

Steve Reeves: A Lifetime of Inspiration

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As I look on my life so far, I said so far, it's inescapable that I have been privileged to have known and interacted with several icons in various fields of endeavor. Each has left indelible effects on countless numbers of lives. In bodybuilding Steve Reeves was one of those unforgettable figures.

Mine was a generation whose childhood and adolescent years were influenced by comic books with heroically muscular, always handsome superheroes and by Saturday afternoon action movie serials. Our steady diet was feature films with leading men named Tyrone Power, Clark Gable, and Robert Taylor, who were famous for their uncommon good looks. They all had soft looking, unimpressive physiques, however. It was what Hollywood wanted, at that time.

During a summer long ago the boy that was me went on what had become a monthly pilgrimage to a news stand at the junction of Westchester and Prospect Avenues in the Bronx, New York. There it was. The August 1947 issue of the magazine *Strength & Health*. It cost 20¢. On the cover was the blurb, “Meet The New Mr. America.” The cover photograph in brilliant color was of a muscular young man striking a front double biceps pose. That was the first time I had ever seen or heard of Steve Reeves. The issue was replete with photographs of the Mr. America competition. Steve Reeves and another impressive young newcomer with amazing arms, Eric Pedersen, were the two most outstanding contenders. The struggle for supremacy between Pedersen and Reeves was close and so difficult for the judges to determine that a pioneer posedown was necessary. The victor was Steve Reeves.

Nineteen forty-seven was a couple of years after the end of World War Two. We had fabulous neighborhood movie theaters where for 24¢ a kid could see two full length feature films, a newsreel and cartoons. On special weeknights there were stage shows, too. So I went to the RKO Franklin one Wednesday evening and, to my astonishment, part of the stage show was the new

Mr. America, Steve Reeves, doing his posing routine. He was actually here, right where I lived. Almost unbelievable. I was about to enter the impressionable years of adolescence and indeed I was impressed. At that time my training was with steel cables in the cellar of our home after school. After I saw Steve Reeves in person, however, the cellar training with cables was no longer good enough. With finances provided by my mother I joined the Bronx Union YMCA. Charles A. Smith was the weight training instructor. In Bronx Union I quickly learned that the Steve Reeves physique had set a new standard to which adolescent, fledgling bodybuilders like me were now aspiring. It was not enough to develop an outstanding physique. Would-be future Mister winners, to the delight of their mothers, now were paying attention to their grooming, seeking as best they could to achieve some degree of the Steve Reeves sensational good looks. The idea was to become an Adonis endowed with splendor of physique, flawless pompadour and imagined good looks, all of which rendered us totally irresistible to the girls of summer on Orchard Beach. Or so we hoped.

Nineteen forty-seven. Siegmund Klein's New York City show with Klein himself posing as well as John Farbotnik, Pudgy Stockton, John Grimek and Steve Reeves. I was seated near the very back of the auditorium. I heard some conversation behind me. I looked around. There were two arena workers also looking around and to my wide-eyed amazement the new Mr. America was standing there in a tan trench coat, hands in his pockets. Steve Reeves, tall, with incredibly wide shoulders, and a small waist. He looked like the 1940s Superman. He looked like a movie star, a leading man but with a fantastic physique. Yes, I was entering those impressionable years and I was very impressed.

Looking back, 1947 was an interesting year. The sensational 21 year-old Reeves was crowned Mr. America and across the ocean a boy named Arnold was born.

It seemed likely that Hollywood would be eager to propel this super-handsome new Mr. America into movie stardom. But this was the late 1940s and the Hollywood of that time just did not share our admiration of a well proportioned, muscular physique. In fact, Hollywood preferred to cling to the old brainless muscleman myth. Hollywood wanted their leading men to be muscle-less. It would take almost thirty more years before that would change. One wonders what might have happened if the young Steve Reeves had come along in 1975.

Hollywood did cast Steve in a mediocre movie called *Athena* at the beginning of the 1950s. It was not a compliment to him at all. Steve then had another not very auspicious part in the Broadway play *Kismet*. He was now Mr. America and Mr. Universe but Hollywood still did not see the potential in this well-built, handsome young man.

Hollywood of the early 1950s did not appreciate Steve Reeves but fortunately Italy did. A producer named Joseph E. Levine recognized Steve's box office potential and the young bodybuilder was cast as Hercules in several movies filmed in Italy. The Europeans, Italians in particular, loved him. Bodybuilders in the U.S.A. eagerly went to see the Hercules movies. The success of these films motivated several American bodybuilders to try their luck in the Italian films, and they crossed the ocean for just that purpose. Among them were Lou Degni and Leroy Colbert. The leading man image was in a process of change. It was Steve Reeves who was the catalyst. It was Steve Reeves whose name became synonymous with muscles to the general public.

During the 1960s I was employed in one of New York City's top of the line nightclubs, the Chateau Madrid, and movie star Ava Gardner was a regular visitor whenever she was in town. In the Chateau Madrid I was sitting directly across a table from Ava Gardner one night when she asked me to join her. She was the most breathtakingly beautiful woman I have ever seen. She was so beautiful that I had to avert my gaze as I spoke with her lest she perceive how totally captivated I was. Just as there is feminine beauty there is masculine beauty and Steve Reeves represented its pinnacle in sharp contrast to the disgustingly ugly, pathologically grotesque steroid freaks of today.

In 1985 I attended the Steve Reeves Special Awards Dinner at New York City's Downtown Athletic

Club. The award recipients were Ms Olympia, the stunning Rachel McLish and Olympic star Rafer Johnson. In attendance, among others, were Mr. Nostalgia, Joe Franklin and his athletic radio sidekick, Richie Ornstein. That night I observed Steve Reeves as he entered the spacious room and made his way to the dais. He still had that dynamic Reeves stride. He still had the wide shoulders and small waist. He was still a handsome, heroic-looking man. In fact, I thought he was even more impressive in maturity. There was a new look of dignity which youth doesn't have. I shook hands with Steve. His large hands and firm grip were impressive.

Nineteen eighty-eight was the year that Steve Reeves was honored by the Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen, again in New York City's Downtown Athletic Club, home of the Heisman Trophy. John Grimek presented the special award. Steve looked like an athletic superhero. He displayed that beaming Steve Reeves smile more than I had ever seen before. Weightlifters and bodybuilders alike jostled for position to be able to speak to Steve, shake his hand, get his autograph.

Nineteen ninety-four in England, when Steve Reeves was inducted into the Oscar Heidenstam Memorial Hall of Fame was the last time I saw him. He still looked impressive. A bit older but vigorous. There were attendees from England, U.S.A., Belgium, France, Holland, and Scotland. Most amazing was the large number of Steve's loyal fans from Italy who made the trip to see their hero. I was given the privilege of speaking briefly at the beginning of the proceedings. Steve was seated a few feet away from me at the dais. At last, a long-awaited opportunity to share with Steve and the audience my boyhood impressions of seeing the 21 year-old new Mr. America in 1947. Back then it would never have occurred to me that I would be doing this 47 years later. Fans lined up patiently in front of the dais to receive Steve's autograph and since I thought it appropriate, I played music from *Kismet* on the grand piano.

There will always be individuals so immersed in negativity that they project it onto everyone around them. They bemoan and criticize the fact that Steve could not match Paul Anderson's strength. Or John Davis. Or Marvin Eder's. The reality is that he didn't have to do that. All he had to do was to be what he was. An inspiration. An icon. One of the greatest natural bodybuilders of all time. *Natural*.