

Where Are They Now?

John Curd Edmunds: Master of the Pull-up

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Al Thomas has been active in physical culture for approximately 50 years and has earned a reputation as one of the leading writers and social theorists in the field. We are much obliged to him for agreeing to write the *Where Are They Now?* column.

Philadelphia lawyers of the weightroom can mount a pretty convincing argument supporting the view that the toughest strength feat is the chin-up (the pull-up), the ultimate playground exercise. Asked to “make a muscle,” the skinny playground urchin manfully flexes his arm and pops up a little ball of biceps. (What other muscle is there to “make”?) Perhaps as a response to some jungle memory, the urchin pulls his chin over a bar, clenched in blood-drained fingers, and in the process releases the monkey in himself, indeed in all of us whose initiation into our great game had more to do with chinning than with barbells. For many a playground kid, chinning is part of the ritual celebration of his initiation into what, for a kid, passes as “manhood,” the signal of which to such a kid is nature’s diploma for chin-ups, a pair of knotty biceps. It is difficult to establish oneself as a champion in weightlifting or powerlifting, and these are sports that most men never attempt. Not so with chinning. The champion chinner has distinguished himself in a test that just about everyone has tried. It’s a test that, for many, comprises their only life-long gauge and exhibition of strength, and for others the pull-up becomes a major component of their bodybuilding and/or strength building regimens. If the cliché of flexed arm and attendant bulge is a universal request to “make a muscle,” then the champion chinner, from his playground days to his glory days, is the real “people’s strongman” in the most universal—the World Series—of strength tests: the chin.

Where is Curd Edmunds, the erstwhile king of the chin-up? Still the farmer he has been all his life, he’s still in Glasgow, Kentucky, where the Edmundses have resided since his great, great grandfather, Captain William Edmunds, arrived there back in 1810 with his 15-year-old-bride, Mary Ann (Penn), a descendent of the great William Penn. Curd and his wife of 40 years, Frances, of French Huguenot extraction, are descended from the earliest settlers in the region, evidence of which is written in bold script across the handsome faces of this stalwart, salt-of-the-earth couple. A “farmboy” (as he puts it), an outdoorsman, a lover of the mockingbird’s song, Curd has spent all his 77 years as a student of the soil, having become in the process a highly respected organic farmer, the first in his county. Indeed, his only absence from this land that had been part of the Edmunds’ blood for almost two centuries was his three-and-a-half-year Pacific Ocean sojourn in which he was kept busy as a Navy man in five major invasions and the “greatest sea battle ever fought.” (He still shudders at the memory of an ill- conceived live-week stint in Yankee-land on

Curd Edmunds and son, Chris, show their world record form on the chinning bar in Curd’s backyard in Glasgow, Kentucky.



a line in the Ford plant way off in Detroit, but the countryboy in him missed his old Kentucky home too much—and its mockingbirds’ songs.)

In his prime, Curd stood 5’10 1/2” and weighed from 171 to 195, his best lifting being done at 171 to 180 pounds. Always hobbled by congenitally weak knees (dislocated at 18, 20 and 26—and ruined finally in 1972 when they were “mashed into the side of a car,” a devastating injury which almost put him into a wheelchair for life), Curd also suffered serious shoulder dislocations “from incidents involving cattle.” Thus, laconically, he dismisses the injuries that, piling up, made it impossible for him to pursue the weight training that had appealed to him so much since boyhood. Though he had trained with crude weights since 1930, in 1934 he bought the first barbell ever seen in his county. (‘The people around here didn’t have any idea what that bar was with the wheels on it.’) That 208-pound barbell, however, was soon the centerpiece of Sunday afternoon lifting sessions with strongboys from neighboring farms. Before becoming too incapacitated with injuries to pursue a weight-lifting regimen, Curd was able to rep stiff-legged deadlifts with 400 pounds and to grind out 105 reps with 165, but the injured knees made lifting impossible: “I learned that I’d have to quit barbells because they hurt my joints too much and then [I] turned to exercises that ‘pulled the joints apart,’ like chins and hanging leg raises.”

In the back of his mind, throughout all this, there had always been the inspiration of his father who, despite the rigors of a farmer’s life, had done 37 chins at 26 years of age. This feat had always piqued young Curd’s curiosity about chinning. Never a “natural” at the exercise, the teenage boy fooled around with chins and by the age of 19 was able to grind out 19. He never improved upon that number until, aboard ship at 31 or 32, he did 23. In 1949, at age 37, he broke his father’s record, but from then until 1968 he marked time. The fillip to his great career came with an article on endurance training by *Iron Man* guru, Fred Grace. Inspired by Grace’s heated prose, Curd embarked whole hog upon his assault on the world’s chinning records. What follows is history.

Age	No.	Age	No.	Age	No.
56	41	63	--	70	80
57	42	64	102	71	82
58	48	65	103	72	75
59	54	66	117	73	60
60	55	67	220	74	71
61	63	68	120	75	55
62	66	69	95	76	43
				77	32

As background to this astonishing assemblage of numbers, in 1976, Curd became the second man in history to break the 100 continuous chin-up mark, pulling 102 at the age of 64. On June 15, 1978, at age 66 and a weight of 167, Curd set the world record with 117 chins, breaking the record 106 set on June 23, 1969, by William D. Reed of the University of Pennsylvania. Strength theoretician David Willoughby gave this feat a performance rating of 1107, the highest ever to that

point for this movement. (In second position on Willoughby’s list was Hall of Famer Marvin Eder [1083], ranked by Terry Todd among the ten most memorable strongmen in history.) Curd’s greatest year, however, was 1979, when he was 67. Curd and his son, Chris, who as Curd puts it, “went on to become the greatest chinner in history”, agreed to perform on the Guinness Show in June 1979 in Bowling Green, Kentucky. At this show, both Curd and Chris did 110 chins apiece, to break the record (106) but, as Curd says, “We could have done more, but didn’t know that a Korean was going to do 120 [prior to the publication date of the London-based *Guinness Book of World Records*], so he got into the book and we didn’t. Chris and I, however, were the only ones in the show who broke a world record and won the live hundred dollars.”

In that year, 1979, both father and son blossomed in a manner that will probably never be duplicated. Chris, who had been doing “only” 53 earlier in the year, was soon doing more than 150, as was Curd. By the early fall of 1979, with the help of straps, the two were flying high.” Before we went to Hollywood for *The Guinness Game* show, a 20th Century Fox production, I did 175 and Chris 174. Later, Chris did 207, and went on to 221. I then went to 188 and later to 210, and knew that I could do 225, but I didn’t want to pass Chris. Now, I wish that I had because I would have been world champ again. But that would have only been for a few minutes because Chris went on to 241. A few days after that, I did 220 in 12 minutes, and knew I could have done 230-235, but decided that 220 was good enough for me at 67 years. As the days passed, Chris jumped to 261, to 275 and then to 301, two days before we flew to Hollywood. He did this in 15 minutes and at a weight of 175.”

Nineteen-seventy-nine was clearly a year that still provides an incredible benchmark for the world of strength. As always, Curt puts it simply: “It took me 48 years to learn how to break the barrier between strength and endurance. It took Chris some 15 years. After you break this barrier, doing chins, you lose sight of how many you can really do because they become so easy. It’s like being in outer space: I felt as though I weighed about 30 pounds, but there we were, weighing 174 -175 pounds. It turned out that Chris lifted the equivalent of 26 tons in 15 minutes, and I lifted over 19 tons in 12 minutes, using just our hands and arms. It’s hard to believe, but we could have done more.”

Unfortunately, this flurry of tandem chinning, the greatest in history—not to mention in one place, or even more incredibly, the same backyard on the same bar and in the very same family, no less—was not accepted by the *Guinness* people because it wasn’t “properly witnessed.” (To know this Christian gentleman is to know that Curd’s word is his bond, but what could poor *Guinness* “know”? To top this off, “The Guinness Game” show, for which all this was preparation, proved to be a travesty of sorts. The night before he and Chris left for Hollywood and the show, Curd came down with a devastating case of food poisoning; his heart was “fluttering like a leaf in a high wind.” According to Curd, “When I got on the bar, I was worried that after 48 years of training, I was going

to flunk my great test. But I prayed and prayed to the Good Lord, and by the time I started—almost like a miracle—my heart had stopped fluttering. I was able to do 64 and Chris did a world record, 86, in the three minute limit. I was the happiest man in the world at that moment, and so was the world champion, Chris.” There would, however, prove to be a fly in the ointment. In Curd’s quietly philosophical words, “There was an elderly man there at 20th Century Fox who worked for the Guinness people, and he wouldn’t let us into the *Guinness Book* because we went up too fast and used straps.” At times like these, one senses the Christian grace and graciousness that characterize this gentle and devout man. [Ed. note: Curd was kind enough to send tapes of the show as a contribution to our Collection here at UT, and the tape shows, as anyone knowledgeable in human performance would have predicted, that he and his son both used the “kip” style, which employs a snapping of the torso to generate much of the upward movement. Both men did come to a full arm stretch and pause between reps in their three minute trial, but we understand that they did their really high rep chinning without a pause at the bottom. Their performances are still remarkable, of course, but the technique they use is not at all like (and far easier than) the technique used by the average bodybuilder.]

Around age 65, Curd had come to the chinning technique that made his progress to 220 chins possible. In order to protect an injured elbow, he learned to “zip up real fast,” rather than pulling slowly: “I got so I could chin more times if I went very fast because I didn’t have to pull as hard.” Today at 77, Curd still preaches daily training and his regimen includes biking and, of course, his standbys: chinning and hanging leg raises. “I do 100 hanging leg raises as soon as I get up in the morning, in sets of 25, 30 or 40 depending upon my grip. In doing the movement, I bring my feet above my head; this works the whole body and makes me feel great. Then, in the afternoon, lately, I’ve been doing another 100. I do the leg-raises to warm up for my chinning workout. This summer I worked up to a lifetime record of 65 reps, nonstop. I think this is an exercise that would be great for most of the Oldtimers.” Curd’s great record in the pull-up was the result of a basic, simple system, built around these two movements: the hanging leg raise and the chins, done in sets of from 65 to 75 to 85 reps each day, no less!

When approached to serve as the first subject of this column, the self-effacing strength great responded with typical modesty; “I consider myself a weakling compared with the other fellows. I never dreamed of such an honor. I have always been way off in the sticks, far from the real greats of the Game.” A man of many parts, nobody in our Game carries them off with more dignity, charm and modesty than Colonel John Curd Edmunds, of the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels. Student of the soil, the good Kentucky earth that has been in the Edmunds’ blood for almost two centuries, a devout Christian for whom “going to heaven is the main goal of life,” a once-and-ever champion of the pull-up, the people’s strongman—the salt of the earth—mighty Curd hasn’t lost his savor with age, either as a strongman or as a memorable human being.