

George Hackenschmidt

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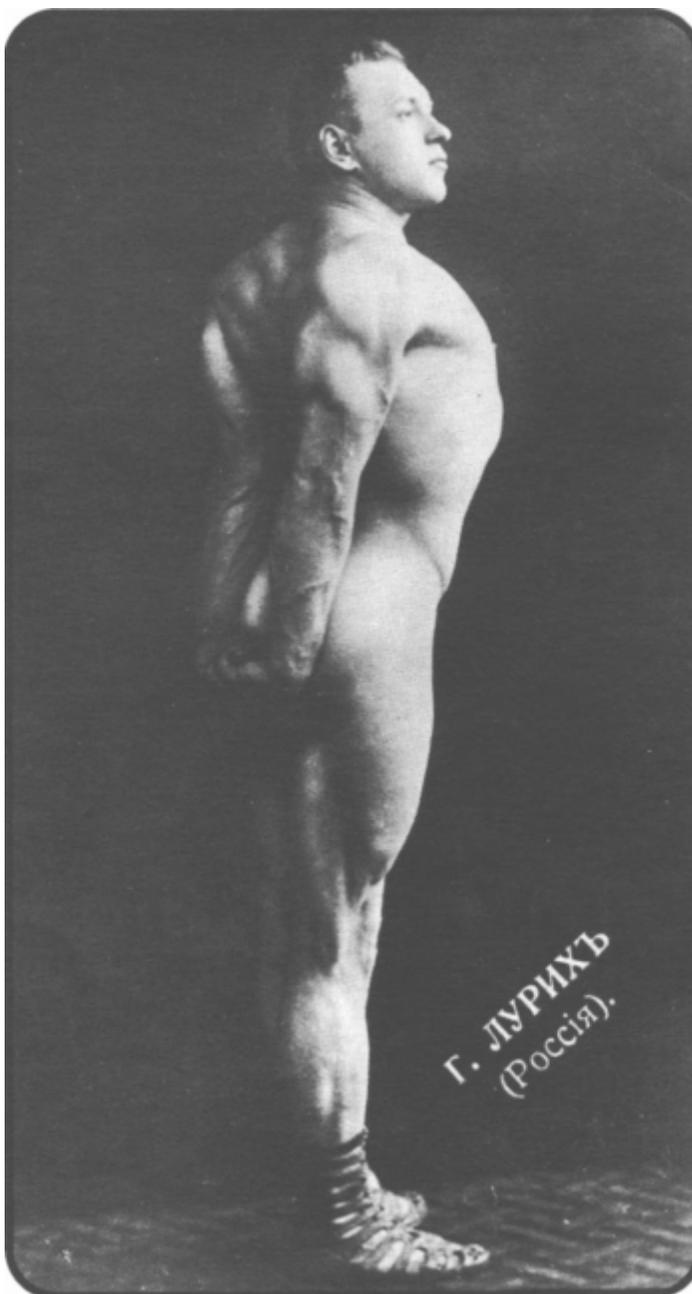
GEORGE LURICH

We have a group of George Hackenschmidt's private papers and manuscripts in the Physical Culture Collection here at the University of Texas, and some of those manuscripts have not, to our knowledge, been published for many years, if ever. One such manuscript, written by Hackenschmidt himself, involves the career of another famous Russian strongman-wrestler, George Lurich.

George Lurich was probably one of the most remarkable personalities developed by weight-lifting and wrestling, in both of which he was a top class man. He was well educated, having passed his college entrance exams before he left school at Reval. As a boy he showed no sign of becoming abnormally strong, but extra-strenuous training earned him an enviable place amongst the foremost athletes of the world.

When I say that he didn't appear to be endowed with unusual strength, yet had become a great athlete, I am differentiating between the terms "strong man" and "athlete": a "strong man" is simply a matter of physiology, whereas the term "athlete" ought to be applied only to one who has by training acquired the ability to perform outstanding feats of strength, endurance, speed and so on. It is well to recognize that the difference exists; a strong man is not always an athlete.

Lurich was entirely "self made"; I never met any weightlifter or wrestler who trained more strenuously and consistently than he did. His methods were built up mostly in accordance with his own ideas and experiences, and partly by the advice he gained from Dr.



Von Krajewsky. One example of Lurich's training philosophy is that he refused to attempt maximum lifts unless he had gone through what most of us would consider a more-than-thorough preparation. He wouldn't even try to jerk, press or snatch a weight of 100 pounds until he had proved that he could do a similar feat five times on end with a 90 pound weight; then, or so he reasoned, the 100 pounds could be tackled with a reasonable certainty of success.

This personal outlook permeated his preparation as well as his actual contests; having decided beforehand to throw his opponent with, say, a "flying mare", he would concentrate on it time and again, no matter how long it took, until he had achieved his object. Anyone else who knew the ropes could have told him that this might be a super-heroic undertaking under certain circumstances. I myself tried it out once when I was tackling Jess Petersen of Denmark, one of the national champions during the first decade of this century. I persisted with it for 20 minutes—which was 20 minutes wasted so far as my object (throwing Petersen) was concerned. Never again! for me, anyhow: by that time Petersen was so wet and slippery

from perspiration that I was unable to handle him properly and had to be content ultimately with a draw. Yet the principle itself has much to recommend it when circumstances permit—for example, if Lurich were out for a specified run he would not under any conditions relax his efforts until he had reached his goal and gone even a few yards beyond it—a sure indication of persistence and determination.

Up to the age of about 30 he neither smoked nor drank, disliking both tobacco and alcohol. But after that, and I think it was brought about by insomnia and loneliness, he started drinking heavily. At night he would order several bottles of champagne and, if none of his friends was handy, he would invite the waiter to sit down and share the champagne with him.

During the earlier part of his career he used to travel alone, but after a time he met Alexander Aberg, another very good wrestler of Estonian descent, and from then on the two joined forces and remained together for the rest of their lives; ultimately both of them died in Armenia within a fortnight of each other. Everybody thought they were brothers, but this was not so. Lurich had a brother who was a cripple and who always drank to excess, for which George used to reprimand him severely, though without any effect.

Lurich and I were attracted to each other by our enthusiasm for the same sport. Wherever we met, be it in Estonia, Germany or England, we supped together and then walked the streets till 4 or 5 a.m. talking “shop” interminably. But although we were close friends, if we had to meet in competition we contested the outcome as seriously and decisively as possible.

You must remember that I am talking of the era when athletics, as we now know them, were in their early stage, even though competitions were fought out as desperately as ever; when the weights we lifted were discouragingly clumsy and when, through lack of means to order or buy barbells, we used broomsticks, to each end of which we tied sacks of sand. In those days—I am speaking of midsummer—each evening I would walk briskly to the club. You know how the prospect of a good work-out boosts your

enthusiasm so much that you almost expect to increase your neck, arms, chest and calf measurements in half an hour or so—I measured mine many times a day always hoping to find I had put on an inch or part of one somewhere! My walk would be gradually accelerated until I had almost reached running pace in my anxiety to get to those ill-shaped, clumsy weights.

I remember clearly one such evening, leaving the street through a wide doorway, into a biggish yard, then going up two flights of stairs in a three-storied house. I came to the clubroom, gave a hearty “Good evening” to the President, Mr. A.A. Andrushkewitsch, and hurried to get stripped, cursing every minute was kept from handling those awkward weights all neatly placed in line at the far end of the room. But training was cut short on this particular evening: through the open door strode the very large figure of a man. It was George Lurich, “The World’s Champion Athlete and Prize Wrestler” as he described himself on the printed bills advertising his forthcoming engagement at Reval. As he was born and bred in Estonia—Weike Maria was his birthplace—it is no wonder that all Estonians idolized him.

He did indeed seem to me to be a huge specimen, immensely broad and tall, but still supple and graceful in his movements. He made a great impression on us youngsters and for the rest of the evening we could hardly take our eyes off him.

Presently he stripped, and I could hardly believe I was looking at the same being; in his enormous overcoat he had looked twice his natural size. One of the youngsters started us off giggling by holding up three fingers close together and then folding two out of the way leaving a single one—signifying Lurich in his overcoat and jacket, which were many sizes too large for him, and the same figure with the exaggerated camouflage removed. This gesture caused a lot of furtive fun and took quite a bit of the edge off our admiration for the man himself. Yet there was no denying that he had a magnificent physique. His chest in particular was formidable and impressive, losing nothing by a great scar running across the right side of it. But his arms and legs were not quite in the same street, being somewhat less developed than his

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torso. Time and again I took his measurements; here are some of the figures:

Height	5' 9 1/2"
Neck	17 1/2"
Chest	47 1/2"
Round the shoulders	50 1/2"
Waist	34 3/4"
Biceps (contracted) 16"	
Forearm	12 1/2,"
Wrists	8"
Thighs	23 1/4"
Calf	15 1/2"
Ankles	9 1/2"

As mere figures they may not be big enough to stagger humanity, but when he began lifting he certainly astonished us, achieving more than we had thought possible. His right arm jerks were stupendous; the leg work to assist the lifts—he already had world records to his credit—being admirable. The entire performance was, as it seemed to us, matchless. When one sees really extraordinary performances and relates them to body measurements—in this case Lurich's—you are apt to wonder how on earth the man ever executed them. Yet if ever there existed a man who was absorbed by weightlifting, a man who lived, thought and dreamed his hobby, that man was George Lurich. All his conversation ranged around the subject; when any other cropped up he became listless and lost all interest in it.

He took no notice of me at first, for I was then only in my 18th year and not fully grown. Besides, I didn't really know anything about the sciences of weightlifting and wrestling. But later he began to be interested in me and even asked if I would wrestle with him at two open-air theaters in Reval. I was more than mighty pleased to get such a chance and was determined to do my very utmost. The first bout must have been a surprise to him, for it lasted more than an hour. I defended myself for all I was worth and Lurich was unable to get me from a standing position to my knees. The second affair was again by no means to his liking, though he managed to get the decision of the judges in spite of prolonged protestations from the audience. I might tell you these two bouts surprised me as much as they did Lurich, for, rightly or wrongly, I got the impression that I was distinctly the stronger man. Naturally this encouraged me to pay more attention to wrestling.

Still more encouragement was to come. Lurich invited me to train with him at Weike Maria, where his father had a grocery store. I couldn't have asked for anything better and accepted the invitation right away. When we started work I got him down to his knees without much effort, but found it impossible to throw him with the holds then in ordinary use. Evidently I should have to devise something out of the common. I did, and when next we had a bout

it seemed to upset the applectart. It was on the second day that I succeeded in throwing him with a hold that forced him onto his shoulders, and I applied it with plenty of strength and insistence. I treated him to it twice. Then, still on our knees, Lurich asked me to swear never to use this hold on any occasion whenever or wherever we met in competition. He told me to lift two fingers up and repeat the words of the oath he dictated. I did so, though I knew full well how silly it all was. I am convinced that these defeats at Weike Maria were the cause of his refusing to wrestle with me in later years.

In February 1897 a new wrestler turned up at Reval, a widely known man with a European reputation—Wladislaw Pytlasinsky. He challenged Lurich, and a match between the two champions was fixed for February 22nd. Pytlasinsky won. It was a grand struggle though it didn't last long, and I watched every move intensely. The loss so upset Lurich that he left town immediately.

He remained in Estonia quite a long time, lifting and wrestling in towns and villages, whilst I made a move to St. Petersburg (Leningrad). From there I traveled as an amateur all over Europe, winning one championship contest after another. During all that time Lurich and I challenged and counter-challenged each other, yet never managed to come to grips, and it wasn't till four years afterwards that we met again. On September 18th, 1900, I was in a German train travelling from Dresden to Chemnitz, a town with a quarter of a million inhabitants. I thought of all the opponents I had met in past competitions and made plans for dispatching the tougher ones; those who were weaker and less experienced I didn't have to worry about. Presently I got out at Chemnitz to find placards all over the town staring me in the face, billing "George Lurich: Strongest Man in the World" and "Invincible Wrestler." He was challenging all comers. As was often the case, the manager of another theater in the town, so as not to be outdone by my advent at his rival's house, had engaged Lurich and a number of inferior wrestlers to appear. Soon I was told that Lurich had been boasting loudly that he had more than once defeated me with ease, and of course I didn't fancy letting him get away with that.

As a rule I had no great liking for impromptu challenges, yet in view of Lurich's continuous and brazen puffing I could not refrain from challenging him to a match. Accordingly, I strolled round to his theater and offered to take him on. That very evening it was announced from the stage that Herr Lurich had accepted Herr Hackenschmidt's challenge and that the two would meet on the following Wednesday. I'll quote the Chemnitz newspaper *Allgemeine Zeitung* of September 21st, 1900 to describe the event.

"As our readers are aware. Georg Lurich, who describes himself as the 'Champion Athlete of the World' and 'Strongest Man in the World', has for some days past been appearing at the Mosella Saal. In addition to a somewhat glowing advertisement of his powers, he issued on his bills a challenge to all wrestlers, whether

amateurs or professionals. On Monday evening George Hackenschmidt, who is taking part in a wrestling competition at the Kaufmannische Vereinshaus, challenged him to a wrestling bout on Wednesday evening. News of this spread very quickly among all the sporting elements of Chemnitz with the result that the Mosella Saal was packed from floor to ceiling on the evening in question. Everyone looked forward with impatience for the beginning of the wrestling match. The disappointment of the spectators can therefore be imagined when Herr Lurich appeared on the stage in the company of Herr Gleissner of Berna, and another gentleman of whose identity we are ignorant. The latter retired in favour of Herr Hackenschmidt, whose challenge had been given on Monday evening, and who therefore had the prior claim. Hereupon the curtain was abruptly lowered amid stormy scenes on the part of the indignant audience. Cries of 'Come out', 'Shame', 'Swindle' were quickly heard mingled with whistling and cat-calls enough to make one's flesh creep. All this was directed against the 'invincible' Herr Lurich who, we are informed, has caused similar scandals in other towns, such as Elberfeld, where the competitors in the International Wrestling contests were unfortunately prevented by the terms of their engagement from exposing the Russian in the manner adopted on Wednesday. Even the management of the Mosella Saal failed to persuade Lurich to meet Hackenschmidt. Presumably Lurich will not be allowed to appear again until he has wrestled with Herr Hackenschmidt, who is ready to meet him on any evening."

Lurich left Chemnitz the same night. What struck me was that, when he saw me coming through the audience to the stage, he went as white as a sheet, took two long steps to the wing, and was gone. What happened afterward was told to me by those who had helped him; he made the same sort of hurried flight that had followed his defeat by Pytlasinsky. I suspect that his action was due to an innate mental instability such as underlies some men's make-up. You can't always judge a man by his outward appearance and attitude, for these have been affected by learning, training, material possessions, tailors, certificates, medals and so on. Fellows with a distinct, though hidden, inferiority complex can at times prove to be brilliantly courageous and persevering as Lurich on more than one occasion was. In Hamburg he was an absolute champion, really excelling in wrestling and winning every one of his matches in faultless style. I watched him closely all the way through and to his honor I must say every single bout was perfectly executed and irreproachably won. He defeated such masters as the Belgian

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Constant Le Boucher, Michael Hitzler the Bavarian, the Frenchman Lassartesse, Heinrich Weber of Germany, Raicevichi of Italy and many others; defeated them cleanly and neatly without displaying the slightest vestige of fear. Yet only four months later his innate instability appeared on the surface once more. It was at the International Wrestling Contests in Berlin when—after he wrestled a bout lasting an hour and twenty-two minutes with John Piening, the American Graeco-Roman champion, which ended in a draw—he asked Koch, the German champion at the time, and me to accompany him to his lodgings. We went. On the way there he spoke never a word. No sooner did he get there than he pulled a big old-fashioned trunk into the middle of the room and proceeded to throw into it in indescribable disorder clean and soiled shirts, collars, underwear, clothes, boots, a harmonica etc. etc. He was obsessed with one purpose only—to get away from Berlin as quickly as

possible. He just abandoned another meeting with Piening! When he had locked the trunk he gave the key to Koch, begging him to settle the landlord's account and to forward the trunk as soon as he was able to give him an address. Then he was off post-haste for Switzerland.

Years later he and Aberg turned up in London. He issued a challenge to me and put up some money with a newspaper to guarantee his appearance. I was then working in the provinces in England but, hearing of the challenge, wrote to the editor of the paper in question to say that I would be in town as soon as I was free to undertake further engagements. When I did get there eventually, I was told that Lurich, evidently having heard that I was due, had called the same morning and withdrawn his stake-money.

There's no doubt that he was sometimes half-crazed with fear. The first time I ever noticed this characteristic was in 1896 in Reval. The two of us had hired a cab. We had nearly got home when the cab stopped abruptly, the horse having overstepped one of the shafts with a hind leg. Lurich, literally terror-stricken, jumped out and with out-stretched arms ran for the nearest house, looking for all the world as though he were about to collapse. The cabby, of course, soon put the thing right, and without ever having moved from my seat I called to Lurich to come back. White as a ghost he turned to look and then, apparently assured that there was no longer any danger, returned to his seat. He never offered an explanation, but the incident taught me that he suffered from occasional terrors which no medicine would cure.

Yet for all that the man was, as I have shown you, a really great figure in the athletic world of his time; so much so that his name is still noteworthy in Continental history. *Ave atque vale* to him!