



# CLASSIC ARNOLD

A bodybuilding contest. A friendship. And a festival fit for thousands of athletes. How Arnold Schwarzenegger's Arnold Sports Festival became a Columbus, Ohio, institution.

BY RICH WARREN

Anyone who's seen the movie *The Terminator* knows that when Arnold Schwarzenegger says "I'll be back," he means it. And in 1970, more than a decade before that iconic film was released, Schwarzenegger delivered that same line to Jim Lorimer, a business executive in Columbus, Ohio, who was organizing a local bodybuilding event and wanted this particular young Austrian with a long last name to compete.

The only problem was that Schwarzenegger, who at the time was a relative unknown, had a

scheduling conflict. He'd committed to a contest in London the day before the Columbus competition.

Not to worry. Lorimer sent a private jet to pick up his star competitor, who not only appeared in the Columbus event but also won it, marking the first in a string of victories that ultimately led him to muscle his way to the top of the bodybuilding world.

A grateful Schwarzenegger, impressed with Lorimer's organizational abilities, told his new friend, "When I retire from bodybuilding, I'll be back, and

you and I will put together a major bodybuilding competition right here, every year."

At the time, Lorimer admits to doubting that promise would be kept. But true to his word, Schwarzenegger returned to Columbus in 1975, and over the next several years, he assisted Lorimer in organizing a series of bodybuilding contests. In 1989, Schwarzenegger decided he wanted an event with his own name on it, and the Arnold Classic, now one of the world's preeminent bodybuilding competitions, was born.

Since then, the event has grown exponentially. This year, after a year's pandemic-related hiatus, what's now called the Arnold Sports Festival returns from March 3 to 6. While the Arnold Classic is still very much part of the four-day weekend, the festival also features dozens of competitions in all manner of sports, including gymnastics, martial arts, wrestling, powerlifting, boxing, cheerleading, dance, jump rope and pickleball.

Novelty events such as Scottish Highland Games and the World's Strongest Firefighter Contest are also included. Following an annual tradition of adding new sports to the lineup, festival organizers are unveiling the Arnold Medieval Fighting Invitational this year.

## FESTIVAL FUN

The Arnold, as it's known locally, has morphed into the largest annual multisport event in the US. Prior to the pandemic's onset, 22,000 athletes from 80 nations were participating. That's more competitors than the Olympics itself. The Arnold also draws more than 200,000 people from around the world to Columbus, filling hotels throughout the city in early March.

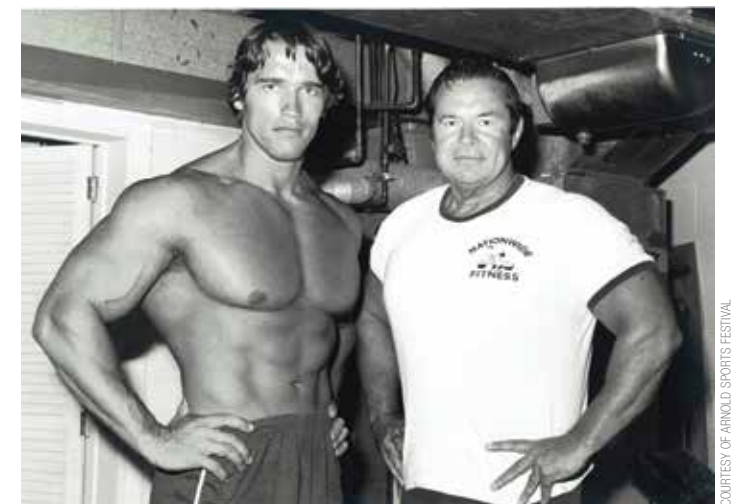
Along with being spectators at the athletic events, visitors can also attend a Fitness Expo with more than 1,000 vendors hawking athletic apparel, sports equipment and nutritional supplements.

Every hour, a different type of

entertainment is presented on the main stage, including strongman and arm-wrestling competitions as well as amateur physique competitions for both men and women. Also featured is the popular Arnold 5K Pump & Run that combines a 5K race with a bench press competition. And at the after-hours Party with the Pros, visitors can rub elbows with bodybuilding stars.

One of those stars may well be Schwarzenegger himself. Each year, Arnold returns to Columbus to preside over his namesake festival, making a commitment to stop by as many of the athletic events as possible.

So, if you see a crowd of people, it's likely that Schwarzenegger is



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** The Fitness Expo at the Arnold Sports Festival includes activities for children; more than 1,000 fitness-related vendors attend the expo; Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Lorimer have been friends since the early 1970s.



COURTESY OF ARNOLD SPORTS FESTIVAL

the reason. His appearance at the expo, often atop a hydraulic lift, is always dramatic. Occasionally, he's joined by friends; Sylvester Stallone made an appearance one year. Schwarzenegger also appears at a Sunday Showcase on the final day of the festival, chatting with past and present competitors and taking questions from the audience.

## ONLY IN COLUMBUS

Cities much larger than Columbus have offered substantial sums to have the Arnold Sports Festival transplanted to their communities, but the main event—and the only one in North America—still takes place in Columbus each year because of Schwarzenegger's commitment in 1970 to Lorimer.

The two have, however, expanded the franchise abroad to cities in Africa, Australia, Europe and South America. Next year, subsidiary Arnold Sports Festivals will take place in Birmingham, England, and Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Both Schwarzenegger, now 74, and Lorimer, still active at 95, are involved in planning the Columbus sports festival, although much of the work of pulling it together is now undertaken by a staff that includes Lorimer's son, Robert, and an army of volunteers.

Schwarzenegger and Lorimer remain as dedicated to each other as the day they met. They've visited each other's homes, and Lorimer not only gave a reading at Schwarzenegger's wedding to Maria Shriver in 1976 (the couple are now divorced) but also attended most of Schwarzenegger's film premieres and even had a cameo in the 1994 film *True Lies*.

Schwarzenegger has attended Lorimer's milestone birthday celebrations and has been there when Lorimer received honors from civic organizations. And of course, Schwarzenegger resolutely makes the return to Columbus each March, even during the years (from 2003 to 2011) when he served as California's governor.

Tickets for this year's festival went on sale in December and started selling briskly from the outset. A handful of events, including gymnastics, martial arts and cheerleading, will take place at the Ohio Expo Center (also known as the state fairgrounds), but the bulk of the activity will center on the Greater Columbus Convention Center downtown.

For a popular photo op just outside the building, check out the eight-foot-tall statue of Schwarzenegger at the peak of his bodybuilding career, sporting bulging bronze biceps. The statue's inscription could easily sum up the philosophy of both Schwarzenegger and Lorimer. It reads, "Life's joy is in the doing."

After all, getting things done is what these two men of action do best.

For more information or to purchase tickets, go to [arnoldsportsfestival.com](http://arnoldsportsfestival.com).