NEW AT THE STARK:

THE MAX FUREK/STEELE JUNGLE COLLECTION

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In March of 1978 Chester Yorton, the 1966 IFBB Mr. America and 1966 NABBA Amateur Mr. Universe, staged a Natural Mr. America Contest in Las Vegas under the rubric of the Natural Bodybuilders Association. It set a precedent. Such was the increasing popularity of drug-free bodybuilding over the next several years that Yorton’s concept gave rise to Tom Ciola’s Natural Bodybuilders of America in 1981 and numerous other spin-off organizations over the next decade, all with corresponding contests, newsletters, and magazines touting their particular approach to resolving the drug problem in competitive bodybuilding.

Although these initiatives were applauded by those physical culturists who wished to restore purity to the sport, they were largely ignored by the majority of promoters, competitors, and editors who realized either financial gain or personal fame from the steroid culture. Worse, the emergence of so many natural bodybuilding federations led to dissension and duplication of efforts that was counter-productive to their common cause. What was needed was an entity that would serve as an umbrella to unite the various conflicting and largely self-serving interests.

This was the object of Steele Jungle, a tabloid founded in 1992 by Pennsylvania bodybuilding promoter Max Furek who sought to publicize activities of the anti-drug movement and to promote natural physique and figure competitions. Born in Berwick, Pennsylvania, on 28 January 1947, Max had always been active in sports, first in wrestling and track and field at school, and then as a competitive runner, having reportedly completed 12 marathons with a best time of 3:13 in 1987. Despite his love of sports and fitness, Max had no personal bodybuilding experience when he decided to start the magazine. His interest stemmed, rather, from his education and profession. With an undergraduate degree in psychology from Aquinas College in Michigan and an M.A. from Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania, he became a counselor and educator for persons suffering from drug, alcohol, and other addictive disorders.

This background caused Max to develop a fascination with how bodybuilding competitors could so radically change their appearance with steroids. He soon noticed that virtually all the major muscle magazines, while often decrying their use, were featuring drug-enhanced physiques as positive role models to readers. Steroids, Max believed, were dangerous, illegal, and unethical, and he wanted to give greater publicity and credibility to the natural side of competitive bodybuilding. He particularly wanted to present a counterpoint to Dan Duchaine and his highly influential Underground Steroid Handbook. Thus his own publication, Steele Jungle, a play on words from the iron game, British rocker Tommy Steele, and the anabolic jungle that Furek perceived to be out there. Soon he developed a relationship with all the natural organizations and became an important component of the drug-free community.

Despite opposition from the National Physique Committee, Steele Jungle, in 52 issues from 1992 to 2005, carried news of drug-free competitions, features on natural athletes and promoters, exposes, editorials, and discussions on challenges confronting the sport. How drugs contributed to the demise of the iconic AAU Mr. America Contest in the 1990s is one of many important topics addressed by the publication. “I believe,” Furek told me in an interview, that “we raised awareness of these issues.” He also organized bodybuilding and fitness competitions in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and North Carolina and manned a Steele Jungle booth for ten years at the annual Arnold Sports Festival in Columbus, Ohio.

In 2013 Max officially donated his collection of materials related to the publication of The Steele Jungle and a full set of the magazine to the H.J. Lutcher Stark Center. Researchers who use this great gift will gain a fuller understanding not only of the forces responsible for the bigger physiques that emerged in the 1990s but the far less-publicized drug-free physique movement which emerged in opposition to it. The Furek/Steele Jungle Collection is an invaluable resource for those interested in the history of bodybuilding and we at the Stark Center are very grateful to Max for his generosity.