

The Roark Report

A History of the Mr. Universe Contest, Part Two: 1948—London, England

Apparently, none of the seventeen men who competed in the first Mr. Universe contest in September 1947 in Philadelphia crossed the Atlantic to compete in the second Mr. Universe event which was held on Friday, 13 August 1948, in conjunction with the 1948 British Empire Weightlifting Games. London's two thousand seat Scala Theater was packed. Posters advertising the event featured two-time Mr. America John Grimek who "has asked us to announce that he is doing all he possibly can to be present at this most representative of contests. . ." Grimek's July fifth letter indicated "Things at the moment all seem favorable. I hope I can live up to all the expectations." Not to worry.

In all, depending on the account, men from eleven, thirteen, or sixteen countries participated. Bodybuilding was interspersed with weightlifting, with a weight class of lifters alternating with a height class of bodybuilders in five segments, beginning at three PM:

1. Empire Bantamweight: 2. Mr. Universe Class 4: Up to 5'5.75"; 3. Empire Featherweight: 4. Mr Universe Class 3: 5'6" to 5'8.75"; 5. Empire Lightweight: 6. Mr Universe Class 2: 5'9" to 5'11.75"; 7. Empire Middleweight: 8. Mr Universe Class 1: Over 5'11.75"; 9. Empire Light-heavyweight: 10. Mr. Universe—winners of four classes; 11. Empire Heavyweight; 12. Mr. Universe declared.

Bob Hasse wrote in *Iron Man* 8:4. page 44, "The second Mr. Universe was staged in conjunction with the First British Weightlifting Championships before a sellout audience of over two thousand stomping, cheering fans at the Scala Theater, London, on Friday the thirteenth of August, under the auspices of the BAWLA." [British Amateur Weightlifting Association] Please note that BAWLA is not the same as NABBA which was formed in 1950.] Stanko, last year's winner, did not defend his title, and only two Americans were in the contest which was open to "both professional and amateur athletes."

In the afternoon, classes two, three and four had pre-judging and all but two finalists were eliminated. Each man posed with two spotlights breaking through the otherwise darkened stage:

Class Four: 1, Mahmoud Namdjou—Iran; 2. Don Dorans—England

Class Three: 1. John Grimek—USA; 2. Andre Drapp—France

Class Two: 1. Charles Jarrett—Britain; 2. Ted White—England

Class One: 1. Steve Reeves—USA; 2. Reub Martin—England;

3. Oscar Heidenstam—England: All three men were allowed in finals because they were the only competitors.

The nine finalists came back on stage. Ron Chifney wrote in the *British Amateur Weightlifter and Bodybuilder* ". . . one was over-awed as muscle, muscle and still more muscle piled up on the stage." When the nine had been sifted to three, each man was allotted three minutes individually to "perform as he pleased—muscle control, agility, posing or what have you." (Bob Hasse asserts four minutes were allowed for each man.) While the heavyweights were lifting, the final judging decisions for the physiquemen were being

made. Each judge handed George Walsh a piece of paper with first, second, and third placings indicated, so even the judges did not know at this point who had won.

Andre Drapp was first on stage and performed some handstands with some slips, and apologetic shrugs of his shoulders. Grimek's posing brought the reserved British to feverish pitch standing, shouting, as his muscle control act made it appear as though "The whole of his magnificent physique appeared to disintegrate part by part, like some complete jig-saw puzzle being shaken on a tray, only to be magically recompleted when this master of muscular motion wished." Reeves had to follow this. And though he "had an advantage in appearing last and he, too, had a terrific reception. . . The man has not been born who could have followed Grimek's great display without suffering a little by comparison."

George Walsh announced: "Whether you agree or not, our decision is Mr. Universe 1948—John Grimek." The audience agreed. Reeves was second, Drapp dropped to third. Walsh honored the judges request that their individual placings not be revealed but he allowed that, "It is only fair to John, however, to state that he won the title by a decisive margin." Grimek received a silver statuette, Reeves a silver loving cup. Silver medals went to all finalists. Class winners received a silver plaque, runner-ups a bronze plaque.

Judging criteria: Forty points for "harmonious proportions." forty points for muscular development, five points for posture, live points for muscular efficiency, five points for vitality, and five for organic condition. Measurements were supposed to be taken, but were not. Also scheduled but thwarted were "a severe medical examination" and a double bodyweight deadlift. Each contestant posed by "straight standing front, back, and side pose," then performed some optional poses. The judges were: George Hackenschmidt, Tromp Van Diggelin, K.D. Arax, Dr. Bankhof (a Russian surgeon) and George Greenwood. Bob Hoffman withdrew as a judge because of his closeness to Grimek.

In an attempt to find a fifth judge, George Walsh included the obviously sarcastic comment regarding the IFBB: "I had been reading quite a lot about physique and bodybuilding associations springing up on the American continent; I thought I remembered that one of them was not only American but International. Either the 1948 Olympic Games weren't important enough to warrant the attendance of members from these bodies or the term International applies to their claims and not to their activities." [The Olympic Weightlifting competition had been held earlier that week—September 9-11 in London.] Indeed, Walsh does not indicate if the IFBB had been asked to participate, and in fact, Joe Weider told this author that his photographers were literally escorted out of certain weightlifting contests in an unwelcome fashion. It was made clear to Weider that he was not to take pictures of lifting events sanctioned by certain parties.

Reeves stepped to the microphone when Grimek was announced winner and spoke words which some bodybuilding fans would even these days echo: "I think that John Grimek is the greatest body-builder who ever lived."

Grimek went west; Reeves went east, where before he slept four more times he would be declared Mr. World.