

The European Corner

Dave Webster



Most readers know that Dave Webster of Scotland is one of the leading figures in the world of strength lore. An outstanding strand-puller; an international official in weightlifting, bodybuilding and strongmen competitions; a respected collector

of strength-related books and magazines; and an avid student of the game for many years, Webster has distinguished himself as a writer through the publication of such books as *Strength Lore & Strands*, *The Iron Game*, *Barbells & Beefcake* and *Scottish Highland Games*. We are pleased and grateful that he has agreed to contribute a column to *IGH*.

Greetings from across the sea. On behalf of all European strongmen I extend cordial and sincere good wishes to our like-minded friends in America. I have followed your activities from the beginning, with interest and a longing to be actively involved and, believe me, I WILL make it to one of the next reunions of the Association of Oldtime Barbell and Strongmen; the sooner it happens the better I will be pleased.

When I was asked to contribute a column to *Iron Game History* I unhesitatingly agreed, even though I was conscious of the problems this may cause me in time to come. I lead a very busy life, all hinging round our favourite activities; you could say I am obsessed by strength in all forms of physical endeavour but particularly in sport and entertainment. I am fully booked with major strength events for 1990 and have good international bookings two years ahead. Equally I am steeped in strength lore from days long gone and the wonderful history of the display of power. In these ways I can look at the past, present and future of strength athletics, my main interest in life.

In this, hopefully regular, feature I would like to work in similar fashion with some items on old timers, some on current happenings with the strongmen and some on advance information of interest.

To set the scene let's look at what is happening. With my colleague, Dr. Doug Edmunds, I run many top class professional strength athletics contests each year. For instance, we have now in Europe a range of contests from national to world championships for real strength athletics. The contenders are all professional strongmen, several of them being full-timers, with this as their main occupation. They compete for cash prizes and it's all genuine and aboveboard; if they don't place well, then the returns are not in keeping with the effort and the training. However, it's certainly not all about money;

almost without exception they love what they are doing. These mighty men enjoy the challenge, the battles and the camaraderie of the circuit which has now emerged.

From small beginnings I have tried to build up a whole new sport very similar to the TV strongman competitions and many of our events are filmed. I use the term "strength athletics" as there is a significant degree of athleticism required, as well as strength and power. To earn a high placing the competitor needs all round ability. Unathletic, overweight strongmen don't do well, nor do well-muscled, very fast men who are not extremely strong. The best men are large, exceedingly strong and also athletic. We have our own International Federation of Strength Athletes and an official journal, *The Strength Athlete*, which carries our news and results. [Editor's note: We understand that the publishers of *The Strength Athlete* have filed for bankruptcy and sold the magazine. More later.]

Dining the past year I have refereed Netherlands' Strongest Man (TV), Finland's Strongest Man (TV), World's Strongest Man, held in Spain (TV) and we have also organised the Scottish Muscle Power Championships, British Muscle Power Championships, European Muscle Power Championships and the World Muscle Power Championships, plus some team competitions.

This reflects the main locations of interest, except that Iceland produces the highest level of professional strongmen, with three truly outstanding competitors who have taken almost everything before them even though there is a host of other good strongmen snapping at their heels. Iceland had its own international event in the summer, won by the fabulous Jon Pall Sigmarsson. Jamie Reeves (Britain) earned an equal number of points but less firsts and so finished second. Two other Icelanders came next and then the popular O.D. Wilson (USA), the man they call "The Nightmare".

Britain has more competitors than other countries as we have more competitions, at various levels. The more milk we have, the more cream we get, so there is a good record with Jamie Reeves winning the World's Strongest Man this year and with great past competitors like Geoff Capes. The 6'9", 364 pound Mark Higgins is currently our number two man. Mark is a great all rounder, being an international discus thrower, a past international basketball player, a champion powerlifter and a man who went to Australia with the British sailing team for the America's Cup. Big though he is, he is not the tallest competitor. That honour goes to the handsome giant, Ted van den Panne from Holland, who is a finely built seven feet in height and strong enough to have tied for second place in his national championships.

Finland also has many fine contestants, two of whom

are of international calibre and travel extensively—Markku Souenvirta and Ilkka Nummisto, a former Olympic hero now turned professional strongman. Bill Kazmaier (USA) has also been around, placing fourth in the World's Strongest Man, after Reeves, Sigmarsson and Wolders (Holland) and placing third in the World Muscle Power Championships to Sigmarsson and Reeves.

It's a colourful, vibrant scene and it keeps me on a very tight schedule. In the last year I have been on more Jumbos than Sabu the Elephant Boy, and in August I went to a competition for just one day in Canada and some nine hours later was back at another major event in Europe. If I go any faster next time I may meet myself coming back!

Next issue I will take a backward look at the development of strongmen in entertainment.