

midwest

Sweating for status with clean-and-jerk

By William Donovan

IN THE basement of the Northwest Suburban YMCA—20 miles out from the Loop, on the far side of Des Plaines in the split-level sanctuary of the working white middle class, yea, more than halfway to Barrington Hills itself—underground, in the weight room under the sweaty hot locker room, these two muscular guys are talking. It's about 5:30 in the afternoon.

One guy has just arrived and changed into gym shorts upstairs with the other evening athletes. The other took off early from work to come and lift, so he is already sweating through a sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off at the shoulders and through his baggy, gray sweatpants, and he has on these black lace-up boots like the professional wrestlers used to wear. He is complaining about the refereeing at a weightlifting competition the previous weekend.

"They could've gotten guys off the street to do a better job . . . it was a disgrace, really . . ."

Wait a minute! Referees? For lifting those big things, those barbells and dumbbells? Don't they just go down to somebody's basement and just pick them up—I mean who needs a referee? But here at Northwest Y and at YMCAs all over the suburbs, maybe all over the country, there are big, muscular guys arriving after work, putting on body shirts or the sleeves cut off so you can see, and doing the weightlifting thing. Or they might change into form-fitting outfits and do gymnastics, or fancy sneakers and play basketball, or handball, or just run around and do calisthenics in a conditioning class. Yes, there is a whole cult of physical fitness out in the suburbs.

But is all this just for physical fitness? Look at them strain and sweat—is that just for their health, or does something else make them come here when they must be tired already from a day on the job? Could it be something like *status*?

Of course. Status is what the suburbs are all about. Take a look at the neighborhood nearest to the YMCA. It is everybody's idea of a very nice middle-class suburb. The houses are all very nice, meaning they sell for \$40,000 to more than \$100,000; they have lots of shade trees around them, broad lawns, sidewalks, a neighborhood school, no through traffic; and shopping is far enough away that you don't see it.

But look a little farther, along any highway in the area, and you'll find apartments and townhouses, the same crowded living as in the city but with a lower profile and with a lower crime rate if you don't include the mayhem on the highways. Within five or six miles of the YMCA, there are thousands living in apartments and so-called townhouses, people who are trying to make it to their own split-level or two-story homes, dreaming about a life even beyond that, the life out in country-club country. They are surrounded by indicators of status, the big cars and nice homes, subtle little indicators. . . .

Generally speaking, the farther you ride from the Loop on the Chicago & North Western, the wealthier the community you will pass through. On a map, North Western tracks are like a ladder of success climbing up from the grimy, industrial West Side.

The Northwest Y is right in the middle of the status ladder, halfway to Barrington Hills. The membership includes a lot of apartment people who have little of the conventional status in the suburbs. But they're solving that problem. They've learned to find or invent their own status games, and the really surprising thing is that



Shelly Anton

Halfway up the ladder to house-beautiful country is a place where they pursue the body-beautiful game

so many of the folks who have made it — to the broad-lawn, monthly ticket, uptight, certain-periodicals-on-the-coffee-table set — are joining them. And one of the really growing games is Body Status.

What else could account for the phenomenal growth of skiing? It's not a physical fitness movement; skiing is the most fashionable way available to break your leg. And look at Weight Watchers, an organization that helps people lose weight by making it a status competition in an encounter group. But at the YMCA, the Body Status game has progressed to an esthetic beyond losing weight to a kind of sculpture in which the medium is the sculptor's own body.

Watch the weightlifters wince and sweat in pain. Look at the size of their biceps, triceps, pectoralis major, latissimus dorsi . . . that's not physical fitness, it's muscle building, the 1950s muscle beach scene. But here, it's in the process of formation. The weightlifters, the pure ones who don't lift for another sport, are the real shock troops of Body Status and, of course, they know it: Who else would dare exercise in front of a mirror?

The weightlifters are an oddly quiet group and clanish, like a tribe of shy musclemen. In fact, participants in all the men's activities — basketball, swimming and diving, paddleball or handball, gymnastics and others—hang together in little tribe-like groups. Everyone tends to remain within one group, and the groups have fixed (if unspoken) rules and their own esthetics of Body Status.

Pull into the Northwest YMCA lot and park, maybe next to a green Jaguar XJ-6, an auto with a \$10,500 pricetag, built to conquer hills and curving roads, and with a dashboard full of gadgets, gauges and switches. Linger and sniff at the luxurious reek of leather, upholstery.

Inside the YMCA, cars don't matter. You won't find a Jaguar locker in the locker room, and you can't do a \$10,500 flex down in the weight room. But the man with the fancy car is serious about Body Status, about improving or at least maintaining the right shape. And the whole scene is in an asthetic flux of different age groups and different ideas about how the body should look.

For the weightlifters, the esthetic has three criteria: making all the voluntary muscles bigger, giving them definition (making them stand out with a certain shape, with certain ripples in the right places), and keeping them in proportion.

Some weightlifters have charts to keep a record of their progress. And they expect consistent progress in their lifting programs, first to more and more repetitions, then to bigger weights, then more repetitions, and so on. A weightlifter explains a bad day or week as "reaching a plateau."

A plateau—the image is a whole theory of body development: growth and plateau, growth and plateau, with no weakening or growing older, only increasing strength and better definition.

The other tribes or body cultists have their own ideas. In gymnastics, the weightlifter's criteria are basic, but the esthetic includes co-ordination and balance. Basketball is a complex team game, and almost any superior physical attribute is of some use, so status depends on having a range of abilities.

And there is the basic principle common to all groups.

"Hey, Ronnie, waddya say! Keeping your weight down?"

The question is asked by a big weightlifter who is

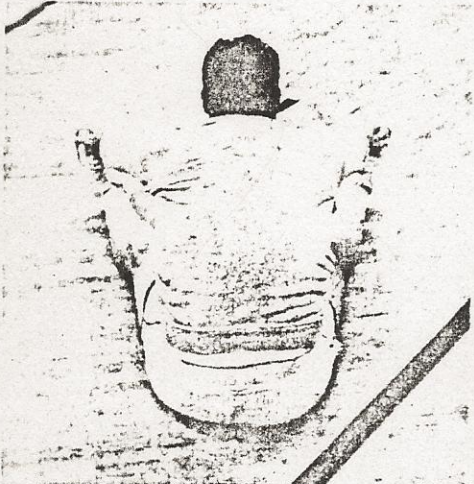


Oof! Stre-e-e-tch to those toes and "KEEP THOSE KNEES STRAIGHT!" Making your body fit is tough, grueling, especially when a hundred other guys are working to be even healthier than you.

resting between sets—series of repetitions—of bench presses.

"Still 205," says Ronnie, who has just entered the weight room wearing a multicolored striped shirt, sleeveless, full and stretching at the shoulders and chest but roomy at the waist. He is about 5 feet 10 inches tall with light-brown, curly hair cut short, bulging biceps and thighs that fill the legs of his gym shorts.

"I laid off last week and I really put it on," says the one on the bench. He lies down, lifts this huge barbell, maybe 200 pounds, from its rest and starts doing bench presses. He does five or six of them, then takes a deep breath and begins one last slow effort . . . the blood reddens his face, neck tendons stand out, perspiration beads on his brow and upper lip, and he grimaces silently . . . the weight—slowly—rises . . . his arms begin to wobble like trees in an earthquake, he grimaces harder but without a sound except for a couple of quick breaths, and Ronnie moves over behind him in



The fitness programs at the YMCA are designed to make even the widest narrow, even the weakest strong.

BODY STATUS Continued

Fat guys don't even try to break into the "regulars"

case he can't get it up . . . the weight is still rising slowly, another six inches to go . . . Ka-langg!

At the other end of the room, another weightlifter, the one who actually goes to weightlifting contests, has just let the barbell fall to the floor.

The man on the bench has lost his concentration. His barbells begin to descend. Ronnie grabs the middle of the bar and together they lift the weight to its rest. The fellow sits up and glares. There is even a sign on the wall saying "Do not drop the weights." But the one who competes doesn't need them to tell him how to lift; sign or no sign, that's the way it is done in competition, so he ignores their looks and resumes the conversation with his buddy about therefereeing. . . .

Above them in the locker room, an old man, in his sixties but looking older and with a flap of loose flesh hanging over the abdomen, is dressing with one hand because the other is paralyzed from a recent stroke. He has just started coming to the Y for therapy and he has discovered Body Status, but to him it is just a matter of keeping fit:

"You play basketball every day up there?"

"Pretty much. Four or five times a week."

"Yeah, I wish I'd been coming here. . . . Might've saved me from this stroke." His voice is apologetic, and he is trying to put a sock on with one hand.

IT IS just 6 p.m. The Chicago & North Western with its cargo of status is still climbing the tracks out toward Barrington Hills, Crystal Lake and Woodstock. The old man who looks older hooks a sock carefully over a big toe and pulls. The sock slips off and he tries again.

Upstairs in the North Gym the evening basketball game is shaping up. The game is played half-court because there is always a crowd.

At one end of the court are the overweight players, the small ones, the uncoordinated and those just learning the game. They are lined up at the foul line, shooting to determine teams. The first five who make their foul shots comprise one team, the next five are the other team, and the rest go to the sideline and wait to challenge the winner, the team that scores 21 baskets first.

At the other end, the procedure is basically the same, except that there are fewer players and they are bigger and better. Right now there are a dozen, but they are not ready to choose sides yet; they take their time, shooting baskets and practicing their moves. None of the players waiting on the sideline at the other end will try to get into this game. They seem to know that they aren't good enough, or that they somehow don't look good enough. No one has proven it or even said it, but somehow they know, and they stay at the other end and wait.

The scrub game starts and the other scrubs wait on the side at the far end, while at the near end the regulars just shoot baskets and practice their moves. Next to the basket, waiting for a rebound, is a newcomer. He stands between two tall, skinny guys, broomsticks about 6 feet 6 who can hardly jump high enough to dunk the basketball.

This newcomer stands out because he is so big, with the build of a weightlifter but about 6 feet 5. He just stands under the basket, taking up as much room as two of the skinny broomsticks and giving everybody a good look. . . . He reaches up and catches a ball and jumps — not a real jump, sort of a careful hop with his 260 pounds or so, as if he doesn't want to risk cracking the

floor — and reaches over the hoop with the ball in one hand, placing the ball down through the net but very gently, as if being careful not to hurt the basket either.

"Kind of big," says one of the smaller players, standing out beyond the foul line.

"Yeah, I think he's one of those weightlifters," another small player says.

This group is a sort of clique. Usually, it is hard for strangers to get onto the floor with them, but of course nobody questions whether this big guy will play. In fact, they ask him to be a captain and choose teams along with another big player, Dave, a scowling, rugged fellow of about 6 feet 2. Dave is strong and agile, quick for his size, and a good jumper and shooter, and he likes to throw his weight around under the basket.

Often he controls the game, and he has on occasion told smaller teammates, "Give me the ball and clear outta the way." And they do. Some nights, Dave will shoot almost every time he touches the ball because in this group there is usually no one who can stop him.

Tonight it is different. Dave and the big fellow neutralize each other, and at the end, Dave is trying desperately to score the winning basket. The game is played to 21 baskets, but you have to win by two.

We are ahead 23-22 and Dave is dribbling and reversing, trying to get an angle to shove his way to the basket. The big fellow and a tall, skinny one are both guarding him closely, looming over him. Then the man guarding me under the basket moves over and tries to steal the ball. Dave is forced to pick it up; he sees me all alone and fires a pass.

I take one dribble and as I jump to lay it up, a defensive player comes at me, not to block the shot but putting his shoulder down and going under me. He is too late, the shot is an easy one, and as I come down I shove a knee into his chest and we both fall to the floor. My team wins, on a shot that looked harder than it was, a reverse layup banked off the backboard.

"Nice shot," a couple of guys say.

"Don't dribble. Just shoot it up," Dave says.

Condescension is not unusual, but it is usually expressed toward other groups and their forms of Body Status. For example, a weightlifter enters the gym to jog. A basketball player says, "I wouldn't want to look like that," and nods at the back of the weightlifter, who is out of earshot.

"Like that" — between basketball players, in fact between all the Body Status groups that play fast-paced games—is understood to mean "musclebound," the thin man's impression of the weightlifter.

"Naah, I wouldn't either," says another basketball player. "If they ever stop lifting weights, it all goes to fat."

How true. But it is just as true of the other groups. Evidence abounds in the locker room. There are always guys returning after layoffs of a year or five years, and others just discovering Body Status. You don't even have to look around for their drooping chests and bellies, the air is full of their talk:

"I'm down to 268 now," says a big, hefty guy about 6 feet 4 who has been trying to make his comeback in the noontime basketball game, a ragged, full-court contest populated by small, fast players. "That's 50 pounds over my college weight . . . (a pause, during which a couple of his listeners nod, but no one says anything). . . I was up to 288 for awhile, but that finally got to be too much."

Audiences are rare

because everybody's working

NONE of this personal information was asked for. It was just given, and without shame, to guys he didn't even know outside the YMCA, as if the conversation were about the weather. Two hundred and fifty-eight pounds! Just mentioned in passing while this hefty fellow and a half-dozen others stripped off their sweaty gymshirts and white YMCA shorts, sweatsocks and jockstraps.

But if being so overweight detracted from his status, if the loss of status "finally got to be too much," then losing weight — even coming here to sweat with the boys and claim to be losing weight — would regain all that lost status, would restore to his fellow players the image of an agile 220-pound pivotman wearing his college colors, cheered on by pom-pom girls.

And this idea of losing weight, returning to some real or imagined sleek, powerful physique, is the only esthetic principle common to all the different Body Status groups. Otherwise, they hardly talk to one another, as if there were some kind of language barrier. And in a way there is:

"I got a second in the snatch, and Fred won the clean-and-jerk in his weight class. But if it wasn't for the refereeing . . . Fred should've won his weight. He . . ."

Snatch? Clean-and-jerk? These are events? Why, the words have almost a smutty ring to them. But they're only part of a weightlifting lore. And there are other terms you can't relate to anything outside the sport—words like barbells, dumbbells. There are pieces of equipment that look like the apparatus in an Inquisition torture chamber, and not completely by accident but, of course, this is all voluntary.

Swimmers have their own Body Status scene, with builds like the weightlifters but more slender and agile. And they have their own fashions, brief bathing suits that accentuate that look of slender rippling brawn stroking through the water — but not too brief, not the

Riviera men's bikini-style that barely covers the pubic hair, fashionable on California beaches when they wear anything at all. No, this is the YMCA, C for Christian, sound mind, healthy body and all that, and moreover in the properly cultural northwest suburbs, so make sure all is amply covered.

Divers really have something going for them — if they can attract an audience. The esthetics of diving is melodrama, filling the air with suspense, held breaths, gasps, then the spectacular denouement followed by cheers and admiration. The problem is that audiences, especially female audiences, are rare because everyone else at the YMCA is doing his or her own Body Status routine.

IT'S really too bad, this shortage of audiences, because at the heart of all this status competition, what we really all want, is admiration. The big car and the two-story with a wooded acre-and-a-half and the little status flag that says your train stop is in the flatlands of Arlington Heights—are fine if you've got them. But Body Status is beyond all that, a way to get a step ahead of your lumpy neighbor Jones riding around on his noisy

Lawn Boy, isn't it?

Just going out in the yard wearing a T-shirt, or better without a shirt so ol' tubby Jonesie's wife can get a good look at your rippling muscles? Don't you just know that later she is going to make some remark about his bay window, and even if that doesn't improve your sex life, it'll make his more uncomfortable? That's getting a step ahead, isn't it? In the uptight, status-conscious, horny suburbs? You bet it is!

In most Body Status groups, there is no chance of interaction between the sexes because more of the games and exercises are segregated. Gymnastics is an exception. Men and women practice and compete together, on different equipment but in the same gym, and there is plenty of opportunity for . . . eye contact.

Early evening in the South Gym, a girl in a lavender leotard hops on the balance beam and gives a quick "look hither" glance at one of those young men (such muscle definition!) doing his own gravity-defying thing on the rings . . .

. . . While down in the basebent, the weightlifters suffer in solitude, lifting and grimacing silently, a couple of them in front of the mirror . . .

. . . And in the humid, gymsuit-odor locker room, big naked young men weigh themselves and strut to the showers, pausing accidentally in front of the mirror, while over in the Cambridge Club locker room, a couple of sweaty handball players rub their sore hands and wiggle their toes on the carpet . . .

. . . And upstairs in the North Gym, yelling "Defense!" and cursing when they miss a shot, utterly serious, the basketball players in their headbands and Converse and Pro-Keds, dripping into their sweat socks, are dribbling, passing and shooting at a furious hot pace while other men wait on the sidelines . . .

. . . Yes, while all this is going on, this girl in the lavender leotard mounts the balance beam in the South Gym. The young man hangs still on the rings and watches the fluid, smooth ballet of the girl's body . . .

Well, yes but, of course, only the form—that is, only in the artistic sense. There's nothing sexual about it, you understand, nothing *lustful*, just appreciation of a graceful performance, young budding Body Status . . . Right?

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