

John Terpak's 80th Birthday: A York Reunion

John Fair, Ph.D.
Auburn University at Montgomery

On the evening of Saturday, July 4, 1992, over 40 guests converged on the Ramada Inn at York to celebrate John Terpak's 80th birthday. A native of Mayfield, Pennsylvania, Johnny appeared destined in the Depression years to share the hard life of his Ukrainian-born father in the coal mines. But he took up weightlifting as a youth to improve his less than robust health and found he was pretty good at it. Soon he was competing on the national level. In 1935 Terpak was "discovered" by Bob Hoffman when he won the lightweight class at the Junior Nationals in Philadelphia with a 907 pound five lift total, making 14 of 15 attempts. He was enticed to Muscletown by a letter from Hoffman containing a five dollar bill. He became the sixth man in the nascent York Barbell Company, joining Bob, Tony Terlazzo, Harry and Walter Good, and Bob Mitchell. Dick Bachtell and Wally Zagurski worked in the adjoining oil burner operation.

Johnny quickly became Bob's favorite. Not only was he a dedicated employee, but he most nearly approximated the vision Hoffman had set for American manhood. Hoffman called Terpak "the mystery man of weightlifting." Although Terpak hoisted impressive poundages in flawless style, he possessed a physique more like that of a basketball player of that era than that of a strength athlete. He had what Hoffman idealized as "useful muscles." As a mainstay of the York team, Johnny went on to win 11 national championships (1936-45 & 1947), capture two world titles (1937 & 1947), and lift in two Olympic Games (1936 & 1948). His Olympic lifter's physique and form were displayed on the cover of *Strength & Health* seven times during his prime.

Terpak's career in the company started with him painting, packaging and labeling weights and loading them into trucks. Later he graduated to a desk job where he, Terlazzo, and Mitchell answered Hoffman's mail, often under the pseudonym of Lawrence Smith. In 1939 John became General Manager. For the next four decades he was Hoffman's right-hand man, accompanying him on most of his weightlifting and commercial junkets. Terpak's basic approach toward business and sport coincided with Hoffman's conception of "the York Way." He complemented, without threatening, his boss's formidable ego and served as a counterweight to some of Hoffman's more Olympian notions. Johnny was one of those individuals at York (others were Dick Smith and John Terlazzo) who sorted out details for Bob and made things work. He eventually became national weightlifting chairman (1967-1971) and Olympic Coach (1968 & 1972). When Hoffman died in 1985, Terpak ascended to the top of the organization as CEO and, later, as Chairman of the Board.

The birthday gala was hosted and emceed by long time friend Murray Levin, who recognized many other old-timers in the group for their many years of service to American weightlifting. The foremost tribute to Terpak was Karl Faeth's accolade that "this man has class," a sentiment that was greeted with unanimous acclaim. At 80 John Terpak remains the "mystery man," still putting in long hours at the office, traveling all over the world to meets and meetings, and displaying all the vim and vigor of a man half his age.