

TERRY TODD

# CHARLES A. SMITH

On January 29, Charles A. Smith died of complications stemming from a cancerous growth on the top of his skull. Smith was a prolific writer during the early and middle 1950s, turning out more than 300 articles in the field of weightlifting and weight training. Many of those articles—most of which were written when he served as an editor for several of the Weider publications—are among the finest writing ever done in the field.

Charles was born on March 27, 1912 in London, England; and his origins were “working class.” On his eighth birthday, Charles’ father, who was a “dustman”, gave him a secondhand set of Sandow expanders and spring-grip dumbbells and these pieces of equipment introduced him to the world of physical culture. He was active in many sports, competing in such activities as soccer, cricket, track and field, rugby, rowing, archery, gymnastics and swimming, in which sport he became a London District Champion.

He was introduced to real weightlifting and bodybuilding by Bert and Joe Assirati, who were very talented lifters. Bert, in particular, was the strongest man in England for many years and had a long and successful career as a professional wrestler. In any case, Charles was bitten by the barbell bug and continued with his training after high school. His life changed dramatically when World War II began, and he had a long and distinguished career in the British Royal Navy, serving from 1939 to 1946. He saw a lot of combat duty and served in every theater of war, earning seven decorations for meritorious service and bravery.

After the war ended, Charles moved to America with his wife and worked in New York City in a bank. Here in the U.S., he became active again in the growing fields of weightlifting and bodybuilding and for six years he served as the secretary of the Metropolitan A.A.U. Weightlifting Committee. Although Charles did not compete, he was an active judge, and he was one of the officials when many national and world records were made. He had

by then begun to write occasional articles about weightlifting for *Iron Man*, and this brought his to the attention of Joe Weider, who appreciated Smith’s retentive mind and knowledge of the game. By 1950 Charles was working for Weider—writing articles, answering mail and editing manuscripts in magazines such as *Your Physique*, *Muscle Power*, *Muscle Builder*, *Mr. America*, *The Weightlifter* and *Boxing* and *Wrestling*. Many close followers of the strength sports consider the work Charles did for these Weider Publications from 1950 until 1956 to be among the best work done up to that

time. Charles was energetic, opinionated and enthusiastic and his enthusiasm enlivened his writing and inspired thousands of young readers of these muscle magazines. Charles’ gifts played a key role in the success of the Weider publications during the early fifties and he often expressed the opinion in later years, when he was no longer in the center of things, that he was sorry he had been unable to continue his editing job after 1956 and find a way to make a living as a writer/editor. He spent some time living in Alliance, Nebraska, writing for *Iron Man* and working as a painter to make ends meet; but he didn’t feel as if he could make a go of it under those circumstances, and he accepted an offer to work with Leo



Murdock, who had a thriving gym business in Austin, Texas.

Thus it was that Charles moved to Austin, which is where I met him in 1958. It was a thrill for a young man like me to talk to the person who had written so many informative and exciting articles about superheroes such as Doug Hepburn and Reg Park, and I remember being saddened by the fact that Charles decided to leave the iron game and accept a job at the Travis County Juvenile Court as the intake supervisor. But Charles succeeded at his new job, which involved directing all incoming cases to the appropriate courts and community agencies, and he worked there until his retirement, managing to earn a degree in Criminal Justice in his

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(1912-1991)

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spare time. He had very little contact with the iron game from 1959 to 1984, but in 1984 he agreed to come to the University of Texas once or twice a week and help Jan and I sort and catalogue our growing collection of physical culture material. Once he began to handle the old books and magazines he had known so intimately in his younger years, he seemed to be revived. He had lost one of his legs a year or so earlier, as a result of complications from diabetes, and he was confined to a wheelchair. But soon he was corresponding with people all over the world, contributing letters and articles to the muscle magazines and serving on the editorial board of *Iron Game History*. Charles' enthusiasm, once it returned, never faltered and in the weeks before his death, when we would talk in the hospital or on the phone, he would always ask me for news about who was lifting what and who was doing well in the physique world. "What's the news, old boy?" he would say, and then commit to his undiminished memory whatever I had to share. Charles A. Smith was a talented, remarkably well-read man and even though he was only partially active in the field of physical culture for the last 30 years of his life, during his prime as a writer he made a unique and valuable contribution to his beloved iron game and his many correspondents will feel the loss acutely.

The biographical information provided above was written for John Balik, who requested it for *Iron Man* magazine; it is reproduced here with John's permission. A similar brief sketch was written at Joe Weider's request for use in *Muscle & Fitness*. Because I knew Charles for almost 35 years, and saw or spoke to him at least once a week for the past eight years, I wanted to add a few details as a way of paying my respects to this fascinating, if sometimes irascible, man.

Until the last year or two of his life, and particularly before he was brought down by diabetes, Charles had a great fondness for beer. His usual habit, after his wife had died of cancer in the late 1950s, was to drive straight home from work, put on comfortable clothes, get whichever book he was in the process of reading, open a quart of beer and sit in the living room reading and drinking until bedtime. He read a great many books and he drank a great many beers and the two will always be intertwined in my mind where Charles is concerned. It seemed to me that he never fully recovered from the death of his wife and I suspect that this loss had a lot to do with his immersion in beer and books. He often quoted the famous line, "Malt does more than Milton can, to justify God's ways to man."

Back in the early 60s, after Leo Murdock had left Austin and his former club was being operated as the Texas Athletic Club by Jack Woodson, several of my friends and I tried to interest Charles

in training again and, for a while, he did. I recall one evening down at the TAC watching Charles work up to a 250 pound bench press and then say, with a smile, "I'm not bitching for 50." But he seemed unable to sustain his interest; the pull of the beer and the books was too strong. Even so, he always seemed eager to talk about lifting and so I continued to visit him before I left Austin in 1967 and during my many trips back to see my family over the 16 years I taught at other universities. Because of his lifelong habit of reading and his first-rate memory, Charles was a storehouse of information on a variety of subjects and this made most conversations with him both a pleasure and an education.

One of the things I recall with satisfaction about Charles' last few years was the excitement he got from going with me and Jan to New York to attend two of the dinners organized by the Oldtime Barbell and Strongman Association. It was anything but easy for a man in both a wheelchair and his 70s to negotiate such a trip, even with two lifters along to help. Nor did Charles enjoy spending the money for the roundtrip airfare, being, by his own admission, notoriously close with a dollar. (He was even fond of pointing out parsimony in others, and one of his favorite lines was, "If he were a ghost, he wouldn't even give you a fright.") But he steeled himself to the difficulties of travel and the necessity of paying for his ticket and, by doing so, had a wonderful time seeing the city again and spending hours talking with many old friends he never thought he'd have a chance to see.

As Charles began to fail a bit last fall, one of the things which always brought him out of the doldrums was news about Mark Henry, the giant teenager who moved to Austin last September. Charles' interest intensified after I took Mark to Charles' home so the two could meet. Charles admired Mark's anti-steroid stance and was astonished at his size; everytime I called Charles wanted to know how much Mark had snatched and how his wrist injury was coming along and he often remarked that he had never seen a man so large, yet so limber. The last time I spoke to Charles, after he was in the hospital in the terminal stages of his disease, drifting in and out of the present, he really came to life at the news of Mark's 341 snatch. By then, Charles had lost all taste for beer and was refusing all my offers of reading material, but his love for the game—a love perhaps made stronger for his having lost and then regained it in the last decade of his life—was undiminished.

Finally, I call your attention to the article in this issue on Bert Assirati. When we got word from Charles that Bert Assirati had died, I asked Charles to write a memorial essay for *IGH* about his longtime friend. Little did I know that before it would be published, I would be writing one for Charles.