

EUROPEAN CORNER

OSCAR HEIDENSTAM

A cold wind blew over British bodybuilding on the blustery day of March 21, 1991, when, as he left his Kensington home, Oscar Heidenstam collapsed and died.

For the past year he had been suffering circulatory problems but it did not interfere with his activities and just days before he had attended a bodybuilding show. He was 80 years of age. Nobody has done more for European bodybuilding than this man; indeed, it can be said that Oscar Heidenstam made British bodybuilding. He took the activity from its physical culture roots and, over 50 years ago, turned it into a specialist activity in its own right. In my perception, Heidenstam was largely instrumental in giving Britain a lead over the rest of the world at that time, for young Joe Weider was still in Canada and Bob Hoffman, who was tops in America, saw bodybuilding as being of secondary importance to weightlifting and devoted most of his time and finances to the Olympic sport. On the other hand, first through his personal efforts and later through Link House Publications, Oscar concentrated his efforts on bodybuilding, the activity which dominated his life and which he loved until the day he died.

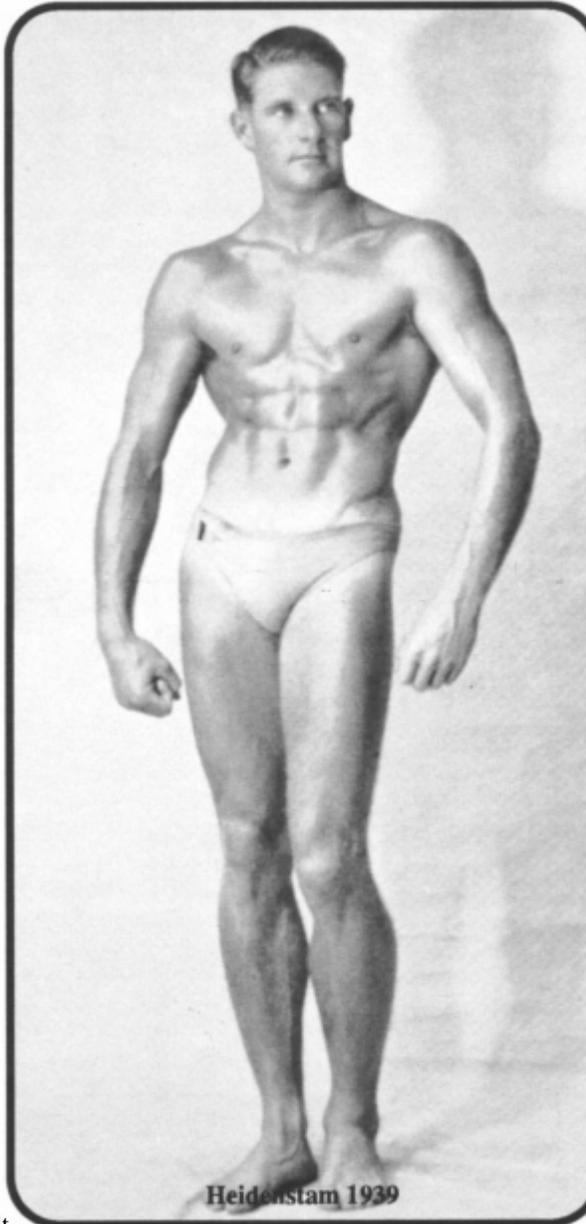
Oscar Heidenstam was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He first saw the light of day on February 27, 1911 in Cyprus, where his father was in the Colonial Police. It was a well-to-do family with Scandinavian origins, his grandfather being a Swede who came to study in England and became a naturalized British citizen. With such a background Oscar was quite a linguist; as an adult he spoke four languages fluently. He returned to England at the age of nine and became interested in sport during his summer holidays in Jersey. He was a very small lad, being barely 5' in height at the age of 15. As a youth he was an accomplished gymnast and remained so until well into his forties. He also became a fine

athlete, a good swimmer and a capable diver, being 'County' level in the two former sports. He collected 11 medals and a similar number of cups for these before leaving school. The next stage was to gain coaching certificates in these sports, after which he secured posts as a physical education teacher in private schools.

George Kirkley, his life-long friend, persuaded him to take up weight training, and Oscar made rapid improvements in spite of the fact that he had a couple of years abroad—something unheard of by ordinary mortals in those economically depressed 1930's. Soon he was entering photographic 'posing' competitions and he became the most popular coverman in British physical culture journals. Those in *Superman*, a superior quality magazine, were particularly admired; and his most famous poses were classics of their time. In all he won 64 *Superman* awards, which made him quite well known, and his reputation was further enhanced when he won the *Health and Strength* Physical Excellence Competition 1937, the fore-runner to Mr. Britain. In those days the contest took much lower billing than other items at the annual *Health and Strength* League show. The ladies winner was awarded £100—more than a year's wages for most of the competitors. Oscar got a measly cup and the other men a simple medal.

For pre-war British physical culturists, the winning of a *Health and Strength* League final would be the pinnacle of their career—except in the case of the ambitious Mr.

Heidenstam. He had the drive and the finances to go further, and he became the first Briton ever to venture abroad in search of further physique honors. In that same year he went to Le Touquet, for the championships organized by the Federation Francaise de Culture Physique, and won a Grand Prix and Diploma of Honor. (This



DAVE WEBSTER

contest was later to become known as Mr. Europe.) At that time Oscar had the lean classical lines necessary for success on the Continent, but it must be said that the Gaulic champions would pass almost unnoticed in the modern hard-core gym, such has been the increase in standards since then, Symmetry, definition and proportion were all-important in those formative years, but now these factors seem to have little bearing on competition results, and maybe we have lost something, as well as gained, in the process of evolution. When war clouds loomed on the horizon, Heidenstam took a privately paid course at the Army School of Physical Training, a most unusual educational experience, and when war came he joined the elite Army Physical Training Corp. He reached the rank of Captain, seeing action in the Middle East, and when hostilities ceased he continued serving the forces through the Navy, Army and Air Force Institution. Oscar soon resumed his appearances in shows, not just competing in physique contests, but showing his versatility in other ways. Few people remember that he participated in an entertaining handbalancing act good enough to grace the stage of the famous London Palladium. In 1947 "The Art of Balance" by Heidenstam and Fred Conway was applauded by a packed house with many distinguished guests, including His Excellency Jonkheer F. Michiels van Verduynen, the Royal Netherlands Ambassador, and members of the Royal Netherlands Embassy. Fred and Oscar did some superb, advanced handbalancing with Oscar doing most of the bearing, but he also showed his own balancing ability.

Oscar Heidenstam was a vital force in international bodybuilding for more than half a century, although he came on the scene at a difficult time in pre-war Europe. After the war his international reputation grew; the big man took 5th in the Mr. World of 1948; in Mr. Universe competitions he was 3rd in Class 1 after Steve Reeves and Reub Martin in 1950, 2nd in Class 2 and in 1951 2nd equal with Robert Duraton of France, Reg Park being the winner. He had to miss the 1952 event as he was in hospital at the time. Over the years Oscar also did well in Mr. Britain; he won in 1937 and placed 3rd in 1951 when he was approaching 40 years of age. In 1952 he won the Senior Mr. Britain title. Oscar then joined *Health and Strength* magazine, which contrary to various rumors was first published in March of 1900. He cooperated with editor David G. Johnson to write *Modern Bodybuilding*, published on June 3, 1953; and the book became a standard text for many years. Heidenstam stayed with *Health and Strength* through many changes, his expertise being invaluable to various owners. In 1956 Link House sold out to W.A. Pullum, who published the magazine until his death in 1960. His son, W.S. Pullum, continued to run the journal until 1967 when it was bought by Gordon Grose, a trader in weightlifting equipment. By this time Oscar was well established as Editor and two years later he and George Greenwood took over the

magazine themselves. In a letter of June 18, 1979 Oscar wrote to me that George never had anything to do with the purchase of the magazine. "I borrowed the money to buy the mag and paid it back and all when I was 57!", Oscar maintained.

Greenwood left the partnership in 1974 to concentrate on his personal interests and now *Health and Strength* was solely Oscar's responsibility; he had achieved an ambition. It was one of the high points of his career but the change from physical culture to bodybuilding had played havoc with the magazine's circulation figures, which had greatly decreased. The main ingredient of *Health and Strength* was now show reports, a fact that Oscar recognized. In a letter to me on January 18, 1977, he wrote "...but all I seem to do is publish show reports, which I am sick of! If only we could afford to enlarge the mag so it is not a diary of shows, I for one would be very thankful." The worries of publishing became greater and finally he passed on the problems and the publishing to others, and there was a succession of owners—in 1981 Steven White and Street Printers of Worcester, then Edward Hankey and Terry Phillips and, most recently, Alex McKenna.

Oscar had withdrawn from the publishing side and he had also experienced a role of diminishing responsibility with the National Amateur Bodybuilders Association, better known as NABBA. In these days, when demands for self government affect even the super-powers of the world, it was not surprising that organizers, competitors and officials wanted a say in how their affairs were to be conducted. NABBA had faced increasing competition and had to become more 'democratic' in order to survive, but Oscar Heidenstam, too, was a survivor and his wealth of experience, knowledge, love of bodybuilding and sheer tenacity kept him an integral part of the bodybuilding scene until his dying day. He was still NABBA secretary at the time of his death.

I like to remember Oscar most in the early 1950's, when he was probably at his physical best. He would attend our Spartan Club shows, act as M.C., judge, pose and do an agility spot with landings light as a feather in spite of his size—6' and 210 pounds. He had no hesitation in accepting my invitation to appear in a TV show carrying one of the Dinnie Stones of Strength, always helpful and always ready to have a go—that was the Oscar who earned our respect and affection. He always gave American physique competitors a good welcome in Britain and I know from Mr. Universe contestants like Dr. Ken Rosa and John Grimek that Oscar Heidenstam's contribution to bodybuilding will not be forgotten.

PHYSIQUE PROFILE. At 205 pounds in competition condition he had the following measurements. Neck 17 1/2" Forearm 14", Wrists 7 1/2", Thigh 26 1/2", Calf 18 1/4", Ankle 10 1/2". He was a talented poseur having won 26 awards in magazine competitions and 64 *Superman* posing certificates.