



IRON GAME HISTORY



THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE

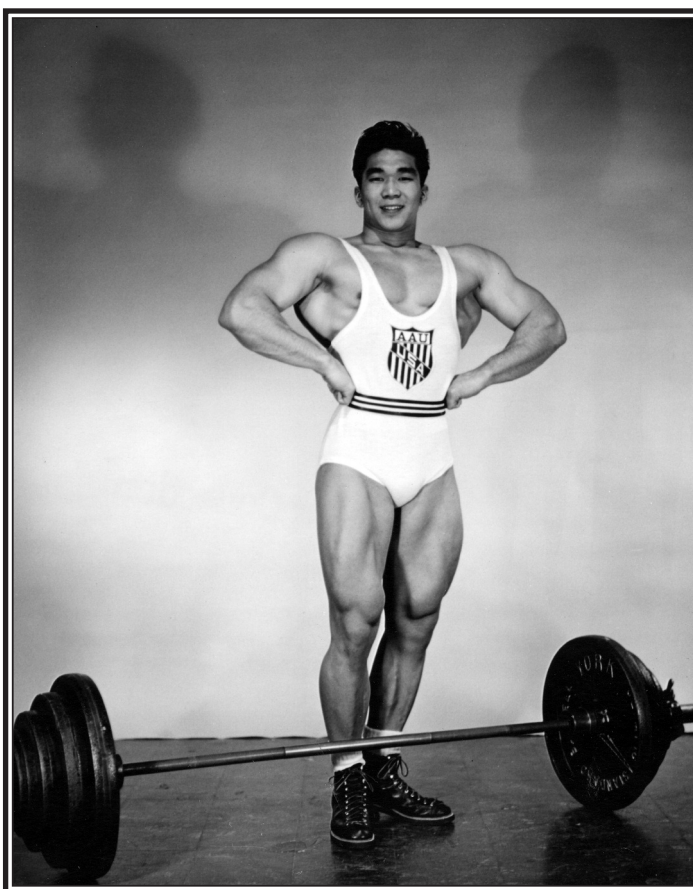
Volume 14 Numbers 2 & 3

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SPECIAL ISSUE:

REMEMBERING AMERICA'S GREATEST WEIGHTLIFTER—TOMMY KONO

Tamio “Tommy” Kono passed away on 24 April 2016 at the age of 85. It was fitting that the first official news of his death appeared on the website of the International Weightlifting Federation, which had named him “Lifter of the Century” in 2005. Almost all of Tommy’s early adult life was spent either training for, competing in, coaching others in, photographing, or writing about weightlifting—the sport in which he won three Olympic medals and set 26 world records in four bodyweight classes. In the days following the IWF’s announcement, obituaries extolling Kono’s achievements appeared in major newspapers around the world, and The Honorable Doris O. Matsui, Representative from California, gave a speech before the US House of Representatives declaring Kono an Ameri-



Tommy Kono in his prime. Described by *Sports Illustrated* as the “Most Beautiful Athlete in the World,” Kono won three Olympic medals in weightlifting (two gold and one silver), and also won four international bodybuilding titles sponsored by what is now known as the International Weightlifting Federation.

can hero. Iron Gamers took to the web to share their personal stories of Kono, posting for all to see how he inspired them, what it had been like to watch him lift; and what a humble, gracious man they’d found him to be when running into him at a gym or talking with him at a meet or a clinic. Walter Imahara and David Meltzer even decided to publish a tribute book in his honor, the *Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono*, through the print-on-demand service at Lulu.com.

Here at the Stark Center, we also pondered how to respond to the sad news of Tommy’s passing, and decided to do something for him that we have done for only two other people (John Grimek and Steve Reeves) in the 27 years we’ve been publishing *Iron Game History*.

Our decision was to create the special issue you're holding in your hands—a journal devoted to only one person. To create this issue, we asked John Fair, the reigning historian chronicling the history of competitive weightlifting, to edit this special tribute. John, as you may recall—if you read last issue's editorial about Tommy's death and the gift of his collection to the Stark Center by his wife, Flo, and the Kono family—went to Hawaii on the Stark Center's behalf and packed the large collection (with considerable help from his wife, Sarah, and long-time Kono friend and fellow lifting legend Pete George). Once the collection was here, Fair spent most of the last winter and spring going through the Kono Collection, interviewing Tommy's

friends and weightlifting colleagues, and asking people to share their memories and thoughts about Kono's life and his matchless legacy. This issue is the result of John's efforts to preserve the memory of "America's Greatest Weightlifter" and to do what historians are trained to do—to drill down into the primary sources and reveal the character of this true gentleman, in the old sense of the term. (The photos in this issue are also from the Kono Collection.) On behalf of the Stark Center and fans of the strength sports we say, "Thank you" to John, to Pete George, to the other contributors, and, most especially, to the Kono family for making this issue possible.

—Jan and Terry Todd

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MY HERO, MY FRIEND: TOMMY KONO

Lou DeMarco

From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer, *Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono* (Mesa, AZ: 2017).

In 1952, similar to many impressionable boys, I began to read the lifting exploits in *Strength & Health* magazine of Tommy Kono who rapidly became my hero, my idol. Unlike many boys, I was most fortunate because in 1956 I saw Tommy lift at the Senior Nationals in Philadelphia; I even got close enough to him to hear him speak. This was an absolute thrill because I was only 17 years old and was seeing my hero in the flesh. The next year at the nationals in Daytona Beach I had a bigger thrill. I was backstage and when Tommy went to take his first snatch attempt, he took off his glasses and handed them to me as I was standing nearby. He made it strongly, then made his second attempt even better, again handing me his glasses before the attempt. That is when he said I was good luck to him and to stay near. Again, he handed me his glasses and went out and made a PR in the snatch. "Stick by me," he said; all I could think of was the Sistine Chapel and the beginning of man as God touched the finger of Adam.

The years went by and I saw Tommy at his best throughout the 1950s at various nationals. He would say hello to me and we would briefly exchange pleasantries. It was not until the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles that we became friends as we both served on the competition staff. After we returned to our homes, we corresponded frequently by letter and with occasional phone calls. With the advent of the internet, we began emailing one another frequently along with almost weekly phone conversations. We also saw one another a couple times a year at the nationals or at an Olympic festival. We often roomed together.

As time went by my respect for him only increased not because of his past lifting exploits or his knowledge of our beloved sport, but because of the man himself, i.e., a person of the strongest character who always was so humble, kind, and generous. I once told

him at nationals that he was too humble for his own good and our sport's good; he said that was his nature, his Japanese ancestry. I came to know Tommy's background and what challenges he had faced. I have often said that adversity builds character and nobody had more adversity than Tommy (beginning with his poor health and the years he spent at Lake Tule with his family). This is why he was such a person of character. He always stressed the importance of character. Despite what he and his family



Close friends Tommy Kono and Lou DeMarco are shown here during a 2009 interview that can be seen on Youtube at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=luqpWOxy8k. DeMarco and Kono shared much in common, including national coaching resumes. Both served in a variety of capacities within US Weightlifting, and became good friends when working together at the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. DeMarco was inducted into the National Weightlifting Hall of Fame in 1999.

had to endure, nobody, and I mean nobody, was more patriotic than Tommy. On the platform, he always fought not for glory or financial gain (there was a strict amateur code), but for the love of his country. At the height of the Cold War, Tommy battled and defeated the Soviets constantly as they threw everything at him. One has only to recall his 1958 trip to the Prize of Moscow meet in Russia where he defeated them all with a world record total without assistance (no coach or handlers). That only established his strength of will and courage further.

I knew that I had become a close friend of Tom-



Tommy's parents, Kanichi Kono and Ichibi Kono, immigrated to the United States and then, like thousands of other Japanese residents, were forced during World War II to live in an internment camp because America was at war with Japan. His mother died when Tommy was only 20.

my at the 1991 Olympic Festival in Los Angeles. We were again rooming together on the UCLA campus (he told me he liked rooming with me as I was as neat as he was, i.e., making my bed and hanging up my clothes; I told him our mothers raised us well). It was here that he told me two personal stories which led me to the assumption that we were now close friends. In 1950 he had gone to York to have a tryout against Joe Pitman to see who would go to the world championships that year. He stayed at the York YMCA, and every day he would walk to the old York Barbell on Broad Street and pass an elementary school where children were in the playground during recess. When he walked past, the children would rush up to the fence and stare at him because he was Asian, which was very foreign to them. He said to me in his softest tones, "You know, Lou, that bothered me a lot."

He always spoke in glowing terms of John Grimek. Once he went to the York Barbell gym and was sitting there looking forlorn. Grimek came in and asked him what was wrong. He handed John a telegram; his mother had passed away. Immediately Grimek said you have to go home and forget the tryout, forget lifting as family is everything. John drove him to Washington, but it was fogged in with no flights going out. Grimek turned the car around and drove to Philadelphia. He put Tommy, who was only 20 years old, on a plane, all the time being

so caring and understanding of what Tommy was enduring. Then I realized how much Grimek meant to him. I also realized how blessed I was to have Tommy share these events with me.

I was asked recently by a reporter what I have learned from Tommy; that would take a book. Speaking of books, I had the pleasure of proofreading and editing his two books. Two years ago we discussed working together on a biography; I even emailed him an outline. He called me immediately and was very happy, along with his beloved Flo, with the idea. But, alas, we never got to it. Do I miss my friend? God yes. I miss his wisdom not only about lifting but about life itself. I miss calling him and Flo answering and calling to him, "Tommy, it's Lou DeMarco." I miss his humble, soft voice and his distinct laughter. As Tony Garcy once told me, "Tommy Kono is the great human being." My only regret is that not more of the world knew of him—as they did of other athletes in their prime—during Tommy's golden age and what he did for his country. ... May his memory and ideals continue to burnish brightly and live on forever.



This photo, taken on 29 August 1952 at an exhibition in front of 6000 people in Berlin, was one of Tommy's favorites. The Berg Hantel he was snatching was loaded to 100 kg (220 lbs.). With no warmups he made two reps and then cleaned 140 kg (308 lbs.) and jerked it three times. The dark glasses? The sun was in his eyes.

TOMMY KONO AND THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING: THE INDOMITABLE SPIRIT OF AMERICA'S GREATEST WEIGHTLIFTER

John D. Fair

The University of Texas at Austin

A man's life is what his thoughts make of it. — Marcus Aurelius

All of us knew it was coming for many months, but the mood of sadness that gripped the weightlifting world was no less profound when we learned that the great Tommy (Tamio) Kono was no longer with us. His death on the afternoon of 24 April 2016, of hepatic encephalopathy caused by cirrhosis of the liver immediately triggered an outpouring of obituaries and tributes from the news and sports media, most notably the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *NBC News*, *Yahoo Sports*, *The Sacramento Bee*, and *The York Dispatch*.¹ These memorials were informed by countless colleagues, friends, and journalists over the years who had recorded Tommy's extraordinary achievements on the lifting platform.² This account aims to provide a richer narrative of Kono's life that is both retrospective and introspective, written not as an intimate friend but as an acquaintance who has observed and been inspired by his approach to sport and life. It is based not only on personal experiences and the many accounts of his life, but by original sources, including interviews and correspondence. Most revealing of Tommy are the two instructional and autobiographical volumes he authored in later life.³ In the spirit of those accounts, my intention is to convey a behind-the-scenes perspective that goes beyond pounds lifted, championships won, and honors bestowed during the golden years of his competitive life. It will also examine other less heralded aspects of his involvement with the sport he loved and provide some insights into the cultural origins of his competitive spirit.

Hopefully this backstory will enrich our understanding of how Kono was able to tap so much mental and physical energy during his long and illustrious career.

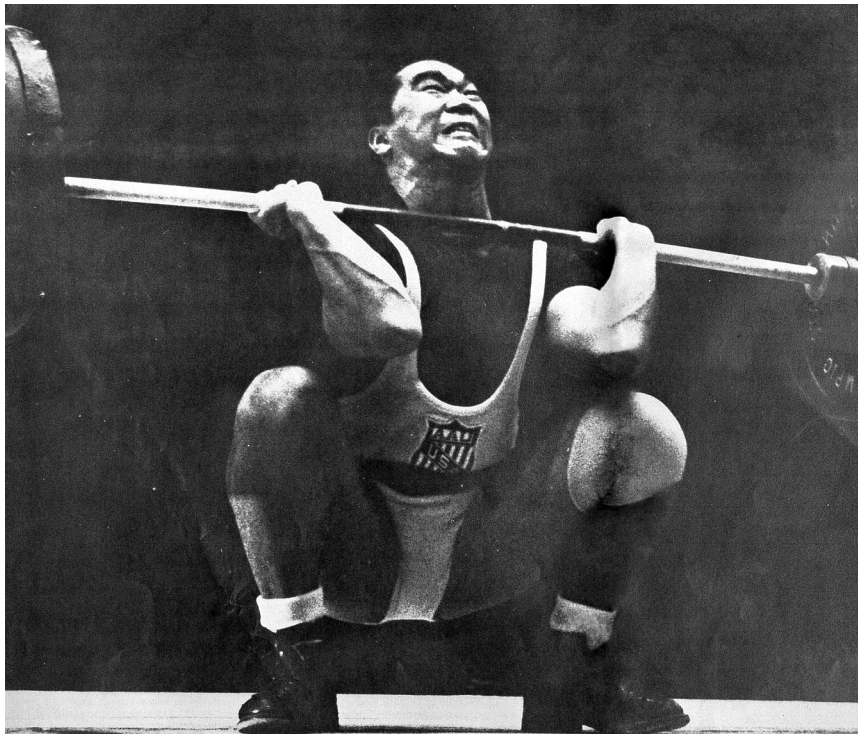
A Supreme Act of Will

My first awareness of Tommy Kono dates back to the summer of 1962 after my first year of college when I was training in a small



At only 22 years of age, Kono shocked the international weightlifting community when he handily won the 1952 Olympic Games. Dressed in a long satin robe similar to what some boxers wear today, Kono couldn't help but smile as the men behind him check the weight of the new World and Olympic snatch record he had just set with 259 pounds as a lightweight in that important contest.

weight room in the basement of my hometown YMCA in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania. There was no Olympic set or even bench press or squat racks in this dreary facility, but on the wall was a poster by Bob Hoffman titled "Guide to Weight Lifting Competition," featuring sequence photos of Tommy, Jim Bradford, Dave Ashman, Clyde Emrich, Norbert Schemansky, and Joe Pitman performing Olympic lifts in competition. What inspired me most were the two panels showing Kono doing the press and the snatch. I could not comprehend how anyone could hoist that much weight overhead. That Tommy was also Asian added to the mystique. By 1963, though still in a bodybuilding mode, I was picking up issues of



The “greatest effort of Kono’s championship career,” according to Bob Hoffman, was when he made this 375-pound clean & jerk to beat Lou Riecke on bodyweight in the 1962 Nationals. *Strength & Health* ran this image across two pages in 1969.

Strength & Health at the newsstand and was thrilled to read about the epic battle between Kono and Louis Riecke at the national championships in Harrisburg in the October issue. After the press and snatch, Tommy was trailing Lou by fifteen pounds in the light-heavyweight class, owing mainly to the latter’s superb snatching ability. As Hoffman described it, Tommy needed a 375-pound clean & jerk to tie Riecke and win on lower bodyweight.

This did not seem possible, for he was out of condition. But what a competitor this man is. The yellow glow of the tiger showed in his eyes. He approached the bar, and three times he walked away from it. Then, with a double superhuman effort he cleaned the weight. It was too much for him. He simply could not jerk it.

One more attempt. Tommy took more time to prepare for this lift than I had ever seen him take before. I was reminded of Pete George’s ordeal at the 1948 Olympic Games, when the Olympic gold medal

hinged on the 363¾ pounds this 18-year-old school boy weighing only 162 pounds had cleaned. Pete tried so hard to hold that jerk, but failed. Was that to be Kono’s fate?

As he stood at the bar, I said to him. ‘Tommy, you can do it!’ He cleaned the bar, and I shouted, ‘Now jerk it, step forward, bang your feet,’ and he did just that and was again the champion. Those who saw this lift saw the greatest effort of Kono’s long championship career. It was a never-to-be-forgotten performance.⁴

This dramatic lift turned out to be one of the greatest moments in weightlifting lore, which not only indelibly etched an admiration of Kono on my mind but confirmed my commitment to become a competitive weightlifter.⁵

What I did not know was that Tommy, after winning two Olympic gold medals, six world championships, eleven national championships, and setting twenty-six world records in four weight classes, was on the downward trajectory of his career. After taking a silver medal at the Rome Olympics in 1960, he placed just third and second respectively at the 1961 (Vienna) and 1962 (Budapest) world championships. Furthermore, Hoffman alleges that Kono was not prepared to lift in the Harrisburg competition in 1963 and needed a break.⁶ He had just competed in the Prize of Moscow tournament in March and the Pan American Games in Sao Paolo in April and was suffering financially from loss of time at work. But the Japanese were sending a four-man delegation with no interpreter.⁷ Tommy, who knew some Japanese, responded immediately to Bob’s call for help and decided belatedly to defend his title.⁸ Riecke, on the other hand, had been preparing for this showdown for several years under the tutelage of Dr. John Ziegler of Olney, Maryland, with his arsenal of ergogenic aids. From his New Orleans home, Riecke wrote in March 1961 that he now had “Tommy Kono’s (whose name hereafter will be referred to as ‘Mud’) picture on the wall in my garage.” A fortnight later he “cut out of a magazine another picture of our friend, Tommy. This one I have cut down so that only the

seat of his pants is left,” he told Ziegler. “As I look at it, I say, ‘Kono, my friend, that’s your ass!’ and I push a little harder on the bar. This is a form of whimsy on my part, but I mean it.”⁹ By 1963, after coming a close second in 1961 and failing to make a total in 1962, Riecke was primed for victory. Unlike his rival and others, Tommy refused to accept any of the newfangled methodologies being cranked out by Ziegler. He recalled visiting him once in Olney with Bill March and concluded that “Ziegler was a kook.”¹⁰

Mind vs. Matter

For Tommy it was a question of putting mind over matter.¹¹ It is not surprising that he and other super athletes, the likes of Paul Anderson and in recent years Mark Henry, are suspected of deriving their amazing feats of strength from performance enhancing drugs. As Tommy explained to me in March of 1992, he had tried steroids but thought he “didn’t need them.” They made him “nervous.” Nor did functional isometric contraction work for him. And he was overly-sensitive to Dr. Ziegler’s Isotron, which stimulated muscular contraction with doses of high frequency electricity.¹² Unfortunately I did not have the presence of mind to ask when, for how long, and under

what circumstances he took steroids. At the 2003 meeting of The Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen in Saddle Brook, New Jersey, Tommy’s former teammate, Clyde Emrich, was reminded of these suspicions when

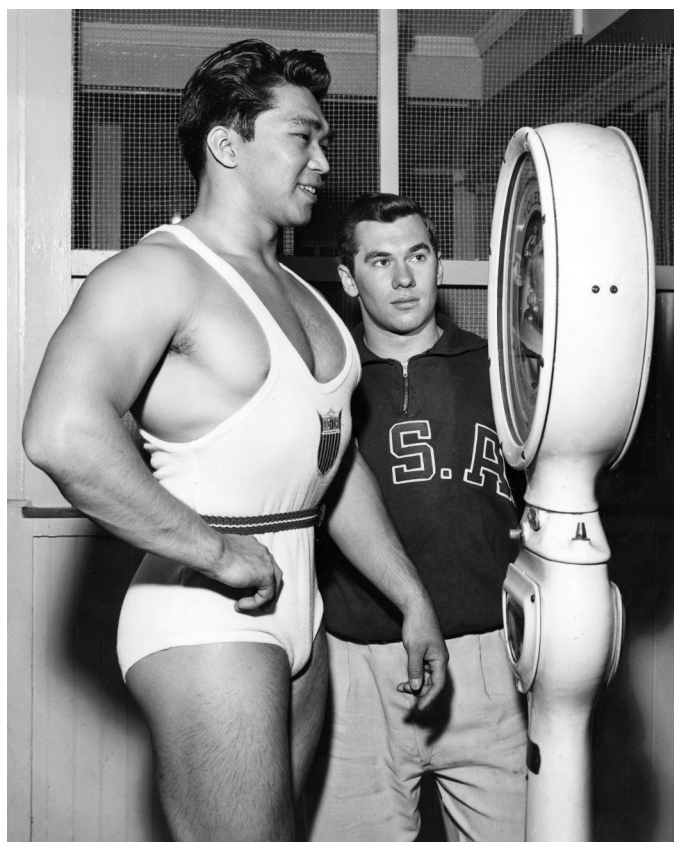
some friend of Tommy’s said to me, ‘Do you know that he used steroids?’ I said, ‘I suspected it, but no.’ The only reason I suspected it was later on, all of a sudden, he’s a lightweight, and he’s a middleweight, and he’s a light-heavyweight, and a middle-heavyweight. How can you gain weight like that and retain the muscularity that he had? So I was suspicious that that was how he was able to do that. And he was a good friend of that Dr. [Richard] You in Hawaii, and I’m sure he was coached on how to do what and when to do it and how much. So obviously he was on it at one time. Exactly what period I don’t know, but I would relate it to those times when he made those weight gains.¹³

My immediate response to Clyde’s reasoning was that Tommy did experience some dramatic weight fluctuations, but most of it occurred after the 1952 Olympics when he suddenly surged into the middleweight class. Thereafter he competed either as a middleweight or light-heavyweight, often on the cusp. Emrich concurred with this line of reasoning and was “positive” that at least he was on nothing in the fifties.¹⁴

What most concerned the powers-that-be in York was Tommy’s bodyweight. Though he made a very respectable 950½ total on Labor Day of 1954 at a variety show in Monterey, California, Hoffman found it curious that he only weighed 172 pounds. “Now that we have crossed the Rubicon,” he lectured Kono, and “decided that you are lifting in the 181 ... you must have more weight.” Bob advised him to add nuts to his diet, especially walnuts, which were high in protein and aid digestion of other foods. “Be sure that you masticate them very well.” He also suggested spaghetti and intended to send Kono his book on *Better Nutrition*. But diet, Hoffman deemed, was only part of the problem.



Dr. John Ziegler’s close connection to the York weightlifting team is demonstrated by this group shot of some of America’s greatest weightlifters and weightlifting officials gathering during their trip to the 1954 World Championships in Vienna. From left to right: Clarence Johnson, unidentified man, John Terpak, Bob Hoffman, John Davis, Clyde Emrich, John Ziegler, Norbert Schemansky, Dave Sheppard, Pete George, Stan Stanszyk standing on his suitcase, unidentified man, Tommy Kono, and unidentified man.



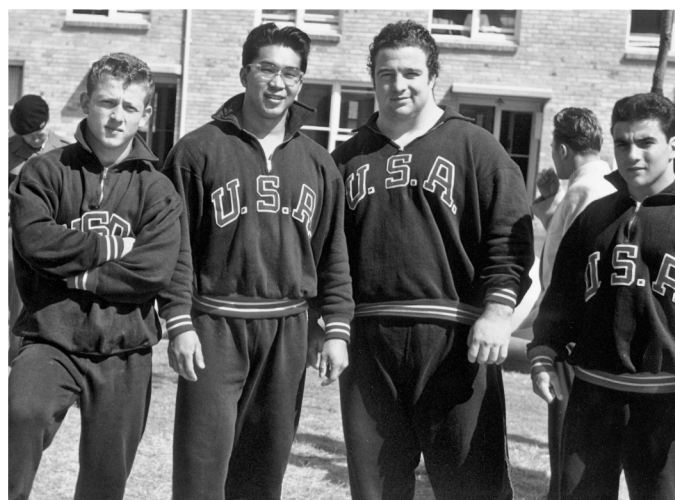
Kono understood that properly making weight is the first step to being a champion. As a lifter he competed in a remarkable four bodyweight classes. He was chastised by Bob Hoffman on more than one occasion for being too light for the class in which he lifted. Jim George looks on.

I believe much of your trouble is being too active, work, training, the pursuit of fun. This business is serious, you must concentrate on gaining strength, muscle and weight. Anything worth doing is worth doing well. The difference between splendid success and miserable failure is made up of a few small things. You need your sleep, you need your rest, never work on your nerve, give up some of your fun to get more sleep. You don't have to do it long. It's only a matter of a few weeks, you have lots of time to have your fun. I didn't really start having fun until I was thirty-eight and I have had a lot since then and have the capacity for a lot more. So get your sleep. Johnny [Terpak] and I were discussing your difficulty in gaining weight and he thinks that is the trouble.¹⁵

Little did Hoffman realize that Tommy's secret to success was that he lived and lifted on nervous energy and that weightlifting always had priority over "fun," at least as Bob defined it.¹⁶ Though unlikely to dispel Hoffman's concerns fully, Kono dramatically proved his mettle a month later when he became light-heavyweight champion at Vienna with a world record 380¼ clean & jerk and a 958¼ total while weighing just 173¼ pounds. Only twice did he venture into the mid-heavyweights, and then, by less than a kilogram, to set world records in the press.¹⁷

Steroid use could only have occurred with the advent of the Ziegler era after 1959 when Kono's fortunes were in relative decline. It would be most discernable in sudden spurts of performance. The chart on page 11 shows Tommy's three-lift totals for both weight classes from February 1955 until his last meet in June 1965.

What is most revealing from these data is how impressive Tommy's performances were as a middleweight prior to 1960, averaging 915.94-pound totals for 19 meets, followed by a decline to 903.67 pounds for seven meets. The opposite effect is evident for his light-heavyweight years with an average of 960.69 pounds for nine meets before 1960, and a small rise to 964.77 in his remaining 10 contests.¹⁸ Bodyweight gain often accompanies steroid use, and obviously Kono's increased weight was helping his performance after 1959, but there is no evidence that steroids were the reason. If so, they were not benefiting him on the international stage since the totals of competi-



The United States won four gold medals at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. Ike Berger (left) placed first in the featherweight class, Kono earned gold as a light-heavyweight, an unusually trim Paul Anderson took the gold in the heavyweight division, and Chuck Vinci earned top honors in the bantamweight class.

tors were increasing even more rapidly. Indeed, Tommy's best years in both classes preceded the drug era.

The Wounded Warrior

The greatest game-changer for Kono, coinciding with these untoward developments, was an accident that put him at a double disadvantage with his competition. At the 1959 world championships in Warsaw, in October, he injured his right knee while attempting a world record clean & jerk of 374.¹⁹ Tommy was still able to win the Senior Nationals in June 1960 with a sub-par 865-pound total as a middleweight. Then he spent a week undergoing treatment with osteopath Dr. Russell Wright in Detroit and recuperated in York while training for the Olympics. At Rome he was tied with Russian middleweight Alexander Kurinov after the first two events but was unable to win when the 374¾-pound jerk he needed twisted his knee. Ever the sportsman, he smiled and said, "I had to lose some time."²⁰ Still he managed to execute a 352½-pound clean & jerk and registered a 942-pound total with a 308½-pound press that broke the American and equaled the world record. Despite losing, it was one of the best performances of his storied career. Whether drugs played a part in tapping his recuperative powers and fueling his courageous losing effort to Kurinov cannot be proven, but with his usual cargo of Hi-Proteen to boost his team's efforts, Hoffman allegedly brought some "anabolics" supplied by Ziegler for American lifters. Only bantamweight Chuck Vinci and light-heavyweight Jim George are mentioned in John Grimek's reports to Ziegler that he received from Hoffman. "I knew people were taking things," recalls George. "I didn't really get involved in it. Quite honestly it scared me. Ziegler scared me. He and Doctor You scared the hell out of me. I was never really in that loop."²¹ It is significant that none of George's remaining colleagues in 2016 admitted or were even aware of steroid use in Rome in 1960.²² Although no evidence links Tommy to Ziegler's "anabolics," he was one of five lifters (of seven) who made gains over previous performances, and it was Vinci who became America's last male Olympic gold medalist in weightlifting.



From 1946 through the 1950s, America had the greatest weightlifting teams in the world. Here Jim Bradford, Jim George, Paul Anderson, Clyde Emrich, Pete George, Tommy Kono, Olympic coach Bob Hoffman, Chuck Vinci, and John Terpak, who often served as team manager, are caught informally by the photographer during their stay in Germany to participate in the 1955 World Championships. Every man in the photo—except Hoffman—had won at least one national weightlifting championship, and most had been, or would be, world champions, too.

After Rome, Tommy returned to Hawaii where he continued to train under Dr. You's auspices while suffering from traumatic osteoarthritis in his right knee. Whether You was administering drugs that might affect Kono's performance seems questionable.²³ But Kono did gain bodyweight and set world records with a 337-pound press and a 1,014-pound total at the Prix de Moscow Tournament in March 1961 as a light-heavyweight.²⁴ The next peak occurred at the world championships in Budapest in October of 1962 where he did 330½-297½-374½ for a 1,003 total, only to be exceeded by a 1,014 total by the great Hungarian lifter Gyozo Veres. On that occasion his teammate, heavy-weight Gary Gubner, told me in a 1992 interview that "Kono, Schemansky, and March," prior to leaving for Budapest, were injected with a steroid using the code name of vitamin B-12, which left "tennis ball welts on their butts."²⁵ Despite Gubner's confirmation of this incident 24 years later, it is corroborated by no further empirical evidence. Tommy attributes his improved performances in Moscow and Budapest to concentrating on the press to lessen stress on his knees and the fact that he always performed best where the stakes were highest. "If you review

all the world records I had set,” he noted, “you’ll find that I was never able to establish a record within the continental US.”²⁶ Frustrated with foreign adversaries benefiting from steroids, Tommy sought an alternative way to enhance his performance by adopting the so-called Olympic or Russian press. “I’m changing my pressing style,” he told Hoffman in November 1962, “so I can press as much as I can jerk. If [Rudolf] Plukfelder and [Gyozo] Veres, [Louis] Martin and [Ireneusz] Palinski can get away with jerk-presses it’s foolish for me to stick to the old style.” Yet his average press for the remaining five meets of his career as a light-heavyweight was only 305.4 pounds whereas his corresponding previous average dating back to June of 1961 was 320.4 pounds.²⁷ These data suggest that the new pressing style no more than drugs was forestalling Kono’s descent.

Retirement

Having thus experimented with the two most significant physical expedients lifters were adopting in the early 1960s, Tommy resorted to the mental resources that had proven so effective in the 1950s. Armed with the confidence derived from his own inner strength, he was able to stave off multiple challenges from Riecke and heroically defend his national title in 1963 for the last time. As he

reflected

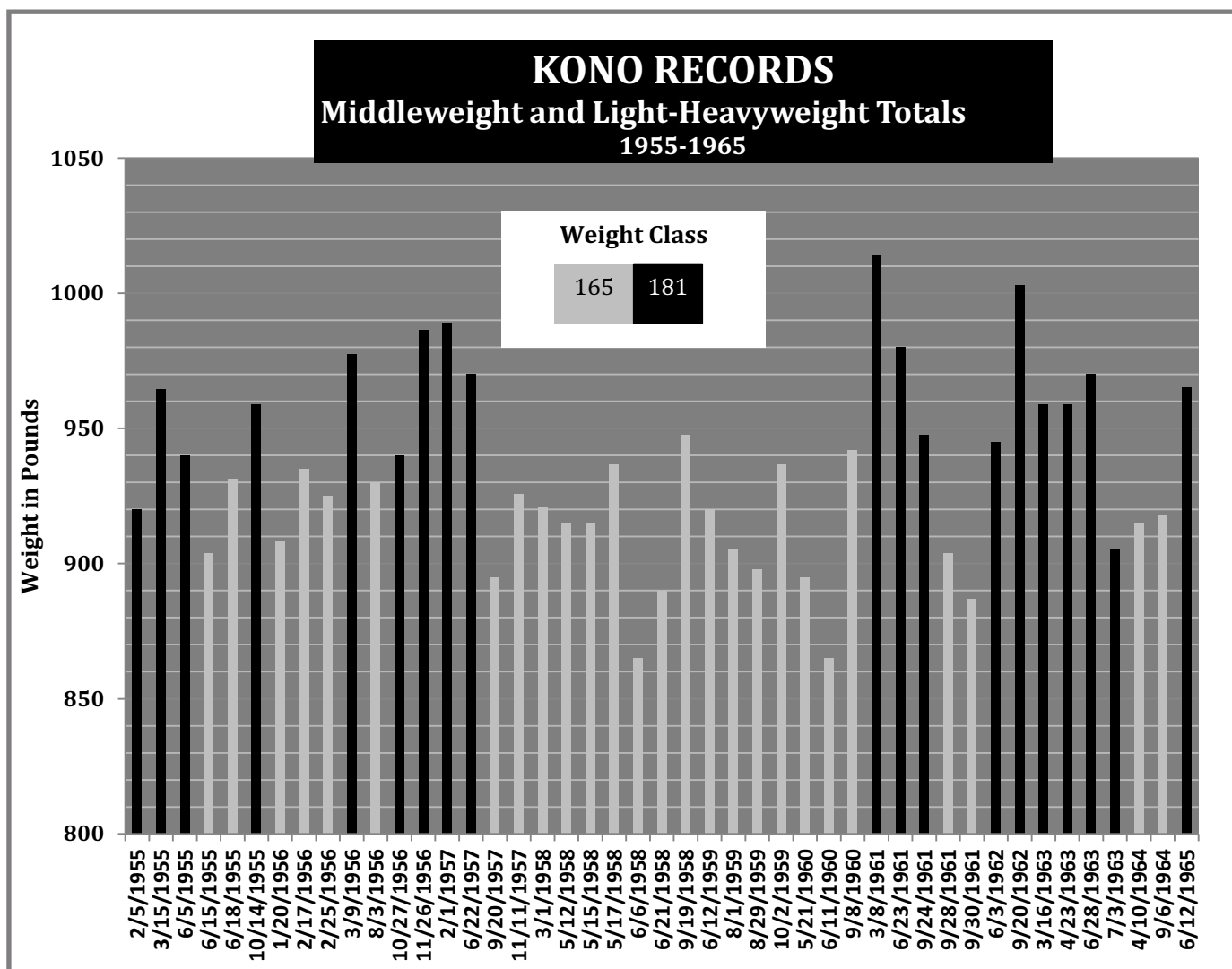
back to my years of competition, this 1963 Harrisburg Nationals was the last of my good lifting. Having nursed my damaged knees for four years and being plagued by unusual injuries (like the surface of my left thumb getting pinched between the large plates when the leg press machine broke down) took its toll. I should have realized that these were all signs that my good lifting days were over.²⁸

Even so, as a display of mind over matter, Harrisburg was his finest hour.²⁹ That Tommy experimented with steroids and a technique that corrupted the strength ideal and ultimately changed the face of Olympic lifting should not detract from his reputation. It was an age of innocence when neither steroids nor the Olympic press were illegal or seriously stigmatized and could have had no effect on Kono’s previous victories. Emphasis should be placed on his unprecedented achievement of eight consecutive Olympic and world championship titles before the advent in the US of anabolic drugs. Coping with a beleaguered body—plus the inevitable age-related decrement in performance—is probably the most difficult psychological adjustment a great athlete must make, especially after a decade of euphoric triumphs. Yet Tommy faced it bravely, calling it only “the realities of life.”³⁰

Indeed, stark realization that his lifting career had reached a plateau must have come in 1963 when, for the fourth and final time, he was runner-up for the coveted Sullivan Award.³¹ Then, after failing to make the 1964 Olympic team, and placing third to Gary Cleveland and Joe Puleo in the 1965 Senior Nationals, Kono retired from competition. In an emotional speech, Tommy congratulated his adversaries and thanked everyone who made his career possible. “No doubt everyone had a lump in his throat at the conclusion of this message,” observed Peary Rader, who called Kono “one of, if not the greatest athlete America has produced.” Likewise, to Hoffman he was “one of the greatest lifters of all



Following his retirement as a lifter, Tommy wanted to work for Bob Hoffman at the York Barbell Company, then the Mecca of US weightlifting. On any given day, iron game luminaries might happen to “drop by.” Left to right: Vic Boff; Harry Greenstein, son of The Mighty Atom; Tommy Kono; Steve Stanko (seated); Norbert Schemansky; Joe Greenstein, aka The Mighty Atom; and Leah Greenstein, Atom’s wife.



time” who would “never be forgotten.”³²

The Idea Man

But Kono was unrelenting in his passion for the sport. Unlike many retired athletes, he sought opportunities to help others by sharing his collective wisdom of weightlifting. A signature trait was to give credit to those who helped him climb the ladder of success, foremost of whom was Bob Hoffman. “Without your personal aid I would have never been able to accomplish any of the achievements,” he told Bob in 1962. “I really thank God the day my two friends introduced me to the barbells and your courses at the relocation camp in 1944.”³³ Tommy was always intensely loyal to Hoffman, and attachment to York remained the lodestar of his post-competitive ambitions. After relinquishing other less intrusive occupations to his lifting, he opened his own health studio in 1964

which featured York equipment and food supplements. Short on capital, he asked Terpak whether Bob would give him “the same deal on the proteen [sic] products as he is on the gym equipment?”³⁴ To promote the health and well-being of athletes and the general public and to further his attachment to York, Tommy devised two products—a Slim-Trim Waistband and a T.K. Knee Band in 1964.³⁵ The former, he explained, was

comfortable to wear, made of special quality material and built to last indefinitely. It fills the present need for all overweight persons who wish to reduce their waistline or need support for their lower back or lower abdomen. The Waistband can improve your posture and appearance immediately. It holds your waist and ab-

domen in and makes you stand taller. Athletes and physical culturists find it an invaluable aid when exercising because of the supportive and reducing effect it offers.³⁶

The knee band was designed to give support, improve circulation, and “promote healing of injured knees.”³⁷ Lacking the wherewithal to turn his ideas into reality, Kono worked out an agreement for York to produce and market the bands.

Many months passed, however, with no response to his repeated queries about progress. By early 1967 Tommy was growing impatient, wondering if production had started. “If you haven’t don’t wait too long, Bob, for even tho’ any new venture takes time, time is also money.”³⁸ Part of the reason for the delay was the lukewarm opinion of the bands by Terpak, who was dubious about their sales potential. To provide more incentive and further link his own fortunes to York, Tommy wrote reassuringly of his personal commitment and appreciation for all Hoffman had done for weightlifting and himself.

I am extremely grateful for all this and in return I would like to help you and your work as much as possible. I’m a professional now so I can endorse nearly everything in the line of weight training. I’ve been approached in the past to endorse an Olympic set, write [a] testimonial on a certain brand [of] protein and have been approached to write articles by another muscle magazine company and have refused them all ... simply because I value my connection with you and York more than the green stuff. Loyalty is something that cannot be bought.³⁹

What defined his future relationship with York Barbell was that Tommy had too much faith in Bob Hoffman, saying money didn’t matter. His loyalty, gratitude, and guilelessness enabled the company to appropriate Kono’s ideas and capitalize on his lack of business experience.

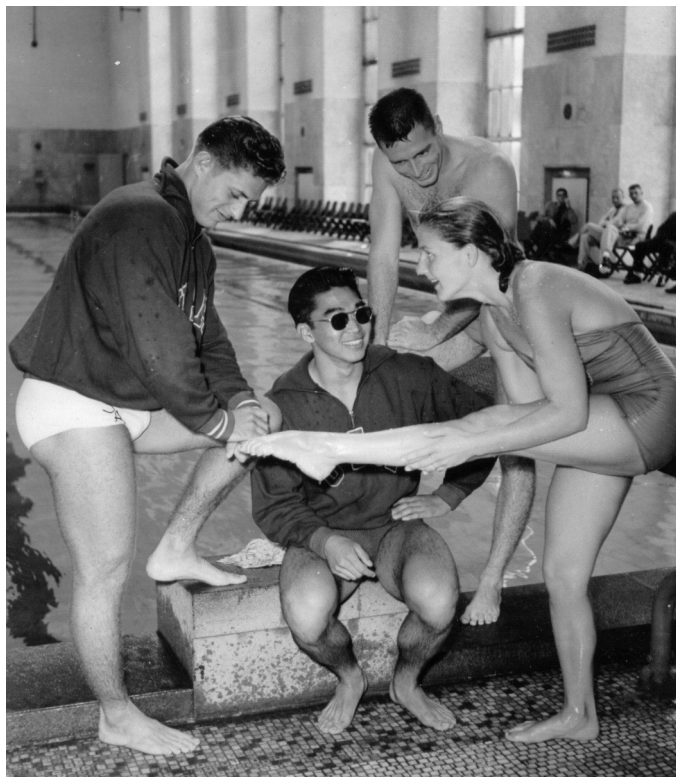
Reminiscent of Hoffman’s pitch in “The Most Important Article I Ever Wrote” when he publicly launched isometrics in 1961, Tommy announced “A Major Breakthrough in the Field of Weight Training” in the June 1967 issue of *Strength & Health*.⁴⁰ Although it stemmed from

the “sore knees” that hampered Kono’s training and finally ended his weightlifting career, the breakthrough was no longer branded Tommy’s “Slim-Trim Waist Band” and “T.K. Knee Band,” but as “Bob Hoffman (BH) Knee and Waist Bands.” Marketing of the product was made to fit the mythical image of Bob as the father of weightlifting. Hence it was Bob, whom Tommy personally if inaccurately credited for devising a cure for lifters’ sore knee woes.

The invention, or solution, resulted after many experiments and consultations with Olympic coach Bob Hoffman. If there is a new development in lifting you can be sure that Bob Hoffman either originated the idea and/or collaborated in its development. He was the first to offer to the public the Simplified System of Barbell training that has become the standard in weight training; the pioneer in weight



Kono joined the army in 1951 when the Korean conflict broke out, but was allowed to continue training for the 1952 Olympic Games as the Army saw him as important to Cold War public relations. He and Clyde Emrich, also a national champion, gave numerous exhibitions during the time they were in uniform.



Following his gold medal victory at the 1952 Olympic Games, Kono, and Clyde Emrich were asked to participate in an exhibition in Berlin along with Olympic diving champions, Pat McCormick and Dr. Sammy Lee of the United States.

training for athletes; and, more recently, the formulator of the system of training that took the world by storm, the Bob Hoffman System of Functional Isometric Contraction. And now he is announcing the Bob Hoffman (BH) Knee and Waist Bands.⁴¹

This Bob-boosting charade was enhanced by Hoffman himself in an ensuing article which traced the inception of the idea back to his childhood reading about Biblical heroes, such as David and Goliath who were armored and “girded for strength” as they went into battle four or five thousand years ago. “The point of this article,” according to Bob, was to tell readers “about a *new and modern way* to ‘gird for strength,’ the same method that is now being used by the members of the York Barbell Club.” This “breakthrough” was an age-old practice still used by world champion lifters and made possible through a “wonder material” provided by modern technology. Indeed, the material was “so scarce for a time that one BH Knee Band was passed around from [Russ] Knipp, [Bob] Bednarski, [Bill]

Starr, [Tommy] Suggs, and Bob Hoffman.”⁴² None of these lifters were world champions, but Bob’s underlying point was that he would receive virtually all of the credit and his company most of the profits from Tommy Kono’s idea.

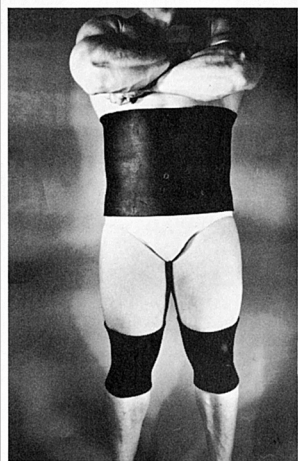
Advertisements featuring the BH Knee and Waist Bands continued to appear in *Strength & Health* from July 1967 to January 1972 complemented by ads for the same product in York’s sister magazine, *Muscular Development*. From December 1968 to September 1970 York also advertised “Hoffman’s Slim-Trim Waist Band,” thus appropriating Tommy’s original title along with his original idea. Further promotion was provided by photos of leading lifters in contests wearing the knee bands. Bob Bednarski, Walter Imahara, and Joe Puleo were among the first to appear in the black rubberized gear. In a pictorial spread of the Empire State Invitational Meet in December 1967, five of the sixteen lifters are wearing them.⁴³ How many knee and waist bands York sold cannot be determined, but from 1967 to 1972, roughly the time they were marketed, there was a dramatic upsurge in sales.⁴⁴ Monthly averages nearly tripled during this period:

Year	Sales	Year	Sales
1966	215,243	1970	451,813
1967	238,032	1971	540,835
1968	293,078	1972	616,972
1969	225,068		

Unfortunately, Tommy received little compensation for his ingenuity. It was only after the sale of twenty or thirty thousand, Tommy recalls, that he received a check for \$800 for only one or two percent of total sales.⁴⁵ Use of the BH knee bands quickly tapered off. In a five-page *Strength & Health* pictorial of the 1977 Senior Nationals, 18 of the 27 lifters are wearing knee wraps (some just below the knees) but none resemble those Tommy invented.⁴⁶

Mexican and German Coaching

Still, as weightlifting coach for Mexico for the 1968 Olympics and West Germany for the 1972 Games, Tommy remained the “idea man” for York, which he hoped would be his eventual destination. Living in Mexico required multiple personal and cultural adjustments, including learning Spanish and providing for his wife Florence and three young children. He explained to Hoffman that she was “continuing her education (to be a teacher some-



the Material Used in BH KNEE and WAIST BANDS is a YORK EXCLUSIVE

BH KNEE and WAIST BANDS are constructed from a completely new and different material, a product of modern technology. It is a quarter inch rubber-like-material that is soft, tough, comfortable to wear, and is specially designed to provide support, heat, and massage while you train. This exclusive material clings to the skin so that it does not come loose or slide down as do the elastic supports and wraps now on the market. A superior material in the York tradition of using only the best.

BH KNEE BANDS

The knees are the most vulnerable joint in the anatomy. That's why every lifter, both Olympic and Power, bodybuilder, or person who participates in football, basketball, baseball, soccer, volleyball, wrestling, judo, skating, and track and field—all athletes who use their knees vigorously or do pivoting movements in their sport—should wear BH KNEE BANDS in training and competition.

This ad illustrates Bob Hoffman's decision to not use Tommy Kono's name to advertise the bands, even though Kono had developed them. The first advertisement in *Strength & Health* appeared in July 1967.

day) and it cost over \$250 every 10 weeks. Getting an American education in a foreign country is very expensive, so you can see the 'idea-man' has to keep coming up with ideas." To further ingratiate himself with York, Tommy submitted newspaper clippings on health issues for Bob's future articles, a brochure on a women's figure-shaping garment that was popular in Mexican department stores, and addresses of Mexican Olympic officials he believed should receive promotional copies of *Strength & Health*.⁴⁷ Also, to keep his name alive with York and the lifting community as well as generate additional income, Tommy became a regular contributor to the magazine.

He began by writing educational articles based on knowledge Tommy acquired as an elite lifter and then national coach. As he later explained in *Championship Weightlifting*, the seeds for his coaching career were planted in a single-spaced unpublished typescript he had prepared in 1953-54 on how to train for the press. Then as an "assistant coach" he began to groom American lifters backstage at world and Olympic championships from 1952 to 1963, thereby contributing to America's golden age of weightlifting not only by his performances but by helping others. As a national coach for seven years (1966-1972) he had an opportunity during his travels to study the training methods of successful international teams and to apply this knowledge to his charges. As an amateur photographer, he used his camera "to capture the critical moment of good technique. ... With a relatively basic background in the science of physics, some knowledge of anatomy and

a smattering of kinesiology, I was able to analyze the Olympic lifting movements so it became a logical sequence of applied leverage."⁴⁸ His knowledge was reflected in articles on food supplements; the snatch and clean & jerk; Cuban weightlifting, the 1966 world championships in East Berlin, and Mexican weightlifter Manuel Mateos. Kono took special pride in Mateos, a bantamweight who broke a junior world press record (Mexico's first in any sport), defeated Jack

Hill Jr. in the American Teenage Nationals, and finished second to veteran Walter Imahara in the 1967 Pan Am Games as a featherweight.⁴⁹ Many more Mexican records were set by his lifters, three of whom qualified for the 1968 Olympics.⁵⁰ Amidst his characterizations of countries at the 1966 world championships, he observed that the Japanese "enjoy their training," the Russians were the "most serious," the Poles were "light-hearted," the Hungarian team split into "two different platforms," and America was notable for its "lack of lifters (only two)."⁵¹

No doubt as a payment-in-kind, the idea-man was allowed a 2" x 3" ad in *Strength & Health* for multi-color decals of hyper-muscular weightlifters and bodybuilders that could be ordered directly from him for \$1.00 each.⁵² What Tommy wanted, of course, was regular compensation for his articles. In March 1967 he informed Hoffman that he had not received a payment for two months. "In fact, I haven't received any kind of statement from Mike [Dietz] for all the articles and photos of mine which was [sic] published in the September, October, November, February and March issues. ... I know York has always been good on its words but I'd like to see some proof of my work."⁵³ Despite this annoyance, Kono authored six more articles prior to leaving Mexico on the anatomy of a weightlifter, Russian lifters in Mexico, and the 1967 Little Olympics in Mexico City, noting that "in the field of weightlifting the Russians have surpassed the land of the red, white and blue by virtue of its number of participants in the sport and by their caliber and organization."⁵⁴

Tommy was always patriotic, but the experience of living abroad seemed to enhance a sense of loyalty to his country and York Barbell.

On arriving in Germany in 1969, Kono continued to bombard Hoffman with ideas and information, but he was disappointed that York had not fulfilled its part of their agreement over the knee and waist bands. Perhaps to induce a response, he observed to Bob on 9 September that Weider had “joined the bandwagon” and that he had been approached by “several companies to endorse their product and work with them to get percentage. In all fairness to you I have held off the decision but I will decide by the end of this month.” Also,

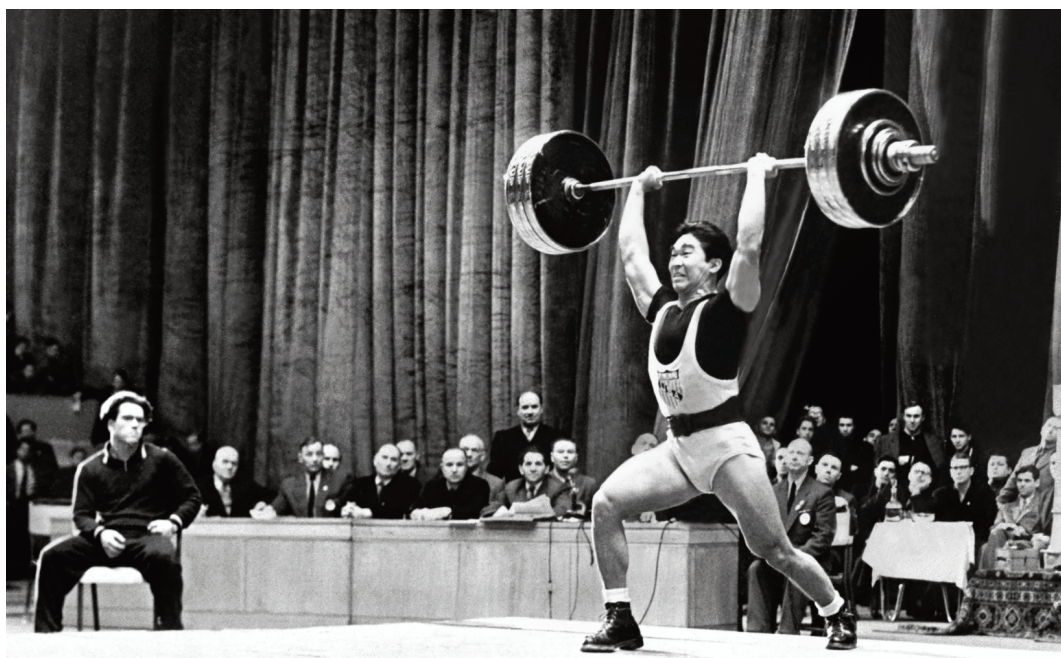
Adidas approached Tommy about designing a new weightlifting shoe. “As I have said before I get some pretty good ideas and I would like to work with you for York but sometime this becomes rough when my good nature is taxed too much.”⁵⁵ Not only did Tommy not abandon York, but he continually sought a closer association. In October, he proposed an experiment with identical twins, Otto and Ewald Spitz, whom he had encountered in his coaching. The difference in muscularity between Ewald, who had been training “hit-or-miss” with weights for six years and Otto, who was a runner, was striking. “My project,” he explained to

Bob, “is to develop the skinny one to equal the muscular one in one year and get him to equal the lifting ability (770 as a lightwt.) in another year with proper technique and correct training program. In other words, develop him in 2 years what it took the other 6 years.” Tommy’s experiment was successful in part because he persuaded Hoffman to supply and ship food supplements by military (APO) mail. Although Ewald also made progress during the same

period, Kono reported that in “13 months of training Otto made exceptional gains.” But the real story was one of commitment. “While Otto had the desire to improve, he did. But once that desire left him he could not continue to improve.”⁵⁶

Tommy’s York Aspirations

At this point the big idea that had obviously been pullulating in Kono’s mind for decades finally surfaced. Although his contract with the West German team did not expire until January 1972, he was willing to resign a year earlier to be part of the York gang. So well does his letter



During the Cold War Era, the United States and the Soviet Union held several dual weightlifting meets in an effort to substitute big arms for Big Arms. In 1958, Kono was the lone American to participate in the Prize of Moscow competition, which he won. Near the end of his life, Kono was asked by a reporter what he considered to be his greatest athletic accomplishment. According to Kono it was: “Competing in the Prize of Moscow Weightlifting Tournament in March of 1958 on short notice. Leaving the balmy weather of Hawaii and arriving in the freezing cold weather of Moscow almost halfway around the world (11 hour time difference) on a propeller plane with no coach and teammates, with only a translator backstage in the warm up area who knew nothing about weightlifting.”

of October 1970 to Terpak capture his innermost thoughts that it must be quoted at length.

I think I can fit into any of your departments and this goes into a little of public relation, magazine, production, clerical and business end as well as the coaching side. Your ‘research and development’

sounds interesting if it would be challenging and with a good future position in the company. I want to be productive, Johnny, and I want to learn about the business. I think you'd have to admit that I've always been interested in the York Barbell business-wise and my ambition has always been to work for the York Barbell Company if the salary was good. And this dates way back to 1954 when you offered me a position (the position [George] Shandor had after he got out of the service the 2nd time, I believe) for 65 dollars a week. I only turned it down then because I was making over 75 take home pay a week at the time and living at home which meant I save more money in the long run. The wage – what would be a reasonable amount for a person of my background, 40 years old, married and with 3 kids? In Mexico I started with 13 grand a year and in my last year I was earning 15 grand. Here in Germany I started with 12½ grand per year plus per diem whenever I am away from Mannheim and the traveling cost. Incidentally, I pay less tax here and also in Mexico than in the US and food, especially vegetables, is cheaper in Germany.⁵⁷

Knowing that 15-grand might be unrealistic for York, Kono suggested the slack could be made up through provision of some living expenses or a company car. "I know the wage that Hoffman wants to start off employees are low but I honestly think that I am a bargain." Tommy also, in light of his Mexican and German experiences, raised the possibility of becoming America's first national coach, a subject that was much in the air in the weightlifting community. "Maybe Bob can work such a thing out so that I can become the national coach and work for York at the same time. I don't wish to take the coaching title away from him but I can enhance his Father of Weightlifting title by working under him"⁵⁸

Terpak's response was no less revealing about the mindset of York Barbell. "You were right," he responded, "when you referred to Bob in one of your letters as having low figures in mind." Terpak explained that nobody at York, except Bob, Mike Dietz, and himself, was making as much as \$15,000.

Before I mentioned this figure and how it may be arranged (car, etc) I asked Bob what he thought a mutually satisfactory salary would be (this after we agreed that you could possibly do the company some good in the research and development area) and his reply was \$150 per week plus bonus. Of course, the question that comes up is 'what's the bonus.' Well, it varies from \$250 to \$2000 annually depending on performance. The bonus is an intangible and could very easily vary. But even at two grand you'd be a long way from 15 total. My suggestion is that we keep working on this. ... At present I know that the 15 g's as a starter is out. Business has slowed up in many industries with resulting lay-offs and a lot of cries of 'depression is coming.' But as mentioned above and to use a now common expression we'll just have to 'hang in' there. I'm all for you, Tommy!⁵⁹

This response was hardly encouraging to the still young and ambitious Kono, who decided to "hang in" by pursuing a new tack, this time directly with Hoffman. It took the form of an appeal to Bob's ego in May 1971. As a result of his myriad contacts with the international lifting community, Tommy warned that the Germans were much better organized since his arrival, the Cubans were on the verge of overtaking the United States in the Americas, and the Poles and Hungarians were vying for supremacy with the Russians in Eastern Europe. He reminded Bob of how the Russians "used to take movies of every lift made by the American team members" at Helsinki in 1952. "I think now the US has to copy from them if we expect to lift at least on equal terms." Recently he had attended the Danube Cup competition in Yugoslavia where he spent a lot of time with Oscar State (the only other English-speaker), who shared a lot of information relating to the Weider organization and the state of international weightlifting.

Bob, I don't think you can just sit back and let things happen. You can't be content with your Olympic barbell plates and bars and the progress the lifters in the US are making. Already Schnell here in Germany has made the 25 kg. plates out of



Shortly after arriving in Germany in 1969, this photo was taken showing Tommy, his wife Florence, and their two older children, Jamie and JoAnn in their apartment in Mannheim, Germany.

rubber and it was officially used last month in the German Championships (Nationals). His new bar is really something too! I've told Terpak about it last year but he said that he was content with the bar you now have. He said something like, 'Why change things when you already have too much to handle'. This might be so with your business but what about your weightlifting team? Whatever happened to the 'Old' York which was the Mecca to visit and train in for every up and coming weightlifter in the US. And in the world? Now you have teams sprouting up here and there that threaten the York team every year the Sr. Nationals roll around. Why is it that the best lifters in the US don't beat a path to your door anymore? ... I hate to write these words but at the same time it is true and if something isn't done then all the work you've done in the past will only become history.⁶⁰

Tommy wanted Bob to rejuvenate York and reassume the leadership he held in the world of weights during the 1950s.

I'd like to be a part of this re-construction

job, Bob. I think I can offer much and be a great asset to you and York. The lifters need inspiration and motivation and I believe I can work with you to create this atmosphere in York. When the lifters beat a path to your door then you've no problem in developing a world championship team! I believe a national coach position was created some time ago by either the AAU or Olympic Committee. If I can achieve this position and work for York at the same time your position and title as Father of American Weightlifting will be further enhanced.⁶¹

Somewhat out of touch on another hemisphere, Tommy was probably unaware that Hoffman's ego had moved to softball and powerlifting as a result of his disenchantment with Olympic lifters and that his health was deteriorating.⁶²

Even without encouraging news from York, Kono remained persistent, this time utilizing the strategy of homesickness. He complained to Terpak in October 1971 that he was in a "rut" so far as his living conditions were concerned. "Matter of fact I see my entire family in a rut over here. My wife too is of the same opinion when I told her of my feelings." He was concerned that his two elder children were "missing out on the American way of life and this is mainly on activities that stimulate the mind and activate the body." He found the school system "sorely lacking," and he was "fed up with living on foreign soil and being an outsider." Tommy was "convinced that we should be back in the good ole USA." Although he enjoyed his job and had a government contract that guaranteed him a position for life, he was willing to leave Germany prior to the 1972 Olympics if he could earn as much in America. He wanted to know "have you and Bob come up with any new figures pertaining to my employment?"⁶³ Impatient after receiving no response, Tommy issued an ultimatum on 14 November with an updated resume and endorsement letters from Oscar State and Fulton Freeman, American Ambassador to Mexico. He reminded Terpak that "it's been almost 4 weeks since I wrote to you and I'd like to know what the decision is so could you telephone me this coming Friday between 4 and 5 P.M. your



Almost all advanced Iron Gamers—be they bodybuilders, powerlifters, or weightlifters—have trouble finding suits or sports coats that can accommodate the big difference between the measurement of their waist and the measurement of their chest. Tommy Kono had even more trouble than most as his waist was exceptionally small compared to his chest, which was both wide and thick.

time. ... My phone number in Germany is Mannheim 21706.”⁶⁴ A further factor impelling Tommy to leave Germany was a 7 November reprimand expressing dissatisfaction with the performance of the weightlifters and coaches. He strongly objected, asserting that working conditions were “impossible” and offered his resignation.⁶⁵

No record remains of what transpired, but Tommy fulfilled his commitment to coach the West German team at the Olympics. Actually, he was offered a contract for the national coaching position in the United States, funded by Thompson Vitamins, which would have provided him with a car to conduct clinics around the country, as well as a salary and benefits, and required him to write occasional articles for *Boys Life* magazine. According to Bob Crist, these negotiations transpired at the Munich Olympics, but

Tommy explained to American officials that he was accepting a better offer from the city of Honolulu via a personal call from the mayor, Frank Fasi.⁶⁶

Prior to our meeting with you at the Holiday Inn for going over the finalization of the contract, my wife and I had entered into a series of discussions on the pros and cons of this position. When I thought of myself first, it seemed too good to be true as here was the position I’d always dreamed about holding, and I was willing to go ahead and take it. But when I thought of my family and the way we’ve been living for the past seven years and more importantly the last two years, I really had to think twice. During the past 8½ months here in Germany I spent approximately 6 weeks out of 37 at home. My ‘father’ role amounted to phone calls every two days lasting 2-3 minutes and I was almost a stranger in my own home when I did get home. Added to this, my wife was having trouble with my oldest son and her nerves were shot from having to cope with three kids alone. It got to be too much of a strain on her. These are just some of the things that influenced my decision.⁶⁷

Tommy was also approached about coaching positions in Canada and Mexico, but declined mainly because he no longer wanted to live in a foreign country and wanted his children to grow up as Americans. Furthermore, his position with the Department of Parks and Recreation of Honolulu would allow him to get time off to make national and international trips and to still assist American weightlifters.⁶⁸

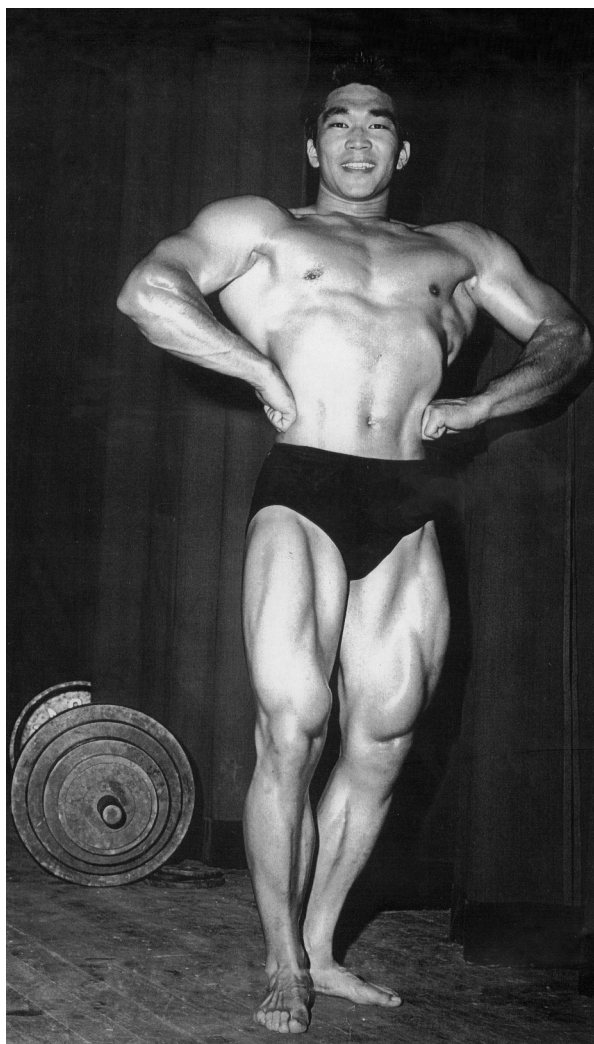
Weightlifting Mentor

Still he remained on good terms with York. By the time Kono left Mexico after the 1968 Olympics he had accumulated a wealth of information about training and performance from over two decades of competitive and coaching experience on the highest level. No doubt to reinforce his ties with York and supplement his income, he decided to share his knowledge more broadly by authoring

a series of “ABC’s of Weightlifting” articles that appeared in *Strength & Health* from February 1969 to June 1974. Focused mainly on training technique and contest preparation, they were interspersed with articles on Russian methods and coverage of international personalities and competitions.⁶⁹ Much of this information was later distilled into his two volumes: *Weightlifting Olympic Style* and *Championship Weightlifting*. In retrospect Tommy’s inability to secure employment at York and a national coaching position proved to be in his best interest with York in decline vis-à-vis the Weider organization and Olympic weightlifting failing to keep pace with the rest of the world. His situation in Honolulu, on the other hand, provided steady employment with benefits as well as stability for his family.

These facts of life soon became obvious to Tommy and York. In his editorial for the March 1974 issue of *Strength & Health*, Hoffman admitted his organization was “facing difficult times” and that neither magazine was doing well. He speculated that “perhaps more people want to be a Hercules, instead of a great athlete, a great Olympic weightlifter, or a person who is interested only in keeping fit.” Discussions were afoot among company officials to make *Strength & Health* a bi-monthly or combining it with *Muscular Development*.⁷⁰ In response to Bob’s appeal for input from readers, Tommy and his wife attempted to revive the sagging morale at York. Florence expressed satisfaction with the magazine’s current contents. The March and April issues, she noted, “contain some of the most

interesting and enjoyable articles on health and strength that I’ve come across in a long time.” She liked the broadened coverage of sport and family life and the inclusion of “articles of interest to women. The articles on bicycling are especially timely and I devour all the nutritional reports.” Tommy expressed “real surprise” and delight with



In 1954, following the World Weightlifting Championships, Tommy Kono also won the Mr. World competition sponsored by the Federation Internationale de Halterophile & Culturiste (FIHC), the forerunner of the modern International Weightlifting Federation. The FIHC, like the AAU, sponsored both weightlifting and bodybuilding contests. In 1955, the FIHC began calling their contest the Mr. Universe contest and Tommy won again, and then repeated in 1956 and 1961. Various bodybuilding organizations also sponsored Mr. Universe contests in the 1950s and 1960s, leading to Joe Weider’s decision to create a contest just for top professionals—the Mr. Olympia.

his wife’s views and encouraged York editors to “keep up the good work.”⁷¹ But in a private letter to Hoffman, Tommy expressed “shock” with the March editorial. “It is really unbelievable for me to picture the magazine going bi-monthly.” The “idea man” suggested raising the price of each issue, cutting the number of pages, dispensing with pictorial inserts and extra color, offering readers longer term cut-rate subscriptions, and providing copies for sale at health food stores. Finally, he congratulated Bob for hiring such a good managing editor as Tom Holbrook who “knows and understands weightlifting and weight training and has the ability to put together a magazine that my friends and neighbors take delight in reading.”⁷² Despite these expressions of optimism, the magazine became bi-monthly with the June/July 1974 issue without Holbrook as editor and any more “ABC’s of Weightlifting” articles by Tommy.

Kono, however, remained a valuable and well-respected member of the national as well as international weightlifting community. According to Hal Wood, a Honolulu sports editor, he turned down coaching positions in Oklahoma City and Minneapolis, and an offer to coach Cana-

dian weightlifters for the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Though not a native islander, Tommy believed Hawaii was “the only place to live. I’ve checked out just about every other place. My oldest boy, now 11, spent four years with us in Germany and speaks German fluently. But I’d rather all three kids spoke English fluently.”⁷³ Also, through the initiative of Bob Crist, the new national weightlifting chairman, Kono became a member of the USOC Weightlifting Committee and was the foremost candidate to exemplify Crist’s idea of clinics to instruct lifters on proper technique. “I am still very interested in trying to get Tommy Kono to appear at the Senior Nationals in Detroit for a ‘clinic presentation’ prior to the lifting,” he observed to Clarence Johnson in December 1971. “Kono is respected by every lifter and could be a great drawing card. He could really make our clinic idea go over and add another feature to the Senior Nationals.” Funding, however, proved to be the biggest hurdle since he was still in Germany. “We have lots of people working on Kono and his travel,” Crist assured Terpak, “military, state dept etc. We may still have to fly him over if this falls through. I got a recent letter and he is well prepared and ready.”⁷⁴ Funding was finally provided by Thompson Vitamins, and I remember attending Tommy’s clinic at the Zembo Mosque where, along with Clarence Bass and some other notables, I earned my national referee’s card. Tommy’s presentation, I recall, was pleasantly and logically conveyed, in stark contrast to the browbeating we endured in Rudy Sablo’s referee’s clinic. I don’t know how I ever passed the test!

Eventually Carl Miller, a knowledgeable but less well-known coach, accepted the position Tommy turned down, but it was reduced from national coach to national coaching coordinator and provided just \$3,000 for expenses to supplement the salary he received as a teacher in Albuquerque. Meanwhile, Kono returned to participate in senior national clinics for the next two years. At Williamsburg in 1973 he “showed slides, and discussed lifting and pulling techniques,” according to Crist. “He did an excellent job, and is a master of detail.”⁷⁵ Prior to the 1974 nationals he was invited to give a clinic in Japan with all expenses paid, he reported to Hoffman. Otherwise he could not afford to make such trips, especially with a recently purchased house for his growing family.⁷⁶ Again through Crist’s resourcefulness, funding was found for Tommy to come to York as “National Coaching Advisor.” Drawing on his vast international experience, he “compared training methods and athlete attitudes in the USSR, W-Germany, Japan to the United States,” observed Crist.

Crist also pointed out that

the US has stood still since the late 1950’s while the other countries have kept on improving. He stressed the importance of respect for coaches. Americans tend to question authority and take an anti-establishment attitude. This interferes with the work of the coach. Tommy then showed slides of long-term training plans and schedules for systematic workouts.⁷⁷

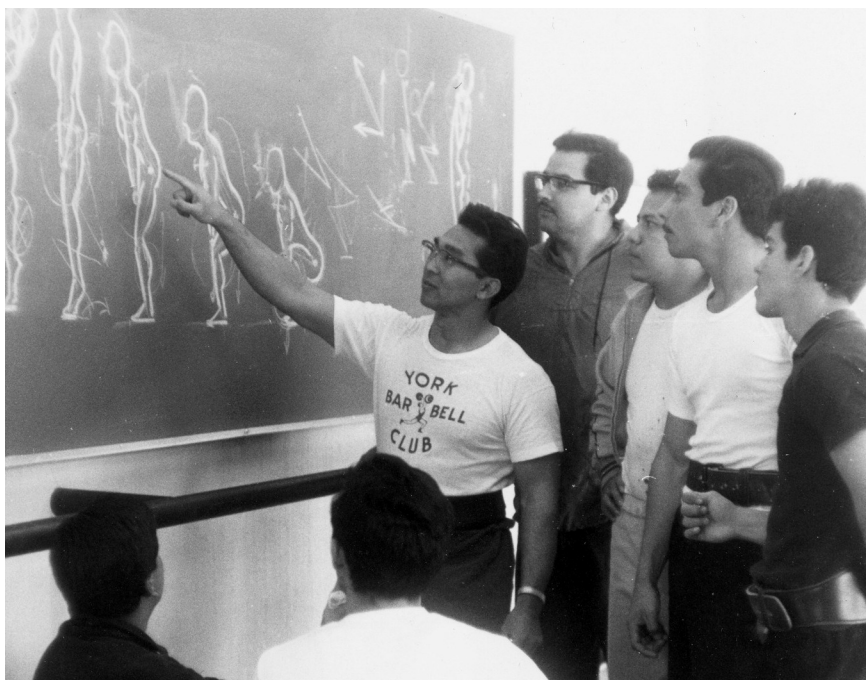
At the 1975 nationals in Culver City, California, Tommy reported briefly on a three-week coaching clinic tour he had taken with Oscar State and English National Coach John Lear to China, Japan, and New Zealand. He was especially impressed with the potential of China which was struggling to escape the throes of the Cultural Revolution.⁷⁸ Privately he confided to Hoffman that this trip enabled him to meditate on the problems plaguing USA weightlifting. “Bob, we have really slipped backwards and there seems to be no stopping unless something is done. Happily I believe I have seen the ‘light’ while on this trip.”⁷⁹

American Olympic Coach

Although he was never able to shed this light, either through his clinics or the pages of *Strength & Health* to others, he acquired an opportunity to reshape the destiny of American weightlifting in 1976 when he was appointed team coach for the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. It was “something that I have aspired for since 1965,” he told Russ Ogata, and would enable him to follow in the footsteps of Bob Hoffman and perhaps return to the glory days of the 1950s. In June, at a meeting of the USOC Weightlifting Committee in Philadelphia, Tommy talked about his responsibility, the mental and physical preparation of lifters, and the need to “pull together” and “avoid over training.”⁸⁰ At training camps at York and the University of Plattsburg as well as the Olympics, Tommy and team manager Rudy Sablo worked well as a team, but recapturing the same camaraderie that worked so well in the 1950s proved challenging with the current set of athletes. “One of the main reasons for establishing a training camp prior to a big competition of international caliber is to establish team spirit,” he later reported. “Though the team officials held several meetings stressing this point, personality clashes among several team members made this virtually impossible.” The “most difficult lifter to work with

backstage” was Phil Grippaldi, who finished fourth as a mid-heavyweight. “His desire to win a medal clouded his judgment so much that he could have jeopardized his chance of totaling had we not kept his starting poundages down.” Tommy felt that “Grippaldi’s uncooperative attitude prevents him from attaining his true potential.” Heavyweight Mark Cameron, who finished fifth as a heavyweight, was also a problem. “The Steroid Test which Cameron was required to submit to six days earlier had greatly affected him psychologically. I also feel that the lifting result of the day before greatly affected his mental attitude which made it next to impossible to perform at his best.” Only mid-heavyweight Lee James lifted up to Kono’s expectations, setting three personal records and winning a silver medal. Tommy’s other charges finished twelfth, eleventh, eleventh, fourteenth, tenth, and fifth to place the United States eighth overall, far behind Russia and Bulgaria. Only three Americans exceeded their Senior National qualifying totals. Tommy concluded that “every lifter could have performed much better had there existed a strong team spirit. Just about every lifter on the team appeared to be ‘totally independent’ as one lifter expressed himself to me.” It was hardly the outcome Kono had anticipated. The United States remained an also-ran.⁸¹

Far more disappointing was news that emerged nine days after the competition; Grippaldi and Cameron had failed the drug tests. The rationalization that “they didn’t intend to ‘cheat’” and that the medication “prescribed” to allow them to compete at maximum bodyweight hardly mattered. They were disqualified and barred from international competition for a year.⁸² Probably what Tommy did not know was that the miraculous feat of his brightest star was drug-aided. As veteran coach Ben Green points out, it was the first year of Olympic testing and there was a lapse of protocol. Green asked “‘How in the hell did you get out of it, Lee?’ He said, ‘By the time I lifted we knew about it, and as soon as I lifted Smitty [Trainer Dick Smith] grabbed me and said let’s go. And I left.’ So they didn’t test him.”⁸³ But enough damage was done to American credibility. As Kono noted, Sablo “had repeatedly announced in our team meeting in York, Plattsburgh



Following his illustrious career as a weightlifter, and after problems with his knees led to his failure to make the 1964 Olympic Team, Kono was hired by the Olympic Committee of Mexico to spend four years coaching their national weightlifting team. Mexico had won the bid to host the 1968 Olympic Games and wanted to hire the best—so they could do their best.

and in Montreal that anabolic steroid testing will be conducted in Montreal. It was evident that some of the lifters did not take heed to this information.”⁸⁴ Contrary to Tommy’s old-fashioned focus on mental preparation and teamwork, the lifters adopted more expedient approaches that proved counter-productive.

Another unintended consequence of the Montreal Olympics was the loss of Carl Miller as national coordinator. For the past several years he had provided yeoman service to American weightlifting by staging weekend clinics nationwide. It was not so much that he was deprived of the Olympic coaches’ position by a vote of seven to six at the 1975 AAU convention in New Orleans or that Tommy was ever disrespectful or made Carl feel unvalued.⁸⁵ Rather it stemmed from the decision of Phillip St. Cyr, weightlifting chairman for the 1976 Games to limit the United States to just one coach and a manager. Crist appealed to USOC Weightlifting Chair Dave Matlin to seek additional credentials for Miller, but funding would apply to the “meet site and training quarter only,” with nothing for the position or for housing and meals in the Olympic Village.⁸⁶ For Miller it was an insult, after putting in so many hours and days of instruction to American

lifters at great personal sacrifice and meager compensation. Nevertheless, it came as somewhat of a surprise that he should tender his resignation at the AAU national meeting at Phoenix in October. Although he was succeeded by Denis Reno and other competent coaches, the program lacked Miller's consistency and drive, and his plans for a national residential training center did not materialize until the early 1980s.⁸⁷

The Idea Man Again

Although Tommy is best known internationally for his weightlifting exploits, he spent most of his working years after 1972 gainfully employed as head of the physical education department of the Honolulu Department of Parks and Recreation, with far-ranging responsibilities. He was hired by the mayor at a time of expansion and placed under the deputy superintendent who gave him a virtual free hand to implement his ideas. "All of a sudden we exploded with all these different ideas," recalls Mike Mizuno, Tommy's long-time assistant.

He'd think something up and say 'okay, let's go to the city council and ask for funding, and we'll start a different section, and we'll start this program, and we'll start doing this and that,' and after a while our budget started going out the window. And his ideas worked pretty much of the time because he was one of the few who were [sic] in tune with all these sports people. So anytime anybody had an idea, they knew if they could run it past Tommy it would probably get enough recognition that they could do it.⁸⁸

Initiating competition for boys and girls in surfing, usually considered an adult male sport, was one he proposed. "All it takes is a few," Mizuno noted, "and you can get some real aggressive little girls who want to learn and compete. And the schools started pushing it because they can get the rest of the student body involved in a sport. Because if you're not tall, basketball is out. If you're not strong, wrestling and football were out. So now it gave an opportunity." Gender equity was another area of innovation for Tommy. "As long as I've known him, he's always had the idea that we're all equal, and he didn't have any biases." Mizuno and some other males were skeptical when Tommy consented to teach women bodybuilding at the

Nuuanu YMCA before they were doing it. But he could hardly argue with the results.⁸⁹

Most of the time during weekdays, however, Tommy was at his desk doing paperwork, writing proposals, answering questions, or writing departmental reports for the city council or mayor. Whether he also used office time to tend to his voluminous weightlifting correspondence is uncertain, but Mizuno recalls that Tommy often worked until 9 PM. "And I know on weekends, if he's not in the Nuuanu Y, he's in the office. If I call him at home, you could hear him using his typewriter or recorder or something, so he put in a lot of extra time. Any time he asked for time off, nobody would challenge it, and I guess he set the example for the rest of us." By working so many extra hours, Tommy could get time off for his many overseas trips. As a supervisor, he was no less accommodating to others in his office. Every Tuesday morning he held a staff meeting "to find out what work we are doing, and what kinds of ideas he needed to help. We just tossed things around until we were satisfied." He supervised by building a consensus, according to Mizuno. His strongest attribute as an administrator was that

he was always encouraging us to keep going, to do our best, and to share our ideas with each other. Almost every day, several times a day he would come by. How are you doing. What kinds of projects are you working on? Do you need any help? Do you have any problems? Let's talk about it. Stuff like that. One of our administrators told us that we click like a machine, and we always seemed to be thinking alike and working alike. ... We always looked forward to going to work.⁹⁰

Another positive feature of Tommy's service to the city was the way he dealt with difficult situations. "He didn't outwardly criticize people," observed Mizuno. "And if people got nasty, he would just sit there and listen, and the first thing to come out of his mouth was 'I'm sorry you feel that way. I was hoping we could work things out.' And then, of course, people would shrink in front of him and apologize and they would become good friends."⁹¹ Tommy formally retired from the Parks and Recreation Department on 1 April 1997.

Marathon Man

What might have seemed to some a lowly bureaucratic desk job for a great champion did not occur to Tommy. Instead of profiting from his reputation, Tommy sought opportunities to help other people pro bono. "I'm not interested in making millions," he once told Mizuno. "He kept volunteering and teaching at the YMCA, and I said, that's crazy. Then he got pulled more and more into the marathon ... and me and a whole bunch of parks people and friends got recruited to help."⁹² Although Tommy was not a runner because of flat arches, according to journalist Paul Drewes, "he gave a boost to the race that would turn into the Honolulu Marathon" by responding to an appeal by Honolulu Mayor Frank Fasi. "There was a letter written to the

mayor, from the long distance running club, asking for assistance with a run and the mayor said, why don't you stage the Honolulu Marathon? I'm familiar with the Boston Marathon back east and we could have it here,' said Kono." Called the Rim of the Pacific Marathon in 1973, the December event initially attracted about 200 runners, but "less than 165 finished," Tommy estimated. "The following year, there was double that. Then the next year double that. It just kept getting bigger and bigger."⁹³ Since that time, it has grown into a major international event, attracting tens of thousands each year from around the world, topping out at 34,434 runners in 1995.⁹⁴ By that time the race was bringing in over 135 million dollars to the island's economy at an otherwise slow period of the year.⁹⁵

Marathon administrator Jeanette Chun observes that Tommy performed several critical functions. Since its inception, he was on the board of directors, served as the marathon's liaison with the city and county of Honolulu, obtained permits for passage through city streets and parks, supervised the bus loading of thousands of runners each year, and handled security for the parking lots in Kapiolani Park. "Tommy was a very detailed person," Chun recalls,

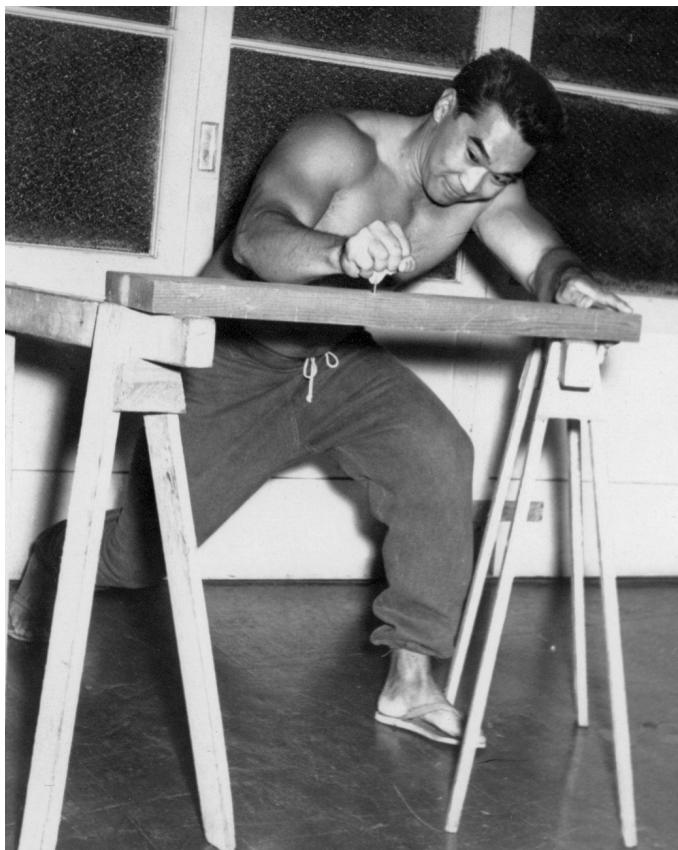


Under Kono's direction, the 1988 Women's Weightlifting Team took second place in Jakarta, Indonesia, at the World Championships. Left to right: Kono (head coach), John Coffee (assistant coach), Giselle Shepatin, Lynne Stoessel, Glenda Ford, Melanie Getz, Karyn Marshall, Robin Byrd, Arlys Johnson, Colleen Colley, Diana Fuhrman, and Denis Reno (manager).

"drawing maps so there was no question of where to park the vehicles or how to get somewhere. Tommy always followed through on whatever he did" and was "well-liked by everyone. Tommy was such a humble person, we would forget he was an Olympic champion. He never talked about his Olympic experiences."⁹⁶ Tommy stated that he supported the marathon over the decades to encourage people to improve their health, but he admitted "you got to be crazy to run 26 miles."⁹⁷ Although Tommy was always on call for advice and troubleshooting, his volunteer work consisted mainly of training weightlifters, observed Mizuno, who was a regular swimmer at the Nuuanu YMCA. "He was always in the gym."⁹⁸ In 1999, Tommy was inducted to the Honolulu Marathon's Hall of Fame.

The Women's World Championships

With the passage of Title IX in 1972 and increasing participation of women in virtually all sports, there was a gradual movement to admit women to weightlifting competitions. It began when Murray Levin, AAU National Weightlifting Chairman, appointed Mabel Rader to chair a Women's Committee which led to the first women's national championship in Waterloo, Iowa, in 1981.⁹⁹ Encour-



Although Kono trained primarily on the “Olympic lifts” he also did some bodybuilding training from time to time as well as occasional demonstrations of “strongman” feats, such as driving a nail through a very thick board with only his padded hand.

aged by a simultaneous surge of international interest, Levin launched his “brainchild” in 1987, after a three-way phone conversation with USAW Executive Director Harvey Newton and IWF Secretary General Tamas Ajan. The first Women’s World Championship would be held in Daytona Beach, Florida, a three-hour drive from Levin’s home in Boca Raton, and the American team would be coached by Tommy Kono, for whom Levin had the highest regard. The competition attracted 100 lifters from 22 countries. “This was our finest hour,” proclaimed Levin. The United States placed second to China, and Karyn Marshall won the heavyweight class, the first gold medal since Joe Dube and Bob Bednarski won their classes at Warsaw in 1969.¹⁰⁰ USAW board member Arthur Drechsler was no less enthusiastic. “The women did themselves proud, demonstrating not only high qualities of athleticism, but the very highest levels of sportsmanship.”¹⁰¹ The success of this inaugural event insured the perpetuation of women’s world champi-

onships and eventually admission to the Olympics in 2000.

Meanwhile, Tommy coached the next two competitions in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Manchester, England, with equal success. “Kono was a perfect coach,” Levin recalls. He “communicated with them by mail, and everyone received a hands-on answer. I use to go to Daytona Beach to watch him coach the women and to teach them their faults.”¹⁰² What Sibby Flowers, who placed third in Daytona, remembers most about Tommy’s coaching is his calming influence. “He was very kind and generous with his time when he was with you, and he was very calm and wanted you to think and visualize what you’re doing.” He taught Sibby to believe “there’s nothing around you, you’re right there in the moment, you see yourself doing it.”¹⁰³ Silver medalist Robin Byrd was no less grateful for Tommy’s “time and support” and pleased that he was returning in 1988.¹⁰⁴ Newton was delighted with the team’s performance and told Tommy that “a large part of their confidence on the platform was a direct result of your involvement with the team.”¹⁰⁵ He vividly remembers Tommy’s positive authoritative manner.

He exhibited his usual calm, mature demeanor (no screaming, no slapping, etc.) that kept the lifters focused on the task at hand. Although we did have a few personal coaches backstage, Tommy had established his typical command presence in both the training hall and at the competition venue.

Tommy enjoyed being part of this new wave of weightlifting, and he fully supported the members’ efforts to achieve success. Expectations for each athlete were expressed positively. He kept strategies realistic and achievable. Most of the team had international experience and were not overly concerned about the pressures of a world championships. However, there was another pressure on Team USA, the pioneers in women’s lifting. Although not openly discussed, they knew they needed to put on a good show and set the stage for eventual Olympic Games involvement. And, this team was very successful ... garnering four gold, seven silver, and seven bronze medals.

It's generally accepted that male and female athletes respond similarly to physical training demands. However, there is also general agreement that coaching styles applied to men and women may need to be somewhat different. This is particularly true relative to communicating expectations, providing feedback, and optimizing motivation.¹⁰⁶ Tommy's ways of coaching were such as to bring out the best in any lifter, male or female. At the first Women's World Championships, he always provided positive feedback, along with solid examples of what was possible. He worked tirelessly to remove any psychological barriers these athletes may have placed on themselves.¹⁰⁷

"I really enjoyed the women," Tommy told Walter Imahara in the aftermath of his experience. "They're very good athletes, and they listen. They miss a lift, and they cry, and I don't know what to do. But otherwise they are good athletes."¹⁰⁸ Veteran official Pete Miller observed Tommy coach a lot of lifters over the years, including "some women at one of the women's world championships. And

I asked him how did he, as the greatest weightlifter ever, enjoy coaching women. And he said he really enjoyed it because they would listen to him, and his coaching was serious. I was very impressed with that."¹⁰⁹ "It was a real pleasure working with the girls," Tommy reported to Levin. "Their cooperation and willingness to cheerfully accept appearances at various schools and functions even during our limited period of training camp made me all the more appreciate being a part of the team and scene."¹¹⁰ What seemed remarkable about Tommy's coaching experience with females is that he was able to transcend any vestiges of his patriarchal cultural background and, as Mike Mizuno previously observed, treat his charges as equals and without bias.

Indeed, Tommy seemed more inclined to believe that females possessed more natural advantages for effective performance than males. While "women take to suggestions more readily and conscientiously try to perform their lifts correctly," men allowed their egos to "get in the way" and were more likely to "use power for making the lifts." Also, given that "women are the weaker sex," they "tend to rely more on technique, or good leverage" and "pay attention to details," whereas men "want to progress to heavy weights as soon as possible and many times forget the technique part and use only strength." He realized that "female lifters can be very emotional, so it is important to

keep your instructions positive. In this respect, they are more sensitive to criticism so keep negatives out of your vocabulary and express only positive thoughts." In fact, channeling emotions properly could be a critical factor in achieving success. "Success will breed success," Tommy believed, "so when female lifters are able to attain their goals, they become more convinced of their capability; success will have a snowballing effect." He believed females had an "extra plus" over males in their reliance on "emotional power rather than only physical power. When they are able to tap into this source of power, they can perform extraordinary lifts at crucial times."¹¹¹ This kind of gender awareness established a basis for coaching future American women's teams. The confidence that Tommy instilled into these first international teams proved to be an



Although Kono had hoped to work as a national coach and go around the United States giving clinics on behalf of the AAU, an acceptable job offer never materialized. However, a lack of pay didn't change Kono's willingness to help young lifters where ever he found them. Here, an unidentified lifter gets tips on his form as other gym members look on.



Tommy Kono served as head coach of the 1976 US Weightlifting Team that competed in the Montreal Olympics. Front Row: Kono, Sam Bigler, Fred Lowe, Dan Cantore, Phil Grippaldi, and manager, Rudy Sablo. Back Row: Mark Cameron, Sam Walker, Bruce Wilhelm, Gary Drinnon and Lee James, who won the silver medal in the 90-kilo (198-pound) weight class.

important factor leading to the acceptance of women's weightlifting. It was a far different and much more positive experience than he had with the American men he coached two decades earlier in Montreal.

A Gift That Never Stops Giving

In his posthumous tribute in the *AOBS Newsletter*, Artie Drechsler refers to Tommy Kono's "many gifts" and the "very special gift" he bestowed on the weightlifting world.¹¹² Indeed, in a 1982 statistical analysis conducted by Hungarian Ferenc Fejer on the basis of medals won, Tommy was rated first among the 30 "most successful lifters of all times" with 70 points, followed by Arkadi Vorobiev with 67, Pete George (62), John Davis (61), and Waldemar Baszanowski (60).¹¹³ In 1990 he was honored by being inducted into the United States Olympic Hall of Fame.¹¹⁴ But his contributions to the sport went far beyond his athletic performance decades earlier. As Drechsler points out, he "gave an endless number of seminars around the world" during his "retirement" years. "And he was a fixture at the Honolulu [Nuuanu] YMCA for decades

where he was willing to coach, gratis, anyone fortunate to enter the Y's weight room (a number of my athletes who travelled to Hawaii availed themselves of the opportunity for an unforgettable session with the master)."¹¹⁵ Tommy estimated that he started coaching as early as 1952, at age 22, and began conducting weightlifting clinics in 1965. Although he never had a coach himself, he learned his craft by "reading, experimenting, experiences, and by asking questions."¹¹⁶ His coaching manner reflected his personality.

I have learned that you work with the lifters and not force them to perform what you want. I found I got better results communicating

with the lifters and having them want the instructions rather than my forcing them. In local competition, I have them do their 'own thing' but review things afterwards. Only in vitally important competitions do I work real closely with them.¹¹⁷

While much awareness exists about Tommy's high-profile coaching positions in Mexico, West Germany, and Montreal, and three years of world championships with American women, it is important to realize that they were merely part of his desire to improve their weightlifting skills on a broader scale. As a continuation of his commitment to women's development, he conducted training camps for them at Colorado Springs in 1989 and 1990. The latter, he reckoned to be "a great learning experience in technique and training." Especially gratifying was the camaraderie induced by "off hours socializing."¹¹⁸ Perhaps the best example of Tommy's dedication to American lifting occurred when the United States boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics, and the State Department and AAU asked him

to stage an alternative event, the America Cup, in less than three months. No doubt drawing on his experience with the marathon, he attracted 106 athletes from 19 countries for a three-day event in Honolulu where he procured transportation, interpreters, and entertainment for the visitors.¹¹⁹

A more prosaic example of Kono's commitment to grass roots development occurred on 29-30 July 2000, when he conducted an "Olympic-Style Weightlifting Clinic" for the East Alabama Weightlifters Club at Auburn University. It was organized by Stella Herrick, whose husband, Richard, has been team physician for many American overseas trips. She met Tommy at a previous clinic in Mexico. Initially it was to be a coaching experience for the local club in Les Simonton's garage gym but was expanded into a formal clinic for all comers. Tommy arranged to visit Auburn on his way to New Orleans for the Olympic Trials and "paid his own way," Stella remembers. "He said, I have some airline points ... and we covered the rest for him."¹²⁰ It was a bargain. Attendees paid ten dollars for two eight-hour days of hands-on instruction from the master on the fine points of lifting from pulling technique to contest preparation.¹²¹ On Friday evening Tommy presented a private workshop with a video focusing on lifting and coaching technique. Next morning, he opened the clinic with a picture of the backs of several elite lifters, asking which one was best. I will always remember it was David Rigert. "Yes, Tommy was always big on lats," Stella responded. Much of the time at the clinic was devoted to working with the technique of individual lifters, all of which was taped. "Tommy was such a phenomenal coach," Stella recalls. He had such a good eye and innate understanding of what was happening that he knew exactly what would be the result. But he was also

a phenomenal reader of personalities, and he could tell when someone was receptive or not receptive. And if someone was open, Tommy felt that he could not do enough. When we were in New Orleans for the nationals, there were a couple of guys there that didn't have coaches. I went to Tommy and said these two

guys don't have anybody to help. Would you be kind enough to help them? He said 'of course.' He was not intrusive by telling them what to do or how to do it; it was if 'I can help you in any way just ask me.' He was such a gentleman.¹²²

It was an "act of love" reflecting Tommy's approach to lifting and the lifting community, "that if anybody needed him, he would be there for them." Similarly, for Les Simonton the clinic was

a perfect example of Tommy's personality. He was instructive, humble, and even-keeled the whole time. In addition to the lectures, he worked with everyone there one-on-one. He corrected our flaws in a polite, even kind, way. ... A couple of young kids wandered in. They had no idea who Tommy was, but ended up getting his autograph anyway. Stella commented at the time that one day they would realize just what they received that day.¹²³

Tommy's spirit of generosity extended also to the highest levels of the lifting hierarchy where his experience and talents might have the greatest impact. Perhaps expecting his



In June of 2000, Tommy Kono gave yet another weightlifting clinic—this time at Auburn University in Alabama. Author, John Fair, and his son, Philip, were among those who attended. Front row: Mike Stazzanti, Joey Hundley, Tommy Kono, Philip Fair, Scott Noren. Back row: Lucian Gillis, Charles Sadler, John Fair, Richard Herrick, Les Simonton, and P.K. Karkoska.

reputation would be a deciding factor, he put aside his “reserved Oriental nature” to volunteer his services to 1984 Olympic Commissioner Donn Moomaw to serve as weightlifting contest director. Likewise, as the 1988 Olympics approached, Tommy expressed his desire to Harvey Newton and IWF Secretary Tamas Ajan to be “more active internationally as an official.”¹²⁴

Although he continued to lend his expertise to virtually any form of physical culture, from local physique contests to national weightlifting championships, Kono never again attained the coveted position of Olympic or world championship coach. It also became evident in the 1990s that he was regarded as too old-fashioned and out-of-touch to assume any major coaching or administrative roles. His criticisms about adopting foreign coaches and methods were clearly not in tune with the powers-that-be. “There isn’t much new under the sun,” he confided to protégé Russ Ogata, who was in the resident lifter program at Colorado Springs, “but most US lifters and coaches think that ‘they’ have better steroids, ideal conditions, better coaches, better programs ... and the grass looks greener across the ocean.” What he proposed was

something revolutionary. Go back to the Old, ole American training system that created Charlie Vinci, Isaac Berger, Peter George, Schemansky, Sheppard and some others. Can many of our current top three lifters come near or exceed the lifts that these former lifters of 20-30 years ago made (B.S.) before steroids? They must have done something right otherwise how could Berger’s Jerk still remain on the American books? Lifters now days want something for nothing. They have better equipment, more knowledge (?), more opportunity to train and travel, and more incentive BUT, something is lacking.¹²⁵

Even after financial incentives were introduced during Brian Derwin’s regime in 1996, Tommy’s data showed that lifting totals, despite bodyweight increases, decreased substantially.¹²⁶

These disparities of vision culminated at the 2000 Board of Governors at the national championships in Frederick, Maryland, where Tommy, one of 12 nominees for five at-large seats on the board of directors, was defeated. Secretary Les Simonton had “a hard time understanding

how one doesn’t vote for Tommy Kono, but there obviously were a bunch who didn’t. Sigh.” Even more exasperating to Simonton was Kono’s failure to attain one of eight positions on the Coaching Committee. Given his unrivalled coaching record, “Tommy Kono’s lack of support among the delegates was even more unbelievable to me in this contest than the other.”¹²⁷ Stella Herrick concludes that “it was a cognizant decision that they made. They didn’t want him there. It hurt him. It hurt him deeply.” It was a very political atmosphere with people who were jealous and felt threatened by Tommy and wanted these positions. Stella believes there were some people “he thought were his friends who behind the scenes were undermining him because they felt threatened by him. They had their own vision for the sport, and he was not part of it.”¹²⁸ It would be “an understatement,” observes Lou DeMarco, to say that Tommy was frustrated with the state of American lifting. “Tommy and I would talk often times about these home-made experts that would crawl out of the woodwork who thought they knew so much. And here you have this man who’s the master of thought, a Newton, who’s the master. Tommy was quite frustrated that here’s this great resource, and they’re not using him. They’re giving the impression that it was that way back then, but what does he know now? The old man routine. Yea, Tommy was very hurt by all that. He would go on coaching assignments sometimes, and these people would not listen to him. A terrible waste.”¹²⁹ Rejection by the people that needed him most, however, did not daunt the indomitable spirit of America’s greatest weightlifter. He took his coaching expertise directly to lifters at large during the next decade through his two inspirational books—*Weightlifting, Olympic Style* (2001) and *Championship Weightlifting* (2010).

The Path to Positivity

These volumes are chock full of weightlifting wisdom accumulated over six decades of experience in virtually all aspects of the sport. The crux of his message lay in tapping one’s mental strength to produce desirable results on the competition platform. “Too much emphasis is placed on the physical side of lifting when in reality it should be ‘mind’ training,”¹³⁰ This principle encapsulated both Tommy’s own success and a prescription for his country’s weightlifting woes. His belief in what came to be known as his positive mental attitude goes back to his early days in Sacramento. Tommy never had a coach, but gym owner Chester Teegarden in nearby Richmond, California,

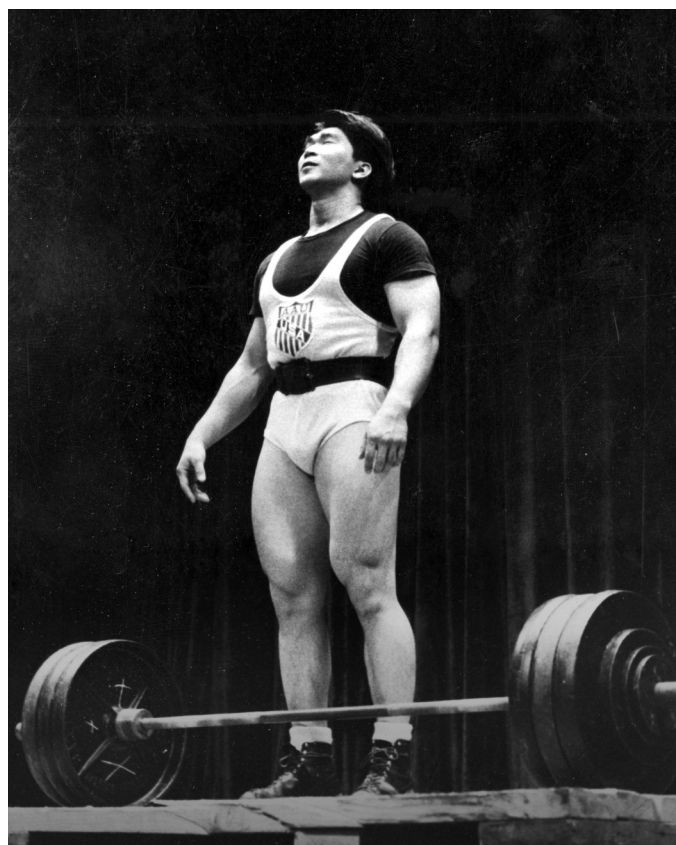
mentored him, and in April 1949, after Tommy had been training for six years and competing a year, Teegarden told him “there is a simple but fundamental principle you do not yet understand. CONCENTRATION OF EFFORT IN LARGE MUSCLE GROUPS IS THE BASIC PRINCIPLE OF BAR BELL TRAINING.” Until this time Tommy had been incorporating a lot of bodybuilding movements into his routine. “It is because you do TOO MANY exercises that you do not progress faster,” Teegarden advised. “Do less. SPECIALIZE, and gain more.”¹³¹ Over the next two years Tommy’s three-lift total increased dramatically from 585 to 780 pounds, enabling him to compete in the 1950 Senior Nationals in Philadelphia where he lost by a mere five pounds to Joe Pitman.¹³²

While there he was inspired by meeting many other iron game personalities he had only read about in the magazines. They included such notables as John Grimek, Steve Stanko, and Jules Bacon, who “came right up to me and asked how everyone were at the coast.” He also observed Ike Berger “roaming around with nothing particular in mind but talk, lift and chew gum. I met Hoffman ... healthy as ever. [Harry] Pasc[h]al[l], [Mark] Berry, [Daniel] Farris, [Frank] Dorio, Charles Smith, [Dietrich] Wortmann and [a] whole mess of ‘Big Wheel’ around.” This excitement culminated in a visit to York in Mike Dietz’s new Cadillac with Ray Van Cleef and an afternoon with Grimek discussing lifting, bodybuilding, and health.¹³³ But the most eagerly anticipated and transformative encounter was with the Ohio contingent from the American College of Modern Weightlifting (ACMWL). A year earlier, eager to know how Pete George had improved so much in such a short time, he had read an *Iron Man* article entitled “Pete George-Wonder Boy” four times, but was frustrated that it was watered down with Larry Barnholth’s life story. He already benefitted from knowledge of the squat-style snatch gained from Dan Uhalde, a Teegarden protégé who set a California light-heavyweight record of 260 pounds.¹³⁴ In Philadelphia this information was reinforced directly through encounters with George, Barnholth, and middleweight Richard Giller who demonstrated how the George-Barnholth style should be done. George recalls that his “initial impression of him was a skinny Oriental kid with glasses who ... adopted my style of lifting. It was considered unorthodox at the time, but is now the accepted style of lifting world wide.”¹³⁵ That he would be able to perfect his technique by imbibing directly the words of the master was soon made possible with the publication in 1950 of *Secrets of the Squat Snatch* which

he annotated heavily.¹³⁶

Even more critical to his success was an awareness of the mental preparation necessary to become a champion. In a memoir written later in life entitled “The ‘Mind Game,’” Tommy revealed his moment of enlightenment when he sat in the audience a row behind Barnholth and George as the heavier classes lifted at the Philadelphia championships.

During a lull in the competition I mentioned to Mr. Barnholth that world records keep improving all the time at a rapid rate. I asked him when he thought the improvements will stop. I will never forget his answer. His reply was, ‘A one-inch



Although Kono was physically well-suited to be a weightlifter, he and many others believed that the true secret of his strength was his ability to focus, to stay mentally positive, and to believe he would succeed in competition. Kono drew his ideas on mental preparation from a variety of sources: Chester Teegarden, Larry Barnholth, Zen Buddhism, his Japanese upbringing, and the “power of positive thinking” movement that swept America in the 1950s. In this photo, he pauses to mentally prepare before attempting this heavy clean & jerk.



When Arnold Schwarzenegger was a boy growing up in economically depressed Austria, he found his way to a gym and began to train with weights. As a teenager, he attended the 1961 IWF World Weightlifting Championships in nearby Vienna, and stayed to watch the Mr. Universe contest held afterwards. Kono won both contests that year, and the young Arnold returned home with a new hero.

diameter bone can support 10,000 pounds. When the arms are pulled out of their sockets, that's when we've reached the limit.'

A one inch diameter bone will not support 10,000 lbs. of weight nor will we ever get to the point where our arms are pulled out of their sockets when we try lifting; but, can you comprehend the positive message he conveyed to me?¹³⁷

The impact of this revelation cannot be overestimated. It was soon obvious in a statement from Kono on how mental preparation induced positive thinking that appeared in the September 1950 issue of Teegarden's *Bulletin* and then was reprinted in *Iron Man*.

I've learned that it isn't so much the size of a muscle that makes a lifter lift heavy

weights, but how he thinks. I could out press [Steve] Reeves even when my arms measured more than 3 full inches less than his. Why can't I out press [Grigori] Novak or all the rest? Simply because I have not 'talked' my subconscious mind into it. ... It is only because one approaches the world's record or some fabulously sounding figures that they assume it is hard. Naturally it is hard, but when you think it is impossible to surpass the record then you immediately set up a barrier in your mind causing you to hit a standstill. In any event, if World Records were shattered by a few pounds or a few seconds each year, by the end of 100 years we'll look back upon the old records and wonder how we were able to make such miserable showings. This is one of my theories and so far it has worked fine. Of course there will be a physical limit (Anatomists claim a force of 3,000 lbs. is required to break a thigh bone—femur—in a vertical position.)... I had thought about this a lot and a recent letter from Larry Barnholth stating it a little differently convinced me that I could total just about as much as I want to. Don't be surprised if I total 850 next year.¹³⁸

These sentiments were refined later in a series of articles in *Strength & Health* on "The Mental Attitude of the Champion" by Pete George who invoked the familiar example of how Roger Bannister used his mental powers to break the physical barrier of the four-minute mile.

There is nothing physiological about exactly four minutes, but there was something very psychological about it. It was a powerful barrier built up in the minds of all runners who had been in the sport long enough to be in physical condition to run that fast. It absolutely prevented them going above this speed in track, as in weightlifting, athletes mental-

ly condition themselves to numbers like the four minute mile, seven foot high jump, sixty foot shot put, 400 clean and jerk, 300 press, etc.

Roger Bannister, who is now a medical doctor, convinced himself that it was physiologically possible to run a mile in less than four minutes. He did this by conducting many tests and experiments on himself, and once he had convinced himself that physiologically he could do it, his mental barrier disappeared. He then went about his training with the proper M.A. [Mental Attitude] and became the world's first man to crack the greatest mental barrier in all sports. As soon as he had accomplished this mental feat, there was nothing to prevent dozens of other physically well-trained milers from following him.¹³⁹

What was important for this technique of mental discipline to be applicable to weightlifting was not only physical conditioning but a conviction that it should be “an essential part of your training program. You will have to Work at it!”¹⁴⁰

And work at it George did. In addition to working out religiously at the rustic American College of Modern Weight Lifting garage/gym in Akron to improve his body, strength, and self-confidence, Pete would repeat, at Larry's behest, the phrase: “Every day in every way I am getting better and stronger.” This mantra, Tommy notes, was derived and modified slightly from Emil Coue, a French psychologist/pharmacist who developed a technique of self-improvement based on optimistic autosuggestion. In his popular 1922 book entitled *Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion*, Coue attributes to the unconscious state of mind a profound influence on human behavior. “The *Unconscious* not only presides over the functions of our organism but also over the performance of *all our actions*, whatever they may be.” It is possible to tap this hidden power, Coue argues, through the conscious method of autosuggestion. “If you induce in yourself a belief that you can do a certain thing (provided it conforms to the laws of nature) you are going to do it, no matter how difficult it may be.” Even for young children, his formula of “Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better,” repeated twenty times, twice a day, would “produce excellent

health—physical, mental and moral.”¹⁴¹ These revelations of the power of positive thinking, adapted to weightlifting by Larry Barnholth, had no less of an impact on Tommy than Pete, with whom he admits to sharing a “meeting of the minds.”¹⁴²

Embracing these precepts proved efficacious in helping him overcome the nervousness that plagued him in Philadelphia and to prepare him for the international stage.¹⁴³ Tommy's mental conditioning was also reinforced by several motivational books he encountered in the fifties. Norman Vincent Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking*, published in 1952, re-awakened the general public to the concept of self-mastery in much the same way Barnholth advocated. To “build up feelings of self-confidence,” Peale recommended “repetitive suggestion of confidence ideas” as a “dominating habit.” Like Coue, he believed it was a “basic truth that “our physical condition is determined very largely by our emotional condition, and our emotional life is profoundly regulated by our thought life.” In much the same way that Tommy later coached his lifters to visualize, Peale used the term “picturize” to induce positive behavior. “Optimistic visualization combined with prayer and faith will inevitably actualize achievement,” Rev. Peale concluded.”¹⁴⁴ Pete George confirms that the Barnholths “strongly espoused his philosophy.”¹⁴⁵ That Peale's words had special meaning to Kono is evident in a clipping in his papers where he highlights the phrase that “anyone can do with himself just about what he has a mind to do.”¹⁴⁶

No less influential on Tommy's growing reliance on mental conditioning, albeit with less of a Christian flavor, was Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*.¹⁴⁷ Not unlike Coue, Hill recognized the power of the subconscious and autosuggestion. He believed that a mind dominated by “positive emotions” could “give the subconscious mind instructions, which it will accept and act upon immediately.” With a growing awareness of the intangibles in human behavior, Hill was convinced that this “other self” was more powerful than the “physical self” and through it, man was capable of becoming master of himself and his environment.

THE SUBCONSCIOUS MIND WORKS DAY AND NIGHT. Through a method of procedure, unknown to man, the subconscious draws upon the forces of Infinite Intelligence for the power with which it voluntarily transmutes one's de-

sires into their physical equivalent, making use, always of the most practical media by which this end may be accomplished. You cannot entirely control your subconscious mind, but you can voluntarily hand over to it any plan, desire, or purpose which you wish transformed into concrete form.¹⁴⁸

This transmutation of desire into physical action, Hill contended, was accomplished through autosuggestion, “the agency of control” into the “rich garden of the mind.” Concentration and persistence were critical to one’s desire becoming a burning obsession.¹⁴⁹ “Whatever the Mind Can Conceive and Believe, It Can Achieve,” Hill’s most inspirational quote, was also inscribed on a sign in front of the lifting platform of the Barnholth gym, according to Pete George. “It was Hill’s philosophy of the boundlessness of the human potential that attracted them.”¹⁵⁰ Hill was no less appealing to Tommy, as reflected in his apothegm that “the mind and body cannot be separated for the mind wills the body” and “the mind must be groomed for success.”¹⁵¹

The Power of Zen

A final, albeit subtle, influence on Kono’s development of a mental approach to lifting comes from his Japanese cultural background and his awareness of a link between Zen Buddhism and his weightlifting endeavors. As historian Edwin Reischauer points out, “No people has been more concerned than the Japanese with self-discipline” and the development of will power. “Since medieval times Zen meditation has been popular but often less for the original reason of achieving transcendental enlightenment than for the cultivation of self-discipline.” Although few modern Japanese practice Zen, their contemporary lives are “full of traces of Buddhism as a sort of background melody.”¹⁵² It could be argued that such was the case with Tommy who was no more a practicing Buddhist than a practicing Christian, yet exhibited a proclivity for Zen. This connection was evident in my 1992 interview with him when, after explaining that “mental concentration comes from positive thinking,” he cited a quote from Hawaii Zen master Tanouye Tenshin Rotaishi: “Among all the sports, weightlifting is closest to Zen.”¹⁵³ The manner of its impact was evident to featherweight champion Walter Imahara who shared many of Tommy’s cultural values, including internment experi-

ences.

In that way Tommy and I discussed these things that nobody else maybe talked about because we’re of the same race. We used Zen power, Zen power. Zen, Zen, what’s Zen. The Zen religion. It was the concentration. Just concentrate. Zen power. ... Not to the degree that he did, but in our later years we used to correspond, and I would see him at the meets. These were the things we discussed. The things he never talked about with other lifters. He never did. In fact, I never did that either. ... We were at a different level, one to one friendship. ... Meditation. We both were at camp and our parents were Buddhists. We went into the camp Buddhists. We got out of the camp, our parents were Buddhists. We got to the Rohwer [AK internment camp] my mother says we need to become Christians because we were kids. Do we know anything about Christianity? No. Do I know anything about Buddhists? Probably less. But always in our life coming up, there was that Buddhist background. ... They have a lot to do with his life. What he ended up as because he practiced it with me. Maybe he won’t talk about it with no one else, like you’ve got to use a lot of Zen power. What I notice about Zen, I know they want you to believe that you can do something. They make you concentrate, meditate, what words you can use. When you see Tommy at a meet, like put a weight on the bar. Don’t tell me what’s on it, I’ll do it.¹⁵⁴

This thought process corresponds to an incident related by Murray Levin in 1958 when US coach, John Terpak, tried to tell him what he would need to beat the Soviet lifter. “Don’t tell me how much I need,” Tommy retorted. “Just put it on the bar and I’ll lift it.” And he did.¹⁵⁵

His association with Japanese culture was also observed by his son-in-law, Gary Sumida, who attributed it to Tommy’s upbringing in an immigrant family and that “his adherence to Buddhist principles may have provided

him with a mental edge during his competitive career.” Children raised in a traditional Japanese family are taught that when they bring shame on themselves, they also bring shame on the whole family. Therefore

You need to prepare.
You need to always give your best effort.
Conduct yourself with honor, AT ALL TIMES.
Respect elders and those of authority.
Win with grace. But lose with equal or greater graciousness.

Sumida, a Buddhist himself, believes that Tommy’s faith in these principles “contributed heavily to his stoic nature. One of the major tenets of Buddhism is the belief in living in harmony with everyone and every THING in the world. I feel that whenever he faced his toughest tests, he probably relied heavily on that belief.”¹⁵⁶ On a more practical level Zen Buddhism, according to author D. T. Suzuki, “always deals with facts, concrete and tangible.”¹⁵⁷ And for Tommy, mental concentration was critical to tangible results.

Tommy contended that “the importance of harnessing the power of the mind dates back for centuries from the teaching of the Zen masters.” He believed it was possible to “focus your thoughts like using the magnifying glass to focus the sun’s ray to a pinpoint to start paper or wood burning.” Peak performance is attained when an athlete is “in the zone,” with his attention totally focused on the task at hand. He develops a “Do or Die” attitude and devotes total effort making the lift, whatever might be on the bar. “Your thoughts are on a few key things that are vital to your performance on the platform.”¹⁵⁸ Nothing else matters. As the Rome Olympics approached, Tommy shared his method for building confidence with a *Time* magazine reporter.

To Tommy Kono, the secret lies in the power of positive thinking. ‘Successful weight lifting is not in the body,’ says Kono. ‘It’s in the mind. You have to strengthen your mind to shut out everything—the man with the camera, the laugh or the cough in the audience. You can lift as much as you believe you can. Your body can do what you will it to do.’¹⁵⁹

Artie Drechsler adds that his powers of concentration were so great that “when a fire alarm went off during his last C&J at the 1964 Olympic Trials, he didn’t ask for another attempt because he said he didn’t hear it.”¹⁶⁰ A further link to Tommy’s Japanese heritage was revealed by Hawaiian protégé Mel Miamoto, who was training his 11-year-old granddaughter for local competitions. “I give her all the sayings that Tommy had, like *Shikata-Ga-Nai* [acceptance of fate] and *Arigatai*, be thankful for what you have.” Drawing from the same Coue-Barnholth-George mindset, Miamoto conveyed another Kono didacticism about achieving total effort. “One time he told me about injuries, and he said if it doesn’t fall off, you’re okay. If your arm doesn’t fall off, you’re okay. So that’s what I tell my granddaughter all the time. I told her, no, it didn’t fall off, you’re okay.”¹⁶¹ Tommy later articulated these sentiments as the key to championship performance. “Usually it is self-preservation that prevents us from achieving an all-out effort. The thought of being injured or having pain will prevent you from exerting yourself so failure becomes eminent [sic].” A do-or-die attitude free of all distractions, even pain, was imperative. “Your mind must take control of your physical side.”¹⁶² Tommy was, as he detailed his methodical approach in a 1997 letter to weightlifter and protégé Melanie Getz, “Your ‘Zen,’ coach.”¹⁶³

These values are hardly exclusive to Zen Buddhism. However much Tommy benefitted from his Japanese cultural conditioning, it merely reinforced an attitude appropriated for weightlifting by Larry Barnholth and practiced by Pete George in distant Ohio. That “mental concentration,” as Tommy assured me in 1992, “comes from positive thinking” and is strikingly similar to the belief expressed by George in a 1991 interview with Osmo Kiiha that “the most important ingredient in the making of a champion is the mental attitude.”¹⁶⁴ Evidence shows that as Tommy was improving in the late forties he was trying to discover how Pete had progressed even faster at such a young age to set world records and win world championships. A revelation came at the 1950 national championships at Philadelphia and its aftermath where he not only learned the secrets of the squat snatch but embraced the concept of mental concentration and the power of positive thinking from Larry Barnholth and Pete. Hereafter their philosophies of weightlifting and life meshed. This approach is prominently featured in his earliest training manual in 1954. “The mind governs all our movements, thoughts and action. It is ‘Mind over Mind’ that we must

all strive to grasp to improve our total ... or anything worth-while in our life." He believed "the most important thing at this moment is to fully realize the magnitude that the 'brain-power' has in direct relation to our muscle-power." He subscribed to the adage, a la Marcus Aurelius, that "As a man thinketh, so he is."¹⁶⁵ Sustained by the motivational writings of Norman Vincent Peale and Napoleon Hill, and the subliminal influence of Zen, Tommy retained this belief in the power of positive thinking through the remainder of his competitive years and subsequent decades of his coaching. Even the onset of multiple bodily afflictions and the prospect of death could not quell his optimistic and indomitable spirit. In 2014 he reflected that "in the old days when I was young, I worked hard trying to improve my strength and fitness. Later in life, my focus changed to trying to maintain. Now my focus is trying to survive."¹⁶⁶ In a final farewell to his friends, he remained stoic and upbeat, that "life is for the living to enjoy the journey while you can!" *Shikata-Ga-Nai and Arigatai*.¹⁶⁷

NOTES

1. See Frank Litsky, "Tommy Kono, Weight-Lifting Champion Raised in Internment Camp, Dies at 85," *The New York Times*, 29 April 2016; Matt Schudel, "Tommy Kono, Two-time Olympic Champion Weightlifter, Dies at 85," *The Washington Post*, 1 May 2016. Also see Ian Scheuring, "Olympic Gold Medalist, Legendary Weightlifter Tommy Kono Dies," *Hawaii News Now*, 24 April 2016; "Tommy Kono, Who Took Up Weightlifting in an Internment Camp for Japanese-Americans and Went on to Win Two Olympic Gold Medals for the United States, Has Died," *US News & World Report*, 30 April 2016; "Olympic Weightlifting Champion Tommy Kono Dies in Hawaii," *Yahoo! News*, 30 April 2016; Armen Hammer, "Weightlifting Legend Tommy Kono Passes Away At 85," *FloElite*, 25 April 2016; "Tommy Kono (1930-2016) Olympian Was Worth His Weight in Gold," *Daily Express* (London), 7 May 2016; and "Tommy Kono," *Dale Harder's Strength & Speed Newsletter*, no. 100 (June-July 2016), 2.
2. For two of the best general accounts of Kono's career see Osmo Kiiha, "Tommy Kono," *The Iron Master*, no. 5 (December 1990) and Osmo Kiiha and Herb Glossbrenner, "The Amazing Tommy Kono," *The International Olympic Lifter* 10 (1991): 18-20. See also "Tommy Kono," in Bill Pearl, George and Tuesday Coates, and Richard Thornley, Jr., *Legends of the Iron Game, Reflections on the History of Strength Training* (Phoenix, OR: Bill Pearl Enterprises, 2010), 2:189-96; Bob Sigall, "Tommy Kono," *Health and Strength* 141 (October 2015): 19; "Tommy Kono 70!" *IWF Magazine* (2001): 33-34; and Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer, eds., *Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono* (Mesa, AZ: privately printed, 2017).
3. See Tommy Kono, *Weightlifting, Olympic Style* (Honolulu: Hawaii Kono Company, 2001), and Tommy Kono, *Championship Weightlifting* (Honolulu: Hawaii Kono Company, 2010).
4. Bob Hoffman, "Best Seniors Ever," *Strength & Health* 31 (October 1963): 16. For Tommy, however, the 358-pound clean & jerk he made at the 1957 world championships in Tehran was more dramatic than the 375 in Harrisburg. "No Hoffman, no Terpak to witness it," he recalled. "I won over Bogdanovsky by being the lighter man. I was carried off the platform by the Iranians for my clutch performance." Kono to the author, 10 June 1999, letter in author's possession. For the context of the 1963 encounter see the section entitled "American Lifting Declines" in John D. Fair, *MuscleTown USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 224-27.
5. Murray Levin, past president of the United States Weightlifting Federation, recalls a similar incident of Kono's raw mental strength at the Soviet Union vs. USA dual meet in Madison Square Garden on 17 May 1958. "It was the largest crowd ever assembled to see a weightlifting meet," recalls Levin. "Over 10,000 people were in the audience. The most dramatic part of the competition was between the Russian middleweight [Fedor Bogdanovsky]. After the press and the snatch Kono needed a fantastic clean & jerk to win [on lighter bodyweight]. John Terpak was Kono's coach at this event and he told me this story. He whispered in Tommy's ear, 'I figured out what you should take to beat the Russian.' Kono turned to him like a tiger. He said, 'don't tell me how much I need. Just put it on the bar and I'll lift it.' I was sitting up front that night and he put everything he had into that lift and won that match." See Imahara and Meltzer, *Book of Remembrance*, 55.
6. Tommy confirmed to me that he was "not training for the nationals" because he did not have the means to get to Harrisburg. Kono to the author, 31 August 1999, letter in the author's possession. His training logs, however, reveal a different story. On his last training day in York, three days before the meet, Tommy appeared robust. He recorded poundages of 295 press, 335 clean, 265 snatch, and 375 front squat, describing his press as "in groove," his snatch form as "good," his high pulls "very good," and his front squat as "done rather strongly." His intention to make a 1,000-pound total (via 330-290-380) in competition contrasts with the 970 (315-280-375) he actually made in competition. Kono Training Logs, 24 August 1962-65 February 1964, Tommy Kono Papers, Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports, University of Texas.
7. Three Japanese lifters, Bantamweight Shiro Ichinoseki, Featherweight Yoshinobu Miyake, and Middleweight Hitoshi Ouchi, all took first places, and Ichinoseki and Ouchi set junior world records in the clean & jerk and total respectively. Hoffman, "Best Seniors Ever," 15-16.
8. A decade later he quipped that his knowledge of Japanese was somewhat elementary and antiquated. "They tell me that I speak a Japanese that only grandfathers use now." *Honolulu Advertiser*, 28 April 1974.
9. Riecke to Ziegler, 22 March and 9 April 1961, Ziegler Papers, 17812 Princess Anne Drive, Olney, Maryland 20832. Despite Riecke's "trash talk," his rivalry with Kono was never less than friendly and sportsman-like. By contrast, Tommy harshly criticized "the poor display of sportsmanship by the second-place winner in the Mr. America contest," Harold Poole. "I believe one of the greatest lessons to be learned from taking part in sports is that you can lose as well as win." "Sportsmanship," *Strength & Health* 31 (October 1963): 7.
10. Kono to the author, 9 May 2005, letter in possession of the author. "A nut" is how Tommy also described Ziegler to Lou DeMarco. "I didn't think much of Ziegler when he made the trip to the World Championships in 1954 because he wanted the team members to tell the Russians he was our new heavyweight!" Kono to DeMarco, 28 October 1993. See also Tommy's "Testimony Against the Use of Steroids," 22 February 1988, Kono Papers.
11. Kono to Bob Hoffman, 20 May 1971, Kono file, Hoffman Papers.

Interestingly, Riecke's thinking at the outset of his experiments with Dr. Ziegler was similar to that of Kono. He was "convinced that a great percentage of lifting is mental." Riecke to Ziegler, 22 October 1960, Ziegler Papers. Tommy later admitted that he was "so naïve I didn't know Riecke was on to something then. I thought he had the right idea about isometric and it worked well for him." Kono to Lou DeMarco, 28 October 1993, Kono Papers.

12. Interview with Tommy Kono, 21 March 1992, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. For contemporary assessments on the efficacy of these ergogenic aids, see Stuart Auerbach, "Steroids: Superdrugs That Create Supermen, or Havoc?" *The Washington Post*, 20 August 1972; Dan Hardesty, "New Exercise Principle Is Now Being Applied To Competitive Sports," *State Times*, 4 October 1961; "High-frequency Stimulation Improves Skeletal Muscles," *Medical Tribune*, 13 July 1964; and Terry Todd, "The Jovial Genius of Dr. John Ziegler," *Strength & Health* 33 (October 1965): 44-45.

13. Telephone interview with Clyde Emrich, 8 June 2016. See also *The Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen Newsletter* for June/July 2003 with details on the 20th. dinner/reunion where Emrich was honored.

14. Ibid.

15. Hoffman to Kono, 8 September 1954, Hoffman Papers. Later, 2 January 1955, he also attempted to advise his Olympic champion on lifting technique.

16. Tommy's close friend, Mrs. Harriet Nomura, whom he called "Ma," stated in 1958 that "Tom has never and still doesn't find time for girls. ... I told him once he's the kind of guy who would turn down the biggest date for weightlifting. And he has agreed—for now." *Honolulu Saturday Star Bulletin*, 19 April 1958.

17. These included a 322½-pound press in Honolulu on 15 September 1956, and a 350½-pound press at the Nuuanu YMCA on 26 May 1961. Kiiha, "Tommy Kono," 12 and 15.

18. Data for this graph are derived from Kiiha, "Tommy Kono," 11-18, and supplementary data in Osmo Kiiha, "George Brothers," *The Iron Master*, no. 6 (April 1991): 31.

19. A premonition of this injury, according to Tommy, occurred at a short exhibition he, Bill March, and Isaac Berger gave beforehand at a Boy Scout jamboree in Dover, Pennsylvania. "I performed a Split-style Snatch of 135 lbs. My best Snatch at that time was 297 lbs. using the Squat-style, so you would think that a measly 135 should not bother me. Well, evidently my forward knee, the right one, must have flexed a little out of alignment for it did not feel right after I gave the exhibition." After failing with the 374 jerk at Warsaw, his right knee became stiff and swollen. This irregularity caused him to favor his left leg which resulted in a corresponding injury to that leg. "I was now plagued with both knees being bad going to the 1960 Rome Olympics." Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 154. Also see Jim Seip, "York's Gold: Greatest Olympian Found America's Strength Here," *York Sunday News*, 8 August 2004, and Kiiha, "Tommy Kono," 15.

20. Kiiha, "Tommy Kono," 15, and Bob Hoffman, "Rome Report, XVII Olympiad," *Strength & Health* 29 (February 1961): 16. According to Ike Berger, Tommy was suffering from knee problems even prior to the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. "It was one knee, then the other knee gave out," Berger recalls. "When one knee gives out, it puts all the pressure on the other knee. I don't remember the year, but I know it was before Melbourne because in Melbourne his knee was bad. He didn't hurt his knee that bad, but even if it's slight it's still a lot." Telephone interview with Isaac Berger, 26 October 2016, New York City.

21. Grimek to Ziegler, 7 and 15 September 1960, Ziegler Papers. Those

who gained over the Senior Nationals/Olympic Tryouts at Cleveland in June include Chuck Vinci (+60.5), Tommy Kono (+77.25), Jim George (+32.5), Jim Bradford (+44.75), and Norbert Schemansky (+27.25). Those lifting less were Isaac Berger (-11) and John Pulskamp (-36.75). George denies any knowledge of this incident, stating that "I never hung out with that gang." Telephone interview with Jim George, 17 June 2016, Akron, Ohio. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Maraniss interviewed Berger and Bradford for his book *Rome 1960, The Olympics That Changed the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), "both of whom made it sound like they had never heard of steroids back then." Maraniss to the author, 4 December 2006, letter in possession of the author.

22. Telephone interviews with John Pulskamp, 19 August 2016, Santa Barbara, California; Chuck Vinci, 23 August 2016, Elyria, Ohio; and Berger.

23. In a recorded interview with two undercover special agents from the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1976, You explained that he responded to bodybuilders' requests for Dianabol by sending them to another doctor. "Holy Christ, there's thousands of them. Like me, I'm Olympic physician. I cannot prescribe you know that. 'Cause if I catch any of my athletes taking drugs, I will throw them off the team." Transcript of Exhibit 1-1, R4-75-0033, recorded on 24 February 1976, by Special Agent Keith D. Earnst, utilizing a Bell and Howell SK-9 Receiver/Recorder. The conversation recorded on Exhibit 1-1 transpired during the purchase of non-drug exhibit H-1 from Dr. Richard You by Special Agents Ululaulani Hu and William Fernandes, at Suite #106, 1270 Queen Emma Street, Honolulu, Hawaii. Kono Papers.

24. As Tommy explains, while he "purposely avoided all leg work for three months" to let his knee heal, he compensated by doing bodybuilding exercises for his upper body and concentrating on heavy dumbbell presses. By the time of the Moscow meet his pressing power was so great that he "felt capable of breaking a world record in the Press ... if I could clean the weight!" Kono, *Weightlifting*, 154. Jim George regarded Dr. You as "an amateur magician and cardsharp who was dealing off the bottom." He was also dabbling in steroids at the same time as Ziegler, and there was "an outside possibility" that Kono was taking them. Interview with Jim George, 24 May 1987, Akron, Ohio.

25. Gubner, known for his raw strength, insisted that he "never took steroids," thinking his own natural level of testosterone was so high that he did not need steroids or additional testosterone. In a follow-up telephone interview, Gubner confirms Kono, Schemansky, and March were taking steroids as much as several times a week but admits that the reference to "tennis ball welts" may have been an exaggeration. Interview with Gary Gubner, 15 June 1992, Weston, CT, and telephone interview, 21 June 2016, White Plains, NY. Joe Puleo, on the other hand, who trained with Kono at York in 1962-64, claims that neither he nor Berger were taking steroids during those years. Interview with Joe Puleo, 2 May 1987, Livonia, Michigan.

26. The other motivating factor against foreign adversaries was Tommy's love of his country. "For me," he recalled, "patriotism plays an important part in my performance. I become emotionally worked up thinking that I am representative of the United States." Kono, *Weightlifting*, 154 and 212. See also A. Grove Day, "America's Mightiest Little Man," *Coronet* 48 (July 1960): 110.

27. Kono to Hoffman, 14 November 1962, Hoffman Papers. For an analysis of the impact of the new pressing style, see my article, "The Tragic History of the 'Military Press' in Olympic and World Championship Competition, 1928-1972," *The Journal of Sport History* 28 (Fall

2001).

28. Kono, *Weightlifting*, 159. But the fire that enabled him to clean & jerk 375 and win on bodyweight in 1963 was not quite enough for him to repeat this feat with 380 at the 1965 Senior Nationals in Los Angeles. As a side note, Hoffman observed that Tommy had first made this weight "in Copenhagen in 1954 when he was 11 years younger and five pounds heavier." Bob Hoffman, "1965 Sr. Nationals Results," *Strength & Health* 33 (September 1965): 18.

29. In a caption for a picture accompanying one of his "ABC of Weightlifting" articles in *Strength & Health*, Kono refers to his Harrisburg triumph as "one of the most dramatic moments in weightlifting history." He is shown at the bottom of a heavy squat clean with grit and determination written all over his face. "Somehow he found the strength and courage to struggle his way out of this low position and fight the jerk, all the way to victory." Tommy Kono, "ABC's of Weightlifting," *Strength & Health* 37 (October 1969): 17.

30. Kono, *Weightlifting*, 159.

31. See a copy of Dr. You's 1962 nomination for the Sullivan Award that he sent to Bob Hoffman in the Hoffman Papers. By no means the least significant aspect of Tommy's lifting career was his record of physique titles, that included many local contests as well as a Mr. World (France, 1954), and three IWF Mr. Universe titles in Munich (1955), Teheran (1957), and Vienna (1961).

32. Peary Rader, "The Sr. Nationals – As I Saw Them," *Lifting News* 11 (August 1965): 12 and 18, and Hoffman, "1965 Sr. Nationals Results," 18.

33. Kono to Hoffman, 15 October 1962, Hoffman Papers.

34. Kono to Terpak, 4 March 1964, Hoffman Papers.

35. Russell Ogata explains that Tommy, along with Russell Elwell, a Hawaii bodybuilder and schoolteacher, designed the knee bands by cutting neoprene "three inches below and three inches above" the knee. Tommy would then "put those things together and have them all over the apartment, and he would make those and sell those until Bob Hoffman started making them. But he did that because his knees were hurting, but again that goes back to you don't look for the excuses. You just look for the opportunities." Interview with Russell Ogata, 12 November 2016, Honolulu, Hawaii.

36 Tommy Kono, "Slim-Trim Waistband," Hoffman Papers.

37. Ibid.

38. Kono to Hoffman, 14 March 1967, Hoffman Papers.

39. Kono to Terpak, 14 April 1967, and Kono to Hoffman, 14 April 1967, Hoffman Papers.

40. Bob Hoffman, "The Most Important Article I Ever Wrote," *Strength & Health* 29 (November 1961): 30-33.

41. Tommy Kono, "A Major Breakthrough in the Field of Weight Training," and Bob Hoffman, "About the BH Knee and Waist Bands," *Strength & Health* 35 (June 1967): 46.

42. Ibid.

43. Bob Hoffman, "Action Report of the "Empire State Invitational Meet," *Strength & Health* 36 (March 1968): 48-49.

44. Monthly Financial Statements, 1966-1971, Hoffman Papers. Prior to the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Kono reported to Hoffman that he had loaned his knee bands to Soviet heavyweight Jan Talts. "In the exhibition record attempt he never used it until his second attempt clean & jerk of 430 lbs. for a world record. I took 5 photos of him in action with the BH Knee Bands on ... and he made the record. ... The next morning when I went to the hotel to pick my knee bands up (yesterday) the Russian doctor who accompanied the team had the knee measurements of all the lifters except [Genadij] Chetin. They all

wanted the BH Knee Band. [Stanislav] Bateshev also wants a waist band since he has some back trouble. While I was talking to the Soviet medico man (he speaks a little English as does Bateshev) Talts came into the lobby and had the translator tell me that if it wasn't for the Knee Band he wouldn't have broken the world record. 'The Knee Band that broke the world record' and I have pictures of it to prove it." He believed that when the knee bands catch on, "just about every Power Lifter and Weightlifter will be wearing a pair in competition. I know I can't do any squats without a pair on." Kono to Hoffman, 26 February 1968, Hoffman Papers.

45. Interview with Kono.

46. Bob Hoffman, "1977 Sr. National Weightlifting Championship," *Strength & Health* 45 (August/September 1977): 25-29. In the dying days of *Strength & Health*, York introduced a new version of Tommy's creation called "Dyna-Wraps." They consisted of a "high quality neoprene, bonded nylon cover." The contour-shaped knee support, designed especially for powerlifters, allowed for "natural movement" and would allegedly "last up to twice as long as other wraps." "Dyna-Wraps," *Strength & Health*, 53 (October/November 1985): 12, and 54 (December/January 1986): 2.

47. Kono to Hoffman, 3 January 1968, Hoffman Papers.

48. Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 81.

49. Tommy Kono, "Manuel Mateos, Mexico's Mighty Mite," *Strength & Health* 34 (November 1966): 30-31; Bob Hoffman, "Teen-Age National Weight Lifting Championship," *Strength & Health* 35 (November 1967): 14; and Bob Hoffman, "Pan-American Action Report," *Strength & Health* 35 (December 1967): 15-16. Also see Tommy Kono, "Food Supplements—An Essential Part of an Athlete's Diet," *Strength & Health* 34 (September 1966): 38; Tommy Kono, "The Snatch in Relation to the Clean & Jerk," *Strength & Health* 34 (October 1966): 46-47; and Tommy Kono, "Behind the Cuban Curtain," *Strength & Health* 35 (February 1967): 40-41.

50. "Information on Tommy T. Kono, Achievements of CDOM Boys (1966-1967), Kono Papers.

51. Tommy Kono, "At the World Championships," *Strength & Health* 35 (March 1967): 42-43 and 73.

52. See for instance "Decals," *Strength & Health* 36 (February 1968): 75.

53. Kono to Hoffman, 14 March 1967, Hoffman Papers. Kono likely attributed the delays in his payments to York Barbell Treasurer Mike Dietz who "was really tight with the money and probably cockroaching it. Nobody liked him." Interview with Kono.

54. Tommy Kono, "Exclusive Interview with the Soviet Lifters," *Strength & Health* 35 (November 1967): 46. Also see Tommy Kono, "The Anatomy of a Weightlifter," *Strength & Health* 35 (May 1967): 16-17; Tommy Kono, "The Russian Lifters in Mexico," *Strength & Health* 35 (July 1967): 14-15; Tommy Kono, "'Little Olympics' Weightlifting Notes," *Strength & Health* 36 (April 1968): 22-23; Tommy Kono, "(Part 2) at the Little Olympics with Tommy Kono," *Strength & Health* 36 (May 1968): 24-25; and Tommy Kono, "A Pictorial Report of the Russians," *Strength & Health* 36 (July 1968): 28-29.

55. Kono to Hoffman, 9 September 1969, Hoffman Papers. Tommy also tried to facilitate a contract between York and Adidas, noting in a letter to John Terpak of 22 October 1970 that the latter had "already written to Hoffman with an offer." He observed that when he returned to the USA for the 1970 world championships, he "sold the few pairs of shoes that I brought over with me to Columbus at 23 dollars each with no problems. In fact, there were so much interested created [sic] that if I had 50 pairs of Adidas lifting shoes I could have sold all of them.

The West German team came back from Columbus without any lifting shoes among them. Fellows in the states were buying used lifting shoes for 15 dollars a pair. I think you could compare the Adidas lifting shoes like Florsheim of the shoe industry in the US for their quality is so high." In the absence of any concerted effort by York to market the shoes, Kono graciously responded to numerous enquiries from American lifters on how to obtain this desired product. Kono to Terpak, 22 October 1970, and 26 January 1971, Hoffman Papers.

56. Kono to Hoffman, 4 October 1969, Hoffman Papers, and Kono, *Weightlifting*, 196.

57. Kono to Terpak, 13 October 1970, Hoffman Papers.

58. Ibid.

59. Terpak to Kono, 21 November 1970, Hoffman Papers.

60. Kono to Hoffman, 20 May 1971, Hoffman Papers.

61. Ibid.

62. It was not until about 1975 that Kono became aware that Bob was not remembering well and that senility was setting in. Interview with Kono.

63. Kono to Terpak, 19 October 1971, Hoffman Papers. Tommy conveyed essentially the same information and query to Hoffman in Kono to Hoffman, 20 October 1971, Hoffman Papers.

64. Kono to Terpak, 14 November 1971, with enclosures of Oscar State to J. W. Westerhoff, 24 January 1967, and Fulton Freeman to Kono, 18 November 1968, Hoffman Papers. What enabled Tommy to issue such a bold ultimatum to York was an assurance from Dr. Richard You that a civil service position in the Department of Parks and Recreation had already been "created sometime ago" which would "pay you a minimum of about \$15,000.00 per year to start." Furthermore, it would "give you a lot of time in weightlifting, sports and physical fitness" and "you will be rapidly promoted at the right time." You to Kono, 23 November 1971, Kono Papers. Concurrently Tommy was also negotiating with veteran lifter Russ Knipp for an \$18,000 contract to join the Athletes in Action organization in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Kono to Knipp, 21 July 1972, and Knipp to Kono, 5 August and 20 September 1972, Kono Papers.

65. Kono to Otto Schmann, 14 November 1971, Kono Papers.

66. Crist to Rudy Sablo, 21 September 1972, and Crist to Terpak, 22 September 1972, Hoffman Papers, and Telephone interview with Bob Crist, 11 August 2016, Hampton, Virginia.

67. Kono to Crist, 19 September 1972, Kono Papers.

68. Ibid. Curiously Tommy concocted the story that he had been offered \$15,000 to become the American national coach, perhaps to induce his new employers to offer him a higher salary. Kono to Young Suk Ko, 24 September 1972, Kono Papers.

69. See Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting," *Strength & Health* 37 (February 1969): 12; Tommy Kono "The ABC's of Weightlifting," *Strength & Health* 37 (March 1969): 12; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting," *Strength & Health* 37 (April 1969): 12; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting IV," *Strength & Health* 37 (October 1969): 16; Tommy Kono, "The Area of Balance," *Strength & Health* 37 (November 1969): 38; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weight Lifting, The 'S' Pull," *Strength & Health* 37 (December 1969): 20; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, A Theory of Acceleration as Applied in the Pull," *Strength & Health* 38 (January 1970): 24; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Growth of a Lifter's Total," *Strength & Health* 38 (March 1970): 16; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, The Hip Action," *Strength & Health* 38 (April 1970): 20; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, The Spine," *Strength & Health* 38, (May 1970): 14; Tommy Kono, "Russian Weightlifting Methods," *Strength & Health* 38 (June 1970): 14; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Head and

Shoulders," *Strength & Health* 38 (August 1970): 12; Tommy Kono, "1970 European Weightlifting Championships, Brief Summary," *Strength & Health* 38 (October 1970): 60; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Bridged Stick, Wide-Grip Pull," *Strength & Health* 40 (February 1972): 32; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Priority Training or Training on your Weak Areas," *Strength & Health* 40 (June 1972): 18; Tommy Kono, "1972 European Championships," *Strength & Health* 40 (September 1972): 46; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Pulling Technique Fundamentals, Part 1," and "The Baltic Cup," *Strength & Health* 40 (November 1972): 10 and 34; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Pulling Technique Fundamentals, Part 2," *Strength & Health* 40 (December 1972): 10; Tommy Kono, "Serge Redding, The Hapless Belgian Champion," *Strength & Health* 41 (February 1973): 10; Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Part XVII (Basic Exercises ... The Deadlift)," *Strength & Health* 42 (May 1974), 26; and Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Weightlifting, Part XVIII (Basic Exercises ... The 'Loosening' Deadlift)," *Strength & Health* 42 (June 1974): 30.

70. Bob Hoffman, "The Future of *Strength & Health*," *Strength & Health* 42 (March 1974): 5 and 80.

71. "The Konos Put It In Writing," *Strength & Health* 42 (June/July 1974): 9.

72. Kono to Hoffman, 28 February 1974, Hoffman Papers.

73. *Honolulu Advertiser*, 28 April 1974.

74. Crist to Johnson, 28 December 1971, and Crist to Terpak, 5 May 1972, Hoffman Papers.

75. Bob Crist, "July Newsletter," 5 July 1973, *AAU No. 73-96*, Crist Papers in author's possession.

76. Kono to Hoffman, 28 February 1974, Hoffman Papers.

77. Crist, "Coaches and Officials Clinic," 19 July 1974, *AAU Notice #74-90*, Crist Papers.

78. "Minutes of USOC Weightlifting Committee Meeting," 21 June 1975, Hoffman Papers.

79. Kono to Hoffman, 18 May 1975, Hoffman Papers.

80. Kono to Ogata, 17 March 1976, Kono Papers, and "Minutes of the USOC Weightlifting Committee," 18 June 1976, Crist Papers.

81. Tommy Kono, "U. S. Olympic Weightlifting Team Report," 1 October 1976, Hoffman Papers. See also Bob Hoffman, "Bicentennial Senior National Championships," *Strength & Health* 44 (August/September 1976): 38, and Bob Hoffman, "1976 Olympic Weightlifting Results," *Strength & Health* 44 (October/November 1976): 10.

82. "The Iron Grapevine," *Strength & Health* 45 (December/January 1976-77): 33.

83. To confirm Green's testimony, I asked the following: JF—"You're saying that Lee James avoided the testing by leaving?" BG—"Yes." JF—"Before he got tested?" BG—"Yes." JF—"And he was still able to claim a medal?" BG—"Now you can't do it. As soon as you lift they follow you. They grab your coat tail and walk off with you. Not then. This was the first year. They didn't have it down." Interview with Green, 1 November 2012, Dadeville, Alabama.

84. Kono, "Olympic Team Report," Hoffman Papers.

85. "Miller's Letter to United States Coaches," 19 December 1975, *New England & Region 1—Weightlifter's Newsletter*, no.39 (24 January 1976): 17.

86. Crist to Matlin, 7 April 1976, Crist Papers.

87. Carl Miller, "Carl Miller Reports," *International Olympic Lifter* 3 (March 1976): 4.

88. Interview with Mike Mizuno, 15 November 2016, Aiea, Hawaii.

89. Ibid. "I know a lot of people used him as a resource, like football coaches and such like that to incorporate weightlifting into their programs. He pretty much let them handle what they thought they should

do, and anytime they had problems or couldn't figure out why this certain athlete was struggling and couldn't build up muscles, then they'd go to him and use him as a resource. But he didn't want to interfere too much to the point where people would say, don't tell me what to do. So, he would sit on the side, and if you wanted his opinion, he would give it to you. But otherwise he wouldn't say anything."

90. Interview with Mizuno.

91. Ibid.

92. Ibid. Tommy's annual performance evaluations were uniformly outstanding. In 1993 his supervisor recognized that "through your positive and quiet manner, resourcefulness and excellent public relations with corporate businesses and organizations, you ably secured their assistance for many of the sports and fitness events. ... You are well respected and received in the community as evidenced by the many invitations to speak on your experiences and motivation." "Performance Evaluation Report," Department of Parks and Recreation, 8 May 1993, Kono Papers.

93. Paul Drewes, "History of the Honolulu Marathon," 17 December 2015, *KITV Island News*, <http://www.kitv.com/story/30609620/history-of-the-honolulu-marathon>. For a more in-depth explanation of the origins of the marathon and Tommy's role in it see Steven C. Todd to Dr. Jim Barahal, 6 June 1993, and Interview by Michael Tsai, 27 February 2014, Kono Papers.

94. "Honolulu Marathon," http://www.digplanet.com/wiki/Honolulu_Marathon. See also Pat Bigold, "Honolulu Marathon, Interview with Dr. Jim Barahal," *RunnersWorld.com*, December 2002.

95. Jeanette M. L. Chun, "A Spirit of Aloha, The 25th Honolulu Marathon, Sunday, December 14, 1997," Kono Papers.

96. Jeanette Chun to the author, 6 January 2016, letter in the author's possession. See also "Honolulu Marathon Association Job Description of Tommy Kono," Kono Papers.

97. Drewes, "History of the Marathon."

98. Interview with Mizuno. To appreciate Tommy's attachment to the Nuuanu YMCA see his unpublished account, "The Nuuanu YMCA and the Glory Days of Hawaii Weightlifting," Kono Papers. Also see Brian Niya, "Glory Days, Hawaii Weightlifting at the Nuuanu YMCA" *The Hawaii Herald, Hawaii's Japanese American Journal* 20 (3 September 1999): 1 and 20-21.

99. Arthur Drechsler, "A Brief History of Women's Weightlifting," *USA Weightlifting* 27 (Fall 2008): 18-19.

100. Murray Levin, "20th Anniversary of Women in Weightlifting," *USA Weightlifting* 25 (2006): 26. One of the American coaches who opposed Levin's initiatives was Jim Schmitz of the Sports Palace in San Francisco. "He fought me at every meeting," Levin recalls, "but when the meet was over and we had that world success party he came over to me and apologized." Levin to Fair, 12 November 2016, letter in author's possession.

101. Drechsler, "A Brief History," 19.

102. Levin to Fair, 12 November 2016.

103. Telephone interview with Sibby Flowers, 6 December 2016, Knoxville, Tennessee. No less exemplary of Tommy's coaching style was his response to a query from Lynne Stoessel, who finished third in her class at the women's nationals, about how to control nervousness, Tommy advised that "you must learn to concentrate; be able to block out the audience and even the officials." Kono to Stoessel, 8 August 1987, Kono Papers.

104. In a postscript, Robin also thanked Tommy for "seeing the good in John" Coffee, her local coach. "Too many people overlook him because of his appearance but he is an intelligent, caring man and I respect him greatly. Thanks again." Byrd to Kono, 25 September 1988.

Decades later Melanie Getz was no less grateful. "I miss our chats, talks etc. You taught me so much about not just wts but training and about me (as a person)." Getz to Kono, 17 December 2007, Kono Papers.

105. Newton to Kono, 9 November 1987, Kono Papers.

106. See Mary Lloyd Ireland and Aurelia Nattiv, *The Female Athlete* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 2002) and "NSCA Position Paper, Part II," *NSCA Journal* 11, no. 5 (1989).

107. Newton to Fair, 2 January 2017, letter in author's possession.

108. Interview with Walter Imahara, 2 October 2016, St. Francisville, Louisiana. Coping with tears presented a special problem for Tommy. "It is during the stress of a contest that the lifter may burst into tears. It could be from anxiety, from frustration, from happiness or for no reason at all. It is a woman's way of being able to 'let go.'" You will not find this happening with the male lifters, and, unless you are prepared for it, it will really throw you off guard when tears well in your female lifters' eyes. Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 63.

109. Telephone interview with Pete Miller, October 2016, Arlington, Virginia.

110. Kono to Levin, 20 November 1987, Kono Papers.

111. Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 62-63.

112. Artie Drechsler, "Celebrating Lives Well Lived," *AOBS Newsletter of The Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen* (July 2016): 2 and 12.

113. Ferenc Fejer, "All-time Ranking List According to Medal Points," *World Weightlifting*, no.2 (1982): 38. See also Bill Kwon, "He's the Greatest, That's All," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, 6 August 1982.

114. "Kono is inducted into Hall of Fame," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 7 July 1990.

115. Drechsler, "Celebrating Lives," 11. As Tommy pointed out to leading women weightlifters in 1989, "I have been into weightlifting for over 40 years and my sole source of income for seven years [in Mexico and West Germany] was as a coach of Olympic weightlifting." Kono to Team Members, 4 August 1989, Kono Papers.

116. "USWF Coaching Resume," 1992, Kono Papers.

117. "Coaching Production Record," Kono Papers.

118. Tommy Kono, "Women's Weightlifting Training Camp Report," 30 August 1990, Kono Papers.

119. "More Recent Achievements of Tommy Kono," Kono Papers.

120. Telephone interview with Stella Herrick, 5 September 2016, Tampa, Florida.

121. Tommy Kono, "The ABC's of Olympic-Style Weightlifting" Clinic, 29-30 July 2000, Auburn University Coliseum, Auburn, Alabama, agenda in possession of the author.

122. Simonton to David Meltzer, 16 January 2016, letter in the author's possession.

123. Ibid.

124. Kono to Moomaw, 21 July 1983, Kono to Newton, 9 September 1986, and Kono to Ajan, 11 April 1988, Kono Papers.

125. Kono to Ogata, 11 January 1987, Kono Papers.

126. Tommy Kono, "USAW Elite Lifters' Progress, 14 May 1998 and 1 September 1998, Kono Papers.

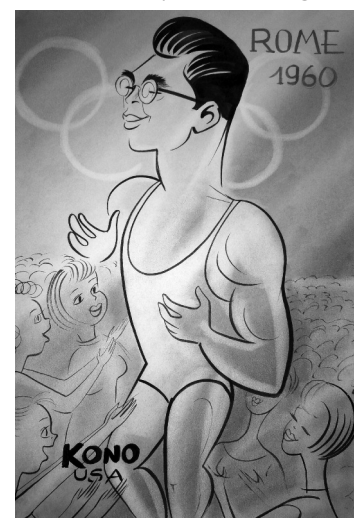
127. Les Simonton, "Report from 2000 National Championships, Athletes' Congress, and Board of Governors," Kono Papers.

128. Interview with Herrick.

129. Telephone interview with Lou DeMarco, 9 September 2016, Warren, Ohio. No less hurtful was Tommy's exclusion from consideration for the IWF Executive Board in 2009 for which he filed a formal grievance with the USAW Board of Directors. See USAW Board Members, 20 January 2009, Kono Papers.

130. Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 2 and 105.

131. Teegarden to Kono, 9 April 1949, Kono Papers. Teegarden also told Tommy that he was “becoming one of the strongest men of your weight in the world. ... I am hoping your youthfulness will not also let you become a silly fool at the same time.”
132. Kiiha, “Tommy Kono,” 7. “In those days,” Tommy recalled, “I ate, talked, and dreamed of weightlifting!” Kono to Warren J. Stewart, 19 June 1993, Kono Papers.
133. Kono to Teegarden, 5 and 26 June 1950, Kono Papers.
134. Kono to Teegarden, 18 April 1949, and “Pete George-Wonder Boy and Larry Barnholth’s ACMWL Gym,” *Iron Man* 9 (March 1949): 26-27 and 45-46.
135. George to Bob Hogue, 11 August 1990, Kono Papers.
136. Lawrence Barnholth, *Secrets of the Squat Snatch* (Akron, OH: American College of Modern Weight Lifting, 1950). Although Pete wrote it, he used Barnholth’s name as author in order to avoid losing his amateur standing. A 2017 reprint with an informative introduction by Pete is available from Gatekeeper Press of Columbus, Ohio, at www.GatekeeperPress.com.
137. Tommy Kono, “The ‘Mind Game,’” Kono Papers.
138. “Kono says,” *Bulletin, California Weight Lifters Association* 3 (September 1950): 2, and “Readers’ Round-Up,” *Iron Man* 10 (December 1950): 59-60.
139. Dr. Peter George, “Mental Attitude of the Champion,” *Strength & Health* 37 (July 1969): 20.
140. Ibid. According to Tommy, “Pete never stressed diet, technique or his training program although these are basic, elemental parts of becoming a champion. His emphasis was the importance of a positive mental attitude.” Kono, *Weightlifting*, 205.
141. Emil Coue, *Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion* (New York: Malkan Publishing Co., 1922), 17, 28, and 32.
142. Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 20 and 36. George confirms that Larry Barnholth “often mentioned Emil Coue” and that Pete in turn discussed Coue’s ideas with Tommy. George to the author, 6 February 2017, letter in author’s possession.
143. Kono to Teegarden, 26 June 1950, Kono Papers.
144. Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952), 8, 15, 39, 56, and 211.
145. George to the author, 31 January 2017, letter in possession of the author.
146. Norman Vincent Peale, “Never Let Anything Get You Down,” newspaper clipping, Kono Papers.
147. In 1971, Tommy told Bob Hoffman that “I read this book about 15 years ago and I’ve used many of its principles as my guideline.” Kono to Hoffman, 20 May 1971, Hoffman Papers. Tommy also confided to Hawaiian champion Russell Ogata that Hill’s book was “an old time favorite of mine.” Kono to Ogata, 11 January 1987, Kono Papers.
148. Napoleon Hill, *Think & Grow Rich* (Cleveland, OH: Ralston Publishing, 1937), 31, 116, and 111.
149. Ibid., 39-40.
150. George to the author, 31 January 2017, letter in the author’s possession.
151. Kono, *Weightlifting*, 186. Although it relates more to interpersonal relations than individual endeavor, Tommy was also influenced by the gospel of success imparted by Dale Carnegie in *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936).
152. Edwin O. Reischauer, *The Japanese* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 152 and 217.
153. Interview with Kono.
154. Interview with Imahara.
155. Imahara and Meltzer, *Book of Remembrance*, 55. See also end-note five for a fuller account.
156. Sumida to the author, 15 January 2017, letter in the author’s possession.
157. D. T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*, ed. William Barrett (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1956), 10. In “Zen for the West,” William Barrett concurs that Zen desires “facts as living and concrete,” a kind of radical intuitionism whereby “thinking and sensing live, move, and have their being within the vital medium of intuition.” See Nancy Wilson Ross, *The World of Zen, An East-West Anthology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 347-48. Barbara Gail Montero, on the other hand, regards Zen as too reliant on the unconscious state of mind or what she calls the “just-do-it principle” and not on consciousness or “cognition-in-action-principle.” Barbara Gail Montero, *Thought in Action, Expertise and the Conscious Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.
158. Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 105-6. Not unlike Tommy’s sense of getting “in the zone” is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “flow” as a way of tapping into ultimate human potential. Csikszentmihalyi believes “the best moments in our lives ... occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is thus something we must *make* happen.” It is achieved through “control over one’s inner life” which will enable a person to “concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else.” Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 3 and 6.
159. “Atlas Comes To Life,” *Time* 75 (27 June 1960): 69.
160. Arthur Drechsler, “Tommy Kono—A Weightlifter’s Weightlifter,” *USA Weightlifting*, 27 April 2016.
161. Interview with Mel Miamoto, 12 November 2016, Honolulu, Hawaii.
162. Kono, *Championship Weightlifting*, 105-6.
163. Kono to Getz, 16 February 1997, Kono Papers.
164. Interview with Kono and Kiiha, “George Brothers,” 6.
165. Tommy Kono, “To Whom It May Concern,” Note to his friends, Kono Papers.
166. Tommy further admitted that “I never thought I would live this long. ... My appearance may look good but, honestly, I’m worn out.” Edward J. Pierini, Jr., “Long Live Tommy Kono Then and Now,” Draft interview in the Kono Papers.
167. A corrected copy for a 2002 biographical entry for the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California states that “From his pre-teen days, Kono remembers his parents talking with friends from the ‘old country.’ Two words that deeply impressed him were ‘shikata-ganai’ and ‘arigatai.’” The former means “it can’t be helped; it was meant to be. In other words, it means there isn’t anything you can do to correct it, for it has happened.” The latter means “being grateful. ... It is being thankful for even a crooked bar or a broken up platform to lift on. The fact that you have some equipment, any equipment, to train with is better than having nothing.” Kathleen Barrows to Kono, 20 September 2002, Kono Papers.



TRIBUTE TO TOMMY KONO FROM HIS HAWAII TEAMMATES

Mike Harada

I represent all the Olympic weightlifters from the Nuuanu Y, outer islands, and the mainland. The Nuuanu Y is the Mecca of Olympic weightlifting made famous by Tommy.

I write this with a heavy heart. Tommy was smart, articulate, and a very humble man. To all of us he was a coach, a mentor, a confidant, a friend and a father figure especially to me. He taught us all to be mentally tough not just in competition, but in life. He taught us to leave everything on the platform and never quit no matter how tired or injured we were. No excuses!

Whatever Tommy did, he did big time. Whether it was bench pressing 135 lbs (barbells, not dumbbells) one in each hand, ripping a phone book in half, squatting 365 lbs for 20 reps at a bodyweight of 157 lbs, or blowing up a hot water bottle until it exploded. He always did things in an impressive fashion.

A lot of us lifters knew Tommy for over 40 years. It hasn't been the same at the Y without him the past year. He was a fixture there. The younger generation may not have realized what a legend Tommy was, but for us old-timers just his watchful eye in the room would make us try harder and concentrate on our technique a little more.

When we traveled to major meets everywhere from Japan to Europe, and many places in the US, everyone held him in high esteem. Recently in Tokyo the lifters called him the Godfather of Japanese weightlifting. We were all proud to be able to refer to him as our coach, and we knew it was an effective scare tactic, letting our opponents know we'd been trained by the best.

We'll miss the coffee candy he gave us when we did good lifts, and him saying "It was a fluke! Try it again!" when we made personal records. We'll be thinking of him in early December when we'd be getting our Honolulu Marathon t-shirts from Tommy. Flo, just like you,



Six outstanding Hawaiian weightlifters gather for a group photo on one of the state's spectacular beaches. The most famous three are standing, left to right, and are Pete George, whose platform career very nearly matched Kono's; Kono himself; and pro wrestler and 1948 Olympic silver medalist Harold Sakata who became famous as the James Bond villain, Oddjob. The three kneeling men are Richard Tom, Richard Tomita, and Emerick Ishikawa.

I'm sure we all have our collection of marathon t-shirts. It's incredible to think that most of us lifters wouldn't be able to complete a 5k! I'm sure we'll all cherish those t-shirts that much more.

The night before major meets, he'd send an email of encouragement. It would always end with the Japanese word *ganbatte* which in English means "do your best."

On a final and personal note, I just want to say that Tommy has been a part of my life ever since I moved to Hawaii in 1979. Nowadays, I catch myself teaching my daughter some of the things that Tommy taught me, and so I know he'll continue to be a part of my life.

From all us lifters, we want you to know that we'll hold you in our hearts forever. We can't believe you are gone, but we know for sure you'll never be forgotten.

Goodbye Tommy, *ganbatte* Tommy, *ganbatte*!

TOMMY KONO'S WORLD RECORD PERFORMANCES

When Kono's world records were made:

- 1) Athletes weighed in within one hour of the start of the contest.
- 2) The lifter had to be re-weighed immediately after the lift to see that he was still within the class limit. If he was, then the barbell and all plates were also reweighed to verify that the previous record had been broken by at least one pound.
- 3) Total records were only recognized if at least three countries participated in the contest.

	Date	Contest	Place	BWT	Class	Event	Weight
1	Aug. 26, 1952	Olympics	Helsinki, Finland	148.75	148.75	Snatch	259.25
2	Aug. 29, 1953	World Championships	Stockholm, Sweden	163.25	165.25	Jerk	371.25
3	Aug. 29, 1953	World Championships	Stockholm, Sweden	163.25	165.25	Total	898.5
4	Oct. 10, 1954	World Championships	Vienna, Austria	173.5	181.75	Jerk	380
5	Oct. 10, 1954	World Championships	Vienna, Austria	173.5	181.75	Total	958.75
6	Oct. 17, 1954	Invitational	Lille, France	165	165.25	Press	288.75
7	Oct. 17, 1954	Invitational	Lille, France	165	165.25	Total	903.5
8	Mar. 15, 1955	Pan Am. Games	Mexico City, Mexico	169.5	181.75	Press	316.5
9	Mar. 15, 1955	Pan Am. Games	Mexico City, Mexico	169.5	181.75	Total	965
10	June 18, 1955	USSR vs USA	Moscow, USSR	164	165.25	Press	292
11	Jan. 20, 1956	Honolulu Champs.	Honolulu, Hawaii	163.75	165.25	Press	293.5
12	Feb. 17, 1956	Oahu Champs.	Honolulu, Hawaii	164	165.25	Press	295.5
13	Mar. 9, 1956	Hawaii Championships	Honolulu, Hawaii	174	181.75	Press	317.50
14	Sept. 15, 1956	Honolulu Open	Honolulu, Hawaii	183	198.25	Press	322.5
15	Oct. 12, 1956	Honolulu Invitational	Honolulu, Hawaii	178.5	181.75	Jerk	382.5
16	Nov. 26, 1956	Olympics	Melbourne, Australia	178	181.75	Jerk	386
17	Nov. 26, 1956	Olympics	Melbourne, Australia	178	181.75	Total	986
18	Feb. 21, 1957	Oahu Championships	Honolulu, Hawaii	179.5	181.75	Press	319
19	Mar. 9, 1957	Honolulu Champs.	Honolulu, Hawaii	178.5	181.75	Press	321
20	Sept. 19, 1958	World Championships	Stockholm, Sweden	163.5	165.25	Snatch	294.5
21	Sept. 19, 1958	World Championships	Stockholm, Sweden	163.5	165.25	Total	948
22	Sept. 8, 1960	Olympics	Rome, Italy	164	165.25	Press	308.5
23	Mar. 11, 1961	Moscow Cup	Moscow, USSR	176	181.75	Press	337.5
24	Mar. 11, 1961	Moscow Cup	Moscow, USSR	176	181.75	Total	1014
25	May. 26, 1961	Hawaii Championships	Honolulu, Hawaii	183.5	198.25	Press	350.5
26	June 17, 1961	Japan Nationals	Tokyo, Japan	180	181.75	Press	338.5

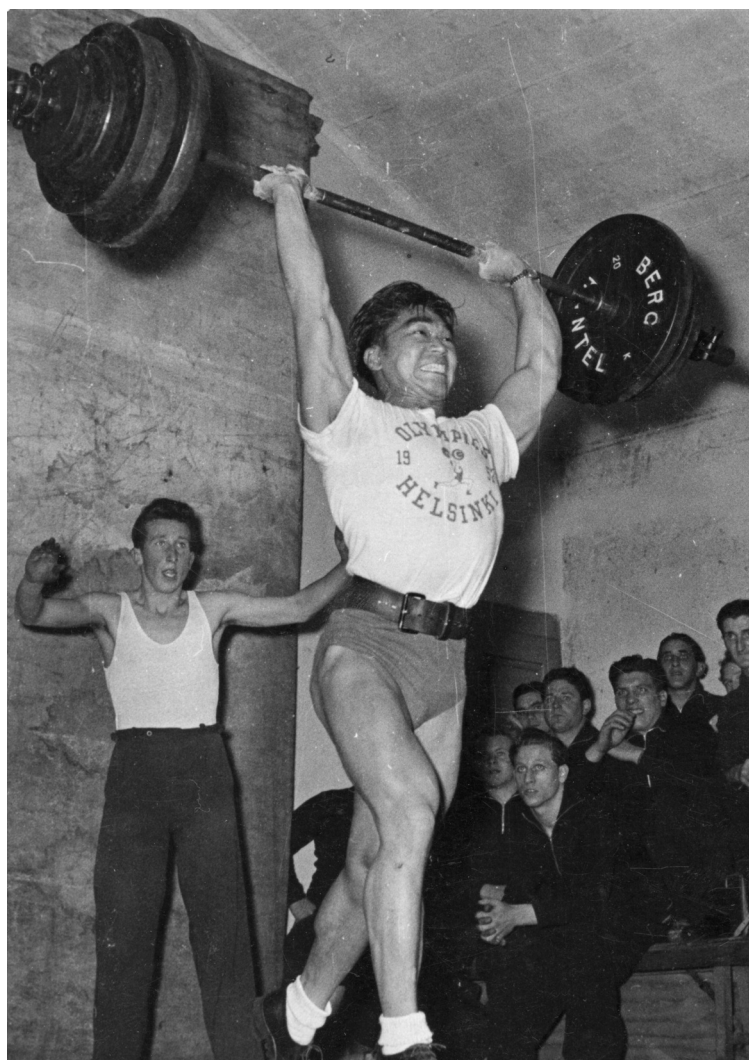
TOMMY KONO'S RECORD OF ACHIEVEMENT

MAJOR WEIGHTLIFTING COMPETITIONS

- ♦US Junior National Championship (1952)
- ♦15 US Senior National Championships (1950-1965), 11 firsts, 2 seconds, 1 third
- ♦12 years of international competition (1952-1963)
- ♦3 Olympic Games (1952, 1956 and 1960), 2 gold and 1

silver medals

- ♦9 World Championships (1953-1963) 6 gold, 1 silver, and 1 bronze medals
- ♦3 Pan American Games (1955, 1959 and 1963), 3 gold medals



Following the Olympics in Helsinki, Kono and the American team spent some additional time in Europe. This shot was taken in Ziegelhausen, Germany in September of 1952. On the back of the photo Kono recorded that in an exhibition "with no warmup" he had pressed 220 pounds (100 kilos) for 3 reps, snatched 231 (105 kilos) for 2 reps, and done a "dead hang" clean & jerk of 352 pounds (160 kilos) all at a bodyweight of 155 pounds). No wonder the young man in the back is so excited.

RECORDS

- ♦26 World Records (Official) in four weight classes (Press-13, Snatch-2, Clean & Jerk-4, Total-7)
- ♦37 American Records (Official)
- ♦7 Olympic Records
- ♦8 Pan Am Records

PHYSIQUE TITLES

- ♦Mr. Sacramento, 1953
- ♦Mr. Iron Man, 1954
- ♦Mr. World (Roubaix, France), 1954
- ♦Mr. Hawaii, 1955
- ♦Mr. Universe (Munich, West Germany), 1955
- ♦Mr. Universe (Tehran, Iran), 1957
- ♦Mr. Universe (Vienna, Austria), 1961

AWARDS AND HONORS

- ♦Most Outstanding Athlete of 1952 for the Pacific Association of the AAU
- ♦Rated Greatest Lifter at the 1953 World Championships
- ♦Commendations from Hawaii House of Representatives, 1959
- ♦Honored in a "This Is Your Life" program staged at the Sacramento YMCA, 1960
- ♦Sullivan Award Nominee (1956-1963), voted 2nd four times and 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th one time
- ♦Outstanding Senior Nationals Lifter for 1952, 1953, 1955, 1957, 1959, 1961, and 1963
- ♦IWF 25 Years Service Award, 1978
- ♦Voted "Greatest Weightlifter of All Time" in worldwide IWF poll, 1982
- ♦Helms Hall of Fame
- ♦USWF Hall of Fame
- ♦US Olympic Hall of Fame, 1990
- ♦One Hundred Golden Olympians, 1996
- ♦IWF Best Weightlifter of 100 Years Award, 2005

REFEREE

- ♦Pan American Games, 1967
- ♦Central American Games, 1966
- ♦Mexican National Championships, 1967 & 1968
- ♦US Senior National Championships, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975
- ♦International Referee, Category II, 1966
- ♦International Referee, Category I, 1968

MANAGER

- ♦Mexican National Team – numerous trips and exhibitions within Mexico, 1966-1968
- ♦West German National Team – numerous training camps within W. Germany and in other European countries, 1969-1972

COACH

- ♦National and Olympic Coach for Mexico, (1966-1968)
 - ♦National and Olympic Coach for West Germany, (1969-1972)
 - ♦Olympic Coach for the United States (1976)
 - ♦Women's World Championship Coach for the United States (1987, 1988 and 1989)
 - ♦Attended the First International Coaching Clinic conducted by the IWF in 1971, Spa, Belgium
 - ♦IWF International Coach Title, 1975
 - ♦Conducted coaching clinics in the following countries:
 - Mexico, 1966-1968
 - France, 1970
 - Scotland, 1970
 - West Germany, 1968 – 1972
 - Japan, 1974 – 1975*
 - New Zealand, 1975*
 - People's Republic of China (Red China), 1975*
- *International Weightlifting Federation Clinics*



Pete George congratulates Tommy Kono on his new 382.5-pound (173.5 kilos) clean & jerk world record at the Honolulu Open on 26 October 1956. In those days the weights had to be unloaded and publicly weighed before the record was official. From left to right are: Clifford Yae; Tad Fujii; Tommy Kono; Dr. Richard You, Kono's coach and the US Team Physician; Roger Taguchi; Olympic champion Pete George; and Olympian Richard Tom.

- ♦Distinction of being the only individual to serve as an international professional coach from the United States, seven years (1966 to 1972)

ADDITIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- ♦US Weightlifting Team Captain and/or Lifter-Official Liaison Person, 1958-1963
- ♦IWF, 15-year Service Medal
- ♦IWF, 25-year Service Medal
- ♦Competed and/or performed in match/exhibitions in over 20 different countries as official representative of the USA: Finland, Sweden, Denmark, W. Germany Poland, USSR, England, France, Austria, Switzerland, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Afghanistan, India, Burma, Japan, Australia, Hungary, and Brazil.



TOMMY KONO: GREATEST WEIGHTLIFTER OF ALL TIME

Pete George

Written for Tommy Kono on 31 October 2015

From time to time the question comes up as to who was the greatest weightlifter of all times. I always unhesitatingly respond, "Tommy Kono." On June 27 and 29, Tommy and I were 85 and 86, respectively, and I think this is a good time for me, as his contemporary, to record my thoughts on this subject for the benefit of future historians of our sport.

The most common response to my choice of greatest weightlifter is something like, "How can you say Tommy Kono was the greatest when all his records have been broken." I can say he was the greatest weightlifter the same way I can say Roger Bannister was the greatest miler of all time. Bannister's historic four minute mile has been beaten and continues to be scrambled repeatedly by boys not yet out of high school. It's tough for most people to believe that athletic records are more mental than physical barriers. When Bannister ran the first sub four-minute mile he broke what he and most people in that sport thought was the actual limit of human capacity. But what he did break was not a physiological barrier, but a strongly reinforced psychological one. After that, the top milers were no longer trying to exceed the limit of human capacity. They were just trying to beat Roger Bannister and other mortals like themselves.

Weightlifters like all competitive athletes set their



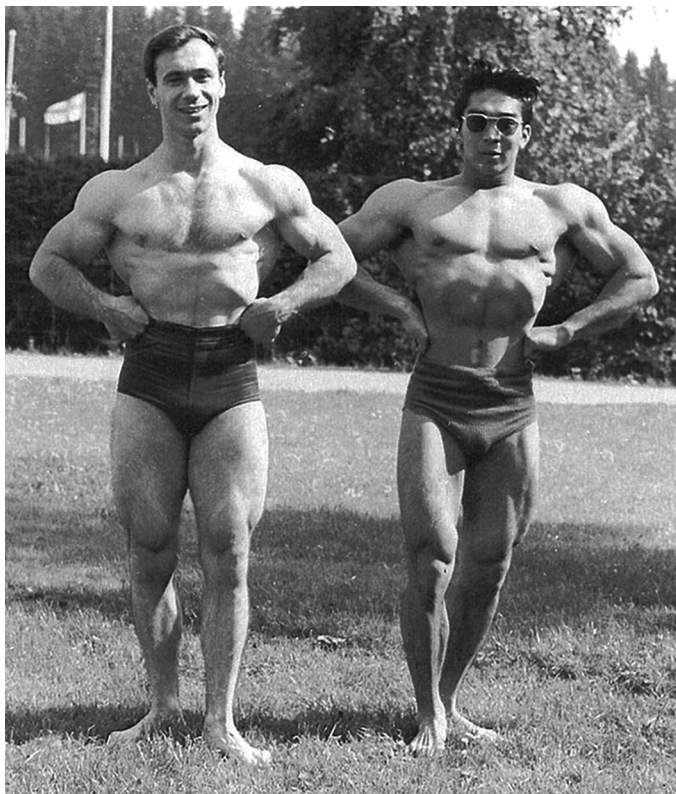
In a 2016 interview, Pete George told the *York Daily Record*, "I think he's the greatest weightlifter of all time . . . He was the greatest competitor because he always went where the competition was the toughest. Most lifters go where the chance of winning is the greatest — at least that's what I did. Tommy would select the weight class that was the toughest."

I don't know of any physique star, other than John Grimek, who could out-lift a contemporary world class lightweight. And although Grimek was an Olympic class weightlifter, he never won a medal in international competition. Tommy won the world's top physique title in four different years!

Kono performed at the highest level in every aspect of our sport. No one has ever had a broader resume in

sights on what they need to do to win. Tommy knew he was the greatest. Not that he was arrogant. Tommy was and still is the most humble great champion I know. He just set his sights a little above what the world's top lifters were lifting. He was not intimidated by their reputations. Although he was a natural middleweight he competed in every class he could temporarily starve or stuff his body into—from lightweight to middle heavyweight. Along the way he broke every record and champion that stood in his path. I believe if the records at the time were 150% higher, Tommy's results would have been the same.

When Tommy started training, weightlifting and body building were considered parts of the same sport; today they are two different sports. That's because to reach the highest level in either, you must specialize. The training programs are very different and the results of one do not translate well into the other. Seldom has there been an athlete who excelled in both.



In almost all photographs featuring Pete George and Tommy Kono in a way which allows their physiques to be compared, Kono's body looks better—with larger muscles, more taper, and more definition. However, in this photo—which Pete reports was taken prior to 1956 with Tommy's camera by one of Tommy's friends—the slightly older Pete comes out on top, mainly because of his outstanding deltoids and definition. According to Pete, the photo never appeared in a "muscle magazine."

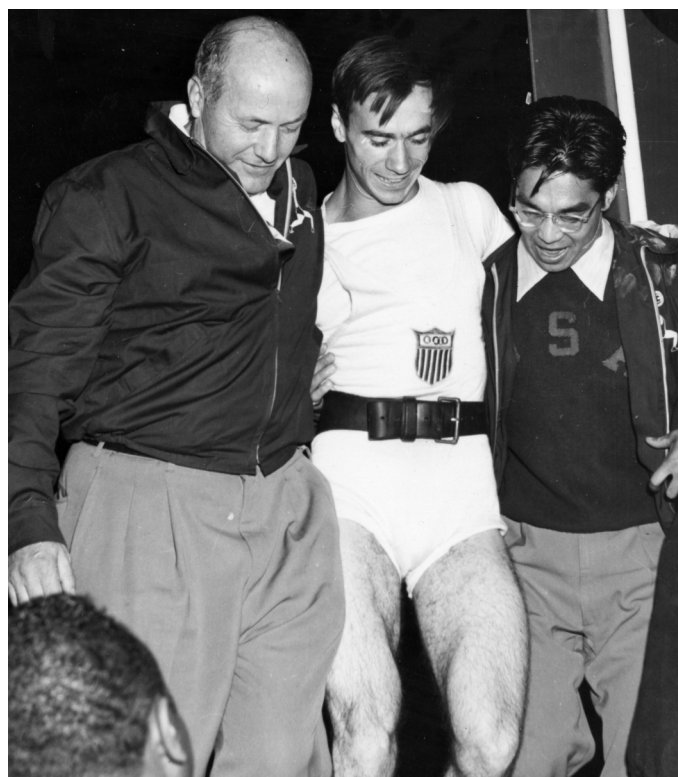
our sport than Tommy. After his competitive days, he was always willing to give back to the sport as a coach, official and author. I don't know of another man who served as head coach for three different countries in three different Olympics. He served as an official at world and Olympic competition eight different years. He was always willing to give a lecture or present a seminar to any level—from rank beginners to Olympic coaches.

Tommy's success as an athlete is all the more phenomenal when you consider that he was a self-made champion. He never had a coach. He started out in a World War II California relocation center as a sickly kid trying to build his muscles with an exercise set of weights. He never touched an official barbell until his first contest. However, he was a constant student and keen analyst of every aspect of our sport. He carefully analyzed photos of the top lifters that he found in *Strength & Health* magazine. At contests,

he would pick the brains of any available coach. I can remember him cornering my coach, Larry Barnholth.

Tommy always has been a quick learner and thankfully, he has documented much of his knowledge in his two books, *Weightlifting, Olympic Style* and *Championship Weightlifting, Beyond Muscle Power, The Mental Side of Lifting*. Every weightlifting coach should first thoroughly study their entire contents then make them required reading for all his or her charges.

Tommy tells me I was his early inspiration. I was a world champion before he entered his first contest. I kid him with, "I'm flattered when you say you wanted to be like me. But you just didn't know when the hell to stop. You broke all my records!" But they like his and all other athletic records were made for others to break and couldn't have been broken by a nicer guy. Tommy and I were competitors, but we have been the best of friends for 65 years—since we first met in Philadelphia in 1950. Now we both live under the Hawaiian sun where Tommy casts a large shadow; I am pleased to be so near to one with the greatest stature in our sport.



Bob Hoffman and Tommy Kono help Pete George offstage at the 1953 world championships after the clean & jerk that gave him a new world record in the total. Waiting to greet Pete with a congratulatory hug is his good friend John Davis, whose head (front and below) is the only thing showing.

TOMMY KONO: WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THIS?

David P. Webster

My home in Scotland is far from Hawaii but Tamio (Tommy) Kono was a very well-known and much admired weightlifter in this part of the globe. Although I had often met him at various important competitions I did not get to know him properly until a rather strange experience. One evening in Scotland I was sitting by the fire planning training schedules when the phone interrupted my studies. Grumbling to myself I was surprised by a female voice saying she was calling from America, mentioning a well-known hotel. Guessing that some of my weightlifting pals had enlisted one of the many American stewardesses from the nearby airport to play a prank on me I decided to play along and asked to be put through to the caller. This time a male voice said that his name was Bell and he wanted the best possible weightlifting coach to come to Chicago and coach a team for the forthcoming Olympics in Munich! "Mr. Bell, your bell does not ring true," I replied and added one or two other wisecracks when Mr. Bell irately interrupted, "Have you been drinking? I am willing to pay you well. I want to have the best possible American team. What would it cost me for you to come and coach them?"

"OK!" I replied. "You book me a suite in that hotel. Send me a plane ticket to Chicago, and I will come right away! Who put you up to this, Mr. Bell?" "Tommy Kono said you were the man for the job and I take his word," Bell replied. "Tommy Kono," I gasped, "Tommy is my hero and Tommy was my hero even though we are on rival teams."

My admiration for Tommy soared more than ever. It turned out that he had read my articles based on the films I made officially for the International Weightlifting Federation and thought I could do a good job. Tommy had put aside all international barriers and I will never forget his quiet kindness and support. When this happened Tommy and I were not personal friends. Even so, he apparently saw in my film analysis and related studies that I was a very serious student of the game. After that we remained friends for life.

At one point Tommy came to Scotland and coached our best men. He was enormously popular and

his incredible knowledge was widely circulated. My family on the other hand was most impressed by the fact that such a famous strength athlete was so quiet and modest. We worked together to produce a weightlifting log book which, if kept up to date, was a very valuable tool for us to study. It allowed us to follow the results of training for the three competition lifts used in those days.

Some years later, when a team of Highland Games champion "heavies" were returning from Japan they were, not surprisingly, very keen to meet Tommy, a request which was accommodated by this incredible weightlifter. At the last minute an urgent private matter kept Tommy from meeting us that night at the airport, but instead he had several of his club members meet us to help with the baggage and take us to our hotel! Our men were astounded by such kind, thoughtful treatment from such a busy sports superstar. The following day, on meeting Tommy, they left him in no doubt about their appreciation of his kindness and that of his club members. Naturally, Tommy's kind response, when it was fully conveyed to our Scottish weightlifters, made them like him even more.

Tommy and I met again in 1972 in Munich, where I was filming again for the IWF. I went to see him one afternoon while he was directing a final training session for the Germans. I had used up all my own film, and wanted a photograph. Without any request from me, Tommy asked the lifter David Berger to take a photograph for me. (Berger, an all-American boy who did not quite reach the standard necessary to be on the American team, had gone to Israel and qualified for their team.)

That very night, 5 September 1972 was the darkest day in the history of weightlifting and should never be forgotten. That night eleven Israeli lifters and coaches, including poor David Berger, were martyred by terrorists! The horror of the situation completely changed the atmosphere at the Olympic village, but some weeks later I was astonished to receive the photo Berger took that last day. The great Tommy Kono, without any request, had gone to the bother of acquiring David's camera, had the film developed, and sent it to me from America! "Treasure it," he wrote, "It was David's last photograph." Rest in Peace.

TRIBUTES TO TOMMY KONO FROM HIS FRIENDS AND COLLEAGUES

Compiled by John Fair

Editors' Note: The excerpts that follow come from a variety of sources and are listed in alphabetical order based on the author's last name. Some of them are based on interviews conducted by John Fair; others are from: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer, *Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono* (Mesa, AZ: 2017); Denis Reno's *Weightlifting Newsletter*; or other websites and publications. If the tribute has been published elsewhere, the source is listed at the top of the entry. Excerpts containing only the name of the person, their hometown, and date, are either from John Fair's interviews or were written specifically for inclusion in this issue. Again, we thank John Fair for his efforts in bringing together such powerful remembrances of the life of Tommy Kono, and we also thank all of you who participated by sharing your memories. The photos are some of our many favorites from the Kono Collection and are in no special order.



West Coast notables in the prime of life. From left to right, Walt Marcyan, Clancy Ross, Bill Pearl, Joan DeMillo, Betty Stern, and Tommy Kono. Although we don't know, we suspect the photo was taken by the renowned photographer Leo Stern.

Dr. Tamas Ajan—Budapest, Hungary
From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer,
Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono

In 2005, Tommy Kono received the title of "Lifter of the Century" from the IWF. Not only was Tommy one of the Greatest of All Times in weightlifting, but he was also the true role model, a man of honour and integrity, as well as a wonderful human being whose friendship always made me proud.

Kevin Asano—Honolulu, Hawaii
From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer,
Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono

I had the pleasure of meeting Tommy for the first time in the summer of 1987. I had just made the Pan American Games team in judo and was visiting Hawaii before my competition. I battled with allergies, eczema, and stress from college and competition. When I went to visit my allergist he offered to introduce me to Tommy. My allergist told me that when Tommy was a child he was sickly and had asthma. Perhaps I could relate to him because of my physical condition. My goal was to make the 1988 Olympic team, but I was under a lot of stress and pressure and needed a fresh perspective on life and competition. As it turned out, this brief encounter with Tommy changed my life for the good.

Tommy shared the mindset that he had when he competed and encouraged me to have the same. He shared that I should compete not only for myself but for the people who supported me. In a sense they were competing alongside of me on the mat. He explained that when you compete for the sake of others you will give your best and not give up. He said that I should compete for the United States, Hawaii, my teammates, my family, and my Japanese-American heritage.

**Clarence Bass—Albuquerque, New Mexico
Ripped Enterprises, May 2016**

I saw Tommy Kono for the first time at the 1955 National Championship in Cleveland, Ohio; I was a senior in high school. As my father and I walked into the auditorium the first thing we saw was Bob Hoffman at the microphone—and Tommy Kono standing on the side of the stage in a colorful Hawaiian shirt. He was already an Olympic and two-time world champion, so I recognized him immediately. The only other thing I remember is that Bill Pearl won the Mr. America contest.

A half century later we became email friends. I have an inch-thick stack of correspondence. He was a kind and attentive friend. He loved precision in everything from engineering to acrobatics—and of course Olympic weightlifting. It was my honor and pleasure to write commentaries that he used to promote his books.

We'll never see his like again. His was a life splendidly lived from beginning to end.

**Waldemar Baszanowski—Warsaw, Poland
From: *Denis Reno's Weightlifter's Newsletter*,
No. 275, (24 January 2003).**

Question by P. K. Mahanand—Who was your model hero in weightlifting?

WB—Tommy Kono. He was such a great lifter, also a very good sportsman and a human being. He was my hero. He won the world championships 8 times. Even when he lost at Rome Olympics, he made no excuses.

**Fyodor Bogdanovsky—St. Petersburg, Russia
From: *Denis Reno's Weightlifter's Newsletter*,
No. 300 (13 January 2006).**

Kono works on me like a Python on a rabbit when he looks from the wings.

**Gary Cleveland—Brooklyn Center, Minnesota
From: *The Avian Movement Advocate*,
No. 11 (July 1999): 4-5.**

Coming into this match, Tommy Kono had

racked up a string of victories beginning with his first Olympic win in 1952, and had never been defeated in international competition. But on this night, he lost five pounds to Bogdanovsky in the press and fell ten more behind in the snatch. At that point Bob Hoffman, who was announcing, remarked that now Tommy was too far behind and couldn't win. After Bogdanovsky ended with a 363 clean & jerk, it left Kono needing 380.

In 1958 a 380-pound clean & jerk for a middleweight was impossible. Kono held the world record at 372 which he had set five years earlier and world records were always broken by a pound or two. To give some historical perspective, no middleweight would make a 380 clean & jerk in either a World or Olympic championship until six years later, 1964 at the Tokyo Olympics.

At Terpak's insistence, Kono took his first attempt with 352 which went smoothly enough but a long way from 380. Then as the weight on the bar continued to increase, one began to wonder if he was going to take anymore. Bogdanovsky, Jim George, Sheppard, Vorobiev, Emrich and even Bradford were taking their attempts. The weight on the bar had passed the amount that a middleweight could make.

Then, with 380 pounds on the bar, Kono appeared for his second attempt, the most competitive middleweight in the world attempting it and it was nerve wracking to watch. The tension that gripped us all when he began the lift broke quickly when he pulled it just to his thighs—a dead lift.

When he came back for his third I wasn't expecting much. But Kono could captivate an audience and he pulled us in again—and again the tension grew. Standing over the bar, his face had the look of extreme concentration as he must have been waiting for that exact moment that would tell him "Now." Finally he bent over, grasped the bar and began the pull from the floor. I recall a strained groan with the second pull. That's where I expected the lift would end but it didn't—he was diving under it. Then I thought he'll never pull it in but there it was on his shoulders. I was certain he'd never stand up, but he began, very slowly and with extreme effort to rise and at some point near the top we all realized he had just cleaned 380—and that's the most impressive lift I've ever seen.

If the lift had gone easily, popped right onto his chest and he had bounced out of the squat like cork in water it would have seemed less significant, less heroic. The difficulty paired with the occasion intensified the dra-

ma. Yes, he missed the jerk, but that seemed incidental after what we had just seen.

**John Coffee—Marietta, Georgia
October 2016**

I probably first learned about Tommy Kono in 1958, reading he-man books from the magazine rack and sipping cherry Coke in a drug store in the small, South Georgia town of Eastman.

Obviously, he was the man of the hour. Who would have ever dreamed that someday I would meet this seemingly almost God-like man and even have the honor and the privilege of coaching with him as an assistant on several occasions at international meets? I have many dear remembrances of this great man who, even though he had accomplished great things as an athlete, remained one of the nicest men I ever met.

One of my favorite memories of Tommy goes back to 1988 when I served as his assistant at the 2nd women's worlds in Jakarta, Indonesia. The team had been shopping and was just getting back on the bus, when this little guy with an armload of paintings came onto the bus. Eventually, he approached me as a potential customer for his art. I'm no art connoisseur and I really didn't have room for a framed painting in my luggage, so I politely waved him away.

Tommy evidently saw all this and he comes over and tells me I should buy one of the little guy's paintings, "it could mean he'd be able to feed his family that night." I gave the man a \$20 bill and learned a great lesson about humanity. I still have the painting hanging on the wall at my condo. It's really beautiful, and it was probably the best \$20 I ever spent. Thanks Tommy.

Another favorite anecdote about Tommy is when we were rooming together in Colorado Springs, and we had the women's team getting ready to go to the worlds. There was a karate, judo, or martial arts group that we ran into in the hall. And one of the guys was making some off-color remarks to some of the lifters. They told Kono who told their coach, and the boys had to apologize and all that shit. When we got back to the room Kono says, "You know, they don't know real karate. Real karate com-



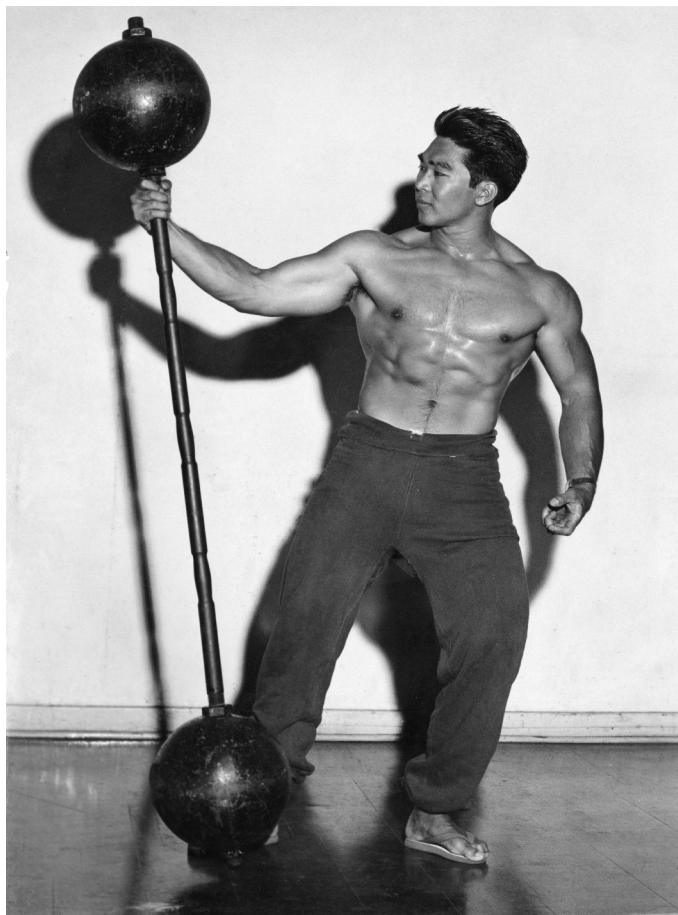
One of the darkest chapters in US history took place during World War II when more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were forced to leave their homes and go to internment camps for the duration of the war. Tommy's family was relocated to the Tule Lake Segregation Center in northern California, where more than 18,000 people—many of them US citizens—were forced to live in these stark barracks.

mits suicide." And he wasn't smiling when he said it.

**Howard Cohen—Savannah, Georgia
18 August 2016**

The passing of Tommy was hard to take for many of us. I have known Tommy for over 60 years. He was a very good friend and also my hero. I competed in the 1956 Nationals and so did Tommy. I was glad that he was there and also glad that he was not in my bodyweight class. I spent a lot of time talking to Tommy and learned a lot from him. First, he trained hard and correct, but the thing that impressed me most was that he felt that 50% was using his mind and always positive. Through the years, I kept in touch with him and followed the many competitions that he competed in. I have read most of the many books that he put out and always learned something each time.

Once in a while I got to see him lift. He was not only a great lifter and probably the best in his time, but he was always willing to talk to other lifters and share his wisdom. Tommy impressed me with his outstanding physique. Most know that he won the Mr. Universe title several times and clearly he was the best built lifter in the world. In that time frame, the AAU controlled all sports,



Kono had a flair for posing and a fondness for lifting dumbbells and barbells from an earlier time. Here he shows off his body as well what looks to be a Milo barbell.

including all Mr. Contests. I competed and entered many physique contests and won several including the Mr. Georgia title twice, but like lifting, I was not in the same class as Tommy.

Several years ago, Murray Levin and I went to The Oldtimers Strongman Reunion as did Tommy. We spent a good bit of time with Tommy and I will remember that visit forever. Time passes real fast and knowing that I will never see Tommy again is hard to take.

David Colon-Arroyo—Puerto Rico
From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer,
Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono

In his formal lecture at Aguadilla, he stressed the qualities that should describe an ideal lifter, not only from a physical standpoint, but also as a conscientious citizen. His graphics and visuals were very eloquent, as well as

his soothing voice and countenance, inspiring confidence within the small population of eager pupils. May I stress the word “pupils,” for one of Tommy’s greatest attributes was to be a perennial teacher.

His contributions to the sport while an active athlete, although great and deserving to be recognized, fall short of his greater ability to reach the minds of his audience in the educational process. His approach to a crowd was incredible, as his subtle but efficient style could bring the best out of every recipient of his wise words.

Not only did he address the crowd in a fruitful way, he spent valuable time with athletes on a one-to-one basis, answering any question and providing advice that can only come from the best in his field. That’s what Tommy always provided to the world, the best in his field, may it be weightlifting, body building, or just being the best teacher the sport of weights has ever had. May I salute Mr. Tommy Kono as a Master Educator, to be always remembered in the sport of Weightlifting.

Bob Crist—Hampton, Virginia
11 August 2016

He was so smart. He was an immediate winner when he took that job over there in Honolulu. He was a Japanese-American, and Hawaii has a great population of people like that. With that national heritage, you know. Tommy was always the perfect gentleman, quiet and well-spoken. What can you say? A man for all seasons. Not original. But it’s true.

Jan Dellinger—Red Lion, Pennsylvania
From: John Wood, ed., *The Dellinger Files*
(Ann Arbor, 77 Publications, 2009), 24-25.

The company was sending me to some event in which Tommy Kono would also be involved. I mentioned to Grimek that I would probably be seeing Tommy, and that I would say hello to him for John as they were good friends. After telling me to make sure that I did convey his good wishes to Kono, Grimek brought up a memorable (to him) dumbbell pressing duel he once had with the former in the York gym. According to John, the challenge was to rep out in the overhead press with a 100-pound dumbbell in each hand, with the final result being that he managed 17 good ones to Kono’s 16. Little did I

suspect that I was being set up, when he also told me to ask Kono if he remembered the occasion.

This was my first face-to-face contact with Tommy Kono, so he asked me how everyone was at York, citing specific individuals. When he got to Grimek, he mentioned what longstanding friends they were, how he'd been over to his house different times, and what respect he had for him. So, at some point shortly after that I relay JCG's reciprocal well-wishes, as well as the dumbbell pressing contest story.

Suffice it to say, the "Happy Hawaiian" insisted that 17 reps was the correct number, but he, not Grimek, made that number. Further, he insisted that I go back and make Grimek aware of the actual facts. So, when I returned and Grimek asked me if I saw Kono, I replied that I had, but in my mind was praying that he not ask me if I had run the dumbbell story by him. Darned if Grimek didn't ask me if I had, and I offered Kono's interpretation of the event, to which JCG replied, "He said what! He did not make 17 reps. The next time you see him ..."

No, the friendship did not fall apart over who pressed those 100 pound dumbbells 17 reps, and who only made 16, but I clearly walked into that one.

Arthur Drechsler—Flushing, New York
From: "Tommy Kono—A Weightlifter's
Weightlifter," USA Weightlifting, 27 April 2016

If anything surpassed Tommy's athletic and second career accomplishments, it was his character and mental powers. One example of the latter were powers of concentration so profound that when a fire alarm went off during his last C&J at the 1964 Olympic Trials, he didn't ask for another attempt because he said he didn't hear it. And if Tommy was known for anything, it was his infectious positive mental attitude combined with unbounded determination.

In terms of character, Kono learned an important lesson from John Davis, who roomed with Tommy in 1952, at the Helsinki Olympic Games. Davis, considered by many to be the greatest lifter in the world at the time, was on his way to winning his last Olympic Games and Tommy was to win his first. The very evening of Kono's victory, Davis sat the young man down and essentially told him "You are now the Olympic Champion, with all of its well-earned joy and glory. But with that honor comes a responsibility. You will for the rest of your life

represent the Olympic movement. So in your every behavior, you must uphold the rich and solemn tradition that has been handed down to you." This was a lecture that Kono never forgot, and always strived to be guided by.

I had the enormous privilege of knowing Tommy for just shy of 40 years, meeting him as a young lifter anxious to learn from one of my heroes. Many young people idolize someone from afar, only to be disappointed when they actually meet their hero. That certainly happened to me on multiple occasions. But not with Tommy Kono. As I got to know him and became his friend, he continuously surpassed my lofty image of my idol, making an impression on me forever, with his expressions of his love for the game.

For instance, many may not know that despite his many high-profile coaching assignments, Tommy was a volunteer at the Nuuanu YMCA, in Honolulu, HI, for decades (he had moved from CA to HI in the mid-1950s). He went to that Y on a clocklike basis, to train and offer coaching advice to athletes at all levels. He never charged a nickel for his priceless advice.

While those who never met Tommy will never fully appreciate his full measure, we can all be grateful that his books and other writings captured at least some of his wisdom and character for all time. Tommy would have had many invaluable messages for the lifters of today and the future, had he been with us longer. But I feel confident that the one message he would have wanted to leave with us all was one that we talked about during our last conversation before his passing. He fervently wished and believed above all else—53

that USA weightlifters can be among the best in the world once again. They can do it if they only come to believe they can, and train intensely and intelligently to realize that level of performance. I hope the young lifters of today will have the courage and dedication to heed Tommy's message, and grant him his last wish.

Joe Dube, Sr.—Jacksonville, Florida
From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer,
Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono

I speak in absolute confidence when I say in today's world of money sports, braggarts, self and popular glorified goons, and so many false idols whose misdeeds were eventually disclosed to the public, that Tom-

my Kono stands apart from them in another universe of sports achievement and courteous behavior. I had the privilege to have met with Tommy on many occasions, the last time at the Arnold Classic in Columbus, Ohio, several years ago. Tommy Kono was of unique class, a humble and true gentleman. My brother Virgil and I in our early training idolized Tommy, he sparked us to make bigger achievements.

Clyde Emrich—Chicago, Illinois
June 2016

We lifted and contacted the military officer to tell us where to go after the Olympics, so we went to Stockholm and lifted in an exhibition. Tommy liked to meet newspaper people and we'd have an exhibition set up. So we did it in Copenhagen and lifted there, and we finally decided we need to get back to the military. We found that Heidelberg was the European command for the US military. ... They finally decided to keep us there, and put me in charge. In Heidelberg I was in charge of fourteen tennis courts, an Olympic size outdoor swimming pool, an indoor swimming pool and steam bath. In Mannheim, which was about 15 miles away, they put Tommy in charge of a big sports stadium. We would travel back and forth. I would lift where he was, and I had a platform set up outside one of the tennis courts where I was in Heidelberg, and he would come and lift with me. So we just went back and forth like that until we got together for the various exhibitions we gave throughout Europe and throughout Germany. But what he used to do, he loved to do, if we were going to lift somewhere, the day before he would go to some local bakery and get the most creamy bun or biscuit that he could get, and then after the meet he would get back to the hotel and couldn't wait to eat his biscuit. We had a lot of fun.

It's a funny thing. I was at the pro-bowl game back a few years ago in Hawaii, and I called Tommy's home. It would be a good chance to talk to Tommy. So his son answered, and I said who I was and your dad—yea, yea—and your dad and I were at the Olympics, and it didn't seem to faze him, and then I said, I'm here with the Chicago Bears for the pro-bowl game. That lit him up. Wow, okay. So then he got his dad.

We covered almost everything about lifting in talking and chatting. What we were going to do, what we did, what the other guys did, and stuff like that. He was

very detailed. He was very precise. He would write out exactly what he was going to do and exactly what we do in training. But then again we all did that. I kept records of what I did. But he was very precise.

Sibby Flowers—Knoxville, Tennessee
6 December 2016

At Daytona he helped calm me down. He was very calming. He sat me down before my first international meet, and showed me how to take deep breaths and how to relax and stay calm. He was just so quiet and calm, unlike some other coaches who were real gung-ho and slap you on the back and were sort of aggressive. ... He was the only one of my coaches who calmed me down. Tommy would be in a room alone with me and talk real softly, take a deep breath and relax, close your eyes. The calmness is what I remember from him the most. He always gave great advice. He was at the training center when I was there. I was lifting pretty good and moved out to the training center, and he would always find little points that would straighten things out for me.

Jim George—Akron, Ohio
June 2016

We are immigrants, sons of immigrants, and we have lived the American dream as far as I'm concerned. It has been so rewarding. You know, so many of us that made it, part of it was an inferiority complex, part of it was being sons of immigrants and so forth. Those of us who were Caucasian of course had the advantage of the white skin and therefore more readily accepted. Tommy being Asian of course was ostracized more, especially coming on the end of World War II, in that era. Part of our success was that we've got to prove something on our shoulders, and Tommy was probably one of the most intense human beings I've ever met in that regard. I mean a wonderful human being, a great guy and good friend, but extremely intense, extremely directed, almost to the point of compulsive. That I would attribute a great deal to his success and mine too, Pete's too, all of us in that regard. Being a champion doesn't have much to do with intellect, but it has a hell of a lot to do with drive.

It's not weight related, but going back to what I said originally, being children of immigrants, and Tommy

being Asian. He was dating a girl in York, Pennsylvania, when I was there. Her parents of course were adamantly opposed because she was Caucasian. And I was the fall guy. I was the surrogate that went in and picked her up, because I presented the Caucasian face. I don't know that's anybody's business but Tommy's and mine and yours or what. The other thing is on one occasion, we were having a discussion about World War II, with Tommy and four or five or six of us. All of a sudden, Tommy just quietly got up and left the room. Later I said, "Don't you believe about Germany or something?" And he replied, "Well I don't talk about World War II because there's too much opportunity here to get into some sensitive areas."

**Walter Imahara—St. Francisville,
Louisiana; October 2016**

He told me some things about Dr. You, but at that point I didn't know what was going on except that Dr. You was in Hawaii. He wanted, Tommy told me, to use Tommy's medal winnings to boost him like Paul Anderson, strongest man in the world and all those things, that kind of promotion. Tommy was not very keen to that, but Dr. You said you got to get out there. You need to tell people how great you are. I listened to him later on in life. Tommy never talked about himself. Dr. You needed that. He wanted to promote Tommy to promote himself.

One of the things Tommy didn't like was the training at the training center because they were using the European/Russian method. You work out every day. Whereas Tommy says the natural body needs rest. You can make more gains by working out three times a week rather than five or six times. He says the result of their training method is that when they go to a meet, they're not super fresh, mentally alert. You hear stories about Gary Hansen who was going to nationals, and a couple of days before leaving, got a better total than he made in the meet. Tommy says it's better to go in under-trained. He had the mind to do that. But you can't tell that to American lifters. No, no, no, you got to wait to the last minute. If I'm going to press X amount, I'm not going to be ready.



When the teenaged Kono returned from the camp in Tule Lake, he continued the training he had begun during his internment. He built this gym in the basement of his home in Sacramento, but the ceiling was so low that he had to place the plates farther out on the bar so they wouldn't hit the rafters.

So Tommy says, the end result is that they get to a meet—a national meet at this level, at the world level—where you're supposed to lift more, but they lifted less. He used to tell me that. Because when you get to the world level, you should think, I pressed 250 pounds. In this meet I'm going to do 260. But the American lifter was trained so that when he got in a big meet, he would do less. That used to get him to no end. When you get into a big meet, you're fired up, you're in the world championships, you're the lifter. You've got to do more.

**Gary Kawamura—Honolulu, Hawaii
12 November 2016**

I've known Tommy since he first moved here and helped him move from Dr. You's house, and he was the one who encouraged me to get into Olympic lifting. I was doing powerlifting, and I did very well at it, and I was trying Olympic lifting since I saw John Yamauchi and Patrick Omori going to the nationals, I thought maybe I should try that too. I remember one of the meets, and I

hadn't personally met Tommy yet, but I did pretty bad. After the meet he came up and said, "Oh, you're Gary, and I was thinking I heard you were doing powerlifting. You know, if you went into Olympic lifting, you might be good." With someone as famous as Tommy Kono telling me I might be good, it took me about two seconds to quit powerlifting. I never entered a power meet after that, even if I could probably win, over the next couple years. That was in the early seventies, and then I went to my first nationals in '75. But unlike some other lifters over here who were very successful, like John Yamauchi and Brian Miyamoto, I was not that successful. In fact, I went to six or seven nationals, and the highest I placed was fourth place. So, in '91 at age 46 I dropped my bodyweight to 123 and went to the nationals. Tommy was coaching me, and in the clean & jerk I missed my first attempt really badly. In the clean I fell backwards. I missed my second attempt. I had my third attempt left, and after all that work, I was thinking if I don't do this I'm going to bomb out. So here comes Tommy, and I'm thinking he's going to give me encouragement. So he comes up and all he said was, "Well Gary, you got yourself into it." That was his exhortation speech to me. And I said, "I guess so." But I made my last attempt, and I got my only national medal which was a third place. But Tommy was a father. Up till recently I actually hated my father, and Tommy to me was that father figure.

Bruce Klemens—Oak Ridge, New Jersey
From: "Tommy Kono, RIP (1930-2016),"
Denis Reno's Weightlifter's Newsletter,
No. 384 (29 April 2016): 3-4.

It was an honor to know Tommy. Besides being one of the greatest weightlifters of all time, he was just a wonderful man, a great human being. I will miss him a lot. Tommy was a great competitor, a real tiger in competition. Most of his many world records were done in foreign countries, not in the USA. Why? Because he had the ability to lift BIG when it counted ... in the World Championships or other major events. He could do far more under pressure than he could do in training. Let me just tell you one story that Tommy told me years ago.

"When I started out, I trained in the cellar of my parent's home in Sacramento. I found I could normally lift "X." But I noticed when my brother came down to watch me I could lift $X + Y$. And sometimes my brother

would bring his friends I could lift $X + 4Y$. Then in National meets, $X + 5Y$, and in World Championships $X + 6Y$ and more."

So, do you see the pattern? Tommy was the ultimate clutch lifter. The greater the pressure and importance of the meet, the more he could get out of his body.

Murray Levin—Boca Raton, Florida,
14 May 2016

Two weeks ago, I received a message from Walter Imahara that Tommy Kono had finally passed away. Although I had received earlier messages from Kono that he was in his last days, I was stunned. The greatest weightlifter this country had ever produced was no longer with us. I went into the garage where I have my old homemade power racks. Above them on the wall is a large framed photo of Kono with all his records alongside him. I went back into my library where it is quiet. In one corner is a full-size treadmill, and above it is a photo of Tommy signed by him with a copper inlay of all his records. I stood looking at it, sat down, and then the tears came. I couldn't hold back any longer.

This wonderful man who had touched so many lives, had been my hero in my sport, and it is hard to believe that I will no longer hear that cheerful optimistic voice. And then I remembered those flashbacks when I first met him in the early 1950s when I saw him lift at the nationals. I thought of the many times I met him in York. I thought of the symposiums and seminars he did for me when I was Pan American president in El Salvador, Guatemala, and a huge one in Puerto Rico. Had I won back the presidency in the 1996 elections, it was my intention to put him in as coach in Colorado Springs.

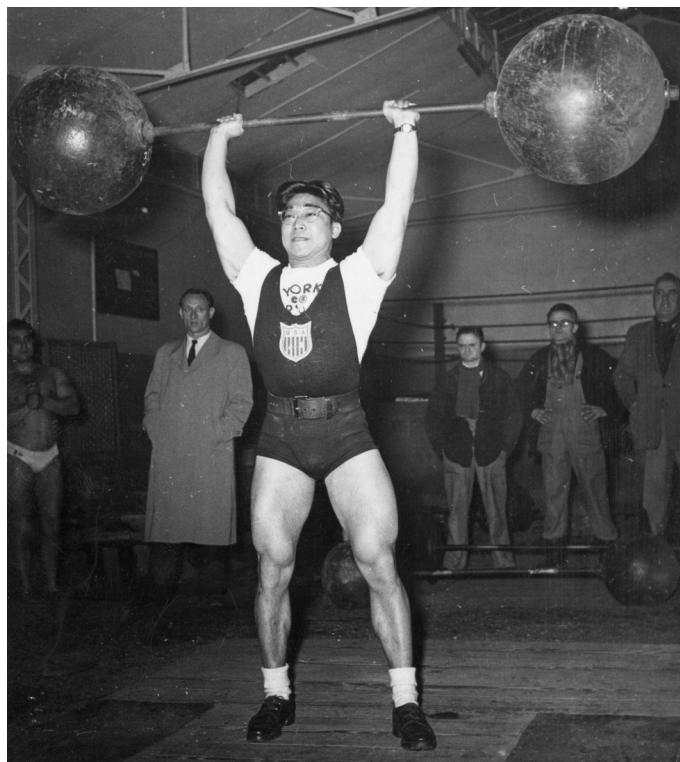
I could write dozens of stories about his career and our travels together. But there are two that stand out in my mind, one which has never been told. It was told to me by John Terpak Sr. who was a giant in our sport and who along with Bob Hoffman headed York Barbell for almost 60 years. It was the night of the final head-to-head competition in Madison Square Garden in 1958 and the largest crowd ever assembled to see a weightlifting meet. Over 10,000 people attended. The most dramatic part of the competition was between Kono and the Russian middleweight. After the press and the snatch Kono needed a fantastic clean & jerk to win. Terpak was Kono's coach at this event, and he whispered in Tommy's ear. "I fig-

ured out what you should take to beat the Russian.” Tommy turned to him like a tiger. He said, “don’t tell me how much I need. Just put it on the bar, and I’ll lift it.” I was sitting up front that night and he put everything he had into that lift and won that match.

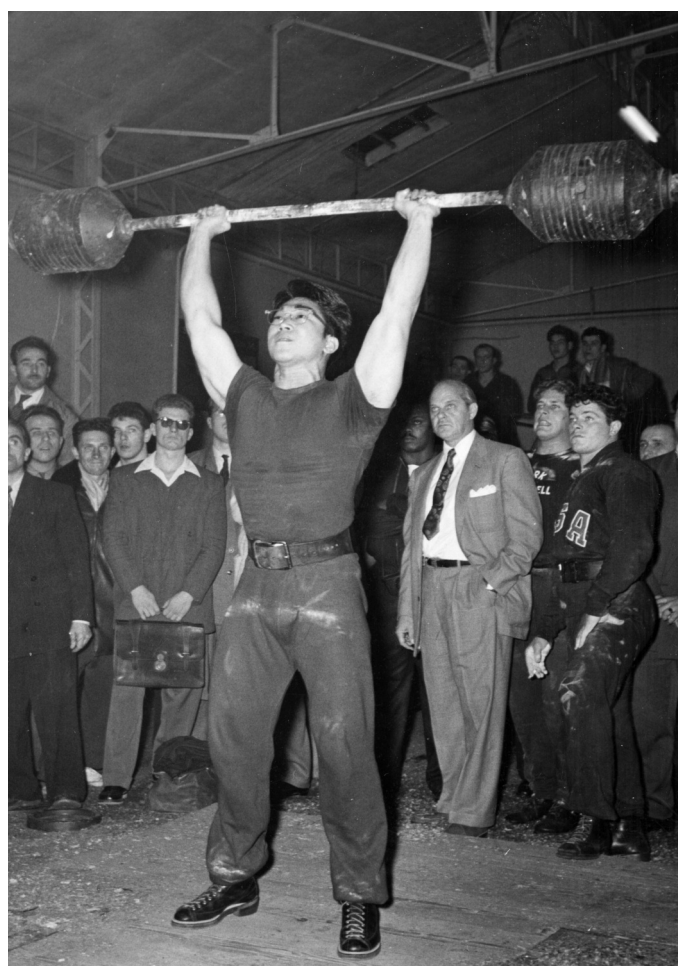
There was one other lift which in all the years of my life in the sport to me was the most dramatic I had ever seen. It was 1963, and the meet was the nationals in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It was hot, the air conditioning wasn’t working, and everyone was watching the 181 lb. class between Kono and Lou Riecke. Riecke had been bragging he would take Tommy’s title at this event. Kono flew in and was not in his best shape, but as always ready to defend his title. After the snatch and press, Kono was behind 22 lbs., and the shout went up that Tommy would finally lose his crown. After he got his first clean & jerk, he had to jump to 375 pounds which looked impossible. The first attempt was a deadlift, and those in the audience

said Riecke was now the winner. I was standing about 50 feet away on the side of the stage and watched Tommy. He walked back into the hallway and stood staring at the wall. Finally he walked back on to the stage. He pulled the weight in and it almost drove him into the floor. I never thought he would come out of that clean. But he did. Then he held the weight at the chest so long, I thought he was going to black out. Then he suddenly jerked it overhead to complete the lift. I couldn’t believe it. Neither did the crowd of thousands of spectators. Those of you who have seen photos of that look on Tommy’s face could see the sheer will power. This man had to make this lift. Riecke was furious. He was screaming outside the building. “This time it’s worse,” he shouted, “he beat me on bodyweight.”

What can I say about this incredible man? As a sickly, Japanese-American boy he learned to lift in a internment camp. Yet he never harbored any ill feelings against his country, instead he was proud of our country and always told me he lifted for the USA and the team,



A favorite stop for the York team when they travelled in Europe was Robert Cayeau’s gym in Paris. Cayeau owned a number of antique barbells—including Apollon’s Wheels—and Kono, like many of the York men, couldn’t resist trying to lift some of these unwieldy implements. The globe barbell above weighed 170 kilos (374 pounds) and after it was lifted to his shoulders Kono jerked it. The thick-handled, non-revolving barbell on the right weighed 319 pounds (145 kilos), and Kono managed to clean & jerk it in 1954.



not himself. We will never see his like again.

David E. Meltzer, Tempe, Arizona
From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer,
Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono

Earning my everlasting gratitude, Walter Imahara was thoughtful enough to assign me to be Tommy Kono's roommate as we prepared to help host the 1998 World Masters Championships in Portland. Although Tommy and I had met before, this was the first time we would spend a significant amount of time with each other. Within just a few minutes of this meeting, Tommy was providing helpful advice: Showing me how best to tie the laces on my new Adidas lifting shoes; giving me counsel on how to sequence a series of tasks I faced in moving—that very week—from Louisiana to Iowa; thinking through how I needed to culminate my pre-meet training, as I was coming off a long summer layoff with almost zero preparation.

Without my asking, Tommy came over to the training hall to watch and offer advice as I went through my abbreviated pre-competition training. Later, again without my asking, Tommy stayed by my side to coach me as I began my warm-ups for the actual competition. He coached me through each of my six attempts, in a competition that was unusually nerve-wracking not because of my competitors, but because I had done so very little training during that summer, having spent most of it away from home with no opportunity to train.

I have now competed in 23 World Masters Championships; in just one single one of them, I was able to make six-out-of-six attempts: It was in 1998, in Portland, being coached for the very first time by Tommy Kono. I suspect that is not a coincidence. As I stood, ecstatic, on the podium to collect my hard-won bronze medal, Tommy joined me, and seemed to be equally happy.

Carl Miller—Santa Fe, New Mexico
1 September 2016

Tommy was always very competitive but also a very nice person. Tommy always had something good to say about somebody. Where he really excelled was overseas, and that's where he made his big mark. Unlike a lot of athletes who don't excel going overseas, he did. He also stressed the basics in his coaching, and that's what he felt a lot of people were missing, the basic ways of lifting. He

really stressed that and answered a lot of questions on the basics. As I said, Tommy was such a great competitor on the international platform and our own. He was just very nice to people. Very humble.

Pete Miller—Arlington, Virginia
October 2016

I first met Tommy at the Olympic Trials in '64. I just was impressed with his mental preparation. So some church bells started to go off. And then I met Tommy as a friend, and I asked him about the church bells. He said he never heard them. I was so impressed with that. And through the years I saw Tommy in many different circumstances, and I've seen him coach a lot of different people, and I especially saw him coaching some women at one of the women's world championships. And I asked him how did he as the greatest weightlifter ever enjoy coaching women. And he said he really enjoyed it because they would listen to him, and his coaching was serious. I was very impressed with that.

What I remember of Tommy is that he was so gracious in everything he did. If he had a criticism, he said it in such a nice polite way. ... He was very kind. He was my hero because he was such a humble superstar. ... You have to be a little bit arrogant to lift a heavy weight, especially if no human being has never lifted it. So Tommy was so special on that. And the thing I enjoyed about Tommy is that he treated everybody the same.

Brian Miyamoto—Honolulu, Hawaii
12 November 2016

The first time I met Tommy was at a chin up contest in Kapiolani Park, and I knew who he was, and as I was growing up my father used to tell me about Tommy Kono. I won the chin up contest, but after that I wanted to go to the Olympics in either gymnastics, boxing or weightlifting, and gymnastics wouldn't work because I couldn't split, so I decided to go into powerlifting first and then weightlifting. Tommy had such high expectations of me. First I did it on my own, and then Gary [Kawamura] helped me, and after my first contest Tommy started to help me. After my second contest Tommy told me to go down to the 114 pound class and go to the nationals; you can qualify for the nationals. I told him no, it's too hard to drop. He said, no, go down, you can qualify for the nationals. I weighed 121. After a week, the

seed was planted, and he knew I was going for it. I told myself, this might be the only time I ever go to the nationals. So, I went to 114, and as I was going down he said, "Brian, not only can you qualify for the nationals, you can win the nationals." So, the expectations kept going higher and higher. A couple weeks later he would tell me, "Brian, now you can not only win the nationals but make the American record." I think the most pressure I've had in my whole life was qualifying for the nationals. Anyway, I qualified, and I was real strict on my diet, and I remember telling myself, if the plane's going to crash, make it crash after the nationals. Pete [George] also helped me. Pete was my first national coach, and Pete was just there because he was getting honored at that nationals. Of course, he would help the Hawaii guys. I didn't win. I had the weight overhead. I had two red lights and one white light. I came in second. Throughout my lifting career Tommy's expectations were always so high. Although I did win four nationals, I never did make it to the Olympics which I thought disappointed Tommy. Besides all this, many people don't know that Tommy was a good artist, and good photographer. He took very good pictures. Each picture meant something.

Mel Miyamoto—Honolulu, Hawaii
12 November 2016

I used to be a basketball coach in high school, and I got interested in strength training. So I joined the National Strength and Conditioning Association. They had a booth at one of the conferences for the USAWF, and I stopped by and got interested. They were doing what was called a cub coach course. I don't know if they still do that, but I actually had to do a lift with just the bar. I fell on my butt and really got embarrassed, but I got interested, and after that I looked up the local weightlifting organization. Team Hawaii listed Pete George as the president, so I called Pete, and he said to call Tommy Kono. Tommy invited me to come and watch one of the meets at Pearl City Highland Intermediate School. That was the start, and it really caught my interest. I'm what some people call a paper coach. I took all the USA Weightlifting certification courses and passed them. But what I really learned about coaching I learned from Tommy Kono. We became good friends, and I still don't know why.



Two men who are always in the conversation when people talk about the most famous athlete from the Aloha State are fellow Olympians Tommy Kono and Duke Kahanamoku. Kahanamoku won five Olympic medals for swimming (in three Olympics); helped popularize surfing on the mainland, and, like Kono, worked for years for the city of Honolulu. Kono promoted sports and recreation; Kahanamoku served 13 terms as sheriff of the city.

Tommy would call me once in a while, and we would talk, and he also insisted that I come down to the Y and learn how to lift. You guys remember my terrible lifting. I entered one, maybe two, meets because he insisted. Local meets. And I'm not very proud of that, but I did, and he reminds me that I did while I try to forget that I did. Anyway, we became friends, and I miss him. I now train my little 11-year-old granddaughter who has been lifting in local meets, and I give her all the sayings that Tommy had, like *Shikata-Ga-Nai* and *Arigatai*, be thankful for what you have. I got that from him. One time he told me about injuries, and he said if it doesn't fall off, you're okay. If your arm doesn't fall off, you're okay. So that's what I tell my granddaughter all the time.



More than most weightlifters, Kono enjoyed bodybuilding training and the muscles it produces. He was blessed with good genetics and the results are plain to see.

**Mike Mizuno—Aiea, Hawaii
15 November 2016**

I first met Tommy when I was in the ninth grade. He had an invitation to visit our intermediate school and put on a demonstration. And I went up to talk to him because I was in awe. Here was this guy in regular clothes, and he looked like the average short little guy. And then he took off his shirt, and he flexed. And one of our teachers actually swooned and fainted. I mean literally fainted. Everyone is giggling and everything else at her.

Then somebody suggested he heard from my friend that Tommy could blow up one of those water bottles, the old-fashioned water bottles. And he said, “I haven’t done it in years, but if you have one, I’ll try it.” Out comes our health worker. “I have one.” Tommy stood there, and he blew it until it was fully inflated. Then he pinched it and said, “Okay, here it comes.” And

he blew it until his face turned red and the darned thing just blew up like dynamite. All of a sudden, the thing just went pow. So, I went up to talk to him afterwards and said I was totally impressed. I didn’t believe people like you had muscles like that because my parents, my mom, grew up in Stockton—and he grew up in Sacramento—and my mom ended up in Roark, Arkansas, in the internment camp. And then the teachers and Tommy asked if we wanted to try it. You should have seen all of us lining up to blow these stupid things up, and we just couldn’t.

**Harvey Newton—Ormond Beach, Florida
22 August 2016**

In 1963, as a young teenager anticipating my first local meet, I traveled to nearby York, PA for a few days of training. Unknown to me, this coincided with a pre-Pan American Games training camp for the American team, including Tommy Kono. What a great experience to watch our best lifters preparing for the Games (back when Team USA was the dominant team in the Western Hemisphere).

At the end of one workout Tommy utilized the York leg press (old vertical orientation model) machine for a few sets. I have no idea how much he used, but numerous large plates had been loaded. When he finished, Tommy left a few plates on the apparatus, probably thinking that anyone could start with this minimal load. Although I’d never used this device I figured I could knock off a few reps. I got in position, straightened my legs, then slowly lowered the weights only to find I was now stuck in a fully flexed position, unable to raise the weight. One of the lifters provided enough assistance so I could extract myself from this embarrassing situation. Tommy finished his workout with some bench presses on the first model York bench, something rather unsuited for anything other than light weights. When Tommy reached his targeted sets of 335lbs he requested that I sit on the end of the bench to keep it from coming up.

Later, as I was leaving the gym for my hotel, Tommy asked me if I would like to come back that evening. He had recently returned from China and planned to show some lifting movies of international competition, along with a Chinese acrobatic display. Return I did. Joining the team and John Grimek we watched about an hour’s worth of great film highlights.

Later Tommy signed my new copy of Bob Hoffman's *Weight Lifting* with "To Harvey, Best wishes! Tommy."

Russell Ogata—Honolulu, Hawaii
12 November 2016

I got to know Tommy when I first came to Honolulu to train because my coach said, why don't you go up to the Nuuanu Y. After three months of training, Tommy came down and he looked at my weightlifting shoes which had built up heels, really high, and he said, "You lift with these?" I said, "Yeah, why?" And that's how our relationship started, but we got along, especially after I retired, so he didn't have to scold me anymore. But he and I would talk about lifters and what made a good lifter and things he respected. He respected Pete a heck of a lot because he and Pete had the same background, and they worked the same way. They never looked for excuses, always opportunities. He filled me in about Pete's lore and about other people he respected in the game. It was not so much their lifting prowess, although Pete was Olympic and world champion. It was about who they were and what they did and about the goodness of each person. One time he told me about a trip the US team had in Europe. This guy Mike Huszka had won second at the worlds and they were going to his hometown. The American lifter, I think it was Joe Puleo, could outlift him, but Tommy told him, hey, don't embarrass him in his hometown. Build him up so that he looks good, because the meet didn't mean anything. But when Tommy said that, he also recognized that Puleo too was the guy who ended Tommy's reign as national champion. He respected Joe because of what Joe chose to do. I think in the end, a lot of times for Tommy it was about who the person was that really mattered.

Joe Puleo—Fort Myers, Florida
2 November 2016

I first met Tommy at the 1962 National Championships in Detroit. I was a 19-year-old lifter who was new to the national weightlifting scene and Tommy was a many times world champion. I was one of his biggest fans. He was friendly and encouraging to me as a young lifter.

I moved to York that summer and trained in the York gym with Gary Cleveland, another young lifter. We

were training in hopes of making the 1962 World Championship team. We were excited when we found out that Tommy was coming to train in York. We wanted to see how he trained. Tommy, Gary and I trained together in York and Tommy was generous with his advice about training and competition. We became good friends during that time and I was pleasantly surprised when Tommy gave me a gift. It was a book entitled *How to win Friends and Influence People*.

When I thought about the title of the book, I wondered if Tommy was sending me a message that I needed to make some changes in my behavior. I told Gary about it, and he said that Tommy had given him the same book. We were worried that we may have offended Tommy in some way. We decided to politely tell Tommy about our concern.

When we did tell him, in a somewhat meek fashion, Tommy laughed and said that he had read the book earlier and thought that it was a good book and he thought we would enjoy it. There was no hidden message in the gifts. Gary and I were relieved, and we all had a good laugh about how Gary and I had been so concerned about it. In the years that followed, this was one of the stories we would tell and laugh about.

Denis Reno—West Newton, Massachusetts
3 September 2016

A real friend is someone who makes you feel like they enjoy your company and listening to you. Tommy Kono had that ability plus he was educational to listen to, and he seemed to care about your point of view, and he always acted happy to see or hear from you. I could fill a book with the anecdotes from Tommy about many of his trips overseas to compete for the USA—also a great storyteller.

Funny thing is that Tommy Kono, as a many time Olympic and World Champion, a World class bodybuilder, an author and coach, a photographer and a volunteer, had a very large number of friends. And just like me, I'll bet they all felt that Tommy Kono considered them a special friend. And we were all correct—above all the things that Tommy Kono was, he was a SPECIAL FRIEND to all he knew.

I first met Tommy Kono in the pages of *Strength & Health* magazine. Tommy Kono the fabulous Olympic Weightlifting Champion, Tommy Kono the Physique

Champion, Tommy Kono the author of some great ‘ABCs of Weightlifting’ coaching articles. I first met Tommy in person in 1972 at the Munich Olympics, then was privileged to manage USA teams where Tommy was the coach during the 1980s and 1990s. This continued with regular telephone conversations every few weeks/months until his passing. He must have sensed that I hated to bother him—so like the understanding person he was, Tommy would be the one to make the calls. It was probably the best idea—I’m sure he was busy managing his time keeping in contact with his many friends and making sure as much in the Weightlifting World as possible was heading in the right direction. I’ll probably never know anyone else like him.

Gus Rethwisch—Honolulu, Hawaii

**From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer,
*Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono***

I met Kono in ‘73 at the Nuuanu YMCA. He was a humble man but still a tremendous presence. He immediately encouraged me to be the best I could be. I told him my goal was a 900-pound deadlift, and he said concentrate on 600 pounds first. I did 555 pounds in my first contest in the summer of ‘73 and 605 pounds in December of 1973. He kept telling me to set small goals but don’t lose sight of 900 pounds. In November of ‘78 I pulled 845 pounds and had 900 over my knees, a good five inches up my thighs. The first thing he told me was “If you wore deadlift slippers instead of 2” thick Nike soles, you would have made it.”

When I came up with the idea for the first Hawaii World Record Breakers in 1977, everybody said it couldn’t be done; everybody except Tommy Kono. In that first tournament we had lifters from Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Great Britain, Australia, and the best lifters from the United States. Tommy helped with sponsors and staff but more importantly he said “If you believe you can pull it off don’t worry about what everybody else says or thinks.” I lost all my staff after that first year. They were all negative. They said I was crazy trying to pull it off and it was too much stress. We got NBC to televise it that first year and then Kono hooked me up with Pan American Airlines for the second year and CBS Sports televised the show for a 1/2 hour special on CBS Sports Spectacular. Eventually in 1988, ESPN televised the World Record Breakers, and the Hawaii Record

Breakers lasted 20 years; without Kono it would have lasted one year.

Tommy Kono was responsible directly or indirectly for powerlifting, bodybuilding and Olympic lifting to flourish in Hawaii. None of the bodybuilders or Olympic lifters supported powerlifting in Hawaii even though the powerlifters supported both bodybuilding and Olympic Lifting. Kono not only supported powerlifting, he was the first person in Hawaii to put on powerlifting meets. Without Tommy Kono there is no Gus Rethwisch and there is no WABDL [World Association for Benchers and Deadlifters].

**Louis Riecke—New Orleans
September 2016**

He was the best in the world. ... Boy, he was something, I’ll tell you. He was the greatest. I’ll have to admit it. I knew what the odds were when I lifted against him. Once I went to Hawaii on a business trip, and this guy says, “You look like a weightlifter.” He said, “You must know Tommy Kono.” Do I know Tommy Kono! He says, “Well he lives here.” I ask, “Do you know where I can get him?” “He works for the city.” So I called him, and he answered the phone. And I said, is this Tommy Kono? And I said, Six times world champion,” and I listed everything he ever did in his life. He was the only son-of-a-bitch I never could beat in my whole life. And he says, “Lou Riecke, what are you doing here?” And that’s true. And one time in the world, I was in really in great shape, and I knew there was the national championships. I really got in shape, and I really wanted to get that guy. I worked as hard as I could work, and I made the best total I had ever made in my life. I broke the world record [in the snatch], and guess what? Kono tied me in the total. He comes up on his last lift and tied me. And you know what they do when you have a tie? They stand up there in the middle of the stage and bring out a guy with a great big towel. You strip naked, and they weigh you, right in front of the audience. And he weighed a quarter of a pound less than me. Son-of-a-bitch, I can’t even beat you when I tie you.

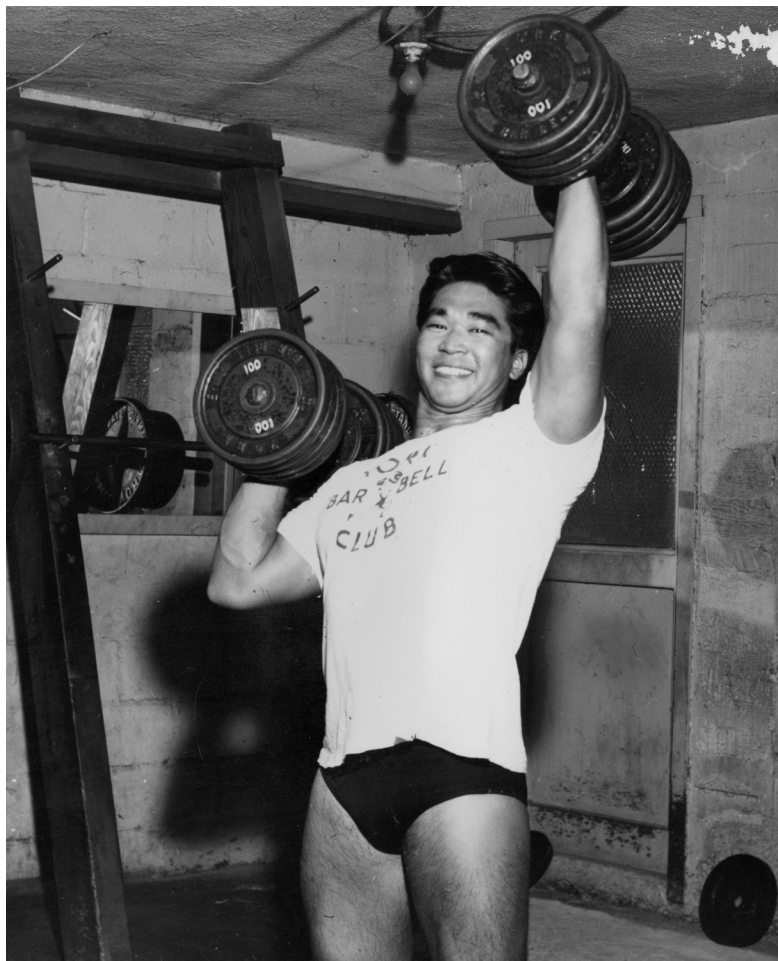
**Jim Schmitz—San Francisco, California
From: Letter to T. Kono dated 15 February 2016**

I want to wish you a full recovery to good health.

I also want to let you know what a great influence you have been on my weightlifting career. I first developed an interest in strength and weightlifting in 1956 when I saw in the newspaper that a man from Sacramento won the gold medal in weightlifting. It was you of course. Then, when I began weightlifting in 1960, the first *Strength & Health* magazine that I bought had the results of the 1960 Olympics and there you were again winning the Silver medal. I followed all US lifters then, but you especially since you were from Sacramento and I was from San Francisco. I followed your career through S&H and read all your “ABC’s of Weightlifting” articles, trained by them and when I started coaching in 1968, I coached my lifters according to what I learned in your ABC’s. I think it was at the 1971 or 1974 Nationals in York, Pennsylvania, that you gave a seminar. I was there and was so impressed. Then at the 1976 Olympics I was so grateful that I could be back stage to assist in coaching my lifters Dan Cantore and Bruce Wilhelm, while you were head coach. Then at the 1984 Olympics, what a honor and thrill to be competition director for weightlifting and work with you as competition manager. The 1984 Olympics was an extraordinary experience.

I’m in complete admiration of your contribution to USA Weightlifting being on USAW’s Board of Directors. No one person has given so much to US and World Weightlifting as you, Olympic and World Champion, World Record Holder, Olympic Team Coach 1968, Mexico, 1972, West Germany, 1976, USA, Competition Manager 1984, LA, Coach US Women’s World Teams, Referee 1992, Barcelona, Jury, 1996, Atlanta, author of two books and many, many articles.

It has been such a great experience and honor to see you every summer at the Tommy Kono Open. The real highlight was your seminar the next day. I’ve been teaching USAW’s coaching courses for the past 10+ years, almost one a month, and I always tell the attendees how much I’ve learned from you, from the high pulls to a stick to the 3 front squats and 1 jerk and so much other information on how to be the best weightlifter you can be, “Quality not Quantity”. I also always include your involvement in the design of weightlifting shoes and inventing the neoprene knee sleeves.



This photo of Tommy toying with a pair of hundred-pound dumbbells in the see-saw press appeared in *Parade Magazine* on 9 October 2005. He was a master of single-hand lifting, and it’s reported that he once bench pressed a pair of 145-pound Olympic bars, one in each hand.

Frank Spellman—Gulf Breeze, Florida
27 August 2016

In 1952 Bob Hoffman asked me to go down to the 148 pound class, and so I went down and placed second to Tommy. Several years later, we were in a bench press and squat contest in Oakland, California. It was 1956 or something like that, and we competed against each other at that time, and I think both of us weighed 170 pounds. He managed 380, and I did 340, and he squatted with 490, and I did 510. That was the first official bench press and squat contest I believe in the United States up to that time. But we only competed against each other three or four times, I think. The only thing I can say about Tommy is that he was a fantastic athlete, and he was a mental lifter. From what I understand, he never lifted heavy, real heavy,

in training, like he did in the contests, and he came up to the necessary lifts that he needed to win each time. So, he was fantastic as far as using his mental capacity.

**Doug Stalker—Aiken, South Carolina
June 2017**

I received an email, out of the blue, from Tommy Kono in August of 1999. John Fair had forwarded an email of mine to Tommy. It was about what happened in the 181-pound class at the 1963 Senior Nationals in Harrisburg. I was spellbound in the third row, center aisle seat, a mere fifteen-year-old aspirant in weightlifting with a fancy “patron” ribbon pinned to my shirt. When I wrote John about this (because he had used Hoffman’s account in *MuscleTown*) I put things dramatically and in detail. Lou Riecke might beat the great Tommy Kono; it came down to a third attempt that few imagined Tommy could make since I recalled he had merely deadlifted the same weight, 375, on his second attempt. Tommy paced and paced at the back of the platform before his third attempt, and then, wow, he lifted the 375 overhead. John thought Tommy, whom I didn’t know then, would appreciate my account and so had forwarded it to him. Tommy did, calling me a “lifting aficionado.”

Thus began almost seventeen years of correspondence between us, most electronically but a good deal via regular mail. I can’t give an exact count, but I know that I saved 220 emails from Tommy between 2006 and 2016. I deleted others that weren’t about lifting. Add in, say, another 100 from 1999, lost back at my old university’s server, and the emails from Tommy approached the 350-mark. Tommy was also a generous guy. He sent me, via regular mail, about fifty items, from regular letters to how-to-lift brochures, his Olympic card, his pogs (as he termed them), Xmas cards, fifteen photos to frame, a copy of his IWF Lifter-of-the-Century certificate, some ten tee shirts from each of the Tommy Kono lifting meets in Sacramento, a couple Team Hawaii shirts (he claimed me as an honorary member), Xeroxes of newspaper articles, a virtual monograph on the press, TK knee and waist bands and tee shirt. Heck, I sent him an invitation to my wedding—just to let him know it was happening, never expecting him to travel that far—and the invitation said “no gifts, please.” He sent a generous check anyway.

The lifting emails were about many things: e.g., whether to let the bar hit your body in the pull, how to use straps, the advent of lifting shoes (Tommy was

there), an item in the latest Reno newsletter, who is a worthy coach these days, common errors in lifting committed even at the Olympics, the mania for spreadsheet routines, the current woes of the USAW, the rigors of being a champion without a fancy gym or jet planes, and of course his view of the current regime. My sense was that they were ignoring him more and more, he thought he had important things to correct the current situation and aimed to get the points out there one way or another. A goodly number of the emails were about things he planned to include in his second book. We would go back and forth about one thing or another for the book, month in and month out, year in and year out. How much criticism of the USAW should there be? What was wrong with today’s Masters lifting? How could you break the notion of the mental side of lifting into specific things a lifter could do? When he was wondering what to title this book, I suggested “Championship Weightlifting.” I am honored that he took my suggestion. That was, after all, what he wanted for American lifters.

**Chester O. Teegarden—Paso Heights, California,
From: “Note to Tommy Kono,” *Bulletin*,
California Weight Lifters Association
Vol. 1, No. 1 (19 October 1949): 2.**

At your age I weighed 154 at my present height and I was just about as natural a Lt-Wt as you are. You may do well at 148 as a lifter but if you wish to do well BOTH in physique and in lifting you will have to have 17” arms and 47” chest and with a 30” waist. . . . Your great advantage now is your PAST experience and understanding of the DKB [deep-knee bend]. When you learn to make your arms and chest grow as you have made your legs come out you will have a terrific physique. Build your self up like some of those pictures you have drawn. Stop being tommy kono and become TOMMY KONO!!

**Leo Totten, Frederick, Maryland
From: Walter M. Imahara and David E. Meltzer,
*Book of Remembrance for Tommy Kono***

Way back in the day when I first got the weightlifting bug, I literally sprinted to the store when magazines were to arrive so I could get my latest copy of *Strength & Health*. I had no weightlifting coach at the time so I had to count on traveling to York Barbell to



Two champions—Arkady Vorobiev of the Soviet Union and Tommy Kono of the United States—became friends at the 1953 World Weightlifting Championships where they both won their bodyweight class. Kono won the middleweight class that year and Vorobiev took the light-heavyweight title.

watch Bednarski, Garcy, Holbrook and that whole crew as motivation, but it was really *Strength & Health* where I learned enough to coach myself. It was Tommy's "ABC's of Weightlifting" that was my coach for many years. His clear, understandable explanation of technique and training methodologies as well as the simple but clear drawings of the proper positions was my best resource for getting into the sport and learning the proper way to train and compete. To this day, when I am out doing my clinics and seminars, I still quote Tommy Kono from his "ABCs of Weightlifting." All of his teachings still hold true over the many years and I owe so much to Tommy for this early guidance.

**Chuck Vinci—Elyria, Ohio
23 August 2016**

Tommy Kono at Rome said, "Chuck, the room is round, like a muscle. If you look out there, don't, because if you do, it can throw you off balance." When in Rome I missed my first press, and I remembered what he said

after that, and I made my last two. He always tried to help me. Tommy Kono was great.

**Arkady Vorobiev—Moscow, Russia
From: Denis Reno's *Weightlifter's Newsletter*,
No. 300 (13 January 2006).**

Kono was a great lifter, who faced the world with great confidence, and set world records in four classes. He was rightly called the "Iron Hawaiian." Kono was not only strong but had the rare ability to lift much more in contest than in his training. He had the mental toughness, and courage.

**John Yamauchi—Honolulu, Hawaii
25 November 2016**

As a young lifter, whenever I would come to Tommy with a problem, he seemed to know exactly what I was going through and how to solve it. Once, when I was in a rut, he suggested that I work out at home for a while, with my old exercise weights. Even though there was no atmosphere, just the change up helped to get me back on track.

When I was competing, there weren't many other people doing the lifts; so I was, to a large degree, self-coached. Tommy would always preach the value of lifting properly; and since he couldn't always be present at my trainings, he told me to imagine someone videotaping the lifts. So every time I finished a lift, I would visualize and critique myself—good lift or not? Could it have been better? More control? Did I swing the bar? Did I complete the pull?

Tommy emphasized that competing nationally or internationally came with a responsibility and obligation. He made it clear that my attempts on the platform were not my call, as I had the responsibility to place as high as possible. If I make my lifts in the snatch and secured a total in the clean & jerk and placed the highest position possible, then maybe I could choose the second or third clean & jerk. At this one Nationals, I was "on." I wanted to break my PR, but Coach Tommy chose to "only" tie my PR to secure the win, rather than risk my missing the PR attempt and thus leave the door open for my opponent. It was a bit unsatisfying to only tie my PR, but I did win, so it wasn't too bad. Tommy's lifting career was post WWII and there were a lot of anti-Japanese feelings nationally. Tommy would always stress that you represent your club and/or your country—and Tommy represented us well.

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