



# IRON GAME HISTORY



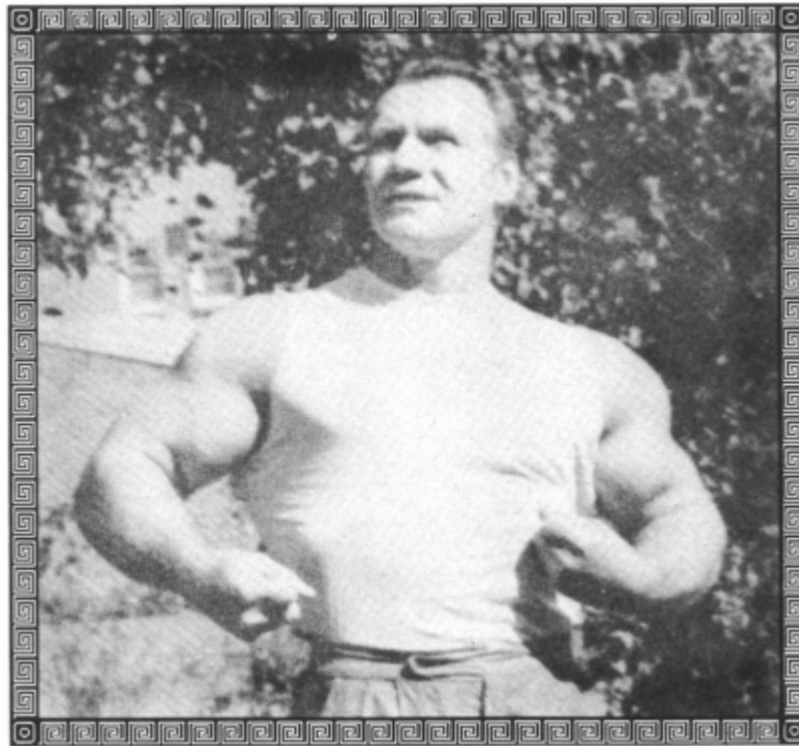
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## John Grimek—The Man

The purpose of this issue is to celebrate the life and career of John Grimek. Like most of the other contributors to the issue, I have my own stories about how I first met John and how he affected my life. That first meeting occurred in 1963 on a trip up the eastern seaboard with my mother and sister to visit people who raised mastiffs, a breed of dog in which I'd become interested and, as it happens, a breed I've owned ever since that trip. I'd visited York and the old Broad Street gym early in the summer of 1958, but John wasn't in that day. But five years later, as I walked into the gym in the York Barbell Company's new office building, there was The Glow, pushing the iron. After waiting until he was finished with his sets of pullovers, I introduced



myself; and I was both surprised and pleased that he knew my name from contest results. This was my first encounter with John's truly remarkable memory for names and faces. He was dressed plainly—in sweatpants and an old tee shirt—but his distinctive Grimekian shape was unmistakable. The calendar said he was 53, but the size and shape of his arms were amazing, and—when viewed from the side—his massively-ribbed torso and his small waist presented

such a contrast that it was breathtaking.

I asked him if I could train and, after I had ended my workout with some seated behind-the-neck presses, we talked for awhile. I remember how friendly he was, how at home he made me feel. At the end of our conversation, John asked me if I would let him take



Special Commemorative Issue



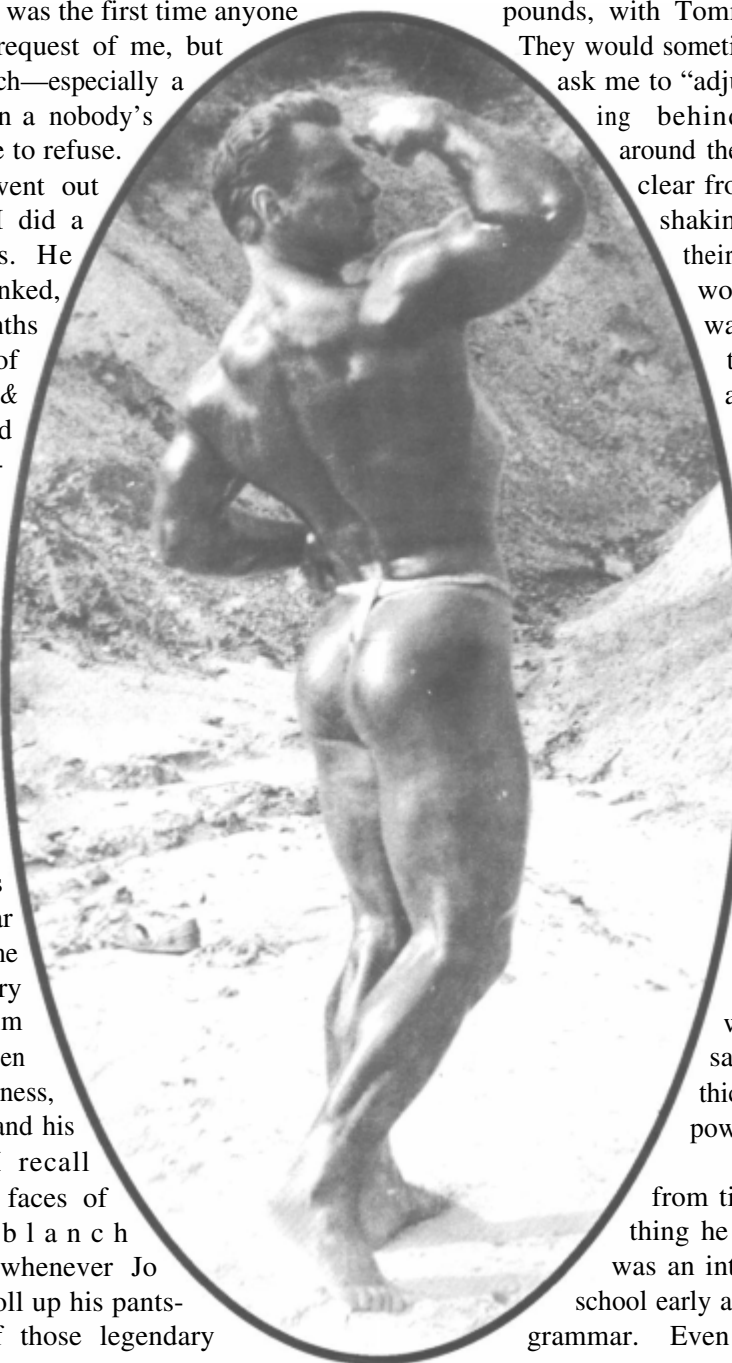
some photographs of my upper body. As a weightlifter and powerlifter, I wasn't used to such requests. To be honest, it was the first time anyone had ever made such a request of me, but coming from the Monarch—especially a monarch who had known a nobody's name—it was impossible to refuse. Thus it was that we went out back, in the sun, and I did a couple of crude arm shots. He thanked me, and I thanked him back, but a few months later—when he ran one of the shots in *Strength & Health*—I was as proud as if I'd set a new personal record.

Little did I know that not much more than a year later I would move to York to become the co-managing editor of *Strength & Health* magazine and a colleague of JCG, who was the editor of York's new magazine, *Muscular Development*. I was in York for about a year and a half, and in that time I saw John almost every day and came to know him well, and to appreciate even more his physical uniqueness, his prodigious memory, and his qualities as a man. I recall than once watching the faces of visiting bodybuilders b l a n c h amazement and envy whenever Jo could be persuaded to roll up his pants-leg and reveal one of those legendary calves. I also remember being struck by the size of his ribcage. Tommy Suggs

and Bill March were both living and training in York at that time, and both men usually weighed well over pounds, with Tommy being closer to 250.

They would sometimes come to my desk and ask me to "adjust" their backs by standing behind them, grasping them around their chests, lifting their feet clear from the ground and gently shaking them and squeezing their chests so their spine would "release." They always seemed to enjoy the treatment"; and one day, after watching all this, JCG came into my cubicle after the other two had left. With a quiet laugh, he asked me if I'd "adjust" him. I still remember how surprised I was at the thickness of his thorax. When I reached around him to secure a grip, I was barely able to clasp my hands. Although he was years older and between 15 and 35 pounds lighter than Tommy or and although he no longer pushed the weights with the intensity of his salad days, he was much thicker than either of these powerful young men.

John also used to ask me from time to time to read something he had written. Although he was an intelligent man, he had left school early and lacked confidence in his grammar. Even though I went to him for help much more often than he came to me (when I couldn't remember some-



THIS EARLY PHOTO OF JOHN GRIMEK SHOWS WHY HE WAS SO OFTEN CALLED "THE GLOW."

one's name, for instance, or something that had happened in the old days), he always seemed reluctant to ask for help. He always asked offhandedly, with that sideways glance he used (in much the same way he used dark glasses) to keep others from seeing his bad eye, saying something like, "Todd, take a look at this when you get a chance." Never once did he say, "Todd, check this for errors for me, would you?" John was one of the proudest men I have ever met, and we both knew what he wanted. I was always happy to do this small thing for a man who had done so much for me and for the game I loved.

Even though JCG was first among equals to me, however, I wasn't above teasing him from time to time, as he was unfailingly susceptible to the same joke. He would often call me over to his office or come to mine to show me a photo of a man he was thinking of using in *MD*. "What do you think of this guy, Toddy? He's got good arms," he'd say in that jaunty way of his. To which I'd sometimes reply, after pausing a bit as if in reflection, "He looks great, John, but don't you think he's a little short?" This never failed to arouse him. "Short? Damn it, Todd, the

guy's 5'9" or at least 5'8", at which point I'd look down at him, smile, and say, "That's what I'm saying, John—short." This always provoked more swearing, followed by laughter, followed by still more swearing until he'd finally stomp off muttering and laughing.

It always seemed strange to me that a man with such an elephant-like memory wasn't immune to such horseplay, but his sensitivity apparently overrode his mnemonic gift. But that gift was real and often on display. One day in June of 1965, during my stay in York, someone mentioned that John's birthday was just a few days away; and I realized that he was within a couple of days of being exactly as old as my father, who was also born in June of 1910. I told John about this as soon as I saw him that day, adding that of course my dad was in slightly better physical condition and probably stronger. "Better calves," I told him, "and much taller." "I'm not only stronger than your old man, Toddy," he laughed, "I'm stronger than you." The next time he mentioned my father was 25 years later, in 1990, when I called to wish him a happy 80<sup>th</sup>. After we spoke for awhile and caught up on iron game news, he paused and said, "By the way, Toddy, how's your dad now that he's 80?" And then he laughed, and added, "is he still training?" I was thunderstruck.

One of the aspects of John's character I especially admired was his deep appreciation for the iron game's past, for its heroes and great occasions. I could—and often did—listen to him talk for hours about visiting with Professor Desbonnet, or George Hackenschmidt, or Milo Steinborn, or making the trip to Berlin for the 1936 Olympic Games. I recall one rainy afternoon in the York gym hearing him recount in detail the story of the trip he and Bob Hoffman and John Davis made to Springfield College in Massachusetts, where he did splits and backbends in front of Dr. Peter



JOHN SENT THIS CHRISTMAS CARD TO OTTLEY COULTER. THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN BY ANGELA GRIMEK IN AUGUST 1955 IN THEIR BACKYARD.

Karpovich and thus helped expose the myth of the musclebound weight-lifter. But John also had respect for the men who were currently at the top. In this he was completely unlike some of the other people at York, who had seen so much lifting that it would have taken the arrival of Milo of Croton, carrying his bull, to impress them.

Some of the fondest memories Jan and I share of the Grimeks are of the summers, beginning in 1990, when we would pass through York on our way to our vacation home in Nova Scotia. We usually stopped on our way up, or back down, and had a meal with the Grimeks. John was in his 80s by then, but my god how he could eat! He preferred buffet-style restaurants, and they made no money on The Glow. Except for my maternal grandfather—who was also a stocky, powerful man noted for his strength—I’ve never seen such an appetite in a man that age. I used to love to watch Papa Williams eat, especially on holidays, and I loved to watch John as he made his way through one of those buffets. (Read Angela’s article on page 19 for proof that this appetite was longstanding.) John ate with obvious gusto—the same sort of gusto he brought to dancing with his Angela, or talking about the Iron Game.

When you stand back and look at the man—and he was, indeed, The Man—it’s no wonder John Grimek is so universally loved and admired. Ruggedly handsome, better built than anyone of his era, more flexible than any top bodybuilder has ever been, more inventive on the posing platform than any man living or dead, more widely acquainted with this century’s iron game luminaries than any other man, and more knowledgeable than almost anyone in most aspects of the iron sports. All in all, Grimek was one hell of a man. A family man. And we were his family. . . . We are his family.

—Terry Todd

Putting together this issue has been a labor of love for us. However, it would not have been possible without the wonderful contributions our readers sent in response to our request for their memories of Grimek. To all of you who shared your thoughts, we are deeply grateful. As you can see, we



JOHN—WITH HIS TRADEMARK SHADES—LOOKED MUCH LIKE THIS WHEN TERRY TODD JOINED THE STAFF OF *STRENGTH & HEALTH* IN 1964

had so much material that we have made this a double issue. However, even with 72 pages to fill, we weren’t able to include everyone’s remarks and we had to edit many of the articles and letters for length. However, we have tried our best not to lose the essence of anyone’s tribute to John and his memory. Normally, because of the cost, *IGH* includes few photos. This issue is different. This was for John.

We would especially like to thank the York Barbell Company for permission to reprint materials from *Strength & Health* and *Muscular Development*; *Health and Strength* magazine for permission to reprint Angela Grimek’s article; Lon Hanagan for permission to use his classic photographs, and Angela Grimek for permission to reprint the other photos of John in this issue.