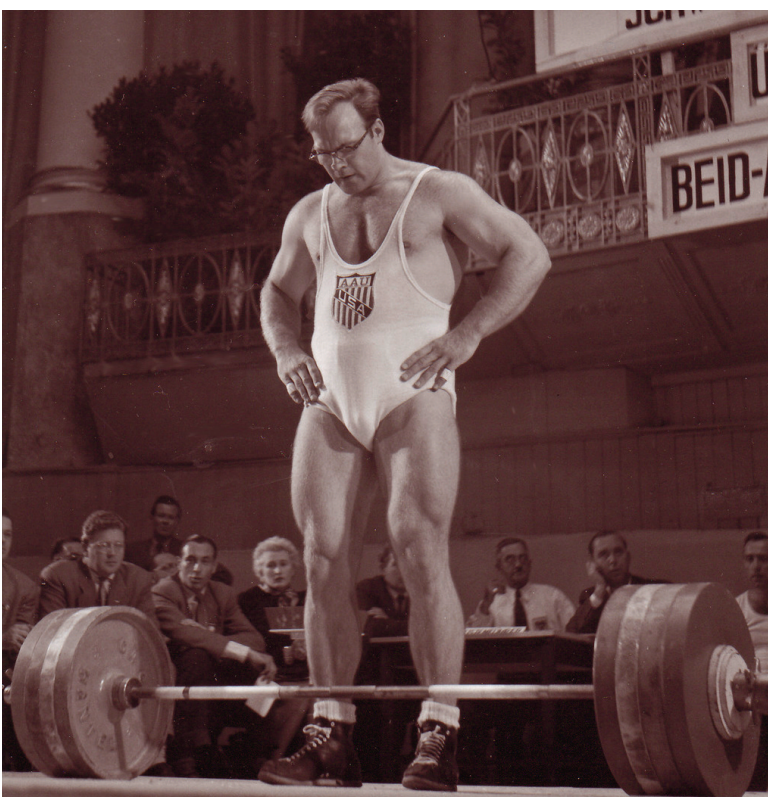
to Davis and score important points that helped the United States win the team trophy. By the 1948 Olympic Games, Ski was still moving up and playing a melodic second fiddle to the great Davis. In the Games, these two majestic men once again finished “gold-silver,” and Ski put up lifts of 270 in the press, 292 in the snatch, and 374 in the clean and jerk—all at a bodyweight of only 205. Ski always had a hard time gaining weight in his early years, but it seemed that every bit of weight he gained was muscle and sinew, because as he got heavier he appeared to become more muscular, too. And his quick lifts were so beautiful that they had to be seen to be believed.

One tends to think of beauty in sports coming in activities like gymnastics or diving, but when Norbert Schemansky took the platform all the old veterans stopped to watch him lift. The great Egyptian lifter and coach El Saied Nossier once said, “I would like for Schemansky to be on my team. I wish he were an Egyptian.” Coming from a former world champion who was a proud Egyptian and the coach of other world champions, this is high praise indeed, but those are the sorts of feelings Ski evoked when he lifted. One thing about his lifting style that was distinctive was that when he dropped into the deep fore-and-aft split style he used in both the snatch and the clean and jerk—in which one foot moves slightly forward and the other is thrust backward while the leg is kept fairly straight—his technique didn’t change, regardless of whether he was doing a light warm-up or making a world record. I remember watching him train one day and do ten single repetitions in the snatch to warm up, using only an empty broomstick each time. Each repetition looked exactly the same, and he had a serious look on his face as he made each “lift.” Then, with no intervening weight increases, he put two 45 pound plates and one 35 pound plate on each end of the Olympic bar and made a perfect snatch with 295 pounds that could not be distinguished from the previous ten snatches he’d made with the broomstick. It was quite a thing to see.

By 1951, the International Weightlifting Federation had added a new bodyweight division—the middleheavyweight class—which was for lifters who weighed between 181 and 198 pounds. This class was ideal for Schemansky as it got him out from under the formidable shadow of

the legendary John Davis, who by then had six world titles under his belt and showed no signs of weakening. The World Championships were held in Milan that year, and Ski reduced to 198 pounds and put up winning lifts of 275-292-374 for a total of 942. By the time the Games in Helsinki were held the following year he had improved to the point that he easily won his first Gold medal, with lifts of 280-308-391 as a middleheavyweight. Meanwhile, Davis won again in the Heavyweight division. But lifting aficionados took note that Ski’s clean and jerk of 391—not to mention his clean and near miss in the jerk with 402—was slightly heavier than Davis’ jerk during the Games, and only ten pounds lighter than Davis’ world record in the Heavyweight class.

Time passed and Schemansky just kept getting better, and sending every writer who covered weightlifting to the dictionary searching for superlatives to describe the power and the technical perfection of his performances. Everyone who wrote about competitive lifting for my magazines in those days—Charles A. Smith, Charles



**In 1954, after standing for years in the shadows of the phenomenally strong John Davis, Schemansky moved to the top of the unlimited weight class and dominated the world championships with new world records in both the clean and jerk (424 pounds) and the total (1074 pounds).**





By 1963, when Schemansky made this American and world record two-hand snatch of 362 pounds he was, to paraphrase the title of Tom Wolfe's famous novel, "a man in full" in the sport of weightlifting. He looked powerful; he was powerful; and with good reason he felt that he was the most powerful man on earth.

Coster, Oscar State, and others—simply raved about him. Charles Coster, for example, said of his lifting in the middleheavyweight class, "I think it is quite safe to say that never has there been a lifter in the heavier class-weight divisions who could compare with him for dazzling speed and perfection of weight-lifting style. It was a valuable education just to watch this astonishing lifter." And Charles A. Smith observed that Ski was, "...the perfect stylist...a big, powerful athlete, as fast on his feet as a fly-weight fighter...those clean and jerks of his...these were just some of the thoughts that went coursing through my mind as I sat watching Ski...and suddenly I realized how well could be applied to Ski's speed and technique the very same phrase that had been used to describe Johnny Weismuller's swimming...poetry in motion."

Oscar State, who served for years as the General Secretary of the International Weightlifting Federation and, later, for many more years as the General Secretary

of the International Federation of Body-builders was a somewhat taciturn man, but even he—as he was writing about the 1954 World Championships in which Ski broke free of the shadow of John Davis—was not immune to the impact of the American powerhouse. Here's Oscar, writing in *Muscle Power* about Ski's triumph, "Looking wonderfully impressive with his added muscular bulk, Ski delighted us with the best performance of his life...His first clean and jerk was the highest start ever made in such championships, with 396, and here his copybook technique returned to delight the connoisseurs, of whom there were a considerable number among this critical audience. On to 413 pounds, and the hush was more pregnant than usual because if he succeeded it would mean a total of 1074, the highest ever amassed in the history of weightlifting. It was a lift without fault or falter."

Following his great success in 1954, at the World Championships in Vienna, Ski stayed with the other lifters in Europe for a week and made a stop in France to have another go at the world records. While in France, the team trained in Lille, and an exhibition was arranged that has gone down in history and become even more famous over the years. What happened is that the French lifting officials brought to Lille a historically important barbell—known as Apollon's Wheels, which were then, and remain until today, the most famous barbell in the world. The "Wheels" were introduced to the world by the French giant Louis Uni, who performed as a professional strongman under the name of Apollon in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth. Sometime in the 1890s, Apollon found two railway wheels from a narrow gauge railway car, took out the thick shaft that joined them and replaced it with a shaft that was just barely under two inches" in diameter—which is quite close to the diameter of the end of a standard Olympic bar. When this thinner shaft was joined solidly to the two wheels the apparatus weighed 366 pounds, and for years it was thought to be unliftable. Although strength historians don't agree, some believe that even the colossal Apollon himself never cleaned it to



his shoulders and jerked it overhead, but we do know that the great French lifter Charles Rigoulot, the 1924 Olympic champion and world record holder, managed to clean and jerk the Wheels in front of a large crowd in 1930. Apparently, when Rigoulot first tried the Wheels he was unable to clean them, and it was only after several months of intense practice that he was able to lift them to his shoulders and then jerk them overhead.

The Wheels remained, unlifted for 19 years, until several French lifting officials—in an apparent attempt to embarrass John Davis following his victory at the 1949 World Championships and his growing fame as the “Strongest Man in the World”—sprung them on Davis and the rest of the American team after the World Championships, asking them if they’d be willing to try to lift the famed wheels that had perhaps been lifted by 6’3” 270 pound Apollon and definitely lifted by the 5’9” Rigoulot, both of whom happened to be French. The officials neglected, by the way, to tell Davis that Rigoulot had had to train specifically on the Wheels for several months before *he was able to clean them.* [Editor’s Note: The story of Davis’ attempt is told in detail in the article on Davis that begins on page 38.]

When Davis dropped Apollon’s Wheels onto the wooden platform in 1949, the shaft was slightly bent, and this was another thing facing the brand new world champion and world record holder Norbert Schemansky in Lille. But Ski was not about to refuse to try the historic implement—a barbell only lifted by Rigoulot and Davis and maybe the gigantic Apollon, all of whom were known in their prime as the strongest man in the world. So after a bit of warm-up, and wearing a sweatsuit, Ski stepped up to the Wheels, surrounded by French fans and the entire U.S. team. Using a standard double-overhand style, he grabbed the thick bar with his big mitts and pulled the Wheels easily to his chest and then jerked them not once, not twice, but three times to the absolute delight of those who were watching. Even the French officials were overcome by emotion.

As for the quality of this performance, let me explain what happened to the Wheels 48 years later, in Columbus, Ohio. In 2001, Arnold Schwarzenegger and his friend, Jim Lorimer—who for 25 years had been promoting a huge “Fitness Weekend” featuring bodybuilding, lifting, arm wrestling, and a number of other sports—decided to conduct a competition that would be a true test of brute strength. They asked Terry Todd to design the event because he had done weightlifting as well as pow-

erlifting and had been one of the officials in several of the first World’s Strongest Man contests. As Todd began to think about a new contest, he sought the advice of Bill Kazmaier, the renowned strongman and powerlifter who had won television’s World’s Strongest Man title several times, and David P. Webster, the ageless Scotsman who has written more about the history of strength than any living man. Todd asked them what they thought about building a replica of Apollon’s Wheels and challenging the modern strongmen to lift it overhead as many times as they could—that is, if they could lift it once. Kaz and Webster liked the idea, and so the Ivanko Barbell Company built a replica of Apollon’s Wheels that weighed exactly the same and had the exact same thickness of handle. What’s more Tom Lincir of Ivanko set the shaft firmly into the wheels so that when the bar turned the wheels had to turn, too. The thought was that these characteristics, taken together, would make the Wheels a major problem even for the gigantic modern strongmen invited to take part in the first Arnold Strongman Classic.

Thus it was that everyone in the strength world was anxious to see what the men could do with the repli-



**Soviet superheavyweight Sultan Rakhmanov stands next to 54-year-old Norbert Schemansky at the 1978 World Weightlifting Championships in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Rakhmanov set a world record in the snatch in Gettysburg, and won the gold medal at the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. Ski holds his own.**

ca, which had been kept in a box so no one could try it before the competition. Eight men came to Columbus to compete in the 2002 contest, and the first event featured Apollon's great Wheels. Each of the eight men was at least six feet tall and weighed at least 300 pounds, and one, Mark Henry, the 6'3" weightlifter/powerlifter, weighed just over 400. The men were given two minutes to lift the Wheels overhead as many times as possible, using any method except resting it on their belt and then "jumping" it to their shoulders from there. (They were also forbidden to stand the Wheels on end and then tip them over onto their shoulders.) The announcers explained to the many thousands people crowded around the huge stage that the Wheels had only been lifted three times in history, and that the last man to do so—and the only one of the three still living—was Norbert Schemansky, who was 5'11" tall and weighed only 224 pounds when he stepped into the spotlight back in 1954. The announcers also explained that Rigoulot and Davis were well under six feet and 230 pounds when they made their lifts, respectively, in 1930 and 1949.

When the dust had settled, only two men got the Wheels overhead and only the prodigious Mark Henry, had really conquered them. Mark Philippi managed to get them to his chest using a squat clean and a reverse grip that had to be adjusted very slowly once he stood up out of the squat, but the whole process was so tiring that he only managed one repetition. Mark Henry, on the other hand, had little trouble with the Wheels, power cleaning them three times and push-pressing them overhead each time. But we have to remember that Mark is even more of a natural giant than Apollon himself was, and that he had prepared for the contest by training on a heavy barbell that was just like Apollon's Wheels except for being a bit lighter. All of this, I hope, will help anyone who reads it to understand what truly wonderful, athletic lifters Rigoulot, Davis, and Schemansky were to have mastered the Wheels. And for Ski to have cleaned them the first time he saw them and then to have jerked them three times remains one of the Iron Game's greatest moments.

Later, however, Ski went on to further glory, but his future was in an odd way spoiled. After 1954 his back began to really bother him, and if that wasn't enough the 5'9", 370-pound Paul Anderson stepped onto the lifting stages of the world and sucked most of the oxygen out of the room. It wasn't that Paul—who, in 1955, broke Ski's world record clean and jerk and total—was so much stronger than Ski; it was that he was so preposterously

huge and personally colorful that he created a feeding frenzy among any media types that took a look at weightlifting in the mid-50s. By early 1956, Paul had taken all the superheavyweight records, won the 1955 World Championships, and gone on a history-making trip to the Soviet Union with the U.S. Weightlifting Team—the first U.S. sports team to go behind the Iron Curtain since World War II. So when the 1956 Olympic Games began Paul was already a popular culture figure known to every American who paid any attention to sports. And just before the 1956 Olympic Games in Sydney Paul was thought to be the surest gold medal winner of any athlete in the Games.

Paul turned pro after the '56 Games, but things would never be quite the same for Ski, who came through major back surgery, unretired after several years away, and became the top U.S. heavyweight again. He even set a world record in the snatch with 364—one of the last world records ever made by a U.S. lifter—and his best total (1224 pounds) far exceeded Anderson's best (1175). But by the 1960 Olympics in Rome, the Russians had begun to produce a whole succession of steroid-boostered supermen (Vlasov, Zhabotinsky, and Alexeyev) who proved to be a little too much for the valiant old warhorse, no matter that in the 1960s he weighed over 40 pounds more than he weighed when he set a world record in the clean and jerk of 424 in 1954. Never again would Ski be the greatest man in lifting—the champion of champions. But, this one man's opinion is that Norbert Schemansky was greater than them all. He had a longer career, he won medals in more Olympic Games, he was much more exciting to watch with his breathtaking technique, he had a far more impressive body, and—what's most important of all—he was a true amateur, a man who earned his modest living working at a series of blue collar jobs throughout his career instead of being supported fulltime and handsomely by the Soviet Union as a hero of the state. Ski was a workingman his whole life, and the Soviets were professional athletes and anyone who's tried it both ways can tell you what an enormous difference that can make. So, for what it's worth, I place Norbert Schemansky—the idol of my young manhood—above all superheavyweights who were to follow. Every top superheavy who came after Ski put up bigger numbers, but they were not as big a man.



# AMERICAN ICARUS:

## VIC TANNY AND AMERICA'S FIRST HEALTH CLUB CHAIN

**Ben Pollack and Jan Todd**

*The University of Texas at Austin*

*Vic Tanny is doing more than any other private citizen to make every American health and exercise conscious.... With the wizardry of a Merlin he has conjured up his recreational fairylands and, like the legendary Pied Piper of Hamelin, has played his magic tune—luring millions of Americans away from their television sets, away from their unsound eating and drinking habits, back to the use of their legs, their muscles, their entire bodies!*<sup>1</sup>

In May 1961, the large-format, hard-cover magazine *Wisdom*, a reportedly nonprofit publication that claimed to honor “the Great Minds of All Time,” carried a portrait of Vic Tanny on its cover.<sup>2</sup> On the back cover, Tanny’s image appears again, alongside portraits of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Paul Dudley White, the famed cardiologist who recommended exercise to President Dwight Eisenhower when Eisenhower had a heart attack.<sup>3</sup> That Tanny received top billing in *Wisdom*’s special issue on American fitness, and that he was declared “America’s Greatest Physical Educator” by the magazine, is significant.<sup>4</sup> *Wisdom* explained that the reason for this special issue was to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Tanny’s “record breaking, outstanding achievement in physical education.” According to *Wisdom*, Tanny was America’s “Greatest Crusader for Better Health and a More Physically Fit Nation,” and the hyperbolic article went on to explain that Tanny was doing more to bring “the great benefits of vibrant health and physical fitness to millions of American men, women and children” than anyone else.<sup>5</sup> Tanny’s medium for this great contribution to national fitness, the ensuing pages explained—and illustrated with dozens of photos—was his chain of “beautifully appointed Tanny Recreation Centers, stretching the length

and breadth of the land.”<sup>6</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s Vic Tanny’s name was known across America. He was described as one of “the country’s most influential fitness entrepreneurs,” a “visionary,” and in one magazine as the “high priest” of health.<sup>7</sup> However, most modern Americans no longer remember Tanny and are not aware that he was the first to have a national chain of gyms and that through his gyms he revolutionized the marketing of fitness and influenced the rise of resistance exercise as the preferred form of health club training for both men and women. Tanny’s name and legacy have faded, perhaps overshadowed by the long career of his indefatigable contemporary, Jack LaLanne, whose televised fitness show lasted 35 years and made him a national celebrity.<sup>8</sup> Tanny’s contributions have been forgotten because he was a businessman first and foremost, and won no major bodybuilding or lifting titles that kept his name and image before the public. While both things contributed to Tanny’s disappearance from modern popular culture, Tanny also suffered swift and unexpected financial ruin in the 1960s that soon made him, and his more than 80 gyms, yesterday’s news. Regardless, the fact that *Wisdom* showcased Tanny—as it had also celebrated the achievements and ideas of Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Winston Churchill, Helen Keller, Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Ernest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, and, yes, even Jesus—suggests that Tanny’s story deserves serious scholarly attention 50 years later. Tanny’s life, and his involvement in the nascent fitness industry of the middle years of the twentieth century, created a template for the successful merchandising of fitness to the masses which continues to be used even in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup>

### A Big Businessman Starts Small

Victor Anthony Tannidinardo’s personal story starts on 18 February 1912 in Rochester, New York, but his family history in America begins earlier.<sup>10</sup> His father, Oscar, came to New York from Italy in 1904 as Ostilio Ullof Tannidinardo, joining the wave of more than 15 mil-

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lion immigrants to America from southern and eastern Europe between 1900 and 1915.<sup>11</sup> Sometime thereafter, he changed his name to Oscar Tanny, likely in an effort to “whitewash” his Italian heritage amidst a wave of nativism that arose in response to the immigration boom.<sup>12</sup> In New York, Oscar met Vic’s mother, Angelina, the daughter of Italian immigrants.<sup>13</sup> Oscar and Angelina married in 1909 and had four children: two daughters, Lola and Norma; and two sons, Victor and Armand.<sup>14</sup>

By most accounts, the Tanny family had little money, a reasonable assumption, given Oscar’s decision to leave economically-depressed southern Italy.<sup>15</sup> According to E.M. Orlick, a professor of physical education at McGill University in Canada and prolific physical culture author, although Oscar worked two jobs to provide for his family they had few luxuries during Vic’s childhood.<sup>16</sup> However, by 1930, Oscar had established himself as a tailor in a clothing factory, and neither his wife nor his children (save for 21-year-old Lola) worked, according to the 1930 census.<sup>17</sup> By then, Oscar also owned his own home, at 137 Argo Park in Rochester, valued, according to the census, at \$7,500—the equivalent of over \$100,000 in 2016. The house’s value—regardless of what the 1930 census reported—was nearly double the average cost of a home in the state of New York at the time.

Perhaps influenced by his father’s hardworking example, young Vic “was always working at something.”<sup>18</sup> In interviews given later in his life, Vic portrayed his life as a twentieth-century version of the Horatio Alger myth, telling reporters that he began selling newspapers at age four and had never stopped working. Tanny also claimed that when subscription-selling contests were held, he would buy up the papers and distribute them for free to non-subscribers on his route. “They got the habit and couldn’t help subscribing,” he said. “I went on to win so many circulation contests...that they had to disqualify me to build up the confidence of the other kids.”<sup>19</sup> Vic also worked in his father’s tailor shop after school. When cus-

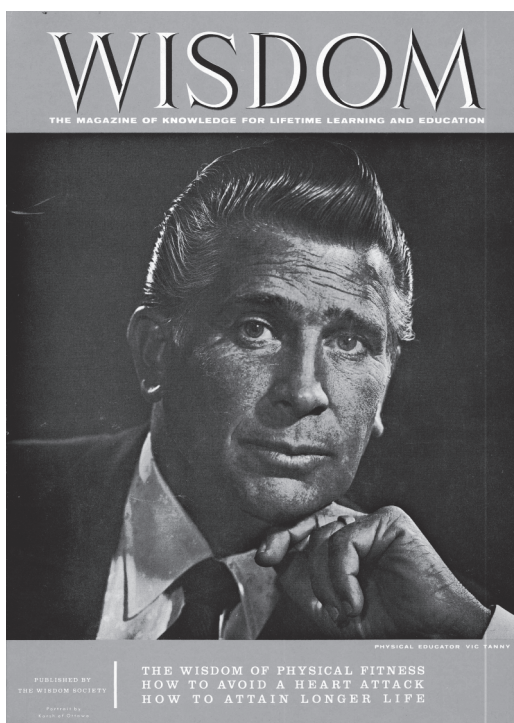
tomers came to have a suit cleaned, Vic claimed he would offer them an additional deal: “Press everything you got on for half a buck!”<sup>20</sup> According to Vic, many people jumped at the chance to have their clothes ironed while they waited and thus avoided having them sent later for cleaning. Though apocryphal, these stories foreshadow the business strategies Tanny used to build his gym empire decades later: *chutzpah*, aggressive salesmanship, low margins, and high volume.

According to *Wisdom*’s biography, Tanny attended John Marshall High School in Rochester, where he allegedly played a handful of sports, won a strength test conducted by school coaches, and was unanimously voted as having the best athletic build.<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter he found his way to Arthur Gay’s famous gymnasium at 252 East Avenue (about four miles from his family’s home) in Rochester,

then a “mecca” for physical culture enthusiasts in the Northeast.<sup>22</sup>

Journalist Henry Clune reported that Jim Rawnsley had a gym in Rochester before Arthur Gay appeared on the scene but that Rawnsley’s gym was a sordid affair.<sup>23</sup> Clune wrote, “There was no chrome plate, no fancy paintings, no beauty salon aspect to [the] gym’s narrow little room in the Ward Building.”<sup>24</sup> Gay’s gym, on the other hand, was modelled more on the lines of Sig Klein’s elegant and world-famous gym in Manhattan—containing mirrors, carpets, paintings, and beautifully designed equipment from an earlier period.<sup>25</sup>

Gay’s interest in physical culture began at the Rochester Y.M.C.A. on South Avenue, where he enrolled in a young boys’ class under Herman J. Norton, director of physical education for the local public school system.<sup>26</sup> By the time he reached maturity, Gay had reportedly built an impressive physique possessing 175 pounds of “knotty, heavy-veined muscles,” and had used those muscles to earn “more honors and championship records than he can remember.”<sup>27</sup> When Gay opened his own gym, he designed it so that it stood out from Rawnsley’s and other



**Wisdom magazine devoted its May 1961 issue to Vic Tanny, describing him as “America’s Greatest Physical Educator.” Ironically, Tanny was on the verge of economic collapse and within several months filed for bankruptcy.**

dreary competitors. Like Professor Attila, whose studio Klein operated after Attila's death, Gay built a luxurious "Physical Culture Studio" and filled it with the best equipment available.<sup>28</sup> Gay's gym appealed to both serious athletes (like champion boxer Bill Darling) and prosperous businessmen (like Thomas J. Hargrave, chairman of the board at Eastman Kodak), and even successful musicians like Wendell Hoss, whose devotion to Gay and physical culture was prominently featured in his obituary.<sup>29</sup> A local newspaper described the gym in 1934, shortly after Tanny joined:

*Gay's Studio is fully equipped with bicycle and walking machines, reducing vibrators, and electric cabinet baths. Sun treatments with sun lamps during the cold months and on the roof during the summer months are delightful features. Hand massages are also given. Individual dressing rooms and shower baths are part of the Gay Gym equipment. Gay has the largest weight assortments of any institution in this section of the country.... An outstanding feature of Gay's physical culture methods is the individual training accorded each pupil under the personal supervision of Mr. or Mrs. Arthur F. Gay.*<sup>30</sup>

The article's reference to Gay's wife, Emily, alludes to one of the gym's more innovative features: it catered to both men *and* women (in fact, some ads referred to it as "Arthur and Emily Gay's Gym.")<sup>31</sup> In the early twentieth century there were only a handful of gyms where women were welcomed in America.<sup>32</sup> Because the idea of commercial health clubs was still in its infancy and the local YMCA was the main gym in many cities, women were largely excluded. As historian Jan Todd put it, "deciding to train in a gym was not a simple matter for women; most health clubs were for men only."<sup>33</sup> Gay advertised that his methods could help men and women alike and so set up a separate department for women at his gym.<sup>34</sup> Segregation of the sexes would linger in American gymnasiums into the 1970s, but Gay's inclusion of women at least represents the beginning of a move towards equal access.<sup>35</sup>

Tanny joined Gay's gym around 1931, according to his brother Armand, and under Gay's tutelage built himself into a respectable, well-muscled weightlifter. "I trained Tanney [*sic*] for five years," Gay later claimed. "I built him

up from 125 pounds to 190 pounds of perfectly proportioned muscle."<sup>36</sup> Like many other physical culture entrepreneurs (or their supporters) Tanny appears, in later years, to have embellished his lifting records in order to appear more accomplished and knowledgeable. *Muscle Builder* author E.M. Orlick described Tanny in heroic terms, explaining that Tanny "started at the bottom, but by dint of his gnawing persistency, he sweated his way to the top."<sup>37</sup> Orlick wrote that Tanny earned three consecutive state weightlifting championships while training with Gay in Rochester, and that he had put 320 pounds overhead in the clean and jerk. However, contemporary evidence fails to support Orlick's claims. Weightlifting reports in Bob Hoffman's *Strength & Health* magazine show that, in January 1933, Tanny placed only third in the 165-pound weight class at a local contest held at Gay's gym.<sup>38</sup> The following month, he elected to judge a meet rather than compete himself.<sup>39</sup> *Strength and Health* includes no other references to Tanny's performance in any meet, and local newspapers show that, while Tanny continued to enter contests until 1935, records eluded him.<sup>40</sup> It seems unlikely that he approached the results that Orlick claimed.

Tanny reportedly opened his first gymnasium in 1930, at age 18, together with his brother Armand. The brothers admitted neighborhood children into their parents' garage where they had a small amount of weight training equipment and charged five cents per visit.<sup>41</sup> Again, evidence contradicts this. Armand claimed his brother "didn't even see a barbell" before age 19. It is far more likely, as other sources state, that Tanny opened his first gym in 1935, at age 22.<sup>42</sup> According to Henry Clune, Gay "took him on as a kind of assistant." When Tanny left Gay's, the younger man opened his own training facility on Ridge Road, in Rochester, renting a space over a bowling alley.<sup>43</sup>

All sources do agree that the first Tanny gym "was no elaborate affair," and performed "way below expectations" as it had more of the atmosphere and appearance of Rawnsley's gym than Gay's Physical Culture Studio.<sup>44</sup> Orlick called it "a sort of proving-ground," a test of his knowledge and of the viability of the industry.<sup>45</sup> Others were less generous: "Vic Tanny didn't seem to be able to get going in Rochester," remembered Joe Ortolani, a weightlifter who trained at the Rochester Y.M.C.A. "In time, he gave up."<sup>46</sup> Vic himself admitted that "the place smelled like a locker room and it was so dark I could barely see my own muscles."<sup>47</sup>

By this time, Tanny had graduated from the Brockport State Teachers College with a bachelor's degree in ed-

ucation, and was working as a history and social studies teacher near Rochester. He taught three grades, coached the school's baseball and basketball teams, and also made time to operate his gym.<sup>48</sup> Although teaching no doubt seemed a relatively attractive occupation when he first began his career, teaching salaries dropped by as much as eighteen percent during the Great Depression, turning "modest" into "meagre."<sup>49</sup> The Depression no doubt also made it difficult to attract and keep customers at his gym, and so while Tanny was better-off than many Americans and had some job security, he began to worry that he would never really get ahead. And so, according to E.M. Orlick, Tanny—like thousands of others during this era—decided to move to California, America's new land of opportunity.<sup>50</sup>

According to *Wisdom* magazine, the impetus to relocate to California began when he visited the West Coast in 1938 to take a postgraduate course at the University of Southern California and fell in love with the climate, the proximity to the film industry, and the care that so many people took with their appearance.<sup>51</sup> Orlick tells a different version of the story in *Muscle Builder*: "[O]ne day Tanny woke up, walked to his bedroom window and stared out at a dismal rainy scene . . . That very day he sold his Rochester Gym, packed all of his belongings and headed West to Santa Monica."<sup>52</sup> In reality, the move was not quite so decisive, dramatic, or spontaneous.<sup>53</sup> It was Vic's younger brother Armand who left New York first, after deciding to attend UCLA because it would cost a tenth of his tuition bills at the University of Rochester. Vic followed a year later, arriving in the summer of 1940.<sup>54</sup>

### Muscle Beach

College-bound Armand arrived at Santa Monica in 1939 in the midst of a terrible heat wave. The usually balmy coast baked under record-high temperatures, reaching nearly 110 degrees Fahrenheit in September.<sup>55</sup> One night, unable to sleep for the sweltering heat, Armand decided to take a walk along the shore to cool off. He heard there a familiar sound: the clanking of barbells. The younger Tanny had stumbled upon Muscle Beach, today an iconic symbol of the twentieth-century physical fitness boom. In 1939, of course, Muscle Beach was still relatively unknown. "Honestly, I had never heard of it," Armand remembered.<sup>56</sup>

Muscle Beach in 1939 was little more than a low, wooden platform by the Santa Monica Pier with some neighboring gymnastic equipment. Although it had begun

attracting media attention, and many of the "regulars"—Pudgy and Les Stockton, Relna Brewer, Ran Hall, Russ Saunders, Johnny Collins, John Kornoff, and Harold Zinkin—were already emerging as Muscle Beach "stars," it was primarily an acrobatics practice space at that time, and barbell training was not yet well established there.<sup>57</sup> The barbells Armand heard being lifted belonged not to the city but to individual "regulars" at Muscle Beach who brought them to the beach and took them home at the end of each day.<sup>58</sup> However, the discovery of the so-called Muscle Beach Gang proved to be providential as the chance meeting resulted in lifelong friendships for both brothers and, when Vic arrived the following year, Muscle Beach also was instrumental in the opening of his first gym.<sup>59</sup>

Vic Tanny arrived in Santa Monica with \$750 to his name, which Armand claimed in a 1999 interview "was like \$100,000 today." [Actually, \$750 equates to about \$12,600 in 2016.]<sup>60</sup> The fact that the Santa Monica Parks Department did not allow weights to be stored at Muscle Beach at that time gave Vic the idea to open a gym in Santa Monica close to Muscle Beach. His hope was that the serious lifters at Muscle Beach would prefer to do their clean and jerks and squats without sand getting in their eyes, and he no doubt also realized that the vision of so many weight-trained bodies performing acrobatics at Muscle Beach on the weekends was the best free advertising one could get to sell the benefits of weight training.

The first Tanny gym was on the second floor of a building at the corner of Santa Monica Boulevard and Second Street.<sup>61</sup> The loft he rented was old, small, and in disrepair, but the landlord offered it to Tanny for just \$35 per month in rent. Tanny crammed the space with weights and other kinds of exercise equipment and charged his new members \$5 per month to train there. "People came in, curious—[because] they had never even seen a weight," Armand said.<sup>62</sup> "Nobody knew anything when we first opened. People would come in and say, 'Are we supposed to pay you to lift those things?'"<sup>63</sup>

Although many Muscle Beach Gang members became members, Vic needed more paying customers and so he began thinking of new ways to advertise his gym.<sup>64</sup> He began by holding weightlifting exhibitions at the gym, with the audience crammed against the walls "for fear the floor would collapse." He then began hosting larger contests and multi-event strength and bodybuilding shows in bigger venues.<sup>65</sup> In 1941, for example, Vic hosted the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) Mr. California contest. It was won



by Muscle Beach regular, Harold Zinkin, who would go on to invent the Universal Gym machine.<sup>66</sup> Over the next decade, Tanny promoted a number of other successful strength and bodybuilding extravaganzas that helped identify Santa Monica as a critical site for the emerging sport of bodybuilding.

According to historian John

Fair, bodybuilding contests like Tanny's Mr. California remained somewhat on the periphery of physical culture interests until the late 1930s.<sup>67</sup> Between 1938 and 1939, however, a striking number of bodybuilding shows were held throughout the northeastern United States, including the meet recognized as the first Mr. America contest. The popularity of physique contests steadily increased throughout the 1940s, thanks in large part to the efforts of Bob Hoffman, owner of the York Barbell manufacturing company in Pennsylvania and ardent supporter of weightlifting and other strength sports. According to Fair, the publicity Hoffman generated for the first Mr. America bodybuilding contest in his magazine, *Strength & Health*, contributed "more than any other factor" to that event's long-lasting significance in the physical culture world.<sup>68</sup>

Exactly when and where Tanny first met Bob Hoffman, founder of the York Barbell Company and the publisher of *Strength & Health* is unknown. However, the Tanny brothers definitely read the magazine in the early 1930s, as a letter from Vic extolling the physical transformation of his brother Armand was featured in *Strength & Health* in March 1935.<sup>69</sup> Two photos from that article show Armand at age thirteen; and again, two years and fifty-five muscular pounds later, at age fifteen. Those photos were then used by Bob Hoffman in his promotional pamphlet, "The Road to Super Strength," published in 1935.<sup>70</sup> In 1941, photos of both Armand and Vic appear in *Strength & Health*, along with a profile on Armand who had just won the Pacific Coast Weightlifting title. Hoffman also



**Pudgy Stockton saved this photo—taken at Slapsy Maxie's restaurant on January 27, 1946—in one of her photo albums now at the Stark Center. Sharing the booth are (left to right) national weightlifting champion, Joe De Pietro; Pudgy and Les Stockton; Walt Marcyan and his wife Roberta; Mr. America John Grimek, partially hidden; and Vic and Shirley Tanny.**

gives Tanny's new gym a positive plug in the caption over Vic's physique shot, telling readers that Tanny "operates one of the finest gymnasiums on the West Coast . . . Visit the gym some time," he wrote, "you'll like the Tannys, and the people who train at their gym. You'll see Frank Jares, West Coast Hercules training there regularly and at times Pudgy Eville and other strong men and women."<sup>71</sup>

Although the early details remain sketchy, Vic Tanny suggested to Hoffman that they become business partners shortly after Tanny opened his Santa Monica gym. The partnership began with Tanny becoming a distributor for York Barbells on the West Coast. Whether Tanny made much money as a York Barbell retailer remains unknown; regardless, the idea of joining forces with Hoffman was a good one because by partnering with Hoffman, Tanny gained access to the pages of *Strength & Health* where he built his reputation as an expert and promoted his California shows and, later, his ever increasing network of gyms.<sup>72</sup> Tanny also began writing a "West Coast Column" for Hoffman in May 1941, which did much to promote the Tanny brothers and Muscle Beach to readers who never made it to that magical spot just south of the Santa Monica pier.<sup>73</sup>

Tanny apparently also discussed the possibility of manufacturing weight-training equipment in a more extensive partnership with Hoffman, and also explored the idea that Tanny's gym would serve as a York headquarters for western expansion. Hoffman turned that offer down, but it seems likely that, in the course of his discussions, Tanny may have gleaned some insights into the manufacturing



Ray Van Cleef took several photos of Tanny's early gyms which he sent to Peary Rader in the late 1940s, for possible inclusion in *Iron Man* magazine. Tanny is shown here, in the office of his second Long Beach gym with gym manager, Phil Pfister. An earlier attempt to establish a gym in Long Beach had not been successful because of a blackout imposed during World War II. Tanny's first Long Beach gym closed in 1942.

process—insights that would pay dividends when Tanny began producing his own equipment a decade later.<sup>74</sup>

Somehow, in the midst of moving across the country and beginning a new business in California, Vic also found the time to marry Rochester native, Florence Shirley Grastorf, born in 1922.<sup>75</sup> Ten years younger than her husband, Shirley, as she preferred to be called, did not immediately move to Santa Monica. However, the Tanny's eventually had four children: a boy, Vic Junior, and three girls.<sup>76</sup> Unlike some physical culturists during that era who celebrated their heterosexuality by putting their family in the limelight, Shirley and the children stayed largely in the background of Tanny's public life. Vic's sister, Norma, on the other hand, moved to Santa Monica where she became part of the Muscle Beach scene and married Bert Goodrich, the first Mr. America and a Hollywood stuntman.<sup>77</sup>

Fueled by its location and Tanny's talent for promotion and salesmanship, the Muscle Beach gym "took off . . . immediately," Armand said.<sup>78</sup> Vic decided to use his profits and replicate the model at a second gym near

the Belmont Pier in Long Beach, California.<sup>79</sup> The location should have worked well; Long Beach, like Santa Monica, was a popular tourist destination and beach proximity made people conscious of their bodies. However, Vic's timing was unlucky. Shortly after Vic opened in 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and America formally entered World War II. Because of its strategic location as a port that could accommodate battle-ships, "the whole town of Long Beach was blacked out," Armand said. "Battleships were sitting offshore!"<sup>80</sup> In a letter to John Terpak at York Barbell, Tanny explained what happened to his Long Beach gym: "For about ten days I thought everything was going to hell out here," Tanny wrote. "People wouldn't go out. Business everywhere dropped off so greatly that they had to stop all blackouts until the real thing comes along. People seem to have lost a lot of interest since the scare and many have screwed back east. Half of my midwestern bastards in the gym have joined the great exodus. The Long Beach place was perking along perfect until the war and now I'm afraid I'll have to get up off my lazy ass and get to work and build it up good."<sup>81</sup> Although Vic did his best to

make Long Beach a success and continued to sink "quite a bit" of capital into the gym, he finally closed it in the summer of 1942. "The blackouts blacked us out," Vic lamented. Luckily, the gym in Santa Monica remained going "like a house afire," he reported to John Grimek in a letter, and his business there more than doubled between January and May of 1942.<sup>82</sup>

For the remainder of the war, however, Vic forgot about further gym expansion and took a day job at Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica where he worked with Moe Most and several other Muscle Beach regulars making airplane parts.<sup>83</sup> During this time he allowed his Santa Monica gym members to leave their dues in a desk drawer during the day since he couldn't be there. Because he was doing government-accepted defense plant work, he was able to keep the gym going, keep his name before the public, and dream of the day he could try expanding once again.<sup>84</sup>

### Postwar Rebirth

Although the war slowed the growth of Tanny's





These two photos, taken by Ray Van Cleef, show the interior of Tanny's second Santa Monica gym on Fourth Street. According to Van Cleef's notes to Rader explaining these undated photos, the gym was being run at this time by Armand Tanny, and it was often referred to as "Armand's gym." Its basement location also gave it another name—The Dungeon. The bodybuilder at the dumbbell rack is gym member, Tommy Humphrey, a Muscle Beach devotee, who became involved with the fight to save Muscle Beach in the late 1950s.

gym business, it nonetheless continued to spread awareness of health and fitness in America and helped Hoffman and others lay a foundation for the peacetime to come. Soldiers trained with resistance of some kind during the war—many for the first time—and experienced for themselves the benefits of regular exercise. In Santa Monica, hotels along the beachfront had been used as separation centers for servicemen. Muscle Beach caught the attention of many of these men and, after the war, many of them returned to live year-round where they could enjoy the sunshine, sparkling beaches, and Muscle Beach. "People seem to be pouring into California," Tanny wrote to Hoffman of the postwar migration, noting that it opened up all kinds of business opportunities for those ready to move. "The West," Tanny wrote, "is ready for the plucking."<sup>85</sup>

One of Tanny's first moves after the war was to open a new gym in Long Beach, at 25 Locust Avenue, about three miles from his former location.<sup>86</sup> The gym proved to be a success this time and allowed Tanny to focus on his biggest venture yet. Ever the gambler, Tanny purchased a seven-thousand-square-foot former United Service Organization (USO) center in Santa Monica as a site for a new Santa Monica gym.<sup>87</sup> In the history of Southern California physical culture—particularly bodybuilding culture—the new Santa Monica gym exceeded any other

location Vic ever owned. Located in a basement on Fourth Street, Tanny's new gym quickly became known as "the Dungeon." Steve Reeves, George Eiferman, and countless other bodybuilders during this era in American bodybuilding thickened their traps and widened their lats in "the Dungeon" while helping to create a new subculture of bodybuilding, youth, sunshine, exercise, and sex appeal—all identified with Santa Monica and Southern California.<sup>88</sup> The Dungeon, like Tanny's first Santa Monica gym, was built for serious lifters and bodybuilders and possessed two squat racks, dumbbells from 5 to 115 pounds, six incline benches, ten flat benches, a platform for Olympic-style weightlifting, a heavy-duty leg press machine, a pair of dipping bars, and a juice bar. Pieces of pipe set into the building's foundation held weight plates.<sup>89</sup> Sunlight entered through a single window high on the wall. Water sometimes leaked through the walls and ceiling, and some even claimed that rats scurried among the shadows. Even so, when Bob Hoffman and the York Barbell team came west, their training sessions were held there.<sup>90</sup> Dozens of film stars and wannabe actors also honed their physiques there alongside the best bodybuilders in America. In many ways a symbiotic relationship evolved between Muscle Beach and the Dungeon. Vic and the Dungeon were viewed as part of the Muscle Beach family—the Mr. Mus-

cle Beach shows highlighted people's hard, regular efforts in the gym—and Muscle Beach became more true to its name in the postwar era because of Tanny and the Dungeon.<sup>91</sup>

Tanny contributed to this transition in a second major way: introducing big-time bodybuilding contests to California audiences. In 1948, together with his brother-in-law Bert Goodrich, Tanny hosted the Mr. USA contest at Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, one of the largest in Southern California. It attracted an audience of 5,000 and earned glowing reviews. Spurred by this success, Tanny and Goodrich planned an even more extravagant contest the following year. On 26 March 1949, in front of an audience of more than 6300, they hosted an event that *Iron Man* editor Peary Rader called “the greatest physique contest the world has been privileged to see.”<sup>92</sup> The show began with a 21-piece orchestra, a “very good” barrel jumping act, a gymnastics show, and then a comedy skit featuring Pansy the Horse. Pansy was followed by a repetition bench press competition, won by George Eiferman who made 20 repetitions with 250 pounds.<sup>93</sup> Bob Hoffman came out from York, Pennsylvania to serve as master of ceremonies for the Miss USA portion of the contest. Judges for the women's contest included Shirley Temple, and others were movie and theatrical stars.<sup>94</sup> Shirlee Tegge of Michigan won the Miss USA award, although one reporter noted that “none of the fifteen shapely cuties in bathing suits who competed, got as many whistles as Mr. U.S.A.”<sup>95</sup> Those extra whistles and the USA trophy went to two-time Mr. America John Grimek, coaxed out of retirement by the lure of the contest. Grimek also received a four-foot gold trophy, a \$1000 check, and “more cheers from the 5,000 fans who jammed the Shrine auditorium than Jane Wyman did when she won the Academy Award.”<sup>96</sup> “Look,” screamed one middle-aged woman as Grimek pulled in his stomach to perform a “vacuum” pose. “His waist is hardly there at all!”<sup>97</sup> Grimek beat out fellow bodybuilding greats Clancy Ross, Steve Reeves, and George Eiferman for first place. Armand Tanny finished fifth.<sup>98</sup>

According to historian John Fair, the 1949 Mr. USA contest was a “credible, though short-lived [attempt] to elevate bodybuilding to a higher level,” and contributed to the shift in bodybuilding prowess and popularity from East Coast to West Coast.<sup>99</sup> However, many signs point to the event's legacy as more long-lasting than Fair suggests. Scholars Tolga Ozyurtcu and Alan Klein have both explained how, from a modern perspective, the prestigious

contests of California helped to legitimize bodybuilding throughout the world.<sup>100</sup> The inclusion of film stars, bands, and other “high class” amenities elevated the show beyond the normal posing contest. Similarly, in their autobiography *Brothers of Iron*, bodybuilding and fitness moguls Joe and Ben Weider, who would make recreational bodybuilding mainstream by the end of the twentieth century, argue that what Tanny was helping to create was a “Golden Age” for bodybuilding during in the 1940s. Muscle Beach, claimed the Weiders, “planted a seed in the minds of thousands” about what was possible with training. Nearly every man who went there, including Joe Weider himself, “wanted exactly what [Southern California] had to offer—more muscle power and a great build to attract the ladies.”<sup>101</sup> It seems, therefore, that the Mr. USA contest Tanny hosted was not only one of the first organized physique shows on the West Coast to attract national attention but a vital step in the evolution of Santa Monica and Southern California as the eventual cynosure of twentieth-century bodybuilding.

### Expansion

Between the fame of the Dungeon, Tanny's presence as both author and celebrity in *Strength & Health*, and his successful promotion of physical culture extravaganzas such as the Mr. USA contest, he had redefined himself by 1950 as a major figure in the American fitness and bodybuilding scene. And, as he watched America recover from World War II, Tanny realized that the growth of highways, the birth of new shopping malls, and the rise of suburban neighborhoods in the postwar era created new opportunities for gyms located closer to people's homes. As historian Roberta Pollack Seid argues, by the early 1950s, postwar abundance was contributing to a larger and less fit population. With automobiles for transportation, packaged foods, spacious refrigerators, and greater prosperity, fewer calories were burned in an average day and many more calories were purchased during a normal trip to the grocery store. “The opportunity, and the temptation, to overeat were becoming omnipresent,” Seid explains.<sup>102</sup> As a result, a few artificially-sweetened beverages were introduced in the early 1950s and Seid claims there was a growing interest—particularly among women—for diet information.<sup>103</sup>

Despite a widespread lack of real understanding of the factors contributing to the expanding waistlines of Americans, health and fitness began to be taken more seriously. In 1952, the National Institutes of Health declared



obesity the nation's number one nutritional problem, and the following year, physician Hans Kraus and his graduate research assistant, Ruth Prudden Hirschland (who later legally changed her name to Bonnie Prudden) conducted a study measuring the fitness levels of children in America, Austria, and Italy. They found that European children outperformed Americans in every measure—findings that set off alarm bells across America in those early days of the Cold War.<sup>104</sup> Most scholars agree that politicians and physical educators alike interpreted the Kraus-Hirschland study as “hard evidence that America was going ‘soft’”—and that American children might not be strong enough to fight Communism.<sup>105</sup> When President Eisenhower suffered a heart attack in September 1955, newspapers and popular magazines pushed the idea that cardiac disease was a new “silent killer,” raising health concerns for working men, particularly those white collar office workers whose jobs were considered stressful.<sup>106</sup> Tanny capitalized on both the political and personal motivations that were inspiring people to become more physically active. “There has been a surge toward exercise for a longer, healthier, fuller life,” a new Tanny ad read in 1956, “and in keeping with the President’s intention to revitalize the people of America, Vic Tanny offers specialized guidance on correct eating [and physical development].”<sup>107</sup> Clearly, Tanny grasped both the *zeitgeist* of 1950s America and its implications for his business.

Between 1949 and 1951, Tanny opened two new gyms in Los Angeles, bringing his total in the greater Los Angeles area to four. Then, on 2 January 1952, he opened another gym, this time in Compton, California, and then another in San Bernadino in the early summer. As the gym chain expanded, Tanny began a vigorous newspaper advertising program to attract new members. In late 1951, Tanny was “cordially inviting” customers to join what Tanny claimed were “the World’s Largest Body Building Gyms,” and offered patrons four months’ free member-



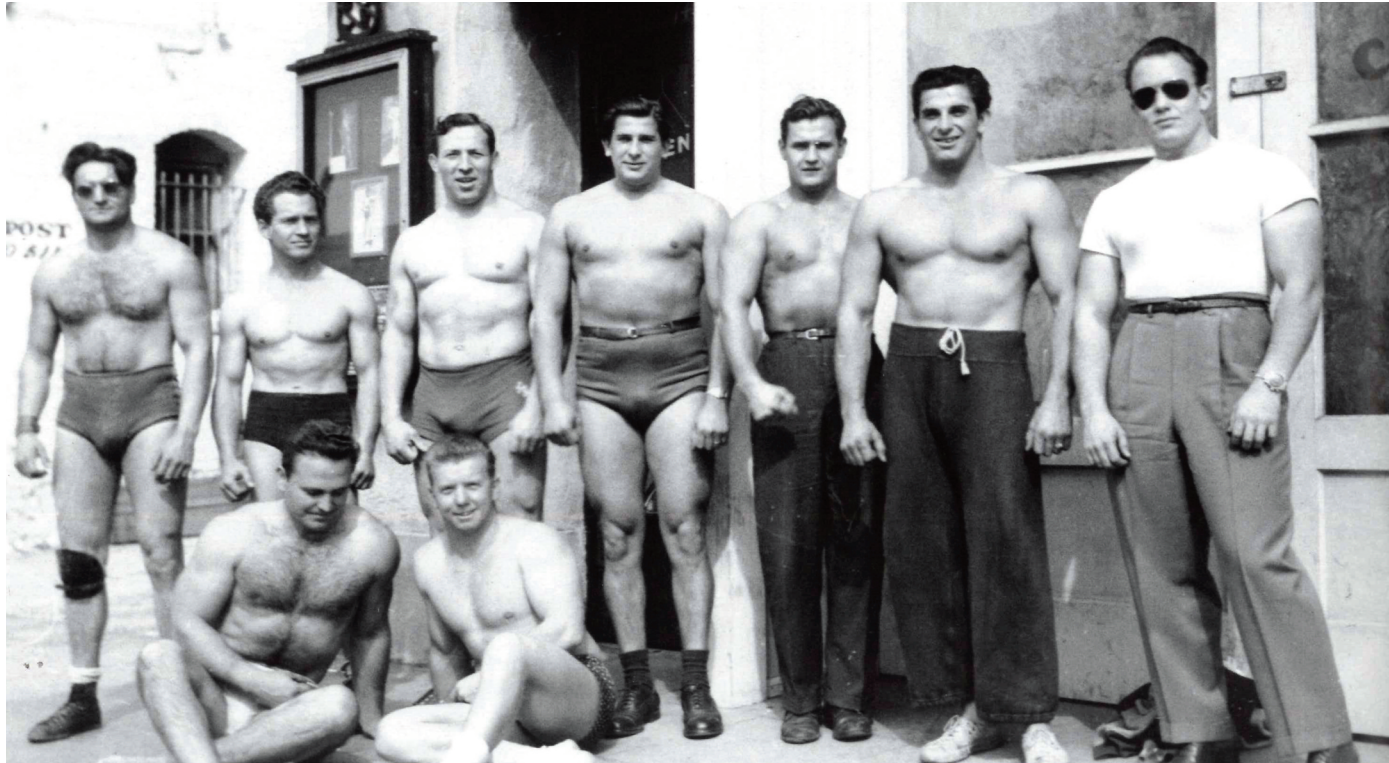
**Vic Tanny watches Mr. America Steve Reeves perform hack squats during a training session in the late 1940s. Reeves and his good friend, George Eiferman, helped Tanny’s gyms become known on a national level.**

ship.<sup>108</sup> He also tried a new form of advertising, offering \$2,000 to anyone who could swim from Santa Catalina Island to the Santa Monica pier—a distance of 41 miles. Thirty-eight-year-old Roy Sutter, of Fort Worth, Texas, attempted the feat on 1 July 1952, and though he covered himself in greasy lanolin to stay warm in the cold water, he conceded after two miles, claiming he was struck by a porpoise that “knocked him three feet out of the water.”<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, Sutter’s attempt garnered a great deal of coverage across the Western and Southern United States—for the swimmer, for Tanny, and for the new gym. Perhaps Jack LaLanne drew the inspiration for his own famous long-distance swims from the event; although LaLanne already had a history of performing similar feats, including a world record in consecutive push-ups.

After Sutter failed to make the swim on two other occasions, Tanny offered to pay Jose Cortinas, a 210-pound Cuban-American \$1000 if he could complete the swim. It took Cortinas an incredible 29 hours to traverse the distance, but he succeeded in 1952—earning even more publicity for Tanny and his gyms.<sup>110</sup> In the years ahead, especially after he began doing television advertising, Tanny employed other publicity gimmicks as well. Betty Weider, one of America’s top fashion models in the 1950s, recalls her stint as the “Tanny Girl,” and a contest Vic ran in which people were supposed to guess her measurements.<sup>111</sup> Again, no one ever won.

By the end of 1952, Tanny was running 12 gyms in Southern California. On 20 September 1952, Tanny opened his seventh gym, in Huntington Park.<sup>112</sup> By the end of the year, he had added five more to his chain: one in North Hollywood, one in Alhambra, one in Burbank, and yet another in Los Angeles (bringing the city’s total to three), and one in San Diego.<sup>113</sup>

The intense attention Vic devoted to his rapidly expanding gym empire did not help his relationship with his wife, Shirley, and the couple divorced in 1953. By this



Over the door at Tanny's Santa Monica gym at Fourth and Broadway was a sign advertising that this was the place to "Exercise to Develop Strong and Healthy Bodies." This group of early Tanny Gym members certainly believed that. From left to right they are: unidentified man in sun glasses; Kerris Keirn; Frank Jaries; Vic Tanny; Gordon McRae; Vic's brother, Armand Tanny; and another unidentified man in sunglasses. Seated are Art Walge and Les Stockton. Note in this photo that, like Armand, Vic had wide shoulders; the rest of his physique was never exceptional.

time, Tanny had become enough of a celebrity that the story of their divorce was national news. "Body Builder Vic Tanny, owner of a string of muscle-building gymnasia, was divorced Thursday on grounds his wife did all the weight-lifting in their family," began the United Press International Wire Service report. "Mrs. Tanny, five feet, four inches and 120 pounds, said the six-foot, 230-pound muscleman made her 'carry out the garbage and mow the lawn.'"<sup>114</sup> Chores aside, their relationship remained amicable after their divorce; but the separation may have come as an unpleasant shock to Vic and, no doubt, to his four small children.<sup>115</sup> Tanny opened no new gyms that year, nor in 1954. Armand also broke rank and moved to Las Vegas to appear as part of the "male chorus" alongside George Eiferman, Joe Gold, and a revolving cast of other bodybuilders in movie star Mae West's Sahara Hotel night club act.<sup>116</sup>

While Vic was no longer married, he hadn't stopped thinking about women and he came back in 1955 with a new approach to his growing chain of gyms that particularly targeted them as customers. Previously, Tanny

gyms appealed mostly to men who were at least semi-serious bodybuilders and competitive weightlifters, or ex-GI's who had learned the benefits of weight training in the military.<sup>117</sup> According to some who remembered Tanny, his early gyms excluded women.<sup>118</sup> However, evidence suggests this was not a consistent policy. Les Stockton, for example, contacted Tanny in 1944 suggesting a husband-and-wife weightlifting contest, to "introduce women's weight-lifting on the West Coast."<sup>119</sup> It seems unlikely that Stockton would have made such a suggestion if Tanny truly barred women from his facilities. Certainly, by the mid-1950s, several of Tanny's Muscle Beach pals—including Pudgy and Les Stockton—had opened gyms that catered to women, and Jack LaLanne was particularly targeting women in his morning television show. Pudgy Stockton realized that she would attract more women members if she called her facility a salon—rather than gym—and if she made her workout space feel feminine and elegant.<sup>120</sup>

And so, whether he was late to the market or not, Tanny didn't hold back once he decided that there was



money to be made in training women. In February of 1955, he announced that he was opening “ladies’ gyms” next door to his Long Beach and Compton locations, claiming in his advertising that he had invested “over \$1,000,000 in gym equipment designed for perfect contouring.”<sup>121</sup> Later that year, Tanny also began offering special women’s training courses designed for new mothers and for “bust development,” and he visited women’s social clubs in southern California to demonstrate simple exercises, espouse the benefits of physical fitness, and try to attract women members to his gyms.<sup>122</sup>

As Tanny opened new gyms in the years ahead it seems clear that he had decided to move away from serious weight training and bodybuilding and pursue different kinds of gym members. By creating modern, luxurious clubs that looked like the interiors of fancy hotels rather than well-used Y.M.C.A.s, Tanny hoped to attract businessmen, professionals, and, of course, those millions of women who were encouraged to stay at home rather than pursue a profession.<sup>123</sup> In June of 1956, for example, Van Nuys Chamber of Commerce President Robert S. Fuller recognized Tanny “for bringing to Van Nuys the finest and most modern gym in the world and for furthering the progress of the community.”<sup>124</sup> Tanny’s new facility had “carpeted floors, mirrored walls, and pastel colors,” making it “completely different from all others.”<sup>125</sup> It was, to use a term that Tanny began using himself, a health club—not a gym—and it was a space where members could exercise alongside people of their own social class amidst tasteful decor, chrome barbells, mirrored walls, and futuristic machinery.

Although never stated in the advertising, nearly all Tanny gyms were racially segregated to protect members from training, or swimming, or sharing a steam room with a person of color. In 1956 Tanny’s Compton Gym was sued by Leslie Gardner, an African-American male who was told he could not take out a membership. When the case was retried on appeal, a Tanny employee, who had worked at the Compton Gym when Mr. Graham was refused access, explained under oath that while there was no written race policy, managers were supposed to screen all applicants and decide who would be permitted to become a member.<sup>126</sup> The determining factor—as the testimony below reveals—was whether the person would be detrimental to the business:

**Witness:** In November, 1956, the facilities at “Compton Gym” were various types of

*equipment designed and utilized for corrective exercise, specifically “gym” equipment, showers, and dressing facilities. There was no swimming pool or steam room. At that time people were allowed to come in on a membership basis; they were enrolled for six months or a year. A person applying for membership had “to make out an application” in writing. The procedure when a person came into the “gym” was as follows: “[T]he first thing the management must do is to find out whether the person is sincere in their desire to improve their physical appearance, physical condition and improve their health.”*

**Q.** Was that the only measure which you used to allow or disallow people from membership?

**Witness:** Definitely not.

**Q.** What other policy did you follow at that place at that time?

**Witness:** Well, a person must be—let me see, how would I put that correctly? The manager is instructed to use his own discretion as far as screening people; not to accept anyone who would be detrimental to the business welfare at that specific location.

**Q.** Did that include also an instruction to them that Negroes were detrimental to the welfare of that particular establishment?

**Witness:** It was put on the basis where the manager, of course, was in charge of the gym and did the screening himself to use his own judgment on the merits of the individual and not to any single specific group or to Negroes as a block. . . . A person who had any physical history of any medical difficulty whatsoever or psychological emotional problems, it is obvious we would never enroll.

**Q.** How would you determine it? Is that on the application at the time?

**Witness:** No, it is done in the process of the manager interviewing the individual.

**Q.** You stated that the policy was of turning down people who wouldn’t further the

*business; is that correct?*

**Witness:** *I said that we would not accept anyone whom they might judge as being detrimental to the business.*

**Q.** *Well, didn't that include a general policy of turning down all Negroes?*

**Witness:** *I wouldn't say that.*

**Q.** *The general public may apply for admission; is that correct?*

**Witness:** *I would say so.*

**Q.** *Your invitation advertising was given to everyone; is that correct?*

**Witness:** *'Eight to eighty' is the way we stated it.*

**Q.** *Was a year the lowest period of time which you would allow anybody to enroll for?*

**Witness:** *The only exception would be guests of existing members who were training at some gym out of town and were visiting for a short period of time.*

**Q.** *Did you in November of 1956 have a general policy at the Compton Gym to refuse admission to Negroes?*

**Witness:** *No. Defendant also issued guest passes.*

**Q.** *That is all you had to do, is just call up and say, 'Mr. Smith, I would like a guest card. I would like to come over and work out,' and you would let them work out?*

**Witness:** *Well, we would set up an appointment for them when and where we could have the extra help there and take them through the guest trial to see whether they would be adaptable to the program."*

Tanny lost the original trial and the appeal.<sup>127</sup>

Despite such legal setbacks, Tanny's quest to have gyms stretching across America continued unabated. Perhaps he was inspired by the lead of business magnates Sam Walton, who started Walmart in 1950, and Ray Kroc who began McDonald's in 1955, but Tanny began working so that the "same Tanny product" was available wherever you were. To create this homogeneity, he established his own line of exercise machines that became standard in all his gyms. He also created exercise plans and marketing plans that were distributed from the national office and employed

everywhere. The phenomenal growth of McDonalds, after all, was the consistency of the food. The fries and burgers tasted the same, whether you were in Tampa or Tacoma.<sup>128</sup>

Tanny aimed for a similar brand identification for his gyms. Some might argue that Tanny sold out bodybuilding in his pursuit of bigger dollars through his new white, middle, and upper class customers. While he had done that, the reality was more complicated as he had begun to dream the bigger dream of getting the whole nation into better shape.

In March of 1957, Tanny applied for and received a corporate charter to open Vic Tanny Albuquerque, Inc., in New Mexico.<sup>129</sup> It would be his first gym outside Southern California where he was then operating 17 gyms.<sup>130</sup> In April he began advertising in the Albuquerque newspapers, claiming that "Today's modern Vic Tanny Gym is a far cry from the old-fashioned gymnasium." An advertisement explained that these new modern gyms were "a symphony of mirrors, gleaming chrome, leather, and plush wall to wall carpeting."<sup>131</sup> Over 140 customers reportedly bought memberships in the Albuquerque gym before it even opened.<sup>132</sup> Buoyed by the response in Albuquerque, Tanny placed ads directed at landlords in several Arizona newspapers. He was interested in only prime real estate locations, with access to transportation and parking and close to already-established businesses. "Vic Tanny wishes to open fifteen gyms in Phoenix within the next three months in order to keep pace with the tremendous Vic Tanny expansion in major cities everywhere," the ads read.<sup>133</sup> That was no hyperbole: Tanny planned to open 50 new gyms in northern California, New York, and Chicago.<sup>134</sup>

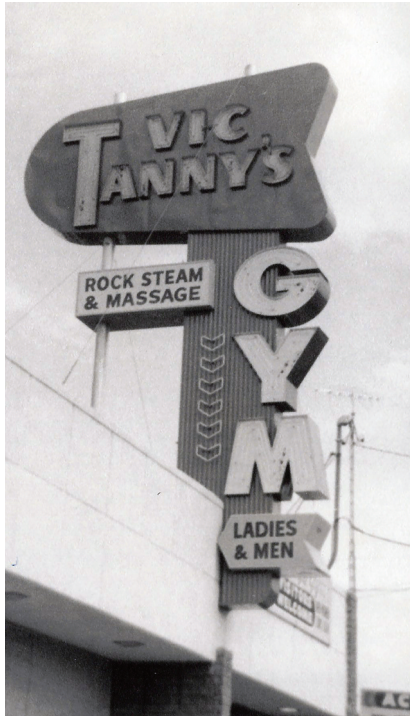
In the summer of 1957, Tanny opened his "newest, most modern gym," *spanning an entire city block*, at 2111 Franklin Street in Oakland, California. Interestingly, and perhaps in a direct challenge to LaLanne's growing national popularity, the new Tanny gym was just three blocks away from Jack LaLanne's well-established gym.<sup>135</sup> Tanny decided to compete head to head with LaLanne—who had built a number of special pieces for his gyms, by advertising that the new Tanny gym had "thousands of dollars' worth of scientific weight resistance equipment, personally developed [and manufactured] by Vic Tanny."<sup>136</sup> He offered discounted "charter memberships" to customers who enrolled before the gym's actual opening.<sup>137</sup> The other 50 gyms he planned to open across the nation, Tanny explained to an Oakland reporter, were all being modelled after this new Oakland health club.<sup>138</sup>

Moving from a regional business to a nationwide



one required a much grander marketing strategy and more reliable managers. Tanny rightly judged that an organization of that scale could not be managed by a single individual, so began creating a corporate culture and sharing some of the responsibilities. He chose, as his vice president and general manager, Rudolph “Rudy” Smith, a longtime associate, who came to Santa Monica from Nevada around 1941 to work for MGM Studios; and almost immediately joined Tanny’s gym.<sup>139</sup> Besides his film work, Smith had also competed in bodybuilding, and he began working for Tanny on weekends in 1951 when other staffers were absent. He later became a full-time employee.<sup>140</sup> Smith was bright, inventive, and a hard worker. Tanny soon asked him to manage one of the gyms where he found himself, “doing everything” from bookkeeping to cleaning up.”<sup>141</sup> He also allegedly invented the “Smith” machine, a fixed-path barbell apparatus still in use in many commercial gyms today.

Tanny no doubt hoped that Smith’s experience at MGM and other film studios would help with their decision to begin advertising on television. Television had become a “central figure” in most American households by the end of the 1950s, reaching people of nearly all regions, races, and social classes.<sup>142</sup> It was, therefore, a potent advertising medium, part of the new postwar “world of high profit.”<sup>143</sup> Television commercials pushed products of all sorts, and physical culturists, like Jack LaLanne, Debbie Drake, and Tanny, quickly realized its potential for spreading their message—and products—of good health.<sup>144</sup> Tanny began purchasing television commercial time around 1957, hiring bodybuilder Charlie Stahl “to flex his muscles and hawk the Tanny name” on camera. Stahl, however, was more than just a pretty face, and also worked to place the ads on television.<sup>145</sup> Tanny intended the high-powered medium of television to attract enough customers to fuel the astronomical growth of his ever-more-luxurious gym chain. Unfortunately, viewers did not enjoy Tanny’s ads. *Variety* put his advertisements fourth on its top-ten list of “Commercials Liked Least” by members of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences in 1959.<sup>146</sup> One



**Tanny understood that his name could become a brand and had this neon sign installed at Fourth and Broadway in Santa Monica in the mid-1950s.**

southern California sports columnist dubbed Stahl “Breathless” in 1957, claiming he sounded like a “radio announcer who can’t announce.”<sup>147</sup> Tanny and Stahl tried to improve the ads, hiring a Hollywood agency to produce them, and injecting a bit of humor “to make the gyms attractive to young executives and career girls from offices as well as the factory workers.”<sup>148</sup> A 1961 ad, paid homage to Charles Atlas’ famous “98-pound weakling,” but placed emphasis on slimming down rather than bulking up. According to *Broadcasting* magazine:

*The spot opens on a beach where a shapely woman in a swimsuit is approached by a ‘man on the street’ radio interviewer. He asks her: ‘Miss Jones, is it true that you used to be a 150-pound weakling?’ She replies: ‘Was I ever! . . . Then Mama told me about Vic Tanny.’*

*Now Miss Jones is in the middle of the gym, working out on all of the machines in extreme fast motion. ‘And the first thing I knew, there I was working out in that luxurious Vic Tanny gym. My overweight hips lost their extra pounds, my bust became firm and youthful. I developed vim and vigor, too.’*<sup>149</sup>

Regardless of their reception, Tanny’s commercials were still valuable because “they showed men and women working out—no one had ever *seen* it,” explained fitness industry giant Harry Schwartz, who worked for Tanny as a business manager during the late 1950s. Despite the increased awareness of the need for exercise, even physicians and physical educators failed to agree upon recommendations for healthful physical activity, especially with regard to resistance training. The commercials helped explain how Tanny’s gyms and training methods could guide newcomers in their pursuit of fitness.<sup>150</sup>

Meanwhile, Tanny’s California gyms grew more and more sumptuous. His new facility in San Rafael boasted “a pink tile steam room, four showers, a large

dressing room, long mirrors on its walls, and shiny chromium plated and pink leatherette covered equipment.”<sup>151</sup> The gym, stocked with a “jungle machine,” a leg press, “lifts of various sorts,” and benches, was staffed by three full-time instructors, trained in the Tanny Method, and by two masseurs.<sup>152</sup>

Late in December of 1957, Tanny opened his first gym outside the Southwest at 345 Madison Street in Chicago.<sup>153</sup> Although newspaper ads claimed, “Tanny Gyms are in major cities from coast to coast,” no east-coast Tanny gyms existed in 1957.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, some began to criticize Tanny’s ads for their deceptive, bait-and-switch “sales.” For example, Sarah Landau of San Anselmo, California, wrote to the editor of the San Rafael *Independent Journal*:

*In regard to your large advertisement for membership in Vic Tanny’s gym at \$2.50 per month, I wish to state that about two weeks ago a group of girls went to Vic Tanny’s gym . . . only to be informed that the \$2.50-per-month offer was no longer open and that if they wished to become members then they would have to pay \$60 each. I feel that the ad Vic Tanny is running is [censored in original] in order to get people into his establishment.*<sup>155</sup>

The editor pointed out that, while \$2.50 per month was equivalent to \$60 for two years, he acknowledged that “there have been other complaints” about Tanny’s ads.<sup>156</sup> And, in fact, the difference between a \$2.50-per-month contract and a \$60-up-front one was material—for Tanny.

Tanny distrusted debt, understood little about finance, and—despite his ostensible success—seemed to harbor a deep-seated need to prove himself a capable businessman. “I’ve saved hundreds of thousands of bucks by telling bankers where to get off and then hanging up,” he boasted. “They never been treated like that in their lives. They find out this Tanny isn’t such a muscle-bound dope.”<sup>157</sup> So, eschewing traditional methods, he financed the enormously aggressive nationwide expansion by “bootstrapping” new gym openings, by using the proceeds from up-front contracts of recently opened gyms to fund the construction and staffing of even *newer* locations.<sup>158</sup> However, that strategy necessitated the use of arguably deceptive advertisements (like the one that so aggrieved Sarah Landau), leveraged the business, and ultimately under-

mined Tanny’s long-term vision.

In the short term, however, it was marvelously effective. By 1958, Tanny employed 650 people, owned 60 gyms, and cleared more than \$15 million. He savored his success, adorning his new office in Beverly Hills with “thick white carpet, pink walls, huge walnut desk, sectional couch, portable bar, and an enormous mural depicting an Indian raid near Fort Phil Kearny in 1867.”<sup>159</sup> Tanny bought himself a \$220,000 mansion on three acres of land near his office where he had twelve telephone lines installed to keep up with his empire. The house also had a kidney-shaped swimming pool, a private gymnasium and a playground for his children.<sup>160</sup> Only his mother, who also now lived in Los Angeles, was concerned about it all. She worried he was working too hard.<sup>161</sup>

She had right to be worried as Tanny was also discussing plans for international expansion in 1958, apparently oblivious to the fact that most would still consider his business largely a regional one.<sup>162</sup> The future gyms he had announced earlier—Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Cleveland, Detroit, and Dallas—all remained just that: planned, not opened.<sup>163</sup> Perhaps the problem was the long list of site requirements Tanny insisted upon for new locations. They had to be centrally located, with ample parking space, adequate soil conditions for installation of swimming pools, and available for leasing (not buying outright). In New York and other major cities, few landlords could meet Tanny’s demands.<sup>164</sup> Nevertheless, he began to also dream of—and advertise—future locations in Paris, Rome, England, and even Japan.<sup>165</sup>

In 1959, his visions—perhaps delusions—only grew grander. Tanny was purchasing so much commercial time on television that he attempted to merge with Guild Films, a television and movie company based in New York. The deal fell through, presumably because of Guild’s financial troubles.<sup>166</sup> Nevertheless, a Tanny publicist reported that sales increased 40 percent in Los Angeles thanks to the increase in television advertising.<sup>167</sup>

Tanny pushed his salespeople harder and harder as the 1950s were drawing to a close. His hard sell tactics became notorious and did much to hurt the company’s image. “Tanny once sent out mimeographed sales instructions to his staff with a list of suggested conversations when telephoning prospects,” alleged a particularly scathing article from *Time* magazine. “It concluded with, ‘If you fail to get an appointment, then take a gun out of the desk and shoot yourself.’”<sup>168</sup> Sales tactics seemed to reflect that directive: one woman claimed that a Tanny gym manager



“kept her locked in his gym office for an hour while he tried to persuade her to sign up.”<sup>169</sup>

As he got bigger, other scandals began to plague the company. In Oakland, firefighters stormed the ladies’ steam room at a Tanny gym after someone smelled smoke—though no signs of a fire were ever found.<sup>170</sup> Another member fell through a glass partition in a shower and subsequently sued Tanny for \$25,000 in damages.<sup>171</sup> In San Rafael, a woman claimed she ruptured a spinal disc while following the Tanny method. She, too, sued for \$25,000 in damages, plus medical payments.<sup>172</sup> A Tanny gym manager was accused of stealing \$300 in membership fees and, in Albuquerque, a gym member had over \$100 in jewelry stolen while he was working out.<sup>173</sup> Theft ran rampant at Tanny gyms, according to John Balik, publisher of *Iron Man* magazine, and a Tanny gym manager in Illinois in the 1950s. “Everybody was robbing him blind,” Balik said. “[Tanny] took the world by storm, but wasn’t set up . . . to run remotely. If he was in the gym, it would never happen, but from 2000 miles away, there were no controls.”<sup>174</sup>

Competitors sprang up, too. By 1959, over 750 “reducing salons,” often with names like Slenderella and Silhouette, catered to women who were brainwashed to believe vigorous exercise was a strictly masculine pursuit. These salons promised to reshape female bodies through massage, stretching, and other (typically ineffective) passive methods, and avoided resistance training. Tanny’s biggest competition came from Ray Wilson, founder of both the Silhouette salons and American Health Studios, a chain of gymnasiums virtually identical to Tanny’s. Journalist Jonathan Black claims that Wilson’s gyms “went toe-to-toe with Tanny in Southern California before each chain expanded nationally. ‘We both went kind of bananas,’ said Wilson. ‘We spent huge amounts on advertising and stole each other’s people. We had a gym war. It enthused everybody, it was great for the industry, but it hurt both companies.’”<sup>175</sup>

In truth, Tanny’s gyms predated American Health Studios by over a decade, and Tanny had begun to advertise and expand before Wilson opened his first gym.<sup>176</sup> However, because of Wilson’s efforts (and those of smaller proprietors), more than five million Americans purchased



**The difference in Tanny’s early gyms—which were mostly stocked with simple free weights—and the carpeted, chromed, luxurious health clubs he later opened, can be easily seen in this photo from 1958. By then, Tanny had begun to focus on working with women and moved to machine-based training.**

services from some type of health club by 1958, spending “untold millions of dollars.”<sup>177</sup> To stay atop his quickly-growing competition, Tanny did, indeed, resort to spending a veritable fortune on advertising in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *Time* magazine claimed he spent \$2 million on advertising in 1960 alone.<sup>178</sup>

Because he now had a direct competitor in Wilson, Tanny’s palatial gyms grew ever more grandiose. In 1960, having waited years to open his New York gym, he invested over half a million dollars in a location in the heart of Manhattan’s financial district, on Nassau Street. “It’ll be a sweetheart,” he promised:

*Imported Italian red carpets, piped-in hi-fi music, move [sic] theater and cinemascope screen, South Seas Island-decorated swimming pool with a constant temperature, free bowling alleys with automatic pin spotters, free ballet and modern dance classes and new Tanny tab dispensers for vitamins, hand lotion and wheat germ oil. The walls will be pink and yellow and combinations of pink and black and*

*turquoise. We'll have scented air conditioning.... I don't call my places gyms. They're plush recreation centers. I don't like the word gym—it has a connotation of filth and paunchy people.*<sup>179</sup>

Other Tanny locations boasted similarly lavish appointments—skating rinks with Swiss chalets, fireplaces, and even pink ice.<sup>180</sup> The pink ice was difficult for employees to maintain, but it helped further distance Tanny's "recreation centers" from the intimidating mental image of gyms that kept so many Americans away in the 1950s.<sup>181</sup>

In retrospect, it is not so surprising that Tanny's ever-growing opulence would prove unsustainable, but the end came more quickly than many imagined. By the winter of 1960, he owned 88 gyms and generated somewhere between \$25 and \$35 million per year in revenue. He had even opened one Tanny Gym in Canada which allowed him—although it was "a broken-down gym in the worst part of town"—to legitimately claim his business was truly international.<sup>182</sup>

But as expenses mounted and revenue never caught up, Tanny finally resorted to financing the business with debt. Unfortunately, having no formal education in business, Tanny had no experience or knowledge of how to structure an appropriate line of credit. Nor did he place enough trust in Harry Schwartz's business advice, or hire a good financial advisor to help him figure out a plan. Instead, he took an advance on the astounding \$9 million that prospective customers had pledged to join Tanny's beautiful New York gym once it opened. Commercial lenders agreed to advance him sixty cents for each dollar of sales, which Vic in turn used for further expansions. The loans, however, were structured in such a way that Vic was required to repay a lump sum of \$3 million if he missed making a planned installment payment.<sup>183</sup> Not surprisingly, he missed a payment; and, even less surprisingly, he lacked the \$3 million he needed to remain solvent.

As his house of cards began to tumble, new revelations made things look even more dire. Tanny had insisted upon making himself "president of each separately incorporated gym, also president of the Management Audit Corporation, which sells financial and bookkeeping services to the gyms, and finally, president of the Vic Tanny Equipment Manufacturing Company," which furnished the gyms with weights and machines.<sup>184</sup> According to SEC reports, in February 1961, Vic personally owed creditors \$743,957.<sup>185</sup> He also owed the government back taxes.<sup>186</sup>

Tanny tried to raise funds by charging extra for his club's many amenities, and then in April 1961, decided to incorporate the business as a public company and make enough money through a stock offering to repay his debts.<sup>187</sup> These maneuvers proved unsuccessful. By summer of 1961, creditors had taken over his business operations and started to close locations.<sup>188</sup> Tanny had no choice but to file for bankruptcy.

Vic lost many of his most valuable employees along with the gyms themselves. Rudy Smith left the company to open his own health club in 1962, which he soon expanded to multiple locations.<sup>189</sup> The Holiday Spa chain Smith started would later be considered by some as the most successful health club chain in history.<sup>190</sup> Harry Schwartz went to work for Jack LaLanne, who no doubt smiled at Tanny's fall from grace.<sup>191</sup> By 1963, "virtually all" of the Tanny gyms in the Long Beach-Los Angeles area had shuttered their doors, as had six of the seven Tanny gyms in the San Francisco area.<sup>192</sup> Competitors rushed to salvage what little remained. Arthur Dallinger, another former Tanny employee, formed California Gymnasium Corporation and tried to scoop up some of the closed gyms' property.<sup>193</sup> So did gym owner/entrepreneur Ray Wilson, who got his start with American Health Studios shortly after Vic started his major expansion move. Wilson had filed for bankruptcy in 1959—presumably as a result of over spending on advertising required to compete with Tanny—but he managed to recover.<sup>194</sup> Vic's brother-in-law, Bert Goodrich, also wanted to take over operation of some of the Tanny gyms that were still open. Bert claimed that Vic supported his takeover attempt, but noted diplomatically, "I would like to continue using the Tanny name, but I do not think it is practical in view of recent developments."<sup>195</sup>

The 1960s were not kind to Tanny. The story of his economic collapse was featured in newspapers across the United States, and the man *Wisdom* hailed as a visionary physical educator became the butt of countless jokes. Jerry Lewis poked gentle fun at Tanny's Gyms in his 1963 feature film called *The Nutty Professor*.<sup>196</sup> Far stronger criticism came, however, in the 1964, *Muscle Beach Party*, a teen movie parody featuring "Jack Fanny," a stupid, poorly-dressed bodybuilding coach and fitness instructor. In one scene, Fanny, played by Don Rickles, discusses a contract with S.Z. Matts (Buddy Hackett), a rich business manager. "Mr. Fanny, please, just sign here. Please," says Matts. "Let's go over it again," replies Fanny. "I like the part about the gyms with my name!"<sup>197</sup>



As bankruptcy proceedings went forward, he lost his mansion in Beverly Hills and his mother had to move out of her expensive home into an apartment in Van Nuys.<sup>198</sup> Nevertheless, Tanny continued to promote merchandise with the Vic Tanny name, including a home gym and a line of health foods.<sup>199</sup> For a while, Vic insisted that his exit from the gym business was only temporary, claiming in 1963 that “[w]e are making arrangements to enter the New York market again in the very near future and expect to reopen our clubs.”<sup>200</sup>

While Vic never ran a gym in New York again, he did try briefly to have a second act in Europe. In 1964, a new Tanny gym opened in Frankfort, Germany, with pink walls, white carpets and filled with Tanny’s chrome equipment. Its opening was covered by the military newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, which explained that although the gym carried Tanny’s name, he was not the owner. Mike Sanzone, a former New York boxer, had worked out a lease arrangement with Tanny for the use of his name and some of his old gym equipment. Sanzone had the Tanny equipment shipped to Frankfurt, where many American servicemen were stationed, because he believed it would make the servicemen and their wives feel like they were in an American gym. In the article, Tanny told the reporter that he once again had “big plans,” and that there would be more Tanny franchises in Europe. “We’re hoping to open 100 health centers in Europe and Britain...we’re already looking for locations in Bonn, Hamburg, Munich and Cologne, as well as in London.” Ever positive, Tanny painted a rosy picture of his financial situation in the interview, telling the reporter, “I spent a lot of the past year aboard my yacht,” and claimed to have “investments in oil now,” that left him in great shape financially.<sup>201</sup>

For reasons that remain unclear, Tanny did not find success in Europe. Interviews with Harry Schwarz and Ellington Darden, who knew Tanny in his later years, both report that they believed he spent several years after his bankruptcy travelling around America in a motor home, perhaps to evade creditors. Eventually, however, Tanny settled in Florida, where he opened a small gym using weights that Schwartz sent him. He continued to work out regularly, occasionally training with Arthur Jones, the founder of Nautilus, and Nautilus employee Ellington Darden, a bodybuilder/exercise scientist who saw a lot of Tanny in his final years.<sup>202</sup> Shirley also moved to the Sunshine State, opening two gyms near Fort Lauderdale that bore the Tanny name. Although divorced, she wanted to make sure Vic could be near their children.<sup>203</sup> Vic, unlike

many others involved in his story, however, never really recovered from the loss of his empire. He died of a heart attack on 11 June 1985, at age 73.<sup>204</sup>

### American Icarus

In ancient Greek mythology the Gods were frequently unkind to those who did not know their place and the greatest of sins was possessing *hubris*—that combination of arrogance, over-weening pride, and the belief that rules don’t apply to you. In the Greek theater, and in Greek mythology, the man possessing *hubris* is always punished by the end of the tale, and most of these men—like Vic Tanny—are not allowed by the gods to rise from the ashes as the Phoenix was allowed to do. The ancient Greeks would probably feel Vic Tanny got what he deserved. Like the tale of Icarus, Tanny’s ambitions were too large—he didn’t choose to live within the rules.

Icarus, the ambitious youth of Greek myth, was cautioned by his father, Daedalus—who made him wings of wax and feather—to be careful to not fly too close to either the sun or to the sea. Icarus should choose the middle path, his father explained, so the wax would not melt and the feathers would not become wet with sea spray. But, once aloft, the joy of flight overwhelmed Icarus. He forgot he had any other mission than to soar higher and higher. Filled with pride at his prowess and loving the view from above, he ignored his father’s warning until, too late, his feathers began floating away on the air currents as the wax softened. He fell, his descent from the heavens swift, brutal, and final, and he paid the ultimate price for his *hubris*.<sup>205</sup>

We no longer live in Ancient Greece and our sense of right and wrong are no longer so absolute. Tanny undoubtedly did many regrettable things but he also gave us a grand idea—chain gyms—that brought fitness and health and an improved quality of life to millions of Americans. We need to remember that when Vic opened that first gym in New York City, it was one of fewer than three dozen health clubs in the entire five boroughs that make up that great city. Today, there are hundreds of facilities in that city alone.<sup>206</sup> The International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association suggests that as of January 2016, there were at least 36,180 health clubs in the USA. Those myriad clubs—large and small—elegant as well as simply functional are all the direct descendants of Vic Tanny’s dream.<sup>207</sup>

In closing, perhaps our modern Icarus is better served by the quote attributed to Oscar Wilde than the ver-

sion of Icarus created by the ancient Greeks:

*Never regret thy fall,  
O Icarus of the fearless flight  
For the greatest tragedy of them all  
Is never to feel the burning light.*<sup>208</sup>

#### NOTES:

1. The Wisdom Society for the Advancement of Knowledge, Learning, and Research in Education, "Vic Tanny: America's Greatest Physical Educator," *Wisdom Magazine* 37 (May 1961). Magazine pages are not numbered in *Wisdom*. The Wisdom Society, with offices in Beverly Hills, California, was run by publisher and editor, Leon Gutterman. It appears that the hard-bound, beautifully-produced special issues of *Wisdom* were provided via subscription to those who joined the Wisdom Society. Although *Wisdom* got into trouble with the postal service in 1963 when Gutterman began selling spots in the society's hall of fame in return for a \$100 "gift" to Gutterman himself, no wrong doing was reported before 1963, which suggests—but does not, of course, prove—that Tanny's inclusion was a testament to his real status in American culture at the time. See United States Postal Service, *Appeal of P.S. Docket 3/64—Wisdom, The Wisdom Society, Wisdom Hall of Fame, Wisdom Encyclopedia* (1974), at <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/judicial/admin-decisions/1974/3-64.htm>.
2. Ibid.
3. Wisdom Society, "Paul Dudley White, M.D." *Wisdom*, 37 (May 1961): 64.
4. Wisdom Society, "Vic Tanny," 2.
5. Ibid., 3.
6. Ibid.
7. See Marla Matzer Rose, *Muscle Beach: Where the Best Bodies in the World Started a Fitness Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 10; Jonathan Black, *Making the American Body: The Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Feats, Feuds, and Passions Shaped Fitness History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 36; and Peter Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," *LIFE* magazine, 29 September 1958: 71.
8. Jack LaLanne was born on 26 September 1914, and *The Jack LaLanne Show* first aired in 1951 and continued for 34 years, until 1985. Upon his death in 2011, LaLanne was called by many journalists "the Godfather of Fitness in America." See, for example, Robert Cochrane, "You Should Know Jack: A Qualitative Study of *The Jack LaLanne Show*" (master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2012); and Richard Goldstein, "Jack LaLanne, Founder of Modern Fitness Movement, Dies at 96," *The New York Times*, 24 January 2011, A25.
9. Albert Einstein was featured in Volume 1 of *Wisdom*, Winston Churchill in Volume 4, Abraham Lincoln in Volume 5, Helen Keller in Volume 11, Jesus in Volume 12, Ben Franklin in Volume 23, Pablo Picasso in Volume 25, Ernest Hemingway in Volume 26, and Thomas Edison in Volume 35.
10. Dave Yarnell, *Great Men, Great Gyms of the Golden Age* (self-published, 2014), 131. Yarnell and others list Tanny's surname as "Tannidinardo," but some sources contradict this spelling. See, for example, the *Chicago Tribune* obituaries, 16 June 1985.
11. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930* (Rochester, New York, 1930); U.S. Library of Congress, "Immigrants in the Progressive Era," at: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/progress/immigrnt/>; and Armand Tanny, interview by John Fair, 7 June 2004.
12. Dominique Padurano, "Making American Men: Charles Atlas and the Business of Bodies, 1892-1945" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2007): 32. Tanny's obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* claims that the family name was "Ianni" (from Iannidinardo), but this is contradicted by the 1930 census.
13. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*.
14. Ibid.
15. E.M. Orlick, "Vic Tanny, The Gym King of America," *Muscle Builder* 1, no. 3 (May 1958): 34.
16. Ibid.
17. *Fifteenth Census of the United States*.
18. Orlick, "Vic Tanny."
19. Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74, and *Wisdom*.
20. Ibid.
21. *Wisdom*.
22. Armand Tanny, "Vic Tanny Jr.," *Muscle Builder/Power* (November 1969): 46; Joe Roark, "Gyms of the Past," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 3 (July 1992): 17; and "Gay System of Gradual Reducing Said Better than Extreme Dieting," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 26 January 1931, 12. According to Roark, Gay's first gym opened at 32 South Avenue in Rochester; Gay moved in 1924.
23. Henry W. Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 30 September 1958, 17.
24. Ibid.
25. Kim Beckwith and Jan Todd, "Requiem for a Strongman: Reassessing the Career of Professor Louis Attila," *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 7, nos. 2&3 (July 2002): 47-48.
26. Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 25 November 1958, 25.
27. Lester Matthews, "Get a Big Load On Your Chest," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 8 August 1937, 4E; and Sigmund Klein, *Klein's Bell* 1, no. 3 (August 1931): 16.
28. Beckwith and Todd, "Requiem for a Strongman," 42-55.
29. Joseph Adams, "Hard Right Hand Smash Drops Jake," *Rochester, New York Democrat and Chronicle*, February 2, 1932: 23; and Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 6 February 1960, 15; Norman Schweikert, "Wendell Hoss-Obituary," viewed at: <http://wendellhoss.info/obituary/>.
30. "Personal Supervision Featured at Gay's," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 May 1943, 11.
31. "Arthur and Emily Gay's Gym" [advertisement], *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 26 January 1931, 12.
32. Beckwith and Todd, "Requiem for a Strongman," 50-53. Attila welcomed women members and hired Caroline Baumann as his women's exercise instructor.
33. Jan Todd and Desiree Harguess, "Doris Barrilleaux and the Beginnings of Modern Women's Bodybuilding," *Iron Game History* 11, no. 4 (January 2012): 8.
34. Art Gay, "How Will You Look on the Beach?" (advertisement), *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 2 April 1934, 6.
35. When co-author Jan Todd began training with weights in 1973, the European Health Spa in Macon, Georgia, where she then lived, would not allow men and women to train together; men and women used the gym on separate days.
36. Clune, "Seen and Heard," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 25 November 1958, 25.



37. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34.
38. Arthur Gay, "Report of Rochester Show," *Strength & Health* (March, 1933): 12-13.
- 39 "Rochester Strength Show," *Strength & Health* (April 1933): 14-15.
40. "Weight Lift Meet Scheduled at YMCA," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 11 April 1935, 23. One exception was the one-handed snatch, where Tanny set "local" records (presumably state records). See "'Strong Boys' Seek Records," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 14 April 1935, 4C; and "City's Strong Men Will Try to Set Marks," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 23 November 1934, 30.
41. Randy Roach, *Muscle, Smoke, & Mirrors, Volume I* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), 374. Armand began training at age 11.
42. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34; and Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74.
43. Clune, "Seen and Heard," 6 February 1960, 15.
44. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34; and Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74.
45. Ibid.
46. Clune, "Seen and Heard," 6 February 1960, 15.
47. Bunzel, "Health Kick's High Priest," 74.
48. *Wisdom*; and "State Probes Vic Tanny Enterprises," *Rochester (New York) Democrat and Chronicle*, 12 December 1963, 5B.
49. W. Willard Wirtz and Ewan Clague, *Salary Trends: City Public School Teachers, 1925-63* (U.S. Department of Labor, June 1965): 1-2.
50. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34. *Wisdom*, "Vic Tanny," p. 4. and "State Probes Vic Tanny." For info on the Great Depression see Wyn Derbyshire, *Dark Realities: America's Great Depression* (London: Spira Press, 2013), 112 and Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 67.
51. *Wisdom*, "Vic Tanny," 4.
52. Orlick, "Vic Tanny," 34.
53. Harold Zinkin specifically debunks the story in his memoir, *Remembering Muscle Beach: Where Hard Bodies Began* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 1999): 61.
54. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 35.
55. Weather Underground, "Weather History for KSMO—September, 1939," at: [www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KSMO/1939](http://www.wunderground.com/history/airport/KSMO/1939).
56. Ibid.
57. Jan Todd, "The Halcyon Days of the Original Muscle Beach," *Sport in Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), in press.
58. Ibid.
59. Tanny Interview by Fair; see also: Tolga Ozyurtcu, "Flex Marks the Spot: Histories of Muscle Beach," (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2014), 79-109.
60. Armand Tanny, interview by Terry Todd, 9 June 1999. Accounts of how much money the Tanny brothers had when they moved to California range from between \$431 and \$750. See also: <http://www.dollartimes.com/inflation/inflation.php?amount=750&year=1939>.
61. Actual address: 1417 Second Street.
62. Tanny interview by Todd.
63. Rose, *Muscle Beach*.
64. See Alexander Cortes, *The Modern Gym Exposed*, at: <http://www.elitefts.com/education/the-commercial-gym-exposed/> for an interesting discussion of the number of members needed to support a modern commercial gym.
65. "Vic Tanny, Pioneer of Health Industry," obituary from the *Palm Beach Sun Sentinel*, June 12, 1985.
66. Mary Rourke, "Harold Zinkin, 82, Muscle Beach Pioneer Invented Weight Machine," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2004, and Vic Tanny, "West Coast Column," *Strength & Health* (June 1941): 4.
67. John D. Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015): 73.
68. Ibid., 72.
69. Bob Hoffman, "Especially for Boys," *Strength & Health* (March 1935): 18.
70. John Grimek, "Armand Tanny: Pacific Coast Champion," *Strength & Health* (March 1941): 32-33.
71. Caption, *Strength & Health* (November 1941): 33.
72. Letter from Vic Tanny to Bob Hoffman in the personal collection of John D. Fair, 29 June 1946, and Vic Tanny, "West Coast News," *Strength & Health* (March 1949): 9. "West Coast News" appeared irregularly in *Strength & Health* into the 1950s, and Tanny was likely compensated for the material with advertising space in the magazine. All personal correspondence from Tanny in this paper comes from Fair's personal collection.
73. The first "West Coast Column" offered Tanny's greeting to reader, and suggested some topics the column might cover in the future. It also offered to help weightlifting teams in California to organize meets. See Vic Tanny, "West Coast Column," *Strength & Health* (May 1941): 11.
74. Letter from Vic Tanny to John Terpak, 7 May 1942.
75. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940" (Rochester, New York, 1940). Though unable to locate a marriage record, according to the census, Shirley was 17 and living at home with her parents in 1940. However, a letter from Vic to John Terpak mentions Shirley and references the birth of their first child in 1942, suggesting that the two were married by then. It is unclear when Shirley moved to Santa Monica. Florence Shirley Grastorf, Social Security Records and Claim Index, viewed at: [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com).
76. Harry Schwartz, interview by Ben Pollack, 13 March 2014. Harry worked as a business manager for Tanny in New York during the 1950s and '60s.
77. Norma married Bert Goodrich, an early Muscle Beach icon and winner of the first Mr. America contest. They remained married until Bert's death. Burt Folkart, "Bert Goodrich, 84; Gym Owner, First Mr. America," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 December 1991.
78. Tanny, interview by Todd.
79. Letter from Vic Tanny to "Jawn" Terpak, dated 1941.
80. Tanny, interview by Todd; Scott Harrison, "Times Editors During First World War II Blackout," *Los Angeles Times Photography*, 11 December 2012.
81. Letter from Vic Tanny to Terpak, 1941.
82. Letter from Vic Tanny to John Terpak, 7 May 1942.
83. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 45; Dominic Juliano, *The Essence of Being* (Bloomington: Balboa Press, 2015); 45; and Valerie J. Nelson, "Deforest 'Moe' Most, 89; Gymnast Was Unofficial Ringmaster at Muscle Beach," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 September 2006.
84. Tanny, interview by Todd.
85. Letter from Vic Tanny to Bob Hoffman, 29 June 1946.
86. Ibid.
87. It is possible that, as Tanny had requested numerous times, Hoffman helped fund Tanny's new gym. However, no definitive evidence of this fiduciary relationship can be found.
88. Ben Sorenson, interview by Ellington Darden, published in *The New Bodybuilding for Old-School Results* (Colorado Springs: Testosterone Publishing, 2006): 21; and Ozyurtcu, "Flex Marks the Spot," 85. Sorenson met Vic in 1945 after serving in the Navy and later worked for Tanny as a gym manager.
89. "Tanny's Gym Equipment," *California Weight Lifters Association Bulletin* 2, no. 5 (April 1950).

90. Dave Yarnell, *Forgotten Secrets of the Culver City Westside Barbell Club Revealed* (self-published, 2011): cii.
91. Jan Todd, "The Halcyon Days." The Mr. and Ms. Muscle Beach shows began in 1947.
92. Peary Rader, "1949 'Mr. U.S.A.' Contest and 'Miss U.S.A.' Contest," *Ironman* 9, no. 3 (May 1949): 6.
93. Ibid.
94. Lew Pike, "Miss and Mr. U.S.A.," *Strength and Health* (May 1948): 8-11.
95. Aline Mosby, "Mr. U.S.A. of 1949: John Grimek, 40, Wins Title; Women Whistle," *Hayward (California) Daily Review* 28 March 28 1949, 3.
96. Ibid. Wyman was a singer, dancer, and actress who married Ronald Reagan prior to his political career.
97. "Muscle Champ Worries Over Exercise Lack," *Bakersfield Californian*, 29 March 1949, 23.
98. Pike, "Mr. and Miss U.S.A.," 27-28. Vic later said that Steve Reeves was really the best-built man that night, and it was only Grimek's "enigmatic star-quality" and stature—Grimek was 40, older than most of the other competitors—that led to his win. See Ellington Darden, interview by Chris Shugart, accessed online at [http://www.t-nation.com/free\\_online\\_article/sports\\_body\\_training\\_performance\\_in\\_interviews/a\\_return\\_to\\_the\\_golden\\_age\\_ii](http://www.t-nation.com/free_online_article/sports_body_training_performance_in_interviews/a_return_to_the_golden_age_ii).
99. Fair, *Mr. America*, 94-95.
100. Ozyurtcu, "Go West, Young Man," in "Flex Marks the Spot;" and Klein, "Pumping Iron: Crisis and Contradiction in Bodybuilding," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 3 (1986): 126.
101. Joe Weider, Ben Weider, and Mike Steere, *Brothers of Iron* (Champaign, Illinois: Sports Publishing, 2006): 182-183.
102. Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Press, 1989), 129.
103. Ibid., 104-105.
104. Ibid., 15. The most popular evidence for this is President Kennedy's "The Soft American" article (*Sports Illustrated*, 26 December 1960). Kennedy writes that since the times of ancient Greece and Rome, "the same civilizations which produced some of our highest achievements of philosophy and drama, government and art, also gave us a belief in the importance of physical soundness which has become a part of Western tradition. . . . But it is a knowledge which today, in America, we are in danger of forgetting" (p. 15).
105. Patricia A. Eisenman and C. Robert Barnett, "Physical Fitness in the 1950s and 1970s: Why Did One Fail and the Other Boom?" *Quest* 31, no. 1 (1979): 115-16; James R. Morrow Jr. et al., "1958-2008: 50 Years of Youth Fitness Tests in the United States," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 80, no. 1 (2009): 1-11.
106. Robert E. Gilbert, "Eisenhower's 1955 Heart Attack: Medical Treatment, Political Effects, and the 'Behind the Scenes' Leadership Style," *Politics and the Life Sciences* 27, no. 1 (2008): 3-5; and Shelley McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013): 93-94.
107. "Vic Tanny Gyms Offer Courses for Beginners," *Van Nuys (California) Valley News*, 12 August 1956, 2B.
108. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 13 November 1951, A12; and "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 29 June 29 1952, A4.
109. "Texan Will Try Long Ocean Swim for Second Time," *Lubbock (Texas) Evening Journal*, 30 June 1952, 4; "Porpoise Nixes Channel Try," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 1 July 1952, 12.
110. "Determined Cuban Conquers Rugged Catalina Channel," *Tucson (Arizona) Daily Citizen*, 1 September 1952, 27.
111. Betty Weider, interview by Jan Todd, 22 December 2015.
112. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 17 September 1952, A20.
113. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Independent Press Telegram*, 21 December 1952, C4.
114. "Muscle Not Put to Use at Home," *Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Gazette*, 17 April 1953, 1.
115. William Tucker, "Creditors Out Muscle Vic Tanny," *Miami News*, 15 December 1963, 12A.
116. Armand Tanny, interview with Todd; and Zinkin, *Remembering Muscle Beach*.
117. Ben Sorenson, interview by Ellington Darden.
118. Ibid.; Harry Schwartz, interview by Pollack; and Jonathan Black, *Making the American Body*, 130.
119. Letter from Les Stockton to Vic Tanny, 17 June 1944, from The Les and Pudgy Stockton Papers, Box 6, Folder 136, at the H.J. Lutchter Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, The University of Texas at Austin.
120. Rose, *Muscle Beach*, 61. Stockton's Salon of Figure Development was on Sunset Boulevard.
121. "Vic Tanny" [advertisement], *Long Beach Independent Press Telegram*, 17 February 1955, B4.
122. "Vic Tanny Gyms" [advertisement], *Van Nuys (California) News*, 13 October 13 1955, C14; "Exercises for Mid-Valley Unit," *Van Nuys (California) Valley News*, 12 January 1956, 15B.
123. For information on women in the 1950s see: Jane Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).
124. "Community Achievement," *Van Nuys News*, 19 June 1956, 5.
125. Ibid.
126. California Court of Appeals, *Gardner v. Vic Tanny Compton, Inc.*, Civ. No. 24111 (California Second District, Division Three, 7 July 1960).
127. Ibid.
128. George Ritzer addresses this trend, which he calls "McDonaldization" by comparing the fast-food chain's Weberian business strategy to other organizations throughout society in his book, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Newbury Park: Pine Forge, 2011).
129. "Legal Advertising," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 12 April 1957, 17; and "'Rat Hole' Service Seeks Charter for New Mexico," *Jal Record*, 28 March 1957, 7.
130. "Vic Tanny Gyms in the Valley," *Van Nuys (California) Valley News*, 12 August 1956, 13A.
131. "What is a Vic Tanny Gym?" [advertisement], *Albuquerque Tribune*, 19 April 1957, 23.
132. "Vic Tanny Gym Opened Here," *Albuquerque Tribune*, 19 April 1957, 13.
133. "Vic Tanny Wants Gym Locations in Phoenix" [advertisement], *Phoenix Republic*, 15 April 1957, 28.
134. "Notes on Bay Commerce," *Oakland Tribune*, 26 July 1957, E34.
135. "You Asked for It!" [advertisement], *Oakland Tribune*, 27 May 1957, E17.
136. Ibid.
137. Ibid.
138. "Notes on Bay Commerce."
139. "Rudolph 'Rudy' Smith" [obituary], *The Malibu (California) Times*, 14 July 2010.
140. Joyce Christensen, "L.B. Health Spas Doing Fat Business," *Long Beach Independent Press Telegram*, 15 May 1977, L-S1, L-S3.



141. Ibid.
142. Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013): 36-37.
143. Michael Novak, "Television Shapes the Soul," in Horace Newcomb, et al., *Television: The Critical View* (Oxford University Press, 2000): 345.
144. PBS, "The Rise of American Consumerism," at: [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americalexperience/features/general-article/tupperware-consumer/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americalexperience/features/general-article/tupperware-consumer/); and Toby Miller, *Television Studies: The Basics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010): 53.
145. Burt Folkart, "Vic Tanny, First Big Gym Chain Developer, Dies," *Los Angeles Times*, 12 June 1985, and Harry Schwartz, interview by Pollack.
146. "Commercials: Likes and Dislikes," *Variety*, 18 November 1959, 29.
147. Hank Hollingsworth, "Sports Merry-Go-Round," *Long Beach Press Telegram*, 27 August 27 1957, C1.
148. "I Used to Be A 150-Pound Weakling, But Look at Me Now," *Broadcasting*, 6 February 1961, 38.
149. Ibid.
150. Harry Schwartz, interview by Pollack.
151. "Does Your Body Need Up-Building? Vic Tanny Gym Opens Tomorrow," *San Rafael (California) Independent Journal*, 10 December 1957, 13.
152. Ibid.
153. "New Gym Opens," *Oak Park (Illinois) Oak Leaves*, 19 December 1957, 14.
154. "Introductory Offer" [advertisement], *Oak Park (Illinois) Oak Leaves*, 6 February 1958, 21; and "Chain Site Hunt is Intricate Job," *New York Times*, 27 May 1958, 53.
155. Sarah Landau, "Gym Ad Should Be Investigated," *San Rafael (California) Independent Journal*, 22 January 1958, 14.
156. Ibid.
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# UNEQUALED YET NEVER EQUAL: THE PORTRAYAL OF JOHN DAVIS IN *STRENGTH & HEALTH* MAGAZINE, 1938-1957

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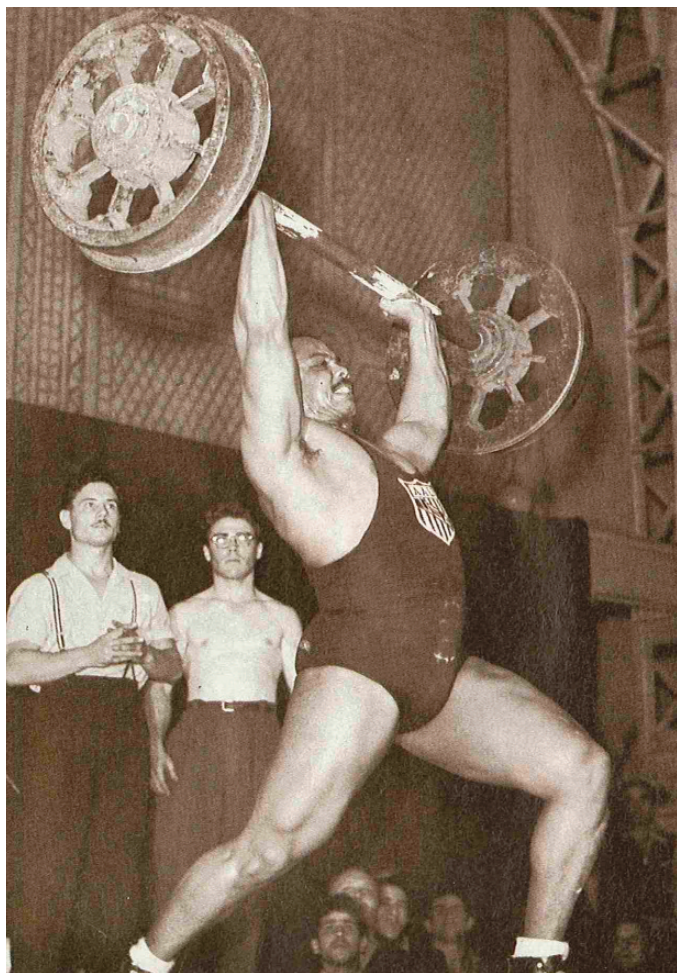
Following the 1949 world weightlifting championships in the Netherlands, French weightlifting officials invited American heavyweight and world champion John Davis to perform a strength exhibition at the Elysee Montmartre, a famous Parisian concert hall.<sup>1</sup> The French delegation challenged Davis to perform a clean and jerk with the ponderous Apollon Railway Wheels. Performance of the lift, one of the three competitive lifts at the time, required a lifter to pull the barbell from the floor with sufficient force to raise it to nearly shoulder level. The lifter then dropped under the bar, using either a “fore and aft” leg split or a bilateral squat, to “catch” it across the shoulders. After steadying the weight, the lifter then shoved the bar upward, dipped his legs, and did a fore and aft leg split before catching it at arms’ length. Once the lifter showed control of the weight, the lift was considered successful. The “Wheels” Davis had been invited to lift were, quite literally, train wheels, taken from a narrow gauge French rail car. Their namesake, Apollon (Louis Uni), was a famous French strongman who had used them as part of his act in the 1890s.<sup>2</sup> While some historians say that Apollon could hoist them overhead in the same manner Davis was challenged to do, many experts remain unconvinced that he ever put his own wheels overhead.<sup>3</sup> To lift such an implement is particularly impressive not only because the wheels weigh 366 pounds, but because the axle connecting the wheels is almost 2” thick and rigidly attached to the wheels. As a result, in order to rotate the axle as one must do to “catch” the bar, one has

to supply sufficient force to rotate both the wheels and the axle. Rotation of the fixed axle requires much more force than is required if one were to use the much thinner “Olympic” barbell, the bar of which can turn independently of the barbell plates (or “wheels”).<sup>4</sup> Successfully lifting these thick, rigid wheels, then, requires phenomenal grip strength. Apollon was a large man at 6’ 3” and 270 pounds at his peak. His size and unusually large hands allowed him to grip the bar with relative ease, which is why some historians believe it is likely he was able to “clean” the wheels and put them overhead even though he apparently never made it a part of his act. Lifting the wheels would have been challenging even to Apollon, who was notoriously lazy. Davis, on the other hand, stood 5’ 9”, weighed only 225 pounds, and had hands that were small even for his size.<sup>5</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that Davis, who lifted in the weight division with the largest men, was unable to employ what is known as a “hook grip,” in which the lifter prevents the bar from rolling out of his grip by wrapping his thumbs around the bar and then placing his first and middle fingers on top of his thumbs.<sup>6</sup>

Though many other men had been challenged to lift the wheels only one man, Charles Rigoulot, the French Olympic champion weightlifter, had successfully done so.<sup>7</sup> Before he was able to accomplish the feat Rigoulot, who had relatively large hands for a man who stood 5’ 8”, practiced with the wheels for months in order to be able to clean them to his shoulders.<sup>8</sup> Davis, on the other hand, got only a few days’ notice. French officials, upset at the fact that Davis had broken Rigoulot’s weightlifting records, challenged Davis during the World Championships to lift the axle during the American

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Davis' reputation as one of the greatest strength athletes in history results as much from his incredible lifting of the famous barbell known as Apollon's Wheels as it does from his two Olympic, six world, and twelve national titles. This historic lift was captured by Bud Greenspan, who included it in his 1952 documentary of Davis' life, called *The Strongest Man in the World*.

team's brief stop in Paris on their way home. When Davis accepted the challenge, French officials advertised the hastily-organized exhibition heavily on radio and in newspapers, resulting in a sizeable crowd.<sup>9</sup> At the time, Davis held the world record in the clean and jerk at 391.5 pounds, so anyone in the crowd unfamiliar with the technique of weightlifting might have assumed that doing a clean and jerk with the 366-pound implement was not likely to be problematic.<sup>10</sup> Davis was also widely recognized as the strongest man in the world at the time and had not been beaten in competition for more than a decade. Nonetheless, the combination of a large diameter axle, wheels that did not rotate independently of the axle,

the sheer weight of the implement, and Davis' small hands and lack of practice with it, made for a challenge the French officials believed would be beyond him.

Spectators and the press, with cameras ready, watched in rapt silence as Davis strode to the bar chewing gum, as usual. Davis then reached down, gripped the immense handle, lowered his hips, and attempted to rip the wheels from the ground. Just as quickly, his grip failed and he dropped it. Undeterred, Davis tried again. As with the first attempt, Davis' small hands kept him from getting a good grip on the bar and made it impossible for him to generate sufficient power to get the bar high enough to split his legs fore and aft and catch it on his shoulders as he normally did. The officials smiled as the crowd began to mutter. Perhaps this American phenomenon was not as great as they had thought; surely not as great as their own Olympic champion, Rigoulot.<sup>11</sup>

Davis remained unfazed. He approached the bar a third time. This time, however, he altered his grip. He grabbed the bar with his right palm facing toward him and his left palm facing away, as is commonly used in the deadlift to prevent the bar from rolling out of the fingers. This time, when Davis pulled the bar from the ground, he was able lift it much higher and faster because of his "reverse grip" and he realized that he had a chance to get it to his shoulders and put it overhead. The reverse grip presented a new problem, however, as catching the bar during a clean required both forearms to be pronated. In order to "catch" the bar successfully, Davis had to pull the bar high enough and then—very quickly, as the bar surged upward toward his chest—release the bar with his left hand, and pronate that forearm so that he could catch the bar with both hands now facing the same way. Another major problem was that the uneven grip caused the right side of the bar to rise much higher than the left, which in turn caused Davis to lose his balance as he "caught" the tilted bar and it fell, crashing to the stage. Nonetheless, because of Davis' grit he kept trying, and because of his phenomenal athleticism—after at least four failed attempts—he managed to pull the bar high enough, switch his left hand quickly enough, and catch the bar on his chest.

Even so, although he had successfully cleaned the Wheels, he had nearly exhausted himself and he still had to lift the thick and unwieldy bar over his head. It must be remembered that the wheels were only twenty-five pounds lighter than his own world record that was made using a thinner, springy bar, which is much easier to jerk.

As he drove the wheels overhead and split his legs to provide a stable base, he had the weight too far forward and almost dropped it. But after several short, rapid steps to catch his balance, Davis finally held the bar still and the judge signaled that the lift was good. As the audience roared in appreciation of this amazing feat, Davis turned toward the back of the stage and literally collapsed into the arms of the officials. Fortunately for sport historians, Davis' struggles to perform this genuinely phenomenal feat were dramatically captured on film by a young Bud Greenspan, who was directing the very first documentary of what would become a body of work that made him known around the world.<sup>12</sup> Bob Hoffman, the United States coach and publisher of *Strength & Health* magazine, the leading magazine in that field, called Davis' lift the greatest feat of strength in history. Although some of the embarrassed French officials announced that the lift would not be accepted because of Davis' use of a "reverse grip," members of the French press lauded him, dubbing him "*l'Hercule Noir*." The newly christened "Black Hercules" was supposedly offered citizenship, a home, and a business if he wished to stay in France following this performance.<sup>13</sup> Subsequent events suggest that he might have done well to accept these offers.

### Beginnings

John Davis was born on 12 January 1921 on Long Island and grew up in the tenements of Brooklyn.<sup>14</sup> Raised by his mother, Margaret Campbell, Davis never met his father. John played football and ran track in high school. At the time, strength training for sport was rather uncommon, due to the pernicious belief that lifting weights would hamper athletic performance.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Davis was introduced to strength training around the age of sixteen by an amateur lifter in his neighborhood named Steve Wolsky.<sup>16</sup> Wolsky had happened upon Davis and his friends horsing around one day in Brooklyn. One of Davis' friends dared him to lift a 125-pound concrete block overhead, which, to Wolsky's amazement, he did with ease. Wolsky recognized the youth's talent and convinced him to train for competitive lifting at a gym he had assembled in his home. Within a year, Davis had begun capturing medals at weightlifting meets and come to the attention of Bob Hoffman, owner of the York Barbell Company.

In addition to manufacturing barbells, Hoffman sponsored a competitive weightlifting club at his York, Pennsylvania factory. Hoffman regularly brought prom-

ising lifters to York and either directly provided them with jobs at the factory or helped them gain work in town by other means. He supervised their training and served as a benefactor for the lifters in exchange for their representation on his team. Hoffman's ultimate goal was to have the strongest club team in the country, so that "his" lifters would comprise a majority of the American national and Olympic teams.<sup>17</sup>

Once aware of Davis' promise, Hoffman arranged for him to attend school in nearby Philadelphia on scholarship so that he could supervise the teenager's lifting program.<sup>18</sup> In June of 1938, Davis competed in his first national championships with a shot at making the national team on the line. The seventeen-year-old Davis was defeated in the heavyweight class (181 pounds and above) by Stanley Kratkowski, but was awarded a spot on the national team as an alternate.<sup>19</sup> When the team mem-



Bob Hoffman stands at the announcer's podium as Davis makes a heavy press during an exhibition. The lack of collars and unorthodox loading of the plates suggests Davis was not worried about missing this lift.



ber in the weight class below Davis' was unable to lift at the world championship meet in Vienna, Davis was able to drop a few pounds and compete in the light-heavy-weight (under 181 pounds) weight class. In spite of the last minute weight loss, Davis seized the opportunity and defeated the reigning Olympic and world champion, Louis Hostin, while posting world records in the press and total weight lifted.<sup>20</sup>

Hoffman, characteristically, took quite a bit of the credit for the 17-year-old's success. In his magazine, *Strength & Health*, Hoffman's retelling of Davis' lifting heroics emphasizes his own influence. "I [Hoffman] asked him to make 850 months ago. I told him he could do it. He voiced his disbelief. But I asked him to carry 850 around with his mind, to think about it, dream about it, and with hard and scientific training he would win."<sup>21</sup> As a benefactor for most of the American lifters Hoffman viewed himself as a father figure to them, but as a manufacturer of barbells and magazine publisher, he realized the commercial advantages of being closely linked to the best lifters in the world. He regularly referred to all of the lifters as his "boys."<sup>22</sup> *Strength & Health* was an integral part of Hoffman's business. Through the magazine he gave detailed recaps of weightlifting meets, created his own personal myth, and, to an extent, mythologized the lifters. As noted by historian John Fair, Hoffman had a fairly progressive attitude about race, owing largely to his desire to build a successful weightlifting team and to associate with talented lifters.<sup>23</sup> This paper will examine coverage of John Davis in *Strength & Health*, the most widely circulated physical culture magazine during the middle decades of the twentieth century, and discuss his racialized portrayal throughout his career.

### Becoming Bob Hoffman

Hoffman began publishing the magazine in December of 1932 in response, he claimed, to what he witnessed at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. In spite of the fact that the United States dominated the total medal count, in the first issue of the magazine Hoffman expressed concern that "other countries are outstripping us physically."<sup>24</sup> The magazine, then, would offer advice on physical training so that America's greatness could ostensibly be achieved, and physical degeneration defeated. In reality, the magazine was established to promote strength training so that Hoffman could sell the barbells he produced, a model established by an earlier barbell entrepreneur, Alan Calvert.

Calvert, owner of the Milo Bar-Bell Company, published *Strength* magazine to promote physical culture, show people how to train, and to sell barbells, books, and training courses.<sup>25</sup> Bob Hoffman was among his many readers and purchased a Milo set in 1924.<sup>26</sup> A traveling salesman at the time, Hoffman dutifully trained with his Milo barbell and began to participate in weightlifting competitions. In addition, he was active in a variety of other sporting events and claimed to have won contests in handball, canoe racing, boxing, and wrestling during the mid-1920s.<sup>27</sup> Hoffman proudly recalled that he had been a national champion in weightlifting, though he neglected to mention that he won by default, as he was the only lifter in his weight class.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, Hoffman viewed himself as a Horatio Alger-like character and, occasionally, even referenced Alger when he recounted his early weightlifting results.<sup>29</sup> He truly believed himself to be a self-made man and, for the most part, he was. He was a decorated veteran of World War I and became a successful oil-burner salesman upon his return home. He was such a successful salesman that he bought out the primary owner of the company and became the sole proprietor of York Oil Burner Company in 1927. By 1929, he was also producing barbells in the oil burner factory. In 1931 Hoffman began recruiting lifters to join his "York Oil Burner Athletic Club (YOBAC)" weightlifting team and providing them with jobs at the factory. His recruiting efforts were so successful that the following year, YOBAC captured the national team title in weightlifting, beating out much larger clubs from New York City and Baltimore.<sup>30</sup> As his barbell business began to take off following the success of YOBAC and the publicity generated by *Strength & Health*, his new magazine, Hoffman sold his oil burner business and began to concentrate on manufacturing and promoting barbells.<sup>31</sup>

In his articles and editorials, Hoffman created an "origin story" for himself, likely based loosely on fact, that included incredible feats of strength, endurance, and heroism. He claimed to have gotten started in fitness very early in life, following a battle with typhoid fever, during which the doctor declared him dead but, "when [the doctor] found there was still a spark of life in me, he said that I would never amount to anything even if I lived, for my heart and other organs were too badly damaged."<sup>32</sup> Hoffman claimed that, rather than accept the diagnosis, he immediately started extreme physical training. For instance, one of his early athletic feats was running "100

times around a double tennis court” when he was about four years old.<sup>33</sup> Hoffman was fond of this story, though the number of laps he ran varied between 100 and 200 in various retellings.<sup>34</sup> A much less credible claim was that at the age of nine he had been asked by two older boys to hold their clothes while they ran a ten mile race. Hoffman’s story was that, knowing they would need their clothes at the finish, he ran alongside the two boys for the entire race. “At the end of the ten miles I was running beside the winner carrying the clothes and shoes, fresh as I could be and it would have been easy to win, had I been properly entered.”<sup>35</sup> Hoffman credited his physical fitness with everything, from his success in business to his escaping World War I alive.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in the magazine, he tried to cast the York lifters as extraordinarily successful in all aspects of life. He would also go out of his way to help them become their own self-made men. However, the narrative that physical fitness and a robust work ethic could lead to success in all areas of life became more difficult for Hoffman to maintain after African-American lifters joined the team.

#### Race Relations and the York Team

The first African-American member of the York and American national teams was a featherweight (under 132 pounds) lifter from New York City named John Terry. Terry had won the junior national championship in 1934, been a member of the Olympic team in 1936, and was



**Flyweight John Terry stands next to Davis in an unidentified park in approximately 1940. Terry was the first African-American lifter to be part of the York Barbell Club, although Hoffman did not let him work at York Barbell as he did other team members. After posing with Terry, Davis removed his shirt and displayed the small waist, broad shoulders, and exceptional lats that suggest he could have had a successful career in bodybuilding if race relations had been more advanced in his era.**



profiled in a 1940 *Strength & Health* article.<sup>37</sup> Hoffman got to know Terry well on the trip to Berlin and invited him to train in York after the Games. Upon Terry’s arrival, Hoffman attempted to help him secure employment but quickly found that “the opportunities for a colored lad are not so many.”<sup>38</sup> Instead, Hoffman purchased a bar in the “colored section” of town from a former Negro-league baseball player who intended to leave to manage a semi-pro team. Hoffman then turned the bar over to Terry to run as the sole proprietor. The bar quickly became a success and Terry still managed to train some in spite of often working eighteen hour days. The article in *Strength & Health* profiling him lauded his work ethic, and its author, Wib Scharzberger, expressed progressive



views on race:

*We subscribe to the principle in this country, as Abraham Lincoln said: 'All men are created equal.' Color, race, or creed should not affect the opinion of any man in a democracy such as ours. Men should be accepted on their own merits... There are good and bad in every race... A colored boy is born with two strikes on him. He has a much harder time than a white boy to make any sort of success in life.*<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, according to Scharzberger, Hoffman purchased the bar for Terry because “he thinks that a man who has sufficient ambition, willingness to strive to be a weight lifting champion, deserves every help he can give him towards attaining greater financial success and happiness.”<sup>40</sup> For his part, Hoffman echoed the quote Scharzberger attributed to Lincoln.<sup>41</sup> This is not particularly surprising, as the article attributed to Scharzberger was probably written by Hoffman.<sup>42</sup> Left unsaid, however, was how this notion of equality squared with a segregated York—which John Davis himself had described as “a Jim Crow town.”

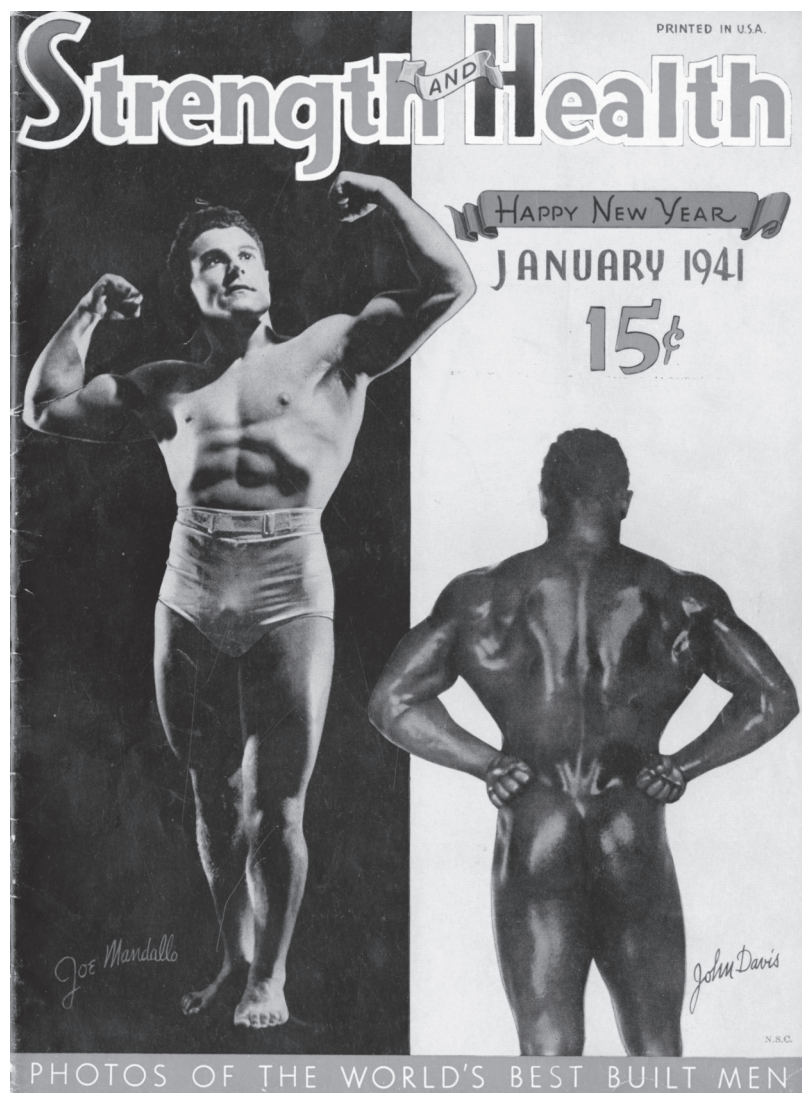
While segregation was mentioned in passing, it does appear that Hoffman genuinely sought to help the York lifters make their own success stories. He truly believed that strong men were intelligent and hard workers like himself, and would invariably succeed in their endeavors. It should also be noted that Hoffman helped lifters of all races at least in part because he saw himself as the patriarch of American weightlifting. In order to maintain this position, he felt that he needed to be the head of the strongest collection of men in the country and, later, the world. By helping them to be successful through pluck and luck, Hoffman reified his own sense of patriarchal authority. Additionally, he felt strong and fit by association with these superior athletes in spite of the fact that his rigorous travel schedule led him to have a less healthful life than he claimed.<sup>43</sup>

The laudatory article on Terry was, almost certainly, an attempt to placate readers who had begun to agitate for more stories about the two great African-American national team members. In the “Letters from the Readers” section of the January 1939 issue, George Weaver from Brooklyn, New York, expressed interest in

hearing more about Davis’ training routine.<sup>44</sup> Later in the same year a New York City physician, Dr. C.C. Pettit, inquired about the “possible omission” of black lifters from the cover of the magazine. Pettit suggested, “I can think of no one who is a more worthy candidate or who has a more beautiful physique than John Davis.”<sup>45</sup> A reader from Los Angeles, James Burch, agreed with Pettit saying that he, “desire[d] to see more of Davis and, if possible, on the cover.”<sup>46</sup> Rather than putting either Davis or Terry on the cover initially, Hoffman and the other writers elected to include the feature story on Terry. While both men were regularly included in the reporting of meet results and pictured in those stories, the article on Terry was the first article detailing the personal interests and life away from the lifting platform of an African-American athlete.

In January of 1941, Davis finally appeared on the cover of *Strength & Health*. The photo was a nude physique shot from the rear emphasizing the development of Davis’ upper back, buttocks and legs. Davis shared the cover with a little-known white lifter, Joe Mandallo, and was set against a white background, while Mandallo, in posing trunks, was set against a black background. The next month’s issue featured letters both elated and outraged at the January cover, as well as a cartoon of Davis that both lauded and degraded him. J.W.B. of Harlem, New York declared, “At last, *Strength & Health* is seeing the light of day. Needless to say we were overwhelmed with a lively emotion of happiness when our beloved strength friend and buddy John Davis appeared on the cover.”<sup>47</sup> Conversely, C.V.C. of Mobile, Alabama claimed that he “nearly went stark raving mad with insult and horror” when he saw the cover with Davis’ photo.<sup>48</sup> The reader demanded to know why Davis was on the cover, to which Hoffman responded, “because John Davis is the world’s best weightlifter and this is still a democracy.”<sup>49</sup>

The characterization of Davis in the accompanying cartoon utilized stereotypical black facial features and speech patterns. The drawing showed a big-lipped Davis, with exaggerated facial features, staring blankly into space at its right edge. Another frame lauds him as “the world’s best weightlifter” and shows him walking off with a crown while exclaiming that the prize is, “Elegant!”<sup>50</sup> Considering that Davis aspired to be an opera singer and was multilingual, the speech pattern depicted was clearly offensive and stereotypical, rather than based in truth.<sup>51</sup> The cartoon, attributed to a William Anselow, encapsulates the ambivalence of Hoffman and the other



Davis finally appeared on the cover of *Strength & Health* in January of 1941. The fact that he appeared nude, and with his face away from the camera, however, can be “read” as a lack of equal treatment by the magazine and its editorial team.

writers at *Strength & Health* regarding race. Davis is at once admired and degraded.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, his cover photo had Davis facing away from the camera. The shot showed the lifter’s impressive back and hip musculature while failing to show his face. The photo was unlike typical *Strength & Health* covers which rarely omitted the face of the model. In the three years prior to Davis’ cover, most models were photographed in a similar fashion to Mandallo: they usually wore minimal (rather than no) clothing, and included full-face, profile, or three-quarter shots.<sup>53</sup> A notable exception is the August 1939 issue which also included two cover models, one of whom was completely nude and shot from the rear. The model, Gene

Jantzen, appeared again in the November issue, still fully nude, but this time from a three-quarter view.<sup>54</sup> It is important to point out that there were no subsequent letters expressing “insult and horror” over this fully nude white model.<sup>55</sup>

While Davis’ nudity and pose were not unique, they were unusual. In their descriptive analysis of *National Geographic* magazine from the 1950s through the 1980s, professors Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins described how the magazine both shaped, and was shaped by, notions of race. Specifically, they noted that the magazine tended to depict those who were “culturally defined as weak” as facing toward the camera, while those who were more powerful tended to face away from the camera. The direction of the subject’s gaze is also important because if they are facing away, the viewer can observe without the subject’s seeming acknowledgement of them. The interaction is more voyeuristic and less threatening to the viewer. Diminishment of a perceived threat is of particular importance when viewing a black male body, where physical strength tends to have “threatening connotations” for a white audience.<sup>56</sup> Given that Lutz and Collins’ analysis of *National Geographic* began with issues published less than a decade after Davis’ cover, it seems reasonable to conclude that some of the same subconscious biases may have come into play. Moreover, this notion is borne out by the fact that this was not the first time Davis had been featured on the cover of a muscle magazine. The prior year Davis appeared on the front of *Iron Man* magazine and, as in the *Strength & Health* issue, was shown fully nude and from the rear.<sup>57</sup> It is also noteworthy that Davis split the *Strength & Health* cover with a white model. As previously mentioned, it was not the first time that more than one model appeared on the cover, but the majority of covers included only one model. Thus the ambivalence of Hoffman and the *Strength & Health* editorial staff is evident; Davis was on the cover, but he was nude, facing away, and sharing the cover with a partially-clothed white model.

In spite of others’ trepidation about him, Davis continued to dominate weightlifting competitions. While international meets had largely been on hold following Germany’s invasion of Poland, the United States and



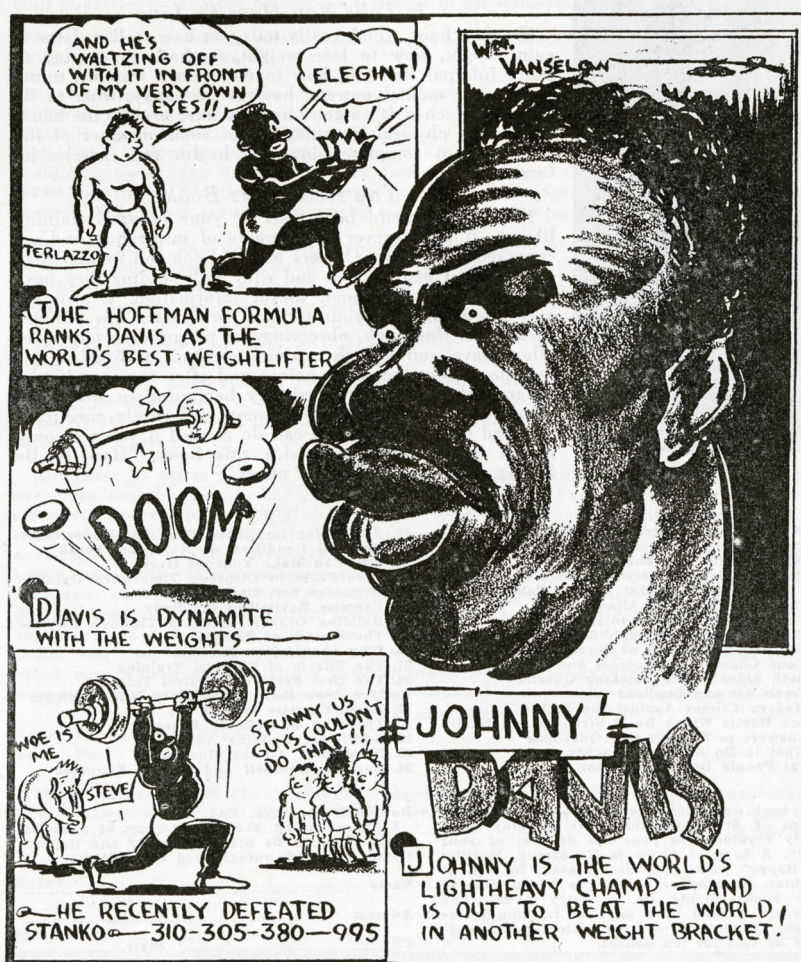
Canada held their own “International Championship” meet in September of 1940. The American team included: Gord Venables, Steve Stanko, John Grimek, Tony Terlazzo, John Terpak, and John Terry. John Davis did not lift.<sup>58</sup> The October edition of the magazine featured a picture of the “York Barbell Club International Championship Team,” which included all of the lifters except John Terry. The shameful decision to not include Terry on the cover in a team shot, in lifting apparel, would certainly have been less controversial than the cover photo of Davis which ran the following January. It is important to also note that not only was Terry a member of the team, he won his weight class by 200 pounds—a monumental victory in such a light weight class.<sup>59</sup>

The explosive power of John Davis was not only instrumental to Bob Hoffman in terms of personal and international prestige, it also proved useful in promoting barbell training. As previously mentioned, until the 1950s, most athletes did not train with weights as a means to improve their performance. Weight training was believed to limit a joint’s range of motion and slow contraction time of the muscles and both of these outcomes would clearly hamper athletic performance.<sup>60</sup> Hoffman, however, believed that weight training could only benefit athletic performance and credited his experience with weights with helping him to victory in the many athletic championships he claimed to have accrued.<sup>61</sup> He forcefully and frequently championed weight training as a means to improve athletic performance from the very first issue of the magazine.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, most coaches and athletes believed that strength training was deleterious to their performance. It should be noted that although Hoffman truly believed that weight training was important for athletes, he also knew that getting athletes to lift his barbells would be huge for his business. As a result, he relished any opportunity to disprove the myth of muscle-binding because he was driven by zeal as well as a sound business plan. A perfect opportunity appeared in April of 1940, when Hoffman was invited to speak to the student body at Springfield (MA) College, the premier institution in the field of physical educa-

tion at the time. The invitation was extended by an undergraduate student and avid *Strength & Health* reader, Frayser Ferguson, who had tired of the anti-weight training attitude which prevailed on the campus. Foremost in Springfield’s anti-weight camp was Dr. Peter Karpovich, a physician and faculty member in exercise physiology. Karpovich had told a reporter earlier in the year that “one of the greatest tasks that faces Springfield College is to fight these muscle builders.”<sup>63</sup> He went on to refer to proponents of barbell training as “faddists” and “quacks.” To disprove Karpovich’s belief that strength training led to muscle-binding, Hoffman brought several barbell men to campus, including John Davis and John Grimek, the leading bodybuilder in the world. After Hoffman gave a brief

### BARBELL PICK-UPS

By WM. V ANSELOW



William Vaneslow’s caricature of Davis—while purportedly praising Davis for his great lifting accomplishments—is drawn in such a racialized and demeaning manner that Davis’ achievement is negated by the attribution of bad grammar and a graphically distorted image of his face that looks nothing like the real Davis.

talk on the benefits of barbell training, he took questions. The first came from Karpovich, who asked the heavily-muscled Grimek to touch between his shoulder blades. Grimek easily complied and then drove home the point that weight training did not reduce range of motion by doing leg splits and showing off his ability to nearly touch his elbows to the floor with his knees locked. Then, to leave no doubt about their point, Davis performed one of his favorite feats—a full back flip while holding a fifty pound dumbbell in each hand. Upon seeing the sheer explosive power and flexibility of Davis and Grimek, it would be difficult for anyone to believe that strength training slowed or stiffened a man. The exceptional physical abilities of Davis and Grimek were instrumental in disproving the myth of muscle-binding for Karpovich and the many future physical educators in the audience.<sup>64</sup> Karpovich, thunderstruck by what he saw, apologized to the visitors, and then went on to perform some of the earliest

and most important research demonstrating that the effects of strength training on components of athletic performance were overwhelmingly positive.<sup>65</sup>

In June of 1941, Davis captured another national championship victory with a total of 1010 pounds lifted in the three events. In three years Davis had added an impressive 157 pounds to his total and bested his closest competition by thirty pounds. In his summary of the meet, Hoffman noted that, while Davis easily won and set a new record in the snatch, he “wasn’t pushed.” Otherwise, Hoffman said, Davis would have lifted more.<sup>66</sup> Not only had Davis set a new record with his 317.5-pound lift in the snatch, he absolutely obliterated the old world record of 296.5 pounds. Davis was only given credit for an American and not a world record, however, as only two of the three judges passed the lift. The assertion that Davis *could have lifted more* if he were pushed by competition was a common theme in the reporting of his lift-



**Davis won his first Olympic gold medal at the 1948 London Olympics. Shown here with coach Bob Hoffman, Davis had just set a world record in the snatch with 142.5 kilos (314.2 pounds). Note Davis’ short fingers.**

ing. Hoffman had previously made the assertion following Davis’ second American championship in 1939.<sup>67</sup> Here, one can again see ambivalence in the coverage of Davis. Hoffman feels the need to make all of the lifters fit within his narrative—they are extraordinarily successful as lifters because they are extraordinarily hard workers. In an article discussing the work required to become a champion, Hoffman mentioned, “John Davis and John Terry put in hours and hours and then more hours of hard training. To get to the top, a man must almost eat, breathe, and sleep weights. More work and more weight, that’s the slogan to keep in one’s mind.”<sup>68</sup> More commonly, however, in mentioning Davis’ amazing strength, Hoffman and other *Strength & Health* writers would consistently slip in the comment that Davis could have lifted more if “pushed.”<sup>69</sup> In one of his more derisive reports, Hoffman said that, “rest is one of the things our heavyweight champion does best...Davis has always been a

good competitor, willing to win by a small margin, unwilling to lift more than needed to win.” Hoffman went on to say, “It seemed there was no limit to his ability when he needed the poundage to win.”<sup>70</sup> Part of Hoffman’s frustration with Davis was due to the philosophy he consistently espoused, “Making the most of yourself.” Hoffman advised the readers of the magazine that “we must all strive to make the most of ourselves, to do the best job we can in the position we occupy.”<sup>71</sup> He apparently felt that Davis was taking his talent for granted. His estimation of that talent, however, was probably tinged with the then current ideology of the natural physical superiority of black athletes as well as the supposed natural laziness of African Americans.<sup>72</sup>

A 1935 *Strength & Health* article authored by Harry Good offered an explanation on the success of black athletes claiming that “negroes for a much shorter period of time have experienced the usually devitalizing



effects of the white man's civilization."<sup>73</sup> Good went on to espouse the Darwinian notion that only the fittest survive in Africa, while in America we save the weak with modern medicine. African-American athletes, then, were more physical because they were not as far removed from their "savage ancestors." In a later physique article on development of the pectoral muscles, another *Strength & Health* writer claimed that for "many thousands of years the men of many ancient races have had exceptional pectoral development so that it has become an inherited characteristic...All natives, whether black, brown, yellow, or red, have fine pectoral development."<sup>74</sup> The misunderstanding of inheritance is interesting, as is the idea that a writer from a magazine devoted to physical development could misunderstand the physical implications of manual labor. This writer clearly believed that African Americans were naturally stronger because they were closer to their "native" state than were white lifters. An obvious inversion of this notion of inherent physicality is that it must be developed in white lifters, who had to achieve success through hard work, discipline, and sacrifice.<sup>75</sup> While Hoffman himself never explicitly articulated such racial views of strength in his articles, it is not a stretch to assert that his view of Davis as a lifter was due, at least in part, to Hoffman's belief in the combination of inherent physical superiority and what he perceived to be Davis' reluctance to give 100% effort all the time.

The charge that Davis "dogged it" when not pushed by competitors followed him throughout his career, in no small part because *Strength & Health* was then the primary source of information about competitive weightlifting. Davis began writing for the magazine in 1947 and defended himself in one of his columns saying:

*Because of my unorthodox or inconsistent performances lifting, I have been called everything from 'lazy' to 'fat and out of condition.' To explain as briefly as possible about my output of energy; I would not consider paying \$5000 for a new car if I knew I could purchase it for \$2500. Likewise, in a contest I would not total 1000 pounds if I knew or realized I could win with 800. Of course, the importance of the contest has considerable influence on my efforts. There seems to be an insatiable, uncontrolled desire among lifting fans to see records*

*surpassed at every contest. . . . But most of these enthusiastic followers of the 'iron game' seem to be of the opinion that I can break [records] at will. This is not always the case. My apparent disinclination to break records is due to the following reasons. During the 10 years that I have been lifting I have broken and re-broken records, national and world's records alike. At one time or another I have held all of the records in the light-heavyweight and heavyweight divisions—without recognition. It seems that I can gain possession of records only during international competition, and even then I can't be sure of acceptance. I have only the personal satisfaction of having accomplished difficult feats. In my humble opinion, these are sufficient reasons for lifting only enough to win in a contest. It has been said that I lift better when faced with stiff competition. This is not necessarily true. The situation, as I see it, influences my lifts and my final total. My attitude may not coincide with the general attitude prevalent among athletes and their followers who continually call for 'blood.' But it is my attitude and as yet I have not felt inclined to change it.*<sup>76</sup>

A picture accompanying the article showed Davis with a stoic expression, surrounded by white officials and judges eager to "share the spotlight" with him on the lifting platform following one of his many exceptional performances.

Davis not being awarded the world record in the snatch in 1941 was not an isolated incident. Though he rarely mentioned it, or did so only in passing, Davis felt that weightlifting judges sometimes discriminated against him. In a competing physical culture magazine, *Your Physique*, Davis was asked what he remembered most about a trip to Berlin to lift in international competition. He responded, "The undemocratic way the Germans judged the lifting," without elaborating further.<sup>77</sup>

Following his national championship in 1941, Davis enlisted in the Army and was sent to the Pacific theater. He was able to return stateside for the 1942 and

1943 national championship contests, winning both in spite of little opportunity to train.<sup>78</sup> Davis was forced to forgo the 1944 and 1945 national championship contests due to his obligations to the Army. While he was overseas, however, the contests carried on as usual. In his absence, the 1944 contest was won by a white athlete from Rolla, Missouri, Frank Schofro. Schofro's winning total at the meet was 850 pounds—a total Davis had exceeded as a 17-year-old weighing 180 pounds. Almost certainly, Davis would have beaten Schofro by more than 100 pounds had he competed.<sup>79</sup> The next month's issue of *Strength & Health* included a feature article on Schofro, which he authored with the tag line "National Champion," titled, "How I got that way."<sup>80</sup> The article was actually a two-part feature and included a second piece the next month.<sup>81</sup> At the time, in spite of his feats, Davis had never been the subject of such a laudatory piece, much less a two-part feature, and had not written for the magazine. In putting up a total Davis had bested six years earlier at a lighter weight, Schofro, the white athlete, was extolled as a paragon of strength.

When Davis returned from the war in 1945 he was "ready to give up weight lifting." Forty-five pounds lighter following a bout of "jaundice," Davis was tired and didn't feel that he could compete.<sup>82</sup> With a bit of cajoling, however, Hoffman was able to talk Davis into defending his title at the 1946 world championships in Paris, the first international meet to be held since 1938. With little training, Davis was able to total 917 pounds at the 1946 national championship meet, easily outpacing George Shandor, who took second with an 831 total.<sup>83</sup> In Paris, Davis again won easily, this time over Russian champion Jakov Kutsenko, by a total of 959 to 915 pounds.<sup>84</sup> To Hoffman and American Olympic officials, Davis' performance was important because, with increasingly frigid relations, the Americans and Soviets began to view athletic competition as a means to prove the superiority of their respective economic systems. The two powers had been tied going into the heavyweight competition, in Paris, but by virtue of Davis' victory the Americans won the world championship because they had two gold medals to Russia's one. In Hoffman's mind, the victory of the smaller and diverse American team validated his vision of the self-made man.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, America was now home to the undisputed strongest man in the world. In spite of this, Davis received surprisingly little coverage in *Strength & Health*, and certainly not the two-part feature Schofro had gotten two years before.

Following their defeat in Paris, the Russians withdrew from international competition until 1950. At the 1948 Olympic Games in London, Davis easily captured the gold medal with second place going to another American, Norbert Schemansky.<sup>86</sup> One of the more noteworthy aspects of the *Strength & Health* coverage was the depiction of Davis in a drawing titled, "Highlights of the Olympics."<sup>87</sup> In contrast to the depiction of Davis following the 1941 cover photo, this drawing was a realistic portrait of the lifter, without the racialized facial features. This was presumably due largely to Davis' importance and utility as evidence of America's purported physical and social superiority.

When the Russian team surfaced again to challenge the Americans at the world championships in 1950, it was as a last minute addition to the meet. Rumors were spread that Kutsenko, whom Davis had beaten handily in 1946, had improved dramatically, totaling 1019 in training. If true, the total was 10 pounds more than Davis' best. When the lifting commenced, Kutsenko and the Russian officials did their best to disrupt Davis' performance. In the first event, the press, Kutsenko finished with a 308 press and then he and the Russian coaches argued with the officials that, due to a technicality, Davis could not try the same weight. While they squabbled, Davis easily lifted the 308 and then put up 319 on his next attempt. In the following event, the snatch, Kutsenko managed 297 while Davis called for 325 on his second attempt. The weight went up easily and he was awarded the lift. However, Davis had felt his knee hit the floor, a violation which would have negated the lift had the judges seen it. In a remarkable example of sporting integrity, Davis reported the violation to the officials, in his words because, "[he] didn't want to go around with that on [his] mind."<sup>88</sup> On his third attempt, he lifted it just as easily, but without the knee contact. In the final event, Davis called for 375 for his first attempt in the clean and jerk. He succeeded and passed on his final two attempts, stopping at the total of 1019 – the exact weight Kutsenko had claimed he would lift. In reality, Kutsenko only managed 931 and the Russians again retired from the international scene until the 1952 Olympic Games.<sup>89</sup>

In the months leading up to the 1951 world championships, Davis had been bothered by a nagging, though unspecified, leg injury. It wasn't the first time an injury had hobbled the great champion, nor the first time he fought through one to compete.<sup>90</sup> At the 1951 championships, however, the injury was so painful that on his



second snatch attempt he came up hopping on his good leg, attempting to avoid putting any pressure on the injured limb. In spite of the severity of the injury, Davis stayed in the meet and managed a 352 clean and jerk. His primary competitor was Jim Bradford, also African American, who had lifted 347 easily. Even so, after Davis' injury,

Bradford refused to make another attempt to beat Davis even though it seemed clear that he could have made what he needed to win. Bradford's incredible display of sportsmanship and Davis' unrelenting competitiveness thus combined to make Davis world champion again in 1951. Following the meet, Davis was featured in a celebratory article written by Hoffman. In the article, Hoffman claimed, "No athlete in any sport has dominated in his field more completely than Davis does."

Hoffman concluded the article by saying, "we are especially proud that this great champion is an American and a member of the York Barbell Club."<sup>91</sup> The statement is further evidence that the barbell magnate viewed Davis as one of history's greatest weightlifters, as well as a means of projecting the success of the American economic system and as a means to sell more weights.

At the 1952 Games in Helsinki, the Russians returned, but elected not to enter a lifter in the heavy-weight class. Knowing they had no one who could com-



**Davis' graceful, yet powerful, physique is displayed to perfection in this artistic pose captured by photographer Al Urban.**

pete with Davis, they instead entered two lifters in the light-heavyweight class. As in 1946, they lost to the Americans by virtue of less gold medals, one of which was won by Davis. In the months leading up to the Games, Davis had been featured in the popular "general interest" magazine, *Reader's Digest*. According to one of the article's authors, Bud Greenspan, then a fledgling filmmaker, the editors at the magazine had "cut much of what had been written about [Davis'] singing [aspirations]."<sup>92</sup> This response led Greenspan to make a fifteen-minute film about Davis, *The Strongest Man in the World*, which featured Davis' exploits at the 1952 Olympics as well as his now-legendary lifting of Apollon's Wheels. When Greenspan tried to sell the film, however, "[he] soon learned that theatrical distributors were not eagerly

awaiting a film about a black weightlifter. But the US Information Agency saw John's story as a way to counteract Soviet propaganda depicting blacks in America as second-class citizens. They purchased the film, as did the Army and Air Force Motion Picture Service, and showed it to military personnel throughout the world."<sup>93</sup> As was the case with *Strength & Health*, John Davis' amazing strength was largely ignored, except as a vehicle to promote the American system. Davis did finally receive more mainstream national attention in 1953, but only



because his reign as champion finally came to an end at the hands of Norbert Schemansky.<sup>94</sup> Beset by injuries, illness in his family, and with only limited ability to train, Davis finally lost for the first time since 1937.<sup>95</sup> The loss effectively ended his career, though he did attempt to make a comeback for the 1956 Olympic Games. At the Olympic tryouts leading up to the Games, however, Davis tore a tendon in his knee, crushing any hope of a comeback.<sup>96</sup>

Near the peak of his career in 1948, Davis made the observation that “outside of weightlifting, I don’t think fifteen people ever heard of me.”<sup>97</sup> While his estimate was certainly a bit low, Davis’ celebrity was highly specific. In a 1952 poll, “seven out of ten sports experts...failed to identify him.”<sup>98</sup> When his career ended, Davis quickly faded into obscurity. He had always worked low-level jobs, likely limited in part due to his race, “that wouldn’t interfere” with his lifting, including stints as a mechanic, subway guard, and can-stacker in a paint factory.<sup>99</sup> As an athlete who excelled in an “amateur” sport, he had received no compensation for his lifting prowess. With little to fall back on, Davis worked as a prison guard at Riker’s Island and soon gave up his pursuit of a singing career. He developed a drinking problem, divorced, and succumbed to metastatic lung cancer in 1984 at the age of sixty-three.<sup>100</sup>

In a 1968 *Sports Illustrated* article, Jack Olsen observed that African Americans failed to understand “that the white American was able to compartmentalize his attitude toward the Negro, to admire his exploits on the field but put him on the back of the bus on the way home.”<sup>101</sup> In many ways, the career of John Davis bore out this observation. In his earliest years at York, in spite of the fact that he was a world champion, Davis roomed in the “colored section” of town with John Terry. Davis, unlike many white lifters, such as John Grimek, Steve Stanko, Dick Bachtell, or John Terpak, was never offered employment by Hoffman nor was he given a business like the one John Terry received. What is more, even though he competed for the York team, Davis rarely trained at the facility.<sup>102</sup> Discussions of his achievements throughout his career were discordant, as exemplified by the 1941 cartoon both celebrating his success and implying that his physicality was due to his race, possibly because he was less removed from his savage ancestors. Similarly, and likely with racial undertones, Davis’ work ethic and desire were consistently questioned, though only if Hoffman wasn’t shoehorning him into his mold of social Darwin-



**Davis did not stay closely involved with the weightlifting community in the later years of his life but he did travel to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to witness the 1978 World Championships. Although this photo by Peary Rader has faded over the years, it still captures the happiness Davis felt at being with his teammate and old friend, Pete George, who is standing behind him.**

ism. Near the end of Davis’ career, his coverage shifted and included less criticism, although this is likely due more to his importance as a symbol of American physical superiority over the Russians and shifting attitudes toward race following the Second World War. Throughout Davis’ long career, Bob Hoffman played an important role in his success as well as in utilizing him to win titles and reinforce racial narratives. In the end, Davis’ fame was limited because Olympic weightlifting was not a mainstream sport in the United States. Nonetheless, Davis made several crucial impacts on American culture and its international image. Through his matchless power, he was able to wound the myth of muscle-binding and thus play a role in making strength training more mainstream, including for other young African-American men.<sup>103</sup> Despite the fact that it was not necessarily his



desire, Davis was utilized both by Hoffman and government agencies to promote the American Dream—the idea that anyone can make it in America, regardless of race, if they're simply willing to work hard enough. John Davis did indeed “make it,” but the “two strikes” of race mentioned by Scharzberger (or Hoffman) proved to be too many as he quickly faded from the spotlight and had few career prospects once his lifting career ended. Given Davis' poignant life story, it is difficult not to speculate on what might have happened had he remained in France.

## NOTES

1. K.D. Arax, “Davis' Colossal Lifting in Paris!” *Strength & Health*, November 1949, 13, 38.
2. Edmund Desbonnet, “Apollon – The Emperor of Athletes,” *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture* 4, no. 5 (August 1997): 23-47.
3. Osmo Kiiha, “Apollon Railroad – Car Wheels,” *The Iron Master: The History of the Iron Game*, April 1993, 35.
4. The thinner “Olympic” barbell that allowed the plates to rotate independently of the bar had become standard during the 1930s.
5. Ted Shane and Bud Greenspan, “Strongest Man in the World,” *Readers' Digest*, April 1952, 85-86; Bob Hoffman, “1949 World's Championships,” *Strength & Health*, November 1949, 44; Bob Hoffman, “U.S. Makes Clean Sweep – Wins Every Class!” *Strength & Health*, November 1947, 20-33.
6. David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (South Brunswick, NJ: AS Barnes and Co., 1970), 159. Davis' hand, according to Willoughby, measured 7.1 inches in length by 3.1 inches in width.
7. Rigolout's successful lift took place on 3 March 1930 at Wagram auditorium in Paris. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13; Terry Todd, “The Arnold Strength Summit,” *Iron Game History* 7, nos. 2 & 3 (July 2002): 4; Kiiha, “Apollon Railroad – Car Wheels,” 34.
8. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes*, 158; Bob Hoffman, “Charles Rigolout – A Few Chapters from the Life of the Greatest Weightlifter that Ever Lived,” *Strength & Health*, March 1939, 34, 41-43.
9. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13, 38.
10. Hoffman, “1949 World's Championships,” 44.
11. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13, 38.
12. “John Davis: World's Strongest Man,” the film by Bud Greenspan of Davis lifting the Apollon Wheels can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3KkZfRCuPs>.
13. Arax, “Davis Colossal Lifting in Paris!” 13, 38; John Davis, “Davis Answers the Critics,” *Strength & Health*, May 1950, 14, 29, 31-32; Shane and Greenspan, “Strongest Man in the World,” 85.
14. John Fair, *Muscle town USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 77-78; Osmo, Kiiha, “A Tribute to John Davis, Super Athlete,” *The Iron Master*, April 1993, 12.
15. Jason Shurley and Jan Todd, “If Anyone Gets Slower You're Fired: Boyd Epley and the Formation of the Strength Coaching Profession,” *Iron Game History* 11, no. 3 (June 2011): 4.
16. Shane and Greenspan, “Strongest Man in the World,” 86.
17. Fair, *Muscle town*, 35-46.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid; Bob Hoffman, “1938 National Championships – Can We Beat the Germans?” *Strength & Health*, July 1938, 28-29.
20. Bob Hoffman, “1938 World's Weightlifting Championships at Vienna,” *Strength & Health*, November 1938, 4, 30-31.
21. Ibid.
22. See, for example, the cartoon on page 20 of the June 1934 edition of *Strength & Health*. Part of the cartoon depicts Hoffman sitting in a chair with two miniature muscle men sitting on his lap. He is rubbing the head of one of the men and saying, “Now this little piggy...” The caption says, “[Hoffman] looks after 'his boys' in a paternal manner.”
23. John Fair, “Mr. America: Idealism or Racism: Color Consciousness and the AAU Mr. America Contest, 1939-1982,” *Iron Game History* 8, no. 1 (June 2003): 9-30.
24. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial,” *Strength & Health*, December 1932, 1.
25. Kimberly Beckwith, “Building Strength: Alan Calvert, the Milo Barbell Company, and the Modernization of American Weight Training,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2006).
26. Bob Hoffman, “How I Learned the Quickest and Easiest Way to Strength and Health,” *Strength & Health*, January 1933, 3-5.
27. Ibid.
28. John Fair, *Muscle town*, 33.
29. See, for example, Hoffman, “1938 National Championships,” 28. In the article Hoffman characterizes the meet as, “Quite the finest weight lifting contest ever held in America [that] went out with a thrill-filled finish that rivaled the stories of Dick Merriwell or those written by Horatio Alger.” Also in a 1953 editorial, Hoffman claimed, “The success of every champion would be a good story in itself – a success story of the Horatio Alger type. Yes, gentlemen, the overwhelming weight of evidence proves that, regardless of the present state of your health or strength, if you have enough ‘want to’ you can succeed.” Bob Hoffman, “Editorial – It Can be Done,” *Strength & Health*, May 1953, 3. For Hoffman, the notion that desire invariably led to success could be much more generally applied than just to acquisition of physical fitness.
30. Fair, *Muscle town*, 20-38.
31. Hoffman sold the oil burner business in 1938. Fair, *Muscle town*, 69.
32. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial,” *Strength and Health*, October 1933, 8.
33. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial,” *World Health Ecology News* 6, no. 4 (April 1975): 5.
34. Bob Hoffman, *Bob Hoffman's Simplified System of Barbell Training* (York, PA: York Barbell Company Press, 1941), 1.
35. Fair, *Muscle town*, 14.
36. Hoffman claimed that the “strength and health” barbell training conferred was necessary for “success in life.” Bob Hoffman, “Why You Should be Strong,” *Strength & Health*, June 1933, 5-6; He also credited his physical fitness with saving his life during WWI in two ways: he tells the story of performing a tumbling feat over barbed-wire to return to the American lines and escape pursuing Germans and that the immunity conferred by his fitness helped stave off disease which was causing other men to “drop like flies.” Bob Hoffman, “Especially for Strength and Health's Boys,” *Strength & Health*, December 1934, 20.
37. Wib Scharzberger, “Glimpses of the Champions,” *Strength & Health*, April 1940, 29-30, 64.
38. Ibid., 64.
39. Ibid., 29-30.
40. Ibid., 64.
41. Bob Hoffman, “Editorial – The Master Race?” *Strength & Health*,

November 1947, 4-5.

42. Hoffman was known to write articles under pseudonyms, including Wib Scharzberger who was, in reality, the Chief of the York Police Department. Hoffman also appropriated his dentist's name for various articles. John Fair, email message to author, 4 August 2016.

43. Fair, *Muscle town*, 227-229, 249-253.

44. George Russell Weaver, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, January 1939, 9.

45. In addition to his tremendous strength, John Davis was also noted for the quality of his physique. Following the 1942 Mr. America contest, Bob Hoffman commented that Davis' physique was as good as any of the winners and that "were it not for the handicap of color, he might have been 'Mr. America.'" C.C. Pettit, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, November 1939, 9; Fair, *Muscle town*, 79; Fair, "Mr. America," 13.

46. James Burch, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, January 1940, 9.

47. J.W.B., "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9; Fair, *Muscle town*, 77-79.

48. C.V.C., "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9.

49. Bob Hoffman, "Letters from the Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9; Fair, *Muscle town*, 78.

50. William Anselow, "Letters from Our Readers," *Strength & Health*, February 1941, 9.

51. One of Davis' teammates from 1947-53, Pete George, described learning of Davis' interest in opera and singing during the 1948 Olympic Games, saying that "John's knowledge of music was far superior to mine, and I learned a lot from [Davis]." For all team trips after that the two roomed together. During a stay in Stockholm for the 1953 World Championships, the two were overheard singing by a reporter who connected them with a prominent voice coach, and arranged for the two to sing at the China International Variety Theater in Stockholm for a one week engagement. Bud Greenspan, "Flowers for an Olympian," *Sports Illustrated*, 13 April 1987, 84; Bob Hoffman, "1938 World's Weightlifting Championships at Vienna," 4; Osmo Kiiha, "Comments by John Davis' Admirers and Friends: Peter T. George," *The Iron Master*, April 1993, 8.

52. As discussed by John Fair, one of the most famous members of the "Old York Gang," John Grimek, hated John Davis. Grimek went so far as to criticize Ray Van Cleef for writing an article about the "God-damned nigger" and to enter a meet specifically in an attempt to break Davis' 280-pound press record. John Fair, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015), 76.

53. The February 1938 cover depicts a completely nude model, though it includes a three-quarter view of his face. *Strength & Health*, February 1938.

54. "Strength & Health League," *Strength & Health*, November 1939, 8.

55. There were no letters of protest in the "Letters from Readers" sections in the two issues following Jantzen's cover. "Letters from Readers," *Strength & Health*, September 1939, 9; "Letters from Readers," *Strength & Health*, October 1939, 9.

56. Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 199, 197, 163.

57. Cover, *Iron Man* 3, no. 2, 1940.

58. Osmo Kiiha noted that Davis claimed to have sprained his ankle prior to the Strength & Health picnic in late September of 1940. The

injury may have kept Davis from lifting at the meet, though Kiiha believes Davis "was holding back for a match with [Steve] Stanko in October [at the Western Union Invitation Meet in New York City]." At the October meet, Davis set new American records in each of the three lifts and the total and had lifts that exceeded the world record in the snatch and clean and jerk, as well as a total higher than the then world record. Osmo Kiiha, "John Davis' Lifting History 1937 Through 1956," *The Iron Master*, April 1993, 21; Charles Coster, "We All Love Johnny," *Muscle Power*, May 1954, 42.

59. Cover, *Strength & Health*, October 1940.

60. Terry Todd, "Al Roy: Mythbreaker," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 1 (January 1992): 12-16; Al Thomas, "Reflections on Musclebinding," *Iron Game History* 2, no. 2 (April 1992): 1-3; Terry Todd, "The Myth of the Muscle-Bound Lifter," *National Strength & Conditioning Association Journal* 7, no. 3 (August 1985): 37-41.

61. Bob Hoffman, "How I Learned the Quickest," 3-5.

62. Bob Hoffman, "How to Improve at Your Chosen Sport," *Strength & Health*, December 1932, 6-8.

63. Jan Todd and Terry Todd, "Peter V. Karpovich: Transforming the Strength Paradigm," *Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research* 17, no. 2 (2003): 213.

64. Ibid., 213-220; Jim Murray, "Weightlifting's Non-Lifting Patron Saint," *Iron Game History* 4, no. 5 (August 1997): 3-5.

65. William Zorbas and Peter Karpovich, "The Effect of Weight Lifting Upon the Speed of Muscular Contractions," *Research Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1951): 145-148.

66. Bob Hoffman, "Results of the 1941 Senior National Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1941, 22-23.

67. Bob Hoffman, "National AAU Senior Weightlifting Championships," *Strength & Health*, September 1939, 7.

68. Bob Hoffman, "More Work and More Weight is What You Need," *Strength & Health*, April 1942, 22-23.

69. Vic Tanny, "1943 Senior National Championships," *Strength & Health*, August 1943, 32; Bob Hoffman, "1946 Senior National AAU Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1946, 23.

70. Bob Hoffman, "World's Heavyweight Championships," *Strength & Health*, February 1947, 41, 49.

71. Bob Hoffman, "Editorial – Making the Most of Yourself," *Strength & Health*, March 1944, 3.

72. As noted by Lutz and Collins, this was a common narrative of the relationship between blacks and labor. They describe a "double mentality" in which people of African heritage were thought to have "a tremendous capacity for work, coupled with an unwillingness to actually work." Lutz and Collins, *Reading National Geographic*, 162. See also John Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 172-3, 104.

73. Harry Good, "The Unusual Physical Ability of Negro Athletes," *Strength & Health*, August 1935, 65.

74. Dick Zimmerman, "Building Shapely Pectorals," *Strength & Health*, May 1942, 22-23.

75. For a thorough discussion of the attempts to quantify natural black athleticism, see David Wiggins, "Great Speed but Little Stamina: The Historical Debate Over Black Athletic Superiority," *Journal of Sport History* 16, no. 2 (Summer, 1989): 158-185.

76. John Davis, "My Views," *Strength & Health*, December 1947, 29-30.

77. Joseph Weider, "Popping the Questions at John Davis," *Your Physique*, April 1947, 10.



78. Bob Hoffman, "1942 Sr. National Championships," 10-12; Vic Tanny, "1943 Senior National Championships," 10-11, 32.

79. Bob Hoffman, "The Senior National Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1944, 6-7, 10, 24-25, 48.

80. Frank Schofro, "How I Got That Way," *Strength & Health*, August 1944, 20-21.

81. Frank Schofro, "How I Got That Way – Part II," *Strength & Health*, September 1944, 7, 9, 29.

82. Shane and Greenspan, "Strongest Man in the World," 87.

83. Bob Hoffman, "1946 Senior National AAU Championships," *Strength & Health*, July 1946, 20-23.

84. Bob Hoffman, "American Wins World's Championships!" *Strength & Health*, December 1946, 8-13, 40.

85. Fair, *Muscle town*, 64, 119-123.

86. Davis won with a 997.5 total to Schemansky's 937. Bob Hoffman, "Olympic Weightlifting – Part II," *Strength & Health*, November 1948, 21-28, 32-46.

87. Ibid., 21.

88. Shane and Greenspan, "Strongest Man in the World," 87-88.

89. Ibid.; Bob Hoffman, "USA Victorious!" *Strength & Health*, December 1950, 9-11.

90. Davis was also injured in previous meets due to dropping the weight across his leg—a hazard of Olympic lifting, muscle strains, and an unspecified knee problem. Bob Hoffman, "More Results from Senior Nationals," *Strength & Health*, September 1947, 28-31; Bob Hoffman, "US Makes Clean Sweep — Wins Every Class!" *Strength & Health*, November 1947, 20-33.

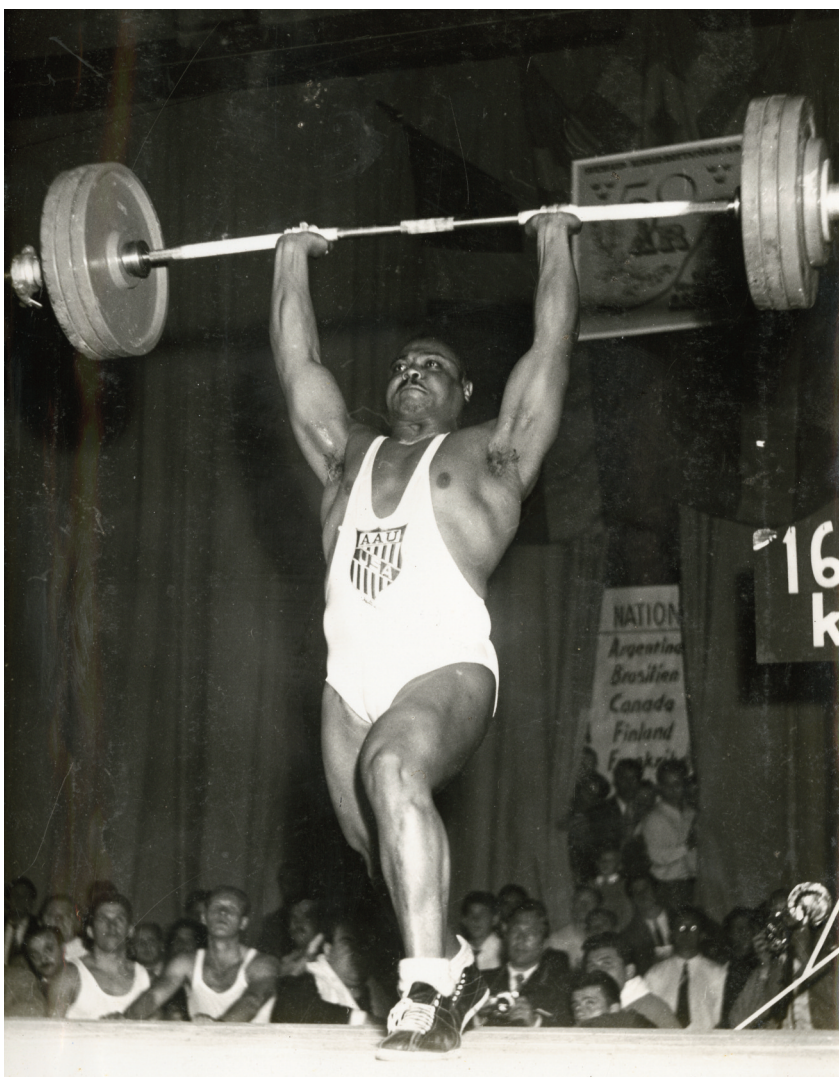
91. Bob Hoffman, "John Davis—World's Greatest Weightlifter—World's Strongest Man," *Strength & Health*, October 1951, 8-9, 45-46.

92. Greenspan, "Flowers for an Olympian," 84.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Bob Hoffman, "American Weightlifting Progress," *Strength & Health*, July 1953, 9-10; Bob Hoffman, "The 1954 World Weightlifting



**British weightlifting coach George Kirkley made a small album in which he kept his "favorite weightlifting photos." This undated photo of Davis is from that book. Kirkley later gave the album to David P. Webster, who donated it to the Stark Center.**

Championships," *Strength & Health*, February 1955, 34; Bob Hoffman, "1954 AAU National Weightlifting Championships," *Strength & Health*, October 1954, 11.

96. Davis was thirty-five at the time of the injury. Ray Van Cleef, "Strongmen the World Over," *Strength & Health*, February 1957, 22; Greenspan, "Flowers for an Olympian," 84.

97. Ibid., 76.

98. Shane and Greenspan, "The Strongest Man in the World," 85.

99. Ibid., 87.

100. Davis married Louise Morton in 1946. The two separated and eventually divorced in 1961. Davis claimed in 1984 that Louise accused him of cheating and invoked a picture from the May 1952 cover of *Ebony* magazine in which Davis, in his Olympic lifting uniform, held a young woman overhead at arms' length. Osmo Kiiha, "A Tribute to John Davis, Super Athlete," *The Iron Master: The History of the Iron Game*, April 1993, 18; "Former Olympic Hero, 'World's Strongest Man,' Losing Battle to Cancer," *Jet*, 7 May 1984, 52.

101. Jack Olsen, "The Cruel Deception," *Sports Illustrated*, 1 July 1968, 17; Hoberman, *Darwin's Athletes*, 30-1.

102. Historian Terry Todd pointed out that none of the dozens of white lifters Hoffman employed was an eight-time World Champion as Davis was. Osmo Kiiha, "John Henry Davis, Jr.," *The Iron Master*, 7, 11. Terry Todd, personal correspondence, November 2011.

103. In a letter to *Iron Man* magazine, later published in *Iron Game History*, African-American Richard Hubert discusses being inspired to take up weight training after seeing Davis in *Strength & Health*. Richard Hubert, "Strong Wind Versus Weak Tree – My True Story," *Iron Game History* 10, no. 1 (November 2007): 23-31.



# BERNARD SHAW'S UNIQUE PHYSICAL CULTURE OBSESSION

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On his way to becoming the most prolific modern playwright and man of letters, George Bernard Shaw contended that he had earned fifteen reputations—as a novelist, dramatist, economist, funny man, street-corner orator, atheist, socialist, vegetarian, humanitarian, preacher, philosopher, and as a critic of art, music, literature, and drama.<sup>1</sup> Neither Shaw nor his many biographers, however, consider him a physical culturist despite his lifelong obsession with the function of the body.<sup>2</sup> The most obvious example is the playwright's fourth novel, *Cashel Byron's Profession*, the subject of Benny Green's 1978 study, *Shaw's Champions*, which culminates in the transmutation of Shaw's artistic hero into the physical heroism of heavyweight boxing champion Gene Tunney. For Green, *Cashel Byron* provided an opportunity for Shaw to "demonstrate the viability of the life force" and "the triumph of mind over matter." In this instance, "instead of the philosopher being utterly captivated by the prizefighter, the prizefighter becomes utterly captivated by the philosopher." Hence readers were attracted to the "miraculous spectacle of Life imitating Art."<sup>3</sup> Playing on this incongruity in his "Pugilist and Playwright," Stanley Weintraub observed that this "process of life imitating art had become complete, for Tunney was the boxer become gentleman, Cashel Byron come to life."<sup>4</sup> In his retrospective rendering of his father, *The Playwright and the Prizefighter*, Jay Tunney explains that "you had this paradox of a fighter who loved books, and Shaw loved the paradox because he himself was a paradox."<sup>5</sup>

Biographer Michael Holroyd identifies a deeper source of this trait in Shaw's attempt to escape from a

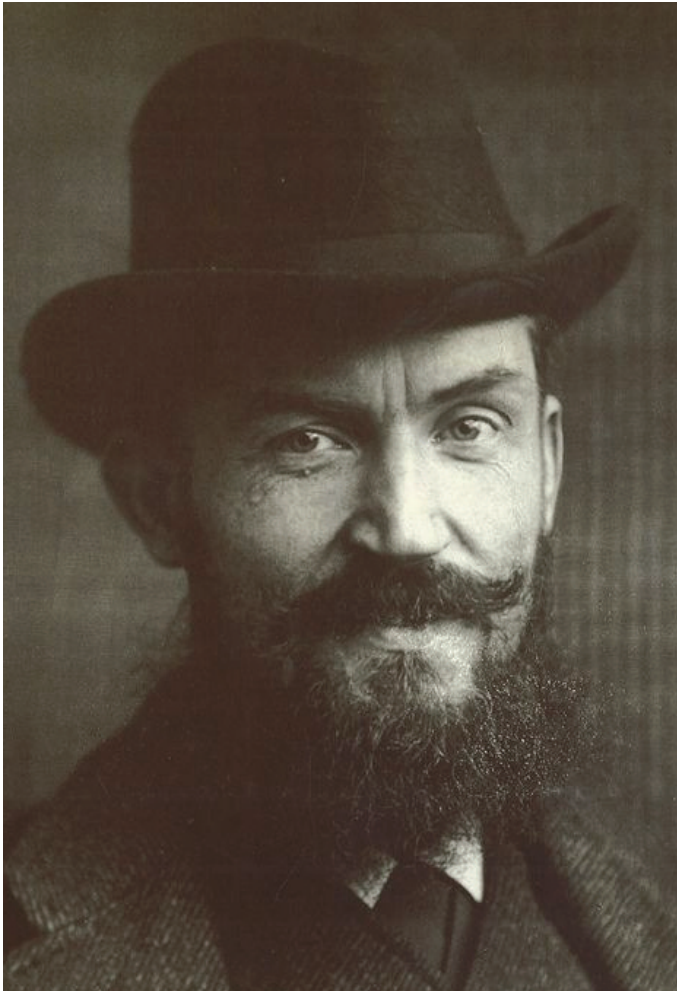
childhood that was "frightful & loveless in realities." He argues that Shaw typically "put on the spectacles of paradox" which became his "'criticism of life', the technique by which he turned lack of love inside out and, attracting from the world some of the attention denied by his mother, conjured optimism out of deprivation." What appears to be a disadvantage "becomes a potential asset in disguise. The art of life therefore is the art of heroic paradox."<sup>6</sup> But Holroyd devotes no special attention to *Cashel Byron's Profession* or any other aspect of Shaw's life-long struggle with his physical self. Coming closer than any other comprehensive treatment of Shaw's link to physical culture, Sally Peters displays the intimate connection between his life and his art while "seeking spiritual salvation in an elusive bodiless realm." Paradoxically he

*wanted to be in the world and to retreat from it, to be himself and not to be himself, he plucked shimmering skeins of moral fancy from his life, weaving parables for humanity. His quest was the heroic one of the romantic and the mystic alike—a grail-like quest for a serene perfection not given to human beings. . . . Armed with artistic and intellectual courage, braced by a resilient comic vision and godlike energy, the fantastic sojourner threaded his way through an intricate spiritual and psychic labyrinth, forging his own destiny—crowning himself superman ascendant.<sup>7</sup>*

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While Peters successfully weaves pertinent details of Shaw's physical life into her account, its final destination,





**This portrait of 32-year-old George Bernard Shaw was taken by Sir Emery Walker, in conjunction with the release of *Man & Superman*, in 1888.**

through the mythical vehicle of the life force, is spiritual. The body, though omnipresent, is always employed to serve some greater purpose associated with the mind. With a predominance of Shaw scholars sharing either a literary background or perspective, it is not surprising that they should so portray Shaw's life of the mind rather than the body, but his obsession with the latter is inescapable.<sup>8</sup> A reexamination of his diaries, letters, and autobiography along with his novels and plays indicates that the principal locus for his energy and inspiration was his body—the place where anxieties over its condition summoned a resort to the mind.

The earliest indication of this propensity appears in the memoirs of Edward McNulty, Shaw's classmate at the Dublin English Scientific and Commercial Day School in the late 1860s. Prior to their meeting, McNulty was mis-

led to believe that Shaw was formerly the heavyweight boxing champion at his previous school, "a hulking, brow-beating bully who would give me a bash in the teeth as soon as look at me." To his astonishment, the new boy, "instead of a burly, beetle-browed ruffian," was a "tallish, slender youngster with straw-colored hair." They then became "friends at first glance" who shared an interest in the arts. Shaw's passion, McNulty recalls, was drawing, fostered by their frequent visits to the National Gallery. But rather than landscape, he was absorbed with "the human figure" and an affinity for Michelangelo "whose exaggerated muscularity did not appeal to me." Seeking to improve their drawing skills,

*Shaw began to hint darkly at a scheme he was evolving for the study of the human form divine. It was a scheme, he explained, which would save the expense of a living model or the necessity of becoming students of the School of Art. One day he brought me to his house. . . . We mounted the stairs to this apartment, where there was barely room for anything but his bed; and, having closed the door with an air of mystery, he sat down on his bed whilst I sat on the window sill, and he disclosed his great plan for the study of the nude. I was to be his naked model and, in return, he was to be mine. This study was to continue from day to day as convenient until we had both become masters of the human figure.*

McNulty declined, not on the grounds of prudery but because he had recently had bronchitis and feared catching cold in Shaw's drafty quarters.<sup>9</sup> Even though this encounter appears to reveal underlying homosexual tendencies, it may not, given Shaw's life-long fascination with the unsexed nude and lack of inhibition to reveal his own unclothed body before the camera.

Not unrelated to this physical awareness was a deepening concern for his personal well-being, drawn mainly from lack of parental nurture. Most disillusioning was the hypocrisy of his father, George Carr Shaw, who while professing to be a teetotaler, was a dipsomaniac. When Shaw as a child once asked his mother whether his father was drunk, she replied "When is he anything else?" For Shaw it would be "a rhetorical exaggeration to say that

I have never since believed in anything or anybody,” but “the wrench from my childish faith in my father as perfect and omniscient to the discovery that he was a hypocrite and a dipsomaniac was so sudden and violent that it must have left its mark on me.”<sup>10</sup> George Carr’s model of fatherhood and lack of manliness, according to Holroyd, made him “a man to imitate, but in reverse.”<sup>11</sup> So humiliating was his father’s drunkenness for Shaw “that it would have been unendurable if we had not taken refuge in laughter. . . . If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.” Nor did Shaw find an adult model in his maternal uncle, William Gurly, who was a “common drunkard” and an “inveterate smoker,” or solace from his mother Bessie who seemed devoid of maternal passion. Yet he respected his mother for coping with his father’s dipsomania and running the family. “It says a great deal for my mother’s humanity that she did not hate her children. She did not hate anybody, nor love anybody.”<sup>12</sup> What Shaw learned from these experiences was an aversion to the self-destructive and inhumane ways of his elders and “where there is a will there is a way,” an aphorism he later coined.

The curse of alcohol is most apparent in Shaw’s early novels after 1878 when, forsaking his hapless father, he joined his mother who was embarking on a music career in London. His first novel, *Immaturity* (1879), features a drunk named Harry who on doctor’s orders was sent to Richmond under his wife’s care. But he continued to “drink like a madman” and died, “almost as if he did it on purpose.” This connection between dipsomania and early death was also evident in the resurrection of a committed alcoholic (Fenwick) to a healthy lifestyle and the downfall of a self-righteous clergyman (Davis) to strong drink. For the teetotal shopkeeper, Italian P. Watkins, the lesson was clear that

*he died much as you may die if you take to your old ways again. He was found drunk on Wes’minster Bridge shoving women off the pathway; and when the police laid hold of him, he fought till his clothes was torn to atoms. When they got him to the station, they left him alone in a cell; and when they went to look after him at three in the morning, he was dead.*

This incident enabled Shaw to reflect on his father’s disgrace and the sham of religion. “Nothing is less easy to

recover than the faith of a worshipper who has once detected clay feet in an idol.” Shaw compensated for his family’s proclivity for alcohol, his artistic temperament, and his lack of physical assets by leading his main character (Smith) to ballet, the most athletic of the arts. At a performance of the “Golden Harvest” at the Alhambra, the stage became

*an actual cornfield to him, and the dancer a veritable fairy. Her impetuosity was supernatural fire; her limbs were instinct with music to the very wrists; that walking on the points of the toes, which had given him a pain in the ankle to look at before, now seemed a natural outcome of elfin fancy and ethereality. He became infatuated as he watched her dancing in wanton overflow of spirits about the field, with the halo of the moon following her wherever she bounded.*

Afterwards the dancer’s “gymnastic skill” and “athletic virtues” became “a center of mental activity” for Smith whose “sole exercise,” like Shaw’s, was walking. It “caused one of those ruptures of intellectual routine which . . . are valuable as fresh departures in thought.” This display of corporeal artistry conflicted not only with Shaw’s inept physical skills but with his resort to the intellect as refuge. Smith revealed his thoughts to the dressmaker he was tutoring.

*The attraction of the dancer made Smith feel that philosophy grew monotonous if not relieved by what he called a little flesh and blood, a phrase which means . . . a great deal of gross sensuality, or a snatch of innocent folly. But his intolerance recognized no degrees in debasement; and he resisted the new influence as strongly as he could. Still, philosophy failed both to argue and to bully the dancer into an object of indifference; and Smith began to crave for a female friend who would encourage him to persevere in the struggle for truth and human perfection, during those moments when its exhilaration gave place to despair. Happily, he found none such.*



That Smith was able to resist converting the dancer's physical artistry to sexual attraction, the ultimate form of bodily expression, Shaw considered "a sort of trade mark of genius."<sup>13</sup>

These insights on the nature of genius, prior to the publication of works by Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson stemmed from years of intellectual incubation in the British Museum and exposure to Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* where Shaw learned about the unconscious and irrational forces governing human behavior. "Consciousness is the mere surface of our mind, and of this, as of the surface of the globe, we do not know the interior, but only the crust," wrote Schopenhauer. "Under the conscious intellect is . . . a striving, persistent, vital force, a spontaneous activity, a will of imperious desire." It was rooted in a discontent inherent to life.<sup>14</sup> What Shaw discerned from Schopenhauer, however, was a possible escape from his physical existence. Despite the tyranny of the will over mankind, it could be neutralized through the "extraordinary strength of imagination," acquiring a level of knowledge that would inspire acts of genius. "What kind of knowledge," Schopenhauer queries,

*is concerned with that which is outside and independent of all relations, that which alone is really essential to the world, the true content of its phenomena, that which is subject to no change, and therefore is known with equal truth for all time, in a word, the Ideas, which are the direct and adequate objectivity of the thing-in-itself, the will? We answer, Art, the work of genius. It repeats or reproduces the eternal Ideas grasped through pure contemplation, the essential and abiding in all the phenomena of the world; and according to what the material is in which it reproduces, it is sculpture or painting, poetry or music.*

It was a Platonic idea based on eternal verities and included, in Shaw's instance, the imaginary work of literature.<sup>15</sup> Reinforcing Shaw's tutorial was his exposure to Percy Bysshe Shelley who revealed the evolution of death into creative life. By 1875, according to Holroyd, Shaw was "a committed Shelleyan" who "read him, prose and verse, from beginning to end." Shelley, who would "make

Shaw into a momentary anarchist and lifetime vegetarian, completed the job of clearing away the refuse of those religions repugnant to his constitution, ready for the planting of Creative Evolution."<sup>16</sup> It is evident in embryonic form in Shelley's 1820 *Ode to the West Wind*:

*O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's  
being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves  
dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.  
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed  
The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow  
Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odors plain and hill:  
Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!<sup>17</sup>*

These ideas of formative genius through evolutionary rebirth, however imperfectly articulated, are embedded in Shaw's early novels.

The theme of rejuvenation is evident in Shaw's retrospective (1930) view of his second novel, that "physiologists inform us that the substance of our bodies (and consequently of our souls) is shed and renewed at such a rate that no part of us lasts longer than eight years; I am therefore not now in any atom of me the person who wrote *The Irrational Knot* in 1880." Although the plot centers on the irrationality of marriage, it is the relationship between alcohol and death and the physical failings of a stage singer, dancer, and actress named Susanna Conolly that excites most attention. For Shaw she had all the makings of a genius. She could converse in any language, adapt to any theatrical role, cook, sew, fence, shoot, preach, mimic, and "drive a bargain with a Jew." There was "nothing she couldn't [sic] do if she chose. And now, what do you think she has taken? Liquor. Champagne by the gallon. She used to drink it by the bottle: now she drinks it by the dozen—by the case. She wanted it to keep up her spirits. That was the way it began." Drink had transformed this beautiful youth into a "beast" when sleeping, "snoring and grunting like a pig. When she wakes, she begins planning

how to get more liquor.” No longer fit for society or marriage, Susanna flirted with death. “It’s nothing but drink, drink, drink from morning ‘til night.” The end came with a fall, bottle in hand, at a New York boarding house.<sup>18</sup>

Such ruination by drink appears only sparingly in *Cashel Byron’s Profession* (1882) where Shaw emphasizes vigor, good health, and the triumph of genius. As stated retrospectively in the preface, he provided his hero with “every advantage a prizefighter can have: health and strength and pugilistic genius” which he defines as the power of “divination.” What made it possible, however, was Cashel’s mentor, Ned Skene, a reformed Australian alcoholic whose wife recalled the horrors of their early years of marriage. “Then he took the pledge; and ever since that he’s been very good.” Thus enlightened, Skene passed along this secret to Cashel: “Don’t stay out late; and don’t for your life touch a drop of liquor.” Shaw creates the image of a strapping youth whose “broad pectoral muscles, in their white covering, were like slabs of marble. Even his hair, short, crisp, and curly, seemed like burnished bronze in the evening light.” To Cashel’s female admirer, Lydia, he was “the statue man” who was “the finest image of manly strength and beauty known to her.” He stood in stark contrast to the foolish drunken behavior of his would-be companion Mellish.

What Cashel had was “executive power,” a Schopenhauer derivative which when applied to boxing meant more than “merely living” but the instinct to “act up to your ideas.” Thus “you want to know how to hit him, when to hit him, and where to hit him; and then you want the nerve to go in and do it.” For comparison Shaw, drawing on his knowledge as a music critic, cites

*a man in the musical line named Wagner, who is what you might call a game sort . . . wins his fights, yet they try to make out that he wins them in an outlandish way, and that he has no real science. Now I tell the gentleman not to mind such talk. . . . His game wouldnt [sic] be any use to him without science. He might have beaten a few second-raters with a rush while he was young; but he wouldnt [sic] have lasted out as he has done unless he was clever as well. It’s the newness of his style that puzzles people; for, mind you, every man has to grow his own style out of himself; and there is no use in thinking that it*

*will be the same as the last fellow’s, or right for the next fellow, or that it’s the style.*

A further Schopenhaurian/Wagnerian principle was that “the more effort you make the less effect you produce. A *would-be* artist is no artist at all.” Having defeated the slugger William Paradise in the ring, Cashel displayed the true character of genius to his female friend as “champion of the world and a gentleman as well. . . . Where will you find his equal in health, strength, good looks or good manners?” Furthermore, the compatibility of good health with the self-guided nature of genius is evident in Shaw’s remark: “Prevent me from walking and you deprive me of my health. Prevent me from going alone where I please and when I please, and you deprive me of my liberty.” Final didacticisms in *Cashel Byron* draw its author toward his emerging intellectual commitments—socialism and creative evolution. “In the eyes of the phoenix, even the arena . . . is a better school of character than the drawing-room; and a prizefighter is a hero in comparison with the wretch who sets a leash of greyhounds upon a hare.” From Lydia, with her eyes fully opened for the first time to the dignity of the common man, emerges her belief in “the doctrine of heredity; and as my body is frail and my brain morbidly active, I think my impulse towards a man strong in body and untroubled in mind a trustworthy one. You can understand that: it is a plain proposition in eugenics.”<sup>19</sup> As a template for the progress of humanity, a sound body seemed a fitting prerequisite for a sound mind.

These thematic patterns are no less evident in Shaw’s last two novels. In *Love Among the Artists* (1882), genius is displayed by young Owen Jack who, despite (like Shaw) skin pitted by smallpox, lack of social graces, and heterodox talent, is embraced by social dilettantes. So adroit was his musical genius that he could mimic, a cap-pella, a full orchestra.

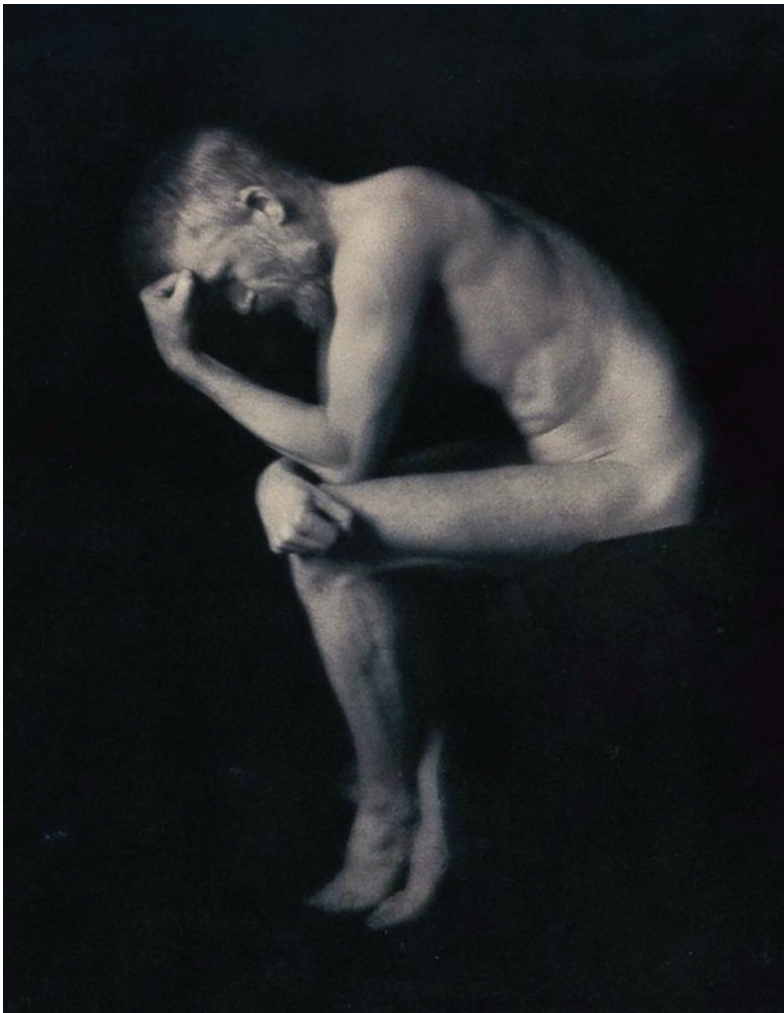
*He was playing from a manuscript score, and was making up for the absence of an orchestra by imitations of the instruments. He was grunting and buzzing the bassoon parts, humming when the violoncello had the melody, whistling for the flutes, singing hoarsely for the horns, barking for the trumpets, squealing for the oboes, making indescribable sounds in imitation of clarionets and drums, and marking*



*each sforzando by a toss of his head and a gnash of his teeth. At last, abandoning this eccentric orchestration, he chanted with the full strength of his formidable voice until he came to the final chord, which he struck violently, and repeated in every possible inversion from one end of the keyboard to the other.*

In stark contrast to Jack, Shaw depicts a young soldier who is equally talented on the clarionet but, like Suzanna in *The Irrational Knot*, is ruined by drink and “spends half his time in cells.” Jack, though socially ostracized, is physically robust and mentally sound. “He’s as strong as a bull, and cares for nothing nor nobody but himself.”<sup>20</sup> By the end of the novel drunkenness is equated with death, and genius, however remote, is the evolutionary hope for mankind.

In *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883) Shaw shows that genius, as hinted in previous novels, is not limited to society’s upper orders. He explores this broader application through Stanley Trefusis, a gentleman disguised as a commoner named Smilash. Foremost of the hindrances, as with Suzanna and the wayward soldier, was drunkenness. When asked whether he had ever been in prison, Smilash replied, “six times, and all through drink. But I have took the pledge, and kep [sic] it faithful for eighteen months past.” That exercise was the antithesis of this lifelong affliction is suggested by Shaw throughout Smilash’s meanderings as a laborer at a girl’s school where a teacher “set much store by the physical education of her pupils.” Ice skating and walking figured prominently in the list of acceptable pursuits. Likewise Shaw casts a favorable light on elocution and gymnastics as ideal preparations for a career in drama and the new fad of bicycling. Yet overindulgence in physical activities, could be life-threatening, as revealed by Smilash (as Trefusis) whose oversexed wife Henrietta succumbs to a tragic accident. This realization coincides with Shaw’s revulsion of his own sexual experience, leading him to whimsically remark, “we’re here to-day and gone to-morrow.” Smilash, like Shaw, even after his marriage to Charlotte Payne-Townshend, carries out flirtations with women around him. But the issue of socialism is ultimately resolved by using artist and convert, Donovan



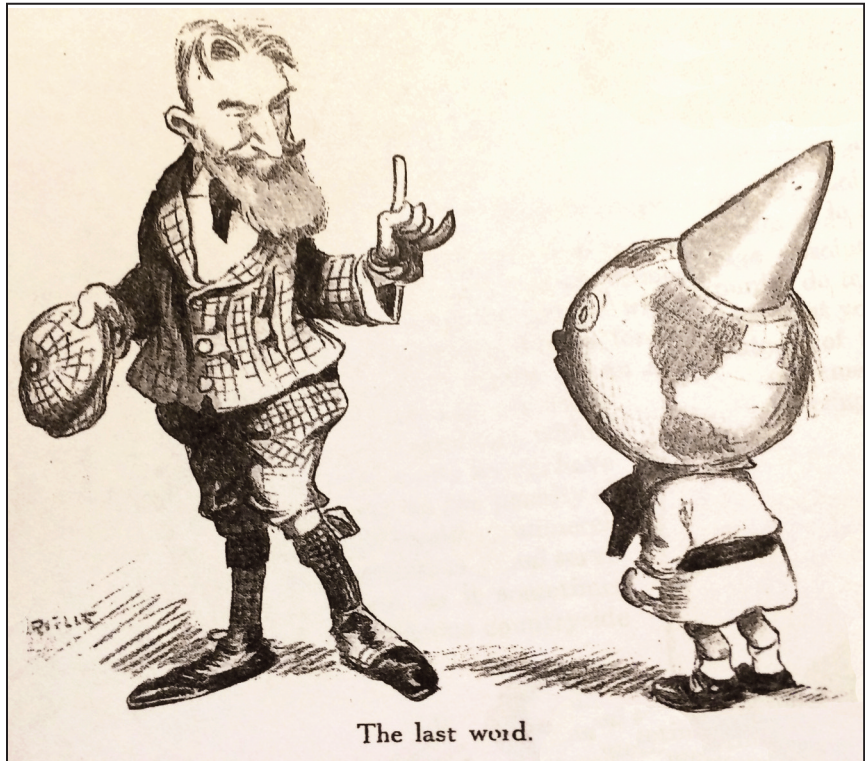
Shaw was an avid amateur photographer and also served at times as a subject for other photographers. Shaw later said of this 1906 photo, “I’ve posed nude for a photographer in the manner of Rodin’s *Thinker*, but I merely looked constipated.” Sadly, despite Shaw’s dislike of the image, the photographer, Alvin Langdon Coburn, sent a copy to the famous sculptor, and word of Shaw’s nude photo session leaked to the press. In response to their almost universal condemnation, Shaw told one journalist: “Though we have hundreds of photographs of [Charles] Dickens and [Richard] Wagner, we see nothing of them except the suits of clothes with their heads sticking out; and what is the use of that?” The original photo is now owned by the *Musee Rodin* in Paris.

Brown, and wine to persuade a baronet to subscribe to socialism as an example to the lower classes. “He was half drunk when he signed,” Trefusis observed, “and I should not have let him touch the paper if I had not convinced myself beforehand that my wine had only freed his natural generosity from his conventional cowardice and prejudice. We must get his name published in as many journals as possible as a signatory to the great petition; it will draw on

others as your name drew him.”<sup>21</sup> Given the nature of British society, it was a top-down strategy that Shaw proposed to reach the working class, not unlike the approach of the nascent Fabian Society to which he subscribed, even if drink had to be used as a catalyst to evolution.

A glimpse at the impact physical culture was having on Shaw's personal life at this time is possible through diaries he began keeping in 1885. By this time he was not only attending boxing matches but training under the tutelage of boon companion Pakenham Beatty and even entering a championship. He also attended the annual Oxford/Cambridge boat race and bought a pair of five-pound dumbbells. In a further commitment to health, Shaw ate his vegetarian meals regularly at a restaurant called the Wheatsheaf and used a spirometer to test the breathing capacity of his lungs. With income from his father's life insurance policy, he purchased a new outfit of sanitary wool clothing popularized by clothing reformer Gustav Jaeger that allowed the skin to breathe. He was Jaegerized from boots to hat.<sup>22</sup> He also celebrated his 29<sup>th</sup> birthday on July 26 with Jenny Patterson, a widow who provided him with his first sexual experience. “I was an absolute novice,” he recalled. Starting in 1886 he kept a separate entry on his health. A persistent concern was colds and an inability to rise early, but he also complains about boils, eye floaters, nausea, loose bowels, headaches, and laryngitis which hampered his public speaking. These were natural bodily ailments, but most frustrating was his vulnerability to carnal desires. It “disgusted” him by the end of 1887 that “the trifling of the last two years or so about women” had consumed so much energy.<sup>23</sup> However much he might style himself a philosopher, he was still susceptible to a biological life force.

At this juncture he read Samuel Butler's *Luck or Cunning*, ironically on the same day he recorded having sex with Jenny twice and staying till 1 A.M., thereby jeopardizing his early rising resolution. What he ascertained from Butler was a two-fold affirmation of purposeful existence—“the substantial identity between heredity and memory, and the reintroduction of design into organic development, by treating them as if they had something of



Universally known for his worldly wisdom and trenchant wit, Shaw often wrote didactic articles relating to social issues, including health and well-being. This cartoon, which aptly displays his demeanor, appeared with an article entitled “Easy Divorce” in the May 1917 issue of *Physical Culture*.

that physical life with which they are closely connected.” Butler (redundantly) contended “all hereditary traits, whether of mind or body, are inherited ... as a manifestation of the same power whereby we are able to remember intelligently what we did half an hour, yesterday, or a twelvemonth since.” Strongly refuting Charles Darwin's attempt to eliminate mind from the evolution of the universe, Butler subscribed to a version of intelligent design, whereby “bodily form may be almost regarded as idea and memory in a solidified state.” He believed in

*an unseen world with which we in some mysterious way come into contact, though the writs of our thoughts do not run within it. . . . The theory that luck is the main means of organic modification is the most absolute denial of God which it is possible for the human mind to conceive—while the view that God is in all His creatures, He in them and they in Him, is only expressed in other words by declaring that the main means of organic modification*



*is, not luck, but cunning.*<sup>24</sup>

As A. C. Ward notes in his introduction to *Man and Superman*, although Shaw had abandoned organized religion as a boy, “many of his strongest convictions and most of his personal conduct were those of a religious man.” It was exemplified not only in his purity of lifestyle but his notion that men should strive to leave the world a better place than they found it and to “hand on to future generations the torch of life burning more brightly.” Although Shaw claimed these beliefs were rooted in reason, and not faith, they were “so powerful in him as a guide to conduct that they had the force of religion.”<sup>25</sup> Seen in this light, Shaw’s life force, as a derivative of Butler’s purposeful existence, can be viewed as a secularized religion.

By 1888 Shaw’s preoccupation with health enabled a better understanding of a body/mind connection. Though heartened by an absence of colds, attributed to wearing gloves, he became depressed over an aching lower jaw and “remained in low health and spirits almost until the return of the sunlight in the spring of 1889.” From this slough of despond, Shaw was drawn into the spiritual realm by the writings of Schopenhauer on genius and Nietzsche on superman and the other-worldly strains of Richard Wagner.<sup>26</sup> That their ideas were pollulating in Shaw’s mind is evident in an 1889 letter to Hubert Bland where he formulates “the spirit of the will” which, unlike Darwinism, seemed more akin to humanism than science.

*The ordinary man, leading the ordinary life, never becomes conscious of the will or impulse in him that sets his brain to work at devising ways and reasons. He supposes his life to be a mere matter of logical consequences from a few bodily appetites and externally appointed ‘duties’ with their attendant pains and penalties. If he believes in his soul, it turns out to be a purely materialistic conception of some intangible organ in him that will preserve his individual consciousness after death and play a harp or roast eternally according to certain conditions fulfilled during his life. If such a man is to attain consciousness of himself as a vessel of the Zeitgeist or will or whatever it may be, he must pay the price of turning his back on the loaves and fishes, the duties,*

*the ready-made logic, the systems and the creeds.*<sup>27</sup>

Yet Shaw was constantly vigilant of his own bodily functions. So closely did he monitor his health habits and problems that one suspects hypochondria, but Stanley Weintraub insists “he was in excellent health for his place and time.” Indeed after leaving the worldly Jenny one evening, he was exhilarated by “a walking race with two soldiers in the park, which I won.” If life for the ordinary man was merely a matter of “logical consequences from a few bodily appetites” and “attendant pains and penalties,” Shaw, with his abstemious lifestyle, could envision a higher level of being from his own physical resources.<sup>28</sup>

During the next several years Shaw instituted several changes to facilitate this process. In May 1890 he relinquished his position as music critic for the *Star* which required almost daily contributions for a similar post with the *World*, a weekly paper. “A man who, like myself,” he explained, “has to rise regularly at eleven o’clock every morning cannot sit up night after night writing opera notices piping hot from the performance. My habits, my health, and my other activities forbid it.”<sup>29</sup> To fellow Fabian E. D. Girdlestone, Shaw shared his dietary habits.

*I do not smoke, though I am not intolerant of that deplorable habit in others. I do not eat meat nor drink alcohol. Tea I also bar, and coffee. My three meals are, Breakfast—cocoa and porridge; Dinner—the usual fare, with a penn’orth of stewed Indian corn, haricot beans, or what not in place of the cow; and ‘Tea’—cocoa and brown bread, or eggs.<sup>30</sup>*

What remained was a nagging sense that diet, even a vegetarian one, had to be complemented by exercise to maintain bodily health and vigor. Thus he invested in a pair of skates in December of 1891. By January, Shaw was mentally “incapable of work and craving for exercise.” He took long walks around Hyde Park, Kensington Park, and Bayswater, and in August he engaged in more vigorous exercise. In addition to walking and swimming, he had a long game of cricket followed by a round of tennis. “This violent exercise, coming after many years of London life, wrenched and strained every muscle in my body external and internal; and I was unable to move without pain afterwards.” By year’s end he was overtaxed and needing rest

and rejuvenation. He wanted “bodily exercise badly.” Yet were it not for his vegetarian diet and abstinence from tea, coffee and alcoholic stimulants, he was convinced his condition would be worse.<sup>31</sup>

Concurrently he was drawn to a higher source of inspiration through the writings of Schopenhauer, consuming a couple books in July 1891 and resorting more briefly to them on the train on 24 January 1892.<sup>32</sup> The [latter] was propitious in its timing inasmuch as he wrote an epistle to actress Florence Farr three days later on the nature of genius of which there were two sorts.

*One is produced by the breed throwing forward to the godlike man, exactly as it sometimes throws backward to the ape-like. The other is the mere monster produced by an accidental excess of some faculty—musical, muscular, sexual even. A giant belongs properly to this category: he has a genius for altitude. Now the second order of genius requires no education: he (or she) does at once and without effort his feat, whatever it may be, and scoffs at laborious practice. . . . I am a genius of the first order; and so are you; but I know my order and the price I must pay for excellence, whereas you are always appealing to the experience of the second order to justify your own self-neglect.<sup>33</sup>*

Shaw’s self-reflection corresponds to Schopenhauer’s distinction between genius and talent.

*For talent is an excellence which lies rather in the greater versatility and acuteness of discursive than of intuitive knowledge. He who is endowed with talent thinks more quickly and more correctly than others; but the genius beholds another world from them all, although only because he has a more profound perception of the world which lies before them also, in that it presents itself in his mind more objectively, and consequently in greater purity and distinctness.<sup>34</sup>*

These ideas, rooted in physical reference points, not only provided Shaw a better sense of his own life but a template

for constructing his superman.

In 1893 his commitment to exercise also became greater. Driven by the same obsession he had with his physical ailments, he took to walking more frequently, not so much to get from place to place but to invigorate the body. After dining on 2 February, he walked around central London until it was time to attend a concert. “It was muddy and drenching rain; but I trudged about for the sake of the exercise.” Concerned that he was “getting out of health for want of exercise,” he indulged in lengthy ice skating sessions in the winter, swimming and sculling in the summer, and singing frequently for respiratory vigor to improve his public speaking. After spending an hour singing on 28 June, Shaw regretted that “I have got almost out of the habit of singing for a year past; and for the sake of my lungs, if for nothing else, I must try to give a little time to it.” On another occasion he sang *Tannhauser* and *The Flying Dutchman* for over an hour, reminding himself that neglect of singing owing “to the pressure on my time is making my lungs less robust than they were.”<sup>35</sup> He also counseled Florence Farr on proper body composure. “As a *grande dame* you should never be at a loss and never in a hurry,” he advised.

*As to the way you tighten your upper lip, and bunch up your back, and stiffen your neck, and hold on by your elbows, that is, I admit, necessary to prevent you falling forward on your nose, and it is good for the calves and lumbar muscles, which are developed by the strain. I sacrifice this advantage on the platform & in the street by balancing my torso on my pelvis, and my head on my torso, so that they stand erect by their own weight.<sup>36</sup>*

Bicycle riding presented a new challenge Shaw eagerly embraced for the sake of his health. In May he carried out a resolution by seeking instruction. “It was a most humiliating experience, but I paid for a dozen lessons, feeling that I must not retreat a beaten man.”<sup>37</sup> Although Shaw’s dietary regimen was a matter of course, exercise required discipline.

Over the next several years Shaw continued to cycle about city and country, sometimes with reckless abandon. The Argoed in Monmouthshire, where he stayed in the summer of 1895, provided ample opportunities for vigorous exercise. Unaccustomed to shoving his machine



up steep hills and descending at blistering speed led to several mishaps within a month. In the first two he landed haplessly in briar bushes, but the third was more serious.<sup>38</sup> “I have had a most awful bicycle smash,” he reported to Pakenham Beatty,

*the quintessence of ten railway collisions—brother of Earl Russell of conjugal rights fame [Bertrand] dashed into at full speed flying down a hill—£3.10.0 damage to machine—got up within the prescribed ten seconds, but had subsequently to admit knock-out—Russell bereft of his knickerbockers but otherwise unhurt—lay flat on my back for ten minutes, but then rose and rode 16 miles back on a wheel the shape of an hourglass—have got over it and flown down other hills since.*<sup>39</sup>

Indeed he confirmed to Ellen Terry in November his interest in bicycling, “having lately tamed that steed myself.” By the summer of 1896, while spending the holiday in Saxmundham, Shaw was peddling four hours daily, but the hills of Suffolk were hardly comparable to those of Monmouth.<sup>40</sup> Still driving himself at a superman pace, he continued to overexert his fragile physique and endure the consequences. In March 1897 he advised Terry to “take care of reviving your strength. I presumed on mine the other evening to ride eight or nine miles at wild speed on the bike; and the next morning I was again a wreck.” After suffering another speeding casualty in November, he described himself as “a ludicrous spectacle” to his future wife, Charlotte Payne-Townshend, “like a badly defeated prizefighter.” But he declared himself to be “as fit as ever” and “positively the better for the adventure in nerve.”<sup>41</sup>

As the day of his marriage approached in the spring of 1898, Shaw declared to Beatrice Webb that he was “in an almost superhuman condition—fleshless, bloodless, vaporous, ethereal, and stupendous in literary efficiency. Then the bolt fell” when, after a ride to Ealing his left foot swelled “to the size of a leg of mutton.” Then he broke his arm in a stairway fall. Though confined to crutches and a wheelchair, he continued to exercise by hobbling up and down stairs. But “a worse evil than even broken bones & abscesses has overtaken me,” he told Webb—“nettle rash. Frightful! I scratch myself in torment all night & am half driven to tear off the splints & scratch there.”<sup>42</sup> To critics who attributed Shaw’s misfortunes to

his vegetarian and teetotal lifestyle, he responded to Lady Mary Murray that “the real question is whether I have worn myself out or not. I am not at all convinced that I have; but I have been overdrawing my account for a long time.”<sup>43</sup> After numerous recoveries and relapses, Shaw emerged weary but in a physical culture frame of mind, declaring to Pakenham Beatty his intention to delve further into the noble art of boxing and how the whole scientific movement was propagating “a decay of the human intellect” by “turning from the simple truth of Lamarckism to the mechanical rationalism of Natural Selection.” For a truer picture he recommended Butler’s *Luck or Cunning*, bearing in mind that the difference between “the Penta-teuch and the scriptures of scientific materialism of the sixties, is the difference between shrewd nonsense and DAMNED nonsense.”<sup>44</sup> Shaw’s profession of faith in creative evolution coincided with the struggles of “the Grand School,” he told drama critic William Archer, “the people who are building up the intellectual consciousness of the race. My men are Wagner, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, who have . . . nobody to fight for them.” Archer reversed it to say “you are *their* man.”<sup>45</sup>

Shaw’s subsequent conception of a superman was a composite of numerous intellects of his day, but it was also an attempt to project man into a higher non-physical reality. In Act III of *Man and Superman* (1903), Shaw uses a debate between the earthly hero Don Juan and a statue from heaven and the devil from hell to illustrate how man creatively evolves through the life force. To the devil’s assertion that “one splendid body is worth the brains of a hundred dyspeptic, flatulent philosophers,” Don Juan retorts, citing the extinct megatherium and ichthyosaurus, that “brainless magnificence of body has been tried. Things immeasurably greater than man in every respect but brain have existed and perished.” Life could best be perceived as a force—“a raw force” that through “more or less successful attempts” has created “higher and higher individuals, the ideal individual being omnipotent, omniscient, infallible, and withal completely, unilludedly self-conscious: in short, a god?” Contrary to the devil’s insistence that without beauty and bodily perfection “life was driving at clumsiness and ugliness,” Don Juan argues that “life was driving at brains—at its darling object; an organ by which it can attain not only self-consciousness but self-understanding.” Brains, not brawn, would be man’s salvation.

*Life, the force behind the Man, intellect is a necessity, because without it he blunders*



Although 40 years separated them in age, Shaw and heavy-weight boxing champion Gene Tunney were close friends who corresponded and visited each other whenever possible. In 1929, in an attempt to escape the press, Tunney and his new bride, Connecticut heiress Polly Lauder, invited Shaw and his wife to join them at the Adriatic resort of Brioni where they spent a month on holiday. This photo was taken on that trip.

*into death. . . . I sing, not arms and the hero, but the philosophic man; he who seeks in contemplation to discover the inner will of the world, in invention to discover the means of fulfilling that will, and in action to do that will. . . . I tell you that as long as I can conceive something better than myself I cannot be easy unless I am striving to bring it into existence or clearing the way for it. . . . That is the working within me of Life's incessant aspiration to higher organization, wider, deeper, in-*

*tenser self-consciousness, and clearer self-understanding.*<sup>46</sup>

As he later admitted to young Fabian, Julie Moore, the force behind man's development was as obvious to him as magnetism or gravitation and could be likened to "the Will of God." Until he could define his views more clearly in a book, "the 3<sup>rd</sup> Act of Man and Superman will remain on record as a statement of my creed."<sup>47</sup>

Meanwhile in a coda, "The Revolutionists Handbook," he showed how this life force would be transmuted to form a race of supermen. First, certain mistakes had to be ruled out.

*We agree that we want superior mind; but we need not fall into the football club folly of counting on this as a product of superior body. Yet if we recoil so far as to conclude that superior mind consists in being the dupe of our ethical classifications of virtues and vices, in short, of conventional morality, we shall fall out of the frying pan of the football club into the fire of the Sunday School. If we must choose between a race of athletes and a race of 'good' men, let us have the athletes: better Samson and Milo than Calvin and Robespierre. But neither alternative is worth changing for: Samson is no more a Superman than Calvin.*

But the superman would be no less a product of the biologically superior or what he called the "intelligently fertile" who could propagate "the partisans of the Superman; for what is proposed is nothing but the replacement of the old unintelligent, inevitable, almost unconscious fertility by an intelligently controlled, conscious fertility, and the elimination of the mere voluptuary from the evolutionary process." To facilitate this transformation, it would be necessary to dismantle existing middle class assumptions about marriage, morality, and immutability of the class system. As Shaw had argued in his youthful novels, genius was not the exclusive preserve of the upper classes. Fulfillment of his utopian dream of allowing the working classes access to the corridors of wisdom would require an overhaul of society along lines promoted by the fashionable eugenics movement of his day. "The only fundamental and possible Socialism,"



Shaw argued, “is the socialization of the selective breeding of Man: in other terms, of human evolution. We must eliminate the Yahoo, or his vote will wreck the commonwealth.” His formula for advancing the species echoes Schopenhauer’s views on heredity (à la Plato) that an improvement of humanity “might be attained not so much from without as from within, thus not so much by instruction and culture as rather upon the path of generation.” For it to happen he advocated “a State Department of Evolution, with a seat in the Cabinet for its chief, and a revenue to defray the cost of direct State experiments.” It could even entail “a chartered company for the improvement of human live stock [sic].” Such radical solutions hinted at flirtations Shaw would later have with totalitarian regimes.<sup>48</sup>

Flirtations for Shaw at this time, however, were limited to young women who often sought his company as a sage. His physically unfulfilling marriage made him vulnerable to the life force embodied in Erica Cotterill with whom he assumed an avuncular role not unlike that portrayed in his most famous play, *Pygmalion*. Responding to her compliment about his youthfulness, he explained it was only through a certain “art of life” that he managed to save appearances and that he was aware of his physical deficiencies. “My body, unfortunately, persists incongruously in the usual course. Every two years or so, my spectacles become too weak; and I have to get new ones. My hair gets whiter: I have gold plates and artificial teeth in my mouth: my feet seem a longer way off; and when I race down a hill or cross a stream on stepping stones I am not quite so sure that they will go exactly where I mean to place them.”<sup>49</sup> Further attention to his body was necessitated by serious bouts of lumbago. “Ow-ow! Ah-ooh! Ow-oo-ooh! Lumbago is a fearful thing,” he told his wife in April 1912. “Possibly it is appendicitis. Possibly spinal paralysis. Anyhow, it does not lend itself to getting up when you have been sitting down any length of time.” From Shropshire, where he was visiting friends, he told Charlotte “from eleven to four we chopped and hacked and piled up heaps of furze bushes for burning like three field laborers. Every muscle in my body is racked: the lumbago is no longer perceptible because I am all lumbago from top to toe.”<sup>50</sup> By June, Shaw was afflicted with the most severe of worldly afflictions when he fell “head over heels in love” with the widowed Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who would play Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*. He could “think of nothing but a thousand scenes of which she was the heroine and I the hero,” he confided to Harley Granville

Barker. “And I am on the verge of 56. There has never been anything so ridiculous, or so delightful, in the history of the world.” A torrent of love letters ensued in which he professed to be her “utter captive.” He seemed deliriously happy. “I shall never be unhappy again,” he declared to her. In his newfound exhilaration Shaw bought a motor bicycle and rode 77 miles on his initial journey, despite having never ridden one. All went well until he approached a “bad corner” near his home at Ayot St. Lawrence which he took too fast.

*Result, I went into the bank, and fell one way whilst the machine happily fell the other. I only broke its lamp, and I broke nothing. The vibration at 40 miles an hour on bad bits of road, and the excitement & confusion of a roaring wind in one’s eyes (I didn’t goggle) mingled with the terrors of the novice as to what to do if anything in the nature of an emergency came up, made a sort of boyish adventure of the thing. Decidedly I am a fool to torment myself with such games. However, the thing is done. I can ride a motor bicycle.*

When Campbell broke off their relationship to marry an eligible suitor, Shaw was devastated. “I want to hurt you because you hurt me,” he told her. “Infamous, vile, heartless, frivolous, wicked woman!”<sup>51</sup> Through this bitter/sweet experience Shaw could understand Schopenhauer’s dictum that “the sexual impulse in all its degrees and nuances plays not only on the stage and in novels, but also in the real world, where, next to the love of life, it shows itself the strongest and most powerful of motives.”<sup>52</sup> Physical exertion in the form of long distance bicycle trips to Essex, Coventry, and Scotland likely served as a catharsis to alleviate his emotional pain.<sup>53</sup>

While the nation was absorbed with war, Shaw’s views relating to healthful living were publicized in America by *Physical Culture* magazine. Its editor, Bernarr Macfadden, introduced him as an ascetic and “a liberal among liberals in his ideas of sex and marriage” who “believes, declares and is almost everything apart from the commonplace in thought, manners and life.” For three successive issues in 1915 readers were exposed to Shaw’s wit and wisdom in his play, *Getting Married*. With the second installment, however, Macfadden included an advertisement

for his own book, *Manhood and Marriage*, which allegedly “sets forth fully the source, the possibilities and the purpose of manly power.”<sup>54</sup> It was followed in 1916 by Shavian advice on health and humanity in essays on “You and Your Doctor” and “The Folly of Vivisection” and in 1917 by a five-month-long series of articles in *Physical Culture* entitled “What’s Wrong With Marriage?”<sup>55</sup> Later Macfadden visited England and treated Shaw to *Rampant Youth at Sixty*, a Pathe Films movie short of himself working out.<sup>56</sup> In 1936, when Shaw and his wife traveled to America, they met Macfadden in Miami and health reformer John Kellogg at his sanatorium. Yet in retrospect Shaw was dismissive of *Physical Culture* “which gives far too much prominence to advertisements of overmuscled strong men.”<sup>57</sup>

Boxing champion Gene Tunney, however, held an attraction of a different kind for him. As Shaw was a leading intellectual who was obsessive about his body, Tunney was a practitioner of physical fortitude who craved intellectual fulfillment. That Tunney was attuned to Schopenhauer and was reading *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler, Shaw’s favorite author, prior to winning the heavyweight championship from Jack Dempsey in September 1926 reveals a meeting of minds.<sup>58</sup> Mesmerized by the fight, Shaw obtained every newspaper that covered it and watched the fight film a fortnight later. Tunney seemed to embody the life force to Shaw, who deemed his victory a measure of intelligence. Unlike Dempsey, “he wins by mental and moral superiority combined with plenty of strength,” Shaw estimated.<sup>59</sup> After retiring from the ring, Tunney visited England and, according to his son, was “electrified” by Shaw who “embodied the kind of man he wished that he could become.” Tunney also discovered that literary scholars in England were fascinated by boxing.

*The more classical they were, the greater their interest. This may seem strange, but their attitude toward pugilism was largely intellectual. Like the classical Greeks, they idealized the boxer as the well-trained warrior athlete. I found that when I wanted to talk about books, they wanted to talk to me about boxing.*

Tunney believed Shaw’s vegetarian diet kept him “radiantly healthy, buoyant and exceptionally fit.” Their friendship was sealed by visits to an Italian resort where they

shared vigorous exercise. “Gene encouraged him to walk briskly for 20 minutes a day,” observes his son. His instructions to Shaw were to “inhale deeply through his nose for 12 paces, hold his breath and exhale slowly through his mouth, repeating the process 15 times to sweep impurities from his body.” A newspaper reported their favorite morning exercise was swimming, even in cool weather. After a cold shower “the former world’s heavyweight champion and the Irish playwright glided easily through the water for long distances.” Shaw, at 72, was “an excellent swimmer.” Another exercise was singing together while walking, especially vigorous pieces by Wagner and Handel. Most of all, these kindred spirits reflected on the nature of life. What boxing taught Tunney was “how to handle life’s ups and downs” and that “one’s gameness in the ring reflected how game one was in life.” For Shaw it reflected “the courage of endeavor” and the ability to sustain “one’s forward motion” and not “lose one’s moral compass.”<sup>60</sup> Unlike the emergent supermen on the international scene, Shaw could personalize his admiration of Tunney. As his 1931 biographer Frank Harris pointed out, Tunney was “another of Shaw’s gods, a man of action. . . . You can write Shaw’s inner convictions and hidden aspirations in terms of Lenin, Mussolini, and Tunney.”<sup>61</sup>

In the postwar years, as Shaw approached 70, he befriended other young men of daring. “As his vigour declined,” observes Michael Holroyd, “so his need for vicarious exploits through younger men-of-action and letters intensified.” One of them was Cecil Lewis, who had won a Military Cross as a flying ace during the war and became a founding member of the British Broadcasting Corporation. Through Lewis, Shaw gained an even broader audience for his outlook on life. Shaw was also captivated during the 1920s by the rising star of Oswald Mosley whose “radicalism and unorthodoxy” led him to abandon the Conservative Party for Labour and to form his own New Party. Mosley seemed capable of “heroic deeds,” notes Holroyd. “He was athletic and quick-minded, part child and part strong man—could this be the superman whose advent Shaw had been prophesying?” Eventually Mosley self-destructed by attaching his star to Benito Mussolini with his British Union of Fascists. Another fallen star for whom Shaw and his wife gained an affinity was T. E. Lawrence whose heroic deeds in the Middle East encapsulated the life force Shaw would utilize in his 1923 production of *Saint Joan*. “The function of both their public personalities was to lose an old self and discover a new. Lawrence had been illegitimate. Shaw had doubted his le-



gitimacy. Both were the sons of dominant mothers and experienced difficulties in establishing their masculinity.” Lawrence often stayed with the Shaws who edited and proofread his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and gave him a motorcycle.<sup>62</sup> Like Tunney, Lawrence regarded Shaw as his idol and even changed his name to T. E. Shaw.<sup>63</sup> What the aging Shaw most appreciated was the youthful exuberance of Lawrence.

Frustrations stemming from the Great War and the seeming failure of parliamentary gradualism are reflected in *Heartbreak House* (1919), where Shaw suggests the need for a strongman to steer the ship of state, and in *Back To Methuselah* (1921). The latter, a five-play metabiological swan song, was intended to be a sequel to *Man and Superman* or “second legend of Creative Evolution.” Acutely aware of his diminishing physical powers, Shaw sought solace in the life of the mind. “My sands are running out,” he explains in the preface,

*the exuberance of 1901 has aged into the garrulity of 1920; and the war has been a stern intimation that the matter is not one to be trifled with. I abandon the legend of Don Juan with its erotic associations, and go back to the legend of the Garden of Eden. I exploit the eternal interest of the philosopher's stone which enables men to live forever. I am not, I hope, under more illusion than is humanly inevitable as to the crudity of this my beginning of a Bible for Creative evolution. I am doing the best I can at my age.*

Shaw argues that effective governance of civilized societies is not possible within the normal human lifespan. The life force enabling creative evolution requires time. Thus his outlook takes an optimistic turn in the preface, replete with sporting metaphors. He believed

*mankind is by no means played out yet. If the weightlifter, under the trivial stimulus of an athletic competition, can 'put up a muscle,' it seems reasonable to believe that an equally earnest and convinced philosopher could 'put up a brain.' Both are directions of vitality to a certain end. . . . If on opportunist grounds Man now fixes the term of his life at three score and*

*ten years, he can equally fix it at three hundred, or three thousand, or . . . until a sooner-or-later-inevitable fatal accident makes an end of the individual. All that is necessary to make him extend his present span is that tremendous catastrophes such as the late war shall convince him of the necessity of at least outliving his taste for golf and cigars if the race is to be saved.*

Shaw adhered to the Lamarckian view that “living organisms changed because they wanted to.” As he stated it, “the great factor in Evolution is use and disuse.” Shaw believed that “the evolutionary process is a hereditary one. . . that human life is continuous and immortal. . . . The human mind has been soaked in heredity as long back as we can trace its thought.” Creative evolution was possible through the “deliberate human selection” of Lamarck, not Darwin’s circumstantial selection. Shaw was indebted to Schopenhauer’s 1819 treatise *The World as Will* which he regarded as “the metaphysical complement to Lamarck’s natural history, as it demonstrates that the driving force behind Evolution is a will-to-live, and to live . . . more abundantly.” The average citizen, what Schopenhauer called “brutes,” was “irreligious and unscientific: you talk to him about cricket and golf, market prices and party politics, not about evolution and relativity, transubstantiation and predestination.” Shaw believed “evolution as a philosophy and physiology of the will” was a “mystical process, which can be apprehended only by a trained, apt, and comprehensive thinker.” While phenomena of “use and disuse, of wanting and trying, of the manufacture of weightlifters and wrestlers from men of ordinary strength,” were familiar facts, they were puzzling as subjects of thought, and led into metaphysics.<sup>64</sup>

To Shaw, the old saying, “Where there’s a will, there is a way,” embodied Lamarck’s theory of functional adaptation. The legend of Methuselah was “neither incredible nor unscientific,” Shaw argued in his autobiography. “Life has lengthened considerably since I was born; and there is no reason why it should not lengthen ten times as much after my death.”<sup>65</sup> This verity was revealed by the elderly gentleman in the penultimate play of Shaw’s pentateuch.

*Short-lived as we are, we . . . regard civilization and learning, art and science, as*

*an ever-burning torch, which passes from the hand of one generation to the hand of the next, each generation kindling it to a brighter, prouder flame. Thus each lifetime, however short, contributes a brick to a vast and growing edifice, a page to a sacred volume, a chapter to a Bible, a Bible to a literature. We may be insects; but like the coral insect we build islands which become continents: like the bee we store sustenance for future communities. The individual perishes; but the race is immortal.*

In the march of progress, “mankind gains in stature from generation to generation, from epoch to epoch, from barbarism to civilization, from civilization to perfection.” But it was a cumulative growth of the intellect, not the body, adds the She-Ancient in “As Far As Thought Can Reach,” Shaw’s final play. “It is this stuff [*indicating her body*], this flesh and blood and bone and all the rest of it, that is intolerable. . . . The day will come when there will be no people, only thought,” she believed. “And that will be life eternal,” responded the He-Ancient. The sculptor Martellus agreed. “The body always ends by being a bore. Nothing remains beautiful and interesting except thought, because the thought is the life.”<sup>66</sup>

Yet Shaw showed no less awareness of his physical being during his seventies, despite his yearning for intellectual fulfillment. How paradoxical it was therefore, that the most flagrant of corporeal pleasures should be so deeply etched in Shaw’s association with the intellect. “I liked sexual intercourse,” he told Frank Harris, “because of its amazing power of producing a celestial flood of emotion and exaltation of existence which, however momentary, gave me a sample of what may one day be the normal state of being for mankind in intellectual ecstasy.”<sup>67</sup> The extent to which Shaw remained physically active is revealed by a 1929 interview by Henry Neil in *Physical Culture* which deemed him in “perfect condition,” looking as if he

took a bath every hour of the day. His movements bespeak energy, his beard bristles with activity. Body and brain are matched to a remarkable degree in a rapier-like keenness. He is a live wire, a human dynamo. When I was at his coun-

try home, he showed me how he keeps fit by getting up early in the morning and vigorously attacking the domestic woodpile, and by striding over the countryside with the strength and swiftness of a twenty-year-old athlete. He is also fond of cycling and knows more than a little about boxing. This fondness for exercise, coupled with the fact that, ever since he was a boy, Shaw has eaten a diet composed almost entirely of fruits and vegetables, explains why he, now seventy-three years of age, still has what Arthur Brisbane describes as ‘the clearest brain of any person now living,’ and a physique that can hold its own with that of such a noted athlete as Gene Tunney.<sup>68</sup>

These sentiments were echoed in Hollywood during the Shaws’ round-the-world tour in 1933 where they stayed at the country home of William Randolph Hearst. G. B. Shaw, reported Louella Parsons, attracted the fascination of film celebrities as much by his unique diet as by his acerbic wit. Asserting that meat was “not only bad for the soul but makes the body sluggish and inactive,” he pointed proudly “to his complexion which has the pink and white texture and firmness of a baby’s skin.” The wife of actor Adolphe Menjou retorted “Well, look at my complexion! Is there anything wrong with it?—and I eat meat three times a day!” A *Screenland* photo showed “literature’s ‘bad boy,’” refusing to act his age, being escorted around MGM Studios by actress Marion Davies, who “has all she can do to keep pace with him.”<sup>69</sup> Shaw was also photographed in his later years bathing in the buff, a practice acquired as a child in Ireland. Though aware of the health risks of sunlight, he was “strongly in favor of getting rid of every scrap of clothing that we can dispense with,” believing it promoted, like excessive eating and drinking, “too much comfort” and encouraged prudery. “I am not a complete Nudist,” he told nudist activist N. F. Barford, but he realized “the mischief done by making us ashamed of our bodies.”<sup>70</sup> How closely Shaw’s lifestyle was entwined with *Back to Methuselah* was illustrated by his choice of a country home at Ayot St. Lawrence where a gravestone in a local cemetery read “Jane Eversley, born 1805, died 1895. Her time was short.” If ninety years was “short,” Shaw concluded, it “was the precise climate and environment for me.”<sup>71</sup>



As Shaw entered his ninth decade he became more aware of his mortality, preoccupied with his last will and testament, and admitting to publisher Otto Kyllmann that “my death may occur at any moment: indeed, actuarially, I am dead already.”<sup>72</sup> When fellow Fabian Sidney Webb was felled by a stroke at age 78, Shaw lamented to Beatrice that “we are the only members of the old gang left. ... Our numbers are up now: and we should arrange to die quietly in our beds of heart failure. I am already in good practice, as it takes me 25 minutes to walk a mile, and the least hill or a flight of steps slows me to a crawl.”<sup>73</sup> Though suffering from pernicious anemia, angina pectoris, locomotor ataxy, and anorexia (weighing only 9 stone at 6 ft.), he maintained a daily exercise routine of sawing firewood during the war years.<sup>74</sup> A flashback to his youthful boxing days was provided by the career of American champion Joe Louis. After Louis nearly lost a 15 round bout to Jersey Joe Walcott in December 1947, Shaw learned he had consumed over two pounds of beefsteak before the fight to increase weight. “The miracle is that after such a Gargantuan extravagance he was able to fight at all,” he told an interviewer.

*He must have believed that the beef would increase his stamina as well as his weight. Any vegetarian could have told him that it would disable him. Every cyclist who has ridden a hundred miles in a day knows that a heavy meat lunch makes such a feat impossible without severe exhaustion. Had Louis eaten only a couple of thin slices of brown bread with red currant jam, he would probably have won triumphantly.*<sup>75</sup>

When Louis arrived in England for an exhibition tour in 1948 he announced the only persons he wished to see were Shaw and Winston Churchill. Shaw would have been “flattered by a visit from a world-famous head of his profession,” he told Tunney, but it never materialized. “I am damnably old (92),” he argued, “and ought to be dead.”<sup>76</sup>

Even death took a physical culture turn for Shaw. It stemmed from one of those accidents he had predicted in *Back to Methuselah* that would shorten otherwise longer lives. On the afternoon of 10 September 1950, while trimming branches in the garden at Ayot with his secateurs, his favorite form of exercise, he fell on the pathway and was rushed to the hospital with a broken femur. Although the

subsequent operation succeeded, doctors discovered a kidney and bladder malfunction, requiring Shaw to wear a catheter and a cast. Shaw’s response to well-wishers was “all I want is to die, but this damned vitality of mine won’t let me.” Jisbella Lyth, the village postmistress, believed he died the day of his fall in the garden, “just like he had



Gene Tunney was one of the most famous sport celebrities of the 1920s. Known for his chiseled good looks and scientific approach to the “sweet science,” he was world heavyweight champion from 1926 to 1928, and American light-heavyweight title holder from 1922 to 1923. Tunney, like Shaw, was also interested in physical culture and was asked to help the train American Navy during World War II.

always told me he wanted to do.” According to housekeeper Alice Laden, he neither ate nor drank when he returned home. He just wanted to be gone as quickly as possible. “His mental worry about his kidney trouble killed him as much as the illness itself,” Holroyd concluded. “I believe in life everlasting; but not for the individual,” Shaw uttered as he neared death.<sup>77</sup>

Bernard Shaw could hardly be considered a physical culturist in any traditional sense. As a general rule he eschewed bodily pleasures and would rarely admit—especially in his later years—that the body controlled his inner impulses or intellect. Repeatedly Sally Peters stresses his disdain for the body. “Paradoxically, to emphasize vegetarianism was to emphasize what Shaw wanted to forget—the body, the essence of the material world.” Rather, he “obsessively sought the ethereal world,” according to Peters. “From the vantage point of a world design structured on equilibrium and continuity, Shaw imagined an entirely cerebral universe free from the vulnerabilities and uncertainties of the body.”<sup>78</sup> Thus his aversion to the world’s foremost symbol of physical perfection of the time is understandable. “Eugen Sandow wanted to overmuscle me,” he told George Viereck in 1926, “but I told him I never wanted to stand my piano on my chest, nor did I consider it the proper place for three elephants. I remained a weakling; but I am alive and Eugen is dead. Let not my example be lost on you, nor his fate. The pen is mightier than the dumbbell.”<sup>79</sup> Physical strength for its own sake held no special place in Shaw’s hierarchy of desirable human traits. Contrary to the view of many Britons that “the way to get strong is to lift heavy weights,” Shaw quipped that “the way to lift heavy weights is to become strong.”<sup>80</sup> Nor did competitive sports, especially team sports, hold much allure for Shaw. For the “recreation” entry in the 1930 *Who’s Who*, Shaw put “Anything but sport” and believed that cricket symbolized what was wrong with England.<sup>81</sup> Even Holroyd admits that Shaw’s achievement, like that of Beatrice Webb, was “built on repression of the body.”<sup>82</sup> As Shaw reminded Viereck in 1934, “The mind makes the body: watch your mind.”<sup>83</sup>

Yet Shaw was obsessed with the body, especially his own body, and engaged in lifelong dietary and exercise regimens to sustain it. In other words, regardless of what he sometimes maintained, his practices were classic examples of physical culture. As a vegetarian and teetotaler who eschewed tobacco and stimulants, he condemned physicians and wore sanitary wool clothing. Always a “sturdy walker,” as his long-time secretary Blanche Patch ob-

serves, he also regularly engaged in swimming, cycling, motoring, log-sawing, hedge-trimming, and occasionally tennis. “Not one of them was undertaken lightly for pleasure; the aim of each was to increase the efficiency of his existence.”<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle were values he promoted for others. “To strength of mind must be added a considerable strength of body,” Shaw advised the father of an aspiring actress in 1917. “The life is sometimes very hard; and touring requires the constitution of a horse.”<sup>85</sup> Prizefighters, as Stanley Weintraub observes, held a special fascination for him and would often appear in his writings, “early and late.” Shaw believed there were “no sports which bring out the difference of character more dramatically than boxing, wrestling and fencing.”<sup>86</sup> While Shaw’s ideal world visualized a state of mind over matter, his real world consisted of matter over mind.<sup>87</sup>

The body also served as the basis for his conception of the superman. In this respect he follows the lead of Schopenhauer who was emphatic on the importance of the body for human regeneration in his chapter on “The Life of the Species.”

*Sexual passion is the kernel of the will to live, and consequently the concentration of all desire; therefore. . . I have called the genital organs the focus of the will. Indeed, one may say man is concrete sexual desire; for his origin is an act of copulation and his wish of wishes is an act of copulation, and this tendency alone perpetuates and holds together his whole phenomenal existence. The will to life manifests itself indeed primarily as an effort to sustain the individual; yet this is only a step to the effort to sustain the species, and the latter endeavor must be more powerful in proportion as the life of the species surpasses that of the individual in duration, extension, and value.*<sup>88</sup>

As a conduit for the will, the body provided the essence of being from which Shaw drew the anti-Darwinism of Samuel Butler and the grounding for his subsequent attraction to the like-minded voices of Nietzsche, Ibsen, Wagner, and the *élan vital* of Henri Bergson. For one so fixated on the importance of heredity to the progress of the species, Shaw’s platonic marriage and repeated statements



of aversion to sex contradict the very premise that would make creative evolution of the intellect possible. For a man of so many paradoxes, it was the ultimate paradox.

## NOTES

1. Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman, The Revolutionist's Handbook* (London: Constable & Co., 1930), 227.
2. Eldon C. Hill, *George Bernard Shaw* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 9, and Archibald Henderson, "George Bernard Shaw: Man of the Century," A Lecture at the Library of Congress (Washington, 1957), 9, cited in Hill, 149.
3. Standard biographical treatments of Shaw include Frank Harris, *Bernard Shaw* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1931); Hesketh Pearson, *G. B. S., A Full Length Portrait and A Postscript* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1942); William Irvine, *The Universe of G. B. S.* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1949); Archibald Henderson, *George Bernard Shaw, Man of the Century* (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956); St. John Greer Ervine, *Bernard Shaw His Life, Work and Friends* (New York, NY: Morrow, 1956); Sally Peters, *Bernard Shaw, The Ascent of the Superman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Michael Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, Vol. 1: 1856-1898 - The Search for Love* (New York, NY: Random House, 1988), *Bernard Shaw, Vol. 2: 1898-1918 - The Pursuit of Power* (New York, NY: Random House, 1989), *Bernard Shaw, Vol. 3: The Lure of Fantasy* (New York, NY: Random House, 1992), *Bernard Shaw, The One-Volume Definitive Edition* (New York, NY: Random House, 1997), and A. M. Gibbs, *Bernard Shaw, A Life* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005). Also see Dan H. Laurence, *Bernard Shaw: A Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983) and J. P. Wearing, *G. B. Shaw, An Annotated Bibliography of Writings About the Man*, 3 vols. (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986).
4. Benny Green, *Shaw's Champions, G.B.S. & Prizefighting from Cashel Byron to Gene Tunney* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1978), xii-xiii, and 194.
5. Stanley Weintraub, "G.B.S., Pugilist and Playwright," in *The Unexpected Shaw: Biographical Approaches to G.B.S. and His Work* (New York, NY: F. Ungar, 1982), 45.
6. Brynn Mandel, Interview with Jay Tunney, *Republican American*, 3 December 2010. See also Jay Tunney, *The Prizefighter and the Playwright, Gene Tunney and George Bernard Shaw* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Firefly Books, 2010).
7. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, Definitive Edition*, xii and 9. Peters, *Bernard Shaw*, ix and 259. See also the special issue of "Dilemmas and Delusions; Bernard Shaw and Health," edited by Christopher Wixson in *Shaw, The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, 34 (2014). This essay intends to complement and provide some variations on the theme of those innovative health-related articles.
8. Peters, *Bernard Shaw*, ix and 259. See also the special issue of "Dilemmas and Delusions; Bernard Shaw and Health," edited by 9. 9. Christopher Wixson in *Shaw, The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, 34 (2014). This essay intends to complement and provide some variations on the theme of those innovative health-related articles.
- See for instance Supriya Chaudhuri, "Professional Sport and Shaw's Cashel Byron," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 28 (2011): 941-55, and Jorge D. Knijnik, "Bernard Shaw's Admirable Bashville: Playwright and Prizefighter," *Physical Culture and Sport Studies and Research* 58 (2013): 76-83.
10. Edward McNulty, "Memoirs of G. B. S.," *Shaw*, 12 (1992): 5-7 and 9-11.
11. Stanley Weintraub, *Shaw, An Autobiography, 1856-1898*, 2 vols. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), 1:22.
12. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, 8.
13. Weintraub, *Autobiography*, 1: 23 and 40-41.
14. Bernard Shaw, *Immaturity* (London: Constable & Co., 1930), 30, 76, 85-86, 79-81[, and 360]. Although written in 1879, it was not published till 1930.
15. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1966), II:136, and Schopenhauer, *The Works of Schopenhauer*, Will Durant, ed., (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1928), 118; *Ibid.*, 105 and 108.
16. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw, Search for Love*, I:39.
17. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1874), 453. Much the same theme is evident in *Adonais*, Shelley's 1821 elegy to John Keats, *ibid.*, 322-334.
18. Bernard Shaw, *The Irrational Knot* (London: Constable & Co., 1930), 220-21, 316, and 342.
19. Bernard Shaw, *Cashel Byron's Profession* (London: Constable & Co., 1930), xix, 209-10, 23, 37, 55, 82-83, 89, 91, 94, 207, 111, 231, and 233.
20. Bernard Shaw, *Love Among the Artists* (London: Constable & Co., 1930), 4, 38, 28, and 69.
21. Bernard Shaw, *An Unsocial Socialist* (London: Constable & Co., 1930), 42, 98, 145, 149, 129, and 226.
22. Stanley Weintraub, *Bernard Shaw, The Diaries, 1885-1897*, 2 vols. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), I:72-73, 75, 103, and 91, and Peters, *Bernard Shaw*, 103.
23. Weintraub, *Diaries*, I:55, 99, 225, 228, 230.
24. *Ibid.*, 236 and Samuel Butler, *Luck, or Cunning, as the Main Means of Organic Modification* (London Trubner & Co., 1887), 1-3, 156, and 316-17. See also Samuel Butler, *Life and Habit* (London: Trubner & Co., 1878).
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26. Weintraub, *Diaries*, 1:333-34, 424, and 559.
27. Shaw to Hubert Bland, 18 November 1889, in Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters, 1874-1897* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1965), 228.
28. Weintraub, *Diaries*, 1:454 and 418.
29. *Ibid.*, 617.
30. Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1874-1897*, 262.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Weintraub, *Diaries*, 2:778, 784, 847-48, and 782.
33. *Ibid.*, 742 and 789.
34. Shaw to Farr, 28 January 1892, Laurence, *Collected Letters*, 332.
35. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), 3:138.
36. Weintraub, *Diaries*, 2:901, 909, 890-92, 947, 950, and 975.
37. Shaw to Farr, 27 April 1893, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1874-1897*, 392.
38. Weintraub, *Diaries*, 2:929.
39. *Ibid.*, 1088-90.
40. Shaw to Beatty, 17 September 1895, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1874-1897*, 559-60.
41. Shaw to Terry, 1 November 1895, and 28 August 1896, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1874-1897*, 565 and 646.
42. Shaw to Terry, 8 March 1897, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1874-1897*, 733, and Shaw to Payne-Townshend, 14 November 1897, 823.

43. Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 21 June 1898, 50 and 54; Shaw to Payne-Townshend, 19 April 1898, 32; Shaw to Grant Richards, 19 June 1898, 48; and Shaw to Payne-Townshend, 22 April 1898, 35, in Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters, 1898-1910* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1965).
44. Shaw to Murray, 1 September 1898, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1898-1910*, 66.
45. Shaw to Beatty, 6 April 1901, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1898-1910*, 225-26.
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47. Shaw, *Man and Superman, A Comedy*, 129-30, 137-39, and 152. Shaw to Moore, 15 October 1909, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1898-1910*, 873.
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49. Shaw to Cotterill, 27 November 1907, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1898-1910*, 731.
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51. Shaw to Harley Granville Barker, 30 June 1912, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1911-1925*, 95, Shaw to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, 4 January, 6 February, 21 March, and 12 August 1913, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1911-1925*, 145, 148, 160-61, and 196.
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53. G. B. Shaw to Charlotte Shaw, 16 August 1913, Bernard Shaw, *Collected Letters, 1911-1925*, 198.
54. G. Bernard Shaw, "Getting Married: A Play," *Physical Culture* 34 (October, 1915): 20-33; (November, 1915): 36-50 and 5a; and (December, 1915): 69-83.
55. G. Bernard Shaw, "You and Your Doctor," *Physical Culture* 35 (May, 1916): 69-75; "The Folly of Vivisection," *Physical Culture* 36 (October, 1916): 39-45; and "What's Wrong with Marriage," *Physical Culture* 37 (January, 1917); *Physical Culture* (February, 1917): 66-74; *Physical Culture* (March, 1917): 61-69; *Physical Culture* (April, 1917); and *Physical Culture* (May, 1917): 73-80. Also see Shaw's earliest contribution to *Physical Culture* on "American Conditions," 19 (February, 1908): 105-7.
56. Cited in Mark Adams, *Mr. America, How Muscular Millionaire Bernarr Macfadden Transformed the Nation Through Sex, Salad, and the Ultimate Starvation Diet* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 155.
57. Shaw to Clara Higgs, 10 February 1936, and Shaw to G. S. Viereck, 24 February 1926, in Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Bernard Shaw, Collected Letters, 1926-1950* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1965), 425 and 14.
58. Tunney, *Prizefighter and the Playwright*, 138 and 58.
59. Shaw to Norman Clark, 21 February 1929, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1926-1950*, 130.
60. Tunney, *Prizefighter and the Playwright*, 139, 143, 147, 163, 171, and 182.
61. Harris, *Bernard Shaw*, 141.
62. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, 526, 534-35, and 539-41.
63. After his much heralded service in World War I, Lawrence sought to avoid the glare of celebrity by enlisting in the Royal Tank Corps under the assumed name of Thomas Edward Shaw in honor of G.B. Shaw.
64. Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah* (London: Constable & Co., 1930), lxxxix, xviii-xix, xxii, xxix-xxx, xxxii, and xlv.
65. Stanley Weintraub, *Shaw, An Autobiography, 1898-1950, The Playwright Years* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1970), 2:143.
66. Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, ix, 162-63, 256, 253, and 255.
67. Shaw to Harris, 24 June 1930, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1925-1950*, 192.
68. Henry Neil, "Bernard Shaw's Undying Youth," *Physical Culture* (November, 1929): 38.
69. Louella Parsons, "Shaw in Hollywood," *Screenland* (July, 1933): 16-18, and "Camera Flashes From the Coast," *Screenland* (June, 1933): 13.
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71. Neil, "Shaw's Undying Youth," 145.
72. Shaw to Kyllmann, 23 September 1937, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1925-1950*, 474.
73. Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 6 February 1938, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1925-1950*, 493.
74. Shaw to Henry S. Salt, 29 August 1938, Shaw to Beatrice Webb, 17 February 1941, and Shaw to Sidney Webb, 29 April 1943, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1925-1950*, 506-7, 596, and 668.
75. "Bernard Shaw on Joe Louis' 'Miracle,'" Shaw Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, 4.12.
76. Shaw to Tunney, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1925-1950*, 820-21.
77. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, 788-91.
78. Peters, *Bernard Shaw*, 73, 75, and 206.
79. Shaw to Viereck, 24 February 1926, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1925-1950*, 14.
80. Bernard F. Dukore, *Not Bloody Likely! And Other Quotations from Bernard Shaw* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 185-86.
81. Cited in T. F. Evans, "Shaw and Cricket," *Shaw: The Journal of Bernard Shaw Studies*, 12 (1992), 47 and 49.
82. Holroyd, *Bernard Shaw*, 154.
83. Shaw to Viereck, 28 May 1934, Shaw Papers, 46.3.
84. Blanche Patch, *Thirty Years with G. B. S.* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1951), 281.
85. Shaw to Michael J.F. McCarthy, 23 April 1917, Laurence, *Collected Letters, 1925-1950*, 466.
86. Weintraub, *The Unexpected Shaw*, 37, and Weintraub, *Shaw, An Autobiography, 1856-1898*, 2:143.
87. Richard Farr Dietrich attempts to resolve this conundrum by arguing that Shaw had "come to understand that as blood is the very life of the brain, nourishing that field of electrochemical charges we call thinking, the mind is therefore to be understood as an organ of passion as surely as any other organ of our bodies." Richard Farr Dietrich, *Bernard Shaw's Novels, Portraits of the Artist as Man and Superman* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 115.
88. Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Idea*, 3:314.





# K.V. IYER: MIXING BODYBUILDING AND YOGA

**Elliott Goldberg**

Excerpted From: *The Path of Modern Yoga: The History of a Modern Spiritual Practice*  
(Rochester, Vermont, and Toronto, Canada: Inner Traditions Publishing, 2016)

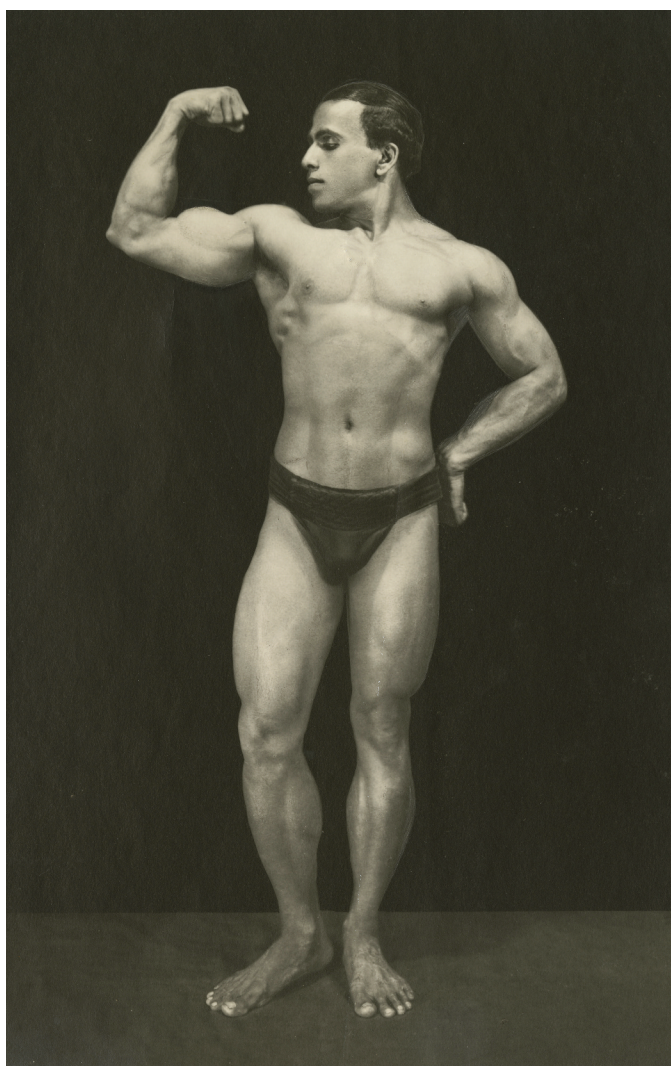
*Editors' Note: Elliott Goldberg spent ten years researching The Path of Modern Yoga: The History of an Embodied Spiritual Practice before it was released in August 2016. In doing his research, Goldberg probed the connections between Western physical culture as popularized by Bernarr Macfadden and Eugen Sandow, and the ancient Indian traditions and practices which gave rise to modern yoga. In Goldberg's book, K.V. Iyer is discussed in several different chapters. The excerpt that follows is from Chapter 11, pages 142-152.*



## Muscle Cult

In 1922 twenty-four-year-old Kolar Venkatesha Iyer (1898–1980) founded the Hercules Gymnasium in Bangalore, the first commercial Western-style gymnasium in India. It consisted of one small room, available after working hours, in the headquarters of the Mysore Troop of Boy Scouts (established by the maharajah of Mysore, Shri Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, in 1909), attached to the rear of Tipu Sultan's summer palace (long owned by the state), an ornate, two-storied, Indo-Islamic structure made of wood, with pillars, arches, and balconies. At first there were only four students. They trained with Iyer not so they could boast of their great strength, enter competitive weight-lifting contests, or excel at sports; they sought, instead, to develop a harmonious, muscular physique, as well as to attain good health and more than adequate strength.

Classes were held six days a week at 5:30 p.m. Every Saturday evening, after finishing their exercises, Iyer and his students bathed and put on clean clothes in preparation for *puja* (a form of ritual worship). Iyer conducted *bhakti* (devotion) to invite the blessings of Hanu-



K.V. Iyer was India's first well-known bodybuilder. Mark Berry wrote in 1927 that Iyer was an "example of the ambitious youth who worked hard with his mind set on physical perfection." Although not a large man—Iyer stood 5' 7.5" and weighed about 160 pounds—his beautifully balanced body inspired many men to take up exercise, including Jack La Lanne.

man, the deity whose portrait sat on a table covered with an altar cloth. (Hanuman, the mighty Monkey God, is revered by gym enthusiasts, including bodybuilders and wrestlers, not so much for his traditional role as faithful servant to Rama but as the giver of strength.) Accompanied by Iyer's harmonium playing, the worshippers sang *bhajans* (devotional songs, especially those of Tiger Varadachar, a composer and singer). Afterward, they offered food and incense to Hanuman, passed their hands three times through a camphor flame, and lightly touched their eyes with sanctified water cupped in their right hands, drank the water, distributed *prasad* (the offered food that had become sanctified), and sat for meditation.

Unlike the discus thrower's or blacksmith's bodily makeup, Iyer's muscular physique wasn't formed as a by-product of some physical task; it was an artificial physique that Iyer designed, as if he were chiseling a stone sculpture, to be pleasing in appearance. Although bodybuilding as an aesthetic endeavor—the urge to transform the human body, the very size and shape of it, into (something like) a work of art—didn't begin until the 19th century (the term “bodybuilding” was coined by Robert Jeffries Roberts in 1881 to describe the workout that he'd devised as director of the Boston YMCA), Iyer validated his pursuit of physical beauty as a continuation of “the ideals of perfect beauty of figure” formulated by ancient Greeks and embodied in their statues, made familiar to people of the early 20th century, including Iyer, mostly through photos of the Greek statues, or, more accurately, photos of Roman copies of the Greek statues. “These ancient classical statues,” Iyer declared in “The Beauties of a Symmetrical Body,” an article he published in the June 1927 issue of *Vyayam*, an Indian physical culture magazine, “have given us models to admire, learn from and even to imitate.”<sup>1</sup> Following the fashion of the times created by Western bodybuilders, Iyer posed as an actual or seeming Greek statue for many of his publicity and illustration photos. For the first photo caption in his gallery of self-portraits in his 1936 pamphlet *Perfect Physique*, Iyer included the words of Carl Easton in order to burnish his reputation and, in effect, define his essence: “‘The living ideal of ancient Grecian Manhood,’ writes Carl Easton Williams, Editor of *Physical Culture*, a Bernard Mc Fadden [*sic*] Publication.”<sup>2</sup>

Iyer also positioned his pursuit of beauty in the context of ancient India. During the Gupta period (3rd to 6th centuries), considered the classical artistic and scientific peak of Indian culture, instructional manuals, called

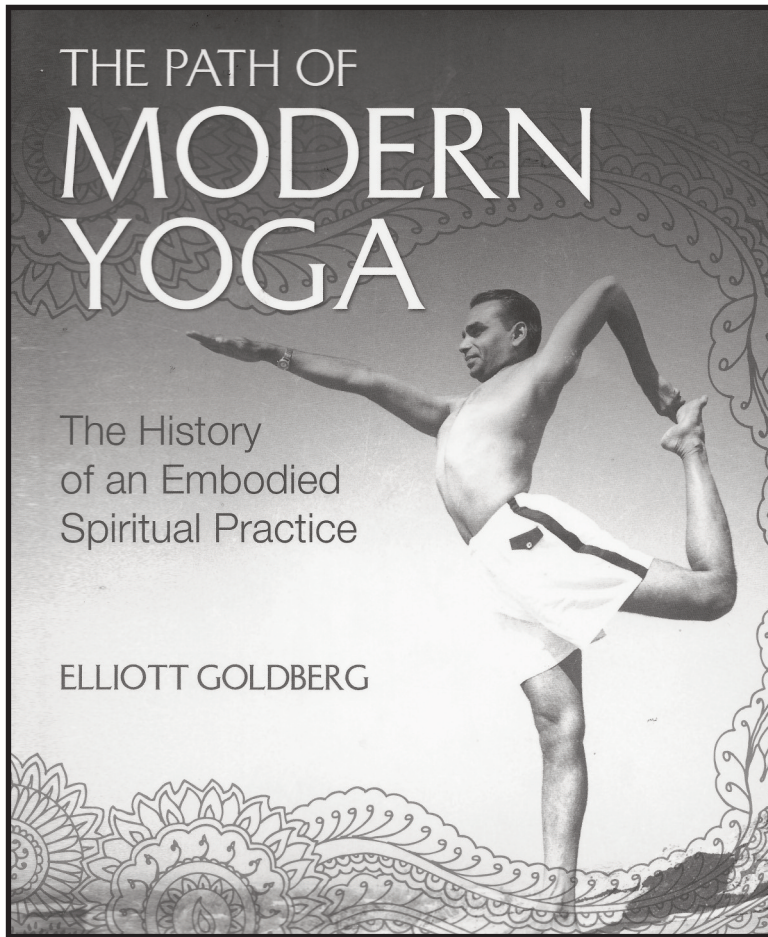
*Shilpa Shastra* or *Vastu Shastra*, were created by Brahmin priests and *shilpin* (master sculptors) for holy pictures, carvings, and statues. Iconometric rules for the presentation of the major gods included, for example, exact measurements for the width of the shoulders and waist and the depth of the chest. For six years, “through sheer physical culture,” Iyer recollected, he sculpted his body to bring it into accord with “the ideal proportions of the *Silpi Shashtra*,” producing a body “identical, limb to limb and inch to inch, with the same.”<sup>3</sup>

In the October 1927 issue of *Strength*, a magazine devoted to weightlifting, bodybuilding, and fitness, editor-in-chief Mark Berry, who would become Iyer's biggest booster over the next six years, introduced his readers to Iyer with a photo of Iyer displaying his broad back muscles (“One of the finest poses we have ever had the pleasure to present to our readers”).<sup>4</sup> Berry described Iyer as an “example of the ambitious youth who worked hard with his mind set on physical perfection; that he has achieved it, can hardly be denied, though he may not consider such to be the case, being an Indian idealist.”<sup>5</sup> Berry was mistaken about Iyer's modesty. Just a few months earlier Iyer had proclaimed (as perhaps only a young man could or would) his pride in possessing “a body which Gods covet.”<sup>6</sup> Although the desire of the gods cannot be affirmed, from all accounts it can be said with some certainty that Iyer was entirely justified in his claim to the title of “India's most perfectly developed man.”<sup>7</sup>

What made Iyer “perfectly developed” was his muscular symmetry and its effect on his carriage. Only a muscular body with pleasing proportions, he argued, could radiate “ease, grace and poise.”<sup>8</sup> For this reason, he abhorred the kind of body developed by the *vyayam*, the centuries-old Indian system of physical training practiced in the service of wrestling (and feats of strength). As in Japan, wrestling is a way of life in India. It's been practiced since ancient times, probably then, as now, as more of a dueling art than a military combat art. Anthropologist Joseph S. Alter fruitfully explains *vyayam* through its relationship to yoga: “As with yoga, a key concept in *vyayam* is the holistic, regulated control of the body. In yoga, however, the body is manipulated through the practice of relatively static postures. *Vyayam* disciplines the body through strenuous, patterned, repetitive movement.”<sup>9</sup>

*Vyayam* exercises fall into two categories. The first encompasses exercises to develop explosive movement, agility, and stamina. These include *dands* (something like





Front cover of Elliott Goldberg's *The Path of Modern Yoga*.

push-ups) and *bethaks* (squats), which are performed together. The second group contains exercises to build strength and muscle bulk. These include swinging *sumto-las* ("Indian barbells") and *korelas*, *joris*, and *gadas* (types of heavy clubs) and lifting *nals* (stone weights) and *gar nals* (stone wheels). The body that's formed from the strengthening exercises is hardly like that of a Greek statue or a god. "It pains me awfully to look at a modern wrestler," Iyer lamented. "One in fifty possesses a symmetrical build. These wrestlers devote themselves *only* to increase the bulk of their flesh."<sup>10</sup> While they aid wrestling, *vyayam* strengthening exercises, he realized, aren't effective for bodybuilding because they aren't based on scientific principles

To achieve symmetry, Iyer turned to Western means of muscle development, primarily barbell exercises practiced according to Sandow's three principles of bodybuilding: selectivity, progression, and high intensity. Selectivity is choosing particular resistance exercises to target muscle groups. For example, straightening bent

arms to target the triceps; pulling the arms down and/or back to target the latissimus dorsi (lats); and curling the trunk up to target the abdominals (abs). Progression is increasing muscle growth by gradually adding more weight resistance. High intensity is lifting an amount of overload much heavier than we're used to. Iyer also practiced and taught Maxalding, the muscle control system developed by Maxick and Monte Saldo based on the isometric contraction of muscles in isolation. Practitioners will a muscle to contract (without moving a bony segment), hold the contraction, and then relax the muscle.

Iyer well recognized that these scientific principles could be misapplied. He found repugnant not only wrestlers who ignore the scientific principles of muscle development but also bodybuilders who use heavy weight lifting to develop a massive musculature: "While exercising one should bear in his mind that he is performing [the exercises] to acquire a good build, a sound and healthy body with ample strength. The desire for only big bulging biceps might mar the symmetry of the body and make him knotty and abnormal."<sup>11</sup> Even worse, "heavy weight lifting . . . when applied unscientifically . . . often results in rupture, heart strain, [and] nervous break down, [as well as] in an ugly unsymmetrical body."<sup>12</sup>

Through introducing and promoting bodybuilding to the average man in the 1920s and 1930s, Iyer helped popularize the Sandowian image of modern male beauty in India, nurturing an avidity for transforming the body among Indians to match the zeal of the ancient Greeks. How thrilling it must've been to be a part of the gathering of men in the various incarnations of Iyer's gymnasiums (from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s, Iyer moved to bigger spaces to accommodate his growing membership) who were involved in this new project to perfect their bodies!

### Reconciliation of Muscle Cult and Hata-Yoga Cult

Along with his fervor for conferring physical perfection on his countrymen, Iyer was equally dedicated to improving their fitness and health. He was concerned with imparting not just the ability to do daily physical activities with a minimum of fatigue but also the capacity to ward off chronic disease, "to remain active to a ripe old age."<sup>13</sup> He bemoaned the then current concept of well-

ness:

*The attitude of the physician towards health seems to be to classify all people under two heads—the sick and the well. If actual disease is not present, the individual is classed as well. But there are degrees of health, just as there are degrees of humidity and temperature. One person may have excellent health, another fair health, and still another poor health, yet none of these would be classified as sick from the view-point of the physician. One may be organically sound, in that, no defect could be found in any organ or tissue of the body: and yet he may not be a robust healthy individual.*<sup>14</sup>

Iyer described the manifestations of robust health by comparing it to the symptoms of poor health:

*A person in poor physical condition is easily exhausted by mental and physical exertion; he is irritable, likely to have morbid thoughts, petty ailments, and low morale; he may have a sallow complexion and dull eyes; and he frequently complains of constipation, head-ache, nervousness and insomnia. On the other hand, it is equally common to observe in a man of good physical condition, evidences of mental and bodily vigour such as alertness, cheerfulness, high morale, bright eyes, elastic step, healthy complexion, and capacity for arduous mental and physical work.*<sup>15</sup>

How is one to obtain this “mental and bodily vigour”? According to Iyer, it could only be accomplished by complementing bodybuilding with the health-building aspects of hatha yoga: *asana* (consisting of conditioning postures, as opposed to the postures suitable for prolonged immobility), *pranayama* (consisting of breathing exercises), *kriya* (consisting of cleansing techniques), *mudra* (consisting of seals), *bandha* (consisting of locks), and diet. He proclaimed:

*The dissimilarity between Hata-yoga*

*Cult and the Western Cult of Body-building lies in the very goal that these two systems aim to achieve. Longevity of life—a life healthy and free from ailments functional and organic, to fit the individual human unit to fulfil his obligations to himself, his home and the society he is a part of, succinctly sums up what Hata-yoga imparts to the worldly man. Europe—ancient, medieval and modern—in her Cult of the human body, has ever been aiming at the symmetry, bulk and strength in the developed man.*<sup>16</sup>

Iyer was the first practitioner of physical culture to combine the “Cult of Body-building” and the “Hata-yoga Cult.” “My aim in My System,” he declared in 1930 in his manifesto *Muscle Cult—A Pro-em to My System*, “is to reconcile these two great systems to assure the future Culturist of robustness of health and beauty of limb and trunk.”<sup>17</sup>

Iyer brokered this reconciliation in a period of great agitation, recollected in a kaleidoscopic rush of words: “Born of early motherhood, puny boyhood, Sandow’s pictures, earnest emulation, unguided headlong rush into spring-bells and cold-baths, small reward of sprouting muscles and stern reprisals of recurring colds and fevers, a depressing period of no gain in bulk or strength,—a baffled mind steeped in Western Physical Culture turns to Hata-yoga, India’s heritage—blending of the two systems.”<sup>18</sup> The result of this febrile revelation was newfound good health and a fine physique. Having created his own system (although he modestly wrote, “I have invented no system of my own” but just made an “experience-guided selection” from other systems), Iyer would then turn to initiating others into it. “It is absolutely necessary,” he advised prospective bodybuilders, “that all those who are ambitious of a beautiful and symmetrical body, combined with the highest efficiency of strength and endurance, should tone up their everlasting health, by developing the internal muscular organs of the body, and their functionings, through proper Yogic Asanas first, and thus overcome once and for all times, all functional defects, to restore the body in every part.”<sup>19</sup>

It turns out that Iyer was largely mistaken about the benefits of hata- or, what we now call hatha yoga. While providing a degree of good health, hatha yoga practices don’t promote the abundant good health that he



believed. However, *asana* practice does provide superb flexibility, as well as grace, which is why *asana* imparts just as much beauty of limb and trunk as does bodybuilding. He was largely correct, though, about the benefits and limitations of bodybuilding. Bodybuilding provides “symmetry, bulk and strength.” It doesn’t impart “longevity of life,” although it does have some health benefits. [Editors’ note: Although Iyer’s use of both bodybuilding and yoga training is interesting, Goldberg does not cite scientific/physiological evidence to support these assertions or to support his dismissal of the health benefits of strength training below.]

Around 1940, after he’d become India’s most famous bodybuilder and the owner of India’s largest and most successful gymnasium, Iyer came to feel that he’d overemphasized the value of attaining “the beauties of a symmetrical body.” In his 1943 book *Chemical Changes in Physical Exercise*, he not only warned again against developing large muscles for a showy physique, with the attendant “pitfall of over-strain,” but seems to have abandoned bodybuilding (weight-resistance training with the goal of developing a well-proportioned musculature with large, well-defined muscles) altogether. Instead, he promoted strength training (he used the term “physical training”) as a means of providing good health to the internal organs, especially those of the circulatory and respiratory systems.<sup>20</sup> In actuality, strength training, like *yogasana* (the practice of yogic postures to maintain or improve fitness and health), has little effect on maintaining good health or improving poor health. It primarily provides a key aspect of fitness: the strength to perform everyday activities involving lifting, lowering, pulling, and pushing with ease (*yogasana* provides the flexibility to perform everyday activities involving bending forward, backward, and sideways and twisting with ease).

Not that Iyer didn’t recognize the fitness benefits of strength training. It makes us “fit enough to accomplish each day’s work with minimum fatigue and to remain active to a ripe old age,” he wrote.<sup>21</sup> He provided training guidelines accordingly. “Hence, it is advisable to exercise each muscle or group of muscles separately.”<sup>22</sup> “For ‘strenuous exercise, . . . exercise the extremities [*sic*] of the body one day and the torso the next day.” “If graded exercise is taken day after day, the load of work may be gradually increased and, finally, that which formerly was a heavy load is comfortably carried.”<sup>23</sup> Fatigue is determined in part by “habits of muscular use. . . . And so, exercises that have rhythm of movement, tempo of



Deeply proud of his native homeland, Iyer paid homage to his Indian roots in this photo where he is dressed to honor the Indian gods. This particular photo best supports historian David Chapman’s assertion that Iyer “was like a bronze temple God that had somehow come to life.” [David Chapman, “Gallery of Greats—K.V. Iyer,” *Iron Man* (March, 1991): 68.]

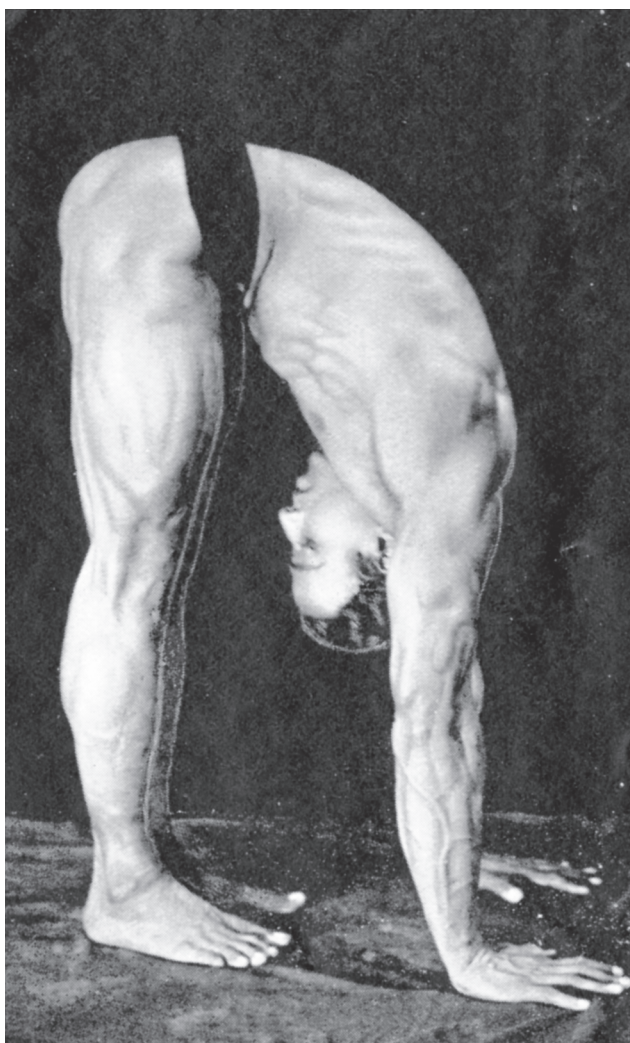
breathing, and harmony of co-operation of the motor nervous system are a potent factor in preventing fatigue.”<sup>24</sup>

Like Sandow, Iyer drew heavily on photography to promote his system. As art historian Tamar Garb observes in *Bodies of Modernity*, her exploration of the representation of masculinity and femininity in the late 19th century, photography was an especially felicitous medium for making the connection between modern and ancient Greek muscle cult: “It was the newest of pictorial media, photography, which became an important vehicle through which modern endeavours could establish their links with an ancient and noble past. The modern body-

building or 'physical culture' movement, as it was then called, depended on photography for its publicity and for propagating an image of ideal masculinity based on ancient prototypes."<sup>25</sup>

To promote the three-month correspondence course for his Correspondence School of Physical Culture, founded in 1928, Iyer created a booklet, *Muscle Cult—A Pro-em to My System*, in 1930, which was replaced in 1936 by a more polished version, *Perfect Physique—A Proem to My System*. The booklets contain a plenitude of photographs of men (some beefed up, but others quite trim, even slight) showing off their muscular development. (None of them are doing exercises; they're all posing.) The front of the booklets contains a gallery of photographs of Iyer (taken by Iyer, who was an avid photographer). He's naked, or nearly so, dramatically lit to emphasize the chiaroscuro of his musculature, and often posed like a Greek statue of an athlete. But it's the casual poses, the ones with Iyer in repose, that catch our eye: they both startle us and draw us in with their seeming intimacy and candidness. One of them, entitled "In a Pensive Mood," shows Iyer sitting on the floor, looking off contemplatively.

Iyer used photographs to link not only modern and ancient muscle cult but also bodybuilding and yogasana, two disciplines ordinarily opposed in people's minds. Included in *Perfect Physique* is a photograph of a student performing a seated twisting yoga pose cited in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. The caption reads: "T. K. Ananthanarayana depicting 'Purna Matsyendrasana,' a very difficult Yogic pose of great chiropractic value"<sup>26</sup> *Muscle Cult* contains photographs of a student demonstrating yogic purificatory exercises of the abdominal



Iyer created remarkable flexibility by including yoga exercises with his physical culture training.

region. A single caption reads: "S. Sundaram. An exponent of Hata-Yoga performing 'Uddiyana and Nauli.'"<sup>27</sup> Although he includes many more muscle cult than hatha yoga cult photographs, by placing the photographs from the two disciplines side by side—or, perhaps better said, by dropping the hatha yoga cult photographs into the middle of the muscle cult photographs—Iyer was showing that they make up one capacious exercise system.

### Legacy

When he was a teenager in the early 1930s, Jack La Lanne (or LaLanne, as his name is often spelled), who would become a famous American fitness expert and bodybuilder best known for his prodigious feats of endurance and his long-running (1951–1985) television show, "began to see stories and pictures in magazines about a Hindu physical culturist named K. V. Iyer. He was

not a 'strong man' in the classic sense of being able to perform great feats of strength," La Lanne recalled in 1973. "But he was a perfect physical specimen, with a muscular and fully developed body that I, skinny Jack La Lanne, envied."<sup>28</sup> After realizing that he and Iyer had the same slight build (their height and bone structure were nearly the same), La Lanne made Iyer his model for changing his body, which means to say, for changing his life. Although Iyer "lived on the opposite side of the world," La Lanne wrote, "he became my inspiration."<sup>29</sup> Following Iyer's recommendations for weight-resistance exercises, La Lanne worked out, "taking my own measurements, always aiming toward the dimensions of K. V. Iyer," until a few years later he finally achieved a physique like Iyer's.<sup>30</sup>

But more compelling praise for Iyer came from



an unsolicited testimonial made by a correspondence school student, Ooi Tiang Guan, from Penang, Malaysia, on June 6, 1929, published in *Muscle Cult*: “I have now come to the last lesson. I can honestly say that your course is the best, because it is not mere muscle culture. The internal organs too are strengthened and nerves are toned up. It unfolds to me the precious and vital secrets of life ‘The Yogic Culture’ which accounts for the long and healthy lives of the Indian Sages.”<sup>31</sup> Ooi understood what La Lanne didn’t: that Iyer’s full teachings were groundbreaking, and what made them so was that Iyer wasn’t merely a bodybuilder but, in Berry’s words, “a professional physical culturist, teaching modern methods of progressive [weight-resistance] exercise, combined with the science of yoga.”<sup>32</sup>

Iyer was the ideal person to implement this merger of Western and Eastern physical culture. By upbringing and inclination, he was cosmopolitan (without ever having left India), yet steeped in his own traditions. Moreover, he had a conciliatory temperament: for him, there was no conflict between muscle cult and hatha yoga cult. They simply complemented each other. In this conviction, Iyer was far more sensible and ecumenical than the oft-intolerant contemporary hatha yogins who feel that they’re upholding the purity of the yoga tradition when they reject other forms of exercise. They’re ignorant of their own history. Two of the yogins who created modern hatha yoga, Kuvalayananda and Sundaram, approved performing both yogasana and strength training. Kuvalayananda recommended waiting twenty minutes between the exercises: “Those that want to finish their exercises with a balance introduced into their system, should take the Yogic exercises last. But those that want to have a spirit of exhilaration at the end, should finish with the muscular exercises.”<sup>33</sup> Sundaram recommended doing the exercises at opposite times of the day: “If the Yogic system is practiced in the mornings, the Muscular exercises ought to be done in the evenings and vice versa. The former works up the internal organs and attracts greater blood to them: while the latter do the same thing for the superficial body.”<sup>34</sup> But Kuvalayananda and Sundaram didn’t integrate the two disciplines into one system.

Iyer’s legacy is in having brought muscle cult and hatha yoga cult together into one workout: the understated muscularity and strength of intense strength training complemented by the graceful suppleness and flexibility of a dedicated yogasana practice. An Indian enthralled

with the bodybuilding systems of Europeans, yet proud of and indebted to the centuries-old Indian practice of hatha yoga, Iyer forged a dynamic West-meets-East physical exercise system, in which movements to resist opposing forces are coupled with movements to surrender to opposing forces.

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