



IRON GAME HISTORY



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PAUL ANDERSON 1932-1994

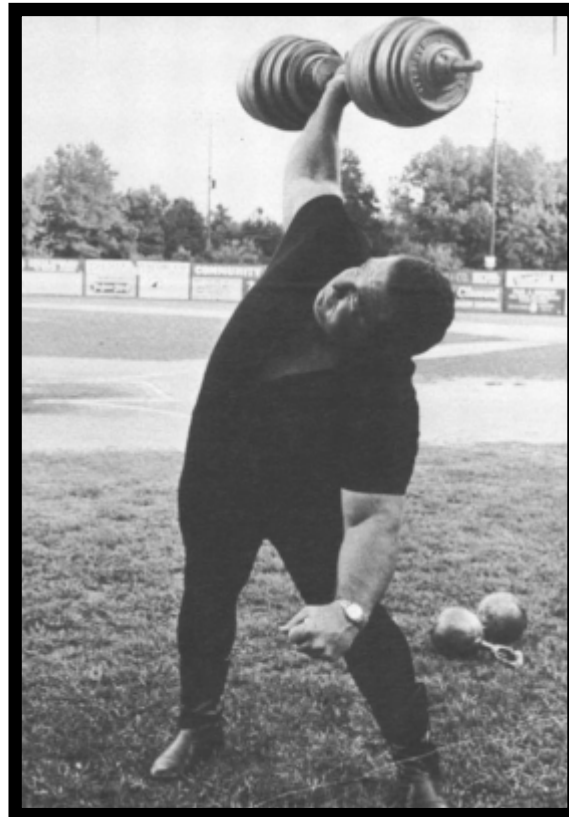
The first competition behind the Iron Curtain between athletes from the two superpowers after the Cold War began was held in 1955 in Moscow. The athletes were weightlifters. Ever since the end of World War Two and the resumption of international meets the American lifters had been dominant, and the soviets resented this dominance and were jealous of it. The political leaders of the soviet sports machine were very aware of the propoganda value of athletic success, and they badly wanted to be able to say to the world that their political system produced the strongest men. They were obsessed by the idea of beating the U.S., particularly in the superheavyweight class, the symbol of strength. Even then, almost 40 years ago, the top superheavy was widely recognized—at least in the media—as the strongest man in the world.

So there was a lot at stake that day in Moscow when an unknown twenty-two year old boy from the hills of north Georgia stepped onto the outdoor stage in front of twenty thousand curious Russians. The lifting conditions could hardly have been worse. It was cold and windy and there was a driving rain. And when the announcer told the crowd that Paul Anderson's first attempt in the press would be more than twenty pounds over the world record they began to laugh. They knew this was Anderson's first international compe-

tion, and that no-one in the history of the sport had ever had the audacity to open with twenty pounds more than the listed world record. But when the five foot nine inch, barrel-chested, three hundred and forty pound Anderson chalked his hands and strode to the platform the crowd got a good look at him and they became suddenly quiet. And when he pulled the bar to his shoulders and pressed it easily over

his head they were so stunned that for a time they made no sound at all. But then they leapt to their feet shouting, calling him. "chudo priyody"—wonder of nature.

This dramatic world record, coupled with Paul's unique appearance, caught the imagination of the public, and he was able to parlay the attention into a career as the most famous strongman of the modern era. When he returned home he appeared on many nationwide television programs—most notably the popular and influential Ed Sullivan Show—and later that year he won his first world championship. In 1956 he capped his brief but glorious amateur career—during which he established nine world and eighteen American records—by winning a gold medal at the Olympic Games. He then decided to become a professional strongman, and for a time he was a headline attraction in a Reno nightclub, doing heavy presses, hiplifts and challenging anyone in the world to match the "silver dollar"



squat he did each performance. But the days of vaudeville were gone and Paul was unable to make it work financially, so he tried his hand at several things—acting, professional wrestling, and even pro boxing, for which he was physically unsuited. Paul’s body, however, was perfectly designed for heavy lifting.

The soviets were on the receiving end of this design in 1958, when their lifters made a reciprocal visit to the U.S. for a series of man-to-man contests against the best Americans. By then the soviets had nudged the U.S. out of the top spot and their prize possession was Alexander Medvedyev, the world superheavyweight champion. The first meet was held in Madison Square Garden, and when the chalk had settled the soviets had prevailed, winning four of the seven

contests. Medvedyev had easily outlifted Jim Bradford, making a clean and jerk with 407 in the process. But after the “amateurs” had finished, the “Dixie Derrick” asked that seventeen pounds be added, then cleaned the 424 easily and pressed it twice, barely missing a third rep, to the delight and amazement of the audience. This story, of course, is well known to many iron gamers, but a lesser known incident occurred later that evening, after a big banquet honoring the lifters. It seems that as the evening progressed, and as more and more vodka was downed by some of the visiting lifters, the world champion 198 pounder, Arkady Vorobyev, began to stare across the banquet table at Paul, who had clearly stolen the thunder at the Garden. Vorobyev even then was a member of the Communist Party,

Contributions to the Paul Anderson Youth Home should be sent to: P.O. Box 5025, Vidalia, Georgia, 30474.

and he apparently resented what Anderson had done. In any case, after the banquet broke up and some of the lifters were in a hotel corridor on their way to their rooms, Vorobyev—who was walking just ahead of Anderson—turned suddenly and lunged at the larger man, grabbing him by the throat with both hands as if to choke him. Whereupon Anderson bent his knees slightly, grabbed Vorobyev by the lapels of his coat, and drove the Russian hard against the wall, dazing him. Vorobyev's fellow lifters immediately grabbed their shaken comrade, apologized, and hurried off. I've often wondered how much vodka Vorobyev must have drunk to have exercised such laughably bad judgement. Trying to choke Anderson's 23" neck would have been a lot like trying to choke a Hereford bull.

I met Paul in the late fifties when he came to Houston to take part in a pro wrestling match, but the first time I ever saw him lift was in Dallas in 1964, at a powerlifting meet. I had taken the heaviest lift of the competition—a deadlift with 700 pounds—but later on, Paul put the same 700 pounds on a bar and did eight reps in the squat. I still remember how easy they looked. The following year, also in Dallas, he did a squat in a public exhibition with approximately 930 pounds, which was almost 200 pounds more than anyone else had ever done. Paul did his squats wearing only a belt—no kneewraps, no supersuit, no bedsheets, and no tape. And make no mistake—his squats would have passed. I believe that had he worn the supporting gear available today he could have established an official record of between 1000 and 1100 pounds. When all things are considered—time, method of performance, and so on—Paul was the greatest squatter in superheavyweight history.

In later years I spent a lot of time with Paul. We collaborated on a monthly series of articles for John Grimek's *Muscular Development* in the seventies, and we got together every month or so. By then Paul had gotten what he believed was a call from God, and he and his wife Glenda were operating the Paul Anderson Youth Home for fifteen or twenty boys on the outskirts of Vidalia Georgia. From what I could see, it was a fine place for a boy to grow up. Set in a shady grove of pecan trees, the home had a swimming pool, a stable with horses to ride, lots of good country food and, of course, a weight room.

One of the things I remember most about Paul was how unconventionally he trained. I was down in Vidalia one summer morning sitting with him under a big pecan tree when he turned to

me and said, "How about let's go to the gym." So off we went, Paul wearing nothing but cut-off bluejeans and a pair of lumberjack boots, rolling along in the characteristic walk of the true superheavy. To say Paul was massive is to understate the case. By then he weighed closer to 400 than to 300. His whole body was round and thick. He carried a lot of fat of course, but he also carried a world of muscle. He truly loved being huge, and I remember him saying one day when we were talking about his short career as a boxer. "You know, when I got down to 300 I felt like the least little breeze would give me a cold." Anyway, when we got to the gym that morning, Paul stepped over to a heavily bent bar loaded with a huge set of iron wheels. When I asked him how much it weighed, he said, "Oh, six hundred or thereabouts," and without bothering to put on a belt he did ten full squats, with absolutely no warm-up. None. "Man, that felt good," he smiled. then ambled on back to his big chair under the tree. Soon lunchtime came, but around three o'clock he said he felt like doing some more squats. This time, he slapped a pair of hundred pound plates on the bar and did five repetitions—once again with no warm-up whatsoever. Ten reps with six hundred at ten o'clock and five reps with eight hundred at three o'clock and that was his workout for the day. Paul's diet was even stranger, and sometimes he even drank blood from a

local abattoir in the belief that it gave him strength. Or he would put ground beef in a device that squeezed out all the liquid, which he drank. But milk was his mainstay in the early days, gallons of the stuff. In later years, he ate a lot of ice cream and drank an amazing amount of coca-cola, but he didn't eat as much traditional food as people expected.

One key to Paul's success was his showmanship. He had his clothes tailored to make himself look even larger than he was, and he realized that lifting things like people and cars would make a bigger impression than lifting barbells. As the years passed, his colossal physique, his storied strength, and his flair for show business made him a legend. An important but sometimes overlooked aspect of Paul's career was that he introduced millions of people to the world of weights. During his life, he gave thousands of exhibitions all across the country to raise money for his boy's home and to spread his version of the gospel. Paul's health broke when he was in his late forties, but in his prime he was sustained by two powerful beliefs—that he was doing God's work and that he was the strongest man in the world.



A RELIEVED PAUL ANDERSON SHAKES THE HAND OF SILVER MEDALIST HUMBERTO SELVETTI AT THE 1956 OLYMPIC GAMES. THE ILL ANDERSON WON ON BODY WEIGHT.