

TOM MINICHELLO

## OASIS IN MANHATTAN

### EXCERPTS FROM AN ACCOUNT OF THE “GOLDEN YEARS” OF BODYBUILDING

I've been bodybuilding since 1945—in the gym business since 1957. Living and growing up in New York City, I was able to see and meet some of the top bodybuilders of the Forties and Fifties.

When I opened my own gym in the heart of Manhattan, I not only met most of the bodybuilders in the Northeast, but also, worldwide. There were two reasons for this—one was the location of my club, which was in the Times Square section of Manhattan. Most anyone visiting New York (no matter what their final destination was) would certainly see the Times Square area. Every New Year's Eve, we saw that ball coming down—my gym was diagonally across the street. The other reason was that for many years Joe Weider was kind enough to publicize my club in his magazine. We even had our own “gossip” column in his *Muscle Builder* publication. This exposure gave my gym worldwide attention and Mid-City thus became a “port of call” for all traveling bodybuilders.

I've recently completed a manuscript which is really my autobiography of the years in the gym business. Most of my story is of a personal nature and isn't really in the realm of the physical culture world. However, I thought that the readers of *Iron Game History* would find some of my experiences interesting.

In my early teens, I was constantly active with sports—or really, I should say, ball playing. But even though I was actively involved with sports, I remained extremely thin. All my relatives would comment about this, but my Aunt Jennie in particular would ask my mother, “Margaret, Tommy-boy is so thin; doesn't he eat?” My mother knew I ate well and didn't worry about my health. She felt in time the weight would come, but I was very conscious of my thinness. I spotted a magazine on the newsstand and the cover had a photo of a muscle man. Inside I found an advertisement on “gaining muscular weight.” As soon as I got the money, I went back to purchase the magazine. It was called *Physical Culture* and it cost fifteen cents.

I read the article and it piqued my interest, but it wasn't until I bought a copy of *Strength & Health* magazine, published in York, Pennsylvania, by Bob Hoffman, that I became serious about this new sport. The photograph on the back cover is what convinced me. It was of John C. Grimek, the top bodybuilder of the day. Grimek was curling a barbell and his two biceps looked like balloons. I envisioned myself with such arms.

I got a job delivering groceries after school and as soon as I saved enough money, I sent for my first set of barbells from the Good Barbell Company out of Reading, Pennsylvania. I think I paid twelve dollars for a 175-pound set. From that point on, an entirely different world opened to me. In little more than two years of training, my bodyweight went from 112 to 158 pounds. In addition to the weight gain, I was stronger, faster and had more endurance

than ever before. In school I was like a monkey. I was able to go up and down the ropes in an “L” position. My nickname had changed from “Skinny Guinea” to “Muscles Tom.”

It was the dream of all young bodybuilders to have their own gym. Training and making money at it. . . how could anything be better than that? Or so I thought. After I'd been training a little more than a year, I typed up cards that read:

TOM'S GYM  
91-38 113th Street, Richmond Hill  
Queen, New York  
Phone: VI 7-9138

During the winter, I trained in my basement at 91-38 113th Street. In the warmer weather, we moved all the equipment to the garage. My friends Bob Henckel and Lou Prevete trained with me.

I soon learned there were very famous gyms in Manhattan. One summer day, Bob, Lou, and I took the subway into the city. The first gym we visited was on 42nd Street, just off Eighth Avenue. Ironically, seventeen years later, I would have my own gym just one hundred feet away. This gym, however, was called “George Bothner's Gym” and was located in a second floor loft, right over one of the many automats that were then still in existence.

That flight of stairs led us into a wonderland of athletes. The room was amaze of physical activity. We were amazed and fascinated, watching jugglers performing. Grunts and groans were coming from the one corner where professional wrestlers were practicing holds on their mat. Several men were using the high bar, rings and horizontal bar. Others were using the barbells for their Olympic lifting. Unfortunately, this great arena of athletes would disappear in a few more years. Vaudeville was on its last legs and Bothner would soon be forced to close.

Our next stop was at “Sig Klein's Physical Culture Studio,” then the most famous bodybuilding gym of the day. It was located at 717 Seventh Avenue at 48th Street, also in Manhattan. On our walk over to Sig's we passed the then famous Paramount Theater, where we had watched the crooner, Frank Sinatra, perform in person a number of times. As we approached Sig's building, we saw that he hid a display of his strongman and physique pictures in glass showcases mounted on the front of the building.

Sig operated his gym for *forty-eight* years. Although Sig is long gone, the building that housed his famous gym still stands today. That loft is empty now but whenever I pass I automatically look up to the third floor window, smile, and nod to Sig.

As we approached the third floor, we could hear the sounds of heavy equipment being moved and smell the odor of sweating bodies. As we stepped onto the carpet in the gym, we heard this loud



PROMOTER TOM MINICHELLO (CENTER) POSES FOR THE CAMERA WITH THREE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT MEN IN BODYBUILDING—LOU FERRIGNO, BEN WEIDER, AND ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER— FOLLOWING ONE OF MINICHELLO'S SUCCESSFUL NEW YORK SHOWS.

shout, “Got out a hair! Go, go, go!” It scared the shit out of the three of us. We raced down the stairs and when we reached the sidewalk, we tried to figure out why he had chased us away so fast,

I knew it was Sig himself. I had gotten a look at him and recognized him from his photographs. He wore black pants and a tee shirt with the sleeves rolled up tight on his deltoids. Although he was only 5’4”, this German-born athlete looked like a giant to us. His physique was outstanding. We figured that since his gym was in the Tunes Square area, a lot of kids (like us) were probably always going to see his gym. Some years later when I operated my own club, I found out just how accurate we were. I also learned that we were in good company. Many other young physical enthusiasts had followed in our footsteps as they ran down those stairs—among them was Marvin Eder, who was to become the “Best Built Youth” and a legendary strongman during the 1950s.

Sig’s gym was opposite the famous Latin Quarter, and many stars trained with him, including Zero Mostel and Montgomery Clift. Whenever Steve Reeves was in Manhattan he’d be at Sig’s. In 1930, Sig had made an important discovery when a young man walked in who was to eventually influence the lives of thousands of men, worldwide. That young man was John C. Grimek, the same gentleman whose photo I had seen in *Strength & Health* magazine, a man who would soon inspire thousands of others to start weight training.

It was not only that Grimek was a master bodybuilder. More than that, he was also proficient in weightlifting, swimming,

handbalancing and tumbling. Nor did his talents stop there. He was also skilled in the art of muscle control and he was decades ahead of his time in the art of physique posing. And talk about endurance! Years later, Grimek and I were at a surprise retirement party for our friend, Ed Jubinville. Events started at around eight that night. There was continuous dancing. Grimek only stopped to have a drink and chow down a little; then it was back to the dance floor. His beautiful wife, Angela, couldn’t keep up with him, so he had a number of partners. At around twelve that night, I heard two ladies at the next table comment, “Have you been watching this man dancing all night? He must be about sixty-five. I bet he’s got a motor up his ass.” It just so happened that Grimek was close to eighty at that party. He danced ‘til the end of the party, which was about one-thirty in the morning.

I was lucky enough to see Grimek give a posing exhibition at Manhattan’s Carnegie Hall in 1949. Before I saw that exhibition, I thought it was unusual to have this type of show at Carnegie Hall, which is noted for musical entertainment. That night, however, as I watched Grimek, I understood why he belonged on that stage. His posing was music. As he moved from position to position, each of his muscles had remarkable shape. The result *was* music—not for the ear, but music for the eyes.

When years later I finally did get to see Sig’s studio, I was impressed. He had a small gym area, but it was very complete and contained all the equipment that was really necessary. All the barbells were of the globe-type and had been chromed. On the wall were

photographs of all the old strongmen. And on a shelf that went around most of the gym, Sig had a marvelous stein collection, which was later featured on the center page of the *New York Daily News* Sunday magazine.

I also noticed how close the members were and their attitudes toward one another. I decided then that if I should be lucky enough one day to have a gym of my own, this is what I wanted. Later, Sig and I became good friends. We had many dinners together and it was fascinating to hear him tell his tales of the oldtime strongmen and the feats he had performed.

Sig and I also agreed on the philosophy of weight training: bodybuilding isn't just for appearance; it's for health and well being. I believe it's the best way to attain and preserve your health, despite your age. It isn't just that you'll live longer. That's not up to us. Bodybuilding improves the quality of your life. Through my years of training and working with people, I've seen some remarkable results in weight loss, weight gain, faster and more complete rehabilitation from illness and surgery, and from all this, I've seen these people develop new, stronger, more confident personalities.

By 1957, I was working as an IBM proof operator for the Chemical Bank of New York and training at the American Health Studios at 833 Sixth Avenue, near 32nd Street in Manhattan. (This site, just five years later, would be my first gym location.) Then one day I spotted an ad in the *New York Times*. The Vic Tanny Gym System was coming to New York.

I knew that in California, Vic had been very successful with his gyms. By this time (1957), his West Coast business had thirty-five operating clubs. (Vic's brother, Armand, was a well known figure in the physique world, having won many bodybuilding titles and written articles for some of the muscle magazines.) According to the *Times* ad, Vic wanted to expand his operation to the East Coast. He had picked Plainview, Long Island as his first East Coast location. The Plainview club would turn out to be a fantastic success. I decided to answer the ad and see what it was all about.

I was interviewed by Harry Schwartz, their number one salesman. He was also their top administrator and they picked him to head their East coast operation here in New York. Harry was also a well known bodybuilder. He had won several titles in California, but like so many of the top bodybuilders of that day, he was from the East Coast. To be specific, the Bronx New York. Harry had gone west to get into the movies. A few bit parts had come his way, but not enough to eat on. To make a buck he had taken a job at one of the local Vic Tanny gyms while waiting for that one special movie role that would catapult him into stardom. However, Harry used his acting ability on his sales pitch to perspective members coming into the gym. He was so good at sales that he soon worked his way up from salesman to manager, supervisor, and district manager. Now he was given his "starring role"—to make Vic Tanny successful on the East Coast. And this he did.. . like no one else could have done.

After talking with him, I soon decided to leave the banking business, which I found very boring, and start a new career in the gym business. This was 1957. I was lucky in those early days of the Tanny gyms. Schwartz himself worked with me on sales and management. I couldn't have had a better teacher. Years later, when I had my own club and many times when business was hurting, I would remember ways Harry had taught me about getting that gross up.

After working in the Tanny chain for four years, I had an opportunity to work at a private bodybuilding gym—Abe Goldberg's Empire Health Studio. Abe was a fun guy to be with. I first heard of Abe Goldberg just after I started weight training. That was in the spring of 1945, just before the war ended. He was one of the best bodybuilders of the late-Thirties, the Forties, and the early Fifties. He made the cover of muscle magazines a number of times and had won several big titles. The highest was the "Mr. North America." His gym was located (as most were in those days) in a second-floor loft. It was on Clinton Street, just off Delaney in Manhattan. You could find all of the top bodybuilders of that period training at Abe's gym.

At that time I was living in Ozone Park, Queens. It was in the section known as City-Line, just a few blocks from Brooklyn. One summer I commuted by subway to train at Abe's gym in Manhattan. I saw the top bodybuilders of the day, men like the great Englishman—Reg Park, Marvin Eder, Artie Zeller, Bruce Randall, Davie Sheppard, and LeRoy Colbert. The gyms then had no air conditioning; some didn't even have fans. But they had lots of barbells and dumbbells various benches and some pulley machines. They had none of the specialized selectorized machines we have today.

Going into Manhattan was just too much for me. I was still in high school and it didn't leave me with time for anything else. So I started training at Dan Lurie's gym. This was on Pitkin and Rockaway Avenues in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, only minutes away from Ozone Park. The area looked much like that around Clinton Street in Manhattan where Goldberg had his gym. Pushcarts lined the streets of Brownsville, as they did in the Clinton neighborhood, and the streets were always filled with shoppers. Like Goldberg's, Lurie's Gym was in a second-floor loft. As I entered the hallway I could hear the radio blasting from the second floor. It was a strong voice, singing opera.

The door to the gym was open. I had thought the singing was from the radio, but it was Dan, himself, singing opera and he really sounded great. As soon as he saw me, he stopped singing and said, "What can I do for you, kid?" This wasn't the first time I'd met Dan. Some three years earlier, friends of mine from Middle Village, Queens, had rented out a store for a clubhouse and decided to outfit part of it for weight training. I read that a strongman, Dan Lurie, was selling weights and so six of us took the train from Metropolitan Avenue to Rockaway Avenue in Brooklyn. At that time, Dan was selling weights from his home and Dan took us down to his basement where the weights were stored.

I'll never forget that sight. The area was a maze of columns of plates stacked from the floor to about six feet high; there was just enough room to walk. We talked to Dan for a while, bought a set, and we were on our way. Dan looked very impressive and his smile seemed to relax you. He handled the plates like pieces of paper. We talked about him on our way home. What a sight that was, six kids, thirteen and fourteen years old, carrying weights on the subway from Brooklyn to Queens. What the hell, we were young and could do anything.

Years later, when I told him I wanted to train at his gym, he invited me into his "cage" and pointed to a chair next to his desk. From his office you could see the entire gym floor. No one could come in without passing Dan's view, so if a member was due with his payment Dan was there to greet him. As I looked into the gym

area, I spotted two huge guys. They both looked like they'd been training forever. Later I learned that one of them was Walter Bookbinder, a regular at Dan's. The other was a transient, Bob McCune, who was one of the first to bench press four hundred pounds. Walter was also amazingly strong. I saw him one-arm curl a hundred pound dumbbell. He and McCune both became professional wrestlers. McCune was known as "Lord Carlton," and Walter as "Ray Thunder."

Dan was explaining the monthly dues to me when a member came in and headed for the locker room. Dan called out to the member and said, "Where is the money you owe me for that phone call you made?" The member looked puzzled, and he said, "What phone call?" "You know, the one you made about a month ago," Dan responded. "You asked to borrow a nickel from me to call your house. You were in the gym and didn't want to go in your locker. You never paid me back." The member reached into his pocket, came into Dan's cage, put a nickel on the desk, looked at Dan and said, "Thanks." I must have had a funny look on my face. Dan looked at me as he put the nickel in his pocket and said to me, "Look, kid, remember this always. It'll help you later in life—*Business is Business!*"

I enjoyed training at Dan's. Everyone had great workouts. We had weights, benches, a lat machine, and squat racks. That was it. That's all we had, and that's all we needed. The atmosphere in Lurie's was great for training. Almost any gym in the mid-to-late-Forties was like that I'm sure the reason for that was that we were sincerely interested in strength and health and had a personal commitment to attain and maintain that goal.

During that period, Lurie promoted a "Mr. Brooklyn" contest at the Loew's Pitkin. This was the second competition that I had seen. The first was at the RKO Madison in Ridgewood, where I saw an unbelievable teenager win that night—Marvin Eder. He was totally fantastic. To me, I believe that bodybuilding's greatest loss was when Marvin stopped competing at an early age. Those who were fortunate enough to see Marvin in person share my undimmed admiration for his great strength and phenomenal physique.

Dan had many other top bodybuilders and wrestlers training at his gym—such as Buddy Gilbert, Thomas Manfred, and Tommy Fitzsimmons. And, of course, Dan himself was a physique star and strongman. I'd catch him on some of his workouts, pressing heavy dumbbells. One of his favorite movements was jumping on the dip bars, pushing out twenty reps, then nineteen, eighteen, seventeen, all the way to one rep. I thought that those potato knishes, franks, and Cokes he ate and drank were potent nutrition.

In late 1962, I opened my own gym, and in 1963, I incorporated The Mid-City Health Club during a time when professional wrestling was being promoted all over the New York Metropolitan area. As it happened, many of the wrestlers were close to our gym in Manhattan, and just about every day, there would be a number of them at the gym.

At that time Bruno Sammartino was one of the top wrestlers in the country, and at a time when wrestling was more believable than today's slap-punch-and-jump comedy. Bruno was truly one of the strongest men in the world, and he certainly looked it, with his trapezius so thick between his shoulders and neck. He was a 260-pound locomotive engine coming out at his opponent; in May of that year, Bruno defeated Buddy Rogers and became the World Champion.

For all the years that he held the title, Bruno did it with great dignity. Over the years, we had many dinners together, after which he would enjoy a cigar. Whenever he did this (after a few years he totally stopped the cigar smoking), he would make sure that there were no teen-agers around to see. For this reason, we always got in the corner, and he had his back to the view of everyone. He knew he had a responsibility that went with his title and he handled it admirably.

I would always spot Bruno in his bench pressing; then I started benching with him. He was patient and very encouraging with me. We both always did ten sets, starting light, going to heavy, and then dropping down to light again. But the last two sets, we went to maximum repetitions. He was responsible for me doing my best bench press of 360 pounds at a 165-pound bodyweight. He pushed me hard, and always had encouraging words. One day we had a contest between the two of us. It was for the most repetitions. I used 220 pounds and was able to get out twenty-four reps. Now it was his turn. Bruno would use 330 pounds. All the members gathered around to watch our little exhibition. After twenty-five reps, everybody started counting aloud, and we counted up to *thirty-eight* repetitions. And this he did at a time when he was traveling and wrestling every night. And, folks, this was done with *no drugs*. Obviously great genetics. And I can tell you he consumed the very best of meals. He never took any supplements. The only addition to his meals was an occasional protein drink that Paul "Zazu" would make for him at the gym. Sammartino stands as one of the world's greatest natural strongmen.

In 1963, when Tony Marino first came to train at my gym, I knew I had seen him before—where, I didn't know. He was a professional wrestler and came to the gym a lot with his friend, Sammartino. He was also very powerful, benching close to 500 pounds. He had beefed up so his body could take the punishment of his trade. However, you could see the symmetrical appearance that his body had. I knew he had done a lot of bodybuilding.

Physique photographer Doug White made a weekly visit to my gym in those days. He came to see who was at the gym and also to let me look through his photo collection. From time to time I'd buy an 8 x 10 from Doug to put up on our reception room wall. Years later I had a great collection of physique photos. Some I took myself, some I purchased, and many were given to me.

In going through Doug's collection one afternoon, I came upon some photos taken at an AAU Mr. America competition. There was Tony Marino. He competed that year. Looking at the line-up, he was fantastic. Of course, it's not fair to judge only from photographs. However, Tony appeared to be the outstanding competitor. This I concluded from over a dozen photos of the competition. Doug said that Tony had come in second place and also won two of the subdivision awards, Best Chest and Best Legs. In those years, trophies were awarded for the best body parts, and overall most muscular.

I hadn't recognized Tony because he now was Tony Marino, the beefed-up wrestler. When he competed as a bodybuilder, it was as Tony Silipini. On his next visit to the gym, I told him that I had seen the photos of the America competition he had entered. It seemed that he was reluctant to talk about it. But I pushed him to and asked him why he stopped competing in bodybuilding and turned to wrestling. Tony by then had been training at my gym for over a year

and we had become friendly. He told me:

"Tommy, after the judging for the America, most of the competitors came over to me and congratulated me, saying I had the title won. Then second place was announced and they called my name. Yes, I was disappointed, but that's the way the judges saw it—or so I thought. Tommy, later I found out that the winner's manager had made a very large purchase of York equipment a month before the competition, and this was the deciding factor in the America. Politics, what else?"

When Tony competed it was still at the time that the York organization had total control over the AAU Mr. America. I know a number of times that the winner was questionable, and one time in particular that it was obviously outrageous. I would have been ashamed to have been on the judging panel when Vern Weaver was picked over Harold Poole. After the death of Bob Hoffman, those at the York organization lost interest in the America competition, and for that matter, it appeared that interest was gone for promoting bodybuilding any further. I can't give an explanation for this, except that those left in power after Hoffman died were totally satisfied with what they had and just didn't seem to pursue it any further. There are people that I'm sure know more of these answers than I do.

During my years in the game, I often judged AAU competitions, and I judged the America contest for several years. There was no control from York, and the winner was picked by the national AAU judges. The AAU committee had a number of very loyal people working for them—Dave Mayor, Pete Miller, Bob Crist, Cliff Sawyer, Jack O'Blenes and his wife, to name a few. I also judged or promoted competitions for Joe and Ben Weider. For the record, I must say that in all those years never did either Joe or Ben try to influence any of the judges. I remember one time that Joe expressed his opinion to me on a particular decision, but this was after the competitions were completely over.

The *only* incident I saw occurred during the 1966 Mr. Olympia contest, at the famous Brooklyn Academy of Music. This was the second Olympia competition. Larry Scott had won the first Mr. Olympia the year before, in 1965, and he was outstanding. He received, I recall, a unanimous decision. In 1966, things were some what different. That night Harold Poole was at his very best. Standing next to a relaxed Scott, Poole's muscle separation was unbelievable, all with the right symmetry. The judges voted a tie, four for Scott and four for Poole. It was up to the head judge to break the tie. The tie-breaking vote went to Larry Scott and for the second year he was awarded one thousand dollars and the Olympia crown. Backstage I was with Ed Jubinville, Kimon Voyages, and Harold Poole. Poole, was taking his defeat like a good sport until the head judge came over and grabbed his hand, telling him how great he looked. Harold looked a bit puzzled and said to him, "If I looked so good to you, why didn't I win?"

I was stunned when I heard the head judge say, "I contracted with Scott a few months ago to take him on a tour of exhibitions in Europe, and I've got to take a winner with me."

Poole looked at me. I looked at both Jubinville and Voyages and again at Harold. I didn't know if he was going to cry or punch this guy out. I felt horrible, especially after his Mr. America loss in the AAU some years back. To my surprise and relief, Harold

controlled himself. He looked at me and said, "Tommy, I've got to get the hell out of here." After the competition, I went over to Ben Weider and told him what had been said. Ben was genuinely disturbed. I told him I would never use this person for any competitions of mine.

Harold Poole was also a great athlete, good at football and sprinting, and he had competed successfully in AAU-sponsored Greco-Roman wrestling. Up to the late Sixties, he was an outstanding natural bodybuilder. He trained at my gym for over fifteen years and I never saw anyone train with more intensity, although Rickey Wayne was a close second.

While training at my gym, Poole became friendly with pro wrestlers Bruno Sammartino and Tony Marino, and he asked them if they would help him break into wrestling. Both Sammartino and Martin liked Poole and agreed to help him, but they told him, "Just because you have a great looking physique doesn't mean you got it made. You gotta be tough on the inside and able to take it. It's not easy." They agreed to try Poole out in a "dark match" to see if he had the guts to make it as a pro wrestler. (A "dark match" takes place in the ring with no spectators.) Bruno came into the gym a couple of days after the dark match and I said, "Well, tell me, how did it go? Was Poole okay?" Bruno replied, "Tommy, let me tell you, Marino and I threw him around like a wet rag. He took a lot from us. His elbows and knees bleeding, he dragged himself up on the ropes and looked at us and said, 'more I'll go again more.' There was no doubt. Poole has what it takes to be a pro wrestler and to be accepted by the veteran pros."

What Poole didn't have was *patience*. He started wrestling under the name of Prince Poole. Unfortunately, at this time in pro wrestling, only a very few were doing well financially (like Sammartino). Things weren't going fast enough for Harold. So after a few months, he packed in his short career as "Prince Poole," professional wrestler.

There were many pitfalls in pro wrestling, and not all of them from one's opponent. Juan Rivera was from the Bronx, New York, and his dream was to be a professional wrestler. Juan was five foot eight and weighed 225 pounds. He trained at my gym a short time before he had the fortune to meet and become good friends with Kenny Ackels (Cowboy Ken). Ackels was respected by all the promoters and he himself was one of the better "technicians" in his craft—having been in the business for over twenty-five years.

Within a year, Juan was getting some matches in outlying areas and picking up valuable experience. An offer to wrestle in a number of Mexican cities came to Rivera, and he was very excited to be on the international scene. But all his dreams came to a tragic end. He played his part as the "bad guy" only too well. After he defeated the local hero, as he came out of the ring, Juan was fatally stabbed by a spectator who was out of control with rage over his hero's defeat.

In early 1963, I was contacted by Bud Parker, then the editor of the Weider magazines, who asked if I would be available to judge the physique competitions of the IFBB. I thought this would be a good move for me to get publicity for my club. It was. I agreed to do judging in the New York metropolitan area for the IFBB. Bud Parker was very kind to me. Whenever possible, he would mention

my club in the pages of *Muscle Power* and *Mr. America* magazines. After I judged a few shows, Joe Weider told me he would place free ads for my club in the magazines. All this magazine exposure was good for the club. Every month for the next several years I would send in information about some of our members and about stars that came in to visit. Joe always told me if I wanted anything in his magazine, to just let him know. He was always good to me.

Joe was also kind enough to print an announcement of our move to 42nd Street in *Muscle Power* magazine, and we kept getting plugs on TV from the pro wrestlers. Bruno Sammartino was instrumental in starting the ball rolling and he influenced others to do the same. Years later, Hulk Hogan just about every Saturday morning on local TV, would mention our club somewhere in his attack against the villains he would be facing in upcoming matches. He really did a job for us. So when Bud Parker appointed me as the Director in the New York Metropolitan area for the IFBB, we were getting our roots into Manhattan.

My good friend from Holyoke, Massachusetts, Ed Jubinville, was the IFBB director for the New England area. Ed would have two or three competitions a year. He held them all in Mountain Park, a popular amusement park at the foot of Mt. Tom. There would always be two or three carloads from our club to compete there, and two or three from Julie Levine's famous R & J Club in Brooklyn. For years, there was a very friendly competition between Julie's club and mine.

Up to that time, Bud Parker produced all the big competitions for Joe and Ben Weider and their IFBB. Early in the year, it was Mr. Eastern America, then the first Saturday after Labor Day, Bud would run the Mr. Universe and the Mr. Olympia competitions.

The Weider offices were in Union City, New Jersey while Bud Parker lived in the Village in New York City. Since the Port of Authority was only a block from our gym, Bud would many times come over and talk with me, get some current news of the members, and print it in the next issue of *Muscle Power*. But Bud didn't like working for Joe. He told me that one time when one of the shows lost money, Joe made him wallpaper the bathroom in their office the next week. I thought it was very funny, but Bud didn't share my view. He was the editor of two magazines, he said, not a wallpaper hanger. He said that this was Joe's way of punishing him for not making money at the show. There were many incidents like this and it was getting to Bud. He soon left Joe, but was always totally loyal to him and gave him one hundred percent of his ability.

This left a question of who would be producing the shows in the New York area. I soon received a phone call from Ben Weider in Montreal, his home and headquarters for his business (the distribution of the Weider products in Canada and worldwide), and the seat of the IFBB. Ben wanted me to take over where Bud Parker left off. He asked me to produce all the competitions under the sanction of the IFBB. He said the pages of *Muscle Power* and *Mr. America* magazines would always be open to me for whatever I wanted in them. Ben said it would be more exposure for my club. He said he would be in Manhattan the following week and we could talk more about it then. I told all this to a friend of mine from Westchester, New York, Peter Vita. Peter thought it was a great move, and he was willing to produce the competitions with me, which was great. Running the gym and doing shows was just too much for

any one person, especially here in Manhattan. There were so many different problems in producing big shows, and having the various unions on top of you all the time was one of them. I will never forget one time, when we did our first show at the Felt Forum at Madison Square Garden and I was taking the trophies out of the boxes and placing them on the sides of the stage. I was told by one of the union men that I couldn't do that: it had to be done by union men. So we hired two men to do this job. The fee—eight hundred dollars!

Ben and I finally met for lunch. He had called me and I had agreed to meet him at his hotel, the Plaza. Ben certainly lived the good life, the best of everything. That day he told me of the struggle he had to get where he was. He said Joe knew how to handle the bodybuilders, but that he, Ben, took care of the business. Yet for all the years I knew them, the brothers seemed to have a great working relationship. I'm sure this was one of the reasons for their success. I was soon to learn about Ben's passion for the history of Napoleon Bonaparte. Ben had become a collector of Napoleonic memorabilia. He told me he had just purchased a hat that was once owned by Napoleon and he seemed thrilled just talking about it. Years later, Ben co-authored a book, the *Death of Napoleon*, which was eventually purchased for the movie rights by Jack Nicholson. In any case, I told Ben I would agree to produce the IFBB shows in New York. He was pleased, and replied, "Tom, I'm going to give you my private number in my office at home. If ever I'm not at work, you can reach me there. And if ever you have a problem, call me."

Before we produced the big competitions, Peter and I put on some shows in a smaller way. We had run a show in a union hall, then at the County Center. This was in Westchester County, New York. And finally, we ran a competition at the New York Coliseum. We had produced successful shows, and we planned for the big ones. The next four competitions were held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. This location and theater had proved to be the best for bodybuilding. There was a lot of space backstage which was needed for the competitors to warm up, and also for the entertainers we had for the night-time show. The Academy was old, but very beautiful, and there wasn't a bad seat in the house.

I had two of the top bodybuilders of that time training at the club, Harold Poole and Freddy Ortiz. They had both been with me since our beginning on Sixth Avenue. There were many articles on both of them in all the magazines and our club was almost always mentioned. When we produced our show in the fall, it was always either Mr. World or Mr. Universe, along with the American championships and Mr. Olympia. The World and Universe competitions drew contestants from all over the world. Jose Brisco from Buenos Aires, Argentina, had competed two years in a row. In his second competition, he won the Mr. World title and he and his wife still operate one of the largest health spas in that country. We still communicate with one another. Another friendship I've kept over these many years and that I value, is with one of the truly greats in bodybuilding—Reg Park. I had seen Reg training years ago at Abe Goldberg's gym but didn't become friends with him until he was in Manhattan and trained at my club. He had won top honors in the physique world and also made a number of Hercules-type movies. How good it would be if all athletes could get along the same way their athletes do.

[Part One of "Oasis in Manhattan."]