



# IRON GAME HISTORY



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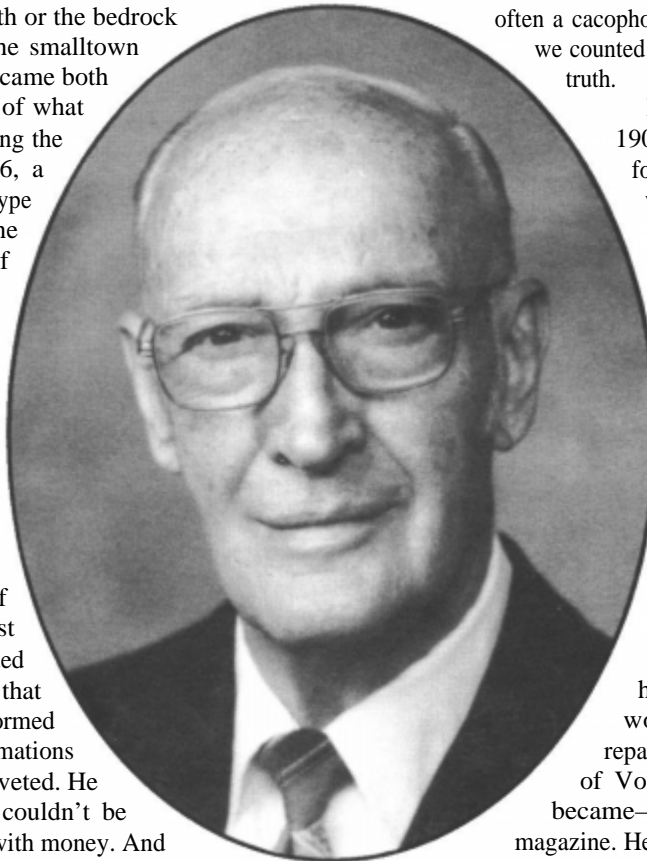
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*Peary Rader (1909-1991)*

## Our Best Man Gone

In what sport historians of the future will no doubt consider an odd twist of fate, a quiet, modest mid-westerner who never left the area of his birth or the bedrock values he learned as a boy in the smalltown churches of western Nebraska became both the symbol and chief chronicler of what was best about the iron game during the half century from 1936 to 1986, a period in which hucksterism and hype played major roles in moving the game from the backwaters of culture to the mainstream. Although Peary Rader never had the impact of, or shared the limelight with, the other publishing giants of the 20th century—Bernarr Macfadden, Bob Hoffman or Joe Weider—he fulfilled a priceless function. He reminded us all—by his good work, his words and, most of all, by the way he lived his life—of what have always been the truest things about our game. He reminded us that there were no secrets, but that we could, nevertheless, be transformed by hard work into closer approximations of the size and strength we all coveted. He also reminded us that muscles couldn't be bought, and had very little to do, with money. And he reminded us that a well-lived—and not just a well-lifted—life is its own reward. Non-commercial in a completely natural way, Peary was the living manifestation of our own early, best days as lifters and bodybuilders, days when we did what we

did for the simple joy of doing it. His magazine—our beloved *Iron Man*—was the steady bass note of reason in what was often a cacophony of claims and counter-claims and we counted on him to sustain us by telling us the truth.



Peary Rader was born on October 17, 1909 in Peru, Nebraska, the oldest of four children. His family moved to the western part of the state, just outside Alliance, when he was four years old and he lived in that area the rest of his life. In 1936, he married Mabel Kirchner, who bore him two sons—Jack (1937), an actor living in Hollywood and Gene (1938), a publisher living in Alliance. By 1936 Peary had been an avid barbell man for several years, having fallen under the sway of the high rep squat as taught by Joseph Curtis Hise. Anxious to share the good news about the wonders of weight training, Peary took a broken copier home from the school where he worked as the maintenance man, repaired it, used it to ditto print 50 copies of Volume One, Number One of what became—and has remained—*Iron Man* magazine. He mailed the copies to his friends and the rest, as they say, is history.

Those who subscribed to the early version of *Iron Man* paid fifteen cents a copy, and the solid honesty of the man behind the magazine was such a strong selling point that it grew through the

late 30's and on through World War II, during which Peary worked for the railroad. Finally, when the war was over and Peary recovered from a serious attack of yellow jaundice, he and Mabel decided they could make a living with the magazine. One of their first acts was to buy an old barracks and move it to 512 Black Hills Avenue, home of *Iron Man* until it was sold to John Balik. The Raders, by themselves, built the concrete block walls for the basement under the barracks, with Peary laying the blocks and Mabel mixing the cement. Once completed, the basement served as a gym, an office for the magazine and a print shop; the barracks themselves were gradually turned into living quarters for the Rader family as money became available.

As the magazine increased in size and readership, Peary and Mabel began to sell their own brand of exercise equipment, books, training courses, and even printing equipment. Eventually, the magazine grew to the point that it had over 40,000 subscribers and was read around the world. Peary and Mabel also printed magazines for other groups, and, in time, a 12,000 square foot

building was erected on the lot behind their home to accommodate the various aspects of their business. Not bad for two kids from rural Nebraska who began with nothing but a broken copier and a dream.

As to the impact Peary and Mabel had on the game to which they dedicated their lives, I'd like to draw now from some of the many comments solicited in 1986 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Iron Man*. I gathered these comments, with help from Vic Boff and Jeff Everson, as I prepared an article for the anniversary issue of the magazine. I should add that I had to convince Peary to give me, and, by extension, his many other friends, the space to publish our comments. Because of our own limitations of space in *IGH*, I'll draw only a sentence or two from each of the contributions we assembled in 1986. Read the comments and judge for yourselves the sort of impact Peary and Mabel had on the field they loved.

"I remember the magazine from its inception, and the great potential it showed with its inspiring pictures and interesting

articles. Though it was quite small by current comparisons, it still packed a strong wallop because of its direct approach." John Grimek—A.A.U. Mr. America, U.S. weightlifting champion and record holder, and former managing editor of *Muscular Development*.

"It is impossible to measure the truly great contributions that Mr. and Mrs. Peary Rader have made to America and the world." Bruce Randall—1959 Mr. Universe, a title he won after having yoayed his bodyweight from 200 to 400 to 187 to 223.

"In a field where commercialism and hype are the order of the day, [Peary and Mabel] have continually been more democratic in their publishing ventures, always allowing all to express their views, opinions and philosophies of physical training." Bill Starr—former managing editor of *Strength & Health*, now strength coach for the John Hopkins lacrosse team.

"More than any other magazine, *Iron Man* has been the foundation of communications for the physical culture community for 50 years." Tom Minichiello, former owner of New York's famous Mid City Gym.

"When I went to work for Arthur Jones and Nautilus in 1973, Arthur sent me to Alliance, Nebraska for six weeks, to learn all I could about publishing from Mabel and Peary Rader...I'll always be grateful...and I appreciate their multiple contributions to the iron game." Dr. Ellington Darden, former Director of Research for Nautilus Sports-Medical Industries and author of many books on weight training.

"Over the years, *Iron Man* has been an encyclopedia of enlightenment. It truly represents our field at its best." Vic Boff—author of many books and articles, member of Brooklyn's famed Iceberg Club and founder and president of the Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen Association.

"[Peary's] a true blue American from your nation's heartland and he has those attributes—honesty, hard work, concern for others, modesty—which you used to see a lot in America but now are becoming rare...It always seemed to me that he just wanted to help people." Doug Hepburn—former world weightlifting champion.

"With *Iron Man*, we always get the best of bodybuilding, powerlifting and Olympic lifting." Jeff and Cory Everson—Cory is the former, five time Ms Olympia and Jeff is a writer and former editor of *Flex*.

"Each issue [of *Iron Man* ] is like a diamond in my library. The magazine represents the iron game with dignity." Milo Steinborn—the late Milo Steinborn was America's strongest man in the 1920's and was also successful as a pm wrestler, wrestling promoter and gym owner.

"What I will always remember about the Raders, and what I, and many other powerlifters will always honor, was the tough stand that both Peary and Mabel took on the steroid issue in powerlifting...And every woman who's involved in weight

training...should be grateful to the Raders for another thing—the fact that *Iron Man* was not afraid to publicize strong women [and treat our] pioneers with seriousness and respect." Jan Todd—former record holder in powerlifting, former head of the USPF and IPF women's committees.

"*Iron Man* is and always has been an informative, balanced and pleasant journal to read." Bill Reynolds—managing editor, *Muscle & Fitness*.

"Two of the finest devotees of the iron game—Peary and Mabel Rader—have devoted their lives for the betterment of our sports and their Christian philosophies are most appreciated in this age of greed, deception and dissension." Herb Glossbrenner—managing editor, *International Olympic Lifter*.

"*Iron Man* has always been a forum in which all opinions could be expressed." Charles A. Smith—the late Charles A. Smith was a writer and editor for the Weider publications during the 1950s.

"No one cares more about the good of the weight sports and no one has contributed more than Peary and Mabel Rader." Clarence Bass—successful master's level bodybuilder, attorney and author.

"What separated it from all the other magazines is that it wasn't so aggressive and pushy about selling products." Frank Stranahan—former U.S. amateur golf champion and pioneer in weight training for athletes.

"Everything stopped when I received it in the mail." Chris Lund—photographer and editor of *Bodybuilding Monthly*.

"The Raders deserve thundering applause on the 50th anniversary of their wonderful publication." Sieg Klein—the late Sieg Klein was a record-holding lifter and pioneering bodybuilder and gym owner.

"Their unselfish contributions have stimulated the growth of the strength sports and have inspired countless young people to embark on healthier lives—a legacy of enduring value." Jim Murray—former managing editor of *Strength & Health* and author of numerous books.

"Peary was always good to put a lot of information in his magazine about [powerlifting]...Some of the people at York didn't really get behind powerlifting until they saw it was going to be popular, but Peary was a long-time squatter himself and he was our salvation." Jim Witt—first chairman of the U.S. Powerlifting Federation.

"I always thought *Iron Man* was the thinking man's magazine...Peary prints things just as he gets them and then lets the readers make up their own minds." Bruce Klemens—author and photographer specializing in weightlifting.

"Whenever I've been asked which physique publication is the best on the market, I've never hesitated, saying, '*Iron Man* magazine of Alliance, Nebraska.'" Bill Pearl—former Mr. America, Mr. Universe and author of several books on weight training.

"Their unbiased and non-political views in reporting and



promoting the sport of bodybuilding are appreciated by everyone who knows the sport well.” Doris Barrilleaux—pioneer in women’s bodybuilding and first national chairperson of the AFWB.

“Together with Joe Weider’s magazines, *Iron Man* has always been my favorite.” Lou Ferrigno—bodybuilder and actor.

“The watchwords at *Iron Man* always seem to have been integrity and modesty.” Leo Gaudreau—the late Leo Gaudreau was an authority on the history of the strength sports.

“*Iron Man* is as close to unopinionated reporting as we can get.” Steve Wennerstmm—editor-in-chief, *Women’s Physique World*.

“In my early days I read, read and read some more (still do) and your magazine gave me countless hours of enjoyment and left me with images that still influence the way I report on bodybuilding.” Rick Wayne—former editor-in-chief, *Flex*.

“Throughout the last 30 years of my life, *Iron Man* has been a beacon of great spiritual as well as physical light showing the way through clean, sensible, health-promoting high standards.” Dr. Ken Rosa—author, chiropractor, jazz pianist and former competitive bodybuilder.

“I think what makes Peary different from other people in his position is that he never seemed to be politically motivated to become any sort of a mogul.” Ken Patera—former national superheavyweight weightlifting champion.

“I think what made *Iron Man* important many of us through the years is that felt Peary kept his magazine above the sometimes petty feuds between the other groups. Because of this, we thought *Iron Man* was more trustworthy.” Tommy Suggs—former editor of *Strength & Health* and former national weightlifting champion.

“I know their help meant everything to me and I honestly believe that had it not been for their example, I wouldn’t be doing what I am today.” Ken Kontor—executive director, National Strength and Conditioning Association.

“The one thing that stands out about Peary and Mabel is that they give everyone a voice.” Fred Howell—author of many physical culture articles.

“Your inspiring magazine is still up to date in our ever-changing weight, exercise and health world.” Ed Jubinville—bodybuilding, powerlifting and armwrestling official and exercise equipment manufacturer.

“Kids are at the mercy of the muscle magazines, and it was a lucky thing for me that *Iron Man* was on the newsstand of the Ideal Pharmacy in Eastman, Georgia in those days. It was my salvation.” John Coffee—coach of the winning team at the U.S. women’s weightlifting championships for nine years.

“Although there were many promises from other strength magazines, only the *Raders* extended advertising to Jackson all down through the many years, even though I was in competition with *Iron Man*’s own line of weight equipment.” Andy Jackson—

barbell manufacturer for almost 50 years.

“Honesty and integrity have been the keywords of the publishers of the excellent magazine.” Bruce Page—author.

“I appreciate the fact that you have taken an outstanding Christian attitude that would show everyone just where you stand spiritually.” Paul Anderson—former world and Olympic superheavyweight weightlifting champion.

“Thanks, Peary and Mabel, for all the years of quality reporting without compromise.” George Redpath—author and gym owner.

“To me the magazine has been openminded and honest in dealing with every phase of weight training.” Leo Stern—former bodybuilding champion and pioneer gym owner.

“I salute you, Peary, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the publishing of the finest and most informative as well the most honest magazine in the business.” Tony Ditillo—author of books and articles on weight training.

“Mabel and Peary created a magazine that was never the mouthpiece for one narrow set of editorial biases or just another glorified catalogue for a given brand name of equipment and health foods. Without compromising their Christian principles, they have quietly led the game for a half century by permitting every ‘voice of reason’ to make its case before the jury of *Iron Man*’s discriminating readers.” Dr. Al

Thomas—college professor and author of many articles about weight training.

Please understand that these remarks were gladly given and that not a single person was approached who was reluctant to join in saluting the *Raders* and *Iron Man*. Please understand as well that hundreds more luminaries of our game would have been proud to add their names and words to the salute, had we only had the time to contact everyone. The people above are meant to be representative, not inclusive.

Perhaps Peary’s reputation resulted from the breadth of his interests as well as his capacity for honesty and hard work. He was vitally interested in all aspects of the game and no one, with the exception of Bob Hoffman, travelled to more bodybuilding, weightlifting and powerlifting meets than Peary did during the 50 years they shared the stage in America. For some years, Peary was the national chairman of the A.A.U. Physique Committee, and he judged at dozens of national championships in all three of the weight sports. He was also voted, along with Mabel, into the hall of fame in all three sports, and he was honored in 1989 by the Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen for his outstanding contributions to physical culture through the years.

In my view, very few people in this century have led lives of such unwavering coherence. Early in life Peary was called to preach the gospel of physical and spiritual strength and for over 50 years he heeded the call with quiet dedication. Now that he is gone and we reckon what he meant to us all, we see that he was the best of us. The very best.

