



Ed Note: Leo Stern’s San Diego gym celebrated its fiftieth anniversary this past summer. The following report is excerpted from Jeannie Brooks’ article in the San Diego Union-Tribune.

In the 1980s, Leo Stern made a huge concession to modern expectations of climate control at his second-floor walk-up gym in North Park. He did so after 40 years of hot-as-blazes summers and nothing but windows shoved up for air.

New fitness centers that had sprung up around the city boasted central air conditioning. They pumped waves of coolness over their members, men and women in color-coordinated Spandex.

Stern bought a few electric fans.

This is the kind of hew-to-the-course management style that, despite half a century of gusting trends, has preserved Stern’s Gym in a nearly pristine state—its decor what you might call *ambiance de iron*.

Stern first opened the gym for business May, 13, 1946, on Menlo Avenue near Hoover High School. “I worked ninety hours a week for the first month,” he recalled “and I made \$50.”

It would be an understatement to say weightlifting was not popular. In fact, Stern said, “it was frowned upon. People didn’t understand it. We were ridiculed for working out with weights.”

But Stern and a small group of friends persisted. “We did it because we enjoyed it. We believed in what we were doing.” And, in any case, “I didn’t give a damn what anybody else thought.”

To promote the gym and the sport, he arranged weightlifting demonstrations like “The Symphony of Strength,” performed at Hoover in 1947.

“You couldn’t just have a couple of strong guys come out and lift, Stern said “It would be too boring.” So the symphony included a professional hand-balancing act, a juggler, a concert pianist and a five-piece band.

At the end of its first year, Stern’s Gym needed more space. Stern leased the second floor of a building on Granada Avenue in North Park. Only the previous tenant refused to vacate the premises.

Stern and pals bided their time. When the ex-tenant left the building one day, they moved his bowling alley and pool hall out, and moved the gym in—where it has remained ever since.

Below the gym in those days was a kosher chicken slaughterhouse. “The odor was so bad in the summertime that people walked on the other side of the street,” Stern remembered. “But the rent was cheap.”

At five P.M. each day, when the rendering truck drove up, weightlifters rushed across the gym floor to shut the windows to the stink of it.

For about twenty years, Stern’s Gym had no heat. “It was so cold in the winter, sometimes the guys had to wear gloves,” Stern recalled.

“I had to put heat in about the ‘60s,” he said. “There were so many complaints, and the membership dropped.”

The ‘70s brought large mirrors to Stern’s Gym, a fashion that had begun in New York in the early 1900s.

The ‘80s brought music—for a while, until the aggrava-

tion got to be too much for Stern “I’d be walking down the street,” he explained, “and somebody’d come out on the fire escape and yell at me to change the music.”

He yanked the music out instead.

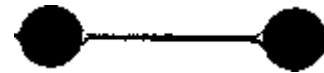
“They were up there to work out,” he said. “They weren’t up there for the music. I wasn’t running a music hall.”

Over the years, serious bodybuilders came through the doors of Stern’s Gym regularly. Lou Ferrigno, who once starred on television as “The Incredible Hulk,” has worked out there.

So has John Davis, a 1940s and ‘50s world champion weightlifter, and bodybuilder/movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger. And Bill Pearl, of course. And a lot of San Diego Chargers. And so did Sherman Brown, a 44-year-old former competitive weightlifter and member of the Detroit Lions, who bought the gym on April 15, 1994.

Brown was a kid in Jackson, Mississippi, when he first came across the name Leo Stern in a muscle magazine. Later, he lifted in Leo Stern-sponsored competitions. Stern’s Gym, Brown said, is “known across the country.”

Stern had sold the place in June 1989. The owner between him and Brown reintroduced music and allowed, for the first time, women to join. There are now 422 members, 75 of whom are women.



Dear IGH:

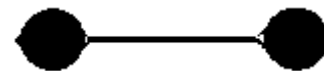
This fall I will give a lecture about the history of the training of bodybuilding, in Rome at the First Seminar of the European committee for the History of Sport (CESH).

Searching for sources on that subject I wondered about the discussion in popular bodybuilding books, that George Hackenschmidt “invented” the leg press Hackenschmidt-machine. Although many believe this to be fact, the books of Hackenschmidt himself, which I looked at, don’t mention it. The bodybuilders from about 1900 normally did not use machines but dumbbells and barbells.

Can you tell me anything about that?

**Bernd Wedemeyer
Gottingen, Germany**

Like you, Bernd, we have never seen any evidence to prove that Hackenschmidt invented the Hack Squat machine. Whether he was the first to perform the exercise which came to be known as the Hack Squat (a very erect squat done on the toes while holding a barbell behind the body and against the tops of the thighs) is hard to say with certainty, but it would seem that he has the best claim on the honor.



Dear IGH:

You may remember that I told you I had an old Joe Bonomo book of free-hand exercises and that I would donate it to the Todd-McLean collection if I could find it. I looked several times without success, but today I was tossing out stuff from old files and lo-and-behold, there it was!

It is surprisingly difficult for me to part with this because as I look through it I get the nostalgic memories of what it was like when I first bought it—for 25 cents! I was 14 in 1940 and Jim Lorimer and I had just discovered barbell training. Actually, Jim made the discovery when we were still 13, when he saw some husky older guys lifting in a garage in Bristol, near his uncle’s home. He couldn’t wait to get back and tell me about it, because we had in mind to “get big

and strong” so we could make the football team. In the back of the Bonomo book you’ll see before-and-after measurements. I had taken the first measurements shortly after we started exercising. I think I might have been still 13, but I did weigh 165 while playing junior high football in ninth grade at age 14 and it was about that time that I visited the Trenton YMCA and found I could clean and jerk 125 pounds—a six-foot exercise bar with a pair of 50-pound plates and collars. I had begun to exercise crudely with a homemade “barbell” consisting of a wooden handle with a collection of sledge hammer heads on each end. My father had been a stone-cutter (as had my grandfather when he immigrated from Aberdeen, “The Granite City,” in Scotland) so he had quite a few big hammers. My parents had given me a pair of York 40-pound adjustable dumbbells for my 14th birthday and Jim’s parents gave him a York barbell. We often combined the plates so we could lift “heavy.”

We and several of our friends—who became the nucleus of a football team that won conference championships for two years, 1942 and ‘43—made fair progress in building strength, though our training was crude, based on reading *Strength & Health*, and consisted mostly of our version of the Olympic lifts. Jim was always a good presser, with natural pressing leverage, and he was the first of us to press body weight. I was the only one of our group to get 200+ overhead (jerk), but a couple of our backs jerked 180 (Reed Pratt, weighing 145) and 190 (Bob Neeld weighing 160). I lifted 250 as a 17-year old high school senior, weighing 190-195, continentalizing the weight to my shoulders. (Jerked 250 for the last time at 55—15 years ago!) Incidentally, Jim Lorimer and I were co-captains of the football team as seniors. I was a starter for three years and he for two. We weren’t scored on in our conference in our junior and senior years, though as seniors we dropped our opening game to Trenton High School by 0-6. Trenton graduated more than 1000 seniors that year; we had 68 in our graduating class.

Enough reminiscing. Hope you like the Bonomo book.

Jim Murray
Morrisville, PA

We liked the book very much but we liked the letter better. What an amazing coincidence that two boys who were best friends and football teammates in high school and who learned to lift weights together in the days when lifting weights was frowned upon, particularly in sports, would each go on to make such significant, if different, contributions to the iron game. Jim Murray, as most readers know, served admirably as the managing editor of *Strength & Health* during several of that magazine’s glory years. He also co-authored, with Dr. Peter Karpovich, the groundbreaking book, *Weight Training for Athletics*. The other Jim—Lorimer—distinguished himself in several ways in the game, most recently (and famously) as the ramrod and organizer since its inception of the hugely successful Arnold Classic.



Dear IGH:

I thought I had better drop you a line. I’m enclosing a renewal for *Iron Game History*. I also am enclosing the picture of Andy Jackson, with me, in his living room. **Andy was 91 on August 27th and my 60th birthday was Sept. 1st. [The photo was taken in the summer of 1995].**

Like many of the Iron Game Fraternity I came to know Andy through his business. My first order was for a pair of Milo Duplex Globes, a five ft. steel bar, and special collars that Andy had designed to fit the globes. This was in the spring of 1970.

I soon became a regular visitor to Andy’s place. I would get some new globe equipment or buy some old books and magazines and we would usually spend two or three hours talking about old time strongmen and wrestlers, steamboats, railroads, and things in general.

Andy and I had both had brief flings at pro-wrestling. Andy tried his hand at it in the thirties. He weighed about 175 pounds at the time. Andy was a good wrestler but says that when they tried to match him with Man Mountain Dean, he felt he had better call it quits. His bouts were in Laurel Gardens in Newark, NJ. It turned out that I also had some bouts there in the fifties.

You know that Andy and John Grimek were friends. Andy told me that John wanted to work for Andy, but Andy didn’t have the kind of job John wanted—working in an office. For most of the 40 years Andy was in the barbell business, he had a one man operation. His plates were cast in the foundry in Hamburg, PA, and shipped to Springfield. Andy would carry the weights from his driveway downstairs to his basement machine shop, finish them and then bring them back outside and put the weights and finished bars together. He then took the sets to the freight agents to send to the customers.

Andy also wrote personal friendly letters to his customers. He built a lot of good will. At one time *Consumer Reports* rated Jackson’s Olympic barbell as the best on the market.

Andy’s best friend years ago was Jack Kent. Andy says Jack could one hand bent press 2.50 lbs. any time in street clothes with no warm-up. J.C. Hise visited Andy and deadlifted 700 lbs. Andy sold equipment to many famous strongmen including Warren Lincoln Travis, The Coney Island Strongman; Sig Klein, Bert Elliot; Joe Weider; Dan Lurie; Peary Rader; Doug Hepburn; Reg Park and Father Lange of Notre Dame.

Joe Roark now has the Jackson set that J.C. Hise once owned. Randy Strossen consulted Andy when writing his book *Super Squats*.

It was through Andy that I found out about The Association of Oldtime Barbell & Strongmen. Andy was reluctant to travel to New York City so I went as his representative.

I think Andy Jackson was a thorn in Bob Hoffman’s side. Andy said Bob wouldn’t hold back at an opportunity to knock Andy’s sets. Andy, however, had pictures of Grimek and John Davis (among others) using Jackson barbells.

I told you about Terpak and Tony Terlazzo showing Hoffman the Jackson barbell at the meet in New Jersey and asking why they had to lift on the “junk” Hoffman made.

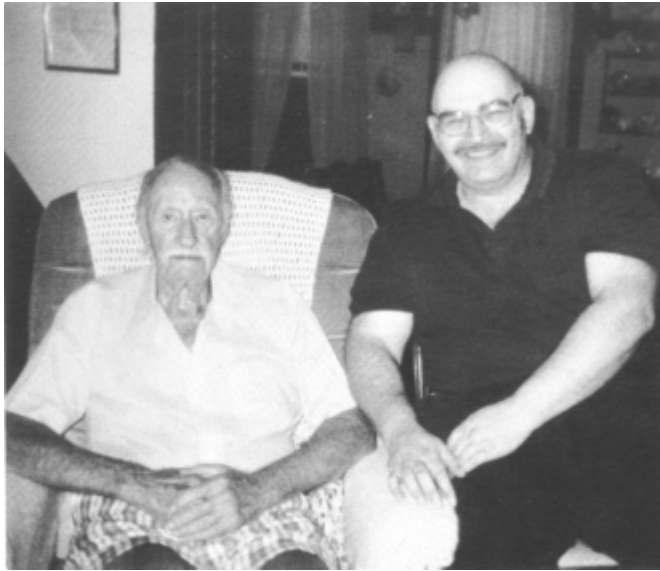
At another event in New Jersey, Andy was present when Walter Podolak (the Golden Superman) was to put on an exhibition of strength. Hoffman showed up with his crew and wanted to take over the show and upstage Podolak. Walter would have none of that, and Hoffman was so upset he wanted to fight Podolak. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed, and the show went as scheduled. Andy feels Hoffman would have received some lumps that night. Podolak was a good wrestler and strongman, and had deadlifted over six hundred pounds.

Andy always speaks highly of Peary and Mabel Rader. I’m sure much of Andy’s business came from his ads in *Iron Man*. Andy also had ads in *Physical Training Notes*, *The Ring*, *Physical Culture*, *The Newark News*, and *Mechanics Illustrated*. He also would place ads in programs of lifting and bodybuilding shows.

Although Andy isn’t as active as he was five years ago due to some health problems, he is still interested in what’s going on in the iron game. If any old timers and old customers wondered, Andy is still there.

I believe he played a very important part in iron game history. As John Grimek said to me, “He’s one of the real old timers.”

Carl Linich
Poughkeepsie, NY



CARL LINICH POSES WITH ANDY JACKSON AT HIS HOME IN THE SUMMER OF 1995. JACKSON IS 90 IN THIS PHOTO.

Dear IGH:

We wondered if you knew about the book *Winning Ways* by Sue Macy? "A photo history of American Women in Sports" published by Henry Holt & Co. New York. Relna [Brewer McRae] received a call about it, because her friends noticed her picture on the cover. Sure enough it was on the front and back cover of the protective "jacket"—a pose Relna remembers being photographed in 1937 at Venice beach for a publicity photographic session connected with the New Years Parade in Pasadena. She was 19, and looks so healthy, in such good shape with a lovely smile on her face. She is in a flexed arms pose—front view on the front cover and back pose on the back cover—as well as one of the front pose inside the book. (It is classified as a children's book).

The city of Santa Monica is planning a great makeover of the beach area and of Palisades Park. We went to a planning commission session a couple of weeks ago, and it looks like they have actually approved installing another gymnastic and hand balancing platform similar to the one originally down there—near where it was in the past. I do not believe they will have any weightlifting; it wasn't mentioned. They looked at pictures of past activities on the platform and were seemingly impressed—they were a very alert and interested group of individuals and asked pertinent questions. We had a group of about eight individuals there including Steve Ford, who gave a nice presentation. He has been very helpful to the Alumni Muscle Beach group even though his interests also rest with the Venice group. At any rate he made a special trip from Santa Barbara where he lives and works.

Our best wishes to all of you—until later.

Les and Pudgy Stockton
Santa Monica, CA



Dear IGH:

This letter is just a quick follow up to the phone conversation I had with Terry this past Wednesday. I just wanted to say thank you again for helping to clear up the difference between the "Kennedy lift" and the "Jefferson lift."

As I mentioned to Terry on the phone (and as I'm sure you guys already know), Charles G. Jefferson was born in Canaan, NH, which is only a few miles away from where I live and was born, so I would really like to know more about this fellow native New Hampshire strongman.

Thank you again.

Chris Girard
Ctr. Barnstead, NH



Dear IGH:

I know you are busy so I will be brief. I collect photos of the old timers. Anyway, do you know the whereabouts of a former Mr. Universe, Leo Robert? If so, I would appreciate your help. Anyway, keep up the great work. I will continue to support your magazine for as long as you publish which I hope will be a long time. You should write a book!

Lou Mezzanotte
Laurel, MD

Leo Robert continues to live in the province of Quebec, as does his sister, Rejane.



Dear IGH:

Herewith is an article, written by Cliff Attenborrow, which included a description of Fritz Hannaner, instructor at Milo Brinn's Gym. I would like Fritz' name to be remembered in *Iron Game History*. We iron game men of the 1930s in London enjoyed Fritz's company whether it was at Milo's or at the open air pools such as the Serpentine Lake in Hyde Park where we dived, swam, handbalanced, tumbled, wrestled, and exercised. Fritz was also a good wrestler, handbalancer and acrobat. Fritz's parents were both Austrian although he was born in London. Fritz was a regular visitor to my brother Charlie's [called Tony in the art world] as he and Charles married sisters. He returned to Austria to live, but later came the sad news that he had died from food poisoning after having gathered some wild mushrooms and eaten them. He was a vegetarian.

As for Cliff Attenborrow, who wrote the article back in 1936; he was born in about 1904. I met him first at Pullum's Weightlifting Club where he broke a "one hand dead lift" record in the heavyweight class. He had recently retired from Guards regiment and had been known as the "Strongest Man in the British Army." He was 6'1" tall and weighed about 14 stone (196 pounds). His outstanding feature was his powerful, beautifully shaped neck. He was a goal handbalancer and I saw him do a one-hand handstand. He later became a professional all-in wrestler and, later still, worked at Morley College, Westminster where he did sculpture in stone, wood and clay. Some of his works were retained by the college for exhibition.

Joe Assirati
London, England

It's always a pleasure to hear from Joe Assirati one of our true iron game heroes, a man who continues to live the physical culture life into his ninth decade. The article mentioned above was: Cliff Attenborrow, "Around the Weightlifting Clubs, Sporting Arena (November: 1936), 31.