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Me and Paul

I met Paul Anderson late one night in 1958 in Houston, in a corridor behind the seats of an auditorium where he was appearing on a pro wrestling card. Paul had just finished his match by body-slamming his 6'6", 280 pound opponent with such force that the slammee's eyes—as he walked toward me along the corridor just ahead of Paul—were filled with what appeared to be tears of real pain. And then came Paul, moving in that wide-legged, rolling gait his 36" thighs required.

I had only been training for a couple of years, and then only sporadically, but I was so fascinated with lifting that I had driven from Austin with a college buddy for the express purpose of seeing Paul and, if possible, shaking his hand and saying hello. But when the moment came to step forward and introduce myself I was so awestruck by his size that I waited until he was almost past before stepping forward, putting out my hand, and telling him he was my hero.

In many ways, he is my hero still. For almost 50 years, Paul has epitomized for me the superheavy strongman

with a social conscience. Back in the 50s and 60s as I dreamed my young man's dreams about the future, I always had the example of Paul before me as a standard.

Being big and strong was for me as it was for Paul—a deep, psychological need that drove us to train and to eat so that we reached bodyweights that were unhealthy yet very effective in the lifting of heavy weights.



In 1965, Paul Anderson got a laugh from 6'2", 335 pound Terry Todd when the 5'9", 365 pound Anderson stepped up on a box just as the photographer snapped this picture at Paul's youth home in Vidalia, Georgia. Anderson used to say that pictures of the two together made him look too short, so he told the photographer, but not Todd, to not take the shot until he (Paul) was on the box. This was during Todd's first visit to Vidalia, the day after he had substituted for an ailing Paul at a benefit in Tennessee to raise money for the children of a friend, Rye Bell, who had died suddenly. Paul was suffering from ulcers and was told by his doctors that to lift big weights could be fatal.

We often spoke of this obsession when we were together. In our competitive years we ate and we drank milk and we trained with an almost religious fervor in order to get big and strong. Not just big, and not just strong. Big *and* strong. Strong *and* big.

As the years passed Paul and his beloved wife Glenda opened their Youth Home, and my lifting hero became heroic to me for another reason—for devoting a large part of his life to a cause greater than himself. Just as I was hungry to follow him as a strongman, I came in time to understand my responsibility to use my talents—just as Paul had used his—to be of help to others.

I don't mean to imply that I was Paul's equal in

either strength or good works, only that I admired him and was led by him as I became a man. I'm proud of the strength I was able to wrest from my less-than-perfect genetic package, of course, but as a strength historian I realize that in most lifts he was the stronger man. Similarly, I'm proud of the physical culture collection Jan and I have built and given to the University of Texas. However, even though it's the largest in the world I'm sure most people would agree that Paul's Youth Home, which fed and housed and clothed and nurtured so many needful boys, was a more significant "gift" than I have managed with my assortment of books, magazines, and photos.

The point here is that as I went to the gym and lifted and then went to dinner and ate, Paul's image was there to follow. And as I built a physical culture archive and found a permanent home for it here at UT, his work at the Youth Home was there as an inspiration. So in two crucial ways he has shaped my life, and I have loved him.

We did not, however, always agree about certain of life's larger questions. In the years I knew Paul he was a committed Christian; I was a low-voltage agnostic. Paul was socially conservative; I was considerably more liberal. But we got along really well during the many times we were together, travelling to exhibitions or

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Table of Contents

- 1. Remembering Paul Terry Todd
- 4. Portrait of a Strongman . . . Jan Todd & Michael Murphy
- 22. Searching for the Real Paul Anderson John Fair
- 30. Ironclad: Anderson's Backlift Joe Roark

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working in Vidalia on our “Size and Strength” series of articles for John Grimek’s *Muscular Development*. Paul was a fine companion.

In any case, I have been reluctant for a variety of reasons to publish the findings Joe Roark and John Fair reveal in this issue. But *Iron Game History* was created in part as a publication in which accuracy would be the watchword, a publication in which full credit would be given to the pioneers in lifting and bodybuilding. Full credit, but not *extra* credit. To do less would be to shortchange the people who have made verifiable lifts that are less than lifts that are *not* sufficiently documented. Paul’s legendary 1957 backlift of 6270 pounds is one of these insufficiently documented lifts.

Paul may well have made this lift, but as Roark and Fair have found, there are substantial reasons to doubt that the lift was done in the way Paul claimed. The problem is that his remarkable career as a competitive lifter, coupled with his charitable work with the Youth Home, have made of him an icon virtually above suspicion in the game. His verifiable lifts were so stupendous and his reputation was so solid that for a very long time almost no one—certainly not me—doubted him.

Joe Roark and John Fair, working independently, began their research into his career believing that if they looked hard enough they would find support for his increasingly controversial backlift. None of us take any pleasure in what this digging has uncovered. But we must remember that Paul is not a god. He is a man and thus, according to his own beliefs, flawed, as are we all. He was also a professional strongman for most of his life, and such men have often found it to their advantage to exaggerate their lifts or their measurements. (Perhaps, of course, new evidence will come to light that strongly supports Paul’s account of his big backlift. On the other hand, perhaps new evidence will further weaken his claim.)

For my part, I suspect that if Paul *did* exaggerate that particular poundage, he did it to bolster his reputation as a strongman with a home full of hungry, hurting boys to support. I say this in part because many years ago, shortly after the publication of his 1975 autobiography, *Paul Anderson: the World’s Strongest Man*, I wrote to him and expressed my concern that he might have damaged his reputation among experts in the game by writing such things as, “Strong, young, supple bodies have come up since my youth and they have aimed at my records, only to fall short. Ten or twenty men will be within a pound or two of each others’ best lifts, but when

they check the record book, they see that the first place lifter, the world record holder, Paul Anderson, is still 30 pounds ahead per lift,” and, “. . . even after a couple of day’s layoff and maybe a month of scheduling difficulties, I would still be able to outlift the second strongest man in the world in any lift.” I mentioned in my letter that in several of the six competitive lifts even Paul’s best *claimed* lifts were approximately 50 pounds behind what had been done *officially*. I also suggested, as gently as I could, that perhaps it was time to pass along the mantle of “World’s Strongest Man” and to bring his weight down to a more healthy level. In response to my suggestion that he partially retire as a competitive strongman and drop some weight he thanked me for my concern but said that he didn’t think he had need for any advice about his personal life. His response regarding the claims he made in the book were more revealing. He pointed out that anyone could “nit-pick” and that he felt he was doing a great deal of good work at the Youth Home.

I suspect that Paul never realized at the time that his claimed three ton backlift would come to have such significance. In the late 50s, he was well ahead of everyone in overall body strength, and he probably could not have imagined that lifting records—driven chiefly by drugs—would soar so dramatically. How could he have known that men weighing far less than half of what he weighed would surpass his records in the snatch and clean and jerk? Or that men half his size would exceed even his claims in the bench press and deadlift. All that remained was the squat and, looming ever larger as the years passed, that prodigious backlift. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the two lifts which have done the most to sustain his reputation as history’s strongest man are the two for which the supporting evidence is weakest.

I hope that out of the analysis provided by Roark and Fair will come the thing Paul needs and deserves—a full-blown, well-researched, objective biography of his life as a lifter and evangelist. Paul was a complicated man, and he had an extraordinary, albeit too short, life. My suspicion is that such a book would leave most readers awestruck by his titanic strength and inspired by his dedication to his boys and to his God. Only then will the now-famous backlift fade to the level of importance it deserves as his strengths are balanced against his weaknesses. Only then will Paul be revealed to the wider world as the multifaceted American original he most surely was.

—Terry Todd