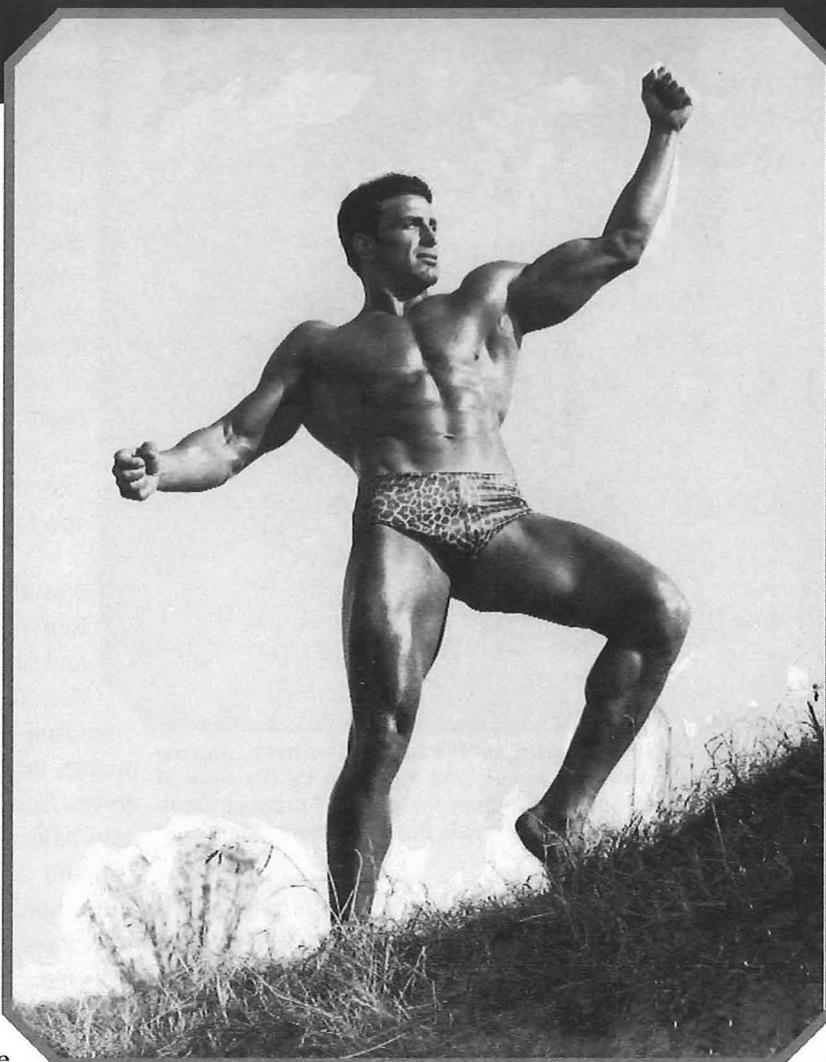


# Remembering Armand Tanny

Joe Weider

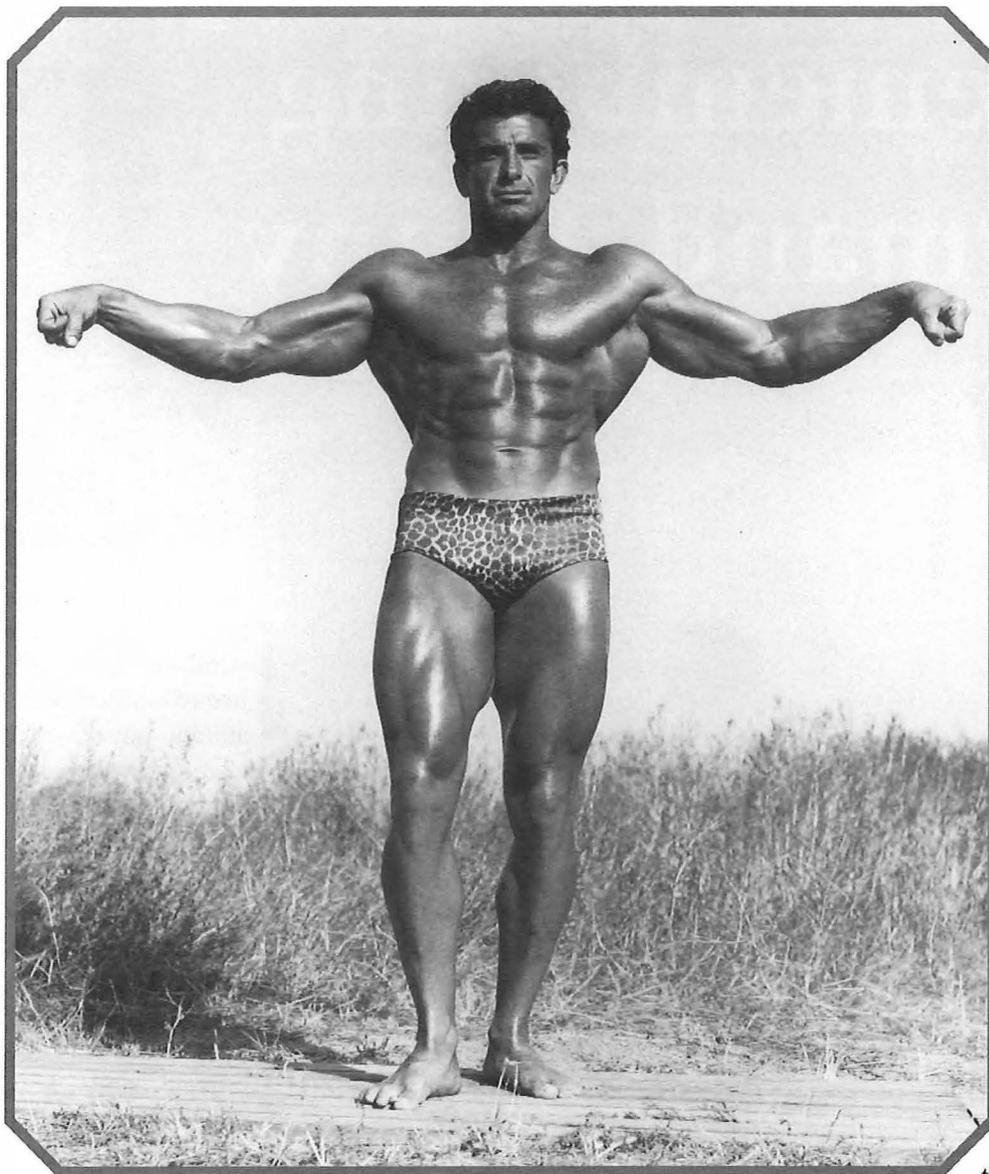
I need to say at the outset that Armand Tanny was one of my closest friends for over half a century, and so I can't be truly objective about him and about what role he played in my magazines and my life. We have grown old together, Armand and I—or should I say older. In any case, being around Armand for so long has been one of the things for which I'm most grateful, as I always held him in high regard as both a man and a devoted follower of the physical culture lifestyle.

I first met Armand in the late 1940s when I sent him a plane ticket to come to the New York area to take part in a bodybuilding show I was promoting.



**Armand Tanny, who passed away on April 4, 2009, at the age of 90, was involved in various aspects of the Iron Game during his long career. He first became famous for his involvement at Muscle Beach, then for his work with his brother in establishing the Vic Tanny chain of health clubs, then as a member of Mae West's stage show, and throughout his long life as a writer and staff member for Joe Weider's various fitness magazines.**

I'd seen his photographs and had admired his lean, broad-shouldered, athletic physique. I also knew about his exploits as a competitive weightlifter, and I admired him for those, too. But after he arrived and I saw him in person and saw for myself how gracefully he moved and how powerful he was I was even more impressed. However, as impressed as I was by how he looked and how he lifted, I was even more impressed by his easy manner and by the large intelligence that was so apparent in even casual conversation. "This is a very unusual man," I remember thinking to myself. I also thought that with Armand's broad



**Although Armand had a wonderful physique, with broad shoulders, narrow hips and a dark golden tan, his body was developed as much by his love of weightlifting as it was by bodybuilding. By the time he was 18 he could clean and jerk 300 pounds, a weight only a few “mannish boys,” in America could master in the late 1930s.**

knowledge of training techniques he’d be a great writer for my magazines. And before long he was proving me right with a series of fact-filled, easy-to-read, inspiring articles that launched a writing career which continued until I sold my fleet of magazines in 2003. Little did I realize that our meeting on the East Coast would lead to a collaboration which would last for over 50 years.

Armand was born in 1919 in Rochester, New York, and he grew up there. He had the good fortune to be the younger brother of Vic Tanny, who went on to

found and operate, with Armand’s help, one of the first nationwide health club chains—Vic Tanny’s. So young Armand had a first-rate role model to follow, and he began to train with weights in his early teens at a time when most coaches and doctors thought that such training would make a person muscle-bound. Actually, of course, it makes a person more athletic, not less, as all coaches and doctors now know, but back in those dark ages Vic and Armand—and a few others of us, too—were in on a secret that gave us a huge advantage over our peers in sports as well as in pure strength and muscular development. Partly because of Armand’s natural athleticism and partly because of his weight-trained power, he excelled in high school sports, particularly wrestling.

Armand told me he was about 13 when Vic gave him his first set of weights and told him to have at it, and that he did so much exercise

the first day that he was almost unable to walk and get up and down from a chair for several days afterward. But this taught Armand a valuable lesson, and

before long he was making rapid gains in both size and strength. He was naturally explosive and so he gravitated to competitive weightlifting. By the time he was 18 he could lift 300 pounds overhead in the clean and jerk, a very rare feat in those days. A few years earlier, Vic—who had started in the “gym” business by charging local boys a dollar a week to train in the Tanny family garage—had expanded and opened a modest gym in Rochester, and that’s where young Armand did most of his early training.

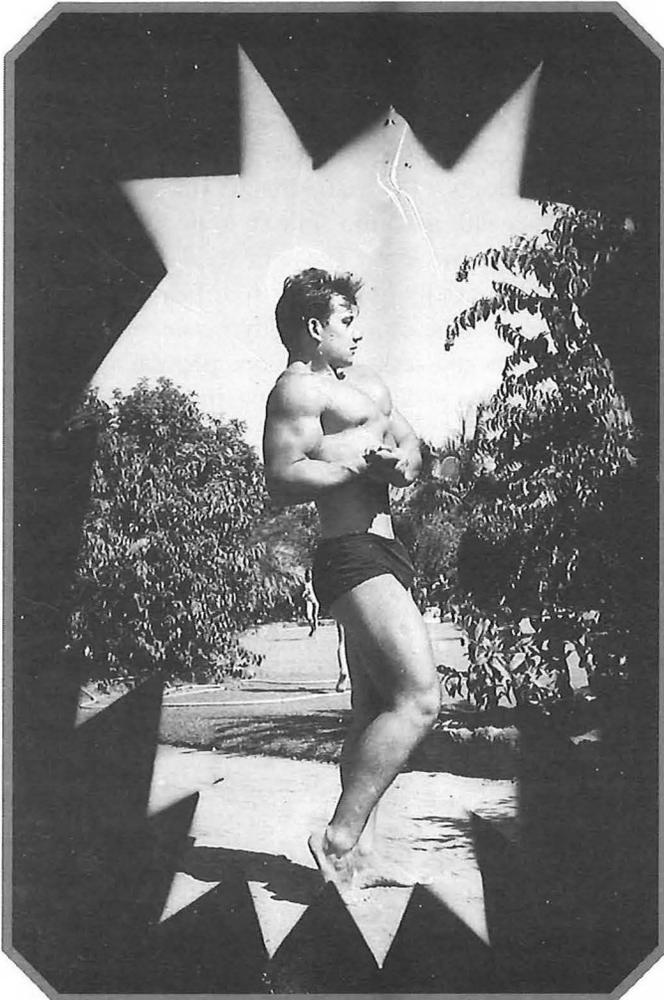
As Armand got bigger and stronger, however, he began to read the “muscle mags,” including my own, and he read about the charms of sunny Southern California. So when he was only 19, Armand decided to transfer from a local Rochester university to the University of California in Los Angeles, where he continued his pre-med studies. This was in 1939, but after earning enough credits to become a physical therapist, Armand abandoned his earlier plans to become a medical doctor because he had fallen so in love with the wonderful, relatively carefree life of Muscle Beach. Make no mistake—Armand didn’t decide to not go to medical school because he couldn’t get in, as he was one of the brightest men I have ever met. Schoolwork of all sorts always came easy to him, but he just didn’t want to prepare himself for a lifetime of work in the confines of a hospital. He wanted to find a way to make a living in some aspect of the field that he loved—exercise and physical culture.

Armand once said, “It wasn’t that I couldn’t finish med school. I just loved the Beach. I wanted to be there from dawn to dusk. Education is one thing, but you have to keep your perspective. You see, I loved chasing pretty girls.” Armand and Muscle Beach were made for each other, and he lived that lifestyle to the hilt back in the days when Muscle Beach was a bona fide magical kingdom. “Life was beautifully pure back then,” Armand once said. “Men of strength paid homage to a freewheeling life of fitness and muscle. Friendships were genuine, people were happy. On the weekends almost all of Santa Monica came to see our muscle circus. We did adagio, hand balancing, tumbling, weightlifting, and muscle display. The Beach was sacred to us.”

By 1940 Armand’s brother Vic had moved his gym business to Southern California, and Armand helped him run it. A lot of people have told me Tanny’s was the best place in that area to train, because back then the weight pit by the Santa Monica Pier hadn’t been established yet. Back then, people like Les and Pudgy Stockton, Russ Saunders, and Harold Zinkin would just take a few weights down to the Beach every weekend. In any case, the Tanny Gym flourished and the brothers made money even though they just charged five dollars for a three-month membership. But Vic was the one with the real drive to succeed as a businessman; Armand loved the sun and fresh air, and he also had ambitions as a competitive weightlifter. And, of course, there were the women.

Unfortunately, Armand had injured his knee so severely in a wrestling match a couple of weeks after moving to Southern California that he was never able to do full squats again. This meant that he was at a severe disadvantage against other lifters as the full squat is such a terrific developer of overall strength, even for lifters who, like Armand, used the split style of lifting in the snatch and clean and jerk. The split style of lifting—in which the lifter rapidly moves one foot forward and the other backward as he drops his body under the bar in a snatch or clean and jerk—was more popular in those days than was the squat style of lifting, in which the lifter simply squats into a deep position when dropping under the bar. But as the years went by and I began to publish articles urging lifters to try the squat style, more and more men came to realize that the squat style of lifting was much more biomechanically efficient. This realization was no help to Armand, however, because his bum knee prevented from using his natural athleticism and switching to the more effective squat style of lifting.

Even so, weighing approximately 190 pounds and lifting in the Heavyweight class against men much larger than he was, Armand became the Pacific Coast weightlifting champion, and he reached lifts of 270 in the Press, 280 in the Snatch, and 360 in the Clean and Jerk. These lifts put him among the top few men in the United States at that time, even with the limitations of his bad knee. But as much as he liked the standard lifts, he also had a favorite lift—a pet lift—that he really loved, and he got so amazingly skillful and strong in that lift that I believe he may have been able for a time to lift more weight in that style than anyone in the world of any weight. That lift was the One-Hand Clean. Armand used an underhand, or curl, grip, and he did the lift with a standard Olympic bar. He gripped the bar with his right hand in the center, pulled the bar upward, and then squatted down to catch it on his right shoulder and chest in about a half-squat position. As he caught the bar in that position he simultaneously placed his left hand on the top of his left thigh near the knee and pushed downward to help his legs bring him to a fully upright position. The lift requires great timing and co-ordination, as well as overall body power—qualities that Armand had in abundance. He could do over 200 pounds in the One Hand Clean before he left Rochester, and once he reached his prime in Southern California he reached the seemingly unbelievable weight of 300 pounds. He did 280 pounds in an exhibition, but he told me he managed



**This rare, and very early shot of Armand was submitted to *Iron Man* magazine with this hand-cut border overlaid on the top of the photograph.**

to clean 300 in practice. By that time, the only man I had read about who had supposedly been able to clean such a prodigious weight with one hand was the 260 pound German professional strongman, Hermann Goerner, who was much larger than Armand and who was said to have lifted a bit over 300 back in the 1920s. I used to love the One Hand Clean myself, and I've always considered Armand's lift of 300 pounds to be one of the greatest feats I know—given his size and the pre-steroid era in which it was done.

Among insiders in the weight game, Armand's ability in the One-Hand Clean became legendary, but to the readers of the muscle magazines he quickly became better known for his outstanding physique. Like most Americans near his age, Armand served in the Armed Forces during World War II. He didn't wait to be draft-

ed, but went down with his fishing and training buddy, Joe Gold, and enlisted in the Coast Guard. Following his time in the service, Armand returned to Southern California and plunged back into the good life at Muscle Beach along with fellow iron workers such as Artie Zeller, Marvin Eder, Joe Gold, Harold Zinkin, Dick Tyler, Pepper Gomez, Clancy Ross, George Eiferman, and Steve Reeves.

In 1949 Armand was looking so good with those trademark barn-door lats that some of his friends convinced him to start competing in bodybuilding, and he wound up winning a show put on by Bernarr Macfadden called "Mr. 1949." He also won the prestigious Professional Mr. USA title. He won a thousand dollars for that victory and he used part of it to pay for the birth of his daughter, Mandy, who thanks in large part to Armand has gone on to have a long and successful career in the fitness field as a gym owner, writer, television personality, and nutrition expert. Armand met Mandy's mother, Shirley, in Southern California after she had moved there from a farm in Arkansas. Shirley was terrifically strong by nature, and quickly became able to one-arm snatch a dumbbell weighing 90 pounds and to put 170 pounds over her head in a two-hand clean and jerk. For a time in the early 50s, Armand and Shirley and little Mandy moved to Hawaii, but before long Vic Tanny and I convinced Armand to come back. Each of us needed his help, and I tried to convince him to move to Montreal and work with me. But he didn't think he could bear the cold weather and, over the course of the years, my readers really liked articles by him and photographs of him, and he was a valuable member of my team.

In 1954 he entered a new phase of his career when he was hired by Mae West to be one of the bodybuilders she used in her traveling revue. That revue played in cabarets and theaters all across the country, and Armand was joined by fellow bodybuilders like George Eiferman, Joe Gold, Artie Zeller, Dom Juliano, Zabo Kozewski, and Dick Dubois. Armand was apparently one of Mae's favorites, and he always made me laugh when he told stories about some of the things that happened back in those exciting days. He recalled the two years or so that he spent on the road with Mae as being strange but interesting. He said about them that, "The act broke records in cabarets all over the country. Dick Dubois was Mr. America of 1954, so he was featured a lot. One night, unbeknownst to anyone else, he took off his posing trunks under his robe. When it came time to

open his robe Dick stood there totally naked with his back to the audience, so only Mae could see. The crowd erupted in laughter at Mae's reaction, but she never missed a beat, moving right up to Dick and rattling off a string of one-liners."

When Armand's gig with Mae West ended I asked him to expand his writing for me and he did so, but he also went to work for his brother Vic, too, on a part-time basis. Armand still needed time for the ladies. But finally, Vic's business was expanding so rapidly and he needed Armand so desperately that Armand moved for a time to New York City and began to work at the headquarters of Vic's national chain of health clubs. His responsibilities involved advertising copy, course writing, and equipment design; and during several years he and Vic made a great deal of money as the Vic Tanny chain grew to almost 100 gyms. One thing I liked about Armand's move to New York was that it put him closer to my own main offices, which were then in Union City, New Jersey. He continued to write for me and we became closer friends than ever before. But by the early 1960s several ill-considered business decisions caused the bottom to drop out of the Vic Tanny empire and Vic was forced to sell out. Finally, Armand convinced him to slow down and enjoy himself, and so Vic did just that, retiring eventually to Florida, where he died in 1985.

As things went badly for the Tanny chain, they were going well for my business, but Armand suggested that things would go even better if I moved my headquarters to Southern California. For some time Betty and I had been thinking about moving to the west coast of the U.S. I realized that being in the center of international bodybuilding and physical fitness would make it easier for me to work with the top bodybuilders, and so we decided to make the Los Angeles area our home. Betty began to search for a good location, and we eventually settled on a property in Woodland Hills, California, where I still maintain my personal offices. This move happened over 40 years ago, and Armand stayed with me until I finally sold my publishing business. Over the years, he wrote hundreds of articles and exerted a huge influence on all of my younger writers, who were in awe of his vast knowledge of the game, his wide-ranging intelligence, and what they would probably call his "California Cool." I've had dozens of young writers and bodybuilders tell me that they hoped they would be as "cool" as Armand when they got to be his age.

To be honest, I have to admit that over the years I've sometimes envied Armand, too. He accomplished many important things in his life, but he always took the time to enjoy himself. He lived his life with a flair that reminds me of a line, written by Paul Anka and made famous by Frank Sinatra: "I did it my way." Armand loved the sea, and boats, and the wilderness, and he would often simply go away for a time to be by himself. He never let himself be caught up in the rush of business, as I did, and I envied him because of it. I suppose a bit of my jealousy—like that of so many of his other friends in the iron game—was a male thing. As much as we loved him, we couldn't help being a little jealous of how consistently attractive he was to women. They absolutely loved Armand, and he loved them back. He took the time to be with them, and no doubt this was part of his magic. Of course it didn't hurt that he was smart as hell, moved like a cat, looked like a movie star, and had the body of Roman god.

The combination of his relatively stress-free life, his regular exercise, his generally-careful diet, his fondness for fresh air and, of course, his genetics allowed him to live beyond his 90th birthday. Even so, his last couple of years weren't easy on him as his family put him in a nursing home—a bad decision, in my opinion. Armand was very unhappy there, and during one sad episode he drove away and stayed away for a week or so without telling anyone where he was. Finally, a man at the restaurant where he'd been taking his meals found out what had happened and contacted the home. So they came for him and they took his keys. In any case, except for his last months he lived a rich, self-directed, productive, active, and enviable life. I was very close to Armand during the last half of the 20th century and I have many wonderful memories of our time together working in the field we loved. Those are the things I remember. And I remember them often.

(This article is adapted from a chapter in a book to be called *Bodybuilding As I Have Seen It*. The book will be published by UT Press as part of a book series under the auspices of The Stark Center and endowed by Terry and Jan Todd.)

