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More On The Nature of Bodybuilding

Al Thomas' article in the December, 1994 issue of *Iron Game History* is a sad reflection of "Old Timer's" disease getting yet another of us. Things were different in the "old days"—and I too liked many things better "back then." But we have to remember that our "good old days" were times for an even older group who thought that their "old days" were better than ours. Our views of the old days were not driven by a pure love of muscle—read the article on George Jowett in the same issue. Joe Weider is surely not a worse person than D. G. Redmond in his successful drive to make a business of bodybuilding.

Thomas maintains "... the function of editors is to provide moral leadership, not merely to follow the dictates of the market analysis." That is a fine ideal, but without a magazine to edit the "moral leadership" provided doesn't go very far, so if the "market analysis" is not heeded we don't have the "moral leadership" of its editor.

Thomas maintains that muscular physiques must not, can not, be judged on "aesthetics," that our modern day bodybuilding contests are therefore doomed to failure since they are based on judges' decisions. And what about judged photography contests, and art competitions, and dance competitions? The judges' decisions based on "aesthetics" have not doomed these art forms.

Thomas contends that the modern bodybuilding fan has, in fact, "... been conditioned by culture and society." He has it backward—culture and society are caused by human nature; they are a reflection of what we think and do, not vice versa.

How many physique contests, or other such events, has Thomas ever promoted himself? If he believes that an audience of thirteen hundred fans in a city the size of New York is a "success" he has a very limited view of what constitutes a successful promotion.

Thomas believes that professional bodybuilding and professional bodybuilders somehow detract from the pure sport of amateur bodybuilding. Nonsense—do professional golfers making millions ruin golf for all of the amateurs playing on thousands of golf

courses all over the world every day? In Al's "good old days" Eugen Sandow was a very highly paid professional and he certainly did not detract from the sport for so being.

Does Thomas really believe that Bob Hoffman ran York Barbell Co. for the fun of it? Or that Joe Weider is not a bodybuilder and a devoted bodybuilding fan? Does he really believe that in the "good old days" it was all for pure fun and enjoyment and that now it is purely business? Why then after Lee Haney left his Weider contract for rival TwinLab and *Muscular Development* did he still win Weider's "Mr. Olympia?" Especially since Lee Haney is black and Thomas feels that hurts him in the "business."

Things change—and I do not like all of the changes—but the business of our sport has always been a very important part of how things "played out," from Calvert and Milo through York and Bob Hoffman and the Weiders. To believe otherwise is the result of "Old Timers" disease and it's just not true. Let's enjoy the past and let the present and future develop and change without losing sight of the fact that these will be the "good old days" pretty soon
Mike Graham, Austin, Texas



Al Thomas Responds:

What we have here is, clearly, a failure in communication. One: I make it clear, throughout, that the "old days" were far from "good" in several important moral and sociological dimensions, which were spelled out in detail. Two: I never suggest that the old days were driven by "pure love" of anything. "Purity" was in no less short supply in those days than it is today. Three: "Market analysis" kept black men off baseball diamonds (to name just one sport) and also off the covers of bodybuilding magazines until men like baseball's Branch Rickey and several right-minded muscle mag editors realized that they were, in truth, obligated to provide moral leadership. When this lesson was at last learned black baseball players became sports heroes second to none, and muscle magazines with

black bodybuilders on their covers sold as never before. This simple lesson was not learned, however, until many of the morally-confused arguments based upon “market analysis”—like similar governmental arguments based on “national security”—were seen for what they are: the last refuge of scoundrels who used such “analyses” to the furtherance of their own agendas and to the obviation of their need to act in principled fashion. Four: Mr. Graham has refrained from grappling with my arguments *per se*. He deals, instead, with a caricature of the complex arguments developed. For instance, in photo contests and art competitions (which, of course, many people find a perverse response to art), a work of art is judged, not a human being. The difference between competition of this sort and physique competition is subtle but important to those of us who love physique exhibition or display, without the competition. In physique contests, we judge, not just an artistic creation but a human being. We do, indeed, judge an artistic creation, but most importantly and devas-

tatingly, we subject to judgment a flesh and blood person, with all the potential psychological damage that attends this gradation process.

Five: The connection is not clear between the gist of Mr. Graham’s criticism of my article and his criticism here, of my proposition that man is conditioned by society and culture, a contention that seems as unavailable to sane debate as his own contention about man’s “human nature.” Even the most honest of folks have subscribed, on occasion, to both his and my proposition: sometimes (counfoundingly, but humanly) leaning to his in one situation; and to mine, in another. In such so-very-human dilemmas, it’s well to judge gently. Six: by the time I reached the sixth criticism, I realized that Mr. Graham was responding, not to my essay but to a simplified and simplistic version of it in his own mind and of his own construction. Of course and obviously, (further evidence that Mr. G. had missed totally the whole painstakingly developed point): An audience of thirteen hundred “fans” for a New York City “physique

contest” publicized in all the traditional channels, would surely NOT be a success. But this, Mr. G. was NOT a “physique contest,” and that it was *not* was the whole point! NOT a physique contest, it WAS the wholly unprecedented creation of one person: a physique EXHIBITION of a sort never before conceived, much less theatrically mounted. In addition, it was carried off with only a hint of publicity in the muscle mags or in any other traditional channels of promotion and publicity, despite the watershed character of this non-contest, non-competitive, wholly-theatrical and unprecedented example of what one writer called the “theater of beautiful physique.”

After thirty-six years of school teaching, I relish and elicit criticism and the debate that attends it. My article may, indeed undoubtedly does need the sort of thoughtful criticism and debate that lead to a new and improved synthesis. My disappointment here is NOT a criticism of my closely-developed arguments, but at the fact that Mr. G. has ignored the complexity of the argument advanced, choosing to destroy air castles of his own construction, over-simplifying complex issues, and then indulges himself with a kindly-disposed homily, lest *IGH* readers succumb to the siren song of my “old timers disease” and its (supposed) bromides about the better-ness of old days. In reality, the “old game” was a creature of the Thirties and Forties, and like the eras that shaped it, it was rife with homophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, and racism. How could it not be? All of us from those days can remember being horrified by examples of these elements in our game—or even more horrified today, that we weren’t, back then. In the Thirties and Forties, these elements were manifest in ways that they no longer are, which has nothing to do with any improvements in the morality of our game or even in ourselves, and much to do with the greater sensitivity orchestrated in our lives and our game today by the socialization of our collective conscience. But lest we get too proud of ourselves, it is clear even in the Nineties, that one doesn’t have to be gay to find examples of homophobia in today’s game; or have to be Jewish to find lingering examples of anti-Semitism; or female to discover sexism (with the sports many “nuns,” but still no priests, much less a bishop or two—or a Pope); nor does one have to be black to discover the vestiges of racism. Before implying that the vestiges of racism are no longer operative in Nineties bodybuilding, it would behoove Mr. G. to ask the game’s current black champions (including the retired Lee Haney) whether they’ve experienced bias (in his word, “hurt”) based upon their skin color. I think he will be surprised.

To demur about Sandow is hardly germane to the article’s points. To be, as Sandow was, a professional “bodybuilder” in his era was totally different from the “profession” today with its thousands of devout aspirants. Indeed, it’s difficult to think of the endeavor graced by Sandow as “bodybuilding” (a term he wouldn’t have understood). It’s even more difficult to compare the commercialism of Sandow’s “endeavor” and era with that of the Nineties bodybuilder and his scene. In similar vein, Mr. G.’s golfing allusion clinches my observation that he missed one of the article’s main points, and has taken off on another red herring. The professionalism of golf is less insidious than it is in bodybuilding. Why? The millionaire golfer makes his money for what he does (for hitting a golf ball, a sport). The bodybuilder’s pathetic pittance comes to him not for what he does, not for a real sport as such, but for what his body is (in essence for what he is). There are profound moral and aesthetic differences

between the money earned in golf (the psychological vulnerability of the earner and the rationale of the sum “earned”) and the money earned (such as it is) in “professional” bodybuilding (the vulnerability of the earner and the rationale of the sum “earned”).

Mr. G.’s Hoffman question isn’t. Neither is his Weider question. These are questions whose purpose is obfuscation, rather than the eliciting of information. The blessing-curse of capitalism is that every nexus is “business” [though not in every case, Mr. G.’s favorite modifier, “pure” (in this case) “business.”] The (business) men who have been, not just OF our game, but IN our game (as business) have HAD to make a business of it, but Mr. G., there is business and then there is business.

I shall deal, now, NOT with subjective opinion, but with inarguable fact. There is a heart-breaking difference between the bodybuilding business in, let’s say, the Forties and the bodybuilding business in the Nineties. Neither I nor my friends were ever turned down in a request for a photo or to have our photo taken with any of our “heroes.” To have been told to pay for a photo—as kids are today—would have been unheard of, even though these men, our heroes, were mostly just plain working stiffs, like our own fathers, not men of financial substance.

As to the contests, Mr. G. may find it difficult to believe, but they were different, profoundly so, from their Nineties analogs. They were happy events for the contestants, as recalled by Grimek himself—no Pollyanna, he—at a recent Oldtimers banquet. They featured none of today’s recriminations, or shameless verbal attacks of one’s colleagues (“opponents”?), or blatant self promotion, or threats to “kick” one another’s “butt,” or forefingers thrust stupidly into the air proclaiming the possessor’s first-ness (the ever-so-important Nineties “first-ness”), on and on, with seemingly no end to variations on a theme of narcissistic vulgarity. Today, kids call it “talking with their hero” when he says “hi” in response to their greeting. They call it getting advice to sit in an expensive seminar and have a shyly posed question answered in a hurried mumble.

If he still isn’t convinced, I enjoin Mr. G. to take a young nephew, perhaps, to any of the big gyms, and to sit him next to one of the current “stars” resting there after a workout, and then to observe how many questions he has answered, or how much advice he is proffered, or how much smiling attention and friendly encouragement he received—in short, to observe just how much gruffly-gentle, never-to-be-forgotten Grimekian kindness he comes away with that fine afternoon. If it runs true to typical Nineties form, there will be precious little exchanged that will warm him when he hearkens back to this scene a half century later. Dozens of such kindnesses by the very best of the Forties strength and bodybuilding stars warm my heart and those of my boyhood training buddies.

Coming ultimately to terms with its embarrassing lapses, which were inheritances of its time, our dear old game has contributed to far gentler, more humane, sweeter, and more generous memories in its old men than its Nineties analog can ever hope to. And all this *despite* the old game’s lack of commercial sophistication in matters muscular and *despite* its utter naivete in bodybuilding business. But, one wonders whether the warmth of its old boys nostalgia returns to them “despite” all these “innocences” or as the result of them, because as even cynical old guys must remind the defensive Mr. G.: There is business, sir, and then, there is business.