

Where Are They Now?

SAM LOPRINZI

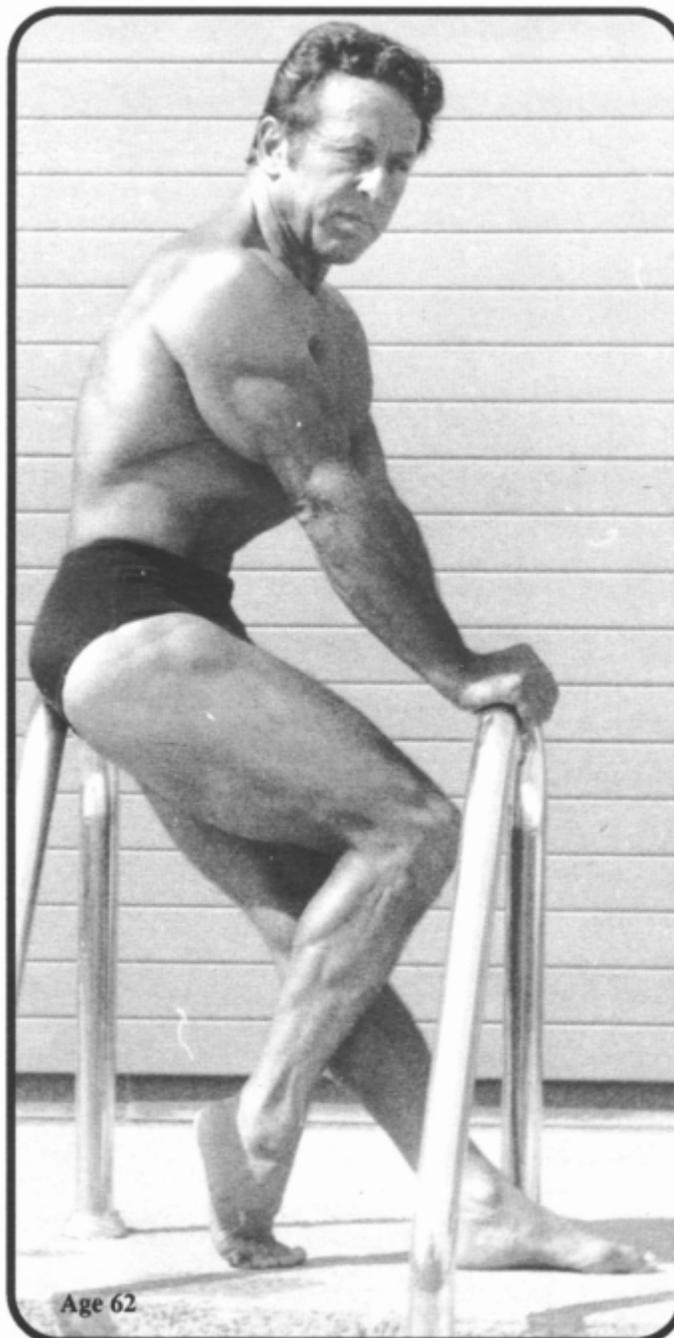
Anybody who has been around since the mid-forties knows that, back then, John Grimek and Joe Weider agreed with each other on just about nothing, except perhaps that weight training was the best way to get big and strong. There was, however, another subject, in response to which their words of praise were similar enough to sound like echoes. About Sam Loprinzi, these two spokesmen for warring muscle-building empires spoke as one; they admired his magnificence as a man, no less than as a bodybuilder: Weider in his December-January, 1945-'46 *Your Physique* article; and a few months later, Grimek in his September, 1946 *Strength & Health* article.

Retired from the health club business, this ex-owner of one of America's best-loved gyms still lives with Helen, his wife, in Portland, Oregon, and still trains in his well-equipped basement gym with George Pavlich, his training partner since he was sixteen years old. (Famous for their elusiveness, training partners rarely last six months, much less six decades — surely a world record.) According to Sam, he and Helen “walk briskly for 45 minutes, two or three times a week and swim for 30 minutes twice a week.” Sam and his partner “use mostly dumbbells with a few barbells” and still do chins, dips, and push-ups: “There is nothing I have not done in the ‘Iron Game,’ the three Olympic lifts, the five International Lifts, and powerlifting, but my best love was, and still is, bodybuilding.” Sam “tries to do stretching exercises every day” and sees

fitness and good health as the reasons for an exercise program at this point in his life and training. He and Helen “eat fresh fruit in season, after our exercises in the morning, with toast or cereal. We generally skip lunch and have our evening meal around 5:30, which includes fresh vegetables and salad with fish or chicken. Rarely do we eat red meat. Once in awhile we eat ‘junk food,’ but I am a great believer in moderation.”

Often referred to, back in the mid-forties, as the most muscular man in America, next to John Grimek, Sam's big-time debut was the memorable “Most Muscular Physique in America” contest, held before a wild audience that jammed the Philadelphia Turner's Hall on May 4, 1946, probably the most controversial contest in the history of American bodybuilding. The outcome of a challenge thrown-down to John Grimek by Dan Lurie (after the two men's posing exhibitions at the 1945 Junior Nationals in Pittsburgh), this challenge eventually grew into a “real ‘open’ contest, ‘open’, that is, to any qualified A.A.U. athlete.” In the parlance of the Philadelphia sports writing fraternity, which soon caught the wild spirit of the affair: “The Battle of the Bulges” (Smith 13-15).

To Wilbur Smith, veteran strength aficionado, this was the “greatest muscle show ever staged in this or any other country” and was spawned by “Letters and words, some of them rather harsh, [that] went back and forth, printed in the *S. & H.* and other magazines.” To complicate matters even more, at showtime, Lurie was



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found sitting in the audience, having refused, after all his challenges, to compete in a contest that he claimed did not have fair officials and was not properly sanctioned (Smith 36). Later on, toward the end of the show, in response to Lurie's charge and in deference to his being a professional, an impromptu contest was rigged-up between him and professional Walter Podolak (the professional wrestler who had been recruited from the audience) and the great Sieg Klein (who was presenting his novelty, strength, and muscle control acts between posing rounds). When the smoke from this unscheduled set-to had finally cleared, Klein emerged as the winner; with Lurie, second; and Podolak, third: at best, a frenetic moment in American bodybuilding, one without precedent and never since duplicated (Smith 35-36).

In a calmer vein, the rest of the contest had gone off on cue, bringing together the best physiques ever seen to that date in one show. Class B (5'4" to 5'6 1/2") was won by Sam Loprinzi with a near-perfect score of 49. This was the very class in which Lurie was scheduled to compete (with special dispensations from the A.A.U., along with an A.A.U.-approved time lapse between him and the amateur contestants). In Wilbur Smith's account, "The audience instantly recognized that Sam Loprinzi possesses one of the finest physiques in the world and a wonderful personality. Photos do not . . . flatter his truly magnificent physique" (35). Had Lurie—whom I, as a teenage onlooker, recall being surprisingly smooth—gone up against the magnificently muscled Loprinzi in this class as scheduled, he would have been lucky to take a second place, which I thought at the time would have gone to the man who did, ultimately, take second place: the heavily muscled Dan "Ape" Bax. In any case, Sam would have been a shoo-in, whoever the competition. The final over-all posedown between winners of the five scheduled classes followed this unscheduled "sixth class," generated by Lurie's grievance: in the posedown, Grimek took first; Steve Stanko, second; Loprinzi, third; Kimon Voyages, fourth; and Dick Bachtell, fifth.

Surprises, however, were not yet over for the evening. Following his announced victory, Grimek "revealed that he had no desire to acquire this title and did not wish to retain the trophy he won." He went on to say that "he was not seeking any personal glory by taking part in this contest," and, having recently become a father, begged-off presenting his muscle control act, in the conjecture of Smith, to return, post haste, to Angela and his family in York (Smith 37).

Sam's class victory in this major event was a real feather in his cap, ensconcing him arguably as the most muscular short man in America. As I recall, many wondered whether, indeed, Steve

Stanko could have beaten Sam in muscularity if the discrepancy provided by advantage-conferring height had not been so profoundly in favor of the far bigger and taller Stanko. Inch-for-inch, it seemed to me, and to others, that the West Coast man was the more muscularly impressive of the two, if not in the impressiveness conferred by height, in the impressiveness conferred by muscular mass (stretched over a shorter frame), along with, in my view, greater separation and definition.

Sam's next competition was to take him to Detroit for the A.A.U. Mr. America Contest on June 2nd at the Boy's Club of Detroit gymnasium, but he spent the intervening weeks in York, where he trained with Grimek and Company. That he won the hearts and amazed even the blasé York crew is clear from Grimek's account of the impression that he made at the old Broad Street gym: "... after each workout, we would watch him go through . . . his poses to make sure he was assuming the proper stance. On each

of these occasions, he showed amazing muscularity and possessed sufficient bulk to satisfy even the most ardent body builder, and what's more, he had far more [muscular] delineation than some give him credit for. He could be matched with any man of his size and weight and still emerge the victor, for there isn't anyone in the world to compare pound for pound with him" (Grimek 17). A wonderful tribute from the nonpareil muscleman of his era, a man not given to cheap praise.

In the "special events" competition, held on Saturday night, June 1st, of Mr. America weekend, Sam lived-up to Grimek's praise, taking a second to John McWilliams in the "best chest" competition. Bob Hoffman's words were especially laudatory of Sam's performance in that year's crop, which Hoffman declared "the best ever to participate in this most outstanding physique contest. . . . It was tough for Sam Loprinzi to lose . . . these special divisions by such a narrow margin. I said at this point [in the contest] that Sam was having the same experience as a girl who is often a bridesmaid but never a bride. [I] also said that Sam was on a par with the best in each division. [I] continued by saying 'When Sam gets all of these extraordinary features together he would be hard to beat for the Most Muscular Man title.' Although any athlete would like to be selected for the 'Mr. America' title, Sam Loprinzi, who is 5 feet 6 inches tall, thought that his shorter than average stature would be a handicap for the honor. So he centered all his hopes and training upon winning the Most Muscular Man title" (Hoffman 30). And win this coveted title, he did—most impressively. After scoring second to Alan Stephan in the overall Mr. America Contest—Stephan scored 72 out of a possible 75 points to Sam's 69—Sam heard his name announced as the winner of the Most Muscular Physique title. (The

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John Grimek 1946

just-crowned Mr. America, Alan Stephan. took second, with Joe Lauriano and Leo Stern tied for third.) In Grimek's summation of Sam's "Grand Tour" that summer, "Sam made numerous friends on his trip East and [those] who saw his in action will never forget him. In Philadelphia he was a sensation; in Detroit he was a super-sensation" (Grimek 17).

Sam's quest for the perfect physique was triggered by the great Clevio Massimo, one of the best-built strength and hand-balancing showmen of Sam's youth, who amazed the Loprinzi brothers, and especially Sam, in their 1927 visit to the Hippodrome in Portland. Post-Massimo, Sam's training took on a new character, evolving from a chinning regimen to the Charles Atlas course when he was fourteen and then on to Siegmund Breitbart's course when he was fifteen — his equipment in those financially lean years consisting of nothing more than barbells made from cement and an iron pipe (Loprinzi).

World War II found Sam in the U.S. Navy, and his memorable accomplishment in those years was breaking down the Navy brass' stubborn resistance to his, and brother Joe's, request to set-up a weight training program for the Naval personnel at Treasure Island Navy Base in San Francisco. Since, in those days, the great fear was that the barbell trainer was doomed to becoming "musclebound," Sam's first order of business was to demonstrate that such worries were unnecessary by means of easily assumed splits, back-bends, and the suppleness of his muscle control (along with his and Joe's demonstrated athleticism in wrestling, swimming, boxing, handball, and hand-balancing (Weider 24). By the end of their enlistments, the Loprinzi brothers were putting "500 men a day through the Loprinzi workouts and, whereas in the beginning they were using makeshift equipment, they ended up with all of the best equipment needed for the job." To make their ideological victory over the Navy complete, by the time of their discharge, the boys "received a ... commendation from their superiors for their achievement in building such a wonderful program of physical training ..." (Grimek 1617).

As a teenager, Sam competed briefly in Olympic lifting, taking seconds in the Oregon State and the Northwest Championships, in meets which he now guesses to have been, respectively, 1930 and 1932 (Loprinzi). With his appetite for bodybuilding competition largely surfeited by his great successes two years earlier, Sam made his swan song appearance at the 1948 Mr. Pacific Coast contest, which he won convincingly. Asked whom he admired over the years, Sam mentioned Sandow and, more recently, Stanko and Kono among the lifters, and Tony

Sansone and John Grimek, among the physiquemen: "My most memorable moment [in the game] was when I met John Grimek, back in 1946."

Helen, Sam's wife of 45 years, has been exercising with weights for 47 years: "We used to meet at Walt Baptiste's Gym in San Francisco to go out on dates when I was stationed at Treasure Island during the last two years of the War." Helen and Sam have two daughters, Cathie (40, a "marathon runner and occasional weight trainer") and Rhonda (37, who "does weight training and Jazzercise"), and three granddaughters: Kristy and five-year-old twins, Theresa and Alexandra. "We also have one grandson. (Loprinzi).

As much as Sam resides, today, in our mind as a man of strength and incomparable muscle, he resides in our heart as a man with much heart: much kindness and love. His great gym was the much-loved institution that it became, over the many years,

because, in addition to knowing just about everything there was, and is, to know about building strength, health, and muscle, Sam loved everything about his gym and his work there. Today, one can still find some gym owners who understand the mysteries of building strength and muscle, although the task of finding them becomes more difficult with the proliferation of the gym chains. Finding a gym owner, however, who actually cares about his "pupils"—who loves them—always has been, if not quite impossible, very difficult. (Can you think of one such for each finger on one hand? Forget the other.) Sam was one such. Sam Loprinzi—the gym owner, the man of strength and muscle, but more than that, the *man*—leaves behind him a legacy, rich not just in the memory of what he accomplished, but even more so of what he is and the gracious spirit that he embodies.

"My most memorable moment was when I met John Grimek, back in 1946"

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