

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

GEORGE REDPATH; A LIFE IN THE BALANCE

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In the words of Curd Edmunds, the pull-up champion,¹ “George Redpath is a gold mine of information on health and fitness, as well as handbalancers and strongmen of the past. He lives a very modest life and in a quiet way, is very religious. Though he rarely talks about it, he enjoys helping people, especially the elderly. On his seventy-fifth birthday, for instance, he walked about twenty-four miles to pay a visit to the old Olympic lifter, Bob Mitchell, now in very poor health. Although he’s seventy-six, he still manages to help his neighbors with their repair problems and such things. He is well-read on nutrition and is generous in providing needed information on diet and supplement programs to his friends when they’re in need.”²

It happens so often that I don’t know why I’m still surprised when I discover the genuine, giving side to the lives of the men whom I’ve admired for their exploits chronicled in the strength magazines. About George Redpath, I had read since the earliest days of my interest in lifting and handbalancing; for me, his name had become synonymous with the legendary strength and acrobatic feats associated with the fabulous strip of the Pacific which has come to be better known by its descriptive designation, Muscle Beach, than by its official one, Santa Monica Beach.

I had always thought of George along with the remarkable assemblage of strongman-acrobats so familiar to Muscle Beach lore: Bert Goodrich, Russ Saunders, Les and Pudgy Stockton, Harold Zinkin, Glenn Sundby, Bruce Connor, Jim and Kay Starkey, Jack LaLanne, Jack Nelson, Jimmy Payne, Walt Marcyan, Terry Robinson, Babe Stansbury, Al Beck, John Ryan, and all the others: all that remarkable crew so defiant of gravity and its demands. I’d known and admired George, also, of course, for his excellent articles in *Iron Man* on healthful eating, nutrition, and supplementation, long before such articles had achieved their current vogue. He was one of the first and best in nutrition writing, and I know that many more, besides Curd, are in debt to him for what he taught all of us about the health-giving properties of food and food supplements.

George was born on a farm in Illinois on 18 April 1915, and moved at twelve, with his family to San Diego. In those years, football was his favorite sport, but his small stature meant that his high school football career was played-out in “Class B” ball (the version for boys of smaller size), in which he lettered, along with Amby Schindler, who went on to become an All-American at U.S.C. His interests soon turned to gymnastics, which became his first athletic love, one that was heightened in 1932 by the Los Angeles Olympics, which provided the youngster with his first real glimpse of high-level gymnastics. His first gymnastics teacher was Bob Leonard (later a U.C.L.A. professor) who, as a San Diego State student, held records in the discus, shot, and hammer. Despite his size (over 200 pounds),

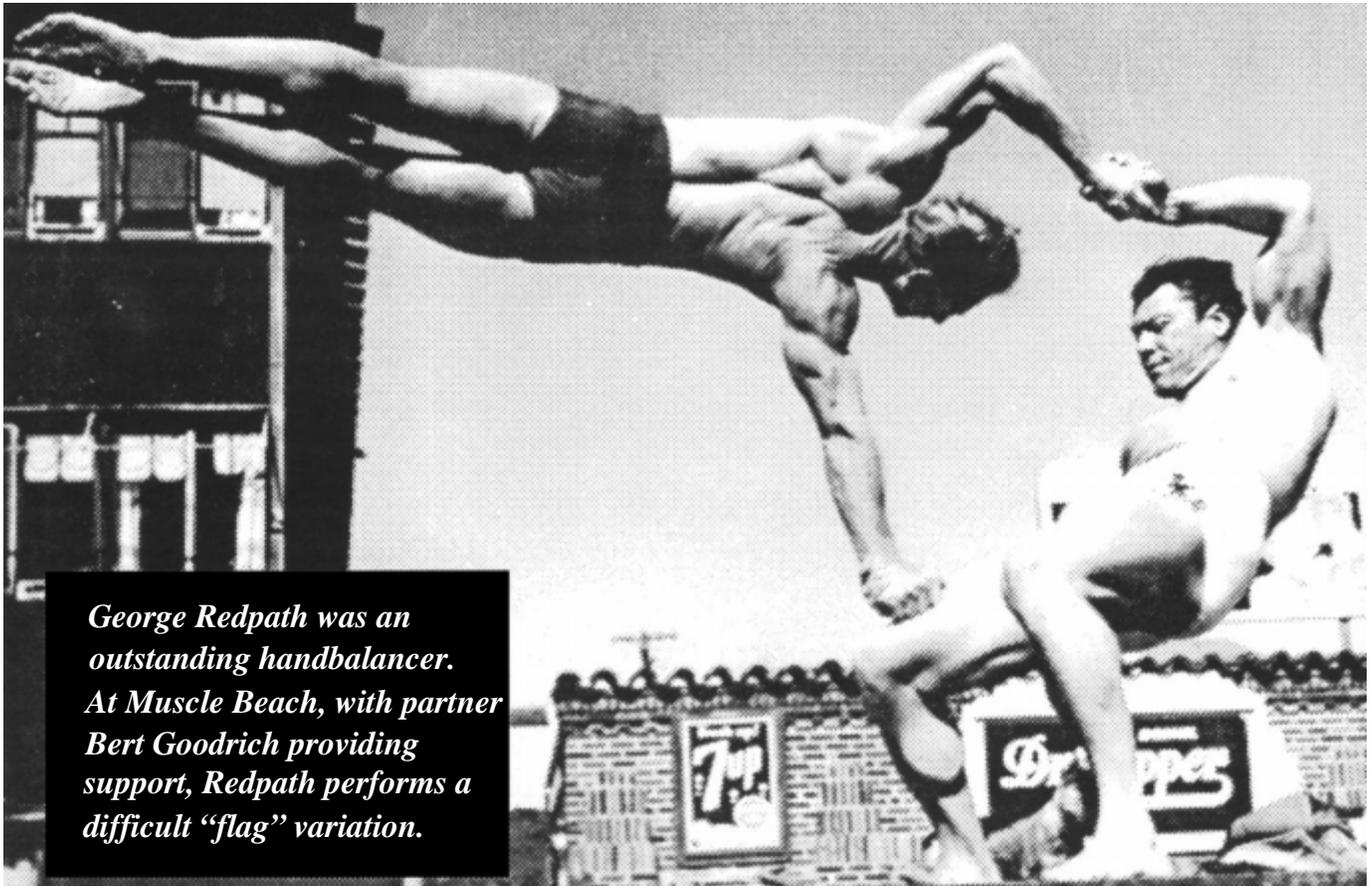
Leonard was an excellent tumbler and handbalancer, able to do a hollowback press to a handstand on his fingertips, having toured with acrobatic troupes. It was Leonard who taught George his first hand-to-hand work, including a “flag” to hand-to-hand and introduced him to the trampoline, a home-made piece upon which George’s oversized teacher was an expert.

“Back in 1939, ‘40, and ‘41, a group of acro-enthusiasts used to get together on Sundays in a grassy park overlooking the Ocean at La Jolla,” reminisces George. “There were often observers of these get-togethers, so we grew accustomed to them but one in particular was destined to play apart in my life: a gentleman in flannel slacks who often showed-up with a camera to record our tricks. On occasion, he’d request that we repeat a particular trick because he had missed it or wanted a different angle. On one occasion, when the guys were teasing me because I was due to be drafted, the gentleman called me aside and asked why I hadn’t thought of volunteering for the Navy. When I explained that Army enlistments were only 28 months, whereas Navy enlistments were four years, he assured me that in wartime, all service enlistments were ‘for the duration.’

“I agreed to meet him a few days later at the destroyer base, and when I arrived, I was shocked to discover that the man in flannel slacks was in reality a Commander in the Navy. Surprised, I followed him to his office, where he handed me a written test, which I hurriedly finished. He checked it, and then handed it to his office mate, also a Commander, who glanced over it, cheered, and said ‘O.K.’ With that, I was in the Navy, with no boot camp, and was, or had become, a third-class petty officer. I was very bewildered.”³

After the attack of Pearl Harbor, George was sent to Hawaii to clean up the battleship West Virginia, but after a few weeks, he “was called on to start a physical training facility. My duties were those of a master-at-arms, plus doing what I could with the limited training facilities. For instance, some machine shop buddies turned-out a bar and some barbell plates. We set-up a boxing gym, and I rigged-up a wall pulley and a chinning bar. Before long, we had lots of guys ‘pumping iron’ for the first time. A visit by ex-heavyweight champion Gene Tunney was a highlight for us, and he succeeded in getting some speed bags and gloves sent to us.”

In 1942, moving in the direction of their later fame, George and his partners formed a handbalancing troupe under the auspices of the U.S.C., playing Army and Navy installations, air bases, and jungle camps. (These, it must be remembered, were the salad days of American handbalancing, a time when some of the finest strength athletes in the land shaped the sport and took it to its heights. George and the troupe brought to our fighting men in the South Pacific the caliber of handbalancing that was bringing top-dollar in theaters and clubs throughout America.)



George Redpath was an outstanding handbalancer. At Muscle Beach, with partner Bert Goodrich providing support, Redpath performs a difficult “flag” variation.

During this time, George worked with men who would leave their mark upon post-war handbalancing, such men as Jack Brick, a well-known professional; Loren Brown, a Hollywood stunt man; and Al Motter, a marvelous balancer. (When I was transferred back to the mainland,” George remembers, “Joe Schabacker, a Marine, took my place in the act with Al Motter, and today Joe is the President of the U.S. Sports Acrobatics Federation, the branch of gymnastics that is reviving interest in handbalancing, which should be accepted, in time, as an Olympic sport”) Al Motter, along with another of his partners, Dwight Davis, had been featured on a *Strength & Health* cover.”⁴

In 1944, George was ordered to Treasure Island for reassignment. There, of course, he met Sam and Joe Loprinzi,⁵ who were in charge of the base gym, that, as a result of their “gym-know-how,” was very sophisticated and well-equipped by the standards of that time. George’s final assignment was to San Diego, and while stationed there, he met and trained with Bert Goodrich, who was a Chief Athletic Specialist at North Island. Together, they fashioned a hand-to-hand act which they “took out” professionally. When Bert was discharged from the Navy, having refused a knee operation, he moved to the Los Angeles area and found a location for a bodybuilding gym. Later, after his discharge, George followed his partner, and the two of them, along with Karris Keirn (who later helped Walt Marcyan set-up his famous gym), built the famed “Gym to the Stars” on Hollywood Boulevard; the Goodrich Gym and Health Club. This was, in the words of the August, 1989, *Stuntman’s Hall of Fame Newsletter*, the first “glamour gym, with leatherette walls and chrome equipment. Most of the stars showed up to pump their bodies into

shape, including Fess Parker (Davy Crockett), Steve Reeves, Bob Mathias (decathlon champion), and James Arness (Gunsmoke).”⁶ In that financially precarious time in their lives, George and Bert played club dates with their hand-to-hand act in order to underwrite the setting-up of their new gym.

In 1949, along with his former wife, Peggy, George opened his own gym: “We had a co-ed gym which was a very rare thing at that time. Peggy was an admirer of Pudgy Stockton and trained with weights at a time when resistance training was rare for women. The gym was an instant success: people loved the idea of coed training. At that time, I invented a leg extension and curl apparatus. As they say, ‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’ Since I didn’t have enough time to provide hand resistance for the leg curls that I always included in the workouts that I set-up, I came up with the idea of this device. I also made the first seated calf machine at that time. Needless to say, it was crude by today’s standards, but it worked.”⁷

“I later leased my gym to John Bazacas, who now runs one of the finest gyms anywhere down in Newport Beach. When John decided to move South, he sold the gym to Bill Pearl. In the meantime, I had a form-fitting t-shirt on the market and worked at that. I sold the business in 1958. My last gym was in Spring Valley, just east of San Diego. I eventually sold it to Gene Fisher, who still has it and builds some of the finest exercise equipment and uses nutrition to help people who have sustained injuries or are experiencing ill-health.” George adds that he has had “some very good results,” a too-modest claim, according to Curd Edmunds and many others.

George’s current training regimen includes biking, walking, running, and Heavy-hands training, along with conventional

weight work including dips with weight, floor presses, incline and flat bench pressing, and chinning with weight, supplemented with neck and cable work and gripper work. This formidable program, along with his gardening and concern for nutrition keeps him in excellent condition. He recommends natural foods, including some meat, eggs, fish, vegetables, whole grains, and modest amounts of fruit, seeds, and nuts from the shell.

"I've watched the diet fads come and go, but I'm convinced that raw food is essential to health and that overeating is our number one health problem. For those with food allergies, I believe that the four-day rotation diet is the answer: this gives the body time to clear any allergic reactions before it is stressed again, with the offending food." A life member of the National Health Federation, George is very much concerned with the dangers to our "health freedoms" and to our right to choose and buy health foods and supplements, posed by the intervention of, and totalitarian powers possessed by, the government and governmental bodies, such as the F.D.A.⁸

The reminiscence of a man who knows what he's talking about is always instructive to eavesdrop on: the "good talk" that we in the Game love—the numbers, the anecdotes, the remembered confrontations, the ventured opinions about the best, the most memorable. When George Redpath talks about the denizens of Muscle Beach, we listen: "When it comes to Muscle Beach, Glenn Sundby is a better historian than I. Of course, he and the late Wayne Long were A-1 among handbalancers (comprising the great Wayne-Marlin Trio, an acrobatic-adagio act in which Sundby took the name Marlin.) Another fine team was 'The Titans' (Al Beck, top; John Ryan, understander). Renauld and Rudy made it to the Beach at times, but I failed to see them there. Harold Zinkin and Bruce Connor did great work Harold also worked with Jim Starkey, and they are seen on one of the Muscle Beach calendars, doing a high one-to-one balance. Jim's wife, Kay, was also a fine balancer. Harold and Walt Marcyan were among the best all-round athletes on the Beach.

"The best all-round guy, in my view, was Russ Saunders, who was tops in so many skills. He was a stunt man in Hollywood, and he could do it all: diving, balancing, tumbling, adagio; you name it. I saw him kick to a one-hand stand on pedestals, which is very difficult. Jack LaLanne was a strong balancer, he did a nice routine on pedestals, along with Jim Drinkward, a good gymnast despite his height."

Bert Goodrich, the first A.A.U. Mr. America, was a marvel as a runner, jumper, ice skater, tumbler, trapeze performer, over-all gymnast, and handbalancer, not even to mention his accomplishments as a boxer and stunt man, good enough in the latter category to be voted into the Stuntman's Hall of Fame. As a handbalancer, according to David Willoughby, he worked with various partners, but "principally with George Redpath (163 lbs.)." [Ed. Note: 150 pounds, in George's correction of Willoughby.] The performances in hand-to-hand balancing that Goodrich gave with Redpath during the 1940s proved both men to be masters of the art. Especially noteworthy were their single hand-to-hands. In one variation of these, Goodrich would support Redpath on one hand "while sitting in a chair and smiling!"⁹ "When I worked with Bert," George continues, "the 'flag' was our best feat. Many teams do this trick, of course, but we were able to 'repeat': to lower down into a 'flag' again and then back up. At first, even Bert didn't think it possible when I suggested it, but

with work and a variation in grip, it all worked out. I remember, at the time of the Mr. U.S.A. show, we borrowed a table from 'The Titans' and did our routine on it. That presented a problem, but we worked it out.

"Not to be forgotten, of course, were Les and Pudgy Stockton, and the interesting thing is that either one could act as the top person. Jimmy Payne was one of the strongest balancers, and some years ago, he went on to become, as I recall, the oldest man to win a national arm wrestling title. When I think back to those days, I remember Babe Stansbury and Terry Robinson, not as balancers, but as memorable people along the Beach. Babe was a super strong gym owner, who had been stricken with polio. He'd been an excellent football player, one who would have been a big-time star. Terry was a good physique-man, Mr. New York, and a Golden Gloves champion. He was the trainer and confidant of Mario Lanza, the great tenor, of course. I remember Mario training in our gym before he made it big in the movies.

The strange thing is that, although handbalancing reached a very high level of skill in those days, coaching was almost non-existent. We learned by trial and error and from each other. I was inspired, and many others too, by the '32 Olympics. In matters of our sport, generally, I've been inspired by John Grimek, Jack LaLanne, Bert Goodrich, and some others, including Earle Liederman, who trained in our Hollywood gym and wrote about Bert and, now and then, about me. My first article was written for Earle. Later, I wrote many for *Iron Man*, mostly on nutrition, which received far less attention in those days than today."¹⁰

Though George calls himself "one of the little guys," his modesty shouldn't be allowed to blur the tremendous impact that he has had upon so many in our Game, from his days in the Pacific, during World War II, until now. Curd Edmunds has caught the flavor of the man and his contribution to those who have come into contact with him: "George is a modest man who lives a most modest life. He can't do enough to help his friends and neighbors, from helping them repair their houses to helping them with their health problems. In addition to his knowledge about the Iron Game and about balancing and its history, he's an expert on nutrition. In fact, his knowledge of supplements may have saved my life."¹¹

Of "little guys" such as George Redpath — our Game needs many more.

Notes

¹Al Thomas, "John Curd Edmunds: Master of the Pull-Up," *Iron Game History* 1(February 1990): 7-9.

²Curd Edmunds to Al Thomas, 21 October 1991. Author's Collection.

³George Redpath to Al Thomas, 15 October 1991 and n.d. Author's Collection.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Al Thomas, "Sam Loprinzi," *Iron Game History* 1(August 1991): 8-10.

⁶Dave Tuttle, "Bert Goodrich—The First Mr. America," *Stuntman's Hall of Fame Newsletter* (August 1989): 1.

⁷Redpath to Thomas, 15 October 1991 and n.d.

⁸Ibid.

⁹David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Company, 1970), 271.

¹⁰George Redpath to Al Thomas, 30 October 1991. Author's Collection.

¹¹Curd Edmunds to Al Thomas, 6 October 1991. Author's Collection.