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REG PARK: THE PASSING OF AN ICON

David P. Webster, OBE

Editor's Note: As most fans of the Iron Game know, one of history's greatest bodybuilders, Reg Park of Great Britain and South Africa, passed away on 22 November 2007 after a long struggle with skin cancer. Reg's passing has been reported in newspapers and magazines around the world, and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger even issued a press release about Park, which is reprinted in its entirety on page five. Park's physique signified a significant evolution in the history of bodybuilding. At 6'1" and 225-235 pounds his combination of size and muscularity had never been seen before. His massive sharpness gave birth to a new physical aesthetic that became a template for bodybuilders such as Dave Draper and Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1960s, and as a film star his herculean body inspired many young men to head to the gym. Few physique men have had such an impact on our culture.

As a tribute to Reg, we include two articles in this issue by men who knew him well. The first is by long-time *Iron Game History* author and man of all seasons David P. Webster, whose interest in physical culture paralleled Reg's own in many ways. The Webster article is an adaptation of a piece on Reg which David published

recently in *Health & Strength's* April 2008 tribute issue to Reg. If you have not seen that issue, it is a remarkable compendium of Reg Park reminiscences and can be ordered by writing the *H&S* offices via email at: royston@daelnet.co.uk. The second piece about Reg was written by Joe Weider for his forthcoming book, *Bodybuilding As I've Seen It*, which will be published by The University of Texas Press in 2009. We are grateful to both men for sharing their memories.

—Jan and Terry Todd



Physique photographer Tony Lanza took this shot of the still growing Reg Park on Reg's first visit to the United States.

Reg died on 22 November 2007 at age 79, and within 48 hours newspapers all over the world were carrying the sad news. Rarely has a bodybuilder's passing had such a swift and sympathetic reaction. Partly because of the current wealth of information about Reg's titles and career I will leave out these aspects. Instead, this will be a very personal look at the life of this great man, with examples of how he touched the lives of many people and influenced them in positive ways.

Reg and I were born within months of each other in 1928, but hundreds of miles apart. Wartime circum-

stances—numerous bombings and a close escape—uprooted my family and we settled for the duration of the War in the West Riding of Yorkshire, where Reg was born and bred in Leeds. Although I may have been best in physical education at the school I attended, my classmates let me know in no uncertain terms that there was another kid in the district who could easily beat me. They were dead right—that kid was Reg Park, and in the regional championships he ran 100 yards in 10.3 seconds at 16 years of age! This was no ordinary boy. Reg’s photos appeared in *Health & Strength* and the *Health & Strength Annual*, which was published during the war years in spite of paper shortages. These photographs were astounding. This was a boy of the same

age as me, but with the physique of a very well-built man of 6 feet in height.

We went into the army at the same time, both being posted to Scottish depots—Reg to Nairn and myself to Gordon Highlanders barracks at the Bridge of Don. Naturally, I was still training hard and got time to train and leave to compete in strand-pulling. News filtered from Nairn barracks, and Reg’s reputation was now awesome, completely overshadowing my efforts. It could have given me an inferiority complex but instead I shone in reflected glory, as I knew so much about Reg’s achievements and potential. We were both put on a draft to Singapore but I was taken off the boat passenger list to become a physical training instructor at Redford bar-

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Jan Todd’s email: j.todd@mail.utexas.edu

Terry Todd’s email: terrytodd@mail.utexas.edu

Subscriptions/Kim Beckwith’s email: beckfish@peoplepc.com

Website: www.irongamehistory.com

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racks, Edinburgh. Reg also became a P.T.I. in what was then called Malaya.

Posted to Fort George I lost touch with Reg's activities, but not for long. One day a soldier passing the gym saw some of us wrestling; I had become a member of Alex Munro's wrestling club and had persuaded my fellow P.T.I.s to incorporate self-defense and wrestling into our schedules. The passer-by asked if he could join us and, chatting after a good bout, he told me that he had wrestled in the Far East with a soldier possessing an incredible physique who had been a big attraction. I guessed, and he confirmed, that it was Reg Park. Reg had a good laugh later when I told him that I kept on hearing about him wherever I went.

In the great annual shows the Spartan Club had at the Music Hall, Aberdeen, Reg's appearances filled every one of the 1,420 seats, and many people without advance tickets were turned away. Usually boys from Powis School would do a gymnastic display or hand-balancing, and they loved Reg, who was always kindly and joked with them. As their physical education teacher I could see how he inspired the lads, and so I followed this up by incorporating Reg's philosophies into their education. For example, I used to have short, very informal discussions while the lads were changing. "How many hours sleep do you lads get?" would be an opener, and having heard some answers I would then tell them that Reg was a great believer in adequate sleep, especially when he was still growing—and so on. By personalizing health hints with references to Reg, their hero, as the example, the advice was readily accepted. Because the informality of the Reg Park anecdotes did not appear as planned lessons, they were more effective. Dennis Law, who became a great international footballer, was one of those lads.

Reg Park set new and very high standards in building the male physique, raising the prestige of British bodybuilding worldwide. He could stand alongside the greatest overseas contestants and not be out-classed. After Reg married Mareon, a lovely and charming ballerina, his posing routine became quite classical, no doubt influenced by ballet, and

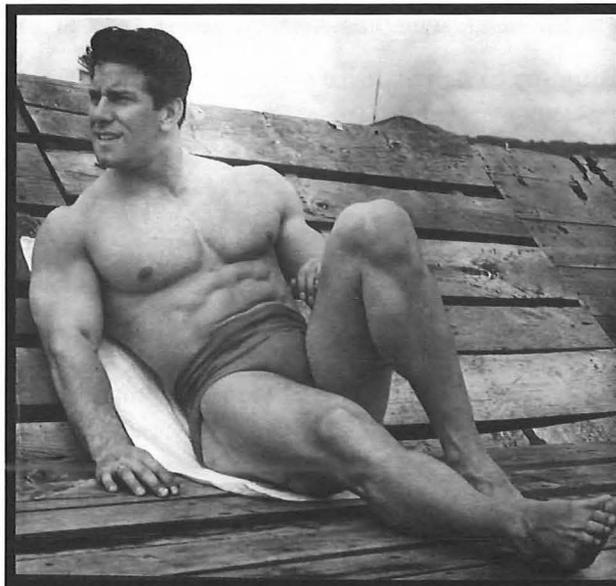


David Webster, shown here with Reg and his wife Mareon in 1998, knew Reg for more than 60 years.

Photo by Alex Thompson.

it was beautifully choreographed to the dramatic "Legend of the Glass Mountain." What's more, in the pre-steroid era, Reg was one of the strongest of all bodybuilders. He *officially* broke British records at least eighteen times and he was never fully extended; Reg deliberately increased his records by only a few pounds at a time as organizers invariably asked him to attempt a record at their show so they could use this in their pre-publicity and then in their show reports.

He always delivered the goods. Reg often broke British records in dumbbell pressing, and I know he did a press behind neck with 300 pounds, squats with 600 pounds, and was the first Briton to bench press 500 pounds. (I believe Wag Bennett may have done 500 pounds in the gym before Reg did but not before an official referee). Reg probably exceeded all these lifts, but I can certainly guarantee the authenticity of those quoted. Naturally they were all done without special bench press shirts and other special clothing and, quite definitely, without the use of steroids. Mr. Park was the real deal.



This shot of Reg sunbathing was taken by Jack Matsumoto of Honolulu in 1952.

Reg was his own man and he stuck by his principles in spite of various tempting offers. Evidence of this is seen in his publishing endeavors and he pro-

duced a good monthly magazine—*The Reg Park Journal*— with his own line of products. This changed the look of British physical culture magazines. He gave lots of space to competition weightlifting and specialized methods of training and he publicized promising bodybuilders and made others household names. I was proud to be a regular contributor to *The Reg Park Journal*, often using pen names. Many people warned Reg about the difficulties facing publishers of muscle mags but it worked well for him with some aid from his father, who looked after things while Reg was travelling.

Reg's parents were fairly affluent and had a very comfortable home, and I met his parents on many occasions. Even so, I still learn new things about Reg's life. About 20 months ago ex-coal miner Kevin (the Rev) Collings presented Reg with the miner's lantern Kev had used down the pit. Reg was delighted and told us that his grandfather had been a miner, and that the lamp was a fine memento of the man who Reg said had "brought me up." I was surprised to hear this for the first time. Like Kev the Rev, Reg was a very generous man. For example, a strength enthusiast, Bert Lightfoot, told me that Reg sold him the genuine original Inch Dumbbell for only £50 although it was worth a small fortune. Bert wrote that he passed it on to David Prowse for the same price.

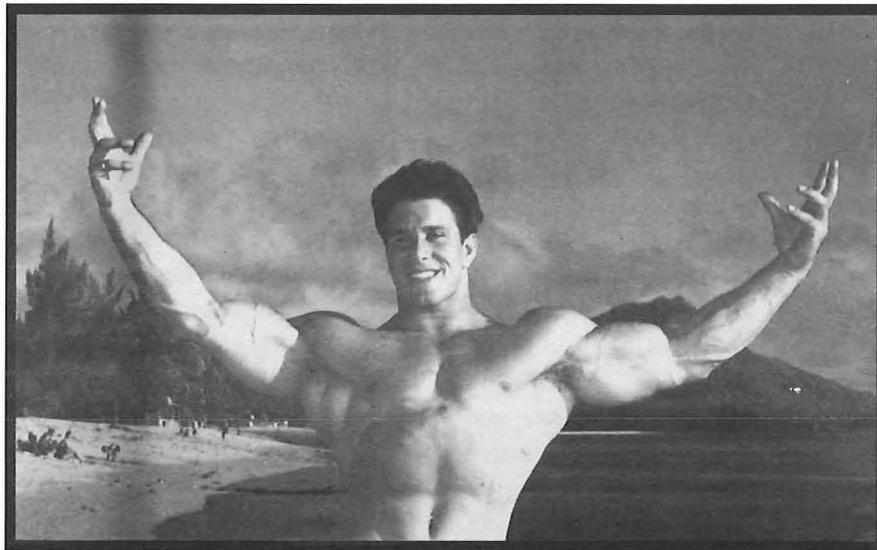
While Reg had the weight he loaned it to us free of charge for a challenge at the Music Hall, Aberdeen. Supposedly, nobody but Thomas Inch had ever lifted the famous dumbbell off the ground since the turn of the century, and because of the two World Wars the Inch Dumbbell had dropped out of sight. Reg had done some shows in London with Inch and had acquired the weight, so we included "the challenge" at one of our major events. Henry Gray, the Highland Games champion of 1954 pulled the bell well up his torso. The rest is history. If Reg had not acquired the famous weight it might have

been dumped like much of Inch's memorabilia, and this important iron game implement would have been lost.

Reviewing Reg's career indicates the breadth of his interests and his sheer versatility; he was a world class bodybuilder, a national record holder in weight and powerlifting, a magazine publisher and editor, a film actor, and a family man with a talented wife and gifted off-spring who are also great achievers. His wife, Mareon, is the sister of Johnny Isaacs, Mr. South Africa, and a Mr. Universe prize winner. Reg's son Jon-Jon was a swimmer of international repute and has a very successful personal training business in California. Reg's daughter, Jeunesse, has recently been in New York to

receive an important United Nations award.

I will greatly miss my annual meetings with Reg and Mareon at the Arnold Classic in Columbus, Ohio. Arnold was one of the many who was inspired by Reg and they maintained close contact. Both men have always been very true to their bodybuilding roots. Last time



One of the most impressive shots of Park ever taken is this photo displaying the mass and fullness he'd achieved by the late 1950s. This shot was taken on the Waikiki Beach in Honolulu with Diamondhead behind Reg's left arm.

we met at Arnold's event Reg was in great shape. "Feel these," he said, thumping his stomach. I tapped his abdominals with my knuckles, and it was like knocking a piece of granite. There was no superfluous flesh, just muscle.

I have known and admired Reg Park for over sixty years and I have never heard a bad word said about him. Reg was the ultimate role model for bodybuilders. He was totally dedicated to competition bodybuilding, but once he married lovely Mareon and started a family he, rightly, put them above everything else. Even with a change in priorities Reg still trained every bit as hard and his list of titles and awards continued to grow. I have seen for myself the wonderful, adventurous, fulfilling, worthwhile, and exemplary life he has led. Little wonder Reg was adored by his family, friends, and fans. All who knew and loved him will sorely miss him.