

George Hackenschmidt – The Russian Lion

TERRY TODD and JAN TODD

The University of Texas at Austin

In the first decades of the twentieth century, professional wrestlers enjoyed widespread popularity in the western world. They also enjoyed widespread prestige, as there was then little thought on the part of the public that the outcome of the matches was prearranged. The most popular and famous of these often very well paid athletes was a man known as the Russian Lion, George Hackenschmidt.

Born in Estonia in 1877, Hackenschmidt excelled in all forms of athletics as a youngster. After he moved to Reval to begin engineering studies, he joined the local cycling and gymnastics clubs, the latter of which included weightlifting. Already exceptionally strong, young Hackenschmidt blossomed quickly into a phenomenal lifter and his fame soon spread throughout the Baltic Provinces. As his strength increased he began his career as an amateur wrestler and he was soon unbeatable at that sport as well.

In his twenty-first year, he travelled to St. Petersburg to visit the celebrated trainer of athletes, Dr. Krajewski, Physician in Ordinary to the Tsar. Dr. Krajewski saw at once young Hackenschmidt's talents as a strength athlete and agreed to sponsor and train him. As amateur athletics was a favorite pastime of the leisure class in St. Petersburg, Hackenschmidt's reputation grew and he was much discussed in the local newspapers as he broke

record after record in weightlifting and easily defeated everyone he wrestled, including the Frenchman Paul Fons in a match for the Greco-Roman championships of the world. Shortly thereafter he won the weightlifting championship of Russia and with Dr. Krajewski's blessing, became a professional wrestler. Always a true sportsman disdainful of those who would exaggerate their lifts or "fix" a match, Hackenschmidt toured Europe for almost a decade as the undefeated champion of the world.

In 1908 he travelled for the first time to the United States where he defended his title against the American champion, Frank Gotch. The match was much anticipated by the sporting world but it failed to satisfy as Gotch, with the referee apparently in his pocket, broke many of wrestling's rules by oiling himself, punching Hackenschmidt with his fists and gouging his eyes. Finally, after repeated protests to the referee appeared fruitless, Hackenschmidt withdrew. In the rematch, Hackenschmidt suffered a crippling injury to his knee during the week before the scheduled bout but he refused to cancel the match because the promoter, a good friend of his, would have been bankrupted by a cancellation.

So disgusted with the entire affair was Hackenschmidt that he retired from the ring forever, thereafter devoting himself to natural philosophy, in which field he published many books, including *Consciousness and Characters*, *Man and Cosmic Antagonism to Mind and Spirit* and *The Way to Live*. Financially comfortable from his years as a professional athlete, Hackenschmidt settled in London. Fluent in five languages, he was a frequent lecturer at Oxford and he was friends with most of the city's leading writers, including George Bernard Shaw. Hackenschmidt kept fit all his life and died at the age of 90.