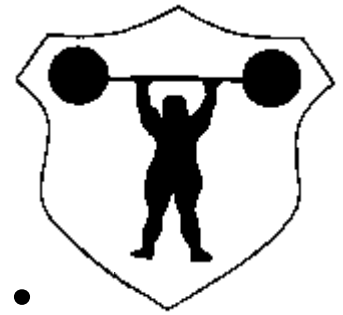




Jim Murray



Paul Anderson: Superman From the South

The person who “discovered” Paul Anderson was the late Bob Peoples, who then held the record for the deadlift at 725 pounds. At the time Bob met the youthful, natural strongman from Toccoa Georgia, Paul was living in Tennessee where his father was employed by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Bob wrote to *Strength & Health* in 1952 to report that he had met a 275-pound nineteen year-old who could squat rather easily with 550 pounds as an exercise and that he had a best single of 635—more than anyone else in the world had done at that time!

Peoples listed the following measurements for his protegee: Height 5’10”, weight 275 pounds, neck 21-1/2”, arms 20”, chest 50”, waist 42”, thighs 33”, and calves 19”. We later learned that Bob had rounded the height measurement off to the next taller half-inch: Paul was actually 5’9-1/2” tall. That was Peoples’ only exaggeration. In a matter of weeks Paul was progressing by leaps and bounds and had far exceeded the feats originally reported in the January 1953 issue of *S&H*. Later that same year, the April issue of *S&H* reported that Paul had begun testing himself on the three Olympic lifts and had won the Tennessee state heavyweight championship with 275 press, 225 snatch, and 300 clean and jerk.

More significant he had performed a deep squat with 660-1/2 pounds (weighed and witnessed by AAU officials)—which was 30-1/2 pounds more than the record set by Canada’s super-strong heavyweight, Doug Hepburn. Anderson was twenty years old by that time.

Bob Peoples wrote that he thought Paul had potential as an Olympic weightlifter to match his obvious aptitude for squatting with heavy weights, an aptitude noted early on by Paul’s brother-in-law, Julius Johnson. Julius told us, during a visit to York, that Paul had performed three repetition squats with 315 pounds the first time he worked out with a barbell!

Later Paul visited York on several occasions, and on one of them he stayed a few days to train at the York Barbell Club gym. He asked to have a bar cambered, so it wouldn’t tend to roll off his massive trapezius muscles. And he wanted it loaded to 700 pounds! This was, of course, far more than anyone else had done at the time. Jules Bacon, a former Mr. America who managed the foundry and shop, had the bar made up—a seven-foot Olympic bar without collars, and eight 75-pound exercise plates. Additional smaller plates were added to bring the weight to a face value of 700.

The way Paul trained with the “700 pounds” was this: He

came into the gym, walked over to the squat rack, shouldered the barbell, backed off a couple of steps, and did two (2) deep squats. Then he rested a few minutes and did it again. I can’t remember how many sets of two he completed, but he did them all without seeming to extend himself—and with no warm-up. And, by the way, he was wearing an ordinary Olympic lifting suit with no belt and no wraps.

After Paul returned to Tennessee, the massive barbell remained untouched on the squat rack for several days, no one having any inclination to try to squat with it. Then one day, out of curiosity, John Grimek, Jim Park and I took it off the rack—just standing up with it a few inches—to see how it felt. It felt heavy! We broke the barbell down and, as an afterthought, put the plates and bar on the scale. It didn’t weigh 700—it weighed 720 pounds. The plates had been poured at the factory, but were not weighed and machined to true weights. All the 75s were two to three pounds heavy. Think about it: Here was this 20-year-old youngster from the South exercising his legs with a barbell about 90 pounds heavier than anyone else had ever squatted with, and he didn’t even notice the extra 20 pounds.

In the June 1953 issue of *S&H*, we published an article on Paul by Rye Bell, a prominent AAU official from Tennessee. It was entitled “The Dixie Derrick.” Bell reported that Paul’s lifts had improved to 300 press, 250 snatch, and 325 clean and jerk. Paul had also performed a jerk-press with 360 pounds and had been able to take 1300 off squat racks, a portent of things to come. He was also exercising with a pair of 100-pound dumbbells for repetition presses. Paul had gained 10 pounds to 285, Rye Bell reported, with the following measurements: neck 22-1/2”, arms 20-1/4”, chest 52”, waist 43”, thighs 34”, and calves 19-1/2”.

It was on 25 July 1953, at Bill Colonna’s “strength and health” picnic in Norfolk, Virginia, that Paul Anderson showed himself to be a throwback to the Iron Game giants of the past and, I believe, established himself as the strongest man in the world. Picture the scene. It was outdoors and a platform of planks for the day’s lifting had been constructed. The ground was not level, so the platform had a definite slope downhill from back to front. Paul decided to go for a heavy single squat despite the uneven base. As usual, he wore no belt and no knee wraps. On this occasion he also was barefoot as can be seen in the accompanying photograph.

After a brief warm-up, Paul decided to try 760 pounds. The

bar was loaded and George Greenfield and Steve Klisanin stood by as spotters. Paul shouldered the barbell, stepped away from the racks and set himself in his usual stance—feet a bit more than shoulder width apart—sank into a deep squat and rose without any difficulty. It looked as though he could have handled 800 on that occasion, but he was satisfied with what he had done so we weighed the bar and plates. The actual poundage totaled 762-1/4 on the scale, a full 97 pounds more than anyone else had ever squatted with.

On the same occasion, Paul tried a 420 clean and jerk—also well above the record—but was unable to hold the clean on his chest due to the platform's slope and the fact that it had some "give" with a 300-pound man and a 420-

A YOUTHFUL ANDERSON SHOWS HE CAN GET DEEP WITH A 762 WORLD RECORD SQUAT DONE BAREFOOT AT AN EXHIBITION IN NORFOLK, VIRGINIA.

pound barbell moving on it. With assistance in getting the weight to his chest, however, Paul was able to shove the 420 overhead despite the unsteady footing. "Shove" is the right way to describe the way Paul jerked weights overhead, incidentally. He just bent his knees slightly, straightened them quickly to get the weight started, and pushed the barbell smoothly up to full arms' length overhead. Anderson's astounding performance at Norfolk was reported in the November 1953 *S&H*, the same issue that announced Doug Hepburn's upset win over John Davis at the world weightlifting championships held in Stockholm that year. (Hepburn's win was considered an upset because Davis totaled only 1008 on the three lifts to Hepburn's 1030. Davis's record was 1062.) Hepburn, the gigantic Canadian strongman, was the only man in the world who could be compared with Anderson for strength and while

Doug at that stage was a better presser, Paul was close in the press and was far ahead in squatting strength. [Editor's note: In 1953, Hepburn beat Anderson in head to head competition in the Junior National Championships with lifts of 360-290-360 to Anderson's 300-270-370]. In Stockholm, Hepburn pressed a world record 369-1/4. In the December 1953 *S&H* we reported that Anderson had pressed 352 for a U.S. record and was squatting with 800.

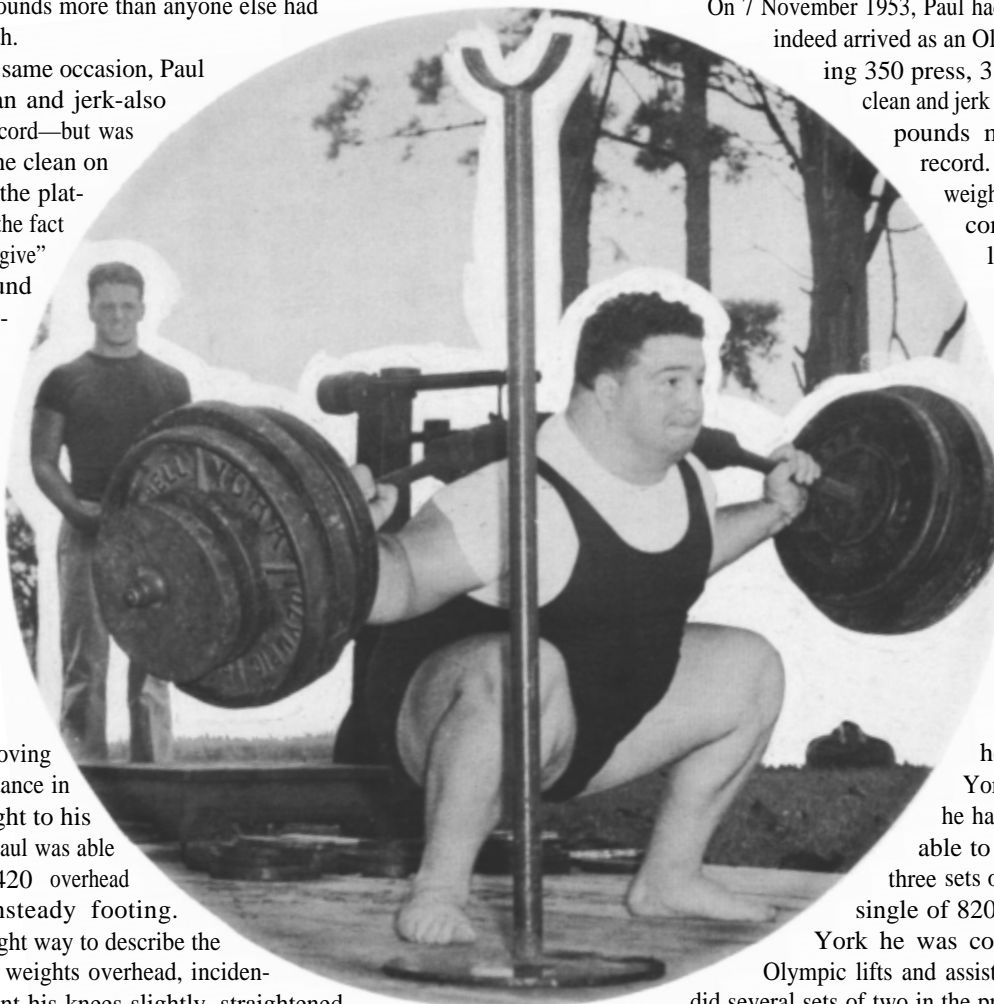
On 7 November 1953, Paul had showed that he had indeed arrived as an Olympic lifter by scoring 350 press, 315 snatch, and 400 clean and jerk for a 1065 total, three pounds more than Davis's record. The actual weights, weighed after each lift was completed, were 351-1/2 press, 319-1/2 snatch and 405 clean and jerk for an unofficial total of 1076. Obviously, some of the plates used were slightly over weight.

In the April 1954 *S&H* we published a progress report on Anderson's training and described a workout he had taken in the

York gym. By that time he had improved and was able to squat with 780 for three sets of two and had a best single of 820. In his workout at

York he was concentrating on the Olympic lifts and assistance exercises. Paul did several sets of two in the press with 320, sets of

three presses with 135-pound dumbbells, singles in the snatch working up from 225 to 310, two sets of three deadlifts with 690 (using hooks to aid his grip), and four sets of waist-high pulls with 500 pounds (also using hooks to help him hold the bar). Asked if he could deadlift 700 pounds without the grip aids, Paul responded by loading the bar to 700 and deadlifting it, using a reverse grip and no hooks. He refused, however, to even consider attempting to break his friend Bob Peoples' record. By this time, Anderson had begun doing some bench presses in his training—and he did three sets of two with 410 pounds



in York. A better indication of his increasing overall strength was the fact that he was doing quarter squats with 1800 pounds. But then Paul's career suffered a temporary setback. Pulling in a heavy clean his elbow contacted his knee and the shock transmitted up his arm resulted in a broken wrist.

When Paul returned to training and competition it took some time for him to regain his former strength. As evidence, his lifts in winning the Jr. National heavyweight championship, reported in the September 1954 *S&H*, were 350 press, 290 snatch, and 390 clean and jerk. A few months later, however, the July 1955 *S&H* reported lifts of 402 press—a record—315 snatch, and 425-1/4 clean and jerk for a total of 1142-1/4. The lifting was done on April 16 and less than a week later, on April 22, 1955, weighing 331, he improved his press to 403-1/2, snatched 300 (losing balance and missing 315 and 320), and cleaned and jerked 434.

The 425-1/4 that Paul had lifted in April was fractionally more than Norbert Schemansky's world record, but not enough to break it. His 434, however, was clearly more than anyone else had done before. As he was gaining strength, Paul was also gaining size. He weighed 331 on April 22. A month and a half later, at the U.S. National Championships, he weighed 340. Surprisingly, despite the weight gain, he had an off day in the press, getting "only" 390. He snatched 320, however, and cleaned and jerked 435—actually 436-1/2 for another record. His total at the Nationals: 1145.

When a group of U.S. weightlifting champs traveled to Russia in 1955—the first U.S. athletic team to be invited behind the Iron Curtain—for a series of exhibitions with the Soviet national team, Anderson showed his lifting at the Nationals had not been a fluke as he astounded the hosts by starting to lift after everyone else had finished and registering 402-1/2 press, 314-1/4 snatch, and 425 clean and jerk for a total of 1141-1/2. One Russian official, at this meet in Moscow, showed his preference for strength over a small waistline by exclaiming, "He (Paul) is Mr. America!"

Paul did some excellent lifting at the 1956 Nationals: 400 press (less than a 409 record he had established earlier), 335 snatch for a world record, and 440 clean and jerk—also a record. His total of 1175 was the highest ever recorded at that time. He weighed 328 at the Nationals.

At the 1956 Olympic Games Paul was considered so invincible that the Soviets didn't even enter a heavyweight. Even so, his performance at the Games was disappointing and anticlimactic. Apparently, he had contracted a throat and inner ear infection that disturbed his balance. His strength was good and he could pull and push the weights with no more difficulty than usual, but when he got them overhead he'd lose control and drop the barbell. It took every effort of will for him to hold his final jerk-press with just enough weight to tie Humberto Selvetti of Argentina—and win by being lighter man. Anderson started in the press that day with 369, after Selvetti's first-attempt 363. Then Paul jumped to 380, which he pressed easily enough only to lose balance and stagger around on the platform. He did this twice and wound up trailing Selvetti, who succeeded with 385, by 16 pounds. Anderson and Selvetti tied at 319 in the snatch, though Paul dropped his first try at the weight (after a 308 start), again due to his balance problem.

In the clean and jerk, Selvetti lifted 374, 385, and 396. The giant Argentinian weighed 320 to Anderson's svelte 303, so all Paul had to do was clean and jerk 413—ordinarily a very easy lift for him—in order to tie on total at 1102 and win by being lighter man. It took him three tries to make the lift. After the first two easy cleans, Paul staggered and lost both lifts by failing to stand still with the jerk for the count. Finally, on his last attempt, Paul made a do-or-die effort and through sheer force of will held the barbell overhead for the "down" signal. He was 1956 Olympic heavyweight champion.

After the Olympics—and after the ear infection cleared—Paul turned professional with a nightclub act in Reno. One stunt he performed was a squat with a barbell that had a safe full of silver dollars at each end. The total in dollars was \$15,000 and the weight was said to be 1100 pounds. [Ed note: The weight was also rumored as 900 pounds.] At each performance, it would be announced that anyone who could duplicate the feat could have the silver dollars. Needless to say, no one ever collected.

I kept in touch with Paul sporadically after I left *S&H* and in 1969 asked what his best training poundages had been on the (then three) Olympic lifts. He responded that he had cleaned and pressed 485, snatched 375, and cleaned and jerked 485. He said he had also done a push-press with 560 pounds, so it was his limit in the clean that held him down in both the press and jerk. Paul had a very strong pull and was amazingly quick and agile for such a massive man, but his thick arms tended to compress and rebound as he pulled weights in to his chest. The barbell would bounce off.

The *Guinness Book of Records* reported a back lift by Paul Anderson (done June 12, 1957, in Toccoa, Georgia) of 6,270 pounds at a bodyweight of 364, calling it the "greatest weight ever raised by a human being." *Guinness* also listed Paul's best powerlifts as 627 bench press, 1200 squat, and 820 deadlift (done after others had exceeded Bob Peoples' record).

I personally believe Paul Anderson was the world's strongest man of all time, regardless of what anyone else has done in widely practiced lifts and feats of strength. It is important to remember that when he did his lifting he was so far ahead of everyone else that there was no incentive for him to continue to try more. It is also important to remember that his lifting was done with no assistance from wraps, super shirts or suits, or any special supports except for a brace on the wrist that he had broken.

When Paul began to raise funds for the Paul Anderson Youth Home he opened in Vidalia, Georgia, he shifted to stunts he could perform for audiences in various locations by borrowing plates to make up a heavy dumbbell for one-arm presses or a table for back lifts with people on the table as weights. In addition to operating the youth home for unwanted teen-age boys and girls—to encourage them to become good citizens through spiritual guidance, education and physical fitness—Paul was a dedicated member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, traveling around the country to give inspirational talks (getting plenty of attention from large audiences by also performing strongman stunts).

But what I remember most about him—in addition to his great feats of strength—is that he was one of the nicest, kindest, friendliest people I've ever met.