

THE ROARK REPORT

The Mr. America Contest: A Brief History

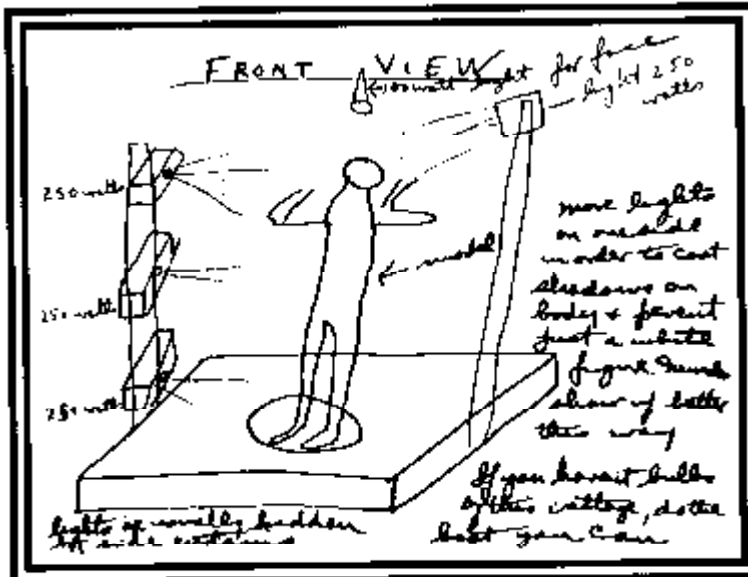
Johnny Hordines was among the first physique contest promoters. Indeed, an article in the January 1948 issue of the *Chicago Bodybuilder* about Hordines was titled: "All American Johnny Hordines: Originator of the Mr. America Contest."

Hordines' "Finest Physique Contest" was held on December 1, 1938 at Gardner's Reducing Salon and Gymnasium in Schenectady, New York. The physiquemen were divided by height: 5' to 5'8"; 5'8" to 5'11"; and 5'11" and above. Respectively, these classes drew 16, 13, and 10 entrants. That this many men entered was somewhat notable since "The" magazine of the day, *Strength & Health* had not been alerted that the contest was to take place. Obviously, then, the February 1939 issue of *S&H* account of the contest was not written by someone sent on assignment.

Hordines, at age 28, appointed these judges: Waker Reagels, art director of the General Electric Company, Dan Duval, sports editor of the Union Star; and Carroll "Pink" Gardner, former wrestling champion.

There was no overall winner, except in the cases of best bodyparts awards. There were two men, Ed Zebrowski and Joe Kurpiel, whom the judges determined had equal ab development, so that ended in a tie. But it was easier to determine that Joseph Peters stood chest and shoulders above the rest in those categories, so he won both. John Bousa was given best legs. No mention is given concerning best arms, best back, and it is worthy of note that weightlifting was not a prerequisite for the physique competition. The top three men in each class were: **5' to 5'8"**: 1st Jack Channing, 2nd Ed Zebrowski, 3rd Joe Kurpiel; **5'8" to 5'11"**: 1st Bill Hillgardner, 2nd Michael Lapausky, 3rd Joseph Peters; **Over 5' 11"**: 1st John Bousa, 2nd Milton Furman, 3rd Matty Van Newal. 1

About seven months later, on June 10, 1939, Johnny Hordines staged an event which some have called a Mr. America contest. It took place just a handful of miles from Schenectady in the city of Amsterdam. Again there were height classes; the first two divisions were the same as the December 1938 contest, but the third height class was now designated 5' 11" to 6' 4". One wonders why this change was implemented, but it was.



This crude sketch by Johnny Hordines, given to the Library by Alton Eliason, shows the revolving platform and lighting for Hordines' 1939 event. It reads: "More lights on one side in order to cast shadows on body and prevent just a white figure. Muscles show up better this way. If you haven't bulbs of this wattage, & the best you can."

Now some judges were sitting whose names ironmen knew: Sig Klein, Joe Bonomo, Otto Arco, Bob Hoffman (all deceased now), and two unnamed judges described as a newspaper writer and a local high school art teacher. *S&H*, in the August 1939 issue, refers to this contest as "America's Best Physique Contest". Indeed, the photocopy of his award that Ted Keppler sent to me indicates that it was called the 'Finest Physique Award.' The judges listed on Keppler's award were the same as those noted above with two names, no doubt belonging to the newspaperman and the teacher, W. Dawson and A. Rhein. The writing

on Ted's award reads: "This is to certify that T. Keppler has been awarded this certificate of merit for having one of the finest physiques in class A in America. Awarded at the AMERICA'S FINEST PHYSIQUE CONTEST, June 10, 1939, Amsterdam, New York." It is signed, "Johnny Hordines, General Director." The words "Mr. America" or "Mr. America contest" appear nowhere on the certificate.

This contest must have been impressive to watch. The musclemen were posing on a revolving platform as music played. There is a mention that lighting was provided, and since one must assume such a contest would not be held in the dark, one must further assume this lighting to refer to some professional arrangement of overhead lights.

This time, in 1939, there was an overall winner, with first place going to Goodrich with 10 points, Farnham winning second place with 11 points and Hempe third with 15 points. The only sub division body parts winners mentioned are Peters, who won best chest and Asnis, who won best abs. It should also be noted that though professionals were allowed, the physique contest could only be entered by people who had also entered the weightlifting competition. A point system was noted; five points each were given for muscular development and muscular proportion, and five more points could be awarded for the grouping of characteristics including hair, teeth, posing, etc.

Now here comes the dilemma for the researcher. Keppler, in separate letters to me, indicated he placed fifth in this con-

test, and as noted, he was in Class A. But I have placings through seventh for the tallest class, and placings not up to fifth in the other classes. Since Keppler's name is not mentioned in the text of any articles I have encountered for this contest, the dilemma doubles. Ted did place fifth as his award shows, but poor reporting of the early writers does not help us today get a grasp on all the details. At any rate, what has been determined is:

| 5' to 5' 8" | 5' 8" to 5' 11" | 5' 11" to 6' 4" |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Elmer Farnham | 1. Jack Hempe | 1. Bert Goodrich |
| 2. Jack Channing | 2. Joseph Peters | 2. George Hooper |
| 3. Murray Merkoff | 3. Monroe Brown | 3. Bruce Whitaker |
| | 4. Walter Podolak | 4. Gene Jantzen |
| | | 5. John Bousa |
| | | 6. Dave Asnis |
| | | 7. Caleb Saunders |

(Other competitors seem to have been: Isador Vicious, Walter Conn, George Kochler, Tony Tricol, and Bill Curtis. All totaled, 30 men competed.) In any case, it is upon the basis of this victory that Bert Goodrich is referred to as the first Mr. America.

But less than a month later, on July 4, in connection with the 1939 Senior National Weightlifting Championships, another physique contest was held. The AAU now enters the picture. To compete in the posing, one had to be a registered AAU athlete, and yes, had to compete in the Senior Nationals. We are told that the judges were "several ladies, artists, and art teachers, a sculptor, and the operator of a businessman's gym. Roland Essmaker won the nod for the tall class, and in February 1964 (25 years later) we are told that the medium class winner was Herbert Marquart, and the small (not short) class winner was Tony Terlazzo. It is upon the basis of this victory that Roland Essmaker is referred to as the first Mr. America.

Are you confused yet? I shall, for the sake of clarity, not clutter the picture with other muscle matters, such as the contests of April 23, 1939 (the Bronx Y.M.H.A. Greater New York Best Built Man) or the November 18, 1939 contest (York Perfect Man). Instead, on we go to the contest the result of which is the basis for John Grimek to be referred to as the first Mr. America.

May 25, 1940. In New York City, the World's Fair was in progress, and in connection with all the festivities going on in the Big Apple that Saturday, the AAU was holding a Mr. America contest which John Carroll Grimek, age 29, would win. But the *New York Times* in covering the event would give full coverage to the lifting at the Senior National Championships, and then, as almost a by-the-way afterthought, include a brief paragraph about the Mr. A contest.

Indeed even three years later, after John Grimek had again won the Mr. America event in 1941, editors at *Life* magazine still were not sufficiently familiar with his face, if not his physique, to catch the mis-labeled photo they included in their November 29, 1943 issue on page 130. Grimek is shown doing the most muscular pose and he is referred to as Peter Skavronek. This was soon corrected in a subsequent issue of *Life*, but it did bring home the message: bodybuilding and bodybuilders were not "recognized" in any sense of the

word by the popular press. To give you a feel for the lightness with which this contest was treated at the time, read the following: "After the lifting, a 'Mr. America' contest was held in which victory went to John Grimek, who took part in the heavy-weight class." (*New York Times*, 26 May 1940) That's it!

Time magazine (June 3, 1940): "Chosen "best developed and proportioned amateur athlete" at a weight-lifting contest in Manhattan, John C. ("Mr. America") Grimek posed with his trophy, glowingly flexed his mighty biceps, triceps, quadriceps." A photo of Grimek holding his trophy is shown.

As was noted earlier, best body parts subdivisions varied from contest to contest. And on this Saturday night, May 25, 1940, it was probably clear who had won which body parts earlier in the afternoon competition, but these many years later, with sparse accounting, we cannot be sure except for the following: Grimek won best arms and most muscular, then he declined to compete for the other subdivisions, not for fear of losing; perhaps for just the opposite reason, as it was written that he probably could have won all subs except, perhaps, best abs, which it turns out were flexed to victory by Chick Deutsch. Frank Stepanek, who this night decided to be known as Frank Leight, was awarded best chest; Joe Thaler won best back. I can find no mention of a best legs category or victor. There was no posing music but all the men except Grimek and Leight used "make-up", that is, oil and suntan powder.

Competition in the lifting was not required to qualify for the posing, but Grimek placed third in the heavies--lifting in his street shoes 285/250/325 for a total of 860 pounds.

Even the point system used to judge this contest isn't clear. *S&H* magazine itself presented two schemes. The July 1940 issue tells us that five points were awarded for muscular development; another five for muscular proportion, three points for posing, and two for general appearance. But exactly two years later a writer says that seven points were awarded for muscular development, five for muscular proportions, and a total of three points for posing and general appearance. Perhaps this is quibbling, since the total points in either case would be 15. If there were seven judges (as I suspect) and if there were 15 points per judge, then a perfect score would be 105.

Here are the placings as best we can determine. Remember that 61 men competed, many names have been lost through the years, and these men were swimmers etc., rather than physique men, which may be one reason their names were not mentioned. In other words, many of the men were really out of place in such a contest.

The 1940 AAU Mr. America Contestants:

1st John Grimek (99 1/4 points); 2nd Frank Leight (97 1/2 points); 3rd Lud Shusterich (88 points); 4th Chick Deutsch (best abs); 5th John Gallagher (*S&H* September 1940, 45); 6th George Lapausky (*S&H* November 1940, 46); or 6th Charles Whitlock (*S&H* May 1941, 24). Others mentioned, though not in order: Joe Thaler (best back); Terry Robinson; Gene Jantzen; Elmer Farnham; Monroe Brown; Dave Asnis; Herman Weinsoff; Carl Hempe; Tony Terlazzo; Melvin Kahn (*S&H* July 1942, 47: best abs?); and Jack Channing. The announcer for the contest was Al Frazen.

Ed Note: Portions of this article appeared in an earlier Roark Report