

OBITUARIES

RAY 'THUNDER' STERN

Wrestler who owned several fitness centers

By **JOE SIMNACHER**
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In 1946, 13-year-old Walter Bookbinder ran away from his Brooklyn home to join the Merchant Marines.

The seventh-grader grew up to be known as Ray Stern and went on to become a bodybuilder and fitness-center entrepreneur. He was also known as Ray "Thunder" Stern, a champion professional wrestler whose 21-year career included about 3,600 matches, including one in which he is said to have pinned a previously undefeated black bear in 35 seconds. (There is no record of how a match with an alligator went.)

Mr. Stern later became an aerobic and commercial pilot and owned an aviation business. He was also a successful Dallas real estate developer.

Mr. Stern, 74, died Tuesday of an antibiotic-resistant infection at Medical City Dallas Hospital. He had recently had elective surgery.

After twice running away from his impoverished neighborhood, Mr. Stern first gained fame as a wrestler and then found his fortune as a businessman.

"He made it happen," said his wife of 10 years, Debi Stern of Dallas. "He is the American dream come true."

Mr. Stern began lifting weights in his early teens, Mrs. Stern said. He joined the Merchant Marines to escape the poverty of his Brooklyn neighborhood, his wife said.

Mr. Stern took two 50-pound dumbbells with him to sea in a duffel bag, to the surprise of a fellow shipmate.

"One of the senior sailors kicked the bag to say, 'Hey, get that bag out of the way,'" Mrs. Stern said.

In 1949, Mr. Stern's interest in bodybuilding took him to Muscle Beach in California, where he learned from Joe Gold and Armand Tanny, icons of the sport.

In California, he was persuaded to become a professional wrestler. He used his mother's maiden name, Stern, and selected a one-syllable first name Ray, to be his ring name. He later picked up the nickname Thunder for his loud ring persona and his airborne maneuvers.

"Ray was most well-known for



FILE/Staff photo

Ray Stern, striking a bodybuilder pose in 1986, was more than just a strongman, eventually adding pilot and real estate entrepreneur to his résumé.

the drop kick," his wife said.

Despite his 19-inch biceps and 50-inch chest, Mr. Stern was more than brawn.

To prepare for a match against a 550-pound black bear, he observed the animal in a competition the night before his scheduled match.

"No one had ever beaten the bear," Mrs. Stern said. "When Ray went into the ring, he screamed 'arrrraahh' and the bear reared up on his hind legs. Ray grabbed it by a back leg and took him down."

He won numerous wrestling championships as an individual and as part of a tag team.

Wanting fortune to go with his fame, Mr. Stern ventured into business, beginning with health clubs in California. He expanded into apartment buildings, including the Wedgwood Tower in Oak Cliff, an investment that brought him to Dallas in 1966.

At the time, Mr. Stern was married to his first wife, Clare, a fitness adviser and entrepreneur for women's spas.

Mr. Stern fell in love with Dallas. The couple moved here and opened a joint effort, Ray and Clare Stern Spa. The couple's clubs were among the first to feature day-care facilities for parents who wanted to work out.

At its 1972 opening, the Forest Lane facility was billed as the largest in the Southwest. It featured a 110-degree mineral water spa, Roman swimming pool, Turkish sauna, ice plunge, steam room

and ultraviolet sunrooms.

The Sterns quickly made their name in the fitness business. In December 1975, Elvis Presley and eight friends flew in from Memphis for a 20-minute tour of racquetball courts at the Sterns' fitness center.

Mr. Stern seemingly added business ventures like plates on a barbell.

There was the Claremont — now the Bonaventure — on Keller Springs Road and the tollway, "not just a place to live ... but a total living experience."

There were high-rise office towers built with French partners and a corporate-jet flying service.

Ray and Clare Stern divorced about 20 years ago. Clare Stern died about 15 months ago.

"Ray always had 10 things going on at the same time," Mrs. Stern said. "You can't define the different parts of Ray's life, because they overlap. He had real estate, wrestling, health clubs and aviation. He was a very complex person."

In 2005, Mr. Stern received the New York State Award at the Professional Wrestling Hall of Fame in Amsterdam, N.Y.

"Ray wanted it all, and he got it all," his wife said.

Mr. Stern's services will be private. He is believed to have a sister, Mrs. Stern said.

Memorials may be made to the International Exotic Feline Sanctuary, P.O. Box 637, Boyd, Texas 76023.

CHARLES BRUCE 'CHUCK' STEVENSON

Longtime First Baptist Irving minister known for kindness

By **DEBORAH FLECK**
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Charles Bruce "Chuck" Stevenson devoted himself to a life of ministry.

The longtime minister of education at First Baptist Church of Irving believed in taking care of those in need and that everyone is important, said his daughter, Amy Lou Stevenson.

Mr. Stevenson, 80, died Sunday. Services will be at 1 p.m. today at First Baptist, 403 S. Main St., followed by burial at Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery, 2000 Mountain Creek Parkway in Dallas.

Born on Dec. 26, 1926, in Cisco, Texas, Mr. Stevenson graduated from Conroe High School. After a stint in the U.S. Army during World War II with the 86th Division Military Police Company, he enrolled at Baylor University. He graduated in 1950, the same year he married Raleigh Mae Adams.

In 1956, he completed his studies at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. But even before his graduation, he became minister of education, music and youth at First Baptist Church of Mansfield.

After stops at First Baptist Church of Alvin and Clarendon Drive Baptist Church in Oak Cliff, Mr. Stevenson came to Irving in 1961. For 18 years, he served as minister of education at First Baptist Church of Irving.

"He will leave huge footprints and fingerprints," current First Baptist pastor John Durham said. "He reached out to everyone and placed a high value on people."



Following his service in Irving, Mr. Stevenson became director of church services for the Tyron Evergreen Baptist Association in Conroe. When he left that position, he returned to Dallas to work at Sunnynglen Baptist Church, formerly Clarendon Drive Baptist Church.

After nearly 40 years of church work, Mr. Stevenson retired and returned to First Baptist Irving as a member. Before long, his pastor asked Mr. Stevenson to serve as minister of missions.

"This was where his real love was," said Ms. Stevenson, his older daughter. "He helped start six missions and kept going from there. At one point, there were people of all nations meeting in missions from the church."

One program he founded, called CHAMPS, reflects his love of children. The program provides free afternoon day care for students from two schools who would otherwise have gone home alone.

"He was the most loving person in the world," Ms. Stevenson said. "Even the boys who got in trouble would tell the police to call

Mr. Stevenson instead of their parents. They knew my father would help them."

Mr. Stevenson was also devoted to his community. He was a lifetime PTA member, past president of the Kiwanis Club, Irving Schools Advisory Board member, Irving Youth Council president, Irving Parks and Recreation Board member and a commissioner on the Irving Planning and Zoning Commission.

His city involvement was recognized with a High Spirited Citizen Award in 1999.

"He was such a people person," said Mark Farish, pastor of Lake Highlands Baptist Church. "He was particularly gifted in the education area and once ran two sessions of Sunday school classes for about 1,500 members."

Mr. Stevenson's health had been failing recently. He underwent quadruple bypass surgery in July at Baylor Medical Center at Irving and never returned home. The family moved him about six weeks ago to a LifeCare Center in Dallas, where he died.

In addition to his wife and eldest daughter, he is survived by a son, Gary Lee Stevenson of Irving; another daughter, Susan Lynn House and her husband, Paul, of Montgomery, Texas; one grandson; and a sister-in-law and brother-in-law.

Funeral arrangements are being handled by Calvary Funeral Home in Irving.

Memorials may be made to Dallas Baptist University, Pilgrim Chapel, Attn. Adam Wright, 3000 Mountain Creek Parkway, Dallas, Texas 75211.

Limited power OK for top candidates

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ISSUES WATCH: STRONG MAYOR

Voters in 2005 rejected two "strong mayor" propositions to give Dallas' top elected official more power. Now that they're running for mayor, do 2007 candidates regret that the office doesn't have more authority?

John Cappello: No. "Dallas is not ready for a strong-mayor system. Not yet."

Sam Coats: No. "We don't need a rock star; we need someone who can build coalitions and build bridges."

Zac Crain: Yes. "Ideally, there needs to be one person who can answer for things."

Gary Griffith: No. "We have a good city manager, and the system works if you have a good chief staff officer."

Roger Herrera: No. "The voters have spoken. We need to move on."

Don Hill: No. "The 14-1 system brings everyone to the table. That's the way everyone is appreciated and heard."

Darrell Jordan: No. "It's the people, not the system, that makes the system work."

Tom Leppert: No. "But on the key issues, I'll be hands-on. On education, for example, you'll see me out there a lot."

Ed Oakley: No. "I feel the same way now as I did then."

Max Wells: No. "The city manager form of government is perfect for Max Wells. He has always been the consensus-building type."

Dave Levinthal

elect this spring. The candidates' talk this year of fighting crime, fostering economic development and improving neighborhoods likewise would have resonated in a markedly different context given the strong-mayor system awaiting the winner.

Instead, the successor to Mayor Laura Miller, who supported the May 2005 strong-mayor proposition and is not seeking re-election, will work within the same governing environment she's long lamented.

Not that most of the candidates mind.

"As mayor, I will have all the authority I need to accomplish all I'm talking about in my platform," said lawyer and 1995 mayoral election runner-up Darrell Jordan, who's trying to position himself as the race's get-tough-on-crime candidate. "It's the people, not the system, that makes the system work. And the right mayor can make the current 14-1 system hum."

District 9 City Council member Gary Griffith says he would have run for mayor no matter the system. "The need for new leadership would have still been there regardless," he said.

Former state representative and airline executive Sam Coats said: "I tell people, 'Get over it.' The Blackwood plan was ill-conceived. We don't need a rock star; we need someone who can build coalitions and build bridges."

In all, six Dallas mayoral candidates donated money in 2005 to one of two political action committees that opposed expanding the Dallas mayor's powers during the first of two strong-mayor referendums that year. (Voters also defeated a second, less comprehensive strong-mayor referendum in November 2005.)

They include Mayor Pro Tem Don Hill (\$5,000), former Turner Corp. chairman and chief executive Tom Leppert (\$2,000), Mr. Jordan (\$1,000), banker and former Mayor Pro Tem Max Wells (\$300), Mr. Griffith (\$100) and lawyer Roger Herrera (\$100), ac-

ording to city campaign finance records. District 3 council member Ed Oakley did not make a donation but actively campaigned against the strong-mayor initiative.

American Way magazine editor Zac Crain is a rarity among his opponents because he supports a strong-mayor government in Dallas. He says, however, he'd still be an effective mayor within the current system, which features a professional, council-appointed city manager who oversees the city government's day-to-day operations.

"Ideally, there needs to be one person who can answer for things," Mr. Crain said, noting that he believes the 2005 strong-mayor proposition failed in large part because Ms. Miller supported it.

"It was probably the wrong mayor, right time," he said.

Bob Schlegel, chief executive officer of Dallas-based Pavestone, said he is surprised that almost no mayoral candidates are talking about strengthening Dallas' top elected office. Mr. Schlegel donated \$2,500 to one of the political action committees campaigning

for the strong-mayor proposition's passage in 2005.

"For sure, whoever gets elected is going to have a lot harder of a time," said Mr. Schlegel, who's supporting Mr. Leppert.

John Zogg, managing director for Crescent Real Estate Equities Ltd. and another advocate of the strong-mayor system, says he suspects another strong-mayor proposal will develop within the next mayor's four-year term.

Mr. Zogg, who hasn't endorsed a candidate, said it's disappointing that few of this year's mayoral candidates are talking about the strong-mayor issue "because the current system restricts our ability to compete with other cities that have a strong mayor."

Ms. Blackwood isn't as confident that another strong-mayor proposal will go before voters this decade, saying that 10 more years may pass before the electorate considers such a proposition.

"But I think we will get there," she said. "It'll either be a catastrophic event or a slow attrition of things that'll make people understand we need it."

C-FB, Lewisville, McKinney plug into virtual classrooms

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"It's a lot better for them to start getting familiar with it prior to college."

Growing in popularity

The state doesn't track online programs, so it's difficult to gauge how many districts use them statewide. But nationally, trade groups estimate 700,000 students in grades K-12 took an on-line class last year.

The state of Michigan went so far as to pass a law in 2005 requiring students to take classes online to graduate from high school. Lewisville school officials said they plan to eventually adopt that requirement, but that's at least five years away.

"Kids who are growing up today had computers since the days they were born," said Lewisville assistant superintendent Penny Reddell.

"They're very comfortable with chat rooms and instant messenger, and they seem to enjoy this kind of learning."

Students taking courses online work together on message boards, swap messages with teachers, read textbooks online or watch lecture videos. They take quizzes, file papers and do other assignments. Some districts require students to take final exams in the school.

School officials said cheating is no more of an issue than in traditional classes. They try to guard against open-book cheating through time limits on quizzes or tests. Officials said students wouldn't have time to look up every answer. Teachers use software that compares student papers with material available on the Internet.

Still, largely because of the risk, none of the area districts count grades in online classes toward class rank.

The concept works easiest with social studies, English or math, but even science labs can be done online through interactive anima-

"Kids who are growing up today had computers since the days they were born. They're very comfortable with chat rooms and instant messenger, and they seem to enjoy this kind of learning."

Lewisville ISD assistant superintendent **Penny Reddell**

tion.

Self-motivation

Online learning isn't for everyone. Educators said it takes self-motivation to keep pace when no one is looking over a student's shoulder.

"It takes a lot of effort and self-discipline to do it," said The Colony High senior Kimberli Greene, adding that it was harder than she expected but took less time than a traditional class. "You can't slack off."

Lewisville ISD launched an online pilot program this semester with a U.S. government class. At The Colony High, one of two schools involved, 12 students enrolled. Four dropped out. School officials said those kids couldn't adapt to the online environment.

"I thought my time was used more wisely, working with kids one on one as opposed to just getting up and lecturing," said Randy Reaves, a government teacher who monitored students at The Colony High while a teacher from Flower Mound High taught the class.

At The Colony, students had a class period in school to work with a teacher but didn't have to attend if they maintained an 80 average. "I could go at my own pace," said Laura Herring, a senior at The Colony High. "If I wanted to go faster, I'd go faster. Or I could take my time."

Lewisville plans to move away from the hybrid model, which has classes taught over the Internet

during a class period in school with a teacher available to help. Carrollton-Farmers Branch uses that model for an algebra class, its only Web offering this semester. Plano also uses hybrid classes for students in danger of not graduating on time.

Interesting offerings

Carrollton-Farmers Branch plans to expand with health and physical education courses this summer. P.E. online?

District officials said the online class will give students a half-credit, focusing on the text-based portion, and leaves a full credit of activity-heavy P.E. that students take at school.

Plano's eSchool is one of the state's largest online programs — and at six years old, it's one of the oldest. Plano now offers 32 courses and enrolls about 2,500 students. The district limits students to two credits online that count toward graduation.

About 20 to 25 percent of participating students come from outside Plano, from places as far away as Tanzania. All students, regardless of where they live, pay between \$230 and \$300 for tuition, depending on the class.

McKinney plans to offer four classes online beginning this summer for \$200 each: U.S. government, economics, psychology and health.

The Dallas and Highland Park districts, among others, are looking at the concept.

Ms. Loughrey, TEA's distance-learning director, said many districts have been slow to adopt online classes because of concern that the material wasn't good enough. But that has changed, she said.

"Just like a face-to-face class, the districts create their own courses," Ms. Loughrey said. "But how that content is taught is left up to the teacher. Some do a fabulous job, and some of them don't."

"The same is true for online courses. For any kind of learning, quality teaching is critical."

