

THE KING OF STRENGTH

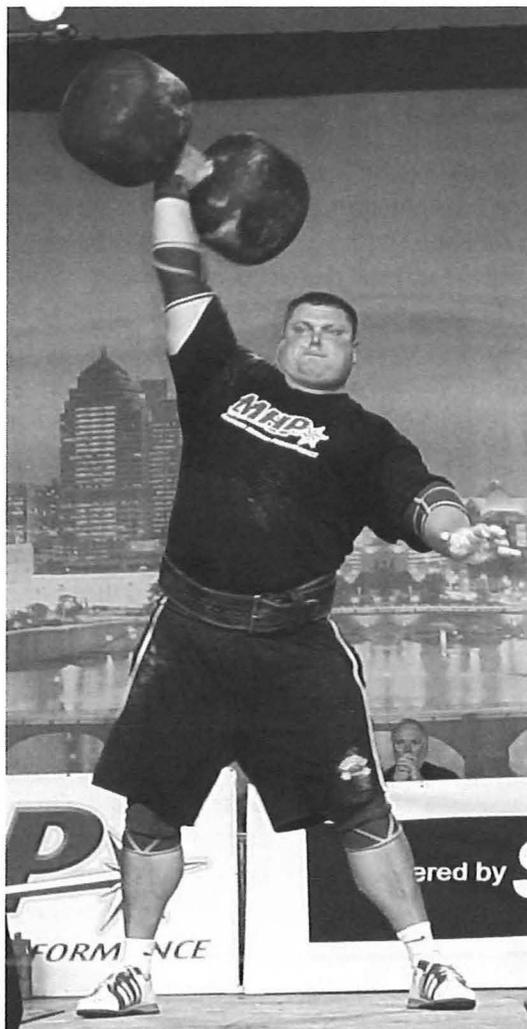
The 2008 Arnold Strongman Classic

Terry Todd

For the sixth amazing year in a row, Zydrunas Savickas, the Lion of Lithuania, dominated the annual Arnold Strongman Classic (ASC), winning \$40,000 in cash; a \$25,000 watch; the bronze, \$10,000 Cyr trophy; and the hearts and minds of strength fans—who are increasingly convinced that he is the Strongest Man in the World and, very likely, the Strongest Man in History. Once again, the venue was the Arnold Sports Festival—the enormous Circus Maximus that was celebrating its twentieth year in Columbus, Ohio—and once again the competition between the ten enormous Strongmen was said by the Festival’s organizer, Jim Lorimer, to be the most popular event among the 39 sports on display over the three-day extravaganza.

As in past years, the most powerful athletes from the Strongman world as well as several from the worlds of Weightlifting and Powerlifting were on hand to test their strength against the best men in the strength business. The 6’3”, 385-pound Zydrunas, of course, was back to defend his title, and arrayed against him were such giants as Estonia’s Andrus Murumets (third in the ASC last year), Russia’s Mikhail Koklyaev (a top strongman and former Russian weightlifting champ with best lifts of a 462 snatch and a 551 clean and jerk), American Brian Siders (former world powerlifting champ and current world record holder), American Phil Pfister (winner of the 2006 “World’s

Strongest Man” contest), Ukrainian Vasyi Virastyuk (the runner-up to Zydrunas in the ASC for the last three years and the former winner of both the “World’s Strongest Man” contest and the International Federation of Strength Athletes world championship), American Derek Poundstone (winner of the 2007 American Strongman contest), and several other top men.



As he has done so often, Zydrunas Savickas made a new record by putting the 202-pound Circus Dumbbell over his head nine times.

Up until about a month before the competition, it was also expected that the winner of four WSM contests, Mariusz Pudzianowski, would take part since he had told officials from the Arnold Strongman Classic that he would be back to try for the fourth time to win the Cyr Trophy. (In his previous three appearances he finished a respectable third place twice, but the last time he competed—two years ago—he was beaten down to sixth place.) Finishing so far down was a major blow to his reputation, but it was clear to everyone who saw him in the “Arnold” that he just doesn’t have the sort of low-gear, brute strength it takes to keep up with people like Savickas, Virastyuk, Koklyaev, and Murumets—not to mention the new kid on the block, Derek Poundstone, who beat Mariusz in mid-February in a WSM qualifier. Pudzianowski is a great Strongman competitor—tough, quick, enduring, and combative—but even though he won the “World’s Strongest Man” contest four times he is not, and never has been, the strongest man in the world.

The Timber Carry

The first of the six events this year was the Timber Carry, which consists of lifting with your bare hands an 875-pound frame made of barn timbers and carrying it up a 32' ramp. This has become Zydrunas' weakest event—mainly because his hands have grown so thick that he can't get a secure grip on the frame's handles—and he opened the door to his opponents by finishing in sixth place. Three men made it all the way to the top, however—the muscular Poundstone; the former world record holder in the deadlift, Benedikt "Benny" Magnusson from Iceland; and iron-fisted Muruments, who hot-footed it up the ramp in a new record time of 7.35 seconds.

The Circus Dumbbell

The second event involved lifting overhead, with one hand, a beautiful, customized dumbbell made (by Richard Sorin) to look like the sort of stage bells used by professional strongmen 100 years ago. Sorin's Circus Dumbbell weighs just over 202 pounds, but it's very awkward to lift because the handle has a 3" diameter and the spheres on each end are so large that it's hard for the men to place the dumbbell in a comfortable spot on top of the shoulder. The rules allow the bell to be brought to the shoulder with two hands, since no man has ever lived who could clean it with one hand, and

after each overhead lift or attempt the bell must be lowered to the platform before the next rep. (Placings are determined by who does the most reps in the 90 second-time limit, and strongman legend Magnus ver Magnusson officiated.)

Probably because we used the Circus Dumbbell as our second event this year (instead of the final one as it's been for the past three years, the men gave by far the greatest display of power ever seen in this event. The least reps anyone got was four, three men recorded eight reps (the "world record" up until last year), and two men—Savickas and Poundstone—upped the record to nine. It was an unbelievable thing to see, and the 6,000-8,000 people jammed around the huge platform were roaring and laughing at the ease with which the men handled this massive bell.

The Tire Deadlift

We use a 14' bar that was tailor-made for us by Tom Lincir of the Ivanko Barbell Company. Most of the weight comes from the 100-plus pound Hummer tires that are loaded onto each end and raise the bar to approximately two inches higher than that of an "Olympic" bar loaded with 45 pound (or 20 kg.) plates. The men can use straps, and they can "hitch" the bar, rest it on the thighs, or employ a double-knee bend, but in the end they must reach the fully upright, knees-locked position. This is a one-rep max event, each man gets three



Iceland's Benedikt Magnusson shocked everyone in the building but himself when he obliterated the "world record" by deadlifting 1102 pounds. Note that he is standing on a "runway" approximately four inches thick.

attempts, and we use the same “round” system as the one used in powerlifting—with each man deciding what to lift for his first, second, and final attempt as the weight goes up in each round. Almost every year since the contest began in 2002 a new “world record” has been made, and this year we had more records than ever before. The bar will only hold eight tires (plus quite a bit of extra metal plates), and loaded with eight tires (and no plates) the massive barbell weighs 1062 pounds. Until this year, only one man—world powerlifting champion Brian Siders—had even attempted this monumental poundage, but although Siders failed to finish the lift in 2007 he raised the hopes of the athletes and their fans that this might be the year when the eight-tire barrier would fall.

Before that Olympian height was reached, however, the old record was exceeded three times—by Savickas with 1027 pounds and by Magnusson and the Ukraine’s Oleksandr Pekanov, with 1038 each. Those lifts concluded each man’s three attempts, but the crowd began to scream, “Eight! Eight! Eight!” and so the officials granted a fourth attempt outside the competition to any man who wanted to make history and lift the 1062 pound, eight-tired bar. After a moment of thought, Zydrunas, who had already made up enough points to be tied for the overall lead, rose up like the champion he is and quietly called for the 1062. As with his first three attempts, he approached the bar calmly, bent down, secured his straps, set his hips, got Magnus ver Magnusson’s call to lift and—as the crowd filled the great hall with sound—pulled the bar up so easily that we realized we still didn’t know the full extent of this man’s seemingly superhuman strength. The head official, Scotland’s David Webster, and I then turned to Pekanov, who declined to try, but when I asked the 24-year old Magnusson, the cherubic Icelander smiled and said quietly, “500 kilos, please. If I can’t lift 500 I don’t want to lift anything.” Eleven hundred and two pounds?! Almost 100 pounds over our previous “world record?!”

It should be mentioned that watching Magnusson deadlift is one of the most exciting things in the world of strength. Some readers probably remember his world record-shattering 970 deadlift made several years ago—a lift that had tens of thousands of hits on YouTube. In any case, as Benny prepares to lift he somehow transfers his own excitement into the crowd as he walks back and forth behind the bar, scowling at it and alternately shoving the sleeves of his t-shirt up onto his ham-like shoulders. Just before he made his final approach to the 1102, Benny’s entire six foot, 380-pound

body actually began to vibrate—not tremble, but vibrate! It was a riveting, dramatic thing to see, and it looked as if he’d been literally galvanized with electricity. As he tied on his straps he gave the bar a contemptuous shake, dipped, and slowly—majestically—hailed this monster load up in a firm, high lockout to the absolute delight of the clapping, whistling, rocking crowd. What a finish!

The Manhood Stones

We introduced this event last year as a way to determine just how heavy a round “stone” (made of concrete) could be lifted off the floor and put over a bar 48” high. We skipped all the light stones used in a traditional “Atlas Stones” event, and began last year with a stone that was heavier than any man had ever lifted—522 pounds, and custom-made by Steve Slater, said to have the largest stones in Ohio. That was last year, and to our great relief two men managed to pull that colossal implement from the floor and put it over the bar—for one rep.

This year, Slater boosted the weight of the stone to 525—for record purposes—but we could have moved it higher. This year three men put the 525-pounder over the bar (Savickas, Poundstone, and Koklyaev) and the winner—the Large Lithuanian—put it over twice more. Three reps with a completely round and smooth stone that weighed 525 pounds. Bear in mind that it takes a very strong man to do a 525 pound deadlift—on a bar, which is easy to grasp—whereas the only way to lift a heavy stone is to reach way down and place your hands as far under the stone as you can, squeeze it with your pecs and deltoids, lift it on top of your quadriceps, regrip, and stand up straight so you have a chance to raise it high enough so that you can put it over the bar. It looks impossible, but Zydrunas did it three times, and he later said it was the high point of the contest for him. For many others, too.

The Heavy Yoke

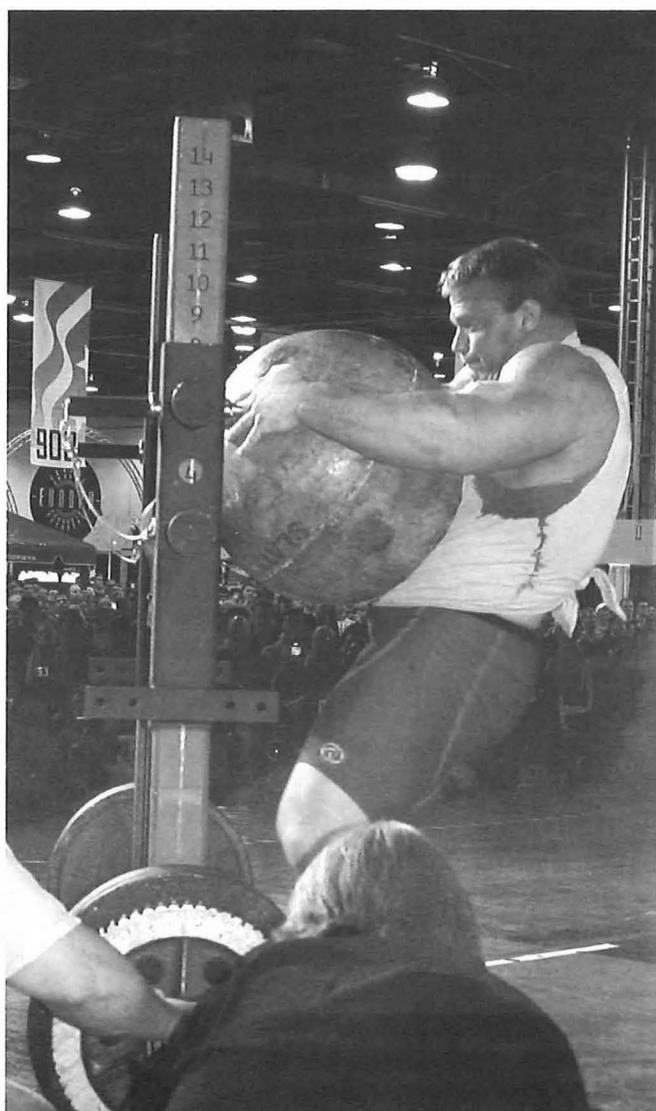
The yoke we use is truly stupendous, and we believe it’s the heaviest one used in a major competition. Made by Richard Sorin, the yoke is loaded so that it weighs 1116 pounds, and even the ten prodigies we invite find it challenging to lift the colossal load and then walk, shuffle, or stagger down the 35-foot course in under 30 seconds. Amazingly, however, each of the nine men who tried it managed to take it all the way to the finish line. (Virastyuk, unfortunately, had a pre-existing

injury and dropped out after two events.) The slowest man made it in 24.42 seconds and the fastest man, Brian Siders, edged Savickas by one-fifth of a second with a time of 9.32 seconds.

Apollon's Wheels

This is our signature event, and in every year the winner of the event has also been the winner of the overall contest—a fact which supports the legitimacy of this challenging, total-body test. This year, however, the overall winner—Zydrunas Savickas, of course—came in “only second” with the 366-pound Wheels, getting them to his shoulders seven times and over his head seven times whereas the winner, Siders, got them to his shoulders eight times even though he failed to put them overhead on the last rep. To watch these two physiological marvels is like it must have been 110 years ago when fans could watch Louis Cyr (the model for our trophy) and Apollon (the man responsible for the original set of wheels that bear his name). Both Savickas and Siders use either no leg drive or very little leg drive to shove the Wheels overhead, and to see them manhandle this awkward, 366-pound, thick-handled, non-revolving implement so effortlessly is one of the wonders of the strength world.

Of the nine men who finished the contest, the man who fared the worst got the Wheels to his shoulders twice and to arms' length once. The rest of the men made at least two full reps, with Magnusson doing four, Murumets doing five, and Koklyaev doing six (with each rep taken clean to the shoulders in only one movement!). For the first time ever, we placed this event at the end of the strength-sapping contest, which made the performances all the more impressive to the elite audience on hand at Veteran's Memorial Auditorium. Of special interest to the crowd was the introduction to big-time Strongman competition of Connecticut police officer Derek Poundstone, who appears ready to challenge the best men in the world, including even Savickas, the indomitable dreadnought. At 6'1" and 315 pounds, Poundstone was relatively small among these gathered Goliaths, but he is very thickly made and explosive and he was so far ahead of the third-place man going into the Wheels event that he was essentially out of reach. What made his performance all the more remarkable was that a week before the show he had suffered a muscle tear in one pectoral muscle so severe that part of his pec and his upper arm were badly discolored.



The American Derek Poundstone, a newcomer to the Arnold Strongman Classic, put this 525-pound world record stone over a 48" bar and finished second overall.

By all accounts, the 2008 Arnold Strongman Classic was the best contest to date. Afterward, the scorekeepers told me that 16 new records had either been matched or exceeded—itsself a new record. What's more, thanks primarily to MHP, the Classic's lead sponsor, we distributed a larger prize package than ever before. Not only that, but Jim Lorimer, the tireless promoter who runs the Arnold Sports Festival, reported that an all-time high of approximately 170,000 people attended the three-day, 20-ring circus. What's next? All the top men at the 2008 contest told me they intended to return next year, so if you like the Strong Side of Life, the Arnold Sports Festival in Columbus, Ohio will be the place for you in early March of 2009.