



IRON GAME HISTORY



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Passings

Whenever a well-known iron man falls, we feel the wind. The cold wind. When we knew the man personally, the sadness intensifies. And when the man played a pivotal role in our own life in the game, the burden is heavier still. But when two such men die within a few days of each other, as was the case with Leo Murdock and Bob Peoples, you have a sharpened sense of the transience of vigor and strength, of life itself. I'm also left with a strong sense of obligation to honor these men by remembering them.

I first met Leo Murdock in Austin, Texas in 1956. He had come to Austin from New York in the middle '50s and had opened a gym in an old house in the downtown district. Being Austin's first such gym, "Murdock's" was much discussed by the young men in the area, especially those few, like me, who had done any training of their own. I'd been lifting weights with a friend in his basement for several months when I heard about Murdock's, and my own curiosity and that of my friend led us one day to walk up on the old house's porch and enter our first commercial gym.

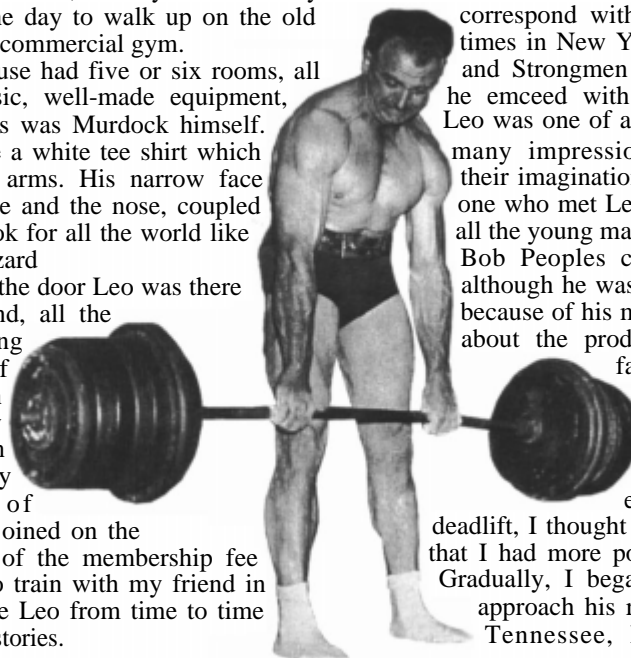
The bungalow-style house had five or six rooms, all of which were filled with basic, well-made equipment, the central feature of Murdock's was Murdock himself. Over six feet in height, he wore a white tee shirt which exposed his long, thick, hairy arms. His narrow face dominated by a world-class nose and the nose, coupled with his bald pate, made him look for all the world like a large, somewhat muscular buzzard

As soon as we came in the door Leo was there to greet us and show us around, all the while keeping up this amazing banter about the benefits of training. He also regaled us with tales of his friendship with many leading figures in the game, men I'd been reading about in my friend's large collection of magazines. No doubt I'd have joined on the spot had I been in possession of the membership fee but as it was I just continued to train with my friend in the basement, dropping in to see Leo from time to time and be entertained by his many stories.

He made a great success of the gym, and soon he'd opened a much larger place in a building constructed specifically as a health club, complete with a large training room, a lifting platform, two steam rooms, a massage room, an outdoor pool and a businessmen's facility on the second floor. Murdock's even attracted the movers and shakers of central Texas, and it was common to see state senators and supreme court judges training there.

Leo did a great deal to promote weight training, often organizing exhibitions at a large outdoor amphitheater. One I recall featured weightlifting, powerlifting, posing, armwrestling, exercise demonstrations and even challenges to the audience, with Leo, of course, maintaining a running commentary on the microphone. Through an unfortunate business decision several years later, Leo lost his lease on the building and thus his business and moved back to New York, where he worked as a physical therapist. I continued to correspond with him, and we spent many pleasant times in New York at the annual Olde Time Barbell and Strongmen Association dinners, most of which he emceed with his industrial-strength enthusiasm. Leo was one of a kind and the impression he made on many impressionable young men helped inflame their imagination with dreams of physical power. No one who met Leo is likely ever to forget him, least of all the young man I was almost 40 years ago.

Bob Peoples came into my life somewhat later, although he was one of my earliest iron game heroes because of his monumental deadlifting records. I read about the prodigious strength this east Tennessee farmer had built in his cellar using primitive power racks of his own design, and I began to hope that I could one day reach big weights. After I began to lift in some of the early power meets, and to practice the deadlift, I thought more often about Bob as it was clear that I had more potential in this lift than in any other. Gradually, I began to wonder if I might be able to approach his record. Finally, in 1965, in a meet in Tennessee, I managed to hoist 730 pounds,



breaking by five pounds the record Bob had held for more than 15 years. But the fact that I outweighed him by well over 100 pounds and had an “inside” job that allowed me plenty of time to train left no doubt in my mind or in anyone else’s that I wasn’t in his league as a deadlifter when everything was taken into consideration.

I spoke to Bob shortly after I’d made the record to thank him for his inspiration and to tell him I knew I wasn’t in his class, and he seemed to appreciate it. In any case, we became friends, and I visited him and his wonderful wife, Juanita, on their farm outside Johnson City several times as the years passed. I even wrote a two-part article in *Muscular Development* about 20 years ago in which I concluded that he was one of the most creative and ground-breaking training theorists in the history of strength training. I still hold to that opinion.

One aspect of Bob’s life which has often escaped those of us in the game is how active he was in the life of his community. He was a county commissioner for years, he was elected to the school board, he was active in the church, and he served on a wide variety of local committees, all the while continuing life as an active farmer. For a time, he even held

down another job, yet he still found time to go down to his cellar-where the first real power rack was ever built-and train. During each of my visits there, I came away amazed and inspired by his analytical and unique approach to training. For example, back in the days when everyone recommended that the deadlift be done with the head up, the back flat and the lungs filled, Bob believed that a greater weight could be lifted by certain physical types, among which he included himself, using a style with the head down, the back rounded and the air expelled from the lungs at the start of the lift.

Bob played a critical role in my life as an athlete, as he did in the lives of other lifters, including Paul Anderson. He was a wonderful, intelligent man and he lived a full, socially responsible life. Jan and I passed within 25 miles of his farm on our way to Canada this June only a few days before he died. We were way behind schedule for a clinic in New Jersey, yet we almost stopped to visit him even though we would have had to drive all through the night and part of the next day. Not a day has passed since his death in which I haven’t thought of Bob and regretted my decision to continue driving.

... *Terry Todd*