

Pumping Irony from GQ by Robert Draper

"THIS GUY- this guy," said Lou Ferrigno as he unwrapped his 6'5" assemblage of muscle tissue and rope-like veins to reveal a middle-aged man of more plausible dimensions blushing beneath, "was my hero." The Incredible Hulk star grinned, and continued, "No foolin'. Two guys inspired me to get into bodybuilding: Arnold and this guy."

This guy wore a thin-lipped smile as he studied the office carpet of Weider Publications, the muscle-mag empire that had made both men stars in an earlier day. Ferrigno then said, "Hey, Dave, I'm goin' boar hunting this weekend. You do any hunting?" Looking up then, his eyes squinting apologetically, Dave Draper said, "No. I can't hunt animals. I feel sorry for them." Ferrigno seemed surprised at first. He blinked, smiled incredulously, and reared back as if to say Who the hell is THIS guy! Then he regarded Dave Draper afresh- and as others have done, re- minded himself that only one of his two inspirations had been the Terminator, while the other had nearly been terminated. Now Dave had returned from the dead, emerging as a force in the body- building industry that he had helped popularize three decades ear- lier. But this was not a comeback, technically speaking, as Dave Draper didn't want to go back to where he'd once been. Besides, I'U be back was the other guy's line.

This guy? This guy was the anti-Arnold.

Here is the stake some of us had in Dave Draper, way back when: Before OJ. and Heidi Fleiss, Reagan and Eisner, the Eagles and Warren Beatty, the Watts riots and Charlie Manson -before all the weirdness and schlock and hard-charging verities -there once was a Southern California that could make a runt from the hinterlands go deranged with American dreams. To see the promised land for myself, I needed only to buy a comic book or a true- crime or muscle magazine and thumb through the ads. And there, on a page devoted to bodybuilding products, would be California personified by the guy they called the Blond Bomber, posing dramatically alongside the waves of the Pacific in his cocktail napkin of a swimsuit -a sun god at ease in his western paradise, flanked by a host of bikini-clad sun goddesses who clung to his uncanny rack of muscles as if all hope and glory were encased within.

The image required no embellishment. It was complete and universally understood. From the snowbound netherworld of Graz, Austria, a dark-browed teenager with the impossible last name of Schwarzenegger contemplated that very same tableau and, as he told me, "not only wanted to look like Dave Draper but to live like him -to live in Southern California with all those great looking women on the beach and to be on TV shows and in film like him. If it wasn't for him, I might not have had the determination to train hard and move: to America." He did so in 1968, and immediately the Blond Bomber and the Austrian Oak were viewed in tandem. Arnold trained with Dave at the original Gold's Gym in Santa Monica, admiring the ridges of Dave's serratus anterior while mimicking his improvisational approach to workouts. They competed and toured the world together, twinned by the gawks of mere mortals.

Meanwhile, back in suburban St. Louis, I stared at the advertisements and wondered what kind of joke God was playing on me. This Draper was the 1965 Mr. America and the 1966 Mr. Universe -"The World's Strongest Youth," as the muscle mags had it. This Draper had been on Johnny Carson and was Sharon Tate's boy- friend in a Hollywood movie. Simply to behold him was to know the bountifulness of his life and to be taunted by the feebleness of mine. Throughout the mid-'60s, the kids at school would ask if he and I were related and barely get the question out before shrieking with laughter. I was convinced Dave Draper was a real asshole, but he had my attention. And in particular, that metaphorically potent image of the radiant, straw-haired Hercules with the modest smile and the day's catch of beach bunnies slung across his deltoids took up long-term residence in my preteen imagination.

Soon the family basement was cluttered with barbells, hand flexors, and other mail-order gadgetry. I drank protein milk shakes and performed sit-ups. I squeezed lemon juice onto my hair and languished in the sun while dreaming the Dave Draper dream. Then one day, we moved back to Texas, where it was too damn hot to lie out. The weights stayed in their boxes somewhere in the back of the new garage. The money I'd once spent on comics now went toward rock 'n' roll records. It was 197°, and I'd turned my back on Dave Draper -unaware that the twenty-eight-year-old Blond Bomber had turned his back as well, vanishing from Venice Beach, from the bodybuilding competitions, and from the magazines and comic books, effectively cast out by bodybuilding magnate Joe Weider in favor of someone who would take Weider's sport to the next level, someone who hungered for superstardom and who would delight in bullying, instead of shying away from, the competition. Someone named Ah-nuld.

Now Dave Draper was back in my sights. He had returned from an alcoholic abyss to boast two Santa Cruz-area gyms, advice columns in national fitness magazines, and an energetic Web site that had set the obsessive weight-lifting community into a clamor: The Blond Bomber's back! To be pronounced a bodybuilding guru at a time when the once lumpen practice has swelled into a billion-dollar colossus is to never again worry about the fate of our Social Security system. Dave's timing looked all too perfect. And thus I could not help but conjure up a new image to supplant the old- that of a slick-talking, information-age, Central Coast boomer-cynic only too willing to hype his fool's-goldenness for as long as his follicles held out. That's whom I'd encounter. And, as the family name was at stake here, I would flay him in print for it.

So I showed up in Santa Cruz, whereupon Dave Draper hid from me.

"I think he's nervous about seeing you," said the attractive young woman at the reception desk of Dave Draper's World Gym. She winced a smile. "Can I fix you a protein smoothie while you wait?"

He was two hours late to his morning workout, which was commonplace for some Drapers, but not for Dave. When at last he strode in, head down, he muttered something about a previous engagement, "something that couldn't be helped." It was obvious he did not want to work out in my presence. He shuffled around his gym in sweats, looking down at the weights, then sidelong at me. I crouched behind an exercycle, peering out from behind my note-pad, and before long I was pissed off. I was here to write about the improbable resurrection of a bodybuilding legend, but at the moment I felt more like an Audubon geek stalking a bronze-cheeked wood thrush. By the time Dave Draper at last commenced his ab crunches, dark fantasies consumed me. What would it be like to kick Mr. America's ass?

"I want to tell you everything, even though I'm a nervous wreck," he said over lunch that day while consuming his usual orgy of protein. "These people who write me nowadays or come up to me in gyms- they say, 'Dave, man, I idolized you! I'd see you on the beach with all those girls -you're why I moved to L.A.!' And I feel this responsibility to them. Not just to give them good training advice but also not to disappoint them. But all that California stuff. ..."

Dave put down his fork and made sure I was listening before he said it: "I've never surfed before in my life."

Then, as if regretting the effect this revelation might have on me, he added, "Though I do love the ocean."

At the age of fifty-eight, and in the most narcissistic substratum of our youth-obsessed culture, Dave Draper has been granted a second act, one that is real. It was the first act that was phony.

He was born not in California, but in Secaucus, New Jersey. Frank Zane, the thinking man's bodybuilder, told me, "In every bodybuilder's background, there are issues with our father" -and this is famously so with Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno and their domineering cop dads. But though Dave's salesman-and-lay-preacher father was preoccupied with spreading the Word, the boy turned to weight lifting for that most basic of reasons: to feel big. "I was always fascinated with guys I'd seen around town with muscles," he said. "I just thought they represented strength, ability, and respect -- things I sought, somehow or other. I started school at four, graduated at sixteen. That's part of it, like in team sports: 'He's the only guy left; you've gotta take him.' The least equipped guy in the class."

As his parents had taught him the virtues of humility, Dave kept his muscles well swaddled, and so only in the gym where he trained did anyone know how big he was becoming. He began to buy his barbells in Union City, at the Weider Barbell Company, and one day the boss checked out the Secaucus kid whom the shipping clerks were working out with in the warehouse. This young man, Weider would later tell me, "looked like the kid next door, and people could identify with him." In 1962 he gave Dave a job in the shipping department, then offered to employ him at Weider's new distributorship in Santa Monica, where Dave could train with the greats of Muscle Beach and one day become a champion himself.

When I asked Weider, thirty-eight years later, if he really believed that a champion was what Dave Draper wanted to be, the bodybuilding publisher pshawed me, saying, "He had the fire in the belly, don't kid yourself. He wouldn't have gotten the kind of body he did without hard work." But for Dave, the hard work, the process, was more than enough. "I developed this relationship with the weights," he said, "and I was satisfied being alone with them." Now, however, he would have to learn how to compete -how to pose and strut his stuff onstage. One of the most celebrated body-builders at the time, Bill Pearl, took the twenty-year-old newcomer under his wing. "I'd say, 'Dave, you're not posing right,'" recalled Pearl, "and he'd actually hit himself in the head and say how stupid he was. The guy liked to train. But he didn't enjoy the limelight."

The limelight found him anyway. Within a year of his arrival in L.A., golden-haired Dave became the designated cover boy for Weider's Mr. America and Muscle Builder magazines, not to mention the choice model for his product advertisements. Thus did Dave Draper find himself on the beach, surfboard in hand, windblown and chick flanked. As current bodybuilding powerhouse Shawn Ray observed, "Joe sold that dream with Draper on Santa Monica Beach, which was why you rarely saw Dave photographed alone. You always saw him with a girl." But Dave was married -had been since the age of nineteen, to a sixteen-year-old New Jersey girl with a bun in the oven -and besides, the most frequent female model holding hands with or nuzzling Dave was none other than Betty Weider, the publisher's curvaceous wife.

In 1965, as foretold by Weider's magazines ("Look out, Mr. America and Mr. Universe. ..here he comes!"), the "Weider-trained" - as the magazines called him -Dave Draper won the Weider-sponsored Mr. America contest. In 1966 he won Mr. Universe. Dave's body was now a shredded 235-pound testament to fevered training. He'd become an exemplar of the classic three-quarter-back pose (those flaring lats!), as well as the overhead-biceps shot (pecs and delts, ten-hut!); all across America and beyond, the pimply-faced masses were standing on their tiptoes in front of the bathroom mirror, emulating the man Joe Weider had dubbed the Blond Bomber. Though Hollywood was decades away from viewing a muscle as something not akin to a tumor, Dave Draper garnered screen opportunities never before afforded a bodybuilder: host of a year's worth of TV Movies of the Week, guest roles in episodes of The Beverly Hillbillies and The Monkees, and an eccentric turn as Sharon Tate's heartthrob in the zany Tony Curtis-Claudia Cardinale vehicle Don't Make Waves.

Which, to Dave, was great. He could've quit right there. He wanted to quit right there. He hated cattle calls; he hated competing, period, and gave the trophies away as fast as he won them. (Except for the Mr. Universe trophy, which his wife, Penny, hurled at him during a domestic set-to.) What Dave loved was the gym and the sweaty, honest, individualized missions undertaken there. When the pressure built for Dave to enter the 1967 Mr. Olympia contest- the previous winner, Larry Scott, had dropped out, telling some he knew he couldn't beat Draper - he descended into a funk and his training habits faltered. "What the hell's the matter with the guy?" Joe Weider would say. "He's got a chance

to be something!"

Dave hated the pressure from Weider, who kept demanding more of him, when all Dave wanted was what he'd already been promised. Though, according to Dave, the original deal included a salary, car, housing, and royalties for the use of his image, Dave received only one hundred dollars a week in exchange for working full-time in Weider's office, selling and inventorying products. ("We made less than the guys working at JC Penney's around the corner," recalled one of Dave's coworkers.) For supplemental income, Dave took up woodworking, in which his muscles would actually be of some use to humanity. He also took up vodka and PCP, or angel dust. His training for the '67 Mr. Olympia contest was half-assed. Upon entering, he took one look at top contender Sergio Oliva's pyrotechnic musculature, knew he'd screwed up, and withdrew after the prejudging. Though Oliva won, he was a black Cuban with a radical physique, so Dave Draper remained Joe Weider's cover boy for a while longer. But the writing was on the wall: Dave was only keeping the throne warm for a newer, hungrier prince.

"He shook my hand the day I arrived and said, 'Welcome to America,'" said Arnold Schwarzenegger. "I'd seen this guy in the magazines on the beach with all the girls, and he ended up being quite the opposite. Dave was an extremely sensitive man. He gave me such a warm feeling - a feeling in my heart I'd never felt before: I really am welcome here. Weider welcomed me, too. But he'd fallen in love with me because I filled this vision of a Germanic machine destroying and conquering. I became a kind of exterminator for him.

"But with Dave, it was all on a human level. He helped me lease my first car. And got me a PO box, a phone number, silverware, dishes, posters for the wall. And when I made my first money, I saw Dave's woodwork and I thought it would be such a pleasure to have this man I admired so much make me a bed. And he made this powerful bed, six hundred pounds - so big, he had to take it apart to get it into my room. And he did it one day, and I came home, and there was incense burning in my apartment and all these candles lit and this bed so big that I could only walk into the bedroom sideways against the wall. I still have that bed. I'd never get rid of it. "

The extraordinary thing was that Arnold had arrived literally at Dave's expense. In 1968 Weider imported him from Munich, along with two of Arnold's friends to keep him company, putting the three of them up in an apartment, giving them a car, and paying Arnold two hundred dollars a week for the use of his image. The new kid in town did not have to sell barbells or vitamin packets at the distributorship. He did not have to do much of anything, except train. As a prominent bodybuilder told me, "Arnold got everything Dave hadn't gotten." And in the meantime, Dave's weekly one-hundred-dollar checks came to an end.

"Joe is a star builder," Arnold told me. "If you let him, he will create you and turn you into something very special. Dave didn't have that killer instinct. I will go until the end, until everyone drops. I will use the personality; I will give the speech to the judges - I will do everything necessary to be a winner. But Dave wasn't really that interested in being in front of five thousand people and saying, 'Look at my naked body. Isn't that great?' Why did he train in dark dungeons in the early morning with all those shirts on, never showing his body and not running around the beach like the photographs showed? That wasn't Dave's reality. That was Joe's reality."

No one could fault Weider for his investment in Schwarzenegger, whose genetic gifts were boosted by a furious work ethic and who would dominate the Mr. Olympia arena from 1970 through 1975 before leaving for the movies. Said Weider, "Arnold was able to express what bodybuilding was. " And when Hollywood instructed him to lose the last name, the muscles, and the Austrian accent, Arnold's reply was, You'll be back. He feared nothing - not competition, not pain, not failure, and certainly not Joe Weider.

Dave, in the meantime, had become the picture of alienation. He grew his hair out and took up woodworking full-time, though even that would become too high-pressure. "He could've made a fortune in furniture," said his older brother, Don. "He had a two-year backlog. But he no longer enjoyed making it, because people would call and say, 'Dave, when's this going to be done?' and it wasn't fun anymore." He worked out at dawn and was out of the gym by nine. The few who would see him there would notice, as Frank Lane did, that "he was already loaded and totally out of it. " Dave had given new meaning to his moniker. The Blond Bomber was drinking two fifths of vodka a day, and on the rare occasion that he would attend a bodybuilding exhibition, "he'd be so shit-faced he couldn't find his butt with both hands and I'd have to collect his money from the promoters," said Bill Pearl.

He'd nearly blown up his house in Marina Del Rey trying to manufacture PCP. As a crowning ignominy, when director George Butler visited Dave's home in 1974 to persuade him to participate in Butler's forthcoming bodybuilding documentary, Pumping Iron, he found a fit and handsome Dave Draper - but one who couldn't talk. "My jawbone was paralyzed from doing drugs," Dave said. The filming proceeded without him.

In 1972 Dave had sued Joe Weider for fraud. His case was strong, despite the fact that Arnold showed up in court as a defense witness. (Asked about Weider's reputation among bodybuilders, Arnold testified, "It is not too good.") Weider telephoned Dave and offered to settle, a move that would liberate Dave's image from Weider's control. Dave agreed just as the jury was returning with its verdict. The settlement awarded Dave \$17,500, enough to cover attorneys' fees and other trial-related costs. After the deal was struck, the judge requested the jury's verdict for the record. It had found in favor of the plaintiff and had intended to award Dave Draper compensatory and punitive damages totaling \$892,350. The money would stay with Weider.

Dave sent each juror a handcrafted cheese board anyway.

In 1984 Dave Draper requested a meeting with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The two convened at the residence of gym owner Joe Gold in Los Angeles. Dave showed up on a bicycle he had borrowed from the friend he'd been staying with nearby. He was now forty-two, divorced, and noticeably weak from having been hospitalized for congestive heart failure

and eczema, both brought on by alcohol, which he had given up. Dave wanted to ask Arnold if he thought a book written by Dave about his experiences might be publish- able- and if so, would Arnold be willing to write the prologue?

The multimillionaire actor, author, and businessman told his old gym partner that a book about Dave's rise, fall, and recovery would be inspirational to many. And, yes, he'd be happy to pen a prologue.

Dave said thanks and prepared to go. Arnold stopped him. "Dave," he said, and held him with a stare. "Is that really all you wanted to ask me? That's all you needed?"

"That's all," said Dave.

Something else caught Arnold's attention. "And that's what you came here on?" he asked. "That bike?"

"Yeah," said Dave.

Arnold shook his head. "O.K., Dave," he said, and drove off in his luxury car.

It would be fully fifteen years before Dave got around to writing that book. But a few years after their encounter, when the first Dave Draper's World Gym was built in Santa Cruz, Arnold flew in for the grand opening and stayed in the packed house for several hours, signing autographs and posing for pictures. At one point, Arnold gave a speech. He wanted everyone to know how important Dave Draper had been to him and to the world of bodybuilding, and how proud of Dave he was. The gesture was humbling to Dave.

In 1998, just after Arnold underwent surgery to correct a congenital heart defect, Dave and his new wife, Laree, happened to be visiting L.A. and thought to drop off a get-well card at Arnold's office. It turned out that Arnold was there, and for fifteen minutes or so, they chatted about his health, which was surprisingly robust. Upon returning to Santa Cruz, Dave wrote a few upbeat sentences in his newsletter to gym members about Arnold's splendid recovery. Some two months later, Dave launched his Web site and added the Schwarzenegger tidbit to the array of advice columns, body- building lore, and archival photographs.

A stern, legalistic letter from Arnold followed. Their conversation had been private. The information he'd imparted had been given to Dave Draper, not to DaveDraper.com. As Schwarzenegger explained to me, "Look, I know Dave well enough to know he'd never do harm to anyone. But since the days when we used to hang out, so many things have changed, and I have to be very careful about what's said. He could've written something wrong about my medical situation, and then the insurance company would've come after me and I would've been screwed."

But the letter stung anyway- serving, however unintentionally, as a reminder of the one's station versus the other's. Dave removed the column from the Web site -along with, at Arnold's request, the photos of the two together, which had not been posted with Arnold's permission. "I wrote a pretty good letter back," Dave said, "not trying just to be submissive. Saying it's good for both of us; it's good for the people; it's good for everyone. ..."

There is the stubbornly prideful side of Dave Draper, and then there is the side that seems forever apologetic about having some-- how let all of us down. It never mattered a damn to him that he didn't burn with ambition, or nail all the babes who flocked around him on the beach, or date Sharon Tate in real life, or make more movies, or win more competitions, or amass a fortune, or at least cut into Joe Weider's fortune, or surf. But that guy on the covers and in the ads seemed to promise such things about Dave. Who's the misfit, the image or the man? It's hardly a metaphysical question, but it will weigh on him just a little, for as long as he thinks it's weighing on anyone else.

He can bear it, because the name Dave Draper also signifies one hell of a bodybuilder, which he was and is, and today that means more than it ever did. "If it ever came down to a popularity con- test," said Schwarzenegger, "Dave would win. Everywhere I travel -Russia, Germany, Japan, Mexico- the name that comes up most frequently is Dave Draper. He is loved so much and has so much to offer to so many young kids, because he just wanted to have a great body. He didn't want to be on stage and destroy and conquer like me."

His bodybuilding manual and confessional, *Brother Iron Sister Steel*, will be published this month. He'll hawk the book, sell his Bomber Blend protein-supplement powder, run his gyms, and pen his columns for *Muscle & Fitness* without having to answer to Joe Weider. Dave has come to discover a humanity-affirming truth, which is that credibility is marketable. In the gym and in writing, Dave preaches a retro ideology of high protein and daily, disciplined, dopeless workouts -which, in fact, was how the Secaucus introvert first drew Weider's attention, decades before the body- building world went wild-eyed and freaky framed with growth hormones.

"It's chemical warfare out there," Shawn Ray, the perennial Mr. Olympia contender and self-made franchise, explained to me over lunch at a Santa Monica bodybuilder's haunt one afternoon. "A drug-driven, freaky industry. Everybody's doing something. The question is how far you're willing to push the envelope. When you look at my physique, you don't see me playing with fire, pushing it too far."

The short, egregiously hard-bodied African-American went on about the sorry state of his sport -biased judges, zero camaraderie among the athletes -but in the end, he could hardly com- plain. "You reap what you sow," he stated in his smooth, learned voice. "I just bought a \$650,000 house. I've had every car in the world, from a Lamberghini to a Ferrari Testarossa, Corvette, Porsche, four or five Mercedes. I've had the material things." He ticked off the means: prize money, Weider endorsement contracts, video sales, posters, Shawn Ray weight-lifting gloves and hats, guest appearances, seminars. "It has everything to do with being market- able," he said.

In that sense, things had changed and yet remained the same. "I'm a bodybuilding historian," he told me. "In order to see the future, you've gotta see the past. As a kid, I used to train in Orange County, where they had all the old bodybuilding magazines. And I'd see Dave Draper on the covers. See, I always wanted to go to Hollywood. And he was Hollywood. Dave Draper was always on the beach, lying on the sand, always with two or three girls around him. It just seemed like he came out here, trained, and then hung out on the beach all day.... And man, I'm like, I wanna be that guy!"

Arnold. Lou. Shawn. Me. We all wanted to be like Dave. Now it's Dave's turn to be like Dave.