

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Webb embraced position of strength

By Josh Langenbacher

Jake Webb spends most of his days rising by 5 a.m., spending an hour and a half hiking the three miles of mountain trails around his Huntingdon County property, squeezing in other workout regimens depending on the day of the week, taking his wife for her daily routine and cooking and cleaning.

And then the 88-year-old goes to bed and does it all again the next day. He does hit the pause button for 15 minutes to meditate after his workouts, though.

"I'm always amazed I can still do all the things I can do," Webb said.

Perpetual amazement extends not only to Webb's reflection of what he can still do, but also to what his peers think about the weight training pioneer's body of work.

Webb, whose lifetime of devotion to weightlifting continues to this day, will be honored with the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Webb introduced weight training to area athletes during an era when such activity was virtually nonexistent.

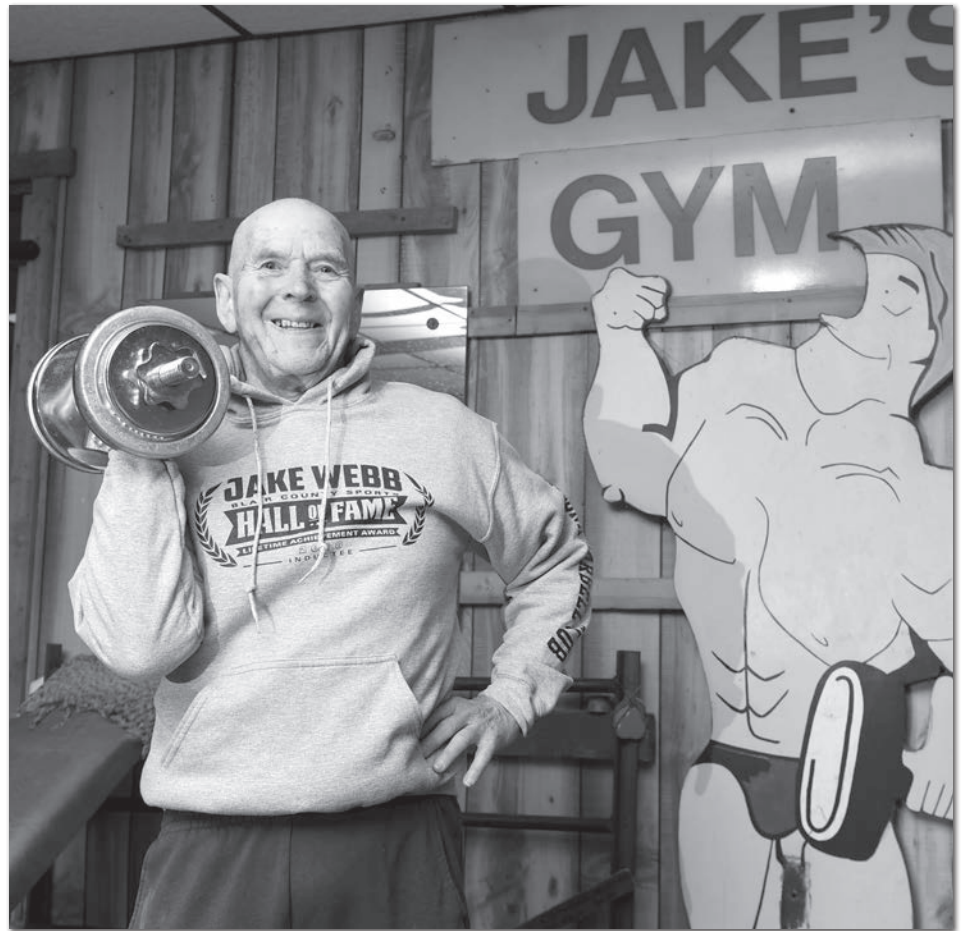
Some high school football coaches banned weightlifting, Webb said, and few gyms in the area offered much. The gym he operated, Jake's Gym on California Avenue in Altoona, was open from the late 1960s until he sold it in 1985.

Webb's acts of strength were recognized by the Zuver's Muscle Hall of Fame, which honored him in 1971 after two of his lifts met Hall of Fame standard.

He was the first person from Central Pennsylvania to receive national recognition in weightlifting after his curl of 150 pounds set a state record.

Though he weighed just 145, he pressed 275, and he was featured in national muscle magazines, some including acts of strength such as a man jumping off a six-foot ladder onto Webb's stomach.

Among the countless local ath-



Jake Webb is being recognized as the Hall's Lifetime Achievement Award for the national recognition he gained through acts of strength along with the mentorship he provided well before weight training became popular.

letes he trained included future NFL players Mike Reid and Brad Benson.

"His gym was something you'd expect to see Rocky in," Benson said.

Webb's longstanding commitment to fitness knows no bounds. Even when he was working for the Pennsylvania Railroad unloading boxcars of paint, he would spend idle time standing in front of a 55-gallon drum and seeing whether he could jump on top of the barrel.

"Then I got cute one day, and I jumped up like I usually did, but I went right through a rusty lid," Webb said. "I had a hell of a time explaining that to the boss. I told them I was walking across them to count them. I didn't tell them I was jumping on top of them. It

was a lot of hit and miss."

For those who worked with Webb, results were much more hit than miss.

Reid, who trained at Jake's Gym in college, said Penn State had no lifting program at the time, and Webb provided the foundation that helped Reid become an All-Pro player with the Cincinnati Bengals.

"Back in those days, you had no machines," Reid said. "It was before any of the machinery. It was just weights, and Jake's was the place. He was a bodybuilder himself, and he understood. He was the first guy to talk to me about what you ate and protein intake. He was way, way ahead of his time."

At the heart of Jake's Gym was

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a reluctant showman whose stunts to raise weightlifting awareness held the attention of a large captive audience.

Among the "carnival strongman" feats Webb pulled off include lifting his wife, Barbara, by his teeth, allowing a heavyweight wrestler to jump off a six-foot ladder onto his stomach and permitting anyone who wanted to punch him in his stomach as hard as they could.

"The only disadvantage I had, most of the performers had assistants that they used over and over again," Webb said. "I had none, really. I just picked somebody out, and they might be a rather clumsy weightlifter or they might be agile. I'd just pick them out of a gym."

Sometimes, Webb's "assistants" actually picked him.

"Another thing I got injured by, I was letting anybody punch me in the stomach as hard as they could," he said. "Well, that was fine as long as Jake knew how intense it was. A girl walked up to me once, and she was pretty husky. Without any warning whatsoever, she hit me in the stomach. I didn't let on, but for a couple days afterward, I was in agony and spitting out blood. I just sort of dropped that idea after that. I thought, 'Well, that wasn't too good.'"

Despite the mishaps, though, Webb said nothing was as painful as a routine in which he would pick up his wife by his index finger, recalling "that



Jake opened Jake's Gym in the late 1960s and gained national recognition for his "carnival strongman" feats.

always dug into me just like a knife."

"I didn't like to put performances on," Webb said. "I wasn't a showman per se. I did it because I had to."

Success for Jake's Gym was slow to come initially. Busy working for the railroad, Webb said his gym initially made such little profit that he "wasn't even paying my light bill for the garage off the darn thing." But after retiring 15 years into working for the railroad — "A job I hated," Webb lamented — the retiree's ability to focus all energy into Jake's Gym created a mecca for those in Blair County. Webb patterned his gym after the legendary York Barbell Club.

"Jake's Gym was the ultimate gym for anyone training," Webb said. "That

type of gym wasn't anywhere else in Central Pa. from what I knew. The gym itself was nothing like gyms today, but we thought it was ultra modern."

Webb becomes the Hall of Fame's second Lifetime Achievement winner, joining retired Altoona Mirror sports editor Jim Lane, who was honored in 2010.

"Jake is a legend in the weight training community and mentored hundreds of athletes," Hall of Fame president Neil Rudel said. "Between the national recognition he earned as a lifter and the number of lives he touched, we felt it was appropriate to recognize him."

The Hall's Lifetime Award is given at the discretion of its board of directors, Rudel said, and will replace the Community Service Award for 2018.

"Because we have such a full program, we're considering alternating the Lifetime and Community Service awards in years to come," he said.

Webb is humbled by the recognition. Close friend Rocco Alianello spearheaded Webb's nomination, and nearly 50 of his protégés will be in attendance.

"I told Rocco (Alianello, nominator) I dread this honor," the sheepish Webb said. "I said I don't own a suit, I've never had a suit on, and I never had a tie, let alone wear one of those monkey suits. That's going to be more nervewracking to me than performing. I hope I can get through it."



At 88 years old, Jake still works out daily at his home near Huntingdon.