

Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon by John Fair.

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***Mr. America: The Tragic History of a Bodybuilding Icon* by John Fair (review)**

David Chapman

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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For a third of the twentieth century, the victors of the Mr. America bodybuilding contest could be justly proud both of their physiques and their place in the athletic world. This competition was born in the glow of idealistic enthusiasm in the 1940s, sustained by “enlightened” commercialism in the 1950s and ‘60s, but then imploded in a messy welter of excess and drug-fueled corruption at the century’s end. Author John Fair thus traces the history of American bodybuilding’s most famous contest from its beginnings to its bitter and unfortunate end.

The first Mr. America contest was in 1939, and, throughout the 1940s–60s it was the most important and prestigious physique competition in America (perhaps even the world). The competition was originally conceived as a male version of the Miss America pageant, but with some significant differences. Muscularity was important in the men’s version, but it was not the only criterion; the first Mr. Americas were supposed to be representative of the country’s ideals: handsome, white, Anglo-Saxon, and religiously devout (at least in front of the public). Originally, bodybuilding (and its older cousin, physical culture) celebrated the human desire for health, fitness, beauty, and athleticism; by extension, the Mr. America contest was designed to determine the top athlete in this field. The victors represented the Greek ideal of muscularity and symmetry, a model that gradually lost much of its relevance as the decades rolled on. Gradually, the old values seemed to get progressively less relevant. What did it matter if the victors could lift weights or had evenly spaced teeth? By the mid-1960s, some even uglier charges were leveled against the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), its Mr. America contest, and lifting and bodybuilding czar and publisher Bob Hoffman: they were accused of racism (no black man had ever won the contest), sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, cronyism, and a host of other ills.

Stepping into the fray were the Weider brothers, two Canadian bodybuilding entrepreneurs who proposed to make muscularity the only

criteria for the Mr. America. Their rival organization, the International Federation of Body Building (IFBB), began running its own Mr. America contest, determined to woo away top athletes from the AAU, a group they felt had antiquated ideas and unrealistic goals. The IFBB also strove to inject some showmanship into bodybuilding competition to make it more of an entertainment. If the public wanted to see hypermuscular freaks, then that's what they would **[End Page 412]** get. Consequently, the contestants started injecting something far more dangerous than a little razzle-dazzle.

The IFBB turned bodybuilding into a professional organization; the winners of their competitions would be awarded large sums of money and be treated like stars. But there was a Mephistophelian twist to this new system: winners were judged solely on their muscularity, so the athletes had to use every means possible to win the contest, and, starting in the late 1950s, this meant taking massive amounts of anabolic steroids. This was not only dangerous to the men's health, but it also caused the concept of muscular symmetry and harmony of physique to be blown away. Now, the more freakishly huge the man's muscles, the better his chances of winning. In the end, Fair's book illustrates America's frequent and fatal desire to take something to its illogical extreme and make it monstrous and grotesque. It is likewise an indictment of bodybuilding's arbiters whose hubris and greed turned out to be as big and outlandish as the drug-induced muscles they encouraged.

Fair's book is deftly written and superbly researched. I have little doubt that this volume will remain one of the best sources for both the story of American bodybuilding and the "tragic history" of its most famous contest. The only quibble I have is that the book could have been even richer if there had been more and better photographs. Despite this, the book is a fond remembrance of the most famous bodybuilding contest...

thematically, leaving the essays to stand on their own merit. A concluding essay by Conyers illustrating the link between the contributions of the work and how they address sports in the modern world would have been beneficial to the reader. Overall, however, this book is a valuable contribution to the current literature on our understanding of the relationship between race, sex, and sports. Future scholars will be able to build upon the chapters in this volume to produce future research exploring athletics in American society.

—ROBERT A. BENNETT III
The Ohio State University

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