Pumping Iron

By Bruce Bawer

Stronger: The Untold Story of Muscle in Our Lives
By Michael Joseph Gross
(Dutton, 480 pages, $35)

I was never an athlete. Or at least I never thought of myself as one. If you were a boy in Queens when I was growing up, only one thing mattered: how good you were at softball. I stunk. I couldn't hit, couldn't throw, and couldn't catch. I was the stereotypical unathletic gay kid, picked last when we chose teams, and grew up seeing myself as a hopeless loser in sports.

Real Sports Photos: Shutterstock

Somehow I didn't grasp that other physical achievements might also matter. In junior high school, for example, I beat everybody at leg wrestling. The one time we had a relay race in high school, I was my team's anchor guy, and although we were far behind the other teams when I got the baton, I effortlessly pulled out a big win. Yet nobody placed any importance on these accomplishments – least of all me. Nor did I make anything of the fact that every summer of my childhood, which we spent in what is now called North Myrtle Beach, I swam every day for miles along the coast. Years later I

realized that if I'd attended a school with a pool, or had one gym teacher who recognized that I was a good runner, I might've been considered an athlete. But it wasn't meant to be.

In middle age, I lived in Oslo, where my model for healthful living was my friend Norman Spencer, a fellow American who lifted seriously at the gym twice a day and kept to a very strict diet. He was determined not to die young, as his father had, and was proud of his success at keeping trim and slim. Often, when he and I and our mutual friends got together, he'd invite us to feel his gluteus maximus through his pants. I always declined the offer, but those who took him up on it testified that it felt less like a human rump than like a skeleton.

On April 17 of last year, Norman died, aged 65, after suffering a massive heart attack at his gym. For me, it was not just a terrible loss but a cautionary tale: strenuous weight-lifting, I concluded, can kill you. But now that conclusion has been challenged. Why? Because I've just read an eye-opening book, *Stronger: The Untold Story of Muscle in Our Lives,* by Michael Joseph Gross. A longtime contributing editor of *Vanity Fair,* Gross has written about such topics as Madonna, the Vatican, and Queen Elizabeth's corgis; in 2010, his profile of Sarah Palin caused something of a controversy. Twenty years ago he published a book called *Starstruck* about celebrity worship.

Now he's published *Stronger,* which looks at weight-lifting from several perspectives – historical, sociological, medical, biological, psychological. His message is simple: undergoing a process of lifting increasingly heavy weights – or, as it's called, progressive resistance – has remarkable physical and mental benefits. For most of history, the consensus was distinctly otherwise. In ancient Rome, Stoic philosophers such as Seneca (4 B.C. – A.D. 65) regarded intensive physical training as an impediment to the development of the mind.

Galen, the pathbreaking Roman physician (A.D. 129-216) who preached moderation in all things, "denounced athletics as bad for health because athletic competition involved striving for excellence, the opposite of moderation." Indeed, for Galen, athletics was the very "opposite of health"; he agreed with Seneca that attempts to build body mass were "ruinous to the whole person, body and soul."

In the Western world, Galen's was the standard view right up until recent times. Yes, there were dissenting voices. George Barker Windship was a celebrated 19th-century advocate for heavy lifting – his motto was "Strength is Health" – who gathered a sizable following. But his death at age 42, in 1876, was universally taken as a lesson to stay away from heavy weights; in its obituary, the *New York Times* maintained that Windship had forgotten "that caution is the parent of safety." No wonder that Windship's disciples scattered, and that in the latter part of the century, the doctors who ran physical education programs at colleges and universities shared an "[a]nxiety about muscle."

Eventually, however, another man came along to challenge the consensus. In his magazine *Physical Culture,* Bernarr Macfadden (1868-1955) promoted muscle-building as a positive good. Some doctors even shared Macfadden's opinion: Gross has tracked down *JAMA* editorials from over a century ago emphasizing the medical importance of exercise. But the medical world, by and large, was indifferent or hostile to pumping iron, dismissing Macfadden's magazine as tacky and the bodybuilders depicted therein as hulking lummoxes.

Then along came a U.S. Army doctor named Thomas Lanier DeLorme (1917-2003), who, during World War II, in contradiction to the medical orthodoxy of the day, instructed injured soldiers to lift weights to speed the healing process. It worked so well that eventually the whole Army healthcare system followed his program. Still, most doctors remained unconvinced. Nor was the cause of weight-lifting helped by the publication of the

massive 1968 bestseller *Aerobics,* in which Kenneth Cooper contended that weight-lifting was "like putting a lovely new coat of paint on an automobile that really needs an engine overhaul." Cooper's take has been extraordinarily influential ever since. Although gym membership has soared all over the world during the last half century, most of the people joining those gyms have done so in order to use exercise machines, not to hit the weight room – a corner of the gym that even now is often considered the province of cultist freaks.

Nonetheless, in the wake of DeLorme, scientists have made remarkable discoveries that have confirmed the positive impact of weight training. For example, "the brain's posterior cingulate cortex, the seat of empathy, grows larger when people do weight-lifting exercise." Also, "progressive resistance exercise produces a spectrum of benefits that aerobic exercise alone does not provide, including increased muscle mass and bone density and reduced risk of falls." In addition, such exercise "can build confidence and reduce anxiety; improve bone density, blood pressure, aerobic fitness, body composition, metabolic health, insulin sensitivity, depression, and sleep; prevent and treat type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease; reduce the risk of several types of cancer; increase resistance to injury; and decrease the likelihood of falls and of osteoporotic fracture."

I've often thought that weight-lifting was something to stay away from as one ages, and that the best way for old codgers to get exercise without risking cardiac arrest or stroke is to walk or swim. But Gross quotes one of the premier researchers in the field, Maria Fiatrone Singh, as saying that weight training is especially important for seniors. "You can get away without lifting weights when you're young," Singh says. "You can't really get away with it when you're older." Indeed, she even urges nonagenarians to lift weights. This strikes me as startling: don't most nonagenarians have weak hearts and/or

medical conditions that would render heavy lifting catastrophic? But Singh is firm in her conviction: while few physicians, even now, "see resistance exercise as medicine," they couldn't, in her view, be more mistaken. Weight lifting, she insists, is "the most powerful medicine we actually have. There isn't anything more powerful than weight-lifting exercise. Full stop." Gross agrees: "Muscle is a matter of life and death."

I can't help suspecting that more than a few cardiologists would dissent from some of the bolder assertions in *Stronger.* But that doesn't mean *Stronger* isn't very much worth reading. It's the very definition of cutting-edge. As Gross underscores, most of what is now known about the benefits of pumping iron wasn't yet known only a few decades ago. Research is still underway. Meanwhile, what he views as the prejudice of the medical establishment persists; the new insights into the connection between weight training and health, he complains, have scarcely affected clinical practice. One reason, he suggests, is that doctors can get rich by prescribing drugs if they invest in pharmaceutical firms, but can't turn a buck quite as easily by recommending weight lifting.

Bottom line: *Stronger* is an elegant, sophisticated, and substantial piece of work. Based on solid research, containing detailed and absorbing interviews with Singh and other top scientists, and enthusiastically recommended by the likes of Arnold Schwartzenegger and the novelist John Irving, a lifelong weight-lifter, it's the kind of book that you might expect to be a heavy read, the literary equivalent of a 500-pound set of barbells; but in fact it's absolutely enthralling, written with a masterly zip and zing – an eye for the arresting visual detail and an ear for the striking quotation – that testify to Gross's long tenure at *Vanity Fair.*

As I've made clear, I'm far from an expert on pumping iron,

and I'd be fascinated to read a strong, well-informed critique of Gross's argument. But I can't imagine a more definitive case for that argument than *Stronger*. I wonder what our iron-pumping new secretary of health, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. – a robust septuagenarian whose uncle's Presidential Council for Physical Fitness required kids like me, a lifetime ago, to take fitness tests that, puzzlingly, were abolished under Barack Obama – would make of Gross's book. I'd certainly urge him to give *Stronger* an extremely serious look.

First published in the American Spectator