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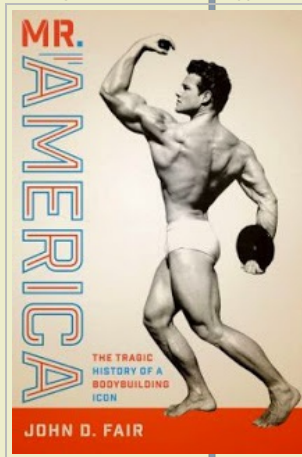
"Open the book to page ninety-nine and read, and the quality of the whole will be revealed to you." --Ford Madox Ford

T U E S D A Y , F E B R U A

## ➔ John D. Fair's "Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon"

John D. Fair's books include *MuscleTown USA: Bob Hoffman and the Manly Culture of York Barbell*. He is a retired history professor (Auburn University, Montgomery, and Georgia College & State University) and has competed in nearly eighty weightlifting/powerlifting meets, served on the national AAU weightlifting committee, and judged many physique competitions, including the 1973 Mr. America Contest. He is currently Adjunct Professor of Kinesiology and Health Education at the University of Texas at Austin's Stark Center for Physical Culture and Sports.

Fair applied the "Page 99 Test" to his new book, *Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon*, and reported the following:



Page 99 [inset below left; click to enlarge] is fairly representative of the subject matter and my writing style. It includes a Harry Paschall cartoon which is revealing about how some people felt about Mr. America and bodybuilders in general. Readers might find it amusing.

What the page doesn't include is any interpretive content which is an important part of the book. In this respect the book uses bodybuilding to reflect on the decline of American idealism and how the decline of the Mr. America reflected the changing culture of the times. The decline of Americanism is merely part of the larger process of a questioning of western values that are rooted in the so-called Greek ideal which became an American ideal. This process is particularly evident in bodybuilding at least since the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and the inception of the Olympics in

1896, and in 1939 the Greek ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano* became the Mr. America ideal. It was also reflected in depictions of American womanhood with the inception of the Miss America contest in 1921 which served as a template for Mr. America. The thesis of the book is reflected in the dust cover picture of Steve Reeves (the choice of most bodybuilding buffs as the ideal Mr. America) posing as Myron's Discobolos, the most famous Greek sculpture depicting the athletic ideal. Most revealing to me were my researches into the impact of Greek cultural values through Germany and Great Britain that informed how Americans viewed their bodies and society, at least until the late

1960s. I think my book helps inform the reading public how Mr. America symbolized a departure from those ideals and the extent to which a desire still exists for their return. Nowadays, however, few people understand this Greek connection to what we were and

THE GLORY YEARS

IFBB Junior Mr. America Contest (for teens ages thirteen to seventeen), featuring winners of state competitions.<sup>19</sup> By organizing a professional Mr. America contest, the Widlers appeared to be blurring age-old distinctions between amateur and professional while capitalizing on the title and those who had earned it under AAU auspices.

On November 6, 1948, at the Roosevelt Auditorium in New York, Alan Stephan, AAU Mr. America 1946, won another Mr. America title, a forty-inch thigh, \$250 in cash, and a free trip to Miami. According to the IFBB reporter Leo Gaudreau, Stephan's muscular exhibition was greeted with "a continuous round of applause and cheering from an enthusiastic house that was packed to the walls." The second- and third-place finishers were French Canadians, Joffe L'Heureux and Leo Robert, as was the winner of the short-men's class, Ed Thierault. Johnny Iino, of New York City, won the Junior Mr. America Contest. Clarence Rows, the so-called King of Bodybuilders, did not compete, but his guest-posing routine highlighted the show. "Ancient Greece had nothing like this," exclaimed Gaudreau. Although the fledgling IFBB failed to follow up its Mr. America Contest with a Mr. Universe event, it conducted a Mr. North America Contest in New York in April 1949.

### BEHIND THE SCENES

HARRY PASCHALL



Figure 4.1. "Bosco," Harry Paschall's comic portrayal of strength and energy. *Strength & Health*, July 1942, 21.

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Graham Joyce's "Some Kind of Fairy Tale"

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potentially what we hope to be. These ideas slowly unfolded over at least a decade while I engaged in full-time teaching and administrative work, writing articles on other subjects, seeking sources throughout the country, training and competing regularly, and maintaining a family life.

Learn [more about Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon](#) at the University of Texas Press website.

Writers Read: [John D. Fair](#).

--Marshal Zeringue

Posted by Marshal Zeringue at [2:05 PM](#)



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