



High School Headlines

Sam Parker-Smith was able to keep up his training regimen after surgery in January.

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There's no limit on heart

Cerebral palsy can be an obstacle, but it doesn't stop teen from bodybuilding

By DALE ROBERTSON
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In many ways, Sam Parker-Smith is a typical teenager. He wears braces — conspicuous because of his disarming smile, which he flashes often — and he thinks he can conquer the world.

In other ways, Sam Parker-Smith is not a typical teenager. He's an utterly focused, totally dedicated aspiring bodybuilder, and he has the ripped, freshly shaven physique to prove it. Also, he has cerebral palsy.

"It's hard for me because I'm disabled," Parker-Smith said, confronting the elephant in the room head-on as he nervously contemplates his debut competition in the Southern States Natural (i.e., drug-free) Extravaganza at the Stafford Civic Center tonight. "But I've never had any doubts. It's my passion in life to become a professional bodybuilder, to show others that being disabled doesn't have to keep you from getting what you want.

"I'm proud that I've gained the respect of the other guys in the gym."

Parker-Smith's trainer, Ray Bessette, started bodybuilding himself 27 years ago and still competes successfully at 55. He'll be entered in the Stafford event, too, so he can provide a calming voice for Sam backstage. In all the countless hours Bessette has spent around the sport, he has never seen anybody with such *presumed* limitations attempt to succeed as a bodybuilder.

Mental overcomes physical

Sam walks with an awkward, ungainly gait because lesions in his brain send scrambled signals to his muscles. His wrists and hands, which have extremely limited flexibility and range of motion, make it impossible for him to hold a barbell like a normal person.

But these obvious, in-your-face physical shortcomings are more than counterbalanced by the single-mindedness of his mission. At 18, the Cy-Fair senior knows what he wants. End of conversation.

"He has more heart in one of his pinkies," Bessette said, trying hard not to tear up, "than most people have in their whole body. He's one of the strongest kids in the gym. All I can tell is he lifts his butt off."

Parker-Smith was just a tyke in his native England when he saw his first *Terminator* movie. Arnold Schwarzenegger's bulging muscles made an immediate impression. He told his mother, Caroline, that's what he wanted to look like someday. Perhaps she should have patiently explained to him it would never be possible because of his cerebral palsy, which had been diagnosed when he was 3.

Instead, she looked Sam in the eye and said he could do anything he put his mind to.

Of course, that wasn't completely true. Like his classmates, what he most wanted to do was fly around the soccer pitch, bending kicks like David Beckham. But all the surgeries in the world — he has undergone three major operations, the most recent in January, to untether his stubbornly uncooperative, balled-up muscles — were never going to let Sam run well enough to be a footballer.

No matter. Despite the problems with his grip, he concluded that a more stationary pursuit like weightlifting might be the answer. So he checked out the scene at a gym south of London.

"I saw the weights," he said, "and I thought, 'Wow, that's it.'"

RESOURCES

ABOUT THE EVENT

- **What:** Seventh annual NGA Southern States Natural Extravaganza bodybuilding competition. All contestants, from around Texas and 13 other states, are certified drug-free.
- **When:** Today-Saturday.
- **Where:** Stafford Civic Center.
- **Schedule:** 6:30 Friday, 9 a.m. Saturday, 6:30 p.m. Saturday.

When his father, Steven, moved the family to Houston five years ago to pursue a business opportunity, Parker-Smith found his way to Sound Fitness near Tomball. He resumed lifting on an almost daily basis, unmindful of the occasionally startled looks from the people working out around him. There he met Bessette, who offered him pointers.

One day Bessette got a call from Caroline. She said her son wanted to take his training to another level and pursue bodybuilding. She asked Bessette to help.

"I said, 'Well, OK, let's go for it,' " Bessette said. "I'd seen the kid work out. He was in there six, seven days a week. I knew how serious he was, how hard he worked. And not once since we started has he slacked off."

Using resistance bands and Velcro wraps to help Sam control the weights, Bessette pushed him hard from the get-go. Sam never pushed back, resolutely answering each challenge while praising his mentor's own tireless efforts by saying: "Where there's a will, there's a Ray."

In nine months time, through his workouts and a smarter diet, Sam has added 11 pounds of muscle and lowered his body fat from 22 to 7.5 percent while increasing the circumference of his once-widened right arm by nearly two inches.

This despite the fact that the January surgery, badly needed to loosen up his hamstrings and straighten one of his feet, kept him in motion-restricting casts through mid-March.

His older brother Mark, who suffers from a mild form of epilepsy himself, calls Sam "the true Samson, just without the hair." Because of Sam's inspiration, all three of his siblings, including a sister, have become gym rats.

You must look closely to detect the lingering disparity in the girth of Parker-Smith's limbs. But the judges will surely notice, and it figures to cost him points. His is an open competition for all teenagers. He won't be scored on any kind of curve. So realistically, his chances of taking home a trophy this evening are slim.

Stage presence a must

Fact is, though, Sam has already won, simply for having the courage to walk onto the stage in front of hundreds of spectators and strike the poses — wearing, as Bessette says, "what amounts to a loin cloth" — his pale skin artificially tanned and oiled to better highlight muscle definition.

"It's a little intimidating," Sam admits. "But it'll be all right."

The way he sees it, the worst part — an excruciating body-waxing session — is over. That was pure hell, yet it had to be done. He can't hold a razor to shave off his body hair.

The waxing ritual notwithstanding, many more of these competitions will follow for him. Parker-Smith insists he won't be satisfied until he's built just like his idol, Schwarzenegger.

But for the moment anyway, he swears he doesn't aspire to become the governor of California or Texas.

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AWESOME SAM! Keep up the hard work. You are a true inspiration to us all.

5/9/2008 8:17:27 AM

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Festus wrote:

Way to go, Sam. You've already proven you're a winner, just by working hard in the gym.

5/9/2008 4:18:00 AM

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Lancebhammond wrote:

Sam,

I once asked you to show me what I could do that you couldn't. Well the real question is can I do what you can do. Christin, Ethan and I are very proud of your

accomplishments. Keep up the hard work.

5/9/2008 9:00:15 AM

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srothr1 wrote:

You got a bullet-proof vest to go with those guns?

5/9/2008 12:50:09 PM

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Way to go Sam. We are all proud of you. Maybe we can use you as a personal trainer.

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