

# STEVE REEVES: MY ROLE MODEL

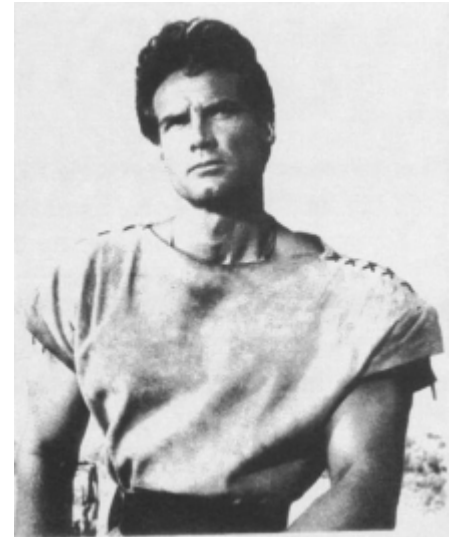
By Grover L. Porter, Ph.D.

**“Steve Reeves was the male ideal of physical perfection.”**

—Joe Weider, “A Giant Legacy,” *Flex* (August 2000).

**“Steve Reeves was the greatest bodybuilder of the pre-steroid era.”**

—Harrison Pope, Jr., M.D., Katherine Phillips, M.D., Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D.,  
*The Adonis Complex*, New York: Free Press (2000).



Still photo from *Duel of the Titans*, 1962.

“Steve Reeves, Mr. America—1947” read the brief comments adjacent to a small photo of the contest winner in the *Nashville Tennessean* [June 30, 1947]. A few weeks later I saw another photo of the new “Mr. America” and a few short comments about “AAU’s Ideal Man” in *Life* [July 14, 1947]. However, neither of these publications answered the question as to how he became the best-built man in all creation.

Our family would usually take a break from the daily grind of farm work and go to town—Lafayette, Tennessee—on Saturday. One Saturday afternoon while waiting to go to the movies, I was looking at magazines on the newsstand at the local drug store. There I saw a photo of Steve Reeves gracing the cover of *Muscle Power* [October 1947]. I spent my entire weekly allowance of 25 cents to purchase that magazine. Since I had no money left for my usual Saturday entertainment—movie, popcorn, cola—I spent that hot afternoon sitting in our car reading about how weight-training could turn me into a “Mr. Somebody” too.

I was inspired by my first visual encounter with the godlike Steve Reeves. He became “my role model” and motivated me to be the best I could be. I never won a physique contest but I later became the first member of our family to earn a college degree. And, I attribute my successful academic career to the inspiration and motivation my encounter with “Mr. America” gave me. Like millions of other men, my life was forever changed for the better because of Steve Reeves!

I didn’t have the money to buy a barbell at the time, therefore I made my first barbell using a bar from an old car and two five-gallon buckets filled with con-

crete. With that crude barbell and a two-part bodybuilding program written by Peary Rader and published in *Your Physique* [November, 1947, December 1947], I began transforming myself from a fat teenager into a muscular teenager. More importantly, the Apollo physique I was developing contributed to a geometric increase in my self-esteem. Thus, I naively thought that I could achieve whatever my mind could conceive and believe.

I lost the fat and gained some muscle during the summer of 1947. My grade school classmates, therefore, did not recognize me when we enrolled in high school that fall. I used my newly developed muscle to help me gain positions on the athletic teams (basketball, football) in high school. Although the coach was opposed to weight-training because he believed it would make a person “muscle bound,” I secretly continued my weight-training in a barn on our farm.

After graduating from high school, I volunteered to serve my country in the United States Army during the Korean War. A veteran of World War II himself, Steve Reeves [Mr. America-1947, Mr. World-1948, Mr. Universe-1950] and some other bodybuilders were entertaining the troops at various military bases in the United States. His visit to our base gave me my first chance to see “my role model” in the flesh. Wow, Steve Reeves looked even more godlike in the flesh than in his photos gracing the covers of the various bodybuilding magazines!

Since I was unable to get copies of bodybuilding magazines while later serving overseas with the United States Army, I temporarily lost contact with how life was

treating Steve Reeves. Upon receiving an honorable discharge from the military, I enrolled as a student at The University of Tennessee. I resumed my weight-training at the campus gym. I also began purchasing various bodybuilding magazines and caught up with the recent exploits of “my role model” again. Steve Reeves was appearing on some TV shows and playing small parts in the movies at that time.

While I was a college student, the movie *Athena* in which Steve Reeves had a small part was playing at a theatre in another city. A couple of friends and I went to see that movie. I had a date that night with a girl on campus. I became so engrossed in watching the movie that I forgot to keep track of the time. Therefore, I was late for the date. “You stood me up,” the girl told me, and threatened to never date me again. However, she has now been my wife for nearly 45 years.

Upon earning my B.S. degree from the University of Tennessee, I accepted a position in the corporate world. During my sojourn in that world, Dorothy and I had three fine children — Venice Ann, Don Lee and Jon Paul. Later, I earned an M.S. degree from The University of North Carolina and completed the requirements for the C.P.A. certificate. Then, I left the corporate world for the academic world. While serving on the faculty at the University of Tennessee, I earned the Ph.D. degree from Louisiana State University. My lengthy academic career has seen me affiliated with universities in several states including Tennessee, North Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, and Alabama.

As the years passed, I continued to follow Steve’s exploits. Then, while writing an article about “the perfect man” for one of the bodybuilding magazines, I had an opportunity to interview him at his ranch in 1982. To my surprise, the star of *Hercules* and many other movies about the heroic age seemed shyer about a visit from an old college professor than I was about interviewing “my role model.” However, Steve and I had a very interesting and enjoyable conversation at his ranch about his dual-career in bodybuilding and the movies. A photo taken at his ranch of us talking about his *Power Walking* book was published in *Muscle & Fitness* [October 1992].

We corresponded a number of times over the years between 1982 and 2000. My last opportunity to talk with Steve was at the “Mr. America” contest in 1996. We had a very interesting and enjoyable conversation at the contest about “the golden age of physical culture” that existed before steroids came on the scene circa 1960. A photo taken at the contest of us talking about his *Building the Classic Physique: The Natural Way* book was published in *MuscleMag* (September 1997).

We all would like to believe that a god like Steve Reeves is immortal. His godly spirit is immortal, of course, but his classic body was mortal. Since God has called my friend back to live with Him in Heaven [May 1, 2000], I choose to remember “my role model” the way he described his journey across the great divide in his last poem:

**When my days on earth are over,  
With my faithful dogs by my side,  
I will ride through knee deep clover  
On a horse called Classic Pride.**

**They have been my true companions,  
Along mountain trails and rivers wide,  
My friends will look at me with envy  
When we cross the great divide.**

—Steve Reeves



Steve Reeves was a horseman all his life, and those who knew him best say he was never happier than when he was training one of his beloved Morgan stallions, or riding in the high country of the Palomar Mountains near his ranch.