

Al Thomas
Kutztown University

REMEMBERED PLEASURES OF ANOTHER WORLD AND TIME: THE GREAT STRENGTH & HEALTH PICNICS

From 1945, until their end, I never missed one. And for a moment, if you yourself ever attended one, I want you to think about what I'm going to say. If true, it may provide an insight into the powerful hold that the iron game still exerts upon even its elder celebrants, despite its compromise by both steroids and commercialization. And now for the pronouncement: Gentlemen, it has never gotten better--it had never been better and was not destined ever to be better--than the old *Strength & Health* picnics at Brookside Park, outside Dover, Pennsylvania.

There are, to be sure, still strength contests with galvanizing feats and marvelous muscle extravaganzas -- if inclining a bit to turquoise and hot pink, MTV choreography, and steroid-stuffed chaps dashing out of dry ice whirlwinds aboard camels. (Seeming to some, the frenetic spluttering of the light bulb before it pops.) But, and of course, despite the blight of steroids, I, just like you, still feel the surge of hot tears in the presence of a marvelous technician who clean and jerks over 570 pounds, steroid-assisted or not, as the slender Pisarenko did for Mack Trucks, a few years ago in Allentown, Pennsylvania. In a parched land, one takes his manna wherever it appears -- with a prayer of thanks and no questions asked. It's the same with the marvelous (if steroid-pimpled) expanses of muscle that present-day physique contests make available for us to survey.

We've grown cynical in this age of steroids, but when honest, most of us have to confess to heart-stopping moments even from the compromised version of our great sport. Granting these moments, however, I ask those of you lucky enough ever to have picnicked at Brookside Park: Has the game gotten better? Indeed, since then, has it ever been as good as it was in those dusty old afternoons in Bob Hoffman's park?

Where are they now? Those old joys of manly and democratic competition, community and commonality. Where are they now? Those rights, virtually "Constitutional," possessed by all of us teenage pests, however puny, scrawny, and uncredentialed. Where



are they now? Those old-fashioned "American picnic verities"? Where is the rock solid assurance, for instance, that (unlike the 90's superstar), if you asked Steve Stanko for his autograph, he'd ask you for a pen to start his scribbling, and not for a sawbuck as recompense for it.

It may well be conceivable (for reasons best known to his pharmacist) that a 90's muscle-kid could be puny, but it's far less likely that he could ever get much chance to share un-bought time (forget camaraderie) with one of the current moment's fruitfly stars, whom he'd be lucky to catch a glimpse of, swathed in designer clothes, whisking off into the night aboard a designer car, abandoning our supplicant 90's kid in a puff of dust.

Supplicant kids, we York picnickers never had to be. Often puny, yes. But never supplicant. We didn't have to be. Shyness aside, I,

we, just-about-everybody thought it our heroes' duty to answer our most tediously involved questions. And answer them, they did: not just the York guys (Grimek, Stanko, Bacon, Terpak, VanCleaf, Venables, Bachtell, Paschall, Shandor, Hitchins, the Terlazzos, and the always declamatory Hoffman), but also that particular year's crop of in-house lifters who happened to be working-out at the York Gym--not even to mention all the "heroes" (known to us from "the book") who were always to be found mixed-in among the picnickers. Such a time and place: Xanadu was nothing compared with this dusty grove in the heartland of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

The 90's kid, on the other hand, forks out big bucks to sit-in on a "seminar" with one of the modern champs (who, we all understand of course, has to payoff his half-million dollar home), and then the kid forks out still more bucks for the current "legend's" autograph. How different it once was in picnic-time: One of the sweetest memories cherished by the papa of our 90's kid was the day, "way back when," that he out-chinned the strongest man in the world: an authentic legend named Paul Anderson, the kind of *mensch* who delighted in giving skinny kids the thrill of their weightlifting lifetime: in this case, a chinning contest victory over our planet's strongest mortal, and all without any charge except for

a little sweat. Lost in all the self-promotion and me-firstness: Where are they now, the gentle joys from this other world and time?

Because it was my first, the 1945 *Strength & Health* picnic is the most magical and most clearly imprinted on my memory: the archetype for me of York picnics. Compared with later attendances that on occasion exceeded two thousand, picnickers were sparse on this oppressively hot late June Saturday. Because the War was still raging, only those who had saved-up the necessary gas coupons could even contemplate a trip of any length. (Too young to drive, I hitch-hiked down on other folks' coupons.) Wending my way into the dusty park that muggy afternoon was the biggest thrill, theretofore, of my first two years in the game. There it was -- Brookside Park, all 200 acres of it, with its outdoor stage ("the biggest outdoor stage in that part of Pennsylvania," no less), the merry-go-round, the dance pavilion, the concession stands, the marvelous oaks, the odorous outhouse (that was to become, in later years, my daughters' sharpest memory of their picnicking) -- not to mention, that year, a fortune teller's tent. Except for York's "Muscle Beach contingent," everybody I'd ever read about was there, ensconced in the hot dust: John Grimek, Tony Terlazzo, Jules Bacon, Steve Stanko, John Terpak, Dick Bachtell, nutritionist Dr. Frederick Tilney, the Hawaiians Emerick Ishikawa and Joe Lauriano and his brother, Art Gay, Alda Ketterman, and of course the redoubtable Bob Hoffman and his Great Dane. Larry Barnholth (of Akron's American College of Modern Weightlifting) had brought his star pupil, Junior National Champ Pete George, who was "supposed" to clean and jerk 300 that afternoon, but had to be satisfied with 270. Tony Terlazzo, John Grimek, and John Terpak also did some exhibition lifting.

If the biggest thrill of my first two years as a lifter was finding myself actually walking around, as though I belonged, at my very first *S & H* picnic (I'd feared being turned away at the "gate" for lack of a passport, or some such)--the biggest thrill and still-sharpest memory of my forty-seven years in the game transpired next: in response to the insistent coaxing of the picnickers, Grimek stripped off his shirt, struck a few poses, and then rolled-in to his incomparable muscle control act I hadn't, till then, and haven't since then, seen its equal. I would have hitchhiked 80 or 800, not just 8, hours to have partaken of this unforgettable moment in my iron game memories. Anticlimactically, after this, the crowd dispersed to the various venues for broad jumping (won by Ishikawa: 9'3"), dipping (won by Jules Bacon: 21), carrying the 56-pound block of iron (won by Stanko), and chinning (with first-place shared by Chief Specialist Chet Chatman and Tony Terlazzo: 22). Alda Ketterman performed some presses and an excellent clean and jerk with 150 pounds and then 12 consecutive one-arm overhead swings with a 75-pound dumbbell. As the shadows of the tall oaks lengthened, I had to admit that there yet remained miles for me to go before I could lay my head down in sleep, so I hoisted my thumb and was soon on the highway back to reality. Earlier Alda Ketterman had tendered, if quietly, an invitation to a post-picnic buffet at her nearby home, but not even my by-then vast supply of "brass" and burgeoning hubris permitted me to think that it included a skinny 15-year-old interloper whose only credential was

hope. The most wonderful day in that boy's life had come to a close, though the joys and memories of his new life in the game were just starting.

Among those joys, for the lover of strength, are memories of the grand strength feats and lifting elicited by the mere mention of this wonderful event. Marvin Eder's full dip with over 300 pounds of human resistance on the famous old wide dipping bar, once used for harness and back lifting (1950); Dave Sheppard's jerk of 420 from the shoulders and Dave Ashman's near-miss clean and jerks with 420 and 435 (1958); Ike Berger's 265-pound world record press on the slanting stage (in the "biggest ever" picnic in 1960, "attended by thousands," as *S&H* reported): the capstone event of a two-week-long Pre-Olympic Weightlifting Clinic at the Gym; Chuck Vinci's 250, 235, and 300 in the drizzle and deluges of the '61 picnic, prior to the Vienna World's Championships (25 pounds more than the world record in the bantamweight class); the exciting competition between Bill March (who totaled 1100 for the first time), Bob Bednarski, and Bob Bartholomew (at the huge '65 picnic on the weekend of the Senior National Powerlifting Championships), a picnic that included the memorable arm wrestling competition supervised by Terry Todd, then-managing editor at *S&H*; and finally (just to name some among so many) Ernie Pickett's 400-pound press, the day after the Sr. National Powerlifting Championships (at the '67 picnic).

Memories -- if possible, even more joyful -- abound of the unforgettable personalities who flocked to the picnics over the decades: All the York men who attended the '45 picnic above, plus Bob Mitchell, Art Levan, Wally Zagurski, Dave Mayor, the Good brothers (Walter, Harry, and Bill), Mike Dietz, Stan Kratkowski, Gord Venables, Eddie Harrison, the Zimmerman brothers (Joe and Dick), Weldon Bullock, Ray VanCleaf, Jake Hitchins, Frank Spellman, John Terlazzo, Harry Paschall, George Shandor, Dick Smith, Bob Hasse, Bill Starr, Tommy Suggs, Dr. John Ziegler, Vern Weaver, and Bill March. Not to mention the legion of York's extended family from far and wide. Virtually every strength world name from East of the Mississippi (and West of it on occasion) journeyed to Papa Bob's muscle grove: Bob Jones, Johnny Krill, Carleton Harris, Bob Harley, Val DeGenaro; the magnificent Seigmund Klein sharing his favorite brand of cigars with George Jowett, the latter with the faintest trace of fine Scotch on his lips; the avuncular Robert Snyder and Ottley Coulter (whose unparalleled strength library, with its vast assemblage of holdings, was bequeathed to the Todd-McLean Collection at the University of Texas); Peary Rader, Charles Smith, Ed Jubinville, the incomparable Paul Anderson, Vic Boff, Leo Murdock, John Fritsche, John Davis, George Eiferman, John Farbotnik; the 22-year-old Bruno Sammartino in 1958 (my new-wife's first-ever glimpse of a muscleman: "What's that?") and, then 13 years later, with his pro wrestling diadem and a \$30,000 Rolls Royce; Jack Walsh, Chuck Vinci, Tommy Kono, Tom Sansone, Joe Pitman, Stan Stanczyk, Gary Gubner, Jim Bradford, Norb Schemansky, John Pulskamp, Dick Zirk, Tony Garcy, Joe Abbenda, Sid Henry, Joe Puleo, Gene Roberson, Van Vasilieff, Bob Gajda, Jerry Daniels, Bill Seno, Karo Whitfield, Rudy Sablo, Jim Witt, Wilbur Miller,

Jim Haislop, Ron Ray, Barry Whitcomb, Phil Grippaldi, Joe Dube, the Hises, Russ Knipp, Fred Lowe, Mike Karchut, Jack Lipsky, the Bergers (Ike and Al), Mark Cameron, Frank Bates, Bob Crist, Karl Faeth, Adam Swirz, Ernie Perersen, Hugh Cassidy, Rick Holbrook, Joe Mills, Morris Weissbrot, Julie Levine, Seymour Koenig, Artie Zeller, Ken Rosa, Pete Rawluk, Dennis Tinerino, Ron Lacy, the Moyers (Jeff and Dave), just to name some that leap out of the past - along with such a one (and this was the magnificence of these picnics) as the big-armed chap who pulled-in to the grove with his retinue from Lynchburg, Virginia--one "Beebo" Logwood (or some such, as I recall the spelling)--who from merely strolling the grounds became, for a Warhol-ian moment, the celebrity of celebrities (where else but at a York picnic...). Indeed, one of my gang (invited only for his gas dollars, I hasten to add) compared his arms with Grimek's, final proof that he was not, truly, "one of us." Dubbed the "Beebo" picnic (by my disgraced friend) this was to be an epiphany for this unpretentious young Southerner in a tee shirt, the afternoon that his unself-conscious stroll through a picnic grove established him as a footnote in the history of this greatest-of-all strongman gatherings: the annual *Strength & Health* picnic.

The memory of Brookside is dear to me for all these reasons, but mostly because, unimportant as I was to this world that meant so much to me, neither I nor anybody else was ever discounted when we approached the famous names, looming there before us as shadow-casting men from "the book." It's even more than this, however. I've long since been disabused of notions concerning "golden ages" and the superiority of the past over the present. There is, of course, much to recommend the present iron game scene. My thesis here is limited: many of the sweet, human, endearing joys of our game have vanished--have been permitted to vanish by us, the very people who bemoan their vanishing. But vanished, they are. Objective folks who have lived in both eras feel this loss deeply. John Grimek spoke eloquently about this loss on the occasion of the Oldtimers' Banquet that honored him a few years ago: the grimness of the current scene, the loss of the joy of competition. Stalwart men "had it out" with one another in the contests that filled picnic day, but though the competition was often spirited, it was fun. One man won and several did not. Nobody really lost, however, because each man took away not just the benefit of an afternoon's exercise, but more importantly, the joy of extending himself in another sort of community, in this case the community of athletic fellowship.

Lest this sound pollyannish, I confess that I do have a memory or two of "snappishness" generated in the competitions on these long, often hot afternoons, but just one or two. Admittedly a 97-pound weakling in many of my picnic-attending days, I don't think it's a boast (and to some probably rather unadmirable) to observe that I am, and was, a good observer and an even better eavesdropper. While my buddies sweated, I observed and eavesdropped. I can remember a quarter-century's words -- and more importantly, faces -- not just of my heroes, but also of the excellent strength athletes who lost to them. On several occasions, of course, my heroes lost to unknowns whose names had never graced the pages of *S&H* and never would, except perhaps in the magazine's follow-up story on the picnic. I don't have memories,

however, of such a loss being perceived as an indignity to be "endured." Along with J.C.G.'s, my memory is of the manliness exhibited in these confrontations: the generosity of both winner and loser.

How different these memories are from what seems to some a sort of "Me Generation" effeminacy, all the more disagreeable to contemplate when manifested by men of heroic musculature and strength. However philosophical one might be, even a dyed-in-the-wool aficionado from an earlier era comes away from much that passes for 80's and 90's competition feeling a bit depressed. As Grimek suggested, our game has been turned into a business. The joy of a game has been replaced by the grimness of a business: so much rides on one's performances. (If a current "star" performs badly too often, he may, God forbid, have to go to work.)

On the other hand, I came away from the York picnics, both as a boy and later as a family man, with a sense of having been a part--a small part to the picnickers, but a large part to me--of a community of people who were gathered to celebrate strength and health, but more importantly, to celebrate each other as celebrants. In such a company, there's no such person as a loser.

Because of commercialization, the influence of big bucks, and steroids' compromise of the innocent joy to be taken in unenhanced athletic accomplishments, what we have today is a game that occasionally leaves a bad taste in our mouths. Of course, it is still replete with shining moments because its current practitioners thrill to the very same siren songs that men have always thrilled to, the difference being that now there are the overwhelming temptations of big profits and big muscles: temptations, thank God, that we were spared 30-60 years ago, lest in our pride and humanness we, too, had succumbed. The York picnic's "shining," however, was not in mere moments; it was a rich glow in which we all basked, young-olders from Atlanta and Chicago and old-youngsters who'd hitchhiked in from just about everywhere.

There were, of course, dissenters (Even the company of God didn't please old Lucifer). I remember one slicked-down chap who, in rounding-up his "slicked-down" buddies, sneered at my hero's pleated trousers and bemoaned a long drive that had ended-up in a "Sunday School with muscles." About the muscles, he was right: they abounded. And he probably wasn't far off about the Sunday School part, either. I always thought it curious that, when a picnicking Brooklyn-type guy broke into a naughty expletive, it invariably came at a decibel-level lower than it would have at Coney Island: a concession (it was nice to think) to the churchly oaks and innocence of honest muscle.

Lucklessly stranded on a hitch-hiking trip back home from the 1945 picnic, I remember looking across the Susquehanna River to a distant column of mountains -- a dark outline against the moonlit purple of a 2:00-in-the-morning sky; and I can still feel the teenager's innocent, if self-dramatizing, exuberance in addressing the attendant stars with a prayer of thanks for just-plain-being-alive in such a deep purple world of so many splendid thoughts to think and dreams to dream: a world of York heroes and York memories and York picnics. Joys, I was sure even then, that would never desert me.