

The King is Dead



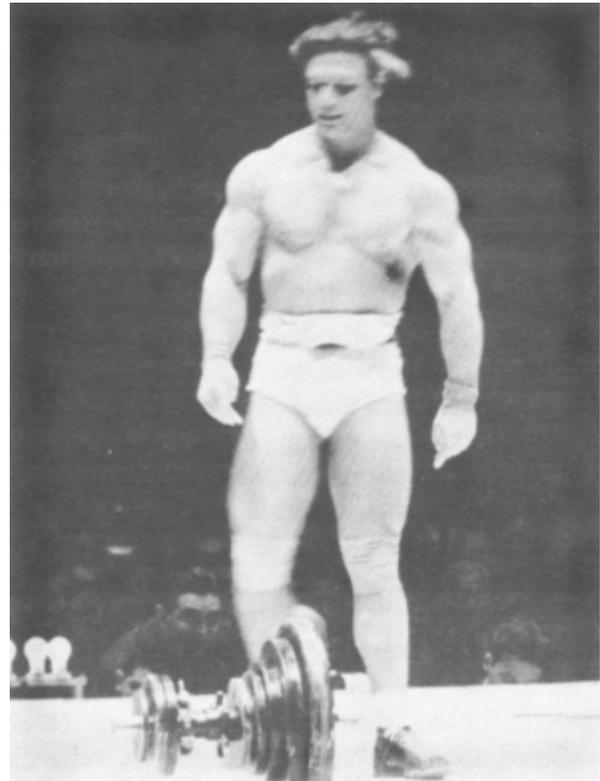
Alton Eliason

“The King is dead.” Such could be the words echoed throughout the weightlifting world. Dennis Reno’s newsletter arrived yesterday with the sad news of Johnny Grimek’s death. So great was his impact on our world that those who called him a friend will reminisce in the future about where we were when we first met him, and where we were when we learned the sad news of his death.

My wife and I first met Johnny and Steve Stanko on May 25, 1940. Marge and I had been invited to dinner at Ray and Virginia Van Cleef’s apartment in New York City, prior to the National Weightlifting Championships and the Mr. America contest at Madison Square Garden. I had opened my gym in 1939 in New Haven and our friendship with Ray and Virginia was of recent origin. I can remember each minute of that dinner as if it had taken place last night. Ray had not mentioned John and Steve having dinner with us, so their arrival was most exciting. I was barely 23 and Marge was carrying our first child. Steve was a reserved, bashful chap, character traits especially pleasing to Marge and ones which made him a special person to her forever after. A rather humorous thing happened that evening when Steve took John’s salad by mistake and John said, jokingly, “Steve, if you’re so hungry you could at least have eaten your own salad first.” This brought a blush to Steve’s face, but an understanding to us country folks, as lacking in knowledge of Emily Post’s rules of etiquette as Steve.

Later that evening John mildly reprimanded Ray for having written an article for a British magazine praising John Davis as a coming super lifter. John said, “Steve is the strongest man in the world and you should have written about Steve, not Davis.” Those were the early, not friendly days, days that later changed for the better.

According to Ray and John, Grimek had been desperately reducing weight in an effort to make a world press record in the 181 lb. class that weekend.



THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN AT THE 1940 NATIONAL WEIGHTLIFTING CHAMPIONSHIPS THE DAY AFTER JOHN GRIMEK AND ALTON ELIASON ATE SUPPER AT RAY VAN CLEEF’S HOME. JOHN WEIGHED 183.5.

But by then I think he had decided he couldn’t get down that low because at the meal he made no efforts to restrain his appetite. This was probably a mistake, for if my memory serves me John weighed in at 183 even after that big meal. [Ed. note: *He weighed 183.5.*] In any case, that 1940 show was John’s first selection as “Mr. America.”

He and Ray had by then been very close friends for years. In fact, Ray & John’s friendship led John to persuade Bob Hoffman to hire Ray to serve as the managing editor of *Strength & Health*. Earlier, it had been Ray who encouraged and helped Johnny become an artists’ model long before JCG’s affiliation with Hoffman. One thing I have always greatly regretted is that before I met him, and unbeknownst to me, John posed for some time at the Yale Art School, which was less than half a mile from my gym.

From that beginning at Ray Van Cleef’s home came a lifetime of friendship with John. While Hoffman’s memory was legendary, John’s was almost as capable. He never failed to remember us by name no matter how long between visits, and he seemed to

remember each visit vividly.

I'd like to recount one further incident as it helps to reveal John's character. What happened is that Bob Nealey from Maine appeared on the scene in Connecticut back in the early 1940s. Bob received considerable publicity in *S&H* back in those days for his performance of the "Good Morning" exercise, as it came to be named, and for his other activities as chairman of the Maine Weightlifting Association and as an active lifter. He had moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, with his wife, who had secured a teaching job at a private school there. Bob was going blind yet still made a few bucks writing pulp stories for *Street & Smith* and other publications. When he first arrived he was very complimentary, praising me for the job I was doing as the weightlifting chairman, but this soon changed and he threatened to have me removed by Dietrich Wortmann, the head of U.S. Weightlifting. He did this with letters, which speak for themselves, but the manner in which he tried to destroy my friendship with Grimek took the cake. At one of our association meetings Nealey attended we were discussing a meet and show I was planning. I mentioned trying to get Grimek. One of the fellows, a close friend who was posing at the Yale Art School and training at my gym, said that John's coming was not likely since he had heard that Yale had a warrant for John's arrest for stealing a student's overcoat when he left. I discussed this with Ray Van Cleef confidentially and he assured me it was untrue. And, knowing Johnny as well as he did, I gave it no further thought. A couple of years later when visiting York I walked to Grimek's desk to greet him and he said, "What the hell's this business of my stealing a coat at Yale?" I was stunned momentarily, but managed to ask where the story came from. He said that Bob Nealey had told him that I was spreading that story up in Connecticut. I explained to John that the story had not originated with me and that I knew nothing about it until Bob Fleming had mentioned it at the meeting. Johnny went on to say how preposterous the story was as he never wore a winter coat and wouldn't if it had been given to him. Ray had mentioned to me at the time we discussed it that John never wore a coat in those days, which I could relate to as I didn't either. I tried to explain to John how erratic Nealey had become. I think it probably began when he started going blind. Nealey's wife wrote me an apologetic letter sometime after, and that was the last I ever heard from them. Bob died many years ago, but I still recall how angry John was at the idea that anyone

would think he would wear an overcoat. I think that bothered him more than to have anyone think he would steal one. Finally, I'd like to share sections from two of John's letters as they deal with an interesting issue.

December 6, 1987

Greetings Alton,

You mention your confrontation with Kiphuth [Editors' note: Bob Kiphuth, the legendary swimming coach at Vale]. Yeah, on the ship going to Germany for the 36 Olympics he and Bob often had a round about weights . . . yet, a few years later he became adamant about w/training and had ALL his swimmers using weights. Even published a book on weight exercises. In time he knew that stronger swimmers would have more powerful strokes, so advocated training, and then became a noted authority on w/training for swimmers. There are so many of those guys around today. Never trained but got on the bandwagon and became an authority. Oh well, who gives a darn, eh?

—John Grimek

January 31, 1941

Dear Alton:

Sorry I have to be so late in answering your kind letter dated some time ago. But I was away when the letter arrived and had to get a lot of things done when I returned, letting your letter wait till I got the opportunity to answer it properly. But it seems to me that if I let it go any longer, I won't answer it till next year.

It is interesting to know what you had to state, and when I brought up this fact to Bob Hoffman, he was sorry that we didn't know of it when we saw Kiphuth at the AAU convention in Denver, otherwise he said that he would have discussed the subject with him then.

It may interest you to know that in my recent article I didn't name Yale as the college, but Princeton. It was after I had turned the article over that that was changed, and even then not to my knowledge until I saw the magazine. I happened to leave when the proofs of the magazine came back.

I spent some time at Princeton and found that the coaches there were not against lifting as some might have thought, and I was under the impression that it was Princeton that I saw pictured in *Life Magazine* using light dumbbells to improve their stroke. Of course I may be wrong, since I cannot recollect what college those students represented.

When I was at Illinois, the coaches there didn't like w/l at first but when I continued to lift weights around there and a sudden interest began to appear, nothing was said about it to discourage it, but rather to favor it. I used to indulge in gymnastics with the fellows there and altho' I wasn't a champion at it, I nevertheless did give a fair account of myself, weighing by far more than anyone there.

So, in closing I want to express my thanks to you for your interest and I'm glad you took the time to write me about it.

—John Grimek