

“That Man’s Just Too Strong for Words to Describe”

The Weightlifting Exploits of John C. Grimek

John Fair, Ph.D.

Iron game lore rightly recognizes John Grimek as one of the greatest bodybuilders of all time. Less appreciated, but no less significant, is the fact that he was also one of the strongest weightlifters of his era. Although he was national champion in 1936 and a member of the Olympic team that went to Berlin, Grimek’s awesome strength has largely escaped the attention it deserves. While his physique clearly surpassed such contemporaries as Sig Klein, Clarence Ross, Alan Stephen, Dan Lurie, and Steve Reeves on the posing dais, his strength has never been compared with others of his ilk on the lifting platform. Perhaps there is no truer test of one’s upper body strength than the old-fashioned military press, a lift in which Grimek was particularly adept. Furthermore he never consistently trained for proficiency in the competitive lifts and never shirked an impromptu challenge.

This kind of approach was once central to the amateur ideal. It coincided with the nineteenth century concept of the sporting gentleman and served as a basis for the inception of the Olympic movement. By Grimek’s time this noble ideal of the “natural athlete,” spurning such modern practices as record-breaking, specialization, coaching, and even training, was fast disappearing. Still, despite his lack of concentration on the Olympic lifts and his preoccupation with bodybuilding, Grimek successfully competed against some of the most powerful weightlifters of his day. Nowhere, however, was his reputation as a strength athlete more rightfully earned than in his encounter with a Swedish stevedore/fisherman in San Francisco during a western exhibition tour with the York gang in 1940. For Bob Hoffman, this showdown provided

support for his philosophy that bodybuilders should also be strong and that muscles were meant to be useful.

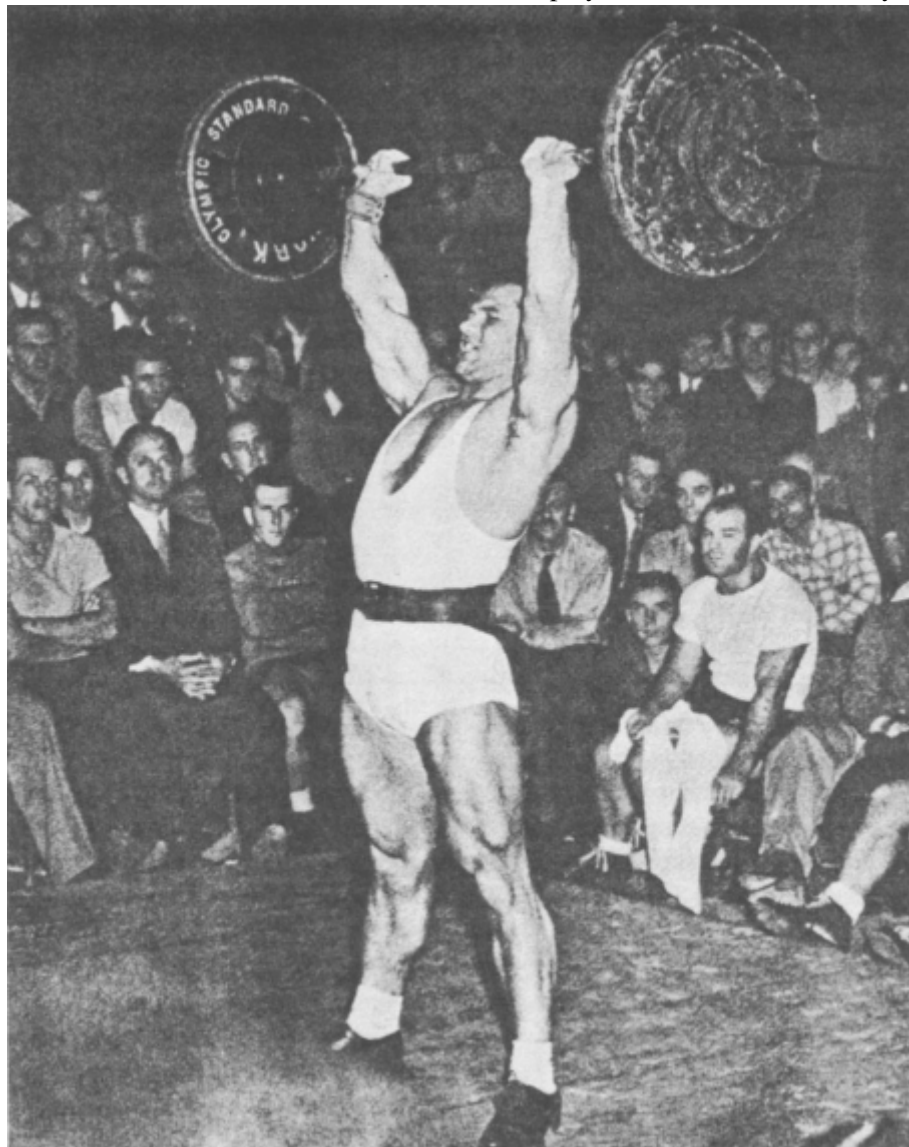
Even before his association with York and his fateful encounter with the redoubtable Swede, Grimek had discovered ways to make his muscles useful. As a young weight trainee in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, he showed outstanding development, especially in the limbs, and was soon in demand by professional photographers in the New York City area. Later he found employment as an artist’s model for studio classes at Princeton University, the University of Illinois, and at an art institute in Chicago. He earned \$80 a week—extremely good wages in the early years of the Depression—but he had to work 80 to 100 hours per week. At Princeton he recalls meeting Albert Einstein, the great physicist, who “looked like he slept in his clothes.” Although Grimek never matriculated at a college, he felt that he had spent enough time in classes to get a degree.¹ In January 1934 he entered his first contest, the New Jersey Championships in Newark, where he easily won the heavyweight class with a 710 total.² Only several months later, as a heavyweight, he entered his first national championships, conducted in Brooklyn by Dietrich Wortmann, the national AAU weightlifting chairman. It was a momentous occasion, featuring the likes of Bill Good, already four-time national champion as a light-heavyweight, and the colorful J. C. Hise of Homer, Illinois.³ Although Grimek’s 242.5 press was the highest of the meet and surpassed John Mallo’s American record by 11 pounds, he failed to register a total, owing to inadequate training on the quick lifts. Still he impressed

Hoffman “with the huskiest physique we had seen. Broad, brown, shapely, terrific is the best way to describe it.”⁴ In the following year at Cincinnati, Grimek took second to Bill Good, but his 1072 (five lift) total was to Hoffman “the best indication of the great strength in that world famous physique of his.” He felt that Grimek would eventually make the 253 press and 302.5 clean & jerk he unsuccessfully attempted—if only “his form could be improved.”⁵

With the 1936 Olympics approaching, Grimek decided to do just that by moving to York to train with the team. The results were spectacular. At the senior nationals in Philadelphia he registered his best press yet in competition at 258.5, up sixteen pounds over 1935; and his 220 snatch and 308 clean & jerk were six and twenty-two pounds higher respectively. Most importantly, Grimek’s 786.5 (three lift) total exceeded that of Dave Mayor by eleven pounds and Weldon Bullock by sixteen, though the latter lifters outweighed him (at 183.5) by forty-three and thirty-three pounds respectively. Had he weighed only two pounds less he would have eclipsed the light-heavyweight world record in the press by nine pounds.⁶ With Bill Good missing all his presses (as a light-heavy) Grimek made the highest total of the meet and with his national record press he was entitled, at least for awhile, to the designation of America’s strongest man.

In light of these accomplishments, Grimek’s Olympic experience was anti-climactic.

Although he pressed a creditable 253, he finished a distant ninth to Germany’s Josef Manger, who pressed 291.5 and made a three lift total that was 121 pounds higher than Grimek’s. Still, John lifted more than any other American and displayed considerable nerve by



THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN ON DECEMBER 22, 1940 AT THE LOS ANGELES ATHLETIC CLUB DURING THE YORK TEAM’S WESTERN TRIP AND THEN APPEARED IN *STRENGTH & HEALTH* IN FEBRUARY OF 1941. IN THE ORIGINAL CAPTION, HOFFMAN WRITES, “WE ARE STILL RECEIVING LETTERS FROM MEN WHO JOURNEYED FAR TO SEE GRIMEK WHEN HE WAS OUT WEST AND THEY ALL REPEAT ONE STATEMENT, THAT HIS PICTURES ‘DON’T DO HIM JUSTICE.’ GRIMEK IN ACTION, THEY SAY, IS ‘AWE INSPIRING.’”



TAKEN IN THE OLYMPIC VILLAGE IN BERLIN IN 1936, THIS PHOTO SHOWS THE MEMBERS OF THE UNITED STATES WEIGHTLIFTING TEAM. ON THE FAR LEFT IS MARK BERRY, THEN IN ORDER: DAVE MAYOR, BILL GOOD, JOHN GRIMEK, STAN KRATKOWSKI, JOE MILLER, JOHN TERPAK, WALTER GOOD, BOB MITCHELL, TONY TERLAZZO, JOHN TERRY, AND DIETRICH WORTMANN.

competing against some of the physical giants of sport. At the 1937 senior nationals in Detroit, Grimek reduced to the light-heavy class to stake his claim to the world press record, but this time he was too light, at 176 pounds bodyweight, and three times failed to secure the judges' approval for his 250 pound attempts.⁷ By the following year some of the great true heavyweights in American lifting were appearing. At the 1938 junior nationals, John Davis showed signs of future greatness by winning the light-heavy class with an 810 total. The seniors featured a gutsy Louis Abele with 815, a revitalized Bill Good with 845, and the meteoric rise of Steve Stanko, whose 850 total included a 347.5 clean & jerk. It was "the highest lift ever made on the American continent," exclaimed Hoffman. [Ed. Note: In 1921, Milo Steinborn, in front of judges George Zottman and Alan Calvert

cleaned and jerked 347 3/4, weighing 200 pounds.] Grimek's 250 press was good enough for an American record but too late for a world mark, and he missed all of his clean & jerks. Furthermore, other light-heavyweights were now surpassing his sub-800 totals, including the likes of not only Davis but Stan Kratkowski (805) and even John Terpak (815).⁸ Pound for pound, Grimek was one of the strongest men in America, but he was inconsistent ("an in and outer" was Hoffman's description), and until he mastered his form in the quick lifts, he would never become a true world class lifter.

Part of John's dilemma was whether he even wanted to be a serious weightlifter. Throughout the 1930s, prior to the Mr. America contest and the advent of Joe Weider, there was no active promotion of the cause of bodybuilding for its own sake. Iron gamers

who wished to pursue it had few competitive opportunities outside weightlifting and had to be satisfied with Hoffman's aphorism (a la Jowett) that a well-developed physique was merely a pleasing by-product of strength. For a while at least weightlifting seemed to be the best way of maximizing Grimek's great potential as a strength athlete. Indeed he made a concerted effort at the 1938 North American championships to become a lifter of true international calibre and qualify for the world championships in Vienna. He "had really trained for this contest," observed Hoffman. Lifting as a light-heavyweight, he astounded everyone by pressing 261 pounds. Although it broke a long-standing world record by seven pounds, Grimek could not be credited with it because he had eaten a meal after weigh-in and tipped the scales at 185. With a 245 snatch and 325 clean & jerk, John's 830 total gave him the distinction of being one of the few lifters ever to beat (by fifteen pounds) the remarkable John Davis, who would dominate world weightlifting in his era as much as Grimek would dominate bodybuilding. It also showed Hoffman what Grimek could do under a serious training regimen. Bob noted that Grimek's "constant practice at jerking has given him unbelievable power and pretty fair jerking ability. . . . with his style, Herculean strength and constant practice he may some day be successful in jerking 400 pounds." That this formula had already reaped handsome dividends was evident from the fact that Grimek had already "made the highest light heavyweight total scored in the world this year."⁹ Imagine how weightlifting competition would have been transformed had Davis and Grimek become dual contenders for the world heavyweight crown over the next decade!

Unfortunately Grimek did not stay the course. He could manage no more than an 803 total for fourth place at Vienna, while Davis won with 852.5.¹⁰ Possibly disheartened, Grimek trained little over the next year, and did not enter the 1939 seniors in Chicago. Then when Terpak hurt his back and was unable to score points for the York team at the North American Championships in Toronto, Grimek agreed to compete with only several days notice. Although Hoffman chided him for his desultory training, he was impressed

that Grimek, as a light-weight, nearly totalled 845, "which is a lot of weight for any man, especially one who drives a yellow roadster around and rarely trains. . . . the man's just too strong for words. He handles poundages over 300 easier than most lifters handle a hundred pounds less." So great was John's natural strength, and neglect of proper technique, that he continental pressed his jerks. "Although he's a powerhouse," noted Bob, "330 is still too much for him to press, particularly when he is competing in the 181 pound class, and that's about what he tried to do with it, for all he did was thrust out one foot a bit and try to press."¹¹ Grimek's finest hour on the platform, however, occurred at the 1940 Senior Nationals at Madison Square Garden where he pressed 285, snatched 250, and clean & jerked 325 for an 860 total as a heavyweight. Although he placed a distant third, behind Stanko and Abele, he had the distinction of being the only weightlifter who also competed in the ensuing Mr. America contest, which he won.¹² This scenario of strength with an extraordinary physique was immensely appealing to Hoffman.

By this time it was obvious to Grimek that he could never take full advantage of his great natural strength as a weightlifter until he met or exceeded the bodyweight of his competitors. But to put on thirty or forty pounds, in an era when lifters ate regular food and did not take drugs, meant that Grimek would lose much of the sharpness of his physique and would likely develop an extended midriff. Whatever hopes he cherished as a bodybuilder would thereby be jeopardized. Hoffman understood this conundrum and appears to have provided wise counsel.

I frequently say that a man can't have everything, John Grimek has more than his share and has done more than his share for weightlifting. His physique is the finest, I believe, in the world at present and I doubt much if the greats of the past could match him. . . . He became a weightlifter to prove that there is power in a shapely physique. But there is one thing I can't believe. That a man can have a build like Grimek and be world's weightlifting champ. He's not a big man, although he was heavyweight cham-

pion in 1936, made the highest American total at the Berlin Olympics, stepped out there like a man and pressed 253 for a first attempt, yet he looked almost like a little boy compared to the continental heavyweights who outweighed him by as much as a hundred pounds. A work horse is stronger than a lighter horse. Grimek would be stronger if he was heavier, but he would not have his present physique. I think his physique does weightlifting and the entire cause of weight training more good than would his winning of the world's championship.¹³

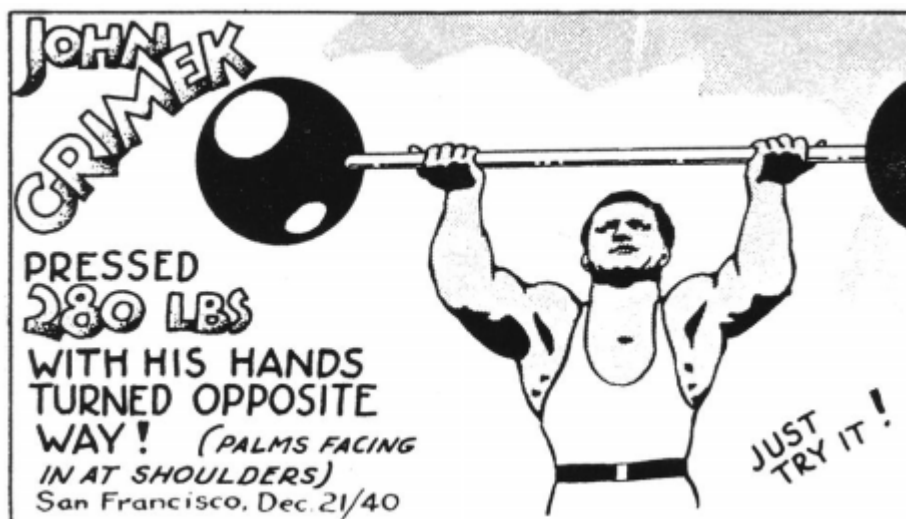
Had Grimek chosen to focus on weightlifting, the world would have been deprived of his classic physique at the height of his powers. Bodybuilding would never have been the same.

What helped deflect him from this course was Hoffman's zealous promotional activities. Grimek's physique proved irresistible to Bob who sought to "use" it to advertise his products and publicize his philosophy of fitness in *Strength & Health*. John was fast becoming a vested interest of York Barbell. Unfortunately, while Grimek's awesome image brought much favorable attention to York, it eventually aroused the ire of the AAU and raised questions about

his eligibility to lift. Although there is no record of his being expelled, Grimek recalls that he was "always in trouble with the AAU—always on the carpet because of publicity for the magazine."¹⁴ Pre-war publicity of Grimek's physique culminated in pictures of him in a dancing pose with Gracie Bard on the front cover of *Strength & Health* April 1940, the most popular and best-selling issue to date. This was followed by Grimek's Mr. America triumphs in 1940 and 1941. So far was he ahead of any other bodybuilder of that era that a rule, aimed at Grimek and Hoffman, was adopted prohibiting previous winners from entering the contest.

It was at this climactic juncture, with Grimek on the verge of becoming an unassailable physical icon, that Hoffman contrived a unique way to promote weightlifting, *Strength & Health*, York products, and himself. In December 1940 Bob, John, Gracie Bard, and Tony Terlazzo embarked on a fourteen-thousand-mile western trip. York's oldest revolving bar, made in 1929, was strapped to the front bumper, and the car, with Bob's typewriter in tow, was packed full. The gang presented exhibitions and clinics in Columbus, Denver, Boise, Spokane, Seattle, Portland, and various locations in California. In San Francisco, however, Grimek, as an archetype of both strength and physique, was challenged from an unexpected quarter.

Karl Norberg was born on January 5, 1893, seventeen years earlier than Grimek, in the village of Grimes in north Sweden. Coming from a family of fourteen, he learned the meaning of hard work early. At age 12 he was doing a man's work in a sawmill, putting in 12 hour days, six days a week. Later he worked on the railroad and in logging camps and served in the Swedish Army Engineers during World War I. Upon migrating to the United States in 1927 he pursued similar lines of manual labor in northern California until 1934 when, in the heart of the Depres-



GRIMEK'S 280 POUND REVERSE-GRIP PRESS WAS FEATURED IN GORD VENABLES "INCREDIBLE BUT TRUE" COLUMN IN *STRENGTH & HEALTH*, JUNE 1941.



JOE WEIDER PUBLISHED PHOTOS OF GRIMEK BACK IN THE EARLY DAYS. THIS PICTURE APPEARED IN *YOUR PHYSIQUE* FEBRUARY OF 1941. IT SHOWS JOHN DOING A HARNESS LIFT AND WAS SNAPPED BY MARK BERRY.

sion, he found himself unemployed. Desperate for work, he joined many others seeking stevedore jobs on the dockside of San Francisco. Though known for his strength among family and fellow workmen

since his youth, Norberg had never touched a barbell and had never publicly displayed his muscular might. Confronted by a job interviewer to prove his worth as a stevedore, “he reached down and picked up two 100 pound bags of sugar,” according to a 1965 account by Vern Weaver, “and proceeded to press them overhead several times with ridiculous ease. The interviewer was so impressed he hired Karl on the spot.”¹⁵ As was the case with Grimek, such impromptu feats, especially in the overhead press, constituted the truest tests of great natural upper body strength.

Later Norberg applied his special gifts in the more lucrative, though hazardous seasonal work of salmon fishing in the Bering Sea off the Alaskan coast. This dangerous and demanding occupation inspired the admiration of his fellow longshoremen during the winter months who respectfully referred to him as “The Noble Norseman” or the “Big Swede.” It was with this reputation as a local strongman in 1941, as he approached the half century mark, that he was confronted with the likes of Mr. America, the epitome of physical prowess, in his hometown. Gord Venables related their encounter in his “Incredible But True” column of *Strength & Health*.

John Grimek tells me the naturally strongest man he ever met was in San Francisco. Two months ago Grimek was giving an exhibition at the Golden Gate City’s Central Y. He announced that he was about to press 270 pounds. While getting set for his attempt there was a commotion in the audience. Several fellows shouted out that they had a man with them who could press more than Grimek. Grimek asked the man to come up to the stage. He was a little reluctant at first but the man’s friends urged him to have it out with our “Mr. America.”

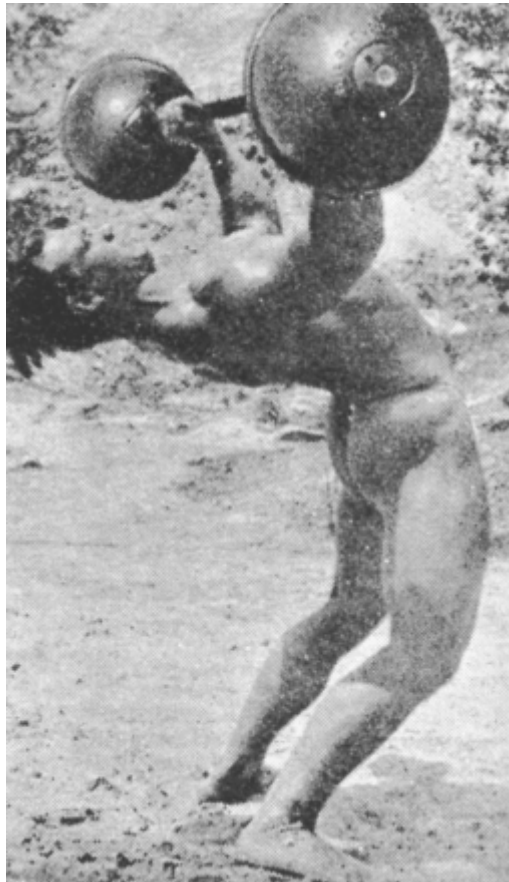
He was Karl Norberg, a 48 year old fisherman, and a very rugged individual. Grimek agreed to go first and press 240, which he did with absurd ease. Norberg took the 240 but *with his hands in the palms out position, like in a regular curl!* With very slight effort he *fast curled* the 240 to his chest! (At this point his palms would be facing in.) He continental pressed this poundage. There was a deafening applause and some of the crowd shouted for Grimek to try a press in that fashion. Without hesitating Grimek made a fast regular curl with the 240 and military pressed it! More deafening applause. Norberg asked for 250. The exhibition that Grimek was

to give was turning into a contest. Norberg curled and continental pressed 250. Then 260! Grimek took his next attempt with 270 pounds which he like wise curled and military pressed. Norberg told John that 255 was the most he had ever lifted but he wanted to try that 270. Grimek says that it was incredible the ease with which he fast curled 270 to his shoulders but in pressing it he had great difficulty, there was considerable back-bending, leg bending and jerking but he made it.

John then took 280 which he curled and pressed to terrific applause. The audience shouted for the fisherman to take a turn, his friends wanted him to retire in view of his age, but Norberg was enjoying the contest and got set for a try at 280. He made a wonderful try but failed to curl the weight.¹⁶

Several features of this remarkable performance quickly captured the imaginations of iron game buffs. First, neither participant had been training for this showdown. Grimek was no longer doing serious competitive lifting, and Norberg had only just started lifting weights in 1939. It was a totally impromptu performance, so much so that Norberg had no idea of proper pressing form, and Grimek had to adopt his challenger's unorthodox palms-out style, thereby increasing the level of difficulty. Mr. America had everything to lose and the Swedish fisherman everything to gain through this chance encounter. But each acquitted himself well, and they developed a lasting mutual respect. It was one of the great moments in iron game history.

Unquestionably it was an incredible human interest story, but how authentic were the lifts? The most remarkable aspect of this display of muscular might was the poundages hoisted. While Norberg was



GRIMEK WAS UNUSUALLY FLEXIBLE, AS CAN BE SEEN IN THIS PHOTO FROM MARK BERRY'S *YOUR PHYSIQUE AND ITS CULTURE*. HE USED HIS FLEXIBILITY TO ADVANTAGE WHEN PERFORMING OVERHEAD PRESSES.

probably as oblivious to the amount of weight he lifted as he was to the form he employed, Grimek, as a competitor, knew exactly what was on the bar. Prior to his encounter with Norberg, his previous best press was 285, done during one of his serious training spells. On this occasion, however, he fast curled and *military* pressed 280 with his hands in the palms-out position and with no special training on this awkward movement. It is highly unlikely that Grimek could have done that much. A plausible explanation for this anomaly, aside from whatever liberties were taken on form, is that Grimek was using the stage barbell that Bob brought along for his bent pressing exhibitions. John Terpak estimates that it consisted of a shorter (six foot) bar, two hollow 25 pound plates with sheet metal covering, and specially machined smaller plates. Actual lifts performed on this bar were 40 to 50 pounds less than face value. If Norberg and Grimek were employing this

bar, as seems likely from pictures and descriptions, they were performing presses in the 220 to 240 range, still quite respectable for the times and the kind of grip being employed.¹⁷

With regard to who really won this test of natural strength, it is a bit like comparing apples and oranges. Although Grimek lifted more weight, he was nearly two decades younger than the Norseman and trained with some of the world's most elite lifters in York. Much has been made of Norberg's amazing strength in old age—that he held a pair of 80 pound dumbbells at arms' length in the crucifix position at age 69, performed a 460 bench press in his 70s, and bench pressed 300 thrice on his eightieth birthday.¹⁸ But at

the time he encountered Grimek in 1940 he was just 48 and presumably capable of even greater strength feats. Critical also in estimating relative superiority is the fact that Norberg outweighed Grimek, perhaps by as much as forty pounds. Considering that Norberg's lack of weightlifting experience was cancelled out by Grimek's having to adapt to Norberg's unusual pressing technique and that age and bodyweight factors cancelled out each other, Grimek in the final analysis probably deserves credit for the win on the basis of weight lifted.¹⁹

As a result of their encounter, Grimek and Norberg developed a strong and lasting mutual admiration for each other. A quarter century later Grimek still regarded Norberg as "in a class by himself, regardless of age," and Norberg retained the June 1941 issue of *Strength & Health* in which their momentous encounter is recounted as "a treasured souvenir."²⁰ On Karl's eightieth birthday they exchanged greetings, with Grimek generously referring to his former adversary as "one of the great strongmen of our era."²¹ Of course the same could be said for Grimek. Like Norberg, his natural physical assets were so extraordinary that it was never necessary to rationalize or compensate for any deficiencies. Still one cannot help wonder how much different their encounter would have been had Norberg been 25 years younger, Grimek 25 pounds heavier, and both been training regularly. Their respective approaches harked back to an earlier era—when the true test of a lifter's worth was raw natural strength. It was this quality, melded with physique, that gave the AAU Mr. America contest such a classical look in the golden decades after World War II and ensured Grimek's status as one of the most important physical culture icons of the twentieth century. What needs to be understood is that Grimek was a strongman, not a weightlifter, and that the most lasting legacy to his greatness as a bodybuilder is that he was as strong as he looked.



1. Interview with John Grimek, August 28, 1987, York, Pennsylvania.
2. See Bob Hoffman, "Weight Lifting Shows and Events," *Strength & Health*, II (May, 1934) 22.
3. A revealing examination of the life and lifting career of J. C. Hise is available in Joe Roark's *Musclesearch*, issues 8, 9, 11-12 & 15-17 (Aug./Sept. 1986—Feb./Mar. 1988).
4. Bob Hoffman, "National Weight Lifting Championships," *Strength & Health*, II (July, 1934) 27.
5. "Reports of Lifting Shows and Events," *ibid.*, III (July, 1935), 78.
6. Interview with Grimek and "Reports of Lifting Shows and Events," *Strength & Health*, IV (August, 1936) 30, and (September, 1936) 30.
7. *ibid.*, V (August, 1937), 10.
8. Bob Hoffman, "Who will Win the Championships?" *ibid.*, VI (June, 1938), 47.
9. Bob Hoffman, "N. A. Championships," *ibid.* (September, 1938), 5.
10. Jay C. Gee, "Highlights at the Championships!" *ibid.*, VII (January, 1939), 5-6.
11. "Weightlifting News," *ibid.* (October, 1939), 5.
12. Bob Hoffman, "1940 Senior National A.A.U. Championships," *ibid.*, VIII (July, 1940), 5-6.
13. "Letters from Readers," *ibid.*, VII (October, 1939), 9.
14. Interview with Grimek. Also see Bob Hoffman, "Weight Lifting Around America," *Strength & Health*, IX (March, 1941), 24.
15. Vern Weaver, "Karl Norberg, the Noble Norseman," *Muscular Development*, II (September, 1965), 22. For other biographical accounts on Norberg see Hal Stephens, "Phenomenal Karl Norberg," *Iron Man*, 20 (May, 1961), 14-15; and Ray Van Cleef, "Karl Norberg, Superman at 70," *Strength & Health*, XXIX (July, 1962), 22-23, 51, 53-54.
16. Gord Venables, "Incredible But True," *Strength & Health*, IX (June, 1941), 20.
17. Interview with John Terpak, December 14, 1992, York, Pennsylvania. In an article on the gang's western tour Hoffman, through a series of specious rationalizations, virtually admits that his stage barbell was at least 20 pounds lighter. Bob Hoffman, "Lifting Around America," *Strength & Health*, IX (July, 1941), 13.
18. See Stephens, "Phenomenal Karl Norberg," 15; Van Cleef, "Karl Norberg, Superman," 54; and "Mail from Muscledom," *Muscular Development*, X (June, 1973), 6.
19. Grimek also retained his strength (and appearance) into old age. That he could "still squat four reps with eight plates" (405 pounds?) at age 84, as asserted by Lonnie Teper, strains credulity. See Lonnie Teper, "News & Views," *Iron Man*, 58 (April, 1999), 24. [Ed note: JCG told us his heavy squats were partial squats.]
20. Weaver, "Karl Norberg," 45, and Van Cleef, "Karl Norberg, Superman," 51.
21. "Mail from Muscledom," *Muscular Development*, X (June, 1973), 6.