

# Testing for the World's Strongest Man: Ensuring that the Man Called "The Strongest Man in the World" Is the Strongest Man in the World<sup>1</sup>

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*"Our own worth is measured by that to which we devote our energy."  
— Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, VII.3.*

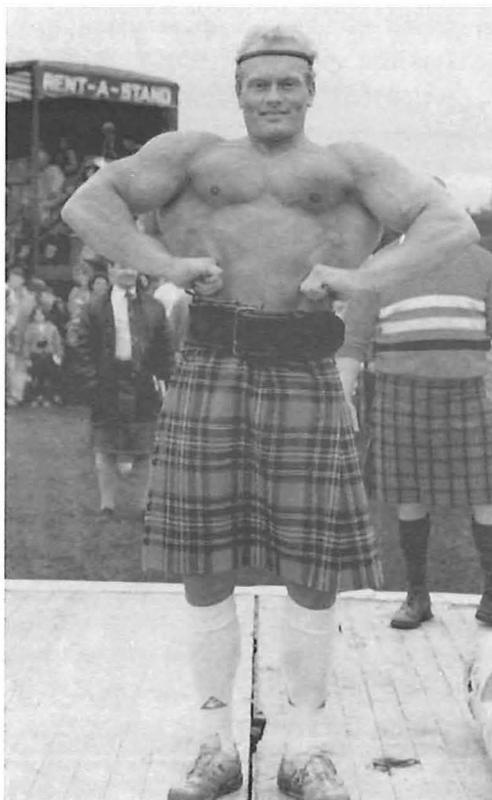
The final event of the 1990 World's Strongest Man contest—held in Joensuu, Finland—pitted Iceland's Jón Páll Sigmarsson against American O.D. Wilson. Sigmarsson, winner of three prior World's Strongest Man contests (hereafter, WSM), was behind by five and one-half points to Wilson (46 to 40.5), just after finishing second to Wilson in the Anvil Lift event. Still Sigmarsson confidently boasted that he would do well enough in the final event, the Brick Carrying Race, to beat Wilson in the contest. The generally soft-spoken Wilson, an incredibly massive man at 6'5" and roughly 400 pounds, was angered by Sigmarsson's boasting. "I hate for people to overlook me like I'm not there," said Wilson. "It makes me mad. And now I'm mad."<sup>2</sup> He vowed that he would prevail. So substantial was Wilson's lead that all he had to do in the final event was to come in fifth place or better, among a field of eight, to ensure victory.

Wilson and Sigmarsson squared off in the final heat of the four heats of the final event. Each was given a 100-kilogram (220-pound) block of bricks to be carried high on the back so that the strongmen could race around the 200-meter track in the quickest possible time. The well-conditioned Sigmarsson, who weighed more than 100 pounds less than Wilson, raced rapidly around the

track and completed his lap in 50.92 seconds—a time good enough to earn him first place and eight points. Wilson started quickly, but soon began to labor under the load and finished the course in 1:12.80 seconds—a time that earned him seventh place and only two points. Sigmarsson's eight points gave him a total of 58.5 points; Wilson's two points gave him a total of 58 points. Sigmarsson's half-point win was his fourth WSM title. The

massive and massively disappointed Wilson pledged to return to the competition next year and win. *[Editors' note: He did not.]*

To most observers, Sigmarsson's win in the Brick Carry event and narrow victory over Wilson in the contest showed his resiliency and his greatness as a strongman. Yet it must have been perplexing to some, as it was to me at the time, that a man as large and strong as Wilson could lose to the smaller Sigmarsson in a contest that aimed to determine the strongest man in the world. Would Sigmarsson have won if the load of bricks had weighed 300, not 100 kilograms, and the length had been 50, not 200 meters? I suspect not, but it is, at least, an open question. That notwithstanding, the Brick Carry ought not to have been what decided victory between Sigmarsson and Wilson. The event was structured so that a man of Wilson's mass could not do well. A truer test was needed.



**Four-time World's Strongest Man winner, Iceland's Jón Páll Sigmarsson stood 6'3" tall and usually weighed during his competitive years between 290 and 300 pounds.**

*Photo Courtesy David Webster*

The sport of Strongman has come a long way, since 1990. As of this writing there are three major contests, including WSM, which aim to test for the strongest man in the world. The number and type of events at one competition differ, often substantially, from the number and type of events at the other two competitions and signify, as it were, key philosophical differences in their approaches to the sport of Strongman.

This paper is an effort to structure a contest that would viably test for the strongest man in the world by setting out the philosophical criteria undergirding such a contest: the completeness, heaviness, and simplicity criteria. Driven by those criteria, the structure of a strongest-man-in-the-world contest depends fundamentally on answers to four questions, which flesh out the theoretical ideal for such a contest. First, what sort of events ought to be included? Second, how many events ought to be included? Third, over how many days ought the contest be held? Finally, how much weight ought to be used in each event?

### *A Brief History of the Sport of Strongman*

Though strongman displays and exhibitions of strength have been a part of human history—as mythologies are full of accounts of human feats of strength that certainly have their origin in actual feats of strength—Strongman has only recently been made a sport with the inception of the World's Strongest Man contest in 1977. Since then, Strongman has gained in popularity to such an extent that many of the world's best weightlifters and powerlifters have left their sports to make full-time commitments to Strongman. There are now competitions of various sorts all over the globe.

The reason for the popularity of Strongman is easy to see. Athletes push up massive logs, pull trains or airplanes, deadlift bars fitted with large Hummer tires or containers overfilled with silver coins, and race with an automobile strapped to their shoulders. From the perspective of the athletes, Strongman enables the very best of them to gain notoriety that they could not have gained in weightlifting or powerlifting. It also enables the winner of one of the three major strongman contests—the



**O.D. Wilson began his career in powerlifting and he totalled 2430 in a contest in 1989, one of the highest totals of all times. Although Wilson's weight varied considerably over the years, at 6'5" in height, he generally weighed between 400 and 420 pounds when competing as a strongman.**

*Photo Courtesy David Webster*

World's Strongest Man (WSM), the Arnold Strongman Classic (ASC), and the Fortissimus Strength Challenge (FSC)—to stake a claim to being the strongest man in the world, which is a title as prestigious within the strength sports as is “heavyweight boxing champion of the world” in boxing, and instantly puts him in a select group of athletes. Furthermore, some of the larger competitions offer modest prizes, often of a monetary sort, that enable a handful of the very best athletes to make a livelihood of the sport.

The most noteworthy and established of these contests is the World's Strongest Man contest. WSM was established in 1977 by Trans-World International for CBS and was initially more of a friendly display of strength by invited athletes from several sports—e.g., powerlifting, weightlifting, bodybuilding, American football, wrestling, shot putting, and arm wrestling. Those invited had to lift logs overhead, race carrying refrigerators on their backs or pushing wheelbarrows with engines, toss beer kegs onto the back of a truck, wrestle each other Sumo-style, and bend iron bars of varied thicknesses.

The overall aim at first was light, almost frivolous entertainment, as athletes joked with each other throughout the contest and the events were unpredictable, sometimes outrageous. Some years later, Met-Rx bought out the sponsorship rights of WSM and, as athletes committed to training throughout the year for the title and pres-

tige that came with it, light entertainment turned into fierce competition. The first great modern strongman was the massive Bill Kazmaier, who stood 6'3" and weighed as much as 335 pounds. Kaz so dominated the events from 1980 to 1982 that he was not invited to return until 1988, when he was beyond his prime, though he still managed to place second to Iceland's Jón Páll Sigmarsson—the sport's second great strongman. Sigmarsson, a man with plenty of charisma, won four competitions between 1984 and 1990. The third great strongman, Magnús Ver Magnússon, also from Iceland, won four championships between 1991 and 1996. Finally there is the Polish powerhouse Mariusz Pudzianowski, who has won five championships between 2002 and 2008 and placed second in 2006 and 2009. Pudzianowski is arguably the most superbly conditioned strongman of all time and shows little sign of slowing with age, as he has yet to retire.

A second contest began in 2002, when Dr. Terry Todd responded to a request by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Lorimer, in response to comments by Todd, to set up a strongman contest that was a truer overall test of strength. Thus, the Arnold Strongman Classic—a competition imbruted, strangely enough, not through more and varied events, but through fewer events with much heavier weights—was established. Over the years, the number of events over two days has ranged from four to six and the weights used in those events were set up to challenge the limits of human strength. Events contested include a timber carry, without straps, of 865 pounds up a 30-foot inclined ramp within a 30-second time limit and a yoke walk, whereby athletes carry 1116 pounds on their shoulders for a prescribed distance over time. The contest was first won by American Mark Henry. Thereafter, Lithuania's Žydrūnas Savickas won it in each of the next six years. In 2009 and 2010, the winner was American Derek Poundstone.

A third strongman contest began in 2005 with the inception of an international strongman league called "International Federation of Strength Athletes" (IFSA). IFSA was formed not only to rival WSM, but also to allow strength athletes the opportunity to make a career of Strongman. Thus, IFSA recruited and signed 60 of the world's top strength athletes—including Savickas, Ukraine's Vasyl Virastyuk, Russia's Mikhail Koklyaev, Poundstone, and Pudzianowski—to contracts, though Pudzianowski quickly defected. Savickas won IFSA world championships in 2005 and 2006. Virastyuk won the title in 2007. IFSA folded in 2008.

Finally, in 2008, the first Fortissimus Contest (FSC) was held. With *L'homme le plus forte de la planète* pasted on its webpage in nine different languages, it no doubt considered itself to be the contest which best decides the strongest man in the world.<sup>3</sup> It had 10 grueling events in 2009, including the Pyramid of Strength—a timed race, in which athletes lift and load three weights with handles (weighing 450, 500, and 525 pounds) up five steps, and a hip-and-thigh backlift, in which athletes lift as much weight as they can and the weight begins at 2000 pounds. Said strongman Travis Ortmayer, prior to competing in the 2009 contest:

I think that FSC 2009 may just be the most brutal competition I have ever seen! For instance, the dumbbell-press medley was completed by three of us last year [Derek, Zydrunas, and myself], so what do they do this year? They certainly didn't do the obvious thing and take the last implement off and replace it with a heavier one. No, they just *add* another, even heavier one! The first day is going to pulverize the back and the second will take away what little will be left of the legs.<sup>4</sup>

The contest was grueling, as advertised. Over the two days, successful athletes had to negotiate over 16,400 pounds. Savickas won the contest in 2009; Poundstone, in 2008. [*Editors' note: The FSC folded in 2009.*]

### **Pudzianowski vs. Savickas**

With the exposure he has been given globally through television by the yearly WSM contest, Pudzianowski has become the most recognizable strongman in the world today. At 6'1" and just over 300 pounds, he is superbly conditioned and is, from the perspective of lean muscle mass, perhaps the most physically impressive strongman of all time. His physical impressiveness is doubtless a result of his genetic gifts as well as his extraordinary drive, focus, and intelligence—reasons sufficient to cement a claim to being the strongest man who ever lived. His drive is manifest in his competitive spirit. In interviews, for example, he is not shy about being known to posterity as the greatest strongman of all time. His focus is manifest in his capacity to concentrate on each event in a manner that is free from all distraction. When competing, his attention is restricted exclusively to his own performance, while adversaries always seem to have one eye on Pudzianowski. His intelligence is manifest in the



**Polish strongman Mariusz Pudzianowski has now won five World's Strongest Man Contests, in which his great muscular endurance and quickness have allowed him to frequently prevail even though he is never the largest man in the contest at 6'1" and just over 300 pounds. In the Arnold Strongman Classic, however, where the events more fully test physical strength, Mariusz has only entered three times, finishing fourth in 2003, fifth in 2004, and taking sixth in 2006. He has been invited every year.**

extraordinary efficiency with which he tackles events. He not only makes the most efficient use of his body on each event, he also shows continual improvement on events for which he is physically less well-suited. His tenacity was no more evident than when he lost the 2006 WSM contest to American Phil Pfister by one second on the fifth and last Atlas stone of the last event and then came back the next year to crush Pfister and all other competitors.

In stark contrast to the superbly conditioned Pudzianowski, in the manner of the physical contrast between Sigmarsson and Wilson, is the massive Žydrūnas Savickas, who stands 6'3" and weighs roughly 400 pounds. Savickas is a physically impressive sight to those initiated in strength sports; to those uninitiated, he seems, as did Wilson, just another large, fat guy. Yet the large fat guy has won six straight ASC championships

from 2003 to 2008, the IFSA world championships in 2005 and 2006, the FSC challenge in 2009, and most recently the WSM contest in 2009—a contest generally ill-suited to men of his immensity.

Who, then, is the real strongest man in the world—Pudzianowski or Savickas? From 2005 to 2007, that was difficult to decide, since IFSA had barred its athletes contractually from competing in the WSM contest. Yet Savickas and Pudzianowski have competed against each other on several occasions in WSM. Prior to IFSA, Savickas had finished second to Pudzianowski in the 2002 and 2003 WSM competitions. Yet Pudzianowski came in third in the 2004 WSM competition, behind Virastyuk and Savickas, both recruited by IFSA the next year. In 2009, Savickas placed first and Pudzianowski, second.

More telling is their head-to-head performance in the yearly ASC. Between 2003 and 2006, Pudzianowski and Savickas competed against each other on three occasions. Savickas, who has competed in the ASC each year since 2003—except for 2009, when he decided he needed to take a break from year-round training—had never lost the strongman contest. Pudzianowski came in fourth in the ASC in 2003, fifth in 2004, and sixth in 2006. He did not compete in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2009, though he was invited those years. Pudzianowski was not only dominated by the more massive Savickas in the ASC competitions, he nowise distinguished himself from other competitors in the process.

Finally, what of the Fortissimus? Pudzianowski, though invited each year, has yet to compete. Savickas attended both competitions and won the competition in 2009.

Overall, Pudzianowski has reigned supreme in WSM competitions in the last decade, while Savickas has dominated the ASC and IFSA contests and made his presence felt at FSC with a win in 2009. Savickas did not compete in WSM contests from 2005 to 2008; Pudzianowski did not compete in the ASC since 2006 and did not compete in FSC in 2008 and 2009. Were the strongmen avoiding each other?

There is no reason to believe that either athlete has been totally avoiding the other in recent years. Savickas was contractually barred by IFSA from competing in WSM contests from 2005 to 2007. He declined to compete in 2008, but did compete in 2009, where he beat Pudzianowski, who finished second. In contrast, Pudzianowski was invited to each ASC since 2003 and to both the FSC challenges. In the years he has attended the ASC, he has been mediocre at best, and he has not



According to the author's CHS formula, Zydrunas Savickas of Lithuania deserves to be called the World's Strongest Man. In 2009, he won the Fortissimus contest in Quebec, Canada, and in 2008 he won the Arnold Strongman Classic for the sixth straight year. He also won the WSM contest in 2009. In this photo from the 2010 ASC, Zydrunas is doing two reps in the Apollon's Wheels with 459 pounds, a new record.

attended a contest since 2006. Moreover, Pudzianowski has verbally committed to both FSC challenges, but has yet to honor a commitment. What seems clear is that Pudzianowski is avoiding all contests other than the WSM contests. Why?

The answer, I maintain, is straightforward. He has nothing to gain and everything to lose by competing elsewhere. His successes at WSM contests since 2002 have given him the reputation of the world's strongest man to a large global audience. His dismal showings at the ASC competitions have shown that he cannot contend in competitions in which the weights are upped and events test for raw, not conditioned, strength. Whereas the ASC has structured its competitions so that the winner distin-

guishes himself in a handful of events by lifting very heavy weights in full-body tests of strength, WSM competitions have been as much tests of athletic endurance as they have been tests of strength. Deadlifting and pressing events, in the WSM, especially in the qualifying rounds just prior to the competition, allow for numerous repetitions that tire stronger, heavier competitors. Thus, a strongman with Pudzianowski's extraordinary conditioning has a decided advantage in WSM, year in and year out. In competitions where conditioning is attenuated, like FSC—or factored out—like ASC, Pudzianowski fails to distinguish himself other than by his impressive physique.

### Testing for Raw Strength

Why should conditioning be attenuated or factored out in a Strongman contest? It should not necessarily be attenuated or factored out in all Strongman contests, only those which aim to test for the strongest man in the world. Before elaborating on that point, let us attempt a definition of "strength."

Lexicons offer up a large number of definitions that relate not only to physical strength, but also to strength of mind and strength of character. For the purposes of Strongman competitions, I wish to focus on physical strength, though it is acknowledged that in Strongman competitions, like all other athletic competitions, character and mental strength play a large part also.

I begin with the following lexical definitions, all of which are relevant for understanding the phenomenon of human physical strength.

**Strength=df<sub>1</sub>** A numerical measure of force.

**Strength=df<sub>2</sub>** A capacity for exertion to overcome force.

**Strength=df<sub>3</sub>** A capacity for endurance to resist force.

The first definition is generic. It says that strength is merely quantifiable force. More precisely, as Newton stated in his second law of motion,  $F = ma$ , or force is equivalent to mass times acceleration. Simply put, for an

athlete, while supine, to press a 400-pound barbell from his chest, he must (roughly) exert continuously an upwards force in excess of 400 pounds or the barbell will remain on his chest.<sup>5</sup>

The second definition states that strength is a capacity to overcome some force, say an object of some specific weight, through human exertion. In the 2008 Arnold Classic, for example, Savickas pulled 1066 pounds in the Hummer-Tire Deadlift, for a new world record.

The third definition focuses on resisting a force, say a heavy dead weight, through endurance. At the 2006 IFSA World Championships in Finland, in the Toyota-Truck Deadlift-Hold event, Virastyuk held up the rear end of the heavy truck 87.8 seconds to best all competitors.

All three definitions seem to add something needed for a definition, suitable for Strongman contests. Thus, drawing something from each definition, let me offer up the following definition of “strength.”

**Strength=df** A quantifiable capacity either to overcome force through exertion or to resist force through endurance.

Although this definition ignores the inner dimension of strength—and as most great athletes admit, strongmen not being exceptions, that success in their sport is principally inner drive—it captures nicely the physical essence of strength competitions. At the end of a contest, the man who pushes or pulls the greatest amount of weight or a certain weight for the greatest number of reps in some events, or the man who endures a weight over time better than other men in other events is declared winner.

There is, however, a certain built-in ambiguity in the definition that reflects what I believe is a problem for any contest that essays to determine the strongest man in the world. The definition tells us only that strength is a capacity to overcome force through exertion or resist force through endurance. Neither does it say anything about how much force one must overcome or resist nor does it say anything about time. One can imagine a strength contest which includes events such as these: (1) athletes fill a shopping bag with groceries, carry it a distance of 100 meters, and then rush back, while they carry a 10-pound bag of flour, to where they began; (2) athletes toss up 10 bricks, one after another, and attempt to clear a 20-foot-high bar within 30 seconds; and (3) athletes try to prevent two hardy five-year-old boys from pedaling away in opposite directions on their tricycles

for as long as they can by holding fast to ropes that are affixed to the rear of the tricycles. Such events are, of course, contrived and silly, but the point I make through them is not: They are legitimate tests of strength, given our definition, so why is it that they seem to be events ill-suited for inclusion in a contest that decides the strongest man in the world? Conditioning, technique, and speed of performance would be deciding factors in the first two events. In the final event, one would expect that the two boys, however hardy, would become exhausted and frustrated, and then quit, well before either could break away from anyone, with a modicum of physical strength, holding them back. The point is that too many persons would succeed and succeed well in such events and such events would not distinguish them, whom we generally consider to be the strongest persons in the world, from them, who are merely good athletes. In short, being exceptionally strong would not gain an athlete an advantage in such “tests of strength.” Strength seems merely to be one of many things that are tested in such events.

Yet each of those contrived events has a parallel to WSM events, which are themselves flawed. The first is comparable to several carrying events at WSM throughout the years that test for balance and conditioning as well as strength. Technique is critical. Often the event is complicated, as athletes, barefoot, have to run through sand, while carrying a load, and the heavier, more massive athletes tend to falter. One year, competitors had to carry heavy sacks of sand onto a platform, situated in the sea! Few finished. The second is comparable to the keg-toss event, where athletes, standing in sand, have to toss 10 50-pound kegs over a 14’6” wall over time. The event favors taller, fitter, and well-coordinated athletes. Efficiency is the key. Extremely powerful athletes, who clear the wall easily on the first few kegs, often exhaust themselves before reaching the last few kegs and fail to finish in the allotted time. Heaviness of the kegs is not the issue here, as the kegs are not in the least heavy to such men; endurance of the athletes is the issue. The last is comparable to the Hercules-hold event, in which athletes, standing between two hinged pillars, grip handles affixed to the pillars in order to prevent the pillars from falling to each side. The pillars are held for the longest possible time. Grip strength is imperative. Moreover, short-armed athletes have a distinct advantage over long-armed athletes in that the weight of the pillar, sitting closer to the perpendicular position, rests more on the apparatus to which it is hinged. Consequently, short-armed athletes have less weight to resist. Furthermore,

the Hercules-hold event simply does not test for overall body strength.

### *Stumbling Blocks*

The flaws of carrying events, the keg toss, and the Hercules Hold illustrate, through their deficiencies, three criteria any contest that aims to decide the strongest man in the world ought to fulfill. I call these the completeness, the heaviness, and the simplicity criteria.

**Completeness Criterion:** Any contest, aiming to test for the strongest man in the world, ought only to include events that are complete, full-body, not frivolous, tests of strength.

**Heaviness Criterion:** Any contest, aiming to test for the strongest man in the world, ought to use weights that test the very limits of human strength.

**Simplicity Criterion:** Any contest, aiming to test for the strongest man in the world, ought to include events that are relatively uncomplicated.

Those criteria, taken together, which may be called the CHS criteria, have implications for the sort of contest that aims to test for the strongest man in the world. Immediately, however, we encounter two pressing practical concerns.

First, there is the problem of biased events. Any contest that tests for the strongest man in the world would have to attract the strongest men in the world, chiefly scattered in three strength sports: weightlifting, made up of the snatch and clean and jerk; powerlifting, made up of the squat, bench press, and deadlift; and Strongman competitions, made up, as we have seen, of a wide variety of strength tests. Consequently, the events contested in such a competition must not show a strong bias in any one direction toward any one strength sport to the exclusion of the others. Otherwise, it will likely fail to attract many or, at least, some of the strongest men in the world and, thus, it cannot claim to have achieved its aim.

The problem of biased events is a huge obstacle. As I have argued in a prior publication,<sup>6</sup> it may be that the best test of the strongest man in the world would be some slightly modified form of powerlifting contest, which tests for maximum weight in each of the three lifts. Testing for maximal weight satisfies the heaviness condition and the relative uncomplicated nature of the

squat, bench press, and deadlift satisfies the simplicity condition. Moreover, each of the three lifts is a relatively complete test of bodily strength. Thus, one could argue that the powerlifts satisfy the CHS criteria sufficiently well to prove a fitting test for the strongest man in the world. Yet staging a contest, aiming to decide the strongest man in the world, which features only the powerlifts, would likely not attract many of the strongest men in the world outside of powerlifting.<sup>7</sup>

Second, there is the problem of spectacle. A strongest-man-in-the-world contest, like all other competitive sporting events with large spectator appeal, is a competitive event with the express, though not exclusive, aim of entertaining. That means that certain concessions will always have to be made to spectacle—i.e., a particular strength event that is a poorer, often more complex test of raw strength but with strong spectator appeal (e.g., a back squat with a barbell affixed to an apparatus that carries women in bathing suits or a deadlift with bulky Hummer tires) will likely prevail over a strength event that is a better, simpler test of raw strength with little spectator appeal (e.g., a back squat or deadlift with a heavy barbell with standard plates). Spectator appeal sells a sport and spectator appeal requires some measure of complexity and, unfortunately for sports purists, some measure of compromise.

There are three other issues, related to spectacle, which need to be addressed: alteration of events, the historical grounding of events, and the safety of the events. First, it is a staple of Strongman contests to modify, rotate, or change at least some of the events each year. That is due, in part, to mistakes made by those holding the event, because of the relative newness of the sport. It may turn out that an event, like the steel bar bend, is too injurious to the competitors, so it is dropped and replaced by a safer event. It may be that an event proved too easy (or difficult) for competitors and so modification was warranted, such as more weight or inclusion of straps (For example, the 815-pound uphill timber carry, without straps, used in the 2002 ASC, was changed to a weight of approximately 875 pounds.) Such difficulties notwithstanding, Strongman, with its inception in 1977, has always at least rotated events to prevent athletes from preparing in advance for particular events and to force them to train for overall body strength throughout the year. The question that remains is this: Are modification, rotation, and change needed, if the events contested are simple, true, full-body tests of strength like the powerlifts? The answer, I maintain, is that they are not

needed, but that modification, rotation, and change of events in strongman are perhaps too entrenched and too much a part of the spectacle of Strongman to be discarded.

Second, strongman contests always seem to include events that have their roots in strongman exhibitions—from numerous decades ago (e.g., the Cyr dumbbell and Apollon's Wheel) to a few millennia ago (e.g., stone lifting). The preference for events with a history behind them, in effect, falls under the problem of spectacle. Does tying events to strongman feats of the past detract from the aim of testing for the strongest man in the world? Given the CHS criteria, one must acknowledge that it often does. Many of the strength feats of the past were remarkable only because they conceded so much to spectacle at the expense of simplicity (e.g., the bent press or side press) and sometimes to completeness (e.g., teeth lifts) and heaviness (e.g., bending coins with one's fingers or ripping apart phone books).

Finally, there is the safety of the events. Ought a contest to make concessions to spectacle that needlessly puts competitors at risk? Liberals in the philosophy-of-sport literature commonly argue that risk-taking is a personal, not a public, issue.<sup>8</sup> None have been pressed fully to demonstrate the practicability of that claim—especially as it concerns socially sanctioned sports. I have argued consistently that socially sanctioned sports must make key concessions to safety—lest we adopt an anything-goes approach to sport that privileges spectacle over concern for athletes.<sup>9</sup> The sport of Strongman, at least insofar as the ASC and the WSM have demonstrated over the years, seems to pay at least some consideration to the safety of its competitors. WSM, for instance, discontinued the steel-bar-bend event, after both Bill Kazmaier and Geoff Kapes sustained injuries in 1982, although they required the men to fight each other Sumo-style even though such matches are risky, especially to men untrained in Sumo techniques.<sup>10</sup>

### *Creating a World's-Strongest-Man Contest*

The problems of spectacle and biased events notwithstanding, I return to the four critical questions, as they pertain to structuring the sort of Strongman contest, aiming to determine the strongest man in the world.



**At the 2010 Arnold Strongman Classic, defending champion Derek Poundstone carried the massive 1000-pound timber frame up the 40-foot incline in an amazing 9.28 seconds. Keeping the time is four-time World's Strongest Man winner, Magnus Ver Magnusson. Poundstone's phenomenal performance with the timbers allowed him to finish four points ahead of Zydrunas Savickas, who had injured his hamstring just before the contest. At this moment in history, Savickas has a slight edge over Poundstone in basic strength. They are ahead of all others.**

1. What sorts of events should be included in the contest?
2. How many events should there be in the contest?
3. Over how many days should it be held?
4. How much weight should athletes have to lift in those events?

Answering these questions, my concern is not the practical problem of setting up just such a contest—for the problems of spectacle and biased events would certainly come into play—but the theoretical problem of deciding just what such a contest, given the CHS criteria, ought to look like.

### *The Type of Events*

Any contest that aims to determine the strongest man in the world ought to be aiming at testing for raw, brute strength. Given that, the sort of events that ought to be included are those that are relatively uncomplicated movements that fulfill the CHS criteria. For instance,

the overhead lift with a log, barbell, stone, or aluminum block is a great and relatively simple test of lower back, torso, quadriceps, shoulder, and triceps strength. The squat and deadlift are also exceptional and simple tests of overall bodily strength. In the main, there should be a preference for maximal single-repetition events over maximal multiple-repetition events.

Given the CHS criteria, the sorts of events that should *not* be included in Strongman contests that aim to determine the strongest man in the world are these:

1. Events too technically complex, where technical mastery prohibits exhibition of strength (e.g., the caber toss, the car walk, and the weight toss over a bar);
2. Events requiring extraordinary cardiovascular fitness, where strongmen often falter or fail because of lack of cardiovascular fitness, not strength (e.g., the light deadlift for reps or the carrying of several relatively light objects, in sequence, without rest);
3. Events focusing on strength of too particular a sort (e.g., the Pillars-of-Hercules hold and the front or lateral deltoid hold);
4. Events showing themselves too dangerous over time (e.g., the steel bar bend); and
5. Events where the apparatus itself is not consistent from competitor to competitor (e.g., the WSM squat or deadlift for repetitions, with a barrel dumped into the apparatus with each successful repetition, because the arbitrary placement of the barrels in the apparatus affords some athletes a leverage advantage over others).

### ***The Number of Events***

CHS criteria require that there should be great care to limit the total number of events in Strongman contests aiming to determine the strongest man in the world. Complete bodily tests with ponderous weights

exhaust fully all competitors. As a rule, strongmen need to be massive athletes, at least in part because body mass affords them leverage against the ponderous weights they encounter. Extra mass, of course, means that the toll on athletes over the course of a particular event or an entire contest will be greater and that by itself precludes having a large number of events. Overall, I think that four or five grueling events over two or three days are sufficient. Historically, the number of events contested as WSM contests have been too many. The 2009 FSC featured 10 events over two days. It may have proven itself to be, in the words of Travis Ortmeyer, the “most brutal competition,” but having so many events in so short a period of time factors in endurance too much.

### ***The Number of Days***

If events are fixed to a small, yet suitable number—say four or five events—it is feasible to conduct the contest over the course of a few days. Three would be ideal: two on day one, two on day two, and one on day three. In general, ASC has the right idea, as it generally contests four to six events over two days. WSM in 2009 only contested seven events over three days and the events (surprisingly) that year were fairly good events by measure of the CHS criteria. Yet the best athletes made the finals by surviving 10 qualifying events over four days just prior to the final events. That is too much testing. As a rule, more events require more days, but that, I have argued, detracts from the aim of testing for the strongest man in the world. [*Editors’ note: The 2010 ASC had five events.*]

### ***The Amount of Weight***

To focus on brute strength and not cardiovascular fitness, events in which the best athletes can pop out 15 to 20 repetitions, in a specified amount of time, use insufficient weight and favor well-conditioned strongmen. The car deadlift for repetitions in WSM contests is one such event. So too is the WSM light overhead press for repetitions. Conversely, the Manhood-Stones event of the 2008 ASC contest, where a spherical 484-pound or 525-pound stone had to be lifted off the ground and dropped over a barrier, approximately four feet off the ground, for repetitions, is the sort of correct test of brute strength that involves repetitions. Many repetitions are not possible, due to the heaviness of the stones. Again, maximal single repetitions in an event are always preferable to maximal multiple repetitions.

Overall, as strongmen become bigger and stronger,



An event such as this axe-hold at the 1994 World's Strongest Man contest is almost impossible to judge. Also the athlete, South African Wayne Price, is being tested more for endurance than for strength.

the weight lifted in events must increase correspondingly, so modification of that sort will be a necessary part of a properly organized contest over the years.

### Concluding Thoughts

The principal and perhaps unremarkable implication of this paper is that the structure of any Strongman contest itself determines the type of competitors that can reasonably contest in it. Contests with fewer events and heavier weights in those events will favor more muscularly massive, less conditioned, strength athletes. Contests with numerous events and lighter weights in those events will favor less muscularly massive, more conditioned, strength athletes.

Overall, I have argued for the CHS criteria to be employed in structuring a strongest-man-in-the-world contest: Events ought to be complete tests of strength, utilize weights that challenge the limits of human strength, and be relatively simple tests. Those criteria impose limits for the type of events that can be contested, the number of events contested, the number of days over which those events can be contested, and the weights that should be employed in those events.

The obstacles confronting anyone wishing to organize such a contest are those of biased events and spectacle and its related problems. The problem of biased events requires contest organizers to include events that will draw in athletes not only from Strongman, but also from weightlifting and powerlifting. The problem of spectacle makes it virtually impossible for the simplicity criterion to be met in the most right-intended strongest-man-in-the-world contest. Concessions will always need to be made to complexity to satisfy spectators.

Yet the problem of concessions to spectacle may not

be such a problem after all. The sport of Strongman has its roots squarely in strength exhibitions, which played to spectacle. To strive for utter simplicity in testing for strength—e.g., to use the three powerlifts as tests for the strongest man in the world—would be to ignore its roots and to pretend that Strongman is something it is not. What separates Strongman from other strength sports is its appeal to spectacle. For contest organizers, imagination and invention are key factors in designing yearly events. For strongmen, resourcefulness, in addition to brute strength, is needed to master those events. Along the way, organizers, competitors, and, most importantly, fans of Strongman have plenty of nerve-wracking fun. Having fun, as ASC has shown over the years, does not rule out a serious contest, in keeping with the CHS criteria, that in the process actually does determine the strongest man in the world.

### Notes:

1. I would like to thank Dr. Terry Todd for insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper and an anonymous reader for helpful comments on a later version.
2. <http://strongestman.billhenderson.org/bios/od.html>.
3. The French translates to: "The strongest man on the planet." The website is no longer on-line.
4. [http://www.FSC.ca/pages/index\\_e.aspx?DetailID=124](http://www.FSC.ca/pages/index_e.aspx?DetailID=124).
5. I say "roughly," because I could explode the weight from my chest with an initial upwards surge of, say, 475 pounds and use that initial thrust to complete the lift.
6. M. Andrew Holowchak, "What It Really Takes to be the World's Strongest Man," *Philosophical Reflections on Physical Strength: Does a Strong Mind Need a Strong Body?* eds. M. Andrew Holowchak and Terry Todd (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 11-33.
7. One could compromise by removing the bench press, which perhaps too narrowly focuses on pectoral, front deltoid, and triceps strength to satisfy the completeness criterion. In its place, there could be a standing overhead press, similar to the "jerk" part of the clean-and-jerk, where the weight is taken initially from a rack and then pressed overhead.
8. For example, W. Miller Brown, "Paternalism, Drugs, and the Nature of Sports," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 11(1985): 14-22, and Michael Burke and Terence J. Roberts, "Drugs in Sport: An Issue of Morality or Sentimentality?" *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 24 (1997): 99-113.
9. M. Andrew Holowchak, "Aggression, Gender, and Sport: Reflections on Sport as a Means to Moral Education," *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 34 (October 2000): 387-99; "Ergogenic Aids and the Limits of Human Performance in Sport: Ethical Issues, Aesthetic Considerations," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 29(October, 2002): 35-51; and "'Aretism' and Pharmacological Ergogenic Aids in Sport: Taking a Shot at Steroids," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 27(October, 2001): 74-86.
10. That was not always the case—especially in the earliest years of WSM. Terry Todd relates an episode from the 1977 WSM contest in which he advised contest organizers against conducting the refrigerator race on a flat surface, due to the consequent impact on competitors' knees. His advice was not taken and Franco Columbo suffered a severe knee injury, from which he never recovered. See Terry Todd, "Philosophical and Practical Considerations for a World's Strongest Man Contest," *Philosophical Reflections on Physical Strength: Does a Strong Mind Need a Strong Body?* ed. M. Andrew Holowchak and Terry Todd (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), 54-5.