

*Where Are They Now?*

Al Thomas Kutztown University

# Terry Robinson

## THE LEGEND BEHIND THE MAN BEHIND THE LEGEND

When the history of our sport is written, a chapter at least must be reserved for the wonderful characters who filled Southern California's gyms and beaches with the loquacious charm peculiar to New Yorkers from all Gotham's boroughs. The senior member of this polyglot Senate is the Robinson whose name had earned respect and affection along the Strand long before those latter-day interlopers, Ed and Robbie, had even been born. An ex-Golden Gloves champion, physique title-holder, "kill-or-be-killed" instructor in the South Pacific, chiropractor, business executive, physical director and gym manager, instructor to Hollywood's greatest stars (and thousands of others), confidante to one of history's most famous singers, author, fine artist, lecturer on health (having appeared on the "Johnny Carson Show", "A.M. America," and "The Today Show" to name three of many), and current General Manager of the Century West Club in Century City—muscle's first and favorite Robinson—he is Terry Robinson.

The son of an ex-boxer, Terry grew up in a tough section of Brooklyn's Coney Island, the middle child among five brothers. Still at 75 a swimmer, Terry's introduction to the world of sports was as a swimmer (at the tender age of four months), the result of being tossed-in, based on his father's theory that salt water possessed healing properties. Over the passing years, Terry distinguished himself in track and took up weight training to build enough muscle mass to permit going-out for football. During his seventeenth year, he spent the summer in a Pennsylvania sports camp, where he gained 15 pounds of muscle: "I could run much faster even with my increased bodyweight . . . and I made the team . . . My whole attitude changed, and it was because I was training with weights."<sup>1</sup>

Following in his father's footsteps, Terry came under the tutelage of Benny Leonard (the great lightweight boxing champion), as part of the Police Athletic League boxing program, going on, at 18, to win the New York Golden Gloves featherweight title. The boxing tradition in the Robinson

household was a deeply rooted one. His father, an ex-fighter, was a member of the New York State Boxing Commission and a licensed judge for professional boxing. In Terry's early years, he started "truly serious training" at the Brooklyn Central YMCA, where he trained with Walter Podolak, Manny Kohl, Phil Morano, and Victor Nicoletti. He also did some training at Sieg Klein's with Frank Leight and the others.<sup>2</sup>

Despite his (still comparatively) light bodyweight, Terry earned a track and football scholarship to Columbia University: "It was clear to me that the weightlifting that I was working so hard at had changed my life. I had developed

the athletic confidence needed by a short man. I've been preaching this truth ever since my college days."<sup>3</sup> More interested in the physical activities that were to provide the basis of his later life than in academics, per se, at that point

Columbia, pursuing his education in night school and working in the daytime at McGovern's Gym in the Wall Street area. At McGovern's, he met Dr. George Swetlow ("a genius who was both a physician and a lawyer, as well as a great inspiration" to him), who introduced the youngster to the healing art that was to provide the professional core of his adult life, chiropractic:

"Swetlow gave Terry books and encouraged

him to read. And for the first time in his life, Terry heard the word chiropractic . . . : 'I didn't even know what a chiropractor was. But when I learned it was related to helping people and fitness, I enrolled at The Chiropractic Institute of New York.'" After graduation, Terry got permission to set up a small chiropractic office in the famed 42nd Street gym where he was training, George Bothner's Gym. Here Terry's reputation grew, both for his spinal adjustments and success as a weight training instructor.<sup>4</sup>

"In those days, we were doing what amounted to sports medicine, but we didn't call it that. We said, only, that we were providing chiropractic stretches and corrective exercises with barbells and dumbbells."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, a simpler, less pretentious time in the evolution of this important modern-day



TERRY ROBINSON WITH THE GREAT TENOR, MARIO LANZA, AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS CAREER.

healing specialty. Some of the famous show business names that he worked with in New York include Cole Porter (after his accident when he was confined to a wheelchair), composer Lawrence Hart, and dancer Ted Shawn.

Contributing also to Terry's growing reputation in the field was his 1940 fifth-place performance in the first official Mr. America contest, won by John Grimek at Madison Square Garden: "Grimek was everyone's idol in those days. He was on the 1936 Olympic weightlifting team and could do things no one else could do, like splits and handbalancing. Just meeting him was an honor. When I took fifth to Grimek, I was the happiest guy that ever lived."<sup>6</sup> In the 1941 Mr. America, in Philadelphia, he took sixth (as Grimek won the title for the second time in a row). In 1948, Terry won the prestigious Mr. New York contest. By this time, his photos had been appearing in the physical culture magazines since 1935, and he had become a coverman for *Strength & Health* and *Iron Man* magazines and had posed, over the years, for many exercise layouts.<sup>7</sup>

Between these contests, Terry was a contestant for four years in the biggest of all contests, World War II: "I graduated from the Non-Commissioned Officers' Physical Training School in Florida as a staff sergeant and was sent to Texas for further training. I was then assigned to the South Pacific to set-up physical training and hand-to-hand combat classes. In addition, as the wounded started to arrive at our hospitals, I set-up physical rehabilitation for them, called "The Convalescent Training Program," centered upon weight training and swimming as rehabilitation."<sup>8</sup>

When asked how he got from New York to California, Terry spoke of his work with a sickly eighteen-year old boy for whom he provided chiropractic, stretching, and physical exercise: "His very wealthy father felt he needed to live in a better climate, and since by that time I was out of military service and divorced, I told the boy's father that I had been planning to leave New York, myself, for California in order to make a new beginning. Fortunately for both of us, the father sponsored the trip for his son and me to California, and even provided a car. So, in the summer of '48, I drove the boy across the country, finally settling down in the Los Angeles area because of its climate and because of the fact it was a center for physical culturists." In the City of Angels, he trained at Bruce Conners' Gym in Westwood, at Bert Goodrich's Gym in Hollywood, in Vic Tanny's basement gym in Santa Monica, and also at the original Muscle Beach.<sup>9</sup>

Professionally, Terry became an assistant to Dr. Benedict Lupica, one of his professors from the Chiropractic Institute. As a result of this job, Terry came into contact with the head of MGM Studios, Louis B. Mayer, whose bad back demanded Terry's chiropractic skills. Liking the voluble New Yorker, Mayer asked him to open a gym and to be the physical director at MGM. In this capacity, he was responsible for getting the stars into shape, among many others Clark Gable, Tyrone Power, Spencer Tracy, Robert Taylor, George C. Scott, Glenn Ford, Billy Dee Williams, and John Ritter. The turning point, however, in Terry's career and life came one day when Mayer asked him to help MGM's mercurial new star, Mario Lanza, get into shape for a forthcoming movie. Terry's life would never again be the same after that meeting: "Mario and I hit it off pretty well," Terry recalls. "We spoke the same language — he was from South Philadelphia, and I was from Brooklyn. He was an only child, and I became like a brother to him. I gave up chiropractic, except to help my friends, and moved into Mario's home to be his personal trainer, and publicity man, movie stand-in, and traveling

companion. His four kids called me 'Uncle Terry'. That's how close we all were."<sup>10</sup>

"Mario loved to bench press and curl. He was quite strong and could bench 300 pounds and curl 150 pounds. He trained hard, and we did very deep breathing to assist his lung capacity. An interesting note is that he worked out before his recording sessions and felt that this contributed to his best singing: it opened his lungs, sinuses, and chest so that the full power and beauty of his voice could be expressed. It was unbelievable. Mario loved weightlifters and boxers. He and I often boxed; in fact, he had built a gym in his home, complete with a boxing ring. When Rocky Marciano was champion, he stayed at Lanza's home when in Los Angeles, and we sparred around together. One evening, when our Olympic weightlifting team was in town for an appearance on the Steve Allen Show, Mario invited them to his home. I particularly remember how thrilled John Davis was to meet Lanza because John loved the opera."

"You asked about my biggest disappointment in the game. My biggest was that I couldn't get Mario, my very best friend, to stop drinking. He simply couldn't drink. When he did, it changed his personality completely. But the pressure of Hollywood brought on his deep depressions and, along with them, his alcoholism, the price for his huge success. If it hadn't been for this problem, who knows? Mario was big in every way. He had a huge chest, which I once measured at 50 inches. He had wide shoulders and, rather than defined muscles, was chunky. He was very athletic and even sang 'physically,' emotionally. He was a good parent, full of fun, a typical South Philly guy. He did everything in a big way. He was all man."<sup>11</sup>

Lanza died at 38 in 1959. His wife followed him five months later. One of the probing insights into the tragedy implicit in the great tenor's life, both personally and professionally, is provided by Terry's fine study, *Lanza—His Tragic Life*, an outgrowth of yet another side of this multifaceted man. Upon the death of Lanza's wife, the court awarded Terry guardianship of the four children (Colleen, Lisa, Damon, and Mark), and he proved to be a loving father. (Though divorced, Terry is a grandfather; his daughter, who lives in Florida, has three children.) It is clear that the nurturing side of this complex ex-fighter has manifested itself in many ways, especially during "Uncle Terry's" 16 years as a "bachelor father" for his clan.

During the 25 years of his devotion to the Lanzas', however, Terry had come to sense a "loss of [his] own personal identity," not to mention having drifted away from his profession, chiropractic. Terry's final reconciliation with his former life was provided by the health club movement, which was just beginning to take shape in those days. It was not long before he was back in the "real world" — opening up health clubs.

For some time, he managed the Sports Connection Club in L.A.; in the late 1950s, he took over management of the splendid Beverly-Wilshire Health Club, the prototype of the luxurious present-day, all-purpose health club: "We were way ahead of the time. We built the club around a swimming pool and had a big weight room, barber shop, restaurant—the works. I managed it for ten years."<sup>12</sup> Currently, Terry is general manager of the magnificent Century West Club in Century City, California: "The health business is the greatest business in the world today. I'm grateful to be alive to see people are finally realizing that the 'muscleheads' of my day were on to something."<sup>13</sup>

Terry rises early, around 4:30, and trains for about an hour,

## TERRY ROBINSON ON HIS 50TH BIRTHDAY

six days a week, mostly bodybuilding with barbells and dumbbells: "Free weights have always been my favorite equipment. I train to stay toned, to keep my good posture, my strength, and my endurance. After my weight workout, I swim for half an hour. I don't run anymore because I had a laminectomy a few years ago and don't want to stress my lower back. My grandchildren, both the boys and the girls, work out also, following my training principles. I never eat fried foods or food with fat, never overeat, and refrain from eating before bedtime. I've never taken vitamin pills and keep my bodyweight between 155-160 pounds. I look taller than my 5' 6 1/2" because I am conscious of my posture and proud of it. I walk tall and even sit tall. As a boy, my father told me 'to walk up and look at the stars,' and I never forgot it."<sup>14</sup>

"I have two hobbies. I write articles on health and exercise for *The Italian Tribune*, *The Century City News*, some senior citizens' newsletters, and formerly for the (now defunct) *Herald Examiner*. I also love to paint portraits and landscapes, especially in oil and charcoal. I studied art at the Russian master, Sergei Bongart's, School of Art for five years. As an aside, one of my classmates was James Cagney. Much of my work is exhibited in homes throughout the area; I've also done album and magazine covers."<sup>15</sup>

For 30 years, Terry has traveled to Philadelphia to "do" the annual Mario Lanza Institute's "Mario Lanza Ball," acting as Master of Ceremonies for this prestigious cultural event, which is attended by opera lovers from around the globe, who gather there to remember the great tenor, whose operatic achievement is honored by the young Lanza Scholarship winners who make their debuts that evening. Yet another honor for our subject.

Unlike many of his age, Terry is generous in his praise for the current generation's accomplishments: "My heroes are Grimek, Reeves, Eiferman, Goodrich, Frank Stranahan, and, yes, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has done more for bodybuilding than anyone else. Today's bodybuilders are unbelievable; words can't describe the physiques. Of course, I am against the use of steroids, but today's bodybuilders and lifters are in a class beyond belief."<sup>16</sup>

The story of Terry's beloved Silvia tells us much about both. Twenty years ago, Silvia, a Flamenco ballet dancer, was hit by a drunk driver and "left to vegetate as a paraplegic in a wheelchair." Finding herself bereft of her career as a dancer, Silvia was on the verge of giving-up when Terry learned of her misfortune through her sister who works in his club. When she was brought to him for therapy, they fell in love, and now, as a result of Terry's therapy and love, Silvia is "up on braces part of the day, and lifts dumbbells every day. She

has a new life, and so do I," Terry declares; "we've been very happy together for these past eighteen years."<sup>17</sup>

"At present, I'm seventy-five and in great shape. I would like to be remembered as a man who spent his life helping others to achieve a sound mind in a sound body. Thanks to weightlifting as a boy, I built my confidence as I built my body. I've had a happy life and will continue to make it happy until the end. I've always preached good health through exercise. It's nice, even at this late date, that we're finally being appreciated by the medical profession, the media, and the public as people who knew what we were talking about and what we were doing. It can only get better!"

To which, the cynic would say, "Yeah, 'It can only get better' because it couldn't possibly get any worse." But with a flash of that mischievous smile of his, part master of ceremonies, part Kirk Douglas, I can envisage Terry putting a muscular arm around the cynic's shoulder and saying something to the effect: "You've heard of 'Social Darwinism.' Well, I preach what you might call 'Social-Progressive Resistance-ism,' and this aims at developing the spirit's muscles, along with the body's: the human race's muscles, along with some individual musclehead's muscles. It's preaching, brother, that I'm all about, and my sermon is that 'It can only get better.' I'm teaching a swimming class to some disabled kids down at the pool this afternoon. Are you with me? How about coming along and giving me a hand with them?"

Under the weighty arm of this (what can I say?) visionary ex-boxer from Brooklyn, our cynic might just find this an offer that he can't afford to turn-down. This is, of course, admittedly, an imagined scenario, but one that projects this writer's best guess as to the real nature of this multi-faceted hero from his long-ago boyhood.

The final word is the great Earle Liederman's, who, when asked about Terry, captured perfectly the essence of his friend: "The man has lived a Technicolor life." Amen.

1. Roe Campo, "Terry Robinson, Trainer of Many Hollywood Celebrities . . . and Still Going Strong," *Muscular Development* (February 1984): 49.

2. Terry Robinson to Al Thomas, personal letter, n.d.

3. Ibid.

4. Campo, "Terry Robinson," 63-64.

5. Robinson letter

6. Campo, "Terry Robinson," 64.

7. Robinson letter

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Campo, "Terry Robinson," 64.

14. Robinson letter

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.