



IRON GAME HISTORY



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JIM WITT: A LIFE WITH TWO LOVES

It is, I suppose, in the nature of things that a journal devoted to the history of the iron game would report the deaths of those who had distinguished themselves in the field of physical culture. Our field is a large and growing one, and the focus of *IGH* is concentrated on people who made their primary contributions prior to 1960, so we often have many deaths to report. Even so, it is a hard thing, especially when one of the men who died was one of our oldest friends.

Jim Witt was a man already in his middle years when I first met him over 30 years ago, but although he was well into his fifth decade of life, he was a “young” lifter, having come to the game late. I’ve often thought, in fact, that his late introduction to lifting accounted for the depth of his love for the iron. I’ve known few men who loved lifting with such prolonged constancy. Perhaps because he realized that he lacked the luxury of time enjoyed by younger lifters approached the weights with a fierce passion. He enjoyed everything about the game—training, coaching other lifters, spectating, promoting co tests, serving as an administrator and, especially, competing.

Some years ago, I taped an interview with Jim, and the following excerpt from that interview reveals not only his love for lifting but also his unique, ornery personality.

“Well, I never touched a weight til I was over 30, but when I did touch one it damn sure touched me back. Lots of folks say

I’m still a little touched. I was a boxer when I was young. Seventy-five amateur fights. I was in the paratroopers in the war and I got my knee all shot up over in Italy in 1944. Once I got on the weights, my knee got better. I entered my first lifting meet in 1962 in Tyler, Texas. I was 47. Lots of folks told me I was too old for such foolishness, but I didn’t pay a bit of attention. An old man

can love a woman just as much as a young man can, specially if he’s never been in love before.

That was how it was with me and these damned old weights. I even do the

Olympic lifts. Not too damn well, though. But the powerlifts. They’ve

been good to me and I’ve tried to be good to them. Lately, of course,

I’ve had a few problems of one sort or another. That fall I had awhile

back was the main thing. I was up on the gym roof with my son and I

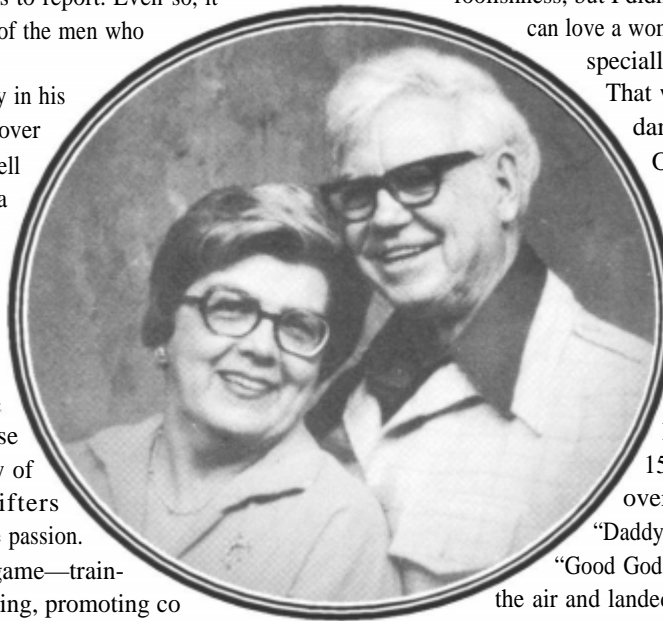
lost my footing and fell about 12 or 15 feet, right on my back. My boy ran

over to the edge and hollered down, “Daddy, are you all right?” and I yelled back,

“Good God Almighty, son, I fell 15 feet through the air and landed on my back and I’m 65 years old.

What the hell do you think?” It was bad enough that I had to have a disc removed that September. Naturally, the doctor told me not to lift heavy anymore. Naturally, I’m not paying him any mind.”

Several years after Jim took delivery on his first York Olympic set, he decided that he wanted to open a gym and make weight training and competitive lifting his life’s work. Many wives



would not have supported such a risky career change for a man in middle-age, but Helen Witt was a woman who wanted what her man wanted and she gave him her absolute blessing. Thus it was that the Hercules Health Club was born, a club Jim operated until he died. The Witts had a marriage which was a source of wonder to all their friends—she always accompanied him to meets when he travelled outside Dallas, and she helped him organize and conduct the meets he promoted at home. When the Amateur Athletic Union began to break up and powerlifting earned the right to its own federation, Jim was chosen as the sport's first chairman, and Helen helped him run the show, handling a lot of the paperwork and keeping Jim from smacking as many people as he wanted to smack. Helen was as kind as Jim was tough. They made a wonderful team, and everyone who knew them at all well knew how hard it would be on Jim when cancer took Helen three years ago.

Helen's funeral was heartbreaking because Jim seemed so lost, but when he went to join her last month all his old lifting bud-

dies agreed that Jim was ready to go. His Helen was gone and he had lost the hunger he had had in such full measure for so long. We all agreed that few men are fortunate enough to have a love which lasts undimmed for a lifetime, and that Jim had had two—his wife and his damned old weights.



We'd like to welcome Dr. John Fair to our Editorial Board. Dr. Fair is nearing completion of a book examining the life and influence of Bob Hoffman and the York Barbell Club on American weightlifting. A longtime weight trainer, Dr. Fair is the Chairman of the History Department at Auburn University at Montgomery, Alabama. He has written two excellent articles on weightlifting for the *Journal of Sport History*. He plans at least two other articles based on the Coulter-Jowett-Willoughby correspondence here at the Todd-McLean Collection. Watch for them in future issues of *IGH*.