

Jack Walsh — World's Strongest Man?

Jim Murray

One of the most unusual strongmen I've known is Jack Walsh, who as a professional billed himself as "The World's Strongest Man." From an early age, Jack was fascinated by the old-time strongmen, such as Louis Cyr, and later he performed as a circus strongman, backlifting elephants and performing other spectacular off-beat stunts such as having people jump from ladders onto his abdomen and hoisting heavy poundages with one finger.

The problem was, it was very difficult to evaluate Jack's strength because he was not tested on standard lifts that could be compared with what others did, nor did he ever participate in a regular weightlifting competition. When I first met Jack, at the Trenton, New Jersey, YMCA, he was 19 or 20 years old and weighed at the lightweight limit of 148 pounds. He told me he had pressed 235 pounds and I saw him do that if my memory serves me correctly, but he did have an extreme backbend that would not have passed with the judging that prevailed at the time (1948 or 1949). He also said he had continentaled and jerked three hundred pounds.

I did see Jack perform some impressive feats, including a one-m jerk with two hundred pounds, a press in the wrestler's bridge with about three hundred, and a shoulder-bridge press ("belly toss") with four hundred-plus pounds. The problem was that when he did the wrestler's bridge he had both his feet and head braced and when he did the belly toss he had me stand on his feet so he wouldn't slip. Nevertheless, this was a young, 148-pound man and the weights he lifted were plenty heavy.

Jack was proficient at one-arm lifts. He cleaned a 210-pound barbell with his left arm, transferred it to his right arm, and jerked it overhead. Ray Van Cleef reported in *Strength & Health* that Jack had visited York and made a good try at jerking the Cyr dumbbell, which weighed about 220 pounds and was very difficult to lift because of its thick handle and massive globes.

Among Jack's claimed lifts early in 1950 were a hand and thigh lift of fifteen hundred pounds, and a backlift of 3,280, consisting of a 2,700-pound elephant and its 180-pound handler on a four hundred pound platform. As he continued to train on very heavy deadlifts, hand and thigh lifts, and leg presses, Jack's bodyweight had gradually increased to 175-180 pounds at his height of 5' 6-1/2". Incidentally, Jack told me he had begun weight training at age thirteen, weighing ninety-five pounds at 5'2" in height. The first time he tried the weights, the most he could lift overhead was sixty pounds. He said he trained on basic, standard exercises for several years before working on the professional strongman stunts.

Later Jack tried to lift two smaller elephants on a similar platform, one of the animals weighing twenty-one hundred pounds and the other eighteen hundred pounds. This stunt was a failure when one of the elephants ran off the platform every time Jack exerted enough pressure to move it. Later, on 7 July 1950, he tried to exceed

Warren Lincoln Travis' 4,140-pound back lift by raising a platform said to be loaded with standard block weights, a total of 4,235 pounds. He succeeded, at a bodyweight of 178 pounds. Subsequently, on 13 November 1950, he said he succeeded with 4,638 pounds, again using block weights, and on 7 February 1951, he lifted twenty-five men on a platform that he claimed weighed a total of 4,700 pounds.

Please note that I didn't see any of these big backlifts performed. Jack said he showed he had lifted the weights by having people pulling on sheets of paper under the four corners of the platform. If the papers came out simultaneously it counted as a lift.

Jack also said that he continued to practice the hand and thigh lift as he gained size and strength, and claimed that he reached a lift of nineteen hundred pounds, exceeding Louis Cyr's best by 2-1/2 pounds. The backlifts and hand and thigh lift were done late in 1950 when he was weighing near the lighthheavyweight limit.

Some of Jack Walsh's most impressive feats called for the ability to stand pain as well as strength. When I first knew him, while he was still weighing under 150 pounds, we tried to get pictures of him hanging from a chinning bar by one finger while holding dumbbells totaling sixty pounds in the other hand. The first time he tried the stunt the callus ripped away from his finger, leaving bleeding raw meat. This didn't deter Jack from trying it again, successfully, despite the blood running down his hand and wrist!

Jack originally practiced hanging from a bar with one finger to prepare himself for lifting heavy weights from the floor with one finger, another favorite stunt of old-time strongmen. He had a ring that fit his middle finger from which he suspended a chain that he could attach to weights for lifting. Louis Cyr had lifted 535 pounds with one finger and Jack claimed to have succeeded with 550 in 1950. Later, he said, he lifted 603 pounds in the finger lift.

Another stunt that he did was to hold a heavy barbell across his unprotected skull. I never saw him do this, but he did demonstrate it at York and impressed Ray Van Cleef, who was not easily impressed. I accompanied Jack to a Philadelphia television studio in 1949 or 1950 and saw him bend a piece of ordinary plumbing pipe across his head (no padding) by pulling down on the ends. The pipe was about three feet long. We stopped at a plumbing supply store and bought it on the way to Philadelphia. What was noteworthy about the performance was that Jack had trouble starting to bend the pipe. To get the bend started, he raised the pipe about four inches and brought it down hard with an audible "clunk," across his skull. Then the pipe bent!

Among the more unusual strength feats Jack Walsh performed was to hang from a chinning bar supported only by his chin over the bar. While "chinning" the bar, he would perform a crucifix with a pair of dumbbells. He claimed that he had done the chinning/crucifix stunt with a pair of fifty pound dumbbells.

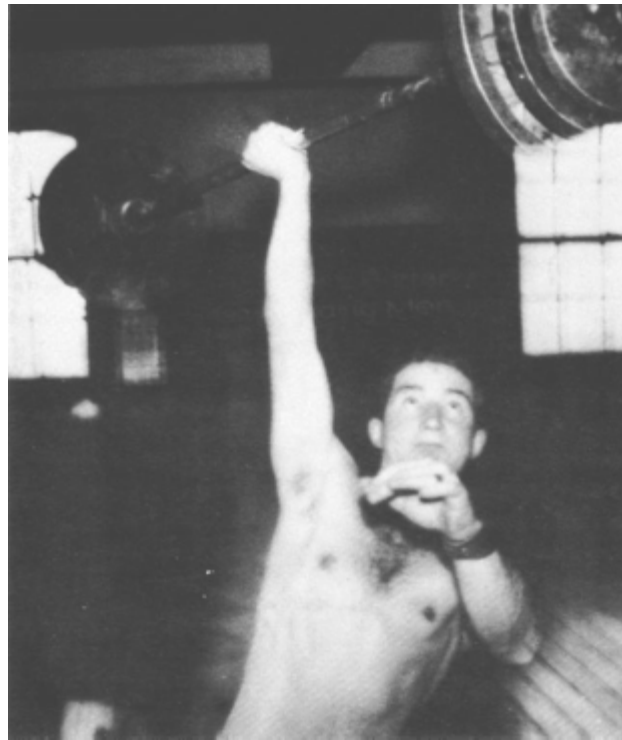
I had a couple of amusing encounters with Jack while I was editing *Strength & Health*. On one occasion, while I was visiting in Morrisville (It's in Pennsylvania, just across the Delaware River from Trenton, New Jersey, Jack's home town), he asked if I would lend him some barbell plates for a lift he was going to do in a Trenton movie theater. (I had my original collection of exercise plates at my parents' home in Morrisville.) I agreed and went along to help Jack set up. He proceeded to announce that he was going to break Bill Lilly's official belly toss record and I would certify it. I had to take the microphone and explain that three judges and a scale were required to set an official record, but affirmed that if he lifted the weight it would be a most impressive, albeit unofficial, lift.

Jack succeeded in lifting the weight, which he said was four hundred-plus pounds—something more than Lilly's record. I have no idea what it weighed, other than the pair of fifty-pound exercise plates he borrowed from me. The rest of the weights were a conglomeration of exercise plates and the counter-weights used to help control the raising and lowering of railroad crossing barriers.

The railroad weights were involved in another incident I found amusing. My wife and I, and our two sons—toddlers at the time—had been at the New Jersey shore. On our return we passed through Trenton and I saw a big sign on a gas station to the effect that "The World's Strongest Man" was appearing there. I pulled in to see the strongman and found that it was Jack, but that he wouldn't be there until later. The attendant showed me a "three hundred pound" barbell that Jack lifted nightly with one arm. Anyone who could match his lift would be given a new set of tires, and anyone who could lift the weight overhead with two hands would receive a full tank of gas. The weight consisted of an exercise bar loaded with a mixture of exercise plates and railroad weights. I hefted it and figured I could lift it, so I pulled it to my chest and jerk-pressed it overhead. When I asked to have my tank filled, the attendant said I had to lift it while Jack was present and he wouldn't be there until later. We couldn't wait so I left Jack a note telling him I'd lifted his barbell and would be back the next weekend to do it again in his presence.

Jack telephoned me in York and told me he had only loaded the bar to a weight he figured no one in the Trenton area could lift. It wasn't really 300 pounds, just 250. But since my visit he had loaded it up to a weight that would defy any contender. "How much weight did you add?" I asked. "A pair of twenty-fives," was the answer.

I was sure the weight I had lifted was not 250 pounds. The



MASTER OF THE ODD-LIFTS, JACK WALSH — AS A LIGHTWEIGHT — MADE THIS TWO HUNDRED POUND ONE-HAND JERK AT THE TRENTON YMCA.

--PHOTO BY LEBEGERN, COURTESY JIM MURRAY

bar was slightly bent and the oversized holes in the railroad weights allowed a lot of wobbly movement. I could jerk 300 at the time, but would have had more difficulty cleaning 250 than I had experienced. The weight felt more like 220 to me. So the next week I took a lifting belt along with me and revisited the gas station. Sure enough, he'd added a pair of twenty-fives. I continentaled the barbell to my chest and jerked it without any difficulty. "There's a tank of gas," I said, and jerked the weight again. "And there's another." The station attendant was undismayed. "You have to do it when Jack is here," he repeated. "When will he be here?" "Later." I never got the tank of gas.

The trouble with trying to properly credit Jack Walsh as a strongman is that, like the oldtime professionals, he put numbers on many of his lifts that weren't entirely accurate. There is no question in my mind but that he

was very strong, however; the one-arm jerks with more than fifty pounds over bodyweight at a youthful age attest to that. He was also exceptionally tough and determined. And he had no end of competitive fire. During the late 1950s he repeatedly challenged Paul Anderson to all-around tests of strength. He asked how I thought he would do against Paul and I told him, truthfully, that in my opinion Paul would beat him in any basic test of strength whether Paul had practiced it or not. [Editors note: We asked Greg Ernst, the Canadian strongman who has officially backlifted 5340 pounds, if he agreed with Jim Murray's assessment that (assuming Walsh had made the backlifts he claimed), Paul Anderson could have raised more than 4700 pounds in the backlift or 1900 pounds in the hand and thigh lift "whether Paul had practiced it or not," and Ernst said that he did not agree. He maintained that although he believed Paul might very well have made such lifts with training, he could not have done so without training, adding that really big poundages in such feats as the backlift and the hand and thigh lift are possible only through progressive resistance, just like any other lift.]

As to whether Paul — or anyone else — could have matched Jack Walsh in stunts such as supporting heavy barbells on his unprotected skull, or in picking up weights with one finger, I don't know. Quite possibly Jack was in a class by himself in tests involving enduring pain while simultaneously lifting or supporting heavy weights. One thing is certain: Jack was an entertaining professional strongman and made a good living for many years by performing unusual feats of strength. [Editors' note: Although he has had some health problems, Jack Walsh is still alive; he resides in New Orleans. LA.]