

Starting Strength

Strongmen of the Crescent City: Weightlifting at the New Orleans Athletic Club, 1872-1972

by
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Outside the purview of the multitudes of tourists and merrymakers that descend upon the French Quarter each year sits the New Orleans Athletic Club (NOAC) on Rampart Street. Since 1872 this venerable institution has played a significant role in the *real* cultural life of Louisiana's largest city. As one of the first of its kind (San Francisco and New York claim precedence), the NOAC has catered to the physical and social needs of male citizens, but no previous publication has dealt with the nature of this service or its relation to the development of sports within the context of the city and nation.¹ In addition to being an exclusive gentleman's club, the NOAC served as a medium for channeling youthful energies and talent into a larger competitive arena and thereby constructing a distinctively male identity. Nowhere is this socialization dynamic more evident than in the weightlifting program where NOAC strongmen challenged some of the country's best teams and helped make New Orleans a hotbed of physical culture. This tradition of enterprising manliness, recorded largely in the club's monthly organ, *The Punch*, can be traced from the grave social crises of Reconstruction, when the status of Southern manhood seemed threatened, to the early 1970s, when a new cultural dynamic appeared which was to change the nature of sport and the club. The strongmen of the Crescent City epitomized, as much as any collective athletic endeavor, the spirit of masculinity that was prevalent at the NOAC during a critical century of American life.

The origins of this manly conception are to be found in a meeting between J.C. Aleix and several associates on September 2, 1872, at the former's home at 252 (later 1626) Esplanade Avenue. Having formerly performed exercises at the swank Hammerly's Gymnasium on St. Charles Street, which also catered to women, they decided to form an "Independent Gymnastic Club" in Aleix's backyard for young men living on the other side of Canal Street. In addition to gymnastics, for which they constructed various horizontal and parallel bar units, club members intended to develop the body through fencing and boxing activities. Aleix was its first president and manager and, according to the club's constitution, he was expected to display a "gentlemanly deportment" at all meetings. Within two years the club expanded to fifty members, and under its second president, Edward Fredericks, changed its name to the "Young Men's Gymnastic Club" (YMGC) and moved to an old building on the corner

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of Rampart and Bienville streets. Here, on a bare ground floor covered with sawdust, members built their bodies with “weights and pulleys, dumbbells, Indian clubs, and other apparatus,” mostly second-hand.²

By the time of its seventh anniversary in 1879, the club had spent about \$2,000 on improvements to the gymnasium and “new apparatus for the development of all the muscles of the body.” At the anniversary observance 175 members listened to an oration by Julius L. Smith on gymnastics, stressing that

The development of the body should go hand in hand with the development of the mind, and that the countries which have given athletic exercises a national support and encouragement have brought about a standard of manly vigor unexceptionable and generalized a national strength, the benefits of which have been shown in the conquests they have achieved and the successful resistance they have made against the encroachments of invading armies.³

This veiled reference to the events of the recent Franco-Prussian War likely stemmed from the strong influence of German immigrants on the sporting life of the city. Gymnastics was carried out with the help of the local *Turnverein*, a German physical culture society rooted in the Napoleonic wars whose members were also active in developing the New York Athletic Club and similar organizations in other Eastern cities in the nineteenth century. It was, according to sport historian Dale Somers, “the sport of German-Americans,” and the *Turnverein* movement was well ingrained in the life of the city prior to the Civil War. “The introduction of physical education in local schools may be attributed in large part to the influence of the *Turnvereins*, which demonstrated the efficacy of an eminently satisfactory remedy to the physical inactivity of urban dwellers.”⁴ New Orleans Germans appear to have been the most active element in the club’s governance through the early decades. An 1898 photograph of the YMGC’s living presidents shows that five – Woulf, Bohne, Gueringer, Fredericks, and Mertz – had German surnames, while only one – Briant – was likely of French extraction, suggesting an infusion of Teutonic militarist values that were strongly attached to the efficacy of sport, male identity, and the birth of modern weightlifting.⁵

By 1884, the club had 350 members and was able to purchase property at 37-39-41 Burgundy Street to house a new gymnasium, baths, and swimming pool, and in 1890, a home at 44 Rampart Street to serve as a club house. In an 1888 article entitled “Gymnasts on the March,” the *New Orleans Daily States* reported that “brawn and muscle had an inning last night when the Young Men’s Gymnastic Club observed its sixteenth anniversary with a monster parade through the streets and a big banquet at Washington Artillery Hall.”⁶ Such gala banquets and parades, also staged by other athletic clubs in the Northeast, were yet another manifestation of Germanic cultural underpinnings. That training with weights was still a primary activity is evident from the inclusion of dumbbells, along with an Indian club and two foils on the YMGC official emblem for 1888.⁷

The most notable athletic endeavor during this formative period was boxing, characterized by a leading gender historian of the nineteenth century as, next to horse racing, “the earliest competitive sport that aroused the attention of a sizable number of males. Of all sports, boxing requires aggressiveness, strength, and muscularity. It is a male sport par excellence.”⁸ The matches, both professional and amateur, were staged in an open arena that separated the gym from the club house. Various club members were recognized as Southern champions, and the likes of John L. Sullivan, Gene Tunney, Bob Fitzsimmons, and James Corbett trained for some of their fights at the YMGC. In fact, Sullivan trained there for his famous seventy-five-round bout with Jake Kilrain in Richburg, Mississippi, in July

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1889, and a plaster cast of his mighty arm remains one of the historic treasures on display at the club.⁹ But the manly art of boxing sometimes attracted a rougher element and did not always fulfill the club's ideal of "gentlemanly deportment." Therefore it had to be discontinued at various times, perhaps as too overtly masculine. In December 1919, the board of directors even barred all prize fighters from the premises. Still, there was never any question about what the club stood for, as evident in the following statement by President W. J. O'Donnell in 1916:

The Young Men's Gymnastic Club is for men and boys, and for many years it has trained men along these lines which mean lean men, strong men, moral men – in short, this club has produced the virility from which has come the progressive and modern New Orleans.¹⁰

Perhaps what set the NOAC apart as a distinctly male organization, aside from its membership roll, was the board's decision in 1911 to abolish the use of swimming trunks in the club's pool.¹¹

It was in this masculine environment that a weight training program began to take shape. The inaugural issue of *The Punch* in March 1924 featured a weightlifter on the cover, along with a boxer, a basketball player, and a bowler. But the most important step was the club's acquisition of a new duplex plate-loading barbell from the Milo Barbell Company in Philadelphia. Frank Tranchina, a leading spirit, expressed thanks on behalf of the fledgling strongmen. "These facilities are the means of securing one of the finest and most beneficial forms of physical exercise."¹² Then in April 1925, Al Treloar, physical director of the Los Angeles Athletic Club, visited the YMGC on his way to the National Gymnastics Championships in New York. As winner of Bernarr Macfadden's "Most Perfectly Developed Man in the World" contest in Madison Square Garden in 1904, Treloar was virtually the first Mr. America and a significant figure in the history of bodybuilding.¹³ It was likely this visit that inspired Prof. H. M. Gill, in an editorial, to extol the Greek ideal of a "sound mind in a healthy body." For the true athlete, "the great achievement is not the honor of victory, but the building up of a perfect body, beautiful in symmetry, strong, capable of endurance, vigorous, healthy, a body fit for a mind of intellect and power."¹⁴ These were rare words in an age when men were not yet enlightened to the benefits of weight training and bodybuilding. Indeed their effect was quickly reversed with Irwin Poché, athletic director and editor of *The Punch*, condemned the "parasitism of big muscles" when legendary strongman Eugene Sandow died suddenly at the age of only fifty-eight. "Muscles mean nothing. It is the tonicity of the nervous system and the conditions of the underlying organs that determines whether we live a long life or not." Poché recommended that weightlifters take up activities such as boxing, rope skipping, basketball, or handball to develop their agility and compensate for the overdevelopment of their pectoral, bicep, and deltoid muscle groups.¹⁵

Nevertheless Poché could not really admit that weightlifting was dangerous, and soon after it moved into its new facility at 222 North Rampart Street in 1929, the



The official emblem of the YMGC in 1888, including dumbbells, an Indian club, and foils. Additionally the club uniform consisted of a black and gold cap and striped shirt, and black knee breeches. The club flag was white, cut square, with the club emblem in the center. Courtesy of the Louisiana Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University.

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club (now styled the NOAC) provided its members “a splendid weight lifting department” on the mezzanine of the gymnasium. With a sense of pride mingled with suspicion about this concession to big muscles, Poché described it as “not too large and yet not too small” and with ample space to accommodate two men working out at the same time.

Heart of pine blocks have been placed in an upright position on a cork floor to absorb the shock of falling weights, thereby preserving the hardwood floor of our gymnasium and making the workout noiseless.¹⁶

Whatever concerns Poché may have had about this controversial activity, they were soon allayed by the publicity value generated by it. According to long-time club member, J. C. Williams, Poché was “always pulling in national entertainers and movie stars.”¹⁷ In 1930, when boxing giant Primo Carnera was in the vicinity, Poché vowed that no celebrity of his stature was “ever going to put his foot in New Orleans soil without peeping into the quarters of the New Orleans Athletic Club.” His visit was subsequently recorded in a *Punch* photograph of Carnera, stripped to the waist in a double-bicep pose with club members standing around in amazement. He also had a picture of his arm taken beside that famous Sullivan cast. “Sully’s arm suffers by comparison” was Poché’s conclusion.¹⁸ National publicity of a different sort came from a brief recognition of one of the NOAC weightlifters in Bernarr Macfadden’s *Physical Culture* magazine in 1933. So impressed was the editor with the photograph submitted of the “beautiful body” of Mr. New Orleans Edwin Reggio that it occupied a full page. Poché hastened to point out, however, that it was the result of a combination of weight training with gymnastics and hand balancing.¹⁹ Finally, club members received “valuable pointers” during a visit by Robert Samuels, alleged to be a former weightlifting instructor at the Siegmund Klein studios in New York. “As you know, Si[e]gmund Klein is one of the foremost artists’ models and professional posers in the country.” Obviously weight training was gaining greater popularity among club members and increased acceptance from their athletic director, to such an extent that the latter, in 1934, ordered a new 300-pound weight set and formed a new weightlifting athletic subcommittee. “This makes this department complete in every respect,” concluded Poché.²⁰



Irwin Felix Poché, Sr., who served for nearly a half century as athletic director of the NOAC. Courtesy of Bill More and Bill Johnston, NOAC.

A quite unexpected but pleasing by-product of this investment for Poché was that weightlifting was also an Olympic sport and not just an activity that built large useless muscles. In June 1936, NOAC lifters first made their mark at a meet staged at the local YMCA, where they won three out of the five weight classes contested in the so-called Olympic lifts – the press, snatch, and clean and jerk. Then Cy Bermudez, a local insurance agent and lifter of note, was enlisted to teach weight training three evenings a week. Exhibiting a more enlightened attitude than Poché, Bermudez rejected the popular myths of muscle-binding and athletic heart, and the idea that “if you train once you will always have to train.” Weightlifting was simply “the shortest and best method to physical perfection,” he argued.²¹ Bermudez’s efforts were soon crowned with success

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when a three-man team from the club edged out a threesome from the New Orleans YMCA by five points in a dual meet, and the NOAC hosted what was alleged to be the first Southern AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) Weightlifting Championships in 1939. Most impressive was a turnout of over 200 spectators for the latter.²² Soon NOAC lifters were beating with considerable regularity teams from the local YMCA, the Catholic Youth Organization, and Louisiana State University. Again the club rewarded the lifters for their efforts with a new York Olympic standard barbell and by moving their training quarters to a more spacious area on the main gym floor. These changes coincided with the new competitive thrust of the NOAC weightlifting program and further integrated it into the mainstream of club life. “In a heretofore little used department,” observed Bermudez, “a few nights ago the boys were waiting in line to use the weights....The sport is spreading rapidly throughout the South with the resultant increase of our club members.”²³ Muscle-building had always been central to the club’s mission, but now it was more focused on lifting heavy weights.

An important factor in the success of Bermudez’s fledgling program was the link he was able to establish with Bob Hoffman, often dubbed the “Father of American Weightlifting,” whose club and company in York, Pennsylvania, was coming to be regarded as the sport’s Mecca. Bermudez, along with Karo Whitfield of Atlanta and Jack Elder of Kilgore, Texas, was promoting York products and receiving a commission. In October 1940, he brought some of the York team – national heavyweight champion Steve Stanko, world middleweight champion John Terpak, Mr. America John Grimek, and Hoffman – to the club for an exhibition. Gender consciousness rose to a new level as a full figure display of Mr. America graced the cover of the October issue of *The Punch* with the caption of “Here he is, – Girls!” The event itself on the twenty-seventh featured a competition between teams from the Southeast and the Southwest, won by the former, a bent pressing demonstration by Hoffman with 260 pounds, a 250-pound press by Terpak, and a 350-pound clean and jerk by Stanko.

John Grimek was then called out and all lights were extinguished save a spotlight focused on John against a white background where he gave an exhibition of posing and muscle control the spectators will never forget. Oohs and Aahs were heard as he moved from one pose to the other flexing and relaxing muscles at will alternately and simultaneously. His extreme flexibility was clearly demonstrated by performing a full split upon the floor from which he leaned over and went into a hand stand then going over backwards his feet landing as lightly as a feather.²⁴

About 600 spectators witnessed this show of muscles, which netted about \$50.00 for the club. Afterwards the participants, at the invitation of their Louisiana hosts, engaged in another manly rite, when Hoffman treated everyone to a local whorehouse visit. According to Bill Curry, one of the Atlanta lifters, Grimek declined, but he did accompany the boys to a place called the “My O My Club,” where the dancers were very attractive and danced with the customers. It was only later that Mr. America discovered, to his great dismay, that he had been dancing with a man.²⁵

This was New Orleans, but it was also part of the masculine culture that permeated the NOAC and its weightlifters during the Poché era. The club was, after all, where the boys came to play, and an early editorial in *The Punch* refers to it as “the finest place in the world for men to play,” in both a physical and social sense, and that “play is one of the most attractive instincts and gives men an opportunity to be together. . . . If you are a He-man, you want to be with your fellowmen.”²⁶ Very often, of course, play was directly related to the work place, the other predominantly male preserve in those days. Poché encouraged members to use the club for sales meetings, as a hospitality center for visiting customers, and for bonding with other local businessmen on special occasions. Such an event took place in October 1941, when the club hosted a Brown Derby Luncheon at which Tulane football

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coach Lowell “Red” Dawson was the principal speaker and Olympic swimmer and movie star Buster Crabbe was an honored guest.²⁷ Beer parties were another opportunity for men to bond, however contrary heavy drinking may have been to the NOAC’s health mission. One such bash, organized by Poché in April 1933, attracted 500 members and included a late-night floor show. In December 1935, the gymnasts, including an assortment of weightlifters, staged “a ‘howling’ success, literally and figuratively speaking. The ‘big arm boys’ as Prof. Poché calls ‘em, convened, convined, consumed and conversed, gorged, guzzled, groaned, gurgled and otherwise made merry in the Club’s Banquet Room.” There followed, accompanied by the caricature of an impish weightlifter, a jaunty description of the drinking performance of each participant.²⁸ As in college fraternities, the ability to consume alcohol was one of the marks of manhood.

Other activities included billiards and card playing, sometimes for high stakes, but the most explicitly masculine, and sexist, ritual was girl-watching. In the 1920s it took the form of occasional “bathing beauty revues,” whereby local women, much in the manner of the budding Miss America contest, would compete in swimsuits for so-called “loving cups.” Often, as at one such gathering in 1926, there were acrobatic acts, hand balancing, musical numbers, and “an exhibition of dumbbell drill to music.” But in 1928 when Harry Batt assumed control of the amusement park at Pontchartrain Beach and started staging the annual Miss New Orleans Contest, Poché began to put on stag shows.²⁹ At first, as in December 1932, these performances consisted largely of vaudeville artists, including vocalists, instrumentalists, dancers, and a “quintette of fast hot-stepping damsels.” But increasingly displays of women, in a new and more revealing context, came to be the main attraction for the all-male audiences. By 1942, the stag show had degenerated into what was billed as an “All Girl Show” where nudity was clearly the draw. Although the first half of the May 8 event featured a variety of song, dance, and gymnastic routines, the second half was devoted to the art of strip tease.³⁰ The war experience only reinforced these sexist gatherings, glorified now as patriotic fund-raisers for war bonds. At a December 1942 show, “men of the armed forces seemed to be in the preponderance” with “military songs, flags and bunting hung promiscuously [*sic*]” around the gymnasium. The entire cast and band from the Casino de Parée and the Casino Royale, classy acts from the French Quarter, were featured in the first half, while “the show closed with a conglomeration of ten perfect beauties in bubble, fan, balloon, Egyptian, Oriental, and veil dances.” This heady mixture of sex and patriotism raised nearly \$300,000 in war bond sales.³¹ According to J. C. Williams, “the stag shows featured anything you could see on Bourbon Street.”³²

This inclination for the bawdy and risqué was no doubt reflected in the sweaty environs of the weight room. Indeed the correspondence of Cy Bermudez is peppered with dirty jokes, sexual innuendoes, and man talk. Well known for his philandering ways was Reyam Sherman, who defected from the New Orleans YMCA to become NOAC’s assistant coach in 1941. On requesting a recommendation letter for a naval commission in 1942, he explained to John Terpak, with a dash of swagger, that “they want some Athletic Directors and my only chance is to get somebody to say some nice things about me. Here in New Orleans, only the proprietors of Whore-houses and Bar-Rooms know me, and that would hardly be a worthwhile recommendation to our Navy.”³³ Tommy O’Hare, the club’s perennial heavyweight champion, confirms that “Reyam fancied himself as a women’s man,” but the rest of the guys were not that way. Some were even prim and proper. Although a lot of foul language came out of the adjacent handball courts, the weightlifters were always “pretty well focused.” The intensity of their activity was indicated by the constant clanking and crashing of weights on the cork and wood block floor.³⁴ It was perhaps for this reason that the Bermudez/Sherman duo were able to thrust the NOAC team into the forefront of Southern weightlifting during the early war years,

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winning three consecutive AAU championships. These achievements coincided with another local physical culture tradition with links to the NOAC. The Mr. New Orleans Contest, started by Harry Batt at Pontchartrain Beach in 1931, served as a complement to his Miss New Orleans Contest. In 1940, *The Punch* reported that the male event “developed as much interest if not more than that of the bathing beauty contest. One way or the other, it is fine publicity for exercise and health work, and a feather in the hat of the New Orleans Athletic Club in having the finest specimen in the contest.”³⁵ Batt further treated the winner, Tommy O’Hare, an eighteen-year-old clerk at Hibernia Bank, to a trip to Philadelphia to enter the Mr. America Contest. Although he did not place in the top five, O’Hare set in motion a tradition for NOAC strongmen – that they should aspire to national recognition. And Bermudez was honored for his promotional endeavors by being selected as a judge, alongside such iron game notables as John Fritsche, Bob Hoffman, and Siegmund Klein.³⁶

By 1943, however, Bermudez, Sherman, O’Hare, and others were whisked away to military service, making it no longer possible even to field a team for the Southern AAU Championships. That club fortunes soon revived may be attributed to the timely, almost Messiah-like, reappearance of Bob Samuels. Born in 1911 in New York City of Eastern European Jewish immigrant parents, Samuels took up weightlifting as a youth to recover from a massive leg infection incurred in a football injury. Inspired by Eugen Sandow, he studied physical culture under the tutelage of Siegmund Breitbart and Siegmund Klein and had a brief career as a Hollywood stuntman. Samuels’ settlement in New Orleans was fortuitous. While passing through the city in 1931, he met and married Helen Cotlar after a ten-day courtship; Samuels then took a job with a shoe company which he held for the next fifteen years. While traveling in sales work to Lake Charles and Houston, he participated in the professional wrestling circuit with the stage name of the “Business Man Wrestler,” and even worked briefly as a mounted state trooper. According to his son Bernard, Samuels was “one tough cookie” and “a control freak.” He “always had to be in charge – front and center.” Although he was “extremely self-centered and ambitious,” he was “very close to his lifters,” whom he regarded as “much like his sons.”³⁷ In his autobiography, Samuels admits that “life has always been a challenge for me to do more than normally required.”³⁸ After a decade of involvement with the weightlifters at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association in New Orleans, Samuels eased into the leadership void at the NOAC in the latter stages of the war. By the summer of 1945 he was offering classes twice a week and attracting forty-five regulars. His weight men also, in quick succession, captured team titles at Novice, Junior, and Senior Southern AAU competitions, for which they were feted to a private dinner in their honor. Weight-room attendance had shown “such an increase that it may necessitate the enlarging of our department,” observed Poché.³⁹

Samuels responded to this encouragement by doubling his efforts. He started writing a monthly “With the Weight Men” column in *The Punch* and hosting monthly dinners at which he showed movies and conducted round-table discussions about training problems and future activities. An additional sixty square feet of lifting space, equipment purchases, and new flooring further heightened the spirit of camaraderie amongst the boys, whom Samuels estimated at seventy-five by year’s end.⁴⁰ “There is no subject quite so fascinating to men as the one on physical culture and development of the human body.” It was this trait, he argued, that inspired so much admiration for such male role models as Babe Ruth and Hank Greenberg in baseball, Ernie Nevers and Bronko Nagurski in football, boxing greats Jack Dempsey and Joe Louis, and movie stars Buster Crabbe and Johnny Weissmuller. “It is the physical development and strength which they admire most in these men.” In 1946 Samuels had an opportunity to display his own manly prowess by setting a “world record” in the bench press of 335 pounds at a meet in February. That this lift was rarely performed in those days, that there were

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The NOAC weightlifters (ca. 1946) with Larry Cox on the far left, Robert Samuels the far right, and Lou Riecke and Freddie Hom, fifth and second from the right respectively. Courtesy of Louis Riecke.

no official records or judges for it, and that no one could remember who held the previous record of 330 only slightly diminished the publicity value of this feat.⁴¹ More significant was his second claim to international fame – a “world record” of 420 pounds in the shoulder bridge press, done while lying flat on the floor, at a meet in May. This time he arranged for no less than ten judges and a notary public to witness the event. He was also able to identify the previous record-holder (Joe Nordquest from the World War I era) and have a photographer on hand to record his lift for posterity. Samuels was probably the last person ever to perform this ancient lift in public, but he gained the recognition he so much craved by being featured in Robert Ripley’s *Believe It or Not* syndicated column.⁴² Most gratifying, no doubt, was an article subtitled “The Southern Hercules” that Reyam Sherman penned for *Strength & Health*, a national publication which detailed Samuels’ rise from obscurity to become “the strongest man in the south” and “among the great lifters of all time.”⁴³ However inflated such claims to individual greatness may have been, Samuels was having an immense impact on the lives of young men, many just out of the service, at the NOAC. Louis Riecke, Jr., then just starting his brilliant lifting career, recalls Samuels as “a forceful personality and egotistical (like Bob Hoffman), but I would rather have him watching [coaching] me in a contest than anyone else.”⁴⁴ Above all, Samuels got results. In 1946 his lifters again won all the Southern AAU titles, the Senior Southwestern title, a dual meet with Louisiana State University (LSU), and the first three places in the Mr. New Orleans Contest. Some of his boys even gave exhibitions at veterans’ hospitals.⁴⁵

Soon Samuels was conducting intrasquad competitions, posting club records, and organizing an “inner club” called the Weightlifters Club. He even broke racial barriers by recruiting Freddie Hom, a talented Asian featherweight, to his team. But by mid-1947, all was not going well. At the Southern AAU meet in June, where the NOAC lost to LSU, Sherman observed Samuels “bickering with the officials and everyone else. . . . Our boys did lousy . . . everyone seems discontented and at odds with everything and everyone. Lack of cooperation from the club, and a few other things made us get the hell kicked out of us.”⁴⁶ NOAC also lost the state meet to LSU in December, and then, at another outing with LSU at the club in early 1948, Samuels exploded. At the conclusion of the lifting he requested towels for the visiting team which included All-American football player and heavyweight Walter “Piggy” Barnes. When the attendant said “no” and Poché supported him, Samuels resigned and went to the YMCA. He had a “violent temper,” recalls his son, but it was usually kept under wraps in public. Then “something would strike” and he would blow up.⁴⁷ Pete Talluto, an NOAC champion in the 1950s, concurs that Samuels, for all his enthusiasm and lifting savvy, was “blunt and not diplomatic.” Unfortunately he also got on the wrong side of Hoffman, Terpak, and others who dominated the national councils of the sport.⁴⁸

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Whatever personal qualities Samuels may have lacked, he had raised weightlifting to a new level of importance among the manly endeavors pursued at the NOAC, and his successor, Larry Cox, was the chief beneficiary. After serving in the Coast Guard in World War II, Cox became a real estate salesman and a regular in the weight room and in NOAC competitions. Unlike Samuels, a rugged individualist who insisted on his own way, Cox was suave, neat as a pin, and a real team player. Poché made it clear that the “most important” quality in his selection of weightlifting director, beyond his competitive record and coaching ability, was Cox’s “‘know how’ in getting along with people.”⁴⁹ It was just what the club needed. With Samuels at the helm of the New Orleans YMCA team, NOAC boys were often relegated to second place in local and regional competitions for the next several years. But there was a more relaxed atmosphere, typified by an all day outing of “muscle men and charming ladies” at Bogue Falaya Wayside Park in Covington. *The Punch* reported that

There was fun, lots of action, swimming, water polo and frolicking throughout the day on the beautiful sandy beach and wooded picnic grounds. Everyone brought his own lunch and there was ample refreshments of cold soft drinks and beer for all.

Climaxing the day’s activities was the selection of Charles Staunton as Mr. NOAC and Mary Mariakis as Miss NOAC.⁵⁰ It was a wholesome form of masculinity that Cox brought to his team, quite different from the rough and ready days of Bermudez, Sherman, and Samuels. His lifters began appearing in competition decked out in gold satin trunks with black NOAC insignias. Eventually Cox’s popularity and programs inspired so much activity that an extra weightlifting platform had to be placed on the gym floor just outside the lifters’ cages, “to take care of the overflow crowd who jam the area between 5:30 p.m. and 7 p.m. almost every day.”⁵¹

Masculine leadership of a more traditional kind continued to be displayed by Athletic Director Poché in the 1950s. “Man or Mouse?” was the challenge he issued to club members to intensify their commitment to physical fitness as a response to Cold War threats to the American way of life. “If there ever was a time that tried men’s souls,” he wrote in 1951, “it is these hectic days when our very homes are at stake – these weeks and months when the Communist octopus is reaching his slimy tentacles all over the earth.”⁵² There is no evidence that Poché himself exercised as he advised others, but he held positions of esteem in the New Orleans sporting establishment, including chairman of the Louisiana State Boxing Commission and membership in the state’s Racing Association. In 1952 he became the first president of the Sugar Bowl “to come up from the ranks of sports.” J. C. Williams characterizes



NOAC champions in the early 1950s. Front row: Jesse Brassett, Louis Riecke; middle row: Odell Bryant, Ed Compter, Charles Staunton; back row: Terrell Brunet, unknown, unknown, Howard Bodie. Courtesy of Louis Riecke.

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Poché as “a good promoter but a terrible individual. He was originally Huey Long’s man. This club never paid taxes for years because of Poché’s influence. All the governors came. All the mayors came. All the judges belonged. Every politician came here – all given automatic memberships. At one time anyone who was anybody belonged to this club.” While many of the city’s social elite might belong but not attend regularly, the NOAC served as a magnet for enterprising businessman. In-house dining clubs (Down-the-River, Brown Derby, Early Birds, etc.) and the card room especially served as sources of social camaraderie and bonding, which inevitably led to business transactions. “Most of the business in New Orleans was hammered out at the club,” according to J. C. Williams.⁵³ Despite whatever suspicions might be aroused by the existence of this all male enclave in the French Quarter, replete with massage rooms and nude swimming, there is no evidence of any sub rosa homosexual culture at the club. Louis Riecke, an active member from 1933 to 1964, insists that there was “no hint of it at all – none,” an opinion that is shared by his contemporaries.⁵⁴

Poché was the main instrument in creating this intense social environment, and his promotional activities seemed as beneficial to the club as to himself. He was instrumental, for instance, in creating in 1949 the Banquet of Champions, an event held in the NOAC ballroom each January to recognize deserving club athletes and the outstanding athlete of the Greater New Orleans area. This latter distinction was extended to the club level in 1952 with the instigation of the Delaney (NOAC) Award. Its criteria included not only outstanding athletic performance, sportsmanship, good character, leadership, and loyalty to the club, but “manliness.” Not surprisingly, Poché’s approach towards women was patronizing and strictly from a separate sphere. For instance, he conceived the idea and organized the Sugarettes to provide an all-girl entertainment during Sugar Bowl festivities, and he broadcast a show on radio and later television to promote fitness “for the fairer sex.”⁵⁵ Most revealing of Poché’s sexist outlook, however, was a picture on the cover of a 1954 issue of *The Punch* entitled “April Foolishness.” Predating the famous Marilyn Monroe scene in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), it shows an attractive female caught off guard by the seasonal wind and rain, revealing a shapely pair of legs in nylons and garter belt. Girl-watching was still a popular pastime at the all-male club.

In the meantime, Cox’s weightlifters seemed undistracted by these diversions and were far exceeding expectations in competition. Not only were they winning most local and regional meets, as squads had done in yesteryear, but some were competing on the national level. What made the difference was the appearance of three outstanding lifters in the middling classes – Louis Riecke (middleweight), Charles Staunton (light-heavyweight), and Pete Talluto (lightweight). Riecke, the son of a local businessman, civic leader, and club member, had been competing for NOAC teams since 1945, while Staunton, a sewing machine sales and serviceman, and Talluto, an engineering student at Tulane University, were relative newcomers. Along with featherweight Allen McDaniel, they spearheaded a club victory over a favored YMCA team at the 1953 Southern AAU Championships, thereby instigating a succession of triumphs.⁵⁶ The first lifter to achieve national recognition was Talluto, who placed third in the lightweight class at the 1954 Senior Nationals in Los Angeles, losing to former world champion Joe Pitman. For his achievement, the club awarded him that year’s Delaney Award as outstanding athlete. Then a NOAC foursome won the 1955 Junior National Championships in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, with Talluto and Riecke taking firsts, Staunton a second place, and McDaniel a fourth. Club elders were jubilant over this unprecedented achievement, and a picture of Cox with his national champions graced the cover of the June 1955 issue of *The Punch*. When club member Alvin Bertaut won the Mr. New Orleans title in 1956, Poché’s response was decidedly different from the negative views he had held towards the sport in bygone years. “The Weightlifting Department has brought much honor to the Club in the last few years. . . . Out of this class are produced a large

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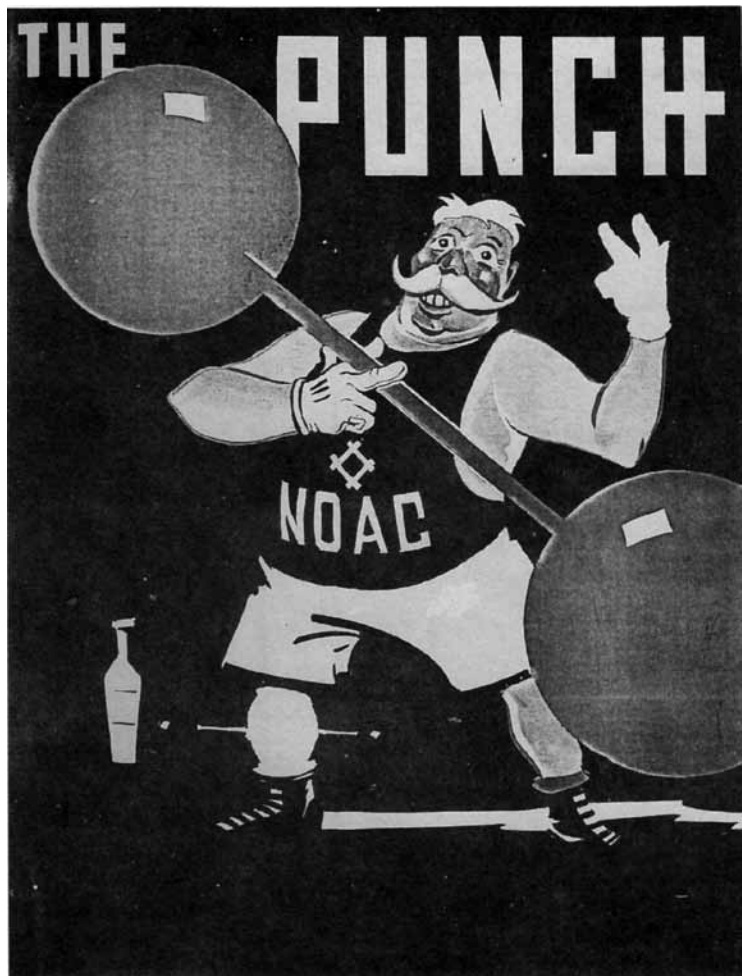
number of young men who are possessed not only with good health and good looks, but what we in physical education call the “body beautiful.”⁵⁷

Hence it was with the blessing and support of the club that Talluto, Riecke, and Staunton, accompanied by Cox, competed in the 1956 national championships in Philadelphia. There, the competition was much stiffer, but Talluto took third with a 220 press, 220 snatch, and 300-pound clean and jerk as a lightweight. Bob Hoffman liked the spunky young lifter, “whom I have long felt was our best hope for the future in this class.”⁵⁸ Widely regarded as the best weightlifter the club ever produced, Talluto again won the Delaney Award for 1956 and 1957 and was even considered a prospect for the Melbourne (1956) Olympics. When the club named a female swimmer, rather than Talluto, as its outstanding athlete for 1957, a local journalist defended “the manly art of weightlifting.”

And while you might hold that his feats are never performed before the huge audiences that see the football star in action and that a male weightlifter hardly has the glamour of a southern swimming queen, you’ve got to admit that Pete must be quite a boy – and quite an athlete.⁵⁹

After he won the national collegiates in Columbus, Ohio and took the North American lightweight title in Montreal, *The Punch* was awestruck, observing that Talluto “continues to amaze and mystify his friends and competitors in lifting meets. To look at this 148 pound lad in street clothes, one would never pinpoint him as a lifting champion.” And when he led his teammates to further laurels at a big meet in Houston, this kind of praise was extended to the entire program. “Our weightlifters have turned in an enviable record in 1957 under the expert coaching of Larry Cox. As a matter of fact more Southern champions have been crowned in this sport than in any other on our program.”⁶⁰

Much of the reason for this success may be attributed to Poché’s initiatives and generosity. Not only did he reward the efforts of his weightlifters with equipment, space, awards, and travel funds, but he recruited talented young men by offering them reduced fees to use only the athletic facilities. “We had



Caricature of a weightlifter that appeared on the cover of the October 1955 issue of *The Punch* signifying the growing importance of this sport in the club’s activities. Courtesy of Bill More and Bill Johnston, NOAC.

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the richest and the poorest in the club,” confirms J. C. Williams. “Poché gave scholarships to poor but good athletes.”⁶¹ The NOAC, though elitist, was an institution open to talent. Lloyd “Red” Lerille, who became Mr. America in 1960 and eventually proprietor of one of the largest and most elaborate fitness centers in the country in Lafayette, joined the club in the early 1950s as a budding but underdeveloped teenage wrestler. Through the benefits of weight training, he never lost a match his entire high school career and was three-time state champion.⁶² In September 1957 alone there were seven applications for athletic membership at the club, five of which were proposed by Poché and one by Larry Cox. Foremost among the late fifties recruits was John Gourgott, who made his mark by winning the Mr. NOAC title for 1957 and then by setting a new light-heavyweight press record of 255 pounds at the 1958 Southern AAU Junior Championships. What really got everyone’s attention, however, was that Gourgott won both the Teenage National Weightlifting Championships in his class and the Teenage Mr. America title in June 1958 in York, Pennsylvania. He was, by all accounts, a gifted athlete. Louis Riecke remembers Gourgott as “the strongest man in more different things than anyone I’ve ever known.” He was also a brilliant student in the pre-med curriculum at Tulane.⁶³ Gourgott, along with mid-heavyweight Staunton and heavyweight Odell Bryant, gave the NOAC team unusual strength in the heavy classes and a model physique to showcase the club and sport. The future looked bright.

It was at that point that two untoward events occurred – Talluto joined the Army and moved to Germany, and Cox resigned. The latter especially came as a shock, but was understandable in light of the level of commitment required and achievement Cox had attained over the previous decade. “Few coaches in the annals of the history of the Club have turned in such a fine performance and brought more honor to the Club and contributed more to the youth of a given sport,” observed Poché.⁶⁴ Though more of an athlete than a coach, Riecke agreed to take responsibility for the weightlifting program. He did so out of a sense of commitment to his fellow lifters and loyalty to the club. His grandfather Henry Heine, a successful New Orleans cabinet maker for banks and churches, had belonged to the NOAC. His father, Louis Riecke, Sr., who started a lumber business in 1924 and was a key figure in integrating city schools, was a proficient indoor baseball player, once one of the most popular sports at the NOAC. Activity and achievements, in what was considered to be the “largest and best” weightlifting facility in any athletic club, actually increased under Riecke’s calm guidance. Overall membership was reaching an all-time high, and weightlifting, a minor sport nationally, was gaining the greatest recognition.⁶⁵ Notwithstanding the loss of Talluto and Cox, the sport’s glory days were still at hand.

Riecke led by example rather than by exhortation. Over the previous fifteen years, he had progressed slowly, taking a junior national title along the way. But in 1958 and 1959, he placed second as a middleweight to the great Tommy Kono, widely regarded as the world’s all-time greatest weightlifter, at national championships in Los Angeles and York respectively. Admittedly his three-lift total was 100 pounds behind Kono’s, but Riecke gave notice that he was truly a national and possibly a world-caliber athlete. This was even more evident the following year in Cleveland, when he closed the gap to 55 pounds behind mid-heavyweight Olympian Jim George. Then in October 1960, at a hotel in York, Pennsylvania, Riecke encountered a physician from Olney, Maryland, named John Ziegler, who had been testing various strength-building ideas on Bob Hoffman’s world-class athletes. Riecke, who had a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology and Biochemistry and two years of medical school at LSU, established an immediate rapport with Ziegler. Riecke agreed to follow a new exercise system called functional isometric contraction (or isometrics) on a device called the power rack. His routine consisted of a single maximum contraction performed daily on a stationary bar in a group of eight exercises. Furthermore, “to assure proper nutrition to the exerted muscles,” Riecke noted, he took “an anabolic daily,” and once a week had his gains tested by attempts with limit poundages on a barbell.⁶⁶

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Riecke's gains on this program were phenomenal. At a meet in Dallas in January 1961 he posted a 925-pound total, thirty-five pounds above his official best and identical to the total of the bronze medalist at the recent Rome Olympics. By the time of the national championships in Los Angeles in June, Riecke was set to take on Kono in what turned out to be one of the classic battles in weightlifting history. After the press and snatch, the lifters were tied with subtotals of 600 pounds. Only the NOAC lifter's failure to negotiate a final 380 pound clean and jerk deprived him of victory and the meet's outstanding lifter award. Bob Hoffman was amazed. "Tommy was the champion, but Riecke was the sensation of the meet, for he lifted 105 pounds more than he did one year ago."⁶⁷ It was not until a year later that Riecke learned the "anabolic" he was receiving from Ziegler was a variety of tissue-building steroid. Whatever effect the highly publicized isometrics were having on his performance, the impact of this covert infusion of male hormones was unmistakable and historic.⁶⁸

Louis Riecke, however, was by no means NOAC's only star performer. Charles Staunton, after winning the 1959 Junior National Championship, placed second in the 1960 Senior Nationals to Olympian John Pulskamp of Ohio. For this achievement he was named as an alternate, along with Riecke, on the 1960 Olympic weightlifting team. Pete Talluto persuaded the Army to fly him from Germany for the 1960 nationals, where he placed third to Kono and young Gary Cleveland. One of the most promising strength athletes on the NOAC team was heavyweight Odell Bryant who, at the 1961 Louisiana State Championships set records of 300 pounds in the press and 370 pounds in the clean and jerk. That Bryant never ascended to the national level may be attributed to a want of nerve. "He was a fantastic lifter," recalled Talluto, who saw him press 335, snatch 295, and clean and jerk 385. "He could keep up with [national champion Bill] March but had no confidence in himself. He was so nervous and couldn't stand any kind of pressure."⁶⁹ Sadly, Bryant soon retired from competition.

The most impressive NOAC performer, aside from Riecke, was unquestionably John Gourgott, who seemed equally adept at weightlifting and physique. In 1959 he won the Junior Nationals as a mid-heavyweight lifter, and in 1960 and 1961 he ranked tenth and eleventh respectively in the Mr. America Contest. In 1963 and 1964, while attending medical school at LSU, he attracted the greatest national attention. Although he only placed fifth in the mid-heavies in 1963, he won a special trophy, donated by Atlanta promoter Karo Whitfeld, for being the best-built lifter. This was a longtime ideal in the iron game. Then he took fourth in the Mr. America Contest, placing just 3.5 points behind the winner, Vern Weaver. The significance of this strong showing was enhanced by the third-place finish of Dr. Craig Whitehead, an ophthalmology resident at Tulane and representative of the NOAC. "It is strange that both Gourgott and Whitehead have very similar types of physiques," observed Peary Rader, editor of *Iron Man*. Both are medical men and both are good Olympic lifters and both are from the same general area of the U.S.A." Gourgott's performance was impressive enough to win him a trip to London to compete in the annual Mr. Universe Contest.⁷⁰ In 1964 he took third place in the Senior Nationals as a mid-heavyweight, out pressing the winner, Bill March, who would later set a world record in that lift. Gourgott was also runner-up to Mr. America Val Vasilieff. "He has a very symmetrical development, well balanced in every respect," remarked Rader. "He has a fine abdominal formation and he shows a well knit shoulder formation from his lifting training. We would say that his chances for a title in the future are very good."⁷¹ It was not to be, however, since he could fare no better than sixth the following year and then, after joining the Air Force as a physician, took second and third in the weightlifting nationals in 1967 and 1968 respectively.

By far the greatest amount of attention garnered by NOAC weightlifters in this era, however, stemmed from the heroics of Louis Riecke. After his dramatic encounter with Kono in 1961, he continued to progress, but was hampered by injuries. Then at the 1963 national championships in

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Harrisburg, he had another showdown with America's weightlifting legend. This time Riecke was leading Kono by fifteen pounds after the press and snatch and had a 360 pound clean and jerk to his credit. Kono had two attempts to make 375 and thereby win on lighter bodyweight. He at first failed to jerk this great weight, but on his second attempt he displayed a superhuman effort and defeated his NOAC opponent. "The biggest thrill of my career came that day when I figured I had Kono beat," Riecke recalls, "and the biggest disappointment of my life came a few minutes later when he made that 375 jerk."⁷² But Riecke was hardly vanquished. In 1964 he led his team to yet another Southern AAU victory and then, at the YMCA Nationals in Los Angeles, he set a world record of 325 pounds in the snatch. This epic lift was doubly significant inasmuch as it was the only world record held by the United States at that time in weightlifting. News of his feat, replete with pictures and stories, flashed forth from publications all over muscledom. "In my twenty-six years of attending weightlifting championships I have never witnessed anything as dramatic," wrote Bob Hise in *Lifting News*.

Lou mounted the platform to a thunderous applause. He pranced to and fro behind the bar. A stillness came over the audience and though the Downtown Y is in the civic center, it seemed that the traffic cooperated by being silent. Lou strode briskly to the bar and meticulously placed his hands at the proper distance. If there is a way to measure nervous energy I am sure that even the electronic device would be unable to contain the great force that Lou had built up at this time. The bar inched off the floor and with the speed of a missile it shot to arms length and with a low fast split the weight was fixed at arms length. Riecke, while in this low position, was making sure he had the bar in a proper position before standing erect, and at this moment the audience went wild with such words as 'Hold it Lou,' 'Come on, Lou,' 'Don't drop it, Lou.' Riecke stood erect and the audience cheered long and loud, and you were aware of the fever pitch emotions and admiration each and every spectator, official and contestant had for this great Southern Gentleman.⁷³

For Riecke, this achievement served as a stepping-stone to a berth on the Olympic team that was to represent the United States in Tokyo. Hometown folks were jubilant. "Self-discipline, a tenacity for hard work, and a strong dedication to the sport and to the Club earned Louis his rightful place to compete for the world's title," exclaimed *The Punch*. "It is our purpose to attract to this department all the young men on our roster to participate in some 11 sports sponsored by the Club in A.A.U. competition. However, from this vast array of juveniles, junior and intermediate members, and a small group of athletic members, we are from time to time able to develop national champions and, once in a very long while, a prospect for the Olympic team."⁷⁴ What made Riecke so special was that he was home grown, with roots buried deep in the NOAC's masculine culture. Although a leg injury prevented him from completing his lifts in Tokyo, Riecke won the Outstanding Athlete Award for New Orleans in 1964, having shared that honor with a female tennis player in 1959, and his picture appeared on the front cover of the February 1965 issue of *The Punch*.

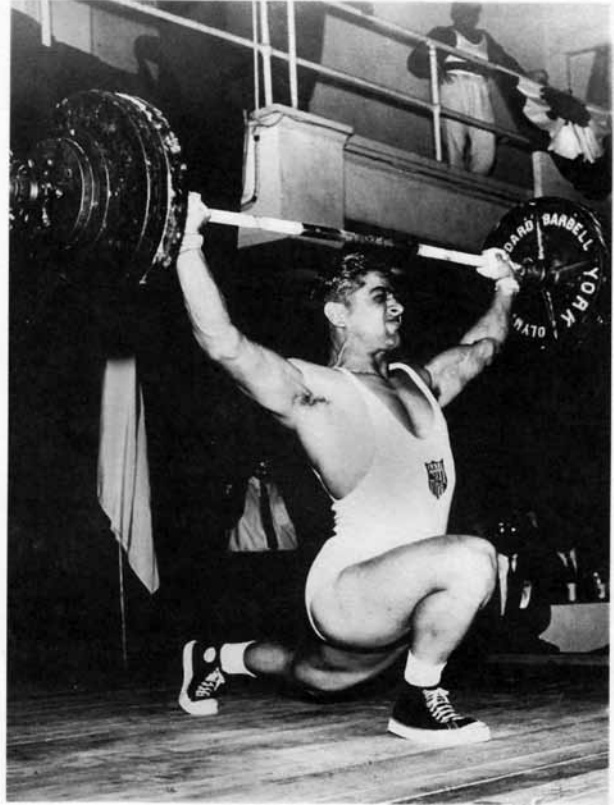
By this time Poché, after nearly a half century at the helm, relinquished his position as athletic director. Before doing so, however, he admitted a change of heart with regard to weightlifting. "Thirty years ago, any weight in a gymnasium above an eight-pound dumbbell was tabooed. . . . We were led to believe that men who devoted all their time to weightlifting were muscle bound and couldn't throw a baseball and hit the side of a house from a distance of fifty feet."⁷⁵ Poché's successor, Lee Early, did not require conversion to weights and seemed prepared to continue building the NOAC team into a national power. To this end, Early brought back Bob Samuels, still an active lifter and chairman of the Southern AAU, as NOAC weightlifting coach. Samuels aspired to challenge Bob Hoffman's York Barbell Club and Bob Hise's Los Angeles YMCA squad for the national team trophy. To do

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so, he employed Hoffman's model of recruiting non-club athletes. Early assisted by providing complimentary athletic memberships and transportation to national contests. The most significant such recruit was Walter Imahara of Baton Rouge who was already a national champion and Olympic prospect in the featherweight class. Of Japanese descent, Imahara and his family had spent most of World War II in relocation camps in California and Arkansas. After graduating from college in Lafayette and serving in the Army in Germany, he entered the family's nursery and landscape business. For Imahara, the NOAC was something of a culture shock. "When I walked in for the first time, I wondered if I was in the right place," he recalls. "The club was one of the most fantastic places I had ever seen." At any rate, he never worked out there or felt any sense of team spirit. Instead, he trained at the Baton Rouge YMCA, which had just one Olympic bar, and it was bent. "I joined the NOAC for the sponsorship to go to the Senior Nationals," admits Imahara. "Yes, I really wanted that."⁷⁶ Though seemingly a somewhat tenuous connection with his club, it helped to propel Imahara through the greatest years of his lifting career. In addition to winning valuable team points by placing first in local and regional competitions, he broke many records and reigned as national champion all four years (1965-1968) that he represented the club. But the high point of his lifting came with his featherweight victory at the 1967 Pan American Games in Winnipeg and his fourth place finish at the 1967 Pre-Olympics in Mexico City.

Another standout that Samuels recruited to his team was David Berger, a psychology student at Tulane. In 1964 he won the National Collegiates and placed fourth at the Senior Nationals in Chicago, and in January 1965, he shattered all Southern and Southeastern AAU lightweight records with a 255 press, a 230 snatch, and 300-pound clean and jerk at a meet in Birmingham.⁷⁷ Later, he was one of those Israeli athletes who was killed in the terrorist attack at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

For most of these glory years for NOAC weightlifting Coach Samuels still nurtured ambitions of greatness in his chosen sport. According to Imahara, he "liked lifting and liked coaching," but above all, "Bob Samuels loved Bob Samuels. He wanted to have a great team, and this was his one shot in life to beat York."⁷⁸ He came closest to achieving this goal at the 1964 Senior Nationals when his team of four lifters – Imahara, Berger, Riecke and Gourgott – took third place in a field of thirteen clubs. Hoffman was impressed, noting that the NOAC "had a very strong team and will push the York Barbell Club in the future for the team title." But Samuels' proudest moment probably occurred in 1966 when he led an American team, which included six NOAC lifters, to victory in a dual international meet with Mexico.⁷⁹ His club had defeated an entire nation! Although he never realized his ambition of

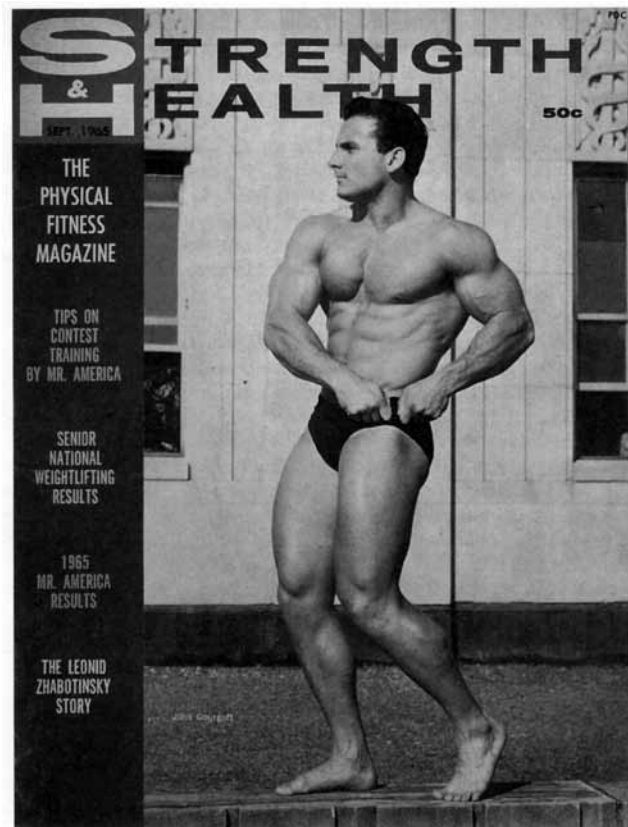


Louis Riecke's world record snatch of 325 pounds at the YMCA Nationals in Los Angeles, 1964. Courtesy of Louis Riecke.

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becoming the United States coach at the 1980 Olympics or defeating the York Barbell Club, Samuels brought the NOAC tradition of achievement in weightlifting to a fitting climax.

The retirement of Riecke in 1966 and Imahara and Gourgott in 1968, and the resignation of Samuels in 1970, marked the end of an era. The nature of the club and nation changed during the ensuing decade, reflecting an increasing diversity in sport and culture. Olympic lifting was no longer pursued with regularity, but there remained an afterglow of this manly endeavor with the instigation of powerlifting (bench press, squat, and deadlift) competitions and with the increased popularity of bodybuilding. The first NOAC powerlifting meet in November 1964 was a “huge success.” It featured many of the weightlifting champions and included Bob Samuels, who took heavyweight honors with a quite respectable 360 bench press (25 pounds more than his 1946 “world record”), 430 squat, and 550 deadlift. The following August his team won the first Louisiana State Power Meet and set ten new state records in the process.⁸⁰ Interest in bodybuilding at the club was sustained over the years by the Mr. NOAC Contest, held at some local beach or playground in conjunction with the annual July picnic. Instigated by Rolla Schwartz, a member of the board of directors and chairman of the Entertainment Committee, the picnic had grown from less than one hundred participants to nearly 6,000 in 1961. Enhancing the display of big muscles, by contrasting brawn with beauty, was the Miss NOAC Contest held in conjunction with it. In 1961 it featured “twenty beautiful girls, one prettier than the other, when paraded on the stage . . . in a hot broiling sun at 1:00 p.m.” Pictures of the Mr. and Miss NOAC winners, Gerald F. Neff and June Byers, in *The Punch* represented traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity.⁸¹ Very often the winners of the Mr. NOAC Contest would go on to win the annual Mr. New Orleans Contest at Pontchartrain Beach, including three ophthalmologists, Robert Azar (1952), Gourgott (1958), and Whitehead (1963). Probably the most notable physique to emerge from these competitions in the 1960s was club member Gable Boudreaux who, after topping all opposition in the Gulf Coast region, moved to Southern California, where he became Mr. Los Angeles and Mr. International and was featured in major muscle magazines.⁸² Joe Burda, Mr. NOAC for 1969, stayed in New Orleans to serve as the club’s weightlifting coach after Samuels’ resignation, looking like “he stepped right out of the old Charles Atlas ads,” according to *The Punch*. “In the past the NOAC has produced many local weightlifting champs, a number of national champions and many muscle men who have won bodybuilding titles both on local and national levels. Once again, the NOAC is in the process of developing weight-lifting and bodybuilding champions.”⁸³ But it was not to be. Never again would the NOAC achieve greatness in this sport.



John Gourgott, who was runner-up in the Mr. America Contest of 1964, was coverman for the September 1965 issue of *Strength & Health*, the leading muscle magazine of that era. Courtesy of York Barbell Company.

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The club's decline in the early 1970s might appear precipitous, but it was intimately associated with cultural changes that slowly diluted and diversified the traditional masculine nature of the club. "The New Orleans clergy started to get aggressive," according to Tommy O'Hare, and the strippers and show girls were no longer featured. Yet the female form was still a draw, as evident in an April 1963 Roaring Twenties Party during which NOAC men could ogle girls dressed up like Playboy bunnies and enjoy a women's bathing-suit revue.⁸⁴ In addition, the emphasis was increasingly on youth, coinciding with a national trend. Forsaking traditional stereotypes of cigar-smoking, beer-drinking, over-weight, out-of-shape avuncular figures popularly associated with gentlemen's clubs, *The Punch* promoted the concept of "a Club whose membership is vitally alive, and, attracts not only the well-established man and his family but offers much for the young man on the way up." An adolescent flexing his bicep in 1964 issues publicizing the NOAC's summer youth programs underscored the continued importance of bodybuilding in defining masculinity for maturing teens.⁸⁵

A sure sign of changing times was the suggestion in an expansion study presented to the club's stockholders in 1970 "that a broader based family membership, if so desired, could be achieved by increased facilities for ladies to include health and exercise functions together, with an expanded mixed and unmixed social function."⁸⁶ Heretofore, aside from special occasions, women were allowed only in the club's formal dining room. The concerns of club elders about social change were well-founded. Though attempts were made to keep up with the times, the NOAC was a faltering inner-city institution by the mid-1970s. In the December 1975 issue of *The Punch*, Pres. Robert Azar, a former Mr. NOAC, issued a clarion call – insisting that the club's eroding membership and economic woes could best be resolved by admitting African Americans. "For more than a century, the N.O.A.C. has been a center of civic and social, as well as athletic, activities. But in 1976 we are becoming morally moribund, socially stagnant, and economically extinct."⁸⁷ Interestingly, no mention was made of the possibility of accepting women, seemingly a less drastic form of social change. Eventually, after a decade of wrangling, blacks were admitted to the NOAC in 1986, opening the way for admission of women in 1989. It was the all-male tradition that proved the hardest to break, but once broken, club owner Bill More, in a 1992 interview with the New Orleans Times Picayune, declared that "we want it to be 50 per-cent." A decade later the male/female ratio hovers at 52/48.⁸⁸ Furthermore, accommodation had to be made for this new mixed clientele in the form of women's dressing rooms, an end to nude swimming, a greater emphasis on aerobic-style programs, and a suite called Le Salon, where largely female members receive massages, facials, manicures, pedicures, and waxing treatments. But the biggest change observed by J. C. Williams has been the decline of card playing, an all-male activity that once attracted over 100 members, now down to fifteen or twenty participants. This is hardly surprising considering the club's recent change of gender orientation.⁸⁹

By this time too a new cultural dynamic was intruding on American consciousness – the fitness craze, instigated by such pioneers as Jack Lalanne, Vic Tanny, and Bonnie Prudden, and brought to fruition by such physical popular culture icons as Kenneth Cooper, Jane Fonda, Joe Gold, and Arnold Schwarzenegger.⁹⁰ At the NOAC this movement has resulted in a blend of the old with the new, the ambience and charm of an early twentieth-century gentlemen's club with the energy and intensity of a modern well-equipped health club that is attuned to the heartbeat of the city. As the club's promotional brochure states, recent conceptual changes have preserved the institution's "congeniality, serenity and architectural significance" while allowing it to advance to "the forefront of fitness, health, athletics and nutrition."⁹¹ Of all the social and fitness activities pursued at the club since 1872, muscle building (whether by gymnastics, dumbbells, barbells, or modern machines) has enjoyed the longest and most distinguished history at the NOAC. It was an integral part of the routines performed by members of

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the Independent Gymnastic Club at their early backyard workout facility. For the next half-century weight training and bodybuilding formed a low-key, but vital component of the program that helped shape the concept of the sporting gentleman in New Orleans. Then in the 1920s and 1930s, with the increased popularity of weightlifting as a sport, there emerged a succession of male leader/role models – Cy Bermudez, Reyam Sherman, Bob Samuels, Larry Cox, and Lou Riecke – who, with assistance from Irwin Poché and Bob Hoffman, raised this seemingly minor masculine endeavor from the parochial confines of 222 Rampart Street to international recognition.

By all accounts, the accomplishments of these Crescent City strongmen were remarkable. From 1954 to 1967, weightlifters won the club's Delaney (outstanding athlete) Award thirteen out of fourteen times and twice copped the city title. From 1940 to 1968, NOAC weightlifters and bodybuilders won no less than twenty Senior Southern AAU and seventeen Mr. New Orleans titles. Even as late as 1972 they held 17 of the 32 Louisiana state records and 15 of the 36 Southern AAU marks. The club won the 1955 Junior Nationals, and six of its members – Talluto, Riecke, Staunton, Imahara, Gourgott, and Berger – went on to win national titles. Riecke, of course, gained international fame as a world record holder and member of the 1964 Olympic team, but Imahara was no less notable, winning four national championships and a Pan American title. John Gourgott was Teenage Mr. America and he, along with teammate Craig Whitehead, came close to winning the Mr. America contest on several occasions. For an overall balance of strength and physique, possibly no one in the nation surpassed Gourgott in his prime. Little wonder that club members continued to express surprise and delight in beholding the exploits of the weightlifters and bodybuilders who took top honors so often at the annual awards banquet each January. The quarter-century after World War II was truly a golden age for the club and the sport.

No one presently frequents the weightlifting cubicles beside the old gymnasium, where globe barbells and other ancient paraphernalia remain, almost frozen in time, as quaint reminders of an era when the NOAC was an exclusively male domain. This was a period when weightlifting, alongside boxing, wrestling, and football, occupied a privileged place as one of the most manly endeavors. But weightlifting was also an activity that could be practiced by females. Americans hardly appreciated this androgynous quality of the sport until the 1970s, but it helps explain the ease with which women were ultimately integrated into this bastion of male culture in New Orleans. Even more fundamental to this transition, and providing the basis for a new social ethos, was the changing demeanor of the weightlifters themselves during the 1950s and 1960s. They tended to ignore some of the more reprehensible aspects of male behavior inherited from previous decades – stag shows, beer parties, gutter talk and other manifestations of hyper-masculinity – and concentrated on exercise and athletic competition, more wholesome outlets for youthful energies. This inclination, well in place by the 1970s, enabled women more easily to embrace resistance training in its many forms. At today's NOAC, the focus is on fitness – total fitness where the time-honored cleavage between aerobic and anaerobic exercise, corresponding with a breakdown in gender roles, has become blurred. Women have not only intruded on the traditional male preserve of free weights, but their presence has led to an increased emphasis on weight-resistance machines and the introduction of such group activities as body sculpting and power cycling.⁹² However innovative they might appear amidst the Old World surroundings of the New Orleans Athletic Club, these modern activities employ many of the same muscle-building principles originally utilized by J. C. Aleix and his associates and validated over a period that now spans three centuries.

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Notes

1 Most studies of male culture, such as those by Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York, 1996) and Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (New York, 1995), follow a feminist or mythopoetic approach that is usually more prescriptive or ideological than descriptive of historical reality. This study, however, resembles the depictions of traditional manhood by John Neuright and Timothy Chandler, *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity* (London, 1996) and Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* (New York, 1996). Within the genre of physical culture this approach is most evident in studies by Alan Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (Albany, N.Y., 1993); and John D. Fair, *Muscle Town USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell* (University Park, Pa., 1999). For analyses of the relationship between the rise of sport and the development of urban America, see Melvin A. Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics* (Urbana, 1986); and Steven A. Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, 1989).

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