

The Roark Report



Chuck Sipes

Little Chuck was watching Big Chuck. About 1948, when Chuck Coker, who would later, in 1961, be in on the founding of Universal Equipment company, was working out hard and regularly in his Modesto, California garage gym, he often noticed a young man who would pause at the end of Coker's driveway to observe the exercises. So, at the age of 16, Chuck Sipes was invited into the gym to learn the iron.

William Sipes, Chuck's father, recalls that Chuck was underweight in high school and wanted to add some size so he could play football. Later, of course, Chuck would run over other bodybuilders on world class competition playing fields.

Charles Harry Sipes was born August 22, 1932 to William and Evelyn Sipes in Sterling, Illinois. Bill and Evelyn were married July 2, 1927, and their first son, Bill, Jr., had come along two years before Chuck arrived.

Little Chuck became big Chuck in more ways than the obvious bodybuilding way. His marriage to Mary on September 1, 1952, would yield three daughters; Daphne, born July 19, 1954, Kathy, December 22, 1955, and Patricia "Irish" in 1962.

Daphne recalls an incident when as children she and Kathy were storming through the house playing and they crashed into the shelf holding their father's bodybuilding trophies. The storm calmed instantly as they pondered the response Dad would have when he arrived home. They cleaned up the broken and scratched trophies as well as young girls could, and waited. Chuck arrived, was told of the mishap, and called his daughters to him. Hugging them he said, "No problem, they're just trophies. We can get them repaired." A temperament such as this, and years of the same loving attitude, now causes Daphne to feel, "He gave me, his daughters, unconditional love. He loved us no matter what. He was very tolerant."

But when the boys came courting later, and got a glimpse of the man-monster, as Daphne called Dad, the boys didn't like to hang around the house too long—perhaps thinking that Chuck's musculancy was coupled with acute mental awareness of their intentions. Nonetheless, once the boys got to know Chuck, they relaxed, though perhaps not fully, wondering how to treat the daughter of a man who easily ripped phone books into halves and bent iron rods. Perhaps the young men thought that this father's actions were indeed speaking louder than words...

Norm Komich is among those who called Chuck Sipes a very close friend. Norm remembers first meeting Chuck, whose 19 inch arms were relaxed, as he sincerely asked Norm to be specific in detailing how he had build his own arms (to about 15 inches). This other-person-oriented interest would be with Chuck throughout his life.

After Norm returned from Vietnam, he drove to visit Chuck that same night and knocked on his door at 3 A.M. Chuck, who was not expecting Norm, welcomed him as though it were 11 A.M. and he was expected.

Chuck cared enough about other people's problems to spend 20 years with the California Youth Authority (C.Y.A.), retiring in 1988. His main function was to take troubled inner-city youths into the mountains of California for about four weeks at a time. Bill Sipes remembers his son's technique. Chuck would walk the youngsters around in circles for about a week to get them feeling lost and to lessen thoughts of escape. By the beginning of the second week, the young men would start to let their feelings out—stories detailing sad conditions which had contributed to the boys' current situations. This therapy was successful. The superintendent of Folsom Prison once noted that 96% of the young men whom Chuck treated in the wilderness never returned to jail. Ninety-six percent.

Other mountain hikes were for fun and exercise. Norm recalls trips into the mountains and workouts involving cables, which would be tied around trees and then stretched in various exercises. Their conversations around campfires on such outings were the underpinnings of a lifelong friendship, and now, when Norm speaks of Chuck, it is with warmth, love, respect, and bewilderment as to what changed Chuck's outlook later in life.

After a month in the woods, Chuck's bodyweight often decreased by 15 to 20 pounds, and Norm remembers the amazing transformation Chuck could undergo in regaining the lost weight and muscle. He simply ate more and lifted. No drugs, according to Norm.

Chuck began his competitive bodybuilding career unwillingly. Chuck Coker recalls that when Sipes was a lifting competitor in his junior college days in Modesto, there was one occasion when a physique contest was held in connection with the lifting. Chuck's buddies on the team filled out an entry form to the physique contest, then informed Chuck that he had to get up on stage and pose. He said no at first, but then did sort of a stroll across the stage and hit a few poses. Soon, he gave up competitive lifting to specialize on his physique. In his prime, his forearms may have been the best in the world.

In December, 1932, *Strength & Health* magazine began, but Chuck would never appear on its cover. In 1940, when Chuck was eight, Joe Weider began his publishing career, and later Chuck would appear on several Weider covers.

By 1958, Chuck was into his early competitions, placing third at the western sectional of the Junior Mr. America contest in Portland, Oregon. Ray Routledge won and Earl Clark was second. The placings for the most muscular award were in the same order. The following year Chuck won the IFBB Mr. America title. By 1961, he was the IFBB Mr. Universe, and he competed in the second and

third Mr. Olympia contests in 1966 and 1967. He was, by then, writing for Joe Weider, and had started his AMERICAN BODY-BUILDER'S CLUB, which cost a dollar to join.

I was in the audience on September 25, 1968, in Miami Beach, Florida, when Chuck won the 1968 Mr. World contest. As odd as it sounds now, the audience was welcomed onto the stage following the contest. This was also the evening, you may recall, that a rough-cut physique from Austria was competing against the finished form of Frank Zane. Chuck, who was a judge at that section of the show, voted for Zane.

A couple of years after this contest, Chuck was rooming with another world famous bodybuilder overseas during a posing exhibition. Chuck walked into their hotel room and found the other bodybuilder with a needle in his butt. Chuck asked what was going on and was told, "Oh, you have to do this to compete these days." No, Chuck did not have to, and the following year he wrote an article in *Muscle Training Illustrated* entitled, "HELP! DRUGS ARE DESTROYING MUSCLEMEN."

He retired rather than take the large amounts of steroids that were being used. Two years later, 1972, Daphne recalls that she accompanied her father on an across the country trip to Annapolis Naval Academy where Chuck was to speak on physical fitness. She remembers the pride she felt upon seeing her father speak in other cities on the way to the academy.

Chuck began bodybuilding as a clean athlete, and as he became aware that steroids were becoming really widespread, he lost some interest toward it. His job with the C.Y.A., in the final years, was negatively influenced by some bureaucratic snafus which thwarted some of the rewarding trips he had previously made into the mountains. One suspects his interests in this part of his life lessened also.

As the years passed, those close to Chuck began to notice changes in him which were not positive. Even his painting, which

he had been doing for years and in which he captured the beauty of his beloved mountains, was not enough to sustain him. Chuck was growing despondent against the best efforts of his true friends and his family. Chuck Coker, who is still involved in the physical fitness field, tried to reach Chuck by phone to offer him a job talking to young people at high schools about physical culture. Unable to get through on the telephone, Coker wrote what would turn out to be an unanswered letter offering the job. But Sipes, after receiving the letter, told his father that he simply did not want to be a burden to anyone. This was 1992.

Also that year, Chuck and Mary would travel to Massachusetts for a six month visit with Daphne and her husband. Also living in that state is Norm Komich, with whom Chuck attended the tenth annual meeting of the Old-time Barbell and Strongmen Association in New York City.

In November, Chuck and Mary returned home to Weed, California. It was about this time that Chuck saw his parents for the final time.

What causes a man, who cheers up everyone, to change so that he cannot be cheered up by those he loves? Big Chuck was becoming little Chuck inside himself. A man whose family loved him, whose art work was respected, whose cell-mates (so to speak) became sell-mates and are forever in his debt, whose stupendous strength and physique accomplishments were no longer able to re-ignite his former bright attitudes.

And, for whatever reasons such an evolution takes place, it took place, and Chuck decided to say farewell on February 24 of this year. And no one was watching.

Chuck is buried in his beloved buckskins in Sunset View Cemetery in Jackson, California, about 50 miles from the gym he used to run in Modesto. Norm spoke the eulogy, the mountains were near, and Chuck became part of the 96% who would not return to whatever demons imprisoned them.

—Joe Roark

