

# Physical Fitness Magazine: Why Did it Fail?

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Since the turn of the century, hopeful publishers have launched more than one hundred English-language muscle and fitness magazines.<sup>1</sup> Very few of these publications, however, are still with us. In fact, the failure rate for new magazines is roughly ninety percent.<sup>2</sup> Still, some magazines do make it. Consider *Iron Man*, for instance. *Iron Man* began in 1936 when Peary Rader, then working as a custodian at a local school, brought home a broken ditto machine that the school had discarded. Rader fixed the machine, turned out a few issues in dittoed purple, and then, as his subscriptions grew, moved to a Gestetner mimeograph machine that printed in black ink. The first couple of issues in black had crudely drawn pictures on the covers. However, Rader soon began pasting a printed photograph on the cover of each issue, and later moved to a fully printed format. From these inauspicious beginnings *Iron Man* grew to be one of the more financially successful and the most widely respected magazine in the field. Peary and his wife, Mabel, ran the magazine for fifty years and, since its sale to John Balik, *Iron Man* has continued to grow in circulation and popularity.<sup>3</sup>

At least forty other physical culture magazines also appeared for the first time between 1930 and 1940. *Klein's Bell*, Mark Berry's *The Strongman*, Jim Evans' *The Weightlifter*, George Jowett's *The Bodybuilder*, and Harry Good's *Health & Physique* all struggled alongside Bob Hoffman's *Strength & Health* for acceptance in this decade.<sup>4</sup> Another contender—*Physical Fitness: the Guide to Health,*

*Strength and Physique*—was edited and published by Lee Birger of Dearborn, Michigan, a well respected and capable man, who published six issues from 1939-40. Recently, a suitcase full of papers and letters related to Lee Birger and the founding of *Physical Fitness* were discovered in a flea market in Tennessee.



LEE BIRGER, FOUNDER AND EDITOR OF *PHYSICAL FITNESS*, FROM THE JULY 1940 ISSUE.

Using these documents and the Ottley Coulter correspondence files in the Todd-McLean Physical Culture Collection, we have attempted to trace the history of this short-lived magazine and to offer some insights into muscle magazine publishing in the first half of this century.

Like *Iron Man*, *Physical Fitness* was originally a mimeographed publication with line drawings. The first issue appeared in July of 1939 and each issue thereafter considerably improved in appearance and content as Birger began having it professionally printed. He also added pages, and expanded his list of authors to include some of the experts of the iron game. David P. Willoughby, for instance, wrote for Birger, as did an obviously generous-hearted Peary Rader, who was already publishing *Iron Man*. Other capable individuals volunteered to serve the magazine without pay to provide technical assistance. But with all of this, the magazine still failed. Why?

One possible reason for *Physical Fitness*' failure was that Birger, and undoubtedly many other would-be publishers of this era, viewed his magazine more as a mission than as a business. Like Bernarr Macfadden and Bob Hoffman, the two giants of the muscle-magazine industry during the 1930s, Birger held strong views on the subject of physical culture.

He believed that physical culture should be practiced by everyone, and that his magazine could become the best means for spreading the “right” kind of physical culture information. In an early editorial, Birger wrote, “We are working in a field that is intensely interesting to us and we know it is for you. We again ask for your help which we need so badly. Do your part to help us increase our circulation. Tell all your friends about *Physical Fitness*.” With enough subscribers, Birger felt he could “put out a nice appearing publication—printed on a regular press and on fine paper.”<sup>5</sup> Bill Speece, writing in 1941, after *Physical Fitness* had folded, similarly observed, “I feel sorry to see a fellow of your high standards be forced to quit the field of physical fitness. We, the fellows who back the magazines in the small way we can are very happy to see a new magazine come on the market, especially as I said before when a regular fellow such as you are at the head of such a magazine.”<sup>6</sup>

Although no subscription figures survive, it appears from a postcard written by Jim Evans, of Lubbock, Texas (publisher of the *Weight Lifter*) that Birger had planned to start his subscription campaign with a mailing list containing 2500 names. Evans warned Birger, however, not to expect too much from the list: “The 2500 names you have don’t mean 2500 subscriptions, no matter how good your mag. will be. If you get 250 (10%) you will be doing good from the 2500.”<sup>7</sup>

Other friends from the world of physical culture also offered suggestions on how to make the magazine work. Frank McCourt of New York advised Birger to consider establishing some sort of an association that would include a magazine subscription with the membership dues. “Good Luck!” wrote McCourt, “If you hope to seriously challenge *Strength & Health* . . . I need hardly point out that an association at least somewhat along the line of their league is necessary.” According to McCourt, Hoffman was contemplating the formation of his own weightlifting association, modeled after the American Continental Weightlifting Association (ACWLA) founded by David P. Willoughby, George Jowett, and Ottley Coulter.<sup>8</sup> “Why don’t you get the jump on him—start a Physical Fitness League or Association . . . it would certainly not only more than pay for itself, but boost your circulation tremendously.”<sup>9</sup>

David P. Willoughby also had thoughts about how to improve circulation. He told Birger that “a

number of new weight-lifting magazines are attempting a start in the field at this time . . . (and) it behooves you to make *Physical Fitness* so obviously superior that the subscriber who has to make a choice will pick *Physical Fitness* from the rest of the publications.”<sup>10</sup>

Willoughby also advised Birger to try to get the magazine out monthly, or a least bi-monthly, as soon as possible. “Only in this way can you impress your journal on the minds of readers (and) challenge contemporary publications in the field.” In addition, Willoughby offered to produce a regular column for *Physical Fitness*. “It occurred to me that a monthly contribution, entitled perhaps ‘Willoughby’s page for weight-lifters,’ might arouse interest and lead to a demand for such material as a regular feature,” he wrote. The bottom line, Willoughby concluded, was that “all this will take money, and plenty of it, but that’s exactly what’s needed. . . . If I were you I would endeavor to get all the substantial advertising I possibly could.”<sup>11</sup>

Although Birger apparently lacked capital, he did not lack in good will. The Birger letters reveal, in fact, a surprisingly supportive and non-competitive atmosphere in the physical culture community at this time. Jim Evans told Birger, for instance, “When you get ready to print your magazine I will be glad to announce it free in the W-L [*Weight Lifter*] and I’ll let you advertise with me if you will let me advertise with you.”<sup>12</sup> Peary Rader also gave *Physical Fitness* free advertising. “Let me congratulate you on the marvelous job you did on the last issue,” wrote Rader in 1940. “It must have cost a lot of dough to put that out. . . . Am going to continue your ad in the *Iron Man* and trust that you have received some results from it already. Hope that you will continue mine.”<sup>13</sup> Despite the stringent economic times, such generosity between magazine publishers was not uncommon. Syed Moshen Alsagoff, editor of *Super-Physique*, wrote to Jim Evans on 11 August 1939, agreeing to Evans’ offer to do reciprocal advertising, “Your suggestion that we should exchange equal space for advertising was an excellent one.” Alsagoff wrote, “I have the pleasure to enclose herewith my advertising material for publication in your magazine . . . I will allow you with half page of space for your advertising in return for half-page of space of my advertisement in your magazine.”<sup>14</sup>

Some contributors to *Physical Fitness* got very little in return. Earle Forbes told Birger in May of

1940 that he would be willing to provide him with physique shots simply for being called the "Director of Photography."<sup>15</sup> And in a letter dated 6 March 1940, Ottley Coulter told Birger, "Although furnishing articles without payment is an unusual procedure with me, I will make an exception in this fine magazine of yours."<sup>16</sup> L. E. Eubanks of Seattle traded articles for a subscription. "According to our arrangements," he wrote, "you were to send me the magazine *Physical Fitness* in exchange for my article . . . I'm expecting nothing more in payment; tho later, when you get going, maybe we can make other plans."<sup>17</sup>

Ed Zebrowski, who billed himself as New England's Perfect Man, offered to strike another sort of deal with Birger. In a letter to Birger on 2 June 1939, Zebrowski suggested that Birger might use photos of him on the front cover of *Physical Fitness*. "How about giving me a front page display in one of your next issues? I have some unusually fine muscular poses that would be ideal for an attractive front cover," Zebrowski explained. In return, Zebrowski continued, he would guarantee to purchase advertising for his training course on the back cover. "Of course I don't know how well my ad on the back cover will pull," he wrote, "but I think I will risk the next two issues also. Perhaps our enterprise will grow together and we can help each other. Maybe I'll reserve the back cover of your magazine indefinitely."<sup>18</sup>

One reason some people were willing to help Birger was because they did not care for Bob Hoffman's approach to publishing or his attempts to take over the weightlifting establishment. Willoughby, for instance, wrote Birger, "Although I am very busy with a number of endeavors, I prefer your publication (and you personally) to the other being launched . . . happy to do all I can to help you "go over" and become a successful and prosperous editor and publisher."<sup>19</sup>

While Birger had much support for his magazine, what he ultimately lacked was Bob Hoffman's deep pockets. According to George Jowett, Hoffman was able to publish *Strength & Health* for quite some time without making a profit. Hoffman had managed to get his magazine on the newsstands early on, Jowett observed, but "it does no business. Of course he does not have to rely on it for a living. It is a hobby with him. He is the president of the York Oil Burners Co., Inc. and has a good income which, part of it he spends on the magazine and loses, but he does not care."<sup>20</sup>

In a later letter, Coulter told Jowett, "(I) saw in a recent copy of *Strength & Health* that Hoffman stated that he was losing a large sum of money each month on the magazine, but will continue anyway. He claims he is doing a large barbell business, but did not mention profits in that connection."<sup>21</sup>

Another factor in *Physical Fitness*' decline was the heavily oversupplied market. Ottley Coulter worried about this in a letter to George Jowett in March of 1940.

Recently, I received a copy of a new magazine, *Physical Fitness*, which is published by Lee Birger of Dearborn, Mich. Mr. Birger recently wrote to me and stated that he would like to have me write some articles for his magazine. He stated that David Willoughby, who is writing for him, had suggested me, as another writer for his publication.

Apparently, there are a number of magazines being published at this time. Has the amateur lifting game become so big, as to be able to absorb all this literature on the subject, or is it just a matter of too many hands in the pie and some of the magazines may have to fail and drop out?

I understand that there is another magazine published by Peary Rader, but I have not seen a copy of it. Another is, or was published by James Evans of Texas; Good Bros, are still publishing their magazine. Berry is, or was putting out one in connection with the Bur Barbell Co. How are these various publications making out? *Strength and Health* appears to be the leader in circulations. At least, it is the only one that I ever see on the newsstands. Is it making any money, or is Hoffman still donating to keep it going?<sup>22</sup>

Jowett responded prophetically:

*Physical Fitness* is just another of those small spotty mags that will never get anywhere. There is a lot of them out, created by the ego of Hoffman, and his antagonism to all who do not do as he wants.

. . . Berry is in Fla, with the barbell concern, or foundry. Just lately Berry was brought back to Phila, on a Federal charge of defrauding in the mails. He is out on parole, on a suspended jail sentence . . . but he is running the business [to get at] Hoffman, selling barbells at prices we have to pay the foundry.

. . . I do not hear anything about Good boys. They can't be doing much. It is a side line with them. Evans is quitting too . . . there are [too]

any in the game now hurting legitimate business. . . MacFadden [sic] is losing heavily the last three years of P.C. [*Physical Culture*]. Atlas is off 60% his normal business. From 22 girls [office personnel] he is down to three now."<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, Jowett was right. *Physical Fitness* was just one of many "small, spotty magazines" that never quite got off the ground. By the early 1940s, Hoffman had virtually no competitors left from the depression years. *Klein's Bell* had ended in 1932; Berry's *The Strongman* lasted only until 1934. Berry's second magazine, *Training Notes*, and Jowett's *The Bodybuilder* both died out in 1937. Lee Birger stopped publishing *Physical Fitness* with Vol. 2, No. 2, dated October-December 1940. *Iron Man* would survive, of course, but it would be many years before it would be considered any sort of challenger to *Strength & Health*. As David Willoughby put it in response to Birger's announcement that he was ceasing publication, "a magazine is usually a "tough" thing to put over, unless one has, and can afford to lose in the beginning, a considerable amount of cash."<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, Birger's pockets just weren't deep enough.

Although Birger's papers suggest that Jim Grabitz, who'd been heavily featured in the magazine as a physique star, had agreed to carry on the magazine, no evidence can be found to suggest that Grabitz tried to do so. Several letters in the Birger papers, in fact, ask where the new magazine is.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, the Birger papers don't reveal why he stopped publication, and attempts to discover what happened to Lee Birger after 1940 have not been successful. Did Birger enlist and become involved in World War II? Did he move to another type of work that pulled him away from the world of bodybuilding? Or, having spent his savings, did he simply throw in the towel? We'd like to ask him, if we can find him. Perhaps some of *Iron Game History's* readers may know if Birger (or Jim Grabitz) is still alive and where he currently lives. If so, please let us know.

## Notes

### The Birger Papers are in the collection of Andy Kosar, University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

1. See: Jan Todd. Joe Roark & Terry Todd "A Briefly Annotated Bibliography of English Language Serial Publications in the Field of Physical Culture," *Iron Game History* 1(March 1991): 25-40.
2. "Literary Life: JFK Better Get it Together or it's Bye George." *Newsweek* (14 August 1995): 21.
3. Interview with Mabel Rader by Jan Todd, Austin, Texas, October 1998.
4. Mark Berry [*The Strongman*] and Sig Klein both debuted new magazines in June of 1931. Unfortunately, *Klein's Bell* only survived for nineteen issues. Jowett began the *Bodybuilder* in June of 1936: and Jim Evans' the *Weightlifter* also began that year.
5. Lee Birger, "The Last Word," *Physical Fitness* 2(2) (July/Sept. 1940): 8.
6. Bill Speece to Lee Birger, 17 February 1941. Birger Papers.
7. Jim Evans to Lee Birger. 28 March 1939. Birger Papers.
8. See John D. Fair, "George Jowett, Ottley Coulter, David Willoughby and the Organization of American Weightlifting, 1911-1924," *Iron Game History*, 2(6) (May 1993): 3-15.
9. Frank McCourt to Lee Birger, 20 July 1939. Birger Papers.
10. David P. Willoughby to Lee Birger, 23 October, 1939. Birger Papers.
11. Ibid.
12. Evans to Birger, 28 March 1939, Birger Papers.
13. Peary Rader to Lee Birger. 18 March 1940, Birger Papers.
14. Syed Alsagoff to Jim Evans. 11 August 1939, Ottley Coulter Papers. Todd-McLean Collection, UT-Austin.
15. Earle Forbes to Lee Birger, 30 May 1940, Birger Papers.
16. Ottley Coulter to Lee Birger, 6 March 1940. Birger Papers.
17. L. E. Eubanks to Lee Birger, 29 October 1939, Birger Papers.
18. Ed Zebrowski to Leslie Birger 2 June 1939, Birger papers.
19. Willoughby to Birger, 23 October, 1939.
20. George Jowett to Ottley Coulter. 18 March 1940, Ottley Coulter Papers, Todd-McLean Collection, UT-Austin.
21. Ottley Coulter to George Jowett. 19 October 1937. Ottley Coulter Papers, Todd-McLean Collection. UT-Austin.
22. Coulter to Jowett, 8 March 1940. Todd-McLean Collection. UT-Austin.
23. Jowett to Coulter, 18 March 1940, Todd-McLean Collection. UT-Austin.
24. David P. Willoughby to Lee Birger. 18 February 1941, Birger Papers.
25. Speece to Birger, 17 February. 1941; and Al Cinlowski to Lee Birger, 26 March 1941. Birger Papers.

