



IRON GAME HISTORY



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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON IRON GAME HISTORY AS REVOLUTIONARY MANIFESTO AND EVANGEL

By Al Thomas, Ph.D.

Editor's Note: The editorial for this issue is part of a much longer essay, and we hope to publish other sections of the essay in future issues. Al Thomas is a man of many parts. For over fifty years, Al has trained with real joy and passion and as the years have passed he has brought his formidable intellect to bear in the service of the game he loves. His series of articles in *Iron Man* in support of serious weight training for women, for example, laid the philosophical foundation on which the phenomenal growth of women's competitive lifting and bodybuilding has been built. Not everyone agreed with those articles and not everyone will agree with this editorial. But anyone who is serious about bodybuilding will do well to read his manifesto.



When I answered, "Over fifty years ago," to the young champion's question as to when I started training, I heard, instead of the expected compliment to my perseverance, "Wow, either you know something I don't or you're just as bad as all the others. Worse, really, because I'd expect a grandfather to be more discriminating than some damn kid in latching-onto a lifestyle its narcissistic and venal as this one is."

As her words swam into focus in my tired brain, I knew my workout was over for the day. In all my years, I'd never heard a gym-type expostulation that zoomed with such precision to the biggest chink in my well-reinforced armor. Focusing on the much-photographed face, I knew that there was more depth to my complainant than just her well-earned reputation as one of the game's strongest physique-athletes. Knowing there was no retreat. I leaned back on my end of the bench and asked what had disillusioned her so thoroughly.



Later in life than usual, she discovered in herself a real "talent" (as she put it) for developing muscle and strength after an already-long career as a social activist. Unfortunately for her, all the unselfish joy of her formerly other-directed life came, over time, to take second place to the self-centered pleasure she was experiencing in the competitive bodybuilder's real *raison d'être*: building her muscles and her strength. The same woman who had fought with all her imagination and courage to heighten society's consciousness now earned an admittedly pretty penny as a personal trainer to "rich folks who sought out [her] celebrity" and spent all the rest of her waking moments mapping out campaigns to acquire more muscle, to win yet-more contests, and to achieve even-yet more salability on the seminar circuit. All of which had come to seem manifestly unimportant to her: a life that didn't stand up to even the most cursory scrutiny.

"I ask old guys whether this is the nature of the beast. But they always give me the usual bull about the 'good old days,' even big-names from the old game who do seem different, I must admit, from the ones today. But maybe it's just that they're old and mellowing with age. Maybe it's always been a ratrace for the big buck, with everybody trying to outpsych the other. The world that Terry (Todd] and you and the other old guys write about doesn't seem to have much in common with today. I keep hoping something from the old-timers I talk with about all this, but I haven't gotten much so far."

In my view, the most important function of *IGH* and the iron game historian is reminding the current generation's weight-men and women—reminding all of us really—about the world and mindset from which we evolve. Not merely calling attention to the game's

giants, but recreating that world so fondly recalled by the old-timers: the worst of it, to be sure, but especially the best of it. Manfully attempting, in the process, to avoid the inevitable lapse of the ruminating old-timer into postures of moral superiority to his youthful audience, a lapse which even the most charming of my childhood's best-loved story-tellers never wholly escaped. The youngest of listeners can grant us the slippery implications of "good" in "good old days," long as we don't fall into the question-begging proposition: If the days of old are (were) good, the days of here-and-now are bad. This is obviously absurd: "logic" at its most fallacious.

In those "good old days" of the not-distant past (as a recent issue of *IGH* attests), the most knowledgeable and sophisticated of coaches denied their athletes access to even the lightest of barbell training.

The outcome of which was that their boys gathered to "lift weights" in conspiratorial stealth, rebels conspiring to build muscle, but almost as devoutly to throw-over the ruling oligarchy: the world of coaches and physical culturists who "sold good health" and the sort of "muscle tone" that accompanied light gymnastics and stretching. And in those "good old days," if a girl sought to lift anything heavier than the "figure salon's" weighted wands in her quest for a "muscled figure" (never, of course, a physique), she was written-off as a "man-hating inversion or worse," definitely not a time for the liberation of a female's desire to be strong and free.

Not a time, either, for the African-American, however symmetrical his muscle mass, to win the major physique contests or even to appear on the covers of most muscle magazines. ("They just

don't sell, you know."). But, then, at least one publisher still has not really corrected this inequity. This was unconscionable in the past when publishers defended this discriminatory practice as a "matter of dollars and cents," but doubly unconscionable today when the other muscle magazine publishers, and those in virtually every other area of American publishing, have grown too "enlightened" to fall back upon such outrageous excuses for prejudice. The function of editors is to provide moral leadership, not merely to follow the "dictates" of the market analysts. Historically, the role of moral leader has been assumed by precious few editors of our magazines. It is beyond conscience in the mid-Nineties that the argument is still trotted-out that covers featuring minority models don't sell.

No. There was much that was decidedly un-good about those old days, but much, also, about which our historians must remind us, and especially the younger generations, that was very good: much that would be a salve, a long-needed purgative, to the puffed-up-ness, the ugliness, of so much in the Nineties world of iron and muscle.

In his graceful acceptance speech on the occasion of being honored by the Old-time Barbell and Strongman Association a few years ago, John Grimek talked in gently reminiscent language about the "fun" that character&d the game in the decades that he was our game's most respected icon. Except for today's wide-eyed innocents (the work-a-day trainers who sweat with such abundantly-amateur-joy and attend the big shows with the uncritical eye of the enthusiast), the old fun extolled by Grimek has long departed our game and especially so in its upper-reaches, in its competitive ranks.

As a person intimately aware of the early physique contests (and even the omnibus strength and bodybuilding exhibition), the historian can best communicate to the young, in their own language, what distinguished such events from their modern analogs. That which was "good" about such contests was the fact that they were (not quite, but almost) an afterthought, hooked-on at the end of a long two-days of Senior National Weightlifting Championships. Since there was no money involved, the contestants' fates (and more particularly their very livelihoods) were not contingent upon their placement. (There were no contracts, endorsements, seminars, or cover layouts on the line: no money.) The result was a camaraderie that one never finds in shows of the last twenty-five or thirty years.

In the early years, our historian never saw or even heard about such latter-day vulgari-

ties as "psyching-out" or even simply upstaging an opponent ("opponent"?), trashing the judges for their "obvious bias," the unmanly "fishing" for compliments about one's body at the expense of another's, the effeminate pouting and other theatrical demonstrations of pique at the announcements of results, the refusal (even the unconscionable smashing) of trophies that fall short of the expected placement, the whipping-up of one's factions (or claques) when it's sensed that one has been "done badly by," the tedious jumping in front of a fellow competitor so that the audience won't have its attention diverted from one's own "infinitely beautiful" self, the after-contest cruising from group to group (the little-boy heart so needful of sustenance and restoration, inevitably broken by any placement other than first), the incredulous look in the little-boy-eyes (the look of one whose very own mama has placed his chief-nemesis two places ahead of him because of a better calf-sweep and lower lats). All so "devastating."

"It's all so narcissistic"; our young champion was downcast, seeing herself as no less guilty than the worst of the others, "but not by nature," she insisted. And it is true. By "nature," she had happily served the oppressed at a salary barely above minimum wage. Indeed, it was the pain of this internal conflict that had brought her to the old historian with her questions about the old days.

Context shapes behavior. The gentle Baptist boy straight from Christian School, plunked-down into the hellishly chaotic horrors of combat, is capable of monstrous breaches of soldierly conduct. Each of us is, to the dismay of everybody but the behaviorist, ever the student of context's shaping power. The force of context is overpoweringly strong in the modern physique contest. Within its shaping context, our generous-hearted champion came to behave as ungenerously as the worst of the contestants described earlier, and that she could be moved to such behavior stabbed her with its irreconcilability to her "real nature."

If for the historical reasons suggested earlier, physique contestants in the "old days" usually escaped psychologically intact, they surely don't today, and neither does the game itself, nor we who love this display of massive strength. Neither in the old days nor today is the contest a proper vehicle for the display of the human physique, male or female. For almost thirty years, I've inveighed against the physique contest in many articles, having long since anticipated the past quarter-century's snowballing of



THIS PHYSIQUE SHOT OF PROMOTER LAURIE FIERSTEN HELPS EXPLAIN HER INTEREST IN CELEBRATING FEMALE MUSCLE.

—TODD-MCLEAN COLLECTION

HUNKETTES

NO DISCUSSIONS OF
FEMALE VICTIMHOOD
THE OTHER NIGHT
AT ROSELAND
JUST TWO DOZEN
WOMEN BODY-
BUILDERS, VERY
PUMPED UP?

by ARNOLD ROTH



the vulgar thing confronting us today.

Many have written about the apples-and-oranges impossibility of judging physiques of different sorts: the magnificent narrow-clavicle, broad(er)-hipped physique versus the no less magnificent wide-clavicle, narrow(er)-hipped one. The chore, no less impossible, of judging the perfectly-developed African-American according to the same criteria employed in judging the perfectly-developed white man or yellow man. All quite impossible. All this has been hashed-out often over the years, but the physique contest continues.

A more powerful argument against the modern contest, however, resides in the aesthetic fact that such a complex experiential response—the response of an observer to the effect upon his nervous system of a shadow-casting body—cannot be reduced to an abstraction, a number, without the loss of all that is important and beautiful in the experience (in the response of the observer to the body). How unworthy becomes our response to the body's transcendent beauty when we operate on the assumption that such a response to the most awe-inspiring of man and nature's artifacts can be mediated by a table full of abstractionist-“judges,” conjoined mindlessly in processes not markedly different from those used in number-grading a truckload of Idaho potatoes.

The aesthetician—but more importantly the historian who has been around long enough to remember the old exhibitions—must remind us that the human body is not a sport, not just another athletic event like diving that may truly lend itself to number grading. In a sport a judge's response is to what bodies *DO*, and these “doings” can be judged and compared by means of number-placements (abstractions). But in physique exhibitions, the response is not to what a body does, but to what it *IS* and (by extension: poetically and symbolically) what it “means.” And neither that which a body is nor that which a body “means” lends itself to number abstractions. Physique-creations are a product of the human brain and will and imagination as they have imposed themselves upon human flesh, upon nature. The result is inarguably an artifact and according to some definitions, a work of art. And neither artifact nor work of art lends itself to the

reductionism represented by number-grading. Therefore, if despite obvious absurdity and against all reason, a phenomenon continues (in this case, the physique *contest*), one is well-advised to follow the money trail—as well as the insights provided by historical perspective.

Embarking upon this money trail, the historian is confronted, early on, by the inevitable defense of the Nineties' contest: “It's the competition that people turn-out to see. So what that physiques are judged from best to worse or numbered first to last? How'd you know who was best otherwise? That's the whole reason for the judge's consensus as to the best body in the show!”

No. Not so. And that it isn't so is borne out by history in the term's usual sense, as well as in the sense of the term as it relates to an observer's careful perception of what happened in the near-past and what is happening here and now. Competition *seems*, surely enough, to be almost second nature to human beings, or at least to human beings as they've been conditioned by culture and society. But in this particular matter of exhibiting human bodies, the “need” for competition is far less intrinsic than it is in traditionally “competitive” athletics.” It is far more the product of a carry-over to the posing dais from the domains and arenas of more inherently competitive athletics. a “carry-over” that has never really been subjected to thoughtful consideration as to its aesthetic or philosophical justification.

“How'd you know, then, who's best without contests?” our contest-defender continues. The aficionado knows. The story has come to the historian that, at a recent “Night of Champions,” Vic Richards was spotted lolling around outside the theater after the competition. Needless to say, to anybody who has ever surveyed this modern-day Hercules, in a minute or two Vic was surrounded, four or five deep, by admirers—all this to the utter consternation of the contestants as they filed-out, wholly unnoticed by the fans. In separately reported pronouncements, several of the contestants deplored the “unfairness of being ignored,” after having exposed their painfully crafted bodies before the toughest judges in bodybuilding. An

PART OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CELEBRATION OF FEMALE MUSCLE WAS THAT THE EVENT ATTRACTED MAINSTREAM MEDIA ATTENTION SUCH AS THIS CARTOON, WHICH APPEARED NOVEMBER 29, 1993 IN THE INFLUENTIAL MAGAZINE, *THE NEW YORKER*.



“indignity and an unfairness,” they argued, especially given the fact that “the guy getting all the attention [was] an eternal-no-show,” and worse yet, a “no-show who’d never in his life gotten himself into real contest shape, much less into a contest.” One of the “unnoticed” complained. “He always gets all the attention, but never’s won anything. How come?”

In answer to his “how come” and to the contest-defenders plaintive. “How’d you know who’s best?”— the historian replies: “Best,” as it applies to the human body, has nothing to do with number-placement in physique contests or, even, with whether a given bodybuilder sees fit to participate in such contests at all. Witness Vic Richards and, in an earlier generation of women bodybuilders, Kay Baxter. They were and are the apple of the aficionado’s eye, whether or not they won (or win) contests—or even deigned to enter contests. Who cared or cares? When Kay came upon the scene, and when Vic does today, (mere) contest-winners just faded away. In fact, they “curled-up and died,” even when they were, admittedly, much more cut-up and “contest-ready,” even, indeed, when they may have been more “perfect” according to one-or-another convention of physique perfection. When offered the opportunity to contemplate the physique magnificence of the contrarian Richards (who abhors contests and their formulaic, cookie-cutter demands) or just-another-version of the shredded, trained-down war-horses so familiar to contest goers, the aficionados, as they always do, showered their attention upon the reclusive Richards.

The contest-ness of contests, their unbearably tedious competition, has nothing to do with the appeal of an ultimately developed physique to an audience. Not that evening. Not ever. Give audiences a modern-day updating of the non-competitive physique exhibition of the past, and they will come—in droves. They will come ready to revel in the artistic, epiphanic pleasure provided to one’s aesthetic sense—indeed, almost to one’s religious sense—by the ultimately developed human body: the Richards-ian sort of physique which transcends the limitations imposed by the contest upon truly unfettered development.

As reported more widely in the general print and electronic media than any other physique presentation in bodybuilding history. audiences descended in droves. in November of 1993, upon a first-of-its kind (totally non-competitive) exhibition called “A Celebration of Muscle.” Created by the young woman who had brought me up so short with her earlier questioning—strongwoman/physique-athlete Laurie Fierstein—tie exhibition was presented as a Broadway-type show at the famed Roseland Ballroom in the heart of Gotham’s theater district. Give audiences a magically conceived and imaginatively executed physique exhibition—even one that was unable to land sponsors or to get more than *pro forma* attention from the muscle magazines—and they will come in great numbers. That night they came thirteen hundred strong, a block-long phalanx of enthusiastic show-goers, snaking past the theater marqueeing Richard Chamberlain’s *My Fair Lady*. Ms. Fierstein had been adamant about mounting this unprecedented performance, this exhibition of the unfettered female physique, in the theater district, even though every single voice from the game had advised otherwise, recommending junior high gyms here and college field houses there: More of the old thing. Unable (as the contest mentality always is) to comprehend that the old presentational modes are simply too boring and unimaginative, contributing nothing to a physique-athlete’s discovery about himself or, in this case, herself.

In telling an athlete how to look—in effect, how to train, because without that “look” he or she won’t win—the contest ignores what the athlete would like his-her own body to be, and how he-she wants to be seen. It ignores that the body in which we move-about is what we are, our statement-to-the-world about how we conceive of ourselves and want others to perceive us.

In Fierstein’s Exhibition, the women had been encouraged, it seems, to present themselves as they wanted to look, whether that was big and massive, or smaller and more cutup: *however* they chose to look. And they were reminded that they had *carte blanche* in the matter of posing or presentation. They could, in short, present themselves in any manner they chose. There would be no judging. No

placements. Just the pleasure of presenting themselves to a manifestly appreciative audience. And appreciative it was, knowing that it was witnessing the wave of the future in physique presentations: non-competitive and humane. Fierstein's Exhibition was an artistic experience that was enjoyable to the women, who had been saved from the contest's built-in dynamics of contestant-alienation; and enjoyable, also of course, to the audience which, in non-partisan relaxation, could bring all its powers of appreciation to each of these profoundly different women.

The question has been posed, "How'd you know who won without a contest?" As one old-timer wrote ever the historian, "I'd never been to such a bodybuilding event, if that's what it was. Nobody was angry about a bad decision. There weren't any decisions. All the women looked happy, not starved-down. Big and round, well-fed. but still strong looking. Round muscles, not like the starved-looking girls in the contests I've seen. They were like the women from the earlier years that I remember seeing photos of in the old *Strength & Health*. At the end, I had a good feeling—what a difference! There were no losers. Everybody was a winner."

"How'd you know who won?" So asked the defender-of-contests. And thus passes yet-another myth.

In the words of our formerly disillusioned young champion. there's a glimmer of hope! "Something like the Celebration would be a sign of good things to come for the men, also. I came away with real hope. What struck me was that all the women got along with each other and were having a happy time, with none of the psych-jobs I've seen so much of. I'd never seen a show where everybody seemed to respect everybody else."

The impact of the human physique beggars all the systems improvised in the last thirty years to quantify it: all the competitions dreamed-up by the game's moguls to enhance their own power and revenues—and to insure a fresh Mr.-This or Ms.-That, whose real "function" is to serve his or her fruit-fly moment of "fame" as the bosses' chief salesperson in their house-organ muscle magazines.

An important role for the historian is to call attention to the venal changes effected in modern physique display and to the fact that these changes are a product of the powers-that-be and their sensed need to enhance their control and revenues. In the hollowness at the core of the purple-thing that our game is becoming lies the cause of so much that is meretricious about it. And a major cause is the moguls' pursuit of ever-more profits. The logical consequence thereof is the money-carrot they dangle before the bespangled eyes of their muscular contest- "winner" -salespersons. And not just the winner: also the other dozen or so males and females kept "breathlessly" on the verge of triumphs-to-be by means of the bosses' skillful manipulation of their own media (and the media dependent upon them).

As a result of all this. it becomes necessary for the top names to make bodybuilding their "career," their "profession." Not just in the defensible sense that they might "use" their bodybuilding know-how in operating a gym, or becoming personal trainers, or going on to a degree in exercise physiology. or into writing about muscles and health, or starting a clothing line or a health food store: all applications of their cachet that would make sense. What doesn't make sense and is, indeed, insidious is that the moguls' dangled-carrot of

"big money" leads even some of the smartest of these muscular youngsters to obsessing about a "career, a profession," up on a posing dais, making-muscles to a pack of co-dependents and facilitators out there in the dark.

If there is some sort of rationalization for paying big bucks to people for hitting golf balls or baseballs or other chaps' jaws, there is no such rationalization for the pimpery and prostitution necessary to the "professionalizing" of "making-muscles" on a posing dais. Such doings don't comprise a sport. They do comprise, in one sense, the creative (and typically unprofitable) side of art and, in another sense, the sacral dimension of the holy man, who is sworn to (at least a twentieth-century version of) poverty.

It's incumbent, then, for our historian, chatting with his young friends after a workout, to remember with them that, even at its best, making-muscles for money is illusory. There's precious little money to be made and no really big money, even for the very few at the top who make the very most (a "most" which is piddling compared with the money earned in *real* sports). But even this "piddling most" is earned, in bodybuilding, by a smaller fraction of the game's participants than in the other sports, the *real* ones. (A message never relayed to the enthusiast by the moguls' magazines.)

And it's not bad (as the historian must be quick to remind his young friends) that bodybuilding is not a sport, real or otherwise. It is, in fact, something much more precious than mere sports or games which, after all, are merely things that we *DO*. Bodybuilding is, and becomes, what we *ARE*.

If the most-winning men and women have been able to buy better cars than they'd have been able to buy otherwise (a debatable "if"), the moguls' growing preoccupation with kindling the flames of competitive fire for their own profit has resulted in the compromise and vulgarization of bodybuilding, bodybuilders, and bodies.

The silly, vulgar squabble between two of the top women should be as embarrassing to them as it is to the game and those who want to admire its heroines. This sort of narcissistic ugliness, unfortunately, is rife among the top men and women, among competitors at all levels. If Muhammad Ali managed to carry this sort of thing off with playful élan, it was because of his mastery of the act which it *was* with him: just another game. Precious few among our musclemen and women have learned the trick of it. It's hard to imagine that the men and women whose vendettas are a staple of the magazines' gossip columns are the same monumental folks whose photos and regimens elicit so much admiration in the reader. But these campaigns to enlarge one's fortunes (by necessity at the expense of one's training partners) because of the limited billets available for the big-money earners) have disastrous effects, as earlier expressed in Laurie Fierstein's disillusionment.

In the old shows, there was a sense of camaraderie among the men behind the scenes. This isn't the word, however, to communicate the taut-jawedness of the ambiance behind the curtains in modern shows. When reproached for her "silent disdain:" her refusal to acknowledge the other contestants in a recent show, one of the top-women shouted, "This is my career. It's my profession!" The implication: "If I blow this show because of being talky and nice and losing my 'focus,' my future goes down the toilet. This is my business."

How very sad. How very unworthy.

Then there's the pathetic sight of kids lining-up to have their photos taken with the game's star, but the big shock (and the historian's mission is to make sure the hardened 90's youngster knows that it is a shock) is seeing kids hand-up greenbacks for the honor of occupying space at the star's side. Then, there are the ubiquitous stacks, wherever he crops up, of the star's autographed photos-for expensive sale. Just try to get him—or her—to pose with your kid, or you, *gratis*. ("Look, this is my job. Plumbing is yours, right? This is mine: it's how I make my living. Nothing personal. Just the way it is in 1994.")

Or, the brusque, "I'm holding a seminar on all that next week at Joe's Gym," in response to a star-struck kid's questions (for which, read: "Be there, kid, and add your twenty-five bucks to my next car payment. My words don't come free.")

But the historian remembers the old York Barbell Club's picnics (free across-the-board), and he reminds his young friends about his annual half-hour questioning of the game's best, Grimek (or any of the York "guys"), with no more payment requested by the Great One (or his lieutenants) than the young wisdom-seeker's close attention.

Not long ago, as Grimek has reminded us, it was *ALL* fun, all of it: all this business of physique shows and the people in them. Unprofitable to be sure, but fun. But though unprofitable, nobody "went without," at least not because they were "professional" bodybuilders (whatever that might have meant back then) *on a losing streak*. They all had jobs. They all trained ponderously hard when they chose to. They all built, withal, wonderfully muscular and powerful bodies. And because their jobs and futures—and their very selves—were *not* threatened by a loss in the weekend get-together—"contest," they hustled themselves onto the dais without the need for any magic muscle-building concoction. always with the expectation of getting some good feedback (a term they wouldn't have understood) from cheering audiences of iron gamers, who had traveled across the country from the very same kinds of jobs that they, themselves, sweated-over back home. And fun it was withal. Not despite, but because of not yet having fallen prey to the present-day contest's preoccupation with the three P's: placement, profit, and product.

As a final thought in this vein, whether or not anabolic steroids represent the scourge that many physicians and researchers claim, they certainly represent for many people a source of ethical discomfort and possible compromise of the endocrine and immune systems. Without them the ethicist and the medical establishment, indeed most people, would be considerably more happy and perhaps even more healthy, certainly less tom than they are now, both ethically and morally.

Before the advent of the big lure of big bucks and all the inflated blather that accompanies big bucks, there was far less sensed need ("need") in the world of muscle for steroids: the primacy accorded steroids occurs primarily in a world that is dominated by a similar primacy accorded the two P's: contest Placement and Profit (growing out of the importance accorded contest Placement by Profit). A world dominated, also, by the muscle industry moguls who exploit these two P's in selling the ah-important third P: Product (the

engine that makes the whole thing go).

Trading upon the obvious fair-mindedness of his historical analysis—and upon his assumption that those whom he focuses upon share his love for the game and for honest self-appraisal—the historian bristles at what he perceives to be the undermining of the iron game by a commercial Fifth Column, obsessed with the huge Profits accruing to Product sales that are generated by puffed-up first-placers in contests that are barely camouflaged extensions of the bosses' product sales and publicity departments.

From his study of the game's roots, the historian has come to sense, with the economist's certitude, that the promise of profit has resulted in a great leap forward in the sort of body that we've become used to seeing in modern contests: the production line, "standardized" Nineties physique. Despite the fact that the promised profits have proved as illusory as all the other big lies propagated by these powers behind bodybuilding (and its industry), the mere promise itself has been enough to fuel the huge production and eventual over-production of bodies, each one of which is aesthetically capable, by any artistic rationale, of winning virtually any major contest, if it were judged strictly on merit.

The most cursory survey of any major contest's stageful of muscle glut provides evidence aplenty of this overproduction. "Custom cut" to specs that allow for differences only in color and height. it's a glut that numbs the senses and defies any equitable or meaningful evaluation by the judges.

"Good heavens," cries the contest-defender. "They're all gods! Over-production? Is this so bad? How so?"

Beyond debate to our historian (as economist) is the economic impossibility of providing an equitable spread of most contests' paltry earnings among the contests' participants, the bodybuilders, the "workers." The bulk of the revenues doesn't find its way into the pockets of the muscle business' laborers. And they don't even expect it to: sad sack rank-and-file that they are. Ever since their propagandized childhood, they've been systematically divested by the muscle mags (the house organs of the muscle industry) of any sense of their just deserts. They've been denied—and deny—that they're really owed anything, except the pleasure of paying to stand up there on a posing dais. And except, of course, the pleasure of the kindly Master's tousling their sweaty heads after hard work (outs). And except—Who could forget?—the Master's celebratory ritual-of-sharing, when (instead of the "symbol-share" of the bushel back to themselves of their very own corn) these muscleman-"share-croppers" of the Nineties are offered tin statues of yet another deballed chap with muscles.

Over-production, however, causes something worse than this matter of a greatly increased number of worker-commodities (contestants), each one of whom is good enough to win even the most prestigious contests. And it causes something worse than the consequent devaluation of markets and (as a function and product of this) the devaluation, objective and subjective, of worker-commodities.

The "something worse" that has been caused is a failure of moral force or nerve. The irony is, of course, that even the mere promise of money and profit (the vehicle of all this abundance in

quantity and quality of physiques) has led to an abundance of yet another, less happy, sort: an abundance of emptiness, as it were. In this case, a pervasive emptiness in what's become just another business with a hole at its core, but was once not a business. not a sport, not even a game in the real sense, but to its devotees a way-of-life that was informed, long ago, with meaning, and with deep and great good feeling.

Whatever its benefit to the young champion, the advice proffered by our historian is the sort expected by the younger generation from the older one: expected if rarely requested in words. And, *as* this piece suggests, the chief function of such advice is subversive (from the Latin "sub" and "vertere": to turn, or overturn, from beneath). The function (basically but not exclusively subversive) of the historian-as-old-man-of (-and-still-in) -our-game is important if what was better about the old days is ever again to bloom in the new day ushering-in the 21 st century.

Yet all this "change from beneath," this "subversion," must be achieved without denying the profoundly important improvements effected in today's game by a vastly upgraded science of strength-and muscle-building, nutrition, and all the physiotherapies. As "science" the game is always in change from beneath, the "subversion" in this case being implemented by scientists who are better trained to implement such changes than the historian is, with his roots in another time, in a less sophisticated "science" concerning such matters.

All this is well and good, and as it should be. The quaint notion, however, that change is always for the better is just that: "quaint" and a "notion" — a peculiarly New World concept. In the Old World cultures, with their more deeply rooted sense of the human condition's tragic dimension, this reflexive view that "sees" change as invariably for the better has never been sufficiently rooted to demand uprooting. In ours, on the other hand, uprooting is necessary. and all the moreso in the glitzy bodybuilding side of our game, with the priority it claims for everything big and new and shiny and expensive. Despite all our intrinsic fondness for it, bodybuilding often seems to know more about the cost, rather than the value, of its baubles.

Formidable indeed is an old guy at the opposite end of a gym bench from an audience of young weight trainers. With a half-century or more of hard truths about the iron world. he is, at the very least the boys' historian, whether by his own choice or popular elevation. At very best, he must be their revolutionist.

Granting the admirable gifts of science to weight training, much in this world and many people in it cry out to be "overthrown from beneath": among these are the braying and venal hucksters who have shamelessly degraded its lovingly remembered dignity.

It's time to correct the stupidity. the injustice, the inequity, the personal humiliation and pain inevitably accruing to a production mode premised upon the promise of profit (especially a false promise) — and especially so in an activity as affectional-visceral as the building of human bodies. Instead of the cruelly acquisitive vision of the muscle industry's chiefs, it is time for all of us, old and young, to develop an unprecedented vision. A vision that includes, for the first time ever, a new community of producers at all levels, from the production of bodies to the production of physique exhibitions or shows. A community of producers who are bound to each other—not by adherence to the self-servingly pompous rules of some body-

building organization or federation or by commitment to the contest—"grading" of bodies for profit—but who are bound to each other by love for the game and for the cultivated human body: its beauty and health and strength.

In short, it's time for bodybuilding's "workers" to seize the means of their game's "government," so long controlled by the body business' money-makers and worse yet, by its greenback-wavers. Enough already.

The correct, the humane, vehicle of physique presentation is something other than the official bodybuilding federations. Over the decades they have demonstrated no real interest in the body-as-body or in the humane values of the body's exhibition, except to the degree that the contest "winner" and the contest itself contribute immensely to the organizations' profits and, hence, to their self-perpetuating power. A cruelly circular business at best.

The only "worker"-sensitive vehicle of physique presentation is the "functional unit" that operates autonomously, without "control from above": a "unit" that is shaped and provided its informing validity from below. from its "worker"-participant. He or she comes then to have a "say" in the direction taken by the particular functional unit of presentation (the show or exhibition) in which he or she is involved (has chosen to be involved). This sort of input on a participant's part is not a gift to him, not a function of the "producer's" generosity, as it often pretends to be in the producer-participant interaction that characterizes the current physique contest and its production. As envisaged here, the participant (the "worker") is the only reason for the show, its *raison d'être*. He is its engine. Not vice versa, as in the Nineties contest that is controlled-from-the-top.

Except as each unit might choose to cooperate with another to the mutual benefit of both, each functional unit involved in physique presentation would be independent of every other unit. Whatever the general, universal power to corrupt exerted by the promise of money and profit, it is beyond dispute to the historian (bestride his gym bench) that the promise of money and profit has corrupted the Nineties muscle game. As the old historian advises his young friends: Just look around and listen. Just read the magazines. Just look back to the time that Grimek alludes to and examine it relative to the empty glitz, the moral nadir, of the Nineties game.

In such an activity as ours—if not in others (That's for others to debate)—the promise of big money ("professional bodybuilding" and profit) has proved incompatible with real freedom for the game's players. its worker-participants, who (however free they think themselves) walk on eggs, ever-fearful lest their freedom prove illusory and they suddenly find themselves banned, outside the bodybuilding pale, having their freedom to compete (their freedom, in effect, to "work" and to "earn a living" in their "profession") snatched from them for nothing: at least for nothing worse than having spoken, or having chosen a course of action, without due regard to the organizations' "rules" or some whim of the federations' masters.

One always returns, incredulous, to the question: Can there actually be "federations" and "rules" for something as supernal as the pleasure to be taken in the ultimately developed human body? Can such a reductionist absurdity as federations and rules—such a perversion of one's instinctive response to the beauty of the human

form—be explained, rationalized, defended?

In a sane world of course not. But it's the very insanity of so much in today's muscle world which renders even the most tedious protestations of its historian so irresistibly important if our game is ever going to return to its former good health.

"No offense, old historical buddy, but all this blather seems to be more of your old hobby-horse, again. The idea of exhibitions as opposed to contests does seem a lot more civilized and humane, but who cares about such idealistic bull? What's important to me is that exhibitions sound more exciting than these boring damn contests. But this isn't your 'old days.' Who'd make all these things happen in 1994? Things like the exhibitions that you talk about? The bodybuilders themselves? What a joke—you can't be serious. They're too absorbed with their muscles to throw-over anything from beneath, especially anything that validates how wonderful they are. As much as I hate the arrogance of the organization, we need them, and you know they'll never Promote non-competitive exhibitions because their corporate profits depend on the contest. We can't just cut ourselves off from these organizations even if they are run by dictators. Realistically, we'd never 'make it' on our own."

Sounds like your typical Tory back in 1776: "We can't 'make it' without Mother-England." But America and Americans have "made it on their own" for the past 218 years, without the control-from-above of "corporate" dictators who had profited so long on the labor of little folk, over here, who'd been brainwashed into thinking themselves powerless, unable to survive without the know-how of a ruling class above them: a class, however, whose true interest in them proved to be, as always, merely economic and, hence, exploitative. (So what else is new about the self interest generated by unshared power and the will-to-profit?)

The Revolution of '76 turned out to be a cake walk, as did the first skirmish in the (admittedly somewhat) less important one mentioned earlier: the "Fifth of November Revolution" fomented by Ms. Fierstein. The revolutionary product of one person's rebellion against a deadening system, her "Celebration" cannot fail to be perceived in historical perspective as a watershed in the history of physique display: A first-of-its-kind Exhibition that has prompted second thoughts—much rethinking—about the validity of the old notion that the physique contest is the only means of exhibiting the



DOUGHDEE MARIE LIFTS 218 POUND FRITZ JAY AT THE CELEBRATION OF FEMALE MUSCLE.

PHOTO BY BJORG, COURTESY LAURIE FIERSTEIN.

physique.

According to all published accounts, this unique Broadway-type show was the product of one lone woman's dream and administrative know-how. Neither sanctioned nor supported in any sense by any of the game's organizations or federations, it received virtually no publicity in the muscle magazines—though publicized to an unprecedented degree by all the other print and electronic media that saw it to be the humane, humanizing, exciting creation that it was. Such a thing can be done. And can be done on one's own. And can be done, literally, on ONE person's own. One single person against the system. It had never been done before. But having, at last, been done—with both financial and popular success—it will be done again. And again. The handwriting is on the wall. And one person, one person alone, pushed the chalk. It can be done. It *has* been done.

Ms. Fierstein's "Celebration," in short, is proof of the power to change history possessed even by one lone dissident who understands history. Hence, the power of the historian to our game. With her

knowledge of history, this young woman was able to throw-over from beneath the contest mode of physique display, in which image had come to be shorn of all content or meaning: Despite their muscles, the women in Fierstein's "Celebration" had previously exerted absolutely no control over the presentational mode which, increasingly, had become a "way of life" for many of them. Her efforts changed this and changed it absolutely.

Though a first step, the "Celebration" was a huge one, the first in what promises to be an on-going campaign to free physique display: to liberate the contest participant (as "worker") from the institutions and administrators that exploit to their own purposes, the bodybuilder: his body and his "labor." Just as important: A component of this on-going revolutionary campaign is to free physique display from the ingrained patterns and procedural dead ends which, over the decades, have made the contest as boring and funless as it has become predictable, inhumane, and exploitative.

Those who think bodybuilders, inevitably and by definition, "too self-absorbed" to be revolutionaries might like to discuss the How-To's of her revolutionary manifesto by writing this most UN-self-absorbed of bodybuilders via Fierless Productions, P.O. Box 1954, New York, NY 10113-1954.