



THE LAST GREAT BASH OF THE CENTURY

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Even though the century didn't really end until December 31 in the year 2000, the change to that big round number has certainly captured the public's imagination. On Saturday, 23 October 1999 the Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen held its seventeenth annual reunion in New York City's famous Downtown Athletic Club. Vic Boff called it the Last Great Bash of the Century. I found it to be a most memorable evening of reflections. Experiences are what memories are made of and we gather every fall in the home of the Heisman Trophy searching for our youthful innocence, enthusiasm and a little bit of the long ago boundless vigor. It was a joy to be reunited with so many Iron Game buddies. Pete Marozas is a good friend with a wonderful zest for life. The richness of his young years at the York Barbell Company during its zenith, his worldwide travels and his current training all make for fascinating conversation. Al Thomas was looking like Captain Marvel, as usual. George Schumacher recalled the great workouts he used to have almost fifty years ago with future Mr. Puerto Rico, Roberto Santana, in Abe Goldberg's famous New York gym. Decades ago we used to read about Roy Hilligenn in the pages of *Strength & Health* and now here he was appearing quite fit and youthful at age seventy-six.

Recently I was looking through a training diary I kept when I first started working out in the Bronx Union YMCA under the guidance of Charlie Smith. Around that time I was a faithful reader of *Strength & Health*. Weren't we all? Those wonderful pages were always filled with the amazing exploits of our heroes. We wanted to grow up to be super men like Grimek, Stanko, and Bacon. Melvin Wells appeared on the cover of *Strength & Health*. Bob Hoffman commented that Wells looked so impressive that all he had to do was just

stand there to win any contest. I dreamed of becoming like that. We wanted to be a forever unbeatable weightlifting champion like John Davis. We read about the astonishing weightlifting accomplishments of Jim Bradford. Back then who was even thinking about the end of the twentieth century? Maybe those of us who read Buck Rogers. We were too engrossed in visions of how we would look after a year of hard training just in time to be sensational on the beach. Whether or not we had ever thought about it 50 years before, here we were now at the end of the twentieth century.

After a pleasant dinner and a lot of good fellowship it was time to pay tribute to our special people of the evening. In memory of Beatrice and Leo Murdock, Rosemary Miller made a distinguished presentation to the women who are the guiding light and strength of the Iron Game. Our first guest of honor was Harry Johnson who was the 1959 Mr. America. Joe Manion reminded me that I had actually entered that contest. It was true. I had trained for it with the sensational Arthur Harris. I had gotten myself into formidable shape but I became so disgusted with what I viewed as the inappropriate A.A.U. special requirements motivated by the blazing Hoffman/Weider feud I decided not to participate. So I didn't go. MC Steve Sadicario, The Mighty Stefan, introduced Fred Yale who spoke about the career highlights of Harry Johnson. Harry's background is indeed impressive. He was a high school middleweight champion boxer in Georgia before he was a bodybuilder. He was offered football scholarships to Notre Dame, Georgia, Georgia Tech, and South Carolina. Harry went into the armed service in 1943 and when he was discharged a couple of years later he was introduced to bodybuilding by his friend Harry Smith. In 1947 Harry Johnson was inspired by seeing John Grimek. After seeing Grimek, Harry trained harder, practiced his posing and won the "Mr. Atlanta" contest. In 1949, he placed third in the Jr. Mr. America. In 1950, he won "Mr. Georgia" followed in 1951 by "Mr. South." Harry was also a competing weightlifter; in 1952 he was named "Best Developed Weightlifter." In 1953 Harry again won "Mr. South" as well as "Mr. Southern U.S.A.." In 1954 he became "Junior Mr. America." In 1956 Harry was named Virginia Beach "Mr. Universe" in the short man's class. The most coveted title anywhere was still "Mr. America" and in 1959 it was awarded to the thirty-six year old Harry Johnson who was in the best shape of

his life. After an enthusiastic ovation Harry Johnson took the microphone and introduced his beautiful family. I had never seen the 1959 Mr. America before and I was most impressed by the fact that he is a really great family man which is more important than any physique title.

From where I sat at the dais I noticed the love of my life, the piano, to my left a few feet away. As in well-rehearsed plays, actors await cues but the cue I was waiting for was not forthcoming. More on that later.

Harry Johnson was awarded his Hall of Fame plaque by Vic Boff and the magnificent color painting of himself as Mr. America was presented by famed artist Jim Sanders.

Many of us had grown up reading about Jim Bradford in the pages of *Strength & Health* but had never actually seen him in person. Now there he was seated at the dais. A legend comes to life. The ever interesting Arthur Drechsler spoke to us about the achievements of gentleman Jim Bradford. [Ed note: Drechsler's comments can be read on page 15.] After

Drechsler's remarks, the very unassuming Jim Bradford took the microphone and after he told us, "I just lifted what Terpak asked me to lift," he accepted his plaque of honor from Vic Boff and a beautiful Jim Sanders painting. Another deserved ovation followed. And now it was showtime.

In this era of steroid monsters, natural bodybuilder Ross Testo's creative posing shows are always entertaining and well received. Russ has a pleasing physique that is a welcome change from some of the chemically produced grotesqueness so prevalent in contests today. Russ Testo is a believer in things that are of a far more permanent duration than are a person's very temporary youthful physical attributes. He conveys this in one of his routines. I thought his encore exhibition and music were particularly powerful. Russ Testo has entertained audiences all over the world. For fans of the symmetrical, muscular, natural physique displayed in a skillful, aesthetically pleasing manner with appropriate music, Russ Testo is the person to see.

Now it was time for Steve Jeck. I had read a lot

about Steve in *Milo*. I also had Steve's book, written with Peter Martin, *Of Stones and Strength*, which had influenced me to include some stone lifting in my own training. Steve Jeck was born in New Jersey in 1964. He was outstanding in baseball, football and wrestling. He then moved south where he became the Florida State Champion in both the discus throw and the shot put. He won a track scholarship to Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. There he won the Southern Conference Championships in hammer throw and shot put, both indoor and outdoor. Steve competed as an amateur in the Scottish Highland Games where he was a two-time East Coast Champion. He became a professional in 1992 and has since had victories in Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Indiana. He has visited Scotland twice where he sought out and lifted many of the ancient testing stones. It was unusual to see huge and obviously very heavy stones on the show platform in New York City's Downtown Athletic Club. Steve Jeck was attired in a white short sleeved polo shirt and full length gym pants. He is big and clearly an immensely powerful man. His forearms are as big as the upper arms of some bodybuilders. His torso is wide enough for two average sized men to hide behind and thick enough to rival Gargantua. And it's all symmetrical. Impressive is an understatement. The Mighty Stefan handed the microphone to this strong man. In addition to everything else the man is articulate and has a good voice.

Ever since I had read about the Farmer's Walk at strongman contests I've been practicing it by carrying a 120-pound dumbbell in each hand while I walk around my basement gym. That's good enough for me I thought so imagine my astonishment when Steve Jeck to the amazement of everyone present performed the Farmer's Walk with two huge stones each weighing well over two hundred pounds. Not only were we blown away by the astounding weight of the stones but his enormous bulging deltoids and arms had me asking Arnold who? Steve shared his personal inspirational philosophy with us in a most captivating and eloquent manner. "Shoulder your responsibilities" postulated Steve Jeck. To illustrate he then lifted from the floor and placed on one shoulder a stone weighing 258 pounds! He repeated the movement by lifting another such stone and placing it on

his other shoulder to emphasize his point. Steve's obviously powerful neck was shown to good advantage as he performed a 225-pound neck lift with a head strap. Another Steve Jeck postulate was "Whatever you have to do, do it with all your might." After this statement Steve proceeded to wrap his huge, muscular arms in a bear hug around a smooth, very round concrete ball weighing 330 pounds, pull it to his body and lift it up and place it onto the top of an upright barrel the height of which appeared to be about chest level of a 5'9" man.

This brought the house down as Steve graciously bowed and waved to the crowd as he finished his unforgettable performance. Quite a man.

After Vic Boff presented the Hall of Fame plaques and Jim Sanders had bestowed his fine paintings we were all treated to some interesting videos of several really legendary Iron Game personalities. I was sill awaiting a cue that never came. That was supposed to have been a signal for me to sit at the piano and accompany Harry Johnson as he played his harmonica. Now that all of the scheduled events were over I couldn't resist scurrying over to the love of my life, the piano. As soon as I began to play the theme from Umbrellas of Cherbourg Harry Johnson, obviously surprised, ran over to me with his harmonica ready and eagerly asked, "Do you know Out of Nowhere?" Did Muhammad Ali know how to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee? Of course I knew it and anything else requested. We joyfully played together until the place began to dim the lights to let all those remaining know that we had to vacate the room.

Afterwards a few of us, Terry Todd, Pete Marozas, Al Thomas, Serafin Izquierdo, Paul Zuckerman, and I, hung around the Downtown Athletic Club lobby with its comfortable sofas and warm homey atmosphere. Terry had everyone's total attention as he recounted the astonishing tale of Weldon Bullock's most legendary lift. I don't think any of us was tempted to try it.

I found the evening to be a time for reflection. Most of us in attendance had lived through the greater part of the twentieth century and we now approached the start of the twenty-first. The videos we saw tonight allowed us to revisit the amazing champion John Davis, to see him clean and jerk the Apollon barbell and to thrill

to his surprisingly good singing voice. We saw Eugene Sandow actually going through a posing routine. We saw our recently departed John C. Grimek doing his own inexhaustible sequences of poses and muscle control. At this farewell to the twentieth century I found myself nostalgic for earlier, simpler times. Crossing the bridge connecting one century to another will be a new experience for all who were present tonight. Some of our Iron Game associates, gym comrades of yesteryear who were present for most of the Oldetime Barbell & Strongmen annual reunions did not quite reach the crossing of the bridge. And it's certain that none of those present will make the next crossing. However, I think we're all enjoying the trip and, as Vic Boff says, let's carry on.