



IRON GAME HISTORY

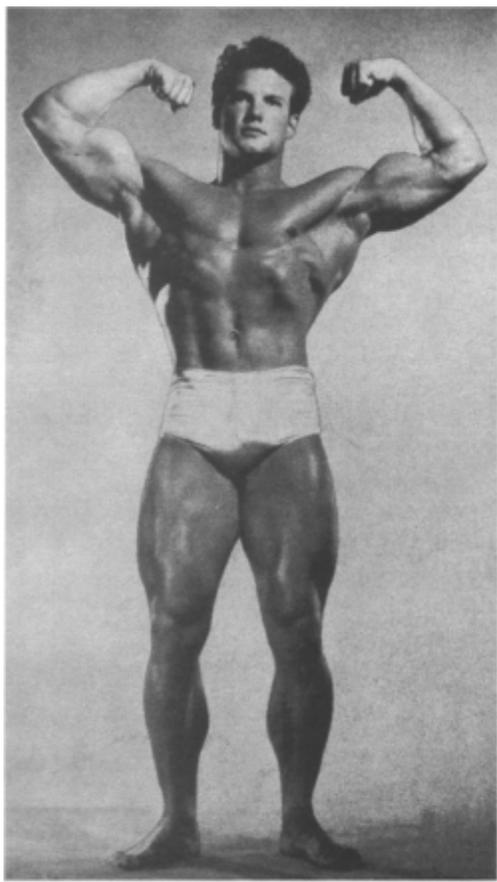
THE JOURNAL OF PHYSICAL CULTURE



December 2000

Volume 6 Number 4

The Last Interview



Steve Reeves: 1926-2000
A Commemorative Issue

As many *IGH* readers know, we've been working on a book about the cultural significance of Muscle Beach for the past several years. As part of our research for that book, we've interviewed many of the "regulars" of Muscle Beach. On 10 June 1999 we visited with Steve Reeves, and as far as we know, this was the last formal interview he ever gave. We met Steve at his horse ranch in southern California and taped him in the living room of his spacious Spanish-style ranchhouse. Present for the interview with us was Steve's longtime companion, Deborah Englehorn Reeves. Steve was dressed in his work clothes—blue jeans, a short-sleeved work shirt, and a pair of well-worn boots. He was a wonderful host, proudly showing us his beautiful Morgan horses and the stable he had personally designed to house them. The day was warm and he was the picture of vigorous health—lean yet thick, with a youthful stride, that legendary face, a pair of hands and forearms that bespoke a lifetime of hard work, and the relaxed attitude of a man at peace with himself.

—Jan and Terry Todd

TT: Yesterday, when I spoke to Armand Tanny, he told me that he remembers very fondly the days you guys spent down there at Muscle Beach and he said he has a pretty clear memory of the first time he ever saw you. He knew who you were. Maybe he'd seen a photograph of you when you were still a teenager and so when he saw you come to the Beach that first time, he recognized who you were. Tell me, what was your first experience there at the old Muscle Beach in Santa Monica?

SR: Well, my first experience was when I was 18 and I'd just graduated from high school in Oakland, in 1944. It was during the War and I was working half-time at the quartermaster supply depot and going to school half a day, so you got your credits for working, instead of shop

and gym and things like that. So, I'd go to school from eight till noon and then I'd "powerwalk" to work and work from one till five, and I did that for two years. And then I got drafted into the Army. I got my notice that I was going to be drafted in September. So a friend of mine, Ronald Roper, who was working with me said, "Let's quit about July 1st and at least take a vacation. I have an aunt that lives down in Hollywood, so let's go down there." I said, "Sure, well, sure, why not?" So we went down there and his aunt had this home there in Hollywood. At the time, there was a tram, streetcar, whatever you want to call it, that went from Hollywood

out to Sunset Beach. All the way to Santa Monica. So we used to go there, oh, every day or every other day, and go to the beach. We started up there at State Beach and gradually worked down to Muscle Beach. And at Muscle Beach—I was 18 then—like I said, all the wrestlers wanted to make me a wrestler, all the adagio dancers wanted to make me an adagio dancer, and all the acrobats wanted me to perform with them.

TT: [Chuckling] Russ Saunders and those guys?

SR: Yeah, exactly right. And on that tram going back and forth, people said, "Aren't you a movie star?" And I said, "No, I'm not." People wanted me to be a movie

star, they wanted me to be an acrobat, they wanted me to be an adagio dancer, they wanted me to be a wrestler. We stayed down there a couple weeks and I used to go to the beach and watch those guys. One of them was Armand. He was known for the "Santa Monica Spread." He had a real lat spread. So I hung around the beach with Armand and those guys for those two weeks. Then I went home and got drafted into the Army and didn't get back there again until after I had won Mr. Pacific Coast—Mr. Pacific Coast, in Portland. Anyway, when I'd gotten out of the Army, I'd gone up there to Portland in December of 1946 and won Mr. Pacific Coast. Then they were going to have Mr. Western America in Los Angeles, so I went down there and that's the second time I went to Muscle Beach. That was in about May of 1947.

JT: And that's about when George Eiferman arrived?

SR: No, George arrived in '48. In fact, George and I met at the Mr. America contest and I said, "Why don't you come out to the West Coast. There are better train-



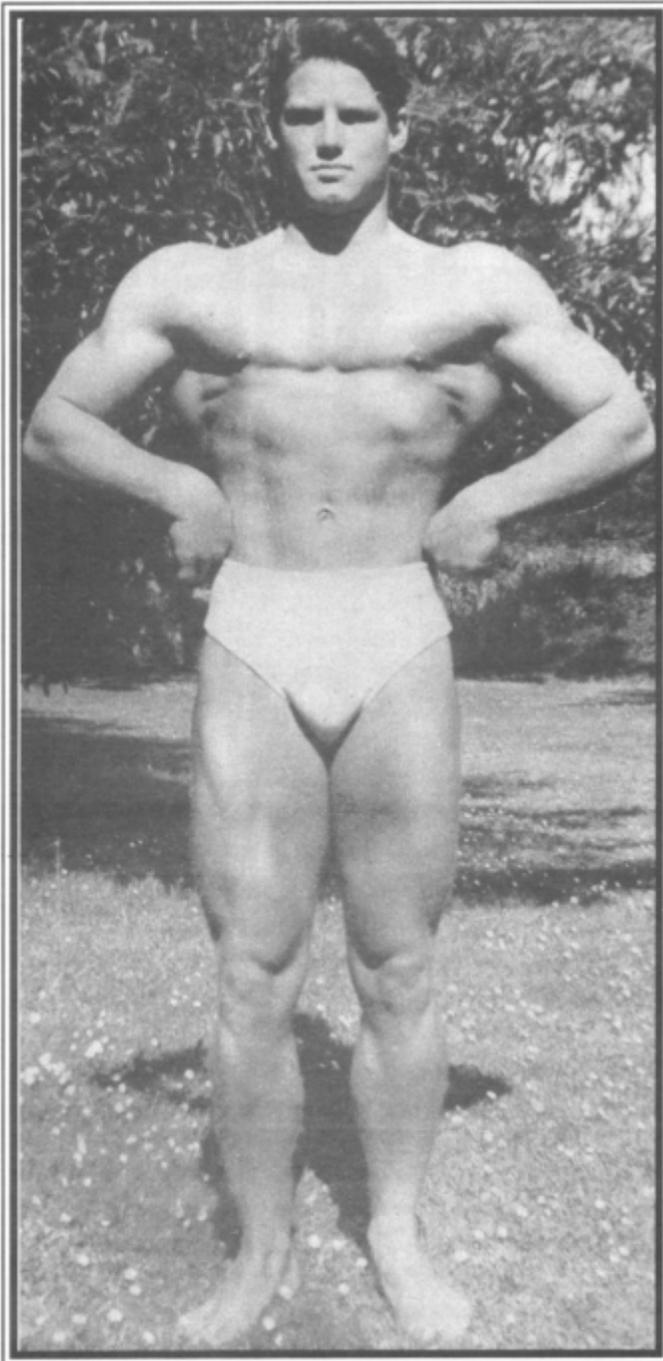
Reeves enlisted in the army in 1944 and saw action in the Philippines before his discharge in 1946.

ing facilities, better climate, things like that." He said, "Yeah, great idea." So, after he had won the contest, he came out to California. He came out in 1948. After I had gotten out of the service I went on this 52-20. In other words, you get 20 bucks a week for 52 weeks, till you find a job or till you go to school or whatever you want to do.

So I went down there to Santa Monica and George Eiferman came out from the East Coast at that time so we got an apartment together there on Muscle Beach. And we both were collecting our 52-20. The apartment on Muscle Beach wasn't too good. It was just a little hole in the wall, in a kind of basement. Then we read this ad in the paper where Joy Cortez had this Muscle House by the Sea. She called it that later. She just had a home that had four bedrooms and she wanted some people there to help her pay the rent. She was a lady in her seventies. And she was very fit. She only ate health food, and she used to go swimming every morning at 6:00 in the ocean there, because the Muscle House was only about a block from the ocean. It was halfway between Santa Monica and Venice. Sometimes George would buy salami or something and hide it in the back of her refrigerator, and she'd say [Steve raises his voice to



Studio pot-trait of Steve aged six, with his beloved mother, Golden "Goldie" Boyce Reeves, taken in 1932.



Steve at age 16 reveals truly unusual maturity and promise, much like that of Louis "Apollon" Uni at the same age.

imitate a woman], "What is this? What is this?"

TT & JT: [Laughing]

SR: George and I were the first guys to go there. We shared a room. So some other people heard that we were staying there and they got a room. So, altogether at one time there were six of us living there.

TT: Was Armand living there?

SR: No, Armand lived with his mother at the time. She had a home in Santa Monica. To me, those were the good old days of my life. I'm telling you, I'd just gotten out of the Army, and when you're in the Army you're under discipline at all times, you have to do this, have to do that. So I thought I'm going to relax and live it up for a year. Just relax and do what I want to do. So, I'd get up in the morning, I don't know, about 7:00, cause I can't sleep too late anyway, and go to the beach. Just hang around for a little bit. Then go to the gym and work out for a couple hours. We'll say from 8-10. Then back to the beach for the rest of the day. At that time on the 52-20 it cost us a dollar a day for our room—which was terrific—and a dollar a day for food, and so we had money left over to go to the movies or whatever, after that. Twenty bucks a week, you see, was 14 for the room and board, you know. And we had six bucks left over. And at the time, there was a restaurant, somewhere between Santa Monica and Hollywood, there, that was called the Roundup. It was all you could eat for a buck and a half. And they had huge hams, turkeys. . .

TT: Oh, me.

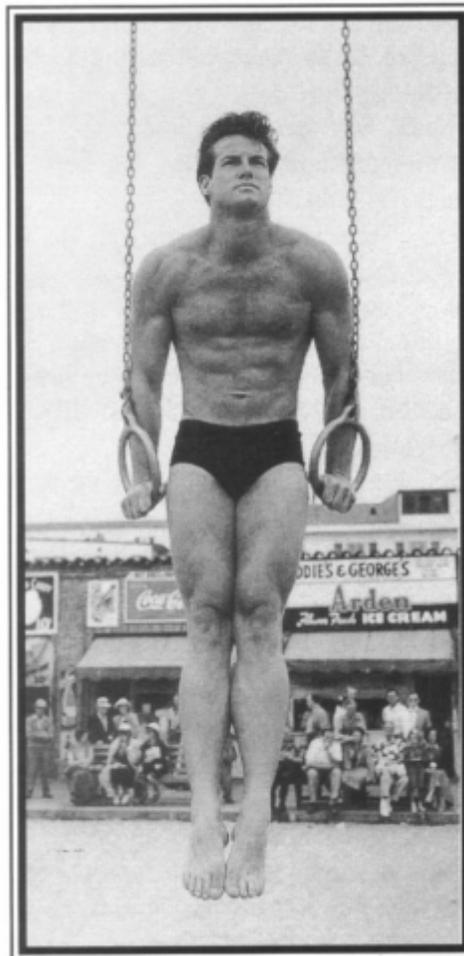
SR: Roast beef, and all different kinds of vegetables. So, us guys would get together about once a week, and say, "Hey, let's go to the Roundup." And that's where a buck and a half would go [laughing]. It was terrific.

TT: They must have hated to see all you guys. . .

SR: Oh, they hated to see us coming. So we never came more than four together, you see what I mean? [laughing] We'd pretend we didn't know the other guys. [hard laughter] And that was great. All you could eat for a buck and a half and a dollar a day for room. Normally, we'd live on a dollar a day for food. We mainly lived on fruits and vegetables, and we'd get our protein from cottage cheese and tuna. We ate a lot of cottage cheese. We'd mix cottage cheese with raisins, cottage cheese with carrots, and other things.

TT: Did you take any meals with Joy as part of living there?

SR: No, each person would furnish his own food and had his own little area in the refrigerator. Sometimes I'd go, let's say, on an orange juice diet for three days in the springtime just to clean out or just before wintertime to prevent colds and get a lot of vitamin C. So I said, "George, let's go on the orange juice diet for three days. "Sure, sure," he'd say, "let's do it." But after about a day and a half, I'd see George sneaking this, or sneaking that, or sneaking something else [laughing].



Although Steve didn't do acrobatics in the Muscle Beach shows or regularly train there with weights, his flawless physique and celebrity status made him one of Muscle Beach's main attractions.

TT: During that time, after the war when you were there, were there fairly big crowds on the weekends to watch the various, you know, lifters and bodybuilders, and all the people weight training and doing acrobatics?

SR: I would say maybe 250-300 people. Maybe on a big holiday weekend maybe 1000 or more. The place was crowded. They liked that free entertainment.

TT: Yeah, I guess so. And it must have been in a way kind of fun for those of you

pletely new thing. People must have seen someone like you walking down the beach and thought they were seeing something from another planet. I'm not exaggerating; it must have seemed that way.

SR: [Laughing] I think it was a little of both. There were two crowds there. People who wanted to see the bodybuilders work out, or walking down the beach, or lying on their blankets. Or people who wanted to see more action on the rings or on the platform, or a little of each.

JT: Where did you train, and where were the weights at Muscle Beach in those days?

SR: Actually, 90% of us trained at Tanny's Gym in Santa Monica. Way down in the basement. We might do something on the bars or on the rings at the beach, but our training was there at the Vic Tanny's.

TT: But there were some weights on the beach, right? Some actual barbells that stayed down there?

SR: Yes, they were to the south of the main platform where they did all the acrobatics.

TT: But it was uncommon for you to go there to take a workout.

SR: That's right. I had a certain routine I did and I'd use a pulley for this, I'd use a bar for that, a dumbbell for this and a barbell for that. I liked order and I liked to have everything the way I wanted it, so I could follow the sequence I wanted. And I didn't want to be bugged when I was working out. I wanted to do my routine in a certain period of time. I'd be happy to talk to somebody before my workout or after my workout if they wanted

who mostly were doing the weight training to watch all of the tumbling.

SR: Oh, it was good, you know. There were a lot of people there—Russ Saunders, Johnnie Collins, Harold Zinkin, George, Les and Pudgy, I can't name all them. Renald and Rudy, and Glen Sundby.

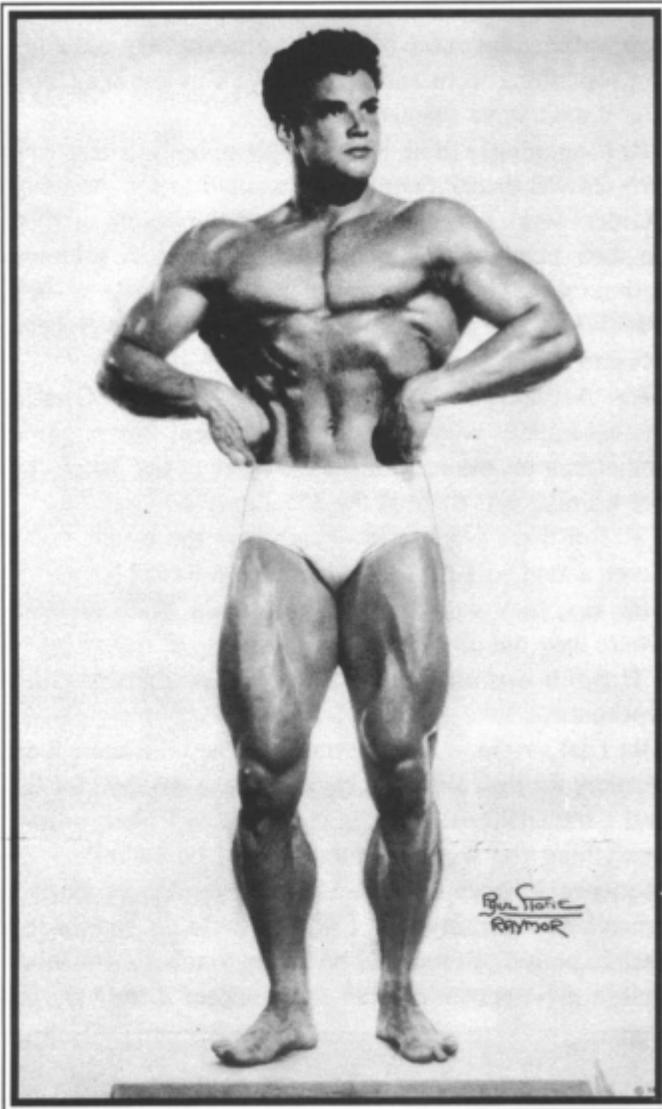
TT: Yeah, Sundby.

SR: And his partner. He had the greatest deltoids I've ever seen in my life. I mean better than any bodybuilder. I mean they came out like coconuts and it was from all that pressing. [Demonstrating the lifting of a person overhead]

TT: From what you could tell, as far as the people who were just down there to look and watch and be entertained, were they there more to watch the acrobats, or to watch the bodybuilders? In those days it was a com-



Reeves and Eiferman began a lifelong friendship in the late forties at Muscle Beach. They roomed together at Muscle House By The Sea and trained in Vic Tanny's basement gym, where this shot was taken in 1949.



Chicago photographer Paul-Stone Raymor took a number of physique studies of the young Steve Reeves which Reeves then sold through the "Steve Reeves Company" he founded in 1947.

to know something—my ideas about bodybuilding, what they should do or whatever. I'd be happy before or after. But during, that was a no-no.

TT: Yeah. And, of course down there at the beach it would have been impossible to go through a workout without people coming over and wanting to know this or that.

SR: One time at Yarick's gym there was a guy always coming and asking questions, so one time he came there and I was ready for him. I said, "Well, this is my favorite exercise." I laid down on the bench, and I had one guy working on my neck, one guy giving me leg curls, and I

was doing side laterals all at the same time [laughing by everyone]. He bugged me so much I thought I'd give him something he couldn't ever do.

TT: [Chuckling] Yeah, he'd go home and say, "You can't believe what this guy told me to do, but he was doing it and he was really built."

SR: Right. I said, "That's the only way to do it. Compound exercises." [more laughing]

TT: I know that one of the things I've heard people say, and I talked a little bit about it to Armand yesterday but he's kind of a modest person by nature. But I've heard people who saw him lift say that Armand was really a very, very gifted weightlifter.

SR: Oh he was, right. He was a combination of the two. He had a great build and he was a talented weightlifter.

TT: Everybody said he was really quick and explosive.

SR: One time Armand and I and George had a contest to see who could clean the most while on their knees. . . [laughing]. We both got to 220 apiece.

TT: When you came back to southern California, how long did you live the life that you came back to live?

SR: Well, I lived that life for just one year. Then afterwards I went down to the employment agency and I said I'm looking for a job. I told them, "I'm an actor." I thought that was how it would work, but it never did [laughing]. But anyway, after that year was over, to make a living I did three or four things. There was a guy at Muscle Beach named Leo. He had Leo's Hot Dog Stand and things like that. He also owned a gas station. So, during that time I would go one day a week and work for about six or eight hours at his gas station and get a few bucks. And then a friend of mine named Dick Webster, he used to park cars at the Captain's Table there

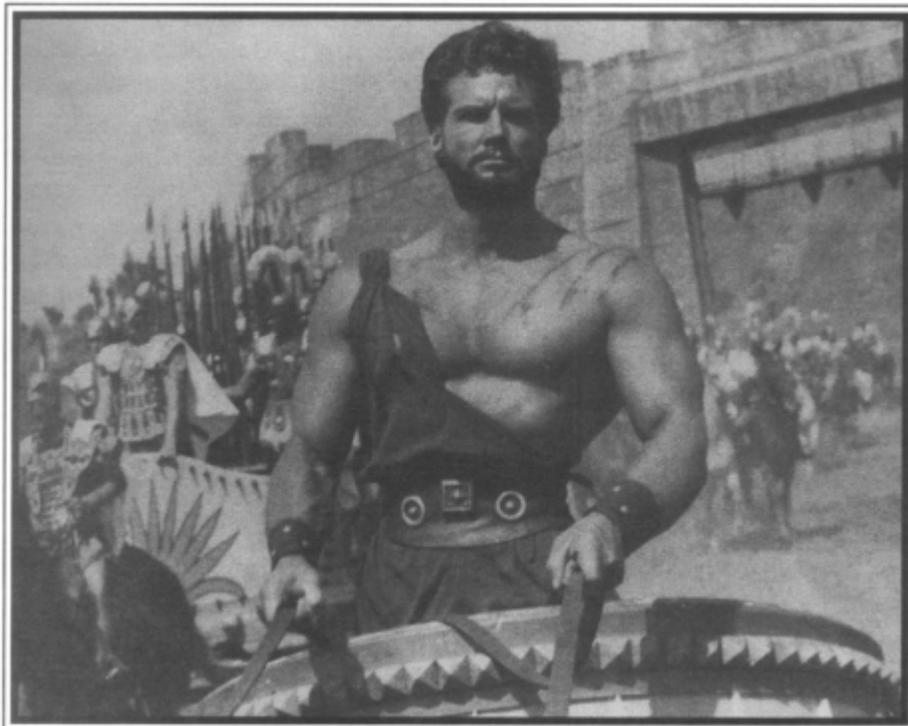
on La Cienega, a very elegant seafood restaurant. And he wanted one day a week off so I parked the cars on one day a week for him. And then every once in a while some television show would call up and say, "Hey, we want you to be on the show. This is the Dinah Shore show and we need somebody like you." I'd say, "All right," and I'd make a few bucks that way. I did the Red Skelton Show, the Topper Series, Ozzie and Harriet and several more. Anyway, that's how I'd make my money.

TT: And that was after that first year when you were on the 52-20?

SR: Yeah, right.

TT: So how long did you live in the Santa Monica area?

SR: Let me think? You see I won Mr. America in '47 in June or July. I think it was probably June. And at the Mr.



Steve Reeves in his roles as Hercules and other cinematic heroes was able to do almost all of his own stunts, particularly those involving horses. This was of great benefit to directors, as Steve's unique proportions made finding a double difficult.

America contest there was a letter for me. I don't know if it was backstage or at my hotel room, from an agent in New York saying, "I think you have possibilities. If you're interested in show business, let me know." So I took that letter back to Oakland, pondered it for a couple weeks and told him I'd let him know. At the time I was going over to San Francisco. I was studying to be a chiropractor, and a physical therapist, on the GI Bill. So when I called the agent he said, "Why don't you come back to New York and go to acting school?" So I told the administration of the GI program that I wanted to change from chiropractor to actor. And so I went to acting school in New York City.

TT: You just took off those first six letters.

SR: Yeah, right, right [laughing], chiropractor to actor. Take off that first syllable [more laughter]. So I went back there and I went to the Theodore Urban School of the Theater. But before I went there I studied under Stella Adler, who was Marlon Brando's coach. Some days she had people just walk, and some days she had people lisping, or stuttering or walking

pigeon-toed, or whatever. And, this one day we were all walking pigeon-toed. And so I was walking pigeon-toed. And she said, "Steve," or "Mr. Reeves," whatever she called me, "You're not doing that right." I said, "Miss Adler, from six years old to ten years old I taught myself not to be pigeon-toed, so you're telling me I don't know how to do it? As I look around this room here I see a bunch of people who want to be character actors. I want to be a leading man. I don't want to learn how to stutter, I don't want to learn how to walk pigeon-toed. I want to learn how to have good diction and how to walk well and gracefully." She said, "You'd better see me afterwards." Afterwards she said, "You're disrupting class, I'll have to give you your money back." So she gave me my money back and I went to the Theodore Urban School, which was a

nice school. There were maybe fifty kids in the class and plays every week and all that. So I would go to school every day—acting school—and on weekends I would do vaudeville. At that time they used to have a stage



After taking second, to John Grimek at the 1948 Mr. Universe contest in London, Reeves travelled to France and entered the Mr. World competition. While in France, he took most of his workouts outdoors, near the swimming pool of the the Palm Beach Hotel in Cannes where he stayed. He won the Mr. World title, on August 16, 1948.

show along with the major movie in New York and all the places within a hundred miles of there. So this comedian, Dick Burney—he was a very good comedian from the Army days—and my agent got me teamed up with him. We did kind of a Jerry Lewis/Dean Martin type of deal. I was the strong, healthy guy and he was the weak, sickly type of guy. And anyway the act went over pretty well. It was kind of corny, though, but that's beside the point [laughing]. Anyway, at one of those shows, a talent scout for Cecil B. DeMille saw me and contacted me and said, "Look, I think you have possibilities, come into our studio there in New York City—Paramount—and we'll give you a screen test." So, I went in there and I took a screen test, I think it lasted about fifteen minutes. I think I did the "Give me Liberty or Give me Death" sort of speech, you know what I mean. So on my 22nd birthday, I flew from New York City to Hollywood with a contract—a seven year contract—with Paramount Pictures.

JT: Wow.

SR: [To Deborah] Would you go to my little box there

and get my little card that says, "*Samson and Delilah* 1948?" So anyway, I flew out there with a contract for seven years for Paramount that had a six months option then a year option down the line. So, I got an apartment, maybe two or three blocks from there so I could walk to the studio. I went to the studio and the first day somebody said, "I want you to meet Mr. DeMille." So I walked into Mr. DeMille's office and there were about six or seven big pictures, about three feet by two feet each. There were pictures of Dean Martin, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Alan Ladd, Dorothy Lamour, and me.

TT: Is that right?

SR: Yeah, right. The picture was called "Perfection in the Clouds," and in the shot I have my hands over my head. He said, "There is my Samson, but you realize that the camera puts on 20 pounds, so I want you to lose 20 pounds." You know the rest of the story. At first I'd have lunch with Mr. DeMille every day. And I wondered why all the starlets seemed so interested in me. I thought, well, I'm kind of a good looking guy and all that, I guess, but this is too much. The real reason was

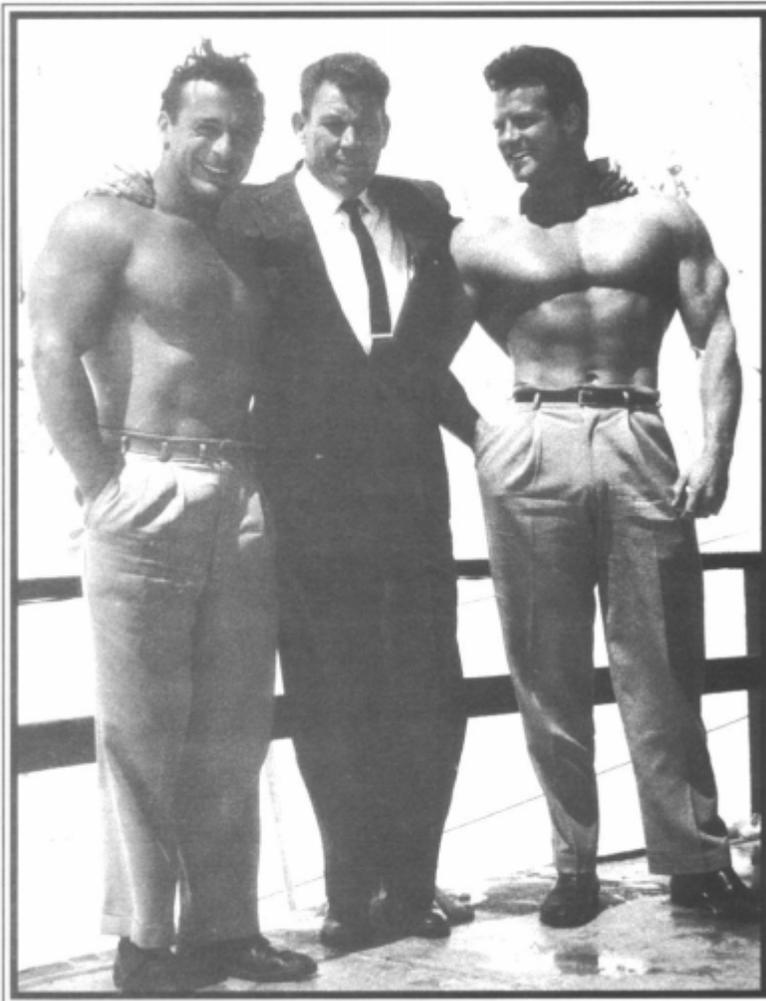
that they had been there for two or three years and never even met Mr. DeMille. This way they could sit at the table and talk to him every day. You see what I mean. . . [laughing].

TT: Yeah.

SR: So they would have me every two weeks or so do a play. You're in this room like a stage and there's a big glass window there. You can't see, but they're sitting there in their lounge chairs just checking you out. you know, as you do your scenes. So, after I was there for maybe three months, DeMille says, "You know, you've been



In 1959, Steve starred in *Goliath and the Barbarians*. At the wrap party on the last day of shooting, Steve celebrated with his co-star, Chelo Alonso, and assorted cast members, most of whom were still in costume. Like many of his films, *Goliath and the Barbarians* wasn't commercially successful in the United States but reportedly did very well in Europe and other countries around the world.



Three iron game immortals—George Eiferman, Bert Goodrich, and Steve Reeves—all past winners of the A.A.U. Mr. America contest.

here for three months already, and I start my picture in three more months, and you've only lost five pounds. And some days you give a good performance and some you give a lousy performance. You're preoccupied about something." Well, the truth was, I'd lost the five pounds and I'd go to the beach and the guys would say, "Steve, you're ruining yourself. Why do you want to be an actor? You're the best in your field, why do you want to go into another field, start at the bottom, and work up?"

TT: No iron gamer likes to lose muscle, and you didn't carry a lot of extra weight, anyway.

SR: No, no. I had to lose muscle. So I lost two more pounds. This made seven pounds that I'd lost by then. I'd go to the gym and they'd tell me the same thing. Everywhere I went I was wrong. At the gym, at the beach, they'd say, "Look at you. You're ruining your-

self." I'd go to Demille's and he'd say, "Look, if you want a career you've got to lose weight, because you look fine but the camera's going to make you look big and I want you to look on the screen like you do in real life." So, after about three more months he said, "You know, I guess I'm going to have to drop your contract." And when the contract came up for renewal, he just dropped it. But I have to say they really treated me well there, overall. They gave me my own office to study in and they brought a drama coach in for a couple hours a day for me.

[Deborah returns with the card from *Samson and Delilah*]

DE: It was the very last thing in the box.

TT: It always works that way.

SR: Show it to them—March 2, 1948.

TT: That's your card. Your pass into the lot.

SR: Exactly. This is what got me in the studio every day.

TT: I see it. March the second, 1948. My goodness.

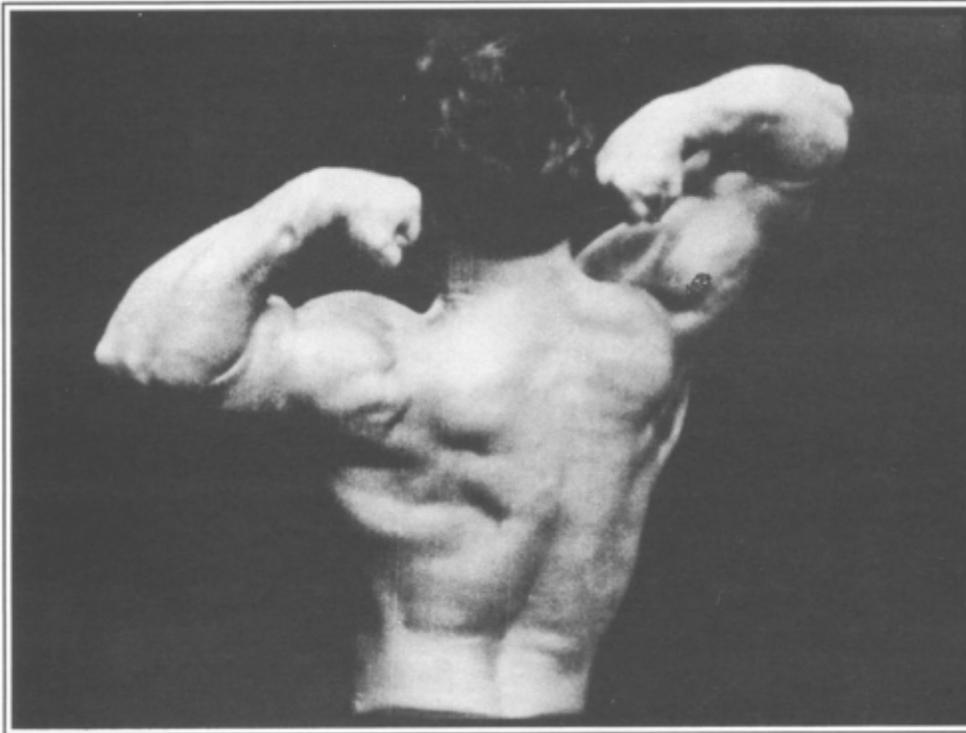
SR: You know, back then I didn't have my priorities straight. I was only 22 years old, and everywhere I went I was wrong. When DeMille dropped me, Vic Tanny had the Mr. USA contest and he talked to me and said, "Why don't you enter the contest?" Well, for one thing I was white. I hadn't been to the beach or anything else

because I was studying and all that, and I'd lost that seven pounds. But he talked me into entering the contest. I thought, "Well, if you're rejected one place you want to hit it some other place where you know you're pretty good."

TT: You knew you'd feel at home.

SR: Exactly. Where you know you can excel under the right conditions. So I built myself a sunlamp with about four bulbs in it and I think I fell asleep there and I burned my back so badly that for the contest it hurt me to pose. I had to put on this powder—I think it comes from Texas—and it's red and it has a little oyster shell in it and kind of glistens. DeMille used it for his Indians in his Cowboy and Indian pictures. I had to put that all over my body to cover the burn. So I came in second, and I deserved to come in second, maybe third. But I entered a contest when I wasn't in shape to win. After that I went to Muscle Beach to live.

TT: Before you talk more about Muscle Beach I want to



This rarely seen back shot of Steve Reeves reveals the thickness of his wrists, forearms, and deltoids that was sometimes overlooked because of his unusual symmetry. He did little specific work on his trapezius muscles as he thought it detracted from shoulder breadth.

ask you about one thing because I've always been curious. Maybe a lifter would always feel this way, but I think DeMille was mistaken in thinking that in the role of Samson you would have been better twenty pounds lighter than your normal contest weight. Obviously you do have a little bit of magnification on film, but with your particular body type I still think he would have been surprised. After all, you were playing a superman.
SR: That's right. I was playing a superman. Samson was Hercules in his time. I think you're right.

TT: Later, in Reg Park's case, unless I'm misremembering the story, they didn't make that requirement of him.

SR: No, they didn't. Because they wanted him for Hercules. And Hercules had been established by then.

TT: Right.

SR: Another reason I had trouble getting started in the movies was because people like Gary Cooper, Gregory Peck and Burt Lancaster said they wouldn't let me work with them. In other words if there was a part for me, and they were going to cast me Lancaster said, "No." And Peck said, "No." And Gary Cooper said, "I'm not going

to walk with that guy in the swamps of Louisiana with my shirt off' [laughing]. I can understand them trying to protect themselves but at the same time it made it difficult for me trying to get a start.

TT: But that was the time that was tied into Muscle Beach.

SR: Right. And so the summer just after the Mr. USA contest I moved down to Muscle Beach—with Eiferman—and I stayed there for about a year, I guess, maybe a little over, a year and a half. Then I started working for Bert Goodrich, at his gym there in Hollywood, so I got myself an apartment a walking distance from there.

TT: Was that gym going pretty well then?

SR: Goodrich's gym in Hollywood? Yeah, it was going very well. They had a lot of stu-

dents there from USC. In fact half my buddies there were from USC. They were all rich kids from Pasadena, places like that.

TT: Was it men and women both at the gym?

SR: No, no, just men.

TT: Was Bert himself there regularly at the gym?

SR: Oh, yeah, he'd be there every day. And he had a juice bar there and I used to like to drink that coconut and carrot. He said, "You're going to drink me out of business here" [laughing].

TT: When you were there did you still make it down to the beach some on the weekends and when you had a little free time?

SR: Oh, sure, I did. Right.

JT: One thing I was asking George yesterday was about the women who were down there and whether there was any kind of negative response to a woman with Pudgy's build and the muscles that she had?

SR: Well Pudgy was the only one. There were acrobats and gymnasts and they had some muscle but Pudgy was the only female bodybuilder that I knew of at that time.

TT: So the Bert Goodrich time, that would have been

when?

SR: I worked for Goodrich off and on, in 1955 and '56. In '57 I started working for American Health Studios. In between times I was in different plays and things like that either in New York or on the road. I moved to Muscle Beach with George Eiferman about three or four months after, probably in July of that year.

TT: I guess some of the people you would see down at the beach that you were pals with also worked in the movies but more in stunts.

SR: Yeah, they worked as stunt men.

TT: And maybe sometimes in bit parts, I guess.

SR: Yeah, Russ Saunders doubled for quite a few people.

TT: And Johnny Collins, he worked as an understander in a lot of those stunts on the beach.

SR: Right.

TT: He was a big fellow, not built like a lifter. He had big legs and hips and he must have been very strong. Everybody said that he was terrific as a catcher and also as an understander.

SR: Yeah, he was terrific.

TT: Jan, did George talk yesterday about doing any work with films?

SR: Actually, he did make one. He played a part in a film at one time, and in fact somebody sent me a video and I sent it on to George.

JT: Yeah, George told me. He also showed me the wonderful book that you guys put together for him. The "This is Your Life" book.

SR: That was Deborah's idea. She thought it would help him with his memory. Help him remember the good times. The good days, you know. When things were positive in his life.

JT: It was the first thing he got out to show me.

SR: That's good.

JT: It clearly meant a lot to him.

TT: This is more of a feeling question than a fact question, but what were the things that made the beach such a magnet to young men like you?

SR: I think it was the camaraderie because at the time you were a strange person on other beaches, you know, you were an oddity. And at Muscle Beach you were just one of the guys. You had the weights in common with the people you were with. Yeah. Just like if you're in the horse business you want to be around people at horse

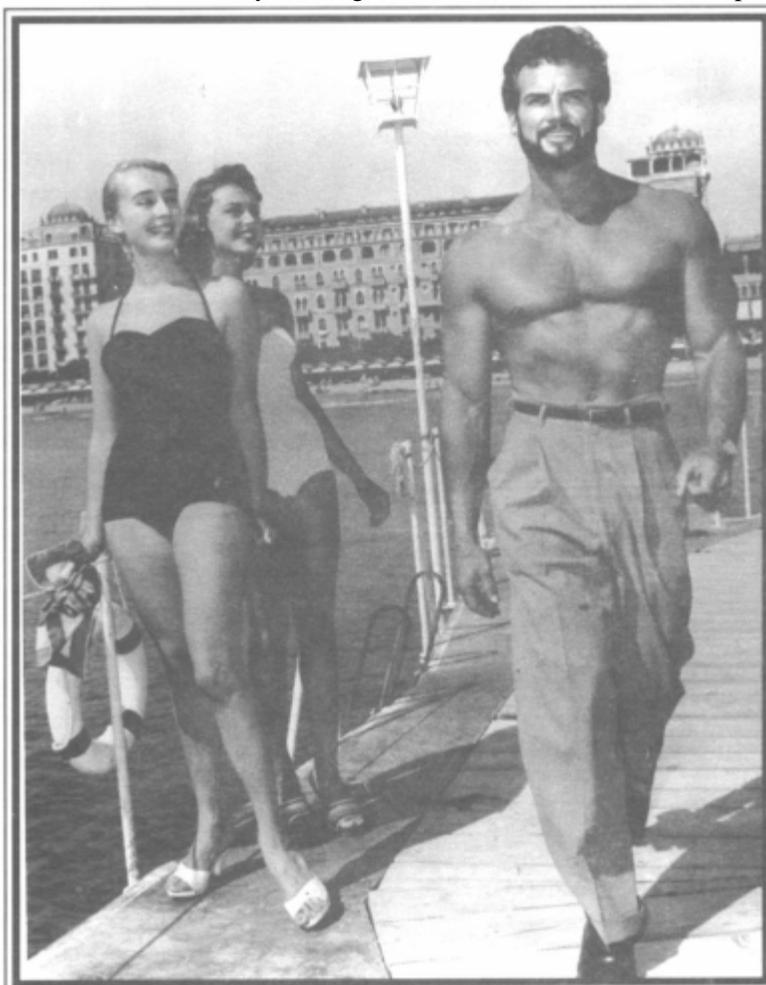
shows, and places like that, so you feel at home.

TT: Kind of like the tag line they always use in that tv show *Cheers*—"Where everyone knows your name."

SR: Yeah, right. And everybody knows the lingo.

TT: Was there friendship as opposed to any kind of rivalry and jealousy between the people who were primarily acrobats and the ones who were primarily the weight trainers?

SR: No, no, no, no. We were all friends. And not only that, we admired each other's talents, you know? We didn't think that guy was too skinny just because he could do a stunt we couldn't do, no, no. We thought the guy was great. We wished we could do it, and still look like we looked. And not only that. At that time bodybuilders were buddies who would help each other. Later eras of bodybuilding were kind of cutthroat. People



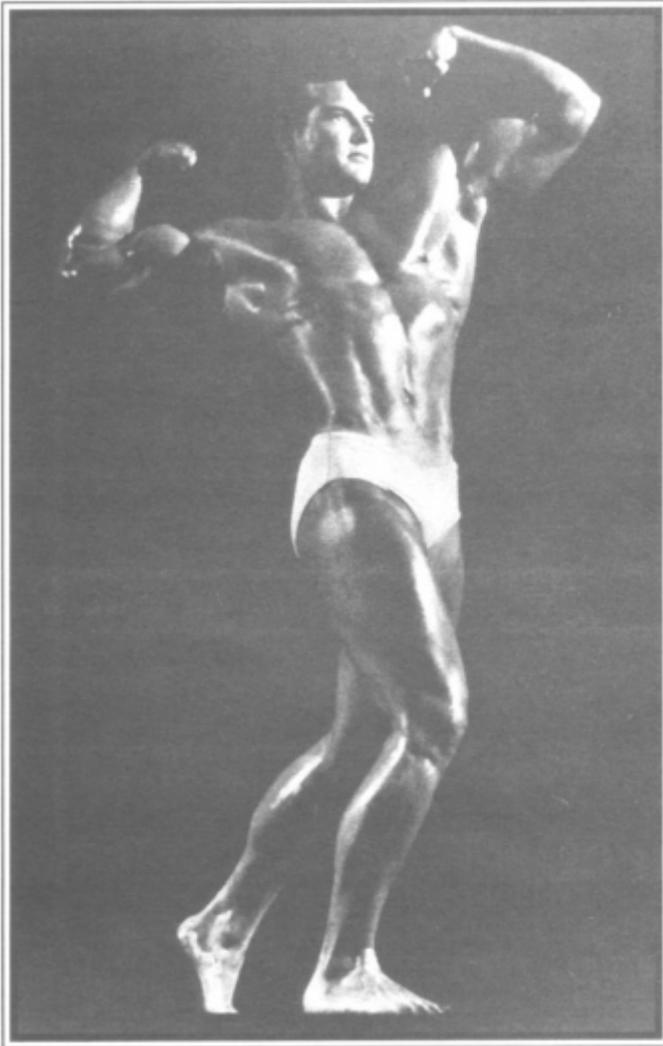
According to those who were his contemporaries, there has never been a showstopper on the beaches to match Steve Reeves. This shot also reveals how he looked when he lost weight for film roles.

would try to sabotage each other. But at this time it was a real true sport and people did it for the love of it because there was no money in it.

TT: Well, I know that John Grimek talked to me about this in person on a couple of occasions, and I know that in the Grimek issue we did about him recently he told a story about the time you came back before you went over for the Universe.

SR: Right.

TT: John told me how amazed he was, and everybody else in York, too, at the speed with which you acquired a high level of condition. But you could tell when he was writing the story, how happy it had made him that you won. And didn't he meet you there in New York when you got back and throw a kind of party or a celebration



Much of the appeal of the Reeves physique was the unusual combination of a heavy bonestructure, a narrow pelvis, and full, yet refined muscular shape.

for you?

SR: Yes, he did.

TT: It was almost like a member of his family had won, and in a funny way I guess it was that way.

SR: In fact I have the telegram somewhere where he said, "Bring home the bacon. John." I wired back and said, "Jules Bacon?" [Laughter by everyone.] He said, "No, no, *the* bacon." [More laughter.] I'm kidding, I'm kidding. That's a joke. That's a George Eiferman joke. Jan, when you saw George yesterday was he still joking?

JT: Yes.

SR: That's good. I'm glad. He really loved jokes. He used to love it when instead of saying, "I'm dreaming of a White Christmas," I'd say, "I'm dreaming of a wide latissimus" [laughter]. Back during the Muscle Beach days.

TT: I'll tell you. We had a meeting at Long Beach a few years ago with an academic conference about sports history. We asked Pudgy and Les, and George and Russ Saunders and Relna Brewer McRae, since they were handy there in southern California, to give a sort of formal interview at one of the sessions. I interviewed them, I'd guess you'd say, but it was really just a free-flowing conversation between the five of them. And those academic people, those professors, they really enjoyed hearing about the old days at Muscle Beach. They told me many times later that it was the best session they'd ever had at one of those conferences. They appreciated hearing and seeing the people who'd actually done it. . . who'd been the star athletes who lived through it and were still here fifty years later remembering it with pleasure.

JT: But George was the star.

TT: Yeah, George was the star. He and Les had everybody laughing.

SR: He always did. I remember one time in Hawaii. We went over there to do a show, Mr. Hawaii, I think, and Les and Pudgy and George and I went over and did this little show there for them. And Hawaiians either like you or they don't like you. So George tried to ingratiate himself and us, too. They had this luau and there was this huge, huge tub filled with ice and beer and pop and things like that. So, Eiferman backed up and fell backwards into it on purpose and that broke the ice. Everybody was great from then on. I can still see him doing it and making it look like an accident.

TT: There's another thing I wanted to ask you about. I've often wondered if Muscle Beach might have helped

a lot in breaking down the myth—and I know you lived through it—when almost all coaches, physical educators, medical doctors, and sport scientists believed that if you lifted weights you'd be musclebound. That was the term.

SR: Right.

TT: They believed it was the worst thing an athlete could do. Of course they were wrong, and those of us who lifted knew they were wrong, but they believed it anyway. And so I'm wondering about the impression anyone who went to Muscle Beach would have. At the beach there were muscular people training with weights right there and right next to the weight area there's a big platform where people can do all kinds of elaborate tumbling, and some of the lifters tumbled and some of the tumblers lifted. That had to have had an impact on the myth of musclebinding.

SR: It probably did help. You know that musclebound stuff is still with us, in a way. Even today, some reporters who don't know anything about it and try to give a person a compliment, will say, "Boy, he's really musclebound." They're trying to say muscular.

DE: You know, when I was growing up I thought that was what musclebound meant.

SR: Muscular?

TT: No, it's true. The meaning has changed over time. But you take 30-40 years ago, 50-60 years ago, "musclebound" meant tied up and clumsy.

SR: That's right. Bound. It meant you couldn't tie your necktie, couldn't comb your hair.

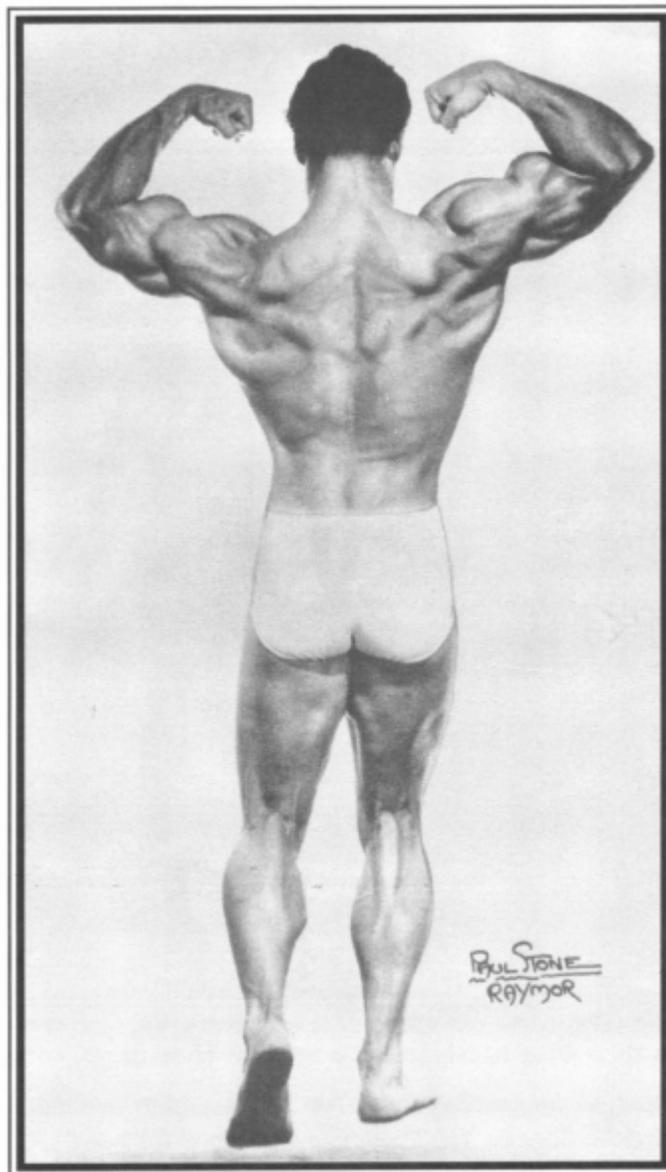
TT: By the way, I was so glad that in your book you laid into the steroid users. Because I really believe that with the steroids and various other kinds of bodybuilding drugs that are used the guys now truly can make themselves musclebound. I think that in the old days you couldn't really build that much muscle. Grimek is just an example. He had a lot of muscle for his height yet he could do those deep bends, he could do the splits.

SR: Yeah, he was really something.

TT: But I think that with drugs these guys can make themselves so thick in the arms and chest that they couldn't begin to address a golf ball, for instance. So, I think that what used to be a myth has become a possibility because of steroids and related drugs.

SR: I think you're right.

TT: You might speak for a minute about how common that myth was, and ways that you experienced it and heard people talk about it back in those days.



This photograph was taken by Paul-Stone Raymor in 1947, in Chicago, when Steve was just 21 years old. In the A.A.U. Mr. America event that year, he won the Best Back Award.

SR: Like you say, the trainers, like the football coaches, wouldn't let their football players lift weights because they'd become musclebound. They wouldn't let the players ride a bicycle because it would cut up their legs. And some of them wouldn't let the players swim, so all the things that condition people today were taboo at that time. It was strange. And baseball players weren't even supposed to go near a weight because if they did then they couldn't swing that bat or throw that ball correctly.

TT: When you were in your high school years and you'd already done some lifting did you catch it that way? Did



This publicity still was taken of Steve as part of the effort to draw attention to his film role as the mythical hero Hercules, a role in which he gained worldwide fame.

some of the coaches say, “You know, you’re making a mistake, Reeves. You know this isn’t good for you?”

SR: Actually, the coach wanted me to play guard but I couldn’t because it was during the war years and my junior and senior years I was working at the quartermaster supply depot like I said earlier—half a day school, half a day work. So I didn’t have any time for after school activities. But he actually wanted me to play because during class, you know, I did well.

TT: Did he know you were lifting?

SR: Yeah, he knew I was lifting. But he didn’t know to what extent.

TT: Maybe it wasn’t quite as bad in California.

SR: Probably wasn’t.

JT: Were you a magazine reader? Did you read *Strength & Health* when you were in high school?

SR: Oh, yes. I loved to read it.

TT: Were there any weights at your school?

SR: In the high school they had a hundred pound barbell. That’s all they had. But they did have a hundred pound barbell at Castlemont High School, where I graduated. And Clint Eastwood graduated from Castlemont too, about four years later. Anyway, during recess we’d go out there and lift it. They didn’t have all these laws about insurance and things like that. I was finally able to one-arm-snatch the hundred pounds.

TT: I doubt if any other kid that age could do it, could they?

SR: I don’t think so. While I was going to Castlemont, one day they had a gymnastics meet, and Jack Dellinger, who became Mr. America a couple years later, after I won, was there. Even as a kid he had great shoulders, arms and lats and a really small waist, but he had nothing for the legs. Nothing. At the time I hadn’t worked out with weights yet, just fooled around

there at the school trying to snatch that hundred pounds like the other kids but I did have heavy, well-developed legs.

TT: I’d say.

SR: I got a lot of my thigh development from riding my bicycle up the hills in Oakland. I really worked at it. When I went up a hard hill one of three things was going to happen. I was going to make that hill, I was going to break a chain, or I was going to come to a dead stop. One of the three [laughter]. I’m a man of determination, right Deborah, at least sometimes? If I set my mind to something. If I don’t set my mind to something, I’m just like anybody else.

DE: You are never like anybody else [more laughter].

SR: What I figure is that if there’s a light at the end of the tunnel and I can see it, no matter how long the tunnel and how dim the light, if I can see it, I’ll get there.