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WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Mike Mungioli

Mike Mungioli started lifting weights in 1926 after seeing Siegmund Klein (his “idol, then and now”) in an exhibition at the old Bryant Hall on 42nd Street in New York City. Wondering aloud, “What nerve I had back then,” his very first competition as a lifter was in the old 126-pound class at no less prestigious a meet than the 1933 Junior Nationals, in which he took a third with a total of 484 (first place going to a lifter from the famous German-American Club, Al Lemay).¹ Mike vindicated himself the following year, winning the 126-pound class at the Juniors with a five lift total of 803 1/2 pounds. He went on to garner 10 Senior Metropolitan titles and four state championships, and in 1937 and 1938 Mike won the Senior National 126-pound championship, making him the strongest man his size in the nation. He held national records in the right-arm snatch (152), the left-arm snatch (138), the two-arm snatch (195), and the left arm clean and jerk (156). He had also posted a two-arm clean and jerk of 240 (Art Levan had the record at 242), a two-arm press of 175 (Joe Mills had the record at 180), a squat of 410, and a deadlift of 500 (these last two lifts, of course, were not contested in those years).²

And now, dear reader, we cut to 1991, more than a half century after all this lifting excellence of the 1930’s, and we find that our hero, “the mighty mite”, is now 83 years of age but still up to his old tricks, in this case rep squatting 200 pounds (10 reps to be exact), with a best squat of 305 at this incredible age—and all at a bodyweight of only 135. It’s an understatement to venture the guess that Mike has to be the strongest 135-pound 83-year-old on the planet. Indeed, it seems likely that, if he could legitimately be called the strongest 126-pounder in the nation back in the late 30’s, he must surely be in legitimate running for the title of our planet’s strongest 83-year-old, pound for pound at least.

When asked about his present-day training regimen and to what he attributed his continued high level of strength and fitness at an age when many lifting greats have long since retired to token poundages—even some who may have eclipsed his wonderful records in the 30’s—Mike replied: “I have no special dietary program, but I do enjoy German beer. Someone once asked a 92-year-old what he had done to reach his remarkable age. He answered, ‘My heart keeps beating.’ In my case, it might be my training methods, my diet, or just good genes. I like to think it’s a bit of everything, but after a good workout, a warm shower, and fresh clothes, I feel twenty years younger than I am. I work out three days a week with weights appropriate to my age and bodyweight.” (An “appropriateness” that has to be unique to the amazing 83-year-old.) “My training is for flexibility, strength increases, and general good health, and it seems to be working. I don’t have aches and pains, the usual ‘old man’s problems,’ so I guess what I’m doing must be correct. I’ve kept the deep knee bend. I don’t feel that my squatting ability is unusual. I’ve done them for over 60 years, and at one time I trained under Charles Ramsey, who didn’t permit any cheating on any lift or exercise. In fact, he said that cheating would produce aches and pains later in life. He taught that squats had to be the rock bottom, sitting-on-your-heels variety, and I still do them that way. I also do hang snatches, hang cleans, jerks, bench presses, and some powerlifts, but not all in the same training day, of course. My

workout takes about 45 minutes. I generally scale about 135 and try to stay in that area.

“I enjoy reading everything printed about the weights and strength feats. The lifter that I admired the most was John Davis, the great heavyweight champion of the 30s, 40s and 50s. He was an inspiration to all of us. In fact he often trained with us during the summer months. I remember, when he finally made the decision to become a full-fledged heavyweight, he began doing 3 sets of 20 reps with 400 pounds in the deep knee bend, and went from 210 to 235 in one summer’s training.

“Someone, probably a few thousand years ago, said, ‘There’s nothing new under the sun.’ I sometimes think of this in reference to today’s Olympic lifting. The Bulgarian lifters go right to their limits each training day. Of course, the American lifters of the 30s and 40s used the same technique.”³

Leo Murdock once observed that anybody who planned a piece of any length on Mike Mungioli had better study-up on his dentistry texts because getting biographical information from modest Mike would be “like the proverbial bare-handed pulling of teeth.” But, though Mike did not mention it, Leo and Walter Ressler in his good 1950 *Strength & Health* article recount a strength feat that amazed me as a youngster. Back in 1938, when Mike was 30, Ripley’s “Believe It or Not” featured a squib about a powerful W.P.A. worker who, angered at not being paid on time, seized a 100-pound bag of flour and announced that he would take it in place of his check. This remarkable chap carried the weighty sack the whole five miles back to his home with only one rest stop along the way. Soon after the publication of this account, some fellows in a downtown Manhattan office building, who knew something of “the herculean strength” needed to transport a 100-pound sack of anything from the car trunk to the kitchen table, were standing about reverently discussing the W.P.A. chap’s feat. Mike, however, ventured that a man who could rep squat 300 pounds shouldn’t have much trouble duplicating this portage. In Walter Ressler’s words, “Wallets were yanked, and folding money, clenched in fists, rose above the arguing voices. Over a thousand dollars was laid on the line. A route was planned from “...downtown Manhattan to Mike’s home in Long Island, a distance of eight miles,” three miles longer than the course in Ripley’s column. Needless to say—it’s part of our Game’s lore—little Mike (20 pounds smaller than the mighty W.P.A. employee shouldered his 100-pound sack of flour at 6:00 after a full day’s work. Followed by a noisy band of rooters from his Maspeth Club and, of course, a far less encouraging band from his firm (intent upon insuring the integrity of their wager), Mike trudged 2 1/2 hours, non-stop, the whole eight miles to his Maspeth home, waiting patiently with his shouldered burden at every red light between Manhattan and Maspeth: one thousand dollars richer at the end of this wearying day than he had been at its start in that bleak deep-Depression year. A wonderful feat for a large, endurance-type strength athlete, an amazing one for a 126-pound weightlifting champion who weighed very little more than the sack he toted.”⁴

In a similar vein, in the early days of his Army sojourn Mike shouldered three G.I.’s, totaling over 400 pounds (well over three times his bodyweight), and carried them 100 yards. Done

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casually and without any preparation, these feats call up interesting speculations about what this little dynamo's limits might have been in feats of bearing and supporting. From those same War years comes another tale—again from other lips and pens—that tells us something about the moxie that undergirded some of these feats that dramatize refusal-to-cave-in (intestinal fortitude, “guts”) as much as brute power.

Hankering to see some action and half-ashamed to be consigned to a desk job as World War II was blazing all around him, the 34-year-old strongman (at 34, “properly” desk-bound, one imagines, in the Army's view of him) was fit to get some real action as an aerial gunner, and (the end justifying the means) told a white lie that subtracted six years from his thirty-four in order to just-qualify “as a twenty-eight-year-old” for aerial gunnery school (getting complimented in the process for being in such “excellent physical condition”). Surviving a crash landing, while training State-side, he was soon a full-fledged gunner in a B-26 Marauder Medium Bomber with the 9th Air Force, assigned to Europe where, among other chores, he flew with the “bridge-busters,” bombing ahead of Patton's ground troops.

After his 20th combat mission, however, his C.O. discovered the “fib” that had gotten the overage Mungioli into this dangerous business, but seeing that the champion's heart had been in the right place (and weighing the warm recommendation of the B-26's captain), the C.O. ordered Mike back to combat with an admiring shake of the head at the feistiness of the little strongman-warrior. Mike went on to fly, all told, 50 combat missions.⁵

Writing about this remarkable man, Walter Ressler captures another side of a complicated nature: “I thought [of all these things] as I heard the . . . firm rap of the gavel on the shiny conference table of the A.A.U. . . . On some faces there was a look of bewilderment on this momentous occasion . . . [because] the chairman's face was that of a boy, and his voice was friendly and informal . . . yet [with] an edge of authority to [it]. [But this] bewilderment was only in the faces of those officials who did not know this former champion too well. [This] was the first time that the gavel was being rapped by anyone other than Mr. Dietrich Wortmann, Chairman of the A.A.U. since weightlifting as a sport was born in old New York. Because of Wortmann's duties as President of the Metropolitan A.A.U., he had been forced to relinquish this favored and honored post of Chairman of the Weightlifting Committee.” In choosing Mike, Wortmann showed his usual sagacity because, as Ressler observed, the lifting champion's “contagious enthusiasm” soon had the committee “pulling with him 100 per cent.”⁶

In Mike's rather too modest recounting, “I started the Maspeth Weightlifting Club around 1928 and trained hundreds of boys and men for about 25 years. We were one of the best clubs in the New York area.” It was, indeed and of course, one of the best clubs in America, boasting some of the best names, not only in New York and East Coast lifting, but in the history of the sport: John Davis, Dave Sheppard, Lou Radjieski, Joe McDonald, Wesley Cochrane, Tim Machaur, Julian Levy, Jim Pappas, Frank Lisarelli, Frank Milano—in Leo Murdock's words, “all coached for free, produced courtesy Mike Mungioli.”⁷

Leo reminds us that Mike corresponded with the legendary Joe C. Hise for years and that much valuable training information was traded back and forth between them. In the 1950 *Strength & Health* article, Mike observes that his favorite exercises were hang snatches (“In this exercise, all the muscles are used vigorously in developing speed, timing, strength, and muscle control. This movement tends to knit the muscles of the body into one unit.”) His favorite exercise for the lower body was the deep knee bend, “for strengthening the legs, hips, and spinal muscles.” He also recommended straight leg deadlifts on “hoppers,” as a “back massager and quick energy builder.” In the same piece, Mike decried the tendency of lifters to enter competition with too little training, “endangering themselves and the reputation of lifting.”

In Mike's view, “organically sound” newcomers to the sport should work for speed, timing, and form with an empty bar. “With squats, deadlifts, and presses for power, and the fast lifts for form, they should be ready for competition (within) twelve to eighteen months.... Lifters use weights too near their limit for training. Eighty per cent of limit is enough on the fast lifts.”⁸

Mike retired at 76, but the spirit is still a young man's and the body, just a few pounds over what it was when Mike was the best 126-pounder in the land. “I still wish for more leisure time. The days should have 30 hours and the week, about 10 days at least. I like to keep busy. I'm married to a grand lady, Gloria, and though we weren't blessed with children, we take care of each other.”

Born in 1908, Mike turned 83 in October, 1991. How many men in their 84th year can squat with 305? Then, among the tiny circle of 83-year-olds who can squat with this most impressive poundage, how many scale less than 135 pounds? Precious few—in my most optimistic guess: and these are not just weightlifting monuments, but national monuments, indeed human monuments of a real and important sort. They are reminders, not just about the triumphs possible to muscle and strength, even in advanced age, but more importantly, about the triumphs of the spirit and the will. Such a reminder is the “mighty mite” Mike Mungioli, a “mite,” however, only in his powerful body; seen otherwise and in the more important sense: a man of significant stature, important for his contributions to our dear game, as well as for his enduring spirit and will.

Notes:

Leo Murdock is a popular historian of our Games with very few equals: I am in debt to him, here for sharing parts of his vast storehouse of anecdotes, through me, with *IGH's* readers.

¹Wahn Ressler, “Mike the Mighty Mite.” *Strength & Health*, (December 1950): 56.

² Letter from Mike Mungioli to Al Thomas, dated 2 June 1990.

³Letter from Mike Mungioli to Al Thomas dated 2 July 1990.

⁴ Ressler, p. 44.

⁵Ibid., p. 55.

⁶Ibid., pp. 44, 55.

⁷ Letter from Leo Murdock to Al Thomas, dated 30 June 1990;

and later from Mike Mungioli to Al Thomas, dated 23 August 1990.

⁸ Ressler, p. 56.