

SIG KLEIN'S PHYSICAL CULTURE STUDIO, AS IT APPEARED IN APPROXIMATELY 1960. NO OTHER GYM IN AMERICA COULD BOAST SUCH A DISTINGUISHED HISTORY.
--TODD-McLEAN COLLECTION

A Tale of Two Trainers— John Fritshe and Sig Klein

Jim Murray

When my copies of *Iron Game History* arrive they rekindle memories and inspire me to write about the old-timers I knew. Al Thomas writes of “recreating that world so fondly recalled by the old-timers” and Leo Rosa writes about remembering “when we were forever young, yesterday.” It’s a bittersweet task to sit at the keyboard and remember those days, especially when those remembered are no longer with us.

Two of my favorites among the departed old-timers were gym owners—John Fritshe, who instructed bodybuilders at his gym on Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia, and Siegmund Klein who trained both bodybuilders and celebrities in his famous gym at 717 Seventh Avenue in New York City. Mr. America winners trained at both instructors’ gyms: Frank Leight at Klein’s, for example, and Jules Bacon, George Eiferman and John Farbomik at Fritshe’s.

I first met John Fritshe when I was only fifteen, at a large swimming pool and recreation center called Somerton Springs, near Philadelphia. John and several members of his gym—two I remember were Jack and Ed Ritter—gave an informal demonstration of barbell exercises, especially squats, which John insisted all

his pupils do—all the way down and usually for twenty repetitions. John himself was a little guy—he’d been a national weightlifting champion in the 112-pound class in 1936—but he was a stickler for correct form and really cracked the whip. His word was law to the big guys who trained under his guidance.

John and his gang were at Somerton Springs several times; once when Bob Hoffman, Tony Terlazzo, and a couple others of the York team were there to give an exhibition. On that occasion, back in 1941, Tony didn’t want to try a clean and jerk because they were lifting on grass and he was afraid he might slip. Bob asked Frank Orant, the powerful Philadelphia light-heavyweight, if he would show the audience a three hundred pound clean and jerk. Frank—who was one of the first, and lightest at the time, to jerk four hundred pounds—agreed to try. As he prepared for the lift—which he made, despite the uncertain footing—Jim Lorimer and I heard him mutter under his breath, “Sure, it’s okay if I slip.”

What I remember especially about John Fritshe was how friendly and helpful he was to young, novice weight trainers. On several occasions a few of us would drive the thirty miles to Philadel-

phia and visit his gym. He always permitted us to try the weights, gave us pointers on correct exercise form, and was invariably friendly and hospitable. During one visit, Bob Neeld, a halfback who was the fastest man in the backfield of our high school team, hung back while the rest of us tried a few lifts. "Go ahead," John urged Bob, "Give it a try." Bob couldn't because he'd incurred a mild hernia playing football. So John showed us an exercise he said would correct the hernia; he had Bob do leg raises in a declined position on a sit-up board. When we returned home Bob did decline leg raises, using my mother's ironing board, for several days and, sure enough, the hernia disappeared and Bob played a major role in our 9-1 senior football season.

On that same occasion, Ed Ritter was grinding out what seemed to be an endless set of squats with a respectable poundage on the bar (to us teenagers it was a massive poundage). Noticing that John was working with another pupil across the room, Ed put the barbell back on the squat rack and said, "Don't tell John. I only did fifteen." We thought we were really part of the "in crowd" to be asked to keep his secret.

The first time I visited Sig Klein's gym I was still in my teens and I was awestruck at the decor. One wall had a rack of barbells with shiny chrome handles and glistening black globes, all standing neatly on end and looking exactly alike. The only way you could tell what one of the barbells weighed was by its location on the rack. Even more intriguing were the steins displayed around the room on a narrow shelf above the weights and other equipment. All Sig's steins had a strongman theme, one even being closed by a small kettlebell instead of the usual hinged lid. I wonder where all those barbells and steins are today.

Sig's place was not large and there were a number of paying customers using the equipment. Sig, ever an efficient businessman, allowed us to look around for a while, then came over and shook our hands, thanked us for dropping in, and suggested we come back another time.

Obviously the visit was over, so we made our way back down the stairs and out onto Seventh Avenue—a much

nicer place than it is today!

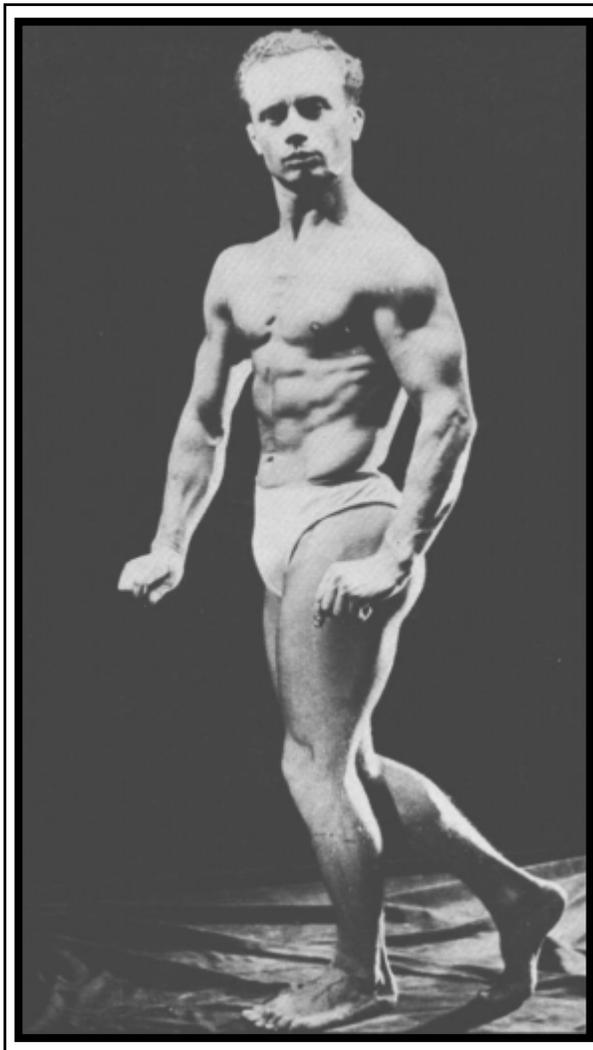
Later, when I was editing *Strength & Health*, I often dropped in to see Sig and was allowed to stay as long as I liked. On one of those visits, he called me over to meet one of his members, who was exercising while smoking a cigar! (Secondhand smoke was not a concern in those days.) "You should meet this fellow," Sig said, "you have almost the same name." It was Jan Murray, then a popular comedian of stage, screen, and television.

Sig had a pair of hundred-pound dumbbells that were unmatched and difficult to clean. There was a story that Josef Manger, the 1936 Olympic heavyweight champion, had been unable to clean them (though he easily pressed them several times when they were handed to him at the shoulders). I was only a third-rate weightlifter, but I could clean a pair of overweight hundreds we had at the old York gym and I wanted to try Sig's dumbbells. I'm sure he would have preferred that I just look at them, but he reluctantly allowed me to try.

The dumbbells were definitely mismatched. One was a beautiful hundred-pounder with a short bar connecting the globes. It had a standard diameter handle. The other was longer, with smaller globes and a much thicker handle. I had accidentally severed tendons on the third and fourth fingers of my right hand some years earlier so I decided to try the thicker-handled bell with my left. The weights came up easily enough, but when I tried to turn them over, the long, thick-handled one wobbled off to the left. Sig had anticipated this and was on the spot to catch it, preserving his floor. I tried again. Same result..

Sig asked, "Aren't you right-handed?" I said I was and he suggested I try the awkward dumbbell with my right hand. I did, and it worked. I had cleaned the dumbbells that Manger couldn't clean! A fond recollection from those wonderful days "when we were forever young, yesterday."

Are there any gym owners like John Fritsche and Sig Klein today, or do they all want to sign you up to "lifetime memberships" at special rates?



JOHN FRITSCHÉ