In general, when a sport figure reaches the highest international standard, he transcends his or her home country’s borders and becomes an international star. Leipzig weightlifter Hermann Goerner (1891-1956) appears to be an anomaly where his own country is concerned. An examination of the three main books in English about weightlifting history, *The Super Athletes* by David Willoughby (1970); *The Iron Game* by David Webster (1976); and *Anvils, Horseshoes and Cannons* (1978) by Leo Gaudreau—plus current internet resources—clearly demonstrates that English-speaking fans and experts have viewed Goerner as a true phenomenon. Conversely, according to the available German literature, Goerner played a far smaller role in the sport. Even Leipzig, his home town, seems uninterested in keeping his memory intact. Although two German cyber-sites devoted to strength sports do mention Goerner, they lack the unbridled enthusiasm of their English counterparts. How was/is it possible for them—and others—to have neglected him to such a degree? Each of the English-language reference books credits Goerner with a stellar career comparable in magnitude to that of such mainstream German athletes as Erich Rademacher (swimming), Max Schmeling (boxing), or Rudolf Harbig (athletics) and, more recently, Boris Becker and Steffi Graf (tennis) and Michael Schumacher (auto racing). However, these German sport stars are recognized in Germany to a much greater extent than is Goerner, even when one considers that weightlifting is a relatively minor sport. Initially, one might think that Goerner’s historical greatness has been buried by his homeland as a result of his membership in the Socialist-oriented Workers’ organization (he was a member from 1909 to 1913 and again from 1919 to 1920) or because he turned professional in 1921. While both his some-time Socialism and professionalism may have been factors, there is more to the tale.

Goerner was born in Haenichen near Leipzig on 13 April 1891. In 1909 he joined the Socialist Worker club “Atlas” and then served in World War I where he lost an eye when he was hit by more than 200 pieces of metal shrapnel. Surgery removed most of the shrapnel from his body, but not all. During World War II, Goerner was interred in a concentration camp because of his membership in the Workers’ organization. Subsequently, he was welcomed as a refugee in Klein Heidorn, now part of Wunstorf, Lower Saxony, where he died on 29 June 1956. His tombstone is engraved with the words, “Der Stärkste Mann der Welt (The Strongest Man in the World).”

Apparently, this claim either escaped the attention of—or was not accepted by—his countrymen. As...
previously indicated, Goerner is ranked considerably lower according to a review of German journals, reference books, encyclopedias, and current websites than he is in similar English-language references. His record in national and international contests, however, is not in dispute. He was runner-up in the 1911 European Championships in Leipzig; he was third in the 1913 National Championships in Kassel; he placed fourth in the 1913 World Championships in Breslau, and he was runner-up in the 1919 National Championships in Munich.6 But whereas English-language literature credits him with several world records and astounding feats, the German sources reflect only a world record in the Two Hands Snatch with 120 kilos [264 pounds] and a not-unanimously-credited world record in the Two Hands Clean and Jerk with 157 kilos [345 pounds], both made in 1920.7 What could account for this discrepancy between the English and German historical memories of Hermann Goerner?

The Inquiry

As indicated above, David Willoughby, David Webster, and Leo Gaudreau each wrote an authoritative reference work providing a comprehensive historical account of the strength sports. However, they based their information about Goerner primarily on his official biography, Goerner the Mighty (1951), written by his close friend, the respected and authoritative trainer, Edgar Mueller (1898-1979).8 Although this biographical work has never been translated into German, Mueller did introduce Goerner’s athletic career in four articles in the German magazine Athletik, the oldest journal devoted to strength sports, having been founded in 1892. The articles appeared in 1951, the same year as the book.9 Perhaps the publication of a concise historical book about the strength sports by the long-time German official Ernst August Kampmann in 1950 moved Mueller to publish his strong response in Athletik.10 Kampmann claimed that another Leipzig native, Arthur Hennig (1878-1921), more commonly known by his stage name, Arthur Saxon, was “the strongest man of all times.”11 In his Athletik articles, Mueller paid tribute to Saxon, but pointed out that Goerner equalled or exceeded Saxon’s best lifts and therefore deserved a reputation as the stronger man.12

However, even though Goerner (or Mueller on Goerner’s behalf) had claimed all—or almost all (see below)—of the most important records mentioned in Goerner The Mighty from the time of an introductory article that appeared in Health and Strength in 1926, the German literature ignored these claims.13 The claims were kept alive in the English-speaking countries, however, by Health and Strength and related English-language journals such as Iron Man, Muscle Power, and Strength & Health until Mueller provided a definitive account of Goerner’s career in Iron Man magazine


Before World War II, Edgar Mueller lived in Leipzig, where he had a fur-trading business and also ran what John Dawe describes as “one of the best known and most fully-equipped gymnasiums in Germany,” a portion of which is pictured here. His home and fur-trading company were destroyed during the air raids of World War II, along with most of his collection of weight lifting books, magazines and other memorabilia. After the War, Mueller stayed in Leipzig, trying to keep his gym alive until 1947, when he moved to Braunschweig, West Germany to escape living under a repressive system.
(1949) and then, two years later, in *Goerner the Mighty*. Approximately two years ago, two of this article’s authors, Joe Roark and Mark Kodya, stimulated a debate over the reliability of Goerner’s reputed performances in the e-Forum, *Iron History*.15

**Goerner in *Goerner the Mighty***

*Goerner The Mighty* does not leave its readers room for alternative opinions: if the book is true, then Goerner was arguably the greatest strongman of the first half of the twentieth century. But the book, in its introduction, asked its readers implicitly to accept it as truth although it is an unreferenced work. [Ed. Note: In the book’s forward, written by Irving Clark, a British Amateur Weightlifter’s Association (BAWLA) referee. Clark argues that the phrase, “If Edgar says it is so, it is so,” should be applied to Mueller, whose book was based on a small, post-war index of records; many conversations with Goerner; and Mueller’s “amazing memory.”] Mueller apparently lost his archives in a fire in 1943 and had reconstructed most of the facts about Goerner using what John Dawe, editor of *Health and Strength*, called Mueller’s extraordinary memory.17 However, Dawe claimed in later years to have helped Mueller and to have even written portions of *Goerner the Mighty*.18 In a foreword to the book, Irving Clark stated that Mueller showed him, several times, newspaper and magazine clippings in support of Goerner’s lifts.19 In *Goerner the Mighty*, however, only a few facts (such as the ones in the last chapter of *Goerner the Mighty*) are corroborated through excerpts from other sources, some of which can no longer be found in European libraries and archives, making verification impossible.20

Let us now analyze Goerner’s best performances, as chronicled in *Goerner the Mighty*: 177 kilograms [391 pounds] in the Two Hands Clean and Jerk, on 11 July 1920 in Dresden, under the eyes of the famous professor Ferdinand Hüppe (1852-1938), a weight which was not officially exceeded until after World War II; 360 kilograms [793 pounds] in the Two Hands Deadlift, in Leipzig on 29 October 1920; and 330 kilograms [727 pounds] in the One Hand Deadlift on 8 October 1920.21

Also, according to *Goerner the Mighty*—and Willoughby, Webster, and Gaudreau—Goerner snatched 125 kilograms [275 pounds] and jerked 160 kilograms [352 pounds] in a victory against Karl Möerke in a one-on-one duel on 4 April 1920 at the Restaurant Hall of Leipzig’s Zoological Garden.22 In that case, the world amateur record in the Two Hands Snatch would have been 125 kilograms [275 pounds], not the 120 [264 pounds] Goerner is credited with in the German sources.

Karl Möerke (1889-1945) was a fierce opponent who used the continental style in shouldering a barbell or a dumbbell for the press or the jerk. The continental style, so called by Britons in reference to the German and Austrian lifters of the early twentieth century, consisted in taking the bar from the floor and bringing it up to the shoulders after having rested it one or more times on the body. This movement was rooted in gymnastic exercises and was generally executed with two classic stops, at the waist and at the shoulders, but some lifters, especially the Austrians, employed multiple rests, so that they were virtually rolling the bar up the body. The “clean” style, done in one movement from the floor up to the chest, is now the accepted international standard; it was initially advocated primarily by the French and Italians.23 When France re-organised the international governing body for weightlifting in 1920 they imposed this “clean” style as the only one permissible internationally.

Before World War I, German and Austrian lifters stuck to the continental style, but the confrontation with France led some champions of the new generation, among them Goerner, to adopt the “clean” style. The continental style consistently allowed higher poundages, of course, especially in the jerk. For example, the world record before 1914 belonged to the Austrian lifter Karl Swoboda (1882-1933), who lifted 185.5 kilograms [408 pounds] in this manner. In comparison, the German Hermann Gassler (1889-1970) held the world record in the jerk with 157.5 kilograms [347 pounds], although the French and (after 1922) the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) recognized only his 151 kilogram [332 pounds] performance done in France on 28 February 1912 because only the latter lift was taken to the shoulders in one movement.25 In sharp contrast to the well-documented information Mueller imparts as to the records of Goerner’s opponents and contemporaries, the data regarding Gassler’s records are lacking. As we will see later, the records of the two lifters, Gassler and Goerner, often inter-relate.

As a professional, Goerner toured South Africa five times from 1922 to 1937. On 4 September 1926, in Kalk Bay near Cape Town, Goerner supposedly lifted 135 kilograms [297 pounds] in the Two Hands Snatch. This was some ten years before the same official record, among amateurs, was made by the Briton Ron Walker...
(1907-1948). Another relevant Goerner/Mueller claim is the 120 kilograms [264 pounds] One Hand Clean and Jerk Goerner supposedly performed in Leipzig on 9 November 1919. The IWF ceased to recognize official records for this lift in 1950, at which time the world record was 117.5 kilograms [259 pounds], so Goerner would have remained unapproached in more than 30 years had the IWF recognized his 264 pound lift. Goerner the Mighty also contains numerous other accounts of claims of other astounding performances concerning “odd lifts” mainly performed in the period 1931-1934 while he was mostly in Leipzig. For example, Goerner was accustomed to lifting the bar with unusual grips and at unusual points of the bar.

The Reliability of Goerner the Mighty

In the IronHistory e-Forum, Mark Kodya, one of the authors of this article, advanced doubts concerning some of Goerner’s performances, the reliability of some photographs, the absence of contemporary reports about Goerner’s duel against Möerke and, finally, the difficulties inherent in Mueller’s statement that, due to the loss by fire of his archive in 1943, he had to reconstruct Goerner’s whole career based on his memory. [Ed. Note: The IronHistory e-forum was begun by Joe Roark in 2003, and it is dedicated to the study of the history of the “iron sports.” Anyone who shares this interest should investigate the forum as it’s a way to interact with people of like mind and to contribute to the sharing of new information such as that found in this article.] Kodya referred also to the doubts expressed in 1952 by Kurt Hennig (1881-1952), alias Kurt Saxon, brother of Arthur and a member of the Saxon Trio, who recalled in his account of claims of other astounding performances concerning “odd lifts” mainly performed in the period 1931-1934 while he was mostly in Leipzig. For example, Goerner was accustomed to lifting the bar with unusual grips and at unusual points of the bar.

This inquiry has primarily sought to identify and verify data regarding all lifts claimed for Goerner during the periods 1911-1914 and 1919-1920, which encompasses Goerner’s entire amateur career. At the outset, the study checked possible differences between Goerner the Mighty and the two other biographical treatments Mueller wrote—the one from Iron Man in 1949 and the four articles in Athletik in 1951, in which Mueller, in his native language, presented Goerner to German readers. Three curious and controversial points emerged.

First, the record clean and jerk of 177 kilograms [391 pounds], which is described in Goerner the Mighty without mention of the status of Goerner’s amateur standing, was labelled by Mueller in Athletik as a “professional” lift. Mueller’s article in Athletik verifies that it was a “professional” feat, as he states that Goerner earned a remarkable sum for that lift—a lift that as of 1951 was still a German professional record and still in excess of the amateur world record.

Secondly, Goerner the Mighty described another sensational performance in Leipzig on 18 August 1933 in which Goerner deadlifted a bar with a seat on either end (in which two men sat) for the incredible total weight of 376.5 kilograms (830 pounds). In Iron Man Mueller disclosed the identity of the sources of the live weight—none other than Edgar Mueller himself and Erich Hennig. In his Athletik article Mueller repeated the information, but provided only the surname Hennig. Besides Arthur and the aforementioned Kurt, Hermann Hennig (1884-1958) was the third member of the Saxon Trio. Probably, Erich Hennig was simply a homonymous sportsman, but the imprecision remains disquieting: was “Erich” actually one of the celebrated Hennigs? Was he a relation? In any case, why did Goerner the Mighty not provide more details? Should Dawe have intervened here to avoid any questions?

Third, in Athletik Mueller explained that Goerner’s club “Atlas” belonged to the Arbeiter Athletenbund Deutschlands (Worker’s Athletic Union of Germany) from 6 April 1919 to 31 March 1920, which was not recognized by the Deutsche Athletik Verband (German Athletic Federation, similar to the American AAU.). Because of this, in order for Goerner to take part in the German Championships on 19-20 August 1919 in Munich, he was obliged to compete for the Arbeiter Turnverein Leipzig von 1845 (Leipzig Workers’ Gymnastic team). Moreover, Mueller affirmed that the Deutsche Athletik Verband did not recognize Goerner’s
world record of 120 kilograms (264 pounds) in the One Hand Clean and Jerk, supposedly done on 9 November 1919 because, apparently, his connection with Arbeiter Turnverein Leipzig von 1845 was not sufficient to warrant official recognition for the lift. This lack of recognition was omitted in Goerner the Mighty. The archives of Atlas are unfortunately lacunose—filled with holes—but in their records Goerner’s best in the One Hand Clean and Jerk was 102 kilograms [224 pounds], done at the end of 1912. The documents concerning Arbeiter Turnverein Leipzig von 1845 and those stored in the Sport Museum of Leipzig do not even mention Goerner.

Two Facts from 1913

Before the outbreak of World War I, the apparent good relationship between Arbeiter Athletenbund Deutschlands and Deutsche Athletik Verband allowed Goerner to compete wherever he liked. According to the Kraftsport Illustrierte Jahrbuch (1908), the club “Atlas” belonged to Mitteldeutscher Athletik Verband, a federation not associated with the Deutsche Athletik Verband. As a result of the difficulty of resuming sports in Germany after World War I and the diffusion and absence of related documentation, we have a clearer picture of Goerner’s career before 1914 than in the years 1919-1920. A proper journal for Arbeiter Athletenbund Deutschlands re-started in late 1920, however, and another important Workers’ journal, Vorturner, was first published in 1921. Athletik and the famous Viennese journal Allgemeine Sport Zeitung, the most reputable and widely circulated German-language sport periodical, both call into serious question two sensational feats claimed for Goerner as a footnote to two events he lost.

On 27 July 1913, according to Goerner the Mighty, Goerner shouldered, in two moves (in continental style)—but without lifting the bar overhead—200 kilograms [440 pounds]. The venue and date given coincide with that of the World Championship in Breslau, where Goerner placed fourth and cleaned and jerked in competition 135 kilograms [297 pounds]. It would seem to be a given that, barring injury, someone able to continental 200 kilograms [440 pounds] would be able to exceed 135 kilograms [297 pounds] on the same day in the clean and jerk. Equally suspicious is the feat attributed by Goerner the Mighty to Goerner during the German championship in Kassel on 21 September 1913. Goerner the Mighty claimed that Goerner was able, on that date, to clean 130 kilograms [286 pounds] with one hand and then lift the bar overhead, failing to get credit for the lift only because he was unable to “fix” it at arm’s length for the required five seconds. According to the official, published report of that competition, Goerner’s best one hand clean and jerk was 92.5 kilograms [203 pounds], which both Rondi and Trappen exceeded with 97.5 kilograms [214 pounds]. The report stated that Goerner cleaned 120 kilograms [264 pounds], but apparently he did not clean 130 kilograms [286 pounds], obviously a necessary step for almost fixing the bar overhead. [Editors’ Note: What’s more, Goerner’s official
best in the Two Hands Clean and Jerk in September is only five kilos (11 pounds) more than the 130 kilo (286 pound) One Hand Clean and Jerk Mueller claims Goerner lost less than two months later only because he was unable to hold it overhead for the entire five seconds required.

A leitmotiv of Goerner the Mighty is that Goerner, Die Stärkste Mann aller Zeiten—"the Strongest Man of All Time"—lost the major national and international competitions in 1911-1914 and 1919-1920 only because he was inadequately prepared for these specific events. This recurring theme is seen to an extreme extent in the cases of the Breslau and Kassel contests, where he was said by Mueller to have been inadequately prepared during the actual competition. Even so, he was apparently still able to astonish Mueller on the very same day but in some sort of unofficial or impromptu demonstration.

The Duel Of 4 April 1920

Reading the pages of Goerner the Mighty, one gets the impression that "the duel" between Goerner and Moerke followed the victory of Karl Mörke in the 1920 World Championship in Vienna. However, this mistake was the least of the errors in Goerner the Mighty. For example, Vienna's event was held in September, whereas Goerner the Mighty placed the duel in April. In any case, even though Moerke had won each of their previous three encounters, in this April Goerner-Mörke duel, Goerner avenged these previous losses with the following results: Right Hand Snatch—90 versus 75 kilograms [198 vs. 165 pounds]; Right Hand Jerk—112.5 with clean style, against "continentaled" 100 kilograms [248 vs. 220 pounds]; Two Hands Press—110 against 120 kilograms [242 vs. 264 pounds], but the press was always Goerner’s weakest lift and Moerke’s strongest; Two Hands Snatch—125 (apparently a world record), against 110 kilograms [275 vs. 242 pounds]; and Two Hands Jerk—with cleaning style 160 against "continentaled" 155 kilograms [352 vs. 341 pounds]. In an optional exercise, Goerner chose the Two Hands Deadlift, performing 300 kilograms [661 pounds], while Mörke opted for the Squat with 240 kilograms [529 pounds].

It appears from the account in Goerner the Mighty that Goerner had secured a crushing triumph over the recognized and official world champion, beating him in four of five events as well as in the extra event. Research, however, soon revealed that there is a significant problem with this scenario. In response to a query, Leipzig’s Zoological Garden wrote in an e-mail that in its archive there was no trace of that contest. Furthermore, a book dated 1928 celebrating the Zoo’s anniversary reported some sporting events, but not the famous Goerner-Moerke duel.

It would seem that had the contest been held, and the World records achieved, some mention of the event would have been unavoidable. The journal Der Leipziger indicated that Professor Carl Diem lectured at the Zoological Gardens on the sport around the same time period, but makes no mention of the Goerner vs. Mörke match. The official journal of the German federation, Athletik, whose authorization was needed for an amateur one-to-one contest (in weightlifting, an event that smacked of professionalism) also failed to report anything about the supposed contest.

But the most convincing evidence against the duel having ever occurred was supplied by Leipzig’s daily regional newspaper Leipziger Tageblatt und Handelsblatt für Sachsen of 6 April 1920. The newspaper reported that on the premises of the “Atlas” club Goerner had improved the World Record in the Two Hands...
Snatch to 120 kilograms [264 pounds] on April 4 the same day as the “duel.” The historian Dale Harder commented that sport history supplies examples of champions able to accomplish astounding feats in two parts of the same day, even in two different towns, and therefore Harder maintains that it would have been possible for Goerner to compete in the contest with Moerke either after or before making the documented record of 120 kilograms. In any case, the published sources and (it has to be stressed) the attentive local press reported only the record in the snatch. Although it seems unlikely, perhaps the Goerner-Moerke contest was not mentioned because it was not an authorized or sanctioned event. We do know that Möerke immigrated to the United States in 1921 and there is no record that he ever mentioned a lost duel, but that could be understandable.

Another factor complicating the question was that, as hinted, the world record snatch of 120 kilograms [264 pounds] on 4 April 1920 was confirmed by many actual and present sources, but not by Goerner the Mighty. Why Mueller would not have mentioned in a definitive biography of Goerner a unanimously recognized world record is hard to explain. [Ed. Note: The only possible explanation could be that if the “duel” Mueller reports actually happened, which seems doubtful, Mueller might not have thought it important to mention the lighter of the two world records.] It is also interesting to note that in an official exhibition held on 7 June 1914 in Düsseldorf, Goerner actually duelled with Möerke in a kind of one-on-one confrontation. This exhibition, although it was authorized, did not yield official results as it was a special preliminary to the upcoming Baltic Games—in which Goerner placed third. It was also a qualifying event for the national championships, which were later cancelled by the outbreak of the war. Had the normal championship’s point system been used, Goerner would have won that duel with Möerke, even though Möerke had the higher aggregated sum of weights lifted.

The Sources and the Records of the Two Hands Clean and Jerk

The authoritative German statistician Karl Adolf Scherer’s record list credits Goerner with a world record Two Hands Clean and Jerk of 157 kilograms [355 pounds] done in 1920, which exceeded Möerke’s performance at Stuttgart’s championship of August 18-19. Goerner, then, equalled Gässler’s previously mentioned Munich performances of 3 January 1912 and 12 April 1912 after August 19 but before December 31. However, a puzzling complexity surrounds Goerner’s records in the Two Hands Clean and Jerk. Goerner the Mighty dedicated a section to this lift, setting apart the 160 kilograms [352 pounds] of the presumed duel, then mentioning a more mundane 150 kilograms [330 pounds], an odd 152 kilograms [334 pounds] (1914), and 155 kilograms [341 pounds] (1932), with no mention of any performances between 155 and 160 kilograms [341 and 352 pounds], nor between 160 and 177 kilograms [352 and 391 pounds], supposedly done in 1920. It must be noted that the 160 kilograms [352 pounds] is assumed to be Goerner’s best amateur performance, as the 177 kilograms [391 pounds], if done, was done as a professional. According to Goerner the Mighty, the 160 kilograms [352 pounds] was done on April 4 and the 177 [391 pounds] on July 11. In three months then, Goerner’s best clean and jerk jumped a remarkable 17 kilograms [39 pounds] according to this scenario. In contrast, it took 23 years for the official world record in the same lift to progress from 160.5 kilograms [353 pounds] by Charles Rigoulot in 1925 to 177.5 kilograms [391 pounds] by John Davis in 1948. Strangely, Goerner the Mighty does not mention Goerner’s other amateur records beyond his performance in the Moerke duel and at the Breslau event. According to Athletik, Goerner jerked 155 kilograms [341 pounds] in 1913; and in 1914, 150 kilograms [330 pounds], leading the World in the lift for these years. In the 1919 German championships, Goerner’s best clean and jerk was 140 kilograms [308 pounds], incorrectly considered a world record by Scherer. Even so, it was still the best international performance of the year. The Kleine Brockhaus edition for 1922-1925 credited Goerner with a world record of 160 kilograms [352 pounds], done not in conjunction with the reputed 125 kilograms [275 pounds] Two Hands Snatch (supposedly done in the “duel”), but rather with Goerner’s 120 kilograms [264 pounds] lift of April 4. Presumably, the compilers of Kleine Brockhaus did not take into account the results of the claimed Goerner-Moerke duel. However, a later edition, Brockhaus—die Große, 1928-1935—reinstated recognition of the 157.5 kilograms [347 pounds] made by Gässler in Munich on 12 April 1912 as the world record. Why was recognition of Goerner’s record with 160 kilograms [352 pounds] withdrawn? Was this performance unverifiable or done as a professional? In total, the Kleine Brockhaus of 1922-
1925 attributed to Goerner four world records, yet three of them (surprisingly) are not mentioned in Goerner the Mighty.

The historians Bürger and Weidt in the book Kraftproben (1985) attributed to Goerner a 165 kilograms [363 pounds] Two Hands Clean and Jerk—performed in 1919 but not officially recognized because he was affiliated with Arbeiter Athletenbund Deutschlands.61 Once again, this performance was not mentioned in Goerner the Mighty. Being ignored by Scherer increased the difficulty of the search, but Goerner himself inadvertently refuted Goerner the Mighty. In a letter he sent to Leo Gaudreau, whose excerpts Gaudreau reported in his book, Anvils, Cannons and Horseshoes, Goerner said that his best in the Clean and Jerk was 168 kilograms [370 pounds].62

In sum, we can document four performances that were not mentioned in Goerner the Mighty—even though each one was considered a world record. This fact seems particularly odd because no official documentation could be found corroborating many of the major “records” that Mueller claimed for Goerner in the biography.

The Deadlift Records

For the English-speaking world, Goerner’s records in the deadlift place him firmly within early powerlifting (the strength sport consisting of the deadlift, bench press and squat). Since 1901, the German federation has recognized records in the deadlift and, in 1913, the Deutsche Athletik Verband credited Goerner with a world record one-hand deadlift of 251 kilograms [552 pounds] and with 275 kilograms [606 pounds] and then 277 kilograms [610 pounds] in the two-hands version.63 Goerner the Mighty attributed Goerner with a world record Two-Hands Deadlift with 360 kilograms [793 pounds] done in Leipzig on 29 October 1920 (not exceeded until 1969). Mueller also credited Goerner with the still-unexceeded right hand record with 330 kilograms [727 pounds] on 29 October 1920, the same day as his two-handed 360 kilograms [793 pounds] was supposedly done. He is also said to have lifted with one hand 333 kilograms [734 pounds] in the form of a block of stone fitted with a handle—a feat of strength not properly considered a deadlift—on 20 July 1920 in Dresden.67 These claims, again, could not be verified in authoritative German sources.

Lothar Groth’s book Die Starken Männer includes a picture of Goerner in an advertisement for a Greco-Roman wrestling championships held in Dresden from the 8th to 12th of September 1920. In this reproduction, Goerner is shown lifting with one hand a stone block not of 333 kilograms [734 pounds], as Mueller indicated, but one said to be 330 kilograms [727 pounds] which equalled 660 German pfunds, the standard measure of weight at that time in Germany. This is also the same poundage claimed as Goerner’s world record for a standard, one hand deadlift with a barbell.68 The Dresdener Anzeiger of 27 July 1920 also reported that Goerner elevated a stone block of 330 kilograms [727 pounds] but no height is given for the lift.69 So, did Goerner lift in October—using a barbell—exactly what he had elevated with a stone block in July? Dale Harder argued in our online forum that this hypothesis was plausible, but it would seem to be a remarkable coincidence that the block and the barbell weighed exactly the same. In any case, the data concerning the 333 kilograms [734 pounds], claimed by Mueller, become increasingly suspicious. Or perhaps Goerner lifted one stone block weighing 333 kilograms [734 pounds] and another weighing 330 kilograms [727 pounds]? What is important is that the Leipzig and Dresden daily newspapers did not register accounts that would support the results provided by Mueller.

Because Goerner entered a major European wrestling contest in July of 1920, he “de facto” lost his amateur status. Deutsche Athletik Verband debated this question in its meeting of 19 August 1920 and in October the official journal of the federation duly reported the disqualification.70 This means that Goerner was consid-
In conclusion, it is clear that Goerner’s two deadlift records were accomplished as a professional, which would have increased the likelihood that the performances were buried by lack of official sanction. Since no professional federation actually existed at that time, these lifts would have been unofficial. Although it listed many records for one hand lifts, the Kleine Brockhaus of 1922-1925 only recognized Goerner’s record with two hands. It did not mention a record with one hand, either by Goerner or by anyone else. Did the compilers of the Kleine Brockhaus know that Göerner elevated a stone block and not a Berg barbell? The successive edition of Brockhaus (1928-1935) also did not report any records of a one-hand Deadlift. However, an article from 1950 in Athletik—published before Mueller’s series of articles—attributed to Goerner a 310 kilograms [683 pounds] Deadlift with two hands, but this reference also remained unconfirmed. In the hope that these data could be derived from a contemporary source, we turned to Die Stärksten (The Strongest), an interesting, miscellaneous booklet by Josef Haupt (1928). Unfortunately, no footnotes support the booklet and the data remain vague, without a precise indication of venue, day, month, and year. For the one-hand record, Haupt referred, incredibly, to a lift of 330 kilograms [727 pounds]—making Goerner’s one-hand record better than his two-hands record! Haupt, however, indicated 1905 as the year in which the 727 lift was made, so this source proved unreliable.

Goerner: A Puzzling Figure
How did Goerner join and relate to the Workers’ federation, and what does this relationship say about his character? Careful study of the original documents reveals that Goerner may have been somewhat introverted, and perhaps somewhat isolated and lonely because of his decision to turn professional. [Goerner’s wife, Elsie,
who died in 1949, appeared with him in his professional acts at times and would have provided him with companionship during his years as a professional. However, by turning pro Goerner distanced himself from the lifters and officials associated with amateur weightlifting, and entered what one might describe as a sort of “sporting ghetto,” which is what professional weightlifting in Europe was at that time.73 In October 1913, Athletik noted his affiliation to Essener Athleten Club vom 1888, and this information is in accordance with Mueller’s assertion in Iron Man that Goerner transferred to Essen to work for the famous steel and armament factory run by the Krupp family. We must also remember that Mueller affirmed that Goerner’s membership in the Arbeiter Athletenbund Deutschlands blocked the probable recognition of at least one world record, but in September 1919, at the Ulmer National Event, Goerner lifted as a member of the Friedrichshafen Kraftsport Verein team.74 We cannot exclude the possibility that “Atlas” re-affiliated with DAV on 1 April 1920. In any event, Goerner’s commitment to the Workers’ cause appears to have been tepid. Goerner achieved the world record in the Two Hands Snatch on 4 April 1920 at the “Atlas” club. Even so, only four months after this performance, the champion became a professional.

The primary focus of this inquiry was limited to 1920. However, a preliminary examination of the archives of Goerner’s friend Tromp Van Diggelen in the Cape Town Library and of past issues of Cape Argus and Cape Times suggests that Goerner’s record of 135 kilograms [297 pounds] in the Two Hands Snatch on 4 April 1920 at the “Atlas” club. Even so, only four months after this performance, the champion became a professional.

Edgar Mueller frequently communicated with David Willoughby and sent him this postcard, dated 10 July 1956 following Goerner’s death. On the back of the card, where the message concludes, Mueller explains that he is asking Willoughby and other American friends to send money so he can have a suitable tombstone set on the grave of “our unforgettable and incomparable friend Herman Görner.” In a second letter to Willoughby, dated 19 January 1957, Mueller thanked Willoughby for his donation to Goerner’s tombstone fund and reported that he’d received altogether about 200 German Marks. He told Willoughby that he planned to have the tombstone erected in the Spring of 1957 and noted that the stone was made possible by “serious kindful contributors” such as Willoughby, Tromp Van Diggelen and Ray Van Cleef.

Town, on 4 September 1926 also left no trace in local papers. Despite the attempt of Goerner the Mighty to do so, it is not appropriate to compare such an unofficial performance—assuming that it actually happened—with other achievements made in competitions with the support of juries and documentary evidence.

The important Encyclopaedia Beckmann’s Lexikon, issued in 1933 in Vienna and Leipzig—two centers of Workers’ sport—carried the first published reports of Workers’ sport records. It would seem that all of the records Mueller claims for Goerner should have been included there, but they were not. By that time, Goerner was a professional strongman in vaudeville shows, theaters, and clubs of Leipzig and beyond. Did the Workers’ establishment punish him with oblivion for his earlier abandonment of the amateur ranks? Also, strangely, the Nazi regime did not exalt Goerner as an Aryan idol. Why would they have missed the opportunity of publicizing the fact that the “Strongest Man of All Times” was a German. On the contrary, the Nazi government interned Goerner in a lager (prison camp) during World War II, where he shared the deprivation of several former Worker mates.

Apparently, Goerner followed an individualistic path in the post-World War Two years. He lived alone, in straightened circumstances, and did not attend the convivial meetings of Old Timers associations, which in Germany and Austria so vividly maintained the memories of past sporting glory. Did Goerner really suffer a crossed and double-crossed, bourgeois and worker, historical removal? Or, when Mueller described himself as a direct witness to Goerner’s amateur achievements in 1920, did he ignore what the Deutsche Athletik Verband journal wrote about his friend? When Mueller repeatedly pointed out the official character of Goerner’s feats, was he ignoring what the German official references reported and relying, instead, on a decidedly selective and perhaps faulty memory?

Goerner Was A Great, Not The Greatest

Thanks to his records in the Right, Left and Two Hands Deadlift—either in his amateur period or during his professional season in 1927 on English soil—and to his provable records in the Two Hands Snatch and the Two Hands Clean and Jerk, Goerner deserves serious recognition, especially since he earned first place in the World Ranking in the Two Hands Clean and Jerk for three seasons (1913, 1914 and 1919—and probably in 1920, too). Our research—and opinion—places him definitely as an iron game great but not, at the time Goerner the Mighty was written, as The Greatest, or Der Stärkste Mann der Welt. Much mystery still surrounds his true status, and possibly he was marginalized and his real greatness disguised because of his affiliation to Workers’ clubs and because of his later professionalism. In any case, perhaps this initial search will help to bridge a gap in German historical sport literature, and we invite all interested students to go over our work and to study Goerner’s career as an “odd lift” specialist and professional strongman for the period 1931-1934.

[Ed Note: We applaud the authors’ open-spirited invitation to other researchers to examine the primary and secondary sources in order to more clearly determine Hermann Goerner’s true stature as a weightlifter/strongman. One thing is probably certain. Had World War I not thrown Goerner’s life into turmoil and resulted in injuries that plagued him for the rest of his life, he would have been even more powerful than he was.]

Notes:

6. Athletik (26 February 1931); 2.
11. Ibid., 88.
12. Mueller, Athletik 7 (1951); 6; and Mueller, Athletik 13 (1951); 6.
Man (December 1949); also available at: http://www.sandowplus.co.uk/Competition/Goerner/ironman12-49/true.htm.

15. The Iron History Forum is managed by Joe Roark and Bill Piche. Some of the participants in the Forum actively took part in the debate, providing information from their collections and scanning some of their material. Registration is needed for viewing the forum. See the sub-forum “Musty Muscle” for the discussion thread entitled “Goerner’s birthday” at http://www.ironhistory.com.

16. It’s interesting to compare Webster’s The Sons of Samson, vol. 1 (Irvine: by the author, 1993), 31, which fails to mention Goerner’s greatest feats to Webster’s, The Iron Game, 57, which does. [Ed. Note: In a conversation with David Webster, he said that he omitted several questionable lifts from Sons of Samson as a result of learning (from a German publication) that Arthur Saxon’s famous record in the bent press (370 pounds) was not completed, i.e., Saxon lifted the weight to arm’s length but never stood up with it, as the rules require.]

17. John Dawe to Joe Roark, personal communication. Irving Clark, in the introduction to Goerner the Mighty reports that Mueller was a “walking encyclopedia on Continental strong men and their feats...Mention a feat and he can state the date, the time and who was present...” Goerner the Mighty, 11.

18. John Dawe to Joe Roark, personal communication. [Ed. Note: In a conversation predating Dawe’s communication with Joe Roark, Dawe told Terry Todd that he had not merely translated Goerner the Mighty but had actually written portions of it.]

19. Mueller, Goerner the Mighty, 11.

20. For instance, an important article by German master Theodor Siebert, written portions of it.

21. John Dawe to Joe Roark, personal communication. Irving Clark, in the introduction to Goerner the Mighty reports that Mueller was a “walking encyclopedia on Continental strong men and their feats...Mention a feat and he can state the date, the time and who was present...” Goerner the Mighty, 11.

22. Ibid., 32.


27. Ibid., 29.

28. Ibid.


34. Ibid.


36. Mueller, Athletik 8 (1951): 7. Neither the book, 150 Jahre Allgemeiner-Turn-verein zu Leipzig 1845, published by the Leipzig Sportsmuseum, or the archives of the same institution contain any mention of Goerner. Also, no data on Goerner was found in the material consulted at the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung where the Arbeiter Athletenbund Deutschlands records are kept.

37. The Atlas Club supplied us with copies of page 54-55 of the Atlas Jahrbuch (yearbook) for 1912 containing a biographical sketch of Goerner and his records up to 1913.

38. See note 36.

39. We examined the most reputable books containing updated and credible German sport records: Deutsche Sport Taschenbuch 1921; Hyppolit von Norman, Deutsches Sport Lexikon (Berlin: Schwabachersche Verlagshbuch, 1928); Otto Vierath, Moderner Sport: Eine Umschau über die Zweige des Sports und die sportlichen Wettkämpfe (Berlin: Oestergard Verlag, 1930); and Beckmann’s Lexikon (Vienna/Leipzig: 1933).


41. Mueller, Goerner the Mighty, 66.

42. In fact, the author of Athletik covering the World Championships did not hide the disappointment at Goerner’s performance since in other exhibitions he had reportedly lifted more than 150 kilos on three occasions that year. See “Weltmeisterschaft in Breslau,” Athletik, 22 (7 August 1913): 512.

43. Mueller, Goerner the Mighty, 46, 48.

44. Athletik (2 October 1913): 652.

45. Athletik (5 October 1920): 328.

46. Mueller, Goerner the Mighty, 32.

47. E-mail from Mustafa Haikal (Secretariat Zoo Leipzig) to Gherardo Bonini, 29 November 2004.


49. There is no mention of Goerner in Der Leipziger during 1919 and 1920, even though this weekly paper carried sport news in every issue.

50. Leipziger Tageblatt und Handelsblatt für Sachsen , 6 April 1920, page 4. This data contradicts Markones, Österreichs Schwerathletik, 101, that places the record on 10 May 1920.


54. Mueller, Goerner the Mighty, 48-50, 52-53

55. See the official list of recognized records in Schodl, Lost Past, 236-239.

56. Published on 11 December, see Athletik (December 1913): 621.

57. Performed during duel of 7 June 1914, see Athletik (15 June 1914): 408.

58. Scherer does not consider the records prior to World War I to be official records. This is a different policy than that of the IWF, which, as discussed earlier, reinstated Gässler’s record.


60. Grosse Brockhaus, vol. 20 (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1932-1935), 215. The staff of Brockhaus kindly checked in their archives but the preparatory documents of the above mentioned editions were lost.


63. Athletik (27 February 1913): 140; and Athletik (23 October 1913): 694.

64. Mueller, Goerner the Mighty, 69-70, 72.


67. Mueller, Goerner the Mighty, 70.


69. Dresdener Anzeiger, 27 July 1920. We would also like to thank the Dresden Library for their assistance with our research.

70. Athletik (26 October 1920): 423.


74. The search was executed by Prof. Jennie Underwood of Cape Town.

75. The search was executed by Prof. Jennie Underwood of Cape Town.